Chapter ?: The Coronation

Those who remembered the coronation of the Valentor remembered a day of sickeningly fervorous celebration; though the loyalists to Gallius were bitter, the common people who had suffered his oppression took up celebrations across the Empire of Nantus… as the aristocracy plotted.

-Peisho Ekhail, *A History of Valentor Tarvik,* 72 APW

At the very moment Tarvik stepped out into the humid night, he was swarmed with people. A mixture of senators with hollow smiles, disgustingly rich aristocrats, and poor commoners crowded around as he attempted to push his way through to the senatorial building.

He scanned the faces of the crowd—to his pleasure, the dominant mood in the area was excitement. Especially from the common people (who, he supposed, he would soon be calling his *subjects*). Those of more wealth and power seemed just as apprehensive as he expected. A new Valentor implied change—and those in power disfavor change, as it may mean that their power will soon be lessened.

He only *disliked* the wealthy, nervous type, but he *feared* the planning type. Those who rubbed their hands together, imaging what a change of power could bring them, imagining his downfall or his death….

He kept his hand resting on the knife concealed in his tunic and wore a smile.

When he reached the entrance lobby of the senatorial building, he took a deep breath and focused on being personable.

The building was large and ornate, constructed of marble and densely populated with pillars and people alike. Archways stretched and held up a tall vaulted ceiling, the top of which was just barely lit by the torchlight emanating from the lower walls. Red banners hung from every archway.

Senator after senator greeted him, with various intentions. Some of the congratulations were genuine—more, though, were through gritted teeth.

At the doors he'd just walked through, guards were pushing back hoards of ecstatic people dressed in simple clothes. All of them had some element of red on

their outfits—a tunic, a scarf, a hat, or just a piece of fabric tied around a wrist. All of them were shouting his name. "*Valentor Atemkin! Valentor Atemkin!*"

"Valentor Atemkin!" The shrill, excessively loud voice behind him sounded like shattered glass being crushed underfoot. Tarvik sighed internally as he turned to greet the source of it.

"Though, I suppose, you are not truly the Valentor *yet!*" Senator Brilic was, as always, wearing a mask of celebratory demurity with eyes filled with thinly veiled hatred.

"No, not yet. I shall earn the title after the rites."

"Hm, yes, you have not yet earned it," Brilic said with an annoying chuckle. *I cannot kill them,* Tarvik thought, *I will never become Valentor if I do.* He kept himself placated by conjuring mental images of various methods of torture and murder.

"Anyway," the senator continued, "I believe this is the first coronation that even the old Senator Taepolis can remember where nobody had any clue who would be chosen as the Ver Carium. I suppose that happens when the previous Valentor dies rather suddenly, hmm…?"

"Indeed. Not a conventional means of deposition, but a necessary one, I think you'd agree." Tarvik found the thinly veiled rage in Brilic's eyes and clenched neck very amusing. *Go on, say you wish Gallius hadn't died. See how that will serve you.*

"Of course! No sense in having those who kill to gain power in the seat of the Valentor!" They stared at Tarvik coldly and his eyes widened. *They didn't specify "kill their own children." Just "kill." One would expect that to be specified, unless they weren't only speaking of Gallius… they're referring to me, certainly. But there's no way they could know! I was so careful.* He inhaled deeply. *I must regain my focus. They were only referring to me killing Gallius, not his heirs. Nobody could know of the heirs.*

"Yes, certainly not," he responded casually, being careful as to not act any differently. *Impossible for anyone to know.*

Brilic opened their mouth to speak, but their ally, Senator Taepolis, tugged at their sleeve and whispered something into their ear. They nodded, the smile plastered across their face growing a bit more strained. "Ah, *well!*"—Tarvik flinched at the sudden and far too loud exclamation—"I must be going. I will see

you when it is time… if you are indeed up to the task." They briskly exited and left Tarvik confused and annoyed.

Seeing an opening, another group of senators politely rushed over to speak to him.

"Tarvik!" The first was Senator Dobis, a meaty brute who usually seemed more interested in hunting than politics, but whose vote mattered just as much as any other senator's. "I must say, congratulations are in order, my boy! I'm sure the gods are very proud of you. They are not the only ones!" He clasped his large hand on Tarvik's shoulder. Tarvik tensed at the action but sensed no danger. *This man is too stupid to be a threat.*

"Thank you, Senator. It means much coming from a friend of Ezira's."

"Then it should mean much coming from me, too," said a thickly accented voice at his right. He turned and saw a tall woman he had never seen before extend her hand to him. "I am Nasia Regas, an ambassador from Aldiel. I wish for Os to look upon your reign favorably. Especially as it pertains to my people, of course."

Aldiel? That is the largest city in the Rezikh Plains, and very far away. Her people would have been oppressed by Gallius… they were the most resilient against his conquests by far. She looks to me with hope. "Thank you very much, Ambassador… Regas," he said, shaking her hand. *Too many names to remember.* "I am honored. Your people will be well taken care of under my reign."

She nodded approvingly, which Tarvik saw as a small indication of success on his part.

With Dobis and the ambassador was another man Tarvik recognized but had sought to avoid, who now stepped forward to speak. "What a wonderful surprise that you will be Valentor, hm?" It was Pomtus Lars, a husband to a senator and *obscenely* wealthy. It was said that the Lars family had more of a hand in the Senate's doings than the Ver Carium themself—something Tarvik had, of course, planned to end. *Corruption is far too much of a confounding variable.* Pomtus, though, could not know this yet.

"What a wonderful surprise indeed."

"The title of Valentor comes with much power. And subsequently money, of course," he laughed.

How I despise these aristocrats. Moons above, free me from this fool. "I do not plan on collecting much money for myself." From the corner of his eye, Tarvik saw the ambassador tilt her head curiously, as if reassessing something.

"Bah. A missed opportunity, if you ask me."

Of course you would think so, Tarvik thought. *Your head is so deep in the imperial treasury that one would doubt your ability to breathe.* He looked around and scanned the crowd to try and find an excuse to exit the conversation politely—he saw a pair of familiar, deep brown eyes staring back at him. *Perfect.* "If you'll excuse me," he said as he stepped away and let out a quiet sigh of relief.

"Hello, *Valentor*," Lornalia said with humor in her eyes. "I see you need saving from that *leech*."

He laughed and looked at all of the senators in various clusters all around him, speaking to each other but keeping him in their peripheral vision. "Careful. This place is full of leeches, they may take offense." He shook his head and added, "it can be so exhausting… so many people wishing to derive power from me."

She turned to look at the crowd outside. "And so many people hopeful that you'll be their savior."

He tilted his head. *Savior?* "I… suppose so. I am saving them from Gallius, yes."

"You *have* saved them from Gallius."

"Not yet, there is much to do. Much of his influence to do away with. I need more influence of my own… favor among the people."

"They—*we* all adore you now. These people would do anything for you, Tarvik."

We? "You adore me?"

Her lips hinted at a smile. "You could say that."

He paused, then sighed. "I am exhausted by these leeches. I wish we could be alone."

"I know a place!" Her eyes lit up.

"You do? But… no, what would people think? I am to be Valentor, I cannot disappear at my own coronation!"

She rolled her eyes at him. "A private political meeting between the Valentor-to-be and one of his allies in the Senate." She grabbed his wrist and dragged him to a small side exit at the other end of the lobby. "The coronation itself isn't for another thirty minutes, anyway! Come *on!*" She yanked him through.

What followed was Lornalia pulling him through a convoluted series of small, dusty halls with peeling red paint. "I think they were for servants," she explained, "so that they would stay out of sight. They go everywhere in the

building—even all the way up to behind the throne. I used to play in them when I was younger."

Behind the throne? "Could be useful as a means of escape in an attack."

She laughed. "You're so…"

"...what? I am so *what*?"

"You're talking about 'means of escape' and I'm trying to show you… *this*." She opened one last shoddy wooden door and moonlight flooded the torch-lit hall, reflecting off of her smooth, olive face. The door led to a balcony that seemed to be built into the hil that the building was on top of, and it overlooked the city—rows and rows of homes and streets glistening under the moonlight as much as her eyes… which he found himself staring in after just a moment.

She pouted at him. "Why are you looking at *me?* Look at the view!"

"What a difficult choice. Both so beautiful."

She blushed, taken aback. "I… I don't know what to say."

"Then don't say anything," he said, taking her hands in his.

They stayed like that for several moments, holding hands, looking into each other's eyes, leaning towards each other more and more.

She pulled him closer to her. "Come on. Dance with me."

"*Dance?*"

She laughed. "Like when we met!"

He nodded and stepped along with her, recalling the same fluid motions. "I remember, yes."

"I'm flattered. It takes much for *you* to remember something."

He smiled. His earlier tenseness was gone, and now he felt truly present with her. The hubbub of politics was far away, absent from the current moment. All that mattered was them and the moonlight. He allowed himself to be graceful and move along with her gently, careful not to step on her feet, watching her black hair and red dress sway along in the cool breeze.

After many precious moments of dancing, she pulled him into a hug. And for the first time in as long as he could remember, his mind felt light. Peaceful. The black sea of thought in his brain had paused its trashing and settled into a stillness, a *peace*.

He leaned out of the hug and looked into her eyes, their foreheads nearly touching.

“Do you like the view?” she asked. He felt her breath on his cheek and saw her face growing closer, closer to his.

He nodded, lost in her eyes and mouth and face, completely mesmerized, completely paralyzed.

“I do, too.” And suddenly her lips were on his.