

THE CROUCHING SHADOW

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First Chapter Sample

CHAPTER ONE

Officially the emperor's Golden Daughters did not exist, which made them more desirable to the right sort of buyer. And only the right sort of buyer knew of their existence, which made Princess Safiya's task significantly easier.

What did not make her task easier was the fact that the right sort of buyer tended to be a stuffy, self-centered, completely piggish sort, reminding her of nothing so much as the empress's pet monkey: hideously assured of its own useless but prominent place in the world, with absolutely no one to tell it otherwise.

The right sort of buyer made her skin crawl.

Not that anyone would guess as much upon meeting Princess Safiya. She sat serenely in her open pavilion surrounded by jasmine and honeysuckle, her face a lake of calm mirroring the outer world and revealing none of the thoughts lurking beneath. As a girl, Princess Safiya had hated the face paint women of her status were obliged to wear daily. As an older, wiser woman,

she appreciated it for the mask it was, particularly when meeting silk-robed monkey-men such as the one bowing before her now.

“Welcome, Ambassador Ratnavira,” the princess said, allowing her face paint to do the smiling for her. “I trust the Lordly Sun shone bright upon your road and the Lady Moon gazed gently upon your rests.”

Ambassador Ratnavira, trembling with excitement, beat his forehead against the lowest step of her pavilion. Princess Safiya could see the red mark on his brow when he straightened and stood once more, grinning just like the empress’s monkey.

But he was the right sort of buyer. And ultimately, this could be the only good end to all her efforts.

“Revered Mother of Golden Worth,” the ambassador said, his voice bowing and scraping even as he himself stood upright, “all the wearisome leagues of my travels melt away as I find myself at last before the gracious luminance of your face . . .”

He continued in this vein for some while, and the princess occupied herself by reading his secrets. These were not particularly interesting secrets. Before her stood a man who had risen to power via the ladder of flattery and well-timed bribes rather than aptitude; this much he told her by his voice inflection. He was the younger son of a minor lord, possibly a tribal chieftain; his ugly, raw features bespoke a rural heritage rather than the delicate inbreeding one expected of the Aja elite. His blackened fingernails and the lines about his mouth indicated his addiction to the Red Flower, but he sought to disguise the addiction via enormous jeweled rings and layers of inexpertly applied face paint. He was also a patron of cheap operas and all the lewd life surrounding cheap operas; the signs of oncoming disease were unmistakable.

In short, he was just the sort of person to represent a rich, powerful, and much-hated Prince of Aja. Just the sort of client Princess Safiya had come to expect and despise.

“So my honored Prince Amithnal bids me hasten back with a bride worthy of the very gods themselves, as promised in the agreement you, Revered Mother, signed upon receipt of the advanced half-sum.”

Princess Safiya said nothing as the ambassador’s voice trailed off awkwardly at the end of his rehearsed speech. She allowed the silence to linger a few moments longer than was absolutely necessary and watched the monkey-man’s eyes shift nervously. She could see him trying to recall everything he had just said, wondering if he’d made a mistake somewhere,

wondering if he'd somehow managed, despite all his careful rehearsal, to offend the Revered Mother.

But she couldn't let him writhe for long. It wouldn't be fair to her girls.

She stood, and the ambassador took an involuntary step back, which he then tried to cover with a nervous bow.

"The test is prepared," Princess Safiya said. "Prince Amithnal will have his bride based upon the results. Walk with me now, Ambassador, and listen carefully to what I say."

She stepped down from her pavilion, and serving children scrambled behind her to carry the train of her golden robe, while others angled oil-paper umbrellas to prevent any sunlight from touching her face and possibly melting the paint she wore. Ambassador Ratnavira fell into obsequious step beside her, his stained fingers twisting his too-tight rings in unsuppressed eagerness. What did he expect this test to be? Some variation on one of his cheap operas?

Princess Safiya made doubly certain that her voice betrayed none of her thoughts. "It is important, Ambassador, that you speak as little as possible while seated at the banquet. The Golden Daughters will read your voice and learn more than they should before completing the test. You must also understand that *this is no test* to the Crouching Shadow I have hired."

The ambassador stumbled, taken by a sudden fit of nervous coughing. Princess Safiya paused, the shadows of the two umbrellas settling around her, and watched fear shake the little Aja man to his core.

"You hired a Crouching Shadow?" he cried. "But they—they do not exist!"

"Neither do the Golden Daughters," Princess Safiya replied calmly. "Shall we continue?" Without waiting for the ambassador, she proceeded, obliging him to trot to catch up.

"But surely it is too dangerous!" the ambassador protested.

Princess Safiya did not reply.

"Who is the target?" the ambassador demanded, and his shaking voice told her he had already guessed the answer.

"Why, the honored Aja ambassador, of course," Princess Safiya said, turning her painted smile upon the little monkey-man. For a moment she almost hoped he would faint, so ashen was his face.

But Ambassador Ratnavira pulled himself together and said bravely, "Prince Amithnal will not suffer his representative to be so treated. Should I die at your table, the reputation of the

Golden Daughters will be forever impugned. You will be dishonored throughout the Continent and across the island nations!”

A hint of a real smile twitched at the corners of Princess Safiya’s painted mouth. “So little faith you show in the legend you have come far to purchase! Do you not believe the Golden Daughters will be everything I have promised?”

The ambassador licked his thin lips and continued twisting his rings. “A Crouching Shadow is—”

“The greatest threat a man such as Prince Amithnal may hope to face in his lifetime,” Princess Safiya supplied. “An assassin of unprecedented cunning and ability. You recall the story of Lord Dae-Ho of Dong Min and his ten thousand warriors?”

The ambassador had seen enough cheap opera to know the story well. His lips murmured a silent prayer. But Safiya continued mercilessly: “When sought by his twin brother, Dae-Ko the Usurper, Lord Dae-Ho entombed himself alive in a secret underground palace and placed a guard of ten thousand warriors throughout his subterranean labyrinth extending twenty miles on each side. But his brother hired one Crouching Shadow. Only one. Within a week, all ten thousand warriors and Lord Dae-Ho himself lay dead in a grave of their own making.”

“Light of the Lordly Sun!” the ambassador whispered. He wiped his sweating brow, smearing paint. “And you have summoned one of those devils here?”

“Indeed,” said Princess Safiya. “To exact excruciating vengeance upon my faithless lover. At the banquet, within an hour, this Crouching Shadow will place gold leaf into your tea. You will be expected to suffer mightily of inexplicable stomach pains, expiring at last by the week’s end, thus restoring my honor and ensuring the Crouching Shadow’s completed payment. Unless, of course, the stories you have heard of the Golden Daughters prove true.”

Princess Safiya continued down the walkway from her pavilion, enjoying both the scents of the sumptuous garden around her and the muttered curses of her companion. This was the one part of the entire process she always found enjoyable: watching the groveling monkey-men squirm.

“But the girls . . . the esteemed Daughters,” the ambassador said, nearly forgetting his fawning language in the midst of near-panic. “They know, do they not? They know to watch for the Crouching Shadow?”

“Certainly not!” Princess Safiya replied, feigning surprise. “What would that prove to your honored Prince Amithnal? That I can provide him with a bride who, so long as she is told everything in advance, might save him from assassination? Do you think such a bride would be worth the price Prince Amithnal has committed to pay?”

“So you mean—”

“Yes, I do mean exactly that, Ambassador,” Princess Safiya said. “To the principal players, this little theater to which we even now wend our way is no act, but real to the very direst extreme. And you will see how the Golden Daughters perform their parts. When the curtain falls, you yourself will choose the bride of your prince, and you will know that in the choice, you may well be saving his life.”

Here Princess Safiya turned and fixed the little man with a stare of surprising intensity from behind the elegant blue and red paint rimming her eyes. “My Daughters do not fail.”

With those words, she withdrew from the depths of her voluminous sleeve a certain document written in red characters to look like blood. She held it up for the ambassador’s inspection. “We can take no chances. Sign here, if you please, indicating that you have heard and understood the parameters of the test in which you are about to take part.”

The ambassador swore again. But he had come too far to back out now. Besides, if he returned to his master with neither the bride-price nor the bride, his head would be forfeit. Prince Amithnal was not a forgiving patron.

“Gold leaf, you say?” the ambassador whispered as he signed his name and watched Princess Safiya tuck the document back into her sleeve. “Is that not . . . is that not a painful way to go?”

“Have no fear,” Princess Safiya said, continuing along the path. The rooftops of the eastern quarter of Manusbau Palace came into sight, and she spied the silk-covered litters borne by strong slaves coming up the path toward them. It would be unseemly, after all, for her or the ambassador to arrive at the banquet on foot. “Have no fear. The poison will never cross your lips.”



Little lion dogs—probably no more than half a dozen but making themselves seem like a hundred strong—ran barking underfoot as slaves carried honored guests into the Butterfly Hall where the banquet was laid. Every new guest was considered an intruder and possible threat, and the lion dogs protested in high yips and low snorts as the slaves stepped carefully around them.

The Radiant Reflection of Hulan's Countenance, Empress Timiran, royal mother of all Noorhitam, sat in serene boredom at a separate table set above the others, fanned with peacock feathers and feeding her fat monkey delicacies off gold platters. The monkey always got his first pick of any fare served at the empress's table, and he had the pot belly to show for it.

At a lower table, three of the emperor's lesser wives sat in gaudy glory only slightly less magnificent than that of the empress. Princess Safiya, the emperor's favored sister, took her place among these, nodding kindly to the pretty queens, who were sweet, if rather simple.

Lower still were the tables of the banquet guests, various visitors to Manusbau Palace from all reaches of the Continent. None of these were important enough for the emperor himself to bother with, but were just important enough that the empress must be brought out and put on display. They were all men: aspiring politicians, stuffy princes of lesser kingdoms, and even a warlord or two of distant provinces come to negotiate terms of peace with the Emperor of Noorhitam. These last looked particularly out of place in the Butterfly Hall and handled with great trepidation the porcelain teacups served to them.

Serving girls with flowers in their hair fluttered about as they tended to the needs of the guests. Their faces were painted moon-white with bright orange sun-spots on each cheek. Ten of these girls wore red chrysanthemums in their hair. Otherwise they were indistinguishable as they rushed about with cups and trays and platters.

Prince Amithnal's sweating ambassador sat between a warlord and a Dong Min councilor, saying little and eating less. Every time a serving girl offered him food or drink, he winced and his eyes lifted nervously to Princess Safiya, who ignored him. He had been instructed to eat and drink as though nothing were afoot. Despite his fondness for cheap opera, the ambassador had the acting ability of the monkey he so resembled.

Princess Safiya sighed and looked around for her assassin. He appeared presently.

The lion dogs started their thunderous barking again and ran skittering across the hall even as the door opened and a court herald stepped through. The dogs rushed at his feet, snarling and making all sorts of vicious threats which none of them had the courage to carry out. The herald

aimed a kick at one of the dogs, which dodged him easily, then cleared his throat and announced in a loud voice that filled the hall, “Lord Dok-Kasemsan, head of the House of Dok, beloved brother of the Fan Clan.”

Another colorful litter was borne into the hall, and when it was lowered and the curtains drawn back, Lord Dok-Kasemsan, a Pen-Chan of remarkable poise and beauty, stepped forth.

Princess Safiya smiled inwardly at the sight of him. He was everything an assassin ought to be: striking, colorful, dignified, and important. The sort of man no one would expect to indulge in the lethal arts.

He was his own best disguise.

The herald led him across the room to genuflect before the bored empress. Then he was seated at a table across the hall from Ambassador Ratnavira. Not once did Kasemsan look the ambassador’s way. Not a glance, not a gesture betrayed the predatory focus on which Princess Safiya knew all his being centered.

What mastery! What genius! His very spirit was a poison-tipped knife. Were she the sentimental sort, she would be half-inclined to love him.

But he was doomed. And there was no point in becoming sentimental over a doomed man.

Princess Safiya kept her head bowed, her expression as bored as that of the empress. But from beneath her long, false lashes, she watched the ten girls with the chrysanthemums in their hair. How frail they looked! How delicate and unthreatening. Yet with their black eyes they each perceived more than any five ordinary persons combined. And behind their painted smiles, their mouths were fixed in concentration that never, never relaxed.

Except . . .

Except what in Hulan’s name was Sairu grinning about?

“Princess? May I beg a word?”

Safiya frowned and turned abruptly to the voice speaking at her elbow. “Ah. Brother Yaru,” she said, trying to disguise her impatience behind cool regality.

The old priest bowed and grinned at her. He alone of all the men in that room dared approach the upraised tables of the queens and the empress without an escort. Despite their rough-woven robes and lives of restraint, priests enjoyed a number of privileges lesser men did not.

This was more than slightly annoying. Especially now.

“May I surmise from your presence here, Princess Safiya, that one of your legendary tests is even now underway?”

Princess Safiya hid her face behind a fan. “Esteemed brother, I would beg you to lower your voice,” she said.

“Oh, of course! Of course!” Brother Yaru said, glancing about, his wrinkled face alight with boyish eagerness. He knew all the stories surrounding the Golden Daughters, but not even he could spot them in a crowd. He searched the faces of those present like a child searching for pixies under toadstools. “Forgive me, Princess, but I find this most fortuitous. You see, I come on behalf of a new client.”

Princess Safiya fluttered her fan coldly. “I never discuss business with more than one client at a time. And certainly not with—”

She stopped. She had not risen to her position as Golden Mother without reason. She read the secrets in Brother Yaru’s face. She could not understand them all, but she read them even so.

“Who sent you, brother?” she asked, lowering her voice still further so that the priest was obliged to lean in behind her fan.

“The Besur himself,” Brother Yaru whispered. “It is a matter of utmost urgency. I am not at liberty to divulge the High Priest’s secrets. But he would be most grateful if Princess Safiya would send one of her own to the Crown of the Moon tonight.”

With this, Brother Yaru slipped away, losing himself in the crowded hall as he went from table to table, stealing dainties and muttering blessings to all who would listen.

Princess Safiya sat in stunned silence, still hiding behind her fan. The High Priest? But he could not desire a bride! That went against everything the priests of the Crown of the Moon stood for. And yet she could not doubt the truth of Brother Yaru’s words. He was far too simple a man to take part in duplicity. No, it must be true. But why?

Again one of the girls caught her eye. Sairu, standing along the wall with a platter in each hand, looked right at her and smiled.

What had gotten into that girl? Did she think this one great joke? Did she—

A sudden commotion exploded a few tables down. Princess Safiya lowered her fan and turned, as did everyone else in the hall, to where Lord Dok-Kasemsan stood. He had leaped to his feet with a shouted curse, knocking over the low table and scattering dishes in broken shards

across the floor. At first no one could understand what he said. But Princess Safiya knew right away.

“How did you do it? *How?*” And then, “I am dead! I’m a dead man! How did you do it?”

He turned suddenly, fire in his gaze, and stared at Princess Safiya. “You witch!” he shouted. “You fire-kissed witch!” Then he choked and spat as the gold-leaf poison—his own poison—took effect on his body. His entire frame, so beautiful, so poised, shuddered.

Then he charged straight at Princess Safiya, a knife in his hand.

He never reached her. One of the serving girls knelt and sent her silver platter sliding across the polished floor. His foot landed on it, and he fell with a crash, striking his head. The next moment, guards leaped upon him and dragged him from the room, unconscious.

The Butterfly Hall lay in stunned silence.

Then the empress said, “How amusing. Monkey wants sugared dates. Will someone bring him sugared dates?”

The spell was broken. The room erupted in voices, all talking at once. Princess Safiya rose quietly and, with children trailing behind to carry her train, exited the Butterfly Hall. Over the course of the next half hour, one by one, the ten serving girls with chrysanthemums in their hair slipped unnoticed after her.

End of Sample

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