

## THE NIGHTINGALE

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There is a pool beneath the fountain adorned by the statue of the Emperor of Teleros. There is always a pool beneath such a statue, although in the winter palace, it is a small miracle; Asaros is cold enough in the winter that exposure to the air will kill a man in a few hours.

Great expense is taken, of course, to ensure that only those whose death is desired are so exposed, and that happens once a season. The windows above the courtyard are made of coloured glassteel, thick as a man's wrist; it distorts nothing, and those who are privileged to receive the Emperor's invitation stand behind the safety of those windows to watch the sport below: a man's death.

Or a woman's. Often a woman's.

There are two seasons here, on Asaros, the Emperor's planet of retreat. Summer and Winter. The Summer is not so harsh; it is therefore for the Winter that he comes. He will arrive soon.

I know this because the ships are singing their way across the vacuum. I heard them yesterday, and woke to their song. The great doors of my rooms unlocked, tumbler by tumbler, as the ships sang their complicated harmonies, one after the other. There is no other way to open those doors; I am valued.

I understand this.

My skin is golden, my eyes are sapphire, my hair is the colour of snow. My feet are small and delicate, and the Emperor dislikes it when I wear bindings or shoes upon them. This was known, before my birth, and the soles of my feet are much like the glass that keeps warmth in; nothing penetrates them.

My hands are soft, though. My lips are soft. Sometimes they are white, and sometimes they are the colour of blood; sometimes, at the Emperor's fancy, they are the blue of death. I wear the clothing he brings me; fashions change more quickly than seasons, ephemeral as the Summer flowers that adorn his rooms. It would not do to have an important servant clothed in something that only the poor would wear -- last year's clothing; last year's fashion.

I must change with the times.

I know this. I was trained for it. In the palm of my right hand, the forked branches of life-lines are a conceit, an unchanging pattern. They are

sensitive to the movement of ions, the song of electricity, of magnetism.

I should be there, in the room of preparation.

But it is two days, two more days, before the Emperor will arrive at this ghost court, and instead, I chose to visit the frozen surface of a pond.

The water is real.

In the Summer palace, it dances with breeze, and in its depths, fish swim, cavorting until food arrives. When food is brought, their colour heightens, their fins and tails stiffen; they grow fangs and their skin hardens. They fight each other for what falls into the water, and the water itself becomes the colour of pale blood.

They were a gift from the ambassador of Dellen. He is long gone, although his people are often represented at Court; the fish remain. But they change; they bear scars; they die when they are too weak to reach the food offered by the Emperor's servants.

They do not sing.

I step out, upon the surface of the pond; touch the frozen tendrils of what might have once been falling water. The statue is made of something that resembles stone, but unlike stone, it does not weather; it lasts. The features of the Emperor's face are still.

When he is present, they will move; they will mirror his moods; he himself shows nothing.

But the statue's hair is not raven black; the statue's eyes are not brown; the statue's lips are not the pale pink of something that might once have known red. The skin is grey, not bronze.

I touch it; I feel nothing.

I feel nothing at all when I touch the face of anything that is not the Emperor.

No; that is not true. I feel nothing when I touch a face or a body, or anything that is formed in such a way as to affect the appearance of either.

The ships are singing. I have stood here for longer than I had intended; I have lost a day. I linger for only a moment longer, and then I make my way indoors.

The other servants are waking.

They are not like me; they live -- and die -- in the confines of the Winter Palace. I look at their faces as I enter the doors; they are thin and long. I recognize none of them.

A boy separates himself from his elders and rushes to kneel at my feet.

"Lady," he says, "the Emperor is coming."

I nod. "I ... had word. How long has it been?"

"How long?"

I can see the gleam of perspiration across his pale skin; his eyes, dark, are wide. "How long has it been since the Emperor has opened the Winter Palace?"

The boy looks over his shoulder.

An old, old man comes to join him. He walks stiffly and slowly; the Winter is unkind to the elderly. But he walks. There are ways to augment the strength of failing legs; those are expensive, and the people of the Palace are indentured. They will act upon their infirmity only at the command of the Emperor; it is far more likely that, upon his arrival, he will have them quietly put down.

I do not tell them this. If they know it, they live with the fear, but I have learned, with time, not to invoke that fear.

"Lady," he says. He falls slowly to his knees; I can hear the stretch of his muscles, the wobbling of his breath.

Something about his face is familiar.

This is wrong. I know it is wrong.

There is only one face that should ever be familiar.

"Do I know you?" I ask, gently. I am incapable of speaking any other way.

The old man shakes his head. His face is gleaming in the artificial light of the early dawn.

"Are you certain?"

"I am certain, Lady." He bows his head. "You must come with us; the throne is waiting. It has been waiting for almost a day."

"Yes. A day. Come, then."

He grimaces and turns to the boy. "I am ... unable to attend you. This is Krysos; he will be your companion."

Krysos.

"Yes. Come. If the throne waits a day longer, the Emperor will know."

Relief. He is relieved. I wonder why.

#

In the long hall of birds, there is no silence. The air is alive with the flurry of their wings. Bright and gaudy, the parrots cling to branches and

squawk in a thousand different languages. The sparrows fly the heights in silence, afraid to sing; above them, white and brown, are the great hunters. There are no ceilings here; the climate in this mile of the palace is controlled in its entirety by orbiting satellites.

The air is warm near the ground; cool near the heights. But it is never too cold; the birds die because of each other, or because of age. Sometimes a combination of both.

The Emperor loves birds. He finds their calls and cries interesting, for he hears song in them when he chooses to listen.

Perhaps once or twice during his retreat he will walk here. He will leave his guards behind; they are not necessary. There is no time, no place, in which the Emperor is defenceless. Only one or two people will attend him. And none of those people will be indentured; he has no need to impress that which he already owns.

The boy by my side is speechless. His silence would either gratify or annoy the Emperor; it means nothing to me.

Or it should mean nothing. But I am curious.

"Krysos?"

"L-lady?"

"Who is the old man?"

"The old man?" He frowns and then his brows lift. "Caverson?"

The name, too, is familiar. "Did he walk with me, when the Emperor last came?"

The boy's smile is generous, bright. He nods.

"Is he your father?"

"Moons, no! He's my great-grandfather."

"Ah. Did he -- did he look like you, when he was young?"

The concept of the old man being young is clearly foreign to him. His brow wrinkles as he thinks; smooths as he pauses. When he is older, those wrinkles will remain no matter how much his expression shifts; they are the lines carved there by time and care; they are real.

My palm aches.

"We must hurry," I tell the boy. But I let him linger perhaps longer than is wise. I know that he will remember what he sees here, not in the way that I remember things, but in the way that the living do: As miracle, as something so bright and so beautiful it fades into the realm of story. Or myth. He will tell his friends, and they will envy him. He will tell his

parents, and they will be overjoyed for him. And he will tell his children, and his children will ask him for this story again and again because it is a part of his youth, and because it makes him happy.

"Lady?"

"Is that what I am to be called this time?"

"P-pardon?"

"Am I to be called Lady?"

"Isn't that what you're always called?"

I do not know.

Memory is selective. In the case of the living, the selection process is not clear to me; in my case, it is defined and decided by the Emperor and the throne. "I do not know, Krysos. I think -- I think I might once have been called by another name."

The boy's eyes are round. He lifts a hand. "Don't tell me," he whispers. "Don't tell me your name."

"I don't know it."

Relief is palpable.

"Why are you afraid of it?"

He shakes his head. "My greatgrandpa told me."

"He told you my name?"

"He told me that your name is only for the Emperor."

Ah. Wisdom. No wise man covets what the Emperor guards. "Thank you, Krysos. May I call you that?"

He nods, tilting his head to one side, staring at me for long enough that blinking causes his eyes to tear.

"What are you looking for, Krysos?"

He hesitates. But my voice is gentle, always gentle. He hears no threat in it.

"Well, uh, I was -- well --"

He reaches out involuntarily, and I leap back, rising and falling with perfect grace ten feet from where he stands, lower jaw slack.

"You must not," I tell him, and if I could make my voice severe, if I could layer it with warning or threat or anger, I would. Not because I am angry; I am not.

But to touch me is death, his death.

It has been a very, very long time since the Emperor last chose to grace the

palace. I knew it, but I did not understand it until this moment -- for his great-grandfather would never have made such a simple mistake.

He blushes, misunderstanding everything. "Sorry," he says, speaking to the tips of his toes. "I just want to know --"

"To know what? Ask, and if it is not forbidden me, I will tell you."

"Are you cold?"

It is not the question I expected.

"Cold?"

"We saw you. Outside. On the ice."

Ah.

"My father was scared. He thought you would freeze. He made my uncles suit up. But my greatgrandpa told them to wait for you. He said you'd been there for hours already."

"Your greatgrandfather is a wise man." He lifts a hand. "I don't know. What do you mean by cold?"

"Cold like ice."

I ask. *Am I cold?*

*You are zero degrees. Your temperature is rising.*

I turn back to the boy. "Yes," I tell him. "I am cold."

"Should we go back? Should we get a 'suit?'"

I smile. "I will not be cold when the Emperor arrives. I do not require warmth; I am cold simply because I did not ask the palace to maintain my temperature at human norm."

"Why not?"

"Because it does not matter. It is not efficient. The Emperor is not here."

He said, "you don't feel the cold."

"I am aware of the cold. It does not kill me."

"Does anything?"

"The Emperor, if he so desires."

He nods. "Same with us," he says quietly.

My hand is throbbing now. "We have to hurry."

He nods again, but still he hesitates. "Do they work? Can you use them?"

"Use them?" For a moment, I am confused. And then I realize what he speaks of. Experimentally, I flex my wings. They feel new. "No."

"Oh."

He accepts the answer until we reach the end of the Aviary, and then he says, "why not?"

"It's only the illusion of flight that matters," I tell him gently. "Flight itself is forbidden."

He nods at that too, but for the first time an expression I can't parse changes his features. The Aviary opens its wide doors, and I wait until he has cleared them before I follow.

#

The hall beyond the Aviary is sparse. It is long, however, and the ceilings are hidden in wells of shadow. As we walk, the lights clear them, cold and distant as stars, but lacking their grace and beauty. He looks up, his head tilted back so far I am surprised he doesn't trip or fall. He is making memories. They will stay with him.

I have walked this hall before. I know it, although I cannot say when. I have seen these lights, these walls, these holographs; I have gazed upon the vistas suggested by the play of plasma along the walls. I do not tell the boy not to touch them as he walks past; if I did, I am not certain he would heed me. He thinks they are windows, and perhaps they are -- windows into the memories of the Emperor.

To my eye, they are trapped and unchanging; I see their colours as part of a continuous spectrum of capture light. I say nothing; there is something about the awe in the boy's eyes that I, too, wish to hold in memory.

But my memories are not of my own devising.

Nothing belongs to me.

At the end of the hall is another statue. It is as tall as the ceilings, a man made god; the Emperor. At his right hand is one large chair, its back red and blue, its arms golden. At his left hand, another chair, this in silver, its backing black and gold, the colour of the void and the unblinking stars.

It is my chair, and it stands five feet behind the throne of the Emperor.

"We're here," Krysos says, at the same moment I do.

"Now wait," I tell him gently. "But wait here. Do not touch the Emperor's throne. Do not stand in his shadow. And do not touch me until I rise, no matter what you see."

He kneels. "Lady?"

"Yes, Krysos?"

"My great-grandfather says that he once heard you sing."

"Ah."

"Will you sing again?"

"Oh yes," I tell him softly. "It is for that purpose, and no other, that I was born."

#

I place my palm on the rest of the chair, and the pain eases instantly. I did not lie to the boy, although I feel I am capable of lying. I do not feel the cold. I do not feel the heat. I have sensors for that; I have a link to this chair, the heart of this palace, this winter Citadel. But I wonder if the pain in my hand was cold, and the cessation of pain like human warmth.

The songs start.

I feel them as sensation, a collection of moving waves.

Fashions change in all things. In clothing. In art.

In music.

The Emperor will bring clothing, art, artisans; he will bring new food, new stories, new history. But the music is what he most craves, and it is the music that the ships send me now. Vacuum song, the song of the void.

There are instruments that have been created since I was last awake, and when he arrives, I will know how to play them. Ah; there are new languages as well, new forms of speech, new idioms to mix with the old. Here, hand on chair, I learn them as if they had always belonged to me.

But this time... this time something is different.

I am not sure what.

I ask, and the only answer I receive is a subsystem check, a spark of light and electricity, a flood of small nanites.

I hear them as they work; they speak to each other in voices that make no sound. But they find nothing wrong, and they return to their dormant state.

I should be comforted.

The only time I am upset is when something has failed. I know this. But I am not, precisely, upset. Something is different. Something has changed.

I open my mouth.

I sing.

The song itself is new, strange; my voice is like thunder.

And after it is finished, my vision returns; the processes by which the outer world become real once again take the forefront of the system.

I see the boy.

His face is white, his eyes wide, his cheeks hollow and pale. His lips are open.

"Krysos," I tell him gently, "You must never gape like that again. If the Emperor sees you, he will send you out into the cold."

He does not even nod; it's as if the return of my vision has erased some part of his. I have not seen this before. If I could touch him, I would offer him my hand and lead him from this place.

But I do not know why.

#

I am not permitted to attend the Emperor upon his arrival. I know that he has arrived; the myth of his return has travelled among this new generation of servants, these men and women born to the customs of cold and isolation.

When they dress and gather, with a mixture of excitement and fear, I find myself wandering back through the colourful, festive halls. My rooms are waiting; the doors are open.

I do not want to enter them. I want to remain with his people, as I have done time and time again. But in this, I have no choice; the palace sings and I step to the beat of its insistent and undeniable song.

My rooms are vast and grand, as befit a woman who might sit in a chair by the Emperor's side. The windows that keep the cold at bay are everywhere; they are coloured, yellow and white, gold and silver, blue and bronze; the light they let in is dependent on that colour, its rays bending and slanting as they touch my eyes.

There are divans here, chairs, fine tables, a desk which is more than ornamental, although it serves no obvious purpose; there are walls that will come to life when they are touched and their song is sung. There are doors that are hidden from all but the servants granted the hereditary positions that given them permission to enter.

But there are also cameras, hidden in a web of silk and embroidery; there are projectors that, when invoked, will gather light and concentrate it, shaping and chiselling it in just such a way it captures reality.

I sit upon my chair. My hands rest, palms down, although only one is necessary.

*Show me.*

The walls are rising across the landing pad, glass bending inward as they reach their full height. The wind's voice is bitter and high as they close upon it, trapping it on the outside, where the cold waits.

The ship is small.

Smaller than I remember, it seems to be fashioned of a single piece of gleaming metal out of which flat wings have been teased and pulled. Those wings bear the impression of the star clusters the Emperor owns; the insignia has grown larger and more complex since last I saw it, although the designer has taken care to make, of complexity, a simple, unadorned emblem.

The underside of the ship dilates; light floods the stones into which the Emperor's hundred names have been carved. There are no servants upon the stones; the Emperor has always chosen to maintain the last of his privacy when he arrives at any of his palaces. He will choose the moment of his entrance, the moment of his departure, and he will gather his thoughts as he does so, for every arrival is the beginning of something new, and every departure, an ending, a time to reflect.

But the last time that I recall waking in the Winter Palace, I waited for him just beyond the glass doors; I cast my shadow, and the lights cast his shadow, and when they met, he looked up to see that I was waiting.

And he smiled.

I remember the smile. I remember it, and I feel strange.

All of the guard he chooses to accept he carries upon -- and within -- his person. No others are necessary.

In his youth, this was not always the case; in his youth, craftsmen made images in his likeness and sent them in his stead, to ascertain the mood of the populace.

Now, the mood of the populace is never in question.

There is not a man upon this world, or any other, that would willingly raise their hand against a god; a god holds the fate of whole worlds in his palm, and on a whim, a god might destroy those worlds with a careless gesture, a careless word.

The cameras are confused by the sudden flare of light from the ship; they adjust their filters, resolving shape and shadow in the harshness of bright white.

And I see, upon the stones, not a single figure, but two.

The Emperor is unmistakable; no matter how he chooses to dress, no matter which fashion he chooses to embrace -- or discard -- no matter what colour his hair, his eyes, I would know him. I am incapable of mistaking him for any other; incapable of *not* knowing him.

But although I was designed for just such adulation, just such riveted attention, such instant devotion, it is not the figure of the Emperor that

catches my eye, that holds my attention; it is the figure of the person beside him.

Smaller, slender in build, her hair is a spill of bronze across her bare, pale shoulders. I cannot see her face; it is so softened by the scatter of light that the lines tell me little. But her eyes are clear; they are large, unblinking, grey as steel. She lifts a hand, or rather, her hand is lifted, and I see -- even in the poor light, the ship's haze -- that it is lifted by his.

I sit in my rooms, as I have been ordered to sit, the cameras lingering over the still body of the Emperor's vehicle long after he has discarded it.

#

Understand that I do not love him.

If I am asked -- and if the person who chooses to speak so intrusively survives for long enough that the Emperor clearly desires that the question be answered -- I will nod regally. If he desires more, I will say, simply, "How could I do otherwise?" And if that answer is not pleasant enough, not musical enough, or not dramatic enough by turns, I will tell the audience that I do, indeed, love the Emperor; that he is my life.

But no one has ever asked me what the word means, and if they did, I would retreat; I would let the palace net take my voice and speak for me in the fashion it thought most suitable for the situation.

Or, if it was appropriate, I would sing. I know songs that speak of love, of a multitude of loves: The love of mother for child; the love of father for son; the love of man for woman, woman for man; the love of a person for their homeland; the love of an artist for his art.

Or a singer for their song, for the truth of a music that comes from voice alone.

Understand, too, that I am not alive.

I have known that I am not alive since the moment I first woke. The man who made me created me to be a thing above the vagaries and misfortunes of the living. Although he himself was old and bowed with the weight of his centuries, he disdained the trappings of mortality; feared them and hated them.

Life, he said, knows change; it diminishes beauty; it tarnishes everything. I was to be his gift to the Emperor. To the only man said to transcend life itself with his power and his ability.

I was to be his legacy.

He did not teach me, although he created places within me that might be taught; he did not prepare me for the changing of technology, although he

made all concessions to that despised progress when he chose to build me.

Had the Emperor valued beauty, he would have made me beautiful; all of my systems and programs would have captured the changing face of beauty over the passage of time, and using it, change me. Had he valued power, I might have been cunning; I might have built empires merely to show him that I had worth and value.

He valued music.

He valued song.

They became my reason for existence.

But the Emperor has returned to the Winter Palace with a different companion. And although I do not understand why I wish it, I wish that I had never been wakened.

And I wonder how many times he has arrived at this palace when he has chosen not to wake me at all.

#

When I am at last summoned, it is not the palace that speaks to me. A servant arrives at the door; the boy, Krysos. His face is glowing, red from exposure to cold. He bows, gracefully, the crisp new length of his uniform odd to my eyes. "The Emperor commands your presence in the visitor's hall."

In his arms he carries a bundle of fabric, something that shimmers in the light cast by the room's walls. "You are to wear this," he adds.

I take it from him.

It is blue, the colour of the skies beneath which men die. I put it on. It was clearly designed for my use; the back is low; it skirts the edge of my waist, leaves room to expose the folded conceit of wings that are far too delicate to bear my weight in any room save the Emperor's.

This is new to me.

Simple. It bears no insignia, and comes with no jewellery, no circlet, no ring.

The palace net tells me that I require none of these to sing.

I have always known that I am owned.

But until now, I have never felt it so completely as the stigma that it must be to the boy who stands before me.

#

In the room, the diplomats are gathered. They are many; they number in the hundreds. I pause; there are four hundred and forty-three. I walk down

the stairs and for a moment, a stillness ensues; it is broken almost instantly by men who turn away whispering into their drinks and their conversations.

I have not been given leave to sing. I may speak, but in gatherings such as this, I am mute. I do not know how to approach men of value or power; I do not know how to approach those people who do not bear the Emperor's hidden brand.

It is clear that the men do not recognize me; that they have no concept of my significance. This is unusual. They do not move when I attempt to pass them; it is I who am forced into the dance of manners. But in that dance, I observe them. They are taller than I last remember, and fairer; they speak a language that I belatedly recognize as new. It is the court language; it has been imposed upon those who would keep company with the Emperor, and is heavy with the unspoken, the subtle statement.

Only when I reach the Emperor's side do they still.

He turns to me, and if I had words readied, I lose them to the sight of his eyes. Brown, those eyes absorb all light; his brows raise and gather as I wait for his reaction.

He smiles.

I breathe.

I do not need to breathe. I remember this.

"Lady," he says, taking my hand. He bows and raises it high, and this earns the attention that my entrance did not. "There is someone I wish you to meet."

I wish it, too. And dread it. And I should feel no dread.

The woman who accompanied him on his journey steps into view.

She is wearing a simple blue dress, the colour of the sky; its folds touch the ground, obscuring the hint of shoes. The neck of the gown is low, the sleeves trailing, the hems sparkling at some light that is not suggested by the fabric itself.

"Constance," he says, "this is my Lady."

"The songbird?" she whispers.

"That is not what we call her." His correction is laced with affection; she is instantly forgiven the familiarity of the word. Men have died for less in the past.

I bow. I am forced to bow; the subsystems take control of my legs, preserving me from the possibility of his wrath. "I am pleased," I tell her, although I am not, "to make your acquaintance."

But she smiles at me. Her smile is brilliant, tinged with awe and something that I have seen only in the face of the Emperor.

He raises his hands.

Silence falls instantly, like ice-storm, stilling all movement, drawing all attention.

"Ladies," he says, "Gentlemen. You have the singular honour, this day, of being in the presence of the two greatest voices in the whole of my Empire.

"I have brought them together for the first time -- for perhaps the only time -- to hear the mingling of their voices. This is a historic moment; I beg your indulgence."

And he bows. First, foremost, to her, to this woman he has named. I have no name.

But the smile on her face stiffens instantly, like flowers brought to the side of the winter fountain. "My Lord," she says, bending until she scrapes the ground with her knees, with the simple fall of her dress, "I beg you -- for such an occasion, there is need for practice."

His frown fills me with dread.

Dread is a word for the clamouring of nanites, the screaming of subsystems that have been designed solely to please the man who stands before me. The only man who can touch me and survive.

And yet along with dread I feel something else: relief. It will not be long. It will not be long before she is gone; the winter pond is waiting, and the sport of observation demands its due.

But she continues to speak, where my vocal chords would be frozen. "I beg of you," she says, in a voice so low only he -- and I -- can hear it. "We must practice. For ... for this ... gathering ... we cannot be less than perfect. Forgive me. Forgive me, my Lord."

Ah, indulgence. His face softens.

He lowers his hand, and after a moment, conversation resumes. I know that it is now focused upon this woman.

"Lady," he says, speaking as gently as I speak, "take Constance to your rooms and give her the chance to practice what you have been taught."

I bow. I would offer her my hand, but he is watching me carefully.

#

In my rooms, she is quiet.

She looks around at the walls, at the windows; looks up at the cameras that are almost completely hidden. "There is no privacy here, is there?"

I parse the question slowly, and after a moment, I answer. "There is no place in the Winter Palace that is hidden from the Emperor's view. If he chooses, he can watch anything, listen to anything, that occurs."

"Do you know when he is listening?"

It is an odd question. "I know."

"Does he listen now?"

"No." Hesitant, I add, "But if you must speak words that you wish him not to hear, you must not speak them here. Nothing in this room is hidden should he wish to review it."

"Then where?"

I do not understand her. She is becoming agitated; her breath is loud and quick. She is sweating. She approaches me and I take a quick step back.

"Do not touch me," I tell her gently. "It will kill you."

"Why?"

"Has he told you nothing?"

Her eyes shutter. "He has told me very little. I am not ... important ... in that way."

He intends me to preserve her. The palace whispers his commands, broken into sound and song, up the length of my right arm.

"I was designed to be his, and only his. No one can touch me without preparation and permission. It will kill them."

"How?"

"I secrete a poison, the way you secrete sweat." The explanation is longer. She does not seem to require it.

"What do you mean, you were designed?"

"I am the songbird," I tell her. "He owns me."

"You're not -- not real, are you?"

The words sting. I do not like this woman. "I am not human, no." I lift a hand and drop it on the rest of the chair; the noise is louder than I had intended, and she startles. "But I am real."

She falls to the floor again. "Forgive me," she says.

And she begins to weep.

I have seen much in my life. I have seen men reduced to tears in the presence of the Emperor. I have seen them plead and beg. But no one has ever done that for me.

I have often wondered what it is like, to be the Emperor. I now know

that of his many powers, his many talents, this is one I do not wish to possess.

I cannot touch her. I would, but it would kill her.

Instead, I send a command to the palace, an over-ride that I have never used. And then I leave my chair to kneel by her side. I am careful to make certain that I am just beyond her reach; people often fail to heed warnings that are delivered gently.

"Constance."

She lifts her face.

"You are here to sing for the Emperor."

She nods.

I know that she will not sing well. A moment ago, this would have pleased me; it does not please me now. I understand neither of these things.

I ask her a question that I had not known I would ask her. "Do you love the Emperor?"

She raises her head slowly, as if I have spoken in a language that is beyond her comprehension. But she does not answer the question. I could ask it again, but it would be unchanged, and her answer, I think, would be the same.

But I wait, and after a moment, she says, "when I met him, I did not know who he was." Just that. She looks down at her hands. Her hands that are adorned with a ring that was once mine. Her skin is not golden; her hands are dark with the sun of a foreign world. I can see the lines across her knuckles, and I know they will deepen with time. If she has time.

"How could you not know who he was?"

"He ... did not say."

It seems beyond possibility. Everyone knows the Emperor.

"I sing," she says quietly. "I used to sing with a tenor. He was my partner."

I do not ask about him.

"He was not ... young. His voice was not as powerful as it had been, but he knew better than anyone how to add nuance and emotion to his song. And his emotion drew out mine. I sang ... with him.

"We were known, upon my world, for our song." She does not smile as she speaks, but her gaze is the distance of memory. "One day, we were asked to sing for a visiting group of dignitaries. He was among them.

"After we had finished our performance, he came to speak with me. He

told me -- he told me --" She closed her eyes.

I need to know this. I don't know why. "What?"

"That I should not sing with my partner again; that his voice was too rough and too poor a match for my own. I did not know him; he did not wear his insignia. I told him that there was no other man in the world I would sing with."

She closes her eyes. "He ... disagreed."

Again she retreats, but I understand what has happened, and I do not ask her for an explanation. Who could tell the Emperor that his desire was to be thwarted? That she survives is proof of her voice.

I want to hear her sing.

But this time, I know why.

"When I found out who he was, I felt honoured. When I found out that Belavas was dead, I felt ... lost. I wanted to tell him what he had done to me. I didn't care if he knew; I didn't care if it angered him. I sang. I sang for him, as he commanded."

She bows her head into her hands, curling her shoulders inward. "He asked me to come to his Court. To sing for him."

"I accepted his ... offer." She lifted her head; she was crying. "And I tried. To sing for him. I do not think he was pleased with my voice. I thought he would send me home."

"But he brought you here instead."

"No. He kept me in the palace for five years. Five years. I have had no word from my family. I have sent them no word."

I nod.

She looks up at me. "I cannot sing," she tells me quietly. "Not -- not that way. I cannot sing."

"You must sing."

"I know."

Neither of us speak of death.

#

She wears my ring.

She wears my circlet.

If the Emperor chose to hold court in the long hall, she would -- I am certain of it -- sit in my chair, her hands impervious to the music of the palace, the subtleties of its voice.

I think I was angry when I first saw her arrive. I think it, but I am not certain; anger is not a subroutine that has ever been invoked before. But if what I felt was anger, what I feel now is different.

"Constance."

She raises her head.

"Why did you ask if I was -- if I was the songbird?"

For just a moment, her eyes brighten. "Don't you know?"

"I do not ask questions if I am aware of the answers I seek."

"You are Genevera's lost daughter," she says simply. But in that simplicity, there is some of her earlier smile; I see wonder in her face, awe, the expressions with which I am most familiar. But I see something else as well.

Genevera. The name is familiar. After a moment, I say, "He was my creator."

"Yes. He was that. But more. He was more than that. In his youth, he had the finest voice in the universe." She frowns. "Genevera was my ancestor," she adds. "And the story of your birth has been a part of my family for centuries. It is ... myth. It is more."

She almost reaches out to touch me, but I step back, avoiding her hand. She lets it fall. I am sorry that she does so. I don't know why. I raise my hand, mimicking her motion, my golden fingers with their static lines spread wide.

"He understood music in a way that the sane cannot. He understood how to make you sing." She shakes her head a moment, clearing her expression of its wide-eyed wonder. "No one understands how it was done. He left no notes. He left no pictures. He forbid the recording of all parts of the process. When he was done, he brought you to the family hall, and he asked you to sing, and ..."

"And?"

"Do you not remember?"

"I told you, Constance. I do not ask a question if I know the answer."

She is disappointed now. I see it in the lines of her face, the narrowing of her eyes. What she thought she had found is not what she sees before her.

"You sang," she whispers. "You sang every song that he had ever sung; you sang songs that he had written and had never found the right voice for. You sang songs that had not been sung since the time before the opening of the gateways."

"You were our history," she added. "The history of our music."

"But ... he gave me to the Emperor."

She lowers her head again. "Yes," she whispers. "Yes, he did. I am so sorry."

I know that it is not of her family's loss that she speaks. She speaks for me. She speaks as if the gifting was somehow a tragedy.

As if I sorrow at some unfathomable loss.

"When the Emperor told me that you were here, I asked him to bring me to you."

"You asked to come here?"

A shadow crosses her face; the play of the room's walls interrupted by something that light cannot alleviate. But she is beginning, I think, to understand me.

"There is only one place that I have ever desired to be," she says softly, "and it is gone now. I will never return. I am sorry, Lady. I am so very tired. I will sing with you. With you, if you will have me.

"But I must rest."

I nod. I ask the palace; the palace confers with the Emperor. For some reason, the Emperor seems well-pleased, and assents. "You may rest here, in my rooms, if you will be comfortable here. There are rooms that are readied for you if --"

"No. I will stay here," she tells me, grateful. She rises as the doors to the West slide open, and only when she reaches them do I speak again.

"Constance?"

"Yes?"

"Did Genevera name me?"

She turns and smiles softly. "Yes." And then she is gone.

#

The Emperor summons me in the morning.

She is still sleeping in my rooms, this Constance, this stranger. I do not use these rooms for sleeping. I require no sleep. When I was ... newer ... I used to sit and watch the Emperor, for the Emperor, augmented and changed, requires sleep as all living things do. He liked that: to be watched in his sleep. I asked him why, but only once, and after I asked, I was no longer allowed to watch him.

Thus I learned that he does not like to be questioned.

"Lady," he says. He sits at his morning table, and there is only one seat

beside him. I take it and turn my attention upon his face.

"Understand," he says, touching my face, "that you are my Jewel, you are my glory, my history." He says this as if I am real. "But she is ... a voice unlike any I have ever heard."

His expression is not pleased. I wait.

"She sang so perfectly; she sang, and for a moment, she was the only voice in the universe. It stilled the other voices. It gave me silence.

"I found her upon one of the core worlds. I offered her riches and titles and a home beyond anything her world has to offer." Now he is frowning. "She came, but she came in silence. She sang, but her voice was not the voice I heard."

"Perhaps she has aged."

"She has aged very little."

He has not asked me what I think, but I speak. "I think she is like the birds in your aviary."

"Pardon?"

His voice. I bow my head. "Nothing, my Lord."

After a moment, he chooses to forgive me my lapse. "She has been almost completely silent in my court. In any of my courts. It is only when she heard of you that she was able to sing at all."

"I am here ... for her?"

"You are here to please me," he says severely. "And it would please me greatly if you could invoke her voice. Make her sing, Lady."

"Yes, my Lord. What priority is to be assigned this task?"

"Any priority necessary."

"Yes, my Lord."

He does not ask me to sing. For the first time in living memory -- if my memory is alive at all -- he does not ask for *my* voice.

#

Constance is waiting for me when I return to my rooms. I tell the palace that no one is to observe us; no record is to be kept of what transpires within these walls. When questioned, I repeat the Emperor's phrase in the perfect pitch of his voice; the palace recognizes the nuance of the waves of sound, for my capture is perfect. It complies.

"We will not be observed here," I tell her.

"Truly?"

"Truly."

Her smile is genuine, but it is odd. She rises, naked, from the folds of sheets, dropping them in a pile upon the ground. While she searches for her clothing, I wait. I could wait without breathing, for I wait in just such a fashion in the Aviary.

"Constance," I say, when she has dressed, "what is my name?"

She shakes her head. "I will answer your question," she said, "but first, I wish a favour."

"I am authorized to grant you anything you ask for, if it does not conflict with the safety of the Emperor."

"I want you to sing. For me."

No one but the Emperor has the right to ask me to sing. Only upon the throne he constructed for my use and my instruction am I free to do so, for in singing I acknowledge what has been delivered into my central system. But he has given his tacit permission. "Why?"

"Why?"

"Why do you wish to hear me sing? The Emperor says that yours is the voice without parallel. Yours in the voice he desires."

"Sometimes," she says softly, "men do not value what they hold; they value what they cannot hold, what they cannot have."

"But he owns us both."

She loses the warmth of smile. "Yes."

I want her smile to return. "Constance don't frown. Don't frown, and I will sing for you."

Her smile is strange. She says, "you are so different from what I expected."

"What did you expect?"

"Genevera," she replies. "You are cold, like the air and the ice; you are distant, like the stars. He was such a passionate man."

"You cannot know that."

"No?"

"He was dead long before you were born."

"I know his history."

"History and story, at a great enough distance, are not so dissimilar."

"Maybe. Maybe you are right. But sing for me, Lady, and I will know which of our truths are the truth."

"You will know nothing except for the song."

"What other truth is there, for us?"

I begin to sing simple scales. She listens. I display a range that her voice could not possibly capture, and she continues to listen, but her smile is shifting into something intense and personal. I have seen a like expression upon the Emperor's face.

After the scales, I sing the oldest of all my songs.

And her eyes widen. "What is that?" she whispers so softly I am not certain she meant it to be heard. But I still sing and answer her. "It is Genevera's work."

She nods. "Please."

And I continue.

I cannot say when it happens, but at some point in the song, she joins me. She sings a strong harmony to my melody, taking my notes and blending them with her own until they are almost one.

I could do this on my own. I have been programmed to be an entire chorus.

But her improvisations are not built into my song; they are hers, and they are a reflection of what is mine, of what is me. I listen to her; I almost forget to sing. Her voice is so pure, her song so full, I realize that it is I who play harmony and chorus to her.

And I want to keep singing. When the song is over, I want it to go on, to continue; I want to hear her sing. I have loved song, if such a word is mine to use, and I realize why the Emperor chose to keep her: she is song. She is music.

I continue to sing when the song reaches its end, segueing into another of Genevera's early works. She follows me -- or perhaps I follow her -- as we tell each other the tale of the love a man has for his country, for his gift, and for his family. Such a threefold love is sharp and terrible, filled with fear and struggle; I know this because her voice falters several times upon the words that contain it. It is not that she does not know them; she knows, and she knows them in a way that I have never known them, who have preserved this song against the ravages of time and history since my making.

But her voice is a mortal voice; it is contained by vocal chords, by flesh, by muscle. When this song ends, I stop.

She stares at me, and I, at her.

"You are crying," we say, at the same moment, our voices distinct and

harmonious, a blending of purpose.

But she laughs and I do not. I lift a hand toward her face and she stills, but she does not draw away.

It is I who jump back.

I lift a hand to my cheeks and I find that she is right: there is water there, like ice melting in the heat of sun, as it does when it is brought inside.

"Songbird," she whispers. "I don't care if you touch me."

"I told you --"

"I know. But I don't care."

She is dangerous, then. When she moves, I move more quickly, avoiding her gaze, avoiding her outstretched palm.

"I care," I tell her.

"Why?"

"Because the Emperor cares."

She tilts her head to one side.

As she does, she exposes the rounded curve of her cheek, the perfect line of her neck. Her skin is pale.

And I know, as the words die into stillness, that I have lied. I have lied to her.

I leave her, then. I walk the halls quickly, seeing nothing, hearing her voice, the heights and the depths of it touched in all ways by tragedy and love, by mourning and a fierce, bright hope.

I find the outside, the fountain, the frozen trails of water, and I wait there while my cheeks freeze. Then, with care, I brush what is left of tears away.

#

When it is done, I return.

She is waiting for me, dishes of food set upon the low tables in the run room. She kneels before them, touching nothing, and gazes at me when I enter.

"Teach me," I say.

She stares at me, wide-eyed.

"Teach me to sing."

"Can you not hear your own voice, songbird? Can you not hear the history in it, the touch of Genevera, the desire and the pain with which he worked?"

"I hear sound. I hear notes. I ... have never heard a voice like yours

before."

"It is my voice," she tells me softly. "You have yours."

I frown. I open my lips and I begin to sing, and my voice is a baritone.

Her eyes widen in genuine surprise. Before she can speak, I sing again, and my voice is a child's voice, a lisping, thin voice that contains merely the seeds of greatness. When that ends, I sing in a raucous, rough screech, my hands beating the table in the asynchronous drum of the Northern belts.

She does not join me; she listens, her eyes rounding and narrowing at every change of identity.

And then, when I finish, I begin once more.

I sing with *her* voice. Her voice, its amplitude and vibration a match for what she offered me in our too-brief duet.

She says, "Is that what I sound like?"

"It is what you ... should sound like. But ... it does not sound like your song to my ears. And it should. It should."

"Songbird," she says, gentle in a way that I have never truly been, "why should your voice be mine? Or anyone else's? Where is *your* voice?"

I must look confused, for she frowns.

"Of the songs you have sung, or the ones that you have not sung, which are your favourites?"

"My favourites?"

"Which are the ones you like best?"

The palace net attempts to speak to me, or through me, and I reject it. Nanites are buzzing. Something is wrong. But although they search, they find nothing. "The Emperor likes the lament of Aegis."

"I did not ask you what the Emperor likes." She stands, walks to my side. I almost forget to move away. Almost.

"But what else *is* there? Everything I have learned, everything I have every been asked to sing is what the Emperor desires."

She shakes her head. "Do you know the aria of Halholden?"

I nod.

"Can you sing the part of Teuaton?"

"Yes."

"Sing it," she says quietly. "Sing it for me."

Only the Emperor has the right to ask me to sing. "From where?"

"The beginning. When he discovers that he has been ordered to betray

his adopted country."

I close my eyes. I find the song. It is a man's song, and it is sung by a tenor. "The key?"

"C," she says.

I sing. She listens and when I open my eyes, I see that hers are red and filmed. But she does not weep. Instead, she waits until the end of the solo, and then she begins her reply. I almost stop. I almost forget where I am in the song because I am where she is. Her voice is like nothing I have ever heard.

I have never felt envy.

I do not think I feel it now.

But I feel something strange and it grows within me, harboured in silence until I, too, am called to join her. I sing until her voice breaks with the strength of her emotion, and even that breaking is musical, the heart of storm, a terrible desolation.

I am across the room before the note dies. I am in front of her. I am so close I could touch her.

And it is this that breaks the spell of her song. I want to touch her.

I have never truly wanted to touch any living being before. It is a terrible feeling.

I lose the song. I find distance, quickly, before hers overpowers us both. I need to breathe. I need to draw air into my lungs, these lungs that were created solely to force air out through nose and mouth in perfect, modulated notes.

She is weeping now. And that, too, is a song.

I bend, I touch the ground because the ground will not pay the price of my desire. And then I push myself up and I turn from the room and I run and I run and I run.

#

The Emperor is waiting for me. The palace has alerted him.

"Lady," he says, gripping my hands in his and holding them tight, "what has happened?"

I shake my head. "I -- I do not know. I am sorry, my Lord, but I -- I do not understand."

"Tell me."

"She sang."

His brows rise. "Truly?"

I nod. "She sang for me. With me. She asked me to sing, and I -- I know that no one has the right to ask such a thing -- but you ordered me --"

"Hush. She has that right. She asked you to sing and she sang for you in return?"

I nod.

He smiles. His teeth are pale and perfect. He draws me into his arms, and I want to pull away; my wings rise before I can bring them under control, flapping ineffectually in the stillness. "This is good," he says.

"No -- it is --"

"Hush. Return to her. I wish her to sing for me. I have waited, Lady. I have waited with a patience that the universe has not seen since I was just another powerless politician. I have waited and I am almost done with waiting. Make her sing. Make her sing for me. Without her voice, she is of little use."

His voice is what his voice has always been. I know that he means to kill her if she will not give him what he desires, for in death, he will be able to move on.

I have heard this a hundred times. A thousand. I have even, on occasion, felt some regret.

But now, all of my systems are in chaos. I cannot find the threat of their music to guide me; I hear cacophony. I hear something that is wild and terrible, and I feel ... something.

I do not know what it is. I do not want to know what it is. When he releases me, I bow, and I leave him, having received no answer.

#

Constance is composed when I return. Her eyes are clear. She is wearing the blue dress that is so like mine, and she is wearing my ring, my circlet. She gazes at herself in a perfect mirror, her back, her wingless back, toward me. But the mirror announces my presence, and she turns away from what she sees.

Because he will not listen, I speak to her. "I am sorry ... for leaving ... like that."

"You were summoned?"

"No. No -- I -- I --"

She does not look alarmed. She approaches me, and I realize that I have seen such an approach before, between the people who gather by the Emperor's side. I draw back. "No. You mustn't."

And she stops, waiting for me, her breath so quiet it might not be there at all. I see myself in her in that moment, myself, in the Aviary, waiting for the flapping of panicked wings to still.

"I have upset you."

"I -- I -- something is wrong. I don't know what it is. I can't think -- I -- my subsystems are not responding. Am I breaking down?"

She shakes her head.

"My breath is wrong -- I could not sing like this -- I --"

"You are afraid," she says.

The words are strange. "I? Afraid?"

She nods.

And when she does, I realize that she is right, this descendent of my father, this woman whose voice is perfect. I am afraid. "But how can I be afraid? Does fear not come from something? Is it not felt for something?"

She nods again.

I turn away from her. I would leave her here, but the Emperor's words repeat themselves again and again. "Come with me," I tell her, without looking back.

She gathers her skirts, for her skirts are meant for display and not movement, and she follows me like a shadow. I am aware that my skirts are likewise cumbersome, and I gather them in handfuls the same way.

I lead her to the Aviary.

His permission was implicit. I do not ask explicitly. The palace accepts this act of subterfuge, for the Emperor's desire is clear and it is all-encompassing. If I can coax song from her voice, he will forgive everything.

As the doors open into this pretense of the outer world, she freezes as if Winter reigned. But it is warm. "Come," I tell her. "I wish to show you something."

"What?"

"His birds."

She reaches for my hand and then lets hers fall away. I do not even have to warm her, and I linger by her side, just a little too close for her safety. Do I want to kill her?

No. No. No.

But what I want *will* kill her. I do not understand it. He did not explain.

She looks up at birds in flight; at hawk and sparrow, at eagle, and then, down the long mile, and the coloured jewelled plumage of parakeet, parrot,

bird of paradise.

"Does he collect all birds?" She whispers.

"Not all. There are no flightless birds here. If they cannot soar, he does not keep them."

"What becomes of them?"

"They die."

She says nothing, searching the blue of the sky, the distance of trees, the height of crags. "They don't live in cages," she says at last.

"They are not aware of their cages. It is not the same thing."

She turns to face me. "Are you?"

"Am I?"

"Aware of yours?"

I have no answer to give her. The answer I should have given has been lost to confusion and chaos.

I sing here, and she stares at me oddly, her voice silent. The birds sing back as I move, for they are familiar with me now, the only flightless creature that he has chosen to gift with the Aviary.

She says, after a time has passed, "Thank you."

"Pardon?"

"Thank you."

"I am sorry, Constance, but I do not understand these words."

"Thank you for singing ... his song." Her eyes are red again. "It was forbidden me. Did you know?"

"No."

She lowers her face into her hands, her lined hands, her changing hands. I see heat in them, glowing across a spectrum that her eyes cannot see.

"You sing well," she says faintly. "When I closed my eyes I could almost forget that you weren't him."

"Constance --"

"Did you understand the song?"

"Yes. It is about --"

"No, not the words. Did you understand it?"

"Song is a collection of phrases, of sound waves, of pitch. It is a knitting of disparate notes, a collage of continuous breath." Before she can speak, I add, "No. But I understand that song is much more than that to you, and I want --"

I do not know what I want. I turn to her.

She says, "I will not sing for him again."

"But you must!"

Her eyes widen.

I can only speak gently. That was programmed into my vocal chords. I can only speak gently. But my song has no such limitations placed upon it, and I realize that, without melody, without notes, I have sung what must be sung.

"Songbird," she whispers. "I would sing for him for the rest of my life if he could bring back my master." She bows her head. "But I have tried. I have tried, and in the wasteland of his court, I cannot find the heart of the songs I once loved."

"But you said that you did sing when you came to Court."

"Yes. I did. Because when I came to Court, I hated him. I hated him. Do you understand? Hate was my song. Anger. The terrible desire for vengeance.

"It sustained me for years."

She bowed her head. "Do you know why he desires music?"

"It is necessary."

"Yes. Yes, for him, it is necessary. It is only in music that he hears what others are, what they can be; only in music that he forgets what he is. What he became in order to rule the galaxy." Her eyes are burning now. Her voice is vibrating. She is singing, I know she is singing.

"Then hate him," I tell her, gentle again. "Hate him for as long as you live. But sing."

She says, "Hate is a fire."

I do not understand. She looks at me oddly, and speaks, her gentleness a mirror of my own, or perhaps the substance to which I am simple mirror. "Hate is a fire," she whispers. "It burns and burns. But after a time, like fire without oxygen to maintain it, it dwindles and dims. There is no fire left," she adds, touching her heart. "There is nothing at all here. I sing, and he knows that my song is gone."

"But you sang for me."

"Yes."

"Then sing for me. Sing for me, where he can hear you, and he will be content."

She closes her eyes. Opens them. "Do you love the Emperor?" she asks

me.

And because her voice is a song, I answer with song. "No."

"But you sing for him."

"Song is all that I am. And if not for him, there is nothing to invoke it."

"Sing for me," she says. "Here, in this place. Sing for me."

"Which song?"

"Any song."

"But I --"

"Sing any song that you want to sing."

I shake my head. "I ... do not have ... a favourite song."

She reaches out and her fingers stop a hair's breadth from the gold of my skin.

"You have sung the song I best loved as an adult. Let me sing you a song that I loved as a child in the hall of Genevera."

She begins. Her voice is soft; it has none of the dizzying height or power that defined it in my rooms. But I listen, enthralled, my subsystems racing to record what I cannot faithfully reproduce.

It is a cradle song. A song a mother sings for her child, or a father for his. It is a song not meant for a voice so fine, so perfect, so powerful as her own; a common song, a thing that demands so narrow a range that even an old and broken voice might carry it and make it sound tuneful.

And I am transfixed by it. I do not know what my subsystems are doing. I listen. I listen and I hear it, suddenly, in another voice, a voice so distant that I have never recalled it until this moment.

When it is over, I stare at her. "May I keep this song?"

"If you can remember it, yes. It was a gift."

I bow. I take her to my rooms.

#

In the morning, the Emperor summons us both.

He does not choose to speak through the palace net; he sends a servant. He sends the boy.

The boy bows proudly. He is so young. I was never this young, but my systems recognize youth in both its awkwardness and its fragile beauty.

"Krysos," I tell him, gently, "we will go to the Emperor. But I bid you, I ask you, to carry a message."

"To who?"

"To your great-grandfather."

He nods.

"Tell him -- tell them all -- to dress for the Winter."

He does not understand the message. But he is in awe of me, of the golden possession, of the Lady of this gilded cage. I know he will do what I have asked.

I do not know if it will do any good.

Constance waits for me. And as we walk, I speak.

"Please. Please, Constance, sing. I will sing the song of your choice."

"There is only one song I desire."

The palace whispers. "Not that song. Any other song. Any one but that."

And she smiles. She looks old, although she is not old. Her eyes are not narrowed, but they are an odd shape.

"I am glad," she says, "that I have had the privilege of listening to you sing. I felt ... for a moment ... that I was home." She bows her head.

I, who have never been harsh, find harshness now. "He will kill you if you refuse."

"I know." She looks up at me, and I realize that she is not tall. "Tell him -- tell him that some birds cannot sing in cages."

She will die.

The Emperor's life is defined by the things he puts in cages, no matter how large those cages are.

"Genevera knew this," she said quietly. "He knew it. Understand that he created you because he thought that you could sing in a cage, and be content; that the Emperor's voices might be stilled in a way that did not cull the music from the galaxy over which he presides." She watches my expression, and after a moment, she speaks again.

"I am not the first singer that he has taken from her home," she says quietly. "In the beginning, he was a patron of the arts, and of those, he best loved music. He loved the drama of it, the love and the loss; he was transfixed by what he *could not* himself do.

"In Genevera's time, his family -- our family -- was a songhouse of great fame and note. Genevera's daughters were known throughout the galaxy for their voices, and his granddaughters inherited that talent. His sons were tenors without parallel.

"He loved them fiercely and drove them mercilessly, because he thought

by so doing, he might increase their worthiness in the eyes of the Emperor.

"And he did. Genevera was revered. His daughters and his sons were taken, one by one, to sit at the Emperor's side.

"And by the side of the eternal ruler, they sang; they were heard, far and wide, by dignitaries from the league of planets, and they were admired. Their fame spread.

"But the Emperor, even then, had no time for the trivialities of life. None of Genevera's children were allowed to bear children until their voices had lost all power, and when that had happened, conception was difficult. Artificial means kept the family line going, but the children of that artifice were ... lessened. They did not grow up in the songhouse; they were not raised on music. It was not their first memory, their first love, their last act at the end of the day.

"And Genevera realized that he had doomed his house.

"And so, with the help of technicians whose power I do not understand, he created you. You were his gift.

"And you were our salvation.

"I heard of you when I was growing up. I did not understand how powerful a gift you were, how much you had done to protect us, until the Emperor came.

"But I understand it now. I thank you, songbird. If I do not sing, it does not matter; my sisters will sing. My brothers."

"They will never be your equal."

"Not to the Emperor's ear, no. But they will be more. They will be free." She is going to die.

I cannot stop her. I realize that I cannot stop her. But I beg her anyway. I am practical. I know that the Emperor will be displeased with me if I fail to invoke the song he desires, and it is my duty -- and my existence -- to serve him. But it is not for that reason that I wish her to sing.

If she is a bird, and she is in a cage, might it not be my cage? Might we not share it, and song?

The doors to the Emperor's audience chamber open before us. He is seated upon the ceremonial throne in the long hall. People are gathered beneath both chair and statue, and they speak among themselves until we enter the room.

He rises.

"Ladies," he says, "Gentlemen."

They stop.

I close my eyes. Had he chosen to speak to us in any other room there is some chance that I might preserve her life -- but not here. Not here. Not even I could survive publicly humiliating my Lord.

And what would death be, for me? Would it be sleep?

I listen as he introduces us.

I listen as he tells the most important men and women of this decade, his year, this hour, that we will grace them with an entertainment. There is menace in that word.

And I listen as Constance turns to the Emperor, kneels, and bows her head in perfect silence. She does not even have to say the words.

I turn to him. I lift my wings, unfurling them until they stretch out, and out, twenty feet from tip to tip. It is only when they are fully extended that I understand why I have done this; I am shielding her from the strangers who even now are whispering, placing their bets.

I have hated nothing in my life, if life is what I have, and I do not know of what I feel now is hate.

"Very well," the Emperor says, in the softest of voices. He does not need to shout; the palace magnifies his tones into stately, icy, dignity. Everyone, high-born and low, short-lived and long, hears his words. "If you will not serve in the fashion for which you were chosen, we will choose a different entertainment.

"Come," he says, raising his voice. The men and women converge upon the doors that swing wide like vultures. Even vultures exist in the Aviary, and I have never thought them ugly until this moment; they will forever be scarred by my experience this day.

Guards come to lift her to her feet. They are his guards. They are real.

I raise my hands before their exposed faces and they halt instantly.

"What is this, Lady?" the Emperor says. His voice is cold.

"It is my gift," I tell him, gently. "It is my gift to you, my Lord."

And speaking thus, I walk to where Constance kneels, and as I have desired these past days, I take her in my arms. I touch her.

He looks up at me, slowly.

Meets my eyes. Sees that my hands are around her. I hesitate for just another moment, and then I reach up and brush her dark hair from where it has fallen across her forehead. I want to see her eyes.

She does not scream or struggle.

This will displease the Emperor, for he has decided upon spectacle. Indeed, I hear the palace; I hear the clamour in my own body; they are at war, now.

"Come, Constance," I tell her. "I will take you to my ... favourite place."

The men and women are already lining the exquisitely coloured glass that lines the observation hall. Unless the Emperor orders them to do otherwise, the guards will not intervene, for my touch is death, and I will touch them.

For her, I sing. I sing quietly. I sing the song that she loved as a child.

The poison will not kill her before the cold does. I linger in the warmth a moment. I cannot produce heat. I cannot protect her.

I carry her. She weighs exactly fifty-five point two kilograms. Her heart is racing. Her body is attempting to undermine the toxins. She is augmented. I had not realized that. She will survive for a while yet.

As we walk, I begin to sing a different song in a voice that was forbidden to her. A man's voice. A dead man's voice.

I feel the palace net now; it is strong.

But it is not as strong as my song. I do not know why this is so, but it is so, and I am grateful for this mercy.

As I sing, she begins to sing. The poison has not silenced her. The air will slowly fade; her ability to draw it will weaken.

But while it is still strong, she begins to sing her aria, and I, mine, and our voices, two voices, are one. I do not look up at the audience. I am aware of it. I am aware of where it is.

The beauty of these windows is that they are permeable; if they were not, sound would not travel through them. Spectacle without sound is like song without sound; of what use are a dying man's pleas if they cannot be heard, if they can only be guessed at by people so jaded they have a poverty of imagination with which to gild a death?

And yet.

And yet they are silent as we sing.

Her voice is strong. It is not so loud as it was when she first sang with me, but there is something about the voice that is so achingly pure, so terribly beautiful, that I am almost paralysed by it.

I carry her. I feel the cold of the outside air as it rushes into the lock between the palace and its glacial garden.

This is my place.

I sing. I sing and she sings and when the last note fades, I surrender it to

her shaking voice.

The cold takes her limbs. Her face turns red as blood rushes outward to the extremities it cannot warm; it turns pale as blood retreats in an attempt to maintain the central system.

She lifts her hand. Her hand shakes, but she struggles anyway, and this time, I do not tell her to stop. She touches my cheek. I am certain that I am as cold as ice to the touch, and I wonder if she feels me at all as anything other than death, part of her death.

"Maria," she says softly.

I meet her eyes; I say nothing. "You were Maria. You were his last daughter. Sing," she says. "Sing the songs he taught you. Sing the songs he wrote just for your keeping." Except that she does not say this; the words are broken by the shuddering of her jaw. She is cold, and she clings to me, clinging to the life that she could not find song to preserve.

I am weeping.

She is not. She is fading, and I -- who have held no one but the Emperor -- hold her as if her loss is the only fear I have ever known.

Because it is. I understand it now; the clamouring of the subsystems, the terrible chaos, the noise that is not song.

I hold her, and I sing all the songs that she has asked for. I sing them loudly. I sing them sweetly. I sing as I have never sung before, pitching my waves of sound as if they were weapons.

As if.

The windows shatter.

One by one, they shatter. Proof against the cold, they shiver and splinter and break, shards of coloured light, a frozen, cracking spectrum. Rain.

The cold strikes them all.

All except the Emperor, except the man I was created to serve.

He stands among his followers, his hands behind his back. I sing now, and the song that I sing is unlike any I have ever sung, although he knows it; he knows every song I have ever learned. And why should he not? Every song I have ever learned is his.

I must have a heart. I must have a heart like Constance's; it has fled the shelter of her body, freezing like glass.

And he watches, his eyes wide; listens, oblivious to the voices of the screaming throng that realizes only now that there is no safety to be found in time as warmth rushes out in clouds of condensing air.

Only the servants will remember this, if the Emperor allows them to live.  
They are dressed for the cold. They wear their suits. They witness.

And the Emperor weeps.

"A gift," he says, and the palace carries his voice to me, his songbird, his  
caged creature.

"Ah, a gift. Songbird, Lady."

I weep, too.

Constance, I weep.

I will sing for him. I am his, and I am loyal, and I obey him.

I will sing, and I will sleep, and I will wake again, and he will call me  
because you have taught me a truth about music that I could never have  
learned if I could not hold you now: I have a heart.

How long will it sustain me?

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