

The Moonlight Queen
Octogana

“I have news,” said Veda. “Megana Dura of Nasas is with child.”

If anyone else had delivered this news, Casmia would have been bemused. Irritated. A small noblewoman from a small kingdom was with child; the gods bless her. But because it was Veda, and because it was the dead of night, and because she’d disturbed Casmia in the king’s bedchambers, Casmia knew: something was very wrong. “Leave us,” she said to the servants, and they left.

The king’s First Advisor *almost* looked unfazed. Veda stood tall in the firelight, her furs and robes tidy, her black plaits sleek. But Casmia had been raised by this woman, so she saw everything. She saw the shimmer in Veda’s dark eyes, the line between her brows.

Veda took a deep breath. “A report,” she said, “just arrived from one of my informants. It seems that Megana has become... radiant.

Casmia’s brow furrowed. “Radiant?”

“Her skin and hair glow silver in the moonlight.”

Now Casmia was the one taking a deep breath. She suppressed a shiver, tugging her furs around her shoulders. Had the snowstorm blown open a window? She glanced across the room. The window was shut.

“Hetika...” The king stirred in his bed, his once powerful voice wavering. “Hetika...”

Casmia sighed, pushing herself up from her armchair. She was five months pregnant now, and the pain in her lower back worsened every day. She left her spot by the fireplace and perched next to her father, who was sweating under his snow lion furs, his gray hair plastered to his forehead.

“Father,” said Casmia, pushing the hair from his eyes. “*Ishan.*”

There he was. His milky white eyes fluttered open at the sound of his name, searching the space around Casmia, but never landing on her. His eyesight had never been sharp to begin with, a trait everyone in the royal family shared. But now, at 83, he was completely blind. How interesting it was, that these eyes, the ones they shared, the mark of the Chosen, were so extolled and so useless at the same time.

“Hetika,” said her father again, reaching out. “Hetika, where are you?”

“Mother is dead, Father.” A daily reminder. “She died 30 years ago, just after I was born. I’m Casmia, your daughter.”

“Casmia,” said her father flatly. Was he confused? Disappointed? “Casmia, I don’t... I can’t...”

“I know, Father.” Casmia took a cloth from the bowl on the bedside table. She wrung it out and laid it on her father’s brow. “Rest now,” she said, and he did, his eyes rolling back into his head.

Casmia’s head spun with thoughts of preparation. It was time to arrange Father’s funeral, that much was certain. Casmia could sense Mahdoth’s approach in her father’s rattling breath, his mottled skin. She wasn’t in denial about his demise, like she’d been with Ayan. She remembered, near the end, trying to play bikemi with him. It was their favorite childhood game. She’d knelt next to his bed, laying the board across his lap and urging him to move the pieces. When he’d done nothing, his brown eyes lifeless, she’d picked up his hand and moved the pieces for him. Even then she’d believed he would come back.

Now, six months after her husband’s death, she was planning another funeral. The idea felt distant, unreal.

She closed her eyes. Sighed. There would be time to think about this later.

“Have you spoken with the Seer?” she asked, finally facing Veda.

“I have,” said Veda. “She has a message for you.”

Veda presented a small scroll, and Casmia grimaced. The advisor gave her a knowing look. “Would you like me to read it to you?”

“No,” said Casmia, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Bring the lamp closer, please.”

Casmia slipped her reading stone from her robes, something she only did in private. Veda held a long-nozzled oil lamp over Casmia as she read, sliding the smooth emerald over the words to magnify them. Even with the stone, she had to squint to decipher the letters, and the light from the lamp, while inoffensive to most, gave her a headache.

“Alright,” she finally said, waving the lamp away. She calmed the fluttering in her stomach as she rerolled the scroll. “We’ll need to move swiftly. Has anyone else spoken to the Seer?”

“No.” Veda replaced the lamp on the bedside table. “She’s being held in her chambers until I come for her. There is a guard placed outside her door.”

“Which guard?”

“The Captain, Your Highness. Affa has been informed of the report.”

“Good.” Casmia knew her sister could be trusted with this knowledge. “Keep the Seer in her chambers until further notice. Allow no one to speak with her.”

Veda nodded. “What of Megana?” she asked. “The rumors are spreading.”

Casmia heaved a sigh. She had never been a particularly superstitious woman. Someone had seen *something*, obviously, but was Megana actually glowing with mysterious moonlight power? Probably not. Casmia’s people, however, were very superstitious, and very... religious. The rumors had likely done some damage.

She briefly considered killing Megana, but she quashed the idea immediately. That was something her father would do.

And yet...

“We can’t let her go free,” said Veda, as if reading Casmia’s thoughts. “The rumors are only rumors now, but if they are confirmed...”

“I know,” said Casmia, touching her belly. “I know.”

Silence fell, thick and heavy. It was only broken by the crackling fire and the low, melancholy howl of the wind. Casmia closed her eyes, and when she listened carefully, she could hear the whisper of windswept sand striking the window. She knew what she needed to do. She just didn’t know if she could do it.

“Capture her,” she said, finally. “Megana is religious. She’ll bring the baby into the desert, to be blessed at the temple of Mahdoth. Take her while she travels.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“Use a small team. And be discreet.”

“Of course.”

Casmia pressed her hand into her belly as if she could bring her baby closer. Was this something her father would do? She wasn’t sure.

“We won’t hurt her,” said Veda, her tone soft. She placed a hand on Casmia’s shoulder and squeezed.

Casmia nodded. She took Veda’s hand and squeezed it back.

With that, the advisor took her leave, and Casmia was alone with her father again. She replaced the cloth on his forehead, stoked the fire, and was about to call back the servants when he woke.

“Casmia,” he rasped, reaching for her. His blackening fingers twitched and shook.

Casmia felt her brow furrow. *Does he recognize me?* she wondered, approaching the bed.

“What is it, Father?” she asked, and he seized her wrist. She tried to pull away, but his grip was strong. Shockingly strong.

“Listen to me,” he said. “Take care of your people.” His eyes found hers somehow, though she was sure he could not see her. “Take care of your people.”

Casmia sighed, her surprise fading. “Which people do you mean?” she asked. “The kingdom? Or the family?”

He didn’t answer.

Casmia sat on her father’s throne—*her* throne, she supposed—and looked over the courtyard. It was the night of her coronation, and nothing was what it should be.

Just a week ago, the kingdom had laid the king to rest. That day had been quiet, somber, a blur of people in dark robes, black furs, and sheer face coverings. Casmia had expected to feel relief as the priests carried her father into his tomb. The brutal, power hungry king, finally releasing his grip on her people, giving her the space to right his wrongs. But as the tomb was closed, the huge round stone sliding over the doorway, she’d found herself feeling little. She wondered what it meant.

Tonight couldn’t have been more different. Casmia had traded her black clothes for a silver gown, her dark veil for a moonstone diadem. She sat on a dais beneath an embroidered tent, absently stroking her belly as she observed the festivities below.

Moonlight slanted into the circular yard, lending shimmer to black hair, silk gowns, and a menagerie of furs: sand fox, golden jackal, hyena, pale dog. Snow lion fur was reserved for the royal family; Casmia wore a full pelt tonight, the lion’s head adorning her shoulder. After weeks of razor winds, the storm had finally passed, and

only a light snowfall remained, dusting the palace's sandstone walls. The air smelled of calamus incense, roasting addax, and fresh cinnamon dumplings, and almost no hand was empty of a wine glass. Casmia's throat burned as she watched the people drink.

Normally she didn't mind these events. Sometimes she even enjoyed them. The clothes, the food, the performances. Spectacular. But tonight her diadem dug into her scalp, and the lion's head was heavy and awkward on her shoulder. She wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed and never leave again.

But she had just been crowned queen, and the entire kingdom was here, observing her. Appraising her. So she forced herself to look interested as she watched the priests' performance.

It was wordless, accompanied by drums and the high singing of the priestesses. Priests hefted huge puppets made of wood and skins and glittering jewels. The most magnificent was a dragon, scaled with carnelian and gold, its eyes made of glass that glowed red from within. The puppet snaked through the air around the courtyard, supported by six white-robed priests, before bearing down on a puppet dressed in silver armor. Both his armor and skin were painted with white runes, and his eyes were lined in silver, meant to symbolize the Chosen's "moonlight" eyes.

A shiver went down the dragon's body, its gold baubles jingling, before it opened its mouth and breathed flame. The crowd gasped in delight as the armored puppet dropped to one knee and lifted an arm to protect his face. The fire didn't touch him, of course, but it was so hot. Casmia could feel the heat all the way from her dais.

The flame ceased, and the armored puppet stood again. He pulled a long, curved sword from his scabbard and thrust it into the dragon's open mouth. The dragon writhed, and the priestesses let out a high, discordant note to represent its dying cry. It collapsed to the stone and lay still.

The crowd erupted into applause, underlaid by the triumphant beating of the drums. "And that," shouted the high priest from his platform, "Is the destiny of the Chosen, beloved of Mahdoth, who will save us from Nafinat, the World Eater, in the final days."

The crowd applauded again, and Casmia settled her expression as Uqid approached. His smooth, hairless head shone in the moonlight. "The first Chosen was

Kahtna,” he said, “Who was visited by Mahdoth herself in the First Age, and accepted the mantle of responsibility with grace and courage—”

And a love for her people that transcends time. Casmia fought the urge to roll her eyes.

“And now...” Uqid approached the dais, sweeping an arm toward Casmia. “We stand in the radiance of Queen Casmia Cira the First, Ninth Queen of Karsis, Chosen of Mahdoth, who will, in these last days, bring us our salvation from Nafinat. May she be sustained by the gods of her father. May she enjoy good health, warm fires, and a long and prosperous reign.”

The priest then spun around to face the crowd, arms wide. “Long live the Moonlight Queen!” he shouted, and the crowd shouted it in turn. He turned back to the dais and dropped into a bow, his forehead on the stone. The crowd did the same. The air filled with the sound of scraping shoes and rustling fabric. Then silence.

Casmia took a deep breath. Released it. She stood, a single fluid motion despite the protestations of her back. She looked out at her people. *Her* people. From the nobles and wealthy merchants near the dais, to the commoners and derelicts behind them. Had her diadem always been so heavy? She wasn’t sure.

I will love them as my own, she decided, pressing a hand against her belly. She would care for them. They were her family now. Her new family.

Whatever it took, she would do right by them.

“Rise,” she said, and the kingdom rose.

And then the moon went bright.

A cry went up from the crowd as the light assailed them. Casmia shielded her eyes, cursing. *What in the name of—*

“What is this?” she heard someone say. “Look away from it! Cover your eyes!”

Casmia forced her eyes open, squinting against the pain, and froze. Night had become day. Except... no. The light was too cool to be sunlight, too pale; it painted the once colorful courtyard in blinding silver and hard shadow. People shaded their eyes with their hands, some craning to look at the sky, others shrinking away. A child burst into tears.

“Peace, my children!” shouted Uqid. He swept in front of the dais and lifted his hands. “Can you not see? This is a sign from Mahdoth! She recognizes her Chosen and bathes this sacred ceremony in her light!”

The crowd calmed slightly, but Casmia could tell they weren’t convinced. They shuffled and whispered, looking to her with wide, shimmering eyes. *Like children*, she thought. She schooled her expression, knowing that if there were ever a time to show strength, it was now.

And then she saw Veda. She stood near the front of the audience, hands behind her back, chin dropped low as she held Casmia’s gaze. The look in her eyes made Casmia’s blood run cold.

“Hush now,” she projected. Her tone betrayed none of her fear. “Go in peace, and know you are protected.”

She swept off the dais, and Veda followed.

Casmia’s skull threatened to burst as she rode hard through the desert.

Megana had given birth. Veda had suspected it, and a report had confirmed it: hours after her capture, Megana had gone into labor in a small camp near the Fingers. Casmia hadn’t known what to think. Did she really believe a baby had caused the moon to brighten? Astronomical oddities happened all the time. But it didn’t matter what she believed, only what the people believed. So they rode.

Veda had urged her to stay. “You’ll be seen. You’ll be hurt. You’ll risk the baby.” But Casmia had dismissed the advisor firmly. She had to see this for herself. Not in spite of her baby, but for her baby.

She, Veda, and Affa had donned common clothes, covered their faces, and escaped the city through the tunnels below the palace. Their horse’s hooves threw snow and sand in their wake, and the moonlight cast the desert in ghostly silver. Casmia had never seen anything like it. She felt like she was in a dream. Or a nightmare. Or perhaps she’d died somehow and transcended to the realm of the dead. She tried not to think about it as she squinted against the moonlight, fighting the urge to pluck her eyes from her skull.

After what felt like days, Veda pointed: a rock formation took shape in the distance. Casmia could barely see it; the pale sandstone pillars were almost invisible

against the gray sky. Casmia had always thought the Fingers were beautiful, but tonight they looked... sinister. Wraithlike. Affa looked back at her, her eyes reflecting the same fears. Casmia suppressed a shiver.

A jackal howled in the distance. No. It was a baby. Its cries grew louder as they approached the campsite, each shriek lancing through Casmia's chest. In another tent, she heard a woman crying. The Fingers loomed taller and taller, clawing at the heavens.

Finally, they dismounted their horses, handing their reins to the guards in silence. Affa helped Casmia from her saddle, a hint of panic in her eyes. The look made Casmia's heart ache. Her younger sister wasn't made for this, for the demands of royalty. She was a good, kind woman and a brilliant warrior, but intrigue wasn't her strength, and she was terrible at hiding her emotions. It was a dangerous flaw in a princess, to be sure, but Casmia loved her more for it.

She caught Affa's eye. Squeezed her shoulder. Affa let out a long breath and nodded.

The three followed the baby's cries to the leftmost tent and slipped inside.

The tent was warm and dim—a welcome respite. A campfire burned in the center, the smoke venting through the roof. A guard sat on a stool near the back of the tent, and next to him, a pile of furs stirred. The baby's cries rang out from there. Casmia was almost overcome by the urge to pick up the baby and comfort it. But first things first. “Thank you,” she said to the guard. “You are dismissed.”

Casmia didn't know what to expect as she approached the furs. Maybe she would find a silver-eyed hyena demon, cackling up at her. But what she saw was somehow worse. The newborn in the furs looked no different from any other baby. It was a little girl, fists clenched as she screamed, black hair still plastered to her head with blood.

“Oh,” said Casmia, her stomach roiling. She tucked one of the pelts around the child and swept her up. “It's alright, my darling,” she cooed. “Shhhh.” The baby quieted, gripping Casmia's robes. She pressed her nose against Casmia's chest and rooted around for food.

No one spoke as they stared at the child. Casmia's heartbeat pounded in her ears. It was a wonder the others couldn't hear it.

“Where is the mother?” she asked, finally.

“In another tent,” said Affa. “Only while we’re here. I had her moved. I couldn’t risk her recognizing us.”

“Of course,” said Casmia. She turned toward Affa, bouncing the baby gently.

Affa leaned away as she watched the child, as if she anticipated an attack. “Have you looked at its eyes?” she asked.

Casmia sighed. “No.” She supposed she had no choice.

Her hand felt leaden as she lifted the baby’s chin, gingerly turning her to face the group. “Look at me, my darling,” said Casmia. As if she had understood, the baby opened her eyes and stared.

They were white. *Bright* white. Not bluish and milky like the royal family’s eyes, but pure, shimmering, opalescent white, like the seashells Father used to bring from his travels. Casmia stared at them as the baby fussed again, clearly unhappy with the lack of food. *Gods help us*, she thought, closing her eyes. She lowered herself onto the stool and sat in heavy silence.

After a long moment, Affa spoke. “We don’t know anything,” she said. “Not for certain.”

“Oh?” said Veda. “Then what do you make of those eyes? What do you make of this?” She swept open the tent flap and gestured at the moonlight.

“Enough, Veda,” said Casmia flatly. She opened her eyes. “We know the harms of superstition better than anyone. Close that.”

Veda released the flap and scoffed. “You can’t tell me it doesn’t frighten you,” she said. “I’ve never seen anything like it, never read about anything like it. And I know our histories well. We would be fools to dismiss it all so quickly.”

“We would be *fools*,” said Casmia, “To suddenly believe in myths because of a light-eyed baby and a bright moon. Blue-eyed children are born every day in the east. Eclipses happen. Stars fall. The moon goes red. Our astronomers assure us that these are all natural events.”

Veda shook her head and turned away. Affa said nothing.

“I’m not afraid of *myths*,” Casmia continued, weary. “I’m afraid of our people. We know what they’re capable of believing.”

Affa stared at the floor, unseeing. “We could adopt her,” she said. “You could claim her as your own. Claim you had twins.”

“No,” said Veda, pinching the bridge of her nose. “The moon goes bright the night Megana gives birth, the same Megana who glowed silver during pregnancy, and then her child is mysteriously stolen, only for Casmia to announce twins a few months later? Except one of the ‘twins’ is four months older than the other? Absolutely not.”

“We could hide her.” Affa met Veda’s gaze. “Send her off to some mining village. Keep her below the palace.”

“Too risky,” said Veda. “One sleepy caretaker and the child escapes. One treasonous guard and the secret is out.”

“We’ve already allowed guards to see the child.”

“Yes, a mistake that could be our downfall. Shall we continue making it?”

Casmia listened from her stool, watching the baby fuss. She sat straight and still, eyes throbbing, a dull pain moving up her back. *I just have to think*, she told herself. She knew there was a solution; there was *always* a solution. Father had taught her as much. She just had to find it.

She searched. Listened. Searched some more. Veda had an idea, but Affa struck it down. Then Affa proposed something, but that would never work, couldn’t she see? Casmia’s thoughts spun webs as she tried to consider every possibility, anticipate every danger. But nothing came together. The webs became messy, twisted, entangled with one another, until Casmia couldn’t tell where one ended and the next began. Veda and Affa’s voices rose, blending together into noise. The baby was crying again, the sound raking the inside of Casmia’s skull.

It was so hot in here. When had it gotten so hot? Casmia stood to open the tent when she felt it: her own baby stirred inside her belly.

That was all it took.

“Enough,” she said, breaking her silence. Affa and Veda went quiet.

“What is it?” Affa asked. The hope in her tone broke Casmia’s heart. She looked into sister’s face, into Veda’s, knowing her relationships with these women would never be the same. But she knew what she had to do.

“Leave,” she said.

Neither woman moved. Casmia knew they understood, but they seemed to be in shock. She couldn’t blame them.

“What?” Affa finally asked. Veda said nothing, watching.

Casmia met Affa's gaze. "Leave," she said again. "Wait for me outside."

With that, the shock faded. Affa opened her mouth once, shut it, and stared at Casmia for a moment, her lips pressed into a hard line. Casmia held her stare. Affa shook her head before turning on her heel and storming out.

Veda, in contrast, approached her. It took all of Casmia's strength not to look away. But, to her surprise, Veda's hard expression softened. She reached out and tucked a bit of hair behind Casmia's ear. Cupped her cheek. "I'll be waiting for you," she said. And then she left.

Casmia was alone.

She exhaled a slow, trembling breath, willing herself not to cry. She didn't want to cry. She didn't deserve to. But now that she was alone, the tears couldn't be stopped. She collapsed back onto the stool and sobbed.

If she were the only one in danger, she would have done nothing. Leave the child be. Let the people believe what they believed.

But her world was so much bigger now. For the first time in her life, she understood how Father must have felt. So many lives balanced on such a thin blade, with only her to keep it steady. She didn't know what would happen if the moon child was discovered, if the family's secret was revealed. But she knew, with the people of Karsis being as religious as they were, that great danger awaited her family. Awaited her child.

She pressed a hand against her belly, shaking her head. She couldn't lose anyone else. Not this child. Not Ayan's child. It was all she had left of him.

She had to do it. The rumors would still be there, but with no mother or child to confirm them, they would die away. It wasn't a good plan, she knew. But it was all she had. She had to do it.

She held the child close for the last time, and they wept together. She didn't know for how long.

Finally, the cries went quiet, and the moon went black.

They'd staged the scene to look like a bandit attack. But the rumors hadn't stopped.

Casmia saw the way her people looked at her when she walked the streets. What had once been cautious hope in their eyes was now skepticism and contempt. One person had even thrown a stone at her. When her guards had moved to punish him, she'd stopped them. She couldn't punish the man. Not when he was in the right.

Now she stood in her chambers, hands clasped in front of her, knuckles white. Sunlight streamed through the stained glass window to the east, painting the room in rainbow. The window depicted the Chosen's battle with Nafinat in a thousand brilliant colors. Casmia had been fascinated with the scene as a child, spending hours staring at it instead of sleeping. Now, she could barely stand to look at it.

"Are you ready?" Veda asked. Casmia jolted.

Veda and the physician stared at Casmia, concern lining their expressions. The three stood around an examination table, Casmia's newborn in the center. Princess Ayana lay naked, screaming up at them, her fists punching the air. Casmia loved those fists, but in this moment, they reminded her of the tiny hands that haunted her dreams.

"What?" she finally asked, staring at Ayana.

"Shall we start?" asked Veda. She took Casmia's hand and squeezed.

Casmia closed her eyes, returning Veda's squeeze with all her strength. She almost said no. She *wanted* to say no. She'd promised herself she wouldn't do this to her children, wouldn't do what her father had done to her. But now, with the entire kingdom watching, she knew she had no choice.

Still, she didn't trust herself to speak. She nodded once, a tear sliding down her face. When was the last time she'd cried in front of Veda? She couldn't remember.

"You don't have to watch," Veda whispered, leaning close. "You can look away."

Casmia said nothing. She didn't even glance in Veda's direction, her eyes fixed on the child she was about to betray.

"I'll just make a small cut through the skin of each eye," said the physician. He was the same physician who'd mutilated Casmia's eyes 30 years ago. "It won't blind her, but it will be painful; the child is too young for mandrake elixir. Once the wounds are healed, the eyes will pale to the proper color."

Casmia didn't respond. Instead, she gave the physician a look that said *Get on with it*. He seemed to understand.

The physician unrolled a cloth on the table. The cloth contained his tools: an assortment of copper and ceramic instruments, and a dozen obsidian knives in all shapes and sizes. He selected one of the knives—a blade so tiny Casmia worried he might drop it—and a copper wire bent in two places, with loops on the ends.

It all happened so quickly. The physician pinched the wire, held it to Ayana's eye, and unpinched. The loops caught the skin above and below the eye, holding it open. Casmia thought her heart would burst from her chest.

“Hold still, little one,” said the physician. Ayana screamed.

Someone burst through the door.

Casmia nearly screamed herself, whipping around to face the intruder. A guard stood in the doorway, pale as snow and panting hard.

Veda rounded on him. “How *dare* you enter the Queen's chambers without being summoned,” she spat.

“My Queen,” said the guard, ignoring Veda. “It's here.”

Casmia froze. Ayana's screams suddenly sounded so far away.

“What do you mean ‘it’?” said Veda. “Show me. My Queen, pay no attention to this fool.”

“No,” said Casmia. Somehow she knew. “Stay with Ayana. Make sure it is finished.”

“Casmia—”

“*Stay.*” Casmia's voice echoed through the chamber. Veda closed her mouth. Nodded. Casmia strode across the room and out the door, every muscle in her body trembling.

Casmia couldn't feel her feet as she swept through the halls of the palace, her robes billowing behind her. She could hear the chaos through the open windows: people and horses screamed, dogs howled, the iron of the castle gates rattled and squeaked. She and the guard burst through the main doors, and Casmia threw up a hand against the sunlight.

The world had gone mad. People rushed the gates, reaching through the bars with desperate fingers. When they saw her, their fervor heightened. “Save us!” she heard someone scream. “Queen Casmia! Please!” The palace guards stood ready, spears

pointed at the people, killing the few who managed to climb the gates. Casmia stared at the bodies, uncomprehending. Why was this happening?

Then she heard it. A sound deep and ancient broke the sky, as if an earthquake had erupted in the heavens. Her body shook as the sound filled her; it took all her strength to keep her knees from buckling. The people stopped screaming, and the silence of the courtyard was broken only by the rhythmic rushing of air. *Wings*, Casmia realized. She looked up.

Screaming broke out again as Nafinat flew over the courtyard, belching fire. Casmia looked up at it, but the sunlight... She tried to step back into the shade of the palace, but she fell, her head cracking against the stone.

Stars. Screaming. A strange blue light. Her body burst into sweat as she was enveloped in intense heat. Was it fire? Or had the moonlight come back to burn her into ashes?

“Stop it!” someone screamed. “Stop the beast! Save us Queen Casmia!”

“I can’t see it,” said Casmia, but not loud enough for anyone to hear. The screams of a white-eyed baby filled her skull. “I can’t see it.”