



MISTRESS OF THE
EMPIRE

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Book 3 of The Empire Series

/ V3.0 Scanned & proofed by Allflippedup 9/4/04 /

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Tragedy

The morning sun shone.

Dew bejeweled the lakeshore grasses, and the calls of nesting shatra birds carried sweetly on the breeze. Lady Mara of the Acoma savoured the air, soon to give way to the day's heat. Seated in her litter, her husband at her side and her two-year-old son, Justin, napping in her lap, she closed her eyes and breathed a deep sigh of contentment.

She slipped her fingers into her husband's hand. Hokanu smiled. He was undeniably handsome, and a proven warrior; and the easy times had not softened his athletic appearance. His grip closed possessively over hers, his strength masked by gentleness.

The past three years had been good ones. For the first time since childhood, she felt safe, secure from the deadly, unending political intrigues of the Game of the Council. The enemy who had killed her father and brother could no longer threaten her. He was now dust and memories, his family fallen with him; his ancestral lands and magnificently appointed estate house had been deeded to Mara by the Emperor.

Superstition held that ill luck tainted a fallen family's land; on a wonderful morning such as this, misfortune seemed nowhere in evidence. As the litter moved slowly along the shore, the couple shared the peace of the moment while they regarded the home that they had created between them.

Nestled between steep, stone-crested hills, the valley that had first belonged to the Minwanabi Lords was not only naturally defensible, but so beautiful it was as if touched by the gods. The lake reflected a placid sky, the waters rippled by the fast oars of a messenger skiff bearing dispatches to factors in the Holy City. There, grain barges poled by chanting slaves delivered this year's harvest to warehouses for storage until the spring floods allowed transport downriver.

The dry autumn breeze rippled golden grass, and the morning sun lit the walls of the estate house like alabaster. Beyond, in a natural hollow, Force Commanders Lujan and Xandia drilled a combined troop of Acoma and Shinzawai warriors. Since Hokanu would one day inherit his father's title, his marriage to Mara had not merged the two houses. Warriors in Acoma green marched in step with others in Shinzawai blue, the ranks patched black, here and there, by divisions of insectoid cho-ja. Along with the Minwanabi lands, Lady Mara had gained an alliance with two additional hives and with them the fighting strength of three more companies of warriors bred by their queens for battle.

An enemy foolish enough to launch an assault would invite swift annihilation. Mara and Hokanu, with loyal vassals and allies, between them commanded a standing army unsurpassed in the Nations. Only the Light of Heaven's own Imperial Whites, with levies from other houses under his sovereignty, would rival these two armies. And as if fine troops and a near-impregnable fortress did not in themselves secure peace, the title Servant of the Empire, bestowed upon Mara for her services to Tsuranuanni, gave her honorary adoption into the Emperor's own family. The Imperial Whites were as likely to march in her defense, for by the honor central to Tsurani culture, insult or threat to her was as an offense visited upon the Light of Heaven's blood family.

'You seem delightfully self-satisfied this morning, wife,' Hokanu said in her ear.

Mara tilted her head back into his shoulder, her lips parted for his kiss. If, deep in her heart, she missed the wild passion she had known with the red-haired barbarian slave who had fathered Justin, she had come to terms with that loss. Hokanu was a kindred spirit who shared her political shrewdness

and inclination toward innovation. He was quick witted, kind, and devoted to her, as well as tolerant of her headstrong nature, as few men of her culture were inclined to be. With him, Mara shared voice as an equal. Marriage had brought a deep and abiding contentment, and though her interest in the Great Game of the Council had lessened, she no longer played out of fear. Hokanu's kiss warmed the moment like wine, until a high-pitched shout split the quiet.

Mara straightened up from Hokanu's embrace, her smile mirrored in her husband's dark eyes. 'Ayaki,' they concluded simultaneously. The next moment, galloping hoof beats thundered down the trail by the lake.

Hokanu tightened his arm around his wife's shoulder as the two of them leaned out to view the antics of Mara's older son and heir.

A coal black horse burst through the gap in the trees, mane and tail flying in the wind. Green tassels adorned its bridle, and a pearl-stitched breastplate kept the saddle from sliding backward along its lean length of barrel. Crouched in the lacquer-worked stirrups was a boy, recently turned twelve, and as raven haired as his mount. He reined the gelding into a turn and charged toward Mara's litter^his face flushed with the thrill of speed, and his fine, sequin stitched robe flying like a banner behind.

'He's becoming quite the bold rider,' Hokanu said admiringly. 'And the birthday present appears to please him.'

Mara watched, a glow of pleasure on her face, as the boy reined in the mount upon the path. Ayaki was her joy, the person she loved most in life.

The black gelding tossed its head in protest. It was spirited, and eager to run. Still not entirely comfortable with the huge animals imported from the barbarian world, Mara held her breath in apprehension. Ayaki had inherited a wild streak from his father, and in the years since his narrow escape from an assassin's knife, a restless mood sometimes claimed him. At times he seemed to taunt death, as if by defying danger he could reaffirm the life in his veins.

But today was not such a moment, and the gelding had been selected for obedience as well as fleetness. It snorted a gusty breath of air and yielded to the rein, falling into stride alongside Mara's litter bearers, who overcame their inclination to move away from the large animal.

The Lady looked up as boy and horse rilled her vision. Ayaki would be tall, the legacy of both his grandfathers. He had inherited the Acoma tendency toward leanness, and all of his father's stubborn courage. Although Hokanu was not his blood father, the two shared friendship and respect. Ayaki was a boy any parent could be proud of, and he was already showing the wits he would need when he reached adulthood and entered the Game of the Council as Lord of the Acoma in his own right.

'Young show-off,' Hokanu teased. 'Our bearers might be the only ones in the Empire to be granted the privilege of sandals, but if you think we should race you to the meadows, we'll certainly have to refuse.'

Ayaki laughed. His dark eyes fixed on his mother, filled with the elation of the moment. 'Actually, I was going to ask Lax'l if I might try our speed against a cho-ja. It would be interesting to know whether his warriors could overtake a troop of the barbarians' cavalry.'

'If there was a war, which there is not at the moment, gods be praised,' Hokanu said on a note a shade more serious. 'Take care you mind your manners, and don't offend Force Commander Lax'l's dignity when you ask.'

Ayaki's grin widened. Having grown up around the alien cho-ja, he was not at all intimidated by their strange ways. 'Lax'l still has not forgiven me for handing him a jomach fruit with a stone in it.'

'He has,' Mara interjected. 'But after that, he grew wise to your tricks, which is well. The cho-ja don't have the same appreciation of jokes that humans do.' Looking at Hokanu, she said, 'In fact, I don't think they understand our humor.'

Ayaki made a face, and the black curvetted under him. The litter bearers swerved away from its dancing hooves, and the jostle disturbed young Justin. He awakened with a cry of infant outrage.

The dark horse shied at the noise. Ayaki held the animal with a firm hand, but the spirited gelding backed a few steps. Hokanu kept a passive face, though he felt the urge to laugh at the boy's fierce determination and control. Justin delivered an energetic kick into his mother's stomach. She bent forward, scooped him up in her arms.

Then something sped past Hokanu's ear, from behind him, causing the hangings of the litter to flutter. A tiny hole appeared in the silk where Mara's head had been an instant before. Hokanu threw his body roughly against those of his wife and foster child and twisted to look in the other direction. Within the shadows of the bushes beside the path, something black moved. Instincts honed in battle pressed Hokanu to unthinking action.

He pushed his wife and younger child out of the litter, keeping his body across them as a shield. His sudden leap overturned the litter, giving them further cover. 'The brush!' he shouted as the bearers were sent sprawling.

Guards drew their blades in readiness to defend their mistress. But seeing no clear target to attack, they hesitated.

Mara exclaimed in puzzlement from beneath a tangle of cushions and torn curtains, over the noise of Justin's wails. 'What-'

To the guards, Hokanu shouted, 'Behind the akasi bushes!'

The horse stamped, as if at a stinging fly. Ayaki felt his gelding shudder under him. Its ears flattened, and it shook its heavy mane, while he worked the reins to soothe it. 'Easy, big fellow. Stand easy.' His stepfather's warning failed to reach him, so intent was he on steadying his mount.

Hokanu glanced over the litter. The guards now rushed the bushes he had indicated. As he turned to check for possible attack from the other quarter, he saw Ayaki frantically trying to calm a horse grown dangerously over excited. A sparkle of lacquer in the sunlight betrayed a tiny dart protruding from the gelding's flank. 'Ayaki! Get off!'

His horse gave a vicious kick. The dart in its hide had done its work, and nerve poison coursed through the beast's bloodstream. Its eyes rolled,

showing wide rings of white. It reared up, towering, and a near-human scream shrilled from its throat.

Hokanu sprang away from the litter. He grabbed for the gelding's rein, but slashing hooves forced him back. He dodged, tried another grab, and missed as the horse twisted. Familiar enough with horseflesh to know this animal had gone berserk, he screamed to the boy who clung with both hands locked around the beast's neck.

'Ayaki! Jump off! Do it now, boy!'

'No,' cried the child, not in defiance, but bravely. 'I can quiet him!'

Hokanu leaped for the reins again, frightened beyond thought for his own safety. The boy's concern might have been justified if the horse had simply been scared. But Hokanu had once seen the effects of a poison dart; he recognised the horse's shivering flesh and sudden lack of coordination for what they were: the symptoms of fast-acting venom. Had the dart struck Mara, death would have taken seconds. In an animal ten times her size, the end would be slower, and brutally painful. The horse bellowed its agony, and a spasm shook its great frame. It bared yellow teeth and fought the bit, while Hokanu again missed his grip. 'Poison, Ayaki!' he shouted over the noise of the frantic horse. Hokanu lunged to catch the stirrup, hoping to snatch the boy clear. The horse's forelegs stiffened, bracing outward as the muscles locked into extension. Then its quarters collapsed, and it toppled, the boy caught like a burr underneath.

The thud of the heavy body striking earth mingled with Mara's scream. Ayaki refused to leap free at the last. Still riding his horse, he was swept sideways, his neck whipped back as the force of the fall threw him across the path. The horse shuddered and rolled over upon the boy.

Ayaki made no sound. Hokanu avoided a hedge of thrashing hooves as he darted around the tormented animal. He reached the boy's side in a bound, too late. Trapped under the weight of dying, shivering horseflesh, the child looked too pale to be real. His dark eyes turned to Hokanu's, and his one free hand reached out to grip that of his foster father's a heartbeat ahead of death.

Hokanu felt the small, dirty fingers go limp inside his own. He clung on in a rage of denial. 'No!' he shouted, as if in appeal to the gods. Mara's cries rang in his ears, and he was aware of the warriors from her honor guard, jostling him as they labored to shift the dead horse. The gelding was rolled aside, the rush of air as its lungs deflated moaning through its vocal cords. For Ayaki, there would be no such protest at shattering, untimely death. The gelding's withers had crushed his chest, and the ribs stood up from mangled flesh like the broken shards of swords.

The young face with its too white cheeks stared yet, open-eyed and surprised, at the untroubled sky overhead.

The fingers that had reached out to a trusted foster father to stave off the horror of the dark lay empty, open, the scabbed remains of a blister on one thumb a last testimony to diligent practice with a wooden sword. This boy would never know the honors or the horrors of a battle, or the sweet kiss of his first maid, or the pride and responsibility of the Lord's mantle that had been destined one day to be his.

The finality of sudden ending left pain like a bleeding wound. Hokanu knew grief and stunned disbelief. His mind worked through the shock only out of reflex trained on the fields of war. 'Cover the child with your shield,' he ordered. 'His mother must not see him like this.'

But the words left numbed lips too late. Mara had rushed after him, and he felt the flurry of her silken robes against his calf as she flung herself on her knees by her son. She reached out to embrace him, to raise him up from the dusty ground as if through sheer force of love she could restore him to life. But her hands froze in the air over the bloody rags of flesh that had been Ayaki's body. Her mouth opened without sound. Something crumpled inside her. On instinct, Hokanu caught her back and bundled her against his shoulder.

'He's gone to the Red God's halls,' he murmured. Mara did not respond. Hokanu felt the rapid beat of her heart under his hands. Only belatedly did he notice the scuffle in the brush beside the trail. Mara's honor guard had thrown themselves with a vengeance upon the black clothed body of the assassin. Before Hokanu could gather the wits to order restraint - for, alive,

the man might be made to say which enemy had hired him — the warriors made an end of the issue.

Their swords rose and fell, bright red. In seconds Ayaki's killer lay hacked like a needra bullock slaughtered in a butcher's stall.

Hokanu felt pity for the man. Through the blood, he noted the short black shirt and trousers, the red-dyed hands, as the soldiers turned the body over. The headcloth that hid all but the eyes of the man, was pulled aside to reveal a blue tattoo upon the left cheek. This mark would only be worn by a member of the Hamoi Tong, a brotherhood of assassins.

Hokanu stood slowly. It did not matter that the soldiers had dispatched the killer: the assassin would have died gladly before divulging information. The tong operated to a strict code of secrecy, and it was certain the murderer would not know who had paid his leader for this attack. And the only name that mattered was that of the man who had hired the Hamoi Brotherhood's services.

In a cold corner of his mind, Hokanu understood that this attempt upon Mara's life had not come cheaply. This man could not have hoped to survive his mission, and a suicide killing would be worth a fortune in metal.

'Search the corpse, and track his path through the estates,' he heard himself saying in a voice hardened by the emotions that seethed inside. 'See if you can find any clues as to who might have hired the tong.'

The Acoma Strike Leader in command bowed to the master, and issued sharp orders to his men.

'Leave a guard over the boy's body,' Hokanu added. He bent to comfort Mara, unsurprised that she was still speechless, fighting horror and disbelief. Her husband did not fault her for being unable to keep composure and show proper Tsurani impassivity. Ayaki had been all the family she had known for many years; she had no other blood kindred. Her life before his birth had already been jarred by too much loss and death. He cradled her small, shivering body against his own, and added the necessary instructions concerning the boy.

But when the arrangements were complete and Hokanu tenderly tried to draw Mara away, she fought him. 'No!' she said in strangled pain. 'I will not leave him here alone!'

'My Lady, Ayaki is beyond our help. He already stands in the Red God's halls. Despite his years, he met death courageously. He will be welcomed.' He stroked her dark hair, dampened with tears, and tried to calm her. 'You would do better inside with loved ones around you, and Justin in the care of his nurses.'

'No,' Mara repeated, a note in her voice that he instinctively knew not to cross. 'I won't leave.'

And though she did after a time consent to have her surviving child sent back to the estate house under protection of a company of warriors, she sat through the heat of the morning on the dusty soil, staring at the stilled face of her firstborn.

Hokanu never left her. The stinks of death did not drive him away, nor the flies that swarmed and buzzed and sucked at the eyes of the seeping corpse of the gelding. Controlled as if on a battlefield, he faced the worst, and coped. In quiet tones he sent a runner slave to fetch servants, and a small silk pavilion to offer shade. Mara never looked aside as the awning was set up above her. As though the people around her did not exist, she sifted torn earth through her fingers, until a dozen of her best warriors arrived in ceremonial armor to bear her fallen son away. No one argued with Hokanu's suggestion that the boy deserved battlefield honors. Ayaki had died of an enemy's dart, as surely as if the poison had struck his own flesh. He had refused to abandon his beloved horse, and such courage and responsibility in one so young merited recognition.

Mara watched, her expression rigid as porcelain, as the warriors lifted her son's body and set it on a bier bedecked with streamers of Acoma green, a single one scarlet, in acknowledgment of the Red God who gathers in all life.

The morning breeze had stilled, and the warriors sweated at their task. Hokanu helped Mara to her feet, willing her not to break. He knew the