

## Psalm-Skinned, Opal-Eyed

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Preparation began the night before, gathering moonflowers from the bower in the rooftop garden. Sedra had lent me their long gloves; it's very important not to touch the flowers, or let the sap touch my skin. I'd seen the faint scars along their hands and arms, where the sap had left them covered in blisters, so I knew better than to question their advice.

The flowers had to be simmered gently together with coda flowers over the shrine's brazier, watched over by Sedra while the rest of us slept. The whole Order compound soaked in the smell of the steam, a little bit astringent and sweet, a little brackish like swampwater. By dawn, Sedra couldn't stand the brightness of a candle, let alone daylight: their pupils had blown so wide from the fumes that I could hardly see any red to their eyes at all. I helped them clean off their makeup and brushed out their beautiful hair, making sure they were tucked deep into the darkest room we could find. They murmured poetry and fantastic, vivid tales I'd never heard before, mixed in with fearful rambling in a voice thick with sleep; they'd always told me never to leave them alone when they were struck with the alchemist's drunkenness in case they did something foolish. I was grateful for the extra few hours of sleep, my head pillowed on their small breasts, their spidery fingers stroking my hair like a beloved pet. Drolosi took my place for the morning chores.

After the midday meal, a smiling Armiger brought us a kwama eggshell full of fresh netch jelly, still glowing bright-blue, harvested from some still-twitching carcass only an hour or so before. Sedra emerged to meet with Armiger Breldryn in the meal hall, where many of us were in stitches listening to his tales: most of them were either hunting stories or soldier's anecdotes, though the best were the racier accounts from the Armiger barracks. Our sibling-sect breeds gossip finer than anyone, I think. Sedra kissed Armiger Breldryn in payment, because Sedra's like that; the Armiger disappeared into one of the rear altar rooms with a giddiness to him. We did not see him again for many hours, though we heard him now and then. Sedra's sometimes like that, too.

The flower extract had to be added to the netch jelly slowly, drop by drop. It won't blend right if it's all mixed together at once. We formed pairs, one to stir and one to measure in the extract, and worked in shifts until it was all combined to Sedra's approval. It took hours and hours: we'd worn out all our worksongs by the time it was done, and the sun had already set, but we did it.

Now, the moons are high, and I'm trying not to tremble in the low light of the ritual hall. The night breezes chill our skin, dressed only in sandals and skirts as we are, every breath of wind catching on the wet scripture spreading over our skins. The candles shiver in honeyed carapaces, the lanterns made of arching brass and delicate panels of resin. The light spreads warm and welcoming, painted in the robes of sunsets, or the dying of the dust-storms in the

summer. The alabaster of the shrine has accepted the light within itself, turning faintly to amber in its vague translucency...

Wait. This isn't my voice. These aren't my words.

Already, my thoughts are beginning to uncoil strangely, growing elaborate and ponderous. I'd been told such a thing might happen. The visiting Armigers look to each of us as they enter and smile with such curious and excited affection, like lovers eager to be reunited with their beloveds. I am not supposed to pay attention to them. I try to keep my eyes on my kindred here, set into pairs for the painting.

"Hold out your arm a little more," Sedra whispers, taking to their knees beside me. I obey, a little slower than I mean to: their silken hair spills over their back, pooling on the floor like a bolt of fine satin, and for a moment all I want in the world is to touch it. Instead, I am carefully motionless, holding obediently still for the tickling brushes swirling over my skin. Glowing blue calligraphy flows over their body in ribbons of perfect cadence and meter, seeming to stream onto mine from their luminous hands, stained to the wrist with the salve we so labored for.

My temple-siblings are beginning to shiver in my vision. Some are almost covered and still stand for the laying on of greater prayer and poetry; others bear only a few dozen stanzas, all but bare yet deemed covered enough by the measure of their eyes, pupils blown wide. Their eyes seem as black as the Void; surely, they must see the places between the stars. Ritual vapors thicken the air around us as I watch them melt, shuddering, into the waiting arms of vividly-scrawled acolytes.

I do my best to be still, to move as I am told, but I feel time coming unstuck from itself and I find myself distracted. After-images scald themselves into my vision, every smallest motion creating a trail of echoes. Our painted bodies look as drawn as the murals on the walls, our shadows stepping down to dance. Mine seems to stare at me and will not stop. Movements around me seem to slow and speed impossibly, reality rendering itself into the art upon the pages of a book flicked by impatient hands, the stuttering mechanocasts of Dwemeri zoetropes. There is a weary murmur muttering below the earth, mocking and insidious, half-drowned in drumbeat and quake-thunder. Doom is coming; doom is *here*...

...No. These are not my thoughts. This is not my *voice*. I *am not*...

I hear panting in the dark between us, dripping and scraping on the floors. Long-legged shadows filigree the walls, creeping slowly towards the floor, crowding out the light. They are reaching into the edges of my vision, blinding me, I feel them on my skin, *I feel them on my skin*—

"Steady," Sedra murmurs, their lips black-stained and soft on my burning skin. "You're almost through. Don't let the nightmare distract you." Their hands lie tenderly from my temple to my

jaw, running down to my throat, my chest, my waist with soothing pressure, their touch reasserting the inviolate bareness of my skin. They slip behind me, the better to guide, their warmth pressed to my back, separated only by incandescent scripture. "Look to the altar," they say, running their hands down to rest at my hips. "Let delirium come. Let it take you. It will be well."

I clutch at the drift of their skirts, eyes wide, and I sound too much like a little child again but that cannot be helped. I hear myself whimper. "I'm scared, Sed."

I can feel their soft laughter on my bare back. "Oh, Meiya..." Their blue-stained hands guide me back to lie against their chest, stroking my cheek a touch too slowly. I notice, too late, that their voice is slurred, crooning with groans, tight already with the strain of holding back their own surrender. "That is for the best."

I do as I am bidden, cradled in Sedra's body. The candlelight that gilds the altar, scant and dim, pulses and flickers in some inscrutable dance. Vapor and smoke fills my breath, renders me lightheaded, and with each breath the candles' flames grow brighter, more liquid, more like molten ores in a smelting furnace. I feel the warmth of it flooding into me, scalding my tongue, filling my throat with all the fierce promise of an era of monument, the essence of lacquer and gold hidden in the moans and sobs of such blessed children as we...

...This is not my... This is...

*Oh...*

*We are witnessed.*

The candlelight wavers in its character just a hair, the room unchanged yet irreparably altered, the sensation of a great unseen eye turning to read our skins with indecipherable judgement. The exquisite disarray of instinct at delicate war with our senses— *ours*, all of ours, I feel my brother-sisters' shifts and trembles as easily as my own— sends me reeling, as the room fills with the air of eminence and apocalypse.

I am blinded, shivering, crying out at every touch and breath of air upon my skin. At once, I see all manner of vision and variance, all and none true: a towering fire of incalculable height with a voice like the howling of tearing steel, a battlefield carpeted in blood and loosed pages of perfect literature, impossible colours that taste of change and delight and summer. The curtains draw closed only partway, reality made dreamlike, floating above its own surface, meat made vapor made pearl, blue as devotion, yellow as cholera...

I am trembling; someone is trembling, at least, novitiate, or disciple, or dissociation. Our hearts each set themselves alight in holy terror, lapping war-drums climbing each other into thunder, inches from flying apart at every weeping breath and flaying us alive. Always, everywhere, there

is the weight of the divine presence, terrible and beautiful, red with blood and black with ink, nails like golden knives, eyes of hellfire. Love without reservation, rage without end. We are pinned beneath the measurement of God, beneath the substance of our Lord's will, and the fire burns our eyes to weeping. Our rituals have been favored.

*We are terrified.*

We are terrified beyond the applicable language for terrors. There exists no word of mortal tongue to contain such fear. Holy dread and shaking awe can be heard in every dripping, heaving breath. We are humbled, frightened, debased and rapturous, with no borders to cleave one state from another. Our adoration is sung in chanting, in blissful screams, in whisper and tear and moan, in biting fit to tear the skin. There is no sensation that is not welcome here. To hold such a state as this and retain sanity is a fine art. Refined hysteria is necessary.

The blood rises heady with urgent, desperate lust, aroused with awe, what would seem at odds with the consuming terror were it not the safest response response to it: the perverse hunger for oblivion trained against the will to live in fragile balance, an anchor of rapture to ward away the Void. The same urge to lean out over the highest precipices and contemplate dashing the body on the stones below, so too do our hands reach for ourselves, for each other. Our awe and love bends itself into new sensations, as yet uncharted by the common mortal experience, and we cling to each other in wonder and comfort, at once brutal and tender. By this cypher, we render a little of the unbearable ecstasy into a torment we can comprehend, that we can withstand. Thus do we ransom ourselves from our self-begged madness, from the lethal danger of our service.

It seems as natural a response as our trembling hands, our whimper-shot chanting, to brush our lips tenderly against the cheeks and throats of our companions, fondly kissing and pawing with our communal pulse too quick and loud to know shame or reservation. We press our foreheads together in love, sneer in each other's faces with the wide baring of teeth reserved for violence, cleansed of malice and all the more dangerous for it. Riding panic without brutality is a careful dance, balanced on swords. All it would take is a single one to slip from delicate mania into savagery, and all of us would be cast down...

That is the purpose of the Armigers at each corner. They are there to assure, not to threaten. Our brothers will care for us, keep us safe in our holy delirium. They will remove what breaks, but that need not be sinister, for we will not shatter. We must not.

Every skin is worn with laughing joy and panting lust, and I watch the aspect-spirit move from one to the other, bestowing what was deserved, taking what was owed. In corners, at times, I watch as it kneels before itself in the forbidden ways, presses itself into the walls, kisses its own lips with violent desire. More than once, it leads the flesh it wears to an Armiger, smiling and speaking to each by name, though the Vimeri priestling has never met them. I do not know when I moved to the floor. I am preoccupied with the taste of the screams and songs, dazed

with the hypnotic dance of painted flesh and eyes like night, opal-lit now with pale fire in the centres. Every moment feels an hour long. I feel chitinous armor beneath my hands: Sedra's skin is bare as I touch them, but still my fingers trace over cracks and ridges regardless. I feel the weight and heft of daggers in my hands, and then they are gone again, my skin knowing only skin once more.

Languid, serene Sedra; dreugh-graceful, tide-limbed Sedra; nurturing *alm'ata* Sedra. Sedra, with their hands smearing star-blood glow along my waist, their begging spear gleaming slick in the shining blue gore, anointing our fitting parts. Sedra, with their body burning against mine, arched taut and whispering rapid, urgent words I cannot grasp the shape of, noise without meaning, meaning without form, the truth of language in the fervid and manic stab-thrust of animal life. Sedra, reborn in the honesty of selfish pleasure, obsidian-eyed and beautiful, screaming in grateful horror, their spear keeping pace with my seizing heart. Their nails sink deep into my hips, and I laugh to feel their painless descent; I am a live coal burning within insensate ash, a membrane of perfect dust begging to be pierced.

My bones are heavy, leaden. My body is gravid with twelve-score hidden concepts, leaping in spasm and tendon-dance to the shifting whims of holy narrative; it is beyond me, and I it. I watch my own ecstasy from higher places, forming wordless poetry to savage glory in the sacred place between sentence and meat. I watch my foolish body try to mouth the words, speaking nothing but fumbled moans and hisses, and the occasional snatch of long-fallen silks, anon Chimeris. I bless the dispensation of nereid composure at the altar-and-sacrifice of my flesh and weigh its worth as three times the generous, the distillation of unadorned humility, instructor insensate, acolyte made offering.

Above, black hands caress my skull, light touches and golden nails turning my eyes from the glory of spectacle. Sun-bladed and hollow-cheeked, the gaunt shade holds me to their gaze, eyes set blinding-pale with the milk of godfire. A crown of cooling flame throws sapphire shadows to paint their skin in shifting letters. Their hands trail dust upon my jaw.

What they speak to me is a secret, to be inked into my spine. I will carry the preserved essence upon my skin, the writ of my alteration's authoring. Their smile is a beauty more terrible than the light of dying stars. Their kiss is soft, until it is not.

Black fingers pry apart my jaws with gentle insistence, wider, impossible to resist. Their teeth close at the root of my tongue. My blood spills in black gouts that taste of steel and persimmon tea, staining the face of God.

Below, I hear my body scream. It is an agonised, sharp sound, full of terror and pain, the sound of some tortured beast. It is weeping, howling. Laughing, "Thank you."

Oh pillar of fire, I am yours. Oh angel of Veloth, I am yours. Oh master and bride and keeper, I am *yours*. I yield to your will with perfect ardor, I accept the great gift of your love and I return it

three times over, I love you, *I love you*—

The body calls me back, and I come apart like glass breaking, a paroxysm of venom and fervor.  
I know nothing else.