The Language of Ruin

Short synopsis • Naria Khan

Elythea arrives to marry Moraeth, the Demon King, nine years before the next bride is due. He offers to send her home, but her own king, Theodren, has threatened her family with the loss of the Crown's protection. She asks for a room instead. In the palace she meets earlier brides whose families still mourn them. The women are Keepers, sent to maintain the seals that imprison a god named Escheron. Moraeth agreed to keep their work secret, even when their letters home went unanswered.

Elythea understands words on the seals that she has never learned. When a worker is trapped in a collapsing northern passage, she speaks a word that steadies the roof while two men pull him out. The power keeps travelling after she tells it to stop. Back at the palace, a scribe remembers her requesting a sealed box at a quarter past nine. The initials beneath the order look like hers. She can remember the whole walk to her room that evening and none of the conversation at his desk.

Moraeth gives her the name he uses in private, Soteran, and tells her about Sophrene, the woman he loved who helped build the prison. When Escheron began to reach the living through her, Sophrene asked Soteran to kill her. Later Elythea sees the blow for herself, but the vision leaves out what Sophrene said. What drives Elythea away is what Soteran has kept from her about her own life. He is investigating whether killing her would cut Escheron off, and he cannot promise he would never do it.

Theodren knew from a childhood examination that fear could awaken the binding Elythea inherited through her mother. He sent her early and arranged attacks to force a response. At the Gate, one of his men stabs Soteran while he holds a broken crossing for the last evacuees. When Soteran's pulse stops, Elythea gives Escheron

access through the living bond to save him. He takes her body towards the prison's anchor.

Inside the binding, Sophrene shows her how to close the paths Escheron makes through her memories. Elythea gives up the feel of her mother plaiting her hair and the memory of kissing Soteran. When she sees him in the courtyard she has to ask his name. She holds the connection shut while Soteran and a guard break the anchor. Sophrene fades as the Gate falls.

Theodren is held for investigation. The court halts the sending of brides, and the Keepers claim compensation. Elythea visits her parents and watches her father mend a wooden horse she cannot remember him carving. She can keep this new memory. She returns to paid work in the archives and to Soteran, on a journey she remembers choosing.