



# The Ballad of a Bard

**Author:** *E. D. Lee*

**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** What would happen if the six Saints that ruled over the world, grew bored and decided to play amongst the mortals?

They'd fall in love, of course.

Crimson and her brother, Cobalt have been alone for the past eight years.

With no one but herself to support them, and her brother's mysterious illness continuously killing him, it leaves her with no choice but to enter the Blades of Blood. A deadly fighting competition down in the slums of the city for those who are willing to risk it all. The masculine alias Red Lyric allows her to compete in the games where women aren't even allowed to enter. A name that has risen to fame over the last half decade, one that's becoming dangerously known.

When the Prince of Tazali begins his search for her alter ego, Crimson finds herself drawn towards the helping hands of Captain Westley Saint, who offers a chance of a better life for her and her brother, but it means tucking Red Lyric away for good.

**Total Pages (Source):** 73

# Page 1

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North gritted his teeth as the staggering, sparkling pain seared over his body. It was like the touch of a tickling feather if it were dipped in fire as it burned and seared and singed along his skin. The magic would conceal his constellation tattoos along his left forearm, making it appear as if the flesh was bare and leave him with the appearance of a mortal. But the rippling wave of enchantments stung like a beast as he took on the human form of the Saints.

The sting dulled the sapphire glimmer of his eyes, the black glow to his hair and the ethereal buzz around him. It made him look perfectly normal in every sense of the word, as much as humanly possible of course. He would keep his magic, his sense of being the Northern Star, but he would not look it.

A game of hide and seek within plain sight.

Call it boredom, call it insanity, but the Saints wanted to play in the world of mortals.

All six of them.

Well, the main ones anyways.

One had already taken her place on the earth, residing in it for more than two decades. Now the rest would join her.

The lesser Saints were permanently scattered throughout the world of Hisaith however, destined to rule as greater beings with mortal skins. They were the product of Saint and mortal relations. Which were far more common than they should have been, hence why they didn't go down in records of any sorts.

Only the six who sired them did.

Dream lowered her hands from his bicep, smiling gorgeously down at him. “All done.” She flicked a hand through the floor-length hair that tumbled into a pool of silver by her bare feet.

“Perfect.” North muttered. He eyed himself in the tall reflective surface that stood only a few feet away. It was incredible to witness the transformation, to see the small differences that allowed him to better fit into the puzzle of people without standing out. His sharp corners had been rounded to fit the mortal mould perfectly.

Within the mirror, if it could even be called that, he saw his new form. His glimmering, golden brown skin was now a regular tone of light russet. His hair was umber, so dark that it almost looked like the colour of night. There were still the starling sparkles of amber in his eyes that would never be dulled, no matter the amount of imaginative power that Dream used. The same magic that she sprinkled into the realm of slumber, to create the very reason for her namesake. Hence why she’d been the one to transform them, hide them away instead of any of the others.

North eyed himself in the mirror again, gauging how much had changed. He could pass for thirty-two, if no one tried to look too deep. There was only so much dampening that could hide an eternal youth.

North frowned as he took in the new addition .

“I added some facial hair to help hide that chiselled chin of yours.” She commented at his confused examination and gestured towards the barely-there dusting of hair that graced his chin, over his lips and met his hairline by his ears.

“So I see.” He studied it, unused to the feeling of something covering his cheeks. “I suppose it will have to do.”

“Have to do?” Her voice lilted, a sour expression coming over her lovely face. “I made you more attractive. Muse has been telling you for years to grow it out, and now you have it. Take it for a test run, see what the mortals think.”

Another Saint snorted in the corner.

“Muse has remained in Hisaith for far too long. The mortal world is affecting her.” He chuckled lightly, dragging a hand through his short hair. She hadn’t changed anything other than the colour, but he liked how the slight brown tint complimented his darker complexion.

“Stay in anything for too long and it will affect you.” Dream expressed with an all too wise tenor, sighing wistfully as if sleep had fallen over her lean shoulders and cast her into a beautiful daydream.

“Including love.” Heartache interjected with a sombre, raw tone, making his way over to Dream and hooking his arm over her. “That is the worst.”

“Says the one in charge of feelings, emotions and hearts. Where’s that mortal lover of yours now, Heartache?” She scoffed but placed her hand upon his scarlet clad shoulder in return. “Ready?”

“Gone.”

It was depleted, dead, bitter.

North studied his fellow immortal, scanning his handsomely rugged features to see some sign that would give any other emotion away, to look past the surface. He couldn’t find anything, not a single drop. Strange for the being, but not completely unexpected considering he represented the emotions and their tedious control.

“I’m ready.” Heartache nodded once and she closed her golden-star eyes, focusing on the rattling glamour that would take over him with ease. Mist began to drift from her fingers as she began again, transforming Heartache to take up his once-mortal shell after he’d returned from a long stint in Hisaith. He’d come back for a year, only to dejectedly agree to play once more, as long as he didn’t have to be in Tazali.

The Warrior, and the Imp had already sat patiently and received their mortal shells, having flitted about to the Empire of Tazali to find Muse. They’d all agreed that sticking close together would be best to keep an eye out for each other, to make sure they blended in seamlessly.

North took one last look as the magic settled over Heartache, rounding out his harsh edges until he merely looked no older than thirty-eight. Which struck his humorous bone considering the male was the oldest out of them all, their maker in fact. But he didn’t let that fact settle over his shoulders for too long as he glanced towards the awaiting world. Then he turned on his heels, opened the door and walked down the cobblestone street that led up to the Empire.

## Page 2

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West eyed the stunning female carrying a stack of books nearly as tall as she was, with a few in precarious positions. Though, considering the female wasn't very tall, perhaps his perception was warped. Her lack of height didn't stop him however, as he asked, "Need any help, Empress?"

Empress Osira Talon shook her dark-golden hair and smiled widely at him with flashing white teeth. "I think I can manage, but if you'll open the door for me, I'd greatly appreciate it."

He strolled over without a second thought, grabbing the door for her before she nearly ran into it.

"Where is Prince Altivar? Doesn't he usually carry your multitude of tomes for you?" He questioned as a pang of relief spread through him in the absence of the spoiled heir apparent.

West wasn't fond of the man, and that was putting it politely. If he had to, he could summon a few choice words regarding the cocky, arrogant royal. Happily, too.

"He's in the yard, practising his spear-handling with Rook and Satori." She used her sandal-bound foot to gesture towards the open yard where most of the men practised when they had down time. He was impressed that not a single book toppled from her stacked grasp, or the fact that she didn't wobble in the slightest. "Something about showing off for the men and women around, and finding a new interest of his."

West followed her like a dutiful hound as she continued to stroll down the hall, heading for her own room with the perilously stacked tower of books. There were

several doors before her room, ones he'd be more than fine to open for her if it meant saving her for an avalanche of knowledge.

"Of course. Doesn't the Prince ever tire of... flaunting?" He lifted his brow, knowing the heir's habits all too well. Females and males that came in and out of his chambers at all hours of the night, and sometimes more than one. The Prince wasn't exactly private with his night time habits, nor did he want to be. Another way to show off, it seemed.

"Altivar is young, experiencing the ways of the world. Let him enjoy it while he has the freedom to do so. As long as they enter his chambers of their own free will, I see no problem with it." Osira reached her room at last, and West rushed in front of her to open the door.

"You're a Saint ." She kissed the air once towards him as a show of appreciation. He snorted, falling behind her once again.

"As long as you have no issue with it, then that's truly all that matters." He let the door shut behind them as she began to carefully slide the mountain of books onto her already overflowing desk of partially read manuscripts.

"What, you don't approve of an ever-spinning carousel of women and men?" Her lovely eyes sparkled with suggestion, and perhaps a bit of mischief. But that was normal for the woman. If anything, West would find it strange to not see even a glint of impish delight within her gaze.

"In all the time you've known me, have you ever thought that to be my sort of thing?" He adjusted the sapphire cape that fell from his shoulders. He didn't like things floating on the wind behind him, but it was part of the uniform and he wore it quite well.

“No, but I’ve also never known you to take a single lover to your bed.” Osira huffed with amusement. “In decades, I might add. Not that I’ve been paying too close attention to what you do in your spare time, so my calculations could be severely off.”

West instantly stopped messing with the article of clothing, his face hardening as if a master carver turned him into perfected marble. “What point is there? You know why I don’t.”

“Of these days, you’re going to accidentally run into someone that has absolutely no meaning to you whatsoever, and find that they will mean everything to you within a blink of an eye.” The Empress scolded as if she were his mother, his matron, something. “And when that does happen, because it will - you can mark my words, don’t try to point fingers at Heartache, or shrug it off. Savour it. Enjoy it. Live it. Love it.”

“You’re very good at giving orders, you know that?” A boyish smile appeared on his face, brushing off her not-so-suggestive-suggestion.

She started sorting the tall pile of books into three different piles, each with categories that made no sense to him. “Why do you think I took up this role when I heard there was a vacancy?”

“Because you get bored when you have no power and have to answer to others.” West answered easily enough with a coy slickness that slipped off his tongue. “Or was I supposed to keep that part to myself?”

Osira stopped her strange sorting to ruefully glare at him. It was all for show. There was never an ounce of parsimoniousness within her stunning person. West considered her to be the nicest soul he’d ever had the good fortune of meeting, and highly doubted ever finding anyone to top it.



She turned her chin upwards. “You could have taken up a role yourself, but instead you chose to be what... a guard dog for the Prince?”

He frowned. “Hey, I’ll remind you that I own a fine establishment that I reside over.”

“Yes, yes. The Spinning Compass. You don’t have to remind me.” She waved her hand in the air, back turned to him as she placed the last two books in different piles. “How many residents do you have currently?”

“Fourteen.”

“Come to me when you rule an Empire.” She laughed lightly, and in the summer wind it sounded like the plucking of harp strings, the blow of flutes, and the whisper of violins.

West picked himself back up and made it to the door. “I’ll leave you be, Empress. I have to go tend to my mighty Kingdom of fourteen people.”

“Be careful when you reach the Silver Gate. I hear someone’s been leaving threatening notes to my subjects down there. Something about finding Heartache.” Osira warned with a clear tone that initiated caution.

There were three levels of gates that kept the city safe and separated by sections. The highest gate, the Gold Gate, was only for those like the Empress. It held the finest merchants around, the rich and desirable, the most beautiful people of the realm. The Silver Gate was a step below that. Hard working men and their families, the middle class that accumulated some wealth over the years. And then there was the Bronze Gate. Known for the lesser people, with the hungry and poor that roamed the streets as they begged for survival.

Osira hadn’t been the one to set the three levels into motion, but she was the one

slowly tearing them down. The previous Emperor, who died due to mysterious causes, had been the one to start separating people due to the amount of coins they held in their vaults.

As if wealth weighed the morality of men.

But regardless of what era he witnessed, men would always be a mystery to West. Humans were creatures of simplicity, or so he often found.

“Strange. I appreciate the information. I’ll make sure to check it out when I make my way through the levels.” He dipped his own head in respect and turned on his booted heel towards the exit as he left her to her reading. The door swung shut behind him and softly hissed closed.

If someone was inquiring after Heartache, and causing a disorderly ruckus in order to find the vanished Saint, it couldn’t mean anything good. Heartache was the only one out of all six of them who didn’t stay in the Empire of Tazali. Within a year of his time in the city, he instantaneously decided that he wanted to venture out past the gates.

No one knew where he was.

Not any of the Saints.

West had an underlying feeling of turmoil that it was due to his mortal lover. Nearly thirty years ago, the wandering immortal popped down to the earth for a spot of tea and chaos, only to find himself hopelessly in love with a human. A curse, when one thought long and hard about it. Because a Saint, with the lifespan of a god, would only be able to watch as the mortal flower withered and perished over what would only feel like a decade.

Which was exactly what happened, if West's inkling was correct. Heartache spent nineteen years in the Empire and left afterwards, joining the rest of the Saints above, then, without a seed of information, he returned to the mortal realm. Muse offered no explanation either, other than the occurring thought that it had something to do with the human woman that the Saint loved more than his own life itself.

It made sense then, if his lover passed away.

Why then he wouldn't find something of amusement to keep him tethered to Tazali instead of roaming all over Hisaith. But a cold, distant Heartache was a dangerous thing. Very dangerous indeed. None of the six Saints were entirely powerful, but Heartache?

He held the most out of them all.

Heartache's power was one of the most sought after as well. With a snap of his fingers and a simple gaze deep into someone's soul, he could see their truest love and their most villainous heartbreak. Many wanted to find him in order to shorten their search for love, to find the one person they were meant to be with. But Heartache rarely let others take advantage of his powers. As his name suggested, he devoured both sides of the most powerful emotion; love.

Heartache loved heartache.

Just as much as he enjoyed chaos.

A drop of his crimson blood, spilled into an innocent goblet of wine, could create the full effect of new love. With every side effect and alluring draw towards the person they first laid their eyes on, unsuspecting or not.

West shook off the eerie feeling that thinking of the troublesome Saint gave him and

made for the sparring yard where the bellowing grunts of a practice fight in progress could be heard. He reached the overlying wall, resting his elbows on top of the limestone as he peered over to see what the commotion was about.

Prince Altivar Talon ducked under the swing of a wooden staff as a sentry by the name of Rook tried to take him out. Rook growled in insipid disappointment and tried again, failing again. Altivar's taunting laugh rocketed off the ochre walls as he easily sidestepped the attack and avoided a hit to the side of his head.

West cared deeply for Osira, but her son was nothing like her. A spoiled, arrogant male that didn't seem to care for anyone else but himself. How a beautifully caring woman managed to produce... well, an asshole, he didn't know.

"Captain, are you going to come down and join me or just stand up there and stare?" Altivar called up to him without so much as a glance in his direction and slammed his own staff down. Rook scrambled back a few feet, picking up his fallen practice weapon and charging straight on like a raging bull.

"I have other duties to attend to, otherwise I would." West swiftly answered back down to him. "Looks like you're keeping Rook on his toes."

Rook Conquell. A man, over six feet tall with a scar that ran down his lip diagonally, and more muscles that West could count. A new recruit, considering how he almost kept the Prince involved in this round. Most of the men who wanted to try out for the army never lasted three minutes in the ring with the Prince, let alone five.

Rook was on his sixth.

"I'm teaching him how to dance, it would seem." He scoffed and swatted at the massive man with the end of the wood. "Know of any openings in the academies? He'll be a far better ballerina than a soldier. "

West tucked his condescending remark under his tongue before it flew out of his mouth like an irritating fly. This was the way things were here. If a man wanted to join the army, then he had to beat the best fighter in a one on one match. That man just happened to be Osira's son and heir, Altivar Talon.

The only reason West agreed to stay by Altivar's side, to guard him, was because he knew that it would break the Empress's heart if something ever happened to her son. The Saints all stuck together, except Heartache.

Muse, she was better known as.

A stunning soul that adored anything to do with art. Books, she devoured. Music, she relished. Art, she cherished. The list went on and on, and Muse found beauty in everything, no matter the size, which West supposed was why she was blinded when it came to her child. He was beautiful, no one could deny that.

The Prince was more than decently attractive, with dusty teakwood hair that ran in a braid down his back and his mother's citrine eyes. On his right arm, an inky tattoo of a snake curled up to his shoulder and around his bicep. There was a splatter of cosmetics along his eyes, in a rich shade of cobalt powder that he lined with gold. But his looks and his skills in the arena were the only good thing about him.

The Prince was a half Saint, better known as a lesser Saint. Sometimes the children of the immortal beings gained specks of magic, while others could make mountains tremble. Some have none, and live a prolonged life as humanly as possible.

There were two ways to kill a Saint.

To break their heart or to mortally wound them with a Saint-made weapon. Something forged only by the hands of an immortal.

Anything else would not work .

“I need you to come with me tonight.” Altivar dodged another blow only to land a perfectly aimed one of his own; directly to Rook’s stomach. The man gargled a foul curse word before gripping his torso and edging back a few steps. There was a white circle drawn around them in the sand. step outside of it, and he was out.

Not that it mattered at this point.

Rook was already approved to join the guard based on his practice round. The additional minutes were just bragging rights.

“Where?” West started to descend the nearby steps that led down into the training yard. His interest was piqued, considering the Prince didn’t often ask for his company. Something that he was more than grateful for.

“The Pits.”

“No.”

“I’ve got something there that needs my attention. It’s all the way in the Bronze Gate and I’m not travelling that far south by myself.” Altivar tossed his staff to an attendant, signalling that the round was over. The boy stumbled as he ran to catch it, the end thwacking his neck as it landed in his grasp.

“No.”

“Repeating the same word over and over again is not going to dissuade me, Captain.” The Prince chortled, swiping up a chilled cloth from a silver platter and dabbing it to his barely sweat-ridden forehead. There wasn’t even a bead of perspiration, yet he wiped it all the same- skillfully avoiding the cosmetics. “Regardless, I’m going. It’s

just the matter of if you'll be by my side or not."

West's top lip twitched in irritation. "Why can't you just send another representative in your place? It's far too dangerous for you to be down there. "

"Unsupervised, yes. Which is why I've asked you to tag along." He ran the damp cotton along the back of his neck, sliding it up his cheeks and over his mouth. "Either you or Satori."

The mention of his fellow captain was enough to stir him into action. Satori stood by his side as they led the Watch. But she watched over the Empress, which was far more important than running down to the Bronze Gate for an evening in the most foul place in Hisaith.

West debated the pros and cons of taking the heir down to the darkest levels, to the fighting pits of blood and gore and gambling. With the coy smile that the Prince sported, he knew it would be a lost cause to disagree once again. Even if he tried to station two men outside his door, Altivar would only sweet talk them into letting him out, or potentially even joining him. And because he was the Prince, West couldn't do much about it.

He sighed reluctantly. "Guess we're going to the Pits."

The Pits.

A dank, damp, mildew infested arena underground. It was a way for the unfortunate souls who resided there to earn extra coin by showing off what little skills they had. Bloodthirsty rats basically. And within the arena was a gambling game known as the Blades of Blood. Two men entered the ring, only one came out. The spoils that went to the victor were enough to raise them up a gate level, if they put up a good enough show.

Altivar grinned like a mountain cat, “Yes, yes we are.”



## Page 3

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Two

He hated being here.

The amount of people crammed into the crumbling, round arena made him feel like a sardine in a tin can. There was a sweaty man brushing up against his left, shouting down at the two competitors in the ring, and another filthy human on his coattail. West could practically see the scent trails wafting off of his hulking shoulders. The entire underground chamber reeked of piss, blood and metal.

Not particularly in that order, either.

The room itself wasn't terrible when it came to design and space. It was more a matter of how many humans were packed inside. The air was thick with sweat and screams. There was a rafter above the first row, where the men gathered with slips of crumpled paper, waving them in the air.

"Bets," Altivar informed him with a gleeful smirk as he purchased three on a certain individual with a melodic name.

There were three ways to make money off of the scheduled, illegal, fights down here .

The first option was to place large sums on each warrior that entered the ring and see if it paid off. Each fight held a certain amount of bets allowed, and it seemed to be a rush of madness in order to get the tickets purchased before the bell rang and the match began. Once the time slots were settled, the betting closed. Additional bets or withdrawals were not allowed once the bell had rung.

The second was to sponsor the competitors. The well dressed men in the very front section of the first row, closest to the sandy pit, were the ones who purchased new supplies and armour for the fighters. They invested in them by making sure the mortals held the proper equipment to survive a few rounds in the ring. In exchange, they took home a decent portion of the money as well as a finders fee from the fighter themselves.

And finally the third, was to fight in the pit themselves. In the Bronze Gate, money and good jobs were scarce thanks to the multitude of people who lived there and snatched up every available task. This was the most dangerous gate out of the three, though looters often waited outside for prey to snatch away the coins that tumbled through the fingers of those fortunate enough to have lady luck on their side.

There was no Saint for that.

If the fighter did not make it out of the pit, then a compensation fee would be sent to their family and relatives in order to 'make things fair'.

Most mortals tended to be a bit barbaric, as shown by the two men currently fighting in the pit.

West watched in a disgusted way that wouldn't allow him to pull away. From their spot up in the veranda, he could make out the entirety of the fighting pit. The large chamber was a massive circle. Surrounding the pit that was filled with a thick layer of beige sand, was a wall of granite. The bedecked sponsors and the announcer stood around it, eagerly awaiting the outcome of the soon-to-be-over battle between two very different men.

Then, slightly up by eight feet, was the first row of spectators. There were about thirty-eight men shoved all around it, screaming down at the warriors that beat each other into a senseless pulp. The calibre of humans was not that of the finest, mostly

heavy-pocketed men. These were the hardworking folk that made up the Bronze Gate.

In the second row, another eight feet up, were the men of the Silver Gates. With slightly more to their names. Names were everything here. A certain surname could get you into the right sort of places.

Or the wrong, such as this one.

The third row was for the richest men of all, the men of the Gold Gate. They held the strings and controlled the puppets below as they funnelled coins into illegal fights like these ones. Pitchers of wine were passed around by serving boys, no older than twelve and girls who carried out sweet and savoury treats which often included themselves, if they were of age.

In order to enter the Pits, one had to find the tavern marked with a swinging sign that read, “ The Bronzed Goblet ”. A simple cup sat on it, but the scarlet liquid inside wasn’t wine; it was blood. At the counter, Altviar whispered an order for a steel cutlass. The barmaid wiped her hands on her apron before ushering them to a secluded room, showing them the door that led down into the depths of despair and death.

West hated the sneaking suspicion that coated him in an oily layer as they entered the establishment. Down they went, through many staircases until it felt like they found the bowels of hell itself. Now, seeing the pits for what they truly were, he understood why they had to fall so far down in order to reach their final destination.

It was hell.

They remained in the second balcony, because anyone in the third and top tier would most definitely recognize the handsome Prince. Even in his shawl of cerulean that

wrapped around his face and hid his sensual lips, his eyes were never forgettable.

“You seem like you’re really enjoying yourself.” Altivar commented from his right, smirking like a wild cat. “Loosen up, West . Unless you want to offer yourself up for the ring and show these miserable creations what a real fight looks like?”

“That wouldn’t be a fair fight.” West couldn’t help it; he chuckled softly. “And you know it.”

Because Saints, no matter their gender, were blessed with strength and skill. It didn’t matter what their outer shell looked like either, when they could choose to be as masculine or feminine as they pleased. West preferred to remain as a male, even if some of the others dabbled back and forth between the two sexes.

The Imp, in particular, went through a phase nearly twenty years ago where they’d popped back and forth, claiming that they held neither gender and yet both at the same time but the Saint represented the mind, good and bad, sane and insane. It made sense that they dabbled between all and nothing at once.

The crowd in all the levels roared like a mighty lion with bared teeth as the second competitor fell to his knees, blood spurting violently from a thin slice in his wide neck. He rapidly wheezed and tried to salvage his dark skin, but to no avail. Three minutes passed rather slowly and the man was dead. guards, dressed in studded leather entered the ring from the raised gate in the back and began to drag the dead human away, a red trail following in the golden sand .

“You’ll want to pay attention to what comes next.” The Prince seductively whispered to him, angling himself closer to the railing and reminding him of a slithering serpent weaving through stone cracks. “I think even you’ll be impressed by this specimen.”

“Is this who you’ve gambled all your mother’s money on?” West inquired without a

hint of care. He highly doubted anything in this slop-pit could snag his interests enough to make this night fly faster.

Time was dragging.

He had more important things to do, such as picking up the portions due from his tenants and checking to see if repairs were required before another shift in the early hours.

“I don’t waste her money, Captain Saint. I invest it in winners.” He reprimanded, lowering his focus to the wrought iron gate that shut behind the victor. A new champion walked into the field from the opposing end, pumping both of his fists into the air to gain a ripple of support.

Red rose petals began to randomly fall from somewhere above them all, as if children climbed onto the unsturdy support beams of the tavern that hid it all, and dropped them by the bucket. West wouldn’t put it past the owners of this establishment, considering all of the other horrible things that happen in the dark.

The petals collected on the amber sand, mirroring that of drops of ruby blood. A fluttering feeling sank into his stomach as he began to hear the murmurs of men all around him. A chant started in the massive group of people, two words over and over again until it became a harmonic song that even Muse wouldn’t ignore.

A prayer, almost.

As if these men and women needed a bit of holy light added to their miserable lives, and this person, this mimic of a Saint, was the one to give it to them. The only gods that would listen were the ones in the room, and he held no pity for them at all as they put on plays of destruction and bloodbaths. Over and over again, until he could finally make the name out.

“Red Lyric.”

A strange conglomeration of words, even if the rose petals began to make sense now.

“Red Lyric.”

West wasn't sure if it was the name of the next fighter, or if it was simply a memorised title that went up between all sorts of humans.

“Red Lyric.”

The captain eyed the excitable men that chanted over and over again, the title of something exciting falling from their mouths.

Something was... off.

“Red Lyric?” He asked the captivated Prince.

Altivar nodded. “A fierce addition to the Blades. No one knows his true identity; just the name he goes by in the Pits. A fascinating one too, if you ask me. I've always wondered where the inspiration for it came from. There's no sponsor for him either.”

“Is that why you dragged me out here? To become his sponsor?” Vexation danced a fine line within him like a tightrope walker on talented toes. Even if money was a limited resource, he didn't need it. It was an object that wouldn't last forever, unlike himself.

“No,” Altivar huffed in mirthful amusement that glittered like the gold of his skin. “I have another sort of task in mind for him. Just wait until you see him. I think you'll know precisely why I brought you here tonight.”

An announcer stepped into the pit below, raising his hands up high in the air until the talk resided. When silence graced them all and not a single sound could be heard, he addressed them all. The rose petals had stopped falling at last, a few stragglers meeting the sand. The single fighter in the arena stopped trying to gain support, lowering his arms until they were flat at his side, next to a long blade at his hip.

“Now for the moment you’ve all been waiting for...” He spun around slowly, speaking to all as he wiggled his eyebrows. “May I present... Red Lyric !”

A holler rose up, followed by others.

The gate shuddered, and someone walked through the dimly lit hallway, into the arena.

West leaned over the crumbling railing, trying to get a better glimpse of the figure that entered the sand pit below. Whatever he expected to see, was not what he laid his eyes on.

Because the man in the ring was tiny.

Not necessarily in height, but in form. Instead of muscles on either bicep, there was lean muscle. His thighs were toned, but not massive like the men before had been. The waist alone was far too thin for a fighter, let alone a male one.

West blinked, trying to adjust his hazy gaze as if he incorrectly saw the figure the first time with expectations already in place, but to no avail. The male still stayed the same. Dressed in leather that had been stained as scarlet as blood that had once run down, with black boots and black gloves, a cowl over his face and head, the mortal completely earned his name as Red Lyric.

But it wasn’t a male.

There, if he looked hard enough, he could see the slight swell of a chest below the tight layers, the curve to her hip and the long lashes that peeked out from pale skin. There was an undeniable grace to the mortal below that could only belong to a girl, even if she looked to be in her late twenties.

A girl, in the Blades of Blood .

“Interesting,” He mumbled more to himself than anyone else. His hand ran along his chin as he continued to study her, his fascination perking up with every breath the female drew. She fisted two long daggers at her sides, as long as her forearms.

But as the tall male across from her didn’t back down, nor did she. West cocked a smirk, unable to help himself. Her surety was dauntless, even if she stood no chance against the human that was taller than her by half a foot. There wasn’t a single ounce of doubt to be seen in the way she held her back as straight as a new bowstring, nor the squaring of her lean shoulders.

Suddenly, West was invested in the fight.

He never thought to find something that tickled his fancy in a place such as this, and yet there she was. If he thought men to be brave before, then it was nothing compared to the sheer amount of balls that this girl held at the moment as she stood opposed to the fighter.

The over-observant eyes of the Prince next to him picked up the tidbit of curiosity as it mingled with her utter devotion.

“Seems as if something finally plucked a chord of curiosity for you.” Altivar taunted, slyly winking at him.

“Please tell me that this isn’t why you dragged me out here tonight.” He uttered



through gritted teeth, really hoping that the heir wasn't looking for another place to stick his cock into.

He playfully tsked, as if the captain's time was immeasurably wasteful. "Then you're out of luck. Red Lyric is one of the most skilled fighters that I've ever seen. I have a task for him that only he can perform."

"She," West corrected. "Red Lyric, is a she."

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 8:04 am*

Stunned silence fell over the bronzed male as he jerked his chin down into the gore-ridden pit, to scrutinizingly gaze at the feminine figure again. As if he had to confirm his captain's words for himself. Shock was a good look on the Prince, one that West took immense pleasure in watching unfold.

“But women aren't allowed to compete. Grimm makes that absolutely the law here. He'd throw any females out if he even so much as scented a whiff of their floral perfumes in the levels, let alone the Blades itself.” Altivar gaped like a codfish, a sight that wasn't completely lost on West. If anything, he wanted to commission an artist to sketch it so that he'd have it for a permanent keepsake.

Grimm, the owner and also another Saint.

The Warrior.

Devoted to the hunger for blood and the sacrifices of mortal men. He lusted for the kill, loved the smell of death, lived for vain slaughters.

A faint smile rose to his face. “I'm well aware of his rules, but that's no man. I'm assuming that's why she goes by a pseudonym. There's good money in it for all. Even if it's humiliating and downright vile.”

“Saints.” Altivar's face turned to the point of snow. “Well then. This is going to tense matters up far more than I hoped for.”

The roar of the thirsty crowd might have unsettled other anxious competitors, but it only added to her delicious anticipation of the event. The cheers of the rich as they

urged her to take him down, to fight, to win. The hollers of the middle class as they lusted for something to fill their time, to spend their precious coin on. The yells of the poor as they watched their fellow man tear man apart and allowed themselves to feel like a god over others for once.

Crimson Bard stared at her opponent.

She wasn't afraid of him, nor should she be.

Not when there was nothing but bulking mass, instead of a single cognitive function. She'd fought against men like him before, even if they were slightly smaller. Not when the stakes in her end were nothing easy.

She hated the pits.

She hated the Blades of Blood.

But she had no choice.

Not when she was the only source of income for her and her younger brother, Cobalt. Ridiculous names, she knew. But her mother died after giving birth to her brother, with the last request upon her blood-stained lips. Crimson wasn't one to deny her that, so she kept true to the name and gave it to her sibling before their mother left them for good.

Cobalt seemed to catch every illness imaginable, which was why he couldn't work alongside her. Not that she could send him out on the streets to beg. High fevers that caused him to turn pasty with a blue tinge, or rapid sweats that made his sleep unimaginable. Medicine was expensive, especially when only one of them could truly work.

But she fought for them, for him.

Crimson wasn't sure if they shared every drop of blood together or only half; but regardless, he was her brother and her responsibility. Her father left when she was on the verge of becoming eighteen, after her brother was born and their mother died. He had claimed a broken heart following her death and wandered off into the sunset. Exactly eight years ago.

She hated him.

She wanted to kill him for abandoning them like that. That was the fiery fury and rippling rage that she poured into all of her fights. Because for a pretty girl like her, there were only a few ways to earn the money she needed to afford their cost of living below the Silver Gate. Crimson wasn't particularly talented in detailed sewing or finding the correct, non-toxic flowers to sell. She wasn't desperate enough to resort to selling her body either.

But fighting?

She held a natural talent for the sport.

Even if women weren't allowed in the pits.

But Red Lyric, her alter ego and male counterpart, allowed her to fight fairly. She won all of the rounds she entered, picking and choosing which battles would best suit her. Crimson supposed if they found out her true nature, that they would toss her out and never let her or Red Lyric enter the Pits of hell ever again.

She held a secret though.

One that allowed her to win, even if it was technically cheating .

Crimson wasn't daft.

She knew who her father was.

Where her crimson hair, her namesake, came from. She knew why she could control the weak emotions of men. Why her thick eyelashes could flutter and she could place the barest of touches towards another in order to suggest a switch in emotions. To persuade them to take pity on a small, helpless female in order to let her win. Of course, she took those risks in small quantities to avoid being caught.

Crimson palmed her knives, left behind by her father. One of the only things, including herself and possibly her brother. The beautiful blades were as long as her forearms, with silken handles that were painted in pure scarlet. The steel itself was smoked, as if held over a flame until they burned. At the pommel, a heart was carved inwards.

Because her father was Heartache.

A Saint, one that she cursed every day for leaving them to the predicament of fate.

"Begin!" The announcer called and hastily exited before he became part of the show.

The man across from her grinned wickedly, as if he expected this to be over and done within a matter of seconds and to emerge the victor. He was right on one count, the first.

It would be over in a couple seconds.

But he wouldn't be the victor.

Crimson reflected it, adding her own edge of rabid viciousness back at him. He

flinched, his head angling towards the side in confusion as she struck as fast as an almost invisible wasp. The crowd cheered and she had him down on his fat knees in five moves.

One, angle her first dagger towards his chest while her second found his thick neck. Two, kick at his leg, near the weak spot that he tried to hide by not limping. A previous wound from his last fight, if she had to guess. , shove her force behind the blades as he tried to struggle against her hold. Four, gently caress his arm and utter a suggestive command that had his hands slackening on his weapon.

Five, win.

Crimson never felt bad for her victims, because she only took on the worst of the worst. The kind that preyed on young children such as her brother. The kind that took things without asking, and the kind that the world would be better off without. This was why she hand picked her opponents.

An extra gold coin to the announcer, a caress to his cherub cheek paid with a flirtatious blush of a pretty maiden and he whispered all sorts of secrets to her about which to take on. She wasn't entirely sure how her powers worked, only that she had them. How to use them with the wiley ways of women, the flirtatious flaunts of females and the gracious grabs of girls. Men saw, heard and felt what they wanted. It was all too easy to change their minds, influence their hearts. To suggest something entirely different to them in order to get her way.

Cobalt showed no sign of powers, even if he was only eight. Crimson wished for all the world and beyond, that he never gained any. The life of a Saint, even a lesser one, was a lonely existence.

She raised her chin towards the audience, dragging the show out for longer than necessary, as they expected her to do. As she always did. But as Crimson met almost

every single face that yelled at her in excitement, she found a new pair of eyes. One that never appeared before, one that struck her as dumbfounded for the sheer night skies she found within them.

Midnight, the darkest sort without any of the shadows that followed, shade colours such as it. There was no white, no ivory iris's to be found. Gold, instead, speckled in them like the night with all its infinite, ineffable stars.

She was looking at him .

West gripped the stone railing hard until he was beyond white-knuckled. "Did you see that?"

It would have been impossible to miss, especially to the well-trained eye of the son of a well-known Saint.

The girl, she'd touched the huge warrior in the barest of places and won the round in a minute flat. Four touches, if he counted right. A brush of her gloved finger against his hand, a flash of her lashes towards his eyes as she edged closer. A dash of her arm against his neck and her lips moved against the cowl in silent declaration.

The man almost sighed in delight as he sank to the ground, unnoticeable to anyone but an immortal, or half of one. He waited, kneeling on the gritty ground with delirious desire, as if she'd promised him something in exchange for his surrender.

"Now you understand why I brought you with me tonight." Altivar bobbed his head, stroking at his upper lip. "I wondered if I was seeing things or if he- she, was doing what I thought."

West inhaled, "She's a lesser Saint."

“That’s what I suspected. I assume you know which sired her, as well?”

“With the power of suggestion, she could be a product of the Imp, but they haven’t been known to tangle in the sheets. Which leaves the illusive Heartache.” He rubbed at his scalp, itching a certain spot at the nape of his neck.

“You were curious as to his rather mysterious disappearance. I think I’ve found out why.” Altivar said. “She has a brother, eight years old. Just around the-”

“Around the time that Heartache returned to us.” West finished for him. “She’s his child, at least one of them.”

He nodded. “Which makes me wonder why the pain-in-the-ass vagabond isn’t here, tending to his children.” He pointed towards the arena, towards the ill fated match as it came to an end.

Red Lyric drew her steel and painted with the colour of life, ending the opponent with a sharp slice.

“You’re searching for him?”

“I am. I require his services, and I thought recruiting his daughter would lure him out of hiding.” Altivar elucidated his plan, one small detail at a time. There was still an unnerving amount of secret wrapped around his silken words, but it was enough to ask another question.

West’s brow furrowed in concern as he asked, “Why? Why are you looking for him?”

The Prince turned away from the fight as the guards came back out to clean up the arena before the next fight. He let his fingers drop, hand falling back to his side. With a velvet voice that sent chills down West’s spine; and not the good sort, he said,



“Isn’t it obvious, Westley ?”

It was rare for the Prince to leave his taunts behind in the dust, let alone use his full name that he gave to the mortals of Hisaith. Which meant that Altivar was entirely serious.

“No.” The captain of the Watch shook his head.

Altivar turned his mouth upwards. “I’m looking for love.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 8:04 am*

Crimson walked towards the rusting gate as clapping erupted, copious amounts of money was won and lives were ruined with a single, ill-placed bet. The creaking gate rumbled upwards, allowing her to walk through and abandon the fighting pit behind her. She passed another competitor on her way out, not bothering to motion a simple greeting to him. He smirked at her small frame, as they all did, and went willingly to his death.

She could still feel the carnage and gore on her hands, even if they were gloved. The warm, sticky rush of blood as it poured out of several versions of joints and ligaments. Even if the men she took on were the worst of the worst, she made sure to make it quick. Death was already punishment enough, prolonged suffering didn't need to be added to it.

Unlike some of the brutes housed and trained here. The select few who enjoyed the thrall of the kill, or the warm rush of scarlet over their hands as they made their opponent suffer. Those were the sorts that Crimson gladly took on as well .

Candles embraced in metal holds adorned the stoned wall, red bricks in every other spot. They guided her further and further until the sconces were barely visible. The hallway turned and so did she, finding the huge room where the other competitors awaited their turn anxiously. There was the rapping of knuckles on steel, the tapping of scuffed boots on the granite and dirt floor, the picking of skin from bare palms as they all sat and sweated in silence.

She nodded once towards a couple that she knew the names of, ones that she would never enter the ring with. They dipped their chins back in respect towards her.

Well, towards Red Lyric.

None of them knew who she was and they would never find out. Not unless she wished to stop her facade and give up on making any coin for her and her brother.

A few grumbled about their odds if he made it out of the arena, how the fights must be slow today if he was still standing.

Crimson didn't dare to remove any of her leather until she was out of sight for anyone. Her jacket was made of two different shades of red, with a hood that hid her hair. A metal hair pin and a clever hook inside the hood kept it in place, as well as a ribbon that kept her bangs out of her face. Crimson, like her namesake, along the outer shell and blood red for the middle panel, as well as in stripes on the puffed sleeves. Her matching high-waisted pants were sticky, thanks to the heat of all the bodies within the underground chamber.

Her hand found her bag on the back wall, along all the other men's personal effects and freed it from its hook. She tugged at the corded laces of her black boots, loosening them from the constricting grip as she sank down another level to the singular bathing chamber where contestants could change. Before she could reach for the door, Grimm, who owned the pits, approached her.

"Tonight's pay." He held his hand out, offering a satchel of coins, tightly tied off with a thin cord around the neck of the chestnut bag. "You fight well, as you always do."

"Fighting to survive is one thing. Fighting to win, is entirely different." She took it with a narrow bow of her head.

Grimm was not an attractive man. His shoulder length blond hair was choppy, as if he'd taken an axe to it when it became unbearably long. She wouldn't put it past him. He seemed to never have enough patience, even for the small things in life. He

looked as if War found a human shell and occupied it, adding nasty scars like a collector did rare books.

He leaned back, taking her in. “It looked quick and easy. I’ll add an extra five crowns if you can make the next one last twice as long.”

For Saint’s sake, twice?

She barely managed to keep the violent opponent off of her today, let alone win. There was only so much of her powers that she could use in plain sight without it being obvious as to what she was doing. She wasn’t even sure about the furthest extent of her gifts, let alone what they could do if she accidentally lost control of them in an underground arena full of folk.

“Twice?” Her voice was low, into the masculine rumble that her brother helped her find to help sell the image that she wasn’t female. Another reason why she wore the charcoal gloves, too. Because even her hands looked feminine.

“The crowd came here for entertainment. Make it entertaining.” He crossed one bulking arm over the other.

She contemplated it, heavily. “As long as I’m the one who walks out, who collects the money at the end of the match, fine.” Her shoulders shrugged. “I can take them down in five minutes or fifteen.”

Crimson didn’t flaunt her confidence much, but when she was blessed with the supernatural gifts of a Saint, she allowed herself quick moments.

He flashed his yellow teeth at her. “Make it fifteen then, next time. Five extra crowns in your winner pouch for the extra trouble.”

Twenty crowns.

That was enough for an entire week of food and medicine, if she used it sparingly. A portion of rent, included.

She didn't dare show the elation that spun around like a whirlwind tornado inside her. "When am I up next?"

"Two days."

With that, he left.

Crimson locked the door behind her, making sure there would be no interruptions. It only took her eight minutes to pull out the female clothes, to strip off her fighting leather. To release the cotton band that held her chest closer than it should have been and loosen her hair from the braided bun that kept it away. When the corset was under her breasts and the skirt was hitched enough for a quick get away if she needed it, she shoved everything back into the brown bag and slung it over her shoulder.

There was a little mirror in the corner of the wash basin and she bent down enough to fix her messy bangs into place. It gave her extra security, to hide a portion of her face that was bare during the fights. Anything to help make her and Red Lyric look entirely different.

Crimson pulled the pins out of her hair, letting the bun fall out of place. The straight braid tumbled down her back, right between her shoulder blades as she unlocked the door and strolled out.

She was running late.

There was no one in the hallway as she dashed quickly through it, searching for the

side entrance that the serving girls and boys used to get to the top layers. Another part of her night, only if for an hour or two while the Blades still went on. Crimson shoved past a few other girls, tucking her satchel under the table with their items and hastily grabbing an apron with two overlapping swords on the corner.

A way to tell who was working and who wasn't.

"He's in a foul mood tonight." Renfri, another girl, muttered in her passing. "Good luck."

"Great." Crimson hastily tied the strings behind her back and swiped up a tray of cold ale that came from the tavern above them. A way to make an additional profit, while housing them all.

"Crimson!" A meaty voice yelled to her. "You're late! Your shift started five minutes ago!"

"Couldn't get past the crowds! It's busy tonight!" She called back and swiftly departed the stockroom before Roland could berate her any further.

"That's because the Red Lyric was on the roster. You know how the audience worships him." Roland grumbled. Roland, sent all the prettiest girls out to the top layer, where they could gain the most amount of tips. She supposed she should be honoured for it, but it felt slimy and wrong.

Her heart did a stupid little dance at the fact that even a man such as Roland, worshipped her alter ego. It shouldn't have gone straight to her head, nor should she have let it, but it did and so did she.

"You're on the Silver Balcony tonight, don't be tardy again or I'll demote you to the bottom feeders!" His face was almost the same colour as a tomato, and she shoved

her giggle down as she adjusted the five cups in a balancing act and made her way out the door. Another girl bustled past her with an empty tray, looking to refill it before someone else quenched her patrons thirst.

Sacks of sugar-coated peanuts were tucked in the large side pocket of the apron, for an additional crown.

Crimson skillfully avoided the drunken men that battled past her, trying to place their last minute bets before the next round began. She headed up towards the second mezzanine and began to call out to the thirsty men who needed a chilling drink.

The ale wasn't flavorful, mostly a mouthful of wheat and pear, without any additional spices to add to it. But it did the job and got the men drunk enough to waste their money on foolhardy reasons and impulsive bets.

Which was why Grimm allowed it to happen.

She sold one instantly, a tall male handing two coins to her in exchange for one off the top. He almost toppled the entire wooden tray if she hadn't caught it at the last moment. Crimson kept her scowl to herself, trying to remain in that cheery, sweet mood that sold more ale. No one wanted to buy a pint from a wretched, pinched-faced server.

She passed a few people who ignored her call for drinks and treats, weaving in and out of the sweating bodies. Someone pressed metal circles into her palm and stole another, leaving with her with three mugs. The liquid slipped over the side, creating a sticky mess on the flat side of the tray.

"One here, Red!" A velvet tone of smoking darkness summoned her attention and she turned towards it. She lowered the tray for the handsome patron that kindly offered her three coins. "A bag of nuts as well, sugared if you have them for my delightful

companion.” The russet-skinned male gestured towards his friend, and he came into view.

It was him , the man with the starry eyes.

He angled his head down, in plain greeting that required no complication. Crimson might have gotten lost in the panels of his face, or the curve of his sensual mouth had the original man not caught her attention.

Saints be damned, she nearly bit her lip.

No one, no one, ever stirred her heart before.

But he most certainly did.

“I have two at the moment. How many would you like?” She tussled with her skirt as she tried to hide her blush, pulling both bags free as she precariously balanced the tray between her hip and the wall.

“Just one will suffice, pretty thing.” He practically purred it down at her and it sent the wrong sort of chills to shoot through her bones, lick her veins and emptied out her head.

“Here you are.” Crimson handed it to him and popped the other back into her pocket. She added the coins into it, giving a hefty weight that jingled when she moved. “Is there anything else?” She moved closer, trying to unload the ale. Her heartbeat slowed as she dragged her fingers across his wrist, trying to influence him into buying another.

He blinked, tilting towards her with a curious expression. Not quite dazed, by the looks of it but something close. His lashes dipped. A few more seconds and she’d



convince him to buy a drink or two, if his pulse was any indication.

“What else are you selling, lovely girl?” The first man’s lids were painted in cobalt glimmer that reminded her of her brother’s eyes. Blue, like broken glass. He smiled at her and it was a pretty thing, unusual for masculine features. There was a snake tattoo that wound up his arm, starting at his wrist and finishing off at his corded shoulder.

Crimson found it chillingly accurate.

“Knock it off.” His friend shoved into him, a warning clear enough. “She’s not that kind of girl.” He met her gaze again, and she had the nerve to meet it instead of casting hers aside as an inner voice told her to do. “Are you?”

“No!” Crimson protested with a shameful heat that kicked through her. “Not at all. I just sell nuts and ale, nothing else.”

For some reason, the emotion churning magic didn’t seem to immediately affect either one of the males in front of her. Strange, considering that it always worked. It was easy, a blink of an eye but not with them. She brushed it off as coincidence and went to grab her tray to find another customer as someone rudely bumped into her. The tray tumbled forward and the ale spilt all over the floor.

Quick, warm hands pulled her back just in time before she became a part of the mess. A dizzying sparkle of something new burst to life inside of her, like the feeling of a bubbling wine.

“You alright?” The tall man peered down at her, sapphire and gold swirling around his incredible eyes.

“Yes, thank you.” She mumbled as a blush took over her cheeks. He was absurdly attractive, bless the Saints. It didn’t help that his uniform fit him very well. She could

make out almost every line in his corded torso, the hidden strength in his arms and the toned muscles in his legs.

“Fast reflexes, West.” The other praised with a clap on his back as West lifted her up and out of the way of the spill. He bent down and handed her the tray. “She might have been completely drenched otherwise.”

“Why do you think I stepped in?” He said with a boyish smile and brushed off a speck of dust from her hem. “Wouldn’t want that.”

The first man reconsidered, “Though, perhaps we may have enjoyed that sight far better than her without a single drop to be found.”

West exhaled a long breath, annoyance dancing through his features as a muscle in his neck jumped. “You shouldn’t say things like that to girls you’ve only just met.”

“Oh, lighten up.” He chuckled, clapping his shoulder. “I’m just having fun.”

“That’s what worries me.” West stole a last glance at her before turning away.

Crimson hastily exited with another mumbling appreciation, finding the store room to restock her tray before the event was over.

When the final fight was over and done with, and no more guts were to be slain in vain, she turned in her tray and apron for the night as well as the coins that piled up in her pocket. Roland counted them all up, separating them into six piles. The other girls added their amounts and he totaled them all up. He muttered thanks to each of them as he gave them their fair wages, Crimson inclined before pocketing the final pile for himself.

He brought his hands together, a clap sounding as he addressed them. “Good work

today, girls! I need four of you for tomorrow night!”

The spots were quickly filled as Crimson found her bag and tossed the crowns inside, hooking it over her shoulder as she left the room. The chamber was slowly emptying out, patrons finding the staircase that led up to the tavern above. She waited patiently for her turn, considering the corridor up was thin enough for only one person to walk up at a time. While Crimson stood in line, her attention caught on a hushed conversation between three people on the first level.

She recognized them.

“Where is he?” West inquired, shuffling back and forth between his boot clad feet. He was dressed in a midnight doublet, lined with gold that made his eyes pop out from his golden-brown skin. Charcoal trousers rose up from his black boots and they fit him perfectly. “We don’t mean him any harm, but rather a word with him regarding his talents.”

“Red Lyric isn’t available for personal tasks. His only commitment is here, in the pits.” The announcer, Zion, nervously sputtered. “Many have tried but he doesn’t accept anything with hires.”

“Why not?” The graceful companion asked as he lowered his scarf, revealing his attractive face. “If he knew who asked after him, then I’m sure he’d change his mind like a shift of sand on the breeze.”

Zion’s eyes widened, but he didn’t seem to be afraid of him. “I’m afraid not, Prince Altivar. He doesn’t take on tasks from anyone from the Silver Gates, let alone the Gold Gates.”

Crimson froze.

The man was... the Empress's son?

That explained the luxury in his silken scarf, the richness of his cosmetics and the shimmer to his dark skin. Which meant that West was Captain Westley Saint, in charge of the Watch.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 8:04 am*

This was getting rather tiresome.

West wanted nothing more than to go home, to his apartments and kick off his dusty boots. Not that that was usual for him, considering he rarely was seen in the establishment he owned and looked after. He spent most nights in the castle, but undisturbed sleep urged him after his long day of duties. Besides, rent was due from his tenants since it was the final day of the month and if he wasn't there to collect it from the chest outside of his office, it could be sitting there for days.

He didn't know most of his tenants, only their names and how much they owed at the end of each four week period. Nor did they know him, only where to set their money after their stay and how much. Some resided in his apartments for years and years while others stayed only a couple of weeks.

"Where does he go after the fights?" West questioned as he casually leaned against the railing of the arena.

"Home, I suppose." The announcer answered.

After an easy press of a cold, metal coin into his hand, they learned that his name was Zion. A bribe, plain as day, but one that worked. West knew who owned this place, and knew the man did as well. Bribery might as well have been the only way to draw information out of Zion.

"And that would be located where, dear fellow?" Altivar swiped his thumb under his pointer finger as he pretended to find more interest in it than the man who stood in front of them.

Arrogant asshole.

“I- I don’t know. The competitors come from all three levels, so he could be anywhere in the city.”

“Leave him alone, Altivar. If he doesn’t know, menacing behaviour isn’t going to miraculously make his memory snap to something that isn’t there in the first place.” West jerked the Prince’s scarf, pulling him out of the foul mood. “We can dig up more information later. But for now, it’s late and I have things to do at the Compass.”

“Very well.” The Prince almost scowled, but seemed to rethink it a moment later as he turned it into a feline smile that most men would have run from. Zion almost did as a perceptible shudder went through him. “If you happen to dig up more information regarding Red Lyric, then please, by all means, come seek me out.”

The male bobbed his head hastily before racing down the opened gate and disappearing into shadows.

“He knows more than he’s letting on, West.” Altivar shoved off the barrier and began walking out of the arena. The sand had been brushed over with a wooden comb, apparent by the fine lines that appeared in the gritty texture. There was no sign of blood along the grains, nor white pieces of bones that stuck up.

“That may be the case, but frightening him isn’t going to get the correct information out. Men tend to blurt out whatever random thing they think will help in the moment. Especially if it means sparing them from any sort of agonising infliction or tormented pain.”

“You have another idea, then I take it?”

West shrugged. “Money always seems to loosen tongues faster than threats. I heard

that Red Lyric fights again in two days. Why not come down to the pits and see her once more, and try to offer the man a hefty sum to see if he knows more than he's letting on?"

Altivar hummed softly, "Not a terrible thought. I suppose it's worth a try. Can I assume correctly that you'll be by my side once again, Captain?"

He let out a long, suffering sigh, "Wouldn't miss it for all the world."

After accompanying the lesser Saint back to the palace and checking in on the Empress afterwards, who was found with her tapered nose glued to a book, West finally followed the cobblestone road to the Spinning Compass. He passed through the Gold Gate, noticing the street lights were already low. He wandered through the Silver Gate, watching the few vagabonds as they scurried home for the night. After an hour of nothing but walking, he at last found himself through the Bronze Gate.

It was late, later than most of his tenants would be up past, so he didn't expect to run into anyone as he unlocked the back door of the building and slipped inside. The hazy candlelight in the glass sconces was low, but hadn't gone out quite yet indicating that someone must have relit them. He knew that it was one of the folk who lived here, and tended after it for him in his absence.

It was one of the reasons the cost of living here was cheaper than most, even in the lowest slums of the city. He wasn't around as often, leaving the matter of things to his residents.

West opened the first and blew out the candle, following up with the rest in the downstairs chamber. A small room, meant for those checking in. There was a rack of keys behind the counter that was secure behind a glass door that required a key to get into. There were tags that went accordingly to each of the ten rooms that took up most of the space. Four rooms were located on the bottom level, not including the

check in counter. The second floor was full with five rooms, where most of them were single bed chambers.

The entire third floor was a single apartment, his.

He quietly took the steps off to the far right without the need for a candle to guide him. Because he was Westley Saint, the Northern Star and he could see perfectly clear in the dark. It didn't matter what sort of dark it was either. It could be that of thieves and threats that remained in the blackest shade possible, and he would be able to make everything out in exact clarity.

His name was a joke, at least the idea of it.

Dream laughed at his other suggestions when they were all sitting around, trying to figure out names that would allow them to blend in seamlessly within the mortal realm. Ronan O'Neal was instantly turned down, as Heartache stated that it didn't fit his looks at all.

But the Saint had been low in spirits, his voice barely coming above that of a scratch.

The option of Erius Bale was berated until he didn't feel like coming up with a third one.

It was an impossible challenge, after all.

A name, one that he'd be stuck with for the next thirty to sixty years, depending on how long he wished to remain in Tazali alongside Muse. There was so much of the vast realm of Hisaith that demanded for exploration anyways, that he could simply start over and select a new name when he grew bored of the Empire.

Imp added their own crazed opinion at that moment. "North, South, East and West !



Only you can know what's best!"

Dream gasped, dropping the peach and pear drink that she'd been slowly sipping from over the last hour and wiggled her pointer finger at Imp. "That one! West!"

A feminine laugh followed after, letting North know that she was entirely kidding. But the name stuck with him, like the sort of hat that felt right.

"West." He murmured, feeling it around within his mouth. He tasted each letter, adding a couple to the back end of it to lengthen it. "West ley. "

"Oh," Dream sighed in a forlorn resonance, "That's actually not terrible. It suits you rather well." Her voice was that of sleepers, lost to both realms as if she were forever permanently stuck in a state of daydreaming.

"I have to agree." He tested it once more, playing around with surnames. "Saint would be funny. Really just shove it in the human's faces."

"Westley Saint." Warrior lifted his hands out as he said it, spreading them wide as if it were sketched into a cloth banner. "Not that they'd ever see the connection once you've been glamourous. It's your best suggestion yet. I say that you should run with it."

North smiled, "I think I will."

So North became Westley Saint.

Now he couldn't have imagined another name belonging to him. West fit him far better than North ever did. North was a tall man with blonde hair and light blue eyes, not the russet skin that he bore or the cobalt eyes that held no white to them .

Gold yes, but not white.

There was a long standing joke with the mad jester, the one that told everyone that he was in fact a blonde male with pale skin, instead of the actual way he appeared. There was some jest about an interview with a writer, who took everything down as if it were the truth and nothing but it. West had never personally seen the result of such impish behaviours, nor did he ever expect to see it.

He unlocked his apartment doors, dragging the small chest outside of the entrance with his foot as he entered. He kicked it aside and shut the heavy oak door behind him. The handle was a curved, amber thing that twisted off at the end. He liked the way it reminded him of a clock's hands.

The trunk was full, evident by the weight as he pushed it to his desk. There was no lock, but he trusted his residents wholeheartedly. And when he peered inside, every single sack was accounted for. He ambled over to his desk, which sat precisely in the middle of the main room, past it and to the shelf on the wall. He reached for the decanter, pouring himself a large helping of butter smoked whiskey before shoving the crystal stopper back in and sniffing at the contents of the full cup.

West set it down after a sip, swallowing and enjoying the burn that followed as he began to lift each parcel of coins onto his desk. He flipped open the records book he pulled from the second drawer and began to track each amount with the corresponding tenant and their amount due. Each bag contained a small note with the linking name for him to cross examine. With each he counted, he dipped his glass pen in the ink canister and left a little checkmark by their name.

But he halted as he came to the last name on the list. Two children, who lived with their mother on the second floor of the Compass. It wasn't the mother's name that caught his eye, rather her offspring.

Cobalt and Crimson Bard.

His dark eyebrows narrowed on the second. Interesting, considering the coincidental meaning of the name.

Crimson, another word for Red.

Bard, a musician, a singer, or a lyrist .

Lyric.

Red Lyric.

He ran a hand over his mouth as he sat back in the leather chair that groaned in protest and gazed upon the parchment. There was no way that she was under his nose all along, was there? He shook his head, taking another swig before counting out her pile and adding a checkmark next to their names. He was tired. That was all it was and coming to the most senseless conclusions only worsened it. Especially if it meant spending less time with his royal assness.

West convinced himself that was all it was.

He was just tired of parading around all day with Altivar tugging on his guard dog leash. Excuses to abandon this ridiculous quest for the Blades fighter wouldn't pop up until they actually did find her. Though West wasn't entirely sure he wanted the Prince to find her. There was a seed of doubt in his reasoning for locating the girl, even if everyone deserved a chance at love. But Altivar never seemed to be the sort who wanted anything tangible, anything to last. He was a one and done sort of male.

There was more to it all than Altivar was letting him in on, he was sure about that. Perhaps he'd keep Crimson Bard's name to himself until he discovered the true

reasoning of why the male wanted Heartache.

Heartache couldn't just find one's true love, he could also break one .

It was a terrifying power to let loose in the world, regardless of which part. Out of all of the Saints, lesser not included, Heartache's was the most deadly. He really, really needed to know everything before letting a troublesome, horrible Prince seek the treacherous Saint out.

West shut the leather bound book and placed it back within the second drawer of his dresser as he sipped at his whiskey.

According to the announcer, Red Lyric was due to appear for another round in two days time. He was going to be there anyways thanks to Altivar, so it wouldn't harm him to study the way the girl fought. The way she moved. Then he could turn his research on Crimson before taking any of his findings to the Prince.

Having a definitive answer was better than assuming anyways.

He finished his drink, setting it back on the shelf instead of reaching for another one, like he did some nights when he was stuck at the castle for too long. There was a room for him there, one that saw more use than this one ever did. West wasn't a gambling man, but he would bet good money that there was a layer of dust on more than a handful of the surfaces around him.

He pushed out of the wingback chair and tucked it back into the carved out nook in the desk. It was late, and only getting later by the seconds he stalled. But he had duties to attend to in the castle come the dawn, so he found the bathing chamber and stripped off his sapphire doublet. The one given to all the top commanders of the guard, regardless of station. Pins hung on the shoulders, informing all of his station.

Muse thought it extra hilarious, because they were stars. Golden ones, too. One large one on the middle of his shoulders, followed by two smaller ones on each side; Captain.

An honorary title, because she knew that no matter how obnoxiously annoying West found her son to be, he would do whatever it took to protect him from harm. He had the skills to back it up after three years alongside Warrior before they went their separate ways in Hisaith. Warrior shared everything he knew with him, even going so far as to fight in rounds with him to better his skills. But it wouldn't have been what he would have chosen for himself in the start of it all.

Nor would running the Spinning Compass, to be fair.

West dragged a hot cloth across his face and neck, almost sighing into the divine heat that wiped the sweat residue and dirt flecks from his coppery skin. He wasn't covered in sweat, but in a place like the Pits, there was filth on everyone and everything. Better safe than sorry. When the rag was dirtier than his skin, he tossed it into the wire basket that held any of his used items.

His hands unearthed the cream shirt from his charcoal trousers, unhooking the belt and tossing it aside as he pulled the tunic off his body. He ventured into the bedroom where the bed was large enough for two people to sleep comfortably within it and still had a little left over. Just like with his desk, it was in the middle of the room. A perfect square, with nightstands and a dresser for his clothes.

There was no need for a closet when the nine drawers weren't even full. It wasn't like he didn't just wear the same thing every day, or something close to it. His duties were nearly the same, why shouldn't his clothes replicate that?

West rummaged through the fourth one until he found the least restricting pants that he could wear comfortably to sleep. Just like his second room in the palace, there

were sets of clothes there for him as well. He tugged off his boots and set them in the corner, exchanging undershorts for a new, clean pair before slipping into the trousers and crawling into bed.

And when West closed his eyes, his breathing labouring out to a nice, even pace, he didn't dream. Just as he asked of the sweven-weaving Saint, because she could see the visions during the night. It didn't matter who it was, regardless if they were a lesser Saint or full, she could always know with a single glance.

He didn't like anyone- regardless if they were friend or foe, to have that much of an advantage over him. He was well aware that the lovely Saint would never, under any circumstance, use his dreams against him but it was a precaution he desired to have in place for his own reasons.

So he asked her to take that away, because his dreams were nothing more than unrequited love and heartbreak when they inevitably died. There was no temptation when there was nothing to tempt one with in the first place.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 8:04 am*

Crimson could barely hear the devastating roar in her ears as Cobalt violently coughed. She held a cloth napkin to his mouth as the dark blood came up with every wheeze and hack. He was worse than she'd ever seen him before. His tiny figure shivered and quivered with a mighty force that couldn't mean anything good.

"Come on, Blue." She whispered, trying to keep her tears at bay. There wasn't enough time for her to break down when he needed her desperately. "You have to pull through. You've survived every other bout. Treat this one like it's no different, like it's just another round."

She stroked his sable hair, a shade given from their mother. She tried to ignore the tremble that ricocheted through her like shaking aftershocks when an earthquake finished destroying everything in sight.

"I'll be okay." He mumbled, his lips taking on an azure tint that scared the living daylight out of her. "I always am."

"I know," Crimson murmured down at him and pressed a light kiss to his damp forehead. "You're stronger than you look. You'll be back on your feet in no time."

Even if he hardly ever left the bed.

She dared to leave him for a minute, rushing to the small cabinet by the door and rustling through it until she found the hyssop syrup. A tincture, made by a healer for a large sum. One that almost left them out on the streets instead of the Spinning Compass that they called their home. But it was the only thing that seemed to subdue his fevers, to calm his coughs and allow him to sleep without waking during the long

hours of the night.

The long hours that she barely got a wink during, because she always watched over him. The bed was large enough for both of them, and when the nights were particularly chilly and the wind howled like wild dogs, she curled up beside him. Tucked him into her arms as she sang soft lullabies to help ease him into a quiet slum instead of focusing on his illnesses that never seemed to cease.

It had always been them, just the two of them.

Ever since their mother gave birth to her brother, Crimson filled both the roles of sister and parent to him. She would do anything in the world even if it meant giving up everything in her life if it meant him surviving. Which was why she fought in the Blades of Blood. The one thing that might kill her if she was ever discovered. It was a risk she was willing to take though, if it meant being able to afford the medicine to take care of Cobalt properly.

Medicine was expensive.

Even down in the Bronze Gate.

Healers charged an arm and a leg, and there were several horrible people in the world that took advantage of the desperate ones who needed it more. Ones who lied about the contents of the vials they sold, ones that were filled with poppycock ingredients that wouldn't do anything, let alone cure a fever or two.

Crimson quickly learned that lesson.

After she'd purchased a bottle of amber liquid from a self-pronounced healer who claimed he held the remedy to cure any illness, no matter the severity. The vial bankrupted her, leaving her without food for a week but her hopes were like a roaring



fire of light and brightness as she tipped her brother's head back and poured the contents down his throat. He swallowed it easily enough, and for the first two days it seemed to have worked.

Cobalt woke before her on the first day, shaking her awake until she blinked in confusion up at the small boy who seemed to have more energy than he'd ever had in his entire life. He laughed when she bolted upright and took his cherub face in her hands, twisting and turning it over to peer at the healthy glow in his skin.

"Let me go, Crimson!" He giggled and she couldn't stop kissing every inch of his face as she almost wept with joy. She couldn't contain her delight as for once, he seemed perfectly healthy.

The cure had worked.

They'd spent the entire day out in the sun, plucking wildflowers by the riverbank and swimming in the deepest parts. Even the fish swam by, tickling their toes with spiked gills and shimmering scales. They found wild strawberries and filled their bellies until they were swollen and even the thought of the ruby fruit made them feel sick. After the sun had set, they made for their apartment and slept until the next day.

He was fine then, as well.

She treated him to a day in the town, showing him around their tiny parcel of peace as he stared in awe at the amount of colours that came through in the summer day. He'd never been outside their door, let alone the Spinning Compass before so it was all a sight unseen for the little boy. When he begged her for a single sweet, Crimson found that she couldn't deny him that miniscule pleasure. Even if it meant she'd have to go another day without purchasing food.

She was just so happy that he was okay.

But then he wasn't.

Because Cobalt didn't wake up the next morning.

At first glance, Crimson assumed he was utterly exhausted from their two, nonstop days of adventure. But then as she'd taken a closer look after another hour passed by and he hadn't stirred yet, she'd seen the returning signs of his fever. The beads of sweat on his forehead, the pale pallor to his cheeks that were puffy and the sapphire colour of his mouth.

"No!" She scrambled towards him, running her hands up against his freakishly warm skin. He groaned softly and she felt the onslaught of angry tears as she shook. "No, no no ! You were better! You were happy and dancing and playing and swimming!"

He didn't answer her and she began to sob.

Crimson yanked the blanket up higher on his thin, too frail chest and tucked him in. She made sure there wasn't an inch of his body to be seen as she stroked his black hair back and dabbed a damp cloth over his face to cool the rising fever that had him twitching.

She found out about her gifts that week, too.

When her stomach growled at her that she needed food, she ignored it. She ignored its whines and calls for four days straight as she tended to her brother. Crimson changed his clothes, washed the previous ones, made dandelion broth and fed it to him with whatever strawberries she could find from the spot on the river bank. She wiped away his sweat and brushed his hair. She held him when he cried and sang him to sleep to the best of her abilities .

But her own needs couldn't be ignored forever.

Wild strawberries and dandelion soup wouldn't fill the gnawing ache in her lower abdomen. Not for someone of her age. So she set out into the town, searching for any sign of a soul that would take pity on her and offer her up a morsel. Even if it was a crumb, she was desperate.

One by one, men and women passed her by without a single, sparing glance or a speck of kindness. It was raining that day, because of course it was. It only added to her misery as she stood in the downpour of cold drops. She was drenched to the bone but it didn't matter.

"Please! Spare a coin or two, for food?" She begged of a gentleman who made for the Silver Gate. He shirked her arm off as she tried to grab him. He cursed her, leaving her behind as he disappeared around the bend.

"Anything would do!" She called to a woman who only wrapped herself tighter in her pink shawl, rushing for the cover of a tavern nearby.

"You're too pretty to be out on the streets, begging." A male voice snickered behind her. "I'll give you a coin."

"Thank yo-" Crimson flipped around to see her saviour, only to have her gut clench in rife terror as she took in the man. The coin wouldn't come for free, by the looks of him. He was dressed for someone who could only belong within the Gold Gate. He wore a smoke doublet with rich, golden buttons that ran down his front and a bag embroidered with silver birds that picked at ruby thistles.

"I- I'm not selling anything." She protested and went to turn away from him, but his gloved fingers latched onto her arm. He whisked her back to him and she could smell the strong cologne that drifted off of him in wafting waves of patchouli and amber .

"I thought you said that you were desperate." He chuckled down at her. "Desperation

is quite a motivator.”

Crimson kicked his knee, succeeding in releasing her from his hard grasp. A crunch sounded and she took a miniscule bit of pride in it as she tore from him.

“You animal ! You belong in the Pits, of all places.” He snarled at her and limped away, leaving her to herself.

The Pits.

She halted her walk down the cobblestone street, back to the apartment as she turned that particular name over in her head. She’d heard of it before, and knew that place.

But where?

Why?

Crimson continued down the street, avoiding the scoffing looks of others who passed her. They snickered at her height and her thinness, even if they weren’t much better off themselves. A life in the Bronze Gates only held so many outcomes for its residents.

She wandered until she found a tavern.

The Bronzed Goblet.

The double doors were held open by metal pins in the ground, welcoming all sorts of life within. But as she peered around the entrance, she saw something strange. All men of life were gathered inside, which was more than odd considering that most people didn’t dare to venture past the Silver Gate. Let alone come into the Bronze Gate.

But there, at the counter, was a man in a velvet top hat and chiffon cravat. He murmured something to the barkeep who grinned and pushed past the counter, beckoning him to follow. He did, only to vanish a couple minutes later and for the woman to return to her post at the bar without him. A second and third followed, disappearing into what seemed like thin air .

Crimson snuck around the corner, fixing herself against the wall to observe some more. Patrons laughed, drank and gambled at round card tables. But throughout the entirety of the night, more and more emptied into some other section of the tavern that escaped her vantage point.

She stole leftover rolls and chunks of meat from abandoned plates, gorging herself on whatever she could find and even going so far as to consume the remainder of ale left in some of the cups. It was far from good, but it was enough to satisfy her craving hunger. She knew she couldn't remain for too long, because she didn't want to leave Cobalt alone.

Crimson slunk closer, finding her way to the counter and hiding behind the hunking male that whispered, "Steel cutlass."

The woman nodded and led him away, as Crimson took up his place and eagerly awaited her turn. When the barkeep returned, without the man, she squinted down at the small female before the counter.

Crimson wasn't short by any means, taller than most girls in fact. But the counter rose off the floor at least a foot, and the woman was nearing six feet herself. She stood on her toes, leaned in and uttered the same phrase that the previous customer had.

For a second, she wondered if she'd misheard him or gotten the password wrong.

But then the woman pushed off the bar and came around it. She opened her mouth and asked, “Are you one of Roland’s new girls?”

Crimson had no clue who Roland was or what his girls were. But if it got her inside the secret door, to find out whatever was happening below the tavern, then she would do whatever it took. Especially if it meant finding a way to provide a better future for her and her brother .

“Yes.” She answered hastily.

“I swear he hires them younger and younger every year.” The barkeep grumbled but ushered for her to follow. “Just be careful with the extra handsy customers.”

Crimson watched as she led her into another room and opened a panel in the wall that wasn’t there before. The woman gestured for her to enter, so she did.

That’s how she found the Pits, and with it- the Blades of Blood.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 8:04 am*

She wasn't entirely sure where to look first.

There was so much to look at.

Within her first step past the long staircase that was tight enough to give her chills, thanks to her fear of confined spaces, there was a massive crowd gathered before her. She could hardly make out what they were all watching and roaring at as she wedged past a few bodies.

Crimson slipped towards the barrier, where a thick stone wall sat, guarding the edge and preventing anyone from accidentally toppling over it. It rose four feet tall and was at least six inches thick. She glanced over, finding that she was on the middle level of the underground chamber, another above her and below her. With the style of the men surrounding her, she could easily guess that they were from the Silver Gate.

But that wasn't what caught her attention.

The arena embedded into the lowest level was.

Because within the sandy pit, there were two fighters who relentlessly went after each other. One was dressed in scale armour that made him appear like a dragon in a fairytale whilst the other was clad in head to toe leather. Steel studs kept the plates in place but allowed him to move freely, without any issue.

A wiser choice, she thought.

Crimson caught the shimmering flash of coins and immediately swivelled her head to

follow the glint of gold. Four crowns passed from one hand to another, a slip of paper following in return.

Gambling.

They were betting on the fighters.

An illegal thing to do, in any of the three gates, but forbidden things were only sweeter. Money was money; something she desperately needed.

She ducked under the bannister and followed the trading coins, desperate to learn how she could get her hands on some. She followed the second set of stairs down into the ground floor, watching from the side walls as the men attacked and countered. They were both fantastic, from what she could tell. But then again, she had no knowledge of the sport of war and bloodshed, let alone how to even wield a weapon.

Crimson found the man who offered up the scrap of parchment and tapped his shoulder lightly. He rotated and as soon as he saw who touched him, a nasty sneer pulled onto his round face. A curve of hair lined his jaw, above his lip, across his chin.

“What do you want, girl ?” He hissed down at her. “You know you aren’t supposed to be in here.”

She instantly pulled the name that allowed her into the pits in the first place out of her mind. “I’m one of Roland’s girls.”

“Ah, a new hire then?” His face fixed into a mask of pleasantness that anyone else might have bought, but she most certainly didn’t. “What do you need, then? ”

Crimson cleared her throat and tucked any ounce of nerves away as she inquired after



the battle. “How does one enter the arena?”

He chuckled, as if she said something funny.

Her blood boiled, cheeks heating.

“ You can’t.”

“Why not?” She knew she’d lose within a couple minutes, but even then there might be some money involved in it for the other party.

“ Girls aren’t allowed in the ring. Your kind isn’t even allowed to watch . You serve the drinks and treats, and that’s it. Now get on before you test my patience. I have other things to handle that are far more important than discussing random facts with you that are useless.”

Crimson tossed her cranberry braid over her shoulder and reached for him again. This time, her thumb and pointer finger found soft spots at his wrist. With every bit of confidence and intent she could muster, she asked once more. “How can one enter the arena?”

The voice that she used wasn’t one she recognized. She could feel his heartbeat between her fingers and the way he blinked slowly as it slowed to a calming pace that thrummed an exciting song to her. It coursed through her like an electric current or a lick of heat as one got too close to the tempting flame. She angled her head in confusion as the melody of life flowed through her and he stopped moving. Crimson applied gentle pressure to the vein she felt and heard nothing but the pound of his life.

She listened, tuning into the notes.

His eyes were wide, but not in fear. In something else, something that almost seemed

as if he'd indulged in one too many cups of ale from the tavern above. He beamed down at her, drawing closer but not for anything nefarious by the looks of his drunk and dreamy expression.

His mouth parted and he sounded tired as he answered her. "By putting their name on the roster. Best to use a fake name, in case the other competitors get mad at you for winning, then. We've lost a ton of good fighters that way, to revenge."

Whatever she was doing, it was working.

She didn't stop, pressing even further for more answers. "How old do you have to be to enter?"

Slow blink. "Twenty-two is the youngest we allow, but we try to limit it to twenty-four. Sometimes some slip past us." Another lengthy dip of his short lashes.

The starting age was a year older than she was, and she'd just reached twenty-one. But perhaps it wouldn't be the worst idea to stay and study the fighters. To see how they moved, observe their techniques and talents. To add to her bare knowledge when it came to fighting. To give her a fighting chance before entering the arena.

Maybe she could become one of Roland's girls as a way to stay in the Pits. To study from afar as she earned decent money, depending on whatever his girls did.

Crimson didn't let go just yet as she asked another question. Instead, her fingers angled tighter. Not tight enough to hurt, but enough so that his veins thrummed in answer. A more powerful pulse that rushed through her with every thrust of blood they pumped.

She mustered that lilting voice again, glossy and flirtatious as she murmured, "Whose Roland?"

He responded within a second. “He takes care of the serving girls and working boys. He’s always looking for more to add to his group. ”

“What all do the girls do?”

There was a nagging feeling in her stomach that sent negative sparks flooding through her, but she ignored it.

“They only serve the snacks and drinks. He’s got other girls too, if you’re interested in a more... filling position. They earn more, but it’s harder work.” He mumbled, his green eyes glazing over until his iris’s became barely slitted.

She let go at last, taking a step back.

“Where can I find Roland?”

Four years.

That’s how long it took her before she stepped foot into the ring for the first time.

Four, long years of diving under grabby hands and greedy fingers, of serving weak ale from the tavern above them and taking tips from the nicer of her patrons. Of tying an apron around her waist every night and spending that time in the Pits of all places. But it was perfect. Because she took enough home from the coins that she could afford the care for Cobalt and look after herself at the same time. She could afford the apartment without worry, and they had stable income at long last.

Crimson made a couple of friends through the serving girls who worked alongside her, instead of the cruel ones that tried to make the job a competition. The ones that powdered their noses and added an absurd amount of rouge to their pinched cheeks and rosy lips. The ones that darkened their lashes with charcoal and soot, lining them

with ink to create a slanted look to their eyes.

She hated them.

Renfri LeNoble hated them too .

A witty girl, with chocolate hair that fell to her shoulders in straight locks. She loved to mock the others and snicker behind their backs about the way they looked, like prancing geese with long necks and frilly cats with white whiskers, instead of pretty ladies and alluring girls. She was the one of the only three people who knew Crimson's secret.

Fitz Oakley, a lanky male in Roland's service also knew. He'd been the one to help her learn the moves, to help her with the footwork and even enter in the ring before her. It was because of him that she knew how to slouch correctly, walk right, and even spit like a man in case she needed to go one extra step to prove her masculinity. Crimson owed him alot, but never had the chance to repay it. Because his short winning streak in the ring ended abruptly, as soon as Grimm purchased the Pits.

He lost, and not just in the round but in his life as well. As the Blades became bloodier.

It wasn't too long after she'd started up the serving work, but he was a new face. One that she'd never forget. Because instead of both warriors leaving the ring with scrapes and bruises and scratches, one would never step foot out of the sand again.

He raised the stakes.

To a deadly line.

Grimm was almost seven feet tall, and looked the part of a death god from the

moment that Crimson laid her eyes on him. Blond hair that almost shimmered with an immortal grace, and brilliant, brown eyes that seemed to glow with a red tint. He was tanned, with muscles that covered every inch of his form. And there were scars too, along each patch of skin on display. He never seemed to be found without a scrap of leather and chainmail, always clad in armour as if he were always expecting a fight.

As if he wanted the mortals to see him for what he truly was. Most were blind, and couldn't tell anything past the tips of their noses, but a clever few would be able to take one look at him and know what dwelled beneath his beige skin. Herself, included. Just like with her father, Crimson knew what he was. Who he was. There was no other Saint that fit him as well as the Warrior's description did.

But even with the hungry male taking over the Blades of Blood, that raised the age of entry to twenty-five, and added the harshest punishment of all for losing, there were some advantages. Because Grimm trained the competitors himself. He physically got into the ring with them and taught them all how to be better warriors, stronger fighters and meaner opponents.

And those long night shifts began to pay off even more as she saw them all too. As she learned alongside them from the shadowed alcoves in all three levels. It got to a point where she began taking the early hour shifts, cleaning the leftover remains from the previous nights, in order to gain as much information as she could before trying her hand in the ring.

Crimson didn't just spend her time serving other men and learning how to wield weapons, either.

Within the four years before she stepped foot into the ring, she honed her gift too. She played around with it as she accidentally bumped into men as they passed her by, as she stumbled into their chests and found their strongest veins that linked directly to their hearts. It got to the point over the many years where she no longer needed

physical contact to maintain a connection.

It helped, but it wasn't necessary.

But eye contact was.

She could find the startling whites of anyone's eyes and smile a simple smile at them, and gain absolute control of their emotions. The intent to play puppet master had to be available to her, for her to find it within herself and harness it before she could access their feelings, but it was always there. A little string that ran along their myocardium, for her to pluck and play with, whenever she'd like.

Toying with their heart strings became a game.

And when she created her persona, made the fabled legend himself, she knew the powers would come to her advantage. She saved up a small portion from each night, tucked aside in a clear jar that she kept under their bed in the apartment. And when it was finally full, she purchased her red leathers.

Leathers, not chainmail.

Because she could move as fast as a viper in them.

Whenever she found spare time in the following two weeks, Crimson wore them. To get used to the slight constriction they gave, the creaking of fabric and the additional layers that she didn't normally wear. When she finally felt comfortable in them, when they became a second skin at last, she pulled out the long box from under the bed.

It was the only place that they had to store the select valuables left over from their parents. Each of her mother's simple pieces of jewellery had been sold off long before then, as well as any of her dresses that didn't fit Crimson. But these, she could

never and would never sell.

Her father's knives.

The weapons she practised with, following the steps and swipes that Grimm taught his students. The ones that were as long as her forearms, with a heart carved into the hilt. Red handles, like the colour of her hair and red sheaths that she could attach to either side of her hips. The blades themselves were a work of art. There wasn't any carved intricate detail engraved into the steel itself, but the smoky shade was stunning

.

It was with these, that she entered the Blades of Blood as Red Lyric, and he was born from nothing.

Her first fight, she almost lost.

The male she faced off from couldn't have been more than a year older than her, and even though she practised the exact moves that Grimm showed the others, he nearly had her in the last two minutes of the round. But with a quick slip of her fingers under his ochre jacket, she found his pressure point in his wrist and convinced him to go down.

For the first time, Crimson took a life and truly embraced Red Lyric. All this to help her brother live, and it was all worth it.

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Her next fight came quickly enough, considering she spent the last two days by Cobalt's side and nowhere else. Renfri came to check on her after she missed a shift in the Pits, but offered solace and covered for her with Roland. Sleep was limited and the small amount she got wasn't nearly enough to make her feel well rested. But it would have to do, because on the third night, she was scheduled to enter the ring against two different competitors. Those were not as easily missable as a serving shift was. Especially not with how much fame and fortune she held in her hands by pretending to be Red Lyric.

Tonight would be different though.

A well-rehearsed dance, a practised game.

To make the onlooking crowd feel as though they were thoroughly entertained, she remembered Grimm telling her as he handed her her pay from the last time.

She could do it.

She could keep them on their toes for long enough. Fifteen minutes with each opponent, only to end them and claim her prize before changing into her apron and taking up the second portion of the gorey evening. With hope, a dangerous thing, she estimated to make around thirty crowns for the entire evening.

If she could hold them off for fifteen minutes.

Crimson shoved her fighting leathers into her satchel and flipped the flap over, hiding the eye-catching colour from all she would pass in order to reach the Bronzed Goblet.



Red Lyric's attire was a staple piece of his identity. As were the daggers he fought with. Everyone knew those blades far and wide, no matter which level of the city they lived in.

She strode out of the second room and checked Cobalt's head. His fever seemed to have gone down, even if just slightly. A good sign. He stirred under her cool fingers and curled up into the wool blanket overtop of him. His tiny knees tucked into his chest and she adjusted the single pillow under his stygian head.

One, because that was all they could afford.

What she wouldn't give for a soft, pliable cushion, stuffed to infinity and back with the most comfortable goose feathers. Even if for a night. But Cobalt came first, so he got the pillow. In the rougher nights, when she tossed and turned and was unable to find sleep peacefully, she often folded one of the extra blankets and tucked that under her head as a replacement. It wasn't terrible but it wasn't good, either.

"I'll be back, okay Cobalt?" Crimson pushed a loose strand behind his curved ear. "Then, if you're showing signs of progress when I return, I'll buy you those ginger sweets you like so much."

He seemed to perk up at that, facing her. She almost laughed at his immediate desire for the tangy candy.

"The ones with the sugary bits in the center?" His tone was raspy, hoarse and yet she picked out the childlike glee in it regardless .

"Yup." She wiggled her crimson eyebrows at him. "As many as you like."

"That's a dangerous proposition." Cobalt laughed softly, which turned into a hacking cough that had him doubling over. She hid her worry as she reached for the hyssop

syrup and silently beckoned for him to open his mouth. He obeyed and she gave him three drops of the healing tincture before screwing the lid back on.

“Try not to exert yourself too much while I’m gone, alright?” Crimson bit her lip, studying his face as if it would be the last time she’d ever see it full of life.

If that’s what it could be called.

It was one of the risks of her working, even if they couldn’t afford to have neither one of them earning wages of some sort. Someone had to pay for their living, and it most certainly wasn’t going to be him in his condition. But to leave him like this, to wonder every time she did it if she would ever see him alive again, it was a terrible weight to bear. She hated leaving every time, but it wasn’t a choice.

Crimson stood from the bed and handed him one more blanket before striding out and locking their apartment door. She ran into a couple of the other tenants, waving to them slyly before ducking down the stairs of the second level and finding the main room.

But she halted before exiting the building.

Because there was a tall figure behind the counter this time, which was unusual. She didn’t recognize him either, which meant that he could have been a new addition, had all the rooms not been full. Which left her pondering over his unfamiliar presence.

“Hello?” She timidly approached the lean male who was messing with something along the rows of keys behind the glass door that was never unlocked. He turned and she almost fell back as she took in the starry eyes .

Her heart stumbled too.

“I know you.” Westley Saint charmingly smiled at her. “You’re the girl from the Pits. You sold us nuts, and ale.”

“I did.” Her pulse was a raging storm that showed no sign of letting up any time soon. Was he here for her? Did he find out that Red Lyric was none other than herself? What did he want with her? What did the Prince want with her?

She was spiralling.

Her mind scolded herself, urging it to stop before it ultimately gave her away. Three breaths in, three breaths out.

“You’re... Crimson, correct?” He glanced down at an opened book on the wooden railing behind him as if to confirm his guess. “I’ve never actually introduced myself to any of my tenants.”

“ You own the Spinning Compass?” She blurted out before she could stop herself. “But you’re the Captain of the Watch!”

Westley didn’t question how she knew that.

“I am. Hence why I’m never around.” He lightly chuckled and locked the glass door as he slid it back into place, sealing off the extra keys to the rooms. “The Watch keeps me occupied enough, but there are things I have to take care of around here as well.”

Crimson clutched her bag even tighter now, as if the contents would miraculously spill in front of him and her secret could be revealed. Just like Grimm pushed the stakes of competing in the Blades, he always increased the punishment for any rulebreakers. She could only imagine how he’d react to finding a female in his ranks. It seemed the savage Saint only enjoyed one sort of repercussion, one that no one but

a Saint could come back from.

Death.

“Are you headed to the Pits for another shift with Roland?” Westley came around the counter, tucking the key ring back into his black trousers. He casually propped an elbow against the desk and leaned as he took her in. He jerked his chin towards her satchel and she bobbed her chin.

A little too fast to seem normal.

His looks didn't help the anxious roar of trembling anticipation that tumbled about her stomach like clothes in a washtub. He was the sort of handsome that made blushing girls stumble over their words, spilling more details than previously intended. The kind that she needed to be extra careful around, considering who he was and who he was close with. Crimson made a hasty decision to leave before she unfolded far too much to him. It was obvious that her body reacted to him, with the stained flush that sent her own heart into a wild tizzy. Better to leave now, than to pursue something that was only a possibility, not a guarantee.

She made for the door before the extra minutes transformed into hours and she was late. Roland wouldn't be happy if she missed her starting time by two shifts in a row. After already not showing up for another.

Crimson waved in farewell, hoping that would be the end to the conversation. “It's going to be a busy night, so I should head out.”

His next words stopped her quick departure.

“Because the Red Lyric is making another appearance?”

Her blood turned to chilling ice, and it slunk down her long spine as she slowly rotated on her boots to face him. Her mind rushed over all the possible answers, settling on one that allowed her to avoid the truth but tell no lies. She hated lying, and wanted to avoid doing so for as long as possible.

Crimson said, “Yes. He’s a popular attraction. Many come from all over the city to see him fight.”

“Have you seen him fight?” The male questioned, dragging a hand through his umber locks. They were so dark brown that she would almost classify them as black. But he was a gorgeous golden brown everywhere else, save for his piercing eyes. There was a scar along his neck, diagonally if he shifted just right and his cream shirt moved with him.

She wondered what it was from.

Wondered what might make someone want to hurt him like that. With the way it was fixed over his jugular, it seemed like a fatal slash, or at least an attempt at one. Him standing here before her proved that it failed.

“Occasionally. It’s hard to focus on the Blades when I’m avoiding running into people and selling ale and nuts for the entirety of the night.” She answered truthfully again. The best lies were often made from segments of the truth.

“And being spilled on?” He playfully winked at her and pushed off the counter in a fluid way. “I can imagine you narrowly miss several situations like that on the daily.”

She did. And usually her skills in the ring came in handy with that, slipping and sliding to the side and barely missing any hit. But when a handsome man was involved, her focus ignored her instincts completely.

“Thank you for that, again.” Crimson couldn’t help the faint curl of her lips as she blushed. He was very, very attractive. “It would have made a mess of me, otherwise.”

“Other than running this establishment and being on the Watch, saving damsels in distress is a specialty of mine.” West opened the front door and held it for her, motioning for her to go first. She walked out and he followed. “I’m headed to the Bronzed Goblet as well. I’ll accompany you.”

He wore a grey bag at his hip, attached to his belt with an additional strap over his shoulder. A sword was attached to his left side, sheathed in black.

She didn’t know what to say to fill the space of conversation he clearly left open between them as they walked side by side down the cobblestone street. But she didn’t need to, because he started to speak again.

“You live with your mother, right?”

Crimson felt her mouth go dry. “No. Not anymore, at least. She died giving birth to my brother. It’s just the two of us, now. You should have my brother on the agreement, since I updated the information myself once he was born.”

“I did know about your brother. I must have missed the part about your mother.” His handsome face fell, thick eyebrows knitting together above his nose. “I’m sorry to hear that. How long ago was this?”

There was guilt behind the constellations in his gaze, as if he hated that he wasn’t in touch with the people who rented from him. As if he wished all the power in the world to let him take on the Spinning Compass and only the Spinning Compass. For a second, Crimson wondered if he didn’t choose the life of a guard.

“A little over eight years ago.”

West seemed to tense, as if the news meant something to him. “And your father? Was he never around to help provide for you?”

“He left when I was eighteen. When Cobalt was born, and my mother died in his stead.” A trigger of pain tore through her as she thought about their mother. There wasn’t a day that passed where she didn’t miss her.

“I see.” He said quietly. “It’s just you then, taking care of you both?”

“Yes.”

West rubbed at his chiselled chin. There was barely a layer of hair that curved over his lip and met with the hair in front of his ears. “Please don’t take this the wrong way, I’m merely looking to satiate my curiosity. But if it’s just you earning the money, then how are you able to afford the rent?”

She carefully thought over her response, knowing that he would buy it. “Roland puts the prettiest girls in the highest levels, and they usually make more because of it. It’s a vain, superficial thing, I know, but it helps pay for what we need.”

“I’ve always hated him. He reminds me of an eel, or a slimy slug with the way he treats the young men and women under his employment.” He informed her as they reached the Bronzed Goblet.

“Some of us don’t have any other options, since we live below the Bronze Gate.” Crimson brazenly spoke, not caring if it upset him. “When life deals us a shit hand, all we can do is make the best of it. Even if it means working for the assholes of this world.”

With that, she left him by himself.

He hadn't meant to insult her.

Not at all.

He admired the tenacity that she kept fighting in a position that she was stuck in. But as she left him there and entered the tavern to prepare for the night, he caught a glimpse of the items in her satchel that she kept close.

Crimson fighting leathers, and the handle of a blade with a heart on it. With the information that she unknowingly handed over to him about her father and the birth of her brother, the details slid into place without so much as a flick of his hand to help them along.

She was most definitely Heartache's daughter, and by proxy, Red Lyric.



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West mentally chided himself for causing her to run off faster than he intended for her to. He also told himself to find her after her round, right after if he wished to catch her. He needed to figure out what to do with her before Altivar figured her secret out too and dragged her off for whatever secret task he was determined to involve her in.

As he found the Prince along the Gold Balcony tonight, he noticed that he wasn't alone. The perfumed male sat on a cushioned couch that was raised to the perfect vantage point to see down in the arena. It was emerald green, with soft buttons that held the velvet fabric in place. Bulbous, citrine legs held it upright, with round cushions along the corners.

But across Altivar's scandalously clad lap, which was spread out far wider than it should have been considering the very public company they kept, and the prying eyes that could land on him at any moment, was a younger boy.

He at least was over the age that was considered inappropriate, but the way that Altivar's sneaking hand kept dipping below his waist was not. West was all for public displays of affection, but this was something else entirely. It wasn't like the Prince held a relationship with the man anymore than for the evening.

Nor did he think the Prince would.

As West approached the heir, he could already sense the dread that knotted firmly in his lower abdomen. The conversation with Crimson already left him feeling all sorts of ways, but this was something else entirely.

Altivar rotated his diamond head to his left, barely glancing at him. “Ah, Captain, you came after all. And here I was wondering if you’d even show.”

“I had things to attend to in my apartments.”

“Forever busy, you always are.” He skimmed across the pale skin of the boy in his lap. “Why not take a break every once in a while? Enjoy all the pleasures and pretty things that life has to offer us ?”

West contained his disgust, but barely.

He didn’t care who ended up in whose bed, regardless of what was between their legs. That was for no one but those two to decide. Or three. He leaned more one way than the other, preferring females for himself but there was no judgement in any who sought out their pleasure in either sex, or neither. But it was the blatant way that the Prince used their statues as Saints without care or caution.

“You’re a Saint, too?” The male’s eyes widened, the turquoise appearing near sea foam blue with a curious shimmer. “Which one?”

“Guess, Torrhen.” Altivar bent forward and began to nibble on his ear, licking up the curve of it in a way that some might find seductive. “Look at his handsome face, the way his hair is almost as black as night . The way his skin almost shimmers with golden light, or how his eyes are the richest blue to ever be seen. Do you see the illecebrous stars hidden within them? ”

“The Northern Star!” Torrhen gasped out as the wandering fingers found something as hard as rock below his lavender skirt. It wasn’t like the Saints-damned thing was covering anything, considering how sheer it was.

“Correct. You’ve guessed right. Shall I give you your prize now?” The Prince

murmured with the voice of a drunken lover, lowering his mouth to his.

West had seen enough.

Red Lyric would be up soon enough, if his guess was good. The last match had just finished, and the body was in the middle of being removed as the gate swung open and the announcer came out. If he wanted to catch her in the act, then he needed to be on the first level. It would be easy enough to demand access to the back hallway where the fighter came from with his status of Captain of the Watch.

Even if Grimm owned the Pits.

Their last encounter nearly resulted in his death, which was the reason for the scar that West bore on his neck. And why Grimm disappeared for a couple of years.

He zigged past the second balcony, finding the stairs to the first and heading down as the announcer spoke to the gathering mass of people that all held their breaths anxiously for the next match to start.

“You know his name!” Zion called to them all. “You know his colour!” Once again, that three syllable cheer began up anew.

Red Lyric.

Crimson Bard , West thought.

Red Lyric.

The rose petals began to fall again, as red as the fresh blood that had been split here tonight, as red as the more to come would be .

Red Lyric.

A twenty something year old girl, trying to survive in a cruel world that dealt her a shit hand from the get go. That was pity for her, deep down. For the girl that never truly enjoyed a childhood, that had to give away her life by the day for someone that should have been a brother, a sibling, not a son.

Red Lyric.

“Are you ready to witness another fast round?”

The crowd deafeningly screamed in answer, multiple versions of the same confirmation over and over again, until nothing else could be heard over it.

“Are you ready to see his one hundredth match?”

The yelling was abhorrent, loud and a parallel to a head wrecking ruckus that West had never heard before in his entire, immortal life. One hundred rounds, though. If he was correct about Crimson and her secret identity, that meant that she'd fought, and won, one hundred different rounds in the arena.

He couldn't deny that he was mildly impressed.

He couldn't even deny that she was more than decently attractive. Gorgeous, he even dared to think to himself. But that sort of interest wasn't something he'd ever pursued, no matter how distractingly stunning the mortals were. Even half Saints, it wouldn't end well.

So he never bothered to try.

Never wanted to try.

“I give you, RED LYRIC! ” The announcer cried out and whipped his hand towards the closed entrance. The gate rumbled open to reveal her small figure standing there, already palming both of her deadly knives.

West kept his eye on her, focusing as he slipped past a handful of people and into the gate before it had the chance to shut and trap him out. The metal bars swung shut and he watched from the inside of the darkened hallway as she started the round.

As quick as lightning, Red Lyric struck.

The clash of metal filled the stadium with cheers rising up every now and then as they fought. She dodged a well placed swipe from her opponent, who was at least a foot taller than she was. The man was monstrous in size, and for a moment, West became concerned that she might not walk out of this round alive.

His hands came up to the bars, grasping them lightly as she jumped back. Her footwork was incredible, almost as if she'd studied under the Warrior himself. Even the way she rode the breeze seemed to be stolen from the Saint. Red Lyric added a slice to her opponent's face, a growl erupting from his vermillion mouth as he charged for her like a raging bull.

He almost cracked his large head on the guarding rail as she avoided his attack. Her legs moved and she was like a leaf in the wind, switching positions within a matter of seconds. The man stopped just inches before the wall, fumbling to brace himself before spinning around and hurdling for her once more. Anticipation was heavy in the thick air, reeking of sweat and mead as she hit his crossed axes. Her toned arms shook with something that wasn't quite restraint but she managed to push him back a couple of feet with a thrust and a grunt.

A sound that was high for a man.

No one else seemed to notice, though.

West didn't notice that he gripped the bars even tighter now. This match was taking longer than the previous one.

Was she struggling?

Why hadn't she taken him down yet ?

There had been several openings that she could have, if she wanted to. He watched as she fell to her knees and rolled, just as her opponent tried to lop off her pretty head with a swing of his axe.

Lyric's scarlet hood seemed to waiver with the motion, nearly coming off. She kicked the back of his ankle and he went down, losing his grip on both of his axes. She rose behind him like a stealthy panther. The black cowl only added to that fascinating illusion. He didn't see her coming, must not have heard the footsteps as she approached him.

Fifteen minutes had gone by, and she still hadn't finished the match. Money was being passed around faster than he could count, last minute bets landing on the massive male that scrambled to find his weapons. His fingers happened across the handles, and then it was all over for him. She leaped into the air, flipping her right knife around until it plunged straight into his back.

He let out a wet sound, as her other blade came around to his front and she jerked it forward. It bit into his meaty skin, down to the bone. He let out a fatal gasp as red sprayed and she slit his throat. With an extra twist of her wrist, his head came clean off. She released herself from the back dagger, finding her footing on the solid ground once again.

Applause burst into action as she heaved.

Her chest rose and fell with every breath she took, exertion clear on her face. Her name became a prayer on the mouths of the many above her as they all praised her over and over again. She bent at the waist, bowing before them all before walking over to the body and freeing both of her blades from his skin.

West didn't need to see anymore as he turned and let go of the gate. She'd be finding her way down here soon enough. And when she did, he'd have words with her.

Crimson hadn't expected the second fight to happen right after the first. A momentary reprieve, at least, but it seemed as though Grimm had other plans in mind for her as the gate rumbled open and a second competitor ran out. She barely had the chance to catch her breath before engaging in the second round of the night.

One that she almost lost, thanks to her lack of energy.

It was almost fifteen minutes, but her life was worth more than five extra crowns. Without her, Cobalt would have no one to take care of him. So when she couldn't dance around the fighter any longer, she ended it. A well placed thrust of her knife and it was over. There was so much sweat that crested down her spine, over her face, through her leathers. They would need a good wash before she could wear them again without cringing.

Crimson tucked her blades away at her hips and made for the gate as it opened for her.

Grimm was there, waiting already.

"I thought I told you to make them longer." He barked at her, folding one arm over the other on his chest. "That was hardly half an hour worth of good fighting."

“You didn’t tell me that it would be back to back matches, instead of spread out over the span of the entire evening.” She fought back. “That’s not what I agreed to when I said I would make them last. Next time, break them apart or lose your best warrior.”

He laughed, low in his massive throat and held his arm out to her, a sack dangling from it. “Fine. Here. I hope four additional crowns is satisfactory since it wasn’t a full half an hour.”

“It’s not, but I don’t have any other choice.” She snapped. “Make sure to fill it all the way next time, or that will be the last time that Red Lyric steps into the ring in this arena.”

Grimm towered over her, a furious expression on his scarred face. “Don’t forget who owns the Pits, Red Lyric. I can make or break you, in a matter of seconds . Just because Zion schedules the matches, doesn’t mean that I can’t change them up at the last minute.”

A bucket of ice water dumped over her, chilling her to the bone as she took in his threat. But she was too tired to mind her mouth, to watch her tongue.

“And don’t you forget, that you need entertaining fighters for your onlookers. I can make and break you just as much, Grimm.” With that, she pushed past him and headed for the additional chamber off to the side.

“You’re up in four days, Lyric!” He added with a growl. She simply waved her hand in the air in acknowledgment and vanished around the corner as she turned into the room. There were five fighters along the wall, bodies pressed together but she avoided them all easily enough. She found her bag and tossed the coins inside before departing to find the bathing room.

Crimson felt sticky in places that she should never feel that way, and she wanted



nothing more than to bathe but that wasn't an option. Not when she had a shift with Roland in twenty minutes. She glanced towards the hallway, searching for any passerbys before having the chance to slip behind the door.

It wouldn't do her any good to appear as Red Lyric one moment before shutting the door, only for a female to magically take his place as she came out. Especially not when they were the same height and build. Renfri would never spill the secret, but Crimson was still more than cautious down here.

She waited until it was clear, quickly entering the chamber and swiftly locking the door after it shut. The bag dropped from her shoulder as a hand clamped around her mouth and she was forced to swallow her scream .

His head angled against hers, whispering, "Don't make a sound, Red Lyric."

His breath was warm against her neck, and it sent the wrong kind of shivers down her shoulders. She gulped, forcing the noise down into her lungs as he huffed lightly and tugged the pin out of place. Her hood slipped from her head, revealing her ruby locks.

With a brush of his mouth against her ear, he murmured, "Or should I say Crimson?"

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West experienced the tremor that vibrated down her lithe figure as he held her captive within the bathing chamber. Pressed against her like this, there was no mistaking her for anything other than a woman.

It stirred something inside of him.

Her bag immediately fell from her grasp as he wrapped his hand around her mouth and held her firm against his chest. He couldn't risk her screaming and alerting anyone nearby. Her shallow pants were hot in his palm as he continued to hold her there. Even if there was a layer of dark grey fabric that separated them, thanks to her cowl that kept the bottom portion of her face covered. He didn't raise any sort of steel to her pale throat, nor did he threaten her.

There was no need for that after all.

"I'm going to let you go, but don't go anywhere and don't yell for help, alright?" West softly announced to her, requiring her agreement before unclamping her mouth. Her head dipped in silent confirmation of his ask, and he slowly released the pressure on her face .

"Who are you?" Crimson questioned with a timid voice that belonged to a spotted doe, a frightened fawn.

It didn't suit her.

She didn't turn around, as if looking at her attacker would send a jolt of pure panic into her heart. He knew better, considering who she was, and who she was related to.

Instead, he answered her. “West.”

“You!” She flipped around them, even if the space wasn’t large enough for both of them to be in here. It was a single room, with a toilet and a sink. “Why are you here? I don’t understand.”

He grinned down at her.

She wasn’t much shorter than he was, but there was still enough lack of height to make a difference.

“Because I knew who you were from the moment we spoke this evening.” He toyed with her hood, pulling the cowl that covered the bottom portion of her features down. Without it, it was clear as day that she was a woman.

Well, a young one at least.

She didn’t look older than twenty-four, but even half Saints aged much slower than most mortals. He assumed she was a few years older than that, as all Saints—regardless of their immortality, appeared younger.

Crimson angled herself even closer to him, if that was possible. As he played with the charcoal scarf, her fingers danced towards his wrists. He knew what she was about to do, and was curious to see how her powers worked. They were different for all Saints. It wasn’t a guarantee either that a lesser Saint would gain the same sort of gifts as their parent, if they’d be completely different like Altivar and Muse.

West let her try to control him.

Clearly, she didn’t know .

She tugged her gloves off, one at a time and tucked them into her high belt. Her delicate fingers brushed against his powerful points in the joints, finding the soft veins that pumped blood from his neverending heart.

“Westley Saint,” She almost purred his full name as she tilted her gentle chin upwards, as if she would kiss him and quietly said, “What do you intend to do about it?”

“Nothing, at the moment.” He acted into it, as if the magic that he didn’t feel a single ounce of was actually affecting him, and she could do whatever she wished. He would be lying to himself if he said he wasn’t leaning towards letting her anyways.

There was something about her that pulled him in, even if it wasn’t her heart-altering, effecting magic. Something that he obviously couldn’t ignore, but he would try for the sake of avoiding heartbreak. Of avoiding death.

West didn’t particularly want to die.

At least not yet.

“Good. I’d appreciate it if we could keep this little secret between us then.” Crimson batted her lashes up at him, pretending to be the alluring girl that men most likely saw when looking at her. It wasn’t a hard sell, especially when the girl looked like she would weigh one hundred and eighty pounds soaking wet.

Men only saw what they wanted to see, not look past the pretty surface to the deadly thing brewing beneath. And he wasn’t blind. There was something there, lurking inside of her that was a menacing, murderous thing. Beautiful, too.

“What will you give me in return?” West was intrigued now. “After all, keeping a secret like this, it’s dangerous.”

No it wasn't.

He was toying with her, like a hungry cat and its poor dinner. But he wanted to see just how far she would go to keep her secret away from the prying eyes and delving ears of the men all around them.

Crimson broke character to chew on the inside of her lip, tucking it between both rows of teeth.

West found it adorable.

"What do you want?" She looked nervous, which only made him want to chuckle. He avoided it, retaining his own charade of the lovesick male that she could control.

There was one thing that he could come up with off the top of his mind, one thing that would make her fumble and toss aside this flirtatious, blushing character.

"I'll settle for a chaste kiss."

"A... a kiss?" Her eyes widened, and he could see the inside circle of brown and gold within the outer ring of olive green. Stunning.

"Don't tell me it's your first one." He teased, a sable eyebrow rising up.

"No!" She instantly insisted.

West didn't believe her. "Then what's the issue?"

Crimson almost made a face at him, one that would have caused him to actually laugh out loud if he was correct about the withering emotion behind it. She came closer as her hand ran up his arm, leaving singular shivers to skitter over his skin.

New stars burst inside of him, exploding and flashing white colourful fires. The ivory moon curved around him, ushering him closer to her.

That was new.

No one ever made him feel alive like this before.

He tucked that observation away for later.

Especially as her hand found his chest and began to circle over his heart. His pulse quickened, and he knew she immediately picked up on it because she stumbled in her romantic wench once more. Crimson looked deep into his eyes, she went to kiss him.

Her lips halted only a centimeter from his as she uttered, “Keep my secret, without the additional clause. You know you want to, handsome .”

West’s throat bobbed.

Why in the Saints name did she have so much of an effect on him? She wasn’t supposed to, since he was a full Saint and she was only a lesser one. And yet there was an undeniable thirst in the back of his mouth, a tingle on his tongue and a spark in his soul as she looked at him like that.

“Fine.” He mumbled, not sure if the baritone voice that came out was the correct one or not. He couldn’t unfix his sight from her tempting mouth.

Did he want to kiss her after all?

Something akin to mortal excitement bubbled up and he couldn’t ignore it, finding fascinating new feelings rising up.

Crimson let out what seemed to be a breath of relief and turned to exit the chamber before he could say another word. But as she reached for the handle, unlocking it, his hand slammed it back closed.

She jumped.

“Little lesson there, Heartstrings . Lesser Saints can’t affect full Saints. I suggest you do some research before attempting to change the emotions of just anyone.” West rumbled into her ear. “Nice try though.”

She gaped at him. “ You’re a Saint?”

“Yes.” He flicked a stray piece of hair out of his sight line. It wasn’t like his hair was long, since it was shorn close to his head in the back. But the front strands like to test his patience in steamy situations. “The Northern Star, before you need to satiate your curiosity. But as you’ve been one of the only people to ever look at me that deep, I’m sure you’ve already figured it out in your smart mind.”

“What do you want with me, Westley Saint?” Crimson dropped all pretence and brought her tone down an octave, as if the higher pitch was something she only used to sell the image.

In his opinion, this one suited her far better.

He would have been surprised that she didn’t grovel and scrape like most did when they found out that he was one of the six Saints of Hisaith, had her father not been the most notorious one himself. She likely wasn’t impressed by him, which only plucked his interest even further.

He lifted a finger into the space between them. “First of all, it’s West. No West ley and drop the last name. Westley is only for those who earn it. Second of all, Red

Lyric needs to disappear. For good.”

She waited for him to explain, to go on and tell her the reasons behind his demand.

West sighed and let go of the handle as soon as he was sure she wouldn't try to escape before he got this part over and done with. “Prince Altivar Talon is searching for you. Well, for who he thinks you are. He-”

“Does he know?” She interrupted him before he could continue. “Did he send you to come after me? Why does he want me?”

“No.” He lowered a finger to her lips in order to quiet her down before she could ask a mountain's worth of questions. She stopped talking. “But it's not for anything good. I'm quite sure that it's for nefarious purposes and until I can figure out what those purposes are, I'm not going to tell him about you either. But until I can do that, Lyric has to vanish. ”

“I can't do that.” Crimson began to untie the ribbon that kept smaller wefts of hair out of her face. “I can't just abandon the only means of making money that I have. Working for Roland isn't nearly enough to cover the cost of living.” She brushed her hands through it and thin bangs fell to her eyebrows.

Another clever, pretty thing to hide her true identity.

“What sort of lifestyle are you living that the tips from these vile bloodhounds aren't supporting you?” There wasn't any sort of judgement in his resonance, he made sure of that. Not after his earlier mistake that made her abandon him with an angry flash in her eyes.

“My brother, Cobalt. He came into this world early. And because of that, because we were poor, are poor- he falls ill often. Enough that I constantly have to provide



certain medications for him or he'll die. Medicine isn't cheap, especially for those of us who live in the Bronze Gate." She untucked the braid at the back of her head, letting it tumble down her back.

West enjoyed the vibrant, unusual colour of it. The way it remained stick-straight even after being pinned up for what he assumed had been hours in a plait. The way it contrasted her pale skin and green eyes, the almost wine shade of it. Fitting for her name, both of them.

"I see." He understood her conundrum, but he also couldn't very well let Lyric make another appearance. Altivar was far cleverer than he let on. It would only be a matter of time before the Prince uncovered the truth for himself. Especially if she kept working as one of Roland's serving girls and fighting in the Blades as the infamous Red Lyric.

"I can't just quit either. Grimm, he'd be suspicious if I didn't turn up for my next bout." Crimson argued. "He's the one who pays me, and I can't afford to lose his graces. If I'm not able to find another job that compensates as well as competing, there's no telling if he'll let me back in after I scorn him. I can't fail Cobalt."

West considered the part with the owner of the Pits already. "Let me deal with Grimm. I'll be able to get him to let you go without repercussions."

"Because he's the Warrior?" She cross examined him with a cross expression. "It's not that difficult to figure out, if one looks close enough."

Smart girl.

"You're far more cunning than you let on. Is the dainty girl just a farce then?" West smirked towards the side. "Because you pull it off fantastically if it is."

“Less people looking at me if I don’t share the same traits with a fierce opponent.” She shrugged and started to unbutton her leathers. Silver hooks kept her in and he was about to stop her when he saw the cloth she wore under it.

“I’ll make you a deal.” He began, already knowing how much it would cost him but offering it up all the same. This was a bigger matter at stake than sharing his room in the palace. “The healers in the palace are some of the finest I’ve ever seen. They’ve been able to handle and treat almost everything that comes in the door. Bring your brother there, and I’ll pay for his costs.”

Crimson stopped fidgeting with her clothes. “I can’t just leave him there in an unknown place. If he wakes up and doesn’t recognize it, then he’ll have a panic attack and it could detriment his health even more.”

He held up a hand. “You didn’t let me finish. I was going to tell you to come to the palace as well. I have a room there, close to the healing ward that you can stay in.”

She blinked, as if she didn’t hear him properly. “I can’t just live in your rooms, with you. ”

He tucked his smile away at her flustered face. “You can, and you will. I’m hardly ever in my rooms anyways, thanks to the title of Captain of the Watch. Nothing untoward will happen if we do share a bed, I promise you.”

He didn’t miss the crimson tint to her cheeks, over her nose, around her ears. “Take the deal, Crimson. It’s the best chance for your brother and it kills two birds with one stone. It’s rare that I would sleep there anyways, and I always have a spare room at the Compass if it truly makes you that uncomfortable. But your brother needs all the help he can get and I’m able to offer it to you at little to no cost, for both of ourselves.”

She looked up at him earnestly, with tears puddling at the corners of her eyes and in her waterline. “And all I would have to do is stop pretending to be Red Lyric? To not enter in anymore fights and lay down my daggers?”

He nodded. “That’s it. I can find work for you in the castle if you’re so determined to stay away from being idle, but you won’t have to sacrifice your life in order to help him. What do you say?”

The girl pulled her gaze away from him, contemplating every side to it as she pulled off her jacket and tucked it into the satchel. She grabbed for a corset, tucking it under her waist and lacing it up with impressive speed.

“I think there’s no downside to this.”

“There isn’t.” West assured her. He knew where her mind must have gone because he said, “I know that other Saints, like the Imp and the Warrior, only do things that best suit them, but I’m not like that. This isn’t something that suits me, benefits me , but everyone. Because if Altivar does what I think he’s going to do, then it won’t be in anyone’s best interest.”

Crimson held her hand out to him. “Okay. I will agree to it all. But on one condition.  
”

West motioned for her to elucidate before he agreed on anything.

“Cobalt needs help now. He moves into the palace tonight .” She stared up at him, determination blazing as bright as a star in the midnight sky. He admired that flash of confidence and negotiation within her.

It was a comet, wrapped in fire and stardust.

Alluring, attractive, significant.

“That’s perfectly fine with me. I’ll even help you move your things from the Compass as soon as tonight’s events are over. Finish out your shift with Roland and I’ll come find you before everyone leaves.” West took her hand and shook it, his lips turning upwards. “I’m glad you agreed, Heartstring s.”

She scowled, yanking her hand from his grasp roughly. “Don’t call me that.”

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 8:04 am*

When West found Altivar again, there was no sign of Torrhen. There was not a single scrap of see through silk or velvety satin out of place, nor an unruffled button to be found on the collected figure of the Prince. Instead, he sat upright on the viridian cushions with a sack of salted nuts in his hands as he munched on them, eyes glued to the arena below them as another fight was nearly at an end. A half-finished chalice of summery wine sat on a nearby table, white by the pear and saffron smell of it.

“Where did you scurry off to, Captain?” Altivar curiously surveyed him for the barest of seconds before returning his attention to the Blades. West was surprised he could still see from his lazy slouch on the couch.

An excuse was already loaded and ready to go. “I was out enjoying the pleasures and pretty things that life has to offer us. ” West retorted, perhaps a bit more sour than it should have been but he seemed to not notice.

“Oh?” A sly thing of a smirk slid into place .

To sell the sentence, he’d tousled his hair before returning to him and popped open the top button of his sapphire doublet, letting his chest peek out. Even his pants looked as though they’d been messed with but that was a result from Crimson pressed against him instead of one of his own making.

Something he wouldn’t soon forget.

Altivar left the view of the Pits, turning to see the captain instead. It seemed as if nothing else would divide his attention now. “What delightful little thing tempted the

righteous, rigid Westley Saint to let loose?”

“The redhead from the other night. The pretty one that you purchased a drink from, that I caught before the tray could splash her.” West sat on the other side of the couch, crossing one leg over the other as he adjusted his tunic and pushed the golden button back into place.

The decadently painted man let out a low rumble of a laugh. “Never would I have pegged you for the sort who enjoys pale girls, or tall ones.”

West scrunched his face into a mask of confusion, mixed with a slight of disgust at his already loaded prejudices. “Now I’m curious to know what kind of girls you think I would be attracted to?”

“None, if I’m being perfectly honest. I thought you weren’t the sort to be interested in anything like that, at all.” He shuffled on the seat, leaning back until his arm was flat against the top portion of the pert cushions. “Imagine my deep surprise to hear that you went off, missing one of the most spectacular matches that I’ve ever witnessed in my entire life, to live a little. To loosen up, even. Congratulations, Captain!” He snickered like an impotent child. “Was this your first time?”

“No.” West stoically said as vexation ignited in his chest like a brand new star. “I’ve been with girls before. It’s just been a while since any caught my eye.”

“See what interesting facts we learn about each other when we’re bonded by the way of life in the Pits?” The Prince patted him twice on the back, and it was the most sarcastic, snarky touch that he’d ever felt before. “When do you see your scarlet woman again?”

“Tonight.”

The heir stared at him in shock. “Already?”

“You’ve convinced me.” He explained simply enough. “So I invited her back to my rooms with me at the palace, to stay until I grow bored of her company.”

“Oh, you dog!” Altivar gaped, slapping his chest with a hand and laughing loudly enough for a couple heads around them to turn in their direction. “Now this, this is the kind of fun I expected from you when my mother insisted that you stay by my side!”

“As opposed to what?”

“As opposed to the boring piece of wooden plank that I assumed you to be. So straightforward and uninteresting with your ways and rules when it comes to the way you live. You’re a Saint. A god, to these plebeians. Act like it, for Saint’s sake.” There was a hissing undertone that rode out the end of his statement, one that West wanted to grab his stupid forked tongue out by and shove it back down his throat if it meant shutting him up for once.

Altivar’s power was far different from his mother’s.

Muse was an artist of all talents, ways of life.

She could sing as lovely as a sea-foam siren, play any instrument as stunningly as the creators who made them, paint and draw better than any of the greats. With a single humming note, she could send a song into someone’s head forever, or inspire them to play at any given notice. In the wrong hands, if her intent was not that of good, she could play the pied piper and send mortal men to their deaths.

But her son was a devious creature of darkness.

Which caused his power to be that of transformation. He could shift his skin into another, or into an animal or beast as long as he could picture it inside his head. The snake tattoo around his arm was a prime example of that, as Altivar loved the slippery serpents. He hardly ever became one, but he had three of them in a glass terrarium inside his chambers of the palace. Venomous creatures that could bite, maim and kill with a single bite. He admired the way they could easily shed their skin and gain a new one, as if it were nothing.

“Perhaps you should be more cautious with how often you flaunt your Saint-hood over others.” West warned him, ignoring the urge to punch his smug face. Settling for wiping it off would suffice, for now. “You forget that the mortals can control us if they find our talismans.”

Altivar huffed out a dry sound of amusement. “Which is why they’ll never get their hands on mine. It’s with my darling serpents, and unless they want to risk death in order to obtain my bone talisman, then it’s perfectly harmless to speak about it all.”

Their talismans, their charms, their objects.

Each Saint had one, as did each lesser Saint.

Most times the items in question were discovered completely by accident by the half Saints though, considering they didn’t forge their own. Each of the immortals was overprotective with their tools, as they should have been. As they all should be since being under another’s influence wasn’t something to take lightly.

His was a compass, which is why he named his establishment after it. One that always pointed to the true north of the person holding it, regardless of whatever they might try to convince it otherwise. Battered and beaten, with a dingy metal rim around the outside of it and tucked in a secret drawer with a false bottom, back at the apartment he owned.



Never in his entire life, had any managed to find it and hold its power over him before. West was grateful for that, considering many searched for it and to harness the power of the Northern Star. The most bright and brilliant light in the sky, said to lead its patrons true on every task, a faithful sign till the very end.

If unleashed, West could glow.

To the point of a blinding pain that would incinerate any who laid eyes upon him in his truest form.

A weapon.

One he hoped he'd never have to unlock.

There was a shoppe in the Silver Gate that sold cheap replicas of all the Saint's items, called the Lucky Talisman. For those who believed in good luck charms, they could purchase mirrored versions of the blessed items for their own sake. They didn't do anything of course, but sometimes people just needed small trinkets to help their life pass them by.

It was easy to distinguish the real artefacts from the replicated ones. The fakes were always shined to the point of perfection, to glimmer and gleam under any scone light possible. To look as impressive as the Saints themselves, if such was possible. Whereas the real ones were always dull, used, bland compared to them. They'd existed for centuries, so why would there be any shine to them?

West visited the Lucky Talisman once, just to see what all the fuss was about. He was unimpressed when he left, finding nothing special but another way for the human's to worship the Saints in lucrative methods .

Just like West, Altivar hardly ever dipped a single toe into his well of magic. Though

his was easier to access, and wasn't as vicious. Depending on whatever form the Prince took, that was.

The bell chimed down in the pit, a signal that the end of the night was here and that there would be no more fights until tomorrow evening when the whole morbid thing started up again. Altivar continuously lounged on the couch, not a care in the world to be seen in his ochre skin. The ruby cosmetics that highlighted his features were heavy but not as much as the glaze of liquor and sex in his yellow eyes.

West made to stand, tugging on the hem of his doublet. "I need to speak with Grimm before we leave. Can you find your own way home tonight, or will you hopelessly fall into another bed of some else?"

"Go, Captain." The arrogant Prince flicked his fingers in the air in dismissal. "I'll be fine, regardless of who I spend the night with."

He didn't need to be told twice.

"Goodnight then, Prince." West bowed his head in the respect that the heir didn't deserve, or bothered to even try to earn before striding off and losing himself to the crowd. He wove in and out, avoiding the greasy touch of men who didn't know how to use a washcloth, or a bathtub for that matter by the smell of them.

He waited for the area to clear as people ambled up the stairs, or down depending on whether or not they had bets to collect or wages to pay for losing. They parted when he asked them to, shoving past them before he got trapped and missed Grimm all together.

He spotted the garnet head of hair first, however, before he could find the massive man that made up the Saint. She paused before him as she undid the cream apron from around her waist. It sagged, as if there was a weighted stone in the single pocket

and he assumed it must have been the tips she made from tonight.

West addressed her, finding interest in a vantage point across the room. “I’m on my way to speak with Grimm. Are you prepared to leave here for good?”

Crimson sucked in air. “West, I’ve been ready to leave this place behind for ages. Until now, I’ve never been able to.”

His lips had a mind of their own as they quirked up. “Good. Wait for me outside the Bronzed Goblet. I shouldn’t be more than ten minutes, if this goes accordingly.”

She understood and told him that she would before heading towards Roland’s secluded corner of the Pits to turn in her apron and grab her things, as well as take in the last few wages that he withheld until the end of the night.

West watched her until he couldn’t make out her head of red hair anymore, then turned towards the lowest level and sank down the steps. The announcer scurried out of his way as he saw him approaching, leaving him to his own devices when it came to finding the elusive Saint that never seemed to appear in his own place of bloodshed.

For someone like the Warrior who enjoyed the scent of metal and salt in the air, relished in the kill and savoured the way scarlet sprayed, he never showed his scarred face to revel in it all.

West found that odd.

He tracked down the last level, meeting the ground as he entered the sandy arena. Just like last time, there wasn’t a glimpse of garnet embedded into the sand, nor a sign of death to be seen. Even the walls had been scrubbed clean by one of Roland’s boys who preferred the dirtier tasks to the more scandalous ones.

He couldn't blame them.

He warily approached the gate, peering inwards. There was no firelight to guide him, but he didn't need it. He never would. His sight was one of the only things that he could still use in this mortal shell, without ruining the lives around him with a flash bang of light.

West cupped his hands around his eyes, setting their focus in front of him instead of becoming distracted with the flickering of the arena behind him.

“War!” He spoke to the darkness and everything behind. “I know you’re in there. Are you going to stop sulking like a Saints-damned coward and come out to face me?”

A deep, treacherous chuckle echoed from the very back of the stone corridor. It slunk into his skin, seeped into his pores and swallowed his immortal soul in one, massive bite.

War's harrowing face appeared in his perfect vision, climbing out of the oily shade as he grinned like the hunting predator that he was. “If I remember correctly, North, I swore that if I ever saw you again, that I would kill you.”

Twelve

A lesser man might have gone running from the monstrously tall male that stepped into the light, but West was not a lesser man. He was a Saint. One that faced this particular beast before and lived to tell the tale. Sure, he gained the scar on his neck from it, and a story that could rival others, but he was here.

“You think that you’re better than I?” War raged, fury brighter than any newborn star that could be conjured. “Then let’s see how you can handle this!”

He should have seen it coming.

Years of staying with the Saint, of learning his very moves and power, the way he jumped and fought, yet he hadn’t. The burning sting of steel, the flash of agony and a warm trickle began down his neck.

“I never said that.” West gasped, clapping his hand over the wound before it could temporarily immobilise him as he succumbed to the normally mortal shell of death that the humans gave over too quickly. It wouldn’t kill him, but render him unconscious for a few hours whilst his immortal body knit itself back together and everything processed correctly.

But the blood still ran.

As did the tensions that pricked the air.

West gritted his teeth and found the nearest weapon, dragging it down diagonally

towards the towering male before him. The smell of salt and power burst into the arena as War started to bleed as well.

Fair was fair.

But War wouldn't see it that way.

He lifted his monstrous blade once more and the battle began, one that was pointless thanks to the misunderstanding of cheap ale and bloodlust that the Saint was constantly high off of like expensive opium.

West was the one that walked away in the end, panting and sweating like a dog as he chucked the sword aside and left his fellow Saint in the sandy area. His own sword protruded from his center, one that he'd wake to remove, only to pass out once more and awaken as good as new.

By that point in time, West would be far away.

He curled his fingers into a tight fist at his thigh, out of Warrior's sight. "That serves my memory correct as well."

"Then why in the Saint's name, our name, are you here, in my fighting pits of all places?" War snarled with the ferocity of a rampant beast, dripping from the maw, "Looking for all the world and beyond like you have a favour to ask from me."

"It seems your perception hasn't altered over the years either." West commented in a bored tone, refusing to back down from his stance before the gate. "You are correct, however. I do have a favour to ask of you."

"Tell me quickly, before I decide to lop your head off. Or try to, again. I may have failed the first time, but trust me when I say that I'm aching for a second chance." He

pulled a lever within, the gate shuddering violently before grinding and cracking upwards into a slit in the stone ceiling where it would remain until forced back down.

“It’s not an easy manner of conversation. It concerns Red Lyric.” He poured the sentence from his mouth like freshly collected honey, almost singing her name.

“What about him?”

Her, West mentally corrected him but didn’t dare to speak it. He knew that War wasn’t blind, but perhaps he truly didn’t know what lay underneath the red fighting leathers. Where Crimson managed to learn his moves became another delectable mystery to West. One to figure out later, as she was most likely waiting for him outside the tavern by now.

“I need to break his contract with you.”

The vicious Saint scoffed, a hacking chuckle following. “He’s signed on for another year and a half. He’s not breaking it any time soon if I have anything to say about it. As you’ve clearly been sulking around my lovely establishment the last few days, I know you’ve seen him fight. I would be beyond idiotic to let him go after the amount of money his rounds bring into the Pits.”

“Tell me what it’ll take to break it. This isn’t something I’m willing to negotiate on.” West put all of his weight on his back foot, crossing one arm over the other in front of his muscular chest. He wasn’t anywhere near as large as the seven foot male before him, but he wasn’t lacking either. “It’s for the good of the Empire so it will be happening. Now, tell me your price, otherwise I’ll get Muse involved.”

“You always did like to hide behind her pretty skirts when things become too complex and hard to reach for you.” He complained and strode out of the tunnels below the arena. “Fine. You want Red Lyric?”

“I do.” West confirmed.

War motioned towards the circular field where the competition took place. “Then fight me for him. Win, and I’ll let you leave without any repercussions. It’s not like we can kill each other.”

Because unless they had one of the few, rare Saint made weapons, any mortal looking blow would not kill them in the end. They might be temporarily disposed of for a good few hours, but they would return eventually.

“If I lose,” He began to counter his offer, “Then I’ll take up his fights in his place. But after tonight, Lyric is done here.”

Perhaps that was the wrong thing to say, because War madly grinned and made for the empty arena. “I see nothing wrong with this arrangement. I hope you’ve dusted off that sword you carry, North. You’ll be needing it after tonight.”

“If you dig into your vast expansion of memory, Grimm, you’ll recall that it was you who taught me how to use a sword in the first place.” West pulled it free of his waist, letting the candlelight hit it just right in certain spots. “I assure you that I’ve continuously practised every day since our departure, and have only gotten better.”

“Then this should be a fair fight.” He thumbed free the two savage knives at his sides, jagged and serrated edges gleaming in what seemed to be excitement. As if the blades themselves carried a seed of a Saint’s soul and were alive.

“As long as you keep your word in the end, I agree.” The captain flipped the finely crafted weapon in front of him twice, then behind him in a circular motion .

There were no more common folk, no mortals watching from the ramparts to overlook the two Saints as they engaged in a battle of skills, of talents, of wits.



Save for one.

Because there, on the Silver Balcony, West caught sight of her garnet braid from afar. It was hard to miss, after all. She was white-knuckled, but she was glued to that spot in the veranda as she witnessed them circling each other. He almost imperceptibly dipped his head at her, silently asking her to stay put while he handled this. If Crimson understood what he asked, she made no sign of it.

But she didn't move, either.

"If I win, will you tell me why Red Lyric is so important to you?" War questioned as he feinted right, only to go left. West was ready and waiting for him, used to his tricks. He parried, striking hard and true.

"No." He responded and slashed upwards in a fluid way. "Because it's none of your concern. Nor was it part of the bargain."

The bloodthirsty immortal adjusted out of the attack, but the tip of his sword caught in his tunic and sliced through a thread. It fluttered to the ground, forgotten and unimportant.

"If I didn't know better, I might say that you're infatuated with my most esteemed warrior." He cut through the air thrice, swiping and aiming for West's chest. Three precise movements that had him fumbling back before the knives took a chunk out of him. "Have you switched sides at last?"

West thrust forward, only to hit nothing. "Then you don't. And no, but you don't need to think about my levels of attraction, either."

He knew he could challenge the Warrior, and potentially even win. But the viewer from the balcony created a nervous aura around him that was hard to ignore, almost

impossible to brush off.

“I don’t what?” War dodged a second set of moves with ease that only belonged to the immortal known and praised for his killing talents and blood spilling thrill.

“ Know better. ” He grunted as War’s knife ripped through his left bicep and through his bronzed skin. It would heal by morning, but it still hurt like a bitch in the meantime. “I’m only doing what I’ve always done.”

The Saint took advantage of that, slashing towards him with unrefined strength. “Which is what?”

“Protect us, and the sake of the Empire.” He jumped out of the way as his blood hit the sand. He swore even within the crimson liquid, he saw stars exploding.

Little bursts of white that rapidly collided with others, creating nebula’s of undefined power.

“Always the best of us, the little Star . No matter what, you never could be anything other than a righteous pain in my ass .” He stepped back and avoided a hit to his large gut. His feet dragged along the sand as he rounded West.

“What’s the point of never doing anything good, in a life that never ends? I understand the need for chaos, the want for mischief and the desire for upheaval when it provides a certain style of entertainment to a bunch of bored immortals, but still.” He struck, hitting metal with metal. “There’s more to living forever than creating a terrible world for those behind us. For those who have to live in it for a short period of time.”

A clash sounded.

War hit him hard then, sending him flying back into the wall. A crack rang out into the empty space, and West grimaced as pain lanced his entire form. He groaned as he rose from the ground, a hand braced in the golden sand as he pushed upwards. He managed to get on his feet before the slam of a knife came down, only inches from where he'd just been.

He rubbed at his ribs but pulled away just in time to brace his weight against an attack. West pushed everything he had into it, and he could feel the pulse of his skin beneath his clothes. It didn't matter how much of a glamour Dream set upon him, it could never truly hide what he was underneath.

An eternal, forever glowing star.

He gritted his teeth as his feet were shoved back further and further, pressing him flat against the railing and between War's hair-ridden chest. The blades slowly angled downwards with every inch lost, and he was struggling to keep it up. The steel would bite into him soon, but at least Crimson would be free of this horrible life and Altivar wouldn't be able to figure her out.

He could handle a life in the ring, if it came down to that. It wasn't like any of the humans could kill him, after all.

War hefted all his sheer size into the blow, adding even more pressure to it than West could handle. His sword slipped from the crossing of steel and he ducked just in time before War slammed the knives into his tanned throat. He spun out of the way, scuffing through the sand as he flipped back around to face the giant.

"Close call." He chuckled with a carnage laced laugh. "I almost had you there."

"Almost, being the key word." West playfully winked, hoping for the male to see nothing but red and that he could use it to his advantage. "You'll have to move faster

than that if you aim to catch me.”

“Brave words, for someone who’s losing.” He growled, a slight snarl in the back end as he charged. West was ready, prepared for it even. He met him blow for blow, shoving off each assault with a grunt of pain from the leftover torment that rippled over his ribcage.

Yet he didn’t back down, nor did he give in.

“Am I losing?” He tsked, “And here I thought I was winning.”

The Warriors power lay in his pure strength, his bulking mass and his towering height. All things that he was currently using. So if War could cheat and use his Saintly gifts in order to help him win, then West would use his as an advantage as well.

“ CRIMSON !” He roared at the balcony, barely making out her red hair in his peripherals. “ CLOSE YOUR EYES AND COVER THEM. ”

West didn’t have time to make sure she listened to his command as he began to burn. He reached into the very center of himself and tugged on the light that made his russet skin gleam like a freshly fallen star. He wrapped his fingers around the flashbang that would ultimately blind the warrior and dragged it up into himself.

“You wouldn’t.” His opponent hissed through clenched teeth. If he looked close enough, he could spot genuine fear there. Something that West delighted in seeing.

“Oh,” West let out a low laugh, “You shouldn’t underestimate me, because I would. Happily , too. In fact, I think I will. ”

He did.

West unleashed his magic, letting it sizzle into his skin until he became a glowing, incandescent thing to behold. The sun and the moon and the stars erupted through the surface of his flesh, blasting into the world. He heard a gasp from the balcony and prayed to himself, as well as the other five Saints, that she didn't look. That she dove under the railing as he filled the entire arena with his brilliant powers.

War screamed in frustration and released his attack, stumbling back as he dropped his daggers and covered his face with both meaty hands. He stumbled back, searching blindly for a way to escape the fire bright room.

West could see perfectly fine through his own gifts, able to make everything out in perfect clarity. He didn't need any help as he stalked towards the mountain of a man and lifted his sword up into the air. He didn't dare dull his powers either as he brought it down, straight through his gut. Scarlet spurted, spraying him as he pushed it in even deeper but he didn't care.

As he finally called his magic back into himself, he whispered, "Red Lyric is no longer on the roster for the Blades of Blood. Nor does he belong to the Pits, or you anymore. As of tonight, he belongs to me."

The room fell and everything tumbled into pitch black.

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 8:04 am*

She'd stayed for the entirety of the fight, even seeing it break out at the start. She'd heard his order, the commanding roar in it that stirred a deep part of herself. And she obeyed, dropping to the floor and covering herself with the balcony railing as she firmly squeezed her eyes shut. Crimson listened to every part of his order, clapping her hands over each eye and remaining like that through it all. Even in her crouched, cowering position against the stone barrier, she could still see the magnificent white light that tore through the entire underground pit.

It was unlike anything she'd ever experienced before.

Crimson stayed like that, curled like a mewling kitten in a ball on the ground, the ringing of metal on metal halting at last. But there was still that overlying shield of ivory that blasted through her. She couldn't open her eyes without the fear of losing her sight forever.

A gentle set of hands timidly landed on her shoulders. The scent of moonlight on water and stardust filtered into her senses. How she knew what those things smelled like, she had no clue, but it was pleasant and comforting.

"You can open your eyes now, Heartstrings." West softly said. "It's over."

Crimson untucked herself from the ball-like form and beheld him. There was blood splattered on his face, over his arm, stained into his clothes and he was hurt, on his left arm, high up. But other than those things, and the slight dishevelled look to his messy hair from the fight, he seemed to be in perfect condition.

"Good job on following my orders." He offered her a hand and she took it. He hoisted

her up to her feet, brushing the gravel from her shoulders. “It wouldn’t have ended well for you if you hadn’t.”

“For some reason I can’t quite explain, I trust you.” She explained. “I’ve never known you, and yet I would put my life in your hands time and time again.”

It was the way a blanket wrapped round frost-bitten shoulders in the middle of a harsh winter that refused to let up, of the way melted chocolate heated ones insides to the point of a cozy steam. It settled into her like an old friend that she had no idea she missed and Crimson realised that she trusted this man- Saint, completely, without reason.

“It’s part of being a Saint. Humans were supposed to trust us, to worship us, to look up to us. I’m sure if you met another, you’d feel the same towards them.” He elucidated as he exhaled, letting go of her and turning towards the staircase that would take them out of the Pits.

“No.” She shook her head in disagreement. “My father was a Saint. A full one too, and yet I never trusted him. I never wanted to trust him. I’m glad I didn’t either, because he left us.”

West didn’t seem to have anything to say to that, other than a bend in his brow. “Let’s go to your brother, shall we? The longer we remain here, the less time he spends in the healing wards.”

Crimson almost leapt up the stairs at his suggestion, already ready to hand him over to trained professionals who could help him far better than she would ever be able to with the tinctures and small tasks that kept his fever at bay. There was a dollop of uncontained excitement that buzzed through her like a fast flying dragonfly on a summer wind and pond cattails.

Finally, she could get him the proper help.

“What’s he like, your brother?” West inquired as they passed through the nearly empty rooms of the tavern above ground. “I suppose it might be good to learn a thing or two about the two wards I’ll be taking under my wing.”

“He used to love swimming, and flowers. Every summer, on the few days that he felt good enough to be able to walk steadily outside, we’d go down to the riverbank and spend the entire day in the water. He loves the colourful fish that joined us, and the way the sun sparkled on the surface.” She told him everything regarding Cobalt, down to the way he looked when he first came out of their mother. The way that her heart felt as though it would burst when she held him for the first time.

“You must really love him.” He commented, sounding sorrowful for some reason. “To be doing everything you’ve already done in his stead. To risk everything for a fighting chance in the Blades.”

Even his features formed into dripping melancholy and she wanted to do nothing more than make them return to the glowing man she’d begun to know.

“I do.” She said without even thinking about hesitating, “He’s my entire world, and I would do whatever it takes to protect that. It’s only been him and I for eight years, and I’m not sure what I would do if I ever lost him. He’s a fighter, you see.”

West grinned, “Just like his sister, it seems.”

A staining heat rose to her cheeks.

They began the upward climb to the Spinning Compass as buildings began to dull their candles and put out their scone light for the evening. There was barely chatter in the streets as they continued. The shoppes were closing, with their patrons exiting



after making last minute purchases, sipping on final drinks and shoving the last morsel of food into their gullet before heading out.

Crimson avoided looking at him, at hating him for growing up in the palace. He wasn't to blame for enjoying a life of ease, a life that allowed him to afford all the pleasures in the world. "Someone had to fight for us. No one did. I picked up that mantle as soon as he became my responsibility and I've been fighting for us ever since."

"I can only imagine how lonely it must be." West untucked his doublet, fingering the buttons until they broke apart and his coat swung open. A tan shirt lay underneath, with a low neck that she told herself not to look at.

"Not really. We have each other, you see." Crimson insisted.

It hadn't ever been lonely, except perhaps in the beginning of it all. When she'd awoken to Heartache packing a bag, her mother's corpse not even buried a day before. Connor, that was the name he went by with them. The one that her mother loved to say and the one that belonged to the man that her mother loved eternally. The one that felt like it broke Crimson's heart when he left, abandoning them to their own sake.

She'd fallen ill for a couple weeks after he'd left, sobbing relentlessly in the bed until the sheets became a puddle from her sorrow. Her chest had burned something fierce and it nearly swept over her like the skeletal hand of death. Crimson thought she had been dying, and if it hadn't been for her newborn brother, she might have. His cries woke her from that state of despair, forcing her to look after him, take care of herself so that he wouldn't be alone in the world.

So she'd mustered her heartbreak into anger.

And it fueled her to live, to fight for them both.

She hated Connor, Heartache, for leaving them.

There were many things she'd never understood about the male who created her, but why he left his precious knives behind was one of the ones that intrigued her the most. It wasn't like that was his talisman, the one that could control him. It couldn't have been, because for the next month and a half, Crimson pulled them out and begged for him to come back home. Her tears dripped into their smoky metal as she commanded him to return, her fury poured into the handles as she yelled at him to find them.

He never did.

And he never came back.

"I knew your father." West said out of the blue. "And I find it very hard to believe that he wouldn't have a solid reason for leaving you in the first place. I'm not excusing his rash behaviour of course, considering how young your brother was and the fact that your mother perished, but I think there may be more to that story than what's on the surface."

"For my brother's sake, I hope so." She almost hissed, as if her fury at him would burn right through her.

"Not for your own?" He asked.

She stopped walking. "No. I will never forgive him for leaving us. There were so many other options that he could have pursued, but abandoning us without a single word, reason or excuse was not the right way to do whatever it was that made him feel as though he had to leave us in the first place."

“Understood.” He paused before the Spinning Compass and reached into his pants pocket, withdrawing the keys on a metal hoop. “But we don’t need to discuss it anymore if you don’t want to.”

Crimson made a disgruntled noise. “It’s not a hard thing to talk about, it’s just pointless. He’ll never come back, nor do I expect him to. If he did, why wouldn’t he have already come?”

“Unfortunately, that’s not something that I can give you the answer to.” West found the correct key before entering it into the keyhole and turning until a soft click sounded and the door swung open. He pushed it forward for her and she ducked under his arm and shut it behind them.

“We’re on the second floor.” She mumbled under her breath. This entire thing felt oddly intimate, as she let a complete stranger into her life.

“I know.” The barest of smiles from him slipped out as he tucked the keys away once more. “Record books, and all that.”

She’d never once had any sort of romantic partner before in her life, not one this involved anyways. Not one that she shared personal details with and invited into her home. Not one that invited her to stay with him, all the while tending to her brother. There’d always been that potential with Fitz, but he’d died before anything could have awoken from that besides flitting feelings.

Not to mention, the man that she led up the stairs wasn’t a man at all, but a Saint. It was a similar sensation to have a freaking god at one’s heels, following around and tenderly taking care of one.

It was strange, and slightly intimidating.

And intoxicating.

“Here.” She showed him their apartment and he unlocked the door again with his ring of keys, pushing open to peer inside. He stepped into the tiny kitchen space, taking in the entire room with one fell sweep of his head .

“Crimson? Is that you?” A boy’s voice called out.

“It’s me, Blue.” She let out a sigh of relief that he was still alive. West seemed to take note of it. “I’ve brought someone that can help you.”

“You’re all the help I need.” Cobalt responded, shifting over in the cot. “We don’t need anyone else. We’ve never needed anyone else.”

West’s handsome features fell into a painting of sadness, mixed with sorrow and a dash of rage that all mixed into one. His jaw flexed, as if he held something else back, something itching at the surface of his skin. His hand curled inwards, muscles jumping at his white knuckles.

“I know.” Crimson found him, checking his pulse and running a hand over his forehead, looking for any sign of a fever. It was warm, but not overly so. “But he has access to supplies that we can’t afford. We’re going to go with him now, okay?”

He peered up at her with concern. “Are you coming too?”

“I wouldn’t dream of separating the two of you.” West swiftly answered for her. “You’ll be taken care of, as will she. I promise that neither of you will want for nothing ever again.”

Her heart leapt into her chest at his sincere vow, the way he smiled down at her brother. Her breathing steadied out to a strange pace, one that she’d never felt before

as her lungs constricted and her head spun like thread on a loom.

“Thank you.” She whispered up at him from her place on the bed.

He nodded as if what he offered her was nothing and knelt before Cobalt. “Hello, Cobalt. I’m West. Like a compass direction.” He took her brother’s hand in his and shook gently. “You’re going to come live at the palace with us now, alright?”

“You’re tall.” Cobalt giggled. “Crimson’s almost the same level as you.” His arms came up as he pretended to measure, squinting to gain a better view.

“I am, and she is.” His teeth peeked out from his lip. He swivelled his chin in her direction, addressing her. “Go pack whatever you wish to take with you. I won’t rent this room out to anyone else, but it’ll be a while before you can come back here. I’ll look after him until you’re done.”

She pushed off the bed and found another knapsack along the kitchen wall. Her hands trembled as she began to shove items into it, things they wouldn’t be able to live without. Clothes for both of them, mostly. A few books that she couldn’t live without, as books seemed to be her only saving grace in this terrible world full of miserable things and horrible people.

When she came back into the main room, her bag with Red Lyric’s items slung over one shoulder, and the other knapsack on her right, she stopped before West. He held Cobalt in his arms, carried like a babe fresh out of the womb. A blanket was wrapped around his frail body, keeping the chill of the night away.

“There’s one condition I need to make you aware of before you agree to coming with me.” He informed her slowly, as if he was unsure of her reaction. “I had to inform Altivar about our arrangement. Not all the details, but that you would be moving into the palace with me. I didn’t want him to stumble upon you and become the stupid

twat I know him to be.”

“Stupid twat?” She raised an eyebrow.

His face almost became crimson, something that made him appear like a flustered mortal man. “He- He won’t try to make a move on you if he thinks that you belong to someone else. So I told him that you and I, were... romantically involved.”

Honestly, it was a passable excuse.

Especially when he looked like that .

West was the sort of beauty found in the rarest of gems, the most clear of waterfalls and the ineffable stars in the night sky. He was alluring in the way that one always wanted to look into the sun, even if it might blind them in the end. She could easily see herself falling for him, madly, deeply, eternally.

She might already be falling for him.

“I see.” Crimson pressed out. “Did he buy it?”

“A little too easily, in my opinion.” West abashedly admitted. “But that’s a good thing. It means that he hopefully won’t try to pry any further. But he is the Prince. Which means that people report to him, regardless of location in the castle.”

She thought she understood where he was going with this. “You want me to pretend that we’re together, whenever we’re seen together in public.”

“I do. I promise that I’ll never bring anyone back to our room, and if it’s such a desperate, primal need that I can’t seem to help myself, then I’ll stay in one of my rooms here for the night. Keep it out of the palace and anyone who could possibly

report back to him.” He hoisted Cobalt even closer, not seeming as if his weight bothered him at all. “But I rarely take someone to my bed, so it shouldn’t be an issue.”

She didn’t want to let her mind even venture in the direction of imagining West in bed. Or the things he would undoubtedly do to whomever joined him. It was a treacherous path that would only cause her to spiral. If she found herself falling in that direction, then it would be a hard recovery to bring her back into the real world and not the one of her daydreams. Sometimes she feared falling, because there had never been anyone to catch her before.

Instead of letting herself fall like that, Crimson dared to ask, “Is Prince Altivar really that dangerous of a person?”

West looked her dead on, unflinching and unfaltering in his gaze. An unregistered shiver went down her spine, and not in a good way.

He was low, warning as he said, “Altivar is one of the most dangerous people I’ve ever had the misfortune of crossing paths with.”

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 8:04 am*

Crimson wasn't sure what she thought the castle would be like, but it most certainly wasn't this. The ivory towers that turned into dome peaks, covered in gold, silver and bronze. It was stunning, an absolute work of art. There were no other words to describe it as West carried Cobalt through the halls. He pointed out certain areas to her, including the Empress's chambers and his co captain, who mostly occupied the Empress's chambers.

Osira Talon was a lover of all things beauty.

Sex, included.

There was no one that she wouldn't have in her bed if she found them beautiful. Currently, it was Satori Marx, a buff female that held no fear when it came to strategic battle plans for an Empire that hadn't seen war in centuries. Most nights, they were tangled together in her rooms, instead of in their own.

West was quiet for most of their walk through the castle and in the absence of speech, she took everything in. It was all so colourful, vibrant, alive. There were woven tapestries depicting all of the Saints hung on the walls, carpets with garden scenes unfolding on them laid about everywhere, and glass creations with flowers all over. There wasn't a single drab inch to be found in the array of light and life.

Crimson loved it all, as much as she could love anything.

He turned down a corridor and she had to run to catch up after staring too long over the second floor that overlooked a courtyard. The floors were even painted, a wonderful display of all the Saints together.



She found him.

But he was easy to find, because even in a group of radiant immortals, he stood out. He always would. There, in the back left corner, he stood behind them all. Muse and Dream took the front center, on display for all to see in lavish gowns of seafoam and lavender. They were the exact opposite of each other, in perfect reflection.

Muse, with her slightly darker than West's skin, and her golden hair that pooled at her feet. Her eyes were painted in an almost exact same shade, save for the hints of brown that stuck out every now and then. Dream was made of silver and aquamarine, and nothing but that. Her hair was nearly as long as Muse's, if not a few inches shorter. Her eyes were molten steel, and her skin was that of the moon.

Imp was next, followed by Grimm on the right side. Grimm with his shoulder length blonde hair and tanned skin that suggested a life spent outdoors. A healthy glow, not a burnt one. But Imp was the darkest of them all, with curled brown hair that rounded their ears. Their face was painted half white and half black, a frown and a smile shown on either side. Green eyes that seemed to glow with madness, even within the painting.

Then she saw Heartache .

Exactly as she remembered him.

With her same shade of hair, down to the colour and broken glass eyes that represented heartbreak and heart power all in one. He was both sides, the good and bad of the world's strongest emotions. His scarlet clothes were tattered at the edges, suggesting that he could always become unravelled at the fastest second. He was breathtaking, as she always remembered him being.

But none of them could compare to him.

To West.

Because he wore a simple navy tunic, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and there on his right arm, was a tattoo of constellations. Many of them, all woven into an intricate pattern of golden ink that wrapped from his wrist to his shoulder, she assumed. He was stunning, alluring in the way that the others tried too hard to appear as.

It took more than she expected to pull away from his piercing gaze of sapphire and stars, to catch back up with his physical form instead of getting lost in the painted portrait of them all.

West motioned for her to open the doors in front of him and she did, allowing him to pass through without a single word as he tenderly carried Cobalt's wrapped form through. There was no sign of his strength tiring, or any formal complaint regarding her brother's weight. He set him down gently upon the first of the many rows of cots, all empty save for two at the very end.

"Leysa, are you here?" He called into the room, untucking the blanket and adjusting the pillow so that her brother would rest more comfortably. "I have need of your skills!"

"Westley?" A feminine voice sang out from around the screen. "Is that you?"

"It is." He confirmed and draped the blanket over the metal bed frame at the end. "I have someone for you to grace with your healing skills, unparalleled to anyone else's."

"I'll be with you in just a moment!"

Crimson remained quiet as a woman stepped out from the wall, a few bottles in her arms. She wasn't as tall as Crimson was, but almost the same height. Her hair was

spun into a bun at the nape of her neck and her eyes appeared to switch between grey and black, darker than any other shade she'd ever seen before.

Leysa laid them out on a close-by table, wiping her hands on her white smock before heading for them and adjusting the spectacles perched on her nose. A chain connected to them, wrapping around her neck for close proximity.

"Now, who do we have here?" She asked as she examined Cobalt with an intense gaze that could only belong to a medicinal professional. "Hello, little one."

"Hi." He said meekly, diving under the layers.

"This is Cobalt Bard." West introduced her brother to the woman with a smooth voice that was like melting chocolate. "He's the brother of my... partner, and he requires the utmost discrepancy with the most care you're able to provide."

"Partner?" Leysa looked up at her, and Crimson felt the wave of heat wash over her once again. It ran along her shoulders, washed over her stomach and tingled in the tips of her toes.

"A recent development, I assure you." He looked as though he almost rolled his eyes at her expression and sudden interest. "If it had happened sooner, you would have been told sooner."

"I just never would have guessed that you'd be the sort to bring a girl back with you." She continued to study Cobalt, checking his temperature, pulling back his lip to see the colour of his gums and observing his eyes. "Must be serious then."

"I care for her, so I care for the wellbeing of her sibling. Do whatever it takes to make sure he lives, and if possible, heals completely." The lie rolled off his tongue too easily, but she couldn't focus on it. All she could think about was the idea of Cobalt

never returning to this ill state ever again.

“Would that be possible?” She dared to hope, to imagine, to dream of a world where he wouldn’t be confined to the cot, stuck between layers of blankets and subjected to his hacking coughs. “For him to get better?”

“Everything is a possibility here. We’ll see what we can do.” Leysa finished her assessment of him and stood. “For now, he needs rest. I’ll start administering various medicinal herbs and concentrated concoctions in the morning. You did a good job, for bringing him here, West. I’m not entirely sure how much longer he would have lasted without the proper care and attention.”

Her heart became a stone in her pocket as she sank to the bottom floor of the river.

“There’s only so much that people below the Bronze Gate can do, regarding health concerns, Leysa.” West sharply uttered under his breath. “She did the best she could with what she had.”

It was almost a compliment from him.

“Oh, I would agree. She kept him alive far longer than I would have predicted someone in his predicament would have lasted. Good job to you as well, my dear.” The healer turned her attention to Crimson. “I’m not sure what you did, but you saved him from an early grave.”

“Just save him, please.” Crimson almost begged the woman. She would have fallen to her knees, if that was what it would take. “Whatever you can do.”

Her tone was grim. “I’ll do my best.”

With one last, swift kiss to his damp forehead, Crimson left her brother in the healing

ward. She whispered a farewell in his ear with a promise to visit him every day. He gripped her fingers once in his tiny hands before letting her go and falling into a deep slumber with the help of a lavender tincture.

West guided her to his room.

Their room.

“Here’s where you’ll be staying. I hope it’ll suffice.” He shoved his hands in his pockets, as if there was a flame of embarrassment that licked him raw. Even his copper skin seemed to hold a red hue to it as she took her surroundings in.

It was huge, at least compared to the two room apartment that she and Cobalt shared at the Spinning Compass. There were four rooms that she could see, with the potential for a fifth in a hidden curve towards the left.

She gaped at the amount of space that lay before her. “This is one of your rooms? What does the other one look like, if you consider this to be small?”

Crimson threw her bags aside at the sight of the bed that was twice the size of the one that she and Cobalt slept in together. Her mouth fell open even more, if that was possible and she ran towards it, tossing herself into the mountain of cushions and pillows.

They caught her and it was like sinking into a cloud. She let out a girlish laugh, glee sparkling over her skin like a tickling blade of grass. Clouds, she was floating on actual clouds. She never wanted to leave the bed again, to do anything other than rest and sleep and feel as comfortable as this.

“I told you that you wouldn’t notice us sharing a bed.” He chuckled at her joy, unbuckling the sword at his side and setting it by the door. “Welcome to my humble

abode, one of two.”

“This is paradise.” Crimson sighed in delight as she sank even further into the mattress, feeling as if it were made of nothing but air. She knew it was feathers, but they were the softest feathers she’d ever felt. “How would you ever want to leave these rooms?”

“Because I have something called duties to attend to.” He began to list them off on his fingers. “Making sure that the Empress has everything she needs to rule over Tazali, watching over his royal smugness, helping to train new guards for the Watch as well as running it.”

She pulled her head up to look at him.

“As well as looking after you and your brother now.” He sheepishly added, rubbing at the back of his neck and looking anywhere but at her. “But they’re all tasks that I’m happy to take on.”

She noticed his right arm.

When he shrugged off his doublet, she didn’t know.

“Where are your tattoos?” Crimson pushed out of her lying position, shoving her feet towards the end of the bed.

“How did you know about that?” West interrogated as he ran a hand through his umber hair.

“The painting in the courtyard. You have them in it.” She gestured towards his right arm as he approached her and took a seat on the side. “As well as one of the hanging tapestries.”

West twisted his arm, pushing the fabric up to observe his own flesh as if he had never seen it before. “Dream set a glamour on us when we first came down to play alongside the mortals, so that we would appear like one of them. It’s probably one of the most obvious parts about me that would give away who I was, so she hid them as well.”

Crimson rose to her knees, trying to find any semblance of the tattoo, or the magic that wrapped around it to keep it hidden. She found nothing. “What else did she hide?”

“You’re full of questions, aren’t you?.” He lowered his head to hide his boyish smile. “She dulled the immortal glow of my eyes, and the way my skin shimmered beforehand. As well as a couple other things, but you get the gist.”

Crimson ran her eyes up and down his face, taking in all of his features. There was a temptation to cup his cheeks to study him even further, but she resisted. “I suppose you could pass for a human. But your eyes give you away. Even if she added something to make them appear less special, they still do.”

His mouth turned upwards and he fought a flush.

“I guess it’s hard to hide all the signs of immortality, even with a glamour settled over us all.”

He rose from his position on the bed and made his way towards an additional room. “The bathing room is here for when you need to relieve yourself or wash up. There’s a study one over, but it’s mostly for my duties and tasks as captain of the Watch. In the morning, I’ll show you the library.”

“Whatever for?” Crimson questioned as she tugged her boots off her feet and set them aside.

“Altivar wants to find Red Lyric because he knows that your father is Heartache. He wants to find Heartache.” West explained as he rested against the doorframe. “I don’t plan on letting him find him. But I figured that someone has to locate him. So why not you?”

“You want me to find my father.” She breathed out.

He nodded. “More than anything in the world, Heartstrings. We’re going to find Heartache and discover why Altivar seeks him.”



West didn't come to bed that night.

She knew because the bed didn't dip with additional weight at any point in the night, nor did the soft snoring of a male body come from the left side of the bed. Where he went instead, she had no clue. Nor did she inquire about it since he told her from the start that he didn't spend most nights in the additional rooms in the palace.

But there was a bedside tray on the nightstand closest to her with all the food she could eat for an entire week. He didn't leave a note, nor did she ever think him the sort to do so. A chilled cup of water with ice, a bowl of steaming porridge which could have only been brought recently considering it was still piping hot, a peach with the sweetest juice that Crimson had ever tasted and a slice of toast with marmalade slathered on it.

She ate it all.

There was no thought to save it for the next week just in case she wasn't able to provide for her and Cobalt, no inside monologue to take it slow. It was a sweet release that she hadn't expected to hit her so hard, and yet it did. Her waterlines burned and her nose became sniffing, her throat clogged with emotion.

When she wiped the crumbs from her hand and cleaned her mouth with the cloth napkin added to the tray, she found her satchel still by the door. It hadn't been unpacked so it was easy for her to pull out the trousers and tunic, slipping them on in a matter of minutes before West could walk in on her mid-change. His side of the bed was perfectly made, as if it had been untouched since the moment she stepped foot into his chambers inside the palace.

Crimson buckled her boots on, and as she rose to her sitting position, she contemplated what to do with her fighting gear. It wouldn't be the worst idea to keep a weapon of sorts on her at all times, considering she was currently in one of the most dangerous places in Tazali, according to West. With some of the most dangerous people, too. But her long knives would be recognized by anyone who'd made it down to the Pits and seen Red Lyric fight.

They weren't an option to carry around with her.

Maybe whenever she bumped into West next, she could ask him for another blade to keep in her boot, or at her hip. She didn't see any reason why he would refuse her.

She stood to her full height and grabbed her second bag, checking to make sure everything was still inside of it. When she was satisfied that nothing was missing from their long walk up from the Bronze Gate to the castle, she began to search around his chambers for a safe place to store it. Anyone could just walk in and see the items laying about, so it was better for all their sakes to hide them. At least for now. Perhaps later, when she was settled into this life and there was no need for the secure backup identity of Lyric, she would burn the clothes .

The knives would be something else entirely.

She wasn't sure that she could ever rid herself of them. They were the only pieces of her father that she had left, even if she despised him. For Cobalt, she held onto them. Then it became for herself, for Red Lyric. Maybe there was a deeper part of herself tethered to the idea of her father, not the realistic image of the one she'd been given.

It was a matter for later, not now.

Crimson took in her new surroundings, gazing up at the sapphire ceiling with golden trim, the yellow curtains that fell against the double paned window. There were

diamond shapes pressed into it, creating an illusion of clear crystal. She could make out another courtyard as she peered out of it, a fighting arena but not for bloody competition that ended in carnage or coins.

A training area, instead.

There were four men in the middle of it currently, and she would recognize his head of hair anywhere.

Not to mention his golden brown skin.

But she paused as she went to turn away from it, realising that there was far more than just his forearms on display.

Oh, Saints be damned.

Her lips parted as she took him and all his glory in. He was shirtless, with low hung leather pants that fit perfectly around his trimmed waist. She wasn't that far up, so she could see everything she needed to see as she watched their bout. He was fighting with no weapons, fist to fist with another tall male that had black hair.

They circled each other and she felt drawn in as West faced her side of the building. That was even better for her, because now she could see everything.

The captain was gloriously built, and for a second she understood why he of all people, was considered a god. She hadn't met any other than Heartache and Warrior, but neither one of them seemed to glow like he did. Though, considering he was an actual star, there was a difference to be accounted for. The sun was on his side, casting him in pale rays of light as they punched and pummelled, dodged and drifted apart. They swung and swiped, missing and hitting.

Crimson found that she could be comfortably entertained for hours, just observing from afar like this.

With that thought in mind, she told herself to stop gawking at the man who saved her and Cobalt's life, pulling away at last as she tried to find some respect for him. She wouldn't very well like it if he was spying on her while she was partially undressed.

Actually, she might.

Crimson mentally chided herself for thinking that lustful way, and pushed herself to continue her search for a decent hiding spot. There were four rooms total, even if her imagination originally told her there were five. Her mind could be overactive, and then some most days.

Daydreams were a common occurrence for her.

The first room was the one they entered into originally, a small office with his items neatly organised along the shelves that began three-fourths up on the wall. His desk was massive, mahogany by the rich red-brown of it. A black chair sat behind it, with a fat back and amber legs that curled into themselves. There were a couple leather bound books on the surface, glass pens stacked in a canister and around six drawers carved into the thing.

A rug of constellations sat underneath, detailed down to the names of the star patterns accordingly with each one. There was a bookshelf near the door, filled to the brim with books on each row. West had more books than she'd ever seen in her entire life. Ones that she would no doubt peruse in the endless hours that she'd remain here for.

The second room was the bedroom, just through an archway. No door closed off any of his rooms, and she supposed he didn't have use for it when this entire section was a blocked off apartment for him. His bed was in the center, with another rug under it.

This one held the moon in different phases, all along the navy fabric in silver. His bed was blue as well. There was a platform that it was set upon, raising it off the floor a good foot or two. The grey back came up high, curling backwards in a grey pleated board.

A dresser faced it, on the wall shared with the office. Six drawers again, with a thin closet nearby that opened towards her. She rummaged through the drawers for a good place to stash her satchel, finding the top two empty. But Crimson ultimately found it too obvious to be secure.

Then there was the bathing chamber, with a strange glass square that cut off a corner. There were silver pipes that ran all inside of it, and a handle that turned upwards. Red and blue lines had been painted on either side of it, indicating a temperature, she guessed. She'd have to ask him about that particular device later.

There was no tub, but there was a wash basin that dipped low in the ivory counter and an oval mirror hung just above it. A porcelain toilet was cleverly hidden in the corner too.

The final room seemed to be a parlour of sorts.

With a large couch against the last wall, another window behind it and cream curtains this time. There was a table before it and a tall glass lamp beside it. A couple of paintings hung on the wall, and she found herself staring at his.

It made him look regal, like a King almost.

He was stoic in it, his tall back straight. He wore his captain's uniform with the star patches on both shoulders, as well as the charcoal trousers she'd only ever seen him wear. His brown hair was almost black, but it was slicked back in a royal fashion that suited him well.

The painting was incredible.

Whoever had done it was a master at capturing him, down to his likeness. Save for one thing, his eyes. Crimson didn't think anyone would be able to capture the churning sky he held in his gaze, but it was still him. She rotated away from it and made for the office once more. The drawers couldn't all be full, if his dresser was any indication.

Crimson yanked at the top two, to her dismay finding them locked. The bottom three were occupied by books and papers and other supplies, but the last one seemed to hold nothing of importance inside it so she tossed her bag within and shut it.

It would do, for now.

A spider tapped its long legs in the far corner of the office, spinning a web of silk and gossamer as it observed her. She did her best to ignore the multi-legged creature, shuddering at the sight of it.

Boredom found her quite quickly as the hour passed. There wasn't much to do in his rooms, and he had said something about a library before she fell asleep. That would saite her curious mind, well enough. With a quick glance out his office window, seeing if he was still in the courtyard with the other men. As he was, she snuck out of his apartment.

The door shut quietly behind her.

There was an entirely new world before her.

There were multiple versions of life that buzzed beautifully around the palace, the way that servants rushed by with hands full of flowers or baked goods, others with brooms and feather dusters. Soldiers dressed in crimson and black rotated past her on

the way to their daily duties and finely dressed courtiers became a swarm of people. She swung past them all, avoiding becoming a hallway block as she made it to the other side, racing down the hallway. Golden railings came up on either side of the courtyard where the painting of the Saints remained, decorated with flowers of all sorts. Calla lilies and cattails along with hyacinths and orchids were all wonderfully carved into them.

This place was like a storybook coming to life.

Crimson had to remind herself to keep her mouth shut because it kept trying to fall open as she explored as much of the castle as she could without diving into trouble. No one seemed to notice her, nor comment that she was out of place here. But she wasn't. Even some of the other girls bore hair shades similar to her own, if not more vibrant.

She loved it all.

It was all so different from her life in the slums, where brown and grey and black were the colours, with a splash of red that represented death. This was rich, alive, mesmerising. She couldn't take her eyes off of it all. Or know where to focus them either.

"Excuse me," Crimson found a stationary guard with a spear in his hand. "Would you be so kind as to point me towards the library?"

"Down the corridor, to your left." He gestured her in the correct direction.

She thanked him and followed his instructions, stopping before two doors. If she thought the amount of novels in West's chambers were massive, it was nothing compared to what awaited her when she flung open the doors and stepped inside the library.

Everywhere.

There were books, everywhere.

Which she should have expected, as this was a library. But this was a proper library, not the tiny one below the Bronze Gate that was a single room of literature. She was always welcomed to borrow them as long as she returned them, and Crimson had read every book the man who ran the shoppe had to offer her.

She wouldn't be able to get through this in her lifespan, even if it was prolonged.

Here would be a good place to start searching for Heartache. To see if she could find any paragraphs that contained information about his whereabouts, or where he might have gone. The Saints had been around for centuries, there had to be research available to her here of all places.

If there wasn't, then there wouldn't be anywhere.

Crimson began at the first shelf, scanning the spines for any bit of the title that could indicate the topic of Saints. The first three shelves held nothing but books regarding food and recipes. The fourth and fifth were about gardening and florals, and the sixth held information about animals.

It took her two full hours before she even found things within the realm of possibility regarding Saints and their immortal habits. Within the very back corner of the room, there was a dusty shelf that looked as though no one had ever touched it. Each tome was covered in a thin layer of dust particles which led her to cough as she started to pull them out, one by one.

Still, she found nothing.



These were all fairytales, legends, myths. They didn't contain anything actually real concerning the Saints. Not even the name of a single one. Then she spotted a rather fat book, at the very end of the shelf. One that held the word Saints in the title.

Crimson pulled it out with a grunt as the weight slammed into her. There was a podium nearby for reading, and she angled the massive thing towards it. When she set it down, a plume of dust followed. She swatted her hand back and forth to clear the air before grabbing the cover and splitting the book in half.

The Six Saints of Hisaith

By Rapsallion Voss

Sixteen

Crimson let her hands run over the time-bitten pages, moths feasting with delight over the ink and parchment that lay open before her. She saw the imaginations that were painstakingly detailed, drawn with the idea of what each of the Saints looked like.

There were six total.

The first image was of a woman more lovely than any other before her, clearly a deity with floor-length hair that pooled around her feet in yards of the whitest silver to have ever existed. Her skin gleamed like the moon with pale spots of grey that appeared where a red blush would normally arise. She was draped in nothing more than an ivory bolt of fabric, thrown across her shoulder with a grey belt made of the several moon phases.

The Dreamer.

Said to represent the line between life and death, the space where all mortals went at night when they experienced a tiny bit of death, when their life floated away in the darkness. She bore the most amount of curves compared to the other Saints, stunning in every way. There was a faint paragraph under it that held a sketching of a six-pointed star, a moon trapped within the clear crystal.

Each of the Saints had a magical artefact that allowed them to be summoned whenever their relic was touched in just the right way. The crystal star needed to be placed in one's forefinger and thumb, spinning it delicately three times and thinking

of their last dream as an offering.

The Dreamer roamed through the blank minds, sprinkling sparkling sands of shimmering visions for those who could not find slumber or dreams. The one that West claimed turned his glory down to an imaginable mortality.

She turned the page to see a familiar face.

Grimm.

Also known as the Warrior, with his infernal strength and rippling muscles that seemed to never end. The image depicted by his drawing barely did anything to cover the indecent parts. He wore chestnut leather that fitted over him like a vest and ran down into a pleated skirt of sorts. Thick hair covered the upper portion of his chest, curling and it made her shudder. Sandals rose to his huge calves. He bore a helmet under his left arm and a short sword in his right. His eyes were red, bloodshot instead of the brown hue they appeared in his mortal form. The description under the image read as such,

The Warrior is known for his brute strength and inconceivable bloodlust. With the rage of every mortal man who thirsts for something more, he carries the weight of war on his shoulders. The Warrior's token is his helmet, seen above. In order to summon him, one must prick their finger and let the blood spill onto the metal.

The Muse followed after the short shiver that ran down her spine at the godlike form of the description of the Warrior.

The Muse was said to have straight golden hair that plummeted to her backside, with a middle part and eyes of strong white that stood out. The illustration had a music note at the corners of Muse's eyes, golden lashes that looked like the cords of a harp. A turquoise dress wrapped around the dark brown skin, leaving the hips bare and

falling just before her anklet clad feet. She wore no shoes but held a harp in her strumming fingers, her item. One had to simply strum the strings of the pocket sized harp and hum their favourite tune to summon her.

There was a paragraph underneath that warned the readers of her piper-like abilities, able to capture men's minds, hearts and souls with a single song. Her music enslaved them if they weren't careful enough to stuff their ears full of cotton before calling upon her.

Crimson flipped the page to see the Imp, who represented the mind, oddly enough. Half of their face was painted to look like they were sane, with a broad smile and rosy cheeks. But the other half held a crazy smirk, green eyes wild. They wore an emerald and violet cap with three points that all ended in shiny bells that matched the ones on their upturned shoes. A skin tight matching suit ran along their body, hands shoved into ruffled gloves that held strings over humans.

They loved to whisper mad little nothings into people's minds as soon as they found their wand, a cap on the end to mirror the one upon their head. They had momentary lapses of judgement, losing to the insane side of their minds with the coaxings of Imp's tongue. A white heart was painted upon their lips.

The next drawing made her heart stutter a little bit at the handsome male she stared down at. The Heartache. His title let on enough, said to be the picture of hearts and love, pain and suffering. Scarlet red hair fell in perfect waves from his head, bronze skin with eyes of the purest blue she had ever seen. He wore no shirt, a large X scar over his heart in black.

Heartache could find one's true love with a flick of their hands or take away the emotions with another. He rarely did the latter, always claiming that it would never be worth it. His grey pants were tattered and yet seemingly in one piece, like the heart itself. Broken time and time again, shattered and stomped, yet able to be put back

together again after every beating.

The last one made her stop, unfamiliar with the blond head of hair that had been illustrated. He had his left arm filled with constellations, golden and silver tattoos that wrapped around his skin. Dark sapphire eyes framed by dark lashes, and a broken compass dangling out of his blue trousers.

The Northern Star.

Crimson pondered over the text below his worn image, finding it fascinating. This looked nothing like the male she knew to be the Northern Star.

The Northern Star. Known for always leading their patron in the truest of norths and most righteous paths. Often said to be the kindest of the Saints, with no tricks or traps up his sleeves.

She paused her reading to look at the black sleeves of his shirt that had been rolled up to his elbows.

One has to spin the compass and find their true north in order to summon the Star, and align their hopes in the purest of directions.

Sounded confusing.

But the Saints always were.

“Imp thought it would be funny to portray him as a glimmering god, a star in every manner of the word.” The Empress mused as she approached Crimson from somewhere between the stacks.

One would be able to tell who this woman was from the moment one laid their eyes

on her. She was stunning, in every definition of the word. Crimson felt as though she should bow or something, but the Saint continued to speak to her as though they were long time friends, instead of a sovereign and one of her mere subjects.

“So in the recorded history of Hisaith, he’s been whitewashed, I suppose you could say.” Osira Talon rolled her glorious eyes.

“But anyone who sees him, can clearly tell who he is.” Crimson protested as she shut the book, dust blooming once more. She holstered the need to cough.

“Not everyone can, surprisingly.” She huffed a light chuckle. “You just happened to see straight into his star-flecked soul. A rare thing indeed.” Osira motioned towards the books. “I’ve been working on correcting that foolish Saint’s tricks. That’s one of the last pieces I need to adjust it. Thank you for pulling it out.”

Crimson wasn’t sure what to say.

“Have you found what you’re looking for?” The Empress asked as she dragged her cream skirts behind her. “North tells me that you’re searching for Heartache.”

So that’s where he’d been for most of the day.

“I am.” She confirmed, feeling safe enough to answer truthfully. “But no, I haven’t.”

“What about seeking out his talisman? If you find that, you could summon him to appear before you. It might take him a few days to appear from wherever he’s hiding out in Hisaith, but it might be worth a shot. ”

“According to the book, no one knows how to use it in order to get him to appear.” She tapped the cover thrice. “What good would it be to obtain it and then have no clue on how to use it?”

“You’d be one step closer to him than before, that’s why.” Osira’s eyes were the colours of lemons in the spring, fresh orange juice and the sun all wrapped up into two beautiful orbs. “But Rapsallion Voss was always a gossipmonger, so don’t believe a word he says regarding the talismans. They’re most likely untrue.” She inched closer, flipping the massive tome open and finding the picture with the terrible rendition of West. “After all, he published this ridiculous novel without checking his sources. Perhaps if he had, North would be more accurately drawn.”

She stroked her pointer finger down the drawing, tracing all the wrong angles fondly. Not in the way a lover might tend to their partner, but in a way that family did. A true family, which is what Crimson supposed they were. For those that liked each other, unlike War who remained in his dark hiding pits and Heartache who had yet to be found.

Crimson smiled, a feminine little thing. “Has he seen this picture of himself?”

“I highly doubt it. He doesn’t often find himself here, of all the places to be in the castle.”

“May I borrow this, then?” She timidly asked, trying to quell her hopes for a spot of mischief.

Osira shrugged, waving her hand in the air. “I see no reason why not, as long as you eventually return it.”

“Thank you.” She closed the book and brought it close to her chest, wrapping her arms around it. The thing was ginormous, even for a history book about the past of Hisaith.

“It’s Crimson, correct?” The Empress suddenly interrogated out of nowhere .

“It is, your Majesty.”

“Oh, none of that.” Osira scoffed with an air of disdain. “I hate that level of praise and sticking noses up where they don’t belong. I’m sure our darling Saint has told you who I am, as he’s informed me of who you are and why you’re really here instead of that poppycock excuse he’s telling others. Muse or Osira will work just fine.”

He hadn’t told her anything regarding another Saint in the palace, but the book made it clear enough who she was.

“Alright.” She avoided the urge to bow or curtsy before the woman in some sign of respect.

“I hope to see you at the ball in a week’s time. It will be an event not to miss. I think some revelry will do you some good, after so long below the Bronze Gate.”

“I’ll try to be there.”

The Empress placed both hands on her hips, glaring at her with a gaze that almost felt intrusive, if it hadn’t been for the soft bit around the edges that reminded Crimson of a mother’s love. “See to it that you are. Even if that means I have to coerce the captain into bringing you along as his date, I’ll make sure that you enjoy the evening.”

“I don’t think he’d enjoy being told what to do very much.” She winced at the thought of Osira shoving a stiff-backed West into the hall and urging him to dance.

“Which is precisely why someone needs to. If it won’t be you, dear Crimson, then it’ll have to be me. That Saint has refrained from living for far too long. It’s time he sampled life and the wonders it offers us all, even if we may live forever.”



“Why?” She asked.

Osira didn't need any further explanation, she understood the one worded question well enough. “Because for people like us, who have eternity and beyond, he feels as though there is no point to it all. To experience and love and laugh, only for it to be taken away in a matter of years, decades, centuries.”

Crimson chewed on the inside of her lip. “But that's a terrible way to look at life. ”

“Exactly.” She agreed, a little melancholic melody that waved in musical ways, clear in her lilting voice. “Which is why I think this little living experiment might be good for him. He already seems to care a great deal for you and your brother, even if he's only known you a short while. A word of advice, Crimson. North doesn't easily attach himself to anything or anyone. I've never seen him latch onto anything or anyone before.”

It almost sounded like a warning, more so than a piece of advice. Even in Muse's tone that reminded Crimson of a breathy flute.

“If you don't plan on sticking around for the long run, then don't bother getting to know him at all. If you leave, it won't be easy for him.”

“He's saving Cobalt's life.” Crimson declared. “I owe him mine in return. I'm not going anywhere.”

“Good.” Osira said softly. “But it might be a hard road ahead, if you plan on getting him to open up.”

Neither one of them seemed to notice the fly that buzzed in the air, right above them as it overheard every single thing.

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 8:04 am*

Two days came and went, and still West left her on her own. He didn't return to the apartments, nor sleep in the bed. Crimson visited her brother on the second morning, to check in and make sure he was doing alright with the transition into the palace. Cobalt was fast asleep when she came across him but Leysa assured her that he was more than fine. She took a small sample of his blood with a thin needle that left a tiny, practically invisible scab and explained all of the various methods she was using to figure out what illness kept him in his cruel clutches.

Crimson understood about half of it all.

There was still much of the castle left to explore, which is what she did. There wasn't much else to do, other than wait for West so that she could show him the image in the book, and ask his opinion on Osira's advice. His portrait kept her company, even if it wasn't as warm as he truly was. She didn't miss him, because she didn't know him, but there was a part of her that ached to see him .

She'd never been lonely before, but she was now.

The absence of her brother lingered around her like a haunting ghost, even if she was able to see him whenever she wanted to. But the large bed, without a second figure to curl up against in the late hours of the night, was the worst part of it.

The instigator of her isolation.

When Crimson turned down the first floor to see what she could find there, she ran into a familiar figure.

Prince Altivar Talon.

It was only a matter of time before she came face to face with him. Now or never, she supposed.

There was a different appearance he held here instead of the one he wore well in the Pits. But she supposed that all had different identities when it came to their second life revolving around the Blades of Blood. A chance to play someone else for a day or two, to leave their troubles and worries behind.

Altivar scanned her up and down, backing up a couple of steps to get a better look before a smile broke out on his face. “Well, hello there.”

His long brown hair was in a high ponytail at the top of his head, and his skin glowed with what seemed to be a pearl powder. He looked like his mother, even if slightly more masculine. He was dressed in a chiffon robe that fluttered with the breeze, draped over his shoulders in a garnet shade. Golden suns covered it, shimmering whenever he shifted. His fawn trousers came to his high waist, but he wore no shirt.

“Hello.” Crimson said warily.

West had warned her about him. And if West thought that the Prince was one of the most dangerous people to ever be known, then she wasn’t going to take his cautious statement lightly.

Altivar slunk around her, circling her like she were some sort of prey for a hunting game he’d cleverly concocted. “I was wondering when we’d eventually meet.”

“And now we have.” She went to excuse herself before she could become involved in whatever game he’d surely force her into playing. His long fingers wrapped around her upper arm and dragged her back to him. His nails were coated in a glossy lacquer that held a beige shade. They weren’t sharp, but trimmed enough that she bit back a

wince.

“Not so fast. We’ve only exchanged pleasantries. I want to get to know you better.” Altivar’s voice was like liquid velvet. It was soft and silky with a hint of roughness. “Say you won’t deny me that.”

Crimson held back her barbed retort. He was the heir of the Empire, after all. Even if she didn’t like him, he still deserved that much respect. “What would you like to know?”

“Many things, so might as well make ourselves comfortable.” He chuckled and refused to let her go as he began walking in the opposite direction. The teal sash at his hips swayed with the movement, bronzed bells jingling with each step. “My rooms aren’t far from here.”

“I don’t think that West would like me to be in your rooms, Prince Altivar.” Crimson tried to flick each of his painted fingers off, one by one, but he held on strongly. There were a couple rings adorned on some of them, studded with square sapphires and round rubies.

“Nonsense. He’d want us to be well acquainted.” He waved her off, slinging her around the corner and into a new section of the castle. “Besides, considering this is my home firstly, not his, then I think I should get to know whom I’m living with, don’t you?”

She couldn’t argue with that logic.

It was his home first, then West’s .

West was a guest of the Empress and her son, and she was a guest of West.

Altivar led her like a dog on a leash towards his part of the palace, allowing her to

trail behind as he brought them into his room. She supposed West's chambers would be small compared to this.

He finally let her go when they entered.

It was mostly open, with lots of curved windows that allowed the Prince to see every angle of the grounds if he ever so desired. There were plenty of lounging settees and a massive four poster bed in the second room, against the fattest wall. It was bedecked in gossamer curtains that hung over it, with all manner of creatures sewn into the sheer fabric.

Crimson took in the massive glass tank off to the side of the entrance and shivered as she saw the three scaly bodies that coiled around each other. They were black as pitch, shiny and hissing with forked tongues that flicked in and out with the rattling sounds.

"Do you like them?" He purred in her ear.

"I've never been a fan of snakes." She responded, trying to look anywhere but at them again.

"I suppose most aren't. Fascinating creatures though, snakes. They can shed their skin just like that." He snapped his fingers. "And grow a new one, leaving the old one in the dirt." Altivar strolled over to his curved windows and threw the citrine curtains open, tying them back with a turquoise cord. "How are you finding everything so far? I'm sure it's vastly different from the Bronze Gate dwelling that he found you in."

Crimson brought her gaze back to him. "It's hard to know where to look. There's so much colour here. Everything is beautiful."

"Myself included?" He asked with a hint of a sly smirk. He was baiting for compliments, and they both knew it. But she gave into him, allowing one to slide

across her tongue and over to him in the most simplistic form possible.

A single word.

“Yes.”

He was, but not in the sort that was warm, embracing or alluring. He was the cold kind, like a white winter that never ended. Or the coarse sand that refused to let up in the middle of a treacherous sandstorm.

“You flatter me.” He fanned himself with his hand as he feigned a blush. “But seeing you up close, in far better lighting than those dank, mildew infested Pits, I can most certainly see why our Captain of the Watch took an interest in you. You’re positively radiant. ”

No one ever referred to her like that, not even Fitz when he was alive.

“Tha- thank you.” She stuttered, unused to taking any sort of compliment, let alone one from a Prince. Altivar adjusted and his robe slipped enough that she could make out both of his tattoos. The snake one that she’d seen previously, and a beetle along his opposing shoulder.

He followed her gaze and peered down at it. “Ah, you’ve found my scarab beetle. I find insects to be devious little creatures. They can spy on any conversation, blend into almost any space, fill almost any crack without ever being so much as noticed.”

“Seems... wrong.” Crimson didn’t like the way he grinned at her. “But then again, insects are along the same opinion as snakes for me.”

Altivar let out a judgemental noise, fixing his robe back over his lean shoulder. “How did you and Westley start this whole.... relationship? ” He inquired with an expression that told her it wasn’t for informal conversations, so much as the fact that

this was an interrogation.

Crimson cleared her throat, reciting the lines she had been fed. “At the Pits. He’s the owner of the apartment that my brother and I live in. I didn’t know it until that night, but we got to talking and realised that we held much in common.”

This was the story West asked her to tell, the one that he felt was the most believable for their short period of time to sell it all.

“I see.” He murmured, as if he almost bought it. “It all happened extremely fast. Any explanation for that? Because I’ve never once seen West take a liking to anyone, let alone in a span of days.”

“He’s very attractive. I suppose when he caught me, something sparked between us. Touch is a very important part of finding a connection, after all.”

Not that she would ever forget the way his hands brushed against her. But it wasn’t the first encounter after the tray spilled that ran through her mind. It was the one after, when he’d cornered her in the bathing chamber and pressed against her.

The way her skin flushed and her body heated to an unreasonable degree. The way his breath caressed her neck and made her feel as though something else was about to occur.

“I suppose so.” He came closer to her and dangled his hand along her neck, tracing her collarbones. “I quite like touching, myself.”

She swallowed, trying to squirm out of his grasp. Something caught her eye in the corner of her room and she took the bait, using it as a way to wiggle out of his touch. She jumped off of the couch and made for it.

“What is that? ” Crimson gasped as she knelt before a vial full of ruby liquid. It

almost shimmered as she shifted her head to get a better look at it .

Altivar came over to see what she found so interesting. “That? It’s Heartache’s blood.”

Her stomach churned. “His blood?”

“Mhm hmm.” He hummed. “It’s said to hold immense power. A single drop of it into someone’s drink can make them fall madly in love for the entire evening with the first person they lay their eyes on. Three drops, and it can break the truest of love. But two, two is the sweet spot.”

“What would two drops do?” Crimson couldn’t imagine someone getting their hands on something as powerful as it.

His eyebrows bent forward, his white teeth flashing in delight. “Two drops of Heartache’s blood into your wine, drunk to the very last bit, can make you lust after the person you most desire. Quite strongly too.”

“I see.” She gulped, falling away from the vial.

He seemed to gauge her reaction. “Or so it’s said. I’ve never seen the potion in action.”

“That’s probably a good thing.” Crimson stood up and fixed her copper skirt. “In the wrong hands, that could be dangerous.”

He flipped his palm over, as if he were looking at every marking within his flesh. “Would you consider my hands to be dangerous?”

She studied him from head to toe. He almost seemed to enjoy her intrusive gaze, bask in it even like a striped tiger in the sun. “I don’t know you well enough to make that



call.”

“We must amend that. You’re Captain Westley Saint’s lover after all. And finding how often the dutiful male is by my side, night and day, it only seems fair that you are as well.” He fell back into the rich red couch, draping one arm across the back of it.

“He wouldn’t like that.”

“Wouldn’t like what, you by my side all day? Or getting to know one another on a more intimate level? ”

“Either. Both.” She replied without hesitation.

“Why ever not?” The Prince pretended to pout, pulling his lip into a downward position and rapidly blinking his long lashes in the effect to cause tears. The painted kohl around his eyes seemed to smear with the action.

Crimson struggled to explain without lying to him. “West is... protective. Not in a bad way, just in a way that means he doesn’t like people messing about his personal life. I think it’s best to respect that.”

“You seem to know him far better than most ever have or ever will. Myself, included.” Altivar said with a curious mingle to his glossy voice. “Why is that? Has the private captain finally let someone see into the furthest parts of himself? Has he unwound from his uncaring and cold attitude towards life?”

The words cold and uncaring did not suit West at all. They seemed to fit the male in front of her far better, though. He could play coy all he wanted, act the victim, but she was beginning to see why West didn’t particularly like his wry charge. He was obnoxious, assuming, and annoying.

And those were just the words off the top of her head.

“He’s not that hard to figure out, as long as you know how to read him.” Crimson muttered under her breath. She’d only known him for a week and yet she felt as though he was a lifelong friend.

“And you know how to read him, do you?” He quickly leaned forward until his elbows rested on his knees, legs spread wide.

“Like a Saints-damned book.” She smiled, stealing a swipe of sharpness from her weapons and adding it to her teeth. He appeared to see it, faltering back an inch. “But maybe that’s because like you said, I’m Captain Westley Saint’s lover. ” She threw his own words back at him.

“There you are.” West’s voice found her ears .

Crimson’s cheeks heated to the point of no return, her rolling stomach turned leaden and a biting chill went through her as if someone left a window open in the midst of autumn as he overheard their conversation, her words. Crimson turned to see him standing in the doorway.

“I was looking for you.” His sapphire studded eyes fell on the wayward Prince who merely wiggled his long fingers in greeting. “Why are you in here?”

“Do relax, guard dog. I was simply showing your dazzling partner here around the castle a tad bit more. I found her wandering on her own, you see, and thought she might benefit from the pleasure of my company.” He explained but didn’t rise from his lazy position on the couch. “We were having a lovely conversation about you just now.”

“I heard.” West was short and blunt with him, edging closer to her. His hand braced along her lower back and she had to remind herself not to jump at his sudden

proximity. It was all for show, this game they would play to sell the reason that she was here. “Are you ready to go? I figured we’d visit Cobalt before heading to the room for a meal together.”

His fingers curled around her hip and her heart melted into it, purred like a damned cat at his touch. Altivar honed in on it, a sly grin tugging on his face that made her gut feel ill.

“Cobalt. What a fascinating name.” Altivar murmured as he checked the underside of his nails. They were perfect, of course, but that didn’t stop the Prince from finding something else more interesting than the conversation in front of him. “What’s your last name, Crimson?”

“She doesn’t have one. Most of the folk in the slums don’t have one. Last names aren’t common in the Bronze Gate.” He answered for her, slick and smooth like an ice patch hardening over .

“Is that so?” His stare met hers, not West’s as he awaited an answer.

But the captain still spoke for her. “Yes.”

Crimson dipped her chin in alignment with his response. “Just one name here, Prince Altivar.”

“If you insist.” He seemed to not believe her, focus slitting until they were barely more than a reptile’s. “Can’t wait to see the pair of you at the ball in three days. I do hope you’ll dress for the occasion. It would be rather bland if you showed up in your uniform, Captain.”

“The Empress has already enforced a strict dress code into me. Rest assured that I’ll be properly dressed for it.” West said through gritted teeth.

“Good. Enjoy the rest of your day.”

“Come on, Heartstrings. Let’s go.” He uttered to her, quietly so that only she heard. West pushed her forward, out of the room but didn’t remove his hand from her lower back for the entire way.