

# **SILVER AND GOLD**

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This book is dedicated to all the former members of the Golden City, who provided much of the inspiration for this story.

## CHAPTER ONE

The heat of the forge blasted Cualli's skin. Instinctively, she turned her head so that the scarred side bore the brunt of the heat. It was easier this way. The skin there was deadened and so she felt the pain less.

Tightly gripping a pair of tongs, she drew the crucible from the flames and frowned at what she saw inside. As the gold had melted, black spots had floated to the surface. Just as she had told Yunuen, he had prepared it wrong. The mixing of alloys had to be perfect, every element tightly controlled. Stray salts or fragments of other ores could ruin the results, and ignorance was no excuse for such a failure. That was why Yunuen was gone, and good riddance to him. It was why she had to start over again, even after hours of work. And it was why, however much the priests insisted, she would not be taking an apprentice again.

The priests spent every day with gold, using it to channel the power of Emperor Sun. If they could not see the imperfections in their work, what hope did an untrained youth have?

The inability of the priests to grasp these problems was galling. Half the gold work in the empire went to them, the jewellery which let them channel the power of Emperor Sun. Doing this badly would weaken them and weaken the empire, yet they kept trying to foist incompetent youths upon her, to make her a teacher as well as a crafter. She was having no more of it.

There were five molds on the stone table and precisely enough gold in the crucible for them all. With a steady hand she filled each one in turn, careful not to stir up the molten metal with quick movements. Dirt and ash floated to the surface, where she would scrape them off later. Tomorrow, she would burnish them, then string them along wires with the other pieces of the necklace.

Different colours, different textures, different sheens. Different smells even, for those few who could tell.

This would be the finest necklace she had ever made. When Lord Milintica wore it on the steps of the temple, the power of Emperor Sun shining from every disk, the whole city would hear his voice as the gold lent his spirit strength. They would see the beauty of her work and, at last, they would give her the recognition she deserved.

Cualli set the tongs down in their place by the forge. She hung up her leather apron, brushed down the simple cotton tunic underneath, and crossed to the far side of the room. There, where sunlight streamed in through window and doorway, sat works near completion. Nothing in gold—no jeweller worked with the divine metal every day—but fine pieces still, worthy of a lesser noble or a wealthy merchant. She took a deep, satisfied breath and settled down to work.

She picked up the first of the pieces, a commission for a merchant's husband. Cubes of turquoise and quartz gleamed as she held them up, bound together by delicate copper chains. With a pair of tweezers, she threaded wires little thicker than llama hair, losing herself in the crossing and recrossing of threads, the glint of small coloured stones. Bright points of light scattered across her lap.

Heavy footsteps emerged from the chatter of the city crowds outside her door. The points of light were extinguished as a shadow fell across the stones.

Cualli let her hair down across the left side of her face, long dark strands masking her scars. Then she looked up.

Four soldiers stood in the doorway. Three wore the padded cotton armour of simple warriors and carried bronze-tipped spears. The fourth was decked out in the chevroned cloak and feathered headdress of an Eagle Warrior, a club edged with chipped obsidian hanging at his side. Cualli stiffened.

"You are Cualli?" the leader asked, returning her scowl.

"Who asks..." She set aside her tweezers and looked up at the gold token hanging from his neck. "...Claw Commander?"

"Show some respect for that title," he said. "I am here on behalf of Priest Consort Nenetl, the hand of Emperor Sun."

The menace beneath the familiar rhythm of the words sent a shiver of tension up Cualli's spine. She should have given him the satisfaction of showing some fear, but instead she reached out to run a finger across his medallion of office. The air around it seemed to thicken, holding her back, but

she pushed through until she felt the texture of the metal and the warmth of sunlight it had absorbed.

“They should come to me for these,” she said. “I would have used a brighter gold and a smoother finish, not like these rush jobs. A better display and better protection.”

The Claw Commander loomed, anger flashing beneath his heavy brow.

“I am not here for jewellery,” he said.

“Then you are in the wrong place.” Cualli turned back to her work. “I’m sorry to waste your time, brave warrior.”

The Claw Commander gave a nod and his soldiers spread out around her workshop, peering into boxes and bags, rummaging under work benches. One of them touched the freshly filled molds, then snapped back her fingers with a yelp of pain.

“Don’t touch that!” Cualli leapt to her feet and ran across the room. The surface of the gold was still flat, no thanks to this idiot. She breathed a sigh of relief.

“You’re renowned for your work with gold,” the Commander said, ignoring the whimper as his soldier sucked at her scorched fingers. “You work with other metals too?”

“Of course.”

Cualli fetched a bucket of cold water from its place near the forge and set it in front of the soldier. The woman dipped her whole hand in and let out a sigh of relief. Only when that was done did she have the good sense to look embarrassed.

“Not all my work is for the priesthood and their servants,” Cualli said, turning back to the Commander. “And even for them, most of my work is in alloys. Gold alone won’t give you the right colour, the right shine, the right hardness or softness for—”

“How about silver?” he asked.

“Of course not,” Cualli said. “I respect the law.”

The Commander kept his gaze on her, cold and unflinching. Tendrils of fear crept across her mind. She valued her life too much to work in the moon metal, but the finger of suspicion could be as deadly as the truth.

Rebel activities had been growing over the past year. They had assassinated one of the Priest Consort’s deputies and had disrupted ceremonies in the outer towns, all in an effort to bring down the priesthood. The guards crushed any fragment of the rebellion they could find, but rumours circulated of secret gatherings and attacks on temples, all in the name of change.

“Not everyone respects the law,” the Commander said. “Rebels have been captured wielding silver. Very fine silver jewellery.”

Cualli's dread deepened as his glance shifted to the delicate necklace lying half-finished by the window. Silver was the metal of Traitor Moon, channel for the cold, sharp magic that had wounded Emperor Sun at the dawn of the world, and so had brought about the first winter. Just owning it was a crime punishable by death. The implication that she would use it was as dangerous as it was outrageous.

"By the sun's blazing power, why would I help rebels?" Cualli asked. "I work for lords and priests."

"A useful position for a rebel to have," the Claw Commander said. "Unsuspected, unquestioned, privy to the thoughts of the powerful."

"I have as much to lose as anyone if winter ever returns."

She was too young to remember winters, but her grandmother had told her about them. How the warmth faded from the world and left humanity shivering in darkness. How rivers hardened and crops faded. How the nights grew long and the food ran short and everyone but the richest found themselves hungry and miserable. How the old and the sick died shivering in their homes.

Then the priesthood had drawn upon the power of Emperor Sun to drive back Traitor Moon's taint. They had brought about an endless summer, with warmth and prosperity for all.

Why would anyone endanger such magic?

"A rebel would support the priesthood in public," the Commander said. "But you speak differently in private, don't you?"

"Who told you that? One of my competitors?"

"A merchant says that he heard you—"

"It was that ratbag Xipil, wasn't it? I told him that his gold wasn't really from High Falls. Now he can't sell it for what he wanted and he's getting his revenge."

"Xipil is a trader of excellent repute."

"You mean he pays you well."

The Commander stiffened. His hand clenched around the handle of his club.

"Have a care what you say, woman," he said. "Insulting the Eagle Order is rebel talk."

Cualli's gaze flitted across the patrol. Years of working with a hammer and bellows had made her as strong as any of them, but they were armed and trained to fight. If they wanted to arrest her, there would be no escape. She would disappear into the temple cells like so many others, to grow pale and weak while they questioned her with knives and crushing weights. No-one would see her again until she was hauled up the steps of the pyramid, to have her heart ripped out and fed to the

fires of Emperor Sun.

She wasn't ready to die. Not for petty squabbles and lies. Darting past the Commander, she hurried to the doorway.

"Hey, everyone!" she called out. Artificers and customers looked up from haggling over their wares. "Come hear Xipil's latest nonsense."

Nobody moved.

Cualli's heart sank. If she had known it would come to this, she might have tolerated her neighbours' inane conversations instead of shrugging them off. She might have made some friends.

Hands grabbed her firmly by both arms and she was dragged back inside. She tried not to let her trembling show, but her heart was pounding and she could feel her face flush.

"No-one is coming to your rescue, Cualli," the Commander said. "Not unless your rebel friends are waiting somewhere nearby."

"I'm not a rebel," Cualli said, gritting her teeth as the soldiers tightened their grip.

"So you say. But we know that you consort with foreigners."

"How else can I buy their metal?"

"It's a short step from trading with heathens to nurturing revolt."

He walked slowly around the workshop, eyes narrowing as he took everything in.

"Now, if I were hiding silver, where would it be?"

He heaved over a box of ore. Dark lumps tumbled across the rush-strewn floor, glinting with pale points of reflected light.

"It could be zinc," he said. "It could be silver. How will I get you to tell me?"

He nudged the ore with his sandalled foot, then moved to the stone table by the forge. Picking up the tongs, he reached for a mold.

"Don't!" Cualli said, straining against the soldiers. "Those are for Lord Milintica."

The Commander tipped over one of the molds and peered at the gold as it oozed out. Then he did the same with the next, and the next, on down the line.

A hot metallic scent filled the air. Cualli could smell impurities from the bench tainting her gold, could feel her mounting frustration.

"Idiot," she snapped. "Meddling with things you don't understand. You wouldn't know silver if they seared it to your skin."

"And you would?"

"Of course I would!"



Two swift strides brought the Commander across the workshop. He slapped Cualli hard, knocking her head back and making her ears ring. The movement shook her hair aside, revealing her scars. The stinging pain in her cheek was nothing compared with the wide-eyed expression two of the soldiers gave her.

“So you know silver?” the Commander said. “Condemned from your own lips.”

Someone coughed. They all turned around.

A familiar figure stood at the entrance to the workshop. Tall, elegant, with muscles bulging beneath her sleeveless red and white tunic. Three precious gold ear hoops glinted under short dark hair woven through with eagle feathers.

Cualli’s spirit soared as if it were that eagle.

“Wing Commander Zyanya.” The Claw Commander straightened to attention. His soldiers followed suit.

“Is there a problem here, Claw Commander Tlacelel?” Zyanya asked, stepping out of the street and into the workshop’s gloom. “The neighbours said they heard shouting.”

“We’re hunting for rebels,” Tlacelel replied. “Someone has been crafting silver for them.”

“Cualli, a rebel?” Zyanya burst out laughing. “You see these rings in my ear? They let me channel Emperor Sun’s strength. Cualli made them to help me fight our enemies, including those rebels you’re so concerned about.”

“We were told...”

“You have been misled, Tlacelel,” Zyanya said. “But all will be well.”

She placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. Her smile passed from him to the wide-eyed soldiers. Few in the city, and fewer still in the army, had not heard of Zyanya.

“Cualli is one of Emperor Sun’s greatest servants,” Zyanya said. “She is as dedicated to maintaining the long summer as any of us. Nobody here wants change, do they?”

“No,” they all agreed.

“Tell Claw Commander Tlacelel what you think of the rebels, Cualli,” Zyanya said.

“Idiots,” Cualli replied. “I like being fed and warm and safe. I like working with the new ores that are found whenever our borders expand. Who would want to end that?”

Zyanya nodded solemnly and the soldiers followed suit. Only Tlacelel, staring at the hand on his shoulder, shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot.

“I am sorry, Wing Commander,” he said. “Will you be taking me to the temple?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Zyanya tossed her head back as she laughed, the rings jingling in her

ears. “This was just a misunderstanding. You brave warriors can be on your way. And here...” She took four clay tokens from her pouch and handed one to each of them. “Come watch me in the game tomorrow. We’re going to wipe the floor with the Emerald Leaves.”

The soldiers grinned at each other and clutched their prized tickets close. As they headed out the door, they chattered excitedly about the big game and the Red Feathers’ chances of winning. Only Tlacelel paused as he stepped into the street, looking back at Cualli.

“Why do you understand silver?” he asked, his voice flat, head tilted on one side.

Cualli sighed. It was like talking to a small child.

“A true crafter must understand all metals,” she replied. “To master the magic of gold I have to know its limits and the ways it can be broken. To avoid the taint of silver, I have to know what I’m looking for.”

“Know your enemy, eh, Claw Commander?” Zyanya said.

“Of course.” Tlacelel’s eyes narrowed in suspicion as he looked at Cualli one last time, then he turned and strode stiffly away.

Cualli rushed over to the molds, now caught in a cooling mess of tainted gold. It would take hours to fix this. She would have to melt the gold down again and let it cool, scrape away impurities, test the balance of other metals in the mix. Then would come the smelting again, checking the molds, pouring and testing and cooling. A whole day’s worth of work to be repeated, and even then, would she have it done in time?

“Don’t I even get a thank you?” Zyanya asked. “Or a proper hello?”

“Oh!” Cualli turned, embarrassed, and tugged the hair back across her face. Then she hurried to embrace her friend. “I’m sorry. And thank you. I dread to think what would have happened if you hadn’t arrived.”

“I’m just happy I could help,” Zyanya said. She rested her chin on top of Cualli’s head, and the crafter felt the tension flow from her body. “Now, I have something for you—cocoa beans from the White Plains plantations. Put some water on to boil and let’s treat ourselves.”

Cualli smiled. Maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad day.