

“He’s alive,” his Father whispers, tears of relief and joy in his eyes.

Darius nods back and then licks his lips. “Father, what of Mother? We must tell her!”

His Father seemed to suddenly grow old right before his eyes. “We cannot, Darius. She must believe Jaron is dead.”

“No,” Darius shook his head, feeling sick. “I cannot play along with such a lie.”

“You must!” His Father commands, but his eyes soften when he takes in his son’s pale face.

“Darius, you know as well as I that your Mother would stop at nothing to get your brother back in her arms once she realizes he is alive. And the consequences of Avenia realizing that Jaron is alive-”

“Means war,” Darius finishes bitterly. “So you would sacrifice your own son to the streets for Carthya? How much more can we sacrifice, Father? Jaron might as well be dead to us now, with the fate you condemned him to.”

His Father flinches. “War means death, Darius,” he whispers. “It can bring Carthya to its knees.”

Darius swallowed. “I understand,” he says hollowly. “May I be excused.” He quickly leaves his Father’s chambers and walks to his mother’s parlor room. He needed to see her, even though it meant lying to her face by not telling her that Jaron was alive and hopefully, well.

He nods to the guards and knocks on the decorated wooden door of the parlor.

“Come in,” he hears his Mother utter softly.

“My son!” His mother gives him a brittle smile from her seat, closing her sketchbook that was perched on her lap. “Do you have news about your brother? J-Jaron?”

Darius shakes his head and lets it fall, squeezing his eyes shut. “I’m sorry, Mother.” His eyes close as his mother lets out a soft sob. When she starts crying openly, he quickly sits next to and wraps her around in a hug. His chin rests on her head and when his mother starts to whisper Jaron’s name as if that would conjure up his brother from thin air, he lets his tears fall as well.

*Forgive me*, is all Darius can say over and over again in his mind. His thoughts wandered to Jaron as they kept on doing since he saw his little brother sitting on that church’s steps looking so

small in such a big world. He knew Jaron was the strongest person he knew, and the cleverest, he thinks wryly, but all the same, he wishes with all his heart he could be with his brother right now, looking after him. Being the crown prince meant he had a lot of responsibilities, but Darius never forgot his responsibility as an older brother as well. And now, after everything he tried to do for Jaron, shield him from the treacherous regents, tried to allow him to lead a normal, happy life without all the pressures that came with being a royal, Darius felt that he failed his little brother terribly.

He hates being Crown Prince or even a royal. That it put him in a position where the future of Carthya depended on a ten-year-old boy to be being dead or missing. All Darius ever wished was to do right by his kingdom and family, but it seemed that for one well being, the other one must suffer.

*Jaron, wherever you are, I am so sorry. For not giving you the life and happiness you deserve. Forgive me.*