



# THE SUMMER PRINCE

ALAYA DAWN JOHNSON



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Summary: In a Brazil of the distant future, June Costa falls in love with Enki, a fellow artist and rebel against the strict limits of the legendary pyramid city of Palmares Très' matriarchal government, knowing that, like all Summer Kings before him, Enki is destined to die.

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SPRING



*The lights are out in Palmares Trê.*  
*Why did they go out?*  
*Because I told them to.*

*The lights are out in Palmares Trê.*  
*Why are you alone?*  
*Because I left you.*

*The lights are out in Palmares Trê.*  
*How do I know?*  
*Because I am dead.*



**W**hen 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 Trê's 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. Mamãe 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 Mamãe.

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."



He. Enki. I take a deep breath and feel my pocket again for the reassuring weight of the portable holo we've smuggled inside. Just a week ago, Gil and I got around security bots in Gria Plaza to paint graffiti stencils on the side of an office building, but we've never attempted anything as daring as this. I've never invited exposure before. Oh, there was always a *chance* that some security bot would dart me and I'd wake up unmasked in a holding cell on Tier Two, but I'm not stupid. I may not be quite as good at running around the city as a grafiteiro from the verde, but I'm tiers above the other wakas in my school.

But today I'm dressed as myself, with a ticket bought in my own name, with my own money. Today we're planning to get caught. Mother and Auntie Yaha won't be pleased, but they never are. I think of it as a coming-out party — if this works, the whole city will see my art for the first time.

The stadium is the pride of the bottom tiers — built inside one of the dozens of spherical nodes that help give our hollow pyramid city its internal structure. The clear dome soars above us, high enough that on some days wispy clouds can form, obscuring from sight the pulsing, glowing city rising into the distance above. From this angle, transport pods shuttle through a glittering lattice of tubes like silver blood through luminous triangular arteries. Megatrusses lined with gardens and shops and houses stretch to our left and right. I'm caught off guard by the spectacle, one somehow more familiar to me from dramas than personal experience. Even though I've lived here all my life, I don't spend much time on the lower tiers during the day. Growing up on Tier Eight, I'm used to seeing the glowing pyramid lattice of Palmares Três from a loftier position.

Two guards stand in front of the velvet curtain separating the special seats from the general rabble. My stepmother is an Auntie, a rising star in our government. I could have asked her for help getting in here, but then she would have known that Gil and I were skipping



school to see the show. I couldn't bear the thought of another interminable argument with Mother, Auntie Yaha acting as frustrated peacekeeper. I can't bear very much about either of them.

So Gil and I will have to improvise. I grin and my worries flow out of me in the tense, gritty joy of danger and release. The guards check tickets with a bulky security fono. Only wakas are allowed in this special section, since we're the ones the Aunties want to show asking questions in a moon year election. Some grandes fill the stadium seats, but most of this crowd is under thirty and respected for it — a rarity in a city run mostly by women past their first century.

Gil squeezes my hand and approaches one of the guards. He casually hands over his flash — an identity chip embedded in the same worn pyramid charm he's used since I've known him. The guard swipes it over her fono, then frowns.

"You don't have a pass," she says.

Gil's bottom lip trembles and his eyes widen. "But I won the essay contest for my school! My teacher told me everything was settled."

The woman sighs. The other guard, accepting latecomer flashes a few meters away, raises her eyebrows in inquiry.

"Everything okay there?" she asks.

"He says he won a contest."

The second guard looks nervously back at the stage, then walks over. "What's this about . . ." she says, but I don't have time to hear the rest. In full sight of the five wakas still waiting to get in, I dash past the guards distracted by Gil's beautiful pouting face and hurry for two empty seats on the opposite side of the enclosure. I sit like I'm supposed to be there, and no one pays me much attention. Everyone stares at the stage. I hope most of them support Enki. He's the surprise favorite this election, the beautiful boy from the verde no one expected to make it to the finals. He will win — he has to — but just to make sure, I convinced Gil to help me with an art project.

A very public art project.

The glass dome turns smoky gray, gradually darkening the stadium



until I can only see the lights on the stage and the smaller lights on the floor, leading to the exits. A moment later, Gil slips into the seat beside me. He bites his lip and squeezes my knee.

"I can't believe they let you in!" I whisper.

He rests his head against mine and breathes deep. "You know me, menina," he says. "All I ever have to do is smile."

I jab him with my elbow. My best friend in the whole world is vain as a peacock, but that's all right. He's pretty enough to justify it.

Auntie Isa, the highest-ranking member of the government aside from Queen Oreste, walks onstage in a careful spotlight. Cheers and chants sweep over the stadium audience until my ears ring with the combined jubilation of ten thousand people. Gil yells Enki's name in unison with a hundred or so others nearby, while different factions for Pasqual and Octavio chant their support. I would join Gil, but I can hardly breathe. I've been planning this for weeks, ever since I first saw Enki at the start of the contests.

Auntie Isa has round cheeks and full lips, skin about as light as mine and smooth, thin eyebrows that seem faded somehow — the only part of her that looks old. Beneath her iconic red turban, her face is ageless and familiar. She's been sub-queen for more than fifty years — five Queens have reigned with her by their side, but she's never put herself forward for the royal position.

"My children," she says once the noise has quieted. "I welcome you to King Alonso Stadium. In a week, the whole city will once again vote for our next king. I have gathered the finalists here this afternoon so that you might ask questions of these fine young men who have put themselves forward this moon year."

Our cacophonous cheers might be deafening to some grande, but I don't notice. I've found my voice, and I'm screaming with the rest. Even if something goes wrong with my small project, it won't matter. I'm overwhelmed with the sense of being part of history.

\* \* \*



The first thing you should know about Enki is that he's dark. Darker than the coffee my mother and Auntie Yaha drink every morning, darker than the sky on a moonless night, not so dark as my pupils gone wide with pleasure, not so dark as ink. I have never seen anyone half so dark as him, though Auntie Yaha says she has. She travels to the flat cities sometimes, since she's an ambassador of Palmares Trê. She's even been to Salvador — what's left of it. Most people don't have the tech to maintain appearance standards, she says.

"Though they wouldn't, even if they could," she always says, and flicks her wrist in her way that always means contemptuous dismissal. "We don't wallow in our differences the way flatlanders do."

I never understood what that meant until Enki. His mother lived in Salvador, they say, though I can't believe it, because I've seen the pictures and I don't understand how *anyone* could live there. She was six months pregnant with him when the Aunties granted her a rare amnesty pass. She was too late for all but the most basic gene mods. There was no time to conform to our appearance regulations, and all the better for him. Enki was born dark as molasses, not so dark as tar. Enki was born beautiful, and when he smiles, you can see he knows it. Perhaps he isn't so sure of its importance, but how he delights in our admiration.

The second thing you should know about Enki is that he grew up in the verde. At the top of our pyramid a great white light shines above the bay. The Queen lives there, way up on the hallowed Tier Ten, with a few of the highest-ranking Aunties. Tiers Eight and Nine are for less important Aunties and their functionaries. And so on until you reach the bottom. Until you find the verde.

Algae vats line the fortified concrete of the pyramid base like a string of giant fake emeralds — glass baubles filled with hints of brown and roiling green. When the waves hit them, they shake and bob. I've been out in the bay a few times, just to see what we look like from the outside (it's so easy to forget, sometimes, that there *is* an outside, and we should never forget). Tour boats are popular in the evening, so



everyone can goggle at the flaming red sunset as it sparks off the metal and glass trusses. They say if you catch it at the right moment, the sun looks like a ruby placed by an orixá in the top of the pyramid.

I didn't think so. Mother took me out in celebration when she married Auntie Yaha. I didn't see a crown jewel, though. I saw blood. It drenched the great hollow pyramid of our city in the bay, spilling down the sides, over the megatrusses and transport pods and round plazas. I didn't look at the sun — even the protective glasses they gave us lay forgotten in my hand. I looked at the base, where the waves crash and the algae vats bobble. On the terraces between the vats, a few dozen people, comically tiny at such a distance, stared at us. None waved.

We call it the catinga, the stink, but they call it the verde. Green.

I'd never thought to ask why, before that moment. *How can they stand the smell?* is the standard question. The kind of idle discussion second only to the weather. But the base of our pyramid is beautiful. Amid all that blood of the dying sun, the verde was still alive.

The blue of the bay, the green of the verde. A rich girl on a boat, wary of a new mother and still grieving for her lost father.

And a boy? Is he among the inscrutable figures watching me watch them? Darker than the rest, but with the bright white of his smile, the light brown of his eyes and the skin of his palms? Does he laugh at us with his friends, or does he stare and wonder who I am?

Enki is from the verde, which means he grew up poor. It means he grew up with the ever-present stink of hydrogen-producing algae. It means that in the winter, when the cyclones roll in off the coast, he's stayed up nights listening to the thunderous crashing. It means that if he came up from the verde, unless he was very careful, he would carry its smell with him, its look and its poverty, and he would be judged for it.

The third thing you should know about Enki is that he wants to die.

He doesn't seem like that kind of boy, I know. They almost never do. But he wants to be a summer king, and so he wants to die.



Gil and I don't talk about it much. What's the point? That's what it means to be summer king. Their choice of the Queen wouldn't matter if they didn't die to make it.

But I can't help but think about that day on the boat, and the silent, almost motionless figures suspended in the lurid green.

What is it like, to grow up beautiful in the verde?

Three finalists, and one will be king. They're seated on three chairs, facing the crowd like degree candidates at university. Pasqual to the left, his eyes lowered, perhaps out of humility, but more likely because he knows how the wakas swoon over his lashes. Pasqual is tall; he looks like a dandelion — a weed with a wild thatch of unusually red-tinged hair that seems to draw the cameras to him like flies to a picnic. He arranges angelic orchestrations of classical music and could solve quadratic equations when he was three. When he smiles, even I have to catch my breath.

Octavio sits to Pasqual's left, and he stares straight out at the anonymous mass of us. He's the least affected of the three, as though he's indifferent to his presence on the stage. I'm surprised he's advanced this far, but then, the summer king contest is never predictable. Octavio is smaller, but not small. He rarely smiles and speaks only when the contest demands it. He isn't particularly beautiful, though I wouldn't call him plain. He writes, which is an unusual skill for a moon prince. Normally, they do something flash, like rivet surfing or capoeira or even just singing. He writes love poems to someone who even now remains anonymous, despite the efforts of a hundred thousand desperate girls and boys. Octavio's poems make my heart feel small in my chest. They make me want to cry and rage at the same time.

These two are brilliant; they are the sort of boys any waka would die to spend an evening with.

I hate them both.



Gil and I don't care that it's a moon year and none of these boys will have any real power. Let the king five years from now, the next sun year, pick a new Queen. We just want our beautiful boy, our true moon prince. We want Enki more than we've wanted anything before.

Enki leans back in his chair with a bright smile, like he's almost as giddy as the rest of us to see him onstage. Auntie Isa orates about the historic nature of our city and our unique system of king elections. Gil and I don't pay much attention. He's pulled out his holo projector and mine is on my lap. I've decided to turn them on close to the end of the event, when Enki is speaking. That way my stunt should get the most attention.

But then Auntie Isa says a name far more interesting than the endless nattering about first King Alonso and his original selection of first Queen Odete. "The distinguished ambassador from Tokyo 10, Ueda-sama, will have the honor of asking our three finalists the first question."

This prompts a strange mixture of nervous laughter and frenetic clapping. I remember Auntie Yaha talking about how some people see the ambassador's visit to the city as a sign that the Aunties might ease our restrictions on new tech. Tokyo 10 is famous for their nanotech and a new breakthrough for turning living humans into immortal data streams. I've read the reports, but the descriptions of Tokyo 10 might as well be a pre-dislocation fantasy for all I understand them. I flirt with our regulations for the sake of my projects, but I've never seen anything even approaching the technology that must seem normal to the ambassador.

But the man who shakes Auntie Isa's hand with a deferential smile looks strangely normal. No body-mod appendages like wings or webbed hands or antennae or the dozens of other things I've seen in pictures. His face has the smooth agelessness of Auntie Isa's, which makes me think he must be very old. His voice is soft but steady, with barely a trace of an accent.



“My thanks, Auntie Isa. It is an honor to be allowed to celebrate such an important cultural moment with all of you. My question for these three young men is simple. What plans do you have if you don’t win?”

Gil and I glance at each other, surprised and intrigued. No one has ever asked a question like that before, not even Sebastião, our top gossip caster. It’s rude in a way I can’t quite articulate — only an outsider like Ueda-sama could get away with asking it.

Pasqual answers first. “I want to be king,” he says. “This city is my city, and you are my people. I can think of no greater honor than to be your sacrifice.”

Gil claps; I roll my eyes. Pasqual is such a grandstander, with this booming, theatrical voice that would make a statue shiver. He wields his charisma like a bludgeon, so it doesn’t even matter that he didn’t answer the ambassador’s real question.

Octavio stays seated, a line between his eyebrows while he answers slowly and with great care.

“I have thought about it, of course I have, though my chief desire is the same as Pasqual’s. But were I to lose, I certainly wouldn’t regret living out my life — though with far fewer people watching on, I’m sure.” His small, self-deprecating smile makes me warm to him despite myself. I don’t want Octavio to be king, but I imagine he would be a good friend.

Enki stands for his response. He opens his mouth, but then closes it without speaking and walks with abrupt grace over to where Ueda-sama waits on the side of the stage.

“We haven’t met formally,” Enki says, extending his hand. Ueda-sama accepts the gesture smoothly, which reminds me of Auntie Yaha. The skills of career diplomats. “It’s a good question,” Enki says, his eyes dancing, “but didn’t anyone tell you not to take us seriously?”

I giggle — high and tight and brief, more to release tension than express mirth. As usual, Enki walks so close to the edge of acceptable behavior that his feet bleed. Sometimes I wonder if he could make the Aunties angry enough to disqualify him from the contest. It hasn’t



happened yet, but flirting with the ambassador of the most preeminent tech city in the world might just cross that line.

But Ueda-sama answers him before Auntie Isa can intervene. “I think,” says the ambassador from a city of immortals, “that a man proposing to die deserves the respect of that choice.”

Enki nods. “By reminding us of the lives we will abandon?”

Even Ueda-sama winces at the heart of his question, stripped raw beneath the bemused lash of Enki’s tongue. “You need a reminder?” he says.

Gil squeezes my hand hard enough to hurt, and I squeeze back.

The smile leaves Enki’s eyes, but it finds his mouth. He buries the long fingers of his left hand deep into dreadlocked hair. “No,” he says. “Sometimes I think about it. I would play peteca, because I’m not very good right now. I’d dance, of course.” He flashes a smile at the mostly bewildered wakas in the audience, which provokes relieved laughter. “Nothing special.”

“So you’ve decided it doesn’t matter if you lose that life?”

“Saying good-bye to it was the hardest thing I’ve ever done,” Enki says. They are standing very close together. “But I still chose this city,” he says, addressing the darkened mass of us, instead of the ambassador. “And I hope she will choose me.”

The cheers and stomping feet shake the floor of the stadium. Gil turns to me. I can’t hear him over the din, but I can read his lips. “Now?” he asks.

It’s earlier than I planned, but I nod impulsively. “Three, two, one,” I say, tapping his arm to the count. On *one*, we both switch on our projectors and hold them high above our heads.

I had to use two projectors to program the image because one wouldn’t have been enough to attract attention in such a large space. But the split image means Gil and I need to hold them at exactly the right height and distance from each other. From below I can’t tell if we’ve managed it. My shoulders ache; sweat traces an itchy line down my temple, but it seems that no one has noticed us at all.



Enki basks in the rapture of his chosen audience. My grimace turns half smile. But as the noise subsides, Auntie Isa thanks the ambassador for his question with the barest hint of annoyance. Enki bows slightly from his hips and walks back to the other finalists.

I bite my lip to distract myself from the fierce burn in my biceps and shoulder blades.

“Damn it!” I say, loud enough in the quieting stadium for my neighbors to glare at me. I imagined turning on the holo-sign to shocked attention and general approbation. I hadn’t prepared for this — what good is public art if no one even *notices*? Gil glances at me, probably waiting for a sign that I’ve had enough.

But then Enki pauses, turns his head, and squints. “Is that . . .” he says, peering out at us like he’s caught sight of Venus on a clear night.

He’s seen it. The familiar floating hologram of our pyramid city, but with a ghostly, dark handprint at its heart — a clear echo of Fidel, our last moon year king, who marked Serafina with his bloody hand. At the top rotate the words *The wakas of Palmares Trê’s want Enki*. The bottom of the pyramid glows green with miniature algae vats. Beneath that, the words *This year, our light comes up from the verde*.

He laughs and claps his hands. “I hope so,” he says, and sits back down. Auntie Isa ignores us entirely, focused as she is on restoring order and control to the event. But why should I care — the only one who matters laughed at my sign and now everyone must be staring at it, wondering who had the audacity to do such a thing. I imagine I can hear a few of the camera bots buzz a little closer overhead. If I’m lucky, this will rate a second- or third-tier gossip cast.

Gil and I grin at each other in a moment of pure triumph. But I don’t want to overstay my welcome, so we shut off the projectors just as the two security guards finally get around to asking us to leave.

*Sometimes I imagine the end of the world.*

*Not this end of the world. The other one, four hundred years ago.*



*You know those pictures they show us on Memorial Day? The thousands upon thousands of tiny white crosses sticking out of the dirt like daisies. The char pits after the bodies piled too high to bury, belching clouds of black smoke that spread like oil above Rio and São Paulo. It's strange for a boy to look at that, no matter how long ago, and not imagine how it must have been. It must have looked like Armageddon when the cold came, when the dirty bombs devastated Pernambuco. Hundreds of millions more died in the nuclear wars and the freezing and the southern migrations.*

*I know all that, but it's not what I imagine.*

*I imagine I'm a Queen. Odete, sitting in a bomb shelter somewhere on the coast of Bahia, in a country that had once been Brazil, and trying to force a new world from the screaming mouth of the old one. What wouldn't I do? What wouldn't I create? Who wouldn't I sacrifice, if it would keep the world from ever dying again?*

*So I take my lover, my king, and I put him on a pedestal and I cut him down. A man, like the ones who ruined the world.*

*I take from the world I know: Candomblé, which always respected a woman's power. Catholicism, which always understood the transformation of sacrifice. And Palmares, that legendary self-made city the slaves carved themselves in the jungle, proof that a better world can be built from a bad one.*

*And so, Palmares Três. Odete's utopia was even more improbable than my birth, and yet here we both are. Don't you ever wonder how we came to such a strange place from the way the world was before?*

*When the world is destroyed, someone must remake the world. I think you'd call that art.*

All of Palmares Três will vote for our next summer king in less than five hours, so of course our social studies teacher picked today to give us an exam. Even Bebel begged him not to, and I swear she thinks exams are only marginally less enjoyable than parties. And so my classmates and I find ourselves hunched over lesson arrays in one of the exam rooms, high cubicle partitions blocking me from seeing



anything but the tops of their heads. I tried to study, despite the extreme temptation to do nothing but stare at gossip feeds all day. My holo-sign didn't make a huge sensation, but a few casters mentioned it. Not the great triumph made lurid in my fantasies, but I don't mind. Just that taste of performance makes me realize how small and confining my art has grown lately. Even Gil and my occasional excursions with a can of grafiteiro spray seem tame compared with this glimpse of what I could do.

But back in the real world, I'm a student, not a famous artist. I shake my head and start to write.

Bebel finishes early. Since we aren't allowed to leave before the period ends, my most competitive classmate leans back conspicuously in her chair and lets out a long, satisfied sigh.

"Were you coming or taking a test?" I mutter, just loud enough for Paul and Gil to strangle their laughter. The teacher looks up sharply from the front of the room but doesn't say anything.

The ordeal is over soon enough. I'm grateful because he gave us one softball: *Explain the evolution of the moon and sun year traditions of the summer king ceremony. Why do moon year kings only have a symbolic role in reaffirming the current Queen, rather than choosing a new one?*

Given all the history lessons even the low-brow gossip casters have been giving us for the past month, the answer is almost fun to write. Maybe that's why Bebel sounded so satisfied? But no, I refuse to give her even that much credit.

I run through the standard answer — two hundred years ago, the king Luiz was the youngest king ever elected and the most popular in a very long time. In his honor, that Queen legislated that all moon kings should be wakas, or under thirty, and that sun year kings, elected when the Queens have reached their two-term limit, should all be respected adults. So they stopped the original practice of only allowing a selection "in gesture or blood," and waited until after the sun year king spoke his choice to cut his throat. Only during the suddenly symbolic moon year did they keep with tradition; with just the current



Queen allowed in the room, her selection for the next term is an inevitable formality. I add to this some of my own speculation: that Luiz's election coincided with the first major life-extension technologies. With grandes suddenly living fifty, a hundred years longer than they had before, wakas had even less of a voice in politics. What better time to make sure that they always had a waka king? Cynical, maybe, but it still works. I haven't paid this much attention to politics in my life. Our last sun year, the contest was dignified and reserved — and I hardly remember any of it.

I finish barely a minute before the timer shuts off our arrays. I stretch and stand up, looking around for Gil. We have plans for this evening.

"Excited about the election?"

It's Bebel, sounding entirely too pleased with herself. She's a huge Pasqual fan, of course, because Bebel could only like someone as self-consciously perfect as herself.

"Enki will win if this city has any sense at all," I say, just to annoy her.

I succeed admirably; her thick eyebrows flash upward and her shoulders rise defensively. "I think they're all very good," she says with her trademark touch of holier-than-thou superiority.

"Maybe Octavio will get through," says Paul, blithely coming between us. "He ran circles around Pasqual in that debate."

Bebel blows back an errant puff of hair, raises her flawless voice. "Pasqual is a composer, not a politician!"

Not too many people can stand up to Bebel in a passion. "Pasqual is great," Paul says, holding up his hands. "I just think Octavio did better in the debate."

"A summer king," says another girl in our class, "should be good at politics *and* art."

"Even in the moon year?" Bebel asks.

"Especially then."

"Maybe," Gil says, "he should respect art and understand politics."



"Maybe," I say, grinning, "it helps when you win the debates *and* dance like a god."

Bebel sighs. "Yes, June, we all know you love Enki."

"Anyone with a soul loves Enki," I say.

Paul nods slowly. "I think they're all great, and if Enki invited me back to his house, you know I wouldn't complain, but . . . I would never declare. I couldn't."

"I wanted to declare," says another boy, drawn into our conversation. "But my papai begged me not to. He said he'd miss me if I were gone. But I thought . . . well, I could have been a *king*, you know? It seems worth it."

Paul shudders. "Not to me. You couldn't pay me. I want to die old, two hundred and fifty at least."

Bebel gives him a derisive smile. "Well, aren't you the world's oldest waka, Paul?"

"I'm just trying to be sensible," he says, but he looks away. He knows everyone is laughing at him. No wonder he doesn't like Enki. My favorite candidate might be brilliant and wild and creative, but no one could accuse him of being sensible.

Beside me, Gil has gone unusually still. I tap his shoulder, a question. "I thought about it," he says softly, though we can all hear.

I feel something drop in my stomach — shock or fear or anger, how could I know which? He hasn't told me this before, but maybe I should have known.

"My mamãe never said anything," he says. "She knew what I was thinking and she never tried to stop me."

"She didn't care?" Bebel asks, stupid even by her own standards. Gil's mother is young, almost a waka, and he's put up with more than his share of derision because of it.

"She cared more than anything. She loved me enough to let me go and I loved her enough to stay."

Bebel nods slowly. The conversation continues, thoughtful and



excited at once, but I don't really hear it. A familiar sensation grips me: I'm getting an idea.

I think about Gil and his mother, about Queen Odete and Queen Oreste, about Enki. I think about the millions in our city all waiting to hear who will be king. I think about the mystifying, endless chain of events that brought us here. Four hundred years ago, there was no Palmares Três, no Aunties, no summer kings, no elections. Four hundred years ago, there was just plague and war and destruction. Four hundred years ago, the boys that I love would probably be dead, because at its peak, the Y Plague wiped out 70 percent of all males. They're fine now, of course. Palmares Três is proud of its perfectly even gender demographics. But still, it's as though I can feel the strength of all our ancestors bearing us up. They are the heavy trunk and thick boughs of a tree on which I am only the tiniest budding leaf.

I'm dimly aware of Gil steering me toward my bag and out of the exam room. But the world has fallen away. My thoughts race too far and too fast. Trees, I'm thinking, and life and ancestors written in me and across me, *yes* that's it, *across me*, and now the way forward clears like a window wiped of frost.

I've discovered my next art project. Its immediate grip eases, and I realize that we're outside. I stop in my tracks and turn to him.

"I need to get into your mamãe's cosmetic stash," I say.

This is a new request, and a little daring, since his mother has a cosmetic and costumer license that allows her to get regulated tech. But Gil just shrugs. "Anything for a new idea," he says. "What is it this time?"

"She won't miss it too much, I promise," I say, and kiss him on his cheek.

For a moment, I wonder if his eyes are a little too distant. Did some part of that conversation back in school disturb him? Stupid Bebel implying that his mamãe was too young to care about him properly?



But then he shakes his head and does a little shuffle-dance and looks so much like the carefree, gentle Gil I love that I stop worrying.

“What’s the project?” he asks, like he always does.

I hold his hand and tell him about my tree.

Five hours later, I am watching a light sink into my skin. The knot of tiny crystalline tubes has submerged halfway, but I need more skin implant gel to finish the job. I want to implant two branches’ worth of lights today, from my collarbone to my elbow on my left side. Today’s final one glitters in the crook of my elbow. I almost like how it looks, with my hyper-permeable skin lifting gently at its edges. My skin is usually too dark to see the veins underneath, but the gel reveals their intricate tracery. Still, my skin is getting more opaque by the minute. I click my tongue and look at the door hopefully, as though that will make Gil hurry. I misjudged the amount of gel I needed, which posed a problem, given that we’d used the last from Gil’s mamãe’s supply closet. But you need a cosmetics license to buy even the most low-level body-modding tech, and they don’t give those to wakas. Gil left half an hour ago, promising to find some. I hope he doesn’t get caught. But I feel safe enough; he never does.

And perhaps my thoughts summon him, because the door slides open a moment later, and he dashes in with a flushed smile and a clear tube in his hand.

“Have they finished counting the votes yet?” he asks, tossing it to me.

I pop open the tube and smear on just a little. My skin tingles but it doesn’t hurt. “Since five seconds ago when you checked your fono? How did you get this?”

“A vendor I know in Gria Plaza,” he says. “I was afraid I’d miss the announcement.”

“But you still went?” I say as the light finally stops sinking just below my top layer of skin.



He shakes his head and turns up the volume on Sebastião. It won't be much longer now. "I couldn't leave you like that, June," he says.

Gil rubs my upper arm; my lights flash in his wake. I'm impressed with even this minor realization of my great idea. The colored lights came from Gil's mamãe as well, though I was sure they'd never been intended for skin implanting. My latest art project is a body tree, all done in colored skin lights. When I'm done, the branches and leaves should travel all the way down my torso and up my neck. The tips of the branches will brush against my unadorned cheeks. It should be very dramatic, but at the moment, I look a little strange.

On the left-hand holo, they're showing a recap of the final competition. Octavio's poem is first, and if he spoke it to me just then, I might be tempted to forget even Enki. The poem speaks of longing and love — and I have to wonder if the one he loves is dead, because how else could they resist him? And how else could he leave them?

Pasqual is next, and the plaintive string section playing the melody of "Manhã de Carnaval" gives me shivers. He plays the guitar from the front of the stage.

"I'd forgotten how pretty that song can be," Gil says a little wistfully, into the silence that follows his last note.

"Traitor," I say again, without much conviction.

And then it's Enki's turn. We've already seen this once, but Gil and I reach for each other at the exact same moment. His pulse thrums beneath my fingertips and my own lights flash like falling stars. The wakas in the audience stop their screaming. They're like us: breathless and silent, waiting for their beautiful boy.

Here's how Enki becomes the summer king:

He walks into the spotlight dressed like a slave in old-Brazil: off-white burlap sackcloth trousers, ragged at the hem, short-sleeved shirt with a jagged gash of a collar. His ear-length dreadlocks are loose and



lighter colored than I've seen them. Later, we will learn that he has snuck out of the city to literally rub road dust into his hair.

His feet are bare, like the poorest refugee from the flat cities. Like someone unaware of even the most basic courtesy due the Queen of the most powerful city in South America.

There's a gasp when he first lifts his right leg. The skin on the soles of his feet is even lighter than mine, and I'm as light-skinned as anyone is allowed to be in Palmares Trê.

He puts his foot down. Pauses. Lifts up the other.

Still balanced on one leg, he spins. We're so tense, so worried and exhilarated, that laughter pops like a bubble. It's gentle, barely there, but Enki smiles. He puts his foot down and now, again, he's barefoot on the stage.

His rudeness of going barefoot would be bad enough in the presence of the Aunties.

But he's facing Queen Oreste.

We wonder what will happen. Our worries change from *Maybe he won't win* to *Maybe the Queen will turn him out of the city*.

"My Queen," says Enki. His voice isn't very low, but it's smooth as a guitar.

He doesn't bow, though he's a boy, because only the summer king doesn't bow to the Queen.

For a very long time, she is still. She doesn't seem to breathe, and neither do we. Her eyebrows are drawn together — her only sign of emotion.

"What is this, Enki?" says the Queen. "Do you not honor me?"

Enki's smile is wide and bright. "I give you the greatest honor," he says.

"You are dressed in the manner of a slave," says she, "in a city where there are none."

"There aren't," he agrees, though now his smile seems too sharp for his words. "But there is the verde."

"And what of it?"



"I am dressed in the manner of my people."

"Are we not your people?" And we see that the Queen is torn between amusement and anger. Enki is leading her in a dance, but has not tapped out its rhythm.

"You are everything to me."

"And yet you come before us hardly as a king."

"I come before you," says Enki, "as a simple verde boy."

He takes a quick step back, almost skipping, and his dust-lightened hair bobs around his ears.

"I will leave you as a king."

And when the drums start, that's how he dances: as a king.

Gil's mother is a tailor, so she always has piles of cloth she doesn't know what to do with. Gil says he's sick of clothes, he doesn't know why I like them so much, and I say that I'm an artist, and an artist who neglects personal adornment is like a singer who can't keep a tune.

Anyway, Gil is full of shit, because when I take the time to make him beautiful, he's happy as a cock. He's just too lazy to think about it, and he knows he'd be gorgeous in sackcloth. I love Gil's mother because she doesn't care what we do. With so many orders for the celebration of a new summer king, she can hardly see past silk and sequins, so when we come racing into her studio practically screaming with joy, she tosses some fabric at us and mutters something about a new turban for one of the Aunties.

"There's tape in the basket," she calls, "but stitch what you can — I still need some!"

"No worries," I say, sifting through the swatches of fabric with steady hands. "I know how to use a needle."

She grins at me. "Just 'cause I taught you, filha. Now go on, and take care of my boy."

This doesn't even get a rise out of Gil. He just laughs and waves her on. "June's Auntie Yaha got us tickets to the reception tonight. We're



about to meet the summer king himself, Mamãe,” he says. “I’m burning so bright, you could as well take care of a meteor.”

Gil’s mother laughs, but her eyes are frowning. “That Enki,” she says, “*he* may be a meteor, but you’re just a boy, Gil. He’ll burn you up.”

Gil puts a mocking hand on his heart, though he knows his mother is serious. “Oh, but to burn up in that comet’s tail,” he says, and then I’m laughing, I can’t help myself.

“It’s all right,” I say before she can start again. “Enki won’t notice us anyway. He’ll have the Queen to worry about, remember?” The king isn’t the Queen’s consort in any technical sense, but he’ll be expected to stay close to her during his first public appearance after the election.

She still seems hesitant, as though there’s something she’s forgotten to say and she can’t remember if it’s important. “Oh, Oreste. I thought she would eat him alive on that stage! I remember how it was with Fidel . . .” She would have been the same age as Fidel back then, I realize. Gil’s mamãe is so mature it’s easy to forget that she’s nearly as young as us. She laughs wistfully. “We were mad that year, I swear. I don’t know how any of us survived it.”

I remember seeing Enki’s name flash across the holo; the screaming of the crowd as they showered him with feathers and flowers and love notes. I remember how happily he smiled and how carefully he walked in his bare feet to accept the circlet of cacao from the Queen.

“We’ll survive it,” I say, while I remember that our kings never will.

We walk into the ballroom at the top of Royal Tower precisely one hour late. Auntie Yaha is there with Mother. Auntie Yaha smiles when she sees the two of us and she waves, though she doesn’t break away from Mother and another man I eventually recognize as the ambassador Ueda-sama. The views from up here are majestic and nearly panoramic. A corner of the ballroom floor is a giant glass bubble that projects out into the city from a precise angle, such that you can see all the way down through the hollow body of Palmares Três and into the



bright green-blue waters of the bay. Tonight, a web of lights glitters all the way down to the water. To mark Enki's election, the legendary lights of our pyramid city have turned celebratory. They flash and sparkle like the implants in my skin, and I'm grateful that I took the time to place a few more before we arrived here. Now, if you squint, it looks like it might be a branch of a tree. At least that's what Gil swore, and he knows I'd kill him if he lied. This party is more than exclusive; no more than five hundred people have been allowed into this special room. Five hundred well-connected, influential people, and even Auntie Yaha must have had to call in a favor to get Gil and me inside. Camera bots buzz overhead, broadcasting us to the rest of the city on this celebratory, festive night.

The lights of Palmares Três are white, so we "sparkle on the bay" as the song says, though if you ask me they could use some color. I press my nose into the smudge-proof glass and make out the greening hump of A Castanha, one of the four volcanic islands that dot the bay like petrified gods. Up here, suspended above the water, I feel as though I can do anything.

Enki hasn't arrived yet. The dozen wakas in the room have been eyeing Gil since we entered. I outdid myself this time, putting him in black, which he likes, but with every element subtly asymmetric — not so much lopsided as rakish. Myself I clothed as simply as possible: a strapless wrap of blue secured with a blue flower, and a matching one in my ear.

One does not, as Gil's mother would tell me, upstage glowing skin.

"Would you dance?" Gil asks, extending his one gloved hand toward me in a gesture so formal I nearly laugh. But it also feels right in this enclave of the Aunties — and now of our very own summer king. I take Gil's hand.

"My pleasure," I tell him, just as formally.

No one else is dancing, which is exactly why he asked me.

The music is classical: so familiar I could sing the bass line in my sleep, but it's still insistent for all that. That's the thing about samba.



Four hundred years and the famous standards still don't sound old so much as familiar. Gil and I have joked that if we hear "Eu Vim da Bahia" one more time, we might throw ourselves into the bay, but then I'm caught off guard by João Gilberto's deceptively difficult rhythmic patterns, his gentle voice, and I think, okay, there's worse music to be forced to listen to.

The song changes to something faster, good for dancing. I'm not a great dancer, but I know how to follow. Gil is the best sort of partner: one who makes you look more skilled than you are.

I feel when Mother notices us. In the corner of my eye, I can see her go still and turn away from the ambassador, who seems confused. Auntie Yaha purses her lips and I smile. Gil's in another world, of course. I'll tell him what a scene we made when we're done and he's had time to come back down. Gil dances like an orixá, and he knows it. He's charming and smart and gorgeous and all the wakas we know are crazy for him. I'm lucky he's my best friend.

We're moving fast, I have to pay attention if I don't want to make an ass of myself. But even so, I'm getting lost in the rhythm. The *one-two-three* that my feet know better than my brain. The way my hips shake and the feel of the polymer silk sliding over my breasts. Gil spins me one way and then the other. I laugh and he dips me. I kick up one leg, not caring that anyone can see up my dress or that I'm in danger of losing my shoe. Gil smiles that secretive, crooked smile. He pulls me up and then his arms are on my hips and I'm flying above his head as the samba pulses around us and I see the city glittering beneath me.

This is the best moment of my life.

And then I see him.

He's on the edge of the glass floor, alone, though a crowd surrounds him like a horseshoe. He's looking at us with those bright eyes. Maybe Gil can tell that something has happened because he puts me down gently and turns around.



Even I can see the spark when Gil meets Enki's eyes. The air leaves the room. Or maybe that's just me, wondering if my heart might fall out of my chest when I lose the comforting warmth of Gil's hands. He heads toward Enki, still dancing, though I don't think he realizes it.

Enki is dressed simply, though he no longer wears the "verde boy" clothes from his final performance. Leather sandals, white pants, and a loose blue shirt. He looks like he might be selling cupuaçu in Gria Plaza, and he's captured the attention of every person in the room.

But Enki only has eyes for Gil.

Should I have known this would happen? I feel my disappointment like some foreign object lodged in my chest. Completely irrational.

It's like what Gil's mamãe told me, when Mother first got engaged to Auntie Yaha five months after my papai died. *Love is complicated*, she said, *and it never works the way you think it should*.

Gil and Enki don't speak. Or maybe they do, but none of us can hear it. Maybe in the way Gil touches Enki's palms, the way Enki's feet start that shuffle-shuffle, there's a conversation. *I've loved you for so long* and *You're beautiful, won't you dance?* I didn't bring a fono with me, but there's a holo array on the far wall, behind the band, and I can see them reflected in it from different angles. Gil and I have been in the background of a dozen gossip items — inevitable, when your step-mother is an Auntie — but this is the first time anyone will remember our names.

Gil, the one who caught the eye of the new summer king.

June, the one left behind.

Above me, the buzzing camera bots let me know I'm in their eyes, a lone figure suspended over the city. I wonder how my skin lights will look on the holos. Can they see the swirls? The colors? Can they see how frantically they pulse when I look at the two of them, together?

I can't tell if Gil is leading, or Enki. They move slowly — the song has switched to "Velha Infância" and though I know they both could be flashy, they instead make a dance of their intimacy. Enki pauses,



still and watchful as a deer. His hand is raised. Fingertips hardly touching, Gil moves in a circle around him — a satellite orbiting our newly chosen moon. Enki smiles at him, full and uninhibited, and my hands cover my mouth, my lights strobe helplessly.

Gil closes his eyes for a moment. He stops moving. Slowly, he sinks to his knees like he's falling through water. The singer falters and then it's just the violin and the guitar and the drums, insistent as a heartbeat.

Gil kneels there, head bent, penitent and worshipful before our new summer king. Alone on the dance floor, I am the only one facing Enki. I'm the only one who can see his surprise, the slight bob in his throat as he regards the top of my best friend's head. I expect Enki to touch his shoulder, like the Queen would a petitioner. I expect him to say something that acknowledges Gil's gesture without exposing too much of himself.

But this is Enki, and I should know better.

"Coração," Enki whispers. I have never heard his voice in person before. It is the same, but it makes me shiver — a ghost from my dreams has entered my waking life. Gil's shoulders begin to tremble. I think he is crying. I want to go to him, and I know I have no place in this.

Enki squats, bending so his head is below Gil's. He puts one hand under Gil's chin and lifts.

"Thank you," Enki mouths.

And then they kiss.

Have I stumbled? Or just lost the feeling in my feet? Because I feel the smooth glass of the floor through the thin fabric of my dress and I think I've fallen. I wonder if I've stopped breathing. Suddenly, Auntie Yaha is beside me.

"June, June," she says, so insistently I wonder how long she's tried to get my attention. I look up at her, expecting disapproval, and getting something that confuses me. Her lips frown, but her eyes are sad. It's her eyes that make me take her hand.

"Come," she says, "filha, come. Your mother and I will take you home."