

Requiem for the Nameless (Side Story)

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Music diluted the passing of time in the quiet hall, enclosed by drawn curtains that left a purposeful near-darkness. As his slender fingers floated across the keys, the notes that he played were carried solely by the melody, coming together in the recreation of a song he'd heard somewhere he couldn't remember anymore. Even without a music sheet, there had always been something about the way each sound had a natural successor that made it work in his head.

Of course, it hadn't been easy. He'd spent half a year teaching himself — encouraged by the praises of the others in the palace — and only now was his performance finally smooth. Basking in immense satisfaction, he let his tired fingers be guided by the tune. He'd always thought it was a waste that the piano had been left to collect dust after the crown prince had lost interest, for no one else (especially Cael) was permitted to use it. Nevertheless, the sixteen-year-old scholar had started "borrowing" the piano on the down-low. Maybe he was lucky that he wasn't absolutely horrendous at it. It was likely the reason that no one had tattled yet.

He closed his eyes briefly while the song neared its end, then an impromptu *Da Capo*, and he was playing from the start again. Music was the one thing in the palace that went at the pace he set instead of rushing him along an endless agenda, and because of that, it was healing the homesickness he felt every so often, when nights got too lonely.

As he neared the climax of his song, lost in his concentration, he failed to hear the door sliding open. "—wen. Cael Yuwen!"

Startled by the call of his name, the boy froze, fingers hovering in the air. It was as if someone had wiped his memory with a spell. In his momentary trance, the rest of the song was forgotten. "Chancellor," he greeted, bowing his head as he scrambled off the piano's seat. "I'm sorry, I—"

"Where did you learn to play?" the imperial chancellor interrupted. Despite closing the piano's lid with a thud that made Cael flinch, his voice was laced with a hint of intrigue.

"I taught myself," Cael admitted. "No one was using it, so..."

Seeing that he refused to lift his eyes from the ground, the chancellor sighed. "His Highness doesn't like anyone using it. I'd admit it's impressive, but it's best that you don't disobey."

"But—"

“He’ll be the king someday, Cael. As much as I understand where you’re coming from, I’d advise you not to get on his bad side.”

It was a reminder out of goodwill, but Cael couldn’t help feeling bitter. Anyone could tell that the prince didn’t like him — the scholar whom the queen paid a little too much attention to. But it wasn’t as if he tried to stand out: His grades weren’t top-notch, nor was his personality the attention-seeking kind. In fact, it was quite the opposite. From the moment he’d been brought to the palace, he’d tried to stay in the shadows as much as he could.

Though I suppose she doesn’t hide her favour well, he mused. The queen treated him differently from the other scholars, even if she’d never acknowledge him as her son. He was the bastard child whom she’d faked the death off before sending off to live with his father in the countryside, and his true identity would be a stain on her name even now that the king had passed. Perhaps it was one of the reasons he found it hard to be around her; he never knew how he was supposed to act.

“We’ll be heading to the capital of Viranthia in a few days,” the chancellor reminded, ruffling the boy’s blond hair that’d grown to the middle of his neck. “It’s a rare opportunity. Don’t jeopardise the chance by getting into trouble.”

Cael wanted to argue that there was no law stating he wasn’t allowed to use the piano, but he could tell from the fatigue on his mentor’s face that there was no point. Everyone in the palace was a victim of the prince’s whims, and they knew it was easier to just let him have his way. “Fine,” he relented, casting a longing glance at the piano before turning away. “I was done playing anyway.”

Whether or not the chancellor believed Cael, he changed the subject. “Well, since you’re here, I want to talk to you about other matters. Your tutors mentioned that your academic standard has dropped as of late. Is everything alright?”

“I’ve been tired,” the boy excused.

“Why?”

“...Nothing in particular. I’m just not used to the pace of things in the palace.”

The old man frowned. “It’s already been six years since you came here.”

“I know,” Cael said frustratedly. “But studying all day is exhausting, and she’s increased the frequency of classes again. I don’t get it. Why do I have to succeed you? Can’t it be any of the other scholars?”

“You don’t want to be the next chancellor?”

The boy bit his lip, searching for the right response. He couldn't quite put his plight into words. While it was true that he *did* want to rise in the ranks, it wasn't for ambition, only practicality. Freedom in the palace was implicitly tied to how important one was. The greater the gap between him and the prince, the more Cael would have to listen to his every command. So it made sense that he'd want to break away from the lower half of the hierarchy. But that came with its own set of issues, and the responsibilities would shackle him again before he'd have the chance to breathe.

I'm just not sure it's worth it, he answered in his head. He dared not voice it, lest word reach the queen and she be disappointed in him. "Never mind," he dismissed instead, not wanting to toil over the matter any longer. There was still time till he had to make his decision. He could only hope that by then, it wouldn't be this difficult. "I'll take my leave and go pack my bags." He bowed his head and hastily exited the room.

The capital of Viranthia was arguably small, but for someone who'd never been out of the kingdom before, it was akin to entering another world. As soon as the carriage entered the borders of the city, Cael gave into curiosity and nudged aside the curtain just enough for a glimpse.

Shophouses lined the streets, along which there was an occasional food cart selling mouth-watering snacks. It wasn't exactly crowded, yet a glance in any direction would have at least one person in sight. Dressed in commoner's clothes that had some unexpected resemblances to those in Zhanar, the locals wore smiles as they chatted with each other and went about their days. And yet amidst the normalcy, an inexplicable unease refused to leave him.

Numerous history books in the library recorded the long-lasting feud between the two kingdoms, painting Viranthia as a cruel, greedy foe. For someone who'd spent hours every day reading them, it was hard not to retain that impression of the other kingdom. The bustling life outside — laughter and street music seeping through the gaps in the carriage's wooden door — felt terribly unbefitting of a land tainted with blood.

The dissonance made Cael frown and he let the curtain fall back over the window, hiding the view from him. If this wasn't his only escape from the palace, he wouldn't be here. But lately, the crown prince had become increasingly difficult, always having a bone to pick as if there was a whole skeleton in his inventory. To say it was irritating would be an understatement, so when the opportunity to take a break came, he didn't hesitate.

Cael had been told not to draw any attention to the delegation of two, so he and the imperial chancellor had kept the window blocked for the majority of the journey. It was a reluctant

decision, for there was much to observe of foreign architecture and things that they didn't fully cover in lessons. But Cael didn't have a say in that matter. He was just tagging along to learn the ropes, ones that he wasn't sure would ever be useful to him.

In all honesty, his future had become a lot more uncertain as of late. Going from the countryside to the palace in a day had given him whiplash, and before he'd been able to settle down in his new environment, they'd assigned him a private tutor who wouldn't give him a break. Classes day and night to catch up with his peers wore him out. They were never as interesting as the books in the palace library, and it was stubbornness alone that kept him fuelled.

But contrary to what the palace servants had assured him numerous times, it never got much easier. The queen's expectations for his future had yet to lower, and even if he wanted to step away from the role he was meant to take on, he didn't know how he'd be able to explain it to her. So now the fire was starting to diminish, and he wasn't sure how much longer he'd be able to keep it going before all that was left was ash.

The carriage rocked gently as its wheels rolled over cobblestone. The rumbling was jarring against the quiet in Cael's head, but even then, it wasn't nearly enough to snap him out of his thoughts. Not until he heard,

"We're almost there."

He looked at the imperial chancellor. "Pardon?"

"Get ready to leave the carriage," the old man reiterated, scratching the short grey beard that matched the rest of his hair. "We're a few minutes to the castle."

"Understood," he said, moving the curtain a little to sneak another peek.

The humble buildings had been replaced by fields of grass and stone, edges running parallel to the wide stone path that they were on. Though part of the castle was visually obstructed, he could see part of it from his current angle. Standing on a slightly elevated hill with its giant main gate and fortified walls encircling it from a distance away, the castle was linked to the lower ground by several flights of stairs. Its main body was defined by layers of uneven, asymmetric structures that grew grander towards the top, where the basic colour scheme of white and dark red was embellished with hints of a more honeyed colour. Under the sunlight, the roofs of the central buildings glistened like they were made of pure gold.

It doesn't look as nice as the Zhanari palace, Cael thought, albeit tactful enough to keep it to himself. He'd often been told that the two kingdoms shared similarities in terms of architecture, but in his opinion, the traditional elements embedded heavily in the Zhanari palace's slightly older-looking design were its greatest charm. The harmony between its fancy, grand halls and the simple yet expansive courtyards surrounding them was incredibly appealing.

Or perhaps he was just biased. He worked on committing the layout of the Viranthian castle — at least whatever was within view — to memory. More than practicality, it was a means to cure his boredom. He'd already finished the books he'd brought along and he wondered if he'd be allowed in the Viranthian castle's library. *Probably not*, he lamented. *I don't think they'd want me snooping around*.

The carriage pulled up at the foot of the hill. Ushered out, Cael raised his hand to shade his eyes from the sun's bright glare. It was the middle of the afternoon, the worst time to be standing out in the open. Although he tried to take in the view of the grand castle, it was outlined in rays that attacked him. He was forced to squint as beads of sweat trickled down his neck. The fabric of his light brown robe stuck uncomfortably to him and when no one was looking, he ran his fingers under the layers to let his skin breathe.

When they finally entered the building, he let out a long sigh of relief. The chancellor turned to him in amusement, asking, "What's the matter?"

"It's too hot," he said simply. He was fairly certain that the heat was indiscriminate, so there wasn't a need to elaborate.

"Take a shower once you get to your room," the old man advised. "You'll feel much better."

Cael didn't have to be told that. He was already planning to stand under cold water for at least half an hour. He looked gratefully at his mentor as the man requested to the guards that they be brought to the rooms as soon as possible. Lucky for Cael, there were no objections.

It was a fairly long walk to the guest chambers, but Cael was too entranced by the architecture of the castle to complain. The corridors that they walked through had similar designs on their walls and hung paintings at intervals between mounted candles. With windows only on one side, they were dimly lit and had a rather cosy feeling. Surprisingly so — Cael had expected the foreign castle to feel a lot less welcoming.

Maybe I've just been in the carriage for too long, he considered, letting his eyes wander as they ascended short flights of stairs to get to the next building. Unlike how one would have to walk a distance in the open between buildings in the Zhanari palace, this castle was a lot more compact, granted the open space between the main structure and the defensive walls they'd driven past earlier was significantly larger. He'd liken the interior to a maze, not just because of the winding corridors but also how most of the decorations were similar enough to cause confusion.

Once they crossed an unsheltered path and arrived at a sturdy wooden door, the castle staff handed them a set of keys. "You will be staying here," he said.

Cael followed closely behind the chancellor as the latter pushed the door open. In all honesty, Cael hadn't been expecting much of the room. He didn't think that the Viranthians were pleased

to host them when they'd had another conflict just a year ago. Maybe that was why the luxurious room soared past his expectations. With beige walls that matched the warm lighting from chandeliers and elegant furniture complete with unique motifs tied to Viranthian culture, it was clear that a lot of effort had been put into decoration.

Perhaps it was a matter of dignity. The guest chambers were where visitors to the kingdom would stay, so wanting to leave a lasting and positive impression was normal. He plopped onto the wide couch — the colours matching that of the castle's exterior, presumably the kingdom's representative colours — and tilted his chin to stare at the white ceiling. It wasn't plain either, as some parts were etched with patterns that matched the rest of the room. It was a very different style from what he was used to. While inconceivable for the Zhanari palace to look anything like this, it fit Viranthia in a way that he couldn't quite explain.

"Go wash up first," the chancellor instructed, beginning to unpack their bags. "I will be meeting some of their advisors this afternoon, but you don't have to come along."

Normally, Cael would insist on joining, especially since this was a kingdom he'd probably never get the chance to visit again. But that was also the reason that he didn't want to be at the meeting: It was his chance to explore. A lot had piqued his curiosity, both within the castle and in the nature surrounding it. The sights they'd passed on their journey had triggered memories of his childhood in the countryside, deepening a hollow that he'd thought was long overcome.

So instead of a protest, he nodded at the chancellor. "Can I walk around?"

"As long as you don't go anywhere that you shouldn't."

Cael's lips curved in a slight smile. "Got it."

The plan had been to wander around the castle till he was told to go back to his room, but Cael faced a dilemma in the first hour. No one had gotten in his way or cast more than an uncertain glance at him — he was, after all, just a teenager — but there was a lingering feeling of unease whenever they noticed him. Alone in the castle of Zhanar's most rivaled kingdom, he didn't feel like he belonged, not even as a guest.

It was only after he walked past the courtyard where there was a group of soldiers training and slipped into the neighbouring forest that he finally felt better. It was still Viranthia's territory and within the guarded zone of the castle, but amidst the trees, the fact that he was outnumbered by people who probably hated him because of his allegiance was a lot less stark. The shouts of the soldiers doing drills drifted to where he was, yet they sounded like mere echoes. Like background noise that he could tune out if he wanted to.

It's nicer here, he thought to himself, fallen leaves crushed under his soles as he followed a long makeshift path towards the sound of running water. Brushing apart thick branches, he was awed by the view that awaited him. From the top of a small cliff was a waterfall, streaks of white and pale blue flowing along the curve of large rocks next to a small cave and landing in a lake. There were small crown-shaped splashes where the water from the top met that at the bottom, but with how far the lake stretched to the opposite side from where Cael was, most of it was tranquil.

The sun had gotten milder and along with the shade of tall trees, only a bit of light glistened off the surface, no longer blinding to the boy's eyes. Nevertheless, the itching reminiscence of sweat on his skin compelled him to get into the water. He hung his outer robe on a nearby branch and cautiously stepped in. The chilling touch of liquid against his skin, even through his inner layer, made him shiver and hold his arms. But it was addicting too. Under the heat of the sun, his body craved the cold to balance things out.

Without his shoes on, the mixture of sand and soil beneath the water was a little prickling. He winced slightly, though part of him liked how it reminded him of walking barefoot in the farm. *Not a good idea*, he remembered being told countless times by his father. A chuckle graced his lips as the water neared his waist. There weren't bodies of water like this near the palace. Because of that, he didn't have the chance to do stupid things like try to swim with his clothes on, or explore natural caves behind waterfalls, or just float on his back and close his eyes under the azure sky.

"Who would've thought that leaving the palace would be the way?" he muttered sarcastically, shutting his eyes briefly as the water touched his shoulders. He was unfortunately shorter than many of his peers, who'd probably find it easy to waddle deeper in without fear of the water being too deep. Still, he wasn't going to let that stop him. He swam slowly in the direction of the cave, keeping his chin above the surface and treading water at intervals to stop himself from sinking.

Lost in his mind, it took him almost three full seconds to register a stinging feeling in his right leg. *Shit*, he cursed, unable to make sense of what was happening, but well aware that it would be dangerous if he didn't get to land soon. His leg had caught onto a submerged branch and gotten scraped, and it didn't help that the wound was getting worse due to contact with the water. The excruciating pain was making it increasingly difficult to stay afloat while his leg refused to obey his instructions.

He gasped, chin tilted up to keep his mouth above the surface. In hindsight, staying calm would've made everything easier, yet in the heat of the moment, panic overwhelmed him and he couldn't think straight. Arms flailing and legs kicking, his energy was being drained rapidly. His vision blurred and he had to shut his eyes to stop them from hurting. As breathing got harder, he choked on the water and his body went weak, gravity pulling him down against his will.

Can't...feel anything... The desperation and regret in his head refused to string themselves into coherent sentences, not that it mattered when he couldn't speak. Between the noisy splashes and a sudden strong tug on his arms, air gushed out of Cael in a silent cry, and took his consciousness with it.

Black turned into an uneven ceiling of rocks as his eyes adjusted to a bright glare. The quiet dripping liquid in the background was all that accompanied the throbbing pain in his leg, yet he didn't have the energy to move. He only snapped to his senses when a droplet fell towards his eye and he shot upright, rubbing it quickly.

"You're awake," he heard an unfamiliar voice and looked up to see someone with him. Dressed in a white tunic that clung to his semi-toned body, the boy — who looked only a year or so older than Cael himself — had a slight smile on his face. His red hair went slightly past his shoulders, clumped together in thick strands like he'd just stepped out of the shower.

Cael didn't know how long he spent staring at silver eyes on a well-sculpted face before he turned away embarrassedly, unable to find his voice.

Oblivious to his awkwardness, the stranger moved closer and cupped his face, thumb pulling his lower lid down. "Your eyes are still red. I guess with all that lake water that got in, that's to be expected." Much to Cael's relief, he backed off and flapped a black cloak in the air to shake water off it. "I managed to stop the bleeding, but you should probably get it checked at the castle later."

"Oh," Cael said, looking down to see his leg wrapped in the outer layer he'd taken off earlier. "Thank you."

The other boy cracked a smile. "No problem." He paused for a while, like he was unsure if he should say something. "Where are you from? Your accent doesn't sound like most people from the capital."

Knowing the feud between the Viranthians and the Zhanari, Cael really didn't want to confess that he was from the "enemy" kingdom. However, the stranger would probably find out sooner or later. It would be shameful to be caught lying about his homeland. "Zhanar," he answered quietly.

Immediately, the red-haired boy's expression changed, morphing into something more wary. "What are you doing here?" His words came out curt, whether or not he'd intended for them to.

"Diplomatic things." Cael hugged his body with his arms, shrinking towards the rough cave wall. They were just in the shallow cave beside the waterfall, but the lake separating them from the rest of the land was enough to stop him from getting up and running like he was tempted to do.

"I think the commander mentioned something about that," the other boy pondered, nodding slowly. His hesitation seemed to fade a little. "Ah, whatever. Zhanari, Viranthian, or something else entirely, I couldn't have let you die."

Against discretion, curiosity prevailed. "Why not?"

The stranger looked at him like he'd asked something foolish. "Because I could save you. Why wouldn't I?"

"Your people don't like mine."

"So?"

So you shouldn't be helping me, Cael wanted to argue, but then he had a feeling that he'd sound like a horrible person if he said that to the one who'd stopped him from drowning. He didn't like how every word that the Viranthian said was honourable, completely contrasting the prejudices that Cael had. It made him feel wrong.

A flick on his forehead took him out of his trance. "Stop overthinking it," the red-haired boy chided. "It's a soldier's duty to save innocent people. Moreover, I don't think anyone with a conscience would've done otherwise."

Even if he hadn't meant it that way, it seemed like an implicit jab at Cael for questioning it in the first place. He frowned, hands tightening as they rubbed up and down his upper arms to create some heat. "I guess not." He paused. "You're a soldier?"

A brilliant smile spread across the other boy's face. "I am! I've been training since I was eight, which is," he counted on his fingers, "ten years ago."

Cael watched as the older boy stood up, stretching his arms above his head. He looked taller than Cael, even if only by a small margin, and despite having a rather slim waist, the rest of his body was somewhat muscular. Staring at his back, Cael started to feel a little self-conscious. He was pretty skinny, considering he rarely worked out and much preferred spending his days in the library or his room. He doubted he'd have been able to save anyone had their places been swapped.

"—name?"

He blinked, startled out of his thoughts. "What?"

"I asked for your name." The other boy took a seat across from him after laying his cloak across the ground to dry. "I'm Elio. Well, most people use my last name, but I don't really care about formalities."

"...Cael."

Elio echoed it, the name rolling smoothly off his tongue. "What are you doing here?"

Actively avoiding the other's eyes, Cael murmured, "I could ask you the same."

Elio leaned forward, chin propped. "I got bored during training, so I decided to take a break."

It took Cael a while to register the implication of his words. "You're playing truant?!" he said, aghast. He couldn't relate to that at all, with how stern the queen and his tutors were on punctuality and making sure that Cael was always studying when he was supposed to be. Those who slacked off would never get anywhere, and seeing how flippant Elio was about it was quite irritating. *Of course* it was easy for him to skip training. He wasn't like Cael, who had too many eyes on him and his future.

"It's no big deal," Elio dismissed with a wave of his hand, paying no mind to the disdain on Cael's face. "I'm doing way better than the others anyway. I can miss a day or two."

"You won't be doing way better anymore if you keep at this," the younger boy pointed out.

"Psh, it's not like I do this often. Besides, I get sick of training sometimes. The same thing every day is...well," he scratched his head, "it gets boring."

A sense of envy bubbled within Cael and his fingers curled over the fabric of his clothes. He would love to say that he couldn't understand what the hell this boy was going on about, but the problem was that he *did*. He understood, *too well*, how the same work every day would eventually drive one to insanity. "Won't you get into trouble?" he asked, taking the more pragmatic route. "I think they'd notice you're gone if you stand out that much."

Elio cracked a roguish smile. "I'm sure the commander has. He'll find me eventually, and at most, I'll have to run a couple of laps around the castle." He glanced out of the cave towards the sky. "Well, we could stay here until sunset. I suppose you'd want to return to the castle before it gets dark."

Sunset was probably a few hours away, but for some reason, despite the slightly bothersome company, Cael wouldn't mind if this lasted longer. "You take everything so lightly," he made an off-hand comment, plucking some loose string on his robe.

"Maybe *you're* the one making everything so serious," Elio shot back.

"I don't understand how someone like you can survive in the military."

Elio pursed his lips. "Bold words from someone who'd be dead if I hadn't snuck off."

"You—" Cornered by his words, Cael gritted his teeth and glared at the other boy. "It was an accident!"

"I never said it wasn't!"

"Annoying," Cael mumbled, turning his body away.

However, Elio simply repositioned himself in front of Cael with an all-too-smug expression.

"Anyway, if you're here for 'diplomatic things', why aren't you at the castle?"

Though he had half a mind to ignore the Viranthian, Cael had a feeling that the other boy wouldn't stop pestering him until he answered. They were, after all, stuck in this cave until Cael was ready to swim again. So frankly, this was *his* fault. "The chancellor told me that I could do my own things today," he explained. "I was trying to find the library, but..."

"But?" Elio probed when his voice trailed off.

Cael shook his head. "I don't think I would have been allowed there."

"Why not?" the red-haired boy said, shifting closer again. "I could bring you there next time. It's not like we've got any top secret books that nobody's allowed to read. I mean, I wouldn't know where they keep those if they do have any."

"That's not necessary," Cael declined swiftly. Yes, he was grateful to Elio for saving him, but there wasn't a need to meet again. They never should've crossed paths in the first place, and nothing good could come out of him being acquainted with someone who could one day fight in a war against Zhanar.

Elio didn't seem to share that sentiment. "How long will you be here? I'm sure we could find a day to meet again."

The prospect of visiting the foreign kingdom's library was indeed enticing, enough to make Cael give in. "Four more days," he answered. "I might be attending some meetings with the chancellor, but I doubt I'll be allowed in most of them."

"Aren't you the future chancellor?"

"It's...complicated," Cael said, rubbing the back of his neck. "The queen wants me to be, but I don't know if I'm interested. It just feels like a lot of work and a lot of pressure."

“Heh, I get that.” Elio sat beside Cael, leaning his head against the wall with his hands behind it as support. “I wanna be a commander someday, maybe even the general of the army. But everyone’s older and more experienced and I doubt I’ll have the chance for at least another decade. Plus I doubt they’d take too kindly to having someone my age in a position of leadership.”

“At least you have the ambition.”

“What good is ambition with nothing to back it up?”

Cael wanted to point out that Elio did, in fact, have the guts to back it up, seeing that he’d jumped into a lake to rescue a complete stranger. Yet he had a feeling that Elio wasn’t talking about that. “Your skills can’t be lacking that much if you’re doing better than the rest,” he said.

“That’s what I think,” Elio corrected. “The commander seems to disagree. He says I’m too reckless to be left in charge.”

“I can see why he’d think that.”

“Hey—”

“But I don’t think it’s necessarily a bad thing. Soldiers can’t be too passive or you wouldn’t be winning wars.”

“I guess you have a point.”

Elio seemed pleased by what Cael had said, a giddy smile on his face as he swayed a little from side to side. His mannerisms were youthful and charming, contrasting what Cael would’ve expected from a stereotypical soldier, be it here or in Zhanar. Most whom he’d met were a lot more brutish. “What else would you want to do then?” Elio asked, bringing the topic of conversation back to Cael.

“I wouldn’t mind just working in the library,” Cael admitted. Being surrounded by books all day long sounded like a dream. “But then again...” He sighed, unsure if he should continue that sentence. The thing was, he didn’t actually mind being chancellor. Under Zhanar’s systems, it meant that he’d be able to travel around the region and even to other kingdoms like he was doing now. Jobs that entailed such enriching experiences were hard to find. What was stopping him was the fact that it felt a bit directionless, for the only reason he wanted to be the chancellor was that he had no idea what else he could do.

But he didn’t know how to explain that. For someone like Elio who didn’t have to align his life goals with the expectations of someone else, it was probably hard to comprehend Cael’s thought process.

Sensing Cael's reluctance to talk about it, Elio steered the topic elsewhere. "This place is nice, isn't it?" he said, back slumped lazily against the rocky surface behind. "I come here a lot when there's too much on my mind. The water is calm and there usually isn't anyone around...it's a lot more peaceful than in the castle, where everything's hectic."

"Don't you ever get breaks from the military?"

Elio cocked his head in thought. "Sometimes. We get a few weeks off three times a year, and most people take that time to return to their hometowns. Although in my case..." His smile turned a little sombre. "I stay at the castle. I like to explore the forest and the mountains, so maybe that's why I know of places like this."

Curiously, Cael asked, "You don't go back to your hometown?"

"...No. There's no reason for me to. None of my family members are alive, at least not that I know of."

The Zhanari gulped, realising he might've pushed too far. "I'm sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have asked."

Elio shrugged. "Don't be. I kinda brought it up first." He raked his fingers through his hair and cracked his neck, an excessive display to mask his tension. "It's fine anyway. It's already been a decade, and I don't remember much about them now."

The conversation had stepped into hazardous territory, but seeing that Elio had yet to shut him up, Cael dared to tread a bit further. "What happened to them?"

A flicker of resentment sparked in the older boy's eyes. "The plague," he said, his voice evidently strained and growing with every word, "The one that *your sorcerers* sent. It wiped out half of the village I came from, and—" He caught himself and went abruptly silent. "Sorry," he muttered half-heartedly, "I shouldn't be saying this to you."

Cael couldn't suppress the guilt that rose in him, even if he had played no part in the war ten years ago. "It's okay," he said tentatively. "I can't lie that it was inhumane." The man-made plague was a highly contested issue of morality even in Zhanar, since it had not only killed soldiers but innocent civilians as well. Debates had spread to the other side of the continent, leading to a widespread ban on sorcery that most kingdoms had promptly enforced.

While Cael had always been aware of the scale of its destruction, he hadn't felt it firsthand until now. The mood had dampened and Elio seemed a little more guarded. "Let's not talk about this," the Viranthian said, clutching his half-dry cloak to his chest. As if on cue, a light breeze swept past them, causing Cael to shiver. "Are you cold?"

“No,” the younger boy denied, but he didn’t resist as Elio draped the cloak over his body like a blanket.

“It’s still a bit damp,” Elio said, “but it’s probably better than nothing.”

“Aren’t *you* cold?”

Elio shook his head. “I’m fine.” It was quite obvious that he was at least a little chilly, yet Cael didn’t want to put him on a spot by calling him out.

Instead, he simply adjusted the blanket to cover himself better. “Thank you.”

The red-haired boy half-smiled. “You’re welcome.”

In the minutes that followed, neither said anything. At some point, Cael’s eyelids grew weary and began to shut, and he struggled to keep them open before giving up and letting them close. Exhausted from near-death and the long journey to Viranthia, the tendrils of sleep finally crept up on him and snatched him away.

When he woke up an indiscernible number of hours later, the afternoon sky had been replaced with a beautiful palette of orange, different shades overlapping and intertwining behind narrow strips of clouds. The cave was fairly dark, but the ground was painted with golden spots from the setting sun, gentle light going easy on Cael’s eyes.

“Wake up, sleepyhead,” Elio teased, poking his arm.

The younger boy’s head shot up from Elio’s shoulder. “What time is it?” he asked, scrambling to his feet.

Elio stood up with unbelievable nonchalance, picking up his cloak. “I don’t know, but we should get going before they start to worry about us. Can you swim now?”

“I don’t think I have much of a choice,” Cael sighed, “so let’s get this over with.”

After crumpling his cloak into a ball and throwing it to the closest patch of land, Elio was quick to oblige. He got into the water without a second thought. “Come on! It’ll get colder the longer you wait.”

“I know, I know.” Despite putting up a strong front, Cael had been quite traumatised by the earlier incident. When his feet touched the water, his whole body shuddered as if the vivid memory of being pulled under the surface was still haunting him. It sort of was — he deliberately took his time getting used to the water level rising with every step.

“Are you scared?” Elio observed, swimming back towards him. A statement like that would normally have earned a stubborn rebuttal from Cael, but there was something about the way Elio spoke that felt different. There was no condescendingness in his tone, only genuine concern. “Here,” he offered a hand, “you can hold me.”

“I don’t need to hold anything,” Cael retorted, slightly embarrassed that it had come down to this. “I am perfectly fine on my own.”

“If you insist.” Elio turned and began heading for land.

Cael couldn’t bring himself to go any deeper. When the water hit his chin, his whole body went stiff in a stark refusal to lift off the ground. *Come on, move!* he urged himself to no avail. Gritting his teeth, he lifted one foot off the ground and leaned forward, but the moment his body began to float, his feet hurriedly latched onto the safety of the lakebed again. After three unsuccessful attempts, he was pretty much ready to just go back into the cave and await rescue.

However, as he was about to do so, there was a tug on his arm and he yelped. “Elio! What are you—” He cut his words abruptly, too shaken to speak.

With an arm hooked under each of Cael’s, Elio dragged him through the water. “Don’t struggle,” he warned. “You’ll make it harder for both of us.”

Thank goodness it’s just us, Cael grumbled. He didn’t know how he’d ever live this down if anyone else were to watch. Nevertheless, he had to admit that Elio was reliable, for they made it to the other side efficiently and safely. He let out a breath he hadn’t realised he’d been holding in when his knees hit the soil and he turned around to collapse onto his back.

Elio towered over him, his smile as bright as the remnants of sunlight tracing him in a haloed glow. “We made it,” he said. “Do you feel better now?”

Cael blinked himself to his senses. “Yeah.”

“That’s good,” Elio laughed, pulling him to his feet. They walked along the path back to the castle until they were intercepted by a worried man.

“Elio Jinn!”

The red-haired boy froze, then his expression melted into a smile. “Commander! Were you looking for me?”

“Where in the world have you been?!” The commander — a tall and muscular brown-haired man — then looked at Cael and noticed his wound. “Meet me at my office later,” he said to Elio, ruffling the boy’s hair. “You’d better have a good explanation for all this. And you,” he addressed Cael, “come with me. I’ll take you to the medic.”

Cael nodded, brushing his wet hair to make it a bit more presentable while the pair was chatting. Then Elio tapped his shoulder to get his attention. "See you around," he said, waving. "Today was surprisingly fun!" He was off before Cael could reply.

"That kid," the commander sighed. He shook his head with a fond smile, clearly more intrigued than upset. "He's really something."

He is, Cael agreed in his head, following the commander to seek medical help. Elio was not the kind of person he'd usually get along with back in Zhanar — Cael tended to keep his distance from people as audacious and eager as him. Even so, he couldn't deny that the time they'd spent in the cave hadn't been so bad. *I wouldn't mind*, he thought, *if we do meet again*.

They did end up meeting a second time, less than a day after the first. It was boring staying in the guest room all day and the chancellor hadn't permitted him to come for today's meeting, so he'd taken to walking around again until he'd decided that his legs were too tired to continue. Now seated at the edge of the forest, enthralled in re-reading one of the books he'd brought with him, he was startled when a shadow was cast over his body.

He closed his book and looked up at a familiar face. "Elio? What are you doing here?"

"I'm done training for the day!" His attire was similar to yesterday's, the standard military uniform, but his hair was dry and done up in a half-ponytail that gave him a much softer appearance. It suited him a lot more than the short hairstyle that most of the other soldiers had. "Ready to go?" he asked.

"Where?"

"I told you I'd take you to the library," Elio reminded.

Cael let the older boy haul him to his feet. "Are you sure that's alright?" He stumbled after Elio, pulled along by his hand.

"I don't see why they'll complain if I'm there too."

Even if they *would*, Cael decided upon seeing the library that it was worth the trouble. The lower level was full of orderly shelves, and the second floor, which ran around the perimeter with its centre open to the floor below, had a few tables and chairs. While it was smaller than the Zhanari palace's library, it had a much more majestic design with painted murals on the ceiling

that had impressively intricate details. The cherry wood shelves were stacked to the brim with all sorts of books, some even with old characters along their spines that Cael didn't recognise.

"It's usually just the scholars who hang around here," Elio said, leading him down the rows. "But now, they're busy with lessons. What kind of books do you like?"

Anything, was the first thing that came to Cael's mind, but it wouldn't be helpful so instead, he said, "History."

They weaved in and out of the maze until Elio came to a halt. "These are the history books. A couple of them are missing 'cause Soren likes to take them to his room, but I'm sure you'll find something you like here."

"Soren?"

"Oops," Elio clamped his hand over his mouth. "I mean His Highness. We're friends, so I slip up on that sometimes."

In spite of the burning questions, Cael decided not to pry into the other boy's personal business. Considering Elio had spent more than half his life in the castle, Cael could make sense of it. "Do you read too?" he asked. His fingers travelled over leather spines before he plucked one of the books off the shelf.

"Not really," Elio said. "I much prefer doing other things." He picked a few random books and stacked them in his arms, much to Cael's amusement. "If I do have to pick, though, I'm normally more of a fiction person."

Cael could see where he was coming from. "History feels like that sometimes," he commented, "even if it's all real."

Elio grinned. "Maybe that's what makes it more interesting?" He nodded his head in a certain direction. "I know a good spot to read."

Several minutes later, seated on a red loveseat at a dead end sandwiched by two shelves, Cael was absorbed in reading. Elio was perched beside him, fidgeting ever so often as he changed his position. He was flipping idly through the books at a pace that no doubt meant he wasn't actually reading them properly, and Cael fought the urge to roll his eyes. If he didn't already believe that Elio wasn't a reader, this made it impossible not to.

"Are you bored?" he asked, taking his attention off his book. "You don't have to stay here with me."

"I don't think they'd like you being here alone," Elio said, one hand swatting the air as if to chase the concerns away. "The scholars are quite snobbish sometimes."

Cael frowned. "I'm a scholar too."

"My point stands."

If Cael did not have as much respect for literature as he did, he'd probably have thrown the book at Elio. "You're incorrigible," he grouched, burying his nose in the book again.

Elio's laughter soon transitioned into occasional remarks about whatever he was reading at that point. Most of them were senseless and possibly a little offensive towards the historical figures involved, but Cael didn't mind. Once in a while, he'd even reply with a quip of his own. He found it rather endearing that Elio was sticking around and entertaining himself just so that Cael could finish his book without being chased out.

Then when it became silent as Cael neared the end, he turned to see Elio curled up on the couch, head on the armrest. The opened book was covering his face, and Cael leaned over to take it off and put it aside.

He's asleep, he deduced when the other didn't stir at a few taps on his shoulder. Cael finished the rest of his book and then stacked it in a pile with Elio's before crouching in front of him. Nearing nightfall, he ought to wake Elio up, yet he couldn't bring himself to interrupt the other boy's slumber. He reached a hand out cautiously and brushed aside the strands of Elio's hair that'd fallen over his eyes.

Elio moved slightly but remained unconscious. His sleeping posture and reactions to Cael's touch were reminiscent of a cat, and it fascinated Cael. He didn't look like someone who dreamt of leading the army, but perhaps it was a bit close-minded of Cael to perceive him that way. There was just this naivety, this innocence that he possessed, accentuated by his bold opinions on indiscriminately saving people, that made Cael want to protect him.

Are you stupid? he scolded himself, banishing the unsolicited thought. *He's Viranthian. He'll lead an army against Zhanar.* He stood upright, returning to sit on the other side of the loveseat. Against his will, his eyes kept drifting back to Elio. It had only been a day since they'd met, but he was quickly growing attached to one of the rare people who treated him like a real friend.

Back in the palace, it was always about rising to the top, and for someone who had the favour of the queen, Cael was the subject of many other scholars' jealousy. And he couldn't blame them. He figured that it would be infuriating to have to work twice as hard to be someone's equal, especially when that someone had joined out of nowhere. Still, understanding their displeasure didn't stop him from feeling alienated, with only a few people he could really trust.

Maybe that was exactly what set Elio apart from them. Somehow, he was able to make Cael feel like he belonged, even in a foreign land. "It'll be hard to leave," he lamented, tilting his head back to stare at the ceiling.

“Mm...? Did you say something?” Slowly sitting upright, Elio rubbed his eyes. His hair was a bit of a mess — half-ponytail hanging on for dear life — and his clothes were slightly crumpled. In the seconds that followed, his eyes scanned his surroundings as though he’d forgotten where he was, then he spotted the books stacked neatly on the floor. “Oh. How long have I been asleep?”

“Just a few hours,” Cael replied. Light from the window behind them slipped past translucent curtains in warm colours, making it clear that the sun was still mid-descent. “I think we should get going before they’re done serving dinner.”

Elio nodded, picking up the books. “Did you like the book you read?”

Cael shrugged. “It was fine. Fairly interesting.”

“Only fairly?”

“Viranthia’s history is different from what I believed. I struggled a bit to put the pieces together.”

“What do you learn about us?” Elio asked, intrigued.

Cael had a feeling that it wouldn’t be very appropriate to share. “Not so nice things,” he kept his words vague. “The kind of stuff you’d learn about Zhanar.”

Elio frowned. “Are you implying that our education’s skewed?”

“That’s not what I meant,” Cael shut down the idea. In all honesty, he *did* mean it that way. But the last thing he wanted was for Elio to be mad at him for putting it so bluntly. Someone as patriotic as him would probably find it hard to come to terms with the distortion that kingdoms liked to partake in. “I meant that you don’t always have the full picture of what happens in another kingdom,” he continued, “because you’ll only have an outsider’s point-of-view.”

His breath hitched as Elio’s expression morphed into one of serious contemplation, and then the older boy sighed. “I know what you mean. It’s just...reminding me that we’re supposed to be on opposite sides. It’s weird ‘cause I swore to myself that I’d always hate the Zhanari, but...” His eyes flickered briefly towards Cael. “But you’re okay, and I can’t bring myself to hate you.”

Cael’s heart clenched as he wondered if Elio would’ve chosen to resent him had he been able to. “Does it matter where we come from?”

Elio pondered the question as he returned the books to their rightful places on the shelf. “Maybe not. I still want to be friends, even if you’re from Zhanar.” He paused, collecting his thoughts. “I’m not sure how that’ll work, though. It’s not like either of us gets to travel much.”

"I'll get to travel more often as the chancellor."

"You'll have to *be* the chancellor first to do that," Elio pointed out. "Besides, that doesn't mean they'll let you come to Viranthia all the time, and you'd probably be too busy with work to hang out with me."

"Still," Cael murmured. Just being able to see Elio again after this would be preferable to being stuck in different lands. "Or you should come to Zhanar."

Elio rolled his eyes. "Fat chance. At least until I'm a general, there's no way they'll agree to that. It's not like I'm a very 'diplomatic' person either." He made air quotes, probably referencing what someone had said to him before.

Though he felt a bit bad for laughing, Cael couldn't resist. "I have to agree with them on that. You'd probably start a fight if they ever did anything to look down on you."

"Ugh, you're not wrong."

As Elio went on about how he'd recently been chided for using improper language by the commander earlier in the day, Cael smiled quietly to himself. Walking through the corridors towards the dining and guest areas, they earned the stares of several guards patrolling the castle, and he should've been as anxious as he had been the day before. However, for one reason or another, Elio's presence beside him was enough to put him at ease.

They didn't see each other the next day. Granted, Cael had seen the soldiers training hard in the courtyard and spent most of his own day in the only meeting he'd be allowed to attend, so it wasn't like they had much time in the day to spare. But when there was no sign of Elio in the evening, his mind cycled through some possibilities and he started to believe that Elio had been warned not to be around him.

Then early in the morning on the fourth day, as he'd almost come to terms with the fact that he wasn't seeing Elio ever again, he was whisked away from his reading spot near the forest. He didn't need to look to know who it'd been, and a mixture of bewilderment and excitement filled him. "Where were you yesterday?" the words slipped out of Cael.

Elio had a grin on his face. "Training. Why, did you miss me?"

Cael rolled his eyes. "No."

If Elio saw through his lie, he was nice enough not to say so. "We're going to the city," he announced before Cael could ask. "It's a little far, but I've got the day off today and I know a few shortcuts."

"Won't we have to get past the guards?" Cael quickened his footsteps to keep pace.

"I'm allowed to go out whenever. We'll just tell them you're with me."

Cael furrowed his brows, puzzled if Elio was really that unafraid of getting into trouble. Nonetheless, he doubted he'd have another chance to check out the city, and he definitely didn't mind spending more time with Elio on this adventure. "We have to be back before the sun sets," he said, in case Elio had wilder plans.

The older boy rolled his eyes. "Of course, killjoy. It's not like I was planning to stay out all night."

Unable to tell if he was just kidding, Cael released a sharp exhale and shook his head. "Knowing you, it's hard to tell."

They traversed the forest in a path that only Elio was familiar with, and Cael stood aside while Elio spoke to the guards. He was a little concerned as the conversation lasted longer than he'd expected, until he realised that Elio was simply having a casual chat. Then at last, as Cael was beginning to get impatient, the Viranthian gave a thumbs-up as a signal that they were good to go and came jogging over to where he was.

"It'll be a couple miles to the city," he said, hands behind his head in a leisurely posture. "Thank goodness we're setting off early."

"The capital city?" he clarified, squinting ahead to try and make out any building forms.

Elio chuckled. "Sorta. It's the so-called backyard of the capital, hence a little quieter. But I like to go there. Sometimes the stall owners that recognise me give me free food."

"Must be nice," Cael remarked, trailing behind Elio as he entered the trees onto an unmarked path. "I don't get to leave the palace much."

"Why not?"

"The queen says she's worried that I'll get into trouble. And with all the work and studying I have to do, it's not like I've got much time anyway. It'll take too long to go to the capital city and back on my own."

"That's what I used to think, before I actually did it." He nudged Cael with his elbow. "You gotta try someday. If I ever visit Zhanar, I expect to be given a personal tour."

The journey to the city was long, but as they continued discussing the various places they liked in their kingdoms, Cael wasn't paying attention to how tiring the walk was. After crossing the forest and walking along a road between farmlands for another hour, they arrived when the sun was halfway to the top of the sky. Cael's legs were ready to collapse — he hadn't spent *this* long travelling on foot in forever.

"Tired?" Elio noticed, giving him a teasing smile. "Want me to carry you?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Cael shot down the offer, hastening his footsteps if only to accentuate his point. But when his knees threatened to buckle, he ended his defiant display and waited for Elio to catch up.

When Elio did, he took Cael's wrist and led him down a stony path. Unlike the shophouses they'd passed earlier, the buildings in this area looked slightly more run-down. A small river passed through the middle of the town, a stone bridge in sight linking the two parts while wooden boats bobbed gently down the river. Close to the forest, there was still a lot of greenery around. The river was lined with potted plants at intervals on short steps while plants with droopy vine-like leaves could be seen further down the river.

The liveliness of the city could be felt as soon they stepped out from the alley between two houses. Stall owners enthusiastically tried to sell their food and merchandise, and the smell of fresh food wafting over to where they were lured Cael towards them. Elio seemed to share his craving, for he promptly dragged Cael to the stall.

"Two red bean pancakes," he said, passing some cash to the owner.

"No, no, it's on the house," the middle-aged woman refused the money with a chuckle. "You haven't been here in a while. How are you doing?"

Elio smiled as he watched her prepare the snacks. "Pretty good! The commander says I've got a lot of potential. During the next assessment, maybe I'll finally get promoted."

The woman laughed. "I'm sure you will. You're so busy nowadays. Hard at work, hm?" She wrapped the pancakes in paper and handed them to Elio, who took one in each hand. "Have fun today," the woman said, waving at him. "Come again sometime. The kids have been asking about you."

"Tell them we'll have a rematch the next time we meet!" Elio waved back as he brought Cael away. Before Cael had the opportunity to ask who she was, Elio stuffed a pancake in his mouth.

"Mmh!" Cael glared at him and took it out. He had no complaints though — the sweet filling of red bean paste in his mouth was heavenly. He couldn't recall the last time he'd had street food. While much cheaper than what was served at the palace, the homely feeling that they brought

with every bite made them worth much more to him. He hummed softly in delight and licked his lips.

“Amazing, isn’t it?” Elio said, taking a bite of his own between sentences. “I get one every time I’m here. Sometimes when I have more time, I stop by her house to play with her kids, teach them sword fighting and stuff. I never had siblings myself, so they’re the closest I’ve got to that.”

Lucky, Cael thought to himself. His half-brother, the crown prince, had never liked him. Despite being seven years older, he was always immature when it came to making sure Cael stayed ‘beneath him’, and Cael had eventually given up on trying to get along with him.

The giddy look on Elio’s face as he savoured the snack caught Cael’s gaze, until he finally tore his eyes away and let them wander the streets. Most of the buildings were only two storeys high, with hipped roofs curved at their edges in a uniform grey that made them look one and the same. Among them, some buildings went a little higher and had fancier designs on top, often coupled with large signs at their entrances.

“Most of them are shophouses, like you’ve probably seen in the more central capital area,” Elio explained. “The owners live on the upper storeys. But some of these buildings are inns, usually for travellers coming down from the towns upstream.”

“Upstream?”

Elio nodded. “The Dari river flows through a couple of Viranthian towns, and if I’m not wrong, some part of it branches out in Zhanar’s direction towards the sea.”

The name of the river was undoubtedly familiar. “I didn’t realise it was that significant in Viranthia as well.”

“You’d be surprised. If you ask me, our kingdoms are a lot more connected than most people think. Which is why,” his smile faded slightly, though he was quick to compose himself and plaster it in full again, “we don’t like each other. We’re too similar, and people want to prove themselves superior when that happens.”

It did make sense, and Cael wouldn’t have expected Elio to say something like that. “I guess so,” he agreed. “You and I are different, so maybe that’s why we can get along.”

A laugh graced the red-haired boy’s lips. “You think so? I don’t normally get along with people like you, I must say.”

Cael arched a brow. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Snobbish scholars,” Elio said with a shit-eating grin, then ducked as Cael tried to smack him with the hand holding his pancake. “I’m kidding, I’m kidding!” He raised his hands in mocking

surrender, the empty pancake paper crushed in one fist. “You’re much better than them. At least you’re fun to talk to. All they like to go on about are things that interest them, that I couldn’t care less about.”

Hearing that gave Cael an inexplicable sense of pride, albeit a petty one. “What do you care about then?” he asked. “Swords and the military?”

“That’s just the surface of it,” Elio retorted, huffing slightly at the assumption. “I’m into other things too!”

“Like?”

“Travelling, for one.” He opened an arm, a grand gesture at the world around them. “My goal is to visit every settlement in Viranthia, and then maybe the ones outside as well. I dunno where I’ll get the money for that, though, so it’ll probably have to wait till after retirement.”

Cael laughed amusedly. “Isn’t that still a long way to go?”

“Yeah,” Elio considered, rubbing the back of his neck, “*but* there are other things I like to do too. Less unrealistic ones.” His smile grew again as he snatched the pancake paper from Cael and threw both pieces in the nearby bin, then led Cael into one of the shops.

While the other boy spoke to the shopkeeper, Cael looked around at the kites hanging on the walls. They were all symmetrical and had similar patterns, yet each and every one was unique. They were slightly reminiscent of the kites he’d seen in Zhanar, made to resemble animals — birds, fish and even butterflies — in bright colours that would appeal to children. Since moving to the palace, he hadn’t dared to fly one as it was often branded as a “child’s activity”. However, right now, Elio’s excitement was contagious.

Hands on Cael’s shoulders, Elio steered Cael closer to the display. “Take your pick!”

It was around half a minute later that Cael overcame his indecisiveness and pointed at a red bird-shaped one with a long tail. Elio paid for it before gesturing for Cael to follow him. They walked by the river until they were beyond the droopy-leaved trees Cael had noticed earlier. Just about big enough for both of them to fly their kite, the large patch of grass was empty, nary a soul in sight. Even though the city sounds, bells on food stalls ringing and people chattering, remained within earshot, it felt like they had entered their own world.

“First time?” Elio asked, holding onto the kite after placing the spool in Cael’s palm.

“My dad taught me once, but I don’t remember anymore.”

“It’s okay, you have an expert here,” Elio declared, pointing a thumb smugly at his chest. “Just keep holding onto it and listen to me.”

Cael nodded and watched Elio gauge the wind direction, then the boy gave him a thumbs up. Truthfully, Cael didn't understand what was going on for the most part. He was caught off-guard when Elio tossed the kite into the air in tandem with a strong gust of wind and it was carried high into the sky. It was a little shaky and the air resistance forced Cael to tighten his grip and plant his feet firmly on the ground.

"What do I do now?" he shouted at Elio, who had run a distance away from him already.

"Release more string when I tell you to!"

Doing as he was instructed, Cael eventually managed to have the kite glide steadily in the air, and satisfaction washed over him. Perhaps it was a nonsensical thought, but for an instant, part of him envied how freely it could fly, high up and away from the rest of the world. The string that held it back seemed invisible, as if it was only there to bring the kite home once it was done rather than a chain anchoring it against its desires. One with the birds, the kite was a peaceful existence in the picturesque blue sky that housed clouds watching curiously as they floated by.

Mesmerised, Cael didn't even realise that Elio had run back to him until he heard his voice. "We did it!" the older boy exclaimed, holding out two hands before he realised that Cael was busy with the kite. His second option, taking Cael by surprise, was to throw his arms around Cael in a hug.

Cael's mind immediately went blank. He wasn't used to being affectionate with people, yet there was something strangely comforting about it. He rested his chin on Elio's shoulder to return the hug to the best of his abilities without letting go of the kite. "I think you did most of the work," he commented.

"*You're* the one who's been holding the kite," Elio objected, releasing him with a stubborn smile. "Whatever, let's just say we did it together, ya?"

"Okay," Cael concurred, mirroring the smile.

When he offered Elio the spool, Elio accepted in a heartbeat, his smile growing as he took over the kite. Minutes passed in silence before he spoke again. "I used to do this with my parents all the time," he said, keeping his eyes in the sky with a mixture of wistfulness and gaiety behind them. "It's one of the only memories I still have of them. There was this field near the place we lived, and they'd bring me there every weekend." He paused, expression faltering slightly. "I stopped flying for years when they died. Then I tried again, but it never really felt the same."

Quietly, the younger boy said, "I know what you mean. Now that my dad has passed, sometimes I still can't bring myself to read the books that he liked."

The look that Elio gave him was underscored by sympathy and understanding. “They always say time heals all wounds, but the pain never fully stops, does it?” He handed the spool back to Cael, keeping his hands over Cael’s for a short while. “But you know, I guess they weren’t completely wrong — it does get a little easier than it was before. Today,” he smiled softly, “it almost feels like it used to.”

The world seemed to stand still for aeons as Cael was lost in silver eyes. “I’m glad,” he said as he averted his gaze. “I never thought I’d get the chance to do something like this again.”

“We should eat some more street food later,” Elio suggested, teetering back and forth on his heels. “Wear a few costumes if the shop owners let us, and visit the old temples if you’re into that. Maybe if we have time in the evening, we can ride a boat down the river when it isn’t so sunny. Anything, honestly. I don’t mind what we do; I’m sure it’ll be fun.”

“You can decide,” Cael said. “You know this place better than I do.”

And so in the coming hours, he let Elio set the agenda. It was a whirlwind of a day, with them trying to accomplish as much as they could before they had to head back, and Cael would occasionally forget what they’d just done at the pace they were going.

Nevertheless, there wasn’t a dull moment. From brewing local tea to stuffing themselves with peanut sauce noodles to hanging paper lanterns along the streets when asked for help by a stranger, the whole experience was at odds with everything Cael was used to. There were moments in which his heart would clench arbitrarily as he questioned if today was only a fever dream.

But even if it is, he decided as he stood on the stone stairs next to the river, waiting for Elio to finish talking to the boat operator, *I wouldn’t mind*. They should be on the way back by now, but under the blanket of ethereal stars watching over the peaceful city, Cael couldn’t bring himself to tell Elio that they had to leave.

Not that he had to, for Elio’s mind was on the same wavelength already. He motioned for Cael to get in the boat. “He said he’ll take us back to where we started,” he said. “We won’t be back too late, just a little past ten.”

Cael sat beside him on the other end of the small wooden boat, the two of them across from the operator. When he lifted his gaze to the night sky, the moon stared back at him pitifully, as if it knew every pathetic thought in his head. *I could stay here all night*, he desperately wanted to say, but the words refused to leave his lips.

“If only the day was longer,” Elio mused, starlight glistening off his lashes when Cael turned to look at him. “If only you were in Viranthia for another week, I could take you to other places as well.”

"I wish," Cael murmured.

Elio smiled. "You should come back again. I'll be in the castle, so you know where to find me." He stretched one leg out, the other bent, and his elbows rested on the boat to support his weight. The moon's reflection complimented his irises perfectly, as though that was where it'd been made to belong. "I enjoyed today," he said, meeting Cael's eyes. "When I saw you, I thought you'd be the stuck-up, boring kind of person, but you proved me wrong. I guess the Zhanari — well, *you* — can actually be pretty good company."

"Is that an insult or a compliment?" Cael jested, though he took no offence either way.

"A bit of both?" Elio quipped back with a cheeky grin. "It's up to you."

"Then I must say that *you're* not as annoying as you looked."

"Excuse me?!" Elio playfully pushed him in retaliation, then grabbed his arm tightly as the boat started to rock from side to side, dangerously close to tipping over.

"Sit still!" the boat operator chided.

Elio pressed his hands together in a sheepish apology. "Sorry!"

Mildly amused, Cael rolled his eyes. "You're such a troublemaker."

"That's what the commander says too," Elio replied, not at all ashamed of the label. "You should try being a little less rule-abiding in the palace. I'm sure it'll make your time there much more entertaining."

Cael couldn't even find it in himself to refute that. The mention of the palace did, however, cause his smile to waver. "I'm not looking forward to going back," he admitted, his voice shrinking. "It's insufferable being consumed by thoughts of the future all the time."

"You don't want to be chancellor?"

"No," Cael shook his head. "It just feels like I'm doing it because I haven't got a choice. There's no motivation, no reason for me to actually try. And maybe it's the way I am, but that bothers me."

Elio tilted his head. "Not even for your kingdom?"

"I'm not as patriotic as you are..."

A soft laugh escaped Elio, melodic in the tranquil night. "Then how about for the sake of travelling? You could come to Viranthia again."

Cael sighed. "You said so yourself, that it doesn't mean we'll have any time to spend together."

"Still," Elio argued, "it's better than being mountains apart."

"You have a point," Cael chuckled. "I guess I'll keep that in mind. If it means I can come back here, I think I wouldn't mind working a little harder."

The older boy beamed, leaning towards him. "I'll be waiting," he said, but then his expression turned more serious, harbouring a maturity that didn't suit his usual demeanor. "Though as much as I'd love to see you again, that's not enough reason for you to take the job. I really do hope you find something to keep you going, and if for some reason, you choose not to become chancellor...I'd still think you're pretty cool."

It was the first time that someone was saying exactly what he needed to hear, and Cael had to turn away to catch himself. He was thankful that the darkness played a part in hiding his reddened cheeks. *You don't know*, were the words lodged obstinately in his throat, *how much that means to me*. What came out instead was the tip of the iceberg. "Thank you," he said sincerely. "I haven't had as much fun as I did today in ages."

Elio smiled in agreement. "Me too. It's unfortunate that you're only here for five days, but if I made your time in Viranthia worthwhile, then that's good enough for me."

Time flew for the rest of their way back, and Cael could only wish that it would slow down. If the path between the farmlands and the road to the castle stretched into eternity, he would gladly keep walking. If the moon refused to leave its peak in the sky, he would accept its everlasting reign without protest. And in his head, he began to curse the cruel, twisted universe for putting the closest thing he had to a true friend a couple hundred miles from Zhanar, a couple hundred miles from *him*.

As they reached the courtyard where they had to part ways, Elio turned to him with a radiant smile. "What time are you leaving tomorrow? I'll send you off."

"Nine in the morning."

"I'll be there," he said confidently. "Wait for me." He hugged Cael for a few seconds, then waved at him and ran off to his living quarters.

Still wrapped in the ghostly arms of Elio's embrace, it took Cael a good minute to uproot his feet and leave.

"Cael," the chancellor repeated for the nth time, "we need to go."

One minute to nine, there was still no sign of Elio. *Did he oversleep?* Cael's chest stung at the thought that he might not see the older boy again before returning to Zhanar. "Can't we stay longer?" he asked his mentor.

The old man sighed. "We have a schedule to stick to. The queen won't be pleased if we're late."

"But—"

"Didn't you have enough time to say goodbye last night?"

There would never be enough time, Cael gritted, but he didn't say it, for the man wouldn't understand. His eyes scanned the courtyard once more; it remained empty as it had for the past few minutes. With a sigh, he glanced at the carriage. *Maybe he really isn't coming.*

The chancellor cleared his throat again. "Cael."

"...Fine," Cael relented, suppressing the bitterness within. He headed for the carriage, casting one last glimpse at the castle, from which a small figure was running towards them. His eyes widened. "Elio?"

"CAEL!"

Elio. Though his mouth ran dry before he could call the name, his legs carried him over to meet Elio halfway. He was engulfed in a hug before he could speak, closing his eyes and burying his face in Elio's neck. "You came," he said.

"I told you I would." Elio pulled away, grinning at him. "I'm sorry I'm late. The commander wanted to speak to me and guess what?"

"What?"

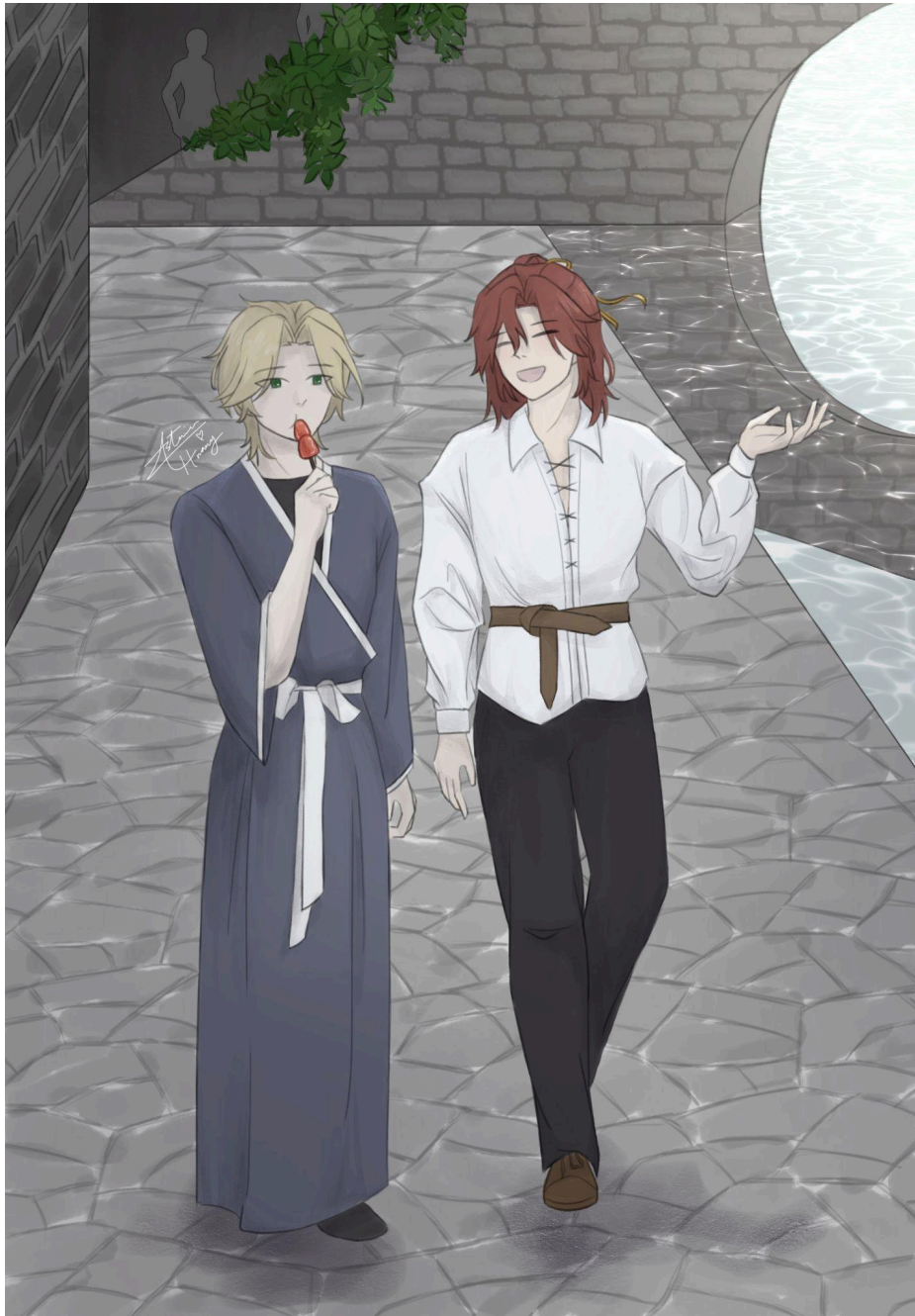
"He said I'll be promoted soon! At this rate, it's a matter of time before I climb to the top. And when I do, when they let me travel around the continent," his smile brightened impossibly, "I'll find you for sure!"

"You'd better," Cael said, unable to stop the corners of his lips from rising as well.

As Elio walked him to the carriage, Cael only took his eyes off him a few times. Even when the door was shut, he pulled aside the curtains, unwilling to let the red-haired boy out of his sight as if that would be enough to make him disappear from existence. Soon, the carriage wheels started to move bumpily on the ground, an unwelcome disturbance in his mind.

“Don’t forget about me, okay?” he heard Elio shout as the carriage got further and further away, distance drowning out his voice. “At least not for another five years! No, make that ten! Or twenty!”

As he smiled silently to himself, Cael wondered if promising forever would be too much.



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