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INTRODUCTION

Arboreum. Most people knew it as a place the Rector had uplifted with generous donations. Blaise considered it his favourite abode, his second home. The city of the poor – that's what his older brother called it, steadfast in his belief their father's financial help had only hidden the real face of Arboreum, which would lack even the most basic things without him.

"I don't understand what you see in those filthy people," Orlando snapped that afternoon, upon their arrival for the summer holidays. "If it weren't for our father, most of them wouldn't even know they had the gift of magic, let alone how to use it!"

Blaise, rosy-cheeked and of a spirit quite compassionate for an eight-year-old, simply shrugged.

"You didn't give them a chance. They're pretty smart, even smarter than me in some things!"

Orlando snorted, displaying arrogance as no ten-year-old should.

"Smarter than the Rector's son? I doubt it. And why would I give them a chance? What use do I have for them? What use do you have for them?"

Blaise didn't need to think long.

"Knowledge. I learn from them and they from me. And they're good company. I really like them!"

Orlando gazed at him sideways for a while, as if weighing his words carefully, only to jump off the richly embroidered couch and say:

"Nonsense. I'd rather stay in the palace and pester the servants or study with the wise-men."

Yet they were not in the palace but in the family's summer mansion, and he decided to have fun to forget where he was. Orlando narrowed his eyes and focused, aiming his ring at the high ceiling and firing green sparks. Leaves rained down on their heads, releasing squeaky sounds, and turned into a sticky mass that disappeared at the very touch. Blaise giggled and tousled his hair, cleaning it. He had a feeling the process wasn't as quick when his brother had fun at the servants' expense; they must have struggled for hours with the aftermath of his ploys. Noticing that his younger brother didn't join the game, Orlando abruptly stopped firing the rubbery, sticky substance.

"Go on, try it!"

Blaise stopped smiling. Still insecure about his magical powers although they had manifested two years ago, he shook his head and hid the hand with his ring behind his little back. But Orlando didn't budge. He felt a duty to encourage his younger brother and help him get familiar with his magic, so he extended a hand and spread his fingers.

"You have to talk to it, let it know you need it."

"What, my hand? Of course I need my hand," Blaise replied in confusion, observing his fingers as if they had just sprouted from his palm.

Orlando laughed.

"Magic, silly! I'm talking about magic!"

Blaise approached him with slight uncertainty and stared at his outstretched hand. Orlando's black onyx shone in perfect contrast to

his pale skin. Blaise spread his fingers too, testing if there was a trace of such magnificence on his hand. The quartz on his ring blended pleasantly with his rosy skin, but the effect was simply not the same. Although he possessed the gift of magic, Blaise still hadn't established a significant relationship with it, while his brother was extremely advanced for his age. He already had a bright future ahead of him, not only as the future Rector, but also as a great sorcerer. The rings they wore from the age of six like all young sorcerers, the heirlooms that greeted them as they entered the world of magic, were cherished possessions to Blaise, not for the strength they promised but the family value they held.

"Focus on what you want to do with it," Orlando said patiently.

Blaise frowned, searching for an inkling of connection to it.

"But... I don't know what I want to do!"

His candid statement baffled Orlando, who often had trouble deciding which cunning prank to pull on the staff or on one of the wise-men teaching him, so he did his best to spark that same desire in his younger brother.

"Start with something simple, let's say..."

He looked around.

"Aha!"

He rushed to an upholstered chair underneath a garish stained-glass window and grabbed its armrests. Pulling it into the centre of the wide room, he made sure the doll seated in it didn't slip out. It was almost as large as a girl their age would be, dressed in finery that commoners would covet as festive garbs. Knowing the exquisite taste of their mother, neither boy wondered why such a valuable doll sat in their summer mansion's parlour.

“Come on, change the colour of her dress,” Orlando suggested, crossing his arms.

Before long, Blaise’s forehead became beaded with sweat. He looked at his brother, whose expression emanated pure confidence as if he knew at least ten ways to do it. Blaise shifted his weight nervously. Noticing his unease, Orlando raised his arm and swished the sparkling ring through the air, and the doll’s dress responded with an instant change of its sombre beige colour to a lustrous blue.

Blaise’s spirits sank.

“How do you do it?” he asked softly. “If I tried that, she would turn to dust or... or nothing would happen.”

Orlando placed a hand on his shoulder, saddened that his brother had so much trouble with something that should have come naturally.

“You know, I was also afraid at first. I thought I was being governed by something I couldn’t control, and I didn’t like that, but in time I realised it’s just a part of me. Magic is under my control, not the other way around!”

Blaise still didn’t look convinced.

“Don’t worry. In time, you’ll understand what I mean,” Orlando said tenderly.

Still dispirited, Blaise remained silent and stared at the floor. He never told anyone, but he felt so estranged from magic that he often wished he didn’t even have it. His best friends, the orphans he had met right here in Arboreum just before his magic awakened, also possessed it but hardly ever used it. In fact, if it hadn’t been for Rector Lucas, the children in Arboreum wouldn’t have known how to cultivate their true nature, but even after his intervention, they would

rather continue their games than study magic. It seemed as if they preferred the simpler commoners' life, knowing magic would take over sooner or later and force them to do otherwise.

"What are you thinking about?"

Blaise flinched. Looking at his brother's face, he wondered if he could share those thoughts with him. He found nothing in his eyes but the affection they had shared all their lives, so he decided to express his fears.

"Sometimes..." he began, uncertain, his gaze fixed on the richly woven carpet. "Sometimes I wish that I were just a commoner. That I had no magic."

Orlando was taken aback, his eyes narrowing and brow furrowing under the weight of that statement.

"What do you mean?"

Blaise could feel his blush spreading. Suddenly he wasn't so sure his brother would understand, but his manners and mild nature prevented him from being silent when asked a question.

"I just... I just want to be ordinary."

His brother scowled, the deep, pensive frown making him look older than he was.

"We are not ordinary, Blaise! We'll never be ordinary. We're the Rector's sons, our veins have noble blood and magic no one else possesses! Don't you know that great things are expected of us?"

Blaise lowered his gaze again, now as heavy as if the whole world had collapsed on him.

"I know, I know."

Worried about his little brother, Orlando gave his shoulders a gentle shake.

"Listen, I'll be with you the entire time. When we get back home, I'll take you to my lessons with the wise-men. Until then, we can just play with magic, no pressure!"

Although he appreciated his brother's generous gesture, Blaise still didn't feel ready for such a thing. Feeling a little guilty, he asked:

"Couldn't we just play without magic? Just one more summer?"

Orlando twisted the ring nervously, looking at his onyx. He didn't like that proposal at all; how would he show off what he could do? How would he develop and grow as a sorcerer if he didn't dedicate every day to practising and studying? He was about to let his brother know, but then Phin, their chief courtier, came knocking.

"Forgive my intrusion, your majesties," he breathed with a bow, "but you have visitors."

Behind him, four smiling kids appeared.

"You've arrived!" Dexter exclaimed joyously.

"That carriage outside..." Onoria whistled without hiding her awe. "Is it for sale? I have a dozen golden apples and four wreaths."

Carmen rolled her eyes. "You need at least ten wreaths for such a carriage, Onoria!"

"Are you ready?" Theodorus asked, barely able to contain his excitement. "We're going to the lake, we heard the ducks there bark because one of them happened to bite a witch staying the night in Arboreum!"

Full of anticipation, Blaise turned to his older brother. Orlando's face remained expressionless until he noticed something about the newcomers.

"Where are your rings?"

Carmen looked at her hand as if she had to remind herself that, earlier that day, she had taken the ring off and left it at home.

"We don't need them!"

Orlando laughed in bewilderment and shook his head.

"What do you mean, you don't need them? That's your direct link to magic. Without them, you can't do any spellcasting."

Dexter shrugged. "We can do it later, we'll have lessons daily."

"Or weekly!" Theodorus added mischievously.

Orlando glanced at Blaise, who didn't show any signs of objecting.

"So, are you coming along?" Onoria asked, one foot already out the door.

"I'll stay here," Orlando said, resigned. "I don't want to miss my daily lessons."

"Ah yes, the heir to the throne stuff and all that." Carmen gave a polite smile, trying to show that she understood him. Deep down, though, she didn't understand why the boy was so serious for his age.

Blaise carefully took his ring off and placed it in the nearest decorative bowl.

"Are you sure you won't join us?" he asked again, hoping his brother would change his mind.

Orlando's displeasure grew at the sight of Blaise's ring glistening from a place it didn't belong.

"I'm sure."

Blaise quickly got lost in the murmur of his friends, who unanimously began to tell him everything he had missed since his last visit. The courtier who had ushered the children in gave Orlando a look that contained a hint of sympathy, then bowed deeply and closed the parlour door, leaving the boy alone.

Standing by the window, Orlando twisted the ring on his finger and pensively watched his brother and his friends walk away in an excited conversation. Indecisiveness simmered in him between the duty he wanted so much, to which he was so devoted, and the carefree play that attracted him like any other boy his age. Almost absent-mindedly, he removed the ring from his hand with a slow movement and gazed at its dazzling shine. The onyx flickered at him menacingly, as if it resented such a treatment. Orlando looked into the bowl where Blaise's ring rested and for a moment thought of putting away his own. But then the arrogant sense of importance prevailed in him, and he remembered he was the Rector's first-born son. Duty was of the utmost importance to him. With a firm look, he returned his ring to its place.

"I will be the Rector one day," he muttered. "I won't let anything jeopardise that!"

He felt satisfied with that conclusion and certain of his decision, aware that he would be a great ruler and an even greater sorcerer one day, precisely because of the sacrifices he would have to make along the way. Still, standing in that vast room all alone, Orlando couldn't help but feel a pang of sadness that he hadn't pushed his obligations aside to just be a boy for a few hours. He would never admit it to anyone, but a part of him agreed with Blaise, ordinary life had many benefits.

“Except... I’m not ordinary,” Orlando whispered.

He was overcome with a deep yearning that his brother was with him, but he clearly preferred a group of orphans over him.

At that moment, no sense of duty, no bright future, no haughty attitude, could prevent him from feeling like the loneliest boy in the whole world.

CHAPTER 1

THE TRAIL OF BLOOD

The echoes of the Dead Bell spread ominously through Ragusa, the sound of a blood-soaked morning. The atrium of the Rector's Palace was bustling with footsteps of those trying to get out as quickly and as quietly as possible. With the war finally underway, the recruits, soldiers, and magical beings had just left Ragusa, but those who remained, such as servants, dapifers, and sentries, were no less busy.

Hopelessly trying to moisten their dry, pale lips, the gatekeepers of the Rector's Palace whispered to everyone who passed by and pricked up their ears:

"They say the Master has executed the guards from the walls! He killed everyone who allowed the traitor to enter the city!"

Young recruits all over the city were looking behind their backs, suddenly painfully aware of their inexperience and fear, as if they were awaiting their own end, even though they were far from the scene of the crime. Among the older soldiers, on the other hand, there was less worry and more whispers and stories. A former member of the Delegation – a respected member of the Rector's circle and a widely known personality – was spotted this morning in the city he had betrayed. The Rector's howl at this knowledge reached the very clouds, tore the blue of the sky like a fragile fabric, and crackled out to the farthest walls. Deep cracks stood out wherever the eye could see, both on the aristocratic palaces and the more modest

houses. The members of the Senate waited in the offices of the Palace, more shaken by the damage to their luxurious homes than by the abrupt summons to an urgent meeting.

Marojica Kaboga waited in the Rector's private chamber, all alone. He didn't need a servant summoning him or a magically sent message to know what awaited him. Leaving the scene of the conflict with Marin Ghetaldus, he headed straight here, to the place where he would pay the price for his failure. Which kind, he didn't know yet, but it was inevitable.

Staring at the grand painting in front of him, he wondered where it all went wrong. Only yesterday, thousands of human and inhuman beings marched out of Ragusa with instructions to trample town after town, and he and the Master, as well as a group of select sorcerers, were to join them today. Kaboga was not privy to why the Master had wished to delay joining the war expedition, but he had served him long enough to believe it could easily be attributed to his penchant for theatrics. He had not the slightest doubt that the Master intended the news of the cruel devastation of war to reach the Lunarians, carrying the most important one on wounded wings, that their cruelest enemy had not yet begun his carnage. But the plan was thwarted by the accursed Marin Ghetaldus, who came in and out of the Rector's city at dawn.

Kaboga recalled the past hour, relentlessly revisiting the images in his mind as if there was even a sliver of a chance something could have happened differently. Marin Ghetaldus was pinned to the ground and only a sigh away from his death. Kaboga's well-calculated and excellently executed attacks caused him to lose his wand. Thus unarmed and weakened, he reached for the only weapon Kaboga could not take away: ancient knowledge. Kaboga knew there

existed an ancient magic that was within the sorcerers' reach in every life-threatening situation, but at that moment, when he found himself bent over his hated former mentor, it was far from his mind. He could still feel the strong mixture of Marin's sweat and doubt as he groaned on the stone ground, while Kaboga, a man half his age and at peak strength, bathed in the sweet knowledge that he was superior as both a soldier and a sorcerer. But, with that, he also felt a sour taste in his mouth when Marin mumbled:

"Give my regards to Orlando. Tell him we're coming for him."

And just like that, he vanished.

What a colossal mistake, Kaboga thought bitterly. Underestimating my opponent. Such an amateur!

It took him a long time to recover from the powerful residue of Marin's spell and realise that his former mentor had slipped through his fingers.

He had to have turned into something living, the spell required it.

Once again, Kaboga's restless mind went over the moment when Marin's flash subsided; he spun frantically around like a hungry, rabid animal whose clutches just lost a delicious prey. Distraught, frenzied, he searched for anything alive, not only to kill but to understand his opponent. He wanted to get into his head, capture his thoughts, predict his next move... High above sounded the cries of birds, in the stone blocks – the sprightliness of the Parapets, in the unseen streets – the rustling of ferocious rodents... and he could have been any of them, or none.

That is how the Master found Kaboga when he climbed the stairs with his entourage, intent on personally confronting the greatest traitor Ragusa had ever known – dismayed and furious,

crushing the stones around him like brittle, dry leaves. The Rector read his subject's face contorted with rage, the marks of struggle on the stone street, and the discarded wand he knew so well... and then he turned into an earthquake and chaos, shaking the city with a roar that sent the brave to pray and the cowards to weep.

Standing thus in the Rector's chamber, Kaboga became aware of the speed with which his body healed and the fact that this gift had come from the very person he had failed. The lavish painting that spanned the entire wall and held his gaze, telling the story of a ruler and a united, conquered world, was most welcome to him. As if it knew, it sympathetically offered its lonely audience these beautiful last moments, its harmony caressing his eyes with a pleasure he tried to remember. If he had to die, why not do it with a good view?

He'd always known he would meet his end like an honourable soldier, and he could handle that, but incompetent? That would keep him turning in his grave. Then another concern, as terrible and screaming as the red colour dominating the painting, suddenly gathered all his thoughts into a collection of new chaos. Kaboga feverishly noticed his anger giving way to fear, filling his lungs with acidity that rose all the way to his throat.

What if I'd let him get away on purpose?

His stomach churned.

Stunned, he made himself relive the event yet again, the moment when he pinned Marin to the ground and stared into his eyes, eager to see fear, eager to hear begging, intoxicated by the feeling of superiority over the man who had imposed his will on him for years...

He closed his eyes. I wanted to kill him, I swear, I yearned for his blood!

He repeated the truth, his truth, over and over as if he had just made up his own prayer, but he couldn't escape reality. Unwittingly or not, whether he called it a momentary hesitation or a prolonged indulgence, he did allow Marin to escape by giving him a brief – so brief – but sufficient and, as it turned out, precious moment to pull himself together enough to reach for the ancient spell that would save him.

A slight, barely perceptible change of the air in the room informed Kaboga that he was no longer alone. The materialisation occurring in the chamber exuded darkness, although noon was close at hand. Kaboga bowed his head, thrusting his chin into his chest with sharp force.

No matter what, I will die as I have served, with honour.

“Look at me.”

Kaboga instantly raised his eyes and obediently stood at attention, like a recruit trying to impress his general.

The Master's luxurious tunic was streaked with a thick liquid that slowly dripped onto the white carpet. The purple damask had darkened under the amount it had soaked in, almost shamefully hiding what it was, if not for the silver fringes that hung from the edges – their splattered surface betraying it was blood. Instead of the fear of finally facing his end, Kaboga was overwhelmed by a surprisingly strong feeling of admiration; His Majesty was not known for getting his hands dirty.

The Rector's face was expressionless and his curls flawless – a stark contrast to the clothes that cried out on behalf of those whose essence was woven into them. He stretched out his hand and, without a word, wrapped his long fingers around Kaboga's head. A sharp pain gnawed at his servant's skull, searching for a way to what the Master wanted to see. Without uttering a sound, refusing to show

weakness in addition to the incompetence he had already displayed, he allowed his Master to see with his eyes, hear with his ears, and exhale in anger with his lungs.

Give my regards to Orlando. Tell him we're coming for him – The Rector mockingly repeated Marin's defiant greeting. He pulled his fingers from Kaboga's head, taking away the internal pressure along with his beautiful fingers, decorated with expensive rings.

"You were the best soldier I ever had. The best."

Although he opened his eyes and tried to maintain a stoic, appropriate demeanour, Kaboga kept his head down, staring hard at the white carpet and the large drops of blood, already drying.

"How can I ever trust you with a task again and be sure you will carry it out?"

Kaboga remained silent, knowing very well that his answers were unworthy of being spoken. He allowed himself to be overwhelmed by the power of the Master's words, trying to take as much guilt and remorse as possible to the grave, as an eternal punishment without penance. But the impatient silence ticking like a wound clock demanded an answer, and he realised he had been given a unique, unexpected opportunity to redeem himself.

Otherwise, he'd be dead by now.

His lips pressed into a thin line, resembling a blunt knife that had already served its purpose. An idea suddenly presented itself as a solution, and he swung his left arm, letting his fingers brush against his right one. A sharp, searing pain scraped through his nerves under his touch, and fresh blood spattered the Master's already bloodied tunic, joining the essence of his slain comrades.

With a thud, Kaboga's right fist dropped onto the floor.

"For you," he sputtered, placing his left hand on his chest and bowing.

The icy, rhythmic laughter that filled the chamber perfectly matched the throb of nerves pulsating in Kaboga's stump, as the blood that trickled from it caused the carpet beneath their feet to lose its snowy likeness forever.

"Cut off both legs too, and maybe I'll consider you again!"

Swallowing hard, weakened by the amount of blood he was rapidly losing and under considerable shock, Kaboga finally dared to look up. The Rector was no longer smiling, but his features expressed clear benevolence. He snapped his fingers and instantly sealed Kaboga's gaping wound.

"You have served me faithfully for a long time. I'll give you one more chance, Kaboga. But if you let me down, I'll tear off your limbs one by one, skin and bone. Without magic."

Kaboga bowed even deeper, trying to show his immeasurable gratitude. From the silence that came over his mind, he heard a buzzing in his ears. He didn't dare think of anything.

"You may be my favourite, but you will not go unpunished..."

Kaboga didn't even have time to straighten or look up when a magical rush seized him and stopped his blood flow, clogged his veins, pressed on his lungs, crushed all his thoughts, and brought him to his knees... and then left as suddenly as it had come.

"...which means you will not enjoy my previous mercy. Stand up."

Kaboga immediately scrambled to his feet, feeling as if a large part of him was missing. He glanced at his stump but then realised it wasn't the loss of his hand.

“We leave at the strike of noon. Find yourself a wand before then.”

The Rector dematerialized silently. The painting on the wall looked at the stunned sorcerer with a loving gaze, as a mother would look at a son who had offended his father. Kaboga's body trembled violently as if it could hardly wait for a moment of privacy to express all the trauma it had experienced. Overwhelmed by the knowledge that he had fought his mentor who escaped unexpectedly, that he lost a hand and the ability to cast spells without a magical channel, and that the cruellest ruler in the world had just spared his life even though he had never done so before, the sorcerer folded at the waist and threw up.



In the heart of Praria, at the place where oak trees were planted in the form of the famous oval symbol of the city, it was time to rest, at least for the old commander. Hannon let his soldiers do as they pleased, as long as they let him enjoy what he considered a well-earned respite undisturbed. Although he held a high rank that didn't require him to dirty his own hands, he was happy to do so, not only to feed on the admiring glances of young recruits with a hunger for carnage, but also to quench his own thirst for the same. Long years of service were behind him – the bloodshed never lost its charm – but they brought along age and weariness, and Hannon chose to divide his time as he pleased. Deservedly so! Surrounded by his own victims, he toasted with the famous Prarian wine made of feathery raspberries.

Praria, a town near Epidaurum, was smaller in population but larger in territory. It was common knowledge that its soil was ideal for vineyards, which is why almost every home here had an abundant source of income. The Rector's order was clear – start with Epidaurum and continue town by town, village by village, dwelling by dwelling, leaving nothing behind but fire. It was Hannor's wish that the fresh troops, composed mostly of young men in their prime, should feast on the most famous reasons for Prarian glory – wine and women – before rushing to Epidaurum. They'd only been here for a couple of hours, but the job was already done. To that end, Hannor decided to clean his favourite dagger before giving the order to depart.

Once upon a time, it had belonged to Rector Lucas, the father of the current Rector and the ruler of old Ragusa. After that fateful day which was supposed to be his wedding celebration, the Master personally presented him his father's dagger with a sour smile and a remark to use it as often and as cruelly as possible. It was a token of gratitude that Hannor had been by his side since the moment everything changed, when the old Ragusa found itself buried under the ashes of a wedding. After several flasks of the local wine, reputed to be very intoxicating, which he had helped himself to from the cellar of the last Prarian home he had ravaged, Hannor randomly wondered why his favourite weapon, often covered in warm blood, was categorised as cold? Amused by that thought, he chuckled to himself for a while, until a sense of duty replaced the fun, as military training dictated.

I should gather the troops and head to Epidaurum, he thought.

He lifted his hazy gaze from his golden blade and wondered where he could possibly gather them. It didn't take him long to

remember the palace of the city elders, the magnificent building in front of which the leaders were executed immediately after entering the city. It was an old military tactic, kill the biggest, then have fun with the smallest. Hannon laughed mockingly. The attack on Praria was a complete surprise. The population, unprepared, unarmed, and mostly occupied with manual labour in their vineyards, met their attackers with rakes and shocked expressions. As if to match that memory, from somewhere behind the commander came a soft, desperate sob.

“Damn it!” Hannon cursed.

Rising to his feet with visible difficulty, due to the amount of wine he had drunk, his physical fatigue, and the heavy armour he was wearing, the sorcerer made his way to the source of the feeble cry. A young man with severe wounds raised his palm towards his executioner, gurgling something unintelligible. Hannon didn't doubt he was begging for mercy like the damned coward he was, so he grabbed him roughly by the hair, pulled his head back, and cut his throat with a smooth stroke of his dagger. The young victim's eyes rolled back in their sockets, and his lips hung open in an unanswered plea for help.

Throwing him to the ground, Hannon spat on his back in disgust.

“Commoner filth! Now I have to clean it again!”

The surroundings were relatively quiet owing to the amount of work done. Even the Arias, annoyingly loud creatures who shrieked almost the entire time, now lazily circled the heavens and squinted downwards, as if they weren't overly impressed with the ease with which the city had been subdued.

Then the silence shattered under the scream of a young woman. She ran past Hannor in tears, begging for help, and three men were at her heels. Hannor jerked his hand and tripped her legs with a simple spell, serving her on a platter to his lecherous troops. As the young men began to hungrily tear at her clothes and restrain her with magic, Hannor sheathed his dagger, scowling. He left the most famous Prarian promenade and resolutely strode away from the woman's desperate screams, trying to control the headache she had caused with her wails.

The city palace was a short walk away, but the sorcerer still had the opportunity to admire his soldiers' work. Occasionally, a few screams of frightened, not-long-for-this-life citizens pierced the air, but more often, only the shouting of orders could be heard. Smoke billowed from all the homes, which meant they had been stripped of everything of value, and judging by the luxurious, richly decorated facades and balconies of the Prarian houses, the local population lived very nice lives.

When he reached the famous building of the city elders, the commander allowed himself another moment to admire its architecture. The City Palace was a rectangular building dominated by tall, brightly lit stained-glass windows and wild blue ivy. It extended to one side into a huge terrace made of a ruddy stone, filled with benches and unusual seats, normally a gathering place where Prarians received public notices. Hannor stood in the middle of it and fired a spell into the air. Soaring high, it exploded into thousands of dark particles, fluttering aimlessly in the air like decapitated butterflies. It didn't take long for the military troops to start pouring in, instantly responding to the commander's order to assemble. Submissive nods and admiring glances began to surround Hannor in record time. Maybe it was the mixture of wine and adrenaline, and

maybe it was the awe that was shown to him at every turn, but Hannon savoured these sweet moments, hiding his smug smile as he waited for the gathering to end. Finally, when he was sure that the last of their boots had tapped the stone ground, Hannon stepped before his troops and spoke with a voice so booming that the local birds flew up in fear, straight into the deathly claws of the ravenous Arias.

"You have received your Master's reward even before the task was completed!"

Appreciative whistling from several young men filled the air.

"The only thing greater than serving the Rector is the reward that comes with it!"

Loud approval sounded from the sea of men spread before him.

"The glory of our ruler is eternal!"

"The glory of our ruler is eternal!"

The echo of thousands rang through the magnificent edifice in the heart of a city that never should have heard them.

"And now, march!"

He solemnly waved his hand towards the west.

"To Epidaurum!"

A roar of delight filled the sky, joined by the Arias and their terrible screams. Leaving the palace of the Prarian elders behind, the military companies started marching, but only symbolically. Owing to the generosity of their Master and the power of materialisation he'd granted them, they were able to move to their new victims in an instant.

None of the citizens of Epidaurum could have guessed that utter destruction awaited them on that ordinary working day.



In one of the houses where the facade had only recently been completed, a middle-aged man wheezed as he regained consciousness. The cough that came over him afterwards was raspy and watery, persistent in its intention to exhaust him completely. Only when he silenced the cry of his lungs with great difficulty and partially successfully focused his gaze, the man saw that the blue carpet, on which he was lying, was completely soaked in blood. He cried out, called for help, but no one answered. Overwhelmed by concern for the rest of the household, not knowing where or how they were, the man defiantly wrestled with unconsciousness, frantically thinking about what he could do.

Not now. Not like this...

Severe injuries that he couldn't even enumerate kept him pinned to the ground, and just as he was about to surrender to the deep wounds that exhausted him with each new sigh, a desperate thought dawned on him. He remembered a day not so long ago in the cave when a new magical channel of communication had been shared with him and a handful of other people.

The Call.

With difficulty, he placed a hand on the nape of his neck, which was already growing hot, and closed his eyes.

Marin, please answer. Marin... please...

But time passed, and there was nothing on the other side. The man's sighs thinned out and the pain intensified, and he felt his head fall heavily despite his superhuman effort to prevent it. He started frantically thinking about the other people in that cave and the names he could call, but his mind just stopped cooperating. The otherworldly side beckoned him, promising him peace and tranquillity, far from the horrors that his family and his wife's hometown had just experienced.

I must warn them... I must tell them the Rector is coming...

But it was already too late. The man was relieved when his hand fell, and his face touched the softness of the carpet. With his last breath, his thoughts were no longer with the Lunarians who had no idea that the war had started in a tiny place like Praria. Instead, he thought of his family, hoping that their reunion would be as joyous as the last few days they had spent visiting extended family.

Behind his body, right above the fireplace, a centuries-old tapestry rested undisturbed, with the family coat of arms and surname embroidered on it.

Costa Aranai had placed it there with his own hands as a gift to his wife's father, the owner of this home.



A burst of men cheering and birds crying brushed the walls of a grandiose house in the immediate vicinity of the central palace. Deliciously dazed and sleepy, Helena didn't even stir, but Radix sat up in bed in a panic.

"What is happening?!"

The sorceress stretched like a lazy cat.

"We'll find out. Don't worry, sweetie. We're part of the Master's inner circle." She gave him a bright smile. "Nothing happens without us!"

Radix's young face, still holding no promise of a scraggly beard anytime soon, frowned in suspicion at her words. In his short service, he had found himself in the presence of His Majesty only a few times and, although they did not sound particularly convincing now, he heard and lived for her words far more than the Master's.

Admittedly, it wasn't him that he lay with every night...

To Helena's disappointment, the household they had broken into had only two members, but it was luxurious and expensive, which eventually lifted her spirits. Although she had killed three dozen Prarian citizens before crossing this threshold, she was insatiable. In so many things. When Radix joined her – that is, when she coaxed him into joining her with very little effort and very many moments like this where she was naked – he found himself under her wing enjoying all the benefits she herself was showered with. Whether it was the ostentatious clothes tailored for her, the luxurious home in Ragusa, or the welcome she received wherever she visited, the young sorcerer enjoyed equal rights without having done anything special to deserve them. He had to admit she hadn't lied to him; when she took him under her wing, she promised him everything he could wish for and more. And yet, the words she had spoken hung in the air as if they themselves were unsure of how to act.

Seeing the doubt on his face, Helena got out of bed, letting the late morning rays dance over her body, celebrating the youth that still hadn't left her. Tousled blonde hair spilled over her shoulders, matching her pale skin perfectly.

“Don’t believe me?” she asked gently, wrapping a strand of hair around her index finger.

Radix's throat danced. He blinked under her seductive appearance, feigning confidence. He'd been fighting long before the war even started, but only with himself; and since he'd been following in her footsteps, they'd mostly consisted of playacting a grown man who didn't want to fall at her feet every time she looked at him.

“Of course I believe you, it's just...”

He cleared his throat of the initial words that came up and used the right ones, those a grown man would use, because logic, he quickly learned, followed men, not boys.

“If nothing happens without us, why are the troops cheering?”

Helena's fair face darkened, and her shoulders straightened. His apprehension finally got to her. Convinced, however, that there was nothing more going on outside than a celebration glorifying the victory over Praria, in a few quick steps she reached a large window with stained glass on which vine leaves glistened. When she opened it, the sun's rays poured into the bedroom, celebrating another day as if they hadn't touched the bloodstained earth. Helena saw the troops heading west in perfect formation, accompanied by an endless flock of Arias, and Arenas crawling around them, drowning the burnt houses in their sand like in crystalized honey. She stood thus naked and barefoot under the rising sun, fragile and strong at the same time – like a storm brewing on the horizon, still uncertain if it would swell the open sea.

“What do you see?”

The sorceress watched silently as the military units completely disappeared from the beautiful Prarian landscape.

They left me...

Radix found himself behind her. Looking over the desolate city where no one but the two of them was left, he understood why she had gone quiet so suddenly. Helena staggered away from the window as if she couldn't stand the sight of the world outside this room. The young sorcerer knew where the troops were headed since Praria was just a momentary fun to them, so he wasn't too worried since it was easy to materialise on their heels. Then he saw her face and swallowed his words.

"I was at rock bottom when the Master found me."

The young man was stunned. Helena was not an outgoing person, and this was not the moment he had ever hoped for. He knew very well how much she valued the armour she wore even when completely naked.

"For the first time in many, many years, someone gave me a hand instead of a banknote. The Master gave me meaning and purpose, and pulled me out of the muck I'd been stuck in since I was thirteen."

She turned to him, her face streaked with heavy memories.

"Did you know I had to sell myself just to have something to eat?"

Radix hoped he would succeed at hiding the blush that rushed to his cheeks. He'd heard stories and gossip; passing soldiers and recruits shouted to congratulate him on a 'good catch', but their whistles were not the only clues to her past. His gaze involuntarily slipped to her thighs. Under the morning rays, deep, ugly scars that

he was never allowed to touch looked like heavy snowflakes had left visible indentations in untouched snow.

"They found me at my father's grave, said they were his old friends. Naramh-Piu, to which they took me, showed me that what they had was not friendship. It was a debt. I was thrown into a working relationship in that city that doesn't sleep... and doesn't breathe, because what happens in it cannot be called life. My father was an alcoholic and a smuggler, but if he knew his daughter was sold on his own grave..."

Her dark half-smile didn't reach her expressionless eyes.

"Well... I don't know if he would toast the buyers or bash their heads in with a bottle."

She ran her fingers over the scars on her thighs. They were symbols of all she had survived in Naramh-Piu, a guarantee that she would never again go through what she had there.

"Sometimes it would be three, sometimes thirteen of them. Sometimes they would whip me with red-hot lianas, and sometimes they would force me to do unimaginable, humiliating things. But no one ever, ever touched me."

She raised her eyes to him and pursed her lips.

"Not the way you would touch a child. Innocently. Benevolently."

Her voice cracked under memories that shouldn't have been there.

"No one has ever offered me a glass of water, a crust of bread, or a kind word."

Images of a rotten city whose visitors had rotten thoughts came into her head, and she stared at the stained-glass window, seeking

refuge in its feast of bright colours from the darkness that dragged her inexorably downwards.

“Decades of rape, sleeping in squalid holes like a dog, stealing, lying, hiding... and then He came. The fearsome terror. Naramh-Piu stopped in its tracks upon his arrival!”

Her eyes sparkled, and a dazed, enchanted smile bloomed on her face.

“He was beautiful, youthful, fearless. He cleared half the city of the people who had harmed me.”

She closed her eyes under a rush of grateful emotions.

“He held out his hand and promised me the life I had always dreamed of. The life I deserved.”

Radix felt completely helpless and, above all, scared. Her vulnerability had caught him off guard. He took a step and reached to touch her where he was allowed, where her skin didn't speak of nightmares, but the board creaked beneath his feet, and she raised a hand to stop him. She could smell the stench of that city and the perfume of that day, so she reached deeper into that precious memory, wanting to relive her salvation.

“He was so caring, so determined in my well-being...”

Her voice was velvety and soft, almost singing. She caressed the windowpane, moving her fingertips about as if examining the rough surface.

“...and everything he wanted in return, everything he ever asked of me...”

Her fingers slipped away and returned to the ugly recesses of her skin, to a well-known place that would forever bear witness to her story.

“...was to deliver the head of my brother...”

Radix swallowed hard. For some unknown reason, his sister came to mind. As she had come, so she went, a shadow of the bond they shared in a long-gone life, just like Helena and her brother.

“...the man who betrayed me long before he betrayed the Master.”

Helena turned to the young man with a dreamy expression on her face. She stood so close to him that he smelled the sweet scent of her neck, where she loved to be kissed the most.

“Don't look at me like that. I don't need your sympathy, sweet boy. I need your faith!”

She moved only slightly, but in a room filled with the sun's long fingers, coloured by the stained glass that surrounded them, her hair shone like a golden halo, giving her the image of an angel reluctantly stepping on the ground. Her advanced age feared her youthfulness, giving up its place, promising moments like this for centuries to come. Radix looked at her mesmerised, lost in his desire to please her, to save her, to be everything she ever wanted, ready to kneel at her feet and forever kiss the steps she took to a better future.

“I need you to believe me when I tell you that great things await us, Radix. Everything that we never had, and everything that we always wanted, is waiting for us.” Plump, ruddy lips curved into a sincere smile. “The master promised me that. He pulled me up from the bottom to take me to the top.”

“You're already there,” said the young, smitten man, drawing out the mocking smile she used to humiliate him with, which he never registered. “You are incredible!”

Helena found herself only millimetres from his face.

"You have no idea about anything, my dear boy," she whispered in his ear, "but fortunately for you, I am willing to teach you."

Radix felt a rush of desire and the need to spin her again in the Prarian satin bed, but she had other plans. She grabbed her wand and dressed with just one flick of it, then threw them both into a well-known maelstrom of materialisation that took them far away from the city which, from that moment, housed not a single living person.

The young sorcerer shied away from materialisations precisely because of such headaches that drained all his energy. To his great surprise, when he felt solid ground under his feet again, he saw in front of him not a commotion of military troops, but the empty streets of Ragusa.

"What are we doing here?!" he hissed, grabbing Helena's hand. "We were sent on a mission to Epidaurum!"

The firm features on her face let him know that the recent moment of weakness she had displayed might as well have never happened; Hannor's reckless behaviour had struck her deeply, and she wasn't about to let it go.

"My Master," she said as she hurried down the street, "would never allow me to be treated like that. Just wait until he hears what his errand boy did to me! Damn dog, he will burn by my own hand, mark my words!"

Radix followed her hurried steps in silence, wondering how, in the name of everything holy, would the Rector react when he saw they had returned from their mission as soon as they had set out, with a complaint about the behaviour of his Commander-in-chief. But more than by that question, he was bothered by the noticeably different atmosphere in the city. Its emptiness was understandable

due to the huge amount of people who had left it, but there was a kind of tension in the air, something vaguely unusual... and the few faces that peeked through the windows of the surrounding houses did so in order to quickly close the shutters. Radix noticed a lot of damage to their walls as well, but when he finally spoke, they found themselves in front of the main door of the Rector's Palace, where two dapifers stood at attention.

They passed in without any problems, but near the atrium, they were stopped by a doorkeeper whose stomach had swelled so much that the gold buttons of his richly embroidered waistcoat threatened to burst without dignity. Visibly distracted, he stared at them with small, anger-filled eyes, waiting for an explanation of what they were doing here on this difficult day.

"We want to see His Majesty." Helena's voice was haughty and high, emphasising her superiority.

"Master is not here."

Helena impatiently tapped her thigh with her wand. "Where is he?"

The doorkeeper flinched, genuinely amazed at her open insolence. Confident in his powers, diligently doing his job, he puffed out his chest, unconsciously testing the strength of his overburdened vest.

"I am not familiar with the details of His Majesty's movements, and even if I were, I would certainly not lightly share such information with random passers-by!"

He hadn't even said the last word when he found Helena's bony wand thrust hard into his throat. His Adam's apple bounced wildly as his eyes closed and he came to terms with his sudden end.

"Let him go."

All three looked at the front door at the same time, where Florens stood next to a dapifer in a deep bow. Helena tossed the scared doorkeeper away like a worn shoe. With a squeal, he muttered a few thanks to his unexpected saviour and, with a quick bow, slipped through the nearest door.

"What are you doing here?" Florens asked, observing them with narrowed eyes. "Shouldn't you be in Epidaurum by now?"

He was in full armour. A wand rested on his left hip and a sword on his right, making Helena wonder why he seemed battle-ready even though he was yet to march to war. However, his appearance was no concern of hers, so she defiantly thrust herself into his face.

"Who are you to demand I report to you? And what would you say if I asked what you are doing here?"

Florens' eyebrows rose high, giving his unflinchingly firm expression a somewhat human touch.

"I have nothing to hide. I came to inform the servants of today's losses, of course. Nothing gets the day started like an opportunity to let a mother know her son was killed by his own Master! And I have to visit a good number of women, I can tell you!"

Someone else's face would betray the question even before it was spoken out loud, but not Helena's. Weakness, including ignorance, was out of the question.

"What happened?" Radix blurted hastily, causing Helena to flush.

Only a small flower of surprise dawned on Florens' face, and then a whole bouquet of joy. "Oh, that's right! You don't know!"

Bursting with laughter, he let the moment take him completely, clutching his stomach as the sword thumped against his armour. Helena's face twisted with the desire to stop the hideous sound of his laughter forever, closing his throat with a very dry and very painful spell.

"The only thing more fun than this knowledge can be watching your reaction when you finally hear what happened here," he said, beaming with joy bursting from his every pore.

"Listen to me carefully, you wretch!" Helena snapped, raising her wand, but Florens immediately interrupted her with a wave of his hand.

"No, no, you'll like it, trust me!

She kept her wand firmly aimed at his head. "Speak!"

Florens straightened and sighed deeply as if preparing for a very important performance. A smile escaped to his face again and again.

"Early this morning, a certain sorcerer broke into Ragusa, slipped past all the sentries and dapifers, and finally, past Marojica Kaboga."

A wave of incomprehension went through Helena's body, but she kept her expression stoic, fully concentrating on the rest of his story.

"We don't know if he came to pick up something or someone, but we know that he tricked Kaboga in the fight and – poof! – vanished into thin air." Florens shook his head in disbelief. "Kaboga is angry, but the Master, oh! He is indescribably furious!"

Her defences loosened, albeit unconsciously, and Helena slowly lowered her wand. Young Radix looked now at one, then at

the other, his mouth wide open at the knowledge that one of the enemies could so easily sneak into the Rector's home, and escape even more easily.

"And best of all?" Florens continued while pure mischief spread across his face, causing a new excitement he didn't even try to stop. "It was a person very close to you."

Helena's gaze darkened, and her hands relaxed, falling limply on her sides, unprepared for the information she hadn't even heard to the end, but which she already knew.

Florens gave them a mischievous wink.

"Now excuse me, I have to tell a lot of people that, in fact, Marin Ghetalduis is to blame for the death of their loved ones."

His whistling bounced off the stone walls of the palace, intertwining with the echo of footsteps that witnessed his departure. Helena's eyes darted frantically across the gorgeous mosaic on the floor. Although she knew that Radix was looking at her cautiously, expecting her violent reaction that would surely harm anyone nearby, she was completely frozen. The thought of her brother walking these streets this morning, so close to her after so many years, filled her with a mix of feelings she just wasn't ready for...

Except for anger.

When it came to her brother, she knew that feeling very, very well.