

# Prologue: Breaking Point

## Zorana

Trapped in the fog between dreams and waking, Zorana rolled to her side, reaching for the one she loved. Her palm slapped cold sheets, and for a single blissful moment, she thought Lyle had left to complete another job. For a moment, she almost groaned at his unexpected absence before letting sleep claim her again. Then, she remembered.

Curling on herself, she shoved her knuckles into her mouth while shards of grief wiggled in place, where they'd been imbedded in her heart. She forced her cry, both the audible one and the one that wasn't, back on herself, a harsh churn of acid that threatened to eat her from the inside out. Only once her sorrow had diminished, the shards of it falling back into a motionless ache, did she open to the bloodsong.

Even months after... *it*, the world's vast symphony limped along like a dog long abused by its master. Swells in its notes gave Zorana temporary hope of an eventual recovery, but these inevitably fell to the ripping discord that had ruled it since the loss of its beloved son. Since Parliament had executed the man many in Flosa and beyond had taken to naming the revolutionary. Since Lord Lyle Cunningham had died.

As always in recent days, Zorana shut out the bloodsong's rippling disharmony, reaching for the only thing that might bring her relief. Her beloved, the one to complete her song, had vanished from her life, but a near identical copy of his strain lived on in their son.

She understood that she shouldn't rely on her little boy to ease her pain. Even as young as he was, August sang his own melody of loss and befuddlement. How could Zorana add to that? But still, she sought his strain of music, the only thing that made her nearly as whole as she'd once been.

She quickly found it, letting its music unfurl her from her ball, but something about it sounded wrong. Distant. Muddled.

Climbing out of bed, Zorana padded across her bedroom and to the door, but before she could leave, Walter rose from his cot. Her attendant had taken to sleeping in her room over the months since... *it*, and elsewhere, Zorana had found herself trapped under his watchful gaze. She couldn't go anywhere without him at her side.

"Is something the matter?" he asked.

"I'm not sure yet," Zorana said. "Would you wake Vaughn up for me, please?"

"Of course."

While Walter raced to comply, Zorana made her way to the children's room. Having a lost monarch under her roof still raised a sheet of goosebumps over her skin. Zorana found it easier to think of her household's newest addition as Vaughn, Lyle's former attendant, than Victor Rothschild, absent ruler of the Ibisian empire. If she ever considered the latter while in his presence, she might transform into a gibbering mush pile.

Or she might fly into a screaming rage. *Why didn't you save my husband, oh famed warmaster?*

Zorana slipped into her children's bedroom on light feet, leaving its door cracked. Two beds filled the space's confines, one for Alice and one for August, but ever since... *it*, ever since Zorana had decided to keep her son awake, the siblings had shared a bed, taking comfort in each other's arms.

That seemed to be the case tonight as well. Only one set of sheets covered their indistinguishable lumps, and Zorana glided to it.

Alice's black curls spilled over her pillow with her eyelashes framing lids that hid striking blue. Her skin had flushed, probably from the heat of the blankets on her, and her lips were curved into a frown, an expression found on her face more often than not in recent weeks.

Her body was curved into an arch, and in the hollow that it cradled, Zorana expected to find her three-year-old son, an alabaster boy with loose muscles and a slowly moving chest. She expected to see bushy, white locks spread over his sister's arms and bleached skin scrunched into a ball.

None of that greeted her. Alice was hugging an empty depression, one that was still warm to the touch. Had August gotten up from bed? What could he possibly have wanted that he couldn't sing to his mother for it?

From the doorway, Vaughn whispered, "Problem?"

Lifting her hand off of the sheets, Zorana shook her head.

"August's not here," she said, "but it's probably nothing. I'm sure he's in the kitchen or a washroom."

"I'll check."

Once Vaughn had left, Zorana rested her hand on Alice's head. Did she dare wake her daughter up? It seemed a silly thing to do when nothing was wrong. Why disturb the girl's rest?

But when Zorana listened to the bloodsong, August sounded further away than before, as if his strain was echoing down a long tunnel. Why didn't this worry her? She should be swept into a panic over a deviation like that, but all she experienced was cool numbness, and upon examination, the cause for this seemed apparent.

*It* had hollowed her out. Besides grief, Zorana was an empty shell, and even her children had been unable to fill a hole lined with glass granules. She hadn't thought this state would be enough to negate what she should feel in this moment, but apparently, it was.

Without Lyle, she was broken.

What use had she, however, for panic or worry or fear? After everything life had stolen from her, what more could it take? It couldn't be crueler than it already had been.

The door banged open.

"He's not in the house," Vaughn gasped.

Blinking, Zorana tried to parse what he'd said. Not here? Where would August go in the middle of the night?

Outside the room, Walter ground to a halt, clinging to the doorframe.

"Xia's gone too," he panted.

Xia, Lyle's thrall. That woman had yet to rise from her near-comatose state, only aware when in August's presence.

When in August's presence.

"She's taken my son!" Zorana growled.

That was why he sounded so distant. Not because he'd muffled his strain but because it was moving away from the house. Why hadn't he cast a cry for help into the bloodsong? He did so love communicating through it. Was he still asleep? Why wouldn't he have woken up, though? Had Xia *drugged* August? Or had his trust in her merely allowed this to happen?

"That bitch," Zorana said.

She'd never trusted that girl, not since the moment Lyle had brought her home. Zorana had only tolerated her presence because her husband had unintentionally stolen from her notes, making him feel responsible for her. With the death of her mage, Xia seemed to have gone off the deep end, stealing a copy of the strain that she'd been bound to. She'd taken August so she could more fully partake of the comfort that he gave.

Like Zorana had done, if not to as much of an extreme.

Walter and Vaughn were watching her, as if waiting for her to shatter, and she wanted to shake them until *they* fell to pieces.

"What are you waiting for?" she said. "I can hear August; therefore, I can track him. We're going after my son."

Snapping to attention, both men scattered. Zorana made to go after them, but before she could take a step, a small hand took a fistful of her dress. Behind her, Alice was kneeling on the bed with bulging, blue eyes.

"Mommy," she breathed, "something's wrong."

Zorana gently pried her daughter's fingers off of the fabric of her dress, patting the back of the girl's hand.

"Go to sleep, silly monster," she said. "Everything will be fine."

"No!" Alice cried. "Don't you hear it? Something's wrong. *How do you not hear it?*"

What could she mean?

Zorana let the noise around her fall into her awareness. A motorcar a few streets from their townhome rolled over uneven cobblestones. Flames in the city's streetlamps flickered, and a breeze rustled leaves in a nearby park. All as it should be for such a late hour in Flosa.

Perhaps Alice had meant a sound in the bloodsong? But how could she have picked out *one wrong thing* from its mess? The symphony sounded no different from how it had been in the moment after Lyle's dying concerto had faded to silence, except...

Had August's strain stuttered? For the briefest of moments, Zorana could have sworn that a song as familiar to her as her own had hitched, stumbling over an unknown impediment.

That couldn't be right. One didn't stop singing into the bloodsong. Notes might become muffled, but silence only came with death.

And something wonderful and terrible *always* heralded the death of a mage like August: the release of a composition of their own making, given to ease the damage their absence would cause. Nothing like that was coming from August now. How could his strain have paused-?

It stopped.

As a second stretched into eternity, the symphony that reality was built on *wrenched*. a sudden halt like that of a person inhaling to prepare for pain. Zorana prayed that the exhale would never come, content to forever hover in anticipation.

But time cared not for the desires of a single woman. In front of her, her little girl's voice whistled as she screeched, a pathetic whine speaking of an accepted hurt too great to bear, and with hands seeking to crush her skull, she folded as if her strings had been cut. Still caught in the world's inhale, Zorana bent a stiff back, ran rigid fingers over her daughter's body, and brushed her numb lips over Alice's forehead.

And her exhale came in screaming sobs. Sinking to her knees, Zorana dipped into the bloodsong, deeper than she had in weeks. Desperation spurred her search, urging her to dive further and

further into the symphony, further even than the time of *it*. The time when she'd watched her husband as he was tortured to death.

As she fell, she didn't care how much damage she left in her wake. She didn't care how jumbled the music around her became. All she needed was a strain of music so similar to one that had already been taken. All she needed was her son.

"Gone, gone, gone," someone mumbled in the waking world.

"No, no, no," another whispered. "I hear- I can hear... mommy, it's ok."

And Zorana shot like a bullet from the bloodsong's depths, grabbing Alice's shoulders to shake her.

"Don't you say that!" she shouted. "Your brother is *gone*. Your father is *gone*. *Nothing* will ever be ok again!"

"ZORANA!"

Someone pulled Zorana off of her daughter, leaving Alice staring at her with glazed eyes and parted lips. Oh, no. What had she done?

"What happened?" Vaughn asked.

Energy was sapped from Zorana like years from a timepiece, and she sagged in Vaughn's arms, fleeing her body. From a distance, she watched herself lift an arm, pleading for her daughter's forgiveness, and her voice was filtered to her through a thin tube.

"August's strain went quiet. My son is dead."

A corpse wrestled its way free of Vaughn, brushing past Walter as it stumbled to its bedroom. Flopping into bed, Zorana stared at the ceiling, never truly seeing it.

She'd thought life could take nothing more from her. She'd been wrong.

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