



Sakturia

Festival of Water and Light



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“Verae amici hinan
True friends are a refuge.”
-Royal Seylan Saying

Sule paced back and forth in her quarters, a sign of impatience and weakness she couldn't help.

It was Sakturia night.

Outside, Kinrai was alive with torchlight and music, the streets filling with revelers who would soon strip bare and run laughing through the city while their neighbors doused them with water. The Festival of Water and Light, when even the most dignified Seylan remembered what it meant to be simply, joyously *alive*.

But Sule wasn't thinking about the festival.

She was thinking about the passage doorway.

It stood dark and silent against the far wall, its panels blending so perfectly with the surrounding wood that even someone standing directly before it might never notice. Only three people in all of Kinrai knew how to open it: Sule herself, her brother Armis, and—

The woman who had disappeared into the Tanati's ascension more than a year ago.

Sule stopped pacing and stared at the doorway again. The wine and goblets were laid out. The Shatranj board was positioned between two chairs, pieces arranged and waiting. Food had been prepared—all her friend's favorites, or at least the favorites she remembered from before.



Before the Gei'Sei'Ugi. Before the glamour. Before the girl she'd grown up with on the streets of Kinrai became the voice that never spoke.

The doorway did not move.

Sule's heart sank. She had hoped—foolishly, perhaps—that tonight of all nights...

Then the wood creaked.

Slowly. Almost imperceptibly. The panel swung inward on ancient hinges, revealing a figure standing in the dark passageway beyond.

Sule's breath caught in her throat.

The woman was soaking wet—some of the night's revelers must have gotten exuberant early—her hooded cloak dripping onto the floor. Water pooled at her feet as she stepped forward and raised her hands to lower the hood.

Sule didn't recognize the face beneath it.

The eyes were wrong. The features unfamiliar. Scars and tattoos covered the woman's cheeks, her forehead, her jaw—ritual markings that Sule had only ever seen from a distance, on their Tanati's, the Queen Mother's face, during formal ceremonies.

But everyone had seen their Tanati. That meant nothing.

Then the woman smiled—warm and urgent, emotion cracking through whatever composure she was trying to maintain—and spoke in a hurried voice:

"Alligator feathers."



Sule was moving before she knew it.

There was only one other woman on all of Innatraea who knew their secret phrase. The eyes and face might be unfamiliar—the glamour of ascension changed those permanently, every Aisna knew that—but this was *her*.

"Tilva."

They embraced.

It was desperate, both of them pulling the other close with a fierceness that bordered on pain. More than a year. More than a year of formal letters that couldn't say what they meant, of watching from a distance as her oldest friend became something untouchable, of grief that had no name because the person she was grieving wasn't dead—just *transformed*.

Sule didn't notice how wet her dress was getting. Didn't notice time passing. Just held on, and was held, and remembered what it felt like to have this—a connection that predated titles and ascensions and the weight of an entire kingdom.

Finally, they pulled apart.

Not far. Just enough to see each other.

Sule raised her hands and placed her palms against the sides of her friend's face—this new face, strange and scarred—while Tilva did the same to her. They pressed their foreheads together, the traditional gesture of Seylan friendship, breathing the same air.



"It is a happiness in my heart to see you again, Sule." Tilva's voice was thick with emotion. "Our letters have been a refuge for me this last year. But not nearly enough."

Sule could feel the scars beneath her fingers. So many of them. Ridge after ridge of raised tissue, mapping a topography of sacrifice across skin that had once been smooth.

"Do they still hurt?" she asked softly. "There are so many."

Tilva closed her eyes. For a moment, something flickered across her expression—memory, perhaps, of whatever she had endured alone in the ritual chamber with the Gei'Ten'Gami.

"Receiving them was the greatest pain I have ever felt," she said. "But they have long since healed."

A pause.

"They told me that no Tanati has ever received so many scars. I am apparently a great oddity." A ghost of her old humor surfaced. "Most likely I have an interesting life ahead of me."

Sule moved one hand from Tilva's face to rest over her heart.

"Thali-rethu zi thali-zithu. Thar-rethu zi thar-zithu," she said quietly. Your pain is my pain. Your heart is my heart.

The words were ritual, but they had never felt more true. Whatever Tilva had become, whatever distance now existed between an Aisna and their Tanati, *this* remained: the bond forged in childhood on the streets of Kinrai, when they had been two girls with nothing but each other.



Sule stepped back and smiled, then took her friend's cloak and hung it on a nearby stand—shaking the water off first, watching droplets scatter across the floor like little stars.

"Tanati," she said, and nodded toward one of the two chairs. A formal gesture, slightly teasing.

Tilva smiled ruefully as she sat. "There is no need to address me as such in private, Sule. We have known each other since our days on the streets as children."

"Public habits are built upon private practices."

Tilva rolled her eyes with exaggerated drama—so familiar, so *her*, that Sule felt something loosen in her chest. "Quoting the edicts to me? I am your Tanati."

Sule sat in the other chair and poured wine for them both—a Thavan Prunelle, not quite a Daphshire, but it would suffice—before handing one goblet to her friend.

"Are you my Tanati?" she asked, mischief in her voice. "Or my friend? I am feeling a bit confused on the matter."

Tilva laughed. That musical sound—unchanged by ascension, unchanged by glamour—made Sule's heart ache with how much she had missed it.

"You well and truly caught me with that one." Tilva took a sip of wine, then turned to look out through the open balcony door. The sounds of Sakturia were growing louder—drums and fiddles, voices raised in song. "Sometimes I wonder if they chose the right one of us for Tanati."



Sule considered her response while sipping her own wine. "They chose well. I am more useful out here, as this last year has shown us, and your mastery of tactics has always been superior to mine."

She set her goblet down and picked up one of her soldiers from the Shatranj board, considering her opening move.

"My gift is people. Yours is everything else." She placed the soldier and looked up, meeting her friend's eyes. "Come. Teach me the truth of my words."

Tilva smiled and leaned forward to study the board.

"How is your brother?"

Sule laughed softly. "Armis? He is well. You could just ask him yourself."

"You know I cannot do that." Tilva's voice held an old sadness. "We live different lives now."

"What, do you miss your days of running around naked with him on Sakturia night?"

Tilva coughed on her wine. "Yes, that would be a very good look for the Tanati!" She set down her goblet, still laughing, and reached for a piece. "That is a marvelous vintage. Where did you acquire it?"

"A merchant in the harbor district. He owed me a favor." Sule watched her friend consider the board. "You could drop the glamour, you know. Run with Armis tonight as your old self."

The words were out before she could stop them. Foolish—she knew the answer already.



Tilva looked down. Her hand rose to touch her scarred cheek, fingers tracing the ritual marks with something that might have been grief.

"I cannot," she said quietly. "The effect is permanent."

The silence that followed was heavy with everything unsaid. Sule had known, intellectually, that the glamour could not be removed—every Aisna knew that. But hearing it from Tilva's own lips, seeing the way her friend touched her changed face...

"I am sorry," Sule said. "I did not know it was... that you could not ever..."

"The experience is indeed very strange." Tilva's voice was carefully controlled. "Though I have mostly gotten used to who I am now." A small smile, fragile at the edges. "Thank you for still being my friend. I needed at least one person from my old life."

"Our friendship is without question. You are like a sister to me." Sule paused, her own memories surfacing. "Though I still remember those first few days after you disappeared. Armis and I must have scoured all the city looking for you."

Tilva leaned forward and placed her hand on Sule's, squeezing gently, while touching her own heart with the other.

"Thali-rethu zi thali-zithu," she said softly. *Your pain is my pain.*

"You did not have a choice. There is nothing to apologize for."

Tilva held her gaze. "Thank you, my friend." Her other hand moved to rest over Sule's heart. *"Thar-rethu zi thar-zithu."* *Your heart is my heart.*

The ritual completed, Tilva's expression grew pensive.



"How is Armis, truly? My disappearance must have been so hard on him."

Sule sighed and turned to look out toward the balcony. The streets below were filling now, torches bobbing like fireflies, the sound of the festival swelling. She thought about secrets, and what was hers to tell, and what was not.

Then she met her friend's eyes again.

"There is something you should know."

Tilva blinked, obviously surprised. "He *knows*?"

"He does. Though I did not tell him a thing."

Tilva laughed—genuine surprise, genuine delight. "I should not be surprised. Armis has always been a very observant man."

"Indeed he is. One of his more annoying qualities."

"He would have made a good Aisna."

Sule almost choked on her wine. "That would have been awful! Men are not supposed to be that observant. He is also nowhere near pretty enough."

"I thought he was pretty enough."

Sule rolled her eyes, but couldn't help laughing. "He is well, though—annoying or not. He is my brother and has always been a very resilient man." She smiled knowingly. "I also believe knowing what happened helped him."



Something passed between them—an acknowledgment of everything Armis was, everything he had built from nothing on the streets they had all once shared. Three children from the same circumstances, sorted by fate into three entirely different lives: their Tanati, an Aisna, and the most successful criminal in Kinrai.

"It is your move," Sule said.

Tilva smiled and leaned forward to study the board—
—and then the sound came.

Music, drums, voices raised in joyous chaos. The thunder of hundreds of running feet. The Sakturia night run, the naked celebration of being alive, pouring through the streets below.

"The runners!" Tilva's face lit up with sudden, childlike excitement.

Sule was already on her feet. "Come. I left most of the balcony lanterns unlit so no one will see you." She smiled. "And I have water jugs."

Tilva laughed—free and joyous in a way Sule hadn't heard since before the ascension—and followed her toward the balcony.

"I have wanted to throw water on them again! I thought becoming the Tanati would deny me such frivolous pleasures."

"That is what I am here for." Sule picked up two ceramic water jugs from where she had set them earlier, handing one to her friend. "The frivolous things are just as important as the great ones."



The street below was lined with people now—torches held high, instruments playing, voices singing the old festival songs. And then the runners appeared: hundreds of naked Seylan women and men streaming through the night, their bodies glistening with water already thrown by those they had passed, their laughter rising like prayer.

Sule raised her jug.

Then stopped.

She watched Tilva instead.

Her friend stood at the balcony's edge, face transformed by joy—*genuine* joy, uncomplicated by duty or ceremony or the weight of ruling a kingdom. The scars caught the torchlight, but beneath them was the girl Sule had known since childhood. The one who had run these same streets naked once, before fate chose her for something else.

Tilva upended her water onto the parade of runners below, laughing as they shrieked and cheered. The sound of her delight was the most beautiful thing Sule had heard in over a year.

Sule handed over her own jug as well.

"Take this one too."

Tilva looked at her, surprised.

"You may never get the chance to do this again," Sule said softly. "I can watch the joy on your face. That is enough for me."



Something moved through Tilva's expression—gratitude, love, the bittersweet understanding of all that she had gained and lost. She took the second jug and turned back to the runners, emptying it with even more exuberance than the first.

Afterwards, they embraced at the balcony's edge, foreheads pressed together, watching the stream of runners flow past and disappear down another street. The music faded slowly into the distance. The torchlight dimmed. The night grew quiet around them.

"Promise me, Sule."

Tilva's voice was barely above a whisper.

"Promise me that no matter what happens, we will always be friends."

Sule held her tighter. Her friend had such a difficult life ahead—leading a nation, speaking through silence, carrying the weight of the Rasenna on shoulders that had once been a street child's.

"Of course," she said. "Without question. Always."

A pause.

"Now come. It is your move."

They walked back toward the Shatranj board together, arms around each other, two women who had started with nothing and become everything to one another.

Some bonds were stronger than crowns.

Some friendships were stronger than fate.

