

My throat itched.

"Up."

"No."

"Going to make us drag you out of that cell again?"

"Yes."

"That didn't go so well for you last time."

"Then why did you bring four more men?"

Unphased, the captain cracked his knuckles, and his entourage of burly guardsmen limbered up in kind. "We always enjoy these visits with you, traitor."

The pleasure was all mine when my palm caved in his nose. I broke bones in half of his men for good measure, but it wasn't enough. Their clubs came down on me, peppering me with bruises, and before long I was shackled and wrenched upright.

"I'd cut your fucking throat, but you'd probably like it." The captain garbled through a mouthful of blood before driving a fist into my stomach. Spots swam through my vision like sharks, and I retched the meager contents of my stomach. "Shut him up."

I was about to reply when a hood was flung over my head and cinched unbearably tight around me. I struggled, my fervor shifting to panic as my throat tightened, but there was no room to negotiate. I was wrenched from my cell and dragged along at a brisk pace that didn't agree with the chains binding me.

I instinctively tried to count the twists and turns we took, but the hood was paralyzing, and I no longer knew the Brave Halls like I once did. I was still able to hear but there was little to help me reorient myself. The only sound I heard in between my labored breaths was the ticking of clocks, though none tolled the hour. There were no stray voices as we traveled either, soldier or otherwise, and even the shuffling of servants and their chores was absent. Were the Brave Halls empty?

I stumbled on something, or I was tripped. Either way, I pitched forward and my escort let me hit the stone floor, and a boot came down hard on my back. Beyond my veil I heard the hammer of a revolver click into place.

"Let's do it." A raspy voice said, before another kick. "Why keep 'im alive? Send a message to the rest. The war killed my brother and every time they want to see this one they always throw 'im back. I'm sick of it. Do it and make it hurt."

There were grumbles of agreement. I felt the barrel of the gun against the back of my neck.

It was the captain who ironically came to my defence. "Stand down! Dim depths, you brought a gun in there? What if he had disarmed you?"

"He's alive because the master's of the Scholar's League want him to be."

"You still say that, even after what happened? Fucking coward." A gob of spit hit the back of my neck, to grumbles of approval from the others. "Following orders was enough yesterday. Today we're all tearing each other apart! Not anymore. Teach the animal a lesson."

I braced for the end.

"Lady Fiacra is being briefed with the council, and he's on his way to see the other lord and lady right now. This traitor is being handled."

That made the agitated guard hesitate, but he didn't relax. It was clear something was going on. I wasn't being dragged out for a typical interrogation. Who were the other lord and lady? I had a hunch, and bargained it would be enough to keep me alive.

"It's easy to kill me." I wheezed through the hood. "Much harder to tell the owl what you did."

The guards died down, and there was a pause so long I thought I might have died of anticipation. I wasn't sure if it was his weapon trembling or my spine. With little other fanfare, I was lifted to my feet and shoved onward, and no one addressed the outburst again. It seems I had been right about who wanted to see me. It was a very small victory on a very long walk to a very unpleasant reunion.

When we stopped and the hood was finally ripped from my head, I expected to see men hanging, not maps. That did not make me feel any better.

The raycrafted lights above our heads were dim, and a single log dying on the hearth was the only other source of illumination. Two figures smouldered in the darkness beside it, a woman deep in thought as she beheld the flames, and a dread mountain of a man who glared at me with murderous intent, leaning his giant frame against an equally large table. Neither moved a muscle, and a terrible silence coagulated in the room.

My throat itched, but I didn't look away. I hadn't seen these faces in a long time.

The guards gave a crisp salute. "We've brought the prisoner, as ordered."

There was no response but a long exhale from the man.

"Shall we inform Lady Fiacra of the prisoner's new locat-"

The kid never had a chance. He crumpled, along with half of the other guards.

A heartbeat before the light went out in his nervous eyes, an avalanche of energy rolled through the room. Unseen and unheard, it could only be felt deep within the crevasses of the soul. Its message was undeniable:

S T O P

When the gale passed through the guards and I, no one was unaffected, but those who kept their focus kept their feet. Everyone shuddered like boughs in a storm, swaying in place. The weak of will twitched and spasmed, some so violently that they collapsed, while others were rendered instantly unconscious.

Rem.

I was caught completely off guard, with no protection from the wave of magic when it collided with me. My knees buckled beneath me and I crashed into the stones, a thin stream of blood trickling from my nose. It was all I could do to keep my stomach from turning over and pitching the little bread and water I had in it. It had been a long time since I had felt the shock of rem, and longer still since a cheap trick like that had worked on me. I was not amused. It was obvious that her temper still got the better of her.

"Outside." The small woman's voice had the weight of a panther's footfalls.

As I struggled to my feet, others leapt to theirs. The words had been audible this time, rather than instinctual, but no less grave. The guards displayed little regard for propriety as they scrambled to evacuate from the war room. The unconscious were hauled out any way they could be, pristine coats dirtied against the stones as they were unceremoniously dragged out by their ankles.

Within moments the room was empty, save for three. I didn't appreciate their theatrics, but I couldn't put it beneath my old companions to taunt me. The three of us had been among the Spyradors, Cheruna's elite military strike force, and now I lived and died at their leisure.

I couldn't stand them.

"You're as much of a bully as ever, Alune." I said.

Alune didn't bother to address my jab or even turn away from the firelight. She was short, but she wore the black uniform of the Cherunian military like she was a thousand feet tall, with a half dozen ornate pins of valor were clasped on each side. Her black hair hung loose over the collar of her immaculate black uniform. , but I was only given the privilege of locking eyes with Axander, her colossal white owl that perched beside her. He swiveled his head around to bore into me with his gemstone eye, a ruby infused with Alune's wild, primal rem that flickered hungrily within it. Alien and all-knowing, Axander saw far beyond the limits of the world around us, but now his stare was solely on me. I could see the rage that seethed within him. It made my soul crawl, but I returned his gaze.

"They had been warned to behave themselves just as you have been, time and again," Alune said, without moving from the table; Axander's mystical eye was enough for the two of them. "You look terrible, Cazra."

"I wouldn't know," I said, and meant it. I hadn't seen a mirror or even cupped enough water in my hands at a time to reflect myself since my imprisonment began. "I would have tidied up if I had received my summons in advance."

Well, I would have at least shaved. There was nothing I could do in a day that could pull the grey from my hair, put the muscle back on my bones, or pluck the s from my skin, but with a bath or ten I had a real chance at smelling better than a burning stable.

"After what you did, do you really think that we've changed our opinions on how comfortable you should be?"

"Haven't I earned a window by now?"

The man slammed a mailed fist onto the oaken table, launching a stack of carefully curated reports into the air that were left to tumble as he steamed. "A window is much more than an animal like you deserves."

I had been expecting an outburst since the moment I laid eyes on him and I was surprised he had lasted this long. "Say it to my face, Leothe."

The Spyrador reared to his full height, more ogre than man, and crossed the distance between us in two rumbling strides. Leothe and I were just inches apart, and my neck cracked and rattled like gambler's dice as I craned it up to meet his fury. He was bull-faced, with a shaved pate and a long beard, intricately threaded with beads in a hundred colours I never thought I'd see again. Two decades of wielding rem defending the Cherunian people had covered his body in golden tattoos that swirled and shifted across every inch of his dark skin like storm clouds.

"Do you know how long it's been since you've seen the sun, Cazra?" Leothe asked. I held his eyes, but no words came to me. I didn't know. I didn't even know how long it had been since my last interrogation, my only source of human contact over the years. My throat burned, but I resisted the urge to scratch at it. Unimpressed by my silence, Leothe grabbed my chains and yanked me off the ground with just one hand, hanging me at eye level like meat. "How long it's been since you felt the wind on your skin?"

"I'll tell you one wind I haven't missed is your breath, it's awf—"

"Nine years."

I clamped down on my tongue, but the pain wasn't enough to keep the surprise off my face. Leothe sensed it like blood in the water and laughed deeply, rattling my chains and I like a chandelier in an earthquake. I had done the best I could tracking the time, given the circumstances, but without sunlight, regular meals, or anything to break the tedium of endless hours but beatings, I hadn't done as good a job as I thought. All my efforts had still been short by two years.

"A decade, Cazra. Do you think we've spent it peacefully? Would you believe that we are still putting out the fires you started?" Leothe's mirth shifted to menace, patterns of rem exploding on his cheeks like the fireworks of Almace. "Have you dreamt of the world outside? Have you seen it on fire as we have? Could you ever come to fathom the depths of the hell that you have plunged us into?"

"I've got a few guesses..." I mumbled as I composed myself. "Get to the point, Leothe. Why am I here?"

"We wonder that ourselves," Alune replied. Axander squawked.

"You are here to redeem yourself," Leothe continued.

"You brought me out after nine years to tell me a joke?"

"There is no humor in serving the League again. But, perhaps, there is honor." The Spyrador lowered me to the ground. "There is an opportunity to heal what you have done to us."

I groaned. I hadn't been brought here to die. I had been brought here to help. "I think we all know there's a good reason why I don't take orders from anyone anymore."

"And you think wasting away in your cell is a better use of your time?" Alune inquired. Though she still did not turn to me directly, she moved from the hearth to meander along the length of the table. She traced her fingers across troop placements and supply lines, news from the outside world that was mundane to the soldier in me and invaluable to the prisoner. "What is it that you want, Cazra?"

"That would be a hot bath and a hotter meal on the—"

"That can be arranged," Leothe interjected.

"—the other side of the Deislands," I finished.

Leothe scowled. "I see you still have a taste for fantasies even after they burned down the world and got your throat cut."

My temper boiled instantly, and my body moved before I could check myself. I snapped out the best punch I could muster, entangled by chains and enfeebled by time. My hand plunked off the Spyrador's glittering armor and Leothe felt nothing. His beard rattled as he chuckled to himself, building to a crescendo of raucous laughter, and behind him Axander chattered along in a chilling caricature of humanity.

"If there's something you need to say, Cazra." Leothe said.

There was a roar of light and sound that blinded my eyes and lanced my ears, and I stumbled backwards, barely keeping my feet. My vision slowly returned to reveal Leothe's face just inches from mine, his golden rem aligned in rigid, intricate patterns runes that now shone through his armor. His eyes glowed, and with every blink the runes would shift into different arrangements, cycling rapidly. A deep rumble began to fill the room, vibrating my eyeballs, and a taste filled my mouth like I was sucking on coins.

"Then say it to my face."

I had spent years thinking of a thousand moments just like this, planning exactly what I wanted to say to Leothe, Alune, Fiacra, Ged, all of them. I had always respected Leothe's passion for the League and that was exactly why his means disgusted me. To deny that passion in others, to kill to keep it away from them, was a hypocrisy that he could not be forgiven for.

But things were different than when I first dreamed of outside, and for the first time in a decade, I was afraid. My anger sputtered. I blinked first. I broke his stare and Leothe bellowed. There was another explosive bang, blinding me again and throwing me across the room. My back splintered the side tables and chairs in my way, driving the wind from me. Before the spots had even faded from my eyes, I was pinned underneath one of the Spyrador's massive boots, to Axander's shrill approval.

"Why are we entertaining this idiocy, Alune? Are we truly this desperate?" Leothe asked.

I writhed to break free but his weight was overwhelming, and he leaned in to crush me. My lungs were trivial things to his boot heel and I writhed like an ant.

"Does it still hurt? Does that scar haunt you as you haunt us?"

I pounded on his boot to no avail, denied even the air to scream for reprieve.

"This is the man that survived the dim depths beneath us? The Tempest of Tesson?"

Leothe pushed down again, and I was five breaths shy of the end. It seemed I was here to die after all.

"Enough of this, Leothe," Alune said and Leothe puffed in protest, but Axander swelled and spread his wings to match. "We cannot let our enmity cloud our judgement, as much as he deserves it. This is a distraction from the real problem right now." she finished.

It irked Leothe, but on some level he agreed. He eased off my chest and I shoveled air into my lungs.

"Pathetic, Cazra. Did Sigrien cut your convictions and your throat?" .

With a word, it was like I had been plucked from the Cheruna and hurled a thousand miles across the Deislands. I was back in the temple that day with Sigrien, and in our hands was the key to all our dreams.

"You want to know what happened to my convictions, Leothe?"

I couldn't see him, but there was only one person it could be. I could feel the bite of the knife in my neck and the crushing panic when I knew I was going to be murdered by my best friend.

"They were stolen from me."

The blade was cold in my throat, but my blood felt molten in my hands.

"He took everything I worked for and felt nothing at all."

Every breath I'd taken since that day was a cruel reminder of the injustice that was done to me.

"I've spent nine years entombed in that coffin with nothing to do but suffer my wounds and survive."

I couldn't help it. It was all instinct and hate. My mind reflexively armed itself with the old mantras, the words quieting my spirit and readying my body to channel energy.

"And with nothing to think about but my revenge."

I rose to my feet, and even Leothe took a step back, remembering a time when our sizes didn't matter. I could feel it there, locked away in an impenetrable vault in my mind. It was mine

by right, my old power, my rem. It slumbered within me, an ocean of gales, the breath of the world, the wind itself.

“No matter what it takes. I don’t care if it takes a hundred years or damns me a thousand times over.”

I reached for my rem.

“Any price. Any cost. I will kill Sigrien Serriot.”

And found only broken glass in its place.

There was no surge of power through my body, only one of pain. My veins ignited with the rejection of my rem. I fell to my knees in a coughing fit, hacking dark globs of blood onto the stone floor, just like all the times I had tried before. I hadn’t learned my lesson. I clutched at my throat like I had swallowed a scorpion. Even without ever seeing it, I knew every twist and knot in the wicked scar my best friend had slashed into my throat.

Warm hands touched me through my agony and tears, pulling me from my madness. I knew it was Alune. I closed my eyes as she cradled my cheeks, and I was able to get a handle on my breathing. For a fragile moment, it was almost like I was held by my wife instead of just the twin who watched her die with me. She helped me to my feet, and I saw her properly for the first time. She still looked like all the things I loved in Palara, a flawless reminder of everything that happened on that terrible day.

Her smile was a promise, a dangerous gift of hope to a man who had nothing left.

“You will.” She said.

There was a knock at the door.