



Checkmate

Author: *K.D. Tabith*

Category: LGBT+

Description: Would you betray your kingdom for your soulmate?

Shapeshifter Theodori Hunter Wolfborn must conquer the kingdom of Siacchi to prove his worth. To do so, he kidnaps a man known for his strategic genius – a champion in the much-revered and ancient game of dominance and submission, Cesse. A man who will help Theo secure a clean, bloodless victory.

Only, Theo has kidnapped the wrong person.

Luka Lockehart, renowned Cesse player, has trained all his life to hide his stigmatized abilities to shapeshift, guided by the unwavering hand of his mother. He never expected he would have to put his training into practice when he is kidnapped by a northern warlord – and he certainly didn't expect to find this man – this monster – so attractive. Now he must hide his feelings and his identity, for if Theo finds out that he is not the man he says he is, it is not only Luka's life that is forfeit, but his entire country.

Luka and Theo are locked in a deadly game. As the secrets between them only continue to grow, so does the unmistakable pull they feel toward each other, even when such feelings might very well ruin all they've ever hoped to achieve.

Something has to break. It will be their kingdoms – or their hearts.

Total Pages (Source): 19

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 8:00 am

The following is a short excerpt from Cesse: A Complete History:

Cesse – or Ravage, as it is known in the North – is a game of wits, wills, and most importantly, dominance. One cannot think of it without also thinking of the brothels in which it was born; of the rooms heavy with smoke and eyes, of the two players locked in attention, hands white knuckled around a whalebone board, trapped in a tension so delicious all else pauses to bear witness.

One cannot think of Cesse without also thinking of the sex that follows.

It is as simple as fighting. The attacks and messages conveyed by the momentum of the pieces – the sacrifice of a spy on square A7 is an invitation, a dare on B12 a reply. And just as in battle, there must be winners and losers.

And, in the case of the whores and the rulers – the founders of this game – there must be the dominator and the dominated.

The whorehouses that birthed Cesse could not contain it for long; within weeks of its conception, the game had spread across the countryside, swallowing the land and spawning a new capital in the Western country of Siacchi, named after the very game, a capital I'm sure you're very familiar with – Cesscounthe.

Cesscounthe flourished under the select watchers and the players brought to enjoy Cesse. The intellect that led to victory within the game became the country's most sought feature. After all, there is nothing more alluring than a dominator who takes the loser.

As it grew, the game disentangled itself from its sexual roots. It became something integrated into school systems, into classrooms. The Northern Kiterans, for all their barbarism and love of physical prowess, with a complete disregard for superior intellect, would find this strange. But Cesse helped to hone the mind, to train the pacifists of the West how to conquer in a non-violent manner. Cesse still maintained its hold on dominance, however, and many moves were banned from children's tournaments because they were entirely too sexual in nature.

As Siacchians will crow, Cesse became their crowning jewel: those who won the yearly tournament in Cesscounthe would receive fame and fortune for years to come, so highly sought after was a strong player's intellect.

But Cesse was not content to be contained merely in the West. It soon flocked to the South – and later, the North.

It was there, in the wintry lands of Northern Kitera, that it became something different. Dominance in the far North was not a concept rooted merely in intellect, but also in strength... and thus, Cesse's twisted sibling, Ravage, was born.

Ravage was used to train military leaders, to hone the raw strength of the Kiterans as they prepared for the battles that the Siacchians were so opposed to. It was the whetstone to fuel their minds and their bodies – and it was the outlet for them to unleash any pent up energy.

But what would happen when the two games – when the two countries – collided? The answer became all too clear when Kitera launched its first attack on Siacchi's borders.

Their beastly soldiers never could have guessed what would stand in their way.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 8:00 am

Luka Lockehart smiles. “Check.”

The room goes still and jaws drop. The empty wooden tables around them have long since been cleaned and tidied, prepared for the next round of games in the morning. As the last match of the Cesse tournament’s opening round, Luka was told by his mother, Linne Lockehart, to anticipate being the main attraction. This is the only reason why Luka let the game drag on so long – his mother needs all the good press she can get with the upcoming elections.

Luka’s opponent stares at the board, eyes wide, hands tugging at his beard. His gaze darts about as he takes in the pieces – the fallen warriors, the hidden taunts Luka wove into each move – before his shoulders slump.

“Mate,” the man – whose name Luka cannot remember for the life of him – says, voice low and not nearly as glum as Luka anticipated. The man shifts his weight, eyes slowly flickering to Luka’s. He’s not an unattractive fellow; probably a few years Luka’s junior with long dark hair, brown eyes, and a smattering of freckles dusting his nose that crinkle as he attempts a smile.

Luka, remembering the attention on them, returns the gesture with teeth.

Around them, their audience leans closer. Other Cesse contestants take furious notes. One paper-runner sketches Luka’s profile. All are eager for a shot of the game’s victor – of the infamously elusive son of new Council Member hopeful, Linne Lockehart.

Luka raises a hand to offer a wave and the crowd’s hushed whispers escalate to

excited murmurs. The silent tension that seized the chamber in a giant's grasp snaps as onlookers shout questions. There are fewer than he hoped for. Linne Lockehart had hoped for more paper-runners, but it can't be helped that Cesscounthe's reporters have turned their focus toward their borders, darkened with reports of war and invasion and other eye-catching headlines. Luka will have to make do with the few present.

The half a dozen paper-runners circle closer, desperate for a quote. They work in pairs, one with a sketchpad and the other jotting down notes on Luka's every movement and breath.

Beyond them, the victors and losers of the Cesscounthe Tournament's first round of games hover, curious to see how the renowned once child prodigy – the second to ever achieve a perfect score on the Bombani Exam – has played. They gathered about the table near Luka and his opponent, but when the paper-runners elbow them away, the players retreat to the upper floors, leaning over the shining balconies and peering through their theater glasses to make out the board.

Looking around now, Luka can faintly make out that their usual pursed lips of distaste have given way to wide-eyed surprise. His heart flutters, and he has to resist the urge to smirk.

Finally.

The overall reaction isn't surprising; Luka's mother has been insistent that he be kept from national – or even local – tournaments until his twenty-first birthday, some three years after the official age of adulthood. His only infamy arose from an earlier incident and his testing scores – but while these were impressive, nothing showed intellect better than Cesse. Luka is a dark horse – an ambush on the Cesse Annual Tournament.

Cesse let Luka finally show the world his skill. And, if the whispered gossip leaking from his competitors hidden in the pews are any indicator, he can finally prove everyone wrong.

Could someone of a dirtied bloodline do this?

“Danessi Lockhart! Danessi Lockhart!” a pretty blonde paper-runner cries. “How do you feel about facing Evland Childes in the upcoming rounds?”

Luka’s smile crimps, and he barely manages to save it at the sound of that man’s name.

“I will answer questions later,” he says loftily, rising from his seat. He extends his hand to his opponent. “Come.”

The murmurs increase and charcoal flies across paper as the paper-runners lap up the shot of Luka lifting his adversary’s hand. Luka knows what they see; a young man, perfectly polished in both looks and manners, attending to his victory like every Cesse winner should: with pride and with certainty.

The dominance would come later – privately.

Luka groans as the man’s lips wrap around his cock, his knees sinking into the silk of the violet sheets. His hips stutter as he thrusts into the throat of the man – whose name he still can’t remember for the life of him. He wraps his hands in soft hair so he can go deeper – deeper –

The man gags as Luka hits the back of his throat and a low noise of pleasure escapes Luka’s lips. Luka admires how the dim lights of his hotel room highlight the hollows of the man’s cheeks – the way his hands are braced against Luka’s bed. Luka can’t remember the last time he touched someone like this – the last time things felt so

easy, so good. How long has he dreaded this moment, knowing he would surely win the Cesse tournament?

But, just as his tutors promised, he takes to the dominance naturally despite his nerves.

It helps that he is still recounting his Cesse match.

“Do you see it now?” Luka asks as he eases back, his voice husky. “Do you see how you could have taken the assassin in that move? Had you merely read the board, you would have been able to pin me with that one mistake.”

There is no response beyond sucking, and Luka tries to lose himself to the sensation once again, but it is a difficult thing. Even with the pleasure, with all of Cesscounthe framed in the window across from his bed splayed out before him, like a body ripe for the taking – Luka cannot relax. There is still too much to do. Too many promises to fulfill to his mother. After all, there is only one thing in his life that truly frees from his always churning mind: the tight grip of Cesse.

Well. There used to be two. But the second matters no longer.

Luka lets the man suck for a while more before Luka pulls out and pumps his slick cock, watching the man’s face, his parted lips, his heavy eyes. He stares up at Luka, lost to it all, and Luka sighs.

“You want me, don’t you?” Luka asks, and the man responds with incoherent blubbling. Luka tries to imagine what it’s like; he had only experienced such domination once before, and it was immediately after he had come of age, some three years prior. Had it not been for the person he had lost to, Luka might have said he enjoyed it.

But he had not had the chance to experience such a thing thereafter.

After all, he had not lost a Cesse game since.

“You know,” Luka says, his eyes tracing the man’s wet mouth. “I’ve already told you everything I would do to you with the movements of my pieces. Did you see them? The little messages I left for you?”

Luka is unsurprised when the man shakes his head.

“I told you,” Luka begins as he strokes the man’s face. Luka had been right before; he is attractive. Those little freckles? Adorable.

“I was going to fuck your face until I come on it.”

And Luka, being a man of his word, does so.

After, the man curls up on his side, sweaty chest rising slow and steady with sleep. Luka scowls as he watches the twitch of the man’s eyelids as he escapes to dreams; Luka has not slept beside another body in two years, and he isn’t planning on breaking that streak tonight.

Luka climbs from the bed. He falls into a comfortable pace. The bamboo floor is cool beneath his feet, laid so as not to creak. The chambers are extravagant with their high ceilings and wispy curtains, but not nearly as fine as the Lockehart household. He had wished to return home after each game, but his mother insisted Luka take his opponents to bed here.

Cesscounthe’s Annual Tournament puts up its most likely champions in a suite containing a bed, bath, and a Cesse room. Each is painted the vital colors of thought: blue for the bedroom and for deep dreams, green for the bath for health and

cleanliness, and a deep scarlet for the Cesse room – for agility and domination. Floor to ceiling windows mark the northern walls, filling the room with sunlight during the day and the flickering glory of Cesscounthe's city during the night. A city that seems to move a bit to the left every time Luka glances at it, as if shrinking away from the rumors of the impending Northern invasion – repairs on the high walls, the outer Gamgy District drawn in, Aiutani watches scanning the night.

Luka is too peeved to pay it heed now. He has already taken it all in before, already marveled at the city night after night as a child – back when it was all an untouchable, unattainable thing. Back when his mother's grasp would turn to an iron band around his wrist, a promise he would not leave the Lockehart compound – not until you can prove your intellect. He could draw the city from memory, so deeply is the image emblazoned into the back of his eyelids – the trail of lights marking the midnight markets and Hyacinth Square, which is left brilliant and golden until the early hours of the morning, when the scholars come to dim the lanterns; the cool dim of the Abraxi District, each noble house hidden behind the compound walls. The smudge of the Gamgy District and the wall surrounding his city, like a towering marble embrace.

Instead of watching, Luka makes straight for the scarlet chambers, footfalls soft as raindrops.

The Cesse room is made dim from the glow of the city, long contours cast from the board and its matching chairs. Luka lights one of the gas lamps resting on the mantle at the head of the room. He sets the flame across from the board, the fire turning the motions of his hands into exaggerated shadows as he lays out the pieces.

With the room now lit, the windows across from him reflect his naked body as he moves. Luka casts half an eye to the flex of muscles in his back, to the fall of dark hair across his cheek. He is a composition of opposites; where his eyes are as light as a summer sky and his skin unnaturally paler than a bitter winter, his hair is blacker

than the night itself. His body is still growing into the strength of manhood. Already he can see the small muscles of his back and arms – muscles his father names for him in his yearly physicals – flexing in his back as he moves.

Muscles brought on not by work, but by a wretched and long-forgotten inheritance.

The dirty Lockhart line.

Anxiety rolls in Luka's stomach at the thought, and something silver flickers across Luka's eyes in the window's dark reflection, like the fire from the candle at his side has been captured in his irises. Disquieted, Luka shifts his weight, pressing his tongue to the roof of his mouth and forcing an exhale from his nostrils, just as his tutors had ordered. The unruly and disrespectful emotions of fear and nervousness unwind, and he turns to the board once more.

"Partaking in some late night practice?" a voice asks, and Luka all but jumps out of his skin.

The man from before chuckles at Luka's response, and Luka tries to act like nothing happened, sulkily returning from the game.

"You could certainly benefit from it," Luka says.

The man hadn't seen Luka's eyes; Luka's shoulders relax marginally.

"You aren't what I expected," the man says, and Luka's tension returns. He decides it best to hold his tongue as the man looks Luka over. "I thought you would be... taller."

"And I thought you would be a better Cesse player," Luka replies coolly. "We'll have to settle for less." His tutors always warned him his tongue would never make him

any friends, but it's a good thing he's only here to win this tournament and the fame and fortune that would come with victory. Most victors were awarded an apprenticeship with a Council Member, which wouldn't guarantee a position in government, but it was as close to a promise as one could get. And Thought knows that the Lockhart family could use the prestige of having a Cesse Tournament winner to clean their name and prove their wisdom.

"Then show me how to play better, Luka," the man replies, taking a seat across from him. "I still have my second chance tomorrow. I could still rank."

"You will call me Danessi Lockhart," Luka corrects. "We are not friends."

The possibility of this man claiming victory is so infinitesimally slim, Luka contemplates ordering the man to leave. But Cesse is always so much better with a partner.

Besides, his cock is already hardening at the thought of being buried deep in this man's soft, warm throat once more.

"Listen carefully," Luka says. "As I do not like to repeat myself, and I'll make sure you have a chance of winning tomorrow."

The following morning, standing before the boards announcing that day's matches, Luka says, "You have no chance of winning."

The man, whose name... is... well, it probably started with a J. Luka isn't sure how he doesn't remember – he just read it seconds before – looks at Luka, dismayed. "But you said –"

"I'm well aware of what I said, but you're playing against Xyla Mobiele. She will destroy you." Luka gestures to the chart, fingertips nearly grazing the head of another

competitor. There are at least half a dozen other contestants bumping their way across the creaking floorboards to read the board at the center of the room, squinting through the brilliant rays of morning sunlight filtered through the two story high windows above. Weaving amongst the players are the Aiutani, distinctive with their tags and uniforms, as they prepare some dozen players' tables for the upcoming matches.

Luka pays none of them any heed, his attention too focused on the writing. The names of the upcoming tournaments glare back at him; today, likely to his mother's disapproval, Luka is in the second round of competitors. There will be no audience-filled room to witness the slaughter – unfortunate, but there's nothing he can do to fix that. The name across from his is some anonymous backwater – Beowyn? Luka scoffs and shakes his head. No one named their children after the old beasts anymore.

The man, whose name Luka is now certain starts with a J, says, “Xyla Mobiele? Who is she?”

Before Luka can respond, an all too familiar voice says, “Not a who – a what.”

Luka's lip curls as Evland Childes, the only other to ever receive a perfect score on the Bombani Exam all Siacchi children are required to take, approaches at a saunter. The man is incapable of walking with any other stride – his shoulders always somewhat slumped, lips half curled into a smirk. The crowds of competitors, upon seeing him, part with open mouths.

“Danessi Lockhart,” Evland says when he sees Luka, mouth quirking until the smirk is full-grown. He tilts his head back, which he has to do to look down on Luka, so similar are their short heights, dark locks falling from his cheeks. It is unfair how, despite being so rotten on the inside, Evland Childes looks to all the world like a piece of art turned flesh – all cheekbones and sharp angles and curving muscle. Though it has been some three years since Luka last saw Evland, Luka is disappointed to find that age has only honed his rival's looks to perfection. Some

have even said the two of them resemble each other, though every time such a thing is spoken in either of their presences, both turn varying shades of disgusted green.

Evland tells Luka with a smirk, “My mother sends her regards to your mother. May the best woman win, she says.”

More people gather around the three of them, and Luka braces his shoulders beneath the weight of their curious stares.

“Danessi Childes,” Luka replies, his own head tilting back. He hates being looked down upon. “I’ve never once forgotten how considerate your mother is. I’ll relay the message.” Evland’s mother is Linne’s greatest opponent in the Council Member election. Anger at the words – at Evland’s entire existence – dull from years of wear, rolls through him. Luka has more than enough practice to quiet the emotion before it appears in his eyes.

“An it?” the nameless man at Luka’s side repeats, brow furrowed. Luka scowls and scans the bubble of people surrounding them. Already, faces turn in their direction – interested in their infamy and the conversation.

This is not the kind of attention his mother requested.

Deep breaths. Ground yourself. Luka inhales, just as his tutors had drilled into him – just as the Toula taught him – and lowers his eyelids. One mistake could give him away – he could lose it all. More importantly: his mother could lose it all.

He needs to stay calm and look for an opening to escape.

Evland, oblivious to Luka’s mental battle, turns to the other man. “You know – an impyassus.”

The man's furrowed brow turns from confusion to wide-eyed horror, and though Evland need not go on, he does, because he's Evland.

“ – or maybe you would know her better as a dog? Because that's what they are after all – animals, right? Barely better than humans – the same as those barbaric Northern Kiterans.” Evland laughs, glancing about at the crowd. When his eyes land on a pair of competitors, they automatically echo the gesture.

“I didn't realize they let impyassi play,” the man whose name starts with J says, looking around as if fearing to spot one.

“You must be from the country.” Evland shakes his head. “Those few impyassi that pass the Bombani Exam and aren't put to manual work in the Gamgy District or made Aiutani – as they should be – are, unfortunately, still allowed to participate in the activities of everyday citizens. Despite lacking the emotional control needed – they could snap at any moment, you know.” Evland snaps his fingers to punctuate this point, and the man actually flinches.

“I've never even met one before,” the man says.

That you know of. Luka grits his teeth and forces his clenched fists to relax.

“Oh, but Danessi Lockhart here has, haven't you?” Evland says, his gaze flickering back to Luka. He has ugly green eyes – like mold. Like slime. They look rotten on his beautiful face.

“You have?”

“He has,” another terribly familiar voice says, and Luka resists the urge to shut his eyes and hope he can wake from this nightmare.

When he faces the scene once more, Xyla Mobiele stands before him, one hand on her hip, the other hanging loose at her side. To the growing crowd around them, she likely looks the picture of calm and poise; her lips are pursed in an easy smile, and her eyes narrowed as if sharing an inside joke.

But Luka knows her – knows her like he thought he knew his own soul. He recognizes the pinch in her dark gaze, the tension in her shoulders. He can see, even from this distance, the flash of color that sparks across her irises, quick and deadly as a flame, turning her brown eyes to amber.

Xyla Mobiele tosses her red hair over her shoulder and bares her teeth in a smile. “Danessi Childes,” she says in a cool voice. “So nice to see you again.”

“Mobiele.”

“The impyassus?” the man Luka now sorely wishes he had never associated himself with squeals in soprano. “I’m supposed to play against you?” He looks Xyla up and down as if she is some giant, not a petite woman with soft curves and stubby legs.

Xyla’s smile grows some fang. “In the flesh.” Her eyes flicker to the board showing the upcoming matches. “And you’re my opponent?” She examines the man, looking at him the way one would a piece of fruit that has sat out in the sun for too long – as if searching for oozes. Her attention skims over Luka as she glares at Evland, and Luka’s heart squeezes. “Guess I’ll see you in the final round then, Danessi Childes,” she says.

“Bold to think someone won’t take you out before then,” Evland snaps.

“Don’t speak to her like that,” Luka growls unthinkingly.

Xyla shoots him a poisonous look, a look that he can read far too well: don’t fight my

battles for me.

Then fight better, Luka thinks as he narrows his eyes.

Evland turns his leer on Luka. “What are you going to do about it?”

Luka’s mouth flies open to respond, but before the words can leave his tongue, a gong sounds and all the players jump. It’s time for the first match – if players are not in their seats within the next five minutes, they will be marked as automatically forfeiting the round.

The crowd knotted around Luka, Xyla, and Evland loosens. Those participating in the initial round of matches peel away to find their tables. The paper-runners are finally allowed entrance to the competition chambers, a half dozen today. Their eyes scan the crowd, raking across the slowly filling tables, the scarlet walls towering above them all, the platform overlooking the playing floor – searching for faces that will win them headlines. They immediately beeline toward Evland – and Luka.

Xyla sighs at the paper-runners’ approach and spins on her heel. “Come now, little man,” she says to her opponent. “It’s time for me to play with you.”

“I’m taller than you are!” the nameless man replies.

“Maybe in bones, but not in spirit.”

Xyla tosses a look over her shoulder at Luka, her lip curled. “Don’t have too much fun without me, boys,” she says to him.

Don’t you dare protect me, her eyes scream at Luka.

Despite the hostile message, the weight of her gaze does odd things to his injured

heart.

Luka looks away.

The first pair of paper-runners arrives. The dark haired man asks, “Are you two playing each other in the next round? What are your thoughts on a match with Danessi Lockehart, Danessi Childes? Who do you think would win?”

Evland laughs, the sound like oil to the fire of Luka’s anger. “Who do I think would win?” he repeats. “Ridiculous. The only one who could possibly pose a challenge to me – the highest ranking Cesse player in this country – is that animal over there.” He jerks his chin in the direction of Xyla. The only sign she has heard the comment is the slight stiffening of her shoulders, but her even strides do not pause. Evland continues, “Just goes to show how untalented this generation is.”

The paper-runner scribbles furiously on his notepad. Heart pounding in his ears and heat warming his cheeks, Luka takes another deep breath.

In through the nose. Out through the mouth.

A mustached paper-runner swings toward him, eyes gleaming behind his spectacles. “What do you say to that, Danessi Lockehart?”

Luka licks his lips, reply loaded and face trained perfectly: a patient – almost indulgent – smile for the foolhardy Evland. It’s a look that’s been practiced endlessly before mirrors and warped glass.

But then Evland interjects, “You’ll see what I mean when the speeches open for the Council Members tomorrow and Linne Lockehart tries to steal my mother’s hard-earned spot. That lack of talent? It runs in the Lockehart line.” Evland leans close to the paper-runners, who lean closer to him in turn. “You’ve heard, haven’t you? That

the youngest Lockhart has failed the Bombani Exam's pretests? Must just be another animal like that thing over there."

A couple of paper-runners gasp, and the scratch of pens on paper grows louder.

Rage ignites in Luka so fast and so fierce he cannot contain it.

How dare he.

How dare he speak of Xyla in such a way. How dare he speak of his mother like that.

And worse – deeper than the anger – is a cutting fear: how does he know about Cassian?

Dimly, he is aware of the way his nails lengthen and cut into his palms, drawing blood – of the way his teeth stretch in his mouth, almost too large for his jaw. He has just enough sense to cast his eyes to the ground and wait one second, two seconds, three seconds, before speaking.

Evland watches with interest. "Perhaps it's best for you to withdraw, Luka," he advises. "The Bombani Exam scores were likely a fluke – you're really no better than your idiot brother, are you? You wouldn't want to bring any further embarrassment to your family."

Evland's words have the opposite effect: it's like Luka has been doused in ice water. His mother. The speech tomorrow. He can't lose control now – here – not after everything he has done to get to this point.

Luka bites his cheek until his mouth fills with iron and squashes everything down and away. Evland is wrong – it was no fluke that Luka got a perfect score on the Bombani Exam. Luka will be the perfect son. He will be the perfect would-be Cesse champion.

He will make his mother happy – proud.

A plan rises in his thoughts – a plan that will keep his family strong. A plan that will allow Luka the opportunity to remove this bigoted ass from the tournament entirely.

Even with this drive, his words still emerge in a barely human snarl as he speaks: “You speak big words for someone who is going to lose to me tonight.”

“Tonight?” Evland laughs. “Are you confused, Danessi Lockehart? Nerves gone to your head?”

“Yes. Tonight.” Luka inhales and exhales so forcefully, he wonders if he is going to force his lungs through his nostrils. “I challenge you, Danessi Evland Childes. You speak terrible rumors and you attempt to sully my family’s good name. I cannot allow you to do such things.” Luka pauses, raising his head when his racing heart finally slows. He allows the grin to spread across his face, lips pressed tight to hide his teeth. “I fear that only one controlled by powerful emotions – jealousy, anger – would speak such words. I challenge you to prove your intellect. I challenge you to prove your control.”

Again, gasps ripple through the paper-runners and eyes dart back and forth between the two men. Tournament contestants crane their necks from their tables.

Evland’s fine features warp with rage. “How dare you?”

“If you do not accept, I will be forced to share with these good people,” Luka nods at the paper-runners around them, “that Danessi Evland Childes is mentally unfit – after all, who would be afraid to defend their own honor? Who would be afraid to prove their control?”

Evland’s nostrils flare, before he masters his expression. “Fine,” he says, and then a

light flickers in his eyes. “On one stipulation: as challenged, I get to set the victory prize.”

“I will not stop you.”

“When I win, you will withdraw from the tournament.” Evland’s smile is huge.

The anxiety that shoots through Luka is painful; his mother made him wait too long to attempt Cesscounthe’s Tournament, which took place once every five years. Contestants above twenty-one are not allowed to compete, as there is little point in introducing anyone older into apprenticeships. Should Luka not win the title this year, he will not have another chance.

Not for the first time, Luka wishes he could go back in time and shake his mother – demand that she allow him to display his intellect sooner. Had she done so, he would have surely brought fame and fortune to the Lockhart name – but now...

Evland’s grin grows wider. Luka has hesitated too long.

“Fine by me,” Luka forces himself to say.

“Happy to eliminate you sooner.”

“Meet me at midnight. South of Hyacinth Square.”

“In the Gamgy District? What – are you going to have me jumped by some hired beggar outside the walls, Lockeheart?”

Luka raises his chin. “I don’t need anything beyond my own wit to beat you.”

He is proud of how the words are firm as they leave him; how they betray none of the

knotting in his gut, of the shake in his hands. He knows that his eyes are clear and blue as a summer sky. His tutors would be proud.

Evland's smile grows hard. "I look forward to my victory." He spins to the paper-runners. "I assume you all caught that? Be there for the money shot – Childes Beats Forever Second Best Lockhart – Again. The perfect headline for the morning of your mother's speech, don't you think, Danessi Lockhart?"

Luka's saved from having to respond by a second gong – the next round of Cesse matches are about to begin. Relief washes over him.

Mercifully, the room snaps to silence. Luka turns with the group of paper-runners and Evland to face the balcony above them all as Council Head Dawls approaches the railing, stepping into beams of morning sunlight. The woman is tall and stately, her dark hair shorn so near to her skull it looks like fuzz. She pastes only the smallest of smiles on her perfectly composed face as she addresses them:

"Players of the 72nd Cesscounthe Cesse Tournament, thank you for coming here today, and congratulations on your soon to be second match of this elite game. We the Council Members of Siacchi appreciate your intellect and your time. Before I allow the next round of matches to begin, I am sorry to say I have... tragic... news to report."

The quiet in the room takes on a tense hum as Dawls swallows, shifting her weight. Luka already knows what she will say before she parts her lips. "I will keep matters brief. You are our bright future. You have all heard the rumors of Northern Kitera, and I am here to tell you: it is true. They have breached our northern borders."

Murmurs creep through the room and a different kind of fear, a quiet, disbelieving fear, grips Luka. Images of the terrible Northerners flash through his mind; always bare-chested despite the cold, emotions wild and untamed, lips pulled into an

animalistic snarl. Barbarians by any other name, the Kiterans were supposed to be monsters to scare children into disobedience, not enemies all but pounding down Cesscounthe's supposedly impenetrable walls.

"How dare they tempt us to break the vow of nonviolence," Evland hisses next to Luka, and for the first time in his existence, Luka finds himself agreeing.

Dawls continues, "Our greatest strategists are working tirelessly to ensure you and all of our citizens' safety, and our Aiutani will help us uphold our vow of pacifism. However, should the time come, know that we will look to you, our would-be Cesse Champions. You are the brightest minds of our young generation, and when these final rounds conclude... your country will need you."

Dawls' gaze combs through the crowd. She pauses when her eyes meet Luka's. "Will you answer the call of Cesse and Thought?"

"The call is all I've ever known," Luka and the room answer in unison. Pride roots in the cool fear shivering in Luka's breast, and images of muscled giants pounding against the walls of the inner Cesscounthe districts melt away.

Luka's city is the brightest gem in all of Siacchi. They will find a way out of this, he has no doubt. And he will do everything in his power to help.

Dawls' lips curl into an almost maternal smile. "I expected nothing less." She tips her head, but before she releases them to their matches, she adds, "With that said – you, our young Cesse players, are too valuable to lose. Take care in the days that come. The North draws too close. Cesscounthe will be imposing a curfew. Those found out after dark will receive strict punishments."

Discontent rolls through the crowd, and Dawls bows her head. "I realize this is stifling, but it is for your own safety. The Northerners are monsters. We do not know

what they will do to our people should they break through the inner walls. Please remain indoors come nightfall and do not tread past Hyacinth Square. Understood?"

This time, the assent that rises is begrudging, but assent nevertheless.

Luka swallows, his eyes flickering to Evland. For half a second, Luka wonders if Evland will call off their match.

Evland's jaw flexes, and, as if sensing Luka's eyes, his gaze rises. Don't be a coward, he mouths to Luka before spinning on his heel and striding off.

Perfect.

Dawls is being overcautious. Luka has nothing to fear. The walls of Cesscounthe have not fallen in some century and a half, during which the Siacchi have observed their vow of nonviolence with ease. Luka knows this city better than he knows himself: his home will always be safe for him.

Besides, Luka told his mother he would get her the attention she needs. With this midnight match, it's certain he'll get her name on the headlines for the paper tomorrow.

He just hopes it will be a story touting his victory.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 8:00 am

Theodori Hunter Wolf-Born raises his chin, smiling. He can almost taste Commander Jennison's fear as the man observes the Ravage board, taking in the scattered pieces and Theo's strategy – flawless, as always.

“Are you sure?” Theo asks as the commander's fingers hover over one piece before darting to another. Jennison's eyes shoot to the board, his scowl darkening. The man tugs on his long gray beard before squaring broad shoulders, scarlet uniform crinkling. He moves the pieces without breaking eye contact.

Theo fights the urge to blink with surprise; so, there is some fight left in the old man.

At least this keeps things interesting.

“Are you?” Jennison replies. His gaze flickers over the fur robes fastened at Theo's collar, landing on Theo's second in command, Octavian Scholar. Theo doesn't need to follow the commander's eyes to know what he is looking at. Theo knows the deal he made and the life that is at stake should he lose.

Instead, he focuses on the cool air rushing through the tent, on the numbness in his fingers. The familiar scents of smoke and meat fill him as he inhales, grounding himself.

“Yes, let's make sure your plan has been well thought out, now,” Octavian says, his slightly pinched voice the only sign of his discomfort.

“Have I ever made such a mistake?” Theo replies, moving his next piece while still looking at the commander.

Jennison's scowl returns as he stares down at the board again, tugging on his beard as if hoping it will whisper the answers to victory. "Only once, Wolf-Born," he replies. "Only once."

Even with the years that lay between him and that day, Theo is slapped by the memory. The way the smoke hung on the air, tangled on his tongue. The bodies he uncovered.

Theo grinds his teeth, fighting away the rise of bile in his throat. The memory of his mother and father's deaths shouldn't hurt him still, and he certainly isn't about to show that vulnerability to Commander Jennison.

Commander Jennison, who is appraising him unblinkingly.

Theo growls, "One mistake in a decade-long career against those demon princes of the South." His teeth lengthen to fangs, nails sharpening to claws. He showcases his wolf with pride. "I must say, that's better than all the other Captains and Sevels you're planning on sending into the field."

"Your track record is good beyond that, yes, though that one mistake, Wolf-Born, it will not be easily forgotten," Jennison says. He looks at Theo and immediately glances away upon seeing Theo's barely restrained snarl. "And you are but four and twenty – too young, too reckless." Jennison gazes at the board, licking his lips. "And unmated still."

"In other words: I am full of life, unlike those fossils you wish to use, I am bold, and I am not easy enough to control," Theo grinds out, voice barely human. He allows the beast to fill him with crystalline rage, refining his vision until the details of the Ravage board stand out in stark relief. Theo slams his piece down so hard, the kings shake. "Check."

“If you wish to phrase it that way, yes. The Elders need someone they can trust in the field, Wolf-Born.” Jennison maneuvers a piece. A smirk upticks his thin lips. “Check.”

Octavian hisses in dismay. Theo tosses his second a glare.

Octavian sits at the entrance of the commander’s tent, pinched between two guards – both of whom have leveled their blades with the lieutenant’s throat. A tendril of blood snakes down Octavian’s exposed collarbone, soaking into the sapphire of his scholar’s uniform.

The sight of his lover under such duress should fill Theo with rage – it’s the very reason Jennison had wanted to use Octavian as collateral. But Theo’s lip only curls with annoyance.

Under the weight of Theo’s disapproval, Octavian’s quivering ceases. The man straightens, knobby throat bobbing. His gray eyes remain wide with fear, but he has been reminded to sit with dignity. He represents Theo’s division, after all, and Theo does not suffer cowards – even cowards he’s fucking.

The next moves between Theo and Commander Jennison pass in silence. Finally, Jennison releases a breath from between clenched teeth.

“Do you even have a plan?” Jennison asks.

“Is that a joke?”

When Jennison merely raises a brow, Theo replies in an exasperated grumble, “It’s simple: a siege might be the obvious answer against a walled city, but these Siacchians are smart – they’ll expect that. No, we don’t need to break the city. We just need to capture its heart.”

“Speak plainly, boy. Metaphors are not strategy.”

Theo bares his teeth and moves his next piece. Jennison pauses, blinking.

“My plan,” Theo says, “is to capture the one person who is their future – the person who is the child of their prominent governmental figures – the one person who will provide the intellect to bring down their city from the inside... once I’ve broken them.”

Jennison shakes his head. “How do you plan to obtain such knowledge?”

“I have my sources.”

“You’re too reckless, Wolf-Born,” Jennison says. “Both in life – and in Ravage.”

“Reckless – but victorious,” Theo says. “Check.”

“Ravage is not the same as the battlefield; in war, you cannot trust your allies to always follow your every whim and order. You cannot even always trust them to speak the truth.”

“You know I am no longer so foolish.” Theo leans toward his commander, eyes flashing from brown to amber. “Well?”

Jennison stares at the board for a long time, brow knotted. His gaze flickers to the guards at the head of the tent. He jerks his chin.

“Release him,” Jennison orders.

Octavian’s sigh of relief floats free as the guards remove their blades.

“You are dismissed,” Jennison says. The guards clank as they exit.

Theo steeple his hands to hide his smile. Jennison is a good loser; he looks only a bit miffed as his gaze flickers to Octavian.

“You are no longer needed, Scholar. Scram.”

Octavian shoots Theo a glare – Theo will never hear the end of this. “So happy to be of service,” he grumbles, stumbling from the tent, hand pressed to the open wound on his neck.

“You really do care so little for him,” Jennison observes after Octavian has gone.

Theo narrows his eyes. “I told you – I learned my lesson about letting such vulnerabilities weaken me from my loss ten years before.”

Commander Jennison offers a weak smile before bowing his head. “You have played well, young Wolf-Born,” he says. He tips his king. “Mate.”

Ordinarily, Theo would claim his prize in the form of flesh – but he is not here for his immediate pleasure.

Before Theo can speak though, Jennison flies to his feet, ripping his blade from his belt. Despite the age wrinkling his limbs, he moves with deadly speed. His expression snaps from wary defeat to intense focus.

But Theo reacts even quicker. He ducks beneath the old Commander’s blow and leaps over the Ravage board, scattering pieces with his jump. He tackles Jennison, wrapping his arms around the man’s wiry middle and forcing him down with a trip.

As Jennison falls, Theo seizes his sword arm and twists until Jennison cries out – but

the old man does not release his blade.

“Brat!” Jennison hisses, though his lips quirk with amusement despite the word.

The two hit the ground with twin grunts. Theo moves to straddle the commander’s chest, his hand flying to the knife that always hangs from his belt –

But the blade is gone.

It is only his beast that saves him.

Jennison wields his own blade and Theo’s stolen knife in each hand to stab at Theo’s thighs. Theo leaps to his feet in a swift movement, slamming his booted feet onto the old man’s biceps as he does so.

This time when Jennison cries out, he cannot help but to release Theo’s blade.

Quicker than light on water, Theo snatches up his knife. Jennison huffs in alarm as Theo presses the blade against his throat.

“As I suspected,” Jennison pants. Theo meets the commander’s gaze, breaths even. He is glad the commander cannot see the sweat dripping between his shoulder blades. “Your instincts are exceptional. As expected for a Wolf-Born.”

“The Mother raised me well.”

“I have no doubt.” Jennison looks down at the blade still flush to his neck. “You were beast-raised. If only you were of a notable family....” He shakes his head, and Theo grits his teeth. Jennison says, “Now – release me.”

“I have defeated you twice, Commander. This means you will owe me two-fold,”

Theo warns before doing as ordered.

Commander Jennison's fingers rise to his neck, brushing away the blood. "If only you were mated," he muses. "You could be their first choice."

Theo's nostrils flare. He would never mate; he did not believe in such things, and even if he did, he would never give the Elders access to such weakness. "What time is my meeting with the Elders?"

"We will go to them now." Commander Jennison creaks to his feet, groaning as his knees pop. His gaze is gentle and sympathetic despite his loss. "They won't let you do this, Wolf-Born. You must know that."

"The other captains and Sevels are all incompetent fools. If the Elders wish to take the capital, they're going to need someone who can think outside the box."

"Take a mate," Jennison presses. "You already have Octavian. Let your wolf bond with him and leave him in Akull. Give the Elders something to... to control –"

Theo scoffs. "You must think me and him fools."

"Power comes at a price, Hunter. How do you think I climbed the ranks despite being beastless?"

Theo's scowls. "I will not pick a mate merely to appease the Elders – there is no one here who interests me, and I will not force the bond." He wrinkles his nose. "They all smell of flesh and blood, nothing more. Nothing of importance or worth bonding to."

Jennison snorts, shaking his head. "A traditionalist? You really think you can find a fated mate out there? The one your beast calls for?" His grin grows when he sees a sour look darken Theo's face. "The mate bond works perfectly fine even with those

you find useful – bearable, you realize? I was able to climb the human ranks of our army twice as fast when I was bound to Himara.”

“Yes,” Theo says, “you rose twice as fast when the Elders had someone to keep you in line with. I would never leave someone I care about here, in their hands, while in the field so they could puppet me with threats to my lover’s life.”

Jennison laughs. “Ah, I would have never guessed there was such romanticism buried beneath that dark scowl of yours!”

Theo towers over the commander. His blond locks nearly graze the tent poles. “I’ve won, Commander Jennison. Quit stalling. Take me before them. You’ll need to convince them before the horses leave at nightfall – I’ll need to prepare Geriin for riding, after all.”

Jennison sighs. “You can’t blame a man for trying.”

Theo makes for the exit of the tent. “If I miss the ride out to the Western campaign? I most certainly can.”

Akull, the mobile capital of Kitera, sparkles with frost. Afternoon daylight filters through the fronds of swaying pines, long, finger-like shadows stroking the tent-covered hillside. Campfires flicker, filling the afternoon with smoke, hissing globs of fat dripping from the rabbits and deer hung to roast over the flames. The cold has yet to force their people to move to the winter palace – the structures are likely yet to completely freeze – but soon they will gather their reindeer, sheep, and cattle, saddle their steeds and move to the northernmost reaches of Kitera.

A handful of eyes dart to Theo as he leaves Jennison’s tent – eavesdroppers who were hoping to learn the outcome of the match. Judging by the blue of their tunics, they are likely Octavian’s friends, scholars and advisers to the military leaders. A few heave

sighs of relief when Theo emerges clearly unscathed. Theo glares at them to make it clear he doesn't appreciate their lack of confidence.

Theo's boots crunch across frozen grass as he weaves through tents and people alike, making his way toward the center of the war camp. Large enough to comfortably hold fifty, the Elder's Compound stands head and shoulders above its peers, smooth canvas dyed a bloody scarlet.

Commander Jennison hurries along behind Theo, half a step behind when they both depart his tent, and is forced to jog to keep up. The man's expression darkens the closer they get. Theo can just make out the commander's mumbling – something about how this is a bad idea.

But Theo has fought his way through life powered on bad ideas and fortitude. He will head this battle. It's his best chance to prove himself – to finally whet his teeth as the sole Sevell in the field.

It'll finally be a chance to prove to himself that he's stronger than he was then – that perhaps, maybe someday, he could be strong enough to care again.

Theo enters the Elder's Compound without prelude. The warmth of the tent curls around him, brushing away the fall frost. Theo pauses at the raised entryway, knocking snow from his boots and removing his cloak. Commander Jennison enters seconds later, out of breath, and does the same.

The Elder's Compound arches above them like the ribcage of a great beast. At its head, the seven elders sit, cushions arranged in an arrowhead shape on the hard packed floor. Their hunched discussion lulls as they see Theo and Jennison, disapproval creasing already wrinkled faces.

“What is it, Commander?” the woman on the far right, Gilianna Scholar, asks. She

draws her blade onto her lap like one would a pet, gently stroking along its leather sheath.

Jennison's eyes flicker to Theo and then away. He curls his shoulders as he kneels on the tent's floor. "Vell Scholar, pardon our interruptions," he simpers. "I come with a... request."

"Request?" Gilianna repeats. She glances at her fellow Elders, all exchanging matching scowls.

"Sevell Hunter has recently proved to me his prowess for battle and intellect. I know you are currently debating the strongest to send to the West to continue the war on Siacchi. I believe Sevell Hunter would be the best to aid the campaign."

The Elders shift, muttering.

"Commander Jennison," begins Hessifer Soldier. His accent is thick from the time he spent on the borders between Kitera and their long-time enemy of the south, Balivartia. He is a small man with a tuft of white hair and a wisp of a mustache that looks like a streak of snow he forgot to wipe away. His eyes flash ice blue as he speaks. "We appreciate your opinion, but unfortunately we cannot send someone as... young as Sevell Hunter. He is entirely too... inexperienced."

A snarl builds in the back of Theo's throat that he only barely manages to stifle. Commander Jennison shoots him a look before continuing. "Yes, of course," he says. "I've taken that much into consideration. But Sevell Hunter is extraordinary. Not only does he excel in Ravage and military strategy, but he also captures the hearts of the people he leads into war."

"I agree with Vell Soldier," Gilianna says, shaking her head. "Sevell Hunter is far too young and unpredictable."

“He has brought many victories home since he assumed the position at fourteen – being the youngest to do so, I might add.”

“I understand your logic, Commander,” Hessifer replies. “But we have already selected the one we would send. Sevell Jordiar Fletcher is mated and carries far more experience, making her the optimal choice.” His brows draw together. “You are keeping us from meeting her as we speak.”

“That’s –” Theo begins, but Commander Jennison’s warning look quiets his protests. Commander Jennison parts his lips, but before he can speak, someone rushes into the tent.

A small woman with dark hair enters – stinking of blood. She stumbles onto the raised floor, trailing red footprints. She is soaked to the bone – blood drips from her hair and face, darkening the hard packed dirt. Her wide eyes rove over the Elders, her lips shaking. “Please – I can’t calm her down,” she whispers, voice hoarse.

“Elliah?” Gillianna gasps. “What –”

“They didn’t mean to knock me down – but Jordiar took it as a challenge. I tried to explain – but she’s just – she’s not listening to me –” Tears roll down Elliah’s face, cutting clean tracks through the gore. “She’s going to kill them!”

Theo’s eyes widen and he inhales deeply – the blood does not belong to the woman.

The Elders rise to their feet as Theo rushes from the tent, the canvas flaps slapping his back as he exits.

The light of the afternoon has turned from tranquil to chaos. Theo stumbles as a wave of salt and copper hits his nose; two men lie crumpled on the ground, hands pressed to weeping wounds. A young boy tends to them. He jumps as Theo exits the Elder’s

tent, nearly fleeing. Another woman stands near the boy, holding a long staff, her braced chest facing away from Theo. She doesn't look back as Theo exits the tent, only sinking deeper into her stance.

Beyond her, a horse-sized wolf bristles, dark eyes filled with mindless rage, muzzle wet with blood. At the sight of Theo, her massive head swings in his direction, lips curling back to reveal teeth the length of his fingers. Her dark fur bristles, and she takes a half step toward him. A growl shreds her teeth, deep and deadly.

“Jordiar!” a voice cries from behind Theo – Elliah. “Please – stop!”

“It's pointless, child,” Commander Jennison chides as the two rush from the tent. “She is lost to the connubial rage.”

“But –”

“We need to subdue her.” The old man's gaze shifts to Theo.

Say no more.

The wolf is always there for Theo, waiting just beneath his skin. He needs to only pull away his loose robes and reach for it, to skim the surface of his anger, his fear, his sadness – and then his bones crack and his skin splits and the beast bursts free.

Jordiar roars at the sight, charging through the woman holding the staff to reach Theo. But she is too slow.

Things move differently when Theo and the wolf are finally one – when he sees things through human eyes, he always feels too slow, too weak. But finally clothed in his fur and teeth, he knows he can do anything. Defeat anyone.

With a snarl, Theo bowls into Jordiar. In wolf form, she is two times his human size – but changed now, Theo easily overtakes her.

Jordiar yelps as Theo pins her, his jaws falling open. His teeth sink into Jordiar's thick throat, digging past the robes bunched there, just deep enough he can taste her flesh. Theo growls deeply, the sound reverberating through his chest.

The blind rage snaps from Jordiar's eyes as she remembers that she is not the only hopiar – the only descendant from the Great Mother – as she is forced from predator to prey.

Dimly, Theo realizes the vibration on his tongue is Jordiar's quiet, puppy-like whines.

“Release her, Wolf-Born.”

Theo is unable to resist a snarl at the command. He snaps in the direction of the order, and a human hand lands on his muzzle.

Commander Jennison stares up at him, body pathetically small in the eyes of Theo's wolf form. For half a thundering heartbeat, Theo allows the beast to run wild through his thoughts as he considers – I could kill him in a single bite. Jordiar is already beaten – then I cut through the Elders, and I will finally prove myself to all of them –

“Wolf-Born,” Commander Jennison says, growl sinking into his voice. He is a simple human, so his eyes do not flicker as a hopiar's would, but he manages to sound beastly all the same.

Jordiar whines again, high pitched and pathetic.

Theo reaches for the anger and tugs it away. The wolf roars disapproval, but he's

well-practiced with this. He exhales long and hard, and the fur creeps away, revealing his pale human flesh.

Seconds later, he stands above Jordiar. His furs, bunched around his neck during the change, fall over his chest, leaving his bottom half exposed. Cold slaps him, but Theo refuses to react.

“Well done,” Commander Jennison murmurs in a voice too low for human ears to hear.

Theo glances at him – and then back to the Elder’s Compound.

Gilianna, Hessifer, and the other five members of the council curve around a wide-eyed Elliah. Elliah presses her hands to her face, cheeks wet with tears. The Elders have drawn their furs tight against the afternoon wind, faces pinched with the cold. Their gazes flicker back and forth between Jordiar and Theo.

They are not their only audience. Other Kiterans have emerged from their tents to gape. No – not gape.

To stare in disapproval.

The connubial rage is not unheard of, but it is uncommon. Rarely, soon after mating, the wolf becomes sensitive to any perceived threats to its mate. Punishment for those who lose control always varies, but, judging by the hard looks cast toward Jordiar, she will not be let off lightly.

“Change back,” Theo orders Jordiar, stepping away from her.

Jordiar does not hesitate. With a crunch of bones and a snap of flesh, she curls on the leaves and frozen grass, covered in goosebumps. Her long brown hair falls to her

waist, tangled with debris, and her cheeks are rosy with blood.

“Rise. Face the Elders,” Theo orders.

Jordiar clammers to her feet, head lowered. Her eyes flicker to Elliah, and a relieved grin cuts through the fear on her face.

Theo resists the urge to shift uncomfortably at the sight; there’s nothing that disturbs him more than the presence of a mated pair. Doesn’t she realize the weakness she has just exposed not only to Theo – but all these people she hurt here? All Theo must do to cut through her now is get to Elliah first.

This is why I will never mate anyone.

“My sincerest apologies,” Jordiar says to the Elders, head still bowed.

“Mistakes were made today,” Theo says when Jordiar falls awkwardly silent. “But no lives were lost. Jordiar Fletcher will seek forgiveness in any way those injured deem fit. That seems a worthy enough reprimand, no?”

The crowd murmurs, but heads dip in agreement. Jordiar first tenses at his words – they are the same rank, but he speaks of her as if she is his subordinate – but when she sees the crowd’s opinion change, she relaxes.

“Yes, they will live,” Gilianna says, gaze skimming the injured. “That’s right... your mating bond is still new, isn’t it, Sevell Jordiar Fletcher?”

“That’s correct, Vell Scholar.”

Gilianna offers a smile that looks at odds with the tension in her neck. “How lovely to see the pair of you. I look forward to Elliah remaining in the capital.”

The muscles in Jordiar's jaws flex. "As do I."

"Delightful." Gilianna's gaze flickers to Commander Jennison and Theo. She purses her lips. "However – we cannot send such a newly bonded pair into the front. Your wolf will not handle the separation well, and I would hate to put either of you through unnecessary suffering – especially with you being so sensitive to the connubial rage." Gilianna curls her fingers in the tiniest of waves. "Wolf-Born. Approach."

Theo does as ordered, standing before the Elders, willing the goosebumps from his flesh. A cruel breeze brushes a strand of blond hair over his shoulder. He towers over them, so it makes sense when they gesture for him to kneel.

"Sevell Wolf-Born, Kitera calls for you," Gilianna begins, and Theo is grateful that his head is bowed so the Elders cannot see the victorious smile blade-like on his face. How nice of this crowd to watch, to bear witness to his victory. "Will you answer the cry of war? Will you lead our troops into victory? Will you expand our empire for the good of our people?"

Theo raises his head, teeth bared – triumphant. "I promise – I will do all that and more, Vell Elders. I will destroy them all. I will go to Cesscounthe and return only when their rulers are in pieces."

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 8:00 am

The sun casts long shadows over Cesscounthe as Luka hurries home.

Autumn afternoons in Cesscounthe fade quickly to evening, and Luka needs to be back by dinnertime. His mother will be disappointed that he hasn't stayed in the competitor's apartments, but he has already dealt with his defeated opponent (thoroughly) and the thought of spending another night in that glass box, tucked against the naked stars, brings bile to the back of his throat.

So instead, Luka dodges paper-runners and ducks his head, skipping past the bustling markets and the glowing lanterns of the spices district, ignoring the beckoning call of peppermint and instead taking the back alleyways. Here, the cobblestone juts, tooth-like, sprigs of wildflower and dandelion cutting through the early autumn chill, barely lit by the glow of residential apartments and flickering sconces.

Luka stumbles twice, half-blinded by the hood of his cloak, but he needs the anonymity. It's such a relief to be out of the unfamiliar heat of the spotlight – his mother has surely received her needed fame for the day. Now Luka can retreat into the life he once had, like a snake returning to shed skin; it might not fit quite right anymore, but it feels so much like home, he doesn't care.

By the time Luka crosses the primary shopping plaza and reaches the Abraxi District, the noble residential quarter, it's nearly dark and he's nearly late. The newly instated curfew draws tight like a noose. He finds himself outside the gates of the Lockhart compound panting, sweat gathering at the back of his neck beneath his velvet cloak. He crunches across fallen leaves as he takes the hidden side door. No need to make a grand entrance.

The Lockehart compound matches its neighbors – enormous, often cold, and bone-white, there are no distinguishing features to set it apart from the other residences in Abraxi beyond the emblem carved on its white beech doors: a clenched hand wielding a long tooth. It is the only sign that remains of the Lockehart’s legacy, a legacy Luka knows his family would much rather live without.

And if not for Luka, centuries more might have passed before the Lockehart family had to be reminded of their roots. If not for Luka, his family wouldn’t have to worry about sideways glances from the neighbors and whispered rumors – rumors that chased him through his childhood, rumors that saw to locking him away until he was finally fit to be seen.

Things would be much easier without Luka – which is why he needs to win this tournament.

Luka shakes himself as he enters the courtyard. It’s dimly lit by lanterns and heavily shadowed by perfectly groomed maples and crape myrtles. Fallen flowers line the manicured cobblestone, sparks of pink and red against the white. This had been his favorite place as a child – right there, next to the tiny pond, where the gurgle of water and the bubble of the scarlet koi had been his only companions beyond the warmed wood of his Cesse set.

“Framellio!” a high-pitched voice cries, and Luka’s head snaps up.

His heart warms and an almost painful smile stretches his cheeks – all lessons from his tutors on emotional control forgotten – as Cassian rushes from the house.

Small for his age and always laughing, Cassian looks more like their mother than he does their father; his dark hair spirals in tight curls, his eyes a deep brown. Even his skin, pale in the winter, freckles in the summer, same as Linne.

He runs to Luka, wrapping his arms around Luka's leg and pressing his face against the soft leather. "Framellio – we didn't know you were coming home today!"

Luka hefts his brother up with a grunt, holding him close and breathing him in – honeydew from an early stolen dessert and sage from the Cesse room. Cassian has been practicing.

"Have you gotten even bigger?" Luka asks as he tosses a squealing Cassian about. His brother writhes, wiggly as a snake, in reply.

"Luka."

His mother's voice is always a cold slap of reality.

Linne stands in the doorway, backlit by the dining room, face cast in grim shadow. The sweet smell of roasted pork and the bitter of freshly picked herbs sweeps around her, drawing a growl from Luka's stomach.

Luka places his brother down and Cassian giggles, wrapping himself around Luka's leg. "Carry me!" he chimes when Luka tries to take a step forward.

"Cassian, you're too old for that," Linne chides, crossing her arms. "Go inside. You'll need to wash up."

"Again? But –"

"Cassian."

His mother only needs to repeat their names with a sterner cast to her voice to receive obedience. Cassian untangles himself, leaving Luka to stagger for balance, and rushes up the bamboo steps. Linne catches him at the doorway, straightening his hair and

adjusting his shirt before shoohing him in.

“You’re back early,” she says to Luka.

“I got you your headlines.”

“I heard. A match at midnight? With this curfew in place? I told you victories and winning smiles, Luka, not dangerous controversy.”

Luka clenches his jaw. “Actually,” he begins, but Linne’s eyes flash and the words tangle in his throat. He bows his head. “I just wanted some dinner, Mother.”

“Is that Luka?”

Luka’s father, Carlo, pokes his head around Linne, brown hair falling across his forehead. His warm blue eyes brighten. “You’re home!”

“Yes,” Linne says. “He’s home. And the tournament isn’t over.”

“Come now, Linne,” Carlo says. “Surely he could come in for a meal? Maybe stay for a bit?”

A breath hisses from Linne’s clenched teeth before she spins in her soft house shoes. “Oh, you boys,” she says as she pads inside. “I swear, I’ll let you get away with anything.”

Carlo rolls his eyes and beckons Luka in, smiling widely. “It’s good to have you home for the evening, figilo.”

“And the night. I don’t like sleeping in that room.” Luka wrinkles his nose, climbing the steps and entering the house.

The Lockehart compound is the same as always: white, chilly, and painfully clean. The oak dining table stretches to cover much of the room, made larger by the lack of plates on it. Three spots have been made – though their household's Aiutani, Mina, rushes to pull up a chair and meal as Luka enters, her eyes downcast as she lays the silverware. At the head of the room, Carlo's automated hunting fuille hangs over the empty fireplace, muzzle gleaming in the gaslights. Luka perches at the threshold before tentatively stepping inside, sliding off his boots.

Carlo laughs, the sound jolly and warm. He pulls Luka into a one-armed embrace, smelling sharply of chemicals and faintly of blood – his familiar doctor smell. He adjusts his spectacles as he draws away.

"You've done marvelously so far, figilo," he says. "We're very proud of you."

Both of you? Luka's eyes flicker to his mother as she lowers herself primly into her chair, adjusting the long white sleeves of her blouse. Even in the late evening, she looks put together enough to face the Council; her curls have been cut to frame her face in a dark halo, her deep brown eyes outlined in kohl, making them appear otherworldly. Her lips, a brilliant red, curl as she catches his eye. Even her freckles have been dusted away beneath makeup, leaving a flawless white canvas behind.

"Well, aren't you going to wash up?" she asks. "Some of us are hungry."

Luka and his father do as told, and together with Cassian, all sit at the four ends of the table.

The sounds of chewing and swallowing are only allowed to be broken by Linne, so Luka avoids eye contact with his brother, who will surely burst into questions about the tournament if they so much as look at each other, and instead focuses on the perfectly spiced food. The pork is spicy and the salad bitter with a hint of sweet from the autumn apples, crunching with each bite.

Linne waves Mina over a few bites in, requesting black olives and the late summer strawberries. Cassian wrinkles his nose and trades grossed out looks with Luka, who barely manages to smother his laughter.

Finally, Linne says, dabbing at her face with a napkin, “The Kiterans are having a new soldier head their attacks.”

“Really?” Carlo replies. “Where did you hear that?”

“Oh.” Linne flaps her hand dismissively. “Here and there. That doesn’t matter. Their new leader – he’s supposedly been hand-picked for their new attacks on Siacchi – is said to be more beast than man. The Wolf-Born, I believe he’s called.” She cuts into her meat with a deft hand, the juices spilling across her plate. “Ruthless, apparently. He sliced through our bordering villages and left them to bleed. Siacchi has never experienced such... such violence before.”

Cassian pales. “But we’ll be safe, right?”

Linne shakes her head, a rueful laugh escaping her. “Safe? No. There’s a reason why these Kiterans have made it this far. Their leaders are not only ruthless, but also smart, despite their brutality.”

“That’s impossible,” Luka scoffs. “They have no control.”

Linne’s eyes flicker to his. “Even the beasts can learn a few tricks,” she says. Luka swallows harshly and looks away.

Linne continues, “I’ve heard they are cutting directly toward Cesscounthe. They know we are the jewel of this country – the brain, to be more apt. Capture the leaders and break us... Well, then the Kiterans could use our intellect to take control of the other nations. With our intelligence and their brute strength combined, the southern

nation – even the eastern kingdoms across the water – wouldn't stand a chance.”

“But – but we have our walls,” Cassian says, eyes darting between his parents. “They won't be able to break through – right? We haven't been attacked in... uh... a centuries.”

When Cassian speaks, it isn't his voice that Luka hears, but their tutors speaking through him.

“We haven't been breached in a hundred and thirty-one years, Cassian, and that is only because our enemies have not learned of the ancient tunnels beneath our city,” Linne corrects, scowling. “Hide that fear of yours, son, it will get you nothing.”

Cassian shrinks. Luka grits his teeth, saying, “Mother, they would perish in the tunnels without a guide and die before they manage to breach. We have the Aiutani – our impyassi – to uphold our non-violence pact, do we not? We would use them to defend us.”

Mina, standing with her back to the wall, pales. Luka tries not to look at her – tries not to think that she might be able to use her own beastly powers to smell the monster inside him.

Linne turns up her nose. “Do you think our country has the wherewithal to train all of those that failed the Bombani Exam how to fight in addition to how to clean? They already struggle enough with the latter. We will have to make do with the few guards we have. It's not like the impyassi pick up things quickly.”

“Linne,” Carlo says. “Perhaps you should tell the children where you're going with this.”

“Oh, yes.” Linne nods. “Tomorrow, when I speak before the Council Members and

compete with Council Member Childes for the open position, I will present a solution to this. So, you needn't worry. I will ensure your safety."

"How?" Cassian asks, eyes wide.

"Well." Linne smiles. "I can't tell you the whole plan now, can I? That would ruin the surprise."

When Cassian frowns, she adds, "But I will make sure we are properly stocked for a siege. The Kiterans shouldn't arrive at least for another week, so we should have time to pool our supplies from those in the Gamgy District."

"Gamgy District? What will they do about food then?" Luka asks.

Linne narrows her eyes. "What they must. They are barely citizens as it is. We already have an ample supply of Aiutani here, in the Abraxi District and the upper reaches of Cesscounthe. Surely we needn't worry ourselves about any of the impyassi or humans that failed the Bombani Exam. They're really of no use to us."

"They were still born here, though," Luka presses. "They still deserve our protection."

"They are little more than animals with their poor intellect. They likely won't even realize what is happening."

"But –"

"Luka," Carlo says softly. "Please don't press your mother. She is already not feeling well. She is –"

"Carlo," Linne cuts in. She dabs at her lips again, a green pallor creeping up her

cheeks. “You... needn’t worry them.”

Luka glances at his mother’s plate, surprised to see she has little more than nibbled at her meal. He blinks. “Would you like me to have Mina fetch you some soup?”

“I’m fine,” Linne snaps, pressing a hand to her stomach. “I will be fine. Carlo, I told you not to say anything.”

Carlo shakes his head. “But Linne –”

Linne silences him with a look. “You must excuse me,” she says, rising from the table, her napkin falling to the floor. Mina rushes to collect it.

Cassian waits until Linne has left before stage-whispering to Luka, “Will you tell me about your matches after dinner?”

Carlo levels an unneeded warning look with Luka that Luka pointedly ignores. “Of course,” he says with an indulgent smile. “You’ll need to learn all the tricks when you’re grown.”

After Luka has walked Cassian through his moves, explaining the hidden messages he left for his opponents on the board – that is, the messages appropriate for a child’s ears – he rises to retire to his chambers. Cassian clings, batting huge dark eyes lined with soft lashes, begging for Luka to stay. When they were younger, they spent long hours in Cassian’s rooms, playing games and telling stories – and even before Cassian was old enough to be aware, Luka hovered, entranced by the magic that was his little brother.

But Luka has matches to win tomorrow – and a man to beat tonight. So instead of indulging his little brother, he kisses Cassian on the forehead and bids him goodnight. “I’ll see you tomorrow evening. I’ll teach you my top secret move then, alright?”

“I already know your top secret move,” Cassian replies, eyes gleaming. He’s remarkably wicked looking in the flickering gaslights, his halo of curls casting horn-like shadows against the blue walls of his bedroom.

“Well, I’ll show you how to perfect it then, you little prodigy.”

Luka is nearly out the door when Cassian calls, “Do you really think that?”

“Think what?”

Cassian pokes the Cesse board they have been playing with, lips tugging into a frown. “That I’m a... a prodigy.”

Something tugs on Luka’s heart. He shoves the feeling away. It doesn’t matter the situation; the emotion is unnecessary.

“Of course,” Luka says.

“Mamma thinks... she thinks....” Cassian takes a sharp breath and starts to put the Cesse pieces away. Good. He’s learning to control himself. But as Cassian’s hands shake, Luka is reminded of Evland’s words with a flicker of hot rage – the rumors that Cassian failed his Bombani Exam pretests.

Even now, memories of Luka’s own test haunt him – the examiner’s unwavering gaze, noting even the smallest furrow of Luka’s brow. The twisting and winding questions, like a path with no end.

“She’s worried,” Cassian finally says.

“She’s always worried,” Luka replies. “But you have nothing to worry about, fratenillio. I have seen you play all these years, and your Cesse is as flawless as mine.

Better, even.”

His tutors only need to teach him control— then he will be safe.

Cassian attempts a tentative smile. “Really?”

Luka nods. “Really.”

It’s the truth. Though young, Cassian is bright and quick, picking up strategies and theories with little to no questions.

But Luka has also seen the pretest scores; he saw the look on their mother’s face as she pulled the letter free, the horror that carved her mouth into an “o”. Despite the words he feeds his brother now, fear gnaws on him.

“Do I look like Alessandro?” Cassian whispers, crawling into his bed and drawing the covers to his chin.

Luka freezes. “Where did you hear that name?”

“Papa mentioned it. When he came home from work the other day after a night shift.”

Luka grits his teeth. “What did he say?”

Cassian shakes his head. “He said he was just tired and we... we acted similar. That he was another framellio. Long before I was born.” Cassian toys with the decorative tassels on his comforter, drawing the golden threads taunt before releasing them. “Did you know?”

“I’ve only heard his name.”

“Papa said Mamma was so sad when he died.”

“I have no doubt.”

“Do you think... Do you think Mamma would be sad if I died?”

“Oh, Cassian,” Luka says. He steps into the room, sinking into the bed so he can stroke his brother’s soft curls. “She would be destroyed if anything ever happened to you – to either of us.”

“But –”

“I know things are confusing right now with her running for Council Member, but she loves us to the bottom of her heart. I swear on Cesse.”

Cassian covers a yawn with the back of his hand. “Alright. I believe you.”

“You better.” Luka pops another kiss onto his brother’s head. “Now go to sleep. You’re half in dreams already.”

Cassian mumbles something too soft to hear as Luka closes his door. He nods to the nursemaid sitting watch at the edge of his brother’s chambers. “Light the incense for warding nightmares tonight,” he orders. The woman dips her head in acknowledgement.

Luka is lost to stormy thoughts as he crosses the compound, head ducked, thankful most of the other Aiutani have already retired for bed.

He had been telling the truth to his brother – mostly. He had heard of Alessandro before, not because of any slip of the tongue from his father, but because of his research.

Luka slows to a stop at his quarter's entrance, drawing open a heavy door. He heaves a sigh of relief as he crosses the threshold; only a handful of days have passed since he last breathed in the soft smell of his rooms, but he missed it so much. Pine and cinnamon and sweet vanilla fill his nose as he lights the scented candles, passing through the emerald entry to the Cesse room overlooking the city.

Though lacking the view from the tournament competitors' chambers, Luka far favors this; splayed below him, the Abraxi District glows and flickers, compounds bright like fireflies. Lights wink in and out as some fall asleep and others wake.

Luka sets his Cesse board, allowing his thoughts to drift – to his elder brother.

Alessandro had been three when Luka was born, and dead at seven.

Luka learned of his elder brother through a tucked away sketch, dim with age and creased down the middle, shoved in his father's research books. He discovered a gap-toothed boy with curly hair so like his own. When he pressed his father – and then his mother – on the issue, both responded with varying degrees of animosity, forcing Luka to drop the subject.

But Luka did learn this: Alessandro had failed his Bombani Exam.

A shudder goes down Luka's spine, and he shakes his head. He can't think of this now – he needs to prepare for his match tonight. A match that might be interrupted because those Thought-damned Northerners are coming to ruin everything.

Luka moves his first Cesse piece forward and nearly leaps from his skin when something goes tap, tap, tap on his window.

Thoughts of muscled Northerners in their skimpy fur garb flash through his mind, and his fangs lengthen to his jaw. Luka flies to his feet, seizing the Cesse board and

scattering pieces. He isn't sure if he's planning on cradling it to his chest protectively or throwing it at the source of the noise. He's saved from having to decide when he sees Xyla Mobiele scowling at him through the glass.

Tap, tap, tap, goes her finger. She mouths obscenities at him and gestures for him to open the window.

Luka touches his fangs, automatic nervousness making his hands shake. But then again, none of that matters. Not with Xyla.

Nostalgia seizes him as he slides the window open. It has grown stiff from nearly half a year of disuse, and they both have to heave to open it wide enough for Xyla to slip through. It doesn't help that Xyla's generous hips always catch on the gap.

Once inside, Xyla levels a manicured finger with Luka. "You," she hisses.

"Xyla," Luka says, aiming for nonchalance and landing on breathlessness – which is entirely due to the effort he had put into opening the window, nothing more. "What are you doing here?"

Xyla's pointed finger lands on Luka's chest with three sharpened pokes. Her eyes flash amber, her fangs growing to match his. By the final jab, her nail is more animal than it is human, and Luka cannot help but to wince.

"I told you not to do anything!" she growls, her voice no louder than a whisper. "I told you I could handle it." Xyla spins, tossing her hands into the air as red fur ripples down her arms and then vanishes into her tan skin. She paces the length of Luka's room, words diminishing to garbled growls. "But no! You had to go and protect me again! I have never needed your protection – not now, and certainly not when we were –"

She abruptly pauses, words jerking off and angry strides pulling to a halt. She has always been like that – a burst of emotions that is contained so rapidly, Luka is left with whiplash and admiration at her sudden control. Xyla swallows and spins to face Luka. Her eyes are pure animal as they meet his, and Luka finds it hard to hold her gaze. “You are not going to that match tonight.”

“I am.” Luka’s voice sounds distant to his own ears. He’s finding it hard to focus. The pull of memory is too strong with her here. He tucks his hands behind his back to hide the tremble.

“Luka,” Xyla begins, and he shudders. The sound of his name on her lips always did unkind things to him. Xyla looks him over. She presses her lips together. “Luka,” she tries again. “You know I love you –”

“Don’t say that!” Luka forgets to keep his voice low as he snaps the response, slashing his arm across his body as if to fend off an attack.

“I do. I just don’t think we’re... I just... you know the Toula is probably right. I don’t think we’re meant to be mated.”

Luka flinches at the words, his heart twisting. He resists the urge to look at Xyla’s hand, at her fingers – the lines on her palm that he thought told of their intertwined fates. The lines that the Toula must have misunderstood. His voice is reduced to a rasp when he replies, “I know.”

“I don’t need you defending my reputation. I told you that when I decided to tell them the truth about me – when I gave you that option, too. Besides.” Xyla’s pinched concern changes to an ironic smile. “You said you didn’t want that kind of attention on you, right?”

“I said I didn’t want them to know. I’m not like you, Xyla. I can’t just go telling

everyone and anyone that I'm a..." The word impyassus is even impossible for him to say, so instead Luka closes his eyes and gestures at the disaster his emotions are rending on his body; to his nails, which have lengthened to claws, to the splotches of fur sprouting and dying on his arms and legs.

"You will be happier."

"I will be forever shunned. You're from the Mobiele family, your reputation is already sound, Xyla – you don't understand."

Xyla looks away. "I don't know why I'm talking about this with you again. Stupid – I'm so stupid."

"Xyla..." Luka shakes his head. "You're not... that's not... look, the reason I challenged Evland wasn't for you. Well – it wasn't just for you. He was saying things about my mother and about... about Cassian." The last word is little more than an exhale.

Xyla blinks, the fur vanishing from her forearms. A worried pinch that Luka knows well – he has smoothed it from her brows so many times before – grows on her forehead. "Cassian? But Cassian hasn't shown any signs, has he?"

"No. I've been so careful watching him, but he – no. Nothing."

Xyla's scowl deepens. "You know, it wouldn't be the end of the world if he were one of us –"

"But it would, Xyla! I don't see how you can't ever see that." Luka tangles his hands in his dark curls, shaking his head. "If Cassian is an impyassus, it will mean death to my mother's political career – they will all think she cheated on my father with some monster. And worse – it could mean the end of the Lockhart line! No good blood to

pass on our intellect –”

Xyla bares her teeth. “You realize it’s inherited.”

“And it skips generations. For centuries, my mother and the Lockeharts have kept it from their children... and now... we’re so lucky that Cassian hasn’t shown any symptoms.”

Xyla stares at him, the lines on her face softening from anger to something that looks alarmingly like pity. Her hand quivers at her side, half rising toward him, but then she shakes her head. “Fine. If that’s how you want to see things.” She turns to face the Abraxi District through the open window, the cool night breeze brushing auburn curls from her forehead. “I just came here to make sure you weren’t going to that silly challenge.”

“Oh, I am.”

“Luka! Kiterans are nearly upon us. It’s not safe.”

“Kiterans are nearly upon us,” Luka mimics, but now he uses the Kiteran dialect. His accent is poor. Xyla scowls at him, crossing her arms over her chest as she refuses to play along. She has always been better at him when speaking in the Kiteran dialect. She sounds almost native.

Instead, she says in a low voice, “You can’t do this.”

“What you said is true, Xyla: we aren’t together anymore. That means I won’t fight any matches in your honor. It also means you can’t stop me from doing something stupid.”

Xyla’s nostrils flare. “He’s already beaten you before – what’s to stop him from

doing it again?”

Luka somehow manages to hold her gaze as he replies: “I know him now. I’ve studied his matches – all the silly little messages he tries to leave his opponents. I know the way he thinks.” His hands curl into fists, claws cutting into his palms. “I will go out tonight, Xyla. And this time I will beat him.”

The words sound so confident – so true to his ears. Luka must believe in them. After all, there is only one thing left for him in this world now, and that’s Cesse – a skill Luka has proven himself adept at with the Bombani Exam. He cannot let Evland Childes of all people take that from him.

Xyla crosses her arms. Luka continues, “And when I win, he’ll be done for. Defeat in a back-alley tournament by me? To the public, I’m still new to Cesse competitions. Evland will be forced to withdraw from the tournaments and face humiliation. It will be perfect.” Luka cannot help but to smile at the thought.

Xyla shakes her head. “It’s a bad idea. But... but you’re right. I don’t get to stop you now.” She sighs and slips through the cracked window. “Just don’t go alone, Luka. I don’t... I don’t want you hurt.”

Luka replies, “I’ll be fine,” but Xyla is already moving away. Luka presses his lips together. To avoid watching her go, to avoid the crumpling hollow in his chest, the empty ache that reminds him he is so alone, he returns to his Cesse board. He picks up the pieces.

He knows he will beat Evland in this game tonight. And Luka knows that he will win. Things will finally change for the better.

Luka is sure of it.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 8:00 am

The West is warm and golden and on fire.

“A flawless plan, Sevell Hunter,” a soldier simpers at Theo’s side. Theo doesn’t look at the man – boy would be a more accurate description. He looks a few years older than Theo was when he first took to the battlefield at eleven. The things Theo had to do to climb the ranks – and the boots he had to lick... Theo hides a smile as he raises his chin, observing the village. The wooden structures have crumpled beneath flame, and dark clouds of smoke billow toward the early morning’s horizon. The Siacchians evacuate into the welcoming arms of the Kiterans, eyes wide with animal terror, wrapped in patchwork blankets likely still warm from sleep.

See? Theo thinks as he looks below. Commander Jennison thought I couldn’t handle this. But I can.

A sigh escapes Theo in a frosty cloud, turned scarlet from the dawning sun and the flickering fire. He holds out his bloodied hands, his ankle-length fur cloak fluttering from his shoulders. “Water.”

The soldier looks left and right, hands patting at his leathers for a wineskin. Octavian appears at Theo’s side, pouring a steady stream over Theo’s sticky fingers.

“You’re dismissed. Take inventory of the villagers, but do not harm them. We can use them for later,” Theo says to the soldier, who bows and scurries away. Theo returns his attention to his hands, washing the blood away with Octavian’s water.

“You didn’t account for if they had a hopiar,” Octavian says when Theo’s hands are clean, voice cast low so the nearby foot soldiers won’t hear. “You smoked them out

like a flock of hens. Had there been a fox in their midst, we would have taken enormous losses.”

“Sometimes it pays to take risks,” Theo replies, looking at Octavian out of the corner of his eye. The cut on Octavian’s neck is all but healed and he wears a new set of pale blue robes, standing out like a winter sky in a landscape of autumn golds and auburns.

“Yes,” Octavian says. “Sometimes you pay for the risks you take.”

Theo narrows his eyes. The memory Octavian refers to – the things Theo lost that day to the... the Snake of the South – burns still.

Without another word, Theo pulls Octavian away from the soldiers. He needn’t watch as his people collect the Siacchians and prepare them for the camp Theo has ordered built. He knows they will follow his orders or suffer the consequences.

He directs Octavian into the commander’s tent erected on the crest of the hillside. A soldier pulls the flap open for them, and Theo waves the woman away. “Help with the gathering of the prisoners.”

The interior of the tent is sparse; his bedroll has been compressed into a portable bag, his breakfast bowl is clean of his usual morning gruel, and his clothes have already been folded and tucked away into his rucksack. Only his Ravage board sits untouched and unpacked, pieces splayed in an unfinished game.

“Sit,” Theo grunts to Octavian; the latter is almost as tall as he is, and Theo wants to be able to look down on him.

Octavian collects his spindly limbs and perches on the edge of the folded up bedroll. He shifts, eyes straying from Theo to the tent, the oil lamp casting flickering shadows

across the curve of his nose.

Theo strikes swiftly. He seizes the smaller man by the throat, forcing him down. Octavian gasps, eyes bulging, but his attempts at escape are feeble at best. He knows that Theo will not kill him.

“Do not question me in front of these soldiers. They are not yet mine,” Theo says, voice little more than a deadly calm rasp. “I don’t care how low you speak. Someone will hear and rumors will spread, and I cannot afford such weakness, not with my position already as vulnerable as it is.”

Octavian desperately nods, nails lengthening to claws as he struggles. His eyes flash from gray to a light wintry blue.

Theo growls, an animal sound, and Octavian’s eyes snap back to ghostly gray and his nails return to human size.

“Do you understand?” Theo asks.

“I-I understand.”

“Good.” Theo releases the man, and Octavian hunches, coughing and gasping.

“You are the only one I trust here,” Theo continues. “These soldiers might follow my orders, but they will report back to the Elders. They will tell them of any mistakes I have made – even the smallest of missteps could result in my forced return – and I cannot have that.”

“You tell me this,” Octavian rasps. “But you used my life for collateral to get here. How could you do such a thing to the one you claim to trust so much?”

Theo's eyes narrow. He turns away to hide any emotions that might slip through his mask of apathy. He cannot allow himself to ever feel anything more than attraction for this man. Not if he wishes to win this war.

“You know what our deal is Octavian. I help you become advisor to the greatest Vell in our history, and you... help me. I need your intel. No one else has been to Siacchi's capital, and you and your spies made it inside only three months before. You know I did what I had to to get us here. You know what I want to accomplish – and you said you would help with that dream.”

“Because it aligns so well with mine.”

Theo turns. “Exactly. I haven't lost a Ravage match since – I haven't lost a match in years. There was never any doubt.”

“But –” Octavian whispers, stroking his throat. The cut at his neck has opened again, and his fingers hover above the blood like anxious birds.

Theo's stomach twists at the sight and he looks away again, squashing any growing sympathy. He mentally curses Octavian's beast. The man has to have the slowest hopiar healing in all the world.

“Would you have had me be a coward and allow this opportunity to pass us by?” Theo says as he stares at the tent walls. He imagines he can see his battalion beyond it, a physical representation of what he has accomplished so far – of what he needs to continue to improve.

Octavian is silent for too long before he finally says in a low voice, “Alright.”

At this, Theo turns, watching the man, taking in the fall of dark hair on his hollowed cheeks, the flicker of his tongue as it darts out, wetting full lips. Theo inhales – ah,

yes, exactly as he suspected.

“You think you can hide from me?” Theo asks, voice deepening to a rasp much different than the growl he released a moment before.

Octavian glances up through dark lashes. “I figured it was worth a try.”

Theo seizes Octavian once again, this time grabbing his face with a single hand. He descends on Octavian’s mouth with a fury, the kiss possessive and consuming and full of teeth. Octavian gasps and Theo thrusts in his tongue, his hands digging into the man’s hair, into the curve of his waist.

Theo yanks away and Octavian groans, eyes glazed. “Look at you,” Theo whispers. “Here I was trying to punish, but you were enjoying that far too much.”

“I could say the same for you,” Octavian rasps, eyes dropping from Theo’s burning gaze to the bulge in his pants. Octavian licks his lips.

It’s the look that does Theo in – he can wait no longer. He pulls his throbbing cock free, hissing as it meets the cool air. He wishes he could take a moment to savor the way Octavian’s lips part, the way his pupils swell at the sight – but Theo is far too eager. He slaps his cock against Octavian’s cheeks before plunging it into the wet warmth of the man’s mouth. A sigh escapes Theo’s lips as he pumps his hips, and Octavian releases a muffled moan.

Theo plunges deep into Octavian’s throat, and the man gasps, hands wrapping around Theo’s hips, pushing.

When Theo pulls away, a string of saliva stretches between the tip of his cock and Octavian’s lips. Octavian stares up at him with heavy eyes, but then shakes himself.

“What I said before – have you thought – I mean you must have thought about it. They could have one amongst them – the Siacchians,” Octavian says, voice hoarse. “A hopiar – I mean. A wolf – or worse – one of the beasts we lost to the West. One we haven’t seen before.”

Theo shakes his head, stroking his wet cock. “They would have already attacked.”

“Not necessarily. They could be waiting – biding their time. They could be planning to ambush us as soon as our backs are turned.”

“Oh, Octavian,” Theo says, shoving his cock back into the man’s mouth before he can continue. “You think I haven’t already thought of that?”

It is as evening falls and the sun sinks beneath Siacchi’s flatlands that the captured Siacchians finally strike. If Theo’s people were caught unaware, the Siacchians would have done irreparable damage to Theo’s battalion.

But Theo told Octavian the truth: he is ready.

As bedrolls are folded and armor is polished, four hopiar Siacchians attempt to explode into their beasts – and struggle. The food and drink given to them that evening has been laced with monkshood – or wolfsbane, as it is known in the West. Theo even borrowed a hint of Octavian’s favorite poison, the Midnight Kiss, dosing it carefully so as not to blind them.

Theo sits outside the encampment, hidden in the long shadows of evening, watching as the huddled prisoners throw themselves to their feet and clench, attempting to transform. Fur rolls across their skin and their eyes glow. Their fellow Siacchians recoil in disgust, crying out in terror as their neighbors try to turn into animals. The makeshift shelter the Kiterans lofted for the Siacchians to take cover beneath sways in the night breeze, apathetic.

“Get them,” Theo orders in a low voice as one lightly furred woman lets out a half moan, half growl, falling on all fours.

His guards surge forward, a sea of hopiar and human alike descending on the enemy. They clear the distance in a handful of long, swift bounds, bringing the Siacchians down.

Bringing them all down, all except one – the woman on all fours screams and surges to her feet, bracing herself – clawing the beast out of her. One of Theo’s soldiers – Medora – cries out as the enemy turns from a small woman to a large black wolf.

Theo raises his brows. The change under the influence of monkshood and the Midnight Kiss is no easy feat; it often requires intensive training to concentrate on the animal beyond the stranglehold of pain. Even Theo, who has been force-fed the herb since childhood, sometimes struggles to call forth his beast under the drug’s influence. Only weekly consumption of the herb keeps him strong.

The Siacchian wolf throws herself at Medora. Medora, unprepared, crumples with a muffled shriek. The Siacchian’s jaws fly open, spittle raining from her finger-length fangs as she moves to tear out her enemy’s throat –

But Theo can’t have that.

He doesn’t need his wolf for this; he tears from the shadows, crossing the clearing on human feet. He draws his forearm-length knife from his belt. Medora screams with terror, feebly slapping at the Siacchian’s thick hide with her human nails, eyes rolling in her skull as Theo slices through the thick coil of fur around the Siacchian’s throat.

The wolf’s attention snaps to him two seconds too late. Blood spurts, thick and hot. Medora and Theo are soaked in seconds.

The Siacchian growls, bubbling blood bursting from her snout, but before she can attempt to attack or escape, she collapses, groaning in pain. A deep moan escapes her as her fur crawls away, revealing sallow skin. Returned to her human form, the woman stares at the sky, eyes wild with pain – and then her body goes still, blood pooling in the dirt. Not dead. Unconscious. Such a blow wouldn't kill a fast-healing hopiar.

Medora lies beside the unconscious Siacchian, soaked and frozen. Theo meets her gaze. "Stand."

Medora clambers to her feet, adjusting the leather armor now hanging in bloody pieces from her broad shoulders and hips. She swallows, spinning to face the rest of the group; Theo's people have subdued the enemy. Medora shifts so she stands by Theo's side, turning slightly so she can guard his back.

The remaining Siacchians gape at them. The subdued hopiars slump. One mutters softly beneath his breath, words that Theo's sharp ears can barely make out: "Oh, dear heart, no."

Theo flicks blood from his blade. "You saw what happened here," he says. "Any attempt at escape – any thought of rebellion – will be met with punishment. The only choice you have is to follow orders. If you do as you're told, I will allow you to live. And you should be grateful."

The hopiar Siacchians glanced at each other. All look terrified but for the man who called the fallen woman dear heart.

And that, Theo reminds himself, is why I can never, ever care about Octavian.

It is the human Siacchians that speak. "Please," a thin, old man begins, Siacchian dialect thickened with terror and age. "Do not associate us with these impyassi. They

act independent of us. We will follow your commands.”

Theo narrows his eyes at the humans, resisting the urge to scoff as they move to grovel. They stink of fear – and piss. The hopiar Siacchians at least still have some spine left in them.

He forces the disgust from his face as he speaks again. “I’m so glad you’ve told me as much,” he says. “I require information and you seem to be eager to share. Tell me, Siacchian, what is your name?” Theo approaches so he towers over the kneeling prisoners.

The old man audibly gulps. He opens his mouth and no words emerge. It takes three tries before he manages, “Frederick.”

“Frederick. You can call me Wolf-Born.”

“Wolf – Wolf-Born?” Whatever little color remaining in the man’s face instantly flees.

Theo scowls. “I don’t like to repeat myself.”

Inwardly, amusement flickers. Already his reputation precedes him. Now that is the kind of start of a campaign that the Elders would like to see. Maybe with this war won, they will finally allow him free reign.

Maybe he can finally make a home of his own. Maybe he can finally have a place to return to – finally begin to rebuild that which was lost over ten years ago.

“Tell me, Frederick,” Theo says. “The Kiterans have decided to take this country for our own, but we’d hate to destroy your lovely minds. I think with the help of your best strategists, I can keep the people here mostly intact. It’s important to preserve

such valuable intelligence, don't you think?"

Frederick's head jerks in a nod. "Yes – yes, Danessi Wolf-Born, that makes perfect sense. A wonderful strategy! I would – well – if you're looking for the brightest minds in our country, Cesscounthe's Abraxi District would be –"

"Frederick," a hollow-cheeked woman hisses. "What are you doing?"

Theo meets the eyes of one of his soldiers, dipping his head. The man's arm flashes out, sword sparking in the dying light of the day. The hollow-cheeked woman's head hits the ground.

"Continue," Theo tells Frederick.

The man's eyes bulge as he looks from the stump of his neighbor's neck to Theo. He laces his shaking hands together behind his back. "Cesscounthe. The capital. Our best strategists are there, likely in the heart of the Abraxi District."

Theo nods like he doesn't already know this. "Cesscounthe is a walled city, is it not? How am I to get inside?"

"Your people – and the Southerners – have tried to invade through the tunnels in the past, but... no one knows the routes well enough to survive – except for the nobles, perhaps. Their families were the ones who built them. If you want to use those, you'll need someone on the inside to help you."

His words align with what Octavian's hired mercenaries, the Wolf's Teeth, reported. Kiteran and the southern Balivartian's skeletons line the tunnel's narrow halls. It is a tempting death trap.

"And who am I to target amongst your strategists?"

“T-target? Well, I supposed – the Council Members would be best –” Too protected.

Frederick continues, “But the winner of the Cesse Tournament is considered to be the best of their generation. That individual is thought to be the brightest of our people.” He swallows again, eyes flickering from Theo to the other Kiterans, pointedly avoiding the blood-soaked grounds.

The old man shudders and whispers, “Are you really – are you really going to let us live?”

Theo gives Frederick a bared tooth smile. “Of course I am, Frederick. I’ll need people like you in the new nation.”

“People like me?”

Sheep. People who are easily controlled; humans who have no connection with their inner monster.

Theo simply widens his smile, which only serves to draw more beads of sweat to Frederick’s shining forehead. “Yes, I think you’ll do nicely, “ Theo says. “One last question and then I’ll let you all return to your fine evening: what is his name?”

“His name?”

“The one who is to win this tournament.”

“Oh – that’s – well, it’s not yet determined – but they suspect it will be... erm...” The man rustles about before drawing a rumpled length of parchment – no, not parchment, paper – from his blankets, likely stuffed there to keep himself warm. “Reports have stated the victor is likely to be Evland. Evland Childes.”

Theo takes the paper. It is smooth beneath his hands. There, on the page, the bold sketch of a young man stares back at him; full lips, wide eyes, dark curls.

Pretty.

“Perfect.” Theo nods to his people. “Release them. Ensure they receive food.” He meets the eyes of each captured Siacchian, taking in their rage and helplessness. “I reward loyalty.” His gaze lands on the hopiar who verbally mourned the death of his comrade. The man’s eyes are filled with tears of rage.

Behind Theo, a low whimper rises from the Siacchian woman. He glances at her out of the corner of his eye; her lids flutter, lost to the pain, as her throat slowly knits itself back together, aided by her wolf’s healing powers.

“Please,” the Siacchian man whispers at the sight.

Theo says, “And I have no patience for deceit.”

With that, Theo spins, sword flashing. He swiftly removes the Siacchian’s head from her body. Better safe than sorry.

He leaves the Siacchians and his soldiers behind, drying blood from his blade. Each village will be like this: people to crush and informants to use.

Evland Childes – so this is the name of the man that Octavian’s spies learned of. Now Theo will have to see what Octavian’s connections can find in regards to their target’s whereabouts.

And then, finally, once Theo has found the man, he can break him so this war can be won.

Maybe then, in the years that follow, Theo will be strong enough to rebuild his home.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 8:00 am

Despite his words to Xyla, Luka considers going to sleep, he really does. He lies in his bed and stares at the arched ceiling, fingers rapping on the mattress as he tries to think about the best strategy for his games tomorrow. But his mind keeps wandering back to Evland's smug face – to the sting of the man's words.

Besides – if Luka doesn't show, what will the paper-runners say the following morning once they catch wind?

Better to be known as a rule breaker than a fool and a coward.

And if Luka wins this – no – when Luka wins this, he will ensure that Evland can never say such things about his family or Xyla again.

With this decided, at half past eleven Luka slips into a dark pair of trousers and a warm sweater, wrapping a fine cashmere cloak around his shoulders and fastening the golden clasp tight at his neck. As he tucks his curls beneath a warm cap, he slips out the window Xyla exited several hours before. He tries not to inhale her lingering scent of oranges and anise as he picks his way along the starlit path.

The Abraxi District is dim against the night, so Luka blends in with his dark clothes as he slips away from the Lockehart compound. He pointedly avoids looking behind him as if fearing he'll see little Cassian's face peering back.

Luka steals onto the streets, moving briskly. The Gamgy District is on the far side of town – and the streets where he picked to meet Evland Lockehart are part of the overflow that extends past the great walls – and he will only make it there in time if he's quick.

Cesscounthe stills beneath the grip of curfew; the normally thriving streets are empty and desolate, and Luka resists the urge to shudder as he crosses Hyacinth Square. The silence is graveyard-like, and his imagination cannot help but to turn the shadows cast by closed vending booths into figures weaving through the night.

Twice, Luka pauses to press himself against the wall of the building behind him, flattening into the darkness. He tries to slow his ragged breathing as he listens to see if the strange rattling noise, like coins being jingled, or a strange shuffling, like the pacing of feet, has been generated by paranoia or reality.

Both times, as awkward quiet stretches between his muffled pants, Luka resumes his brisk walk, grateful no one bore witness to his jumpiness.

Ten minutes in, Luka sees the first other person, or more specifically, couple, breaking the newly established curfew.

Luka again hedges into the alleyway upon hearing their hushed voices. He wipes at the sweat gathering on his forehead, warm despite the chill of the autumn night. As he cautiously peers around the mortar, his anxiety calms when he realizes the source of the sound.

Two men lean on each other as they exit an alley a few blocks down. They smile excitedly, hands locked as they dart from shadow to shadow like a child would puddle to puddle. Though Luka does not know their faces, he recognizes their matching necklaces and the sheen to their eyes as they pass beneath the moonlight – the two men are impiassiAiutani.

And the alley behind them leads to the hidden door where the Toula works.

Almost three years ago, Luka went to that same little hovel for her wisdom. He entered with Xyla, both wearing hopeful smiles – and they exited separately. Luka

lingered for a while afterwards, pleading. Surely a woman with such foresight could foretell a different future, one where they would be together.

But the Toula held firm; their fates did not align, she explained with a sad smile. She pointed to the lines on his hand. “Love with her is not for you, giovone,” she said, shaking her head.

Luka left alone and broken-hearted. The woman he thought his mate – his childhood friend, his one companion in Cesse and Thought – the one person who saw him for what he truly was and still seemed to love him, was gone.

Luka bites his tongue to fight down the memories, nausea welling in his stomach. After that meeting, Xyla pointedly avoided him. She only met with him once – when she demanded they come forward to society as impyassi. “I want to stop living a lie,” she whispered to him on a late, cool night like this, her eyes wet with tears and shining like the stars. “Come with me.”

But Luka looked at her outstretched hand and at the lines on her palm that read a fate meant to be intertwined with another – and said no.

After that, Xyla and his relationship officially ended, which was exactly to his mother’s approval. Humans aren’t meant to marry based on fates or hand lines, she would have shouted – had Luka bothered to explain. No, someone like Luka Lockhart is not meant to be with someone like Xyla Mobiele, for all that the Mobiele house should have strengthened his family – he should marry someone greater. Someone who could help his family, and his mother. Besides, without Xyla, Luka had more time to dedicate to Cesse.

Luka shakes his head. He’s already wasted enough time, and these memories will take him nowhere good. They never do.

The giggling couple disappears into the night and just as Luka eases himself from his hiding spot, another person emerges from the alleyway.

It's the Toula herself. She is small and hunched and hobbles along with her cane. The beads around her neck clink as she moves, her free hand wrapped around a red leather bag.

She isn't alone. A tall man walks behind her, his stride the opposite to hers.

"We need to get you home," the man whispers. Same as the couple that left before them, both the man and the Toula wear a heavy medallion around their necks, marking them as having failed the Bombani Exam. Unlike the Lockehart's household's privileged Aiutani impyassi, they are subjugated to manual labor – no matter their age. Even from where he stands, Luka can see the toll the work has taken on the Toula, who is old enough to be his grandmother; her gnarled fingers tighten around her walking stick, lips pressed tight as if each step is pain.

The man gathers the Toula's elbow to help her. "We shouldn't have stayed so late."

"Hush, Damian," the Toula replies. "Did you see them as they left? Giggling like little Abraxi school children?" She shakes her head, a pleased smile spreading from cheek to cheek. "It was worth it."

The man – Damian – scowls. He towers over the Toula, his dark cloak sweeping the packed dirt street. His features are carved, with cheekbones sharp enough to cut. His nose is the only severing of the clean lines of his face, a bump at the bridge indicating it has been broken and never set right.

"Worth it?" Damian repeats. "If we are caught past curfew, it's not just us that could face repercussions. If they discover the –"

Abruptly, the man pauses and his head snaps up, eyes somehow shooting to the dark alleyway where Luka hides. Luka swallows.

That's impossible.

The man couldn't have heard him or seen him. Luka has been far too careful.

"What is it?" the Toula asks.

"Stay here."

Luka's heartbeat doubles as Damian drops the Toula's arm and cuts across the streets, heading – impossibly – to where Luka hides. Discovery by a lowly impyassus would likely not be the end of his mission, but there are plenty of paper-runners willing to quote even one who failed the Bombani Exam if they can cast people of power in a poor light. Luka cannot be discovered.

Damian's nostrils flare, and Luka's eyes widen.

Is he scenting me? Such a thing isn't impossible per say, but impyassus skills are unrefined. If seen used in a public space the user would be punished. Luka presses deeper into the alleyway, heart in his throat – only to stumble over a heap of trash.

Luka muffles his cry of terror as he topples, landing on his backside amongst meal scraps and thrown out leftovers. The smell is wretched, but his fear keeps him from gagging.

Damian rounds the corner, shoulders braced. Even more impossible than his ability to track Luka by smell is the – the naked blade in his hand.

The closest Luka has ever come to such a thing is his father's long skinning knife, but

even that – in addition to the automated fuille Carlo uses in the annual fox hunt – are not to be touched for eleven months out of the year.

“Who are you?” Damian snarls, blade swinging toward Luka.

Luka’s mouth is so dry, he struggles to find an answer around the mess of his tongue.
“I-I –”

“Damian, what in Sweet Fox’s name are you doing – oh.” The Toula pauses behind Damian, peering around him. If not for the situation, Luka might have found their size disparity almost comical; the Toula barely even reaches Damian’s mid-chest, rendering the old woman childlike. “Luka.”

“You know him,” Damian says, voice deadly soft. His blade gleams.

“Oh, put that away, Damian!” the Toula scolds, swatting the man’s shoulder. “He’s one of us.”

Luka flinches at her words, lips automatically shaping the word no, and Damian’s eyes narrow.

Damian hisses, “He’s still spying.” He looks Luka over again. “He is of the Abraxi neighborhood. He’s seen the blade.”

“And whose fault is that? I will not have you injuring this boy! I only just read his fate, you realize? There was nothing stating you would be the one to cut his life short.”

“Cut my life short?” The words rush from Luka’s mouth before he realizes it. Both the Toula and Damian’s attention swing back to him, and Luka internally curses. And what did she mean only just? It has been years now.

“Oh dear, don’t worry about that!” the Toula says. “It might have been metaphoric.”

“Or it might have been literal if you say anything about having seen us here,” Damian says, brandishing the blade.

“Hush now, you fool.” The Toula squeezes forward, helping Luka to his feet. “Put away that silly thing. There’s no need to scare the poor boy.”

“Poor boy? We’re practically the same age.”

“Exactly. You’re both children. There now.” The Toula brushes bread crusts and clumps of tomato from Luka’s jacket. Thankfully, the dark fabric seems to have mostly escaped staining, but it’s difficult to tell in the dim light. “I know you won’t tell anyone about having seen us here, will you, Luka?”

The Toula straightens his collar and stares deep into Luka’s eyes. The beast flickers inside her, turning her warm brown gaze to two shining coins. Luka swallows.

“Of course not,” he says, voice barely more than a whisper.

“Good, good, good.” The Toula almost compulsively seizes his hand and gazes at it the same way one would a very engaging book. “Well, it was delightful seeing you, dear. Give my love to your brother and... oh! No, no, not yet, hmmm.”

Luka’s brow furrows as the Toula turns his hand left and right, as if trying to better see it in the dim light. Before he can speak, she is pulling away, saying, “Be good now. We’ll be seeing you again soon.”

Luka’s lips part, but the Toula has turned. She collects Damian’s arm and pulls the man away. Damian narrows his eyes at Luka, lip curling to bare abnormally long teeth.

For a moment, Luka thinks that the man will linger to threaten Luka some more, but the Toula says, “He will be in just as much trouble should he decide to say anything, dear,” and drags him away. Luka can barely make out the man’s snapped response of “He’s from Abraxi – don’t be ridiculous”, but by that point, the two have disappeared.

Luka remains half slumped in the alleyway garbage for what feels like a long time. He waits until his heart settles, wiping his sweaty palms on his now filthy trousers.

It is the ringing clocktower’s announcement of midnight that brings Luka springing to action. Shit.

He returns to the streets at a silent sprint. He might be late and reeking of garbage, but he still has time to defeat Evland. He can still salvage this.

Luka soars through the first section of the Gamgy District – he turns down an alleyway, easily locating those tunnels from so long ago. As he descends into darkness, he forces down the memories that rise like bile. You are not going to his grave, he reminds himself, swallowing reflexively. He emerges on the other side of the wall, chest heaving, boots damp. Carvings of hunters chasing monstrous foxes watch him from the stone and wood. The clocktower has long since silenced. Cesscounthe looms behind him, hidden behind the soaring walls that keep its people safe – well, most of its people. Those people who can afford to live inside the walls. He realizes as he forces himself into a trot, that it is very fortunate Evland Childes is from such a prestigious family. Only a Childes would be able to follow the tunnels as well as a Lockehart. He is fifteen minutes late as he comes to a screeching halt outside the spot he had told Evland to meet him.

Only to find it empty.

Luka compulsively swallows as he looks about. Nothing but empty stalls, sagging

houses. Most of the residents have been forced inside the walls, fearing the oncoming invasion.

Did Luka make the wrong turn? His breaths rattle through him as he paces, the rotten tomato stench following him as he searches for any sign of movement.

But the night is eerily still. Worry gnaws at Luka as he walks.

Has Evland simply decided not to show?

Have the paper-runners decided it wasn't worth the danger?

Luka returns to the spot he is certain is where he and Evland are to both gather – which is still empty. He kicks the dirt, grumbling. Has he really risked all this danger just to be stood up?

Luka presses his lips together and glares up at the night sky. The moon has followed his movements throughout the night, smiling down on him now in a faint sliver. Even the stars seem to blush at the sight of Luka, alone – and an idiot for thinking Evland would actually break curfew for this match –

Wait.

Luka squints at the horizon. Something odd drifts amongst the stars, cloud-like but too light.

Smoke?

Before Luka can scrutinize this further, a strange scuffle sounds behind him. Footsteps.

He heaves a sigh of relief. Somehow, the strangeness in the sky all seems so much easier to handle when there is someone else there, even if that someone is Evland. He braces his hands on his hips, spinning.

“About time you showed up –”

Luka’s words are cut off as a hand descends over his mouth and nose. A strange scent fills his nostrils. He gasps, inhaling the sweet smell, limbs flailing – but a tree-like arm has wrapped around him, rendering him immobile. His heart pounds against his ribs and he tries to scream –

But already, the world has gone soft. Something roars in his ears – the ocean?

Luka sighs as he slumps to the ground. The darkness consumes him.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 8:00 am

“This is him?” Theo asks.

“Yes,” Octavian replies. They both look the unconscious man over.

Evland Childes resembles the sketches in the papers. He is undoubtedly beautiful, but in the way a summer flower is beautiful – his delicate features and rosebud lips won’t stand the test of winter. His dark hair falls in crumpled ringlets, haloing his pale face. Looks aside, he stinks – rotten tomatoes, old cheese, and moldy bread fill Theo’s high-ceilinged tent, and both men step away with curled lips.

“He’s not much,” Octavian says, taking in the slender arms and diminutive frame. Ordinarily, hearing someone like Octavian say such a thing would lead to laughter, but even Evland Childes is delicate in comparison to the scholar. Conscious and standing, their prisoner would probably only reach Theo’s chest.

“We didn’t pick him for his size or strength. We picked him for his brain – and his connections to the council and Council Head Dawls,” Theo says. “Besides, if he fails us, we can find another to help us.”

“Another one?” Octavian raises a brow. “My intel only told us of Childes.”

That’s why I did some research of my own. Theo remains silent, crossing his arms over his chest. Octavian wasn’t the only one capable of using their mercenary branch, the Wolf’s Teeth.

“You’re really not going to tell me?” Octavian says, voice gaining a nasally pinch. “I thought we talked about this Theo. You need my insight. Things go better when two

heads are put together.”

When Theo doesn’t reply, Octavian’s brows raise as he says, “You don’t trust me.”

“That’s not a question.”

“First, you pull that Ravage stunt to get us out here in the first place when I could have died –”

“Are we really talking about this again?”

“– and now you send our people in the dead of night to kidnap this man – how do you know they picked the right one?” Octavian’s cheeks grow cherry-red under the oil lamps’ circles of light. “I don’t care how much he resembles some sketch of the man you think we’re after. I’m surprised you haven’t even asked me if I’ve used the correct poison!”

“Are you done?” Theo asks.

“No! I am most certainly not! I’m supposed to be the one to help you conquer this land! I’m supposed to be the one who is made your right hand when we assume control over this territory as leaders! We could be doing so much more, Theodori – digging beneath the wall –”

“I already told you: that’s a waste of time.”

“I’m supposed to be the one you trust!”

Theo runs a hand through his hair. “That’s where you’re mistaken.”

Octavian pauses, puffing and blowing. “What?”

“You shouldn’t trust me. Just like I can’t trust you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“This is war, Octavian. I can’t entrust all my secrets with a single person. Should you be captured, you’d be my greatest weakness.”

Octavian’s face contorts, and for a second Theo thinks the man might say but what if I want to be your greatest weakness or something equally dreadful. Instead, Octavian whispers, “Why is this any different than before?”

Theo closes his eyes against the obvious hurt on Octavian’s face. “Before?” he repeats. “You saw how Commander Jennison used you as collateral. Our enemies – our people – will try to use the ones I care about against me.” The scent of scorched flesh and carnage rises in his memory, and he automatically draws away from the hand that Octavian extends. “And I won’t ever let that happen again.”

“But –”

“But I will trust you with this.” Theo opens his eyes. Both he and Octavian look at Evland Childes.

Octavian’s lip curls. “You trust me with the Siacchian? My place as second is by your side –”

Theo scowls. “There is no one else I can trust with this,” he says. “This Siacchian is now inside our base. If he is even half as intelligent as all of your reports have made him out to be, he could simply outwit our people and escape into the night – our siege places him just outside Cesscounthe’s walls. You must watch him carefully.”

Octavian stills at this, blinking.

Theo continues, “I need you to keep him here – to keep him safe. Our people won’t be pleased with having a Siacchian amongst our ranks.”

Octavian’s gaze swings to the unconscious man. They both observe Evland Childes’ rose-colored cheeks for three soft exhales. Octavian sighs. “Fine.”

A strange wave of emotions wash over Theo as he watches Octavian resign himself to the task. There is annoyance at himself, for having picked such a clingy man. But also a stifled affection for Octavian that Theo wishes to beat out with a vengeance. He can’t afford to care for Octavian any more than he can afford to care for Commander Jennison – or anyone, for that matter.

“Keep him in your tent,” Theo continues. “Be glad he looks so feeble; that should make him easier to crack.”

“I don’t suppose you’re going to bother sharing your plan for that,” Octavian grumbles. “Or at the very least provide me with a soldier to help me carry his body.”

“You can manage, I’m sure.”

Octavian heaves Evland Childes over his shoulder, grunting. It is only his hopiar strength that enables him to carry the man. He walks to the exit of Theo’s tent, mouth set, but then abruptly pauses. “But you do care about me.”

Theo stiffens. “Why do you say that?”

“You said it yourself; you can’t let them know about the people you care about.”

“That’s not what I –” Theo bites his lip and approaches his second in command. He lays a hand on Octavian’s shoulder, wrinkling his nose as the waves of Evland Childes’ stink slap him. “Yes, alright. I do care about you. Against my own will.”

Octavian narrows his eyes. “You could at least be a bit happier about it.”

Theo summons the willpower to reply, desperate to escape the conversation, when something – something impossible hits his nose. He blinks, shaking himself. His gaze darts to Octavian as he inhales deeply.

“Is that – what is that?” Theo says.

“You’re going to avoid the question? Really?”

Theo inhales again. It’s like bathing in the sweetest scent in the whole world. It has been buried beneath the rotten tomato stench, but now he’s not sure how even something that foul could have obscured it. Lightly sweet and slightly musky, with just a hint of spice – like the woods in spring, when the flowers first spread their petals to bloom beneath the misted sun. It’s a smell that takes him back to his happiest memories. It’s the smell that makes all his worries melt away.

It’s the smell that belongs to his mate.

His true mate.

Theo’s wolf reacts without thought, his vision tunneling as his claws extend. His mate is here, but he cannot find them – he does not know where they are. What if they aren’t safe? What if they are in danger right beneath my nose? Dimly, he’s aware that Octavian is speaking to him, but the words are lost as Theo swings left and right, searching. It couldn’t be Octavian – right?

But no – Octavian’s scent, beneath the smell of unwashed skin and the spice of worry, is unchanged as always; old books and something salty, like sweat or brine. It can’t be Octavian. And the only other in the tent is –

This time, when Theo takes in the sharp lines of Evland Childes' carved face, he does so as if his very gaze is a caress. He swallows, unable to control himself as he falls to his knees.

This is my mate.

This is my mate?

The wolf reacts with joy and elation – we are no longer alone. They will finally have someone at their side that will be there for them – someone they can trust –

Theo crushes his spreading smile. This person is not his strength. This person is not his happiness. This person is at the very least a stranger, and at the very most... a weak point.

“Theodori?” Octavian says, the irritation in his voice suggesting this isn't the first time he has called Theo's name. “What are you doing?”

Theo only barely manages to snatch his hand back in time, preventing himself from stroking Evland Childes – his prisoner! He is my prisoner! – on the cheek. His prisoner and his enemy. He will need to break this man. He will need to turn him.

I will need to harm my mate.

No.

Theo turns to the side and claps a hand over his mouth, only just keeping down his meager breakfast at the thought.

But he can't be thinking like this. Not with a battle to win. Theo can't have a weakness like this. Not now. Not ever. He is surrounded by unfamiliar soldiers,

camped outside the stronghold of his enemies. Should he show one scrap of affection for anyone, he is putting them at risk... and they would put him at risk, too.

“Theodori!” Octavian hisses, alarm creeping into his tone. He glances over his shoulder at the shadows cast by their soldiers moving outside the tent, as if fearing they might see through the canvas. “What are you doing?”

Octavian’s words are an icy balm to Theo’s fear. He cannot let Octavian see any more of this. Somehow, Theo forces himself to his feet. Somehow, he cages his emotions, shoves them down beneath the smooth surface of his usual glower. Somehow, he forces himself to say, “It is the man’s smell. It is truly awful – make sure he is bathed and given new clothes. We can’t have him stinking up the camp.”

The thought of this man – mine – in another’s arms, naked, soaked in water, soft skin covered in soap, is almost too much for Theo to bear. He shakes the images away.

“Alright,” Octavian says, eyes narrowed, making it clear he is not convinced this is the problem. “There isn’t anything else?”

“Make sure he is examined. We cannot have him internally bleeding from that capture and have him die some weeks into captivity.” Theo’s heart squeezes at the thought. “And... just – just keep him away from me. I’m too busy to deal with the Siacchian now.” Theo is amazed at how calm his voice sounds. How measured. Like he is aware of every syllable and takes care to speak it.

“Shall I be the one to handle his interrogation?”

An involuntary shudder wracks him, and Theo seizes his right hand with his left to keep himself from grabbing Octavian by the throat. Anger turns his vision to scarlet. Theo has heard enough about it to recognize it for what it is: the initial rage, a precursor to the connubial rage. A common stage in the early mating process, before

the bond is finalized. Anything that tries to keep him separate from his – his – no, he won't even think the word – anything that tries to separate them will lead to his wolf clawing that person apart.

Theo shoves the feeling down. He is strong, and this can't be real. Theo has never believed in the true mating bond – in the involuntary pull of supposed soul mates. Such things are fiction for children.

I just need a good fuck, Theo realizes. His eyes flicker to Octavian. "Yes," Theo says evenly. "You will be the one to handle him. Do whatever it – whatever it takes."

Octavian's throat convulses, and Theo forces a smile. He cannot help but to add, "Ensure he is kept hidden in your tent at all times after the exam. He is in danger in the camp. Should one of ours with a war grudge discover we've captured a Siacchian, we will need to defend Ev – we will need to defend him."

A tiny sigh of relief escapes Theo when Octavian nods. "You're right; a pacifist Siacchian would be torn to shreds."

"Even if he is a hopiar."

Octavian pauses. "A what? He is no such thing."

Theo stares at his second. "You cannot smell it? His beast?"

"Theodori, are you sure you're alright?" Octavian cocks his head to the side. He drops the Siacchian carelessly. It's all Theo can do to keep himself from checking the stranger for wounds – and strangling Octavian. "Shall I call for a healer?"

Theo narrows his eyes. "Patronize me again and you will regret it."

Octavian raises his hands defensively. “I smell no hopiar. You know how the Siacchians are; they stifle their beast until it is all but bound. The ones who captured him detected no wolf, not even when he was ambushed.” Octavian snorts. “Perhaps he is a little bunny beast. That would explain why he fainted so easily.”

Not a hopiar. Is it possible? Theo is just mistaken then. Hopiar can fuck humans, but they cannot find their true mate amongst them.

Theo turns away, a silent, relieved laugh shaking his shoulders.

“Theodori?”

The burn of Octavian’s gaze warms Theo’s back. Theo says, “Make sure you’re present when he wakes, Octavian. Break him how you see fit.”

“Understood.” Octavian’s boots crunch in the frozen dirt.

“And Octavian,” Theo calls imperiously. “After you’ve secured the... prisoner, return here. I need you to attend to me.” His hand grazes the bulge in his leather trousers – his cock is rock hard.

“I’ll be there,” Octavian says, gathers the Siacchian in his arms, and then exits the tent.

And with that, the sweetest scent, the gentlest scent, the scent of Theo’s prisoner, is gone. It’s like a vice has been lifted from his heart – and his balls. He sighs and sinks to a crouch, thinking of his captive.

Evland Childes. That is his name. Your mate’s name is Evland Childes.

Not my mate. He is not even a hopiar.

He is only my prisoner. Only my key to victory.

Theo sets his teeth, hands curling into painfully tight fists.

After I have the information I need to invade Cesscounthe, I will dispose of him – I will.

I have to.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 8:00 am

Someone is poking at his fingernails.

“He’s fine,” the someone says, voice smokey and feminine, accent foreign and thick. “Obviously not in the best of physical condition, but that’s to be expected for a Siacchian. It’s a good thing your men like you so much, Octavian. Had they known it was Wolf-Born asking for this capture, they would have banged him up more.”

Another person chuckles – male. “My men say he squealed like a rabbit when they captured him.” His voice is raspy with a slight whine.

“I have no doubt,” the woman replies. “All Siacchians are shrinking violets. Even so much as a boo, they faint and are found dead by heart attack. You’ll have to take care with him, Octavian. Wolf-Born must want this brain desperately to go to such great lengths to ensure his well being.”

All Siacchians? Wolf-Born?

Luka sorts his tattered memories; the alleyway, the match that Evland didn’t show up to – the cloth settling over his mouth. Darkness.

And then... a smell. Warm. Inviting. Like the sweet of dew on those early mornings Luka spent beneath the trees in the Lockhart compound, all those years ago, when Cesse was still an abstract concept. Even the memory of the scent calms Luka’s fear, slowing his heartbeat and easing his lips into a smile –

– which Luka aborts promptly. He cannot let these people know he is conscious. He cannot let them know he is listening – gathering information.

“Did Wolf-Born want me to check on him later?” the woman says.

“No need. He’s fine. Don’t want to draw any more attention to him than necessary, after all.”

“Oh, yes. Just our little secret.” The woman lets out a strained laugh. “Not even the Elders are to know.”

The man goes quiet before saying in a low voice, “Vittoria, if they find out, then we shall know who the rat is in this camp. Do not for a second think that Wolf-Born will be kind to you, no matter your status.”

There it is again – that dreadful name: Wolf-Born.

The main prong of the Kiterans’ attack on Siacchi. The bloodthirsty man who is leading the charge against Luka’s beautiful home –

Where am I? Luka’s mind drags from a crawl to a soar. The dim light of the morning presses against his eyelids. They’re facing west. Dawn – that means a few hours must have passed.

Which means the enemy is at most a few hours outside of Cesscounthe’s walls.

Luka’s throat tightens at the thought of the Kiteran’s soldiers closing in on his home – his place of safety – the only place he has ever known. How close must they be now? They weren’t supposed to arrive so soon. Surely miles must still separate their camp from Cesscounthe.

Even with his cold, rational thoughts crunching numbers and calculating distances, Luka cannot control the terrified message racing through his thoughts, the words pounding in time to his heartbeat: They’re here. They’re here. They’re here, and they

are going to kill us all. Nothing can save his people – his people, to whom violence is so abhorrent, they must rely on beastly impyassi to protect them.

Oh, how he hopes – he so sorely hopes – that his mother has a plan to handle this. His people are not prepared to face such destruction. Even with their impyassi, these bloodthirsty Kiterans will cut through them like a scythe through corn – like a bullet through a fox.

Luka's chest aches from caging his racing heart. To his horror, his teeth lengthen, arms itching – the beast is trying to break free. He needs to calm himself.

One inhale – Luka pictures the Cesse board. He pictures the perfect squares, the rounded pieces. He imagines the way the wood feels rolling beneath his fingers. He moves a piece forward, and then another.

He is seventeen moves into a game against himself when his emotions quiet.

He forces himself to reevaluate the facts.

First: he is still alive. Why? They need him; they must know his mother is a powerful political figure. They must know that she will do anything to ensure his safety... within reason. This has the potential to destroy her campaign.

Or... they are planning on using him for worse things –

Images of ropes and muscled men restraining and torturing him flicker through Luka's thoughts. He shoves them away with a vengeance.

They are either planning on using him for a bargaining chip or they think he knows something that can help them. But why haven't they just attacked? Cesscounthe is well guarded, but like Linne had said at dinner – last evening, now – the Kiterans

could easily outman and overpower them, if they so desired.

The realization shoots through him: Linne is right. The Kiterans do want to use the Siacchians. They need them. If these barbarians could harness Luka's people, they could attack more, ravage more, rule more – the Southern Balivartians, the Kiterans' decades-old enemy, will easily crumble beneath the combined forces of the West and the North.

And now they have Luka.

Luka is not strong. He's known this since childhood. He's known this since his tutors sat him down to practice the Bombani Exam questions and tears streamed down his cheeks from the pain of their beatings. He remembers their words, burning through him like acid: You are weak. You will fail. You are useless.

Yes, the Kiterans can break him if they wish. It would not be the first time.

But while Luka may be weak, he is smart. He is the second in his generation to score a perfect score on his Bombani Exam. He can use this.

Could he maybe even... no. Luka doesn't dare think it.

The only thing that matters now is escape. Escape from these Kiterans. Escape from Wolf-Born. From the man who has kidnapped him.

At the thought, Luka envisions a terribly hairy beast, more wolf than human, pinning him to the ground with a single paw, teeth glazed with saliva.

Luka cannot contain an involuntary swallow. He shifts slightly, feeling slowly returning to his limbs. His arms ache and are tied at the wrist, but his legs are free. Should he run now?

Heart in his throat, Luka cracks a hesitant eyelid.

A man stands with his profile to Luka, clothed in long vibrant blue robes, the edges muddied from travel. His face is marked by a crooked, narrow nose and framed by long dark curls drawn into a complicated braid. Pale gray eyes narrow. “Vittoria, hush,” the man says.

“I wasn’t saying anything!” the woman, who cuts a slender figure against the pale walls of the tent, says, crossing her arms over her chest.

The dark haired man’s – Octavian’s – gray gaze flickers to Luka, and it takes all that Luka possesses to lie still and pretend to be unconscious. The man’s eyes shift, and it might just be a trick of the light, but Luka is suddenly filled with the terrifying certainty that this man is an impyassus by the way his pupils dilate. By the way Luka thinks they might flicker with inhuman, monstrous blue, like the white-blue sheen of fresh winter ice.

He’ll know I’m awake. Luka’s heart slams against his chest. If the man is a beast, surely his unnatural hearing will make it out. Surely he will know.

But the man’s eyes only slide across Luka’s form before he shakes his head, looking away. “Fetch me something to feed him before we go,” he says. “Can’t have Wolf-Born thinking we’re starving his important prisoner, now can we?”

“Certainly not,” the woman says, turning. She hands the man a sack and a wineskin. “The drink is fresh. Still warm.”

“Perfect. Maybe we can fatten him up a bit. Make sure he survives the winter.”

The woman frowns. “Are we going to be here for so long?”

“As long as Wolf-Born needs us to be.” Octavian ties the bag to his belt and approaches Luka. Luka forces his limbs to weakness – he needs this advantage. He will not have many windows of opportunity to so openly observe the enemy. He can’t let them knock him out again.

Octavian again surprises Luka and instead of ensuring that he is still unconscious, the Kiteran hefts Luka onto his shoulder with a small grunt – using only his right arm. Luka tries his best to flop about with difficulty. Any doubt that Octavian is a normal man vanishes; this Kiteran is an impyassus. That strength is not human.

Despite the way the woman and Octavian discussed it, Luka can’t help but to wonder if this Kiteran – this impyassus – is Wolf-Born.

An uncontrollable shudder wracks him at the thought; stories from his mother and rumors from those outside the Lockewood household flash through his thoughts. More man than beast, Wolf-Born is known for his cruelty – and, shockingly, his intellect.

But he would be no match for Luka. Of that much, Luka is certain.

No, Luka thinks as Octavian bids the woman farewell and peels back the tent flap, stepping into the faint morning – judging from the height of the sun, it must be only just past dawn.

This is not Wolf-Born. For some reason, Luka is sure he will know the man – the creature – when he meets him.

No, Octavian, despite his impossible strength, is not built to intimidate, but instead to duck and hide. Certainly not the kind of person Luka suspects Wolf-Born will be.

Autumn air nips at Luka’s skin as the man carries him swiftly through a – makeshift

camp? It's hard for Luka to tell through narrowed eyes, but he can only just make out what look like endless pitched tents around shoulder height. Soldiers roam about, faces muddled, horses trailing behind them. Many call out friendly greetings upon spotting Octavian. A makeshift wall of wooden spikes marks the edge of the camp – the wood looks so hastily cut, Luka can see the strokes of the axe's felling strikes from here. The land is flat, relatively treeless – familiar...

No.

There is good reason it's so familiar. Luka's stomach drops.

There, towering before them, is the wall of Cesscounthe. Luka recognizes the iconic fox hunters carved into the wooden entry – now locked tight. The guard towers glow against the pink dawn, likely occupied by terrified Siacchians or one of the few combat-trained impyassi.

But the Kiterans aren't supposed to be here for another week!

Even if Linne does have a plan, surely she wouldn't have accounted for such speed. To cut through Siacchi so quickly, how many lives must have been lost to the Kiteran's warpath? How many families have been torn apart?

How many more will these monsters kill before they're satisfied?

Luka's breaths escape him in dry rasps as terror descends once more. His fangs lengthen, claws digging into his palms. Will they hurt Cassian? They're going to hurt Cassian!

The thought is a catalyst to an explosion of rage and terror. He can barely contain himself. Something roars inside, something evil and deadly and hungry for blood. He has to get out of here –

“Just wait another minute more,” Octavian murmurs. “Mustn’t let all these fine soldiers know you’re awake, alright?”

The rage and fear rushing through his veins chills as Luka tenses. He knows I’m conscious.

Why would he pretend otherwise?

Why would the enemy allow me the time to take into account his defenses?

Hypotheses bubble to the forefront of Luka’s mind, fogged by the fear in his thoughts. Before Luka has the time to focus, Octavian says, “There you go.” He hefts Luka a little higher on his shoulder. Luka’s skin crawls at the touch. Out of the corner of his narrowed eyes, he can make out the man dip his head to a staring soldier. “Had a few too many last night,” Octavian tells his fellow Kiteran, shaking his head.

“You’re a beast, Octavian Scholar. Wolf-Born not enough for you?” the man replies with a laugh, and Octavian’s responding jovial chuckle reverberates through his narrow chest.

He either hasn’t seen the ropes binding me – or he doesn’t care. Luka’s cheeks flush.

“Careful about such questions,” Octavian warns. “You might find out.”

The man’s response is too quick and strangled for Luka to catch, the Kiteran dialect shifting to something near incomprehensible. This man holding me... he likely is... attended to by Wolf-Born.

Luka uses the distraction to gather his scattered emotions. Embarrassment stabs at him. He has not nearly lost control in years – almost a full decade. What would happen to him if he allowed his monster to burst loose here? His death, surely.

And then what would become of Cassian?

No. Nothing good comes of such fears.

Octavian's speed slows as he approaches a tent placed far from the main cluster of the Kiteran's shelters, bending low as he ducks inside and pulls the flap shut. He places Luka on a soft cushion and settles opposite, pushing stray strands of hair behind his pierced ears.

"Now, no need to pretend to be unconscious anymore, Childes," Octavian says. "Let's talk. I'm sure you have questions."

Childes?

...Childes?

Two seconds is all Luka allows to gather his thoughts.

One: This man is high in the pecking order, but not the commander. Someone who has some sort of... relationship with Wolf-Born himself.

Two: They think I'm Childes – Evland Childes. But why?

Two seconds up, Luka opens his eyes. He collects himself, rolling his emotions inside like he would his Cesse pieces into a bag. Carefully, he balls his hands into fists so any minute changes to his claws will remain undetectable.

That is – if these people haven't already scented the evil animal inside of him.

"You're remarkably calm," Octavian says.

Luka forces himself to take in the tent before he replies, the words trembling on his tongue. He needs to be careful. Every action that he takes now will be like a move on the Cesse board – belabored with purpose and meaning.

The tent is larger than the one he woke in; he would likely be able to stand comfortably. The walls are slightly translucent on the east side where the sunlight floods in, and Luka can faintly make out the shadows of the Kiterans soldiers moving outside. Beyond a plain bedroll unrolled on the dirt ground and a makeshift writing desk – all signs of letters or journals unfortunately tucked away – the interior is utilitarian.

“Calm?” Luka repeats. It’s likely not hard for Octavian to believe Luka doesn’t understand; Luka has a knack for dialects. He sounds practically fluent in Balivartian. But the Kiteran tongue is gruff and foreign to his ear.

If they think I’m Evland Childes, they must have never seen his face.

Realization is a cold slap: they’ve likely only seen drawing or daguerreotypes – like in a paper-runner’s article.

Even worse than that is the question that gnaws at the back of his mind:

What will they do when they find out I’m not their target?

When Octavian nods, Luka swallows, saying, “How could I be calm? I’ve been kidnapped – by the enemy.” Luka curls his lip at the word, trying to channel Evland’s superiority despite the fear making his palms sweat. As Octavian’s right brow lifts, Luka adds, “Whatever you’re planning, you should know my mother would do anything to ensure my safety.”

Octavian’s eyes only widen by a hair, but the surprise is enough for Luka to eliminate

one of his theories: they aren't after ransom money.

Ultimately, this is for the best. Besides the obvious fact that the Childes family would never pay for Luka's safe return – in fact, they might even pay for the Kiterans to keep Luka captive – it's a relief to hear the Kiterans aren't seeking money.

Luka isn't sure how much his mother would pay if it put her career in jeopardy.

"It's not your parent's finances we're interested in," Octavian says. "Your mother... she is an Elder – a Council Member, is she not?"

Luka nods.

Octavian steeples his fingers. "The Council Member whose position is being challenged?"

"Y-you know much about Cesscounthe politics." Luka grits his teeth.

Octavian smiles. "It is my job to know things."

And yet you kidnapped the wrong person. Luka tries to keep his face steady as he nods again. "So if not money, then why? Leverage?"

Octavian rises to his feet. His eyes flicker to the restraints at Luka's wrists and then away as he paces the tent. "If you haven't already figured it out, I'm not sure how much use your life will be to us."

A chill rattles Luka's spine. He forces his shoulders back, muscle memory instilled by thousands of tutors keeping his spine straight.

Ah.

The Kiterans do not seek compensation. They kidnapped the one who is most likely to win the Cesse Tournament. They want him for his intellect.

Well, they want Evland Childes for his intellect. All the more proof they are idiots.

“You want me to help you bring down Cesscounthe,” Luka whispers.

Octavian’s smile widens, and despite himself, old joy stirs in Luka’s stomach – the pleasure of having passed a test. He crushes the sensation.

Octavian says, “Yes. Do this, and we will spare you.”

Luka’s teeth sink into his lip as he forces the response out, “And if I choose not to?”

Octavian shrugs. “We replace you.” His hand falls to the sword hanging from his side.

Luka closes his eyes at the sight of the weapon, at the thought of such violence. He remembers the first and only time he accompanied his father on the yearly fox hunts on the outskirts of Cesscounthe. He remembers how the fuille fired through the air, filling the foggy morning with great clouds of smoke. He remembers the way the fox fell, twitching, blood pouring from its side. The little sounds leaking past its dagger teeth – the wild, rolling look in its eyes. And then the peace as it let out a small sigh and went still with death.

Will that be me?

“Oh, don’t look like that,” Octavian says, and Luka’s eyes spring open. Octavian grins. “Wolf-Born will torture you first.”

Luka gulps, and Octavian’s face grows even softer. “Look at you, you poor

Siacchian,” he says. “I’ll make sure things don’t come to bloodshed. I do hate violence, especially when inflicted on those who don’t deserve it.”

Luka doesn’t trust a single word of kindness from the man’s lips. “If you want me to help you, you cannot harm me,” Luka says, though the creak to his voice steals any certainty.

“I’m doing my best to shield you from Wolf-Born, but speak to me like that again, I don’t think I’ll be able to save you from his wrath. Is that what you want?” Octavian asks as he crouches so they sit nose to nose. Shockingly, as the man’s face grows close to his, that beautiful smell flashes past Luka.

It’s not coming from Octavian – Luka would have noticed it sooner. No, it’s something that Octavian interacted with – something he must have touched recently.

The smell calms Luka, grounding him as much as his Cesse board. Luka parts his lips, unsure how he is supposed to respond, when his stomach growls.

“Ah, yes, right.” Octavian dumps the sack of food stuff and the wineskin onto Luka’s lap. “Dig in.”

Luka jerks his chin toward his bound hands.

“You’re small but you make up for it with your guts, don’t you, Childes?” Octavian says. He draws a small but sharp blade from his waist, and Luka grits his teeth as the man slices his bondings.

Luka flexes his hands as he draws a stiff piece of bread – stuffed with meat if his nose is to be trusted – from the bag. He devours it swiftly, and Octavian chuckles. “Not at all what I expected,” the man says when Luka looks up. “You eat like a Kiteran.”

He laughs at the look on Luka's face. "Not an insult!" Octavian assures. "We Kiterans are quite clean. We cleaned you up, didn't we?"

Luka disguises the tension that ripples across his shoulders at the words as he lifts the wineskin. He tries not to notice that Octavian is right; his once filthy, tomato stained clothes are clean. He instead focuses on the drink. It's warm, banishing the autumn chill. The liquid is creamy and almost nutty. He wipes his lips with the back of his hand when finished.

Octavian readies his writing desk. He sets down a stack of parchment and a selection of charcoal. "Left handed," he murmurs to himself as he does so, and Luka has to fight off a pinch of despair. These Northerners are supposed to be half-wits and barbarians – why do his captors have to be so Thought-forsaken observant?

"Now," Octavian draws himself to his feet. "You have the day to impress me. I want a map of your city drawn to the most minute detail; all entrances, exits, secret passageways or tunnels easily marked by sundown."

"A day... sundown may not be enough time," Luka says.

Octavian tuts and shakes his finger.

Suddenly, Luka's head snaps to the side, blinding white pain filling him. He gasps as he presses a hand to his cheek – blinking back into reality. Something – had something hit him?

He looks up, shaking himself, and Octavian stands before him, head cocked. "I am being kind now, Siacchian," he says, a slight smile still frozen on his face. Only the redness on his palm betrays that he struck Luka.

Luka goes cold. Octavian was blindingly quick – how is Luka to escape such a

monster?

“A day,” Octavian says. “No more. Think of this as a trial run. And remember, Evland Childes – you are infinitely replaceable. I want a map – focus on entrances that will allow us the least amount of bloodshed. We just want access to your leaders. If you do your job well, no one has to die.”

Luka’s blood pounds through him, his mind flying. He can’t think of this as real life. No, he can’t think of this as his death if he fails. He has to think of it as Cesse – as a move an enemy player has just made.

Yes, if he pictures Octavian’s strike as a piece moved there, then Luka would react like this: Luka forces a smile to his face.

“Infinitely replaceable?” he says, voice forced as smooth as a piece on the Cesse board. “You and I both know that cannot be the case.” He licks his lips, mouth painfully dry. “You chose me specifically for this role, after all. Wouldn’t a map maker be better suited?”

He was gambling on being the only Siacchian they kidnapped. They could have gone after others, but did they have the time? And surely they want to keep him hidden – too many Siacchians captured would raise too much of a stir.

“I think, Octavian,” Luka says, enjoying the bolt of satisfaction that runs through him when Octavian blinks at the sound of his name. “That you need me. There’s a reason you picked me – Evland Childes – for this task. It’s because I’m someone just high-ranking enough that my intellect is guaranteed, but not important enough that my missing will shift the tides in the war. And I’m willing to wager there aren’t many others that fit that description, are there?”

Octavian’s eyes shift, that same icy blue from before rolling across his gaze. Luka

fights off a shudder. He needs to end this move softly – too harsh of a threat, and he'll trigger his enemy's beastly emotions.

Luka then realizes, with a shock, what Octavian must be looking for.

The tunnels. Only the old noble classes of the Abraxi District would still remember how to navigate them. No. That can't be – how would the Kiterans have learned of their existence?

The answer comes too easily: old noble families live in the villages they ransacked.

They must have tortured those people to learn of the tunnels' existence.

“Sunrise tomorrow,” Luka says, his face blank. “You will let me work through the day and the night, and I will produce a map for you that properly displays my skills and knowledge.” He pauses, considering, before adding, “A map of the tunnels you are looking for.” Again, he enjoys the way Octavian lifts his brows. “Should you find it lacking, I wish you the best of luck locating my replacement.”

The words feel like salt thrown across fresh wounds, but Luka sits tall as he speaks them, maintaining eye contact. He imagines his hand rising from his moved piece, the Cesse board a shield between himself and his opponent.

Octavian blinks the cold blue from his eyes away, lips curling into a smile. “Good,” he purrs, “so nobles do know about the tunnels. Keep telling us the truth.” And then, in a softer voice, he adds, “You know, you actually remind me of someone when you grow a spine like that, Childes. It's too bad they don't feed you enough here. Had you been given a proper diet, I might have even mistaken you for a warrior.”

“Is that a yes?” Luka asks, though he knows he has won. When his opponent sinks to degrading comments, it's because they have no better strategy to lean on.

“Sunrise tomorrow.” Octavian brushes an invisible piece of dirt from his blue robes. “Now, I suggest you get to work.” He spins as if to leave the tent.

Luka blinks with surprise. “Wait,” he says, unthinkingly.

Octavian pauses halfway out the tent, eyes narrowing. “My patience wears thin, Siacchian.”

“Where are you going? Are you leaving me unwatched?”

Octavian offers a thin grin. “Thinking about escaping already, Siacchian? Entertain those thoughts while you can. When you’re in my tent, you are in the safest place in this entire camp. Your people fear the hopiar, don’t they?”

Hopiar? That’s their word for the beast. For impyassus.

Despite Luka’s efforts, fear must leak into his expression – or worse, his scent – for Octavian’s grin widens. “As I thought.” He bares his teeth, which have grown long and sharp, and Luka lurches away. “If you want to survive this night, you’ll stay here. Leave, and you’ll risk my people discovering you. They do not take kindly to rogue Siacchians roaming our camp, and you humans are so soft and delicate, I’m sure you won’t survive their first nibble.”

Octavian snaps his teeth to punctuate his point before leaving the tent. Luka shivers in the dirt, collecting his thoughts like a blanket.

Surrounded by wolves. Monsters are all around him. That shadow moving just beyond the tent wall? Some beast that could tear him to shreds.

Luka steadies his breathing as he settles before the writing desk. He rolls up his sleeves – the fabric is coarse and warm – wool. Kiteran blend. At least I won’t freeze

to death before they find out I'm not Evland Childes.

Childes. How differently would things have gone had that coward actually met Luka for their midnight match?

These damned barbarians – they had only supplied him with parchment. Disgusting.

At least there is a small charcoal sharpener to refine the point of his writing utensil. Luka shaves a few pearls of charcoal away, hands moving mechanically.

Luka flips through the pieces of parchment. Octavian has left him seven in total; enough for Luka to start anew should he make a mistake – which should hopefully be enough, considering it will be near impossible to erase.

Carefully, Luka casts a line of charcoal. He scoffs as he starts his sketch of Cesscounthe. Charcoal. He hasn't written with such archaic tools since he was forced to learn writing as a child. As his hand whispers across the page, tremors turning his smooth lines to zig zags, a plan forms. A plan warmed by a single realization: his captors do not know.

They do not know that I am a monster, too.

Come nightfall, Luka gathers a stray piece of parchment and sneaks from the tent for the first time that day. His stomach rumbles as he peels the entry flap open, peering out into the dim.

He knows Octavian is not far – but not too close either. He heard him, only a few hours before, scolding fellow soldiers for speaking poorly of Wolf-Born. “You must trust in your leader's strategy,” Octavian advised, and it was only after he spoke that the other Kiterans fell silent.

The camp is made misty in twilight, oil lamps flickering as they sway from nearby tents. There are fewer soldiers now. Luka tenses as a pair of men walk past, but his shoulders relax when he realizes how unsteady their strides are and how red their faces have become – they're drunk.

In fact, as Luka peers closer at the half a dozen Kiterans he can make out, almost all sway unsteadily. He covers a smile.

Perfect.

Luka slips from the tent like a whisper as he creeps through the camp. He moves west-ward, closer toward the Cesscounthe wall. The Kiteran's makeshift compound is sprawling and almost completely encircled with their spiked barrier, made even larger in darkness, but it is dwarfed by the enormous gate before them.

And there, only five tents away, is an entrance in the barrier. The tiniest of holes. As he suspected, the Kiterans have created a cup-shaped camp, wrapped around Cesscounthe's towering wall. Octavian left Luka near the center, close to the entrance of the city.

This is why Octavian left Luka so unguarded; he wouldn't have thought Luka bold enough to try and squeeze his way toward such a well-defended exit.

But Luka has stood on this very ground before. His feet have only walked this path once, but his body could never forget it.

Because around the western bend, beyond the camp and pools of light emitted by the oil lanterns, near the man-sized rocks over the hill, lies a secret his mother shared with him the first time he emerged from the catacombs and stood beyond Cesscounthe's walls.

Luka still remembers that night well; the vice grip of his mother's hand on his arm, the fear sour on his tongue. Even now, the hiss of his mother's words – be quiet! Speak a word – fail another test – and you'll end up here, with your brother – slithers through his ears like a snake, raising goosebumps on his arms.

Luka shudders and sinks behind a tent as a group of drunken Kiterans totter back to their tents. Grateful for the distraction, Luka sneers at them; they're within an arm's length of the enemy. How could they feel so confident to get this drunk?

He can use this – if he gets out.

Another handful of painfully long minutes later, Luka stands a tent away from the barrier, palms damp. He drops his small ripped piece of parchment from his pocket, scattering sticks and stones in a careful pile onto the path his mother took him years ago –

Which is exactly when something slams into his side.

Took you long enoughis what Luka planned to think, but as the ground crashes up to meet him, all that runs through his head instead is ouch.

Darkness snaps across his vision, and he gasps, crumpled on the ground beneath a huge – hairy – creature. Something is crushing his chest, smashing his lungs. A terrible scent fills his nose. Animal. Blood. Rage.

It is only when something wet and warm slips down his cheek does Luka realize his eyes are closed. Breaths escaping him in ragged gasps, he forces himself to look at his attacker.

The icy blue eyes betray Octavian. If not for the color, Luka might have thought a different Kiteran tackled him; Octavian's wolf has pale, almost white fur, a stark

contrast to his dark locks. He's also huge – easily three times the size of Luka, with teeth the length of his palm.

Octavian snarls against Luka's cheek, and Luka flinches. "D-don't kill me," he says with a rush. He raises his hands, fingers shaking like leaves. "I just – I just need the b-bathroom."

It's a stupid excuse, but Luka came prepared. A warm wetness spreads around his trousers as his bladder releases. His cheeks warm as Octavian pulls back, curled lip turning from an expression of rage to that of disgust.

Octavian releases a sharp huff, breath smelling of meat and onion, and then withdraws. Luka inhales gratefully, though his breaths stutter in his throat as Octavian releases a low groan and a terrible crunch as he changes from animal to human.

In three terrible seconds, a horrifyingly nude Octavian stands before him, brows drawn into a sharp point. "Really?" he snarls, sounding remarkably like his wolf form. "You were looking for a bathroom?"

Luka shrugs helplessly, face still dangerously hot, lungs trying to recover from being sat on by an enormous animal. He coughs, somehow managing to push himself up to his elbows. "You were gone. I didn't want to ask someone to walk me to the latrines."

Octavian places his hands on his hips, completely ambivalent about his nudity. "I left you a bucket," he says, as if this explains everything. At Luka's terrified, quizzical expression, Octavian massages his temples. "For the Great Mother's sake – you seriously expect for me to believe this?"

Luka's hands adjust scattered pebbles, piling them atop each other in a miniature of

how his people mark their graves. He's already built the pile high enough that even from a distance, it could be spotted by a clever watchtower guard.

"You don't have to," Luka says to Octavian. "Just give me till morning. I'll show you how much I'm worth then."

Octavian's face is hard to make out in the waning light, and the swinging lanterns turn his already dark scowl into a cavern. He parts his lips to speak –

"Scholar! Is that you?"

Both Octavian and Luka jump as a soldier, a man with short red hair and a bright, drunken smile, approaches. He swings free of the grip of his two comrades and stops just short of Octavian, oblivious to the man's nudity and the tension. "I thought so! Listen – I have a plan I want you to pitch to Wolf-Born – it's about that connection you said that you made with – Leeann. No – Lima? That woman?"

Octavian's expression grows even more murderous. "I should have never spoken to you, Jack. The services of the Wolf's Teeth are not needed at this time."

"Oh," the man, Jack, says, drawing away and looking back and forth between Luka and Octavian. He giggles. "Interrupting something?"

Octavian looks ready to draw blood, but Luka's already moving, staggering to his feet. "As a matter of fact," Luka says, dragging his soft shoes across the ground, concealing the area his fingers had sunk into the dirt with a sweep of his leg. "Yes, you are. Octavian, care to continue this in private?"

Octavian blinks, but his surprise is fleeting. He snatches his blue robes up from where they have puddled on the ground. "I'll speak to you later," he growls at Jack, before seizing Luka by the back of the elbow and dragging him away.

“I’ll speak to you later, too!” Jack says, waving. “You too, strange smelling guy – wait a minute –”

Before Jack can complete whatever drunken epiphany has struck him, Octavian and Luka vanish behind the tents. Luka stumbles trying to keep up with the other man’s rapid speed. He has to resist a sigh of relief as they speed away from the small pile of stones, parchment, and grass he has left behind. He couldn’t have asked for a better excuse to leave – now Octavian will never know. Luka shoves his dirtied fingers into his now empty pockets and clears his mind as he prepares for his next planned set of moves.

As expected, Octavian tosses Luka into his tent like one would a sack of old laundry. Luka lands poorly, scratching his hand. He presses his fingers against the wound to stem the flow of blood as he gathers himself.

“Let me see this map,” Octavian says as he shoves past Luka. He pauses before Luka’s work, blinking as his eyes dart from one edge of the drawing, first moving swiftly and then slowly, taking in the details.

Luka’s chest eases. For the second time this day, he has won against Octavian.

Octavian, as if realizing Luka’s thoughts, crosses his arms over his chest and strides across the tent with as much pomp as a nearly naked man in a fluttering open robe could possibly summon. “At sunrise, I expect it to be complete,” he says with a sniff.

“It will be ready for you then.”

“Oh, not just me,” Octavian says. “I think it’s time for you to meet Wolf-Born.”

Luka swallows.

“And if you’re extra good, we might even give you a new pair of trousers – and perhaps a bath.”

Luka cannot help to think of what that bath might entail now that Octavian trusts him less. He would be monitored of course – Octavian might even wash his back, running his slippery hands down Luka’s skin to wash away the bubbles. Luka could even use the moment to his advantage. Octavian seems to like the other male soldiers. Perhaps Luka could use the skills his tutors taught him: nibble his lip, bat his lashes, and reach for Octavian’s –

Luka shakes himself. No. He doesn’t need to seduce his way out of this. Not with the message he just dropped.

Octavian raises a finger. “But do not test me again, Siacchian. It might not be simple to find your replacement, but it’s certainly not impossible.”

“Understood,” Luka says, tucking his hands behind his back. He has no need to attempt escape now.

“Until morning then.” Octavian ducks out of the tent, leaving Luka to the darkness.

The instant the Kiteran has left, a sigh of relief escapes Luka as he sinks to his knees. I can’t believe that worked.

His message is out there. Now, it’s only a matter of his mother discovering it.

Luka forces himself back to his map, picking up the piece of charcoal. He has until morning.

I can do this.

His drawing is nearly flawless. It is close enough to perfect that as Luka looks upon it, guilt writhes in his gut. In the hands of the Kiterans, this would be such a useful tool... had Luka not shifted everything slightly. Though appearing perfectly drawn to scale, entrances are placed randomly, passageways made large enough to fit three men abreast when really they would barely fit one. It would have to be enough to keep Luka alive and to satisfy the enemy.

For Luka gave every detail he could think of – almost. He had yet to decide how to twist the secret passageway – the same that his mother used to sneak Luka – and before that, her dead son – out all those years before. Luka has always wondered why. Sometimes, he even dreams about it, imagining her saying something like I wanted to bury him outside the walls where he could be free, with a tear trickling down her cheek.

But Luka knows better than to fool himself into thinking that dream a reality.

No, practical Linne would never allow herself to fall apart in such a way. Practical Linne, who made sure Luka would never fail the Bombani Exam, with her pinches and her whispered threats. Which is why Luka knows he will need to give her something if he's going to get a rescue. He will need to make himself worth saving.

At long last, Luka allows a slow, triumphant smile to grow across his cheeks, a smile that grows into a silent, shoulder-shaking laugh. They think I'm Evland Childes.

The Kiterans had wanted Evland Childes for his intellect, but they now have Luka instead.

He will make that mistake their downfall.

Luka will find his way out of here. He will return home to Cesscounthe and to his mother with the information he has gathered, and he will bring these Kiterans – Wolf-

Born himself – to their knees.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 8:00 am

“You did what?” Theo says, standing, hands wrapped around a warm cup of horse milk. His low voice hardly breaks the morning quiet of his tent.

Octavian’s jaw works. “I wanted to see where he would go,” he replies, robe crumpling beneath clenched fingers. “I figured he would try to escape. He might have led us directly to a secret entrance through the Siacchians’ gates.”

“You could have lost him!”

“I needed to see what he would try!” Octavian hugs himself, shrinking into a ball at Theo’s feet. “But now he doesn’t respect me – he thinks he could have slipped from my fingers.”

“Then make him respect you,” Theo growls, stalking over to seize his clothes. He yanks on his robes, securing the dark linen at his waist with a thick leather belt. There is no need for his fur cloak here. He is not planning to change shape, and it is warming this far south. Weak morning light bleeds through the tent’s walls. Octavian watches on from where he sits on the floor, his robe parted to reveal his naked body.

Theo looks away. “I told you not to bring him before me.”

“But, Theodori – I can’t scare him. I need him to trust me and respect me, but not be terrified of me. And last night – well, he’s scared shitless – pissless, really – of me now. I need him to see a real monster so he knows I’m not the one to be afraid of. Please. You have to be the one to interrogate him.”

Theo stiffens, but Octavian continues, “When he trusts me, I can make sure he’s

feeding us truths – not lies. But he'll never believe in me if he thinks I'm the one in charge."

Theo narrows his eyes. "You want me to show him I'm holding your leash by – by scaring him." His skin shudders at the thought. The memory of the man – his prisoner – rises once again. Even now, Evland Childes' scent lingers. It crept into his dreams last night, haunting him in the form of wandering hands and warm lips. Evland Childes splayed before him in a position much like the one Octavian was in the evening prior, cheeks flushed and lips parted, the most delicious noises leaking from his mouth while Theo praised his body with his tongue alone –

Theo angrily shakes the thoughts away, not for the first time this morning. "I will not see him."

He cannot see him. He is afraid of what he will do – what his wolf will do – should his eyes fall on the man once more. Already, his body craves this prisoner, this stranger. Surely, if he gives in to his desires, this pull will only become stronger.

No. Theo shakes himself. Resist it.

"Theodori," Octavian says firmly. Theo fixes his second with a glare. "The amount of fight he put up to produce the map he sketched last evening... I was ready to strangle him right then and there, damned the consequences of finding another source –"

Theo's lust turns to rage, his nails cutting deep bloody furrows into his palms as they turn to claws. It is all he can do to spin away. Octavian has not hurt this man. This man who they are to torture should he not give them the information they need. This man that Theo has no right to be protective over whatsoever.

Octavian continues, unaware of Theo's inner battle. "But then I saw his map. It was perfect. Every detail laid out for us. Such information is invaluable. We would have

lost hundreds of soldiers to gather even half the intel he presents us now.”

Theo’s lip curls into a snarl. “So the Wolf’s Teeth aren’t producing information like you hoped they would?”

Octavian stiffens. “It is easy enough for them to investigate the outskirts of Cesscounthe, but only so many of them can sneak past the walls – and remain undercover – without drawing attention to themselves. This Siacchian is an endless resource... if he is scared into submission.”

The word brings wicked images to mind, and Theo shakes his head, pressing at his temples. “You can use someone else.”

Octavian falls silent long enough for Theo to turn, taking in the other man’s expression – which has now gone coy. “Why do you not want to see him, Theodori?”

Theo grits his teeth. “Just because I’m busy with other matters doesn’t mean I’m trying to hide something from you, Octavian.”

“This would only take a few minutes of your time. I drag him in here, you roar about him trying to escape, he pisses himself – again.” Octavian snorts. “You throw about a few threats that sound too terrible to be realistic. Like, run away again, and I’ll make you eat your own eyeballs. Then we send him on his merry way for the next assignment I give to him.”

Clarity dawns on Theo, cutting through the mist of his lust. “He tried to run.”

Octavian raises a brow. “You’re very out of it this morning.”

“And you’re positive that was his goal?”

“Well, he told me he was looking for a bathroom, but I sincerely doubt that was the case. Surely someone of his wit would have come up with a better excuse. I think the panic just finally settled in.”

Theo shakes his head. Both seem like unlikely reasons. The man Evland Childes is supposed to be almost as clever as a hopiar, with instincts honed like a wolf. Surely if he were attempting escape, he would have found a better way.

But then again... these Siacchians are soft. They are unaccustomed to the violence of the world because of their pacifist ways. Perhaps his prisoner really had been so scared, so overcome with his own prey-fear, he just blindly fled. And when he was inevitably caught, he had given his only stammering excuse.

But there is only one way for Theo to know for certain what his prisoner had been attempting.

“So you will meet him? This morning?” Octavian presses.

Theo closes his eyes, trying to ignore the way his heart stutters at the thought of seeing this man – he’s your prisoner – again. These are just my body’s responses, and I am master of my own body.

“Fine.” Theo draws his hair back into a complicated braid. “There are some questions I wish to ask of him anyway.”

“Oh?” Octavian raises a brow. “Can I help?”

“No. These are my own theories. Since you are so incapable, I can handle it.”

“Theodori –”

“No,” Theo growls. “You have ignored my wishes and pushed me enough on this matter, Octavian. I will scare him for you, yes, but you will get nothing more from me, understood? Bring him before me and leave us. If I am to take care of this myself, I will take care of it my own way.”

Octavian shakes his head. “Just remember that we need him alive.”

Leaving their prisoner alive certainly wouldn’t be the problem. Theo just needs to keep his hands off the man while somehow threatening him. As Theo finishes his braid, Octavian gazes up at him, gray eyes turned warm in the early light.

Ah, the perfect solution presents itself.

Theo steps forward, running a hand through Octavian’s silky hair, fingers circling down to clasp the man’s chin. “We still have some time before the sun is considered officially risen, do we not?”

“I would say so,” Octavian murmurs as Theo draws the man’s face close to his crotch. “We could always give our prisoner a few extra minutes.”

When Theo only groans in response as Octavian undoes his leather belt with his teeth, Octavian grins. “See,” the smaller man says. “You don’t always dislike my ideas.”

“Less talking,” Theo orders, closing his eyes as Octavian trails kisses down his hip to his hardening cock. As his second falls blissfully silent, Theo tilts his head back and allows his control to slip and imagination to wander. For just that moment, he lets himself picture it is Evland Childes at his knees before Theo. Evland Childes worshipping Theo’s body with his mouth.

For just that moment, Theo lets himself go. After, he will shove these feelings away

so he can focus on more important things, like winning wars and conquering countries. Now is a time for pleasure.

And now is a time for pain.

Evland Childes trails behind Octavian, placing each foot in front of the other as if even his stride is calculated. He keeps his chin tucked but eyes raised, scanning the tent as he enters. Theo sighs as he sinks into the chair he has placed at the head of the tent, waiting for the two men's eyes to adjust to the light of the oil lamps.

The morning daylight has faded to gray as dark clouds hover on the horizon. Faint rays highlight Evland Childes' face, leaving him to look like a carving of some famed Vell's beautiful mate. Only the tension in his sharp jaw betrays his fear – that, and his delicious scent, which Theo is trying his damndest not to breathe in.

Evland Childes' eyes dart around the tent, taking in Theo's bedroll, which has already been neatly rolled, and the parchment containing folded battle maps. Only the makeshift desk has been left messy from a brief morning planning session. Theo's gaze snares on the Ravage board. The pieces have been untouched for nearly seventeen hours now, and though Theo's fingers ache to return to it, he refuses to make his next move. When Octavian pressed him about it, asking if Theo was stuck, Theo had snapped of course not! – though he very much was.

Evland Childes' face lights up as he stares at the board, but he jerks himself away, hands tightening around his map.

“Sevell Wolf-Born,” Octavian says, greeting Theo officially with a salute reserved for the second-highest ranking hopiar war officials. Theo replies with only a nod, attention still fixed on his prisoner.

Evland Childes, as if sensing Theo's stare, looks up. Theo's heart chokes; the man's

eyes are the clearest of blues, like ice on a cold day. Evland Childes swallows, throat bobbing, and Theo's gaze traces the motion, nostrils widening as his wolf instinctively picks up on the change in scent.

Arousal.

It is all Theo can do to remain sitting on his makeshift throne. His hands tighten painfully on his knees, forcing himself to focus.

Mate. This is my mate, howls the wolf in Theo's chest. But his beast is wrong; this is a human. This is his enemy.

This is an obstacle in his way to victory.

"Show me the map," Theo says. His voice is deeper than usual, raspier, but his words are stone steady.

Octavian pulls the parchment from Evland Childes' hands and approaches, unrolling it in a swift motion. He presents it with a bowed head.

Theo blinks, taking a second too long to accept it.

The work is astonishing. Though Evland Childes is clearly no artist, he has expertly rendered what little Theo knows of Cesscounthe. Shaped like a target, with the rich districts tucked deep inside and the poorer trade markets scattered on the outskirts, Evland Childes' creation showcases every minute detail.

"Exceptional," Theo says, the word little more than an exhale.

Evland Childes stares at his feet.

“My thoughts exactly,” Octavian says, satisfied smirk darkening his face as if he had been the one to create the map. “The Siacchian obviously carries invaluable knowledge –”

“How does it feel to be a traitor?” Theo asks, not looking up from the map. A smudge mars the top right corner, and he runs his fingers above it, trying to interpret the mark as mistake or subterfuge.

Evland Childes presses his lips together. “Traitor?” he repeats. “I wouldn’t call it that.”

His voice is low and his accent lengthens his vowels, making each word bleed into the next. And, Wolf Mother curse it, it isn’t the least bit attractive hearing him speak.

Theo shifts uncomfortably against his hardening cock.

“No?” Theo says. “Yet here you are, giving vital secrets to your country’s enemy. I believe that is the very definition.”

“I would hardly call what is common knowledge in any museum or city hall vital secrets,” Evland Childes replies. He pauses before looking up, eyes bright. “Had you simply decided to raid a library on your way here, you would have had no need for me.” He adds, after a moment’s hesitation, “Danessi Wolf-Born.”

“You will address him as Sevell Wolf-Born,” Octavian corrects.

“Sevell Wolf-Born,” Evland Childes says. His eyes flicker away, jaw flexing again. He tucks his hands behind his back – as if that can hide the tremors.

Theo should be angry at such impudence. And in front of Octavian – he has to be.

“Leave us,” Theo says, not even looking at his second. Octavian releases an audible sniff but does as told, sweeping out of the tent.

His absence feels like a sigh released. Evland Childes’ shoulders relax half an inch. Theo hides a smile. His second claimed he was trying to forge a relationship between himself and their prisoner, but clearly Evland Childes has other ideas.

“You believe your country would carry such detailed information about its own cities in libraries?” Theo asks with a chuckle. “Have you never even left Cesscounthe?”

Evland Childes shifts, not meeting Theo’s gaze. Two spots of color rise to his cheeks. Theo tries to imagine what it must be like, having spent his whole life behind the towering walls of Cesscounthe.

He rises to his feet, map in hand. He takes in the details again, the careful handiwork. Is this Evland Childes talented? Certainly. And even a little mouthy – and although Theo would admit it to no one, he finds himself chuckling at the man’s words. Few would speak to him in such a way and live.

Ah, right – he still needs to dispense a punishment. Especially while Octavian is surely in earshot.

He circles Evland Childes and approaches from his side, close enough he is certain Childes will feel his words on his neck when Theo speaks. “You should not have spoken to me like that in front of my second.”

Evland Childes stills, pulse fluttering in his throat. He swallows, tongue darting out to wet his lips. Theo’s eyes trace each movement with rapt attention.

“Octavian is your second?” Evland Childes says. He immediately closes his eyes after he speaks, releasing a sharp sigh through his nose. “Sevell Wolf-Born,” he adds.

His tongue stumbles over the Kiteran word, and Theo tells himself he doesn't find it charming.

"Yes," Theo replies. "And he is listening outside right now, without a doubt. He is waiting for me to punish you. To scare you."

Evland Childes' eyes snap open. "Is that so?" he says, staring directly ahead. He shifts his weight as if he wishes to turn to face Theo, but he remains in place. He releases a slow, steady breath from pursed lips, muscles in his jaw clenching.

"Does that scare you, Siacchian?"

Evland Childes' gaze returns to the Ravage board, taking in the pieces. He surely knows the game – Ravage and Cesse are close enough to be mistaken for twins. "I don't know if it should," he finally says. "Because I think you would have already – er – scared me or... punished me, if that was your actual intention."

Theo lets his wolf slip. It's like pulling a blanket aside.

His teeth extend past his lips as fangs, claws growing sharp. He traces the back of Evland Childes' ear with his lengthened nails.

The other man shudders.

"You should at least put on a show for him," Theo says.

"Why?" Evland Childes says. "If you don't punish me, will that loss of face be so detrimental to you?"

Theo's claw slips closer, shearing a lock of raven curls from the man's temple. He dangles it before Evland Childes' beautiful blue eyes.

Theo's prisoner gulps. "What kind of a show?"

"Give him a noise. Something loud."

"I – I don't –"

"Do you want me to help you?" Theo means for his words to emerge as a growl, but instead they roll from his tongue in a purr. Angry with himself, he seizes Evland Childes' throat. The Siacchian's pulse flutters against Evland Childes' fingers, bird-light and painfully fast, and Theo squeezes.

Evland Childes releases a gasping groan that sounds like a cross between pained and pleased. His eyes fly open, scorching Theo with blue. He speaks in a wavering whisper, throat straining against Theo's fingers. "Is that good enough for your eavesdropper, Sevell Hunter?"

Theo cocks his head to the side. It's difficult to turn his attention away from this man before him, from the splay of gooseflesh creeping across his pale neck, from the way his scent flourishes beneath Theo's attention.

Outside, someone – one of the Wolf's Teeth, likely – calls Octavian's name. Octavian's boots crunch across brittle autumn grass as he leaves the tent, no doubt satisfied with the thought that Evland Childes has been properly reprimanded.

With iron will, Theo withdraws from Evland Childes and the man's delicious scent. He forces distance between them. The pull of the man's soft skin, of his lips, which are now red and wet, is so strong –

No. Theo brushes his hand against his hardening cock, strangling his pleasure. To distract himself, he paces back to the map left splayed next to the Ravage board.

Evland Childes follows Theo's movements with his gaze alone, still frozen in the center of the tent, arms crossed over his chest.

Silence stretches, cold as snow and thick as blood. Theo paces. Evland Childes remains quiet, gaze hooded. Theo tries his best to breathe through his mouth, but he can taste the change in his prisoner's scent, the sour stench of fear growing stronger. Though it would be impossible to tell by looking at his changeless expression.

As Theo passes by the Ravage board for the fourth time, Evland Childes' gaze once again lingers on the board, and Theo smiles. He has been so blinded by his dick. The perfect answer to test this man's intellect is right here.

"Do you play?" Theo asks.

Evland Childes presses his lips together. "I play Cesse."

"This is Ravage."

"The name suits it."

Theo places down the piece he has been rolling between his fingers. "Explain."

Evland Childes takes a tiny step in the direction of the board. "The pieces... they're shaped differently from Cesse pieces. They're much... sharper. Almost like – like blades." He looks away from the board as the last word leaves his lips.

"Sweet Mother – are you not allowed to even talk about weapons?"

Evland Childes scowls. "Our pacifism is not a joke."

"Right – it's probably just an excuse you use to enslave the hopiar of your kingdom

and use them to do the dirty work for you.”

The man’s nostrils flare. “Violence is the action of a mindless thing,” he says, tucking his chin as if he is trying to look down on Theo. “It is the action of one who has lost control of themselves – of their emotions. Our pacifism demonstrates our ability to control ourselves and our feelings. The better the control, the better our intellect.” He adds, in a softer voice, “That is why the impyassi – or, hopiar, as you call them – are our... defenders.”

“Really?” Theo smiles as he looks Evland Childes’ over, taking in the slight color leaking into the man’s cheeks. “You must be the village idiot then.”

“How – how – you –”

A laugh builds in Theo’s chest and he blinks with surprise, only just managing to smother it in his throat. He instead picks up the red Ravage king. The piece is shaped like a knife, the base a jagged metal crown. “So you think the Kiterans are a lot of savages then?”

“That’s – that’s not –”

Theo presses the sharp tip against his thumb. A bead of blood bursts to the surface, trickling down his calloused fingers. His attention flicker over to his prisoner, whose eyes have gone wide, nostrils flared. “Don’t worry,” he murmurs. “I’m not offended by the beliefs of your backwater country.”

Evland Childes splutters.

“I am confused about one thing though. Are you saying that if you were given the chance to escape – to overpower me or Octavian – but via means of violence, you would forgo that method because it is too brutal? Too... stupid?”

“That’s – that’s ridiculous.” Evland Childes shakes his head. “First of all, such an opportunity would never present itself –”

Theo sweeps forward, red king in hand, and presses the sharp blade against his own throat. Pain stings through him, a familiar feeling. But he is not afraid.

All color drains from Evland Childes’ face. “What are you doing?”

Theo smiles in answer.

It would take work – massive work – for any human to kill a hopiar via a makeshift weapon like the red king alone. Now, had Theo selected the Ravage queen and her five jagged edges, it might have been a bit easier. But no normal human would be able to overpower Theo’s blessed strength and increased healing abilities. He is just testing this man, seeing how far his silly beliefs will limit him.

After all, this is just a human Theo is dealing with, and humans with their fragile flesh and weak muscles stand no match against a fully trained hopiar. Yes – just a human. Evland Childes’ scent, no matter how bewitching, and his lips, no matter how soft looking, are nothing more than temptations and false flags. Humans can’t be true mates with hopiars, after all.

You are not my mate.

But still, even after Theo has eliminated the possibility from his mind, he is curious. Never before has he met someone who is composed of such contradictions. A scent so confusing and a belief so twisted.

Evland Childes stares at Theo, eyes darting from the red king to Theo’s steady gaze, as if hoping an answer will be written there. Theo gives him nothing, not even a blink.

When Evland Childes remains still, Theo reaches for him. The man flinches, but does not retreat. Theo collects his hands and lays them against the piece at his throat. “There,” Theo says. “Now, apply pressure.”

But Evland Childes only trembles like an icicle in spring, like he is about to come melting and tumbling down. His mouth falls open, lips quivering, and he shakes his head. “No,” he says. “I won’t. This is – this is some sort of trap –”

Theo leans against the king and the brace of Evland Childes’ hands. The sting at his throat builds to a burn. Warm blood leaks down his collar.

Evland Childes’ eyes grow impossibly wider. Moisture flashes, and a tear drips down his cheek. “No!” he cries, and jerks away from Theo’s grasp, the red king still in his hands.

Theo lets him go. He rises to his full height once more. His skin burns where he has been cut – and it burns from that pain alone, nothing more.

Nothing to do with Evland Childes’ touch whatsoever.

Evland Childes stares at the red king laced between his fingers – at the blood drying on his hands. His eyes dart between the weapon and Theo and then back again, nostrils flaring, looking like a terrified rabbit.

You would be a terrible mate, Theo forces himself to think. I could never trust you to protect me when our enemies come for us.

Evland Childes’ eyes settle on the cut at Theo’s throat, and a little gasp escapes him, almost as if he has been the one injured.

“Will your gods strike you down now?” Theo asks.

Evland Childes shakes his head, shuddering. Goosebumps ripple down his arms. “We believe in no gods other than Thought itself,” he whispers, eyes tracing the drop of blood as it vanishes beneath Theo’s tunic.

Theo’s skin burns from the man’s gaze. He forces himself into movement to ignore the feeling. “So what will happen to you now that you’ve inflicted this violence upon me?”

Evland Childes gazes at the red king in his hand, examining the bloodied tip. “Nothing, because I did nothing wrong. I have not lost control. I have not acted out. You are the one who has shown poor behavior.”

“Haven’t lost control?” Theo cocks his head to the side. “Could have fooled me.”

Evland Childes exhales sharply, gazing past Theo at the Ravage board. “You people wouldn’t know what it means to control yourselves in the first place,” he says. “I don’t even see how you could play such a mockery of Cesse – your minds likely can’t even understand the true complexities of the game.”

Theo chuckles, turning back to the board. “Then why don’t you show me?”

A spark lights up Evland Childes’ face, a joy so bright, it looks childlike. He extinguishes it quickly. “I do not wish to humiliate you.”

“You already speak so sweetly to me, I can’t imagine you unleashing your full candor.”

Evland Childes wets his lips, dropping his gaze. Sour fear soaks his scent again, and his shoulders hunch, as if he is trying to make himself smaller. “I – I – I don’t know why I speak this way.” He wrings his hands. “My tongue is not usually so loose in the presence of... er... Sevels.”

Theo snorts. “As it should be. Any other Sevell would not have stood for it.” When the stench of fear grows stronger, Theo adds, “But I find your tongue far too interesting to ask for such restraint.”

Evland Childes gazes up at Theo through dark lashes, the question of why clear on his face. He licks his lips, lids fluttering. But he does not ask, so Theo does not answer.

Instead, Evland Childes approaches the board, his cheeks flushed. He lowers himself onto the gold-hemmed cushion primly, like a prince seating himself on an unsteady throne, and adjusts his sleeves. “I will play you then,” he says. “But under one condition.”

Theo plops across from him, both feet planted on the hard packed dirt floor of the tent. He spreads his legs, bracing an elbow on a knee and his chin on his hand. “Perfect. I never play Ravage without a wager.”

Evland Childes blinks, his eyes widening. He recovers quickly though. “Should I win,” Evland Childes begins, eyes narrowed. Oddly, his cheeks redden before he shakes himself. He draws out his next words slowly, like a blade from a hilt. “You will grant me an answer to a question. A truth for a victory.”

Theo snorts. This prisoner needs to be reminded of his place.

His hand darts out, impossibly fast, and he snatches the red king from Evland Childes’ grasp. Evland Childes’ eyes go wide as Theo places the king on his side of the board, drawing back on his cushion as if to flee.

“So afraid of the torture you’re going to face?” Theo asks, cleaning his blood from the red king and adjusts his pieces. This will be the perfect way for Theo to interrogate this prisoner without laying his hands upon him. “Why would I agree to

such a thing?”

Evland Childes narrows his eyes. “You must know torture often yields poor results. If you really want to pull the truth from me, you’re better off using methods that appeal to my morals.” He pauses, looking at the Ravage king in Theo’s hands. “Which are clearly superior to yours.”

“So confident in your victory, and yet you are my prisoner,” Theo says.

Evland Childes parts his lips, but then shakes his head, remaining silent.

Theo inhales deeply through his mouth, careful to avoid his opponent’s – his prisoner’s, he reminds himself for what feels like the millionth time – scent. He reaches for his wolf, cloaking himself and his jagged emotions in its sweeping presence.

When he speaks, he’s careful to ensure his words are cutting and cruel – promising punishment. Promising his victory. He offers Evland Childes a bared tooth smile. “Let’s play then.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 8:00 am

Ravage is different from Cesse. For one, the pieces are dissimilar. Scholars have been replaced with soldiers, students with pawns. The only three constants are the kings, queens, and assassins.

It takes Luka the first dozen moves to understand the slight variations to the rules and patterns, but he quickly settles in. This is a kingdom of defined rules and infinite control. This is his place of calm.

However... the messages in the movement of the pieces and the strategy of attack has to be different. Luka's eyes widen as Wolf-Born moves his steed to block Luka's pawn. Ordinarily, this would be an extremely sexual declaration – one that has to do with mounting their opponent like a dog. Luka often made the move while maintaining eye contact to make it clear he understood his actions completely and that the promise would be fulfilled, though he would always struggle not to blush while doing so.

But Wolf-Born's attention remains fixed on the board as he adjusts the piece, already moving on to his next attack.

Luka swallows, hesitating. Perhaps things are different with Ravage. Kiterans are supposed to be simple-minded. Maybe there is no meaning behind the moves at all. Still, he takes his time before attacking with his assassin. After, he wipes his palms on his clean trousers, grateful Octavian gave him a new pair to change into last evening.

Wolf-Born sits back as he assesses the board. There are only a scant few seconds when Wolf-Born is not watching him, amber eyes taking in Luka's every move, every breath. Luka savors the time left unobserved. He savors the heartbeats in which

he can... admire his captor.

Wolf-Born is beautiful. This is an undeniable statement, like saying the sky is blue, Cesse is perfect, or thought should be rational. His golden locks have been tamed into a rough braid that skims his shoulders, and his features are blade-like; his nose a once-broken arch, his lips soft, plump, and a gentle pink that contradicts the coldness in his brown eyes. His hands are large and veined, soft golden hair trailing down his corded forearms as he moves his next piece into place.

And his smell...

It took Luka approximately two and a half seconds upon meeting Wolf-Born for him to realize this man is the source of that delightful scent that has been haunting Luka since his capture. The smell that feels like home and warmth and the comfort of a soft bed beneath a tired body all rolled into one inhale.

Luka also came to the startling conclusion that Wolf-Born's scent cannot be a coincidence; Luka has to be under the influence of some sort of drug. Or he is just simply too exhausted from his captivity. Why else would he have reacted like... that when he had seen the blood of his enemy? Why did he feel himself bending and breaking as he watched his own hands wound this man?

"Well?"

Luka jerks back to attention. His teeth sink into his lip and he internally curses. He never loses concentration in a Cesse game. What is this man doing to him?

Wolf-Born raises a brow, bracing ridiculously broad shoulders. He is such a large man, easily dwarfing Luka's more delicate frame. He props his chin on his hand again, spreading his legs wide. Luka wishes he would stop doing that, but he's starting to suspect the man's shadowy robes and lack of pants is probably some kind

of tactic.

Luka summons his willpower and makes his next move. The piece clinks softly as he places it on a red square.

Wolf-Born's heavy gaze lifts from Luka to the board and his eyes widen. He goes so still, tension creeps into Luka once again.

Beauty aside, Wolf-Born is also terrifying. Huge, obviously intelligent. Worst of all – his beast is so close to the surface, Luka sometimes imagines he can catch glimpses of it stalking beneath Wolf-Born's honey gaze. Every time the monster peers out from the man's human eyes, Luka cannot help but to freeze, like a mouse spotted by a hawk.

But I am no mouse.

Like now, as Wolf-Born observes the board, shoulders taut, Luka reminds himself he is not helpless. He is just undercover.

All he has to do is hold out; his mother will look for him once he's discovered missing. The headlines for a vanished son overshadowing her big day of rallying for a Council Member position will not be favorable. It will take no time to discover why he had gone – the enemy is camped right on their doorstep.

And it is impossible for her to have forgotten the spot where Luka left his note.

No, once she discovers he's being held captive, he just needs to wait for her plan to arrive. Then he can work on escape.

And for now?

Luka moves his next piece, victory solidifying before him. “Check.” He keeps his expression carefully neutral so Wolf-Born cannot see his triumph shining through. He only hopes the man’s beastly nose won’t catch a single whiff of joy.

Wolf-Born’s expression darkens as Luka’s snare tightens. It takes another dozen moves – the man will not go quietly – but as the tent goes dark, Wolf-Born finally looks up. He speaks the word like a threat – like a promise, “Mate.”

Luka releases a slow, steady exhale, barely able to remove his eyes from the threat sitting across from him to take in the board – the battlefield – below. His body is automatically tensing with anticipation – nervousness – to take Wolf-Born, before he reminds himself they have played for an entirely different kind of dominance. Luka extinguishes the smile before it can bloom on his face. Inappropriate, he chides himself. He should never let himself enjoy playing with the enemy.

“You are the best of your generation,” Wolf-Born says. It’s not a question, but when Luka looks up, Wolf-Born arcs his brows as if expecting a response.

“That can be your question,” Luka says. “If you win a game.”

Wolf-Born’s scowl deepens. “Ask then so we can move on to the next match.”

Their next match? Luka’s pulse flutters at the thought, though he is unsure if it is anticipation or fear that kicks his heart into overdrive. He wets his lips. He has been so focused on victory, he hadn’t set aside the time to contemplate what he would do with it once won.

This is why, he tells himself, the question that slips out of him is so foolish.

“What is your name?” Luka asks.

Wolf-Born blinks. “My... name?”

Luka inwardly curses; he could have asked anything. He could have asked this man’s greatest weakness, what he wishes to accomplish with this attack, if he plans to use the great minds of Siacchi and Cesscounthe or if he just plans to destroy – but instead he asks his name.

Wolf-Born shifts his weight. He leans forward as he returns the pieces to their original positions. Luka does the same, careful to avoid brushing the other man’s hands.

“Theodori.”

Luka jumps despite himself. “Theodori?”

“My name is Theodori. Theodori Hunter Wolf-Born.”

Theodori. Luka rolls the name across his tongue as he gazes up through his lashes at the man. The name is shockingly soft for a beast like this. It seems like the kind of thing a lover would whisper while tucking a stray lock of blond hair behind an ear –

Luka shakes the ridiculous thought away. That is your enemy. “Shall we swap colors so you can make the first move?”

“I don’t need that sort of advantage.”

Luka manages to smother his scoff. He sinks into the sweet embrace of the game once more. All his fears fall away as he plays. He forgets who his opponent is, the direness of the situation. He forgets he is here as a prisoner, as an information gatherer.

Instead, he plays with a slight smile on his face. Never before has he found a partner more creative, more interesting – more challenging.

They are halfway through their third match (both victories having fallen to Luka. His second question being “What is your goal with Cesscounthe’s siege?” and Theodori’s cold answer “Victory and acknowledgement”), when Octavian enters the tent.

He sweeps inside with an oil lantern in hand. The light is blinding against the darkness, and both Luka and Theodori squint.

“I told you to leave him alive,” Octavian begins with a smile. The expression drops away when he sees the board spread out between them, the pieces in midplay. He blinks, face going carefully blank.

“Scholar,” Theodori says, looking up from the particularly tricky play. He has braced his hand on his chin for so long now, his fingers have left impressions on his face. Luka’s cheeks warm as Octavian takes in the situation of the board, wondering if the other Kiteran understands the messages Luka has left there. “Did I say you could interrupt us?”

“It’s getting late, Sevell Hunter,” Octavian says. “I just assumed –”

“Assumed?” Theodori’s eyes narrow.

Before Theodori could continue, Luka’s stomach releases an ear splitting grumble. He claps his hand over the noise as if to stifle it, the heat in his cheeks increasing to a burn. Hunger suddenly rips through him. He has been so distracted by the game, he hadn’t even noticed.

Theodori sighs. “Fine. Take him and feed him. Make sure he receives enough. He’s much too small.”

Luka shoots the man a glance, self-consciously running his hands over his thighs. He is undoubtedly slender, though Xyla never found any grounds for complaint. But Theodori's attention is resolutely focused on Octavian. As if sensing Luka's beseeching stare, he waves his hand dismissively.

"I will see him fed then," Octavian says, lip curled. He looks between the two of them, brow furrowing. A strange mixture of emotions play out across his face, moving so quickly Luka has trouble distinguishing one from another – anger, frustration, and... envy?

Octavian seizes Luka by the arm and forces him to his feet, jerking Luka from his thoughts. Luka's legs stagger beneath him, doe-weak from having sat for so long. Theodori's shoulders tense, a muscle twitching in his cheek as he watches from the corner of his eye, but he remains silent as Octavian directs Luka from his tent.

"Bring him to me again tomorrow," Theodori says as they both exit. "I am not done with him yet."

Luka's stomach tightens at the words, but he immediately grits out the strange wriggles of excitement that bloom at the thought of continuing the match. Ravage might be different from Cesse, but its pull is just as magnetizing.

That, and the fact that Luka's captor cannot read the messages that Luka has left him amongst the pieces. The outlet for Luka's anger at his captivity and his frustration at the way he has been held prisoner, is the only reason Luka can remain calm as Octavian forces him out into the – evening?

It's evening?

Luka's bewilderment must be obvious, for Octavian says drily, "You've both been at it for nearly ten hours. I thought he had flayed all your skin from your flesh, yet

you're still... in one piece." The Kiteran looks Luka over, nostrils flaring, as if searching for any sign of injury. Finding none, he jerks away, scowling.

What had been Wolf-Born's goal with that game, exactly? He had not drawn out any additional information from Luka – not to Luka's knowledge. If anything, Luka learned more from him. And yet, Theodori still requested Luka return the following day.

Unbidden, Luka's thoughts cast back to the way Theodori looked while they had played; the slight curl to his lips, the drum of his long fingers on a lean thigh, the inclination of his body, as if he was being pulled closer to the Ravage board. The picture of a man enraptured by the game. Luka only recognized it so easily because he has seen it so many times before – in himself.

But the leader of the Kiteran's military forces wouldn't simply allow himself to give in to the base pleasures of a game – no matter how sacred – above conquering. Especially not when all his people cared about were physical victories.

So what is his angle? What am I missing?

"What did you speak of?" Octavian asks as he directs Luka through the camp swiftly. In twilight, the tents have turned to fireflies, glowing with golden light from within. Kiteran soldiers roam, long hair flowing over their shoulders, crimped from a day of being bound in tight braids. Smoke and the smell of cooked meat hangs on the cool autumn wind, and Luka's stomach growls again as the taste of sweet-fried pork fills his mouth.

Luka shakes his head. "Ravage."

"Ravage?" Octavian's brows draw together. "Did he ask you questions?"

Luka directs his gaze to his boots. “He didn’t get the chance to.”

Though he cannot see Octavian’s face, the man’s frustrated exhale released through gritted teeth is more than enough to convey his captor’s anger. Luka hides a smile. Obviously some miscommunication took place here.

What a perfect time to sow discontent.

Luka looks up at Octavian through his lashes. “Are you going to give me another task tonight?”

Octavian huffs and jerks to a halt as they arrive at Luka’s tent. He shoves Luka inside. “Not tonight,” he growls, fur rippling down his arms. Luka is proud of the way he hides the fear that shoots through him at the sight. Octavian crosses his arms as he stands at the threshold of the tent, gnawing on his lip. His gaze drifts about the tent, and then the knot in his brows loosens.

“You need to prove your use to us,” Octavian says in a low voice. “If you do not –”

Perhaps it is because Luka is tired from hours of playing, and that is what emboldens his tongue when he speaks. “You’ll kill me. Yes, I understand. Was the map I made not enough? Give me another task. I’ll prove my worth again and again. Killing me would be your loss.”

His words are oil to the fire of Octavian’s anger. The man’s shoulders rise around his ears, eyes flashing ice-blue as his beast fights to the surface. Luka draws back into the shadows of the tent, bumping into the writing desk. His fingers scramble behind him as if they are trying to flee, landing on the charcoal sharpener.

But Octavian exhales. It’s like he forces all of the anger out of him with a breath. “We’ll see,” he says in an even voice that scares Luka more than his rage. “But you

should know there are worse things than death, little Siacchian. Speak to me like that again and you will learn them.”

He moves to close the flap of the tent. “My food?” Luka says. His words emerge in a croak, strangled by fear. His hands curl around the charcoal sharpener, pressing the tip against his fingertips, angered by the sound of his weakness.

“Maybe a little hunger will teach you to hold your tongue,” Octavian says. The tent flap slaps against the canvas walls as he lets it swing shut, storming away.

Luka waits another long minute, staring at the entrance, charcoal sharpener pressed so hard against his thumb, warm blood wells against the writing desk. When only the faint noises of the Kiteran camp seep through the tent’s walls – flickering fire, distant laughter, boots crunching over autumn leaves – he allows himself to relax. With a sigh, he sinks to his knees.

His heart pounds at his ears and he closes his eyes, recounting everything he has seen and heard. Any sign of weakness – anything he could give to Cesscounthe to use against their enemy upon his escape.

The first place his thoughts yank him is Theodori’s wan smile as Luka wins his second game, as if the Kiteran was anticipating his own loss. As if he was awaiting Luka’s second question. Then, his mind serves up the image of Theodori turning away as Luka is pulled from the tent, as if he cannot even bear to look upon Luka’s face.

Luka’s stomach grumbles as he shakes the thoughts away.

They are unorganized. Leadership unaligned.

That, and Theo recalls how the soldiers have spoken of Theodori – compared with

how they speak to Octavian.

Soldiers respect Octavian. They fear Theodori.

To win, Cesscounthe only needs to separate Theodori from Octavian. They would lead too differently, plans canceled out by their own allies.

But this isn't enough – Luka needs more.

And he needs to know he has a lifeline – a way out. He needs to know his mother will come back for him and the information Luka carries.

A shudder shakes him at the thought of being trapped here without help, without any sign of escape. Stifling fear wells in his throat. Wetness swims before his eyelashes, vision blurring.

No. No. He can't fall apart now.

Despite himself, he reaches again for the charcoal sharpener. The tip is still wet from his blood. It's not a knife or a sword, merely a writing tool. He isn't giving into any beastly impulses by cradling it in his hands because it isn't a weapon.

And yet, he still feels safer pressing it to his chest, just as he would with the Cesse king as a child, bruised and battered from his lessons. Both represent shields; the Cesse piece promised escape – and the charcoal sharpener? Though not a weapon, it promised a bite of pain should Octavian decide it best Luka be punished.

Later, Luka will think it is a good thing that he fell asleep there, leaning against the writing desk, chin tucked against his chest, because even unconscious he still grips his charcoal sharpener in his left hand. For sometime into the night, something enters the tent.

Luka's lids flutter, not fully comprehending. Weak light filters through the tent's walls, turning the folded bedroll into a mountain and the intruder into a monster –

Intruder?

Monster?

Animal tension seizes him, his heartbeat jackrabbiting to a roar. Rapid breaths rake out of his mouth as Luka tracks the thing in his tent – a thing, not a human.

Huge, it hunches to fit in Luka's enclosure. Its breath stinks of meat.

An impyassus.

Before his capture, Luka has only seen one in its beast form once before as a young child. In the heart of Cesscounthe, a dozen Aiutani impyassi turned against their people and unleashed their beastly urges against those of pure thought. Three died before properly aligned Aiutani restrained their wretched brethren. Luka remembers little of the incident itself, though he had been in the heart of it all – as had his mother.

After, Linne declared in a low hissing breath she would save Cesscounthe from these monsters. She would see them safe from their curse – finally. Her nails had dug into her skin, eyes tawny in the light as she had stared out the scene, taking in the white sheets laid over the bodies of the fallen.

And the beast – the last one left alive, still trapped in its uncontrollable animal form – had towered above its human handlers. Blood seeped from its amber hide, glassy eyes rolling about in its skull while reddened teeth bulged in a snarl. Luka hadn't even been able to cry at the sight. He had frozen, staring at the monster.

At the thing he knew was locked inside of him. The thing that could never be allowed to escape.

But this impyassus towering before him now is larger than any monster Luka has ever seen before, made all the more huge by the darkness as it looms over him. It bristles with dark fur. Hand-length fangs glisten as its lips curl into a snarl.

Its head swings toward Luka, eyes catching in the dim light. An enormous jaw unhinges. A whine escapes Luka's throat.

A low growl creeps through the tent. The monster tenses, muscles bunching.

Thoughts flash through Luka's mind, clouded and twisted with fear. He struggles for an idea, a plan – something, anything – he can't die here! He has to escape. He has to share his findings with his people. He has to stop these Kiterans from taking his country.

A thin sheet of icy calm rolls across his panic as Luka stares death in the mouth.

It's going to jump.

It's going to eat me.

Luka's grip tightens on the charcoal sharpener in his hand. Not a weapon. A tool.

The only way for him to survive.

The impyassus lunges and Luka throws himself aside. The beast crashes into the writing desk, a thunderclap against the night's tense silence. Luka whips his charcoal sharpener around. He will have to aim for the soft bits – the eyes, the nose – anything less, and he will do no damage whatsoever.

He braces himself, spreading his feet. His hands shake as he braces his makeshift tool in front of him, awaiting the next attack.

But as the beast wheels around, growl leaking from its lips, it pauses. No – it freezes. Its eyes, wide pools of brown so dark they look black, go so huge, Luka can see the white beneath. In a blink, its posture changes from bristling to hunched.

Behind him, the sound of tearing fabric rends the air, but Luka can't look away. He blinks in confusion as fear fills the tent. The impyassus is staring right at him, so why –

A deep, earth-shaking growl rolls out behind Luka. Blood curdling, it draws goosebumps to Luka's arms and shudders down his spine. Despite the fear pounding through his veins, a strange scent fills his nose, dropping his pulse a notch – though Luka hardly notices as a terrifying thought rings through him.

There's another impyassus behind me.

The thought is as painful as a bite, and Luka slowly forces himself to turn, careful so he doesn't leave his back facing the other beast. His charcoal sharpener sways in the breeze unleashed by the raw opening in the tent flap, where the new impyassus has clawed a gaping entrance.

Dimly, Luka becomes aware his mouth is making a low keening noise. He seals his lips to silence himself, slowly dropping to a crouch, unsure if he should even bother with his silly charcoal sharpener or if he's better off running.

Never run, a voice that sounds like his father's rings through his head. The memory of Luka's first and only fox hunt rips through him with sudden clarity; the bright red fur of the creatures as they turned to flee and Carlo's face as he leveled his gun to take aim.

“Never run,” his father had said. “Prey running will trigger the predator.”

But oh, how Luka wants to run now.

The second impyassus growls again, the noise reverberating through Luka’s ribcage. It’s even larger than the monster that has broken into Luka’s tent, with creamy fur and deep amber eyes – wait.

Luka looks closer at the creature and his mouth goes dry. He suddenly becomes aware of the scent in the air – the more he breathes the smell, the calmer his heart becomes.

He knows this scent. Knows it because it belongs to Theodori Hunter Wolf-Born.

And despite himself, despite the terror and the charcoal sharpener Luka has rebelliously clutched in his hand, relief crests through him.

He might just make it through this night in one piece.

He chases the treacherous feeling away – his sworn enemy is not his savior – but he cannot help the tiny smile that breaks across his face or the tears that well at the corners of his eyes.

And it is through blurred vision that Luka dimly makes out the other impyassus lowering itself once more – not in a supplicatory manner, but in a tensing of muscles. In preparation to charge.

Theodori grunts and throws himself toward Luka – to shove him clear of the line of fire or to act as a shield, Luka is unsure. All that he knows is that one minute, he’s weakly smiling up at the monster who is his captor and the next – his world becomes fur and darkness.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 8:00 am

“Who is this hopiar?” Theo growls as he lifts the head by the hair, glaring at the bludgeoned face. The night wind wicks bloodied curls across a concave forehead, the light locks the only remaining distinguishing feature. Theo’s glowing eyes snap to Octavian.

Octavian bows his head. “Sevell,” he began, before gesturing. Another three Kiterans rush forward, freezing only when Theo bares his teeth. Octavian continues when the Kiterans – members of the Wolf’s Teeth, Theo now realizes – each raise circular objects. No. Not circular objects.

Heads. Much like the one dangling from Theo’s own grasp.

“Siacchian spies,” Octavian says before Theo can speak. “They sent this one ahead,” he nods to the dead man’s head in Theo’s grip, “and then tried to retreat back through the tunnels. We found them thanks to our prisoner’s maps.”

Beyond them, Kiterans rush from their tents, weapons raised. Upon sighting their leader, naked and standing on a headless corpse, most quickly return to their slumber.

Theo snaps his teeth, spitting out gristle. “How did they learn of Evland Childes?”

At this, Octavian’s face tightens, “I do not know.”

“Why did you leave your post?”

Octavian looks down. “We were in pursuit. We saw these men beyond the walls of the camp.”

At Theo's feet, an unconscious Evland Childes moans, rolling onto his side. There is a splash of scarlet across his cheek.

Terror slices through Theo's rage, though it only serves to make his anger burn hotter. "Is he injured?" Somehow, his voice emerges steadily.

Octavian's eyes flutter to their prisoner at their feet. His gaze shutters. "I do not know."

"Well, what do you know?"

"I know that us standing here, chatting about a potential enemy invasion before our people, will not instill our soldiers with the morale you were hoping to arouse."

A snarl rips from Theo, but he quickly stifles it. There is a reason I picked this man for my second, and it was not just for his tongue.

"Fine. To my tent." To any lingering soldiers, Theo growls, "A training exercise. Thought we might release a couple captured Siacchians for a midnight hunt. Return to your sleep." His gaze lands on the Wolf's Teeth. They wear their usual bone masks, standing like ghosts in the night. "You as well."

The half a second of hesitation that stretches as the remaining Kiterans rise up on their toes in an attempt to verify this by examining the heads – and to attempt to identify the unconscious body at Theo's feet – is enraging. But before Theo can fling threats to send them fleeing, Evland Childes rolls onto his back, eyes fluttering open, his long black lashes like soot on his cheeks, and his eyes clear crystalline. Dimly, he is aware of his soldiers departing.

"Theodori?" Evland Childes murmurs, and Theo's anger vanishes. He drops the head of the monster who tried to injure what is his, and falls to a crouch. Gently, he takes

Evland Childes' cheeks, turning his head from left to right. Theo's fingers leave streaks of blood across pale cheeks, and his stomach twists.

"He isn't concussed," Theo hears himself say distantly. "But he might be bleeding. Bring me a wash basin and some rags. I will need to assess him."

"You will need to assess him?" Octavian splutters.

"I thought you said you didn't want to discuss this here." Theo picks up Evland Childes as gently as he can, slinging one of the man's slender arms over his shoulder.

Octavian trails behind Theo, hissing protests as Theo carries his prisoner to his tent at the head of the camp. "Surely you have more important things to do, Theodori," Octavian presses as Theo sweeps inside.

Theo whirls, teeth bared. "You're absolutely right, Octavian. Yet, for some reason, I find myself doing your job because you are unable to do so. First, you want me to intimidate the man. Now, you are unable to provide him with the most basic of defenses?"

Octavian shifts his weight. "I actually wished to speak to you of this, Theodori –"

Theo's nostrils flare. "Speak to me of what?"

"It might be best to turn to other sources of information. We took Evland Childes because we didn't know anyone better, but his parents are on the Council. If we could extract a ransom sum, we'd be better for it, and safer, so these suicide attacks –"

Rage turns Theo's vision snow-white. "You suspected he might be attacked? Did you tell someone of him?" The world melts around Theo as his wolf overtakes him, and he isn't sure how much time passes before he comes back to himself, hands balled

into fists at Octavian's collar, forearm pressed against his second's throat.

Octavian's strangled breaths brush Theo's fingers. "N-no – I didn't – Theodori, please – you're – you –" His cheeks turn from pale to purple as he claws at Theo's grasp.

Theo forces himself to release the man, shocked by the rage burning in his chest. Normally, his wolf is close to him, prepared to leap when his emotions turn. But nothing has ever set it off like that before. It is only when his eyes land on Evland Childes, who has fallen back into unconsciousness, that the knot of tension in his chest eases.

No.

Simple lust can do strange things to a person, though Theo has never been so swayed by a pretty person to such an extent. He cannot allow himself to forge such a relationship, not with a Siacchian, and certainly not with his enemy. Such a weakness would be detrimental.

And if someone were to suspect Theo might be falling prey to such feelings...

Theo's eyes dart to Octavian. The man presses a hand against his throat, hunched over, panting and heaving. Theo has never pushed him so far before – never done so much damage in a fit of anger. Beyond his shock and fear, slimy guilt twists in his stomach.

"What is going on with you?" Octavian rasps. "You've been on edge ever since the siege began – ever since we captured the Siacchian."

Theo spins into a pace to hide the guilty lilt of his brows. "There's so much at stake here, Octavian. I need – we need – to win this battle to prove ourselves. If we can

take Cesscounthe, we'll have them. Those damned Elders will finally believe in us. But now..."

Theo's eyes drift to his prisoner's face. "We need him to win this."

"We don't need him," Octavian insists. "We can find another Siacchian."

"Octavian." Theo's voice is cold. "That map... this man could be the key to unlocking the secrets of Cesscounthe. After we have conquered their rulers –"

"But Theodori – we don't have to conquer them by force," Octavian says, rising to his full height, hand still cradling his reddened throat. "We can find weak points inside. Surely not every single person of Cesscounthe is satisfied with their city – surely some are looking for an opportunity to rise up, to rule. What if we –"

Theo waves his hand. "We've spoken on this, Octavian. I said no. The Elders respect battle and victory, not treachery."

"Not treachery – strategy."

Theo forces his gaze to the tent walls. Beyond the canvas, the dim silhouette of the night watch paces past his tent. The soldier pauses, looking toward Cesscounthe, but he is likely only spotting the Siacchian hopiar fleeing their city, for a moment later, his shoulders ease. All the same, Theo's nostrils flare as he scents the wind, automatically searching for the next possible ambush. "Tell me why you thought he would be attacked. Your spies told me Siacchians are pacifists, and he was only just captured. How can the Siacchians have learned of him?" A low winding growl trails from his throat. "Do our people know about this?"

Octavian closes his eyes, tucking his hands behind his back. "I – believe me, Theodori, I have not spoken a word of his capture to anyone. But there is Vittoria,

and those of the Wolf's Teeth who grabbed him. Any could have talked, and if word got out...." He hangs his head. "Most Siacchians are pacifists, but they use their hopiar for their dirty work. And they must have decided it easier to kill someone than to save them. At least that means the information in his head is probably valuable."

"You seem to know much for having done so little." Theo's hands curl into fists. He barely feels the bite of his claws digging into his palms or the warm blood dripping to the dirt floor.

"I have suspicions, Theodori. Nothing concrete. And I had been under the impression that this man was replaceable."

Theo's cheek twitches.

Octavian continues, "But now I see you must have learned something valuable from him during your... interrogation sessions. I assume you have some sort of tactic here to win his trust."

"The information in his head is, as you've said, very valuable."

"Of course." Octavian bows his head.

Of course.

That's what Theo's doing – that's why he's been doing all of this. He's just playing a role. Just as Octavian has tried – and failed – to win the Siacchian's trust, Theo is now attempting to do the same.

Theo's eyes flicker to the man in question. At the sight of Evland Childes' too stiff lids and too pursed lips, Theo allows himself the smallest of smiles. The bastard's awake.

He's alright.

"Are you planning on sharing that information with me?" Octavian says, voice still strained. He pokes at his bruised throat, looking pitiful.

"If you're trying to guilt it out of me, stop." Theo approaches his second. His heart pinches when the man takes a step back.

Ah, yes. That's right. He let Octavian get complacent. He let Octavian think himself Theo's friend – a disservice to them both.

"I will share the information with you when necessary. It does not affect our current plan of action," Theo says. He rests a gentle hand on Octavian's shoulder. "Next time you have even the slightest fear of attack, you will warn me. Understood?"

Octavian nods.

"Good. Now fetch me those rags and warmed water – have Vittoria make him a poultice as well. I'll need to check how bruised our prisoner has become. We can't have his brains all scrambled up, now can we?"

Octavian looks like he wishes to protest, but then bows his head. "Understood, Sevell Wolf-Born," he says, and creeps from the tent with hunched shoulders.

Theo watches him go, sighing. It's for the best, he reminds himself. Closeness is weakness. This distance will strengthen us both.

He ignores the tiny voice that whispers hypocrite as he returns to Evland Childes' side, brushing a stray strand of midnight behind the man's ear. "Open your eyes," he commands. "I need to assess your injuries."

Evland Childes tenses, and then slowly does as ordered. His eyes dilate against the darkness of the tent. His mouth parts, little pants escaping reddened lips. “I’m alive,” he whispers. His eyes trace the tent ceiling, throat bobbing as he swallows nervously. His gaze drifts to Theo, and his cheeks color. “And you’re naked.”

Theo hands him a wineskin which Evland Childes drains in a gulp. Theo’s eyes climb over his body as he does so, searching for visible wounds. Beyond the dried blood at his temple and a splotch of red at his thumb, he looks to be uninjured. A sigh escapes Theo.

“You are fine,” Theo says, as if reassuring himself. “You could have been killed though.”

Evland Childes’ gaze rolls over to him, not even bothering to move his head. His pulse flutters against the thin skin of his neck. His hand gradually rises, pressing against the blood on his temple. “Is this... mine?”

Theo scents the air to confirm his observations. “No.”

Evland Childes’ cheeks go green, and he claps a hand over his mouth. “You – you killed it. It is dead, right? Or was that just some sort of a twisted test? Is this the torture Octavian was talking about?”

Torture?

The word brings a much different image to mind than what Evland Childes probably intended. An image of bound wrists and shaking thighs, and Evland Childes’ plump lips shaping the word please. Theo shakes it away.

“The hopiar is dead, yes.” The truth slips out before he has the chance to rein it in. Somehow, it’s so difficult to lie to this man, especially when gazing into his

impossibly blue eyes, but Theo tries all the same. “It seems that your own people have learned of your capture. We’re lucky that I got there in time.”

Evland Childes’ eyes go huge, and before Theo can stop to reign in the half truth, he finds himself continuing, “I have made sure that – that none – only a few – of my people have learned of your capture,” Theo manages, the words difficult to force from his tongue. “Some Siacchian must have noticed your absence. They likely have determined the truth and sent assassins here to keep you silent.”

“That’s impossible,” Evland Childes says. “My mother would never –” He silences himself by clapping a hand over his mouth.

Theo lets the silence stretch, waiting for the man to say more. When Evland Childes only stares at him, Theo says, “You will come to no harm when you are with me.” Just to make him trust me.

Evland Childes narrows his eyes, but this close, Theo can make out the faint spark of relief glowing there.

Evland says, “So for the next hour I’ll be safe while you patch me up, but then what? You’re just going to send me out to be eaten by those damned impyassi again.”

“Impyassi?” The word is clunky on his tongue.

“The monster. I’ve never seen one so large before.”

Theo dips his head in understanding. “You will be safe from these monsters – the impyassi – as long as you are with me, you are correct. Which is why you will be staying by my side, in my tent.”

Evland Childes gapes at him. “What?”

The idea pools in Theo's mind just as quickly as the words leave his tongue. "I cannot have you endangered again, not with the knowledge you keep. If either your people or mine have learn of your existence, then you will be under attack –"

"Under attack by both?"

"Siacchians will keep you silent. There has been a mass exodus of your... impyassi from the outer rim of Cesscounthe. From the areas not shielded by the wall. We let them pass our barricade, but they will not be pleased to learn you are leaking secrets that could harm the family they've left behind in their haste to escape. That, and Kiterans will slit your throat for their blood feud."

Evland Childes' sour fear smokes the tent. "Blood feud?" he squeaks. "Exodus?"

"The pact a Kiterans swears upon the blood of their fallen brethren. We have lost several to your hopiar – impyassi, as you have called them, and my people seek vengeance."

"My people have – have killed yours? That's not – that's not possible. All but the Aiutani have sworn a nonviolence pact –" He abruptly stops, blinking. Then, in a low voice clearly meant for his own ears, he says, "They're really doing it."

Now, here is why I'm doing this. Information clearly ripe for the reaping, Theo presses, "Doing what?"

"I..." Evland Childes shakes his head. "My mother always said that should war come, we would uphold our pact of nonviolence by using the Aiutani – the lower caste – to fight for us. We will sully the hands of our beastly folk..."

Theo watches the horror unfold on Evland Childes' face, disgusted. What a backwards society, to treat their beastkind as second class citizens.

Evland Childes shakes his head. When he gazes up at Theo, his eyes have shuttered. “This is the only way to keep myself alive? To stay here? With you?”

Evland Childes speaks the words as if reciting his death sentence, and Theo chuckles. “Without me, you might have lost your life tonight. I will keep you safe, Siacchian. There’s no need to look so grim about it.”

“That’s right,” Evland Childes says distantly. “You did save me. You were the monster at my back. Without you, I would have just had my charcoal sharpener.”

“Your what?” Theo raises a brow. “You had a weapon?”

“Not a weapon – a tool,” Evland Childes protests. “But that’s entirely besides the point. You – you did save me.” He ducks his head, eyes dropping to the floor. A warm red blush spills across his cheeks. “Thank you.”

Theo blinks and his heart does a strange skip. Oddly, the feeling reminds him of the first time he had been touched lovingly. The first time someone had pressed a hand against his cheek and called his name, the name that only his family had used. He shakes his head. Betrayal came soon after butterflies, inevitably. Just like it will now.

Focus.

“You’re a valuable asset,” Theo says, turning away. “I had no choice.”

“You could have let Octavian handle it.” There is something odd about Evland Childes’ voice when he says this, a strange tenseness that Theo can’t place.

Theo snorts. “That man cannot handle anything when you’re concerned.”

His eyes finally alight upon his bedroll, and he is shocked to feel his lips part in a

yawn. That's right – he had forgotten how late it is. Tomorrow, he will have to interrogate this man properly. He will have to learn the secrets of this damned walled city, and soon after conquer it. If he took too much time... the Elders did not look kindly upon slowness, especially when waging a war against pacifists, no matter how brilliant the pacifists are said to be.

But first, he needs to deal with his prisoner. Theo turns to the man in question, who has slumped into a ball, eyes still wide. "Sleep," Theo orders. "Octavian will return shortly, and I will tend to your wounds, but it will take awhile to warm the water and fetch the poultice. Best that you rest while you can."

"Rest?" Evland Childes repeats the word as if he's never heard it before. He closes his eyes, entire face scrunching with the motion, then goes still as a mouse. He slowly forces his body to relax. It doesn't take long before his breaths go steady with sleep.

Somewhere, deep inside him, beneath the rasping whisper of his beast, Theo knows he is lying to himself. He knows that Evland Childes means more to him than any person possibly should.

But Theo has never much cared about any inner voices beyond the one calling for violence and vengeance.

He still finds himself watching the rise and fall of Evland Childes' chest, marveling.

Humans are ridiculously fragile; had he been a minute later – had he not already been out, pacing his camp and pondering what to do with his prisoner – he might not have made it in time. And then he would have come across gore and death and Evland Childes' cooling body.

The image wrings Theo's heart like a rag, dragging bile to his tongue. He grits his teeth.

He isn't sure how long he sits there, watching his prisoner sleep when Evland Childes suddenly starts awake, eyes springing open. His lips part with little pants. His eyes race around the tent, before finally alighting on Theo.

"You're still here," he whispers and then scowls. He draws his knees to his chest, curling even tighter in on himself. "I – I can't sleep now," he murmurs after a long silence. "Every time I close my eyes, I see that beast again. I see my life ending on its fangs." His shoulders shake.

The words I will keep you safe from everything weigh on Theo's tongue – but it seems he truly cannot lie to this man, try as he might.

"If you will not sleep," Theo says. "Then you might as well show me how you were planning on finishing this match." He gestures to the Ravage board, still set from their game earlier that day.

The furrow between Evland Childes' eyebrows eases as he stares at the unfinished match, as if gratefully soaking in the red and cream squares.

"Will you need a light?" Theo asks as he pulls out a chair for his prisoner. He learned humans see poorly in the dark, and his tent is black as aged blood. Evland Childes shakes his head, clambering to his feet like a child, shivering, before sinking into the seat. Oddly disturbed by the sight of goosebumps creeping down the man's pale skin, Theo drapes his travel-worn blanket over the man's shoulders before he realizes what he's doing.

"No light needed," Evland Childes says, clutching the blanket and leaning forward to take in the board. His pupils dilate as he does so, and Theo forces himself to stop observing his prisoner and study the board as well.

They lapse into a comfortable silence as Evland Childes makes his next move. The

sound of the metal pieces clicking against the steel board are the only noises that dare to break the quiet.

That's how Octavian finds them probably half an hour later, entering the tent with a sweaty brow, Vittoria's poultice, a heavy basin, and a scowl. He sloshes steaming water as he places a basin large enough to submerge a small child at Theo's feet. "The prisoner seems in good health," he growls, eyes flickering to Evland Childes, who is so absorbed in the match he hasn't even looked up.

It's difficult to make out in the darkness, but as he turns, the blooming bruises on Octavian's throat catch the light. Theo looks away. They will heal by daylight. "You brought the rags?"

Octavian drops a handful of threadbare patches of fabric, stained various colors that only serve to look more disgusting upon closer examination. His shoulders rise to his ears as he looks back and forth between Theo and Evland Childes.

Theo needs to address this now. "Clean yourself up," he says gruffly to Evland Childes. To Octavian, he orders, "Come with me." Theo seizes the man by the elbow and pulls him into the night.

Octavian's scowl only darkens as they exit the tent. "Are you serious?" he growls as soon as they leave, voice cast low enough only hopiar ears would be able to hear. "You're playing Ravage with him again? What are you doing, Theodori?"

Panic darts through Theo, but just as quickly as it spikes his pulse, he squashes it. "I'm doing what you failed to do: I'm earning his trust. If I am the only person who can keep him safe here – the only person who treats him with kindness – he will have no choice but to open up to me."

Octavian's jaw works. He spins away, placing his hands on his hips. Finally, he says

in a low voice, “How strangely you’re acting... it’s more than just the stress of the siege, isn’t it?” When Theo doesn’t reply, Octavian murmurs, “Do you think I can’t see the way you’re looking at him?”

Theo flattens all emotions from his face as responses whirl through his mind. Before he can reply, Octavian says, “You could have anyone, Theodori. You have me to satisfy any urges. These Siacchians – they’re emotionless, unfeeling creatures. They could never want like we do. They would never satisfy you – even if they weren’t our prisoner.”

Theo crosses his arms over his chest, narrowing his eyes.

Octavian continues, “I’m not trying to – to heckle you, Theodori. I’m not your mate, I’m your second. And I’m telling you now: you need to clear your mind. The way you’ve acted since we’ve captured this man....” He shakes his head.

“Are you done?”

Octavian flushes but doesn’t look away. “You know we don’t have long. The Elders will learn of this move... somehow.” He adds the last word hastily when Theo’s lips curl to reveal growing teeth. “They will want to see results.”

“And they will get them,” Theo says, voice cold. “My attraction to this man will not get in the way of our mission, Octavian.”

Octavian presses a hand to his bruised throat.

Theo says, “You said the prisoner’s intel was good?”

“What?”

“Before – when your Wolf’s Teeth found the fleeing Siacchian humans who attacked our camp – you said Evland Childes’ maps were thorough?”

Octavian slowly nods.

“You’re right; we’re running out of time. We need to add more teeth to this siege. Bring me heads – one for each day we’ve been here. We’ll add them to our wall.”

A light sparks in Octavian’s eyes. “Understood.” Before he turns to leave, he adds, quietly, “I trust you, Theodori.”

“Good.”

“You will tell me if you learn anything from him when it becomes relevant to me?”

“Yes.”

Octavian looks over Theo’s shoulder, to the entrance to the tent. “I will keep a closer watch on him from here on out –”

“There’s no need. He will be staying with me.”

Octavian presses his lips together. “Theodori –”

“You realize the attraction is not one sided.”

At this, Octavian pauses. He slides his hands into his robes, his next word a single clouded exhale against the moonless night. “Continue.”

“Give me time. I told you: I will earn his trust – and his lust. I can use this. We can use this.”

“And the Ravage?”

Theo manages a grin. “Come now, Octavian. You just told me you weren’t going to act as my mate. Am I detecting a hint of jealousy in your voice?”

Octavian huffs and turns. “Jealousy.” He scoffs. “Me?”

“Octavian,” Theo calls as his second retreats into the night. “I need information on those hopiar. If they were Siacchian, how they got into the camp – and how they learned of Evland Childes – we need to know if there is a leak in this camp passing information to the Siacchians”

Octavian pauses. “I’ll speak to my people.”

“Good.” Theo’s hands clench at the reminder of Evland Childes’ would-be attacker’s head dangling from his fingers. He runs his tongue over his teeth, though his mouth has long since been cleaned of blood. “That cannot happen again.”

Octavian nods. “I will work on it.” He adds with a glance tossed over his shoulder, “Goodnight.”

Theo looks up at the blinking stars above them and the velvet sky. A cool breeze brushes across his semi-bare shoulders, now wrapped in an old tunic, and a chill sweeps across him. Despite the goosebumps, Theo allows himself a small smile; things have been smoothed over with his second. Everything goes better when Octavian isn’t angry at him.

Theo turns and returns to the warm heat of his tent.

Inside, Evland Childes sits hunched, facing away from the Ravage board. “I didn’t look at the board while you were gone,” he says as Theo enters. “But I have moved

the next piece.”

He doesn't ask about the conversation he couldn't hear. He doesn't press to learn about the attack or why it happened. Evland Childes only wants to keep playing.

The relief Theo feels to return to the world of Ravage, a place where you have the power to see each attack coming and can defend accordingly, is so strong it almost hurts. It reminds him why he loves this game so much – how much of a solace it is for him to retreat to, to hide from memories of scorched earth and burned flesh. He eases into his cushion, spreading his legs so he can brace his elbow on his knee and his chin on his palm.

They both return their attention to the game, ignoring the occasional yawn from either man. Neither of them has any interest in stopping. They could have played for a matter of minutes or hours before Evland Childes breaks the silence with a snort.

“What?” Theo looks up from his recent move.

Evland Childes shakes his head. “It's nothing – just... well.” He covers his face with one hand. “It's Cesse rules and customs influencing my perception of your play.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don't know if I can talk about this right now,” Evland Childes groans through his fingers. He runs his hand through his curls, looking everywhere by Theo's questioning gaze.

“If you don't tell me, I'll have to find out through our other prisoners.”

“You have other prisoners?” Evland Childes gapes at Theo.

“Jealous?”

“You do not have other prisoners!”

“Maybe that can be what your next question is.”

“Since I’m guaranteed to win again, I might consider that.”

Theo allows the chuckle to bubble past his lips. “Confident. I like that.”

Confidence that is, apparently, overblown. It takes another two dozen moves, but Theo advances his pieces with calm, even precision, pinning Evland Childes’ king in an inescapable maneuver that leaves his opponent red-faced and sweating.

The man in question glares at the board as he tips his king in defeat. “Mate,” he mutters, as if hoping Theo wouldn’t hear.

Genuine laughter bursts free as Theo takes in Evland Childes’ mussed hair and pursed lips. “You look like a child.”

“Just ask your Thought-damned question.”

“Are you always like this when you lose a match?”

“Is that the answer you want to hear?”

Theo waves his hand. “No, I don’t want my question to be anything foolish – like asking my opponent what their name is.” Evland Childes glares. “Tell me what these Cesse rules and customs are. The ones that had you blushing all pretty when I moved my assassin opposite your soldier.”

“That’s... are you sure you don’t want to ask a question that’s more relevant to – I don’t know – the invasion you’ve launched against my country?”

“Stop avoiding. Answer.”

Evland Childes winds one curl around his finger and releases it. The lock springs away, shaped in a perfect spiral. “Surely you know the origin of Cesse – how it was a game of... dominance.” He meets Theo’s eyes as he speaks, the confidence surprising Theo. “Each move is a different signal to your opponent. A soldier placed to D17 could mean a number of things depending on the pieces placed in its periphery. If, for example, you were to make a move like that here...” He adjusts the pieces. “You would be stating you wish to kiss me.” Blue eyes flicker to meet Theo’s gaze.

Theo goes still. It takes all his will power not to look down at Evland’s lips, which are surely full, red, and damp from where his tongue flicked out to wet them moments before. Instead, Theo forces himself to laugh, a noise which somehow doesn’t even sound strained. He says, “I didn’t realize Cesse was so juvenile in the West.”

Evland’s nostrils flare. “And this move...” He moves the pieces quickly, reassembling what Theo recognizes to be the play on the board where Evland briefly lost his composure. “Means you wish to fuck me like a dog.”

Theo’s vision hazes as the image takes him: Evland splayed out before him, pale skin pinked from the cold, limbs long and slender, skin soft and warm. Theo groaning as he pumps his cock before sliding it between the plump flesh of Evland’s –

Theo shakes himself. “Are these messages implied in every move?”

“It’s very complicated.” Evland rearranges the board again. “See, here? Had you moved the piece like this, it would mean you are threatening to choke me on your

cock. Had I replied like this, it would have meant I would be suggesting we place ourselves so we can both pleasure each other simultaneously.”

The images fly through Theo’s mind, so blindingly fast he barely has time to register – and enjoy – them. Spoken in Evland’s quick and businesslike tone, they are oddly not stripped of pleasure, but only added, like Evland has done this before and he plans on doing it again. Like he thinks he is the dominant one here. Like he is a challenge.

“And the move you made?” Theo easily recalls the way Evland responded and picks up the red Queen, turning her between his thumb and forefinger. He places the piece. “What does that mean?”

Evland blinks, gaze shuttering. “That’s – that’s a second question.” He shuffles the pieces on the board again, setting them up for the next game.

“You are greedy with your answers.”

“I think I provided you a fair enough reply.”

Theo leans back in his cushion, spreading his legs wide – as if that could alleviate the ache pulsing from his groin. He releases a slow breath, careful to keep himself from returning to the images Evland planted in his mind. Did the Siacchian do this on purpose? To throw him off his game?

“You realize,” he says, mostly to buy himself the time needed to regain his concentration. “That Ravage games usually end in the same manner.”

Evland Childes stills. His lips press together, and he takes a moment too long to respond with an overly casual, “Is that so?”

“Don’t worry.” Theo watches his prisoner from lowered lashes. “I’ve made an exception for you.” This time around.

As they begin the next match, Theo watches each move Evland makes, wondering at possible meanings. The question must be clear in his eyes, for sometimes Evland meets his gaze as he places his pieces, the challenge clear, though the substance not. Theo’s wolf rises as Evland does so, eager to meet the dare, and Theo feels himself smiling as they play, an expression caught between joy and a baring of teeth.

However, if Evland’s strategy was distraction, it works far too well. The next game concludes shortly, Theo unable to dive into the world of Ravage, his concentration lost with Evland’s every reply. The examples Evland used to explain Cesse prior did not come up in this game, though Theo had watched carefully for them.

As Theo tips his king, a low, “Mate,” escaping his lips, Evland Childes leans forward, the words jumping from him: “Tell me of those other prisoners.”

“That’s not a question.”

Evland scowls. “You know what I mean.”

“And I also abide by the rules you yourself set,” Theo replies, grin growing wider.

“You didn’t strike me as the type.”

“You’re right – but you’re also special. That’s why I make exceptions for you, Evland Childes.”

Evland runs a hand through his hair and sighs, closing his eyes as if to summon the best words to shape into a question. He finally says, “Who are the other prisoners the Kiterans are holding in this camp?”

Theo waits until the man has opened his eyes before he replies. “There is no one else,” he says. “Just you.”

Evland blinks, tension draining from his shoulders as he slumps. He suddenly looks exhausted sitting there, the dark bags under his eyes standing out in stark relief. “Just me,” he repeats, and the words sound almost intimate to Theo’s ears.

Theo nods, still holding the man’s gaze with his own. “Only you.”

They sit like that, eyes cradling each other, for an unknowable amount of time, until Theo realizes Evland is blinking with exhaustion. Theo rises, unrolling his bedroll. “Come,” he says. “We need sleep.”

“I can make do here.” Evland gestures to the dirt floor.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Theo splays out the soft furs and thick leathers. “It’s wide enough for two.” He manages to bite back the words it’s actually wide enough for three because Evland is staring at him with a slack jaw.

Theo shrugs and makes his bed swiftly, lying on his back so he can stare at the tent’s ceiling, eyes tracing the canvas and wood poles. Across from him, Evland tries to make himself comfortable in the dirt, curling on the ground like an animal, limbs stiff as boards.

Theo watches the other man’s chest rise and fall, vision sharp enough to make out that Evland’s eyes are still open. He stills with surprise when Evland meets his gaze.

“Aren’t you afraid I will run?” Evland asks, sitting up and rubbing at his back.

Theo bares his teeth. “You saw what happened to the man who attacked you. Would you like to see what I would do to someone who pushes my patience even further?”

Evland shudders, and Theo fights an odd twist of guilt. The other man lies down again, this time on his back, his arms tucked close. He shivers.

After a few ridiculous minutes of this, Theo says, “You’re being silly. I’m not going to do anything to you beyond sleep and keep you safe from any potential attackers. But I can hardly keep you safe from hypothermia.”

When Evland Childes doesn’t reply, Theo adds, “You realize our children sleep like this, pressed together, to keep warm? It doesn’t have to be... whatever it is that you’re thinking.”

Finally, teeth chattering, Evland Childes says, “I wouldn’t get hypothermia in these temperatures.”

“Evland.”

Evland freezes at the sound of his name and then shakes himself.

Theo realizes he shouldn’t have addressed his prisoner like this – so informally – but it felt so right. Before he can add the final Childes, he stops himself.

It’s better this way. This way, he will trust me more.

Evland Childes rubs his hands together as he crawls on his hands and knees, burrowing into Theo’s bedroll. He shivers as he wraps himself in the furs. Carefully, he curls, pale limbs almost flower-like as he rearranges himself. With at least an arm’s length of space between them, Evland releases a contented sigh. His eyes flutter, shoulders finally relaxing from where they have been held around his ears.

“I can’t trust you,” he whispers, almost to himself as he tucks his arm beneath his head. He looks so delicate, his hand curled beneath his cheek like that. Warmth

blooms in Theo's chest, a feeling so bright, it chases away any lingering autumn chill.

"Of course not," Theo agrees, voice just as soft. "I'm your enemy."

"I'm your prisoner." Evland's eyes close, soft exhales pouting his lips. "Your only prisoner. Because you have no others."

"No others. No one else. Only you."

"Only me."

The night envelopes them, and the world steps away, leaving only the cool embrace of darkness and the warmth of the bed. Theo isn't sure when sleep drags his eyes closed, only that before slumber finally comes for him, he spends his time tracing Evland's fine features with his gaze.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 8:00 am

Fangs gleam. Hot breath fans his face. Something wet smacks his cheek. The monster is here and it will eat him if he does not escape. He opens his mouth to scream, but as he claws away to run, he finds the beast is everywhere, pressing in on all sides. It grows closer, smothering him.

His heart shakes his chest. He will die if he does not run, run, run –

His hands fly up to fight off the monster, but as he fends the thing away, he realizes his fingers have grown a terrible fur. A bright, russet color, a color like the pelts his father carries home after the winter hunt. His nails arch, claws sprouting.

The monster isn't around him.

It is him.

He screams –

“Evland.” Hands shake him into awareness. His head lolls, smacking against his chest, and his mouth snaps shut, cutting off the whimpers leaking past his lips. Luka blinks, shoving away from the man holding him – holding him?

Not again.

Luka inhales deeply through his nose, summoning the Cesse board in his mind's eye. The perfect black and white squares, the smooth wood, the metal pieces carefully arranged and prepared for war – he is three moves into a game when those hands start shaking him again.

“Don’t go back to sleep, Evland.”

“Don’t touch me,” Luka hisses, opening his eyes. Theodori stares back at him, hair ruffled from sleep. It might be Luka’s imagination, but he thinks he sees a brief flash of hurt wrinkle the Kiteran’s face. But it’s gone before Luka can fully comprehend it.

“Was it the same dream?” Theodori asks.

Luka nods, shivering. He’s soaked in sweat. He pulls up the furs he has kicked down during sleep, wrapping them around himself. Theodori shifts, moving as if to help and then drawing away at the last moment, instead adjusting his own covers. “At least you timed it well,” Theodori says. “It’s nearly dawn.”

Luka bites back a sigh. For over a week and a half now, he has woken his captor with his pitiful whimpers and terrifying dreams nearly every night. Theodori might not always be there when Luka first wakes though – the Siacchians have taken to sending down groups of Aiutani to make weak attempts at skirmishes, and Theodori often goes to fend them off. Luka can hear their cries outside his tent, and though Theodori tells him only a few have died from these fights, Luka imagines the walls of Cesscounthe have grown shaded beneath corpses. Despite this, Theodori tries to be by his side when Luka wakes from his nightmares. Even yesterday, a still-bleeding cut on his brow, Theodori pulled Luka from his sobbing slumber, and Luka pretended not to be concerned over the Kiteran’s superficial injury.

For over ten days now, Luka has played Ravage and slowly snuck answers from his captor, scribbling down all that he can remember on notes he leaves for his mother at the far end of the camp. And for so long now... Theodori has comforted him as he shakes into reality, wide-eyed and terrified.

Each night, before sleep drags him back into the same twisted snare of claws, fur, and death, Luka tells himself he will wake peacefully. He will wake before this man

holding him prisoner so he can assess the situation; he will observe Theodori's tent properly, take in the various parchments at the writing desk or study the letters that the man pencils when he thinks Luka sleeps.

He might even finally take the chance to observe Theodori uninterrupted and unhurried. Purely for tactical purposes, of course.

And Luka has failed each night, instead awakened by strong, warm hands. He tells himself he doesn't like how they feel, calluses rasping across his skin. But that would be a lie.

Hands that Luka is staring at now. Luka manages to jerk his gaze away from the strong fingers, the scarred palms, and the hair dusting the length of lean, corded forearms. He instead directs his attention to the blushing sunlight streaming through the tent, turning the canvas to an almost egg-like translucence.

"Speak to me, Evland," Theodori says, easily reclaiming Luka's attention. "You still have that frightened rabbit look on your face."

Luka's jaw snaps shut. "I have never looked anything like a lagomorph."

"Of course."

Eager to change the subject, Luka crosses his arms over his stomach. "What sorts of tortures are you planning today?"

It's an unfair question and they both know it; Theodori has not laid a hand on Luka since they have started sharing a bedroll and has made it clear he never would... assuming Luka follows the strict rules of the camp. Namely, Luka is to never attempt to flee and always to speak the truth.

Two rules Luka has, of course, already broken.

Theodori runs a hand through his hair. Half of his golden locks have escaped his shoulder-length braid. He is perfectly ruffled, and it fills Luka's chest with a strange warmth to look at him. Maybe he has indigestion.

"If you want an answer to that question, you'll have to win a game," Theodori says, his eyes drifting from Luka's to the board. It has been set next to the bedroll for easy access, the pieces already arranged.

Despite himself, excitement shoots through Luka – like it always does. Though he loathes to admit it, he is falling into a routine with this man.

A routine that he's using to his advantage; he is learning everything he could ever possibly need to know about Theodori Hunter Wolf-Born.

Luka adjusts his pieces needlessly as he recites the carefully gathered facts.

First: Theodori trusts no one. Octavian is his closest adviser, but even he is not privy to Theodori's thoughts. Careful to hold everyone at arm's length, his obsession to control the flow of information doesn't simply stem from strategy, Luka has determined, but trauma. Luka gleaned as much when he pressed about Theodori's family in an effort to learn about weaknesses. Upon supplying a curt, "My family is dead," Theodori immediately ended the game. Luka didn't see any point in pushing the issue if it would always lead to the end of a round of Ravage.

Second: Theodori is a well-trained leader. Though his soldiers do not smile as he passes as they do for Octavian, they sit up straight and pay attention. He is not liked, but respected.

Theodori so naturally falls into a leadership role that when Luka woke from a

nightmare one night, Theodori said, “If you’re so afraid of being attacked, I can teach you to defend yourself.”

Incredulous, Luka replied, “You’re teaching me to fight?”

Theodori laughed. The noise was rich. Luka wanted to hear it daily – and hated himself for thinking as much. “Come here. I’ll show you.”

That afternoon, after their daily Cesse games concluded, Theodori positioned Luka’s limbs, hands warm. “Strike here, and here,” he would say. He curled Luka’s hands into a fist, calluses whispering across his skin. Luka, trying to focus, found the following evening, as he fell asleep, he did, oddly, feel safer.

Third: Theodori is young. This tidbit Luka gleaned one night when Octavian burst into the tent and growled that the Elders are growing impatient. The Elders wanted to send not someone who had a better track record of victories – for Theo was the cream of the crop – but the leader with the longest track record.

Fourth: Theodori has a terrible sense of humor. After a particularly long match in which Luka wrangled victory from Theodori with gritted teeth, Luka pressed to learn Theodori’s most valued thing.

“Thing?” Theodori repeated, a single bushy blond brow raised. “I don’t have favorite things. There are the things I use.” He gestured to his assortment of weapons, which Luka carefully avoided looking at directly. It seemed even staring at a knife could pollute his thoughts with impure stupidity and violent desires. “But favorite thing?” Theodori stroked his chin.

After some thought, he said, “Likely Geriin. Though she is hardly a thing.”

Flabbergasted – how could Luka have missed that Theodori had a woman on the

side? – Luka said, “Geriin?”

Though it took another Ravage victory for Luka to pry the answer from his captor’s full, but tightly pressed, lips, Theodori said, “My horse.”

“Your horse is your favorite thing?” Luka spluttered. “But – but –” He waved his hands.

Theodori made that delicious chuckling noise that put wind beneath the butterfly wings in Luka’s stomach and said, “What?”

“How could a horse be your favorite thing?”

“Maybe you have to meet her to understand.”

And perhaps it had been the late hour – it was well past midnight by this point, they had been playing Ravage for the entire day and nearly half the night – but Theodori led Luka outside the tent. They crossed to the edge of the camp bordering the Kiteran’s hastily built wall and drew to a halt before three enormous horses.

As a child, Luka had seen a horse exactly once: when he had joined his father on the annual fox hunts. The creatures terrified him then, and they terrified him now; easily towering above him with enormous hooves and broad backs. They twitched as he approached, eyes too wide as they raised their heads and flared their nostrils.

“Calm yourself,” Theodori instructed. “They can smell your fear.”

Luka shot Theodori a glance. You can, too, can’t you? he thought, though he said nothing, too focused on trying to calm his breathing.

Theodori approached the smaller of the three horses. She was a dark creature, made

nearly invisible in the moonlight, though she bore a pale white star on her forehead. He scratched her nose and muttered something to her that sounded pure Kiteran, the words rolling from his tongue.

“This is Geriin. She is my favorite thing in this world,” Theodori explained as he ran his fingers through the horse’s dark mane.

“But,” Luka began, blinking. “What about Octavian? Isn’t he your ma – er, I mean – your... your... man?”

He had not missed the way Theodori would disappear for long periods with the man in the small hours of the night and return with his braid mussed, pants undone. Or the way Octavian paid a little too much attention to Theodori’s hips as he walked or his hands as he gestured. Such sights ignited a rotten feeling in Luka’s stomach, like a festering wound that rose up and bubbled in his throat.

“Octavian?” Theodori laughed. “I wouldn’t call him my man. I’d much rather ride my horse than ride Octavian any day.”

Luka’s cheeks burned as he looked away. He had thought them lovers, and he wasn’t sure how he should feel to learn they were just... using each other for their flesh. Such acts seemed better reserved for the conclusion of a Cesse match.

Theodori only laughed more as Luka became pointedly absorbed in his shoes. “Come now, Evland,” he said. “You were the one who asked the question.”

Luka resisted pointing out that Theodori hadn’t needed to answer so thoroughly. After all, the man had given Luka exactly what he had wanted, which was more information. And there was no need to look this... gift horse in the mouth.

But the information Luka learned of Theodori is painfully finite. Luka has yet to

discover if this is the full extent of the Kiteran forces or what they will do if this invasion takes too long. Already, he has heard Octavian stress the actions the Elders might take if Theodori should spend too long on his siege, and Luka dreads what might come next should the Kiteran leadership decide if Theodori has failed.

Luka needs more information to satisfy his mother – his mother who has yet to reply to his messages, though he has dutifully and dangerously returned to the spot often, leaving ciphers in the form of sticks and stones, the same as he would on a Cesse board. He did consider if Linne Lockhart had been the one to orchestrate his attack, and it was only after a day and a half of playing out what her strategy might be to remove him from the board that he decided she would never do such a thing to her own son.

Perhaps his mother had yet to discover the cipher, but when he checked each day, he found the pile of stones and sticks disturbed. And as Luka is still alive, he can only assume the destruction was not done by Kiterans.

“Your move,” Theodori says, and Luka blinks. He takes in the board with a quick scan and places the piece without too much thought – a stupid mistake, he realizes when Theodori is unable to hide his triumphant grin.

The game concludes shortly thereafter. Pleased with himself, Theodori scoops pieces of his breakfast bread and cream into his mouth before asking his question around the food, “What do you know of the hopiar?”

“That’s a broad question,” Luka says, biding his time while he considers his answer.

“Don’t think.” Theodori shakes his head. “Just tell me.”

Luka glares at him. “Hopiar – they’re similar to our impyassi, correct? People who can turn into animals?”

“Into the blessed beast, the wolf, yes.”

“Well, into the blessed beasts – there was more than just the wolf who left the sacred kingdom, according to the lore.” Luka pauses, afraid he has spoken too much. Such texts that explained Siacchi’s old religion are not public knowledge, and it took much of his childhood to even discover as much as he has shared.

Theodori gestures for him to continue.

“Well, I don’t know much beyond that. You change when you lose control of your emotions and turn into a creature much larger than what is considered natural. You hunger for flesh – should I go on?”

Theodori’s eyes crinkle. “Please. I enjoy hearing what terrible tales the Siacchians are told of us and their own people to keep their children in line.”

Luka shakes his head. “That’s really all I know.”

Theodori’s amusement fades and he withdraws into himself, suddenly looking almost bashful. “So you do not know of the... of the mates?”

“I believe that’s a second question,” Luka replies quickly. He manages to control his expression as he holds Theodori’s intent gaze, only just hiding the flash of alarm that makes his heartbeat race.

Mates?

Why would he ask about such a thing?

Luka knows that’s a stupid question. He’s just not bothering to uncover the reason, like having found a rock in his path and leaving it unturned because he doesn’t want

to see the worms beneath.

Theodori grumbles and resets the board. They are both eager to escape from their thoughts and return to the play. Both are eager to ask their next questions.

Theodori's openings are familiar to Luka now; an attack with a soldier on the queen's side, or a rapid onslaught of offense meant to put Luka on his heels. At first, the initial aggression stunned him, leaving him reeling in his defensive reply, but now Luka responds to the ferocity in turn. If Luka used such plays in a Cesse tournament, his moves would have been read as so violent, everyone would have seen him as foolish at best – stupid at worst.

But now? They win him the game.

It is perhaps because of his eagerness to overtake Theodori that leads to Luka repeating a move he showed Theodori in the past. A move that means he wants to kiss the man.

Luka realizes it the instant he releases his piece, and embarrassment shoots through him. But days have passed since Luka explained the move's meaning – surely Theodori can't still remember it now.

His stomach clenches as he gazes at Theodori through shuttered eyes. Beneath his shame, something akin to hysterical laughter shakes him. Never before has Luka been embarrassed by signaling something so chaste in a Cesse game.

That's not to say he hasn't made crude gestures to Theodori prior; plenty of times now he's signaled how much he would love to choke on the man's cock or ride him till they both lost themselves in each other's flesh, but those were messages Theodori was incapable of understanding.

Theodori takes in the move with a smooth face, not even blinking as he scans the board. Relief cools Luka's warm cheeks. He doesn't know.

But then Theodori gazes at Luka with a slight quirk to his lips, his brown gaze deepening to honey amber in the early morning light, and Luka's stomach tightens in a very different way.

Anticipation warms him. Luka wets his lips, and Theodori's eyes trace the movement.

Just as quickly as the spell has been spun, Theodori shakes himself and Luka snaps back to reality. The reality where this is his captor and his enemy. The reality where Luka will need to use and betray this man to escape and help his mother win her position – help his city and country.

Theodori places his next piece. Anticipating the other man's strategy, Luka ends the game in another dozen moves.

Theodori sighs as he tips his king. "Mate."

Luka struggles to gather his thoughts as Theodori stares at him, unblinking. "Sevell Hunter Wolf-Born. What does Sevell mean?"

Theodori raises a brow. "That's your question?"

"Yes. Answer it."

Theodori chuckles. "So impatient," he says darkly, and the coiled tension in Luka's stomach tightens. "Vell, Sevell, Tesevell. They're the different rankings for the hopiar leaders in the Kiteran military. Vell is reserved for our most honored leaders. Tesevell are for those who have only begun their careers."

“Do you only allow hopiar to lead?”

Theodori, shockingly, shakes his head. Luka hides a smile as the man unknowingly answers Luka’s second question. “Humans are allowed to rise as well, but they are only commanders or lieutenants. They do not receive the names of honor.”

Clearly, Luka does not hide his grin well, for Theodori adds, “I only answer that because I thought it was a terrible question. I felt sorry for you. Poor Childes and his poor critical thinking skills.”

Luka scowls. “I don’t need that sort of edge. Mine was a perfectly reasonable question.” He crosses his arms over his chest. “I’ll give you one free answer in return.”

Theodori leans toward him. He holds Luka’s gaze like he would a fragile thing. “Foxes.”

Luka blinks. “That’s – that’s not a question.”

“What are they?”

Having been fully prepared to answer more questions about mates, Luka finds himself annoyingly disappointed. “They’re mammals. Like a wolf but smaller and red.” His answer feels lacking, so he adds, “Siacchians are known for their annual fox hunts. They started after we began to celebrate Cesse and Thought, leaving behind our beastly ways.”

“How can you hunt when you can’t handle a weapon?”

Luka resists the urge to shudder when he thinks of the tools his father uses. “These are used only for hunting, not violence against others.”

“Certainly violence against foxes.”

“They have no higher intelligence. Some argue they can’t feel pain.”

“That’s surely not the case. Everything feels pain.” Theodori runs an absentminded finger over the scars roping his hands. He stares at something in the distance, eyes softening.

Luka resets the board, eager to escape not the pain glowing on Theodori’s face, but the bizarre pull he feels to comfort the man. Perhaps it is his lack of focus that causes him to lose the next match, because it certainly isn’t Theodori’s annoying skill.

Luka swears and grumbles, “Mate.” Theodori chuckles.

“I have never lost this much in my entire life,” Luka says.

“Neither have I.”

I’ve met my match, some distant thought whispers, but Luka shoves it away.

As if hearing the words, Theodori says, “What do you know of hopiar – impyassus – mates?”

“I... not much,” Luka begins. He struggles to recall the answer he dedicated a quarter of his thinking power to during the last game, but comes up with rambling threads of thought that lead to no real conclusion. “In Siacchi culture, an impyassus can have a... soul mate. One with whom their fate is eternally bound. The Toula, a figure of great mystical power, can determine who your mate is by reading the lines on your palms.”

He pauses, thoughts of Xyla as familiar as his mental Cesse board. Oddly, though he

has braced himself for the usual ache that arises at her memory, all he feels is a distant sadness, like he has pressed on a nearly healed wound.

“Do you have one such mate?”

Luka jerks his head side to side. “N-no. I don’t have one.” He adds, the lies sour on his tongue and difficult to speak, “I’m not – I’m not a... an impyassus. Humans don’t have them.”

“Right.”

Theodori crosses his arms over his chest, biceps bulging. Lines gather on his forehead and bracket his scowl.

“Have I said something to displease you?” Luka asks.

Ignoring the question, Theodori says, “Do you think they’re real? These mates?”

Luka contemplates telling his captor he’ll have to win another game to earn that answer, but Theodori’s unhappiness is clear and Luka wants to fix it. “I did think that.”

“What happened?”

Luka draws his knees to his chest. “I had a... a friend,” he begins. “He thought he and this girl were meant to be. But they went to the Toula and learned that their fates were to be intertwined with another. She left him. They were both... heartbroken by the whole process.” He adds a hasty, “I think,” when he finds Theodori staring at him too intently.

“This... friend of yours,” Theodori says. “Does he still believe in mates?”

Luka closes his eyes. He thinks back to that moment, to the Toula telling him there was another who would hold his heart like Xyla once had. It was unimaginable then. He forces his lips to say, “I don’t know.”

When Theodori falls silent, Luka opens his eyes. The other man gazes at his own palms, as if trying to read his fate there. Luka asks hesitantly, “Do you believe in them? Er, mates, that is.”

Theodori looks everywhere but Luka’s face. “I learned a long time ago that such relationships would bring nothing but pain and weakness.”

Luka remains silent. He knows the quiet will draw the words out of Theodori.

Theodori continues, “The Elders use mates against us hopiar. They keep us split when we are at war; one at the capitol in Akull, another in the field, so we cannot rebel or ignore orders. Creating such a bond would open myself up to such weakness.” Theodori’s jaw flexes. “It doesn’t matter those who are mated are allowed to rise through the ranks faster. I could never do something like that to myself.

“Mates and friendships. Family.” Theodori shakes his head. “All are impossible for me if I want to accomplish my goal.”

“That’s...” Luka pauses when Theodori’s eyes flicker open, his tongue tripping against his teeth when he finds himself staring face to face with Theodori’s wolf. It peers from the man’s face, eyes gone from human to animal. Luka forces himself to continue, “That’s horrible.”

Theodori nods his assent, but Luka is not finished: “And foolish.”

When Theodori’s lips part to likely snap a reply, Luka rushes to say, “You can’t go through life without creating bonds. What happened with Xyla – what happened

between my friend and his old lover, that happens when you open yourself up. But to go through life with no love, no friends, no family? You would be so alone – so – so empty. How can that be what you want?”

The veins in Theodori’s neck pulse. “I know what I want. I want power.”

“Power should give you the ability to love safely and protect those important to you.”

“Those very relationships drain that which I desire. They expose my weaknesses to my enemies.”

“Weaknesses? Enemies? Maybe you shouldn’t go around invading foreign countries. Then you wouldn’t have so many enemies to worry about.”

Theodori’s lips curl in a snarl. “That’s easy for a pacifist fool like you to say. You’re intelligent. You know the situation you’re in right now: you are my prisoner because you decided to never learn to protect yourself. Even with all the power my family had they were still lost to the demon princes of Balivartia because I wasn’t strong enough.”

Luka forces down the image of his own family dead. Would he mourn his own parents so much like Theodori has? Cassian’s death would ruin him, but Linne –

Luka rose to his knees, his finger whipping to point at the other man accusingly. “I never needed to learn to protect myself. In fact, no one would need to learn to protect themselves if people like you weren’t so eager to attack.”

“People like me?” Theodori laughs, the noise cold and dark. “Oh, Evland Childes. I have been nothing but kind to you. I have protected you from those who would harm you. Had it not been for people like me, you would be dead.”

“You’re the one who put me in danger in the first place.” Luka’s angry finger draws closer to Theodori’s face, each jabbing motion imbued with rage.

“Don’t you gesture at me like that.” Theodori rises to his feet, face looming close to Luka’s.

“Or what? Will you show me what people like you would do to people like me? Should I be scared of you, Theodori?”

Something flickers across Theodori’s face that looks akin to anguish, but Luka is too far gone to notice. The terrible monster housed within him scrambles against its walls, eager to climb to the surface. His arms itch as fur sprouts, and he quickly drops his accusatory finger, sliding his sleeves down to cover his loss of control.

Fear makes Luka’s words fall quicker. “Do you want me to grovel? Or are you looking to trick me? You’re trying to befriend me and use that relationship against me, I understand that, but do you not see the cruel irony of you preaching how close ties have damaged you when you’re trying to use them to damage me? You’re not protecting me – you’re actively seeking to hurt me!”

The hypocrisy of his words sting, but Luka is on a warpath.

“That’s –”

Luka presses even closer. He bares his teeth like the animal he is and always was. But instead of recoiling, Theodori only leans in.

“What is it you want from me, Theodori?” Luka hisses, so close his breath brushes Theodori’s blond locks. “My country’s secrets? My treachery? Or do you want something more?”

“Theo.”

Luka pauses. “What?”

Theodori is so close now, their noses brush. There is a tiny scar tugging on the upper corner of his lip, impossible to see from far away. Lips, which look so soft, so pink.

“Call me Theo.”

Luka scrambles for a response, but before he can reply, his mouth is busy with something other than words.

Theo presses those perfect lips against Luka’s in a kiss that stops time. Just as the Cesse board grounds him, Luka suddenly finds himself at peace like he’s never felt before.

This is what it means to have absolute control.

But just as he thinks that, something new lights within him. Something warm and sweet, something like that glowing feeling he gets in his chest on those early fall mornings, when he sits in his family’s garden and watches the sunrise’s weak light touch his Cesse board. Something that makes him both grateful and hopeful that he is there to witness it.

To feel it.

Theo’s lips are even softer than they appeared. They are gentle, like he’s afraid if he presses any harder, Luka might break.

But gentle has never been what Luka wanted.

He wants more.

Luka's hands scramble, knocking Ravage pieces akimbo as he reaches for Theo. His fingers search exposed skin – skimming the round surface of a bicep, the hardened planes of the man's chest – until they meet the scratchy surface of Theo's face. He pulls the other man closer and moves beneath him, his hips rocking against Theo's.

Theo hisses, and his tongue brushes Luka's lips. Upon feeling the Kiteran's hard cock through his thin robes, Luka groans.

Once before, Luka awoke before Theo had, and stared at the bulge large enough to make out even from beneath the blankets. Thereafter, for so many times now, he has envisioned taking it in his hands, his fingers – his mouth – sucking, touching, licking – and now he cradles that very cock with his own hips.

“Evland,” Theo groans into Luka's wild lips.

And just like that, the world jerks back to horrible, screeching normal.

Luka yanks away. Panting breaths rake in and out of his heated lips, and he realizes his body is on fire. Never before has something as simple as a kiss made him want to rip off his clothes, made him want to –

No.

Luka shakes himself. This man is his captor. This man is his enemy.

Somehow, Luka manages to reign in his breathing and ignore the painful throb from his hardened cock.

He forces himself to look at Theo. Forces himself to take in the man's flushed cheeks,

dilated pupils – swollen pink lips. Luka raises his chin. “Well played.”

Theo recoils. But the reaction only lasts half a second. He doesn't have any more time to recover or reply, for at that very moment, Octavian sweeps into the tent.

“Theodori,” Octavian snarls. “We're out of time.”

Octavian calls him Theodori, not Theo, Luka forces himself to take note for his country and certainly not for himself, though he cannot deny the glow of satisfaction as he hears this.

Theo snaps into attention. If not for the clear plumpness of his lips and the pink tinge to his cheeks, it would have been impossible to know what he was doing seconds before.

But Octavian is observant. He pauses, panting, eyes darting from Theo to Luka. “What were you two doing?”

“Lost our heads,” Theo explains, gesturing at the Ravage pieces Luka scattered. “We were taking a break.”

“Good,” Octavian says, marching toward Theo. “Because this is not time for games.” He pauses before Theo, his expression carefully crafted.

But Luka has dedicated all of his time in the past ten days to understanding these people, so he can read the minute expressions on Octavian's face with ease: the man is afraid.

“Out of time?” Theo repeats as if finally registering the words. “What happened?”

Octavian's eyes dart to Luka and then away again, clearly not wanting to speak in

front of their resident Siacchian.

“Fine,” Theo hisses. He drags his second into the morning. “But next time you have such urgent news, summon me from outside of the tent. I don’t appreciate being ambushed.”

“Of course, Sevell Hunter,” Octavian says as they exit, closing the flap behind them. Their voices drop to levels that would be too low for normal human ears to make out, and never before has Luka been so grateful for his impyassus hearing.

“The Elders know about your little... prisoner,” Octavian whispers.

“What? How?” Shock colors Theo’s words.

“I’m... not sure. I’ve spoken to each who could have known. The Wolf’s Teeth used to kidnap the Siacchian have been put to death.”

“Good.” Theo’s words are so cold, Luka shivers. This is who Theo is: a monster. Someone who would revel in the death of others even if they let the slightest bit of information slip. Luka could never care for this man. He could never want to – to kiss him.

Do I care for him?

The question floats through Luka’s brain for only an instant before Luka swats it away. This is not the time for such thoughts – for such distractions.

“They think,” Octavian begins, speaking carefully. “They think the Siacchian might be your....” The next word is said so quietly, not even Luka’s keen ears can hear it.

“What?” Theodori hisses.

“They want him sent to Akull, and they want you to continue with the campaign.”

“That’s – that’s ridiculous! He’s human. We cannot form such bonds with humans.”
Theo spits each word.

Realization dawns on Luka and he takes a step back. The word Octavian said must have been – mate.

It is impossible – right? Such a thing is unheard of. Mates are someone you are forever bonded with. Mates are the one person who is meant to be yours, no matter the circumstances.

But those circumstances have never extended across borders.

Or had they?

Once again, before the question can gain enough momentum, Luka forces it away. Mates are a concept that belongs to his younger self, to a boy on the verge of manhood who had thought he found his person, only to instead find heartbreak. He isn’t ready to do that again – ever – much less with a man as terrible and infuriating and sweet and wonderful as Theo.

“What led them to this brilliant conclusion?” Theo growls.

“They apparently know of the... conditions the Siacchian has been living under.”

“And what conditions are those?”

“That you share a bedroll. That you spend your days not leading your command, but instead hiding in your tent, playing a child’s game.”

“Ravage is hardly a child’s game, and my interrogation techniques have earned us plenty of fruitful knowledge.” Theo pauses, saying in a lower voice, “You have already taken out seven of their people with his information, have you not?”

Cold terror seizes Luka. That’s impossible.

“Seven of our enemies are dead, yes, but that knowledge has not won us Cesscounthe,” Octavian says.

Luka sinks to his knees, staring at his hands. Seven dead because of the information he shared. He might as well have taken their lives himself. Somehow, he forces himself to continue to listen.

“You realize what this means, Octavian.” Leaves crunch as Theo starts to pace. “There is a mole in our camp. Someone is leaking information back to them. Someone who we have trusted enough to allow them to witness this.”

“The Elders have many spies within our camp, Theodori –”

“But none that we were aware of were so close to me. How do I know that you haven’t been the one sharing this information with them?”

“Do not growl at me like that, Theodori,” Octavian says coolly. “What would I gain from betraying you like that? I need you here so I can be here. If you were removed from your seat of power, how would I accomplish my own goals? Think rationally.”

Theo releases a breath that sounds like a kettle filled with boiling water.

Octavian continues, “They have given you two weeks to breach the walls and prove your prisoner is not the distraction they believe him to be. After those fourteen days... they will send Commander Jennison.”

“Jennison? Jennison trained me. I know all his best teachings – he will never be better than me.”

“But he has experience where you don’t.”

“That’s only because he’s old enough to meet the Mother Wolf herself!”

“Theodori....”

Theo grumbles, his pacing increasing until he is practically running back and forth in front of his tent. As if realizing their voices have increased in volume, he says quietly, “Fine. Thank you for sharing this with me, Octavian. I will move forward with the next step.”

“So you’ve... you learned something that can be used against –”

“Yes. Not here.”

Luka stills as the silhouette of Theo’s head turns, almost as if the man is staring directly at him. His heart rattles. Surely Theo can’t know that Luka can hear them?

Theo continues, “Find me the one who shared this information with our Elders and bring them to me. I will move forward with the next stage in our plan. We’re taking Cesscounthe in the next ten days.”

“But we have fourteen –”

“And the last four will be spent in celebration of our monumental accomplishment.” Theo chuckles, and the noise is nothing like what Luka has heard during their games. Instead of sounding warm, it chills his blood.

“And the prisoner?” Octavian asks.

Theo pauses. After a beat he says in a determined voice, “I’ll deal with him.”

Luka steels himself as Octavian and Theo conclude their conversation. He carefully folds his fear, his anguish, and his guilt into a neat box, where he refuses to think about the seven dead (who were they? Did he know their families? Did he know them?). He imagines how he will fashion his mother’s cipher to explain this message, carefully arranging each piece in his mind. Once he has the message’s formation memorized, he rights the Ravage board. He strokes the pieces – black and blood-red, how appropriate for such savages.

Savages that kissed him.

His fingertips graze his lips as he briefly relives the moment. Never before had he experienced something so close to perfect.

Savages that have killed his people.

But those feelings he felt then were false. No, they weren’t feelings at all, but hormones mixed with longing and loneliness and lust, all turned into a perfect concoction that merely felt like love, but in reality was simply survival and terror.

Is simply survival and terror.

Luka freezes as the tent opens and Theo steps in alone. He catches a glimpse of Octavian hurrying across the camp, boots crunching across dying autumn grass.

Theo’s shoulders are braced as if approaching battle. He stares straight ahead for a moment too long before his eyes finally locate Luka. A tiny muscle relaxes around his eyes, almost as if he is relieved.

But Luka is sure he must be reading into things, for Theo quickly looks away.

“I need to use the latrine,” Luka says as Theo pointedly avoids eye contact.

“I’ll escort you,” Theo replies, words rocky. He opens the tent flap.

It’s impossible to make casual conversation as they cross to the same side of the camp Luka left the first message for his mother. Sweat gathers beneath Luka’s warm Kiteran cloak as they walk.

Theo doesn’t bother to bind Luka’s hands. “We can’t let my soldiers know you are our prisoner for your sake,” he explained. “Then they will think you a target – someone of import they use to fulfill their need for vengeance.”

Instead, Theo walks painfully close. Oftentimes, he would either sling his arm over Luka’s shoulder or hold his bicep in a way that was less prisoner and more lover. “It’s what my soldiers expect,” Theo explained the first time he had done it and Luka jumped away. After, Luka grew used to the little touches – he almost anticipated them.

Now though, they walk with distance between them.

They arrive at the latrine and Theo has the courtesy – and foolishness – to turn away as always. Luka does his business and scans the ground.

Every three days, he has left a new message for his mother, tucked at the weakest point of the camp where the walls are shortest. The location is one of the few her spies might have been able to safely locate.

Luka’s stomach sinks as his eyes spot what only he would be able to see; a twig left diagonal to a stone, a scattering of grasses covering them. Untouched, unlike the

messages he left before.

“Sevell Hunter,” a Kiteran calls, approaching Theo. Luka jumps. Theo automatically steps in front of him, shielding Luka from the Kiteran’s eyes.

An opportunity like this won’t present itself again.

Usually, Luka has to wait until nightfall to leave his messages, using the cover of darkness to avoid even the sharpest of impyassi eyes. But now, he can’t wait. Why is this message untouched?

He moves quickly, replacing his old message with the new. As he adjusts the rock, something glints from beneath it.

A sheet of paper.

Luka drops to one knee to feign adjusting his boot. He shuffles the paper to where he can unfold it without the Kiterans seeing.

The handwriting is familiar and it takes only half a heartbeat to realize why: it belongs to his mother.

Luka reads the words in a blink and then shoves the paper into his mouth, swallowing the evidence just as Theo turns.

“Ready?” Theo asks.

Luka nods, not trusting himself to speak.

“I’ll speak to you later,” Theo says to the soldier. “Have to deal with this little troublemaker for now.”

The soldier chuckles as Theo escorts Luka away. Thankfully, Theo has his back to Luka, so he won't see the tears gathering Luka's eyes or the raw terror Luka is unable to contain.

His mother's message keeps running through his mind, the words so cold and so final.

We can't come for you.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 8:00 am

“Perhaps this isn’t the best plan,” Octavian says. This is the fourth time he’s voiced his unease, and for the fourth time, Theo ignores him. Octavian sighs when he sees the set to Theo’s jaw, and pulls his hood to cover his face despite the sky’s lack of a moon. Their boots crunch across the frost-bitten ground.

It is the coldest night since the Kiterans first arrived outside Cesscounthe’s walls, nearly four weeks ago now, and Octavian’s breath fogs the air with each exhale. The guards lining their camp’s makeshift walls are still tense from the incident three evenings ago, which saw the Siacchians sending out their second wave of hopiar soldiers. Or, according to Evland Childes, a more accurate title would be hopiar slaves. It was easy enough for Theo’s well-trained soldiers to cut down the two dozen Siacchians, though they did so with looks of disgust.

“They didn’t need to die,” Theo said after the last man’s head was severed from his neck. His soldiers looked to him; they were only a month into the siege. They knew this might last for much longer.

But Theo needs to end things. The Elder’s deadline looms, only days away.

“We can get Siacchi’s walls open if we have the right leverage – like Council Member Dawls,” Theo replies to Octavian, trying to ignore the way the guilt in his stomach only grows heavier and fouler, like a festering wound in his gut. “Evland Childes shares things with me, but we need more than a few dead officials. This will be enough to crack him open completely.”

“I still don’t know how you could put so much faith in just him. He might know nothing of import, Theodori.”

“If he does not, then we now have two additional prisoners – isn’t that what you wanted, Octavian?”

Octavian’s wrinkled nose is only just visible. Ordinarily, Theo would chuckle at his second’s look of distaste, but he’s too distracted by thoughts of his prisoner. He left Evland Childes curled in his bedroll, hand tucked beneath his cheek, dark tendrils of hair splayed across his lips. Never before has Theo shared his bed with someone for so long and not been inside of them. Theo had brushed those locks away with unthinking hands, and Evland turned into the touch, lips parted.

Such a sight – such a hard thing to leave.

And an even harder thing to betray.

These past few days only led to the tension between them tightening. The kiss was never mentioned, of course, but Theo had found himself absently gazing at Evland’s lips when he was certain the other man wasn’t looking. Twice now, he has been caught.

And twice now, Evland looked away, cheeks colored, brows furrowed. The interest that had shone so brightly in his eyes extinguished, now lost to a snarl of conflicted emotions that Theo only recently came to understand: after Theo had spoken with Octavian outside the tent about the Elder’s imposed timeline, it became clear Evland’s opinion had soured.

It was as Theo suspected. Somehow, Evland had heard Octavian and Theo discussing their plans. It was a high price to pay to test such a measly theory – but Theo had done it intentionally.

Surely human ears wouldn’t be able to hear so keenly?

Which meant...

But Theo hadn't even dared to think his theory and he was glad he hadn't. In the days that followed, he tried to determine if his prisoner was a hidden hopiar.

But Evland had failed every test Theo had subtly put to him with flying colors; he had no superior reflexes (every time Theo tossed his lunch, pillow, or threw a Ravage piece at a speed only hopiar would be able to handle, Evland fumbled, no matter how off guard; he had no easily provokable wolf that would rise to the surface when poked or prodded, as Theo had learned during a late night of fierce name calling that nearly devolved into a second round of kisses; he even didn't have a superior sense of smell: he hadn't detected how foul the horse's milk had turned before taking two deep sips of it).

Sure, these were all things that could be faked, but it would have been difficult for a man like Evland to keep up such an act for so long.

No, Theo is quite certain the man is human, and therefore absolutely not his mate.

Which means what he's about to do – what he's already done – isn't something unforgivable. It's something he has to do to win this battle – to win this war. To finally prove to the Elders he's someone to trust with power.

Theo and Octavian draw to a halt outside the newly erected tent. It stands on the outskirts of the camp, kept isolated from the bustle.

"Are they awake yet?" Octavian asks one of the four guards posted.

The Kiteran woman shakes her head.

"Must be still shaking off the spirits," Octavian says to Theo. Theo narrows his eyes

at his second and waves a hand at the guard posted at the head of the tent. The man draws the flap aside. Before Theo enters, he exchanges a look with Octavian. He speaks in a voice so low, he is certain that even the guards across from him won't be able to hear. "And the mercenaries who carried out this mission...?"

Octavian's nod is the slightest dip of his chin. "Dealt with using monkshood."

Theo smiles grimly. He will not have another leak take place, especially since only those who were well acquainted with Cesscounthe could have been used for this task, and mercenaries familiar with the inner city – so far removed from Kitera – cannot be trusted. He is only grateful that the mercenaries were able to snatch his new captives. For all that both are nobles, they spent an unusual time in the lower districts of Cesscounthe.

Theo can't afford any mistakes. He has to hide his tactics from the Elders, who surely keep close tabs on his own movements. Avoiding their spies meant ensuring that the guards posted outside this tent are rotated on a regular basis and never told the truth about the people kept inside. This will narrow the pool of people aware of his decisions down to two: himself and Octavian.

If another information leak occurs, Theo will know where it came from.

Theo and Octavian enter the tent, both pausing as their eyes adjust to the flickering oil lamps.

There, crumpled on opposite ends of the tent, lie two bodies: one female, one male. Both unconscious and bound, left facing away from each other. The rest of the tent is barren but for a chamber pot.

Octavian's breaths fog the air as he speaks, "Would you like me to watch them? I can alert you when they wake." His eyes narrow as he shoots Theo a sideways glance.

“That way you can get back to your prisoner.”

Theo shoves down the bile that rises in his throat at the thought of returning to Evland after witnessing first hand what he has done. Before he can reply, the female prisoner lets out a low moan, rolling onto her back.

Theo walks to stand over her. She is pretty, with a heart-shaped face and round, freckled cheeks. Her fire-colored hair falls in clumps around her face, bits of dirt and grit caught in her auburn curls.

Her lids flutter as her eyes part. Dark irises, so dark, he can barely make out the swell of her pupils as she stares up at him, dilated with fear.

Her scent matches her description – female hopiar.

Her name – spoken to him in only passing by Evland – rings through Theo’s thoughts. It had taken some digging to find her, and it was only because of Octavian’s clever wits and Cesscounthe’s paper-runners, eager to report on local gossip – that, and more digging – that Theo and Octavian were able to find the man that Evland spoke of. Getting their hands on the woman was easy enough; she spent almost all of her time in the lower district, escorting impyassi refugees past the siege.

The tricky part had been capturing Luka Lockehart.

How fortunate that the now killed Siacchian mercenaries Theo hired found Luka Lockehart outside of an impyassi whorehouse.

But now that Theo has captured Xyla Mobiele and her lover, Luka Lockehart, Theo has leverage over his prisoner.

Now, he will get his Evland to tell him everything.

With victory so close, Theo isn't sure why he feels this is going all wrong.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 8:00 am

Luka knows something is wrong the moment he wakes up that morning.

First, Theo has left him. He always waited on the rare days that Luka slept in, warming two cups of horse milk and preparing the Ravage board for their usual game, backlit by the sunrise. Though the milk disgusted Luka, there was something so heartwarming about the picture of his Kiteran, warmed by the golden rays of the new day, tending the fire and setting the game.

But today, Luka wakes alone.

Second, the fire is dead. Autumn clenches the air with its icy fist. Luka shudders, dreading emerging from his blankets.

Before Luka can contemplate the third thing – for there is definitely a third thing wrong, too – Theo enters the tent.

An odd array of expressions plays across Theo's face when his eyes land on Luka, cocooned in furs and shivering. Expressions that Luka desperately doesn't want to read into. He doesn't want to see the way the hard planes of Theo's face soften with a gentle smile, the way his eyes crinkle around the edges, or the way his entire body leans toward Luka like a flower does the sun. No, Luka has practice in ignoring those things now that he knows what few tidbits of information he allowed to leak past his lips led to dead Siacchians. Siacchians who might as well have been killed at Luka's own hand.

Just as quickly as Theo softens, he shakes himself, and the furrow between his brows takes up residence once more.

“Get up,” he says. “I need to speak with you.”

Luka stifles a groan of protest as he drags himself from the covers and gathers his clothes. Once dressed, Theo hands him a mug of steaming horse milk. Luka rolls the clay cup between his hands to warm his fingers.

“You will tell me what I need to know today,” Theo says after he takes a sip from his own mug. “And I will finally end this siege. Tell me where your leaders are located – where your Council Member Dawls is. Where your mother is. Tell me of their defenses and how I can pass them, without violence. You can be the end of this, you realize. There are people inside the walls of your city that are suffering now, likely starving. How many resources was Cesscounthe able to stockpile before we arrived, Evland?”

As always, hearing the name Evland on Theo’s lips is like a slap to the face. Luka hides his grimace by taking a sip of his warm drink. The milk is sweet with a slight nutty aftertaste, though it tangles on his tongue with each swallow.

When Theo doesn’t continue his attempts to intimidate, Luka says, “We aren’t even playing yet, Theo. I don’t believe you’ve earned the answer to that question.”

Theo shakes his head, and the milk sours on Luka’s lips. “The time for games has passed, Evland. You will answer me now, or you will answer me later. Things will be much more pleasant if you answer me now.” Muscles bunch in Theo’s jaw. His eyes flicker as his wolf darts through them, paling to a moon-like amber.

Luka’s heart presses against his chest. “What have you done?”

When Theo does not reply, Luka says again, “What have you done, Theo?”

Theo hangs his head. “I should have never let you call me that,” he mutters. He stares

at his fingers for what is likely only a few seconds, but feels like hours as his lashes flutter, grazing his cheeks. Finally, he says, “I have your friends.”

Luka’s stomach drops. “What?”

Fear clouds his thoughts as terrible images hound him; Xyla, bound and gagged, Xyla bruised and bleeding, Xyla – dead. But logic cuts through just as swiftly.

His friends. They must be Evland Childes’ friends.

They don’t have her.

Luka hasn’t reacted quickly enough to cover the terror on his face, so instead he reigns it in carefully, allowing for the fear to rip through before hurriedly stuffing it away. It’s the kind of reaction Evland Childes should have.

He needs to say something. He can’t just simply stare.

“How?” Luka forces the word through his lips. Best to get Theo to talk.

Best to pull Luka away from the terrible emotions welling. Emotions that feel as sharp and painful as heartbreak. Emotions that he has no right to experience.

“You mentioned a name. I worked from there,” Theo says. He can only hold Luka’s gaze for a second before he looks away.

Something wet slips down Luka’s cheek and he realizes he is crying. His heart is aching. Oh, it’s such a terrible feeling, like someone has gripped his chest with great claws and squeezed, rending his lungs to bits. He struggles to breathe, staring at this damned man, and it’s only when he focuses on the smooth ridges of his cup, on the weak morning sunlight filtering through the walls of the tent, that he’s finally able to

inhale.

“From a name alone?” Luka scoffs. The noise is so distant. It’s as if he’s been ripped from his body and he’s watching his limbs and lips operate on their own. “I don’t believe you.”

“This isn’t a game, Evland,” Theo says, words heated at the start of the sentence and then a weak whisper by the end. He still isn’t looking at him. “Tell me what I need to know to take down Cesscounthe.”

Luka sets his jaw. “I don’t believe you.”

“What?”

“I. Don’t. Believe. You.” Luka spits each word. “I don’t believe you’ve captured anyone. I think you just rolled out of bed this morning and decided your new method of interrogation is going to be lies instead of truth. And I don’t believe you – I don’t believe this.” He presses his lips together, fighting to keep the last words inside. But they slip out despite himself: “I should have never believed in any of this.”

Theo remains silent. He finally raises his head, soft eyes growing hard as he meets Luka’s gaze. The bunched muscles in his jaw spasm. “Fine,” he whispers. He puts down his mug and pulls away Luka’s cup. He squares his shoulders and guides Luka to the exit of the tent, placing his hand – which is so warm it burns – against the middle of Luka’s back.

“Come with me,” Theo says. “And you will see.”

The walk is painful, and certainly not because Theo keeps so close.

Luka’s thoughts snarl and trip against each other, teetering like unsteady stacks of

textbooks. They captured his friends based on a name Luka let slip. This is his fault. What if they did capture Xyla? What if she was injured because of his loose tongue?

Every other step he tries to drag himself into a game of Cesse, but before he can get as far as the third move, the image of Xyla scared, Xyla afraid, Xyla hurt – it all cuts through him again. His terror only grows all the more sharper when he realizes if they have Xyla... does that mean they have Cassian?

Friends. Theo said they have Evland Childes' friends. How much did Luka give up without noticing? How much did he allow himself to slip when caught in the gentle lull of this relationship?

How could he have been so stupid to think the heat that flushes through him when he meets Theo's eyes – heat that looked to be reciprocated – was anything more than deception?

Luka is halfway to the newly erected tent at the far end of the camp when he realizes he is making soft, wounded noises. He clamps his lips shut to muffle the whines.

Thankfully, Theo doesn't seem to notice. His stride only slows and then increases, his shoulders tensing as he keeps his gaze directed straight ahead. He bobs his head in acknowledgment to the soldiers milling about despite the early morning. Luka is even greeted – he has become a familiar sighting at Theo's side.

I'm so stupid.

Luka glares at this Thought-damned Kiteran's back. This man was supposed to be a mindless beast. He was supposed to be a fool that Luka could easily trick.

And Luka was the one to fall into his trap.

Has this all been part of Theo's plan?

Luka's anger chills at the thought; it must have been. Even from the beginning, the attack that forced them together, must have been intentional. Theo is far more calculating than Luka has ever realized. Luka closes his eyes as his heart wrenches again, tearing into even smaller pieces. Did Theo let Luka win those Ravage games?

Has he been toying with Luka this whole time?

Luka's eyes burn and he inhales raggedly, the noise strangled and wet. Theo slows again, tension rippling across the muscles of his exposed arms. His hands flex into fists.

Get a hold of yourself, Luka.

Desperately, Luka reaches for the one thing that he has never sought: his own beast.

The monster is warm and eager for violence as always. Luka cuddles to it, clutching its rage close in hopes of melting the icy pain in his chest. His body shudders and fur itches beneath his skin, his teeth aching, claws extending.

Theo comes to a stop. He turns his head, and Luka both dreads and anticipates the Kiteran seeing him, on the verge of change. If Theo looks at him now, Luka won't be able to control himself – won't be able to control this monster inside him.

He will attack.

But Theo only shakes himself and returns to walking. Luka inhales once again, more controlled, and forces his beast away. Only this time, instead of thinking never again, Luka promises the monster not now.

Later.

If Luka cannot glean information from this man, he will at the very least gain vengeance.

Theo gestures Luka into a tent at the edge of camp. There are three guards posted on the outskirts, and they avoid eye contact as Luka enters. Luka holds his breath as he ducks beneath the flap Theo opens for him, heart shaking his ribs as he waits for his eyes to adjust to the dark.

No.

Oh, Thought. I'm so sorry.

Xyla lies not three feet from Luka's boots, her red hair like a bloodied pool around her head. She looks up as Luka enters, her bared snarl melting into horror. "No," she whispers, a perfect mirror to Luka's own thoughts.

Dread makes it near impossible for Luka to look past her, at the other prone body. His mind makes it difficult, turning familiar black locks to brown curls. But a blink shatters the illusion, and Luka finds himself staring into the pond scum-colored eyes of the real Evland Childes.

Luka struggles to control himself, trying to smother the way his raw terror transforms from fear for Xyla to fear for himself.

What will they do to me when they learn I've been lying?

Truly, it is a miracle they haven't yet discovered that Luka has been hiding his identity this whole time – assuming that wasn't all part of Theo's charade, too.

Theo's boots crunch as he comes to stand behind Luka, his presence changed from a strange comfort to a looming threat. Luka instinctively wants to lean into his warmth, but he stands frozen, hands shaking.

"Yes, this is them," a voice says, and Luka can't help but jump.

He hadn't even noticed Octavian standing in the shadows. The man emerges like a snake, lips curled in a smile. "Look at his face."

Theo's swallow is only audible because he stands so close. "Believe me now?" His words are a warm gust of air against the back of Luka's neck.

"You won't hurt he – them," Luka says, only barely managing to correct the pronouns. Better for them to think Xyla and Evland are both important. Better for them to think Evland is more important, really – maybe they would torture him first. It would buy time for Luka and Xyla to escape somehow.

His gaze drops to Xyla again. He claws his way through his thoughts, somehow trying to convey to her through an urgent look alone that he will get them out of this – they'll both figure a way out. Together, surely they can escape.

"Of course not," Octavian says. He approaches Evland and pokes at the man with the toe of his boot. "We don't need to hurt them. Because you're going to tell us everything you know, Siacchian."

"My father will pay!" Evland blubbers, and Luka feels a pang of satisfaction that he at least correctly performed Evland's character upon his capture. The satisfaction wilts when he realizes that Evland is in near hysterics, his face ruddy and wet with tears and snot, turning the dirt beneath his cheeks to mud.

"Can you believe this man? He looks like a discount version of your prisoner,

Theodori,” Octavian says. When Evland attempts to speak more, Octavian raises a finger. “Hush, your betters are speaking.”

“They don’t want money,” Xyla says, voice hoarse but words steady. “They want to end this siege. They want power.”

“As I expected, the hopiar is smart,” Octavian says and Luka tenses. They already know Xyla is an impyassus. That eliminates one plan of escape.

Evland sniffs. “That beast?” he hisses, face twisting. “She’s barely even human – it’s a miracle she can even compete with us civilized beings –”

“Beast?” Theo’s words are no louder than a whisper, but the occupants of the tent fall silent when he speaks. Luka can feel him moving, placing himself so he’s between Luka and Evland. “Please explain. How do you, a human, consider yourself to be her better?”

Evland wets his lips. “A-all impyassi struggle with rational thought – this is a known fact.” His eyes dart back and forth between Octavian and Theo. “Any information provided by something like her will be of little value to you. But me? I received a perfect score on the Bombani Exam. You want Cesscounthe’s leaders? I know them. I can get you them. I even won the annual Cesse competition –”

“ – and he’s also willing to tell you anything he thinks you want to hear should it guarantee his life,” Luka says. He schools his expression and shoots Evland a look. “Hush. You’re making a fool of yourself.”

Evland’s lips curl. “Locke –”

Luka continues, inhaling sharply as the first part of his family name emerges from Evland’s lips, “I don’t want you to hurt them. Take me back to your tent, Theo. Tell

me what you want to know.”

Theo braces his shoulders, his back to Luka.

“Theo?” Octavian spits.

Luka closes his eyes, cursing the slip. He has been so careful to hide the way he addresses Theo. He can practically feel the anger radiating from Octavian.

“Why is he calling you that?” Octavian hisses.

“You really want to talk about this now?” Theo says.

“Well, since you seem so determined to avoid it every other time I bring it up, maybe the captive audience will pressure you into answers!”

“You don’t get to pressure me into anything.” Theo turns, his shoulders hunched as if he wishes to pull Luka into his chest. But no – no, Luka isn’t allowed to think those things anymore. He is just projecting his own twisted desires. “Evland,” Theo says softly, as if the name is a prayer. Alarm shoots through Luka. “You will speak your truths here. Where we can test them against your friends.”

“Evland?” Evland repeats. “Friends?”

Luka grits his teeth. This has gone so wrong so quickly. His eyes dart to Theo; surely now, now, Theo will realize that Luka has been lying this whole time. Theo is too smart to miss such a thing.

Unless, whispers a tiny voice in the back of Luka’s head, Theo wants to ignore the truth because he wants to keep you close to him.

Theo gestures and Evland squeaks as Octavian presses his boot against the middle of the Siacchian's back. "Remain quiet unless you've been asked to speak," Octavian says.

Theo's eyes are beseeching but determined. His gaze cradles Luka. "Tell me how to get to the leaders of Cesscounthe."

"Linne Lockhart won the election," Xyla bursts out.

"Linne Lockhart?" Octavian repeats, eyes widening.

"She won?" Luka whispers and then shakes himself. He shoots Xyla a pained glance, but she doesn't meet his gaze as she glares at Theo's turned back.

Xyla clears her throat. "Linne Lockhart should be the one you wish to target. She is the one who is gathering the current war efforts, but should you... persuade her, you will be able to take the city with as little bloodshed as possible."

Theo faces her. "Xyla Mobiele. Who would have thought you would be so useful, little sister?"

Xyla bares her teeth. "I am not your sister."

Theo chuckles, the noise dry and humorless. "All hopiar are descendants of the great Wolf Mother. You are our sister, whether you like it or not." His gaze shifts to Evland, who wiggles beneath Octavian's boot like a worm on a hook. "That's right, Luka Lockhart. We're all monsters here."

"Luka Lockhart?" Evland rasps, eyes bulging as he looks from Theo to Luka. His fear transforms to hysterical laughter, giggles wheezing out of him as he shakes. "You think I'm –"

“I told you, it would be best if you kept silent, Luka,” Luka says to Evland, shooting the man an urgent look. He needs to keep Evland quiet. “Xyla and I already know of your cowardice, but it would do little for you to impress your captors with it.”

“Cowardice?” Evland cries.

“Yes. There is no other reason you would have avoided meeting me for that match I challenged you with, weeks ago. You knew you would lose then just as you know you will lose now. So keep quiet, and I’ll try to keep you alive.”

Evland’s lips part, but before he can speak, Theo waves his hand. Octavian must put more pressure on the Siacchian’s back, for Evland’s words emerge as a pained gasp.

“Linne Lockhart. Good. This is good,” Theo says. He looks at Octavian. “Take Evland Childes back to my tent and question him more on the matter. I will speak to these Siacchians here. For every misalignment of their story, we will take one of this one’s fingers.” He looks down at Evland Childes’ long, slender fingers, running his hand over the knife at his belt.

Evland shakes. “Please –”

“Understood,” Octavian says. He steps on Evland’s back as he moves to guide Luka from the tent. Luka tries desperately to meet Theo’s gaze – why would he split them like this – but Theo looks the other way.

Instead, Luka looks to Xyla. Xyla, whose eyes are wide and filled with a strange understanding. Xyla, who Luka needs to get out of here.

We will escape together, he thinks as he meets her gaze.

And suddenly, they click into alignment again. Just as it had been before, when Luka

had thought them soul mates, Xyla understands his words without the need for vocalization. She nods.

Together, her gaze replies.

Luka shivers as Octavian guides him back to Theo's tent. He glances at the man as they walk, sizing him up again. No, even though Octavian is one of the smallest of the Kiterans Luka has seen thus far, it will be impossible for Luka to overpower him with strength alone.

If only he had something more – if only he had an ally that would be willing to help them from the inside.

If only I had Theo.

Luka shakes his head. He can't think about such things now, not when he needs to get his story straight. At least he has Xyla on his side. The thought warms his weak, aching heart ever so slightly, and surprise flashes through him. Before, having Xyla with him would have meant he felt like he could accomplish anything – beating a Kiteran army with Xyla as his ally would have been a bonding challenge.

But now... now he wishes instead that Theo hadn't left his back turned to Luka. That Theo hadn't betrayed his trust like this. That Theo hadn't reminded Luka, painfully so, that they are enemies.

Octavian ushers Luka into Theo's tent. The Kiteran looks around the outside before he joins Luka.

Luka blinks as Octavian glances over him, unsure how to interpret the way the Kiteran's face has shifted from emotionless to tensed.

“Have you had sex with him?” Octavian asks.

“What?” Luka shouts.

Octavian winces. “Calm down. I asked you a simple question.”

“Is this part of the interrogation? Why would Theo want you to ask something like that? Have sex with who? My captor?”

Octavian scans Luka again, brow furrowing. “So he hasn’t sealed it yet, then,” he mutters, words too soft to be meant for anything other than his own ears.

“Why in the world would you ever want to know such a thing? Why would you even think something like that?” Luka is aware his voice is far too loud and painfully high-pitched, but he can’t seem to make himself any quieter.

Octavian glances around once again, looking toward the entrance of the tent. When Luka parts his lips to speak, Octavian hushes him, cupping his ear. After a long silence, the Kiteran presses a finger against his lips and says in a low voice, “If that’s the case, then we can speak freely, but not for long.”

When Luka only continues to blink in stunned silence, Octavian glares. “Come now, Siacchian. You’re supposed to be smart.”

“You’re Theo’s second. You... you don’t like me.”

“Of course I don’t like you,” Octavian says, wrinkling his nose. “And likely not for much longer.”

“What?”

“I don’t have time to explain now, but you’re going to have to trust me. All I can tell you is that I’ve allied myself with Linne Lockehart, and she wishes to recover both you and Evland Childes.”

“Evland Childes – w-what do you mean?”

Octavian’s narrowed eyes grow impossibly narrower. “I don’t have time for these games, Luka.”

Luka’s mouth goes dry at the sound of his name – his real name – on the Kiteran’s tongue. He struggles to sort through his thoughts. “I need some sort of proof that I can trust you,” he manages to say. That should buy him time.

Octavian closes his eyes. “Fine.” He reaches to his belt and pulls free a small sheathed blade the length of his finger. He hands the weapon to Luka and Luka accepts it automatically before realizing what rests in his hands.

“I-I can’t take this,” Luka says. The only reason he doesn’t immediately drop the weapon is because of the fierceness of Octavian’s glare. His stomach churns at the sensation of holding something that could hurt someone – something that could cause violence.

“You can and you will. You don’t even have to use it against anyone. Don’t think of it as a violent stabbing if you will, but a defensive stabbing. Surely your pacifist ways will allow for some defense.”

“Not at all.”

Octavian sighs and slides the sheath from the blade, revealing the gleaming metal beneath. Luka’s mouth goes dry as Octavian seizes Luka’s hand and raises it so Luka is holding the knife against the Kiteran’s throat.

“I would let you slit my throat with my own blade,” Octavian says without breaking eye contact. “I do not like you, Luka Lockehart, but I have a need for you – a use for you. And I think you can find a use for me, too.”

Octavian pulls too hard on Luka’s hand and the blade cuts, drawing a thin tear of blood down Octavian’s throat. The man doesn’t even blink.

“Haven’t you wondered why Theodori still believes you to be Evland Childes?” Octavian asks. “Who do you think has kept him in the dark about your identity after we kidnapped Xyla Mobiele and the real Evland Childes? It wasn’t easy to keep them quiet, you realize.”

Luka stares at Theo’s second. “How did you learn?”

“How do you think I captured Xyla Mobiele and Evland Childes? The Cesscounthe mercenaries had to know who they were hunting for.” Octavian’s lips curl into a smile. “And do you want to know where we found the man you’ve been masquerading as?”

Luka slowly shakes his head. Sweat slicks the knife in his hand. The blade quivers against Octavian’s throat, though the Kiteran hardly seems to care.

Octavian laughs. “In a hopiar whorehouse. Sweet Mother – he’s been stinking up the whole tent with the stench. And he calls us beasts.”

This is a trap, Luka thinks. But with what gain? Theo has already won. He already has all the insurance he needs. No, the real question here is: what does Octavian have to gain from turning against his leader who is about to overtake Siacchi’s capital?

Unless Octavian has already been promised a greater position of power.

“Linne Lockehart trusts you,” Luka says. “She has offered you something.” Though it is not a question, Octavian nods.

“Yes,” he says. “I told her we could rescue you – save Childes, too. She didn’t think I could do it.” He grins. “But I’ve always been smarter than Theodori.”

Allies in all sorts of places my ass, Luka thinks as he remembers his mother speaking of how she knew when the Kiterans were moving and how quickly. How long has she had this relationship?

Has Octavian been planning on betraying Theo this whole time?

The twist of anguish Luka feels at the thought is wrong. He squashes it and instead forces himself to meet Octavian’s gaze.

“I can trust you,” Luka says.

“Good,” Octavian replies. “Because I’m getting the three of you out of here tomorrow evening. We’re going to end this siege.”

Before Octavian turns to leave, he pauses, considering Luka. His gaze lingers for so long on Luka’s narrow shoulders, his thin arms – his chapped lips – that Luka shifts his weight, wondering if he’s failed some sort of test, until Octavian lunges forward and smashes his mouth against Luka’s.

The kiss lasts less than an instant before Octavian is pulling away, scowling.

Luka coughs, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “What was that?”

Octavian chuckles. “I just wanted to see why he’s so interested in you. I wondered if it was catching.”

Luka gapes at the man. “And?”

Octavian casts him one last disparaging look. “You’re not worth it.”

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 8:00 am

Dawn comes bloody when Theo goes to war. He stands before his gathered battalion, words of power bleeding from his lips. His people gaze at him, eyes blazing with determination – with blood lust. Weapons shake in their fists as they echo his cries, completely enraptured.

“For months now, we have stood before these walls,” Theo shouts. “And tonight – they will fall!”

“They will fall!” echoes his warriors.

Theo raises a fist to the air, and his soldiers mimic him, and, despite everything with Luka, his heart flutters with anticipation. This is where he belongs. Not with some Siacchian, but on the field of battle.

Theo’s mouth continues to speak as he looks above them, at the walls of Siacchi that have taunted them for a month now. Carvings of kings and Ravage pieces and foxes fleeing hunters look back.

Today, these walls will fall.

All the night before, he pored over his war map. He spoke with his people. He plotted, he schemed, he strategized.

And now he is ready.

The information from the prisoners is good; Evland’s words perfectly align with those of Theo’s new captives, for all that it took more days than Theo hoped to

procure the information. Theo is confident in his victory – and not a second too soon, with the Elders’ imposed deadline looming a scant twenty-four hours away. If Theo does not send them the head of Cesscounthe’s leader by daybreak the following morning, he will be overthrown and stripped of his titles. He will lose everything.

But not this time. This time, Theo has won. He has no doubt.

No, daybreak will see him victorious. This time tomorrow, the battle will be won and Theo will be triumphant. He will finally be one step closer to the victory and power he has always dreamed of – of the power that might finally enable him to be strong enough to protect the ones he cares about – instead of endlessly hurting them.

He dispatches his troops.

The first will attack the walls – a distraction. A powerful distraction, of course; a threat is not a threat unless it is loaded with a real promise. They will bear weapons and bloodlust, and should they break through the walls, Theo will have to take lives he has sworn to leave untouched. But he’s prepared to take that risk.

His second group will sneak through the sole passageway Luka and his friends confirmed – the same tunnel Evland marked on his maps weeks before. Theo’s people will break into smaller parties, cutting through the Abraxi District, where Cesscounthe’s upper class reside. Theo’s new prisoner, Luka Lockehart, has been especially forthcoming, revealing further detail to Theo of the tunnel that the nobility built so they would have special means of escape – a tunnel that was forgotten by most in the centuries that followed.

“This way, we can avoid the Siacchian’s hopiar,” Octavian said, satisfied. “There will only be untrained upper class nobility in our way – and they never know how to get their hands dirty.”

Any guards that do confront them will be short-lived. Octavian will head the raiding party, and finally apply his favorite weapon, the Midnight Kiss, a poison that only he will carry an antidote for. “It will shorten bargaining,” Octavian said, “when Cesscounthe’s leaders learn their options are to forfeit or die.”

“I should be with you,” Theo said.

Octavian shook his head. “You need to be here with your people – and I know the city better because of my spies.” His finger worried the skull mask hanging from his waist. It was the standard uniform for all of his spies.

Theo kept his face expressionless as he considered his second. If Octavian saw even a flicker of hesitation, he would be disappointed that Theo didn’t trust him. But the success of his plan rode on Octavian’s shoulders.

Theo’s eyes search the crowd now, though it’s impossible to locate the man. Half a dozen snarling skull masks meet his gaze.

You made the right choice, Theo tells himself, and finds, to his surprise, he doesn’t doubt it.

This is, after all, the only way.

Octavian and his men will find the leaders of Cesscounthe – Linne Lockehart and all of her fellows. There, they will force them to surrender.

Once triumphant, Octavian will come for Theo through the tunnel, and Theo will be escorted into his city. He will claim the land for Kitera. Not only that... but he will also free these enslaved hopiar.

Luka Lockehart’s words from earlier echo through Theo’s mind; the way he had spat

the word impyassus like it befouled his tongue. The look in his eye that was akin to hatred reserved for a stupid animal, not for a person.

Already, Theo has seen the refugees as they sneak through the cracks of the city's walls. He has seen the desperation in their eyes – scented the brokenness of their spirits. These will be people who will have their lives bettered once Theo takes this city.

Yes, perhaps this victory will be even more than it seems. Perhaps Theo will not only add the mark of his win to the history books as a moment where he overtook Cesscounthe, but as a moment when he was able to save a people, too. He never dared to dream he would be capable of such a thing.

If he leaves his mind idle though, he finds his thoughts wandering back to thinking about what will come after the battle is finished... when the dust settles and Theo is left with three prisoners who know too much and who can't be trusted to let go.

Who can't be trusted to live.

Theo closes his eyes against the weak touch of dawn. He sends his first and second wave of soldiers away as morning is born. He watches the red rays fade to blue as the fall day grows only more beautiful.

Such a delightful color – almost the exact same shade as Evland Childes' eyes.

Octavian has already been sent away with the second group of masked assassins, tasked to take down Cesscounthe's leaders, and Theo reminds himself that this trust is hard-fought and well-earned. Octavian has done nothing but aid him. Yes, I must trust Octavian with everything, Theo tells himself, though some small part of him quakes at the thought.

Uncomfortable with his wavering beliefs, Theo casts back deeper, for a time when he was small. When he needed the help and advice of others.

He imagines he speaks to his proud mother and strong father. He crawls on his father's knee and tugs on his beard as he confesses he is scared. He wants someone else to bear the burden of this decision.

But his memory has faded with time. Though he can perfectly remember the cadence of his father's voice, his face is blurred as the man in Theo's memory gazes down at him. "You always know the right thing to do, don't you, Theo?" he says in a gentle, unironic timbre.

Theo shakes himself, barely pulling free of the memory.

His father was almost right.

Only once has Theo failed in making the wrong decision. Only once did he fail in battle, and the Snake of the South, the demon prince, made an example of him and thousands had been killed.

And amongst those thousands were his mother and father.

Theo will never make that mistake again. He will never allow his strategy to be led by his heart.

This is what Theo tells himself as he summons the final group of soldiers. When he speaks, his words sound distant, like someone else's tongue is shaping them.

"Come nightfall," he says. His voice, he realizes, sounds like his father's, heavy and thick, though still never as wise. "Kill the prisoners."

Theo imagines the Kiteran he speaks to blinks in surprise. He imagines she says, “All of them? Even the one you’ve kept for so long? The one who has slept by your side and woken with you in the morning? The one you have laughed with, dreamed with, played with? The one who finally calms the rage in your heart and makes you imagine peace?”

In his mind, Theo nods, setting his jaw. His words slice from his tongue like the executioner’s blade when he says, “Especially that one.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 8:00 am

An hour before noon, a soldier wearing a snarling skull mask enters the tent, binds Luka's wrists, and blindfolds him. When Luka protests, the soldier muffles his words with a hand. "I thought you decided to trust me?" Octavian's voice brushes Luka's ear as he forces Luka from the tent.

"Where are you taking me?" Luka hisses.

"I think you know where," Octavian unhelpfully replies. Their boots crunch in unison across the frozen ground as Octavian guides a blinded Luka across the camp.

"I thought we were supposed to wait until evening?" a soldier asks as Octavian pushes Luka ahead.

"Plan has changed," Octavian says, voice cast in an oddly gruff manner. "Don't want to question Sevell Hunter's orders."

"Understood, sir," the unfamiliar soldier replies, and Luka rolls his eyes, easily able to picture the Kiteran's salute in response.

Luka struggles to keep track of their direction as Octavian pushes him through camp. His vision narrows to the tiny patch of land he can make out next to his right foot, and it is only the occasional splash of pale brown grass that helps ground him. Even with that guide, when they come stumbling to a halt, it still takes Luka an instant to realize where they are headed.

"You're taking me –" Luka begins, but Octavian hushes him again as the gleam of daylight fades.

The patch of grass turns dark beneath the shadow of the wall of Cesscounthe. They walk for some time, Octavian starting and stopping in bursts. Likely to avoid being spotted by the Aiutani posted on the wall. In the distance, Luka hears the sound of running water – yes, it is as he suspected.

Octavian has brought Luka to the wall surrounding Cesscounthe – to one of the hidden entrances Luka told the Kiterans about. Chills creep down Luka’s arms as he steps forward, fear drying his mouth.

A door creaks open and Octavian carelessly escorts Luka inside. Ambient light vanishes completely, and Luka stumbles.

“Humans,” Octavian grumbles and finally removes the blindfold.

Still bound at the wrist, Luka looks around, blinking.

A decade has left the tunnel unchanged. Just as it has been the day his mother took him through this passage to pray to Thought above his dead brother’s secret grave and promise to prove himself to the Lockehart legacy, Luka finds the underground damp and chilly, the same as the very soil his brother had been laid to rest in. Only the faintly glowing lichen casts a pale blue light against the dirt walls, highlighting a path that once was carved into the dirt by centuries of walking, but now has faded from recent decades of disuse. The tunnels were to be a last resort for nobles to escape the city, and after generations of being a well-guarded secret, most who knew of them took said secret to their graves.

Linne Lockehart only knew of the one winding path that led from the Abraxi District to the outer wall. Thrice, she had taken the wrong turn, and her hand had grown damp in Luka’s grip. “Another cave-in,” she’d muttered.

But surely there are many other paths hidden here. A cautious hope lights in his chest

as Luka's eyes adjust. He searches for Xyla. "Where is she?" he asks, voice breathless, when he finds Octavian and himself alone. A skull winks from a pile of rocks, and the pale yellow of a femur rests beneath a clutch of lichen. Luka swallows, his throat dry as gooseflesh rises on his arms. There is a faint sound from the tunnel ahead – like the dripping of water or footsteps, heading away from them.

"Your friends?" Octavian asks, removing his mask. "The other prisoners have already been sent ahead. I couldn't sneak all of you out at once, of course. I'm good – but not that good."

The dust on the path has clearly been disturbed – but then what had that soldier meant by I thought we were supposed to wait until this evening?

The answer seems far too plain, and Luka narrows his eyes, his vision sharpening.

Has he taken me here to kill me?

Luka will only have one advantage against the Kiteran should Octavian decide to attack; he will have to use his monster.

His skin shudders at the thought of fur creeping across it – of fangs bursting from his mouth and snapping toward Octavian's neck –

Bile rises in Luka's throat and he shakes himself. No – even with someone like Octavian, Luka wouldn't be able to attack. He couldn't think of his life as a measure of how many he would need to kill to escape – he couldn't even think of it as a measure of how many he would save if – when – he gets out of this and warns his people.

No. Flashes of the hunt his father had taken him on so many years ago dart through him. Never run, Carlo had said.

I'm sorry, Papa – but sometimes you have no choice. After all, Luka knows these tunnels better than any Kiteran. He will be able to escape.

I can do this.

The two walk down the tunnel. Octavian chuckles with every misstep Luka makes, and Luka's hands tighten into fists as he narrowly avoids tumbling into an enormous mining shaft to his right. Had he fallen, his body would have been lost to the underground spring rushing beneath. He shudders.

“Will I see Xyla here?” Luka asks, his voice echoing against the rounded walls.

“Yes – you will see both your friends,” Octavian replies, and Luka's mouth goes dry. Maybe he had been wrong to suspect. Maybe Octavian is telling the truth –

But Luka doesn't have the time to contemplate such things, for the next few footfalls take him around a corner and there, standing at the heart of a tall cavern, are Xyla Mobiele and Evland Childes. They've been left bound – and though Evland lies on the floor, unmoving, Xyla looks unharmed.

And, standing across from them, one impatient hand on her hip and the other placed imperiously on her stomach, is Linne Lockehart.

“Good,” Linne says when she spots them. She should look small standing in such a huge hollow, a single woman against weeping stalactites cast in pale cerulean and dressed in a ridiculous amount of layers against the caves' chill, but instead she takes up the space with a mere tilt of her chin. “You finally brought him.”

“Did you think we got lost?” Octavian asks, the lilt of his voice still airy.

Luka is seized with a sense of unreality seeing the two speak to each other. He

struggles to contain his confusion, instead focusing on Xyla. Under close examination, there is a bruise on her cheek, like someone has backhanded her. Her wrists and ankles are both bound, and she stiffens when Octavian speaks.

“Mother,” Luka begins, unsure what to say – if he should even talk.

Linne finally graces him with a passing glance. “Well,” she says. “You’re all in one piece at least.”

“I should go,” Octavian says. “We have a schedule to stick to.”

Schedule? Luka spins, confused, but Octavian is already hurrying into the darkness, back the way they came.

Back toward camp.

Back toward – him.

What if Theo had a hand in all of this? What if the Kiterans have been able to trick his mother – one of the smartest people Luka has ever known – and they’ve just walked into a trap? No. That can’t be it. Octavian has made an alliance with his mother. His mother has promised him power. And since she has won her position as a council member, she can easily grant it.

And in return, Octavian has brought him and the other prisoners.

But Luka was never such an important bargaining piece to Linne. So why –

Luka meets Xyla’s unfocused gaze – there’s an odd film over her eyes. She offers him the smallest of smiles.

“Son,” Linne says, and Luka stiffens. Automatically, his shoulders roll back and down, spine straightening out of its habitual slouch. Even a month as a prisoner of the Kiterans can’t shake old habits.

Linne draws her velvet robes around her, bundling them tight across her stomach. “What knowledge do you have for me?”

Typical Linne. No questions of are you alright? Or did they hurt you?

Luka wishes he could say her apathy didn’t still hurt.

“They are weak. Scattered,” Luka says as he recites the insights he painstakingly gathered. Most of his information has already been conveyed via the messages he left for his mother, and he speaks for only a short time before falling to silence again.

Linne’s scowl of disapproval cuts sharper than any knife ever could.

Before she can speak, Evland Childes sits up, blinking into consciousness. He gazes around the cavern with dismay before his eyes alight on Linne. Realization sharpens his focus. “Danessi Lockhart. You need to bring me to my mother,” he orders.

Linne rolls her eyes. “I told you both to hush,” she says. “And I don’t need to do anything for you, boy.”

“My father will reward you handsomely for –”

Linne’s eyes flash, almost luminescent in the blue light of the lichen as she rounds on the man. “We are on a clock, boy. You hold value, but it is best you be silent.”

Evland’s face reddens. “How dare you!”

Linne raises a brow. “Speak again and see how much value you hold.”

For all that Luka has no love for Evland, he still finds himself saying, “I – I have more.”

Linne’s eyes flash. “Go on.”

“The – Wolf-Born, their leader, he has no love for the south – for the Balivartians.” Luka stumbles as he tries to recall what Theo has said. “He has an enemy there – the Snake of the South, he called him.”

Linne’s brows raise and she smiles. “Oh, Luka. That is perfect. We can use the Third Blessed Prince, since he is your ally.”

Luka’s tense shoulders ease.

But Evland just can’t keep his mouth shut. “My mother will insist –”

Before Evland can complete whatever order he is sure to unleash, Linne moves. She is almost impossibly fast, her soft shoes silent as a shadow across the damp stone. She stands with her back to Luka, facing Evland.

A strange, wet noise rings through the cavern. Evland Childes goes quiet.

Linne’s arm jerks, as if trying to pull her hand free. “More difficult than I expected,” she murmurs, her shaking voice cast so quietly, it’s clearly meant for her ears alone. Xyla stares at the both of them with wide eyes, mouth falling open and lips shaking.

Linne pulls away from Evland with a squelch, her hand wet with blood. In her fist, she clutches a knife – but this isn’t a blade designed to chop vegetables. Its serrated edge is outlawed in their city. Such a thing is designed only for violence. It gleams in

the gloom, soaked with red.

Luka stares at her, frozen. This is a dream, he immediately thinks. It is the only explanation that makes any sense. Why else would his mother be committing such horrendous acts of violence – why else would Evland Childes be still sitting there, mouth still open, hand still pointedly raised, throat split like a grin?

Linne makes a noise of disgust as she shakes the blood from her blade. Seeing Evland hasn't fallen, she nudges him with her kidskin shoes so he crumples with a muffled thud. He gurgles and twitches. Blood soaks the lichen, turning its blue glow to purple.

“Mother?” Luka hears himself say distantly.

Linne wipes the blood on Evland's coat. The man gasps and goes still. She pauses for a moment, bracing her hand against the cavern wall. Her touch leaves a bloody imprint behind. “Good thing we're so close to the mineshaft. I won't be able to carry him far,” she says once she finishes cleaning her weapon, rising from her crouch and returning the blade somewhere deep beneath the folds of her cloak. “Don't look like that, Luka. It's practice. I wouldn't want you to suffer like... this.”

“Danessi Lockhart,” Xyla begins.

Linne rounds on her. She draws the blade in half a breath. “Did you not hear me either, girl? We are on a clock. Speak again. I know that there are far more painful ways to die.” She traces the round of her belly. “Yes – I've studied them; split the gut open and spill the intestines, it could take hours of excruciating pain. Slice the tendons of your ankles and the ligaments of your arms, you won't even be able to crawl. You'll starve before you die of blood loss, and you would beg for me to end things sooner.” She smiles, briefly, though there is no pleasure in her face, only cold intent – no, that wasn't right.

Cold interest.

Xyla's eyes grow to moons as she stares at the woman. Linne traces the knife down Xyla's cheek, drawing a line of blood. The wound heals before she has even completed the stroke.

"But of course," Linne continues. "You're not human. Impyassus." She spits the word. "I could probably split you open down the middle and you would suffer – but survive... depending on how deeply I cut. The texts say the best way to end you is by removing your head from your body –"

"Mother," Luka says, horror coloring the single word. "What are you doing?"

"Come now, Luka," Linne says without looking away from Xyla. "You're a smart boy."

Her free hand alights on her stomach, a gentle caress, and Luka is taken back to their last dinner so long ago. His mother's illness – nausea she never would ordinarily experience. Symptoms that Luka has only seen once before –

When she was carrying Cassian.

A cold laugh leaks through Linne's lips when she sees Luka's eyes widen. "Oh, if only you were human," she says as she steps away from Xyla, staring at her son and shaking her head. "You are the best of your kind, Luka, truly, you are. Despite all of your faults and failures, there was true intelligence in you. If only that monster didn't corrupt it. No matter how many times we tried to have it beaten from you, it still seems you couldn't control it, could you? If you could've harnessed it, if you could've let your mind overpower the monster, I could have let you live."

And she's right. Even as she speaks now, Luka can feel his beast rising to the surface.

With guilt, he recalls the strategy he made to escape Octavian only minutes before – even now, with all these years of practice and restraint, he still falls back upon what should be his greatest weakness.

Linne strokes her stomach. “I’ll make sure this one isn’t like you. Or like my eldest. Failures, the both of you. It’s so unfortunate my sons died so young.”

Xyla gasps. “You –”

Linne rounds on Xyla. Her expression morphs, just for an instant, and true anger turns her features monstrous. “Beast, speak once more and I will do my damndest to remove your pretty little head from your shoulders with this knife. It will not be a pleasant experience for either of us, I assure you.”

“Don’t speak to her like that,” Luka shouts. He steps forward, slashing his hand across his body. “Why are you talking like this? What does it matter if you’re – you’re pregnant? Having more to carry on the Lockhart line should be a good thing –”

“A good thing?” Linne shakes her head. “Luka, don’t you realize what you are? What your elder brother was?” She sighs and a look of exhaustion passes across her face, turning her skin gray. “What Cassian likely is as well?”

“Cassian is not an impyassus!”

“He failed the pre-exam. He will fail the Bombani Exam, just as Alessandro did. I will not have another failure in my family.”

“Cassian won’t fail,” Luka shouts desperately. “I will make sure of it. I have been tutoring and working with him. I’m sure since I received a perfect score –”

Linne laughs coldly. “Oh, Luka,” she says. “Do you still believe that lie?”

Time slows to a crawl and then a stop. Luka blinks, struggling to contain himself. “What?”

Linne approaches him. She touches his cheek, her fingers still sticky with blood, leaving behind a trail of red. “My son, my stupid, beastly boy – don’t forget: you are a monster. You never could have passed.”

Luka stares at his mother. Memories of hours, weeks – months – of preparation flash through his mind. The pain, the suffering, the silent, muffled tears rolling down his cheeks as he was endlessly drilled on facts, numbers, equations. The end of it all – the final piece – when he was placed before a Cesse board in the last round and allowed to regain all of the control he had lost.

Then – the test itself. The paper, unfamiliar beneath his fingers. The charcoal holder, too large for his fist. The way his heart had pounded the whole time, every smudge on the page another sign of his failures.

But he had passed. He had not only passed – he had been the second to receive a perfect score.

He succeeded. He had finally – finally, finally, finally – brought pride to his family.

Linne sighs. “It took money,” she says, and Luka hears the words distantly. They echo through his skull. “And strings were pulled. Oh, the favors I had to work through. The people we had to get rid of when we finally reintroduced you to society!”

She raises Luka’s chin. He hadn’t even realized he had dropped his head. “You understand, don’t you?”

Time might have stopped for Luka's heart, but it hasn't for his mind. "You swapped the tests. You changed my test with another's." His voice sounds so far away to his ears.

Linne shakes her head. "That's what I don't understand," she says. "Why is it that you can appear so smart, and yet still be so stupid?"

"Who?"

"Who? Luka – that doesn't matter. Whoever the poor boy was, he failed. He was made an Aiutani. That's how poor your results were."

Each word is another blow to Luka's heart. He closes his eyes against the burn growing there, struggling to speak around the knot in his throat. "You're – you're lying –"

A slap lands against his cheek and Luka's eyes fly open, stunned. Linne stares at him, her face apathetic despite the blow. She glares at her hand, as if disappointed in its loss of control, before saying, "I'm telling you the Thought-damned truth for the first time in your life. The least you can do is listen."

Linne stares at him, her eyes impossibly dark. "Your elder brother was an impyassus. He failed the pre-exam. We knew that he would fail the Bombani Exam. We couldn't have that stain on our family." She laughs, cold. "Did you know, they thought I cheated on Carlo? Two brilliant people can't have a stupid child – so obviously the woman is at fault! My children always find ways to sully my reputation, no matter how hard I try.

"We thought, at the time, that we could start again with you – with Cassian." She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, correcting her flawless updo. "So it was safe to dispose of him."

“Dispose of him?” Xyla cries, rising to her knees, still bound at her wrists and ankles. Her amber eyes bore into Linne, a flicker of the beast rising to the surface. “You killed your own son?”

“Of course,” Linne says, still holding Luka’s gaze. “He wasn’t human. He wasn’t my son. He was simply something I carried in my womb and then had to bury in the ground. A monster can’t hold the Lockhart name.” She touches his cheek again. “Isn’t that right, Luka?”

Luka struggles to hold her stare, but he finds himself gazing at his feet again. He finds himself dragged back to those memories – standing before his brother’s grave, his mother’s grip on his face as she hissed that he mustn’t fail.

“But I didn’t pass the exam,” he whispers. “Why...?”

Linne scoffs. “Carlo. So soft. He grew attached. Couldn’t administer the drug.” She carves blood from beneath her nails. “I’ve always had better control of myself.”

Papa. Luka closes his eyes, remembering his father’s embrace. I’ll take care of you, Luka. Don’t be afraid.

“But I can dispose of you now without him knowing. Threatening to turn me into the authorities, the fool. Like he thought I wouldn’t find a way around him.” Linne offers Luka a small, controlled smile. “Can you imagine what your death will do for my political career? There is nothing the people love more than a strong leader, working through a terrible tragedy. Why – the Childes family will be an even worse rival now that their son is dead.” She gestures to Evland’s body.

Luka is dimly aware of how his breaths rake in and out of his lungs. The world narrows to a single point. He can’t look away from his mother’s face. Xyla shouts something, but he can’t hear it above the pounding of his heart.

“Cassian...?” Luka begins, unable to finish the question.

“Your brother has less than a year to prove himself. If I find another failed Bombani Exam on my doorstep, I won’t abide it.” She pauses as Luka feels his face contort. His eyes overflow, hot streams of tears flowing down his cheeks. “Oh, don’t look at me like that, child. This is the way of things: the strong survive. The weak are the pedestal we must stand upon. For a while, you might have thought you were one of us, but you were only a brief replacement.”

She touches her stomach, face softening. “I can feel it. This one – this one will be the best of all of you.”

“Cassian only has months left,” Luka says.

“Months, yes.” She shakes her head, apathetic. “All this careful breeding, and it still resulted in three impyassi. It is disappointing your father’s strong bloodline couldn’t overwrite the Lockehart curse.”

Something burns at Luka’s throat, and for a moment, he thinks it’s that he can’t swallow. He thinks it’s the breaths caught there, struggling to burst free.

But then he realizes that Linne has pressed the knife to the expanse of his neck. Warm blood flows down his collarbone, soaking into his Kiteran robes. For some reason, the thought of dying in a foreigner’s clothes – clothes that aren’t even his own – fills him with anguish.

“Don’t touch him!” Xyla screams.

Luka’s chin jerks up and the rest of the world snaps into focus. Xyla strains against her bonds. Her eyes flash and then fade back to human colors, fur rippling across her arms and then vanishing again. She meets Luka’s gaze.

“They’ve done something to me!” she sobs, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Why can’t I change?”

Linne sighs and pats Luka’s cheek. “Give me one second, child.”

She walks to Xyla as Luka sinks to his knees. The world shakes around him and he struggles to remain upright.

Only months left. The words echo through his mind. Linne will kill Cassian in less than a year if he fails the Bombani Exam.

Flashes of Alessandro gleam through his mind’s eye. A cold hand. A pile of churned dirt. An unmarked grave. The only sign of visitation a flattening of the greenery.

That will be what this woman will do to Cassian should he fail.

But what will she do to you now?

Xyla cries out and Luka jerks at the sound. “No!” he shouts as his mother sinks her blade into Xyla’s stomach. “Don’t worry,” Linne says as Xyla falls to the ground, curled around the wound. Blood seeps from her, staining her clothes scarlet. “She won’t die from this. Hopefully, it will teach her to follow her better’s orders. Isn’t that right, dear?” She taps Xyla’s cheek with her shoe.

Xyla snaps at Linne’s foot with lengthened fangs. Linne scowls. “This is why I never liked this girl, Luka,” Linne says. “She’s too willful. Hard to form.” She looks back at him. “Not at all like you. So eager to please. So eager to shape. You were almost perfect, boy. But don’t worry – I won’t make the same mistakes with this one.”

With those words, the world sharpens. Luka’s heartbeat still roars in his ears. His hands still shake. But his mind grows clear.

This will all happen again if you do nothing to stop it now.

We need to get out of here.

Linne came prepared. She came ready to face them.

Should we fight? Luka's eyes dart to Xyla. She remains curled on her side, groaning. No, whatever they have done to her – be it a drug or poison – it's effectively blocked her monster. She will be of no help here – not yet.

Briefly, Luka entertains the idea of using his own beast, but as quickly as the thought enters his mind, Luka shoves it away.

He couldn't do that. He couldn't summon his beast against his mother.

We run.

It would be more difficult than fleeing from Octavian. Xyla is injured.

Luka needs more time to think of a plan – to think of a distraction.

“How can you be so sure you can trust Octavian?” he asks. “He is a – a beast, after all.” A stupid question. What if she realizes what I'm doing?

“You should have figured that out,” Linne chides, ticking her finger at him. Luka's shoulders slump with relief as she continues to speak; she hadn't realized his plan because she suspects nothing more from him. “The Kiterans provided us with the perfect opportunity.

”I'm already on the Council – your disappearance helped with my election. The people ate my speech up. And Cesscounthe will need leaders after this siege. We will

need people to negotiate a treaty.” Linne paces as she talks and Luka’s eyes shoot to Xyla. Her wound has yet to heal, but she meets his gaze, her arms bulging as she wears her bonds to nothing with a quiet snap.

I’m not leaving you, Luka thinks as he meets her stare. Xyla shakes her head slightly, but Luka sets his jaw.

We’re getting out of this. Together.

They don’t look to where Evland Childes’ body lies, unmoving.

“It’s the perfect platform,” Linne continues. “Now, my son murdered and I still broker peace to help our people. That has an even better ring, doesn’t it? Finally, the Lockehart line will have something to be proud of.”

“You should have brought a bigger blade,” Luka says, his eyes drifting to the knife.

I just need to buy enough time for Xyla to heal. Just wait a few moments more. He looks to Xyla again and subtly jerks his chin to the caves behind him. They will head back the way they came. In her beast form and Luka in his Kiteran clothes, they can blend in with the soldiers waiting outside of Cesscounthe’s walls.

The Kiterans. Linne made an alliance with them – will the Cesscounthe he knew survive this battle? Who else has Linne sacrificed to keep her power safe?

“Oh, this knife?” Linne says, turning the blade so it catches the blue light of the lichen. “Luka, I might be cold, but I’m not cruel. This was the best I could get on the black market, but I’m not going to use this to take your life. I’m just waiting for backup.”

A cold feeling seizes him. Backup?

He looks to Xyla again. She presses herself to her elbows. Not healed enough to flee, but enough to move. They're running out of time.

Linne remains focused on Luka, her eyes intent.

"Why not just ask Octavian to kill me? You need him to dispose of our bodies, don't you?" Luka asks, forcing himself to his feet. He thinks of the mineshaft he nearly tumbled into. This is why Linne has brought them here. It is the best place to hide their deaths. He finds himself moving, matching his mother's stride. They circle each other, unable to look away. Luka is careful to keep her attention fixed on him.

"My trust in the beast can only go so far."

"And yet you've allied yourself with those beasts you hate so much."

Linne smiles patiently. "A greater evil is easy enough to choose when it means I can see the salvation of our beautiful city. I will lead us to a new age, an age when we are finally rid of our old beasts' blood. We will hunt all of the monsters and eliminate those incapable of intelligent thought. Think of it, Luka. I know you've imagined it too – a city without suffering. A city without blemishes."

Xyla climbs to her feet. Fur ripples down her arms before vanishing into her skin. She shakes her head. The drug is still in effect – she can't change.

"You think the Kiterans will allow that? They love their beasts," Luka says desperately when his mother follows his gaze. Linne looks back at him, offering a smile.

"They will let us do as we wish. Cesscounthe will be clean. They need us – our intellect. The Kiterans are bloodthirsty; they're eager to conquer. They want to go after the South next, you realize. You and I both know Hessalar is divided with all of

their Blessed Heirs. Balivartia will fall at their hand. They want vengeance for the border skirmishes they've lost. And with our alliance, we'll be able to win – together.”

“We are a nonviolent people,” Luka begins. Linne scoffs.

“Nonviolent people? We are an intellectual people. We swore ourselves to nonviolence to fight off the beast, but with those bloodlines extinguished, we are capable of change. We can spread the word of Thought and save others from the corruption in their country and minds.”

Xyla touches her stomach, wiping the blood away and revealing whole and healed flesh.

It will have to do.

Luka needs to deliver the final blow.

He approaches his mother, dragging his feet to hide the noise of Xyla creeping across the ground, heading for the tunnel from where they came.

Linne's hands tighten around the knife, but she stills as Luka approaches.

Luka's heart rattles his ribs as he raises his hand. He forces fear from his face, softening his expression. He rehearses his words carefully before he lets them pass his lips, weighing them with just the right amount of hurt, the right of amount of spite:

“Did you ever love me?”

Linne's face contorts at the question, but before Luka can parse any of the emotions

that flicker across her face, she has gone still again. She raises her chin, blood-red lips curling into a smile. “Oh, my boy,” she murmurs. “You are so much like your mother.”

Luka steps close enough to smell her; her perfume, heavy and floral, her sweat – Evland’s blood on her hands. He raises his arms as if to pull her into a final embrace.

As she approaches, he watches where she places her weight. He remembers what Theo had taught him the night after the attack –

When he moves, he does so quickly and without thought. He rears back and slams his foot onto her ankle.

Linne’s shriek echoes against the walls of the cavern, the cry not even muffling the sound of her ankle snapping. She falls to the ground, clutching her wounded leg, and Luka sprints toward a wide-eyed Xyla.

“Run!” he cries breathlessly, catching her hand with his.

They turn to sprint back into the caverns. The world howls around them, like a fox in his ears. Luka remembers running like this before, as a child, on the hunt with his father at his side. The red tails of their prey darting in the distance, the weight of the fülle in his hands. Their footsteps ring through the caves as they flee –

Xyla cries out and Luka looks back just in time to see her fallen. A knife sprouts from her leg. Linne tears up behind her, eyes bulging. Luka shouts, torn. Xyla gestures him away – but he can’t leave her. He could never leave her. He fumbles for another solution, whirling around –

– only to run into a rock-hard chest. Luka tumbles down, arms tangled with arms, legs tangled with legs. He lands on a body, a warm body that feels like he has just

jumped into safety, home, a warm blanket, and a steaming mug all wrapped into one. A scent hugs him all around, sweeping away his fear for a handful of desperate heartbeats before it returns twofold.

Theo.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 8:00 am

Octavian comes for Theo, as promised. Theo and his soldiers guard the entrance to the tunnels as they await news to keep an ear out for Octavian's mercenaries and to block any potential escapees. There is no need to alarm the people of Cesscounthe with an army after all. This mission calls for stealth. No, the army and complete takeover will come after Theo explains he is now this city's ruler.

It's late evening by the time Theo hears shuffling footsteps coming from the cavern. At the sight of Octavian's face, his skull mask removed, Theo relaxes.

But Octavian is frowning. He looks from Theo to the other soldiers before jerking his chin back the way he came. Theo says, "My second needs me. Hold the line," to his soldier, and then follows Octavian into the dark.

They enter through the caves as a pair. Blue lichen casts deep shadows across Octavian's furrowed brow. Moisture lines the cavern walls, and the ground is slick beneath his feet. They pass aborted passages as they walk, footfalls echoing, and Theo follows the tunnels for as far as he can see. Some lead into ever-shrinking tunnels, others to drop-offs so steep, he only needs to tilt his chin to see down into an endless darkness.

Octavian finishes explaining how the takeover had gone perfectly, without a single hitch, as he hands Theo his wineskin for a celebratory drink. "The tunnels that we use will take us into the Abraxi District, where the nobles reside. We won't encounter any resistance there. Some of their Council Members want to side with us, actually. It will be easy to turn their governing body." He spares a brilliant smile for Theo. "I wanted to bring you alone so we can celebrate this – together."

Theo swallows down the wineskin's contents – some bitter spirits that burn his throat – wrinkling his nose. He is far too distracted to judge. He follows his second, thinking, The Elders will be overjoyed when they hear how flawlessly my plan has been executed. Surely this will mean us both moving up in the world.

But beneath those thoughts, something pulls his attention away from Octavian's explanation of victory. A scent drifting through the damp caverns – a scent both familiar and delightful. It twists his heart when he focuses too hard on it.

Even now, Evland Childes haunts him –

Theo hands the wineskin back to Octavian, shaking his head. The liquid must have been alcoholic, for it feels as if a fine film has been stretched across his skin, a buzz dulling his eyes and ears.

“And Cesscounthe's Elders?” Theo asks, clearing his throat.

Octavian pauses. He looks up at Theo, eyes bright. His nervousness from before has vanished, and now he looks as victorious as he should. Elation looks good on him, bringing color to his ordinarily wan cheeks and a grin to his face that Theo hasn't seen in a long time. Even in the dimness of the damp caverns, he practically glows. “Their Council,” he corrects. “They have... surrendered and are willing to make peace talks. As I have said, some are even interested in our plan.”

“Our plan?”

“Well – your plan – to use their brilliant minds to assume control over the rest of their countryside. They wish to join us. With Cesscounthe fallen, very few defenses stand in our way from taking over all of Siacchi. Once defeated, our people can turn our attention to the true enemy.”

The South.

Theo's chest clenches at the thought – at the memories that threaten to rush in. He squashes them as quickly as they arise, but still, the bitter taste of defeat and the scent of blood, shit, piss, and death overwhelm him, pulling him back to his first loss – his only loss – now close to some ten years ago.

The day they died.

Octavian's hand lands on Theo's shoulder, pulling them both to a stop. "Will you be ready to face the Snake of the South again? Balivartia?" he asks. His smile vanishes, and now a carefully plastered look of concern widens his eyes. Something sharper roams beneath the depths, something that Theo can't fully parse – not with this odd roaring in his ears distracting him. Not with that strange scent, though weaker now, still pulling at his attention.

"Of course," Theo says.

"I understand this siege has been difficult," Octavian continues, pulling Theo to a stop once more when Theo tries to resume their rapid pace. "The capture of the prisoner... the Siacchian... was not easy."

Evland Childes, Theo's mind automatically corrects, but he manages to keep the words from leaving his mouth. Instead, he nods. "Proving myself on a timeline has always been a challenge, but when faced with..." he pauses, blinking. The cavern grows darker around him. "With you," he finally says, meeting Octavian's gaze directly. "With you, someone I know I can count on, it becomes easier."

Octavian's face softens.

"I do not trust easily," Theo continues. "You understand that."

“Of course.”

“But this siege has taught me that trust is necessary in order for me to win. It is still a weakness, of course –”

“It is not a weakness though,” Octavian protests. “Trusting someone – allowing yourself to open up again – it is a strength.”

When Theo opens his mouth, Octavian continues, “You trusted me here, didn’t you? You let me lead this siege because I know the inner walls of Cesscounthe. The Elders are breathing down my neck, and you knew my failure would mean our failure, but you trusted me. Just like –” Octavian touches his arm. “Just like I knew you would, Theodori.”

Theo closes his eyes and imagines a different voice speaking those words. A different voice speaking his name – his name, the name that those important to him addressed him as so long ago.

“I am not strong enough to do that yet, Octavian,” Theo says, meeting his second’s gaze. “That is what I am doing now. Amassing power so I can one day get to the point where I can care about someone again. Where I can be strong enough to trust so openly.”

Octavian shifts his weight, looking ahead of them. Beyond where they stand, the cavern widens into a cave awash in blue lights. His eyes dart back to Theo.

“And with this victory,” he says. “Where do you stand with that power? What trust can you give me now, Theodori?”

Theo stares at his second and for a moment imagines he’s gazing into blue eyes, not gray, and a face of a different shape. He pictures the fall of Octavian’s hair, twisting

and darkening into black curls, and he imagines his wolf wants to be with him so desperately when they are apart, Theo can think of nothing else, and he says, “Whatever you need.”

Everything. Anything. For you.

And though the words are directed at another face, at another person entirely – they land perfectly with the wrong mark. Octavian goes stiff and then soft. He looks at the cave ahead again and presses his lips together. Then he shakes himself. He grabs Theo’s arm and turns them around.

“What are you doing?” Theo asks. The world spins as they move.

“There is something I forgot.”

“And we have to return for it now?”

“It’s important.”

When another question loads itself on Theo’s lips, Octavian gives him a beseeching look. “Didn’t you just say you would trust me now?”

Before Theo can reply, a wave of nausea grips him. He staggers, only held aloft by Octavian’s grip on his arm. Octavian doesn’t react to the misstep as he continues to drag Theo away.

Distantly, the sound of footfalls and a low voice – a woman’s voice – reach Theo’s ears. He blinks, trying to organize his sluggish thoughts.

“Did you hear that?” he asks.

“Hear what?” Octavian replies. He glances down at Theo and his brow furrows, then he shakes his head. “I don’t hear anything, Theodori. You look unwell. We should return to the camp quickly.”

“But my victory –”

– and my prisoners.

Once again, Evland Childes floats to the top of his thoughts like scum on a pond – like a drowning man surfacing from the ocean for air.

“Your victory is assured,” Octavian says as he pulls Theo along. He casts a look over his shoulder and his jaw tightens as he increases his pace. “Your plan could use refinement, as always, but you moved well. You – we – finally impressed the Elders, Theodori. They thought we would fail, but we’ve proved them wrong, as always.”

“Not as always,” Theo corrects.

“We will turn our attention to the South next, Theodori. We will bring them and their demon princes down – I assure you, their heads will rot outside the borders of our kingdom. Together, we can make strides in this world. Already I’ve made sources, those we can turn to.” Octavian smiles, the expression small but victorious. “I’m so pleased, Theodori,” he continues. “I really wasn’t sure if we were going to make it...”

He trails off, his pace not slowing as his words fade.

“Of course we would win,” Theo says. Even his words sound strange to him, slightly slurred.

“He distracted you. I thought – I was worried, oh, this is ridiculous.”

“He?”

“You were spending all of your days at his side, Theodori. What was I to think other than that you had lost yourself to lust or whatever it was – his beauty wasn’t anything out of the ordinary, but lesser men have fallen prey to the enemy for such things in the past.”

Theo’s thoughts slop about in his brain. “Octavian, what are you talking about?”

“The Siacchian,” Octavian spits the words.

Theo jerks to a halt. He draws himself to his full height – has he been hunching? Despite the tilt to the world and the strange blur at the edge of his vision, he meets Octavian’s gaze directly. “Evland Childes.”

Octavian’s face goes still. His throat bobs. He seems to part his lips with effort as he says, “What?”

“His name. His name is Evland Childes.”

Octavian stares at Theo. He has such absolute control of his expressions; it has always been something Theo admired about him. When superiors would pull them aside and lecture them for their failures, Theo could never maintain the rage that sparked in his eyes or the exasperation that tugged at his lips, whereas Octavian looked like stone.

Even now, as his eyes dart about Theo’s face, around the cavern, his expression is closed. But maybe it’s because of the years together that Theo is able to read the tiny creases in his lips, the twitch to his gaze – Octavian is furious, heartbroken.

Betrayed?

“No,” Octavian says. “No. It’s not.”

He presses a finger against Theo’s chest and – impossibly – Theo staggers back, put off balance by the shove.

“You think you’re so smart, Theodori, don’t you?” Octavian hisses. “You think you could still keep me at your side when you break down into this shell of yourself – this man enraptured by a pretty boy?” His lips curl. “Come back to me, Theodori. Show me you’re still there – show me you’re still the fearless leader you always promised me you would be.”

“I have nothing to prove to you,” Theodori snarls, baring his teeth. His hands curl into fists, short nails cutting into his palms.

“Oh, but you do.” Octavian chuckles, the noise bitter. “Did you really think I would stay with you through it all? Do you think I have no choices, Theodori? Do you not realize how many others came to me with offers of power and glory – offers that I turned down because I had put all my faith in you.” He spits the word.

Theo stares. “How dare you speak to me –”

Octavian whips up a finger. “Hush. You had your time to lord over me. But you’ve lost that power now.”

Theo tries to raise his arms to fight back, but his body does not respond.

Octavian leans close. He smells faintly of blood, Theo realizes. “Do you really want to know what happened to your perfect plan, Theodori?” he whispers.

When Theo doesn’t reply, Octavian continues, “Oh, we went to kill the leaders located in the Abraxi District as promised, of course, but the enemy was waiting for

us – waiting for us because you betrayed them.”

Theo blinks dumbly.

“You know the soldiers all hate you now, don’t you? They think you’ve lost yourself in a pretty man. Sure, they fear you, they would never say as much to your face, but they were all too eager to run to me for alternatives. Why do you think I insisted on being the one to lead the invasion into the heart of Cesscounthe? I’m not a fighter like the Wolf’s Teeth. No, but I needed to be there. I’ve earned their trust, yes, but how else was I to negotiate terms of peace between the Siacchians and our soldiers? How else was I to tell our people that you were the one who leaked our invasion plans?”

When Theo splutters, words failing him, Octavian continues, “And of course, it makes sense that you didn’t notice me working – you’ve never noticed how hard I’ve worked. And you never gave much thought to the connections I formed either, did you? Didn’t ever think that one day, someone might come to me with an offer that outweighs even you.” He jabs his finger at Theo.

Theo’s heart crumples. He stares at Octavian, this man who has been his ally through years – through everything. They were supposed to rise to the top together. They were supposed to be comrades –

“And you should know, Theodori, that I didn’t want to. But you left me with no other choice. In the end, it’s exactly as you said: we can only look out for ourselves. If someone – even the enemy – comes to me with an offer for victory, for joined powers – for all the things we were fighting for – I couldn’t simply say no.

“Even if that means having to sacrifice you.”

“What have you done?” Theo says. He tries to move again, but his feet are so heavy, he only manages to take a single step.

“I’ve fixed it,” Octavian says. “I gave you the option. But you always come back to him. To that damned captive. I wish I had never suggested we take a Siacchian –”

“His name is Evland Childes!”

Octavian’s eyes blaze. “I know there’s a lot moving through your system at the moment, but try to keep up, Theodori. That boy was playing you like a game this entire time.”

“Playing me – that’s impossible.”

“Impossible? Ask him his name. Maybe you should win one of your ridiculous Ravage games first, just to make sure he tells you the truth.”

Who is he if not Evland Childes? Theo claws the thought from his mind, desperate to escape the pain that arises at the idea of Evland – no, is that even his name? – lying to him. Instead, Theo focuses on Octavian’s other words. “Moving through my system – Octavian, what have you done to me?” Theo slumps, bracing himself against the wall.

Octavian crouches so he can meet Theo’s gaze. “I learned from the best, Theodori.” He brandishes a bottle that looks so familiar. The smell turns Theo’s stomach, taking him back to his years of training.

Monkshood.

Theo feels his body shaking like his skin is trying to shrivel from his bones. He tries to call to his wolf like he has been trained, like he has done so many times before, but there is no response. He growls. The noise is weak. Octavian must have used a ridiculously high dose – that drink he gave Theo earlier –

Theo manages to heave himself to his feet, but still, his body can barely move.

He closes his eyes.

Stupid. How could he have not noticed?

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. You were so caught up in lust with that prisoner, Theodori,” Octavian says. He scoffs. “Or should I say Theo? You’re a fool. Just like your mother and father were. I should have had the Wolf’s Teeth kill that man on his second night here. I should have never put my faith in you, Theodori Hunter Wolf-Born.”

Before Theo can reply, the clap of feet against stone rings through the caverns. The noise bounces off the walls, doubled with each stride. Theo turns – only for a warm body to slam into his chest.

And though he shouldn’t have, Theo tumbles. His muscles have softened to liquid, his reaction time quartered.

He hits the ground with a grunt – but can’t summon anger at the thing – the person – that has slammed into him.

For Theo knows this scent now filling his nose. He inhales it deeply and his confusion and anger – even that growing bite of fear – wilt, leaving only contentment behind. This is his person, here, in his arms. Safe.

Impossibly, Evland Childes is here, on top of him.

Evland Childes struggles and then looks down, realizing it is Theo beneath him. His eyes roll in his skull like a nervous horse, but his fear seems to ease as he meets Theo’s gaze. His mouth shapes Theo’s name.

Beyond them, Octavian towers, arms crossed over his chest. “Oh, look,” he coos,

rage coloring his cheeks. “You found each other again. I knew that crazy bitch couldn’t be trusted to keep you in one place for so long. No matter. She has me now to deal with the loose ends.”

His boot descends. Theo rolls himself so he can protect Evland – whatever his name is – from the blow at the last moment. Pain starbursts through him as the attack collides with his skull.

Darkness.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 8:00 am

Theo's deadweight pins Luka to the ground. He struggles, but he is as trapped as a bug beneath glass. Octavian shakes his head as he watches before he calls a limping Linne over. Together, the two of them carry an unconscious Theo and a struggling Luka back to the cavern hollow. Luka takes the tiniest bit of satisfaction in how his mother pants and heaves as she does so, blood staining her leg and her perfect hairdo finally mussed.

All feelings of smugness fade when Luka catches sight of Xyla, now retied. Blood crusts her ripped trousers and streams from a swelling lump on her temple. Her eyes flutter as she sees Luka return, her expression crumpling.

"All you had to do was keep them here!" Octavian hisses to Linne as he struggles to drop Theo's unconscious body. Theo hits the ground with a dull thud, a low moan rising from his chest. "That's all you had to do, Lockehart. And yet, here we are with one almost escaped. Our whole plan could have unraveled thanks to your carelessness."

Linne fixes the man with a cool gaze, not backing down from Octavian's glacial eyes or the pale cream fur creeping down his arms. "My carelessness?" she repeats. "You should have arrived four minutes ago, Octavian. I knew they would use that tunnel should they decide to escape. Had you been here at the assigned time, we would never have had this problem."

Octavian's lips part but before he can speak, Theo twitches, muscles flexing in his back.

Octavian curses. "He's a monster," he hisses. "The monkhood should have kept him

unconscious for at least ten minutes.”

“Perhaps you should use the Midnight Kiss on him.”

“No!” Octavian snaps, looking surprised at his own vehemence.

“Then we don’t have any time to spare,” Linne snaps. “If you won’t do it, give the sword to me.” She holds out her hand, her bloodied fingers shining in the blue lights.

Her attention diverted, Luka attempts to jerk free from his mother’s grasp, but she seizes him by the hair. His attempt to escape is aborted with a single yank, and Luka gasps in pain.

At the noise, Theo stirs again, his lids fluttering. His eyes crack as he gazes up at Luka, awareness flooding his face as he takes in the situation. His gaze snaps to Octavian, and he bares his teeth – which are more human than beast.

Luka’s stomach sinks. Monkshood, Octavian had said. It must do something to the monster inside an impyassus.

How long does it last? He glances at Xyla, whose wounds have started to heal. She doesn’t meet his gaze this time, her logic washed away by panic – no. Not panic.

Cold acceptance.

No.

Luka wills her to look at him, to see the determination in his eyes. One failed attempt at escape doesn’t mean the end. They would get out of here. His gaze darts to Theo.

We’ll all escape.

“It’s pointless to give a weapon to someone who doesn’t know how to use it,” Octavian says to Linne and draws the sword bound at Theo’s waist. The blade is the length of his forearm and shines in the lights, untarnished and sharp.

Luka’s mouth goes dry.

“Surely you wouldn’t benefit from killing him,” Luka says, the words leaping from his lips.

Octavian rounds on him, eyes bright. “Speak again, Siacchian,” he growls, teeth growing past his snarl into fangs. “I’ve been eagerly awaiting the moment I can separate your head from your neck for a long time now.”

Linne’s hand tightens on Luka’s hair. “He will remain silent,” she growls. She forces Luka to his knees, and he is reminded of his childhood tutors. How many times had they done the same to him after another failed test? He had thought he was past this powerlessness.

But I failed. I failed the Bombani Exam.

I’m a failure.

Defeat weighs on his chest like a stone and Luka sinks beneath its cool waves.

All his life, the one thing he had that buoyed him above the rest was his position as the second to ever receive a perfect score on the Bombani Exam. The whispered scorn and rumors from his neighbors in the Abraxi District, the disappointed scowl of his mother when Luka had asked if he could make his debut day after day and her resounding “no” – even his father, who sometimes looked at him like Luka was a living ghost – the one thing that kept Luka from succumbing was his victory.

Who am I without that title?

The answer is all too clear:

No one.

No one important. No one worth saving.

Suddenly, Xyla's defeat made all too much sense.

Luka's shoulders slump. The pebbles scattering the cavern floor dig into his knees. His scalp aches from where his mother grips it, forcing his head to bow. Beyond him, he can hear Octavian crunching across the gravel, approaching Theo's prone body, sword catching the light. Theo groans quietly as the other man nears, managing to roll onto his stomach.

Theo.

Theo, who captured Luka's best friend.

Theo, who threatened his country and home.

Theo, who was the first to see Luka and know him and still want him.

Theo – who is going to die with him should Luka do nothing.

Tension shoots through Luka at the thought. His chest aches, as if his heart is compressing itself into a ball. For a moment, he allows himself to envision that dreadful future:

Octavian would slice Theo's head off. Blood would muddle the floor, mixing with

Evland Childes'. Theo would never breathe again, never offer that surprised smile – like he was shocked it had somehow slipped past his defenses – again.

He would never kiss Luka again.

He would be gone.

Octavian would then kill Xyla and then Luka. Their bodies would be disposed of. And then what – did Linne really think she could trust these Kiterans? Did she really imagine their future would work together?

Octavian brandishes the sword, and a weak growl flutters past Theo's lips. Theo struggles, muscles flexing. Only his fingers show the tiniest signs of movement – is the drug starting to clear his system?

But I'm a failure, whispers a tiny voice inside of Luka. There's nothing I can do now. The words echo through Luka's head, crescendoing into a mantra that he desperately tries to ignore.

Octavian's sword rises, a silver arc above Theo's head –

– Theo's blood. Theo hurt. Theo dying.

Theo dead.

Luka's heart breaks. Something sweeps across his vision, basking the world in red. Distantly, he hears someone – something? – screaming. Something roaring. An animal wounded, enraged, and ready to lash out.

His mother holds him down with her arm alone. It will not be enough.

Sensations tear across Luka's skin, moving so quickly, it's little more than an itch. His eyes roll back, and it's like a film settles over them, casting the world in shades of gray. Suddenly, the sharp scent of Xyla's fear, Theo's anger, and his mother's bitterness rip through him.

Suddenly, for the first time in his entire life, Luka has teeth.

His maw gapes, and he jerks, powered by inhumane strength. He's never lost control like this.

He has never felt so powerful.

His mother cannot contain him.

Linne will never hold him down again.

"You told me you were certain he wasn't a hopiar!" Octavian howls, rounding on Luka as he rears up to his full height. Octavian moves as if he wants to stop Luka, but this puny human won't even be able to slow him down.

Linne reaches for Luka again. She has become so much smaller – almost frail. It seems ridiculous that she thinks she can keep him away from Theo. Luka moves with single-minded purpose. When her arms dangle in his path, Luka parts his mouth.

Linne screams as her right arm snaps between his teeth. Blood spurts.

Luka's mother sinks to her knees as she claps her hand to her shoulder. Her entire face clenches with pain, and through gritted teeth she shouts at Octavian, "You can't let them get away!"

"You swore he wasn't a hopiar!" Octavian hisses in response. He throws his weapon

aside and braces his shoulders, facing Luka. His eyes glow blue and cream fur bursts down his exposed forearms.

But this stupid man is too slow, and Luka is so, so angry.

Rage like he has never felt before burns through him, tearing up his lungs and emerging from his throat in a bone chilling growl. Luka clears Octavian in a single bound and lands above Theo's prone body, bracing himself on top of the man. Protecting him.

Theo gapes at him as Luka stares down Octavian, daring him to try and approach.

Dimly, Luka is aware that he has no strategy. He has no plan – the only thought that pounds through his mind is his need to protect. To save.

To ensure that this man survives.

“Just buy me a little time,” Theo rasps from beneath Luka, his words cast quietly so Octavian wouldn't be able to hear. “I can change. I can help you. We're getting out of this.” Disbelief colors his words as he gapes up at Luka, taking in Luka's monstrous form. Beneath the rage clawing through him, Luka must resist the urge to shrink away in shame.

No one has seen him like this before.

But before Luka can reel his emotions in and pull together something like a plan, Linne calls out, “I don't know what you think you're doing, Luka, but it's a mistake and we both know it.”

Luka bares his teeth, rounding on his mother, still braced protectively over Theo's body.

When he catches sight of Linne, cold shock slaps him.

His mother stands with her foot on Xyla's back, her good hand snarled through the girl's red locks. Blood spurts from her ruined shoulder, but Linne doesn't look at the wound. She jerks Xyla's head up as her robes turn scarlet. "You think you could kill me with that, Luka?" she asks as Luka stares at her. Laughter puddles from her lips. "Now – stop this foolishness. Control yourself, boy."

Habit is a terrible enemy. Half of Luka is already moving to obey as soon as the command leaves his mother's mouth – that, and Xyla's weak cry of pain as Linne jerks her head.

Leave her alone! Luka wants to say, but the words leave his muzzle in a snarl.

But his mother can't last long. After the initial panic ebbs, Luka can see how weak she is. Her usual pallor fades to a deathly shade of gray, and she sways where she stands.

Xyla stares at Luka as Linne's blood soaks her clothes. I can handle this, her eyes seem to say.

And then, her gaze widens, lips parting –

The growl is the only warning Luka is given as a weight slams into him from behind. Luka is gripped with a terrible sense of déjà vu as he is thrown to the ground, a horribly familiar weight braced on his chest – an even more familiar mouth gaping above his face.

Octavian's wolf form is larger than Luka's monster. Luka struggles and howls, but Octavian has him pinned. Even as a beast, Octavian's smirk is clear as he moves to rip out Luka's throat –

– only for an enormous rock to crack! over his head.

Octavian stumbles away, whining. Blood wells and trickles between his ears as he staggers, blinking rapidly.

“Are you alright?” A hand settles on Luka’s side, and he barely avoids the instinct to turn and snap at the touch. Theo’s worried eyes fill his vision. There’s another, smaller rock in his hands as he looks from Luka to Octavian, ready to throw.

I’m better now.

Theo seems to read the answer written there. His face softens. He gives Luka’s face a stroke before crouching to collect Octavian’s fallen sword. Luka climbs to his feet as Theo braces himself between Luka and Octavian and Linne. “It’s over,” Theo says, brandishing the sword. Despite his fluid movements with the blade, there’s a clear awkwardness to his stride – the poison hasn’t worn off yet.

“Over?” Linne sniffs, though her voice has grown weak. Her grip on Xyla slackens. “It isn’t over, Kiteran. Return to me my son and we will talk.”

“Son,” Theo repeats, understanding dawning on his face. “And you must be Linne Lockehart – which means.” He turns to face Luka – Luka who is a monster covered in russet fur. Luka, who Theo now knows has been lying this entire time.

Guilt curdles in Luka’s stomach, and he looks away.

Theo shakes his head. “No, Linne Lockehart. I will not return your son to you. Here’s how this will be –”

As he speaks, Octavian rises to his feet, and he circles Theo and Luka. Theo’s attention is so focused on Linne – the woman’s lips curl in a scarlet smile as the

cream wolf rounds Theo's back, haunches bunching. Luka's muzzle parts in warning, but Theo is already moving.

As Octavian bounds over Luka to throw himself at Theo, Theo moves to the side. The dodge is elegant and blindingly fast, his sword sparking through the air as he shifts.

Just as quickly as the attack is sprung, it's over.

Octavian's momentum carries him past Theo, and he crashes to the ground, a whine leaking from his muzzle. Blood darkens his light fur, seeping from his wounded face. The cut Theo has left marks him from his right eye to his stomach, and Luka catches sight of shiny intestines as Octavian rolls away.

"Now," Theo says, turning the blade toward Linne. "Are you next?" It's only because of his proximity to Luka that Luka can hear the shake of exhaustion in his words.

Linne raises her chin, but even that defiant motion can't disguise the quiver in her lip. She releases Xyla, lifting her remaining hand to show she has no other weapons. Her shirt sticks to her side with blood. She looks past Theo, toward Luka, imploring.

"Son," she calls, and Luka wishes he could close his eyes and turn away. "You can't let them kill me, boy. Not now." She touches her stomach, leaving bloodied smears on the fabric.

"You dare speak to him," Theo snarls, raising the blade. The muscles in his back shake as he advances.

But Luka has already placed himself between Theo and his mother. Oh, how desperately he wishes he could turn back to his human shape, but the monster has a hold on him. He can barely recall his original flesh, much less ask it to return.

“That’s right, Kiteran. He can’t let you kill me now. Not while I’m carrying his sibling,” Linne says. The victory in her voice burns, but Luka can’t look back at her. If he does, he isn’t sure if he’ll be able to control the animal he has loosened. Instead, he stares at Theo, willing the man to understand. Willing the man’s expression of disgust to fade to acknowledgement.

Theo’s eyes drop to Luka’s. “Are you sure about this?”

Before Luka can answer, something echoes through the tunnel – footfalls. Heavy footfalls, like the sound of a squadron bearing weapons and racing toward them.

At first, Theo looks triumphant. “You thought you could take this from me,” he whispers, though Luka isn’t sure to whom the man is speaking. But then Theo’s victorious smirk wilts as he cocks his head, listening closer.

“Those aren’t your men, Kiteran,” Linne says. “I suggest you run now, should you not wish to find yourself caught on the end of the Aiutani’s blades.”

Theo snarls and shakes himself. Fur rolls down his arms and his eyes flash – but he remains human. Growling, he advances on Linne once more, only to jerk to stop when his gaze alights on Luka.

Emotions Luka can’t parse flicker across Theo’s face, before Theo finally throws his sword down. “You don’t want them to find us like this,” Theo says. He forces a smile past his anger. “You hate hopiar, don’t you? How will your people feel if they discover that your son is one of them?”

Linne sways. A tick flexes in her jaw. “You are Kiteran,” she says. “They will never believe your word over mine.”

Theo’s smile darkens. “You would risk your perfect reputation for that?”

Linne's shoulders slump. She clasps a hand to her right arm, her face a terrible gray. Finally, she says in a low voice, barely audible over the footsteps drawing closer, "Go."

"I will be back for my people and my city," Theo says to Linne.

"We'll be here when you return with my son," Linne says. "I'll make a grave for you next to his." Her eyes meet Luka's. "I know you'll come back to me, Luka – if not for this sibling, then for Cassian."

As Theo turns to run, Luka makes a weak noise, swinging his head toward Xyla, who remains on the ground.

Theo collects Xyla in his arms. She dangles like a doll, her eyes glassy. Luka desperately wishes to comfort her, but the sounds of soldiers draw closer. Instead, with Theo at his side, Luka runs.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 8:00 am

Theo doesn't know these caves, so he blindly follows the man who has lied to him – the Siacchian, Luka Lockehart – through the darkness. The world shrinks to their panting breaths and their pursuers' footfalls. The girl – Xyla Mobiele – lolls on Theo's shoulder. She only speaks twice, the first time to ask the Siacchian if he is well – to which the hopiar replies with a strained whine, clearly not.

The second time, Xyla directs her words to Theo.

“Are you going to kill us now, big scary Kiteran barbarian?” Her words are so acerbic, Theo's surprised they don't burn.

“Kill you?” Theo repeats. His mind still feels too soft, his thoughts difficult to shape. “Why would I kill you?”

Xyla scoffs. Theo isn't sure how she manages to sound so incredibly pissed off when she's nearly immobile and draped over his shoulder like an old rug. “Just a few days before you were holding us prisoner and threatening our lives. Now what – you're our ally?”

Theo scoffs; though the question is fair, he has no answer.

Now what?

Thankfully, he has plenty of time to consider his answer; the pounding footsteps grow closer and closer, until Xyla groans, “Luka, this can't be the right way – we need to find another path.” They pull into a tiny alcove, barely large enough for the three of them – especially a beastly Luka – to fit, muffling their breaths as the guards race by.

Theo sets Xyla on her feet and she leans against a wall.

They double back when the caverns fall to silence once more, pausing again for rest when Xyla demands it. In the silence that follows, Xyla panting, Luka avoiding his eyes, Theo has nothing to do but think –

What now? What now? What now?

The question tears up the weak scar tissue Theo has laid down to cover the events that took place hours – has it already been hours? – before. Even with the winding distance of the caverns put between Octavian and Linne Lockhart, Theo still aches with betrayal.

All of my worst nightmares have come to pass.

When he emerges from this cavern, what will he have left? His command? No, that is surely gone, stolen by his second, the one he was supposed to trust more than himself.

But you never really trusted Octavian, did you? whispers a tiny voice.

And I was right to do so! Octavian betrayed him. Betrayed him.

Anger sparks in him at the thought. He shouldn't hurt at all. He should have kept himself closed off to Octavian. Had he done so, maybe he would have seen this coming – maybe he could have stopped it.

They rest for a while, the cool cavern walls damp at his back, before Luka gets to his feet. Theo falls into motion automatically, following him through the winding tunnels. They walk for a long time in silence. The Siacchian huffs but Theo doesn't look at him.

“Well?” asks Xyla Mobiele. “Are you going to try and capture us again?” Even with

all of the time that has passed, she is still weak from the monkshood.

Theo says to Xyla Mobiele, “I know you’re under the influence of the poison, but my second betrayed me back there. I’m not your ally, but I’m not your enemy. We just both need to escape – I will find my soldiers and –”

His words stutter to a halt as they burst into the world outside, a gory twilight darkening the sky to shades of scarlet. It takes a few disoriented blinks for Theo to place where they have emerged; a side entrance that must be some distance from the main gates that the Kiterans occupied with their siege. But even from where they stand, Theo can hear the victory songs of his people.

Disbelief grips him. Theo walks around the curve of the wall. In the distance, he can see his people – celebrating.

They just don’t realize he’s missing.

Theo takes one step and then another, determined to correct them. He will tell them of Octavian’s betrayal. He is their leader, and they will believe him.

But he jerks to a halt, his keen eyes narrowing as he takes in the sight of the great gates of Cesscounthe parting – and a trio of people emerging.

One of which is a heavily bandaged woman and the other – a scarred man.

No.

Linne Lockhart can’t possibly be mobile after such an injury –

But there she stands, Octavian at her side.

This is a dream. This is a dream, and any minute I will wake and have everything

again.

As Theo's nails draw blood from his palms, Octavian and Linne – wounded but victorious – approach Theo's Kiterans. They are greeted with joy and victorious cries. They are greeted like heroes.

Octavian pulls a scrap of fabric – a scrap of Theo's bloodied robes – and throws it into the crowd.

Cheers.

Theo's mouth is too dry. His people are celebrating his downfall.

Suddenly, Theo understands the true extent of Octavian's treachery. Octavian has been sowing seeds of discontent amongst his soldiers. Octavian has either told Theo's people that Theo died in the invasion – or, worse, that an injured Theo fled with his Siacchian lover.

Blood drips from Theo's fists.

His people would believe Octavian.

Theo can't go back.

Not as he is now.

A soft whine sounds behind him. Something warm and wet brushes against Theo's bloodied hands – the Siacchian is licking him nervously.

The world roars around Theo as he forces himself to look away from his failure – from all his dreams and desires crumpling into a simple twist of the knife in his back – to look into the Siacchian's cool silver-blue eyes.

The scream of rage echoing through Theo's mind halts. Everything quiets. Even the sun itself seems to understand the way the world should still, pausing as it descends into night.

You are a hopiar, Theo thinks as he looks at the man.

You are my mate.

The Siacchian whines again, nuzzling at Theo's fists.

He's scenting my anxiety – and offering me comfort.

Despite it all, something blossoms in Theo's heart. Something he can't even begin to understand. Softly, he says to the man, to his mate, to his heart: "Evla – er, it's Luka, right?"

The Siacchian freezes, ears flattening against his skull when Theo speaks his name – his real name – for the first time. But then the sharp scent of his fear fades as Theo only continues to gaze, unable to keep the wonder from his eyes.

Slowly, Luka nods his russet-colored head.

Theo runs a hand through his fur. "You're no wolf, are you?" he murmurs as he takes in Luka's smaller stature and white-tipped tail. "What are you?"

"Fox," Xyla says from behind him.

Fox?

Like the beasts that fled from the north, centuries ago.

Jerked from his reprieve – from the tiny, safe world that existed only in Luka's gaze –

Theo whirls to face the woman. The color has mostly returned to her face, though dark bags still hang beneath her eyes.

“He’s a fox. Like me.” Xyla raises her chin as she meets Theo’s gaze. The clear challenge brings a growl to the back of Theo’s throat, but before he can speak, Xyla drops to her knees, gathering Luka’s head in her arms. She speaks to him in a voice cast so low, Theo can only make out a few scattered words:

“Come with me.”

Terror grips Theo’s heart as his attention darts to Luka – his mate.

You’re the one person who’s supposed to be with me forever.

Luka jerks his head from side to side with a soft whine. Xyla draws away, her eyes wet. “What is he to you?” she hisses.

Luka bows his head, unable to reply, and Theo steps in front of him. “Don’t speak to him like that.”

Xyla crosses her arms over her chest, and Theo realizes with a start that her eyes are wet. “Don’t worry – I’m leaving you both now.” She furiously wipes away her tears.

“Where will you even go?”

Xyla looks back at Cesscounthe. “There’s no place for us here anymore,” she says. “But this was supposed to be our home, Luka. Don’t you remember? This was ours. And I’m not going to let that crazy bitch keep it from us.”

The spark of vengeance in her eyes speaks to Theo. He’s surprised to find himself empathizing with her. “Go North,” he says. “To Akull. Ask to speak to Commander Jennison. Remind him that he owes me a favor. Give no one else my name. Tell

anyone else that you have information from the Western front. They – they may give you shelter.”

“They may give me shelter?”

Theo shrugs. “My people are not known for their kindness.”

Xyla narrows her eyes, rubbing her forearms. The cool autumn air only serves to drop in temperature as they approach nightfall. She glances back at Cesscounthe one last time. “And you aren’t going to Kitera.” It’s not a question.

Theo rests a hand on Luka’s head. It’s the perfect height. Luka presses into him.

“No,” Theo says. “We will get our vengeance here, but we’re not ready to head north yet. That’s where Octavian would think we would go first. Instead, we go south. Hessalar. We should be safe there.” So long as we avoid those damned demon princes.

I will need to see the Snake of the South again. The one who took my family from me.

Theo looks at Luka, and once again, the world shrinks to just the two of them. Like before, they are again locked in a Ravage match. Only this time, they are on the same side.

Octavian has made his move. Now it’s up to Luka and Theo to come up with the best countermeasure.

A countermeasure that they will make together.