



Vardavar

Festival of Rose and Water



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“Sa ser e tsnvel. Siro tsaghiky, nra karmir vardn u nra jrery
sareri verevi yerknk'its' ein galis: Nra nvernery mez,
t'ert'ikner, siro, jur, ptghaberut'yan, urakhut'yun,
geghets'kut'yan hamar.

This is how love was born. Love's flower, her red rose and its
waters came from the sky above the mountains. Her gifts to
us, petals for love, water for fertility, joy for beauty.”

-Sophenen Saying

Taline finished the last stroke with her makeup stick and examined
herself critically in the mirror. She hadn't used as much ceruse today,
having decided upon ochre from Farundia instead. The stuff was
expensive, but it set off the kohl around her eyes perfectly—dark and
bright at once, the way a princess should look when meeting her
people for the first time without her parents' shadows falling over her.

She smiled. Spun in a circle, watching her dress twirl around her like
rose petals caught in wind.

Today was important. Her first Vardavar alone. She was finally allowed
to dress as she chose and walk amongst her people without her
mother's hand on her shoulder or her father's guards forming a wall
between her and the world.



Other girls at school had told her how lovely her life must be—the princess of Sophene, born to silk and servants. They didn't understand. Everything she did was weighed, controlled, judged. Every smile measured for political consequence. Every word sifted for weakness.

She had long ago accepted this as the price of being heir.

But today—today—she would simply be a girl at a festival.

Taline shook herself, straightened her spine, and opened the doors to her apartments with a grand gesture.

Gurgen was there, of course.

The gruff soldier followed her everywhere—had followed her everywhere since she was a small child prone to climbing things she shouldn't. His job was to keep her safe. His duty, as her *hetaireia*, was something deeper: to guide her, advise her, stand one step behind her for the rest of her life or his.

"You look beautiful, princess."

She rolled her eyes elaborately as they started down the hallway.

"Thank you, Gurgen, but my parents pay you to say such things."

He looked genuinely insulted, and she immediately felt sorry. The words had been careless—the kind of thing she said to deflect compliments she didn't know how to receive.

"That is unfair, princess." His voice was quiet but firm. "I am your *hetaireia*. I am not here to kiss your feet."



Taline smiled—a real one this time—and reached up to twitch his mustache, the way she'd done since she was small enough to need lifting to reach it. "I know. I'm sorry, Gurgan." She turned down a hallway to the left, trying to avoid the palace's main entry hall. "Come on, let's hurry! I want to be at the festival as long as possible."

She made it three steps before Gurgan cleared his throat.

Taline stopped. Sighed. "Do we have to?"

He looked nonchalant, the way he always did when advising her toward something she didn't want to do. "It is not my job to tell the princess what to do." A pause. "Your mother, however, went through a great deal of trouble organizing your unveiling for Vardavar."

There was no use arguing. He was right—which she hated, mostly because it usually meant she was wrong.

"You are right, Gurgan. Thank you."

She started walking toward the main corridor, and he followed one step behind, as always.

The walk was short from here.

Taline would have preferred the longer route—fewer eyes, less attention. One of the maids had already stopped and clapped for her, though whether in congratulations for her coming of age or approval of her dress, Taline couldn't tell.

The adoration bothered her.



Sophenen were mountain people, stone-born and iron-willed. They should know better than to worship someone simply because she'd been born into the right family. Respect was earned, not given. Perhaps it was different for palace servants—perhaps proximity to power changed something in them.

She would have to ask Gurgun about that later.

For now: deep breath. Hands away from straightening her dress. Smile ready.

She nodded to the door attendants.

The massive doors swung open, and the *avetaber's* voice echoed through the main entry hall as every noble in the room turned to look at her.

"Her Royal Highness, Taline Bagdhasaryan, Princess of Sophene!"

Taline stepped into the hall.

Crystal and gold caught the light from high windows. Sophenen nobles stood in clusters throughout the space, their clothing a carefully calibrated display of wealth and allegiance. She scanned the room, reading alliances and tensions in the spaces between people—who stood close, who kept distance, who pretended not to notice whom.

Then she met her mother's eyes.

The Sovereign stood near the far wall, resplendent in crimson and silver, her expression carefully neutral. For a long moment, nothing. Then—almost imperceptibly—a nod.

Taline felt her face light up.



Court annoyed her. She much preferred the streets of Mayrik Lerr, the smell of roasting lamb and rosewater, the sound of her people laughing. But approval from her mother meant everything.

The smile didn't last.

Looking around the entry hall again, she saw the afternoon stretching before her—an endless parade of pleasantries and political maneuvering while the festival happened without her. She would have to employ every trick she had to extricate herself quickly enough to see Vardavar without insulting anyone too grievously.

Then she remembered something Gurgen had once told her: how a smaller force could use a larger one's momentum against it, tricking the enemy into allowing retreat by making them think they were advancing.

Perhaps such tactics worked with politics as well.

She didn't look at him—she knew he would be standing just to her left, one step back—but spoke quietly out of the side of her mouth.

"Gurgen. I have need of you."

His resigned sigh told her he already didn't like whatever she had planned.



Gurgen smiled to himself while watching the princess walk through the streets.

It was important to keep a stern face when guarding her—*hetaireia* did not grin like fools—but inside, he allowed himself this small joy. She was looking up at the sky, watching a flurry of rose petals carried past on the warm wind, and the smile on her face was one of pure wonder.

She had seen Vardavar before, of course. But she was older now, at that age when ideas of love first began expressing themselves. When rose petals meant something different than they had in childhood.

He looked away to scan the street ahead. Most Sophenen would never hurt their princess, but he was her *hetaireia*. Keeping her safe was more than his job—it was his life's purpose, sworn before their mountains the day he had accepted the honor.

When he looked back, she had stopped walking.

She was staring at something in the distance, one hand raised to touch her lips, a peculiar expression on her face. He followed her gaze and found what he expected: a young couple kissing beneath a walnut tree, lost in each other, oblivious to the festival swirling around them.

The princess was definitely thinking about things she shouldn't be.

He couldn't blame her. She was young, and this was Vardavar. Everyone was thinking about love today—the petals, the rosewater, the ancient blessing of the Old Gods flowing down from the mountains.

He stopped beside her. "Princess. They will be releasing the largest bloom of rose petals soon, then pouring the rosewater into the river. We should go watch."



She didn't respond at first. Lost in thought. Then she shook herself and looked at him, slightly embarrassed.

"That is a wonderful idea, Gurgan! I'll meet you at Anush Vishra!"

She started to run before he could respond.

Gurgan put a hand on his sword hilt to keep it from swinging and ran after her. Truthfully, he had expected as much. When she was a child, the princess had enjoyed playing a game she amusingly called *korts'nel hetaireia*—"lose the retainer." She hadn't ever succeeded, but she had also never stopped trying.

The crowds here were light—most had already gathered near Anush Vishra, Dragon Mother, the fiery red and purple Great Tree that towered over all Mayrik Lerr—though small groups still lingered at festival booths, shopping for goods or playing games. Most paid them no mind beyond noting their presence with smiles or waves.

The princess stopped ahead of him, staring at one of the booths.

A fortune teller.

Gurgan caught up to her a few heartbeats later. She flashed that innocent troublemaker's smile—the one that meant she was about to do something he would have to pretend to disapprove of—and held out her hand.

"I want to get my fortune read for Vardavar!"

He opened the purse and handed her a few silver pennies. Fortune tellers always charged more during festivals, and this one would certainly charge extra once she realized who had wandered into her booth.



The princess took the coins and ducked through the tent's entrance.
"Thank you, Gurgan!"

He followed her inside.

The fortune teller was an older woman draped in gemmed jewelry, color-dyed scarves, and sigils on leather cords. Rings crowded her fingers. Strange tattoos marked her wrists. In Gurgan's experience, fortune tellers were either like this—elaborate and mysterious—or young and beautiful. The theatrical ones were usually better at their craft.

The old woman looked up as they entered, and he caught the quick flicker of her eyes as she assessed her new guests. He wasn't sure the princess noticed.

"Would the young lady like her fortune read?" The woman's voice was honey and smoke. "Is she perhaps interested in love? Fate?" She gestured mysteriously over the table and opened her weathered hands, revealing a deck of cards. "Lady Siran knows all."

Gurgan rolled his eyes at the nonsense, but the princess was already leaning forward, slapping the silver pennies onto the table with both hands.

"Yes, all of that! Tell me everything!"

He couldn't help but smile at her exuberance—carefully, where she couldn't see. It was remarkable how quickly she shifted: this morning she had been a calculating young woman playing nobles against each other, engineering a minor scandal just so she could leave court early. Now she was an excited girl bouncing on her heels at a festival booth.



She was at that age of transition. Becoming the woman she was meant to be while still remembering the child she had been.

The fortune teller made the coins vanish with practiced ease, then shuffled her cards with dramatic flourishes before spreading them across the table in a sweeping arc. Her eyes never left the princess.

She knows exactly who this is, Gurgun thought. Every fortune teller in Mayrik Lerr would recognize the princess's face. But grifting aside, having your fortune read was relatively harmless—and he would make certain it stayed that way.

The old woman closed her eyes, let her hands hover above the spread cards, then selected one seemingly at random. She slid it in front of the princess, tapped it twice with her fingertips, and flipped it over with a flourish.

Crossed swords. The Two.

"An interesting beginning to your reading." Lady Siran's voice had dropped, becoming weightier. "The Two of Swords can mean duality. Two conflicting natures. A soul pulled in two directions at once."

The princess leaned forward, enthralled. "Oh, how interesting! Please continue!"

The second card made Gurgun's jaw tighten, though he kept his face neutral.

Death.

The princess looked at the fortune teller with wide eyes. "How can someone die twice?"



Lady Siran took on what Gurgun assumed was supposed to be a mysterious but knowing expression. "It could be simple—two deaths, at different times." The princess's eyes widened further, and the old woman continued smoothly. "Or it could mean something more complex. The death of one nature, and the birth of another. Transformation. Becoming."

The princess glanced at Gurgun with a small smile—*I hope you won't die*—then turned back eagerly. "What's next?"

The Ace of Wands.

"A sign of powerful magic." Lady Siran touched the Death card, then the Ace. "Whatever death has in store for you, princess... it is not an ending, but a new and powerful beginning."

The princess rubbed her chin, eyes thoughtful now instead of simply excited. "That is very interesting. It could mean so many things."

Her attention snapped back to the table as the old woman reached for the fourth card.

The World.

"Another powerful card." Lady Siran studied it, then looked at the princess with the air of someone about to impart valuable wisdom. "This could mean you are destined to go out into the world—to travel, to see what lies beyond Sophene's mountains." She touched the Two of Swords again. "Or, given the duality... it could mean you are meant to bring the world to Sophene. To draw it here, to your home."



"I have always wanted to see more of Innatraea." The princess tapped her chin. "But I wonder how one brings the world home with them? Perhaps through alliance. Or..." She paused. "A foreign husband."

Gurgen nearly choked.

She was not yet at marrying age, and Sophenen royal marriages were arranged by the Sovereigns. But the way she said it—*husband*—as though trying the word on for size...

He shook himself. This was nonsense. Fortune-telling frippery.

The old woman reached for the fifth and final card.

Her hand stopped.

A tremor passed through her fingers. An odd look crossed her face—something that didn't seem like a performance. For a long moment, she simply stared at the remaining cards as though seeing something the rest of them could not.

Then she shook herself and reached again.

As she lifted the card, another came with it, stuck to its back as though glued there.

Gurgen sighed inwardly. Here it came—the request for more coin, based on some foretelling nonsense about fate doubling or signs being amplified.

But the old woman's face had gone pale.

"Can I see them both?" the princess asked, leaning forward.



Lady Siran placed both cards on the table and separated them slowly, one hand on each. When she spoke, her voice had lost some of its theatrical honey.

"An extra card costs an extra coin."

The princess didn't even hesitate. She reached her hand back toward Gurgun and made a gesture with her fingers—*pay the woman*. He grunted his disapproval but dropped another silver penny into her palm. She placed it on the table immediately.

"I want to see both. It's very interesting how they stuck together."

The old woman didn't take the coin. She was staring at the two face-down cards as though they might bite her.

Then a breeze swept through the tent—wayward, sourceless—and lifted one of the cards into the air. It hung for a moment, spinning lazily, then settled back down directly on top of the other.

Gurgun felt the hair rise on the back of his neck.

That was no trick.

Lady Siran gathered herself visibly and reached to flip over the top card. But as she turned it, both cards came with it—stuck together again, inseparable—and landed face-up on the table.

The Lovers.

And beneath it, still clinging as though bound by something stronger than chance:

The Dragon.



The old woman stared at the cards. When she looked up at the princess, the performance was gone from her eyes entirely.

"A combination rarely seen in a lifetime of readings." Her voice was quiet now. Genuine. "The Lovers and the Dragon, bound together. A great love, intertwined with the Old Gods of Sophene." She met the princess's eyes and held them. "You are meant for great things in this life, Princess Taline. Greater than you know."

The princess's face lit up like the sunrise over the mountains.

"Did you hear that, Gurgan?" She clapped her hands, practically bouncing. "It's wonderful! I'm so excited!" She was already getting to her feet, words tumbling over each other. "Do you think he'll be handsome? And have his own dragon?!"

She ducked out of the tent before he could respond.

"Thank you, Lady Siran!"

Gurgan lingered for a moment, looking at the old woman. She was still staring at the cards—the Lovers and the Dragon, lying atop one another like destiny made visible.

When she met his eyes, he saw something in her face that he did not like.

Something like fear.

He turned and followed his princess into the light.

She was looking at the foreign men now.



Gurgen noticed it as they walked toward Anush Vishra—the way her eyes lingered on anyone who wasn't obviously Sophenen. Scanning for... what? Dragons? Destiny?

"Princess, we should be getting to Anush Vishra. We'll be late for the rosewater ceremony."

She laughed and patted his cheek before twitching his mustache. "You're always so practical, Gurgen!" Her eyes were still wandering. "By the Old Gods, it's alright to have a little fun with me sometimes!"

She was walking faster now, nearly skipping, still scanning the crowds.

"None of these men have dragons anyway." She glanced back at him. "Do you think he'll be handsome? Maybe he'll be a powerful warrior like you. Or a king!"

He smiled but didn't reply. It was best to let her enjoy these moods—entertaining her fantasies was harmless, so long as it stayed talk.

As they neared the plaza around Anush Vishra, a great flurry of rose petals swept past them in a sudden wind. Thousands of them, crimson and pink and white, swirling through the air like a living thing. Several petals caught in the princess's hair, and she laughed with pure delight.

She turned to watch them fly down a side alley.

Then she ran after them.

"Princess—!"

Gurgen chased her into the alley.



When he rounded the corner, she was standing completely still.

Twenty paces ahead of her, filling the narrow space between two buildings, was a *vishapakar*.

A dragon stone.

These ancient statues were scattered throughout Sophene—monuments to the Old Gods, carved in ages past from the living rock of the mountains. Gurgun had seen dozens of them over his years.

But he did not remember one being here.

And this one was large. Larger than most. Its stone wings were half-furled, its great head lowered as though peering down at something small and interesting. The carving was impossibly detailed—scales and claws and teeth rendered with a precision that seemed almost alive.

Its eyes were fixed on the princess.

A cold wind blew through the alley, and Gurgun shivered despite himself.

He approached slowly and touched her shoulder. "Princess? Are you alright?"

She didn't move. Didn't blink. Her gaze was locked on the *vishapakar* as though she couldn't look away—or didn't want to.

"Princess."

She shook herself. Turned toward him.



Her eyes were strange. Distant. As though she were seeing something far away, something he couldn't perceive. Then they focused on his face, and she was just Taline again—but paler than before. Quieter.

"Gurgen." Her voice was small. "I'm not feeling well. I want to go home."

He knew better than to press. Instead, he offered her his arm.

She took it—surprising him—and leaned against his shoulder as they walked. She had not leaned on him like this since she was a child afraid of thunderstorms.

"Of course, princess."

He guided her back toward Vishra Lerrneri, Dragon of the Mountains, the Bagdhasaryan family palace, one step at a time, his hand steady on his sword.

But before they left the alley, he looked back.

The *vishapakar* hadn't moved. Stone never did.

And yet Gurgen could not shake the feeling that it was watching them go.

That it was waiting.

Whatever was to come, Gurgen would protect her.

That was his purpose.

That was his life.



That night, Taline dreamed of wings.

She stood on Khen'ut'yun, Madness, her family's unfinished bridge. Their dream of spanning Ch'ari Vatsk, the Great Rift. Wind whipped her hair, and she watched the sky fill with dragons. They came from every direction—great serpentine shapes of crimson and gold and midnight blue, their scales catching the light of a sun that seemed too close, too bright. One by one they circled above, their shadows sweeping across her like the hands of Sophene's Old Gods, which they were

And then one descended.

It was vast beyond comprehension, its wings blotting out half the sky. Its scales were the deep red of heart's blood, and its eyes—

Its eyes were fixed on her.

It landed before her, stone cracking beneath its weight, and lowered its great head until they were face to face. She could feel the heat of its breath, smell the ancient fire that lived in its chest.

You, it said, though its mouth did not move. *At last.*

She woke with rose petals in her hair and the taste of smoke on her tongue.

And somewhere in the mountains, something ancient stirred.

