



— IN THE LIGHT OF A —
BROKEN MOON
A SERIALIZED NOVEL

EPISODE ONE

CHAPTER ONE

“I know what you are, knight,” Vorac Avarita snarls. His voice is like an oil slick, iridescent with threat. He steps into the locker room from the shadowed hallway, menace in every movement. “I know what you are, and I want what you stole from me.”

Demya looks up from her tablet and the rush of Imperial credits flooding her account. Two pitifully small purses for the fights Vorac paid her to lose that afternoon. And a third, worth a fortune, for the match she won tonight when she refused to lose again.

For the last four months, Demya has fought and intentionally lost

dozens of fights in Vorac's arena each week. With her identity hidden beneath a mask and a fake name, Demya became the perfect punching bag. Every victory Vorac's fighters claimed against her helped them climb the league rankings. And every guaranteed loss for Demya dropped riches into Vorac's pocket. He paid her a small percentage of the winnings each week to keep her on staff. With each payout, he preened like some sort of benevolent patron, blessing her with coin. But Demya earned every credit with blood and bruises and more than a few broken bones. She knew how to put on a good show, Vorac said. She knew how to bleed and how to take a punch. How to lose in a way that convinced the crowd and had them howling for more.

And until tonight, nothing mattered to Demya except the coin she earned. Not the humiliation or the hurt or the hours spent healing herself with sigil magic after each day's work. None of it mattered, because at least Demya earned enough credits to keep Selena safe. To buy enough food to keep them fed and enough fuel to keep their starship flying. To stay one step ahead of the bounty hunters and the megacorp mercs and the Imperial death squads. Over the last four months, Demya had even managed to save enough to purchase a smallholding on a distant moon. A home where she and Selena might finally be safe for more than a few weeks or months at a time.

That is, until Demya gave herself over to her grief and let it drown every thought.

Until she cratered Vorac's business prospects and claimed the victor's purse for herself.

Demya knows that she should feel some sense of dread at the cold brutality in Vorac's face. But when he draws a pistol from his shoulder holster, she goes still as a winter lake. A lifetime of training

narrows her focus to the gun in his hand. To the sweat beading on his brow and the flare of his nostrils and the dry swallow quivering through his throat.

Vorac is a thick-chested man, his hands large enough to easily circle Demya's throat. His broad shoulders flex with powerful muscle beneath his immaculately tailored suit. Grey silk, woven with carbon fiber. High class body armor. Not that it will matter against Demya's Citadel-forged spatha blade, dripping with golden sigil magic.

If Selena were here, she'd rest her hand on Demya's arm and ask her to reach for any other options but her blade. But Demya knows what sort of man Vorac is, and what he will do if she makes him an offer to avoid his own death. She knows exactly what he will say and the threats he will make that will doom him.

"I know what you are," he says. His voice cracks. His knuckles go white around his pistol's grip. "And I know who travels with you. I know what she is. And I know you'll pay any price to keep that information off the planetary feeds. Any price to keep your Librarian safe from the Imperials."

Demya closes her eyes.

Nothing about this moment surprises her. Nothing about this moment can even disappoint her anymore. The only emotions she can muster are exhaustion and a dark and bitter resignation. This is how it always goes. She and Selena may find a few months' peace on one of the Periphery worlds of the Caedes Empire. But inevitably, someone realizes what they are and they're forced to flee, fugitives again and on the run.

Demya isn't even angry. She's just so very, very tired. And through that weariness, she hears the voice of a beloved ghost, seven years dead. He's no true revenant, summoned back from death with sigil

magic. He is just a memory, a piece of her past, a product of her wanting a world she can never reach again. But still, Demya feels the warmth of his hand on her knee as he crouches beside her there in the locker room.

He threatened our Librarian, Dem, Aleksan growls. Remember the oaths you dreamed of taking for her. You serve as Selena's sword and shield, with your blood and bone and breath and blade. Even to the edge of doom. End him, Demya. End him now.

Demya shakes her head.

The future where she and Aleksan should have been Selena's knights is gone. Aleksan is dead, lost in the starfire bombardment when the Imperials destroyed Salus Sermo. This – acting as Selena's bodyguard and struggling to earn enough coin to get by – is her life now. And this life requires a different kind of sacrifice from her. One that she failed to make in the arena tonight.

A sacrifice that asks her to forget her grief and set aside her pride.

Demya should have lost her third fight. She should have taken the hits and the humiliation. She should have collected her minuscule purse in payment. She should have healed herself with sigil magic at one of the city's thousand shrines before returning to Selena. But instead, Demya failed to bury her hurt and her grief in frigid winter calm. Failed to forget, at least for the length of that third fight, everything the Imperials stole from her and Selena and Aleksan.

As much as she regrets it now, Demya knows she was lost the second her opponent stepped into the arena. The second he raised a belt over his head, strung with dozens of golden coins, all carved with intricate sigils. Knight medallions. Each earned by knights for their service to the Librarians they loved and to the Great Library. Trophies, her opponent bragged, that he'd taken from the knights

that he slaughtered at the Siege of Salus Sermo.

There in the arena, her opponent had played to the crowd, his pupils blown wide with endurance enhancers and achor healing meds. Everything he would need to stay on his feet while he dodged her attacks and broke her bones. But Demya didn't care. Something vicious and feral cracked open in her chest as she watched him basking in the crowd's adoration. Her body ached from fights she'd lost earlier that day, but Demya did not hesitate.

She crossed the distance between them with all the speed and grace she'd learned as a knight cadet and as her brother's apprentice. Her opponent turned, still glowing with the crowd's praise. He screamed in shock, just before her first blow landed with a nauseating crunch in his ribs.

But Demya didn't notice.

She was caught in the memory of watching her brother's execution, broadcast to all the thousand worlds across the Imperial feeds. She saw only Andrzej's face as he died in the snow at Salus Sermo. Ash and tears and grief. His Librarian and her other knights already dead. Blood bubbling arterial red from his torn throat. The last choked breath as he reached for Laia, as he tried, even at his death, to reach her. And worlds away, Demya had been powerless to help him.

In the arena, Demya finished the fight in less than a minute. As her opponent tried desperately to crawl away from her, weeping and bloodied, the roaring in Demya's ears died down. With the last of her strength, she broke his jaw beneath her fist and crushed his fingers beneath her boot. Then she claimed his collection of knight medallions. The crunch of her footsteps against the arena gravel echoed up through the stadium, the crowd stunned into silence.

And while Aleksan's ghost here in the locker room is right, and she may be required to draw her blade on Vorac to leave this room alive, Demya knows that Selena would not approve. Too much blood spilled tonight already. So, Demya reaches for a different solution. One she'd been researching and preparing for weeks, decrypting Vorac's personal files and snooping through his private servers.

"You know what I am," Demya says. She pulls up her holo array on her tablet and projects a glowing sphere of information into the air between them. "So, you know how I can hurt you."

With a wave of her hand, she cracks the sphere open. Images of butchered bodies and forged ledgers and maps to unmarked graves spill out across the locker room. Pale lines of light create a network between each image and extend out to photos of Imperial military commanders. To the planet's political elite. To the heads of the five criminal syndicates currently operating in this sector. A horrible, ghostly web of Vorac's crimes and how each and everyone is connected to the most powerful people on Dedecha.

Information that guarantees the end of Vorac's business and his life.

Vorac surveys her research, weeks in the making. He browses casually through the images of his victims and nods his head, as if impressed. And then he turns back to Demya and gives her a soft, cruel smile.

"You think anyone cares about any of this, little girl?" Vorac chuckles. "Or that anyone who did care would ever get a chance to see your data sphere? Every organization caught in your web has AI prepped and programmed on the feeds to bury this info in nanoseconds. And when they're done burying your data drop? Those AI will follow the transfer trail up the feed and right back to

the implant in your head. You're dead before you get back to the capital city. Or to your Librarian, waiting for you in that wreck of a starship."

Demya grits her teeth, her cheeks burning with shame. And as much as she hates him, and as much as she wishes he was wrong, Demya also knows that Vorac is right. She knows what sort of world she lives in and what sort of people hold power here. Her stomach turns with humiliation that she was ever stupid enough to think that any of this research or this evidence would matter. Vorac barks a short laugh, shaking his head like she's an idiot child.

As Demya's frustration and fury writhe against her restraint, she raises a wall of frosted thorns around them. She must examine her options with icy calm. If she drops the data sphere, she's dead, and so is Selena. But Vorac still holds his gun in a trembling hand, trained directly at her head. If she lets him kill her in this room, he'll collect the bounty reward on her head and claim all the winnings in her account. And then he'll lead the Imperials right to Selena.

Demya knows Selena would want her to find another way. But she won't fail her Librarian again. She lost control over her grief and the shattered wreck of her heart in the arena tonight. But here, with this last choice laid so clearly before her, Demya is certain and sure. Vorac may not fear the law on Dedechae or in the Caedes Empire, but he – like every man before him – fears Citadel-forged steel and the warriors who wield it.

Demya surges to her feet, lethal as lightning.

She draws her spatha blade, liquid smooth from the scabbard nestled across the small of her back. Vorac's eyes go wide. All the color drains from his face. Before he can scream, before he can fire on her, Demya closes the distance between them. He stumbles

back, his pistol swinging wide. Demya catches his wrist and with an artful twist, she breaks six bones in his hand. Vorac drops to his knees, screaming. But before Demya can bring down her blade and end him, he raises his hands chokes out a cry for mercy. Her blade stops just a breath from the pulse pounding in his throat.

“If you love your Librarian, you will spare me,” he gasps. “If you kill me, my AI will automatically drop a dossier with all your information to the planetary authorities. Facial recognition, blood samples, voice ID, the signature of your starship’s drive. Even specifics on your Librarian. The Imperial fleet in orbit will make sure you never make it off this rock alive.”

Demya stares down at him at him in horror, shock spilling through her like snowmelt. Her spatha blade trembles against his throat. One more breath, one more step and she would have doomed Selena. Demya swallows back her nausea, steadying herself. She can face all of her innumerable mistakes only once Selena is safe. But right now, Demya needs to survive this moment with Vorac. And she sees, suddenly, the sole safe path out of this room with crushing clarity. Demya couldn’t make the sacrifice required of her in the arena that night.

But she can make here.

For Selena.

She can offer Vorac her pride and provide him with exactly what he wants.

“There’s only one way you see sunrise,” Demya says. To her surprise, her voice comes out calm and flat. “If you drop that dossier and my Librarian dies? You might collect the reward money. And you might recoup my winnings. But understand that you will not live to spend it.”

Her spatha cuts a thin line against Vorac's carotid. A bright bead of ruby blood sizzles through the golden sigils glowing bright along her blade. Vorac whimpers. The stench of his piss fills the locker room. Disgust rolls through Demya. At him. At this entire situation. At herself for bringing them to this moment with her mistakes. Slowly, she steps back from the pool spreading beneath him and wipes the edge of spatha clean on the shoulder of his fine grey suit.

Demya sheathes the blade at her belt and turns from him, sweeping aside the evidence still drifting through her holo. So useless. So naïve. She lets whatever victory she thought she might claim tonight slip from her grasp. The hope of that smallholding home she might have made with Selena is only a child's dream, now. Nothing more. From her glass tablet, Demya transfers more than half of her earnings from the last four months to Vorac's account.

Enough Imperial credits keep him in business.

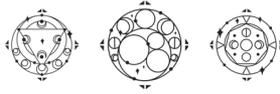
Enough to cover any bounty reward he might be tempted to claim on her and Selena.

All those credits and the scar she left across his neck should buy Demya enough time to refuel their starship. To resupply their food and their water and their air. To get Selena safely offworld and past the Imperial fleet in orbit. The cost is everything Demya has bought with blood and pain for the last four months. But she'll pay it, without question, for Selena.

"Understand me when I say this," Demya says. Vorac doesn't even glance at the influx of credits on his tablet screen. He barely breathes. She shrugs into her jacket and shoulders on her pack, ignoring her aching body. She crouches down to meet him eye-to-eye, careful to avoid the puddle of piss. She says, "All those legends

your mother told you about Librarians and the knights who served them? You know they're true. You *know* what I am, remember? So you know there will be no safe place for you if my Librarian is harmed. Keep your mouth shut and live to see another morning. You ken?"

Vorac whimpers his agreement, cringing back from her. Demya stands and steps over him and out of the locker room. As the door swings shut behind her, his breath hitch in a wet mewl of fear.



When Demya exits the arena, she pauses at her lightcraft speeder and takes in the view of Dedechae's capital city, sprawling out and glittering beneath a sky full of stars. Through the haze of evening mist and light pollution, Demya locates the spaceport docks down near the sea, where Selena waits for her.

Demya pulls up the hood of her jacket and fixes a shimmer shield over her face. From her perspective, the mask is gossamer thin and transparent, barely a whisper against her skin. But it will be enough to confuse the networked facial recognition AI in the city. Once Demya swings onto her speeder, she guns the engines blue. Racing toward the high-speed transit lanes back to the city, she leans low over the pilot console and holds tight to the controls. In the cool night wind, Demya shivers. For the first time in hours, the full weight of her exhaustion sinks into her bones.

But Demya can't rest.

Not yet.

Not until she gets Selena safely offworld.