

Elysium's Shadow

Elysium Chronicles: Book One

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6.30pm, 9th April, ICY 418

Island Two, Elysium

JULIE MARTIN BREATHED in, deeply, and savoured the moment. Blain had taken obvious pleasure in putting her in the smallest, most cramped cell his security compound possessed. He hadn't admitted to the gesture being intentional, of course – he'd not said a word to her since her arrest – but she'd had to endure his smug features gleefully watching her as necessary preparations were made to drag her from Island One over to Island Two. Her new home.

These two islands had been Julie's world for the past two years, but didn't form the whole of the Earth-sized planet called Elysium; it was a beautiful world, with a single vast continent they had nicknamed Pangaea dominating a full third of the planet's surface, and an innumerable series of smaller islands – a paltry two of which were colonised by humanity. None of the staff or prisoners ever left the safety of their two islands without heavily-armed guards, and only then to try and find anything that could be considered valuable on nearby islands. Elysium *looked* beautiful, but it was savage, and bristling with predators. Pangaea remained resolutely off-limits to the small band of

human residents, and lasers kept the airborne predators far enough away for limited peace of mind.

Her mind was still reeling from all that had happened in just the last few hours, as she stepped down from the shuttle onto the warm dock. Now that she was seeing her new home through different eyes, those of a prisoner, she appreciated how secure it really was. Prisoners didn't even get the run of the entire island, despite the endless seas acting as a far more effective barrier than the wall in front of her ever could. The enormity of what she had done only now hit her.

I'll never see my best friend again.

Her lapse had taken everything away; her reputation, her job, her calling and her *life*. She had stood by and allowed the suppression field – an invisible field capable of pushing down elemental power – to be activated, reducing her abilities to the point of non-existence. Losing them hurt almost as much as losing her friend. In some ways, it hurt *more*. She would never admit that guilty secret to anyone, but her power had been with her since puberty had arrived thirty years ago, and she couldn't remember being anything else.

As the guards communicated with their fellows up in the guard tower, Julie savoured the momentary delay and looked around. While Island Two's dock was half the size of Island One's equivalent, it was nevertheless perfectly serviceable. All of the goods, equipment and personnel that were delivered to Elysium went first to Island One for processing and onward travel.

Prisoners were the one exception. They came directly *here* to the prison island, ensuring Island One was forever unsullied by their presence. Julie, of course, was the exception to *that*

exception; the only member of staff, probably in the history of prison worlds, to move from the comfort and security of her staff quarters to the stark and severe world that the prisoners inhabited.

Elysium had been her home ever since the prison had first opened two years previous, and she'd hoped to stay here for a while longer – she was a rare breed; a graduate of the Merlin Institute, working for the Republic as part of a half-hearted programme to try and improve relations between the two sides – but had intended to move on eventually. Not now.

Out of her peripheral vision, she saw men step either side of her. She tensed; the security guards who had accompanied her on the flight were two of Blain's favourites. They were thuggish, only mildly intelligent and no lovers of the power they called magic. She could understand that; not many non-Institute people were. They didn't understand it – of course they didn't, otherwise why would they call it magic? That was for sleight-of-hand card tricks, far beneath the subtle art of elemental control she and her fellow Merlins performed; and the Institute called their power just that. But "elemental control" wasn't very catchy, and the term magic had stuck amongst the general population. The ability to manipulate the elements was a rare art; only a small number of people born with the power. Any human child could be born with the right sequence of activated genes, but scientists still – even after so much research – didn't know the exact sequence, so those born with elemental powers were entirely at the lap of the ... Julie hesitated. She wouldn't use the word "gods".

Perhaps "fate" is a better choice of word.

She sighed; pedantry was the least of her worries right now. Human beings often feared what they did not understand, and when an evolutionary quirk had burst those powers out into point five percent of the population, hundreds of years before, the people *with* those powers had been often treated abysmally.

Sadly, things were still difficult between the Institute and the Republic more widely; humanity didn't understand the Institute, and the Institute members struggled to remember what it was like to live without power. A gulf of misunderstanding had split open between them over the years, and proved more difficult as time went on, as each side relied heavily on the other; the Republic needed the Institute for a more creative defence against some of their more unusual enemies, and the Institute needed the Emperors and Empresses to give them political cover to continue with their research and development without interference.

Things had gotten worse under Guinevere's leadership, of course, but no-one was surprised – she made her distrust of the Institute well-known. She had declared, back when she was heir to the Golden Throne, that she would keep the Institute at arm's length when she was in power, and she had apparently been true to her word; she and the Chief Warlock had barely spoken. Or that's what Julie had heard anyway. That did nothing except increase the tension between the two sides; *T'was ever thus*, Julie thought wearily.

Blain's choice of guards, therefore, had made her wonder if the chief of security might have hoped for something to happen to her in the transit time between islands. The guards – Walters and Smith, if she remembered correctly – had been incredibly well-behaved. They had watched her carefully and both had kept

their right hands on their nightsticks. The suppression field had done its job well, but the guards obviously still believed that she had some kind of latent power being kept in reserve, to turn them (perhaps) into a frog or a small vase. Of course, she'd certainly thought about it. They would have deserved it.

I even know what to do with the excess matter. But I don't want to get into more trouble – and it's moot anyway with the bloody suppression field engaged. How very prescient of Mr Blain to have had one installed; I knew he didn't trust me.

Each guard grabbed one of her arms, making it clear to her that it was time to move. She bristled at their touch.

I won't be escorted there like some common criminal, she thought stubbornly. That's one thing I'm not. None of the inhabitants here are; I never believed that, even when I was on Island One. I never agreed with imprisoning people purely on the basis of their dissent from the accepted norms, especially when the dissent was peaceful and the norms are so violent.

She flushed, realising how loose she'd become with her thinking in such short a period of time. She had come into the Prisons Directorate to see what she could learn from people living in the system. She just hadn't expected to be *amongst* them quite so intimately.

But they're all intelligent, resourceful people. I'm no better; they fought against a corrupt system before they were caught, and I respect them. She managed to suppress a guilty smile. I actually quite like their radical approach.

She pulled her arms away from their firm grips and glared at each of them in turn; they both tensed, and Smith's hand twitched back towards his nightstick. He seemed to be fighting an urge to pull it out and use it anyway, just for the hell of it.

Walters, for his part, seemed unsure now that Julie had resisted their touch. Walters' indecision spread to Smith, and both men hesitated. They weren't to know that Julie was quite willing to move on; she had made her point. They clearly wanted direction, and she saw two sets of eyes glance back towards the shuttle to seek it.

Julie refused to look. She wouldn't give Blain the satisfaction. He hadn't yet deigned to leave the comfort of the shuttle, and she wondered if he even would; *he* was clearly driving home the point that he was important enough to keep any prisoner waiting – even an ex-colleague. Commander Robert Blain hardly ever left the safe confines of Island One; he had staff to sort out the actual prisoners, leaving him to deal with whatever he chose. Julie had never been entirely sure, in the two years they had worked together, what he *actually* did. He hadn't spent a lot of time in his office or his quarters, but whenever questioned, Blain would merely say that he had enough to keep him busy.

He only got away with it because he and Noble were friends.

Governor Noble. His face floated in her mind's eye again, and through the feeling of vague sickness, a heavy cloak of sorrow and guilt threatened to smother her.

Another movement brought her back to the present moment; Blain had finally decided to leave the shuttle. She looked – she couldn't help but look – and scowled as she saw the insufferable pleasure on his face. His eyes flickered over Walters and Smith for a moment, and then his gaze settled on Julie. He stepped down to the dockside and walked the few steps towards her, making sure his face was turned so that she could see him.

“Are you going to try something?” he asked. “Go on, Julie. I dare you. Try *something*. Let us defend ourselves.” He clicked his

fingers, like he had only this moment remembered something. “Oh, that’s right,” he went on, “you can’t, can you? I’ve taken your powers away. You’re just like the rest of us now. I’ve cured you of your ... instability. How does it feel to be properly human for the first time since you hit puberty?”

“Boring,” she replied in what she knew came across as a flat monotone. “Bland. Limited. I’m sure I don’t need to go on. How do you live in a limited world?”

Blain’s face tightened; he clearly hadn’t expected to get a response, not least one that was quite so snappy. He was used to having his authority unchecked; Noble had certainly always been willing to allow that. Julie, however, had never given him an easy ride. Noble had tolerated their disputes because he recognised Julie’s elemental powers and was afraid of Blain. Julie also suspected that Noble enjoyed watching them argue.

“I wouldn’t be so confident right now,” he retorted. “Look around you, Julie. Don’t forget where you are.” Blain’s face settled back into the usual smirk, and Julie instantly bridled. He was *enjoying* himself. The swap programme between the Institute and the Republic was meant to encourage understanding, but Blain hadn’t shown anything but bigotry.

Noble was meant to have been his friend! she thought angrily. *But our governor was just a pawn in whatever game our beloved Security Chief was playing. He even convinced the governor to make him Deputy over me. I’ll never forgive Noble for trusting me so little.*

“I wouldn’t ever forget where I am now, nor why I’m here,” she replied. “I *want* to remember everything.”

Blain nodded, apparently satisfied, but Julie wasn’t finished. Her face set hard into a scowl. “I want to remember what Alexis

Noble did to his wife. I want to remember the look of terror on Catherine's face as he shot her – his own wife – in the chest with a phase pistol.”

“He was defending himself!” Blain barked. “Catherine had systematically lied to her husband since their wedding day. Since *before* their wedding day, in fact. She hid who she was from your own Hunters. They bring in every person with the activated magical – or elemental, if you insist – gene into the Institute, because that's the law, and you people need to be controlled and regulated. But Catherine lied and kept her abilities tightly locked away, and you helped her. She put Alexis' career at risk!”

“She was scared and lonely!” Julie retorted. “And don't you *dare* lecture me about being on the run from the Elemental Hunters, Blain. You know full well that I used to be one. I detected Catherine's latent power as soon as I met her, but she wasn't doing any harm. I was training her to *control* them.”

A vein throbbed in Blain's forehead, and his cheeks had flushed red at the ferocity behind Julie's words.

“It's *Acting Governor* Blain to you,” he snarled. “Director Wood has named me temporary ruler of this world, and it'll only be a matter of time before he makes the appointment permanent.”

“Ruler?” Julie sneered. “You do think highly of yourself, don't you? You're still nothing more than a jumped-up, tin-pot dictator. You won't last five minutes as Governor before Wood sees your true colours and sacks you.”

She couldn't bear his supercilious, condescending attitude. However, the two guards, as she saw out of her peripheral vision, had tensed. Walters' hand moved towards the phase pistol in the

belt around his waist, but he was watching Blain carefully before making a more overt move.

Blain chuckled, the sound cold and humourless.

“You’ve clearly given this a lot of thought,” he replied, “but your analysis is completely wrong. After all, you *killed* Governor Noble in cold blood. He was defending Elysium from an unlicensed, potentially dangerous magician. As an ex-Magic Hunter, you must recognise that?”

“I am a graduate of the Merlin Institute. I can control the elements, and so could Catherine. What I did was *not* in cold blood. Noble killed his wife – my friend – for no other reason than he was ashamed of her. She wasn’t a threat to anyone; he could see that her powers were so weak they’d barely register on the Institute’s scale. Alexis Noble hated practitioners because they were different; he might not have known what Catherine was, but his bigotry made her ashamed of who she was, and I tried to make her see the world differently. When her husband killed her for the crime of being different, then I *had* to act.”

“You used *magic* to kill him.”

“It’s *not* magic, and you know it!” Julie drew in another breath, more ragged this time, and tried to calm herself; Blain was looking for any excuse to do her harm. “It’s science; magic is just the word non-Merlin members used when we first discovered what our minds could do. Catherine and I were exploring the capacity of the human brain, not mysticism, and I resent the implication that there was anything improper in that.”

“Killing people in any culture is wrong,” Blain barked. “I know for a fact it’s taboo in yours to kill using your powers.”

Julie swallowed hard as shame washed over her; she *had* killed someone. That knowledge would stay with her forever, and

hearing Blain tell her what she already knew made it more real somehow.

“We can defend ourselves when needed,” she said. “That’s what I did this morning. I defended myself against an aggressor after I couldn’t protect my friend.”

“I imagine that the Merlin Institute would challenge your interpretation of that.”

“Then the Merlin Institute is wrong.” Julie pressed her lips together, but there was nothing she could do about it now; her words were out, and she had expressed the sentiment that she had been thinking for most of the day. Blain’s eyebrows rose as far as they could possibly go up his forehead.

“I would imagine that the Chief Warlock would be *very* interested to know what you’ve just said. It might put a completely different spin on your career so far.” He smiled. “What am I saying?” he went on. “So far? I certainly didn’t mean to indicate that your career has a future. We both know that you’re finished.”

Their argument, held on the dock of Island Two against a bright, glowing sun and clear blue sky, with the high walls of the prison compound rising up to show her the future, had a strange sense of unreality about it. Julie shook her head and turned away.

“Take me there,” she said, nodding towards the compound. “Let’s get this over with.”

If Blain said anything else, she didn’t hear. The guards allowed her to walk without constraint, up the track towards the prison compound where her new life would begin.

She stepped inside the outer gates – twelve feet tall, steel-reinforced and impregnable – and turned to face them. All three were staring at her, and Julie knew exactly why. They were

waiting for her to do something. They didn't trust the mage, even with the suppression field active.

But I've already made my mistake, she thought. I can't make any more. I'm going to die here; I'm never going to know freedom again, and all because I killed a murderer.