

# **Bleeding Red**

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*Excerpts from a story about trying to save the world... from itself.*

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# 1 - In the Beginning

Before there was the world, there was a dark ashen shell. From a crack in this shell sprang a great bird with plumage of light itself and wings that spanned over all of time. The heart of the bird became the world; its feathers, the stars; its wings, the sky; and the shell blew away into dust and became the darkness in which we take refuge. We are but a single light aloft in the darkness.

As does the world, the heart of this bird burns brightly - so bright, and so hot, that not even the bird can bear its own heart. The world heard the cries, and saw the fire, like blood, bleeding red from within the heart.

One man approached a river flowing with the bird's fiery blood. He stooped down and washed his hands in this river. As he stood up, the fire licked at his body and enveloped him, and rather than die he began to shine with the bird's heart. His people followed him, then his people's people, then their people as well, until thousands upon thousands washed themselves in the river of fire.

They each became beacons, bearers of the bird's blood. As they walked away, they carried with them fragments of the bird's heart, fragments of the world itself. With these fragments, the bird's fire was spread out across the breadth of the world, and no longer burned through. With the help of this man and his followers, the bird was once more able to bear its heart and give warmth and light to the world without destruction.

It is our duty today to spread bird's fire to warm the world without burning it through, as countless others have before us. It is in their memory, and in the spirit of the man who first washed himself in fire, that we don the red cloth and reach across the world.

We are the **Rangers**.

## 2 - They Dreamed A Dream

The night was most decidedly not young. It was one of those nights that happened to be, in fact, almost over. In just an hour or so, the sun would come up over the horizon and another day would begin. Those on the night shift were beginning to go home, and others were just now preparing to go to work.

And then others, like Sebastian Howards, were beginning their day off by sleeping in. The whispering, however, was keeping him between waking and dreaming, a most uncomfortable place to be for a tired physician like himself.

“Won’t you do it?” it nagged him. “You should, you should... No one will miss you if you do... It’s been so quiet, you should do it quickly before someone really will miss you...”

Sebastian rolled over in his bed, staring at the wall with bleary half-open eyes. Once more, another restless night. Once more, waking up, unable to recollect exactly what he had dreamed, only that it had left him with an uneasy and impatient feeling.

He sat up and shook his head. How pathetic of himself, he mused. Every story began the same way – some unsung hero receiving the vision of a damsel in distress. Empowered by this sight and his impeccable morals, the hero sets out to save the mysterious lady of his dreams. He best not, then, make a fuss of his own dream: the faded silhouette of a queen with golden eyes and jet black hair.

Sebastian decided that he would be unable to fall be asleep, and so he got up and began to get dressed. He bypassed the white and black scrubs hanging in his closet, and instead went for faded green denim pants and a plain black short-sleeved shirt. He paused in pulling on his shoes, and glanced out the small window. It was still dark outside, but the birds were beginning their incessant shrieking of the day. The sky was just now going from black to blue, the stars beginning to fade away, but three of the four moons were still vaguely visible, like spirits.

By the time he had gone across the compound for breakfast, the sun was poking up over the watery horizon.

“Ozzy,” he said, startled, seeing one of the field Rangers still inside. “Shouldn’t you be...?”

Sebastian remembered the first time he met Ozzy in person. He had gawked stupidly, looking down at the name on the paper, and back up at the woman standing before him.

“What kind of a name is Ozzy for a girl?” he had asked her. She glared at him with gold eyes.

“The kind you won’t forget,” she threatened.

Yes, he was sure it had to have been a threat. Almost everything Ozzy did was threatening in one form or another. She could be wearing a pink dress and doting on little gold-eyed children, and still have the air of a serial killer on the run.

“Shouldn’t I be what,” said woman replied flatly. Sitting down on a bench in the main corridor, she stared up at Sebastian.

“Nice hair by the way,” and she made a flipping gesture with her wrist towards the back of her head. Sebastian reached up and felt the top of his hair, and saw his reflection in the tinted windows, that a large chunk of dark hair at the back of his head was upturned. He hurriedly ran his fingers through his hair, trying to smooth it down.

“So Ducky,” Ozzy continued, crossing her legs. “Going to breakfast? Hold off for a bit, and sit with me.” She patted the empty seat next to her on the bench.

“Yeah, sure,” Sebastian agreed, and sat next to Ozzy. They were in the same unit, and although he (just like everyone else) found her frightening, he knew that Ozzy was not at all like other women. She wasn’t concerned with feelings or implications, and she hardly cared what she looked like. This was the woman who came back from an assignment unbathed and wearing the same clothes for four days in a row, covered in mud and possibly droppings, and her first concern was how much of her paycheck she could spare for casino night.

But today must have been her day off too, because although she was wearing the bright red pants and the tough black boots of her uniform, she was wearing nothing over her sleeveless black undershirt – no jacket, no gloves, no belt.

“You really don’t have any other clothes, do you?”

“Nnnnnnope,” Ozzy said, absolutely unconcerned. “I’m not going to buy clothes when I get them free.”

Sebastian chuckled, and turned sideways on the bench to face Ozzy. There was something in her eyes, a look on her face... Something was up.

Ozzy looked over at him, feigning cluelessness.

“What?” she asked innocently. “Is something the matter?”

“You’re thinking something,” Sebastian accused her.

“You’re walking on dangerous ground, Ducky. What could I possibly be thinking?” Ozzy sat up, and stared down the man defiantly – an easy task with her threatening air and impressive height.

‘Ducky’ was an astute man. He was not going to let this slide by so easily.

“You’re wondering,” he said, and was interrupted.

“Wondering isn’t the same as thinking.”

“It is absolutely the same difference, now shut up and listen to me. You’re wondering if I’m wondering – or thinking, whatever – you want to know if we have the same thing on our minds.”

Ozzy crossed her arms, her eyebrows raised in a suspicious and doubting manner.

“And that thing would be...?” she asked.

Sebastian opened his mouth, and paused. He slowly looked away. All stories began the same way, didn't they? With a cliché calling to a hero, who dupes himself in answering.

Ozzy leaned forward, her gold eyes glittering with a childish malice.

“You don't know, do you?”

“It burns!” he blurted out suddenly.

“Not that,” Ozzy hissed. “That's disgusting, you're a doctor, you should be able to keep that –“

“No, not that!” Sebastian groaned. “No, not that at – look, this is what I meant!”

He leaned over and pulled at the collar of his shirt so Ozzy could see his collarbone and part of chest. There was a tattoo there, thin intertwining lines of text, like snakes or knots. The small letters were glowing slightly, barely visible if it weren't for the shade of the corridor and the general lack of light coming through the window.

Ozzy shrugged silently, agitating Sebastian.

“So now you're playing the nonbeliever!”

“No, I just don't see where you're going with this, being all sneaky and whatnot. Your mark itches a little, so what? It just means you'll get an assignment soon.” But even as she said that, she could tell that Ducky knew she was lying through her teeth. He was annoying like that, and he would never tell her how he was always able to figure everything out. Her fingers curled around the edge of the bench, and tightened.

Sebastian rolled his eyes.

“Alright, fine. I'm just saying that almost nothing has been happening. My mark has been reacting every night for the past week, you would think that if something were to happen by now, it would have. But no, nothing is happening – not that I'm complaining, I like the break. But! Listen, Ozzy!”

“I don't have to.” She reached up and ruffled Sebastian's hair, making that section in the back stick up again.

“I know exactly what you're about to say, Ducky. Your mark is reacting, but nothing is happening. Marks are warnings, not prophets. So, barring that your mark can actually tell the future – in which case, there would only be half the Rangers there are now – the something is happening. It's been happening for the past week, and it obviously hasn't been resolved because it keeps reacting. Either something is wrong with you, which I doubt, or there's something wrong that we haven't fixed yet, because we can't

see it. Am I right?"

Sebastian grumbled something under his breath.

"Furthermore, in order to confirm that the problem isn't in fact, on your side only, you came to me and tried to drop hints, probe the sand, see if there was something I had buried, if I was having the same problem."

She patted him on the shoulder, and grinned.

"Oh, and a few things I have to tell you. I love you, but I'm not stupid. I've been having the same problem with my mark too – trust me, we're not alone. Oh, and... fix your hair again before I decide to – nah, too late."

"What's too late?"

"Oh, nothing... Later, Duckbutt!" She left him there, on a bench in a main corridor, all alone to wonder – or think, same difference. Whatever he was doing, he now had the information he had wanted. No, he was not alone.

Ozzy had felt her mark react too, despite the ongoing peace around her. There was no war, no storms, no earthquakes or fires or wild rampages, or anything else that the Ranger's mark would respond to. There was just a burning itching feeling, like a rash of the mind.

"I see her too," she said to herself as she left the main building of the compound, and walked outside. The sun was up now, the sunrise reflecting off the sea.

"And I have a pretty good idea of who she is, and what she wants. It's just a matter of time."

Ozzy stretched her arms over her head until she felt her shoulders and spine creak and crack. In her dreams, she had seen a woman with dark hair and fierce gold eyes. It made Ozzy uneasy. Every time, she felt as though she just might be looking at someone she once knew, a long time ago.

The woman was always smoldering, not quite on fire, but with a thick smoky aura that seemed to cackle like a thundercloud and cause hair to rise on end. It was always very vivid, with the woman speaking to her, urging her to do something. What it was though, Ozzy did not know.

"Next time I see you, lady," Ozzy addressed the woman in her dreams. "I'm going to punch you in the face so you'll shut up and let me sleep."