

AURELIA ISENDARE

Etania

Our palace is sharp with autumn's chill. The boilers in the cellar hiss to life, radiators ticking in every parlour corner, but creeping cold still permeates the arching halls of home. A wintry breath snakes between double doors, jeweled chandeliers, marble alcoves. The high ceilings and endless rooms swallow warmth, hearth fires burning brightly in defiance.

My mother is as defiant as the flames. She sits at her mahogany desk, dressed in a wool coat trimmed with ermine, and I stand at her left shoulder, seeing every twitch of breath in the slender expanse of her throat. It's the only thing that belies her calm. Beyond the large windows, the faithful mountains rise, their peaks gone brown, spindly leaves clinging in scarlet patches.

Lord Jerig places a white paper on the desk. "Your Majesty. Let justice be dealt."

He waits obediently before us, as do the other men of her Royal Council, and even her brother, my uncle Tanek. A little herd of men hungry for retribution. From where I am, the decree is easy to read. A simple paper, with elegant script.

Ink words holding death.

"For betraying Etania, the kingdom of our true hearts, and aiding in the coup against Her Majesty, forsaking the honourable legacy of His Late Majesty Boreas Isendare—who, in good faith, crowned Her Majesty to rule until our Prince is of age—the following shall forfeit their life in payment for their shameful crime."

It's only been two months since that awful night when these men attacked my birthday masquerade, a fragment of our own people revolting against us and claiming my mother murdered my father for the Etanian throne. It's still fresh, still frightening inside, and sometimes I catch myself counting the steps to each door or window in a room, scouring for an escape—anything to get away from the clatter of bullets, the plumes of smoke rising into the night sky. Something deep within me has been left small and fearful. I want this over. I want this hateful thing ended forever. And yet, I can't stop reading the names on the paper.

Twenty-five names.

Elegant, precise, dead.

Mother tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. The raven black is twisted into a regal chignon, but another cut of grey strikes the dark. "Yes, let justice reign." Her firm voice lilts with its lovely Southern accent.

She scrawls her looping signature, the first from our family.

My father, the late king, worked hard to ensure the death sentence was a laborious verdict to pass. He didn't believe in handing out death like God. My mother, in only eight weeks, has undone that. She introduced a new law to the Council—"guilt by absence"—and they voted in quick favour, the entire kingdom left shaken from that night. We don't have the true culprits who plotted this treason against us, only the secondary men who are either too fiercely loyal to confess where their orders came from, or too fiercely threatened into silence

by their superiors. But now they will hang regardless, bearing the guilt of their absent leaders.

Mother kept only one of Father's rules. The one that says each royal must agree before life is taken, each royal signature on the warrant.

So, here we are.

I'm next, and I know what they all see—a seventeen-year-old princess, the perfect reflection of her foreign-born Resyan mother with a flicker of traitorous doubt on her face. I can't hide it. Guilt slips between the cracks as I read those names. They're real people, with families and homes and hearts, and while I despise them for what they did, for trying to hurt my mother and shattering the sanctuary of my home forever, I also don't want to take life again.

Once was enough.

Mother looks over her shoulder at me, and there's gentle prodding in her eyes. We've discussed this too many times over the past month, the importance, she says, of making this decisive statement, so no one will ever try to steal from us again. I don't want to disappoint her. I don't want to imagine how she would look at me if she knew the truth, what I've already done.

I reach for the fountain pen and sign.

Jerig offers an indulgent smile at me—his tiny moustache spiderlike above thin lips—then slides the paper to Renisala, who stands at my left.

My brother's signature is the one they're truly waiting for. Their nineteen-year-old prince who is mere months away from his crown. They've heard his eloquent speeches denouncing this severe sentence, this abject rejection of everything Boreas Isendare stood for. But my brother has been overruled by fear—and our mother. He had no choice but to surrender to popular opinion, and now he stands on Mother's other side, the picture of everything noble, uneasy at the prospect of executing men for simply believing an idea. His dark hair is brushed smooth, his hazel eyes fixed on the paper.

His hand rests against his tailored suit, unmoving.

Jerig shifts awkwardly, glancing at the Council, and Mother turns to face Reni. The clock has the nerve to tick rather loudly as my brother continues to stare.

Somewhere down the hall, a muffled radio address talks of peace, glorious peace, since Savient's war in Resya has been denied. The Safire Commander's impossible claims against my mother's homeland—"the Resya problem" as they call it—were soundly overruled by the Royal League's verdict this summer, and surely reason and good sense will overcome these trying times, lead everyone to a brighter dawn of trust and reconciliation.

Peace for all.

Before us, the death warrant still taunts.

"Your Highness," Jerig begins uncomfortably, then stops.

What is there to say to a prince who defies his queen? Reni's eyes lift, but they don't settle on Jerig, or Uncle, or even Mother. They look beyond the flock of men, to the oil painting hung above the gilded bronze of the crackling hearth. It's our royal ancestor, Prince Efan, waging his victorious battle for the North, centuries ago. Kneeling in silver armour, Efan holds his helmet in humble acceptance of his divine victory. His regal face is lit by three

rising suns, and his black stallion sprawls on the ground nearby, arrows poking from its chest and hind.

Earlier this morning, Renisala looked at me across our breakfast tea, and asked, “Do you think you can dream your own death, Ali?”

It was the strangest question he’d ever uttered. One that came, seemingly, from his musings over the history of Efan—a prince who once foresaw his fabled victory, every detail of it envisioned, from the flame-tailed horse to the three suns. Over the past month, my ever-pragmatic brother has developed a habit of waxing philosophical about the nature of fate, and it’s a surprise to everyone, since he’s always been more inclined to simply take what’s his. Perhaps he’s kept this under lock and key for all these years, only now, at last, tapping into the full realm of the deep spirit Father left him. Weighted with responsibility, longing to imbue everything with some shred of nobility.

I feel obligated to be firmer. I have no patience left for myth.

I nudge Reni’s foot with my own, behind Mother’s chair where no one can see, and his gaze shifts to mine. The storm of regret churning there mirrors the one I’ve hidden from sight. My sweet, sweet brother. All of his rules and reasons can’t save him from the true weight of taking life. It’s final—it hangs over your soul like a shroud, an endless bruise that throbs with sudden words and thoughts and even the way someone says your name. Cheerful, because they don’t know the blood on your hands. It’s hell, forever.

But still I nod at him, because Mother knows best, and today, justice must come.

His shoulders straighten. “I’m sorry,” he says regally. “I simply wanted to read the names again.”

“I’m sorry.”

It’s not Reni’s voice I hear in my head now. It’s the boy I love, his apology whispering against my neck, and I’m back in that lonely place with only him, the palace splintering round us, both of us reaching for each other’s warmth. Seizing that precious moment that was ours before it all went wrong. My beloved Safire pilot who agreed to aid me in blackmail against his General Dakar, then kissed me perfectly as the royal forest burned—and he thought to beg my forgiveness. For what? For being afraid? For not knowing how to save us? Athan Erelis betrayed his own uniform to become my ally that night. I told General Dakar that I ordered Athan to help me, that Athan had no choice, but what if that wasn’t enough? What if someone signed a warrant for Athan’s execution just as I signed one today? Guilt by absence?

Is that why I haven’t heard from him since then?

My cold hands tremble, that tiny, fearful thing in me gnawing afresh as Reni signs his name and the entire Council exhales with relief. They don’t need to worry. My brother is everything they could want in their future king—compassionate where possible, just when necessary. Strong and gentle and good.

I’m the murderer.

I’m the one who killed my own cousin.

The necessary signatures over, everyone smiles, like executions are proper business. Uncle Tanek’s consent doesn’t matter, since no blood of Prince Efan glitters in his veins. He’s only a quiet, foreign phantom following his royal sister who was gifted her dying husband’s crown,

and Reni passes the warrant across the table to Jerig. At last, it seems finished, the sentences to be carried out immediately, ropes placed round necks and life strangled away. Yet I feel no relief, no joy, because nothing's over, nothing's done, and the worst might yet come.

"Peace," the radio broadcast assures, *"between all our great nations."*

Only I know what that truly takes.

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ATHAN DAKAR

Savient

It's been over two months since the Royal League ruled against our war in Resya, but the sunset wharf before me tells a different story. Standing on the walls of an old citadel, I count three torpedo boats floating in the murky water far below, mounted anti-aircraft guns gleaming on the forward and aft decks. Earlier this week, they only had a single turret. Now they've multiplied to four, and everything's encased in armour. On a nearby carrier, hidden beneath netting, twenty fighter planes sleep, camouflaged wings and flanks painted forest green.

The quiet conspiracy of our war machine rousing to life.

Trying to ignore that unpleasant reality, I focus above the deceitful harbour, on the multicoloured sky still honest and raw and mesmerizing. Tiny pricks of light appear, the first stars, and I challenge myself to find at least ten while they're still pale and barely detectable. Soon enough they'll be enemy planes. Barreling out of the dusk light, guns ablaze. The faster I can train myself to spot danger in the sky, the better pilot I'll be.

Also, it's a nice excuse to stargaze.

"How's that letter coming along?" Cyar enquires, leaning on the bulwark beside me. "Your page still looks mostly blank."

We've been hiding out here for over an hour, me with a fresh sheet of paper in hand. Usually Father relies on speeches and toasts and contracts for his wars, businessmen made to feel important and essential. But since no one in the North can know we're about to invade a sovereign kingdom, he's been forced to employ a different tactic. Instead of a proper war rally, he's let my brother Arrin host another kind of spectacle—a reckless party that outshines any arms deals being signed backstage.

It's turned, more or less, into a drunken cabaret show.

I squint up at the sky. "Six..."

"Stop avoiding this, Athan. You said you'd do it before I took leave, and now I'm back, and there's still nothing."

"Just let me get to ten."

“If you don’t write something, I will.”

“Seven ... Eig—”

Too late. Cyar whips out his own notebook and begins penning something for me.

“I swear,” I say, “if it’s about snakes or sunflowers I’ll—”

“No, that’s my thing. Get your own.”

He scribbles away, then passes it over and looks at me with a very Cyar look—a bit earnest, a bit smirking. His thick black hair’s all mussed from the sea wind, which means mine probably looks even worse.

I glance down.

The letter’s two lines long and barely legible.

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