

When I was eight, my papai took me to the park to watch a king die.

At first, all I saw were adults clad in bright blues and greens and reds, in feathers and sequins, in cloth glittering with gold and jewels. Carnival clothes for carnival day, but covered in the early-morning chill with darker coats and shawls. I looked up at this mass of grandes like I had stumbled into a gathering of orixás. I couldn't see their faces, but I could see their hands, the way they twisted them around each other, or clicked through a string of rosary beads. Some held candles, some held flowers. They were dressed for carnival, but they were quieter than I remembered from other years. The legs and torsos swayed and jostled, but no one danced. A few of the men cried. For the first time in my life, I knew a carnival without music.

I held my papai's hand. He did not look at me. A strange sigh swept over the crowd, like the wind howling past the cliffside during a winter storm. A woman's voice boomed through the park, but I was too young, too close to the ground to understand.

"I can't see," I said, tugging at my papai's hand.

With some difficulty — our neighbors had pressed forward, packing around us so tightly he hardly had room to turn around — he knelt.

"This is how the world works, June," he said to me. "Are you sure?"

I didn't understand his downcast mouth, the crying from the crowd, the austere finality of the woman's voice on our city's speakers. Carnival was supposed to be fun and beautiful. But I knew, because

my papai never asked me idle questions, that I was to consider my answer. That if I said no, he would leave me on the ground where I could see nothing I didn't understand, and understand nothing of what I heard. And if I said yes, the answer would change my life.

I nodded. He lifted me, though I was heavy for my age, and perched me on his shoulders. If I blocked anyone's view, no one complained.

There was a holo in the sky. It projected a few meters above the heads of the people in the park, near the falls where I would play with Mamãe in the summer. Queen Serafina stood in a stark room of wood and stone — the high shrine. I liked her because her skin was dark and glossy and her hair silk-smooth. I had even gotten a Queen Serafina doll for my birthday last June. But today her face was fierce and still; today she held a blade in her hand.

Beside me, a man shook his head and murmured a prayer. I thought it sounded nice and wished I could join him. Mamãe didn't like the city shrines, so I'd never learned any prayers.

The holo angle widened, showing an altar with a miniature projection of our city glowing at the far end. A man had been bound with ropes beneath it, so the great hollow pyramid of Palmares Três looked like a crown. An appropriate symbol for our latest king, elected exactly one year ago.

"Why is Summer King Fidel tied down?" I asked Papai.

He squeezed my hand and shushed me gently. "Watch, June," he said.

"I honor our ancestors who were slaves, and their legacy for which we have named our city," Serafina said, icy and calm in her white ceremonial turban and white shift.

From the altar, Fidel responded in a steady voice, but his shoulders trembled and his eyes had dilated a permanent, unnatural black. "I honor the dead who have fallen like sugarcane before a scythe. I honor the men who lie beneath us and the women whose strength and wisdom have saved us."

“Heir of Zumbi, great king, you are infected,” the Queen said, words almost familiar and ultimately incomprehensible. “Will you give this great city the gift of your sacrifice? In the name of Yemanjá, in the name of Oxalá, also called Christ, will you offer your soul to the orixás, and your choice to Palmares Três?”

Fidel nodded slowly, as though he was already swimming in Yemanjá’s ocean. His too-black eyes stared wide, and I shivered. We were safe in the park on Tier Eight, while he was tied to the altar on Tier Ten, but still I felt as though he watched me. “I will,” he said, and fell back, prone on the stone altar.

Now the man beside me wept openly, and even Papai wiped his eyes.

I was eight, and no one had told me what happened to the kings at the end of winter. In the end, no one needed to.

Serafina mounted the stairs to the altar. She touched Fidel’s shoulder with her left hand; her right fingers tightened around the blade.

“You will mark your choice of the woman to be Queen,” Serafina said. “In gesture or blood.”

He nodded. A few seconds passed. She swept the knife across his throat, clean and irrevocable and deep. His mouth opened and closed like a fish in fresh air. His blood pulsed in spurts over her hands and dress and altar.

I cried, but I didn’t want to stop seeing. “He must point!” I said, my stomach so tight I thought I might vomit.

The crying man beside me nodded. “It will be okay if he doesn’t, filha,” he said. “It’s a moon year. Serafina is the only one in the room for him to pick.”

I don’t know that I understood him then. The five-year cycle, the elections, the Queens and their kings, the moon years and sun years — they govern our lives, but are not easily parsed. Especially not by an eight-year-old, shocked to tears by the sight of a young king killed by a beloved Queen.

And then Fidel managed. A bloody hand raised, trembling and final. He smacked it on Serafina’s belly with enough force that its wet

impact echoed over the tinkling of the falls. A bloody handprint marked her stomach, final and sure.

The holo focused on Fidel's body. In death, his eyes stayed wide open and impossibly black.

Papai took me home. Mamāe was in one of her rages, berating him for letting such a violent ceremony mar my carnival day.

"You'll let her have the celebration without showing her why?" he said.

"She's too young," said Mamāe.

I took a deep breath. "Did he want to die?" I asked Papai.

He regarded me very seriously. "I believe so, June. His sacrifice helps our city."

"Then it's okay," I said. "I'm old enough."

We call him the summer king, even though we choose him in the spring.

It is early September. Gil and I dance through a screaming throng of wakas, hoping to trick our way into the roped-off section in the front of the stadium. In a few minutes, all three young finalists for this year's summer king election will appear onstage, and we need to be as near to them as possible. I've never seen Enki up close before — holos don't count — and my excitement makes me feel like I'm vibrating. Gil turns, sees my eyes scanning the stage for any sign of them, and laughs.

"We have at least five minutes, June," he says, taking my hand to pull me forward.

"What if we miss him? What if the cameras don't see us?"

Gil shrugs; he respects my craving for fame and recognition, but he doesn't share it. One of the hundred things I love about him.

"It doesn't matter if they see," he says, pointing to the cloud of thumb-sized camera bots buzzing on and around the stage. "It matters if *he* does."