

Link to original source: <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/556378/ember-queen-by-laura-sebastian/>

Reckoning

The sun is blinding when I step out of the mouth of the cave on weak legs. I lift a heavy, aching arm to shield my eyes, but the effort of even that small gesture makes the world around me spin. My knees buckle and the ground comes up to meet me, hard and sharp with rocks. It hurts, but oh, it feels so good to lie down, to have fresh air in my lungs, to have light, even if it is too much all at once.

My throat is so dry, it hurts to even breathe. There is caked blood on my fingers, on my arms, in my hair. Distantly I realize that it's mine, but I can't say where it came from. My memories are a desert--I remember stepping into the cave, remember hearing my friends' voices begging me to come back. And then . . . nothing.

"Theo," a voice calls, familiar but so far away. A thousand footsteps beat against the ground, each one making my head throb. I flinch away from the sound, curling tighter into myself.

Hands touch my skin--my wrists, the pulse point behind my ear. They are so cold, they raise goose bumps on my skin.

"Is she . . .," a voice says. Blaise. I try to say his name, but nothing comes out.

“She’s alive, but her pulse is faint and her skin is hot,” another voice says. Heron. “We have to get her inside.”

Arms scoop me up and carry me--Heron’s, I think. Again, I try to speak, but I can’t make so much as a sound.

“Art, your cloak,” Heron says, his chest rumbling against my cheek with each word. “Cover her head with it. Her eyes are oversensitive.”

“Yes, I remember,” Art says. Fabric rustles and her cloak falls over my eyes, wrapping my world in darkness once more.

I let myself fall into it now. My friends have me, and so I am safe.

The next time I open my eyes, I’m on a cot inside a tent, the bright sun filtered through thick white cotton so that it is bearable. The pounding in my head is still there, but it’s dull and faraway now. My throat is no longer dry and raw, and if I focus, I have a hazy memory of Artemisia pouring water into my open mouth. The pillow beneath my head is still damp from where she missed.

Now, though, I’m alone.

I force myself to sit up even though it intensifies the pain echoing through my every nerve. The Kalovaxians will return sooner or later, and who knows how long Cress will keep Søren alive? There is so much to be done and not nearly enough time to do it.

Placing my bare feet on the dirt floor, I push myself to stand. As I do, the tent flap pulls open and Heron steps inside, ducking his tall frame in order to fit through the small opening. When he sees me awake and standing, he falters, blinking a few times to ensure he isn't imagining me.

"Theo," he says slowly, testing out the sound of my name.

"How long has it been?" I ask him quietly. "Since I entered the mine?"

Heron surveys me for a moment. "Two weeks," he says.

The words knock me backward, and I sit down on the cot again. "Two weeks," I echo. "It felt like hours, maybe days."

Heron doesn't look surprised by that. Why would he? He's gone through the same thing.

"Do you remember sleeping?" he asks me. "Eating? Drinking? You must have, at some point, or you would be in much worse shape."

I shake my head, trying to grasp what I do remember, but very little of it solidifies enough for me to hold on to. Scraps of details, ghosts that could not have been real, fire flooding my veins. But nothing more than that.

“You should have left me,” I tell him. “Two weeks . . . Cress’s army could be back any day now, and Søren--”

“Is alive, according to reports,” Heron interrupts. “And the Kalovaxians have received no orders to return here.”

I stare at him. “How can you possibly know that?” I ask.

He lifts a shoulder in a lopsided shrug. “Spies,” he says, as if the answer should be obvious.

“We don’t have spies,” I say slowly.

“We didn’t have spies. But we got word that the new Theyn was at his country home, two days’ ride from here. We were able to turn several of his slaves before they returned to the capital. We just received our first missive. The Theyn hasn’t ordered troops back yet. Besides, the vast majority of the army has left. It’s only Blaise, Artemisia, Erik, Dragonsbane, and me, plus a group of those still recovering from the battle. But even they’ll be going to safety with Dragonsbane in a day or two.”

I barely hear him, still trying to wrap my mind around the idea of spies. All I can think of is Elpis, of what happened the last time I made a spy of someone.

“I didn’t approve the use of spies,” I tell him.

“You’d walked into the mine the day before the plan was hatched,” Heron says, his voice level. “You weren’t around to approve much of anything, and

there was no time to wait for you to come back. If you came back at all.”

A retort dies in my throat, and I swallow it. “If they die--”

“It will have been a necessary risk,” Heron says. “They knew as much when they volunteered. Besides, the Kaiserin is not as paranoid as the Kaiser, from what we’ve heard. She thinks you’re dead, she thinks we aren’t a threat, she has Søren. She thinks she’s won, and so she’s getting sloppy.”

The Kaiserin. Will there ever come a day when I hear that title and think first of Cress and not Kaiserin Anke?

“You said the army had left,” I say. “Where to?”

Heron lets out a long exhale. “You missed quite a lot of squabbling while you were gone--I almost envy you. The Vecturian chief sent his daughter Maile to assist us, along with his troops. With Søren gone, she and Erik have the most battle experience, but they don’t agree on anything. Erik wants to march straight to the capital to take the city and rescue Søren.”

“That’s foolish,” I say, shaking my head. “It’s exactly what they’ll expect, and even if it weren’t, we don’t have the numbers for that kind of siege.”

“That’s exactly what Maile said,” Heron says, shaking his head. “She said we should continue to the Earth Mine.”

“But we can’t do that without marching past the most populous cities, without even the cover of forests or mountains,” I say. “It’ll be impossible to avoid

detection, and then Cress will have an army waiting to greet us at the Earth Mine.”

“Which is exactly what Erik said,” Heron says. “See, you’re all caught up.”

“So who won?” I ask.

“No one,” Heron says. “It was decided that we should send the troops to the cities along the Savria River. None of them is heavily populated, but we’ll be able to contain the Kalovaxians, free their slaves, add to our numbers, and collect weapons and food as well. And most importantly, our troops aren’t just waiting here like sitting ducks.”

“Like we are, you mean,” I say, rubbing my temples. The headache blossoming has nothing to do with the mine this time. “And now I’m here to break the tie, I suppose.”

“Later,” he says. “Once you can actually walk on your own.”

“I’m fine,” I tell him, more forcefully than necessary.

Heron watches me warily. He opens his mouth, but closes it again quickly, shaking his head.

“If there’s something you want to ask me about the mines, I don’t remember anything,” I tell him. “The last thing I remember is going in--after that, it’s a blur.”

“You will remember, in time,” he says. “For better or worse. But I know I never want to speak of my experience. I assumed you would feel the same way.”

I swallow, pushing the thought aside. A problem for another day--and I have too many problems before me as it is. “But something is on your mind,” I say to Heron. “What is it?”

He weighs the question in his mind for an instant. “Did it work?” he asks.

For a second, I don't know what he means, but I suddenly remember--the reason I went into the mines in the first place, the weak power I had over fire before, the side effect from Cress's poison. I went into the mine to claim my power, in hopes that I will have enough to stand against Cress when the time comes.

Did it work? There is only one way to find out.

I hold my left palm up and summon fire. Even before I uncurl my fingers, I feel heat thrumming beneath them, stronger than I've ever felt it before. It comes easily when I summon it, like it's a part of me, always lurking just below the surface. It burns brighter, feels hotter, but it's more than that. To show him, I toss it into the air, hold it there, suspended but still alive, still bright. Heron's eyes grow wide, but he says nothing as I lift my hand and flex it. The ball of fire mimics me, becoming a hand of its own. When I move my fingers, it matches each movement. I make a fist, and it does that as well.

“Theo,” he says, his voice a hoarse whisper. “I saw the extent of Ampelio's power when he trained me. He couldn't do that.”

I swallow and take hold of the flame again, smothering it in my grip and turning it to ash in my hand.

“If you don’t mind, Heron,” I say, my gaze fixed on the dark pigment that smears over my skin just as the ash crown had, “is Mina still here? She’s--”

“The healer,” he supplies, nodding. “Yes, she’s still here. She’s been helping with the wounded. I’ll find her.”

When he’s gone, I dust ash from my hands and let it settle into the dirt floor.

By the time Mina enters the tent, I’ve gotten used to standing again, though my body still doesn’t feel entirely like mine. Every move--every breath--feels like a labor, and every muscle aches. Mina must notice, because she takes one look at me and gives a knowing smile.

“It’s normal,” she says. “When I came out of the mine, the priestesses said that the gods had broken me and remade me anew. It seemed to sum up how I felt.”

I nod, easing myself back to sit on my cot once more. “How long does it last?” I ask her.

She shrugs. “My pain lasted a couple of days, but it varies.” She pauses, looking me over. “What you did was incredibly foolish. Going into the mine when you already possessed a measure of power--when you were already a vessel half-

full--you were asking for mine madness. You realize that, don't you?"

I look at the ground. It's been some time since I've been chastised like this, by someone concerned about my well-being. I rack my mind for the last person; it very well may have been my mother. I suppose Hoa did as well, in her wordless way.

"I understood the risks," I tell her.

"You're the Queen of Astrea," she continues, as if I haven't spoken. "What would we have done without you?"

"You would have persisted," I say, louder this time. "I am one person. We lost far more in the war, far more in the siege itself, including my mother. We have always persisted. I wouldn't have made a difference."

Mina fixes me with a level look. "It was still foolish," she insists. "But I suppose it was also brave."

I shrug again. "Whatever it might have been, it worked," I say.

I show her the same thing I showed Heron, how I can not just summon fire but turn it into an extension of my own self. Mina watches me all the while with her lips pursed, not saying a word until I've finished and am scattering the ash to the ground once more.

“And you slept,” she says, more to herself than me.

“Quite heavily, as I understand it,” I say dryly.

She steps toward me. “May I feel your forehead?” she asks.

I nod, and she presses the back of her hand to my brow. “You aren’t warm,” she says before reaching out to touch the single tendril of white in my auburn hair.

“It was there before,” I tell her. “After the poison.”

She nods. “I remember. Not like the Kaiserin’s hair, is it? But I suppose you have Artemisia to thank for that--if she hadn’t used her own gift on you so quickly to negate the poison, it would have affected you far more. If it hadn’t killed you on the spot, the mine certainly would have.”

“You didn’t see Cress--the Kaiserin--yourself,” I say, changing the subject. “But you must have heard stories of her power by now.”

Mina considers this. “I’ve heard stories,” she says carefully. “Though I find stories are often exaggerated.”

I remember Cress killing the Kaiser with just her scalding hands around his throat, the way she trailed ash over the desk with her fingertips. She radiated power in a way that I have never seen equaled. I’m not sure how anyone could exaggerate what I saw with my own eyes.

“It’s as if . . . she doesn’t even have to call on her gift. She killed the Kaiser in a few seconds with just her hands,” I say.

“And you still don’t feel strong enough to stand against her,” Mina guesses.

“I don’t think anyone is,” I admit. “Did you ever hear of Guardians killing with that little effort?”

She shakes her head. “I didn’t hear anything about Guardians killing at all,” she says. “It wasn’t their way. If a person’s crimes ever warranted execution, it was carried out by more mundane means. Guardians never did the deed with the gifts given to them by the gods. It would have been its own kind of sacrilege, a perversion of something holy.”

I think about Blaise going out into the battlefield, knowing he could have died but determined to kill as many Kalovaxians as possible before he did. Was that a perversion of his gift? Or are the standards different now, in times of war?

“The children I saw before, the ones you were testing,” I say, remembering the boy and girl with the same unstable power as Blaise. “How are they?”

“Laius and Griselda,” she supplies. “They are as well as can be expected, I suppose. Frightened and traumatized by the horrific experiments the Kalovaxians did on them, but they’re strong in more ways than one.” She pauses for a second. “Your hypothetical friend has been helpful. They like him, standoffish though he might be. It truly is something, to discover you aren’t as alone in the world as you thought.”

Excerpted from Ember Queen by Laura Sebastian. Copyright © 2020 by Laura Sebastian. All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced or reprinted without permission in writing from the publisher.