

Interlude: Faith

Faith is a funny thing. There was not a person in the empire who didn't put their faith in someone or something. The blind devout in the divine, the fanciful nobles in their traditions, the gullible soldiers in their captains, and the dirty street rats in the hope that someday they didn't have to crawl and beg for their meals. The thing they all shared was that they didn't know jack shit if there was any merit to their faith, even if they think they did.

Gaven supposed that the street rats were the worst of the lot. Unlike the others, they were the only ones that could never afford to be wrong in their faith, yet who almost always were.

He'd once been a young idiot like that. A fool who thought that, as long as he persevered, there was a bright future ahead of him. That even if he did a few dishonest things here and there, he could always turn things around later on. That an old heirloom left by his welcher pop somehow held the key to his hopes.

Course, he'd been brighter than most others. He realized the futility in all that pretty early on, save for a brief stint with the Vanguard's when he got it in his head that there was such a thing as honest work.

Having faith in things was almost never worth it. You either were lucky enough to live in blissful ignorance about whoever was screwing you over, or you faced the consequences and hoped you came out with your limbs intact. When you were in his line of work, faith was a currency better kept to oneself.

And yet here he was, sneaking into what was supposedly one of the most protected places in the empire for a payday that—while tempting—certainly wasn't worth the risk. All because a strange noblewoman had brought up memories of his youth with a couple sentences and promised him something he had no clue about the value of.

Gaven fingered the locket inside his jacket as he sneaked up to the corner of the corridor he was in. He didn't have many memories of his father left, but the man's words about the locket had always stayed.

'It's been ours for generations, son, and it'll bring us riches like you'll never imagine. Power that those dirty nobles can never look down on, and strength even those damn Imperial Swords would envy. Mark my word, son. One day, we'll be at the top of the world.'

His dad had been a raving lunatic and a serial liar, so there was no reason to put believe those words. In fact, he'd been sure he had completely put all that behind him up until a few weeks ago. And then the Baroness mentioned the locket.

And the Baroness knew things. Gaven's current location was proof of that.

He pulled at the piece of cloth hiding his face and peeked around the corner into the open courtyard beyond. It was empty, save for a few statues and flower beds spread around the space, as well as a wide fountain at the center. He didn't know what this section in particular was called, but there was one thing he knew for certain.

He was currently inside the Sanctuary of Ittar, and the act of sneaking in had been frighteningly easy.

Staying behind the corner for a while, waiting to see if any person would show themselves, he eventually nodded to himself and started moving back the way he came. The corridors around here were made of gleaming white granite, polished to perfection, and had extravagant decorations and tapestries running along all the walls. The whites and golds almost hurt his eyes, even despite the only light coming in from the skylights above being moonlight. He bet that even just one of the fancy tapestries he passed by could net him enough solars to last him a month or two in Elystead's Eastgate district.

If it was one thing that was good for Gaven and his ilk, it was the shared interest posh nobles and these religious types had for shiny things. They were like crows, collecting everything that sparkled and preying on the remains of those unfortunate enough to get in their way.

He hoped they never changed. Who was he to care if simpletons wanted to give away their lives for some type of salvation, duty, or whatever? Let them, he said. Because in the end, their gains might fall into his hands.

His footsteps barely made any noise as he moved through the corridors, and soon, he reached a small vestibule empty of people. At the end of it, a set of broad pillars held up an arched ceiling of painted glass. He walked over to one of the pillars, looking around for a second before leaning closer to it and feeling with his hand in the space between the pillar and the wall behind it.

Something clicked as he found the hidden switch. A few steps away from him, a tall statue of a priest of some kind started sliding to the side without a sound. Soon, a dark passage with a stairway leading down was revealed. Standing at the mouth of the opening was a woman in a hood and black robes, anxiously fidgeting with the fabric of her clothes.

"I've already checked everything out the way we're going," Gaven said, pointing behind him with his thumb. "It's just like the Baroness said. No one's around. Come on."

He started walking, stopping after a moment to look back at the Countess who hadn't moved yet. "What are you doing just standing there? We don't have all night."

She jolted, and Gaven held in a sigh as she finally followed him out of the passage. Not long after, the statue returned to its original position. Shaking his head, he ignored whatever senseless mutterings that left her mouth and continued onward, eyeing their surroundings and her simultaneously. He had learned the hard way that you had to keep an eye on her on jobs like this.

What one didn't do for work.

With him already having scouted the path ahead of them, they made swift way through the corridors now. The Sanctuary of Ittar was about as grand as the tales told, but it was funny how lax the security felt in comparison up till now. The Baroness had said it wasn't to be underestimated, and he believed her, but just to get this far it had been enough for the woman to share the location of a single underground passage that no one apparently bothered keeping

under watch. It hadn't taken them even half an hour to sneak inside with the Followers none the wiser.

Things like that were about what he'd come to expect from the Baroness. Lady had the blasted Viles guiding her. Or a god, though he could scarcely think of one who'd commit such blasphemous acts so casually.

Once more, he had to remind himself not to get on the woman's bad side. He'd met plenty of nobles throughout his life, ranging from lowly fourth sons to an actual countess back when he was part of the Vanguard. When it came to how nobles behaved when public eyes weren't on them, he was more familiar than most. He had experience with both the calculative, scheming kind and the uptight, overly righteous kind.

They were all arrogant and the same in the end, even when they thought they weren't. He didn't peg Scarlett Hartford to be much different on that end. His interactions with her had told him about what he'd expect. But he also knew not to underestimate her. Outside of her being a noble, he knew her type of person as well.

She was the type who was always in control. Used to giving orders and being obeyed, seeing everyone else as tools to be used. The type that was far too good at anything they set their mind to, often to the detriment of the people around them. The type that always rose to the top of whatever order they took part in, from the rough alleyways of city slums to the powdered banquets of the empire's nobility.

He liked nothing more than witnessing the moment when all that fell apart around that kind of person. That moment when all their finely laid plans crumbled to dust, and they had to feel what it was like for everybody else. Call it a sadistic streak of his.

That said, he also rather liked living. Being used as a tool wasn't bad, as long as he wasn't considered broken or unusable. His ambition was to get paid while he still could, and then be in the next town over when things went down the gutter. Which it usually did, eventually.

Although, just this once, he hoped it would take a while for that to happen with the Baroness. And for some reason, he felt like it might. She was a scary woman, but he also wanted whatever information she had on his locket. All that had to wait until this job was finished, though.

As they reached the courtyard he'd been at before, he stopped the Countess for a moment and peeked around the corner to make sure things were still clear. It was, of course. According to the Baroness, this entire segment of the Sanctuary was almost entirely devoid of people most of the time. Why that was, he didn't quite understand.

He looked across the space to where a small marble patio served as the entrance to another section of the Sanctuary. A massive, tower-like structure that stretched into the sky. He wasn't the kind of person who put too much worth on old myths and legends, and he certainly wasn't the religious type, but could imagine there was some truth to the tales about divinity being involved in the building of this place. This was just one part of the Sanctuary, after all. Even Dawnlight Palace wasn't this big.

He turned back to the Countess. Raising his left hand, the ring on his finger glowed briefly as a decorated dagger appeared in his grip. He held it out to the woman. "It's your turn now."

She simply stared at the dagger without taking it.

He clicked his tongue. "You haven't forgotten the Baroness' plan, right?"

She blinked at him, then lowered her eyes and pulled the hood tighter around her face. "...No...No...I...Remember..."

She held out a hand.

Gaven placed the dagger in it, then waited for her to use it. As she just stood there, eventually, he had enough and stepped closer to her. Carefully, and with telegraphed movements—he wasn't stupid enough to surprise her—he took her wrist and guided her hands that were covered in loose bandages, using the dagger to cut a thin wound on her index finger.

Somehow, she didn't even seem to notice at first, then gave him a startled look as she wordlessly stared at the trail of blood on her finger.

"You know what to do from here, yeah?" he asked.

They'd already done this part several times over for practice, and then there had been no issues. But of course she had to go and waste time when they were on the actual mission.

The Countess gave a slow nod. "...Y-Yes..."

She shifted her attention solely to the dagger, staring down at it. After a few seconds, the violet gem on the dagger's guard briefly turned dark. The moment after, the woman before him had changed. Gone were the frayed locks and bandages sticking out from beneath the robes, replaced by a set of long, golden locks that hung down the side of her hood. Gaven pulled the hood itself back to reveal a woman's youthful appearance, with even more hair bundled up at the back of the hood and a pair of bright, marigold eyes. He didn't think himself a man easily tricked by a lady's looks, but he felt certain this was one appearance that would drive most men crazy.

No wonder the Followers of Ittar tried to hide the Augur all the time.

He shook his head and turned away. That said, those weren't the eyes of a sane person. The Memory of the Covenant was damn impressive. He'd admit that much. But it was still limited by the person using it. Put it in the hands of an amateur and even a kid could tell something was off.

There was also a time limit on the thing, which made things harder when you had to work with someone like the Countess.

The woman reached to pull up her hood again, but he stopped her. "Don't cover yourself again until after we've reached our destination. Remember, we need you to continue looking like that for a while longer."

The Augur's beauty might be a gift from Ittar, but that wasn't the craziest thing about this. He was still trying to wrap his head around the fact that this woman in front of him was actually the Augur's sister. He couldn't understand how that worked, and he wasn't sure he wanted to.

He couldn't wait to not ever have to work with the Countess again.

The two of them stepped out from behind the corner and entered the courtyard. While they were crossing it, Gaven paused and looked back to see that the Countess had stopped again. Transfixed like a statue, she stared down at a bed of blue, star-shaped flowers that grew in clusters around a simple marble bench.

"...You like those flowers?" he asked, stepping back to her. "We can look at things like that all we like later, but right now we've got to stay moving. Short on time, remember?"

"...Blue stars..." the woman mumbled to herself in a charming and soft voice. She turned to look at him. "...My sister's favorite..."

"Yeah? I bet they planted it because of her then. Nice that they're treating her well. We really ought to get moving, though."

He waved and waited for her to follow, then started walking again. Thankfully, her head wasn't entirely empty, and she actually did as he said, trailing behind him as she gazed at the surrounding flowers. Soon, they reached the other end of the courtyard, where they entered the patio leading to the next section. There, they were met by a set of wide, polished stairs.

The Augur's quarters were supposed to be at the top of this entire structure, so they had a lot of legwork to do.

Climbing the stairs, they soon reached a set of doors that led into a hallway. It was similar to the corridors they'd been moving through before, with white stone and golden tracery running along the floor and walls, but the ceiling here was a lot higher and lacked skylights. Instead, large crystals shining a bright yellow were spread about the space and illuminating it.

A short distance ahead of them was a small cross-section, where the hallway split into two and had another set of stairs that continued forward. The Baroness had told them to just keep climbing when they reached this part, so he supposed he didn't have to waste any time scouting around here.

As they neared the cross-section, Gaven heard steps right around the corner, down one of the other hallways. He froze, his hands going to the blades hidden in the belt under his overcoat. He hadn't sensed anyone, yet they were already this close. There was nowhere to hide now.

An armored figure appeared around the corner. It appeared to be a woman, clad head to toe in shimmering bronze-gold armor. The armor was intricately crafted, consisting of plated sections that fit tightly around their body, and whose surfaces were etched with complex designs of emblazoned suns. Framing their head was a polished, cylindrical helmet with wing-like horns extending out and forward from the sides, lacking slits or any visible means allowing its wearer to see.

The figure moved with grace and precision; the armor made tiny, distinct sounds with every step. Around the back half of its legs was a dark, skirt-like piece that fluttered down to its heels, and in its left hand, it was holding a chain with a thurible hanging at the end and a trail of smoke following it. In its right hand was a long, bronze-colored sword that widened at the tip and had a flat pike sticking out from the lower half.

The figure stopped as they entered its field of view, its helmet turning to look at them.

A Knight of the Eternal Oath.

Gaven had heard stories about the inner guards of the Sanctuary of Ittar, but it was different seeing one in person. Just one look was enough to tell him this wasn't something he wanted to fight head-on. It wouldn't hesitate to cut him in two the second it perceived him as a threat. While it looked like a person outwardly, he now understood why there were rumors about these things not even being human.

The knight simply continued staring at them, and a bead of sweat formed on Gaven's forehead. He glanced back at the Countess, who wasn't doing anything at all. He nudged her with his elbow. "*Remember your lines,*" he whispered.

She blinked a few times, and a look of recognition appeared on her face.

"Ah, ah, ah..." she started stuttering.

Gaven wanted to palm his face.

"I-I am...returning to my...quarters..." the woman continued, with the appearance of the Augur. She nodded at him. "This is...a helper...helping me... You can...continue patrolling..."

The knight stayed silent, continuing to observe the two of them for several seconds more. Then, it suddenly performed a strange salute where it held its sword out to the side and raised the thurible into the air, before immediately recommencing its walking into another of the hallways.

As Gaven watched it leave, he let out a small breath.

The Baroness had been right about another thing. Those things really didn't question anything they thought came from the Augur's mouth. They also couldn't tell the difference between the real deal and the Countess' terrible performance.

What the Blazes the Followers had done to get guards like these, he didn't wanna know. He doubted they wanted anyone to know either.

He looked back to the Countess. The woman was visibly troubled, gripping tightly at her robes as she looked around them.

...He *really* hated working with amateurs. Especially when he had to rely on their performances to get things done. Even more so when they were stark-raving lunatics.

“Come, let’s go. This isn’t gonna be the first of those we run into,” he said.

It took a short while before the woman got moving again, but eventually they were climbing the next set of stairs and continuing higher up. They encountered more Knights of the Eternal Oath as they did, and each encounter was as nerve-wracking as the previous one, with Gaven worrying the Countess would screw up too much and they’d have to fight their way through, but none of the knights questioned them no matter how much the woman butchered her lines and went into her ramblings.

After they had climbed probably over a dozen sets of stairs, spread about the place far enough from each other that Gaven was starting to question if they were moving in circles or not, they reached a wide hallway that ended in a large set of gold-encrusted doors. Intricate illustrations of priests praying to the sun covered the doors, and a knight was standing guard on each side.

Neither made to move as Gaven and the Countess approached.

He glanced back at the woman’s altered appearance. He was pretty sure they were nearing the end of the Memory of the Covenant’s effect, so it was lucky that they’d gotten this far, even with her delays.

They stopped in front of the two knights. “You’re up,” he quietly told the Countess, urging her forward.

The woman simply stared at the large doors ahead before them, and it seemed to take a couple of seconds before she registered his words. She turned to the guards, taking a few slow steps ahead. “...We wish...to enter...”

The knight to the left stepped to the side in one of those strange salutes as the other moved to stand before the doors, gripping hold and pulling on them.

An amused smile found its way onto Gaven’s face at the sight. Supposedly, the actual Augur would be inside right this very moment, yet the knights didn’t even react at seeing another ‘Augur’ in front of them. He could tell they were strong, and he wasn’t sure he could sneak past all their defenses, so he could understand why this place might be regarded as incredibly secure as it was. But with just this one flaw, they’d made it this far with no opposition.

So much for the Followers’ vaunted keepers.

The doors moved slowly, and a loud reverberation sounded through the hall as they were entirely opened. Beyond them was an impressive, circular chamber with a high ceiling. The walls were lined from floor to ceiling with bookshelves, most bearing books bound in rich leather and decorated with intricate designs in gold leaf. In the center of the chamber stood a wide, curved desk covered with items and positioned to face the entrance. Behind it, on the far end of the chamber, a large window opened up onto a balcony that overlooked the night sky and the forests in the distance.

Gaven eyed the two knights for a moment, then tapped the Countess’ shoulder to urge her into the chamber. As they walked in, the doors closed behind them, locking them inside. He took another look around the space. It was filled with the scent of incense and the soft glint of

a fire, creating an atmosphere that was both peaceful and solemn. To the left was an inconspicuous door that presumably led to a bedroom and assorted quarters, and to the right was a fireplace, with a fire crackling quietly in it. In front of the fireplace was a small table and a high-backed armchair. Sitting in the armchair was a lone woman dressed in a flowing white gown, looking down at a thick book in her hands. Her face was turned away from them, but he recognized those bright, golden locks that rested across her shoulders.

Compared to the Countess, there was a completely different air to this woman. Even from here, Gaven could tell there was something special about her. As if there was a glow around her, invisible to his mortal eyes. He supposed that if holiness was to be personified, it would look like this.

It was annoying.

He never cared much about Ittar, the Followers, or any of the other guards that the empire liked to pretend didn't exist anymore. They could do whatever they wanted as long as they didn't bother him. But this? This was just screaming at him to pay attention. Like he didn't have the *right* to look away.

"S-Sister..." A small wail left the Countess beside him.

But the Augur hadn't looked up even after they entered her chambers. It was as if she hadn't even noticed the heavy thud earlier as the doors opened and closed.

The Countess started shuffling across the room towards the Augur. When she reached the woman, she kneeled down next to her chair and grasped at its armrest. "Ah, ah, ah, s-sister... I am here, I am here, sister..."

The Augur's head gradually lifted from her book, and she gazed out into the air in front of her for several seconds. She turned to the Countess, then cocked her head. "...Me...? I...?"

She lifted a hand to her own face, then ran it through her golden hair. "...No, I am I." She shook her head, returning her attention to the Countess. "You are...not me?"

"Sister, sister... It is me..." the Countess said.

"No, I am me," the Augur replied. "...Who are you?"

Gaven observed the display with morbid curiosity. The Baroness really hadn't been lying. The woman was almost as loony as her sister. And that was saying something. It was like he was watching a senile Voneian try and converse with a blind Imperial.

"Sister... I am your sister..." the Countess said, but the words didn't seem to mean much to the Augur. A frenzied look entered the Countess' face as she started looking around the chamber.

Gaven sighed.

"The knife," he called out. "Forget about it already? Just use it again."

The woman looked back at him with wide eyes, then reached into her robes and pulled out the Memory of the Covenant. She fiddled with the dagger for a moment, before eventually managing to deactivate its effect and return to her normal appearance. Her messy, blonde locks hung behind her as loose bandages covered half her face.

“Ah, ah.” She hurried to pull up her hood again, then turned back to her sister. “Sister, sister, it is me...”

The Augur stared down at her for several seconds, a confused furrow on her brows. Finally, a look of recognition appeared in her eyes. “Big sister...?”

“Yes, yes.” The excitement rose in the Countess’ voice. “I am here... Everything...everything will be okay...”

The Augur reached out a hand to touch the face under the Countess’ hood. “Poor big sister. Does it hurt? I am sorry, so sorry. Poor big sister.”

The Countess shook her. “I am good. I am well...sister... I am sorry...sorry...are you hurt, sister...?”

A sorrowful smile had formed on the Augur’s face as her hand moved down to her sister’s neck, caressing it gently. “Poor sister... It must hurt... I am sorry, please do not cry, please. I wish I could help. I want to help.”

Gaven raised an eyebrow at seeing the exact spot she was touching.

...He supposed she wasn’t called the Augur for nothing.

He walked over to the Countess, dipping down beside her for a second.

“I am not sad...not sad,” the woman said as she grasped her sister’s hand with both of hers. “I will save you... I have...a friend... They helped me... And I will help you... We will get away from the bad people...”

Gaven cleared his throat, then picked up the dagger that the Countess had dropped to the ground after she was finished with it. “I’ll be taking this. You fine ladies can continue your chat for a bit.”

He stood up and started moving over towards the desk at the center of the room.

“A friend? A friend?” The Augur’s soft voice rang out from behind him. “Poor sister. You have no friends... You are all alone, sister. It breaks my heart.”

“I am not...alone... This woman... She is kind...she helped me save you...”

He paused for a moment, glancing back at the two. It’d be bothersome if the Countess said something about the Baroness now, or if the Augur said something to rile her up...

“I see no woman. No one,” the Augur said as tears ran down her face. “Poor sister. So much grief, so much suffering. You were all alone all this time and I could not help. I am sorry, does it hurt? Please don’t cry.”

...Perhaps he didn’t have to worry. The girl made about as much sense as her sister.

The Countess fervently shook her head. “I am fine... There is...no pain.”

Keeping one ear to their nonsensical conversation, Gaven continued crossing the chamber until he reached the desk. There, he looked over the various items spread out on it. Most, he had no idea what they were—religious junk, he guessed—but they looked expensive. Everything from a golden chalice with a lid shaped like the sun, a silver bell with illustrations along the base, an intricately carved box of ebony wood lined with silver, and more.

He set his eyes on three items in particular that fit the descriptions the Baroness had given him.

The first was a finger-sized metal plate that had a strange glass pane with various hues swirling in it at its center. Next to it, a bronze stand at the head of the desk supported the second item: a crystal ball whose depth held a multitude of colors that coiled around beneath a strange cloud of orange filled with stars. The third item was a palm-sized metal sphere made of gold whose sides held a bunch of strange symbols on it.

He quickly gathered all three of the artifacts up, storing them in the spatial ring that the Baroness had coughed up the money for.

Easy as that, he’d secured his main objective.

Even a kid could get this much done.

He eyed the other items spread out across the desk.

...The Baroness only needed these three items in particular, but it’d be a waste to just leave the rest, wouldn’t it? He imagined the things that remained weren’t as good as what the boss-lady wanted, but money was money. With a smirk, he picked up the most valuable-looking pieces that were left and stored what he could inside the ring. Then he turned back to the Countess and the Augur.

He had everything he needed. Next up was tying off loose ends so that he could get out of here without having to worry about the Followers hunting him down for the rest of his life. He checked over his gear and his weapons as he started moving back towards the crazy sister-sister pair.

The Countess was holding onto her sister’s arm now, seemingly not having gotten far in the conversation. “S-Sister...leave... We need to...leave...”

The Augur wasn’t shifting from her chair, though. “Dear sister... You should not have come. I wish you hadn’t come. The words of the Ophidian are grey. They seek the moon’s light, yet you are here.”

Gaven frowned. What the Blazes was she on about now?

“I...I don’t understand... Sister, come...we need to...leave...” The Countess pulled at the woman’s arm.

“You must leave,” the Augur said. “I belong here.”

The Countess froze. She stared up at her. “No...no... The bad men... They will...” She shook her head. “They took you... I am here to save...save...you...”

The Augur touched the Countess’ face. “Poor sister. Your eyes...your beautiful eyes... Clouded by tragedy and darkness. Touched by Adtia, yet too late and too soon. Hear my words, dear sister. You must prepare... Take refuge, but do not heed the fallen knave. Be ever vigilant and beware those who follow that which covered and seek to bring down the skies.”

“Sister... I don’t understand... Listen... Please listen... Please, we must leave...”

Gaven erased his presence as he moved up behind the Countess, reaching a hand into his belt. He pulled out a deep obsidian dagger. The blade seemed to shimmer in the weak light coming from the fireplace, and a black liquid covered its edge.

The Augur didn’t even seem to recognize his presence as the woman simply continued sputtering her incomprehensible inanities.

He stopped behind the Countess’ crouched figure and looked down at her.

Sorry, lady. Can’t say it was a pleasure, but you had your uses. Next life, you might be pickier about who you place your faith in.

“Ah, ah, ah, Sister...wait... I can bring us away—”

A scream escaped the woman as his blade dug into her neck. Then a silvery light exploded out and filled Gaven’s vision. A sharp pain sprang out from his shoulder as he just barely managed to *shade morph* in time. The world turned into a canvas of red hues, and a moment later, he reappeared several meters back.

“Ah...ah...ah...” the Countess cried as she fell to the floor, blood pouring from her neck. The silvery light that had just blinded Gaven took the shape of dozens of spears that stretched out from beneath the woman as if to protect her from harm, and they were now inching their way back to her. The obsidian dagger that he’d used seemed to have been completely obliterated by whatever that was.

He panted as he eyed the scene with wariness, pulling out and downing a healing potion the Baroness had provided him with. A rumble spread through the chamber, and the next second, a sizeable chunk of stone slammed into the floor to his right. He glanced up at the ceiling to see a large hole there, with several cracks running from it.

Blazes... That was one scary ability. He’d never seen the woman use anything like it before. Usually she just hit anything around her till it broke.

He downed another potion as he looked at the Countess where she whimpered on the floor. Getting close to her again was far too risky. He'd clearly underestimated what she was capable of. It was lucky that he had prepared the Specter's Tears poison for this. It was supposed to be able to kill even young dragons under the right conditions, so it was only a matter of time until she was finished.

What surprised him, though, was that the Augur was still completely unharmed next to the Countess, sitting in her armchair and looking down at her injured sister with a strange gaze. That was probably for the better, though. The Baroness didn't want the Augur to be touched for some reason.

"Ah...ah...it hurts..." The Countess tried moving on the floor with both hands pressed against her neck. "Why...why...what...?" Her cries became more and more unintelligible as the seconds passed.

"Poor sister. Does it hurt? I'm sorry. Please forgive me, I'm sorry," the Augur said. "Why do you have to suffer so? Why can't I help you? Why can't I see the way? The paths are disordered. Interlaced. Fused. I see only confusion and suffering, but there is so much uncertainty."

"...Sister...help..." The silver light around the Countess convalesced into a pelt that covered her wound, and she sent a disoriented look Gaven's way.

"Who is the knave?" the Augur asked out loud. "Who cowers? Who is a friend? Sister, I cannot see it. Why can't I see it?"

Gaven turned to the chamber's entrance as the doors slowly started opening.

Well, that was his cue to leave.

He looked back to the Countess. It'd be a problem if she said anything before she keeled, though. He assumed it wouldn't be a problem to leave a body. That much he could explain to the Baroness, at least. She was the type to be practical in these things, and he was pretty sure she'd already thought it through anyway. If not, he'd just spared her the effort. But if the Countess spoke before that...

He pulled out two daggers and threw them through the air. They were instantly blocked by two of the tendrils of light that were protecting the woman.

That was problematic...

He looked back to the entrance, where he spotted the two Knights of the Eternal Oath through the widening gap.

Pulling out even more daggers, he started throwing them each after the other as he moved towards the open balcony. None made its way through the Countess' defense, however, and he clenched his teeth in annoyance. He would just have to bet on that the woman didn't get the chance to speak. It wasn't as if there was anyone nearby that could genuinely listen.

Suddenly, the Countess grabbed hold of the Augur with one hand, using the other to pull out a small cube from beneath her clothes. Then, a moment later, the Countess disappeared in a flash of light.

Gaven's eyes widened. What was that?!

"Poor sister..." The Augur's voice sounded out loudly across the chamber. "I pray for your future. Forgive me."

For the first time, the woman turned to Gaven and acknowledged his existence. He found himself entranced by her gaze. "...You are not the knave," she said deliberately. "You are but ash strewn in the wind, but I cannot see the catalyst."

The two knights entered the chamber, and Gaven had to tear his eyes away from the crazy woman. There wasn't any more time. He dashed to the window and stepped out onto the balcony, spending only the briefest moment to peer out over the stone railing at the extensive compound of white buildings that stretched out directly beneath him. It was like a tiny town all unto itself.

Hearing the noises behind him, he didn't waste another second as he placed a hand on the railing and leaped over. The wind whipped past his ears as gravity took him.

He'd have to take a second to explain things to the Baroness later.