

The Cost of Power - Katyayani, Year 7, ACT

All my life, I have been power – not powerful, but power itself. Magic incarnate. The whispers, the prayers, the pleading; I know how it feels to be so high on a pedestal that sometimes I feel as if I am standing on a ledge in the sky.

But I know the price of power. I know that if I take one wrong step, I will fall. Fall and fall and fall, and there will be no one able – or willing – to catch me.

My power holds the essence of all things living. I can steal someone's breath in an instant, or breathe it back into them without so much as touching them. I can make someone bounce with energy, but just as fast, I can coax them into sleep with a mere thought. I can twist emotions, shape and mold until they only feel what I want them to feel. Until they are a puppet only I can control. I can give them the things that make them human and just as quickly take them away.

These are the things that make me an angel. These are the things that make me a god. These are the things that make me a monster.

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Another day of court; of justice, as the nobles like to say. Perhaps they are clouding reality with the fog of illusion – that they are good, delivering justice, and they aren't condemning people to death. I watch this every single day. Watch this ridiculous power play as people battle not with swords, but with words, shattering minds instead of bone. Worst of all, I deliver this so-called justice.

Just as I do every day, I watch, cool and collected, as another pleading, sobbing person is dragged to the floor in front of me. I almost flinch as I realise this person is a young woman, most likely my age, her beautiful face marred with scars. My eyes travel up the brutal slashes on her arms, her expression twisted with terror.

“Please,” she begs, falling to her knees, voice cracking, “I am innocent.”

I say nothing, do nothing, even as my heart wrenches, even as I feel nausea climbing up my throat at the sheer horror of what I am to do. Even with all my power, I do not decide who is guilty and who is innocent. I simply punish. Sometimes, I feel as though I deserve to be punished instead.

“My lady,” a man of the court says to me, completely ignoring the weeping woman in front of him, “She has stolen many possessions from a noble lord. The court has decided she is guilty.”

I nod almost imperceptibly, trying not to let my hands shake as I finally look into the eyes of the woman. Her eyes are the deepest, clearest blue, reflections of the sky and the sea and they swim with tears, silently begging me for mercy. I feel my heart crack once more.

“Due to her thievery, the court has decided she will be tortured in front of her family until she admits her guilt and apologises one hundred times. And after that, she will be killed.”

This time, I do flinch, unable to hold in my rising disgust at the court. The woman looks up at me, dark locks of her brushing her tear-stained cheeks, the worst kind of fear etched on her face. I want to kneel down and beg for her forgiveness, plead that she not hate me for the destiny I am forced to fulfil.

Guards march in, every step of their polished shoes clicking against the marble floor as they drag three people in and to their knees in front of me. A woman, perhaps twenty years older than me, shakes with despair, tears streaming down her face as she watches her daughter begging for her life. A man, most likely her father, shudders at each word from her lips, tears welling in his eyes, looking as if he wants to wrap her in his arms and take her home. Worst of all, a young girl, perhaps six years old, stares at her sister, confused, sky blue eyes shimmering with innocent worry.

“Please, not my family- Don’t make them see,” the woman pleads, gaze travelling over her family with love, goodbyes, as if she might never see them again.

I feel tears of my own burning in my eyes, at the family I am meant to rip apart. Suddenly, a small voice calls out to me – the young sister.

“Please don’t hurt her. You can hurt me; sometimes I’m naughty, but she is never naughty.”

Her offer of sacrifice breaks me. I look into her azure eyes, twinkling with hope. She hopes to save her sister. And then suddenly, I am plunged into memories.

My sister. My sweet sister. My kind sister. With green eyes like emeralds, with hands that gripped mine as if she would be there for me forever. But she wasn’t.

Gone. Gone. Gone. The words thrum through me with terrible finality, each a terrible reminder of the sister I lost. The sister I could not save.

But then the little girl’s voice shatters my descent into tears and heartbreak.

“You look like you might cry. Do you want a hug?” She doesn’t wait for my response, walking up to me innocently as if I am not a monster to be afraid of.

Guards rush to restrain her, the court rumbling with unrest, but I hold up a hand. Her small arms wrap around me, head buried in my neck as she squeezes, holding me together in more

ways than one. Her hug feels so similar to my own sister's – undemanding, kind, as if she was prepared to hold me forever.

Softly, unbelieving of my own actions, I wrap my arms around her too, hugging a small child in front of my own court. Then, I gently put her down in front of me, holding both of her hands in my own.

“I had a sister too,” I murmur to her, only her.

Her eyes look at me without judgement, just kindness.

“What happened to her?” she whispers back, as if understanding this conversation was for us, not for the court.

“She's gone,” I feel my voice crack, “She is gone because I could not save her.”

“I'm sorry.”

“It's okay. It's not your fault.” Tears fill my eyes, “But if I couldn't save her, I can still save your sister.”

“Thank you.” She smiles, her grin lighting up her face with gentle sweetness.

“Don't thank me. I am a monster.”

“No, you're not. Don't think like that, okay? Promise me.” Her words unravel me – I cannot make promises, not after I promised my own sister she would be fine, only to hold her, weeping, weeks after. But her gaze is unflinching.

“I-I promise. And I promise you'll be okay.” She hugs me one more time, and as I hold her hand, I remind myself that what I am about to do is a sacrifice I will make for her.

I watch her walk back down to her family, watch them stare at me, watch the court murmur with confusion. But I will do this. I look into the woman's eyes.

“I made a promise to your sister, okay? Protect her,” I whisper into her mind. Her eyes widen with confusion, then understanding, then fill with grateful tears. She opens her mouth to thank me, but I shake my head.

“I could not save my own sister, but I can save you,” I murmur into her mind again, and then nearly break when she mouths, *Thank you. You are not a monster like some say. You are a saviour in disguise.*

Suddenly, I thrust my hands out, releasing a kind of power so deep and commanding it stops the world. Time stops, caught between magic, motionless, a frozen heartbeat. I am grasping seconds, minutes, hours, months, years in my palm, slipping in between time itself. Everything is frozen, but me and the woman's family.

"Go," I command, body shaking with the power radiating from my being.

They do not speak, running as I demanded, but I see grateful tears swimming in their eyes as they flee. To their future, together. Suddenly, the little girl turns around to face me.

"I hope one day everyone realises that you're not a monster. But promise me that you'll prove it?"

"I promise," I whisper.

She nods, smiles, then flees with her family. I walk out too after a minute. I can't stay here anymore, not after letting what the court thinks is a guilty criminal go. But it was worth it, because I had vowed the same thing to that girl as I did to my sister all those years ago. And with each step away, I start to fulfil that promise. I am not a monster. Not anymore.