

Chapter 3

“Devric... Devric?”

His eyes fluttered open and realized that, after praying for hours, he'd fallen asleep on the floor still wearing his breeches and loose shirt. The last thing he did before exhaustion overtook him was pray at the altar adorning the top of his trunk. He hoped the passionate pleas that went far into the early morning hours would make the Gods listen. The three candles he lit were out and burned down to almost nothing. The offerings of flowers were still there, along with bits of dried blood flicked upon the surface of the smiling Dé Gilla statue.

Getting into a sitting position, he saw Ingriss sleeping on the bed and, for a moment, thought her chest wasn't rising, causing his heart to come close to stopping. Then it rose and fell, making the fear loosen its grip.

“Devric?”

The voice came from outside. He knew its clear strong cadence- Mael, the offspring of the two martials aboard the ship.

Devric opened the tent flap. The twelve-year-old boy looked up at him with intense hazel eyes, looking as stern as his curly auburn hair pulled back into a severe ponytail. He dressed impeccably. Black leather boots shined to perfection. Light gray breeches under a long, embroidered green vest worn atop a crisp white shirt whose cloth collar would fit perfectly under a steel one soon.

Mael would become a martial like his parents, though he did not know it. He didn't have an inkling that he was legally a gilla either. He'd know both truths soon enough. Martials were strange because, throughout most of their lives, they treated their own blood so terribly. Having come from such a loving kin group, Devric couldn't understand this. They were amazing fighters, protectors, he wouldn't deny them that, but he could help but think that it did more damage than it was worth.

The days Devric spent at the Fyrrluen's estate would feature a nightly beating and a sorry looking bruised boy afterward. From what Devric could see, Mael did nothing to deserve it, except for having a poetic soul. He'd often find the boy's poetry hidden around the estate and lamented that such a talent would go to waste.

One line came to mind: *Keep my breath where no god can reach. Behind this wall the wicked hearts with rampant caws and piercing claws they teach.* That one stuck with him, sorrow tugged at his heart every time he thought of it.

"Master Mael. What're you doing here? Shouldn't you be at the estate?"

The boy frowned and ran a hand over his hair. "You know I don't like to be called that. It feels odd."

"My apologies."

"Um, I just arrived. I don't know why I was sent away from the estate. Feels kind of odd being here without Quint."

They raised martials closely with their future owner, who were also just as unaware of the situation. Rarely was Mael seen without Quintus, and that was by design. Quintus was Mael's principal support and vice-versa as per their tradition.

He had a good idea why the boy was here in Bel. It was overdue. They're preparing for his Breaking, a long held tradition for martials. They would reveal the truth to him, then torture him mentally and physically until his sense of self ruptured and became malleable.

Devric wished he could tell him the truth right now, tell the boy to run far away, but the Fyrrluens would spend considerable resources to retrieve him.

Gilla catchers had it much easier now with the photograph to help trap their prey. He wasn't sure how it worked, but every gilla was required to have one put into their file. Plus, it was a major affront to the Gods and a large fine against his umber palace if they found out it was him who

revealed the truth to Mael. Was he ready to cross that line yet? He suspected that he'd be crossing many lines soon enough, and become an anathema to every god, except Dé Gilla. Still, despite the fear, the thought of telling the boy clawed at his mind.

"I heard Ingriss was injured. She's so kind to me whenever you visit and I, um, can she... is she well enough to talk? I would like to see her." Devric moved aside and let him pass.

While lighting the wick of a candle, he observed the boy walk towards Ingriss's bed and sit on the edge. The light from outside had already awoken her. She focused on Mael while slowly propping herself up on an elbow. Her right eyelid fluttered.

"Mael? Is that you? How was your trip?" Though she was tired and wincing in pain, her smile was genuine.

Fearing the worst but seeing otherwise, he perked up. "I wish Quint was with me, but it's exciting. You know, they usually make me stay at either the estate or the insula. Can't tell you how bored I am with both. It's not far, but it's a pretty country between here and there. I got to write some along the way. Think you can keep them safe for me? Don't want my parents finding them."

"Of course, dear. I promise to keep them safe."

Mael handed her a few small rectangular pieces of paper. "You can read them when you feel better. Will you, uh, tell me what you think later?"

She cupped his chin. "You know I will."

The same look came across Devric's face, knowing that she'd lost none of her faculties.

"Can't believe all the murals here, nothing like that in Bellum."

"Oh yes, the artist lives in town. I sang for him while he painted a depiction of Dé Gilla. He thought that a gilla singing about the god would add to its effect."

Mael's smile grew wider. "Did it?"

She chuckled, "I like to think so, but it seemed silly at the time."

He frowned then and pointed to Ingriss's head. "Did mister Dylan do this to you, truly? He's always, well... not exactly kind, but not cruel."

She nodded as if she'd lost something dear.

"He did Mael." said Devric.

"But why? Was it an accident?"

Devric ground his teeth. "It was no accident. He found her to be displeasing. This is what they consider their right to do."

Devric sucked in his breath as Mael gave him an odd look. It was the wrong thing to say. The hatred in his heart was layering upon itself and becoming difficult to hold back. Still, the boy said nothing. Instead, he reached into his satchel and took out a peach.

Ingriss sat up as much as she could and accepted the fruit. As she did, Mael placed both hands on hers. "I hope you heal quickly. I hate the thought of you hurting."

He stood from the bed, turned to walk out of the tent, but jumped back when Devric stepped in the way to block the exit. Ingriss sat up further, eyes wide. "Dev, don't."

A memory came of winter after a snowfall, when a runaway domesticated fox took shelter in the pleasure palace's courtyard. He was only ten, but not afraid, and so coaxed the poor thing from its hiding spot, fed it and, after a short time, it allowed him to run his hands through its fur. The owners heard and came to have a look. Devric reassured the fox that it would be alright, but as soon as he placed it on the snowy ground, they shot her without delay. They'd killed something he loved, and broke his heart. He knew then that he was owned just like that fox was before it found its way to him.

"I have to, this might be the distraction I need."

"What do you mean?" Said Ingriss with a croaking voice.

"Sister, can you stand the thought of what they're getting ready to do to him?"

"Devric, what is this?" said Mael.

"May Brigantia, Ard, Gilla, and all the rest of them forgive me..."

"Brother, please don't. You know the consequences."

"Mael, you're legally a gilla."

The boy backed up a step. "Heh, what? Stop jibbing and let me go."

"Please stop." Pleaded Ingriss, but it was too late to stop now. If he did, then Mael would recite what he heard to his parents and there would indeed be consequences. For good or ill, best to see where this road would lead.

"It's no jib. Your parents are not just bodyguards, or lower-class cousins of the Fyrrluens. They're owned by the Fyrrluens- They're gilla, you're a gilla."

The boy chuckled in disbelief, hoping that this was just a complicated joke that he'd understand in a moment.

"I said it was no jib. There's a reason why they treat you so terribly. You're a martial, someone who's broken to their owner and, for the rest of their life, they protect that owner. After they break you, you will be a martial with a steel collar around your neck."

He took another step back. "You're... lying."

"Think about all the training they've given you. The isolation they enforce. How close your parents are with the Fyrrluens. How close you and Quintus are. Now tell me again that I'm lying."

He looked at Devric hard. "You're a pleasure gilla and can hide your tells." He then turned to Ingriss, who had a completely sincere face. Her eyes watered, and Devric could sense her hesitation.

"It's true Mael."

The boy stared at her for a moment, then shook his head. "Do you know how ridiculous it sounds? Keeping something like that a secret?"

Ingriss looked at him, sad brows and watering eyes. "Many think that pleasure gilla are a ridiculousness that belongs in the past. Tell anyone outside of Kymbri how a pleasure palace works and they'll give you the same look. I'm sorry Mael, I'm so sorry."

He turned back to Devric. "It shouldn't be this way, Mael. Now you can make a decision. One that's not orchestrated for you."

Mael's brow narrowed at him and his fists clenched, but he controlled the pitch of his voice. "No, no. That cannot be what it's all leading up to. I don't believe you and that's that." He pushed past Devric and out of the tent.

Devric poked his head out from the flap and looked about, making sure that no one was close by. "Mael. Mael!"

The boy turned, tense and red in the face.

"I beg you not to tell anyone, or else it would be the end for both me and my sister." A slight lie implying death, but if he told, the boy would truly never see them again.

Mael made no response, simply turned and walked away. Devric swallowed the lump in his throat. It was in the Gods hands now.

Reentering the tent, Ingriss looked just as tense and fuming. She did her best to keep her voice to a whisper. "How dare you. How dare you do that to him. Do you have any idea how much turmoil he'll be in?"

"Better than the turmoil they'll put him through."

"Whatever he chooses to do from here, it'll lead right back to the Breaking and it'll add to his suffering. You know this. So why did you do it?"

He sat on his bed, rubbing his face with the palms of his hands, then looked between his knees at the fur rug and listened to the slosh of the

water below the dock.

"I... The thought of what would happen to him. I couldn't hold it back. Not anymore. I have no plan to help him."

She looked away from him, disgust in her face. "If he tells, then we're done. There would be little chance of earning your forgiveness you lumberwhirl." She winced and her hand shook as it grasped the side of her head. "Ah! Give me opium, now."

He prepared the long, simple wooden pipe on her nightstand, handed it to her, then lit it with a match. As she breathed in and out, a pungent smell of toasted nuts permeated the tent, making his eyes water. He thanked the Gods that she still seemed mentally like herself. Watching as she puffed, he wondered if the pain had passed, because nervousness had taken its place.

"Sister, everything will be fine."

She breathed out, and in a hoarse, trembling voice, on the verge of a sob, "No, I don't think it will be. You've taken me across the Rubicon. What other choice do I have but to help you see it through? Let the Gods sort us out after, if the Fyrrluens don't sort us out first."