

A TRAVELER AND A STRANGER

“The dangers of threading through time are many, but one often overlooked is the danger it poses for the traveler. The mind is fragile, and time is pitiless. Even powerful marques have lost themselves to the ravages of their temporal experiments. Perhaps it is best, then, that over the course of recorded history, only a few hundred beings have ever possessed this power, and that, now, most of them are dead.”

—*Meditations on Time*

by Basara Oboro, renowned Mazabatian scholar

When Simon awoke, he was alone.

He lay flat on his back on a scrubby, brown plain veined with brown rocks and white ribbons of ice. The sky above him was the color of slate, choked with sweeping clouds that reminded him of waves, and from them fell thin spirals of snow.

For a few moments he lay there, hardly breathing, the snow collecting on his lashes, and then the memories of the last hours returned to him.

Queen Rielle, giving birth to her child.

Simon’s father, his mind no longer his own, throwing himself off her tower.

Rielle thrusting her infant daughter into Simon’s arms, her face worn, her eyes wild and bright gold.

You're strong, Simon. I know you can do this.

Threads glowing at his fingertips—*his* threads, the first ones he had ever summoned on his own, without his father's guidance, and they were strong and solid. They would carry both him and the child in his arms to safety.

But then...

The queen, behind him in her rooms, fighting the angel named Corien. Her voice, distorted and godly. A brilliant light, exploding outward from where she knelt on the floor, knocking Simon's threads askew and summoning forth new ones—dark and violent, overtaking the others. Threads of time, more volatile than threads of space, and more cunning.

He'd tightened his arms around the screaming child, wound his fingers in the blanket her mother had wrapped around her, and then, a rush of black sound, a roar of something vast and ancient approaching.

Simon surged upright with a gasp, choking on tears, and looked down at his arms.

They were empty.

The only thing left of the princess was a torn piece of her blanket—slightly singed at the edges from the cold burn of time.

He understood at once what had happened.

He understood the immensity of his failure.

But perhaps there was still hope. He could use his power, travel back to that moment on the terrace with the baby in his arms. He could move faster, get them both away to safety before Queen Rielle died.

He pushed himself to his knees, raised his skinny arms into the frigid air. His right hand still clutched the child's blanket. He refused to let it go. It was possible to summon threads with a cloth in his fist, and if he released the blanket, something terrible would happen. The certainty of that tightened in his chest like a screw.

He closed his eyes, his breaths coming shaky and fast, and remembered the words from his books:

The empirium lies within every living thing, and every living thing is of the empirium.

Its power connects not only flesh to bone, root to earth, stars to sky, but also road to road, city to city.

Moment to moment.

But no matter how many times he recited the familiar sentences, the threads did not come.

His body remained dark and quiet, the magic with which he had been born, the power he had come to love and understand with his father's patient tutelage in their little shop in *Âme de la Terre*, was gone.

He opened his eyes, staring at the stretch of barren, rocky land before him. White peaks beyond. A black sky. The air held nothing of magic inside it. It was pale, tasteless. Flat where it had once thrummed with vitality.

Something was wrong in this place. It felt unmade and clouded. Scarred. Scraped raw.

Once, his magic blood—part human, part angel—had allowed him to touch the empirium.

Now, he could feel nothing of that ancient power. Not even an echo of it remained, not a hint of sound or light to follow.

It was as if the empirium had never existed.

He could not travel home. He could travel nowhere his own two feet could not take him.

Alone, shivering on a vast plateau in a land he did not know, in a time that was not his own, Simon buried his face in the scrap of cloth and wept.



He lay curled in the dirt for hours, and then days, snow drawing a thin carpet across his body.

His mind was empty, hollowed out from his aching tears. Instinct told him he needed to find shelter. If he lay for much longer in the bitter cold, he would die.

But dying seemed a pleasant enough thought. It would provide him an escape from the terrible tide of loneliness that had begun to sweep through him.

He didn't know where he was, or *when* he was. He could have been thrown back to a time when there were only angels living in Avitas, and no humans. He could have been flung into the far future, when there were no flesh-and-blood creatures left alive, the world abandoned to its empty old age.

Wherever he was, whenever he was, he didn't care to find out. He cared about nothing. He was nothing, and he was nowhere.

He pressed the scrap of blanket to his nose and mouth, breathing in the faint, clean scent of the child it had once held.

He knew the scent would soon dissipate.

But for now, it smelled of home.



A voice woke him—faint but clear.

Simon, you have to move.

He cracked open his eyes, which was difficult, for they had nearly frozen shut.

The world was thick and white; he lay half-buried in a fresh drift of snow. He couldn't feel his fingers or toes.

“Get up.”

The voice was close to him, and familiar enough to light a weak spark of curiosity in his dying mind.

An age passed before he found the strength to raise his body from the ground.

“On your feet,” said the voice.

Simon squinted through the snow and saw a figure standing nearby, wrapped thick with furs.

He tried to speak, but his voice had disappeared.

“Rise,” the figure instructed. “Stand up.”

Simon obeyed, though he didn't want to. He wanted to tuck himself back into his snow bed and let it take him the rest of the way to death.

But he rose to his feet nevertheless, took two stumbling steps forward

through snow that reached his knees. He nearly fell, but this person, whoever it was, caught him. Their gloved hands were strong. He peered into the folds of furs over their face, but could see nothing that told him who they were.

They wrapped an arm around Simon, bolstering him against their side, and turned into the wind.

“We have to walk now,” they said, their voice muffled in the furs and the snow, but still somehow familiar, though Simon’s mind couldn’t place it. “There’s shelter. It’s far, but you’ll make it.”

I will. Simon agreed with their words. They slipped into his mind, firm but gentle, and gave him the strength to move his legs. A sharp gust of wind sliced across his face, stealing his breath. He turned into the furs of the person beside him, seeking warmth in their body.

He wanted to live. Suddenly, passionately, he wanted to live. He craved warmth and food. He clutched the baby’s blanket in his trembling, half-frozen fingers.

“Who are you?” he asked, finally able to speak.

The person’s arm was a firm weight around his shoulders, their gait steady even in the snow. For a strange moment, so strange it left him feeling unbalanced and not quite within his own body, it seemed to Simon that perhaps this person was not even truly there.

But they answered him nevertheless.

“You may call me the Prophet,” they said, “and I need your help.”

RIELLE

“Her Majesty the Queen is delighted to announce that Lady Rielle Dardenne—recently anointed Sun Queen by His Holiness the Archon, with the support of the Magisterial Council and the Crown—will be arriving in the town of Carduel on the morning of October 14 to introduce herself as Sun Queen, pay homage to the Saints in, and demonstrate her abilities for those who were unable to attend the holy trials earlier this year.”

—A proclamation sent from Genoveve Courverie,
Queen of Celdaria, to the magisters of Carduel
September 20, Year 998 of the Second Age

Apparently being anointed Sun Queen did nothing to diminish the pain of monthly bleeding.

Rielle had spent half the morning in this bed, and she had decided she was never leaving it. It was a good bed, wide and clean, with piles of pillows and a quilt so soft she felt tempted to steal it. According to the proprietor of the Chateau Grozant, who had been beside himself with nerves as he escorted Rielle and her guard to their rooms the night before, this was the finest bed at the inn. Really, she owed it to the man to luxuriate in the room he and his staff had so meticulously prepared for her.

She told Evyline as much.

Evylina, captain of the newly formed Sun Guard, resplendent in her golden armor and spotless white cape, stood at the bedroom door, raised one inscrutable gray eyebrow, and replied, "Sadly, my lady, I don't believe lying in bed all morning is part of our schedule."

"You can make it part of my schedule though, can't you?" Rielle threw an arm over her eyes and grimaced as her cramps returned with a mighty vengeance. She shifted the hot-water bottle Ludivine had brought her, pressed it to her lower abdomen, and muttered a curse. "You can do anything you set your mind to, Evylina. I believe in you."

"I'm touched," came Evylina's dry voice. "However, my lady, we only have fifteen minutes before they'll be expecting us downstairs."

A knock sounded on the door, followed by the muffled voice of Ivaine, one of Rielle's guards. "Prince Audric to see Lady Rielle."

Rielle peeked out from under her arm. "I'm staying in bed! Forever!"

"Ah, but I've brought cake," came Audric's reply.

Rielle grinned and pushed herself upright. Before she could reply, Evylina rolled her eyes and opened the door.

Audric entered, in his trim formal coat of emerald-green, looking entirely pleased with himself. He strode to the bed, knelt at Rielle's side, and presented a silver dish bearing a tiny slice of chocolate cake.

"For the Sun Queen," Audric murmured, his dark eyes dancing. "With the chef's compliments."

From the door, Evylina clucked her tongue. "Cake for breakfast, my lady? We have a long day ahead of us. Surely something heartier would be more suitable."

"Nothing is more suitable than cake when you've been traveling for a month and your body feels like bruised mush." Rielle placed the cake on her nightstand and returned to Audric with a smile. She held her face in his hands, relishing the sight of his warm brown skin, his dark curls, his broad smile. "Hello, there."

"Hello, darling." He caught her mouth softly with his. "Should I leave you to your cake?"

“You absolutely should not. You should sit with me and order everyone to leave us alone for the rest of the day.” Grinning, she wrapped her arms around his neck and whispered against his ear, “And then you should kiss me, everywhere, over and over, until I tire of it, which I never will.”

Evyline cleared her throat and left the room, shutting the door quietly behind her.

Audric laughed into Rielle’s hair. “And here I thought you weren’t feeling well.”

“I’m not. I feel awful.” She closed her eyes as Audric kissed her cheeks, her brow, the hollow of her throat. “That helps though,” she murmured. She threaded her fingers through his curls and pulled him gently closer, a smile melting across her face. She shifted closer to him, fisting his shirt in her hands. One of his hands slid down her back, his touch so gentle that it painted soft shivering ripples across her skin. His other hand palmed her breast through the thin fabric of her nightgown, and she arched up against him with a soft cry.

From the courtyard outside the inn came a distant burst of noise—firecrackers, chiming bells, the cheers of children awaiting their first sighting of the Sun Queen.

But Rielle ignored it all, instead letting Audric press her gently back into the pillows. She curled her fingers around his, scraped his jaw lightly with her teeth, and then smoothed over his skin with her tongue.

“Rielle,” he said hoarsely, his mouth finding hers. “We don’t have time.”

I do so hate to interrupt, came Ludivine’s prim voice. *But what excuse, exactly, should I give the lovely people of Carduel who are waiting so eagerly to see their Sun Queen? That she is indisposed at the moment? That their prince has his tongue down her throat?*

Rielle pulled away with a groan. “I’m going to kill her.”

Audric looked up from where he had been lavishing her neck with kisses. “Lu?”

“She’s admonishing us.”

Would you rather Tal come admonish you instead? Ludivine suggested.

Rielle nearly choked at the thought. *No.*

I'm happy to sit here under this canopy, enjoy my tea in peace, and send him up in my place.

No, no, we're coming. Just give us a moment.

Ludivine paused, and then said gently, *This is our last stop. We'll be home soon enough.*

I know. Rielle sighed. *Thank you.*

She touched Audric's cheek. "You need a shave."

He smiled. "I thought you liked me like this. What did you call it?"

"A bit of scruff. And yes, I do like it. I like the way it looks, and I like the way it feels against my thighs when you—"

With a groan and a kiss, Audric cut her off. "I thought we were meant to be responsible now, go greet the adoring masses."

"We are, we *are*, yes, fine." Rielle gently detached herself from his arms, allowed him to help her out of bed. When she turned to look at him, the sight of him so fine and poised—his lips swollen from her kisses, the sunlight through the windows gilding his curls—made her lose her breath.

Ludivine's words from weeks ago returned to her, sharp and searing: *And you lied to Audric about his father's death. We are well suited.*

Her chest constricted around her heart, and she suddenly wanted more than anything to wrap Audric in her arms and never again let him out of her sight. Instead, she blurted out, "I love you."

He cupped her face in his hands as if to imprint the sight of it forever in his memory. "I love you," he replied softly, and bent to kiss her once more. Then he murmured against her mouth, "My light and my life," and left her.

Before the door closed, as Evelyne returned to the room with Rielle's two maids flanking her, a page arrived on the landing, breathless from the stairs. "My lord prince," he said to Audric, "I have a message for you, from the north..."

But then the door closed, and Audric's reply was lost.

"What gown today, my lady?" asked one of Rielle's maids—the younger

of the two, Sylvie, in the white-and-gold shift that all of Rielle's new attendants wore.

In Audric's absence, Rielle's abdominal pain returned to her. She cupped her lower belly with one hand and stuffed the cake into her mouth with the other.

"Something comfortable," she declared. "And red."



They had been traveling for a month through the heartlands of Celdaria, introducing Rielle to the Celdarian people as the recently anointed Sun Queen, and the reception in each of the thirteen cities and villages they'd visited so far had been, as Ludivine wryly put it, *amorous*.

The town of Carduel was no different.

When Rielle stepped out of the Chateau Grozant and onto the stone road that led up to Carduel's House of Light, the wall of sound that met her ears nearly knocked her off her feet.

Carduel's population was just under one thousand, and every one of its citizens had turned out for Rielle's introduction. They lined the road dressed in their most formal attire—embroidered coats edged with gold, the cut of the fabric a few seasons out of fashion; brocaded gowns stiff with disuse and faded with age; jeweled hair combs that caught the morning sunlight and sent it flying across the road in trembling bursts. Children sat on their parents' shoulders, tossing white flower petals and waving golden sun-shaped medallions. Acolytes from Carduel's House of Light stood every few yards, their castings softly glowing.

Audric led the way, Ludivine on his arm in a summer gown of lavender and pearl, and his guard surrounding them in a loose circle.

Rielle watched them, a slight unease nicking at her breastbone. Though there had been no official announcement, the truth was plain. It was impossible for anyone who paid attention not to notice the Sun Queen and the crown prince sneaking up to each other's rooms night after night, and word of that had traveled quickly throughout the country. Someday

soon, they would have to address how to move forward, appease House Sauvillier, officially share news of the broken betrothal, and introduce the idea of Rielle as Audric's future queen.

But not today.

She ducked out from the vine-crowned trellis covering the courtyard and smiled for all the gathered crowd to see.

A sharp cry from above drew her eye; her smile became a beaming grin.

At Atheria's descent, those townsfolk nearest Rielle cried out and hastened away, making room. The massive godsbeast landed at Rielle's side with hardly a sound and folded her wings neatly against her body.

"There you are," Rielle cooed, stretching onto her toes to plant a kiss on Atheria's velvet muzzle. "Have you been hunting?"

In response, Atheria chirruped and peered about curiously, bright-eyed.

Rielle laughed as she began the ascent toward Carduel's humble House of Light, Atheria at her side. She felt the eyes of the crowd upon her and stood straighter, her cheeks flushing with pleasure. Some she passed met her gaze; others smiled and looked away; still others bowed, kissed their fingers, then touched the lids of their eyes—the sign of prayer honoring Saint Katell and the House of Light.

By the time Rielle reached the temple entrance, her arms were full of flowers, and soft white petals dusted her hair.

Tal, waiting at the doors in his magisterial robes of scarlet and gold, plucked a petal from her collar. "You're late."

Rielle wrinkled her nose at him. "Sun Queens can be tardy if they want to, Lord Belounnon," she replied, and then bowed low. He gathered her hands in his and kissed her brow.

"Last one," he reminded her softly underneath the din.

"And thank God for that."

He glanced down at her red gown, lifting an eyebrow. "I'm not sure it was wise to wear red, of all things."

Rielle rolled her eyes. She had guessed he wouldn't approve of this gown and its skirt of deep crimson. On him, it was a firebrand color.

On her, it could be interpreted as a color of the Blood Queen.

She took Tal's offered arm and accompanied him inside to the temple altar. As he began the ceremony of greeting—so familiar by now that she could have recited the entire thing from memory—she let her attention wander. It was, she knew, a disrespectful thing to do.

But if she had to listen to Tal praise her courage and heroism on the day of the fire trial one more time, she would scream, or start confessing things she shouldn't.

She maintained an expression of placid humility as he spoke of the tragedy—the innocent civilians who had lost their lives. The executed Sauvillier soldiers, who had been tricked into treason by Lord Dervin Sauvillier, who himself had lost his way in the face of ambition.

Ambition, Rielle thought. *That's a word for it.*

Pay attention, Ludivine scolded. *You look bored.*

I am bored. Rielle drew in a breath. *We should tell them the truth.*

Ah, that an angel took over the minds of their fellow citizens? That angels are returning? That the Gate is weakening? Yes, that sounds like a splendid idea.

For how much longer do you think they'll believe these lies and omissions? Rielle looked steadily around the sanctuary, into which so many townsfolk had crowded that the air had already grown damp and hot. *Our people are not stupid. We should stop treating them as if they are.*

"...And, of course," Tal continued, his already solemn voice taking on an extra weight that made Rielle tense where she stood, for she knew what came next, "we still mourn the deaths of Armand Dardenne, Lord Commander of the royal army, and our beloved late king, Bastien Courverie, a compassionate and courageous man who led our country into an era of unprecedented peace and prosperity."

Rielle lowered her gaze to her hands, swallowing hard. She would not think about her father, or King Bastien, or Lord Dervin. She would not think about the glorious moment just before she'd stopped their hearts, when the empirium was hers to command.

She shut her eyes against the memory, but still her mind summoned it

forth: the sensation of the world splitting asunder at her command. Heat crowding her palms. A detonation of unseen power blowing her hair back from her face. The empirium, raw and blinding, reflecting her own fury and fear.

Corien, crawling away from her, his ruined body glistening with burns.
Three men, lying still at her feet.

Her father, using his last breaths to sing her mother's lullaby.

A mother, and a father. Both dead at her hands.

Rielle opened her eyes, stared at her clasped white fingers. Every time Tal's words forced her to recall that awful, wonderful day—the day her father died, the day she transformed fire into feathers, and killed a king, and began to understand the true scope of her power—every time, she was forced to reckon with the truth she could not avoid:

If given the choice, she would do it all again. She would change nothing that had happened that day, for doing so would mean giving up that glorious brief moment of understanding—touching the raw empirium, tasting its sizzling, storm-flavored power on her tongue.

Even if it meant that her father would still be alive, and Audric's father too. Even then, she would change nothing, and her heart stewed in its own black delight—ashamed, but resolute.

Then Ludivine spoke: *Four men are approaching through the crowd, with the intent to kill you.*

Rielle flinched. *What? Who are they?*

Men who lost loved ones at the fire trial. They blame the massacre on you. They distrust you. Don't act until I tell you. We must wait until the right moment.

Rielle's fingers became fists. *Tell me where they are, right now, and I'll flay them where they stand.*

That would certainly ease the minds of all who doubt you, said Ludivine dryly.
Do they have weapons?

Yes.

Rage dragged its eager claws up her spine. *Audric is here, and Tal. You're putting their lives at risk.*

A woman is about to interrupt the ceremony. Let her speak. Be ready.

In the next moment, a dark-skinned woman in a high-collared azure gown, standing near the front of the crowd, moved forward until Tal's acolytes barred her way.

"My daughter was killed," she called out, interrupting Tal, her voice cracked and thin. "At the fire trial, she died. She was killed. My *daughter*."

The room fell silent. Audric rose to his feet.

"She had come to watch the fire trial," the woman continued, her eyes bright with tears. "She had come to pay homage to the Sun Queen. She was killed by a soldier from House Sauvillier." The woman pointed at Ludivine, her hand shaking. "*Her* house. And yet there she stands, alive and whole."

The crowd shifted, murmuring. Ludivine rose to her feet, the expression on her face one of eloquent pity.

Here it comes, warned Ludivine.

Rielle's body tensed. She resisted looking around the room. *Here what comes?*

"You brought her back to life." The woman locked eyes with Rielle. "And you should bring all the others back too. If you don't, you're worthless to us. A coward, and a fraud."

The crowd's voices grew into a low roar—insults thrown at the woman, a few angry cries of agreement.

Rielle took one step back from them. *You shouldn't have lied to them. We should have told them the truth.*

That I'm an angel? Ludivine scoffed. *Yes, they would have accepted me wholeheartedly.*

They would have. I would have made them.

I need to be able to protect you, not spend my time fending off the fears of small-minded people everywhere I turn—Rielle, now! Left!

Rielle whirled, throwing up her palm. The fire from the altar's prayer candles flew to her—a dozen flames coalescing into a single ball of fire. She caught it in her hand, then flung it toward a curtained balcony affixed to the far wall.

The knot of fire consumed the arrow zipping toward her, dissolving it to ash.

The crowd exploded with noise. Some ran for the doors. Others shoved their children to the ground and covered their bodies with their own.

Audric moved before Ludivine, unsheathing Illumenor. The moment the great blade hit the air, it flared to brilliant life, and the air around Audric snapped with sudden heat.

Evyline shouted orders, Rielle's Sun Guard—seven women strong—dispersing in flashes of gold to form a protective perimeter. Rielle heard a sharp twang and spun around to face the opposite wall. She felt the arrow more than she saw it, the empirium directing the instinctive power in her blood faster than her mind could form commands. She summoned a gust of wind from the air over her head and used it to slam the arrow against one of the sanctuary's high arched rafters, where it snapped in two and dropped harmlessly.

A third man was running up the altar steps, a long dagger flashing in his hands. Audric intercepted him, Illumenor blazing, and knocked the weapon to the floor. Defenseless, the man fell at once to his knees.

"Mercy, Your Highness," the man begged, hands clasped, eyes darting back and forth between Audric and Rielle. "Mercy, I beg you!"

A cry from the crowd made Rielle turn in time to see the fourth assassin tackled to the floor by a group of young women. Three held him flat against the polished tile; one kicked a dagger out of his hand. A fifth delivered a sharp kick to his head with her brocaded boot. The crowd cheered; the woman kicked the man once more.

Show him mercy, Ludivine suggested. *The ones here who love you—and there are many—will love you even more fiercely for it.*

Rielle raised her hands, flames sparking at her fingertips. "Stop! Hold him, but don't hurt him."

The women obeyed at once, bowing their heads as Rielle approached. She doused the fire in her palms and knelt beside the man.

"I'm sorry for the loss you have suffered," Rielle said, gentling her voice even as she itched to recall her fire and frighten more tears out of him. "I

am still learning, and I hope that, one day, none in Celdaria will endure the grief of needless death. I will work tirelessly at the side of Our Majesty Queen Genoveve to achieve this.”

The man stared furiously at Rielle for a moment, blood trickling down his forehead and nose—and then, as Rielle watched, his face softened and his eyes dimmed. His expression shifted into something sly and familiar.

One of the women pinning him to the floor cried out and scrambled away from him.

Rielle’s skin prickled.

The man opened his mouth to speak, but Rielle did not recognize the words. It was a harsh tongue, yet somehow lyrical, and though Rielle did not know the language, she caught the meaning well enough.

It was a taunt. A tease.

An invitation.

And underneath the man’s voice hummed another, familiar one that Rielle had not heard for weeks.

She stiffened. *Corien?*

The man grinned, and then, abruptly, his eyes cleared. His body stiffened, jerked, then fell still.

Rielle rose to her feet and backed slowly away from him, the wild drum of her heart drowning out the sounds of onlookers shoving closer to get a better look, shouting questions at Tal, at Audric, at each other.

The Sun Guard swarmed, forming a tight circle around Rielle and ushering her quickly out of the temple, Audric’s guard following close behind.

Ludivine’s voice came urgently. *We need to leave. Now.*

Rielle murmured a protest, shaking herself free from her shock as they moved outside. Atheria was prancing nervously in the garden just outside the temple, wings out, ready to fly.

Rielle turned, found Ludivine leading Audric toward her. The crowd pressed close, barely held back by the circle of guards.

“We have to stay,” Rielle protested, looking round. A man shoved forward his small child, who reached for Rielle’s skirt, sobbing. “They’re frightened!”

No.

Climb.

Ludivine's voice arrived like a fist. Rielle stumbled forward, caught herself on Atheria's chest. The godsbeast knelt at her feet; in a daze, Rielle mounted her. She heard Audric and Ludivine climb up behind her, felt Audric's arms wrap around her waist.

"Make her fly," came Ludivine's tight voice. "We're leaving."

He won't touch you. In Rielle's mind, Ludivine's voice was low and tremulous, like the roll of nearing thunder. *Never again will he touch you.*

Distantly, Rielle realized she was not in control of her mind. Ludivine was there, in her thoughts, stifling her, calming her, even though she did not want to be calm.

And yet, she gathered Atheria's mane in her hands and croaked, "Fly, Atheria."

The godsbeast obeyed.

ELIANA

“The Emperor favors dreams most of all. Here, you are at your most vulnerable, and therein lies the appeal. Before sleep, clear your mind. Say your prayers. Recite to yourself the following: I am myself. My mind is my own. And I am not afraid.”

—*The Word of the Prophet*

At first, the dream was familiar. Eliana searched through the smoking ruins of the Empire outpost where she had dined with Lord Morbrae. Prisoners still trapped in the rubble screamed her name, an agonized chorus.

Eliana.

Their voices overlapped, shattered, surged. She ran with her hands clamped over her ears, but the screams pierced her palms and burrowed inside her like animals scrambling for shelter.

Eliana.

Quivering flakes spun down from the sky, a gossamer gray curtain of ashfall. Soon she was inhaling more smoke than air. She stumbled over a pale-brown arm jutting up from a black drift.

She wanted to shout a protest, but her voice had gone.

She wanted to run, but her body did not obey. Her body was not her own.

She grasped the cold hand, stiff with death, and pulled, dislodging her mother's body. It was monstrous, deformed, frozen in a state of convulsion—not Rozen Ferracora, but the bestial crawler into which the Empire had made her.

“Eliana.”

This voice was near, and singular. A cool breath puffed against her shoulder. A faint, perfumed scent—spice and incense.

She whirled.

She was no longer in the field of ash.

She stood at the end of an eternal corridor, its carpet red as a raw mouth.

Galvanized lights, affixed to the walls with wrought-iron brackets, buzzed quietly between closed doors. The walls were wood-paneled, polished to a gleam. As Eliana walked, her blurred reflection accompanied her.

She tried the first door she came to. Tall and narrow, its arched frame formed a point that reminded her of knives.

She reached for her belt, but found she was without her weapons. She wore a simple dark nightgown; her bare feet were wet.

She glanced down at the plush red carpet, testing her feet. As her weight shifted, so too did the carpet's color.

Red bubbled between her toes.

Her stomach tightened, and the sudden high whine in her ears told her to run, but when she tried to move, she stayed right where she was. Her feet were pinned to the soaked carpet. When she tried to cry out for help, only silence emerged.

Then, with a great slam, as if from the drop of some unseen mammoth blow, the door nearest her shuddered in its frame.

Eliana stared, her skin an icy shell of sweat.

The sound came again, and again—faster, louder, until it was a pounding heartbeat, and then the rhythm degraded, and it was a hailstorm of two frantic fists, then a dozen, then two dozen, all beating against the locked door.

Eliana pulled at her legs, desperate to dislodge them from the floor.

Silent screams lodged in her throat like food too sharp and hot to swallow. And still the door shook, rattling in its frame. A scream began. Distant, deep, and rising, it joined the cacophony of fists until it drowned them out entirely, and the door was shaking then, not from the weight of hands but from the sheer anguish of the howling scream now bearing down upon it.

Eliana stared, her vision watery, her legs stinging from the scratches of her own fingernails. Not long ago, she had summoned a storm from the skies and used it to sink a fleet of Empire warships. On that frosted beach in Astavar, in the cold shallows of Karajak Bay, her blazing fingers had summoned angry wind and furious waves, and every muscle in her body had bloomed with pain as a strange new power ricocheted up the ladder of her bones.

But here, in this corridor, the world remained unremarkable and closed to her eyes. Her hands shook and her knees trembled, and she couldn't gather her thoughts well enough to reproduce that terrible moment on the beach, her mother dead at her feet, when her scream of grief had shaken the world apart.

The door would fly open at any moment, and when it did, whatever was on the other side would find her, sweating and barefoot and defenseless and alone—

Eliana awoke without moving.

Her eyes flew open. Five ringing seconds passed before she was able to catch her breath. The alien angles of the world slowly turned familiar—the vaulted ceiling above her, painted a rich dusk-dark violet and spangled with silver stars. The thick, beaded quilt of her bed. The arched sleeping alcove lit quaveringly by an inch of melted candle.

She was in her bedroom, in the Astavari palace called Dyrefal—the home of Kings Tavik and Eri Amaruk; and of their son, Malik; and three other children, working to aid Red Crown in distant waters, far from home.

And their youngest daughter, Navi.

Navi.

Eliana pushed herself upright, swung her legs out of bed, and padded

across the midnight-blue rug toward the far wall. She peeked through a door that stood ajar, and at the sight of Remy sleeping peacefully in the adjoining room—embers glowing softly behind the fire grate, fur-trimmed blanket pulled up to his chin—some of the tension in her shoulders diminished.

Soon, she would have to tell him about their mother's death—some of the truth, if not all of it. He deserved to know, even if she couldn't find the courage to tell him how Rozen had died.

Soon, she would have to tell him.

But not yet.

She pulled the door closed, slipped on her boots, threw on a heavy velvet dressing gown over her sleeping shift, and steeled herself before opening her bedroom door.

The two guards stationed in the corridor, standing against the opposite wall, snapped to attention and bowed their heads.

One of them, a short, solid woman with dark-brown skin and close-cropped white hair, stepped forward.

What was her name? Eliana searched her memory for the answer, but could only think of dream images: A scream behind a locked door. A soggy carpet foaming red between her toes.

"Is there anything we can help you with, my lady?" asked the guard. "Shall we send for the captain?"

At the thought of seeing Simon in her current state, Eliana blurted out, "God, no!"

Then, collecting herself, she managed a polite smile. "I simply wanted to go for a walk. Please, as you were."

But as Eliana walked away, the guards followed her.

She turned to face them. "As you were, I said."

"Begging your pardon, my lady," said the guard, "but we've been ordered to accompany you, should you need to leave your chambers."

Meli. That was the woman's name.

With considerable effort, Eliana softened her expression. "Meli, isn't it?"

The woman straightened, clearly pleased. “Yes, my lady.”

“Well, Meli, while I do appreciate your devotion, surely, after everything I’ve done for your people, you can allow me this one small thing?” She placed a gentle hand on Meli’s forearm, which made the woman flinch. She stared at Eliana’s hand as if it were a star that had fallen expressly for her to enjoy.

“Of course, my lady,” Meli said hoarsely, bowing her head once more. “I apologize.”

“I don’t need your apologies. I simply need an hour or so to roam the halls undisturbed.”

With that, Eliana left the guards behind. She felt the press of their awe-struck gazes upon her back long after she had turned the corner, and tried to stifle her annoyance. If they insisted upon looking at her that way—as if she really were some long-awaited queen come at last to save them from the world’s evils—then they could do so. Their adoration did nothing to change the truth:

The power she had summoned that night on the beach had not returned. And she was in no hurry to find it.



After three-quarters of an hour, having wandered through the palace’s corridors, each dark and velvet soft, lit dimly by candles from within and the night from without, Eliana stepped into the windowed gallery that connected the palace proper to Navi’s tower. The ceiling arched high overhead, bracketed torches throwing shivering arms of light across the polished stone floor.

She hesitated.

Then, in the corner of her eye, a flutter of movement. A flash of color against the obsidian glass.

Eliana turned, and a body slammed into her, knocking her to the floor. She managed to twist, landing on her side, but then a fist connected with her jaw. Her head snapped back against the floor.

She lay there, gasping. Once, she would have been able to clear her vision with a swift shake of her head and launch herself to her feet, but now she remained breathless and immobile. Bright stars sparked across her eyes. A pain reverberated through her skull from where it had hit the floor and bloomed outward, sharp and hot. She touched her scalp; her fingers came away red with blood.

Remy's words from the previous week returned to her:

Your body could heal itself, and we never knew why. But it was because all that power was trapped sleeping inside you, and it didn't have anything to do, so instead it fixed you up whenever it could.

And now?

She tried to push herself up, but her head was spinning viciously, an unfamiliar and utterly disorienting sensation, and she stumbled back to the floor.

A wild shriek cut the air, just before a weight slammed into her once more, smashing her flat. A body straddled her; two hands closed around her throat.

Eliana blinked until her vision focused on Navi, glaring down at her with glittering eyes, her face rage-twisted.

"Navi?" Eliana gasped.

Navi's hands tightened around her neck, her fingernails digging into Eliana's flesh. She growled gibberish words, and Eliana clawed at her friend's arms, tried to push her off, but the pain in her own head was a spreading fog, dumbing her senses. Her head filled with blood; her face felt ready to burst.

Running footsteps approached. Someone seized Navi, yanked her away. Eliana gulped down air, coughing and gagging. She looked up, eyes watering, and saw Navi crouched several feet away, teeth bared in Simon's direction. He circled her slowly, hand hovering at the holster hanging from his belt.

"Don't," Eliana croaked. "Don't hurt her."

His gaze flicked sharply toward her, and that beat of time gave Navi

her opportunity. She launched herself off the floor and flew into Simon. He slammed into the nearest window, cracking the glass, then staggered away, shaking his head with a slight snarl.

Navi ran back for Eliana, but she was ready. She let Navi pin her once more to the floor, keeping her arms still at her sides.

“Navi, it’s me,” she said. “It’s Eliana.”

Navi’s warm hazel gaze flickered across Eliana’s face, animal and unseeing.

“Listen to me.” Eliana blinked away the black crowding her eyes. “‘Tell me something real.’ Remember?”

A wave of recognition shifted Navi’s expression.

Eliana clung to the sight. “I came to you, in Sanctuary. I’d had a nightmare. You held me. You comforted me.”

Navi’s grip loosened. The scowl on her face uncurled.

“You told me to tell you something real. I told you about Harkan.”

Navi’s eyes brightened, twin candles flaring to life in a dark room. She scrambled away, shaking her head.

“No, no, no.” She raised shaking fingers to her temples, drew her knees to her chest. “Oh, God, what’s happening?”

Unsteadily, Eliana crawled toward her. “It’s all right. I’m here, I’m right here, I’m fine.”

“What did they do to me?” Navi huddled against the stone pillar dividing the cracked window from its unbroken neighbor. Shivering, her face drawn and hollowed from fatigue, her shorn head still bearing the marks of Fidelia’s knives, she turned imploring eyes toward Eliana. In the silence, her single sob broke like the crash of glass.

“What did they *do* to me?” she cried.

Down the gallery, past Simon, four guards turned the corner and hurried toward them, but Simon—hair tousled, weapons belt hastily thrown on over his trousers and sleep shirt—stopped them in their tracks with a single icy glare.

Eliana approached Navi as she might a wounded animal, her neck still throbbing. Blood trickled down her cheek; she wiped it away, realizing

with a sick lurch, belly to throat, that, for the first time in her life, a wound wasn't closing.

But then Navi looked up from the nest of her thin arms and cried out, and Eliana forgot everything but the sight of her friend's tear-streaked face. Navi reached out for her and let Eliana gather her tightly against her chest.

"Send for Princess Navana's healers," Simon instructed the guards.

Eliana tucked Navi's head under her chin and met Simon's furious blue gaze. She could see the reproach there—and the pity.

"Don't say it," she told him quietly. "Not tonight."

He inclined his head and turned away to stand watch until the healers arrived.

But Eliana heard his unsaid words as plainly as if he'd whispered them against her ear:

There is no hope for her.

The Navi we knew will soon be gone.

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