

You dream a familiar scene, one you've turned over in your waking mind so many times it comes to you without effort.

Julia, smiling over her shoulder at you as you open the door to the Opera for her. It was her favourite, the Opera of the Virtuous Beggar, and your heart is thumping in your chest just like it did that night, the first night you took her out.

Nerves make you quieter than normal, as you guide her to her seat, watch the anticipation and excitement light her face, but around you all is indistinct; the opera is shrouded, the crowd of faces around you blurred and indistinct.

The mask of the female mountebank, the heroic Mendicante, glitters as she crosses the stage, preparing to steal from the pompous miserly merchant prince Alfonso. The noise and light of the Opera crashes over you, overwhelming, disorientating.

Julia laughs as the female hero steals from the unvigilant man and mocks him from the walls of the imperial mint itself before descending to the streets to leave her spoils in the donations basket of the Church of the Little Mother in Fassarto, but the sound is shrill and high. It echoes and morphs, becoming the voice of the lead tenor playing Alfonso. He opens his mouth and sings and Julia flinches beside you; his off key performance causing her hand to tighten around your own. She pleads a headache, she needs to leave.

You take her out into the cooler night air, and the dark pressure of the dream recedes to memories: the warmth of her hand in yours, the light of torches and lanterns shifting softly on the canal waters. You see her face, and reach for the words you said, for the words you wish you could say to her now, but they are lost: she before around you, her smile and bright eyes just out of reach

The dream shifts, but again building itself moment by moment from your memories.

You stand in her bedroom, the sound of the Masquerade of the Reaper can be heard outside, the crowds casting shadows on her window. This will be the first time Julia has taken to the bridges of the city to go duelling with you. She is nervous, as nervous as you were on your first date. Her hands are fumbling at her buttons, fumbling with the buckles on the scabbard and sword you have lent her.

The dream plays out in front of you just as it does in your memories; her hands in yours, fingers cold and trembling just a little between yours. The smell of her hair as you kiss her forehead, the shape of her shoulders beneath your hands as she presses herself against you. The words you said to her are lost, they seemed so inconsequential at the time, though you grasp longingly for them now.

Julia pulls away, smiling a little now, whatever you said having smoothed out her fears. You help her tie on her mask, remember the feel of her hair beneath your fingers and the warmth of her so close to you. You step apart, and she cocks her head, her smile all teeth and her shoulders thrown back straight and hard.

You ask her is she is ready. Sword in hand, she strikes a pose and her words echo in the dream:

“No, i’m nervous as all hell. It’s just lucky that tonight Mendicante will be the one doing the fighting!” she whispers as she slips into the guise she knows so well.

Another shift, another memory overwhelming you. This one unwanted, dreaded, but as much as you struggle to escape, it cannot be denied.

Julia pacing the floor before you, her equipment laid out on the table, cleaned and polished, oiled and ready to fight the Thule in Skarsind with the Young Empress.

In the dream shadows lie on everything, wrapping around Julia as she paces, clinging to the edges of the room. In the memory you are speaking to her, reassuring her again, just as you did during that night during the Masquerade of the reaper so many years ago.

But in the dream you are screaming, screaming and she cannot hear you. She paces just as she did, talks just as she did, the memory playing out before you whilst you stand helpless, desperate, voiceless.

Julia stops before you, that feint smile on her lips, saying she has something to tell you. In the dream you cry out to her, beg her to tell you, beg her to release you from the torment of not-knowing that she left you with. But in the dream she just smiles and promises to tell you when she returns.

You feel tears on your face as she lifts her hand to her lips and lays a gentle kiss on her bond ring. You can hardly see her through the tears as she leans into your arms and whispers “Dont worry, I’ll be fine. Wherever I go, you go with me.”

Desolate loss rolls over you as you pull her to you, kiss her desperately, willing that kiss to say everything that you wish you could say to her now. But the dream fragments and she is slipping away, dissolving between your hands. You wake, tears cold on your cheeks, heart swollen with remembered grief.