



King Me (Checkmate #3)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: HAVING WED HIMSELF TO THE DEMON PRINCE...

Luka Lockehart, trapped in marriage and psychically bound to the Snake of the South, rides for northern Kitera. There, he hopes to find the allies he needs to return home and save his brother from his mother's claws.

HAVING TRADED HIS LOVER'S KINGDOM FOR FREEDOM...

Theodori Hunter escaped captivity – but only after promising to retake Luka's home country in the name of the demon prince-turned king. He will need help to do so, but he doesn't know if he will find it in this homecoming to Kitera. Kitera, where if Luka and Theo's mating bond is discovered, Theo's people will finally have the leverage they've always wanted.

But when Luka and Theo arrive at the northern capital, the return of an old enemy ruins their plans.

One execution and prison break later, Luka and Theo are left fleeing the capital into the winter. Luka, desperate to save his brother, and Theo, terrified to break his promise, must turn adversaries into allies to survive. Their only constant is their ever-growing, undeniable need for each other – and the demon king in their way.

CAN LOVE SURVIVE A REVOLUTION?

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The following is a short excerpt from Slither: The Game's Origins

Slither was born in the deep sands of Balivartia. People were drawn to it much the same way a mouse is drawn to a venomous snake – the sparkling pieces, like shards of glass caught in the oasis' shores; the gliding motions of manicured hands moving their Bandits across a marble board; the insatiable look in the eyes of the players, like a hungry mouth about to meet bread.

It was irresistible.

Thought to have been originally created in Cesscounthe, the Western Capital of Siacchi, Slither is no common duplicate. The Siacchians lack the soul to create such a game.

No, no one other than one blessed by the Lady Mother's sweet mind and wicked, scarlet smile would have been able to invent such a torment.

Especially not the barbaric Northern Kiterans.

Such animals are much like the monstrous occupants of Alimaris; they lack creativity just as much as they lack elegance –

“Cassian?”

The boy stiffens on his brother's bed at the sound of his mother's voice. Linne's footsteps echo in the hall, approaching Luka's rooms. “Cassian?” she calls again, closer now. Angrier now. The hairs on the back of Cassian's neck rise as he looks

about the room. Linne's footsteps are just outside the door.

Cassian only has a moment to dive beneath the wooden bed frame before she opens the door.

He presses himself against the cold bamboo, the chill seeping through his thin sweater. He shivers, watching his mother's legs, just visible between the rise of the bed and the flat of the floor.

Linne Lockhart pauses in the threshold long enough for Cassian to start to sweat. Surely she could hear his racing heart. He swallows, pressing a hand over his mouth to muffle the noise. She takes a step forward. Inhales deeply.

Just as Cassian is about to reveal himself – the punishment will be surely worse if he is found hiding – Linne turns, closing the door behind her.

Cassian's sigh of relief isn't audible as he relaxes against the bamboo, pressing his now-damp forehead to the floor. Luka's book digs into his stomach, and as he crawls from beneath the bed, he examines the cover. There, on the inside flap, written in unfamiliar handwriting, is a message addressed to his brother that reads, See – I told you. Slither was ours all along.

Cassian presses his lips together as he embraces the book, his chin trembling. Three months now Luka has been gone.

Three months now, since his brother apparently betrayed his people to the barbaric Kiterans that attacked them.

Cassian has never missed anyone so fiercely.

He slides the book back onto the shelf and tiptoes to the door, easing it open. He

cannot linger in the room – any longer, and the tears burning his eyes will surely flow free – and he cannot disappoint his brother by losing control of his emotions like this.

He most certainly cannot disappoint his mother.

You're too old for such things, Linne said when she saw Cassian weeping at the start of it all, when Luka first disappeared. He is just your brother. Dry your tears. You have more important things to focus on. She pressed her hand against her stomach as she spoke, her eyes sharp.

Cassian creeps along the hallway, half lost in thought, his teeth digging into his lip. He is about to turn the corner when Linne's sharp voice fills the air, freezing him mid-stride and mid-heartbeat.

“And what else should I do, Carlo?”

“Anything but that, Linne. Please.” His father always sounds so worn now, like a piece of leather stretched and stressed until it has gone soft. Pliant. “I can't do this again.”

“Well, I can't simply have you pay someone off to swap the score again,” Linne snaps. “Not now. Not with so many eyes on me.”

“I told you – allying yourself with that Kiteran wouldn't result in anything good. You were too close to him to see –”

Linne snorts. “What else would you have had me do?”

“You can't trust him –”

“Don't speak to me like I'm a fool. And I'm not the problem here. Your son is.”

Cassian muffles his alarmed squeak with a fist. He presses himself flat against the wall, willing his heartbeat to slow. Sometimes, when he's hiding from his mother, it seems she can find him by the sound of the blood pounding in his veins. Or maybe by the smell of his fear – sour and dark.

So now, he focuses on inhaling and exhaling slowly – and listening carefully.

“You saw the scores for the recent Bombani pretest I had him retake,” Linne says. She's calmer now – which is somehow worse. She speaks to Carlo the same way she speaks to Cassian – like each word is a pocket that she must carefully turn inside out to prove to them that no, she carries no weapons, and they are fools for thinking otherwise.

“He'll do better,” Carlo mutters.

“He'll fail. Just like Luka did.”

Cassian's eyes widen. Luka didn't fail his test.

...did he?

“The test is still nine weeks away,” Carlo says. “Give him another two months. Please. It doesn't hurt anyone.”

“Fine,” Linne says. “But should he fail...”

Cassian closes his eyes. Of course his mother thinks he would fail.

“Yes,” Carlo whispers. “Yes. I will do it. But with all his tutors – with all the time he dedicates to his studies – he must get a good score, Linne.”

Linne laughs, the noise pale and joyless. “The Lockehart bloodline is dirty, Carlo, and it always has been. If Luka didn’t prove that, you know that Alessan –”

“Don’t.” Carlo’s voice is so quiet, Cassian almost can’t hear him. “Don’t speak his name.”

A long pause.

Cassian looks back the way he came, but he’s too afraid to move. If Linne finds him here, she’ll be enraged. Even a step in the other direction seems too loud. Too dangerous.

“Is it even mine?” Carlo asks. “Is it – is it – his?”

“Does it matter?”

“In a way,” Carlo whispers. “It would be easier.”

“Cheer yourself, Carlo,” Linne says. “Luka still lives.”

“Not by your good graces.”

“He betrayed us all, Carlo. Us – Cesscounthe – all of Siacchi. He was always a monster inside, but at least he used to fight it. Now he’s given in. And he is our enemy .”

Cassian winces as the knot in his throat – and burn of tears –returns. He looks back toward Luka’s room again, the door still shut, and imagines a world where he could run to his brother’s chambers. He would throw the doors open and there Luka would be, like he’d never left. He would smile crookedly and spin Cassian around.

But Luka is gone.

And Luka is a traitor.

Cassian presses himself against the wall as he takes one tentative step away. They continue to argue, voices raising as Cassian takes another step – and then another.

When he is certain he is out of earshot, he breaks into a quiet run, sprinting back into Luka's room and closing the door swiftly and silently. Cassian throws himself onto Luka's bed and hopes, though his brother is a traitor to his family, his people – to Cassian – that wherever Luka is, he is safe.

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Chapter One - Luka

The snow-capped mountains are blurry white smudges in the distance. Luka Lockehart squints through the carriage's shutters, his eyes burning against the sun. He shelters his face with a hand and a fur hat, but even with that, the icy capital of Northern Kitera, Akull, is impossible to make out, all jagged mountains and gray sky. A strange cold grips him, and he shudders, trying to shake off the discomfort.

"Well?" Darri asks from Luka's side. He dodges the sunlight leaking through the window with a scowl. "Can you sense Cathalan?"

Luka resists the urge to look back at the two dozen guards flanking the carriage – at the guard who stands exactly two men down on the right side, who is not actually a guard but a Kiteran soldier forced to masquerade as a Balivartian. Who is actually an impyassus, a man who can turn into a beast.

Who is actually Luka's mate, Theodori Hunter Wolf-Born. Or to Luka, just Theo.

"Cathalan is in Akull looking for allies under his guise as a noble, so obviously not," Luka says instead when Darri's gaze becomes insistent. "I can't see through mountains." The guard rolls his eyes, looking pointedly at Luka's palm. Luka, realizing he has been pressing against the full-moon shaped scar with the curve of his thumbnail, immediately stops.

"I know you're worried about him," Luka continues, knowing that Darri will put him on his heels otherwise, "but my marriage bond to him can only feel if he's in pain. Nothing more."

“That you know of,” Darri points out with raised brows.

The thought brings Luka little comfort.

His marriage to Cathalan, the newly crowned King of Balivartia, the country south of Luka’s home, was something Luka fought hard for... and regretted immensely. The bond between the First Consort and the King of Balivartia means any injury is shared between them – thus preventing Luka’s mate, Theo, from immediately betraying Cathalan when they arrive at Theo’s home, Akull. That is, if Theo were to learn of the bond’s existence. If Luka were to finally tell him.

But the bond only conveys pain. At least, so far it’s only conveyed pain. It wakes Luka sometimes, in the early hours of the morning: strange pricklings on his skin, a phantom ache around his wrists. He supposes that Cathalan is probably subjected to a similar experience when Luka’s shoulders stiffen from hours of sitting painfully upright in the carriage, relentlessly rocked as the roads only grow stonier, but it’s impossible to know.

A knock rattles the door, and Luka startles from his reverie. Darri shuts the window before glancing through the blinds and says, “What is it?”

“We’re approaching the mountain’s base,” a guard rumbles. “From here, we’ll have to proceed on foot.”

“And the snow?”

Luka follows the guard’s gaze to the pale blue sky – and the distant gray clouds.

“Judging by the clouds,” the guard says, “not far off. If we’re lucky, they’ll hold off until afternoon.”

“We’ll break here then. Pick our weakest two and have them wait at the mountain’s base in case we need well-rested messengers upon our return.” Darri glances at Luka. Luka presses his hands into his sleeves, the cold sinking into his bones despite his furs. Darri says, “Bring us some wineskins.”

Luka closes his eyes and rests against the lumpy headrest. A sudden warmth fills his chest –a feeling not directed toward Darri –not directed toward anyone. He doesn’t have the time to contemplate it before Darri presses a wineskin into his hand and says, “Drink. We have a long road ahead of us.”

Yes – a road winding through the treacherous pass before arriving at the winter capital of the barbarians of the north. The capital of the people who invaded Luka’s homeland not three months before.

And now, Luka and Theo will have to beg them for help... assuming the Kiterans don’t kill them first.

The guard predicted correctly: some few hours later, the first flakes of snow begin to fall.

As the clouds darken with heavier snows, Luka and Darri leave their carriage behind. Darri ignores Luka’s protests as he forces Luka onto a stubborn old mule. They use a second beast to carry their heaviest supplies. Afternoon has only turned the day colder, and the howling wind knifes through Luka’s cloak. In seconds, he’s lost all feeling in his fingers. Darri, tucked beneath a heavy cloak and hood, shoulders a heavy traveling pack. Luka again resists looking behind him to the couple dozen guards, to the second man on the right, as they climb the mountain. Theo must be there; the heavy weight of his gaze rests on the back of Luka’s neck, drawing the fine hairs to salute.

After an hour of ascent, the mule stumbles for the third time. The snow has grown

only higher, and even the surefooted beast looks unsteady. Darri sighs as he gestures to a guard. Luka dismounts at Darri's insistence, grateful to leave behind the mule's awkward gait. The guard produces a length of wool scarf, mittens, and another hat, and Darri swaddles Luka. Luka attempts to protest, but his guard works quickly, muffling Luka's cries with fabric.

"You're already turning blue," Darri says when Luka shoves the scarf out of his mouth. "Cathalan will have my head if we lose any of your toes along the way. He needs all his toes."

Luka adjusts the hat, indignant and angry that Darri is right. He rubs his hands together and sensation slowly returns –as does the odd warmth in his chest. "At least let me walk," he says. "It will keep me warm."

Darri clearly wants to protest, but Luka's argument has too much logic. "You will tell me if you grow tired," he says fiercely, and with no small amount of relief, Luka leaves his mule behind. The odd warmth in his chest flickers again. He ignores the sensation, as it feels nothing like his own, and concentrates on the snow crunching beneath his boots. He had told Darri he couldn't feel Cathalan from this far away, but was he wrong? By the time he thinks as much, though, the sensation has gone.

The mountains tower before them. Luka cranes his neck back to see the peaks. Behind them, a pair of guards remain with the horses and carriage, making camp on the back of the pale countryside. It's impossible for Luka to ignore the pang of envy in his chest as he imagines his descent into a worsening cold. He burrows deeper into his cloak, shivering, and automatically lifts his feet when a guard comes to attach snowshoes to his boots.

"We have two, maybe two and a half, days over the mountain!" shouts their Kiteran guide. "The descent will be easier. Akull is waiting for us in the valley on the other side." The guide isn't impyassus, but he looks pure Kiteran with his pale skin and

eyes and the long beard whipping from his chin. He met Darri and Luka's carriage two days ago, assessing them both with narrowed eyes.

Luka was nervous until the Kiteran said, "This is the consort?" looking at Luka like one might a rather stupid child. Darri bristled, but Luka only felt relief: They don't recognize me .

Their guide, Leif, pulls his fur hood over his head as he looks Darri and the guards over. "It would have been better for us to wait until the storm passed," he begins.

Darri cuts him off. "You said there was a shelter halfway from the peak, yes?"

When Leif nods with a sharp jerk of his chin, Darri smiles. "The storm will be here any minute. We're wasting the day's warmth, aren't we?"

Leif grumbles and turns, lifting his legs awkwardly as he begins to lead them up the mountain. His mittened hand finds the nearly-buried rope guide, and it is only when Luka squints (it's almost impossible to see in the thickening storm), that he realizes the mountain's face has shallow stairs.

When a female guard gestures Luka onwards, he flares his snowshoes the best he can and attempts to follow. He manages two steps before his heel lands on an exposed sheet of ice, and the world falls –

Only for him to land in warm arms.

Luka doesn't need to look up to know who caught him. He only needs to inhale the scent of woodsmoke and sweat. It's hard not to linger there, to dream of the things those arms – those hands – could do to him –

He opens his eyes to find Theo staring down at him with a crackling brown gaze. The

Kiteran looks at Luka like he wishes to strip away Luka's furs and taste the skin beneath. Oh, those eyes – any lingering chill in Luka's bones immediately vanishes beneath their attention.

Darri clears his throat. "Are you alright, Consort?"

Luka jerks away from Theo – and this time, he can't help the nervous glance he casts toward Leif. Though the other Kiteran lacks the superior senses of an impyassus, it's surely only a matter of time before he realizes that Theo looks nothing like the other Balivartian guards – heavy furs or no.

It will also only be a matter of time before said Balivartian guards – who now cast measuring looks toward Luka and Theo – realized something is off about their newest member. Luka is, after all, their new First Consort. Luka belongs to Cathalan. Guards shouldn't be cradling him in their arms. That, and most of the guards here are familiar with each other. Thankfully, they will only have to keep Theo's identity secret until they arrive at Akull.

Carefully, Luka ignores the pressure of Theo's eyes as he stands. He bites his tongue in concentration as he follows their Kiteran guide.

"Try to keep your need for humping under control until you have a tent to conceal your... well, tent," Darri hisses as he slides past.

Luka's cheeks flame, and he shoots the guard a nasty look. Darri is the only other who knows of Luka and Theo's... relationship. If another of the guards were to learn... Luka swallows. Darri reminded Luka before they left for Kitera:

"Kings are allowed more consorts, but consorts can only have one king. Until a royal heir is produced, any consort who takes another lover will see their lover executed – usually in creative ways, though that always depended on the king."

Luka's mittened hands ball into fists as he resumes the climb. Every inhale scorches his lungs. He focuses on the flaring of his ankles and the burn of exertion in his legs. And on his anger.

After all, Luka can't forgive Theo yet – not after the Kiteran hid the fact that they are both destined for each other as mates. Theo kept this from him, allowing Luka tortuous months of not understanding why even a whiff of the Kiteran's scent chased all logic from his head.

Now isn't the time for Luka to think about Theo's strong hands on his waist, stroking down his thighs before wrapping around his –

No. Now is a time to focus. To sharpen his anger as Luka travels into the nest of the barbaric enemies of his people.

There is more than just Luka and Theo's lives on the line, after all.

There will be no room for error. Luka will need to be careful to hide his feelings for Theo. He can't trust Cathalan to help him – not with the king's betrayal of binding him and Luka together still so fresh. Even with the years of childhood friendship between them, Luka has found himself hard pressed to forgive the newly crowned Balivartian king. The man cannot help but to lie. Even now, he lies to their potential allies in the north, having gone ahead of them under the guise of a noble for his safety... and to observe the Kiterans without their knowledge of his title.

Luka has no time for forgiveness, anyway.

If he and Theo can't find allies in Akull, Luka won't be able to save his brother, Cassian – or his unborn sibling. They'll need Kiterans that will be sympathetic to their cause. Cassian is likely the same as Luka, an impyassus, a beastly creature in the eyes of their home country of Siacchi. Luka and Theo hope they'll be able to find

supporters – at the very least Theo's old mentor, Commander Jennison, to help them with the rescue.

Luka and Theo have just over two months until the next spring. Cassian will, undoubtedly, fail the next Bombani Exam.

And if Luka can't be there to save his brother by then, their mother will kill him.

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Chapter Two - Theo

Home smells like winter and of pine and salt – and the scent of his mate, some two dozen steps away – so close, and yet so impossibly far from Theo's eager hands.

Theo's eyes linger on Luka's shoulders, slumped against the driving wind. He only drops his gaze when he senses the guard behind him raise her head, her curiosity like a bright candle against the darkening afternoon. Though Theo knows he shouldn't blame her – what else is there to do when scaling a mountain if not pry into the business of others? – he resents her sharpness. Even the glances at his mate are stolen now, and it makes his beast growl in frustration.

But his wolf has other things to focus on, like the shortness of his breath and the creaking ache in his bones. His body has regained some thin, weak semblance of muscle, but after nearly a month spent wasting away in a Balivartian prison, his beast drugged into nothingness, Theo... struggles. He's climbed this mountain thousands of times, starting from age three, but never before has it been so trying. He resists the urge to brace his hands on his knees, and instead grits his teeth.

The air hangs heavy with the promise of snow, and the sky has long since gone dark gray. Wind howls in his ears. Exertion has banished the chill from Theo's bones – though, judging from the shake in Luka's shoulders, not from his mate's.

I just want to hold him. Just once.

Theo stifles the desire, startled because its source doesn't sound like his beast, but like... like his own.

First, they must face down Cathalan. Theo will find allies in Akull –Commander Jennison will surely be there, waiting to hear the truth behind Theo’s defeat at the siege of Cesscounthe. He owes Theo a favor, and Theo fully intends to collect – assuming Luka’s childhood lover turned friend, Xyla Mobiele, hasn’t already cashed in. Once Theo has people, he will be able to conquer his long-time enemy, the Snake of the South. Then, finally, Theo will have all the time to hold Luka.

Assuming they don’t find themselves at war with the Siacchians first.

The promise Cathalan tore from Theo in exchange for Luka’s safety aches, like the words are a fist around his heart.

Theo shuts his eyes as he imagines Luka’s face when his mate learns that Theo has sworn to help overtake Siacchi for the Snake of the South – a deal that will give away Luka’s homeland – a land that is not Theo’s to give. All promised in exchange for his mate.

But if it means keeping Luka safe, Theo is more than willing to return to the battlefield.

That is where he will always belong.

The snow is falling in thick flakes by the time they make camp midway up the mountain. Theo’s cloak keeps the worst of the wet away, but the chill still seeps deep. He can hear Luka’s teeth chattering despite the distance between them, and Theo is grateful when the Kiteran guide calls for a halt.

The weather only worsens as they prepare camp. The shelter is tucked beneath the outcropping of a rock, but the wind drives hard, and Theo’s numb fingers struggle to light the fire. He uses his body to shelter the weak flames from the oncoming blizzard, assessing the pile of wood remaining in the camp’s stores. It should be just

enough to get them through the night.

Darri and the other guards erect stout tents, barely wide enough for pairs to sleep in. It will be the best way to survive the cold; the thick fabric is proofed to keep the wet out and the heat in, and with two bodies tucked inside, they will be kept warm.

Luka curls around the fire, his face pale and his jaw tight.

“Here,” Theo says, careful to keep his touch brisk as he pulls the wet gloves from Luka’s hands. He examines each digit, but they are only pale, not blackened with frostbite. “You can make a fist?” When Luka does, Theo nods. “Put them in your armpits. That will warm them fastest.”

The fact that Luka doesn’t automatically protest is enough to tell Theo how tired his mate is.

“Datheo,” Darri calls, and it’s all Theo can do to not curl his lip at the sound of his false name. Though Cathalan needed Theo’s help to reach Akull, it would have been impossible to keep Theo safe from blood-thirsty Balivartians had the guards known Theo’s identity. If the guards surrounding them learned Theo was Theodori Hunter Wolf-born, a Sevell commander from Kitera, they would be eager to claim vengeance against him due to the lives lost from the decade-old border wars. But – they really couldn’t have given me a better false name?

Darri arches a brow. “We need your help over here.”

As Theo helps Darri unfurl the bedrolls, the king’s closest guard, left behind to protect Luka from harm, snares Theo’s arm.

“It makes the most sense for the two of you to share a tent this evening.” Darri doesn’t even look at Theo as he says it, his attention focused on smacking a tent to

life. “I know that you will work the hardest to keep him safe.”

Theo’s nostrils flare despite knowing that Darri has to be lying. Already, his body hardens at the thought.

“Just know.” Darri casts Theo a dark look. “I’ll hear everything .”

“Maybe I like an audience,” Theo growls.

Darri raises a brow. “Something about you tells me that you don’t like to share, Theodori.”

Theo glances at Leif, the Kiteran guide, but the man is too far away for his human ears to have heard Theo’s name. Still, he pulls his fur hood tighter over his head, grateful for the way imprisonment has hollowed his face and rendered him unfamiliar.

Darri smiles. “See?” he says. “You’re already behaving.”

The guard leaves before the growl wrenches from Theo’s throat.

Dinner is a thick, meaty soup, warmed in pounded tin bowls over the fire. Theo eats so quickly he burns the roof of his mouth, spooning the steaming bites in as fast as he can chew.

Leif eats at his own smaller campfire at the base of the alcove. The storm outside has only escalated, and even the wall of low tents can’t keep the full brunt of the thrashing winds from breaking in. Darri keeps an eye on Leif, and once the man tucks into his tent for an early night, he faces the rest of the guards and Luka.

“The king will be waiting for us,” Darri says in a low voice. “He will likely have

entered Kitera under an assumed identity while he waits for our arrival. Always best to play it safe with northern barbarians.” He doesn’t look at Theo as he continues, “We expect to find new allies in the North and to end our border wars with King Cathalan’s new reign. But we must operate under the assumption that something may go wrong. It will be difficult to escape this place if the Kiterans turn on us, especially with this weather. If they turn on us, Garlian and Vebri, you two are the most adept in the snowshoes; you must return to Baccarna and Selissa at the base of the mountain to report back home. Study our trail closely. You might have to make your return alone.”

The two Balivartians, faces wan, nod.

Darri addresses each of the guards in turn, giving over half of them the order to retreat. They discuss different escape routes – and Darri’s eyes flicker to Theo as he does so. The motion is nearly imperceptible, and the nod that Theo gives when he confirms or rejects the path Darri has named with a shake of his head is even more subtle.

Theo tries to ignore the way his compliance makes his stomach turn. It’s a small betrayal – the Kiterans are too noble to turn on us either way – but he still struggles to hold Darri’s gaze when the guard looks to him.

The conversation carries on for the better part of the hour before Darri has each guard repeat back their orders. Their rolling Balivartian dialect muffles the words, making their hushed voices difficult to distinguish over the roar of the storm outside. Theo is careful to note each order (that one is the one who will defend their escape, this is the one Darri trusts with Cathalan’s life).

At last, Darri is satisfied. “I have faith in you all,” he says in a low, slow voice. “Now rest up. We have a long day tomorrow.”

Dismissed, the guards break into chattering groups, and Theo takes his time spooning out the remains of his soup so he doesn't immediately rush to Luka's side. Throughout Darri's speech, Luka's alert gaze slowly softens, the shivers returning to his shoulders.

A hand catches Theo's arm as he rises. Darri leans down, smelling of woodsmoke as he whispers in Theo's ear, "Remember who you are, Datheo. You're to keep him safe. Nothing more," before he continues to a pair of guards, seamlessly joining their conversation.

Theo's initial response is hot anger, but once that cools, he casts about a slow glance. Darri is right; Theo is already on thin ice. A mysterious man joining the ranks of the typically elite royal guards is suspicious enough without Theo having a close relationship with the newly crowned First Consort – be that a First Consort crowned in the name of a false marriage or no. Theo doubts Luka and Cathalan have officially wed themselves to each other. Luka will go to great lengths to assure alliances, but that would be... too far.

But when Luka yawns delicately, Theo finds logic too weak a force to keep him away. He's on his feet and across the shelter in half a heartbeat.

"These tents are made for two, you know," Theo says. "For warmth."

Luka straightens, his lips curling upward. Then his gaze sharpens, as if he's fully registering it's Theo who spoke. He says, a little gruffly, "Good timing. I need to retire."

Theo tries not to rush to the tent at the base of the cavern – the safest and warmest position. Before the two of them slide inside, Theo casts a furtive glance toward the other guards, but none watch them with suspicion. No, instead Darri passes a small clay bottle to a pretty woman with blonde curls, and she takes a long drink before

coughing, rubbing at red cheeks. Theo briefly entertains the idea that Darri distracted the guards so he and Luka could steal this time alone before dismissing it – Darri isn't kind enough for such things.

The interior of the tent is just wide enough for both Luka and Theo to fit so long as they press tightly together, shoulder to shoulder. Luka squeezes in first, removing his heavy, snow-caked boots.

"I'm not happy with you, you know," Luka whispers as Theo does the same.

"What? What now?" First Theo is captured by his sworn enemy, and then Luka is married to that enemy, only to be poisoned by would-be assassins. Surely they could have a moment of peace.

Luka narrows his eyes. "What now?" he repeats. "You hid the fact that we're mates for months, Theo. When did you learn?" His eyes narrow further. "It was back in Cesscounthe, wasn't it?"

Theo scoots into the tent and pulls the canvas flap shut. It's dark inside, and it takes Theo's eyes a moment to adjust, to see the furrow between Luka's brows.

"Well?" Luka hisses. "Tell me. This might be the last moment we get time alone together."

Exactly! Theo wants to cry. So let's savor it while we can.

But Luka has a point.

Theo crawls into their shared sleeping sack, settling beneath the heavy furs and fabrics. They stink of unclean animals, but they're impossibly warm. He takes another long moment to consider his answer. The truth sours on his tongue.

He finally says, “Yes. I realized back in Cesscounthe, but I didn’t say anything because I was... I was afraid.”

Luka’s eyes widen. “What?”

“Don’t make me repeat myself,” Theo grumbles.

“Afraid? But you’re – you’re not afraid of anything.” There’s an odd breathlessness to Luka’s words.

Theo chuckles, low and bitter. “That was before I met you.” That was before I had something I needed to be afraid of losing. His gaze follows the nervous dance of Luka’s fingers. He traces the pale, blue-veined underside of Luka’s long arms. Delicate. His mate is terribly delicate.

“Were you ever going to tell me?” Luka whispers.

Theo closes his eyes as he casts his thoughts back to that moment, at the seat of his failure in Cesscounthe, just betrayed by his lover and having learned that his infuriating prisoner of war was actually his mate. The anger he felt then hadn’t been anger at all, but warped fear – fear of what would come next.

“Luka,” he says. “In Kitera, do you know what they do to mated pairs?”

Luka slowly nods, “Didn’t you tell me that... in wartime, they’re kept separate? One will be sent to the battlefield. And the other will be kept in the capital? In Akull?”

“Yes,” Theo says. “If the hopiar in battle decides they wish to flee – if they betray their superiors – their mate is killed.” Theo touches his throat unconsciously at the thought. Though his bond to Luka has yet to be fully sealed, he struggles to fathom Luka – dying . “The pain... it renders the hopiar in battle nearly insane. The mating

bond means you can feel as your mate feels. Their happiness. Their pleasure. Their – pain. Most perish alongside their mates.”

Horror dawns on Luka’s face. “If your people discover that we’re mates...”

“Yes. They will force us to complete the mating bond and then separate us. You will remain in the capital and, assuming they don’t punish me for whatever lies Octavian has surely fed them, I will return to the battlefield – to wherever they wish for me to be.”

Luka lies back onto the furs at Theo’s side, his eyes tracing the tent’s ceiling. He’s so close to Theo, their arms brush. The sensation tightens Theo’s throat in a delicious way, and he scolds himself – this is not the time to be acting like a teenager.

But that’s what Luka does to him; the Siacchian renders Theo stupid in the worst (and best) of ways.

“I still want you to apologize,” Luka mutters. “For hiding it from me.”

“I’m sorry,” Theo says immediately. “It was stupid. I just – I never felt this way about someone before –”

“And you think I have?” Luka’s words rise to a hissing fervor. “I didn’t understand myself, Theo. All my life, I’ve been told that only idiots and fools let their emotions control their actions, and I’ve been doing nothing but that around you.” He throws himself onto his side, dark curls falling across his face as he glares at Theo, cheeks flushed and eyes bright. He looks so beautiful.

“Idiots and fools?” Theo smiles.

“Yes! The logical thing would have been to abandon you so, so long ago, but instead

I found myself coming up with the most ridiculous plans to try and save you from Cathalan's prison – which, by the way, you haven't thanked me for either."

"Why would I thank you? I was seconds from saving myself."

Luka snorts. "More like seconds away from starving yourself to death."

"If you had waited another day – and not married that demon prince – I would have escaped, and I could have saved the both of us."

Luka's eyes dart from Theo's stare to Theo's lips. His blue gaze draws a line of fire across Theo's face, so heavy it might as well have been a touch.

"I think," Luka says, voice dropping to a low, husky whisper. "That you're full of –"

But Theo can't contain himself any longer. The warmth of Luka's body, pressed against his side, the heat of the man's every exhale – it's all torture. Terrible, terrible torture. And that flick of Luka's tongue, pink and wet, across his lips before he speaks, the flush rising in his cheeks –

Theo wraps his arms around Luka. He draws Luka close, breathing in the heady scent of him. His beloved mate, in his arms at last.

And then he kisses Luka.

Their mouths collide with an audible click. The kiss is half teeth, half lips. Luka's whisper seamlessly shifts from angry hissing to a soft, breathy exhale that Theo captures with his mouth. Luka tastes of salt and home, and Theo can't get enough.

"Theo," Luka whispers, the word stuttering across Theo's lips. Luka's tongue is hot in Theo's mouth.

Hands scrabble at Theo's waist, eagerly peeling back furs. Theo cannot contain a muffled gasp when Luka's fingers, cold but soft, meet the naked skin of his chest.

Theo kisses down the length of Luka's neck, biting and sucking while Luka's hands explore his body. Chilled fingers skirt over Theo's chest, caressing his nipples before curling to meet his waist. Luka pulls Theo closer – closer – like he hates the idea of even the smallest space between them.

Theo's tongue finds the hollow of Luka's throat where he can feel Luka's pounding pulse. He traces the tendons bulging there, and a loud moan breaks from Luka's lips.

Theo slaps his hand over Luka's mouth, shooting Luka a look. They both pause, straining to hear the Balivartians.

The conversation around the campfire quiets.

Luka's throat bobs against Theo's lips, his fingers dancing around the curve of Theo's back. They remain frozen for three very long seconds before one of the Balivartians says something and the group bursts into laughter. Luka's smile presses against Theo's fingers, the gleam in his eyes wicked as his hands trail lower –

Theo runs fingers through Luka's hair, pulling at the knots in his curls, keeping his other hand clapped over his mate's mouth. Luka pauses again, the groan bursting from his lips barely muffled by Theo's hand.

“You like that?” Theo rasps. “You like it when I'm rough with you?”

Images of Luka splayed before him, lips wet and red – on his knees begging for Theo's cock, bent over while Theo nudges his cheeks and presses against his tight –

“I don't let people manhandle me,” Luka growls through Theo's fingers, eyes

sparking.

Theo pulls Luka's hair again, and Luka's eyes roll back. "Are you sure about that?"

Luka's fingers slip beneath Theo's trousers and find his cock. The world jerks to a halt when Luka palms him, and Theo's hips stutter, shoving closer, closer – oh, yes –

Luka peels Theo's hand away from his lips and whispers in Theo's ear, so close his teeth graze Theo's lobe, "Are you sure you aren't the one looking for some manhandling?"

"When it comes to you," Theo whispers. "I'll let you handle anything."

Luka grips Theo's cock and strokes down the length. Stars burst behind Theo's eyes. The sensation is... unimaginable. The pleasure consumes him, and the world shrinks to the growing heat of Luka's hand –

Theo seizes Luka's hips and rolls him so he faces away from Theo. He yanks Luka toward him so he can press his cock against Luka's ass. Luka muffles his moan with his arm.

"Oh, you look so beautiful," Theo murmurs as he slides his hands beneath Luka's trousers to grip his hips. "You're going to look so beautiful when you take my cock, Luka. Oh, I wish I could hear you scream for me –"

"Theo," Luka gasps, hips bucking.

Yes, this is where I've always wanted him. Begging me, calling my name – finally, finally, I can claim him, we can be fully mated –

Reality slams into him, sharp and painful.

“Luka,” Theo rasps. Luka shoves his ass against Theo’s cock. He’s soft and warm and pliant, and Theo wants nothing more than to bury himself inside –

No.

“Luka.” Theo clears his throat. “Luka, we can’t. Not now.”

Luka blinks, eyes hazy. He stares at Theo, his gaze trapped on Theo’s lips as he leans in.

With a force of will he didn’t know he had, Theo places a hand on Luka’s chest to hold him back. “If we – if we do anything tonight, I won’t be able to stop myself, and I – I can’t seal our bond, Luka. Not now. Not when we’ll be in Akull in two days. If the Elders discover us...”

Luka shakes his head. “You don’t need to worry about that, Theo,” he says. His right hand curls into a fist, obscuring the strange, circular scar on his palm. Theo asked about it before, but each time the question left his lips, Luka shook his head and refused to explain. “I’ll – I’ll be safe.”

Tenderness warms Theo’s heart, contesting the painful ache in his loins. He rests a hand on Luka’s cheek. Luka leans into the touch. “I would never do anything to put you in harm’s path, Luka. As much as I want to be inside you now –”

Luka groans softly at the thought, and Theo’s hips automatically buck at the sound.

“– I can’t do this. Not if it means the Elders have something else to hold over me. To hold over you.” Theo leans close, so their noses brush. Luka’s pants bloom on his lips. “Besides, I’ll have plenty of time to torture you later.” He nips at Luka’s ear.

“Bold of you to assume you’ll be the one administering the torture,” Luka rasps. His

pupils are so wide, Theo wonders if he'll fall into them. "Don't you know I was always the one giving in my past relationships?"

Theo raises a brow. "Past relationships?"

Luka muffles his snort of laughter in Theo's shoulder. "What? Did you think I'd never lain with anyone before?"

"Well – I – I mean –"

"I know without a doubt that you have. Or did you think I could somehow forget Octavian?"

Theo's lip curls at the mention of his lieutenant turned traitor. "He's not easily forgotten."

Luka chuckles again, and Theo places a finger under his chin, lifting his face. "If we mate now – we seal this bond between us. You understand what that means now, yes?"

A faint red flush spreads across Luka's pale cheeks. He blinks, throat bobbing with a swallow before he replies, "We – we'll be mated until we die."

"We feel each other's emotions. If you're sad, I'll be sad."

"And if you're..." Luka trails off, looking down at Theo's bulging erection.

"Yes, yes." Theo laughs, but then swats Luka's hand away when it drifts toward his crotch. "I'm serious, Luka. I've wanted you for so long, but it's too dangerous. It's one of the reasons why I never let myself... care about someone like this before."

Luka shifts closer to Theo, pressing his head against Theo's chest. He's so much smaller than Theo, and so warm. Kitera's howling winter falls away in Luka's arms. Everything falls away. The aches and weakness in Theo's tired body, the fears of what will come when they arrive in Akull – it's all so much smaller here, where he's safe.

Theo closes his eyes.

"I never let myself care about anyone either," Luka whispers as sleep hovers above them both. "But I'm... I'm glad I have."

"Me too, Luka. Me too."

The next day and a half passes in a blur. Theo isn't sure how well he hides his bliss the following morning, but it isn't until they're near the tip of the mountain that he realizes no one will notice. Unlike Luka and Theo, the Balivartians and Leif emerged from their tents looking worse for wear, heavy bags under their eyes. No one makes an effort at conversation over a meager breakfast beyond a quiet complaint about returning to the snow. Theo doesn't care. Even now, as his thighs burn from walking and his ankles chafe in his boots, he's practically floating.

When they break for lunch beneath an overhang the Kiterans built centuries before, the already gray sky grows darker. Leif mutters something about needing to hurry into Akull before the bad blizzards hit, and Theo takes a moment to steal time with Luka.

"Do you see them?" Theo whispers over his mouthful of dried jerky and steaming tea. He is all but leaping with excitement. He spotted them only moments before, thank the Mother for his luck.

Luka's lips are pale, nearly blue. He's curled his entire body around his mug of tea.

“See what?”

Theo resists the urge to press his warmth into Luka’s body and instead attempts to breathe more life into their small fire pit. The wood rests in the hole, sheltered from the wind, but sputters stubbornly against the damp, releasing spouts of smoke.

“Over there, behind that bend.” Theo extends his mittened hand over Luka’s shoulder. He directs Luka’s attention to the opposite peak, barely visible through the darkening clouds. Movement flickers over the snow, distance rendering it the size of Theo’s thumbnail, when he knows in reality, it’s nearly twice as large as his human form. But he knows them – knows them better than his own hands.

“What is it?”

“Egarara.”

“What?” Luka blinks.

“And there, right next to her, that’s probably Leiro. He was always a smarmy bastard, but I’m glad to see he’s still well. I can’t tell about the others, not from this distance.”

“Are you... are you making a joke?” Luka uncurls, gaping at Theo over his tea.

Heat spreads up Theo’s neck. “No. Well, those are the names I gave them as a child,” he says, softly. His excitement wilts. “That’s – they’re – you can see them, right?”

“I mean –” Luka squints in the direction of Theo’s finger. “Barely. They’re – they’re wolves, right?”

Theo nods. “You know my full name, don’t you?”

“Theodori Hunter Wolf-Born,” Luka recites so quickly, he immediately flushes after the name leaves his mouth. “Yes. I’m aware,” he mutters afterwards, as if trying to recover his dignity.

“Wolf-Born is literal. I wasn’t born human.”

“Your poor mother.” Luka says the words dryly, but his eyes are wide – almost scandalized. Had they been anywhere else, Theo might have laughed.

“Yes – had she been human, she would have died. But hopiar sometimes have such births. It’s a sign that I have a very powerful wolf.”

“But Egarara and Leiro aren’t... they aren’t your parents, are they?”

Again, regret strikes Theo like a stone. He looks out across the Balivartians, wondering if they’ll be leaving soon. He was so eager to share his old life with Luka, so stupid to think that painful questions wouldn’t emerge.

But the group is stuck in quiet conversation, sipping their tea with care as they eye the weather. Only Leif and Darri watch Luka and Theo; Leif’s eyes are cast in mild curiosity, while Darri’s gaze is darker.

Theo looks out at the wolves again. They’ve vanished into the wintery cliffsides now, and the distance between them makes it impossible for Theo to catch their scent. He wonders if they saw him, too. If they remember him.

There are few left to miss him at home. Fewer still that will welcome his return. The thought tears at him with jagged teeth – but does any of that matter now, with Luka here? Now that he has the person who will always be at his side, who will care for him no matter what they must face together.

Theo can't let their arrival at Akull break them apart.

"My parents are dead," Theo says. "Being Wolf-Born meant that my parents gave me to the wild to be raised by Egarara's pack. Wolves like Egarara are descended directly from the Wolf Mother. They live until She calls them to death, and they are blessed with human intellect."

"Oh," Luka says, face unreadable.

"Being Wolf-Born means respect – if you survive. It was... it was difficult, but it made me stronger. It was how I earned a position under Commander Jennison at such a young age." Theo closes his eyes. Those early memories of his life are punctuated by long stretches of hunger and cold, with the occasional hot, salty taste of blood filling his mouth.

"Theo," Luka says, voice soft. Theo looks at his mate, and is shocked to see how gentle Luka's face is. "That's not a childhood."

When Theo only stares at Luka, Luka's cheeks redden. "How – Theo, how did you maintain human speech? Or how did those wolves keep you from getting sick?"

"I was brought back to my parents once a month and would turn human then. And illness? What are you talking about? It's not as if I were eating rotting corpses. Egarara's pack took care of me. It made me strong, Luka. My parents did it so I could have a future as a brilliant Sevell – a Vell, even. They knew if I lived, I would become a renowned military commander." Theo's aware that his voice is rising above their conspiratorial whisper, that his cheeks are growing hot with protest, though he's not sure why.

Luka's hand rises, moving as if to touch Theo's knee, before awkwardly halting, as if remembering they aren't alone.

“I’ll introduce you to them – to them all,” Theo promises after a long silence. “My pack. Commander Jennison. I want them to meet you.”

Luka’s eyes crinkle with joy. “I would be happy to,” he says. “I’m glad some good can come of all this.” Despite the smile on his lips, his thumb worries the scar on his palm.

Though Theo wants to ask, he doesn’t. Instead he grins back. There will be plenty of time for Luka to explain, after all.

And then, suddenly, they’re outside Akull’s walls.

Returning is a punch to the face. Memories rush in like blows too rapid to block while Theo cranes his neck back, staring at the carved ice walls. Though typically mobile, after winter grips Kitera, Akull firmly anchors itself in the northern heart of the country. Inside, it will be bustling.

Beyond them, the icy pines sway. Snow falls thickly, coating Theo’s eyelashes. The gray sky looms, promising worse storms yet to arrive.

Their group made good time; Leif is good at his job. He guided them down the mountain with little hesitation, half an eye turned to the weather and half an ear turned toward the snow leopard stalking them. Though neither threat came to fruition, Theo appreciates his skill.

Last night, the final night before arriving at the capital, Darri again ran his group through the plan. Standing outside the carved gates of Akull, staring at the brutally shaped snarling wolves chiseled into the ice walls, Theo can smell the Balivartian’s fear. Their anticipation.

“Greetings!” Leif calls from below, pulling his hood back to reveal his face despite

the wind whipping blond hair from his braid. “I come bearing Balivartian guards and the Balivartian king’s First Consort. They seek an audience with the Elders.”

Tension creeps into Theo’s shoulders as the guard stationed in the watchtower calls a quiet response, heavy with the Kiteran dialect. Leif’s tone changes as he replies, his words lost to the screech of the wind. Luka shoots Theo a nervous glance.

Two guards part the gates and halt their group before they can enter. Leif leans down to speak to a short hopiar woman covered head to toe in furs. “Keep them calm,” she murmurs.

Darri raises his chin, wetting his lips, but before he can speak, the woman turns to them.

“We have the noble you sent,” she says to Darri in a low, smokey voice. “Leave your guards here, bastard, and we’ll leave your people unharmed.” She has filed deep grooves into her front teeth, sharpening them to look like fangs. There is something familiar about her face. She says the words so calmly, it takes Theo half a heartbeat to register that it’s not a statement – it’s a threat.

Darri’s eyes flash, and Luka takes a step back.

“Run, and your people will meet their end, and we will kill your noble,” the woman continues. She’s armed only with a small axe, and her hand rests on the wooden hilt as she speaks, though the motion looks more habitual than it does threatening.

Darri raises his hands and speaks slowly, “I was under the impression that this was a peaceful gathering.” Though he does not glance back at Theo as he speaks, his shoulders shift slightly.

The woman’s eyes flicker to Theo. Recognition flares. “This is him?” she says to

Leif.

Leif nods.

Shock pummels Theo.

You idiot.

Malnutrition and time hadn't faded his appearance as much as he hoped. How long has Leif known who Theo is?

Did he see me with Luka?

Does he know?

Half a second ticks by in a slow, viscous drip. Theo's eyes dart from the guards, still frozen in shock – there are two dozen of them and only three Kiterans, but this is the capital, they will be murdered quickly and easily –

But why have they taken Cathalan captive?

Kiterans aren't known for diplomacy – but they are known for their honor. And they aren't fools.

Theo tucks his arms behind his back as his hands curl into fists. It won't be long before the Kiterans turn their attention to Luka – what better way to keep the Balivartian King under their thumb than to threaten his First Consort? It doesn't matter that Cathalan arrived under the guise of a noble to keep him safer. Luka is in danger. But if they lay a single claw on Luka's head –

Theo steps forward, curling his lips into a snarl. "If you knew who I was, you could

have said as much,” he growls to Leif before addressing the woman. “ Sevell Theodori Hunter Wolf-Born, returning from the field. As you know, I’ve secured an alliance with the South, and it seems you are rapidly digging yourself into a war we can’t afford by keeping their newly crowned First Consort captive – ”

The Balivartian guards draw back in horror as Theo speaks. At least half of them are old enough to have fought in the horrible border wars between the North and the South, so they’re undoubtedly familiar with his moniker, Wolf-Born. Their hands stray toward knives as their lips curl, but when the Kiteran woman fixes them with a cold gaze, they freeze.

“Don’t be foolish,” the woman says, and it is then, hearing the knife’s edge of her voice, that Theo recognizes her; Vittoria Healer Wolf-Born. She had been assigned as a medic during his siege. Not once has he seen her fight.

Judging by her artificial fangs, things have changed since Theo’s defeat. Or perhaps this was her true identity, and her role under Theo was a guise so she might act as a spy for the untrusting Elders.

Vittoria looks Theo over with a scowl. Despite her small size, Theo knows better than to underestimate her. Her exposed cheeks and nose redden as the snow starts to fall in thick clumps. “Theodori.” She says his name like it carries a foul taste. “You didn’t return with us when Cesscounthe fell. We were told...” She pauses, her nostrils flaring.

Theo resists the urge to close his eyes at his own foolishness. Too long he has been away from his own people. Too long – and he has grown so, so soft.

Vittoria’s eyes dart from the Balivartian soldiers to land on Luka. She inhales deeply. Though Luka’s fear clouds the air, much the same as the other Balivartians, he does not look away from Vittoria’s stare.

“Get the chains,” Vittoria says to the soldiers beyond her. “Execute any who protest – we don’t need more mouths to feed.” Her eyes linger on Luka in a way that boils Theo’s blood. His beast stirs in his chest with a rumble that echoes in his ribcage.

“This one,” Vittoria says, gaze flickering from ice-blue to a brown so deep it looks almost black as she looks at Luka. “Put this one with the noble. It will be a good message to their king. We don’t treat spies kindly here.”

She smiles as she says this, finally glancing back toward Theo as she says, “Welcome home, Theodori. We’ve been waiting for you.”

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Chapter Three - Luka

Luka's heart slams against his chest as cold iron manacles close around his wrists. He forces his gaze ahead. He will not look back at Theo. He will not.

At his side, Darri's shoulders hunch. Twice, the guard attempts to pass a message to his fellow Balivartians, and after an initial warning, the female Kiteran draws her axe and removes another guard's head from her body. Silence falls as warm blood sprays.

Now, Darri, wet with red, walks at Luka's side, not a single sound leaking from his lips. It's impossible for Luka to tell if the man's shoulders are slumped in defeat, or if there is still a plan churning behind his furrowed brows – and there is little point in Luka trying to ask him.

They are led through the towering walls of Akull. The gate creaks shut behind them as the storm increases in fury. Snow falls so thick now, it's hard to see – which helps. It means, logically, that even if Luka were to glance back at Theo, to stare at his mate, his lover, beseechingly, it would be harder for Luka to see the man, though they must be only a few strides apart.

But Luka is struggling with logic.

Failure here means we get no allies. It means we can't make it back to Cesscounthe. It means that, in two months' time, when Cassian fails the Bombani Exam, Mother will kill him.

This is doing Luka no good. He wets his lips again, instead focusing his attention on

the short female Kiteran who leads their group. She moved quickly when she executed the Balivartian guard, and is stronger than her small size implies. There is a strange scent about her, a musk like wet fur. The previous night, Theo tried to show Luka how to use his beast's nose, and Luka pieces together the meaning now, uncomfortable with how he must draw upon his beast.

She's an impyassus .

Luka takes in the five other Kiterans guiding them into the heart of Akull; it's hard to smell them above the wet cold of the snow, but the two closest to him have a similar scent.

Despair knots in Luka's throat. They're probably all impyassi.

They are so fortunate that Cathalan arrived wearing the disguise of a diplomatic noble. If he revealed himself to be king and the barbarians decided to turn against him... but why?

What did Cathalan do? The Kiterans wouldn't imprison a diplomatic visitor, even one from an enemy nation, not when they are already at war with Siacchi – though the West will provide little resistance now that Cesscounthe has fallen.

Luka allows himself a moment of painful terror; the rabbit-like emotion tears through him, and it does little to help. The guard behind his elbow glances at him out of the corner of her eye, and amber rolls across her irises as her nostrils flare. She can smell my fear.

Just as quickly as Luka loosens his grip on his emotions, he clamps down again.

Enough of that.

Yes, enough of thinking back to last night, when Theo wrapped his arms around Luka and they were so close that Luka thought nothing could part them again. That was yesterday, and this is now. Now, when the short female Kiteran's axe seems eager for another beheading.

Akull grows around them as they enter the heart of the Kiteran capital. Towering pale structures vanish into the growing blizzard. Torches flicker, steaming with animal fat. Luka lifts his chin, craning his neck back to take in the winter palace as snow melts from his lashes.

Akull's base is lined with tents made of tanned animal skin rippling from the winds that make it through the towering ice walls. Distant puffs of smoke rise, darkening the snowfall with ash. Luka can barely make out the commoners who emerge from their tents, faces dirty, cooking knives in their hands and dinner on their lips as they take in the manacled arrivals; most smile at the sight.

Raised stone paths lead them through the towering, finger-like buildings. Piles of snow rise on either side of the walkways. They likely have to shovel twice a day, if not more. Ice windows gleam against the storm, entire buildings made of a mix of stone and ice. Impossible buildings that could only be made with impyassus strength.

Luka can feel curious eyes following them. They don't walk for long before the Kiteran soldiers move to separate Luka from the group.

Luka's wrists ache in his manacles as a Kiteran guides him away by the shoulder. This time, he can't keep himself from desperately looking back.

"He cannot be separated from me," Darri says suddenly.

"What did I say about speaking?" the short female Kiteran asks. Her husky voice is low and soft, and on anyone else, it wouldn't have been threatening – but for the

blood smeared across her cheek. There is something familiar about her that Luka can't place.

"You don't want us all dead, do you?" Darri lifts his chin as he faces down the Kiteran. He's almost two heads taller than her. "The newly-crowned king told me to not let his First Consort out of my sight. If he learns that I have disobeyed my orders, myself and my soldiers will be forced to commit suicide."

Luka manages not to blanch. The lie is bald-faced but delivered with such certainty, doubt flashes across the Kiteran woman's face. She blinks slowly at Darri, her hand resting on her axe's pommel. Luka swallows.

Theo says in a gravelly voice, "Vittoria, you don't honestly believe that nonsense do you? They're going to kill themselves? With what weapons?" He chuckles and Luka's stomach rolls.

I hope you know what you're doing, Theo.

The woman, Vittoria, looks at Theo. Her name brings a flash of memory – Luka, when first captured, and the Kiteran doctor who examined him. Luka tries not to gape. She has changed much in the past months. Vittoria's eyes gleam brown-black, the beast rolling beneath the surface, and she laughs, though the sound is humorless. "You were always so eager to underestimate our enemies, Theodori." To the soldier at Luka's elbow, she orders, "Take this talking one with you to the hole." Her gaze swings from Darri to the rest of the guards. "The rest can go into the Pen with the soldiers that came with their king."

"This way," says the guard behind Luka, though Luka barely hears the words through his relief.

Darri falls into line at Luka's side as they are guided away from the group, toward the

western sides of the city. Luka doesn't look back, though he imagines he can feel Theo's eyes following them, cradling Luka's shoulders until they vanish around the corner. The snow melts on the waterproofed skins draped over Luka's body, and it is then that the cold slams into him, forgotten in his fright. He realizes his teeth are chattering.

Three guards escort them. All are armed. And all are likely impyassi.

Three versus two.

And then, even if Darri and Luka manage to overpower these guards, they would have to face down the rest of Akull to get to Theo.

Luka closes his eyes and finds himself wishing, not for the first time, that he knew how to reach for his beast.

But what good will that do here, against soldiers who have been trained to fight with their animal from birth?

Hysterical laughter bubbles in Luka's chest; he doesn't stand a chance. The thought of turning his frantic claws against the leather-armored woman next to him makes his stomach heave.

They walk in silence, Luka's chattering teeth punctuating each step. The snow is deeper here, and he must step with care. He tries to conjure his mental Cesse board to ground himself, but the cold is too great, breaking his concentration.

Out of the corner of his eye, Darri's face remains blank. Frozen blood still splatters his cheeks. It is only when they pass a long stretch of stone and ice buildings, now shrinking to one-story structures as they approach the western edges of Akull, that Luka realizes Darri is signaling something.

Pinky finger scratching at the brown-black blood on his chin. Ring finger worrying his collar. Pinky finger twisting the empty place at his belt where his poisoned daggers used to hang.

Stay in place. Attention with me. Prepare for future orders.

Relief breaks over Luka. Those nights prior when Darri lectured his guards endlessly on dozens of hand signs had seemed overly paranoid to Luka, but he's now grateful he still bent half an ear to listen.

Darri has a plan.

They're getting out of this. They can salvage this, somehow.

Luka's relief wears thin as they exit the city and cross a small, snow-covered hillside. The blizzard has only increased in ferocity, but the manacles tearing dull, frigid teeth into his wrists promise that even the storm obscuring visibility won't make for an easy escape. The female guard at his side echoes the sentiment in a low growl, saying, "It's been months since the last prisoner tested the pitfall traps, so please, try running. Help us confirm the spots."

The snow first rises to their ankles, then their knees, before stopping at Luka's thighs. His teeth clatter and he tries not to stare at Darri, to will him to send another message. It isn't until they enter a small, walled camp, with watchtowers high enough that they vanish into the howling winds, that Luka wonders if maybe Darri doesn't have a plan. Because they seem well and truly screwed. Darri, yet to provide new hand signals since he saw the understanding on Luka's face, avoids eye contact.

Luka is allowed some measure of relief as they enter a dimly lit building warmed by flickering fireplaces. As the wood door closes on the storm outside and snow from their boots and cloaks pools on the stone floor, the heat that slams into him is so

fierce, he nearly stumbles. His numb toes and fingers scorch to life, aching fiercely. He grits his teeth to dampen a grunt of pain.

They must have passed half a dozen guards on the way to the prison's entrance, but inside, there are only four others, each pair stationed over strange black circular cut-outs in the ground. The four Kiterans raise their heads, and it is the tall, broad man who speaks.

“These are them?”

The woman at Luka's elbow says, “Yes – did you clear out cell four?”

The man's expression changes minutely, tensing in a way that Luka nearly misses. He mumbles, “No. All of the cells are full with our other political prisoners from the last of the Siacchian rebels.”

Luka shudders for the third time, as if he can shake the cold from his bones. His clothes cling to him now as his body begins to sweat, and the damp feeling spreading from his armpits is terrible.

The woman grumbles, “I told you this morning, Jauson.”

“But he – he kept talking to me – I thought he might have something important to take to the Elders –”

“And I told you not to speak to them – you know he has a snake's tongue.” The woman behind Luka heaves a sigh so heavy, it ruffles Luka's damp curls. “Fine. We'll put them together for now.” She flashes a bared tooth smile to Luka and Darri. “Unless you two would like to spend the night with pissed off Siacchian mercenaries?”

The woman doesn't wait for them to reply, instead forcing them forwards. The tall man and his shorter partner approach the first black cut-out. This close, Luka can see it must be made of heavy wood – both men strain as they lift it up –

And reveal a pit hidden beneath.

A pit with two familiar faces peering out.

The first face is expected; the once Third Blessed Prince and now King of Balivartia, Cathalan, first of his name, squints up at them, shading his eyes with a too-thin hand.

The other face is a shock.

Xyla Mobiele stares up at them, her eyes widening once they adjust to the dimly lit prison above. Her lips shape Luka's name three times before any noise passes from her throat.

"Luka?" she says. "What – what are you doing here?"

"Oh," Cathalan says with a smile. "Good. You're here. We can get down to business then."

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:50 am

Chapter Four - Theo

A kull blurs around Theo as he is led to the Elder's stronghold in the heart of the city.

Dimly, he's aware of Vittoria at his side and that she's saying something about Cesscounthe and losses and wins that have taken place since his disappearance – and alleged betrayal. He should be thinking up a story as to why he didn't immediately return to Akull after Octavian declared Theo a traitor—a story that explains why Theo hasn't brought his case before the Elders to spread out evidence, to show that the betrayer wasn't Theo, but Octavian.

If Theo had followed the rules, an official war trial would have been declared. As the accuser, Octavian would have been given the choice to settle things before an anonymous tribune selected by the city, or through Ravage or combat.

But Theo didn't come forward – just as Octavian would have expected. Theo wasn't guilty of betraying his people... at least, not in the way Octavian claimed it.

But he is guilty of falling in love with the enemy.

And though that crime is more forgivable, it is the one crime Theo can't let Octavian prove.

“Understood?” Vittoria says. She holds out her hand.

Theo stares at the calluses lining her fingers that speak to years of hard labor. If the curves of muscle on her shoulders and arms didn't already betray a life of warfare,

her hands certainly do.

What if she had been the one to tell the Elders of Luka during the siege of Cesscounthe, and not Octavian?

Vittoria's gaze searches him, almost as if she can see his thoughts. When he only stares at her, her lips curl downwards.

"Let's hope that you are as good as your mentor swears you are, Wolf-Born," she says.

Theo grits his teeth.

You're such a fool for thinking the Snake of the South could have handled this, he tells himself.

And now Luka is in danger . Again.

This is why Theo always has to handle matters of war on his own.

He exhales a long breath as he looks up at the stone doors before them. They are carved with ancient images of howling wolves chasing foxes and rabbits from the northern reaches of Kitera. The designs stretch far above him, toward the slanted roof just barely shielding him from the thick snowfall. Inside, the Elders will be waiting. He rolls potential answers around his tongue, testing their sounds, and then, before Vittoria can say an expectant, " Well?" he pushes the door open.

Inside, the stronghold's ceiling seems high enough to scrape the clouds. Bone chandeliers drip with candle wax. Torches blaze from pillars carved into the shape of wolves, heads bent back so their snarls press against the wooden beams. The air hangs heavy with tension, like the stretching calm before a scream.

Theo doesn't have to look at the path beneath his feet. The stones are worn from the tread of generations of Kiterans that have walked before him –the tread from his own feet, a dozen winters prior, when he first entered this hall. Nervous energy hums through him, but he smothers it with a clench of his fist.

At the head of the stronghold sit the Elders. Their chairs fan out above him, placed so they can look down their noses at whomever must stand on the carved dais. The last three months have done little to change them; Gilianna Scholar still frowns, pressing a stray strand of auburn curls behind her ear while her other hand worries the dagger at her hip. Opposite her, Hessifer Soldier strokes a still poorly trimmed white mustache, his gaze calm. Their fellows look equally disapproving.

And there, tucked into the shadows beyond the Elders, is Commander Jennison.

Theo can't help the tiny sigh of relief that escapes him at the sight of his old commander, even if the man looks oddly haggard, face lined, back bent. Though human, Jennison only wanted the best for Theo. Surely that can't have changed.

"Theodori Hunter Wolf-Born," Gilianna says, voice clear as a bell as she steeples her hands. She leans back against the carved wooden throne. Each chair is made specific to the Elder; hers has legs made of books and arms made of swords, with small vines weaving the two together. "We expected you much sooner."

Theo ducks his head to hide the curl of his lip. Though she doesn't accuse him outright, the flatness of Gilianna's voice makes it clear she believes that Theo is guilty.

"I promised not to return home empty handed, Moon-Blessed Elder," Theo says. Though he starts the sentence looking at Gilianna, he ends it with his eyes on Commander Jennison. The man's face softens as he looks at Theo, making him look almost... sad?

“Yes,” Hessifer says, toying with the leather slats of his armor. “You did send a spy right into our midst.”

Theo looks at Hessifer sharply. Before he can speak, Gilianna’s hand snaps up.

“Enough,” she says, shooting Hessifer a look. “Theodori, my patience is thin. Speak plainly: why did you not immediately return to us? Why did you let others tell your story?”

Theo squares his shoulders. The answer emerges with carefully measured sorrow and anger; too much sadness would make him weak. Too much anger would make him seem vengeful. He says, slowly, carefully: “The siege against Cesscounthe was a success –but only due to the betrayal of my second, Octavian Scholar.”

Brows draw together as the Elders sit straighter.

Theo continues, “Octavian allied himself with a traitorous Siaccian who wished to see her own city fall. Their combined forces were the reason Cesscounthe fell –and the reason why you can’t trust Octavian now. The victory was not claimed in your name –in the name of our people –but in the name of Octavian’s hunger to conquer at any cost.”

Theo pauses. He holds his hands behind his back to hide his shaking fingers. He looks at each Elder, holding their gaze, as he continues, “Octavian Scholar betrayed me –he is not to be trusted. A man’s word is his life. ” Theo quotes as he looks at Commander Jennison.

He continues when the Elders say nothing: “Octavian Scholar planned to kill me to ensure you never heard the truth. I knew I couldn’t come home empty handed, so I went south –and I brought you a potential alliance with my worst enemy instead.”

Theo spreads his hands. “I know I should have come sooner, but like I said: a man’s word is his life. I promised you I wouldn’t return without something to show your trust in me was well placed.”

He halts, tucking his arms behind his back again.

Silence stretches as the Elders stare down at him, expressions unchanged. Theo holds their gaze, refusing to look away. Refusing to fill the empty air with foolish words.

Finally, Gilianna says, “I see.” Her voice is, if possible, even colder than it was before. She looks at Hessifer and the other Elders. “Is there anything else you wish to add?”

Theo looks at Commander Jennison again, but the man’s face is unmoving as a block of ice and as impossible to read.

“No,” Theo says.

“Then we shall compare tales. The truth is here, I’m sure of it.”

Theo stiffens, gritting his teeth. Before he can speak, Gilianna raises a slender, long-fingered hand, gesturing to someone behind Theo.

“Octavian,” she says. “Come forward.”

Theo’s heart stills. The warmth of the stronghold drains from him as he manages to turn, looking over his shoulder as Octavian emerges from the shadow of a pillar carved like a crouched wolf. Two guards trail behind him.

The world slows as Octavian approaches Theo; his hair is longer now, brushing his collarbones in dark waves. His cheeks hollower. The scar Theo gave him catches the

light, pale and thin over his right eye. His blue scholar's robes are dirtied around the hem.

It isn't until Theo looks into Octavian's eyes – absent of his wolf, for now, a simple human gray –that anger sinks its fangs into him.

“Octavian,” Theo growls. He becomes aware of a distant pain in his palms –his nails have lengthened to claws. Blood drips to the stone floor. He's moving forward, toward Octavian – his legs are propelling him toward the target of his rage, this man, this traitor who ruined everything –

“Vittoria.” Gilianna's voice is far away, but Vittoria is anything but. One moment, Theo's feet are carrying him across the stone, and the next his nose is meeting the floor as his legs are swept out beneath him.

Theo grunts as he hits the ground. The crunch of his nose rattles his brain. Before he can lift his head, a hand lands on his skull.

“Stay down if you want to live, you absolute imbecile.” Vittoria's words fan on Theo's neck in a warm exhale. Theo snarls, still mad with rage, and it is only the telling pain of claws sinking into the back of his spine, the promise that his head will be soon severed from his skull, that stops him.

If I die here, what will happen to Luka?

Somehow, Theo reaches past his beast. His breaths still escape him in half-growls half-pants as he watches Octavian walk to the dais before the Elders. The rat-bastard only spares Theo a glance –and has the nerve to smirk when he does.

Theo's beast howls for vengeance, but he forces it to silence.

“Octavian Scholar,” Gilianna says, and it comforts a small part of Theo that her voice remains just as cold speaking to Octavian as it was speaking to Theo. “You told us Theodori was failing in his leadership, and that your decisions were a last resort – the only actions that would be capable of salvaging the campaign. You told us,” Gilianna pauses, her eyes narrowing as she finally looks to where Vittoria grinds Theo’s face into the floor, “that Theodori was compromised . That one of the traitor hopiar was Theodori’s mate.”

Roaring fills Theo’s ears. He misses Octavian’s reply. He can only see Octavian’s lips move, the little smirk turning up the right side of his mouth, and make out the words another traitor. It takes one, two, three long breaths for Theo to quiet the rage of his beast. He only prays to the Wolf Mother that Octavian will not speak Luka’s name. If he does... I won’t be able to control myself.

Gilianna’s severe expression lightens somewhat at Octavian’s reply, and Commander Jennison looks at Theo, frowning. Theo curses inwardly, shoving his wolf down deeper. Now isn’t the time for violence.

Not yet.

“And what of the spy?” Gilianna asks.

Spy?

“Ah, of course,” Octavian says, straightening. “Xyla Mobiele. It was fortunate that I identified her upon my arrival. Had you not caught her, Theodori would have prepared himself for this. His lies would have been near impossible to see through. Yes, she was sent by Theodori and his mate to keep tabs on your people –to provide Theodori the information needed before his homecoming.”

“And this Luka Lockhart,” Gilianna says, and Theo’s skin shudders. He’s sure that

Vittoria must feel it. “How can he be the man you claim when he has been made the First Consort of the King of Balivartia?”

The only sign of surprise on Octavian’s face is the slightest widening of his eyes, but it’s enough. Theo is certain the Elders see it.

“I’m sure it’s some sort of a plan he and Theodori concocted,” Octavian says smoothly as he folds his hands together. “My sources have confirmed nearly as much. Besides, Theodori has already howled on and on about how he couldn’t return empty handed – we all know what... lengths he will go to.”

The Elders exchange muted looks of disgust and it’s all Theo can do not to bark with laughter at their hypocrisy. Sure, they’ll hold the mates of high-ranking Sevels and Vells hostage here, but the idea of marrying away your mate for strategic advantages was taking things too far.

“And have your spies confirmed that they are officially mated?” Commander Jennison interjects.

“Commander Jennison,” Hessifer says in warning.

Gilianna holds up a hand. “Commander Jennison, we allowed your presence here out of respect, but, as you agreed, your silence is paramount.”

The muscles around Commander Jennison’s jaw flex, but he bows his head.

Gilianna turns her attention to Octavian and says, “Answer his question.”

Octavian smiles. “Yes.”

“Lies!” Theo spits from the ground.

“Vittoria,” Gilianna says, and pain starbursts in the back of Theo’s skull as Vittoria’s claws break skin. He cannot muffle his shout of agony. “Theodori,” Gilianna says. “Octavian remained silent throughout your accusations. You owe him the same respect.”

“Have you seen proof of the bond?” Hessifer asks, leaning forward.

Theo closes his eyes. This has gone so wrong.

And it is all Octavian’s fault.

Luka was supposed to be kept safe. Luka was supposed to be stashed away in fine quarters by now, kept by that damned Cathalan’s side. Theo was supposed to be stifling possessive anger as Cathalan taunted him with the way he could touch Luka when Theo could not.

Theo had been dreading those moments –and now he so desperately wishes that was the version of reality that came to pass.

Instead, Luka is likely in a prison somewhere, and Theo is here, pain filling his head with blinding light while he listens to Octavian say:

“You see the way Theodori reacts when I speak of his mate. Is that not the same rage we’ve all seen when the bond has been newly established? If you doubt me, we can test them.”

“Yes,” Gilianna says, watching Theo. “I believe a test should be an order.” She taps her steepled hands together, considering, before adding, “A test for Luka Lockehart, and an execution for their supposed spy, Xyla Mobiele.”

“And should Luka Lockehart or Theodori show weakness at the Siacchian hopiar ’s

death,” Hessifer adds. “We will have our answer as to where their allegiances lie.”

Octavian’s smile grows. “I think that’s a marvelous idea.”

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Chapter Five - Luka

It has been nearly four months since Luka last saw the woman he once thought he would spend the rest of his life with, but time has been unkind to Xyla Mobiele. Her hair is roughly shorn around her ears and springs from her head in red tufts. Her cheeks are hollowed and lines bracket her mouth. Despite her thinness, her eyes spark with life as she raises her head, taking in Luka and Darri.

“Your king’s First Consort is Luka Lockehart?” Xyla says, still staring at Luka. It takes him a moment to realize she’s speaking to Cathalan.

Cathalan shrugs carelessly. He’s thinner, too, though his body is still lined with lean muscle. A constellation of fingerprint-like splotches of mud mar his cheek. “I was so distracted by your beauty, Xyla- hessa , it must have simply slipped my mind. You never did mention his name, did you?”

She glares at him. “I did. I mentioned it twice . You repeated it back to me.”

“Your beauty is so ravishing. I likely forgot your old lover’s name as soon as it left your lips.”

Luka gapes at them both. Xyla is here – with Cathalan? The joy of seeing Xyla safe is muffled by his own confusion. And they’re – are they flirting ?

Xyla and Cathalan pause in their bickering as above them the Kiteran guards push their cell’s circular cover into place. Their hole is plunged into darkness. The holding cell is a glorified pit approximately twenty feet deep, and the ground is made of hard-

packed dirt. Beyond the four of them, their prison is completely bare.

For a while, they stand in silence. Slowly, Luka's eyes adjust. Darri still looks at the floor, but Cathalan and Xyla both meet his gaze. Cathalan's stare gleams with an inhuman sheen that makes Luka shudder. His hand automatically moves to his throat – and he looks at Xyla's neck as he does so.

“Do you really have so little faith in me, Luka?” Cathalan sighs when he sees the gesture. “I just met her. I wouldn't do something so... intimate.”

“Why are you speaking nonsense again, idiot noble?” Xyla says.

“I love it when you use pet names with me.”

“You cannot hurt her,” Luka says to the Balivartian king. “If you hurt her, I don't care about this bond between us. I will kill us both.”

Cathalan raises a brow, his grin shrinking by a hair. When his voice emerges, there is a slight undercurrent of hurt. “You really think I'm such a monster, Luka?”

“I don't know what you are–”

“Cath,” Darri says again, his voice dropping to a deep, angry timber. “How did this happen?”

Cathalan finally looks at his guard. The bravado falls from his face, and he wets his lips. “Darri, I... I'm sorry.”

Luka blinks. Cathalan looks almost ashamed.

Cathalan continues in that same soft, abashed voice, “Was everyone alright?”

“No,” Darri says. “Elvara is dead.”

Cathalan closes his eyes. “May the Lady lay her down softly.”

“She didn’t have to die, Cath. What did you do?” Darri moves toward Cathalan, his teeth gritted so tightly, the muscles in his jaw strain. “I never should have let you go ahead without me – this is all my fault –”

“No.” Xyla steps forward. “It’s my fault. Blame me.”

They all stare at her.

Xyla stands shorter than Luka by half a head. Darri easily towers over her as he approaches, nostrils flaring, but Xyla doesn’t back down. She tucks her chin, saying, “Your name is Darri? I assume you’re Cathalan’s br – guard.”

“Who are you?” Darri’s voice is so tight, so carefully measured, he sounds barely human. His hands shake in poorly contained fists. “And why have you told her so much?” The last angry question is launched at Cathalan, who, glibness returned, offers only a shrug.

Xyla places a hand on her chest. “My name is Xyla Mobiele. I’m Siacchian. I escaped the siege of Cesscounthe and came to the Kiterans for aid since they were betrayed in the battle. Luka and I were... we were—”

“They were lovers,” Cathalan supplies, brows wiggling.

Xyla glares at him so fiercely, Luka is surprised Cathalan doesn’t melt.

“That doesn’t matter,” Xyla says. “I thought my cover was solid upon arriving in Akull. Plenty of soldiers had been scattered during border wars, and I smell of hopiar

– of impyassus. ”

Darri’s nostrils flare. “Ah,” he says. “You’re one of the beasts.”

Xyla’s eyes gleam an otherworldly golden amber. “Yes, I am one of the beasts .” She blinks, and her eyes return to a warm human brown. “Things were going well. I was always better with my Kiteran dialect than Luka. But then Octavian showed up out of the blue – just before this idiot noble was supposed to arrive – and the second Octavian saw me, he declared me a spy.”

“ Octavian is here?” Luka says.

Xyla nods. “I didn’t think he would have the balls to return, but against him, the second to a well-known Sevell , my word was... useless.”

Anger flares in Luka’s chest, so hot and bright, it’s almost blinding. “Thought curse that man,” he growls as he kicks at the dirt floor.

Xyla blinks in surprise at his reaction. “That’s more emotion I think I’ve seen you express than in all of our time together,” she says. She continues, ignoring how Luka stares at her in alarm: “Octavian arrived just before the idiot noble, and he convinced their Elders that I was Cathalan’s Balivartian spy. That the West and South formed an alliance and were trying to turn against the North.” Xyla shakes her head, biting her lip. “And I played so perfectly into his story.”

For a brief instant, Luka wonders what it must be like to play a game of Cesse against Octavian. He quashes the thought.

“That’s where they took the Wolf Prince,” Darri says to Cathalan. “To report to their Elders. I’m sure of it.”

“Wolf Prince?” Xyla repeats.

“Theo,” Luka says.

Xyla presses her hands against her face to muffle a groan of dismay. “You’re telling me the best person we have to argue our case is that idiot?”

“He’s – he’s not an idiot,” Luka says.

“He is whenever you’re involved,” Xyla says.

Cathalan and Darri nod. “It’s true,” Cathalan says. “Never have I seen such a skilled strategist crumble faster than when I threatened your life.”

Darri abruptly sits in the dirt, his fall raising a cloud of dust. “So, the one testifying to our innocence is the Wolf Prince – your sworn enemy.” He looks at Cathalan. “And it’s his word against the man who overtook Cesscounthe.”

“Theo will get us out,” Luka says automatically, though the words ring hollow.

“No,” Darri says. He runs his fingers through the dirt. “We need to think of a plan. We can’t count on that fool. How often do they give you water and food? They must be feeding you, or else you’d be much weaker –”

Cathalan holds up a hand. “None of that, Darri.”

“Cathalan, we don’t have time for your antics. This is serious . They have nineteen of our people. Nineteen lives . We need to handle this with care –”

Cathalan crouches by Darri’s side. His eyes are almost luminescent in the dark. He smiles.

“Oh, Darri, do you think I’ve forgotten about our cardinal rule? You can never trust a Kiteran.” He looks over Darri’s shoulder at Luka. His smile widens into a toothy grin. “I –”

“He already has a plan,” Xyla cuts in. “And neither of you are going to like it.”

Ten hours – and some change , Cathalan promises after he explains. We’re going to get out of here. We just need to be patient.

Luka spends most of those hours ignoring Cathalan’s attempts to tell him there’s nothing useful buried in the dirt. He presses against the walls. He tries to summon his beast, wondering if he could claw his way to the top, but when he reaches for his monster, he finds the bond shockingly weak.

“Lovelace,” Xyla says when she sees his surprised look. “Or wolfsbane, as they call it here. I think they buried it in the walls. There’s just enough in the air that it weakens us. I’ve tried to climb to the top.”

“Yes, she has lovely calves,” Cathalan says. He sits on the ground to conserve his energy . Darri perches at his side, looking ready to spring to his feet, his gaze fixed on the metal door.

Luka’s head snaps to Xyla. He raises his brows in a look he knows she will easily read. Is this guy bothering you?

Xyla blinks at him, surprised, and then her cheeks color. She doesn’t shake her head, but instead looks at Cathalan and Darri, and then away again. He wonders how much she has learned from Cathalan since they’ve been thrown into this pit. Does she know Cathalan is the Balivartian king?

Unlikely. For all that Cathalan seems to have told her everything else, that is the one

thing he kept from her. The name Cathalan is not unheard of in the south. Xyla wouldn't be acting so... playfully with a man she thought was the King of Balivartia, no matter the situation.

"I'm fine, Luka," Xyla says aloud after the silence drags on for too long. Her cheeks are bright red. Cathalan and Darri at least have the decency to pretend not to notice.

An hour into their stay in the pit, food, water, and a bucket – "For peeing!" Cathalan says with far too much cheer – is lowered down. They have to eat and drink quickly, for just as soon as the supplies are offered, they are pulled away. The group is left in darkness and silence once more.

It takes another five hours before the cover at the top of the cell finally creaks away, and blinding fire torch light pours in again.

They squint as a face peers down at them. It's a different Kiteran soldier than before – this is an older man with a heavy beard.

"Luka Lockehart," he says, his eyes landing on Luka's face. "You're to come with me."

Luka resists the urge to stare at Cathalan. He's sure the king is smiling knowingly.

Just as Cathalan said would happen.

Luka stands, and it's far too easy for him to pretend to stagger to the side, as if weakened.

The guard lowers a ladder, and as Luka moves toward it, Cathalan rises.

"Where are you taking him?" Cathalan says. His voice is the perfectly pitched

amount of royal indignation and tightly reined fear.

“None of your concern.”

“You’re wrong,” Cathalan says. “He is my concern.” He raises his palm, revealing a pale white scar that resembles a blazing sun. “That is my consort you are speaking to, as I am Cathalan, third of my name, King of Balivartia, and you have been treating us rather poorly.”

Cathalan and Luka are led in chains by the bearded guard, who cannot disguise the worried way he tugs at his mustache as he glances back at them.

His thoughts are plain on his face. He doesn’t believe Cathalan – but none of that matters. He believes them enough to doubt his Elders’ commands to keep the prisoners in the pit.

“Look none of them in the eyes,” the Kiteran guard orders as he leads them through the streets. Three other guards trail behind, their hands on their blades. No chance to escape, just as Luka predicted – but that doesn’t matter. Now is not the moment they are waiting for.

Night has fallen over the winter capital of the North. The streets gleam with fresh snow, already left in dirtied, scuffed piles, disturbed by the hurrying soldiers’ boots. The blizzard left the world carpeted in white powder, and the moon glares down while Luka’s shuddering exhales cloud the air. He presses his hands into the borrowed Kiteran furs draped over his shoulders, dragging his feet. Buying time by leaning into his inability to catch his breath isn’t part of the plan, but it does give him a moment to breathe, to calm his racing heartbeat.

Cathalan looks at Luka out of the corner of his eye. Just follow my lead, Cathalan's bold gaze says, but Luka raises his brows.

How am I supposed to trust you after your betrayal? Luka presses his thumb against the circular scar on his palm, the mark of his bond to Cathalan. How am I supposed to trust you when I still don't fully understand what you are? Or when you still haven't told me how to break this bond between us?

Either Cathalan doesn't understand Luka's intense gaze or he is feigning ignorance as he looks away. A strange noise fills the air – a distant... hammering?

But Luka is far too lost in his own thoughts to care –in his desire to seize Cathalan by the shoulders and to shake him.

Unfortunately, now is not the time to pepper Cathalan with questions. Luka didn't want to press him in front of Xyla – keeping her in the dark felt safer for her, for now at least. Luka doubted that Darri would want Luka sharing any of Cathalan's secrets, and he wasn't sure how far Darri would go to keep Cathalan safe.

“What is that?” Cathalan says. The question pierces the silence, loud enough to make Luka flinch at his flippant tone. He recalls all too vividly their path down to the pit and the female Balivartian killed because Darri spoke out of turn.

Cathalan jerks his chin toward a strange platform and the three Kiterans tending to it with fresh wooden planks, replacing old boards with new.

“Execution platform,” replies one of the guards. He adds after a long pause with the slightest of inclines of his head, “Balivartian king.”

Cathalan raises a brow, clearly still confused.

The guard continues, “Sometimes it decays over the winter, but the Elders ordered us to make sure it's ready to go. It's needed now that we're sorting out who exactly is telling the truth –and who is lying.”

“... Ah,” Cathalan says, and even he isn’t able to disguise a flash of alarm.

“No more questions,” orders the man leading the group.

The rest of the walk is made in tense silence.

The guards around them pull to a stop before an enormous building with wooden doors bearing carvings of snarling wolves. The Kiteran female heaves the entrance open, ordering Cathalan and Luka to enter.

Inside, torches flicker from carved columns. Snow pools from their clothing, leaving a damp trail on the stone floor. At the head of the room, half a dozen wizened figures droop in their chairs. The night has been long – judging from the height of the moon outside, it is likely an hour or two past midnight –which explains the burning in Luka’s eyes and the heaviness in his bones.

Focus .

Luka exhales again. Of the six Elders, one woman stands out to him. She has bright eyes and a straight posture, and she sits at the center of the others. It’s at the command of the impossibly subtle flick of her fingers that the guards push Luka and Cathalan closer.

Luka steps forward awkwardly in his too-big boots, slipping in something on the floor –

Theo’s smell hits him first as Luka looks down.

Theo’s smell – and blood.

Terror sinks its teeth into him so quickly, Luka’s vision whites out. He stares at the

dark liquid on the stone floor, unseeing.

They hurt Theo.

Where is he?

WHERE IS HE?

The beast howls inside Luka as fur ripples down his arms. Fangs tear from his mouth
—

“—are bonded, you see,” Cathalan is saying. “It is the relationship between all First Consorts and their king. I understand if you wish to punish Theodori for his failures, and you think that harming Luka Lockehart will achieve this, but the two of them are not bonded together —not like Luka and I are.”

A narrow faced woman raises her brow. “And you decided to hide your identity from us because...?”

Cathalan laughs. “Obviously I came without my guards and had good reason not to trust you...”

Rage makes Cathalan’s words fall away. It makes it hard for Luka to gloat that Cathalan’s plan is working . Just as they predicted upon learning that Octavian beat them here, the Elders probably already realized Luka is Theo’s mate —which is why their soldiers came to summon Luka.

But none of this registers. None of it can penetrate the rage consuming him. Anger oozes a red haze over the world, and Luka blinks, trying to listen past the roaring in his ears —

“Is he –he’s –the Siacchian is changing! ” one of the Elders shouts, panicked, and the world flies sideways as someone tackles Luka to the ground.

Cathalan grunts as pain explodes in Luka’s ribs. Someone is on top of him –someone is pinning Luka to the stone floor. He snarls, the noise inhuman and terrifying, as fangs close around his neck.

“Stop!” Cathalan shouts. “When you injure him, you injure me, King of Balivartia! Stop – now .”

Somehow, Cathalan’s voice cuts through Luka’s rage –or maybe the thing that cuts through his anger is the burst of pain against his throat. Two paws brace against Luka’s shoulders –a wolf, smaller than Theo, and dark gray.

“See?” Cathalan says. Beyond the thick scent of Luka’s fresh blood and Theo’s old, the stench of the red fluid seeping from Cathalan’s throat fills the air. “I speak the truth.”

“He could have injured himself while we were subduing the Siacchian hopiar ,” mutters one of the male Elders.

“That’s easy enough to test, Hessifer,” says the woman in the middle. “Jordiar, bite the Siacchian on his right shoulder.”

As soon as the command leaves her lips, a terrible pain pierces Luka’s arm. He muffles his cry with the floor beneath him –but Cathalan can’t quiet his own pained grunt.

“Proof enough for you?” Cathalan asks. From where the gray wolf stands on Luka’s back, Luka can make out the king raising a bloodied hand from his right shoulder. Cathalan’s face has gone gray from the pain, and red liquid smears his throat and

worn robes.

“Balivartian witchcraft,” says the man named Hessifer.

While the Elders hiss at each other in alarm, Cathalan shoots Luka a look of both reprimand and concern. Luka must close his eyes for a moment to bask in his own stupidity. All he had to do was stay silent and demonstrate their bond, but he lost control .

Theo always makes me do such stupid things.

Swiftly, Luka lays out the steps for his brain to sort through; the execution platform they saw upon their entrance, still incomplete. Theo, a man who used to be of high standing in their society, would not be put to death like a common dog.

He is injured, but he still lives.

I can still save him.

But first – the plan.

“Let me up,” Luka says, though the word emerges little more than a rasp only Cathalan can surely hear.

Cathalan relays the request to the Elders, who, scowling, gesture for the Kiteran to release Luka. Luka manages to stand, pressing a hand against the wound in his shoulder to staunch the blood – though it will heal soon enough.

“Fascinating,” says the woman at the center.

“Gilianna,” warns the man to her right. “We cannot injure –”

“No matter,” says the woman at the center, the one named Gilianna. She purses her lips. “Luka Lockhart, we have heard much about you.”

Luka tries to hide the cool shiver of fear that snakes down his back.

“Would you care to explain your loss of control?”

Luka presses his lips together. He meets Gilianna’s gaze only for a second before looking away. The iciness of her stare reminds him so much of Linne Lockhart. It makes his answer catch in his throat –though only for a moment.

“I was afraid,” Luka speaks honestly. “You have taken us prisoner. As a Siacchian, I was never taught to control my beast. In moments of severe emotions, I can... lose control.”

“Yes, that make sense,” says the male Elder –Hessifer. He exchanges looks with the man next to him.

Gilianna spares them both an exasperated glance. Her eyes flicker to the blood at Luka’s feet, and understanding seizes him.

She had been waiting for such a reaction. That is why Theo’s blood is still here, even though, judging from the dried edges of the liquid, it has been hours since Theo was present. Luka failed Gilianna’s first test. He cannot afford to fail another.

Gilianna continues to speak after a beat, her lips curling at the edges, “Ordinarily, we would ask for your truth now, but I feel it is best that we tell you first why we have brought you before us.” She holds each of their gazes for two heartbeats before continuing. “We know there is a spy in our midst. There is someone leaking information to the enemy –how else could the Siacchian rebels avoid our forces so well? Pacifists with weakened hopiar to shield them can only fend us off for so long.

We have their capital. The country should have fallen weeks ago.

“No, we know there is a spy. Now, it is a matter of determining who leaked our secrets.”

“Spies are an unfortunate byproduct of an empire,” Cathalan says carefully. “Such is the nature of running a kingdom that has secrets worth stealing.”

Gilianna wets her lips as she leans forward, folding her hands in her lap. “Balivartian King, if that is who you really are, if you are claiming innocence, your arrival is either extremely unlucky, or coincidental, seeing as how we identified the spy so soon after you came.”

Cathalan offers a charming smile that does little to melt the ice of Gilianna’s stare. He opens his mouth, and Luka knows he’s about to declare Octavian the spy, just as they planned. That they would support whatever story Theo told, because Theo undoubtedly told as close to the truth as he possibly could, but Luka has visualized their positions on the Cesse board in his mind. He has looked through the upcoming moves.

And Cathalan’s next words will not help them win.

“Y-you’re right!” Luka shouts. His words awkwardly bounce through the enormous hall.

The entire room turns to look at him. Cathalan glares, his thoughts clear: What are you doing, Luka?

Luka narrows his eyes. Trust me.

Oh, I hope you can trust me.

Luka says, “You’ve already communicated to the townspeople that there is a spy in your midst?”

Gilianna dips her head.

It was a mistake on their part, unless they want to incite fear in their people – unless they want their people to crave bloodshed.

Luka continues, “They will need to see someone dead on that executioner’s platform come morning, then?”

Morning.

That gives us less than six hours.

Again, Gilianna nods.

Luka closes his eyes, as if considering his next actions, as if he is weighing the words on his tongue and deciding if he has the strength to speak them. Gilianna watches him intently.

“I’ve suspected for some time,” Luka finally begins, before pausing again for one, two, three carefully measured seconds. When he is certain the entire room is leaning forward in anticipation, he continues in a low voice, “I’ve suspected for some time that Theodori does not return the same feelings for me that I carry for him.”

Gilianna’s eyes narrow.

“He thought I was his mate – but things never seemed right between us. He never... cared for me as he should. It was only when we arrived here, when I saw Xyla Mobiele again, that I realized his love was not for me, but for the other scent I carried

on my skin. Before Theo, I was with another impyassus – another hopiar . And it was her scent that he fell in love with. It was for her that he pledged himself to protect her life and to protect Siacchi. After Octavian discovered this, Theodori sent her north in an attempt to keep her safe. He... he knew people here. He thought they would shelter her. And that woman is the woman you have in captivity – Xyla Mobiele.”

Luka closes his eyes as if these words pain him, but really he does it so he can stop staring at the naked shock on Cathalan’s face.

“You have not one spy, Elders, but two. Xyla Mobiele has been sent here to gather secrets to send back to the Siacchians, and Theo – er, Theodori –is pledged to protect her. The woman herself has told me as much, thinking she could put her trust in me, her childhood friend and lover.” Now, Luka pauses, bracing himself for what he must say next. He opens his eyes, staring directly into Gilianna’s intent gaze.

Luka says, “You must execute them both to prove to your people that Akull’s walls are free of spies –and then you must free myself, and Cathalan, and our people. I was unaware of Theodori’s duplicity –I thought he wanted to protect me and keep me safe, but this whole time, he was playing me. He thought he could gather allies in the south, but after he was captured, he knew he had to rely on me to return to his l-love.”

Luka pauses, afraid if he speaks more, that his shaking voice will betray him. He forces himself to not look at Cathalan, who surely will be gazing at him in shock. But that shock will only feed into the story – why should the King of Balivartia know of such things, after all?

“Interesting,” Gilianna says. Her gaze flickers to Cathalan. “And I suppose you were just played for a fool? Why else would you marry a man who was already in love with another?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Luka watches Cathalan straighten his shoulders. He

doesn't plaster that sly grin on his face, but instead his cheeks flush faint red. He's... embarrassed? Either that, or a very good actor.

"Things are a bit different in Balivartia," Cathalan says as he avoids Gilianna's gaze. "Having multiple lovers isn't... unheard of."

"Even for your First Consort? The person who you are apparently... bonded with?" Gilianna's eyes hone in on the circular scars on Luka's and Cathalan's palms.

"Yes," Cathalan lies. "Even then."

"And how would you explain this, Luka Lockehart," Gilianna continues. She looks at her fellow Elders, whose faces are pictures of different stages of shock. Their surprised whispers scattered like birds throughout Luka's story, and now they sit in silence, trading wide-eyed glances. "That when Theodori was brought here and your name was mentioned--"

"No, when his life was threatened," cuts in Hessifer.

Gilianna inclines her chin. "When your life was threatened, Luka Lockehart, Theodori lost control of his wolf?"

Luka cannot control his surely audible swallow.

It's Cathalan who speaks for him. "Xyla Mobiele and Luka shared close feelings," he says. "The pain of seeing your mate suffer the violent death of their close friend – the pain of losing an old lover – Theodori surely wanted to spare... Xyla... that suffering."

Cathalan speaks Xyla's name strangely – as if it is something secret that he wishes to keep from the Elders.

“Do you agree, Luka Lockehart?” Gilianna says.

Luka forces himself to nod.

“I see,” Gilianna looks at her Elders. The fine lines of her face catch the flickering torchlight. “I see.”

After they are led away into the night, still dark, still freezing, Cathalan presses his lips to Luka’s ear, his whisper hot down Luka’s neck. “Sweet Mother, I always forget how clever you are, Luka Lockehart.”

Luka only says, voice cast so low the guards around them can’t hear, “The rest of this plan had better work.”

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Chapter Six - Theo

They don't put Theo in the dark hole dug specifically for political prisoners, but they do lock him in a guarded chamber in central Akull lined with windows so narrow, he can only fit his hand through up to his wrist. His quarters overlook a growing wooden platform, built with the surely numb hands of young human Kiteran soldiers.

The executioner's platform.

"I don't advise trying to escape," Vittoria says as she lays down a tray of steaming broth and a mug of beer. "It won't help your case."

Theo raises his lip in a half-snarl. His wounds from her claws have healed, but the dried blood flakes from the back of his head like red-brown dandruff.

"Is Octavian Scholar being treated as kindly?" he asks.

"That's none of your concern." The door closes in his face.

Theo counts the next six hours by the rise of the moon. He sleeps in short bursts, waking from dreams he's almost forgotten by the time his eyes fly open – all that remains besides his gasping breaths is a fear so fierce it hurts. He sips through the broth and beer slowly – suspiciously – after smelling both. Weeks of poisoned food in captivity means he waits for an hour after the first swallow, and when nothing happens except for his already vacant stomach growing angrier, he takes another sip.

It is some hours before dawn when a knock sounds at the door.

Theo, half awake, jolts to his feet as Commander Jennison steps inside, flanked by two human guards. “Are these really necessary?” he says in a rough, low voice to someone outside the door. After being clearly met with an affirmative, he sighs, coughs, and closes the door, the two guards close behind him.

The old man looks even worse than Theo feels after a night of scattered sleep. His face has aged decades in the months since Theo has left, and he wearily crosses the threshold into Theo’s chamber, clasping his hands around a cane – a cane? He never needed a cane before.

“Theodori,” Commander Jennison rasps, and guilt flickers through Theo – though he feels he’s done little wrong. It’s an instinctive response. After spending his early years under Commander Jennison’s wing, he learned that any time the commander uttered Theo’s name in that tired, exasperated tone, Theo must have done something wrong.

“Commander,” Theo replies, and he hates that his voice automatically pitches itself in the same way it always would when he was a child. Petulant and already angry.

“The Elders have made their decision.” Commander Jennison shakes his head. “They want to use that Octavian Scholar and the Siacchian politician he allied himself with – supposedly – to take the rest of the West... and the South as well.”

He pauses for a long time, staring at the floor. His breaths rattle in and out of his lungs. Theo wishes he could shut his ears. Finally, Commander Jennison says, “I’ve invoked my right as your Commander.”

Theo shakes his head, refusing to understand.

Commander Jennison presses his fingers – longer now, thinner, the joints swollen – to pinch his brows. “Even with the story you told, Theodori, you’ve done wrong. You

abandoned your post. There is a reason these guards are with me now. The Elders don't trust you. Not anymore."

"Commander –" Theo begins, but Jennison silences him with a raised hand.

"You've lost muscle," Jennison continues. "Why – you look nearly as bad as I feel, Theodori! And I'm old. I'm – I'm dying." He pauses now to press a balled fist to his chest. He inhales and the noise is a wet, rattling thing.

"And yet," Jennison's voice hangs on the word, "you seem better."

Theo blinks, confused.

"You were always so angry, Wolf-Born. You looked at everyone like – well, they weren't enemies, but they were obstacles to cut through or climb over. Either the people around you were there to help you, or they were there to hinder you." Jennison shakes his head. "I always thought the practice of leaving a child to be raised by wolves was barbaric, and I was worried that you would never... that you would never acclimate to the way we human-born acted –"

Theo's lips fly open, though he's unsure of what he might say. What Commander Jennison is speaking of is so close to heresy, it's hard for Theo to listen. His eyes dart to the Commander's human guards, but their gazes are lowered, expressions impossible to read.

Commander Jennison asks, voice soft, "You love this Luka Lockhart, don't you? Not Xyla Mobiele?"

Theo's aghast horror fogs into confusion – and then sharp understanding cuts through.

This has Luka's handiwork all over it. But why? Luka would never put his friends in harm's path.

Foolish Luka. Theo can handle this on his own.

Theo presses his lips together, which seems to be enough of an answer for Commander Jennison.

"I'm happy," Commander Jennison says. "That you found someone to help you see this world as a brighter place. I was always so worried – after your parents were killed –"

The memory of houses burned to the ground, great smoldering piles of ash like terrible beasts only slumbering in the snow, one day to rise again, to wake again. The way the smoke coated the back of Theo's throat, hoarse from screams –

"– I wasn't sure you would find your way back. But you did. And I just wanted you to know, I'm aware that you failed your mission. But I'm still proud." Commander Jennison claps Theo on the arm. His hands are cool.

"Just remember, Theodori: I am dying. There is not much time left for me. And it makes sense, after all, with you being the young, inexperienced, reporting officer, doesn't it? I should be the one to take responsibility for your mistakes. Well, that, and I still owe you one last favor, don't I?" Commander Jennison bares his human teeth, and before Theo can process the man's words, he turns and leaves with his guards.

Theo, unable to move, stares at the door for a long time.

From his window, he can see them finish building the platform about an hour before dawn. He watches with growing horror as Commander Jennison is brought out and –

No, he won't look away.

If he must stomach another of his guardians being murdered, he will at least do them the respect of watching.

None of this would have happened if you were stronger, whispers a quiet voice, but it's so soft, Theo can hardly hear it over the little sobs shaking his body.

The Kiterans emerge from their houses as bloody dawn starts to grow, the sun too weak to break through moon-hardened frost. Snowshoes crunch across the pathways, littered with fresh snow, as they stand before the newly erected platform. The pine boards creak. A tall hopiar holds the two-handed blade, head lowered respectfully as Commander Jennison is led onto the platform.

A small-boned Scholar charges Commander Jennison with treason and, oddly, a violation of Kitera's sacred laws. Theo hardly hears her speak, parsing meaning by reading her lips. His gaze falls from the woman's face to Commander Jennison waiting at the block, and he finds himself lost to memory – the early days under Jennison's leadership, the fights, the anger, the ridiculous joy when Theo was met with the first praise he has ever received.

And now – now this.

It happens so quickly –

Theo is careful not to blink. Careful not to look away.

All it takes is a single, heaving swing. The Commander's head rolls across the snow.

Blood melts into the white.

Theo exhales sharply, angry, stinging tears in his eyes. He fixes his hands on either side of the window, wedging himself there, refusing to let himself look away, even as his heart tears itself apart.

I am already dying , Commander Jennison said. They found me guilty .

Luka, what did you do?

“Commander Jennison has been found guilty of aiding a traitor to our people,” the small-boned Scholar declares after Jennison’s death. She holds Jennison's head by the hair, stretching her arm out to keep the blood still leaking from the stump of his neck onto her blue robes. “He enabled a naive, foolish soldier, and sent Theodori Hunter Wolf-Born to the front to lead our people, though he was aware that Theodori was unmated and difficult to control.

“When Theodori found his mate in the enemy – in Xyla Mobiele –”

“ Luka, ” Theodori hisses, though he isn’t sure if he’s correcting the Scholar or cursing his mate’s name. His vision blurs, and he scrubs at his face furiously.

“ – Theodori found himself unable to fight against the Siacchians. He is being kept now, monitored until the Elders are sure the mating bond has been completed...”

The door at the entrance of Theodori’s chambers swings open.

Theo spins, teeth bared.

But it is not Vittoria who enters.

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Chapter Seven - Luka

So far, the plan has gone as well as expected.

The soldiers guiding Luka and Cathalan back to the prison clearly don't anticipate that the rumors about the demonic princes of the South held any weight. It is easy enough for Luka to stumble again – they already knew from their walk up that he is terrible at using snowshoes. As one of the guards mutters, helping Luka to his feet, Cathalan slams into her, teeth ripping into her neck, before moving on to his next victim, lips wet with red.

Dressed in the guards' clothes, Cathalan is able to tear his way through the guards remaining at the prison. Luka tries to help – he tries – but his hands shake so violently when he lifts a stolen blade that he is nearly impaled on the guard's sword. Only Xyla's quick movements save him.

"Don't bother," Xyla says when she sees Luka's tormented face. She glares at Cathalan over her shoulder. She had been furious to learn that he is king of Balivartia – that he has been lying to her this whole time. She changes her hands easily from human to beast, and she withdraws her bloodied fingers from the soldier's side, wiping them on his armor. Luka gapes at her. When did she learn to do that? At her side, Darri moves like a shadow over water, swift and deadly silent as he trips a guard, plucks their sword away, and then cuts their throat. Luka swallows down hot bile. Don't bother. Xyla's words echo in his head to the beat of his heart.

But Luka does bother. He does try to change – but the fox won't come to him. After years of forcing it away, of bending it into an odd shape, it refuses him.

After tearing Theo's location from a dying guard's lips, they sneak across Akull, and Luka's heart starts thudding in his ears when he hears an execution underway –

“Commander Jennison has been found guilty of aiding a traitor to our people,” a low voice intones. It takes Luka a moment to sort through his panic, to understand the meaning behind the words, but the small-boned scholar is already continuing: “When Theodori found his mate in the enemy – in Xyla Mobiele –”

Luka closes his eyes.

This is all my fault.

Commander Jennison. Theo's commander.

His heart slaps his chest, beating so quickly, it hurts. His lungs are too small. Stop this – I need to stop this –

He calls on his beast again, desperate now, clinging to it like a child, begging it to the surface –

His skin itches and ripples. Russet fur shoots down his arms. Their group, racing awkwardly through the snow, pauses. Xyla blinks in surprise. Cathalan and Darri both blanch, and it takes Luka a few panting breaths to realize they are staring at him in horror.

“Is he... supposed to look like that?” Cathalan asks Xyla.

Luka opens his mouth to reply, only to realize he cannot. He tries to lick his lips, but his tongue – it encounters too-long teeth. He makes a noise of panic, a low animal whine.

Xyla looks pained. “No,” she finally says. Luka balks. “It can happen to inexperienced impyassi . Sometimes they get caught between... two forms.”

Luka stares at his hands – not hands! Half paws, half fingers. Pads have formed on his palms, fur covering his skin. Claws ridge from his nails, but wrong, it’s all wrong.

He catches a glimpse of himself in Xyla, Cathalan, and Darri’s wide eyes.

He has been caught halfway between his fox form and his human form. His teeth creep past his chin, forcing his lips up in an almost comical grin. His back hunches as his body tries to force him into a quadrupedal gait, his hips curling unnaturally. Russet fur covers his forearms and cheeks, and his eyes gleam with an animal-like light.

Darri sighs, and Luka nearly crumples in shame. “Cathalan, I don’t have time for this. I need to find our people.”

Cathalan touches Luka’s shoulder before capturing Darri’s arms. They exchange low, tense words. Darri shakes his head. “We have to save them,” he says, and Cathalan, sighing, nods.

“You are right as always,” Cathalan says. “If only it were you wearing this crown. You have always been better suited for these hard decisions.”

Darri shakes his head. Either affection or irritation – perhaps both – crinkles the corners of his eyes. “I will be back, my king. We’ll all return alive.”

“You better.”

Darri looks at Luka and then Xyla, expression turning fierce. “You will keep him safe.”

Luka means to open his mouth, to tell Darri that the Kiterans will treat Cathalan with kid gloves, but all that emerges is a garbled growl. Darri's brows furrow. Xyla steps in instead. "You need not worry," she says.

With that, Darri leaves them slowly, clearly torn. He goes to rescue his soldiers, wearing a worried frown and the blood of the dead.

The sun rises, casting golden light on them as they return to the main hall. Cathalan makes quick work of a guard, withdrawing truths from him by exposing flashes of his too-sharp teeth and threatening irreparable damage to important parts. They keep their heads low as they move through the snow, shouts rising on the horizon speaking to the bodies they left in their wake.

"Hurry along now," Cathalan says, wincing as sunlight catches his cheek. Cathalan's pain fills Luka, the burn scorching across his face glancing but impossible to ignore.

It is only by the grace of Thought that they find Theo's rooms without hitch. A fierce blonde woman stands guard outside his door, but before she can raise an alarm, Xyla is on her, nails like knives. Luka can only swallow great gouts of bile to keep from losing his lunch as his friend unleashes herself, using surprise to take down the Kiteran warrior.

"Working through something?" Cathalan asks when Xyla steps away.

Xyla looks at him through narrowed eyes, flinging drops of blood from her claws.

"Aren't you Siacchians supposed to be pacifists?"

"This one was my ally when I first arrived," Xyla finally says. "And aren't we supposed to be in a hurry, idiot noble?"

“Right. Yes,” Cathalan says, and with a complete lack of fanfare, heavens open the door before them.

Luka only has a moment to worry – perhaps they have gone to the wrong place, perhaps that had been Theo on the executioner’s platform – but then Theo is standing there before him, brown eyes wide, blond hair braided. Luka can only stare at his mate, unable to form words around the horrendous teeth hanging from his mouth. Sweet relief fills him.

They have only been apart for a little over a day, but the twenty-something hours have carved bags beneath Theo’s eyes. Theo’s gaze darts from Cathalan to Xyla before it finally lands on Luka, and though relief eases the tight stretch of his shoulders, something else ignites in his eyes – anger?

“Oh, good,” Cathalan says. His eyes dart around the room, and, finding it empty, he looks at Theo again. “It really wasn’t you they were executing. They work quickly here, don’t they?” His teeth gleam in the weak dawn light, red with blood.

“What did you do?” Theo hisses.

“None of that now,” Cathalan says. “We’ll explain on the way. Come on now – I don’t think Xyla succeeded in killing that woman standing guard at your door. We’ll explain on the way. This isn’t the time for angry, silent staring.”

“Luka,” Theo says. “What did you tell them? What did Jennison take the fall for?” He snaps his teeth, and yes, he is definitely angry. “I didn’t need your help. You should have let me handle this alone.”

Chills raise the russet fur on Luka’s arms, but still unable to speak, he can do nothing more than jerk his head toward the door.

“No time for angry grumbling either. Talk later, Theodori. Run now.” Cathalan moves as if to seize Theo’s arm but, thinking better of it, he turns and scans the hallway.

“It’s clear,” Xyla says. “I would have told you if it wasn’t.”

“Of course, my sweet melody.”

Xyla glares as she checks the body of the Kiteran woman – Vittoria. The Kiteran is already healing. Xyla curses at the sight.

“You’ll need to cut off her head,” Theo says distantly. He still lingers in the room, his hands hanging limply at his sides. “If you don’t want her to heal.”

Xyla moves to grab the axe from Vittoria’s back, but Cathalan stops her. “She’s a Sevell now. We can’t murder their prominent leaders,” he says. “No need to burn our bridges here.”

Xyla snorts. “You think we haven’t burned them already?”

In the distance, a cry of alarm rises. Cathalan closes his eyes, exhaling a long breath through clenched teeth.

“Not yet,” Cathalan says. “Which is why we need to move. Now.”

They burst into the dawn, and the cold is a knife to Luka’s exposed skin. He shudders despite his fur, his shaking exhales clouding his face as he squints into the light. They are trapped in the heart of Kitera. Guards and soldiers swarm in the distance, cries of alarm sounding like birds against the glistening ice buildings.

Cathalan curses at the sight of the sun. “We’ll need to be quick,” he says, muscles

flexing in his jaw. Theo glances at the king in confusion as Cathalan seizes the remains of Luka's cloak and pulls it over his head.

"Try to keep me alive, Luka," Cathalan says with a grim smile as they race across the paths cleared through the snow, stealth abandoned. Towering buildings crusted with ice flash by as they head for the city walls.

Over the rise of the hill, the alarm bell clangs with a wailing, incriminating cry.

Luka grits his teeth against a sudden bite of pain near his ankle. He glances toward his leg and his stomach tightens when he sees the skin has been burned away, revealing raw, red flesh beneath.

That isn't his injury.

"Cathalan," Luka hisses, the word garbled around his teeth, nearly impossible to make out.

"I told you to try and keep me alive," Cathalan growls in response, the words thin with pain.

Luka looks at Theo and, with stumbles and starts, manages to say, "Give... cloak. Need something... longer."

Theo stares at Luka, that same alien flare of anger lighting in his eyes again. No – not alien. It's familiar in the way that Cassian's face is familiar to Luka; it's something Luka has seen before, but it's been a long, long time.

It's the same way Theo used to look at Luka after Luka was first captured.

Don't think about that now.

Thankfully, Theo says nothing more as he hands the cloak to Cathalan, who wraps the fabric around his exposed calf. Theo takes in Cathalan's ruined skin, burned by the shy kiss of the sun, his eyes darting from Cathalan to Luka, and his expression grows impossibly stonier.

Xyla ignores them all as she leads the way, winding through the streets. They run in silence for only a short stretch – the early hour means the city is still mostly empty – only to jerk to a skidding halt when they see a wall of soldiers positioned around a side gate.

The soldiers, miraculously, don't notice them as they press against the side of a building, the stone cold enough to shock Luka's claw-like hands into numbness. They only remain for a handful of pounding breaths, before Xyla shakes her head and starts running back the way they came.

"Why are we returning to the city center?" Cathalan pants.

"I spent several weeks living here before you arrived and blew my cover. I know another way we can get out," Xyla replies. She's breathing hard, too, Luka realizes, and limping slightly. Imprisonment has been unkind to her.

Behind them, a chorus of shouts arise, mixing with the alarm bell.

Panic tightens Luka's throat.

They've spotted us.

He presses clawed fingers against a stitch in his side, heart pounding so loud in his throat, it drowns out the cries of their pursuers and the clang of the alarm bell. His legs slow, and suddenly, it's like he's running through sand. He is so tired.

“Don’t stop now,” Cathalan growls. Biting pain rips through Luka’s arm, and he can’t restrain a howl of pain.

He glares at the king – who has revealed a patch of skin on his arm to the rising sun. The skin flakes away as it cooks beneath the light. Luka’s forearm suffers the same punishment.

Theo takes this in with narrowing eyes. The flicker of anger grows to a flame of rage. He says, quietly, barely loud enough to be heard above the clamor, “Luka, what did you do?”

Luka isn’t able to respond; it’s like his lungs are neatly folding themselves into squares. His arm burns with pain as his impyassus healing tries to wipe the injury away. When he starts to slow again, Cathalan reveals the skin of his elbow.

“Stop that!” Luka growls in an inhuman voice.

“Keep up,” Cathalan replies.

Xyla throws a glance over her shoulder, her short red hair whipping in the light like a bloody flag. She leads them toward another wall, another exit, still so impossibly far away. They’re all sliding on the slurry of the pathway when half a dozen Kiterans whip around the street corner. Three of them have changed into their beast form, and the wolves close the distance quickly – too quickly.

“Keep up!” Cathalan shouts again. Luka bites back a cry and makes his legs move faster. They don’t have long. The Kiterans are closing the gap.

Ahead, the walls of Akull loom – and then, ducking through a narrow alleyway, a sloping door. A side entrance to the capital – with a single guard standing point.

“I have him,” Cathalan says as he tries to throw himself in front of the group.

“Don’t be an idiot, idiot noble,” Xyla replies. She flexes her fingers, and her nails sharpen to claws. The guard braces himself, raising a spear, but Xyla ducks beneath, preparing to slice his throat –

“No!” Cathalan shouts. He slams the back of his fist against the guard’s temple. The man crumples into the snow, narrowly escaping Xyla’s claws. “He’s human,” Cathalan hisses. “I told you – avoid killing when you can .”

“They were just fine with killing us,” Xyla says, though the words lack bite. She throws her shoulder against the wooden door, grunting as it barely gives.

Behind them, the snarls of their pursuers are so close, Luka imagines he can feel their teeth.

“Move,” Theo says when Xyla throws herself against the door a third time to no avail.

Xyla jumps aside as Theo rolls his shoulders and explodes into his wolf form. He’s so huge – Luka forgot how giant Theo is as a beast – even standing on all fours, he nearly reaches Luka’s chin.

Their Kiteran pursuers are seconds away. Luka can practically feel their hot breaths on the back of his neck.

Theo turns his head and charges the door – it gives upon the first heave, shattering into splinters.

And then the Kiteran wolves are on them.

The first of the three wolves launches itself at Luka. Luka goes down with a cry as teeth sink into his furry forearms. He scrabbles uselessly, half-human, half-fox nails slapping against thick wolf fur. Blood sprays as the Kiteran tightens its grip, and Luka gasps beneath its weight – the world going dim, gray – black –

And then air rushes into his lungs as the wolf is forced away.

Xyla faces the Kiteran down in full fox form. She's significantly smaller, but the vicious spark in her eye and the snap of her teeth makes it clear she doesn't care. She braces herself before Luka.

Someone yanks Luka to his feet, shouting, "Move!" and Luka is forced through the small door, Xyla stumbling after him as she snaps at the Kiteran.

Before the Kiteran wolf can follow, Theo is on him.

Theo moves like a snowslide, impossibly fast for his large size. He sinks his teeth into the Kiteran's hind leg and yanks, pulling free sinew and muscle. Blood sprays. The Kiteran cries out, eyes bulging, as he falls before the small door, acting as a wall of fur.

"Move!" that same voice shouts in Luka's ear again, and Luka realizes Cathalan is all but cradling him. They're both soaked with blood, their arms bleeding with twin wounds.

Somehow, Luka finds himself running again, clumsily tearing up the thick snow. The path here hasn't been shoveled. Each footfall has him sinking up to his thighs. Theo and Xyla race at his side, righting him when he stumbles, while Cathalan leads the way.

The sun only rises higher, and a terrible stinging travels across Luka's face, like the

top layer of his skin is burning away – though the pain is small in comparison to the ache in his arm. His arm. He can't even look at it.

Behind them, a Kiteran howls angrily. The fallen wolf's body is heaved to the side, and another four wolves pour from the mouth of the gates.

Oh, Thought.

The Kiteran wolves tear across the snow like they're skating across ice. They're so fast – so impossibly fast. Behind them, human soldiers move on foot, loading their crossbows.

“Shed my skin,” Cathalan mutters at the sight. “Hurry – we need to get over the rise of the hill – out of sight of those arrows.”

But every breath is like claws sinking into Luka's lungs. His legs burn – and his arm leaks with blood, healing, but not fast enough.

We aren't going to make it.

No. That's not right.

They can make it without me.

“L-leave me,” Luka tries to say, but the words are little more than a guttural snarl when forced around fox teeth. He tries again, “Leave me.”

The group understands his meaning this time. Xyla's lips curl, revealing needle-sharp fangs. Theo snarls.

“We're not doing that,” Cathalan says. He adds, with half a glance toward Xyla,

“Don’t be an idiot.”

“Sl-slowing you,” Luka manages to say.

They’re halfway up the hill now, and his legs might as well be made of dough. The four wolves are seconds away. Luka cringes as he imagines their fangs sinking into his flesh.

“Darri will come,” Cathalan says with more determination than his eyes betray. “He’s freeing our guards now. They will come, and we can stand our ground here. We can talk our way out of this if we show the Kiterans we have numbers.”

But there is no Darri.

It’s just their little group of four – just them and –

What is that?

A dark form rises from the hillside, cresting the hill opposite them.

Theo’s ears perk, his head rising. Luka tries to interpret the emotion that flickers across his mate’s wolf face.

The dark form shifts, wind catches its – fur.

It’s a wolf.

And it’s not alone.

Another dozen wolves crest the hillside, standing against the dawn light, looking down at them as they desperately climb.

Despair ties Luka's stomach into a knot.

How did the Kiterans know we would head in this direction?

Did they really outplay us – outplay me?

But Theo isn't slowing. If anything, he's speeding up – heading straight toward the wolves. He lifts his head and an excited yip escapes his muzzle.

Wait – Luka has seen these wolves before. They used to be Theo's pack.

The black wolf at the head of the pack raises her mighty head and howls at the winter dawn. Egarara, Theo named her, those handful of days ago as they hiked the mountain pass to Akull. She levels clear brown eyes with Theo as they approach, and then she braces her shoulders and charges past them, facing down their Kiteran pursuers.

The wolves flow around Luka, so close that they bump against the healing wound on his arm. He stumbles, only righted by the press of Theo's furry side. Hysterical laughter pours past his lips, terribly distorted by his teeth, as they stagger up the hill.

Below, the wolves face down the Kiterans. The Kiteran beasts are larger, but fewer in numbers. They watch the pack with narrowed, darting eyes, looking beyond them to the escaped prisoners. Archers shout orders from Akull's walls, their voices now made small and tinny by the distance.

Luka's breaths puff, muscles tensing. If they have to run again, he won't be able to. He will simply collapse.

Theo's old pack brace themselves against the shifting Kiteran wolves, but then a loud horn sounds from Akull.

And, finally, the Kiterans turn and retreat.

A relieved exhale escapes Luka in a breathy whistle.

The Kiterans return to the snow-covered walls of Akull, their eyes fixed on Luka – on Theo. The intent behind their snarls and the audible yips of their hopiar is clear:

This isn't over.

Luka's legs give out beneath him as he falls into the snow. The cold sinks into his bones, though the sensation is distant.

Someone is speaking to him, shaking his shoulder. It's difficult to make out the words over the roar of his heart –

“– breathe, Luka,” Cathalan says, his voice cutting through it all. He seizes Luka's face, directing Luka's eyes to his as he maneuvers the cloaks to cover his skin. “We need to get to shelter. You can't leave me out in the sun, remember?”

Numbly, Luka nods. He doesn't realize Theo is helping him to his feet until he finds his right side is warm – warm from the furnace of Theo's body. Comforting cedar and smoke fills his nose as Theo pulls him up the rest of the hillside.

We made it.

I don't know how, but we made it.

The wolf pack meets them at the top of the hill. Their leader, Egarara, looks each of them over, gaze lingering on their still-healing wounds and Cathalan's raw skin. Theo shifts to human form, skin pinking and gooseflesh rising as he stands naked in the snow. He wraps one arm around Luka to hold him close, though Luka isn't sure if the

movement is for Theo's sake or Luka's.

Before Theo can speak, Cathalan jerks his head about and says, "Where is Darri?"

Xyla, returned to her human form and wearing the scraps of her prisoner's uniform and a stolen cloak, looks down the bend of the hill. "I don't think they abandoned the chase here just because the wolves were backing us up."

Cathalan's eyes widen, genuine fear yanking color from his face as he looks back to Akull, as if he can make sense of the city now made toy-sized by the distance between them. "He said he would meet us outside the gates," Cathalan whispers, and the words are clearly meant for his ears alone. "Darri never lies."

"Egarara," Theo says as he greets the enormous black wolf. He tips his chin to his chest. "Thank you for your help. You saved us – you saved our lives."

The wolf's nostrils flare as she exhales. Her eyes, which are nearly the size of Luka's palms, flicker from Cathalan to Xyla, before finally landing on Luka. She raises her head before she looks at Theo again.

Theo's cheeks color as he presses his lips together. "It's complicated," he mutters. But before he can speak more, a pack of three wolves, nearly half the size of the female, charge into him. The creatures are still enormous, and Luka stifles a cry of alarm as the first knocks Theo into the snow.

Theo grunts, but his face cracks in a wan smile as he ruffles the fur of one of the russet wolves. "I've missed you, too," he says, his expression warming further as the brown wolf licks his face.

"No time for that," Cathalan says. "Can you get your wolf friends to help us go back? We need to make sure Darri is alive – and then we need to get out of this sun."

Theo shoves away the russet wolf, and Luka stifles a bizarre spark of jealousy at the sight of Theo's hands on another creature's fur.

"Don't be foolish," Theo says. "We only escaped because you had the element of surprise. They didn't know... what you are." He looks pointedly at the cloaks shielding Cathalan from the daylight – which is becoming less effective as the sun climbs higher. Luka's skin still sizzles faintly.

Theo continues, "We can't launch an attack now without you burning alive – apparently. Beyond that, it's impossible for us to surprise them –"

Cathalan throws his arms out. "We can't leave Darri there!"

The panic in his voice shows in the bulging veins in his face. His fingers break free of the cloak, and under the glare of the sun, begin to burn. The pain is so powerful, the world flashes white, and Luka grinds his teeth together as the stench of burning flesh fills the winter air.

"Stop that," Theo growls. "I don't know how – and you're going to explain it to me as soon as we're safe – but you're hurting Luka."

Cathalan holds Theo's stare for a long moment, flesh falling from his fingers in red hunks. Blood melts the snow. The wolf pack watches them, eyes darting between Theo and Cathalan before lingering on Cathalan's raw, meat-like fingers.

Then, just as abruptly as he revealed his arm, Cathalan shoves his hand back into the cloak. The pain doesn't end, but it softens. Luka could have sobbed with relief. A sheen of sweat gleams on Cathalan's forehead.

Theo says slowly, "We can return for him. But first, we need to get out of here. Unless you would like to injure my mate further."

Luka didn't notice through the haze of pain, but he now realizes, with shock, that Theo is barely human. His eyes have changed to liquid amber, and his arms are covered in dark fur. At his back, the wolf pack bristles, lips lifting to reveal gleaming teeth.

Xyla lays a hand on Cathalan's shoulder. Cathalan jumps at the weight, staring at her with alarm before his panicked expression softens into something Luka can't read. Cathalan heaves a sigh.

"We will come back for him," Cathalan growls. "We will not leave him behind."

Theo's shoulders relax. The pack behind him calms as well.

"Where are we going?" Xyla asks. "We need to get this idiot noble under shelter, and surely the Kiterans will send reinforcements. We need to move quickly."

Theo glances at the black wolf at his side. She raises her head, her eyes gleaming with an intelligence that makes Luka shiver. All his life, Luka was told never to give into the beast because it would sap his intellect, but here is a creature that has never been anything more than an animal, and judging from the look on her face, she keenly understands the conversation. The sight makes Luka want to look away, to deny it – it is even more uncomfortable than the sensation of new tendons regrowing in his fingers.

Theo places a hand on her neck, fingers sinking into her deep fur. "Are you sure?"

The black wolf dips her head and turns, looking back once over her shoulder.

"We'll follow Egarara," Theo says.

"Follow her to where? Allies?" Cathalan says, his voice a little too acerbic.

“To the one place Kitera would never think I’d return,” Theo whispers. He doesn’t look at Cathalan – or even Luka. He stares at the rising sun as it casts red shadows across the snow, expression distant – pained. “I’m finally going home.”

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Chapter Eight - Theo

Egarara leads the pack with the trio of Theo's littermates. Theo is grateful to her for acting as their savior and guide – he only dreads what she will want in return. Egarara was never known for her boundless generosity before, and he doubts that she has changed in the past twenty or so years. They move at a rapid clip, and Theo is careful, ensuring Luka doesn't fall behind. The pace is too quick for conversation, and an hour in, a gray snow clouds the sky.

Cathalan breathes a sigh of relief, and Luka rubs at his too-pink temples. Theo glares at the both of them, hating Cathalan for the pain he has somehow caused Luka, and hating Luka for the secrets he still keeps from Theo—for Luka's handiwork in Commander Jennison's execution. The thought of his mentor twists Theo's stomach like a rag. Even before all of this, Theo suspected Luka was hiding secrets, but he could never have guessed it was something like this. Whatever this – sharing pain with the enemy – is.

Midway, they pause. Theo passes around the wineskin he always keeps attached to his hip. Egarara's wolves pant as they lap at the snow.

"I'm so sorry, Theo," Luka whispers as he runs his tongue across dry lips. He presses a hand to his stomach. He managed to return to his human flesh an hour into the run, and his stretched jacket and robes hang from his shoulders, revealing scattered bits of gooseflesh.

"What, in the name of the Mother, was that plan?" Theo grinds out. Luka's cool blue eyes seek his, but Theo can't stand to look at his mate. Whenever he does, he finds

Commander Jennison's sad face staring back, always patient, but disappointed in death.

"We thought they needed to come for Xyla," Luka says. "That's why we lied and said she was your mate –we were certain we'd have more time to break you out. We figured they'd... they'd execute the two of you together. Xyla said that's how they kill mated pairs turned traitor. We never thought that someone might take your place."

Theo presses his lips together, glaring at the sky. Snowflakes melt from his lashes.

"Commander Jennison – was your... mentor?" Luka's hand alights on Theo's arm, butterfly-light.

My mentor.

The last man alive who might have thought of me as their child.

A father.

But no, none of these were quite true. Not anymore.

This wasn't Luka's fault. This wasn't even Theo's fault, for all that it was easiest for Theo to point the finger at himself. Yes, Commander Jennison took the punishment meant for the traitor Theo feared he might be, but that had been Jennison's decision. Jennison... who was already dying. Jennison had made the choice so that Theo might live. So that Theo might be – happy.

Theo's lips knotted. A knot grew in his throat. Luka was still waiting for his answer. Who was Jennison?

He was –

“No one,” Theo said, his voice emerging guttural, as if ground through rocks. “He was no one.”

He was our savior.

“Well.” Cathalan claps twice, making Luka flinch. “If he was no one, you should be able to recover quickly enough. You’ve plenty of lives bloodying your hands, after all.”

Their group is silent for a long while. A pup attempts to play with Egarara, but she cows him with her teeth. Luka take the wineskin and empties the contents with a long swallow before finally saying, “What are we going to do? Akull was our last hope for allies against my mo –against Cesscounthe.”

“Octavian turned Akull against us – we can still win back the Elders,” Theo says.

Cathalan laughs. “You can never trust a Kiteran.”

“I’m Kiteran,” Theo growls.

“Exactly.” Cathalan smiles, bitter. “Never know when you might kill someone’s sister.”

“Enough,” Xyla says. She wipes the back of her mouth with her hand. “We can’t make a plan now – not when the idiot noble himself could burn to death if the sun so much as winks at us. We need to get to shelter.”

“And what – you think these wolves will be able to just lead the way?” Cathalan says.

“Those clearly aren’t ordinary wolves.” Xyla waves a gloved hand at the pack who have all turned to watch them. Egarara narrows her eyes when Xyla gestures in their direction. Xyla slowly lowers her hand.

“They are said to be descended from the first shape changer,” Theo says. “They live longer than humans, and they are very intelligent. And don’t point at her again. It’s rude.”

“Rude,” Cathalan repeats, scoffing.

Theo scowls. “We don’t have time for this. Xyla Mobiele is right. Akull might have sent foot soldiers or sleds after us, so we’d do good to put more space between us. The snow should help cover our tracks some, but not completely. We follow Egarara. I trust her. She is taking us – to safety. There we can discuss our plan.”

And so, with that left completely unsettled, they keep moving – and Theo, despite himself, keeps dragging himself down into the icy waters of memory with every landmark they pass.

Under the blanket of winter, the Kiteran countryside should appear as an unchanging sea of white. But to Theo’s clever eyes, familiar landmarks start to emerge. I didn’t think we would arrive so soon.

There is the snowfall where he made a full return to his human life, after he made his homecoming as one of the few who survived a Wolf-Born childhood. There is the flat hilltop where his mother handed him his first sword, awkward and fumbling in his small human hands.

There is the overlook, the place where he stood after returning from the Balivartian border wars, only to find that his home – so small it is left unnamed, even now – had been burned to the ground.

It isn't until they're halfway up the hillside to the overlook that Theo realizes his teeth are chattering. He's not cold – no, his muscles are warm and slick with sweat. He shrugged off his cloak to wrap around Luka miles back, ignoring his mate's grateful glance. Ahead of him, Egarara and his packmates, fur now long and thick with adulthood, flicker, as if their forms are caught in a fog of heat.

“Theo?” Luka's voice is raspy with exhaustion. Theo looks back.

Theo can't be sure what it is that Luka sees in his face, but he only knows that Luka instantly closes the gap between them. His heart hammers, his feet too heavy to lift. What is happening to him?

“Theo?” Luka says again. “What is it? Talk to me, please.”

Luka lays a hand on Theo's shoulder. He wears Theo's gloves. He smells good, like salt and the evergreens in winter and home, and Theo desperately wants to bury his head into the crook of Luka's neck. He wants to collapse in Luka's arms, to turn back, to beg him that they go anywhere but there.

Anywhere but here.

Because just over the hillside, Theo knows what will be awaiting them; buildings burned to ash, bones left to freeze in the snow, skulls locked in eerie post-mortem smiles. The crows and vultures will be gone now, flown south years ago, but then – then, when crispy flesh flaked from white femurs and forearms, the birds were thick. The ground was so covered in black feathers, it looked like an old bloody stain on the earth.

Theo almost tells Luka this. He can feel it building in his mouth, rolling like a snowball as memories pack together into a massive numbness that melts on his tongue.

But Theo can't take solace in his mate's arms. Not yet. So instead he bites his lip.

Don't be a coward, hisses a voice in the back of his mind. The voice that drove Theo to lay siege to Cesscounthe all those months before. You can handle this alone.

A louder voice, a gentler voice, whispers, You have nowhere else to go.

You need to face this eventually.

And as Luka wraps his gloved fingers around Theo's, Theo realizes that there will never be the right moment to go home.

"I'm fine," he manages to say, and is shocked at how even his voice sounds. He repeats himself, and it's like the words come to him from far away. "I'm fine. Let's keep moving. We can't stay in the open."

Cathalan and Xyla hover behind Luka; the Siacchian woman all but glares at him with fierce, pine-sap eyes. The Snake of the South looks exhausted, his skin peeling from wounds he has yet to explain.

Wounds that echo on Luka's own worried face.

Keep moving. You can shake answers out of him once we're in hiding.

Luka laces his mittened hand into Theo's (ahead, Leiro yips in amusement and Theo resolutely ignores him), and they continue.

Ten years later, Theo is returning home.

And there it is. Theo's birthplace. The place he returned to after nearly a decade in the wild. Yes, Egarara was the one to raise him, but she was the mother to his wolf

form.

It was here that Theo learned to be human.

And it was here that Cathalan took everything that mattered from him.

Tucked between the rolling hills is a deep-set valley. In the spring, when the snows start to thaw, Theo knows streams will bleed through long, yellow grasses. Spring onions will burst through melting grounds, and once, his people would come here after months in Akull, herding their sheep and goats and horses. They would have dusted off the remaining frost and prepared for the quick but warm summer.

The houses here, near the border, would have been stout and small and made mostly of wood. Easy to build.

Easy to burn.

Not much is left now; though the ashes are impossible to make out through the dense covering of snow, Theo can easily imagine them hidden beneath the drift, seeping through like a bloody handprint –the land itself refusing to let those who return to forget the lives lost. Theo's house has vanished beneath the snow. There used to be seven other structures – seven other families – next to his parents' home. Only two houses remain; and only one has a fully functional roof. The fences that kept livestock at bay jut from the land like fingers bursting from a grave.

Theo almost laughs at himself; there isn't anything left here to grieve over. Not anymore.

He considers glancing at Cathalan, wondering if he'll see recognition on the man's face. But he stops himself before he does. He isn't sure what he'll do if he sees either ignorance or understanding in the man's eyes, but he does know he won't be able to

control his rage at either reaction.

Luka's hand tightens around Theo's. There is no warmth conveyed, not through the thick wool of his mittens, only pressure.

Theo glances at his mate, and he's startled to see tears sparkling in Luka's eyes.

"What is it?" Theo asks.

Luka shakes his head. "I'm not –it's not me –" He casts a sidelong glance at Cathalan, but pauses when his eyes skate over Theo. "What's this?" He rests his hand on Theo's cheek.

Theo does the same, and is even more shocked to find his face damp. The tears freeze around his eyelashes, making blinking difficult.

Self-disgust coils in him like a snake, but he seizes it by the neck before it manages to strike. Quietly, Theo says, "I'll tell you tonight." He squeezes Luka's hand in return.

As they stumble down the hillside, Xyla turns to Cathalan.

"Why do you look like you've just eaten a lemon?" Xyla says. The gray afternoon light catches on the new sharpness of her cheekbones.

Cathalan doesn't break his stride, but his face contorts. Xyla's statement is accurate: he looks stricken.

Theo immediately looks away as Luka's grip on his hand tightens.

Theo's first steps on the ground of the town that used to be his home are faltering. He only continues into the heart of the town – erased now by time and snow – because of

Luka's steady presence at his side.

Egarara pauses at what used to be the village square. She lifts her head as she surveys the land. Theo wonders if she can see past the ruins to what his home used to look like. She looks at Theo's childhood packmates, and jerks her head.

Leiro yips and circles back to Theo. He lunges, mockingly, and then butts his furred head against Theo's side. Theo braces himself just in time, managing to keep the enormous wolf from knocking him to the ground.

Elliarra and Meelo circle him, eyes twinkling with merriment. Theo can't help a smile at the sight of them, even with his old tears still dried to his cheeks.

"Thank you for your help," Theo says as Egarara comes to stand before him. "I'm glad we had one last chance to meet, Egarara, Leiro, Elliarra, Meelo."

"Do they understand all you say?" Luka whispers from his side.

"They understand the meaning loosely." Theo gently lowers Luka's head. "Just don't look her directly in the eyes. You smell like a hopiar. You're expected to follow our rules."

Egarara rumbles her approval, and an unexpected flash of warmth toward her fills Theo. He guides Luka by his hand toward her.

"You have undoubtedly saved our lives, Egarara," Theo says. "And I am grateful I have the chance to introduce you all to my mate – to Luka Lockehart."

Luka awkwardly averts his gaze to keep himself from looking the enormous black wolf in the eye. In turn, Egarara – the foster mother of Theo's youth – looks Luka over. Her lips pull upwards in a mockery of a human smile, though she reveals no

teeth. Her exhale gusts over Luka's face while she breathes him in.

It's in that moment that the realization that Theo has come home hits – home, here to the place of his greatest defeat, the place where he wasn't able to keep his loved ones safe – with the most precious thing in his life. And now he is introducing that precious thing – precious person – to the last living being that resembles a parent.

Wolf-Mother, Theo curses as his eyes again sting with tears. He blinks them away furiously as Luka, oblivious to Theo's sappiness, attempts to introduce himself to Egarara. Luka awkwardly raises his hand and offers shaking fingers to her flared nostrils.

Behind Egarara, Leiro and Elliara jostle each other, wide, toothy wolf-grins bared on their faces. Expressions that would inspire terror in any other.

"We're in your debt," Xyla says after the exchange drags on in silence. Theo and Luka both jump. It was as if Xyla and Cathalan disappeared from their periphery. Now they return in sharp clarity: Cathalan, pressed against Xyla's side, expression frozen in an awkward place between amusement and fear, and Xyla practically vibrating with impatience.

Egarara glances at Xyla out of the corner of her eye, and her lips curl again – it's a shockingly human expression of humor. She lowers her head in a single, slow nod, before she looks at Theo's packmates. She doesn't bother with a farewell; they will either see each other again or they won't.

"I'll tell you, Wolf-Prince, so long as you promise to keep it secret from everyone else," Cathalan stage whispers after the wolves have cleared the steep, snowy hillside. "Those wolves scare the shit out of me."

"Why didn't you use them in the war against the south?" Xyla asks.

Theo's attention snaps to her. Xyla's voice is even and she doesn't flinch beneath Theo's sudden attention.

Theo says, "Because they always ask for something in return, and those asks are never humble."

"Ah," Luka whispers. "So, I guess we'll have to pay up."

"One day," Theo says. "One of us will have to, yes, but that moment isn't now. Come. I'll check the stores for food while you three prepare the shelter."

The storage shed is, surprisingly, not completely empty. Buried beneath the earth are old root vegetables, and Theo is surprised to find them fresh enough to eat; someone lived here last summer. Hopefully that means the shelter will be strong enough to keep out the winter storms that are sure to come.

Being a day and a half farther south means the knife of winter has been dulled, but only slightly. Now that they're no longer moving at speed, Theo shivers as he leaves the storage shed, arms heaped with vegetables and sacks of dried beans. They only have a few hours of daylight left.

He somehow manages to walk past the shelter that once was his home. Manages not to look at the shape of it; buried beneath the snow like that, he wonders if it would look like the splayed limbs of a lifeless body – or if it would be simply a mound, like a grave.

He can't keep himself from glancing up the hillside, opposite of where they entered. Though the snow has wiped away all memory of the place where he laid the ruins of his parents' bodies to rest, his hands recall the stinging pain of clawing through frozen earth. He clenches his fists and forces himself to move.

Inside the last remaining structure, Xyla has patched the wall with a moth-eaten cloak and found some only slightly moldy clothes. Luka and Cathalan gather close around the fire. They struggle to light it the entire time Theo is gone – judging by the sounds of their bickering – until Xyla takes on the task herself and completes it in minutes.

“I found a pot we can use,” Xyla says when Theo enters with the food.

“Thank the Lady,” Cathalan says. “It would be so wonderful to have something warm.”

“Will we be safe here?” Xyla asks. She looks at Theo when she speaks. “Is this a place that your people can easily find?”

“Our tracks will be covered by the recent snow,” Luka says, warming his hands over the fire. “And this village looks like it hasn’t been occupied in...” He trails off, his eyes suddenly bright with understanding that makes Theo shift uncomfortably.

Theo waits until after they prepared the food and water – until they’ve settled in a tight circle around the fire, huddling close as the final rays of daylight fade, before he says, “Now tell me what the fuck is going on.”

He hates the look exchanged between Luka and Cathalan. A kind of knowing glance – a question clearly shared by their gaze alone.

“No,” Theo all but spits. “None of that. Don’t you look at my mate like that any more, whatever you are.” He glares at Cathalan. The man holds his gaze evenly, though the sharp lines of his jaw tighten. “Tell me what’s going on. Now .”

Xyla chews through a half-cooked carrot, her bites punctuating the silence like fists. She looks between the three of them before shoving a steaming onion into her face. “I would like to know as well, King of Balivartia ,” she says, and, to Theo’s surprise,

Cathalan flinches.

“I don’t understand why you’re so irritated about having not realized I am a king –” Cathalan started, smoothly, only for Xyla to snap, “You knew full well you were keeping me in the dark! The name Cathalan is common enough. And the Kiteran is right. You haven’t only hidden who you are, but what you are.”

Cathalan presses his lips together. “You must know we’re called demon princes for a reason.” When none react favorably to his offered grin, he adds in a more serious voice, “In Balivartia, in Alimaris, that is, we are called hushilings .” The word rolls off his tongue in his wide southern dialect.

“And how in the name of the Wolf Mother’s sweet tits have you, a hushiling, managed to bind yourself to Luka?” Theo says, his thoughts sprinting. Hushiling – have I heard that word before?

But no, even with all of Theo’s research about how to defeat the Balivartians, he is certain he never came across the term.

“A shadow creature.” Cathalan stirs the vegetables in the pot, not looking at any of them. “Similar to a hopiar –”

Theo snarls, “ Do not make that comparison –”

Xyla shoots him a look. “Luka,” she says around her food. “Quiet your man. And you, idiot noble – or I suppose I should call you idiot king? – stop antagonizing him. We are allies. Get through this quickly now. I have planning to get to after this, and we don’t have all night.”

All three men stare at her as she resumes her chewing. Luka places a hand on Theo’s thigh. The touch is warm –distracting –comforting in a way Theo almost wants to

push away, because now is a time for focus.

Cathalan offers a long-suffering sigh, though his shoulders are too tight to make the noise anything but theater. “ Hushilings –we are stronger and faster than a human. We wear human flesh, but we cannot stand sunlight. Exposed for too long...” He gestures to his skin.

“Yes, yes.” Theo waves his hand. “I’ve figured as much –”

“He also drinks blood,” Luka says.

Theo’s nostrils flare.

“That, too,” Cathalan says. “Though we don’t need it as often. I can survive on... this.” He scowls at the food in the pot before chewing through a parsnip with such blatant misery, Theo can’t help but grin –though he smothers the expression swiftly.

“That doesn’t explain why Luka is also suffering from your malady,” Theo says.

“Well, Luka,” Cathalan says. “Sweetling,” he adds the endearment, looking at Theo as if to wield the word like a weapon. “I think this would be best if it came from you.”

“Our marriage is real. I had to do it to keep him safe,” Luka blurts, color draining from his face. He presses so hard against the circular scar on his palm, Theo almost moves to steady him. “I knew that we needed... leverage. With Cathalan, I could save you –I could save... Cassian.” He whispers his brother’s name like a prayer, and guilt needles Theo. He let himself forget what else was on the line for Luka –more than just their lives are at stake.

Marry him , echoes through his thoughts, and he considers, for the first time, what it

must have entailed to seal the bond of First Consort. This title was not created through some simple ruse. It was real. Legally binding. Magically binding. And how was such a thing sealed?

Images of Luka, naked but for silk sheets, splayed on Cathalan's surely grand and kingly bed while Theo's greatest enemy enjoys his mate's skin flash through his thoughts. Equal parts rage – and, oddly, lust – tighten Theo's trousers.

Luka wets his lips. He stares at Theo like they are the only two in this little hut, crouched in the remains of Theo's home. His left arm is so close to Theo's that his skin brushes against him with each inhale. Stale fear and fresh woodsmoke cling to the ashy rafters of the building as quiet hail plinks against the thick cover of snow overhead.

“Stop that,” Xyla says. “You know we're here too, right?”

Luka shakes his head, breaking the spell between them. “There is... apparently... a marriage bond between the First Consort and the King of Balivartia.” Luka holds out his palm. Theo cannot contain a growl at the sight of the wound – especially now that he is all too aware that the source of it, the source of Luka's current pain, is sitting directly across from him.

Luka says, “Please, stay quiet, Theo. This is hard.” He looks at Xyla and Cathalan out of the corner of his eye as if to imply things would be easier without their eavesdropping, but he says nothing and the two remain.

“The bond means that whatever pain Cathalan experiences, I experience. Whatever suffering I undergo,” at this, Luka presses his cooking knife against the white skin of his wrist, drawing beads of blood to the surface despite Theo's warning grunt, “Cathalan undergoes it as well.”

Theatrically, Cathalan waits until all eyes are on him before he draws back his cloak to reveal the same wound on his own arm.

Both cuts heal quickly.

“And you were unaware this would happen?” Theo barely recognizes his own voice, so booming and rough.

Luka’s shoulders tense. He slowly nods.

“Cathalan,” Theo rasps. “How do I reverse this?”

“What? So you can strangle me with your own hands?” Cathalan shakes his head. Despite the lightness in his voice, his face is wiped clean of amusement. “It can be undone, but I will not share that information with you.”

When Theo’s head snaps toward Luka, Cathalan adds, “Nor does Luka know how to undo it, so there’s no point in glaring at him like that.”

“Why did you not tell me sooner?” Theo snaps at Luka.

Luka spreads his hands. “When did we have the time to do that? And it’s not like you don’t keep things from me, Theo!”

Theo’s face warms. Though he’s almost certain Luka is referring to how Theo hid their mate bond, he can’t help but to glance at Cathalan. He can’t help but to wonder if in Luka and Cathalan’s brief imprisonment together, if Cathalan told Luka how Theo promised he would help Cathalan take Cesscounthe in return for Luka’s safety.

Damn that snake. He had played Luka and Theo like a game of Ravage.

But Cathalan isn't looking at Theo; he's watching Luka. "We all do what we must to survive, Theodori," Cathalan whispers as he takes a long drink from the wineskin filled with now-melted snow. "I knew I could never hold you to your word. And now, your promises have weight."

Chills erupt on Theo's arms at the cold intent in the Balivartian king's words.

"Are you all finished?" Xyla asks, running a hand through her red curls. "Because we don't have time for you to have petty disputes all night –we need to plan our next move."

Luka's eyes linger on Theo as if he wants to say more, but Xyla is already speaking. She locks her shaking fingers together. "I've been working with the Toula and her people to help impyassi children escape Cesscounthe. Linne Lockhart has used her new position as the head of the Council to put impyassi to death if they fail the Bombani Exam – and she is trying to do the same to those who have failed the pre-tests."

Luka gasps. Theo can't contain his flinch. Cathalan watches Xyla through the fire with an unblinking gaze.

"We've smuggled dozens of children to the outskirts of Siacchi, but this can't go on. Linne is planning something after the upcoming Bombani Exam this spring –in two months time. Impyassi in Cesscounthe won't be the only at risk; Linne has been spreading poisonous propaganda. There have been some that attempted to cross the northern border, fleeing her spewed hatred, but..." She presses her lips together. "All were killed by the Kiterans. They were thought to be spies."

Luka's face drains of color. "How did you manage to stay hidden for so long, Xyla?"

"Other impyassi don't wear their furs as proudly as I do. And all those sessions

practicing the Kiteran dialect together –they paid off. I might have been able to stay hidden until you arrived if it wasn't for this idiot noble over here.” She meets Cathalan’s gaze through the flames, and it might have been the red from the fire, but her face looks to flush. “Well, that –that and Octavian.”

Cathalan shrugs helplessly. “How was I supposed to know not to draw attention to you? Everyone deserved to know of your resounding beauty. I just thought it would be better to... announce it.”

“And that’s why you’re the idiot noble.”

“And here I thought you were just calling that because you like me, my sweet melody.”

“Like you? I could never –”

“Have you heard anything about Cassian, Xyla?” Luka cuts in, voice urgent.

“This isn’t just about Cassian, Luka,” Xyla says. “ Our people are dying. Cassian will be at risk, but imagine how many other brothers, sisters –children, parents – will suffer at your mother’s hand.”

Luka’s face reddens. “I know that –”

“But do you? Have you really thought about the damage your mother will cause?” Xyla presses. “You know how cruel she can be, especially toward impyassi . She doesn’t seem satisfied as a Council Member –she wants more –more power . To return the Lockhart name to what it once was.”

Luka’s face goes pale. “The Lockhart name,” he repeats the words like a curse.

“Yes, and she will step on whomever gets in her way –or whatever , as she would say. She doesn’t see us as people , Luka. Animals are treated better in Cesscounthe now than impyassi .”

“But Cassian hasn’t taken the Bombani Exam yet, has he? He hasn’t... he hasn’t shown any signs?”

Xyla closes her eyes. She’s silent for a long time –so long, Cathalan nudges her leg with his own. She doesn’t look at any of them when she speaks, her words cold, “Luka, I know you’re scared, but see past Cassian –we can save him, too –but everyone in Cesscounthe is suffering because of Linne. This cannot last .”

“So, you are with the rebels my spies have been telling me so much about,” Cathalan says after a long silence.

“Rebels?” Luka echoes.

Cathalan waves his hand. “Of course there are rebels. There are plenty who want to resist Linne’s new rule. Look at this one –she left before they fully established themselves, but she’s still proud to call herself a rebel, isn’t she?”

“Yes,” Xyla says impatiently, before a strange understanding dawns on her face. “But that doesn’t mean –”

Cathalan grins. “I believe that means you owe me a –”

“I owe you nothing , idiot noble.” Xyla shoves his knee away, which only sends her closer to Luka, who pushes in tighter to Theo. Theo has no problem with any of this.

“If you refuse to help me, Luka,” Xyla says. “I will return to Cesscounthe alone. If we can’t save the capitol, I will at least try to save the people.”

“What do you think I can do?” Luka gapes at her.

Xyla looks at Theo under hooded eyes. “I think you have powerful connections.”

“We were just run out of Akull!” Luka cries. “You think we can just go crawling back and ask for the same thing we got thrown into prison for?”

“We were caught unaware the first time,” Xyla says. “We didn’t expect Octavian – and Octavian was ready for the idiot noble’s arrival. He had a plan. They won’t expect us to return –”

“Because we’d have to be idiots to go back,” Theo says.

Xyla throws her hands in the air. Her cheeks are flushed, and her eyes shine too bright in the firelight. “Fine!” she says, climbing to her feet. She levels a shaking finger at Luka. “I don’t need your help.” The finger jerks to Cathalan. “And I certainly don’t need yours. I’ll go back myself. I was able to get into Akull and find those who might be sympathetic to my cause, I’m sure I can get back into Cesscounthe –”

“You’d go alone?” Cathalan says. He watches Xyla carefully, no trace of mirth on his face.

“I don’t care if I have to go naked –”

“–you’d go without letting me pay my dues?” Cathalan says.

“Dues?” Luka looks between them, only to be ignored.

Xyla glares at Cathalan, her eyes sparking with the amber fury of her beast. “Now is not the time –”

“Balivartian kings do not allow their debts to go unpaid, no matter how small.” Cathalan stands as well. He’s far taller than Xyla, and she has to crane her head up to look at him –or at least she would, if the stooping roof didn’t force the king to slouch. As it is, their noses are so close, they nearly brush.

Theo feels oddly embarrassed for them, watching this showdown, though he quickly forgets the sensation when Luka nuzzles closer to his chest, likely seeking warmth.

“No,” Cathalan continues. “We protect our debtors –where would a kingdom be, if we made promises we never intended to uphold? You promised to keep me safe, Xyla- hessa . Let me return the favor.”

Xyla looks about ready to rip out his throat when Cathalan says, “You can have my legion –and any of my soldiers Luka and Theo free from Akull. Several of my riders wait at the base of the mountain to the south. They will carry word to the border to seek reinforcements.”

Hail plinks against the roof. It is the only noise in the abrupt silence.

“What?” Luka squeaks.

“Are you serious?” Xyla says, the rage vanished from her face.

“Unfortunately.” Cathalan holds her gaze. “Once a king has offered his word, it cannot be retracted.”

“But – but –” Xyla stammers.

Cathalan says, looking at Luka and Theo, “So long as those two return to Akull to free Darri and my men, yes, Xyla Mobiele, I will lend you my soldiers to free Cesscounthe from this tyrant.” Cathalan catches Theo’s eye, and Theo’s stomach

lurches.

You sly snake.

What better way to take the capitol of Cesscounthe than under the guise of dethroning a rotten ruler?

“I still don’t like the idea of returning to Akull,” Luka says.

But Cathalan isn’t looking at Luka. He’s looking at Theo, and his gaze clearly conveys his thoughts, Remember your promise.

Luka, in exchange for Cesscounthe.

As Xyla manages a hushed thank you to Cathalan, Theo says, his arms tightening around Luka, “Tomorrow we must discuss our strategy to return to Akull, Luka. It seems the best course of action for now,” and though guilt twists in Theo’s stomach and his mate glances at him in confusion, no protests emerge.

As they curl into sleep that night, Luka pressed against Theo, so warm and so soft, it’s all Theo can do to keep his hands at his sides, the truth weighs on Theo.

It would be as simple as breaking his promise to Cathalan –but how could he? They are married , Theo thinks, looking between the Snake of the South and the person more dear than his heart. How am I to protect my worst enemy and my lover, as their lives are intertwined?

No. Theo cannot worry about this. He has to go along with this plan.

For now.

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Chapter Nine - Luka

M orning comes with weak light and Luka's breath fogging the bloody dawn when Theo pulls him from the nest of their fur cloaks.

“What is it?” Luka whispers after they've yanked on their boots, glancing at Cathalan and Xyla. Though one of their group stayed awake during the night to keep watch and stoke the fire, it was still cold enough that each of them paired off to sleep, huddling close for warmth. Cathalan presses tight to Xyla now, his face vanishing into her shock of tangled red curls. When she grunts and shifts, he follows her movements.

Luka blushes at the sight of them, and eases the door to the small house shut behind him.

Outside, the sky glows with pre-dawn light. The sunrise is impossible to make out beyond the warm golds and reds of clouds and pale mountains. Luka's feet crunch through frost-hardened snow as he follows Theo from the house.

“What's wrong?” In the quiet, with the only sounds breaking the soft morning being their footfalls, Luka feels he must whisper.

It's not just the silence of the morning, but also the mood of the town; this is a solemn place. The only house left standing is the one they made camp in, but Luka can make out the slumped shapes of wood and stone broken into rubble, slumbering beneath the snow like a bear awaiting spring. But the buildings here don't feel like they're sleeping. It feels like they're dead.

Theo extends his hand back toward Luka, his fingers pink against the cold. When he speaks, his breath fogs the air. “I want to show you something –before they wake up.” He glares at the cabin.

Their shelter looks pitifully small –lonely –against the horizon. A single cabin choking out the remains of their fire in thin, smoky belches, a smudge against the sweep of snow.

Luka takes Theo’s hand, twining their icy fingers, and together they crunch along. The walk takes effort – they didn’t bother with their snowshoes, and they must move with care. In places where the snow didn’t freeze solid overnight, Luka sometimes sinks to his thighs and Theo has to lift him free.

They make their way up the opposite hillside with effort. By the time they reach the top, Luka is puffing and blowing, sweat gathering beneath the thick wool of his sweater. He pulls off his knit cap, mopping his brow.

“Will you tell me what this is all about now?” Luka says. “Are you still mad that I kept secret what happened between me and Cathalan –oh, don’t look at me like that, you know I didn’t mean it that way –”

“This isn’t about that,” Theo grumbles, though the dark look on his face says otherwise.

When Luka’s lips part to protest, Theo shakes his head, squeezing Luka’s hand. He’d kept his grip on Luka the entire climb up the hillside. “It’s not about that,” Theo says again, this time in a whisper. “Look.” He jerks his chin out.

Luka, hands braced on his knees and panting, looks up. His jaw drops as he takes in the view: the sunrise paints the valley scarlet. New morning light falls gently as kisses across the white winter. Up here, the noises from below carry; not silence, as

he first thought, but soft birdsong and the curl of the wind. The air is sweet and chilled, and a small smile grows on his face as he takes it all in.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Luka whispers, squeezing Theo’s hand. “I’m sorry again about... what happened.” He closes his eyes as he remembers the executioner’s block – the fear knotted in his throat as he thought for an instant that they were too late –and the relief when he realized it was another’s head rolling from the stand. Relief, shortly followed by a terrible guilt.

Theo exhales sharply. “Commander Jennison knew what he was doing,” he rasps, his voice heavy with grief. “He died so we could escape.”

Luka’s stomach constricts. Carefully, he says, “I’m sorry, Theo. That was –”

“Not your fault,” Theo says, his expression gruff at first, but he softens when he looks at Luka’s face. “He... he told me he was dying. That this would at least give his life some purpose.”

“Oh, Theo.”

“He did this for us, Luka. So we might build our own lives.” Theo’s hand finds Luka’s. Theo’s skin is cold and rough but so comforting as their fingers twine.

But we aren’t free. Luka presses his lips together. No, they’re still bound to their mission.

Muscles jump in Theo’s jaw as he turns them away from the sweeping view. “This is beautiful, but not why I brought you here.” He attempts an awkward smile, and Luka raises a brow. Theo rushes on before Luka can speak, “I brought you here to introduce you to... to them.”

Before Luka can make an absolute fool of himself and ask who? his eyes land on the two stones nearly buried beneath the new snow. Theo releases his hand and brushes the white away so the rocks gleam beneath the morning sun.

“These are... these are my parents,” Theo says, crouching with his back to Luka. His voice drops so low, Luka has to step closer to hear. Theo’s hand remains on the rock, his grip tightening.

Luka struggles for words. What happened? When did they die? None of it feels like the right thing to say. Instead, he crouches at Theo’s side.

“Hello,” Luka says. “Nice to meet you.” The words feel silly at first, but as he looks at Theo’s tortured expression out of the corner of his eye, he calms. “My name is Luka Lockhart, and I’m in love with your son.”

The graves do not reply.

Luka presses his hand to the first grave and then the second, laying his fingers over Theo’s and squeezing. Shocking cold numbs his palm.

“You have a very nice son,” Luka continues after a beat. “He’s rude and terrible at following instructions. He also thinks the only way to do anything is his way –”

“Hey!” Theo says.

“ – but he’s also extremely loyal –sometimes funny – and also has a really, really, really big –”

Theo glares at him.

“ –heart,” Luka finishes smiling. “That’s why I love him so much –because he has so

much capacity for love. And kindness.”

Theo’s face softens. “Only for you.”

Luka leans forward and kisses Theo gently. Theo’s lips are cool and chapped from the wind, but they always feel so good on his mouth.

“What happened to them?” Luka asks after he pulls away.

Theo’s face sharpens as he grits his teeth, but he holds Luka’s gaze as he says, “A fire.”

“We’re right on the Balivartian border,” Luka says after Theo goes silent for a long time. “Is that why this place looks like...?” He gestures to the town below, partially obscured by the bend of the hillside.

“Yes.” Theo still holds Luka’s gaze. “It was during my battles with the Snake of the South – with your husband. And I had to make a decision: win a battle so I could secure a promotion to Vell , or save my family.” Theo’s eyes go glassy and he blinks rapidly.

Luka’s brow furrows. Theo is a Sevell –the military rank second only to Vell . Was he demoted after this took place?

“I tried to save them instead,” Theo says. “And I failed. I lost my family and my chance at a title.”

“Oh, Theo,” Luka whispers. “I’m so sorry.”

Theo stares past Luka now, his nostrils flaring. “You would think one day their deaths would start to hurt less. That one day, I would be able to...” He pauses, the

muscles in his jaw flexing. “You know, before I met you, I was so afraid to love someone like I love you. I was afraid that because I was so weak –because I am so weak –something like this would just happen again. And I knew –I knew –if something like this did happen again, I would just break.”

Luka shifts closer, pressing his knee against Theo’s.

Theo continues, “That’s why I was invading Siacchi. I wanted to prove myself to the Elders –I wanted to show myself that I was strong enough to accomplish something like that. And yet I failed, time and time again. I was even his prisoner.” He stares at his hands, still thin from the days he spent in Cathalan’s prisons.

“But you are strong,” Luka whispers in bewilderment. “Theo – you’ve withstood so much suffering. You’re incredibly brave. You’re an amazing tactician not because of your intelligence –”

Theo winces and Luka rushes on.

“ – but because of your inability to give up.” Luka places his hand against Theo’s cheek. “I love you, Theodori Hunter Wolf-Born. You have always been strong enough to deserve my love, and I have always been...”

At this, Luka falters, his own mother’s words hounding him. You’re an idiot. A fool. You mustn’t let anyone else know. Those long hours Luka spent studying, hating himself for not being what his mother wanted. His beast curls in him, instinctively shrinking, and Luka shoves the memories away.

“And I have always been good enough to deserve yours,” Luka finishes, meeting Theo’s eyes. He blinks, shocked to find Theo’s gaze damp with tears.

“I love you, too,” Theo whispers. “I love you. I love you, Luka Lockehart.”

They fall into each other's arms, and Theo buries his face into the bend of Luka's neck, inhaling him deeply.

They cling to each other for what feels like a long time. Long enough for the snow to melt beneath Luka's trousers and soak through, chilling him.

Theo murmurs in his ear. "What if we just run now? Together, we can break into Cesscounthe. We'll steal Cassian away in the night."

"And my mother's unborn child?"

"We'll cut her open and steal it, too."

Luka laughs despite the ghastly image, and pulls away from Theo. He thumbs away his mate's tears.

"No, my love," Luka whispers. "I can't leave all those people behind. Xyla is right; it's not just Cassian suffering from the danger that is my mother. And I helped her to power by being the perfect son all those years."

"That's not true, Luka."

"It's true enough that I know I have to do something about it."

Theo offers a small smile. "Alright." He casts a watery glance at his parents' graves. "I'm glad you got to meet them."

As Luka parts his lips to say, me too, a cry sounds up from below, and his skin cringes with a sudden wave of burning pain. Cathalan.

"Luka? Luka!" the voice shouts.

And then: “Theodori! I’ll even take the Wolf Prince! Hello?”

“That damn Snake,” Theo growls.

They both stand and move to the crest of the hillside. At the dimple of the valley, Cathalan emerges from the cabin, wrapped in blankets to shield him – ineffectively – from the morning sun. He looks around in a way that seems... panicked?

“Xyla!” Cathalan shouts, his voice carrying around the valley. “Luka!”

Luka glances at Theo. “Time to go back?” Luka asks.

Theo nods, resigned.

“We’re up here!” Luka shouts, waving his arms.

Cathalan’s eyes dart about as he hunts the sound. When his gaze lands on them, the sharp line of his shoulders eases. He steps back into the shade of the cabin’s roof while Theo and Luka make their way down the hillside.

It’s only when they draw closer that Luka realizes Cathalan is vibrating with nervous energy.

“Is Xyla with you?” Cathalan asks.

Luka shakes his head.

“Did you see her?” Cathalan presses.

“No. When we woke, she was... she was with you.” Luka tries not to blush at the shockingly intimate memory of Cathalan and Xyla intertwined.

“She actually did it,” Cathalan whispers, shocked.

“Did what? Speak plainly,” Theo says.

Cathalan hands them a crumbling scrap of parchment. “She left this for us. She went back to Cesscounthe. She says she doesn’t trust any of us to help, and that she has to do this on her own.” Cathalan’s face hardens with a despair that Luka doesn’t understand as he whispers, “She’s gone.”

It takes the better part of the morning to fix breakfast and talk Cathalan down from going after Xyla. Luka’s own fears do nothing to help. Xyla is strong, yes, but taking on Cesscounthe alone is – reckless. Why wouldn’t she trust me with her plan? Why would she just go? Luka worries his lip.

“It’s not the best move,” Luka says for the fifth time after Cathalan finishes muttering about how he could catch up with Xyla if he left now, and when he caught up with her, he could convince her to come back. And it’s the truth: it isn’t the best move. Even when he plays out their next steps on an imaginary Cesse board, that much is clear. Xyla should have seen as much with her cold, calculating Siacchian logic.

But then Luka recalls the betrayed look on her face when she learned Cathalan was not simply a Balivartian noble, but King of Balivartia. Perhaps she is less logical than he thought.

“And why do you care so much?” Theo grumbles over their morning bowl of gruel at Cathalan. Luka shoots Theo a look that Theo ignores.

Cathalan blinks, his gaze lingering on the door before he whispers, “I’m not sure.”

“It’s not the best move,” Luka says again, imbuing his voice with steel. “She’s probably in wolf form, and she’ll move much faster on four legs than you can on

two.”

“Especially since the sun is out,” Theo adds, narrowing his eyes. “And you’ll only hurt Luka by leaving.”

Cathalan presses his lips together as he approaches the door, squinting into the day. The outside world is brilliant and white with snow, and the sun reflects so brightly off the hillside that it fills the house with false light.

“She will get hurt,” Cathalan mutters to his hands, his brow furrowing.

Luka stares at the man. Never, in all his years of knowing him, has he ever seen Cathalan fall to pieces like this. They left Darri, the closest thing Cathalan has to an actual friend, back in the nest of the enemy, and for Thought’s sake, Cathalan did so with only minor hesitation and regret.

But this? Worrying over a woman he shared a prison cell for maybe a week and a half with like she’s his –

Luka narrows his eyes.

That’s impossible.

...Right?

“Cathalan,” Luka starts.

Cathalan swings his head toward Luka. His eyes are shockingly red-rimmed and heavy with bags. He stares at Luka hopefully, almost child-like.

Luka thinks of when he and Theo were separated. The pain he felt – the inability to

think clearly, beyond how he could ensure they reunite again, safely.

But Cathalan isn't an impyassus . He has never reacted in such a way to any problem. Cathalan is methodical, always plotting, scheming. Never overwrought. He shouldn't have such thoughts.

Unless...?

Luka opens his lips, but he aborts the question before it can leave his tongue. Instead he says, "The best way to help Xyla isn't by chasing her down." He thinks back to their conversation the night before. "It's by getting allies to help Siacchi."

"Then the best way to do that would be for me to go home," Cathalan says.

"No," Luka says, trying to keep frustration out of his voice. "Asking for border soldiers for support is one thing, but you can't just go home without the alliance you promised to your people. No – you'll need proof that you were successful in the north. You're still a new king, Cathalan."

Cathalan blinks. Luka is surprised to see – hurt? – cross the king's face. Cathalan recovers quickly though, crossing his arms over his chest. "Are you saying they won't believe my authority if I demand we supply aid to Siacchi, Luka?"

Luka's shoulders relax despite the undercurrent of anger in Cathalan's voice. This is ground he understands.

He meets Cathalan's gaze evenly, saying, "You're forgetting your siblings." Images of Cathalan's angry brothers and remaining sister flash in his memory – how hungry they were for power. They wouldn't dare hesitate to take advantage of whatever fumbling misstep Cathalan might make in his mission to help Xyla. "If you go back now, they will try to take the throne from you."

“They can try,” Cathalan scoffs, but his anger sharpens to understanding. He glares at the sun outside, as if his frustration can dim it.

“Instead, we need to go back to Akull,” Luka finishes.

“Luka...” Theo begins, but halts when Luka holds up a hand.

“And you can’t come with us.” Luka fixes Theo with another look. “No,” Luka continues before Theo can speak. “Cathalan and I will go back together.”

His gaze drifts past Theo to their slumping shelter. To the hard-packed dirt floor, cold beneath his feet. To the scatter of their breakfast and the still-smoking fire. Behind his stare, the Cesse board grows, and their scattered position clarifies in his mind’s eye. His mother’s voice nags him, You’re a fool, an idiot, no son of mine , but he pushes it away. Cassian is counting on me.

All impyassi in Cesscounthe are counting on him.

“We made the mistake of treating Akull like a potential ally when we first approached,” Luka says, standing so he can pace the cramped space. “But we need to think of them as the beast they are. If they see us as vulnerable prey – as Octavian made them think – then they will treat us as such. Instead we need to bluff.”

“To lie,” Cathalan finishes. He meets Luka’s gaze, understanding dawning.

“Yes,” Luka says. He shapes their story quickly, the lies easily falling from his lips: “We will tell them that the South is already halfway to Cesscounthe. They will be grateful to learn that shortly, impyassi civilians and Balivartian soldiers alike will be liberating Cesscounthe. And once they understand the situation, Akull won’t want to lose face. They’ll want to withdraw their soldiers and decry those who disobey.”

“Like Octavian,” Theo whispers.

“And Cesscounthe will turn against its own traitors,” Luka says. Like Linne Lockehart.

This way, I can save Cassian and all the other impyassi suffering under my mother’s rule.

The small hovel falls silent as the three consider Luka’s words, the scuffing of Luka’s boots against the dirt floor the only sound.

Finally, Theo says softly, “You’re right.”

Luka’s head snaps up.

Theo continues, “I can’t go with you. I am a traitor to them. It will be much harder for you to convince them to do anything if I am at your side. And if they try to hurt me...”

At the thought, mindless rage grips Luka, and he jerks to a halt.

Theo sighs. “Exactly. If they threaten me, your judgment will be instantly clouded, Luka. And we can’t have that. Not with these stakes.”

Not with Cassian and all those other lives on the line.

“But...” Luka starts to say, even though he knows Theo is right. Even though it was his own idea.

“We can recover Darri and my soldiers,” Cathalan says. “Ensure their security and gather Akull soldiers as well. We’ll have them ride with us to Cesscounthe – we’ll

still technically be their prisoners, so they have no need to trust us. It's brilliant, Luka. As we approach Cesscounthe, those occupying the city won't know that the Kiterans are just coming to assess the situation... not if we have them approach so aggressively. The Siacchians will think them enemy soldiers, and the occupying Kiterans will think something has gone wrong. My own people can... aid the Siacchians in the chaos."

Luka searches Theo's face, but all he can find is resigned exhaustion. He pushes past the automatic panic at the thought of them separating again, focusing instead on the firm outline of his mental Cesse board. He lays out the three of them, thinking through the plan with them together – and with them separate.

With Theo, those in Akull will be less likely to listen. They will be hostile – and angry. It will be personal. Besides – they can't hurt Luka without hurting Cathalan, and the Elders won't want to risk another war.

Without Theo, Luka will be alone.

And alone, Luka is weak. He can't defend himself. His hands shake at the idea of leveling a weapon.

What other choice do I have?

Luka bows his head. "Fine," he whispers. "We leave you behind, Theo."

The comforting warmth of Theo's hand hovers above Luka's shoulder, but it doesn't land as Theo pulls away.

"I'll go after Xyla," Theo says. "I'll explain the rest of the plan to her so the... the Cesscounthe rebels are ready when we arrive." He presses his lips together. "Yes, I'll be able to handle it alone after I find their rebels. I'm sure of it."

An odd look passes between Theo and Cathalan, but before Luka can study it, Theo looks away, his lip curling.

“We’ll leave at nightfall,” Luka says. “When it’s safe for Cathalan and I to travel.”

The thought makes him want to crumble. How many times will he have to separate from Theo with the understanding that they might... that this might be the last time they’re together?

Luka closes his eyes, whispering softly, “Will this get us peace?”

Theo’s arms wrap around him, warm and smelling of sweat and pine and the perfect warmth of a campfire. “If we win.”

“And what will it cost?” Thoughts of Theo wounded – Theo dead – Cassian hurt or tortured by Linne –

“Whatever it takes,” Theo answers. “Now enough of that. There’s something more I need to show you before we go.”

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Chapter Ten - Theo

Theo spends the day showing Luka his childhood.

“Here,” Theo says, “was where my father taught me to shoot. There is where my mother taught me to sew a wound.”

“Was there anything you learned from your parents that didn’t have to do with warfare?” Luka mutters.

“What would be the point in learning if it didn’t help me with battle?” Theo looks up from the flat spread of land at the top of the hillside, quirking his brows. When Luka gapes back at him, he chuckles. “Come now, my little pacifist. I know you don’t hold those ideals as closely as you did.”

Luka flushes, a flicker of pain crossing his face, before his eyes flutter to his hands. “You’ve corrupted me.” He presses his fingers to his face, mock-grinning. “This must be what my tutors always warned me about. Insanity!”

Theo laughs as he steps close to his mate, drawing Luka’s hands away to reveal flushed cheeks. “I think I like the look of insanity on you, Luka.”

“Don’t say my name like that.”

“Like what?” Theo leans so close, their noses brush.

When Luka speaks, his breath fans across Theo’s face in a hot rush that goes straight

to Theo's groin. "Like you want to eat me."

"But what if I do?" Theo brushes a feather-light kiss over Luka's lips. Luka groans, and the noise is like a warm hand on Theo's cock. He has to resist the urge to pin Luka to a nearby pine and finally have his way with his mate.

"Is now really the time, Theo?" Luka whispers as if he could read Theo's mind, pulling away to scan Theo's face. "I'm leaving you in –" He pauses, looking at the sun. It's midafternoon, judging by the long cast of shadows from the nearby pine trees. "In a few hours."

"I think now is the best time," Theo says, thinking of how Luka must return to Theo's hostile home – alone. With only the Snake of the South to guard him – when Cathalan has already failed in seeking Akull's help once before. Theo's stomach clenches and his grip on Luka tightens, drawing his mate close to his chest.

"We'll be together again, when this is all over," Luka mutters into Theo's cloak.

"Yes," Theo says, and though he desperately wishes saying it would make it true, he's still afraid.

That's why he adds, "There's one more spot I want to show you."

He takes Luka by the hand and leads him into the pines east of the ruins of his home. They leave a drowsily scheming Cathalan behind as they enter the shade of the towering trees, their feet crunching through snow made shallower by the shelter of the enormous green boughs above them.

They don't walk for long before Theo pulls them to a stop. "There," he whispers over his shoulder to Luka. "Do you see it?"

Luka rises on his toes. “No?”

Theo smiles as he sweeps Luka closer, excited to share this slice of his past and thrilled to find it still standing.

“Oh!” Luka exclaims as he spots it. “Did – did you make that?”

There, tucked between the narrow spacing of the pine trees, is a small shelter. As a young teenager, Theo built the platform by himself, lifting it a foot above the snow. Slender pines were cut to make walls, though the mud he packed between the cracks to keep out the cold has long since washed away.

Theo leads Luka inside.

It’s small; Theo has to duck when they enter. He’s grown at least half a head since he built it. It’s about the right size for two to kick off their boots and curl into each other.

“Is this...” Luka begins, eyes wide. “Theo – did you just take me to your sex cabin?”

“That I built myself.”

“How old were you again when you left your parents to join the Kiteran military?”

“Fourteen.”

Luka’s entire face turns scarlet. Even his ears. “Isn’t that a little – a little young? ”

“Not too young to be discovering my neighbors’ bodies.”

“Theo!”

“Don’t look so scandalized, Luka,” Theo says, grinning as he takes in Luka’s bright red cheeks. “When was the first time you had sex?”

Luka’s face grows impossibly redder. He mumbles something.

“What?” Theo says.

Luka jerks his head away. “Things were different for me, Theo! My mother controlled my entire life –it’s not like I could just sneak out and have dalliances with strangers at fourteen.” He runs a hand through his hair. “At that age I was probably... I was too caught up with my tutors to be even thinking about someone touching me like that.”

“But Cesse is about power –and sex –”

“I was taught that, yes, but it doesn’t count. It wasn’t someone I loved.” Luka looks back at Theo now, his face softening. “The first time with someone I loved –that was with Xyla.”

Theo’s stomach gives an initial, insecure lurch. But the gentleness in Luka’s face isn’t that of romantic fondness. He misses her–and he’s worried about her.

“She was my best friend,” Luka says. “I know that when you two spend more time together, you’ll realize you have more in common than you first thought.”

Theo tucks a strand of Luka’s dark hair behind his ear. “I think the only thing we have in common is you.” He kisses Luka, just a brief brush of their lips. “Well, you, and this war.”

Luka grins against Theo’s mouth. “Isn’t that more than enough?” He winds his hands through Theo’s hair, pulling them together. “Now, let’s not talk about our past

experiences. All that matters is you, Theo. My love.”

Theo can't help the little sigh that escapes his lips at the declaration. He will never grow tired of hearing it.

“That's right,” he mutters into Luka's mouth. “I brought you here because...” He pauses, his hands roaming Luka's body. I don't know if this will be our last time together, he wants to say, but that seems wrong. Too serious. I want to know your body before we part.

I brought you here because I'm afraid.

Luka places his hands on Theo's cheeks, his blue eyes cradling Theo's.

“I love you,” Luka says. “And I want you inside me.”

Theo's nostrils flare and his cock throbs. His fear eases away as he runs his hands over the round curve of Luka's ass. “That can be arranged.”

Theo's mouth comes down on Luka's, harder this time, his kisses desperate. He devours Luka's lips, their tongues meeting in a fierce struggle that Luka surrenders to with a groan. He lifts Luka's thigh, pulling him tight so he can press his growing erection against Luka's stomach.

“Theo,” Luka whispers as Theo kisses and nips at Luka's neck. He runs his teeth against the curve of Luka's ear, drawing a gasp from Luka's lips.

“That's it,” Theo rasps. “Sweet Wolf –your face when you make that noise, Luka.” He presses a kiss to Luka's cheek, running his fingers through Luka's curls as his hands venture beneath their clothes.

Luka's body is lithe and lightly muscled, so unlike the warriors Theo has touched before, yet perfect all the same. He presses against Luka's stomach before teasing his nipples with first his fingers, and then his lips.

Luka whimpers, his face flushed as his hips buck.

"That's it," Theo says again. "Press against me, love."

"Stop teasing me!" Luka snaps, eyes closed in pleasure as he rubs his erection against Theo's thigh.

"I won't give it to you that easily." Theo runs his hands along Luka's thighs.

"What would you have me do?"

Luka gasps as Theo ghosts his fingers over the outline of his cock, bulging painfully against his trousers.

Theo leans close, his lips gracing Luka's ear as he whispers, "Beg."

Luka groans, and Theo greedily captures the noise with his mouth before he drops to his knees.

"Theo —" Luka starts, eyes flying open.

"None of that now," Theo says, standing and pulling Luka's shirt up. He places the fabric over Luka's beseeching gaze. "Eyes stay covered." He kisses Luka's exposed nose. "For now."

Luka laughs, his body rippling with the motion. "You should know," he says. "I've never been all that good at following instructions."

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Theo murmurs as he steps back, ducking his head beneath the overhanging beam. He takes a moment to admire Luka; his mate’s pale skin pebbles beneath the chill, his nipples pink and stark against the gentle curves of his chest. Dark hair trails tantalizingly into his trousers.

The outline of Luka’s cock is a call that Theo nearly loses himself to –but no. He needs to take this slow. To savor this, their first time together.

“You realize,” Theo says. “If we make love now, the mate bond will be sealed.”

“Good,” Luka whispers. He reaches for the fabric over his eyes but Theo says, “Don’t,” and Luka stays his hand.

“Just give me one more moment to look at you,” Theo says. He tries to memorize every part of Luka, every piece. The sketch of his ribs against his skin, the curl of his hair as it falls over his exposed cheeks –the pink flash of his lips as he smiles.

“Okay, but next it will be your turn to stand blindfolded while I weirdly stare at you,” Luka says.

Theo approaches on soft feet and drops to his knees just as silently. He dampens his fingers.

“You do realize this is a bit odd –” Luka starts to say, but his words are lost as Theo pulls down his trousers, exposing his cock to the cold. As Luka gasps from the temperature change, Theo says, voice soft but hard:

“What do you want me to do, Luka?”

Theo places a hand on Luka’s thigh. The small muscles in Luka’s leg quiver beneath his fingers.

“Theo,” Luka whispers, hips bucking. “Please. I –”

“What do you need, love?”

“Put your mouth on me.”

Theo smiles. His heart is so light. He never thought he could feel this happy, this intimate, with another person. So raw, so exposed, and so full of love. “As you wish.”

He kisses down the length of Luka’s cock, and Luka’s guttural groan makes him grin. He works his dampened fingers against Luka’s hip, easing around to the soft curve of Luka’s ass, and Luka moans again, louder.

“I thought you said you were going to put your mouth on me,” Luka hisses as Theo winds his tongue around the base of Luka’s cock.

“So bossy,” Theo murmurs against Luka’s skin. Luka shudders. Theo works his hands against Luka’s ass, pressing his fingers closer –closer. As Luka bucks against him, Theo takes the length of him into his mouth.

“O-oh!” Luka shouts, head rolling back. The makeshift blindfold falls away. He braces himself against the wall, his knees locking. Theo props his shoulder against Luka’s hip, holding himself up as he swallows Luka down to the dark coarse hairs of his sex.

Theo bobs his head as he takes Luka in, and with each suck, he works his fingers closer to Luka’s asshole. As he presses against the dip of his entrance, Luka gasps, his hips pushing his cock into Theo’s mouth and working back against Theo’s hand.

Theo lifts his lips from Luka’s cock, seal breaking with an audible pop . Luka’s head rests against the wall, eyes glazed as he gazes down at Theo.

Theo wets his fingers. “What do you want, love?” he says, his voice little more than a growl. “Where do you want me?”

“Why do I have to say it?” Luka whispers. His hand drops to his glistening cock, but before he can pump it, Theo slaps his fingers away.

“None of that,” Theo says. “You can’t touch yourself without my say.”

“What?” Luka’s eyes widen, but Theo only smiles. He places a firm, wet kiss on Luka’s lips.

“You’re mine to enjoy tonight, love.” He grabs Luka’s dick, and all protest falls from Luka’s face. “There. That’s it. Now tell me: where do you want me?”

“Inside,” Luka mutters, brow scrunching as Theo’s hand increases in speed. “Inside – me.”

“Good,” Theo rasps into Luka’s ear. “Turn around.”

Luka braces himself against the wall, back arched, and Theo admires his profile; Luka’s body flushed with pleasure, his cock red, shining, lips ready to beg for pleasure.

Theo fumbles at the lopsided side table he made over a decade ago, relieved to find the bottle of oil still preserved. He wets his fingers before returning his attention to his mate.

“Such a good boy,” Theo says, just to see the way the words make Luka shudder. “Spread these cheeks for me.”

Luka does as ordered, and Theo palms his own cock. He drops his trousers, stroking

slowly. Luka watches through hooded eyes.

“What if I want to taste you?” Luka asks, and his lips curl in a grin when Theo’s cock twitches in response.

“I need to come inside your ass tonight,” Theo says. “And if I let you take me in your mouth –” Theo shudders at the thought, his eyes rolling back in his head. Oh, there are so many different ways he wants to take Luka; fucking his mouth until Theo can come deep in Luka’s throat –deep in his ass on the soft bedding of his war tent –curled around each other –slow, fast –

But they only have now –and Theo’s imagination is working just as effectively as a hand ever could.

He drops his cock and presses oil-slick fingers against Luka’s asshole. He watches, desperately taking in the flush of Luka’s cheeks, the arch of his back, and the little pants escaping his lips as Theo eases the first finger inside.

“Oh, Luka,” Theo moans. “You’re so fucking tight, love –”

Luka pauses a moment as Theo presses the second finger in. Theo waits, letting him adjust, but half a breath later, Luka is pushing back into him, shoving Theo’s fingers deeper. At the third finger, Luka releases a breathy gasp and shouts, “Yes –right –right there!” and Theo smiles.

He lets Luka fuck his hand for another few short, rapid thrusts, before he withdraws his fingers and spits on his cock.

“Where do you want me?” he asks again, and Luka replies instantly, words spoken like a prayer, “Inside me –inside me, now –oh, Thought, just fuck my ass please, Theo, please –”

Theo, never one to deny a polite request, aligns his cock with Luka's ass and slowly, slowly , pushes inside.

Everything vanishes into a world of tight, hot pleasure. It's all Theo can do to not slam his full length into Luka, to pump until he's emptied himself inside his mate –to take what Luka has so willingly given him –

But he needs to see to Luka's pleasure first.

He reaches around Luka, wrapping his hand around Luka's wet cock, and jerks his mate to the rhythm of his thrusts. Luka starts with low, quiet moans, but as Theo adjusts his thrusts to hit against the bundle of nerves inside, the noises change to near-shouts.

Pleasure builds in Theo, but he grits his teeth, tapping it down –

Luka comes first. Luka comes first –

Luka screams, "Theo!" hips stuttering as warm liquid sprays over Theo's fingers. "Come in my ass –please, come in me, Theo –I need you –"

Theo's eyes roll back as the pleasure bursts out of him. He groans into Luka's ear, hands dropping to his mate's hips as he mindlessly thrusts –

He comes with a growl, and only manages to keep himself from collapsing onto Luka by bracing a hand against the wall. His chest rests on Luka's back, their skin slick with sweat as they pant.

For a moment, they press together, the air heavy with the stench of sweat and their lovemaking as they breathe each other in. Theo savors the moment, the sweet silence. He savors that same warmth in his chest –the love he feels for this man in his arms.

And there, beneath it all, he feels something else bloom.

The mating bond stretches between them. Distantly, like it's taking place almost out of earshot, Luka's love brushes against him – and Theo laughs softly. The sensation is impossible to mistake, even if it feels different from his own love; softer, but sweeter.

“Is that...?” Luka whispers. He looks at Theo, his eyes bright.

“We're officially mated.” Theo wraps his arms around Luka. “You're mine now.”

Luka twists around, pressing a heavy kiss to Theo's lips. “And you're mine.”

And you'll be leaving me in the evening .

But now is a time for celebration. Theo chases the thought away as he kisses Luka back, savoring the way the warmth blooming in his chest belongs to both him and his mate.

His fears can wait until nightfall.

They return to find Cathalan scheming. Though the Snake of the South looks knowingly between the two of them, his brows wagging suggestively, he says nothing when Luka glares. Instead, he explains his plan to Luka, and the two fall into a discussion that Theo participates in, though only half-heartedly. He's too busy thinking about his next steps.

Evening comes too quickly. Evening, and with it, the three bottles of cheap wine Cathalan found in ancient storage. They whittle the corks out with Theo's knife and exchange drinks and secrets until the sun grazes the snowy hillside, though Theo realizes only halfway through the second bottle that he's doing the majority of the

drinking, and that Cathalan and Luka's words are far too coherent.

It's only when the moon peeks a hesitant silver eye over the hill and Luka presses a kiss against Theo's temple that Theo realizes they're bidding him farewell.

He tells himself that it's the headache blooming in his temples that draws tears to his eyes as they crest the hillside.

Dawn greets him with painful daggers to his eyes. He stretches, thaws his water, and forces himself to eat a thin gruel. His last hours in his nameless hometown are spent before his parents' grave markers.

He presses a hand against the stone, closing his eyes.

"I used to think I had to be strong to love someone – anyone –again," he whispers, though even that feels too loud in the echoing silence. "I used to think that it was something I had to fight to earn. I thought that if I wasn't strong enough, than I didn't deserve it, but now I –I learned that all I needed was kindness. Kindness... and Luka."

He crouches, looking between the two graves. "I wish you could have met him. You would have loved him –even more than I do, probably."

He presses his hand against the foreign feelings in his chest –weaker now that so much distance stretches between them, but still present. That pitter-patter like rain on a tin roof must be Luka's nervousness. By this time, assuming they walked through the night, they have to be approaching Akull.

"And because of him, I realized what I really want now." Theo stands, looking out: north, toward the capital and his mate heading into sure danger.

South –toward Cesscounthe, so desperately in need of allies.

Cesscounthe, filled with hopiar . Home to Luka's little brother. Home to people that Theo once threatened, but now, he realizes, people he could save.

“I don't know if I'll be able to come back here,” Theo says to his parents. “But I hope that by going back to Cesscounthe, I can make you proud of me. I'll save the hopiar there. I'll make a difference this time.”

And with that, he drops to the ground, summoning his wolf form. He has days to journey before he catches up with Xyla Mobiele.

Chapter Eleven - Luka

Luka presses against his chest as foreign feelings blossom; Theo's sorrow and determination, salty but strong. Despite the chill seeping through his boots and the dry taste in his mouth, Luka's heart feels light. For a moment, he closes his eyes against the pale of snow and the cloudy dawn, and he transports himself back to last afternoon, when he was wrapped in Theo's arms.

Throughout the night as they walked, the moon their only guide, Luka comforted himself with the chorus of Theo's feelings. They moved at a rapid pace, Cathalan quick without the fear of pain from the sun, and Luka, despite the ache of his muscles, desperate to return to Akull. When Theo falls into slumber, Luka is left only with the echo of his own thoughts in his head, the reminder that they have less than two months to save Cassian. Less than two months before, without a doubt, his brother will fail the Bombani Exam.

Less than two months before his own mother will kill his little brother.

His throat knots and he shoves the emotion away. He can't let Theo feel his sadness – and the realization makes his eyes fly open. He glances at the Balivartian king out of the corner of his eye as he touches his breastbone. Luka can feel Theo's emotions because of the mating bond, and Cathalan can feel Luka because of the marriage between them –so could Cathalan –

Surely not.

“You ready?” Cathalan asks. Hours of traveling through the night have turned

Cathalan's tan face pale and drawn dark bags beneath his eyes. But when the Balivartian king turns to face Akull, the exhaustion drains away into determination.

Luka follows his gaze. He swallows.

Akull rears before them, all icy walls and promises of death and violence. They chose to approach from the thick forest on the east. The guards have yet to spot them amongst the winter-blackened trees. Luka rubs his mittens together, the rabbit fur lining damp with his nervous sweat.

If only he could have hidden in that little cabin with Theo for years. If only he never left.

But there's no point in thinking about that now. Now, when Luka has Cassian and so many others counting on him.

I'll save the impyassi from my mother's rule. I'll make sure Cassian and my unborn sibling are kept safe from Linne.

No matter the cost.

Luka squares his shoulders and nods. "Ready."

Cathalan spares him a wan smile. "There's my Luka," he murmurs fondly. He brushes a stray curl, knocked free from Luka's hood, behind Luka's ear. Luka shudders at the brush of Cathalan's gloveless hands, frigid against his cheek.

"Time to save my –Darri. And my people," Cathalan says, the words so soft, they must be meant for his own ears alone. He doesn't look back as he approaches the side gate.

Guards posted for early morning watch spot them seconds later.

“Halt!” a man with a pale golden braid shouts, leveling a crossbow.

Cathalan slows, but does not comply as he raises his hands. “Do we need to go through this again?” he says. He glances at the cloudy dawn. Weak red light filters through the gray clouds, not strong enough to burn him –so long as the clouds remain.

“State your business!” the guard orders from the watchtower above.

Cathalan rolls his eyes and ignores the command. Luka keeps pace with him, only jerking to a stop when the guard loses a bolt. The projectile slices through the snow, close enough that it snips a line of fire across Luka’s cheek.

“Rude,” Cathalan mutters, whipping the blood away from the matching wound on his face.

“Standing before you is the King of Balivartia and the First Consort,” Luka announces. His voice is only a little hoarse, and he wets his lips before continuing. “You hold our people hostage, and we wish for their freedom –and in return, we will give you recent news of the fall of Cesscounthe.”

The guard levels his crossbow with them. He’s too far up for Luka to clearly make out his gaze, but the sharp lines of his shoulders easily convey his nerves.

“Open the gates,” a familiar voice orders.

Luka’s stomach drops.

Of course he’s still here.

Luka fights to keep his face calm, and curses inwardly when he finds how difficult it is to hide his fears. For months now, he's allowed his emotions freer rein, and now they control him, and it seems all logic is lost.

The smaller gates ease open with a sigh, and there, standing and smiling at the entrance, is Octavian Scholar. Vittoria postures at his side, one hand on her axe as she takes them in and the other on a small pouch.

"I spot no reinforcements, Sevell Octavian!" the guard stationed at the watchtower reports.

Sevell Octavian. Octavian has been promoted.

"Of course not," Octavian says. He folds his hands together, offering a shallow bow to Cathalan and a dip of his head to Luka.

"Balivartian king, Danessi Lockhart," he says. "So good to see the both of you again. I was hoping you'd come back."

Octavian leads them into the heart of Akull. "Bold of you to return to your captors so soon after your escape," Octavian says, offering a welcoming grin.

"Well, I couldn't leave my people behind." Cathalan smiles just as warmly. If not for the guards bordering them and the weapons bristling from Octavian's coat, they could have been mistaken for two friends. "I hope they've been treated well."

"As well as can be expected." Octavian inclines his head.

Cathalan's smile sharpens. "And I'm sure you, Octavian, will be especially disappointed to hear our news."

Octavian misses a step.

Octavian is uneasy.

It's difficult to tell at first over the grip of Luka's own fear. Even with Cathalan's steadiness bracing him, Luka still vibrates with nerves. He tries to tuck his mittens behind his back, but they still shake so fiercely, Luka is sure Vittoria, who trails them on their way to the Elder's stronghold, sees it plainly.

Cathalan doesn't exchange a victorious look with Luka, but the punch of excitement in Luka's gut is confirmation enough.

Octavian didn't think they would come back.

The plan is working.

So far.

Cold sweat gathers in the small of Luka's back as they stop before the stronghold once again. Luka sets his teeth and lifts his chin as they enter.

Nothing has changed in the days since their escape. The Elders sit in the same seats, looking down from their high above dais. Their faces remain painfully blank as Cathalan and Luka enter, and once again, Luka stifles his nerves.

"I must say," the head of the Elders, Gilianna, begins, looking them both over. "I'm surprised to see you return after such a desperate escape, Balivartian king?"

Cathalan inclines his head. "I could never abandon my people, Moon-Blessed Elder," he says, using the title Theo explained as most proper. Both Luka and Cathalan studied the Kiterans as much as any high-born, but scholars didn't keep cohesive

records of Kiteran culture. Balivartians and Siacchians alike thought there was little point in understanding their barbaric northern neighbors, which would have left them at a disadvantage if not for Theo's knowledge.

"Avoid eye contact," Theo schooled them the day before. "Address the woman properly and ignore the others. She is the head of the pack."

Gilianna's lips curl into a surprised smile. "Your manners have improved since we last spoke. How... respectable, and unexpected of a Southerner."

Cathalan chuckles. "I am nothing if not unexpected."

Gilianna inclines her head. She says, "We cannot return your people after the accusations leveled at them."

"Have you not already executed one of your own for the accusation of spying?" Cathalan asks. "Surely the life lost will suffice."

"Don't toy with me, Balivartian king," Gilianna warns. "I was told you come with information to trade for their lives." She arches a thin brow. "Though I am curious as to how you came across this knowledge."

"I am no fool, Moon-Blessed Elder," Cathalan says. "I left soldiers at the base of the mountain. I met them after my escape, and they reported how things have changed with... well." He pauses with a coy smile. "I will share the information, depending on how discussions go."

He continues before Gilianna can speak, "And be aware, Moon-Blessed Elder, that my soldiers are not only stationed at our shared border, but outside Cesscounthe as well. If my people do not receive word from me after our meeting, they will move to lay siege against the city, weakened as it is."

Luka hides his surprise – and distaste. That must be a bluff, he thinks, though he doesn't dare look at Cathalan to give him away.

“Threats are unnecessary,” Gilianna says, raising a hand when a man at her side moves to speak. “We know you want your people.”

“Will you offer us no assurance they will be released once we speak?” Luka asks, just as they rehearsed.

Before Gilianna can chastise him, Cathalan shoots Luka a look. “Be quiet, Consort,” he says, and unlike their practice sessions, he manages not to grin.

Luka ducks his head, playing the role of foolish, mouthy spouse. They've fooled all but Octavian, who glares at Luka, clearly seeing through the ruse. None of that matters though; the question has been asked, and Gilianna will struggle dancing around the answer now.

“You're very lucky we've determined you are not Theodori Hunter Wolf-Born's mate, Luka Lockhart,” Gilianna says after a long silence. “I don't suppose you've returned with him or his supposed mate, Xyla Mobiele? Are they hiding beyond our gates?”

Cathalan's face twitches almost imperceptibly at Xyla's name.

“They abandoned us, High Elder,” Cathalan says. “After we helped them escape, they left us to die in the snow to save their own skin. They are no allies.”

“Lies,” hisses Octavian. “First you claim to be a foreign diplomat – a noble – when you arrive, and now you are a king, and now you are making these claims?”

Gilianna fixes him with a fierce glare, and Octavian instantly quiets.

“Share your information,” Gilianna says after a long silence. “We do not want war with your country, Balivartian king, nor do we want to lose more to a mindless conflict. After, we will weigh your story’s worth against the lives we hold.”

“If my people are not returned to me, whole, I will be very unhappy, Moon-Blessed Elder,” Cathalan says, breaking their script as his voice drops an octave.

Luka presses his lips together.

“Enough of your peacocking.” Gilianna waves a hand. “Share your information, Balivartian king.”

Luka watches Octavian’s face as Cathalan speaks:

“Cesscounthe has fallen once again. This time, not to your people. Nor has it been reclaimed by the Siacchian government. No, impyassi rebels have taken the Council. The capital is a mess of conflict. Your guards are lost, but the battle is not.” Cathalan takes a step forward, looking just above Gilianna’s head as he speaks.

Octavian’s face pales the slightest bit.

“Now is the time,” Cathalan says, voice soft but powerful. “You can reclaim the capital entirely and fully crush their council. Before, you had a weak grip through... certain alliances.”

A muscle twitches at Octavian’s right eye, though otherwise his face remains still.

Cathalan continues, “Whatever you decide, Balivartia will support your efforts.”

By the time he finishes, his lips lifted in a polite smile, Gilianna’s brows have reached her hairline.

“Balivartia will support us... assuming the prisoners are released unharmed?” she says.

Cathalan’s smile widens. “Exactly.”

“I never imagined Balivartia to be so forgiving –”

Cathalan’s expression sharpens. “Consider it as you doing me a favor by lowering Siacchian trade tariffs.”

Gilianna falls silent. She sits so perfectly straight in her chair, her spine doesn’t even brush against its back. Her eyes drift to the side as she looks at her fellow Elders. Their faces appear equally apathetic, but she must read something there, for when she looks back to Cathalan, her jaw is set.

Before she can speak, Octavian clears his throat. “If I may add something, High Elder?” he simpers.

Luka strangles the urge to bare his teeth. Memories of Octavian bringing Luka to Linne, to Xyla, injured, and Evland Childes –dying –

He stuffs the memories deep, instead focusing on the steady beat of his heart and the new strength of the mating bond that connects him to Theo—and the marriage bond linking him to Cathalan.

“Please,” Gilianna says. “I’m especially interested to hear about these Cesscounthe rebels. They never appeared in any of your reports, Scholar.”

Octavian shifts his weight. “That’s... there are things that my contacts kept from me, High Elder. That much is becoming clear.”

When Gilianna's brows again rise, Octavian rushes to finish, "Cesscounthe is the heart of the Siacchian empire. We need their farmlands, High Elder. If we can take the capital, we can take their country. And if we have truly lost it, and this is not some fabrication the Balivartian king is spinning –"

"I will not have you accuse my guest," Gilianna cuts in, steely. Luka must hide a smile, though the swell of victory in his chest immediately flattens when Gilianna adds in a softer, more private tone, "But you are correct. A liar proven once will prove himself to be a liar again. Whatever you claim, Balivartian king, we will send a scouting party to accompany you."

"I understand." Cathalan inclines his head by a hair.

"Please hold a civil tongue in your head or not at all, Octavian Scholar," Gilianna says to Octavian.

"Of course," Octavian says through gritted teeth. He stares through Cathalan. Muscles flex in his jaw as his hand tuck behind his back, surely curling into fists.

Warm satisfaction curls in Luka's stomach at the sight. For so long, Octavian cast a long shadow of fear over his heart, but now Luka can enjoy the sight of his tormentor forced to make himself smaller.

Octavian bows his head and finally says in a low voice, "I cannot determine if this information is true or not. I can only advise that you handle it with care. The situation at Cesscounthe was... delicate when I left, though nowhere near as fraught as the king claims. If we were to send an army based on his word alone and if he has lied to us... we will likely lose any allies we have left in the capital."

Gilianna steeples her fingers. "I'm aware," she says. She glances at her fellow Elders from the corners of her wrinkled eyes before she waves her hand. "We will speak

amongst ourselves. Vittoria, please escort our two... guests... somewhere they can wait in the meantime.”

The blonde guard approaches them, her face impossibly stonier than it was before. As she glowers, Luka realizes she was likely punished for their escape. From what little he learned of Kiterans from Theo, they are not a people who take kindly to their leaders making mistakes.

“And your prisoners?” Cathalan asks before Vittoria can herd them away. “Will you release them to us?”

Gilianna’s lips curl into a cold smile. “Not yet.”

They’re left in a small, windowless room to wait. While Luka worries the floorboards with pacing, Cathalan mutters to himself.

“Stop fretting,” Cathalan says after Luka completes his fifth lap of the room. “It will do you no good.”

“I’m thinking of what our next move should be,” Luka says while he gnaws on a hangnail. “What are you doing?”

“They’ll make their decision based on what we’ve already said, Luka,” Cathalan says. His face is calm except for the lines of tension in his neck.

“Is it true what you said? About having your people outside Cesscounthe, ready to take the city?”

A cord appears in Cathalan’s neck and then disappears. “No.”

Before Luka can press Cathalan further, the man turns to him with an expression that

were he any less pretty, would have been called a leer. “And what’s this I felt yesterday afternoon? And again yesterday evening? Have you and you-know-who sealed your bond?”

Heat rushes up Luka’s neck. “That’s – you – how –”

Cathalan points to the circular mark on his palm. “I feel what you feel, Luka.”

Luka tries not to think back to all that he felt – Theo’s warm fingers, his mouth, his –

“You –” Luka tries to say.

“I know, I know. Some privacy would be nice. Don’t you know you’re not supposed to entertain lovers until I have a royal heir on the way? I could have him beheaded, Luka.”

Luka bares his teeth. “You wouldn’t dare.”

Cathalan smiles. “No. I wouldn’t. I am happy for you, Luka.”

They fall into silence again, and all too quickly, Luka returns to his thoughts. His worries.

Luka completes his sixth lap and silently celebrates the knowledge that they likely won’t be killed. No –Cathalan is too important for that.

But who knows how long the Elders will take to make their decision. Will he and Cathalan have enough time to make it back to Cesscounthe – to save Cassian – everyone?

As Luka concludes his fifteenth lap of the room, a knock sounds at the door.

Luka darts forward as the lock clicks open and Vittoria's dour expression meets them.

"The Elders have decided to release your people," Vittoria says. Behind her, afternoon light filters through the narrow hallway. She taps the hilt of her axe mindlessly as she speaks. "Upon the condition that you will take Octavian Scholar and myself in a search party to investigate. Should we find that Cesscounthe is not in the state you report, both your lives will be forfeit."

The tension in Luka's chest eases, but Cathalan's expression remains blank.

"Well?" Vittoria says. "What say you?"

"I will agree to your terms," Cathalan says, holding up a finger before Luka can speak. "On one condition."

Vittoria narrows her eyes. "Speak."

"I need to be sent ahead of the party. Your Elders will let me leave now, with your fastest steed –"

"No."

"– my people are being sent to Cesscounthe as we speak, but they are acting on a messenger's command. They will be scattered and in need of a firm hand. I worry that if they arrive at Cesscounthe without me to lead them, the battle will go astray and lives will be lost. I cannot have that." Cathalan does not smile as he meets Vittoria's stare directly. He folds his arms over his chest, squaring his shoulders. Suddenly, the difference between his height and Luka's seems much larger as Cathalan directly meets Vittoria's stare.

"We cannot trust you. Those rumors about you being a demon prince must have some

stock,” Vittoria says.

Cathalan all but laughs in her face. “Those nursery tales they spread on the front because they wanted to scare your children? What do they say – that we drink the blood of our enemies? Would you like to check me for fangs?”

Vittoria curls her lip.

“You could send me with a scout, as your Moon-Blessed Elder suggested,” Cathalan says. “Your strongest, most trusted soldier. There would be no doubt then – it’s not like I would ever be able to defeat such a warrior. I am only a king bolstered by rumors, after all.”

Vittoria’s stone face doesn’t crack.

After three long, slow heartbeats, she says, “You are a powerful tool in our hands. Why would we let you, the King of Balivartia, go so easily?”

“You’ll still have my people in your little party, won’t you? My consort?”

Vittoria’s silence is confirmation enough.

Cathalan says, “I understand that I’m politically powerful and there are none like me _”

Despite himself, Luka cannot help rolling his eyes.

“– but I can give you a Balivartian heir instead.”

“Balivartian heirs are about as common as summer rabbits,” Vittoria sneers.

“Not this one. His claim to the throne is kept secret. None know he is a threat. If I am killed, he is next to compete for the throne, and they will never see him coming.”

Vittoria raises a blonde brow, and Luka gapes at Cathalan.

You don't mean –

“Who is this man?” Vittoria asks.

“His name is Darri.”

An hour, much worried pacing (in Luka's case), and one nap (in Cathalan's case) later, they are released from their windowless room and Cathalan mounts his newly acquired horse with his new Kiteran companion – whom Cathalan will no doubt make short work of once they are out of eyesight of Akull. The darkening evening is cold enough that Luka's teeth chatter as he stands with his back to the half a dozen Kiteran guards –including a scowling Vittoria.

Cathalan only pauses for a moment after he's seated. He looks down at Luka, his face apologetic.

“I'll see you again, my love,” he says with a little too much drama for Luka to be able to take him seriously.

I have to go after her, was all Cathalan said to explain why he was leaving Luka behind.

But why? Luka wanted to ask. Why is Xyla so important to you?

And, of course, the question left unanswered while Cathalan's snores filled the room:

Darri is your brother?

Really though, that last part should have been obvious. They even look alike.

“Darri will keep you safe,” Cathalan says as he turns his horse’s head. “And don’t turn your back too long to that Scholar.”

“I know,” Luka says.

Cathalan reaches for him, and Luka clasps the Balivartian king’s hand with his own. The ring of scar tissue at his palm winks up at him from his chapped skin.

“Try not to do too many stupid things,” Luka says.

Cathalan smiles, and though the gesture is careless, fear flickers in the corners of his eyes. “I’m not sure why I feel like this, Luka,” he says. “It scares me, a little.”

Empathy warms Luka’s heart. He understands why, but he doesn’t have time to explain.

“Are you done?” Vittoria asks behind him. “We need to prepare to leave by sunrise.”

Exhaustion hangs from Luka’s body like hands trying to drag him beneath icy waters. Cathalan squeezes his hand and turns the horse away.

“I’ll see you when this is all over, First Consort,” he calls back as he shoulders the supply bag the Kiterans gave him. His horse makes its way slowly through the plowed snows, the steed of his Kiteran guard close behind.

Luka closes his eyes, imagining what things will look like when this is all over . When he opens them, Cathalan is gone.

I hope so, Cathalan.

Oh, Thought, I hope so.

Chapter Twelve - Theo

O n the third day of Theo's slow journey to Cesscounthe, an unwelcome figure appears north of him, outlined against the gray evening. The figure's Kiteran horse moves fluidly through the snow-dusted road, tiredness drawing its pace to a walk.

"Theodori!" the figure calls, and Theo lengthens his stride.

The first two days he made his journey south in wolf-form. He shifted back into his human flesh that morning in hopes of eating a warm meal prepared with opposable thumbs, wrapping himself in furs and skin he kept draped around his wolf's neck. He considers now changing back; he'll surely be able to outrun this tired horse.

But no –if the Snake of the South is traveling during the day, Luka's life will be in danger. And Theo can't have that.

So Theo jerks to a halt, turning his back to the northern wind. Furs flap against his cheek as he glares into the growing night.

The Balivartian king pulls to a halt beside him. The Kiteran horse is large but old, a scarred creature that is one of the few allowed to retire from the battlefields. Its dinner plate sized hooves leave frown-like holes in the snow as it snorts, releasing a jet of steam into Theo's face.

Cathalan looks awful; his skin has a sallow undertone and there are deep bags beneath his eyes. And his hands – are his fingers crusted with old blood?

“I thought I might catch up with you,” Cathalan says. There’s a fleck of something red-brown at the corner of his mouth that he smears away with a dart of his tongue.

“Why are you not protecting Luka?” Theo growls. His hand hovers above a sword he’d uncovered that morning from a settlement abandoned near the Siacchian border.

“Now, now,” Cathalan says. “There’s no need for that, Theodori.” He raises his hands from the reins. His skin is slightly pink and shiny beneath his cloak. The day, Theo recalls, has been overcast, but likely sunny enough to burn the monstrous skin of the Balivartian king.

Cathalan dismounts from the horse. “It’s wonderful that I caught you just in time for the evening meal! What do you have for us?”

Theo’s hand has yet to leave his sword’s hilt. “Where is Luka?”

“Come now, Theodori. I’ve come a long way to get to you. I had to clear some people out of the way, too.” He flaps his rust-colored fingertips. “And surely you still feel Luka with your mating bond, yes?” Cathalan wiggles his brows.

Theo’s mind eagerly conjures the moment when said mating bond was finally solidified. Luka’s soft sighs against Theo’s naked skin –the press of their lips –Theo licking his way down Luka’s body and then plunging inside –

No. You can’t think about that now.

“Luka told you?” Theo says, voice little more than a barely restrained growl.

Cathalan barks a surprised laugh. Theo blinks at the sound. All of Cathalan’s chuckles and chortles sound so rehearsed, like each sound is measured and counted to be the perfect amount of amused–but also the perfect amount of grating. But this

outburst sounds honest.

“Of course not,” Cathalan says, waving his hand. “But I wasn’t born yesterday –the two of you wander off into the daylight and then come back, all pink-cheeked and smelling like a whore house? What was I supposed to think?”

Theo settles on glaring because he can’t think of anything better to say. Finally, he grinds out his first question: “Where is Luka?”

“I didn’t leave him unprotected, Theodori,” Cathalan says. He pulls the horse’s reins and walks slowly toward a copse of trees. “This should be shelter enough for the night, don’t you think?” The horse trails along behind the Balivartian king, mindlessly obedient.

Cathalan continues, “We freed Darri. I left him behind –despite his multiple protests, you should know –to watch Luka. Oh, don’t make that face now, Theodori. You know you can’t harm me without hurting Luka, don’t you? Your barbarian people know that too, and they really don’t want an international incident on their hands. They’re being much more respectful now that they know I am king.”

Thankfully, he doesn’t turn around to wiggle his brows at Theo again –Theo isn’t sure he’d be able to resist the urge to strangle the man if he did –but Theo can hear the gesture in Cathalan’s half-laughing tone.

“The Elders need to deal with someone they can trust, and they will never trust me, even if I far outrank Luka. Luka is Siacchian first, my First Consort second to them. A Siacchian isn’t an automatic enemy.” Cathalan strokes his horse’s dark flank. “Walk with me now, Theodori. It will be dark soon, and I have kindling and dinner in my saddlebags –and you look like you have nothing more than old boot leather to chew on.”

“The Kiterans really just let you go?”

Cathalan finally spares him a smile thrown carelessly over his shoulder. “No, Theodori, they didn’t just let me go . Like I said, I had to clear some people out of the way. I’m sure it was no one you knew.”

Theo hesitates as he watches the distance between Cathalan and himself grow wider and wider. The Balivartian king and his borrowed Kiteran horse cast long, purple shadows against the snowy hillside, like bruises against pale skin. The gray sunset fades to grayer evening, and slowly color drains from the world, replaced with the glow of the moon. He should feel more anger at Cathalan having killed one of his people, but instead he feels nothing but relief because – Luka is still alive. Luka is still safe.

I would have traded anything for such news .

Theo tucks his chin, resigning himself to an evening of talking, and follows Cathalan.

They make camp beneath the stout, leafless trees. Cathalan clears the ground and Theo breathes life into the kindling, and before long they’re crouched around a humble fire, the horse warm against their backs and bowls of rations from Cathalan’s saddlebags heating their hands.

Cathalan chats aimlessly.

It’s like he hates silence, Theo thinks as he chews his way through dried jerky and thin soup, watching the king out of the corner of his eye.

What does Luka see in this man?

He is attractive, that much is certain, but there’s little more to him besides. The sharp

lines of his jaw grow more pointed in the flickering shadow of the firelight. The veins in his hands more prominent. His brown eyes catch and reflect the flames, turning his gaze to a dancing amber.

“–and I am really sorry about that,” Cathalan finishes. It’s only when he looks at Theo, his eyes a little too intent and almost –warm? Sympathetic? –that Theo realizes he should have been listening.

Theo takes his time as he finishes chewing through his rations, letting the king squirm in something akin to discomfort before he says, “Sorry for what?”

“Were you really not listening to all of –Theodori! I was pouring my heart out to you!” Cathalan glares, and Theo is surprised to see genuine anger in his face.

Theo wrestles with a mixture of frustration and embarrassment. Finally, he says slowly, as if speaking to a child, “We are not friends, Cathalan.”

Cathalan’s expression softens minutely, which frustrates Theo even more. “No,” he says. “We are enemies still, I imagine. But we are also allies, are we not? We’re both trying to end this war.”

“And you are still trying to win Cesscounthe and the West because you gave me Luka, and I must assist you in that effort.”

“I don’t believe I gave you Luka. Luka is not a person that can simply be given. I just let the two of you know where you could find each other.” Cathalan chews thoughtfully before continuing. The fire crackles as it devours a sap-filled log. “And I’m not sure if I want Cesscounthe any longer.”

“What?” Theo cannot keep the shock from his voice.

“There is more to this world than conquering and power, Theodori – as I’m sure you’ve learned. As the third heir, I was never raised for ruling. I was to be a weapon. I was to expand our kingdom. But now I ... I have seen the cost of such an upbringing. Now, I can see that there is far more to life than victory. A good king is not a bloodthirsty, conniving man, but a kind one.”

Theo gapes at the Balivartian king, struggling to find words. This is the man who haunted his nightmares. This is the man who took his mother and father from him. The Snake of the South. Cathalan was not allowed to rest, not in Theo’s thoughts. He was always driving Theo forward – in the Kiteran military, it was vengeance and a desire for power, power to keep himself and his loved ones safe, that forced Theo to ascend the ranks.

No, a monster like that isn’t allowed to say there is anything that matters more than conquering and power .

Theo’s hands curl into fists. “What do you mean by that?” He is shocked by how evenly his voice emerges.

Cathalan stares into the flames. “Which would you prefer, Luka or victory?”

“That’s not even a comparison.”

“Exactly.” Cathalan meets Theo’s gaze, and Theo tries to interpret the expression resting there; it’s like looking into a mirror and seeing the version of himself months ago, when he first met Luka. When he realized that his life as he knew it was about to end – horribly – and that he wouldn’t care because something more important was there.

“I’ll think about it,” Cathalan says. “But thoughts of conquering Cesscounthe are too small for me now. There is so much more I can accomplish, don’t you think?”

Theo tenses under Cathalan's teasing smile.

"Besides, there are far more important things for us to discuss, aren't there, Theodori? We're both heading to Cesscounthe, aren't we? To help Luka and Xyla? What's your plan?"

"As if I would share it with the likes of you," Theo growls automatically, despite the foolishness of the statement.

Cathalan laughs like this is a very good joke. "Xyla will hopefully have already informed the rebels that support is coming –"

"You can't be serious," Theo says. "You're going to send your own people to help a woman you just met?"

Cathalan looks away, shrugging. "The bonds of prison are not easily broken." He continues then as if Theo hasn't spoken, "We'll want to stir the rebellion so when the Kiterans arrive, it will look exactly as we reported: that Cesscounthe has fallen."

"You've just been crowned king! You've been so careful to craft a terrifying reputation – that will be ruined if you don't have an explanation for your people –"

"Oh, Theodori!" Cathalan claps a hand to his chest. "I didn't realize you cared!"

Theo's mouth snaps shut because – well – he doesn't care. Not really.

"I guess it would make sense if you do," Cathalan continues. "Not only are we allies, but we're also brothers in a way, aren't we?"

Theo chokes and then glances at Cathalan's watery soup.

“What is it?” Cathalan asks.

“Just checking for alcohol.”

Cathalan chuckles merrily. “No need for that! Think about it, Theodori; you are mated to Luka and I am married to him. Does that not, in some twisted way, make us brothers of some nature? Or if not that...”

He looks at Theo again, his gaze changing. It takes Theo a moment to understand what the darkening of the Balivartian’s eyes and the straightening of his shoulders signifies:

Arousal.

Theo flies to his feet. “Now I know you must be joking –”

Cathalan smiles. He brushes his hand, lightly, against his inner forearm. “Did you know, Theodori, that the marriage bond between myself and Luka conveys more than just sensations of pain?”

Theo pauses.

“What Luka feels, I feel. When Luka feels pain, I feel pain. When Luka feels... pleasure, I feel pleasure.”

Images of Luka, body braced tight as an orgasm rocked through him – as he came in Theo’s mouth, as he curled and flushed beneath Theo’s talented fingers, flash through Theo’s thoughts.

“You... felt what I was doing to him,” Theo says.

“You’re as clever as they always claimed.” Cathalan’s fingers brush against his own collarbone, barely exposed beneath his furs. “And what I feel, Luka feels – and what Luka feels...”

Distantly, as if in a dream, pleasure stirs in Theo’s stomach.

Cathalan grins at him. “You do feel it, don’t you?”

Theo scowls at him. “Nothing. I feel nothing.”

“Don’t be such a prickly pear, Theodori.”

“I would never do that to Luka.”

“Didn’t you hear what I said? Luka feels what we both feel.”

“But I haven’t asked him first,” Theo bites out. “And you don’t care for him like that, do you?”

He glares at the Balivartian king. “No,” Theo continues. “You don’t care for Luka like that, and you may be attracted to the both of us – to me , but you don’t care about me like that either. You like Xyla Mobiele – you like her far too much.”

Theo steps toward Cathalan, who rises to his feet, the smile falling from his face.

Theo says, “Why are you teasing me like this?”

Cathalan shrugs, though the gesture is somewhat manic. “What? I can’t ask for a once-in-a-lifetime psychic threesome?”

And despite everything , the thought does make Theo’s cock twitch with interest.

For a moment, Theo entertains the idea; Luka, likely preparing for his own journey to Cesscounthe, curled in his sleeping furs. Would he feel the sensations two-fold, coming from both Cathalan and Theo? All Theo would need to do is press his lips to Cathalan's throat – right there, where his pulse flickers, and reach beneath his belt. Already, he can see the curve of Cathalan's own interest in his trousers, ready for Theo's hand. Theo would wrap his hands around Cathalan's cock, and the sensation would reach Luka, and then Theo – would it be like stroking himself?

What if I put my lips on him?

What if I –

“No,” Theo says, crushing the thought. “Not after all that we've done to each other.”

Cathalan's eyes drop to the snow melting at their feet. Beyond the flickering light of their campfire, the leafless trees sway with a soft wind.

“I killed your sister,” Theo says. “You can never forgive me for that.”

“You were a child,” Cathalan whispers. “We were both so young.”

For the second time that night, Theo is shocked, and this time, he can't control his stuttering response. “Tha-that's no excuse.”

“We should have never been on that battlefield. Being a prodigy is not an excuse for such poor leadership.”

“Had I been ten years older, I would have killed her just the same –”

“– stop saying that.”

“Saying what? That I killed her? Because it’s the truth –”

“ Stop .” Cathalan raises his head, nostrils flared. He bares his teeth, which have grown long and inhuman. The fangs gleam in the firelight. Strangely – wrongly – the sight makes Theo’s cock twitch.

“I forgive you, Theodori. Is that what you want to hear? My sister died – she was killed by you ten years ago, and I can never seek revenge against you because you were a soldier. We were both soldiers, fighting in a pointless war. You are mated to a dear friend of mine, and I never want to cause him pain. And he loves you – for some reason.” Cathalan’s blazing fury fades with each word into a sadness so deep, Theo must look away.

Cathalan presses his hands against his face. “If I continue hating you, I don’t think I will like the person I become.”

The fire crackles. The stars peer down, silent observers, as Cathalan says quietly, so quiet, it is nearly lost to the night: “So I forgive you, Theodori Hunter Wolf-Born.”

True silence descends between them, as soft and delicate as freshly fallen snow.

Theo breaks it with a sigh. “Fine,” he grumbles. “I forgive you, too.”

Cathalan laughs wetly, and Theo realizes, with no small measure of horror, that the Balivartian king is crying.

“You don’t have to forgive me,” Cathalan says.

“I don’t care,” Theo says. “I do forgive you. I made a mistake. I should have moved my parents away from the border. It was the...” His words tangle in his throat, caught on the scent of burning flesh, still all-too-fresh in his memories. “It was the right

decision for you to make. I would have done the same.”

Cathalan shakes his head, pressing his hands to his cheeks. He clears away tears. “It didn’t work though. I was so afraid when I learned your spirit wasn’t broken. I was terrified of who you would take from me next.”

Theo closes his eyes. “I... I pushed everyone away. I was so careful to not care about anyone again – because I thought you would kill them.”

“We’re both a couple of fools, aren’t we?”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Theodori grumbles. “One fool, and one simpleton.”

Cathalan chuckles and sits. He turns his head to his horse’s side. The beast doesn’t even stir. His face almost vanishes beneath his furs, his tanned cheeks flushed and his eyes watery. “I’m sorry I haunted your life for so long, Theodori.”

Theo chews through the words, and for the first time, looking at the Snake of the South doesn’t conjure memories of roasted flesh and poor choices. Instead, he just sees a man. Part of himself hates that. You’re growing soft, a voice hisses inside, but it is an unfamiliar, quiet voice now. Another, bigger, part of himself feels strangely... proud.

“I’m sorry your sister died because of me.”

Cathalan stiffens and then relaxes. The firelight casts strange shadows on his face. He is quiet for so long, Theo is sure he has fallen asleep. But then the Balivartian king murmurs, words barely audible over the crackle of the fire, “I think... I don’t mind having you as Luka’s mate.”

“I’d rather you not be Luka’s husband.”

“Well, mistakes were made.” Cathalan rubs his fingers against the scar on his palm. “I did what I was trained to do: make the best of a bad situation. I knew I couldn’t trust either of you.”

He flops onto his back and rolls onto his side, and after another long silence, he hisses, “Also, I’m sorry I tried to seduce you.”

“Don’t apologize for that yet,” Theo says, closing his eyes. Despite the tightness in his chest, his cock pulses in his trousers. He grits his teeth as a phantom hand strokes him – Luka .

Cathalan chuckles softly. “Ah,” he says. “It seems the matter will be answered for us.”

They both sit in tense silence as Luka takes matters in his own hands. Pleasure ripples across his mate bond and is surely rebounded through the marriage bond between Luka and Cathalan. He is careful not to look at the man across from him, even as muffled moans fill the night air. It doesn’t take long for them to both turn in opposite directions and shudder into the snow, their groans sounding in unison as Luka answers their problem for them.

“Yes, don’t apologize for the seduction yet,” Theo says after they have both returned to their sleeping furs. He is suddenly very tired. “I’ll need to mull over forgiving you for at least another ten years.”

Chapter Thirteen - Luka

“ I ’m so glad we’re getting to spend this quality time together again, Luka,” Octavian says. The smugness in his voice is somewhat lost as he bites the inside of his cheek, words mangled by the gait of his Kiteran horse. He growls and spits a glob of frothy blood into the snow, glaring at Luka like it was Luka’s fault that he bit his own tongue.

Before Octavian can speak again, Darri presses his horse between them. The Kiterans were reluctant to give the Balivartian any weapons, but after much persuasion from Luka, they granted Darri and Darri alone a single dagger. Darri’s hand rests on the blade’s hilt now while he glares at Octavian. Cold wind buffets between them, the stark white landscape and the small party of Kiteran soldiers at their backs.

“Step back, Scholar,” Darri says. He puffs out his chest. The overcast day only highlights the shadows under his eyes, the hollows of his cheeks made more prominent by the two and a half nights he was left behind in Kiteran prison. A fact which Luka is not guilty about.

Luka looks down, focusing all his attention on maintaining his seat. He has not missed sitting in a saddle since his and Theo’s frantic ride to Hessalar, though Kiteran horses are far wider than Siacchian beasts. He is grateful to look away from Octavian, for eye contact with the man only serves to remind him of the confusing night before and the strange sensations and feelings that gripped him.

The night before, when a sudden heat overcame him. The feeling drove him to unlace his tunic to expose his sweaty chest to the inside of his tent, and then a phantom

tingling that ran from deep in his stomach to his groin. Confused, he had curled on his side. It took him a few moments to recognize the source of the feelings: Theo.

It was, of course, at that moment that Octavian Scholar had demanded an audience.

“Luka, are you still awake? I wish to speak to you.”

Luka managed to muffle a low groan as the sensation of fingers trailing along his arms and collarbone brought bolts of pleasure to his groin. Truly, he had never felt anything more baffling.

He shifted, and just when he nearly gave beneath the pressure and grasped himself beneath his trousers, the feeling changed to a profound – nearly shattering – sadness. Confused, he curled on his side. It took him a few moments to recognize the source of the feelings: Theo.

And Cathalan.

“Luka, I can hear you in there.”

Before Luka could protest, the flaps of his tent were opened and Octavian entered. Luka kept his expression as passive as he could while Octavian said – something – truly, Luka was only paying him a quarter of a mind, torn between the pleasure burning in his lower belly and revealing none of the sensations to the man prattling on about – truce? Peace? Really, none of it made any sense. And judging by the slight smirk Octavian couldn’t seem to hide, none of it was worth trusting either way.

Octavian paused, “Are you listening, Luka? Or are my intentions to help your hopiar really just moving you to tears?”

“What?” Luka touched his cheeks, mortified to find his face wet. “No – I mean, yes –

certainly.”

“Perhaps we should discuss this at a time when you are less... emotional.”

Luka leapt on the opportunity. “Yes. Yes – a wonderful idea.”

Octavian arched a brow when Luka didn’t rise to open the tent for him. Darri paced outside, grumbling disapprovingly, and Luka certainly didn’t want to give them and any other eavesdropping soldiers a front row seat to the pressure growing – again – in his trousers. The sadness faded quickly.

What in Thought’s name are Theo and Cathalan doing to each other to feel like this?

The thought should have been concerning. Instead, it only made it harder for Luka to concentrate on his farewells to Octavian.

As he ducked into his tent, Luka was gripped by another heat again, and this time, he decided it best to embrace the feeling in hopes of driving it away. He wetted his palm with a quick swipe of his tongue and gripped his cock. He was only three jerks in when Octavian’s voice, still just outside the tent, drifted in: “Still thinking of my proposal, Luka? I had a few more thoughts before I went.”

Thankfully, Luka was never a noisy bedmate, and he was able to finish with gritted teeth while Octavian waxed on about opportunities and potential partnership through the thin walls of his tent. It was only after, Luka’s face burning hot, that he recalled Octavian’s sharper than human hearing. Was that why he refused to leave? Because he knew what I was doing?

It means that now, Luka still can’t meet Octavian’s eye.

It also doesn’t help that they are at the heart of a Kiteran company headed by Vittoria

Healer.

They were forced to wait several days for the mountain passes to clear beneath a chilly winter sun before Luka begged the Elders to release a group of two hundred Kiteran soldiers. Their group is large enough, hopefully, that Luka will be able to use them to bluff his mother into forfeiting.

But not so large that, should the Kiterans decide to claim a wounded Cesscounthe for themselves, the Siacchians won't be able to fight them off.

Hopefully.

Luka inhales harshly, and cold bites into his mouth. He curls his hands into fists, trying to wiggle some feeling back into his fingers. Kitera stretches before him, bleak and white, and at their backs, the mountains loom, ominous as a predator. His skin, which had pulsed with a phantom ache and grown burnt-pink over the last few days, has finally healed. Cathalan finally got out of the sun, thank Thought.

The Elders' parting words follow him.

If you're lying, Gilianna had said, face perfectly calm. We will come and kill every last citizen in Cesscounthe. And unlike your people, we don't discriminate between hopiar and human. We do not take kindly to those who try to play us for fools.

As if Luka could forget; Octavian is an ever-present reminder of Gilianna's threat. Last night was not the first time Octavian haunted Luka's tent. For each evening, before Luka finally relaxed into his meal and drink, Darri tested his food. Twice, the steaming pile of grains and goat milk were discarded. Once, the milk, when splattered across the snow before Luka's dismayed eyes, curdled upon meeting the ground, turning a grayish green. Octavian looked on with something like disappointment.

Was all that nonsense about a partnership just a game to him? Luka wondered. Was he just trying to get me to let my guard down?

“You are lucky,” Darri told Luka while Luka gaped, “that Cathalan had me trained as a taste tester.” His words should have made Luka sad – it meant that Darri, who Luka only just learned was Cathalan’s half-brother, would have suffered in training himself to withstand a myriad of poisons. But Luka was too focused on himself.

Lucky was not the word Luka had been reaching for then. And it certainly isn’t the word Luka thinks of now, as Darri inserts himself between Octavian and Luka like a human shield. Octavian’s lip curls as he directs his mare clear of Darri’s path, though the expression on his face makes it clear he will return when Darri lets his guard down.

“I don’t understand what he thinks he will gain by coming after you like that,” Darri murmurs once Octavian’s horse has stomped away.

Luka concentrates on his steed. Though the mare is surefooted, the descent down the mountain –the sheer drop to his side –makes his hands shake. They take a different path down the mountain than before to cut the fastest, and apparently more dangerous, route to Cesscounthe. His answer emerges almost absently, “Should I die, he can go home.”

“What?” Darri says, looking back at him.

Luka blinks, meeting the man’s eyes. He’s shocked now, that he missed any resemblance between Darri and Cathalan before; the two look so similar with their tawny skin, sharp jaws—even the way Darri narrows his eyes looks the same as Cathalan’s suspicious stare. Sure, Darri is nothing but stoic silence to Cathalan’s grins, but with their mouths shut, they could be twins.

“If my horse tumbles from the cliff, I die – and Cathalan dies. But the Kiterans can explain this away with words like accident and exposure –”

“Poison doesn’t fit. It’s not like five times the lethal limit of lovelace would fall into your cup without intent.”

“Ah, but don’t you see?” Luka smiles grimly, and his heart aches a bit. He misses Theo. He misses him the way a soldier would miss a blade. The way a bird would miss a wing. “The poison isn’t meant for me –it’s meant for you. With my persistent guard out of the way, it will be much easier for an accident to happen. And we’re miles from any sort of help or kind ear who will listen to my cause... and surrounded by scapegoats.” He jerks his chin toward the Kiteran soldiers.

Darri stiffens. He was the only Balivartian soldier allowed to accompany Luka. The others were sent home to the South, escorted by a slow-moving Kiteran group that would guarantee they arrived months later, long before the Balivartians could send political reinforcements. That means Darri is not just Luka’s first line of defense –he’s Luka’s only line of defense.

“He’s really thought that all through?” Darri mutters, looking at the back of Octavian’s head.

The Scholar sits primly on his horse, speaking to a common soldier. Though he doesn’t look back at Luka, his head turns slightly.

“Yes,” Luka says. Octavian sits a little straighter.

Darri takes in this change in posture with a raised brow. He casts a sideways glance at Luka.

Darri was hurt to hear that Cathalan left him behind –again –but he took well enough

to his role of guarding Luka. It was, Darri told him, just as important as guarding the king, because of the marriage bond.

Luka inclines his head. Yes, he thinks as Darri's eyes widen, darting from Octavian to Luka's face. He can certainly hear us.

"He's a smart man," Luka says, because Octavian loves nothing more than to have his ego stroked. "We will have to be careful."

The tension in his chest eases a bit when Darri shares a small smile with him, and says, "I see. I'm glad you told me as much."

Luka knows about keeping dangerous, capricious people happy. His mother taught him well. He just needs to survive until they arrive at Cesscounthe –Cesscounthe, where Xyla should be stirring the rebels, and Theo and Cathalan should be at her side.

These Kiterans soldiers will be the last matches to ignite the rebellion that saves the impyassi .

Then Luka can save his brother.

And all he needs to do is keep Octavian happy –and stay alive.

It's afternoon on the fifth day when Luka's nerves start to wear on him. Octavian gave up on the poisonings a day ago, and now Luka's left to wonder what else the Kiteran is planning. Fretting, Luka paces the perimeter of the camp.

There's more than just Octavian to worry about. They're traveling far too slow –even after the fifth time Luka questioned the navigator and he received the answer that they will arrive in about two weeks, Luka was antsy and dissatisfied.

His boots crunch snow as he walks. The soldiers eye him with mild disinterest, and Luka does his best to ignore them. Most are tall and light-haired, like Theo, and when he sees them out of the corner of his eye, sometimes his heart gives a hopeful lurch – only to fall in disappointment.

He taps his gloved hand against his collarbone as he paces. There, deep in his chest, he can feel the bond between himself and Theo. Weaker now, with all the distance surely between them, but ever-present. It means that even on long, late nights, shivering in his sleeping sack, Luka knows he's not alone.

“Luka,” a voice says, and Luka is forcefully reminded that of course he isn't alone –there's always Octavian.

The Scholar smiles as he emerges from his tent, like he's approaching an old friend instead of an old enemy. “Just the person I wanted to see. Hope you're feeling better? You seemed a little... off the other night.”

Luka's cheeks warm. If he ignores Octavian, will he just go away? He is caught between wanting to shrink –both to continue the charade and because of the shameful, genuine fear that fills him at the sight of his old captor –and to stand his ground. Before he can make up his mind, Octavian is upon him.

“Walk with me?” Octavian asks.

Luka tries to disguise his nervous scan of the camp as he searches for Darri as a scratch to the neck. But no Darri. The bored Kiterans don't make eye contact. At the camp's heart, Vittoria sharpens a knife. Her brown-black eyes find Luka's and give him some measure of relief.

Octavian doesn't have the power to kill me in front of her. She is too just to stand for such a thing.

Luka sets his shoulders. “Alright,” he says, and he’s proud of the coolness in his voice.

Their strides match as they fall into the footprints Luka has already laid down in his first lap around the camp. They first walk in silence, and Luka is surprised to find that for all of Octavian’s length, his wrists are just as nobby and thin as Luka’s.

“You know, Luka,” Octavian says at the farthest point from the camp. “It’s nothing personal.”

Luka draws upon the lessons from his tutors and his mother from long ago and wills his face into the calm of a Cesse board. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

Octavian chuckles. He’s not an unattractive man; his face is a bit too narrow and his nose a little too pointed, but the lilt to his eyes speaks to good humor when he smiles, not just deviousness. He tucks his dark hair behind his cap before he speaks again, “No need to play dumb. I haven’t given up the game entirely, but I... I’m not the villain you think I am.”

Luka only barely muffles his scoff.

Octavian watches him with narrowed eyes. “You have different goals for when we return to Cesscounthe. No – no need to say anything otherwise. I won’t believe you.”

Luka closes his mouth.

Octavian continues, “I think you have changed since I knew you as Evland Childes. I think you have found that the beast you kept locked away is useful, and that our fellow impyassi do not deserve the treatment Siacchi forces upon them. You’ve gotten nobler. Yes. Disgustingly so.”

A pause.

Luka says, quietly, “Why do you think that?”

“Why else would Theodori have picked you over me? He would never be with a man who denied that part of himself.”

Luka swallows.

Octavian looks out across the fading horizon. The sunset streaks the sky with muted stripes of orange and red, and if not for the eternal cold, Luka might almost appreciate it. “I know I’ve done terrible things to you, but it wasn’t because I wanted to hurt you personally. Well... there was some of that. I didn’t love Theodori, but I cared for him. And you took him from me.”

“Theo is a person. You can’t take a person.” Venom seeps into Luka’s voice despite himself.

Octavian inclines his head, a little furrow digging between his brows. “What I mean to say is that... what I’ve done is for my own gain and my own gain only, but I can see that what you’re doing is for far more than that. Yes, I have been watching you. I know you, Luka. It would be much easier for me if you died, yes, but it’s not my goal. As I said the other night when you were... occupied, your death would just be... convenient.”

Cold fear seizes Luka at this confession. Fur sprouts from his arms, impossible to see beneath his coat. Claws strain his mittens. He swallows, glancing at the camp again. They round the edge of the perimeter. Two dozen steps and they’ll be within earshot again.

Octavian murmurs, “I want success, but not at the cost of hopiar—even if those hopiar

are Siacchian. Do you understand?”

Fifteen steps now.

Luka shoves his fear aside so he can dissect what Octavian is saying.

“You... you don’t want Linne to succeed in eliminating all the impyassi in Cesscounthe?”

Octavian’s lips quirk, and for a moment, Luka almost wonders if the soft expression on his face is one of amusement.

Five steps.

“What I want,” Octavian says, “is only the glory of Kitera, of course. Well, that, and _”

“Luka.”

Darri’s voice is like a gust of warmth in the cold evening. He bursts from his tent, eyes narrowed as he searches Luka for wounds.

“Ah, the bodyguard,” Octavian says. He returns Darri’s once-over with a small smile. “And what a nice bodyguard you are.”

Darri’s lip curls as he crosses his arms over his chest. He ignores Octavian as he meets Luka’s stare. He doesn’t speak, only raising his brows.

Are you okay? his gaze says.

Luka dips his head.

“Well, that’s enough of that!” Octavian says. He wraps his cloak around himself tightly, shivering. “It’s freezing out here. Not sure why you would want to pace around in the cold like this.”

And with that, he hurries back to his tent.

Darri marches toward Luka with all of the intensity of an oncoming storm. His hand wraps around Luka’s arm, vice-like, and he growls, “What did I say about being alone with him?”

Luka yanks free. “We have dozens of witnesses.” He jerks his chin toward the soldiers who are watching with increasing interest.

“And you think they would have done anything to stop him?”

“Of course they would have.” Luka snorts. “I can’t imagine how you and Cathalan ever made it through childhood without tearing each other to bits.”

Darri presses his lips together, but the anger does not fade from his eyes. “You are connected to him. You cannot be so careless with his life –especially not after you told me that man is actively seeking to kill you.”

“Actually, I think he just said that he’s giving up on that. For now, at least.”

“What?” Darri blinks. It’s clear he’s just woken from an early-evening nap. His cloak hangs haphazardly from his shoulders, and his jaw twitches, as if restraining a yawn.

Luka shakes his head. He looks past Darri, to where Octavian has vanished into his tent as he mentally replays the brief conversation. He rearranges his mental Cesse board, thumbing over the piece that he thought Octavian was. But no, despite Octavian having cast a long shadow over Luka’s fears for the past few months, there

is nothing truly cruel about the man –beyond his own ambition.

“You don’t need to worry about him killing me anymore,” Luka finally says.

“You’re certain?” Darri follows Luka’s gaze, scowling. “That didn’t last very long.”

“I think he realized he’s better served if I’m alive – for now, at least.”

Darri’s scowl darkens. “So you’re fine living entirely by his whims.”

Luka shrugs, wrapping his arms around himself. “I’m used to it.”

“Are you cold?”

Of course he’s cold. It’s impossible not to be cold in the cursed north. The only times Luka was warm here was when he was with Theo. Now every night he falls asleep shivering and he wakes up starving and numb.

When Luka shrugs again, Darri huffs a sigh. He looks around the camp before reaching for Luka’s arm. When Luka skitters out of his reach, Darri closes his eyes, looking as if he’s slowly counting to ten.

“Follow me,” Darri says. “I know something we can do to get you warmed up.”

He turns and walks into the camp without looking back to make sure Luka is following. Luka isn’t sure if he should be impressed with Darri’s own self-assurance, or annoyed that the man thinks he has nothing better to do. He begrudgingly trails behind his guard.

Darri halts outside of his tent, which faces the outer rim of the camp. He rummages about in the nearly knee-deep snow, grumbling, before he finally grunts, yanking free

a length of branch. He plunges the limb into the ground, fumbling while Luka glares at his back.

“You wanted to show me a stick?” Luka says, mostly just because he knows it will annoy Darri. He shivers suddenly, so hard his teeth clang together. He can’t help glancing over his shoulder; with the camp at his back, he feels oddly exposed, like Vittoria and Octavian and the other soldiers will glare holes between his shoulders.

Darri ignores Luka. He ties a smaller stick perpendicular to the larger one, fixing a patch of canvas to the edges. He steps back, observing the structure. It looks similar to the makeshift targets the Kiteran soldiers make when they pause for camp each night. Since Kitera has taken the northern swathes of Siacchi, they have started practicing with fuille – and the echoing BANGS of the weapons discharging always sent Luka to his tent, clapping his hands over his sensitive ears.

“It will have to do,” Darri mutters when finished setting the makeshift target. He faces Luka.

Luka bites his tongue when shuddering, and the tang of his own blood fills his mouth. Darri’s eyes widen ever so slightly before he shakes himself. He opens his mouth, but before he can speak, Luka says, “Why haven’t you asked me about Cathalan?”

“What... do you mean?”

“I can feel him, you know,” Luka says. He nods his chin toward his chest, though Darri only responds to the gesture by looking more confused. “His feelings. You haven’t asked about him yet.”

“I don’t much care about his feelings. I care if he’s safe.”

“So you aren’t worried about him and Xyla?”

Darri's hand stiffens over the knife at his side. "Xyla... that was that... that woman, wasn't it?"

Luka narrows his eyes. "You realize she's my best friend, right?"

"Ah, yes, I do remember that. Yes, I saw the way the king was around that –around Xyla. You don't need to worry. He'll recover." Darri unsheathes his knife.

"He's acted like that around people in the past?" Luka's words fog the air as he arches a brow. Sure, he only knew Cathalan when they were young, but even then, the king was always guarded with his feelings. Never has Luka seen Cathalan's eyes follow someone so... hungrily. Longingly.

"He knows how important it is to build a harem that will secure his throne," Darri replies.

"Besides," Luka says, "it's not like they could be together. Impyassi and... well... hushiling –I'm sure the two don't mix."

"Oh, they can mix." Darri spins the dagger around and shoves the handle into Luka's hand.

Luka blinks. "Are you... speaking from personal experience?"

Darri shakes his head, looking pointedly at the knife.

Luka hides a grin as he glances at the dagger, and any amusement at the thought of Darri mingling with an impyassus instantly vanishes. Beneath his mitten, his palm sweats.

"You know," Luka says, swallowing. "For Siacchians, they consider violence beneath

a brilliant mind. If you are smart enough, you never need to draw blood. All you need are your own wits to protect yourself.”

“Unfortunately, you are not just Siacchian anymore.” Darri turn Luka so they’re facing the stick cluster –a target. “You married the Balivartian king. That means you’re part Balivartian, too.” Darri draws Luka’s arm back, cocking it at the elbow. His hand rests over Luka’s, gripping the knife for him.

“And Balivartians aren’t afraid of a fight.”

There is a crunch of snow behind them. Luka looks back to see one Kiteran soldier on his feet, but Vittoria stops the man in his tracks with her stare alone. Her eyes shift from Luka to Darri, and then to Octavian’s tent. She gestures, and the soldier returns to his post.

Darri launches the knife from Luka’s hand. The dagger snaps through the air, rotating handle over blade, once, twice, three times – THWAP!

It sinks into the lower corner of the target, vibrating.

Oddly, Luka’s stomach tightens, though not with fear or disgust –but with... excitement. He should be horrified at touching this weapon. He should be apologizing, focusing on his Cesse board.

He wants to do it again.

Darri picks up the dagger, feet crunching through the snow. He returns the blade to Luka.

“You are not safe here, Luka,” he says. “And I fear I won’t be able to protect you –or my king. Let me teach you this.”

Luka stares at the blade. He remembers how Evland Childes died at his mother's hand. He remembers Xyla, bleeding into the dirt. He remembers his own helplessness, choking him.

"I'm an impyassus , you realize," Luka says, not meeting Darri's eyes.

"Luka," Darri coaxes. Luka finally looks at the man. Darri's face is soft. "I know you don't want to hurt anyone, but there are people who want to hurt you. And I can't let that happen." He offers the knife again. "This will keep those people from getting near enough to hurt either of you."

Luka slowly accepts the blade. When he faces the target again, his mother's face haunts him as he pulls his arm back, and throws.

Chapter Fourteen - Theo

The following week sees Theo and Cathalan covering ground quickly. The weather is good, meaning when it is not overcast, it is storming. They rarely see the sun. Cathalan wears his cloak and head coverings just in case, and for all the frustration Theo feels when they move slowly on a sunny day, Theo can't imagine forcing him to travel any faster, knowing that every injury Cathalan endures, Luka also feels.

Most days pass in silence. There are few late-night conversations now. There is simply nothing to say that is more important than their exhaustion. They try to take watches in turns at first, but the constant travel wears on them, leading them each to nod off on every watch they attempt to take. Theo is grateful for the lack of conversation, and for every evening he can go to bed without the conflicting thoughts about his tangential connection to Cathalan through his mate.

Instead, they watch as the snowy mountains of Kitera melt into the wilted hills of Siacchi. There is no immediate distinction when they cross into the western territory. It only becomes clear they've left Kitera behind when Theo encounters the first town he toppled.

"Should we get supplies?" Cathalan asks as he eyes the tiny grouping of buildings from the hillside's peak. He slides from the horse, looking down at Theo. Theo, unwilling to change from his wolf-form, shakes his head.

Cathalan raises a confused brow, but when it becomes clear Theo won't offer a reason, he shrugs, remounts, and nudges the horse back into a trot. Theo trails behind, watching the town.

His heart feels strange –like there is a fist wrapped around it.

Siacchi is all shades of brown and yellow grass and pale gray sky. This town, though, is little more than embers. Even from where they stand, far enough away that the citizens are reduced to ants, Theo can make out the destruction he left behind. Destruction these people have yet to recover from.

How likely is it that there, I am the same monster to someone that Cathalan once was to me?

No, that's not the question he should be asking.

How many people am I a monster to in this town? How many am I monster to in every other town we pass?

A lump gathers in his throat, but Theo swallows past it. He falls into a run.

“You know, with our dwindling supplies, we should take things slow!” Cathalan advises at Theo's retreating back. But Theo ignores him.

Will this be how Cesscounthe looks when they arrive? Will Theo gaze upon the city he once so desperately wanted to conquer, and will he see nothing but hollow eyes and thin faces, people tottering about on stick legs, unprepared for the winter as they were unprepared for his invasion?

Yes, a voice whispers. You ruined Luka's home. You did this.

How can he love me?

And worse – how did Theo not see this all before? Before, when he was so desperate for conquering, for conquest. What did he think such an intangible victory would

bring? Safety?

He scoffs now, though the noise emerges muffled through his wolf's mouth, and runs a little faster.

Though he knows it's not possible to outrun the angry truth in his mind or the errors of his past, he'll try. He isn't sure what he's running to. What could he possibly want to go, now that the thirst for victory has deserted him?

It only takes another three days to arrive before Cesscounthe's walls.

Theo cannot deny his relief at the sight of the very obstacles that once kept him from his victory. The walls are massive and carved with beasts brought to their knees by human hands—no, not just beasts. Foxes.

Theo, now changed into human form, growls softly. Cesscounthe was never kind to its hopiar, and the thought of the childhood Luka had to endure raises the fur on the back of his arms.

“You might want to be completely human for this,” Cathalan advises from where he walks beside the Kiteran horse. The poor creature shies away from Theo, its eyes widening enough to show the white. It has been trained to handle wolves as well as a prey animal can be, but Theo's muted growls make it twitch.

Theo grunts. He scowls when he finds his mouth is bulging with inhuman teeth. “I'm out of practice. Too long in wolf form makes it hard to remember how to be completely human.” It's mostly true; it was easier when he was younger. Easier when he didn't struggle with the powerful anger at the thought of Luka being treated poorly because he was born hopiar and not human. Theo puts a concentrated effort into tucking away his fur.

They stand close enough to the walls that Theo can make out the twisted snarls of pain on the carved foxes' faces, moving carefully to avoid being spotted. Dry grass crunches underfoot. The air smells faintly of smoke. They both pause before the remaining shrubbery, taking in the tall grasses that cover the land between themselves and the walls. The gurgle of a stream draws closer.

"Do they usually have people posted in the watchtowers?" Cathalan asks.

"Before? Only at the end of the siege. The Siacchians are supposed to be pacifists. It goes against their customs." Theo squints. Obviously things have changed in the last three months. The top of the wall is lined with people; some carry torches to ward off the darkening night, and some... are those bows?

"They're armed," Theo says, grabbing Cathalan's arm when he starts toward the tall grasses. "We're better waiting for nightfall, when they can't see us."

"What happened to pacifism?"

Theo frowns. "I'm... not sure," he starts to say, but then realization seizes him with brutal teeth, and his expression darkens. "They're using hopiar."

"How can you tell? Can you see their little furry ears and tails from here?"

Theo glares at the man. "Just as clearly as they can see your wicked fangs, I'm sure."

Cathalan grins to bare his only-slightly-too-long human teeth.

Theo shakes his head. "It's something Luka told me –his mother, Linne, she and their people don't see those who can turn into beasts as... human. So there's no need to keep their minds pure from violence, as they've already been corrupted."

“Ah, so it’s a prejudice thing.” Cathalan strokes his horse. “Wonderful.”

Before Theo can glare at him, the king says, “We’ll wait another hour then, until it’s completely dark. Where is the entrance to the tunnels?”

“Near the stream.” Theo points. “You can see it from here. We’ll need to be much closer for me to be sure. I’ve only been once, and it’s been months.”

“Wonderful,” Cathalan says again, studiously ignoring Theo’s glare. “I’ll be sad to leave you behind, my darling.”

“I’ll be coming with you,” Theo says, voice dropping to a halting growl.

Cathalan laughs. “No, not you –why would I call you my darling? I was talking to my horse.”

Come nightfall, they steal across the grasses. The yellow fronds wave across Theo’s brow as they crouch, moving with the sway of the wind. Rain hangs heavily in the air as weak moonlight filters down at them, turning the world to shades of gray. Cathalan clings close behind him as they dart across the soft soil, their boots soundless.

As scouts on the watchtower look below, their distant faces highlighted in amber and gold from the torches in their hands, Theo and Cathalan pause. Though the Siacchians surely can’t make out anything in the growing night, they stop twice, just to be certain. Theo is only too grateful that they aren’t heading toward the gate, where the guards are thickest.

Theo finds himself holding his breath. If they are spotted, they will have to run very fast – or pray the Siacchians are as poor at handling weapons as they are rumored to be.

When they finally reach the wall, Cathalan is breathing heavily, despite their slow pace.

“Are you alright?” Theo says, knocking along the wall.

“Just... great,” Cathalan replies, bracing his hands on his knees while he breathes. “I spend every day running from the enemy.”

“Good.” Satisfaction and relief thrum twin harmonies in Theo’s stomach as he finds the door. He gestures Cathalan close as he heaves on the handle once, twice –

“Are you sure this is the right spot, Theodori –”

He heaves a third time, and the door groans – too loudly – as it swings open.

Darkness awaits inside. The air smells of damp. There is the distant sound of something dripping. Cathalan’s hot breaths spill across Theo’s neck as they both peer in.

“I don’t suppose your monster eyes can see in the dark,” Cathalan says. He’s so close, Theo can feel the heat emanating from his body. He tries not to think about it – or about the smell of Cathalan’s sweat and his own scent, something warm and spicy.

“Probably as well as your monster eyes can see.” Theo glances upward. “Hurry in. If they look down now, they’ll spot us.”

“If they haven’t heard us first,” Cathalan says, muffling a yelp as Theo yanks him inside. “Should have brought a torch,” he says with a grumble after stumbling into the dark.

As Theo follows the king and pulls the entrance shut, they’re encased in a tomb-like

darkness. They both stand in silence, waiting for their eyes to adjust. They wait long enough that Theo almost jumps when Cathalan says, “We really should have brought a torch.”

“We can follow the wall,” Theo says. He narrows his eyes. Months have passed since he was here last – but hadn’t there been a source of light? Yes, there had been glowing blue lichen. Had he somehow found a different entrance?

Theo’s hand grazes the wall and his heart stills. Yes, there is the spot where the lichen once was, and now only loose soil remains.

Someone removed the lichen.

Someone wants those who enter the tunnels to do so in absolute darkness.

“Follow it to where? ” Cathalan says, breaking Theo from his thoughts. “Do you know where in the tunnels Xyla said the rebels would be?”

Theo bares his teeth, realizing only after the gesture is straining his cheeks that Cathalan can’t see it. “Of course she didn’t tell me that. She didn’t tell you?”

Cathalan pauses as they both make their way to the carved edges of the tunnel. Theo runs his hands along the hard-packed dirt and stone. Each step feels fumbling and uncertain, and he grinds his teeth together. He wants to race along until he finds an answer, but he forces himself to slow.

If I move faster, he’ll only fall behind , he tells himself, biting his lip.

“Why would she tell me?” Cathalan says, and even in the darkness, Theo can hear the disgustingly shy smile in the king’s voice. Theo curls his lip and walks faster.

“Did she say something about me?” Cathalan continues as they walk. He whispers, but even that feels loud in the tunnels, where everything is silent but for a distant drip drip of moisture. “Was it good?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Theo growls. “Why would she ever speak to me–”

“Hush!” Cathalan hisses. He slaps his hand forward, probably intending to hit Theo’s shoulder, but Theo is farther ahead than he likely anticipated. Cathalan’s hand lands on Theo’s lower back instead, and Theo skitters away like a nervous horse.

“What?” Theo growls, baring his teeth. Unbidden, Cathalan's proposition from days ago rises in his mind, but he pulverizes the memory

“Did you hear that?”

“Obviously not –” Theo pauses, straining his ears.

Footsteps.

Before either can react, flames play against the tunnel’s walls, casting long shadows outlined in brilliant gold. And then – muffled voices.

Theo and Cathalan freeze. Theo braces his shoulders, drawing on his beast as the speakers approach.

“No,” Cathalan whispers, laying a hand on Theo’s shoulder. “Don’t be afraid.”

“I’m not –” Theo snaps, but he quiets himself when the group rounds the tunnel’s curve.

Heading the pair is a tall, broad man with blade-like features. He bends at the neck to

fit inside the low tunnels, and his dark expression grows more ominous when he catches sight of them. At his back, an old woman, already small and made even smaller in comparison, raises her wobbly chin.

“Well,” says the old woman. “As I expected. See, I told you that we’d find someone down here, Damian!”

The tall man – Damian – looks Cathalan and Theo over with a scowl. His nostrils flare and his gaze snaps back to Theo. His stare combs over Theo, taking in his travel-stained clothes and knotted blond hair, before lingering on his eyes.

“What is your name?” Damian demands, his voice little more than a growl. Siacchian. And more than that –

Theo bares his teeth, inhaling deeply. This man is a hopiar.

“Whoa, hold on a moment.” Cathalan raises his hands, stepping between them. “We came here to help you, not to fight–”

“We’re here to help you overthrow Linne Lockhart,” Theo says.

“That’s not your name.” Damian takes a threatening step toward them, standing so close to Cathalan that their noses almost brush. Cathalan must lift his chin to meet his gaze. Theo has to give it to the Balivartian king: he doesn’t waver in the face of the snarling hopiar. “What is your name?”

“Since you asked so politely –” Cathalan tries, placing a hand to his chest, but Damian isn’t looking at him. Damian’s nostrils flare. He has scented Theo – curious. A trained Siacchian hopiar.

“Theodori Hunter Wolf-Born,” Theo says.

“Theodori. Yes, that is the name Xyla told us when she explained that help was coming,” the old woman croons behind Damian, peering around his broad shoulders.

“Xyla is here?” Cathalan’s eyes widen, and he cranes his neck as if to see past them, toward wherever Xyla must be hiding.

The woman’s face, already furrowed with age, grows more lined. “Well, she was here. She left two days ago to head south. She said she hoped to get more allies there, though she didn’t explain why.”

Cathalan presses his lips together, looking impossibly pained. “That’s no good,” he whispers.

“Why?” Damian grunts.

“Because they won’t give her anything unless I’m there.” Cathalan glares at his hands. “Damnit, Xyla. Why didn’t you just wait for me?”

“Maybe you should ask his name, too,” the old woman whispers to Damian. “Because I’m a little unclear as to who he is.”

“I’m unimportant,” Cathalan says, straightening. He brushes invisible dirt from his cloak. “I’m afraid I have to leave you here, Theodori. I can’t let Xyla head to the border villages alone. They won’t – they won’t help her.” He sets his jaw.

Theo stills. He examines Cathalan’s face for a long moment. Oddly, something makes him want to ask the man to stay – but what good would Cathalan be to him? Theo’s life has always been easier when it was just him dealing with problems. Cathalan would only be a hindrance, not help. Still, Theo hesitates a moment more before nodding. There is a strange desperation in Cathalan’s eyes that – despite himself – he recognizes. He empathizes with the feeling. It mirrors the tension in his

own chest whenever he thinks of the distance and danger between himself and Luka. He wonders if he should say something – good luck? You’re sure to find her? But none of it feels honest.

The old woman runs a hand through her white hair. “I don’t suppose you’ll explain more as to who you are and how you will supply us the aid Xyla promised?”

“I thought it was obvious – I’m here to help you take back Cesscounthe. And he’s...” Theo gestures to Cathalan, who shoulders his way past Theo to rush down the tunnel. “He’s going to bring us our second round of backup.”

The old woman blinks. “The second round?”

Damian presses his lips together, eyes darting from Theo to Cathalan. “How do I know he’s not rushing to warn the guards at the watchtower?”

“Because I’m one of you. Inhale deeply. Do you scent any lies?” Theo bares his teeth. “We know what horrors Linne Lockhart has wrought here. You know me – you know my name. If I found your base and wished you ill, you would be dead already.”

Perhaps not the best thing to say. Damian bares his teeth and takes another step forward.

Theo releases a hissing breath from between clenched teeth. “But that’s not why I am here.” When he breathes again, deeply, he realizes that the woman is a hopiar, too, only older, her scent more muted. “I’m here to help. Take me to your base and explain your plan.” He looks up to find Damian’s gaze, all but glowing in the flickering torchlight. “You won’t be able to take back Cesscounthe without my help.”

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Chapter Fifteen - Luka

The days grow warmer as they travel southwest. The snow melts and the horses increase their speed to a jaw-rattling trot that makes Luka's bones ache. He's sat in a saddle for so long now, that every break when he hauls himself free, he's surprised to find the leather hasn't been pressed into the shape of his behind.

Each evening sees him so tired he's nearly unable to keep his eyes open, and yet he still trains at Darri's side until his arms ache. The shape of the knife's pommel becomes so familiar to his hand that sometimes he wakes imagining his fingers still cradling it.

Luka takes better to wielding a dagger than he ever took to wielding his father's fuille. There is no echoing boom and – for now – there is no body leaking blood. There is only the air, his invisible opponent, and the occasional makeshift targets Darri makes for him. The contact of Luka's blows on wood is a satisfying and welcome distraction. Though he desperately wants to be at Cesscounthe now – or even better, yesterday – the thought makes his palms slick with sweat.

He tries imagining seeing his mother again – seeing his father, knowing that they both conspired to murder his elder brother.

To see Cassian again.

The Kiterans at first avoid Luka as he trains with the blade, but after a day or two of watching him warily, they join him. Luka is unsurprised to see them wielding fuilles – weapons they must have taken from his fellow Siacchians. Though he tries to avoid

it, he finds himself unable to stop himself from correcting the aim of one soldier.

“Like this.” Luka takes the fuille from a brunette with big blue eyes and demonstrates how to brace it against his shoulder. The shock of the weapon in his hands takes him back to his childhood. He had never been very good with it, but now, as he hefts it, leveling the sights with his eyes, he finds it easy enough to aim –

BANG.

The shock takes him a step back. He blinks, expecting to see the little red body of a fox.

But no, there is only the target.

And his perfect bull’s eye.

It occurs to him afterward, that he is teaching his enemies how to attack his own people, but in the moment, Luka finds himself caught between horror at the violence his own hands are capable of –

– and... a strange power.

I can fight.

I can defend myself.

When he curls in his tent that night, the BANG echoes in his thoughts, but it doesn’t leave him frozen with fear. Instead, he pauses, considers.

It makes him feel stronger.

He isn't sure how much time passes before he jerks from his routine one late evening, eyes going wide, and shouts, "What day is it?"

Unfortunately, the person nearest who has the answer to this question just has to be Octavian. The man glances at him. Winter sky unspools at his back, the full moon a silver coin dropped amidst a sea of stars. In the distance, an owl cries. "It's the third day of the month."

"Curse Thought ," Luka spits.

"Why does that matter?" Octavian asks around a mouthful of dinner. The fire crackles before them, a flimsy, flickering barrier against the winter chill. Darri sits not far away. He watches their conversation as he takes a long drink from his wineskin.

Luka digs his lengthening claws into the log beneath him, and for once, he doesn't flinch from the way russet fur creeps down his arms. "The Bombani Exam takes place on the twentieth day of the month."

"Oh, that silly exam they have you Siacchians take to see if you're beastly?" Octavian picks at his teeth.

Luka blinks, momentarily shocked from his rage. "What?"

"I've heard of it," Octavian continues. He takes in Luka's white face with a sidelong glance before drinking deeply from his wineskin. "They test all of your children around... what age is it? Six? Seven?"

"Seven," Luka says, eyes still wide. His thoughts race ahead of Octavian, running in circles, avoiding the true meaning behind the man's words. The test we take to see if we're beastly.

“I mean, didn’t the Siacchians move west to avoid hopiar, after all? So it makes sense they would test you to ensure you were kept in the lower caste.” Octavian looks at him through the flames.

“It’s a test of intelligence,” Luka says, though his voice is faint.

“I’m not sure they usually prepare children by slapping them with rulers and pushing for a bad temper for tests of intelligence,” Octavian says, face growing serious.

“But...” Luka fumbles. Memories of his mother’s face, warped with anger, as she told him he failed tear at him. The knowledge that the one thing Luka had to keep him afloat was all a lie she fabricated and then ripped away just as easily.

“You Siacchians want to stay superior by calling it a test of intelligence, but anyone who does a little digging could see through that easily.” Octavian raises his brows, looking over Luka’s shoulder. “Put those hackles down, Balivartian. I haven’t done anything to him.” He adds after a long slurp of his dinner, “Yet.”

Darri stands so close to Luka, his warmth washes over him. “Luka?” he says, the question clear in his voice.

“Yes, yes.” Luka waves a hand. “I’m fine.” He’s certainly not fine, but the crisis he’s undergoing isn’t one Darri can solve. Unfortunately.

He presses his hand to his face, staring through the gaps of his fingers. His mother always knew that Luka would likely fail the test. She put him through all of that suffering, saw all of those poor scores on the preliminary exams, and she looked him in the eye and didn’t care.

He closes his eyes, recalling Alessandro. The only memories he has of his elder brother are those of his grave, just outside the walls of Cesscounthe. That, and the

way Linne's hands would grip Luka's arms after she dragged him into the night, her breath misting in white clouds around Luka's neck as she hissed, He failed. Don't be like your brother.

Luka's throat works. He doesn't bother to calm his whirlwind of emotions. I never had any chance to make her happy.

And then beyond that terror and despair, a lighter feeling blossoms: it never really mattered.

For so long, Luka draped the idea that he was the second ever to receive a perfect score on the Bombani Exam around himself, using it like a cloak that could protect from his past failures. He gained a reputation that mattered, a reputation he bolstered by his genius at Cesse—a genius that was impressive in spite of his beastly nature.

But none of it was ever true.

None of it ever mattered.

“Wow,” Octavian says. He empties his waterskin. “You seem to be thinking very deep thoughts over there, Luka.”

Luka opens his eyes. None of it ever mattered .

But the words no longer crush him. They mean he is free . He can build his own identity.

Who am I? Who do I want to be, beyond my mother? Beyond the Lockehart name?

I want to be someone who helps people. I want to be someone who never repeats the horrors that my mother imparted.

I want to save Cassian. I want to save all the impyassi.

And then, like a shot to his chest, Luka realizes: Cassian has to be an impyassus.

All of those pretests that Cassian failed; the knowing gleam in his mother's eye as she watched her youngest son across the dinner table, like a fox about to descend on a rabbit.

The sad, determined set to Carlo's mouth.

"How many impyassi even pass the Bombani Exam?" Luka asks. He's shocked by the steadiness of his voice. Darri's hand lands on Luka's shoulder, warm and heavy, but Luka feels far away from the reassuring pressure.

Octavian says, "Your mother told me that both you and Xyla Mobiele passed the test, so there's likely a few others." He smiles, but the gesture doesn't meet his eyes.

"I didn't pass," Luka says flatly. "My mother swapped my failed scores for someone else."

Octavian shrugs again, his gaze falling to the fire. "Ah, yes. I do believe Linne mentioned that. That means the one who got the perfect score... was another."

"Do you know Linne well?" Darri asks, and Luka glances back at the Balivartian. Darri's face is smooth but for the little pinch between his brows. "You betrayed your... what do you call your leaders? Your Sevell ? You betrayed Theodori for her alliance, didn't you?"

"Yes, Sevell. That's what we call the second highest rank of hopiar ." Octavian nods, clearly stalling.

Luka takes one, two, three long seconds. He lets his emotions uncoil. Anger. Sadness. Fear. It sours his tongue. After allowing them space, he slowly folds his emotions into a square. He imagines tucking the neat package into one of the even sections of the Cesse board. He will return to them later, when they are useful to him.

He turns on Octavian. “When was the last time you saw my mother?”

Darri squeezes Luka’s shoulder, anchoring him.

Octavian looks from Darri’s face to Luka’s, and his expression oddly shifts. Vulnerability, brief and flickering, shines like meat from parted flesh. Octavian clears his throat, going blank again, but he knows that Darri and Luka saw his soft underbelly –it’s clear in the paleness of his face. His eyes dart from them, flickering around the surrounding guards, as if contemplating escape.

Octavian says, quietly, “It’s been three weeks. I left Cesscounthe in her hands. I didn’t expect she would...” He clears his throat again.

Luka tries to conjure images of Evland Childes bleeding into the catacombs. He tries to recall Octavian’s expression –likely one of glee, at having won.

Or was that really how it happened?

Despite himself, guilt warms Luka’s chest. He whispers, “What has she done?”

Octavian stands, but he doesn’t move away. He gazes at Luka. “My spies have said she’s pushed all hopiar – Aiutani and those who passed the test alike – to the Gamgy District. They’ve been removed from their homes and forced into servitude, living under a strict curfew. They all fear her. Some children have been... taken.”

“Did she not realize what you are?” Darri asks. Luka glances at the man out of the

corner of his eye; Darri's face is blank, neither eager for Octavian's vulnerability nor sympathetic.

"She knows what I am." Octavian looks past Luka. "But she was never afraid of me. She was never afraid of any of... any of us." He blinks. Another strange emotion passes through him. "She even – she welcomed us. Some of us."

"Why?" Luka whispers. "I never understood why she hated... us so much."

Octavian shakes his head. "She wants to purify the bloodline –is what she said. I knew, after seeing how she lost control –even Kiterans don't allow themselves to fall to such bloodlust –that I could never trust her." Something akin to regret borders his voice.

Luka forces his eyes open as memories pound against his skull. The fear of his mother is one written in the long-healed bruises on his skin.

"You look a bit like her, you know," Octavian says distantly. "In the eyes."

Luka bares his teeth. "That is unkind, Octavian."

Octavian shakes himself. "Right," he says. "Right," he repeats, quiet enough that it must be a reminder for his ears alone. He takes another sip of his wineskin. His cheeks flush in the firelight. "I don't regret it," he declares after he has swallowed. "It let me move up through the ranks. I couldn't stay by Theodori's side –you likely don't remember, but he wasn't always... he's... he's kind to you. He was never like that with me."

Luka blinks, but before he can speak, Octavian rises. He brushes dirt from his trousers.

“I’ve said more than enough,” Octavian says. He nods to them both. “Maybe I was better off when I was still trying to kill you,” he mutters, just loud enough for Luka’s sharp impyassus hearing to make out as he turns for his tent.

Darri shifts so he stands at Luka’s side, watching Octavian go.

“You don’t need to glare at him like that,” Luka says.

Darri quirks a brow. “I’m not glaring,” he says. “This is just what my face looks like.”

The days that follow stretch painfully long. Luka’s body grows only sorer as his hand grows more familiar with the blade and his shoulder more familiar with the fuille . He contemplates, in the late evenings over a pint of mead, approaching a friendlier Kiteran soldier to ask for recommendations on how to... be a hopiar ? But even the question imagined seems ridiculous, so Luka never pursues it.

It doesn’t help that Octavian avoids Luka pointedly. He spends his nights in his tent, and in the day, he rides at the front of their troop, avoiding eye contact.

Luka is left to only stew.

He spends his days unpicking the neat box he folded his emotions into. He unfurls the anger and sadness at his mother’s betrayal, though the process leaves his palms damp with sweat. Every night, before he falls asleep, he pictures first Cassian’s face, and then Linne’s. He pictures her every move, how she might station herself on his mental Cesse board.

And he wins against her. Every time.

He doesn’t bother thinking about Carlo. His father has always been a second note to

Linne, and now, knowing that he killed Alessandro all those years ago, Luka finds nothing but anger toward him.

Nothing useful.

As the winter warms and the forests fall away into flatlands covered in sweeping fields, Cesscounthe suddenly seems too close.

Eight days pass, and despite the way time stretched out before their arrival, it seems abrupt when the massive walls of Cesscounthe rise on the horizon.

Vittoria rides ahead of their group, shouting orders. She delivers a booming speech, her face flushed beneath her war helmet. The night before, she rehearsed the battle plan with her people, and Luka churns her orders over in his head now, overlaying the commands with the strategy he and Darri formed on their own.

Vittoria's horse froths at the mouth as she trots back and forth, shaping them into lines. The impyassus herself looks fierce; her armor is all leather pads and loose hinges, making it easy for her to shift from woman to wolf and back again. Her blonde hair has been bound flat to her skull in a long rope braided through with blades, promising punishment for whoever attempts to grab it.

"We have ridden long," she says. She starts speaking low. Her warriors lean in. Luka, despite himself, echoes them. "But we have arrived."

"We have arrived," rises a low whisper around Luka, emerging from the Kiterans.

"This city is ours. We have claimed it before. We will claim it again. It matters not what opposition we face – be it from the West or the South. We have never needed their help. We stand strong."

“We stand strong.” The whispers around Luka increase in volume.

“This city is ours. We will take it back.” Vittoria rides her horse back and forth. She meets all of their eyes. Her gaze burns.

“We will take it back!” cry the Kiterans.

Vittoria turns her back on them. She faces forward, raising a fist. “We come here today for blood!”

“Blood!” her warriors echo back. The soldiers swarm around him, eyes widening. Their exhaustion falls away like melting snow. They throw their heads up, lips peeled back with a terrifying, hungry expression marring their helmeted faces.

“We come here for vengeance!”

“Vengeance!”

“We come here to retake what is ours!”

“What is ours!”

Despite what Vittoria says, despite knowing the words aren’t meant for him, Luka raises his head.

“We came here prepared for death, but when victory is ours, we will all return home!”

“Home!” the warriors roar, and Luka echoes the call. Darri startles at his side, but Luka hardly notices.

Vittoria tosses her head back, her braid like a blonde whip, and releases a bloodcurdling howl. The sound races through the air, and even though the walls of Cesscounthe are small in the distance, Luka has no doubt that the occupants hear them.

Luka joins the howl. The noise that crawls from his throat is rusty and hesitant at first, almost embarrassed, but then he lets his beast fly free. Who will hear him in this crowd? He can't distinguish his own voice from the others.

But surely combined, together, his mother will notice their screams.

She'd best be afraid.

Because Luka has had many days to plan now. He knows how to keep the Kiterans from breaching Cesscounthe's walls. He knows how to prevent bloodshed.

He knows how to take Linne Lockhart down.

This time, she won't catch him unprepared.

Chapter Sixteen - Theo

The rebels' hideout is sad. Theo has seen worse, certainly, at prisoner of war camps. But there, at least, in the pockets of borders between the South and the North, the guards were armed. Here, the Siacchians wear kitchen knives strapped to their belts and strut about like they're carrying the biggest sword in the city.

"Linne has made it a criminal charge for a Siacchian impyassi to be caught with any blade longer than the length of a thumb. And no, there is little point in us conducting raids to get more weapons. Not when none of us know how to use them and our people would have to face down trained Kiterans," the old woman, the Toula, Theo learns she is called, explains upon his arrival. She smiles knowingly at him. "Later, after you've schooled them all in the way of warfare and whatever it is you Kiterans think about, come find me, yes?" She winks and even squeezes his cheek before she vanishes into the group.

Theo tries not to stare after her in bewilderment. The last person who touched him so maternally was his own mother. His fingers rise to brush against his cheek, still warm from her hand.

"Our camp is built to keep children on the outskirts, so they can be the first to flee," Damian explains as they walk. He restrains his long, dark hair with a leather tie.

Theo's lip curls. Shoving all thoughts of the Toula aside, he takes the rebel base in again, closer now.

The camp sprawls like a descending target, with the center sinking deepest into the

caverns. Overhead, stalactites drip onto clumsily erected tents. Each structure is made with cloth so threadbare, Theo catches glimpses of the haunted faces of the occupants.

Children run about at the highest level of the camp, barefoot and dirty. Their mirth is muffled, and when they see Theo and Damian, they instantly hush, returning to thin, tired parents.

Three men and one woman stand at the entrance to the cavern. They are large, and their scowls speak to intimidation, but the awkwardness of their stance quickly banishes any threat. They both nod as Theo and Damian pass, giving Theo a long, lingering glance, taking in his clearly Kiteran clothing.

All are impyassi. All are – based on the weak scent of their beasts, only slightly stronger than what Luka’s scent was – untrained.

Damian continues to murmur as he and Theo descend the steps to the heart of the settlement, but Theo pays him no mind; he’s explaining the other bits of logic behind the camp. Reasons as to why the latrines were dug into the top layer (“it’s easier for our elderly to reach them”), talk of the meeting room kept at the center (“so our people know where they can look for inspiration”), and other bits of pure nonsense.

It’s only when Theo learns that they keep their source of water three levels below the latrines that he can’t take it anymore. “Are you all looking to die from cholera?” he hisses, matching Damian’s own hushed voice.

Damian pauses mid-sentence. He looks back at Theo, and at first, Theo reads his furrowed brows as a look of anger. But after closer observation, Theo realizes the man is amused.

“I said the same thing,” Damian murmurs, “when I first arrived.”

“Is there some sort of logic behind it?”

“No.” Damian shakes his head. “Some of the people in charge were just unwilling to believe the word of someone who so terribly failed the Bombani Exam.”

Bombani Exam. Luka mentioned the test his people forced their children to take to assess intelligence before.

“Was there anything else you advised upon arrival that your... leaders... ignored?” Theo asks.

“Moving our weakest people to the center of the camp –if we’re discovered, it’s unlikely any of us will escape. If they’re kept at the heart, we can at least see they die humanely.” Damian continues in his same quiet, hushed voice, speaking low enough that the people around them wouldn’t be able to hear. “Obviously moving our latrines away from the camp, as you’ve so succinctly pointed out. Hiding where our leaders meet.” He ticks the points off on his fingers.

“And Xyla didn’t listen to you?”

Damian snorts. “Xyla does what she can, but a woman so closely associated with Abraxi nobles can’t easily bend the ear of impyassi lower-caste.”

Theo looks at the towering man before him with new respect. He inhales again, ignoring the scents of human waste, fear, and body odor.

“You’ve changed shape before,” Theo says. “And recently.”

Damian’s eyes narrow minutely. “You realize,” he says. “I’m taking an enormous risk bringing you here.” He abruptly turns to the side, three rings before they reach the lowered structure at the base of the camp and pauses before an empty, slumped

tent. Before Theo can ask what he's doing, Damian reaches inside and pulls out a bundle of clothes.

“Obviously there's nothing I can do to disguise that accent of yours,” Damian says as Theo unfurls the clothes. They are simple Siacchian robes, a few shades lighter than the embroidered tunic and trousers Damian wears. “But this will keep them from immediately calling for your death.”

Theo wrinkles his nose. The robes reek of onion. “Is there a reason you didn't think to give me these before you paraded me past your poorly trained guards?”

Damian grins. “I hadn't decided if I liked you enough.”

When Theo lifts his lips in a half-snarl, Damian continues, “Besides, you're filthy enough that they likely wouldn't have recognized you at first glance. That's why they haven't outright attacked. Yet.” He shrugs. “Your accent will make it clear who you are, though.”

“Don't expect me to keep my mouth shut the whole time,” Theo growls.

Damian bears his teeth, though the expression looks less like a snarl and more like a grin. “Xyla wouldn't have sent you here to sit and be meek and silent. I expect you to guide us, Theodori Hunter Wolf-Born. We are obviously not strategists, and untrained minds, no matter how brilliant, can only accomplish so much.” His expression sharpens. “You might have failed at the siege of Cesscounthe –yes, we have all heard of your loss –but I think you can make a recovery here, don't you?”

Theo yanks off his furred robes, bearing his muscled chest to the flickering flames of the cavern. Damian looks straight ahead, providing a modicum of privacy.

“I think I can make more than a recovery,” Theo says after he's drawn up the

trousers. They are, embarrassingly, a little long. It's only after he's pulled on his heavy boots and rolled up the waistband that they fit. "I'm going to help you impyassi win this war –win this city –for your people."

"Good," Damian says. "But save your speech for when I introduce you to the Toula's husband."

The Toula's husband, as it turns out, is a sour old man who resembles nothing of the sweet woman who pinched Theo's cheek and now, in his memory at least, smelled faintly of gingerbread. No, Brigard Rightess is hunched and frowning, and his expression only darkens as Damian leads Theo inside the structure built at the lowered base of the rebels' camp.

Colored candles flicker at the corners of the erected tent. The hard packed dirt floor is crowded with sweating bodies, the air musty and warm despite the winter raging outside the tunnels. Theo wipes sweat from his brow as he joins Damian at the back of a crowd of almost two dozen people. The Siacchians murmur in low voices, words lost to the masses, but the nervous, darting looks in their eyes make it clear they are waiting for news from Brigard Rightess.

The tension in Theo's shoulders eases slightly when he sees the Toula standing at Brigard's elbow. Her eyes catch Theo's, and her lips quirk in a kind smile.

Theo takes careful stock of the crowd; most of the people are young. Old enough to understand the impyassi deserve more rights than Linne Lockhart has allowed them, but young enough to believe a violent uprising is the best answer. There are more men than women, and nearly all carry those same tiny knives, at the sight of which Theo must muffle a snort

Really, what do they think they're going to do with a blade that length? Shave?

Brigard raises his hands, and the room instantly quiets. He wets his lips and says, “We have already wasted too much time determining our next steps. Now is not the time for further discussion, my people. We must act –before Linne Lockhart and our leaders can sink their fangs deeper into our young.”

Theo glances at Damian. Damian presses his lips together and whispers, “Leadership has taken some children who failed the Bombani pre-tests and made the knowledge public. We haven’t seen them since.”

Theo closes his eyes and tries not to think about Luka’s little brother. Cassian is safe. Cassian has to be safe.

“We can’t move foolishly!” one of the few women cries. She brushes dark braids from her face as she squares her shoulders. “Each move must be calculated. We are facing down the best and brightest of Cesscounthe.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Brigard says. His deep voice easily carries across the tent.

“We have suspected that the Bombani Exam tested more than intellect. We are not fools, us impyassi , for all that Siacchi tries to prove us wrong. For all that, for so long, we found ourselves agreeing with them, stepping on each other so we might raise ourselves high enough on the backs of our own people for the privilege of simply licking their boots. But the Bombani Exam does not test for intelligence. It tests for one thing and one thing only: our beast.” He clenches his fists. “Lies made to make us small.”

The man’s face changes minutely, the shadows deepening across his cheeks and under his eyes as his jaw lengthens and his teeth sharpen. He doesn’t seem to notice this change, but his audience is all too aware, shifting and murmuring in concern.

“The Bombani Exam was always designed to test if we were impyassi . We were never meant to pass,” the man says, and the people’s murmurs rise to a roar.

Brigard raises a hand, waiting until they quiet before he continues, “We cannot let ourselves be cowed by them any longer. If we had acted sooner...” He tucks his chin to his chest. “We might have kept them from taking our children.”

Silence grips the tent. The people lean toward Brigard, listening for his solution.

“We will take their capital first,” Brigard says. “They are above violence –that’s why they always relied on our hands to deal out their dirty work. Without our aid, they are capable of nothing – nothing! They don’t even know how to clean their own houses.

“We know what their homes look like. We know what their stronghold’s lacking defenses are. We overrun them –and we establish control. After their leaders have been all captured, we will speak to the masses. They have been blindly led thus far, but once we establish control and use reason –”

At this, Theo cannot contain a loud snort.

The noise is as loud as an avalanche in the quiet tent. All eyes swing toward him.

Damian, for his part, stands straighter, but does not back away from Theo’s side.

Brigard narrows his eyes as he takes Theo in. “Young man,” he says. “I don’t know your face –who are you?”

Damian grunts something under his breath, but Theo ignores it. “I’m the person who’s going to help you win this revolution.”

Quiet, awkward laughter sputters around the tent. Some shift, ears pricking at the

sound of Theo's accent. Brigard frowns. "I wasn't aware we needed your help. Who are you, stranger?"

Theo's beast stirs. But before his anger can draw fur to his skin, Theo calms himself.

How would Luka speak to this man?

Theo builds his argument with bricks of logic. He tries to mimic Luka's voice, the rolling Siacchian dialect. "What are you planning on doing with the Council leaders after you've captured them? Keep them alive, and their supporters will never give up. Kill them, and you've turned them into martyrs."

The muscles in Brigard's jaw flex. "You cannot think us to be as bloodthirsty as the Kiterans," he says. "We would never kill –"

"And have you taken the remaining Kiteran soldiers into account?" Theo continues as if Brigard hasn't spoken. Though he has yet to see any hopiar left behind, Octavian wouldn't leave Cesscounthe without guards, and Linne isn't a big enough fool to have them all murdered. "Do you think they'll stand by casually as you murder the leader who helped them establish control?"

"We are planning on making these movements subtly –"

"And are you planning on subtly getting the attention of your people without catching the eye of the Kiteran soldiers?"

"... your people?" Brigard repeats. "I'll only ask one more time, young man – who are you?"

The crowd parts now, creating a clear path between Theo and Brigard. Theo clears his throat, prepared to deliver the truth, when the Toula places a wiry hand on

Brigard's chest, drawing his attention to her.

She leans close to whisper something in Brigard's ear.

Theo remains quiet, holding Brigard's gaze as he listens to his wife. A long moment passes before Brigard speaks again.

"What is your plan here, stranger?"

Theo's victorious grin make its way through his defenses despite himself. He drops any attempt at the Siacchian dialect. His lips quirk as he says, "I'll tell you here and now, but this isn't a plan we can complete by tomorrow."

The whisper of Kiteran rises, but Brigard hushes the people with a look.

"There are children on the line," Damian says from Theo's side. "Are you saying that we should wait?"

"Of course not," Theo grinds out. "But if you want to win with this revolution, you're going to need better weapons than butter knives and conviction."

"And how do you recommend we do that?" Brigard says, his face growing more and more unkind with each word. "I don't think you understand our situation, stranger. There were already few weapons in Cesscounthe before this happened. Now they're nearly impossible to find."

Theo shakes his head. "You are a weapon, Brigard Rightess."

Silence.

Theo continues, "You're all weapons. You've just spent so much time quieting your

beast, you've forgotten that those fangs and claws can be used for something better than self-loathing."

"And you're going to train us how to use our beasts in time to stop them?" Brigard says.

Theo raises his chin. "Yes," he says. "I am. Because I am Theodori Hunter Wolf-Born."

Gasps catch like flames.

Damian presses closer to Theo, acting as a human shield to hold back a man and a woman who lunge forward, faces turned into masks of anger.

"Cease!" cries the Toula at the head of the tent. "Listen to what the man has to say."

The tent quiets, though it continues to crackle with barely restrained anger.

Theo acknowledges the woman's efforts with a nod. "I have threatened your home in the past," he says. "But I come to you now as an ally. I understand the weaknesses of your city. I have laid siege to it, and I know how to bring it down."

His words seem to only fan the flames of the people's anger, so Theo rushes to continue, "I am also a Wolf-Born. I was brought into this world wearing the skin of my beast. I know it as well as my human flesh. I know its powers and weaknesses, and I can teach you how to use your own abilities to save yourselves. To save your people."

"How can we trust you?" Brigard asks.

"Because though borders separate us now," Theo says. "We are the same, at our

heart. We are beasts. And the ways the West has treated you is wrong.”

The answer isn’t enough. The crowd closes in around him, voices blending into an angry, bloodthirsty murmur. Theo closes his eyes and finally adds, “And my heart-mate’s brother will be killed if I do not intervene.”

Theo gazes out at the crowd. How did I get here? whispers a small voice. Here he is, planning to breach Cesscounthe’s walls in an entirely different way – all to save Luka’s little brother. All to save the very people he once planned to kill.

Flashes of the moment that led him here – Octavian at his side as Theo cut his way through Siacchi, the first moment Luka walked into his tent as Theo thought him someone else –

The first moment Luka won that Ravage match, eyes bright with violence, and Theo felt himself slip, just a bit, as he gazed into the man’s brilliant blue eyes, and realized that perhaps there was more to this world than victory and failure.

Their first kiss. Theo’s loss. The deserts, Cathalan’s prison, the bitter north and Jennison’s death.

All to lead him here.

“I fell in love with one of you,” Theo says. He will earn these people’s trust, just as he earned Luka’s. “Luka Lockhart was my – my prisoner, until I realized he was my mate, the one always meant to live in my heart. I realized I had been seeing the world wrong, blinded by glory when I should have been seeking love – seeking peace.”

The angry woman at his elbow blinks, taking a step back. The man at her side still frowns, eyes bright with mistrust – and interest. Interest Theo can work with.

“Since the siege, I have been with Luka Lockehart, fighting for Siacchi’s peace.”

Murmurs rise. Good. They recognize Luka’s name. It had been a risk to mention him with his connection to Linne Lockehart, but Theo had hoped Xyla had spread the word of Luka’s true impyassus nature.

Theo continues, “I made a mistake, yes, but I am here to fix it now. And make no mistake: I have suffered. I was betrayed by my closest confidant –”

Octavian’s eyes, so cold and sharp as he revealed he had sided with Linne Lockehart instead of Theo.

“ – imprisoned by my greatest enemy –”

Cathalan’s wicked grin as Theo wilted against the bars of his prison.

“But I am going to fix things. We both are – Luka is coming as fast as he can to help.”

Theo braces, waiting for angry human hands to descend. But when no blows come, he opens his eyes.

The crowd has drawn back. They are waiting.

“How do we know this is not a trick?” one man asks. “How do we know your people aren’t waiting to take our city back once we’ve overthrown our own leaders?”

“I can answer that for you,” the Toula says in a calm voice. Heads swing toward her as she approaches Theo, ignoring Brigard’s grunt of disapproval. “Give me your wrist, my boy,” she says.

Theo extends his hand toward the woman, confused, but unafraid.

“Here,” she says, taking his arm. Her fingers are dry and cool. “I can feel for his pulse. Slow, steady.” She inhales deeply. “It increases in speed when he lies. It remains constant when he speaks the truth.” She gazes at him with clear eyes. “Speak your truth, Theodori.”

“I am not here to hurt you. I am here to help your people retake control of this city.” Theo slowly repeats his message, methodically.

The Toula’s face remains scrunched with concentration long after Theo has finished. Finally, she says, “The Kiteran speaks the truth.”

The crowd’s opinion shifts. They eye Theo with new understanding, a sort of glowing hope that fills Theo with a ridiculous giddy joy.

Theo steps toward Brigard. He only needs to convince their leader. Then they will all fall into place. “All I need is six days.”

Six days for Luka and the Kiteran armies to arrive. Six days for Theo to try his best to fix the mess here.

Six days.

The people stare at him now, assessing. They take in Damian’s too-long pants and the worn spots around Theo’s knees. They trace the lines on Theo’s face and the scars on his hands.

“Six days,” Theo repeats. “That’s all I ask for.”

Brigard’s face darkens. He looks out, to his people, his eyes searching. Though he

receives no verbal response, when he meets Theo's gaze again, the answer is clear in his eyes before he speaks.

"Six days," he says. "We will give you this, Theodori Hunter Wolf-Born. But know this –if this is a betrayal, even if our people are destroyed here, we will haunt you, and our offspring and their offspring will haunt you, from living into the afterlife."

"No need for threats," Theo says. "Six days is all I need. I will deliver on my promise."

Probably.

Chapter Seventeen - Luka

Luka and the Kiterans meet with the walls of Cesscounthe with more force than he anticipated. The Kiterans roar their rage, and Luka, to his shock, finds himself joining the rallying cry. In the high watchtowers above, shaking aiutani watch them, their hands too weak to draw the bows at their sides. The Kiterans around him loose flaming arrows, aiming for wood, not flesh. Their goal here is not to kill, but to intimidate. They think they are facing down a hostile, recaptured city – which means Luka doesn't have much time. Vittoria's flinty gaze makes it clear she anticipates opposition, and is ready to face down any who stand in her way.

Through the chaos, Luka is dimly aware of a new flicker in his heart. Feelings that are not his own.

Theo.

Hope soars, tangling with some foreign sensation Luka can't bring himself to understand. The foreign sensation from –

Cathalan.

Both men are not far.

It doesn't take long for Cesscounthe leadership to answer the Kiteran war cries. A man next to Luka tips his head back and lets out a blood curdling howl, and for all his human flesh, he sounds like his wolf counterpart. Chills rise on Luka's arms. Darri keeps close to his side, and this is perhaps the only reason Luka doesn't let himself be

swept up in the feeling of – of – truly, he cannot put a name to it.

Bloodlust?

No, surely not.

A cry comes from above. Luka recognizes former Council Head Dawls as she peers down from the walls surrounding Cesscounthe, her eyes wide as she takes in the Kiteran war party.

“You Siacchians are quick to send your leaders to negotiate. I’ll give you that much,” is all Vittoria says before she signals the group to halt. It clearly takes willpower for the Kiteran soldiers to stop their screaming, and they all frown as one as their leader peels away from the group. Dawls, all but obscured behind a bodily shield of Siacchians, gestures Vittoria to a smaller side entrance, and though many protest, demanding Vittoria to take guards, the Kiteran warrior is unswayed and unafraid.

“We will talk,” Vittoria says, “but my people will remind yours of what you will lose should I die.” She jerks her chin, and the Kiterans, grinning, resume their assault on Cesscounthe’s walls. Council Head Dawl’s watches with a set jaw, but she says nothing in protest, only allowing Vittoria entrance to Cesscounthe.

It is only as Luka watches, a vaguely disappointed feeling stirring in his stomach, that he returns to himself.

The moment Vittoria speaks to the Cesscounthe leaders, she will learn I have lied.

Luka will need to act quickly.

The Kiterans are still firing arrows and shouting, banging their fists against the walls, making the aiutani guards quiver with fear, and the chaos is enough for Luka to draw

Darri away.

“What are you planning?” Darri asks as Luka seizes his arm, pulling him through the shouting Kiteran warriors. A pair of young men seize a bottle of grain spirits, dump it over themselves, and then move to set their hair on fire. Only a senior warrior stops them with a half laugh, half grunt of disapproval. “Intimidation factors should not include grievously injuring yourself,” Luka hears her say as he and Darri disappear over the curve of the hillside.

Luka isn’t fully able to answer Darri – not at first – because he isn’t certain where his feet are taking him.

That is, he isn’t sure until he sees the familiar pile of rocks, just atop the hill overlooking a gurgling brook.

Yes. That is why his feet have carried him here with such certainty.

“There is a door,” Luka says, “that leads to tunnels beneath the city. It’s this way.”

In the same direction is his eldest brother’s grave.

He winces as they walk, pausing occasionally to avoid any attention from the Kiteran war party.

“Have you injured yourself?” Darri asks after inhaling deeply.

“No, I –” Luka pauses. He gazes at his palm – there is a deep cut across the surface of his marriage bond with Cathalan.

But the injury is not his own.

Cathalan, I hope you know what you're doing, Luka thinks. For he truly does not have the time to worry about what troubles the Balivartian king might be getting himself into.

It's only there, sitting among the waving fronds of winter grasses, squinting into the too-blue afternoon at the walls of Cesscounthe, that a form begins to take shape. Yes, there. He can see it now, only barely, standing at the gravestone where Alessandro was buried all those years before. So close to the hidden entrance to the tunnels beneath Cesscounthe.

Luka's stomach drops.

He casts a look over his shoulder. They have put distance between themselves and the Kiterans. The hill shelters them from their attention – and the aiutani posted at the gates are too focused on dumping great buckets of water on the soldiers to see him and Darri.

Luka's eyes dart back to the grave where his brother was buried all those years ago.

He mistook the blur of black-brown at the base of the towering gates to be dead undergrowth. But now, throat dry, Luka realizes with a harsh lurch of his stomach that his mother is standing at Alessandro's grave, two horses at her back.

How did she know? is his first ridiculous thought, for what other reason would Linne Lockhart be here? She must have known he was coming somehow.

She has been waiting for me.

He swallows harshly, clearing his eyes with a few blinks as if he could vanish her form, clearly angry even at this distance, into a stress mirage.

But no. It's impossible for him to mistake those pale blue robes, stark as a splash of paint against Cesscounthe's dark walls.

"Luka?" Darri says, but his voice sounds so far away. Luka's legs are already carrying him forward.

"Luka!" Darri hisses. "Where are you going?"

"Linne Lockhart knows we're here," Luka manages to say.

"It's not like we've been discreet." Darri closes the distance between them and seizes Luka's arm. He still hasn't seen Luka's mother. His attention is too focused on Luka.

Linne has yet to spot them. She has one hand on the horse.

Luka lowers his voice as he replies, though the distance between him and his mother should make it impossible for her to hear: "You weren't there when we convinced the Kiterans to send their soldiers back to Cesscounthe, but –"

"Yes, I know," Darri says, shaking his head. "The impyassi rebels have overthrown the few Kiteran soldiers left behind, and now the Kiterans have sent these brutes to crush the insurgents –"

"No," Luka hisses. "That's a lie. There are rebels, but they're too weak to do any uprising. That's why we're here."

Darri's eyes bulge.

"Why did you think Cathalan went ahead of us?"

"Luka," Darri says, words calm despite the visibly pulsing vein in his forehead. "I'm

not Cathalan's right hand because I'm able to outthink him. I'm here to keep him safe. I'm here to keep you safe. Why haven't you told me this?"

Luka shrugs carelessly and looks away to hide his warming cheeks. I didn't think you were so dense, is the answer that builds on his lips, but he manages to stifle it. "I know you're good enough to keep pace with me as I go."

He glances toward the blue-brown blur at the wall. Has it moved?

Is she just my imagination?

Luka shakes his head. None of that matters. Even if she is there, it makes his plan easier.

"Luka!" Darri growls. "What are you thinking? Keeping me in the dark will not help me keep you safe."

Luka glances back. Despite the chill in the air, Luka's hair already sticks to his forehead from sweat. Dead grass gathers on his palms. Darri looks as fresh as a spring pup, apart from the still-pulsing vein at his temple.

Luka sighs. "First, I find my mother, Linne Lockehart."

Ahead, the blue form shifts, as if she has heard her name. Darri follows Luka's gaze. The only sign of his surprise is a slow blink.

Luka continues, "And then I kill her."

Linne Lockehart stands before the grave of her first son. Two horses shuffle behind her. The fülle from the Lockehart house is slung across the bay's back. Luka's mouth dries as they draw closer and he looks upon his mother's face for the first time in

months.

Linne Lockehart's dark curls have grown long enough for her to draw them from her face in a stubby braid. Her face is pale beneath the clouded sun. The scar Luka has left her with catches the light, even as she shades her eyes with her long-fingered hand. A delicate, clingy silk tunic reveals her complete lack of a belly. She has given birth. The thought makes Luka's stomach drop.

And there, holding onto her arm, is –

Luka's eyes fill with tears. He races forward, heart pounding from the sprint, before Darri can stop him.

“Cassian!” Luka cries.

“Luka!” Darri says, but Luka pays him no mind.

Cassian has grown impossibly older. Though only a handful of months stand between when Luka saw him last, Cassian seems to have aged a year. He's taller now, and his curls bristle from his skull. He rubs at his face with the backs of his hands, pressing his knuckles into the bags beneath his eyes.

When Luka shouts again, “Cassian!” Cassian's brilliant brown eyes fly open.

“Luka!” Cassian cries in delight. As he moves to run into Luka's arms, he's immediately jerked to a halt by Linne's firm grasp.

“Hello, Luka,” she says. There is no surprise in her eyes – is there? She must have known, Luka thinks, but how? The only explanation he has is his mother's ridiculous intellect. She has predicted his every move thus far, why not this?

“I’m sure you’ve already noted the ground upon which we stand, Luka,” Linne says as Cassian first struggles, and then, wilting beneath her cold glance, goes still against her.

The world jerks around Luka. He struggles to summon the many lessons from his tutors to keep calm while he holds Linne’s gaze, trying not to let himself drown in memories. This is where, so many years before, Linne had dragged the dead body of Luka’s eldest brother and buried him because he failed her.

Don’t be like your brother, Luka, she had hissed then, her breath warm against his neck as he shook. He understood far too well what she meant by the words –

And why has she taken Cassian here now?

The Kiterans were not quiet in their approach. Linne and all in Cesscounthe should have heard them, but here she is, outside these walls.

Her original goal wasn’t to wait for Luka.

She likely brought Cassian here to threaten him, just as she had to Luka, all those years ago.

And, should Cassian defend himself... well, perhaps he had simply gotten caught in the Kiteran crossfire.

“No,” Luka growls, and again his emotions threaten to overwhelm. Everything is so much harder to keep grasp of here, now, staring his mother down. His arms bristle with fur, and Luka suddenly doesn’t know why he even bothers to stifle his beast.

“You won’t harm Cassian. I won’t let you harm anyone else,” Luka says, his words warped by the bulge of his fangs.

Cassian's eyes grow huge as he gapes at Luka, shrinking back into his mother.

"You've lost, Mother," Luka continues. He advances on Linne slowly. Distantly, he's aware of Darri at his back, tense and waiting, eyes likely on the fuille. Luka flares his hands, revealing how his nails have lengthened into claws. His dagger hangs from his belt, but there is no point in him using it –Luka himself is a weapon.

"I've lost?" Linne repeats. The utter lack of fear in her voice makes Luka pause. Linne raises her chin. Her eyes dart to Darri. "Is that why you've bought this new beastly friend to make yourself feel safer? Because you know you are too weak?"

Luka is painfully reminded of how he felt as a child, watching his mother, wishing he could better emulate her. Back then, he thought himself a monster, and Linne Lockehart, nothing but smooth skin and quiet feelings, seemed like a fairy tale.

Linne's hands tighten around Cassian's wrists, and Cassian's face contorts in pain. "I know you've managed to trick your way into bringing Kiteran armies to our doorstep." She shakes Cassian. "Your own brother! I told you he was a traitor –do you not believe me now?"

Cassian blinks, tears welling in his eyes. "Of course I believe you, Mother," he says. He is a terrible liar.

Linne rolls her eyes. "You're as bad as my eldest was. I should have picked a better sire for the both of you." Her free hand ghosts over her stomach. "My new child... will be the best of you, I'm sure." She bares her teeth. "I know the beastly bloodlines can be eradicated. A stronger mind and refined self control will help restrain the monster I could never beat out of the two of you."

Her smile turns sweet as she looks at Luka. "I'm sure you wouldn't hurt me, boy," she says. "I've only just given birth. No one would even think I'd be on my feet, out

here of all places. It's the truth. Use those beastly senses of yours. Surely you can smell the blood. Think of your sister. Your baby sister. Would you leave her without a mother?"

She must know Luka has no training. He has no idea how to do such a thing.

Luka swallows harshly, his eyes swinging from his mother to Cassian.

Cassian shakes his head, curls askew. Tears shine down his cheeks. So much older –so strong. When did he get to be so brave?

"War is about sacrifice," Luka growls. Even to his own ears, his voice sounds barely human. He takes another step.

Linne laughs sharply. "You really think you can kill me? "

Another step. Luka is so close now. All he needs is another thing to say to her, another moment of distraction. Then he can yank Cassian from her grasp – and then he will – he will lay a hand on her. It shouldn't be hard. She is only a human.

And he is a monster – no. An impyassus .

Linne looks past Luka's shoulders. "You are right about one thing, Luka," she says. "I never thought you'd have the Kiteran armies on your side – how did they learn that I've turned the guards they left behind? Was it that Octavian? I knew I should have never let him slither away." She shakes her head.

Turned? Of course Linne would be pulling Kiterans to her side. To her cause, which would never align with the Northerners.

Luka lifts his foot, eyes on Cassian. Hold on. Cassian's wrist purples beneath Linne's

firm grasp, and Luka's beast surges –

“But there's something I need to tell you, Luka,” Linne continues. “Since you think you're ready to take my life.”

She smiles at Luka. There is a strange light in her eyes –almost as if the flicker of a flame has been captured in her irises.

Cassian cries out, scrabbling against Linne's grip on his arm.

“Let him go,” Luka growls.

Linne cocks her head to the side. Her smile widens, revealing teeth –no.

Not teeth.

Fangs.

“Let me go!” Cassian screams, clawing at Linne's arm. Linne's nails have stretched into claws that dig deep, drawing Cassian's blood.

Linne hisses and releases him.

“You're –” Luka gapes at his mother.

Cassian cries out, spinning toward Luka, but his feet tangle and he falls, facing their mother.

Linne Lockehart stands tall and proud, the scar over her shoulder rippling as she bares her teeth. “Yes,” she says. “The Lockehart line is full of nothing but poison –poison I tried to beat out of all of us.”

She seizes the fuille from the horse's side. The horse snorts, sweeping away. She lifts the weapon – aims –

“No!” Luka screams –

“Don't worry, Luka,” Linne says. She smiles a beastly grin. “I'll make sure this next child is pure. And she'll grow up without ever having to learn about her brothers. Failures. The lot of you.”

And before Luka can move, she pulls the trigger.

Chapter Eighteen - Theo

D aylight, Theo argued six days before, is a better cover than nightfall at times. Whereas during the night guards will be on high alert, they will relax in the sun, and grow tired and lazy. That, and Theo's rebels, poorly trained as they are, will at least be able to blend into the crowds. This is why, at midafternoon, his newly trained group of rebels rise from the dark tunnels into the too-bright world of the Abraxi District.

Training the Siacchians was no easy thing. The first few days had been focused on impressing into them that they would not suffer some great drop in intellect if they raised a hand against another – even if they were learning how to throw a punch. Theo found an unlikely ally in Damian. At first, Theo found the man annoyingly underfoot. Damian would trail Theo and, to Theo's ears at least, only echo what he had already said. If Theo were giving advice to a woman about how to perform a hold so one might not escape her grip, saying, "Just squeeze tighter. Don't be a coward," Damian would appear behind him and say, "You're doing a great job, Ambria. This will prevent future bloodshed." A Kiteran would spit upon hearing such encouragement, but Ambria brightened – and listened.

Theo saw then that it should not be himself who should lead the charge into the heart of Cesscounthe. It had to be a Siacchian. It had to be a person that the rebels trusted.

It had to be Damian.

This means that now, as Theo and his rebels enter the Abraxi District, it is Damian who heads their charge. Theo has only heard rumors of what the Abraxi District looks

like. He works hard to keep from gazing about like a fool at the fine glass windows of overflowing shops, the looming streetlights made from gleaming metal, extinguished during the day. The people match perfectly with their finely cleaned streets, wearing ghost-silent silk slippers. Even the very air smells expensive; perfumes and scented candles, fine chocolates and coffee.

Thankfully, Theo and his rebels blend in well enough. Their stolen clothes whisper across the cobblestones as they walk in groups of twos or threes. There are nearly two dozen of them total, and they move with the casualness Theo trained into them days before, their shoulders forcefully relaxed, conversation low and quiet.

They're performing far better than expected.

Damian leads them through the Abraxi District. Theo trails half a step behind him, the cobblestones unforgiving through the thin soles of his new shoes.

The day is bright and golden. Not a single cloud darkens the sky. The streets are, as expected, relatively crowded, filled with students wearing red frocks or older folks making their way along the narrow streets. Most are likely working as Council members or as highly-paid artisans. There is only a guard here and there, and, just as Theo predicted, most are distracted by drink, cards, or both.

"Here," Damian whispers, drawing to a pause. Two blocks down, the scattered pairs and trios of the rebels trailing behind them slow.

The shops have faded to houses hidden by high walls. Gates emblazoned with family sigils block the entrances, towering high above Theo's head.

Damian pauses at a small, dark doorway. He presses his shoulder against it.

Locked .

Damian's brow furrows, but he quickly wipes any panic from his face. He waits and the crowds thin. When a final student rounds the bend, leaving the street empty but for a pair of sleepy guards posted half a block away, he presses his lips together and braces himself before he shoves against the door.

The impact releases a small burst of dust. The door remains closed. Damian grunts with frustration.

The guard halfway down the street pauses, lifting his head. Theo leans against the wall and tries to think casual thoughts. "Hold," he whispers to Damian.

They don't have to wait for long. The guard scratches his beard, yawns hugely, and returns to conversation with his fellow.

"What do we do?" Damian barely moves his lips as he speaks.

"If we can't go through," Theo's eyes dart to the walls, assessing their height, "we must go over."

Damian widens his eyes, but before he can protest, Theo is moving. The guards have both fallen into drunken laughter, one pointing at the other over a deck of cards, their backs turned. It's the best chance they'll have.

"Brace yourself," Theo says, and thank Wolf Mother he has trained these rebels to obey without questions, for Theo is already racing forward. He scales Damian's body – a foot here at the man's hip, and then his shoulder, and heaves.

His fingers meet the top of the wall. He dangles only for a second, space yawning between his feet and the ground, before Theo pulls himself up. Muscles left weakened from travel and imprisonment groan, but he is running out of time. The guards will see him at any moment.

He muffles a grunt with his teeth as he throws a leg over the wall – and drops down to the other side.

He freezes, waiting, but is met only with silence on both sides of the wall.

It is only as he opens the lock on the door from the other side that he curses himself. He should have let Damian do this – though Damian seems not to mind as he enters the opened gate.

Theo casts one last glance over his shoulders. Ten rebels are scattered across the cobblestone at his back. Three break away to follow him, while the remaining seven spread out to keep eyes on the streets. The roads might be empty now, but it's important they remain vigilant.

Who knows how loud Linne Lockehart might get when we threaten her with death.

She will have given birth almost two weeks ago now. Being human, she will likely still be weak and recovering – which explains her absence from the emergency Council Meeting the rebel spies caught wind of earlier this morning.

Theo steals through the small door, his footfalls silent as he crosses from the cobblestone to the pale yellow grasses of a small yard. Damian hides in the shadows, his back pressed to a tree, but before Theo joins him, he takes a breath.

This is Luka's home.

The courtyard is just large enough to house a babbling fountain. A small metal table sits opposite a hunched, leafless tree, the perfect size for a Cesse board. If Theo were to close his eyes, he could easily imagine Luka here, bent over a particularly complicated game, brow furrowed with concentration.

Theo pictures a different life, one where he was born here, in Cesscounthe. One where he might have sat across Luka – Luka would gaze at him with those clear blue eyes, so surprised and pleased to meet his first real rival. Perhaps Theo would have met Luka’s parents, shaken his father’s hand, hugged little Cassian.

But instead, Theo is with the men who break in through the side door. Instead, Theo is here to press the cruelest knife they could find in the rebel’s storages to Linne Lockehart’s throat and kill her to assume control over the Council.

That is, if everything goes according to plan.

Theo slinks into the shadows by Damian’s side, pressing his back against the cool stone wall. Two men and one woman join them—Eryn, Bathen, and Lyra. The best of Theo’s trainees these past six days. None have mastered their wolf, but they came as close as any untrained hopiar could ever hope to doing so after less than a week of practice.

All three are breathing hard, nervousness written in clear lines across their faces.

“All clear?” Damian’s eyes flicker to the street.

Lyra nods.

“Block the exits,” Damian orders, breathing life into Theo’s commands.

Eryn and Bathen move to the front door while Lyra circles around to the back. They creep like shadows across the dead grass, and disappear into the well-trimmed shrubbery.

Damian waits until they’ve gone before he moves again. He creeps as quietly as snowfall, making his way to the door Bathen guards before testing the knob. When it

creaks open beneath Damian's soft hand, Damian exchanges looks with Theo.

Theo considers the height of the sun – yes.

We're on schedule.

Assuming the other half of their team is just as timely, they'll be breaching the afternoon Council meeting by now, hands empty but knives sheathed at their sides, while they speak to the remaining Cesscounthe leadership.

Theo at first pushed for the Cesscounthe Council's death. He was unsurprised by the Siacchian rebel's knee-jerk, "Absolutely not!" in response. He was surprised by how little persuasion it had taken for them to agree to scaring their leadership. It helped that they knew Linne Lockhart would be isolated.

It shouldn't be hard to talk Cesscounthe leadership into a deal without her in the middle of things.

After all, Siacchians are well known to go to great lengths to avoid violence.

Well, your average Siacchian, that is.

The Lockhart house is quiet and sunlit as Theo enters. The floorboards shine beneath his soft boots as he creeps into a dining room. The table is made of gleaming, pale wood. Polished dishes rest at the corner of a metal sink. The distant smell of cured meats and some sort of sauce hovers in the air –someone's lunch.

Linne Lockhart is, as they suspected, still here.

Theo and Damian switch places now they are out of the rebel's eyesight. Theo leads the charge as they snake through the house, and he tries his best to ignore the clear

signs of Luka's childhood (the trophies Luka won, though all are recent; a switch casually leaning against the back of the door, stinking of cleaning fluid; the textbooks peeking out of a room that probably belongs to Cassian).

Theo's mind wrestles with the images; Luka, a perfect child, surely. And Linne Lockhart, the mother to raise a hand against him.

The next door yields another set of chambers, ending with a distant bedroom. Larger than the child's rooms Damian and Theo just searched. Theo takes a tentative step forward.

"He's not in there," Damian says, catching Theo's bicep.

Theo resists the urge to snap his teeth, instead yanking his hand free from Damian's grasp. He allows himself the briefest of moments to take in the empty quarters, inhaling deeply.

The scent is faint, but impossible for Theo to mistake.

This was Luka's room.

Slumped candles perch atop of tables, blue and green and heavy with the scents of pine and cinnamon. Neat lines of textbooks mark the walls. A Cesse board, match incomplete, sits behind a blue wall, and Theo is filled with the ridiculous urge to make a move –to challenge the Luka of the past, the Luka who lived here.

Instead, Theo checks the next door.

The room's contents again drag him to a stop.

A baby stares up at Theo from a cradle, round face scrunching as it wakes. Wisps of

black hair quiver on its forehead. It rubs at impossibly red cheeks as it gurgles in confusion, little hands searching for the person who entered its room.

“So the spies were right. She did give birth,” Damian murmurs at Theo’s back.

Theo forces himself to blink to reality. He can allow himself to soften over these echoes of Luka, but such weakness can lead to his downfall if he slips in front of Linne Lockehart. If she is as vicious as she was all those months before, he knows he must prepare himself for the terrible weakness wolf’s bane brings,

But Linne Lockehart doesn’t spring from the darkened corners of the room. Instead, the baby coos again – well, more of a cry than a coo this time, cheeks growing redder as it thrashes.

“Hush,” Damian hisses from the doorway, but his lackluster reassurance is clearly doing nothing to calm the child.

Theo huffs and steps into the room. As he reaches down to quiet the child –a twig snaps.

Theo stiffens, ears straining.

The noise came from outside the house – from a boot.

All of the rebels are wearing soft-soled shoes.

Before Theo can raise a cry of alarm, a voice sounds from his right:

“Please, I know you’re here for Linne and myself, but don’t hurt the child.”

Damian yanks his kitchen knife from its sheath, eyes wild, and lunges toward the

speaker –

Theo catches Damian's arm before the weapon's point can pierce the wide gaze of Carlo Lockehart.

Carlo shakes before them, half a head shorter and made all the smaller by his hunched, cowering frame. He doesn't dare blink, staring up the length of the blade to Damian – and then Theo. His mouth parts, but no words emerge.

Finally, he manages to say, "Please don't hurt the child."

At Theo's back, the baby gurgles again, merry despite the violence about to take place at the foot of its crib.

"We don't kill children," Damian growls.

Theo tightens his grasp on Damian's arm. He keeps his words calm as he orders, "Sheath your blade."

The muscles in Damian's forearm flex beneath Theo's fingers – before Damian grits his teeth and withdraws. Theo releases him.

"Someone is outside," Theo says, not looking away from Carlo. "Make sure the others are well."

"We came here for Linne Lockehart," Damian says, voice boiling with barely contained anger. "But her husband stood by while she ripped families apart. Are you getting soft, Wolf-Born?"

Fur rolls down Theo's forearms, but he doesn't look away from Carlo. When he speaks, his voice is even softer than before, but deadlier. "I told you that you need to

trust me,” Theo says to Damian. “I’ll handle Carlo Lockehart. You don’t need to get blood on your hands.”

Theo more senses the fight go out of Damian than he sees it. Damian says, “Use the code if you need me,” and then vanishes back into the house to investigate the noise from outside.

The baby cries again behind Theo, louder now, more insistent.

“P-please,” Carlo whispers. He doesn’t look away from Theo’s stare, but there is no challenge in his eyes. Only fear.

Theo takes half a heartbeat to examine his mate’s father’s face.

Yes, he can see Luka there – in the upturned corners of Carlo’s eyes. In the marks of laughter outlining his lips.

But Luka would never allow such monstrosities to befall impyassi and stand by.

No, Carlo is rotten in all the ways that Luka glows. Even his scent is polluted; his hands reek of chemicals. Luka said his father was a doctor. What a terrible irony considering the lives he has ruined.

Theo’s hands tighten into fists as he continues to stare, his teeth grinding together. Only the distant but all too familiar memory of returning to his parents’ homestead and finding scorched, withered bodies halts his arm.

I will never forgive Cathalan for what he did. Not really.

Will Luka be able to forgive me?

For a monster like Linne, probably. But for this –

There's no point in Theo pondering that question; he already knows the answer.

That's why he sent away Damian.

The rebels want blood – and that, unfortunately, is a promise that Theo cannot fulfill.

“You knew we were coming?” Theo asks. He measures each word out with the perfect amount of promised violence.

Carlo raises his hands. His fingers shake. “Linne... after hearing the Kiteran war-cries, she suspected they had... that they had betrayed her. I don't know where she's gone.”

Kiteran war cries.

Theo and the rebels must have missed the shouts while they were in the underground tunnels.

If a Kiteran war camp is closing in on Cesscounthe –

Then Luka is here.

Theo mentally lunges for the bond between himself and Luka – for so long, the sensation of his mate was as faint as a long-since cooled hand resting on his chest. But now Luka burns brightly. Theo's heart warms.

But there is something tangled in the feeling – something wild and angry and –

Luka is afraid.

“Where is Linne Lockhart?” Theo asks, icy realization seizing him.

Carlo’s eyes flicker past Theo’s shoulder before he replies.

It’s then that Theo realizes the baby’s irritated gurgles have gone eerily quiet.

His hands fly to his blade as the door to his right slams open – and Kiteran soldiers explode inside, screaming threats, axes and swords drawn.

Before Theo can demand an explanation, Carlo lunges, something glinting in his fist
—

A syringe?

The device sinks into Theo’s neck with a brief spark of pain – and then his body goes slack and the world drops away.

Chapter Nineteen - Luka

Blood splatters Luka's cheeks as Cassian falls, his throat gaping open. Linne stands with her back to Cesscounthe's wall, her fingers – no, her claws – gleaming from where she grasps the fuille. She pales as she looks at Cassian bleeding out into the dead grass, like she can't fully comprehend what she has done. But then her expression flickers into something darker – crueler. The single eye of the fuille swings to Luka.

“NO!” Luka screams. His body moves for him, and in an instant, he is at his brother's side. Has Cassian always been so small? He drops to his knees, clapping his hands to Cassian's ruined throat. He blinks furiously, trying to see through the tears. In seconds, his hands are soaked with blood.

“How could you?” Luka screams, not looking away from his brother – his baby brother, his only brother – dying beneath his hands.

“Cassian, Cassian!” Luka presses down harder, trying not to think about how warm Cassian's lifeblood is. Trying not to think about how slick his skin has become. He shakes his head to clear tears from his vision. “Cassian? Can you hear me?”

Cassian's eyes blindly rove before they finally land on Luka's face. Fear – and blood loss – have drained all color from his cheeks. He opens his mouth, lips shaping words, but no sound emerges.

“Don't speak – Cassian – you don't need to speak – you'll be alright. You'll be alright.” Luka's voice grows softer and weaker with each word.

He's dimly aware of Linne's approach, but Luka can't find it in him to care.

"Move another hair closer and I'll remove your head from your body."

Darri's quiet threat barely registers in Luka's panicked thoughts, but Linne's approaching footsteps halt. Dimly, Luka realizes his tears are soaking his Kiteran clothes. Worse – Cassian's eyes are rolling back, consciousness fading away. Luka feels like he has been pushed from his body and he's watching all these horrible, horrible events take place from somewhere far away – somewhere padded and soft.

"Luka," Darri says quietly. "What do you want to do with her?"

"Unhand me!" Linne is shouting. A strange click click of her snapping teeth sounds. The soft thud of the fuille hitting the grass. Darri is restraining her – barely.

Luka can't look away from Cassian's neck –

"Luka," Darri says again in that dreadfully soft voice, like he's speaking to a wild animal. He sounds much like Luka's private tutors after a particularly bad breakdown. "Let him go. He can't survive that. No matter what you do."

"NO!" Luka's body jerks in response to the calm, kindly meant words. His teeth lengthen into fangs so quickly, they slice through his lip. His own blood rushes to join his tears.

To his horror, he realizes that his hands have morphed into something akin to paws. He yanks away from Cassian, crying out.

Linne releases a gurgling laugh, and Luka finally looks up at his mother – his brother's murderer.

Linne Lockehart stands stiffly, Darri restraining her hunched semi-human form with one arm, holding his blade to her throat with the other.

Linne's face contorts in fear as Luka meets her gaze. Colors fade from Luka's vision. His body crunches and warps. The rage is changing him – and he is all too eager to let it take control.

Luka raises his half-hand half-paw appendages to his face – and he leaves a streak of blood across his barely human visage. His cheeks bulge like a muzzle is attempting to emerge from his nose. Furry ears protrude from the side of his head.

The temptation to let the beast take control and rip Linne's throat out – to feast on her entrails – overwhelms. Luka nearly lets himself fall into it.

Nearly.

And oddly, it isn't the horror on Linne's face that holds Luka back, but instead the realization that she, too, is an impyassus.

“All these years you treated me – my older brother – like monsters, but you were always the same as us,” Luka growls.

Linne shakes her head. The movement drags her throat across Darri's blade. Blood trickles down her neck. Her expression freezes, as if she realizes that her disgust has been written across her face in enormous letters, and her eyes shutter.

“I am not like you,” she says. Her eyes flicker back to Darri briefly, narrowing, but when she speaks, she addresses Luka, “I have risen above. With the help of my father, I beat the beast from my flesh. If only I could have done the same for you and Alessandro. Then, maybe you could have joined us as humans instead of being killed like the animals you are.”

“Is that why you brought Cassian here?” Luka whispers. “To remind him of what his fate would be if he failed the Bombani Exam?”

Linne’s face contorts further. He tries to see some bit of his mother in her – the loving, kind person she is supposed to be.

“I never would have thought you’d return, Luka,” she says instead. “I had hoped you dead – killed at the hand of those mercenaries.”

“Then why...” Luka looks around them. His eyes land on Alessandro’s unmarked gravestone. “Does my father know you’re here?”

“Carlo is too soft. Too warped. I thought I could use him to purify the bloodline – but clearly he is just as corrupt. That is why I did not use him to help father my fourth child.” Linne laughs softly, cruelly, but Luka can hardly hear her.

“You really brought Cassian here to kill him,” Luka whispers.

Linne shakes her head. “Truly, Luka you could have been so much better. So sharp – if only you could have brought those beastly urges of yours to heel.”

Luka swallows. He tries to breathe, but the air has turned liquid in his lungs. “But Cassian was...” human, is what he means to say, but something halts his tongue. Luka’s mind finally shoves past the horror of the situation. Fragile hope thaws his logic.

Cassian is an impyassus.

And impyassus have inhuman healing abilities.

Does Linne know?

No, Linne is staring at Luka with carefully built contempt. She doesn't even glance at her youngest son.

After all, how would she know the full extent of her powers if she only bothered to suppress her beast?

Cassian will live , Luka promises himself, still careful not to draw Linne's gaze back to his brother. Back to his – hopefully – healing wounds. Cassian has to live .

“And I know you,” Linne is saying, speaking now to Darri. Her voice drops to something resembling a purr as her body slowly tenses. “I recognize your face – you are the bastard prince, aren't you?”

Darri's eyes widen.

“Yes – Cathalan's brother. Your father told me of you. You were always in his shadow. I suppose you don't remember me – you were rather young, after all. And the king did not handle you kindly... of course he wouldn't. Because you were one of his... indiscretions... weren't you? I can only assume you take after your Alimartian mother.”

As Linne's lips quirk into a grin and Darri's face continues to pale, Linne heaves her elbow into Darri's stomach in a sudden, violent movement. Darri's grip, loosened in his shock, falls away as he staggers back, gasping.

“Leave him!” Luka shouts as Linne whirls on Darri.

Darri dry heaves, and Linne spares Luka one last glance.

“I'll be there in a moment, Luka,” she says, spreading her claws.

Luka doesn't speak. He only draws his knife.

The moments where his fingers linger on the leather wrapping of the blade stretch. All those years living – surviving – under Linne Lockhart's roof. All those tortuous moments where he forced himself to be the creature she wanted. But he never would have pleased her.

It was Linne who told Carlo to take Luka fox hunting. It was Linne who insisted Luka learn how to hold the *fuille* .

How to kill the same creature he could change into.

"I feel sorry for you," Luka says as the world slows. Everything sharpens. His fingers, still half-human, half-beast, hum around the blade's pommel.

Linne's face twists again in disgust, a surely cutting response building on her lips. She doesn't even bother to glance at Luka's knife – she isn't afraid of Luka.

She thinks him too *Siacchian* to hurt her. Too trained and logical.

Too human.

Luka releases the knife with an exhale.

As the blade arcs through the air, he wishes it were the *fuille* cutting into his shoulder. He wishes, all those late moments with his father, those cold nights where they exchanged stories and jokes, could amount to something more than a fox crying and bleeding out in his child-sized hands.

The blade hits Linne Lockhart in the throat.

She goes down with a gurgle.

She looks broken, splayed at Luka's feet. When her body hit the ground, the world should have shaken. She has been such a monumental figure in Luka's life, it seems wrong now, to see her crumpled, bleeding. Small. Her hair a fan of black against her cheek.

"She won't be down for long," Luka says as Darri wipes bile from his lips. "You'll want to cut off her head –"

Luka's stomach heaves. His eyes are wet, and he hates himself for it. These tears are not a weakness, but his mother is a monster. He should be celebrating how she lies at his feet, a starburst of blood against the frozen earth.

Darri's hand lands on Luka's shoulder. "You don't have to be the one to do this."

Luka presses his lips together. "No," he hears himself say. "I do."

It feels as if another man is operating his limbs as he holds out his hand – as Darri places his blade in Luka's palm.

Luka hefts the sword, its weight unfamiliar. He grits his teeth against his tears. He holds the blade above Linne's head. Already, he can see her wound healing. The dagger falls from her flesh. But his hand is shaking –

"You don't have to do this," Darri says again. He is so close to Luka, Luka can feel the heat of his body. His hand lands on Luka's arm. "It does not make you weaker to ask for help in slaying your monsters."

Luka laughs bitterly. "She is my mother. I should be the one to end her."

Darri smiles. The expression held no joy. “You know, I thought the same. But I am forever grateful that Cathalan was the one who took my mother’s life. Not me.”

Luka stares at the man in shock. Darri’s mother – she had been one of the old Balivartian King’s illicit affairs. What could she have possibly done to warrant such vitriol from her son?

Darri squeezes Luka’s arm. “It makes you no weaker.”

For an instant, Luka wants to hand Darri the blade. His mother groans at his feet, and the weak animal noise should make him want to weep. This is the woman who carried him, who brought him into this world.

It is only right that I be the one to take her out.

Swiftly, before he can hesitate, Luka brings the sword down.

The sound of his mother’s head separating from her body is wet and meaty. Luka looks away.

Darri’s warm hands disentangle the sword from Luka’s vise grip. “There now,” he says. “You’ve done well.”

When Luka opens his eyes, he finds his mother’s head staring back at him. Her eyes, so cunning, so vicious, are now blank with death.

Darri tears the bottom of his tunic and drapes the cloth over her head. Luka cannot look away until her eyes are covered.

In the distance – toward the south – a war horn sounds. Not Kiteran.

Balivartian.

Darri's head snaps up. "Cathalan," he says, blinking rapidly. "He was able to get reinforcements."

Yes, Luka should be thinking of the oncoming Balivartian war party, likely now emerging from the south like a roll of dust from a dune of sand. The war party who has surely collided with the Kiterans, leaving them in a battle between Siacchian impyassi, Kiteran soldiers, and the Balivartians.

But he can't make himself think of any of this. He isn't paying Darri's panic any attention at all. Instead, his hand flies to his chest – to the place where his connection with Theo is gently tucked beneath his heart.

Fear – not his own, but Theo's – spikes through Luka.

And then nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

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Chapter Twenty - Theo

“O h, good, he’s alive.”

The smoky, feminine voice is familiar, and the northern burr marks it as clearly Kiteran.

“Of course he’s alive.” A soft male speaker – Carlo Lockehart.

Theo’s eyes crack to take in a blurry world. Nausea rolls. He’s reminded, painfully, of those weeks he spent in Balivartian captivity, and he tests his wrists and ankles, expecting shackles.

But he has full mobility.

And the lingering dryness in his mouth doesn’t speak to lovelace, but to some other drug. No – his connection with his beast remains strong – and his connection with Luka. Luka, who’s pain is so powerful, it sears him. Theo screws his eyes shut. He interrogates the connection between them until he understands that Luka isn’t hurt, just afraid.

Not good, but that, I can handle.

Hold on, Luka. I’m coming to you.

Carlo’s face swings into view. Oddly, his brow is creased with concern.

“As promised, we have not harmed him,” the familiar voice says. Theo still can’t place it. “But this traitor does not deserve such kind treatment. I don’t understand why you wish to aid him with all that he has done.”

“This way will ensure the least amount of bloodshed.” Carlo places cool fingers to Theo’s neck. Theo tenses – his body is still stiff and slow to respond to the threat – but no. Carlo is only taking Theo’s pulse.

“I’m sorry,” Carlo says as he meets Theo’s eyes. “I didn’t know if I could trust you or your people – the rebels, that is – especially not when you came to us with so many... weapons.”

Theo’s arm finally obeys the commands his mind is screaming, but instead of heaving Carlo away, it flies to his side.

His sword is gone.

“Would you give us a moment, Danessi Vittoria?” Carlo asks, his gaze moving to someone behind Theo’s prone body. “And yes, I won’t wait so long to signal you and your people if something goes wrong this time.”

Vittoria?

Theo’s head jerks, but he only catches a glimpse of blonde hair as the Kiteran soldier leaves the room. Growls leak from his twisted lips as he tries to force himself to follow her, but Carlo braces a hand against Theo’s shoulder.

“She will kill you!” Theo snaps, mindlessly shoving. His ears roar as he tries to rise, darkness crowding the edges of his vision.

“She’s helping you. She’s been holding... peace talks with the Council. She seems to

know the Kiterans have lost the battle here, but that there are still connections to be made. Because of her experience as a healer, she volunteered to examine you to ensure you were well after I... was forced to apprehend you,” Carlo explains, and despite the stink of fear leaking from him, his voice is calm. “Give yourself another minute. Your body is likely still clearing that sedative I gave you.”

Theo falls back against the cot, a huff of air exploding from his lungs. “Explain,” he growls. With every blink, the world becomes a bit sharper; he’s in a brightly lit room. It’s still day – but afternoon now. At least three or four hours have passed. His back is softly cushioned – he’s resting on some sort of bed. The air stinks of blood... this is some sort of... hospital?

Yes. Luka did say his father is a doctor.

“I’ll explain only if you provide an honest answer to one question,” Carlo says.

When Theo levels a glare with him, Carlo’s throat bobs with an anxious swallow, but he holds Theo’s stare.

“Ask,” Theo says. He strains his ears. There aren’t any sounds of fighting. There is some conversation, distant but loud, taking place outside the building. He’s too far to make out the words.

“Is my son safe?”

Theo looks at Carlo again, and this time, he reads new meaning into the creases between Carlo’s brows and the way he worries at his hands.

“I didn’t realize you cared.” Theo curls his lip, gauging Carlo’s reaction to his cold words.

Carlo's face twists with fear and anger. He raises a syringe. "If my son isn't safe, this will stop your heart in seconds. Don't think I won't use it against you, even if you're defenseless."

"Yes," Theo growls. "It's my understanding that's how you handle all of your victims."

Carlo's eyes widen as the color drains from his face.

"You think I didn't know that you've killed sons in the past?" Theo laughs coldly. He tests his limbs again; his arm twitches in response. Another second or two, and he'll have enough mobility to rip this foolish man's throat out –

But this is Luka's father.

Well, maybe he'll just knock him unconscious.

"It was just Alessandro," Carlo murmurs, his shoulders loosening. "I didn't realize... I thought... no, that's a lie. I knew what I was doing. But Linne... she said she would hurt Luka if I didn't..." He sniffs loudly, and Theo realizes with horror that Carlo is crying.

"I never wanted to hurt my children. I never wanted to pick between them," Carlo says to his feet as tears roll down his nose. He shakes.

Theo tenses. His body replies eagerly. He can move now. He can take this man down and move on to the next enemy. He can end this – and he can go to Luka's side. Luka, whose pain has only grown.

"Answer my question, please," Carlo says in that awful watery voice. "Is my son safe?"

“He is,” Theo replies with begrudging truth. “But he is in pain. Something has happened – something awful. I need to go to him, and you’re in my way.”

Relief clears the deep lines from Carlo’s face before it is replaced with a different kind of horror. “Linne must have found him.” He closes his eyes. “I thought the Kiterans would stop her before she got to him, but she left with – with Cassian not long ago – oh, oh, no – ”

Theo stands. His knees wobble beneath him, but he manages to stagger to Carlo’s side, pressing his forearm to the man’s soft throat as he shoves the both of them against a wall. A tray of medical tools clatters to the ground while Carlo gurgles in surprise.

“Explain what is happening,” Theo growls. “Or I choke the life from you.” It is an empty threat, but Carlo doesn’t need to know that, and Luka is in so much pain, it’s hard for Theo to concentrate.

Carlo’s eyes roll as he slaps against Theo’s forearms. “Please!” he rasps. “I don’t want to hurt you – especially if you are to Luka... if you are so important to Luka.” He drops the syringe, and it shatters against the tiled floor. “See? Please – release me. This will be easier for me to show you than to explain.”

Theo narrows his eyes.

“If I tell you,” Carlo wheezes, coughing. Theo draws back a hair and Carlo gulps air before continuing, “If I tell you, you won’t believe me. It will be easier for you to see it.”

Theo grinds his teeth together. He reaches for his bond with Luka – the pain there hasn’t dimmed, but it’s close. Luka is here, in Cesscounthe, just as he was hours before. Inside the walls now, if Theo judges the distance correctly.

Carlo could be lying – but why would he have sent Vittoria away if he was leading Theo into a trap now?

Theo releases the man. Carlo staggers, hand flying to his throat as he swallows grateful lungfuls of air.

“Show me then,” Theo says.

Carlo nods, dragging himself upright with the help of the wall. “Very good. Follow me.”

Carlo leads Theo into the glowing afternoon to a bright plaza at the heart of the Abraxi District. There, gathered upon cobblestones polished so often that they gleam, is an impossibility that likely never stepped foot into Cesscounthe before:

Kiteran leaders, bristling with furs and weapons, face down robed Siacchian scholars. Opposite them stand Balivartian warriors in their bejeweled scale armor, and, pressed into the tiniest corner, are Damian and half a dozen rebels still wearing their fine Abraxi disguises. Shockingly, the Toula stands with them, palms pressed together, mouth firm. She is the only one not shouting, hands waving about in the air. All faces flush red.

But none are bleeding. None are reaching for their weapons.

“This was all founded on trickery!” shouts the Siacchian scholar. She towers over her fellows, dark hair shorn close to her skull. She projects her voice so it easily carries across the courtyard. “How can we trust any of you?”

“How can we trust you?” Damian counters. “You took our children!”

Shouts rise again, but the Siacchian scholar from before waves her hand. “As

discussed, the children were to be given remedial lessons –”

“You took them in the night!”

“– and they will be returned to you!”

At the head of the Balivartians, a familiar man steps forward. A travel-weary and dust-smeared Cathalan faces the woman with a practiced smile. The Kiterans and Siacchians fall silent, likely seeing the glimmer of a crown at his brow. “If we wish to come to any sort of peace, then you must find it within yourselves to trust.” The words seem to take more effort than they should. Xyla slumps at his side, almost leaning on his shoulder.

At the head of the the Kiteran leaders stands Vittoria, and at her side is –

Octavian.

Theo starts forward, lips curling into a growl, before Carlo catches his arm.

“Release me,” Theo snaps. “That is – I must deal with that man –”

“Is your personal vendetta truly greater than the war between our countries?” Carlo asks. He releases Theo’s arm before Theo can answer.

Theo’s hands curl into fists, and he despises Luka’s father all the more for knowing that Theo will choose to forgo his vengeance without even needing Theo’s response to the question.

“See?” Carlo says as they draw to a stop before the raised forum, still out of eyeshot of the arguing leaders. Nervous soldiers from each of the countries stand at the steps, shifting their weight as they watch their leaders. “Would you have believed me if I

told you this was waiting for you?”

Theo refuses to humor the man. “How did this happen?”

At that moment, Cathalan’s eyes settle on Theo across the lifted dais. Even with the distance separating them, exhaustion lines his face.

“My understanding is that the Balivartian king saw a moment of Kiteran weakness and swept in to help us Siacchians reclaim Cesscounthe for ourselves,” Carlo says, though it’s clear from the dryness in his voice that he doesn’t believe this one bit.

“Who told you that?”

Carlo jerks his chin in the direction of the Balivartian king. No, not to Cathalan. “The woman who used to court my son.”

Theo’s gaze shoots to Xyla. Her red curls have been flattened against her skull. There is a smear of blood on her neck. His brow furrows. “Why would Xyla Mobiele tell you such a thing?”

Carlo’s face tightens. “Lower your voice.” He looks again to the gathered leaders, but none other than Cathalan have noticed them – Cathalan, who is now headed toward them, Xyla trailing behind.

“Theodori!” Cathalan says a bit too loudly. Xyla hushes him without breaking stride. Heads turn in their direction, though Octavian pointedly looks straight ahead.

“Perhaps you can explain what in the Mother’s name is going on here,” Theo grumbles when the two halt before them. Cathalan’s gait is unsteady, and he leans toward Xyla as he walks. Xyla responds in turn, as if she is pulled toward the Balivartian king – before she realizes what she is doing, and immediately jerks away.

“We got lucky,” Cathalan says. He pauses a moment before he steps outside of the shadow of the heavy trees, not entering the sunlight. His right hand is heavily wrapped in bandages, Theo realizes. Dark blood stains the fabric around his palm.

“Lucky?” Theo stares doubtfully at the wound.

“Balivartia was already sending a war party toward Cesscounthe. Apparently they encountered a group of soldiers who had been waiting for news at the foot of Akull’s mountain,” Xyla says. She pointedly doesn’t look at Cathalan when he smiles at her. “We met them partway.”

“They were desperate for bloodshed, so it was hard to bargain for peace... but thankfully I was able to convince them that my consort’s life was in danger with a little bit of... improvisation.” Cathalan wiggles his injured hand.

“You decided it best to injure Luka so you could bring bloodthirsty soldiers into an already volatile situation?” Theo growls.

Cathalan narrows his eyes, a flicker of humor lighting his weary face. “You were hoping this injury would have broken the bond, weren’t you? Oh, Theodori. You dog.”

“That is not the case,” Theo says stiffly.

“Oh, something much worse would have had to happen, Theodori, to break the connection between myself and Luka. It’s a good thing I didn’t have to remove my hand or something equally drastic.”

“We had it under control,” Xyla cuts in, seeing Theo’s narrowing eyes.

“Yes! Exactly. We had it under control. I knew they wouldn’t disobey their king –”

“Though opinions about their king seem to be rather low now, especially since they wish to return to the border they were guarding,” Xyla says.

“I told you – there’s no reason to be so angry, Xyla. You’ll get those supplies I promised –”

Again, he tries to meet Xyla’s eyes while she pointedly observes the ground.

Xyla says as she runs the tip of her boot along the shining cobblestone, “The Kiteran leaders didn’t want to face down the rebels – who apparently they thought had occupied Cesscounthe – and the Balivartians. One front, they can face. Two... not so much.”

Theo struggles to piece together their explanation. His body still sags from the drug Carlo injected him with. But really, nothing else matters other than –

“You’ve seen Luka?” Theo asks. Their leaders are in peace talks, even if their surrounding guards look nervous, and the walls of Cesscounthe are not being held by a siege. His life isn’t in immediate danger – though it would be best for him to avoid Kiteran attention for now.

He glances down; he still wears the worn robes the Siacchian rebels gifted him. Good. That will have to act enough as camouflage.

Cathalan's smile fades.

Xyla places a hand on Theo’s arm. “We’ll take you to him.”

Theo’s heart flutters in his chest, nearly choking him with fear and anticipation.

As he allows himself to be led away, he risks one last glance back at the dais. He

realizes now, looking upon it, that some part of him should be eager to join the leaders standing there. He should want that power – right? Isn't that what he fought for?

But no, the only thing that matters now is his own safety and happiness – Luka's safety and happiness.

The Toula's eyes meet his. She had wanted to speak to him. Her lips shape words it takes Theo a moment to comprehend:

It will be alright, in the end.

Oddly, it reassures him.

Turning, Octavian catches Theo's gaze. Their eyes linger on each other; Theo's old lieutenant looks humbled. His typically brilliant robes are dusty, and bags linger beneath his eyes. But he stands behind Vittoria, the position of second. Likely a recent promotion he was able to lie and scheme his way into.

He got what he wanted.

And though his eyes widen in surprise when he sees Theo, he doesn't cry out. Instead, he inclines his head slightly.

Perhaps – impossibly – Octavian wants peace, too.

Theo wishes he found Luka sooner.

They enter the Gamgy District on soft feet. Crowds of impyassi, necks now light without the weight of the markers of their beasts, mill about, voices cautiously hopeful. Reform is coming, they whisper. Things will be better now.

Luka is kept in a group of medical tents at the edge of walls of Cesscounthe. Theo is reminded painfully of their first meeting, not far from where they now stand, though under wildly different circumstances.

Theo shoves aside a flapping piece of white canvas to enter the tent, his mouth dry. Despite his connection with Luka – a connection which promised his mate to be alive and well – Theo can't help but to dream up horrible circumstances, ones where Luka is breathing, but lost to him.

But Luka sits inside the tent, uninjured. Darri, Cathalan's guard, stands at his back. Both look at a tiny figure, bandaged and prone on a lifted cot.

“Oh, Theo,” Luka whispers as he looks up from the body. Cathalan goes to Darri and the two clasp arms as Luka rises. Luka's cheeks shine with tears, and Theo's heart seizes. He takes one step forward and then another, until Luka falls into his arms. As Luka burrows into his chest, Theo holds his mate close, breathing him in.

Safe. Luka is safe.

We are both safe.

It is only later that Theo learns the quiet words Luka mumbles into his shoulder are: “They aren't sure Cassian is going to wake up.”

The days pass like water dripping from the tip of an icicle. Moments catch in Theo's mind; that night, returning with Carlo, who has been sentenced with house arrest by the Council, to Luka's childhood home.

Luka, picking up his baby sister, eyes still wet, but now overflowing with joy. He presses the girl to his heart, murmuring impossibly quiet words, before he looks up to meet Theo's stare.

“Do you want to hold her?” he whispers.

Theo finds himself nodding, extending his arms. Carlo looks on, his newly assigned wardens at his back, as Theo takes the child into a gentle embrace.

“She’s so small,” Theo finds himself whispering.

“What’s her name?” Luka asks Carlo. They are the fourth, fifth, and sixth words he’s spoken to his father, the first three being, How could you?

Carlo attempts a weary smile, pushing his spectacles up his nose. “Isolde.”

“Issy,” Luka says.

The name fits as perfectly as Theo’s hand fits his sword. The little girl’s mouth parts in a tiny yawn as she snuggles closer to him, perfectly warm and perfectly soft, smelling faintly of milk and sleep. Theo presses his nose to the soft curve of her head, delicately patterned with thin strands of dark hair. There is something odd about her eyes. They are a brilliant, piercing blue. Not at all like Luka’s, but an ice shade. The kind of color one would only find in the far north.

“She’s not mine,” Carlo says when Theo returns the child to her crib. “Linne lay with – well, to be honest, I’m not certain. She thought that perhaps I was at fault for the impyassi in our previous children.”

Theo blinks, but Luka doesn’t look surprised.

“Is Cassian your son?” Luka asks. He speaks dully, not looking at his father.

Carlo fumbles with the metal anklet he’s been fixed with. It circles his right leg, chiming as he moves. Its intent is to make it not only impossible for him to move

stealthily, but also to clearly identify him to all other Siacchians as a criminal. The guard behind him holds the key, and the man stares straight ahead when Carlo moves.

“I’m not sure if he’s my son by blood,” Carlo says. “But I raised him. He’s my child.”

“And yet, you were still going to help her kill him if he failed the Bombani Exam, were you not?” Luka’s eyes blaze. “And today, you still let her flee with him in tow, having no idea what she was going to do to him.”

Carlo looks away. “He was better off dying by my hand, Luka. Linne would have made it painful.” He pauses, pressing his lips together. “And I truly had no idea what she was going to do today. I did not know she thought to kill him so – so soon.”

“She’s a monster, and you’re a monster for supporting her.” Luka’s voice does not change in volume, but a growl bubbles beneath the surface. Carlo’s guards shift, eyeing the way russet fur sprouts on Luka’s exposed arms.

Before Theo can speak, Luka heaves a sigh. The fur vanishes. “But we’re all monsters here, aren’t we? Some are just better than others.”

And with that, Luka extends a hand to Theo and whispers, “Come to bed with me.”

They find comfort in each other’s bodies. Hidden deep within Luka’s chambers, they pull their clothes away, gentle at first, and then frantic. Luka groans as Theo kisses down the length of his neck, arching against Theo.

“Are you sure?” Theo whispers.

“I-I’ve never been more sure,” Luka gasps. His hands scrabble down Theo’s body, claws sprouting so he can rip away Theo’s borrowed clothes. “I need you inside me.”

Theo's nostrils flare.

Luka drags his teeth over Theo's nipple. "I need you to make me feel good. I need you to make me forget."

Theo's eyes roll back in his head as Luka kisses down his stomach, hand slipping to grasp his hip –to wrap around his cock.

Theo thrusts into Luka's lazy jerks, grunting. He shoves Luka back onto the bed.

Luka nearly vanishes beneath the silk sheets, but Theo finds him. Theo rolls Luka onto his stomach, exposing the pale curve of his ass.

As Luka presses against Theo's seeking fingers, muffling his moans and pants into his pillow, Theo strokes Luka's cock with his other hand. It's only when Luka is shuddering and crying out in weak pleas that are more animal than human that Theo eases himself inside.

Luka's cries grow to shouts. He thrusts himself back against Theo, and Theo grits his teeth, pleasure building. Instead of letting the feeling peak, Theo sinks his fingers into Luka's hips and rides his mate's frantic bucks with brutal control, waiting until Luka's cock splutters dry before he empties himself.

The passing pleasure seems brief in hindsight, but it is enough for Theo to help Luka forget, if only for a moment, the life hanging in the balance.

Ten days pass. Luka spends most of his time at Cassian's bedside.

Once, Theo finds him in tears, Xyla comforting him.

"The cost of peace was too high," Luka whimpers into Xyla's shoulder.

Xyla shakes her head, stroking Luka's back. "Think of the lives you saved, Luka," she murmurs. "Your mother would have taken so much more from our people."

"If only I came sooner," Luka manages around the tears, voice thick. "I could have stopped her. If only I was faster –if only I was better with my beast –I could have –I could have –"

"There is no road there, Luka," Xyla says, gentle but firm. She looks up, meeting Theo's eyes as Theo enters the healer's tent. "We can only move forward now. He will get better, you just have to wait."

Theo holds Xyla's gaze, though oddly, guilt twists in his stomach.

This is the remains of war that he never looked at, not since his parents died. This is the kind of destruction he left in his wake. Before, it was all a game to him – before, the people who died were simply pieces lost on a Ravage board, swept away and easily replaced when they fell. He could ignore their deaths, looking past them to the greater good. To his victory.

But he can't look away now.

All he can do is wait by Luka's side, wiping away his tears and holding his hand.

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In the days that follow, Luka and Theo often walk through the streets of Cesscounthe. Holding patterns lead to restless legs, and together they march from the shining cobblestones of the Abraxi District to the hard-packed dirt of the Gamgy District, arm in arm. The sky turns from pale dawn to twinkling twilight. Flowers begin to bloom. Winter has ended. Spring is coming. Theo smiles as he tells Luka, “I never thought I’d get inside these walls, not like this,” and Luka returns the gesture with an equally amazed and bewildered, “I never thought I would walk these streets, uncaring that any might know I am impyassi .”

Though they do not speak of it, they do wonder in the isolation of their own minds where the future will take them next.

In the evening, they will return to Luka’s childhood bedroom and Luka will guide Theo’s hands to his hips, mouth to his lips. Together, just for that moment, they lose themselves in their shared warmth. Time slows to flashes; Luka’s teeth teasing Theo’s nipple, his tongue on Theo’s cock. Theo’s fingers grasping Luka’s ass, spreading him, kissing lower and lower until Luka comes undone in his arms again and again, like Theo has always dreamed.

On the twelfth day of their stay in Cesscounthe after they have repeated this pattern again and again, three small miracles take place:

First, the Siacchians and Balivartians come to an unsteady peace – so long as Theo does not assume a position of power in the Kiteran armies and the Siacchians allow two impyassi a seat on their council. Theo is unsurprised when he is forced to renounce his title. He has been too prominent in the wars of the past, and too many wish for him misfortune. To continue to lead would be asking for retaliation, which

would surely lead again to war. Theo expected it to hurt more as his hard fought Sevell name is stripped away before witnesses –including Octavian –but all he feels is a faint, fragile hope for the future.

Balivartia and Kitera discuss their own peace talks, and Vittoria handles it better than Theo ever could. No decision is made, and the defeat is clear in Cathalan’s slumped shoulders as he leaves the Cesscounthe council every dark evening. His face has hollowed by the time the Kiterans withdraw from Cesscounthe, the treaty yet to be signed.

Vittoria alone stays to sort out the final details of Siacchi and Kitera’s relationship, while Octavian is sent to Akull. He passes Theo in the streets, and their eyes meet for a second time. Oddly, Theo is compelled to stop him.

“I’m sorry,” Theo says when he grips Octavian’s arm. The apology comes out all wrong –it seems he’s sorry for stopping Octavian in the street, and not for all of the awful things he did before.

Octavian looks at Theo’s hand, and a strange shudder seizes him. Theo releases his arm immediately.

“I can’t accept that,” Octavian says, but then, blinking and looking away, he adds, “but I’m sorry, too.”

When Theo finds he can’t accept Octavian’s apology either, he simply nods, and the two continue on their way.

The second miracle: Cesscounthe’s newly installed impyassi leaders abolish the Bombani Exam. It is to the surprise of no one that Damian is selected for one of the two open council member seats, but Theo is shocked to hear that Xyla is chosen for the second. The end of the Bombani Exam is impossibly huge but also still not enough; impyassi are still left with the jobs of unskilled labor and not provided

resources to help themselves or their children ascend the social ladder. But it's a step in the right direction. The first step in that direction in all of their history. People celebrate in the streets of the Gamgy District for days.

The third miracle – Cassian wakes.

Luka and Theo both sputter into consciousness at Cassian's bedside that night, nearly half an hour past one. As the full moon gleams down, Cassian seizes Luka's hand with wide eyes, a pleased smile spreading across cracked lips.

Luka exclaims with joy, pulling his brother into a careful embrace –and Cassian winces, his hands going to his throat. When Cassian's lips part to speak, only silence emerges.

Luka pauses. Though Cassian's eyes well with tears, Luka shakes with joy. Alive. Cassian is alive.

"I wasn't sure you would wake up!" Luka whispers, gathering Cassian's face in his hands. "Oh, Cassian –we made it. We won!"

On the thirteenth day, Xyla leaves the Mobiele compound in the Abraxi District. She departs at night, bidding Luka a brief farewell and giving Theo a curt nod (he should probably be grateful for that much). When Luka presses her on where she will go – who she will stay with, she only shakes her head.

"Don't worry, Luka." She kisses his cheek. "I have duties to attend to now – being a council member and all. They've only allowed me a short bit for reprieve before I need to get back to work. Besides – someone has to fulfill the promise we made to those wolves. She cracks her knuckles. "I just hope when the time comes your Kiteran wolf mother doesn't ask too much of me, Theodori."

Theo and Luka blink at each other, a moment of perfect confusion –and then

understanding –dawning between them.

“What did they ask of you?” Luka asks, but Xyla shakes her head

“I’m not sure yet,” she says. “I just know she told me, all those months ago, that she will call upon me when the time comes. And that I might be needing some goat’s milk.” She wrinkles her nose.

Cathalan is despondent because she said nothing to him, though he departs on the fifteenth day – mustn’t get underfoot with these newly elected officials around, after all! And I do have a kingdom to return to.

Before he departs, he looks Luka and Theo over. “I will have to leave you with guards,” he says, “should you ever depart the city.”

Luka presses his thumb against the scar in his palm. His life and the Balivartian king’s life are irreparably intertwined. With this, will he ever know true freedom?

But Cathalan’s face can only remain serious for so long. “That is,” he says, “unless you two decide to go somewhere that has already been cleared by my guards and is kept secret from my conniving court. Somewhere you will be safe, always.”

He shares a conniving smile with them as he whispers the location into Luka’s ear.

Really, it only makes sense when Cassian is well enough to travel that Luka, Theo, Cassian –and little baby Isolde –depart as well.

They take the infant at the Cesscounthe council’s order –though Luka already refused to leave his little sister with his father, part of Carlo’s sentence required his supervision around children at all times, and such a thing was difficult to ensure when he lived with a baby.

Together, the four of them load onto horses and a wagon, jostling down the road, hoods drawn over their heads. Their little family heads into the sunset until the east falls around them with foreign lands of thick forests and ringing birdsong.

It's only when they reach the beach –roaring shores as the waves slam against dark rocks, turning black stone to sand –that they stop. There, just as Cathalan promised, is a small house. Cassian races from the cart, laughing when he finds the door open. He darts through each room, kicking his boots off so that the sand might stick to his feet, stopping only when finds a bedroom overlooking the rocky shore.

Theo and Luka trail behind, the baby strapped to Theo's chest. Both pause in the doorway. The air hangs heavy with salt. The first night they have no furniture and they sleep on the floors and listen to the crash of the waves. Luka finds that each rise and fall is an echo of a promise: "You've come home. You've come home."

It is just as Cathalan promised.

It is a small home, humble, but warm on chilly nights, firelight highlighting their laughter. They decorate it with fine smelling candles and Cesse and Ravage boards, and when Luka teaches Cassian the moves, he does so with so much patience and kindness, it hurts Theo to watch.

Luka and Theo will play each other late into the night. They don't play for questions now, but instead quick pecks or sips of each other's wine. Luka will often hold eye contact as he tips his king in defeat, lips only shaping the word mate as he gazes at Theo.

And it is there, in this house in the east, that they stay. Here, where there are no monsters, no tests.

Just peace.

For now.