

From the night, a nebulous entity emerged, calling the darkness into exile as she loomed over her domain. The possessor of many titles; there was no definition to her, no certainty but perspective. To the power brokers, she was a vagabond; to the kingdom, a ruler. To her kin, nothing; to her blood, everything. The sages knew her to be cursed, yet the stars blessed her as one of their own.

She was Aurelia, Queen of Jardenia, the gambit of the future, the last stand between destruction and tragedy.

Staring out off the balcony, her eyes reached past the majestic palace falls, past spires of silver, fountains of wealth, and gardens of abundance, and turned instead towards the forgotten. A complete, trancelike quiet descended as she watched a golden sunrise caress the villages of Jardenia, rousing them for another day. The same routine would ensue: hacking sugarcane with rusted blades and hefting jagged stone with calloused hands, then hurrying home in time for warm meals of rice and beans and meat; served with tart tamarind juice and love. Today, children would laugh and play in the mud, picking fruit and gathering rocks, eyes always twinkling with the mischief of a new discovery. The day would pass without event; the people would turn in for a warm, humid night, none the wiser of the volatile flashpoint they lived atop.

The queen allowed her gaze to linger on the view, her being ever-shifting in the morning light. The dampened footfalls of a soldier caused her to change posture: hands stiffening, shoulders relaxing, not yet turning to meet his eyes. She spoke sharply, somewhere between anger and desperation, but the roar of the falls reduced her demand to a passive wondering.

“Tell me, Belvar, why is it that kingdoms only exist past their time?”

The soldier appeared at her side, close as he dared allow, leaning over the balcony, searching for the cause, the trigger, the path into his queen’s mind.

“In what sense?”

“Kingdoms are built through legacy, by the conquerors of old; the craftsmanship of an art long-refined; the constructs of generations long-past. Thus, the grandeur of a kingdom is governed by precedence, never preeminence. In that sense, a kingdom lives only in its past, only in the yesterday of glory.”

The queen’s voice faded, muted by the water. She waited, it seemed, for the soldier’s response, but his expectant silence forced her to articulate her struggle, to show the hand of the ominous player at war in her mind.

“Do you think that is why nobles and commoners alike remain passive in the face of destruction? The illusion of safety, of old days of glory, so prominent the future appears a mirage.” She chuckled. “What cunning irony.”

Belvar left her waiting again, refusing to play further into her obsession. His queen turned towards him, finally meeting his eyes with a gaze of such intensity he struggled to hold it. Jewel eyes, they called them, iridescent in the light and luminous in the dark, fawned over by the wealthy. They painted Aurelia as an object of adoration, every tale manifesting a different image: stone gray, earthen brown, fountain blue, no one could decide, which made her all the more entrancing.

Yet where others saw passive beauty, Belvar instead perceived the treacherous, vivid shades of the land. Her eyes bore the truth of her kingdom, the same illusion of quaint, simple splendor. The people inevitably saw what they lived: the safety of the trees, the comfort of the mountains, the reliability of the soil. A stable society, a protective haven Belvar could never enter. Whenever he looked out, he saw their true kingdom: a disaster backlit by crimson fire; a wreck beached by the deceptive shine of the sea, a prisoner bound by the rumblings of attack by

the jungle. It was the truth of the kingdom he saw in Aurelia's eyes: the vermillion of fury, the blue of fickle serenity, the emerald of deceit.

And yet, while corruption thrived and the balance of power trembled, he worried about her. Perhaps because he sensed her significance in the events to come; perhaps because it was his duty; perhaps because he loved her.

"I take it you had a long night,"

"Always long nights," Aurelia murmured. "You know that."

It broke him, seeing her overburdened and exhausted by a duty she should've never had.

"You deserved better."

"We all deserved better," Her voice cracked, and for a flickering moment, they saw each other as no one else could: Children, not yet twenty, caught in a web of injustice and impossibility, struggling to maintain a normality they could never possess. With a sigh, Aurelia turned away first. "But what good is merit in the face of reality?"

"Only what we make it to be, I suppose. It could be everything," he leaned in, hoping to catch her eye, "or just another lie."

Aurelia inhaled sharply, jerking away from him. Belvar caught his breath, realizing he had reached to touch her, pull her out of despair. He withdrew his hand and stumbled back. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't-I wasn't thinking,"

She closed her eyes, leaving Belvar to watch her emotions unfold: the anger, the uncertainty, the fear, and worst of all, the hint of betrayal.

She opened her eyes, a pulsating amber in his shadow. "You were wearing gloves." Her voice was cool, impersonal, which hurt almost as much as her anger. She shook her head.

"Forget about it."

“Thank you,” Belvar exhaled, knowing he was the only one who could’ve made such a move and been given a pass.

“Why are you here?” Her voice startled him, and for a moment, he feared he had misread her, that he had fractured her trust, and she was through with his sympathy.

“Did you come to inform me of anything, or just play at being a philosopher?”

He relaxed. “What were you doing, if not the same?”

“My duty. Meditation, ponderings, headaches, such is the life of a queen.”

She was too serious for her own good, “Ah, yes, the desolate life of a queen, condemned to forever gaze upon her palace from a silver balcony,” Belvar teased, hoping to win a smile.

“Give me the news before I have you replaced.” Her tone was irritated, but the shadow had lifted from her eyes.

“Well, it would seem our friend Nightstrike has, indeed, struck again. The Earl of Operin has vanished; and there was a fallacious attempt to transfer his funds to an advisor.”

Aurelia clucked her tongue. “What shame. It would seem I have some new appointments to make.”

“Indeed. The Council, however, is becoming restless. They fear that between the recent turnover rate and the and Nighstrike’s campaign of terror, there will be none left of the old order.”

*But then, that’s the idea, isn’t it?*

“Restless over Nightstrike? They’re simply another mercenary hired by some group or another. If anything, the Council should know how to maintain their own security.” Her mouth twitched. “especially the ones tied up in... *questionable* affairs.”

Belvar forced himself to be serious. “They may begin to ask questions. It is becoming evident that Nightstrike is among the Gifted.”

“That’s far from unheard of, not even for a mercenary.”

“Yes, but there is a clear connection between you and the Gifted. You’ve done more for them than any ruler ever has. They may-”

“Do you really think they would dare accuse me of conspiracy?”

“Directly? Never. But you know how the nobility works. It would not be beyond one of them to seize the opportunity to undermine your rule.”

“Or worse, attempt to corrupt Nightstrike,” Aurelia rubbed her temples. “Duplicity upon duplicity. Nothing has changed.”

“I doubt Nightstrike’s a direct threat. She-or he-doesn’t seem interested in much negotiation. Even so, you’re, well-we’ve ensured, in every sense of the word, that you’re untouchable.”

“But either way, they will seek to use Nightstrike against me,” She sighed, nursing a new headache. “This could get messy,”

Belvar inclined his head, eyes sparkling. “Such is the life of a queen,”

She stared at him incredulously, then, finally, smiled for him. “Leave me be, Captain.”

At twilight, the hand of justice was ready.

Slipping through the darkness with ease, the warrior crept alongside Governor Carnado’s estate. Wrapped in simple leather from the nose down, they might have been a common thief or an enemy spy, but the reality was far more terrifying. Gloved hands brushed the stonework, then clenched into the tiny grooves between stones. They ascended with grips of steel, in no hurry,

pausing every so many holds to rest, then jumping upwards with new strength. They vaulted onto the roof with ease, now running with no desire for stealth. They paused, listening to the clamor beneath as the guard was summoned before dropping onto the ornate windowsill and smashing the frame in. Governor Carnado, still in daywear, shouted in fear as the lamplights blinked dead; the door locked shut.

“Who goes there?” He demanded, stepping into the sliver of starlight, blindly waving his sword.

*“You should know who I am,”* The voice seemed to come from the air itself, barely a whisper yet impossible to ignore. Carnado, to his credit, showed no fear.

“Enough games! Reveal yourself and submit to seizure and arrest! My guards will breach the room in seconds!”

*“I need little time,”* The voice hissed. Carnado stumbled; the voice seemed closer, yet without direction.

*“You will depart from this kingdom, alone, by sunrise. You will take up residence in the Kingdom of Archeales, where you will be welcomed with the rest of the slime.”*

“I-I have no connection to the Archeales! They are rivals and t-theiving scum!”

*“You stutter.”*

“I am done with you! *Guards!*”

*“We both know what lies you tell. Your life in Acheales will be far better than you deserve.”*

“Why would I ever agree to such an outrageous demand?” Carnado was stalling now, honing in on the voice, readying his blade.

*“Because-”*

Carnado struck, feeling his blade tear through flesh. A moment of silence passed, the pounding of the door muffled by the hum of adrenaline. The figure stepped into the light, a bloodless gash torn across their leather garments, unarmed, hands folded behind their back. The governor rushed forward, swinging at their head. They sidestepped and pivoted, catching the sword by the blade, wrenching it from his grip, stepping close to the governor, voice now clear.

“Because I am *el golpe de la noche*, the voice of the kingdom; the gift of the land,” they rasped. “and I cannot be touched,”

“Your mission is impossible,” Carnado sneered. “The face of the land is soon to change, and those like *you* will not be able to hide so easily.”

*“Is that s-”*

A crash sounded as the door fell, and a strangled gasp came from the intruder as a dagger was plunged into their back. They fell limp as guards poured in, checking Carnado for harm.

“What did they want?” the captain demanded.

“T-to kill me, of course! What else?” Carnado snapped.

“*No.*” The guard stumbled, thrown by an unseen force. A familiar figure came between them, crimson-stained dagger in hand.

“I am not so easily undone,” they cackled in the half-light of the window, eyes glinting yellow. “I am Nightstrike.”

Before the guards could overcome their disbelief, Nighstrike was gone, leaving not a drop of blood on the floor; only the lingering message in the air.

*“Do not forget.”*

Midnight struck, and Nightstrike hovered outside palace walls, admiring the woven silver banners and jade embellishments; the precision of the stonework. They gazed up at the impossibly high structure, at the falls adorning the spires.

A turn of the dagger.

A glance towards the flickering light they knew to be the queen's chambers.

*Not yet*, they thought, tossing the dagger into the bush and descending into the night.

Morning smiled, and Aurelia sat alone at the high table, an untouched plate of fruit and chocolates before her, absentmindedly rubbing the palm of her hand. A knock sounded at the entrance, and she dropped her hands, assuming an appearance of formality.

"Enter," she said, slipping fine gloves over her hands. A middle-aged, motherly woman appeared: Castala, her chief administrator and only advisor.

"I'm sorry to disturb, but news has come from our far borders,"

"I know about the Governor. See that his estate is appropriated and the arrangements are made for a transfer of power,"

"No, no, it's not that, I've already done so, it's-" Aurelia's breath caught upon seeing rare panic in Castala's eyes. "A *legion* of knights accompanying the Archduke of Archeales" She swallowed. "With them, the disappeared Councilmembers,"

Aurelia's eyes flashed red. "What demands have they made?"

"They've issued an ultimatum," Castala shut her eyes as if holding back tears "They want you, my queen, or war."

Silence, then a shriek and the clatter of fine dishware as the queen smashed her glassware. "Tell them to meet me in the Conqueror's Garden at noon,"



“You’re making a foolish move,” Belvar pleaded. “You’re not invincible,”

“I will settle this alone,” the queen snapped. “They will witness the consequences of trying to kill a worthy ruler,”

“Please, just take *someone*. It doesn’t have to be an army or even a guard. The Archduke is clever, he will use trickery and wordplay to get what he wants. Bring an advisor. Bring Castala. By the stars, bring a negotiator!”

“You know just as well as I that I can’t afford to trust anyone,”

“Trust me, then,”

She stared at him, eyes shining with emotion. “No,” she rasped. “I can’t.”

Noon came, and Nightstrike waited within the palace walls.

“You’re late,” she addressed the incoming party, expression obscured by her hood.

Frantic whispers came from the Councilmembers-fear, disgust; shock. The Archduke of Archeales thrust past them, standing close, but not within striking range.

“Where is the queen?” he demanded.

“Also late, it seems,” Nighstrike chuckled.

“What are you- the queen’s defender, her henchman, or her murderer?”

“What difference does it make? I am here, she is not, and *you*,” she laughed, “are hopelessly outmatched,” In a flash, she moved, and his entourage fell in a mess of steel and shouts. Nightstrike was stabbed and sliced, but not one wound bled beneath the leather. The Archduke watched, impassive, amused.

“Yes, yes, very impressive.” he drawled.

Nightstrike picked up a sword and slashed him across the face.

“I should kill you,”

“Oh, but you can’t, can you?” the Archduke gasped, taunting her with his fearlessness.

Nightstrike grabbed him by the throat, while the Councilmembers cowered in the background, unwilling to intervene.

“*An army stands ready to burn Jardenia’s villages if I do not return by sundown!*” he wheezed, grasping at Nighstrike’s arm.

The slightest hesitation as Nighstrike considered, loosening her grip.

“Ah yes, I too have cards to play. I knew you would come here, intervene in our works. But of course, you had to bring that silly, naive sense of *justice* I’ve heard of. In the dark, you seem a terror, but in the light, you are *weak*.”

He tore the leather wrappings from her arm, clamping onto the exposed skin. Nightstrike shrieked, writhing as energy flowed from her. The gash on the Archduke’s face rippled, knitting itself back together into clear, unblemished flesh, only the stain of blood remaining.

“Better,” he chuckled, wrenching Nighstrike’s arm from his throat. “I know the queen is not dead. In fact, she hired you to do her dirty work, didn’t she? Perhaps from the start of her reign, when she first visited the Gifted.”

“I do no one’s bidding,” Nightstrike snapped, struggling against his grip.

“I already know you were not bought. You could’ve exacted great profit from your abilities, had you liked. No, you were *won*, you were *deceived*. Did she convince you we are selfish? Look at yourself! You could have healed every veteran in the land, every scar and blemish. Instead, you hoard your power and play at being a hero in the night. *Pathetic*.”

Nightstrike twisted, catching him in the ribs and breaking his grip. Her hood fell, and though her face was still half-covered by the mask, in the light, her eyes told the full story.

The Queen of Jardenia had always been here.

“*You.*” the Archduke sputtered. “*You.*” He shook his head while the Councilmembers shouted in outrage. He shook his head. “The Queen who always had to do things herself,”

“It’s more effective this way,” Aurelia said, standing firm, energy renewed.

At that, the Archduke burst into laughter once more, a habit Aurelia already found immensely irritating.

“You thought exiling them would solve the problem, didn’t you? What did you think-Archeales would be happy with a bunch of lost kittens, content to leave you be? You have only served to further our campaign.”

“Nonsense. The forces of Jardenia stand against you. As this land’s protector and its queen, I command you to leave.” Aurelia hissed, eyeing the scattered swords.

“Oh, but you misunderstand. The campaign has already begun. A quarter of the land is already ours, thanks to the very helpful arrangements you’ve provided.” He inclined towards the Councilmen. Aurelia’s eyes flashed, not in anger, but white in fear.

The Archduke smirked. “Never before have I seen such a magnificent, terrific failure. Sometimes things are best left out of your hands.” He stabbed suddenly, making for a quick kill, but in that instant, chaos erupted from the garden as a detachment of royal guards emerged, a mess of battle and blood ensuing. Aurelia stumbled and fell, tackled by a silver-clad soldier. The world swirled, dancing between color and shadow. When she arose, there were two men on the ground, one stabbed through the chest, the other the stomach.

“Belvar,” she breathed, rushing to pull him from the fray,”

He forced a smile, eyes hovering between life and death. “I warned you this was foolish,”

“You always did,” her voice broke. “I should’ve trusted you.”

“You will fix this,” he gasped, gritting his teeth in pain. “I know you will. I’m only sorry I won’t be by your side.”

“No,” she declared, eyes brilliant blue, forcing back tears. “Enough of my power has been taken by evil today,”

Aurelia tossed her mask away, eyes brilliant blue, and did what she had never willingly done, pressing her head against his, sending life surging back into him. In the clamor behind her, some part of her sensed what was about to happen, but in that moment, she refused to care. A shout came from behind, and a spear burst through her chest tearing a long, jagged gash. She fell, the wound pulsating as her power tried and failed to close the wound.

Belvar screamed in horror, hurling her assailant away and catching her.

“I turned out no better than they did,” she breathed, a tear running down her cheek.

“No,” he insisted. “You were stronger, you were wiser, you were-” he whimpered. “You were untouchable.”

“That was why I failed,” she whispered. “You won’t make the same mistake,” She strained, pushing herself to sit. “Remove your gauntlet.”

He wanted to protest, but her eyes, a regal, soulful purple, demanded he oblige.

Aurelia removed her glove and clasped her hand against his, allowing her power to flow into him, now relishing the sensation. At the last trickle of power, her hand dropped, and she smiled, finally, completely human, completely vulnerable. She met his stricken gaze and smiled, trusting the future into the hands of another.

