

ACROSS TIME
AND
STARLIGHT

ALESSANDRO CANDOTTI



RIVER GROVE
BOOKS

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First Edition

To my parents, who showed me the way.

To my wife, who keeps me on the path.



◆ 1 ◆

SAYA



New Time

THERE WAS ONLY ONE THING I remembered about the boy I loved. He didn't believe I existed. Perhaps that was only natural, since we met in a dream. Mine or his, or the World Trees' who dreamed our lives into existence, that I never truly figured out. Now all I had left of him was his voice, just a whisper of breath under the bright stars of my imagination.

*"What if I told you you're not real?
That I just made you up
so I don't feel so lonely all the time?"*

he asked, and I replied,

"I would like that."

It would mean something inside you poured itself into making me.

Just so I could love you.

So, in a way, I'm a love letter to you.

From your deepest self.

Wouldn't you want to be something so beautiful?"

And for a long time, I believed in that.



The expanse held my body on a cushion of weightlessness. I floated beneath a vault of stars, blazed through wisps of cloud backlit by the moon. Below, the ocean sighed and cascaded into ripples of light. My chest strummed with something immense and full of longing, unafraid.

I rolled and cut through the night sky, my hair streaming out behind me. Wind streaked over the wings he had dreamed for me. On my back they beat and rose, effortless—the wings that set me free to love him, even if I knew I'd never see him again. With their power they thrilled me, the air brimming with possibility.

Now I was free.

Higher and higher, they took me away from this world, from everything. Then came the mechanical thudding, the sleek machines slicing through the cloud banks. They never tired, hunting me across this expanse. My lungs burned as I dived and danced away from their searchlights. They broke me, league by league, until my only escape was a desperate surge toward the moon.

But soon the air grew too thin to breathe, and I wavered before a summit of stars. My wings faltered, barely keeping me afloat. The moon was like a portal to a dream, too far to touch. Everything

became soaked in a hideous and wondrous slowness. The lights of the universe burned as the machines circled below me. And gasping, I plummeted toward the hungry sea.

Their nets caught me, abrasive, tearing into skin and feather. I tangled myself, thrashing like an animal. Men with black holes for eyes pulled me from that web, clubs at the ready. Then there was darkness.

I didn't know how much time had passed when I awoke to another night's stars. I had been bound with leather straps, spread-eagled on a table, my wings pinned with nails. Blood pooled around my wrists. I tasted copper in my teeth, my knuckles tight as a brace squeezed on my forehead. Saws glinted, their teeth sharp. Bitterness coated my tongue from a surgeon's morphine. The branches of a gigantic twisted tree crawled over the sky, blotting out the last of the twinkling lights.

I tried to remember him. I could not.

I screwed my eyes shut and saw a kaleidoscope of dancing red, green, and black. Soon, I couldn't feel my wings anymore. Soon, I didn't believe they could ever have existed.



"Approach, my child," came the priestess's voice. "Sit at her feet."

As I knelt in front of a temple pew, the ancient woman guided the urchin toward me. His eyes were downcast, cheeks smudged with dirt, milky-blond hair standing on end like a wick of pale flame. As the orphan neared, I lifted myself to sit back on the wooden bench, brushing off the memories of that night sky, letting my old self float further and further away.

This was to be my third conversation with a child, and my chest

was wild and tender, stung by the hope in the little ones' eyes. But it was not them I was here for.

I studied how the Mother guided the orphan forward, one hand on the small of his back and the other on his shirtsleeve. He lurched into the pew, his soft fingers groping the seats. The priestess watched him, a bronze circlet gleamed in her close-cropped hair that had turned entirely white, a shock against her dusky skin.

Above us, inky roots crawled across the stories of the Beginnings on the temple's dome, choking this place of worship. They gleamed an unearthly blue and I was prickled by a sense they were somehow aware of us.

This night and every night before it, they had taken our dreams back to the citadel, to the Black Tree that feasted on the nightly imagination of our people. But the Tree and its Regent hungered for more than just our inner worlds, as I understood only too well.

In the pew opposite, the First Mother pressed her mouth together in muted hope this orphan would be a good fit, and I sensed she had seen too many little hearts broken. The lines on her face told me she was pragmatic, used to making hard decisions. Her only vanity was the purple polish at the base of each nail.

"Are you a faerie?" the little boy asked, gumming his teeth. As I smiled at him, he gaped, his fingers dropping out of his mouth.

Like the priestess, I too had a copper band on my forehead. I had added a string of yellow flowers to my flowing golden hair and was sitting cross-legged in the white lace dress I had chosen for the moment, dangling one bare foot.

The orphan's eyes and mine locked. His were fox brown and alive with trust. Everything in me wanted to take care of this tiny person, and there was something so natural about it. I found myself

wondering if this was the same feeling my father had when he plucked me as a babe from the river. I took a deep breath, aiming for an artful lightness.

“Perhaps I seem so, but I am a creature just like you.” I slid off the bench and crouched before him, offering my hand.

“Will you be my mother?” he asked.

My breath caught in my chest, as if I’d inhaled a cloud of warm, heady smoke. If I could not have a mother of my own, shouldn’t I know how it feels to become one? I deserved this at least. I tucked my golden locks behind my ear. Hesitantly, the boy reached for my hand, his pudgy fingers tugging on mine.

“What is your name?” I asked.

“Salerio,” he replied in a small voice. He looked at me as if I had descended from the moon to rescue him.

“Salerio, tell her about your drawings,” instructed the Mother from behind.

“My black monster!” he blurted, digging into his pants behind his back. The First Mother watched me as he removed a crumpled manuscript. On its back he’d scrawled and colored his beasts, variations of the same sinister amber eyes and muscled humps.

“Salerio has talent and should imagine while he can,” I replied, offering a shy glance at the First Mother.

Her eyes signaled agreement. I had passed one of her tests. We both knew it would not be long before all of his fanciful dreams would be taken from him.

“Salerio, can you sing?” I asked.

He fidgeted with his drawing, folding the page into a grimy square and stuffing it back into his pants.

“Let me sing you a song of the white dragon of Aiyan, the Eternally Blooming.” I gathered myself to make use of that fragile

feeling in my chest. The first verse told of a snow dragon who flew through time searching for his own tail.

*Dragon, dragon, come and go
As your heart lost in the flow
Find your tail and time will show . . .*

There was a charged silence. Wide-eyed boys and girls appeared from the doorways of the temple on the left and right of the altar. I opened my arms to my audience. Salerio dived in and the others snuck forward, curious heads bobbing in a huddle around us in the pews as others crowded to my knees.

“Where did you learn this verse?” The Mother’s words were sharp, a warning. She stood and peeled the more enthusiastic children off me, grabbing their shirts like the scruffs of their necks. I didn’t think they’d ever heard someone sing before.

“Mother, may we speak privately?”

She nodded, brushing off the last little hands that tugged at my dress, and indicated we should pass into the aisle. She guided me toward the altar, and there for a second I saw within it the wasted body of a child, entombed in the black roots, sacrificial eyes only showing the whites. But the altar was simply a statue, tangled in the dark latticework of the Black Tree. I turned away from the Mother so she wouldn’t see the horror that crawled over my face.

“Bye, Salerio,” I sang over my shoulder, keeping my composure. The orphan’s eyes swelled, and I was spiked with guilt. I forced a smile, wiped my eyes, and waved to the others. I couldn’t tell them I wouldn’t be back, that I would never be a mother to any of them.

“You’ve done such a wonderful job,” I gushed at the First Mother. She nodded again, curtly taking us past the altar to a

circular door. The wrinkles on her forehead and the corners of her eyes crinkled as she pushed it open and we entered into her makeshift study. Shuffling, she gestured with hands clasped as if in prayer that I should join her.

Inside were two chairs, no decorations, just an oval mirror and a carpet with a pattern of concentric circles hanging on the wall. Here too the roots had grown across the roof to obscure whatever murals had once been there. Their rustling seemed to register us entering.

There was a table between the chairs and a fireplace full of sullen embers. I crossed my legs and perched on the edge of my seat while the Mother coaxed a glow from the ashes. A sweet smoke wrinkled my nose as she sprinkled blossoms into a teapot. I stared at my nails and listened to the timid crackle of the embers, the hush of her unhurried breath. These were the only sounds in the room.

“The ballad borders on . . . treachery,” she finally said. The scent of chamomile mixed with the woodsmoke while I fidgeted.

“Yes,” I demurred, toying with a braid of my hair.

The Mother said nothing for a while. When the tea bubbled, she served it in clay cups. “I don’t need to tell you what would happen if you were discovered lifting your voice to dreams long lost.”

I held the heating clay with both hands, blowing shyly as she took her seat on the other side of the table, scratching the small rash on the inside step of her foot.

“Mother, do you know this song?” I preempted, cloaking my face with a curtain of golden hair. My soprano bloomed in the room.

One day, lovely, we’ll be free

Oh lovely, we’ll be free, oh lovely

As I sang, shock had registered, but quickly she regained control. Her mouth and posture softened as she leaned back, her arms draped over the wicker chair. A small sigh filled her breast. There was a warm core beneath the iron.

“It has been many moons since I last enjoyed this,” the priestess mused once I had finished. Her purple nails shifted into a steeple position as she considered me. Her eyes flicked to the copper ringlet around my temples. Mine involuntarily jumped to hers too.

“Mother, I am one of the few who keep the faith of the Beginnings alive. I have heard there is a Traveler from another time who can return our stolen dreams . . .”

“Who told you this?” she demanded. “You foolish girl, you should not be mixed up in this!”

I shrank away, pulling my legs up onto my chair. This seemed to mollify her. I waited as she regarded me in charged silence.

“I’m not asking for the same emancipation,” I began.

“Do not bring this abomination upon our heads!” Had I imagined it or did the roots above us quiver as if she’d mentioned them by name?

I placed my arms around my knees, burrowing my face in them and making a small hurt noise. Then I waited. For a moment, I thought it was too much. Then I sensed her approach and felt her hand resting on the crown of my head.

“There now, child. The old ways are gone.” Experienced fingers found my chin; rough calluses brushed against my skin. When she raised my face, my eyes were as bright and trusting as Salerio’s.

“Mother, I wish to see the *sai maran*, the sanctuary of Beginnings where we once prayed for the rebirth of the world. There are so few of us left, and I fear . . . I cannot bear children . . .”

Slowly, the resolve softened in her face. “Come, my child, don’t fret, don’t fret.” She grasped my wrist with the same firmness she

had shown the orphans and took me to the back of the room. “Does your husband not approve?”

“He doesn’t.”

“Mine didn’t either.” She offered me a wry smile and squeezed my hand.

She reached out and dragged the carpet of concentric rings from the wall, revealing the stone beneath. We both coughed, dust tickling our noses.

“Help me, child.” The Mother carefully positioned her fingers in a set of tiny grooves in the stone. “Now pull!”

The groan of a hidden mechanism filled the room, cogs and wheels croaking to life. Then the stone slab rumbled aside. My eyes adjusted to the hues of lilac and emerald emanating from the cavern within. I could make out prismatic crystals, spires of gleaming gemstones with a speckled honeycomb of living spaces carved from the rock. There were sleeping bunks, pools of water, groves of sacred plants, shrines that depicted the rings of time, ghostly in the ethereal light of the crystals.

“These holy places were built to house the First Mothers when we entered the Life Praise,” the Mother said as she entered into the expanse. “A week of prayer to the roots of the world, to the World Trees we call the Fates, who dream our lives into being, imagining time as we know it. These plants and waters are their descendants, and they give the Mothers all the sustenance we need.”

She gestured to the pools, where strange flowers arched upward. They resembled lilies but for a kaleidoscopic pollen that twinkled from tightly bound cones. “The *sai maran* can also be understood as an *arkh*. The Mothers locked themselves inside these caverns, sustained by the plants with no way to return until they had completed their—” She turned around and cried out at the sight of me, her palm reaching to her mouth.

I had not followed her in. I was holding on to the stone slab, but it was no longer with the dainty hands of the maiden I had been just moments before. My hands were now old and compact with purple fingernails—identical to hers, as the rest of me was. She stared back at a mirror image of herself.

I had recreated her image, transforming my shape despite the agony it caused me within. Now I was wearing her body like a second skin, down to the smallest detail.

My name was Saya, and I was the girl whose dreams came true. But since that night I found myself spread-eagled on a table, all I ever dreamed of was becoming someone else. A dream that brought me here to locate the time Traveler or find myself caged once more by servants of the Black Tree.

“May the Beginnings guide your Life Praise,” I whispered, pushing the stone slab of the sanctuary shut. The Mother did not move as the shadow of the rock door crossed her face, but only cried out again, a frightened gasp. The mechanism groaned, then gave a final click as the door locked, leaving the wall precisely as we had found it. I rehung the carpet, then dusted off my calloused palms, shivering as reverberations of the transformation continued to knit pain through every inch of me.

Gritting my teeth, I ran my hands through my hair, short and wiry, surprised at how gummy my knees were from exertion. I felt sick. I touched my round new body and put my ear to the carpet, barely able to hear her pleas: “Why are you doing this?” I turned and leaned my back against the wall. Soon there was only silence. A tear fell onto my immaculate priestess’s habit, pooling and absorbing into the brown wool.

“Because I too am a prisoner, Mother . . .” I whispered. When the men who’d taken my wings saw me shape-shift for the first

time, they'd understood my potential. They'd opened the door to my cage. But the moment I'd stepped out, I'd exchanged my old self for a new one, swapping one prison for another.

Gingerly I started testing out my limbs. My new body hurt, arthritis in the left knee. But that pain was nothing compared to the fractures within me. It felt as if every particle inside was splintering, as if the fabric of me was being ripped apart and put back together again. This was the changeling. It had started after my wings were taken from me, during my long imprisonment at the hands of the Tree and its Regent.

I shuffled to inspect my lined face in the mirror. It had the same roundness, severe lips, and benevolent wrinkles as the First Mother. For a second it flickered, and I saw fragments of the girl I had once been, her hair streaming rainbows, her eyes flashing through colors, her lips blossoming and thinning into so many shapes. With a grunt, I wrenched it back to the Mother. I was the changeling now. That Saya was gone. I wasn't even sure I remembered her.

I leaned heavily against the table to inspect my ankle: the rash I'd spotted the old priestess scratching, a tiny but necessary detail. Satisfied, the nausea lifting, I placed my fingers into a steeple and looked back at the Mother in the mirror.

"I will come back for you," I told my reflection. "I promise."

I inspected the bare room. That she hadn't lost her religious fervor was suspicious enough. The Black Tree had all but eradicated her faith. As our inner visions and dreams were taken from us, so too was our belief in a higher plane. Sensations that were once sacred had lost their meaning—love and fear, reason and religion, holiness and hate, joy and music, the invisible breath of life—all were fading into memory.

Those who refused to offer them as tribute were hunted by the

kai talan, inquisitors charged with extracting dreams by any means necessary. And the Tree had only grown bigger with each succeeding year.

The Mother had retained other contraband, faded books and sheets of music, making it clear she had not been contributing for years, decades even, evading inspections. For most who lived in the ruins beneath the Tree, these items would no longer be of interest. But my suspicions ran deeper.

The Mother had known what I meant when I spoke of the Traveler prophecy. She knew of the possibility of returning lost dreams. While it was circumstantial evidence, the unease would not leave me.

I paused and glanced upward at the gleaming roots above me that choked the religious paintings on the ceiling. The prophecy spoke to the very heart of why our dreams could never come back. Why those who sought to do so threatened the lives of us all.

The Black Tree and its Regent weren't just our rulers. They were the only things that kept our people from extinction.



It was barely three months ago when I had found myself huddling in a cave's mouth in the mountains. Lime and sandstone stalagmites guarded the opening like teeth; a wet mineral smell clogged my throat. Rain fell past me many hundreds of feet, all the way down to the ground no one had touched in generations.

Gently, I reached down to the abandoned bird nests at my feet, plucking a white feather. Cupping it in my hands, I let the wind take it out into the storm. Caught in the swirls, it floated and pirouetted as if dancing, as miraculously as the Floating City we lived

on ourselves. Then, as if the fragile dreams that powered it had disappeared, it vanished from our sight.

Behind me was my captor and handler, Favian. A *kai talan* inquisitor and the son of a legendary spymaster, he was dressed, as always, in black, with a white tree on his chest and a blue stripe in his short blond hair. An efficient, elegant figure, he did not have a speck of dirt on him.

For a moment, as we looked out at an earth blurred by the rain and clouds, so far below us, I wondered what it would feel like to leap onto those clouds and glide free across the sky of that unknown world below. And then stop flying once and for all.

“Do you ever wonder what’s down there in the Flat Lands?” I asked.

Favian didn’t answer. We just looked at the rain together. I couldn’t tell if, like me, he was nostalgic, longing for a place he had never seen. I never knew what Favian was thinking. It was one of the things I hated about him. We listened to the falling water, and for once, he let the moment be. Maybe we were both reflecting on the strangeness of it all and the roles in which we now found ourselves. But then again, I didn’t think he ever questioned his.

“The distilled dreams of those who have Risen are harnessed through the roots of the Tree.” He quoted the law of the Regent in his crisp luxurious croon. “It is the fuel that keeps us and our glorious home afloat. To maintain it, all citizens are required to offer their dreams to the Tree. . .” He paused significantly and let the tension build. *To avoid a catastrophic fall to our deaths* were words he didn’t need to say.

I shivered, droplets trickling from the teeth of the stalactites around us. I couldn’t look at him, sensing his cold black eyes boring into my skull.

“Show me our enemies, Saya.” His voice slithered over my body.

I gritted my teeth and slipped off my frock, revealing my bare breasts and undergarments. My nipples were hard in the cold. I’d made it through this test before but here, so far from my cage in the citadel, I felt different, more exposed. Flecks of rain prickled my skin, blown in by the swirling winds.

“Change,” he commanded. Crushing a whimper, I screwed my eyes shut, searching for the rippling pain of the changeling. It took so much of me to remain subdued. *Breathe*. I couldn’t slide the awareness of his eyes off me.

I imagined myself standing down on the Flat Lands, at the edge of the crater where the gargantuan mass of the Floating City had ripped from the earth. Gazing up at the impossible miracle of our home in the clouds.

I envisioned myself as a knight of the Marauda Empire, a member of the legions who had invaded us. One who knelt among the graves of my fallen comrades who had tumbled from the cliffs as they tore up into the sky on Our Day Of Rising. I grasped for their fury, their sorrow, their conviction, but still the shape of the enemy would not come.

“Change,” he ordered again. That cold voice belied his true nature, so velvety it hid all signs of the rage within him. I was shaking more violently now, each particle of me ripping and returning together. All I could hear was the water cascading, a distant, endless drumming.

Favian’s hand slid up my neck, his breath warm on my skin, his scent whispering of saffron and leather. He began to squeeze and I groaned hoarsely, pulling on the agony of the changeling, the tiniest pieces of me shredding and reknitting themselves.

“Change,” he hissed.

I am a willing servant of the Empire. My muscles spasmed and crinkled, the rippling within me reconfiguring itself. I vow to slaughter the people of the Floating City. My back widened, my chest heaving, my jaw reconstructing itself as Favian let go.

The heretics will travel the forbidden way, across time and starlight. My skin sliced open into the traditional scars of Maurada knife fighting. This will crack open the fabric of time itself, pulling apart our world as we know it. The yellow cloak of the Empire draped down my back, as I swelled into my powerful new body. Not one of them can survive.

I gasped for air, my lips ill fitting and severe. Favian strode around me, examining every inch. I was a Marauda in all but soul, tendons hardened by war and devotion, clean shaven and hunched, with an angular face and hooded eyes. He stopped and pushed his foot squarely into my back. I collapsed like a newborn infant.

“Change,” he repeated mercilessly. My vision was blurry, my broad soldier’s shoulders shaking, the wind licking at my close-cropped hair.

I heard him unfurl the whip he’d used to train me. Faster, I had to do it faster. “Saya.” His voice held a warning. “My gorgeous Saya.” I closed my eyes again, hammering my chest with a fist thick as a gauntlet.

“Change. You know who they are.”

I imagined myself in the deepest alleyways of the old city, among the crumbling ruins of the Temples of Beginnings. Swarms of ragged fanatics following me like rats in a stream of the faithful, the ever-present shadow of the Black Tree looming over our passage.

I am one of the Last Men, those who resist the monstrous Tree and its Regent.

I saw myself whispering in hallways charged with prophecy, the blessings of the First Mothers pulsing in my heart. *I believe the time Traveler will return our stolen dreams.* The whip cracked against a stalagmite next to me, pinging my cheeks with powdery sandstone.

My body suctioned inward, becoming more starved, haggard. I groaned and cried out, my voice vibrating into a higher pitch. *The Black Tree is a dark World Tree, a harbinger of the end of times.* My hair sprouted, my beard lengthening, the cloak on my back slithering into rags. *It devours not just our dreams but our very souls.*

We must save the people of the Floating Lands by any means necessary. My eyes became wider and rimmed in red, hollow and manic. *Even if it means working with those who would exterminate us, our ancestral enemies, the Marauda.* I turned on my knees, flashing a look of rage at Favian. He had crossed his arms with a smirk, like I was a pet learning how to walk.

I collapsed onto my elbows, exhausted by the pain. Favian strolled up to me with his whip and gently rolled me over, examining my new face. He tugged his hand through my chest-length beard, testing its integrity. “Good girl.” Was that a touch of pride?

Shuddering in the dim cave light, my form reversed back from the withered rebel into Ciana, to the dainty and elegant girl who was to be my next mission’s camouflage. She came easier than the others, a relief from the burden of our enemies’ minds.

He sat me up, gently placing my frock over me and then retreated, tucking the whip into his belt. I lay still for a few seconds to gather myself, shivering before the gaping maw in the cliff face.

The rain fell, down down down. At last I stood like a fawn, my knees rubbery and awkward, dragging the frock over my shoulders.

“Excellent, my darling.” Favian perched cross-legged on a

mushroom limestone, keenly observing for any flickers of my old self. For the briefest of seconds, did a hint of self-loathing ghost over his face?

No, I was so scrambled from the changeling, I wasn't seeing things clearly. My captor composed himself as I leaned on a cold column of rock. Finally I was stable.

"Saya," Favian leaned forward. "This time Traveler prophecy has been designated a *satar* threat." He waited while I absorbed this.

"*Satar* means. . . existential?" I ran my fingers through my long blonde locks, my scalp tingling.

He blinked his delicate eyelashes.

It wouldn't be dangerous unless it had some truth to it. Favian fixed me with piercing black eyes, swirling and mesmerizing. I had always hated how confused his eyes could make me, the way they baited and invited, penetrated or thrilled. He regarded me now with that inky analysis.

"Does an existential threat excite you?" he asked, snakebite in his eyes.

"Does it excite you?" I retorted. He enjoyed that, bestowing on me a lavish smile, and I couldn't help being impressed by how numerous and small his teeth were.

"How are you finding Ciana?" he asked, somehow gentle now.

The delicate farmer's daughter from the Outer Rim liked to dance through the streets, put flowers in her hair, and care for the elderly. Some of these poor souls even believed she was their grandchild, having sacrificed any dreams of their own to the Tree. She was innocent in all the ways I could never be—an ideal subject to infiltrate the First Mother's heart—and I'd spent the last week studying her like a sculptor. Favian paused before me, weighing a bag of silver in his hand before tossing it to me.

“For your needs.” His eyes flicked to the abandoned bird nests as I snatched the tinkling coins from the air.

Then he took an envelope from his inside breast pocket. I wished he would not open it. Projects of his were so secretive they could only mean dancing along a razor’s edge. Even other *kai talan* would not know of our mission, putting me at risk from both the Last Men and my own supposed allies.

The cave’s stalactites hung down around us like some ancient, fossilized monster, the hush of the rain loud in my ears.

“From what we can make out, the prophecy around the Traveler first surfaced in the old Temple of Beginnings in the ruins of the old village. If there was one thing I knew for sure about him, it was that his ambition was limitless. “As you know, we have had suspicions—”

“Please, not me,” I begged.

He stood up and approached, without taking his inky black eyes off me. “Saya, darling, it will be better than last time.” He reached out to touch my hand, making me flinch away.

“You sent those old women to join the Forgotten without trial!” The pouch of silver coins dug into my palm.

His whole demeanor hardened, his many tiny teeth frozen. He had changed since being promoted to hunting people. He was a boy no longer. “The First Mothers panicked. We only wanted to understand—”

“Don’t lie to me, Favian.”

He folded the report succinctly, his fingers precise and controlled. The sheets of rain were falling forever behind him, blotting out the sky.

“I hate it when you lie to me.” I could not cut from my memory the hunted look on the old priestesses’ wrinkled faces as members

of the *kai talan* held them down in their habits and anointed them on their brows with a single drop of the extract of the Tree's poisonous blue flowers. Their pupils filled first with horror, then with darkness, and finally, worst of all, with gratefulness as spidery black tears welled and streaked down their cheeks as the burden of their dreams was taken from them.

At that moment they joined the Forgotten—those who had been drained of their dreams so completely that they were only empty husks. For what were our lives, our purpose, but the dreams of the World Trees?

“Saya, do you not recall the Regent's words? That you will become whole again?”

I loosened my clutch on the pouch. The clinking of the coins cascaded through me.

Both of us waited. The moment could cut either way.

Once there had been a ragged girl on her way to the capital, huddling under the only blanket I'd ever owned: a patchwork quilt smelling faintly of horse manure and home. My mother, abandoning me on a desolate cliffside, had vanished into the night. I woke to the crunch of footsteps and cried out for her, hopeful and ready to forgive.

Instead, a centipede of fingers tore my quilt off me, and manacles bit into my tender young wrists. In my confusion and panic, the secrets in my back flared—my wings burst forth, ethereal and glowing in the platinum moonlight. The soldiers staggered back in wonder as my wings beat and thundered with my panicked heart. The soles of my feet rose from the ground, and whirlpools of wind clutched at the soldiers' disheveled hair.

Then an ugly jolt, for from my manacled wrists there was a chain, a gnarled steel worm crawling with soldiers that twisted

and wrestled me back to the cold ground. And there was Favian, dropping a pouch of silver into my mother's open palm. The coins tinkled into her hand as he smiled with his tiny white teeth.

"The Regent pays handsomely for miracles." I hissed the same words he had spoken then and pitched the pouch of silver at his chest. He grunted as it thudded and burst open, showers of dancing light exploding onto the cave ground. The rain poured past the cave opening, all the way down to the Flat Lands.

I froze as my handler stepped forward, whipping a slap up to my cheek. He faltered at the last second, and his hand merely brushed against my jaw, tender, almost afraid. A droplet trickled from the blue stripe in his hair, pooling and then dripping over his eyebrow. I did not move, staring him down. He swallowed the accusation, and for a split second, I saw the lonely boy he hid inside.

At that, I turned and fled back into the tunnels of the Skala Mines, into the warren of the Forgotten.

"Saya!" His voice had echoed after me.

I winced at the recollection, wishing it, along with many other memories of Favian, could be taken from me like the dreams of so many others. We'd known each other for a long time, and none of it had been easy between us. He'd been the first to imprison me and the first to release me after my failed escape into the stars. I'd been his "bird in a cage," and he'd ministered to me when I was most broken. Once, on a mission hunting the Last Men, he'd pressed me up against a wall, and I was afraid of what he might do. Afraid of what I might have wanted him to do.



I shivered away my memories of that cave and its portal of falling rain. It was far warmer here in the First Mother's office, a humble

temple room of stone. I found more faded books, religious artwork, and other contraband under the false bottom of one of her desk drawers. Since the resurgence of the resistance, the Regent had cracked down on any evidence of a deep inner life. Nothing I found directly confirmed she was one of the Last Men; anyone could hoard these precious artifacts. I decided to widen my search to the temple more broadly.

Closing the door behind me, I reentered the dome. The beam of sunlight was coming down at a slightly different angle. No orphans in sight. I inspected the root system feeding on the altar. I could see twinkles of blue in the dark tangle. Somehow the dreams of the ancients embedded in the walls of the temple itself were feeding the Tree, maintaining enough of a threshold not to alert the inquisitors without the Mother having to sacrifice any dreams of her own.

“Fascinating,” I murmured to myself. Could this have been where the Last Men began? These orphans, free from giving to the Tree, able to dream of a different life? Perhaps the temples were shielding their inhabitants from the taxes, incubating new rebels with each generation.

I walked around the dome’s circumference and opened a circular doorway leading into the kitchen, where a fire blazed under several pots. Two volunteers peeling yams for the evening soup waved at me, one younger, one elder, but both with the same chestnut braids. I acknowledged them and headed through the steam.

“We are following the recipe, Mother!” they assured me.

I nodded, mimicking the Mother’s curtness.

On the other side of the kitchen, I stepped through a doorway into a courtyard. Around it were simple living quarters built into the cliff face, an elongated stone house with a thatched roof for the children on the right, the Mother’s personal quarters to the left,

and across the way, a small natural waterfall enclosed by a waist-high wall, which acted as a washroom.

Faded clothing hung from a washing line. A gingerbread cat yawned from the steps of the Mother's hut and then meowed at me. With the exception of the run-down root system running from the temple and between the stone buildings, the setting was primitive, and I crushed a whisper of nostalgia for a home long ago lost to me. These memories were so deeply buried they only surfaced in dreams. I should let the Black Tree take them and be done with it.

The bubbling excitement of noisy kids running stopped me in my tracks.

"Mother! Mother!" From around the corner came Salerio with a younger girl in tow. They were both dirty from head to toe and grinning with a mad glint in their eyes. Salerio slowed in front of me, a frown furrowing his brow. "Mother?" His voice wavered, and with it his pale wick of hair. The girl echoed her brother. She had placed a big dirty flower in her hair, the roots behind her ear.

"Yes, my children," I said, striving for the Mother's confidence. "Why are you running?"

"We saw the time Traveler!" He jumped excitedly.

My heart skipped a beat.