

9 The Surface of the Earth

The beautiful pale creature was stark against the cloud-free, sunlit sky, its iridescent blue-black wings shimmering as it glided on thermals and then gaining altitude with heavy wing beats, searching – desperately searching – for land.

The wine-dark sea stretched infinite, embracing the world in a vast waste of deep water. The tallest mountain peak the creature could just barely perceive a full five fathoms down, which meant the valleys, the plains, the villages, the cities –

The creature’s wings shook with rage, but they steadied, careful of who were in its arms.

A girl, just barely a woman, impossibly small and impossibly thin, slept fitfully against the creature’s robed chest. Swaddled tightly against her chest was an impossibly thin baby boy, his head looking grotesquely huge in contrast to his small, listless body.

Looking down at both of them, the creature’s face – at times looking female, at other times looking perfectly androgynous – settled on the strong, square jaw line of a young man entering into his latter twenties, his skin still smooth but his eyes beginning to sink with tired despair, which only enraged him more.

Keep the girl and baby alive. Keep the body materialized. Keep flying. He cannibalized his own self, to feed his wife and son via energy transfer. But he also needed to conserve energy for himself, to keep his wife and son aloft from their watery grave below. Save them from drowning, save them from starving, save them from drowning – he could feel the matter of his own existence straining, wanting to wink out into shimmer and light.

Forty days of rain, a hundred fifty days of flood, no end in sight, and he raged against his impotence, his inability to save the humans that he saw as his people, his inability to save his own wife and son. His rage was chaotic, an all-points-bulletin sending of screaming and cursing and crying to nobody and everybody, knowing full well that nobody with power was listening.

That damn ark, he swore, his mind filled with the image of the titanic ship shining bright with the reflected light of Heaven, which expanded out in a force field so potent that he could not break through, lest he crush his frail cargo against it. *That goddamn ark* –

A small, brown hand reached up, touching his chin lightly before settling on where his heartbeat would be. *Hush, love.*

He started. In all the time he had known her, not once did she communicate this way. *You can... send?*

Is this what this is? He felt her smile in her sending. *Yes, I can send.*

For how long?

For always.

Why didn't you do it earlier?

He felt her shrug. *There was no need, then.*

There's need now?

Her sigh rippled through him. *I can no longer talk. And* – she added quickly, feeling his sudden panic – *you need to know something before I die.*

He began to protest, but she only pressed her tiny hand into his chest as she sent her long-held memories.

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The smell of lavender and sweet water, and a gourd rattle so red that it glistened. The plump, doughy skin of a woman still soft from childbirth and postpartum. The slow tears falling silently and gently around soft kisses on forehead, baby cheeks, and tiny, fat hands and feet.

Over time, the tears would lessen and lessen, the skin would shrink and firm, and the rattle would be put away, but Mara's Tanta always smelled of lavender and sweet water as she would slip into Mara's nursery between her palace duties, relieve the nurse, and rock her in her lap, humming a song, telling a fairy story, or reading a rare book. She taught Mara – against all custom – to speak and read, and with language the little girl's earliest memories stayed with her as she would re-tell Tanta's visits to her aloof but gentle nurse when Tanta wasn't around.

Sometimes the nurse would bring Mara to the palace gardens, where the little girl would “help” Tanta plant some medicinal plants of Tanta's native homeland. In those excursions, Mara would play in the dirt while Tanta smiled and laughed, calling Mara “my little river,” for she would babble and run around the garden, as vibrant and alive as the great river which fed life into the kingdom's large city and its growing people, greedy for food and land.

For four years Mara wanted to call her guardian “Mama,” but she always insisted on “Tanta” – she was Aunt, not Mother. In her fifth year, Mara realized that Tanta's lap was getting smaller and smaller because her belly was getting bigger and bigger. Then one day, exactly a half year before her sixth birthday, Tanta did not relieve the nurse, which angered Mara. She threw a tantrum, and the nurse scolded, “Hush, Mara!”

“I want Tanta!”

The usually gentle nurse gave her a little shake. “You must never call Queen Anica that again. She’s a real mother now. Prince Halim Pyr-Ra’d was born last night, and it is time that you remember who you are.”

“You can’t talk to me that way!”

The nurse, her eyes glittering, gave the little girl a harder shake. “You may be the daughter of King Ra’d, but remember that you are only the illegitimate daughter of a dead concubine. It is only the generosity and weakness of a queen who had lost her newborn son when you were born – a birth which cost you your weak-bodied mother – that has kept you here at all, as spoiled and pampered as a pet peacock.” The nurse let go of Mara’s arms, seeing the little girl stumble backwards and sit down hard on the lushly carpeted floor of the nursery that was no longer hers. “Remember who you are,” her nurse declared, her aloof tone cold and frightening to the newly displaced child.

That night she slept in a simple, little room in the female servants’ wing of the palace. A different woman was assigned as her caregiver, as her nurse now served the new prince and the convalescing queen. As Mara was too young to do any proper work but too old to be allowed to play all day, the caregiver would bring her to the gardens to learn the craft of the gardeners and then, when the day would wane into night, bring her indoors to learn weaving and sewing with the other servant women of the palace.

The next three years were a blur of monotony and silence as Mara learned to close her heart as she opened her eyes and ears. She observed the exhaustive, thankless work of the servants. She learned about the role of her mother – to produce a son – when Queen Anica was feared to be barren. She learned about her mother’s cremation and scattering of her ashes in the river. She learned about her father’s decision to have another concubine because of Queen Anica’s inability to bear children – a decision never enacted once her pregnancy became official. She learned about her father’s continuous conflicts, battles, and negotiations in far-flung lands, in the perpetual pursuit of expanding and securing his kingdom.

All these things Mara learned by keeping silent while hearing the non-stop murmur and private chatter of servants’ gossip. All these things Mara was warned ahead by her ability to see the odd colors and shapes of intent and emotion of the people around her, once she stilled her own thoughts and emotions and laid her mind as open as a basket catching rain water.

When Queen Anica came to visit her with the little prince, nine-year old Mara already knew she was coming, from the gossip and the color of servants radiating bright yellow – a happy, expectant color.

She arrived in the common room of the servant women’s wing, the three-year old prince, in robes of royal purple, holding onto the queen’s hand, looking timidly at the group of servants before him and turning his face into the soft, warm folds of his mother’s dress.

Mara tried not to look at the queen and ended up staring at the little boy, who saw her and cried, “Go away!”

Mara felt all eyes on her, but the queen only said, “Hush, Halim, don’t be rude.” She presented the prince before her. “Mara, this is my son Halim. Halim, say hello to Mara, your sister.”

The servants stared agog as Mara’s heart skipped. She looked at the scared little boy and then at the queen.

“Hello,” the little boy said, still clinging to his mother’s side.

“Hello,” Mara replied automatically, her voice sounding distant and not her own.

The queen looked at the servants and gave a small nod, indicating a need for some space, and they drifted away a little, affording her and the two children a little bit of privacy.

“My little river. I’m so sorry. Your father – well, let’s say he didn’t understand why you needed me. In many ways I am just as powerless as you. But you’ve grown, yes? You’re no longer my little river?”

Mara heard her kneel down to her level. When she looked up, the queen looked blurry. The queen put her arms around Mara, even as her son clung to her dress. Yes, she still smelled of lavender and sweet water.

“I miss you, Tanta,” Mara whispered.

As if to recapture lost time, Tanta would send for Mara when she and Halim were visiting the gardens, about once a week. It was there that Mara taught Halim how to climb the belajoun tree, and it was there that Tanta taught the two children the names and uses of the plants, like the hazel herb, which was useful for fevers and pain. But then Mara again noticed Tanta’s growing belly. When she hugged Tanta goodbye for what would be the last time, she could feel, underneath the happy yellow color of Tanta’s pregnancy, a dull, ugly gray that scared her. The weekly visits to the garden ended and the entire palace seemed to hold its breath.

One day she heard a young boy’s voice. “Mara, it’s Mama.”

Her heart racing at his words, Mara looked up from her book, a gift from Tanta. Halim’s face was still, as if he were trying hard not to cry. She left her book to follow Halim to wherever he would lead.

But he did not lead her far, for at the entrance of the common room was Halim’s nurse, who used to be Mara’s old nurse. She looked angry but tried to make her anger look like concern. “Your Highness, we really need to come away – your father --”

“Not without Mara.”

“Prince Halim, what has this girl to do with your father needing you by his side?”

“Nothing. But Mama was her mama, too, and she’ll be by *my* side. I command it.”

The nurse sighed at his words. “Your father will not be pleased.”

“But Mama will be, and it’s Mama I care about, not Papa.”

Mara could see the woman debating within herself, on whether she felt like arguing with a stubborn little boy and then physically having to remove him from the women’s wing like a sack of food or a young animal or just giving in to his demand so that she could escort him away quietly. But the king’s might was on her side, and Halim had already learned what everyone else knew – only the king had power. “No, Prince Halim, it is your father’s command that you – and only you – stand by your father’s side. And we don’t have time for this, Your Highness; one minute arguing with me here means one minute less you have with your mother.”

Halim’s face stilled even more – it became a mask that looked awful upon a person as young as he. It was a mask that Mara was fully used to upon herself but not on the shy, sincere face of Halim. He turned to Mara and let the mask slip a little as he whispered, “I’m sorry.” Then he left quickly, with the nurse immediately behind him, closing the common room doors.

Only when the palace bell tolled three hours later, at an unusual time where there were no routine activities, did Mara know – for she knew – that Tanta was dead.

She was dead. And Mara never even got the chance to say goodbye.

With a stifled cry, Mara sprang up from her bed and ran, tears threatening to fall, all the way to the gardens, as dark and abandoned as a graveyard. She stumbled to the belajoun tree of her childhood play and, sitting underneath with her knees drawn against her face, she allowed herself the freedom to cry.

For her mother, long dead and burned and thrown away.

For the little boy, who died when he was born.

For the little boy, who just lost his mother.

For the tiny baby, who died with its mother, still in the womb.

For her Tanta, the only mother she had ever known.

For herself, who was as bound and trapped as they.

After a time, the wild sobbing gave way to quiet, gentle tears. She wiped her eyes with the palms of her hands and looked up at the sky. Through the spreading branches of the belajoun, she saw the black sky thick with stars. She stood up, her arms wrapped around herself from a sudden chill of the desert night air, and left her place of solitude for the empty loneliness of her room.

The funeral of the next day was a blur of wailing people, thick incense of the priests, and the slow procession towards the royal burial grounds. King Ra'd led the procession, a large, imposing man with hard, black eyes, the heavy, black mourning robes just barely brushing against the dirt and sand. He had commanded that Prince Halim join him, but, in a rare instance of rebellion, the prince only agreed if his sister was with him. Unexpectedly, the king accepted this term, and Mara – the king's superfluous offspring – found herself holding Halim's hand tightly and staring at the dirtied hem of her father's mourning robes as they marched to the queen's burial place.

Mara closed her eyes, not wanting to see the linen-and-silk wrapped body, and she felt Halim's face buried in her own simple mourning robes, his tears flowing into the cloth as Mara simply held his hand, breathing in the dry, dusty air and the thick incense of myrrh and cedar.

Is it over yet, Mara?

Mara felt the sobbing behind the words. *No, not yet. But soon. Stay strong, Halim.*

I'm trying, Mara. It's hard. He rubbed his eyes against Mara's robes like the seven-year old child that he was. *I miss her.*

I miss her, too. Mara opened her eyes to see their father set the last stone against the entrance to Tanta's burial crypt.

The formal one-year mourning period began that day. By year's end, the world Tanta left behind would be falling apart.

First came the fever that swept throughout the kingdom like fire, sickening so many and killing enough of the sick that the people beseeched both king and priests for salvation, as the hazel herbs were exhausted and the funerary pyres were fed non-stop, the dark smoke blackening the sky.

Then came news of an invading army conquering the neighboring lands bordering King Ra'd's domain and, like a predator stalking its weak prey, crossing into the far hinterlands of the kingdom.

The frenzy of fear and despair nearly drove Mara to madness as she was powerless to do anything except witness the catastrophe around her. When Halim took sick with the fever, it took the bodily restraint of the palace guards to keep Mara from him, as her old nurse scolded, “Do you want to get the fever, too? The healers are with him – all we can do is wait and pray to the gods.”

When the priests assured the king that defeating the invaders would end the epidemic, the palace came alive with the activity of impending war, and Mara could no longer keep silent. In the vacant time between the changing of the guards, Mara slipped into the council chamber, where her father spent most of his time when he was in the palace.

There she stopped, stunned to see King Ra'd in full armor, in deep consultation with his most senior of generals. She realized then that he had fully intended to lead the charge, to meet the invaders on the field of battle.

“What – no!”

King Ra'd looked at her and, in an even voice, said, “Mara, go back to the women's quarters.”

Mara shook her head. “How can you consider going out there, how can you – you have generals, you have soldiers, Father. How can you risk your own life --”

“This is no concern of yours. Leave us.” He turned his attention back to his generals.

“NO!” Her voice rang out in the closeness of the chamber. In spite of herself, she stamped her foot in frustration. “You listen to me. You have a son who is sick, you have a palace – a people – who need you *here*, who need your strength and guidance *here*, and you're just going to leave us so that you can go out and play soldier?”

Her father's eyes widened. His generals discretely left the chamber, leaving father and daughter alone for the very first time in their lives.

Mara stood, rooted to the spot. She saw her father strode to where she was, intimidating and shaking in anger as he towered over her. She held her breath, expecting to be struck, and was surprised that her father noticed that that was what she was doing.

He stepped back as if catching himself, as if remembering something important. “You can't understand.”

Mara looked at him. For the first and last time, she truly saw her father.

Behind the hardened leather and iron, behind the armor and the pomp of his kingly station, was a prematurely old man, his spirit weeping in suffocating black and the deepest blue. In one thunderstruck moment, she saw a man who had never struck his wife, never struck his children, never even struck his concubine, who was – after all – only a slave. She saw a man who never had the peace to grieve over his wife's death and so was in the throes of grief now – and was actually already grieving for his son. She saw a man battling grief and despair, who was afraid that he was losing that battle.

She saw a man who needed to fight physically in order to continue fighting that inner battle. She saw all of that, and then she understood.

“I’m – I’m sorry, Father,” Mara said quietly.

For the first and last time, she saw her father cry. He stood still and silent as slow tears traveled the rough contours of his face, looking so much like Halim that it made her heart ache. She realized, then, that he was as bound and trapped as she was – bound by duty and responsibility to a life that was chosen for him, well before he was ever born.

With great effort he stopped his tears, wiping his eyes dry with the palms of his hands in a motion that was identical to how Mara would dry her own tears.

In one motion, before he could protest, Mara hugged her father – a tiny, fourteen-year old girl embracing a hulking bear of a man. King Ra’d at first remained still but then returned the embrace, his face anguished as he forced himself not to weep with sadness and love.

“Goodbye, Father.” Mara broke away from the embrace and stood apart from him at a respectful distance,

“Goodbye, Mara,” was her father’s last words to her, and she left the chamber, ignoring the generals standing just outside the doors and looking at her curiously.

When the army departed the city, she could see them snaking away across the great plain, to the far valley in the distance. She stood upon the rooftop garden of the palace – the highest place in the kingdom – until the horsemen and infantrymen and archers and the man who led them all disappeared into the dusky gloom of distance and sunset.

Six months after the army’s departure, the insatiable fever consumed Halim, and it was Mara who led the procession to the royal crypt; it was she who set the last stone in the entrance.

Five months after Halim’s death, news reached the palace that the king had fallen in battle, that the kingdom had fallen to the invaders, who were coming to the royal city – whether to claim it or destroy it, no one was certain. When the survivors limped back home, carrying what few bodies they could salvage for proper funerary rites – including the tightly shrouded body of King Ra’d – the people discovered that the invaders’ leader was coming to claim the throne.

On a cold, wintry day, Mara placed her father to rest next to her Tanta and her brother. The next day, for the first time in two years, she removed and put away her black mourning robes. She refused the assistance of the handmaidens, preferring to bathe in solitude and silence.

Floating in a blood-warm pool smelling of lavender and sweet water, Mara thought of her mother, of the woman who never saw this room, the bathing chamber of the generations of the queens of the House of Bril. She felt the smooth, carved stone surface of her bath and breathed in the thick smoke of cedar, lavender, and rose, rising from the vessels of incense hanging above her. With careful and

efficient movements, she scrubbed herself smooth, combed through her long, dark hair with fingers wrinkled as an old woman’s, and rinsed herself thoroughly before leaving the water.

She slipped on the oversized drying robe of a woman much larger than she and rubbed her hair dry with a thick swath of woven belajoun fibers. Once dried, she removed the robe and, removing the stopper of a thick glass bottle, anointed her body with a thin, resin-smelling oil, even rubbing it into her hair. Only after did she put on the white underclothes left neatly for her by the handmaidens. She slipped on a thin, light green shift and then continued with the various robes, vestments, and sashes until the carefully laid-out royal clothes were on her body. Without aid of a mirror, she combed her hair taut into a single twist secured with a golden comb, eschewed the kohl and various face paints favored by high-born women, and stepped out of the comforting dark of the bath chamber into the cold, wintry day of her wedding day.

In the great Hall of Kings, as she walked in a procession towards the dais of two empty thrones, she saw her betrothed for the first time and paused for one heartbeat.

The man, still in the armor that he had arrived in earlier that day, was young – perhaps only ten years older than she was. In spite of his young age, however, he was as tall and muscular as one would expect from the commanding officer of an army that had been on the field of battle for months and years.

But it wasn’t that that struck her still – not even his impossibly pale skin that shown in sharp relief to his iridescent black hair. What she saw, underneath the armor, the skin, the muscle, was a burning, flaming color of rage – a red so thick that it was almost black – but, underneath even that were a suffocating black and the darkest blue so deep and vivid that even the red could not hide it. It was that black and blue – almost like day-old, angry bruises – that were the color of the man’s wings.

It was the color and the wings, and Mara instinctively knew that no one but herself could see them. She saw the man waiting for her, and she could see that this man – who was more than just a man – was a tortured being, in as much fear and grief and loss as her father had been only a mere six months ago that now felt like a lifetime ago.

The man who was her enemy, who killed her father in battle, was just like her father. For that, she could pity him.

For that, perhaps she could forgive him.

And for that, perhaps she could love him.

She prayed not to the gods but to her mother, to her father, to Halim, to Tanta, to give her strength and courage. After one heartbeat, she continued down that path she had not chosen but accepted, into the waiting arms of her enemy.

Her ears buzzing with wild thoughts, she did not hear the old, sacred words of the matrimonial rite from the oldest priests of her people. She barely saw the witnesses of her handmaidens, the surviving members of her father’s royal ministers and military generals, and the motley group of generals of her soon-to-be husband. She only saw the man, who was not a man, and felt him place the sheer veil over her head and face, claiming her as his wife.

With his rule legitimized, the new king sent his wife back to the royal quarters.

“He didn’t even say a word to her,” one of the handmaidens whispered to another, thinking that their new queen couldn’t hear her.

But Mara heard.

Unlike the priests’ prediction, it was the invaders who ended the fever, with their foreign herbs and odd decoctions of fermented grains and green-black mold. Mara would be a married woman for seven days before she saw her husband again, busy as he was coordinating the training of the kingdom’s healers in the ways of his army healers, and then ensuring that every sickened person received treatment.

The relief felt throughout the palace was palpable, as Mara heard the gossip turn from fear and despair to hope and gratitude. Ra’d may had been their king, but he had been a distant, martial ruler, leaving the day-to-day governing to his ministers. The new king Malech, accustomed to commanding an army on the move, kept the ministers but oversaw their actions and, when all signs pointed to the fever lifting, he came to the palace’s bedchamber a week after his short and spare wedding.

Mara wore what she had always worn to sleep – a simple shift of softened belajoun fibers, queen or no queen. She sat staring at a lone candle, to still her thoughts, as she received official notice earlier that day that the king would be with her that night. She stared at the bright, spare flame, trying to fit what she knew about sex with what she knew about an invisibly-winged man.

Although still a virgin, Mara was not ignorant about a wife’s – or a concubine’s – duties to her man. Between Tanta, her old nurse, and the various gossipy women in the servants’ quarters, Mara knew about the process of baby-making. She even saw the human male’s parts, when she helped Tanta clean Halim when he was little and had accidentally urinated all over himself while sitting in the dirt. Also, when she was still seen as the illegitimate daughter of a slave, she was sometimes sent to the outer fields, to conscript a farmer’s daughter into palace service. Depending on the season, she would see

the mating of sheep, goats, or cattle. While strenuous for the male, the female always looked cross or bored.

Mara smiled at that thought for, of course, humans were different.

But her husband wasn't exactly human.

She started when the great door to the bedchamber opened, and he entered, holding a single oil lamp. She quickly returned to the candle as she heard him undress in silence. After a short while, she said, “Thank you for saving my people.”

He remained silent, but she could feel him observing her.

“Your people’s healers have been miraculous --”

“Mara.” His deep baritone was soft and gentle. “You needn’t be afraid of me.”

She looked away from the candle and saw him, but, like their wedding day, it was not his nakedness that startled her but his impossible wings, which still flashed with fiery blue and black, even in the dark bed chamber. Yet she could feel in her marrow bones that he didn’t know that she could see his color and his wings, and this realization gave her strength. “I don’t fear you,” she replied.

“You don’t?” He looked surprised.

Mara stood up and, in answer, slipped off her shift and stepped towards him until she was only six inches away. She tilted her head up so she could see his face and, for the first time, saw that his eyes were an unearthly violet.

He swept her up and carried her to bed.

Mara could feel her husband’s body, feverish and muscular, a man comfortable in skin, bones, sinew, and blood. But she could also feel the explosive cacophony of transforming energy, as he swept and flew and dove in and around her, as a great osprey tears through the sky and then plunges towards the sea, the up rush of wind, the piercing pressure. As they were now one, she could share in his sensations, in this otherworldly existence, and whether he noticed or not, she couldn’t tell and didn’t care, as she shared in the breathless dive, gasping for breath, and then soundlessly screamed as they pulled up from the dive, the great talons cutting through the waters, he into and through her, diving and swimming in her body, which arched and ran slick with sweat. After a time, the wind and seas calmed and Mara came back to herself, and they were just two young people, holding each other gently in a room lit with a low candle and an oil lamp with a dying flame.

When she awoke in the morning, she was alone.

For several days, it would be as it was that first night, always with the next morning with Mara alone in their nuptial bed. She wondered sadly about that, until one night she woke up after only a

couple of hours of sleep. She saw her husband just about to fall asleep, and as she watched, not moving, she saw him disappear in a visible shimmer of air and light.

Three months later, and after Mara had endured increasing nausea and tiredness, the healers made official her pregnancy, and she felt terror at those words.

“Why?” her husband asked her, after she shared her fears.

“Because both Tanta and my mother died in childbirth.” She looked down at her increasing belly. “And I’m even smaller than either of them.”

He gave a merry laugh and, standing behind her, wrapped his arms around her, resting his hands on her hands, which were protectively on her belly. “You’ll never have to worry about that.”

On a warm day that promised days of cooler weather, Mara gave birth to her son, Prince Halim Pyr-Malech, on the very bed that he was conceived. While a healer and midwife were there, as expected, her husband – against her people’s ancient traditions – was also by her side, propping her up, squeezing her hand, and fervently whispering when to breathe, when to push, when to resist. Unbeknownst to anyone – including her husband – Mara could also feel the flow of energy from him, deadening the pain, increasing the pliability of her body so that it wouldn’t tear and rip. When her husband held his son – a large, pale baby with a hearty cry – for the very first time, he whispered, “It is good,” and then sobbed heavily.

The healer and midwife assumed his tears were from joy and relief, but Mara, even in her exhaustion, could see the blue color – the color of grief and sadness – expand and swallow what little sparks of yellow he had been feeling throughout the ordeal. When he laid their son on her belly, and when she gave the newborn her breast to suck, the boundless joy she felt was mixed with the sadness that she could not transfer even a little portion of the happiness that she felt to the being who was both husband yet stranger still.

After a period of healing, when both queen and prince became stronger, the king and queen presented their son to the whole kingdom, the oldest priest holding the swaddled prince aloft as they stood upon the rooftop garden of the palace, the multitude cheering below. After the official presentation, the priest returned to the temple, and the royal family turned away from their public audience, retreating from the balcony towards the center of the rooftop garden.

“Coming inside?” asked Mara as she about to go back to the nursery.

“In a bit,” her husband replied. “I just need a little space to think.” But he looked distracted, his face troubled as he peered at the sky.

After she had attended to the needs of her son in the nursery, she suddenly felt compelled to return to the rooftop garden. As she approached the doorway of the garden, she stopped as she heard two voices: her husband’s and another male voice.

“You’re lying,” she heard her husband say, but his voice was icy and cruel, entirely unlike her husband’s.

Silence, then – “Angels can’t lie,” said the other voice.

Mara’s eyes widened.

“All right, all right. I don’t care if you believe me or not. But a Reboot’s coming, and all of this will be wiped, to start all over. I thought I could save you, but I see I was wrong.” The sadness in the stranger’s voice was the sadness she always felt in her husband, even as he believed that he had it hidden so well.

“I don’t need saving,” she heard the oddly cruel voice of her husband. “I --”

Mara decided to speak. “Love, is someone up there?” She pushed open the door, just in time to see the faint outlines of an older winged man, weeping the darkest blue from his brown wings, disappear into shimmer and light and rise above the rooftop. She dared not follow this angel with her eyes, instead concentrating on her husband, who burned bright with the red color.

“No, Mara, no – just talking to myself,” her husband sweetly lied, opening his arms towards his wife and child.

As he held her and kissed their son’s head, Mara heard distinctly in her heart, *I’m sorry, Miranda... for not following you.* Yet she felt no change in her husband, as if he hadn’t heard. As he had kept secret this part of who he was – to his own people, to her people, to even Mara – she decided to keep silent what she had heard, what she had seen, to keep hidden this secret, that the man Malech was truly the angel Miranda.

Mara did not understand the meaning behind “Reboot,” but she felt her husband’s wild panic, matched by the iron will of his denial of that panic. When the rain came, it began gently, and the farmers welcomed it. But when it would not stop and the winds began to blow with increasing strength, the people’s calm turned to worry and then to panic when the river, their lifeblood, began to overrun its banks, breach the earthen levee walls, and flood the entire valley as the rain became a storm, seeming without end.

Mara, at the rooftop garden, saw the people try to evacuate the valley, and how successful her husband’s evacuation order was carried through was difficult to tell in the blinding rain lashing against

bodies and buildings. In the end, it was just a sixteen-year old girl holding tightly a crying two-month old baby, and a young man desperate to save them.

“Don’t – don’t be afraid,” he said, expanding long-unused wings that materialized as they achieved its full span.

“I’m not,” Mara simply said, their baby secured with sashes against her chest. She looked down as the waters swallowed the rooftop garden whole, making the whole earth into endless sea as her husband, his secret finally revealed, held her tightly as they rose into the wild and stormy sky.

She closed her eyes, suddenly afraid of heights. *My love*, she thought fiercely. *My love*.

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Mara’s hand released its pressure from his chest, and she sighed deeply.

You knew, from the beginning.

I knew.

He groaned, in sadness and regret. *I should’ve known – I should’ve told you before –*

We are foolish creatures, she interrupted, smiling. *Young lovers especially so.*

I’m not young, Mara.

She smiled at that. *And how old is Miranda the angel?*

Miranda the angel is far too old and far too horrific a creature, compared to Malech the man.

And yet it is Miranda the angel trying to save Malech’s wife and child.

He groaned in reply.

No matter your name, Mara sent, *you are who you are. And I will always love you.* She closed her eyes as she felt the life leave her little boy and, with one final pulse of her last reserves of life, she pushed away from him.

The force of repulsion startled him that his energy transfer connection broke, and he lost material substance. “NO!” he screamed, both in sending and in sound, as he saw Mara’s body fall like a ragdoll to the waters below. He dove down, grabbing for her, but his hands only passed through her, like light illuminating the dust motes of the air. Again and again he tried, in his pathetic pursuit to save the last of the non-chosen people of God.

When Mara and little Halim hit the water, their bodies passed through as silently and gently as if passing through a cloud – the water swallowed them whole, with no splash or wake, as if they were never there.

He dove into the water, a fallen creature of light swimming in the waters of the judgment of Creation. He looked for Mara and Halim, but they were not there. Swimming to the deepest depth,

he saw that Mara and Halim were not there. In flying through the water, just above the rocky earth’s surface, he saw the extent of the Reboot.

There were no drowned bodies, human or animal. The evidence of man’s existence – his cities, his roads, his temples, his farms, all *tebne* – were wiped out and wiped clean, as if they never existed.

As if Mara and little Halim never existed.

He shot out of those waters, an angel enraged, the color of his rage manifesting itself in an expanding fire in the sky, as if a star exploded, creating a new being burning with hate. He found the ark again, floating peaceably in a peaceable ocean, and he threw himself against it – futile, as the light of Heaven’s force shield around the ship was so impenetrable that, from the inside, the inhabitants of the ark wouldn’t have seen nor known an attack was occurring.

Exhausted, he turned away and slowly flew at a far enough distance so that he couldn’t see the ark anymore. Home had been Heaven before his fall, and then Earth became his adopted home, especially when he became a husband and father. But now he had no home, no place – except for one place reserved for a creature such as he.

He had not known how to get there when he was a resident of Earth. But homeless, rootless, with hate burning him alive, he easily slipped from the Earth to the prison realm of Lightbearer, as if his previous existence was a fool’s dream, and he had finally awoken to reality.

#

“Zoey, are you okay?”

Zoey found herself staring at the step where AJ was conceived long ago, trying to reconcile Miranda-Malech’s grief and loss of Mara and Halim with her own grief and loss of her father, only just newly forgiven. Unsure of her feelings, she pulled away from Ed as she asked, “How long have you known this -- Miranda’s memory?”

Ed gave a deep exhale. “For you – it would be eighteen years.”

“Eighteen years,” Zoey repeated softly.

“When you were fighting for Jamie’s soul and I was running defense above that tower, Miranda accidentally sent. I know you were able to overhear my and Miranda’s sending, but you didn’t hear this.”

“Why didn’t you tell me eighteen years ago... when you knew?”

“Ah.” He shook his head. “I wanted to, Zoey. But – don’t take this the wrong way – both your brother and I felt you needed to know only at the right time.”

“The right time. And how is this the right time?”

“You’re angry.”

“No – yes – I mean,” Zoey rubbed her eyes in frustration, angry at the tears she found there. “That’s all ancient history, isn’t it. Well before I or anyone else in my family were born.” She forced herself to look at the angel standing before her. “I’m sorry. I’m being silly.”

“No, you’re being human.” Ed held out his hand, and Zoey, with a little hesitation, took it. “Even a saint is allowed to feel that Heaven’s keeping secrets. With good reason. But I need to ask you this: how do you feel about Miranda, now that you *do* know?”

Zoey sighed. “Pity. Pity and fear. It’s like a Greek tragedy. She was heroic in her love as a husband and father, yet it was just that love that damned her, that drove her insane with rage and grief. My own father was afraid of becoming that, when our family was falling apart and he was powerless to stop it. That’s why he ran away – to save himself. But to spare us, too – to spare us from his guilt and shame. While I could never do what my father did, I can understand it now. And as for Miranda –”

“Yes?”

“If AJ had been more like Jamie, I could very well have been like Miranda.” Zoey sighed again. “Jamie and me and my dad were just ways for Miranda to grieve – as destructive as those ways were.” She looked at Ed, whose blue eyes shared the same intensity as hers. “She needs help.”

“And that’s why I had to wait until you were ready to share Miranda’s memory.” He gave a reassuring squeeze to Zoey’s hand. “Miranda’s actions wouldn’t be forgivable until you forgave your father – for not being brave enough to do what you and Miranda could do. Now that you have done so, it will help with my current mission.”

“Your current mission –” Zoey paused. “The one in jeopardy really isn’t my father, is it? If he’s in Purgatory, he’s already safe. It’s Miranda who’s in danger – who’s endangering herself, right?”

“Hmmm.”

“So... this mission isn’t really about saving my father at all. It’s about saving Miranda.”

“Astute, this one is. How do you feel about that?”

She smiled softly. “If you’re asking for my blessing, then – you have my blessing.”

“Spoken like a true Beatrice.” He kissed the top of her head and turned away.

Zoey saw Ed walk to the golden ring, but before he left she asked, “Can I ask you one question?”

“Shoot.”

“Do you still love Miranda?”

Ed paused in his movement. “Always.”

“Oh.” Looking up, Zoey saw the slowly fading rainbow as the last of the rainclouds cleared away, revealing a dazzling, sunny day, and then heard his sending as he took flight, his earthly clothes melting away into a raiment of silvery white that shimmered as he slipped out of the material world.

But I love you, too, Zoey.

This time, neither one said goodbye.