

R.J. LARSON



PROPHET

“Wow! ...powerful.”

—DONITA K. PAUL, author of *Dragons of the Valley*

↳ BOOKS OF THE INFINITE #1 ↳

PROPHET

R.J. LARSON


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To Jerry
Your steadfast faith and encouragement
never cease to amaze me.

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Character List

Ela Roeh \El-ah **Roe**-eh\ Prophet of Parne

Kalme Roeh \Call-may **Roe**-eh\ Ela's mother

Dan Roeh \Dan **Roe**-eh\ Ela's father

Tzana Roeh \Tsaw-nah **Roe**-eh\ Ela's sister

Kien Lantec (Lan Tek) \Kee-en **Lan**-tek\ Ambassador from the Tracelands

Tek An \Tek **An**\ King of Istgard

Tek Lara \Tek **Lar**-ah\ A cousin to the king of Istgard

Tsir Aun \Sir **Awn**\ Istgardian commander

Ket Behl \Ket **Bell**\ Istgardian judge

Piln \Pilln\ Istgardian clerk

Ter \Ter, as in *Grrr!*\ Warden

Syb \Sib\ Warden's wife

Tek Sia \Tek **See**-ah\ King Tek An's sister

Jon Thel \Jon Thell\ A Traceland commander

Beka Thel \Bek-ah Thell\ Jon Thel's wife, Kien's sister

Rade Lantec \Raid **Lan**-tek\ Kien's father

Ara Lantec \Are-ah **Lan**-tek\ Rade Lantec's wife, Kien's mother



Tarnished snow sifted through the air, clinging to Ela Roeh's skin the instant she stepped outside. Warm snow.

Impossible.

She rubbed at the flakes on her bare forearm and watched them smear across her brown flesh like menacing shadows. Ashes. What was burning?

Unnerved, Ela scanned the plain mud-plastered stone houses honeycombed around the wide public square. Houses built one atop another within a vast, irregular, protective curtain wall, sheltering the city of Parne. Mud and stone wouldn't burn, but the timbered interiors could. She'd seen it happen before, the thick dark smoke suffocating its helpless victims.

No, none of the houses were smoldering. Nor was Parne's crown, the temple. Good. A blessing.

A gust of wind brushed her face with more ashes. Ela tasted the harsh metallic bitterness and frowned. If none of Parne's homes were burning, then the ashes were puzzling indeed, because they must have come from a great distance. Parne, Ela remained convinced, was the most isolated city-state in existence. "Infinite . . ."

She stopped. Why pray about ashes without first learning their source? But perhaps she shouldn't wait, especially when those ashes were interfering with little things, like her ability to see and breathe. Really, she needed to cover herself. The ashes were clinging to her like living creatures, scuttling bugs determined to cause misery. Ela shuddered, imagining insects scurrying over her skin. Why hadn't she grabbed her mantle before deciding to take a walk?

Ela stepped back inside her family's home, a stark uneven box of a residence, exactly like every other home in Parne. Useful. Basic. Never changing from one generation to the next. Just like Parne's citizens. She snatched her thin brown mantle and called to her mother, "I'm going up to the wall! It's snowing ashes."

"What?" One dark eyebrow raised in disbelief, Kalme looked up from her work space by the low-domed plastered oven, but she continued to fan the oven's coals to a sullen red glow.

"It's snowing ashes," Ela repeated. "I'm going up to the wall to look for the fire."

"A house is on fire?" Kalme's eyes widened with the question, and she lowered her fan.

"No. The fire isn't here in Parne. But it must be huge if ashes are falling from so far away."

Kalme exhaled and resumed fanning. "Find your father and Tzana," she ordered. "Don't visit with Amar and his friends."

Don't create a scandal, Ela. She could almost hear the unspoken words.

"I won't," she promised her mother. Actually, Amar hadn't even been in her thoughts until Kalme mentioned his name. Why think of Amar at all? Ela was only *supposed* to marry him. Eventually.

Sarcasm helped nothing, Ela reminded herself. At least she hadn't snapped back at Kalme disrespectfully. Surely this was a sign of her growing maturity. Perhaps.

"Oh!" Kalme called out a parting order. "Bring more vinewood for the oven when you return. I'm running low."

"Yes, Mother." Ela took a deep breath, pulled the corner of her mantle across her nose and mouth, and then stepped out into the ash-laden public square. By now the dark flakes were

descending thick and fast. Eyes stinging, Ela squinted and padded toward the stone steps built into the city's converged walls, leading up to Parne's rooftops, which rimmed the city's protective outer wall. There would be no running up these steps today. The ashes powdered the stones and her bare feet, denying her steady footing on the steps' surfaces.

"Ela!" a husky voice hailed her, then coughed. Amar.

Though tall, lanky, and dark-curved, like every other young man in Parne, Amar still managed to make her insides flutter. Just a little. Shielding his face with the corner of his cloak, Amar charged up the steps, slipped, and hammered a knee on the stones. Ela winced, but Amar shrugged off the injury, ignoring the shreds of dangling flesh and the blood oozing from a blackened scrape just below his kneecap. "Are you going up to the wall?"

"I'm not supposed to speak to you," she told him through the edge of her mantle.

"Good. I'm not supposed to acknowledge that you even breathe." His brown eyes crinkled with a cloak-concealed grin, and he took the last few steps up to meet her. Face to face now, he murmured through the fabric, "But I'm ignoring the rules today. I want to become acquainted with my wife."

Amar was the sort who needed a bit of a challenge. And right now, Ela was impatient enough to offer him one. "Wife? We're not even betrothed. So you mustn't presume my time is yours."

"That'll change in two weeks. Until then . . ." He slid his free hand inside Ela's mantle. His fingertips glided up her bare arm, making her shiver.

Ela shook him off and hurried up the steps to the rooftops. Stone pavings traced the sturdiest and least obtrusive public paths across Parne's terraced roofs. Mindful of her duty to evade Amar, Ela chose the most direct path to the city's broad wall walk. The ashfall was more scattered here, but new flakes clung to Ela, seeming to seek her deliberately.

Of course, she was entirely too fanciful. Why would ash flakes seek her deliberately? If Father could hear her thoughts, he would point out that ashes were without reason and unable to recognize her, or anyone else.

But where was Father? And Tzana? Ela stepped onto the wall walk, scanning its uneven contours and landings, hoping to see her father. There. Beside the northern lookout's shelter—a slender stone cupola wide enough for only one man, the lookout, who was sensibly sheltered inside.

"Father!" Ela's voice was so muffled beneath the ash-laden folds of her mantle that she doubted he would hear. But Dan Roeh was nothing if not acute. He turned immediately, his thin tanned face weathered, his expression grim. Nestled in the crook of his arm, Ela's fragile little sister, Tzana, peered at Ela over the edge of their father's patriarchal cloak.

Ashes crowned Tzana's wisp-thin black curls like a bleak benediction, muting their normal shimmer and wringing Ela's heart. Tzana looked like a tiny, dark, wrinkle-faced lamb, hushed with fear. What had the men been saying to frighten her? Squinting, Ela faced north and saw the source of the ashes. Smoke towered black above the crests of the wild borderlands that separated Parne from its neighboring countries. Surely an entire city had to be ablaze to create such massive billow above the clouds.

"Infinite," she murmured, "what is happening?"

Ela's question was rhetorical, no answer expected. But a whisper permeated her thoughts.

Close your eyes.

"What?" She gasped through her mantle, captivated, recognizing the Infinite's voice—hearing it as if He'd leaned over her shoulder and whispered into her ear.

Close your eyes and you will see.

~~She obeyed.~~

A vision slammed into Ela's mind. She reeled through the image against her will, comprehending the scene as if she stood in the midst of it. Countless homes ablaze, crackling with heat. Children wailing. Women kneeling on bloodied soil, screaming as their husbands fought for their lives, hopelessly outmatched by soldiers clad in thick square-plated armor. Soldiers who wielded giant swords. Ela inhaled, almost gagging at the stench of burning flesh as soldiers set fire to screaming dying men.

Helpless as any of the wailing women, Ela watched one of the bleeding men collapse. She felt his anguish for his family, his terror as the malevolent grinning soldier raised his killing sword one last time.

This is butchery, dishonorable and unjustified. . . . As the Infinite's voice whispered through the vision, Ela gripped her head and cried out in agony. The combined force of the words, the odors, the image, and its torrents of emotion were overwhelming her senses. "Stop!"

"Ela!"

Someone was shaking her. She returned to herself, shocked to realize she was sprawled on the ash-strewn walkway. Still alive. But her head hurt so badly she wanted to retch. Dry-mouthed, she shut her eyes again and whispered, "Infinite, what was that? No, please! Don't answer!" She recoiled at her stupidity and trembled, scared the answer's force would destroy her.

No answer. Tranquil darkness enveloped her instead—a blessed relief. Ela went limp on the stones.



Someone shook Ela again. She finally opened her eyes and looked up into her father's face. Dar Roeh was staring at her, openmouthed, his expression a mix of fear and outrage. "What is wrong with you?" he demanded. "Get up!"

"Yes, sir." He was yelling at her because she had collapsed? Could she stand? Ela hardly knew. And by the look on her father's face, she could only presume she'd gone mad. Or . . . at least she must seem mad. But she couldn't be mad because the vision, the voice, and the emotions had been horribly real.

So agonizing that she didn't want to experience them again. Please, no.

Her father hesitated, then blurted the question Ela wished he'd asked first. "Are you well?"

"Yes." Now that the voice, the storm of emotions, and the vision had ceased, yes. She was only dazed. And alarmingly queasy. "Sorry. I don't quite know what happened." It was the truth. And she was afraid to petition the Infinite for details. Grit scraped between her teeth as she spoke. She longed to spit. She needed a drink of water.

"Ela? Are you listening to me? Take your sister home."

Ela pushed herself to her knees, eye to eye with Tzana, who now stood on the walkway, her small face puckered with old-woman concern.

"Want me to help you up?" Tzana squeaked, offering a tiny arthritic hand.

"Thank you," Ela mumbled, giving her little sister two fingers to hold, then dragging herself to her feet on her own wavering strength. She dared to look at her father again. He turned away. Amar, however, was staring at her oddly. Ela gave him an embarrassed half smile, then headed for the roof paths with Tzana skittering ahead of her, showing unusual liveliness. "Tzana, slow down"

You'll slip in the ashes and break a bone."

"I won't," Tzana called back over her shoulder, not arguing but stating something she clearly regarded to be a fact.

Still dazed, Ela forced down her nausea and tried to gather her fragmented thoughts. Those poor families in her vision. She wished she could have saved those dying men. She longed to hold the children. To console their mothers. Tears slid down Ela's face, dripping black with ashes as she grieved. What had happened to those women and children?

They are now prisoners, the Infinite informed her. Those who have survived are slaves.

Dreading the impact of another vision, Ela braced herself and waited. But only the voice permeated her thoughts this time. And the voice was tolerable. More than tolerable. The Infinite's voice was compelling beyond any she'd ever heard. As it should be. Could she expect anything less from the Creator? No. And yet. And yet . . .

Why should she expect anything from Him at all?

She yanked the edge of her mantle over her nose and mouth again, then whispered, "Infinite? I'm no one special. Why are you telling me this?"

Because I know you will listen. Now follow your sister.

Tzana? Ela looked around, suddenly realizing she had stopped halfway down the stone steps. How had that happened? She didn't even remember leaving the terraces. "Tzana!"

The ashes were thinning now, but Ela still had to squint to see, her eyes felt so raw. Tzana was already at the base of the steps, poised in the open public square like a tiny dark-feathered bird. A listening bird. "Tzana!"

Tzana fluttered a hand at her. But instead of waiting for Ela, she crossed a corner of the public square and stopped before an ancient stone house. A tomb house.

What did Tzana think she was doing?

Deliberately, Tzana placed both hands on the tomb house's door and leaned forward, pushing open.

"No! Tzana, stop!" Ela hurried down the remaining steps as quickly as the ashes and her own wobbly legs allowed. Tzana knew better than to violate the sanctity of a tomb house, didn't she? Tomb houses were dead. Plastered memorials honoring the names of the families who had once inhabited them. But sacrilege wasn't the worst part of Tzana's offense.

This wasn't an ordinary tomb house.

By now, other citizens of Parne were stopping to stare in obvious shock as Tzana scooted through the door, which should not have opened so easily. The traditional plastered seals alone should have been too hard for Tzana to force apart. "Tzana!"

Ela reached the doorway and paused, summoning her courage. This was the tomb of Parne's last prophet, Eshtmoh. Inspiration for countless terrors whispered by the children of Parne for more than seventy years. Eshtmoh the prophet had defeated monsters with mere words. Had foretold catastrophic droughts. Predicted assassinations, diseases, disasters of every kind. An Istgardian king had died of terror at the sight of him, and it had taken an entire army to finally bring Eshtmoh down to an early grave.

All true prophets died young. This was fact. Parne's elders could recite the name of each ancient prophet and the gruesome details of his death. At the end of a traditional recitation, the elder would shake his head, looking wise, saying, "A silver-haired prophet has failed."

"You'd best get that imp outta there!" someone scolded.

Matron Prill, a neighbor whose home rested above the Roehs' to the east, was shaking her ash-

dusted topknotted head, her fists on her hips. “Wait until I tell your parents.”

“I’ll tell them first.” Ela stepped into the broken doorway. How dare Matron Prill call Tzana an imp! Didn’t she have a speck of compassion for Tzana’s incurable aging condition? Why couldn’t she, and everyone else in Parne, realize that Tzana was a blessing, not a sign that the Roehs were cursed? Poor Tzana—a tiny, wispy-haired old woman-girl before age ten.

An old woman-girl who was breaking down doors.

Ela stared at the door’s timbers, wondering how her little sister had managed to demolish them. The door’s wood was obviously still sound, yet Tzana was so fragile she often had to be carried through the city. “Infinite . . . ?” No. Please don’t answer.

But how, as she lived and breathed, had Tzana managed such a feat?

Ela forced herself to call into the shadows. Her voice came out in a mere squeak. “Tzana?”

“Here!” Tzana sounded breathless. Thrilled.

Moving forward, her eyes adjusting to the gloom, Ela saw her little sister standing beside a massive clay rectangle plastered to the floor. Was that the prophet’s sarcophagus? Ela stepped closer. Vinewood had grown up through the stone floor, twining thick over the tomb, as if protecting Eshtmoh’s resting place. One particular branch of the vinewood was paler than the others. A bit straighter. It glowed oddly in the darkness, and Tzana clasped it in her small hands. Lifting it.

“Tzana, what are you doing? We have to leave *now*. Put that down!”

“But it’s not mine,” Tzana protested, her innocent voice filling the stark tomb house. She faced the doorway’s slanting light and smiled at Ela. “It’s for you.”

The Infinite’s voice whispered, *Will you accept?*

Accept?

The prophet’s branch.

The Infinite was asking her . . .

Will you be My prophet?

Trembling, Ela quoted the ancient saying, unable to stop herself. “‘A silver-haired prophet has failed.’ Is it true?”

Yes.

“If I accept will I die silver-haired?”

No.

Ela swallowed. Her hair would remain black. She would die young.

Will you accept?

Ela knelt and stared at the gleaming vinewood branch in Tzana's tiny gnarled hands, knowing she could refuse it. With her entire being, she felt . . . knew . . . the Infinite offered her a genuine choice. His patience settled her, even as she hesitated.

Tzana too waited patiently, holding Ela's death sentence. Still smiling.

"Tzana, what have you done?" Even as she spoke, Ela regretted the words. This was not Tzana's doing at all. The Infinite knew, of course, that fear for Tzana's safety was the only lure powerful enough to bring Ela to this place. To this decision.

Tzana's smile faded and her dark eyes glistened, brimming with unshed tears. "I thought this would make you happy," she pleaded. "It's a gift from the Infinite."

A gift. Was it? Ela hunched over and hid her face in her ash-smearred hands, resisting the impulse to bang her forehead on the aged stone floor. And yet . . . and yet . . . if she refused, would she even hear His voice again?

"Infinite?" Ela sent up the plea and listened hard. Craving an answer.

Silence.

This was so unfair! Would He expect her to live the remainder of her life, enduring such unbearable silence? Already, her soul thirsted for His voice. "Infinite," Ela babbled into her cupped hands, "here I am—and I don't know why! Who has ever heard of a girl becoming a prophet? I'm clumsy and insignificant. No one will listen to me. And I dropped like a stone when You shared a vision with me. I'm not going to be of any use to You at all!"

You will. If you accept.

She drank in the words and sat up, thinking hard. She had two choices. Live to be old, silver-haired, and full of dry regrets, or accept this "gift" with all its uncertainties. Listening to the Infinite.

Tzana shifted slightly, clutching the prophet's branch a bit closer to her frail body. Ela pondered. Would this decision fall to someone else if she refused? And what would happen to those widows and orphans who suffered in the vision? Slaves, the Infinite had said.

Could she help them?

How could she not?

Despite her apprehension, Ela held out her hands, smiling at her little sister. "Thank you. I'm sorry I scolded you."

"I know." Tzana rested the branch on Ela's palms.

The branch was so light. And surprisingly warm. "Thank You, Infinite. I accept." But she was quivering inside. She leaned against Tzana and hugged her gently. "Help me up."

Beaming, Tzana tugged Ela's arm upward. Ela stood and paused to study the gap in the vinewood on the prophet's sarcophagus. Had Eshtmoh carried a forerunner of this same branch? What had he suffered during his time as a prophet? Were the stories about him exaggerations? And how old was he when he died?

No. She must not consider his death. Or her own. The fear would be too much. Breathe. Be calm. Steadier, she asked aloud, "Infinite? What now?"

Go outside. They are waiting for you.

They. Her neighbors, who couldn't be happy. Ela and Tzana had just violated one of Parne's

most sacred sites. To Ela's knowledge, no one had ever broken into a tomb house before. What was the sentence for such a crime? A beating? Prison? A forced jump from the rooftops? Well, besides to face everyone and endure the consequences with dignity. Chin up, shoulders back, Ela motioned Tzana toward the doorway. Dust motes and ashes mingled in the entry's slanting light, oddly peaceful.

Unlike the neighbors.

Even as Tzana stepped over the threshold into the ash-filtered sunlight beyond, Ela heard Matron Prill's scolding. "Look what you've done! How do you plan to repair that door? And the seals? Ela, you'll have to speak to the priests about those!"

"Take us to the priests," Ela commanded the outraged matron. "Immediately, please."



Standing before the priests' council in their high stone chamber, with Tzana at her side, Ela told everything. Somewhere between her explanation of the Infinite sharing His overwhelming vision of Parne's wall walk and Ela's questioning Him about silver-haired prophets and dying young, the mood in the stone chamber darkened. All the idle whispers and chuckling among the priests hushed. Zade Chacen, Parne's imposing gold-and-blue-clad chief priest, backed away from Ela. Tiny edging steps, as if he feared she might notice.

Or as if he simply feared.

One of the chief priest's assistants spoke coldly. "How do we know you are truly the next prophet? Parne has not seen a prophet for seventy years. Furthermore, none of the prophets were girls!"

Ela almost argued that she was nearly eighteen, and—female or not—she hadn't chosen this role. Before she could speak, her scalp tingled. The branch warmed against her palm, its sheen intensifying almost unbearably, brilliant as lightning within her fingers.

Shielding his eyes with both hands, the doubter retreated. His long hair stood on end, and he gasped. "Forgive me! O Infinite, forgive me!" He dropped to his knees, cowering, as if he feared a blow from his Creator.

Ela forced herself to look away from the terrified man, toward the other priests in the stone chamber. "You—all of you—know this is truly the prophet's branch. I was asked to accept it, but I will gladly give this branch to one of you. Gladly. If you have been invited by the Infinite to accept it, *please* step forward."

No one moved and the chamber remained silent. Until the chief priest cleared his throat. "We will repair the doorway," he soothed, as the other priests nodded, their multiple gazes fixed on the branch glowing in her hands. "You must not worry. We understand the Infinite's own Spirit led you into this situation. When will you leave Parne?"

Leaving her birthplace hadn't occurred to Ela. But even as the chief priest was forming his question, she realized the answer. "I leave at dawn."

The branch glistened, and its sheen softened, becoming metallic. Mesmerized, Ela paused, studying it and listening to Him. It was her turn to clear her throat. Her first duty as a prophet was beyond uncomfortable. Trying not to squirm, she looked the chief priest in his eyes. "Zade Chacen, your Creator sees your heart. He knows what you cannot admit to yourself. You have become faithless and cold, never studying His words, never seeking His will. Never sharing His visions."

The chief priest's face slackened. "I . . . how . . . ?" He composed himself and stared over her head as if she didn't exist.

Miserable, Ela continued, "Your sons refuse to even acknowledge the Infinite, yet you favor them over Him. Therefore, you are removed from your place of power. As a sign to you, your son will die on the same day, during a terrible calamity. Your descendants will never be priests again—though they will beg for the lowest priestly office, asking for nothing but bread to eat."

Most of the white-robed lesser priests were retreating now, avoiding Ela's gaze. She lifted the branch. "Wait." Everyone froze. "Where is Ishvah Nesac?"

One of the youngest priests—until now an onlooker from a shadowed corner—came forward. Reed-thin and slightly awkward, he knelt before Ela and shut his eyes, clearly expecting to be cursed. She'd never seen Ishvah Nesac before. She'd never heard the Nesac name. Yet now, through the Infinite's will, she recognized this young man. "Ishvah Nesac, you have been found faithful. Serve your Creator, seeking His words, His will, and His visions. He will honor you as His chief priest."

Clearly overcome, the new chief priest collapsed, whispering prayers into his hands.

Zade Chacen threw his priestly gold in a clattering heap at Ela's feet and fled the council chamber. Two handsomely clothed young men followed him, glaring silent threats at Ela as they passed. Chacen's sons, Ela knew. They looked so much like him.

Tzana hopped backward as if alarmed. Ela caught her tiny sister by one hand and steadied her. Nearby, Ela's erstwhile doubter stirred, tentatively, as if he still feared the Infinite's displeasure. Ela prayed for the man. How could she be angry with him if she had so many doubts herself? The branch cooled in Ela's grasp—ordinary vinewood now. "Come," she murmured to Tzana. "We're finished here. Let's go home."

Would this be the last time she saw her home?

Hand in hand, Ela and Tzana left the chamber. The ashfall had finally stopped. The air was clear, and Ela could almost pretend nothing had happened today. Except that Matron Prill was waiting in the courtyard below, watching Father, who was being jostled by Zade Chacen's irate sons.

"Leave him alone!" Ela released Tzana and stormed down the broad ash-dusted steps, so indignant that the two young men could have been giants and it wouldn't have mattered. "You've caused trouble enough for yourselves—why are you inviting more? You should be praying to the Infinite for mercy! Humble yourselves and He might forgive you even now—after all you've done!"

The two young men retreated, sullen, but visibly intimidated. Ela stared after them until they climbed a set of steps up to a terrace path and finally descended through a sheltered roof door.

"Ela, what's happened to you?" Dan Roeh put out one wide hand, then lowered it as if he'd wanted to shake Ela, but resisted. "First you have a fit up on the wall, then you break into Eshtmoh's tomb, and now you're screaming at Chief Priest Chacen's sons. I don't want them as enemies. When we return home, I expect an explanation." He bent and picked up Tzana, who had crept down the stairs, her movements slowed as if the effort pained her.

Matron Prill approached now, her expression pinched and disapproving as she eyed Ela. "I saw Chief Priest Chacen leave. You've been released?"

"Yes. The council agreed we've done nothing wrong."

"*That* is what's wrong with the priests' council," the matron huffed. "Those greedy men have forgotten how to punish anyone. Chacen's sons accept bribes instead!" She stomped away. Ela let her depart. Time was too precious to argue with self-certain neighbors.

Now, how could she tell her parents she was a prophet? She hardly believed it herself.



Father listened in silence, but Mother began to sob and rock back and forth on her floor cushion. “This is my fault!” Kalme cried. Her sobs lifted to a full-throated wail, and she clutched her head, tearing at her smoothly coiled brown hair until it slid down past her shoulders. “He’s taking you because I was afraid!”

Kalme tried to pull the branch from Ela’s hands, but her fingers passed through the vinewood as if through air. “No! Ela, this is my fault! Mine! You should have refused!”

“Mother, this had nothing to do with you. It was my decision.”

“I was your a-age,” Kalme sobbed. “Before I m-married your father, the Infinite spoke to me in vision. I longed to become His prophet, but I was afraid!”

Ela stared at her mother, speechless. Was this true?

Yes.

Infinite! Ela’s heart bounded at His voice. He would know how to comfort Kalme. He . . .

Comfort her with the truth. Tell her.

“Mother.” The woven floor mats crackled beneath Ela’s feet as she crossed the room. She sat beside Kalme and placed the branch on the mat before them. Cautious, she hugged her mother. “You mustn’t cry. Shh . . .” When her mother finally hushed, Ela said, “Your Creator has remembered you, and you must not blame yourself for my situation, because He doesn’t blame you for refusing to become a prophet.”

“But He’s taken you,” Kalme wept. “It’s my fault!”

“He hasn’t ‘taken’ me. I accepted His offer,” Ela pointed out. “Equally important, if you had accepted the branch, I would never have existed. And I promise you, Mother, I’m glad I exist.”

“Even now?” Kalme’s slender body stiffened, and she looked Ela in the eyes. “Tell me you’re not afraid.”

“I am afraid. More than that, I feel unworthy and foolish and too young . . .” Ela cut her list short. She was filling herself with new doubts just by naming the ones she’d already acknowledged. Better to change the subject. “Mother, listen. I’m about to tell you something that you must tell everyone tomorrow after I leave.”

“A prophecy,” Kalme sniffed.

“Yes, Mother. Now, don’t say anything foolish, or the Infinite will scold you and I’m the one who’ll have to deliver your disciplining.”

Kalme sobered and wiped her tears. “Tell me.”

Joy mingling with her forlorn wish to meet this prophecy’s fulfillment, Ela said, “You’re three days pregnant. With a son. His name is Jess.”

Seated opposite them, Dan Roeh gasped. He released Tzana, his pet, and she immediately tottered across the mat to Ela. Dan sucked in a thin breath and rasped, “A son?”

“Jess,” Ela repeated, smiling, though the knowledge was bittersweet. “He will delight you both.”

By now, Tzana was patting Ela’s arm for attention. “I’m going with you.”

“No you’re not!” Ela shook her head, horrified by the thought of putting her little sister in any sort of danger—leading her into a world of fire.

Yes, the Infinite corrected Ela. She is.

Beside them, Kalme cried, “No, I want you here—my girls!” She sobbed again but at last she

mopped her face. “There’s no help for it, is there? I’m going to lose you.” Kalme gave Ela a mournful look, then frowned. “How did you manage to smear yourself so badly with ashes? Let’s wash those off.”

Ela stopped her. “No. I was anointed with ashes from a dying city. What could be more appropriate?”

“Oh, my poor girl!” Kalme moved to embrace her daughter but was interrupted by furtive taps on the doorpost.

Dan Roeh straightened, though he looked dazed. “Come in.”

Two men entered, both shuffling uncomfortably. Ela had to look twice to recognize them—they seemed so misplaced among the Roeh family. Amar and his father. When recognition took hold, she immediately understood what Amar was trying to work up the courage to say. How could he marry a girl who was supposedly Parne’s next prophet? For him, it would be worse than having no wife at all because she could never belong to him. Her life and her heart were no longer her own. Ela’s throat tightened as she fought unshed tears. Truly, his decision was for the best.

“Amar,” she said, “you and your family are quite admirable. But I must leave Parne tomorrow, so I cannot agree to marry you. Ever.”

Amar didn’t even have the grace to hide his relief.

Yesterday, Ela knew, she would have thrown something at him.



Casting a wary glance around at the borderlands’ desolate rock formations and life-stripped soil, Ela knelt in a smooth patch of dirt and allowed Tzana to slide off her back. “Don’t wander away,” Ela reminded her.

“I won’t,” Tzana promised. “I just want to find a comfortable place.”

“Watch for bugs!” And poisonous lindorm serpents. And stinging plants. And hideous scalns . . . Ela had to stop thinking of the dangers in this wilderness. She’d frightened herself. Seeking composure, she wiped the sweat from her face and drank some water from Father’s newest waterskin. He’d insisted she take it. Ela had seen tears in his eyes.

It was an awful, awful thing, seeing Father almost cry, particularly during his farewell with Tzana. He always fretted over Tzana. But they’d been brave at their parting. Even Mother. Would they meet again? Ela frowned, wishing the Infinite would answer that question.

Meanwhile, she and Tzana were here, in this barren waste of rubble, sand, and jagged stone spires and canyons that separated the city-state of Parne from its warring neighbors. Neighbors who were probably much worse than the bugs, the poisonous lindorms, stinging plants, and hideous scalns. Ela tensed, listening for her sister. Not a sound. “Tzana? Tzana!”

“Oh, just wait!” her sister’s small voice piped from beyond a huge boulder.

She will be protected here, while you are being trained as My prophet, the Infinite assured Ela.

“How long will I be a prophet?” Ela begged, hoping for a hint of her life expectancy.

Instead of an answer, she received a command. *Place the branch exactly where you are now standing. Tzana will guard it until your return.*

What? Leave her vulnerable young sister in the wilderness with no supplies? “Infinite—”

I told you she will be protected here. Do you think I can forget My promise?

“Just leave her here?”

Yes. Step out of your sandals, and take the waterskin with you.

“Leave Tzana here without water!”

Yes.

“Why are you yelling?” Tzana demanded, tripping her way around the boulder.

“I’m not. I mean, I won’t yell again.” She begged silent forgiveness from her Creator, then knelt to kiss Tzana’s soft, vaguely wrinkled cheek. “Stay here and guard the branch, please.”

“Why?” Tzana knelt on the dry sand, her face creased in charming confusion as she watched Ela untie her sandals.

“Because the Infinite asks you to. He promises you’ll be safe.”

“All right.” Tzana lifted a sparse eyebrow. “What about you?”

“I’ll be safe too.” She hoped. She spiked the branch into the ground, stepped out of her sandals, kissed Tzana once more, and then walked away. In tears.



How much longer? She’d been hiking for half the day through too-warm sand, surrounded by these barren rock formations. Her feet were screaming. Well, if they could scream, they would, Ela was sure.

She was also hungry. Tepid water from a skin was not filling. Worse than the hunger, Ela was worried about Tzana, who’d never been alone for so long in her life. Despite the Infinite’s promise that Tzana would be protected, Ela’s thoughts continually circled back to her little sister. Was she so mistrustful of her Creator? If so, then why had she agreed to become a prophet?

Finally, as Ela hiked into a dusty hollow rimmed by gray stone spires, He spoke. *Stop here.*

Relieved, she halted.

Do you understand what My Presence truly means?

He had perceived Ela’s lingering doubts, she knew. “I cannot begin to understand—please tell me.”

It will be best for you to understand by experiencing Its loss.

Loss? Was He leaving?

I am leaving you completely alone now. But as I Am, I will return.

She felt His presence sucked from her body like air—saw it leave in a whirlwind rising above her. He was gone. No! Ela staggered, fighting to breathe. The mimicry of breath she finally managed was a searing torrent of agony. She tried to raise her hands to her throat, then comprehended that even the dust the Creator had used to sculpt her kind was incapable of holding form without His Presence.

She crumbled into the ground itself. Bereft of a body, her soul collapsed in fiery torment, screaming for death and for Him.

The world around Ela vanished amid flames, leaving her writhing in agony. Without His sustaining Spirit, she could not endure this measureless cauldron of fire. Where was its end? Where was He? Why couldn't she die? "Infinite! Let me die!"

A touch drew her soul from the fire, and her body from the dust. Alive, she lay helpless, her face resting against ash-tainted desert sand. Clawing the parched ground, which was cold in comparison to what she had just felt, she whimpered, "Please, let me die."

What purpose would your death serve now? He seemed so near that Ela imagined she felt His breath restoring her senses. Her sanity.

She was trembling, unable to even lift her head. How was it possible she still lived? Who could exist without Him?

Not even those who deny Me can live on this world if I withdraw My Spirit, the Creator murmured into her thoughts.

"I've never been without You," she realized aloud, her voice breaking.

Never.

"Never leave me again!" she begged.

Never, He agreed. The word was a promise.

Ela inhaled another cooling breath, sighed, and shut her eyes. Seeing flames, she opened her eyes hurriedly. Wide.

Rest. You are safe. She sensed the Infinite waiting, keeping watch. Guarding her . . .

She woke before sunset, recovered enough to move again. She'd stopped shaking. Her limbs, her whole body, seemed to be wrapped in an invisible blanket. As Ela sat up, her Creator sent her a thought.

Drink your water.

He was right, of course. She guzzled water from the leather bag, which remained full long after the water should have been gone. Particularly after she clumsily splashed herself. Fascinating. At last, feeling restored, she closed the plump waterskin with a firm knot. "Infinite? Was that like death?"

No. That was life without Me. Death without My Presence is immeasurably worse, for it brings eternity in torment, without hope of release.

"What gives us hope? What gives us eternity with You?"

Faith in Me.

If she'd had no faith in her Creator before, Ela was certain she had it now. And she intended to cling to the Infinite and pester Him like a persistent toddler for the rest of her short life. Perhaps He would become wearied by all her questions.

No. He responded to her notion before she formed the words. *This is why I brought you here. To listen and learn. Learning begins with questions. Now, ask.*

"I'm sorry, but what did You do to my water bag?"



Death deserved unrelenting black.

Ambassador Kien Lantec eyed himself in the polished metal mirror and knew he was making the correct choice. Tunic, belt, leggings, boots, all black. His people, Tracelanders, the victims of the massacre of Ytar, deserved no less than his country's formal mourning attire.

Sorting and packing gear on the other side of the room, Kien's servant Wal grumbled aloud. "I still say we ought to leave immediately. Without a word. We should have left last night! Who knows what the Istgardians might do. They have almost no sense of honor and even less self-control." Wal approached now, sounding almost desperate. "Sir, please reconsider the black. If you appear in the king's formal audience chamber and insult him while wearing *that*, you will incite war on the spot. The king's guards will surely kill you."

Kien turned and thumped his nervous attendant on the shoulder. Though Kien was younger, Wal was the one behaving like a frightened child. "Control yourself. I will not insult the king. I give you my word. I'm going to walk into the audience chamber, protest the massacre, return my insignia, and leave. We will reach the border by nightfall. Are the horses and carts ready?"

"Yes, sir." Wal's voice was hushed.

"Will you follow me into the audience chamber?" Kien knew what Wal would say, but he couldn't resist asking. Just to see the expression on Wal's face.

The thin man's gray eyes bugged, and his mouth gaped. His pale skin went ashen. "Ah. No, sir. I'll stay with the horses. You won't actually say the word *massacre* to the king, will you?"

"Yes, I will. The 'skirmish' at Ytar *was* a massacre, no matter what the Istgardian commanders claim." If Kien thought of the massacre too deeply, he would be in a killing mood when he walked into the royal audience chamber, and he needed to be calm. His father would counsel coolness. But how could any loyal Tracelander remain cool, thinking of the slaughter, the enslavement, and the burning of a peaceful city?

The instant Kien reached the border, the Tracelands would declare war on Istgard. He would be sure of it. Those enslaved citizens had to be freed. Ytar must be avenged. "Where is my sword?"

"Sir!" Wal squawked. "Do not wear your sword!"

"Istgardian protocol demands a ceremonial sword," Kien reminded his servant. "Where is it?"

Wal sat on Kien's clothing chest. Blinking.

Kien grabbed the smaller man by the shoulder and wrist and dumped him to the floor. "You can ignore protocol if you think it will guarantee your own safety, Wal, but—excuse me—I will not."

Wal jumped to his feet. Agile. Kien had to allow him that much of a compliment. The man was also determined—admirably so, when he wasn't being annoying. As he was now. "Sir! I promised your father I would advise you. . . ." Wal hesitated, like one who has said too much.

"Advise me? Concerning what? My youthful foolishness? My failures in etiquette?"

Wal turned away, not denying Kien's words.

Kien glared. So Wal finally admitted he'd been hired to be a nursemaid. Or an etiquette master. Both options were insulting. Kien knew his conduct had been almost irreproachable throughout his service in Istgard, despite multiple opportunities that tempted him to indulge in less-than-exemplary behavior. Seething, he flung open his clothing chest and rummaged through it for his ceremonial sword. Wal—the maggot!—had hidden it in the bottom of the chest. Well, scheme as he might, Wal couldn't part Kien from his weapons. Not his sword. Not his boot knives, nor his buckle knife. Wal would screech like a seared fowl if he ever learned of Kien's hidden cache.

Kien slung the leather baldric over his shoulder and buckled the sword at his side. Wal, not quite remorseful, offered Kien his black cloak. "I pinned your insignia to the shoulder."

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