

Danilo slumps against the sewer's dark walls, eyes burning from the fumes that rises from the water beneath him. And though he can't afford it, he pauses there to acknowledge his failure and loss; the ache overshadowing his throbbing injuries. It doesn't last long before the need to run builds within him again. He sighs.

A familiar song cuts through the sewer's silence—the cry of steel fleeing its sheath. Cold metal presses against his carotid. He tenses, knuckles grinding into the stone behind him. He looks at its wielder, eyes catching on a carved dragonhead carved staff. Glowing blue eyes stare down at him. He stares back. When the blade shifts, he chances a glare at the staff's owner.

The graying edges of Enzo's temples, and the peppercorn color of his beard, are as familiar as sea striking earth. Conflicting shades of blue from the staff reflect in his stone-cold eyes.

A fire breaks through Danilo's adrenaline with something akin to fury: a heated combination of guilt, blame, and vengeance.

TARKASSA
ISLES

THE UNCHARTED
SMUGGLER'S WILDS OF
SERAGOTTA ISLAND

HERE BE
MONSTERS

S E R O N A ' S
P A S S

JUTSIQUE

DUCASSA

NAAMEST

YILUSSA

FIGANDI'S
VINEYARD

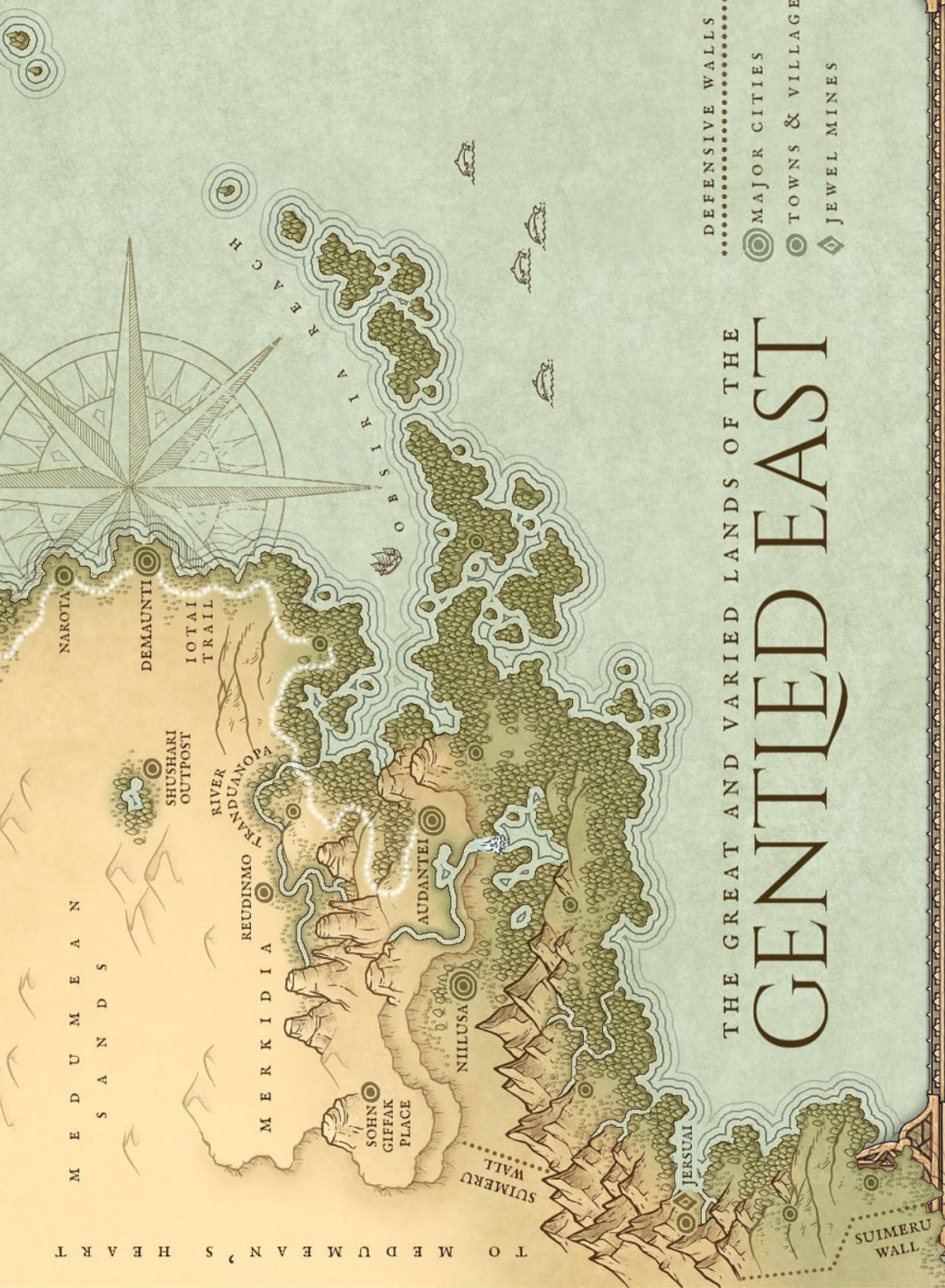
GEOVEX'S
ESTATE

DECARII

KETUSAI



M E D U M E A N
S A N D S



T O U N C H A R T E D E A S T E R N W A T E R S

DEFENSIVE WALLS
.....
MAJOR CITIES
TOWNS & VILLAGES
JEWEL MINES

THE GREAT AND VARIED LANDS OF THE GENTIED EAST

SWORD OF AUDANTEI

ASHLEY HOLMQUIST

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"Sharper than a double-edged sword,
penetrating even to dividing soul
and spirit, joints and marrow; it
judges the thoughts and attributes of
the heart."

Hebrews 4:12



SWORD OF AUDANTEI



For anyone in need of a family,
welcome to mine.



PROLOGUE

There were five FIRSTS.
Legends.

Five gifted with the breath of power, living among non-magic people as peacemakers and warriors, holding direct connection to the Crafter. The FIRST was a messenger, bringing truth; appearing human but carrying a power all could discern. The SECOND was a warrior—large and strong—a parallel force to be fought, responding to the call of power. Unable to be defied. The THIRD was deceptive. Cunning. Crowned a wise guardian and protector of mankind until his entitlement turned to greed. The FOURTH had only been heard of once before, tied to the THIRD but allegiance unknown. A ruler of an Empty Realm. The FIFTH will return. Created and perfected by the ONE to save humankind.



CHAPTER ONE

Danilo never understood the phrase ‘from man to monster’. Though it may have more to do with the black stain of his misdeeds than his understanding of literature. Or lack thereof. Staring down at the near-unintelligible inky scratch across the confiscated page, Danilo figures its more likely a distraction than a cipher.

He pushes achy fingers through the blond strands that tickle at his brow. The early morning on the dry desert bites at the tender skin of old scars dusting his knuckles. He frowns down at the back of his hands, allowing himself to become distracted for a moment. Anything is more interesting than the pages laid before him. A subtle form of torture from the General. Especially after the nightmare ridden sleep he sequestered during the night.

The tent flap flutters in the hostile tearing winds of an incoming sand storm. A comfort in these unfamiliar regions. Danilo tenses when the incessant noise silences, signaling the entrance of another. He settles his palms atop the makeshift table and waits for the intruder to state his intentions.

“H’eh, Lieutenant.” Deandro, the second-youngest soldier in their camp, sidles alongside Danilo’s table with his helmet tucked beneath his arm. “The General is asking for you.”

Danilo nods stiffly. Deandro mimics the motion and claps a hand down on Danilo's unarmored shoulder. No soldier wants the heat of the General's undivided attention. The man is reputed for his anger as much as his dominance in the battlefield.

He follows Deandro from the tent. They march together at a hurried pace. Danilo scans the blurry grey skyline for a threat, shielding his eyes from the sandy breeze.

Deandro abandons his friendly persona as they pass soldiers huddled around a dying fire. His frigid conduct joins the icy stares cast Danilo's way. Danilo refuses to meet their eyes, instead focusing on the path Deandro weaves through the encampment to the large tent in the middle. When Deandro pauses, Danilo rounds him to approach the tent. He feels like he's being marched into a prison chamber.

Giving Deandro a dismissing nod, Deandro scrambles away from the tent. Likely retreating to the safety of the cook tent. Danilo turns back to the tent, staring at the cord. The facade of bravado sloughs from his bones and leaves him hollow in the chilly air. With a choked back sigh, he enters the tent.

Lit candles surround the map table, wax sprouting from an array of colorful saucers. It's a meager light compared to the encampment's torches, and growing dimmer in the rising day. The General sits on the table's far side, one hand clamped over a wooden mug that he pushes into the surface. His shearing ice-blue eyes drag up to watch Danilo enter.

"Secure it." He demands.

Danilo nods curtly, his shoulders in a stiff line, and turns to secure the cord to the pole. He approaches the table with clenched fists tucked at his sides. The General doesn't look up again. Danilo glances at the map.

"I am sending you under your old title." The General says, referring to Danilo's adulterated role as an Audanteian scout. Because of his habit of do-or-die early in his training, the role became something of his own. Not unlike an assassin. The General's fat finger points to the little town on the map. "They have the vined chasms of the Untamed North closing in on the dunes. Abandoned jewel mines lay to the east. Best not to rush in, else they vanish in those caverns. Won't waste my men chasing them."

Danilo yearns for the times he operated free of the General's command, eradicating vermin as he saw fit with men he could trust to follow his orders. Alongside the General, his command means little. Even less to the soldiers

beneath him. The tasks the General gave him set him further apart from their respects.

The General continues on, in great detail, about the surrounding terrain. As if Danilo had not thought to survey it himself. As if he had not sent Danilo out the preceding day to scope the commandeered town on the distant horizon. Danilo keeps his jaw clamped shut, his breathing shallow through each driving remark falling from the General's lips. He should be used to General's vile tone by now.

Danilo only dares to respond when the man finishes speaking and gazes at his face from beneath thick brows.

"Sir, may I speak freely?" He asks.

The General's eyes lower to the scar splitting the left of Danilo's lip, cleft lightly from the raised skin beneath his nose.

"This once." He lifts his mug, swirling the liquid before taking a swig.

Danilo nods but doesn't relax.

"I would prefer the task be given to Turniuk or Deandro. The men despise my authority, believing it to be bias or privilege rather than skill."

"Bias." The General scoffs, slamming his mug down with his hand atop the opening. Liquid sloshes audibly over the lip, droplets rolling across the General's calloused hand, a red tint evident within the low light. Never in excess, but always enough to have an edge. The General wipes the spill from his fingers with the hem of his shirt. "What bias?"

Danilo's lungs ache. They beg for him to breath. To relax. One too many hard-learned lessons keep him from succumbing to the temptation.

"You know." Danilo says. A little desperately, in his opinion. It comes out quiet, barely discernible over the wind slapping against the tent's sides.

The General stands, his chair falling back into the sand with a soft thud drowned out by the snarl laced into his sudden movement. Every muscle in Danilo's body clenches, holding back the flinch shuddering beneath his skin.

"What bias, Lieutenant?" The patch on Danilo's shoulder burns with the slur of his latest title.

"That I'm your son."

General Llodis straightens, the red tint in his blond hair shining beneath the first rays of sunlight that cut through the fabric overhead. Danilo's blood rushes in his ears. Distantly, Llodis continues on about the task he assigns Danilo, ignoring the comment. Danilo can see the fire hidden in his eyes. When the

General leans over the table, he grinds layers of parchment beneath his knuckles. His next words are all Danilo can remember hearing.

“If you don’t come back covered in their red, you’ve failed. Am I understood, Lieutenant?”

Danilo wheezes out his next words as clear as he can manage. “Yes, Sir.”



The enemy’s ‘fort’ is a pathetic, vandalized heap of an old town. Partial stakewalls act as the lone indication of Stormthrower presence. Danilo slides closer on his stomach, ignoring the sand pouring into his boots. His beige military uniform blends in with the surrounding long-grass. Tufts of his hair fight for freedom as the face wrap slides further downward. Threatening to engulf his vision. Heavy winds toss sand into his face and he blinks away the grit clawing at his eyes.

Closer to the wooden pikes, Danilo can make out charred pathways and the removed doors of abandoned buildings through the churning sand. Stormthrowers burn the brush in apprehended towns to keep their view of the area clear. A trick they started after years of casualties. When he sidles next to the town’s border wall on the inside of the stakes, he drags the fabric away from his neck and buries his face within its folds. A hopeless attempt to breathe clear air. There he remains, listening.

Stormthrowers—even with unconfined, impure power—are as predictable as sands in an hourglass. Few of the *skud* have military knowledge. If they do, it’s a pathetic half-done alternative. With few exceptions.

Enzo Sapienti is the most dangerous Stormthrower in the whole of the Gentled East; wanted throughout the regions for heinous crimes against the Royal Beseecher and his city’s military. And he is the sole man in the East, who has tactical wits about him.

Hearing nothing, Danilo scales the brick wall. Fast and cautious. Because despite the contaminated winds, he’s still visible.

The impact of his weight sprays the sand. A brown dog leaps to attention in the empty door across from him, teeth bared and hair raised. They stare at one another; the dog crouched and poised to charge, Danilo with a hand on the

knife at his waist. His breathing is slow. Steady. The opposite of his heart. Even after all these years.

With a growl, the dog lunges forward. He looses the knife. And he does so in a blink. In an act of pure instinct. The dog sags to the ground with a muffled whine, the knife protruding from its throat. Danilo stares at the creature. Then stares a little longer. Belatedly, a pressure clutches at his heart. The sensation of it as muted as his numb fingers.

His fingers always go numb after a kill.

A whistle cuts through the choppy wind. Danilo lurches away from the wall, leaping over the pile of smoke-stained dirt and bleeding fur. He settles inside the building, a vigilant ear to the source of the sound. When the whistle strikes the air a second time, he hears the faint footfall beneath it. Danilo clambers into the rafters of the rickety cottage. Just as the Stormthrower's third whistle halts abruptly.

Without as much as a shout, the Stormthrower runs upon the scene. The man's cooing echoes into the hut. Then stops—Danilo guesses he found the knife. He waits, perched on the thin beam, hunched against the sloping thatched roof with a second knife in hand. His eyes linger on the doorway. The Stormthrower steps inside the building and into the main room, leaning around to peer through the open windows on the opposite wall. His short, dark hair glistens when white light crackles up his bare arms, moving within his veins. Lightning.

Over the years, Danilo has learned characteristics of certain forms of Stormthrowing. Lightning, for instance, is volatile and hard to control, especially within tight spaces. Except for a few talented users, they make for an easily controlled opponent.

The Stormthrower beneath him foolishly drops his defenses once he believes the building to be empty, the fractured lines in his arms fading from brilliant to chalky. Danilo shifts forward and dust rains from beneath his boot. The lightning-bringer looks up and Danilo lands on his shoulders, driving the knife down the column of his throat. He chokes, his knees collapse beneath him. Shock lances his dark complexion, sun-dried hands dancing across the knife's edge. With the Stormthrower's final breath, lightning cracks across the inside of his eyes and he sags to the floor.

Blood slicks Danilo's fingers as he removes the knife from the corpse. He wipes them on the hem of his shirt. As he moves from the cottage to retrieve

his second knife from the dog, the pile of torn down shutters bursts aflame in the center of the otherwise barren room. Without knowing how many Stormthrowers there are, Danilo has no means of preparing for their potential advances. But with what little magic they show him, he can ascertain their power.

He steps out into the dust storm with a palm over his face covering. Shouts echo in the wind. The hollers grow in anger until his undiscovered whereabouts turn them into something more sinister. More hopeless. Hoping in and out of windows, he counts each walking step from doorway to doorway while he moves between the houses. This dance he does is easy now. Boring, as it was a little unnerving. None of the other soldiers understood that. They couldn't face a man with magic and ignore the thrum of their ears. The lack of fear is what made Danilo stand out to the General. But it wasn't the magic that made a man terrifying. It is the hunger in their eyes, the feral proclivity driving them. That is what made someone a beast to fear.

He circles them on the outskirts of the little barren town, waiting for them to divide. He doesn't wait long. Untrained men tend to split up. For what reasons, Danilo is unsure. But it makes his game—his task—simpler.

The second lone Stormthrower he comes across is sickly pale in the harsh desert sun, a bright sunburn blistered across his freckled nose. Danilo follows him through the sparse shadows from inside a house. He doesn't sense Danilo's eyes, and it grows more apparent when he turns directly into the building and Danilo's knife.

The dagger plunges into the underside of the Stormthrower's jaw and he gasps airlessly, gripping Danilo's wrist with fading eyes. He dies as ordinarily as any other man and sags into Danilo's arm. Danilo grimaces when his knuckles slip with blood. He turns the body, allowing it to drop off the blade. The act successfully lessens the blood dripping down the inside of his sleeve.

A ragged cry breaks the air, echoing within the hollow bones of multiple buildings. Danilo squints at the crimson puddle spreading over the floor's ashen surface, his face screwed up at the odd timing of it all. The woman screams again. A name called in equal parts agony and anger. She barrels through the doorway, hair as frenzied in color as the flames rising up her arms. Clad in a purple cloak, her freckles and pale skin stand out. Identical to the dead man at Danilo's feet. The smoke of her hatred blinds her, and she throws the flame in

Danilo's direction randomly. He ducks. Fire plumes across the mud-brick wall, its reaches blazing the straw roof to life.

Fire is vengeful. Cleansing. Though a fire mage has more control than that of a lightning-bringer, their rage is unlike any other Stormthrower kind. But it's difficult to control the adrenaline of fury.

Danilo rolls and pulls the body atop of him when the woman aims again. Her inferno bursts around the dead magic-user, setting the floor aflame. He hooks the dead man's middle on his shoulder and leaps to his feet, using him as a shield. His sibling chokes down a sob, throwing again for good measure. Her fire splits like before. With a gritted, watery cry, she rushes forward. Before she can draw her sword, Danilo deflects her arm and buries his knife between her ribs. He tears the blade from her, wrenching to gape the wound. She drops faster than the others had. Without even a struggled breath.

Danilo rolls the brother at her side, stepping over his head as it bounces. The roof snaps ominously. Signaling the roof's soon collapse. He doesn't care. There's no repair for a dead town.

Blood flecks across Danilo's face. Unregistered until Danilo swipes his tongue over his scar. He cringes and spits at the sand, sauntering toward the town's center. On his way there, he assassinates two more lazy patrollers. Each kill takes only a second. Still, his hands grow number. As he approaches the well marking the town's center, the noise lulls—the snap of the wood under heavy flame, the plume of smoke, the shrill wind cutting around his ears. He pauses, gulping in a steady breath through the fabric. It feels hot against his face. Suffocating when his stomach rises into his throat for a second. With the smoke billowing overhead, he has little time before Audantei's High General leads his best troops into the area. Danilo swallows down the urge to vomit at the thought. He'll double over once he's alone. As he usually does.

When he enters the square, another Stormthrower rounds into view, his eyes nothing more than a bright yellowish glow. Danilo knows who he is, though they've never faced each other. Magus Sohn. The soldiers claim his blood-lust rivals only the Lieutenant Commander of Audantei.

Magus has seen enough action to approach Danilo slowly, with his magic ready for the strike. Orange flames dance up one arm, blue on the other. The mess of black curls fanning over his eyes does nothing to diminish the light shining from them.

Magus throws his arms to the ground, palms down. Fire consumes the area in a perfect half-circle. His playful, devouring grin morphs into a sneer. Danilo knows Magus has the strength and the skill to leave him as a heap of seared muscle. So when Magus steps forward, drawing his sword, it's for the same reason Danilo pulls one pitiful, bloody knife from his waist. Magus' smirks.

When Magus swaggers forward, the twinkling coins and pendants on his green shawls become a target for Danilo's eye. He flings the first knife. Magus dodges. Then the second. It sinks two inches from the large medallion sitting over Magus' heart, deep in the man's shoulder. Magus grunts, grips the knife, and vanishes into the fire.

Danilo stands in the rising flames wondering if the Stormthrowers' blood-lust maniac is as much a coward as he is wanted. And he stands there until he's certain Magus is not coming back.

He never worried about the vengeance of fire, anyhow.

Stepping around the fire spreading through the long-grass, Danilo finds the one house in the town with all of its doors and windows boarded. He approaches quietly. Though he doubts there's any good for it. Those hidden inside wait in quiet stillness, holding out to ambush him. Danilo drives his wide shoulders into the door at the lock. Tarnished metal snaps away. He doesn't pause to wonder why it had been easy.

It's quiet in the manor house. The battened windows seal out all light except the spectral glow casting over Danilo's cheeks in slits. An illusory cage in the tight confines of the foyer. His stilted breath disrupts a fine layer of dust in the air. Rotten floorboards creak beneath him as he creeps through the building, remaining close to the wall to try and limit the sound he makes. He steps too far out once. The floor groans. Its echo is endless in the vast ceiling overhead. He breathes once. Twice.

Nothing. And it's the nothing that causes Danilo's heart to stutter.

He toes into the dark dining hall. Someone is still here. There's a foreign sensation Danilo cannot explain burrowing into his lungs. As he continues through dusty and dark rooms, the demand of his mission becomes increasingly poignant. His cautious steps croak through a small entertaining area. A narrow hall connects the small space to the kitchen. Sunlight slips inside from around the sealed servant's door. It reflects against steel atop the prep table. He charges into the room to investigate.

The servant's door swings open. It cracks off the wall as the wind tears it from the newcomer's hand. Danilo's erratic heart caroms in time with it. He grimaces against the light assaulting his unadjusted eyes and grips the small hilt tucked into his belt. A young man stumbles in, the contents of his bag tumbling onto the floor. His hair cowlicks in every other direction, unearthed by his hood. The Stormthrower's wide hazel eyes stick to Danilo. Pots clang together next to Danilo's ear. Like the Black Gate bell. It grips his heart and his mind succumbs to the panic.

He tosses his only knife—gleaming as if made for this purpose—and watches it pass through the intruder. Like a stone in water. Embedding in the wall with a thunk. Red magic coils around the Stormthrower's chest like a snake. He didn't flinch at the knife. Didn't even notice with his scared eyes so fixed on Danilo's presence.

Danilo shrinks back, the air blown from his lungs. He's never seen that before. Not in all his years serving. This is foreign and new and horrifying. Still, the Stormthrower trembles, more afraid of Danilo than he naturally should be. And he remains frozen until his gaze flicks beyond Danilo's shoulder. Danilo spins around.

Before he can draw his sword, he's pinned to the wall. A sharp blade hovers across the base of his neck and a familiar shade of ice blue seizes the room like a hurricane. Water flicks against his face despite the surrounding desert wasteland.

Enzo Sapienti is a powerful man. He has faced off against the General for as long as Danilo can remember. Long before Danilo became the Lieutenant Commander. Danilo knows his skill is slim compared to Enzo's vast years, and his inexperience makes him eager for a fight. But the haunting memory of a soldier's head, blown off by water, against his leg on the borders of the Untamed North, settles the reality of the situation.

Enzo cages Danilo's throat in an iron grip. Danilo meets Enzo's glare with a sneer of his own. It pulls his notched lip beneath the fabric secured to his face. His fingers twitch toward his belt, searching for knives that are no longer there. Enzo's steely grey eyes are unchanging through the curtain of brown hair, temples ing where it's pulled back from his face.

Danilo blinks away the spots in his vision when Enzo's grip tenses. Magus appears in the doorway. He grips the young Stormthrower's sleeve at the elbow.

“Easton,” Magus warns, shifting a blood-stained shoulder away from the young man’s sight. He smiles at Enzo’s failing control. A displaced thing that shows too much teeth and not enough lip.

Magus drags Easton closer to him, the kid’s red leather coat bunched between tattooed fingers. The young man jumps when he bumps into Magus, a trembling hand forcing its way through his untamed hair. Enzo jerks on Danilo, tearing his gaze from the other two. His fingers press into Danilo’s neck in warning. Danilo takes an involuntary breath in. If he were Enzo, that’s when he’d hold tighter. Enzo doesn’t. Instead he tears the fabric away from Danilo’s face. Enzo’s gaze flickers before falling still. Danilo’s unable to chart the emotion.

“How old are you?” Enzo growls out. His voice sounds akin to the General’s when the man enters an interrogation.

Danilo clacks his jaw tight, prepared to die in his next moments. He would rather do so by Enzo’s hand. Not the General’s. There’s a familiar, fiery threat which darkens Enzo’s expression. Enzo presses closer.

“We’re overrun.” Magus’ stares the blood staining the tunic beneath Danilo’s armour, his face withholding his feelings.

Enzo speaks over his shoulder. “Take Easton.”

Magus nods, readjusts his grip, and hauls Easton from the dingy kitchen. Neither man acknowledges Easton’s chattering complaints.

Danilo’s feet leave the floor once the door rubs shut. His vision tilts as he’s forced through the wall. Splinters bite into his back. He hits the compact sand outside the back of the manor, the remaining air within him blown from his lungs. His head ricochets off the ground twice. Agony spiderwebs across his skull the first time. He doesn’t feel the second time.

Amber sun engulfs the smoke-filled sky, mocking the land with its greedy devour. It joins the skirmish of black spots dancing across his sight until the blue sun-sear encroaches on his vision. He’s allotted little time to wonder how he’s alive before being swallowed by unconsciousness.



CHAPTER TWO

A familiar chortle echoes above Danilo's head, waking him from the brief darkness he succumbed to. It bounces inside his skull with a hazy sense of foreboding. He blinks his weighted eyes.

The fierce sunlight, now dimmed by a grey film in the air, scorches an ache beneath his brow bone. His nose itches where the skin is now hot. He lies there for a second, trying to remember where he was and how he got to be sprawled in the sand face-first. But he's dragged to his feet. He flails against the fist clutching the front of his leather breastplate.

The General's permanent scowl fills Danilo's vision. It comes rushing back to him then. Almost sickeningly quick. He corrects his stance, staggering when a heavy hand crashes onto his shoulder. From the imprint of Danilo's body in the sand, there's good reason for the General's garbled words.

"Always know where you are by the mess you leave behind."

Danilo nods, blinks dazedly, and attempts to hock the burning, gummy phlegm from his throat. The General stomps off without issuing his commands. Danilo follows as the General rounds the front of the manor house. His head pulses with each step.

The General is in a seemingly decent mood. Which makes Danilo ill. There's only two reasons the old soldier would be this mellow. He's had enough wine to flood his veins. Or he found the bodies that Danilo left behind.

General Llodis' men wait at the broken well. The town's outbuildings plume ash into the air. It reeks; like the raging fight on the coastline years prior—locals leaping from the cliffs into the choppy waters to escape the flames consuming the edges of their town.

The General boasts Danilo's skill to his men, further dividing him from their good graces. Danilo grimaces. It cracks the dried blood crusted beneath nose. He swipes at it, eyes straying across the group. Turniuk and Dermish sneer at him, scrutinize his blood-soaked sleeves, and glance at one another.

"Lieutenant." The General calls. Danilo's sight sways when he turns to him. He stands in the manor's entry, the hilt of his sword clenched in one hand and the front door in the other. "Come."

They move through the manor dutifully. The General plows about, upturning tables and burning remains of Stormthrower existence in his wake. Floorboards wail under his weight. Danilo knits the gaps in his memory as they retrace his steps. His blood boils to think he missed a chance to have Enzo Sapienti's head. To deposit it at the General's feet and prove his worth. To prove his commitment to Audantei's justice. As he always must.

"Lieutenant." The General shrugs towards the servant's hall to the kitchen. Light pours in from the hole Enzo created, wood planks snapped outward. Ash settles in the opening.

Danilo nods and leads the General into the kitchen. He enters, hand shielding his eyes from the sunlight. General Llodis smooths his hand over the jagged edges of the shattered wall.

"You were smart enough to not let them take your head. Gave the *skud* what they deserve." He says.

Danilo doesn't care to examine it.

Numerous weapons scatter over the table. They refract light against the dusty wood walls. Most, if all, are nondescript. The General takes a necklace from the pouch on his waist as he approaches the table. Its gem glitters blue, dangling on the pure white chain between the General's fingers. Testing the weapons for traces of magic is a slow process, and getting slower as Stormthrowers learn to leave a minimal signature on the weapons.

“What storms did they send?” The General glances over his shoulder, moving to the end of the table, necklace swaying above the first item.

Danilo watches him before responding. “Lightning. Fire. Ice potentially—” “Potentially?”

Danilo swallows, standing straighter. “Wasn’t waiting to see if I was correct.”

When the General says nothing and walks along the table—the necklace skimming a hatchet atop the left of the pile—Danilo takes a breath and continues.

“And,” Danilo says while rubbing his head, “Enzo Sapienti.”

“A storm in and of himself.” The General growls, pausing to look at the wall behind Danilo. “Explains the hole.”

Then he glances back as the necklace catches on a hooked dagger.

Danilo never understood why Stormthrowers carry weapons. Especially since slipping past border patrols as commoners or menial workers could provide a tactical advantage. Blue glow fragments across the room from the necklace’s gem, hovering above a blunted short-sword, and Danilo dismisses the thought. The weapons serve the same purpose as every other item recovered from Stormthrowers: a means to kill.

The General rumbles, his lips white as they press together. Danilo watches the General drag his knife through the pile. Steel screeches against steel until a short-sword teeters over the edge of the table. It hits the ground, crackling with enough energy to split the wood floor. Danilo releases a breath.

“Surprised they haven’t learned how predictable their ways have become.” The General steps over the sword and dangles the necklace above the other side of the table.

Danilo doesn’t say Enzo Sapienti isn’t predictable. The General would neither care nor appreciate the backtalk. So he remains silent.

Finishing his second pass, the General moves toward an etched sword hidden beneath the center of the pile. A large item. But not overbearing. Simple but not underwhelming. Decorative runes run along the blade’s center, small in comparison to the steel’s width. Leather frays along the hilt, the tattered edges threatening to break off entirely. Llodis drops the necklace on the table to grasp the sword’s hilt.

As the General lifts the weapon, the runes ripple black. Danilo feels a familiar tightness in his chest at the sight. Weapons belonging to Stormthrowers glow a colour according to their wielder; depending on their make, amount of decora-

tion, and the power of the Stormthrower. They become black for those without the Storm. The General either didn't notice or didn't care.

"Fine weapon." He extends it to Danilo. "You've earned an upgrade."

Danilo hesitates, staring at the General's beefy hand clutched around the blade. He extends his palm, and the hilt is laid into it. His fingers close around it. An unfamiliar weight, though not an unwelcome one.

The runes snap a brilliant glowing blue.

Danilo's lungs stutter, blood curdling as the General's stare bores into him. Whatever brief joy the General looked upon him with, decays.

Shredded leather chafes Danilo's skin as the General rips the sword from his grasp. Its blade slices over his head before he thinks to duck. The Mad General's eyes widen. Then he swings again. Again Danilo ducks. The General's frustrated swipes grow deadlier in accuracy. Its pommel strikes above Danilo's ear. He trips backward through the servant's door. Vision doubled, he stumbles into the manor's handrail and turns to face the General. Carnal rage fills the General's weathered face. A swift kick to Danilo's chest launches him over the railing.

The air squeaks from Danilo's lungs when he lands. His head spinning from the fast events unfolding before him. Twice he's been thrown from that room. The irony of it isn't lost to him.

He's in the open. An easy target. The General's words collide tinnily with the open air to the soldiers burning the manor's barn to Danilo's left.

"Skud."

Sand floods his boots when he scrambles up from his hands and knees. He doesn't stop to see which soldiers come running.

Danilo maneuvers around the few houses between the manor and the north wall. Rancid smoke burns his lungs. He dodges through the paths. Attempting to lose the men that trail behind him. The stone wall claws into his knees and fingers as he clambers up, scoring open his skin in his urgency.

An incoming body slams into him. And his grasp comes loose. A sword rings out as it's pulled from its sheath. The soldier's firm grip forces Danilo's face into the wall. 'Twister' echoes in the air. He turns in the soldier's feeble grasp. In a quick act, he catches Deandro's hand gripped around the weapon's hilt. Distantly, he thinks that a sword was too long in this proximity. The blade bounces off the stone with an angered cry.

Danilo punches him in the nose and the snap of bone shatters the tense air between them. Deandro cups his nose with a muffled groan, stumbling back.

Blood pours from between his fingers. Free of him, Danilo scrambles over the rock wall. His legs collapsing into the sand on the other side. He releases a watery gasp. Relief, grief, and horror grip his heart. The General's hollers, his anger branding Danilo him with a new title:

“Traitor.”

And despite the gutting sensation it leaves him with, he runs.



CHAPTER THREE

The gutter alleys are the cramped areas of Audantei tucked between towering buildings. Damp between the hours of midnight and half-light. Acting as a refuge to the seedy and homeless, the gutter alleys mar Audantei's pride of prosperity—its comfort—with shame. The city's success withers in the darkened corners of the gutter alleys' crumbling foundations. An equally dark crevice of Danilo's mind whispers that this is where monsters like him belong.

Over several days, he's come to understand the anger in the vagrants living here. His existence encroaches on their territory. With their reluctance to share space to sleep or food, he's carved his survival through their ranks. Now they tolerate his presence, though he still expects the draw of blood for simple needs.

Stepping over a scowling old man huddled in the connecting mouth of intersecting alleys, Danilo toes through squelching sand towards the soldiers' barracks; one demand prevalent in his mind.

The Gentled East's night sky is normally an abyss littered with constellations that rival the glow of the moon. Night troops have little need for torches, as firelight is a weak rival for the moonlight. Only necessary for the stairs of city walls or battened buildings. Tonight, the clouded sky darkens with warning as he crawls from the alleys, bathing Audantei in a macabre grey.

Danilo's outstretched arm blurs in the shadows. Accumulated sand around a building's foundation sinks around his ankles. He peers into the streets, watching as it sprays onto the wide road from a cold gust of desert wind. His informant leans against a building across from the barracks, closer than Danilo is comfortable with, but within killing reach of the gutter alleys.

He sidles into the man's shadow. His tattered shirt brushes on the stone wall, alerting the informant to his presence. The tender spot on his head collides with the stone. The informant's forearm cradles his throat. Danilo chuckles dryly. He pats the hand clenched in his military garb.

"Steady, Chason." Danilo peers over Chason's shoulder at the yellow flicker of a torch passing the barrack gate from inside. His informant's wild eyes bore into him.

"The hell has you been?" Chason tears his hands off Danilo. "Been waiting for three days."

Danilo has an answer. Or half an answer. But as Chason takes another step back, the dark maroon stains on his beige uniform say more than his words will.

"What's happening, Lieutenant?"

It's not loud enough to be heard by anyone but the sleeping residents whose windows they converge under. Still, Danilo leaps forward and clasps his hand over Chason's mouth, dragging him into the gutter alley. It's a tight squeeze. Tighter still when Danilo leans to peer at the barrack gates.

He swings back to Chason, saying, "Do not call me that. I've been dismissed. You'll report elsewhere soon."

"I's not calling anybody else 'Lieutenant'."

"Might want to reconsider." Danilo rubs his knuckles on his pants. "I can't pay you anymore."

Chason's ruddy hair falls limp over the burn scar marring his nose and cheek, faintly resembling a wrinkled handprint. Though not—by any means—an attractive man, he wouldn't be considered ugly if it weren't for the scar.

After a prolonged pause where neither of them speaks, Danilo stretches out an open palm. With no offer for his skill, Chason and his self-serving soul will flee the city. He doesn't face Danilo, instead opting to stare distantly down the alley. The damaged skin over Chason's nose rolls with his scowl.

"Not needed, Lieutenant." He looks back at Danilo.

Danilo stares blankly, hand dropping to his side. He scoffs a moment later—an indebted ex-Lieutenant Commander of Audantei is a powerful form

of repayment. He nods. Chason waits watchfully as Danilo stares out at the barracks.

“You wanting the update?”

Danilo crosses his arms and ignores the pain zapping through his chest, along with the temptation to say ‘yes’. Habit has been ground deep into his veins. With his problems, it’s foolish to be distracted by flashy news and empty promises. They’ll do him no good.

“No.” Danilo squares his shoulders at Chason’s unblinking, wide eyes. “No. I want you focused on a new assignment.”

Chason nods, mimicking Danilo’s stance in preparation to remember. Danilo knows he won’t soon forget the weight of such a request.

“You’ll shadow Audantei. Glean information from her regarding her military commands and advances.”

“You needing me to shadow a city?”

Danilo glances back at the barracks. “I want to know what’s going on in there. *How* is up to you.”

He can count the thrum of his own heart in the heavy, bold silence between them. It’s no simple task.

“Aye, Lieutenant.” Chason huffs. “I understand.”

Danilo’s certain he does.

“See you next week.” Chason slips from the gutter alley, a hint of light making the piebald scar on his face shine when he stops. “And Lieutenant?”

Danilo hums, eyes fixed on the barracks behind Chason.

“Cover up that lip of yours.” Chason nods, eyes falling to the branching scar on Danilo’s upper lip. “Your face they be recognizing, but the scar’s what will get you killed.”

Danilo rubs the scar with a sigh, cursing it yet again. “Goodbye Chason.”

Chason vanishes from sight, casting an ‘until next’ over his shoulder. Danilo remains in the alley, watching the flicker of fire behind the towering stakewall. The firelight breaking beyond the slats in the gate snuffs out as it passes into the barracks. Danilo knows there are a few dozen men awake, leaving hundreds more safe to sleep within the city’s walls. As his eyes linger, time slips further away. But time is useless to a man grasping for his standing in an anarchy.

Desperately, Danilo had run to Audantei, taking up residence in the gutter alleys four days before the General returned to the Royal Beseecher. Now,

Danilo wonders if he ran to Audantei to hide, or because he knew the General would return soon after him.

Fighting is all he knows. Which made it easy to inject himself into the Nameless; the homeless nation in Audantei's underfoot. Regardless of what happened between him and the General, Danilo will not step down from fighting for his title. The General's dismissal wasn't legal. Which means Danilo's rank is safe. Either the Royal Beseecher, Kosymo Guerra, dismisses the soldier, or the noose dismisses them. And Danilo had not started training so young to have it taken away from him before the nine-year mark. His goal had been to be the highest-ranking soldier in ten, and he remains determined to see it through.

With a sigh, Danilo turns into the depths of the gutter alleys. His arms press tight over his chest as the frigid winds rush through the narrow passages. Shoving his aching hands into his armpits, he retraces his steps. He pauses, squinting at the mouth of the upcoming intersection. The old man is missing from his place.

Nameless refuse to give up their sleep spots once the night settles in—their body heat warming what little refuge they found from the cold. They move for two reasons: the promise of food, or the promise of death. The second threat was far more lenient.

A large body barrels Danilo into the rough exterior of the middle-class housing at his side, knocking the air from his lungs. He palms the empty sheath on his waist before a fist slams his jaw into the stone. His feet are kicked open and a smaller man joins the larger one to pin him against the wall. Thrashing does little to dislodge their grip.

"Ey, 'ey, settle down, Lieutenant." The end of a broken handle sharpened to a point presses into the soft flesh of his open throat.

The third man holding the handle is tall but slight. Sickly looking. With mottled sunburns across his forehead and cheeks, and patchy growths of hair over his head. Grease streaks the dirt lining his skin.

"Isn't this a treat." He's familiar more by the rotten, broken-toothed grin than by the rest of his appearance. The handle at Danilo's throat readjusts when he arches in an attempt to free his arms. "Na'ah, no."

Two years prior, Danilo met Neor—broken-tooth—while tasked with finding the Head of Orders. The Orders were a private cartel who sold lethal powders and vials to commoners with vendettas. Mass murders terrorized Audantei

for weeks before Danilo made a final arrest. Neor was a distributor with a habit of sampling his supply. By the looks of it, he still is.

Danilo lurches forward and his arm slips free of the smaller man's hold. The larger man cracks Danilo's head into the wall with a curt 'behave'. His vision darkens for a moment and he's pinned to the stone again.

"To think you almost snuck by us... got your patch to thank for that." Neor tilts his head, unperturbed by Danilo's struggle, and pats the patch sewn to his upper arm. He sinks his fingers beneath the loose stitching—a layer of dark fabric in the shape of the Royal Beseecher's insignia: a skull with a sword through the eye-socket—and rips the mark free from Danilo's shirt.

Neor had time to improve his skills since their last meeting. A visible change gleams in his eyes, the weapon digging into Danilo's skin, adding to his obvious pleasure. Two years is plenty of time to become dangerous.

Danilo grits his teeth and leans forward. The handle slides from the underside of his jaw to the hollow of his throat and the wood's jagged edges raise a stinging pink welt. He swallows reflexively.

"You deserve whatever justices await you." Danilo bites his tongue to hide his grin, failing to do so when Neor lurches into his space and sours the air with his breath. The old phrase strikes.

"Justice?" Neor pulls back to rub his knuckles down Danilo's scarred lip. "There's nothing *just* about Audantei."

Neor drives the handle between the stones, catching Danilo's ear. A warmth oozes along the curve of his pulsing lobe, but Danilo continues smiling.

"Or have you forgotten your age?" Neor's hands slide down Danilo's neck and descend past his shoulders.

Danilo cracks his elbow into the smaller man's chest, driving air from his lungs with enough force to shove him back. Reaching over his shoulder, Danilo tears the handle free. With a jab into the large man's throat, his captor drops. Stumbling from Neor's reach, Danilo tightens his grip on the makeshift weapon. The smaller man bolts at Danilo's middle. Danilo wraps his free arm down to squeeze around the assailant's throat. He coughs and Danilo twists. The snap of his spine cuts through the air. Danilo drops the body and faces Neor.

Neor pales. Danilo doubts he considered the skill it would take for a man his age to achieve the position of lieutenant.

“You kill me and she won’t be happy.” Neor stumbles backward, speeding up as Danilo starts after him.

“Your wife will get in line.”

Neor scowls, kicks piss-filled sand in Danilo’s direction, and takes off through the sludge. Despite Neor’s lithe form, Danilo outmatches him for speed. They collide and slide to the ground. Danilo buries the handles in the soft junction under Neor’s chin, landing atop his dead body.

Acid burns within his throat at the sight of Neor’s hollowed gaze. Danilo uses his sleeve to wipe his face free of filth and swallows down the urge to vomit across the corpse. Residue lingers on his skin regardless of his efforts. He deserved it, Danilo tells himself. And he repeats it as his fingers clutch the bare spot on his shoulder. A sun-bleached square of untouched cloth bright across the rest of the fabric. He’s better off. The soldiers would draw to it like moth to flame.

Unsure whether he’s bought himself time or assigned himself a hunting party, Danilo stalks away from the scene. Any Nameless who stumbles on the mess will find the dead finished by their own weapons. And the rising Head of Orders will learn what Danilo already knows. He’ll be the king of this broken kingdom.

After squeezing through the alleys, snagging the fabric of his newest stain, he leans against the sandstone and palms his closed eyes. Sleep is a demanding but cunning mistress. Soft in comparison to the squalor of the sand he sinks into. His heavy eyes and fading adrenaline drain him.

Violence is her jealous consort.

Jutting knuckles collide with Danilo’s cheek, slamming his jaw into the alley’s crumbling foundation. He jolts awake, kicking out his assailant’s knee. A weathered, auburn-haired Nameless leaps at Danilo’s collar, his shattered pride fighting for his usurped standing in the otherworldly homeless hierarchy. Vendetta glitters darkly in his eyes. The fight is brief and unfair.

Bracing his feet against the walls on either side of the body beneath him, Danilo sighs. Then keeps moving.

Always moving.



CHAPTER FOUR

Today is Hanging Day.

Danilo's hood, though unforgivably and unbearably hot, provides safety from the growing mass of vendors around the Chalkire fountain—a large, white, twisting monstrosity south of the city's center. Red fabrics that droop from balconies and crowded flat rooftops create shade for the throng of bodies in the Chalkire Market.

With a voice as honeyed as his hair. And a smile as dazzling as his startling blue eyes, despite the crawling scar on his lip, Danilo is easily identifiable to the citizens of Audantei. Wanted posters line the major streets where locals and traders alike gather. But as the famously skilled Lieutenant Commander, he's recognizable regardless. The signs are a useless precaution.

The gutter alley's filth clinging to his skin and clothes repels the eyes of those seeking to benefit from the reward. In the multiplying bodies that pour into the market from the spiderweb of streets connected to the Black Gate, Danilo dodges unaware travelers and civilians, grimacing as the movement jars his previous injuries.

After a month of flitting through the crowds, Danilo has learned to snag food when vendors barter with passers. His meals are meager, but fit for a king of the gutter alleys.

Snatching a warm, crisp roll from the varieties at the bread stand, he shoves it between his teeth and shimmies onto a deck overlooking the area—a cramped, broken thing saturated in fabrics. Heat trapped from within the roll wafts against his face as he tears it apart, thanking the Chalkire Market for its glamour and riches which provide the vendors with fancy trinkets like warming carts. The bread will still be a bland and tasteless thing, as it has been for weeks, but at least it's fresh.

This daily pattern is a poor semblance of a once-balanced routine. What's more, however, is an opportunity; a chance to search for a means of pardon. And it starts with survival.

Danilo squints at the oddity of a still soul in an otherwise bustling crowd. Chason leans against the eastern wall, hood cloaking his downturned face in shadows. Shoving the remains of the roll in his cheek, Danilo clammers down. He's careful where he plants his toes, wary of the wandering soldiers.

"Lieutenant." Chason steps into him, nearly shoving his mouth against Danilo's cheek with urgency. Danilo jolts away from Chason's sudden closeness, looking to where the man had been on the other side of the market. "The Altamuras have been gathered for today's hangings."

Chatter and banter overpower Chason's hushed, hurried tones. Danilo's mind stutters momentarily.

"For what reasons?" He asks, watching over Chason's shoulder for lingering eyes.

"Don't know, couldn't say. All I's seen is them being removed yesterday." Chason whispers.

"Do you know who's being hanged?"

Chason shrugs. A young girl trips into him and he clutches his hood to keep it low. She swiftly apologizes before collecting her armload of fabrics and bolts toward one of the wealthy shops with a permanent residence on the edge of the market. Decorative wood slats rot across the building's supports—evident by the holes that the rodents broke to make a home near the food vendors.

"No, but rumor is there's a band of traitors. For illegal housing of an outlaw."

Chason shoves Danilo into an open alleyway when a soldier turns sharply around a nearby corner—utterly clueless. Danilo drops his gaze to his feet and allots Chason a momentary trust. When Chason steps back and continues speaking, Danilo chances glancing up to look around.

"Apparently, they were in full knowing." Chason continues.

If rumors held weight, High General Llodis Altamura will be rewarded yet again. ‘Outlaws’ were a term for Stormthrowers. Few know this. The belief in magic has dwindled into myth across the East, and the Royal Beseecher took pride in the city’s ignorance—‘a sign we’re doing our jobs’.

“Thank you.” Danilo extends his forearm and clasps Chason’s. “See you next week.”

With a dip of his head, Chason weaves into the crowd and leaves Danilo to survey the bustling area.

Military families gather for important events; promotions, decorations, or banquets. Otherwise, they live separate lives from their husbands and sons, given a status equivalent to nobility. The Altamuras command the utmost respect as the family of the great High General and High Lieutenant Commander. However, there is no good reason for this gathering.

The Beseecher’s citadel sits above the market, divided by stone walls and brutal guards. Its white splendor reflects the desert light off sharp edges and pointed gables sitting over windows. Danilo scowls at the monstrosity.

Today is Hanging Day.

In the end, Danilo’s curiosity wins and he follows the crowd weaseling from the Chalkire Market to the public courtyard. He weaves among the spectators, using his hood to obstruct his face, and grimaces as sweat rolls down his neck. Many use hoods to protect from the desert heat. It never helps. To blend in, he makes sacrifices; even in the dreadful scorch of a full courtyard beneath the peak heat of day.

The courtyard’s cold familiarity mocks him. A door in the center of the back stone-laid wall leads to the underground cells. On either side, open hallways connect to the surrounding buildings. Stone pillars support the white upper levels that lead to the depths of the fortress.

Royal Beseecher Kosymo Guerra arranges Hanging Days for the end of every month. Hanged are those who violate the absolute of Audantei’s law or those who are caught with Stormthrowers.

None enjoy when it’s hosted. Not the people. Not the nobility, who sit on an upper level as if watching a prized fighting championship. Not Beseecher Guerra, who sits among them at their center with a stern brow and sorrowful eyes. A show much like the rest of it.

He strokes the hair of his goatee while a young and beautiful false-noble wraps Kosymo’s beaded braids hidden in the brown hair around her primped

fingers. Her weaved hair and red painted skin states her paid services. The Beseecher's foot presses against a post on the deck as he drapes across his seat. His armour doubles his size even while slouched.

Today is Hanging Day.

The Beseecher's diplomat reads rights and treasons over the mingling volume of the crowd, standing above them to the left of the platform. Whoever hangs first awaits the end of the paper.

Danilo pushes through the crowd, ignoring provocative comments and the gag-inducing graze of tacky flesh against tacky flesh. As he searches for a clear line of sight, the High General steps forward.

The crowd lulls. His presence as commanding as his voice. All six feet of his jostling body halts beside the trapdoor lever.

Danilo's as tall as him, with the promise of growing left still. But for all the General's height, he has the weight to match. With shoulders congruent to a bull and ribs thicker than a Nuicallian warrior—from the tribes of the Frozen South—his presence is imposing on most men.

The General's meaty hand clenches the lever with an unperturbed grimace outlined by a narrow mustache which overshadows his beard. If experience didn't say otherwise, the General's deep scowl could be mistaken as a testament to his anger.

Today is Hanging Day.

Danilo squints as he bends around the crowd of heads, struggling to see past the blurred tears of his aching eyes. He finds his mother, grief weathering the wrinkles around her frown. Her brown eyes glitter like the jewels of Jerusai in the south. The brown braid crowning her head matches the thick ropes of the noose around her neck, the twisted cord catching the tears dripping off her cheeks.

Danilo's chest drops at her lifeless expression. It mocks him from afar. Onlookers fall silent when the lever groans as it's pulled, pulled, pulled. Then clunked.

Today is Hanging Day.

Danilo's breath dissolves in the harsh, hot air. The colour drains from his face. He scrapes his nails across the inside of his palm to ignore the plum fabric in his peripheral; swaying from the breeze dipping through the open platform. Toes of leather boots clack over the gasps of the crowd, each tap striking his heart.

The flutter of blonde hair beside his mother belongs to his sister. Only a year older than him. He remembers a time she swiped a damp cloth on his sticky skin. Back when his fingers couldn't curl around her wrist. Danilo refuses to search for the flat brown hair and toothy, dimpled grin belonging to his brother.

Sun reflects off the sand, painful for his tired eyes but grounding in its familiarity. Ragged breaths flit through his lungs and he slides a hand across his forehead. It's a weak attempt to steady himself, but as nausea rises in his chest, he finds he cannot fight it. His hood bumps up as he fishes beneath to grasp his curls.

"The Lieutenant!"

The title echoes in the empty space of his mind. Habit drives his elbow into the oncoming man's nose. Reason and response war like the colliding winds of east and west. Something deep within him grins.

Shrill screams rattle his ear and he stares down at the soldier flattened at his feet. The man's sword clangs across the dirt, sand billowing beside his crumpled body. The spaces between the guard's fingers dribble blood, stained palms braced over his mouth.

The General leads his soldiers from the stands, face red and pale eyes crazed. Icy blood pulses through Danilo, heart knocking against his ribs with a sudden urgency.

When Danilo sprints through the gate of the courtyard, he uses his momentum to cripple the sentry at the throat. The spear in the guard's hand falls, its clatter drowned by his wheezing breath. He's alone by the exit, which means they hadn't prepared for the possibility of him being there.

He shouldn't have come.

Soldiers rush through Audantei, gleaming swords drawn while the Beseecher's courtyard horn echoes over the thousands of hushed citizens—the mark of an escape. A rare occurrence.

Danilo barrels through the streets, stumbling around pedestrians that trip from his path. He scrambles up crates to find purchase on a blisteringly hot low-hanging roof. Blurs of red pass through his peripheral as he sprints with one destination in mind.



CHAPTER FIVE

Danilo considers himself a fairly optimistic person. Even after all the death claiming his troops over the years. Claiming men he was meant to watch out for. Maybe he was too young for the responsibility. But it didn't stop him from trying.

The gutter alleys threatened was little optimism he scrounged together. The Nameless want him dead. The city wants him starved. And the men guarding the mouths of its most accessible entries want him in chains. Still, he flees toward those narrow paths. Angry at himself for only being capable of running away these days. He is far better than that. But perhaps because he is, he knows that the downtrodden characters in the gutter alleys would gladly take the opportunity to attack an Audanteian soldier in their territory. Danilo counts on that very security.

As Danilo bursts from the rooftop into conjoining alleys below, he skids to his rear in the sand. He scrambles left as one of the General's finest rushes from their depths—Audantei-red fabric draped off the shoulder of his bow arm. An arrow tings off the stone house behind him.

Animals and citizens screech when Danilo throws them into the path of the troops, drowned out by the soldiers' forceful commands. He rounds a corner, kicking out the supportive leg of a merchant's canopy and collapsing it on

vendors and civilians. It forces the soldiers to stop and aid, or squeeze through narrower alleys. Hopefully Audantei's dark corners will engulf them.

He grinds to a halt. A line of soldiers block each of the gutter alleys' entrances amid the Chalkire Market, shields held at their front—the Beseecher's symbol smeared in blood-red across the steel—and swords pointed outward.

With a deep breath, he sprints into the crowd. People scramble to escape his path. He ducks under the sword of the soldier who rushes to subdue him. Old injuries groan with his effort. Forced to change directions, Danilo slides beneath the busted underside of the fabric shop into the adjacent street and dashes to the High District.

The upper district's alleys are bright and open—their gutters tucked under the roads in an elaborate sewer system. There's a higher chance of running into another patrol rather than a Nameless. He hopes they left their posts when the courtyard horn sounded. Danilo is relieved to find the towering white slab paths abandoned as he weaves through, sand spraying against the walls as he skids over dry earth to put as much distance as possible between himself and the men chasing him. His legs ache as he pushes onward.

Danilo spots a narrow sewer opening tucked under a wide street planter, designed for the upper class servants. He slides to his knees and shimmies inside, feet sloshing into the filth. He muffles a violent gag with his hand, thumb and finger pinching off his nose. Soldiers storm across the cobbled street. They shout throughout the area, having lost his trail when sand turned to stone. Danilo hunches lower. He knows with the horn echoing across the city, its citizens will have noticed him.

Sloshing echoes under his feet, amplified from the surrounding stone, as he slides further from the opening. His boots drag across the upturned roof tiles on the bottom of the sewer, his movements cautious to keep the noise low. Streets grow silent, one voice at a time.

Danilo slumps against the sewer's dark walls, eyes burning from the fumes that rises from the water beneath him. And though he can't afford it, he pauses there to acknowledge his failure and loss; the ache overshadowing his throbbing injuries. It doesn't last long before the need to run builds within him again. He sighs.

A familiar song cuts through the sewer's silence—the cry of steel fleeing its sheath. Cold metal presses against his carotid. He tenses, knuckles grinding into the stone behind him. He looks at its wielder, eyes catching on a carved

dragonhead carved staff. Glowing blue eyes stare down at him. He stares back. When the blade shifts, he chances a glare at the staff's owner.

The greying edges of Enzo's temples, and the peppercorn color of his beard, are as familiar as sea striking earth. Conflicting shades of blue from the staff reflect in his stone-cold eyes.

A fire breaks through Danilo's adrenaline with something akin to fury: a heated combination of guilt, blame, and vengeance.

Danilo attempts to lurch forward. Enzo rocks the blade, cutting his skin. He grinds his knuckles deeper into the stone, splitting open dry scabs. With the filth surrounding him, he's quick to wipe the backs of his hands on his shirt. Enzo squints at the quick movement.

Their breathing collides in the cramped space, echoing in tandem with the sewer sloshing around their ankles.

"What is your plan of attack?" Enzo slides the dagger up until Danilo tilts his head to avoid it slicing his jaw. Danilo refuses to meet his eyes, scrutinizing the stone slab beyond Enzo's shoulder. Enzo sneers and glides the knife against Danilo's cheek, forcing Danilo's gaze to him.

"Your father should be behind you with a battalion of men. Is he not?" Danilo flinches at the mention of the General, and Enzo's eyes light up in interest. He chuckles darkly, the sound growing deeper with satisfaction when Danilo lurches for his throat. He drives the blade's tip into Danilo's cheek. "What did you discover in the Narota camp?"

Danilo's teeth clack together. Enzo squints at the obvious defiance. The sewer beneath them gains speed, growing clearer with its sudden violence. As Enzo's expression stills, Danilo whitens with realization. He drives his heel to Enzo's knee and the man staggers into the opposite wall.

His nails dig into Enzo's clothes, but it does nothing against the man's many layers. Between Danilo's dwindling strength from the day's events and the rapids pulling his feet from beneath him, Enzo peels him from the wall and pins him to the roof tiles at the bottom of the sewer. Waters as violent as the western seas pull him into the depths of their own accord. Danilo's head pulses as he struggles to hold on to air. When Enzo pulls him up, Danilo sputters water across Enzo's sleeves. Enzo scowls.

Danilo pants, gripping the stone on either side of him as the water stills. His eyes wander for a moment. He could play the game. Allow that overlong sport of drawing out answers only to discover very little at the end. But Danilo's most

hated form of torture is waterboarding. And Enzo could do it for hours without laying a hand on him. As it stands, he doesn't have hours to offer. He needs out of the city, and he needs out *now*.

"Why would I tell you?" Danilo grimaces at the exhaustion in his voice. Enzo kneels, fisting Danilo's collar, and pushes him towards the water. He fights back, breaking his nails across the slabs. "I'm not saying anything at all if you're just going to kill me."

He glares at Enzo from where he sits, his waist submerged in the tossing water. Enzo hums, his knee brushing against Danilo's chest and his staff scraping the tile beside the Lieutenant's ear.

"Sounds like a bargain."

"Maybe it is." Danilo licks his scar when it pulls uncomfortably. He doesn't move to escape, but he doesn't relax.

Enzo releases him and straightens. The water and filth squelches as Danilo flees its confines, flicking his hands dry despite his sopping clothes and hair. Standing with his arms against his chest, Danilo eyes the sewer, slumping on the wall with a tired sigh. Enzo stares from beneath his brows, looking tempted to throw Danilo back in by the time he speaks.

"The sword."

Enzo sneers. "What of it?"

"What of—" a bitter laugh cuts from Danilo's lungs. "It turned blue."

Enzo pins Danilo's throat to the wall with a forearm. "Who touched it?"

Enzo's grey eyes blaze into him, disappearing beneath his brows. His heaving breaths scratch Danilo's cheeks. The corner of his mouth tips upward. Enzo fists his hair and cracks his head against the wall. He takes Danilo's weight, supporting his lolling head.

"I did." Danilo admits.

There's a slur on Danilo's tongue, but he can't find the words through the fog muddling his brain.

"Do continue." The suddenness of Enzo's voice causes Danilo to flinch. "You are alive because I've not yet found benefit in killing you."

Danilo's jaw clenches under Enzo's frigid gaze. Enzo's face remains still as Danilo's eyes flick over him, trying to find a crack in his mask; a hint of his thoughts.

"There are some questions I need you to answer." Enzo leans heavier on Danilo's throat.

"I'd rather die."

"That could be arranged."

Enzo breathes steadily, his hold unmoving from Danilo's neck, fist tight in the tattered fabric of the sand-coloured tunic. Danilo doesn't budge under the older man's intense stare—acclimated to judgment. Rolling his arm to force Danilo's chin higher, Enzo squints and watches Danilo steal light breaths between his teeth.

"A bit older and I would sever your head from your neck." Enzo raises a brow at Danilo's pathetic attempt to glare at him from where he's pinned.

Danilo, with failing self-control, pushes his next words through the cracks of his teeth, near unintelligible from the force he exerts. "Why don't you?"

Patterned marching echoes overhead, storming into the upper district. Steel armor clangs off the cobbled streets. Danilo's breath hitches and he freezes under Enzo's grasp. Enzo relaxes, allowing Danilo room to breathe as the boy's face betrays his thoughts.

"They are after you," Enzo says, gaze narrowed when Danilo focuses on him rather than through him.

"Shut up, skud."

Blue magic lights their stretch of the sewer, and Danilo bites his tongue before saying anything more.

The screech of the grate—on the border of the High and Mid District, where the middle class dumps their buckets—tells Danilo that they have little time before the soldiers are upon them. Enzo releases his hold on Danilo's neck, still fisting Danilo's shirt. Both look down the darkened tunnel.

Neither can afford the cost of attention.

"Is it possible to agree on a point of contention?" Enzo places his staff upright and straightens. The air stops shifting in circles.

Danilo's gaze flicks between Enzo and the distant sewer before Enzo's words bring him to attention. They glare at one another; implications heavy between them.

"No pity for the dead?" Danilo's whisper rattles out in a cough, muffled in a dirtied sleeve stinking of sweat and salt and ordure.

"You are not dead yet." Enzo stalks down the sewer, wind and water rising behind him. It wades around Danilo's knees.

Danilo has encountered Enzo enough times to know the odds favor the old Stormthrower. The man is likely to drown him or block his exits with a typhoon, forcing him into the General's hand.

"I can guarantee food once we are beyond the city." Enzo pauses, light eyes catching on the larger tears in Danilo's clothing. "And water. We'll do the city a favour by ensuring you do not drink from troughs like a vagabond."

Danilo snarls, face hot. He has not made it a habit to drink from the farm troughs found near the western walls of the city—tucked among the middle and low classes, having been part of Audantei long before the walls were built. It had been on the rarest of occasions. Enzo either gleaned the information from the Nameless or from anyone looking to make an extra bit of coin. And while Danilo knows his skills have kept him from disaster, Audantei's dark corners will close in on him soon.

Danilo looks at Enzo and finds the man's blank expression overcast by a slight upturn at the corner of his mouth.

"Why?" Danilo asks.

There's a pause in the air—made tense by the sound of splashing from further in the sewer. Enzo's stare is hard and unyielding despite the barking of the soldiers. Familiar commands cut above the slosh under their feet. Yet Danilo can't bring himself to look away.

He's run to Audantei, seeking answers and pardon alike. Though the cause of his blame stands before him, he finds his untried guilt sated by a mixture of shock and grief.

Knowing the General, Danilo has seconds to decide whether to give leverage to his enemy, or his life to this city. He'd been primed to lay his life down for Audantei. Now he wants to live to spite the General. And the answer to his pardon stands before him with an icy stare.

He reaches out a hand, swallowing down a grin with all his might, and waits while Enzo observes his open palm. Danilo closes around Enzo with an iron grip, and though Enzo doesn't wince, he does tear away from Danilo soon after. If Danilo could be grateful for anything the General gave him, it's his strength. When Enzo spins on his heels, Danilo is forced to follow after him or be left behind for Audantei's men.



When Audantei was still young and bright and full of opportunity, larger colonies had also seen its value. Armies from neighboring regions prepared to march upon its borders to claim it as their own.

The Black Gate hadn't been designed black. Crafted from the thickest pale trees of the Frozen South, it was meant to open inward with two grand doors—in height, not design—and an oil-slicked metal portcullis dropped from the front to allow for quick closure. A strategy many disagreed with. When enemy armies tried to burn the door, the portcullis erupted in flames, charring the doors black. Now, a thick layer of Verrai clay, a substance which grows stronger from heat, barricades the wood from any future attacks.

It made Audantei famous; a city known for its wealth and impregnability. For its fortitude.

The first Royal Beseecher rose from the success. A title now earned through dedication to Audantei and her many peoples, so desirably sought after, it overthrew the status of noble lineage and became the governing voice of authority.

The Black Gate, while of historical importance, is the most heavily guarded part of the city. Its guards receive training from ex-Ravagers and wear the darkest gear in the Gentled East. Danilo is not jealous. The black gear in the direct glare of Audantei's sun is torture. The gate sees the most traffic as it's the fastest means of getting within the city—and the spot the sewers drain from the wall.

The sewer drains into a hole in the ground. The heat dries the bottom of the cavern, leaving a disastrous drop beneath the grate. It's not Danilo's first choice of escape. Unfortunately, with the General's anger, it's likely the one option he will live through.

Danilo stares out into the cavern, the breeze on the air failing to lift his dirt-heavy locks. He and Enzo have run through the few connecting sewers, having stalled the soldiers behind them for mere minutes. Enzo sneers at Danilo's profile, reaching to grab for him. Danilo constricts bruised fingers around his wrist.

"You've set a trap," Enzo accuses.

Danilo pulls his gaze away from the hole to glare at the older man. "You're blackmailing the Lieutenant Commander of Audantei for information."

"I'll have you aware, Lieutenant, that while I initially believed the horn was notifying soldiers of my presence, it was you they climbed into the sewer in search of." Enzo tears his hand from Danilo's grip, the air growing stronger outside of the gate.

"If you want answers so badly," Danilo says while he gestures to the cavern, "fill the hole."

"Pardon?" Enzo stares at Danilo's hand where it lazily points to the drop beneath them. Danilo tilts his head back, eyes level with the man in answer. "I will not make my presence know to your General."

Danilo crosses his arms over his chest. "You don't have to. I'm not saying fill it completely. We only need enough to jump."

"Will your Black Gate guards not notice when water arises?" Enzo's eyes harden as he stares at Danilo.

Danilo steps back from the grate, allowing Enzo to look out. Enzo raises his staff, forcing Danilo back further. Enzo grips the metal grate and peers out cautiously.

When the courtyard horn sounds, the Black Gate drops the portcullis in part. A mount cannot pass under unless the rider draws his head down. They search each cart and make an account of each person. Audantei's list of wanted is kept by one individual. The other soldiers create order. Two lines: one coming and one going. There are two dozen men on the ground at the Black Gate for the hundreds of passers. Their attention is not to be divided. The few archers or captains atop the wall wouldn't spare a glance at the drain—trained to watch the horizon and city on threat of demotion or death.

But it doesn't mean Danilo and Enzo would be invisible to their eye. Especially if the soldiers in the sewers take the correct turns. While none of them have studied the maps and blueprints like Danilo, the sewers aren't exactly a maze.

"We're running out of time." Danilo says as a loud order echoes along the stones overhead.

Enzo squints at him, pulling back inside the grate. He remains watchful, his thoughts carefully guarded behind his stony stare.

Danilo tries not to smirk as he feels the storm growing outside; the wind ripping into the tunnel. Sunlight cuts into the opening behind Enzo, stretching the man's shadow to Danilo's feet, jailed by the dark lines of the grate. Enzo steps to the side—back against the sewer wall—and gestures to the cavern beneath him.

"At my insistence." Enzo says contritely.

Danilo nods at the grate without letting go of Enzo's gaze, conveying without speaking how likely Danilo will be to offer himself so foolishly. Enzo's frustrated stare moves over his shoulder. An angered shout severs the air behind them.

Danilo's face drains of colour and he sprints forward, shoving himself through the grate without care of whether Enzo follows.

The white rays of the desert sun claw at Danilo's eyes and he's unable to brace them from the sun-sear as he falls. Wind cleaves at the holes in his shirt before he's slurped up by the waters at the bottom of the cistern. The shadows of the trench encase the water in darkness as he paddles towards the surface. He breaks with a gasp before he's dragged back down by his ankle. Enzo grapples at his tunic, eyes simmering with silent threats when Danilo grapples at his throat.

Danilo, though he can swim well enough to survive, knows he is weak in the water. And Enzo proves he is a far better swimmer, pinning Danilo in the dark edges of the cavern. His focus is divided between getting free and holding onto his breath. He freezes against the rock, pliant in Enzo's grasp when a bolt from the wall's gunman pierces below the surface of the water, rushing to a stop between their faces as it struggles to carve a path through the depths.

Enzo shoves him towards the surface. Danilo breaks the water spluttering, and heaves himself onto land. The gunman yanks the line tight on a second bolt. Danilo staggers to his feet and Enzo yanks him aside, the bolt screaming past Danilo's head and into a palm tree.

Danilo spares a glance at the gunman, watching as he slides another bolt into the groove of the ballista. Without mercy. He sprints after Enzo into the congregating merchants and farmers, hoping to dissuade Audantei from firing at its citizens. From the petrified screams and the telltale pierce of a ballista bolt through flesh, Danilo knows his hopes were in vain.



CHAPTER SIX

Danilo's adrenaline saps him of energy long before he slows to match Enzo's pace. They weave through the crowds of vendors and farmers until the bustling sands give way to crops. And the crops—along with the heavy odour of fertilizer—stop at the thick underbrush surrounding the lake. Lush green bushes and reeds divide pathways from the lake's edge.

Farmers would carve streams into their farmland to avoid approaching the water; an attempt to keep themselves and their livestock from falling victim to the crocodiles. As Danilo follows Enzo through the musty underbrush, he steps over the carved streams and the world vanishes. He'd consider the refuge of the interwoven brush a blessing if he weren't sinking into Enzo's previous steps, the moist sand suctioning to his boots.

The tremble of his fingers adds to his heightened alert. With his faltering strength, he stands no chance of winning a fight against Enzo. But the warning of potential death can't stave off his desperate hunger.

Danilo struggles to ignore the orders within him that are aware of Enzo's open back. The rusty iron weight around his ankle is a heady reminder of what he could accomplish in a brief second.

Enzo must sense a change in him because before Danilo can lunge forward, he's pinned to a palm tree. Its rough bark drags against Danilo's thin shirt. They

stare at one another in thinly concealed distaste. Enzo's grip on Danilo's tunic flexes. Then he speaks.

"I will keep my word, and you will go." Enzo looks between Danilo's eyes from beneath his brows. "Else I decide you are of better use dead."

Danilo bites down on his tongue until he tastes iron. He gives a curt nod. Enzo leaps back as if touching Danilo cut open his palms.

With quaking knees, Danilo pushes himself in Enzo's shadow. Stepping directly into Enzo's prints in the lakeside will deter the searching soldiers, since they'll likely ignore one set where they can find two. He keeps a keen—waver-ing—eye on the back of Enzo's head and considers his chances should he sprint into the fray of vendors along the road.

Danilo's aggressive focus remains on Enzo's swinging hair until the ever-growing waft of stew engulfs the tang of smoke. A rich, mouthwatering scent that has him stumbling past Enzo in the dense vegetation. He grinds to a stop, berating himself for the mistake.

Seven Stormthrowers surround him, burrowed into the underbrush comfortably. Some stand at Danilo's arrival.

A man with sweeping, hooded eyes and flopping black hair holds a fistful of cards. His sleeveless sky-blue tunic is tied shut by a cobalt sash. His arms are covered with binding fabric—a mark of injury. He faces Easton, tawny locks flying about in a cluster of cowlicks. His familiar blown-wide hazel eyes mock Danilo with memories of Narota.

"You realize you've got a tail, right, Enzo?" A woman flicks short wisps of black hair from her left cheek, the other side chopped close to her scalp—for the bow draped over her shoulders. She glares at him. Her green eyes are bold against her teak skin.

When Danilo shifts, the man nearest to him drops a hand to his sword. The burgundy coat stitched and lined with accents of gold softens his dark eyes. A thick and short black beard hides half his face, but not his distaste. The tightening grip on his weapon causes Danilo to clench his hands, coiled for a quick motion of the Stormthrower's spear.

Enzo gives the fire a lazy wave as he steps into Danilo's peripheral. Danilo doesn't notice.

He knows this man—Gellert Akintol—from long before when he defended against an attack in one of the bitter-cold cities in the southern Gentled East under Audantei's protection. Gellert's a decent fighter with an aggressive offense.

Danilo hasn't fought him, but he remembers three soldiers being crippled in the time it had taken them to draw their swords. Without the aid of magic.

Gellert had been among the last to retreat, his voice drowned out by the whistling force of the mountain winds. All he called was a name.

A Stormthrower, dying from a deep gash to the chest, leapt up to attack but found Danilo's sword sunk between his ribs. The man's gurgled response to the wind-broken cry struck Danilo deeper than any weapon had. Danilo knows regret will forever haunt his heart.

The sudden snap of the fire has Danilo flexing his knuckles; poised, ready, and at attention. He sways on his feet. Desire swells in his throat, but he refuses to let his eyes wander to the pot above the flames. Even as the scent tickles his nose.

"Why's he here, Enzo?" Another woman stands, popping out her full hips and fitting her hands over them. Her white-blond ponytail flicks over the thick furs sitting on her shoulders, unbothered by the desert heat. She snaps her gaze between him and Enzo. Judging by her wide stance and large figure, she's from a Nuicalli tribe. Or had been once.

When Enzo's silence persists, Danilo casts a glare in his direction. He double-takes. Enzo's piercing eyes have darkened—and Danilo would consider himself grateful for the lacking heat if it weren't akin to pity.

"I made a deal." Enzo gestures to the pot again, glaring at Danilo from under his brows. "He aids me. I aid him."

Danilo scrutinizes the taunting fire. His stomach claws at him with urgency.

He can say no—like he so desperately wants to—can walk away without the weight of being indebted to Enzo Sapienti pressing down on him like the death sentence he runs from. But he doubts he could make it two minutes out before hunger drives him to insanity.

Shuffling closer, Danilo takes careful stock of the members around the fire. Enzo remains behind him. He's faced Enzo before, and has no qualms about doing it again. The others he's not as certain about.

The Nuicallian backs up as he shuffles forward. All are still. All are watchful. With a strong but wary hand, she takes an offered bowl from Magus. His grin is devouring and his eyes glow. It distracts from black-brown hair glued to his sweaty forehead, and the upturned nose of a northerner.

"Magus," she says, "stop it."

Magus blinks, revealing a greener shade of hazel. His smile is mischievous rather than hungry. Still not friendly.

Names like ‘Magus’ are uncommon. Most avoid giving those names to their children because of Medumean; the mythological beast dismissed as tale, but whose name still holds terror over the lands. As a vile devourer of worlds—breathing both fire and famine—the centre had become a void, now named after him. Medumean’s Heart. An unlivable desert wasteland. While most have rejected the story, the lingering fear of The End keeps names from reflecting his power. Magus has likely named himself.

“Hestia.” The Nuicallian hands off the bowl when it’s tight in Danilo’s grasp. Audantei’s speckled light dancing between the palm leaves, highlighting the pale freckles over her nose and forehead.

“D—”

“We know.” Her tone is blunt, but her smile is kind.

He settles far from the fire, the day’s heat finding its way through the underbrush. The coolness of the plants and dampened sand provide a brief escape.

Danilo ignores the sweat rolling down the back of his neck as he dives into the stew. Their eyes keep on him, and while he loathes it, he ignores it; ignores Hestia’s sad expression as she holds the wooden spoon and how Enzo regards him without a hint of surprise. His skin twitches and jumps in discomfort.

He wipes his chin with a tattered brown sleeve and cautiously accepts the utensil. After flicking his attention to the man in the blue tunic pretending to appraise his cards, he eats slower.

First fuel, then fight.

The lake glitters like glass a short distance away, small fishing boats accenting the still surface. It reminds Danilo of the sea. He was happiest when he was stationed by the water, smelling the salt rising off the shores and watching red and gold light reflect where the sky touched the world. He inhales the faint breeze of sand and sweat breaking through the underbrush while clinging to what brief images he conjures.

A shift disrupts the silence—the telltale of a leg inward. A fidget under the overbearing weight of the atmosphere. Danilo’s eyes are on them. Hard and unyielding. Easton sweats at the attention.

“I—ugh—well, uh, w-w—”

“Breathe, Easton.” Gellert shakes his hand, as if to pat Easton’s knee through the air. “He ain’t gonna kill you with looks alone.”

No, he can't. But why let him think otherwise?

"What, uh—" Easton's hazel eyes flick between the cards he rotates between his fingers, dirt packed under his nails. "What happened to you?"

Danilo recoils, intense gaze turning confused. "What?"

"You were the Lieutenant Commander."

"And?" Danilo braces to run.

"You're acting like a starved stray."

He takes a steady breath inward. His eyes flicker about the group, landing on Enzo. They're all thinking the same. There's no chance he'd have won against them if he were his usual self, but he'd have put up a respectable fight.

He's thinner. Covered in grime. Patches of red and brown stain the tan fabric of his torn uniform. Easton should be smart enough to figure it out on his own.

"I was relieved of duty." He raises the bowl to his lips.

The green-eyed woman scoffs, stepping on a plant for it to grow twice as large as before, green magic fizzling across the dirt, following the roots beneath. "You?"

"Yes." Danilo mutters into the edge of the wood bowl, spoon rubbing against the side where he clutches it.

"That's it?" Her gaze shoots to him. There's a cunning gleam in their depths—she's trying to glean information from him.

"That's all I'm telling you."

Tension crackles in time with the fire, the flames spurred on by Magus' entertained laughter. Danilo eyes it warily, jumping when Gellert stomps closer to him.

"Are you wanted?" Gellert asks.

Danilo clenches the bowl until his knuckles whiten, scanning Gellert for a weakness. "What of it?"

"You're like us," Gellert chuckles, hand still lingering on his sword.

Danilo makes to stand, but he's thrown down when yellow magic coils around his middle. It constricts similar to a snake, darkening the fibers of his shirt and welting his skin. A lightbender. The black-haired woman—Reina, Danilo gathers from a couple of yelling members—leaps forward and grabs Gellert's throat, spitting at him through her teeth.

"Gellert." She drags his gaze to her, fingers locked around his jaw.

"What?" Gellert's fist trembles as he holds Danilo in place, talking at her through his teeth in return.

Reina hollers at him in the Ruhari tongue of the Dead West with such vigor it draws the worst of Gellert's focus. Her finger points at Danilo, but her glare remains fixed on her companion. The rest watch on. Eventually the warm magic disperses into the breeze like sand, Gellert deep in argument with Reina despite the hand on his hilt and the pointed glare in Danilo's direction.

Danilo's hackles rise with the swirl of emotion in the air. He's content to let them make their assumptions and be on his way. Hestia takes the bowl tossed to the ground and fills it again, another tender smile directed at him.

"How are you aiding him?" Gellert shoves away Reina to speak at Enzo, who raises a brow in return.

"What makes you believe I have not already?" Enzo rumbles, arms crossed over his chest, content to let the chaos unfold.

"e fact 'at I know you."

Enzo hums, glances over the group, and resumes his glare. "In return for food, he promised me answers. Now is as good a time to hold you accountable."

Danilo abandons the spoon when Enzo squats before him, opting to tilt the bowl little by little. He holds Enzo's stare.

Danilo is underwhelmed by the questions Enzo asks. And he answers them in honesty, just as he had encouraged his soldiers. Audantei has no hidden entrances. Not including the sewer grate he and Enzo leapt from. The west wall backs onto the mountain ridge, and the face has been chiseled flat. Unless one of Enzo's finest happens to be a wind-rider, they're out of luck. There are three small gates on the north wall which backs up to the barren desert. Two narrow gates claim the east wall for access to the fishers' docks, though the High District tends to host extravagant parties on the lake's edge where the reeds grow highest and the palms are tallest.

Danilo thinks this is information Stormthrowers would strip from a foot soldier. It seems a waste of words to ask the Lieutenant Commander. When Enzo switches to the Beseecher's political circle, the apprehension ebbs from him.

It's a chase of questions and answers. Danilo understands what Enzo wants to know after ten minutes.

The Royal Beseecher is a warrior with more political control than one would desire. And as a man of battle, he has no amiability. Instead, Nalcun Barmithol, the Beseecher's diplomat, acts as the main emissary. Danilo is aware of the po-

tential disasters of intercepted letters sent by Nalcun. The Beseecher's messages are formalities to distract the enemy. A fact Enzo must have discovered.

By the time Enzo begrudgingly accepts Danilo's half-truth answers, the sun is deep orange and shadows swallow the underbrush. Enzo snaps his wrist in dismissal and Danilo leaps to his feet, turning to leave when Gellert blocks his path. His eyes are dangerous.

"We cannot let him go wi'out risking ourselves."

"You can't just kill him, Gellert," Hestia says.

Gellert's eyes move from Hestia to Danilo. Danilo doesn't need to ask what he's thinking. He's thinking the same.

Enzo sighs, staring at Danilo as he mulls over a solution. "Kibeck owes me a favor."

"A wheat farm?" Hestia's screech makes Danilo jump, abandoning his focus on Gellert to watch her storm closer to Enzo. "The only reason they don't buy slaves is because they'd drop dead from the demand."

"And? We all know he's strong." Magus looks up at her.

"I also know what I see." Her eyes soften to Danilo, and she places her hands on her hips. "You got any other plans, sweetheart?"

There's a tenderness in her tone that makes his response die on his lips; she's yet to prove herself worthy of the slur, and Danilo is painfully aware he's out-powered. Her smile is full of sorrow, the edges sharp with knowledge. It's a hint of kindness he has yearned for, but was only offered in brief moments amongst the busy demands of formal gatherings. Something exclusively maternal.

"I... I don't know." He sighs, looking in the direction of the vendors packing their wares for the travel ahead. "I don't have many contacts outside the city."

She shuffles on her feet and nods encouragingly. He squints at her, the scathing expression dislodged when Gellert steps forward in warning.

He has no plan. No means of escaping the city or the threat against him. Habit had kept him tied to Audantei, working in its shadows, protecting the little he could of his former life.

"I'll head for the Dead West." He figures it's enough of an answer to deter her curiosity.

It's not.

"And do you have a way of getting there? Any supplies?" She tilts her head. He studies her.

There's no wrinkle of malice in the depths of her eyes—none he can find. Her smile is wooden and stiff. Reminiscent of a puppet or a painting. A show of caricature rather than character.

Danilo rubs his stinging knuckles and shakes his head with a slow and deliberate motion.

"Well," she brushes sand from her furs and straightens, "how about—"

"Hestia." Enzo barks and lurches towards her. Danilo flinches, though he will forever deny it. "Don't dare suggest it."

"I'm not 'suggesting'." She crosses arms at him, fixing him with a hardened expression that makes the man halt in his tracks. "I'm offering."

When she faces Enzo, the black gleam of a massive Ostertain battle-axe glowers at Danilo. An unyielding, unforgiving material native to the Frozen South. It's as wide as her hips and hidden against her back as the handle follows her spine. Danilo's seen Ostertain weapons in action—and while they're rare, it's known that no soldier wants to face them—the axe-head shatters regular iron swords. He's grateful Enzo has taken her attention.

"I demand you refrain from 'offering' niceties to the enemy," Enzo booms, his eyes turning to Danilo with a cold and deadly rage.

"Why? Because you're the Second?" Hestia trudges a circle around them, opting to pass in front of Danilo rather than behind him. She pauses, nodding in his direction while addressing Enzo. "Look at him."

Enzo glances between them with a curled nose and a heavy scowl. "I am."

"No. You're not." Her hands fall to her hips. "Look again."

Danilo looks over the lake when Enzo's analytical eyes flick over him, a defiling sensation which becomes unbearable when disgust darkens Enzo's face.

"You still can't see it... the once High Lieutenant Commander, and now what? Malnourished, dehydrated—"

Danilo takes offense to that, but he has enough sense to see what she sees. In Narota, Enzo met an ox of a boy who was equally stocky as he was tall. He shed weight, and it's evident in the skin clinging to his face. Highlighted by the dark, bone-weary exhaustion from living in the streets.

"—how old is he, Enzo? No older than eighteen?" Her tone softens, recognizing something in Enzo despite his face remaining impassive. "It's a little too familiar for my liking."

Enzo bristles. Nods. Then vanishes into the underbrush. Hestia crosses and uncrosses her arms as she tries to decide whether to follow him.

"He'll cool off." Magus runs his fingers through his curls, leaving red marks at the edge of his hairline. He smiles at her. Danilo's unable to tell whether it's in warning or at her expense.

"I know." She sighs, settling her hands atop her hips as she paces.

The others look between Hestia and Magus before finally opting to stare at Danilo. He tries to leave and walks into the edge of Gellert's blade. After that, he keeps his eyes on his nasty boots. Even then, he notices the track Hestia wears into the ground, still glances when someone shifts, and stiffens when she approaches.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" The man in the blue tunic gestures at her.

"Do any of us?" She pauses.

He gives her a wry half-smile and nods at the cards in his hands, forgotten until that moment. He tosses two at the pile between him and Easton. Easton grumbles and continues their game.

Hestia looks between Danilo's eyes. He refrains from leaning away. "You look like you could use an actual bed, honey. What do you say?"



Llodus Altamura, the High General of Audantei, is very damn good at his job. Regardless of what its people may say.

But after the sour taste of being outsmarted swells his failure more than his pride, he begrudgingly admits seeing to the soldiers' skills may have been his own downfall. He'd trained them to swing a sharp betrayal. And his son, no less.

Coming before the Royal Beseecher had never been a daunting task. Though he never had to carry the cumbersome weight of acidic disappointment before the unused throne. *'It's made for far more conceited men than me'* rings clear in his memory as he saunters past the seat, engraved gold encased in red velvet.

Damn shame, he thinks.

He pushes open the heavy door dividing the throne room from the Beseecher's quarters.

"Sir," he says as he straightens.

"Hello, old friend." Beseecher Guerra's tone is as kind as it is mocking.

The back of Kosymo's head doesn't move from where he hunches over papers and messages strewn about the table. Brown hair conceals his exhaustion from the soldier stationed inside his door. The useless soldier, in the General's opinion. With the Beseecher built like a beast, and as treacherous as one, there's no man—not even Llodis—better equipped to guard him than himself.

"News you bring?" Guerra rubs his brow, gesturing to the front of his table without looking up.

There are no chairs. Kosymo has never been a man to invite company. None that didn't involve a casket's-worth of wine and a beautiful woman. Still, his suggestion is as good as an order. General Llodis walks to the desk's front, shoulders as set as they'd be in a march.

"The traitorous lieutenant has been found in the presence of Enzo Sapienti."

Kosymo looks up at him then, dark eyes sparkling with something unspoken. He waits. For what the General doesn't know, but he out-waits the waiting.

"Please tell me, General, you don't believe your own son has abandoned you for the enemy?" Kosymo pushes hair from his face and stretches his writing-arm with the action. "Even I know he's far more loyal to you than that."

"Due respect, sir, he's never followed orders without causing another problem. Never shown respect for our reasons."

Kosymo scowls and huffs a breath.

"General, a man will walk into a diamond noose if it means he's worth more in his last breaths." Kosymo leans forward as if inching closer will allow the General more cognizance. "Do you understand?"

"No, Sir," he said.

Kosymo sighs. "I'm saying that boy is lost among the greatest manipulators this world has yet seen."

"And he's always been a fool."

"Llodis!" Kosymo slams his fist on the desk and the wood groans. They both pretend not to notice the guard jump. "Your own son." He glares up at him from under thick brows. "Your boy. Have you no faith?"

"No."

The General watches him recoil. Catches the brief curl of his nose. Can practically feel the clench of his knuckles where they wrap against the wood.

"Y—" There's a darkness boiling in his eyes, one Llodis has grown to appreciate. "Out."

A screech cuts through the air as the door from the adjacent hallway opens. Llodis grunts, dips his head, and halts mid-turn.

He's seen her before. She's been a favourite of Kosymo's for years. A brunette with silky waves and upturned brown eyes that glitter red in the sunlight. The blood-red makeup painted horizontally over her glass-white cheeks and nose indicates her paid services. Llodis risks a glance at Kosymo, a jealous heat rising in his gut at the Beseecher's loose shoulders and suave, lazy grin. Llodis was denied the chance at Beseecher because of his marriage. Kosymo gets any woman he wants and never lost his title.

She glares openly while they pass one another, his ire nothing more than a tickle for her to deter. He will see her again. But the next time they pass one another in the Beseecher's personal chambers, he'll have the Lieutenant in custody. And he won't be bothered to wait for Hanging Day.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Chagrin stirs in Danilo as he curses Hestia for her gentle, vile intentions. Agreeing with her had gotten him bound with a hemp sack over his head and thrown onto a camel.

His breath is stifling beneath the sack, sagging around his mouth and nose. The rough fabric chafes the damp skin of his neck. He wants to toss it in their faces. With the rope cinching his wrists together, making his fingers numb, he has few options. Fewer while riding double with Gellert.

He feels he's headed to his execution rather than escaping it.

Danilo knows who he's surrounded by. And while they're exemplary in... minimal hospitality, he shouldn't receive any. For that reason, he grits his teeth and forces his waning control to sit alongside him. Besides, he's not risking being dragged.

He sits for hours, seething, evading his instincts in favour of listening to their hissed whispers. Danilo knows the mounts meander southwest, despite the sack deterring him from distinguishing an exact heading. Gellert and Reina's constant bickering give away meaningless details which Enzo berates them for from the rear of their procession.

Gellert's camel slips in the dunes. Danilo braces against Gellert's back, trying to ground himself as the camel jarringly corrects its footing. It grumbles as

Gellert jolts on the reins, a grunt rattling free. He shoves Danilo off his back, and Danilo scrambles to grab the fabric beneath him.

“Rather pick me off the ground?” Danilo says, fists tight as he struggles against the binds.

“Say any’ing more and I’ll leave you ‘ere.”

That’s what he wants.

Danilo opens his mouth when reality slams her fist against his head. Hours. He would need to walk the same back. Which he would have no qualms with at another time. But with exhaustion and a lack of weapons, he hardly wants to risk meeting the bone-thin hyena packs prowling the region.

Gellert rips the bag away and Danilo’s eyes burn with sunset’s acidic light. He ducks into Gellert’s shadow and pushes his fingers into his watering eyes. As they adjust, he wipes sweat from the side of his face left behind by the hemp.

Orange and pink stain the horizon with vibrancy, merging to greet the darkening sky. Glittering views were a luxury obtainable in Audantei only for those who march the citadel’s upper halls. Danilo had the chance to memorize them across the landscapes of the Gentled East; over babbling lakes, glinting off snowcapped stones, and peering between green branches twined together. The pictures in his mind never compare to the real thing.

He blinks in the small town—which could classify as an overlarge farm if it weren’t for the populous. Cattle wander about near the stream, their red coats a bright ocher in the setting light. People trip over one another as they divide for the camels, some women yanking their brown shawls over their shoulders.

An elderly woman, sienna skin weathered by smile lines around her eyes, greets the Stormthrowers by name. She fusses over Borak—the man in blue—as he dismounts to give her the same kindness, ducking into her palms when she cups his face. Her thick accent distorts her native tongue. Danilo squints, correcting his seat when he feels Gellert’s eyes on him.

Guilt crowds Danilo’s heart, often felt when he travels beyond Audantei’s borders. Long before him, Audantei was a city of culture. Then the nobility rushed in at its successful trades and promises of wealth. It hadn’t taken a year before their privilege became oppression and the native races and beliefs were watered down by their own. Danilo doesn’t know whether his ancestors were among them or if his forefathers had carved their way into Audantei’s power more recently, but he’s guilty of the same as the rest. He wishes he weren’t.

A thin layer of sand dusts the air from a bull hauling his wagon. His owner ambles ahead, straw hat tucked low over his brow, without interest in whether his animal follows. Dogs yap at the beast, weaving between its legs to escape the squealing children running amok. None of the communing adults glance about in concern.

Danilo sighs past the tightness in his chest. He never traveled under Audantei's flags to towns like these. There was something about them that both settled him and caused his anxiety to rise. He gulps in a breath; the air lacking the sticky tang of sweat which lingers in Audantei. Even potent with the heat, he savours it.

Riding up to an obscure, monumental building, Gellert dismounts from his camel, keeping it in place with a palm on its chest. They stare at one another. Danilo refrains from strangling him with the abandoned reins.

"Get off." Gellert says.

Danilo holds his bound wrists higher, cupping his hands as if a beggar.

"Not likely. Get off." Gellert grips the saddle strap with a pointed glare. "Before I pull you off."

Danilo swings a leg over and drops to the ground, his knees and thighs groaning from the awkward ride. There's a brief opening where Gellert's back is to him, the man's sword glinting in its sheath. Before Danilo pulls it free, Enzo drives the bottom of his staff into Danilo's neck. Danilo coughs, bringing his palms up to cup his throat. He glares at Enzo with watering eyes. Gellert chuckles, leading his camel and Enzo's dapple grey mare into the shelter around the building's side. He casts a comment to Reina, who smirks, holding open a rickety gate. It groans when she shoves it shut behind Gellert, her sharp gaze on Danilo.

Enzo strides forward. Danilo steps back and continues back until his spine touches the building. Enzo sneers, snags his collar, and tugs. Danilo's boots scuff the dirt against his efforts. A darker scowl lances across Enzo's stony face seconds before he shoves Danilo into the mudbrick, dislodges his stance, and throws him into Magus—who grabs him with a snake-like grin dancing over his teeth. Magus' focus makes Danilo feel like prey.

Hestia knocks her shoulder against Magus as she passes, looking down at him in distaste. She flicks her white-blond hair away from her face, ignoring Danilo's struggling in favour of Easton. He approaches her with a curious gaze, and she throws an arm over his shoulders.

The threads of Danilo's tunic scream in Magus' clutches, and while Hestia guides Easton into the house, Magus forces Danilo towards the stairs until his ankles meet the bottom step. He falls onto it.

Danilo's glare ticks to the knife on Magus' belt. Enzo looks over his shoulder when the paddock gate creaks behind Reina and Gellert but is quick to return his attention to the struggle. The latch clacks shut over their chuckling. As they approach the stairs, Reina's face pinches. She steps over Danilo, Gellert behind her.

He casts his attention back to Enzo and Magus, recoiling from Borak's sudden appearance. Borak waves to the elderly woman and cradles a basket under one arm. Turning to the house, he grimaces at Magus' hungry stare and pushes his black fringe from his blue eyes.

"Can you just get the civilian inside?" Borak says with disapproval, shifting the basket as he shuffles closer to the stairs. Danilo scrambles aside, not eager to be stepped over again.

Magus grins at Borak, shrugging nonchalantly. Borak frowns, shielding his eyes from the last sunlight to see Enzo's expression. Enzo's face doesn't change aside from the tick of a brow. Danilo supposes Borak understands because the man nods and pads past him on the staircase.

The sand in Danilo's clothes makes his skin itch beneath the weight of their stares. He moves to his feet when Magus lunges, hands winding in Danilo's collar. Danilo tears the knife from Magus' belt.

Enzo cracks him in the jaw with his staff and pulls Magus back.

"Do not take arms against him—" Enzo tells Magus, clawing the knife from Danilo's hands, walking him backwards to throw him into the door frame. "I can attest to his skill. I've seen his massacres."

Massacre. Danilo rubs his jaw, the word filling his mouth with bitterness.

He'd done what was ordered. And he would do it again. But for his honour—his life—to be called 'massacre' by a man with the same misdeeds... it breeds a vile resentment in his lungs. Danilo's glare conveys his opinions on Enzo's hypocrisy.

Enzo steps closer, eyes hard like the General's from that fateful day, and Danilo stumbles inside, blinking as he struggles to adjust in the dark. Laughter bounces off the bare reed-wood walls alongside the crawling shadows, and the floor creaks beneath their combined weight.

A drawing room huddles to the side of the entrance, and its old furnishings define the purpose of such a large house in an otherwise shabby village; an abandoned brothel meant for entertaining and housing travellers. Velvet lines the aged couches in Audantei's signature red, its spongy cushions thick and inviting. Matching chairs sit across from it, their colour emphasized by the midnight blue curtains consuming the narrow wall. A chipped brick hearth sits in the middle of the far wall. Once, this room was grand.

Danilo's breath catches at the snap of a latch and he whirls his attention back to the exit, recoiling like a serpent as the frigid blue hue of Enzo's magic slices around the door. Magus watches him with a smirk. His heart thuds in his ears—an unsteady, hurried pace, made heavy with the cold weight of recognition.

He meets Enzo's steely gaze while the man steps down the hall to where giggles punch through the tension. Enzo lingers in the doorway to cast a glance at Magus. There is no interaction between them. And within a breath, Enzo shuts the door behind him.

Magus stalks Danilo with a grotesque fascination. They stare at one another, blank eyes versus blank eyes; icy despite the heat in the air. A sharp sensation pricks Danilo's fingers as they beg to wrap around Magus' pulse. Magus' lips pull wide, warring with the warm colour of his eyes. Danilo's skin crawls.

He takes in his surroundings with an eye on Magus, noting the spread of books and papers, the layered carpets, and the low ceiling. And a hoard of candles with pooling hot wax, as if lit moments before. A single droplet rolls off one's edge. Then another. He flinches when it flares to life.

Magus laughs—dark and jagged with appreciation.

Danilo meets Magus' eye again as the man exhales, like an attempt to blow the wick out from where he guards the door. All the candles roar alight. Danilo recoils and Magus' smile widens, laughter lingering in his breath. Recovering his dignity, Danilo looks between his binds and the open flame before stupidly holding the rope over the fire. Magus tilts his head, a mad grin on his face that Danilo doesn't see. He clenches a fist and the flames consume Danilo's wrists. Danilo hisses and hits his forearm against his middle to stamp out his blazing sleeve.

When he's rescued his arms from severe burns, Easton crowds Magus. Mousy locks splay about his head. His angry chatter doesn't deter the fire mage's

satisfied leer. Pendants and coins across his clothing chime as he saunters into the other room, leaving Easton in his stead. Easton turns hazy eyes onto Danilo.

Of them all, he should be the last they pair against the ex-Lieutenant. Though, Danilo's seen Easton's expression on merchants who'd learned to read the wants of a man. The accompanying smile is knowing.

Rope scrapes the reddened skin of Danilo's wrist, and he bites his tongue to stop from hissing. Easton flinches, dances from foot to foot, leaps forward, then freezes as if the sudden movement shocked him. Danilo appraises him but refuses to respond otherwise.

The restraints twist and Danilo grits his teeth, expression paling as the rope grows hoary scales. It slackens around one wrist, coiling around the other with the flick of a tail. Danilo doesn't move, paralyzed by the black eyes of the notorious white cobra. The snake watches him, glands fluttering with its breath.

Soldiers would leap up from a dead sleep as if possessed were the sands to move beneath their bedrolls, their muddled minds quick to stab the ground or sprint from the tent in search of the nearest torch. The white cobra's venom potency can kill twenty men—as can its lesser cousin. But paired with a paralytic saliva, it is the largest threat to Audantei's armies. He's seen men die in minutes.

Never has he been face-level with one. And it wasn't a beast he aimed to face.

Danilo sweats, his arms shuddering when his body demands for air he refuses to release. Angered by his shaking, the snake hisses and recoils into the strike position. Easton snatches it, fingers pressing on either side of the head, acting before it does. They're frozen aside from their trembling. Easton stares at Danilo. But the snake's sharp, curling fangs snare Danilo's attention. They retract when Easton forces its mouth closed, pinching the head in a tight grasp. He lifts the serpent free of Danilo's arm.

"Uh—Enzo?" Easton moves back into the hall, fear amplifying his voice.

Enzo bursts through the door with Hestia and her axe in tow. He halts at the sight of the white snake in Easton's hands. Its tongue flicks, glands relaxed in Easton's clutch, placid about being handled.

"Is that—" Hestia cups a hand over her mouth when the serpent hisses at her volume. She settles the axe-head on the floor.

Enzo toes forward, settling a palm against Easton's arm. Danilo rubs his burnt wrist, watching aptly as fear graces Enzo's stoic expression.

"Was trying to help," Easton whispers, hands steady despite the tremble in his voice.

Enzo pins him with a disapproving look, faltering as the snake writhes in Easton's hands. He nods and turns to the open door where Gellert leans in wait, his dark eyes flicking between Enzo, Easton, and the snake. With a cautious sweep of his hand, Enzo waves Gellert over.

"Dispose of it," Enzo says, hushed.

Gellert weaves through them until he stands at Easton's back, placing his palms over Easton's shoulders to guide him to the door.

"I—I didn't mean—" Easton frowns at the cobra.

Gellert taps Easton's head before sliding away the latch. "We know."

Easton's lip juts out before he stumbles out the door. Gellert chokes, the skin around his eyes wrinkled in fear. He shuts the door behind him, and a soft blue glow permeates the frame. Enzo's magic weakens with their absence. Danilo studies it before the heat of Enzo's stare draws his attention. The man sneers and snaps his gaze away.

"Watch him." Enzo says to Hestia, turning on his heels.

Hestia's ponytail snaps her cheek as she turns a glare on him. She drops a hip, hands settling over them both. "Ask me."

Enzo pivots with a raised brow, and she raises one in return. Their stares make Danilo's breath catch. Hestia is as defiant and demanding as to be expected from a Nuicallian, her strong will steadfast beneath Enzo's scowl.

Danilo received such looks from both the General and Enzo. And while the General's presence was far more daunting, his glare failed to match Enzo's in intensity. So when Hestia tips her chin upward and her gaze narrows, Danilo's eyes widen.

Enzo sighs, tipping his head to the ceiling, and glances at Danilo from the corner of his eye. "Watch him?"

Danilo's jaw drops.

Hestia's smile breaks across her glittering cheeks. She nods, flicking her ponytail aside and bracing her axe against her shoulder. Enzo hums, rolling his eyes while shoving through the old, thick door. Danilo stares at it, waiting for Enzo to return.

"What's in there?" Danilo asks.

He jumps when Hestia tsks. Her saddened eyes hover over him.

"The kitchen." She peers at the door before tilting her head to him with a shrug.

Despite having eaten, his stomach rumbles. The stew, while deep with flavor, was not heavy enough to sate his need. He doubts they will allow him in while they commune. Especially since he's likely the center of their discussion.

Hestia, despite her imposing axe and powerful form, doesn't pose much of a threat. Soft natured enemies are as likely to kill as a cowardly ally. And though Danilo guesses she's a Stormthrower, she's yet to wield her magic. Danilo chances stepping into the hall to scrutinize the door, but she blocks him from seeing past her.

A staircase descends from the wall near the kitchen door. It's cascaded by shadows, blackened by a lack of light from below. He glances over his shoulder. Hestia waves at him, scratching the faded purple paint on the trim with her boot. Though it means there's no chance of escape, he's desperate for a moment of refuge.

Dust sparkles in the basement's dim candlelight, which flickers from the wind sneaking between stone slabs. He rubs his wrist, the red skin tingling beneath his touch. Three straw dummies wrapped in white fabric—a red target painted on their middle—sit to the side of an open platform, two stout steps welcoming him atop. A selection of swords decorate the wall behind the stage, their dull edges glittering silver.

He lifts a sword, squeezing it, surprised by its weight. Its blade couldn't cut through still water, but it's a relief to hold a weapon. If he knew he'd lose his own on that fateful day, he'd have kept it closer. The blade's edge folds on itself, meant for training. Never designed to act on his thoughts.

They train like him. Flesh and blood. Only here, the punishment of a fumble didn't become the stinging reminder of inevitable casualty; the price of imperfection. He hooks the sword back into its place, fingers lingering on the cold steel.

"Hey." Borak stands on the stairs with one palm braced on a beam, ale-mug in the other, his eyes fixed on Danilo's hand. "Food, rest. Come."

Danilo follows—always an obedient soldier.

Hestia sits on the floor with her dinner, the meal half gone in her lap. With a quail drumstick shoved in her mouth, she offers a plate to him, tearing meat from the bone tucked in her cheek. Danilo grimaces.

Borak floats down the hall, and Danilo pretends his intrigue doesn't flicker to life. There isn't much to notice before Borak comes to an abrupt halt, his stance

set to block Danilo from going farther. He feels smaller despite seeing clearly over Borak's head. Borak ushers him inside an open door.

The bedroom is small, but not cramped, teetering on the edge of cozy and uncomfortable. Danilo stands in its middle, clinging to the plate of food. He looks at the narrow path from the bed to the desk to the door. The room is simple. But he's had simpler.

He sits on the bed, shoulders caving from exhaustion. It's feather-soft. Plush. Calling to him like the song of a soldier's mistress. The clack of wood against wood snaps him from its spell. Borak places the mug down on the bedside table, alert eyes gleaming with his perception.

Danilo's skin twitches as he tries to evade it with nowhere to go and chooses instead to inspect his plate; quail meat and oiled bread. Borak straightens and steps out of the room.

"Rest. You'll be let out." The door clicks behind him.

A thought pulses in the back of Danilo's mind. Placing the plate on the bed, he stalks to the door. Lightning snaps off the handle—a scornful purplish-blue cuts through his palm, burning and numbing as it travels through his wrist and up his arm. He shakes out his hand, stepping back. Then he leaps at it with renewed fervour. It burns as he yanks, and despite his tugging, it remains fixed. Both hands tremble when he releases.

Borak is a lightning wielder.

In that moment, he admits two things: he's a prisoner, and he's starving. When the food and water are gone and sleep hums her sweet tune, he'll admit to a third, the thought incessant as he fights sleep. He became their willing prisoner to escape the General.

And it puts him farther away from his pardon.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Enzo tilts his head back with a sigh, eyes falling shut after their exhaustive reports. Allies and gossipers alike bore news of Audantei's military and political advancements. He rubs a circular burn, obscuring the grooves of the golden banquet table, fingers lolling across old wax. The rub of the door marks Borak's return.

Borak sits, shuffling his chair inward and banging his knee against the table's many legs with a gasp. Magus frowns, muttering his concern as Borak waves him off.

"Can't do any'ing about its legs?" Gellert glances at Easton, whose face scrunches.

"I didn't do it on purpose. The—uh—" Easton sags in his chair. "It was my first time."

Hestia's brows dip together in confusion as she glances over the group, digging her elbows into the oak surface. She looks at Reina.

"He morphed the tables together." Reina gestures at Easton, leaning on her hand.

Hestia's eyes widen at him.

"I didn't—" Easton flushes, palming his brow. He sighs, and the room falls into silence.

The light of the brazier flickers beneath the clay oven. Smoke rises around the pots and pans, escaping the room through the reed roof. Candlelight flickers across the scarred tabletop from the breeze whistling through the narrow windows. Magus' fingers dance over the candle in front of him, the fading black tattoos moving with the flame. Enzo snaps his fingers when its blaze cuts into his eyes. Magus apologizes with a lopsided smirk.

Easton sniffs, shifting in his seat while chewing his cuticles. Hestia bumps her knee to Easton's thigh, her smile soft, but her gaze pointed at his fingers. Easton grits his teeth and flexes them before sticking them under his legs. A silence settles over the table, all attention on Enzo. With Danilo caged, the tension mounts tenfold. Aside from Easton's squirming, the group remains tacitly expectant.

Enzo scratches his beard with a sigh. "The materials from the Narota camp are among the Besecher's belongings."

None of them speak. Except for Magus, whose curse jars the tense air.

Easton's eyes blow wide, his attentiveness fixed on Magus with combined horror and amusement. Borak slaps the back of Magus' head, the suddenness forcing Magus to brace against the table. The room erupts into arguments. Enzo groans, pushing his eyes into his knuckles. He grinds his teeth together as the prolonged chaos further accentuates the sharp strain pulsing behind his eyes. It cracks the glass of his composure, allowing frustration to seep through the jagged edges onto his comrades; some more deserving of it than others. Easton leans forward across the table to ensure Enzo can hear him.

"Sw—"

"Sword included, yes, Easton." Enzo makes a cutting motion with his hand in dismissal and Easton slouches. "It is the least of our concerns."

"What's 'at mean?" Gellert's nose wrinkles, and he abandons the snide remarks aimed at Magus.

"I'm sure he'd elaborate if you kept your trap shut." Magus earns himself a kick to the underside of his chair from Reina, where she drapes over her own. "Oi."

Borak drops a fist to Magus' hand laid out on the table. "Shut up."

"Both of you, shut up." Hestia rolls her eyes, flicking her hair over her shoulder.

Magus glares back as he rubs his hand. Easton scans the table, sinks in his seat, and pales at Enzo's aggravated scowl. Enzo places a palm in front of Easton from

across the table, watchful as he knocks the staff on the floor. Borak coughs at the panicked edge of Magus' face and the annoyed grimace on Hestia's.

Enzo waits until their attention returns to him. "It has awakened."

"What? The swor—"

"Yes. The sword," Enzo snaps, raking both hands through his hair.

Magus clenches and releases his fists. Easton fidgets, unable to carry the weight of the tension. Borak's sigh snuffs out the candle before him, earning a non-committal glare from Magus, who flicks his wrist to bring the flame back to life.

"How does this affect the Fifth?" Easton asks.

Gellert slides a palm over his face, grumbling "Doesn't."

"But—"

"Breathe, Easton, please."

Easton squirms, shoving his tongue into his cheek. He opens his mouth, but Reina cuts him off.

"Who's awoken it, Enzo?" She pins Easton with a raised brow. "'Cause if they can use it—"

"Not currently. Though they may try." Enzo scratches his beard and sighs.

Reina's green eyes flicker. She squints between Enzo and the door. "Ah."

"Ah' what?" Easton shoots his eyes between them. "What's 'ah'?"

"Easton—" Gellert groans, folding his mug between both hands.

"What's 'ah'—oh." He settles in his chair, stare snapping toward the door. "Oh."

Enzo hums.

"By the FIVE." Magus laughs, eyes alight at the sudden helplessness which scourges the group. Hestia hisses at him from taking the celestial entities titles in vain. Her ire, though appreciated by the rest, would not discourage him from saying it.

"So, uh, what..." Easton looks to Enzo, who rubs the underside of his furrowed brow. "What does that mean?"

"For who?" Borak says.

Enzo rubs his face, loose hairs tangling into his familial ring, its pocked metal leaving imprints on his skin. He wiggles it free; the motion draining the last reserves of his energy. The others become mute when he stands.

"We will reconvene in the morning." He glances over his shocked companions.

Magus groans, but the rest nod in return. Enzo hums, crossing his arms and trudging from the kitchen. Darkened halls lead to the door locked with lightning, mocking his apathy with a vengeful tenure. A soft, yet hastened, footfall passes through the doorway at his back. Despite himself, his tired sigh rattles free.

“Enzo.” Reina grabs the elbow of his sleeve, voice terse at his incredulous expression. “We should keep him here.”

“Pardon?” Enzo glares, causing her to release his sleeve.

“Play nice.” She leans against the wall, glancing at the door Enzo had been glowering at. “If we turned one of the most prolific soldiers to our cause, it could benefit us from Niilusa to Ruedinmo.”

It’s a riveting proposition, piquing his curiosity and ambition, but the waves of stronger emotions drown both.

“Understandable reasonings aside, I will not risk our efforts with the hope that one teenager has the capacity for compassion.”

Reina walks back toward the door. “We both know he’s innocent—”

“Having crippled our attempts to half within the eastern region? Chance your lives, but do not ask me to do the same.” Enzo faces the hall, his quarters beckoning to him in the darkened shadows.

“We’ll vote on it.” Reina places a hand on the kitchen door, glancing at Enzo over her shoulder. “In the morning.”

Enzo grits his teeth, snide remarks trapped between them as she shuffles inside. Without a doubt, she will have the rest of them in agreement before they depart for their rooms. He drives his thumb and his forefinger into his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. His occupied mind spurs him to wander into the drawing room.

Tens of minutes later, the others leave the kitchen. Borak pauses to ask if he needs anything, eager to please despite the problems at hand. Magus wraps an arm over Borak’s shoulders with a conniving grin in place, dissuading Borak from entertaining anything Enzo potentially said. Hestia chases them along. He’s left in a restless silence, pacing between the couch and chairs, mind chasing possibilities. Entrapped by Hestia’s boisterous argument and Reina’s logical standing, Enzo has very little he can say to contend against them.

In all means but one: that ‘boy’ is far from innocent.



CHAPTER NINE

Company is scarce for prisoners. Danilo knows this from years before when his training first started. Men in solitary would converse with themselves until their sanity all but vanished. Others would rather fight their cellmates than be ignored. The reclaimed brothel isn't a prison, but it's far more empty.

After days of tense wandering, Danilo commits himself to maintaining a semblance of his routine—outside of the month in the gutter alleys. The swords in the basement, though it makes his arms sore, are satisfying to wield after his hiatus. In a week, Danilo works clenched muscles loose.

Hunger reaches from the pit of his stomach to claw at his lungs while he's deep in another self-imposed training session; a sensation recognized as going too long between meals. With a sigh, he replaces the training sword and trudges up the stairs, fists in anticipation. He shoulders through the kitchen door, and sighs in relief when his gaze flicks over the empty chairs. He shakes his hands loose before raiding the baskets.

Danilo has never eaten rich. The soldiers' diet was only porridge, eggs and corns—spiced with the occasional kill made on the road. But as he digs into the Stormthrower wares, he finds an abundance of fruits and vegetables he'd only seen in the Royal Beseecher's kitchens and the High District banquets. He shoves a plum between his teeth and he settles his plate at the table.

The kitchen door slams into the wall. Danilo bumps his plate off the lip of the table, dropping into the chair to curl an arm around his food. His glare falters at Enzo's expression.

Meeting eyes with Enzo Sapiienti is a lethal affair, but while Enzo stares at him, Danilo finds it to be lacking its usual heat. Instead, he lingers with curiosity on Danilo's defensive arm. Danilo pulls his plate closer, unwinding from around it. He drops the plum to his plate, hardly chewing his mouthful before swallowing it. Enzo continues into the room with a frigid glare on Danilo's braced position, palming his hair from his face.

"That's an ugly look." Danilo tears the dry bread apart, gaze flicking between his hands and Enzo. He's not interested in eating it. The bread will be a bland and tasteless thing, as it has been for weeks.

"Caused by your pitiful existence."

Danilo chokes, hand cupped beneath his mouth. A shudder moves through him as he meets Enzo's deathly glare. He's reminded that Enzo is dangerous for his cunning—though it was a hard fact to forget when they collided in doorways, unbidden words clashing between them.

He wiggles his fingers, bread clattering against the plate. The tension in his hands is not unwelcome. Enzo moves further into the room, vanishing past Danilo's peripheral. Danilo chews out of time with Enzo's steps, tracking the man without turning.

Watchful eyes heat the back of his head. Familiar, yet dreaded all the same. He grits his teeth. "When can I leave?"

Enzo stalks forward, wood mug in one hand. Danilo knows the answer. The uneasiness is due to more than leaving his back unprotected.

"You are under the arrest of the Nephla," Enzo grits at him, hair flying in the growing winds above their heads. Then he paces towards the door. "Complain, but I am no less thrilled."

The Nephla were sorceresses from the Reckoning. Their unparalleled powers left no rivalry compared to today's Stormthrowers—or from what Danilo understands.

"Still, you didn't have to volunteer as watchman."

"Volunteer?" Spittle lines Enzo's bottom lip, shoulders stiff and spine straight when he whirls around. "Due to injury, I am saddled with your unfortunate company. Like it, or not."

Danilo assesses Enzo's weak knee and shoves to his feet to round the table. Regardless of whether Enzo had his staff, the man was far more powerful than him. But when Enzo tenses, Danilo takes pride in being marked as a threat.

Enzo flicks his fingers and the swirling winds drop atop Danilo. Gale tides tear at the skin of Danilo's forearms, where they brace against his face, protecting his eyes as he pushes through the barrier. It tightens around him, cutting into his sides and back. With a shout, he lurches forward, and the wind dies away. Water drips from his hair and his clothes. He lowers his arms, panting, blinking black spots from his eyes. Ocean-blue engulfs the edges of his vision, and his jaw clenches, throat seizing. Energy courses through his veins. His eyes roll back before he collapses.

Danilo will never know he didn't hit the floor. Or how Enzo places him down before jumping back, fingers numb and trembling. He won't know Enzo gathers magic above his middle, or how the airborne water churns in a chaotic flurry. Because Enzo would rather die than admit he saved him twice.

Enzo flinches back, staring at Danilo. With a grimace, he places two middle fingers on Danilo's forehead. Ignoring how the skin feels like sandpaper, Enzo outlines from Danilo's temple to sternum.

He waits, hopeful when nothing happens. He's seen responses to magic from many individuals, and the boy's malnourished state could explain the random collapse... until Danilo's blood reflects the glow of Enzo's magic on the surface of his skin. Dutifully, Enzo disregards the taste of dashed hopes, bitter resentment filling his mouth in its wake.

The sky-blue hue, not unlike his own, is faint. It gathers around the usual points found on a Stormthrower; the chest, the fingers, the dark of Danilo's under-eyes. Magic gathering beneath the eyes shows an intake of detail. At the fingers means one is adept at using their magic. Areas close to the heart, such as the chest, are prominent on wielders with great power and dim on any magic-bearing soul. Seldom did magic gather elsewhere.

A bright and unusual glow cuts through gummy strands of blond hair. Enzo tilts Danilo's head to the side, brushing strands off the prominent glow showcasing from Danilo's temples. Enzo—while not overburdened with knowledge, knows more than he will admit—smothers his sour curiosity.

When Danilo's trembling dwindles, Enzo retracts his magic. Ever-slow. The glow vanishes with it. He pulls his hand from Danilo's chest and shifts to no

longer kneel over the boy. Instead, he sits on the floor at Danilo's side, rubbing his brows with a sigh, and reclaims his abandoned wood mug.

He ponders calling on Easton, who he's tasked with researching within another area of the building. After considering Easton's history and lack of magical knowledge, Enzo is quick to dismiss the thought. With the remaining party out on assignment, he has one option. Not to be used without reason.

Scratching his face, he forces the water in Danilo's hair to gather beneath his palm, which hovers over the boy's forehead. It churns like an airborne maelstrom before it disperses into the air.

Enzo chastises himself for refusing to recognize signs of a sensitivity; Danilo took harder hits than most before crumbling, his survival of Enzo's treatment at the Narota camp for one, and the staff striking to his jaw for another. Repercussions of Enzo's decision to leave the weapons at the Narota camp were unforeseeable, and he grimaces at the weight of his contrition. The reality of Danilo's near-impossible survival is weakened by his resentment.

This boy caused plenty of grief. He could bear its crushing weight.

"What am I to do with you?"



Danilo groans, brows furrowing at the onslaught of pressure on his eyes, which pinch despite the dim light slipping between the cracks in the brick.

"Back to me."

Something worms through his stomach as it flips back and forth. Back and forth. Back and forth. It grows stronger as he rocks his head, eyes shut and breath heaving, his nails clawing wood floors to fight the hard grip of unconsciousness.

Enzo's heavy hand pushes him down when he scrambles to sit. Nausea punches his stomach into his throat. Despite the tension in his limbs from the Stormthrower's presence, he has no will to flinch away, even as Enzo's stalwart gaze becomes tinted with an underlying frustration.

"Your name?"

Enzo's furrowed brows frame his incensed, stony eyes. But his tone is unfamiliar, higher in pitch than their previous conversations. Danilo stares at him, incredulous, choking as he swallows down a burning sensation. Enzo, unappreciative of the glare, shoves Danilo's head to the floor. Danilo lies still.

"Name?" Enzo shifts on a knee, braces to stand, and grips the hair on either side of Danilo's head.

"Danilo." He blinks, scouring Enzo's gaze.

"Complete name." Enzo demands. Danilo raises a hand to rub his eyes. Enzo's reflexes are faster, pinning it to the floor with a determined stare. "Answer."

"Altamura." Danilo tugs his wrist, but Enzo holds firm.

A brilliant burst of amethyst and sapphire flares above Danilo's middle, and he recoils into the floor. It shifts like a gathering storm. Danilo dodges Enzo's hand, eyes glued to the cloud of colour. Enzo flicks it away, and it disperses in the air. Danilo jumps in Enzo's hold. When Enzo moves to cover his eyes, he snatches Enzo's wrist with his free hand, eyes searching the empty space above him. Enzo's sigh rattles behind clenched teeth.

"On your feet." Enzo pulls on the shoulder of Danilo's shirt, dragging him up mercilessly.

Danilo attempts to hide the quiver of his knees but crashes into Enzo, who shoves him upright into the wall. After fumbling for a decent hold, he braces himself. Gazing over the kitchen dizzily, he finds Enzo holding the kitchen door open with an expectant stare.

The distance between the door frame and the room Danilo occupies is mocking. Feeble breaths rake from him as he gathers the gumption to stumble across the hall.

"No." Enzo winds his hand in Danilo's collar and drags him to the drawing room.

He's deposited on the couches to watch Enzo linger in the open front door, favouring one knee once he stumbles beyond. Unlike the first time Danilo sat on the ornate couches, the scratchy fabric and lumpy cushions absorb him. Danilo's heard certain materials remember magic: changing with magic's memory and strength.

He shifts between alert and the threshold of sleep, enjoying the peace. Sunlight cascades through the crack of the curtains and heats his face. It dances on the wall above the mantle, a soft pattern his fingers mimic on his sleeve. With heavy eyes and blanketed by warmth, he tilts his head back, breathing a gentle tune.

Light filters grey through the windows, as if a heavy fog has settled outside. Glass in the chandelier overhead reflect a dangerous array of blue and purple, the

candles bursting alight before snuffing out a second later. The charge is invisible to the eye but electric to the skin. The air burns within his lungs.

It smells like snow.

She enters the room, and he understands. Power exudes from her, running through him like a spear. Her hair cascades over her shoulder, full and pale grey. Her skin glistens like carved marble. Pale blue lace clings to her bust, the same shade of chiffon draped around her waist, splitting over both her thighs to reveal more of her legs than it should. Despite her towering height, most men would find her alluring.

Danilo sees her for what she is.

Sorceresses from the Reckoning wiped out entire armies with nothing more than a sultry exhale. They were capable of bending men to their knees in wonder and awe before their necks were severed. Danilo is aware meeting her eye will open the door to his thoughts. And if she's survived this long after the mass executions, she's not to be trusted.

But she's not to be disrespected.

His shallow breaths leave him cold, but his hands are damp. He watches her bare feet as she moves into the room, following behind Enzo.

"Altamura." Danilo's eyes snap to Enzo and he strains to keep them there. "Calista Cassiopeia—"

"Last of the Nephla." There's a smile in her voice, and it rings like one would expect of an ancient celestial.

"I wish you would desist from announcing—" Enzo starts.

"A pleasure to have met in the flesh, Danilo." She places a hand to Enzo's chest, preening at his sigh, though her expression lacks a smile.

His knees tremor as he stands; feet planted, shoulders squared, and head bowed. He keeps his eyes on her broken toenail.

"You know my name?" Danilo asks.

She makes a dismissive gesture before pacing deeper into the room. "You have been the more... challenging opponent my advance has faced."

Danilo glances at Enzo, refusing to meet the man's eyes with animosity.

"Enzo sent a message of distress." The Nephla stops behind Danilo and his breath falters. He leans to hear her. "I assumed you were having an altercation over past differences. Wrong of me. Both of you seem in valorous health."

Enzo's sneer is grounding.

She drops into the chair across from Danilo, gesturing Enzo to sit on the couch. Enzo glares at Danilo and, with a sniff, sits in the chair next to her. She watches Danilo lower.

"Fortunately, I was on my way." Her hair rolls over her poised shoulders. "I release you from the arrest placed under my name. You may leave."

"Calista?" Enzo chokes.

"He's a man wanted more than you have made yourself, my dear Enzo." She places a hand atop his, and he nods, brows curling inward. "I cannot allow him to draw attention. His vestige is great. And we are not far enough from Audantei to be without concern."

At Audantei's name, a rush of memories assault Danilo; tears roll off a frown-marred face, blond hair fluttering in the breeze, the shout of the General as he charges, and a potent stench of sweat. Then came the burden of brazen anger, of revenge, of sorrow. And with it, the chance of death; and soldiers running to follow a command, arrows whizzing past his eyes, of fleeing with Audantei's most wanted magic-wielder.

"I offer supplies, robes, a horse, aught you may need. I am nothing of unreasonable." Calista murmurs, roving over Danilo's profile.

Danilo jumps when his gaze drags upward.

"I will prepare—" Enzo starts, moving to stand.

"I need your help." Danilo doesn't recognize the words that fall from his lips until he watches Enzo's expression turn murderous, eyes darkened with an angry promise.

"Continue." Calista's smooth voice chafes against Danilo's crawling skin—an old command echoing behind his ear.

He rubs his heel over his ankle.

"I, uh, I don't know, En—" Danilo swallows any words he may have been able to find. His shoulders become a tense line at the murderous expression on Enzo's face, a look which mirrored the General in every way.

Enzo's sneer fractures and Danilo shrinks into himself.

Enzo sighs as Calista shifts her attention to him. "He has a sensitivity."

Calista hums and the silence following absorbs into Danilo's flesh. Their combined focus makes him retreat into the couch cushions, fists rubbing on his pant legs.

"Volatile response?" she asks.

Danilo chances looking up. Enzo's glare tightens, more in assessment than anger. And while Danilo doesn't care for it, he prefers it to Enzo's customary judgment.

"Understated." Enzo says.

Calista raises her hand and Danilo's hearing muffles as if under the current of an untamed ocean. Her words crash against the surface of his conscious, becoming muted as she pulls him deeper. "Blocking the natural flow?"

"No," Enzo flicks his hand at her, "as if he has none."

She drops her hand to rub the neckline of her gown in thought. Danilo shakes his head and rubs his brow as his hearing grows normal. His nails dig into the rough, faded cushion edge at the hue in his peripheral.

"You may stay." The split of her skirt falls open when she crosses her legs and the revealed skin glitters like stardust. "Enzo will oversee you."

"Yes, Lady." Danilo dips his head.

Enzo shifts forward, and her hand rushes toward him, Danilo's gaze moving to her instinctively. She tilts her chin as they meet eyes. A shimmering mist of pastels overlay her blue irises, the power of her magic shifting through them.

Her lips curl, patient and friendly, but warning enough.



Enzo will not admit he's aging, but the white hairs hidden among his greying temples say more than the ache of his healed knee.

He and Calista enjoyed ten minutes of silence—a mere blink of time for a Nephla—once Danilo left, with the obedience and honour of a soldier evident as he heeded Calista's dismissal; not a sign of disrespect or anger within him.

Before Enzo is prepared, Calista speaks his name. A soft and wary sound warns him of her hesitance more than the tone of her words.

"I gather from his age, the out-lash was intense." Her eyes glisten with curiosity.

Enzo shrugs.

She huffs. "Come, Enzo, you've an answer. Will your bitterness best your judgment?"

"Yes." He rolls his eyes at her glare. "I have no basis. He likely had an outlet before. One he's been without."

She hums at that, a small smile quirking at a proper response. Enzo sneers, looking away. "Thank you."

He grumbles and scratches his beard.

"Do you believe it is a sensitivity? Or is there a possibility of more?"

"I doubt, with my entirety, that boy has more in him than the skimp he has to become an annoyance."

"Enzo."

Enzo swats his hand in the air. "I will attend to his sensitivity. Do not expect more from me." His nails dig into the arm of the chair.

Calista chuckles. "You have shown yourself to be quite ambitious."

"This is one situation where you will notice a lack of enthusiastic commitment." Enzo says.

"We'll tell in time." Her hair glistens a yellow-white in the sunlight as she stands. "Will we not?"

He shakes his head, standing to escort her. The dismissal is as abrupt as every other. She avoids prolonged goodbyes, past hurts stinging her heart. He imagines if he lived as long as she, he would submit to abruptness.

"Until next we meet," she says, patting his chest.

"Until next we meet."

He watches her descend the stairs, a vigilant habit overpowering reason. The bright flare forces him to look away. When he glances back, she's gone along with it. Only pastel stains across the sand hint at her previous presence.

It leaves him saddled with discovering the origin of Danilo's sensitivity alone. With the zones of combustion proximate to one another, it is an imperative task. Especially now that Danilo's survival is on his shoulders. He could have refused. But when Danilo glanced at him, his stare had been flavourful in fear. Honest and striking. Not like the past flickering sense he'd seen in passing.

And despite the boy being the son to his greatest enemy, that look is not one he's keen to see again.



CHAPTER TEN

Breakfast is a demanding affair. As it has been for six days with Enzo's irritating presence.

Danilo grabs the dried roll from his plate and smears honey across the top before plunging it in his mouth. He licks at the corner of his lips, unsuccessful in his attempt to free it of stickiness. Enzo growls in frustration, delving into the physical details of sensitivity and bloodlines which Danilo wholeheartedly ignores. Where Danilo was concerned, there could only be one side of his family where magic could have been present. Or the General would have hanged years ago.

Honey oozes onto his fingers while he maws at the roll and he slurps it from between them, thoroughly enjoying the disgust darkening Enzo's features. A smirk quirks Danilo's lip and a recognizable anger—one filled with injustice—strikes through the shadows of Enzo's glare.

"Can you try?" Enzo slams his hands down on the kitchen table, hair frazzled from running his fingernails across his scalp.

"I am. I don't know what to tell you." Danilo shrugs lazily, peeling multiple grapes from their dried vines and popping them inside his cheek.

Enzo's sneer folds deeper as he traces the movement, his own porridge dripping from his spoon before he replaces it in the bowl and folds his hands over

his lap. “Your lack of observation amazes me when I consider you have managed to stay alive this long.”

“Shove it.” Danilo rolls his eyes.

“I will do more if you insist on giving me half-thought answers.” Enzo bites the inside of his cheek and pointedly stares at the furthest wall.

Danilo rocks his weighted ankle against a leg of the table, ignoring Enzo’s glare when the action shifts the contents across its surface. Danilo pushes hair from his eyes, and cold metal bounces against his skin. After years, he hardly thinks anything of the rings’ weights, and when Enzo glares at them, he accepts it without a thought. They were lifted from Stormthrowers. He’s not shocked by Enzo’s reaction.

“We had a routine—” Danilo said, slumping against his chair.

“We?”

“Audantei’s soldiers—” he winces, catching his tongue with his clenched teeth, “—had a routine. Wake up, train, eat, train, sleep. Broken up by orders, missions, assignments, the like.”

Enzo sighs from his nose, teeth grinding as he says, “Then your training.”

“Except you’ve had me training downstairs until nightfall for days, and we don’t know whether it’s working.”

Which is the truth. Danilo has spent the better part of the past week chipping the blades from the basement on the straw dummies. And while he had no inclination or warning of a sensitivity before the attack, he still senses his efforts aren’t enough. Confirmed when Enzo had come down yesterday, placed a begrudging hand over Danilo’s chest, and scowled.

“It’s not. Yet.” Enzo’s nails leave trails of red marks in his beard. “You survived the streets for weeks before your sensitivity erupted. Until we discover the cause, train as you had been.”

Enzo stands, dismissing himself and Danilo’s argument. Just as well because Danilo’s head has throbbed since he awoke, and food hadn’t helped. Danilo watches the man go, twisting his rings mindlessly when the door knocks against the mud-brick frame.

Today won’t be the same, he promises himself. His urgency for freedom overshadows his annoyance with the situation at hand.

When Danilo freezes at the bottom of the third-level staircase, breathing steady to brave the magically frigid air billowing against him, each step forebodes of potential death. Not one of Enzo’s fellow Stormthrowers has been in the

building since the magic in his veins threatened to shred through him. Though it's unlikely they would stop Enzo from killing him.

A black banister divides him from the expanding room drenched in shimmering pale light, turned periwinkle by the sheer curtains. It's an open space, supported by darkwood beams; an old wood native to the Untamed North, naturally dark. The supports sit where more bedrooms had once existed. In their place is a library with overflowing bookshelves lining every wall, divided only by windows. Danilo cannot see Enzo, but he knows the man is here, as he recognizes the scratch of a quill against paper.

It's abnormal for the Gentled East; a place made up of bricks and heat. Wood is an expensive resource in the region, between the price of importing and the costs of labourers. The wide bookshelves and dense wood walls are worth thousands of serots. And four of the Gentled East's serots are equal to one of the Untamed North's coins—a tuilo.

He's not a reader. Not because he can't see the benefit. But because it bores him. It is a task for scholars and politics. After his aimless wandering—during which he had stumbled across Enzo, and while the man was obviously ornery about the interruption, he said nothing—Danilo found a few books from a collection of thousands which may be of use to him.

Stiff wood chairs line the table edge where Danilo settles. He'd become used to the woven seats of those in the kitchen; these, however, weren't as friendly with his back. As a soldier, he often sat on the ground to eat, to review tactics with his men, or for down time. On the occasions he was sent with the General at the Beseecher's request, he never sat in a chair for longer than necessary. After an hour of study, he searches for a place softer than the flat wood.

Easton moves clumsily into the room, traipsing around the banister and heading for Enzo. He mutters to himself, pulling at his sleeve, not noticing he has to pass Danilo to do so.

"Just when the mission gets good." Looking up, he skids to a halt. "Oh... oh, hi."

Danilo nods, flipping to the next chapter, eyes skimming the pages until he can make sense of the words. Wood grinds against wood. Danilo looks up to meet Easton's gaze. Easton recoils at the ferocity of Danilo's dark look, clenching the back of the chair in his hands, and decides to press onward, regardless.

"You, you aren't that old... are you?" He stumbles over the words he presses out around the fingers he chews on.

Danilo sits straighter, shoves his elbows into the book, and captures Easton's eyes to growl, "Pardon?"

Easton flinches back, hazel eyes blown wide as he stutters. His fingers flick over the table as if he's trying to ground himself. "I—meant nothing by it. Just thought we've—we're close in age."

Danilo squints at him, tongue touching the scar on his lip. "How old are you?"

"I—" Easton squirms in his seat, face going blotchy. "I'm twe—almost twenty-two."

Danilo stares, considering leaving it at that. But the longer the silence drags, the more Easton's fingers scrape against the table and snap at the thin cords of his patience.

"Five years older." Danilo admits.

He traces over the previous two sentences in his book while Easton rambles. Then he does it again. And again.

"—how could you be, with all the stories of your success?" Easton says.

Danilo snaps the book shut. Easton's eyes display bloodshot corners, emphasized by the swollen green bags beneath. Easton rubs from his eye to his temple, creating another cowlick among the splaying locks. A streak of ink smudges lightly over his blemished, freckled skin.

Danilo withholds a grin at his obvious discomfort. "What stories?"

When Easton flinches at his undivided attention, it makes no difference to him. He grew used to the simple intimidation he could press into a person. Holding to habit, Danilo folds his arms against the book. The small action presses his shoulders wider and Easton twitches, eyes frozen on Danilo's hard face.

"A, uh, a number..." Easton scratches the patchy hairs on his sweeping jaw, "...of them?"

Danilo raises his brow. "Tell me your favourite."

Easton swallows, eyes ticking over the room, not settling on any detail.

"A—Apparently you, uh, took out eighteen men. Single-handedly. At... so me..." Easton places both hands on the table, fingers spread out wide, "a noble's party."

"Been assigned guard duty a lot. Were you there?"

"No. No. Uh, no." Easton winces. "But I heard because I was, was tracking the High Commander."

“High Commander?” Danilo smirks.

“It, uh—it’s no—” Easton shrinks in the chair, gasping for breath around his stuttering.

“Not nothing.”

“Uh... it’s, uh, what we call him.” He admits.

Danilo hums and lets the silence echo, leaning back to slouch in the chair. Easton licks at his lips, sweat speckling his blotchy red face.

“There’s never one guard assigned to the Royal Beseecher. But if you were tracking him, you know that.” Audanteian soldiers contract out to the High District’s socialites. The successful traders among them were given the best. “But I know which one you mean.”

Interest gleams in Easton’s curious eyes. Danilo’s scowl falls deeper.

“Some young noble. I’d been her lone guard. Apparently, her father made a trade his partner had been less than thrilled about. There’d been eight men, not eighteen. Felt like it.”

“And you stopped them all?” Easton’s fingers curled against the tabletop.

“No, I killed them.” Danilo’s smile curls, false and dirty.

Easton flinches back, and Danilo knows the entertainment died. People always want him to relive his actions--to reveal his history. It hadn’t been glamorous. Hadn’t been a warrior’s epic tale. There was blood and death and killing before he got killed.

“Eastern Ravagers don’t fight to be stopped. They fight to die. I had no choice. Maybe it’s why your teammates sent you back.”

“They hadn’t—”

“Have you killed someone?” Danilo rolls his shoulders, placing his feet heavily on the many overlapping carpets beneath the table.

“No.” Easton says, biting down on his tongue.

“Then don’t say otherwise.” Danilo tongues his scar when he grimaces, then rubs it when the light touch doesn’t deter the tingling. “There’s no choice in war.”

He hopes it upends Easton’s interest in him. Hopes it makes him distant. Wary. Danilo’s nails snag the cover of the book back open, flipping to a random spot close to where he’d perused. It’s better to be feared than to be befriended.

It’s better.

“Is that why?” Easton’s eyes narrow. “You, uh, wiped out a town because of... because a rumour and ‘there’s no choice in war’?”

“Which town?” Danilo pushes past gritted teeth.

“‘Which town’,” Easton scoffs. “My town. Jutsique.”

Danilo’s fingers flex, the rings on his hands squeezing.

Jutsique is a small town of only a couple hundred, settled on the border between Merkidia and Naamest. An unimportant landmark in Audantei’s sights. The eradication of Jutsique was unnecessary and unfortunate.

“I was under orders. I made my reports and presented the evidence. When they combed through Jutsique, I wasn’t there.” Each word feels measured. “Some things I’m not accountable for. Despite my reputation.”

Easton nods, deflated. Danilo flattens his hands against the book and makes to stand. Easton leaps to his feet with a sharp intake of breath, fingers trembling as he rubs his nose.

“N-no, I’ll—uh, I’ll go.” He trips away. “Meant to... to meet Enzo.”

Danilo watches him leave, noticing coat pockets stuffed full of rolled parchment and the black ink stain on the bottom corner of a frayed leather bag. Matching ink spots decorate the back of Easton’s worn-thin coat. His watching continues until the familiar, intolerable weight of a stare heats his back.

Enzo leans against a bookshelf, his eyes reflecting a dangerous frigid hue in the dusk light. Danilo turns to continue reading, shoulders set in stubborn will. If Enzo wanted him out, he’d have to remove him.

Hours drip by. And every word drags on.

Enzo never bothers throwing him out.



The Artifacts of Renowned Tales have become mere myth, even among powerful magic kind circles. As of current understandings, these mythological items continuously circulate throughout man and magic kind tellings.

The oldest records refer to the first Artifact, with rough translation, as the ‘Book of Veracity’. There have been no confirmed sightings or evidence of its rumoured existence. Its contents are unknown. Older documents indicate it existed before the era of The Reckoning.

Recordings refer to the second oldest Artifact as the ‘Shield of Conviction’. Though it’s said to have been the strongest of Artifacts from Before, it has lost the title.

Tales of victorious battles claimed the Shield to have a magical strength. It's described as sentient, but from our understanding of magic sensitivities with incredible strength, the Shield would have become an outreach of a natural flow. Descriptions state it to be made of "glittering silver etched with a Pegasus".

The 'Twin Daggers' were claimed to be forged by the High Murisse Kloomata, a talented and powerful blacksmith who harnessed magic as the source of her craft. They're the first Artifact forged in such a way. Rumour alone attests to their power or their creation, as they vanished along with Kloomata.

The 'Helmet of Deliverance' came to be from a magic-user dying from a battle wound during the ending era of The Reckoning. He placed his magic into his helmet and his Second delivered it to his daughter, to protect her beyond death. It remains safely hidden in the depths of the Untamed North.

While all have the potential to be incredible weapons, and many more are rumoured to exist, there is one fact that remains: Artifacts are a source of destruction, chaos, and ruin.



Nimble fingers twist around the braids hidden in Kosymo Guerra's beard. The woman's smile widens as their brown hair tangles together, her weight propped on his chest. With his arms tucked behind his head, he exudes the tranquility a Beseecher never shows to the city or his soldiers.

"Y'know," she tucks her chin against his breastbone and places a hand over the hair tickling her skin, "the other girls don't believe me."

His chest bounces.

"I'm not surprised." The slap of his palm against her unveiled thigh carries through the silent room. She gasps at the sting. "You boast too loudly for it to be believable."

A scowl mars her features alongside the smear of red paint.

"Oh, how would you know?" The ball of her foot drives into his knee, but his hand is fast around her ankle before she can do it again. "You don't see me with the girls."

"I don't have to. You squawk no matter who you're with."

She scoffs, rolling in a fan of brown hair and red blankets. Kosymo grabs after her, hauling her back to his chest. A jovial chuckle shakes her in his arms. Cursing, she rolls to face him, a smile stretching her thin lips.

Kosymo's dark eyes are distant, a frown pulling the wrinkles above his brow. Her smile falls. He watches the light across the ceiling, her brown eyes flicking between his from his peripheral.

"Still thinking about how the General's been talking?"

He hums, fingers running through her hair. Shadows dance over the dark ceiling as a fire roars in the hearth. Her sigh ghosts across his shoulder and she rubs her lips over the scarred skin.

"It's sad..." she says, laying her cheek on his shoulder. "I imagine he's sad—betrayed by his own son. Probably be the same as me betraying you."

He glances at her with a sigh.

"We've known each other longer than I've been the Beseecher. Longer than I've been in Audantei. It'd be different." His thumb traces over the splattering of moles on her right cheek, eyes soft. "You haven't aged."

A mischievous grin reveals her teeth. "You have."

He chokes on a chuckle, his eyebrows high on his forehead, feigning shock to crush his smile. "I take offense to that."

"No..." She sobers, shoving his chest. "You're just... you're older."

His dying laughter picks up. "That's not any better."

"Wiser." She smacks him with an incredulous smile. "Stop being smart."

He squints. "You're still calling me old."

"I am older, too. Stop being offended."

"Predator."

She slaps an open palm against his bare stomach with a shrieking gasp.

From the other side of the room, a wail rises into the rafters. Kosymo's grin twists into a sneer, his meaty hand clutching his abandoned breastplate and heaving it across the room. Between the heavy item and the searing glare, the high-pitched sobbing of his prisoner silences.

"Kosymo," she scolds.

"What?" At the sharp tone, she grips his jaw and forces him to meet her gaze.

He grits his teeth.

"I'm not worried about the General." Kosymo grabs her forearm and pulls her hand away. "I'm worried about his son."

"The Lieutenant?"

Huffing, he lays back. She falls with him. “He’s young, easy to manipulate. No telling what they could make him believe.”

“And? He’s ostracized. Nothing more to worry about other than the General going mad trying to kill him.” She tugs the sheet back over them, smoothing out the satin.

“But you said—“

“I said what I did,” she glares at him, running her fingers over his chest, “but it’s not my job to run this city.”

He grunts, watching the flames toy with the shadows above. Each heavy crack of the fire drowns out her humming. Her fingers trace over the lines of Kosymo’s umber skin. Pressing a kiss to her fingers, he scoops up her wrist, tracing a path over her with his lips. The smell of smoke surrounds him.

“If the General finds him?” She asks.

After waiting for his response, she places an index finger on his chin and pushes down until he meets her eyes.

“If the General finds him, I’ll act as Audantei’s ruler.” Kosymo’s brown eyes harden like the glaciers in the Frozen South’s seas.

“Good.”



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Danilo glares at each word with grotesque curiosity. The extensive book, though it says little about sensitivities, speaks about the Stormthrower Artifacts. Four days earlier, when it had mentioned them among a vague historical accounts, he risked confronting one of his captors.

Hestia wasn't around—hadn't been since he stumbled upon a rather boisterous round of 'Hunter's Bridge'; a card game the soldiers were determined to fight and bet over, though Danilo never took part. After his fourth round of the building, Reina's keen eyes softened. Danilo would have preferred Hestia's tender approach, but he would accept Reina's blunt delivery.

They'd discussed the Artifacts as tools which absorb a Stormthrower's signature, and the type of power ancients wielded them with. Danilo froze when Borak cut in; rambling about mass slaughter from the very force which created them. Reina had nodded, uttering 'unbridled', and watched Danilo's expression harden.

When Magus collected Borak, citing a problem in their eastern affairs, Reina had waited for them to leave before continuing.

"They're accidental. From an older era of magic," she'd said, sad and distant as she stared over his shoulder. "Our predecessors weren't all good."

Danilo took the answer and hadn't pressed. The sorrow over her features deterring his intrigue.

While the text before him calls them 'mere myth', the Stormthrowers act as if they are more.

Enzo clears his throat from his makeshift study, hidden by full bookshelves. Danilo fixes a glare at the books in Enzo's general direction. After Enzo toed in during Danilo's training, both nearly killing each other in the moment, they had taken an approach of strict avoidance to keep from staining the walls red.

Books clatter to the floor as Easton rounds the shelves, followed by a large roll of parchment. Easton's eyes flick between the roll and him, another falling from his grasp as he reaches for it. Then again, as he stands. Danilo notices the tremble in Easton's hands. Enzo stops behind him, his stare set on Danilo.

Easton stumbles over the leg of a chair, dumping an armload of scripts on the table across from Danilo's.

"I fail to understand this heinous transfer." Enzo sets down a book, eyes fixed on Easton, trying to gather the rolling papers.

"Because I," Easton nearly leaps over the table to snatch the parchment teetering on the edge, "I need to spread out... to think."

Danilo surveys their attempts to pin the curling corners of the papers, his fingers running over the edge of his book's pages, cheek planted heavily in his fist. Their bickering is amusing until Enzo senses his stare.

"If you are, by any means, intelligent, you will define discretion and forewarning the same." Enzo's eyes darken at Danilo's confusion. "Keep from private matters, Lieutenant. Else I make it clearer."

Danilo delivers a curt nod before turning to the book.

"No." Enzo stomps, shoulders jerking as he moves to Danilo. "Not enough."

Danilo pushes deeper into his chair, back flush to the wood. Enzo leans into his face, a hand splayed on the edge of the table. "You will never—and I mean never—review plans detailed by any member of this company. Am I understood?"

"Clearly." Danilo snarls.

Enzo straightens with the barest of nods. Easton's owlsh eyes blink upon Enzo's return, twitching fingers pull at the soft edges of a feathered quill, increasing in frequency as Enzo comes nearer to their table. Danilo watches the deliberate slow drag of Enzo's weathered hands, cautious and gentle as he shifts papers and quills across the table's surface.

He drags the book closer, unable to commit the words to memory. Not with Enzo's harsh presence and Easton's repetitive flinching.

Danilo doesn't note Easton's fear, ignoring the *enemy, enemy, enemy* that rattles in his mind. Nor does he unfurl from against the hard edge of the chair's backrest. He twists his rings over the phantom sensation of dislocated fingers—ones he set himself only to re-set again hours later. There is a hot drop of shame in his abdomen.

A trembling, ill-kept sigh rises from Enzo at the other table. Danilo peers over. Enzo scrubs his beard with his nails, leaving red tracks on his skin. "We will reconvene momentarily."

Easton gives a clenched and vibrating nod, to which Enzo hesitates. Once Easton meets his eye, a second passing between them in an agreement Danilo can't catch, Enzo hustles down the stairs.

A misty expression darkens Easton's blank face, passing through Danilo similar to the distant glaze of a soldier after witnessing his first death. Easton flushes when he realizes Danilo stares back. They blink at one another before Easton stands on knobby knees and wobbles over to Danilo's table.

Danilo is silent as Easton sits across from him, unable to find the strength he poured into chasing him away before. Not when the muted, haunted colour in Easton's eyes bores into him, caging his anger. Easton fixes his attention on Danilo's thumb pushing the rings around his fingers.

"What are your rings for?" Easton clears his throat, wrapping his arms around himself.

Danilo trains his eyes to the ink stains on Easton's left hand where his forefinger and thumb dance in a silent pattern.

"They're rings." He says.

"Got a lot of them." Easton leans back, shoulders loose, fingers increasing their tempo.

"A lot of people tried to kill me." Danilo stares down at his hands.

Rings were fitting. A constant reminder of the acts he committed. Their weight like manacles, clenched around his fingers. Easton is silent, but as he leans against the table, his eyes scan each with unmovable interest.

"Seven... killed—uh, over seven." Easton's squint flickers with recognition, making the hair on Danilo's arms stand. "They're souvenirs."

Danilo sighs, recognizing the manipulative gleam in Easton's eye—the same as the day he watched Easton turn the rope into a living snake. Easton wants an answer, with minor consideration for the outcome. He won't like what he finds.

“Enzo—uh, Enzo has... one similar to you.”

Danilo hopes Easton is as smart as he appears. No story Danilo has lived will entertain him. Bloodshed isn't glamorous. Easton should understand companionship isn't a service he offers. And unless Easton needs a hired bodyguard, Danilo should be the last he crawls towards for company.

“Well... no, I guess.” Easton's brows furrow as he stares at the rings. “I guess not. A few have as much detail but... Enzo has this stone. Looks like the ocean... blue and green. Metal tentacles... yeah—”

Danilo clenches his fingers, feeling the bands squeeze.

“It's... it's a family ring. Apparently from a, uh, a pirate. He'll give it to...” There's a brief pause in Easton's breakneck speed that hints of regret slurring his busy mind. “Is that how you got any of yours? You've, uh, worked with your father, and he no doubt has family among the ranks elsewhere—anyway, that's where you got one of them, right?”

“No. No, none of mine are from that.” Disappointment grips Danilo's chest.

He never felt it was safe to talk family with the General. So he never did. Never knew if either of his parents had siblings; doesn't know if he has uncles or aunts who feel the same ache in their bones at the loss of his mother. Probably not. They'd hang as accomplices to a crime the public would never know. Because even if they lived far from Audantei, its reaches through the Gentled East would have ensnared them.

“So, they're... all from, uh, kills?” Danilo struggles to swallow, the hurt clear in Easton's whiny tone.

“Why?” Danilo asks, his aggravation rising from his shoulders like a physical heat.

Easton's fingers become still at the glare he receives. Danilo squints when Easton doesn't flinch. His fingers move again and his eyes land on the ring encompassing Danilo's middle finger. The one that started the collection.

“That—uh,” Easton points determinedly. “That one is Enzo's mother's.”

It's braided silver. The forger's stamp faded beyond recognition.

Danilo remembers her. She was heavier, with dark hair tinted by age. Her eyes had been kind, but horror had etched the wrinkled skin between her brows.

A scout knows the cost of being caught. He hadn't expected her kindness. When she stumbled over him, recognition marred her faded blue eyes. Still, she offered her hand, promising things he never realized he needed. Her stare trapped him when an alarm sounded. As the angry hollers of war began, he tried to run. She predicted it and grabbed him.

Despite the chaos, he stayed as she bled; thick, rough fingers stroking his face while she apologized as if he'd been the one bleeding out.

Her death hadn't been the first he mourned in secret, but she was the first he'd taken from. The ring had been larger than his finger then. He kept it on a chain until someone tried to strangle him with it. With every substantial kill he carried out, he added to the collection. He didn't have a lot of space left when he became lieutenant.

Easton calls them souvenirs. They are. Of agony; never allowing him to forget the truth of his existence. He brings wreckage in his wake, and he's not worth more than another completed mission.

Easton nods when he refuses to answer or meet his unrelenting gaze.

"He knows." Easton's eyes fall to his twitching fingers pressed flat on the table. "But, I—I don't think he wants to say as much."

Danilo and Enzo are intrinsically tied together. From Danilo's beginning, he was condemned to Enzo's ire. With the man's record of observation and cunning, he'd undoubtedly noticed the ring long ago.

The chain of Danilo's jade tags spins as he busies his fingers. Easton's eyes track the motion, observing its etched ridges and flawed edges. The deep emerald rectangle lost its sharp edges over the years, from Danilo's persistent fiddling and the action it witnessed. One engraved face announces his rank in a throng of stars, the other is scored with his name. He becomes aware of it only after it's fondled into his palm, encased in his fist, out of direct sight.

Danilo's half-present stare meets Easton's growing smirk, alert eyes categorizing the mindless movement. His words stumble from his lips, trying to deter Easton's wit from noticing his stupor, and his current desire announces itself.

"What do you know of sensitivities?" He blurts.

Easton pushes at the edge of Danilo's small stack of books, a smile creeping across his face as their titles come into his view.

"Sensitivity, huh?"

Danilo nods, gaze slitted at Easton's change in demeanor.

“They’ve—have the potential to be dastardly...” Easton’s fingers thrum again, “what do you want to know?”

“Everything.”

“Everything?” Easton crosses and uncrosses his arms, shrugging, and meets Danilo’s eyes with confidence. “You don’t have time for everything.”

“Then what’s important.”

Easton’s lip quirks into a smile. Too akin to a grimace. Danilo knows Easton isn’t a fighter—he’s armed with a single half-sharpened knife, and he doesn’t remember its existence. But the look in his eyes is preparation for battle. Whatever Easton braces for, Danilo is woefully unready.

“It’s the... the trace of magic. Not the presence of magic. A sensitivity bends and shifts to accommodate what you sense.” The silence drops like a physical weight on Danilo’s shoulders when Easton’s knee stops bouncing and he tenses. Easton notices. “I’ve heard it can be trained—harnessed, maybe—into magic. Not strong magic, but...”

Easton tries reading him, his eyes hooded beneath his brows. A bright red glow coils around his fingers, swirling with the fluid movements when a coin appears in its place. He dances it across the tops of his knuckles. Danilo leans back in his chair. They’re locked in a standoff; an impasse opposite to the one from days before. Easton isn’t mean, but he has all the potential to be, making him a man to be wary of.

Something in him wound tighter than the portcullis of the Black Gate. The uneasy sensation makes him claustrophobic.

He needs out.

Danilo jumps to his feet and presses forward beyond his volition. The tightness continues up the left side of his head, an inch underneath his ear.

“Altamura, wait.” Easton’s chair cracks against the table behind it.

“Don’t call me that.” Danilo barks.

He nears the banister and collapses against it, rubbing his fingers into his eyes. He takes a steadying breath. And another. After a handful more, he notices the numbness in his legs and the distant feeling in his hands.

“Danilo, hey, w—“

Danilo stumbles off the handrail to escape Easton’s close voice and finds an arm cages his back against the spindles. “You’re okay.”

Easton’s words don’t provide comfort. Especially when the tightness feels like knives. He opens his eyes to snap at Easton, to chase away the ‘help’ on his

lips, and his remaining breath blasts from his lungs at the blue hue fogging the corners of his vision.

“Okay, all right, uh...” Easton—though warm in character—is chilling to the touch. Red contaminates his sight as Easton’s hands hover at either side of his head. “I-I’m not strong—ENZO.”

Danilo loses time because when he opens his eyes, Enzo has replaced him. Frigid blue replaces the blood hue dancing in the air. Enzo’s hand is heavy over Danilo’s eyes, squeezing his temples with his thumb and middle finger. The contrast between them makes Danilo gasp. Enzo—who’s composed of striking greys and chilly glares—is warm enough to rival the desert heat.

“You are lucky.”

Danilo doesn’t respond, no matter how strong the groan of agreement begs to be released. He’ll keep his grateful silence to himself.

His muscles unravel from their taunt hold and Enzo’s hand follows his head as he relaxes against the spindles. Easton pants and mutters to Enzo. They engage in soft discussion, but it’s filler to him; soft murmurs and the drag of clothing against skin. Without energy, he’s not keen on eavesdropping. Not with this fragile serenity. Exhaustion pulls his breath out, deep and even in the tense atmosphere.

“Hey.” Enzo’s baritone voice jars him into action.

Before Enzo can use his unoccupied hand to smack his shoulder, Danilo’s wrist flies up to block it, and he drives his elbow into the wrist of the hand gripping over his eyes. He launches forward to smother Enzo’s open neck.

Enzo hadn’t been at war to be strangled by a teenager. He catches Danilo’s hand and squeezes his fingers. “Easy.”

Enzo remains steadfast. Solid. The pressure around Danilo’s palm is unyielding. And a weight settles atop his chest when he tries to push off the banister. Easton falls silent. Enzo’s grip tightens, waiting for the discomfort of his grasp to register.

Danilo tugs on his hand, slumping when Enzo relaxes but doesn’t release. He tilts his head back, trying to breathe past the wild thump of his heart. His hands shake in Enzo’s hold from the sudden drop of excitement.

“Look to me.” Danilo scrunches his face, deciding to ignore Enzo in favour of befriending the silence again. “Ah-ah, no. Look to me.”

Danilo drags himself upright with a half-hearted scowl. Enzo drops his hand, grasping the fabric of Danilo’s elbow, and drags the stumbling boy to follow.

“Easton, retrieve the items from the study?” Easton’s wide eyes remain unmoving. Enzo flicks his wrist at him and he sprints into action.

Danilo moans at the steep staircase and Enzo silences it with a constricting tug that wrenches them both down the first steps. He attempts to tear from Enzo’s grasp. The man pitches him into the wall by his elbow. It nearly tips him down the remaining stairs. Despite the anger within him, he settles for following, his willpower sliding between his fingers like sand. When they reach the bottom, Danilo’s eager for the bed he’s been occupying.

“No.” Enzo tugs him away when he leans toward the door as they pass. “I will not sit in there. Not with you.”

Enzo glances over, expecting Danilo to struggle against his instruction as he has been the preceding days. Danilo’s certain he finds the heavy presence of his fatigue in the valleys of his face as Enzo’s brow quirks soon after.

He allows himself to be pulled along and deposited harshly onto the drawing room couch. Deep red fills his vision as he tilts his head against the cushion, listening to Enzo’s retreating steps. The silence echoes in his ears, leaving him with muted thoughts and deepening breaths.

Danilo flinches when a hand settles on his shoulder. His eyes snap open, and he fists Enzo’s shirt. Their proximity makes his throat tight with fear. On reflex, he tries sitting up. Enzo keeps strong, pushing down until Danilo’s head hits a pillow.

He falls into exhaustion, his resentment a dying light in his mental forges, snuffed out by the constant flick of pages and the beat of a quill on thick paper. Minutes pass before Danilo sags into the couch, leaving Enzo to work in nothing but his own silence.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Danilo grunts as he drives a sword into the shoulder of the dummy. The metal strikes with a dull thud. After persistent tugging, Danilo releases the hilt, glaring at its mocking gleam. His control wanes and bends with every shift of tension in the room.

Days ago, when he woke with thready breath and weak fingers, Enzo was gone. In his absence, moisture lingered in the air, the ceiling hazy with evaporating clouds. It dampened Danilo's sleep-warmed skin. He froze, waiting for Enzo's magic to strike against him, just as it had in the sewer. And though it never did, he couldn't shake the imminence hovering over him.

He's grateful for the privacy of the old training room, and doesn't dare complain about the creaky ring or bagged straw dummies. The dull, tarnished swords can't cut through butter, but they are better than resorting to sparring with his split knuckles. It allows him to haphazardly pull the seams of his self-control together.

Dim sunlight strokes the sweat rolling off his forehead through the foundation's cracks. He shakes out his wrists, grips the training sword in one hand. Gritting his teeth and placing a foot on the dummy's chest, he grips the hilt with both hands and tears it from the dummy's shoulder, drawing across its center. Straw spews to the floor, the cloth hanging similar to the fluttering blond

hair of his sister. ‘Lieutenant’ hisses in his mind before it morphs into a ringing reminder of his new titles: thief, traitor, prisoner.

He swings, scoffing when the sword’s folded edge cannot cut the dangling fabric. It clatters against the ground. Danilo winds the limp fabric around his palm and pulls. The cloth screams before leaving Danilo’s jagged breaths echoing in the empty room.

Turning up the stairs, he ignores the sharp pain of loss that chases him. He grinds his teeth together when he trudges into the kitchen and stares down the subject of his ire.

Enzo glares at him over a pile of chaotic scribbles and splayed books, his cold eyes flicking down to the white rag in Danilo’s clenched fist. Danilo sneers, lip, nose, and brow scrunching with a hostility he’s received from noose-bound prisoners. He dunks an ale-mug into the water bucket. The silence in the air rattles inside Danilo’s head until it causes him to speak without thinking.

“Let me go.” Danilo swings around, hair sticking to his sweaty forehead. “You don’t want me here. Let me go.”

Enzo quirks a brow at him, staring with a tilted head as if he could strip Danilo with a glance.

“Regardless of what ill thoughts you concede with that statement, you are not incarcerated here. You may leave.” Enzo rolls his quill between his fingers.

The fact that he can look relaxed while Danilo is present drives him into further action.

“Then why do I still feel like a prisoner?” Danilo jabs the mug in Enzo’s direction, the motion spraying water across the ground. He clenches the mug tighter to ignore the tremor in his hand. “That I have to pay penance for living in your vicinity?”

“Consult your conscience.” Enzo continues to write without a glance in his direction.

“No, I’m taking it up with you.”

Danilo drops his mug on the opposing end of the table, earning himself a glare. The man shifts, sets his quill on his paper, and observes Danilo’s petulant scowl. “For what reason, other than to vex me?”

“I asked for help.”

“Please, Lieutenant. Your plea was meant to absolve you from the fire Kosy-mo Guerra has set. I’ve done my utmost to keep you alive,” Enzo drawls.

“One would think your ‘utmost’ is to helping me stay alive so I can leave.”

"Your ignorance, in which you've lived, is what keeps you from understanding basic concepts." He sneers down his nose. "You have no means with which to fault me."

"Hard not to when you don't help."

"I've given you a definition. Whether you are too far beyond stupid to apply it is a problem I need not concern myself with."

"There is no way you are this arrogant all the time," Danilo hisses between his teeth, hands clenching and releasing.

Enzo's eyes travel to his hands. Under the weight of his stare, Danilo flexes his hands and pushes the hair from the drying skin of his tacky forehead. As if in understanding, Enzo hums and returns his attention to his pages.

Danilo growls, drawing Enzo's terse brow to him. "Do prove how rash decision controls your better judgment."

Though Enzo doesn't smirk, Danilo watches the lines beside Enzo's eyes crease. Danilo swallows the urge to throw the mug at Enzo's head. Enzo knows how to provoke him, but by hell, he started the fight, and he wasn't about to let Enzo finish it.

"As if you aren't capable of the same." Danilo slams his fist atop the table and Enzo tenses.

"I—in fact—am not." Enzo shuts his book, standing to round the edge of the table. "My impulses are not so beyond my control to be brought down by a teenager."

Danilo paces forward, baring his teeth. "We both know that isn't true."

Memories war through their eyes. Danilo vibrates, waiting for Enzo to make the first move. Enzo's brows relax, awareness lancing through his eyes, and his shoulders deflate as he backs towards his chair.

"Don't mistake my loyalty to the Nephla for kindness, boy," Enzo says, punctuating 'boy' much like the General would. "I'm not a man of idle threats."

Danilo's shoulders rise, and before he can think of the consequences, he lifts a foot and buries a hand inside his boot, grazing the poorly wrapped knife around his ankle. He withdraws the piddly weapon as if he were to plunge it within Enzo's chest. When Danilo steps forward, Enzo thrusts out his arm. A wave crashes against Danilo's knees and solidifies into ice. Danilo ignores the urge to shiver, twisting his knife lazily.

"If I wanted you dead, you would've been dead," Danilo says, slamming the weapon down on the table.

He doesn't have to look to know it's a plain and unassuming item—its dull colour stained with blood and dirt except for where it got polished against his skin. Audantei's military ingrained it in him to keep it secure and hidden. To never give it away. The second it left his hand, abandoned on the edge of the scored wood, he knows it's gone. It was his lifeline—his saving grace—at his side when none of his soldiers were.

The kitchen door whines open.

"I fou-und, uh," Easton flicks his gaze between the melting ice and Enzo's scorching stare on Danilo's knife, and swallows audibly, "I've, uhm, I've found nothing, I—I'll just--"

The door rubs against the mud-brick, and they're alone again. Danilo counts out the silence with his own heart, only speaking when Enzo lifts the knife from the table, removing it from Danilo's reach and securing it beneath his belt with narrowed eyes.

"He didn't come to your aid." Danilo jerks one of his knees, toes wiggling in his boots, and finds he's unable to move beyond that. "Why should I worry?"

"You are not the one he's seen fight." Enzo steps into Danilo's space, glaring down his nose. "He has no reason to fear you."

"But I have every reason to be afraid, don't I?" Danilo's sneer turns to a grin, watching Enzo's rage strike through the depths of his grey eyes. Lightning within a hurricane.

A growl pushes past Enzo's teeth, and he raises the back of his hand mere inches from Danilo's face. Danilo doesn't move. He's learned responding ignites a larger anger; brings about a larger beating. And while he baited Enzo's response, humility irritates his stomach.

Enzo freezes, the back of his hand skimming the surface of Danilo's cheek. The ice around Danilo's ankles cracks and sinks into the floor as fast as Enzo darts from the room. Danilo, though his head spins from the suddenness, chases after him, hollering and cussing. Soggy leather slurps around his feet.

He follows Enzo until the door slams shut on his sleeping quarters. His forearm slams into the unmoving door, and blue ripples from the impact. He doesn't bother struggling to open it.

The fires of his anger scorch his control, and reflecting off the halls in a violent volume of unintelligible threats. Silence thins its edge. Clarity ebbs the heat. Whatever sparks remain in the dimming embers is snuffed out by a surprising realization. There's a lack of damage in the wake of their argument.

Their relationship changed—despite what either of them wanted. And though it scares him, it's not as much as he knows it should. Not as much as the reluctant knowledge that while Enzo isn't a friend—or even an ally—he isn't an adversary. Which leaves him with the same trembling fear, without the anger to hide it behind.



Enzo trips into his quarters, dropping in the darkwood chair at his desk. A faint breeze wades the heavy curtains from side to side, sneaking light into the dark room. He massages his temples, then drags his nails through his beard. The leather strips peeking from between the pages of wide books speak of his intentions to continue his work. Instead, he stares at the pocked scars on his knuckles which frame his heirloom.

The ring on his finger reflects the water of his old town; cerulean and mint, moving and darkening with its reoccurring storms. Hard skin on his palms refuses to soften, despite the infrequency he uses the weapons rather than tools. His nails scrape down the sides of his thumb.

Enzo's agonizing childhood, spent alone on the fishers' wharves on the open sea rather than the waterfall's edge near their cove, had made his hands coarse. As it did his heart.

Danilo had refused to flinch when Enzo's hand raised. But the poised place next to a cheek weathered by exhaustion forced Enzo to squelch the rising memories. His hands resembled a mass of men from when Decarii homed him. Never did he desire to see a reflection of them in his actions. But he'd been a mere moment from striking a boy. Not the man he posed to be.

"Listen 'ere—" Even as a child, he should have known better than to acknowledge the youngest of his mother's earliest boyfriends, "—this disease you carry. 'ide it."

The fish he gutted had slid from his small fingers, regardless of his best efforts to cling to the oily scales.

"Ot'erwise, you'll get killed for it." The man gave a forceful squeeze to his narrow shoulders, his accompanying breath reeking worse than the innards tossed aside. "And you'd be lucky if it were by my 'and."

Enzo crumbled beneath the force of the man's skinny hand. As his elbows collided with the deck, he came precariously close to driving the gutting knife into his own eye. He stared at the hooked point, then to the disgust on the man's face.

At that moment, Enzo understood not to trust anyone. Understood to protect the secret he'd promised his mother to keep. When the man left their life, Enzo waited for the armored soldiers to drag him away. The apprehension of every officer he passed made him ill with fear.

It wasn't until he grew older that he realized how felonious Decarii had been. Regardless of his magic.

Enzo resolved not to cower in society, and he began with tossing out his mother's last parasite of a partner. She'd been his supporting grace, following wherever he went, learning to fight despite her lack of magic. His commitment to the Nephla solidified ten times over when magic-kind welcomed her as an equal.

That old fishers' wharf birthed his understanding; all else fell in after. The non-magic world would bring ruin to them.

Danilo is young and uninformed. But uninformed men sank their lines into the waters of his life. He won't snare on their hooks.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Easton started avoiding him after his sensitivity flared, which, Danilo had learned, Easton triggered. He didn't notice until the morning he skipped his usual training—a rough sleep weighing down his limbs—and Easton inhaled sharply, flinching as he entered the library. Enzo had laid a hand across Easton's shoulder. It had kept him from fidgeting until the dim grey light splashing through the windows turned golden, its bright hue crawling across the table and licking the corners of Easton's scribbled pages. Easton scrambled from the room without explanation and both Danilo and Enzo stared after him, leaving Danilo alone with Enzo to stew in the shocking comfort of their silence.

That had been days ago.

As the tension of Easton's chaotic excuses lessened, Enzo moved open books to spread across Danilo's table. He refused to sit, opting to wander between, sparing glares at Danilo. In return, Danilo offered explanations and suggestions for the ambush strategies Enzo grumbled over. And he'd done it knowing it would be used against Audantei's forces. Enzo's answering hum shook the room, and it fell into a steady silence.

Time inches by on a dim morning, much like the one Easton started his avoidance on, Danilo's elbow propped in the middle of his book while he stares

out an open window. A chill fluffs his blond curls. The black tea's fragrance is prominent over his table from the ale-mug sitting across from him.

Enzo ambles over, sipping as he looks between his pages. Danilo watches, turning back to the book when Enzo turns him. It's disarming to trust the man not to strike him. He reads five lines before realizing Enzo hasn't moved. He recoils at Enzo's stare; hardened, without the intrusive air. Danilo tries to remain still beneath it.

The heat of Enzo's observation isn't unfamiliar, but he's learned it's not often good. Enzo's ever-present scowl furrows in anticipation, solidifying Danilo's nervousness.

"I have a proposition." Enzo is patient while he waits for Danilo's response, despite the wrinkle of his nose and crossed arms which say otherwise.

"All right." Danilo sits straighter, resting his forearms on the open tome.

Enzo grimaces, making a gesture implying Danilo should move the book. Not bothering to mark the page, he slides it down the table. It doesn't move far. The man shifts, huffs, and pulls out the chair across from Danilo.

"I—there may be a secondary method." Enzo interlocks his fingers, resting his chin on the tops of his hands.

"For what?"

"Narrowing the origin of your sensitivity. Along with the outlet."

Danilo straightens before the conversation's implication pierces his hope. "Why haven't you mentioned this before?"

Enzo sighs, breaking eye contact as he fists his hands together and holds them in front of his mouth. Danilo watches the stone on Enzo's ring and how the colours crash together. "It would grant me direct access to your mind."

Danilo stares, jaw lowered. "I..."

He tries to analyze Enzo, as the man is analyzing him. But Enzo's stoic and calm. Unlike the storm in his eyes.

"Neither of us were ready to discuss that method," Enzo says.

It's an understatement.

Months ago, upon meeting the other, blood would spill with no regard for cost. Within the month of his dismissal, Danilo would never try—there were more daunting threats. And since he no longer has to worry about his survival, it had taken this long to tolerate Enzo's existence. A fact Danilo knows to be mutual.

"But you're telling me now?" Danilo tips his chin downward.

"I am aware you may be more receptive to suggestions."

Enzo Sapienti is a complex man. Presenting as an enemy, strategist, and criminal before proving to be human. Danilo had forgotten, only now noticing the exhaustion lines around his eyes, the weary weight of life gathered across his forehead, the stiffness in his shoulders from the burdens of war, and the dull brown waves limp from a lack of care. There's no hate present in Enzo's eyes, just a tired curiosity in its place.

He's offering.

"H—how would you go about it?" Danilo bites the inside of his lip and the cleft tightens uncomfortably.

Enzo tilts his head, and it makes Danilo's skin crawl. He holds still, accepting.

"The mind is made up of water." Danilo swallows, remembering men who faced wave-eaters that found their bodies out of their control. "You would let the memories flow. I would bring forth your sensitivity," a dust of blue flows between Enzo's hands as he stretches them apart, "and the correct memory would present itself."

Danilo squints. The offer had an ulterior motive; a chance to get into the mind of the Lieutenant Commander. Enzo notices, his chin lifting in offense.

"I'd not offer if past differences could not be overlooked." Enzo looks over the library with a sneer. "Once the source is identified, I can be liberated of you."

Danilo ignores the sharp sting of betrayal at the lack of jest or lightheartedness in Enzo's voice. Enzo's smug expression speaks louder than any words; hoping for a response, volatile or not. Danilo flushes and his jaw clenches, but for once, he's eager to disappoint.

"What do I have left to lose." It should be a question—he should be nervous about the consequences.

But hasn't he lost everything already?

Enzo's gaze snaps to his, locking them in a heated stare. It's clear he'd expected Danilo to reject the offer. Perhaps he'd even embraced that chance. They're both set on holding their bluffs, waiting for the other to fold. Enzo leans forward, elbows braced. The blue glow between his hands quivers.

"Now?" Danilo shoots back against the chair.

Enzo's expectant stare heats his cheeks.

"If you are ready." Enzo's jaw clenches, his patience feigned.

Danilo's eyes linger on the blue hue dancing around Enzo's fingers. Moisture permeates the hot air when he leans toward Enzo's waiting palms. He tries to

ease his anxieties by fisting his hands, driving his broken nails into his palm. Enzo's hands lower to be level with Danilo's temples. As blue gathers in Danilo's peripheral, he turns to look, and Enzo shoves his head back into place.

Enzo's focused eyes and furrowed brows announce his frustration. Danilo thinks it's the first he's seen them free of anger when using his magic.

"Close your eyes." The grumble makes him jump, but he's quick to follow orders, flinching when fingers brush the air away from the tender spots below his temple.



Enzo finds Danilo's eyes soften every day. But as they glance at the gathering magic by his temples, there's a familiar edge. He's braced for the worst.

"Close your eyes," Enzo says.

Bewilderment surges in his chest at Danilo's rapid obedience, replaced by cynicism when Danilo recoils in the next breath.

Enzo tampers his emotions while entering Danilo's mind to withhold, impressing his sentiments—both negative and positive alike—upon the memories he observes. A calamity of emotions and images collide against his conscious. Each memory hosts the General.

It's abrupt to watch Danilo's father age under Audantei's harsh light. There's a familiarity in the clanging weapons; a similar and distant heart-clenching fear to Decarii in the atmosphere. The distinct scents of blood and sweat creep at the edge of his senses.

He stares down at a boy notably small for his age, recognizable blue eyes teary from exertion. Danilo's unruly blond curls have an uneven military cut. While stretching for a sword beyond his reach, golden dust settles in the shadow consuming his frame. Despite his rounded features, Danilo's eyes still shine with the same determination.

Memories are finical and capricious. And more so for the third party, due to being crafted by those reliving them. Magic-kind seldom resorted to peering through memories. Such a thing is to be saved for dire circumstance.

Therefore, when Enzo perceives the bile of anger directed toward the General, he cannot arbitrate whether it originates from Danilo or himself. As the man speaks, he finds he doesn't care.

Outside the memory, he squeezes Danilo's temples tighter.

"You will move like them." Llodis Altamura swings his sword, and it collides with the ground where one of Danilo's small knees had been. "It's harder to fight an enemy that moves the same as you. Harder to counterattack. Harder to attack. Harder to defeat."

Even as young as he is, the curt nod is well practiced. Danilo's response is cut short as he dives away from another embellished swing. Disgust rises in Enzo. The boy moves with a smooth precision unlike any child he's seen—dodging swords and knives. Enzo is inclined to believe he's dodged sharp things for many prolonged years.

A brutal kick to the chest follows Danilo to the ground. Enzo stiffens as the man leans on the squirming child with unnecessary force.

"Pathetic." Spit flies in Danilo's face.

The red flush of anger is more prominent than the bite in the General's tone. Enzo's mind reels with discomfort. He forces indifference to the forefront of his thoughts.

Little Danilo shakes his head, writhing and gasping to escape from beneath the mad General. With a kick, Danilo rolls to his stomach. He chokes for air.

"There are vermin in our world." The General sticks the tip of his sword in the dirt next to Danilo's head. "Magic is an unnatural creation only the sick and vile can use."

Sand sizzles and darkens in the memory beneath Danilo's fingertips.

Danilo tries to drag himself from the memory, scraping his nails across the darkwood desk. Enzo holds tight, hooking his thumbs under Danilo's jaw, not allowing him to leave.

"It's the one thing I've tasked you to remember." Llodis swings at Danilo's waiting sword. "Do you understand, my boy?"

My boy. Those words should hold comfort, but it's not an endearment, it's ownership. A reminder as harsh and painful as the cut bubbling blood from the slash of the General's weapon. Pressing a small hand to the injury on his upper arm, Danilo stumbles out of reach. Enzo's self-control reaches a fever pitch.

"I want an answer."

Danilo nods, gripping the sword tighter as it tips forward in his grasp.

"Good." Llodis brings his broadsword around and holds it like an axe meant to slice through trees. "Again."

As the General pulls back to swing, a glint shines off the blade and Enzo recoils, tearing from the memory. He blinks, clearing his mind. Magic shines over Danilo's temples and his furrowed brows show he lives deep within the memory. Enzo's stomach spins with an uneasy resentment.

Though the anger had been hazy within Danilo's mind, Enzo now finds the blind rage never stemmed from himself. Glancing over Danilo, he's overcome by the weight of reality.

Enzo prides himself on his attentive commitment to detail. Noticing more than others—Borak included. He ponders how he'd missed Danilo's responses before speculating that his resentment had governed his opinion over his judgment.

Clinging to his own anger, Enzo rips his hands from Danilo's temples, severing his magic from Danilo's mind. Danilo gasps and collapses against Enzo's forearms, pinning them to the table, shuddering. His tacky skin sticks to Enzo's clothes as he sucks in air. Enzo ignores the desire to shove him onto the table.

Fast, determined footsteps echo in the stairwell.

"Enzo." Borak grabs the top of the handrail as Enzo braces Danilo's collar and shoulder to rest him on the table. Danilo groans at the movement, no doubt ill from the motion. "Enz—"

Borak's hair flops into his face, a frozen palm pinning it from his eyes. Danilo's shivering and quaking breaths are undeniable, leaving the air charged with meaning Borak can only speculate. He recoils when they meet eyes, choking on puffs of air when he tries speaking. Enzo sneers.

"Am I to assume a reason for your urgency?" Enzo stands, crossing his arms during his slow approach.

It sparks a jolt of realization over Borak and he spares one more glance before devoting his attention to Enzo. "In shadowing the Beseecher, our task was redirected."

"Say 'changed' Borak, you've no reason to prove your intelligence."

Borak and Hestia are newer additions to Enzo's crew, due to the recent deaths caused by the half-conscious child on the table. While he and Hestia have plenty of history, Magus spoke on Borak's behalf. Despite Borak's skill and intelligence, he feels a need to prove his place among them.

Borak nods, thinks, and says, "We had a change of plans."

"I gathered as much." Enzo blinks at him, expression as deadpan as his voice.

"Right." Borak's eyes travel again to Danilo.

Their losses at the Narota camp were an unfortunate reality. For Easton more than the rest. The twins had been loyal to the Nephla's cause, but they were not her chosen. Easton grew attached to them faster than anticipated. Borak, however, knowing them from long before, mourned them. And though Enzo knew himself to be a resentful soul, Borak was his opposite. He mourned and he forgave.

"His brother is alive." Borak whispers in Danilo's direction.

Fisting the shoulder of Borak's shirt, Enzo drags him from earshot. He glances at Danilo, who's moved his hand to rub at his forehead but otherwise remains still against the table.

"Are you certain?" Enzo asks.

When Enzo turns back, Borak's curiosity shines in his eyes. He motions for Borak to answer.

"Yes. I tracked the family when we found out he vanished." He tips his chin in Danilo's direction. "I know what he looks like."

Enzo hums.

"Guerra is attempting some unrestrained things." Borak adds.

"Meaning?"

"You've heard the term 'fight fire with fire'?" Borak scratches at the caked dirt stuck in the junction of his neck, waiting for Enzo's unnecessary nod. "He's gathered quite the array of resources, even has a Stone. I doubt he's aware of it—yet."

Enzo quirks his brow.

The non-magic, unaware of their true origin, incorrectly titled Stones. Often Stones were mistaken scales or bones from beasts of old. They hold significant power.

"He's... he's trying to pull magic from his kin," Borak mutters, looking at Danilo. Enzo's impressed Danilo is upright, though his swaying means he's plenty absent-minded still. "As I can tell, he's the only one of their bloodline. Must've gotten it from his mother. The General would run himself through."

"Pulling as in—" Enzo starts.

"He's trying to wield the sword from the Narota camp."

Words don't have enough delineative power to explain the terror of an unhinged man wielding a sword capable of granting magical force. Havoc would wreak the Gentled East, decimating Merkidia until ash and death desolate the ruins of civilization; an unhinged abyss much like Medumean's Heart.

"The spontaneous rescue was a success?" Enzo asks, rubbing his beard.

"You figure we'd attempt?" Borak bites the inside of his mouth, face creased with his humour.

"I figure you and Hestia are bleeding hearts." Enzo's eyes flicker to Danilo. "You wouldn't bear news without attempting."

"It was a success."

"Then—"

"Blame Magus." Borak's lip quirks at Enzo's eye-roll. "We had outside help."

Enzo lifts his brow again, face pinched as he waits.

"He's alive. His brother," Borak shifts on his feet and moves to cross his arms before deciding otherwise. "But he's—he's ashen. Comatose. Guerra stripped him of..." He sighs. "He's stripped him. I don't think he'll live."

An apologetic haze covers Borak's eyes as he looks at Danilo, who shields his eyes from the light. "You should tell him."

"I will not deliver an aforesaid message." Enzo shoots a light glare at him.

"Have a problem taking his anger now?" Borak grins.

Enzo grumbles and concedes. "Who was the outside help?"

Borak scrunches his eyes shut with a pained expression. Enzo watches him breathe, apprehension sharp in his lungs.

"It's... uh—" Borak straightens to meet Enzo's piercing gaze. "We succeeded with the aid and capture of General Llodis Altamura."

"Leave."

Before it's ground from between Enzo's teeth, Borak flies down the stairs, his cape snapping a farewell as Enzo's lungs burn with feeble control. The mention of Llodis brings bile to his tongue.

Many of Enzo's pains came from the man, and more from his blood son.

Danilo's head wobbles as he attempts to shake free the distortion, wincing when it backfires. Enzo cannot see past the similarities of father and son; the burly, thick fingers, the dusting of scars over his face, the prominent jaw. A glimmer reflects on his rings.

He begrudges the differences; the childlike curiosity, eyes which fill with hesitation, his ability to speak as if treading through undetermined waters.

Or perhaps it had been their plan from the beginning.

Uncertainty rolls through him as he meanders towards Danilo. His approach draws Danilo's eyes, and though they seem hazy, he jolts from recognition.

“My crew found your brother—“ Danilo launches from the chair and collapses into Enzo’s chest. “Wait, boy. Wait.”

Danilo shakes his head and Enzo pushes on Danilo’s shoulders until he sits. With a sigh to gather his patience, he begins again, slower.

“They have found your brother—“

“I don’t believe it, I need to—“ Enzo sighs in frustration and Danilo’s words halt.

“And why, young Altamura, do you not believe it?” Enzo steps back to see Danilo’s expression in its entirety; gaze wide and tired, skin pale, brows furrowed.

“He hanged. He’s dead.”

Enzo waits until Danilo meets his stare. “Did you see it? With your own eyes?”

“What do you mean ‘did I’? They...” His breath shudders and his eyes glaze over. “No. I didn’t.”

Enzo allows Danilo a moment, assessing his pained expression before imparting the remaining information. “He was recovered from Kosymo Guerra’s affairs.”

When Danilo’s eyes snap up to his, the confusion is clear.

“The Royal Besecher, Kosymo Guerra?” Enzo nods unnecessarily. “W—why? He’d have no use for him alive...”

“Because of your sensitivity.”

“My sens—“ Danilo pales. “That’s why—they... for treason.”

The library bathes in tense silence. With the braided ring gleaming on Danilo’s finger, Enzo has no desire to ease his grief. Differences be accursed. When Danilo straightens, Enzo lets him slip from his grip. A fleck of yellow sunlight cuts through the sheer curtain. It’s a horrid reminder of the day yet to be delivered.

“What happened to him? My brother?” Danilo doesn’t let the silence settle before snapping, “I’m a smart enough man to know he wouldn’t have kept him without a reason.”

“You are not a man.” Enzo sneers and takes a steading breath. “But you are correct. You deserve more credit than I have allotted.” He swivels on his feet, raising two fingers into the air in order to motion—‘follow’.

“Will he live?”

There's a flicker of hope in Danilo's clouded, knowing expression: a gentle light in his blue eyes. Even with its presence, Danilo falls somber.

Enzo's brief silence drops like a weight in the air. "No."

Danilo spins the ring on his middle finger, and Enzo cannot determine whether he is angrier at the lieutenant or the man who raised him.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Danilo expects the grief. But as he looks upon Bratni, the swift gut-wrenching pain stuns him. Bratni seems decayed. A black ash riddles his long, delicate fingers. His round face has elongated, emphasized by bruised eyes, sunken cheeks, and grime. The haggard knees of his trousers bear holes from being left bound for days on end.

Borak and Magus bicker in the background, tones hushed. Danilo trudges closer—eyes locked on Bratni—and they grow silent.

“I’m sorry,” Borak says.

Danilo wants to wave off his apology and thank him in the same breath. Yet as he peers down at Bratni, just old enough that he’s unfamiliar, he stops from doing either. The stranger in this bed is a distant hope.

“Were you close?” Borak asks.

Danilo looks to Borak, and though he’s thrust into a windstorm of emotions, his face is calm. “I didn’t even know him.”

Borak’s mouth thins to a line. Magus sputters a vulgar question, earning himself a kick to the shin.

“Magus.” Borak looks between him and Danilo.

“What?” He rubs his shin.

“Shut up.”

“I only meant—”

“Don’t say it again.” Borak raises the backside of his palm.

Magus leans from reach, the corner of his lip ticking upward. He directs his question to Danilo, focus resolute on Borak. “What do you mean?”

Bratni’s thinned face resembles their mother more than their father. Danilo ignores the urge to force his fingers through the congealed clumps of blood in his russet locks.

“I didn’t...” He falls into the chair at Bratni’s side. “I grew up by my father’s side. Lived in the barracks. I’d known of him, as I knew Tamnora—my sister. He delivered messages to my father but was never trained.”

“He was a messenger-boy?”

Danilo nods, remembering each time Bratni would stand on his toes to peer into the booth with a toothy grin and a letter in hand.

“None for you?” Magus crosses his arms and leans against the wall to contemplate Danilo.

“Guess not.” Danilo says.

He shrugs in a wholehearted attempt to distract them from the reason his eyes burn. Borak drags his fingers across Bratni’s forehead. His finger creates a path from Bratni’s temple to ear, over the nose and repeated on the other side. Fissures of lightning raise beneath the skin before fizzling away. Purplish-blue veins dance over greyed skin, and for the first time, Danilo feels an inkling of hope crawling through his middle in place of disgust.

“Do you remember your sister?” Borak asks.

Danilo nods, throat tight. “We were closer in age.”

Magus mimics Danilo, leaning against the wall beside him when Danilo fails to notice him. Borak doesn’t speak, working in silence until he’s done all he can. With a light pat to Danilo’s shoulder, he toes around him and shoos Magus from the room.

Danilo’s younger brother was a fast boy. The General hoped it would outweigh his small stature. But ‘a sick boy isn’t a strong one’. He wonders if they’d be close if Bratni were capable of training. Jealousy swells like a physical heat within his blood, smothered by the cool weight of guilt.

The silence is loud. Aggressive. More demanding and penetrating than any battle he lived through; cutting away each carefully secured piece of his defense, shearing straight into the heart of his desires. As the stillness compresses the

room, he sits with the shell of his hope and faces the burden of truth. Family isn't a destiny for him.

It's a curse.

Danilo stumbles to his feet as if a flame was set beneath him, leaving the door cracked open and using soft, practiced steps to return to his room. Once the door is shut behind him, he sinks against it. Three quaking breaths escape before he's wracked by soundless sobs. One thought rings above all others, and he presses the heel of his palms to his eyes in an attempt to dispel it.

The hollow shell of his brother should have been him from the start.



When Danilo jolts awake curled against the door, his face is tight from dried tears. Any of his residual sorrow is engulfed by anger. He spends the next hours in the training room, hacking relentlessly at the dummies with no sign of slowing.

He's adapted to the heavy weight of the training sword. It fits in his hands and traces each slice with precision. Regardless of its fluidity, something is amiss.

"The dummy will not parry your moves."

He makes to swing at the intruder. The tip glints with an unforgiving accuracy where ice claims the blade—curled edge pointing at the tendons of Enzo's throat.

"No other man moves as you do." Enzo tilts his head, categorizing Danilo's shifting expression.

"Great." Danilo tears the sword away. Water ripples off the blade when Enzo allows it freedom.

"It is a peculiar level of awareness for your enemy," Enzo draws.

Danilo sighs, sensing Enzo's unyielding observation. He tilts his head to the dusty ceiling before facing the man's intrigue. "I've always trained with another soldier."

He swings at the dummy's middle, sword tilting in his slack wrist. The snap of Enzo's head catches his attention. A gloomy, distant look in his eyes clears for the twinkle of vivid realization.

"That is it." Enzo barks before storming away.

"What?"

Danilo follows Enzo with his eyes. Wariness is still present in Enzo's steps, carving a path through the room which leaves little of his back open to Danilo. And Danilo finds no pride in the comfort of it. Enzo pauses beside the sparring ring's stairs to select a wooden pole.

"Up," he says, gesturing to the platform while pausing on the steps. Danilo narrows his eyes. Enzo slams the fighting pole against the floor. "Up."

Danilo slinks closer before he can decide against it, leaving himself open as he passes Enzo. Enzo follows a short distance behind him.

He gives no warning.

Danilo blinks, finding his sword before him. Enzo's training staff caught between the blade and the hilt. Enzo's grey eyes flicker.

His attacks grow faster. Harder. Near the neck. The knees. Around to Danilo's opposite side. Not one hit lands, and when Enzo stops, he's puffing breath with dark eyes. Danilo's thoughts rake to the forefront of his mind, confused and alarmed, his breath and heart steady despite the sweat tickling his forehead. Enzo appraises him, steps closer, and freezes, hand hovering in the air over his chest. His expression falls blank.

"This whole time..." Enzo inhales to keep his voice from growing louder. "Never had you mentioned you trained with another person."

"Well, how else do you train?"

Enzo pinches the bridge of his nose, rubbing to ease the tension.

"Aside from how you have been?" The tone, though biting, is not venomous. Though it's close.

"I never trained like that before." Danilo swings the weapon with his wrist, shoulders loose despite the demand of their interaction. "From the time I was seven, I've sparred with someone."

Enzo squints. "Your soldiers train at seven?"

"What? No. Just the son of the High General." He pauses, witnessing Enzo's thoughts combat themselves before the man settles on him unflinchingly.

"How long was it until you attended the battles you trained for?"

Danilo watches Enzo watch him.

He was sent as a scout to count heads and relay details back to the soldiers. The wail on the air makes it difficult to hear, and the thick, pungent scent of blood harder to swallow. He knows it's not there. But her pain is as visible as it had been that day. She was smaller than him, despite being close to his age. And her stubby stature made the dagger plunged into her middle that much larger.

The blood slicking the hilt and his palm was identical in colour to the dark hair sweeping her jaw, glistening in the firelight.

It was the first time he'd been ill over a kill—panic and desperation staving off everything before it—and he vomited across her feet when she crumbled off the blade. The image of her seared in his mind, her splayed hair and the ebony stain around her mouth blemishing his soul. It defined him and his future more than he ever anticipated. Shortly after her was Enzo's mother.

After both, he began to defy the General, regardless of the cost.

Danilo flinches when Enzo steps forward. Then again, when he meets Enzo's burning eyes.

"How old?" Enzo growls.

He shuffles under the thickness of Enzo's tone. "Uh—I think... I was—I... I'm not sure."

"You're not sure." Enzo steps closer.

"Uh..." Danilo steps back with him. "First battle was around fourteen. Was the scout before. Could sneak in—burn things without being caught."

"Where?" If Enzo looked deadly before, he's murderous now.

"What do you mean 'where'?"

"Where were you sent?"

"Camps and forts; a town once." His brows furrow at Enzo's sneer.

"I hate your father."

Danilo tightens his grip on his sword. "What does that have to do with anything?"

Enzo rolls his eyes, beginning again with urgency.

Rarely could he be taken by surprise in a fight. His focus on the enemy clouded everything else. Like now, dueling with Enzo.

Danilo tilts his head back, sighing with relief. He spins the training sword in his palm; the weight sitting differently. Exhaustion leaks from his limbs and into his mind. Enzo hums when he calls their session to a halt, shortly after murmuring 'curious' to himself. Danilo doesn't care to figure out why. He follows after unthinkingly when Enzo steps off the platform, pausing only when Enzo stops on the stairs. They stare at one another, ignoring the easy disposition between them.

The front door seems larger, looming over Danilo from where he stands. His attention divides between it and Bratni's room. Hours ago, he would have run, especially knowing how to combat his sensitivity--equipped for survival

without depending on his rivals for aid. But with Bratni here, Danilo wars with his head and his heart. Survival at the core of one, and belonging at the other.

He swallows, looking at Enzo. His hum is soft in the air between them, and he continues down the hall without a word. Danilo decides he has more time to wait on Bratni's condition before chasing his freedom.

Gellert shoves the front door open before either of them can move from the hallway junction, allowing the frigid evening winds to flutter in alongside a chattering Easton. Gellert nods at Enzo. Easton hesitates at the sight of Danilo, fingers dancing through his splayed hair. His prattle consumes the house, but Danilo has no desire to hear it with Gellert's hard stare fixed on him. The door thumps shut and its bolt slams home into the lock. Danilo remains still, crossed arms guarding his chest.

Enzo snaps his fingers at him and Danilo internally snarls when he obeys the silent command for his attention.

"Leave." Enzo waves down the hall.

Danilo chances a final glance at Gellert, thankful the man directed Enzo's attention elsewhere. He's ensnared by the memories Gellert's presence calls up. Blood wells up from the indents he presses into his tongue. It does nothing against them. He stumbles back when he rounds the corner and nearly collides with a large body.

He doesn't believe what he sees.

The General's hair gleams both blond and red in the candlelight.

As the man stares at him, the hushed comments make sense. Enzo's reinvigorated anger, and his crew's sudden coldness—it had been because of the General's presence. Because of their presence.

"Well." Danilo's breath catches at the grumble of the General's voice, as if he'd been yelling himself hoarse. "This is where you've been hiding."

When Danilo steps back, the wall cages him within the General's sights.

"I should've known you would side with them." Llodis leans into him. "You hated your tasks." Danilo's gaze ticks downward when the General's fists clench, the meat of his scarred knuckles bloody and bruised. "I never thought to suspect my own son. They finally outsmarted me."

Danilo's scar pulls as he snarls. "I was never with them."

"As if I would believe that," Llodis scoffs.

"If you paid any attention that day, you'd know I was just as surprised as you." Danilo swallows when the General's jaw ticks.

“So you’re here because what, coincidence?”

A growl in the General’s voice causes him to hesitate. He mis-stepped under that tone before and earned himself a whipping for his negligence. Though Enzo may keep the General from killing him, Danilo can’t count on his interference.

“Yes.” Danilo says finally. “They’re smart. Seems they’ve managed to imprison the Lieutenant Commander and the High General.”

“I’ll give them credit for the little they did when I promised not to fight.” The General crosses his arms. “But if they did to me what I am sure they did to you, then we both know how to retrace our path.” The implication drops like a stone in his stomach. “And with my best soldier behind enemy lines, we’ve a better chance of getting what we need and getting out.”

While Danilo had been eager to be free of Enzo’s caustic behaviour, the urgency to flee from under the General’s undivided attention is twice as demanding.

“What information do you have for our cause?” Llodis dips closer.

“Nothing.” The answer falls from his lips but it stuns him into snapping them shut.

“Nothing?” The General steps closer, and despite his proximity, it creates an opening. “You’ve been here for over a month and you have learned nothing?”

Sliding through the gap, Danilo ignores the burn of eyes on his back.

“Come back here, boy.”

He turns around the corner he’d come from and his sure steps waver under Enzo’s glare. His fear claws at him from either side of the hall.

Llodis’ shout drains the blood from his face. Enzo places the back of his hand against Easton’s chest, pushing him aside to start down the hall. Gellert rolls his eyes and moves into the kitchen.

Enzo’s murderous gaze is equally daunting as the wrath in the General’s voice, and though Danilo’s been keen to see a fight between them all his life, he no longer finds the idea entertaining. General of the Nephla versus General of the Royal Beseecher; he’d be the collateral.

He bolts into the makeshift infirmary. The door collides with the frame, shoving Danilo inside. A blue glow rises from the cracks, similar to Danilo’s initial imprisonment within this house.

Magus smacks Borak's shoulder, brows raised in entertainment. Borak glances between Danilo and the door, palm stuck on Bratni's face. Danilo ignores how the walls seem to press inward at their surveillance.

With Bratni's outerwear removed, Danilo can see the extent of his coarse and ashen skin. His veins swell along his forearms, starting from his blackened fingertips, charcoal beneath his sallow complexion. His pale lips crack. Without the dark pitch of blood caked under his still-crooked nose, he's closer to appearing dead. Danilo wonders why he let it be so long between visits that he hadn't done it himself.

"You cleaned him?" Danilo asks.

Borak flinches.

"Figured it would help," he says. "Does it?"

"No." Danilo sits next to the bed, electing to watch Magus watch him rather than look at Bratni's beaten face. When Magus' bored expression irritates his frustrations, he turns to Bratni's nearest hand, tracing the horrid lines.

"What caused this?" He whispers.

Borak coughs, looking between him, Bratni, and Magus before spitting out his response. "It won't be wise to mention anything without Enz--"

"Enzo ain't gonna say anything with him here." Magus nods at the glowing door before leaning into Borak's space. Borak glares at Magus' abrupt closeness.

"You don't know—"

"I don't know?" Magus shakes his head. "Did he say anything about Cordinye? Or Rendir?"

"Those were—"

"They're no different."

Danilo keeps silent as Borak glances over at him. Glancing at the door, Danilo notes the strength of the blue glow around its frame. Though it would take most of his strength, he could still break through. The truth could be avoided easily enough.

"His condition is caused by a combination of Arrisoot and an old magic. That sword you found—" Borak says, pausing when Danilo grimaces. "Yeah, you know the one. It requires someone to have magic in order to wield it—"

A piercing fear renders Danilo's palms cold, a flash of blue inlaid in steel lifting to the forefront of his mind. "Wait, Easton told me a sensitivity isn't magic."

"It's not." Magus leans against the bed beside Borak.

"Why did it work for me?" Danilo asks.

"We don't know." Borak shrugs. "Some things we have no answers for."

Danilo nods, a sinking sensation in his chest as he stares down at Bratni's ashen skin. The little rise and fall is all Danilo has to know he's alive.

"From what we know, Guerra tried stripping magic from Bratni to wield the sword. We don't know why, but..." Borak glances at the sunken skin around Bratni's eye sockets. "He's desperate."

"No." Danilo clenches his teeth, staring at the bare wall. A distant memory of Guerra's recent battle unfolds in his mind. "He's enraged."

Magus looks at Borak. Borak stares at Danilo. Lightning spreads beneath the skin of Bratni's chest. It draws attention to the raised white and pink fissures over the bare skin of Borak's honey arms. Danilo recoils, then watches Borak grimace, sensing a lack of change in Bratni. Borak sighs.

"When someone tries to strip magic from a person, it results in magic exhaustion. Drains them, but doesn't hurt them. Unless that's the plan." When Borak backs off Bratni, their eyes meet. "The body will regenerate in time, or someone can speed it along."

"Is that what you're doing?" Danilo's ask.

Borak looks to Magus and when Danilo glances over, Magus stares at the wall, eyes distant and face disengaged.

"Because he doesn't have magic, his body's collapsing under the weight of... this." Borak gestures over Bratni's sunken body, laid out on the bed like cadavers Danilo has seen pulled from the lake. "This doesn't look good. I can't regenerate something he doesn't have. All I can do is slow the damage."

"Can't you just heal him?" Danilo bites his tongue.

Magus reaches across the bed to place a hand on Danilo's shoulder, nails digging into the muscle with pursed lips. Danilo grips the perforated sheet at the unwelcome weight but makes no effort to shrug free.

"Not even magic can do that." Magus says, pulling his hand off Danilo to prop his chin. He stares at Borak lazily.

Danilo nods, glassy eyes downward. The silence is like an anchor in the room.

"I'll," Borak's shoulders slump, "work on his head later. If I can get him conscious, then maybe we can get the process moving in the right direction."

Danilo nods as he stands. There's a lot he doesn't know, and even more he's not being told. But he does know the cushioned version of the truth when he hears it. And he doesn't want to be around when he cracks. He turns to the

faintly glowing door, pausing to shoulder it free of the barricade. Borak and Magus scowl at the ripple of Enzo's magic when it fractures.

Danilo speaks over his shoulder at Borak, clenching the handle in a whitening grasp.

"Thank you."

"You've got nothing to thank me for," Borak near whispers.

Danilo's brows tighten before he looks at the man. "We both know that's not true."

Borak fiddles with the rough hewn blanket spread across Bratni's lap, a faded grey material matching the sun-bleached curtains over the narrow room's window. Magus stares at Danilo before turning to the many pages spread across the desk which engulfs the far wall.

When Danilo flees, he presses the deep-grooved door into place, but not before hearing Borak mutter to Magus, "I think I'm keeping him from feeling it."

Though it isn't an admission, the weight of it drives Danilo to his room. The new silence in the building sets his nerves alight. Relief crashes over him as he stumbles in. The door latches in place offering a flimsy sense of privacy. And when he drops onto his bed, staring at the ceiling while his thoughts strip him of energy. He's asleep before he removes his boots.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Anger burns in Danilo's chest—a sizzling coal cutting through the thin layers of his self-control—and he's unable to relax most of the night. As he tosses beneath the thin fabric covering him, a dim and grey light wades through his open window. Though the heavy clouds obscure the abyss overhead, he traces lines between the fading stars, watching until the sun dances over the orange dunes in the distance. He's unsure whether this irritation is from a broken sleep or from the events of the day before.

An argument rises through the house from the kitchen door, igniting his thirst for a fight. He shoulders into it, satisfied when the crash slices through their hollers.

Danilo grinds to a halt. Llodis violently flinched with the vicious slam of the door, but in his self-righteous rage, he refuses to turn the destructive focus of his wrath chained to Enzo's vexed presence.

"If you do not allow this building to release me, then I'll—" Llodis snarls, shoulders poised in a threatening way.

"No threat will deter our decisions." Enzo wipes his cheek and makes a dramatic motion of flicking off spit. "You alone are no irritant of misfortune. Regardless of your heartfelt claims of concern, you are not granted access to

more than the primary facilities. Nor may you leave, as the detriment of your release is not beyond either of our presumptions.”

“You’re keeping me from attending matters of—” Llodis starts.

“Matters which benefit us from prohibiting your attendance.”

The General steps closer, pressing against Enzo without touching the man. His laboured breathing makes Enzo’s lip quirk—and Danilo knows it’s purposeful. He’s fallen prey to the same expression. Baited as expected.

“You pompous—” The stained armour guarding the General’s fist is dark in the early light of the room as he raises a hand to strike against Enzo.

Danilo’s anger swiftly buries itself, and he lurches forward, eyes trained on the General’s hand.

“What’s the problem?” Danilo asks.

His itching ankle serves as a reminder of the weapon Enzo has confiscated. And he knows better than to offer himself to either man without a means to defend himself.

Llodis jumps at the suddenness of his voice. Enzo doesn’t.

“This skud won’t let anyone leave.” Llodis says.

Danilo looks to Enzo for answers, but his face remains impassive. Unmoving. Not that Danilo is more skilled in the art of reading Enzo than in the art of manipulating the General.

“You aren’t getting out.” Danilo says, eyeing Enzo’s expression to gauge which words were the right ones.

“You know better. Nobody keeps the man waiting.” Llodis swings to Danilo and he straightens, refraining from cowering under his gaze.

“Nobody but you,” Danilo says.

Enzo looks between them, eyes dark and nose wrinkled.

“If that will be all, General.” He offers a mocking bow, then fixes Danilo with a stare from beneath heavy brows. “Lieutenant.”

Danilo lets him push through. His head tilts as if it were falling from his shoulders, following Enzo’s path past him, a tinge of blue in his peripheral. He shakes his head and blinks at the General.

“If the Beseecher issues blame for the situation at hand,” Llodis growls, gripping the breast of Danilo’s ragged tunic. “I will feed you to the beasts myself.”

Enzo hesitates in the doorway, igniting Danilo’s resentment when he pushes through. He grinds his teeth and forces the expected response from between them.

“Yes, General.”



Ignoring the General's thunderous shouts, Danilo heads toward the library. A terrible idea, considering Enzo's returned temper. Despite it, he continues on, one foot before the other, eyes unseeing to the banister beneath his hand. He reaches the top step, a frigid glare on him while he approaches the table covered by abandoned books.

His dazed memory of his confrontation with the General presses into him like a physical weight, encompassing his limbs until it pains him. He blinks in his surroundings—the chair beneath him, the tome he intends to read, the altering expression of Enzo's steady gaze—but he fails to grasp the reality of them. Enzo stands with a ragged sigh, stepping closer with caution. The abrupt movement in his peripheral jars him into full consciousness. He hunches over the pages, the daggered teeth of anger mauling him as Enzo continues to approach. He sidles next to Danilo, laying a palm on the page.

“Move your hand.” Danilo stares up at him, teeth grinding together when Enzo doesn't acknowledge him. “Enzo!” He inhales, screwing up his face while focusing on the heartbeat knocking against his ribs. “Move your hand.”

“I'd rather not.”

“You'd rather—“ He bounces back and forth between Enzo's grey eyes. “You're not serious, right?”

“Enlighten me.” Enzo's lip quirks.

His face flushes, threatening to suffocate him with the sudden rush of heat in his veins. His fists shake with his struggle. He stands. The chair crashes behind him. Enzo has the audacity to look humoured.

“Enlighten you?” He tears Enzo's hand from the book and steps into Enzo's face. “Enlighten what? I've not done anything. Which means you've no reason to ignore me.”

“You are quite eloquent when you are angry.” Enzo says, rubbing his beard with his knuckles.

“Who gives a damn about my damned eloquence.”

Enzo tsks. “Close.”

Reason recoils in Danilo's mind as he shifts away from the man, blinded by his anger and the slow-growing hint of panic. "You're just like him."

Enzo hums as he turns the book, tilting his head to have better access to the page. "Like whom?"

"My father."

Enzo's head snaps up, a burning fury in his eyes. He straightens over Danilo.

"Do not dare compare me to that parasite. There's nothing between him and I bearing any resemblance."

"You mean aside from your anger? Your stubbornness? The 'my way, or no way' attitude?" Danilo sneers. "Yeah, you're right."

"And you, his blood son, bear no kinship of your own?"

"Difference is, is that I know it."

"And you're proud of it." Enzo scoffs. "Else you'd not keep trophies of your slaughter."

He gestures at Danilo's curled hands, the ring on his middle finger gleaming.

"Then we are both more alike than you wanna admit." Danilo says, thumbing at the rings.

"Pray tell."

"How many of my soldiers who simply followed orders did you cut down?" Danilo replies. Enzo's eyes flicker in surprise, and Danilo steps closer to him.

Somewhere, a part of him slams against the anger, begging him to back down. To quit. He's made headway with Enzo over the weeks.

Enzo chuckles, a dark sound from deep in him. "Do remember the faces of those you've killed?"

"Do you remember ours? Our allies or friends?"

"'Friends' is a tender word coming from you." Enzo rolls his eyes. He replaces the book, meeting Danilo's glare. "As is 'family'."

Danilo stomps closer, and a sheering wind pulls him back. The layered carpets gather under his feet until he stumbles, landing against the banister. Hurricane waters darken the light in the room, glinting against Enzo's side and casting a daunting incandescence over his irate gaze. A dagger flies toward him. It stops inches from his face, gale winds encompassing the glinting tip, water sliding off its edges.

Betrayal coils through his ribs, bringing a bitter, bubbling laugh from the depths of him—a sound so broken and disappointed it drags Enzo from his

narcissism. He pulls back his arm; the dagger soaring into his hand. Enzo's wide eyes scan over the twisted scars on Danilo's face.

"Thank you—" Danilo hazily grins at the ceiling, droplets of water sparkling opalescently in the cobwebs caking the reed roof, the dreary haze fading, "—for proving me right."

Enzo leans on the table and stares at the ceiling, a puff of air escaping him.

"I have proved nothing other than your ability to aggravate someone beyond their own volitions." Their exhausted eyes meet.

"Yeah, okay." Danilo sags into the floor.

Enzo rolls his eyes, muttering something to himself about 'eloquence' and 'decorum'. Though it sparks a kindle of frustration, Danilo stays put and lets the winds of a stronger emotion snuff it out.

"Would you kill me?" His voice rings clear in the near-silent room.

Enzo whips around with a stunned expression, brows furrowed in thought. "Pardon?"

When Danilo doesn't respond immediately, Enzo walks over to stand above him, arms crossed.

"If we were to meet on the battlefield," Danilo says as he meets his eye, "would you kill me?"

There's a sudden shift in the air he can't quite grasp, stilling as quickly as it stirred. When Enzo speaks, each word is deliberately slow.

"Is this dependent on variables we determined since we've shared quarters?" Enzo lifts a brow when he doesn't respond.

Despite the tension heavy in the room, Danilo remains calm, eyes stony and the corners of his mouth carved up like a marionette. He believes a faint hue of blue recedes from the corners of his vision, and he breathes steadily through the clawing sensation atop his breastbone. His limbs tremor.

"Yes?" Danilo whispers.

"Is that a question?" Enzo tilts his jaw up, staring down his nose at the lieutenant sunken into the floorboards.

"Since we've shared quarters." He nods.

Enzo drops his quirked brow, squints at Danilo for a moment, then hums. Danilo clears his throat, forcing his distant gaze to remain firm on Enzo. When he speaks, his tone is unabashed. "Initially, yes. Now, however, there'd be hesitation."

"Hesitation?"

“Yes, Altamura.” Enzo turns, shuffling to his table. “Believe it or not, I would not find pleasure in being the one to strike you down.”

The statement is heavy in the air, and Danilo finds that the next conclusion he comes to feels like damnation to his soul.

“I wouldn’t kill you either.” His voice is quiet in the still room. As Enzo assesses him, Danilo grimaces and peels himself from the floor.

Each muscle aches and his spine feels as if stretched and poorly stacked back together. Despite it, he felt lighter; prepared for a long, deserved sleep.

He stares down the staircase and ignores Enzo, struggling with the foreboding shadows shifting at the base in the dark hall beneath. For whatever reason, the General is not permitted upstairs. Danilo is not eager to chance the brief comfort of his false safety.

Enzo hums—a sound reserved for himself in the awkwardness of their silence—when Danilo drops back into his chair.

He peers at the pages, as equally incapable of focusing as before. However, this time his exhaustion is tangible, not a distant haze, extinguishing his blazing anger, which had been present since the dreadful hours of the morning. It weighs on his shoulders until he slouches against the open book. And though Danilo hadn’t known, the anger had simply been guilt’s jailer.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Enzo is aware of Danilo's sensitivity which followed their altercation, his struggle apparent in his dark, twitching under-eyes, which he vigorously rubbed when he awoke in the library. Despite himself, he pities the boy. Though not enough to resolve the flinching shadow that Danilo has become as he zipped between rooms, fearful of any noise he hasn't grown to expect in his time in the house. Nor when Danilo hesitantly approached him, requesting to train together.

Enzo, in his unfairness, had said, "Your father is present, and if memory serves, he had overseen your progress. As for your outlet, it would be best served by him."

In hindsight, he should have known the shadow in the boy's eye meant nothing good.



With a heavy heart and a busy mind, Danilo swings the sword. The platform bends under his weight. His arm moves in a memorized pattern. Swing, stab. Swing, stab. Sunlight glints off the training sword's dulled edge from between

the mudbricks of the basement. He becomes absorbed in the simplicity of the motion—swing, swing, swing, stab; forgetting his anger, his frustration, and the tremble in his hands.

Danilo breathes in the hint of cold air slipping inside from off the river, his eyes fluttering shut when it licks his sweaty forehead. When the breeze dies, he swipes his face with a tattered sleeve and rolls his arm back into position.

“I see you’ve been diligent in your training.”

Llodos’ voice triggers him into the waiting posture.

“Yes, General Altamura, sir.” The words claw out of his mouth.

The General stalks onto the podium, eyes gleaming. His hungry grin widens as he takes stance at the top of the stairs. Old wood groans beneath his weight.

The General’s meaty hand lands on the shaft of his sword. It drags against the sheath with a ring.

Danilo’s everything is at war within him. As the General lifts the sword to full height, Danilo’s palms sweat around the hilt of the training sword. He grips it tighter, unable to drag his gaze away from the General.

Then the blade charges at his own. If it weren’t for his sensitivity, it would have paralyzed him to a literal death.

There’s a pull at his middle he hasn’t felt since the last time he faced the General, and his body follows it before he consciously thinks to. He dodges and parries the General’s sword. His panicked thoughts utilize his every sense in an attempt to push away the man’s advances by slinking around his enormous mass.

“Getting soft, boy?” Llodos grabs the back of his collar and it encircles his airway. “Trying to escape rather than fight?”

Briefly, Danilo feels eyes on him, but all he can see is the General and his blood-stained armour glinting in the dark light.

The General barrels forward, sword ready and swinging. Danilo rolls, leaping to his feet to stay out of reach.

He falls short.

Heat tears across his bicep, slicing through the lighter patch where Audantei’s insignia was once woven into his clothing. Dragging his blade along the ground, Danilo grapples at the wound. Blood oozes between his fingers.

“You’ve grown weak.” Llodos spits on the platform.

The bubble of pain breaks through his tunneled thoughts. His clarity demands to know why their captors hadn’t taken the General’s sword from him.

His experience knows why they didn't. Though he may be crazed, the elder Altamura could speak with persuasive authority.

General Altamura traces the wound with mirth in his eyes. The sword swings at him again and Danilo wrenches up the training blade to block the blow.

Danilo moves into the General's next swing, intending to avoid the white blade's razor edge, but the pommel is driven into his jaw. His vision sways, and he blinks against the black spots. He's thrown to his stomach, the General's fat boot dropping onto his wounded upper arm. His weapon clatters against the deck beyond his reach. Metal rings over his head.

Urgency pulses within him, but the heavy weight of the General pins his throbbing shoulder into the croaking boards. Danilo tugs and gasps; the point-less motion further encasing him in a haze of pain and desperation, distancing him from the General's shouts. When the General's boot presses deeper with a growl, Danilo drops his damp forehead against the wood. He tenses for the inevitable strike.

The clash of steel on steel echoes in his skull.

"You dare interrupt me in my son's training?"

Danilo turns, and finds Enzo's boots close enough to kiss. He nearly sobs. As it is, the solitary sound of relief causes the General to lean on him heavier.

"Your son has had enough." Enzo drawls.

A chill rips through the basement, rattling the training weapons on the wall. Danilo blinks against the sting of water ripping across his face. He recoils, settling into the wood to shield himself.

"I believe that I'm fully capable of making that decision." Llodis punctuates the statement by spitting on the platform.

"Are you certain?" Enzo pushes the sword, a gale force shoving back the General. "He is unarmed and bleeding, and you were not practicing restraint."

"That is how my soldiers are trained. And they receive the consequences of their failure."

Enzo squats down and tucks his hand beneath Danilo's chest, bracing Danilo with a forearm. Danilo is untouched by the growing hurricane while pressed to Enzo.

"He's not your soldier."

Enzo's hand cradles the nape of Danilo's neck, pressing him towards the stairs. He swallows tightly, clutching at the cut with a bloody palm. Wood erupts against the wall, emphasizing the scream of winds and water. Llodis curses,

loud and long. The storm conceals the base of the staircase, and Danilo flinches beneath Enzo's hold. He turns wide eyes down the stairs, and though Enzo's grip tenses reflexively. When he releases, Danilo appraises the piercing blue light that cuts through the blackened typhoon. Enzo swats Danilo's dirty palm from his injury, muttering as he peels back the soggy fabric.

When they reach the upper hall, Enzo releases his hold and drops the training sword. Danilo pauses in the room, hollowed from the exchange. A distant awareness turns his attention to the blade's edge as it curls in on itself once again. His upper arm throbs. With it, his pride. He wishes someone had taken that sword from his father. Why hadn't they?

"Come." Enzo passes him and moves to the open front door.

Why hadn't they?

Danilo follows. Ever the obedient soldier.

He steps outside and clenches his eyes shut, tugging the door closed behind him, the thunk of wood against wood bringing a breathy laugh to Danilo's lips. His hand wraps around the handle.

"Danilo—" Enzo stands at the bottom of the stairs, watching quietly. "Come."

He swallows at the use of his name.

Enzo exchanges brief pleasantries with the locals. Danilo smiles when the people greet him, curiosity shining in their eyes. One addresses him by his title and, for a terse second, the world seems as it should.

His fabricated reality collapses beneath him when the locals shout and duck. He acts instinctively to their imminent response, crouching level with them as a barricade of brush and vines weave overhead to combat an onslaught of hailing arrows—their tips unnaturally green. Enzo hollers over his shoulder, hands settled over his hips, and a scowl set in place. Reina grits her teeth as she jogs over, apologizing in her heavy accent before muttering 'habit' to Enzo and flicking her gaze to Danilo in her peripheral. He pretends not to notice. A mother pins her child close, smiling wearily and accepting the apology for what Danilo believes to be in earnest.

Flashes of red and slate-blue flash across the near horizon, billows of orange sand spewing into the air and dispersing in the breeze. Gellert waits atop the mound dividing the town from the remaining Stormthrowers. Enzo heads in his direction, nodding for Danilo to follow when he does nothing more than stand

there in confusion. As they trudge over the ridge of sand past Gellert, Danilo recognizes the kaleidoscope of colour as an intense and brutal sparring session.

Enzo gestures to palm-tree stumps around a charred spot of dirt, various articles of clothing, sun-warmed mugs of water, and a latched wood pack spread around it. Danilo finds a seat among the mess of belongings to watch Enzo rotate a stump next to him. When Enzo sits, he balances the wood box on his knee. Reina and Gellert return from the village, pacing outside the chaos before leaping in. Danilo jolts in surprise as their elements collide against one another in ways he's never seen. Enzo follows Danilo's gaze over his shoulder before returning to the contents of the box.

"Your sleeve will not survive this endeavour." Enzo says. "We will provide a fresh shirt."

Danilo nods, scrutinizing the reach of lightning Borak casts and how the earth rolls in tandem with Reina's movements. Earth knocks sand into the air, encompassing the fractured branches of light and leaving sculptures of glass in its absence.

Enzo pulls out an all-too-familiar brown glass bottle, the clink of it against the box drawing Danilo's attention. He groans internally and tenses for the sting to come.

"I understand if there is sentiment tied to this particular article. However," Enzo says, dipping his fingers into the forearm of Danilo's sleeve, still torn from the gutter alley, "need I say more?"

Danilo grunts, rolling his eyes. Enzo grabs the fabric on either side of the seam at his shoulder and waits for Danilo's nod.

"Got new pants too?" Danilo's grin wobbles when he lifts his arm, allowing Enzo to pull the sleeve away. Enzo raises a brow, wads up the sleeve, and throws it in the charred dirt.

Danilo hisses as Enzo shoves a soaked rag to the wound, fluid rolling down his arm when Enzo presses into either side of his tricep to staunch the blood-flow. He wiggles his fingers, arm strange under the pressure, and looks out at Enzo's group.

Hestia flies across the sand, the ground boiling beneath her and leaving a lumpy mass of rock in her path. Smoke lifts from it, red-hot under the black surface. Gellert bows at Hestia, acknowledging the woman's prowess and giving her the win. True to Nuicallian practice.

Danilo fought one of her kind only once. The black-haired man had dark stained skin and an undeniable evil in his eyes, his volcanic matter consuming a vast and successful sea-port. Danilo had never seen such ruin, and he hopes to never again.

Enzo peels the rag away to scrutinize the wound.

“It will not require stitches. Keep it wrapped.” Danilo nods at him, gaze still on the others.

After a moment, he meets Enzo’s eyes and tenses, surprised when Enzo nods, waiting for him to speak.

“Why does your magic look different?”

Enzo grunts and leans forward to swipe the stained skin around the wound.

“Their magic is a direct result of their power.” He collects the remaining disinfectant and lays the rag over the box’s lid. “An out-branch created from their source.”

“And it can be broken.”

Enzo regards him while pulling the cap from an ointment container. Danilo jumps when Borak throws lightning in Hestia’s direction as she speeds by. “Yes.”

Enzo glances at the others absentmindedly, dipping his finger into the ointment before leaning back in. Danilo’s fingers dig into the knee of his breeches, catching on a hole. He flinches when Enzo rubs too deep, kept still by Enzo’s tight grip on the underside of his arm.

It’s odd to watch Stormthrowers without being manipulated by the mind of war. And he would name the sensation *freedom* if he weren’t so familiar with the presence of his fear.

Fire puffs to life in the long grass to the side of the fighting area, dancing across Magus’ arms in an array of blue and orange. His eyes glow yellow. Enzo rolls his eyes, freeing the gauze from the box on his knees, setting it aside and starting his task. He looks to Danilo, squinting at the emotion written across the plains of his face.

Magus raises his arms and the dry brush around Easton lifts into towering flames, caging Easton into the fight. The group slows in their training, watching the match with caution. Easton sprints at Magus and vanishes through him in a haze of red. Magus’ eyes flicker a claret hue and he straightens—painfully and unnaturally. Hestia flits over, dragging Easton to the opposing side of the crater. Borak places his fingers on the pressure points of Magus’ face, the skin beneath his fingers glowing until Magus collapses to his knees.

Danilo pulls his throbbing arm, yanking on the bandages half-wrapped around him. Enzo refocuses his efforts, grumbling and correcting the fabric.

“I will answer whatever question is on your mind so long as you keep still.” Enzo tugs and Danilo flinches back, but Enzo’s hold keeps firm.

Hestia approaches Easton, who hovers at the edge of the training area like a wounded animal, her words loud but indecipherable. Danilo swallows.

“How strong is Easton?” Danilo asks.

Enzo meets his eyes, voice quiet as he answers.

“He’s considered one of the weakest.” He ties off the bandage. “But for your own sake, I’d not mention it to him.”

Easton’s teary eyes glance between his hands, Hestia, and Magus. Borak has let Magus try to stand, though the fire mage grips his friend’s forearm with whitened knuckles. Danilo wonders if Easton is weak because of his magic, or his lack of control. As Hestia leads Easton over to Magus, Danilo decides it’s both.

Enzo snaps the lid shut and the sound rattles Danilo from his thoughts. The heat makes his skin sweat beneath the irritating bandage. He’s eager to scratch at the fabric. Enzo spins around, pinning him with a stare. Not keen to start a fight, Danilo picks the ever-present dirt beneath his nails.

“Come, I will provide you with clothing.” Enzo stands, flicking his fingers dramatically.

Danilo follows, eyes drifting back to the group divided from each other in distance. Not divided in heart.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

There are few things left in Danilo's life that are the same. Few belongings he keeps.

As he stands over the unfamiliar clothing for the fourth morning in a row, he realizes all he has left are his boots and his jade tags. Without dirt to pick from beneath his nails, he spins the tags, finding comfort as they bounce against his collarbone.

The shirt is a deep blueish grey, and it's soft against his cheek as he pulls it over his head. He's certain Enzo wears no other colour. And they are, in fact, Enzo's clothes.

Easton is thin, and despite the width Danilo may never get back, he wasn't as skinny at his thinnest. He and Magus are close in size, but Danilo would not dare touching that eccentric style. Borak is too short. And Gellert, Danilo feels, wouldn't lend him a torn scarf.

The lace-up tunic is not a style Enzo would wear, but its light material and colour is native to the eastern shorelines. Between the shirt and his array of scars, the citizens of the Gentled East will label him a fisher sooner than the ex-Lieutenant Commander.

Though months have passed since his dismissal, he maintains his boots. He knows better than to mistake their value. They are one of the few Sumitar

leather pieces in Audantei's military, and custom designed for him; for his agility and unique skills. With upkeep, they'll last another ten years.

He received them less than a year ago and had worn the creaking out of the leather. Now, they're as silent as he would be barefoot. Even as he pads down the hall without care for who hears him. His steps are no louder than the pests Easton gathers from within the building to release back outdoors.

Stumbling around the corner, Danilo finds the General backed against the wall, a hurricane cracking above Enzo's head while he stares the man down. The air swirls, lifting Danilo's curls off his forehead. Danilo's entrance draws the General's eye. His stare is condemning.

Enzo glances over his shoulder and stands straighter, waving Danilo toward the kitchen door. Danilo slips in, avoiding the General's burning gaze. He misses the General's meaty hand clenching the metal breastplate's insignia.

Enzo does not.

Danilo shudders as he steps into the kitchen, eyes wary on the closed door as he greets the crew at the table. While he's communed with some of them in the breaking light of morning, he understands others would rather leave the waking hours for the afternoon. Magus rarely makes an appearance unless dragged from his bed. And while his expression is sour, sleep isn't present on his face.

"What's going on?" Danilo nods over his shoulder.

They look among themselves. After a pregnant silence, Hestia sighs.

"We can't say." She rests her cheek on her knuckles.

"Can't? Or won't?" Danilo scowls.

"Shut up and grab your food," Magus says.

Borak backhands Magus' arm.

"Ignore him." Borak drops his heel atop Magus' foot when the pyromaniac attempts to kick him. "We can't tell you."

Danilo sits at the table next to Hestia. She smiles at him, laying her arm across the back of his chair. He scoops a heaping pile of porridge with raisins into a wooden bowl. Borak chuckles before offering a plate of grapes. Danilo grabs the stem and moves to snap it in half when Borak gestures for Danilo to take the bunch.

"Far more than you got as an officer, eh?"

Danilo nods, and Hestia pats his shoulder before continuing to eat. After slurping half the bowl into his cheek, he glances at the door.

"Why can't you tell me?"

“B’cause you are Enzo’s charge,” Gellert says, steam rising from the stein he rotates between his thumb and his fingers.

Danilo’s spoon pauses halfway to his mouth. “I’m Enzo’s charge?”

“Mhm.” Reina stabs the knife into the table and raises the small tankard to her lips.

“Calista’s orders.” Gellert’s eyes focused on him, dark with intent, and Danilo clenches his fist to keep from flinching.

“So that’s why he’s out there.” Danilo shoves his thumb over his shoulder. “Because the General... disagrees.”

Hestia’s brows curl as she stares at him—confusion and anger warring in her gaze when he refers to the man with his title.

“Yup.” Magus knocks his empty mug on the tabletop.

A gleam dances in the depths of Magus’ eyes, turned on the door. For all Danilo’s indoctrinated loyalty, he understands the cold-blooded rage. With a sigh, he nods, tearing apart the Kesra with no intention of eating it. Then he berates himself for being wasteful and eats it anyway.

The kitchen door crashes against the wall, a large body claiming the doorway. Danilo refuses to meet the General’s eye. He stomps closer, heat billowing from him.

“Pack your things, boy. We’re leaving.” Llodis’ hand drops on Danilo’s wrapped shoulder.

Danilo bites his tongue at the sharp pain spiking down his arm. His opposite hand crushes something soft and malleable. The General’s grip shifts when Enzo shoves him.

“You fatuous quisquilian.” Enzo’s words squeeze through his jaw, hovering above Danilo.

The General scowls, and Magus laughs. A high-pitched and entertained sound.

“I have been called both of those, but never at once.” He raising his mug in a celebratory gesture, grinning at Llodis’ confusion. “Dumb trash.”

Danilo sinks in his chair at the General’s red face, his fists shaking at his sides. As he stomps toward Magus, Enzo blocks him. His words are concise.

“Returning would be his demise. Do you not care for him at all?”

“Of course I care for him. That’s why I, his father, will take him to sort through the ordeal.”

The object under Danilo's hand shifts—Hestia turning her palm against his, a stare fixed on the General. Danilo's awash in cool embarrassment.

She turns her knees out from under the table to stand even with the Mad General. One hand remains on the back of her chair. The hard Nuicallian glare marks her his adversary. And the General has always paid attention to the biggest threat in the room.

"Let him go," Hestia says.

"Like hell."

She drags her axe from behind the chair and drops its head next to her feet. The sound echoes above the thrum of anger. Her gaze snaps between the General and his hand, still digging into Danilo's shoulder. His grip releases.

Hestia uses her hold on Danilo to drag him into her chair, placing herself between him and the General. Danilo wishes she hadn't, because now he can see how Enzo's eyes burn; a rage aflame with all the control of a forest fire. He slinks in his seat, glancing at Borak when the lightning-bringer leans to meet his gaze.

"You will decide," Enzo says to Danilo.

"He will follow—" Llodis starts.

"He is not your soldier." It is the first time Danilo has watched Enzo grit his teeth with a failing control.

The General turns to Danilo, a lifetime of memories accompanying his stare. An order in and of itself. But while the General has a branding iron glare, Enzo could melt glaciers.

Cautiously, he looks to Enzo. "What decision?"

"Let the General speak." Enzo gestures across the table.

Llodis' temper gleams like his hair when he considers the men and women staring at him expectantly. Enzo stripped the man of his authority with four words. Danilo feels breathless with awe, wishing to have such a power.

"We are going back to Audantei, Lieutenant." Llodis shifts on his feet, pointing at his heel as if Danilo were no more than a trained dog. Danilo is stunned at the strength it requires to not respond in kind. "The Beseecher's willing to listen to an explanation."

Willing—his cooperation planned before the Stormthrowers found Bratni in the Royal Beseecher's affairs.

For a moment, Danilo wishes his father would regret driving him away. As it is, the clipped edge to his voice makes Danilo's shoulders stand at attention, similar to an animal on guard.

Enzo peers over his shoulder at the prolonged pause.

With a shaky exhale, Danilo braves the heavy air of the room. "Enzo?"

"What?" The General stomps closer but halts abruptly when Hestia and Gellert spring to their feet.

"We will move to a remote location. Leave behind who we can," Enzo says.

"Why?" Danilo asks.

"The Royal Beseecher knows where you are." Enzo folds his arms. "He is coming to collect his property."

"And he wants to take me back?" Danilo jabs a finger towards the General. "When Kosymo Guerra leaves Audantei, it's not for good things."

"Watch your words, boy." Llodis drops his hand to the hilt of his sword.

Gale winds tear through the room, forcing Llodis back. The man rips his sword free, bracing an arm near his face and breaking through the blasts toward Enzo. Rain water tears at his clothes. Enzo flicks his wrist, and a wave surges from beneath the floor, plowing the General into the wall on the opposite side of the kitchen.

"Get him out of here." Enzo thrusts a finger toward the door.

Gellert and Hestia charge at Llodis, slowing their steps as the General backs up, yelling. Nothing he says is coherent, just animalistic noises to keep them from tackling him. The rest watch on.

Magus scoffs, muttering to himself before raiding the bottom cupboard for a large bottle of strong Nuicallian ale. Borak lifts a brow, gathering his lightning between his palms. They stare at one another.

Magus pops the cork and Borak releases the lightning, dousing the room in white light. Danilo blinks away the burn as he readjusts, noting Borak's self-satisfied smile directed at Magus. He rubs his eyes, jumping in his seat when the door cracks open minutes later.

"Magus." Easton crosses his arms in the doorway, cowlicks flying about his head and an ink stain smeared from chin to brow.

Borak and Reina meet eyes, giggling and chortling under their breath. Enzo hums, pulling his hair tie free to correct the loose strands. Magus stares at Easton, slowly raising the mug to the mouth of the bottle. Easton moves into the room.

When Magus tilts the bottle, the ale pours through the bottom of the tankard, spraying across the table and down his front. He leaps away, lifting the mug above his head to uncover the intact underside. Reina snickers louder. Malt cascades over the edge of the table, hundreds of serots seeping over the floor.

Easton grabs the decanter from Magus' grip, placing his other hand on the tabletop. The brew stops dripping, and Danilo freezes, astounded when the amber liquid rises from the floor, running up Easton's hand. It dips beneath his sleeve and runs out the other into the mouth of the bottle.

Borak offers Easton the cork, a grin on his face. Magus sighs, setting the ale-mug on the table and bracing his hands on his hips. And just as soon as Easton appeared, he left, bottle in hand.

"I require clarification, young Altamura." Enzo speaks over Borak and Reina's laughter.

Danilo looks to Enzo and finds the man's stare teasing despite his scrutinizing tone. He raises a brow when Danilo doesn't respond.

"Right, uh, not Audantei," Danilo stutters.

Enzo's lip quirks.

"Very well." He sits in the chair Hestia vacated. "Now, have you left anything worth eating?"

With a tense shrug, Danilo tries to adopt the lighthearted atmosphere Enzo spurs them into.

Borak teases Magus, and within ten minutes, it turns into bickering. Reina's eyes roll skyward as she stands. Borak and Magus follow. She pats Enzo's shoulder and leaves her plate in the steaming bucket on the counter. Magus nearly throws the utensils in it, rushing to stand in the doorway, arm through the gold barrier. He yells at Reina as he gestures for Borak to hurry in collecting the abandoned plates.

Danilo realizes Enzo stares at him with a softened, puzzled expression. He leans on his elbows, hands clasped together.

"Where is this location we're headed to?" Danilo asks.

Enzo rocks his head to crack his neck. "An hour southwest."

"That'd take us closer to Audantei, not farther from it."

"And I thought you directionally compromised."

Danilo sniffs. "Why aren't we moving further away?"

"I answer you, not because I trust you, but because I believe you can make proper decisions when fully informed." Enzo points a brow at him.

Danilo rolls his eyes, nodding.

"We do not yet know why the Royal Beseecher wants you."

"Wh—yes we do. He needs whatever magic he thinks I have." He silences at Enzo's warning glare.

"There is more to his reasons than a simple excuse. You pose less threat than I, or anyone from the Nephla's chosen." Enzo straightens. "Your sensitivity is his excuse. Not his reasons for pulling from a non-magic individual."

Danilo tries swallowing around his closed throat. "So I'm a means to an end?"

He has himself to blame since he accepted a Stormthrower's offer despite a lifetime of history warning him of the outcome. In Audantei, he should have fought harder against Enzo.

"In truth, yes." Enzo lifts a pitcher, pouring water into two empty ale-mugs. He slides one to Danilo. "But we keep you near to guard you. To understand whether his plan requires you. To see if he will move on. His plan is flawed. We need only find how."

"Are you moving the General with me?" Danilo takes a gulp from the mug.

"Yes." Enzo tilts his head at Danilo's scowl.

He traces the raised skin above his lip when Enzo leans back, scrutinizing the path of his thumb.

"Why?" Enzo crosses his arms over his chest.

Four days ago, the General stood over him, his sword glimmering with promise. Enzo had been his refuge. He lifts his brow.

"My father has been and is loyal to the Beseecher—once he's loyal, he's loyal to the death."

"Implying he's not loyal to you?" Enzo says.

Danilo reaches for the ale-mug, freezing when red light glints off the water. He places it down. Enzo looks between him and the mug.

"Never has been."

A pattern thrums on Enzo's arm as his fingers move with his thoughts. Briefly, Danilo wonders whether he adopted the tick from Easton or if Easton took after him.

"The General's actions and claims are incongruent." Enzo nods to himself. "Unable to reach fellow men, his involvement is unlikely. But awareness is valuable. You know the risks of contact."

"So he's coming?" Danilo asks.

"Unfortunately."

Danilo sighs with a sneer.

“Go gather your things.” Enzo waves at him in dismissal.

“I don’t have any things,” Danilo says, crossing his arms over his chest.

He jumps back at Enzo’s glare—it’s playful, without passive aggressive undertones. “Then you’d call the items accumulated from the library. What? Collateral?”

A smirk breaks across Danilo’s face. The corner of Enzo’s mouth quirks and his eyes relax. Danilo’s amazed at how much younger it makes him look.

“Go. You will have time there to study.” Enzo dismisses him with a wave of his hand.

“Yes, sir.”

Enzo’s brow raises, gaze following Danilo as he stands.



“You’re not coming?” Danilo stares as Enzo tugs at the ties of the reinforced leather framing his middle. It’s stained dark with age. He feels as if the Black Gate landed on him.

“There’s rumour of an attack approaching. These people deserve our protection; they have guarded our secrets. Been devout to our cause.” Enzo replies.

“So you’re sending me with Easton and the General?” Danilo tosses an arm down the hall from where he leans on Enzo’s door frame. Enzo casts a light glare in his direction.

He flicks his wrist. The door slams shut with the motion. Danilo stumbles into the room, glancing about hesitantly, waiting to be thrown out in the next breath.

“Easton is more than capable.” Enzo wraps the binding strings around his fists and yanks. Is he? Danilo thinks.

“If it’s meant to draw attention from the three of us?”

Enzo lifts his shoulder-pads in place.

“Then you are more than capable.” Enzo meets his eyes and there’s a heavy pause in his movement.

“And Bratni? Is he staying?” Danilo asks.

Enzo sighs.

“He is to stay under the care of Magus.” He sneers at an uncooperative guard cradled against his core. Danilo itches to secure the leather in place; a habit from living in the barracks and preparing others for battles he couldn’t attend. “Magus’ healing talent is not equivalent to Borak’s, but he is adequate.”

He clamps his jaw shut, knowing Enzo’s limit for his crass behaviour teeters on a fine line nearly invisible to the eye. Enzo’s brow lifts at Danilo, and he sighs as the plate shifts.

“If there is something to be said, best say it now.”

Danilo rocks on his feet before moving forward to shift the leather higher. Enzo grunts and fixes the straps.

“Is... is it safe to leave him here? He won’t be at risk?”

“In short,” Enzo says, his fingers moving smoother without the added weight to fight, “there’s nothing left he can offer. Guerra likely could not be bothered with his existence.”

Neither of them acknowledge the long answer. They’d both seen the Be-seecher’s wrath first hand.

“Is that the last of your harassment before all is executed?” Enzo asks.

“Yes, sir.” Danilo shifts between his feet, moving away as Enzo reaches for his cloak.

Enzo assesses him over a shoulder. Danilo recognizes the indirect question.

“When...” He clasps his hands behind his back, fingers twisting into one another. “When will you join us?”

He scrunches his face and drops his stare to the floor, attempting to bury the expression though it was too late. Enzo’s set jaw makes him cringe.

“Once I can.” His voice is heavy with contempt.

Enzo dismisses him with a gesture at the door, the cloak swishing into place. Danilo fumbles as he takes heed.

The Nephla’s chosen gather their camels and horses outside. Little more protective equipment than hunting basic lay over their simple travellers’ gear. To Danilo’s distaste, the horses were being left for those tending to the attack. Gellert and Hestia kick their steeds, leaving Enzo and Borak to make up their lost time.

Easton bends low, red tendrils of his magic lifting from the hilt on Llodis’ waist. Mischief crinkles the corner of his eyes as they meet Danilo’s. He grins.

Yes, Easton is more than capable.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Metal sheers through flesh and bone with a squelch. Blood flicks over Danilo's eyes and nose. He stumbles, wiping his face in a daze. His stomach flips when his fingers draw back, the blood mockingly—maliciously—settling into the grooves of his dry skin. Easton's magic flares in his peripheral, the colour identical to that consuming his vision.

Distantly, Danilo is grateful he doesn't recognize the scout. With brown hair obscured by the indentation where the General's sword struck his scalp, and the puddle of blood soaking into the sand, he doesn't want to.

"We've got to go back." The General's voice booms through his skull and he recoils into Easton. "We're giving the wrong message by running."

"Danilo—" Easton places a hand on his shoulder and blinks owlishly.

The General points the weapon towards Easton's open throat, face screwing up at the disregard.

"Makes no difference to me if it's their red or yours." Llodis steps forward, sword glinting in the light.

Easton flinches, fear burning in his amber eyes. Danilo snaps from his daze, moving between him and the General.

"The red of the innocent isn't to be spilled."

The General bares his teeth. “Don’t quote my words back to me, boy. He’s no innocent.”

“He is if I’m here.” Danilo refrains from cowering at his own tone, tapping Easton’s elbow. “Lead the way.”

Easton nods, squeezes his shoulder, and continues to push through the barreling heat of the flat desert. Llodis sheathes his sword, then examines the peeling skin of his burnt palm.

White buildings speckle the horizon, teasing him of the hours yet to pass. Danilo keeps his eyes and thoughts on the General, walking between him and Easton. The red skin on the old soldier’s palm blisters like the burns found on poisoners.

Easton is a distorter—and a flimsy one at that. A manipulator of the real world. Rumour says there are less than a hundred at a time; their kind at the edge of extinction by the Reckoning.

An old man wanders from the guest house beside the aged farm. His dark skin is free of wrinkles, and his steps bounce with ease. As they come closer, Danilo watches the dead dune grasses beneath his feet spring with life. Easton exchanges a stuttered greeting, passing off a tinkling brown bag no larger than Danilo’s palm. The keeper gives his thanks, tucking it into his pocket. He walks them to the main building.

It’s a blinding thing to look at—sun-blasted by the Merkidia sky. A fence divides it from the guest house, trapping a single sleeping camel from the vast surrounding dunes in a large pen. Mudbricks frame the building’s curved windows and a wood plank sits above the door, the name scored into its face nothing more than faint lines. Easy to mistake for imperfections caused by debris tossed inside sandstorms.

Danilo evaluates the plaque overhead, desperate for something to do while Easton discusses the keeper’s plans. Likely until the Nephla’s chosen should need his watchful presence in the building.

By the time Easton bids the attendant farewell, Danilo gapes at the plank, his discovery bordering on impossible. For the name was none other than that of Alezandir Geovex. The first Royal Beseecher of Audantei.

Easton cranes his neck with a smirk before forcing a hollering Llodis inside, a red hue engulfing his fingers and hovering beneath the General’s feet. Danilo grins, ear to ear, at the lines carved in the sand toward the entrance. He wanders in soon after.

Once the door shuts, Easton drops to his knees and weaves his hands across the threshold, as if stitching the air together. Fascinated by the spider-web of glowing red lines burning into the wood door, Danilo steps forward. The glow dissipates, and the marks burned into the door vanish soon after. Easton offers a hand to the entry.

Danilo opens it to find a mirror image of the room behind him; pale, old beams, split and brown from age, hold up the thick reed roof. The house's weight settles on the lumber rather than its mud-brick walls. Looking into it causes his head to spin. He closes the door, his throat leaping into his mouth.

Something shatters within the building, and Easton sprints away.

Danilo takes the reprieve to brace against the nearest wall, grounding himself on the lumpy texture of the coarse, cold brick. There's a tinge of blue in his peripheral, but it's dimmed enough that he could mistake it for the sun sear on his eyes.

"Hey." Danilo whips around to Easton, shoulders straight. Easton squints, a wrinkle at the start of his brow, similar to when he first set on squeezing answers from Danilo. He nods, and Easton mimics it, tilting his head to a hall branching off the main room. "Let's settle in."



In the next days, the General attempts to plow through the front door, an armchair acting as a shield. He stumbles through another doorway, red lines sizzling into his skin. With a cry, he shatters the wood chair against the brick wall, his fiery glare turned on the entrance. Danilo grins, swallowing it when Llodis' gaze snaps to him.

Danilo explores a new piece of the farmhouse, each overlong day spent waiting for Enzo's arrival. Easton circles him in intervals, occasionally asking if he needs anything. And while Easton's task is to contain the General and all his anger, Danilo cannot help but feel he's being monitored as well.

The quality of the patchwork brick reflects any other farmhouse in the vast lands surrounding Audantei. Aside from the sparkling Vintioni glass—jewels and other such glittering minerals melted into a thin pane—atop an open, barren chamber, there is no sign the building once belonged to Besecher Geovex.

Danilo stands in the room's middle, cascaded in darkness except for the green, purple, and blue light filtering through the broken panes. The design of the old training room attests to the building's age.

He leaves the darkened space, sweating once he steps into the main area. Wood floorboards groan in the heat as he pads through. It's the only sound he hears, meaning the General is asleep or contained.

In a greenhouse off the kitchen, Easton rocks a chair not meant for rocking. Shoots of greenery greedily curl into whatever sun they can steal. Muggy air churns through the open door, combating the dryness.

Papers in hand, Easton dances his fingers absentmindedly, the red hue of his magic spinning around them like thread. The shrub in the pot under Easton's hand grows, and he jumps when it skims against his palm.

"Not again." Easton touches the little leaves at its top. "You're going to kill me, Gellert."

An absentminded smirk makes its way to Danilo's tacky face.

"This is Geovex's estate?" He asks.

Easton leaps in the chair with a stuttering gasp, clinging to the pot before he backhands it. His head swings to Danilo and his hand clutches the shirt on his damp chest.

"Don't—don't do that." Grumbling to himself, Easton moves the plant, gathers his papers, and shoos Danilo from the room. The air dries the moment he tugs the door shut behind them. "Thirsty?"

Danilo waves him off, hands settling on his hips.

"So... Is this Geovex's estate?"

"Yeah, why?" Easton's head tilts.

"Alezandir Geovex?"

Easton's brown brows raise high above his eyes, as if the answer were obvious. He digs through the cupboard, lost in the small kitchen. When he finds a clay cup, he palms his bangs from his forehead; the sweat causing some strands to fly in odd directions. Danilo shakes his head.

"How would you have the first Besecher's estate?"

The skin between Easton's brows crinkles, and he wiggles his bottom lip over his teeth. His eyes are sharp with stubborn determination, sparkling when he finds the answer.

"Ah," he says with a grin, "this is one of those half-truths."

Danilo tries to keep his jaw from twitching in irritation. Easton leaps on the counter and gestures to the nearby chair. His hand flaps in an uncoordinated wave. Danilo leans against the wall.

"The masses don't know Geovex was a—a, uh, Stormthrower?" At Danilo's huff of disbelief, Easton gives a wobbly smirk. "They tried keeping it quiet. For, uh, for the Nephla. To prevent the soldiers from turning against him. That's the, uh, fight they were fighting, ya know? It's why the Black Gate went up. In flames."

Supporting Calista's cause as Beseecher, Geovex would have had immediate inside knowledge and control over a majority of Audantei's reach and resources. Altering the city's influence and trajectory for a time would allow Stormthrowers to affect the surrounding nations.

The Reckoning turned the world against magic, though most wouldn't believe it exists. But the tales and legends clung to life at Alezandir Geovex's insistence. A man playing both sides of the war like a coin toss.

Danilo hums, accepting Easton's answer for what it is—an impossible truth to uncover. He leans forward to peer around the corner at the untouched front door. Easton's eyes glint when he turns around, a smile pulling at the corner of his mouth.

"They—they're heading to one of the eastern borders to—"

"Don't tell me." Danilo bites.

Easton's brows screw together, eyes flicking back and forth as he flounders. Allowances were little more than imprisonment. Of all the people who spend time at Enzo's side, Easton should know better.

"I'm not your ally," Danilo says, shaking his head. A stormy expression cuts across Easton's face and he opens his mouth to contest. "I'm not your ally."

"I'd consider you friendly."

Friendly. Not friend. Not even comrade.

"Then you're a fool." Danilo scoffs.

"Maybe..." Easton's fingers flick, and a coin drops into his hand in a flash of red. "Maybe I, uh, find people worth being foolish for."

Danilo can't stop his scowl. He pushes off the wall, followed by Easton's confused and watchful gaze.

"I wouldn't extend that kindness to everyone," Danilo says over his shoulder. "Some aren't worth it."

"Like you?"

His feet freeze to the floor. A faint red stain pools over the rings weighing down his fingers. He clenches his hands, knowing it's not there. The scars on his knuckles tighten with horrendous familiarity, recalling the battles he'd fought and lead. Death is rancid in the air.

"Yes."

It's not there, but its realness magnifies when Easton recoils, the growl in his voice reminding Easton of who he is. Darkness overturns Easton's distant eyes. His mouth gapes like a fish as he searches for words beyond his mind. He looks older than his age.

"I see things differently," Easton whispers.

Danilo shakes his head, forcing his feet forward despite the sensation of sinking into the floorboards.

"You live freer than most."

"We both know that's not true."

No, Easton isn't free. He spent years alongside Enzo and his band of rioters. Audantei has sketched his face countless times and sent him dashing throughout the surrounding cities. Just as Danilo has been. As Enzo has been. And despite all of Easton's troubles as a Stormthrower, a haunted remnant claims the dark of his eyes, attesting to what he truly meant came long, long before.

"Yeah." Danilo hardly hears himself agree.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Danilo avoids speaking to Easton for two days. And despite Easton's chattering attempts at small talk, Danilo keeps silent. Rather than fight it, Easton fills the air with endless rambling to pass the hours by.

Danilo shoves his forehead into a hand, staring at the leopard sketched across the parchment in front of him. He sighs, teeth grit. Easton's knee bounces and his words string together incoherently.

The front door ricochets off the wall and Danilo tenses, reaching for a sword he no longer carries. Magus stumbles in, blood and soot smeared over his scrunched nose. He limps to the straw-stuffed couch to brace himself. Hestia is fast behind, taking the brunt of his weight in order to not aggravate his injury. She appears unscathed—angry, but unscathed.

Gellert stomps in as if he's attempting to put out a fire. Fury burns in his eyes, his fingers looping through a hole in his glittering burgundy coat. Reina passes her bow to him, blood running between her knuckles as she clutches a cut on her arm. It's reopened, the crusted blood surrounding her hand familiar to Danilo in ways it shouldn't be.

Before Danilo stands, Easton leaps over, speaking triple the speed of before.

"Got this. Help Reina." Hestia kicks a door open and hauls Magus inside.

With a clumsy nod, Easton moves around Gellert, receiving a warning as he stumbles underfoot. Easton pries Reina's fingers off the wound to inspect it. He stutters over Gellert's dry coughs in demand for supplies to stitch the injury. Her complaints grow louder while she's dragged from the room, but Easton's prattle is undeterred.

Just as fast as the maelstrom of activity came, it was gone. Danilo is winded from watching.

Enzo shuts the door, untouched by the fight as the rest had been. Not one hair from place. Danilo has known Enzo long enough outside of battle to know it's a farce. Enzo straightens, stepping into the living quarters, anger brazing the lines of his scowl. Danilo shrinks at the heat before realizing it's directed past him.

A dark, rumbling chuckle bathes him in dread.

"Looks like our boys do just fine without us." A drawl rattles behind him. Straw stabs against the back of Danilo's neck as he turns to keep his eye on Llodis. The man gestures with his hand, eyes never straying from Enzo. "Leave."

The order makes Danilo's knee twitch. He stands before he thinks not to, freezing at his position between them.

War rises on the horizon, and Danilo's caught in the gully between them. And all things considered, he figures his best chance of survival is to pick a side and fight.

"No. Sir."

The General's gaze snaps to him, lip curling as if he whiffs the gutter alley still lingering on Danilo's skin.

Llodis advances, and Danilo tenses, squaring his shoulders. A blade sings behind him. Though the General's eyes widen and his hand drops to his hilt, Danilo's mind is calm. The General's blade drags against its sheath.

Danilo stumbles back with a gasp, a force dragging him from the General's reach as water freezes around Llodis' forearm. His sword sparkles where Danilo had been standing.

Enzo steps closer, his voice cool and shallow. "I hope, General, you understand your place among us has not changed."

Danilo can see the General's fist yanking on the hilt. Despite his white knuckles and the sweat rolling from his forehead, it doesn't work. Enzo straightens, and though he's shorter than the man, he towers over him in presence.

Llodis Altamura is not a man who enjoys being made to feel small.

"I will not be compliant where my son is involved."

Danilo shifts on his feet and Enzo glances over his shoulder at him. Enzo grabs Danilo's arm and drags him to the side until he topples onto the couch, the straw spreading under his weight within the fabric. It isn't until Enzo's touch that Danilo notices the drop of temperature in the room.

"Understood." The ice shatters and Enzo forces the General against the wall. "Now leave."

Frigid blue eyes glare at Enzo. Then at Danilo. He doesn't make to move.

Winds slam open doors and shutters, the ferocity of their appearance dousing Danilo's vision in a hue of blue. Danilo grabs his face to dispel the pain. Shouting rattles in the room as if made larger by the wind. And just as suddenly as it began, it stops. Danilo heaves between his knees, hands clenched over his head as he covers his ears with his wrists.

Coarse fingers brush his profile. He recoils, the sensation heightened beyond comfort. A hand grapples over the expanse of his face, hooking over his nose and beneath his jaw, its bruising pressure a branding force. It remains there until he sags into the couch.

Danilo blinks up at Enzo as the man pulls back, raising his chin in a final assessment. He drops onto the opposite couch.

Danilo's week has been avoiding and waiting. Now, the man of his ire and curiosity sits before him, and despite all his stalling for this moment, he doesn't know what he wants.

They watch one another, minds empty and mouths emptier. He feels there's something he should say. The implication grows stronger when Enzo's stare tightens, brow raising as Danilo rubs his raw knuckles.

"Thank you." Danilo gapes at his own words. He adds, "Uh. For that—and... And for last week."

Enzo cranes his neck back to peer down his nose. After regarding him, he leans forward to grab the hand of cards Easton abandoned. "Has Easton taught you anything?"

Danilo bristles at the abrupt redirection. Though it's better they don't acknowledge it, lest they throw themselves into unfamiliar territory, ignoring it doesn't annoy Danilo any less.

Cards purr as Enzo flicks their edges together, shuffling the stack though Easton had just done it. Danilo watches, mind busied with their previous interaction. Enzo hums and deals the cards. When Danilo scoops up his hand of

cards, he shoves his elbows into his knees. They play in silence. Enzo appraises him after the dozenth pass between them and Danilo tries to ignore his gaze.

"We were ambushed on the Iotai Trail outside Budenia." Danilo's neck twinges as he snaps his gaze to Enzo, and he brings a hand up to rub it. Afraid speaking will break the temporary truce Enzo allotted him, Danilo doesn't speak. Enzo lays down a wild-dog card. Danilo grumbles as it flutters over the table. "What do you know of Audanteian routes?"

Bitterness swells in Danilo's chest. Of course, the man levies a favour rather than responding with 'you're welcome'.

"Everything until..."

Enzo hums when he doesn't finish. "Audantei's soldiers never marched those trails."

Danilo doesn't deem the statement worth responding to. But when Enzo straightens, he knows the answer is written across his face. He huffs. For a strategist, Enzo seems to be unaware of an awful lot regarding Audantei.

"The soldiers have always patrolled them," Danilo says, rolling his eyes at the quirk of Enzo's left eyebrow—the eyebrow of inquiry. "Those trails are scouted three times a month, but they're too far beyond Butarri's vineyard for foot patrols. Your meeting was probably a coincidence. Won't be now."

"Men will be permanently stationed along the path?"

"Undoubtedly."

Danilo drops a card, shifting as Enzo stares at it. He grumbles when it's swiped away.

The cool air pushes through the room in lazy circles. It sweeps against the drying sweat at Danilo's hairline, and he tilts his head back on the couch. He sighs before pulling two cards from his hand and tossing them on the small table.

"Would you like my advice?" Danilo says, clacking his jaw shut and slicing his tongue with the force of his regret. He busies himself with the dwindling cards in his hands. The following silence perforates his ears with every beat of his erratic heart. Enzo's gaze peels the skin from Danilo's cheeks.

When he's overstepped in the past, it was without heed for the backlash. Now, with his sensitivity, and this begrudging understanding that they're not on opposing sides of the war, every transgression throws him closer to the line of 'enemy'. He's gotten comfortable not being the object of Enzo's vexation.

“Terrible of me to consider.” Enzo finally says, his gaze roving across the rings twisting around Danilo’s fingers—a cold reminder of how quickly Danilo could overstep. “What do you propose?”

Everything he was going to say leaves under Enzo’s scrutiny. Floundering, he gapes at Enzo, jaw twitching at the uncomfortable position.

“Plan to speak? Or only stare as if the dead have risen?”

“Uh...”

Enzo rolls his eyes, his wrist twisting to lay his cards face-down.

“Nalcun Barmithol,” Danilo croaks.

“Pardon?”

Danilo swallows when the air stills. He hyper-fixates on Enzo’s shifting weight; the sunlight bouncing off the silver woven into his grey clothing. The furrow of Danilo’s brows gives him a headache as he searches for words.

“Nalcun Barmithol is Kosymo Guerra’s adviser. He issues orders directly to Audantei’s patrols and contacts our allies. If you want to know what Audantei is doing in the Gentled East, intercept his messages.” Danilo says softly.

Enzo blinks at him, mind fast at work behind his eyes. Danilo just handed Enzo and the Stormthrowers victory across the Gentled East. With a hum, Enzo ends the conversation, lifting a single card from the face-down row and placing it atop Danilo’s wild-dog, swiping them both away with another success. Danilo devotes his attention to the game. The lingering sensation of a blade-sharp gaze intensifies the strike against his soul, knowing he’d given up his dedication to Audantei to gain Enzo’s respects.

“Game.” Enzo sweeps the last cards into the gathering pile to his left. The lazy pull of his fingers announces his exhaustion. “You need to train, young Altamura.”

“If it’s all the same, I’d rather not.” Danilo slouches against the cushion, biting on the cleft of his lip.

“Enjoying the relaxed house Easton runs?” Enzo’s brow quirks.

“No,” Danilo says, placing the toe of his boot on the table. “I’m... preoccupied.”

Enzo nods, relief casting light across the shadows of his fatigue. “Be vigilant come morning.”

Danilo gives a solitary nod of affirmation.

Enzo’s scowl falls into place as he leaves the room; a bitter, natural expression that briefly makes Danilo want to sink into the couch.

As a shout echoes from the hallway, Enzo glances back at Danilo. Danilo grins in a way that says ‘give him hell’. Enzo’s lip quirks and cuts through Danilo’s nervous energy. The brief interaction leaves Danilo to wonder when they learned to communicate without speaking.



CHAPTER TWENTY

S words clang together in a mess of chaotic noise. It's the first occasion on which Danilo has sparred against Enzo while the older man wields a sword. Danilo—unfairly—expected ill-timed swings; a sign the transition between fighting styles is more trying than Enzo let on. But Enzo's aggressive offense forces Danilo's hand. While he hoped for an opening to show his skill, he had the impression these sessions would never allow for such opportunities.

As if to prove him right, Enzo raises a palm in pause, sufficiently keeping Danilo from making his first strike.

"Getting tired already?" Danilo swings the sword, a lion-like grin spread across his features as he stalks around Enzo.

"I may wield magic," Enzo says while push back the damp hair on his temple, "but unlike you, it does not increase my stamina or endurance."

"Unlike me?"

"Yes." Enzo inhales, tilting his face toward the breeze slipping in through the broken panes overhead. "From the combined effort of training—and a sensitivity which magnifies your defenses—your stamina is greater than that of most men."

Danilo lets out a puff of air, driving his sword into the sand floor to free both hands. He pushes them through the sticky curls around his face. "And?"

Enzo rolls his eyes, grabbing the loose edge of his shirt to wipe his hilt of dirt and moisture.

“I suspect you would not maintain an offensive for any prolonged period.”

The glimmer of Enzo’s blade mocks Danilo and his grin flares reflexively at the challenge. Enzo’s hum bounces within the barren room.

“Believe me to be incorrect?” Enzo asks.

Danilo leaps into Enzo, sword cutting the empty air above Enzo’s ducked head. Enzo forces him back with monsoon winds. He rushes beneath, water flecking his face, and hooks an arm around Enzo’s middle. The hurricane throws him over Enzo’s head, the man’s fingers tight in the curls brushing the base of his skull. Danilo lands on his feet, wrapping his arms around Enzo’s neck and dropping to his knees. Enzo rolls, dislodging his grip.

Danilo pants, rotating the weapon in his hand. He scans Enzo before lurching forward. Their swords crash together. Near the head. The thighs. At Enzo’s chest. Again, in reverse order.

Compared to the day Enzo tossed Danilo through the wall, Enzo is only prodding him. Not unlike poking at a scab.

Danilo drops low and runs at Enzo, his sword jerking toward the Stormthrower’s head. Enzo’s hand raises, and Danilo feels the wisps of wind against his face. At the last second, he spears at Enzo’s middle—driving it to the right, aiming for the fluttering edge of Enzo’s shirt.

Danilo does not prove him wrong after all.

He lies on his back panting, staring at the shimmering glass speckled by droplets of water from Enzo’s magic. A groan slips past his lips. Though he’s tempted to peel off his sticky tunic, the satisfaction twisting Enzo’s expression kills the thought. He settles for pushing at curls clinging to his dirty forehead. Enzo hunches over a pace away, but the chuckle echoes through the air as if he stood over Danilo’s head.

“You—” straightening, Enzo pushes his hair back into place and adjusts his grey tunic. “Lasted longer than expected.”

Danilo glances over, a quip ready on his tongue. It dissolves as Enzo pants through a smile. The grin, though not large, turns his face an awkward way. But it relaxes his eyes. For the second time in months, Enzo appears younger than the scowl and colourless hairs have made him out to be—closer to his father’s age than older.

“Enzo?” Danilo says. The resonating hum of acknowledgment rumbles his own chest in sympathy. “Easton said a sensitivity can be... ‘harnessed’, I think is the word he used.” With a light quirk of his brow, Enzo regains his previous composure. Danilo’s nervousness eases without his rapt attention. “Do you think mine will affect how I fight?”

“I, nor any of my colleagues, have worked in correlation to a sensitivity. My theories are no more useful to you than as inconclusive guesswork. Easton may be comfortable divulging his knowledge. I am not.”

It’s a fanciful way of saying ‘I don’t know’ and while Danilo feels eagerness rattling his impulsive tendencies, he refrains from pointing it out. Their tentative relationship is a powerful motivator to rein in his untrustworthy self-control.

Enzo twists his weapon around, gesturing with his free hand for Danilo to stand. “Again.”

The swords sing against one another. Steel on steel. Danilo slides and parries, determined rather than scrambling like a man drowning out his loss. He’s aware the dull edge of a training sword could cause damage he couldn’t reverse.

Their feet turn the damp layer of sand into a slick surface. Without thought, Danilo leans before Enzo’s sword begins a clear path—a distant sensation singing in him when he lands on the ground.

Everything halts.

Danilo braces for a hit that never comes, burying the flush of embarrassment. He tries meeting Enzo’s eyes, pushing to his knees, but the man stares over his head.

“Do you require help, General?”

Danilo doesn’t stand until Enzo has stepped in line with his shoulder. It gives him a brief opportunity to brush the sand from his hands and trousers. Llodis’ intentions had always unnerved him.

“What do you think you’re doing, training with my boy?”

More so when he says things like that.

“I am doing what you are incapable of,” Enzo draws.

As the tension escalates, Danilo chances glancing over.

“That is?” Llodis asks.

Danilo rubs the broken skin on his knuckles, irritating it further rather than soothing it.

“Regulating my emotions.”

He holds his breath as the coolness of Enzo's voice rushes over him.

The General sneers. "I can regulate as much as I wish."

"That remains to be seen." Enzo faces Danilo with a stormy expression. "Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir?"

The reflexive title shocks them all. Enzo squints calculatingly, though he doesn't linger on the slip.

"Leave the room to the General." He gestures for Danilo to move ahead of him. "You've earned a break."

Danilo walks tentatively, and despite Enzo acting as a barrier, the heat of the General's glare scorches his nerves. His pardon burns with it.

They continue into the kitchen, silence hanging between them while prepping their midday meal, before Gellert drags Enzo away with more pressing matters. Danilo doesn't argue, his mind occupied by his desire for pardon; wondering when he'd forgotten it, and where he'd abandoned it. He leaves it for later evaluation, food pressing on his priorities.

Danilo feels lighter when his stomach is full. Living in the gutter alley had eroded his ability to recognize hunger. Starvation became indistinguishable from stress. Being caged with Enzo had rebuilt a proper schedule. It had taken Danilo a few weeks to notice the pattern of Enzo covertly pressing food into him. And longer to get over his pride.

His hunger appeased, Danilo pads into the main room where laughter and arguing rise. Reina and Magus play the cards abandoned on the table. Their dynamic is stranger than the rest of Enzo's crew.

Gellert, though he comes across calloused—matching Enzo with finesse and resolve—is soft; mostly for Hestia. Hestia's motherly instincts give her insight to the others' needs, but with Enzo, those instincts turn coarse and calculated. Danilo understands there's a history there he'll never understand. Borak strikes with honesty, wringing confessions with a single stare. Magus acts the pompous jester to spite them all when the tension is high. Reina is reserved.

With one foot propped on the edge of the wooden table, Reina leans into the couch. Magus' bandaged knee lies on the table's surface with a cushion stuffed beneath. He throws the top four cards on the deck across the table at her with an over-emphasized scowl. And Reina giggles.

"If I could stand—" Magus waves his cards in her direction, on the brink of divulging his hand.

“Shut it. You’ll heal in a manner of days.” The laughter in her voice is airy, like a flute.

Danilo’s certain the rest of the house can hear her. Magus slumps sideways, grinning at Danilo.

“Heyyy Dani-boy.”

It’s as loud as it is discomfoting. Regardless, Danilo responds with a lopsided smile. Reina assesses him with reservation, dropping her head back into place. A grin lightens her features when she turns to Magus.

“Come,” Magus says, waving him into the room, “come join.”

Danilo considers as he steps closer. Though the shutters are strapped in the rattling winds, leaving the room cool and dark, Magus radiates heat. Sitting near him doesn’t seem appealing when his hair still sticks to his scalp after trying to swipe himself clean with a warm, damp rag.

“Nah, I’m good, thanks.” He drops into a nearby chair. “I got caught playing against Easton and Enzo the other day, so I’ll watch the true masters now.”

“O-ho, cheeky, are we?”

“I’d like to say I’m smarter than that.” Danilo drudges up an old charisma, slouching into his knuckles with a playful grin. Magus squints at him.

“All right, pretty boy.” He shuffles the deck.

Reina smirks.

Danilo doesn’t bother trying to keep up with their quick-witted foreign language of inside jokes. Sitting back, he basks in the ease of their familiarity.

Reina throws down a set of cards with swords in their upper corners. Magus uses his good foot to kick hers off the table.

“You snake.” He glares, and she sticks her tongue out at him. “A king and a noble of swords... gotta rearrange my entire hand now, thank you.”

“Oh, you are most welcome.” Her laughter bubbles over the cards she covers her mouth with.

She nibbles her lip behind the thick papyrus, cheeks glimmering from her hidden smile. Magus’ hazel eyes focus through a mess of waves. Danilo snaps his head between them and Reina pins him with an unmoving stare. With one glance more at Magus, Danilo raises a brow in question. Her eyes glow a vibrant green.

Yup, warning enough. Danilo doesn’t have the history to pry.

Magus continues. Oblivious. Reina throws down a few cards with little attention to Magus’ move, continuing from where she’d left off. From the fluid

transition between threatening Danilo and play, it's clear she's warned others off on enough occasions that it failed to impact her.

Danilo settles back to watch, unable to roll free the coiled muscles beneath his shoulder blades. Every third sentence makes the tension palpable. Each time, Danilo wonders how Magus never notices.

Eventually, their game softens into timid conversation. Quiet mutters flit through the room as Danilo lays his head against the chair, eyes growing heavy. The straw stuffing caves beneath him, and the fabric bunches by his ears. Reina's melodic hum wanes according to her success. He allows the occasional tremble of the shutter to block their chatter out; the faint, warm breeze brushing against his face. A delicate serenity encompasses him.

"Where is he?" Gellert shouts, causing Danilo to flinch. He leans to glance at Gellert over the chair.

"Awe, you woke him." Magus throws down a few cards without glancing up.

"I wasn't asleep." Danilo murmurs.

"Coulda fooled me, princess." Magus winks.

Danilo rolls his eyes as he slouches into his spot.

"Magus. I don't like repeating myself." Gellert's voice carries loud over Danilo's head as he moves deeper into the room. "Where is he?"

"Who?" Reina looks up at him, chin against her chest from where she's slouched.

"His father."

Danilo tries gulping in air through frozen lungs. His clammy palms clench the fabric at his knees as he sits forward to face Gellert. "You... can't find him?"

Gellert squints at him, arms crossing over his chest. "Neither can Enzo."

The words echo in Danilo's skull. He clenches and releases his fists, the whitened knuckles pulling at broken skin. "He—will retrace his steps. Return to the previous location."

Gellert's curt nod makes Danilo wince.

Shouting Easton's name, Gellert storms from the room, leaving just as fast as he rolled in. Danilo wrings his fingers with a bouncing knee. Reina places a hand over his, squeezing.

Minutes tick by. Reina is tucked against the couch corner to hold down Danilo's leg. Magus is unmoving, leg still propped, eyes distant in thought. The house is unbearably silent.

Danilo swallows down the acidic rise in his throat, leaned over to ease the churn of his stomach. Reina tsks when he scratches his knuckles, and she tugs his wrist away from the bleeding splits he smears into the grooves of his skin.

“Altamura.”

Danilo jerks hard. He kicks, missing Reina’s knee by inches. Enzo’s intimidating gaze brings a bitter taste to Danilo’s mouth.

“Come.” Enzo turns and disappears around the corner.

Reina nods at him, Magus watching her rather than meeting Danilo’s eyes.

With heavy feet, he trudges towards the kitchen, counting out his steps to combat the sense of impending doom. Enzo leans against the counter, his unreadable, rigid expression set in place with a ferocity which just now lends Danilo the understanding that he hadn’t gotten better at reading the man. Enzo had only gotten more comfortable with Danilo’s presence.

“Tell me the General’s connection to the Royal Beseecher.”

“Oh, uh...” He rubs his knuckles, wincing at the twinge. Enzo’s glare darkens. “They were in the same ‘best of fifty’—only ones who waged a competition in their battles. They rivaled for Beseecher. Because of their camaraderie, there was never any hostility between them.” He falters, staring at Enzo, who stares back with vehemence. Enzo’s jaw clenches and he makes a sharp gesture for Danilo to continue. “The General was disqualified due to his marriage. Kosymo respected him, granting him the position of High General and exclusive rights to outvote his adviser.”

“Friends then.” Enzo’s brow quirks at the scrunch of Danilo’s face. “No?”

“My—the General is loyal. The Beseecher...”

“Does not inspire loyalty.”

“No.” Danilo scoffs, moving to lean against the wall. “Neither does he hold emotional ties to people. He has no ‘friends’.”

Enzo remains silent, eyes flicking as he thinks. It occurs to Danilo that, as a strategist, Enzo failed to make this inquiry sooner. And though it is an obvious error, mentioning it would cross the thin line he treads. But his tongue and his mind are warring forces.

“Enzo?” The man hums in acknowledgment. Danilo snaps his jaw down tight, hoping Enzo’s distraction alleviates the attention he’s called to himself. The heavy silence only magnifies the tension, and Enzo turns to him when his silence persists. Danilo forcefully says, “you didn’t ask me.”

The glare he receives rivals the sweltering heat plowing through the open door of the greenhouse.

“That...” Danilo scratches his forehead to avoid Enzo’s leer. “That was meant to be a question.”

“Why wait?” Enzo clarifies.

“Yeah.”

The dim light spots through the room, freckling the divots in the tawny stone between them. Enzo scrapes the heel of his boot across its pitted surface while he thinks.

“We were distracted by the information presented to us. With no cause to assume his involvement in the Beseecher’s plans, aside from your brother, I’d not place credence in his history. Now, however, I see the faults of my presumption.”

Danilo watches Enzo, aware the man knows it. The heat of a lasting stare is difficult to ignore. Danilo shakes his head, brows pinching together as he sorrowfully sinks into his apprehension.

He sags against the wall, head tilting up to fix on the ceiling, tongue touching the scar on his lip. “Will you bring him back here?”

Enzo’s musings turn to Danilo, his stare even and unflinching. “If he is intercepted, yes.”

Danilo nods. There’ll be trouble sharing space with the imprisoned General, especially since he will have betrayed him to the Stormthrowers to gain Enzo’s favour. Twice.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Kosymo Guerra narrows his gaze at the book in his hands, scowl attesting to his options of what his beloved claimed. The beads in his sable braids bounced against the bone of his face. When he shakes them from his face, they chime together.

“I don’t want to read this,” he says.

“You better.” She flicks her brown hair over her shoulder. “You don’t want to know what I did to get my hands on it.”

Kosymo looks to where she stretches over his throne, curves on display over the red fabric and skin glowing from the reflection off its gold details. She picks red-dyed dirt from beneath her nails.

“No,” he says, pulling his eyes back to the little book, “I don’t.”

It’s small in his hands. The size of a brick. Its worn leather cover conceals the pages beneath except around its edges where the old material unraveled. The first few pages are almost illegible, the paper aged and ink disappearing. A charred section in the middle sheds pieces into his hands.

“I’m pretty sure it will be useless.” He flicks the debris to the floor, smearing soot across the inside of his palm.

She lifts her eyes from her hands to give him the briefest of glares. “It won’t.”

He flicks through it, pausing to give her a disagreeing grimace. At the silence, she raises her head. She stares at him from beneath her brows until he returns to his task.

It's all boring expositions and prologues and general notes that he's seen time and again when his soldiers dumped their 'findings' in his halls; old parchment scrolls of recipes and homemaker journals they hadn't the education to read. This book is flavorful, but it speaks more of Stormthrower history than of anything pertinent.

And then he sees it.

Flicking back, brows sewn together, he trudges for his quarters. The wood door echoes off the marble walls of the room. His eyes shoot between the item on his desk and the one on the page. Behind him, she pads closer. Her hand lies on his forearm.

"I make good on my promises, sir." The glitter of her eyes is dangerous.

"That you do." He strokes her cheek with his knuckles. "I need a key."

Kosymo dismisses her soon after. And for all her squawking, he knows she has things to attend to. He sates her with a kiss and a promise to see her that night.

For the next hours, he wears a trail into his glittering limestone floor. His armour clanks with each abrupt step. A chime carries across his balcony, the large and open expanse accepting it as an offering for the king; the wind playing with the alarm in his courtyard. The sound grates on his ears and his patience as he waits for Nalcun to return. Soldiers march far beneath him at the citadel's main gate, their pattern a testament to his strength.

He stares at the charred edges of the journal fitted in his palm. There is little information which could hide from him. Less with the newly appointed Head, his girl acting as a liaison between them and him. With his resources, this little book shouldn't have slipped from under his nose. But it had, and the soul who deemed it wise to keep it from him, paid his weight in blood.

His dearest made certain of it.

When Kosymo tosses the book onto his desk, the door from the throne room croaks open. Nalcun enters, sword firm at his hip and his hands clasped behind his back. His slim shoulders are firm and high.

Nalcun is a man with royal posture, and if it weren't for his code, Kosymo would consider him a threat to the throne.

“Beseecher Guerra—“ Nalcun half bows before drawing rolled sheets of parchment from inside his thin overcoat, “—the information, as requested.”

Kosymo closes the distance between them and tears the notes from Nalcun’s grasp, a grin stretching across the Beseecher’s face. His search proves fruitful.

“I’ve got what I need.” He sashays through the room, red fabrics draped from the rafters glittering against the illustrious white marble.

“What, sir?”

“The stone.” Kosymo places the paper on his desk, retrieving the book and holding it out to Nalcun. “And the sword.”

Nalcun peers down at the pages, nodding at Kosymo’s pause.

“Get them.” Kosymo demands.

“Sir?”

“If I am to eradicate the threat, I will need them at my disposal.”

“But the previous plan, sir—“ Nalcun blinks, squeezing the book in his palms.

“Will be taken into consideration once I have the final piece.”

Nalcun’s brows twitch together minutely. “She will not be happy.”

“She is not the Beseecher. I am.” Kosymo struts to the balcony and leans on the banister to look over Audantei. The white citadel overlooks the varying growths of the city; from the wasteland of the gutter alley to the colourful skyward complexes in the High District. After all these years, the view is just as boring. Plain. “And I will do what is best for this city. Now, call on the Order.”

“Yes, sir.” Nalcun sighs.

Kosymo listens to Nalcun shuffle from the room, pulling the creaking door shut behind him. His soldiers complain about the noise. But he appreciates his groaning doors. They were more his ally than his men.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Three stifling hours after the General's disappearance, the man had been found wandering the sparse palms west of the estate. Danilo supposed it was to find a water source to obscure his trail—which would have worked, with the river not three leagues from his position, if he weren't going in circles.

There is an ominous weight in the General's eyes upon their return, and he pauses his thrashing to deliver a dark glare at Danilo. A brand as damning as the besmirch of Hanging Day. Once contained in a little room, Llodis cast his vehement demands, wielding slurs and orders like Audantei's ballistas; albeit blindly, but even poor trajectories could result in devastation.

Danilo flinches as the General's hollers crash through the walls, each command punctuating the fitful silence. He contains himself to the main room only when Enzo's motley crew can overpower the air the General seized. When it proves stronger than them, Danilo opts to remain in the training room or the courtyard, working alone until his feet bleed. After cracking three blunted swords, Danilo eyes the wood staff.

Regardless of the headway he's previously made with Enzo, Enzo's appearance dwindled to nonexistent, their previous training regiment having been interrupted by the General's disappearance. And though he has no obligation to aid Danilo, he has, until now, remained dedicated and objective.

With the passing week, the General's incessant commands, and an intensifying sense of suffocation pressing around his skull, Danilo abandons his training. The wood staff leaning against the wall only serves to encourage his search.

Hestia watches him pass through the main room three times and pauses sharpening her axe. Her look of curiosity delves into concern. Danilo leans on the wall, a sigh slipping through his teeth. Gellert looks up from the book tucked between his pinkie and thumb to regard him. Hestia's soft gaze doesn't move from Danilo, even when Magus grunts from the floor at her side, leaning away from the slackened axe blade.

"Hey." Gellert smiles, though it doesn't reach his eyes.

A young face sears to the forefront of Danilo's memory. The rueful ache in his chest makes him drop his gaze.

"Hi. Have any of you seen Enzo?"

Magus looks up from his cross-legged seat to shake his head, then continues sharpening his dagger. Gellert and Hestia mutter 'no'.

"Sorry, kid." Borak glances at him while Reina plays a hand from their game.

Danilo jumps, crossing his arms to hide the action, having forgotten their silent presence after his first pass through the room. Magus moves his blade's edge over the whetstone, back and forth and angled. Danilo tries to ignore his technique, though the dagger's song sounds more like a cry than a tune. He shuffles over and Magus meets his eyes.

"You're doing it wrong." Sliding the stone off Magus' knee, Danilo shifts it in his grasp. He reaches for his ankle, pauses, and paws at his boot. Magus flicks the dagger in his palm, offering the hilt to Danilo.

Danilo stares at him, reaching for the offered item. The pyromaniac's eyes gleam with a vindictive challenge which reminds Danilo of the psychotic tendencies the fire mage had yet to unleash in his direction. His fingers twitch with the urge to plunge the blade into Magus' neck.

He pulls his arm into his side, rolling the dagger in his palm. Aside from the edges angered by being sharpened wrong, it's an ordinary weapon.

Placing one edge against his propped knee, Danilo braces the hilt to keep it still. Taking the stone in his hand, he runs it down one side and pulls it up the other, each push and pull with the same gentle pressure. Magus watches him, absorbing the technique.

"Flawless." A darkness rolls through Magus' eyes. "Instinct to you, isn't it?"

Danilo flicks his thumb on the edge, refusing to meet Magus' keen gaze as he flips the blade. He stops after a couple passes, dropping the stone in Magus' lap and offering the dagger's hilt to him. Magus mimics the exact hold and Danilo bumps the hilt until Magus fixes his grip, his long, thin fingers cupping the hilt rather than commanding it to be still. Each pass is weak, but it's accurate, practice making the new and awkward movement easy.

Hestia observes them and Danilo bristles under her attention.

"What?" He asks.

She shakes her head with a warm, wavering smile and drops her gaze to the axe in her hands. Gellert smiles at her and turns it on Danilo, matching Hestia's expression with none of her paternal inclination, and returns to his book.

"You look better, Dani-boy." Magus bumps his elbow.

Danilo rocks his shoulders beneath Hestia's gaze and Borak turns to look at him. Reina glances in his direction, throws her hand of cards down, and slaps the table when Borak doesn't act soon after.

From honest training and consistent meals, Danilo is returning to his old strength. And while he's not as husky as he was, he's healthy. The pains in his knees when he trains are from effort, not from rotating a bony surface over the ground.

"Been talking about me?"

"Yes." Borak places his cards down, leaning his cheek into his knuckles to watch Danilo from the corner of his eye.

It snatches the breath from Danilo's lungs. Of course they talk about him, he's not their ally. The tension around his head bears down on him.

"I've been feeling better," he says as he stands.

Hestia's watering eyes snap to his, a wobbly grin on her face. As he tries to avoid the strength of her expression, he finds Borak's softened smile. His throat dries and he stumbles back.

"I'm gonna find Enzo."

When he's out of their sight, he sags against the nearest wall, trying to settle his racing heart.



Danilo discovers Enzo was never at the estate. With Bratni in critical condition, Borak near depleted himself into ‘magical exhaustion’. Which, as far as Danilo understood, meant Borak had been about half a day from dropping dead from the sheer demand of caring for Bratni. And unless Danilo could convert his sensitivity into the gift of healing—impossible, if he could discern anything from Easton’s rambling—there was nothing more to be done than to wait for the outcome. As time ticked on, it became bleaker.

Between his self-scheduled training sessions, the Nephla’s chosen have sporadically cycled through. He’s grateful that while they seem preoccupied, they have a designated member to keep the General in his cage.

Unfortunately, Danilo is left to his own discretion; an unfortunate circumstance leaving him to struggle with his sensitivity along with a whirlwind of thoughts. The potential for catastrophe lends him strength to force through another set of practiced, memorized movements.

For about another hour.

He throws the dull sword down at the door, storming the hallway. He halts when the borders of the dark door thrust to life with a gut-punching, familiar shade of blue. His heel catches on an unveled board and he braces himself on the wall, watching Enzo emerge from a room across from the General’s confines. Enzo’s hand hovers before the door with sharp eyes on his task.

Danilo, never seeing the process from the opposing side, gapes at the ice spreading over the wood. It cracks into jagged blue lines; not unlike Easton’s spiderweb of magic. The General fights, and each hit to the door causes the blue glow to pulse brighter.

Danilo is too occupied with trying to figure out when Enzo returned to notice the peace. It is silent for the first time in days.

Enzo pauses. Easton’s unintelligible shouting from the other room becomes mere background noise as they stare at one another. When Danilo fails to move, or blink, or breathe, Enzo squints in troubled curiosity. Danilo swallows and straightens, looking between Enzo and the door. He stumbles from the hall before Enzo finishes his assessment.

When he crawls into bed, he realizes his error. And with the blue hue lingering in his peripheral each time he blinks, he’s uncertain he’ll find the courage to approach Enzo before his sensitivity overtakes him.



Danilo knows Enzo's ignoring him, which becomes painful for more reasons than the ache in his head. Llodis' unending hollers encapsulate him in horrors he entirely forgot. Despite it, and the rings manacled around his fingers, and the occasional flinch he tries to hide from the others, ignoring the General is freeing—liberating.

However, this sense of doom—not so freeing.

He charges through the house in search of Enzo once again, hushed discussions falling stagnant as he passes. The General's door glistens in the edge of his vision while he circles the hall and main quarters. A harsh blue.

Danilo paces for an hour, debating a course of action. Hestia's sad eyes avoid connecting with him when he stumbles into the living area again. Easton's eyes flick between him and the floor lightning-fast, his fingers twitch and he shifts in his seat.

Gellert leans next to the entrance Danilo is paused in, his shoulders set and eyes hard. Danilo shuffles from the room.

He stumbles into Magus upon entering the kitchen. Magus' hands squeeze his upper arms to slow him. They meet eyes, and the corners of Magus' gaze tighten. Reina watches from a small table in the back corner of the kitchen.

"Know where Enzo is?"

Magus chokes out a sigh and shakes his head. Danilo nods and Magus drops his hold.

Danilo wanders the house in circles again. After nearly an hour, there's one room left he hasn't bothered to check—aside from the door with the blue glow—which feels like a death wish to attempt.

Regardless, he knocks on Enzo's door, the beat tuneful with a confidence he doesn't feel. He hears no movement on the other side. When he knocks again, the door croaks open. There's a pause where he expects Enzo to rip open the door with the speed of a roiling storm. The darkness echoes back.

He means to call for Enzo. But as he slips in to peer around the door, no words escape him. Curiosity renders him quiet.

It's cluttered and overrun by a mass of trinkets, trunks, and a slew of books. Not barren, as he expected, rather muted in colour and personality. Bright only by the eastern sunlight streaming through the open window, bathing papers in a golden glow. None of the items appeared sentimental, a loss Danilo understands; the war has cost them all. A single parchment hangs over the desk, small trinkets scattered across its surface. Danilo glances over his shoulder before

sliding into the room. The door pads against the frame as he leans on it, eyes enraptured, while his heart pounds on his ribs. Silence is stagnant in the room.

The parchment's edges flake and crack despite the bright, new colour suggesting its young age. Intersecting lines of black and red vein over faded designs. Red lines mark the paths of the Beseecher's finest over the Gentled East. Danilo knows Enzo was a strategist, but only comprehends the weight of such a role looking upon the chaos. Paths he knew by memory. How the Stormthrowers have such detailed knowledge, Danilo doesn't know. But as it sits before him, parchment edges draping over the sides of the desk, he cannot deny its accuracy.

He scoffs at the red mark of Audantei's soldiers across the Iotai Trail, faded among the stark additions. He traces its line, mouth twisted with a hint of pride. It dulls the hot smoulder of outrage in his chest.

In the map's center, at the halfway point between Audantei and Bugandi—the southern vineyard outside Audantei's largest competitor—lays two parallel lines. Never intersecting. It is not a simple correction, with the ink seeped into the life of the parchment. Yet he dips a wooden quill in a bottle of black ink, prepared to mark a secondary option, hoping to avoid a collision with a patrol of the Commander's greatest of fifty.

"What are you doing?"

Danilo leaps in his spot, wrenching his arm back before the black ink can drip on the paper. Enzo's tone is frigid in a way Danilo hasn't heard in months. He swings around to face Enzo, swallowing at the dangerous gleam in his eyes.

"I—" he stutters. "Uh."

"For reasons of which I am unaware, you welcomed yourself into my quarters and—upon not finding me—decided to make 'adjustments' to plans you have been strictly forbidden from examining."

"N-no, wait, that's—no—"

"No. Young Altamura, you've nothing more to explain. Now—" Enzo says, grabbing the edge of the door and hauling it open, "get out."

Danilo stands there, gaping. His lungs flutter at the mental image his ignorance has painted. Just as he grinds his teeth, preparing to dig his heels in and brave the backlash, Enzo slams his hands together and blue drowns the room. Danilo's head tilts and the clawing sensation shredding at his head and throat doubles until he cannot breathe.

"Get out!"

His feet leave the floor before he can think to move. Familiarity prickles at the forefront of his thoughts—above the pain and the confusion—drawing him into the memory of the Narota camp, in the same darkened confines with the same feeling of ice needling his skin; a weightlessness similar to the events which started Danilo on his lonely course. He lands on his knees, head lowered to the stone floor as he fights his pains. Drool smears across his chin from his efforts.

By the time he's successfully pushed them back, the door is closed. A blue hue glistens at its edges.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Danilo is submerged in blankets the following morning, anger and betrayal twisting tighter around his lungs with each sluggish hour. He's determined to sulk the day away and ignore the sunlight burning through the window across from him, the fabric cover flapping in the wind with the promise of an oncoming sandstorm.

His determination is wrought short when a clatter of metal rises from the common area. He swings his legs over the edge of the bed and ignores the spiking agony from each step.

As he steps from the hall, Enzo shoves past, a scowl marring his features, and continues on. Hestia's sad eyes try to find Danilo's from across the room, but at every near pass, he ducks his head. With slow steps, he approaches Magus, who leans against a nearby wall.

"What's going on?" Danilo asks.

Magus shakes his head and whistles at Reina. She looks up from the vambrace she is struggling to secure to her forearm. He gestures for her to come closer. Rolling her eyes, she wanders over, a wry glance at Danilo.

"There's been an attack. It's an hour away and we should clear it out by tonight." Magus says.

Magus pulls Reina's strap tight. She yanks her arm back, his fingers moving deftly to loosen it.

"Do..." Danilo's throat tightens at Reina's glare, "...do you need any—"

"No," Enzo growls from the other side of the room.

The movement grinds to a halt. Sand spurts from the clattering battened windows, causing dust to settle in the fraught air of the dark room. Danilo drops his gaze, refusing to release his sigh or his sneer.

"I've been fighting my whole life, I can—" he starts.

"You," Enzo scoffs. "Yes, you have fought your whole life. And while you seem innocent and capable, you are still the enemy."

Danilo chokes on his breath. Enzo's resentment is now binding with the festering pains of his neglected sensitivity. Being called Enzo's 'enemy' feels more founded now than when he was the Lieutenant Commander.

Wind collides against the building, plowing a board off the shutter and spewing sand through the gap. Light bathes in the opening, battling with the firelight threatening to snuff out. Reina snorts irately before stomping over. Her palms hover over the remaining board on the shutter. It swells, devouring the opening. Magus wiggles his fingers and the lanterns on the wall flicker blue. Danilo remains quiet, and the room builds back to its rush. Magus tilts his head to meet Danilo's eyes. Danilo allows it for only a moment. With a nod, Magus smacks him on the side of his tender, nearly healed arm, and moves to follow the directions he likely received when Danilo hadn't been present.

After a few minutes of watching them prepare, the anxiety to help overtakes him. He circles, collecting items and stacking others, dropping occasional hints to Magus and Hestia; wary of Enzo's anger clouding the air above him. He stares at Reina as she stares at him, fiddling with the strap of her quiver. A question burns his tongue.

He cups the arrows as the leather strap slides between his clammy palms. "Where's the General?"

"Is there something the two of you need to discuss?" Enzo snarls while stalking behind him to collect a rolled parchment.

Magus bumps into Enzo, knocking the satchel off his arm. Enzo delivers a frosty glare at Magus before bending to collect the contents. Magus winks at Danilo—lacking its usual mirth—before Enzo stands. Danilo shuffles back when Easton appears in his space.

“He’s quarantined until—until we, uh, leave.” Easton’s fingers fidget with a worn compass, dancing in the tension. “We can’t contain him when—we’re all gone.”

Danilo feels himself pale, mouthing ‘all?’. Easton nods, and Danilo clenches his jaw to try to crush his worry.

“You’ve—” Easton glances over his shoulder at Enzo. “You’ve got complete access.”

Danilo grimaces and steps away from Easton, unable to make eye contact when Easton scrambles closer to his front.

“Could even go outside.” Easton tries a friendly smile. “But I—I don’t suggest it. Looks like, uh, a storm is...”

Gellert’s eyes are hard on him from under dark brows. Distrusting and angry. He jerks his chin at Easton and creeps to the other side of the room, lingering in its shadows until the bustle slows. Reina approaches him with an outstretched hand. Danilo looks at her with a blank expression before the leather slides between his fidgeting fingers. He thrusts her quiver out to her.

Enzo pins him with a glare. Desperation bursts forward in his chest, and Danilo tries urging Enzo to understand with a desperate gaze. Enzo’s lip curls. He throws open the door. Danilo’s facade cracks when the brewing sandstorm strips the wood from Enzo’s hold. It slams into the wall, sand creeping across the floor. Enzo steps from the building without a glance over his shoulder. Hestia chases after him.

Easton leaps up, eyes flicking between Danilo and Enzo’s receding back. Reina follows Hestia’s angered shouting, tugging Easton by his shirt collar. He stumbles after, the squeeze at his neck keeping him from spewing information to a dejected Danilo. Magus mutters under his breath and slaps Danilo’s shoulder as he passes into one of the abandoned rooms. The front door groans as the wind pulls it through the sand gathering at the doorsill.

Sighing through his nose, Danilo turns to grab his book from the table. He lurches when he finds it in Gellert’s hands, gold magic glittering over the cover. It vanishes into the leather like dust. Danilo reaches to take it when Gellert offers it out. When Gellert lets go, it slides through Danilo’s hand like he is an invisible force. The thud echoes in the room. Gellert sneers, shoves Danilo’s shoulder with his own, and storms towards the door.

Magus cusses at the man’s back, earning an ill-intended gesture from his comrade. Danilo ignores them both, instead opting to watch the fabric Magus

winds around his neck and head. The door thunks against the wall and Danilo flinches, blond curls tickling his lashes as he glares at it. Magus pats his arm before moving past him. He stalls in the entry, clenching the door in his hand when the wind threatens to take it.

“Wish us luck.” Then he pulls the door shut, leaving Danilo to watch sand puddle beneath the door’s edge. The wood muffles the cry of the storm and he’s alone with nothing but silence as his punishment.

“Good luck.” Danilo whispers.

Magus’ holler echoes outside as the wind pauses in its attack. “Oi, I’ll relieve Borak—hey, hey, pretend you’ll miss me”. Danilo looks down at the book, toeing at it in hopes of pushing it aside. His boot merely passes through it. An apparition like those on the desert horizon. He sighs at the empty house, watching as the lanterns threaten to dim out upon Magus’ leave. Their flickering steadies, the light less brilliant than before.

A heavy pattern beats across the floor, springing forward an icy fear in Danilo’s chest. It spears through the last of his hope.

Danilo would have preferred it if the General barreled into the room as if aflame. But when he sashays to the front door, Danilo knows the silence builds toward an explosive moment.

Striking winds pound the door against its frame, held still by the man’s meaty hand. Lightning strikes a bellow from the man. The General pries at the hand melded with the handle in an attempt to free himself. He must have irked Borak more than it showed. Danilo smirks but is fast to control it when the General stumbles back, panting and snarling insults beneath his breath.

“Skud.” He flexes trembling fingers. “Aren’t allowed out, are we? There are ways past that.”

With a scowl aimed at the man, Danilo backs from the main quarter. His movements are slow and silent to keep out from under the General’s unwavering attention. The man makes no sign he otherwise knew of Danilo’s presence. Fixated on an escape.

When Danilo shuts the door to his room, he hopes to find his brief solitude warding against the General. He tugs the cover over his aching head, blocking out all thoughts of the man and the light slipping beneath the sheer fabric.

Danilo intends to stew where he left off. But it proves difficult with daylight cutting through the screaming fabric over his window, the sun having shifted to

attack it directly. Sand gathers on the floor beneath. Guilt laps at his conscience, the hazy warmth of sleep easing its sting.

Eventually, Danilo crawled out to eat, newly conditioned to address his hunger. He toes passed the main room, boots whisper-soft across the mudstone. Then freezes at the sight of the kitchen.

Though it is a little room, with even less storage, it is fraught with devastation. What wares they did not barricade in Gellert's greenhouse are strewn across the floor, counters and tables—as hyenas would shred a cadaver. Dining chairs lay in multiple heaps from Llodis' attempts to break the magic over the window latches. He scoffs, backing into the living quarters.

A snore rumbles from the couch. Danilo stops, staring at its backrest. The General's feet dangle over one edge, and the shoulder of his beige tunic is visible in time with his breathing.

As lieutenant, Danilo learned to be adaptable. And his adaptability kept him alive. But looking upon the man who'd been his superior, in every aspect of his life, he understood what his men had meant when they explained to have 'frozen in fear'. There isn't a single strategy that will help him now. His lingering stare startles the man awake. Llodis leaps from the couch, fixing wild eyes on Danilo.

Danilo swallows, keeping his shoulders locked as he trudges by for the training room. He maintains the same subservient position he used as a soldier. Llodis' eyes follow him—Danilo's skin crawls up his spine in an unrelenting sensation he associates with the gutter alleys; the knowledge of an oncoming fight. Briefly, he wonders if his sensitivity is trying to warn him. He doubts it. When the General makes no advance towards him, Danilo slinks by and into the training room.

He feels the immediate change upon entering the room. It's colder than the rest of the house; frigid and derisive. Deep, rigid grooves now span the walls. Though a part of the walls story from long before, the shadows accentuate them in a new way. He sniffs, halting before the weapons rack. A single unbroken sword glints in the fragmented rays beneath his palm. The fighting staff encroaches on his peripheral, returned to its rightful home. Grasping the staff, he wonders how fast it would break in comparison. His anger dares him to find out.

At first, it is a lot of awkward flailing and whacking himself in the ankles. After an hour, he's certain he'll have enough welts and bruises that if he doesn't

break the staff, Enzo will still berate him. He stumbles before shaking his head and resuming.

Sand rains from the broken glass sunlight as the wind batters against the house. The staff swings into action, malice charring the edges of his thoughts. It finds balance in his hands, moving with him. It isn't smooth. And it definitely isn't graceful. But it is effective.

Danilo focuses on his form and the staff as an extension of himself—like his sword had been. Each swing is seen within a series of attacks. Jabs directed against unseen opponents. Swipes curve toward the knees and heads of foes, his limbs moving in an imaginary battle only his body knows.

A sense of urgency scrapes within the cavity of his chest, and the staff surges behind him. Directed at the side of the General's head. Llodis snatches the weapon, prepared for the strike. They stand, watching one another. Nothing is said for a moment. But distrusting glares are cast both ways.

"Best way to move like the enemy is to be taught by the enemy." A grin overtakes the General's face, stretching like a snake preparing to unhinge its jaw.

The General's meaty hand grips the staff with white knuckles, and his sword shines at his hip. Danilo isn't about to outright deny him.

"Would you like something?" Danilo tilts his head back. "Sir."

A glare has more emotion than the cold, blank stare the General delivers his way. Danilo's spine twitches under it.

"How desperately do you wish to be pardoned?"

Pardoned. It's a word Danilo has longed to hear. And one he lost hope for with the General's latest threats toward him. As it falls from Llodis' mouth, it sounds a lot like 'massacred'. The General takes his silence as intrigue—he isn't wrong.

"I apologize, boy. We'd planned this since the beginning."

"We?"

"Beseecher Guerra and I." The General allows Danilo to tear the staff from his hand. "We had orchestrated the ordeal to put my best in the enemy's folds. To put you right where we needed you most."

Danilo scoffs, slowly retreating. For every two of his steps back, the General takes one forward.

"And how were you to know that it would be Enzo and his merry band of misfits to take me off the streets?"

"The Lieutenant Commander of Audantei is a powerful temptation."

It had been, hadn't it? Hestia had sung her little siren song of promises and he'd literally gone willingly. Had been led like a dog on a line, and for all his barking, he followed them without a fight.

"If you come with me now, we can get you pardoned. But if you continue to stay in this shack with these Skud, then you will be labeled a traitor of Audantei. There will be nowhere in the Gentled East you could go." Danilo spins the staff as he thinks. "And it's easy to see how far this lot extends their trust."

Resentment collides inside Danilo's chest; thunderous and wild and at war with his heart. Its chaotic demands sully his face with a sneer, and though the General remains at his back, he struggles to hide it.



Danilo is an idiot, that's what he is.

Sand sprays into his face. He tugs his hood over his mouth and nose to keep from inhaling it. The fabric over his eyes flaps and he tilts his face inward to avoid the wind whipping the skin of his cheeks. General Llodis marches onward, hood secured and a cloth guarding his nose.

To avoid the worst of the storm, they trudge west of the estate to the sparse forest of palms and gnarled underbrush. He stumbles on the serrated vines, wrenching his pant leg from his boot. The palms overhead are dead, their leaves shriveled and browned next to the rotting dates rolling across the sand. Most trees die in the summertime at this proximity to Medumean's Heart.

He's fifteen minutes into the dust storm when he's slapped with the reminder of where the General had so recently disappeared to. And with it comes the horrific reminder that this is the man that hanged Danilo's family. Hanged his own wife and children. Danilo knows he did it without regret.

"General, why did you hang them?" The wind drowns his shout and the General trudges on. Danilo stops, pulling the hood away from his face. "Father!"

Llodis halts, turning to look over his shoulder. Danilo can't see his eyes through the whipping sand.

"Why did you hang them?"

The wind continues to scream past his ears, and Danilo believes the General will ignore him once again. Anger rumbles through him, like the sand had barreled into the house, echoing alongside the persistent thought of 'enemy'.

“You really wanna know why, boy?” The General withdraws his sword. “It’s because I never cared for them.”

If there is something to note about the General’s sword, it’s the pure white colour of the blade. The colour of bone. Nuicallian blades are made in one of two shades; black or white. Ostertain metal is a coastal tradition, blending the minerals into the natural slate found there. Nuicallians of the tundra dye their blades white as the snow.

Danilo stands out like a black blade on a white backdrop. As the General advances through the flying sands of the dust storm, the beige of his uniform blends in. The reddish hue of his light hair and the white gleam of his blade flicker in and out of Danilo’s sight. He palms at his empty waist, muscle memory driving him to fight.

A snap echoes to his left. Not the loud crack of a branch broken from a tree, but softer. The General freezes.

They’re not alone.

“And you were coming with me.”

Metal glints in Danilo’s peripheral and the growling in his chest stops long enough for his brain to whisper ‘run’.

Danilo turns into the wind, choking on a mouthful of sand. He fumbles to cover his mouth and nose.

It’s a battle to run against the wind and sand blasting him. His boots sink ankle deep. Hope blazes within him—he only needs to lose them in the sand. Unfortunately, the odds of it happening before he can carve his path back to the house are slim. Sunlight glares through the sand in the air, mocking him as he struggles to find the estate.

A branch snags across his face, but its sting is pale compared to the one against his shins. His fingers wind into the familiar sharp and cold weight of a tripwire. General Llodis’ shouts carry nearer in the wind.

With panicked tugs, he frees his ankles and scrambles to his feet. The wind tears at the bare skin of his leg, the wire having cut the fabric where it’d been free of his boot. He cradles the cloth against his lower face, panting against the humidity. His cheeks sing as the wind rips off his hood.

A dark shadow engulfs him. The estate stands tall in the haze of sand; a refuge. He’s steps from the door when he’s struck in the back of the knee. As he fumbles to grab the handle, he’s pinned to the door, his arms yanked behind him.

The soldier careens forward to trap Danilo with his weight, and Danilo cracks his head to the soft tissue of the man's nose. The cry is first of shock, then of pain. Danilo hopes he broke it. He grapples at the door-frame with his loose hand.

A wire wrenches around Danilo's free wrist, pulling it away from the door. Danilo turns his head from beneath the soldier's forearm. He chokes in surprise to find it's Deandro, determination blazing across his rugged features.

When Danilo plants his feet to kick off the door, Dermish tackles his legs. They land in the sand, and the grit momentarily dislodges their grasp, slick from sweat and spit. Danilo kicks at the door, trying to give himself an opening. It's just out of his reach.

"Spill his blood, I spill yours. He's of no use dead."

The General moves outside the fight, a fist held up as Turniuk and Chakon wait to leap into action. When Danilo rolls, Deandro is caught between his knees. He is smart enough to cover his head before Danilo can strike him. Dermish leaps up, bear-hugging Danilo's arms to his sides. This time, when Danilo flings his head back, he dodges. Beneath him, Deandro waits for Danilo's move. Danilo drives Dermish against the door, holding him to the wood. Deandro scrambles up and Danilo drives a heel into his temple.

The General nods to Turniuk. As he rushes forward, Danilo throws Dermish at him. Danilo's fabric guard is stripped from his face, and his mouth fills with sand and dust. Llodis rolls his eyes and nods to Chakon.

Sand sprays around Danilo's feet, his fingers brushing the door handle. An arrow sinks into the tender flesh of his thigh. He collapses, one hand against the door-frame and the other clutching the wound. A ragged cry falls from his drooling lips as he struggles for air.

Deandro bounds up from the sands, wrapping the wire around the hand Danilo squeezes his wounded thigh with. Then he wrenches back the other that had been propping Danilo up. They collide with the edge of the door-frame. Danilo coughs. Deandro binds his wrist proficiently.

Danilo casts a sneer over his shoulder, and it delves into a cackle. Blood smears beneath Deandro's crooked nose. His laughter is cut short when Turniuk kicks out his injured knee, and the arrow snaps when he lands on it.

"What are you doing? Hog tying him? Just get to his ankles already." Turniuk coughs, yanking his own mask back into place.

"Shut up," Deandro says, blocking his face with Danilo's neck before stretching the wire to tie Danilo's elbows together.

Danilo shakes his head, trying to loosen the sand from his hair. It flies into his eyes. He tries rolling, hoping to aim a kick at Turniuk. Chakon kneels on the back of his thigh where the broken arrow protrudes. A garbled howl falls from his lips.

"Shut up, boy." The General kicks sand into his face.

He steps away, the green glow of jade reflecting in the sand beneath his feet. Danilo swallows.

"Burn the place down," Chakon says, tearing the rest of the arrow out and chasing Deandro away, hooking Danilo's collar.

"No," Llodis barks.

"But sir, you said the less resources and clues they have, the better."

"I've changed my mind. He's done plenty to help." The General gestures at Danilo. He tries to ignore the burn of vomit in his throat at the reminder.

"The blood, sir."

"You boys know how to clean up after yourselves."

Deandro leads three horses with sacks over their heads. Sand dusts the General's glistening cremello, its extravagantly detailed leather accessories now blended into its mane. Two plain bays follow behind it. Judging by the lack of sand in the air, they'll ride out soon. The General turns to the soldiers pinning him down.

"You," he says, gesturing vaguely at them, "stay here. I want you waiting for their return."

"Sir, we didn't bring enough water."

"Then die by your own stupidity."

"General—" Dermish steps forward, shielding his eyes from the wind.

"Would you die for the Beseecher?" The General moves towards them, hovering over Danilo as Deandro forces him into a kneeling position.

"Yes, sir," Dermish replies.

"Then make peace with your fate."

Danilo wrenches his shoulders and spits sand from his mouth. "You'll have two dead men for no reason."

"Oh, concerned with the fate of my men, are you?" The General turns, a wicked grin on his face. "Open the door, then. There is plenty of water inside."

Danilo squirms. "They aren't returning," he says.

The General squints, his hair whipping into his eyes. He squats in front of Danilo and grabs his jaw, chuckling.

"You're a piss-poor liar," he says, "and a fool."

When the General stalks away, Danilo chances a glance at his tags that lay half hidden in the sand. Panic claws at his chest, but he refuses to keep his gaze in fear the soldiers will find them.

"Sir?"

"What?" the General snarls.

Chakon, still kneeling on Danilo's thigh, shifts under the weight of the man's cold gaze. "Deandro should go."

"Hijacking his responsibility, are you?" Llodis crowds Chakon—the only soldier Danilo thought would be enduringly loyal to the General.

"No, sir." Chakon shifts, glancing at Deandro. "But look at the state of his nose."

The General glares at Danilo before looking. Danilo watches anger and appreciation collide in his eyes as he looks upon Deandro's swelling nose, blood sluggishly running into his teeth. He spits blood aside, unable to meet the General's appraising gaze.

"I'd say he's earned the right to a healer, sir," Chakon says.

Llodis meets Chakon's gaze, and Danilo—though incensed about the situation—applauds Chakon for not shrinking beneath it.

"Very well." The General turns to Dermish. "Take his place."

Chakon twists his hand beneath Danilo's hood, yanking the hair at the base of his neck to force him towards the horses. Danilo anchors his feet in the sand, but his thrashing does little to deter Chakon from his path. Danilo sweeps Chakon's feet with his bad leg—his head sings from pain—and Chakon drops. But the General, the man who had trained him before he was a scout, the man he fought alongside, was prepared.

Before Danilo can run, the pommel of General Llodis' sword strikes his temple. His vision darkens at the edges as he falls to his knees. He blinks away black spots dazedly. From his previous conversations with Enzo, he supposes he has his sensitivity to thank for that. Though, if not for his sensitivity, he wouldn't be bound before the Mad General of Audantei, whose eyes shine wildly.

The General fists his hair and drags him towards the horses. Danilo tries easing the pain on his scalp by kicking his good leg into the sand. Between his

fading vision and the steady beat of his wounded thigh, Danilo doesn't have time to fight.

Blood rushes to his head as he dangles over the horse's rump. The General mounts and Danilo grimaces. He'd thrown it all away—the peace and safety—for one chance at a life with the Stormthrowers he never wanted. And as the General kicks his steed into action, Danilo doubts they will look for him. It leaves him with a sinking feeling, unsure which is worse: the possibility of what comes, or that not a single soul would consider him worth saving.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Danilo's head throbs where the General's armoured knuckles had cracked against his brow when he attempted to roll off the horse. He blinks back the pocked sunlight dusting across his eyes from beneath the sack over his head, flexing his jaw from the strip of cloth yanking at the corners of his mouth.

An overwhelming odour of manure and cattle entwines with the scents of bread and clay. Bartering merchants and idle chatter drown out the complaints passing through his gag. He tongues at the sandy fabric, grinding his teeth against it in reflex. The horses trot over the cobbled streets, their paths through the main roads effortless and fluid—aside from the bounce of the gelding's rump against his ribs.

He's tempted to roll free again. Though bound, gagged, and blinded, there's little he can attempt. It would merely risk the civilians' lives in his path. Not that any of them would rush to his aid when he's a captive on the horse of the High General of Audantei.

Shouts whiz by as civilians leap from the horses' paths. From the horse's rump, lacking his usual military garments, he'll remain unrecognizable until he faces the trials of Hanging Day. The onlookers will be content to watch his feet dangle alongside the others he's placed with on the gallows.

When hooves move from clay to stone, his chest drops into his stomach. Though its halls are vast, atop the horses, they will reach the throne room in minutes. Shadows and lights flicker by rhythmically, arching posts of the open halls sailing past the cloth.

The horses lurch to a stop with a snort. Danilo twists his bound wrists, yelping when he's shoved from the rump. His head connects with the stone floor, and he slumps, his sight wavering as he's pulled up by the front of his shirt. The authoritative command of a Beseecher's Best turns his stomach over with nervousness. As their titles suggest, these men served one purpose: to guard the Beseecher in everything he does; in politics, in bed, or in battle. While Danilo wonders if their skills are as renowned as professed, now, with his hands bound and blinded, is not the time to test his theories.

"You're dismissed, General."

"What?" Llodis' voice gurgles from above Danilo's head.

"He does not want your bias to take precedence in the room." Armour clanks together as a soldier moves closer.

"Bias?!"

"Leave, General. Before you're made to leave."

Hands grapple at Danilo's upper arms and drag him into Kosymo Guerra's quarters. Llodis cusses loudly, the word echoing over the ding of his helmet against the carved marble post. A door groans shut, dulling whatever choice words the General followed with.

Danilo's head spins, distant from his shoulders with pain, as he's forced to walk deeper into the room. Only after he's shoved to his knees, do the black spots fade. Wire digs tighter into his wrists when the man steps atop it. He hisses, leaning back to ease the chances of slicing them open. His fingers twitch when they brush a leather boot.

Time drags on, and his arched back aches. When he'd been Lieutenant, criminals and Stormthrowers would try alleviating their pain by leaning against the soldier pinning them down. Often, they'd receive a knee to their heads. It was rare that soldiers would let it happen. The man behind Danilo inches forward. He recoils, struggling against the grip reflexively until his back is settled on the man's knee. His grip relaxes when Danilo pauses.

"I'm sorry, Danilo." Nalcun squeezes his shoulder.

Danilo accepts the help and silence while he can, the gentle weight of Nalcun's hand grounding in the tense atmosphere of Guerra's quarters. His neck sweats from the hot air beneath the sack.

When the wood door crashes against the stone wall, a familiar clang follows. Danilo tensed and straightens. Nalcun tries pulling him back.

Chain mail chinks against shoulder plates. Kosymo Guerra has entered.

"You, Lieutenant Altamura, are as slippery as an eel." Nalcun flinches at the timbre of his voice, allowing Danilo free of his hold.

Guerra's armour shakes and the cloth tears off Danilo's head. He's blinded by the light chopping up the room from the balcony. By the time Danilo's eyes adjust, Guerra has shed parts of his armour on a nearby table. Danilo commits the arching ceiling, golden beams, and draping red fabric lining the walls to memory.

"I've expected your arrival for some time." Guerra meanders across the room, crouching to Danilo's level.

There's no dip in Guerra's straight nose, just as there's no remorse in his dark eyes framed by thick brows. His thin beard is only thick above his frown. Light scars freckle across his face—like the General, like Danilo, and like every other soldier Danilo has come across, even those outside of Audantei's military; the scars of a fighter.

"I was thinking about using this—" Guerra lifts a sword, its blade glimmering. The runes down the blade's center ripple a harsh black in the sun. He laughs, slow and cunning, when Danilo leans his head back and clenches down on the gag. "I'm glad you remember it."

Danilo glares. That sword had been the dime that flipped his world on its head.

Guerra rips the gag from Danilo's mouth, catching it on his teeth. "If you've got something to say, then say it."

Danilo spits in his face.

Nalcun cuffs him in the back of the head. Not as hard as a soldier would, but the warning is clear. Kosymo grins and wipes his cheek. Another laugh rises from his chest.

"You have always been ballsy." Kosymo's smile twists from humoured to devious. "I tested this sword on every soldier in my army. Then I tried using force on your brother."

He reaches up and slides a hand around Danilo's throat, squeezing when Danilo breathes out.

"You are the only one this sword responds to that doesn't have magic," Guerra says. "Isn't that unfortunate for you?"

His hand relaxes when Danilo's eyes water. Danilo tries not to gasp as air rushes back into his lungs.

Guerra stands, stares at Nalcun—who squeezes Danilo's shoulders—and turns back to his desk.

"How is he?" Guerra tosses something black into the air and it clatters against the desk's contents. He sniffs, reaching for another item. A smirk plays across his face when he glances over his shoulder. "Your brother?"

Danilo grinds his teeth together. Guerra grins, rubbing his iron sword with a cloth.

"Are you prepared to die, Lieutenant?"

In every honest sense, Danilo had been ready. He was raised to do just that. But when the General chased him out of their ranks and had named him an enemy of Audantei, it opened his eyes to the disturbing truth.

He will die for a cause, but not Guerra's. And not today.

Guerra tuts. When he turns back around, the sword's edge gleams with an unidentifiable substance. Though Danilo's sure he's about to get a much closer look.

Nalcun releases his shoulder and backs up with his hands clasped behind him. Guerra points the sword at the hollow of Danilo's throat, and Danilo sets his shoulders. Guerra needs him alive—no matter how much he may want Danilo dead.

"Your answer has changed. I'll remind you who you belong to."

The blade pierces the skin on Danilo's throat and he winces at the flame of pain crawling through his veins beneath the cold metal. Venom from the white cobra is extracted by poisoners and assassins, but it can be done by anyone with a steady hand. Its venom, paired with its saliva, acts as a paralytic. Alone, the venom acts as the opposite of a painkiller. Sweat and venom run down the column of his throat, leaving streaks in the sand and dirt. He grinds his teeth as a garbled cry escapes him, regardless of his effort to suppress it.

"Submit; make this easier for yourself. I will gladly make it worse." Guerra steps closer, forcing the sword to glide along the cut he creates.

Danilo pants, sweat rolling down his forehead and into his eyes. He gasps as Guerra pulls back to appraise him. His reprieve shatters when Guerra drives the sword against the open wound on his thigh, drool running from between his teeth while he fights against the will of the Beseecher.

“Very well.” Guerra pulls the sword back. “I look forward to what’s coming.”

He gestures to Nalcun before tossing the sword onto his desk, disrupting its contents and bumping various belongings to the floor. Nalcun drags Danilo up by the wire around his wrists, pulling him to the manacles built into the wall and locking him in place. Guerra wipes his hands with a damp cloth, watching with keen eyes.

“I’m going to see the boy.”

He stalks forward and Nalcun approaches the door, holding it open in wait. Danilo leans away when Guerra gets in his face. “When I come back, you’ll remember who you answer to.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The only individual from Enzo's crew who had witnessed his debacles was Hestia, and he refuses to make an exception for the rest of them. Upon returning to the Geovex estate to find Danilo and the General missing, he will admit he came close to losing his restraint.

"He saw his opening and took it." Gellert leans against the wall, spear tucked between his crossed arms and rolling his eyes at Borak. "He and 'e General both."

"You have no way to prove that." Borak pinches his nose, pressing shallow breaths between clenched teeth in an attempt to calm himself.

"And you have no proof he was taken." Gellert's eyes tighten. "No more than an abandoned necklace."

Enzo squeezes the tags in his hands. The jade's etchings bite into his palm. Easton leaps from his seat and runs from the room. He stumbles over the sill and shuts the front door with a bang while everyone watches on. With the tension swirling the air, nobody dares to stop him. Hestia huffs; undoubtedly eager to leave. She shifts on the couch, elbowing Reina in the side accidentally.

"We can't ignore Guerra's plans—" Borak glares at Gellert and continues speaking before Gellert does. "Everything we found in his quarters suggests the most reasonable explanation."

"Most reasonable, but unlikely." Gellert drops his spear onto the floor, listening to the blade ting off the stone. He recrosses his arms.

"Even if it is, he doesn't deserve whatever is coming his way," Borak starts.

"He deserves what the Royal Beseecher has decidedly planned for him." Enzo turns with a sneer, rolling the jade beneath his fingers. "However, that punishment puts the citizens between Audantei and the southern region in jeopardy. Therefore, we should see to it he does not receive it."

Borak grimaces, shaking his head.

"What of the General?" Reina asks.

"He's of neither use nor consequence; leave him to his fate." Enzo flicks his hand.

Hestia raises a brow in argument but recognizes the tone of Enzo's voice as a warning to keep her opinions to herself. She settles into the straw fabric, picking out a large piece jabbing into the back of her bare arm.

"What'll you have us do?" Borak asks.

"Who gave you the false lead?" Enzo asks as he begins pacing.

"Jonatan of the Villusta Isle. Left for 'the city of fish and sea'."

"Decarii?" Enzo scowls.

"Demaunti, I believe."

Demaunti is a trade center known for its gangs—a beacon of activity for black markets and piracy. Enzo had been lucky when Decarii made no effort to engage in such affairs, despite being short hours away by sail. Hearing its name causes his gut to coil.

"And his next client?" Enzo cups his hands behind his back and thumbs the jade tags in thought.

"A chieftain of the Warwest Nuicalli." Borak watches Enzo pass behind him.

"Very well, you will—"

Easton falls through the front door, catching himself on the nearest chair. "There's blood."

"Where?" Gellert pushes off the wall, trudging to the door.

"Outside the front door." Easton shoves shaky fingers through his mousy hair, ruffling the played locks further.

"We didn't see that?" Reina sits up from her spot on the couch, looking amongst the group.

Borak shrugs at her.

"We wouldn't have, they—" Easton glances at Enzo as Gellert reaches him. "It was buried during the, uh, the sandstorm."

"Did you bend the fabrics of time?" Enzo shouts, causing the group to jump. "Easton?"

"Well, uh, I—"

Gellert touches his hand to Easton's shoulder, nodding at the open front door. "Show me."

Enzo sighs and shakes his head. The door rubs shut.

"I'll talk with them, Enzo." Hestia peers up at him, wiping sweat from her forehead.

Enzo raises a brow at her, knowing that when she does speak to Easton, it'll be a softer conversation than he needs. He turns back to Borak. "Intercept Jonatan's meeting. Take Hestia to head the affair."

"Why? Because I'm Nuicalli?" Hestia scoffs, uncrossing her legs and folding her arms.

"No, because your sensitive nature will appeal to their caution."

"What makes you think they'll be cautious?" Borak grabs his back, twisting out his sore back when he stands.

"They are conducting business in Demaunti."

Borak tilts his head with raised brows, conceding.

A ball of fire erupts inches from Borak's face—a collision of blue and orange. He leans back, fanning the roiling heat; a fruitless effort as it evaporates in the air with immediacy. Borak swallows, his eyes glazed with panic when he turns to Enzo.

"Go."

Borak doesn't need to be told twice. He rushes out the front door as it opens, causing Easton to scramble into Gellert. Regardless of his urgency, Enzo doubts he will arrive at the repurposed brothel in time.

"Where's he going?" Gellert tugs Easton in, peering out the door.

Enzo sighs, squeezing the jade tags. "Magus has called upon him."

"Enzo—" Hestia's voice cracks as she stares at him with watery eyes. The inevitable death magnifying the strain of Danilo's absence.

He nods, understanding the weight of her concerns.

"There is nothing to be done." When Hestia looks ready to argue, he adds, "Borak and Magus are both tending to the situation. Our focus must remain

on intercepting Jonatan and deriving any pertinent information from his next meeting. Gellert will travel with you in Borak's stead."

A momentary silence settles over them, disturbed by the hum of hot air over the sand. The wood's pores and the cracks in the brick glow faintly from their efforts to track Danilo's sensitivity. To no avail.

"Jonatan has never given us false information before," Gellert says as he reaches Enzo.

"It does not mean he never would." Enzo pushes his thumb into his eyebrow, nose scrunching in irritation.

"And me?" Reina leans on her knees.

"Take Easton." Enzo looks up to where Easton leans on the door, fingers picking at the scabs on his hands. "There will be messages sent to the Iotai Trail troops by Nalcun Barmithol—the Besecher's adviser. Discover what you will."

"You trust 'is source?" Gellert squints.

Enzo considers the question, but he knows the answer immediately. Regardless, he continues his current path, willing himself to consider multiple avenues before arriving at his response.

"More than Jonatan." Enzo approaches Reina. "Take great care to keep him away from the guards and the snakes."

Reina looks up at Easton.

"I will." She stands. "And I'll try to get into the Besecher's personal quarters."

"Gellert and Borak could afford such risks. We cannot. Try to glean what you can from the comings and goings of the quarters at a safe distance."

Reina nods Easton over, gathering her quiver and arrows from the table. "Need anything Easton?"

"Water."

"Obviously." She says.

When he approaches her, she slings her arm over his shoulder and ushers him from the room.

"Where are we meeting you?" Gellert grabs one saddlebag, abandoned by the door after the initial panic upon their return. His screwed-up expression screams of his skepticism.

"Shushari Outpost, northeast of River Tranduanopa." Enzo grabs his staff and the dragonhead flares blue, responding to the surge of his magic. "I will see to Magus and Borak before joining the others in Audantei. Burn the estate."

Easton, Reina, and Gellert look amongst each other but make no comments. None aloud. Though they disagree, they accept his command without question. For they know as well as Enzo, that the Mad General of Audantei is many things, but he is no fool.

Danilo's legs shake as he fights Guerra's efforts. His poor self-control allows for many things, but crumbling before the Beseecher with tears on his face will not be one of them. Instead, he keeps his knees locked and his glare fixed on Kosymo. Sword runes glow in the hand of the Beseecher. A bright blue that washes out the hue of firelight; a competing force in the darkened quarters. And though the man has charged the weapon as he desired, his displeasure at Danilo's intact determination is apparent.

When Kosymo paces around Danilo's front, the sword glimmers at the edges of his vision.

"Nalcun—" Kosymo waves and Nalcun stumbles to his side with a tense expression. "He's served his purpose today. Hand him off to the soldiers at my door. I don't want him spoiling my mood."

Nalcun dips his head and drags Danilo by an elbow. He doesn't wait for Danilo to get his feet beneath him, but he does slow so that he isn't dragging Danilo's weight. The remains of Guerra's clanging armour approach the door. His meaty hand locks onto Danilo's jaw and he growls in his ear.

"Thank you. Lieutenant."

Guerra strikes the sword against the floor, creating a gapping and jagged seam as thick as Danilo's foot. Guerra's hard chuckle echoes, and he releases Danilo's jaw.

Nalcun plows them into the hall, slamming the heavy darkwood door behind them.

"Beseecher Guerra wants him contained elsewhere." Nalcun clenches the collar of Danilo's tunic, offering him to the soldiers like a kitten. A hapless casualty in Nalcun's profession.

The soldier on Danilo's right grabs a fistful of his hair, a malicious grin emphasized by his missing teeth. His excitement glimmers like the marble walls behind him, the torches fixed on it, casting menacing shadows over the expansive hall.

"I've got this covered. Special cell for a special traitor."

Danilo ignores the sharp pain of the clenched fist at his scalp as the soldier leads him through the white corridors. He's led around each corner with a yank. He'll be amazed to have hair left in that spot by the time they reach the cells because, while the Beseecher's Best are skilled, they aren't creative.

As they enter the empty courtyard, horror passes through Danilo. The gallows are erect for the upcoming Hanging Day, a reminder of his loss and what he has yet to lose. His captor jerks his gaze around when his stare lingers too long. A foot soldier chuckles in appreciation, stepping aside to open the chamber door on the back wall of the public courtyard.

Inmates grab at him, whistling as he's marched through the stone hallway. Most of them curse and spit in his direction, and familiar or not, he knows he put them here. Knows he's responsible for their bruised faces.

He's kicked into a crowded cell for five minutes, and within that time his cellmates fracture his ribs. His middle will be a mass of bruises. He's briefly grateful the soldiers chose a collection of frightened men rather than the hulking, bitter ex-Ravager staring at them from across the hall.

Provocative comments echo around Danilo where he lies on the cell floor, distracting his overactive thoughts by studying the blackened corners of cracked stone within his cell. One soldier passes his cell, spitting the nickname he'd been given by his platoon. Two more angered convicts yell "sunshine" at him tauntingly, twisting the few fond memories which remain untouched by the General.

The hall falls quiet within a breath, focused on the clanking metal of heavy steps that grow louder down the corridor. Keys jingle outside his cell. When Danilo's cell door flies open, he refuses to move.

"Have you forgotten how to address your superiors?" Danilo rolls his eyes but remains still. Llodis paces around him, glaring down where Danilo watches him with disinterest. The General's foot settles on Danilo's knee. "Address me."

"Llodis."

A pop echoes in his small, dark cell. Danilo grinds his teeth, tasting blood as he swallows a cry.

"I'll have you know that I wanted you dead before returning you to Audantei."

"Why wasn't I?" Danilo ignores the urge to spit, afraid the General will see the blood.

“Because there are greater things than the likes of you.” The General paces. “And I’ve tasted a promise of them.”

Danilo waits for him to resume his pacing before stretching his dislocated knee. It slots back into place.

A stone bounces next to his head. In the darkness of the lower jail level, it appears to smoke—as if it were a smouldering lava rock. Danilo’s gut drops unnaturally. The General kicks it aside before crouching down. “And because I’ve been promised more than watching you hang.”

Something crude reflects in the General’s eyes as he grabs the stone and stands. Danilo’s anger ignites; an old flame for an old enemy.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Before joining Enzo's crew, Magus had been tasked with branding traitors. And it had taken time to get Jonatan to admit his err.

Brandings are left on one of three places; the mouth is for liars, the eyes for those who betray what they saw, and the throat for those who do the unthinkable—reserved for the ones who must live with the pain they caused; each breath, each thought, each momentary fit of forgetfulness a burning reminder for the rest of their lives.

Enzo is aware of Magus' psychotic tendencies, and the longer he keeps to Shushari Outpost—the longer he witnesses Borak fix Jonatan's injuries—the more he witnesses Magus descend into his madness. With a sullen exhale, Enzo marches into the curtained building.

Light chases the surrounding darkness, consumed by the shadows as the curtain curls into place behind him. Enzo twists his wrists, erupting the room in a phosphorous light. The smell of burnt flesh coats the stifling air. Magus steps back from the sobbing, round man, blood covering his knuckles as much as it leaks from Jonatan's nose. He glares at Enzo's entrance.

"Can I help you, Enzo?" Magus grits his teeth, running the back of his hand across his beaded forehead.

Fire wielders often find themselves at war with the flame within because of its catastrophic nature. Magus, though his lineage was divided and his power equally so, is no less immune.

Enzo stares at Jonatan, who gapes back with a swollen eye, a wet face, and hair plastered to his brows. Borak loiters on the edge of the round, empty building, shaking his head in Enzo's peripheral.

"Take a break." Enzo looks to Jonatan, at the handprint burn over his mouth. He swaps his argument when Magus prepares to argue. "Let him stew in his own filth. I am sure you have worked yourself into a thirst, Magus."

Jonatan groans, then winces as it tears his charred lips. Borak prepares to deal with Jonatan in Magus' absence. His eyes are hollow. Enzo doubts Magus gave him much time to rest before beginning on Jonatan.

"You as well, Borak," Enzo says.

Borak sighs, feet dragging through the sand floor. He nods to himself, glancing over his shoulder at Enzo before following Magus through the curtain. Jonatan winces back as the light from their exit blinds him.

He tilts his head back and sags into the chair, fidgeting his wrists where they're bound on the wooden armrests. Enzo crosses his arms and waits. Jonatan tugs on the bindings, then looks up, eyes landing on Enzo. His feet scramble in the sand where they're bound to the chair legs.

"Who is your master?"

"No master." Jonatan's hoarse voice cracks, throat raw and dry.

Enzo hums, pacing circles around Jonatan.

"You serve a master," he draws. "Whether it is man or money is another inquiry." Jonatan squirms when Enzo narrows his eyes at him. "Who paid you?"

"You—" Jonatan wheezes, eyes rolling back in pain, "—can't..."

"I cannot pull the truth from you?" Enzo crowds him, hands glittering with a blue hue and rain pelting across their faces. "I am certain I can."

Jonatan's eyes widen.

Jonatan is a stupid man. Yet, he knows the meaning of the colour in a magic-wielder's storm. While all with magic can wield or bend the elements of their world, only those with notable abilities can exude a visible external force. It's as horrifying to Enzo now as it had been the day he discovered it. But with a man as morally impudent as Jonatan, Enzo finds some satisfaction in broadcasting his power.

“No matter.” Enzo paces around him. “Magus has a mean streak, and I would rather him use it on you than turn it on us.”

Enzo takes deliberate, slow steps to the curtain, glances back at Jonatan’s pale face, and peels the heavy fabric away. He blinds Jonatan as he leaves.

Magus leans against the exterior, water dripping from his black hair and the yellow of his eyes shining darkly.

“Can I keep going?” He straightens.

Enzo holds out his hand with a brow raised expectantly. Magus rolls his eyes but drops his hand onto Enzo’s, waiting for his inspection to be over. His once-split knuckles are pink with faint scars—canyons over bone which will forever hurt if his magic never aids them along. Blood stains the patchy colour of his knuckles. When Enzo finishes, he drops Magus’ hand, keeping his palm raised. Magus huffs, dropping the other into Enzo’s grasp.

“He was paid.” Enzo meets his gaze, grey eyes iceberg cold. “Find out by whom.”

Magus nods and vanishes behind the heavy curtain. Borak sighs behind Enzo.

“I wish you wouldn’t encourage him. He becomes someone else after.”

“We all adapt to darker things,” Enzo says as he turns to him, noticing Borak’s shadowed under-eyes, “it is how we use those dark moments which define our actions.”

“Yeah, well, doesn’t change the fact that he’ll be an arse later.”

Enzo shrugs, lips sewn shut as he sighs. “Walk with me.”

Borak and Enzo follow the border wall, large pikes shooting from the ground at a hard angle. The vast desert lands surrounding Shushari are decorated with dense vegetation on the northern horizon, a small forest having homed itself along the freshwater lake and river seeping from the Untamed North’s jungle.

They march the boundary line twice before Magus tears out of the building. As he runs over, Enzo is glad for the absence of blood on his hands. Until memory serves the reminder of Magus’ creative knack.

Magus approaches them, rubbing the purpling skin of his knuckles, his magic working to heal the damage caused to the new skin. Borak tips his head to the sky.

“He was paid by the Head of Orders—” Magus swats Borak’s hands away. “And gave me this.”

A pendant spins on the chain, swinging from Magus’ closed hand—a serpent coiled around a raven. The dark metal doesn’t glint in the sunlight.

“Gave it to you?” Borak scowls, and Magus meets his eye.

With all of his charisma, and all of his charm, Magus’ grin still shines with something fouler. It forces Borak’s gaze away. Enzo’s grey eyes remain impassive. There are a few unsettled breaths between them before something clears in Magus’ eyes. His brows curl inward and he clears his throat, gathering the pendant in his palm.

“It’ll get me in, but there’s a problem—“

Borak nods. “You’ve branded at least four of them.”

“Yeah, that,” Magus says, pointing at Borak.

Enzo hums, scratching his beard. He walks away. Borak and Magus glance at one another before tailing behind him, continuing the path along the border.

The Head of Orders, whilst annoying and ambiguous, is not on their dossier of problems. As a cartel, its troubles are vast. As a wealth of information on the city’s trades and alcoves, its sources are desired. But as a new enemy, undermining Stormthrower advances—and hiding information on the whereabouts of Lieutenant Altamura—it is at the forefront of Enzo’s upcoming plans.

“Enzo.” Magus steps up when he stops. “I wanna go.”

Enzo quirks a brow, tilting his head to convey his disapproval. The sun beats onto them, little more than midday, and sweat dots each of their foreheads. Borak grabs his shawl to swipe his face free of moisture.

“You will be undoubtedly recognized.”

“I’ll take the risk,” Magus presses, squinted eyes on the cusp of crazed, the sunlight spearing golden light into his internal flame.

“Why?” Enzo braces his elbow in his hand, rubbing his lip with the other.

Magus shifts and glances at Borak.

“Danilo’s not our enemy,” he glances down at the pendant, rolling it in his palm. “Not entirely.”

“But is he our ally?” Enzo grimaces.

Borak sighs yet again, and Enzo sends a glare his way.

“Doesn’t matter.” Magus crosses his arms over his chest.

Enzo’s shoulders raise and a growl rattles in his chest. Borak steps back, shaking his head. Though Enzo’s word was often taken as irrevocable, Magus was the most often to challenge—a ram battering into Enzo’s thin patience. Enzo grumbles under his breath.

He concedes. “If you are caught, there will be little we can do.”

“I’ll make sure that if it comes down to it, they’ll never recognize me.”

Borak gasps, reaching out to grab Magus, who walks backward towards the horses. Enzo holds a hand in front of Borak's chest, speaking over his shoulder to Magus.

"I will accompany you within the city," Enzo says, nodding at Borak in promise. "Send word if Hestia and Gellert return."

"What am I to do with Jonatan?" Borak shoves his arm into the air, looking back at the outbuilding in distaste.

"I've a few—" Magus shouts.

"Gag him, tie him, and send him down River Tranduanopa." Enzo waves Magus away. "See how little his Head of Orders trusts him when it is clear his meeting has been commandeered."

He walks away with little more thought toward their current situation, leaving Borak to heave a groan into the open air.



Enzo hates this city. In records, Audantei once meant more to both its citizens and the Gentled East. But greed and pain and mankind corrupted it. As they corrupt all things.

When Magus and Enzo ride through the Black Gates, Enzo keeps a cautious eye on the guards from under his hood. None of them had been smart enough in the past to stop him. Or maybe, more likely, they hadn't cared.

Stars litter the darkening sky, peeking above Audantei's walls, the city draped in blues and pinks as the clouds overhead dab the sky in wondrous colour.

Magus' camel sways beneath him, eager to find its meal. Magus had preferred the bay gelding. But as the animal was likely to be sold on him within his days inside the Order, Enzo insisted on this steed—a much more comfortable ride for a long journey.

"Heard a beater in the Mid-District recruits anyone who can best him in a fight." Magus grins.

Enzo dismounts, pulling his dapple grey beside Magus' grumbling camel at the day-boarding. She nickers at Reina's mare in the opposite stall. They bump noses over the divider in greeting.

"You cannot beat him in hand-to-hand combat," Enzo says while Magus yanks on the reins he ties.

“Who said it was hand-to-hand?” Magus grins.

Enzo rolls his eyes. “Do not attack him from the left. You leave yourself far too open.”

“Enzo?” Magus tilts his head back against Enzo’s shoulder. “Are you worried?”

Enzo rotates his arm, moving around the rump of Magus’ camel to disappear into the thinning crowd. Magus chuckles while catching up to Enzo’s pace.

“Nah, things’ll get heated before that.” He shoves his fists into his pockets. “Heard his blade was poorly made. Y’know?”

Enzo casts a glance out of the corner of his eye.

“No,” he says, smirking to himself. “I do not.”

Magus bumps shoulders with Enzo before splitting off.

“Take no longer than five days,” Enzo warns.

He slows his pace as Magus waves a hand in acknowledgment, vanishing into the sea of bodies. The flicker of warmth in the air—left from Magus’ presence and personality—chills to the dying day. Enzo tugs at the sleeves of his drab grey cloak to keep the little remaining heat close to his skin.

Gold arches and gaping balconies held open by wood posts inlaid with gold glisten against the white stone of the Beseecher’s citadel. A wall divides the large stone architecture of the surrounding high community from the citadel—a blend of functional and frivolous. It had undoubtedly been built with donations made by the High District to ensure a safe community.

The cobbled streets of the high society appear to become one with the buildings, made of the same resources as the once-stout building standing across from the balcony of the Beseecher’s quarters. It stands two floors higher than its neighbours, exterior layers changing with the passing decades. Enzo stands in the middle of the street, appearing entirely out of place in his drab clothing.

Easton’s energy spikes when his anxieties run high, and even more in a crowd. It makes following him to his location an impossible task. Reina’s, although it requires more focus to locate, remains steady. Enzo rounds the side of a courtesan’s residence and clambers up the side, its rear garden oblivious to his existence as the socials party frivolously. His callouses catch on the grit of the stone roof and he hoists himself over the edge.

“Any activity of value to report?” He asks.

Easton jumps.

Reina glances over her shoulder, keeping the scope pointed at the balcony. "Nothing. Lots of movement."

"Lots of blood." Easton twists his fingers, stepping from foot to foot beneath Enzo's hard stare.

Though the likelihood of Easton disregarding Enzo's requests is nearly nonexistent, Reina, when she deems the situation necessary, does not share his inhibition.

"Did you—" Enzo starts.

"Didn't need to." Easton wrings his hands. "They didn't bother to, uh, cover this."

"There's not enough blood to worry about. Don't know whose it is, anyway." Reina shrugs, looking back through the scope.

"Enough to see, however." Enzo steps forward alongside Reina.

She hums in agreement.

"Anything else worth mentioning?"

"I—I'm pretty sure Reina killed someone." Easton ducks behind Enzo at Reina's glare, her black hair fanning over her eyes.

"Don't worry about it." Her eyes tighten, and she shifts her glare to Enzo when he crosses his arms. "Don't worry about it."

Reina shifts her attention back to the Beseecher's citadel. Enzo withholds a sigh, but his nod conveys his determination to sort out the truth at a later time.

"There's been no notable activity." She offers the scope to Enzo, whose eyes remain trained on the balcony as he approaches. "Just training and setting up the gallows."

"Early for Hanging Day," Enzo collapses the scope, handing it to Easton.

"Unfortunately, no." Reina shrugs when Enzo quirks his right brow. "They make a show of it."

Easton chokes down a whine behind them. Reina sighs through her nose, looking back at the gangly young man with a pained nod. Enzo continues to hold his shoulders high. The last limbs of composure for a harrowed crew.

"Magus is under assignment. We gather at Shushari. The horses wait."

Reina glances up, green eyes glittering with concern, but straightens and gathers her quiver without complaint. Easton sputters, dropping parchments on the dark stone roof and chasing them around as they roll. He stares up at Enzo in question.

"I will update you with the others," Enzo says. "No sense being repetitive."

Easton's patchy upper lip curls, papers crinkling in his fists, as he shoves them into his pouch. Enzo guides him towards the roof's edge. Reina fiddles with an old arrowhead she keeps from her first kill and first heartbreak. She looks up from her seat on the lip of the stone roof, clenching the dulled tip in her palm before returning it to the depths of her pocket. With a nod at Enzo, which he returns, she descends into the street.

"He—he's a mean man..." Easton sighs, clutching the strap of his bag. "I don—don't like leaving him there."

Enzo clenches his jaw, flicking his hand to dismiss Easton. "If Beseecher Guerra planned for—"

"Not the Beseecher."

The Mad General of Audantei was hard and coarse and sharp. He is not the kind of man to wait for the justices of Hanging Day.

"We must hope he is the Beseecher's prisoner," Enzo says, directing Easton to the building's edge in order to hurry him along, "and not the General's."

Easton clambers down, asking, "How long do you, uh, do you think the General will respect that?"

Enzo waves him down, unable to answer.

Concern festers in his thoughts as they pad through darkened streets, their path lit by the dim firelight that filters through curtains swaying over doorways. Reina's black hair catches the glint of lamplight. Easton kicks at the stones, face screwed up while he chews his fingers. Enzo sighs and waves at him in the darkness.

A figure cuts into the street before them, the brim of his hood pulled over his brow. Easton collides with the back of Reina. Mean blue eyes cut through him and he tucks even closer to her shadow.

"Enzo Sapienti." The man's smile is warped by burned, wrinkled skin.

"I appear to be at a disadvantage," Enzo says as his grey eyes harden, fixing on the man's stiff gestures. "I do not know you by name."

"It is not important." He leans in, grinning further when Enzo leans back. "Call me 'Informant'."

"That title holds little meaning for a man with no name."

The Informant tsks, peering up at him from beneath the hood. "It does knowing who has given it."

Enzo withholds a growl, arms folding over his chest as he tilts his chin higher.

"And pray tell who that may be."

“Lieutenant.”

Reina grabs the front of Easton’s tunic as his feet scramble into action. The Informant smirks, as if the fumble unveils the very nature of Enzo’s history with Danilo.

“What do you want?” Reina steps forward to shield Easton.

The stranger grins. “Nothing.”

Enzo squints, offering little emotion to convey his intrigue. The shrugging informant flicks ruddy brown hair out of his eyes.

“Let us say the proof’s going to be the payment.”

Reina mutters in the Rhuari tongue over Enzo’s shoulder, asking for permission to deal with the situation as she desired should the Informant overstep. Enzo hums his agreement.

The Informant folds his arms over his chest, scowling. He mutters to himself and though they are no more than a whisper, the broken words prove incriminating. There is a man rumored to sell high-valued Stormthrower artifacts. No one in the community knows his name—none alive—but he can be identified by a partial burn and an ability to speak several languages within the continent. English being his most broken. Enzo has little more than word-of-mouth tales as evidence against the stranger.

“Are you open to the attempt?” The informant clears his throat, meeting Enzo’s eyes with sudden wariness.

“And what attempt might that be?” Enzo raises his brow. “Your intentions have not been made clear.”

The stranger sighs, an impatient noise despite his calm exterior. Enzo smirks.

“Consider it a trade—of sorts.” He fishes in his pocket, pulling out a gold chain with a gold and diamond serpent pendant. “If I find the lieutenant, he gets it. If not, I’s get it.”

“It?” Enzo squints.

“Your choice.” The stranger shrugs.

Reina squints. She knocks her elbow to Enzo’s, raising a brow with the shake of her head. In the past, Reina had been a trusting teenager—she had no reason not to be, having been raised in a Stormthrower reserve. But the combination of adolescent rebellion and young love brought about its own heartache. Those who witness a shelter-town fall to blood and ash tend to become distrusting.

But while she wears her distrust on her sleeve, Enzo can see the stress of her worries in the lines beside her eyes.

"I must be transparent, but an unsavoury character like yourself hardly seems an honourable man to hire as means of espionage for someone of the lieutenant's stature."

The Informant turns several shades of red before sighing. He glances at Reina, who grins over Enzo's shoulder.

"You're too suspicious to be a spy," she says with a sneer.

"Ah." The Informant nods, deflating a little. "I am suspicious when I speak. And we've not spoken before, have we?"

"Well, you're—" Reina starts. Enzo holds his hand up, pausing her before she can say anything further.

"Sir Sapienti, we have a common ally." The Informant shifts closer. "And we are both in a tough situation if what I've heard is correct."

Enzo hums.

"What's in it for you?" Reina says as Easton tugs on her sleeve.

"Knowing he's alive's good." He rubs the old burns over his nose. "Or whatever you got is worth more. To the right people."

Reina shoves past Enzo.

"And who's 'the right people'?" she asks as she steps forward with purpose.

"Reina." Enzo uses her momentum to toss her into Easton, glaring when she swings around.

As Enzo turns back to the Informant, he tugs off his ring and tosses it in the informant's direction. Blues and greens swirl with starlight in the Informant's cracked and dirt-caked palm. Decarii mocks him.

"Enzo?" Reina hauls on his shoulder, but Enzo remains as resolute as stone.

"Tell the lieutenant I am coming."

The informant nods, fitting the ring over his finger. He then disappears into the shadows of the building without another word. Reina steps forward, staring at Enzo's profile.

"Was it wise? Giving him that?"

With a bated breath he tries to hide, Enzo flicks a glance over his shoulder. "Time will tell."



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Danilo stirs, dirt scraping his cheek. He groans at the pain across his stomach, his body protesting the movements he makes to rub the fog free from his eyes.

“You’re not the man I thought.”

Danilo lurches toward the newcomer with a hiss. Chason squats next to the shadows of the dark cell, face leaned into the bars. Danilo half-musters the strength to glare, ignoring the twist of betrayal. The man owes him nothing.

“Yeah, I see how that sounded.” Chason leans back, placing a steady hand on the bar he raises his cheek from. “I only meant I thought ya older. Look too young behind these bars.”

Danilo’s glare falters, his knuckles itching with a feverish need to break Chason’s nose. He glances down at the cracked open skin.

“What are you doing here?” His words drag against his dry throat.

He coughs, guarding his mouth and nose from the rising dirt with a stained sleeve. Chason watches with blank eyes and a blanker expression. When Danilo’s lungs still, he chances a tired glare at his informant.

“Feels like you knows about my latest update,” Chason says with an attempt at humour.

The stone walls of the cell press closer with Danilo's foul mood, a menacing darkness lit by the sunlight piercing between fractured stone. Danilo stares at the shadows over Chason's shoulder. With a disappointed sigh, Chason scratches the wrinkled skin of his nose, ruddy hair falling into his eyes.

Chason clears his throat. "Made contact with your ally--"

"For what reason?"

"Dunno..." Chason jerks, his eyes wide. "Guess I'm hoping you have somebody. More than one somebody."

Danilo licks his scar, cringing when he tastes the unpleasant reminiscence of dried blood settled in its ridges. He prods at his tender nose.

A prisoner shouts profanities a few cells down, antagonizing his cell mate. Danilo groans and drops his head against the dirt. He sags into it; the coolness relieving the pulse in his head. The rub of metal against metal echoes in the otherwise silent cells, an aggravating reminder of Chason's presence.

Chason patiently waits for Danilo to wear down his remaining energy. He twists a ring about his finger with a thumb—its black band familiar. Danilo tries to make it out in the dark, but Chason tugs it off and clenches it in his clammy palm.

"Come for another—"

Metal hinges cry as the sound of the opening courtyard door echoes through the cells, driving the prisoners to silence. Chason tosses the ring into Danilo's cell. It skitters across the ground, inches beyond his reach.

"He's coming." Chason says.

"He's—"

"Good luck."

Colliding blues and greens reflect up at Danilo from the gemstone. His breath falters as he struggles to his hands and knees.

"Wai—" Danilo glances up at Chason, but the man has already gone. Vanished as suddenly as he arrived.

Heavy footsteps echo in the hall outside Danilo's cell. He lurches forward, snatching the ring in recognition and fear. The chime of keys clang above his head as the ring slides atop the delicately braided silver on his middle finger.

General Altamura stands over him, blond hair reflecting in the dim light. "You'll regret fighting me."

It's a warning specific to Audantei's guards. One Danilo had used himself on the Stormthrowers he retrieved for Hanging Day.

As the key slams home, dragging the lock on his cell door open, Danilo takes comfort in the heavy, unfamiliar weight of Enzo's ring, knowing the General may strip it from him. But Danilo hopes that if he's being marched to his death, the General will wait until after.



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Horror stories of the Reckoning had seared themselves into the fear tinted corners of Kosymo's mind from a young age, morphing from burning shadows to beasts with charred wings and curling horns—of a desolation vanishing without trace—of souls screaming about acid and ash. He was kept awake by his night terrors. And the few nights he could find sleep, he'd wake again in fear of his world burning.

There was one night more memorable than the rest, when he woke to screaming and heat more fervent than his dreams. He thought nothing of it, until the flames crawled up his arms and pain drove him to move—he now wears heavy armour to protect the thin, damaged skin. His feet hadn't carried him far—planted in the charred dirt just out of reach of the fire, unmoving and eyes distant as he watched the house snap and sag before him. Frozen, while everyone inside screamed. Every last person he cared for burning beneath a blazing blue fire high and vast around him. He should have run.

Their screams stopped when slow, soft, and sure footsteps approached. And even with all his fears and all his nightmares alight around him, he turned to her with certainty. Her dark eyes reflected the fire as she scrutinized him. She whispered sweet nothings. A tempting and believable tune.

Those dreams linger in him to this day.

He accepted his title as the Royal Beseecher and changed the course of Audantei's mission. With all of Audantei's allies and secrets, hunting Stormthrower footholds had been far easier than it should have been. And with a determined and devoted General, the wake of their destruction became legendary.

Llodus drags the lieutenant along by the metal cuffs on his wrists while they trudge onward through the desert, the glowing sword tucked between the manacles. Blue runes cast a bold hue across Danilo's chest regardless of the unforgiving brightness baring down on the marching troops. They're slower than Kosymo would like, but the General had insisted on binding Danilo's ankles 'to keep him from running'. It's a load of crock, because though Llodus had trained the boy, Kosymo doubts he would bolt beneath the steady gaze of a thousand men. Danilo jerks away from the General. The General fists the hair licking at Danilo's jaw.

"You'll regret fighting me."

The General has been repeating himself since they started marching from Nastui—the military outpost two days northeast of Audantei. His psychotic rambling was triggered the moment he dragged Danilo off the rump of his horse, driving a crop into the tender wound on Danilo's thigh. Kosymo doesn't linger on the obscurities of his General, as the edges of Ketusai sprout alongside him.

Six hundred people live in Ketusai—the acclaimed mining town of the north—making jewelry and trinkets with gems and metals which could rival Jerusai; its southern competitor. And every one of them were rumoured to be of Stormthrower blood.

Women and children screech as the soldiers pour through the paths. Kosymo nods to the men, signaling for them to begin their slaughter. He watches with interest when the General cranks Danilo's head back, forcing him to watch. Danilo's jaw clenches and the tip of the blade glows brightly, charging under the direct contact with the lieutenant.

"You made this possible." Kosymo grabs Danilo's jaw, shrugging out to the burning town. "This is your legacy."

Danilo scrunches his eyes shut, jerking on the chain. Llodus releases him, smirking when the boy launches free. He stomps atop the rope binding his feet, forcing Danilo to brace his arms and knees beneath him or risk gaping his chest on the blade. The sword fractures the ground, the crevice crumbling ahead of Danilo's hands and swallowing the nearest house. Danilo pales when

multiple screams cut short. Kosymo grins at the General before strutting around to Danilo's front.

"Thank you, Lieutenant." He shoves his hand beneath Danilo's white knuckles, grabbing the hilt of the luminous sword.

He tears the sword from the manacles, slicing the bone of Danilo's wrists. On instinct, Danilo clutches the blade. He hisses and his fingers curl reflexively.

The weapon trembles Kosymo's arm—the runes surging with power. Danilo's smeared blood mars its glow. He sneers up at Kosymo, twisting his stinging wrists in the manacles, his scar pulling his anger across his face. Kosymo grins at him hungrily, then turns, dragging the sword against the ground to feel it rumble under his feet.

Llodos clenches Danilo's hair, cranking him after the Beseecher as he cripples building upon building with quick slashes at their foundations. The wake of the sword's destruction grows around their knees. Kosymo's eyes water from the burn of smoke on the air.

They reach the entrance of the mine held up by stones and one bulky post. Kosymo rolls the sword in his wrist and slashes at the beam. It crumbles before the sword scrapes the wood's surface.

"This will serve me well," Kosymo says with a dark chuckle.

Llodos drags Danilo closer. Danilo jerks in the General's grasp.

"Behave." Beseecher Guerra holds the sword to Danilo's throat. "You will serve me well, too. But if you continue to be a problem, I have no grievances emptying your wrists on the blade."

He presses the sword closer to the healing wound on the lieutenant's neck, breaking it open and staining the blade's tip with blood. Danilo's eyes widen when the sword vibrates.

"Might bleed you out anyway." Kosymo smirks.

The General tips his chin and Kosymo meets his eyes. Their steady gaze swaps a series of questions and orders while Kosymo's guards shear through men sprinting from the brush beside them, armed with mining hammers and pickaxes.

"Come." The Beseecher grins. "I have more to play with."

Danilo thrashes as the General drags him through the growing ruins of Ketusai. Llodos remains unperturbed, as if all the boy's strength and weight are nothing more than a sack of barley.

Brickwork scatters the paths dividing what remains of the buildings. Danilo's sorrowful eyes fix on a doll clutched in a tiny hand pinned beneath a collapsed wall. The pooled blood stains the doll's dark wool hair black.

"Sir—" the General recoils, eyes tight with fear, "—your hand."

Kosymo looks at his empty hand, then the one clutching the sword. His veins swell across his skin, puffy and red, the blood black inside his olive complexion. He grunts, examining the still blue runes of the sword. The blade has dwindled from a blazing glow to plain steel—its runes flickering colour.

"How long was he holding it?" Guerra asks, turning to the nearest of his guards.

"From Nastui to here."

"And how long have I had it?" Kosymo drops his arm, the sword skimming across the dirt.

The soldier's words stutter when the ground shakes. "Just short of the same."

Kosymo grunts again, twisting the sword in his grip.

"Guess you're lucky, Lieutenant." He leans closer, gripping Danilo's chin and forcing his gaze up. "You're no use to me dead."

"Sir." The General jerks his chin, requesting Kosymo's attention. "He will fight you at every turn."

"Let him." Kosymo saunters down the path, sword pointing ahead of him. "He'll bend or break, eventually."

General Llodis grips Danilo's hair and tilts his head back until he can see Danilo's eyes. They sparkle with defiance. The General sneers, well aware that his offspring takes one thing from him that cannot be smothered or destroyed—willpower.

Kosymo glances back, watching Llodis step down on the rope between Danilo's feet and shoves Danilo to his knees. With the sword ceasing to vibrate, Kosymo cares little for how the General handles his prisoner.

He swings around, gripping the sword tighter with eagerness. A black blade slices before his eyes, a hair's width from cutting into his skull. The blond at the other end grips her axe tighter and readjusts for another hard swing. Kosymo catches her axe with the sword's hilt. Her blue eyes sparkle with an array of emotions.

He chuckles. "And who might you be?"

Kosymo can feel the sword jump at her proximity.

Danilo shouts at her, only getting half her name out before Llodis gags him with a tight hand around his neck, squeezing until Danilo's eyes widen and his curled hands scrape against the metal of the General's armour.

Hestia's eyes harden before shooting over Kosymo's shoulder.

"Your blood will do," he taunts.

He kicks her knee and she yowls, shifting her weight to carry the axe differently. Kosymo wrenches the sword back. He cuts the air where she had been. The sword pulses with power and tears a gaping wound into her shoulder without kissing her skin.

She cries and falls to the ground, her skin blackening with her anger. It blisters with heat. Blood seeps through her fingers. The sword's runes waver from blue to red, the hilt smoking. Kosymo yells and tosses the blade, reaching for the sword at his waist.

He swings for Hestia's neck, and a gold hue wraps around his arm, freezing him mid-motion. Gellert leaps from around the corner of a collapsed house, his spear aimed and hand stretched before him. Hestia shifts, magma erupting from the ground beneath her. Kosymo sticks his free hand between his teeth, whistling his soldiers into action. His arm trembles as he fights Gellert's magic.

Hestia screams at Gellert as he approaches. Her words are deep in her Nuicalli tongue and her bloody hand reaching for Danilo. Gold magic fractures over Kosymo's forearm. Gellert slides to the ground, barricading himself and his cloak over Hestia. Kosymo breaks free, hollering as he slices thin air.

A smoky breeze pulls the edges of Gellert's maroon cloak where Kosymo's pinned it into the sand. Kosymo pants, a deep and trembling sound, as he stares at the fabric. The soldiers grind to a halt behind him. He tears the sword free, and Gellert's cloak flutters down the path.

"Check the area." Kosymo growls. The soldiers look at one another, wary eyes glancing at Kosymo. "Go!"

They scatter, leaving Danilo alone with Kosymo and Llodis. Danilo gasps as Llodis releases him, gaze fixed on the ground by Kosymo's feet. Kosymo stands in the middle of the remains, inhaling the putrid combination of blood, smoke, and burning flesh. Screeches pierce the billowing film consuming Ketusa's infernal ruins, hollowing out that cavity in his chest he kept filled with abysmal and futile promises. Depositing him into that old horror. The spectre of his damnation swallows the destruction. It breathes the lasting curse of grief into his veins.

He turns, trudging forward to collect the sword, willing the dead runes to life. The remaining colour blows away like ash, leaving darkened shadows within, which could do nothing to combat the sensation within him. Kosymo's scowl deepens as he towers over Danilo, his colossal frame amplified by the mass of armour over his shoulders.

He spits at Danilo, hauling him up by his shirt. "So. You were one of them."

When he tosses him back to the ground, he meets the General's eyes—cold, with an anger churning in their depths. Regardless of Llodis' judgments concerning how the Besecher handles the lieutenant, Kosymo knows he won't dare speak them. The man—his own father—treated him worse. And for that, they say nothing.

His men enjoy their time demolishing Ketusai; lifting its riches from the remains and terrorizing the last of the living. Once Danilo is chained to the remains of a well and forced to be present for the soldiers' entertainments hosted in Ketusai's devastated courtyard, Kosymo wanders about to admire their work. Llodis follows him, on alert after the failed rescue attempt. And while Kosymo recognizes the General as a devoted man, he cannot keep himself from feeling a threat in his presence.



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Shushari Outpost is far closer to Audantei than any of them would like. Enzo more than his party. But it is one of the few remaining locations in the Gentled East they can afford to lose.

Reina and Easton sit on the couch—a stack of straw-stuffed fabric cradled in part of a dilapidated wagon—snapping cards between one another at a speed neither Enzo nor Borak would be capable of playing. Reina’s quick wit kept Easton’s active mind and over-active mouth occupied. Meanwhile, Enzo and Borak pace circles next to the rounded wall of the hut, their continuous paths never diverging or intersecting.

Easton and Reina found little information in Nalcun’s letters; few detailed the political advancements of Audantei—in cryptic tones—and fewer were sent to the distant patrols. Though Enzo despises waiting, not much can be done between the four of them.

Enzo glances across the darkened room, lit by the fluttering cloth over the door. Borak’s shoulders sag with guilt. He returned an hour ago, having disposed of Jonatan’s body down the river, his remains visible through the char. In the time between Magus leaving the hut and Borak entering, Jonatan had succumbed to his injuries. And while the intention to kill him was within Magus,

it was clear he would rather the man suffered. Enzo straightens, preparing to confront Borak.

A rushing wind—akin to the release of an Audantian catapult—cuts through the tense silence. Both Borak and Enzo drop to the sand, waiting for a strike that never comes. Borak's eyes widen in recognition and he sprints through the curtain. Enzo, left more confused than before, rushes after him.

The sun's light reflects off the sand, and Enzo raises an arm to guard his eyes. He winces at the light, rushing to join Borak where he kneels over Gellert and Hestia, blood smeared over their unresponsive forms. A tunnel of gold dusts the air in a faint path—easily mistaken for sand—snaking through the sky between their location and where Gellert had brought them from.

"Help me carry her," Borak shouts, shoving Gellert off Hestia.

Enzo approaches at a controlled pace, cautious of spraying sand over the three of them. He places a palm over the gaping wound on Hestia's shoulder. Borak backhands him.

"I've already done that. Grab her."

Borak kneels between her legs, gripping her thighs and staring at Enzo with urgency. He directs Enzo backwards. Reina holds the curtain, shouting at Easton to clear the table. In his panic, Easton shoves everything off. Glass shatters on the ground; contents of mugs spray over the sand floor. Borak leaps into action when Hestia's placed.

"Go get Gellert." He orders.

Enzo's face scrunches before he gestures for Reina to follow. Easton's frantic and incessant questions slow their attempts to heave Gellert inside. When they deposit him on the couch, Enzo shoos them out. He and Reina know Easton cannot handle the blood.

Despite the darkened light, Enzo sees enough to realize none of the blood is Gellert's. He sets to work cleaning Gellert as best he can. Another half hour passes after Enzo finishes his task before Borak collapses into the nearest chair. Exhaustion and fear are clear on his face.

Enzo assesses the damage, rounding the table with a bowl and rag. A mass of stitches holds together red and swollen skin starting at her collarbone and ending near her elbow, a white glow branches from the veins surrounding them.

"What could cause such an injury?" He lifts a rag from the bowl, wiping smeared blood from around the area.

Borak tips his head with a tired glare and Enzo raises a brow in response.

"We'll know when she wakes." Borak says.

Enzo hums, looking over Hestia, and resumes his focus on swiping the red stains from her skin.



After leaving Ketusai a smouldering heap of sobbing ruins, Kosymo marches his soldiers back to Nastui. There'd been few buildings and fewer tents capable of hosting as many soldiers as Guerra's caravan, which meant some of his men stayed behind to put up tents for the troops. And a private residence for Kosymo.

As Kosymo flings back the flap to his tent, sparing his eyes from the Gentled East's overpowering daylight, and he throws the sword atop the makeshift table. He sneers in disappointment when the weapon falls without laying waste to its surrounding. The flap billows behind him, signaling another's entry.

"I've come to talk." Her voice carries a sultry air, but he's known her long enough to hear its underlying anger.

"You've no reason to be out this far." He turns, drinking in her appearance.

"Neither do you."

"Come, darling," he says, giving her a lopsided grin to displace her foul mood, "there's no reason for you to chase me with this animosity."

"Apparently there is." She scowls.

He rolls his eyes and stalks around her, his arm tight around her waist.

"And what have I done to not only put you in such a sour mood, but to have given you enough of a reason to chase me to Audantei's furthest reaches?"

"You are distracted by the promise of false greatness." She shoves him back, sauntering to the table and glaring down at the sword.

"It promises me power. I only take advantage of it." Kosymo readjusts his vambraces. "He is my key."

She whirls around, dark eyes shining red in the brightness of the tent's thin fabric. When she rushes up to him, she stops shy of shoving herself into his face, calming herself for a moment of collectedness.

"I have better plans."

"Plans which are taking too long, woman." He brings his hand up, dropping it on her collarbone with the slightest squeeze—a warning.

"You are out of line, Kosymo," she says.

"Am I?"

Her dark hair falls from her shoulders as she tips her head back. Kosymo grabs the back of her head with his free hand and rushes to meet her lips. He drinks her in greedily, regardless of her hesitation and disinterest.

"You are mine." Kosymo enjoys the way her lips curls in careless disgust whenever he lays claim to her.

"I asked for him specifically to be my Head of Orders—"

He cackles, loud and unfiltered. "Is that your reason for chasing me out here?"

"And you mock me by giving me a flee infested beggar." She continues.

Kosymo strokes her cheek with metal covered knuckles, watching a white line appear on her frighteningly pale skin.

"Maybe I'm jealous." He says.

She scoffs. "That is no excuse for undermining me."

"Undermining you would mean I had a use for you." He cups her jaw. Her eyes blaze, rage drowning what paltry amount of pain he expected to see. His smirk pulls into a devilish grin.

"You are a snake."

"Says the serpent." Kosymo pats her cheek, dropping his hand and towering over her.

"You will keep to our plan." She steps away from him, shrinking into herself as he assesses her.

"No." Kosymo rolls his shoulders, cracks his neck, and steps forward.

She backs into the post at the center of the tent, gripping it with both hands and watching with wide eyes as he closes in.

"You chose a poor Head of Orders," she says, her nails drag on the wood as she rounds the post's edge. "And were a poorer Beseecher."

He falters at her sudden grin.

A sword pierces his chest, the path through his back carved out between his ribs with precision. He attempts to breathe around it, his hand gripping around the weapon as his knees give out from under him. Blond hair tickles his cheek as his assailant leans down. Each word is slow and direct when it skims the surface of his skin.

"Do you regret fighting me?" The General's words are smooth and mocking in Kosymo's ear. He coughs up blood when he tries to speak.

Llodi's rips his sword from Guerra. Kosymo collapses back, choking around the fullness of his lungs, and his arm flails when he paws at his chest. His woman saunters forward, straddling his stomach while grinning down at him.

"You forgot something important, Guerra." She drags her nails over the open wound above his heart and his mouth opens in a mute cry. "You. Are. Mine." Her dark eyes roll up to Llodi's. "Long live the king."

Guerra's chest stutters with a final breath. She keeps her eyes fixed on Llodi's, who keeps his on hers. Her smile unnerves him.

The black gossamer skirt is opaque in the sunlight cutting through the tent, her pale skin glistening beneath the fabric as she stands. Her bodice clings to her torso from, as Llodi can sympathize, the sweat merging with the heavy black fabric.

She rounds the opposite side of the makeshift table, nothing more than a wide board propped up by two barrels, and reaches for one of Guerra's most expensive wines and two round glasses. Llodi examines the sheer purple colour.

"Congratulations." She tips the wine into the glass and offers it with an outstretched hand to Llodi's. "To the new Besecher."

Llodi steps over Kosymo's body and the growing pool of blood and squints at the contents of the cup, thumb following its lip.

"Not to worry, my dear General," she smirks. "I'd not murder two Royal Besechers. Nalcun will do me no good."

Llodi sips at his glass, watching her pour a chalice before tipping back the contents. He smirks at her in return.

"Don't drink for enjoyment?" He asks.

She tilts her head as if considering how to answer. But Llodi can see the stillness in her eyes.

"There are far more enjoyable things in this world." Her gaze falls to Kosymo.

Llodi spares a glance over his shoulder. "You want his body?"

"Not in the slightest." She sneers, flicking her dark locks over her shoulder while dancing the glass beneath her lips.

"Neither do I."

She hums, watching the blood run over the edges of Kosymo's expensive carpets and sink into the sand.

"And what of you, Altamura?" Llodi tips his chin up to her in question. "Will you keep to our plan?"

He smiles, closed-lipped and joyless, and nods over his shoulder at the body without taking his eyes from hers.

“I waited twenty years to kill him. I can wait another twenty if need be.” He leans closer, glass at his lips. “Siren.”

Her grin leaves him feeling displaced—as if he made a deal with the devil.



CHAPTER THIRTY

Danilo, though he's done horrible things in the name of good, will be the first to admit Audantei has few honourable goals. Audantei's soldiers are brainwashed to believe the Royal Beseecher and his orders are flawless, like Jerusai glass. Many soldiers follow that failed belief to their death.

But some men are evil.

The dried purple leaves of the Arrisoot flower are incredibly potent, often used in small doses to dilute an animal's aggressive response, allowing the handler to control them without harm. Audantei's military utilizes it against hostiles. It has become a staple for cell block guards and officers with the highest rankings. Extensive training is required before the soldiers are allowed in the streets with it on their person. Fewer are sent beyond Audantei's walls.

Danilo has heard whispers of a time—and of rumoured occasions still—where foot soldiers befriend like-minded men in order to dip their fingers into acts of violence and greed that Audantei's symbolism won't stand for. With those stories come sobbing women begging for vengeance and men demanding for their honour. It is a shame their grievances are handled by men with the same sins.

At the very least, Danilo can be grateful it was from a time past. A time where those men were branded as traitors of Audantei and cast beyond the walls.

He hopes.

As he stares at a bowl filled with a purple substance reminiscent of pot-pourri, Danilo wonders if those men were cast from Audantei after all, or if they had worked their way into the depths of the ranks, silently spinning their lies and traps in a final act of greed.

The tent flap whips in the wind. Men cackle outside. A haze in the air clouds his mind. Despite how much he aches, he wished for Kosymo to return. If only for the reprieve he would have from his shredded, dry throat.

The tent breaks open, and Danilo forces himself to remain still as an act of defiance. A chuckle rings over his head, piercing through him. It leaves his belly sloshing. His eyes snap up.

There's a heavy red stain on the metal plates of Kosymo Guerra's old armour. Worse is the red-hot anger in Llodis' pale blue gaze. He grins, turning to dismiss the guards at the entry. Danilo doesn't notice he's holding his breath until he releases a broken gasp.

Llodis knocks a cylindrical stone against Danilo's forehead as he passes. "Always knew you were an asset."

Despite knowing better than to open his mouth, Danilo cannot keep a sneer from marring his face. Beseecher Altamura smirks, dropping the stone inside the bowl.

"I will hang you." He glares at Danilo over his shoulder. "But only when you have nothing left for me to take."

From the General, it could mean anything. From the newly rising Beseecher, Danilo cannot fathom the destruction planned.

Llodis dips a rag into the bucket beside the pedestal, rings it out, and wraps it around the lower half of his face. With a last stare, Llodis takes the stone and begins grinding whatever shape remains from the pedals. Danilo swallows, gritting his teeth together while twisting Enzo's ring. The tentacles bump across his other fingers, settling him enough to enjoy his last breaths as a free man.

With the General's unfolding plans, maybe this is for the best.



Pinks and oranges paint the horizon as it peeks into the ever-darkening room. Gellert groans on the floor, attempting to flint the fire-pit at the building's centre.

"Had to let him go, did you?" He swings around to glare at Enzo.

"Had to be done," Enzo says into his hand, scratching his beard, his path along the wall of the wooden dome unbroken.

Gellert rolls his eyes.

The chatter, while consistent, refuses to grow in the small space. Hestia hisses between her teeth, cradling her arm where she sags onto the couch. Borak leans out of her direct reach.

Enzo rolls a rusty brooch into his palm. Its emblem is nearly unidentifiable. With its grooves worn thin from age and dirt and neglect. A half-visible raven scars its front.

Magus stumbles through the curtained doorway.

"Good!" Gellert throws the flint to the ground, stomping away from the pit. "You do it."

"You returned." Enzo stares, frozen in his path—brow furrowed and eyes unblinking.

Reina leaps up and runs over to push the curls from Magus' eyes, examining the cuts above his brow.

"What happened?" She smears the blood away with the cuff of her sleeve.

Borak stands, tearing a strip from the rag on the table and dipping it into a basin. He shoos Reina away as he closes in on Magus. His scowl deepens when he deems Reina's fussing unnecessary.

"You arrived earlier than expected." Enzo clasps his hands behind his back.

"Yeah." Magus winces when Borak rubs harshly at the wound, slapping Borak's hand away to turn to Enzo. "Was made. Got as much as I could."

"Made by who?" Borak makes a second attempt at Magus, only to be dodged again.

Magus shrugs, stumbling to the fire pit. He lands on his knees with raised palms. The air swirls beneath his hands and flame bursts skyward. Borak yanks on the back of Magus' collar, dragging him to the nearest broken armchair and depositing him on it.

"Magus," Enzo starts.

"I'm fine—" Magus swats Borak's hand away. "Tired."

Enzo hypothesizes Magus' magic—while a source of significant power—used more energy than he cared to admit. He slept long hours after battles. Much like Borak. But with no inclination as to how long.

Enzo nods, withholding a sigh as he resumes pacing.

"How about before you collapse from exhaustion and are out for the next two days, you tell us what you found out?" Borak flicks Magus' nose.

Magus grumbles, a tired stare aimed Borak's way.

"Not much—lots of Arrisoot leaves headed to the Beseecher's citadel. And a lot of change in their ranks." His eyes wander to Enzo as he passes by the old chair and around Borak, who squats next to it.

"Facts which we had gathered by this point—" Enzo glances at Magus.

"Not this much."

Enzo hums.

"Enzo," Hestia says as she shuffles forward, placing a hand on his elbow. "That's not far news from what we heard."

Gellert slouches on the couch across the fire pit, leaning on his knees and rubbing his palms together. "A source heard 'ere will be a shift coming up. They wanted to arrange passing through the Bridge of Osaira into 'e channel."

"A fisherman?" Enzo glances between them.

"Trader, of a sort." Gellert rolls his shoulders.

"Said to give this to our Lady," Hestia says. She winces and points to the brooch in Enzo's palm with her other hand. He resumes pacing. That much, they had said prior.

Between the scraps of information his crew had been fed, Enzo cannot piece together the true means of it all. The facts fit together seamlessly regardless of their holes and the missing gaps where other facts belonged. He concludes, however poorly the verdict, that it isn't likely coincidence. Yet, despite the insufficient prognosis, he can only hope it is enough to spearhead their actions in the right direction.

Hestia's argument with Gellert grows louder, and Enzo slips from the outbuilding. The curtain sways at his exit. They will bleed their lungs dry before giving up, and while he knows it was in their nature as fighters, he hates the collateral that comes of it.

Clouds overhead in the darkening sky remain frozen in time, unchanging grey masses amid the slow-darkening backdrop. Enzo sits in the main building

on a chair overlooking the bay window, sheer fabric fluttering at either side of the glassless opening.

A pale fog settles atop the ground, the wind clawing grooves beneath its surface. Saffron sunlight combats the chill's bloodless wounds, dousing the air above the outpost in a lingering warmth, promising to return and mend whatever ills the night may bring. Enzo stares into it, thoughts tethered to reality by neither. He remains unmoving. Aside from the gentle twist of the chain belonging to Danilo's jade tags.

Reina enters, silent and stoic. Enzo can sense the chaos in her magic from his seat.

"He's here." She says softly.

With a firm expression in place, he turns to her. She shifts in the door on the other side of the room, hands clenching and releasing.

"Who?"

She inhales. "The Beseecher."



CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Beseecher Llodis Altamura found that the best way to find a Stormthrower was to follow the random growth of plants in an otherwise barren desert. Their magic, while destructive, has an affinity for drawing life to them.

When he marches his men alongside a trail of long-grass growing from desolate sand, he knows they're getting close. He tosses a black stone in the air and catches it in his palm, its vibration growing stronger. His suspicions are confirmed when he sees firelight on the darkening horizon. A beacon in a vast land of despair.

When his soldiers storm the outpost, they are expecting a fight. Gellert, with his dark skin and darker eyes, appears ready for just that. But none of the Stormthrowers move. Maybe they expected a different Beseecher. Maybe they are frozen from the glowing blue sword vibrating beneath his palm. Or maybe they are in shock over the manacled man he drags, gaze blank and unresponsive.

Power and greed had blinded Kosymo. Llodis knows better than to let those trivialities be such a crutch.

"I can be a reasonable man." Llodis grins, tilting his head at the array of emotions among Enzo's crew.

Enzo, his grey eyes filled with more hellfire than a man should possess, does not move or speak. He keeps his hands braced on the walkway banister from where the main outpost building sits on stilts, ten feet above.

"You will die for what you call reasonable." Hestia lurches forward, clutching her shoulder when Borak grabs her.

Llodi's chuckles.

Easton toes closer to Enzo with watery eyes, moving slowly under the aim of Audantei's archers. He says nothing, just grabs Enzo's sleeve and waits for their eyes to meet. Enzo resumes his stare at Llodi's, moving Easton behind him and out of reach of the arrows.

Llodi's grins at the rest before turning to the soldier at his left. "Would you die for me?"

"Yes, sir. Always."

"And you?" He turns to the man on his right.

"Without question, sir."

"I will not be the one dying today." The Beseecher twirls the sword in his grasp before meeting Hestia's eyes, watching her pale in fear as the sword glows stronger. She drags her gaze away, looking to Borak for aid. "Loyalty is a powerful thing."

Llodi's looks back to Enzo in time to see the man raise his chin and squint. Enzo's eyes flicker over Llodi's shoulder to the man who betrayed those very loyalties.

"What do you want?" Enzo asks.

Llodi's chuckles. "What do I want?"

"You have not come to flaunt your newfound status. And certainly not with peaceful intent."

He shrugs and then nods at his soldiers.

"I'm bringing ruin." He watches his men light their torches and burn the dried grass at their feet. They step over the beginning embers before moving towards the outbuildings. "Burning your resources, at the very least."

Raising the sword, he places it to Danilo's open throat. Reina raises her bow, drawing the string back until a glowing green arrow sits in place against the riser. All but one of Llodi's archers moves to aim at her, the other trained on Easton hiding behind Enzo. To her credit, she remains resolute.

The Beseecher grins.

“And you are going to let me.” He can taste the tension like salt on a knife’s edge. It remains on the air for a few moments; long enough to allow the straw rooftops of the outbuildings to plume smoke into the air. “I would consider a trade.”

When he meets Enzo’s eyes, the man’s mind is fast at work behind them. “Your terms?”

“Enzo.” Borak admonishes, moving as if to run at him. But the archers keep him still.

Llody watches with raised brows, intrigued by their hesitation and reluctance. Enzo waits for him to continue. The Beseecher reaches behind him to take a chain from one of his soldiers without removing his eyes from Enzo’s.

“One soul.” He tugs on Danilo’s manacles before tossing him to the sand at his feet. “For another.”

All eyes are on Danilo, willing him to react to the harsh treatment. It takes every ounce of power he has to keep from laughing at their useless hope.

Enzo straightens, releasing the handrail. The crew calls to Enzo as he descends the staircase into the chaos of fire and soldiers. It feels like a challenge, the way Enzo delivers himself, and it has Llody clenching the sword in his hand. Though he wants to use it, he’s smarter a man than Kosmo.

“A soul for a soul?” Enzo says.

“Soul for a soul.” Llody mock bows, arm thrown out and head tipped, his eyes locked on the Stormthrower before him.

Enzo nods, examining Danilo. Llody glances down and smirks. Danilo’s distant eyes emphasize the gaunt shadows beneath them, and his shallow breaths barely move his chest. Even to the Beseecher, it is reminiscent of how Danilo looked months ago at Hanging Day. He enjoys the thought.

“I surrender.” Enzo says.

The words force a grin past every ounce of Llody’s inhibitions.

“Good man.” He can see Enzo trying not to sneer. “But you’re not the soul I want.”

No, Enzo would be a sweet victory, but Llody wants to strip Danilo for the very acts of defiance which set him apart. Llody nods to his soldiers, and they pinned Enzo to the ground. His knees brush Danilo’s stomach.

Llody touches the sword to the bare skin of Enzo’s neck and the runes flare. He tightens his hold on the hilt.

“I came to ruin you.” The sharp edge of the blade caresses through the first layer of skin, but Llodis won’t draw blood.

Danilo coughs below Llodis and his gaze shoots down, eyes hard and peeled. When it happens again, it sounds like the boy is choking on a name—a name similar to that of the man kneeling before him. Llodis glares at Enzo from beneath his brow, his hair flying about his heaving breath.

“Will he cooperate for you?” Llodis tilts his head in consideration. “He’ll cooperate for you, won’t he?”

Enzo doesn’t respond; not verbally, not physically. Llodis cracks the sharp metal edge of his gauntlet to the hard bone above Enzo’s brow, slicing the skin. Enzo falls—blinking and shaking his head—and the moment he hits the sand, chaos breaks out.

Colliding hues of red and gold rain down on Llodis’ forces, his soldiers thrown into the posts of the outbuildings as they run to advance. Specks of gold barrel through the air at Llodis, who shifts beyond their reach. Dry grass lifts with flames behind him.

Hestia screams—a battle cry his men are incapable of—and rushes forward in a blur, magma churning the sand beneath her feet. Despite the hollers of their Beseecher, none of them can reach the Stormthrower. Her axe severs heads from their shoulders. Llodis raises the sword.

He drives it against the ground and the sand ripples like a rolling wave, uprooting the dome buildings. An outbuilding post snaps. And Hestia is sent sprawling. Her yelp echoes over the fight, and she clutches the bloody bandage on her shoulder.

“Burn it.” Llodis snaps at the nearest soldier, nodding at the main building.

From the stifling heat of the wasteland and the fire raging around them, it takes no time before the entire outpost has been engulfed. The growing mass of smoke morphs the hollers. Through the dark clouded air, Llodis notices Enzo where he lies, facing Danilo with a trembling hand against the boy’s dirt-stained face.

Sparks and ash float through the air, and the blazing heat bounces off his skin. The pained and angered scream of a psychotic Nuicalli cuts through the otherwise mute air: ‘Easton!’ For the first time, Llodis watches Enzo’s face scrunch up in pain not caused by a physical wound.



CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

A growl reverberates in Enzo's chest as the Beseecher's guards drop Danilo on the marble floor of Audantei's grand throne room. He staunches the fear blooming in its place at the lack of a response, this from a boy who cannot hide his true feelings.

With the many chandeliers above casting firelight through the room with enough power to rival Audantei's sun, Danilo's wounds would shine against his skin. Instead, Enzo fixes his gaze on Llodis Altamura, who lounges in the red velvet throne. Its gold embellishments acting as a crown the Royal Beseecher was never meant to wear.

"Take him beneath the barracks." He waves his hand at Danilo. "I'll deal with him later."

A soldier wipes greasy hair from his face. "But the barracks aren't as secure, sir."

"He won't be alive long enough for it to matter."

The soldier doesn't argue further. He picks up Danilo's forearm and drags him along until he reaches the large double doors.

"Where's the adviser?" Llodis tilts his head, light eyes sheering through the line of men at his side.

"Nalcun?" a soldier says, stepping forward.

“Where?”

“We don’t know. Sir.”

“Find him.” Llodis leans to the side. “I want him dead.”

Enzo glowers at the Mad General, Llodis opts to stare at him. A terse silence fills the air above their heads, but it doesn’t last long.

“Figured the great Enzo Sapiienti would run himself through before considering surrender.” Llodis tilts his head, his hair falling flat to his face in stringy sections. “Are you that loyal to him?”

Enzo lets the statement sit, not eager to come across as a liar. “No. Though I more than you.”

Red tints the Beseecher’s neck.

“He’s always been my enemy—my rival,” Llodis says, leaning on his knees. “Funny he means more to you after all he’s put you through.” Enzo remains silent. Beseecher Altamura smirks and allows his half-chuckle to sneak through. “What an interesting thought.”

Llodis stands, circling Enzo and raising his arm to the grand door. It croaks open. He grabs Enzo’s jaw, distorting the drag echoing in the high ceilings.

“Care to elaborate?” Llodis says from between grit teeth, his eyes on the cusp of crazed.

Enzo pulls from Llodis’ grip. “Not for the likes of you.”

“Shame.” Llodis grins, watching over Enzo’s head. “The kid seemed nice. Hate to spill red so wastefully.”

Enzo glances over his shoulder as the soldiers flop Easton alongside him. Deep purple bruises tint his jaw and the oozing cut on the bridge of his nose swells. Enzo finds himself momentarily grateful Easton is unconscious.

“He can’t withstand the same beatings you’ll take. I know that.” Llodis grabs Easton’s arm, bending the joint of his elbow awkwardly until the taut skin turns. “But do you think you can withstand the same as my traitorous lieutenant?”

Enzo’s control blazes in his eyes, and he refuses to meet the Beseecher’s gaze. A dark chuckle rumbles the air.

“He deserved everything he got. And more.” Llodis leans from above Easton to glimpse at Enzo’s face. “A man without morals to fight for—he’s a coward.”

Enzo’s nausea is at war with his overzealous emotions, but his face portrays none of it.

“Cowards deserve to bleed.” Before the meaning of the Beseecher’s words can settle, the sickening pop of Easton’s elbow fills the empty air.

“You, Enzo Sapienti, were never a coward.” Llodis drops Easton’s arm before rounding to Enzo’s front. “But you will be.”



CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Danilo is weightless. Adrift in a timeless space. Disturbed by nothing but an incessant pattern thudding against his skull. A rushed and anxious beat. He scrunches his face up, lip twitching when his scar pulls, and tries to pry his eyes open. The sudden light makes his head pulse, and he snaps them shut. With a groan, Danilo allows himself to drift back into the untethered world.

He's unsure how long it's been before he wakes again, his peace disturbed by a palm urgently shaking his chin. The faint perfume of Arrisoot dances on the forefront of his memory. He gasps, fluttering his eyes open and lurching from where he lies. A heavy hand pins him to the floor.

"Stay."

Danilo's eyes roll back—or he blacked out again—before he meets Enzo's face.

"Back to me. There." Enzo's healing nose emphasizes his swollen and black eyes. "Good."

Danilo grimaces, head lolling in Enzo's hold. Enzo taps his forehead until he opens his eyes, unaware he'd closed them again.

"Your name?" Enzo continues bracing Danilo's face, fingers resting in the hair over his ear.

Danilo coughs when he tries to answer, his mouth and throat dry as if he'd drunk the sand from a mirage. Enzo hums before pulling his leather canteen from his waist and propping Danilo against the wall.

"Slow." Enzo warns.

Danilo tries. He really does. But the moment the water hits his tongue, his control is like that of the dead—non-existent. Enzo mutters 'defiant' under his breath before tapping his cheek in warning and pulling away. Danilo pants, ignoring the queasy sensation in his stomach.

"Your name?" Enzo moves from his heels to his knees.

"Danilo."

Enzo looks prepared to press, but decides otherwise. He tears a strip from his shirt, dampening it with the water pouch before returning the cap. Danilo shuts his eyes as Enzo dabs the wet fabric to the sweat rolling from his forehead. Enzo squints as he swipes grime away from motley bruises.

Danilo tries to not let relief rest so plainly on his face, but Enzo's brows twitch with recognition and he repositions his hand to support Danilo's jaw rather than clutch it.

"Didn't tell—" Danilo says between coughs, "tell anything."

Enzo quirks a brow before smothering it with indifference. He says nothing.

Danilo hisses and recoils, pushing his knuckles against Enzo's wrist and away from his tender nose. He blinks at the red tinge on the rag. Enzo waits for him to settle, fingers grazing the skin of his jaw, before continuing his task, cautious as he checks Danilo's fractured nose. He hums again when Danilo winces.

"I apologize." Enzo starts. Danilo furrows his brows at Enzo, grunting in question. "I spoke out of anger. Believed you to deserve what befell you."

Enzo tosses the soiled rag aside and lifts Danilo's hands. He prods at Danilo's clenched fingers. Danilo tries unfurling them, but the movement is delayed. Enzo bites his tongue, and pulls Danilo's fingers free to glare at the bloody crevices dividing Danilo's palms. Ice crawls across the surface of Danilo's skin, encompassing the wound. A soundless gasp escapes Danilo and his fingers try to curl inward before Enzo pins them back with the weight of his hand. Danilo's fingers sting as they regain feeling.

"I would not wish this on the worst of our enemies." Enzo moves to repeat the action with his left hand. Despite knowing what to expect, the pain takes Danilo's breath away. He finds a momentary distraction in Enzo's words. "Least of all, you."

Enzo watches Danilo like one would watch a wounded, cornered animal before tearing another strip from his shirt. The Arrisoot lingering through his bloodstream has stripped him of the energy it would take to kick up a fuss. Enzo damps the new rag and holds it to the first palm. Danilo's certain it should have hurt. He's even more certain when Enzo furrows his brows. Enzo swipes at the wound, relief filling his features when Danilo tugs his palm away with a gasp.

"Did you know I fought to stay?" Danilo asks through grit teeth.

"In a sense." Enzo reaches into his pocket, depositing the clicking jade tags on Danilo's thigh.

Danilo blinks at the tags, flipping one over with uncooperative fingers. His rank stares up at him on the chipped stone. A swarm of thoughts churn through his mind. Enzo pauses in his ministrations, glancing between him and the tags. He takes them up, holding the chain wide to settle it over Danilo's shoulders. When Danilo reaches up to tuck them beneath his shirt, Enzo grabs his hands, laying them palm-up on his thighs, and tucks the tags out of sight.

Danilo had never belonged to Audantei's military. Not in the same means the other soldiers had. He was an outcast. But the tags belong to him. He earned his rank and the respect; if not from the soldiers, then from the city.

"Hoped you'd find them." Danilo traces the jade over his shirt.

Enzo hums in answer, finishing with one of Danilo's palms and moving to the next. When Enzo is halfway finished with it, Danilo braves speaking the question on his mind.

"Why are you here?"

Danilo, for the first time in his life, hears Enzo audibly swallow. He sets the rag on his knee before grabbing either side of Danilo's head.

"You are not my enemy."

Danilo sags against the wall, nodding. He wants to ask if Enzo could ever forgive him, wants to know whether Enzo could consider him an ally before they face the death upon them, but unlike the things he doesn't want to say, this won't leave his lips.

A gasp—harsh and jagged—rips through the settled air, spiking it with a tension so hot, Danilo tastes his heart in his throat. Enzo pins him to the wall, speaking to him past the pulse in his ears.

"—Easton." Enzo shifts to the other side of Danilo's front, allowing him to see beyond his shoulder. "It's Easton."

“BY THE FIVE.” Easton groans, bleary eyes blinking in his surroundings as he finally wakes.

Danilo scrunches up his face and releases a shuddering sigh. Enzo slides off him.

Easton continues moaning and whining. Enzo places a hand over Easton’s mouth, scolding him with words softer than Danilo has heard. His hand remains on Danilo’s knee while the other lifts from Easton’s face. Danilo settles, using Enzo’s distraction to familiarize himself with the barracks’ underground cells, the all-encompassing dirt walls lit by a single torch lining the narrow hall on the other side of the metal bars.

They were likely the only prisoners in these chambers, as it remains a well kept secret among the higher-ranking officers.

“What’d they do to me?” Easton gripes.

Enzo helps Easton sit up and keeps him from moving his swollen elbow, the sleeve pushed around his upper arm to keep from constricting the injury. Danilo pales, eyes fixed on Easton’s mottled face. The bruises are healing.

“Does...” Easton glances between Danilo and Enzo. “Does it look that bad?”

Enzo keeps his expression blank. He follows Easton’s gaze.

“I’m sorry,” Danilo says.

“Why?”

Easton rubs the hand of his uninjured arm through the hair flattened on the side of his head, wincing at the tender spot Danilo knows is there. Because the patterns of the welts and lesions that blazed atop Easton’s skin matched the beatings Danilo had preferred for torturing his captives. Danilo recoils from Easton’s grimace. Enzo glances between them with a resolute expression.

A trapdoor groans in the distance—cutting through their conversation and echoing down the narrow wall of the packed dirt corridor. They fall silent, tensing as it thuds against the ground. Metallic footfalls echo in Danilo’s mind. His heart thuds in tandem with the synchronized steps of the Beseecher’s Best—they never left the citadel. His stomach twists up into his lungs as two soldiers file in to guard either side of the cell door while another two guard the outside, eerily inhuman with their perfected turns and stances.

The Beseecher enters, and Danilo wonders how he had forgotten.

Llodos Altamura shifts his shoulders, unused to the weight of his new armour. Unlike Kosymo, who preferred the simplicity of his gaudy steel plates, Llodos painted his red and gold. The throne’s colours. Propped beneath his arm

is a matching helmet. He hands it to a guard who takes it with the movements of a wooden toy.

“Hello, boy.” Llodis grins.

Enzo stiffens in Danilo’s peripheral, but Danilo’s focus doesn’t falter. He struggles first to his knees, then to his feet, and looks Beseecher Altamura in the eye, taking what little enjoyment he finds at the disgust marring the man’s scarred face.

“Llodis.” Danilo grins back.

Sharp steel knuckles crack across his cheek, and he stumbles back into the wall from the force. Bracing himself, Danilo stares the Beseecher down. He refuses to fall beneath him again.

The sword’s metal glints menacingly from within the sheath at Llodis’ hip, and Danilo pales as it’s pulled free. Llodis points it at his throat. Enzo stands, torn between protecting Easton and defending Danilo. Before Enzo can make it to his feet, one soldier pins him to the opposite wall. The other points a sword at Easton, who still looks as if he’s trying to figure out what’s happening.

“I have... orders. But it will only keep me from you for a time.” Llodis scowls. “You will die. Are you prepared, boy?”

He had been once. But now he doubts whether it had been his own commitment, or if he had been conditioned to lay his neck under the guillotine as the other soldiers were.

Llodis replaces the sword into its sheath. As he approaches Danilo, his meaty hand thrusts out, constricting around Danilo’s throat and pressing into the bruises he’d left.

“You will be.” Llodis’ frigid blue eyes glare down his ex-lieutenant. “When I’m done with you, you will be.”

The Beseecher shifts his hand to cup Danilo’s jaw, pulls him away from the wall, and taps his head with enough force that Danilo drops, unable to catch himself. Dirt builds beneath his nails as they scrape the wall for purchase.

Enzo struggles against the guard, his magic splitting the ground, water slicking the sand floor. Easton’s wide eyes flick between the chaos. Llodis swings the sword against Easton’s throat while Enzo grips the soldier’s helmet and freezes. Danilo glares up at the old General.

As if testing the action, he drags the sword’s tip through Easton’s skin. The runes glow red and Llodis trembles, gripping the sword tighter. His entire arm shakes with effort. He stills, sweating and panting while his guards stare on.

Llody slices through the front of Danilo's shirt. Danilo gasps, clutching his chest. His hand is sticky and red when he pulls it back. The sword settles and the runes glow blue. Llody raises it above his head and turns to Easton.

"Spill mine."

Danilo snaps his jaw shut, not realizing the words were his until the Beseecher turns with the sword lowered.

"His blood won't be any good," Danilo pants, pushing to his knees and ignoring the urge to stand. "Spill mine instead."

Llody lurches forward to grab Danilo's face, glancing over his shoulder at Easton and Enzo.

"You never would have been my General. You're too weak." But even as he shoves Danilo back, he doesn't resume his previous act. Instead, he stares down, eyes narrowed. "Fool." Llody spins the sword. "I've been given an order. And it ends with you."

The air churns and the hair on the back of Danilo's neck stands. Enzo whips his head in Easton's direction before warping the helmet beneath his hand. Llody raises a hand to strike Danilo again.

Blood flicks across Danilo's face, red magic twisting a sword through Llody's chain mail. A soldier grapples at his empty sheath. Llody howls, gripping the wound with one hand and spinning around, spearing the sword through Easton's middle.

Enzo forces the soldier from the cell, hurricane winds whipping the Beseecher off Easton. The sword clatters alongside him. Danilo lurches forward, and the remaining guard by the door grabs him by the throat and throws him back in time to slam the cell door shut. They crank the keys back when Danilo scrambles to his feet and clutches the bars. Danilo glares at the troops dragging Llody from the cellar; blood runs from his mouth. Good, Danilo thinks.

Enzo is on his knees next to Easton, pressing palms to the spot beneath his chest. Blood runs between Enzo's fingers. Easton gurgles, sagging against Enzo. Danilo knows it's pointless, as Easton's blood covers them both.

Easton flops a hand at Danilo. He slides over on his knees, catching Easton's hand as it swings toward him.

"You—" Easton coughs, blood dotting his bottom lip, "were worth... being foolish for."

Danilo grimaces. Easton turns his gaze up to Enzo.

"T—next we meet." His breath rattles as it falls. Never to raise again.

Easton's hand slackens in Danilo's and he stares on numbly. The band of Easton's ring catches his own. In a detached haze, Danilo slips it free, removing himself from Easton's side while Enzo tucks his face against Easton's. The brown gemstone of Easton's ring shines at him from his open palm and he places it onto his finger; another manacle to bear. He presses his lips together.

Companionship isn't a service he offers. And now, neither is protection.

"Until next we meet," Enzo chokes out.

Danilo bites his tongue, his chest flooding with anger—injustice. He marches for the cell front. Leaving him unattended will be their last mistake.

He grips the bars and drives his heel against the bottom bracket anchored in the dirt wall. Their holding cell was once an ale cellar. It hadn't been designed to hold prisoners. The bracket doesn't move on the first strike, or the second, or the third. Danilo blinks back the lingering spots in his vision, heaving himself up onto the bars and jumping onto the anchor. Dirt sprays where it breaks free from the wall. Enzo barks behind him.

An ex-Ravager guard rounds the corner, scars decorating his face in criss-crossing lines. He pulls Danilo into the bars. The metal scratches his cheek and purple powder plumes the air. His vision blurs and his knees buckle beneath him.

Enzo's hand cushions his head as he hits the ground.



Enzo's fingers tremble as he settles Danilo against the floor, Danilo's sensitivity dancing chaotically within him. With a sigh, Enzo slides his fingers over Danilo's eyelids. He cards his fingers through Danilo's looser curls, transfixed by the ring shining on Danilo's hand.

He unclasps his cloak. Loathe as he is to face the realities of the situation, he kneels next to Easton. The array of bruises and stains across his skin amplifies the horror of the scene. Enzo swallows a sob and lays his cloak over the boy.

Enzo doesn't want to send him. Doesn't want to imagine Hestia's shattered face as she screams and breaks things with tears running down her cheeks. Doesn't want to think about Magus leaving for days and returning so drunk he cannot crawl on his hands and knees. Doesn't want to imagine the catatonic state it will put Gellert in, or the threat it will be for Borak, who will try

to contain the calamity before it happens. Doesn't want to picture Reina, so broken and lost she's unable to cry.

Enzo doesn't want to leave them with the hope he will live. Despite his desires, he raises his hands. The edges of the cloak lift, following Enzo's movement, water pooling beneath.

Then Easton is gone.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Danilo wakes up staring at a dry puddle of blood. Distantly, he wonders if he should remember why. Sweat lines his face, and his shirt sticks to his back. He groans, and Enzo glances his way, a keen eye watching as he braces his elbows beneath him. Laughter grates on Danilo's raw nerves, and it rings oddly inside his skull, along with the echo of dragging feet down the corridor outside the old converted cell.

Danilo lands against the wall, half on his side and half on his front, head spinning. Numb, trembling fingers bounce around the stiff brown stain on his tunic. His chest burns with each breath. He tries to search Enzo's eyes, but they're turned to the creaking cell door.

The first soldier Danilo believes to be Nalo—a second-in-command from the border patrol of Merkidia's southern lines—recognizable by his close-cropped black hair and the frown lines emphasizing his scowl. The second is the ex-Ravager who powdered Danilo the day prior, and Danilo knows the ill bode that comes with the man's arrival. His deep scars are horrifying, deep and grooving, the skin over his cheeks thin. Rioder had a malicious jealousy for Danilo in the past. It's absent from his eyes now. Instead, a hunger takes its place as he slams the cell door shut, leaving Nalo to lock it behind him. The idiot leaves the key in the latch.

"Y'know," Rioder says as he crouches over Danilo, "if it weren't for the Besecher's plans, I'd make you regret everything."

"Think he does," Nalo says, his hand on his hilt as he stares down Enzo. "No cause is worth the Arrisoot."

Danilo notices Enzo's hands shake as he stands. There are tricks to keeping a Stormthrower weak; first is the Arrisoot. After that comes the denial of food and water. A Stormthrower can convert their energy into magic. Without food their magic converts to energy, and without water, they dwindle to nothing more than bones in a few days' time—Enzo, while trembling and unsteady, stands ready.

Prisoners who are given Arrisoot for over three days die from dehydration. Considering the fact Danilo is still alive, they mustn't have been locked in for over two. Danilo glares up at Rioder, trying to dislodge the thought that perhaps his sensitivity bought him time from dying of dehydration, and things were far worse than he imagined.

"Do you regret it?" Rioder grabs his face, squatted over Danilo's awkward seat.

"Go to hell," Danilo says.

A knife slides out from its leather home, the tip dancing in front of his eyes. Nalo snaps his gaze away from Enzo. "Rioder."

"Shut up," Rioder says, tracing the side of Danilo's face with the tip of the knife.

"Rioder."

"Shut up." His knife meets the top of the scar near Danilo's nose, following the path down. It settles beneath Danilo's lip, the tip touching to his gums beneath. He ignores the sting and taste of blood.

"Rioder—"

"Shut up, Nalo." Rioder swings around, pointing the knife toward his partner.

"He's property of the Besecher." Nalo points his sword when Enzo moves and raises his brows. "Last time you toyed with his prisoner, he was the General and still almost had you killed."

"He doesn't scare me." Rioder spits.

"He shoul—hey."

Enzo rushes Nalo, and Danilo uses Rioder's distraction to clamber up. His hands feel distant from his arms, and when he's pushed to his knees, nails scrape

at his scalp and shove him back to the ground. Danilo swings his head around under Rioder's grasp as the soldiers argue above him. Nalo's hand clutches Enzo's throat with a whitening grasp—not strong enough to successfully suffocate him, however.

Rioder wrenches Danilo onto his back, his fingers skating over the multi-colour bruises decorating Danilo's jaw and neck. Judging by the crazed look in the eyes of the ex-Ravager, Danilo should be afraid of what is yet to unfold.

"What would it matter?" Rioder grips the underside of Danilo's jaw, pressing the heel of his hand down on Danilo's airway.

Danilo coughs, kicking his leg out in hopes his thrashing will break Rioder's hold. Rioder squeezes his throat tighter. When he tries lifting a hand to fight, Rioder kicks it down, locking both of Danilo's arms beneath him while straddling Danilo's chest. His lungs protest Rioder's weight.

"Don't—" Nalo says.

"Why not?" Rioder walks the fingers of his free hand up Danilo's nose. "Not like he'll say anything. Won't even remember it."

"I will," Enzo chokes out, and Nalo loosens his grip.

Rioder coos, eyes locked on his prize. When Danilo's eyes haze over, he slaps his cheek and grins when Danilo kicks again. The silence in the room grows thick with boiling anger.

"Take him." Rioder nods his head at the exit.

Nalo grips Enzo's hair and drags him from the cell.

"Where?" Enzo plants his feet and the soldier lurches.

He tugs on Enzo's scalp. "It's Hanging Day."

Nalo drags Enzo down the corridor and their shouts and scuffles echo until the trapdoor slams shut. Rioder lifts his hand from Danilo's throat, and Danilo wheezes air in around his words. "You're under-qualified to give orders."

"Look who's talking, Outcast."

Rioder's pale eyes flare before he raises both hands to Danilo's throat and leans his upper body onto locked arms. Danilo doesn't have the room to thrash. But as his body screams for air and darkness clouds his sight, it's all he does.

"Y'know what I'm a fan of?" Rioder leans down, forcing even more weight on Danilo's aching airway. "Control." Danilo gapes, fighting to find even a whisper of air. His head floats from his shoulders. "It's a high like no other."

Dirt builds beneath Danilo's nails as he claws at the ground. His eyes throb.

“Do you think it runs in the family? Your father sure seems to like it—the power. Doubt you’re any different.” Rioder’s nails scratch at the skin on Danilo’s neck. “Distinctly remember you being famous for that.”

Danilo knows he should panic the moment he feels his body sag beneath Rioder’s hands. Rioder lets go. Black spots dance across the ceiling as Danilo heaves in. Rioder’s palm snaps to the side of his face, gripping hard. He doesn’t let Danilo go until his head stops lolling to the side. Danilo blinks at the pouch Rioder pulls from his waist. He rolls his head to the side and Rioder turns his jaw to face him. Rioder spins the bag between his fingers, over Danilo’s head.

“Been wanting to do this since you killed Neor. Took me a while to find the new guy distributing this stuff.”

He brings the bag to a stop.

“Control.” Rioder scoffs. “You never had any, did you?” Danilo rolls his tongue and coughs, planting his feet on the ground. “Nah, you did. But it wasn’t enough, huh? I mean, look at your life. Couldn’t control the men. Couldn’t control the sword. Couldn’t control your daddy, or how hard he hit you.” Rioder chuckles at Danilo’s glare. “Can’t control me.”

He wiggles his fingers into the small bag, a grin crawling across his pocked face.

“Everyone claims Arrisoot isn’t addictive.” Rioder leans back. “I think we both know that’s a lie.”

“Lost a handful on you last time. Let’s not be so wasteful.” He pulls the bag open.

Danilo thrusts his hips, throwing Rioder forward and spilling the Arrisoot above their heads. He yanks his hands free, punching above Rioder’s kidney. Rioder howls, curling up in pain. Danilo flips them, pinning the Ravager beneath him. Rioder knees Danilo’s tender ribs.

He rolls, dragging Danilo towards the Arrisoot. Danilo braces on his forearms and drives his elbow back. A crack resounds in the air and Rioder cries out. Danilo locks an arm around Rioder’s neck and forces him into the powder. Rioder snags Danilo’s hair and thrusts the side of his jaw into the powder as well. Danilo coughs in surprise but holds Rioder down until the man slackens.

Danilo hauls Rioder from the Arrisoot by his scalp. Twenty seconds of silence ring in the air, allowing Danilo a reprieve to tame his racing heart. As he tilts his head back, he notices a figure stands in the cell’s doorway with their sword drawn.

“Well... I pity the fool who calls you incapable, Dani.” Magus raises his brows with appreciative laughter.

Danilo smirks with a wince. “He kinda did.”

He leans into the wall after standing, his knees buckling beneath his weight. Nausea swirls in his empty stomach, made worse when he shakes his head.

“Danilo?” Magus’ voice sounds garbled. Danilo counts out his breaths, bracing on the wall to correct his knees. “Hey.” Magus clamps a hand on Danilo’s shoulder, looking him in the eye. “You good?”

Judging from the growing furrow of Magus’ brow, it takes far longer for Danilo to respond than it should. He gestures in Rioder’s direction. Magus must understand because he tucks an arm beneath Danilo’s, bracing Danilo’s weight with his shoulders.

“I gotcha, but you’re gonna have to help me.” Magus glances down at Rioder. Danilo groans.

A blood stain in the sand glares up at him and he drags his feet, tensing with urgency.

“I know—” Magus shifts, tightening his grip. “I know. Let’s get you out first.”

Danilo’s legs move like they’re trudging through marshland, his feet suctioning to the floor. Magus takes a steadying breath and Danilo tries to copy. Each slow step threatens Danilo’s queasy stomach. When Magus squeezes Danilo’s sore ribs, Danilo’s mind stutters. He drags his eyes to Magus while they stumble down the corridor.

“You real?”

Magus gazes at him, eyes tight and grip tighter. “Yeah buddy, I am.”

“M’kay.”

For a stretched second, the dirt walls are magnified under Danilo’s fingers. Then the numbness takes hold.

Something thuds in the distant end of the tunnel, metal dragging alongside rushed steps. Magus deposits Danilo against the wall, and Danilo nods at him once his head stops spinning. Magus lifts its sword from his sheath, freezing when a kid, no older than twelve, tears around the corner. He trips across the uneven dirt floor, wide black eyes staring at Magus. Dark hair frames his fine features, and Danilo grasps to remember why he’s familiar.

“How old do you guys start?” Magus whips around to Danilo.

Another set of steps echoes in the underground corridor, and Nalcun launches in front of the child.

“Pa, I’m—”

“You’ll not argue with me, Ari.” Nalcun barks over his shoulder.

Magus straightens. “Nalcun Barmithol?”

“Yes?” Nalcun turns with a palm in front of the child.

Magus sheathes his sword, instead offering his hand. Nalcun stares at it and the child reaches around his waist to accept.

“Ari.” Nalcun directs a pointed glare at the kid.

“What?” The boy—unbothered by the heated stare—grins at Nalcun, cheeks and eyes glittering.

“Get back in the pass.” Nalcun demands.

“I have a mission, Pa.”

“As do I. It is keeping you alive. Now get.” Nalcun pushes the child through the doorway by the head of his head.

Instead of running in the direction they had come, he runs around Nalcun’s other side, dragging a sword behind him. Too heavy to carry. He offers the hilt to Danilo, and its black runes fade like ash into a crisp blue. Magus whips his head to the child, gaping in question.

“Finished my mission, Pa.” Ari bounces on his heels, running in the other direction.

Nalcun watches him go, turning to Magus and Danilo when he’s safe, and sheathed his own sword.

“Audantei was never a place of death,” he says, glancing at Danilo, then back to where the child vanished. “I do hope one day our city can remember that.”

Danilo nods, eyes hazy. Magus answers on his behalf. “Yeah, same.”

Nalcun offers his hand, which Magus takes. Then he is off. Magus peers through the doorway, his neck craning up and down before turning to Danilo with curled brows.

“Magic.” Magus grins.

Danilo smirks, moving to stand. Magus scoops beneath his shoulder before he falls.

“Gonna be even harder to get you outta here now,” he grumbles. “Hold on to that sword.”

Danilo grunts, dragging his feet beside Magus. War echoes on the ground above their heads when they reach the stairwell. Magus clutches Danilo’s hand,

holding the sword, nodding. Danilo nods in return, following Magus up the cellar stairs.

He's blinded by the glare of the sun reflecting off the sand and walls of the barracks. Metal clashing with metal echoes at Danilo's side. Gellert grabs him.

"Could you take any longer?" He turns to Magus.

Danilo feels a surge of heat as Magus pulls a shield of fire between them and the next wave of soldiers. On his other side, gold hues flicker in the air and three men lay groaning.

"Come, Dani-boy." Magus grips around Danilo, pulling him along.

"What's wi' him?" Gellert throws his spear, piercing through the shield of an oncoming soldier, and pulls it back to him. He looks over his shoulder at the blue glow casting over his fight. "How'd he get 'at?"

"Later," Magus says, searing the eyes of the man swiping a sword in their direction with a satisfied smile.

Danilo looks down at his hand, rotating the sword. His thoughts drag like a paddle through mud. Both Magus and Gellert play gatekeeper well, but he has the key to the problem at hand.

Power surges through Danilo, moving in his veins with a speed which rivaled lightning. His sight rings clear, the effects of Arrisoot scrubbed from his mind. He trembles, clenches the sword, and slashes at the ground. Cracks and fissures consume the training grounds and barracks, sand billowing in the wake of destruction. It clears, pulled away on Audantei's higher winds. Some soldiers look among themselves before dropping their swords. Others run to regroup. Danilo sighs, his sight waning, and the sword slides from his fingers.

"Did you know it coul—" Magus snatches Danilo's elbow.

"No." Gellert lifts the sword from the ground with a hiss.

Danilo takes it, unaware of the scene unfolding before him. Gellert clutches his sizzling palm. His magic fades the burn. Magus and Gellert stare at one another.

Dragging Danilo along requires finesse and talent from both Magus and Gellert. Soldiers pour from passageways and fire arrows from slitted gaps of upper corridors of still-standing barracks. Danilo thrusts the sword when his mind works in his favour, though the longer it takes for Magus and Gellert to drag him to their rendezvous, the more infrequent it becomes.

Reina volleys arrows from the wagon she stands atop, bow pointed skyward. The few stragglers struggling against their deaths finds the arrows turned to

vines within their lungs, and their bloody vomit joins the mess surrounding them. Bodies pile in a semi-circle around the rear of the cart.

Hestia swings with a lazy arm, focused on holding the horses steady. White gauze hangs from her shoulder, torn by the ongoing battle.

Gellert hops beneath Reina as she fires another set of arrows, using the cover she provides to drag Danilo into the tailboard of the wagon. Danilo slumps against the into it, sword arm twitching.

“Hes. Ready!” Reina shouts over her shoulder.

The wagon shifts as the horses stomp about in the action, eager to flee when Hestia tightens the reins. Danilo’s eyes roll, and the sword loosens in his grasp. Magus pats his cheek while clambering into the wagon, near landing atop him.

“Not yet.” Magus flicks fire to life in his palm and pushes it into Danilo’s chest—Danilo gasps at the heat rushing through him. He lurches upward and grips the edge of the cart, panting at the fever roiling through him. “We need you. Down one already.”

Another fifty soldiers pour from the corridors, chasing Borak and Enzo. Danilo stares at them from beneath his brows, clenching the sword. Borak boosts Enzo into the wagon, shoving a foot on the wheel to bolster himself up. Gellert draws him the rest of the way in, but not before a soldier aims a spear at Borak’s open back.

Danilo grits his teeth and raises the sword. His world slows. The sword draws across the air in front of the soldier’s neck, beheading him and slicing the throat of the man behind him. Its power swipes the surrounding men from their feet. Though his vision wavers, he braces on the wagon and prepares for another swing. He finds his wrist and the sword pinned to the wagon.

Rioder sneers up at him, digging his broken nails into Danilo’s armed hand. Danilo curses himself for forgetting that Ravagers, excommunicated or otherwise, tend to sample their supply, which gives them a partial immunity.

Before he can squeeze the sword in Rioder’s direction, Rioder is blown from the side of the wagon. Grey clouds darken the air above the broken gate between the barracks and the courtyard passage, a frigid chill in the growing winds. Borak grabs Danilo’s shoulders, bracing Danilo against his chest. Magus cups Danilo’s sword hand and drags them both inside the wagon.

Danilo—while he’s witnessed men die at Enzo’s hand—has not seen Enzo kill with such unconfined rage. Rioder’s skin tears from his flesh, and his flesh from his bone, as the force of Enzo’s cyclone rivals those of the Dead

Sea—blackening the sky surrounding the cart with its ferocity. The winds punch the breath from Danilo's lungs. What he first believed Enzo's strength to be was only a hint of the irrevocable storm within him. On all the occasions Enzo had fought him, the man merely toyed with the thought of killing him.

Enzo stumbles into the wagon and shouts at Hestia. She snaps the reins, and the cart begins its jostling path through the gate. Enzo clutches at his chest, hand grasping a non-existent wound.

Though they leave the grey clouds to churn above the Beseecher's citadel, Danilo's world grows darker. He blinks at Enzo, noting the rope burn around his neck and the strands of hair stuck to his sweaty forehead. Screams from the streets would shred apart whatever concern may roll off his heavy tongue. He slumps in Borak's hold, a hand patting against his cheek.

"Leave him." Fingers land on his forehead, combing the hair back from his face. "We no longer require his aid."

Danilo tries to fight the Arrisoot, his attempts upended when a hand slides over his eyes and the blurred world vanishes.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Enzo's kicked awake, having fallen asleep next to Danilo from depleting his magic reservoir. He blinks up at the sky and clears his uncomfortable throat.

Sohn Giffak Place is a secret abode few magic-users use to their advantage. And when they do, it is often said their odds of success would crumble beneath the rotten remains of the house, along with their hopes. Others say a heavy curse hangs over the house. Enzo, of course, knows curses join hexes and superstition in the believable imaginings of the incredulous. Regardless of his disagreement, their arrival at Giffak Place darkens his spirit. If the Nephla's chosen have found it to be the last resort of escape, he is to consider it with the ill it bodes.

Borak and Gellert lift Danilo from the wagon, rushing to be free of it before Audantei's horses can catch up. Hestia jogs after, tying up the tears on her gauze. Reina stands atop the wagon, dagger in one hand and the reins in the other. She nods at Enzo, waiting for him and Magus to move along.

Gellert bought them little more than a few minutes—using his magic to allow their carriage passage through the dropped Black Gate. With Llodis Altamura as reigning Beseecher, Enzo will not chance their freedom by abandoning efficiency for false assurance. He aids Magus from his drunk-like stupor and gasps, sharp pains lancing through his chest while he exits the cart.

Reina cuts the horses free, and the remaining leather in her hands slaps against the ground. She jumps off the groaning cart. It crumbles to its original state, as Enzo knew it from Shushari Outpost... If a little more blackened than before.

Magus grumbles, pressing ahead once the three close in on the sunken building hidden by sand and long grass, the surrounding savanna forest growing over the old remains. Enzo pauses, allowing Magus to move down the uneven steps, remaining free of sand from clay-brick walls on either side.

He hobbles into the entry and drops into the nearest chair. While blinking in the darkness, he leans over the small, round table. His sleeves disrupt the film of dust across its scarred surface. A hand drops onto his shoulder. He glances up at Reina before squeezing her fingers with his own.

"Need anything?" Reina holds his eye, nodding though he'd not spoken. "If that changes, tell me."

Enzo pushes a hand through his hair, watching her move through the age-stained walls of the living quarters. A lone item on the table's dusty surface draws his eye—an envelope with his name scrawled hurriedly in stark black ink. His fingers dance around the envelope's edge, not moving it from the table until he determines no presence of something fouler.

He flips it over and the yellow wax seal of the House of Carielle mocks him—the Head Region for the Dead West. With a squint, Enzo drags the edge of Danilo's confiscated dagger through the ornate symbol; water encased in fire. The envelope's lip bounces free.

There is no signature at the letter's end. No kind regards or farewells. But the letter closes with a clear indication it was finished as intended.

Their western partners have been at war with a formerly underground Order for the last decade, though Enzo's informed the Order's existence wavers with no clear origin. His presence in the Gentled East was originally to ascertain whether Audantei's actions were a branch of the western cult. He instead found their massacre to be bigotry. And his unending battle began.

Enzo skims the letter's vague contents, implying warning and requesting aid. Despite his desire to decline, he knows the letter has made it into Giffak Place by Calista's sanction. And from discussions he prefers not to remember, it is a call he would be required to answer.

Enzo pushes to his feet, staggering through the dark main quarters. Magus snores from the dilapidated leather divan, the furniture's low back threatening

to deposit him on the floor. Gellert sits stiffly in an old chair at Magus' side, shaking his head with a half-wry smile. Enzo rolls his eyes in response. He continues past, pressing through the doorway as Borak and Hestia bustle by. Hestia's gaze shoots up at his entry.

"You should be sitting. Why are you up?" She scowls, pressing her knuckles into her hips.

Enzo shuts the door behind him. "I am at liberty to do as I please."

Hestia grits her teeth, shoulders tensing beneath Enzo's defiant stare. Borak inhales sharply.

"Was Reina in the main room?" Borak asks, straightening from his position over Danilo.

"No," Enzo says.

Reina has a habit of tending to herself alone, hiding her wounds from everyone until she physically collapses under them. They all know if she vanished after a hard-won excursion, she took an injury.

"Hes, please check on her." Borak demands.

"I don't wanna argue with her," Hestia says, swinging around to Borak.

"But you'll argue with me and Enzo?" Borak gestures towards the door.

She screams through her teeth and marches to the table, sweeping supplies into her arms before charging out the door. Enzo drops into the chair next to it, leaning his head on the spongy wall. He inhales the mildew before shutting his eyes. Borak shuffles around, and Enzo uses his time to catalog the importance of his next steps.

Foremost, though simplest, is discovering how they came to be in possession of the sword. Second is the current state of Audantei's Beseecher. A far more arduous task, considering the Nephla's chosen unveiled their faces, as well as their magic, to the whole of Audantei.

Borak pins Enzo's head in to the wall with a firm hand around his jaw, ignoring Enzo's flinch. When he reaches up, Borak smacks his hand away. He pulls down the collar of Enzo's shirt.

"Nasty hangman's burn," Borak says, prodding the raw skin. Enzo scrunches his face but otherwise remains silent. "This could scar even after helping it along."

When the hangman realized the citadel was under siege, he took it upon himself to drop the trapdoor early, attempting to strangle Enzo with the noose

by hand. The hangman himself fared no better. Regardless, the quick thinking proved to make Enzo's life unbearable for a fraction longer.

Borak frowns, moving his palm from Enzo's neck to hover above his chest. "Enzo—"

"See to him." He nods to Danilo, tacking on when Borak looks ready to argue, "I am not headed elsewhere."

Borak scowls before nodding, moving over to the bed. He needs the dying light to see Danilo's injuries.

"See to his hands." Enzo attempts to clear his throat of the incessant burn, shutting his eyes once again.

"Stop that. It won't help," Borak says, skating his palms over Danilo's ribs, lightning fizzing beneath them as it works cracked bone together.

When finished with Danilo's sides, Borak pushes Danilo's fingers open and blinks at the silvered scars across the insides of his palms. His eyes flick back and forth, thumb tracing the scars before looking at Enzo.

"Did you do this?" Borak asks.

Enzo grunts in response, not bothering to open his eyes. Borak returns Danilo's hands to his sides, fingers roving across Danilo's rings, and chews his bottom lip while glancing over Danilo's entirety as if it could provide an explanation.

Gellert shoves the door open, glancing at Enzo when the man looks up in curiosity. "You got 'e nightshade oil, Borak?"

"Yes. Why?" Borak straightens with a glare. "What happened to you?"

"Not me." Gellert folds his arms over his chest. "Hestia is yelling for it."

Enzo hums in laughter.

"Oi, enough." Gellert sneers. "She'll gladly take a chance at you."

"She needs no reason for reprimanding me." Enzo says.

Borak doesn't move. He squints at Gellert. "Hes is mendable with treatments, but I'm not giving her nightshade oil. I don't give Magus the nightshade oil and he's sub-par."

"Because Magus is an idiot—"

"Because there are three different nightshades and every one of them is toxic. There's a thin margin between effective and deadly. Magus would poison himself first from inhalation, then would kill his patient. Of course, that's not before he—"

"Borak, give me 'e thyme oil 'en." Gellert scowls, rolling his eyes when Borak stalks away grumbling.

He takes the offered bottle from Borak and halts when Enzo gestures for him to stop.

"I have a task for you. Return to me once you deliver the nightshade," Enzo says, giving Gellert a pointed look to which Gellert nods, "without bodily harm."

Gellert grunts in acknowledgment and Enzo rolls his eyes, flicking the letter up in his hands. Borak sighs as he rounds the bed and places a hand on Danilo's swollen knee as he passes. His brows screw together while he flexes his fingers over the injury. He flicks the letter as he passes, nodding at it when Enzo glances up with a quirked brow.

"What is it?" Borak says, leaning against the end of the bed.

"Heard news on Jiffane Carielle?" Enzo's chair creaks as he shifts, offering the letter to Borak. He crosses his arms, watching Borak squint at the paper, tilting it toward the light pouring from the small round window on the far wall.

"No. Why?" Borak asks.

"He's dead."

There's a brief silence as the news sets in. Borak blinks, shakes his head, and sighs. He folds the letter, holding it out to Enzo between his index and middle finger. Enzo takes it, setting it down on the supply table at his left.

"They're asking you to go," Borak assumes.

"As of now, none are asking."

"You gotta go." Borak's shoulders drop and he lifts a jar of soothing balm from the clutter, twisting the lid free.

"I am required to do nothing," Enzo responds curtly. "I have duties here."

Borak snorts, scooping the balm with his fingers and setting the jar at the table's edge.

"We like you Enzo, but we don't need you."

Borak jolts forward, smearing the balm across Enzo's sheared skin. Enzo hisses, his argument fizzling from his mind. Borak tilts Enzo's chin up with his free hand to access the entire wound.

While Enzo knows the Nephla's chosen can succeed where they apply themselves, he would like to believe that his presence ensures they will do it right. There are many, in past and present, who argue his aid and his wisdom to be unrequited. Some imply it is a crutch. And though Borak may be Enzo's elder, Enzo believes in his experience of directing less savoury characters—such as

Magus, and, though she may have the masses fooled, Hestia. Be that as it may, if Enzo received instructions to give Borak command, he would do so.

"Calista will demand you go." Borak presses the balm in circular motions into Enzo's neck.

He scowls at the friction.

"Calista will drag me. Her request for my stationing there has been under review for the better of a decade," Enzo replies.

"Under review by whom?" Borak's voice raises.

"Mysel." Enzo smirks for no longer than a second, but Borak does not miss it.

"You were the First's first choice? Enzo..." He rubs his brow with the heel of his hand before gathering more salve from the jar. "You denied the offer for Head of Region?"

"I never wanted status." Enzo rolls his eyes. "Besides, I had pressing personal matters."

Borak sighs. "Yeah."

Salve stains Borak's blue tunic in a darkened, greasy streak as Borak wipes off the excess product. He caps the jar and deposits it among the clutter, hands passing over the supplies before pausing.

"Did she take off with both rolls of gauze?"

Enzo glances at the table. He shrugs. "Your punishment for making her go."

Borak tips his head to the ceiling with a sigh, then stomps to the door, pointing at Enzo before leaving. "Stay still."

His steps falter when Gellert blocks his path. They step around one another, and Gellert shakes his head as Borak charges through the dank main quarters. Gellert tells him which room before chuckling deeply.

"Did she accept it?" Enzo asks, leaning his head back against the wall.

"Didn't say what it was." He grins. "If she noticed, she said no'ing."

Enzo hums, watching Gellert close the door behind him.

"I do not want you anywhere near Audantei." Enzo holds Gellert's gaze, though he blinks at him confusedly.

"Wasn't planning to be."

Enzo drags his eyes from Gellert's, lingering on Danilo's sweaty forehead before fixing on the wall. He presses his lips into a line. Gellert nods and moves further from the door, turning his gaze to the remaining soul in the room. His face is impassive as he counts Danilo's bruises.

"The Beseecher sustained a fatal injury," Enzo says to Gellert. "He was last seen asphyxiating on his blood. I desire an updated on the state of Audantei's political reign."

"Is 'his over?'"

"We have yet to hear confirmation of his death. Until then, we continue as if he lives."

Gellert scrunches his face and nods, patting Enzo's shoulder with the promise of a swift return. Enzo doesn't watch him leave. Instead, he drags the chair from against the wall to the bedside. He tucks his chin into his palm and pushes back the hair clinging to Danilo's forehead. Sweat beads on the surface of his skin. The squealing door tears through Enzo's endless thoughts.

"Thought I told you to stay," Borak grumbles beneath his breath. "Will there ever be a time you listen when I speak?"

"I always listen," Enzo says. "I do not always obey."

Borak's agreeing laughter cracks through the air. It mutes whatever the man grumbles next. Enzo doesn't move away from Danilo until Borak comes to stand at his side. He leans back in the chair. Borak unrolls the gauze, tugging Enzo's collar away from the salve and flicking away strands of hair. Only after he starts wrapping does Enzo speak again.

"You are not aiding the Arrisoot from his system?"

Borak pauses, staring down his nose at Enzo, who glances up with a raised brow. He looks between Danilo and Enzo; a hint of humour in the depths of his eyes. He winds the gauze around Enzo's throat, distracting Enzo from his tone—heavy with dual meaning.

"He'll be fine." Borak focuses on tying off the fabric, then cups the cloth with both hands. Enzo swallows at the warm sensation.

Head of Region. A title Enzo never intended to have. His purpose in this war—this ongoing battle—is to turn Audantei's forces upon themselves. Though he is hesitant to accept, duty silences his reasons.

"You know you're going to need to start, right?" At Enzo's raised brow, Borak tacks on, "Listening to people." When Enzo blinks without a quick-witted response, Borak huffs and nods at Danilo. "You've got someone relying on you. Can't ignore them now."

The statement is heavier than Head of Region.

"I can try."

Borak shakes his head, releasing Enzo's neck.

“Now,” Borak says while rounding Enzo’s other side, hands casting a purplish hue over Enzo’s chest. “Are you going to tell me? Or do I have to find out for myself?”



CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Danilo groans. His stiff muscles throb in time with his head. A hand splays over his face, a thumb impressed into the dip of his nose and fingers laying over his ear.

“Fever broke.”

Danilo’s eyes flutter. Jagged blue lines distort his vision, the ferocity of the pain ripping the nerve endings from within his skull. He squeezes them shut and swallows a whine. Silent breaths echo in the room as the hand on Danilo’s face dances across his forehead. A sigh rattles impatiently.

“How are his withdrawal symptoms of this severity?” A chair drags across the wood floor and a weight presses to the left of his bed. “I understand Arrisoot’s use as a dissociate.”

“It is a dissociate.” Borak’s hand moves to his chest, and Danilo withholds a grimace at the pressure. “But we haven’t attempted a rescue from the Hanging platform. And there’s not a lot of time between administration and then.”

Danilo’s fingers twitch, and the urge to shift beneath Borak’s constant prodding only grows as he becomes more alert. He doesn’t want to be awake yet. Awake means facing the realities of his injuries, his surroundings, and his errs. As it is, Enzo’s voice has taken on a gruff weight, and Danilo isn’t keen on being beneath it.

"Besides," Borak says, "I think we can agree he's had more than most people."

Enzo hums.

Danilo follows Borak's movements through the room—the ting of a glass bottle and the scrape of a wooden instrument against a wood tabletop. His slow steps drag closer to Enzo.

"And you?" Borak whispers. The edge of the bed dips.

"Fine."

So, not fine, judging by the curt dismissal. Borak sighs.

"Are you in pain?"

"No." Contemplation slows Enzo's voice. "I will notify you should circumstances change."

"I'll hold you to that."

Enzo hums, and Borak shuffles from the bedside.

"He needs to sweat through the rest." Borak closes a book with a soft thud. "Will you join us?"

"Yes."

"Will he?"

Danilo furrows his brows.

"Should we determine him capable of moving without volatile response." Enzo shoves hair from Danilo's face, the rough skin of Enzo's palm dragging along his cheek.

He groans, blinking in the sagging ceiling overhead. Borak chuckles from across the room and the telltale rub of a door signals his leave. Danilo's sensitive eyes water from his efforts. Enzo's hair falls in his peripheral, the man tilting his head in assessment.

A tightness sits in Danilo's chest at the thought of facing the man. Since their unspoken agreement to peacefully coexist, Danilo has upended it not once, but twice. And while they may have ignored their problems in the cell, their problems wouldn't stay confined to that cell.

Danilo braves glancing at Enzo after the man's second impatient sigh, having nothing to distract himself other than blinking away the endless pains of his tired eyes. Enzo's face is impassive. The rigid lines surrounding his eyes deepen with an emotion Danilo's seen on few occasions. With nothing to say or do, Danilo swallows and waits for Enzo to speak.

"Would you like to attempt sitting?" Enzo stares at him down his nose.

Danilo nods, nauseated by the movement. Enzo provides minimal help, instead tilting his head and watching Danilo's process. As the silence stretches between them, Danilo's fingers sink into the blankets. He finds a loose thread and twists it around a finger. Enzo squints at him.

"And the verdict?"

"The... verdict?" Danilo parrots. His head feels detached from his shoulders.

"How are you feeling, Danilo?"

The use of his name makes Danilo's brain skip. He stares blankly before Enzo raises the brow of inquiry. Danilo inhales, his lungs burning with the motion.

"Been better." He swallows, ignoring the churn in his stomach.

Enzo scowls, glancing at the door. "At least you are speaking this time."

Danilo's thoughts travel in circles. He straightens, heavy eyes landing on Enzo with purpose.

"What's happening?" His words slur and he nods to the door.

"What the others currently discuss is not for you to concern yourself with."

"Borak—"

"Offered, yes." Enzo's attention falls back on him. "We've yet to figure the severity of the situation." After another assessment, he adds, "And you need to rest."

Danilo chokes around his argument, sagging against the headboard. He breathes past the acidic rise in his throat. Though he may agree with Enzo's conclusion, his mouth does not.

"I overstepped boundaries," he mumbles, head lolling onto his shoulder.

Enzo hums. "Yes, you did."

"I'm sorry."

Enzo sighs, studying Danilo further. Danilo grips the top blanket, snapping the strand trapped around his finger. He raises the thread to his eye level, watching it fall atop the blankets. Enzo takes it and flicks it to the floor, leaning closer to Danilo's bed to hold his attention.

When Danilo considers that he'd gone searching for Enzo's scrutiny in the days before his capture, he would have thought himself comfortable beneath it. But as Enzo's stone-grey eyes flick over his shaking hands, he finds it foreboding. Enzo hums, and he swallows.

"Considering the abhorrent demands made by your abuser, your apology—while appreciated—is unnecessary. We are at fault for not considering the repercussions of your trauma."

Danilo lifts his hand to rub his forehead.

"Is that even—"

"Because of our narrow-minded thinking, we should not have expected you capable of remembering the multitude of unclear rules set before you."

Danilo swallows. "I did remember."

"Then I should atone for my deportment. And seek exculpation for the abuse which you sustained from me."

Enzo waits, charting each blink and breath Danilo takes as he settles on the words to say.

"What?" Danilo scowls.

Enzo hums.

Danilo's eyes close, the heavy lids taking force to pry open again. When Danilo meets his eyes, Enzo stares at him incredulously.

"While you are unwise for ignoring the rules, you are not responsible for the conduct others cannot maintain."

"I'm too tired for whatever you've said." Danilo drops his head against the bed, swallowing the growing urge to vomit on himself.

Enzo taps his knuckles to Danilo's jaw, holding an ale mug filled with water. Danilo stares at Enzo with furrowed brows. He pulls away from Enzo's hand, his shivers dragging out his unspoken question.

"Would you believe me if I claimed to have more concern for you than for the fate of the Gentled East?"

"No."

Enzo smirks. "Good. You have not lost what sanity you claim to have."

He doesn't let Danilo lean away again, his hand grabbing Danilo's jaw. When Danilo grimaces at the mug, Enzo raises a brow in challenge. Danilo sags, accepting the mug placed at his lips. He's grateful they're alone.

From Enzo's creased brow, Danilo supposes the man expected more thirst from him. Instead, he licks at the edge of the mug.

His chills exhaust him. He clenches his hands in the blankets gathered around his waist, and though he hasn't watched for Enzo's reaction, the man must have noticed. Enzo pulls the mug free and lifts Danilo's sinking chin. Their eyes meet and Enzo nods, releasing him to set the mug aside. Danilo's uncooperative limbs feel detached as Enzo aids him down.

He's asleep before his head rests against the pillow.



CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

When Danilo wakes next, it's with a strangled scream and a hand pinning him to the bed by his throat. He clenches the collar of Enzo's shirt and while there's a fire in Enzo's eyes, his hand is firm, not constricting. Danilo writhes, unable to still his trembling body. None of his limbs respond to his command.

"Borak!" Enzo shouts over his shoulder.

The door collides with the wall, and Borak hovers in the doorway with blank, wide eyes.

Danilo should let go now. Really, he should. Especially since Enzo's eyes crease with fear. The muscles in his arms twitch as he tries to release.

"Tell them to stop." Enzo grips one of Danilo's wrists, pulling a hand free from his collar and hissing, "Now, preferably."

Borak vanishes.

Danilo slackens in Enzo's grasp, panting through his exhaustion. His eyes roll back with a groan.

"Ah, no." Enzo shakes his face and Danilo blinks up at him. "You need to know."

Danilo sighs and Enzo drags him upright. Borak rushes into the room, hands plastering to Danilo's face and neck.

"You don't think—" Borak says with a huff before Enzo interrupts.

"I do not. Yet I have not seen a response aside from."

Borak nods, brows furrowing. "Doesn't feel like it."

Enzo raises a brow, scratching his beard.

"Doesn't feel any different," Borak clarifies.

Enzo hums, walking from the room. "Come, young Altamura."

"Thought you wanted me to rest." Danilo sags forward, resting his arms atop his knees. Enzo swings around.

"Why is it you feel the need to oppose my every demand?" He shakes his head. "I said to rest, yes. You no longer have the luxury. We have information which affects you."

Danilo groans, heaving his legs over the edge of the bed. Borak lurches forward with arms stretched out to help. Enzo stops him from across the room with nothing more than a raised hand.

"Enz—" Borak starts.

"He will do it."

Borak grimaces and crosses his arms, taking a few steps back. Danilo steels himself, and wobbles like a drunk sailor swaying aboard a sea-tossed ship. Enzo nods at Borak, who gives a pointed stare as he scoops beneath Danilo's shoulder. Danilo leans on him.

The darkness of Danilo's room doesn't rival the main quarters; a solitary round window matching the other is half-buried by sand. Two run-down leather couches spice the room with colour. Their occupants turn tense stares toward him.

"This doesn't need to happen, Enzo." Magus pulls at the mismatched stitching from the arm's patch until Hestia slaps his hand.

"It happens now," Enzo says.

Borak deposits Danilo in a vacant chair. He shifts with a scowl, and his muscles ache against the chair's rigid back. Reina fixes her gaze on him, unflinching when they meet eyes.

Danilo's eyes drop to his trembling hands and he curls them into his sides. Magus stands, moving to sit on the low table closest to Danilo. He raises his palms to Danilo's forearms, skirting above the skin. Danilo sighs as the heat soothes an itch beneath them that scratching won't relieve.

“Honestly, Enzo. How are we supposed to go about this?” Hestia slaps Borak in the face with her ponytail, her movements between Enzo and Danilo jarring even while seated. “You think any of us are smart enough to understand?”

She gestures to the sword on the table. Danilo’s eye gets caught on it—trapped. His breath hitches and as Magus drags his fingers across Danilo’s arms, and the broiling heat snaps Danilo’s attention to him. Magus nods and takes a steady breath, the corners of his mouth ticking.

“Even I—“ Enzo begins.

“You what? What else are we going to do with it if you cannot decide? We can’t hand it back over to—“

“Borak,” Enzo says, cutting off Hestia with a gesture at the sword.

Borak swallows and stares at Danilo, unsure whether Enzo means what he implied. At Enzo’s raised brow, Borak sighs and shifts forward on the couch. He levels his hand over the sword. It gleams up from the table, mocking all who look on.

Lightning strikes across the blade, darkening the metal in jagged lines. Danilo gasps, pressing himself into the back of the chair—bone-straight. Jagged white lines bounce across the inside of his eyes, the surrounding skin reddening in the same angered paths. Magus flinches, Danilo’s nails dipping into the flesh of his forearm. Borak pulls back, wide eyes on Danilo.

Enzo stares at Hestia, waiting for her to look away. She raises a palm to her mouth.

“If you wish to destroy it, be my guest.” He crosses his arms. “You will risk destroying him.”

Danilo pants raggedly while everyone else stares between him and the sword.

“How—I—it...” Hestia swallows. “How’d we not see it? How’d we not know?”

She looks toward the empty space beside her, just as Enzo does. The silence deafens them all.

“Why did it respond to him?” Reina pulls dirt from beneath her nails, picking at the skin until Magus reaches over to grab her hand. “Of all the blood it has spilled and could have chosen, why did it respond to his?”

Dust glitters in the dark air, stirred by Danilo’s coughing. He grimaces and pulls his arms away from Magus’ hands, crossing them over his chest. Magus smiles, though it doesn’t reach his eyes, then stands, making his way to sit beside

Reina. Borak peeks at them but resumes watching Enzo pace a steady circle around the outside of the room.

“My what?” Danilo’s voice wobbles as he cranes his neck to Enzo, sweat lining his forehead.

Enzo studies him amid his pacing and he twitches beneath the analyzing stare; an unyielding storm amidst an already raging chaos.

“Your signature.” Enzo scratches his beard. “More specifically, your blood.”

“My...” Danilo stares at him blankly, “blood?”

“It carries your signature.” His voice wanes, thoughts continuing silently.

Danilo nods, as if the simple explanation makes any sense to him. Hestia still holds her palm over her mouth, leaning on her knee with distant eyes.

“Is she okay?”

Enzo turns to Hestia and hums. “She knows what you do not.”

“What don’t I know?” Danilo looks to Enzo.

Enzo sighs. “Stormthrower weapons are forged from the magic of their makers.”

“Okay.” Danilo rubs his eyes.

When Enzo continues pacing without a hint of further conversation, Borak groans audibly.

“Their residual magic, when subjected to another signature over time, can bond with the host of that signature. Since every signature is different—like a fingerprint—it’ll only respond to them.” Borak crosses his arms, casting a wayward scowl at Enzo. “It’s what makes Artifacts dangerous.”

“No one said Artifact,” Danilo stutters.

Enzo shuts his eyes and sighs. He meets Danilo’s gaze, his frown weathered by the weapon’s existence. Danilo has not seen him look so old.

“What’s the difference between an Artifact and another magical weapon?” Danilo asks.

Enzo pauses, his expression skeptical.

“Tell me, did you witness the destruction of that weapon?” Enzo replies. Danilo nods, rolling his eyes at Enzo’s tactlessness. “Compare, in your mind, the catastrophe following its use to that of my staff.”

There was nothing to compare. Enzo used his staff as a branch of his power, not as a power itself. The sword sitting before him was an outpouring of strength, of anguish, and of death. It couldn’t exist without the combined effort of the three—whether by the wielder or those at the end of its blade.

"Thought Artifacts could only be used by those with magic." Magus leans into his knuckles, glancing over the group with a laze expression.

"He does have magic," Hestia says, her sad eyes ungrounded.

"That's arguable, Hes," Magus says.

"It matters not." Enzo clasps his hands behind his back.

Reina heaves a breath, looking at the ceiling.

As Danilo breathes through the serrated sensation skimming over his skin, something stirs within him; in the empty space between his lungs and his ribs. A foreign strength not unlike that of his anxiety or his sensitivity waking as if it had been long dormant inside him. And he hates it.

"Why me?" Danilo says, blinking as the sigh draws him back to the discussion.

Magus flinches in repulsion, his lip curling as though a foul odour permeates the room. Pain flares in his eyes as he refuses to meet Danilo's gaze. Enzo stiffens when Danilo turns to him, though his face remains impassive.

"Easton."

Danilo's heart clenches when the atmosphere weeps with grief. He avoids the sword, its edges stained with a maroon crust. The remanent evidence of malice waits to be sloughed from the earth.

"Easton studied the sword." Enzo glances at the weapon, its runes blending into the steel. He halts abruptly at the living table's side, hand hovering above the weapon. "None of us predicted an unknown weapon could produce such catastrophe."

When he touches the hilt, the sword trembles. The table beneath it shakes with the force, red encompasses the runes and spreads over the blade as if it were pulled from a forge. Danilo leans back into the chair. Enzo straightens.

"Weapons forged by magic-kind cannot destroy magic."

Though the explanation is vague, it explains the pain both Beseechers were in once they turned the sword on Stormthrowers. But even in the chaos, it left one scene to stand out above the rest.

The cell had been bathed in so much red, Danilo hadn't seen. Though the after-battle clarity turned itself on the moment. On the tendrils of scarlet magic swirling in the air, and the sense of doom contaminating each breath in Danilo's lungs, a blue hue among it all, from the runes of a sword that never turned against the Beseecher.

"But Easton—"

"It was Easton's doing." Enzo turns his scowl to the wall, his hands clenching behind him, steps slightly heavier than before.

Danilo only breathes in and Borak kicks his foot, sensing the nervous energy swarming in his chest. He places his head in his hands until Enzo pauses beside his chair with a sigh, squeezing the joint of Danilo's neck with his thumb and middle finger.

Danilo swallows, looking at the sword. "If I touch it again, what happens?"

Enzo hums gutturally.

"We don't know," Borak translates.

"And if I don't touch it?"

"Were you there when he..." Hestia drags in a trembling breath, straightening as Borak pats her knee, and aims the back of her hand intentionally.

"Hes," Borak starts.

"No," she snarls, ponytail snapping behind her. Her shoulders fall with the volume of her voice. "I just want to know."

Danilo wraps his arms around himself, clenching his shirt between his fingers. Enzo speaks over his shoulder.

"We were present."

Danilo hates the heavy weight of the admission.

Borak leans forward, resting his forehead in clasped fingers. He peers at Hestia from beneath them.

"The Beseecher's mind had half gone." Enzo's hand slips from Danilo's shoulder and he resumes pacing. He mutters beneath his breath, "Rambling about direction and death." Though it was more for himself than the others.

Danilo shakes his head. The actions of the new Beseecher were no different from the actions of the deranged General.

"His mind was half gone years ago." He pushes against the scar on his upper lip. "Easton isn't the first to pay the price for his madness."

Enzo's eyes flick to him, then again, following Danilo's thumb as he traces the raised skin.

"His elbow was broken..." Reina murmurs, head low, as if she could no longer hold it. She stares up at Enzo.

"Yes."

Enzo doesn't elaborate. Which is for the best. Llodis Altamura doesn't break a man just to see him bleed. Not like Kosymo Guerra. Llodis Altamura breaks

a man to showcase his control. As his once-lieutenant, Danilo's seen first-hand how.

It is better Enzo doesn't elaborate. Danilo wishes his mind didn't do it for him.

Magus stands. He approaches Hestia, who muffles her sobs by biting down on the fur over her shoulder. Tears streak down her cheeks. He palms at her face and gathers her in his arms, nodding at the hall. Enzo nods back hesitantly, dismissing them.

The creaking pattern of Enzo's steps cuts through the tense silence. Danilo's rattling breaths rise and fall in time with him. Reina dismisses herself with a quiet voice. Her fingers card through Borak's bangs before she, too, has left them to carry the grief. Borak doesn't blink and Danilo only half-wonders if he notices.

Enzo pauses at Danilo's side, looking down at him with dark under-eyes and drooping shoulders.

"We do not know what will happen, should you remain in its presence." Enzo answers his previous question hesitantly. "Never have we experienced an Artifact come to be. Much less by an individual without magic."

"So..." Danilo stares at the wall to Enzo's left before meeting his gaze. "We are worse off than before."

"To put it simply." Enzo nods, sinking into Reina's abandoned spot.

Borak's distant, sorrowful eyes leave Danilo and Enzo alone in the room.

Danilo cups his face with a sigh, his thumb pressing into his temple. Enzo hums, shoving Danilo's shoulder with his knuckles until Danilo drops his hand. Enzo's eyes are hard and cold and inquiring. The silence leaves Danilo worn thin. Enzo pulls away, grabbing Danilo's elbow and hauling him to his feet.

As the room spins, a desperate, yawning need rises in his chest. It's shaken from him in the first few steps towards the bedroom.

"You need rest."

Danilo doubts sleep will come easy.



CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Danilo shakes and sweats in the small room alone, attempting to feign sleep as people shift in and out of the living quarters. He would rather stew in his miserable filth than hear Hestia sob and Reina snifle. Would rather not receive sad smiles from Borak or glares from Enzo.

Though the glares he deserves, because he's the reason Easton is dead.

Easton was buried before they arrived. It is the only thing about the funeral he is told. He doesn't ask how, and he doesn't ask why.

They have been in and out of his room, asking him if he needs anything—asking him if he's okay. And all the while, whispers of arrangements and tradition and of carved stone slip in through the open door. He bites down on his tongue at every slip he catches.

Eventually, Hestia mentions they wanted him there. That Easton would have welcomed him there. He refuses to fall victim to her kind words a second time. It doesn't feel right to mourn with them. He's not one of them. Not as long as the Beseecher's blood flows through his veins. As Hestia's persistent pleas die into concerned murmurs of his name, he offers little acknowledgment. Then the house, or whatever building he's locked in now, is quiet.

He lays in bed, a thin sheet over himself as sweat lines his brow. His body trembles, despite his stillness, watching the sunlight dance across the greying

boards of the ceiling overhead. A soft breeze whistles through the half-open pane, though it's not enough to soothe his heated skin. Danilo licks the salt from his upper lip.

Slow steps echo through the empty house. Danilo ignores the sound in favour of his sour thoughts. The groan of his door cuts through. His nose twitches in annoyance, but he remains still.

It isn't until Enzo drops into the chair at his side that he bothers to look over. Enzo doesn't look back or make any effort to speak. He sits in the bitter silence, chasing away Danilo's broken thoughts with his presence until they are left alone with nothing between them but the shared pain of helplessness.

And Enzo remains in the chair, unmoving and unspeaking, until the rest return to the building. None of them attempt to speak with Enzo as he flees Danilo's room.

Borak wanders in, eyes hollow but face tight with purpose. Danilo grimaces at the inevitable focus he'll be subjected to. When Borak reaches his bedside, he doesn't sit or slow. Instead, he places his fists on the mattress and leans over Danilo with a scowl. While Borak's bedside manner could use improvement, this is far worse than their past few interactions.

"I'm not giving you opium unless you're bordering on hysteria, so don't pull a Magus." Borak pauses before reconsidering his terms. "But don't be like Reina."

Danilo hadn't bothered to look around. However, at the mention of opium, the urge to do so took root in his thoughts.

"What does that mean?" Danilo asks.

"Nothing. Are you in pain?" Borak wanders to the supply table.

Danilo immediately spots the poppy opium amid the variety of bottles, a dark brown bottle with the name written across it in a vigorous scrawl. He swallows, memorizing its placement as Borak lifts select items from his assortment. Borak considers each oil or salve, weighing them in his palm as he mentally filters through their purposes and side effects. A process he'd done for Bratni. Danilo's pain doubles as he's blindsided by the memory of his abandoned brother. His hope withers before he speaks.

"Bratni—"

"Don't," Borak says, shaking his head while refusing to look at Danilo. "Don't ask me."

Borak scratches his nails against his scalp, moving from the table with one oil and salve selected. He takes up Danilo's hands, turning them palms up to assess the unnecessary patchwork of wraps covering the healed wounds. Again.

"Bratni's injuries were too severe." Borak says after a long pause. "I wish there was some way I could have coerced his body to heal."

Danilo turns his hands in Borak's, squeezing them with all the strength he can muster. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me." Borak pulls his hands away.

Danilo grabs the crook of Borak's elbow before he escapes his reach. He keeps firm until Borak meets his eye.

"Thank you."

Sorrow drowns the brief acceptance in Borak's eyes. Danilo lets him slip out of his grasp. Borak flits around him, mouth in a firm line as he moves through his mindless tasks. His silence leaves Danilo alone with thoughts fixated on that brown bottle across the room, disturbed only when Borak smears oil across his upper lip, and the vapours force his eyes to water.

He struggles to remain awake after. A side effect Borak mentioned when Danilo growled at his bobbing head. With the aided silence of his drug-induced state, he falls into sleep.



Danilo lays in bed staring at the bottle of opium, wondering why he's drawn to it. Arrisoot is not addictive unless mixed and rumour states Audantei's military pays double to the Head of Orders for the clean supply. Danilo doubts the General would spend the same amount of funds, but he's not a man to waste their reserves. Which leads Danilo to believe that there is only one form of Arrisoot and Audantei had known upon its first purchase.

Arrisoot and poppy opium are two very different drugs. Danilo knows opium's uses are for nerves, pains, or nightmares. He also knows it is just as addictive as it is toxic. While Arrisoot is supposedly addictive, it isn't deadly. Not unless the influenced individual is without outside aid for a lengthy period. But anyone who is under Arrisoot's influence for long is likely not dosing himself.

Danilo clenches his jaw at the wave of want, forcing his eyes closed to ignore the bottle shining in the dimming sunlight. He is not interested in becoming an

addict. Of course, that mentality does nothing against the desire for what the Arrisoot had temporarily provided.

Peace.

Danilo had not been so numb to his world—not even on the brink of death. He doubts the opium would provide a similar escape. But the bottle sits on the table, daring him to try.

It tests his willpower and self-control for about another half hour before he stumbles from the room. His healing knee slows him. Borak claims it'll be fully healed in two days and Danilo wonders which injury Borak could be concerned over enough to leave all his medical supplies in Danilo's room.

Enzo's been illusive since he last graced Danilo's room. If it weren't for his trembling need, Danilo wouldn't care. But he's eager for a distraction, and despite his lack of enthusiasm about being around people, he feels well enough to train.

His knees wobble as he trudges through the empty main room, voices and clattering dishes rising from the entry across it. The thought of food makes him hungry for the first time in days.

"ere's been word." Gellert's voice rolls like a distant thunder through the house. Enzo hums in response. Danilo freezes before he rounds the corner, leaning up against the wall. The grit of the wood rubs on his itchy skin. "e Beseecher lives."

"Pardon?" Enzo says and what Danilo guesses is a wood mug colliding against the counter follows.

"e Bese—"

"I heard you." Enzo breathes past his anger. "It should not be possible."

"Why?" Gellert says.

"Easton punctured organs and could craft poison with his mind. The man should undoubtedly be dead."

"He isn't. And you expected it."

"I did. Though the impossibility of it remains." Enzo pauses. "Find out why."

Danilo knows, even healthy, he can't slip from the doorway fast enough. So as Gellert rushes through, Danilo meets his eye. He's blindsided by his guilt, threatening to drag him past the floorboards into the depths of the earth where he will remain for the rest of his days. Gellert raises a fist beside Danilo's shoulder, in what Danilo is certain is a show of camaraderie. The darkened hues

of his eyes shift and he drops his hand before it connects, then rushes away. Danilo swallows.

He's no longer hungry.

There's nowhere he can go. Hestia cannot be alone, and if Gellert was being sent again, then she will follow him. Magus has been avoiding Danilo, an old twinkle of fear in his eyes hidden by a devouring smirk. Borak is often found with Magus—which makes avoiding them easier—but refuses to meet his eye, much less speak to him. Reina keeps her hands busy and her thoughts busier. Which leaves him alone, wandering through the open areas before the pyromaniac's challenging gaze sends him into the direct heat of an overbearing sun.

Their latest place of refuge hides in the savanna forest southwest of Audantei's walls. Sand pours into his boots, scratching his skin as he blends into the surroundings where he sits, staring at a white slab of a headstone.

The events leading Easton to this spot repeat in his mind—clear memories broken by the Arrisoot. Danilo's emotions swirl as he considers the poor barriers of small talk Easton had charged through. He'd ignored Danilo's vague threats; the fiercer Danilo had come across, the more Easton pulled at the curtain which hid Danilo's fears.

Sweat rolls from his forehead and his eyes flick up to the glittering white stone, Easton's name mocking him. He scowls, ripping dry grass from the ground and tossing it aside.

"Why couldn't you have let him have me?"

"Because Easton was incapable of giving up."

Danilo's breath catches in his lungs as he swirls to look at Reina. For all his training, he never heard her coming. She stands, staring at him with surprise in her eyes at the shock on his face. A stone balances on her hip, her arms tucked around it and pressing it to her front.

"I'll—" Danilo scrambles, sand sinking under his nails.

"Stay." She says.

He pauses before falling back into the sand.

"We couldn't give... You..." Reina sighs, lowering the stone beside Easton's. "I wish there was more we could do. For you."

She steps back, the bright stone shining with the name Bratni Altamura; *'Until Next We Meet'* carved beneath it. His chest drops as he swallows around wet emotions, afraid speaking his thanks will unleash them. Reina understands.

Because as she leaves, she squeezes his shoulder. Once she's gone, Danilo realizes she was a better distraction than the silence.

When he ducks beneath the overhang of the stairwell, his shirt clings to his flanks. Through his churning thoughts—fixed on the General, his alluded death, and how he is more like the man than he ever hoped to be—he wonders if the smoky scent of sun-seared skin will overpower the sourness.

His thirst takes hold, pushing him into the kitchen and directly into Enzo's presence. It takes all his dwindling strength to ignore his keen gaze. He dunks an ale mug into a cold bucket, slurping back the water until its contents are empty. Enzo stands and Danilo refills his mug with rapt attention. When Enzo drops his book beside Danilo's mug, it claims Magus and Borak's attention. They return to their silent company after determining their efforts aren't needed. Danilo sighs and meets Enzo's gaze. Enzo hums, squints, and nods with a gesture for Danilo to follow.

He pads outside after Enzo until the sand turns to dirt and the dry long-grass sprouts a cluster of trees. The backside of the house vanishes into the surroundings, nothing more than a mound in the space between. A village dots the horizon, framed by the dense trees casting shadows over Danilo's face. His heart lurches when a horse snorts, their paddock hidden among the wildlife. An array of rainbow birds swarm the branches overhead, mocking the hoopoes and seemingly unbothered by the hawk among them.

Enzo exits a shed tucked alongside the paddock with two wooden swords in hand. Danilo catches one, spinning it in his wrist lazily. With a sigh, he glances at the house. White stone glints on the horizon past it. He turns, subjecting himself to Enzo's judgment, and takes stance.

Their movements are slow and noncommittal, each sloppy deflection followed by a squinted, analyzing gaze. Danilo's arms shake when Enzo shoves his sword. They keep on until Danilo's arm moves of its own volition. Enzo pulls back with a breath.

"Your sensitivity is uncharacteristically settled." His stare follows the strained muscles of Danilo's jaw when he tries to swallow his yawn. "You need rest."

Danilo thinks about the silence in the house—of the mourning and grief attacking the air he breathes. He shifts his feet and takes a weary stance. Enzo raises a brow, glances over him, and hums. The fight resumes.

As far as distractions go, it works. Danilo forgets the constant edge of his fear hissing need into his veins, and the stupidity of his capture, and the events that

followed. And, if he focuses on the thump-swing of Enzo's wooden blade, he can forget he's the reason for the shift in their rapport.

Of course, it all comes back when they stop.

He sighs, looking up at the pink-tinged clouds overhead. Last light casts leafy shadows across Enzo when he exits the shed with a pointed glance at the house. The golden rays of sundown sparkle off the sand while they return. Danilo's shoulders tip at the weight of Enzo's hand, vanishing after they've descended the staircase. His mind is silent—a welcome blankness as night looms through the windows.

Magus' somber expression brightens when he meets Danilo's eye. He sidles alongside him with a heavy, chattering voice and slow steps. Borak waits, cards spread across the table beneath the window. Magus leans on his chair, throwing his other arm around Danilo's shoulders with a 'whatta ya say, Dani-boy'. Danilo is too focused on the pain Magus can't wipe from his eyes to hear what he asked.

When the sunlight is torn from the room, Magus' fingers dance across the table's candles and blue flames burst from their wicks before burning down to red. Borak doesn't flinch, his focus on the silent conversation between him and Magus. Danilo looks to his feet and crosses his arms. He detests having to deny the round of cards Magus offers, though Magus doesn't let him do it.

"Nah, it's okay, buddy." Magus claps Danilo's arm. "Figured it was a long shot since you've been out training with Enzo."

Danilo's shoulders drop in relief, and he nods his thanks. His palm rests on the door of his room and he freezes. A distant yet persistent ringing in his ear causes his fingers to twitch. It pulls on him, almost physically. Begs him to wander deeper into the unexplored house. Magus and Borak stare at him in curiosity. The sense of lingering eyes jolts him into the room.

He tears his shirt over his head and drops it next to his pillow before falling into bed.

Nightmares aren't unfamiliar. They're a soldier's lone companion during their time of service. But familiarity doesn't mean nightmares can't evolve into something worse.

A jarring gasp fills his ears. He swallows. His nails dig into his shoulder, attempting to pull Audantei's emblem from his skin. He tries to sleep multiple times, and within minutes he's jolted upright, panicked and sweating and

pawing at his jade tags. Each time, he knows he will be lucky to get five more minutes.



CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Danilo lays eyes on Enzo that morning and knows something is severely wrong. Enzo walks with stiff knees, using his staff for support rather than as a weapon. In all the years Danilo knew Enzo—in and out of battle—never once was the staff used as a crutch.

Danilo doesn't mention it. Though he's tempted. Enzo's back remains straight as a board waiting for Danilo. When Danilo opens his mouth to contest, the wooden sword hangs limp at his side. Enzo tilts his head with a look. 'Drop it', it says. Which is fine because when Danilo shot up from sleep for the last time that morning, a devastating need he will not admit to accompanied it. He nods and takes his stance, ignoring all his aches.

Regardless of Enzo's demand, Danilo's remains alert to each unusual shift. He notices Enzo wince as he steps forward, the staff swinging above his head.

"Stop," Danilo says after he side-steps the swing with relative ease.

"Why?" Enzo's eyes flash while he sticks the staff's end into the dirt, squinting as concern peters into curiosity. "What is wrong?"

"I'm fine. But what's wrong with you?"

Enzo scowls to mask his surprise. "I am fine. Continue."

Water rises from the middle of the savanna floor, and the mud slurps at Danilo's ankles. Danilo steps into the attack, twisting the staff free from Enzo

in the same movement. He shoves Enzo back and tosses it to the ground. Enzo's eyes churn, a storm in their grey depths.

"Danilo."

"Well—"

"You've no reason to be a pest this early." He bends down to grab the staff and Danilo kicks it away.

Enzo's fingers curl into his palms. Sand blows through the underbrush.

"Danilo," Enzo leers up from beneath his brows, "what is the meaning of this?"

Danilo would prefer Enzo's yelling to the cool tone of thin contempt. His waning patience turns his unarmoured shoulders wide beneath his cloak. As Enzo stands, Danilo can see the thin line he walks.

"Why are you hurting?"

Enzo sneers. "That would be a poor question coming from the likes of you."

Danilo glares at him, his lip curling until the scar pulls uncomfortably. Enzo tilts his head back and Danilo leans into the stare.

"Fine." Danilo throws down the training staff, sand spraying through grass and stone as he retreats. "Don't tell me."

He knows who will.

"Where are you going?" Enzo hisses.

Danilo turns, hair swinging into his eyes as he glares at Enzo. "To talk to Borak."

Enzo's eyes widen and the storm within them darkens like billowing smoke. Before the fire becomes a raging argument, Danilo spins on his heel and stomps off. He doesn't stop when Enzo shouts. Not even as it gains an edge.

The threats echo behind him as he slinks into the building and Gellert throws aside a saddlebag before jumping out of the way. Hestia's grin drops and she peeks up the stairs. The cool air inside licks his warm skin free of the early morning heat, and it grows cooler still when he moves into the kitchen where Borak prepares lunch.

Borak leans over the counter when Danilo enters. His gaze flicks between Danilo and the kitchen doorway. He tosses a knife into a bucket. Danilo doesn't know whether to be grateful or offended that Borak disposed of the weapon.

"Danilo?" Borak says in greeting.

"What's wrong with Enzo?" Danilo drops his palms atop the counter.

"I don't," Borak starts.

"Danilo." Enzo fists his collar, and he's forced to face the ferocity darkening Enzo's scowl. "Leave Borak be. This does not concern him."

Danilo clenches his fists to keep his flinch from his face, but Enzo's eyes flicker and he leans out of Danilo's space with a guarded sigh.

"It should." Danilo steps closer, challenging Enzo's control.

Enzo's shoulders tighten and he steps around Danilo, taking a reprieve to regain his composure. Despite Danilo's targeted argument, he cannot prod Enzo into engaging with Danilo. Borak cuts into him, asking about his pain and near-healed injuries. He's derailed, mind conjuring an image of the opium bottle sitting in plain sight on the table. Enzo squints at his sudden reticence. Danilo locks his jaw and Enzo's eyes flare at his show of stubbornness.

"Regardless of Borak's involvement, I have no reason to advise you of my private affairs."

Danilo straightens, falling into his military stance. A habit from answering to the General. A physical show of anxiety when commanded to explain himself. He takes the apprehensive silence to contemplate his best possible argument. They've been through a lot together, but as far as Enzo's loyalties go, that's all Danilo has.

"I'm your charge."

"Pardon?" Enzo's eyes harden and his jaw clenches. Borak chokes.

"I'm in your charge. Your care, Enzo." Danilo glances at Borak and continues while Enzo lets him. "If something happens to you, it does concern me."

Enzo rolls his eyes and begins pacing.

"A weak argument from someone, at most, a few months shy of being considered a man."

Danilo has learned from many of their past disputes, large and small alike, that Enzo will be more receptive if Danilo doesn't shove his thoughts down the man's throat—as is the case with most people, but Enzo requires a peculiar and specific silence.

He lets Enzo pace, watching patiently. Borak pulls the knife from the bucket, cleans it off, and continues chopping and dicing potatoes. A series of unintelligible grumbles rise through the air and Borak smirks.

"Are you going to tell me?" Danilo asks.

Enzo continues pacing. Danilo tilts his head to Borak, addressing him in question before Enzo crowds his space.

"No." Enzo fists Danilo's shoulder. "You are not to bother Borak about this."

Danilo tilts back to Borak with a suave grin he once used to slip into places without a fight. Borak bristles, squinting his eyes before raising a brow at Enzo.

“Not bothering you, am I, Borak?”

Borak snaps his jaw shut when his knee jerk response tries to answer. He squeezes the knife tighter, his focus razor-sharp on his task. Danilo cannot help but find humour in his discomfort, grateful for what remains of his charm. Enzo pins him with an unimpressed stare, lifting his hand to pull Danilo’s chin to him.

He sighs, fingers grazing Danilo’s jaw until he’s certain he has the boy’s attention. “If this is, in fact, between us, you will allow me to tell you in time. Agreed?”

Danilo remains silent and unmoving, which Enzo takes as agreement. He hesitates in the doorway before stalking from the room. Borak’s knife hovers in the air, his brows furrowed at Danilo until the boy turns to him with a cunning grin.

“Just give me something?”

Borak tips his head back and forth over his shoulders before shrugging. He made no promises.

“Beseecher Guerra had...” Borak pauses upon Enzo’s reentry, continuing at Enzo’s defeated nod, “a vast collection of Stormthrower belongings. We believe he was searching for Artifacts.”

Borak places the knife down and wipes his hands on the nearest rag. He rounds the counter and pauses in front of Enzo, placing a hand on Enzo’s chest only after he nods. Sharp lines snap between his palm and Enzo’s chest in a bright hue reminiscent of the colour burnt into the sky after lightning flashes.

“From my understanding, he found what is commonly referred to as the Beggar’s Stone.” Borak says.

Danilo’s eyes brighten, his mind providing a flash of a flat stone with smoking pores. His chest had been tight in that cell; an unnatural force against his ribs. He remembers watching as the piece was tossed aside with such carelessness.

“Black? Smoking?”

Borak snaps his head up.

“It gives the illusion, yeah.” Borak replies. Enzo lays his hand on Borak’s and Borak lifts away. “How’d you know that?”

Danilo shrugs, “The General mocked me with it.”

Borak and Enzo glance at one another as Borak resumes his task. The knife clicks against the wood cutting slab.

"How much have you read?" Enzo turns to Danilo.

Reading—being the curse of his boredom—was one of the few things left in his routine he had gladly thrown out the window. He did it only when necessary.

"Why?"

"You've read about the FIVE?" Borak looks up and Danilo nods. "We believe the stone is from the THIRD, or his children."

Sunlight slips in through the little circular window, casting shadows across the kitchen. Danilo grabs a second knife and begins peeling the skin from a pile of potatoes as he listens. Borak's frown lifts a little, and he slides the pot closer between them.

"It's looks like a dragon's scale more than a stone," Borak says, spinning the knife and glares past Danilo's shoulder.

"Dragon scale? I thought dragons were myth." Danilo stares at Borak in disbelief.

"Welcome to the big boy world, Dani-boy." Magus says as he enters the kitchen. He pats Danilo on the arm before slinging his own over Danilo's shoulder. "I tease. Obviously. Borak will kill me for letting you believe that."

"Is that the only thing stopping you?" Borak waves the knife at him.

"Oh, absolutely."

"Good."

Magus gapes at him, clutching his heart before sliding off Danilo.

Enzo continues, sitting in a chair at the breakfast table. "As creatures of chaos, the children of the THIRD left pieces which can be harbored by magic-users to exhibit or control a level of their rumored power. Some of those rumors claim such pieces can change shape to the wielder's desire."

"And what can the stone do?" Danilo asks.

"Do? Anything." Borak sighs, nodding Magus toward Enzo. "It only needs someone who can convince it of its purpose."

Danilo nods dumbly. Magus bumps his elbow as he moves to sit beside Enzo.

"So," Danilo clears his throat when his voice breaks and he tries to ignore the surrounding eyes on him. "The Beggar's Stone is doing... what?"

Danilo tosses a peel towards the pile. It bounces off the side, falling to the floor only to become dust on the way down. He stares after it.

“Stripping my body of magic,” Enzo says, leaning onto his knuckles and wiping a grimace from his face.

Danilo nods, eyes distant and hands still. “Does it hurt?”

“Not yet.”

“I’ve made him promise to let me know when it does.” Borak scoops his current collection into the pot, freeing his workspace again before looking to Enzo. “I expect you to tell him, too.”

Enzo communicates how thoroughly he disagrees with only a glare. But he doesn’t argue. Danilo places the knife down and directs his attention to the wall, speaking to Borak without turning.

“Will this kill him?”

Borak pauses. “Possibly.”

“How possibly?”

“Best let him rest,” Borak says quietly, dropping his gaze in favour of staring at the counter.

Magus bumps Enzo’s knee with his own. Danilo swallows.

“Is there any way to reverse it?”

“No, Danilo,” Borak sighs, setting down the knife and bracing on the counter. “There’s not.”

“Nothing more than rumours and stories, anyway.” Magus nods at Danilo with determination.

Danilo grips the knife and lifts his chin at Magus’ gaze. He understands the hard stare of a covert promise. Unfortunately, Enzo has become gifted at reading him. With a nod, he sets back into his task.

“Enzo?” Borak smiles—sad and hopeless—and Enzo hums. “Go lay down. Work laying down if you have to. Please.”

“Very well.” He trudges from the room, shoulders low with barely hidden exhaustion.

Magus watches him go before dragging his chair closer to the counter. Borak lifts his knife, twirls it as his gaze lingers on the doorway, and sets in on his task again. Companionable silence fills the air, interrupted by gentle conversation and the heady voice of Beseecher Altamura where it echoes in Danilo’s mind.



It's unnatural, seeing Enzo in bed. Even if it was surrounded by books and maps and the shimmering colors of magic lifting off pages. And despite its oddity, Danilo savors the image, tucking himself against the door frame.

Enzo's dark hair falls from where it's pulled back, concealing the white strands sprouting from his temples. His grimace tightens the lines surrounding his eyes and mouth. Danilo frowns, wondering if Enzo looked older or was older. He hadn't seemed so when they sparred together before his capture.

"May I help you, young Altamura?"

Danilo jumps and tries not to grimace when Enzo lifts his gaze. Enzo's sees through it and raises his brow. A minute passes before Danilo realizes he expects an answer.

"I'd rather you call me Lieutenant." He shrugs.

"I would rather not." Enzo twists his legs over the edge of the bed, moving closer to Danilo. "Seems another impasse is before us."

Danilo nods, straightening off the door frame. Then, in a moment of clarity, realizes Enzo had been asking why he was standing there and not acting out of sorts.

"Food's ready."

He tilts his head towards the kitchen and stumbles away before Enzo answers. The man follows behind him down the near-black hall. Danilo notices it's not the first time he had no qualms about leaving his back open to Enzo. Now, however, it felt more deliberate.

Enzo's brigade flow into the kitchen, pestering Magus over his annoying habits. His grin indicates his enjoyment of their harsh play, preening at the attention. Clattering utensils and thumping ale mugs rise with the lighter note of laughter as they sit, leaving Danilo to wonder if Magus invites the teasing as a distraction. The warmth in the air lasts until they lift their spoons, the air hollow where it once had been filled by undeterred chatter. Gellert inhales his bowl, pausing to stare pointedly at Enzo.

Danilo tries not to follow Gellert's gaze, shoving his tongue into his cheek. It's taken this long to hold Enzo's attention without it being done in anger or duty, whatever thoughts or desires he wanted to talk about would be done only when it seemed Enzo was open for conversation. Judging Enzo's pointed stare at his bowl to avoid Gellert's hard gaze, this table was not the time to try.

"You can't keep it from him." Gellert slams his mug on the table, the liquid licking at the inside edge.

Danilo, and half the table, jumps—albeit for different reasons. Enzo hums, raising a brow while spooning his food. Hestia sags into her hand and drags her spoon through the stew.

“Don’t play coy,” Gellert says.

Pausing with the spoon halfway to his mouth, Enzo sighs and straightens.

“I am fully aware he knows.” Enzo places the spoon back in his bowl, laying his hands on either side of it. “Now is neither the time nor the place.”

“ere is no time or place.”

“I assure you a time and place more appropriate than a tense mealtime can be found.”

“We are at war.” Gellert shifts in his chair, his eyes fiery.

“Not now.” Enzo tilts his head in contemplation. “There is a time for war and a time for grief.”

Borak squeezes Gellert’s forearm. Danilo tries to withhold from shifting when Enzo’s eyes flick to the side. He sinks into the chair, drawing the entirety of Enzo’s attention. The ferocity of his gaze makes Danilo stutter, “how’d he survive?”

Enzo’s brows furrow and his shoulders raise.

“I’m not stupid.” Danilo folds his arms over his chest, refusing to look at anyone else.

“Never implied you were.” Danilo raises his brow. Enzo concedes. “Recently.”

Danilo tries not to squirm under Enzo’s hard, puzzle-solving gaze while the man considers his next words.

“Very well. Your intelligence may yet be put to use.” Enzo leans back in his chair. “Why had Audantei not hanged the Head of Orders publicly?”

Danilo jolts, snapping his gaze and over the others.

“How did you know that?”

“I know a great deal. Especially those pertaining to you.” He inhales, a hint of panic at the edges of his eyes. Danilo doubts it’s real. “You were more active in duty than the General.”

Hestia snorts, her cheeks and forehead red. “Sorry, but I have some vulgar opinions about that man and the child he put into a war.”

Danilo bristles at the word but shrugs when her eyes fall on him. He couldn’t deny it.

"There's a lot I didn't get told. But I can flesh out the difference between a truth and a rumor." Danilo sips from his mug, hoping he can gather his thoughts fast enough. "We claimed it to be for the sake of the city. But Kosymo Guerra killed him for his dishonesty and betrayal."

Enzo snaps his head up. The sheer intensity of his stare is intimidating. "The Royal Beseecher runs the Head of Orders."

"They've got their hands in each other's pockets." Danilo says. "Where'd you think the Arrisoot came from?"

Enzo's brows curl together, eyes flicking as he connects past events Danilo hopes to learn one day.

"You were undercover during that time."

"I was." Danilo shovels a spoonful into his cheek.

The others remain quiet, watching on in curiosity—desperate for the distraction and without anything else which promised the same level of entertainment.

"The General had not appointed another Lieutenant Commander." Enzo tilts his chin upward.

Danilo knows his cold fear has no foothold, but that doesn't keep it from spreading through him at what Enzo insinuates.

"That's because the General doesn't hold that power. I was just smart enough to get out before the Beseecher could do it by dismissing my head from my shoulders."

"For that reason, he wants your death? He can no longer dismiss you with Guerra gone?"

"No." Danilo rubs his dry knuckles, shaking his head. "No, I think there's more to it than that. He never did things simply."

Enzo tugs Danilo's wrist away when his nails begin to dig in. Danilo swallows at the shake of his hands and the unwanted desire which follows. When Danilo wiggles his fingers in rebellion to Enzo's grasp, he receives a questioning, raised brow. He nods and keeps his hands on the table.

"How did he survive?" Danilo asks again.

"We do not know."

Danilo shoots his gaze to his dry knuckles, following the new splits and the scars there. The skin pulls strangely when he curls his fingers, but he had grown used to the sensation long ago.

“Perhaps it is a sign more than any other to be prepared for the worst to come.”

Danilo nods. Enzo lifts his spoon before addressing the table.

“It appears I will no longer be Danilo’s primary sparing partner, and between possible future events and his sensitivity, we cannot allow him the opportunity to slack off.”

Danilo recoils and scowls at Enzo. He lifts his brow in humor.

Gellert straightens. Reina nods, waving her hand as she agrees. Enzo falls into explanations and his observations while Borak leans into Magus’ gossip. They give a noncommittal agreement when Enzo questions their involvement. Hestia shakes her head, giving Danilo a sad smile before dismissing herself from the table.

Danilo would give whatever he had left on him to know what Enzo thought. But not with guilt and the weight of Audantei on his shoulders. Enzo looks at him with confusion teetering on the line of concern, Reina having been dragged from discussing tactics and theories by Magus and Borak’s bickering. Danilo stares into his half empty bowl, uninterested despite the gnawing in his stomach.

He straightens when Gellert’s wary eye latches on him.

“You gonna tell ‘im?” Gellert stares at Danilo, eyes moving to Enzo in suggestion. “Or am I gonna announce ‘is in front of everyone?”

“Announce what?” Danilo says, the question rising breathlessly in his nervousness.

Gellert groans, though he does so with his teeth and lips locked together. The table’s occupants fall silent, staring at the interaction as people watch a failed butchery.

“You are ‘e General.” Gellert leans over the table with his palms pressed into the wood, remaining seated only from Borak’s hand hovering between them. “And wi’ Nalcun running, you are next in line for Beseecher.”

A dull piece of glass could cut the silence. Breaths echo across the table.

“By the FIVE,” Magus says into his palm, leaning on the table.

Reina turns her gaze to Enzo, who remains staring at Danilo, unmoving, a dual meaning in her gaze. The blood drains from Danilo’s face, his pallor paler than parchment. His hands tremor as he stands. Despite the multiple voices calling after him, he charges into his room, kicking the door shut for good measure.

He wrings his fingers through his curls, sliding down the wall to bury his head in his knees. Danilo peers through his fingers at the brown bottle, glinting in the wavering sun that peeks through the winds outside. With a ragged breath, Danilo drags the desk chair to the middle of the bed-frame, propping the back against the footrest. He drops into it.

His stare is fixed on the barren wall before him while the window casts turbulent shadows across his profile. He hopes Enzo won't corral him for answers, but he waits for the inevitable. Though the once-distance, once-impossible respect he considered for Enzo seemed like an impossibility, it's wrapped around his ribs as if it belonged there all along. And maybe a little had. Maybe it started in their battles—at Enzo's courage and dedication, and held himself in honor. The bottle glistens from the corner of his eye. He swallows. Though Danilo has no desire to admit his current thoughts, he realizes if the man came, Danilo would give him any answer he wanted.

His hands continue to shake, and he clenches them in a desperate for control. It isn't the respect that catches Danilo off-guard, but the panic settled in his chest at the thought of a world without him.

Scores decorate the opium bottle, marring the glint with its rounded edges where it sits engulfed in Danilo's palm. He blinks, forgetting when he moved from the chair. Almost hysterically, Danilo thinks that this should be the time Enzo walks through the door. In his haze, he glances over. It remains pressed into the frame, shadows and light dancing across the wood from within their circular cage. By the time he drags his gaze back to the bottle, his fingers have popped the cap. The rising smell slaps him back to reality.

Danilo replaces the cap and stumbles to his chair, the bottle of opium replaced as if it'd never been touched. It glistens at him mockingly and he drives his nails into his scalp, gaze fixed on the toes of his boots. Each breath is deliberate and drawn. He counts each one, hoping it would be the last before his door swung open.

Enzo never came.



CHAPTER FORTY

While Danilo had known—or guessed—Gellert had an average power for a magic-wielder, the man is more than fluent in the art of battle; even capable of besting Enzo—faster, stronger, more cunning in his movements. And though Danilo’s skin twitches to be out from under Gellert’s stare, he finds the fight forces his wits to be present as much as his skill.

It’s been a long time since Danilo has felt challenged.

Gellert grunts, the sound speaking volumes more than anything he or Enzo have said. Sunlight cuts through Danilo’s vision, and Gellert jabs his spear forward. Danilo ducks closer, swinging at Gellert’s stomach—he feels guilty for pouring his frustrations on Gellert, but since Borak removed the opium early that morning, he could not think of anything else. Gellert drops his weapon and rolls away to avoid the blow, sand and dirt sticking to his sweaty face. The pale earth is bright in contrast to his dark complexion. His eyes swirl in thought when Danilo meets them.

“Enzo?” Gellert’s voice drips appraisal like honey, oozing sluggishly from his tongue with the hint of a heavy assumption, dragging Danilo into the sickly sweet threat of another memory with another man from another time.

Danilo tilts his head to where Enzo paces outside their makeshift circle, hesitant to take his eyes from his rival. The yellow glow of the savanna sun blinks

through the trees swaying overhead. Enzo pauses in Danilo's peripheral. He thinks it's deliberate.

Relentlessness flickers in the grey of Enzo's eyes, latched onto a thought and working through every angle he can find. Danilo's learned to hate the assessment for multiple reasons. Gellert squints, a similar interest gleaming in his eye. Danilo tenses under their paired focus. Recognizing his discomfort, Gellert collects the spear, giving Danilo a reprieve.

Danilo's hands twitch and he bites the inside of his cheek until he tastes blood, grounding his thoughts in the present. Enzo squints at him, eyes roving over Danilo's newest nuances while he awaits instruction.

"Continue," Enzo directs, his tone not portraying his thoughts.

Gellert resumes his advance with more speed and less thought. It gives Danilo no opening, no chance to do any more than counter or parry.

When Enzo calls on them to pause, Danilo groans in relief. Gellert doubles over, staff at his feet and hands on his knees. He shakes his head, sweat lining his temples and jaw. Danilo gives the wooden sword a squeeze before glancing at Enzo.

Enzo, while he doesn't want to show it, has been growing tired. And Danilo would like to say his sensitivity urges him to monitor the man—but he knows it's his paranoia. Sensing Danilo's gaze, Enzo locks his shoulders higher. Danilo leaves it alone because he can see the fractures in Enzo's composure. He'll be concerned once he can't.

Enzo calls their training to a finish and they move back towards the house as a trio. Air licks at the moisture beading his forehead and he swipes at it with the back of his hand while kicking the long grass vanishing among the dunes. He ducks as they descend into the cool house. Gellert and Enzo branch in another direction.

Enzo calls to him, the wave of his hand a sign to follow. Danilo hesitates, watching Gellert vanish into a small room. He doesn't move and Enzo's brow ticks.

Enzo hums, then approaches him. Danilo examines the bleached streaks on his dark leather boots until he can no longer ignore Enzo's presence. But he only raises his gaze to Enzo's chest.

Enzo breaks the silence, "Did he—"

"He didn't do anything." Danilo crosses his arms, tonguing his scar.

Enzo hums again. Danilo grinds his teeth and meets Enzo's eyes.

"Then what I had to discuss can wait." Enzo clasps his hands behind his back, beginning his retreat down the hall. Danilo's chest spasms and he follows without conscious thought. Enzo stops, turning to flick his gaze over Danilo. "Are you certain?"

He shrugs, but Enzo doesn't take it for an answer this time. "It's not going away."

Enzo's ever-present grimace softens.

Danilo pads after him, freezing in the doorway where a familiar set of papers engulf the nearest tabletop. Dread creeps into his airway, hollowing out his lungs. He turns to Enzo. Gellert glances over his shoulder before cataloging the trinkets hanging from his palm. Enzo gestures to the map, an expectant expression glossing over the unspoken emotion behind his eyes.

"Easton would have accepted your knowledge with enthusiasm," Enzo assures.

The statement is an apology. Only revealed by the way Gellert whips his head over a shoulder and blinks dumbly at the ledger in hand. Danilo scans him and toes closer to the map, snapping his gaze to the parchment when Enzo raises a questioning brow at Gellert. Their silent exchange is brief. When Enzo steps toward Gellert, Danilo pinches the fabric of Enzo's sleeve.

"I..." he glances at the map, swallowing. "I'm—"

"You have nothing to apologize for." Enzo says, then slips away.

Danilo watches their interaction, following the path their fingers point between one item and the next, directed by Gellert's discussion and notes. His stare remains unnoticed, or more likely ignored, until Gellert turns. Danilo stiffens.

"Water?" Gellert asks.

Danilo nods and spins to face the map fully.

With a glance around the room, he's amazed by the varying fabrics draping from the ceiling, tied to Vintioni jewels and twisted through Jerusai jewelry. The sparkling colors refract over the walls. Glass set in weapons cast dots of light along the tables. It's a spectacle in the rundown shack.

As he turns his eyes back to the map, he lifts the quill from the inkpot, hand catching the ink before it can drip on the page. The quill's maker had taken pride in collecting the rare feather. His eyes flicker up to the empty ink pots filled with unique quills on the shelf, waiting to be used.

Danilo clears his throat, flipping a corner to test the ink. Easton's name stares up at him. He blows out his breath and slams the page down, shoulders tense as he braces himself on the table.

"ere we are." The water inside the mug vibrates from the force with which Gellert places it down. "Been a long time since I've been challenged during a spar."

Danilo nods, eyes flicking over him before grabbing the mug. He leans against the table, eyes on the water he swirls.

"You seemed surprised," Danilo says.

"At what? Your skill?" Danilo nods and Gellert wanders to his own table, flipping his books back open. "Hardly some'ing to be surprised by. You were 'e Lieutenant Commander. Earned it somehow." Danilo glances at the doorway, wondering whether Enzo planned on returning or if he was better off to flee the room before Gellert's attitude took a turn for the worse. "I was surprised by how your sensitivity adapts."

"Adapts?" Danilo blinks, Gellert's admittance bringing his escape plan to an immediate pause.

Gellert sighs at the ceiling. "I wasn't supposed to say any'ing."

"And Enzo will torture you for it, will he?"

Gellert laughs. "No, he has other ways."

"Sounds threatening." Danilo lifts the mug from the table again.

"Of all people, ya should know."

Danilo's mug freezes before his mouth as his chest drops. That stung. He tightens his grip on the cup and swallows the remainder of its contents without fear of choking on it. Desperate for an excuse to flee Gellert's determined stare. Gellert grimaces at his own choice of words, fists curling atop his workstation.

Aside from poorly timed statements and snide remarks, Danilo has yet to find a reason to distrust Gellert. He pushes off the table to leave, wanting nothing more than to ignore the hollow ache in his chest—the heavy reminder that of anyone left in the Nephla's chosen, Gellert is the most likely to kill him over past grievances.

"I'm sorry." Gellert reaches out—never touching—to keep Danilo from leaving. "For 'at as well as your brother. Your family. I understand 'e loss you feel."

The statement would be considerate and heartfelt if Danilo weren't the cause of his loss; a good man dying in a snowy fortress, lungs filling with blood at his attempts to cry out. Danilo's loss was not the same.

Gellert spent years fighting alongside his friend—they would have grown up together, trained together, travelled together. They would have shared a time when the weight of the world and all of its sins didn't sink onto their shoulders. Their worries would have been over scraped knees and girls.

No, Gellert couldn't understand because he didn't have a lifetime carrying the weight of snuffing out ambition, hope, and innocence.

Danilo's throat tightens from a putrid combination of remorse and envy. He flicks his eyes to Gellert, ignores how his lungs revolt, and leaves the room with the barest of nods. Discomfort snaps at his heels until he's baring his bedroom door shut with his weight, and it follows him like a shadow until he's beneath the covers.

He cannot be bothered to shuck off his boots, accepting the smudges amid the musty sheets.



CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Sunlight blinds Danilo regardless of how desperately he struggles to blink past the haze misting his eyes. The large wagon tosses about on wooden wheels as it hits softened piles of sand. A shout stabs the air. He jerks on his arms in an attempt to cover his eyes, but they lay detached at his sides. Unresponsive.

Arrows thunk into the inside of the cart. Frozen against the bottom of the wagon, he cannot roll out of the line of fire, or pick up the sword abandoned inches beyond his reach. Gellert rolls atop him, shielding his body. An arrow pierces through his shoulder and he presses against the wound with a cry. Reina tears it from Gellert—the force drawing him off Danilo—and notches it, firing at a soldier. The soldier falls from his horse, dead on impact.

Borak straddles Danilo's middle, shielding him with a blue hue while sending a shock of magic into Gellert's shoulder. Gellert flings himself into the floor of the wagon, howling and clutching the wound.

Danilo's world falls into blackness, a hand fitted over his eyes. He wants to scream, to throw it off, to leap into the fray. But he's kept still. The sounds of battle swarm around his ears. It gnaws at him he cannot do the one thing he was bred for.

To fight.

Danilo gasps as he hurdles upright, palming the headboard. He leans over the bed, groaning at the bubbling nausea threatening to upend his near-empty stomach. He swallows it down and sags into the wood headrest, ignoring its veins as they imprint on his skin. Both his shirt and his pants cling to him, the neckline dark, even in the ghoulis light speckled through his grungy window.

He's aware Arrisoot-induced hallucinations can siphon into dreams. Despite it, his thoughts and limbs are disconnected. His fingers tremble as if possessed by another mind, their control troublesome in his struggle to peel away the blankets. Danilo blinks at his bare feet. Then, in a last effort, times his uneven breaths with each count of his toes. He repeats the process until his arm responds as an arm should—especially that of a seasoned soldier.

Danilo grumbles, stomach flipping again when he shuffles them across the uneven floorboards. He scrubs his fingers over the tired valleys of his face.

Gellert throws himself down as a shield, no matter how the recurring dream changes. And Danilo paid him in advance by taunting a bloody, dying man like a cat bored with the kill.

His punishment isn't death, but the sentence he serves when shadows twist memories into a noose of his making. A punishment he'll serve into his last breaths.

And long after.



CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Danilo tosses and turns from the moment he wakes until first light slips in his window. But it's what he deserves for falling asleep so early. A hawk's screech barrels down the hall from outside, and he groans. He shrugs on his tunic, deciding to forgo his boots to keep from waking the others. An attempt to prolong the solitude.

It's a pointless decision. He enters the main room and finds Enzo perched in the still-backed leather chair. Enzo looks up upon his entry. Though his stony expression doesn't change, Danilo recognizes the surprise scrawling among the wrinkles at the corner of Enzo's eyes. Danilo rocks on his feet before padding deeper into the darkened space, white light peeking beneath the blanket over the open doorway.

He chafes beneath Enzo's squinted gaze but continues his determined path. The act of defiance, though weak, is the most he's felt like himself without anger flooding his veins.

"What is the origin of your scar?" Enzo asks quietly, gesturing to the raised skin stemming from Danilo's cleft lip, allowing the book to fall shut on his lap.

Danilo blinks at him, touching his tongue to it. The question once sent daggers into his heart, but as time stretched on, softening the scar's appearance and the stares that lingered, he built an immunity to the sharpness of it.

"I'm a soldier," he says with a shrug.

Enzo hums. "It is older than when you began participating in battles."

"Never said I got it in battle." The couch creaks as he drops across from Enzo.

Silence carries between them as Enzo's eyes soften. "You got it from your father."

Danilo grimaces.

"I got it from the General." He clenches his hand to keep from tracing the healed line. "A hard-learned lesson."

Enzo bristles but refrains from sharing his immediate thoughts. The quiet air tickles Danilo's feet with its chill. He drags them over the spongy wooden floorboards, unable to relax with the horrors chasing him.

"You and I are more alike than we seem." Enzo admits. Danilo meets Enzo's eyes, jaw clenched to keep himself from gaping at the man. At the show of vulnerability. Enzo looks away first. "Aside from impulse control, and key personality traits, and the need to please others and prove oneself."

Danilo rolls his eyes, leaning back into the couch. He grins. "I'm not the only one with something to prove."

"And how is that, pray tell?" Enzo asks.

"You're from Decarii."

"You are certain?" Enzo furrows his brows, eyes flicking to Danilo's squeezing fingers. Danilo shrugs, spinning the braided ring. "You are correct. However, I fail to see how it affects my need to prove anything."

"The way you talk, for one. Never met a man out of Decarii—or any other eastern wharf—without the sea-slur." Enzo grimaces at the term. Danilo cocks his head. "Gotta prove not everything from the coast is stupid?"

After the silence carries through the air, Danilo wonders if he's overstepped.

"Tell me," Enzo says with a pointed look, "Danilo. Are you your father?"

Danilo tries to keep his lip from curling. "No."

Tries.

"Then why prove you are not him?"

Danilo's jaw ticks as he thinks, rubbing his knuckles against the knees of his pants. "The man's shadow is hard to escape."

Enzo hums. "The shadow he cast over you in society? Or in your mind?"

Danilo understands why the friction between their personalities sparked arguments into a raging flame. He understands, of all the people in Merkidia,

why it would be Enzo to see past his walls. They're cut from the same cloth, if a different colour. You cannot hide from like-minded men.

"What is your repulsion with Gellert?" Enzo asks, disrupting Danilo's thoughts.

"Repulsion?" Danilo jumps.

"You have a difficult time hiding your feelings."

"It's not repulsion." He crosses his arms. "Not at him anyway—What is this? An interrogation?"

"Do you have a question yourself?" Enzo raises a brow.

"No," is his knee-jerk answer. Then he thinks better of it. "Not yet."

Enzo gives a single, slow nod in response. It takes Danilo a moment to understand Enzo's staring as waiting. Danilo bites down on his tongue in frustration.

"Who was the man Gellert lost?" He spits out.

Enzo's expression flickers. "You know he lost one?"

A sick enjoyment lingers in his chest. He can't shake it. Never could. It was bred into him as much as his looks. Danilo's shoulders raise as realization dawns on Enzo's face, turning his ever-present scowl blank. He grinds his knuckles into his rough pant leg.

Enzo's eyes narrow, and Danilo tenses for the oncoming question. "How heavy is the guilt you carry?"

"Are you in pain?" Danilo thinks Enzo may ignore him in favour of taking his spitfire question as an answer.

"I am not in pain." Enzo places his book between the seat cushion and the arm of the chair, leaning on his knees. "Though there is discomfort."

A cerulean hue dances around his fingers like ocean foam, and with a pulling motion, Danilo is jerked forward, elbows pinned to his knees. Enzo straightens, grabbing Danilo's hand and turning it in his grasp.

"You have split the skin." Danilo looks down to where blood smears across his knuckles. Enzo knits the surface back together, his magic hot against Danilo's hand. "Am I to believe you are in nothing more than discomfort?"

Danilo nods, fingers bouncing across the healing fissures. Enzo leans back. Their conversation rolls into banter, airy in the cascading light, their peace is broken by the wildlife waking at the promise of another day. It peters into silence, the quiet and careful laughter swept away in the dry air, the breath of the Gentled East softening the dank quarters, flicking through their hair with a

faint warmth to combat Enzo's natural chill. A howl cuts through the door, the sheet swaying with the dunes' lazy breeze.

Danilo's head spins with his tiredness, and he leans back into the arm of the couch, lifting his feet to take up the entire space. Enzo hums a tune while his finger follows what he previously read.

Danilo ignores the tremble rupturing the underside of his skin, clinging to the haze over his thoughts with little effort. His heavy eyelids press him into the leather cushions and his drawn breaths rumble his chest—closer to a growl than a snore, though his once-fellow soldiers would argue differently. On the precipice of sleep, his limbs twitch in rebellion. Images flash behind his lids. Quiet sceneries through the Gentled East rapidly turn bloody and grotesque.

He gasps, clawing at the couch as he jolts upright. Enzo sucks in a breath. Danilo curses the Arrisoot and Enzo tuts at his choice of words.

"Is that the cause of this?" Enzo asks.

"It was there before. It's worse now." Danilo shrugs, shrinking under Enzo's scrutiny.

The peace melts from the room as Enzo's gaze becomes fiercer with the sluggish time passing amid the rigid silence, Enzo's thoughts connecting previous events before Danilo's very eyes. Danilo shrinks, knowing Enzo's seen the obvious. He hums, lifting a hand to force Danilo to meet his eye. With each symptom Enzo lists, Danilo tenses in his palm.

"Inability to sleep, withdrawn behaviours, sudden appetite change, tremors, irritability often manifested as irrational anger or depression—" Danilo opens his mouth to argue, biting it back when Enzo lifts a brow in challenge. He lets Danilo pull free of his hold. "You had no intention of verbalizing your latest struggle?"

Danilo shifts under Enzo's gaze.

"Uh, no?" He bristles when Enzo scowls. "What was I supposed to say? I'm fine."

"And Borak's negligence with his preferred iatrical reserve was of no consequence to you?" Enzo's brow lifts, his face growing darker the longer Danilo takes to answer.

"What?"

"Have you, or have you not, self-medicated using Borak's wares, Danilo?" Danilo figures Enzo tacked on his name to soften the blow of the accusation.

Unfortunately, Enzo once again is right. Despite the seething anger pumping through his veins, the lingering concern in that one word douses it. Shouting back will prove nothing but Danilo's need to defend himself.

"I didn't use the opium." He crosses his arms over his chest, shoving his clenched hands against his flanks. A last-ditch effort to guard his secret.

Enzo hums. "Yet still you singled out the bottle which could replicate the effects you desired."

Danilo pales, gaze dancing around Enzo's face without meeting his eyes. With a broken sigh and his tongue clenched between his teeth, Danilo nods. Enzo shakes his head, rubbing his brow.

"I will discuss Borak's imprudent tendencies."

"No point. He's removed it. I don't want everyone knowing," Danilo says.

Enzo splays his hands over his knees. "Can you promise to be open with me?"

"Yes." Danilo meets his eyes and swallows at the intensity he finds in Enzo's gaze.

Enzo tips his head back, staring down his nose as he analyzes Danilo. His stray grey hairs sway. He breaks the connection first, opting to watch the makeshift curtain with a silent "very well".

Danilo sighs in relief, his thanks stumbling from his lips. Enzo hums.

Dark circles mar Danilo's golden complexion, creating a ghoul of his expressive, youthful face. He rubs Danilo's closest temple, ignoring the flinch of surprise. Danilo's eyes flutter as he fights the effects of Enzo's magic manipulating his mind. A valiant attempt, considering it's not an ability Enzo exercises. Then he sags into Enzo's touch, deep in a desperate sleep.



CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Danilo is about to slip inside for breakfast when Magus pins him to the wall of the stairwell.

“Sorry!” Magus leaps back, throwing his hands up from Danilo’s shirt. “Sorry, buddy. Habit.”

He straightens out Danilo’s shirt and Danilo stares at him, the darker tinge of warning edging from his eyes.

“S’okay.” Danilo clears his throat, trying to dip around him. Magus blocks his path.

“Come with me first,” he says, pulling on Danilo’s sleeve.

Danilo’s stomach jumps into his throat but he follows. An ironwood tree’s blue leaves flick in the breeze as Danilo and Magus wander by. The tension grows each time Magus glances over his shoulder.

“You know, I think half of them would be fine if you killed me on the steps. Didn’t have to drag me out here,” Danilo says in a weak attempt at humour.

“Nah, you’re fine for now.” Magus smirks, but it falls before it can seem genuine.

There is a pregnant pause swallowed by the chirrup of birds and beetles before Magus finally speaks again.

“There’s a way to save Enzo.”

“What?”

Magus nods, moving to sit on a fallen tree. It bows under his weight but supports him.

“He’s being stubborn. Won’t listen to anyone.” He tilts his head to the side and stares up at Danilo, squinting to block the sun. “Y’know, if your hair was a little longer, you’d look like a lion. With the sun and all. Is that why you’re called ‘the Lion of Audantei?’”

“Magus,” Danilo sighs.

“I know, buddy.” With a sigh, Magus shoves his hands into his pockets. “There’s only rumour. It’s why nobody’s said anything to you. But I didn’t want you to hear it too late.”

Danilo shifts, standing in front of Magus with crossed arms.

“The Beggar’s Stone is a remnant of the THIRD. Not of his children. It was created to be used by humankind to give them a taste of power. Or at least that’s what some texts claim.” Magus jerks when the tree slides deeper into the sand, planting his feet but still leaning against it. He mutters at the rotten wood before continuing. “Anyway, from what we gather, your father used the Beggar’s Stone. And since the stone is absorbing Enzo’s power, there’s one of two things that can happen. It tears his magic from him and he dies. Or we destroy the source.”

“Being the Besecher?”

“Being the stone.” Magus shrugs, face growing bored.

Danilo breathes steadily, eyes taking in the way Magus chews his lip. Magus’ brows furrow when Danilo fails to respond.

“Dani?” Magus’ voice snaps Danilo into motion, his march spraying sand. Magus chuckles. “Oh, you’re gonna make me regret this, aren’t you?”

Magus follows with a smirk, brows raised at the storm weaving into Danilo’s stern expression. He shoulders the front door. It collides against the wood wall with a crack, sealing his decision. Rather than follow him in, Magus leans outside the front door, waiting for when hell turns on him.

It doesn’t take much effort on Danilo’s part to find Enzo, as the man has been in the same two rooms since their arrival. Gellert jerks back at the fire in Danilo’s eyes, setting his things aside.

“I’m gonna...” He dips from the room, leaving it to Danilo and Enzo.

Enzo places the parchment listing the room’s items atop Gellert’s abandoned books, staring at Danilo in the kaleidoscopic light bursting through the pen-

dants and jewels hanging from the low ceiling. His expression is curious but still while pale grey eyes scour the anger pocking Danilo's face.

"Were you going to tell me you knew how to fix this?"

"No. I was not." Enzo's face turns stony—cold and distant in a way that should warn Danilo.

He clenches his fists. "And why not?"

Enzo crosses his arms over his chest.

"Because I will allow none of mine to charge in like the General of Audantei would." Enzo looks down his nose at Danilo before moving a delicate glass candelabra further from the table's edge, then swings around to add, "Least of all, you."

"Least of all..." Danilo's nose curls. He shoves his hands onto his hips. "This is still about my past."

"This is about your self-control and casualty awareness."

"You doubt my loyalty."

"Never once has your loyalty been in question, young Altamura," Enzo sneers.

Danilo's fight is brought to a cold stop, hurt dousing the flames of his argument. He swallows, scoffs, and glares at Enzo.

"And I should have known I couldn't trust yours."

Danilo shakes his head and leaves the room with his gaze on the floor, storming outside, deaf to Enzo calling his name. The world passes by him as if in a trance. When he passes Borak and Magus arguing outside, they both stop to stare at his expressionless face. Neither of them bother to ask where he's headed.

Danilo hacks at a dead tree with the wooden sword, using vengeful strength to chip and dent the bark refusing to fall away. A thick sludge of poisoned thoughts drowns his heart.

He clenches the false hilt and shouts through clenched teeth before renewing his attack on the defenseless branches. In his state, he stops tracking time.

A stone skitters against the rocky frame of the waterhole. He tensed, ignoring the urge to face the threat. His attacks halt, his ragged breathing making it difficult to hear. Distantly, he commends whoever is brave enough to approach him. The anger rushing through him must be palpable in the air.

"It'll feel better to fight me." Reina stops at his side, looking between him and the tree.

Her voice strikes him like wet silk across the back of a bare thigh, cutting through to his nerves. He tosses the wooden sword aside, appraising her with his hands on his hips.

“It’s not a fight when I’m standing over you.”

She rushes forward, rolling into one of his knees and bringing a dagger to his middle. He catches her wrist with a shout.

“I didn’t accept.”

“Is your enemy going to let you accept?” Dropping her dagger, she catches it in her other hand and lunges at him.

Danilo growls, catching her and throwing her over his shoulder. She rolls with the movement, perched on her feet again. Reina smirks and runs at him. His sensitivity works in his favour and before she can make the impact, he deflects and drives a fist into her ribs.

The longer she defends against his strikes and worms her own around his blocks, the more Danilo can see where her magic is similar to his sensitivity.

“You sense the next strike?” Danilo asks after throwing her away from him.

She pants, poised for a tackle. He knows she is going to fake once she charges.

“No, I follow your elbow.” Her green eyes glimmer with mischief. “Is that how yours works?”

When she fakes, she throws her leg over his shoulders and pulls him to the ground as she falls. He’s pinned beneath her, blocking her blows with his arms over his ears. She pulls back too far, and he drives his fist into her ribs in the same spot as before.

Reina winces, and he takes the pause to roll her off him, getting to his feet again.

“I was wondering why Enzo wanted you—” she kicks at his knee, missing when she has to duck his elbow, “training so hard.”

Danilo’s frustration gathers in his hands, and drives his fist at her tender ribs. It stops mid-air, vines wrapping around his wrist and trapping his arm. He swings his opposite hand up, grabs the back of her neck, and pulls her stomach into his knee. She drops her hold on him, coughing but grinning. The vines shrivel into the sand.

“You never did let yourself be distracted,” Reina pants, rubbing her stomach. “And you’re choking out your sensitivity, by the way.”

Danilo pulls on his arm, trying to stretch out his shoulder. “Choking?”

Reina takes a couple of steps back, nodding.

“Yeah, just when it starts to do the work for you, you stomp it down.” She gestures up and down at him. “Makes sense since you’d have to control your movements, you know, as a soldier.”

He nods. Reina wanders over to her dagger, examining its dirty edge before sliding it into her sheathe. The blistering sun shines down overhead through the sparse treetops. Each step makes the blooming bruises ache—each kick, each hit, each time she slammed him to the ground—and while he’s never been fond of the pain, he is fond of the familiarity. An olive branch extended among the thorns. Reina smirks at him and gestures for him to follow.



Enzo is piecing together stratagems for after his death when Reina struts into the room. Her face cascaded in an array of fractured colours. The jewelry and crystal insets from weapons refract what little light slips in through the sand covered window. Gellert turns at her entry.

“Danilo’s stronger than I thought,” she sighs, pushing her hair out of her face and placing her mug on Gellert’s desk. Her hand rests atop it.

Gellert coughs out a laugh before turning to his work. “Hadn’t learned it when he tore through ‘e Narota camp?”

“You don’t remember that I’m first a long-distance fighter?” Her wood mug screeches on the tabletop, and she smirks at Enzo’s annoyed scowl.

As she closes in on Enzo’s workstation, she turns and straddles a chair. Her mug hangs from her hands as she leans over the backrest. Enzo, aggravated by her presence and by the knowing gleam in her eye, takes precautions to ignore her. She has no business interjecting herself on behalf of Danilo.

“Preparations?” Reina tips the chair closer, scowling at the words scrawled along the top of the parchment.

Enzo quirks a brow at her disapproving tone. “As the Second, and with duties I will pass to you upon my death, it is in your best interest I make arrangements.”

Reina sighs, glancing at Gellert. Gellert shrugs with a scowl.

“Not to insult you, Enzo, but we’d be fine.” Reina clacks the chair legs against the floor as she settles back, peering up at Enzo when he hums. “Danilo won’t be.”

He shoots her a grimace, noticing the red welts turning various shades of green and purple.

"Did he—"

"I offered." She swirls her water before taking a swig. "He's tense. Your argument did a number on him."

Enzo sneers. "If his concern was with survival rather than acting a martyr—"

"Do you really think that's what this is? Do you really think that's in his character?" She sighs, watching Enzo brace himself against the table. "Enzo, he's spent his entire life causing... well, I'd say problems, but we all know that's not strong enough." When Enzo says nothing, she adds, "He's eighteen years old, and he's killed more people than the three of us."

"I am aware." Enzo sighs, nodding solemnly before clearing his throat and standing over her. "However, his efforts would be better spent on saving hundreds as opposed to one man."

Reina watches him. It drags against Enzo's patience, and she knows it. Of course, she uses it to her advantage, and often on behalf of others. For an individual who can't trust herself to make informed decisions, Enzo finds she is more than willing to meddle in the affairs of others.

"Well—" Reina stands, patting his shoulder, "I think that's what you need to tell him."

Gellert stares with a white knuckled grip on his book, his face turning various shades of red. Waving two fingers, she slips through the door.

"Did I not say 'e same 'ing?"

"Same thing, different words." Enzo smirks at Gellert's sound of annoyance before a book slams down on his table. When Enzo chuckles, Gellert's shoulders loosen.

"You'll listen to her?"

Glancing over his shoulder, Enzo nods, placing his latest page down.

"No time like the present," Enzo says, and crosses his arms over his shoulders in a wide stretch before toeing from the room. Gellert pumps the air in triumph seconds after Enzo passes through the doorway.

Enzo knows nothing about children or soldiers. He will admit as much. So, while he may be headed to Danilo's room, his slow steps are merely a provision for time to decide which of them he's more willing to face. The child, whose bitter emotions wrought Enzo's beyond control. Or the soldier, who refused

to bend a knee in servitude without Enzo first proving the reason why. As he reaches Danilo's room, he has yet to decide.

Enzo watches Danilo spin the rings on his fingers with a distant look in his eyes. Danilo turns to him when he leans against the doorframe. That wretched scar deepens the boy's scowl, though this time Danilo doesn't correct it. Enzo knows it isn't personal. As a boy, Danilo couldn't regulate his emotions or his control. As a warrior, he was forced to try.

Enzo can no longer hate either.

"Will you allot me the credit due for recognizing what you are failing to communicate?"

"Will you let me go?" Danilo snaps.

Enzo sighs, entering the room with a hand on the door. He closes it when Danilo makes no argument otherwise. They stare at one another, unsure how to proceed. Danilo rambles once Enzo prepares to speak.

"When Gellert brought up that I might be the Beseecher a few nights ago, I didn't say anything because—"

"I am aware you had not known." It saves Enzo from a torturous conversation, but does not give the man more time.

Enzo remains fixed on his spot while he scans Danilo. The boy shifts beneath the tranquil attention.

"What do you think I'm not saying?" Danilo's face contorts, his anger and stress colliding darkly in his bright eyes.

Enzo raises both brows before nodding to himself. "Overall, or currently?"

Fear crosses over Danilo's face before he stutters out, "Overall."

The air pulses like a third heartbeat in the room, demanding to be felt. Enzo gestures to the end of Danilo's bed and waits to sit until Danilo nods. Both listen to the wind slipping through the cracks in the window. It dawns on Enzo that Danilo uses his emotions as a shield. More specifically, his anger. So acclimated to the whims of the General, Danilo had built himself an impenetrable front meant to safeguard his genuine emotions. And it was constructed with such brilliance, Enzo is certain Danilo wields it against himself.

"You are afraid."

Danilo tucks his chin into his chest, his forearms braced on his knees. It is the most childlike Enzo has seen him over the year they've spent together. Enzo watches Danilo's knuckles whiten as the boy struggles against the emotion opposing his anger.

"You're avoiding me," Danilo says, resting his chin on his arm, voice vehement to bait Enzo into an argument.

Enzo inhales, shaking his head in amazement at the impulsive emotion rising within him, easily manipulated into life. "I was."

"Why?"

Enzo sighs, scratching his beard. "You have been failed by a great number of men. I will not add myself to the list by promising you deeds or time I do not have."

"You already did."

Enzo tips his chin up, closing his eyes as a refuge against the current of emotions in the air. When he nods, it comes to a still, and he looks to find Danilo sunken into himself. A bright contrast to the boy he'd been mere seconds ago. He squints at the uncharacteristic change, but Danilo beats whatever thoughts linger on his tongue.

"I hope you can find some way to be okay with that," Danilo says, just above a whisper. "Because I need whatever time you can give me."

Enzo glances out the window, finding dim sunlight sparkling on the glass pane. The scent of dinner wafts into the room.

"Come." Enzo opens the door, gesturing out. "Let us eat. We can discuss this further with rational minds."

Danilo follows his gesture, an invisible weight lifting from his shoulders. Enzo falls in step behind him.

"And do remember to remove your boots before you climb into bed. Else I make you scrub every sheet in this building." Danilo's cheeks burn, but he nods at Enzo's request.



CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Enzo walks into his room to find the Serpent of Decarii sitting on his plans, a braided band beneath it, delicate in design but large in size. Their placement is deliberate; careful and showing respect. As he rotates them in his palm, he finds them in an identical state to when he saw them last. He shuts his eyes against the surge of remorse.

The day Enzo found his mother's ring missing from her effects, she felt more stolen from him than before. Years later, he found it around Danilo's neck. He never expected to see it again, nevertheless hold it. His fingers roll the metal into his palm—a cold weight of vengeance against his skin.

Enzo knew of its presence when he pinned Danilo at the Narota camp. After discovering the truth of Danilo's age, Enzo promised himself he would kill Danilo when he was older. It settled the weight of justice in his gut for a time. Ironically, with the current turn of events, he found the injustice of her death resolved. Or, rather, had discovered enough truth to know the man the boy pretended to be was not at fault.

When Enzo looks upon the band, he finds an unexpected care went into maintaining it. The grime, which Enzo's mother had never removed, was cleared from the junctions of the woven metal. Any new scores were rubbed away.

Danilo sits in the slatted shade of the paddock, his blond hair blending into the long grass. He brushes sand from his breeches, scowling when the wind throws it up over his head. Enzo hums, then squeezes the rings in his palm.

Each of Danilo's rings lay before him in the sand. Save for Easton's, which encircles Danilo's pointer finger. Danilo looks up when Enzo's shadow rests over him. When he does, a timid grin crooks across his face, betraying his nakedness with those items shed from his skin. Enzo smiles in response and gestures to the spot on the ground next to him. Danilo nods, back rigid against the fencepost while Enzo lowers himself at his side.

Nothing but the gentle caress of the wind through their hair disturbs the silent moment. Enzo breaks the serenity by lifting one of Danilo's rings from the dirt. He can infer Danilo's guilt from their shine.

Whatever their purpose, Enzo knows Danilo seldom removes them.

"This was not crafted by a magic-wielder." Enzo observes, twisting the ring in his palm, a double axe signet decorating the metal. It's otherwise plain, edges and grooves wavering as forged metal does.

Danilo's heavy eyes drag away from Enzo's face and fall on the hunky metal band.

"You can tell the difference?"

Enzo hums. "Stormthrower metal is smoother than what jewelry-makers or blacksmiths can produce."

"Nuicalli." Danilo nods, face unmoving and exhausted.

"Nuicalli?"

Danilo hums, taking the ring from Enzo and rolling it between his fingers.

"I took it off a psychotic axe wielder from an unnamed tribe in the southern East." He swallows at Enzo's brow twitch. "Passing between forts. They killed half my garrison."

Danilo's fingers tighten over the item as he shakes the weight in his closed palm. He drops it against the others with a ting.

"This was about three weeks after that." A plain bronze band sits pinched between Danilo's fingers. He offers it. Enzo cradles the band in his palm, examining the tight lines along Danilo's eyes before Danilo turns them out over the desert land. "I was just promoted to Overseer of the fortress north of Suimeru."

Two weeks south of Audantei by horse, Suimeru sits on the coastline as the passage between the wall diving the Gentled East from the Frozen South. It was a heavy area of trade and in dire need of protection from Nuicalli and Ravager

raids. Gellert lost many when he aimed to take it, and though Enzo has heard rumors about the involvement of a particular soldier, he does not speak his thoughts.

“Do you think Gellert wants it?” Danilo asks.

Enzo hums. “That is a discussion you must have with him.”

Danilo’s brows tighten, and a heavy sigh falls from him. He clutches the ring with a grimace before placing it down with reverence. Enzo steadily ignores the shifting emotions in the air, instead directing his attention to the next item in Danilo’s procession.

“And that?” he says, and Danilo flinches. “Settle yourself. I have no nefarious motives regarding the information you divulge.”

“You saw that?” Danilo looks at him then.

“With you, I notice everything,” Enzo swallows at the admission.

Nodding, Danilo flicks up the ring and allows it to fall into his palm. He offers it out to Enzo, describing the bounty hunter Audantei had hired and sent to Jutsique, where Danilo had been stationed.

Enzo heard the story when Easton came tearing into his quarters at their residence on the borders of the Untamed North. As Danilo talks, it becomes clearer; a hunter with a bias against Audantei’s General, aiming to kill his son. If Enzo were to vocalize his thoughts, the hunter deserved the death he chose.

Danilo stares at the onyx jewel when Enzo settles it in his palm. He takes a breath. Grips it in a fist. Then tosses it into the sands, grunting when his shoulder knocks against a paddock board. Enzo hums, raising a brow at Danilo’s profile. The corner of Danilo’s lip tips upward. He nods.

They proceed through the rest of Danilo’s lineup, discussing the hammered steel of a woman who tried to burn him from the inside. A scaled band from the original Head of Orders. And an intricately designed band as dark as obsidian—a crow constricted by a snake—once belonging to an assassin.

Enzo hums, pushing it into Danilo’s palm. “I do believe it is well earned.”

Danilo holds it for a moment before sliding it onto his right thumb; its previous home amid the mass he freed himself of.

“I have avoided this question for as long as I have known you.” Enzo waits for Danilo to meet his eyes. “How came you by this?”

Danilo’s eyes flare at the delicate band between Enzo’s fingers. His gaze snaps to his boots with an audible swallow.

"Was hoping you'd never..." A weight in Danilo's voice matches that on Enzo's heart. "I was around nine. And I was scouting where I shouldn't have been."

Enzo hums, rolling the ring onto his finger.

"She caught me... I took the ring as a reminder." Danilo hunches inward, shoulders bowing. "Guess I became my father anyway, didn't I?"

"No." Danilo shoots his gaze to Enzo and shrinks at the hard edge in his eyes. "You have never been him."

Danilo shifts under his conviction. "Not even—"

"Not once."

Danilo doesn't believe him. The scar morphs his twitch into a full grimace, and his tongue touches to it.

Sand blows into the air as the wind whips across their fronts. A slam resounds from behind them, the shed door battering against the building's side. Danilo jumps. Enzo smirks before clearing his throat, turning his face from Danilo's squinted gaze. As the wind settles, so does the somber air lingering in their lungs.

"I do not blame you," Enzo says. Danilo's grimace speaks of his disagreement. "What kind of man would I be if I could not forgive a child for actions they are not accountable for?"

"An honest one."

Enzo hums, twisting his mother's ring. The horizon before them grows dim with an oncoming sand storm. He stands, motioning for Danilo to follow. Danilo kicks at stones peeking out from the sand and grass. Enzo rolls his fingers in the air to draw his attention.

"Let them be lost to the sands."

Danilo crosses his arms over his chest with a twitching lip. No words are exchanged until Enzo turns halfway down the stairs.

"It is unwise to return this to me." He pulls the Serpent of Decarii from his pocket, the gemstone swirling green in the hard light of the East's sun.

"It's yours." Danilo stumbles on the words, mind and feet grinding to a halt.

"Which will make finding you easier," Enzo holds out his palm, "when you are hunted throughout the entire Gentled East."

Enzo quirks his brow and raises his palm. Danilo clenches his fist midair before lifting the ring. He spins it, fingers bumping over the tentacle band. His shoulders tense as if Enzo has handed him an anchor. Enzo lifts the curtain to encourage him inside.

“Did you neglect your training?” He asks. Danilo pokes his tongue into his cheek rather than answering. Enzo rolls his eyes. “You will work twice as hard this afternoon.”

“How?” Danilo slides the ring onto his middle finger, where Enzo’s mother’s once laid. Danilo follows Enzo inside, battening the door behind him. “There’s no place inside to train.”

Enzo’s smirk falls as the realization settles over him that Danilo has not been seen in any room without instruction to be there, a fact which would combat his military training. His eyes soften.

“Come.” He calls for Gellert and Reina, waving them to follow with a bend of his fingers. “Tell me, Danilo, how strong are you feeling?”

Danilo sighs, the following words hardly more than a grumble. “A little more fragile than I’d like.”

Enzo hums and lays a hand on Danilo’s shoulder, pushing him toward the end of the black hall.

“We are fragile. Sometimes it is easily forgotten.”



Danilo rolls in the small space. Firelight and glowing hues of gold and green act as his only sources of light. Beneath Giffak Place, in the small remains of a cellar, he parries Gellert’s sword and deflects the swing of Reina’s dagger. Enzo paces around the dirt wall where the posts are inset to hold the buried house above. He pauses when the fight moves close to his path.

Danilo discovers soon after they start that Gellert and Reina are learning how to synchronize their attacks, using him as their dummy. So far, they haven’t found a pattern, and he isn’t complaining, since it gives him a chance to find some momentum of his own.

Gellert’s sword cuts by Danilo’s cheek. Danilo traps it between his own weapon and the dirt wall. Enzo barks out a warning, backing away from the flying dirt.

Reina hoists herself onto Danilo’s braced thigh, wraps herself around his shoulders, and flips them both to the ground.

Danilo locks a hand in Reina's hair and rolls, placing her in the path of Gellert's sword. Vines wrap around Gellert's weapon like a whip—green glow never fading as he pushes a glowing gold palm toward her magic.

"Maybe don't get me, thank you," Reina says sarcastically, kicking Gellert in the knee.

Danilo leaps to his feet, glancing at Enzo while Gellert and Reina bicker. Enzo's lip quirks as he meets Danilo's eye.

"Tighten the routine." Enzo's voice, though steady, holds the airy weight of entertainment.

Danilo grins, ducking as Gellert slices the sword at him. He brings his wooden weapon up to block the vines of Reina's magic. She had strained her arm in their solo training—attempting moves only Danilo was willing to be her target for. Her brief moments of attack now are light, more of a distraction from Gellert than as the real threat. Together, they are still a team to be wary of.

Gellert is aggressive and intentional. He swings and jabs with precision. A growl catches in the air as Danilo deflects Gellert's next hit, dodging to bring Reina's strike at him. His muscles cleave from his bone, leaving him strands of sweat and air held together by the obstinate brawn of determination.

Danilo grabs Reina's leg and tosses her into Gellert.

"Enough." Enzo waves.

Reina rolls off Gellert, laying on the dirt floor with a groan. Gellert nods at the ceiling. Neither one of them move to get up. Enzo hums, a smirk on the corner of his lips. His hand settles on Danilo's shoulder before he heads for the stairs.

Gellert smacks Reina and scrambles to his feet, cackling as she kicks in his direction. Memories war inside Danilo's mind, and he barely refrains from glancing between Gellert and the staircase, his brief window of escape closing with Gellert's eyes on him.

"Reina says you struggle wi' your sensitivity. Want me to show you?"

Danilo swallows, choking on, "Sure."

Gellert raises his palm, glittering gold circling his fingers. He gestures for Danilo's hand. Danilo clenches his fist, glances at Reina where she watches from the floor, and offers it up. Reina smirks.

Gellert's touch isn't gentle, not that Danilo expected anything less. But the fire his fingers ignite beneath Danilo's skin was beyond unpredicted. He gasps, his fingers curling into themselves when Gellert grasps both wrists. His hold

remains firm and unmoving until Danilo pants through the initial shock and nods. Gellert raises both brows, asking for verbal confirmation. Danilo stutters out his readiness and finds himself unfairly unprepared.

His veins pulse within him—as they do when his sensitivity is closest to turning on him. But this is more. The intensity spurs his heart into overbearing speeds and his sight becomes entirely engulfed in white light. Then at once, it settles. He stares distantly, amazed at the sensation.

His lungs expand as if surging outside his body, each breath fueling the power moving through him. Gellert holds him tight as he retracts his magic. And Danilo has a moment to wonder why the sand felt different before the power stole the life from his body. He wobbles, bracing himself on the nearest wall and flexing his fingers. Reina stares at Danilo with a point of her brow.

They watch him, letting him breathe his way through his return. From her lazy position, Reina rambles an explanation Danilo has already been told. Still, he can't understand. When Gellert speaks, he cuts over her words.

"Have I done anything?" Gellert's soft, dark, watchful eyes remain on him, questions clear in his gaze. He runs his fingers through his coarse black hair.

Danilo can't meet his eyes.

"No." Danilo tries to ignore the fear coiling around his tongue like a snake. He clears his throat, glancing at Reina. "You've done nothing."

She casts her eyes to the floor before bracing to stand. Danilo clenches his fingers and the sweat there turns to blood in his mind. He glances down, expecting to see red in place of glistening metal. Gellert cracks his fingers to remain calm.

"I've—" Danilo chokes, tugs the band from his finger, grabs Gellert's hand and slaps the ring in his palm. "Belonged to your friend."

"Friend?" Gellert's eyes turn downward, sorrow filling them as his hand closes around the item. "Bro'er."

"Brother." Danilo winces, crossing his arms over his chest.

He's grateful Reina has the sense to turn away. She silently slides a knife through the air to make her eavesdropping less obvious. Gellert squeezes his eyes tight in memory, his shoulders sagging.

Clearing his throat, Gellert asks, "what made you give it to me?"

"Didn't belong to me," Danilo admits. And he wishes the shame didn't burn away the shield he created. Leaving every malleable part of him on display for Gellert and Reina to scrutinize.

Gellert lifts the ring from his flat palm and turns it into the firelight before wiggling it onto a finger. Dark eyes burn holes in Danilo's cheeks, but he refuses to look up. Instead, he kicks at the dirt and wrestles with the story on his tongue.

"When—"

"I don't wanna know," Gellert chokes out. "I like you. Don't wanna know." Danilo squints before calling Gellert out. He has the decency to look half-surprised before conceding. "I wanna like you."

"Why?"

"Because Enzo likes you." Gellert shrugs at Reina's lifted brow. "Enzo doesn't like just anyone."

Danilo chuckles to himself as he begins up the stairs. He pauses when Gellert thanks him. It stings, just as with everything else the man does or says. Though it's not a new pain, but one caused by an old haunt. And old haunts eventually hurt less. Reina smiles at him, a sad and kind thing, before she sits on the bottom step in wait for Gellert.

Gellert conjures a gold silhouette. It dances around him, vanishing when his sword slices through the illumination and reappearing at random. It moves as Gellert's mirror image, yet with enough sentience to combat. Though fascinating, Danilo understands the solemn atmosphere is not ready to be broken.

He leaves his questions for another day and resumes his trek up the stairs in search of Enzo. While the admittance lifts a burden from his shoulders, there's still a fight to be had. And he has every intention of winning it.

As Danilo trudges by the narrow closet doors on either side of the old cellar entry, his vision blurs. He swallows down a weightlessness and blinks a last time before he buckles into the encroaching darkness.

A shelf crumbles atop Danilo's shoulder, the abrupt pain clawing him from the darkness with a gasp. Fissures snap the wood walls of the cramped closet, a piercing blue glow rising from the crevices. Weapons clang together as the makeshift racks tremble. Colours collide as they tear past the missing door. Power fractures around him. He backs from the room, colliding with the door across the hall. The wall splinters when the sword knocks against it.

The sword in his palm.

Danilo stares at the harsh glow of the runes and how the veins in his arms thrum with a similar shade. Gellert shouts from the staircase, braced in the doorway to guard Reina. Danilo notices nothing until Enzo grips his wrist,

fingers grazing his pulse in warning. In the next breath, the sword cracks against the floor—free of its glow. Danilo heaves, eyes wide as he sags into the wall.

“What happened?” Enzo eyes the sword, dragging Danilo from his place.

“Dunno. Blacked out.”

He speaks and then realizes that the question was intended for Gellert.

Enzo snatches Danilo’s sleeve and tows him from the hall. Gellert kicks the sword into the makeshift armoury, barring the doorway with a gold hue. Reina blinks owlishly before bounding up the steps to add a second layer to Gellert’s efforts. Their magic emulsifies. Green and gold cascade over the dark, narrow hallway.

Danilo collapses onto the couch when Enzo releases him, his mind muddled by exhaustion. The argument crashing over him is a distant cataclysm until Gellert clutches his wrists and plunges him into the same overwhelming process from minutes before.

Again, his sight wavers, and he stands against his own accord. Hestia shoves him down, keeping a hand on his shoulder. Danilo doesn’t remember when she got there. Magus sprawls beside him, examining him with interest.

“I pulled on his sensitivity, and a minute later he blacks out wi’ ‘e sword.” Gellert sticks his arms out to either side. “What o’er explanation is ‘ere?”

“Any other.” Enzo paces. “A sensitivity cannot be pulled.”

“Neither can it be manipulated,” Borak says, staring at Danilo hollowly. Enzo follows Borak’s hand as it flaps toward Danilo. “I manipulated his healing. I shouldn’t have been able to. You shouldn’t have been able to in that cell.”

Enzo scrunches his face before placing his raging emotions behind a stony front. “I had not.”

“You did. His hands.” Borak places his hands on his hips. “You probably didn’t even think of it.”

“It is not explanation enough.” Enzo shakes his head and resumes his pacing. Reina scoffs, moving from the side of the room.

“You’re all daft.” She stares between Borak, Enzo, and Gellert. “Watch again.”

When she kneels before Danilo, her palms sit out before him in the air. Danilo furrows his brows at her, and she nods at his hands. He swallows, placing them on her own. She shifts her grip until he flips them over. Palm against palm.

She pushes and pulls on his sensitivity, much like Gellert had, but without the same ferocity. As if giving it a heartbeat. Hestia shoves down on his shoulders as he tenses.

“He’s not going anywhere yet,” Reina says, glancing at Hestia. “Maybe once I let go.”

Hestia nods, lifting her hand. Magus drapes on the edge of Danilo’s comfort levels, threatening to claim it should he move.

“Where did you see his sensitivity gather?” Reina asks, then after a moment, “Enzo?”

Enzo clears his throat, shifting nearer to Reina’s side but well out of the way.

“His temples.”

“Temples?” Borak frowns. Enzo hums in confirmation, and Borak steps forward to push the hair from Danilo’s face. “That’s unusual.”

A blue glow displays beneath Danilo’s skin. As clear as Decarii waters and brighter than the shine of Ducassa silk. Enzo scans the group’s confusion, pacing again. Reina pulls her hands away, gasping when Danilo’s nails dig into her palm. His scrunched brows speak of his pain. Borak places a hand on Danilo’s chest until he’s aware enough to release her. Enzo hums, pinching his brows together without pausing his path.

Danilo stomps a foot when Hestia and Magus keep him from getting up, and rubs the heel of his hands into his brow bone. His eyes seem to wander as he blinks. Enzo hums again.

“It’s dormant magic.” Reina crosses her arms, moving back to the edge of the room.

Gellert gapes at her, pointing his finger between her and Danilo. They speak to one another in the Ruhari tongue.

“Enzo,” Borak starts, voice quiet, “Easton couldn’t have disguised his own magic if it weren’t.”

Enzo’s steady pattern around the room keeps time. With each beat, Danilo’s thoughts become clearer. One of which fixates on Enzo’s puzzled expression; wondering how many events he’d categorized as uncharacteristic of a ‘sensitivity’. Then comes the fear. A sensitivity had taken him long enough to accept. Dormant magic, he isn’t as willing to consider. He may admit killing those with magic is wrong—they hadn’t chosen it—but having it himself...

“If—” Enzo tilts his face towards Reina before glancing at the rest of the group, still pacing, “there is a possibility of dormant magic, then the sword acts as the flow of energy.”

“If?” Magus releases Danilo’s shoulder, stepping into Enzo’s path. “Enzo, we all know a sensitivity will change colour according to the wielder activating it.”

Enzo hums, waving his hand in dismissal.

“Reina’s source is green.”

Enzo freezes, a hard gaze rolling to Danilo. His timid nervousness congeals behind the resolute expression of bravery, refusing to part with the front unless sundered by the wrath of those he hides from.

“I do not want you near the sword until we have convincing evidence of what is going on.” Enzo waits for a response. “Danilo?”

“Yes, sir.” Danilo jumps.

“Good.”

Enzo nods at Hestia. She grunts, hauling Danilo upright and guiding him on fawn legs. Their absence leaves a palpable silence broken only by Enzo’s pacing. There are few facts which bode ill for all of them: Danilo fell unconscious, from either the sword or himself, and near destroyed a room. None of them want to know the resulting calamity should Danilo use the sword to achieve his wants.

Because what he wants is war.



CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Within the week, Danilo can see Enzo wavering. But between the crew's silent fear of the sword—him—and the new, heavy weight on Danilo's middle finger, he has yet to find an appropriate method of bringing up the Beggar's Stone. Every time he thinks he's figured it out, it's as if Enzo read his thoughts, and pins him with a stare conveying not to try. It makes Danilo want to do it tenfold.

Sand slips into his boots where he sits in front of the headstones, unable to think of anything else other than the argument to be had. Borak has deemed Enzo well enough to travel, and Enzo has decided they will move locations until they can agree upon an end goal.

Danilo twists the Serpent of Decarii and stares between the names engraved on the otherwise perfect face of the stones. Something yawns in the depths of him, threatening to consume the remnants of his sanity with guilt, growing sharp teeth when he stares at the ring. One which should have belonged to another. Yet, it feels like it was destined for his finger. Logically, Danilo knows it is because he's worn a ring there for years and his bare fingers feel naked without the added weight.

Heavy boots drag across the sand, their direction purposeful. They stop at Danilo's side. Grey fabric flicks in his peripheral.

"Time to wrap up?" Danilo asks as he turns his gaze to Enzo, finding the man's attention rapt on the carved name of the glimmering white headstone. He squeezes his fingers together, knuckles turning white beneath Easton's ring.

"I have no intention of rushing you."

Yet Enzo's presence says the opposite.

"It's all right." Danilo stands, knocking sand from his clothing. "How many times can you apologize to the dead?"

Enzo hums, nods, and turns on his heels, his mind distant from the conversation and likely filled with the current move of their supplies. Danilo stares at the stones, his voice raising despite his better judgment.

"Hey, Enzo?" The spray of sand falls silent and Danilo chances glancing behind him. Enzo's eyes portray nothing. "You know I don't hate you, right?"

The corner of Enzo's lip drags upward. "A shared sentiment."

Danilo nods to hide a smile of his own before falling in step at the man's side. As dawn breaches the dune horizon to cast the first rays of day over their world, Danilo reflects on the peace. It is a seldom occurrence, but the longer he lives alongside Enzo, the more he finds himself among them.

Enzo suddenly clutches his shirt and pitches sideways. Danilo braces the older man against his chest. He hauls Enzo towards the hidden stairs, desperate to find Borak. They're halfway down when Enzo's knees buckle and Danilo braces their combined weight against the stone wall.

Borak appears at his side, likely sensing the change in Enzo's magic. He trips on the sheet over the door and tears it down in his panic. Enzo hisses when Borak presses his palm to his chest.

"Help me," Borak says to Danilo, fear caged in his eyes as he wraps an arm around Enzo's waist. Danilo doesn't take his time to argue the obvious. Enzo groans as they lift. Sand blows over the wall onto their heads. Borak shakes it from his hair. "Thought you agreed to tell us when you were in pain."

Danilo moves his hand from Enzo's chest to free Enzo's hair of sand.

"Must have forgotten," Enzo grinds through his teeth, head tilting back with furrowed brows.

Borak's incredulity screams from his scowl.

When they lower Enzo onto his bed, he braces his knees with planted feet, distributing more weight to his chest. Borak places his hand down, white lightning branching off like a spiderweb beneath Enzo's clothes. He tugs on a few buttons before covering the revealed skin. His eyes shoot to Danilo.

“Get out.”

“I can—“

“You can’t. Out.” Borak orders. Danilo glares, bracing himself against the wall in challenge. Borak lurches forward, zapping lightning through him and dislodging his stance. “Out. Now.”

“Go, Danilo.” Enzo lifts his hand in dismissal, cringing through the entire movement.

Danilo pauses in the doorway before leaving and sees the hint of black veins on Enzo’s chest. The door thumps against his back, knocking the breath from his lungs.

Hestia gathers him to her, dragging him from the hall into the main quarters. She’s gone as quickly as she’d appeared. When she returns, she forces a warm mug of green tea into his hands.

“Did you see?” Her hands hover on either side of his. “He didn’t want you to see.”

Danilo nods, shifting the mug in his grasp. Her sigh rattles through the room as she pulls off her furs, tossing them onto the arm of the couch. She gazes at him, unsure what to say in response. After a moment she must realize no words can make this better and instead flops onto the couch across from him.

Danilo stares at his rings. At Easton’s and Enzo’s. And he wonders if he’s cursed to live with loneliness as his only companion.

Though Danilo has little idea how long it takes Borak to finish with his task, it is both forever and not long enough before he settles on the couch beside him. Borak doesn’t look at either of them, his solemn eyes glued to his black leather boots.

“I could tell,” Danilo mutters. “Something wasn’t right.”

Borak nods, clasping his trembling hands together. His brows draw tighter. He stares at Hestia with a blank face and she stares back, sorrow darkening her eyes and sagging her features.

“Why didn’t he say anything?” Danilo asks.

Borak sighs, rubbing his lip before turning to Danilo. “Because Enzo is a stubborn man, but he’s not a selfish one. I would have been buying him time by exhausting myself.”

After years of being blinded by his own hate, Danilo knows the difference between Enzo being obstinate and indifferent.

“How long does he have?”

Hestia and Borak meet eyes. She whines and wraps her arms around herself. "Not long." Borak admits.

Danilo shoves his tongue into his cheek, refraining from harassing the man with more questions. Borak rubs his hands over his knees, staring into the distance and nodding to himself. Borak rubs his hands over his knees. Hestia slumps over herself, half folded into the leather couch. She snuffles before falling into silence. They stay in the uncomfortable silence like that until the others return from transporting supplies.

Heat wafts in with them before Magus shoves the croaking door into place.

"How bad?" Gellert pauses, staring down the hall.

"Not much left for me to help," Borak mutters, leaning his mouth into his palm with a sigh.

Hestia jumps up, eyes wet while headed to Enzo's room. After she leaves, they all repeat the discussion, if in a little more depth. Danilo cannot bring himself to listen enough to hear it. Not until Magus voices the same question Danilo wants to ask.

"There's nothing we can do?" He asks.

Well, maybe not the same question, but close enough.

Borak shrugs.

"Unless we can prove killing the Beseecher will in fact save him, I don't think so," he says softly, meeting Magus' gaze for a second before resuming his blank stare. "And at this rate, even if we could, he won't replenish his magic."

Danilo doesn't know whether that means for good or in order to heal, but he doesn't care. Hearing Borak admit the same theory as Magus is enough for him to solidify his idea. And he will make it work.



Rumours and stories are powerful. Danilo has seen their cataclysm enough in his lifetime. They can make people insane with paranoia or fall apart in hope. Which makes him the same as all the rest because he waits for hours for the right time to try to break the combined strength of Gellert and Reina's magic on the makeshift armoury door.

The rest think he's the last to say his goodbyes and though he can't swallow down the thick smoke of betrayal, he's not sorry for what he's about to do.

Crouched before the blockage glittering over the closet door, he listens to the still movements down the hall; every creak of the couches and floorboards and the sighs that accompany them. With their attention elsewhere, it hadn't taken him long to slip a knife onto his person and away from their sight.

As the ex-lieutenant, and a scout, he is accustomed to finding multiple methods of getting past barriers. Ones even the General didn't know. Danilo leans down, starting where the barrier meets the floor, and runs the knife's edge along the frame. All barriers have a weak spot—a point where the knife dips in and severs the barrier. But the combined power of Gellert's and Reina's magic doesn't give.

He runs the knife back and forth over every inch of the barricade, watching as the magic ripples in the tip's wake. It doesn't give then either. Danilo grits his teeth, clenches the knife, and hopes this last attempt works. When he points the knife at the center, twisting their magic around the blade's tip, Reina's power spiderwebs through Gellert's obstruction. And with another yank on the knife, the green tendrils twist into vines. Gold dances over the door, untouched by Danilo's efforts.

Danilo grins, throwing his shoulder into it. It shatters before him. The sword glows up at him from the floor, dousing the room in a bright light when it comes into contact with Danilo, free of the boundary. It slides into a sheath and settles with an uncharacteristic stillness. As if the weapon can sense the risk of his endeavours.

Enzo lies on the bed, disturbingly peaceful aside from the darkness beneath his eyes and the greyish hue to his skin. Borak forced his body to sleep to save him from the pain. Danilo swallows, crouching beside the bed nearest to the window.

"I'm sorry. I know you asked me not to go near it, but... nobody deserves this." A shout echoes in the hall. "Least of all you."

Danilo tugs his hood up and wiggles out the window. Sand sprays around his feet. And with the Gentled East spread out before him, they stand no chance at stopping him.



CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Danilo has never been a strategist, and at the rate he's going, never will be. Especially if it means pouring over page after page of information to find the smallest hole in ranks to cripple opposing forces like he's seen Enzo do. He is good at one thing; getting in where others can't.

Wrapping the reins of Enzo's dapple mare around his wrist, Danilo pulls her to a halt in the depths of the palm forest next to Audantei's walls. His other hand holds the sword still, keeping it from spearing her in the rump. He dismounts, legs sore and stiff from hard riding through the soft sands. She snorts in complaint.

"Atta girl." Danilo pats her neck, tying the reins up to keep them from catching on the thick brush as he releases her. If he survives, he will find his own way back.

He trudges through the lake's underbrush, climbing over freshly chopped upper halves of the taller palms.

With the day's dying light, the soldiers on the wall sparkle in their armor. Danilo would prefer to wait until nightfall, but Gellert is a man of action as much as he is. Gellert will know he stands a better chance of catching him if he follows right after. With that thought in mind, Danilo finds his footing between the large brick slabs of Audantei's walls.

Memories cascade over him while he climbs—of the General and his demands. His idea of punishment was to ship Danilo to the Black Gate. And occasionally, the Dead Man's Wall where newer recruits sat bored, watching the city beneath them. Where seasoned soldiers occupied their thoughts with eyes locked on the horizon. It was Danilo's reprieve.

True to expectation, the soldier doesn't notice Danilo's presence until his feet met the walkway. He can't turn past the blind zone of his visor before Danilo gathers the soldier's airway into the crook of his elbow. With a sputter, the soldier sags to his knees and Danilo lowers his unconscious weight, and the pommel of the sword cracks against the wall.

Dusk glares off the helmet and pierces Danilo's eyes. He winces before shedding the man of his helmet and readjusts the cloth over the sword.

Orange light casts shadows throughout Audantei's streets, crawling over civilians moving into their homes. The Beseecher's citadel gleams in the distance. By the time he reaches it, night will have fallen. Up on this wall, Danilo feels like he has every other time—he feels free.

Audantei is his domain.

Danilo walks out the Black Gate door with relative ease—aside from one of the gate soldiers asking him where he was headed. After stumbling over his words, he'd shouted back about relieving himself before he did it off the wall. Then made yet another excuse for the lack of armour. It'd been a long time since he had to answer to a soldier of Audantei, and the uniform brought him back to ranks.

Before he scurries onto the rooftops, he cuts the innards of the Black Gate Bell and pockets the weight. If only because he hates that bell.

Running over slate shingles is to risk certain death—to fillet your shins as you fall. Sheared shins are considered a lucky injury for those few who scale the rooftops, if their face and palms stay off the slate. Enzo had slipped into Audantei for many reasons—dark cloak blending into the dark roof even with the white moonlight—often unseen. Danilo knew Enzo preferred to take his time and use his magic to stabilize himself. But after losing him once during a brutal pursuit, Danilo had taken to Audantei's rooftops.

The first time, Danilo slid—and has a gaping scar down his shin to prove it. He trained on the slate rooftops until the blood on his knuckles and palms ran together, making it impossible to keep his hold firm. Until he could promise the Royal Beseecher that if Audantei lost their mark, it wasn't from his efforts.

His surefire footing on the slate now is as effortless as it is shocking. And Danilo knows it, having seen Stormthrowers slip over the clay tiles and wood shingles, wet from cloudbursts or not, and fall from the untamed slate. He reaches the citadel in a record time.

The Beseecher's building is impregnable to forced entry or raids. However, all the sharp angles and gold inlaid banisters make scaling it less of a chore. There weren't assassins when it was first built. Or by the least, not ones who climbed the exterior of a building to get to their mark.

It's a slow process. Slower when Danilo has to search in shadows that the moonlight casts for a hold. Slower than he would like with the soldiers marching beneath. All it would take is one wrong move and one loud noise.

Despite the balcony of the Beseecher's quarters sitting fifteen feet above him, he can't find the energy to drag himself further. His shoulders quake and sweaty fingers cause him to fumble. He picks a perch and stills.

The perch is poor. It juts from the citadel with little space for Danilo to let his legs dangle, never mind turn around. His back arches where he presses his chest to the building. He focuses on breathing and wiping his hands free of sweat with slow, cautious motions. The ground is a distant memory from this height. He appreciates Enzo's grey cloak, allowing him a reprieve without risking the soldiers' eyes. Dim light and the changing shadows engulf Danilo's cloak—Enzo's cloak. Thinking of Enzo rekindles his urgency.

Bracing himself on the underside of the balcony, he listens inside the private quarters. Upon not hearing a sound, he leaps onto the balcony. Beseecher Guerra had never left his quarters. But the General, in his paranoia, would oversee the men. Danilo clammers over the banister, holding the tip of the sheath to keep it from bouncing off the stone while crouched.

The hearth crackles, embers succumbing to a dark abyss. He scans the room before rounding the posts of the balcony and moving into the grand room. Chains weave in the shadows at the other side of the quarters. Danilo shudders. While studying the vaulted ceiling of the Beseecher's quarters, the door creaks open. His heart leaps into his throat and he scrambles into the rafters, hyper-aware of every scrape he makes.

"I don't care." Beseecher Altamura swings around, fisting the top of the soldier's breastplate. "You get the adviser and drag him here on his knees."

The soldier nods, trying to back out of his grasp. Llodis doesn't release until the soldier stutters out, "Yes sir." Danilo winces in sympathy as the new

Beseecher towers over the young man. His back presses into the dark shadows cast by the firelight. The soldier stumbles back and reaches for the door before daring to voice his question.

“What of the lieutenant, sir?”

Llodi halts halfway to his desk, glaring over his shoulder. “What of him?”

“Your plan, sir?”

The Beseecher stares. Then a dark chuckle breaks through him.

“He is coming to me,” Llodi says. While the soldier looks unsure and prepared to argue, he knows better. He tips his head and opens the door. “Take my guards with you.”

“Sir?”

“They’re an insult to me. I can defend myself.” The soldier hesitates, staring at the Beseecher as if he only now realizes he’s crazed. “Out.”

He scuttles from the room, chain mail bouncing off his leather pauld. Danilo wishes he were anywhere but here, dangling above the source of most of his nightmares. He refrains from grabbing the sword. The sword activated by his blood.

The one he brought right back to the one place he shouldn’t have.

“I know you’re here.” Beseecher Altamura steps up to the desk, retrieving his helmet and staring into the eye slits. He fits the helmet over his head. “I haven’t lived this long to be assassinated by the likes of you.”

His eyes skip past Danilo as he searches the ceiling of the private quarters, all the alcoves and royal details disguising his shadow. Danilo’s heart throbs in his throat as fear sets in.

He’s never beaten the General. And the fact hangs over him. One wrong move, one wrong sound, and he will be gone.

The General turns to assess the other side of the high vaulted ceiling and Danilo launches from his lookout. Llodi tosses Danilo aside. As Danilo crashes against the desk, he sends its contents scattering. Danilo rolls with the backward motion, keeping on his feet. The General always got him once his feet were out from under him.

Danilo swallows, eyes tracking the Beseecher’s movement beneath his hood. He tosses the knife at the man’s open throat. Llodi dodges and the knife connects with his shoulder before rolling over the armour and clattering to the ground. The Beseecher squints at him beneath his blood red helmet.

He advances with a growl, shoulders low and aimed at Danilo's middle. Danilo uses his momentum to throw him over a shoulder. He retreats from the Beseecher's circle of reach. Chains rattle beneath the man's feet, causing Danilo to shudder. The Beseecher squints again. His eyes fall beneath the hood, skimming Danilo's nose to the scar glimmering on display.

"I should've known it was you."

There's an advantage to knowing the enemy. A known enemy is predictable.

Rolling under the General is where Danilo has the advantage. He's nimbler than the man. So, Danilo gathers the knife, runs, and stabs Llodis in the inner thigh, missing that artery by a hair. He roars and swings at Danilo, cutting the back of his cloak.

Llodis rips a halberd off the wall, jabbing it towards Danilo. The destruction in the weapon's path reflects his wrath. Danilo somersaults as the axe head ricochets off the split in the floor caused by Danilo's time with Kosymo. Gold veining glitters free as the blade's edge cracks.

Llodis knows, as much as Danilo, that a damaged blade can still kill. He thrusts the polearm towards him and it bounces off the stone wall with a final shatter. The General throws it aside, pulling the knife from his leg and drawing his sword.

Danilo's mouth goes dry as the weapon gleams at him. He touches his tongue to his lip.

And armed with nothing but a knife and his potential demise, he stares at the advancing Beseecher, a sword in his meaty hand. Desperation clutches his chest as he backs away.

"Why'd you do it?" Danilo straightens, looking the General in the eye. "Why'd you raise a soldier?"

"Because I thought the only man I could trust was the one I made myself." The General clenches his sword tighter, lining up the swing. "Turns out those are the most untrustworthy."

Danilo dives to the side, rolls on his knees, and pops the latch on the hilt of the sword. It sings through the room as he unleashes it. The Beseecher's grin sparkles.

"Had my own forged." He turns the pommel of his sword, showcasing the Beggar's Stone in the handle. "Let us see who got the better."

Thoughts fly through Danilo's head as he dodges blows and swings, deflecting them with the sword. Blue runes glow brightly throughout the room.

All Danilo can see is the black, glistening stone with every swing the Beseecher makes. The General pins Danilo against the wall, their swords locked together as the blades cry.

“Unlike last time, I will uproot their faith in you.” Llodis presses his hand to his own blade, using both arms to lock Danilo and his sword in. Danilo’s blade inches closer to his neck. “I’ll promote you and drug you and nobody will be the wiser.”

Danilo pants and pushes against the General, then drops. Llodis collapses against the wall, his sword bouncing off the stone. Danilo slices at the back of the man’s thigh as he leaps up from beneath him. Llodis hollers, first in pain, then in rage.

Ignoring the churn in his gut, Danilo dances around the Beseecher’s aggressive swings. He remains out of his reach, only parrying when he has to. Enzo said his sensitivity affects his defensive stamina—he’s using it.

A strike connects with his abdomen. Low and left, hard and rushed. It knocks his breath from him. Instinctively, Danilo wants to touch it. He keeps his hands on the sword.

Danilo rushes and Llodis ducks his shoulder to Danilo’s aching middle and buries them into the nearest wall. Something cracks as Danilo falls to the ground, and he releases a few shaky breaths.

Pain flares across the side of his head before vanishing and Danilo brings the sword to where it had been. Llodis stomps his foot through the blade. Blood drips from the wound across Danilo’s forehead and he leaps up, wrenching the sword up with him. He dumps the Beseecher on his back. Danilo tears the sword free. Blue runes gleam through the scarlet stain.

He stares at the blade in cold wonder when the Beseecher clammers to his feet, skating over his blood.

Searing heat slices Danilo’s stomach and he leaps from Llodis’ sword, driving his own to the inside of the General’s arm. The sword edge glows blue where it cuts through the heavy armor. A wine hue dyes Llodis’ red armour with its shine. He cries, slashing the stained knife at Danilo’s throat. Danilo pulls the sword up the General’s middle, forcing him back.

“You’re a damned traitor.” Spit flies from his lips.

Danilo pants, tightening his grip on his sword. “I’m okay with that.”

A stool connects with Danilo’s chest before the General flies at him. The swords lock together. Black veins crack through the floor from the force of their

connection, Llodis willing his weapon to match that of Danilo's. A blue glow cast across their chests, the post and banisters above. And, for the first time, Danilo sees fear swimming in the General's icy eyes.

Danilo shoves, and his sword draws near the General's chest. He stumbles back, palm streaking the oozing slash across his armour. Spit flies from Llodis' mouth as he roars, gripping his sword with renewed fervour. Black veins crawl up his arms, consuming his neck and face. His eyes blacken. As one would expect of the possessed.

With double the strength, Llodis renews his attack. Each strike extinguishes the blue flame, a molten heat rising from the cracks in its place.

Danilo's sword tugs on his consciousness—just as it felt when Gellert did it. He wants to fight it, wants to keep his eyes on the enemy, wants to be in control. Blackness encompasses his vision.

It feels like a blink in time, but when he looks upon the room, the General heaves desperately and his blade lays snapped in half, dark steel contrasting against the marble floor. The support beams groan, leaning inward as their middles bend to a force still pressing on them. Smoke rises from the cracks in the floor. As the General looks upon him through his broken helmet, fear stains his glacier eyes. Danilo knows it's the only opening he has.

"What are you?" Llodis stutters, eyes watering as he fights for breath.

Danilo pants, leveling the sword with Llodis' sour gaze. His arms shake as he stares down the ridge. The General's eyes taunt him as the seconds pass. Danilo can only stare.

"You don't have it in you." Llodis laughs. "Pathetic."

A fast and sharp pain shoots up Danilo's spine and he twists to the side. With a yell, the General lifts the broken sword, pulls it above his head, and chokes. On a mouthful of blood.

Danilo wipes his face, hand coming away with the spatter caused by the broken polearm thrust through the General's middle. Llodis collapses to his knees, grasping the weapon. His mouth opens and closes like a fish. Red tendrils consume the whites of Llodis' eyes, swirling and pooling, scarlet rivers amid the bloodshot corners. Danilo snaps his attention to the balcony.

A woman stares at the scene with dead eyes, arm outstretched and red magic moving between her fingers. She watches the Beseecher gape and gasp for air from her half-straddled position over the banister. The moonlight ghoul's appearance.

“If I can’t have you in life—“ her chin tilts up, “I’ll have you in death.”

Llodus gurgles a final breath then slumps onto the polearm, flopping to the ground.

She smiles and Danilo recoils.

Her dark eyes turn on him and his sensitivity shudders. Trembles. The red paint across her ghost white skin is akin to blood in the snow. Her crimson-brown eyes cut through him. Even the black of her tight clothing exudes an air of horror. Her magic continues to dance around her fingers.

Danilo feels the ghost of metal strike against his ankle and he steps down before the General’s sword can fly to her hand. The Beggar’s Stone shakes, vermilion smoke wrapping around it. Before Danilo can think, he drives his sword into it. The Stone shatters in a flash of blue.

She screams, clutching her chest in pain, and falls from the banister. Danilo rushes into the darkness and peers down. Nothing lay beneath but smoke rising into the air. A contaminating and bitter taste settles on his tongue. He leans further over the banister to peer at the wall and hisses. His hand glazes over his lower middle, coming away red. Swallowing around his fear, he sheathes the sword and looks back at the Beseecher’s quarters.

Tapestries and weapons from the wall lay scattered beneath the rubble of broken beams and furnishings. Among it all lays a heap of a man Danilo cannot bring himself to feel sorry for.

Danilo saddles the banister, clutching his middle, and allows his head to tilt back at the sky. The starlight glistens overhead in an array of patterns and colors, shining with a light which could combat the moon. It’s silent.

And as he clammers down the building, he finds he doesn’t mind if this is how it ends; laying in the desert looking up at the stars.

At least he will find peace before his death.



CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

There's blood down the side of the Beseecher's citadel, of that Danilo is certain. His fingers tremble distantly as he wanders toward the Black Gate, his muddled mind guided by the obnoxious clang of a sword battering the inside of the Black Gate bell. Danilo wonders if it's the torn clothing or the blood stain traveling across his front which gives him away to them.

He staggers, crimson skipping across the dirt below him. His shirt squelches in his palm as he presses the wound.

Soldiers yell as they pour from the Gate wall, swords drawn and at the ready. Danilo frees his own, skittering the blade's tip against the ground. The path cracks. They grind to a halt, watching sand fall into the crevice. There are no friends among them—they shove one another closer for their own self-interest.

Danilo's breath flutters, but he clenches the sword, pulling it before him so the blue runes reflect off their armour.

Blood loss muddies his thoughts, but his one repeating command cuts through the air. "Step aside for your General."

Danilo accepts they won't. Will accept that he'll die as he lived: fighting.

He blinks and finds himself in the middle of the desert, his head spinning. The sword falls from his grasp, blue runes swallowed by the sand as he falls to his knees beside it. Starlight twinkles overhead and he tips his head back, the

moonlight casting over his face. His breath flutters and he falls back, groaning, and clutches at the left of his abdomen.

Blood seeps through his fingers and he lifts a hand atop the other, his foggy mind believing they will contain it. He stares up at the night sky, exhaustion falling over his limbs. It's lingered in him since he shattered the Beggar's Stone.

He hopes it worked. Hopes after all the ill he's done to Enzo's life, that he has made right what he made wrong. As he sags deeper into the sand with a cough, he tries to dislodge the feeling of failure. He doesn't want to take it with him as he goes.

Because he's certain he will meet his father in whatever hell awaits them.

A deep voice shouts his name, distant and quiet over the sand. The chilly breeze wracks his numb limbs. Sand blows up onto his cheeks. He cannot find the energy to swipe it away; unaware his hands have fallen from the wound. His eyes fall shut from the sheer whiteness of light above him.

A thud ricochets inside his skull, the sand beneath his cheek sliding as an additional weight displaces him in the dunes. He groans. Then again, when someone pushes on his injury, shaking him from peace.

"Look at me, kid—hey." Gellert scoops beneath Danilo's head as he blinks up, eyes unfocussed. "Hes, I need your help."

Danilo grins and, judging from the swirling emotions on Gellert's scrunched face, can gather that it's not a comforting smile. Before he can mutter his colliding, swampy thoughts, Gellert vanishes from his side. Ringing fills his ears and his vision goes black.

When he wakes, it's to the sensation of being dropped. He coughs and his stomach throbs. His eyes drift until a warm palm settles on his face and pushes his hair from his eyes. The moonlight is gone. Along with the starlight. He doesn't remember the sky ever being so brown.

A sound echoes at his side and he flits his gaze over, finding grey eyes and worry lines.

"Beat." Danilo's lungs spasm from the force of trying to talk.

It hurts to talk. And breathe. And even though Enzo shushes him, tapping his cheek, and everything short of covering his mouth, he's started and won't stop sputtering nonsense.

"He didn't know..." Danilo furrows his brows at Enzo, trying to lift his hand. It tingles, still on the bed as if disconnected from his body.

‘He didn’t know I did it for you’, is what he’s trying to say. Try as he might, the words cannot escape his chest.

“Danilo, stop.”

His eyes flutter. There’s so much more to be said. Danilo groans out a sound he hopes is close to Enzo’s name before his eyes fall shut.



Danilo stares at the ceiling with cloudy vision, blue light filtering in through the window. His fingers prickle as he wiggles them. He attempts to drag himself up, and the blankets fall to the floor, a cry in the quiet room.

“Don’t sit.” Enzo crowds him, placing a heavy hand on Danilo’s chest.

Danilo furrows his brows, rolling his tongue until he chokes on the movement. There are words he wants. A thought floats beyond his reach as he stares up at the ever-present scowl on Enzo’s face. He manages a quiet groan. Weak, like his uncooperative limbs.

A thumb from the hand on his chest smooths over his bare collarbone. It’s paired with a soothing noise, and their combined effect pulls him into the dark embrace of sleep. When the hand rises from Danilo’s chest, he scrambles—sloppy and uncoordinated. More the motion of a dying man than a waking one. He clings to the sleeve of Enzo’s grey tunic as he’s lowered down.

“Enz—“ A shush silences him, as does the gentle stroke of a warm palm against his shoulder. He swallows, opening his mouth to try again.

“You are...” Enzo sighs. “You will be fine.”

Danilo coughs and gives a weak sigh when it subsides. The watery gaze of Enzo Sapienti is a trick of the moonlight and half-dead vision. Regardless, guilt coils around Danilo’s heart and he paws the air until his hand falls into Enzo’s. He squeezes weakly.

When Danilo’s fingers slide, Enzo raises a free hand to Danilo’s shoulder. Enzo uses a thumb to tilt Danilo’s sagging head up, needing no additional strength to force Danilo’s gaze to his own. Glazed eyes sparkle in the light, unseeing and heavy, hooded with the weight of obvious exhaustion. Danilo scrunches his brows together and blinks, struggling against his needs stubbornly. It causes Enzo’s mouth to tick in light humour.

Enzo catches Danilo's hand before it falls across his middle and places it on his bed, the movement jarring Danilo from his reverie. He looks at Enzo with coherent, yet still distant, eyes.

"Hi." A wobbly grin curls across his face, one side pulled further than the other, bunching his cheeks with an unrivaled purity.

Enzo chuckles, humming as the sound shakes his chest oddly. His palm settles over Danilo's eyes.

"Sleep."



A sudden gasp tears through Danilo's chest when he lurches from the bed. Searing heat drags across his middle and he howls in agony.

"Are you attempting to put yourself in an early grave?" Enzo grabs his shoulders, hauling him back down to the bed despite how Danilo jumps beneath his palms. "I would believe it, after you were found covered in blood in the middle of the desert."

Danilo heaves out a breath, staring at his once-nemesis, and finds relief makes its home in his lungs.

"Enzo."

Enzo quirks a brow at him, placing a warm hand to his face.

"That is, by far, the clearest you have sounded." Danilo can feel Enzo's magic tickling him.

"It's back?" He asks.

Enzo hums, brows furrowing as if unsure how to continue. He humors Danilo.

"Pray tell, what is back?"

"Your magic." Danilo lifts a hand, gesturing to the hand on his face.

"Cannot leave me in its entirety." His eyes meet Danilo's. "Though I will never be the same."

"So, it was all for nothing." Danilo scowls.

"Well," Enzo says, "I was going to say 'thank you'. However, I am glad to know beforehand that my life is 'nothing'."

Danilo chokes, scrambling to sit as Enzo turns away. He grabs Enzo's sleeve, swallowing his pain. His grasp shifts to clutch Enzo's arm, unable to meet the man's eyes.

"It was for you." He admits.

Enzo pushes Danilo back down, recoiling when Danilo hisses.

"What is wrong?"

"Nothing." Danilo pulls in a breath, wincing. "Nothing's wrong."

"Your expression says otherwise." Enzo's palm glows. "What hurts?"

"The gaping wound that tore through my abdomen." He says sarcastically.

With a hum, Enzo presses the heel of his palm to the injury, stitches knitting the skin beneath the fresh shirt and bandages. His foamy magic seeps beneath the additional layers, melting across Danilo's skin with an unusual heat. He gasps on reflex, twitching away from the cautious press of Enzo's splayed fingers when they dance around the outside of the mending flesh.

Danilo sags into the pillow when a rush of cold numbness seeps into his blood, carrying the pain away with it. Enzo lifts his hands away in the same moment a shout of warning barrels down the hall. They wait for the intruder to press through the door, but they were left to their comfortable solitude.

Enzo sighs quietly before placing a hand on Danilo's foot and saying his name. Danilo meets Enzo's steely gaze.

"Do not do that again."

The man turns away and the corner of Danilo's lips quirk into a light-hearted smirk. "I don't plan on it."

"No." Enzo swings around, pushing on Danilo's shoulder and forcing him to understand. His eyes are hard. Determined. Angry. Danilo knows he should have expected it. "Never again."

"Never again." Danilo parrots, eyes bouncing between Enzo's.

Enzo nods, satisfied. Then he moves about the room, continuing his earlier task.

Without his relief muddled by exhaustion or blood loss, Danilo can examine Enzo. The tense lines surrounding Enzo's eyes have relaxed, and, though Enzo could do with a smile or two more than Danilo's ever seen, he's returned to the state that Danilo knows him best.

When Danilo sits up the third time, he props himself up and watches Enzo's hands shift through his work station.

"I apologize for the intensity with which I make demands." Enzo opens a book, searching for a page with his finger and following the words downward. He speaks over his shoulder. "Never do I want for you to be bleeding and unconscious without the promise of aid."

It's a fancy way of saying, 'I was worried'. Both Danilo and Enzo know it. "Didn't want to put you through that."

"That is not the point." Enzo glares, moving closer. "You were nearly lost."

And doesn't that strike Danilo to his core—he has someone who thinks he is something worth losing.

"I'm not going anywhere." Enzo nods and Danilo swings his legs over the side of the bed. "I just... I didn't want to lose you either."

They stare at one another, contemplating their next move. Enzo surges forward, fists the fabric of Danilo's shoulder with vigour, and draws Danilo into his chest. And Danilo, almost humorously, sits there without taking a breath. His shock is apparent on his unmoving face. Enzo draws back and Danilo shakes himself from his stupor to cling to Enzo's tunic—grey. Danilo smiles into Enzo's fabric, pulling Enzo deeper into the embrace. Even then, it's tense. But less tense. Which, in the grand scheme of things, makes it the best hug Danilo's ever gotten. And he wouldn't trade it for any other, despite what his guilt says.

Danilo is the first to pull back, unsure of Enzo's limits. But he can't say he wants to. Enzo sidesteps, moving away from the bed. He places the sword atop the blankets beside Danilo's lap.

"It is yours now." Enzo judges Danilo's stare. "You are the guardian. The power of an Artifact in an unknown sword."

"That's not what I wanted." Danilo sighs, fisting the blankets.

Enzo flicks his gaze over Danilo, then the sword. "I know."

Danilo spins the rings on his finger, staring down at Easton's and Enzo's where they shine on either hand.

"Can I toss it into the ocean?" He grins, his charismatic smile lopsided.

"No." The corner of Enzo's mouth ticks upward. "You cannot."

Danilo sighs, hand tracing the runes on the blade. They turn blue beneath his touch. 'The Unknown Sword'. He finds he doesn't mind the name.

"What do they say?"

Enzo quirks a brow and Danilo points to the runes. "Kelibe."

"Son?"

Enzo shrugs. "I would gather it to mean 'jewel', but 'son' is another translation. Regardless of its meaning, its tie to you changes your need to train with another. Should you choose to ignore your sensitivity."

"If that's even what I have," Danilo huffs.

Enzo hums.

"You have yet to find out." He lifts the sword, placing it back on the table and staring at it with animosity. Danilo shifts on the bed, glancing at the floor to decide whether he wants to chance it. Enzo speaks without turning around. "I alleviated your pain. But if it means you will remain in bed until you have healed, I will gladly return it."

A cheeky grin worms onto Danilo's face when Enzo turns and smacks the bottom of Danilo's bare foot, encouraging him to climb back up. After bickering over the heat and the blankets—though it is a thin sheet and Giffak Place stays relatively cool—Enzo agrees to allow Danilo to lie atop it.

"Enzo?" The man raises his brow. "If I choose to keep training with you?"

With a hum Danilo is certain is meant to entertain him rather than agree, Enzo grabs his book and moves to the chair at Danilo's bedside.

"We would need to have an entirely different discussion."

"I have time." Danilo grins up at Enzo's playful scowl. Enzo rolls his eyes.

"You are incorrigible."

"I'll take it as a compliment."

"You would." He sits. "Very well, we will talk."

Danilo grins.

"After you rest. I will not," Enzo says, tilting his head, raising his brow, and folding his arms over his chest, "be dragging you off the floor because you forwent the rest your body needs."

Danilo huffs a laugh, grimacing when he twists his injury. With that, Enzo pushes Danilo down. He lifts a brow when Danilo opens his mouth to argue. Enzo settles deep into the chair and flips open to his latest page, ignoring Danilo's fidgeting.

"Hey, Enzo?" Enzo drops the book to his lap, sighing at Danilo. "You're all right?"

The greying edges of Enzo's temples, and the peppercorn color of his beard, are as familiar as sea striking earth. He pretends to ponder Danilo's question, but the lift of his brow gives him away.

“Yes, Danilo.” His eyes soften. “Thanks to you, I am, and will continue to be, quite ‘all right’.”

Danilo releases a breath, smiles, and allows the silence to fill the air. He lasts another dozen minutes before he tries to sit. Danilo’s neck doesn’t leave the pillow before Enzo pushes him back down and does the one thing he never expected the man to do. He reads aloud. And as Danilo listens, and his eyes grow heavy, he can’t help but think back to a similar moment where the sun warmed the air instead of trust.



EPILOGUE

After all this time, Danilo believes the reason he never understood ‘from man to monster’ is because he was equal parts monster and man. It had taken him slaying the beast’s more putrefied thoughts before the true meaning settled in his lungs: greed.

He can confirm its death by simply looking at Enzo; his malicious desires no longer hide in the vast crevices within his lungs. In their place sits humility, and as Danilo spins his rings, he finds there is a lot to be humbled by.

With Audantei Beseecherless for the time being, the Nephla’s chosen have been divided over the continent. Reina and Magus have moved to the Ruhari region of the Dead West to aid in the uprising of a new order. A blustering endeavour in one of the major trade centers. Hestia returns to the Frozen South to face the chieftain in his conceited claims; her goodbye had been tearful. Gellert is to meet her when he’s done his current task, which Danilo has yet to be told. And Borak is to remain in Audantei to oversee the reconstruction of the political hierarchy.

Enzo had asked Danilo questions about ranks and Audanteian methods for Borak’s benefit. Most of which he knew since Nalcun Barmithol’s return to the citadel, Audantei accepting him as Regent. And seeing as Magus had made a friend of the man, there was a brief window before Enzo sent him to use his

wiles and charms to introduce Borak. It wasn't needed. Nalcun waited for them with kind greetings.

Danilo has hope for the Gentled East.

None of them had expected Danilo to uphold his position or take the mantle of Beseecher. He had been relieved of that duty, settling the debt he owed them with his most recent sacrifice. Though Enzo had told him he had no sins to absolve in the eyes of the Nephla's chosen, Danilo had every intention of rewriting his mark over the Stormthrower nation.

Curiously, Danilo had not been told what Enzo's plans are now that his party has been divided. He straightens from the pages of information he pours over, rolling his neck to peer at Enzo over his shoulder. Enzo watches him. A whirlwind of combative emotions and thoughts surge in the depths of Enzo's stoic focus. He vocalizes them when Danilo spins around to face him fully, tilting his head in question.

"I wish you refrained from killing him." The old Stormthrower says.

"The General?"

"Llodos Altamura, yes." Enzo leans against his own table.

Danilo shrugs off the correction, turning back to his paper. "I didn't."

"Pardon?"

Danilo waves his hand in dismissal and Enzo paces forward to stand by his side.

"Were you not the one to save my life?"

"I would like to think I was." Danilo glances up, eyes nervous. "I broke the Stone."

Enzo's eyes flare, a light hue of shock glazing his expression. "I demand an order of events."

Danilo sighs and gives his report, shoulders stiffening as they had when he'd been a soldier. Enzo places his hand there, squeezing to relieve Danilo's tension.

"Anyway." Danilo knocks Enzo's hand away. "I destroyed the Beggar's Stone with the sword." He gestures to where it leans against the wall behind him, a blue glow raising from the hilt where it sits within the sheath. Enzo's eyes flicker in realization, turning back to Danilo. "Then some woman with red paint and this wrongness killed him. Kinda deathly looking broa—"

Enzo's hands fly up, cupping either side of Danilo's head. He stares into Danilo's eyes, waiting for permission. The sensation of Enzo entering his mind is as invasive and uncomfortable as it'd been months ago.

Danilo swallows at Enzo's tense expression, unwilling to break the silence.

"Mara." Enzo says.

When Danilo opens his mouth to ask, no sound leaves. Enzo's hands tighten on either side of his face.

"You had seen Mara." Each word is slow and icy as it leaves Enzo's mouth.

"Who's Mara?"

Enzo's brows furrow before his grip snaps away, and he starts pacing the room. The silence knocks against Danilo's unsteady heart. He sits on the table, wincing as it aggravates his wound, and watches Enzo while rubbing his knuckles.

"Mara is a child of the THIRD," Enzo finally answers, scratching his beard. "We have hunted her since the dawn of time. According to legend and myth, she is meant to release him."

Danilo nods, not knowing the realities of what is being said. After his brief explanation, Enzo continues to pace, and pace. And pace. When Danilo clambers off the table, he goes back to his previous task of marking his map. He jumps when Enzo speaks again.

"I have been called upon by those in the Dead West to take up residence in place of the late Jiffane Carielle. The man had been hunting an order commonly called the Medumara." Enzo pauses, looking at Danilo. "As I understand, we agreed your training is unfinished."

Danilo nods.

"If you have no prior commitments, I am willing to continue our agreement under a new title. Rules and other such necessities would be decided upon at a later time."

It's a mouthful of fanciful words meaning 'come with me'. Danilo swallows down a smirk.

"The title?" Danilo asks.

Enzo lifts his chin.

"You are aware of the Nephla as the First?" Danilo nods. "I have been appointed her Second and have such been told, on many occasions, to acquire a Second of my own. Taking the responsibilities of the House of Carielle will negate my leniency to name one."

"You will need a Third?" Danilo straightens, and Enzo scowls.

"We refrain from referring to it as Third. Rather, the Second's Second."

Danilo smiles, a cheeky and conniving expression that has Enzo sneering.

"I would rather think you are not—"

"Too late, I accept."

"You will be an absolute pest to have about." Enzo sighs, rolling his eyes and resuming his pacing.

"You prefer it that way."

Enzo hums, glancing at Danilo from the corner of his eye. "The title will not be official until you are of age and no longer in need of a charge."

"I was of age like four months ago," Danilo says with a shrug, pulling a red line throughout his map.

Enzo stops pacing, and Danilo realizes the severity of his words.

"Do you mean to tell me you were no longer my charge when you conveniently decided to use it against me?"

Danilo's grin stretches both in fear and in cunning, and it is in that moment Enzo sees the brilliance of the Lieutenant Commander and a child at once. The look his crew had claimed to notice. Occasion after occasion.

Enzo pinches the bridge of his nose with a sigh.



Sohn Giffak Place is cursed—of that the Stormthrower community is certain.

Most of them refuse to use the building unless in dire need, and all of them hold one another like death is looming at the door. Because it has. And it does. And it will.

Though it has nothing to do with a curse.

Regardless, Giffak Place grew brighter after the younger Altamura shattered the piece condemning the souls of the Gentled East. Sohn Giffak's griefs and mournings clinging to that shard of the ancient relic long after his death; burdening the remains of Giffak's life until its destruction. Including, and not limited to, the rotten hideaway in the depths of the desert. And though the earth was freed of that particular evil, there still remains a great many to be lifted from humanity.

The souls charged with such a task gather their few belongings and mount their horses for the long trek ahead, talking and laughing amongst themselves. A young boy with shining blond hair and a weathered face grins at a gruff old fellow, whose face consists of frown lines. Though he's more man than boy now.

And as they leave, four white headstones shine in the sand with three matching names and one familiar only in heart. Together they glimmer their final goodbyes on the eastern world, watching the Chosen disappear into the early horizon eager to begin another adventure.

A PREVIEW OF BOOK 2: HELMET OF NITHAR

CHAPTER ONE

Danilo leans forward in the saddle, its leather straps groaning in protest, and thinks perhaps the fall would be enough to kill him. But nothing's been that successful so far.

Is it a byproduct of his sins? Maybe. They mar him in stains—announcing to any passerby with a modicum of attentiveness that he was a thing to destroy. Many have tried. And many have failed. Logically, Danilo knows these sins serve a purpose. Both in life and in battle. But he's only learned to live with one.

Danilo pulls his beastly black horse to a halt as he gazes across the overgrown gully. A rickety bridge sways in the faint, humid breeze, jolting beneath the weight of a landing macaw. Mist rises into the air off the waterfall below.

The likelihood of the Stormthrowers Danilo tracks being across the rapids are definite. Despite them having the capabilities of manipulating the world to their favour, not many think to obscure their trail. Unfortunately, the leader of the group he hunts, knows of people with his skills. It makes his task harder, but not impossible.

His mare snorts in worry as he taps her into motion.

“Steady, Fantasy.” Danilo eyes the drop, settling deep in the saddle.

The bridge bends and sways over the rushing rivers beneath them, but the wood holds. He pats Fantasy's neck when they climb to the other side without her so much as tossing her head in disagreement.

Danilo steers Fantasy into the thick foliage, to follow the trail of bright new shoots pointing up from the ground amid the haphazardly chopped heavy leaves

in the dense brush of the Untamed North's jungle. The overgrowth curtains the brazen path, hiding it from the untrained eye. Danilo ducks low to avoid the hanging vines, straining to hear the chatter of camp or the missteps of a patrol. Nothing disturbs the silence aside from the cooing wildlife and the eager push of the muggy breeze.

Danilo guides Fantasy around the messy remains of an old structure, coming to a sharp halt. She snorts and stomps in surprise. Danilo lurches from the saddle, bracing on her neck. The man in their path reaches for the reins. His eyes land on Danilo. He stiffens beneath his sagging black leather armor—the moisture and heavy rains weighing on the material.

“Who are you?” The man's piercing yellow eyes glow, narrowly flicking between Danilo's face and the weapon strapped to his back. His lip curls to reveal a piercing canine.

“I've been sent to provide information and aid by Enzo Sapienti.” Danilo says.

“A messenger,” the man scoffs, grappling the sword at his waist. “Yeah, right.”

He pulls the weapon out partially. It cries when it catches the sheathe—likely chipping its edge. Danilo refrains from reaching for Kelibe where it hums against his spine.

“Enzo Sapienti isn't a man to send messengers.” The guard smirks arrogantly.

A horrific red glow cracks beneath the skin stretched over the man's knuckles, alive and pulsing in time with his breath—a bright and harsh colour in the overpowering green of the surrounding scenery.

“You know of Enzo Sapienti?” Danilo asks, grip flexing around the reins. He's not searching for an answer. Not truly. The arrogance of this young man would have made him memorable through Enzo's bitter complaints.

The man coughs out a laugh and fully frees the sword of its cage. “Well enough to know he doesn't send anyone in his stead.”

A third voice dumps frozen water on the smoldering embers of Danilo's temper. “Then you best believe he won't forgive you for killing him.”

Danilo glances back from atop his horse.

This man is familiar to Danilo in every sense. Jet black hair shines atop his head, short, straight, and trained to grow backward from the fingers stressfully digging through it. The wrinkles around the outside of his slanted blue eyes are

the sole indicator that he aged. He looks just as he did to Danilo when they met outside of Audantei six years ago.

“Hey Borak.” Danilo smiles.

“Hi Danilo.” Borak grins up at him, his eyes aglow with fondness.

The man standing guard looks at Borak, tossing his chin towards Danilo. “You know him?”

“I do.” Borak’s expression hardens. He gestures at the sword. “Best put that away before I send word to Enzo telling him you attacked the important one.”

“The important one?” The guard asks, just before Danilo can.

“You’re not getting an answer.” Borak grabs the reins of Danilo’s horse. “Now go.”

The young guard sneers at them both and storms off into the brush, slapping large leaves away from him with the backside of his hand. Gathered moisture dribbles to the jungle floor.

“His mouth or yours?” Danilo asks.

Borak grins at Danilo. “You’re not getting an answer either.”

Too bad, Danilo thinks, intrigued by what those words meant from Enzo’s mouth. He dismounts.

Between the years, Danilo grew a few inches taller. When they embrace, Danilo could easily tuck his chin on Borak’s head. But he doesn’t, content with the peace colouring this greeting. With a pat to Danilo’s shoulder, Borak dips under Danilo’s mare and begins into the camp hidden in the jungle. Danilo’s knees groan when he pulls Fantasy along after him, knees twinging from the prolonged time spent atop her.

Danilo follows Borak until the brush opens to a cleared encampment. Pitched huts scatter through the area. A temporary set-up for the bustling crew. Borak passes off Danilo’s horse, then he turns, hands out and smile genuine.

“Now let’s get a look at this man you’re posing as these days.” Borak’s palms hover near Danilo’s elbows, eyes following the beard and the shoulder-length blond hair. The mischief in Borak’s grin is reminiscent of Magus—Borak’s closest friend, and the most chaotic and charismatic fire-wielder Danilo’s met. He settles his hands on his hips. “What’s it been? Three years?”

“Three since Judacaa,” Danilo nods.

They don’t mention their meeting in Tuilni, which occurred eight months after the events in Audantei. Danilo had been a spooked animal then—prepared to strike at anyone and everything. On edge waiting for the worst. Neither

Danilo or Enzo knew what brought it on. And while Danilo wanted to enjoy seeing Borak then, he couldn't. He has a better grasp on his paranoia now, and Danilo intends to make the most of his time with Borak.

Borak bumps Danilo's bicep with a shoulder before continuing through the camp. He barks at some of his rebels, who leap away from the dwindling fire. They wipe moisture from their weapons. They scramble to follow Borak's commands accordingly. Danilo smirks as they stumble over themselves in their rush.

"Come on Sunshine, got a man for you to break." Borak mutters.

"Not exactly in the habit of breaking people anymore." Danilo says.

Borak nods, eyes heavy and full of grief. He, of all of Enzo's closest allies, hates asking Danilo to fall into his past role to do the dirty jobs Stormthrowers were hesitant to get involved in. Stories and rumors cling to the united fear across the continent, threatening to upset human-kind. Danilo and Borak knew, more than the rest, that if anything happened in Stormthrower camps, they were responsible. And while Danilo knew that Borak would like to make the final decision to send Danilo back with nothing but warm meals and warmer welcomes, Borak's group are desperate for answers.

"It won't take much, he's already dying. His so-called backup struck him." Borak bites the inside of his cheek.

Borak and Danilo walk together in relative silence through the bustle of the camp. The muggy heat clings to their skin, cutting through their clothing. Danilo follows Borak up to a lone wood building—a hunting cabin Borak's group has pitched camp around. Heavy fabric drapes over the windows and door. Borak holds a palm up to Danilo's chest when he makes to go inside.

"It's going to look familiar." Borak mutters, dragging his nails through his shiny black hair.

Danilo glances at him, expression slowly turning more puzzled as Borak continues to stare at him pained.

"What is?" Danilo cocks his head.

"The uh—" Borak sighs. "You'll see."

He kicks the bamboo door open and holds the curtain out of Danilo's path. The dark abyss inside cloaks the man tied to the chair, but not the winding black veins up the sides of his neck and face.

"Let me know if you need out." Borak says softly.

Danilo swallows as he pads inside, trying not to let his resolute expression fracture under Borak's worried stare. Those curtains weren't for their captive but because Borak would have demanded it; thinking it easier for Danilo to handle than be subjected to the sight.

It wasn't.

The smell of rotting flesh consumes the room, and grew more potent as Danilo approaches the captive. His ragged breaths wheeze like a broken whistle. Danilo sets his shoulders and paces around the man, watching for signs of where to begin.



Danilo stumbles from the hut, sucking in a lone breath. As if it might be his last. Sunlight filters through the thick treetops overhead. Winding vines cast shadows in the beams dancing across Danilo's face. A pretty cage sitting atop him.

His gaze flickers to Borak, who sits on a crate waiting for Danilo's tension to pass. In the past, the Stormthrowers made the mistake of placing an unknown sentry by the door, and after a gruesome death, they never made it again.

Borak examines Danilo's bloody knuckles and turns away. Danilo flexes them, using the hem of his shirt to wipe away the stain on his skin. A combination of the dying man's and his own. The splits throb when he looks upon them.

Borak moves closer. He raises a hand to Danilo's. Danilo watches brilliant, jagged tracks snap across the surface of his skin, encouraging it to knit together.

"You didn't try healing him?" Danilo asks. Borak sighs and finishes his task, looking forlorn. "It was too late to try, wasn't it?"

With a nod, Borak shuffles off. Danilo's hollow chest yawns, grieving an old loss. Borak glances back at him, waiting for him to follow. Once Danilo does, Borak signals to one of the nearest rebellion troops.

"What he tell you?" Borak looks to Danilo.

"He didn't." Danilo says. He continues at Borak's confused expression, "he promised to say everything to anyone but me."

Borak's gaze darkens. The troop stands at attention in Borak's path, glancing between the two of them. Borak turns his scowl on him.

“Go get what he knows.” Borak tips his head to the hut and the soldier nods, jogging away.

Danilo watches after the man, speaking over his shoulder. “What is it you’re after?”

Borak holds up his hand in pause, and keeps trudging through the camp. Danilo follows, thumbing at the scar breaking through the hair on his upper lip, following the path it climbs towards his outer eye. Borak glances back, his eye tracking Danilo’s thumb. He swings back around. Danilo stares at his hand and drops it.

Borak advances on the greenery at the edge of camp and shoves his way through. Shaking his head, Danilo charges in behind him, ducking beneath the large leaves. Moisture clings to his cheeks as he shuffles among the dense plant life. He rubs at it with his sleeve only for the next unavoidable shrub to slide across his cheek. Borak chuckles at Danilo’s huff.

“Forgot what it’s like to have someone around here who’s tall.” Borak says over his shoulder, dropping down a root system to the ground beneath.

Danilo braces and leaps to Borak’s side, the drop easy for him. He looks around at their surroundings as it opens up. Borak vanishes beneath his gaze. “Why are we out here?”

“Because I love them but I don’t trust them.” Borak admits.

Danilo understands. Despite the cooing of the animals above and the roiling of water, his skin still crawls.

“We’re being followed.” He whispers.

Borak hums, “this one I trust.”

“You know which one?”

Borak raises his hands and the periwinkle blue rises underneath the skin of his palms. Indirectly saying he can sense the user’s signature. Danilo nods.

“Ask me again,” Borak prompts, glancing up at him.

Danilo blinks, brain dead behind his eyes. Borak stares back. He slowly grows more dumbfounded until Danilo’s gaze brightens suddenly.

“What are you after?” Danilo pushes his long hair from his face, blue eyes skirting over the land behind them, nerved by the unseen third party. The sword hums, vibrating his spine, feeding of his nervous energy.

Borak puffs out a breath, shaking his head and shoving his fingers into his eyes. He mutters to himself in his mother-tongue before finally spitting the answer at Danilo. “The Nameless.”

"The Nameless?" Danilo snaps his gaze to Borak, who nods. He furrows his brows. "I was called Nameless when I belonged to the gutter alleys—"

"Belonged? Why do you say it like that?" Borak grumbles to himself.

"—it's nothing more than a title for the homeless."

"Not here." Borak halts and they both pause abruptly. The river at their side muffles Borak's words. "Here it's becoming its own entity. Like a cult."

Danilo lifts his brow, watching the water churn over the edge of the waterfall. The bridge sways in the distance.

"Something wicked." Danilo waits until Borak mutters his agreement. "Do you think it's connected?"

"With our luck?" He shakes his head, glancing over Danilo's profile. "No, I think they just don't want to be consumed by the Medumara."

"Why bother with him then?"

"Because they're on the hunt for the Helmet, like the Medumara."

"Like us." Danilo grunts. "Which means there's three parties at odds—"

When the third voice arises, Danilo doesn't jump, but his body moves into action before his mind can. "Four actually."

Danilo grabs the sword at his waist just as Borak grabs his arm.

"It's alright." Borak nods at the newcomer. "You know, for being half deaf you have the oddest habit of knowing what everyone's saying."

He's younger than Danilo. If Danilo guessed, he would say around twenty. Dark brown hair frames his black-brown eyes and strong nose. Hope reeks off his person. There's an air of familiarity about him that Danilo cannot grasp.

"What can I say, I got good at reading lips." The newcomer gestures at Danilo. "Your scar makes it difficult."

Good, Danilo thinks. With Borak's wary gaze on him, he knows better than to voice it. Borak meanders off and Danilo follows suit, eyes still trained on the young man.

"This is Audantei's acting adviser, he travels with me from time to time. He's grown quite close with Woldwin." Borak places his hands on his hips in Danilo's peripheral, next to his throwing knives. It's subtle. And while Danilo would like to believe it's for the newcomer, Borak doesn't do subtlety.

It's for him.

"Woldwin?" Danilo glances at Borak.

"The one you met when you first got here." Borak clarifies.

"Ah," Danilo tilts his head back, looking at the younger man from the corner of his eyes. "Well it's a good thing I didn't kill him."

The young man's face twitches but his grin remains in place. Borak squints at the tick.

Danilo offers his hand, "Danilo Altamura."

Fear dances at the edges of the boy's eyes as he takes it, choking out his name. "Nolein."

Danilo knows the name Altamura haunts the dark corners of the sun-blasted city. Any person who lives a day's time from Audantei felt the horror reigning with it. He's yet to go back East for that reason.

"Just Nolein?" Danilo asks.

Nolein shuffles, glancing between Danilo's stern brow and the scarred hand still clutching his. He sputters, "for now, sir."

"Sir?" Danilo releases Nolein's hand, looking to Borak. "Do I really look that old?"

"It's the beard," Borak says as he begins to move through their surroundings again. "Definitely makes you older than you are."

"Is that a good or bad thing?" Danilo side-eyes Nolein and moves with Borak. Borak makes a noncommittal noise.

"You mentioned a fourth party." Danilo speaks over his shoulder.

Nolein jogs into action behind them. "Aye, a group from the west—"

"Was my accent that thick?" Danilo asks Borak.

"Oh, yours was worse."

Even with Enzo's efforts, Danilo struggles to make friends over enemies. Borak's teasing tone takes the blunt edge off Danilo's words and softens the potential strike they may have. But it doesn't undo the initial damage they cause.

"Really?" Danilo asks.

Borak flicks his eyes over Danilo appraisingly. "Still is."

"I don't think it's—"

"Course not, you're a man of the world now. Been everywhere. No doubt being with Enzo has helped significantly."

Danilo huffs and glances at Nolein—his brows scrunch tight in a way that makes Danilo's head throb in sympathy. Despite Nolein's disgruntlement, he grins. Danilo turns back around, biting on his tongue.

"I had my fun." Danilo gestures with his arm, inviting Nolein to his side.

Nolein falls into step with him but leaves a weapons space between them. Borak squints at the two of them, the skin around his eyes tight with an unspoken reservation.

"A group from the west have spread their recruits through the region." Nolein keeps his locked jaw level with his stiff shoulders, the front layers of his hair skimming his cheekbones. "They're radicals both of human and magic kind. I've found them circling the North looking for the Renown Artifacts. The ones without magic tend to be sent to infiltrate the Great Libraries and armories. Those with, they do the dirty work."

"Sounds like the opposite of the Medumara," Danilo mutters, pulling ahead to stare into the gully. He hears Borak stop between him and Nolein. "And what of the East and South?"

There's a brief pause in the air that makes Danilo's hand twitch. Nolein's voice falls in a slow drawl, as if he's unsure how much information to disclose. Danilo understands; hesitance is one of his few close friends.

"Audantei is as much a stonewall as ever. The East is too active for them to get a footing. And the South is too cold for them to try. Those who have get killed by the Nuicallians. How they figure it out before we do is beyond me."

"Because they're warriors before men." Danilo glances to the river at the bottom of the cliff. "Any man or woman who comes in ready to dominate is killed as the threat they are."

He turns over his shoulder as Nolein nods with a clenching jaw. A false smile falls into place.

"What are they called?" Danilo crosses his arms, his sword hand close to the weapon.

"They're fresh enough that I've not found a name." Nolein purses his lips.

Danilo quirks a brow at Borak, who stares at him with a feigned disinterest. The bugger is finding humor in Danilo's annoyance. He grinds his teeth in a pitiful effort to keep his questions about Nolein to himself.

"Do you know why they've taken interest in the old Artifacts?" Danilo asks.

"I believe they're an exploration team looking to make money off them." Nolein grins lazily, head tilting to the side.

Borak nods to himself at the embellished attitude.

Danilo's skin crawls despite himself. Nolein's similar to Liander—the boy Enzo freed from the Beaters. They both share a careless, suave smile and both

seem overall carefree. Danilo knows better than to believe the mask Liander dubs. Nolein, however, is a far more slippery a personality to grasp.

"Looks like you've got competition, Borak." Danilo says, trying to ignore Nolein's attention.

Borak's nose scrunches when his attention shoots to Danilo. "You're not helping?"

"I'm just the messenger." Danilo thrusts his arms out with a cheeky grin.

He's torn. A part of him wants to stay, wants to enjoy Borak's company after being apart for so long. But a larger part of him wants to be leagues away from the young man staring holes into his profile.

He never did like attention.

Danilo's smile falls as fast as it came, morphing into a horrific resting glare. Nolein peddles out of Danilo's way.

"Has Enzo not talked to you about that expres—" Borak pauses. "You inherited that look from Enzo, haven't you?"

"What look?" Danilo glances over his shoulder, face unchanged.

"That look!" Borak waves his hand at Danilo's face, falling in step back to camp. "The one with an air of superiority and a certain level of disappointment."

Danilo furrows his brows. "I'm pretty sure Enzo's neutral expression is more stressed than disappointed."

"He's been training boys, it's the same look." Borak grumbles.

Danilo shrugs in a cagey agreement. Borak shakes his head.

They bicker back to camp, Nolein trailing a distance behind with a sour glare fixed on the back of Danilo's neck. It heats Danilo's skin but he once lived under that heat for nineteen agonizing years.

The next thirty minutes are no different from the rest.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ashley Holmquist is not your average writer. As the eldest of five children, she honed her skills in managing chaos early on, a talent that now fuels her dynamic career. While balancing two demanding jobs, Ashley finds time to weave compelling stories that captivate readers. Her unique background and relentless work ethic set her apart as a fresh voice in the literary world.

Ashley's journey is a testament to her incredible ability to juggle multiple roles. Her days are filled with the precision and organization required in her secretary position, while she dedicates afternoons to making a difference in the lives of individuals as a Behavioral Interventionist. This blend of structure and empathy infuses her writing with authenticity and depth, creating relatable and impactful narratives.

Despite her packed schedule, Ashley's passion for storytelling remains undiminished. She draws inspiration from her own life's whirlwind, transforming everyday experiences into literary magic. Her stories resonate with readers because they are born from a place of genuine understanding and a knack for finding the extraordinary in the ordinary.

Ashley Holmquist is on the rise, bringing her remarkable multitasking skills and a fresh perspective to the world of writing. Her ability to thrive amidst the hustle and bustle of daily life is not just impressive—it's the secret ingredient

that makes her an author to watch. Keep an eye out for her upcoming works; they promise to be as vibrant and engaging as the woman behind them.

