

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."