

THE CITY
BLEEDS
GOLD

LUCY SAXON

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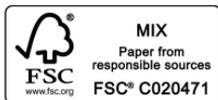
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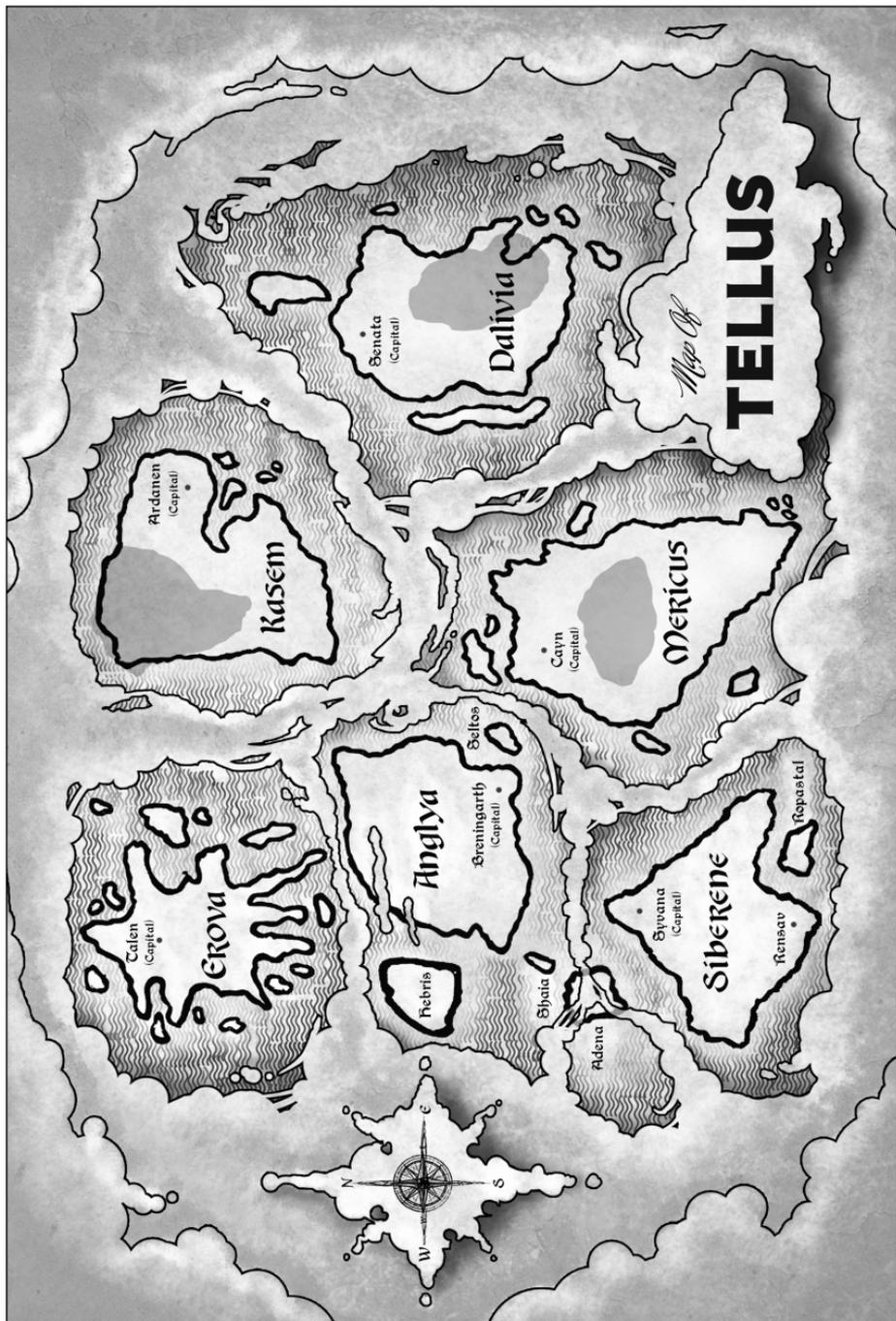
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Books by Lucy Saxon

Take Back the Skies

The Almost King



Map Of TELLUS

Map Of

Senata
(Capital)

Dalivia

Ardanen
(Capital)

Kasem

Cayn
(Capital)

MERICUS

Beltes

Anglya

Greningarth
(Capital)

Calen
(Capital)

GROVA

Repaatal

Sivana
(Capital)

SIBERENE

Rensar

Hebris

Blyais

Adena



1

It was well past dark, not that anyone would know it by the activity in the city centre. Every lamp at every street corner shone brightly, and the noise from all the people still about was deafening. The blond-haired teen wandering through it all with his hands in his pockets was unsurprised to hear the sound of squalling sprogs irritated at being kept awake so late. It was a far cry from the deserted late-night lower city he was used to – the air was thick with anticipation and the sharp tang of bleach as the city went through its annual pre-festival cleaning.

Everywhere he looked, crowds of people in olive-green work uniforms were scrubbing and sweeping and dusting every inch of stone and metal in the lower city until it was pristine, ready for the most important event of the year. Soon, he mused, the troupers and merchants would arrive and set up their stalls, and then the tourists would appear, undoing all the hard work of making the city gleam. The only time the lower city ever got any kind of attention, and it would be gone in the blink of an eye.

The Festival of the Goddess began every year on the summer solstice and lasted for five hectic days of feasting,

dancing and – in many cases – debauchery. Everyone in Erova who was able came to the royal city of Talen to praise the Goddess for keeping them healthy and prosperous over the past year, and to gain her favour for the upcoming harvest. They needed a good harvest now more than ever; a lot was riding on this year's festival. The weather hadn't been stellar over the recent months – too dry when rain was needed, and a far colder winter than Erova was used to – and if the murmurings from the outland farmers were anything to go by, they'd need nothing short of a Goddess-given miracle to have enough food to feed all of Erova once the Anglyan government had taken its ever-increasing share.

As he walked, the teen's hazel eyes were sharp beneath his messy fringe, taking in that which most would overlook. His pace was slow but purposeful, drawing eyes to his movements – in part due to him being almost a head taller than the rest of the crowd. He caught his name whispered a few times, and smirked to himself; people always thought they were being so subtle in their recognition. He made eye contact with several people, each of them giving him a brief nod of deference before quickly and carefully getting back to their work. He would never get used to having this effect on people.

'Daniel!' He looked up at the call of his name, the smile not coming as quickly as it should have in return for the blinding one bestowed upon him. Emilie's light brown hair bounced in its perfect curls as she hurried towards him, not hesitating to lean up and peck him on the lips. 'I was wondering where you had got to! You're missing all the fun, come on!' Without waiting for a response, she slid her hand

down to take his, dragging him in the direction of a small courtyard not too far from the river. He'd heard that the troupers might be causing trouble and had been heading there anyway, but he wasn't really in the mood for distractions. He'd had a long day.

'So where is this fun I'm missing, exactly?' he asked lightly, earning an eye-roll from the girl at his side.

'Oh, don't start! Look, isn't it beautiful?' She directed his attention to the lower courtyard, which they could see beyond a cracked stone railing. Obviously some troupers had arrived early; a shimmering bronze tent had been erected in the centre of the stone square, a bright blue pennant flying from the central pole. Acrobats, then. 'Imagine how incredible everything will look once the festival is all set up! Oh, I just can't wait – it's going to be spectacular!' she gushed, sliding her hand into the crook of his arm and leaning against his shoulder.

He allowed it, but made no move to bring her closer. His eyes had landed on two men in work uniforms lurking around the back of the shining tent, shadowed by the structure. One man was rail-thin with wide, desperate eyes and trembling hands clenched tight around a leather money pouch. His companion was taller, broader, holding a small glass bottle that flashed green in the light. Recognising the gold insignia on the bottle, Daniel grimaced. He hadn't realised the Meyers brothers were working for Diora now. They'd been dangerous enough by themselves, selling all manner of illegal substances, but with that kind of backing Daniel would have to think carefully about his next step in getting them under control. If they were still selling when

the festival rolled around, the Goddess only knew what kind of trouble it would cause.

It was things like this that made it hard for Daniel to truly enjoy festival time. He'd always loved it as a child – the lights, the parade, the food and the dancing were the pinnacle of excitement for a young boy. But the older he grew, the more difficult his life became around festival time, and it had begun to tarnish his outlook. People were more daring in times of celebration, and it wore him down trying to keep track of them all.

Shaking his head, Daniel turned to the honey-skinned girl at his side, offering a pleasant smile. 'The festival is still almost two weeks away, Em,' he reminded her lightly. 'Plenty of time to stare at tents. I was working.' He still was working, she just didn't know it.

'You work too much,' Emilie retorted, head briefly resting on his arm before she pulled away. 'Take a break, it's late. And I know you're done for the day – you said so earlier. Even Adamas has managed to find time away from the Boss to come out and see the tents.' Sure enough, when Daniel looked around he could see Emilie's older brother standing with the rest of her friends in the courtyard, grinning at something one of the girls had said. It surprised him; Adamas was usually far too busy to spend time with his sister. That changed things.

He sighed, though a smile tugged at his lips. 'Fine,' he agreed. Emilie beamed, taking his hand once more and leading him towards the rest of her friends.

'Aha!' Adamas crowed by way of greeting. 'The infamous Daniel Novak, deeming us worthy of his presence.' His

voice was teasing but his eyes were cold, mocking. Daniel forced an even smile in return.

‘Em insisted,’ he replied. ‘Apparently I work too much.’

Adamas barked out a laugh. ‘You and me both, kid.’

Daniel bristled; he was only two years younger than Adamas, and was both taller and broader at the shoulders – certainly not a ‘kid’.

‘At least my work keeps food on the table,’ Adams continued. ‘You ever gonna get a real job? I’m sure the Boss could find something for you, now you’re starting to get a bit of a reputation.’

Daniel resisted the urge to scoff. He had more of a reputation than most of Diora’s men, including Adamas, who apparently assumed Daniel had gained that reputation through dealing with anything deemed too petty for Diora to be involved with – and most of the lower city believed it too. But his stomach turned at the thought of working for Diora. He’d spent the last three years working to bring the man down.

‘I’m managing all right with my work as it is, thanks,’ Daniel assured the man somewhat sharply, then winced. He took a deep breath, mentally reminding himself that he had to play nice; arguing with Adamas would only get him noticed. The longer Diora thought that Daniel wasn’t worth worrying about the easier it would be for Daniel to get his work done without interference. ‘But I’ll keep the offer in mind.’

‘Can you boys stop talking about work for ten minutes?’ Emilie cut in, her lips pursed in irritation. She wound her arm through Daniel’s, and he tensed. ‘All we want to do is

enjoy festival time, and it's hard to do that with you two being so boring.'

'Sorry, Em,' Adamas said. 'The Boss has been giving me so much more work lately, it's hard to go off duty. It's difficult for him when there are so few people he trusts as much as he does me.' He twisted the gold ring on his middle finger – the mark of Diora's men – and Daniel's lip curled slightly. Now he remembered why he didn't spend much time with Adamas in person. It was much better to hear about him through Emilie, when he could coax her into bragging about the things he needed information on without having to endure the man's astonishing ego. If he had his way, he wouldn't spend much time with either of them, but Adamas was Diora's third in command, and Daniel's best source of information on the Boss's plans. With Adamas's unwitting help, he might one day find Diora and get rid of him so he could never hurt anyone again. Emilie didn't care how he really felt about her; as long as half the lower city knew her as Daniel Novak's girlfriend, she was happy.

Under Emilie's scolding gaze the conversation turned back to the festival, and Daniel let the rest of her friends talk around him, preferring to listen. Daniel Novak made his work in secrets, and luckily, most people tended to underestimate what constituted a secret.

The whole group's conversation paused at the loud chimes that rung out through the city, and he counted them with a frown. 'I need to get going,' he declared.

'Oh, but you've barely been here an hour!' Emilie protested, bottom lip forming a pout. He leaned down to kiss her cheek.

‘I’ll see you in a couple of days,’ he promised. He moved to step back, but Emilie’s hand reached for his jacket collar before he could get too far. She pulled him down into a firmer kiss, lingering enough for a man across the street to wolf whistle at them. Daniel flushed – he hated it when Emilie made a scene. Unfortunately, it was her favourite thing to do.

‘I look forward to it.’ Emilie’s painted lips curled in an attempt at being coy. It fell short, however, and he merely nodded, heading on his way.

Daniel followed the well-lit streets through several twists and turns, up and down endless stone staircases, before slipping into a dark side alley and climbing up on to an overhead walkway, a cool breeze ruffling his hair.

It was always joked that there was never more than ten feet of flat land in Talen at any one time; the whole city was made up of slopes and stairways and bridges over narrow rivers and streams. Daniel loved it; it made sneaking around infinitely more interesting, and it made the city breathtakingly beautiful. He’d only ever seen pictures of the other cities in Tellus, but none of them compared.

With pale yellow stone buildings and neatly paved pathways, and parks and courtyards never more than a ten-minute walk from one another, Talen truly was stunning – the Golden City of Tellus. Daniel only hoped it would stay that way. All over the world cracks were forming in Anglya’s carefully built empire. There was word that Mericus was preparing to make a bid for independence and might force Anglya out of its borders. Erova had no need

for independence yet – its monarchs were strong, and they had no quarrel with Anglya. But all that would change if the harvest was poor and they didn't meet their side of the trade agreements. Anglya was quick to punish these days, and Daniel dreaded to think what might happen should the Anglyans get involved in Erova's business.

Crossing the city at roof height was something he did with hardly a thought, leaping and rolling on instinct, his feet pounding rhythmically on the slates. No one noticed him flying from rooftop to rooftop, scaling buildings to get ever higher without a moment of hesitation. He'd been exploring the city from above for years, and the routes were so familiar to him now that he could clear his mind and lose himself in the motion of his arms and legs, watching for handholds in brick walls and noting where his previous holds had worn away or broken off. As his blood pumped faster with every step his stress melted away, a grin coming unbidden to his lips. Everything was simpler when he was in motion.

Slowing down a little in order to swing hand over hand across the decorative struts above the bridge to the upper city, Daniel breathed in the fresh air with a smile; twenty feet above the ground, he could almost forget he was in the most crowded city in Erova. Performing a tricky twist mid-air to leap from the bridge to the nearest walkway without having to drop to street level, he continued on his way, soft-soled leather boots digging into the small cracks and dips in the stone.

As soon as he was within the bounds of the upper city, it was like he'd stepped into a whole new world; the buildings were larger and newer, gleaming without the help of a

cleaning crew. Decorative steel and bronze trimming on the roofs and windows made Daniel's journey infinitely easier here. Flower baskets hung from almost every corner of the quiet well-lit streets, filling the air with a sweet scent; a far cry from the damp-river smell that permeated most of the lower city. The upper city didn't need a special cleaning crew as it was already regularly maintained.

Taller buildings were no problem for Daniel. He swung from one of the higher walkways on to the roof of a nearby building, scaled its stone facade to the top and jumped across to the next building. A loose tile on the roof had him sliding towards the edge, but without missing a beat he slung an arm around a chimney stack and propelled himself across to the next roof.

It was a while before he climbed down, dropping to the pavement below. Picking up his pace, a spring in his step, he hurried along a quiet residential street until he came to a familiar dark-brown door. Digging his key from his trouser pocket, he unlocked the door and went inside. He didn't bother calling out to his father straight away, but instead headed towards the basement stairs and padded down in socked feet.

'Evening, Father,' he said fondly, dropping the rougher voice he used as Daniel in favour of his natural upper-city accent. The older man was sitting at his workbench, goggles covering his eyes as steady hands worked a soldering iron. Pausing in his work, the thin mechanic raised his goggles to sit on his salt-and-pepper hair, his glasses still over his eyes, and turned to his son. His smile became a critical frown and his thick brows furrowed.

‘I’m not talking to you while you look like that. We’ve been through this,’ he declared, returning to his work with his goggles still raised.

‘Goggles, Da,’ Daniel reminded him as he walked out of the workshop and turned left into his bedroom. Shutting the door, he shed his jacket and dropped on to his bed, reaching beneath it for the large wooden box he kept there. Flipping the lid, he dug out a cloth, dampening it in the bowl of water that rested on his desk. As he wiped the cloth over his bared forearms the skin darkened several shades and the cloth turned a peachy colour. Daniel skimmed his hairline with blunted fingernails, pulled the wavy blond hair off, then tugged at the netted wig cap to reveal dark brown locks that hung straight to his chin.

A quick wipe over his face with the damp cloth turned it the same tawny colour as the rest of his skin. Finally, he held an eyelid open, removing the near-invisible film over his eye and revealing the true dark-green colour. When both lenses were removed and stored in their liquid-filled cases, he turned to the mirror above his desk, a smile breaking free at the sight of his natural face. He ran a hand through his hair to get it back into place, checking his throat and jawline for excess make-up. Satisfied, he returned to the workshop, clearing his throat to gain his father’s attention.

‘There you are, Noah!’ Evander enthused, greeting his son by his true name. ‘Much better. Come, come, sit,’ he insisted, gesturing to the chair at the desk adjacent to his workbench; Noah’s desk. The dark-haired teen obediently moved to sit, sliding open the top drawer and

pulling away the false bottom to grab a battered black notebook. ‘Good day?’

‘Quiet,’ Noah replied, cracking his neck and letting his shoulders slump. Being Daniel Novak was always stressful during festival time, this year more than ever. ‘Everyone’s mostly staying out of trouble. For now, at least.’ He didn’t doubt that would change as the festival grew closer. With so many country folk and outlanders in the city, Diara never could resist the many opportunities to swindle and steal and profit from human naivety.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ Evander mused with a hum, paintbrush between his teeth muffling his words. ‘Maybe Daniel’s reputation is finally enough to keep the troublemakers at bay.’ Noah sighed, resting his elbow on the desk. He knew where this conversation was leading. ‘This year might be Daniel’s last.’

‘Da, I know you don’t approve of Daniel, but he can’t stop until the city is safe. You know that,’ Noah implored, no longer finding it odd to talk about his alter ego as a separate person. He’d been splitting his time between Noah and Daniel for over three years, and was now used to keeping them apart in his head.

‘So you say,’ Evander muttered skeptically, lips pursed as he painted. Noah bit back a sigh; no matter how much he tried, he couldn’t get his father to understand how important Daniel was. Without Daniel, there would be nothing to stop Diara from having the entire lower city under his thumb.

‘What are you working on?’ A knowing look in his father’s brown eyes let him know he wasn’t off the hook

yet, but Evander obligingly turned to let his son get a better look at the mask he was painting. It was equal parts porcelain and metal, with carefully painted gears melding with real ones so seamlessly you could hardly tell which was which. Noah was always impressed with his father's work. While Evander made most of his money from fine-detail mechanical work, he was a craftsman at heart, and an incredible artist. The pair only spent two or three months of the year making masks for the festival, but it was easily their favourite work, though Evander had also been working on a secret project lately, which was absorbing him more and more.

'This beauty is for one of the noblemen from Coamar,' Evander said. 'He was very specific in his instruction.' Noah snorted; the men from Coamar always were. Lording over the biggest of the Erovan Isles often gave them a sense of self-importance far greater than was bearable. A common problem among nobles, Noah found.

Straightening up, he turned back to his own desk, digging out a pen and flipping open his notebook to the next blank page. He'd almost filled the book, and it was messy with near-loose pages and splotches of black ink among his neat, cramped handwriting. The notebook was the most valuable thing he owned. Or, rather, the most valuable thing *Daniel* owned. In it was everything he needed to bring down Diora's gang. Almost everything. He just needed the whereabouts of Diora himself, and then he could finally put a stop to the man's control.

Discovering the truth about Diora's men had mostly been an accident – Daniel had started out as a way for

Noah to wear his own mask and be all the things he wasn't: bold and daring, brave and mysterious, and able to explore the lower city he was so often warned away from. He'd enjoyed climbing the older buildings in that half of the city, and soon became caught up in people's lives, their secrets. And when he'd stumbled across a man with a gold ring on his middle finger making a drug exchange in the dead of night, there was no going back; Daniel was here to stay. Gold rings were the symbol of Diora's men, the gang of 'protectors' supposedly helping the citizens of the lower city, the people the guards never bothered with.

Curiosity sparked, the then-fifteen-year-old stalked the men and women enforcing Diora's word, and soon realised that they were behind all the crimes Diora was lauded for having supposedly solved – black market sales, violence, theft. Diora's gang were taking a small fee in exchange for their 'help', and had made a very profitable business out of fear and deceit. Daniel had spent most of the last three years sneaking about, gathering information. All of it went in his notebook, ready for the day he could find Diora and get rid of him, dismantling his stronghold and freeing lower Talen from the corrupt reign they didn't even realise they were under.

He made himself available to those in need, asking for nothing in return and making it clear he worked alone. He was careful, and only ever called the guards in when it was absolutely necessary. Daniel hadn't expected people to rely so much on his help. But now his reputation was so exaggerated that people seemed to think he was *always* around, like some sort of omnipotent shadow, and he couldn't deny there was a part of him that liked playing the hero.

‘Can you get back to your real job now?’ Evander asked when Noah had finished writing in his notebook. He sighed, a smile at his lips, and reached into the box of blank festival masks beside his desk, pulling out the first one his hand met. It was a fully porcelain mask, clearly made for a woman’s face, with unusually short sides and several small holes at the edges and top for him to glue feathers once it was painted.

He flicked through the large binder propped against the wall until he came to his sketch of a beautiful feathered mask. Reaching for his deep sea-green pigment and a complementary royal purple, Noah got to work. It was easy to lose himself in the delicate methodical brushstrokes as he painted an array of feathers on the mask.

‘I’ve got a box of these for you to take over to the palace tomorrow, if you’re not busy,’ Evander murmured, breaking the comfortable silence between them.

‘You mean if I’m not Daniel,’ Noah corrected. Evander had been trying to get him to give up Daniel for the better part of a year, claiming Diora wasn’t his responsibility. He didn’t understand how bad it was down there; he never went to the lower city, except for the odd repair job. No one from their area went to the lower city unless they had to. ‘I’m heading over in the morning anyway, so I’ll drop it by Damien’s office.’

‘Excellent,’ Evander said, setting his finished mask on the drying rack with several others. ‘I’m off to bed. You should be too.’

‘As soon as I finish this mask, Da,’ Noah promised, brush not faltering when the older man ruffled his hair gently.

‘Goodnight, lad. I’ll be working on some of our other orders tomorrow. Will you be around later to keep going on the masks?’ Other orders meant mechanical work – their *actual* work. Noah thought for a moment.

‘I’ll try to be.’

Evander left his son alone in the workshop, heading upstairs to his bedroom. Noah turned back to his mask. As much as he liked festival time, he would be glad when it was all over. The festival meant having thousands of unfamiliar people in his city, and Daniel worked on overdrive to keep everything in order. All that, combined with his growing duties to Crysta . . . he was finding it impossible to be everywhere he was needed.