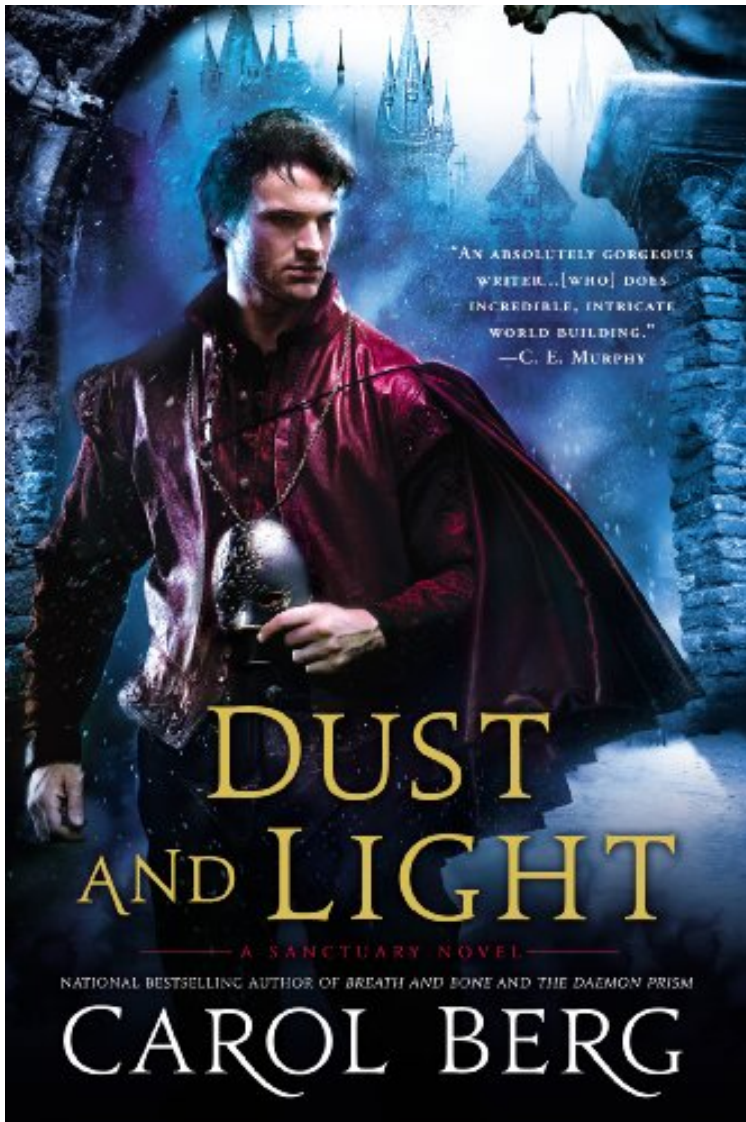


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Dust and Light: A Sanctuary Novel



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurNational bestselling author Carol Berg returns to the world of her award-winning Flesh and Spirit and Breath and Bone with an all-new tale of magic, mystery, and corruption.... How much must one pay for an hour of youthful folly? The Pureblood Registry accused Lucian de Remeni-Masson of unseemly involvement with ordinaries, which meant only that he spoke with a young woman not of his own kind, allowed her to see his face unmasked, worked a bit of magic for her....After that one mistake, Lucians grandsire excised half his magic and savage Harrowers massacred his family. Now the Registry has contracted his art to a common coroner. His extraordinary gift for portraiture is restricted to dead ordinariesbeggars or starvelings hauled from the streets.But sketching the truth of dead mens souls brings unforeseen consequences. Sensations not his own. Truths he cannot possibly know and dares not believe.

The coroner calls him a cheat and says he is trying to weasel out of a humiliating contract. The Registry will call him mad and mad sorcerers are very dangerous....

CHAPTER 1 YEAR 1291 OF THE ARDRAN PRINCIPALITY YEAR 214 FROM THE UNIFICATION OF ARDRA, MORIAN, AND EVANORE AS THE KINGDOM OF NAVRONNE YEAR 1, INTERREGNUM, MOURNING THE DEATH OF GOOD KING EODWARD EARLY WINTER

Rumors flew into Palinur on a malignant north wind. After seven bloody months, Perryn, Duc of Ardra, Prince of Navronne, had battled his contentious brother Bayard back into the northlands. While frozen roads and rivers locked Bayard in the river county, Perryn was returning triumphant to his royal city. For better or worse, King Eodwards throne was his. Navronnes brief war of succession was over. Perhaps. My unfocused anxieties felt somehow traitorous to my heritage. The politics of ordinaries shouldnt touch me, a pureblood sorcerer, gifted by the gods to provide magic to the world. Were they yet living, my parents would berate me for unseemly distraction and my teasing brothers call me soberskull or grimheart. But the war had touched me, and would forever, no matter which prince won the prize. The frigid air pricked like needles this morning. Another fretful night had left me nervy, as if bowmen stood on the rooftops, arrows nocked and aimed at my back. Ten times in the half quell from my town house Id spun around, imagining a pickthief fingering the gold chain about my neck. Now the babbling river of people flowing through the back lane of the Council District had come to a standstill, trapping me between a heavily guarded flock of squalling geese and a rickety tinkers cart headed for some noblemans kitchen. The blockage did naught for my composure. Id determined to reach my studio at the Registry Tower early and had foolishly assumed the streets might be less crowded while the morning was yet dark as pitch. But refugees from the northern battles had swarmed into the city ahead of Prince Perryns legions. Barons and villeins, freeholders and crofters, monks, practors, and townsmen crammed the streets with wagons and carts, trading their belongings for what provision anyone could offer. What hopes people bore of sustenance in a famine year might be realized only in Palinur and before the returning troops ravaged the remaining stores. Fools, all. The new year had not yet turned, and Navronne already lay in the grip of yet another ruinous winter. Market stalls were bare, grain stores heavily guarded. Meat and fish commanded prices akin to rubies. The poor light a weedy torch here and a grimy wagon lamp there scarce penetrated the murk. An escort to carry a lamp and clear my path was a luxury my purse could no longer support, and when my steward had offered to hire a linkboy, Id refused, unwilling to wait. A poor decision. I was expert at those. Exasperated, I squeezed past the tinkers cart, only to end up ankle-deep in a stew of ice and muck, blocked yet again. Two men were pounding each other bloody, surrounded by jeering onlookers. Move aside! Magelight blazed white from my hand, quieting the noise in the lane. Most folk properly averted their eyes at the sight of my mask and claret-hued cloak and squeezed to the sides of the lane to let me pass. I could properly summon a constable to punish those who did not, but that wasnt going to speed my progress. Unfortunately, neither was the uncomfortably direct assertion of my prerogatives. A rag-topped cart crammed with women and children choked the lane ahead, while three men attempted to repair a broken wheel. The families had painted their foreheads with dung to appease whatever god they believed had brought this doom of war and winter on the world. I considered reversing course altogether, but an alley sheering off to my left looked more promising. The alley was certainly no garden path. I stepped over piles of unidentifiable refuse, a bloated cat, and a beggar, either sleeping or dead. But the empty quiet was a welcome contrast to the cacophony that rose again behind me. The wind sighed and whistled through the dark slot. I dimmed my magelight. I needed to conserve power, rid myself of distraction, and focus on my work today. A portrait done the previous afternoon needed repairs before the Master of Archives inspected it. Lucian... see... I would not look back. Would not. The breathy words were naught but wind. . . meddling... end it... . . no saving him... I made it halfway to the graying light at the far end of the alley before I whirled about and raised my light again to affirm that the touch on my shoulder and the footsteps soft as bare feet on green grass were mere imagining. At six-and-twenty, I was a man of fit body and intelligent mind, a pureblood sorcerer of honorable bloodlines and with an exceptional magical bent for portraiture. Save for one small failure in discipline five years past, which had borne entirely unsubtle consequences, my conscience was clear. So why did I have this incessant sense of being watched? My eyes insisted that shadows darted away as I rounded corners and that wisps of colored light glimmered in the dark courtyards outside my windows. Only in the last tenday had my fancy added these whisperings just at the farthest limits of hearing. Warnings, but of what, I had no idea. Not that I believed in them. That would be madness. The sensations were not magic. Every day of my life was filled with magic. Nor were they ghosts. Were ghosts real, mine would be only three months raised and so numerous I could not mistake them. These oddities had

gone on nigh half a year. Reason could explain none of it. No matter reason or belief, my fears were undeniable. Reason did not always hold sway, and purebloods were not immortal. Lucian... listen... Without looking back, I raced from the alley into the busy boulevard that led uphill to the Tower.*** By the time the city bells pealed ninth hour of the morning watch, I was glaring at the sketch propped on my easel. The subject, an overripe girl of fourteen, had come into the Pureblood Registry the previous day for her biennial portrait, which seemed a silly exercise in the face of such world-shaping events as war and disastrous winter. Instead of the pups and roses she wanted as her background setting, my fingers had insisted on drawing wrecked houses and hanged men. The girls grandfather Pluvius, Master of the Registry Archives and my own contract master, would most certainly disapprove, so I'd come in early to remove them with an unsatisfactory wash of ink. Touching my pen to the portrait yet again, I raised the girls true image, shaped in my mind at her sitting. A quick comparison to the actuality on the page, and my will released the enchantment waiting in my fingers like liquid fire. A few quick strokes instilled a little more of the spoiled-daughter pout so clear in my minds eye. Better. Truth. Even so mundane an evocation of magic filled me with awe and divine purpose. No matter personal grief or inexplicable megrims, magic held me centered an inexhaustible source of wonder. The fire in the grate had left the tower studio stifling. Blotting my fingers, I hurried across the cluttered chamber to the fogged casements and twisted the latch, welcoming a drift of cold air. Better to be here than down below. My boots were dry. The air was quiet. A small fire blazed in the pocardon, the royal citys ancient marketthankfully nowhere near the town house where my young sister remained secluded with our devoted servantsbut I could not smell it. Here in the chambers of those who administered the lives of pureblood sorcerers, all was as it had ever been: serene, unhurried, and well disciplined, separate from the chaos of ordinaries, as the gods intended. A bitter draft swooshed through the tower room, riffling fifty loose pages before the door slammed shut again behind a rumped giant. Earths Mother, Lucian! I thought I was never going to get here this morning. Gilles dropped his pen case and sagged onto a stool, puffing and blowing, his cloak muddy and twisted halfway round, his hose ripped, and his mask drooping from the left side of his flushed face. Some cursed lackwit found a stash of five pigs and let them loose. A thousand beggars were tearing each other apart to get at them. Despite the grim circumstance, I had to grin. Pigs. And yesterday it was geese. And the day beforehmmyour manservant spilled your morning posset on your sleeve? Though the Albins, the wealthiest of all pureblood families, provided their son an armed escort party, he arrived most mornings in a similar state. Gilles attracted disorder like beggars attracted fleas. Tripping over his own feet or annoying his hound served as well as riot or ill wind. I appreciated Gilles. He had mentored me when my first contract brought me to the Registry Archives, and he had taken it with grace when I was given a senior commission of six major portraits only a few years later. Although his uncle was a Registry curator, he had never been offered one. Our skills meshed well; I worked better with younger men and with elders of both genders, Gilles with middle-aged women and fidgety children. We had even supped together several times over the years when our work kept us late. An ordinary might describe us as friends, though such frivolous relationships were discouraged in pureblood society. Surely Prince Perryns victory will settle the city, I said, turning back to the window. Of the three, hes said to be Eodwards truest son, noble in mind and bearing. Bayards stubborn, though, said Gilles, blotting his broad forehead. And until hes crushed entire or someone finds Eodwards will saying which one inherits, Bayard wont leave off fighting. But even Bayard the Smith couldnt be a worse sovereign than the Bastard of Evanore or the Harrower priestess, may she writhe in Magrogs chains for eternity. I actually knew very little of Perryn or Bayard or the third royal brother, the bastard prince who ruled the south, but every day of my life I would beg the gods for some fitting end for the vile priestess, Sila Diaglou. She and her fanatical Harrowers believed our ten-year siege of ruinous weather, the rampant plagues, diseases, famine, and war were humankinds penalty for corrupt living. Harrower mobs had destroyed far too much of worth in their pursuit of purity and repentance, ravaging, burning, slaughtering innocents in the name of their vengeful Powers.... I closed my eyes and summoned discipline. Emotions about the unchangeable past, especially when snarled with ordinaries and their politics, only cluttered a mans thinking. My grandsire had been wise to negotiate my first contract with the Registry itself. A historian of rare gifts, he had warned of the upheaval to come at mighty King Eodwards death. Young and stupid, I had chafed at the limitations of a Registry position. A contract with a town, a hierarch, or a noble family outside Palinur would certainly have fetched better termsmore prestige, wider contacts, a better stipend to fill the family coffersand surely more interesting work. But youthful folly had already squandered my grandsires favor that might have allowed my opinion to be heard. The Pureblood Registry will endure, no matter the shifting loyalties and upsets of

ordinaries, my father had said, trying, as ever, to ease the bitter gulf between my grandsire and me. The world cannot live without pureblood magic, and our survival, as well as our prosperity, is founded on Registry discipline. You'll flourish there. Unfortunately, Patronn had not lived long enough to see his own father's predictions fulfilled. Nor had my grandsire, my mother, my brothers, nor any child or elder of my bloodline—all of them dead in the ordinaries war. Only Juli and I were left. I just hope for order in the streets, I said. I've not taken my sister out in months. Her tutors have stopped coming; gone into hiding, I think. Yet she insists she should be out rebuilding the Verisonn Hospice or designing an enlargement of the Fullers Guildhall. Rebuilding? Designing guildhalls? A girl of fifteen? Idiot child. No one's building anything until times are more settled. And without serving a proper apprenticeship, she's like to build roofs that will collapse. Though, in truth, it's not just that.... I let it go. No need to bemoan my inadequacies as surrogate parent. Juli was immensely gifted, and star-eyed about her magic despite our personal sorrows. But her stubborn nature was going to bring us more grief. Oh! Gilles clapped a hand to his head. Almost forgot. I met Master Pluvius on the stair. You're to attend him immediately in the Curators Chamber. Great gods, Gilles! I slammed the casement shut and raked fingers through my hair. Tugging my shirtsleeves straight and adjusting my wrought-gold belt, I eyed the blue velvet pourpoint I'd discarded when I began work, weighing the consequences of further delay against the disrespect of casual dress before my superior. Of course, Master Pluvius himself forever fussing over me had recommended I work in shirtsleeves to keep my outer garments clean. But he also held the future of a very important commission in his hand, and he was ferocious about promptness. Did he say what this was about? No. Just that you should come immediately. Sorry, Lucian! Gilles's call drifted after me, as I abandoned the pourpoint with its hundred button loops and raced for the upward stair. *Revue de presse* Praise for Carol Berg: An absolutely gorgeous writer... [who] does incredible worldbuilding. C. E. Murphy, author of *The Walker Paper* series: Praise for *Flesh and Spirit* and *Breath and Bone*: Engrossing. Sharon Shinn, National Bestselling Author of *Royal Airs*: Altogether superior. Kirkus s (Starred) Emotionally intense. Publishers Weekly