

Lucia lost her religion after the first month and a half. She hadn't seen the sun in years. Five years, 3 months, and 16 days according to the neat little marks on the walls.

She traced her fingers over where she had etched in the stone "The Sun will shine again." But it hadn't. Endless twilight surrounded her. Flickering torchlight swallowed by dark stone. The Sun did not know her now. The Sun did not hear her cries. And how many prayers did the dark stone swallow before she realized that in this place, no Sun could hear her and no Sun cared?

Even in her religious delusions, she had the presence of mind to learn her guards. Now she knew their names, the names of their spouses and children and dogs. So she knew that when Gaius replaced Julia a new day began.

Lucia stood up. She had a routine. She needed a routine. She'd go insane otherwise. Her shoulder pulled tightly where she stretched her arm across her chest. Stretching. Keeping her body ready. Ready for the slightest chance of escape. Even if she couldn't be totally sure what she would be escaping to. What changes in five years, three months, and sixteen days? Lucia couldn't be sure. Even the guards didn't get out much, so they couldn't tell her how the world functioned under the Republic. Part of her wondered if there would be anything left for her to escape to. But she had to hold onto that hope. She had to remember Sevilla's cold body with her blue lips and fingertips. She had to remember Rel's strength and Cassian's haughty determination.

In the beginning she asked about the revolution. But when Gaius told her how the rebels beat Cassian's beautiful face to a pulp and dropped his broken body from the parapets, something inside her broke. She was glad to be in a prison. Safe behind bars. She should have been safe in Torovi with her fiancée, but life had different plans.

Lucia bent herself in half, wrapping her arms around the backs of her legs and pressing her face into her knees. She liked the way it burned.

Ayvie. She would have married him. She didn't care about his preferences, if he had a lover, or multiple. It would have been a good match for both his kingdom and her Empire. But Ayvie couldn't do it. She'd never forget the tears in his big brown doe eyes when the shackles closed around her wrists. Or how she screamed at him. How in her need for retribution, in her surprise at betrayal, her broken trust, she'd outed him. Before the Sun and everyone. And a tear slid over his round brown cheek and she could tell he *knew* she would do that. And then the guilt. The neverending guilt because his father wouldn't accept him and what they must have done to him...

She never asked Gaius about Prince Ayvie. Sometimes it was better not to know.

"Are you hungry, Princess?" Gaius called from beyond the cell bars.

Lucia dropped to her stomach on the floor, legs still draped in front of her shoulders. "I am always hungry, sir." This was part of the routine. Gaius came to slide a narrow tray between the bars. An apple, a hunk of dry bread, and a bowl of chicken broth. Lucia untangled herself but remained lying on her stomach. Gaius sat outside the bars. "Thank you, sir," Lucia tried to be polite. Her imprisonment wasn't Gaius's fault and he had always been kind to her. She'd almost watched his children grow up. His precious little baby boy born two years into Lucia's captivity and his reckless daughter. "Has Katia's knee improved?"

Gaius smiled, happy to talk about his children while Lucia dipped her bread in the broth. She knew this was better than what other prisoners ate and she expressed her gratitude often. And if she wished for the sort of food she'd been used to - roasted blood nuts and honey braised

pork and spiced wine and sweet baklava - then she didn't tell anyone. Lucia laughed at something Gaius said and tossed her apple core at the rat who lived in the back of her cell. She'd made peace with the rat. She had to. She couldn't function otherwise.

"And Brutus caught it! He caught the cat." Gaius finished a story and Lucia clapped her hands and giggled girlishly. Perhaps nineteen was too old to act childish, but fourteen wasn't. And she'd been fourteen the last time she had to act properly.

A metallic clang echoed off the stone walls, alerting Gaius and Lucia that they were no longer alone. Gaius scrambled to his feet as someone rounded the corner. Long dark hair, curly, falling in his eyes. A uniform - grey wool, blue trim, two gold pins at his shoulder. A rebel soldier. An officer. Lucia felt her back straighten and all her muscles tighten. If this was her chance, she would be ready. She could almost taste her freedom and it tasted sharp and metallic where her teeth pierced the tip of her tongue.

The intruder nodded at Gaius then took a knee in front of Lucia. "Imperial Highness, I beg you forgive our incompetence."

Lucia did not know how to react to that. It was the last thing she expected. She looked up at Gaius, but he shrugged, just as lost.

The kneeling man didn't raise his eyes from the uneven ground. "The Republic is on the verge of collapse. We will restore you to your rightful place on the throne of the Allyricine Empire and you will restore us to our former glory." He sounded very sure of this.

Lucia understood four important things simultaneously. First, she was finally getting out of here and that in itself was a cause for celebration. Second, there were still Imperial loyalists (and Gaius appeared to be one of them) and they had the means to find her and free her which meant they had a chance at doing what they set out to do and putting her back on a throne. Third, if they did succeed she'd have to not only rule an Empire (which to be fair she had been raised to do, but being the youngest bastard heir, she never took her studies seriously) but she'd also have to fix whatever irreparable issues the Republic created. And fourth, prison had been hell for her and she *needed* power to thrive, so she didn't care how hard it would be to clean up the ruins of two fallen regimes, she would do it or die trying.

She leaned forward and reached out to tilt her liberator's chin up to look at her. "There is nothing to forgive, Patriot. You have already earned every honor for your service to the crown." She slipped easily into the political persona she'd seen her older sister don so many times. "The Sun smiles on you and on all those loyal to Her children." Lucia wished for 4,346th time since she'd been locked up that she wasn't a bastard. If she had yellow hair like Rel and Sevillea or red eyes like Cassian, her claim to divinity would be a lot more convincing. But Lucia knew her brown hair and brown eyes were unimpressive and looked very mortal. Probably more so in her current state. She did not falter though. She could not. The Empire would not function otherwise. "What is your name, soldier?"

He met her eyes. "Julian Bellator," he said, "At your service."

Lucia stood and dusted herself off. "Tell me, Julian." She looked between Julian and Gaius. "What has the republic done to my Empire?"