The Language of Ruin

Extended synopsis • Naria Khan

Elythea notices the date on her king’s decree while her father begs the priest for more time. Theodren signed it two days before the gods supposedly chose her to marry the Demon King. Her mother has an hour to alter the white dress the soldiers brought. Yet when Elythea steps on the threshold of the Black Gate, a pale line goes dark and Moraeth tells the priest to take her home. The next bride is not due for nine years. The priest has already warned her parents that a family can lose the Crown’s protection by refusing. Elythea asks to stay as a guest until she knows why she was sent.

Looking for the women who came before her, Elythea finds Maera eating burnt bread in the palace kitchen. At home she has heard Maera’s name read out among the dead. Neris, who crossed only eleven months ago, has written to her mother without receiving one word back. The women are Keepers. They maintain the seals that imprison Escheron, and they have never been free to go home. Moraeth agreed to keep the purpose of the crossings secret. When Elythea gives a clerk a letter for her parents, she watches him go, wondering what good it will do to have sent it.

At the Gate, Elythea understood a command she could not repeat. In the archives she learns that the results of a childhood examination are missing from her copy of the record. When the northern seals fail, she goes with the Keepers to see which marks on the stones she can read. A worker named Joren is trapped under a shifting roof. Elythea finds an old channel and speaks a word that makes it take the weight so two men can pull him clear. The light travels on towards the outer wall after the controls are cut. When a voice claiming to be a missing man later calls from the stone, she listens long

enough to hear it repeat the same hesitation. She cannot tell his family they have found him on the strength of that voice.

Back at the palace, Elythea gets an evening with Moraeth that she wants for herself. The next morning a scribe tells her she spent part of it at his desk ordering a sealed box. He has her initials. She remembers leaving Moraeth and going straight to her room. When another attacker wounds Maera, Elythea can call the power up deliberately to save her. Afterwards she asks Neris to teach her how to help with her own hands. Her notebook starts to distinguish what she learned for herself from words that came to her unbidden.

Moraeth asks her to call him Soteran when they are alone. The first time she uses an old form of that name, he recognises the pronunciation Sophrene used to insist on. Sophrene was his lover and helped make the original prison. When she became a way out for Escheron, she showed Soteran where to put his blade. Soteran tells Elythea this himself. She spends a night with him knowing what he did, and later sees the killing through memories that stop short of Sophrene’s request. What Soteran has concealed is his search for a way to sever a living host from the god. If it comes to that, the host dies. Elythea moves out when he admits he cannot promise that he would never pay that price with her life.

The missing examination result shows that Elythea inherited part of the binding through her mother and that her response as a child grew stronger when she was afraid. Theodren wants the force beyond the Gate to answer to his Crown. He sent her early, then arranged attacks, first on her and later on people she would risk herself to save. At the Gate, Soteran holds a broken stretch of causeway steady so the last families can get

out. A man in the human escort stabs him with a blade meant to leave a wound only a living bond can heal.

Elythea keeps pressure on the wound while the healer works. Before she answers Escheron, she asks Irdovan to keep the clamp on the Gate shut even if a voice that sounds like hers demands otherwise. When Soteran loses his pulse, she yields the living bond. His heart starts again, but Escheron walks her body towards the anchor. In the memory of the temple, she meets what remains of Sophrene. Each memory Escheron can make Elythea live again gives him a path into the world. She can close those paths, but knowing that something happened and remembering how it felt are two different things. She gives up her father offering her plum pie, the feel of her mother's hand against her neck, and the first kiss she shared with Soteran. When she looks at the wounded man outside, she has to ask who he is. He tells her his name again. Together with a guard he breaks the anchor while Elythea holds the connection shut and Sophrene holds Escheron long enough for the Gate to fall. Before she fades, Sophrene asks to be remembered as the woman who once hoped to plant a garden.

Theodren is taken into custody. The court suspends the sending of brides and orders copies of the ruling made public. The Keepers demand compensation for years of work they could never refuse, and Soteran acknowledges his part. Elythea declines a title and accepts three paid mornings a week collecting the accounts of Keepers who wish to tell them. She goes home to her parents first. Her father can tell her why he left one ear longer on her wooden horse, but she cannot remember being the girl who asked him to do it. What she will remember is sitting beside him while he mends it. When she returns to Soteran, she sets the horse beside the crooked wooden bird he made as a boy.