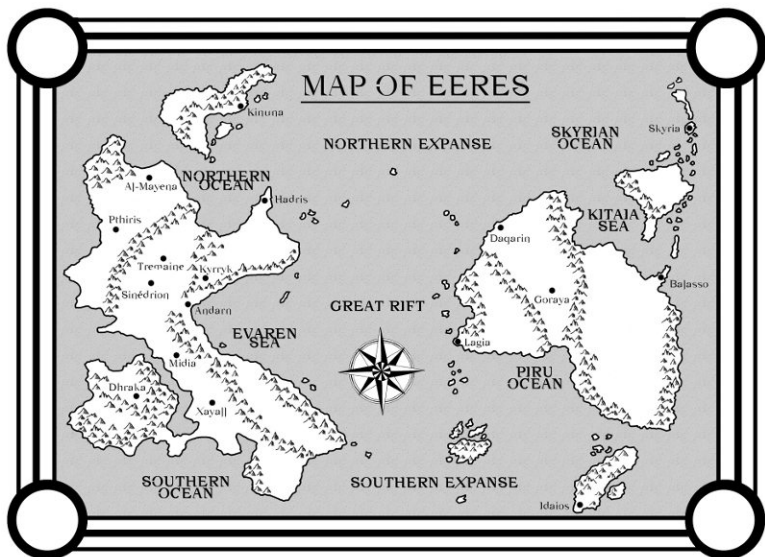


FRACTURE

Book 2 of the Resonance Tetralogy

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Prologue

The door smashed shut, splintering at its hinges. A terrified, desperate figure collapsed down the steps and into the street. He had barely hit the floor when he was up again, tearing down the dark pavement and away from his pursuer. The ragged breath cried from his throat, his feet slammed the rough stones, and he felt the electric burn of fear clambering over his shoulder. He dared not look, not for a second.

He was going to die.

The streets of Andarn listed wildly as the sleek tayra pelted from door to door, scrabbling madly at latches, casting his fists against the forbidding barriers in the hope that someone would grant him mercy. The shadows, deepened and spread by the clouded, starless sky, struck him with a lance-like fear whenever he caught sight of them.

“Please, help!”

The empty streets devoured his cry, and nobody came. Behind him, he felt his pursuer advancing quickly, too quickly. He sprinted away again, survival and sanctuary his desperate, vanishing goals.

“Guards! Someone, *please!*”

Rounding a corner too fast he listed sideways into the wall, crushing his shoulder against the brick. He wrenched himself

upright, head spinning from the impact, only to have his neck slammed with choking force, pinning him to the wall. Knife-like claws sunk into his throat. He gasped and spat, tugging vainly at the assassin's grip.

“P...please... I'll get you... what... you... want...”

A smile in the darkness. Wry and sickening.

“What I want is a good death. Thank you for your assistance.”

The tayra's eyes widened in horror as a blade flashed in the torchlight. The curved edge sliced from the base of his neck to his chin. His blood painted the ground, and when the cut was done, his body dropped.

Satisfied, the dark figure dipped his claw in the fresh crimson and scrawled a message on the wall. His work done, he paused only to spit on his prey before vanishing into the night.

The clouds rolled by overhead, and the city stood in cold silence.

Chapter One

For weeks it had been hard to tell if it was ash or snow falling from the bright, colourless sky above Xayall. Now, however, in the throes of winter, tiny ice flakes danced their way down to the sovereign city-state. Huddled in the centre of its wide, shallow valley, the usually vivid tapestry of rich greens surrounding the city had faded under the season's frosty restraint and lay eerily still. No gentle, rustling breeze tousled the leaves and calmed the valley with its sound, and many of the forest birds had flown to warmer climates, leaving the city in a strange, ethereal quiet.

The skies had been deep grey during the city's second brutal siege, and since then had regained no colour, only brightening with the sun's winter rise, like a sheet of rolling, translucent glass. Five months after the onslaught of Dhraka's reptilian forces, one could be forgiven for thinking Xayall was a ruin from a distance, were it not for the many plumes of smoke rising softly from its chimneys and the constant, irregular beat of city reparations. It still bore the heavy scars of conflict, and little had changed since the echoes of battle cries and clashing metal stopped ringing in the trees.

The skeleton of the metal pyramid Gargantua lay wedged against the outer wall. The giant drawbridge it had lowered for its troops to swarm into the city was twisted, partly broken during the

machine's demise. Its empty cannons reached for the sky, the iron fingers of a dying giant.

Now depleted of the vicious legions and armaments within, the Gargantua was a harrowing, empty chamber, an enormous mausoleum that echoed and rumbled as the wind coursed through its desolate hallways. The hollow smell of burnt metal still hung in the air, and every so often ghostly metallic noises of decay resounded in its charred stomach.

Xayall itself, despite being in a similar condition to its deceased and rusting assailant, still held hints of the vibrant life it harboured before its ordeal under Dhrakan claws. Teams of soldiers and civilians worked diligently to clear the streets, and many smaller buildings were already mostly healed of their wounds. The once bright sandstone walls, although still riddled with scorch and pock marks where the Dhrakan bombs had spent their wrath, were patrolled by dedicated troops eager to defend against any unwanted raids. The biggest change in the city's visage, however, had been made to the central tower. Formerly the city's glimmering pinnacle, the Tor's severed column now virtually disappeared against the blanket of clouds, while the wing structures previously cradling the sky had shattered at its base when they fell, and were now solemnly being used to rebuild vital structures still suffering from damage.

“What do you see, Faria?”

The young fox jumped at the deep voice in her room and pulled the blankets around her neck. Her small, elegant frame looked even more diminutive in the hospital's generous bed, and the many bandages covering her slowly-healing wounds and burns only served to restrict her gentle body further.

She had been gazing at the city for so long that her focus had been completely removed from the immediate world around her. She turned her head to her visitor and gave him a weary smile. Every time Osiris was in the city he would come to keep up to date on her condition, both mentally and physically. If he had any

concerns, the physicians were not usually far behind upon his departure.

Not prone to expressing emotion anyway, the gryphon had seemed even more guarded since Faria had been admitted to Xayall's hospital straight after her return from Nazreal. She found his stoicism sweet in a strange sort of way, but even through her tiredness, she knew he was trying to prepare her for the role she had yet to fulfil as Xayall's Empress. His aged lifespan had allowed him to oversee the construction of two different eras of their planet's history, watch countless mistakes and injustices, and witness great heroism and sacrifice. She trusted him to know what a leader should bring to the world, but the burden of that knowledge was not something she looked forward to receiving herself.

"Ah, Osiris, you startled me," she replied, shifting herself upright. "The city's rebuilding well, from what I can gather. I like picking sections to watch for a few days to see how quickly they're repaired. As for everything below the rooftops... It's hard to tell without being down there. Damage can look worse or better from so far away, and I wouldn't like to speak for those who aren't fully recovered yet. There's still a lot to rebuild, and... I, um... need to retake my duties, eventually,"

Osiris strode to the window. His hulking avian frame would have blocked out most of the light, but his crimson armour and golden wings reflected a warm glow to the walls. His bedside manner left a lot to be desired at times. Despite his presence always being a great comfort to her, she could tell he battled with his own uncomfortable emotions, especially where she was concerned. Initially, when they returned to Xayall, he had been by her side every time she woke up, along with her wolf companions Aeryn and Kyru, but Osiris seemed to grow more pre-occupied with reparations and future issues as time passed, and the guarded care and concern that he showed her became marred with thoughts of the ongoing political and military struggles of the sovereign. She

could understand why: Osiris' past was millennia long, and undoubtedly difficult. He conducted himself with an emotional mask that, to most, remained impenetrable. Faria had become one of the few who could see past it, into years of wisdom and painful memory. She had seen the same look in her father, and it saddened her greatly.

Faria worried that she would start to look the same if she were left in the hospital room by herself for too long. Here she lay, the recent inheritor of a sovereign nation's title of 'Empress' (by itself an obsolete and criticised honorific), and her greatest act so far was to secure herself a big window and a collection of blankets any avid quilter would be proud of. Even ignoring the weight of responsibilities she had not yet even shouldered, it currently took most of her strength to simply stay awake.

"Do not worry too heavily on your duties for now. I am glad to see you too," Osiris said with a slight smile. "I'm sorry I haven't been here more often, but getting the Coriolis out of the sand to the nearest ocean is proving more difficult than I expected. How are you feeling?"

She shifted in her bed, trying to force co-operation into the huge bank of pillows she'd constructed specifically against the doctors' orders so that she could see outside.

"All right," she said, stifling a yawn. "I mean... I still feel like I've been burnt inside and out, and as if my joints would snap as soon as they move. It doesn't hurt as much now, but I think there's more medicine in me than muscle. I can't even go near a crystal. My body's so weak they don't know what could happen. They say it's better for me to sleep, but it makes me sick to lie down so much."

The gryphon looked reflective for a second. She knew the look well, and she only hoped that he wouldn't draw another comparison to her father, as usually accompanied such an expression.

"You will heal, in time. I will make sure of it."

She gave a secret sigh. Every time she thought she'd come to terms with her father's absence, the feelings spilled over like water from a spring, and the pain in her hands, her whole body, would burn again. And it wasn't Osiris' responsibility for her to get well, even if he personally marshalled every doctor in the city to her bedside.

"I'm... I'm glad. At least, I hope I will. Sometimes I just..."

He turned to her expectantly as she trailed off. Feeling defeated by an argument she didn't even know she was having with herself, she rested her head back against the pillows. Still watching the city in the middle-distance, her bright, electric blue eyes fogged with a wistful gaze.

"I don't know," she said quietly, after a time. "Everything's changed. It feels like a completely different world. But..." She looked back up at the ceiling. "More than that, I don't... I don't really know who I am at the moment. I don't know if the world's changed or if it's just me. I've lain in this bed for months barely able to move, drifting in and out of sleep while outside everything spins around me and..." She took a deep breath and held it, as if trying to compress her emotions into a smaller, more manageable form than the pulsing, sometimes violent wave of feelings that bashed at her body. "I hate it, Osiris. I... I don't even know that I'm happy to have survived some days. And I'm ashamed of that. But there's so much that I know only I can do, just so much..." She let her head fall to the side to stare at the window once again.

Osiris watched her, his calm expression betrayed by a hint of worry in his deep red eyes.

"Who would be here if you were not, Faria?"

"I don't know," she lied. It had taken her a long time to stop blaming herself for the shortcomings and losses of previous battles, and she still had days where she would do nothing but replay specific moments over and over, as if thinking about them hard enough would give her a chance to change them. So many people

had sacrificed so much for her survival, in ways so great and so deep that she felt she would never be able to repay them.

“It would be poor of me to give up, wouldn’t it?”

“In what sense?” he asked coolly.

She hadn’t meant it as a question. “In every sense. Poor recompense to everyone, and poor strength on my part. I think...” She let out a long, heartfelt sigh. “It’s about time to stop being ill, Osiris. There are a lot of people counting on me.”

He let out a quiet laugh – quiet for him, anyway: being such a size and with such a commanding voice he did few things with subtlety.

“Your nobility and conscience are admirable, Faria. But do not forget, people are counting on you to recover and be yourself as much as anything else. There is more to living than duty.”

“You don’t seem to think so,” she quipped with a sly smile, catching the gryphon completely off-guard. He cracked his shoulders indignantly, making his huge golden wings bristle. It created quite a draft, stronger since his restrictive injuries had healed.

“*My* life is best spent safeguarding Eeres’ interests,” he muttered, waving his claw dismissively. “You are too young to lose passion in such a cold way, and you are far kinder than I am. Do not underestimate the value of compassion, especially when times are dark. And besides, I still have the Coriolis as an escape. Which I really must return to.”

Faria looked disappointed. “I’m sorry I can’t help. It seems everyone who stops by has to run off and do something after visiting me. I feel useless wrapped up in bed.”

Osiris flicked an imaginary speck of dust from his gleaming shoulder armour. “Resisting resonance energy strong enough to move continents is no minor task,” he said with an air of light scolding. “I would always be grateful for your help, Faria.” He punctuated himself with a short, frustrated breath. “And I know it would be a lot quicker with your assistance, but your absence from

the task is not your fault, and we would be in a far worse situation if you had not protected us. Once the Coriolis is back in dock here, we will spend time talking about Nazreal and preparing ourselves for the journey ahead.”

Faria scrunched her nose in playful disgust. “There’s no getting past you, is there?”

His feathers bristled. It was a subtle dig, but she knew how hard he was trying to be both dutiful and kind. She regretted how little she could do when her mind swam in such fast rivers of thought, especially when his ship meant so much to him. In a world that knew nothing of his species or his world, this was the single piece he could still keep hold of. She would be doing the same in his position. She was lucky, albeit reluctantly so, that her world, her friends, and her city were taking care of themselves without her intervention. He stood by her bed. “I have asked Aeryn and Kyru to check in on you while I’m away. I hope that is permissible.”

She nodded gratefully. “They do already, you know.”

“Yes,” he said bluntly, “but now I have specifically asked them to come in and see you. So I expect they will be here more often, at the very least.”

Faria allowed herself a smile at Osiris’ expense for his determination to trust almost no-one but himself. Without the three of them, she would have been completely alone, and she didn’t believe she could have found the strength, the motivation, to survive otherwise.

“Thank you, Osiris. I’ll miss you, as always. I have Bayer and Kier, too – they’re very good to me. They always have been.”

As hopeful as she tried to sound, she couldn’t hide the sadness in her voice when her thoughts turned to one of her companions in particular.

“I did visit him before seeing you.”

She swallowed and looked to her hands, wringing them in her lap. Eventually, she forced herself to reply. “And...?”

“Physically, he has healed a moderate amount, but there has been no change in his response for some time, and he will not wake yet. He needs to travel to Skyria for further attention.”

She winced. Osiris’ words felt so cold, so painfully distant regarding a friend who had always been so warm and kind. Many harsh memories of her struggle still lingered, but Tierenan’s injuries had weighed on Faria’s mind the most. Her stomach roiled and twisted whenever she relived the moment her brightest friend was struck down by Raikali. When she had insisted on seeing him after she first woke up, she needed to be led away and forced to sleep, the sight of his condition upset her so badly. The young raccoon had looked like a ghost, torn and battered, and still caked in blood, old and new. She was sure he would die. He hadn’t even been moved from the Tor to the hospital; his condition was so grave that he had to be treated virtually where he lay, and monitored intensely. Still, with all of the falcon surgeon Maaka’s efforts, and a great deal of unconscious strength from Tierenan himself, he held onto life with the thinnest thread. How he might recover past that, though, was still a grave uncertainty. Even for only being a few floors apart, it crushed her to know that he would not be bouncing colourfully into her room any time soon, if ever.

“I see. I want... to go with him, when he does.”

Osiris nodded. “All the more reason to get the Coriolis free. I will not have you putting yourself at risk, understand?”

Faria puffed her blankets in an indignant rustle. “You sound like the physicians,” she mumbled. “I had to ask for hours before they even let me near a window, and they’re constantly trying to convince me I’m too cold. I already told them I have more blankets than the rest of the city put together. I want to go outside again. And I miss my real bedroom.”

The gryphon scratched his beak idly. “Well, Aeryn and Kyru lack the stringency that I have, so I am sure they can aid you in breaking any rules that have been laid before you. Just be careful. Even though Raikali and Fulkore are gone, we are still vulnerable,

you especially.” He flicked his claw demonstratively toward her, and she answered with a reluctant nod.

“I promise, Osiris. I’ll be fine,” she sighed. “I’ve started asking for regular reports on the city’s progress, but they don’t always arrive.” She shifted in her bed, looking embarrassed as she formed her next question: “Could you scare someone before you leave, please?”

He gave a derisive snort; she surmised it was at the lack of reports. It was an irritation guaranteed to strike an immediate nerve with Osiris.

“Of course. Is there anything else you need, Miss Empress?”

“Not right now, thank you.” She shot him a warning glare. “By the way, if you call me ‘Miss Empress’ or ‘Your Majesty’ again, I’ll clip your wings. ‘Faria’ is fine, and most important to me.”

As he swept into the corridor, she could have sworn she heard him laugh.