The Temple of Vows

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A collection of scenes

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The Ceremony

Something was poking into the prince's neck. He raised his hand to feel for a loose pin but dropped it when he noticed his father watching from the altar, staring hard. The prince stood above everything, backlit by the passage's hundred-lit torches, which gave him the glowy quality of divinity. Sunlight could not reach down here, a league underground, so it was the fire that produced his edges.

Shaded masses filled the chapel's belly, but the dais in the center was bathed in the full light of a hundred ceremonial candles and held only two: the prince's father, the king, and the Seer, whose eyes were indistinguishable through the thin red veil he wore. Between them, the massive stone table that had rested there for centuries; across its sleek black surface, runes glowed pale blue.

The crowds circled the threshold in formal lines but stood nearly on top of each other in their enormous numbers and wore variations of the same woven colors red, white, and yellow–the colors in the Godwin sigil. Some wore modest robes, woven from heirloom cloth, with animal-skin shoes; and others wore intricate ceremonial skirts with silken capes that licked the backs of their boots fragrant with fresh leather.

The men in the prince's family were present too. His three uncles and his twin brother, Taylor. They wore identical ceremonial robes, and each regarded the prince as he stood above them, pride and longing woven like blood brothers in their faces. He met each of their eyes but remained longest on his twin, a prince younger than him the long evening that made the king two sons strong but without their mother. Only Lucian's superior ceremonial dress and painted skin distinguished them from each other.

The prince stood for as long as it took. All eyes but eight pairs were beholding him for the first time and for the last time in their lives. When he became king after

his father, he would serve his people away from them, the heart of the Temple of Vows, keeper and protector of Jantrea.

His father gave him the slightest nod; he began his descent. Slowly, the prince heard his name echo in the chapel's wide body: *Lucian, Lucian, Lucian, Lucian.*

His breaths came in blissful sighs and his hands now hovered at his sides, totally numbed–a mercy given from the bitter oil given to him in just two drops coated his whole mouth. Otherwise, Lucian would be too wary of the pain to come, and the people could not be witnesses to the future ruler in a trembling form, just as shy of flesh as they. There would be blood, and the prince needed to disregard it as he did the breeze.

The crowd parted for him, forming a path to the dais. As the prince passed, they dropped their eyes, unwilling to meet his gaze. Hundreds of knees bent in reverence to him, hundreds of hands clasped in awe and prayer, hundreds of hearts teeming with love. It took gnawing his tongue not to smile.

The path to the altar was not a long one, but each of the prince's steps contained the importance of an hour. His bare feet made no noise on the cool black stone underfoot, but the stones that hung from his ankles, each smooth and marked with tiny runes, clinked against each other–the only sound in the bated silence of hundreds.

The Seer met the prince at the edge of the dais, with his veiled face that revealed nothing. But when he spoke, the quiet thickened around his deep, ancient tongue:

"Lucian Godwin, esteemed son of Elrich Godwin, tenth of his name, heir of the Ivory Throne in the Temple of Vows, divinity among men, protector and keeper of the law in the Great Empire of Jantrea."

The ascent was a single step. He glanced back at Taylor as his bare foot passed the threshold. His younger brother had been looking at him, as everyone in the room

was, but something in his gaze was baring its teeth. When Taylor lowered his eyes, Lucian realized he'd paused, and stepped fully onto the alter.

The Seer stood on one side of the stone table, and his father stood on the other. Lucian took his place behind the stone table, facing the many captured faces of the underground chapel.

Lucian glanced down at the table. Thousands of glowing symbols surrounded the shape of two hands, printed in blood. Layers, each layer placed by a man who was revered above all.

The Seer's voice rose again. "The world of Man was once a dumbly led, blood-dim realm. But then Edmund the First found this land and found me, then a naked child on the beach, sent before him by our divinity to serve as his guide and protector, and from the chaos of the first era we forged a new, greater world, an empire that shields you all from the depravity of the wild and its demons. For a hundred years, I have served each great king, I have watched their greatness unfold. I have known their divine powers. I am trusted to keep the Tether, the bridge between your world and the Godfather's heavens. Without it, plagues would fill you and desolate your children and their children."

Intensity shivered through Lucian's flesh as he listened. His eyes were fixed on the Seer, who could have been looking anywhere in the room. But somehow, Lucian knew the Seer was returning his stare. The ancient keeper's regard had a weight larger than the common man and he'd been keeping an eye on the prince his entire life.

"Edmund was an inventor, blessed by our Godfather to save this world from the wickedness of man. With I as the sole witness, Edmund created Votives, the runes he carved with his blade into the pillars as our Temple was built and into his own skin. They are a great power that can only be trusted to given from my hand and trusted only to be wielded by a first-born Godwin son." The Seer produced an intricately carved sheath from his robes. Its redwood surface was covered in all the existing

runes, done in such small penmanship no mortal hand could make them. Edmund had carved them in his sixty-seventh year. Lucian could not look away from it. The oil sapped him; he was only vaguely aware of himself as the Seer unsheathed Edmund's blade. Sleek, black steel that reflected the table's blue light. An ivory and obsidian handle. "It is my duty in this realm to provide. Today I provide the future king with the first runes of his servitude and begin our oath of brotherhood for our eternal lives."

Lucian breathed in deeply. The Seer stepped behind the table with Lucian, towering over him. Lucian turned to face him and lifted his hands, palms up, to the Seer, who took his left hand.

"Power, so that he may hold the peace and prosperity of our empire." As the blade's edge sank into his left palm, Lucian made no face of pain. Thanks to the subduing oil, the tip of the blade carving into his pale palms was bearable. He knew not to look away, so he watched as blood wept from the inscribing in his palm and dripped at his feet. He mirrored his father's expression: cold, unbothered by the fleshly.

"And discipline, so that the flesh of his body may be contained by his greater spirit." The Seer took Lucian's right hand and wrote the second rune of the hundreds he would receive in his servitude.

When the Seer stepped back from him, blade dripping at his sides, Lucian knew what to do. He turned back toward the stone table and slowly placed his hands over the dried prints. The runes seemed to give a stronger light as fresh blood bubbled from under his fingers and into the stone. Lucian looked down at his palms. Through the smear of blood, inside of the carvings, Lucian glimpsed a faint glow.

When the prince lifted his hands from the table, he breathed out a shaky breath. His blood covered his father's now. He opened his palms and recognized the runes, so

precisely cut they didn't look real in the center of his blood-smeared hands. He did not feel the sting.

He closed his eyes and lifted his hands to the crowd, whose worship of their future leader was a roar in the chapel.

The Salt of Bearing It

The prince's flesh spoke for him: striking wine-swept eyes, his pale curls splattered roughly about his head, sticking out in odd kinks from where he'd run his fingers, a deep rosy flush in his cheeks. He was terrifically drunk and perfectly unpained. The oil's numbing effect had worn off hours ago and what took over was a feverish glow in his gut and chest. The pain in his palms had ebbed with each swallow of wine at his honorary feast, and standing ankle-deep in the severely cold water of the ocean, he felt his first relief of the day, of that whole month. He walked down the shore unabashed, bathing in the moonlight that lit his pale skin and hair with a white glow.

Salty, rogue winds lashed at his bare chest, but he savored the sting. It was rare he was allowed such pleasure as to wander the shores bare-chested with the immodesty of a common boy. The discomfort of cold mixed with his fleshly pleasure stirred a superior feeling inside, of life.

His father followed close behind him. Close enough for Lucian to turn his head and note his grave expression. This walk had been his idea, so why did he look as if a blade was shelved between his ribs? Lucian stopped, turned toward him.

"Why are we out here?" Lucian asked.

His father caught up with him before speaking. "I am proud of you, son." He clasped a strong hand on Lucian's bare shoulder and gave him a grim smile. "You will be a fine leader."

"You have completed the most sacred ceremony, and soon you will be wedded," the king said, and Lucian nodded. The Seer would be the one to choose his wife under divine guidance—it would be one of the few times in Lucian's lifetime when he would see the Seer leave the grounds of the Temple. He would return within the season with the woman Lucian was to create his heir with. He didn't entirely find the idea tasteful, for a woman to be plucked from whatever life she led to serve him, but Lucian knew his manners—he withheld.

"When?"

"Soon." His father's reply was baseless. Soon could entail days, weeks, or months. "The Seer delivers the Godfather's will, so we will wait as his discretion."

"I understand," Lucian replied, afflicted, staring out into the sea.

"A marriage to the king will be your wife's greatest pleasure. It will be her honor to provide you children."

"How does the Seer know who to bring?"

"The Godfather tells."

Lucian turned to his father, tearing his eye from the swallowing horizon. "How does the Seer know? Even as King, you don't hear a voice from above. Why *him* over *us* to deliver our fates to ourselves?"

"The Seer was given to our bloodline by the Godfather. He was not born in our realm but in the heavens. He came down to give us guidance and power under the Godfather's perfect wing," the king replied coolly as if he had been anticipating Lucian's fret well before it came. He walked forward, the fabric at his ankles floating on the black water. He reached out a hand to grasp Lucian's shoulder. "Our family has a unique obligation to the world. We may not be able to understand all that we are given or given to do, but it is not our place to question the will of our maker, yes? We have been blessed so wealthily; the children of your children and their children will live as princes and kings. They will never be left wanting. Isn't that inspiration enough to not question the Seer?"

Lucian swallowed and nodded. His father only touched him when the occasion was of high importance—when Lucian needed to remember he was an obedient son before he was a future king. "I understand, father."

"Will I be happy?"

His father's eyes had always revealed nothing of light. He was powerful and revered, but quiet at dinner. He ate like a King, sparing no drink for the next man, but

Lucian knew a solemn look when it came. His father looked like every frowning man of their history depicted in the faces of their forebears in each hallway.

"Happiness is a weightless thing, son," he replied slowly, eyeing Lucian like he'd been crude, "It satisfies the common man, but we must be above that."

Lucian frowned, flush. He scolded himself internally for the misstep. "I'm sorry, I know this. My joy will be in leading."

"This is the part of the ceremony the Seer does not come to witness, nor any other man." The king motioned to the stretch of beach, "Wash your hands here, on the shore where our forefather Edmund first landed. The sting of the salt in your wounds will remind you of the labor you perform as heir and—eventually—as King. the healing properties of salt will be kind to your palms."

Lucian bent his knees, darkening the red of his skirts. Slowly, he submerged his hands. He began to thumb away dried blood with a grimace, closing his eyes to try and occupy his mind with other things. He thought again of the ceremony, the Seer's haunting gaze, his cold hands folding over Lucian's, the crowd of witnesses, and the sting of the ancient blade. As if years had passed him in moments, Lucian felt much older and massively exhausted by it.

He stood. The world felt contained, and touchable. He looked up at the sky to the full-bellied moon, closed his eyes, flexed his hands, and breathed in deeply. He was a prince. Divine-sent. Better. He was to be a King.

He looked back at his father, feeling more like a man, and waded to shore.