

Chapter 1

The tower sat across a sea of grey rocky wasteland, polished and worn by fierce storms. Its smooth stone walls reached high into the sky. There were no fractures, no openings; no known way in or out. It was a place of nightmares, where only the worst criminals resided. There was magic carved into every stone, placed by long-dead hands, meant to keep prisoners in.

Inside the hollow, desolate stone, words echoed; soft and gentle, like a lonely cry. The words drifted across stone in clipped and whispered tones, “Come call to Alrekr his blood is in your own.”

Faesia Skyldr laid on the floor of the prison she called home, with only the cold hard stone and her demons for company.

“The power that has blessed you can’t be all that you know. With sacrifice, he will rise and protect you right before your eyes.” Her voice hitched on the word protect, and the song faded.

She stared with lethargy-glazed eyes at a bucket in the corner. Her cracked lips, that once knew soft warmth, mouth down the seconds; fyia, thesh, ungse, and like every day in the past four hundred years, she watched as water welled in the bucket containing all the nutrients necessary to sustain her pathetic life.

If the Dreheli guards, who had put her here all those years ago, wondered how she was the only one still alive after all this time, they did not say. Some days she did not believe it herself, the immortality that coursed through her veins. A gift — a curse — stolen from Ormfar, the serpent god of the world.

Peeling her eyes from the bucket, uninterested despite the burning desire for nourishment swelling in her belly, her eyes instead traveled the length of the room, over the dirty hay she was

Commented [CS1]: Why do people think people live there if there’s no way in or out?

Commented [CS2]: Oh, prisoners. But...how do the prisoners get put in?

Commented [CS3]: PRESCRIPTIVE ALERT: something like this could be a cool first line.

Commented [CS4]: Is...SHE talking? I’m still not sure even with the dialogue tag after this line.

Commented [CS5]: ?

Commented [CS6]: Is it...flavored water? Or is water not supposed to be in it?

Commented [CS7]: I thought there were other prisoners here

Commented [CS8]: Lots of world building with no context or way to really process it. I’d love to know the details that are immediately relevant to understanding THIS scene.

expected to sleep in, to the ancient stone scarred with deep scratch-marks filled with blood — her blood. The tips of her fingers seemed to throb with the long-ago pain of making those rifts. What a waste of time it had ended up being, like everything else in this cell-blotted world of hers. There was simply no way to escape, no amount of blood on walls that could free her. She had stopped trying a long time ago.

Three sides of her cell were those cursed stone walls with their magic draining veins. Some days — at least in the beginning — she swore she could feel its leeching touch pulling the magic from her. She hated that the walls took all her power except her immortality, the one thing she often wished desperately they could take.

The fourth wall of her cell wasn't a wall at all, but a gaping hole. How many times had she stood at that edge, eyes searching the black endless drop? It was an illusion, it had to be. The bottom had to exist. She thought she saw someone jump once. Had she heard the thud and crack of bones when they landed? She couldn't recall. It had been a long time — two hundred years at least — since the last person died and even longer since she gave up waiting for the Dreheli guards to bring new prisoners.

Now she simply stared intently at the ceiling, as if willing her vision to see beyond the smooth aged stone, to the world beyond. She could feel the same questions bubbling in her mind like the geyser wells of Ifenhald.

Does the world still exist, would she recognize it?

Do the seasons still change?

“Are there still stars?” Stars that form the shape of Gods in the sky?

Will she ever smell fresh air again?

“Rain?”

Commented [CS9]: Seems like she'd be used to it by now

Commented [CS10]: ? like...it's smeared with cells? Her blood?

Commented [CS11]: Sad. Ironic.

Will she ever hear a voice, feel the warmth of flesh?

Her spoken words weaved and paralleled her thoughts until they became one thing, where voice and inner thought met.

Her fingers resting on her bare abdomen stiffened their slow, barely perceptible movements tracing the silvered scars from another lifetime, at the audacity of her traitorous thoughts. There were some things she no longer deserved to miss, to crave. His face came unbidden to her mind.

“Vikr?”

Her heart squeezed with the rush of longing but his image began to flicker and die in her mind like a star fading from the night sky. She felt a trickle of tears roll down her dirt-covered face. Her heart stuttered, body stiffening with anger.

“I can’t remember,” the words were more of a movement of lips than spoken words.

Click-Clishhh...

Faesia bolted upright, head spinning with the movement.

“A prisoner?”

Or have they come to kill me, free me? She couldn’t dare hope for an end to this.

Her limbs screamed in protest as she scrambled to her feet. She rushed for the edge of her cell, eyes scouring the darkness as she swayed perilously over the edge. The gas they once used when bringing in prisoners laced the air, but her heart beat too erratically to calm her breathing. She had a plan once. She could feel the idea scratching at her mind but she was too shocked, too desperate, too everything to try to remember what it had been.

Desperately she strained through the blurred edges of her vision. That was when she heard it, a sound she thought she would never hear again echo through the stone walls: a voice.

Commented [CS12]: I’m not sure why some of these are in quotes and some are not. It doesn’t seem to serve a purpose to talk out loud.

Commented [CS13]: ? I’m not sure what this is connected to

Commented [CS14]: Who is talking?

Her knees buckled and her vision darkened around the edges as if becoming one with the deep well of black that fell forever before her. It wasn't her shock that pulled her down but the poison-filled air, forcing her to sleep, sleep, sleep.

She fell backward, head slamming into hard stone.

* * * *

Faesia's eyes opened, a soft, slow blink bringing the grey, bleak prison back into focus. In the dark corners of her mind, she could feel the dream slipping away, hear the soft giggle of a brown-haired girl running through a field, a woven basket clutched in her small hands filled with wildflowers.

Sitting up, Faesia let the memory slip through her mind. Once she would have scrambled to remember every detail, but years of dreaming in memories and nightmares left her depleted. She ignored the single tear tracking down her sharp cheekbone, a remnant of her dream.

As she stood up, Faesia rolled and stretched her body, teeth gritting through the intense pain. Still, it was nothing compared to the pain she had known before.

"Is anyone here?"

Faesia stiffened at the sound of...of a person.

Panic snaked through her, seizing her bones. How could it be, after so long?

Tense and shaken she stumbled jerkily, like a wounded animal, back to the edge of her prison. She had waited so long to hear a voice, to see a person, that now she did not know what to do. So

she simply clutched the edge of the wall, feeling the hard stone press into her body. Every time her abdomen touched the stone she remembered to breathe, breathe, breathe.

There. Sitting three rooms down, body leaning out over the distant fall, eyes searching, was a man.

“Hello. Anyone?” His voice echoed through the tower, filling the air. Faesia relished the sound. He had an accent, breathy with soft elongated words, but she could understand him well enough after having listened to the slow change in prisoner accents when she first arrived, until... until they stopped coming.

She stayed still, not saying a word, despite her body screaming at her to call out to him, to reach him. She stilled her itching feet, pressing her heels into the hard, cool ground.

Her lips parted, cracking gently. As if that simple motion was a scream from her throat, the man looked up, his gaze falling on Faesia, dark eyes taking her in. She wanted to stumble back at the intensity of that stare, the fierce emotion pulsing behind his eyes.

It was hard to force herself to form meaning with sentences. She opened her mouth and croaked out a single word.

“Inot.” *Hello.*

A sigh of relief seemed to pass through his body as he slumped against the hard stone, a sly smile crossing his lips as if he were meeting an old friend.

Could he survive years of solitude as she had? There was a look of fresh freedom about him that made her think he could not, at least not as she had.

She equally hated him for it and yet longed to touch him, to know he was really there.

Have I survived?

Perhaps I have died.

Commented [CS15]: This is taking a very long time.

“Inot.”

Commented [CS16]: Who is speaking?

Faesia’s pierced lips lifted in a slight grin. Hearing the words of her people, not her echo but from a voice, a person, made her quake. Tears pricked her eyes but she swallowed, forcing herself to hear the deep and smooth flourish he gave the greeting. And though she was grateful, she couldn’t help but wonder, why was he here?

Commented [CS17]: Both her lips are pierced? Is this a relevant detail?

Her eyes narrowed as she took him in, squinting in the dim, filtered light that drifted through the smallest of holes lining the roof of the tower. A faint smell of smoke touched the air.

The other prisoner wore a white tunic, already dirtied from his cell, that ended at his elbows exposing amber-tan muscled arms folded across his chest. His posture was one of ease and Faesia could picture him in a tavern, the smile he wore now brightening the raucous room. Did people still frequent taverns? She supposed she could ask him, but she didn’t; instead, she relished in the fact that at least people still existed. She was not alone after all.

Commented [CS18]: She remembers taverns?

“Iqu sume—” His smile faltered as the words failed him.

“Yes, I can speak the common tongue.”

Relief passed over his face coupled with an intense curiosity. Her own accent was thick with the heavy cadence known to those from Heilm. A weighted pain pulsed in her gut with the thought of home.

Commented [CS19]: This is a lot of out-of-context detail. Sounds like you have a very, very developed world, but this detail is one I won’t remember because it’s not given in a way that makes me think it’s important. It’s just one of the many.

“Why are you here?” Her voice cracked, the sentence surprising her. Had she meant to speak aloud the thought that kept resounding through her mind?

The Flárgud had stopped using the prison; it had been a lifetime ago she had seen another person. He’s dead, she had thought, had dared to hope. But that was wrong; he couldn’t be killed. At least not easily. Did anyone else know? But if the False God was still alive then what had this man done to warrant the tower’s use once more?

Commented [CS20]: We know 😊

Commented [CS21]: I am so confused

His face hardened ever so slightly at her words, the edges of his almond-shaped eyes squinting. But then his smile returned.

“To find you, Faesia.”

She stiffened at his words, her guard immediately pulled back in and over her skin like armor. She could feel her lip curling in anger. Without a word, she began to turn from him.

That had not been what she asked, but wasn't it what she had hoped? But it was not him that she had been waiting for. Did it matter now? But if years and years have passed then how...?

Her thoughts spiraled down, down, down.

The scramble of rock skidding beneath feet before rolling down the side of the cell into the bleak darkness caught her attention. “Wait. I, we need your help.” It was his words that made her turn.

“The last time I helped it did not go well.” She could hear the sadness in her own voice, the strain of years of trying to forget those memories. Of not letting herself forget.

“What happened?”

Now she fully turned to face him. An anger she did not realize she felt slowly burned in her voice. “You know my name, surely you know my story.”

How did he know her? For that to be true, someone would have had to record what happened in Heilm. Perhaps... perhaps it had all been an illusion, what had felt like hundreds of years was simply a moment, a passing glance.

Vikr. Her mind whispered the name with such longing that goosebumps unfurled down her arms. But, no that can't be. He died. They all died. She had watched them burn. And those others, those prisoners that had shared this life with her, she had watched them die too.

Commented [CS22]: Where...is he? Below her? Above her? Across the hole from her?

Commented [CS23]: Is there a reason for her to hope someone would come for her? Is she guilty of whatever put her in the prison? Why does she think she's there, and is escape even an option she sees as feasible? Something she even wants anymore?

He was shaking his head before her words ever finished leaving her mouth. “I only know of you. Please, what do you have to lose?” His hands outstretched before him, his voice echoing through the desolate stone. She had the impression he was stalling for something.

Her eyes glanced across the round stone structure, drifting from the empty cells to the dark abyss, to the cell not filled with a ghost but flesh and bone. A sigh escaped her lips, a hiss of dusty air. What would telling him do? It could not change what had happened. And yet a part of her longed to speak of it; to tell someone how she had come to lose everything.

So she sat down, closing her eyes. She let the hazy sheen of memory wash over her. When she could smell the bloody, rot-filled air and hear the sickening crunch of bone beneath her feet, she began to talk. Her voice became distant to her ears as she desperately tried to recall the day that she had died.

Commented [CS24]: What...is he asking her to do? There's no anchor to this plea because he's not pleading for anything yet.

Things we like:

- I love the setting of this prison. It does seem pretty cool. I'm intrigued to know why it's there and why it fell out of favor/use
- I really like the inciting incident--a new prisoner showing up in the prison of all prisons tells me that this characters are going to be a brittle/broken bunch. Agreed, this is a cool development.
- “To find you Faesia”--this line turned my expectations on their heads.
- So many fun atmospheric details. The first paragraph starts it off and the atmosphere never really loses its power.
- Fun tension of “She hated that the walls took all her power except her immortality, the one thing she often wished desperately they could take.” loved that!

Things that might need a second look:

- Though the words Faesia is saying at the beginning are very cool, because I had no context for her or the world, I ended up just being very confused by them. Agreed--I feel like there are lots of really cool world building drops that make me think this is a huge, well developed and thought out world, but because they're given without context or relevance to what is actually happening in the scene, they're more confusing than anything else. The details about the hole, the other prisoners either dead or having jumped, the gas they use when they bring in someone new--I was 100% on board and intrigued by all that because it was right there in front of us. The other stuff was harder to follow. Agreed. In the beginning of a book, your readers are inevitably going to have a

Commented [CS25]: This is my own taste, perhaps (and I'd say my writing is a little on the flowery side) but this writing and detail is a little bit dense. It's hard to carve through the detail to what is actually happening, where people are, what they are doing, and what the point of it is. My recommendation is to write out a scene list. What is supposed to happen in this scene that is going to move the story forward? Then keep it focused to that thing. There are so many words, so many moments of empty naval gazing, when I'd rather just know what is happening both physically right now and what happened in the past. A mystery doesn't propel a reader forward unless the mystery has context and it adds tension to something we already a firmly grounded in. The mystery of what happened to this girl...I mean, I'd rather just start the story and watch it happen.

There are stories that do what you're trying to do here, sharing the end before the beginning—The Name of the Wind and Strange the Dreamer to name two, but it's not the mystery of what happened before that drives the interest in those scenes.

ton of questions--but you want to make sure that the questions they're asking are the right ones, which often means limiting the new information you present. The prayer/song lines were probably my biggest sources of confusion.

- The first few pages dragged a little for me because Faesia is only lying down and talking to herself, but I really like the ambiance they create. My prescriptive advice is to condense the first few pages together as much as possible and get to the inciting incident faster. Agreed on the critique--There are so many words, so many descriptions, so many departures into naval gazing that I'm not actually sure where the characters are in relation to one another. I like flowery writing, but detail and creative turns of phrase need to say something, to draw attention to something, otherwise it's just dense writing.
- Related, and maybe more in keeping with what Aliah was saying--nothing really happens. There's no movement in this first chapter, so it feels very slow.
- So I've seen books succeed in doing what I feel like is being done in this book--we've got the ending before the beginning, a train wreck readers can't look away from because they want to see how something ended this way--Strange the Dreamer is one. The Name of the Wind is another. However, in the opening scenes for both of those books, the inherent tension is *not* "how did this character get here"? There's other tension that makes us want to get *back* to the scene. A mystery that's ungrounded in real tension and characters...I mean, I'd rather just read the beginning of the story. I think the question in Strange the Dreamer's opening is "how did this character get here" because it's a blue-skinned girl who fell from the sky and died and wow this city is weird, etc. To me the main difference is its prologue/opening is two pages, not 10.
- I liked the "to find you Faesia" line--this chapter, if you're going for a cliff-hangery sort of ending could very easily stop on "there's a new prisoner here!" or "to find you Faesia!" but immediately after, she says she was hoping that's why he was there, which made me really confused. Before he said it, I didn't get the vibe that Faesia thought anyone was coming for her, and she's not...surprised? Similarly, in that same paragraph, she says "That had not been what she asked," but since "To find you, Faesia" is an answer to "Why are you here?", it seemed to me like it *had* been what she asked.
- When Faesia "stiffened at the sound of . . . of a person," I was confused by the shock there because my understanding was that a few paragraphs earlier she'd already decided it was a person. So that line didn't quite land for me.