The Flower and the Blade

by turquoise_moon

Summary

"I'd always be grateful to your family, Sorey... for giving me a home when nobody else did. That's why I won't let you waste your time on this! Being who you are, it's your duty to stay alive, to keep those raving lunatics off the throne and to do what's right, no matter the cost!"

Sorey flinched, fingers aching to touch something, someone. "Mikleo, is that all you think of me? Do you really think I want anything more than being with-"

"It's not what you want that counts, is it?" Mikleo breathed. "It's what you'd settle for that matters."

A thousand years after the Age of Chaos came the Great Seraphim War, which the Odelian Chronicles say, saw the end of all seraph existence in the world. Six centuries have passed... Kreveldor, the legendary battleground of the last seraphim, is now a thriving empire, uniting all kingdoms under the Overlord of the West. But to a prince destined for such greatness, desperate choices have to be made to fulfill that destiny.

Even if it means running away to learn more about himself, about the world... and the kind of love that can bring a king and an empire to its knees.
Formerly titled "Broken Pieces"

Sorry guys but I changed the title for one obvious reason: there are a lot of fics with the SAME TITLE already. I also took the liberty of revising the chapters and removed the whole work from the series "The Emerald Throne and the Mooncaster" since I don't know if I could really write a long, multi-part series for this one. If I find the time, I might develop a part 2 but that would be too ambitious of me, considering I haven't even finished my first fic, "When the World Revolves Around You."

I know my stories are awfully slow in the beginning and the dialogues are LONG. I fell in love with Zestiria because of the character interactions, so the influence is there. And I always include canon elements... Actually, I dream of a Zestiria sequel (I keep wishing the original writers would launch one themselves) and the canon elements sort of give me a personal comfort that hey, this is STILL Zestiria! When I do bend the canon, I try to establish the new elements early on before launching into the main action. So that explains the slow start.

Btw, THANKS FOR THOSE WHO CONTINUE TO SUPPORT THIS FIC! I'll always be a ToZ fan, so I'm gonna read and write as much as I can when I have time. Thanks again and enjoy!

DISCLAIMER: The original story behind Tales of Zestiria and Tales of Zestiria the X belongs to Bandai-Namco and Ufotable respectively. Since the writer makes no profit from this labor of love and, in fact, struggles against shame and hopeless obsession every time she has to write an additional chapter for her self-pleasure and that of others like her, she respectfully makes a plea against any law suit. :D

Obsession has no shame, by the way. You've been warned. ^_^
Between midnight and the early hours of dawn Mikleo felt his soul rise, felt his body being dragged into waking as something in the flickering, sputtering flame of the bedside lamp gave him warning. This was hardly the first time it happened, but just as his eyes were beginning to adjust to the dimness, his body alarmingly tenses up at the sight of the figure lying next to him—the one whose gaping mouth always has the slightest drivel of saliva on one side, whose swamp of chestnut-brown hair always seems exactly the same whether asleep or awake.

For a second, he wondered whether he was seeing something real or nothing but a play of shadows heightening some foolish expectation or fantasy. But then the weight of that arm pressed against his stomach seemed incredibly real—and heavy.

Mikleo shifted on his side, pushing the arm off him gently to let it fall on the bedcovers. With an index finger, he poked at the cheek of the one facing him with a pillow still pressed tightly between his legs.

“Hey, sleepyhead, time to get up.”

Eyelids move, a low groan ensues from the slightly open mouth, and a pair of emerald-green eyes flicker open, tiredly, hesitantly. But even with only the tiniest hint of light peeking softly into the shadows, Mikleo could glimpse the slow, almost playful smile lighting up the same face that always seems to be gazing at something incredibly bright and mesmerizing.

“Uhh, Mikleo... is it morning already?”

Mikleo looked around him. It seemed impossible to tell from the dim light of the candles but...

“Sorey... I don’t think you should be here at this hour.”

"Eeeh?" Languid eyes light up with a sleepy frown. “Not to worry, Mikleo. When I become Overlord, my first royal declaration shall be "Let the King sleep where he wants or be damned."

"Right. Remind me to fix the royal stables for that then."

"Hey, I mean it... Besides, we both know I don't sleep well on my own. At least when we were kids, we always end up sleeping on the same bed."

“My point exactly. Don’t you think you’re too old, big and heavy to be rooming with me? On top of that, you snore like a pig.”

Sorey throws back the covers and sits up facing him, eyes now wide-awake. "Whaa! When did I-"

"All night? Probably?"

"C’mon! I know I don't act like royalty all the time, but I do try to be a gentleman most of the time!"

“True, I’ll give you an ‘E’ for effort. How’s that?”

“Huh, at least I don’t talk in my sleep like some people do.”
"I do not!"

Something in the amused smile that lighted up Sorey’s face made Mikleo almost want to run away. “To be honest, it’s not like I hate it, I mean the way you call out my name in your sleep... I must admit it’s sort of… cute.”

"Cute?" Mikleo could have hissed louder had the walls been completely sound-proof. "A punch on the face would definitely be cute on you, Sorey!"

"-----o-----o

“My lord, if there is anything else you should need…”

The voice jolted Mikleo into awareness, forcing him to open his eyes to a pair of warm, brown ones gazing directly into his. For a second, it made him wonder whether he was still asleep, whether the face behind the whirl of light and sound was just a sliver of a lucid dream. But as his vision slowly began to adjust to the view, it became clear that he must have dozed off while sitting up on the same pristine-white, four-poster bed where he had been reading since he woke up that morning.

True, being cooped up in a room with no one to talk to, much less argue with, was absolutely boring. But there wasn’t much use complaining about it either. It was purely his fault for even considering getting away with something so dangerous, such as sneaking into a private library to borrow, without permission, a rare and precious book. Of course, even if he had his own interests in venturing so far as to get his hands on something forbidden and taboo, he would have to admit that his primary goal was really childish: he wanted to win a casual bet he had made with someone who had the habit of bragging about his easy victories.

Being caught red-handed, however, was not what he had expected, the outcome of which doomed him to solitary confinement for three days. He could only surmise that the punishment was intended to give him the sublime pleasure of reflecting on his atrocious crime (but seriously, if he had to be punished for book theft on each and every occasion, he might as well become a recluse). On hindsight, Mikleo thought that this was no different from self-exile. Bedroom confinement could not be all that bad, so long as he need not recite the Atoner's Creed (all seven hundred and seventy lines of it) for the redemption of his soul.

Of course, in front of Bishop Heldalf, those thoughts must be kept private; in the presence of the Holy Council, he was made to swear before all the saintly statues that he would mend his broken ways and seek the enlightened path—whatever that meant.

Blinking several times to clear his vision, Mikleo regarded the sloe-eyed, young maid waiting on him with a startled half-smile. He must have dozed off unawares and had some random dream or daydream, which was already making him feel rather embarrassed.

“Uh, thanks, Cazra, but I’m fine, really. That raspberry tea was simply ambrosial, how could anyone complain?”

“Still we all miss you at the dining hall, Lord Mikleo. Uh, s-sorry for being so forward!” Her startled voice made Mikleo look up. "I only meant… if I may be so bold as to speak for His Highness, Prince —"

“Never mind,” Mikleo sighed with a wry smile. "At least I get to do things I really like instead of being dragged from place to place by you-know-who.”
"His Highness does seem to be pensive and restless without you by his side."

"He's just aching for another misadventure, no doubt."

Cazra laughs a little, the gesture sending her ribboned, sunflower hair swishing from side to side. 

“Indeed, no one should doubt that my lord, for His Highness is, among other things, an amazing story-teller! It is not unlikely that he knows every legend by heart: the Rayfalke dragons, the ruins of Elysia, the battle at Camlann, even tales about the Shepherd and the seraphi—”

“He loves obscurities, doesn’t he?” Mikleo interrupted, making Cazra flinch in surprise.

Mikleo regretted it. Under normal circumstances the mere mention of that taboo would have him frowning even at the crown prince. However, there doesn’t seem to be any reason to scare Cazra away, not when his own curiosity on the topic of seraphim seemed worth the risk.

His confinement would attest to that, of course.

Cazra gave him a concerned look. "Uh, Your Majesty, if I ever said anything that displeases you..."

Mikleo shook his head. "My fault, sorry for startling you, but I do get what you mean. His Majesty's stories can be a bit overwhelming, and it's not surprising since he's very passionate about what he reads. If I were you, though, I wouldn't patronize him too much. He's the type who needs no encouragement when it comes to his favorite topics, and he can be pretty insensitive in just assuming that people like to hear about the same stuff over and over."

"I'm afraid we are to blame for it, my lord! Hermei and I, as well as every maid here in the palace, always look forward to his visits because of it..."

Mikleo shook his head. "Frankly, you should hear him go on for hours lecturing royal guests on the motifs of the Mabinogio murals or the architecture of Asgard. If boredom can kill, I'm sure he'd be a one-man army. Though he does have his interesting quirks—for a prince."

"Indeed!” Cazra gushed with a wide smile. "The other girls would agree that it's the same reason the crown prince is much appreciated, for we all grew up to the same stories about the legendary Shepherd who vanquished the evil lord Maotelus. I remember how every night my brother would read to me the same story from a book handed down by our great, great, grandfather. It is said that in the olden days, angels who lived with humans were known as... oh my, I forgot, it’s that forbidden word, isn’t it?"

“Uh, it’s all right. I know the word but I appreciate the caution. Go on, please.”

“Well, as my brother says, the angels were tainted by an old curse unleashed by the ancients, and their only hope was to be purified by the powers of the Shepherd. But with the heavy yoke of darkness becoming heavier within him with each demon purified, the Shepherd soon succumbed to the Malevolence, and a new lord of calamity was born. Before his soul could be completely engulfed in shadows, the noble Shepherd, however, wisely took upon himself to become a vessel for that evil and laid himself to rest in the deepest bowels of the earth. It is said that to this very day, he sleeps waiting for his savior... for that one untainted sera—uh—angel who continues to walk the earth in search of the answer with which to defeat the lord of calamity. My brother and I believe this pure-hearted being would someday be able to release the noble Shepherd from the eternal bonds of the Malevolence.”

“And then what?” Mikleo found himself asking, though his tone betrayed his thirst for new information rather than any passing curiosity or even romantic interest in the conversation itself.
“Surely, he and his Shepherd would be so happy to walk the earth once again, hand in hand, no longer alone and afraid of being apart…”

“Oh, but Cazra, isn’t that a little iffy? Wouldn’t the more fitting ending be something like they’d go out into the world to spread their blessing, make new discoveries and help mankind carve a brighter, happier future for themselves—something like that? I guess I hadn’t thought of that story as being romantic at all…”

Cazra smiles tenderly, like a fond memory just made itself felt. “My brother... I’m certain he feels the same. He used to tell me that celestial beings should be different for not having the same human desires that make us what we are. He thinks human emotions would only corrupt them and turn their blessed innocence into something evil and ugly.”

Mikleo hated provoking an argument with anybody else, but his curiosity was getting the better of him. “And what do you believe?”

“My lord?”

“Don’t you agree? I mean, your brother did argue sensibly…”

“I think…” Cazra’s eyes fluttered shyly, a quick blush dusting her cheeks. "... true love is neither good nor evil. It is just what it is. I also believe every heart should be capable of love… as there are many ways of expressing love, so there must be many ways of expressing desire because one is hardly felt without the other. That is why the Shepherd’s story for me will always be the most beautiful love story there is.”

Mikleo found himself speechless. True, the conjecture was based on unwarranted assumptions and naïve logic, but he could find nothing so completely wrong with it to feel so opposed to it. Besides, tales pertaining to the Shepherd and the seraphim have been around for almost two thousand years since the end of the Age of Chaos. Minstrels, bards, balladeers, travelling gypsies aside from chroniclers and historians all have their versions to tell. Doubtless, Cazra’s was different like so many others, varying along a central theme that remains essentially the same.

Given that, it would be near-impossible for him to hide his pleasure over such an unexpected discovery. “Though it tells a sad story, your brother must be lucky to have come across such a valuable store of information.”

Cazra smiles with a slight nod. “We both were, back in our childhood days when there was no other entertainment but simple books to pass the time. It is in the same way that you and His Highness seemed to have formed unbreakable bonds of brotherhood and friendship.”

Mikleo was beginning to wonder how true that may be when Cazra gave him an encouraging smile, as if to dispel any lingering apprehension on his face.

"I am most certain His Highness is thinking of the same thing."

"W-what do you mean?"

Cazra found her cheeks heating up. "That a man's greatest treasure is his bond."

"I think you give him far too much credit," Mikleo grumbled as unbidden memories flooded him. "To be honest, I'm pretty sure the crown prince is more entertained by horrific details of our childhood… Like he would remind me of the time when we were kids and I was so poor at directions I get lost even on the way to the baths… And then there was that time I was so gullible I believed every word Beldin said when he translated my greeting in Askengaard. So I ended up
telling Princess Elva of Aldemarr ‘Your ass is refreshing my wanton hobbyhorse. I so look forward to seeing more of you…’ Since then, every time we need to speak in a foreign tongue, His Highness would give me that knowing look, and I’d get so annoyed and self-conscious I’d stutter and make a fool of myself… Gods, you should see how Sore--I mean the prince--laughs his head off!”

“Oh my, that is plenty amusing,” Cazra giggles. “I’ve never thought His Highness is capable of teasing when it comes to you, my lord. He often has too much concern in his face when he speaks of you… and is quite adamant about making sure you have raspberry tea when you’re not feeling so well…”

Mikleo could almost feel the hot flush of embarrassment on the maid’s cheeks. It was easy to tell she was misunderstanding something, but whatever it was did not seem like his place to explain. “That’s just the way he is.”

“Ah, and a good thing it is, my lord! After all, only people with such strong bonds could tease each other with such fond memories. And teasing is but a happy expression of a deeper, more intimate affection…”

Mikleo smiled wanly. “I think you appreciate him far more than he deserves. Or you must be comparing him with someone you have fond thoughts of?”

Brown eyes averted their gaze, seeming to hold back a little. Then pulling back her shoulders she flashes a wide but trembling smile. “My younger sister died very young… when she was but six. And my brother—uh, my twin brother whom I played with and laughed with, who read stories with me and cared for me far more than anyone in my family ever could—he was sent to another country just like me in the hopes of keeping us far from the plague…”

It was the first time Mikleo had anyone share something so personal and tragic that he did not know exactly what to say right away—though he wondered how he could feel her anguish without being as deeply shocked as he had expected himself to be. Maybe because the experience and reality of it felt familiar somehow…

“I—I’m sorry to hear of it… likewise for conveying assumptions which were careless and naive.”

The maid shook her head, sending her braids aflutter. “I agree with His Highness that you worry too much about others. But I assure you, my lord, my stay in this castle has given me not only warm friends but even warmer memories to make up for everything. Of course there had been moments when I miss those things I could never relish again, though in time they’ve become few and far between… and I guess neither more frequent nor rarer than others’.”

Mikleo gave her an encouraging smile. “Definitely. Now that you mention it, I think being grounded isn’t half as lonely as it looks when I’ve got all I needed just right here…”

Amethyst eyes rest their gaze on a pile of leather-bound books neatly stacked on top of the bedside table.

A half-suppressed, silvery laugh rocks Cazra’s shoulders, rattling the tea set she was balancing on the tray in her hands. “A divine sight, my lord, for such a scholar as you. But to compete with books for your affection, I am certain now why so many breathe a hopeless sigh on the ground you walk on… which reminds me…” Cazra manages a faint gasp. “I feel I’ve overstayed my purpose… Lady Gelda might have a fit if she finds me not in the kitchen.”

Mikleo watches her bewildered gaze then nods understandingly. “It was as much my fault as yours. But many thanks, Cazra, for everything.”
“Oh, the pleasure is mine, my lord… and please be well.”

The door shuts gently and the room was quiet again. It has been three days. But even if Mikleo tried to imagine how regretful it was to miss the final days of summer, to feel the wind against his face as he rode Cerylle, the rare and precious silver-white steed that the king had given him for a present, he knew that a solitude such as this should never feel too lonely.

Not when such misfortune may afford someone like him a bit of forbidden freedom while being kept prisoner in his own bedroom.

Well, thanks to him… Mikleo found himself grinning with a smug, self-satisfied look as he stretched his legs lazily under the covers. If it weren’t for him, I wouldn’t be so lucky as to find a treasure worth more than the punishment it deserves.

With that, he reached down under the mattress and pulled out what seemed to be a journal bound in coarse leather, with a metal strap that has an ornate crest carved into it. While the crest looked like an ordinary embellishment, it took Mikleo two days to break the seal on it—which of course he was able to accomplish only by using all the tricks he had learned from reading about and actually exploring dungeons and ruins with the crown prince. As he finally got to leaf through the pages of the gilded tome on his lap, a kind of breathless anticipation moves him, making him eager to breeze through the book in one sweep.

But then something catches his attention and he finds himself staring wide-eyed at a sketch laid out in front of him. Mikleo blinks back his amazement as he turns the book counterclockwise, amazed at the fine details that only betrayed a truth he has known since childhood…

Kreveldor Castle… Chroniclers describe its magnificence in many words. But they all agree that the kingdom was first built as an impregnable fortress, a colossal bulwark of black rock whose austere, moss-laden walls signify a war-tainted past cited both in history and legend. Now ruled by Odelius VIII, a king descended from a line of warrior-kings who fought and defeated the seraphim, Kreveldor, which is likewise home for both him and Sorey, is lauded as the single, most powerful empire that was able to unite all the kingdoms spread across the continents of the world. Furthermore, as the wielder of the Sacred Flame believed to be bestowed upon his bloodline by the last of the seraphim allies of mankind, the Overlord is venerated as saint and hero, feared and respected like the Shepherds of legend.

All these, aside from many other achievements, are well expounded in such books as A History of the Golden Age and The Odelian Chronicles, which have been approved by imperial scholars as standard references. Chronologically speaking, both accounts begin with the end of the Age of Chaos and continue to the current age, the Golden Age of Empires. And while they do mention the Great Seraphim War, they make no mention of the seraphim as described vividly in the Celestial Record; neither was there any reference or even a footnote on the forging of an alliance between seraphim and humans, between Prime Lord and Shepherd that ended centuries of malevolence in the early bygone days.

Now those are nothing more but songs of ancient lore, written but not remembered as in the case of the Celestial Record and the Seraphim Chronicles.

Of those two, Mikleo regards the first as his personal favorite, and the second—which was his most recent discovery—as a promising read. If only he could compare those two in greater detail, it would be interesting to bet on which one was a finer work of scholarship. And this time, he might actually win back the 3000 gald he lost three months ago.

As myths and legends are a great deal more fascinating than the histories of modern chroniclers,
Mikleo manages a smile as he traces the fading gold on the fringes of that forbidden word seraphim gracefully etched on the leathery book cover. For some reason he could not satiate himself with the history of the unnamed Shepherd of the Age of Chaos and his mysterious seraphim companions. Every account, every testimony reveals something new and refreshing, and every rereading rekindles a somewhat vague but not so unfamiliar feeling—the feeling of some memory stirring and waking into life... of old regrets spilling from the cracks of an old, old soul.

Shaking that momentary distraction off his mind, Mikleo runs his fingers through the pages again until he arrives at one that was ear-marked and a bit more faded, but remarkable for the fact that it alone was written with a different hand, graceful and fluid like water flowing along a crystal-clear brook. He took a moment to relish the shape of the ancient words, which he could translate as he speaks, for it was one of the things he had the luxury to practice since he was five, when he had first stumbled upon Jiji’s—the stern-looking sage he has come to regard as his own grandfather—private collection of books and ancient relics.

Mikleo traces with an index finger the first line of words and rehearses it in his head, savoring each sound, each syllable. Yes, he can most definitely do this. For as much as he enjoys enunciating foreign tongues, there is nothing more exhilarating than translating the archaic, finding nuances and matching them with modern lexicon. Letting his fingers wander softly on the brittle, yellowed pages once more, he lets the sound of the ancient words drift into his memory, to be disassembled into meanings that have an even more ancient story to tell.

“Blessed by the divine powers of the Sacred Flame—the eternal fire of the soul of man and seraphim merged into a single form of enduring grace—Odelius, Knight of Pendrago, raises above his head the one pure light created against the darkness of evil. Its brilliance is unearthly, ethereal, like an innocence rising into song, like a shard of clarity cutting through the pillars of darkness guarding Kreveldor Mountain. Against the Knight’s Divine Light, the encroaching sea of miasma disperses like raging waves being parted by a rising wall of pure, relentless might. And in the center of that blinding fire—those scorching flames that sing of hope and faith, of redemption and enlightenment— the Dark Foe falls, his eyes reflecting the profound and poignant sorrow of defeat.

Yet this victory is incomplete. From the shadows a new darkness swells, a storm ensues, and a breathless sea of white wings rises from the ashes of the Fallen One. The wings rise to the clouds in a shower of feathered sparks, spiraling into a seamless column of white light, immaculate in their blinding radiance against the surrounding perfidy of black. The column breaks, and—as King Odelius would recount in his last days, when he is no longer knight but Emperor of the World—he witnessed with his own unfailing vision two souls rise up, to float in a sea of fire and water.

Though showered by an ethereal light, the two souls encircle in their midst a form appalling in fairness and form—an angel of unholy beauty and power, with wings coated in the intense black of malevolence. Those two souls call out to Odelius, as if to command him to be ready; and as Odelius summons the sphere of the Sacred Flame to once more appear in the palm of his right hand, the two souls close in on this paragon of evil, casting a veil of blue light around it, even as the form struggles in their reluctant embrace.

Then as if he has known from the time he drew his first breath the coming of that day, that moment when the destiny of man and seraphim shall be rewritten in the stars, Odelius releases for the last time the power of the Flame...

This time a gentle stillness descends from above, throbbing, pulsating in the air with a mysterious serenity. In his final days, Odelius would recount how that serenity continues to fill his spirit, calming him in those woebegone days when swords have to be raised yet again to protect the fragile peace borne from centuries of war and discontent. In his memoirs he relished the idea that this
spiritual calm must be the final gift and blessing of the true warriors of the world, those begotten sons of light who came to banish the final lord of evil.

Though their origin be unknown, the greatest of knights now Emperor of the World had a shrine built for them, and in words etched in stone and memory, he called them neither Shepherd nor Seraphim but, rather, Heralds of Light whose shine endures to save mankind from the curse of evil wrought from the dawn of ages. Though the shrine must have been destroyed in the tide of battles fought once more between and among the human nations, Odelius the First, King of Kreveldor, First Emperor and Overlord of the World has this to say in the history written by his own hand:

"If the world may regret one thing let it be this—

that it might never know if such pillars of light and hope would be seen again,

if their struggle against the Malevolence would ever be complete,

if they had indeed become the final vessel of the curse of the gods and the seraphim,

doomed to fight against the never-ending darkness

until the pure fire in their souls are extinguished.

Truly, neither heaven nor hell has an answer as to what has become

of the shining pillars of light that redeemed the world from its ineluctable fate."

Mikleo was chasing his breath by the time he punctuated those final words. Who would have thought that a single page could contain an entire mystery, could speak of so many forbidden secrets, which by themselves make the entire work a dangerous, yet priceless treasure to behold and possess? Doubtless, the writer took many risks to write such a narrative and may have even come to some real danger upon the discovery of this somewhat heretic testimony. The same goes for the reader. Bishop Heldalf had given more than ominous warnings against venerating shrines or perpetuating tales of shepherds and seraphim even for entertainment.

In the line of Odelius, Overlords of Kreveldor, only King Odelius I was rumored to have had dealings with the seraphim, but no historian or member of his bloodline dare speak the truth regarding it. Nothing in the archives anywhere in the kingdom has any material whatsoever that speaks of, or even make references to, the events that transpired before and during the Age of Chaos. Every living modern historian seems to truckle to the bishop and the Apostles of the Church by filling their accounts with blandishments and enticements, hailing Odelius VIII’s reign as the peak of the Golden Age, the fruit and reward of man’s victory against the seraphim.

To any real scholar of history such flatteries are disarmingly unethical. But if it were a matter of opinion, Mikleo would rather say that any book has its own merits. Even fulsome praises bestowed on a degenerate age may hint at some relevant truth that penetrates the surface of the hypocrisies and ideological detours that distort it.

Which reminds him… what sort of book could Cazra and her brother have gotten their hands on? If it had indeed belonged to a much older generation, it is likely that the copy she speaks of is just one among many now lost to the ravages of time… though it would neither contradict nor detract so badly from what he has just read from the Seraphim Chronicles—about two ethereal beings who sealed away a creature of malevolence using their combined powers. Even if Cazra’s version included no real, historical figures such as the renowned King Odelius I to make the story more
credible, the conclusion coincides with remotely existing narratives of the same.

After the *Great Seraphim War*, which spoke of a legendary evil being defeated with the combined efforts of the Knights of the Temple Round—as *The Odelian Chronicles* and *A History of the Golden Age* say—circumstances pertaining to the existence of the Shepherd and his seraphim companions ceased to appear in the records and retelling of the period, even when, logically speaking, such was pivotal to the birth of Kreveldor as an empire, which then marked the beginning of the Golden Age.

It was the Golden Age of Empires that eventually saw the rise of the Overlord of the West, the king of kings, who became *the power to rule all*, as what the word *Overlord* literally meant.

Mikleo mentally winces. *Overlord, huh? Can anyone really rule everyone absolutely without inviting a single opposition, without arousing the envy of those he needed to subjugate to wield a power more formidable than anybody else's?*

*Even the gods and the seraphim became objects of envy and hate.*

*Because it is our nature to hate winners as much as losers. It hurts to be defeated by something greater than our better selves.*

Then again, such things are never admitted in the open but rather, evolve into complications that become less obvious and more difficult to judge. So one way of explaining the silence of history on matters that should be integral to it is that most, if not all, documents making references to the Shepherd and the seraphim have been expunged by order of the Imperial Church. Although one may think it a hasty conclusion, assuming that all traces of something could be completely removed—even those that do not easily submit to the rigors of censorship like private journals and oral literature such as folk ballad and esoteric verse. So taking this into consideration, both Cazra's version and the *Seraphim Chronicles* may be factual enough. It does seem likely that the Shepherd and his Seraph companion disappeared for good, perhaps to a place sealed off from the mortal realms... a place called Celestia perhaps?

Or to entertain a less romantic possibility, the supposed fallen heroes may have simply chosen self-exile in some far-off island, an underground cavern or some hitherto unexplored ruins. Practically speaking, they could have simply decided to go their separate ways, to live ordinary lives far from prying human eyes and their unwanted curiosities...

But if the Shepherd had been reborn as a seraph, all these conjectures would be definitely off the mark. As everyone familiar with the myths and legends surrounding the existence of seraphim should know, resonance is required to see or sense seraphic presence. If the world has truly lost its ability to resonate with these heavenly creatures, it should not be surprising that seraphim continue to linger in the human world unnoticed by the naked human eye...

Another curiosity is the fact that, judging from the time period alluded to in the *Seraphim Chronicles*, it must have been at least six centuries since the last Shepherd and his seraph made their appearance. If they stayed on to co-mingle in the human world, the probability of either one of them accidentally meeting even a single human with enough resonance should be high enough to allow one to speculate that a direct witness—or a few witnesses—may have actually attempted to record such meetings. If so, verifying the fate of the seraphim and the Shepherd is only a matter of unearthing antiquated sources hidden somewhere in some forgotten or forbidden, secret place.

But then, even this practical logic relies on the most fragile of assumptions: that personal interest in anything involving seraphim inspires its preservation in memory by any means available... private records, oral narratives, even personal diaries.
Mikleo scrunched up his face, swathing his forehead with a hand. Isn’t he missing something important in trying so hard to fit everything within the parameters of such convoluted presumptions? Why should he even agonize over possibilities that depend on mere conjectures and wishful thinking? The Shepherd is supposed to be driven and self-sacrificing… Was it not his destiny to give himself up for the greater good? To over-sentimentalize facts by suggesting that there must be something romantic in the bonds shared between Shepherds and seraphim is to cling to some idealization of a hero’s selfless suffering as worthy of the highest reward, which is true love…

In the end, the mystery of the missing Shepherd and his seraph companion may just be a strategic diversion—a political tool intended to mask deep fissures within society and the Church where real conflicts rise from the divide between believers and non-believers…

A shuffling sound outside the door forces Mikleo to slam the cover of the book shut and to slip it back into its secret hiding place beneath the mattress. Then again, the weight of that footstep inching toward the door just seemed awfully familiar—too familiar in fact that Mikleo need not even hazard a guess as to whose it could be. With a deep groan, he looks around the room and notices for the first time that it is getting dark. Though others might find the quaint shadows and the fading light unfit for reading, for someone who has rarely been allowed to indulge in nature and its elements, these are more than a welcome reprieve.

Of course he has not forgotten how today—for certain, not for the first time—this same bedroom has become a prison. As Kreveldor Castle is known for the austerity of its black stone walls and heavy, gothic arches, one hardly needs to know the difference between a dungeon and a private chamber to realize why the latter seems but a slightly more convenient alternative, a place of confinement for members of the court whose audacity and mischief occasionally mislead them into underestimating Kreveldor’s uncompromising discipline.

The door finally creaks open—gently, hesitantly—then a figure in a simple, blue tunic and deep brown trousers with a white mantle swaying up to his knees and arched over his right shoulder stands just barely through the gap, leaning forward ever so slightly. He peers into the semi-darkness soundlessly, letting his feet remain close to the door as his eyes scoured the room with a serious expression.

“Hey, Mikleo… still alive I hope?”

“What a question, Sorey,” Mikleo retorts without bothering to look up. He has grown accustomed to the weird sort of overenthusiasm that almost always accompanies that voice and yet... despite the quiet innocence that never leaves those clear, emerald eyes, the fixed emotion with which they smile at him, Mikleo could not help but sense something being suppressed.

Those wide-eyed, child-like gazes just seem too open yet elusive... like a birthday present that remains unpredictable despite the all-too-familiar wrapping.

Mikleo shakes off those distracting thoughts. “It’s not like you have ears for the dead, do you now?”

“C’mon, that was supposed to be a joke, all right? By the way,” Sorey looks around the room and scrunches up his face reprovingly. “I don’t suppose you’re reading in this light again, are you? Besides, it’s freezing in here! If you’re too lazy to get up and get the fireplace going, I’d do it, it’s easy enough and I’d hate for you to catch a cold…”

On any other occasion, Sorey would simply cross the room in one bound to reach Mikleo’s side. Today, though, he could not figure out why his feet refused to budge from the door as his fingers automatically began fiddling with the feathers clipped on his right ear—a charm he received from Jiji, their aged and beloved tutor, on his sixteenth birthday. The feel of it somehow relieves his agitated
nerves and gives him some place to put his hands to keep them from dangling awkwardly at his side.

"So, for how long do you intend to stand there, Sorey? You don't expect the fireplace to move, do you?"

Sorey wanted to give himself a mental kick. "Very funny. I was just-"

"Look, if you came to ask for your book back, just ask all right?"

The assumption was typical of Mikleo to make, but this time, Sorey's body involuntarily flinched as if it had been doused with cold water. Even when the better part of him knew how pointless it was to brood over it, the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach would not go away. It felt like disappointment and something much worse than that... something like trying to reach a place one could never get to no matter how close it seemed. To say the least, it was frustrating... the feeling of not knowing where the feeling was coming from even though the hurt and the exhaustion that came with it seemed palpable enough to be distracting.

Sorey winced mentally. Today is probably not the best time to think about such things. Holding the door ajar, he stepped just a little past the doorframe.

"Uh, Mikleo, before we even get to that... aren't you gonna invite me in?"

For some reason, Sorey almost choked on those words. But it was Mikleo's turn to look surprised. "I believe I just did."

"Uh, really?" Sorey scratched his cheek. "Must have missed it."

Mikleo shook his head in disbelief. "Besides, why would you even need my permission? It's your castle, so do as you please."

"Sure you're not gonna regret that?"

Something in what he said felt like a slip, making Sorey pull back slightly with a stuttering sound. Mikleo gave him a twitching glare.

"So long as you keep your hands off my collection, we're pretty good."

"Hey, what?" Sorey took the bait almost gladly. "You're the one who keeps borrowing stuff from my collection!"

"Excuse me? I only take what's mine, which happens to be the ones you never give back until I ask!"

"Well, as you said it's my castle, right? Guess that means I practically own everything... except-uh-"

Mikleo glared suspiciously at him. "Except what, your majestic Majesty?"

"Except you of course..." Sorey breathed out, knowing his voice sounded strange as he tried to laugh. "But... uh... I guess that would be stating the obvious, wouldn't it?"

The nervous hesitation in that question made Mikleo look down at his book as if he had suddenly found something intellectually stimulating to read. Tensing up at that awkward silence, Sorey decided to inspect a charcoal painting up close, one that Mikleo knew he had seen far too many times to be even remotely interesting.
Mikleo exhaled loudly to disturb, if nothing else, the fragile peace. “Look, if you happened to drop in just to wake up the dead, well, I’m already awake. Thanks for this visit until next time, your Highness.”

Sorey craned his neck in the direction of the bed, swiveling his body rigidly as if he had just heard some bad news. “Gods, really, can’t you even joke and say you missed me?”

Mikleo huffed. "Sorry, but I don't humor princes for free."

"Oh really?" Sorey grinned, eyes a-twinkle. "So what's your price?"

Mikleo snorted. "Nothing you can afford in this life and after, your Greatness."

"Fine." Sorey looked down at his left hand, wondering when it had started shaking. "Honestly, I wish you'd lower your standards a bit, I mean... you don't have to be unreachable all the time, do you?"

"And I guess the problem with you is-" Mikleo threw him a sidelong glance. "-you're just easy, way too easy. For someone who's gonna wear the crown someday, you better learn how to frustrate people once in a while and manipulate their better side."

"Maybe." Sorey flicked a look at Mikleo, noticing the petulant curve of his small mouth and the deep, despondent gaze resting on the book on his lap. If Mikleo were in a sour mood, it would hardly make any difference. Mikleo was just so hopelessly attractive, impressive...

No, if he were to be more honest, Mikleo is just beautiful... so beautiful Sorey found it too much to handle.

Again, his heart began pounding in his ears. It was not until Mikleo looked up with a visibly curious frown that he realized, too late, that he had been staring.

Sorey laughed, scratching his right cheek. "Hey, don't be disappointed yet, all right? It's not like I was lazing off the whole time you weren't around! But since it wasn't fun reading the usual stuff without anyone to share it with, I kinda did some research... not seriously, by the way..."

Mikleo noticed the self-conscious tone. "Care to elaborate on that a bit?"

"Uh, politics?"

"You must be kidding."

"Hey, you think I can't handle deep stuff like that?" Sorey bantered. "I admit it's not that exciting, but some parts seemed interesting enough."

"That's new. Can't believe you've finally matured, Sorey."

"Shut up. Besides..." Sorey looked down at his feet. "It's not like I could ignore the need for it. People expect me to know so much, do so much. But more than that, there are people around me... people I really care about whom only I can protect..."

Sorey stopped there, feeling a familiar twisting pain in his chest. Mikleo breathed an audible sigh. "Gods, Sorey, you do over-exert yourself sometimes even when there's plenty of time to study and explore such things. Besides, it's not like there's anything else we can do around here but study."

"I know but-" Sorey felt a jolt of excitement rush through him, as if all he needed right now was for
Mikleo to look at him.

"But what, Sorey?"

"Huh?"

Mikleo caught him daydreaming, almost.

"Uh, I'll work harder, learn faster, do things better from now on, Mikleo, you'll see!" Sorey told him with clenched fists. "So when the time comes for me to really take the throne, I'd know exactly what to do: lower farmers' taxes, increase collection on merchant guilds, build more schools in the smaller towns farthest from here... maybe even ask the ruling families to move out of the capital and spread their wealth in places where it's more needed. Of course it's risky, and I might have to hire spies just to see what they're up to, or to make sure they're not making trouble or hatching something against me."

"Risky, are you sure? I find that the most obvious understatement of the year. I mean, you're dealing with your family here. It's normal for them to expect the usual favors, not obligations and duties no one's ever demanded from them before."

"But, Mikleo, there must be some other way of expanding the reach of the empire other than the use of force or even of religion. What we really need is to push the growth of provinces that aren't getting that much attention, and part of it is changing the way we run things here in the capital... like curbing bad habits that have been tolerated around here for ages..."

Mikleo sighs. "Name a few, then."

"Uh, like making sure the royal families have better things to do than just keeping score against each other... or taking advantage of all the flimsy gossip and backstabbing that's keeping everyone hopelessly distracted. We have sixty-eight provinces each having at least five representatives in the council. But do we even have any idea what they do all day? Yesterday I tried to sneak into the Secretary's chamber and got a good look at the records."

"Oh god, and what did you find out?"

"That apart from making lavish trips abroad and making excuses to have the Treasury spend for them, they also spend a lot of time planning even more expensive military campaigns up north."

"Is there anything unusual about that? It's been the empire's prerogative for years... ever since your—our father had become Overlord."

"I know... but the strange thing was, these campaigns aren't even targeting places in dire need of security. Neither are they provinces which have somewhat become a threat to the Empire one way or another. To be honest, I want to have a chance to investigate those reports... I mean, I can't help but be suspicious... something doesn't feel right somehow..."

Mikleo could not help tearing his eyes away from his book to stare, slack-jawed, at Sorey. "Hey, I think this is the first time I'm hearing all this. You used to hate the idea of rising to power as Overlord and literally ran away from any conversation on the subject. What got you so politically motivated all of a sudden?"

"Sheesh, I guess I've always been motivated... in my own little way?"

"Right," Mikleo sighs, wondering why the unexpected enthusiasm is giving him goosebumps. "It's just that for someone who's thought of this for the first time, that sounds awfully a lot, don't you
"Hey, I've been giving these things a lot of thought, it's just that... I've never felt confident enough to discuss them with anyone before, I guess."

"So today is supposed to be special?"

Sorey felt his neck getting hot. "Never mind-I mean... uh... anyway, what do you think?"

Mikleo yawned. "Seems decent enough. For a novice or an amateur."

"Hey, no fair! You haven't even heard half of it, Mikleo!"

"So, I guess I'm in for another lecture, huh?"

Sorey grinned. "Well, how about this? I'm thinking about reviving the Platinum Knights of Rolance!"

"Huh, seriously? What for?" Mikleo was barely able to suppress the alarm in his voice. "They've kindly acceded to the king's wishes and willingly disbanded by order of the King's Own. I doubt if the former knights would be interested in getting their old titles back after everything that's happened."

"That might be true but-" Green eyes held a serious, brooding look that was almost tempting for Mikleo to watch. "Cutting ties with the Council of the Holy Twelve means doing away with the Knights of the Temple Round as well. And that would create a vacuum that needs to be filled."

Mikleo's eyes widened, but he refused to show it, fixing his gaze on his book. "You're seriously kidding. Bishop Heldalf is untouchable and so are his knights-"

"That's what he wants everyone to believe, doesn't he?" Sorey cut in, looking down thoughtfully. "Maybe we should remind him there's that doctrine called separation of powers between the church and the throne, between the bishop and the crown. He's been treading a dangerous line, imposing control on the military by lending his own armies for the empire to use. I'm actually expecting Heldalf to be very unhappy when I start shredding those old agreements. It might bring a few tears to his face, but that shouldn't hurt him all that much, right?"

"Sorey!"

"Of course, removing him by a decree or a vote would be even more challenging! I don't know if the King's Own or the Holy Council would even let me go that far... the Bishop wields that charisma of his like a bludgeon. I guess an ordinary campaign wouldn't have a chance against his supporters, but then that means I just have to work harder at a plan!"

The high-pitched resolve in Sorey's voice was undeniably clear and almost embarrassing. Mikleo shook his head, not wanting to show concern if he could help it, knowing it would drive Sorey deeper into a dangerous entanglement. "Really, you're way overthinking this, Sorey. You don't have to leap too far into the future to settle problems you see every day. Especially with the way things are in the empire. No king could ever hope to change the world in a week."

"Hmm... maybe... though to be honest, I thought I needed something more drastic."

"Scandalous seems to be the more fitting word for it! Sorey, are you out of your mind?" Mikleo couldn't believe this was the same crown prince he had not seen in three days. Did he just bump his head or get possessed?
Sorey looked sideways apprehensively. "On the contrary, I've never been so into me than now."

"Get over yourself, will you? This is no matter for jests and conjectures! Heads may roll if any of that plotting turns against you!"

"I know, but, there's actually more, Mikleo... like that backwater army the Church seems to be raising on the side. We don't really need more soldiers when the Bishop has practically more than enough. If you ask me, the Knights of the Temple Round would be of much better use to the empire if they're sent to those borders. There are a lot more people they can help out there instead of here, where all they do is strut around the castle like personal bodyguards, spying on everyone I bet! It's not like the Apostles haven't been doing the same... I mean it's all just a rumor but..."

Mikleo sensed his hesitation. "I don't think my heart is ready to hear the rest of it, but I don't think you'd stop even if I plug my ears now, will you?"

"But, seriously..." Sorey looked up thoughtfully. "I also heard that the Council of the Holy Twelve has started leasing its most valuable lands to some members of the King's Own, most likely in exchange for that recent decree exempting church property from taxes."

"No way, are you sure? Even the empire can't build roads and bridges on church property without being charged a hefty sum. Their lands are untouchable."

"I know. That's why someone must definitely look into the accounts of the royal houses... especially those who've been in the King's Own for decades now. Though I guess I should be more worried about how much gald finds its way into the pockets of the Church and the Council from there. Gods, if they keep dipping their fingers into the coffers of the Treasury like it's their own private purse..."

"Now, hold it there, no need to get ahead of yourself, all right?" Mikleo found himself saying with a voice that sounded a little more worried than he was willing to let on. "I mean, Sorey, listen, there's a difference between preponderance of evidence and establishing guilt beyond reasonable doubt. And in matters like those, it's pretty dangerous to hold on to just mere conjectures. Even with your standing in the empire, do you think you can afford stirring up all the powers that be without getting yourself pulled into the tornado?"

Mikleo tried to sound incredulous, even tired, but his nerves were on edge.

Sorey seemed fired up. "Look, I know it sounds complicated right now, but, c'mon! In that last trip we made across the borders, you said we should be doing a lot more out there... and that just got me thinking... "

Sorey couldn't help sounding worried, forcing Mikleo to forget about his book, not that he was genuinely interested in reading it since Sorey arrived.

"You've seen it yourself, haven't you? A lot of the smaller towns we passed looked like they've been neglected for so long, while the ones closer to us seem to be just... overflowing. I don't know exactly who's pulling the strings... or influencing those who make decisions about where the imperial funds should go... but it definitely needs looking into. Much worse, I heard the Silk Chamber is proposing to raise tax collection next year. I don't think the rich are even paying as much as they should, but we all know who stands to benefit from those changes. New tax laws would definitely hit the ones doing real work out there, and that means having less to keep for themselves at the end of the year even when as it is, they're barely surviving."

Mikleo wanted to give himself a mental kick. He knew how attentive Sorey could be, but he had not been planning on making him brood on every little thought or idea either of them mentioned in their
casual conversations. In any case, Mikleo realized he needed to hold back some of his opinions every now and then. There is no way he would burden Sorey with worries about the crown... duties and obligations that tie the prince to the throne and the empire against will and common sense from the moment \textit{that day} finally arrives until his last, dying breath.

\textit{Until his death}... Mikleo shuddered at the thought. The empire owns Sorey, that much has been clear from the start. He belongs to everyone and no one in particular, a person doomed to be loved and hated, praised and despised. His destiny is a path of thorns and roses, strewn with lies, deceit and vague hypocrisies that make power what it is. A necessary evil...

Mikleo winced. \textit{That} unspoken fear almost sounded desperate if not pathetic. He sighed as green eyes waited for him to speak.

"Look Sorey, it's too early to get yourself worked up over stuff like that. Besides, these problems are the kind that just won't go away so easily, no matter how much thinking you put into them."

"Is that what you really think? C'mon!" Sorey gave him a mocking scowl as if he already knew that Mikleo said that just to pinch his resolve. "Sometimes I wish I've thought about these things sooner... just like you did when you'd discuss them over with Jiji. I remember you saying once how ironic it is that the poor who do real work hardly get anything more than what they need to keep on working... while all we do in the capital is spend and collect. The truth hurts, but you're right, Mikleo. Protecting the people is not just about making peace and avoiding conflicts. It's about providing for their needs... and making sure they're living not just surviving. Because freedom without bread is just as bitter as bread without freedom. Sounds familiar, huh?"

Mikleo tried to look annoyed. "Do you really have to remember almost every random thing I say?"

Sorey scratches his cheek. "Well, Mikleo, you know how much I hate politics but... still... I wanna stick to your theory. You told me that solving what can be solved is a ruler's first law... that if I can protect the happiness of those in need, I can be a good king, and it's more important than being a \textit{great} one. It's hard work, and there are many things I'd have to give up... It's almost like admitting that I'm not going to enjoy being king. But... don't get me wrong. None of that gives me the right to stop thinking about what I can do... or to stop doing what needs to be done to make things right. And then uh... I'm sure there's more..."

"Something like you'd be the greatest Overlord who's ever lived, and the empire will live happily ever after. End of story."

"Fine, I'll do that too." Sorey's voice was reassuring. "So long as I get the reward I wish for, I've no reason to complain."

"Reward?" Mikleo was suddenly curious. "Is there anything so great that could match all the heartaches and headaches of an Overlord?"

"Guess I'm just lucky to have found one!" Sorey had a moment to wonder if Mikleo knew how warm he felt right now just admitting that, as if his heart was about ready to burst.

Must be something pretty amazing, huh?" Mikleo could not help feeling just a bit jealous. "Care to share that wonderful secret?"

"No way! But it's not like you haven't seen it yourself..." Sorey cleared his throat embarrassingly.

"That's convenient." Mikleo went back to his book, flipping a page a little too loudly. "So what's the real reason you dropped by, your \textit{Hindness}?"
“Be nice,” Sorey chuckles, walking farther into the room with both arms folded behind his head. Right now, only one thought kept nagging at him, the same thought that had been there for three days since Mikleo had been confined. If he had not bragged too much about finding the Celestial Record in that underground chamber at the Mt. Mabinogio Ruins, Mikleo would not have had the audacity to seek out his own dangerous treasure in the most dangerous of places—no less than Bishop Heldalf’s private library.

Sorey was beginning to get anxious just thinking about it. If anything else had happened, if the Bishop even tried to lay a single finger on-

"Mikleo, are you sure you're--uh, ahhh, w-w-wai..." Sorey felt his foot hit the corner of something hard lying on the floor and losing his balance, his immediate impulse was to stagger his fall by launching his arms forward to grab at something—anything.

“Sorey!!! Watch where you’re—”

Too late. Sorey crashed headfirst into Mikleo’s lap, his chin landing on the soft covers of the blanket nesting on the silver-haired boy’s chest.

To be honest, having Mikleo this close is close to magical... like watching a seraph materialize from the pages of the Celestial Record.

“Sorey?”

He heard but could barely push his tongue to form a normal response. “Huh? M-Mikleo?”

“You’re heavy.”

Of course he is. Doesn’t Mikleo complain about it during weapons practice every time he accidentally lands a foot or leg on him? “Uh huh…”

“I think my legs are getting numb… seriously.”

Sorey only blinked those words back, hearing but not understanding as random thoughts flooded his mind, submerging anything else that needed attention. Right now, those thoughts kept reminding him how breathtakingly beautiful Mikleo really was... how enticing the fragrance of fresh grass, mint, and spring rain that emanated from that creamy white skin—that pale complexion that looked so soft and smooth compared with Sorey's slightly tanned and calloused hands.

Finally realizing how his body was beginning to tingle uncomfortably in some unseen places, Sorey groaned mentally and pulled away with an abrupt, goofy smile plastered on his face.

“Oh, sorry about that. At least it was a safe landing…”

A book dangled from Mikleo’s right hand on top of their heads. “At my expense as always…”

They exchanged glances only to find themselves looking away the next second. Sorey scratched his right cheek with an index finger while looking sideways even as Mikleo seemed suddenly interested in the book in his hands.

“Oh, so I guess—uhh—nothing happened? I mean, Bishop Heldalf just got you grounded, right?”

Mikleo set his back rigidly against the pillows, opening the book in front of him as if preparing to read. “Were you hoping for something worse? Stealing books may be the noblest crime in the universe, but a crime is a crime, and the punishment for stealing is having a finger cut off…”
“NO way, he didn’t!” Sorey felt his body grow numb at that and without thinking lunged for Mikleo’s hands. For a few seconds he stared dumbstruck at the slender fingers that seemed as intact as ever.

Finally realizing his mistake, Sorey frowned, meeting the other’s grinning, mocking stare. “I swear that wasn’t funny, Mikleo!”

“I bet it isn’t—but the look on your face is. Gods, that’s a trip!”

Sorey was partly lying on his stomach on the bed with his hip and the rest of his body supporting his weight on the floor, but at the sight of his sibling laughing off his worries he could not help but act on instinct. He pulled himself onto the bed, letting his body dip the mattress toward him and pull Mikleo’s weight along with it.

Ignoring the shock on Mikleo’s face, Sorey folded his arms behind his head and leaned back on the pillows. “Now, isn’t this comfy?”

Lavender eyes flashed and a pillow was instantly yanked from underneath him. “Excuse me, your Hindness, but I believe you’ve exceeded your boundaries…”

A smug smile danced on Sorey’s lips. “But you said it yourself. It’s my castle. I can do as I please.”

“Stop quoting me, all right!”

Sorey caught the pillow with a strong grip halfway through its descent, causing his attacker to struggle for balance and grab at the bedpost within reach as he still has one hand gripping the corner of the pillow that Sorey caught.

“Oh, are you going for a wrestling match?”

Mikleo could hardly tell if it was his imagination, but he felt the pillow tremble slightly from Sorey’s end. Even so, it did not seem like Sorey was kidding or giving up, the single gloved hand bearing the crest of Kreveldor firmly fastened on the other end of the fluffy white thing between them. “A match, huh? If you’d give me back my 3000 gald, I might.”

“Still couldn’t forget that bet, Mikleo?” Sorey huffed with a wide grin, reminded of the way Mikleo pouted and fumed when he had to give up all of his pocket money as Sorey waved the Celestial Record proudly in front of him, right after finding it in a sealed chest buried in one of the countless secret chambers deep in the caverns of the Mt. Mabinogio Ruins.

“How can I forget something that happens once in a lifetime? That was your one and only victory if I remember correctly.”

Sorey feigned annoyance. “Of course not! I was the one who found Muse’s staff too…”

“Huh, your eyes may have found it but I was the one who unsealed it! Besides, there’s really no absolute confirmation that it’s Muse’s staff. For all we know, it may have been a standard staff used during that time. Just because it matches the design in the Chronicles of the Shepherd doesn’t mean it’s anything special. Even ‘Muse’ sounds more like a title than an individual person’s name.”

“The point being?”

“The staff might be a standard tool rather than a specialized equipment—which also means it could’ve been owned by anyone, not necessarily someone with a particular connection with a particular Shepherd…”
"Well, that certainly sounds just like you, Mr. Skeptic! You do seem attached to it though. Correct me if I'm wrong, but you've been using it as a spear during weapons practice since then."

"Oh, and am I the only one? How about that ceremonial sword we've both found in the Galahad Ruins when we were kids? Gosh, it was funny seeing you hug it all to yourself even though you can't carry it around without *my* help."

Sorey's green eyes sparkled nonetheless. "And that's one of the best memories I have! It was the first time we've ever set foot in any ruins, remember?"

Mikleo couldn't help smiling back. "Yeah, I bet it was! We even got lost because someone kept triggering death traps, sheesh!"

Sorey inched closer, his face all radiant and aglow with a mirth that was almost blinding. "Mikleo, c'mon, it was lots of fun testing those theories we've only read in books! And about getting lost, well, you're the one crying when I found you! You kept shouting Sorey, Sorey! Gods, I've never seen you so scared before! And when I finally grabbed your hand, you were so happy you hugged me like it was my last day on earth and wouldn't let go until my breath almost gave out…"

Mikleo looked away, shoulders tensing. "That's the ugly part of the memory, I'll say."

"Just admit it…" he pulled the pillow back until their faces were barely inches away. "You owe me one, Mikleo… so there's no getting away from me, no matter how many death traps you get yourself into."

"Right. I bet it would be much worse if I gambled all my ten thousand gald only to lose to you. You'd probably chase me to the ends of the earth to collect."

"I can chase you to the ends of the earth for other reasons."

"What? For a book?" Mikleo gave the pillow a violent tug.

Sorey's eyes softened a little. "I'm not sure, but I'm willing to find out…"

Something in the way he said that was making his skin tingle, his heart drum rapidly like he had been running. To make matters worse, his body was keen on Mikleo's scent, the fragrance of pine, mint, and lavender rousing his senses, making him sweat. But just as he was about to shake the distraction off, Mikleo gave the pillow another yank, causing his loosely buttoned tunic to slip down one shoulder.

Sorey looked panicked. The gentle slope of that slender shoulder was just as delicate as every part of Mikleo he had seen from before when they were too young to have reservations about their open nakedness. Now, to be allowed even a tiny glimpse of that creamy skin made his neck heat up, his cheeks flush and his stomach flutter like a million butterfly wings were brushing against it.

Mikleo gave up his claim on the pillow as he buttoned the wanton tunic with suppressed embarrassment.

Sorey tried to rest his gaze elsewhere but could hardly even blink away. "Uhh, kn-know what? You don't have to be so self-conscious, I mean, do you have to look so perfect even in your night wear?"

"Huh? Compared to me you're the one who's overdressed."

"Something wrong with that? Or you prefer me naked?"
It was a tease that Sorey felt was almost a slip. He averted his face when Mikleo gave him a sour look. "Who's imagining who naked?"

He forced himself to laugh it off. "Well, can't deny I'm unbearably good-looking!"

Mikleo huffed, lifting his chin for good measure. "No thanks, I've seen better."

Sorey felt miffed for some reason. He tugged the pillow a little too forcefully, but not enough to make Mikleo lose his balance yet again. "Know what? Only people who insist on winning must say that."

“Fine, the pillow’s yours,” Mikleo conceded, obviously showing how much he hated losing to Sorey even if his words deny it. "I’m not gonna sweat over something so trivial."

“You think you can sweat in this cold? You gotta be kidding.” As he spoke the thought of nuzzling against Mikleo’s neck came to him, and he uttered a low groan in protest.

“All right, I’ll get the hearth running. Geez, what a complainer I’ve got today…” Somehow the warmth nestling beside him was giving him a strange feeling so Mikleo was only too glad to have a reason to get as far away as he could. But before he could swing one leg out the bed, a hand gripped his wrist. He looked over his shoulder and summer green eyes were gazing at him intently.

“Uh, don’t sweat it, Mikleo. I said I’ll do it so I would. Just wait here all right?”

Sorey’s warmth was now seeping into his skin and though it felt good, he couldn't help but be curious as to what his own skin felt like to Sorey. Back when they were younger, when they were still allowed to sleep side by side on the same bed, Sorey would always complain about how cold his feet were. It was only lately when Sorey would occasionally sneak into his room with something interesting to read and eventually fall asleep on his bed that Mikleo noticed how Sorey seemed more gentle and sensitive to his moods, which meant fewer fights and squabbles between them. Although that was good too, Mikleo could not dismiss the nagging feeling that something in him—or in Sorey—was subtly changing.

There were hints here and there but without any concrete meaning to pin it down, he could not help but feel more wary and guarded. Thinking about it, he could not say exactly what kind of confirmation he was waiting for—if that was what he wanted to begin with—since the unbroken companionship they’ve always shared never failed to resolve whatever ambiguities and tensions surfaced between them.

So where is this feeling coming from—this uncertain sense of anticipation that makes him yearn for something missing but could not be named? To make matters worse, the more he tried to stop himself from overthinking it, the more awkward and uncomfortable he felt.

He felt his pulse race beneath Sorey’s fingers and wondered if it was just a natural reaction to being grasped so tightly. “Fine, if you insist. Hope you don’t set the whole castle on fire.”

“My castle? C'mon, not with the two of us in it!”

“You make it sound like burning it would be easier if we’re not in it.”

Sorey gave him a lopsided grin that he probably didn’t know was cute enough to make Mikleo feel uneasy. “Well, if the castle’s under siege that might be one of our options. Though I don’t have to feel happy about it. At least we’d have an excuse to run away…”

“Let’s hope we don’t get caught by the enemy. Or maybe you haven’t thought beyond running
away, have you? You’re really single-minded, Sorey!”

For some reason, Sorey’s eyes fell on the hand in his grasp. When was the last time he and Mikleo clasped each other’s hands so tightly while running away from the traps either of them set off by accident? Or while trying to escape the guards on their heels who would do anything to keep them from getting lost in the deadly maze of the ruins they loved hiding in?

Mikleo frowned. “Uh, aren’t you getting up?”

Sorey remembered all of a sudden where his hand was and pulled it back violently with an embarrassed yelp. “Uh, right, my bad, I better work my butt off right now before we start freezing.”

“Good thinking.”

Sorey caught Mikleo’s ironic tone. “Shut up.”

It took only a few minutes for Sorey to get the wood in the hearth crackling and burning. Lazy shadows began to form around it, swaying with the flames and the slight breeze.

Mikleo stole a glance at Sorey. Against the flickering, orange hues of the kindling fire, his features looked serene, composed, almost frighteningly serious. True it was a face that rarely frowned or showed any negative emotions but when Sorey is not smiling at all, when he seems preoccupied with his thoughts, that face takes on a different—what could the right word be—charm? At their age, it seems fairly obvious that both of them are growing up and changing in many ways. But for some reason, seeing Sorey mature physically so much faster than anyone their age makes Mikleo feel awkward and a bit edgy around him.

Especially when girls have started to notice those changes as well—the firmer jawline, the lean, shapely muscles on his chest, around his shoulders, hips and thighs showing even through the loosely fitted clothes he wore, the thicker wrist and biceps that could brandish any weapon so easily during training…

Sorey must have felt his gaze and looked his way, giving him a self-conscious smile. That was weird. When Mikleo returned his attention to the book on his lap and started flipping the pages randomly, he heard a shuffling noise and realized that Sorey had backed a step toward the wall and stumbled against the log pile next to the fireplace, causing the wood to tumble out of the pile and roll away. When Mikleo looked up from his book in surprise, Sorey met his wide-eyed stare with an awkward laugh.

This restless fidgeting was more than Mikleo could take. Sorey, for all his regal upbringing—for he is no less than Kreveldor’s crown prince—should know better than to hide things from him. Hell, even the most trivial lie puts such a strain on that wide-eyed innocent face of his that watching him becomes an absolute pain. In fact, if any stranger were to judge His Royal Highness without any prior knowledge, that person might say there is nothing even remotely prince-like about Sorey, nothing so striking or intimidating as to stamp those boyish charms with a regal impression.

But for someone who has never been separated physically from the one-and-only heir to the throne of Kreveldor since birth, Sorey being just Sorey is more than enough—and that meant being the sweet, horribly naïve, yet amazingly sensitive young man who seems alien to this world.

And whether that was a good or a bad thing, the crown prince could hardly be blamed. Sorey’s birth was believed to be itself a miracle borne from the prayers of Bishop Heldalf—prayers no doubt accompanied by countless oaths and sacrifices, which rumors say, went beyond the boundaries of
scandal and controversy. But since these were nothing compared to saving the honor of the greatest of empires whose fate depends on a legitimate heir, the Overlord and his Queen were only too grateful to overlook them.

And when the Queen finally conceived, barely a month after Mikleo was adopted, it was not surprising that the royal couple rewarded the Bishop with the most controversial of favors as well—the revival of the Council of the Holy Twelve Apostles, and the immunity of the Bishop and his Council against any persecution. If his memory serves him right, it was also around that time that the Knights of the Temple Round came into existence—holy warriors the Bishop calls them, whose obedience belongs to the supreme authority of the Council and its laws, and no other.

But of course, these were hardly matters that were openly discussed, even to Sorey who was unwittingly sheltered from political intrigues. Just like any other treasure kept jealously guarded, Sorey had grown up in a virtual prison, a golden cage with a perfect view that shut everything else out. His education progressed in the strictest confinement, made bearable only by a strict yet, doting old sage and a brazen brute of a general whose good humor managed to get him into as many scrapes as he could get himself out of.

That and having Mikleo as a constant though reluctant accomplice to sneak books out of secret archives and to explore almost every forbidden nook and corner of the castle became the indelible mark that was Sorey. And so one must forgive him if, in his seventeen years, he possesses the strength to swing a sword or battle axe and the wisdom to recite the Knights’ Creed in twenty-six different languages, but not the vaguest idea of what sex, courtship, and romance entail. Of course, that may be a blessing in itself since lately there has been too many scandals in court, owing to their male cousins’ reputation for lustful, clandestine trysts with courtesans and other young women who find the attentions of royalty an asset to be sought.

As for Sorey, well, women would have been more eager to seduce him if only he would stop geeking out; or rather, if he would quit giving random lectures on almost every historical landmark he had been researching on, without even batting an eyelid.

And that worries Mikleo all the more. Too consumed by love for archaisms and obscurities found only in the dead pages of history books, Sorey seems as vulnerable as a toddler taking his first few steps on a slippery path of lies and who may easily stumble upon anything that could break his spirit and scar his soul.

Not that anyone could use that as an excuse for underestimating Sorey, of course. For even if the heir to the greatest of empires is anything but crass, brazen, or intimidating, his sword skills are an entirely different matter. Nobody in Kreveldor save Lord Zaveid, its highest general, has ever beaten the crown prince in a duel. And the fact that the Overlord has just passed on to him Levengar, the legendary sword that embodies Kreveldor’s Golden Age, was more than sufficient to remind everyone of his true worth. At least in the imagination of his subjects, Sorey is one you never cross swords with without forfeiting life and honor at the very least.

So despite the fact that Mikleo is about ten months older, he has nothing to boast or brag about when it comes to muscle strength. Aside from being half a head taller, Sorey’s overall, well-toned body was a far cry from Mikleo’s lithe and frail physique which made him the target of bullies since their nursery days.

Mikleo finds himself suppressing a mental groan at that. Though he enjoys almost the same privileges for being Sorey’s adopted sibling (save the right of succession, of course) Mikleo is well aware that he is not immune to court gossip. His ears have all but become numb to the sing-song teasing of their royal cousins, who would call out to him and say: “Pretty Miki white as lily, hiding
behind his stalwart princey. But when your knight is not in sight we’ll ride you mad and break your pinky!”

He wondered if he should at least be thankful those shameless words have never been voiced in front of Sorey. It would have hurt his pride more than anything to appear so fragile and defenseless against those undignified attacks, but he knew better than to react with aggression. How could he even blame them for hating him—for harboring ill-feelings toward a complete stranger, an adopted nobody brought up in a life of luxury that wasn’t his birth right?

Finally setting aside the book he has been browsing haphazardly, Mikleo turns his attention to the figure bending down the fireplace, poking at the wood absent-mindedly it seems.

“Careful there, Sorey, your cloak might catch fire.”

Sorey must admit he has been feeling a bit edgy and restless for a lot of nameless reasons. But somehow, that half-joke, half-banter coming from Mikleo in unguarded moments such as these just as quickly coaxed his muddled mind to clear up, his smile to swell beyond all the mixed emotions he felt.

“Seriously, can’t we call it a robe or a... uh... a cape at least? I swear this thing’s really starting to get in my way... though it’s supposed to make me look a bit more respectable—what do you think?”

Sorey posing in front of him in his full height with that half-swaggering confidence that seemed a little out of character would have made him laugh years ago when they shared the same height, the same body type even. But looking at him now standing like a warrior’s statue, so broad and masculine beneath the boyishly disheveled hair and sparkling emerald eyes, Mikleo felt that same, disturbing, fluttery feeling in his stomach.

Personally, narcissism disgusts him but... Mikleo had to pause to suppress a familiar heat taking him by surprise. The idea of Sorey trying to look good, trying to make himself attractive seemed somewhat refreshing—and exciting? The realization alone was enough to make him feel helplessly distracted and self-conscious.

Shifting his attention to the subject at hand, Mikleo thought that courtly fashion in recent years seems to have become more modest and reserved, shying away from the outrageous, somewhat outlandish tastes of aristocrats elsewhere. But even so, any design whether modest or trendy would have looked perfect on someone as naturally handsome and well-endowed as Sorey. Even his occasional, awkward gait and over-enthusiasm lend him a personal charm that easily draws the eyes of others, as many a girl lately seems to lavish on him second glances and breathless sighs.

Mikleo trembled slightly as his heart began to pound in his ears. Since when has he started noticing those things? But before Sorey could even ask what was wrong, Mikleo cleared his throat and gave the disputed cloak one more sweeping glance.

“Well, Sorey, the elaborate embroidery against all that spotlessly white background does make you less easy to ignore... That’s a good thing, right?”

Sorey scratched his right cheek. “Oh yeah? I never really thought about it that way... I guess being ignored never really bothered me when I always have you to say, ‘I will never leave your side Sorey, even if the whole world becomes your enemy. You’re my friend, my king, the only one to whom I pledge both body and—’”

“What the—you’re *not* gonna start with *that* one, are you?” Mikleo warned, clenching his fist, feeling something furiously hot rising to his neck as Sorey gave him one of his merciless you-can’t-
deny-that-can-you smiles. “Besides, don’t you get goosebumps just saying those things? Though we both must’ve spouted a lot of nonsense when we were kids, we’re not that anymore!”

“Oh, that?” Sorey found Mikleo’s irate expression so amusingly cute he could not help but push the banter a bit further. “You mean when we used to say we’re going off to war then run away and build our own castle on a hill overlooking the ruins of Elysia? I thought that was cool.”

Mikleo almost choked. If the idiot planned on punishing him for whatever reason there was in the universe, he was almost succeeding.

“Get over yourself, we’re not even ten years old old back then so if we ever said or did anything that embarrassing, I’d rather forget it! Besides…” Mikleo looked away. "Elysia is just a legend. We don’t even know if it exists, much less if there are actual ruins to confirm our theories."

“C’mon, where’s the fun in knowing everything anyways? Besides, it’s nice pretending I’m the Shepherd and you're the seraph marching off Elysia to find the Lord of Calamity! We used to play that scene in your bedroom whenever you had to stay indoors because you're not feeling well. And just like a miracle, you get better afterwards…”

“Well, right now I’m really gonna be sick trying to remember a childish game like that!”

“Only when you think of it that way…”

Having said that, it barely took more than three strides for Sorey to be by his side, leaning his towering frame on the wall right next to the bedpost where Mikleo had propped up two pillows to his liking. Then putting both hands behind his head, he let out a sigh so deep Mikleo found himself wanting to swear yet a second time.

“Sorey, if you’re not planning on saying anything, then deal with it all right!!”

“Is it my fault you’re the smarter one? I’m hopeless without you even for a day.”

“It’s been three days, I’m grounded remember? Thanks to some idiot who thought I was smart enough to steal the Celestine Book of Magic Spells and Curses from Bishop Heldalf’s private library and get away with it.”

“C’mon, if the book said something like Warts, Moles, and Other Skin Disasters I wouldn’t even be curious enough to want to look it up.”

“Yeah right, I bet you wouldn’t.”

“Hey, my bad, I’m sorry, really… I couldn’t sleep thinking about what Bishop Heldalf might have done to you when you didn’t show up! And when he had every square foot of this hallway guarded to keep you out of reach, I was certain it was bad. Good thing I have good, ole, dependable Zaveid to back me up and let me sneak in here.”

Sorey decided for himself, however, that Mikleo had no reason to know any more than that… that he got himself into a pinch that morning while practicing with the strongest man in Kreveldor—and that meant having enough cuts and bruises to make the “good ole” general take his worries seriously.

“Whatever it is, can’t you just tell me exactly what’s wrong? Even though it’s cute, you can’t go around wearing that face and looking like a lost puppy all day—not as the crown prince of Kreveldor anyway…”

“I—so you think I’m cute, right?” Sorey thought for a second that it was the first time in a long while
that Mikleo called him that.

Mikleo glared daggers at him, crossing his arms in front of his chest. “Yeah, so relish the thought, you old dog. Now, can we go back to the subject please?”

“Uh, right. It’s just that I was told my fiancée’s arriving tomorrow.”

“Your what?” Mikleo’s eyes shot up, voice rising to an octave. He had to admit that that was unexpected. He scrunches up his face, trying hard not to look suspicious but failing. “If this is some joke—well—I mean, it’s the first time I’ve heard of it and besides a fiancée is…” Mikleo puts his hand over his face, eyes raised toward the ceiling. “No wait, are—are you by any chance talking about Alisha? The one-and-only heir to the throne of Erinvale, Princess Alisha Diphda?”

“Alisha? I guess…” Sorey scrunches up his face as if trying to recall a vague memory. “Yeah, I think she’s the one. But, now that you mentioned it, isn’t Erinvale’s library one of the best we’ve seen so far?”

"I guess," Mikleo relented. "It even has an abridged copy of one of our favorite books, The Age of Chaos: Chronicles of the Shepherd, which, coincidentally, we found in an old shop in Pendrago just weeks after that! Of course there's nothing like the Celestial Record if you ask me... it's your favorite book too I know."

Sorey nodded. "I just kinda feel bad that people don't seem to have the same interest as we do when it comes to history, and almost no one cares to talk about the Age of Chaos."

Mikleo sensed the easy regret in those words. Maybe because he understood and felt the same. "Come to think of it, it's not like we have to indulge in other people's amusements either. We're weird as it is, without you trying to give all your potential admirers a long, tedious lecture on the Catacombs of Camoria or the legendary Altar of the Holy of Holies, or the architecture of Rolance Cathedral."

"Nothing beats Erinvale Palace, though! I mean, the libraries are just huge! The whole place is the size of an arena, and their gardens are no less fascinating! Touring the place was the only real fun we got after sitting in the carriage for days and getting headaches from reading ‘cause the ride was bumpy half of the way."

Mikleo sighed. "Don't you think you're forgetting something more important? 'Cause all I remember is Bishop Heldalf confiscating our precious book as soon as we arrived back from Erinvale. In any case, didn't you come to see me because you're curious about Alisha?"

"N-no… well not exactly. I just wanna know what the heck it means to be someone’s fiancé."

Mikleo's eyes bulged. “S-Sorey! Don’t tell me you’re perfectly clueless!”

“Of course not!” Sorey took a defensive stance, hands on his hip, which only served to fuel Mikleo’s doubts. “Everyone’s gossiping about it over breakfast and I did my best to pay attention for once!”

“Right.” Mikleo’s voice was sarcastically neutral. “By everyone you must mean cousin Beldin, Drindane Freinhir, Grendal, Kalren and Tallis. No offense but any information coming from those guys can only be just as warped as their brains.”

“I know. Still… they kept saying Alisha’s a real babe and bedding her is absolutely steamy so having babies right after the wedding should be my priority.”

"What a crude way of putting it! But knowing your cousins, that's something you'd expect them to
say! Seriously, though, since Princess Alisha’s the heir to the most powerful kingdom next to Kreveldor, it’s not surprising that Erinvale wants to negotiate your engagement. In any case, if the Overlord and the Queen approve of it, well that, irrevocably, makes Princess Alisha your ideal future queen. Haven't our parents even discussed the subject with you in private?"

Sorey scratched his cheek. "Whatever it meant hardly came across to me as anything but political. I'm sure no one's supposed to mention it until the right time comes, and you know Beldin, Kalren, Tallis and the rest... they're probably shooting their mouths off just to brag, and they're pretty good in sniffing out secrets as this one must be. Besides, even if I have some idea what marriage is, I've never really bothered to ask or read up on it. Have you?"

Mikleo scrunched up his face. "Well, not exactly... I mean..." For some reason, he felt his cheeks heat up.

"Hey, Mikleo, you're turning red just now!"

“It's fairly obvious why, Sorey! I mean, making babies—you’re not supposed to do that unless you’re married to the woman who’s giving birth, all right? At least the Church thinks that way... sheesh, Sorey, you don't live under a rock, do you? I know you're naïve and hopelessly clueless at times, but-"

"Mikleo! You're really making me feel bad right now!"

"Seriously, Sorey, how can you not know these things! I mean, have you never really been curious as to how you were born in the first place?"

"Err... I don't think the Queen would have time to explain something so mundane, do you?"

"Still, you can work on a theory and imagine the rest."

"All I know is that living things come from living things... and what they have in common is mana..." Sorey suddenly looks thoughtful, touching his chin with the tip of his thumb and index finger. "And like what Jiji said, mana is some kind of life force, isn't it? So I guess, babies are no exception, I mean they must be born by lending your mana to someone who needs it... Honestly, I don't know how you lend mana to someone 'cause we've never even tried it..."

"Oh god..." Mikleo swathed his face. "You really think you can go around making babies by doing some random thing like lending your mana to anyone who asks for it?"

"Uh, well. why not? Seems like a good idea. That's how seraphim are born, right?"

"Well, you're truly as meek as a lamb and as clueless as an idiot. You should have at least guessed that marriage is not just some ceremony joining two people together. It also means producing children by doing...uh... certain things... very intimate things... in private..."

"Still knowing how seraphim do it, aren't you curious if human beings like us could be born by some other means?"

Mikleo found the question strange, almost absurd, but nonetheless intriguing. "By using special artes like sorcery? Or witchcraft? But that entails a lot of overthinking that violates the principle of simplicity... meaning the most simple explanations are often the more accurate ones as well."

"I know, but if you think about it, nothing is ever that simple to begin with. Besides, how can we know what we don't know unless we start doubting what we think we do know..."
"Right. And how did we get that far? By thinking about babies. That's like circumnavigating the world to find something that grows in our own backyard."

Sorey’s reaction, however was unexpected. He frowned at Mikleo and folded his arms across his chest. “Even so, I'd like to know how you seem to know a lot about these things when we don’t even read that kind of stuff, Mikleo!”

Mikleo felt like punching him right now. “Well, don’t you even eavesdrop on conversations around you?”

“Hey, that's your habit, not mine.”

“If you think there’s something wrong with that, well—”

Sorey uncrossed his arms and flicked a wayward strand of hair sticking up on Mikleo’s forehead. “I’m sorry… my bad… It’s just that I…” Mikleo felt Sorey’s voice tremble a little. “I guess I just don’t see myself being that way with any woman… not that I have anything against the fairer sex…”

“Say that out loud and our parents might marry you off tomorrow.”

The furrow on Sorey’s forehead deepened, and his eyes looked almost angry. “Well, I'd like to see them try.”

"Aren't we being a rebel?"

“Maybe.” Sorey exhaled loudly, not knowing why he felt so frustrated, though some part of him knew it was always like this whenever the topic became a little too personal. He could not help fixing his gaze at Mikleo, suddenly in deep thought. Mikleo flinched under the weight of his stare.

"Don't think about it if it worries you."

"Not really, I'm just thinking..." Sorey drew out a long sigh. "I guess if there’s anyone I wish to be by my side, it’s someone I can’t ever live without... someone who makes me feel safe and happy and free to be just who I am... someone I could walk with to the ends of the earth without looking back… someone who—"

Sorey felt awkward saying it but... "... someone who’d look up to me as his man, not just his king."

The deep, hushed voice in which he said that somehow made Mikleo feel embarrassed to meet his gaze. He exhaled loudly, crossing his arms this time. “Hopeless romantic.”

“Anything wrong with that?”

Mikleo still kept his face averted. “Such high standards you have there… But I don’t see how being realistic is wrong either. Kingdoms are ruled by dynasties and dynasties depend on how good a king is in producing children as heirs. I don’t think you need to be reminded that you’re our one and only crown prince. Without a queen to bear your children, everything will plunge into chaos and—"

“If being king means that I’d rather run away.”

“Sorey, you know as much as I do how almost everyone would kill to be in your place. The empire has secret enemies everywhere, lurking in the shadows, ready to strike when you least expect it. Knowing that, your position is not something you should take lightly.”

“I know, believe me I do... it’s just that...” Sorey’s eyes soften and Mikleo finds himself unable to
look away. “…my heart seems to be somewhere else…”

Mikleo tried not to think about that either. “Well, it’s about time you realize you have one, the gods probably took their time looking for it.”

Sorey felt his heart sink, though he couldn’t figure out why. ”Very funny.”

Mikleo tried to shake off the strange feeling in his stomach as he absent-mindedly flipped the pages of the book on his lap. ”Going back to our topic, when it comes to marrying Alisha and making babies, well, that’s supposed to start with your first honeymoon.”

“Uh... h-honeymoon?”

“It’s when you and Alisha get some alone time together and—and I suppose you do something—uhh—intimate like…”

Mikleo didn’t know how to follow that through and hesitates with a frown. But Sorey’s curiosity was just too intense to let him see through his companion’s discomfort.

“Like what?” Sorey scratches his cheek, obviously baffled by the mystery of it. “Is it any different from when we’re alone just reading by ourselves? Because if it isn’t, there’s no reason to feel so awkward. I swear you’re redder than a tomato right now.”

“Sorey! Staying together in the same room to read isn’t exactly what you’d call intimate.”

“Jiji said ‘intimate’ means ‘showing one’s affections’—and it’s something that happens when you care about someone really deeply that anything you do is just special. So if that’s what it is…” Sorey felt a strange excitement in his chest and inhaled deeply. “…you can pretty much say we’re intimate, right?”

Mikleo clenched his fist at him, eyes ablaze. “But that—that’s entirely different I swear!!! Listen, you think people make babies just reading a book? You have to do something more, uhh… aggressive…”

“Oh? Like this?” Fingers reached out to grasp the other’s waist, followed by a look of absolute shock and disbelief surfacing in a pair of amethyst eyes. Sorey grinned, leaning over Mikleo, eyes languid. “It’s been a while isn’t it?”

“S-Sorey! St—stop, dammit! We promised not to do this when we turn sixteen, hey! Cut it out, I’m seriou—gods, Sorey!”

Incomprehensible bursts of laughter forced its way out of Mikleo as soon as those familiar fingers wriggled and touched places that sent Mikleo giggling in between protests.

“Well, neither of us is sixteen anyway! You’re eighteen and I just turned seventeen last month. So that means tickling’s just fine, right?”

Mikleo finally caught his fingers, then gripping them tightly, gave them a violent push. He slapped Sorey’s other hand when he tried to curl it around his waist for another attack. “Your logic’s terrible as always! And if the Duchess Meliahnna had seen us like this, it would be the death of me I swear. Sorey?”

That name. Although Sorey has a lot of respect for the duchess who happens to be his deceased uncle’s wife and the Overlord’s sister-in-law, he can’t help but be reminded of unpleasant things whenever her name is mentioned. He vividly remembers those days when he and Mikleo were
compelled to keep themselves busy in the company of their cousins—his Aunt Meliahnna’s three sons. Because Mikleo didn’t feel comfortable playing with other boys, Sorey never let him be alone with them for more than a few minutes.

Besides, there was little to like in the games his cousins preferred. Not only were they fond of tearing and decapitating books to build their imaginary bonfires, they also like breaking stuff and giving each other nasty names at the slightest offense.

But even these were nothing compared to his aunt’s stern and intolerant attitude toward Mikleo, most especially. He could hardly forget the scornful way she’d look at him when she thought no one was around to notice. And when one time she caught Malfus kissing Mikleo’s hair, she went livid and dragged Mikleo out the room. No matter how Sorey begged her to let Mikleo take meals with them that day, she brushed him off with a polite but resoundingly cruel apology. But that was not even the end of it. When he and Mikleo were finally back at Kreveldor, he was suddenly told that Mikleo would have to be in confinement for at least three weeks for reasons that were not even explained. Only the maids were kind enough to give him bits and pieces of information. It seemed his Aunt Meliahnna had taken the matter with her brother-in-law and gave the Overlord sufficient—though obviously contrived reason—to have Mikleo brutally and unfairly punished. Sorey would be lying if he could say, after so much time has passed, that all of that has been forgiven and forgotten.

Just thinking about this morning’s incident in the kitchen…

No… That’s definitely not something he could afford to think of right now, not with Mikleo’s mood being as bright and cheerful as this. If only he could see him smile a bit longer… smile with a genuine sort of happiness that could pierce through everything, even those dark and moody days when Sorey was forced shut in his study, left to wonder when he would be allowed to see Mikleo again…

His chest would hurt when he thought of that. Whenever he thought of anyone taking him away, forcing them apart… Sorey always felt like some part of him was withering, slowly flickering into nothingness like embers being swept under a swirling sky of snow…

“Know what? I would pay a hundred gald to know what you’re thinking right now…”

Sorey scratched the back of his head the way he would when caught unawares. “To be honest, I was just wondering if we could—I mean—if it’s all right to stay like this forever…”

“Whoa, since when have you started being over-dramatic, huh?”

"Stop teasing, all right?"

Mikleo grinned. "Thought I was the one who’s supposed to be touchy-feely around here! But, seriously, I don’t think it’s even worth considering. Knowing you, you’d get bored and quit halfway through forever.”

“Maybe you’re the one who wouldn’t be able to keep up!”

"Look, if you wanna live forever, I have nothing against it. But keeping someone like you company is altogether different.”

“You really have a mean streak don’t you? Anyways, aren’t you curious what sort of person Alisha is like?”

“Pretty amazing maybe.” Mikleo put a thumb on his chin as he thought about it. “I heard at the age of ten she sneaked into one of the royal ships sailing north because she wanted to see what Slavers
and Heldons really looked like.”

“Err… they’re deadly sea warriors and treasure hunters right? Some say their ghosts become vicious headhunting monsters who collect their victims’ skulls to offer them to Leowulf, their god.”

Mikleo nodded in deep interest, resting his chin on the back of his hand. “Right. Of course Jiji would say Leowulf is venerated by most pagans for his sheer strength and warrior’s spirit. Some cultists and fanatics believe Leowulf would someday rise from the bowels of the deepest hells to reclaim the world for the one, true race of mankind.”

Sorey balls his fist excitedly, looking defiant at once. “Huh, as if the seraphim would allow something like that to happen! ‘Cause I’m sure Celestia will open its gates and let the holy seraphim fly out to kick him back to hell!”

Mikleo’s eyelids drooped at that. “Look, admiring the seraphim is pretty much all right for as long as you’re not the prince of Kreveldor. On top of that, you don’t have to turn every legend you know into some romantic fairy tale.”

“Hah, I’m so good at it, right? Maybe someday you’d be reading my book yourself!”

“Get real! There’s a huge gap between fantasy and insanity, and yours is just a little over delusional.”

“But wouldn’t it be cool if we could write our own book and see which one is better?”

“Where’s the excitement there? We both already know who’s the better writer.”

“Feeling proud aren’t we, my peacock?” Sorey snickered.

Mikleo reaches out and tweaks a stray strand of hair across Sorey’s cheek. “How many times do I have to tell you not to call me that? And please, could you refrain from being embarrassing even once? I swear I’d have permanent goosebumps just hearing you talk!”

“No worries. Goosebumps can’t make you any less pretty.”

“Sorey!!!”

As usual, Sorey’s smile shone like a beacon at him, two fingers spread out at him as if to say it was Mikleo’s victory, no need to get flustered. Even so, Mikleo didn’t feel like it was right to laugh the matter off just as casually as he would before. Crown prince or not, he and Sorey are getting too old for this kind of teasing. Besides if it were true that his engagement with Princess Alisha was well on its way, it would do them both good to establish some distance, to get used to living separate lives...

Sorey catches his changing mood and stares at him with a slight frown. Though the gaze is giving him a tingling sensation that is not altogether unpleasant, Mikleo feels like running away before his body shivers visibly. “What now?”

Sorey shakes his head. “Nothing.”

Mikleo switches the book on his lap with another and flips through it randomly. “That look hardly means nothing, and you know it.”

Sorey hesitates for a moment, suddenly unsure about what to say next. He has been trying to calm himself and waited for the right mood to speak his mind, but it seems he was too confident to think it would be easy. On impulse, his right hand clenched itself into a fist and though he could easily hide it from beneath his mantle, he felt disappointed and uneasy for letting his body give in to such
emotions. “You remember cousin Malfus don’t you?”

Mikleo steels his breath. "What about it?"

"He's due to arrive tomorrow."

Mikleo had to swallow his breath this time. “That's to be expected, I guess. He's been gone for a year.”

“I suppose Father wants to celebrate his new title. Bishop Heldalf seems equally enthusiastic about it.”

“Fairly predictable.” Mikleo tried to keep his tone neutral even when his mind screamed for an explanation. "Quite honestly, I don’t know anyone besides Malfus who’s as hell-bent on becoming the next bishop of Kreveldor. I suppose he thinks—no, imagines—that leading the Council of the Holy Twelve is just as important as becoming Overlord.”

“Yeah, I sort of get that part. And I sense you’re not that excited about his coming either. Even when we were kids you seem to avoid him a lot—but we both know he’s not the type to get discouraged easily.”

Sorey hesitated, rubbing the feathered edges of one ear while stealing a glance at Mikleo. If he could be honest enough to say what was bothering him from the start…

No, that would be bad. Knowing Mikleo, if he found out Sorey knew what that filthy, dirty leech of a cousin did—Mikleo would certainly avoid him out of self-pity or shame. And that may be the only thing in the world more difficult to endure than this feeling of abomination and disgust toward Malfus.

Mikleo broke the awkward silence. “You and Malfus get along somehow anyway. So why do you seem so worried?”

Sorey forced a smile. There is nothing he wouldn't do to let Mikleo feel at ease, but doing that without cutting open hidden scars is just a mile's stretch from what he has mentally prepared himself to do since that morning when he first heard the news. “N-nothing, geez, it's just... I mean... who'd forget that time you and I went hiking just to get away from Malfus and he got lost trying to follow our trail?”

"Oh, right. That was pretty much annoying."

"Gods, all three of us got grounded because of it, then next time I heard Father sent you to Aunt Meliahnna’s castle while Malfus was sent to a seminary at Pendrago. Aunt—I mean the Duchess—wouldn’t tell me what it was all about, but I got the feeling that somehow Bishop Heldalf’s involved. After all, no one’s permitted to enter Pendrago Shrine without his approval. I never thought he wanted to enter the Order with all the rumors about it being so strict. Then there’s you disappearing for a week and I kept wondering about—"

"Sorey," Mikleo interrupts without looking up. “Whatever it is, you don’t have to be so concerned. After all, you already have a lot on your shoulders. There's no need to worry about senseless trifles when it's just about me or Malfus.”

Senseless? Trifles? For a moment, Sorey felt something burning, pushing inside of him and he could barely suppress the urge to shake Mikleo by the shoulders. Say something Mikleo! After all this time, why—why do you have to keep it all in?
At that moment, Sorey couldn’t help but let his mind slip back to those snips of conversation in the kitchen... things he heard while hoping to pilfer some berry preserves from the royal pantry.

“Oh, that Malfus is coming back have you heard, Hermei?”

“Oh, Cazra, you don’t mean—that shay-rin is, really?”

“Hermei! You know better than to use that word around here!”

“So what? It’s not like anyone who might overhear even knows what it means!”

“But we made an oath to His Holiness about this.”

“Cazra, don’t tell me you care about that nonsense? Why if Malfus weren’t of royal blood he would have been disowned and much worse sent away to rot in the Rayfalke dungeons! It’s ironic that an aspiring bishop—a young noble no less from the king’s own bloodline—is disgustingly tainted! More than anyone we know!”

“Have a heart! It’s not like a shay-rin chooses what he is. They’re born that way. Man-lovers.”

“But—if we hadn’t seen what we saw that day—”

“Hermei don’t—please!!! It gives me nightmares just thinking what could’ve happened to Prince Mikleo! That Malfus breaking my lord’s knee with a blunt sword so he could ride him like a horse! That animal!”

“Indeed! Such things are an abomination, even to the worst of heathens! Ride him you say? Not that it’s entirely Malfus’s fault.”

“What ever could you mean by that?”

“Oh Cazra, just imagine if you were so lucky as to be wearing Prince Mikleo’s face...”

“Huh? Well... I guess you’re right. Lovely doesn’t even begin to cover it. Uhh... actually, I just came back from my lord’s room to serve him tea and—”

“And what? You’re not gonna keep secrets from Hermei are you?”

“W-well, I just can’t help it, I mean, seeing him up close I really can’t believe how beautiful he is, how—”

“How much he makes you breathless with desire—is that what you’re trying to say? I imagine I must be married by now with at least ten kids if I had those looks...”

“But—but hearing how the other boys talk about him? Really Hermei, my heart fears there may be more trouble soon... I’m so afraid for my prince...”

“Cazra! You know better than to fantasize about the kid! Not that I blame you... I mean just imagine being naked with him every single night... caressing that porcelain skin, feeling, squeezing every tight muscle on that youthful body... and staring into those rare amethyst eyes as he plunges his manhood into that waiting desire between your legs... Oh, to make love to such a beautiful boy over and over... ooohhhh, sweet ecstasy, absolute joy! Can anything be more steamy than that?”

“Hermei! That—that’s the most shameless thing—what a whore you are, I hate you! Really, really,
“that filthy, little mouth of yours—”

“You’re imagining it aren’t you? But honestly, have you even kissed a boy before? Because if you haven’t, then start with that.”

“A k-kiss? To tell you the truth, my lord’s lips look so supple I find myself—uhh, I’m sure staring is not half as worldly as imagining him in my bed!!!”

“Uhh, Sorey? What suddenly got into you?”

Sorey bristled as if he had just scorched himself. It seemed that the room just got several degrees warmer, hotter, making him break into a sticky sweat. “N-Never mind… It’s really nothing… just—uhhh—”

Mikleo huffed. “Such a bad liar you are…”

“Err… no way I just—I—remembered something I forgot to do before coming here! I—I need to see Zaveid right away—yeah, that must be it.”

Mikleo turned a page noisily, seeming to be agitated though he couldn’t quite put his finger on it. “Whatever it is, be careful all right? And thanks for dropping by. It’s much appreciated.”

Sorey rubbed the back of his head with a nervous laugh. “It’s my fault that got you grounded. Next time I joke about stealing, please take it as a joke. ‘Cause if you get into any scrapes again, whether it’s your fault or mine, I promise I’m gonna make such a ruckus as to send us flying out of Kreveldor with only our clothes and boots on.”

“Don’t forget books. They’re more important than either food or clothes. But of course saying that is beside the point. After all, you can’t promise anything that wasn’t even asked for.”

Sorey was suddenly quiet at that, his stare so focused on Mikleo that the other just had to look up. “Hey, are you sure you’re all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Sorey tried to make light of it, but his sigh was audible enough for Mikleo to hear. “Sorey?”

“Sometimes I wish you’d just be honest enough to ask…”

Mikleo met his stare, noticing the change in Sorey’s mood by the way he spoke in a flat, cheerless, deeper voice. For its rarity, Sorey’s meditative air makes him look more masculine, more virile. It also makes him more attractive in a frighteningly intimidating way that was making Mikleo feel uneasy again.

But of course, this is just Sorey, he needed to remind himself one more time as he tried to match the other’s gaze. He smiled wryly, trying to focus on that thought. “Know what, Sorey? I just figured something.”

“Huh?”

“Sometimes you’re like a maze with a lot of dead ends… and I’m lost trying to find where you’re coming from or what goals you’re trying to accomplish…”
“But Mikleo!” Sorey was trying to calm himself ever since he had brought up the matter regarding Malfus, but no matter what he did, it wasn’t working. And that casual comment just about made it worse, fueling his worries about how inadequate he really was, how careless and thoughtless he was to let terrible things happen to the one person he wanted to protect—

“Look, I know I could be insensitive, and you probably think I don’t care about what you feel, but it doesn’t mean it’s okay to fool yourself…”

“Sorey? Just what are you trying to—

“All this time, I know you’re not happy here. You hate Kreveldor. You hate Tallis, Beldin, Grendal, Kalren, Freinhir, Drindane—”

Mikleo sensed the frustration but didn’t understand why Sorey was acting like he was the one suffering. It’s not like he even wanted him to know about those things, or he wanted his sympathy. All his life he never wanted Sorey to take on any unnecessary burden, especially his own.

“Look Sorey, if hate bothers you that much, then consider it as intense lack of affinity. That sounds better, doesn’t it?”

Sorey’s gaze softened a little. “Hey, it’s not that I blame you for feeling that way… It’s just that I—I can’t stand knowing you’re putting up with something you don’t have to… and that includes Malfus.” Sorey pauses long and hard at that final word, feeling something heavy in his chest rise to his throat. He shakes it off with a slight wince, wondering at the painful, throbbing feeling that has since begun to disturb him that morning.

“What’s he got to do with anything—or are you waiting for an explanation of some sort?”

“Honestly Mikleo, don’t you sometimes wish you could just escape from here?”

Mikleo raised the book to his face as if he had come across something very interesting all of a sudden. “I’d never say anything like that.”

“I know why.”

“So mind-reading is your hobby now?”

“Mikleo…”

Even when he kept his eyes on the book, he could paint the emotion in those emerald-green eyes clearly, unmistakably, like a permanent picture on the back of his mind. But Mikleo swallowed his awareness of it. “Don’t say things you’d regret later…”

With a swift movement, Sorey was over Mikleo, one arm planted firmly on the bedpost right behind Mikleo’s shoulder, with Mikleo’s right leg between his knees.

With his other hand, Sorey gently lifted the book from Mikleo’s grasp and set it aside, meeting those amethyst eyes with a straight gaze. But now that their faces were barely inches away with nothing in between, his knees began to melt beneath him, his ears pounding with the sound of their heartbeats and their quickened breaths.

“Why, why are you always like this… always pretending not to get hurt? Always letting even the worst things happen to you without saying anything?”

Mikleo looked down, not wanting to believe he was hearing this—not wanting to think Sorey knew
something he shouldn’t. “Gods, is being emotionless such a crime?”

“You’re—” Sorey’s eyes softened. “—you’re definitely not that. If anything, you’re too… kind.”

“Look who’s talking…”

“Mikleo…” With his other hand, he grasped Mikleo’s shoulder a little too tightly, feeling his energy drain from him, his knees melt with an insistent pulsating heat above it. “You don’t have to endure everything by yourself. I already like you too much because of it…”

“Sorey???”

The startled gasp, the suppressed panic in the amethyst eyes that stared back at him—despite all that, it took Sorey all his strength to pull away, feeling feverish and nervous and excited in a way that made his head spin. He scratched one cheek awkwardly, averting his gaze as he stood by the bed.

“Uh, sorry if I scared you, didn’t mean to. Guess I should be going before you kick me out of the room and all. But I’d drop by again as soon as I could get Zaveid some of the things he wanted…”

Mikleo could hardly make sense of those words as the hammering in his chest wouldn’t abate no matter how he tried to convince himself that it was just he and Sorey having one of their senseless fights. The fact that he didn’t feel convinced by his own words, that every time Sorey looked at him or touched him—even barely—made him yearn for something that seems unreachable, unknowable, irrational to say the least is just about enough to make him want to escape from Sorey or lock himself away.

But right now Sorey looked somewhat like his normal self with that dopey look on his face, and for one minute, Mikleo couldn’t help but wonder if he was just imagining things or if he was just plainly overthinking everything. Whatever it was, he felt he needed to say something, anything to keep this normal side of things from crumbling away.

“Just a reminder, don’t go spoiling Zaveid too much. I know he’s deeply caring despite appearances but you wouldn’t want to play favorites and incite jealousy in a court that’s already full of it. Then again, I’m pretty sure you’re gonna ignore all that ‘cause you’re completely hopeless.”

Sorey folded his arms across his chest at that. “Yeah, and I figured something out too.”

“Huh?”

“That you’re completely you, Mikleo. And I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

With a single bound, Sorey was out the door before Mikleo could even glimpse the expression on his face when he said that. He was left staring at the door as it closed with a decided click and everything was quiet again.

Mikleo sighs and was about to toss away the book he has been reading when something caught his eye.

Sitting on the pillow next to him was a piece of parchment folded into a small triangle, the kind that fitted perfectly into a secret pocket. He lifted the folds carefully to read.

“Coming up… your celestial dinner on record. Enjoy.”

What the—he wouldn’t—it’s too risky… Mikleo thought of a hundred reasons to stop himself from running after Sorey to give him a kick on the head. But then a hundred reasons just came as quickly
to make him smile.

Having the *Celestial Record* to read the entire evening until daybreak is probably the next best thing to having Sorey right next to him…

The thought almost made him blush. It was absurd, this feeling, this yearning, but the denial only confirmed it and made it worse.

*I guess I’m the hopeless idiot...*
Celestia

Chapter Summary

Sorey makes a visit... and finds out more than he bargained for.

Chapter Notes

Hi, this is a quick update... it's less than a week after I posted the first chapter. School is getting even more hectic so I decided to post this before I forget. I have the habit of editing the summary, the tags, and some of the dialogue (like the conversation in chap. 1 about making babies... I added details like Sorey's understanding of "mana" and how that relates to procreation. Sorey's not interested in male-female relations so he never bothered to know the details... Anyway I inserted a paragraph in that part of the dialogue just to clear that up...)

THANKS for the kudos! I don't know if you guys are enjoying this, but I deeply appreciate it if you do!

DISCLAIMER: The original story behind Tales of Zestiria and Tales of Zestiria the X belongs to Bandai-Namco and Ufotable respectively. Since the writer makes no profit from this labor of love and, in fact, struggles against shame and hopeless obsession every time she has to write an additional chapter for her self-pleasure and that of others like her, she respectfully makes a plea against any law suit. :D

Obsession has no shame, by the way. You’ve been warned. ^_^

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Ordinary is a seeming,

A might disguised by plain
When life has lost its living,
Then madness will be sane.
This life that has been given
Is life with no returning.

Until flames of black are frozen

In the pure light of your keeping.
The faint echoes of distant singing resonating in the crevices of his shallow sleep woke Sorey up. But the moment he opened his eyes nothing but the empty, hollow, semi-darkness of his own bedroom greeted him. For several seconds, he watched the tiny, sputtering flame of the gas lamp carefully placed in a niche on the wall alongside his bed cast listless, stuttering shadows on the opposite wall. Then figuring out that there was little chance he could fall back to sleep any moment soon, he yawned the rest of his sluggishness away before finally pushing himself up and out of bed.

His body felt sore. He had never felt so tired, so enervated in his life, and it was strange that he should even feel that way. As soon as he left Mikleo yesterday, he went out in search of Zaveid only to be told that the general had been asked to escort Bishop Heldalf to Lady Meliahna’s castle, which was only well over two hours on horseback from Kreveldor Castle. If Jiji—a term of endearment he and Mikleo use on the stern but doting tutor who was more like a grandfather to them both—had not threatened him with a two-week library reprieve (which to Sorey is no worse than instant death), he would have waited at the stables until the general’s return. But dinner came and went and there was no sign of the irascible general anywhere.

What seemed a bit stranger was the fact that the bishop was missing as well, and as for his cousin Malfus who was due to arrive and dine with the royal family that evening…

Sorey felt the same tightening in his chest, the same nausea overcoming him, so dragging his feet to the bathroom, he scooped some water into his hands from a basin left there by the maids then splashed it onto his face noisily. The water was cold—cold enough to send tingling shivers over his neck and shoulders, which he carelessly drenched. The sensation woke him up, nevertheless, and thankfully eased some of his headache. Then without bothering as much as to change his sleepwear into something more comfortably decent, Sorey stepped out of his bedroom, night lamp in hand, looking tired but alert as he padded softly along the hallways that were just as dimly lighted.

A rat scuttled into a corner as he finally came to the entrance of the general hall that leads to separate adjacent rooms that make up the royal quarters. Though he had on a pair of bear-skin, wool-padded slippers, he could not help but notice the additional warmth and coziness afforded by the thick carpeting here, which bears, at the very center, the crest and emblem of the royal family—three concentric lines around a single wing spread out and struck in the middle by a slender blade on the hilt of which are two small feathers and a circlet of beads. Each bead, according to legend, stands for each of the kingdoms that rose up against the seraphim in the Second Battle at Tiamat—a victory for the humans that, history and legend say, finally drove those winged harbingers of calamity back to Celestia to be seen no more.

Tiamat, of course, is an old name, almost non-existent even in their history books. The legendary battleground became the new capital and was changed to Kreveldor with the first emperor’s rise to power. For obvious political reasons, the ancient name had been discarded for something historians thought sounded more imperial, more aristocratic, devoid of all the unwanted connotations that
reminded people of dragons, hellions, seraphim and Shepherds.

A name that would make it easier for the people to forget. Because bad memories have a habit of coming back every now and then.

That aside, Sorey knew that as crown prince of Kreveldor he should feel no less honored to stand by this iconic symbol of his ancestors’ leadership during some of the darkest moments of human history. The victory against the seraphim recalled in both ancient and modern tongues, in idyllic ballads, plays, and romance novels, as well as in almost every modern piece of architecture around the world is supposed to convey the history of man as the grand conquest of god and nature. Except for Jiji, his intensely patriotic tutors never fail to remind him that everything else written about mankind is nothing but a footnote to Kreveldor’s achievements.

So it is no less surprising that in almost every chronicle he and Mikleo could get their hands on, the epic exodus of the seraphim was depicted as mankind’s blessing, a blessing that Kreveldor’s Overlord—also the future Sorey—must uphold at all costs.

Perhaps it was the same reason he and Mikleo always fantasized meeting real seraphim and asking them a hundred-and-one questions about the seraphim wars. Vague accounts refer to the Last Great War, but it seems unlikely that such a tragedy had not been preceded or pre-empted by a series of conflicts leading to its own catastrophic resolution. Even when a lot has been written to support the premise, he finds it hard to believe that the seraphim were the true enemy of humanity or that vanquishing them meant saving the world. Both he and Mikleo believed that faith in the power of gods and seraphim does not necessarily mean underestimating the power of man. After all, coexistence entails neither subordination nor domination but harmony and mutual dependence.

However, the history books he and Mikleo grew up with seem to overlook this point in favor of simple equations such as war is power and power resolves everything. With the malevolence vanquished, there was nothing left to defeat but the absolute laws of gods and seraphim impinging on the imperfect conditions of human existence.

It seems natural that only by reclaiming the world from these ethereal usurpers can mankind carve a path toward his enlightened destiny, a destiny that achieves his own vision of perfection, his own ideal universe upon which all futures can be forged entirely with his own independent will.

Sorey is no hypocrite to deny the grandeur in all of that—in the awe-inspiring vision of man as the prime mover, the leviathan behind all of creation. There is nothing entirely wrong in the belief that man is his own savior, that only through his own enlightenment would he be able to transcend all the forces of evil and arrive at his own redemption. But even without the profound wisdom of saints and scholars, Sorey could not help but think it delusional to assume that this kind of earthly, absolute power could be entirely pure, good, and true. Something tells him that the will to power can never be neutral, that even when it strives to do justice, any sort of power carries with it the burden of tipping the scales of good and evil...

And the seduction of that—of having control over good and evil—is all too much for anyone, innocent or otherwise, to resist when nothing or no one is allowed by whatever name to stand in its way.

He has just been contemplating these things when he thought he saw a distant light glow an amorphous green along a narrow passageway leading to the inner corridors of the sentinels’ quarters. General Zaveid, being the chief military adviser in charge of the security in and outside the palace, rooms in one of the chambers at the end of that corridor. Putting down the night lamp and using the hint of light in front of him as his guide, Sorey allowed his instincts to lead him along the narrow hallway that was as familiar to him as the back of his hand.
Doubtless, the amorphous hue is shimmering from below Zaveid’s door. But before he could lift his hand to knock, he heard voices talking from the other side of it. Curious, he clenched his hand and strained his ears to listen.

“You’re such a dumbass, you know that, right? If those two haven’t realized who they truly are at this point in time, it would be too late. The universe isn’t gonna wait forever.”

“Celestia, you mean.”

“Just like what I said. The universe.”

“Edna, get real. You may look awfully younger than any other seraphim I know—including your precious Meebo—but you sound at least a thousand years older than cool ol’ Zaveid here.”

“Look, how many times do I have to tell you and the others that stupid Meebo is not my precious? I’m not the type to play second fiddle, or to accept hand-me-downs even if their previous owner was some saintly Shepherd.”

“Uh-huh, sooo... you finally admit getting jealous of His Shepherdness, huh? He may remind you of Eizen, but I guess sibling love can’t compete with something like puppy love, what d’ya think? And Meebo is the good, ole, lucky pup, I’d say!”

“That hopeless idiot is nothing but a meeb and you should know better than to insult an earth seraph! Say that again and I’d have this castle tumbling down right on top of you!”

“Sheesh, still sensitive aren’t we? Don’t get so worked up over the past, all right? It’s not like you to hold a grudge this long... and against you-know-who who never had any choice to begin with.”

“Sure thing. Even if the idiot could think, he’d do exactly the same thing for his one and only Sorey.”

"Not unpredictable, that kid."

"Obviously. Stupid meeb meets the dork of his life. Sappy love story. Just pass me the barf bag."

"As Rose had said, they’re just two of a kind."

"Oh please, Zaveid, don't tell me Sorey reminds you of you?"

Sorey? Hearing his name more than once almost convinced him that he wasn't imagining this. There's the slightest probability that it may be nothing more than a coincidence, of course, but any discussion involving seraphim and humans is already thought-provoking without his worrying about that.

"Can't help it, can I? I just know that true love is a once-in-a-lifetime thing. You should try it to believe it."

"No thanks. If you can't help it, well I'm not helping. Romance is, after all, a falling sickness. It's incurable."

“I guess love makes sense only to those who are in love.” Zaveid winks with an overly-fond smirk on his face.

“We've always known humans and seraphim don't mix, though some selfish creatures believe otherwise. If it wasn’t Sorey, I’m sure the meeb wouldn’t hesitate to think about his own good. But like the idiot that he was, he let his feelings for his one and only decide everything.”
“That can’t be helped, Edna, and we might as well accept it. Of course, I can’t speak from experience and believe me, I don’t even wanna know what it feels like to surrender the last precious thing you have to save someone from his own mistake, whether it’s worth it or not…”

“We all know the story. Being reborn as a seraph because your human soul was used as a sacrifice for a greater end or something is one thing. But sacrificing one’s seraphic soul and using an oath to seal the sacrifice is sheer stupidity. I’ve never heard of any god or seraph who would do such a thing in the name of whatever, even for something so noble as saving the world from absolute doom. Given that, we’re not even entirely sure if a human-turned-seraph that reverted back to being human can have his seraphic soul back… There’s just no affirmation of that possibility anywhere.”

“I see,” Zaveid grinned. “So... Edna... still hoping Mik-boy can be reborn as a seraph after all of this is over, huh?”

"If things were that easy. Over isn't over 'til it's over and you know it."

“That aside, it’s not like being human is that bad for him… at least he can’t pretty much do what he did before even if he wanted to. I mean he’s had it pretty tough as a seraph… more than any of us, so this might even be a blessing in disguise, if you know what I mean.”

“Pointless to talk about it.” Edna knew the inevitable but could not convince herself to believe it. Maybe she needs another thousand years or so? But that could be worse. She could hardly imagine letting centuries pass walking the ends of the earth with that scene in her head, playing over and over again… of a certain water seraph reciting the forbidden mystic arte of soul summoning using a Life Gate and a Soul Key… The fact that she could have stopped it, that she could have told the other seraphim what was going on… that they could have armitized with another Shepherd and combined their seraphic arites to sever the line between that idiot of a water seraph and the depraved being of light-and-dark his precious one created.

Edna felt a sharp sting that almost felt like tears. Whenever she closed her eyes, all she could see was a blinding, bluish hue of pure light resonating with a song of innocence and strength—the pure embodiment of a beautiful soul rising up out of a white mist only to be engulfed by a whirlwind of ashes, like a helpless leaf tossed into a brute and terrible wave of Malevolence…

The anguish of feeling one's body and soul burn away into oblivion. No pain is more horrible. Even the gods cower from such horrors. But that stupid seraph...

“Edna? Hey, it’s not like you to be quiet all of a sudden…”

“As I was saying, that stupid meebo did something irreversible, much like asking to be turned into a dragon, which is the worst thing that can happen to anyone.”

*Of course that’s a lie. The worst thing that can happen is to let one’s soul wither away like that… and to let me see it happen every time… an unbreakable cycle of pain that never gets tired. But the worst of the worst is to expect me to carry out a death wish to the bitter end… Even for a meebo there should be a limit to stupidity…*

*And Sorey… would you ever really know the truth of what you’ve done? I’ve never broken a promise before, but I might… if it’s the only thing that can make things right for him before everything ends…*

*Besides, I hate to see the two of you become a walking personification of the ruins you so admire…*

Edna winces slightly through tears that wouldn't fall.
That Meebo... there's no beauty in something broken and forgotten... just like you.

But no matter what you've done, what sins you're tainted with, how many oaths you've broken to release that horror, none of us can hate you.

And as it seems, Sorey won't ever rest until he's seen the end of all this... the ultimate reason he's still here...

If you knew that much, what would you do? Would you have the strength to fight off your Shepherd's selfish love, to finally set yourselves free?

Edna squeezed her eyes shut to keep those thoughts as far away as she could. She’s an earth seraph after all. Everyone expects her to be strong, stable, unmoving and unmoved... and that means keeping her feet on the ground no matter what.

“If you ask me, being turned back into a human ain’t as bad as becoming a dragon, that’s for sure…”

“Well, whatever you say, humans are still lower life-forms to me. Having denied the existence of a higher being, they’ve truly become blinded to their own false superiority. I don’t know how any seraph could stoop so low as to endure that corruption and ignorance once he becomes human.”

“But it’s not like it was ever a choice for him…” Zaveid groaned, his brows suddenly knitted together. Edna thought he looked suddenly vulnerable at that point, as if he was speaking with an honesty that he preferred to deny. “Your Meebo may be no ordinary seraph, that’s for sure, but let’s face it, none of us would be here if fate is so gullible. He’s laid down all his cards and that’s it. Personal choices don’t count once the dice starts rolling.”

“That only applies to meebs I guess. Once they get involved with humans they lose themselves figuratively and literally. And I almost thought my brother’s the only one. Insane to the core.”

“Nah, but if I were you I wouldn’t say such things in front of Lailah. I kinda get the feeling no matter how much time has passed, what happened to all of us when we all fought Maotelus, is as fresh in her mind as if it happened yesterday. So blaming anyone for anything, whether that be your Meebo or Sorey, is definitely gonna cut her deep.”

“That’s expected. Wounds are supposed to hurt and burn scars into your memory.”

“Spoken like a true Edna there!”

“Shut up or you’re gonna wake up the entire castle.”

“Well, thanks for reminding me when I’m in my seraph mode! I’ve trained long and hard to perfect the artes that came with Musiphe’s blessing three centuries ago. Now I can control my visibility and switch from human to seraph mode just like that, whenever my intuition feels the need to.”

“I’m not worried about that. It’s just your inner logic that says there’s no way any human here possesses enough resonance to catch ‘us’ in ‘our’ seraph modes. Even if they do, you equally assume they’d mistake us for humans like them and just ignore us. You’re truly scary Zaveid. In more ways than one you loathe humans as much as I do and think of them as lower spiritual life forms—with the exception of those two idiots we speak of. Did I nail it?”

“Guilty as charged. Sheeshe, we’re kinda hopeless aren’t we? Here we are, stuck in their world and tolerating their misguided notions of seraphim, and for what good reason? Because none of us has been able to move on since those two threw their lives away for this hellhole! I guess we need another thousand years to try getting over the habit of thinking about those two... because right now,
we even sound like them when we talk!”

“Thanks, but no thanks. With you reminding me that we sound like those two almost means we’re
devolving from dumb to dumber. But that’s understandable. Those two idiots are just the perfect pair.
Dumb Sorey. And dumber Meebo.”

“Say, are you sure you don’t wanna take a peek to see how ‘dumber Meebo’ is? If it gives you any
comfort, both of them took on their previous names. So Sorey’s Sorey and Meebo’s you-know-who.
Swearing never to mention their names won’t work anymore.”

“Seriously, that oath’s pretty useless. There’s no way we could keep any secret for long. It’s not like
they could be useful to us if they didn’t know anything about anything.”

“Well to be honest, I was hoping we could give those two a little bit more time to themselves. It’s
kinda relaxing to see them brought up in much better conditions than we last saw.”

“Regardless, even if it’s just being reborn with almost exactly the same names, I’d take any sign as
the sign. If we have to wait for another reincarnation to see if those two are ready, I might have to kill
myself.”

“I know. As any man would say, it’s the waiting that kills.”

“If that’s true, then the young man behind your door should drop dead this instant.”

Sorey breathed sharply at that. But before he could even back a step, a strong grip took him by the
collar of his robe and reined him in.

The room looked awfully bright. But it wasn’t the reason Sorey found himself squinting.

Surrounded by an ethereal glow of amber was a young girl—or so she appears—with honey-blonde
hair pony-tailed on one side and accentuated with a flower accessory on the other. She would have
looked really cute save for the creased brows and dagger-sharp stare with which she regarded the
prince from beneath her long lashes.

Sorey noticed that despite the cold, she was dressed somewhat sparsely, in what others would take as
undergarments.

“Staring is rude. And I thought royalty can afford almost anything including manners.”

Sorey blanched. “S-sorry… It’s just—it’s the first time I’ve met an actual seraph!”

Edna turned up her chin sideways to show off her annoyance, though Sorey’s smile gave her
goosebumps. Sheesh, some things just never change, huh. She was sitting on the edge of Zaveid’s
bed right across the other seraph who sat himself on a table, one knee raised up on a chair. Even
though she would have felt more comfortable standing up so Sorey didn’t have to look down at her
while observing, her pride wouldn’t let her.

“Uhh…” Sorey could sense the tension in the room and scratched his head awkwardly to ward off
his own nervousness. “By—by the way my name’s Sorey…”

“Do you suppose I don’t know that? You’ve been eavesdropping on us for some time before I
decided we’ve had enough. Unless you’re deaf, you must have picked up my name by now so this
introduction is really just a waste of time, Shepherd Sorey…”

“Hey, Edna, what’s the rush? You’re gonna give my student the creeps talking that way this early!”
“Your student? Right, I forgot, dumbass begets dumbass. This meeting has been dragging on for at least six centuries. Don’t you think I’ve the right to be impatient?”

“Yay, women these days. They sure strike a hard bargain.”

“Been like that for centuries so get used to it.”

Zaveid whistled low and threw Sorey an impish grin. “Go ahead. It’s not like she’d literally bite your head off.”

“Nice word. Literally. No, I prefer chopping. Literally.”

Without thinking, Sorey knelt down where he stood, bowing his head really low in what seemed like exaggerated deference. “Uhh, my bad, Lady Seraph Edna… I should’ve been honest enough to admit my misconduct as soon as it was discovered. Though it’s quite unforgivable, let me apologize all the same. Sorry.”

Edna stared dumbstruck at the young man in his sleepwear who seemed so shamelessly obsequious as to bow with no regard for his royal status. She averted her gaze and pulled her shoulders back haughtily.

“Lady Edna is fine. I don’t think it’s politically correct to go around using categories like ‘seraph’ or whatever else. Unless you prefer having me address you with something like ‘hello human Sorey, how are you today?’ that kind of thing—which, by the way, is so brutally uncivilized if you know what I mean…”

But Sorey refused to lift his eyes from the floor and would have stayed that way if Zaveid had not clamped him on the shoulder with a heavy hand. Unfortunately the weight of the tall, muscular, general was more than his sluggish knees could take; Sorey stumbled forward, forced to grab the edge of the bed in front of him to stagger his fall. The only problem was, his hand miscalculated and landed on something soft and smooth, barely covered by a short, flimsy-looking skirt.

“Is this your idea of meeting a seraph?” And Sorey went flying toward the chair behind him, crashing against Zaveid as he was struck by a long, hard, pointed—

“Uh, is—is that an umbrella?” Sorey tried to blink several times to check if his eyes were still intact. For a moment he thought he saw stars spinning above his head.

“Sure is—though I don’t mind giving you another whack to clear any doubts.”

“Uhh, I don’t think you need go that far, My Lady.”

“Is this how you two talk around here?” Edna flashes Zaveid a look of annoyance. “Because seriously, my ears are bleeding.”

Sorey was immediately concerned. “Bleeding? Are you injured in any way?”

Edna huffed. “The only thing that’s gonna hurt is you if you don’t quit being an airhead.”

Zaveid pulls the prince back on his feet and pushes him onto the chair that he practically kicked back in place between him and the other seraph. “What she means, Sorey, is you can dispense with the formalities and let your guard down a little. After all we’re just old friends talking, ain’t that right Edna?”

“Friends. You’re lucky if I even call you that.”
"Whoa, I can feel the luck coming in now!"

"Get real. Six centuries may have been a breeze for a wind seraph like you, but for the rest of us, it’s been painfully long so I can’t let this night go to waste a minute longer."

Sorey leans back as Edna scrunches up her face and, with arms akimbo, stands up to give him a deathly glare. “You. Human. Shepherd—I mean, ex-Shepherd Sorey. Do you still carry the brave shine of courage within you to know what you’ve done—and what you’re about to do from here on? By the way, that one is a rhetorical question. Only a dumbass would even bother to answer it directly.”

"Err, I’m here to listen if that’s all right. It's not like I can go back to sleep after a discovery like this... I mean, finally meeting a real seraph is just amazing, I suppose?"

"How certain are you that we’re telling the truth? We could be pulling your leg because you're so gullible."

Sorey smiled at the seraph named Edna. "Are you kidding? No one goes around with that kind of aura and be normal! I mean, even Zaveid seems to be glowing or maybe I just haven't noticed it before..."

Zaveid chuckles. "Ain't I a beauty? But that aside, seraphim do give off some kind of energy signature that's unique to every single one of us. It's just that you're kinda more sensitive to it right now so you can actually see us even if we're not supposed to be seen right now. I'm fine with that, actually, since I've always known I'm hot and gorgeous, more than the regular kind if I'd be honest!"

"Honesty, my behind!" Edna huffed. "As for you..." Edna gave Sorey a withering side-glance. "... dare you imply that we're less than normal? I can't believe humans think so little of us after everything that's happened, or maybe that's exactly what being small-minded means."

"Don't be so hard on the kid, c'mon! He's actually happy to see us, that's good enough! And he's smarter this time around too!"

Edna rolled up her eyes. “Yeah, wonderful isn't it? Though one thousand two hundred years in total is long enough to grow some brains, don't you think? Unless it's fungus or a guy called Zaveid.”

“Believe me he’s far more impressive than he looks, though to be honest, it’s not like he could be that much different from before even if he tried.”

Edna gave Sorey a hard, withering glare. “How tragic. So I guess Mikleo-Not-Waterboy’s still his eternal one and only, huh?”

“Nothing tires those two. I have to hand it to them such patience is more legendary than any legend I’ve heard.”

“If you ask me being lovie-dovies this long is the height of dumb. They should give romance some dignity and get over themselves once and for all.”

“Well, if you wanna know more about romance, you can ask my man here, mister loverboy, huh?” Zaveid laughs, slapping Sorey on the back which sent the other coughing. “In the entire universe, I bet he’s the only one who succeeded in keeping someone tied to the same apron string for the last err—oh sheesh, two thousand years!!!!”

Sorey rubbed the back of his head. “Wh-whose tied to whose apron string?”
Edna gave Sorey a surreptitious glance—the kind that could melt icebergs. “As if I care. With things being a little complicated right now, it’s better if you could keep the stupid waterboy off our backs by tying him with a rope to the biggest boulder you could find. Our concern right now is how to get a defunct Shepherd such as yourself to work with us properly this time, given all the trials you have yet to face.”

“Uh, excuse me Lady Edna, if I may interrupt—but did you and Zaveid just call me Sh-shepherd by any chance?”

“If you were listening properly your Glorious Highness, that would be the most obvious conclusion to make. But let me just say it again for your benefit—you’re the Blessed Shepherd reborn, the original Shepherd of the Age of Chaos, and we’re the seraphim companions who gave the idiot that you are some fighting chance against the forces of Malevolence. Now, if that’s too hard for you to grasp I can give your memory a whack to jumpstart it.”

“Wait, hold on, if I’m the real Shepherd that ended the calamity back then…” Sorey gazed into her clear blue eyes unflinchingly. “Is there any—any way Mikleo’s involved in all this?”

"How did you arrive at that conclusion, if I may ask?"

Sorey looked at the small blonde with the bluest eyes. "So he is involved, huh? To be honest, I'm more concerned about that."

"Oh? Shouldn't you worry about yourself a little bit more?"

Sorey's face suddenly takes on a soft yet wounded expression, as if he has just lost a limb. "I'm no scholar, really, just another avid reader of history and stuff like that, but I've come across accounts of the Shepherd of the Age of Chaos and his seraphim companions and... and even if those records hardly mention names and places that sound familiar at all, I can't help but worry. Just imagining Mikleo to be part of those darkest moments in human history... I mean, it was just so tragic... the killing, all those persecutions, the rise of the Lord of Calamity... and eventually people hating everything the seraphim stood for, even forgetting the sacrifices they made, their blessings, their guidance... eventually leading up to the final fall of the last Shepherd and the seraphim..."

For two seconds, all Edna and Zaveid could do was stare speechlessly at the boy whose summer green eyes shone back with a luster they only knew too well. Then the wind seraph snapped his fingers in front of the stupefied blonde, flashing a victorious smile.

“Whoa, he got you in quite a quandary right there, Edna! Guess Shepherd Sorey just got an upgrade. I could even say this version is a bit more—sparkly.”

Edna was livid. “Sparkly, my butt! It's so elementary if you ask me, nothing but pure and simple deduction.” She turns to Sorey, sapphire-blue eyes ablaze. “So what if Mikleo-Not-Waterboy happens to be involved, what do you plan to do about it? It’s not like you two don’t have enough problems to deal with already! Just watching you dance around each other like you’re even fooling anyone—is practically the worst torture I’ve endured since Eizen! So let me throw that question back to you—have you even reached first base with the love-of-your-pathetic-life yet, or are you planning to go all-out the first chance you get?”

Sorey wasn’t sure which part of it he understood or didn’t quite understand because right now his face is heating up in ways that made his eyes hurt and his throat just a little sandy, making him cough slightly.

“Edna, Edna, I didn’t know you have it in you to say something so erotic—if I can even call it that!
Then again, as you’re subtly implying to our dear, ole Sheppy here, the last six centuries should be more than enough to work wonders on anyone—even on the most depraved like us.”

“If you want the truth, you two seem more deprived than depraved. But of course, lumping Sorey with you is kinda unfair. Your deprivation is hardly dignified if you think about those stupid, skirt-chasing antics of yours that get women up and running away from you. As for this guy, he doesn’t even have to stretch a muscle to get his waterboy so hooked and excited but see? They choose to enjoy their little crushes in secret, sighing all their repressed urges to themselves like absolute bores.”

“I know, right? Self-deprivation must be the worst kind of pain—next to cutting off that divine tool of pleasure right down there.”

“Yeah, I could almost imagine that dictionary of yours screaming its head off.”

Sorey looked completely lost. “Err… if you don’t mind, could you explain one more time how all this is related to Mikleo? I know it’s my fault for not knowing anything but… I just can’t help worrying that a lot of things I don’t quite understand right now might become important later on.”

Both seraphim chose to exclude him nonetheless, treating him like an audience to be dissected for their secret pleasure.

“Well, in fairness to our cute Sheppy-turned-prince over here, he was bold enough to give himself unsightly bruises to show how worried he was over our pretty Mik-boy, ain’t I right? Of course I couldn’t let the chance slip by and gave him the perfect opportunity to be secretly alone with his precious angel.”

“Z-Zaveid! I—I just didn’t do well in today’s practice that’s all! I mean, it’s not like it has anything to do with Mik—”

“C’mon, no need to be shy, Prince Sorey it’s just us, after all! Though it’s rather cute the way you’re hiding your first-love anxieties from the public eye, but believe me, we’ve known you forever and let me just say this, you’ve never really gotten over Mik-boy, nah-ah, not even when there are pretty heads out there who would do just fine... like that Alisha Princess, if you know what I mean.”

Sorey coughed. “Mikleo and I—even if we’re not blood-related, he’s adopted officially so... I mean, we can’t be anything but—uh, w-wait, all I’m trying to say is we’re—”

“Secret lovers in heat. What a shame.” Edna yawned. “Life is too short to wish away your feelings when there’s actually a way to set things right.”

“Whoa, so you’re cheerleading now for those two? I thought you were on a different ship and planning to whisk your Meebo away on some getaway island!”

“In your dreams! Assuming of course that normal assumptions apply to those two dorks. I bet they wasted that perfect opportunity you’ve just given them to discuss some far-off ruins on the other side of the universe.”

“Well, even princes have their limits. You’re forgetting they’re siblings in this lifetime. Though a budding romance between childhood friends is plenty exciting, I can’t say the same for brothers. That would be too scandalous—even in this era.”

“ Heard of bromance, stupid head?”

“W-w-wait, hold on, are you guys implying that Mikleo and I—I mean—” Sorey was waving them off with the palm of his hands facing them. “Look—we—Mikleo and I don’t really have that kind of
thing between us! And I swear, Zaveid, I just came to see if Mikleo were okay, and we just talked a little about—uh—things—nothing out of the ordinary! We—we just had a little chat, that’s all.”

Edna smirked. “Tragic. You bore me to tears.”

“Well, Sorey, there’s really no reason to be so uptight! Though I can’t help but notice—for someone who just did something ordinary, you seem awfully flustered…”

“Zaveid! I-I am not—I mean, what reason do I have—”

“You want reasons?” Edna huffed angrily, a vein literally popping on her right temple. “Really, ex-Seatwoman Sorey, aren’t those centuries enough for you to come up with more than a few? Or do you need a live demonstration to figure out what to do with your precious object-of-desire when you’re alone with him?”

“Whoa, I think that’s about the most interesting thing I heard from the great Lady Edna for centuries! Want my assistance? I’m good at live, you know.”

“Shut up, Zaveid, before I start an earthquake!”

Sorey balled his fists at them, trying to suppress the heated impatience growing in him. “Look, what happened six, seven, or even eight centuries ago are important, I give you that but… right now the present matters more than anything, especially when it involves people I care about. True, I don’t have the Shepherd’s power to be of much help, but at least I want to keep Mikleo out of harm’s way… He’s already been through a lot… and if tearing heaven and hell apart is what I must do to protect him and this world where we stand—”

“Oh please—” Edna’s voice was dripping with sarcasm. “Don’t start with that, all right? You’ve been tearing heaven and hell apart almost every two hundred years since you woke up, don’t you get it? After you’ve slept for eight centuries purifying Maoletus as his vessel, you were reborn as a seraph. Of course that’s only natural ‘cause no human body can stand still in time that long. Then you and your precious were reunited—so we heard—and for some time the two of you traveled all over the world like giddy love birds exploring every ruin you could find. Unfortunately one of those ruins should not have been explored in the first place—least of all by a blessed seraph with such powers as yours.”

“W-what happened? What did I do?”

Zaveid looked away as if to avoid letting Sorey see the flash of fury in his eyes. “The Insidion, the original manifestation of Malevolence in the universe which the seraphim sealed away in some secret place in this world... the same curse they swore to guard with their lives to keep it from returning to Celestia... you guys found it.”

Sorey didn’t know whether to look incredulous or amazed. “Mikleo and I found the Insidion while exploring some ruins? What, is it some kind of rock or jewel?”

Edna rolls up her eyes. “Evil is wise. Maybe it was the best way it could be found by the likes of you, who knows? Dare we contemplate a truth older than time itself?”

“Well kiddo,” Zaveid spoke, clamping a light hand on his shoulder. “… if you remember the Iris gems that record all human history, including the events that involve the seraphim’s work in this world, you may think of the Insidion as a record of the creation and existence of all evil in this world. It’s the forbidden legacy of Celestia that no god or seraph, no matter how pure or powerful, should bear witness to. Its malevolence is so great there’s no place in the entire kingdom of Celestia that...”
could contain its power without risking the very existence of gods and seraphim alike. To be blunt about it, the world’s like a sewer specifically designed to flush all the unwanted filth that threatens the purity of the gods and the seraphim. By sealing all that evil power in that cursed rock, the gods thought they could safely hide the sins of the past and use the human world as a tool for slowly purifying that evil.”

“Way to go Zaveid,” Edna huffed, her voice a dead monotone. “Unleashing all the secrets of the universe in one breath—do you really hate your life that much? Or maybe you’ve given up every possibility of returning to Celestia like every seraph should, once all this is over.”

“Huh, I couldn’t care less. Where I live or die is no one’s business but my own. That’s my answer.”

“I think…” Sorey was in deep thought, trying to piece together the details disclosed by Zaveid and those he has read so far on the topic. “Yes, the Iris gems were definitely mentioned both in the Celestial Record and the Chronicles of the Shepherd… They’re supposed to be the Earthen Historia that distills the most important elements of seraphim and human existence in this world. But, unfortunately, I don’t remember seeing or holding the real thing myself. Are you suggesting that as the Shepherd Sorey, I read the Earthen Historia myself? That I really talked with the seraphim and was able to wield their power?”

Zaveid laughed at the brimming fascination in Sorey’s eyes. “You did more, and if you’ve noticed, it’s no different from what you’re doing right now. Actually I shouldn’t be that happy about all the things you did. After the Insidion gem was accidentally unsealed by you—and Mik-boy—you guys practically stirred the most exciting event in Celestine history! You woke up the gods who were not supposed to wake up for another millennium and provoked all their seraphim bodyguards to come down from the heavens to try and quell the earthly disasters unleashed by the Insidion!”

"They're the ones that started the war, sheesh, and humans were not supposed to get involved. It's a celestial civil war if you could call it that." Edna flopped back down on the bed, heaving a painfully agonizing sigh as if to say that Sorey had every right to feel as guilty as ever.

"You mean seraphim were fighting their own-"

"Yeah, basically. It's a love-and-hate thing, I guess. Like Meebo and Edna." Zaveid's expression, though, seems to say otherwise.

“Leave me out of it, you jerk! So as I was saying, you did tear heaven and hell apart when you tampered with something that’s been sleeping from the very day the world itself was born. To make matters worse, all the human countries at that time cared little about the fate of the universe when the Insidion was awakened. They waged wars over the right to possess its unholy power with no other intention but to expand their empires and dominate the world. This place, the kingdom you now call Kreveldor—this was the original birthplace of the Dark Shepherd whom you and Mikleo-Not-Waterboy created to absorb the malevolence of the Insidion. Doubtless your overly common commonsense gave you the idea that that would eventually end all wars and save humanity from self-annihilation.”

Zaveid gave a low groan. “In any case, the seraphim weren’t so happy about it since saving these humans who only wanted more power is bound to make the Insidion acquire more malevolence. So you could say that the arrival of the Dark Shepherd to quell human disasters was not what Celestia had in mind as a long-term solution. Guess you could say that your being as stubborn as hell was what actually triggered the First Seraphim War a thousand years ago, kiddo.”

I knew it... the Great Seraphim War was the last, but there were others... and the church chroniclers have been trying to hide that fact all along... but why? Of course they have their reasons... but
maybe it had something to do with the Dark Shepherd, is that it? And that Dark Shepherd is-

“W-wait, you mean we—or I—” Sorey felt his heart skip a beat. "... I created the Dark Shepherd? But the Celestial Record described all the legendary Shepherds as the holy servants of both mankind and the seraphim! It speaks of the Blessed One who purified the source of malevolence in the human world by allowing his soul to become a vessel for the seraphim’s power! So how is it possible that a seraph—I mean if I was really reborn as a seraph—how was my past self able to create a vessel like the Dark Shepherd to contain the malevolence instead of purifying it?

“Shouldn’t we be the one asking for an explanation here? In theory, though, to infuse your Dark Shepherd with all the powers he needed to reseal the malevolence, you used a taboo seraphic arte called soul—”

“Edna, are you sure you really want to talk about that right now?”

“Look, Zaveid, what good is there in hiding the ugly truth? It’s bound to come out soon enough once we start searching for the Divine Trinity…”

“Oh yeah, that other thing. Sheesh, I wonder when the day would come when we could just relax in a good ole sauna with no cares whatsoever! Just freedom, my steamy, sweaty, hot body, and even hotter babes everywhere!”

“Yeah, yeah, steam can work wonders on the body and soul. But it’s no cure for stupid.”

“H-hold on, what—what’s the Divine Trinity all about? Are you by any chance suggesting that the malevolence unleashed hundreds of years ago by the Insidion is still here? I mean, didn’t all of that come to an end after the Dark Shepherd sealed all the malevolence back into the gem?”

Zaveid raised an eyebrow at that. “Though we call it a gem, its crystal form is just one of its manifestations. Once the malevolence leaked out, the gem disappeared. Some say it was broken up into bits and pieces and scattered all over the world. Some say it took the form of demons and hellions.”

Sorey felt his skin crawl. “D-demons? Did such things really exist?”

Edna gave a low groan, obviously exasperated. “Look, unlike hellions which are nothing more than malignant spirits that take root in any creature—humans and seraphim alike—depending on how much malevolence has been absorbed in its lifetime, demons have a body... or a vessel... of their own. Basically, they're tainted mana... energies that come from polluted reservoirs that have accidentally collected or accumulated in a place, or in certain objects, even charms and such things. When they've absorbed enough mental influences from their surroundings, they can take on any shape they desire, or perhaps any form that will make it easier for them to get stronger. In other words, they're like parasites that feed on tainted mana wherever they might find it. Really strong ones they say even get to retain an ageless physical form for centuries and duplicate the habits and culture of any human they become attached or attracted to. Some, which we call shadows, can stalk their prey for many years unnoticed, feeding on these humans slowly just enough to keep them alive until they've found someone more attractive or tasty. They're worse than hellions, that much I can say, those filthy, bloodsucking monsters!”

Zaveid scrunches up his face in deep thought. "Human myths are not slow on the uptake on these creatures either. I've heard of talk about vampires and werewolves, and it makes me wonder if these stories have stumbled upon the truth that demons like those actually exist in more ways than one."

“But…” Sorey wondered about the connection between that and something else. “If the Insidion
didn’t retain its original form, then how did the humans wage wars to possess such a power?”

This time Edna yawned impatiently. “You’re right Zaveid, we should continue this discussion some other time.”

“Hey wait!—I mean—I’m sorry but... you haven’t really explained that much of anything! At least not about Mikleo and how—”

“Look, if I were you I’d be more appreciative and try to digest for now whatever little facts I learned with my meager brain! Besides, shouldn’t you be concerned with other things… like actually doing something about that stupid soul mate of yours? Because you may never know if there’s another moment left in this universe to do that thing you’ve always wanted to do with him ever. And time is the only thing that can’t be stopped by anyone be it god or seraph, human, hellion or demon. So once you have it, use it and enjoy it. Human pleasures—for all the passion and excitement they provoke—are doomed to be short-lived anyway…”

“Short, wise and true, just like Edna! Our own proverbial proverb personified…”

“Shut up wind stalker!”

Sorey had a strange pained look in his eyes even though he was smiling at the lady seraph. “You—you seem to care a lot about Mikleo… Just that I guess is enough for me to be grateful… It’s not like at this point I have anything much to offer for your help but, somehow, I could feel your concern for the both us—and I know Mikleo and I could rely on you if ever we need some guidance or protection! So I guess that means thank you Lady Edna… for now at least?”

The seraph looked surprised, annoyed, but seemingly moved for once. Whatever her feelings were, though, were lost on Sorey as an umbrella surprisingly opened in front of him, hiding the lithe, fragile form of the small girl he would rather regard as a lady for the inveterate wisdom and maturity she seemed to possess despite her childish outbursts.

“Well, well, well, this is some night we have here! It’s bound to be one of those things that may yet be unforgettable for another two thousand years!”

“Gods, can’t forget that last night at Lastonbell, can you? Pray Zaveid, that you’re still alive by the time we have another get-together like in the old days..."

“How sweet of you, My Lady! But fear not ‘cause good ole Zaveid here would never let you get too lonely as long as he’s around! Unless, of course, you’d rather have touchy feely Mik-boy to play with…”

“Oh, SHUT UP!!!”

“So Sheppy Sorey, what are your plans for now? By the way, I couldn’t help but notice you weren’t thrilled to know I’m a seraph. Why, don’t I have the looks?”

Sorey had a meditative look in his eyes, but that was momentarily broken by a stifled laugh. “Don’t mean to be rude there, Zaveid. Of course I’m more than pleased to learn you’re a seraph. Mikleo and I’ve wanted nothing more than to see seraphim!”

“As for me, I don’t think I’m ready to show myself to another one of your kind, ex-Shepherd. So I guess Zaveid has to do the talking for me when Meebo’s time comes.”

Zaveid folds his arms behind his head and leans back. “Fine, whatever.”
“Uhh… if it’s not too much to ask, how did ‘waterboy’ become Mikleo’s nickname? I mean, this may sound presumptuous, but I have a feeling he won’t like that very much.”

Edna twirls her umbrella. “I’ve thought of worse things so be grateful. For now that nickname suits him just fine, at least until I have Lailah’s permission to reveal everything.”

“So… uhh…” Sorey rubs his right cheek. “… it seems you do like him…”

“Is that a problem? Are you feeling jealous already?”

Sorey was taken aback. “Huh? Should I even be?”

Zaveid grins from ear to ear. “Hah, the confidence! Well, Edna, I can see some sparks flying now! Guess this time around you’re against some real competition…”

“Oh really? Well then, how about this?” Edna abruptly fixes an unwavering gaze at the ex-Shepherd. “Know what? I’ve kissed your Mikleo a gazillion times before in your many past lives as a human—something I’m positive you haven’t done even once in any lifetime with him. And you know what that means?”

Zaveid shook his head with a groan. “There you go. Talk about overkill.”

Edna huffed. “I’ve beaten you to the starting line before the race has even started!”

Sorey gave her a blank stare, as if in a daze. “K-ki-kissed? You mean you—you KISSED Mikleo?”

Edna threw her head back a little, looking deeply satisfied. “Zaveid, help him out please before he starts having a heart attack.”

“Sheesh,” Zaveid rolls up his eyes. “Why am I stuck with such heartless women!”

“Woman, not women. Don’t overgeneralize…”

With that, Edna turns to Sorey with another of her usual, impatient frowns. “As for you, before you get completely sidetracked, let me remind you just one more thing. While for the seraphim time is just a random way of marking events in history, you humans consider it as a means of organizing your short, uneventful lives. So I guess what I’m trying to say is you better come up with a plan as to what you intend to do with what you’ve learned today. Sure we can give you guidance and protection along the way, but the rest is something you have to decide on your own. Just like before, the seraphim are just accidental residents in this world bound to you by choice, not by destiny. If it’s true that your world was created for the benefit of keeping the Insidion—and its malevolence—as far away from Celestia as possible, then I guess we owe you our existence and survival as much as you depend on ours. That means we share the responsibility of protecting each other’s interests so the risks we take must be our own to relish or to regret. The same goes for the people we cherish, whoever they are. So if you’re starting to think you could save your waterboy from all the hassle by taking on the burden by yourself, think again. Take care of him if you must—protect him with whatever power you have if you could, but don’t leave him out of the equation this time. Because if anything half as terrible happens to him again… if you make him suffer like before, I—”

“Hey, Edna, need I remind you that past is past—”

Edna wasn’t even listening to Zaveid, her eyes beginning to get misty as she stood on tiptoe to lean over Sorey. “Have you seen a seraph turn into a dragon? No. Speaking from experience, I swear that’s the last thing you’d ever want to see. So if I were you, you’d better start wishing I don’t turn into one, ’cause that’s just something that might happen if I see—if I have to say goodbye to that
stupid idiot *that* way again…”

Without thinking, Sorey reached out to her, not even sure if she would welcome the gesture. Edna bristled slightly as warm hands grasped each of her shoulders and the deepest jade shot through by sunlight gazed at her with a pained but hopeful look.

“If there’s any promise I’d like to keep, it’s to make sure you and Mikleo will see each other again… and again… as much as you like. And for that I’ll keep him safe no matter what.”

“Careful there, Sorey. Unlike you, little Edna here ain’t shy at all when it comes to Mik-boy, you see. You could even say she’s relentless. I’m just warning you in case you wound up with the short end of the stick after all this.”

Sorey already looked worrisome even though he was doing his best to smile it off. “Uh, I’d worry about that when it comes to that… In any case, I think Lady Edna is right when she said I’ve got to have a plan. Sure I can worry about Mikleo as much as I want but that would be stupid if I just sit here waiting for things to happen when being prepared is the best solution to whatever comes our way.”

“Spoken like a true Shepherd! This really brings back good memories…”

Edna gave a low, exasperated groan. “That aside, if you plan on involving yourself with the whole Shepherd business, the Divine Trinity is the place to start. Zaveid and I have just come from the far north and though we’ve practically scoured every inch of it, there aren’t enough clues there to help us find it. Lailah, Rose, and Dezel should be coming back from the south anytime soon, though I’m not expecting *that* much from them either. I hate to be the pessimist, but it doesn’t seem that the Divine Trinity—whatever the name implies—wants to be found before it ought to be found. Just the same, I’m sure Lailah’s group was able to observe and experience enough of the areas they’ve covered to help us plan our next move.”

Sorey nodded at that. “The Divine Trinity it is then! The best I can do right now may be to try and find out if anything’s been written about it. Even vague references can provide unexpected clues if you know more or less what you’re looking for. So I guess that would be my start for the day.”

Edna sighed. “You’re forgetting something. The key words are ‘if you know what you’re looking for.’ Even for seraphim like me and Zaveid, that’s difficult to define. The Divine Trinity after all, is just as old as the Insidion. Only the oldest seraphim can hazard a guess as to what it is and even so, their assumptions are simply more intelligent than ours, but no more accurate.”

But Sorey seemed beyond discouragement. “Never mind that. If this Divine Trinity you speak of possesses a legendary power, there might be ways of finding it in places where battles have been fought... old, unmarked graveyards might give us some clues since they’re what wars normally leave behind… and there’s also some possibility that such relics have been buried with their masters in secret tombs or catacombs. Of course, I’m no expert on ruins and relics to be absolutely certain, but judging from what I’ve seen and read, powerful things were often used as weapons of war, which give their owners or masters fair reason not to part with them even in death.”

Blue eyes narrowed at him. "So you're saying?"

Sorey looked down thoughtfully. "Well, in any case, something so amazing can’t really just up and vanish without leaving some traces behind, right? I mean… there’s no way the past could hide everything about something that played a great part in making the world what it is.”

Zaveid flashed Edna a lopsided grin. “See, what did I tell you? The boy looks promising, doesn’t he?"
Combine that brain with his better half and we’d really be on a roll!”

“Yeah?” Edna raises an eyebrow flicking her eyelashes at Sorey who already looked preoccupied with this new plan of his. “Say, do you mind if I sneak a peek at Mikleo-Not-Waterboy to give him a light peck on the cheek? Just for good luck…”

“W-what do you mean?”

Zaveid grinned sheepishly. “Aww, it’s really nothing much—just a little kiss is all.”

Sorey looked mildly surprised, raising one eyebrow at that as he turned to leave, one hand on the door latch. But before stepping out, he looked over his shoulder at the two seraphim, eyes shimmering with renewed strength.

“Just a small favor from you guys… can we leave Mikleo out of this at least until we have a clear plan? I don’t want to worry him with anything for now.”

Zaveid nodded lazily. “We’re fine with that kid.”

Edna noticed he was hesitating. “Something else on your mind?”

“Err… honestly…” Sorey scratched his right cheek as he always did when embarrassed or nervous. “About that—umm—that kiss…”

“Hnnn, distracted already? That was quick.”

“Edna, have some bit of compassion will you? Something tells me this is not something we’ve heard before… never in all those centuries, so pay attention.”

“All right, fine, so what about it, ex-Shepherd Sorey?”

“Uh... can we... spare Mikleo from any kissing until we reach our ultimate goal? I know it sounds selfish but... I don't think I can focus on anything if I worry about it too much so I’m just saying it right now before it gets in the way... I guess there’s no point in denying how important Mikleo is to me. And that part of the reason I want to do this... to know more about the Shepherd and what happened then... is him.”

Zaveid whistles low. Edna elbows him with a warning glare.

"Even when we were kids, I've always tried to protect him." Sorey looks up, flashing the seraphim a wan smile. "Without him I wouldn't last a minute thinking I have this huge responsibility on my shoulders. It's shameful to admit but... I've never really been fond of the idea of being king, or emperor, much less being called Overlord of the West! Without Mikleo to help me bear that burden, I... I feel lost. I'm not even sure if he feels the same way but... even if he doesn’t... I want to have him by my side. He’s all the world to me, and no fate or calamity by whatever name can change that. I hope you understand... and thank you so much for everything.”

With a slow, grateful smile, Sorey takes another step and was out the door the next minute. The scraping sound of an iron latch falling into place becomes almost deafening as an irrepressible silence seems to have filled the void left by Sorey's footsteps.

Edna and Zaveid openly stared at each other unblinkingly, but it was the wind seraph who spoke first. “Whoa, tell me Edna, is that a warning or what?”

“So you think a mere sponge that grew horns is scary?” Edna huffed with a twirl of her umbrella.
“Though I have to say… an angry sponge can be quite refreshing… especially when it grows enough courage to admit what’s precious to it.”
A Blue Blood Moon

Chapter Summary

Fights... arguments... misunderstandings...
But under the moonlight, something unthinkable is about to begin.

Chapter Notes

This one is long and a bit slow... but I hope some of you are enjoying this as much as I am. THANKS SO MUCH! Feel free to comment! (I'm okay with anything, I only fire my watergun in youtube... because that's a battlefield out there, ha ha... please comment.) And have a great week!

Also, thanks to those who gave kudos and comments! BTW, I've revised parts of this chapter. I figured there must be some transition between this and the next chapter. So some of the explicit details for the next chapter were moved here. THANKS!

DISCLAIMER: The original story behind Tales of Zestiria and Tales of Zestiria the X belongs to Bandai-Namco and Ufotable respectively. Since the writer makes no profit from this labor of love and, in fact, struggles against shame and hopeless obsession every time she has to write an additional chapter for her self-pleasure and that of others like her, she respectfully makes a plea against any law suit. :D

Obsession has no shame, by the way. You’ve been warned. ^_^

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When the moon is blue

Broken stars gather at your feet

Their shards pierce and cleave

And the twilight sky bleeds like rain.

But a new moon rises

Like a circlet of vows beneath a storm of clouds

A ring shines like a drop of snow

A jeweled promise...
In the darkness, an eternity is spoken

Sealed with a kiss

And your secret name.

translated from Askengaard

“One, two, three, strike left, cross right, down left, center, what in *Maotelus’s name* is wrong with you today?”

Sorey’s gaze hovered between confused and apologetic. “I’m not so sure. Maybe I’m just tired. Didn’t get much sleep last night after that long talk with you and Lady—”

“Yeah? Well, it’s not like you can come to weapons practice like some heartbroken wallflower and *not* expect some injuries! Or maybe I should ask good, ole Mik-boy to come join us so he can beat some sense into you?”

“H-hey, no fair!” Sorey bristled, cursing himself for reacting to that name, not wanting to admit that his thoughts have never really been far from *him* since last night.

Of course, there had been other things too. Knowing he could be of service to the seraphim, knowing they do exist even if not in the most ideal of circumstances, was just one of those things. He vaguely wondered whether he was bound to see and hear more about these powerful, heavenly beings—and perhaps be able to work with more of their kind. Lady Edna, after all, did mention some names last night, which vaguely hint that seraphim can, in fact, work in teams, which might include some seraphim believers like him and Mikleo no less.

To be entirely honest, the mere thought of being surrounded by seraphim made him feel both anxious and excited. Any kind of contact or interaction with such exceptionally-rare creatures would definitely help his research on the taboo topic of celestial beings. Such opportunities would allow him to confirm, no less, some of his own theories that may one day see the erosion of a number of rude preconceptions propounded by church authorities.

More than that, it gave him a strange sense of comfort to know that, far from what modern history says, the seraphim are *not* insidiously manipulative beings with very little concern for human affairs. True, they may be a little high-minded, arrogant, and not entirely keen on treating humans as their equal. Even so, Sorey figured they must have their reasons. Certainly, being around the universe since forever had earned the seraphim the right to their own beliefs, their own ideological presumptions a little biased they may be. Besides, as the Celestial Record says, seraphim and human cultures thrived in mutual isolation for more than a few centuries, so it is not surprising for either race to find the other alienating and revolting. It is a well-known fact that even among civilizations that have grown alongside each other, different ethos as well as individual idiosyncrasies could just as
easily produce misunderstandings, culminating in irreversible conflicts and irreconcilable differences.

Even such unhappy circumstances, however, did little to dampen Sorey's enthusiasm. Of course, hearing about the real state of the world from the point of view of the seraphim makes him realize that involvement with their kind is far from being a simple, harmless adventure. The mere fact that Lady Edna seemed frustrated about the way things were going more than conveyed to him how critical the situation seems to be.

He was not expecting, though, that getting right into the bottom of things may be more challenging than getting the usual, garrulous general to talk his head off. Zaveid may seem laid-back and carefree, but it seems the seraph side to him does have its quiet moods. The same strategies proved futile in cajoling the smooth-talking general and duel instructor to shed more light on the mysteries he and the child-like seraph revealed to him last night. On the contrary, it made Zaveid even more tight-lipped and evasive.

Not that he could blame him. The little girl whom Sorey would rather address as Lady Seraph Edna seemed to be the one in charge of finding the Divine Trinity as well as the scattered shards of the Insidion.

No one has told him this, of course, but it seems obvious that the mission has those two goals in mind. And knowing the earth seraph’s fragile temper and scary disposition, Zaveid has every reason to be careful about giving clues that may give away more secrets than necessary.

He could imagine Lady Edna twirling her umbrella as if such an inadvertent weapon could make her diminutive size less apparent.

Speaking of appearances… he has read somewhere that seraphim are gifted with abnormally long lives and could go on for thousands of years unchanged in almost every way. Of course to call it abnormal seems strange, for who, among humans, would refuse eternal youth? Having the option of staying invisible, seraphim bodies likewise seem volatile enough to follow whatever form or shape their owners prefer. The material condition of being tangible and solid seems to be nothing but a state of mind to such higher beings whose physical state seems to obey the emotional fortitude of their wills—if anything could be called that. In any case, they are certainly immune to the external laws of nature that decree aging to be a property of real, physical forms.

Funny, though, that it should even cross his mind. Any theory he might have could simply be nothing but pointless pondering. Still, there did not seem to be any harm in thinking about it more. Concepts of time, space, existence, immortality… perhaps because seraphim see time differently that their existence somehow seems less predisposed to follow the orchestrations of time and its discontents? As if it wasn’t a case of time passing them by, but rather one in which seraphim live day by day *timelessly*, disposing of the crude divisions of time into days, seasons, months, centuries, even epochs…

Sorey wondered about that. Had time been simply a theory, and a useless theory at that, would humans have been less ambitious—less concerned about securing their place in history, which chroniclers call “the destiny of great men written in their own hands?” Would the first emperor have chosen to be someone less than other men had made him to be? Would he have chosen to be a farm boy, a country peasant, an ordinary shepherd tending his flock around glades and pastures? Instead of a warrior brandishing sword and shield in bloodied battlefields?

*And in wastelands filled with the stench of corpses and the distant echoes of soundless grief, washing away the color of rain that drains away the hope of the ages, sinking with it all the secret joys of youth that would never be…*
Sorey admits those words could not have been his own. He has no idea know why but he remembers the exact, same words taken from a play based on the life of Emperor Odelius I, a tattered copy of which he and Mikleo had literally unearthed from the west-wing attic of the Towers.

Sorey wrinkled his nose somewhat mentally at the memory of it. He has read in the histories of other kingdoms that places that have a notorious past are usually given general names to shroud it in mystery or to obscure facts better left forgotten. The Towers may have been such a place, or rather, is exactly the kind of place that did not deserve any name to remember it by. Separated from the main halls and corridors of the palace by a bridge-walk that traversed the wide courtyard where the royal houses usually played competitive sports or held lavish garden parties, the Towers have a peculiar, unspoken history that made them a no-man's-territory within Kreveldor's imposing walls.

Not that the forbidden has ever discouraged or frightened Sorey enough to keep his nagging curiosity at bay. Though court gossip would rather be less explicit, especially in matters relegated to the realm of the absurd and taboo, Sorey had to admit that common sense is harder to ignore. Housing spacious apartments that seemed to have been extravagantly maintained not-so-long ago, the Towers were rumored to have been used for the private pleasures and entertainments of the king. And since only women have ever been allowed to visit its corridors back then, Sorey could only surmise that the word harem must apply to women providing the king with such extraordinary pleasures. How worldly they might have been was something he could not even imagine, but since the Towers have been held in intense disfavor by the women among the royal family, including the queen no less, Sorey could only assume that such pleasures could never be innocent.

But what really intrigued him was the fact that the attic he and Mikleo discovered could not be accessed by any other means except through the sealed, private chambers devoted to the king’s secret entertainments. Even more mysterious was the fact that such a nondescript room was connected to the spacious, private quarters by a rickety, secret staircase hidden in a hollow behind a painting of an infamous relic—the underground altar of Galahad. And this upper room, which should normally serve the purpose of a general storage room, turned out to be an archive housing chests and trunks of moldy, dusty, bug-smothered books that seemed to have been untouched for years.

For less-than-obvious reasons, Bishop Heldalf had the entire west corridor of the Towers sealed off permanently and guarded by a few knights who did not seem to mind a few distractions (because Sorey had gotten them drunk on more than a few occasions so he and Mikleo could sneak past them). Not that anyone could accuse the guards of being lax in their duties. The Order of the Silver Falcons is made up of the finest knights in the continent, an army to be reckoned with in the real battlefield. But in the case of the Towers, the sentinels were probably just as clueless as to the significance of keeping a post that had no bearing on the overall security of the kingdom.

Especially when the reason for guarding such quarters has become practically obsolete—nothing more than just giving an old scandal a little dignity that the dead could no longer afford.

Last night, though, he had been very much tempted to venture into the same, forbidden chambers to search for answers… or to get his hands on any book to soothe his mind. All night those questions kept haunting him… about the Shepherd, the seraphim, the myths and legends about their timeless existence. A part of him seems to know which questions to ask, even if a great part of him felt that the answers would not be found so easily. Some part of him wondered if Emperor Odelius I had thought of those same questions when he had the chance to work with the seraphim, when he had to defend them against the ire of the church that was rabidly making its influence felt in the shaping of the new age. Speaking of which...

Sorey remembers reading about how plays used to be staged as a popular court entertainment. There used to be bards, actors, and playwrights who would take residence in court under the patronage of
the members of the royal houses. Some of those plays have been crudely published in pamphlets for the convenience of reproducing the better—more popular—versions. His favorite was, of course, a historical play based on the life of the first emperor of Kreveldor. He remembers reading and rehearsing those lines intended for Odelius’s character, parts of which survived in a few, whittled pages that he and Mikleo had found… lines he used to read with Mikleo when they played make-believe games, hoping that one day they’d be allowed to stage their own play. He would love to try his own hand at writing a script, maybe an adaptation of those works that have survived in secrecy.

Now those questions are coming back, and the words are just as he remembers them with Mikleo…

Would the loss of history and time be enough to change the course of human destiny—to undo the mistakes of a past proclaimed as a glorious heritage? Would the loss of time dissolve the failings of compassion that have made war an instrument of prosperity and peace?

Would it be enough to escape the tragedy of being king that hides the agony of a love that was never given a chance to breathe?

Sorey felt a tender, slow ache in his chest. It was strange how that last sentence left him with a lingering impression of something sad, regretful, almost heart-breaking. To be honest, he has no idea what a real, romantic relationship even feels like. True, he might have feelings that may pass for intimate affection, but as far as being in a situation where he could do things… private things… physical things that required hands, lips, and that hard, aching part of him that made his breeches bulge and feel unbelievably tight every time he imagined Mikleo…

N-no, s-seriously, no no, no way!

It was actually their fault. There was that book his cousins lent him once... volume two of Mad Screams of Love, was it? There were pictures... sketches... different lovemaking positions and... and... it made him nervous just looking that he politely returned it just as quickly without mentioning such a thing to anyone, not even to...

Lavender eyes gazed up at him curiously in his memory, and Sorey suddenly felt his neck heat up, his knees falter as if a heavy weight pressed itself onto him and his stomach was all aflutter, making that swelling, rigid part of him jerk at attention as if to deny his innocence with shocking clarity.

Stop already, all right! If only that part would listen and behave itself...

"Hey, Sorey, if I may just say... all those things you’ve heard for the first time, the same things Edna and I said about the past… I mean, yeah, I would be shocked if I were in your shoes, but, trust me… if there’s anything Edna is good at aside from bashing someone’s ego to moondust, it’s keeping a promise. She would never let any harm come to Mik-boy, or the-love-of-your-lives, no matter what!"

Sorey blanched. Is Zaveid mind-reading him now, or is he simply embarrassingly transparent?

Zaveid gave him one of his wise-cracking grins. “I’m pretty sure she’s as worried about him as you are. And believe me, she would have turned the world upside down the same way you’re about ready to do now, if I weren’t around to knock the wind off her sail every single time she tries.”

Sorey smiled wanly. “Thanks Zaveid.”

“No worries Shep—or should I say ex-Shep. Your being a prince this time takes a lot of getting used to… of course, when it comes to our little lady friend, that’s a big understatement. Edna’s simply not the type to hold any human in high regard. But when it comes to friendships—any seraph values that far more than he or she lets on. I think that’s the most human thing about us right there.”
“I'm good with that, I guess.” Sorey, however, would be lying to say that being referred to as the ‘Shepherd’ even in jest doesn’t bother him at all…

Although a lot of things that were discussed last night seemed to be just as important, he couldn’t explain why his mind kept going back to those hints about his former self creating a *Dark Shepherd* for the purpose of containing the malevolence unleashed by the Insidion. He could not help but wonder what kind of mind he had back then that prompted him to do something so desperate and dangerous. Besides, don’t things like that have a trade-off somehow? Any power has a price, and if his past-self thought that the price—whatever it was—was well worth it, there must be a very good reason behind it as well.

And that was probably what was really bugging him all this time. The way Lady Edna and even Zaveid tried to sidestep the issue gave him the feeling that the reason was something too terrible to discuss, like a mistake responsible for the undoing of the ages.

Or simply a disaster of cataclysmic proportions… most likely with irreversible repercussions.

Then something like a whack buzzed in his head, which made him realize he had just taken a direct hit from the general.

That just about pushed him back into the present. Right now, the mistake he should be worried about is losing his concentration during sparring sessions with Zaveid, who, strangely, seemed to be wriggling his left brow at him as if in warning. That hit caught him completely unguarded, hurting his wrist far more than he would want to admit, but it also sent his instincts on a rebound. Even the shock wave of pain that crawled down his spine was nothing that could steal his attention for more than two seconds, as his eyes burned at the sight of his sword just a few feet away. His weapon had scuttled a few feet to his left when Zaveid had hit his wrist *then* his head, relieving him of his useless sword and forcing him to really pay attention this time.

Just as he had ducked, slid, and overshot the distance in an effort to retrieve it, he saw a pair of slender legs in knee-high boots block his view. He was down on his chest, legs spread out, his chin feeling the dust and grit of the rough, practice grounds when he looked up to find it was Mikleo standing barely a foot away, giving him a suspicious look.

“Good grief, are you in so bad a shape that you actually dropped *yourself* along with your sword? Or maybe you were being careless because I wasn’t around to beat the hell out of you?”

Sorey gulped down his nervousness. Even in the sweat and heat of his own body, he could not ignore the minty, lavender scent Mikleo’s pale creamy skin was exuding. Right now, that smooth, alabaster skin was barely showing beneath the loosely buttoned, brown tunic and black leather vest he was wearing, which hugged his lithe figure and emphasized the small waist and slender physique that made him incredibly feminine.

*Barely*... Sorey muttered, agonizing over the rush of heat that was making him uncomfortable again. Mikleo's skin showed barely past the collarbone, but Sorey could not quite keep his glances away. To his chagrin, his imagination knew all of Mikleo’s private secrets, those parts that he had seen when they were young enough to share bed and bath together. Right now, he couldn't say whether he regretted being too familiar with Mikleo even in that aspect. He was almost certain that if Mikleo had shown the least bit interest in him during those random peaks of intimate excitement that normally assaulted boys their age, he might have done something shameful to relieve himself of his *swelling* curiosity.

Sorey winced and was just about ready to give himself a mental kick. Mikleo would *never* think of him that way. If anything, Mikleo is indifferent, cold, almost insensitive to the point that made
Sorey's frustration almost too painful to bear…

_Not that I can do anything about it either._ Most likely, Mikleo has not the slightest idea what agonies the future king goes through just to be _normal_ in front of him. Right now, he would trade the crown just to know what kinds of thoughts Mikleo was having at the moment...

_Normal. Right. And what am I even thinking if that were the case?_ With those pale, amethyst eyes staring him down as if to taunt, Sorey pushed the distracting thoughts away, barely managing a soundless groan as he slowly picked himself up.

He dusted his knees, wondering why he couldn’t even meet the familiar stare without catching his breath.

Mikleo felt there was something odd and out-of-character in Sorey's motions. After all, the crown prince was not the kind of person who cared about appearances... not the sort who would be sensitive about getting soiled in dirt and sweat every now and then. Mikleo frowned. “Uh, Sorey, I can't believe you're being prim and proper when you’ve just _literally_ kissed the ground I walk on.”

The tease caught him in a bad mood. Sorey wanted to hold himself back, but something in him was already aching for an argument. “Sheesh, Mikleo, get over yourself, will you? I don’t think you even know what I imagine to be kissing half the time I’m awake!”

Now that was just too… crass. The frustration had been nagging at him for weeks, and letting it all out now, after all the struggle to keep it in was even more frustrating. He stole a glance at Mikleo but his face was averted, chin raised haughtily as if to compensate for Sorey’s height advantage.

Sorey felt like patting Mikleo’s head right there and then. That cold, deprecating glare, that conceited, pouty disposition was just… very… tempting.

Mikleo tapped an index finger on his upper arm, now wrapped tightly around his upper chest. He refused to meet Sorey’s gaze, sporting instead a faraway look, one that barely disguised the fact that Sorey had just rubbed him the wrong way.

The crown prince hated apologies when irked into an argument, but Mikleo’s stance was more unbearable.

“Look, Mikleo—”

“Keep your gross fantasies to yourself, all right?”

“W-what the—”

“And make sure you mind your imagination in front of Princess Alisha… I mean, we don’t want her running away, do we?”

Sorey frowned, feeling something hot rise to his throat. “Is that what you want? Just tell me what you want from me, I’m always at your service, Prince Mikleo!”

Lavender eyes widened, something more than just shock and bitter confusion surfacing in those pupils, which were blown in anger and disbelief.

_Sheesh, what did I just say?_

Not that he even had to ask. The reproachful sarcasm was obvious, and Sorey didn’t even know how his mind got there or how he could pull himself back out.
Mikleo’s mind was reeling. “I’m not a leech. And if I ever was because I have to live like royalty to keep up appearances, then whose fault was that?”

Sorey impulsively reached out. No, he couldn’t have implied something so condescending—enough to make Mikleo look so hurt and upset…

“Hey, my bad, I’m—I’m sorry, I didn’t know what I was thinking, I’m just—look—don’t be mad…”

“Too late for that, Sorey,” Mikleo’s voice was thick. “Guess you’re asking for it then.”

“Whoa, hold on…” Sorey could only stare helplessly as Mikleo took a fighting stance from across him, spear firmly grasped and pointed at him at an angle that was all too familiar.

They have been doing this since they were six. Yet, Sorey has never gotten used to picking Mikleo for a dueling opponent. Most of the time, he would suggest being his dueling partner against the general who could easily take them on at the same time without even sweating an eyelid. And on such occasions Mikleo would relent and follow his lead without complaint. But this time, Mikleo looked serious. Deadly serious.

“So how about it? Care to match my eagerness, Your Hindness?”

It was hardly lost on Sorey how Mikleo was doing his best to cover up his battered pride. The least he can do right now is to let Mikleo deal with this the way he wanted… even when that amounts to pretentious bantering and casual provocations that hide the better part of those feelings neither of them is admitting.

“Say that again, Mikleo, and you’d be picking your teeth off the ground!”

“Whoa, nice speech there—for someone who’s never gonna have another chance to say anything when I’m through with him!”

“Fine, I appreciate the comedy—must be the joke of the century, huh?”

Mikleo huffed. “Are you saying something, Sorey? Can’t hear an idiot when he’s talking.”

“Really? I guess only an idiot would say that.”

“Well, any idiot must be better than a talking oyster, right?”

Sorey was miffed. True he was never eloquent—it was one of his more obvious failings. But having Mikleo rub that in hurt a bit more than he expected.

“Well Mikleo, uh-I’m sure... a talking oyster is so much better than a dead one!”

“I see. Already talking about your future self?”

Gods, how can he come up with those kinds of comebacks? Sorey squinted back in frustration.

“I’m not holding back this time Mikleo, even if I get your face dirty!”

“Hey, hey you two, could you just get right down to business? Sheesh, having those little crushes for each other is fine, but do you really have to make those love speeches to get into the mood? Or is that some sort of foreplay?”

“Eeehhh?” The two boys gave Zaveid confused looks, their shoulders dipping.
“Oh, the look of innocence. But, hey, no time for talk, use your hands, c’mon, this is your chance Sorey! You can touch, grapple, and wrestle as much as you want, just make sure you still have your clothes on by the time it’s over, all right?”

Mikleo gave the general a cold, drooping-lid stare. “Seriously, is that some joke you and Sorey have been rehearsing while I’m gone?”

“Well, Mik-ster, if you’re talking about that speech of mine, I’m trying it out today to see if I can stir one of you into action—ehh, how about that ex-Shep, hnn? You can thank me later if you want.”

Mikleo shifted his gaze to Sorey. “So what’s with the awful nickname, huh?”

Zaveid smirked at him. "Awful? Mik-ster ain't half as bad as Waterboy if you ask me..."

Sorey looked panicked, eyeing Zaveid with a scowl. "Hey, I don't think you should-

"Should what, Sorey?" Mikleo raised an eyebrow. "It's fine if you like to keep secrets from me. What I can't stand is you two giving me nicknames like I'm some pet whose opinion doesn't even count."

"Hey, Mikleo, you should know by now that hurting your feelings is the last thing I'd-" Sorey felt his throat dry up. "I-I mean-

Zaveid coughed. "Stop embarrassing yourself, kid, and just blame it on poor ole' Zaveid here... After all, what are friends for anyways?"

"Sheesh," Mikleo muttered. "I'm not even sure if I’m looking at the same General Zaveid here, he sounds so drunk to me."

"Uhh, as far as I know, Zaveid’s always been like that—I guess?" Sorey scratched his right cheek.

“Yeah, you sound so sure I might even believe it.”

Sorey gave him one of his helpless-looking smiles. Mikleo groaned. “Stop trying to be cute, this isn’t an engagement ball, all right? Or are you already rehearsing?”

Endless summer green blinked back a surprised yelp. “Ugh, I forgot all about Alisha!”

“You’re forgetting a lot lately,” Mikleo muttered. "Are you all that excited?"

Sorey gave him an exasperated sigh. “C’mon, you know me better than that, Mikleo! Besides, why would I forget something important if it were that important?”

“Sounds defensive to me…” Mikleo could not help sounding a little amused with Sorey’s habit of overemphasizing words when upset.

“What’s so funny? You think I’d hold back just because you’re—”

“I’m what now?”

For two seconds, Sorey thought he saw the end of Mikleo’s spear waver.

He smiled, meaning every bit of it. “Prettier than a girl, as always.”

Amethyst eyes flashed, and all it took was one step for the spear to reach Sorey’s unguarded wrist.
“I’m gonna break every bone in your body if you say that again!!!”

Sorey felt the pressure of the wind that accompanied that blow, but he swiftly avoided it with a forward lunge and a quick sidestep, using the momentum to block the spear from the right middle side as he jumped away to Mikleo’s left instead of landing a consecutive blow. Mikleo absorbed the pressure of that initial hit, lowering his body then reversing the spear’s position as if to anticipate a second blow. He knew Sorey deliberately held back when he simply moved away and out of the spear’s direct orbit.

Sorey felt smug, and his wide smile showed it. “You’re gonna break what? I don’t think you’re serious enough—or good enough.”

Mikleo was livid. Zaveid only watched from the sidelines, amused at the exchange between the two. It was rare to see them dueling with this kind of intensity.

Wordlessly, Mikleo swung his spear, this time rotating it using his backhand before leaping to Sorey’s left where the spear would land on his right torso when it orbits. But Sorey must have known what was on his mind for he swung his sword just right at the tip of the spear, swelling his body along the spear’s length and jumping out of its reach as soon as he saw Mikleo’s weapon vibrate out of focus from the impact.

Of course, hitting the very tip of a long weapon flying at you with a speed that makes up for its length requires luck and a calculating vision. The spear trembled and became unbalanced for the briefest of seconds. But it was all that Sorey needed to slide behind Mikleo and push him with the back of his hand.

Mikleo was caught unaware, his expression registering shock. To Zaveid, it looked more like playing, but with that unexpected push, Sorey fulfilled what he had promised to do. Mikleo stumbled forward and landed on his knees, palms down, his face dipping ever so slightly onto the dusty training grounds, smudging his left cheek a little.

“I think this oyster just proved his point.”

Mikleo dusted his knees, all the time avoiding Sorey’s goofy, _I-won-again_ victory smile. “So? Even oysters can get lucky, I guess.”

Mikleo stood up and met his gaze, his fine, smooth silver hair disheveled a little and hanging over his face. But what Sorey couldn’t help staring at was the smudge on Mikleo’s left cheek. When they were kids, Mikleo would always get the left side dirtied, and he the right side because whenever they crawled through low tunnels or squeezed into tight passageways, their other cheek would be pressed together, keeping it clean compared with the exposed one.

“So what now, Sorey? Still rehearsing a comeback or something? Or do you expect me to cry and whine because I lost?”

“Hey Mikleo, it’s just a stupid match is all. Are you—” With one swift stride, Sorey was suddenly just inches away, his fingertips brushing the smudge of dirt on Mikleo’s face ever so gently as if it was some brittle glass that could break at the slightest pressure. “Did that hurt or anything? I mean, it wasn’t such a bad fall, right?”

Mikleo could hardly tell if it was the sun’s glare or Sorey’s emerald eyes or the sensation from Sorey’s fingertips which was more intense, but he had to blink back and avert his gaze.

“Cut it out, Sorey.” Mikleo felt flustered and annoyed, but his voice came out in a hushed way. It
wasn’t like Sorey to show this much concern over something so trivial—and for a second Mikleo wondered if something else was bothering him. “Look, I may not be the dashing warrior that you seem to be—in your imagination—but I’m not a hopeless wimp either. Besides, don’t you have other things to worry about? It’s not like you can meet Princess Alisha looking all sweaty… not to mention smelling like a pig.”

“I couldn’t agree more, Mikleo…”

That voice. Sorey felt Mikleo freeze beneath his fingertips and saw how hopelessly and completely shell-shocked he looked as he backed a step away from him slowly. Like he has just seen a ghost.

“Is that you, Sorey? You’ve grown bigger, I see…”

“Malfus…” Sorey clenched his fist. That person filled him with a suffocating feeling in his chest—that frighteningly intense desire that was spreading to his limbs and filling him with an urge to hit something really bad.

The white-clad figure leaned a little forward with an almost disgusted expression as if Sorey was an insect aching to be squished.

“I’ll forgive your rudeness just this once, Sorey. But as a member of the Council, I have to say I deserve to be addressed with more respect. It’s not that I’m bragging, but I think you know the law as much as I do, do you not? Given your education, you must at least be familiar with the ethical rules for the treatment of members of the Imperial Church. Or perhaps you and Mikleo are still into that childish hobby of yours? Still wasting your time exploring ruins? Stealing relics? Even books?”

Malfus threw a furtive glance at the figure behind Sorey.

Mikleo was frozen to the spot, his blanched face paling to an even more deathly white shade.

“For a prince,” Malfus goes on, giving Sorey a sidelong glance, "you are rather too carefree, if you ask me.”

Sorey paid him no heed. His thoughts were on Mikleo who seemed unaware of anything or anyone else save Malfus. For some reason, Sorey felt mad just seeing that… felt a chilling cold in his gut spread to his limbs, felt his head spin and his vision blur. Something selfish and careless and irrational in him prodded him to admit that Mikleo should know better than to show this kind of fear.

Sorey gritted his teeth. Doesn’t Mikleo trust him enough to let him take care of Malfus? To keep Malfus at a safe distance? This is not the time to be jealous or even possessive, not that he’s ever felt that way with anyone else to know how to handle such reckless emotions.

But this is Mikleo...

Sorey winces at that indiscreet admission, but he would have to be honest. Mikleo is someone he has every right to protect.

Because Mikleo is part of his family.

No, that’s not it. Sorey felt his heart skip to deny that half-hearted assumption.

Because Mikleo is…

Sorey stared at Malfus hard, recalling those ancient words—a sacred oath etched in lavish gold and silver on the east wall of the throne room reserved for no less than the Overlord of Kreveldor:
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever…

Hail Odelius, Heaven’s True Light and Glory…

The One True Lord of the Empire of Nations…

Bow down all ye, all kingdoms, kneel at his feet!

Herald of Light, fulfill thy Sacred Destiny!

Sorey closed his eyes for just one second, one moment, and breathed.

Gods, what I would give up… to protect the only thing that’s ever important to me…

“Say, how are you Mikleo…”

Malfus was looking past him, but Sorey would die before letting him through, feeling the pressure between his fingers as they ached to draw his sword. He could not quite help it if his voice came out in a low growl. “Don’t take another step, I’m warning you! Even if you have Bishop Heldalf’s authority, I won’t let you force yourself on anyone... not this time, Malfus!”

Suddenly Zaveid was between them, stopping Malfus in his tracks. Although Mikleo’s face was a revelation, Zaveid knew it was Sorey he should be more worried about. For if Zaveid knew anything about the calm, composed, and good-natured Sorey, it was that his overprotective instincts could be—and were, in fact—deadly. Like the time he was dueling against the two of them and he attacked Mikleo a little too strongly. Sorey lunged at him with a speed he had never displayed before, hitting his shield full in the middle with a swing that caused him to fall backwards, splitting the shield likewise.

Which means one thing: Sorey need not wait for Mikleo to get as much as a scratch for him to be so goddamn over-protective.

That aside, he had never met someone with nearly the same strength or speed as Sorey’s in the many battles he had faced against human opponents. And by all appearances, Malfus would have what was coming to him if no one intervened before the inevitable.

He gave the tall, young man a passing glance. Malfus has changed considerably since the time he left a year ago for Pendrago. While he seemed no taller than Mikleo before, now he was almost Sorey’s height, though in terms of physique he was much slimmer but neither too lithe nor frail either. His blonde hair and sapphire-blue eyes make him almost as handsome though if not for the quiver of arrogance and self-worship that seems to go well with the arched eyebrows, the aquiline nose and the sharp jawline that accentuates his high cheekbones and even sharper chin.

If Zaveid were to judge him objectively, though, he would have to admit that the blossoming youth exemplifies in every way the looks of a royal aristocrat descended from the line of Odelius—if physical features alone were to be an accurate measure of that. Giving it some thought, he couldn’t help but infer the reason behind the King and Queen’s lavishly favorable treatment of the widowed Duchess Meliahna—Malfus’s mother—and her three sons. If they weren’t strategic about handling the mother and his eldest son Malfus, doubtless the most potentially threatening of them, political intrigues could worsen and affect Sorey’s position as heir. After all, if anything were to happen to Sorey, only the nearest relations from the same bloodline could take his place. Rules of succession leave out the possibility of adoptive siblings and appointed heirs having any right to the throne—and that makes Malfus, the eldest son of Odelius’s deceased brother, the closest link in the chain.

What further threatens Sorey’s position may be the fact that despite his lineage, Sorey definitely
lacked the looks, the political acuity, and the aristocratic disposition to make him suitable for the title of Overlord of the West, which Kreveldor historians imagine must belong to an exact copy of their previous kings.

For Zaveid, of course, such shortcomings were hardly deplorable. In fact, he was rather satisfied that Sorey remained Sorey—endowed with a natural charm and a graceful wit that went beyond aristocracy. Even his sensitivity and pure-hearted innocence were nothing pretentious or superficial—nothing like the shallow courtesy and etiquette common among aristocrats who take pride in their hypocritical views. But this apparent difference only explains further why court opinion regarding Sorey’s suitability for the coveted position of Overlord seemed damp. It is easy to see how politicians may favor the likes of Malfus—someone who epitomizes not only the more obvious qualities of the bloodline of Odelius but also those of the aristocracy in every gesture, word, or deed.

Putting those thoughts behind him, Zaveid tipped the edge of his hat—the black hat he had been sporting ever since Dezel returned and claimed his own. The habit was hard to break so he thought that a more fashionable replacement might be in order. “Pardon me, your lordship, but I think there’s a better way…”

Malfus snickered with obvious distaste, eyeing the general with contempt. “I believe His Excellency is the more appropriate address, General Zaveid. Unless you want to be excommunicated for disrespect toward a member of the Holy Order!”

Zaveid would have knocked the young man out of orbit if he had the good manners of his older self in mind. He gave a quick nod instead.

“My apologies but, as I was saying, there must be a better way for you and His Majesty to rekindle your uh-broken friendship-right... Besides, I hardly think these training grounds fit your holy presence. I suggest we all get inside to be reacquainted.”

Malfus sniggered. “For someone who hardly thinks, that suggestion seems practical enough. I just couldn’t help hearing Mikleo’s voice. His presence calls to me even in the deepest wilderness.”

Sorey was livid, barely able to hold himself back as Malfus’s eyes wandered back to Mikleo. He clenched his hand, spreading his arms wide in front of him, like an eagle ready to grasp its prey with its cold, deadly talons.

“Dammit, I said back off, Malfus! Acting like a jerk isn't something I'd expect from his holy-ness... if the title suits you.”

Malfus smiled ruefully, not even flinching at the implied threat. “Really now, Sorey, if I were you, I wouldn't betray myself so openly like this! Just imagine if someone had heard you defend your sweet brother with such a passion! As the future Overlord, you must realize how your position attracts many enemies... how every little thing you do or fail to do will be judged so harshly you would rather sink your teeth in iron than lift a finger to please your critics. What the throne gives is nothing compared to what it takes..." Malfus snickers, stealing a glance at Mikleo. "... if you let it..."

Sorey glares back. "I don't see how your position is any different!"

"Me?" Malfus throws back his head, laughing at the thought. "No, no, you have it all wrong! For an emperor, nothing but force is important! Without it, no kingdom knows fear, no subject knows obedience. As for me, I choose to be persuasive... and there is nothing that persuades more absolutely than faith, don't you agree? When all things fail, when life becomes absurd and nothing seems to work out the way you want it, there is faith to guide you. Faith can do away with evidence, it isn't ruled by reason. Faith, belief, hope... the more desperate you are, the more you cling to these
rubbish, and the more you lose sight of what is reasonable. As they say, those nearest to God are the farthest from wisdom. Perhaps it’s the reason I find beauty irresistible... because it lacks reason, and whatever lacks reason approximates the divine, the most holy..."

Malfus catches his breath. "As thy beauty surpasses all divine things, Mikleo..."

Sidestepping Sorey completely, Malfus sweeps past him, ignoring his presence as if he was nothing but air. In the next moment, he was hovering over Mikleo, his face barely inches away, his hand resting palm down on Mikleo’s heaving chest.

Sorey’s breathing hitched. Mikleo was immobile, panicked, the pupils of his eyes dilated and quivering as if in deep, desperate fear.

“Stop staring Mikleo, can’t you tell I’ve missed you too? All this time I thought only of you—and how I might shine your pure soul with the divine light of my blessing… myself which I give to thee... to remain in thee and possess thee... to become one with thy body and spirit for all eternity...”

Sorey felt his chest tighten the moment he saw Malfus’s hand snake its way farther down Mikleo’s chest, sliding toward his slim waist. But it barely touched it when the blonde’s face twisted in agony.

“Hands off, you bastard!”

Mikleo was shaken by that. B-bastard? Did Sorey just—

Mikleo found his inner voice the moment Sorey crossed his line of vision, but could only stare as the shameless hand that grazed him went up and above Malfus’s head. Hurting someone from the Holy Order—much worse from the Council of the Holy Twelve—may be the most serious offense next to treason, but Sorey could not afford to have any thoughts on that as he tugged at the other boy’s arm, pulling it as high as his longer arm would let him.

And between the two, Sorey was definitely the taller, the stronger, and this time, the more frightening.

Malfus’s face was twisted in pain, but his mouth managed a twitching retort. “You’re unworthy to touch an Apostles’ holy—”

Sorey pushed the conceit aside, green eyes smoldering as he stared down the figure in pristine-white robes. “I don’t know much about holiness or what-not, but this much I can say…”

Malfus cowered as flames seemed to burn from within the depths of those emerald-green eyes. “You dare touch Mikleo again and I swear…” Sorey gritted his teeth. “For once, I’d forget who you are and what might become of me!”

Malfus’s eyes snapped wide open. Is the crown prince seriously belittling the powers of the Council? Is he that stupid to stand against the highest power in the land—the only power that cannot be subordinated to the laws of the empire itself—and accept whatever punishment or outcome was waiting for him?

Zaveid stepped in between them, face seriously livid. “That’s about enough, you three! Training or not I’m the authority here so when I say you break up and quit it, you better listen or I’d make you!”

Sorey let go of the wrist in his grip but not without leaving Malfus a warning glare with all his pent-up emotions in it. No, he cannot allow this bastard anywhere near Mikleo again or god help him, with or without the Council and the Bishop on his side, he will make sure his cousin paid with agonizing cries every single, dirty, little craving he had in his filthy imagination…
But right now, he has to let that go. After all, Mikleo needs to be reassured. He wouldn’t let him suffer the same torture again no matter what.

But when Sorey turned to face him, to make sure he was all right, there was nothing there except the sound of dust grinding against the rough cobblestones below his feet.

Mikleo had left without a word.

“We have been too lenient with you I’m afraid, and now it’s come to this…”

Sorey left the training grounds as soon as he realized Mikleo had disappeared wordlessly, but he hasn’t even gone past the hallway leading to the private chambers when a palace guard interrupted his search to inform him of the summons by the Overlord. The word Overlord is the King’s official title as a political authority and seems awkward as a way of referring to the family head, but to Sorey, there doesn’t seem to be much of a difference.

To be honest, he could hardly say the word ‘father’ since personal relations have never been too personal among members of the royal family. When he thought of the king or addressed him, Sorey always felt the need to remind himself that here is the greatest ruler of all time, King Odelius the VIII, Emperor of Kreveldor, opposed by no one, revered by everyone, looked up to by all the western kingdoms scattered within and beyond the continent.

The Overlord of the West is the supreme protector and keeper of the peace. His voice is law and law is the absolute power that binds everything in the world together. So who is he to speak in the presence of such an undisputed authority?

“My Lord and Master, our son has but misunderstood Malfus’s gesture of friendship, did you not? You were most likely surprised to find him so grown up after just a year.”

Sorey kept his head bowed so he couldn’t see the expression on his mother’s face to hazard a guess if she were joking or deliberately lying for his sake. In any case, there seems little sense in attracting more attention by disagreeing.

“That may be so.”

King Odelius was obviously unconvinced. “Agreement in times of conflict is a weak resolution—that is why those words you speak betray nothing but lack of judgment. Speak your mind, Sorey. Remember that you remain my son and a son of Kreveldor whether you incur my wrath or not.”

Tough luck. The last thing Sorey wanted was to tell the truth. Hiding it is a different matter altogether and could hardly be called lying. But if he were to even try to lie right now…

“Speak up I say!”

Without looking, Sorey could imagine the Queen’s hand steadying the King who would be leaning a little too forward, with that kind of tone and emotion in his voice. It has always been like that.

“But before he could hazard a word out, he heard a distant voice announcing the arrival of a herald-knight, presumably fresh from the outer grounds of the palace.
In a matter of seconds, the shuffling sound of armor and heavy footsteps drew the King and Queen’s attention to a presence behind him. Sorey was still kneeling on one knee with his head bowed so there was no way he could see the source of the commotion.

“Your Majesty, The Great King Odelius and His Honorable Queen Cyrvonne, please forgive this intrusion but the congregation from Erinvale has arrived earlier than expected, and so we felt that his Highness must be informed in great haste to make way for their arrival here in Kreveldor Castle.”

“Your apologies are unnecessary, Sir Koryn. I presume they are waiting for us in the guest hall?”

“Uh, Your Majesty, I must beg for your indulgence. They are waiting behind us, I told them they shall be summoned upon your orders.”

King Odelius stood up, offering a hand to his Queen. “Uh, that you should care so much about our rules of conduct at a time like this. Erinvale is an ally. Please ask them to come hither and share this welcome with us.”

Sir Koryn bowed. “I shall, Your Majesty.”

Sorey was mildly surprised. So the guests from Erinvale have finally arrived? That would mean more complications, although worrying about all of that could only be tiresome as settling political matters never really held much interest for him.

Sir Koryn must have returned. “Your Majesty, may I present to you and the Honorable Queen, Princess Alisha Diphda, crown princess of Erinvale.”

Whoa that was quick. He felt a shadow cross his shoulder and light footsteps fall a few feet to his right. It was hard to see everything, with him still on his knees with his head bowed deeply. Nobody seems to remember the difficulty he was having of course, with his leg starting to cramp in that position. But maybe this is part of his punishment? In any case, the attention, at least, was not on him, and that meant he has time to come up with an explanation about the incident with Malfus.

The approaching footsteps stopped just a few feet away from him. He could tell there was hesitation in her gait—and also inner strength and confidence. It seems all eyes are on her and the atmosphere feels thick with a deadly serious but awkward silence.

“Your Majesty, I, Princess Alisha Diphda, in behalf of the Kingdom of Erinvale, would like to express my sincerest appreciation for this opportunity to receive the honor and pleasure of your presence after such a long time…”

Sorey senses the abrupt pause in her speech and wondered if she forgot the rest of it.

“Err… I—I’m—sorry but… is—is that really you, Sorey?”

Sorey felt all eyes revert to him. Gods, what a way to be noticed!

An unexpected laughter reverberated within the walls of the throne room. It was rare to hear the Overlord laugh in such a carefree way but together with the Queen? It seemed the entire hall was in celebration—and for the life of him, it didn’t make much sense.

King Odelius was the first to confirm the princess’s amusing discovery. “Uh, forgive us Princess Alisha, but it is rather pleasantly surprising that you remember such a young fellow as he… Quite honestly, we were having a serious talk just now and it seems your arrival made us forget that for the time being. Allow me to thank you for bringing the matter to our attention, and for receiving him in such a friendly manner as we deem fortunate.”
If Alisha blushed as she had never blushed before, Sorey would not have seen or understood as he remained bowed and kneeling despite the acknowledgement he has just received. He could only vaguely wonder what was going on to make the princess seem too flustered to speak after such a remark.

“Stand and introduce yourself, Sorey. I think you’ve done enough kneeling for one day… But let me remind you, your presence will be requested sometime soon so we could finish that conversation we’re putting off for now.”

Sorey knew that the irony was meant only for his personal understanding. He smiled awkwardly, touching the feather earrings on his right ear. “A most pleasant conversation I hope it will be, Your Majesty, though my tongue shudders and my feet quiver in my boots as we speak.”

“Well, young man,” the king spoke, his voice a bit stern. “This is the first time I’ve heard of one so afraid that his tongue shudders in his boots.”

Oh, that careless mistake! Sorey rubbed the back of his head with an apologetic smile only to be met by a roar of laughter from the knights in the hall. Even Princess Alisha found herself joining the laughter despite the austere atmosphere that greeted her upon her arrival. It seems Sorey really has his own personal touch to everything—even the way he conducts himself in court. Whether it was aristocratic enough or diplomatic enough lost their relevance as the crown prince’s light-hearted demeanor set everyone at ease.

Sorey finally musters the confidence to stand up and face Alisha. As he had expected, the princess looked regal, respectably charming, and every bit as mature as her voice conveyed so gracefully. Her light, honey-blonde hair was arranged daintily in a tail on one side topped by a rare-looking blossom, while her bangs, falling on the sides of her face, curl gracefully to emphasize her soft chin and jawline. Her eyes were the same emerald color as his, only a little paler it seems, and her wide forehead made her even more charmingly child-like and innocent. Unlike the recent fashion worn by most aristocrats, her chest was fully covered, her neck gracefully emphasized by a deep black collar with lace fringes and a ribbon. Her gown was made of sheer layers of delicate fabric, becoming thinner on the surface—almost veil-like but not transparent enough to give more hints as to the shape and outline of her figure as are necessary. Altogether, the white, pink and lavender hues blending softly around her fair complexion made her so appealing a picture to look at Sorey knew it would be difficult for most young men to ignore her even if she were in a crowd.

She was beautiful, like a work of art made to be admired by the public eye. No doubt, she had the qualities of a future queen…

He reached out a hand casually. “Uh, hi there, Alisha—err… I mean Princess Alisha. Uh, it’s been a long while. I remember you were sorta small and cute back then… Uhh… I mean you’re still cute, uh pretty should be the word I think—it’s just—been quite some time since that time…” Sorey waves his hand frantically. “I—I hope you don’t think it rude of me to say so?”

The entire room seem to blossom with smiles all around. Sorey wondered where the cheer and enthusiasm was coming from unless he had said something too weird?

“I am so pleased to have this chance to speak to you again, Sorey—I mean, Prince Sorey, that is. You must forgive my rudeness, my way of speaking but shows how much I hold fond memories of you since we last saw each other…”

Sorey noticed the red color rising to her cheeks and wondered if he had said anything so embarrassing as to make her seem so awkwardly shy and modest. “Yeah, how could I forget? If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t know that Erinvale’s got the biggest and best library in Glenwood! It
was awesome! I’d do anything to have another chance to browse your rare collection of books!”

The King and Queen gave each other knowing looks. Expect Sorey to talk off tangent—which is quite charming, to be honest, but…

“Oh, I see,” Alisha pouted a little. “And is the library far more amazing than any sights you’ve come across while you were in Erinvale, Prince Sorey?”

The whole room grew quiet and the King and Queen exchanged smiles. It seemed everyone was waiting for his answer, but Sorey couldn’t figure the excitement in that.

“Uh…let me think…” Sorey raised his chin and began to ponder it seriously. “I guess if anyone should know it would be Mikleo… you remember him, don’t you? He actually has a good eye for finding valuable stuff that I’d normally ignore—y’know—uh, like paintings, sculpture or any of those artistic stuff fashionable people rave about? Anyway, I can’t wait for you to meet him again, we have so much to talk about, us three!”

The Queen might have been mistaken, but she sensed the Overlord’s discomfort in the sigh that accompanied his worried look. She laughed a little to draw his attention and nodded briefly as if to reassure him. “Sorey, dear, before that, would you be so kind as to escort Princess Alisha sometime later, after all of us have lunch? It would be nice if you two could get some time together to talk and to get to know each other more… at least before the ball this evening. Is that all right with you, Princess? But should you wish to rest and spend the rest of the afternoon in private…”

Alisha returns the Queen’s generous smile. “Oh, no, I’ve had enough rest on my way here, Your Majesty, so I’d truly be grateful if Sorey could show me around. Of course, only if Prince Sorey would be so willing as to have me after lunch… Oh, uhh… I mean—I’m sorry—what I mean is—”

Her blush was so deep Sorey wondered if she was feeling well. Maybe a fever?

“Oh, are you all right, Alisha?”

“I-I’m fine… please forgive my blunder, I seem to be quite careless with words…”

Sorey didn’t understand her confusion but felt she needed reassurance for what it’s worth. “Well, for starters, you can stop being so formal… of course maybe not when everybody’s listening like right now…” Sorey looks around and notices everybody’s gaze fixed on them. “Never mind, I’m sure everyone understands exactly what you mean, so no worries.”

With a more serious face, Sorey turns to the King and Queen. “Uh, Your Majesty, if it’s all right, could I have some personal time before the evening ball? I promise to escort Alisha and show her around, it would be a pleasure to do that. It’s just that I… have personal matters that needed attention as of today… uhh… nothing related to what happened this morning, so don’t worry too much…”

Of course there were a lot of things that happened that morning, but he has every reason not to go into details. Though some part of him felt guilty about hiding the truth, a greater part of him thought only of that one concern that could override everything else—the guilt, the anxiety, all of those worries lumped together.

He must find Mikleo, no matter what. Not knowing where he is, what he could be thinking, what he is planning now that Malfus has returned is enough to give Sorey an intense urge to run from this place and find him. But, of course, patience is a virtue and letting others notice, especially his parents and Alisha, may just invite more trouble.

King Odelius looked skeptical and seemed like he was about to object, but the Queen beat him to it.
“It will be as you wish, my son, for as long as you do everything to make sure Princess Alisha feels welcome. Let’s all pray she enjoys her stay here.”

Alisha smiled warmly, green eyes brimming. “That will be easy, Your Majesty. Prince Sorey is good company I can tell.”

Sorey rubbed the back of his head, still baffled by the flush of deep color on the princess’s cheeks. In any case, it must be her nature to blush in front of someone she hasn’t seen in a long while. “Thanks, Alisha, that’s generous of you. But we’ll see each other later, all right?”

Taking a deeper bow toward the King and Queen, Sorey withdrew and thought of his next course of action.

To find Mikleo before Malfus finds him again.

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“So… I heard you’ve received a most warm welcome this morning.”

“Heldalf… I…” Malfus ignored the irony in that remark, looking distracted and forlorn as he let the tip of his index finger trace the outline of an ivory statue of a mythical creature, half-boy, half-snake, with a pair of wings as graceful as an eagle’s on its back. “I want him so much… I want only him…”

“Be careful of your thoughts. If you as much as stray from the principles of the Council…”

“Oh, Heldalf, be quiet. Don’t threaten me with those words again, I know fairly well what power I have and what you want me to do with it! The reward I ask for is so small compared with the work you’re putting in my hands.”

Bishop Heldalf bristled at the casual arrogance the boy so audaciously flaunted in his presence. No matter how high his position, the boy would not cower or pay the slightest respect regardless of the most serious threats he could think of. Truly, if evil had any face…

“So what are your plans? Intend to snatch him away from under everyone’s nose?”

Malfus’s eyes sparkled like broken glass under a blue moonlight, and his lips held a menacing smile. “Gods, Heldalf you take me for a romantic? Love is nothing more than a plaything, something we entertain ourselves with when the real thing’s beyond reach. In the end, it’s really nothing more than repressed lust. You humans give it too much credit and write whole volumes of nonsense thinking there is something so vague as love for god, love for humanity, love for someone who shares your bed… But for me…”

Heldalf finds himself unable to stray from the topic even if his better sense wanted to dismiss Malfus's soliloquies as those of an obsessed lunatic.

"It’s all the same. Love is lust. And lust is nothing without the power to carry out one’s desires to its bitter end.”

Heldalf suppressed a bitter smile. “Oh, and if the end is nothing but bitter, why pursue it?”

“You suppose happiness is the end-all, be-all of every living soul in the universe? I doubt that. We don’t have desires in order to be happy… we have desires because deep down we’ve always known we can never be happy. No matter how hard we try to keep to our ideals or change our personal
circumstances, nothing changes. We live, we die, we return to this barren wasteland of broken dreams hoping for another chance at a better life. But does that even change anything? It matters little what means we use to achieve such illusions of enlightened bliss—some do it by pacifism, by charity or philanthropy if you’re desperate to sound wise. Society doesn't seem to run out of hypocrisies, unable to see the way truth and morality annihilate each other with every stupid lie, with every sin they forgive yet punish..."

Malfus laughs from the pit of his stomach. It sounded sick, almost insane. "Amused Heldalf? You should know such things better than I do!"

"I know many things. But your vague propositions aren't helping."

"Propositions! Oh, Heldalf, the lovely words that hide our ignorance are so deceptively appealing... or should I say appalling? We love to educate ourselves, to fulfill grandiose dreams and ambitions, but the end is all the same... We keep getting frustrated and those frustrations fuel our desires."

"I do not think we fuel something we already know to be deceiving."

"Aye, we fuel things we can’t live without." Malfus smiles softly, almost tenderly. "Like truth and miracles. We don't care about contradictions for as long as we can make our follies seem wiser than others. Because there's nothing more we hate than being wrong... even if being right is sometimes more foolish."

“But some do claim to be happy regardless of how pathetic you make of them... regardless of how you may judge their petty joys and miseries."

Malfus snickers. “Like our beloved Prince Sorey? Those like him love deluding themselves into thinking they’re happy. And they either stay deluded or sooner or later wake up to the fact that happiness is too short-lived to be remembered beyond the grave. If you ask me, hate is the only permanent thing in this world…”

“That’s why hate breeds Malevolence…”

“Wish everyone knew that!” Malfus's voice sounded almost triumphant. "Hate is stronger... one can be filled with hate for an eternity without even knowing why. Even eternal love becomes stronger when bound by hate, and that is why there are such things as hellions, demons, and dark shepherds... old grudges, unrequited loves, sins and spite... the shadows of our worst fears and failures...”

“Eternal love and eternal hate. If I didn’t know any better, you almost sound like a romantic idiot yourself.”

“Hah, an idiot’s an idiot, romantic or otherwise,” Malfus tries to laugh this time, but the sound seemed more like a low, desperate chuckle, a grunt of conceit.

“But why him? You know how precarious the situation could get if Prince Sorey …”

“Mikleo’s beautiful. Is there any other reason more compelling than that? Or has religion made you so barren that you have become immune to the lustful cravings of our sex?”

“One beauty is just like any other—”

“Well, I don’t sense others the way everyone else does,” Malfus grates impatiently, eyes suddenly languid. “Just like every heavenly body, mine is bound to a single star that outshines them all. My world revolves around a center that gives it life, like the sun that keeps this world and others in perfect orbit, not too close yet not too far away. The first time I saw Mikleo I knew why Sorey
wanted him for himself… knew why he keeps such a close guard on him, like a jewel that must be kept from prying eyes lest it incites envy… for envy is what drives all thieves to steal what is precious to others. But I would have him Heldalf. I must have him or nothing in this world would have any meaning for me. And a meaningless world could just disappear, don’t you agree?”

“I still don’t understand. There are so many beautiful boys to toy with, what makes him so utterly special?”

Malfus picked up his glass of wine and stared at it languidly, as if to watch the way the light from the candles give it a strange, incandescent glow.

The bishop watched him warily from the shadows. His private chamber had its own dining room, furnished with expensive furniture and an exquisite arrangement of wine, silverware, and other assortments fit for royal guests. Malfus did not look the least flattered though, despite the handsome preparation made for his welcome.

“He knows something I don’t, Heldalf… something that eludes me so…”

“With your gift of wisdom, that is hardly possi—”

“He knows how to love…”

The bishop raised an eyebrow at that, watching his young guest swirl the rich, red wine playfully around the glass as his eyes sparkled with a metallic glint. “Sentimentality would be the death of you, Malfus.”

There was the sound of thin glass cracking then breaking into tiny pieces as Malfus held what was left of the glass in a fist, letting wine and blood ooze together from between cuts around his fingers as shards fell from his grasp. Then a rasping, maniacal laugh full of desperate misery and aching contempt issued from his lips.

“Do you know what it’s like to love Heldalf?” Malfus grinned, the laughter dying in him like the croak of a defeated man facing execution. “Could any man of religion be honest enough to say that he has loved like other men, when he himself forbids it? To rise above men like the seraphim, one’s soul must forsake love, first and foremost—the kind of love that binds him to the flesh, to the broken desires of human existence. But the Dark Shepherd was once a seraph, wasn’t he? A seraph who loved beyond hate, beyond corruption, beyond all things that could destroy him forever. He loved more than anyone ever had… more than anyone ever could. How do you think the Dark Shepherd came to be created, if not through the absolute contradiction between love and hate, between an absolute good and an absolute evil? Not even the gods have thought of such a paradox as capable of being born into this world. Such a waste if you ask me…”

Heldalf touches his beard, suddenly thoughtful. “Which is?”

“Don’t you see? They created a world for their own purification, created all these human vessels to bear the corruption of that forsaken love that they fear and hate. They wish to be rid of sin so badly not for your sake, but only so they could rise to the heavens and claim their immortality…”

Malfus watches his own blood trickle down the broken shards that fell onto the floor at his feet.

“It’s true, Heldalf, isn’t it? Love and Malevolence are the offspring of a single power that breeds in the soul of the living, whether man, seraph, or god.”

Heldalf gazed emptily at the dim light of the candles around them. What Malfus spoke of just now—that was the truth. He knew that long ago when he was not Heldalf yet, even before the rise of
malaks and exorcists threw the world into chaos, even before the coming of the Shepherd of the Age of Chaos whom he had fought as well, long after this endless cycle of birth and rebirth that came after the purification. That was the ultimate power that ended it for him, wasn’t it—his defeat by the Shepherd and his Seraphim companions that robbed him of the chance to know the true nature of the curse that is called the Malevolence. If the Dark Shepherd, that ultimate accident and freak of nature had not been created, there would be no way of knowing the true nature and essence of that curse.

But even so, Malfus is just one sliver of that forsaken soul, just a tiny part of that accursed darkness reincarnated with the help of the shards the Apostles have been collecting since that war...

The war that ended that torn, despondent race of winged Celestials… a race that allowed itself to be enslaved by both gods and humans…

But Heldalf cared little about that.

For until that forsaken soul within Malfus is completely reborn, this dark power called Malevolence which is greater than the gods themselves… the power that not even the shepherds or their seraphim allies fully understood or understand, must doom the world over and over until its absolute will is carried out.

And such gives Malfus sufficient reason to be so carelessly confident. For if knowledge of the greatest evil, the most ancient of curses, can bring such frightening existence under control, then that being may stand above the highest stars, on a plane of existence higher than that of the highest gods. To understand the curse that is feared by all is to stand at the precipice of power itself, to open the proud gates of heaven and free those cowards from the shackles of their own bondage.

After all, isn’t it cowardly of the gods to fear the loss of their kingdom by throwing away such a dark, perfidious power? To shelter themselves with the divine power of the True Light while cowering from the shadows of their own polluted desires? Casting all its unwanted filth down this world... wasn't the end to let it ravage and pillage souls until it has exhausted itself into sleep? Wasn’t that the reason why the Malevolence kept returning every two thousand years, as if to say that no power could ever put it to sleep long enough to give shepherds and seraphim the separate peace they deserved?

Heldalf hands Malfus a sheer, white cloth that has a blue cross sewn on one corner of it—a blue cross with a smaller cross at the center, shaped like a sword.

“Young as you are, you’re as perceptive as ever Malfus, just as an Apostle should. And also reckless beyond sympathy.”

Malfus scowled. “I didn’t bleed myself to get your sympathy! It doesn’t even hurt at all… why is that, Heldalf? And yet, I want to feel it… the kind of pain that really hurts… the kind that would bring me back memories of what it is like to be human… and weak...”

The kind that almost made me desperate when he pulled my hand away... away from that one thing I wanted the most...

At that moment, I felt a yawning emptiness within me awaken... like a dreadful beast that had been in slumber for ages...

Heldalf could only watch stoically as Malfus wipes his right hand clean of blood, then stares at the fingers that have been lacerated and have started bleeding again. He laughs at the sight of blood oozing from the cuts to flow along the deep creases on his palm. Then without as much as flinching, he pours the remaining ruby liquid from a bottle of rare and exquisite wine, letting it run against his
blood-soaked hand. Smiling to Heldalf, he proceeds to the door, letting his hand limp by his side.

“Malfus, I advise that you stay away from that young man for now if you don’t want the crown prince at your heels. You may be a member of the Council, but Prince Sorey is no easy enemy either. This evening ball has been prepared for him and his future fiancée so it would be best not to attract the attention of the nobles who at the moment look at him with favor—at least until the matter with Erinvale is settled.”

Malfus pauses at the door but does not care to look over his shoulder to acknowledge that. Yet in the darkness he smiles as if he has been given a piece of good news.

“A fiancée, you say? I believe this is the best time to see that for myself. I don’t want Mikleo to be lonely after all…”

In the modest elegance of the well-lighted ballroom that looked almost crowded with guests glitteringly and lavishly dressed for the occasion—most of them relatives of the royal family, officials and ministers, subjects and deputies with enviable positions in the King’s Own—Lady Maltran gazed with nothing less than admiration, still taken aback by her mistress’s transformation from a stiff-faced, austere-clad knight to a sweet, charming, and infinitely beautiful young woman—if personal biases be permitted.

“I-is something the matter?” Princess Alisha asked as she straightened the little coronet of emerald and pearl on the tiny bun on her head which was entwined with a single braid the end of which was left to dangle gracefully on her left shoulder. “You don’t think it’s too daring or bold, do you? I’ve never worn this kind of gown before…”

They are standing by a curtained archway above a long flight of stairs that lead to the ballroom where several guests have taken to dancing to the somewhat romantic music being played softly by the court musicians. Maltran glimpsed the crowd of dancing pairs below and cast a furtive glance at the princess whose profile gleamed under the light of the chandeliers. She looked radiant and dreamy. Too dreamy in fact.

“I’ve never seen you look more beautiful than tonight, Princess. I am most certain Prince Sorey would agree and will not miss this rare opportunity to admire your gracefully slender shoulders.”

Alisha blushed. “H-hey, that’s not what I meant…”

“I am merely speculating, Princess. I was hoping it will give you comfort since as you’ve said so many times before, my predictions were never wrong.”

“Well, it does make me a little nervous though…”

“But you seem very much yourself this afternoon as you and he conversed in the gardens and the courtyard.”

“Maltran, don’t tell me you’ve been—”

“Eavesdropping?Spying?Both actually…”
“Maltran!”

“Well, you are the crown princess of Erinvale after all. It is my duty to ensure your safety—even if we are, presumably, in the most guarded and secure place in the continent… Besides, I do not know Prince Sorey enough to trust that he will not make any move that might compromise your womanhood…”

Princess Alisha blushed to the roots of her hair. “He is a perfect gentleman… a truly kind and unassuming young man though he is of such high stature…”

“Too perfect, I’m afraid. He seems too gentle and polite for someone with the reputation of being the most skilled swordsman around, only second to the reputable General Zaveid.”

“I do not expect him to be less. And to be honest, I’m more than pleased to find him the same insatiably curious and enthusiastic boy that he was when we first met in Erinvale.”

“Boy? His smiling eyes may seem boyish and innocent, but he has the body of a man who is ripe and mature for fatherhood. How many babies do you think he can give you?”

“I’m afraid my thoughts never strayed that far! The engagement is a topic neither of us mentioned even by chance.”

“And do you find that comforting? Does he lack the interest any other young man would have in his place? Or perhaps he’s too complacent about his status, thinking it your duty to show more interest in the prospect of marrying such a—”

“I—” Alisha hesitated, averting her face, looking suddenly uncertain as her eyes fell on the ribbons lacing the fringes of her chest and shoulders. “I honestly believe him to be incapable of either malice or arrogance. Perhaps that is why I find comfort and joy in Prince Sorey’s company. His manners have neither conceit nor pretense. He rarely speaks of himself unless asked.”

Maltran saw through the princess’s reluctant smile. “He speaks too much of another, does he not? I am almost curious of that person because of the praises bestowed upon him, which, had they not been kind and generous, made me imagine a rival than a friend. Prince Mikleo is someone to watch out for.”

“Maltran, that’s preposterous! Mikleo is his own brother… Certainly he’s not the rival that you deem him to be? His charms are more the envy of women—distant, a little too stern and sharp for my liking, too feminine and quite a mystery I would have to admit. I do not see him as someone who might even be interested in marriage. Besides, he is too different from Sorey… Not better but just… I do not feel the same warmth and cheer that makes me smile when Sorey smiles at me. I certainly do not wish to develop intimacies with two boys who happen to be brothers as well… or do you—”

Alisha cut herself off, as if something too disturbing to be named just crossed her mind. “… are you by chance implying something else?

“Men lavish admiration on members of their own sex who mirror their strengths or possess qualities they wish to excel in. Even the greatest leaders have once followed the footsteps of another paragon.”

“A rival to which the prince may compare. A paragon… meaning to say Prince Mikleo is someone Sorey…”

“Worships, as if the air he breathes is holy, something he values far more than he might himself realize. I was amazed you have not suspected it when he started speaking of him in front of His Majesty upon your arrival. I think his thoughts stray too often and too much in the direction of his
brotherly affections. Even your conversations in the garden were litanies and praises sung in the absence of his idol. I just hope that in time, he would have more pleasant things with which to draw a princess’s attention.”

Alisha frowned slightly, though it was more out of confusion than displeasure. “Prince Mikleo and Sorey… they share too many things in common, such as books, ruins, and adventures boys their age must find irresistible. I believe that is all there is to it, Maltran, nothing I should seriously be jealous—I mean—it’s not something worth worrying about… is it?”

“Be careful of your thoughts, Princess… for someone who would be Queen should not betray their feelings too much.”

Alisha nervously smiled, waving off the warning nonchalantly. “Romance doesn’t suit me, and my reason loses its hold when it comes to these things that I hardly even think about.”

Maltran deadpanned. “Of course. You haven’t thought much about being engaged with anyone else, perhaps…”

Alisha gave a slow, defeated sigh. “Perhaps not. Perhaps Sorey is the only one that my heart considers without fear… With him, I feel I can always be myself…”

"To thine own self be true, one great poet said. And Prince Sorey is one who brings you closer to this ideal?"

Alisha smiles softly. "Confessing it seems bold, but to answer your question, yes, he does seem to have that charm about him. With him, I feel comfortable enough... like I'm with a very old friend. I don't know how to describe it Maltran but... with him, I feel I can speak my heart out without putting up a facade. With him, I can be Alisha, not the princess, not the future Queen of Erinvale, not the potential Empress everyone imagines me to be. With Sorey, I... I feel I can be any person I want to be, and he wouldn’t even mind... even if I’m not the fairest, the wisest, nor the most ideal model of majesty that Erinvale says I am. I just know in my heart Sorey accepts me and wouldn’t wish anything but my happiness and contentment. I cannot even explain why… but that is how he makes me feel… and I cannot deny that those feelings give me reason to consider the idea of marriage with him as something like… a child’s fond and innocent wish… like a fairy tale that seems almost too good to be true…”

“I pray not that it becomes too good and therefore untrue. Nothing is perfect in this world, for every good thing that comes always has its better. But if it be any comfort, I do believe that great men are only led by even greater men, hence, we have a saying in Erinvale, if you wish to find a hero, ask a great man who his friends are.”

Alisha hid a silvery laugh behind her hand. “So you are now on Mikleo’s side, are you?”

Maltran looked a little uncomfortable. “He charms the eye far more than your Prince. If only he is more manly, he would be to my taste.”

“He—he’s only eighteen! That’s ten years—”

“Tut, tut, Alisha, no woman must be so bold as to speak of an adult woman’s most guarded secret. Her age.”

Alisha suddenly raises a clenched fist, her eyes lighting up. “I feel women are entitled to the same standards, do you not? Neither age nor beauty should keep us from achieving our goals.”

“I agree. Women are creatures of infinite wisdom, grace and beauty. The standards by means of
Alisha laughs at that, somehow realizing where her thoughts were leading. Maltran’s comments always have a way of surprising her and putting her at ease. Though she wondered why some part of her needed the kind of reassurance only Maltran could give—or perhaps because Maltran could sense her worries and insecurities far more than she was aware of them herself?

“So I guess we agree on the charms of both princes, at least! I hardly think of Prince Mikleo as a rival in any way... but it does remind me of my own shortcomings. I’d love to rise to the challenge of being the kind of person Sorey can cherish in that way... the kind of person who meets his mind, who knows and values everything he holds dear, everything that makes him the kind of man he is and wants to be…”

“Love is not always a battlefield, Alisha,” Maltran touches her arm slightly, speaking in a hushed voice that has a sisterly tone to it. She is after all not only the princess’s bodyguard and weapons master, but her personal adviser and counsel as well.

Alisha looked flustered all of a sudden. “L-love? I don’t know anything about—”

“Even when you were a little girl you had always been an astute student—competitive almost to a fault. You won’t settle for anything less than perfect but you are likewise modest in acknowledging your strengths and accepting praise. But this time, winning the battle no longer depends on beating down every opponent that blocks the path to your goal. When it comes to wanting a man’s affections, all you need is to find your own strength and let him see it, so that he can see you the way you see yourself, and love you the same way… To be honest, Prince Sorey should be an easy conquest for a princess with so much in herself to admire.”

“I—I swear you’re doing everything you can to make me even more nervous Maltran! I feel that you are amused by it!”

"I would not even deny that, Princess, just as I cannot deny that all your worries spring from wanting to conquer Prince Sorey. Though I find a lot of qualities wanting in him, I cannot disagree with your taste entirely. He is a handsome specimen, if I may use the term, by far superior to anyone else we’ve laid our eyes on.”

Alisha felt the heat really rising to her face this time. “I’m afraid I’m not as keen as a truly mature woman is in observing such distinctions.”

Maltran raised an eyebrow at that, as if daring the princess to be honest. “Should I recall, Alisha, the way your eyes sparkled whenever he called you by your name? Or the way you sighed at every comment he made though it be as trivial as naming an obscure herb or flower, or classifying specimens of rock and stone? Or the way you stole glances at his profile when you thought he wasn’t looking?”

Alisha laughed behind her hand, but it sounded even more awkward and nervous than before. “I should remind myself that there are no secrets that a princess may keep to herself for too long.”

“I’ll say ‘aye’ to that and let these lips be sealed.”

“O-----)O(-----O

“I knew I’d find you here…”
Mikleo bristled at the sound of that voice, but the fear that came to him was not of desperation or shame but of absolute surprise. He decided to wait until the palace got their hands full with guests coming from every royal house and family around Kreveldor who had been invited to grace the engagement ball. Finding the host and main attraction of that event just a few feet away, trailing his steps along a dark alley that supposedly leads to a less guarded exit along the east wall of the castle grounds was just not what he had bothered to include in his list of surprises while planning his escape.

Even now he couldn’t decide how to react. And that was why he paused in mid-step in wordless response to the intrusion, then shuffled back to his former pace. He could tell from the sound of the footsteps behind him though, that the figure stopped in his tracks and probably expected him to do the same.

Ignoring everything else, Mikleo pushed his feet to move though they somehow felt heavier this time.

“H-hey, Mikleo, stop ignoring me, will you!”

Sorey felt his chest tighten when Mikleo took another step without as much as looking at him.

"C'mon, don't tell me I have to give a royal order just to make you stop!"

Mikleo winced. “Good grief, can’t you tell I’m avoiding this conversation?”

Sorey was suddenly in front of him, arms spread wide. “Look, whatever your reason is, I'm sorry... I'm sorry if I made you angry, I'm sorry if I... if I got us into trouble, I didn’t mean to, I was just doing my best to protect-”

Mikleo shook his head. "No, that's not it. It was nothing like that at all. Honestly."

The reassuring denial did nothing to lessen Sorey's concern. "Then just tell me what's wrong, Mikleo! You know I'll always listen... I don't always agree or understand, but I always try, you know that."

Mikleo backed to a corner, at the doorstep of an abandoned shed with a broken lock that was well hidden under a wide awning. The slight movement was a distraction, prompting Sorey to look up and assess their surroundings. Above them, completely obscuring the light of the moon, was a tent-like, tattered overhanging connected to a ramshackle rooftop of cluttered bricks. From the wide curve of the doorframe to the broad span of the awning, Sorey guessed that the shed must be one of several, semi-private, waiting shelters built around the inner walls to serve as resting areas for merchants and common visitors coming in through the east gate with animals and supplies. Reports of banditry taking place more often on this side of the castle walls, however, led to the gate's permanent closure a few years ago as a public entry and exit point.

Since then, only light travelers taking the east route to the outlying fields and grazing pastures are given special permission to use it as a back door.

With continued disuse, this side of the wall, along with the structural supports and practical conveniences built around it, has fallen into abandon and disrepair. Even the roads and alleys became tight corridors that do not allow even smaller, two-wheeler carts and wagons to pass. But having tried sneaking outside the palace on more than a few occasions, both he and Mikleo know pretty well that a secret passageway under one of the warehouses nearby grants easy access through the gate. With every sentinel preoccupied with guests coming through the main gates, taking this chance to try an escape would definitely have better chances of success than any other.
With Sorey daring to follow him this far out, Mikleo’s instinct was to avoid the sliver of light streaming from a flickering gas lamp at the corner where the alley turns into an even narrower graveled path, leading to a blind street of abandoned shelters and storehouses. But even in the light of that weak, sputtering flame, he could make out the deep, navy-blue jacket with red and gold trimmings, the wide, white sash and white breeches Sorey was wearing for the ball, no doubt. It was hard to ignore how it complements those striking green eyes that, in rare moments such as these, looked serious and intimidating.

Mikleo looked away, suddenly feeling self-conscious. “Sorey, are you starting a fight at a time like this? Don’t tell me you came in your best suit just to pick a fight?”

“I’ve been so worried, Mikleo! You weren’t in your room when I checked, and you didn’t even join me for dinner, and you even left your tea—”

"Sheesh, Sorey, can you stop being so dense! Do you think I’d be sneaking out if I wanted to be found? Besides...” Mikleo squeezes his shoulders tight involuntarily, as if he was suddenly cold. "You shouldn’t even be here. You should be with Princess Alish—”

Suddenly, Sorey’s hands were clamped on his shoulders. Mikleo found himself staring straight into those mesmerizing, summer green eyes. Their emerald depths glistened, smoldered, as if ready to melt anything beneath their warm, unflinching gaze. “I don’t want to think about that right now.”

Mikleo looked sideways, turning his chin up. “Well, I suggest you think about that right now if you don’t want to worry about it later...”

“Are you running away just because that bastard—I mean, it’s Malfus, isn’t it?” Sorey peered into his face, green irises blown and trembling, obviously hurt and angry and in a panic. Mikleo felt his grasp tighten around his shoulder. "Did he come to your room? Did he try to-if he does anything stupid, all you have to do is tell me-"

Mikleo shook his head. “You keep talking like that, and I’d have every reason to run away, believe me! I think you’re forgetting how important Malfus is from hereon. He’s not someone you’d cross swords with, not when Bishop Heldalf could—”

Sorey was furious. “To hell with that, Mikleo! He’s—he’s not someone you should even worry about-not in front of me, all right!”

"What do you mean-" Mikleo’s eyes widened. “Hey, it’s nothing like that!”

Sorey felt his chest rising as if ready to explode with all those pent-up feelings of uncertainty eating at his heart. “So then, what is it exactly, ’cause I’m just dying to know!”

“Sheesh, the way you talk, Sorey, you make it sound like I’ve just switched sides and decided to be best friends with Malfus.”

"I don't want you saying his name if you can help it. But more than that, running away isn't an excuse for punishing yourself, Mikleo. I won't let you."

"What the-Sorey, it's not like I’m some snotty, little brat running away from home! Besides, if I remember correctly, someone did ask if I feel like running away."

“Hell, why are you quoting me all of a sudden? I don’t think that’s how I even put it!”

“As if that even matters now!”
Sorey flinched. “Mikleo…”

“Look,” Mikleo stepped back, barely slipping away from Sorey’s tentative touch as he reached out desperately to close the distance between them or to ease the misunderstanding that was tearing them even farther apart. “When you asked if I'm happy being here, if I wasn't tired of it all—I—I didn’t want to sound like some spoiled, ungrateful kid who forgets the reason he's made it this far. This place has been my second home... the only place I've ever really known all my life. Thanks to everyone, mostly you, I've known what kindness and concern feels like... what it feels to be loved...”

Sorey’s chest heaved as his arm went up to reach for Mikleo again. “Gods, if that's how you really feel, then why are you—”

“Sorey... I know I've no right to criticize the same family that made me what I am... not when I was a complete nobody to begin with...”

Sorey let his hand ball into a fist. “Shut up!”

Mikleo punched him on the shoulder. "You shut up!"

Something in Mikleo's voice made Sorey regret his sudden outburst. He caught the hand that touched him lightly, wanting nothing but to be allowed to hold it longer. Without thinking, he lifted Mikleo's hand to his cheek, letting it graze his lips for a second before pulling it to his chest. It made Mikleo stop and stare at him, violet eyes questioning and confused.

Sorey exhaled, feeling suddenly tired and torn between holding on and letting go.

Mikleo pulled his hand away, and Sorey was suddenly too embarrassed not to let go. His lips tried to work on something more responsive and thoughtful, but all he could think of was a vague apology.

"I-I'm sorry, that didn't come out the way I intended it. And I'm not apologizing about touching you like that."

Mikleo's eyes widened. Although Sorey felt no apology would ever be enough, he tried to brush off the awkward pause with that, but the false cheer in his smile was just too painful to hold, and Sorey knew his voice sounded just as guilty and miserable.

He let his gaze linger on Mikleo's profile, suddenly wishing he could do just that... just gaze at him quietly whenever he felt like it. If only Mikleo would look at him too, would let him catch even a tiny flicker of emotion in those pale, amethyst eyes.

Mikleo felt he needed to say something, anything, or his own feelings might overtake them both. Besides for Sorey to look at him so intensely, it was enough to make him swell with a furious, frightening heat. "Look, Sorey, you don't have to apologize for anything. It's me... I was way out of line there. Besides, this isn't even about you... or Malfus..."

Sorey grinned, but it was obviously weak and half-hearted. "Yeah, maybe I should get over myself, huh? But even if that's true, I think you're forgetting what Jiji said once..."

Mikleo shot him a look of surprise. They both loved and respected the same stern but doting tutor. "Which one?"

"As Jiji said, people are not made by others,” Sorey said gently, as tenderly as he could, knowing how fragile and volatile Mikleo's stubborn pride could be. Besides, despite the relentless bantering and teasing between them that often get out of hand and start their nasty fights, Sorey is well aware that Mikleo is someone to respect for what he is. Isn’t that one of the reasons Mikleo stands out
among everyone he’s ever known or met? Sorey knows there is absolutely no way he would find someone like Mikleo, someone so close to being just…

Perfect. Even his imperfections seem to be part of that too...

Sorey exhaled, trying to find the words to soothe Mikleo’s ruffled feelings. Not that he could afford so much honesty at the moment. But he’s willing to try. He’s willing to say what’s in his heart if it would make Mikleo stay.

“Sorey… you do know I’m not going to change my mind about this, right?”

“I know but…” Sorey felt his heart race, almost as if it would leap out of his chest any minute. But he tried to steady himself, to give himself a few seconds to consider his words. He looked up at the shattered rooftop, caught a tiny glimpse of the moon briefly before a gentle wind blew against the overhanging, covering the sky from view. When he shifted his gaze, he found the same lavender eyes peeking at the tears of the tattered canopy above them, trying to catch a flicker of light from the moon.

The gaze was too beautiful it makes his knees weak just watching it like that.

“Mikleo,” he started, though his throat felt parched and his hand felt restless and awkward dangling uselessly at his side. He ignored this. “Look, I know it sounds weird saying this but... who you are right now... to me... that's got nothing to do with you and me being royalty, whatever that means. I know we don't have much of a choice when it comes to that... living this kind of life... bound by duties... with almost everyone around us wishing half the time we're dead. But even if that's how it is... I know you're different—different from the rest of us in a good way, different in a way that makes you special—everything anyone could ever hope to have as… as a family… and... best friend…’’

Sorey paused, amazed at how he could lie right there and then—lie about his real feelings despite the truth in everything else. “So if we made you feel as if we’re taking you for granted, if I ever made you feel that you’re just anybody, I’m saying right now that you’re not!”

As soon as those words slipped out, Sorey felt his skin breaking in cold sweat. His mind kept screaming those words he has hidden for so long, but the fear, the uncertainty, it was choking him up, swallowing back those feelings that wanted to break free.

Sorey could only groan inwardly at his cowardice. “And that’s why I can’t—” He struggled to say the words in a way that wouldn’t frighten Mikleo away or think he’s being strange.

Mikleo's eyes fluttered, looking wary, almost nervous.

Sorey took a step toward Mikleo, fists clenched, his mind in tatters. Right now, he couldn't hide his real fears, his emotions, which were rising like a tide. He held Mikleo with a panicked and desperate gaze. “I won't let you leave like this, Mikleo! You can't just go like nothing here matters to you anymore!”

Mikleo stared at him dumbstruck. “Who said I needed your permission?”

Sorey squared his shoulders stiffly—almost like a real prince. “No matter what, I’m not giving you one, Mikleo—and I'm commanding you as Kreveldor's-!”

“How dare you, Sorey!” Mikleo huffed in breathless heat. “Emperor or not, no one commands me, and we’re not arguing about this—”
Another huff and Mikleo's brows twitched. Sorey grinned. "You know, you're almost right about
that—there's no way I could ask anything of you, even if I become Overlord..."

Mikleo blinked back his surprise. "You're not going to order my arrest, are you?"

"Hell no," Sorey chuckled. "... ’cause I’m going with you!"

For a minute, or what almost felt like an entire century, Mikleo just stared at him, speechless.
"Seriously, you’re out of your mind!"

“That makes two of us.”

“Hey, I have my reasons!”

“I have mine. Wanna know what they are?”

Mikleo’s eyes drooped but his cheeks were flushed with the slightest color. “No. And besides, I
didn’t say you could tag along!”

“You always say that, but you end up letting me come with you anyway.”

“That was when we were kids. How many times do I have to tell you to grow up—”

“Hey, I am taller if you haven't noticed! Besides, we could always settle things in a duel if you
like...”

Mikleo glared at him. “When you look like you just ran away from your own wedding? Seriously,
your Majesty... I hate to get your fancy clothes all dirty.”

“I know I look dashingly handsome, but I could still fight, you know.”

Mikleo hit his lower rib. “Get real. Even a beggar would look good in that fancy suit.”

“Oh yeah?” Sorey rubbed his chest with a slight wince, though it didn’t even hurt the way he
expected. To some extent, he was happy Mikleo did that. It changed the course of the conversation,
steering it away from dangerous waters that could just as easily drown them both.

Not that the danger wasn’t worth the risk. But for now, Sorey was willing to wait and take his
chances on letting Mikleo grow on his own in that direction.

He sighed, eyeing Mikleo critically. “To be honest, we’d look great together... though you can't
looking more like a princess for a change.”

“Say that again, Sorey, and I’d punch your face even if it gets you dirty!”

Sorey gave him a sly look. “Fine, you always take my jokes seriously. The truth is, that hood seems
like a useful disguise. You think I should grab one? I do look kinda conspicuous the way I am right
now.”

Mikleo folded his arms across his chest stiffly, giving him a stern, no non-sense look. “I didn’t bring
an extra set ’cause I wasn’t expecting company?”

“Well then, Mikleo, guess you’re lucky I’m full of surprises!”

Mikleo ignored his smile, looking sideways with a frown. “Yeah, lucky me. But seriously, I travel
light. No extra cargo allowed. Even if it happens to be a prince.”
“I’m not going to let you leave without me.”

“Sorey, I don’t think any threats from you will work on me.”

“No, never, you know I’ll never do that. So how about a promise then? Will that be all right?” Sorey breathed in a hushed voice, eyes softening as he held Mikleo’s gaze under the moon’s flickering stare. He knows his voice sounded strange, like a choked sob that was desperately begging. But at that serene, strangely sublime moment that stretched like an eternity between them, he couldn't care less.

Mikleo was standing in front of him, cloaked in the blue-blood moonlight that comes only once in a hundred years. In the ethereal light of that ethereal moon, Mikleo looked flawlessly perfect, so beautiful that something in Sorey's gut stirs, making him shrug away any doubt, any uncertainty that has been eating at him for the longest time.

“As I was about to say… I go where you go, all right?”

This time it was Mikleo who caught him by the shoulder, grasping him with a warmth that summoned back those urges *where* he least wanted them.

Mikleo looked down, anywhere but straight into Sorey's soft, unflinching gaze. “You know I would always be grateful to your family, Sorey… for giving me a home when nobody else did. And that’s why... that's why I won’t let you waste your time on this! Being who you are, it’s your duty to stay alive, to keep those raving lunatics off the throne and to do what’s right, no matter the cost...”

Sorey flinched this time, fingers aching to touch something, someone. So near and yet… and yet… invisible walls neither of them wanted kept Mikleo beyond reach. More than that, something in the way Mikleo said those words cut him like a dagger, making him angry, hurt, and confused.

Sorey clenched his fist until his knuckles were dead-white. “Seriously, Mikleo, is that all you think of me? Do you really think there is anything I want more than being with-"

“It’s not what you want that counts, is it?” Mikleo breathed, as if in agony over his own words. “It’s what you’d settle for that matters.”

Sorey unclenched his fist. "Look, stop thinking of me as all good, all right? I'm not so pure... not as noble as you seem to think I am!"

Mikleo felt his body shudder at the slightest suggestion. Sorey being less pure is just... impossible. He has known him all his life. Sorey is purer than the driven snow... his smile, his boyish laughter, his innocent love of things both mysterious and profound...

Sorey saw the incredulity in Mikleo's eyes giving him away. Although Mikleo's unwavering faith in him was admirable, it was also frustrating. "I swear, I have my own life... my own... needs. Everybody does. I-I don't even care if it sounds selfish or stupid!"

Mikleo wants to believe he understands that, but probably not in the way Sorey expects him to. For him, the only thing important is this: Sorey is meant for better things, things that could be nothing less than extraordinary. And what’s more, there is no such thing as another king to take Sorey’s place. If he needed to march across every border and battlefield to defend Sorey's empire, he would. He would get his hands stained, trade his soul for all the things he couldn't help but resent... war, politics, hypocritical alliances... if that is what is needed to give Sorey everything he rightfully deserves.

The kingdom, the power, the glory, the entire world if need be. That's how important Sorey is because... Sorey is Sorey.
His Sorey. There is no one else like him. And there are greater things out there waiting for him... greater than all these shallow childhood fantasies they have both been obsessing with that could easily be outgrown in time.

Mikleo regarded Sorey's stubborn gaze and shook his head. "Don't be a fool. In the end, we'd face these regrets and realize they're nothing more than childish conceits... careless wishes... things better left behind, like memories of what we used to be…"

Sorey felt like crying, clenching his fist uselessly. "That sounds... almost like... giving up..."

Mikleo looked down at his feet. "Giving in isn't. Besides, I'm sure the world wouldn't hurt to have a weirdo like you for an emperor. So it's not like you have to lose that part of you that makes you the kind of person I would always—I mean—being what you are..."

"Please say something nice for a change before I kill myself."

Mikleo almost smiled at that light banter, but he kept his eyes averted. In this strange kind of mood, he's not ready to meet that soulful gaze that almost always seems to stir the most vulnerable, irrational part of him. Especially when some things meant to be said seem more difficult to say as they are, even without such distractions in the way.

"Don't go waste your time on silly misadventures with a loser like me, Sorey... 'cause I'll never ever forgive you for that. Consider that as a promise as well...”

With that, Mikleo lets his hands dangle back to his side. As ugly as it sounds, there is no other explanation that can make the truth more truthful than it really is, when everything about him can be summed up so pitifully. After all, no profound logic can excuse the obvious.

"No, you’re wrong about that, I’m sure you are," Sorey breathed deeply, daring to take a step closer, waiting for Mikleo to flinch or pull away.

But Mikleo didn’t. Sorey pulled in his breath, swallowed deeply and reached out to touch with one gloved fingertip the smooth, silvery sheen of flawless skin on Mikleo’s cheek that made his breath stutter, that made Sorey want to drop to his knees just imagining how it would feel beneath his naked fingers...

Lavender eyes widened, but Mikleo stayed where he was. Sorey pulled him close, brushing their foreheads together. Quietly, gently, he stroked Mikleo's cheek, feeling it yield to the warm press of his thumb, his trembling, hesitant caress.

"I... I want you..." he breathed desperately, yearningly, unable to keep the frustrated longing in his voice. "I want you beside me, next to me... I don't understand how or why... but... there's no way I'd let anyone take your place, Mikleo..."

Mikleo froze beneath his fingertips. "S-Sorey!"

But Sorey didn't relax his hold, not with Mikleo this close to him, so achingly close. "And I won't let you push me away either! 'Cause it hurts like hell when you do. It breaks me more than anything I've ever felt and... and it's unbearable. It... just... hurts... so bad... when you think it's the end of everything... when you don't... even care about me at all...”

Mikleo froze as fingers pulled his chin up, lifting it to the light of the moon. But more than that...

Lips moved, slow and hesitant and questioning. Sorey tilted his head and dipped his mouth to drink in the sweetness, wondering how their mouths fill each other so well, how their lips seem to know
the ritual that has never been explored outside their imagination. And in that sinking, aching moment when despair and desire felt like a giant wave of hopeless resolve, Mikleo let their lips touch again and again...

Sorey's tongue was slipping in and out of his eager mouth to caress with a tentative almost nervous gentleness. Mikleo could taste all of him, wondering how Sorey managed it, drinking, languishing wet and warm with a quiet hunger that was making Mikleo weak with need. Sorey's kiss was warm, deep and tender, filling him with an urgent yearning that seemed just as frighteningly intense as those desperate fingers that were making his head spin and his body throb impatiently with every stroke and heated caress.

Sorey groaned breathlessly, fingers beginning to play with the ribbon around Mikleo's throat. Mikleo felt the knot around his collar give way, felt his tunic loosen as trembling fingers tugged at the buttons awkwardly, followed by wet lips that teased his burning skin.

Another pull, this time by the waist, hurriedly led Mikleo out of the halo of light and into the soft shadows that fell all around them. Sorey's languid eyes smoldered like liquid fires as fingers moved in a slow rhythm down Mikleo's collarbone, trailing with a shiver further down his waist.

Sorey's breathing has already become ragged as he pushed Mikleo beyond the doorstep of the abandoned shed behind them and into the darkness of its single, empty room. Their surroundings mattered little but still, Sorey couldn't help worrying about their safety. "Mikleo, is... is... this all right?"

Mikleo couldn't respond as his chest hurt with a heavy, pounding nervousness. Slowly, with careful ease, Sorey began to unbutton the cloak fastened below Mikleo's collarbone, letting it drop as his other hand moved to untie the remaining strings on the lower part of Mikleo's tunic.

Mikleo stuttered Sorey's name, Sorey taking that as the affirmation he needed to continue.

Mikleo heard Sorey groan as the tunic partially slipped off his shoulder, heard Sorey mumble an apology as his mouth grasped the exposed skin, sucking softly then more eagerly with wet, fervent kisses. Mikleo tilted his head to the other side, breathing in Sorey's scent as he felt Sorey's teeth graze the crook of his neck, trembling fingers snaking down his back to fumble with the clasps of the belt at the back of his waist.

Mikleo felt Sorey press himself harder, felt his urgent need grinding against his thighs hesitantly at first as if to gauge his reaction. When Mikleo clasped his tunic with clenched fingers, anchoring himself on Sorey's shoulders against that unfamiliar pressure moving along his groin, Sorey abruptly broke the kiss, a long, sobbing moan escaping him as he gazed at Mikleo, pupils dark and blown. "Mikleo... I've been waiting... and waiting... and wanting you so much..."

Mikleo couldn't say anything. Nothing so wrong felt so right as he pulled Sorey's hand down toward the remaining knots on his tunic. Sorey worked on them more urgently this time, moving his mouth across every inch of newly-exposed skin. His mouth trailed kisses along Mikleo's collarbone and further down, reaching those pink buds that swelled and became taut as soon as his lips nipped them, scattering pink marks around the sensitive center. He gazed at Mikleo with a questioning look when he heard him make a soft, whimpering sound, unaware that he had violently disposed of his gloves to the sides while they were kissing, and now his hands had begun to roam and touch those places too intimate to name, causing Mikleo to flinch against the feel of his raw skin.

Sorey reached down with those urgent fingers, coaxing his way beneath tight undergarments as he bent down to put a kiss on the curve of Mikleo's nape. Mikleo moaned against Sorey's chest, fists curling tightly around Sorey's neck as hot breath sent shivers down his spine. Mikleo gasped as
Sorey cupped that part of him, making him burn and arch shamelessly into the kneading, impatient caress of those pliant fingers that stroked him relentlessly.

Sorey groaned with a choking sound, pulling back only to catch his breath. "Just like this I want... to touch you... and taste you... and do all sorts of things with you... but if you think I'm just like Malfus... that I'm just-"

Mikleo shivered as he leaned into Sorey, aching to bridge the awful gap between their bodies as if every second that he couldn't feel Sorey's touch was hurting him. "Sorey I... I need you please..."

The breathless voice in which Mikleo said that gave him the reassurance he had been waiting for. Sorey pulled Mikleo up against him, letting their bodies arch against each other's taut and aching needs. But the weakness that was taking over seemed more urgent than real, and slowly, without planning to, they began to lower themselves onto the cold, earthen floor, on the two cloaks that have just been tossed there carelessly and in haste, their mouths and hips parting only for the briefest of seconds before grinding back into that irresistible embrace that left them needing and wanting for more...

Above the darkest shadows that shrouded everything with its infinite, palpable gaze, a cold, blue blood moon wanes. Its silver gleam scattered everywhere with a promise filled with the haunting echoes of a broken, uncertain future.

A future of unsung hopes sealing two fates forever.
A K/night to Remember

Chapter Summary

At the start of their new life together, Sorey and Mikleo meet someone who might just change their luck for better or worse.

Chapter Notes

Just a reminder, this fic's title before was "Broken Pieces." I changed it after finding out that dozens of fics have the same title already... sorry... I also revised the tags to update you on what future chapters might have (Plot, what plot? Kkkk...).

I know it took me so long to post an update for this, but I do hope you guys welcome this new chapter! It's not much, the plot thickens a little here, some new characters, and some info on Sergei as well... I just hope you won't be disappointed. And yeah, I enjoy writing so much I can't stop. I still have to update the others and I'm so slow... (always...)

Anyway, Happy Holidays everyone! Sorry for not joining the SorMik Advent Calendar... I don't think I'm worthy or ready... (my imagination hyperventilates) and I think I enjoy reading the contributions more than writing my own. I tend to overthink writing prompts and well, I'm a disaster with prompts. But the contributions are all amazing and it's good the fans really still care... ^_^ (yeah, I'm being over dramatic, I'm so happy people care so much and keep other fans interested!)

Also, for those who take time to read my fics, thanks so much, guys! You inspire me! Your kudos and comments are much, much appreciated! ^_^

DISCLAIMER: The original story behind Tales of Zestiria and Tales of Zestiria the X, to Bandai-Namco and Ufotable respectively. Since the writer makes no profit from this labor of love and, in fact, struggles against shame and hopeless obsession every time she has to write an additional chapter for her self-pleasure and that of others like her, she respectfully makes a plea against any law suit. :D

Obsession has no shame, by the way. You’ve been warned. ^_^

What your heart holds within

Is kindness and pain

Your stars are tiny teardrops
Gods, am I really ready for this?

The question seemed surprising enough, but for some strange reason it wasn't at all unfamiliar. It felt more like a slight ripple, a tingling sensation from some memory that had long been suppressed. So it was more frustrating than anything when Mikleo found his inner voice quivering with the same doubtful anticipation the moment his back touched the ground.

Even without being so aware of what was going on, he couldn't help but notice Sorey's careful attentiveness, the way he made sure Mikleo was lying down on the spot sparsely covered by their thin cloaks, which he had thrown aside, it seemed, for that very purpose. Of course, the situation they were in was hardly ideal, hardly what Mikleo had in mind imagining his first time with Sorey. Still,
Mikleo found himself admitting that nothing about it was entirely uncomfortable either. Even the breeze blowing against the fringes of the tattered canopy that substituted for a roof above them was hardly unpleasant, though the noise reminded him of a startled pair of wings. To be honest, he found such small details, peculiar in themselves, somewhat comforting because right now any distraction would do to keep him from showing Sorey how much he had wanted—how much he had embarrassingly fantasized—being this way with him.

He could no longer deny how much and how long he had craved for Sorey’s attention, those accidental touches—a slip of the hand over his shoulder, an involuntary tightening of fingers around his waist, an occasional brushing of naked arms and legs when they still bathed together—that have never failed to send crazy quivers running up and down his body, as if it was a harp being played upon by urgent fingers. Despite the open indifference with which he had treated Sorey’s more transparent intimations, he would admit he was hopelessly attracted to him, to every manly part of him, both physically and emotionally.

However, saying all these things inside his head is one thing; confessing them now, admitting them now by gazing back into those deep, emerald pools that openly expressed how deeply he was loved and desired is an entirely different matter. For a moment, a lingering peace hung between them as they simply gazed at each other, seemingly content to languish in each other’s presence; then Mikleo felt Sorey’s fingers move tentatively over his chest, then to his waist, stopping at the leather belts tightly wound around it.

He remembered being embarrassed the first time it was presented for him to wear and were it not for Sorey’s attentive glances during those times he would not have had the nerve to even consider fitting it. The covering originally served as a substitute for the heavier coat of mail that knights typically wore beneath their armor for protection. But with his naturally light physique, a mail shirt made of fine steel would still be too heavy and self-defeating, making the heavy, leather corset a somewhat awkward, unconventional, yet, practical alternative.

Now that he could feel Sorey’s fingers move urgently across his leather bodice, Mikleo thought how vulnerable he really was, even as those same fingers hesitated before getting to work on the protective bindings that tightly secured his tunic and breeches.

Involuntarily, his hand reached out for Sorey’s, holding it fast with a shiver. Sorey lifted it up to his lips to kiss, eyes languid with smoldering desire.

“I’ll be gentle…”

Mikleo felt his insides quiver at the tender hush of that whisper. He let out a sigh. “I trust you…”

Sorey leaned forward and gave his lips a soft, lingering kiss. “I’m sort of nervous too…”

“Not half as nervous as I am…”

“I-I still can’t believe I’m touching you right now… It feels like a dream.”

“If you’re ready for this—”

Sorey looked down at the prominent swell tightening his breeches as if to point out the evidence. “I’ve been ready and aching for the longest time, Mikleo… but it’s all right, I’m trying to get used to it. Besides, I’ve waited so long I guess a little while longer isn’t much… and… feeling you, touching you is special enough,” Sorey breathed in his ear, his voice thick with impatience but warm and gentle like a slow current. “I guess I’m not so good at this, and I’m so needy I think I’m going to pass out if I don’t—I mean—I’m sorry, there’s no rush I just… I want you, Mikleo... I've wanted you since
I've known you...

Mikleo knew how honest Sorey’s mind and body were from the way Sorey’s breath hotly beat down his skin whenever his lips grazed him. They both knew they wanted this... wanted it urgently as if they’ve been seized by a hunger so real and raw it couldn’t be satisfied by anything merely imagined or fantasized.

Sorey’s fingers went back to work through every buckle of that coarse leather bodice that hugged Mikleo’s intimate parts so jealously, so protectively.

Not that that kind of protection would have worked anyway with Sorey’s deft fingers pulling out each leather strap from its hook gently but with accurate precision as if Mikleo would break should he use just a bit more speed and pressure. Mikleo almost wanted to complain whether Sorey intended to torture him with slow embarrassment. Or was he actually giving him time to think about what he was doing in mid-process?

Mikleo hated that possibility. True, being a bit older than Sorey makes him more responsible for what is about to happen, but that is not exactly a refreshing thought right now. He wanted this, gods, he would be lying to deny it even if he could come up with a million reasons why this shouldn’t be happening at all. Not least of these reasons is the plain, simple fact that Sorey is the heir to the greatest empire in the history of the western world while he’s...

Well, he’s just Mikleo... a prince by gratuitous title, by nothing more than an act of charity that makes him an unworthy liege. Needless to say he’s no more related to Sorey or any noble blood as birds are related to bees. To act like he deserved his attention, his intimate affections as a lover equal in worth and status is a notch away from either reckless greed or self-serving madness.

And insanity is never a joking matter. The King’s Own could conveniently order his detention in some remote island asylum out there to keep him away from the crown prince, and such unhappy prospects wouldn’t even be shocking. Sexual taboos are unforgivable even among commoners who may be more lax on social rules, so the slightest suspicion regarding this side of his and Sorey’s relationship will surely be met with absolute disgust.

Mikleo almost shuddered, suddenly reminded of the strangest circumstances that bound him to Sorey from the very beginning. He has heard of superstitions, tales told with a grain of truth regarding how individuals marked as offerings and sacrifices to the gods bear some indelible sign, a peculiar quality that comes with their unique personal histories. Tragic experiences, mysterious origins, uncanny luck, talent, or wisdom had been interpreted by the ancients as ways in which the gods separate such sacrificial beings from the rest of the world, like keeping the chaff from the grain. Such tell-tale signs were believed to be apparent only to those who have the eye, the prophetic ability to see through all kinds of foreshadowing, to interpret the signs and symbols portending calamity. Prophets and mystics have supposedly used these abilities to ostracize such beings... children of misfortune, harbingers of disaster who must be kept far away from anyone who may be influenced by their power and charisma. They believed that by eliminating these evil omens, they could protect human history and civilization from the interference of the gods.

But that's not all. There were rumors that Heldalf had performed an ancient Rite of Purification on the day he, Mikleo, was presented to the King and Queen as an infant. Those rites where supposed to cleanse him... make him pure and worthy of that place he was to inherit as the servant of the future king. Adoptive princes can never hope to succeed or acquire a crown prince’s title, the laws of Kreveldor make that certain. So the real reason children are adopted, the real reason they are subjected to such rites, is to prepare them for their real purpose... the dark, secret meaning of their existence.
Mikleo suddenly felt his skin run cold. Didn't all the rumors claim one single truth? Adoptive children are brought into the royal fold not to put substance to personal or moral convictions but to become an instrument to something more urgent and, likewise, starkly menacing.

Their purpose is to absorb the evil *mana*, the malevolent curse that infects the royal bloodline and keeps it from begetting children. And by distilling all curses that keep the blessings away, the King and Queen must have believed that he, Mikleo, may likewise carve a path for the true heir, for Sorey's holy coming.

But realistically, with or without that superstition to make things seem more mysterious than they already are, Mikleo is aware there are many other repercussions he should worry about. For in truth, he could also be executed for political reasons that may sidestep the scandal of being condemned for incest and seduction. It would be so much more convenient for the King's Own to charge him with kidnapping and treason to avoid needless questions... any revelation that may besmirch the nobility and Kreveldor's good name. And there is no need to overstate the significance of Sorey's marriage to Princess Alisha either. That can be used as an easy resource to paint him as the traitorous snake, the seduction that attempted to lure the crown prince from his rightful destiny and throw the empire into chaos.

It is beyond commonsense, after all, that political marriages form the backbone of dynastic power and etch onto stone the continuity of the royal lineage. Furthermore, if news regarding the escalating conflicts between the northern and the southern alliances held any grain of truth, Sorey and Alisha’s union should be a brilliant political strategy—one which could reassuringly turn the tides of history in favor of the western world once more.

For to bind the fates of the two wealthiest, strongest, most influential kingdoms in the continent—Kreveldor and Erinvale—at a time when there is much talk about peace treaties and diplomatic missions to the north means only one thing: that quite the contrary, someone up there is contemplating war... a large-scale war that would see the clash of the two most powerful empires in human history. And there is no further need to belabor an open secret—that Kreveldor desperately needs Erinvale’s support. Not that Kreveldor would ever admit its dependence on any other power including that of its allies.

Perhaps so because the stability of an empire is so deeply engraved in the soul of its history that doing anything less than what its reputation proclaims would be interpreted as weakness and likewise, an invitation for old and new enemies to rise up.

But of course, and Mikleo knows this... reality is altogether different and no less harsh than the laws that bind it to the whims and caprices of the powerful few. It is no leap of faith to imagine that whoever is manipulating the throne to make good its promise of war knew far too much to deny the state of its dwindling resources, its depleted coffers which have always been in desperate need of replenishment. Whoever is controlling the hands of the treasury or influencing the King’s Own to approve even more stringent tax collection laws knew that the outward show of opulence is exactly what it is: a facade meant to staunch disturbing news of unrest, instability, and discontent already simmering within the populace.

War means military campaigns... contributions from those who can afford a chance to carve a place for himself in the empire's long, tireless history.

It means money... money to realign political alliances, make new friends and even newer enemies...

Mikleo could only sigh mentally at the implications. Maybe in the future Helmdall might even thank him for letting Sorey jeopardize his own engagement. The invasion of the north is probably the longest-running public secret that has kept the kingdom divided between raising funds to support the
Mikleo could feel Sorey's subtle touch stimulating him, making him shiver in breathless anticipation. But he could not even let it distract him. So many problems are waiting to be solved by the next overlord... the war, the dwindling treasury, the corruption within the King’s Own and the church that, without a doubt, must be conspiring with forces unknown to broaden its political influence. How can he even let Sorey handle all of that without worrying about his future, about enemies lurking in the shadows ready and willing to snatch that fragile power away from him the moment he lets his guard down?

“Something on your mind?” Sorey’s voice broke through his thoughts like cold water through fire.

“Erinvale… and the war. It’s all connected, isn’t it?”

Sorey took a few seconds to answer, caught between unbuckling the last of the belts that held Mikleo’s corset in place and giving room to such thoughts.

“There’s not much we can do about it if the King’s Own and the Council make a unanimous decision.”

“Erinvale occupies a third of the Council. If the proper influence can be used to make it vote adversely…”

Sorey leans forward, using his elbow for support so he wouldn’t have to put all his weight on Mikleo. He looks down for a moment, trying his damnest best to focus even with Mikleo’s slightest movements heating him up. “Uh, four out of twelve doesn’t look optimistic if you think about the rest of the Council. Most of them would rather defer to Heldalf’s wishes because of the influence of the Church in those regions that contribute the most taxes.”

“By 'influence' you mean the Order of the Silver Falcons, right?”

Sorey frowns in concentration. “They offer protection across almost every disputed border in the entire continent. I hate to admit it, but somehow the presence of those knights may be one of the reasons the empire’s been able to avoid civil wars and border battles in those places.”

Mikleo sighs. “No wonder Heldalf invests a lot on the Silver Falcons. By making them play bodyguard to the most powerful political clans out there, not only would he be able to collect some sort of loyalty fund for his campaigns, but likewise win such influential people over to his side if such should ever be needed.”

Sorey winces. “Wars definitely need support. I’m sure no one would have the gall to ignore him once he succeeds, and that alone could make him the single most influential man in the kingdom.”

“And he could easily use that to his advantage against anyone, even the Throne.”

“I can’t even begin to imagine it,” Sorey whispers hoarsely, glimpsing the white skin peeking from the front part of Mikleo’s tunic that was parted by the loosening of the belts. He knew stealing furtive glances is rude, but right now, trying to keep his thoughts from straying into those parts of Mikleo that looked enticing to kiss, to touch, to do everything his imagination wanted is just a feat that seems too much even for a future king.

Mikleo frowns in deep thought. “As for Erinvale, even if it claims to be rather neutral, it won’t have any choice but to obey the Treaty of Galahad once the matter is settled. And that means supporting the Church’s campaign if the war pushes through.”
“Not surprising though,” Sorey adds with a regretful sigh. “After all, alliances are what they are
because of such treaties. Even an Overlord’s personal say on the matter wouldn’t count.”

“A *obiter dictum* against the greater *ratio decidendi*. Pretty harsh.”

“Guess you can say that.”

Mikleo pursed his lips, trying to ignore the heat that Sorey’s fingers stimulated as it drew feather-light
circles on the back of his hand. “But what if you and Princess Alisha were to take the reins? I’m sure
there’s enough support behind you two to apply some pressure on those who aren’t as hell-bent on
following whatever Heldalf is plotting. The both of you can launch a campaign to convince—”

Without any warning, Sorey leaned forward and brushed Mikleo’s lips with a soft, lingering kiss.
“Sorry, but the only person I’m desperate enough to convince is you. And it’s not like you’ve ever
given me a chance of winning, at least not yet. I guess I’m not smart enough... or persuasive
enough...”

“Gods, let me remind you that as the crown prince, you’re *not* allowed to admit your faults, all
right?”

“Right, I forgot I have a lot to begin with.”

“Stop it, Sorey! I won’t let you insult yourself either, even if I agree with the insult!”

Sorey laughed, seeing the hot flush on Mikleo’s face. “Sheesh, Mikleo! And here I thought you’d be
nice enough to deny it! But are we going to argue about this all night?”

“Maybe?” Mikleo was almost scowling.

"Hey, what do you mean by *maybe*?"

“If you have to disagree, that is...”

"I don't think I should, should I?" Sorey intertwined their fingers.

"Wise decision," Mikleo huffed.

Sorey felt his heart race. “Can we continue kissing then?”

Something in the tone Sorey used made Mikleo blush even harder as he felt his groin heat up, felt
Sorey’s breath send shivers of nameless pleasure up and down his spine only to pool in that
forbidden space between his thighs.

“Silence means yes...” Sorey playfully nudged their lips together, parting Mikleo’s slightly only to
have himself pull back quickly enough, just when Mikleo arched forward to deepen the kiss.

To say the least, the evasion left Mikleo breathless and visibly annoyed.

“Are you trying to be a tease?” Mikleo asked, more harshly than he would have liked. “That was
flirting, wasn’t it?”

Sorey looked amused as Mikleo’s impatience started wearing thin. For some reason he wanted to see
this side of Mikleo. “Only with you, my love.”

*M-my what?* Mikleo couldn’t hide the irritation and confusion he felt as he continued to frown at
Sorey. “Fine. Maybe we should just forget about this whole ngghh—”
Sorey didn’t let him finish. Unbuckling the last of the belts that kept Mikleo’s leather bodice in place, he proceeded to unbuttoning Mikleo’s breeches with quick, eager pulls, letting the fabric peel away to reveal the swollen heat that had been throbbing against his own feverish skin, against his own rigid cock that had been aching for release.

Speaking of which, Sorey felt his hard, hot erection jolt at the feel of Mikleo’s naked flesh pressed against it. It made him want to grind against that heated peak deep and fast as the last of the buttons gave way between his fingers.

“S-Sorey…” Mikleo moaned in a hushed whisper when he felt Sorey’s fingers around his beating cock. Sorey grasped it at the base, giving it a careful stroke bottom up, repeating the motion with hesitant speed.

“How does it feel?” Sorey asked in a hushed whisper, his voice thick with desire and concern. “Tell me what you feel… like if I’m hurting you or… or if I’m doing it fine.”

Mikleo began panting his name in open sobs. “Sorey, g-gods… gods, that feels… Sorey…”

“W-what? Uh-oh, jus-just tell me…” Sorey himself couldn’t help stuttering as waves of pleasure seeped into him. He could hardly believe he was touching this part of Mikleo—this hot, rigid, most intimate part of him. The experience made him just as hot and heady and reeling with so intense a pleasure that he couldn’t help but become harder and thicker…

Sorey felt his manhood twitch and swell with a delicious ache. He was so hard and thick and needy that it seemed like he was going to burst and spill something…

Mikleo’s eyes were shut tight, but his body strained against Sorey’s touch, taut and aching with need. “I… I want more… much… more… oh, faster…”

Sorey felt his own body become rigid at the unabashed way Mikleo said that. He began to quicken his pace, feeling Mikleo’s shaft tremble as he moved his hand up and down its length. Mikleo opened his eyes as a breathless, panting moan escaped his quivering lips.

“Oh, Sorey… Sorey…”

“I know, I’m… I’m the same…” Sorey groaned as he lowered his other hand toward his own crotch. Mikleo couldn’t help but follow the motion of Sorey’s hand as it disappeared quickly into the depths of Sorey’s breeches. Then realizing what that meant, Mikleo gave a sound of disbelief.

“W-what are you doing?”

Sorey felt his entire body quiver as his hardened erection responded quickly to his touch. “Taking care of myself… ‘cause you’re amazing and can’t… can’t help it.”

Mikleo watched as Sorey’s hand began to stretch the material of the fabric when it caught the stalwart, swollen heat beneath it. Mikleo felt ashamed enough to watch, but the sight of Sorey doing this in front of him while stimulating Mikleo’s own pent-up desires with his other hand only made Mikleo’s urges throb even more intensely, to the point that he could feel his face starting to prickle like he was having a sun-burn as wave upon wave of excitement and thrill rushed through him.

Mikleo was almost sure that part of it was the effect of seeing, for the very first time, a part of Sorey he could never even bring himself to imagine was there. The rapid strokes moving the fabric between Sorey’s legs formed an uncharacteristically huge and almost awkward bulge that Mikleo logically presumed included that hardened part of Sorey—and judging by the size of it, Mikleo could only guess what state Sorey was in at the moment. Like a ship at full mast, that huge swell beneath those
breeches betrayed an arousal that must be thick and ripe with lust and hunger, with a longing to arrive at its final destination.

Admittedly, it fuelled Mikleo’s heat to think that Sorey’s shamelessly hardened manhood could be this erotic... that what he thought was benign and innocent had been dangerously awakened, betraying a part that wanted Mikleo, that wanted to feel Mikleo against it, that wanted to enter and ravish him as much as Mikleo himself wanted to be devoured and dominated.

At the thought of it, Mikleo felt something within him overflow as if all of his blood was now coursing through that hot and needy part of him too. For the first time it became clear to him as to what Sorey’s urgent moans and desperate strokes were trying to convey: that Sorey’s body was burning for and demanding the same stimulation, the same attention, even when in his heart and mind he wanted Mikleo’s needs to come first.

Lips slowly shaped those words in between kisses... words that confirmed Mikleo’s vague conclusion just now as Sorey’s hand continued to stroke him... and himself and his name started coming in thick gusts of breath.

“Mikleo... Mikleo, I’m almost... are you...?”

Sorey’s pupils were blown, his face flushed as he reached out to catch Mikleo’s chin and turn it in his direction when Mikleo averted his gaze in embarrassment—as if he was the one who had just been caught doing something unthinkable.

“Sorey, I—I can’t look...”

Sorey gave a slow smile, lips tracing an invisible line as they grazed Mikleo’s chin, licking the skin there before pressing against Mikleo’s swelling bottom lip. Mikleo opened his mouth to take Sorey’s tongue in as Sorey pushed farther into Mikleo’s mouth, tasting him there.

Mikleo moaned through the kiss, trembling as Sorey’s hand kept stroking him below. “You’re perfect...” Sorey whispered hoarsely when he took a moment to breathe. He looked down at their swelling peaks now wet and hot, trembling and throbbing between his fingers. “You feel so good and I want to come with you now...”

C-come now? Mikleo’s heart skipped several beats, and this time, it was not the effect of his heightened lust getting used to the stimulation Sorey was giving it. “Sorey... we can’t—” he stuttered weakly, denying what was already obvious as both their heated peaks swelled and throbbed with every stroke as if to declare the readiness of their mutual desires for something more climactic.

“But I want to, Mikleo...” Sorey cut him off, his voice panting, thick and hoarse with need. “Gods, I want to make love to you like this, to enter you and fill you up... to give you everything I have and make you mine...”

Mikleo broke the kiss, moaning as Sorey’s other hand started to ramp up its pace, stroking Mikleo fluidly, rapidly, in time with his own pulsating cock.

Sorey groaned long and hard into the kiss as soon as his mouth met Mikleo’s again. He felt every vein in his hard, swollen cock expand and constrict, pushing his body to quell the irrepressible hunger and frustration by grinding itself against the delicious heat of Mikleo’s body... that warm, soft, pliant flesh sculptured to perfection beneath him.

Mikleo arched forward as Sorey pushed his tongue inside his mouth. He felt Sorey’s heaviness moving up and down his naked swollen peak, and for once, he could no longer muffle his moans as
his cock grew hot and rigid with the persistent pleasure of Sorey’s grinding hips. Suddenly the urge to melt in this persuasive heat was irresistible and also frightening, a combination of frustration, pain, and an overwhelming compulsion to stay like this forever, bonded skin to skin, heart to heart with nothing in between.

Except that there is, and will always be, something in between, something more powerful than love and lust and all its promise of a happily-ever-after.

They are bound by a sacred contract of absolute terms, a meeting of minds perfected not only by consent or purchase but by the more impervious conditions of tradition and faith.

The realization was painful and disturbing even in the midst of Sorey’s distracting sweetness. Even as his awakened body, his beating lust wanted nothing more than to efface the memory and the warning, Mikleo sensed the vague stirrings of some strange, lingering presence, cold and faint like a whispered secret or a gust of wind in an eerie place.

_The scourge of taboo…_

He moaned with a shudder, conveying to Sorey a different meaning as Sorey stroked him and licked him hard and hungrily, grinding his body against the heat of their pleasures, ripe and swollen with shameless lust.

Sorey must have read a little bit of his worries as he felt himself shiver despite Sorey's warmth suffusing him.

“Whatever it is, I want you to know I'm right here, Mikleo…” Sorey smiled, eyes languid, misting. "I'm always here... and I won’t let anything hurt you…”

_Such words…_

“But Sorey… we’re not—this isn’t what anyone would let us—”

“But I’m already yours, am I not?”

Mikleo’s eyes misted as Sorey bent down to kiss the palm of his right hand.

“If you make me yours, no one can come between us. They’d lose more than a king if they even try to take you away from me.”

Mikleo frowned, trying to brush off the mood. “Know what? You sound just like a hero in a romance novel.”

“But, Mikleo, I’ve been reading you far longer than that.”

“Sorey…”

“Just say you want me…” Sorey gazed up at him, eyes as soft as starlight. “That’s all you have to do to make me yours.”

Mikleo steeled his breath. _How come when you say it like that, it seems as if anything is possible?_

“And then what, Sorey?” Mikleo felt as if the stars and the heavens staring down at them had suddenly become unreal, a brilliant illusion or magic that he needed to dissolve, to pierce and penetrate to clear his mind.

But it was Sorey’s smile that cast down all his lingering doubts.
“And then I’ll follow…” Sorey’s voice was a faint whisper, yet it sounded stubborn and unflinching, like a thorn on a tender rose that hasn’t quite bloomed yet. “To be by your side, for better or worse, until the very end of all ends…”

Those words… Mikleo found himself surrendering to his rain of kisses—kisses Sorey trailed on his lips, his chin, his neck. How can you break me so easily with those words, with that one look? A part of his mind wanted to shake it off, the seduction, the temptation of letting those words give comfort, but Sorey’s motions were making it difficult to think things through as his mouth dipped lower and lower, sucking and nipping the flesh that bared itself irreverently to his intimate hunger. True, Sorey’s words sounded as unreal as they are beautiful, intoxicating.

In fact, they sounded just like those fairy-tale confessions in popular romance novels, riddled with foolish, shallow, self-fulfilling fantasies. But admitting that does not change the feeling after the fact.

Sorey’s kisses burned. They scorched him with delicious heat, heat that rushed to his groin and made him crave for something more intimate, more filling…

When Sorey groaned desperately like a wounded animal, Mikleo arched forward as if he needed to let Sorey know how needy he was too, how much he wanted what Sorey must be craving at the moment.

It didn’t matter that the castle must be in an uproar right now.

It didn’t matter that an innocent princess must find herself caught in the middle of that madness, one that would not only shame her but also taint the pride and dignity of her kingdom by no fault of her own.

It didn’t matter that the entire world might have been waiting for this mistake to happen, for a chance to laugh at Kreveldor’s conceit, at the ambition foiled by its own irreversible folly.

But Sorey would not give him the opening to think about these things.

Mikleo found himself biting down his lip to stifle his moans. Not that he wasn’t allowed to, but rather it seemed just too wanton, too embarrassing to let Sorey know how seductive he was. How his wet kisses were tantalizingly deep.

How everything he touched felt hot, felt ready to burst with an intense need to be sucked and ravished.

How every kiss tasted so sweet, so addicting that even if someone were to tell him that those same lips drip with poison, he would meet those lips. He would still yearn for that sweet, hungry mouth to drink all of him, even if their last kiss was to be a kiss of death.

The way Sorey’s tongue moved inside his mouth, tasting him, exploring him greedily—all of these things made Mikleo want to forget that there is a world outside this feeling, that there are laws that forbid such desperate yearnings, such insatiable hungers. Dangerous desires nurtured within the same sex, much worse between members of the same lineage whether by blood or by name only are more fearsome than any curse or superstition, more malevolent than demons and their manifestations.

But all of that seemed fog to reason as Sorey started grinding on top of him, against him, their naked arousals touching, swelling, throbbing in shameless abandon. All he wanted now is to be lost in this heat, in the scent of Sorey’s sweet, sweet, sweat, in the fragrance of his leaking desire coating their lusts together.

He felt Sorey pull back, felt a sudden yawning gap between their bodies which had already become
moist and clammy with the heat of their lovemaking. When Sorey’s warmth did not return, Mikleo cocked one eye open to see what was wrong. It made him blush to think that he was expecting Sorey to continue what he was doing, to educate him on the rudiments of lovemaking without the slightest hesitation, and yet, he couldn’t hide his panting, his heaving chest as a strange excitement filled him while anticipating Sorey’s next move. Whether right or wrong he could not bring himself to deny that he wants Sorey now, that there is something irresistibly charming and tormenting in his vagueness, in Sorey’s manner of making him wait for something that never ceases to surprise him nevertheless.

Right now Sorey’s gaze was somewhere else, directed beneath them in that place that was so open and exposed to him already. Mikleo had never seen him look so curious and wanting, and when he realized where exactly Sorey was looking, his instincts took over.

Mikleo pulled himself up and away from Sorey, folding his knees against the pit of his stomach in a manner no different from that of an animal curling unto itself for protection.

“H-hey, no need to do that,” Sorey mumbled with a breathless, teasing grin as he blocked Mikleo’s hands from pulling down the parted tunic that still hung loosely around his hip, as if curling into a ball to hide that intimate part of him was not enough. It was obvious how embarrassed Mikleo was to have Sorey see his shameless erection staring at them both like that, so wanton and needy and impatient, spreading the scent of its leaking desire in a way that was calling Sorey’s hunger to it.

Mikleo glared at him. “S-staring is rude, you know!”

Sorey chuckled. “Can’t blame me for being curious.”

Without any pretense, Sorey knew he had imagined this part of Mikleo too—imagined it hard enough to be shocked or surprised with the real thing. After all, this part of Mikleo was reassuring in its own way, telling him that despite appearances, Mikleo was certainly not the cold, dispassionate person he has always silently and begrudgingly accused him of being… that Mikleo certainly must have some attraction for him too, and his body, just like Sorey’s, is capable of reciprocating the attention that was being lavished upon it.

Sorey mentally scolded himself for being so engrossed. It was absurd, comical—if not insane—to be having these thoughts right now. But if he were to be perfectly honest with himself…

This kind of realization was just what he needed to feel relieved and happy. Even without being conscious of it, Sorey knew that he had allowed more than a few frightening uncertainties to take hold of him, to fill him with the burning frustration and fear of possible rejection. Now it seemed clear he was not the only one who had been torturing himself needlessly. Mikleo must have quietly harbored the same mixed feelings for the longest time.

If only life were simple enough… If the situation had been extraordinarily ordinary between them, Sorey was certain he would have done everything to convey his feelings to Mikleo—at the earliest possible time, even—pushing aside inexperience and all the insecurities that go with the kindling of first romance. If Mikleo just wanted to be courted, Sorey would have done that too, even in secret.

Admittedly though, that was easier said than done. With everyone treating them as if their sibling relationship went beyond affinity and extended to something as real and genuine as natural blood ties, it was near impossible for either of them to act on impulse. Even so, Sorey would have been content to stay safe within the shadow of such false appearances if it were easy… if he had not the chance to be familiar with Mikleo’s rarity, his unique self that made him so precious… irreplaceable.

And part of that is Mikleo’s undying loyalty, his fervent faith in Sorey’s capacity to accomplish
something admirable and beautiful no matter how foolhardy and inadequate and shallow he perceives himself to be…

No matter how inexperienced he is and might be as king to whom an overwhelming burden and duty have been entrusted, Mikleo had sworn to be his ally, the one who would never leave his side come war or peace.

On top of that, Mikleo is not just attractive as every sheltered member of the court may boast of being handsome or charming or pretty. There is something elegant and exquisitely unsettling in the way his beauty unfolds, like a bud just about ready to unclose its petals to the first morning dew. Others may disagree, but Sorey honestly believes that nothing in this life or after can compare with that stark, silver beauty of his—that innocently sublime, fragile, yet bewitching beauty that can draw every eye to it.

Next to Mikleo, any other pretty face turns into a desperate distraction, a poor imitation struggling to equal his flawless perfection.

Sorey has to smile in between kisses. As biased as that sounds, there is nothing to unlike about Mikleo—nothing he can think of anyway. As a matter of fact, his charm has always been capable of overwhelming either sex. On more than a few occasions, his features had invited desperate sighs and embarrassing proposals from foreigners and outsiders who had been frustrated by the discovery that Mikleo was not the right sex to accept a gentleman’s offer of marriage.

As for him, his feelings for Mikleo have always been ambiguous in the best and worst way possible with a hundred different shades of grey in between. Their relationship seems harder to define than enemy lines in an actual battle, especially when the attraction has always been a distraction.

Not that Mikleo has ever done or needed to do something deliberate to get his attention. The way his heart and mind gravitated toward Mikleo felt so natural, a feeling accompanied by the deliberate ease and persuasiveness of an instinct. The fact that it felt awkward and dangerous as if they were both treading on thin ice made Sorey careful and wary, but it was never enough to dilute the meaning and feeling behind every act and gesture he could convey.

At first he thought sharing an occasional bed would cure the need—much like actually learning how to swim might cure the fear of drowning. But things don’t always work by simple equations or analogies. If anything, the want has only deepened, frustrated it seems by anything accidentally physical—a broken gaze, an incidental touch, a sweet, lingering smile that held too much meaning or none. By then he realized that every unworded assumption, every frustrating guess that represses a secret longing only makes one’s buried feelings stronger…

With every denial, with every ounce of resistance, love and desire just become even more agonizing, a temptation too painful to resist…

And so it should be understandable, despite it being uncanny and even comical, why he seems to be taking his quiet time appreciating this intimate part of Mikleo of all things. Seeing that throbbing peak, that inflamed pink flesh betraying all the desires that Sorey knew burned within him too was just a confirmation of a long, overdue fantasy. Mikleo might have been indifferent to him for the longest time, but that was far from what Mikleo’s intimate secret is demanding from him at the moment. The mental anguish of accepting that Mikleo might simply be the kind of person incapable of responding to any romantic feelings or having those urgent, physical demands is a burden he can finally lay to rest.

Definitely, waves of relief burned those unhappy fears to ashes and carried them away into the abyss of the forgotten.
There is just one bit of a problem…

Sorey must now face the embarrassing question of what he is supposed to do to this intimate and attentive part of Mikleo. Although using his instincts may help, he was certain that relying purely on those uninhibited, primitive urges may do more harm than good. The mere thought of hurting Mikleo in the process, of not satisfying him as much as Mikleo’s breath-taking body completes him makes him bemoan his apparent lack of worldly experience.

Admittedly, Sorey has never been with anyone he wanted this much—or anyone he wanted at all. But contrary to what everyone probably thinks or imagines him to be, he is not entirely ignorant of how carnal pleasures are to be had…

If he had any secrets from Mikleo that must be it, thanks to his cousins Beldrin, Tallis and the rest who had connived to impart to him some wanton knowledge of the erotic. It was their perverted scheme after all that brought a young woman in his bedchambers one night, on his thirteenth birthday. Come to think of it, was that what they call bedding, that word they teased him about when they mentioned Alisha? The details of that night four years ago must have slipped through the net of his muddled memories, since he was never the type to recall things that he had neither discussed nor had shared with Mikleo.

Come to think of it again, the young woman they brought him was attractive enough. She had bright blue eyes, which seemed enticing enough, and the reddest hair he had ever seen. She was voluptuously endowed too, which was the easiest to notice with her being half-dressed or half-naked (whichever was more accurate in describing her sparse clothing) at that time. Embarrassing as it seemed, if he tried hard enough to remember the details, he thought the young woman showed a healthy bosom and a smooth, finely-sculptured midriff that made her seem very athletic.

But that wasn’t the part he really ought to remember. When Sorey finally got over the initial shock of finding a complete stranger in his bed, he realized to his absolute horror that her condition was no different from that of a captive hostage. Shuddering in those scanty, red trimmings that barely covered anything important, the girl also had her spread-eagled legs tied by the ankles to the bedpost by flimsy chains, while a ball of cloth seemed stuck in her mouth, gagging her. The sight moved him so much that the last thing Sorey had in mind to do was to pleasure his birthday present “to his heart’s content” as his cousins so dastardly suggested.

To say the least, the impression she left him with was that of a hapless maid in dire need of rescue, not some wanton whore willing to be ravished. Thinking about it, it seemed unnatural for anyone’s desire to be provoked by such ignominy… or rather by a prisoner whose discomfort and misery seemed too disconcerting to enjoy immersed they may be in standard symbols of romance: lavender-scented candles, rose petals, red lace and ribbons that made his bedroom look like a scene from an erotic novel.

He remembers the somewhat lost and pitiful look in the blue, startled eyes of the young maid when she peered at him through an equally flimsy blindfold, her breathing heavy but muffled as sweat trickled down the side of her rosy face…

Sorey lost no time breaking those bonds (she even provided him with the keys to the locks), and with relief, she explained to him that she would not have considered his cousins’ generous offer of becoming his “present” if she had not been desperate enough to do anything to get a seal of approval on her merchant’s license after setting a record of seventy-seven counts of theft.

Sorey wasn’t sure if sometime in their short conversation she also admitted having been charged of frustrated homicide at least once, involving a man she alleged was the leader of the most notorious syndicate of bride-snatchers in the continent... and that despite her mercenary skills she was really
just an amateur, not that much experienced in the use of any weapon save a pair of daggers, which she almost always manages to hide under her belt.

He told her calmly that he knew little of mercenaries and frustrated cutthroats to engage in outright condemnation, and if it was all right, could she dress more properly with real clients… and no, to be honest he had no need for an actual visual demonstration of how to secure a dagger with a thong that barely covered one’s maiden treasure…

In any case, she tried to leave him a kiss for thanks when he refused to collect the end of the bargain she had so callously agreed to. Sorey politely refused the kiss, of course (after all, what would Mikleo say if he didn’t) and with that, he surprisingly received a soft, almost nostalgic smile.

“We’re almost the same… I wouldn’t care for a man unless I’m in desperate need of a few gald…” he remembered her saying as she loosened the remaining ribbons that tied her to his bedpost using her twin daggers. “And your being the prince—that must explain why a lowly gypsy thief such as myself can’t persuade the likes of you, right? Or perhaps your heart is already set on someone else a long time ago. I just hope I didn’t disgust you too much, knowing I’m not the type you’d even imagine having…”

That she was very perceptive was the thing that almost made her interesting enough, but mumbling, “It’s not that at all, really, I’m sorry if I can’t…” was all he could say by way of a vague apology back then.

“Your Highness, if you ever get the right chance to do it with that person, just remember this…” She spread her legs apart, V-like, and Sorey was too speechless to stop her. “Your tongue could do wonders with what’s between these legs. And believe me, soft, wet kisses are good at making things harder in a good way… if you know what I mean.”

And just when he thought that was the end of it, she lowered her head and covered her mouth while flashing him a knowing look.

“But fingers can also work miracles, your lordship. Sure, virgins might offer some tight resistance at first, but y’know, don’t let that overwhelm you! You can always try poking your curiosity into any hole you can find… though if you’re a shay—you know, if you like doing it with other boys—there’s just one possible fit, isn’t there? And if you’re more adventurous, you can try tasting that delicious hole there. I’m sure the tongue is more tantalizingly erotic and gentle than any other part of your body…”

By then, he had made up his mind that she was either too drunk to know what she was saying, or had been drugged to the point that she had lost all inhibitions if she had any to begin with.

On the other hand, knowing that instinct can be a crude and impulsive teacher, he must try getting the most of that scant information if he wanted to do things right with, and for Mikleo. His lack of experience would mean he had to fill in a lot of gaps that would require some imagination and experimentation, that much is true. Nevertheless, he was certain these doubts held neither regret nor disappointment other than those directed at his own ineptitude, his own embarrassing virginity.

Virginity, right… he admitted wryly. Too late to blame himself for that, not that any state of self-imposed reserve is even blameworthy. It never crossed his mind that he needed practice anyway, or that love required expertise or training in the arts of love-making. Who could he have asked about such things anyway?

Not Zaveid, definitely. Sorey was certain—too certain—that the general’s over-enthusiasm on the subject would make any information coming from him somewhat risky, unconventional, even
scandalous. Besides, even if the general could be trusted to begin with, it wasn’t like Sorey could honestly share something about Mikleo without feeling guilty of violating his privacy—their privacy, to be exact.

It would be difficult, no unthinkable, to share things about Mikleo—personal, intimate feelings and fantasies—that he had accumulated through the years. For without needless exaggeration, Mikleo, to him, was like a childhood diary that contained all of his innermost secrets. Seeing that side of him through Mikleo would be tantamount to violating not only his sense of self, but his connection to a precious someone he could never share with anyone.

Caressing Mikleo’s trembling, shivering pale skin, Sorey could only catch his breath. Regardless of all the vexing complications that make everything difficult between them, he had no regrets. What is more important, more precious is this moment of truth that is now within reach—a moment of realizing missed chances and repressed wanting, a moment of rendering visible what once was nothing more than a forbidden fantasy.

The ghost of an illusion that before held nothing but a vague, inconsistent hope of what dreams may come is now as tangible as the back of his hand, as real as the beating of his heart, the heat in his limbs...

As restless and insistent as the urge to melt in the moment and forget everything else.

Sorey had to pause to think through this carefully. Without much confidence and experience to take risks in this grey area of first love, maybe he can start with a little instinct and that bit of advice from that strange young woman with the twin daggers. It’s not like he readily trusts strangers but... it seemed to him at that time that she really knew what she was talking about, having worked in places he had neither seen nor even vaguely experienced.

The combination may be worth trying... and little mistakes here and there may be something he and Mikleo could endure and revise in time.

And so, finally relaxing his hold on Mikleo’s slender wrists, Sorey leaned forward with a breathless moan and caught the trembling peak in his mouth.

The moment his need was enclosed in that wet, warm mouth, Mikleo stuttered Sorey’s name between breaths. His fingers involuntarily intertwined themselves in Sorey’s hair, trying to make a tangled mess of it as he arched into Sorey’s mouth with restless yearning. Grasping that fragile excitement and letting it fill him both inside and out, Sorey groaned back a response, letting his tongue slowly experiment on this new sensation...

Mikleo twisted beneath him with another moan as Sorey kneaded his thighs and the soft flesh underneath that. With every breathless quiver in Mikleo’s voice, Sorey felt reassured. He must be doing something right, something that should make him less concerned about enjoying this just a little too much at Mikleo’s expense...

“S-Sorey... Sorey...” Mikleo pleaded, though he wasn’t exactly aware what he was pleading him for. Because as shameless as it may seem, he would be lying not to admit that the wet caresses of Sorey’s tongue was making him heady with need, enough to make him open up to Sorey like a gaping scissor, as if to invite him to drink of this forbidden pleasure as deeply as he liked and as much as he wanted...

As if reading his thoughts, Sorey pushed his mouth further down slowly, not wanting to hurt this sensitive part of Mikleo in any way. The feel of it, the sensation of that warm, throbbing heat inside his mouth, the texture of those soft, pliant folds of skin traveling the length of that hardening shaft
was enough to make Sorey sweat and shiver as if he was in a heated snowstorm.

Excitement and anxiety brought about by his eagerness to please beat into his chest, cool and hot and light and heavy, like water from a sun-warmed waterfall crashing down on him. The fact that Mikleo’s moans were beginning to sound more desperate, sounded just as shamelessly honest and uninhibited as his, made Sorey’s toes curl and quiver with a nameless, shuddering intensity.

Even so, he cannot be unaware that his own cock had gotten harder, that it had been twitching and pushing against his breeches, sore, swollen and restless like a crazed animal in a leash.

Mikleo whimpered as Sorey pressed harder. Now, Sorey’s tongue was sliding with deliberate control around the glistening peak, probing the folds of the crown, exploring the sensitive skin underneath its shaft. Mikleo threw back his head, feeling shivers crawl down his spine, making him want to cry out, to complain that it wasn’t quite enough… It should be faster, tighter, wetter… Sorey sucked once, twice, afraid his teeth might hurt the sensitive skin even when he felt like pushing the soft, quivering flesh even farther into his mouth so he could suck it to his heart’s content.

His right hand massaged Mikleo’s thighs as if to coax him to relax even as his other hand became busy with untying his breeches to ease his own discomfort. His cock was frantically, yet wordlessly, screaming from beneath the thin fabric, stretching it beyond the limits of his princely dignity. With Mikleo’s breathless moans of pleasure quickening, Sorey found that selfish need responding greedily, wanting nothing more than to be squeezed and sucked within Mikleo’s core as if that alone can give it the comfort and release it has been restlessly seeking.

As Sorey’s mouth pushed against Mikleo’s quivering peak back and forth, again and again, Mikleo felt his groin ache for something deeper and more fulfilling. His entire being shivered in impatience to receive him. His legs gaped wide and open to Sorey, bewitching, beckoning. When Sorey started making very wet noises with the slick, vibrating motions of his tongue, Mikleo jerked forward as if to shove everything he has into that welcoming cavern; unfortunately, he ended up hitting Sorey’s chin with his knee in the process.

Sorey groaned and pulled away, but not before licking off the slight, trickle of liquid that had begun to ooze out of the pink flesh throbbing invitingly at him.

He gazed up at Mikleo with a smile. “No need to panic, I mean… I’m sure it’s not the first time it did that.”

Mikleo blushed even harder. “W-what do you mean?”

Sorey averted his gaze embarrassingly. “Uh, you know, you would have this coming too if you use your hands…”

The look Mikleo gave him was nothing but bewildered innocence. Sorey froze, his face heating up with a furious blush.

“Oh god, Mikleo, so this is the first time ever? I mean…”

“Shut up!”

Mikleo pulled down the edges of his tunic to cover himself. But the effort was useless. When he struggled to pull himself up by the elbows, his tunic moved up, revealing not only the still trembling peak, but likewise the smooth expanse of his smooth, sculptured abdomen and the tiny pink bruises spread almost evenly across it.

Sorey found it erotic and whimpered as he caught Mikleo by the waist and reeling him in, captured
the trembling peak in his mouth again with a satisfied groan. Those few seconds of awkward shyness forgotten, Mikleo arched involuntarily into Sorey’s mouth as if the wet noises Sorey was making with his tongue weren’t loud enough to please and he wanted more… something bigger and harder and hotter…

“Good… you taste so goo-I mean…” Sorey pressed his lips down the pink crown, licking the slick and the pool of his own saliva coating both. He looks up at Mikleo beneath half-closed lids. "I want everything about you..."

“But… S-Sorey…" Mikleo could only whimper in a blaze of want and confusion as he tangled his fingers back into Sorey’s hair. "T-too much... I'm almost-

Sorey clenched his mouth around the delicious peak, following the massive urges building within him, within his own cock that was desperate for the same stimulation. Mikleo moaned his swelling hunger, making him clench his fists on Sorey’s chest as he felt his abdomen lurch with the full force of a giant, tumultuous wave within it. Lifting his hips off the floor, he released himself with a shivering quiver, Sorey twitching slightly as he caught the first full force of that powerful orgasm. As soon as he released Mikleo’s need, he slid his hand around the wet, rigid shaft to encourage it, to let Mikleo ride it out completely. It shook and trembled as it generously spurted Mikleo’s seed, drenching Sorey’s fingers that were still wrapped possessively around it.

Mikleo gazed down at him, panting. “You crazy, stupid, you… how could you let me do something so—”

Sorey pushed himself up to Mikleo’s height and bit down his neck, his mouth hard, heavy, and hungry. His hand still lingered on his belt, but this time his fingers worked faster at untying the knots, giving the strap a final, violent pull before throwing it aside. Even so, his breeches still felt agonizingly tight around his swelling manhood, rubbing it in ways that hardly satisfied.

With a groan, Sorey tugged the waist of his breeches down, finally releasing his throbbing cock from its uncomfortable prison. It bobbed stiffly, hard and tense as Sorey grasped it firmly by the base and began giving it fluid strokes.

Mikleo was shocked. He couldn’t take his eyes off Sorey’s motions, watching as his hand violently tugged and pulled at the quivering flesh without mercy. His eyes did not, even for a second, leave Mikleo’s face as his other hand pushed Mikleo back by the shoulder, pinning him on the floor.

“Mikleo… god… please touch me… before I come…”

Before Mikleo knew exactly what was being asked of him, Sorey lowered his hips against Mikleo’s thighs, letting his manhood brush up and down against the smooth curve of Mikleo’s legs. Even without shifting his gaze down Sorey’s hips, Mikleo cannot be mistaken about how much more endowed Sorey was.

Mikleo threw back his head with a deep moan escaping him. The rigid flesh was tantalizingly rough and hard and so, so thick against his sensitive skin… so unbelievably hot, so burningly, achingly hot…

Mikleo closed his eyes with the deep, drunk knowledge that what was happening was dangerous, twisted, and without forgiveness. But no matter how pressing the guilt was, Sorey banished that as quickly when he reached up and grasped Mikleo’s hand.

Sorey wrapped Mikleo’s hand around his manhood and held his breath.
“S-Sorey!”

Breathlessly, Sorey intertwined his fingers with Mikleo’s own to keep them in place, then slowly guided it up and down the rigid shaft.

The motions were repeated in increasing rhythm, until each thrust of Mikleo’s hand forced a hushed, stuttering groan from Sorey that was loud enough to convince that this was not some overdue fantasy repeating itself needlessly.

Sorey was panting heavily, his breaths coming between choked sobs that pleaded Mikleo to continue. The force of the thrusts built up in rapid succession until Mikleo swore the sensation must hurt.

“Gods… I think it’s hurting you…”

Sorey opened his eyes and leaned down to give him a wet kiss on the lips. Not satisfied, he bit Mikleo’s lower lip and slid his tongue in, giving Mikleo a muffled reply. Their hands intertwined still, Sorey kissed him deeply, almost desperately, his thrusts becoming more urgent and demanding.

“There… there… oh god, god… I think I’m going to… it feels so good I can’t hold it… Mikleo…”

Then in the middle of that passionate groan of pleasure that was fast approaching its thick, heated climax, Mikleo’s head jerked.

“Sorey, listen! I think someone’s—“

Sorey blinked, gathering composure as he tried to still his heavy, heaving chest. He turned his head to look at the doorway but other than that, he made no move to disengage with Mikleo who had been staring owlishly in the same direction.

Sorey turned to face him, and for the first time, Mikleo heard him mutter something in the ancient tongue, a not-so-respectful word that he would rather not translate.

“Are—are you all right?” Mikleo was almost afraid to meet his stare as emerald orbs glistened with an unreadable intensity.

“Sorry, my bad… it’s just so…” Sorey exhaled loudly, deeply, his harsh breaths beating down Mikleo’s moist skin.

“What? What is it?” Mikleo couldn’t help sounding concerned at the dangerous flash in Sorey’s eyes. Sorey’s labored breathing was also making him worry.

Sorey gave him a wan smile. “I’ll be all right soon, don’t worry, I’ll explain later.” He chuckled softly, giving his groin a disgruntled look before pulling up his breeches. “We better move while we still can.”

Mikleo hurriedly grabbed his tunic and started dressing, ignoring some of the straps that would take a lot more time to hook in place. Having fixed himself a lot sooner since he hadn’t really gotten to the point that he needed to undress, Sorey came forward and reached for Mikleo’s waist.

Mikleo blushed as Sorey started to fondle the loose straps of his belt. “Let me help. I didn’t know this is complicated.” Then he leaned forward and gave Mikleo a peck on the cheek. “You’re amazing…” Sorey fondled Mikleo’s lower lip, giving it a quick kiss. “… the way you always take my breath away.”
Mikleo didn’t know why he couldn’t find the words to say anything to that. His face felt so hot and his throat seemed parched and sandy, for some reason.

Sorey continued to stare in that straightforward way that was almost certain to embarrass Mikleo. “I’ve never felt anything like it in my life…” Sorey gave Mikleo’s hand a squeeze. “I… I promise I’ll do my best… everything, Mikleo… as long as you’re here by my side, I can do anything…”

Mikleo arched his brows, making Sorey grin as boyishly as Mikleo remembered it.

“I’ll work hard, I won’t disappoint you, all right?” Sorey swallowed, feeling his chest swell full with overflowing feelings. “You’re my first, my last, my always, my one and only, Mikleo! I just hope that someday… that pretty soon I can—”

Mikleo took his hand and laid it on his chest. Sorey felt Mikleo’s heartbeat and his eyes widened. “Sorey… my heart is already racing as it is. If you say more I might have a heart attack.”

“Mikleo, if I don’t keep talking I might do something worse and then we might end up staying here until morning because I won’t be able to keep my hands off—nghh… M-Mik-le—”

It was Mikleo this time who stopped him with a full kiss, straining to deepen it even if the motion was awkward since Sorey was almost a full head taller.

Sorey was suddenly flustered, stopping himself as if he was just about to say something even more embarrassing, a secret that almost slipped past his awareness.

Mikleo made a playful, snickering sound, enjoying his nervous panic. “Boy, that confession of yours sounds just a wee bit scary, don’t you think?”

Sorey tightened his hold on Mikleo’s waist, letting their gazes rest on each other. He would never tire of looking into those silvery lavender eyes that seemed able to reach through his soul, those eyes that were too beautiful to let go even for a second.

“Mikleo, remember what I said from before? I was hoping to be with someone… someone who’d look up to me as his man, not just his king. That someone I was talking about… it was you… it has always been you.”

Mikleo averted his flushed face as if he was carefully considering that revelation. “Yeah, right, who would’ve guessed?”

Sorey caught Mikleo’s ironic tone and laughed, pulling Mikleo to him in a way that made Mikleo lose his balance so he ended up stumbling helplessly into Sorey’s arms.

Mikleo gave him a scorching glare, not that it could keep the goofy smile off Sorey’s face.

“You’d probably need more than a few lessons on subtlety. And here I thought all those poems we’ve read together actually helped.”

“That’s harsh! I mean, being a crown prince is hard enough. But if you’re patient, I can try being a poet… The only problem is, I’m as see-through as glass. That means I’m going to be pretty awkward with metaphors and symbolisms, though that actually gives me one more option.”

“Which is?”

“To be as direct and straightforward as I can…”
Mikleo sighed, elbowing Sorey as he tried to steal a kiss. “Absolutely not! If people can read you like a book you’d be the worst politician there is!”

“Not for you, I hope?” Sorey asked teasingly.

“Do I even have a choice? You’re an absolute dork and I love—”

Sorey’s eyes widened. “Say it, Mikleo... say you love me and want me because I do love you… I always have and always will…”

Mikleo flicked Sorey’s nose with his thumb and index finger. “Pray for it and I might.”

“C’mon, be nice!” Sorey chuckled, relishing the playful banter that always worked to lift his spirits. “To be honest, I wished you went easy on me if you knew back then what my real feelings were. I mean… we could have done these things sooner…” Sorey’s hand began tracing a gentle line along Mikleo’s jaw to his chin as if imagining the kisses he had left there.

“In your dreams, Sorey!” Mikleo flicked Sorey’s chin with twice the strength as before, making the prince rub the soreness away with a hand to soothe the pain. “So you think I’m easy?”

“No, never!” Sorey laughed, but instead of playfully returning the painful banter, Sorey bent down to put a kiss on Mikleo’s forehead for compromise. “I guess I was expecting more—uh—appreciation? A bit of tenderness, maybe?”

“You make it sound like I’m an unfeeling rock.”

“It’s easy to change my mind. Just kiss me or grab my cock—”

“What!” Mikleo was fast turning beet red, imagining—no, more like remembering—that he had, in fact, just done that. “Am I supposed to act like some wanton heathen when you’re around?”

“Whoever said it's all right to look down on wanton heathens, Mikleo!” Sorey laughed, obviously teasing. "At least it wouldn’t be boring. Besides, a little excitement can’t be that bad.”

Mikleo reached up and flicked his nose a third time with his thumb and index finger. Sorey barely avoided it, pulling Mikleo’s head to him to rest it against his chest. “Guess I have to be satisfied with your weird notion of romance, even if it hurts a little.” He rubbed his nose for emphasis.

“Serves you right for complaining. You probably have no idea what a pain you are sometimes.”

Sorey didn’t want to disagree but… “Just so you know, sometimes doesn’t count.”

“Whatever,” Mikleo huffed, feigning annoyance. “I won’t get mad next time, I swear. I’ll just get even.”

Sorey fondled Mikleo’s neck with a slow, aching caress that made every fiber in Mikleo tingle and burn uneasily. “I want to see you try.” Then without as much as a warning, he lifted Mikleo’s chin to him for a kiss, savoring the swollen bottom lip that was pouting at him.

Sorey finally opened his eyes with a breathless moan. “I’ll do more than what's needed, if that’s what it takes so I can spend more time with you as me... and not as some king you have to look after.”

“Fine.” Mikleo smiled wryly.

Sorey raised an eyebrow, looking disappointed all of a sudden. “Fine? That’s all?”
“You’re not hoping I’d disagree, are you?”

Sorey made a harsh sound. “No. But I was hoping you’d say something like ‘I’ll love you forever and I will never look at any other man but you, Sorey, ‘cause I only want you.’”

“Yeah, right,” Mikleo huffed. “I forgot how much an airhead you and Zaveid could really be.”

Sorey reached up to touch Mikleo’s cheek, fingers tracing yet another invisible line to those graceful lids that fluttered against the most enchanting eyes Sorey has ever seen in his life. “I’m serious, Mikleo. I won’t have you looking at anyone else. You know by now how jealous I could get.”

“That was never obvious.”

“No, seriously…” Sorey kissed Mikleo’s chin, then the side of his neck with a savage groan as his tongue relished a pink bruise hidden somewhere beneath the folds of Mikleo’s tunic. He stopped only when Mikleo squirmed at the tingling sensation.

Sorey mumbled an apology, then nuzzled Mikleo’s cheek. “Seriously, you’re mine and I won’t take ‘no’ for an answer.”

“What the—” Mikleo raises an eyebrow at the stubborn tone in Sorey’s voice. “Do you really have to say that?”

“Look, Mikleo, if that bastard Malfus comes for you again, I’ll make sure he’ll regret he’d ever touched you!”

“How much do you know about—”

“I’m sorry that I can’t help finding out… but I should’ve been there to protect you and I wasn’t.”

Mikleo shook his head with a deep frown. “Sorey, that’s not true… it was me—”

“No, Mikleo, it’s my fault… and I promise it won’t happen again! I’ll give him a war he’d regret for the rest of his life if he tries to drag the entire church into this. I just know how twisted Malfus could get. He won’t stop until he’s taken what he wants—you.”

Mikleo tried to hide his shudder. “Malfus can’t be that obsessed. I’m sure he’d get over it.”

“That look he gave you, I hate it,” Sorey voiced it without reserve, his rage and disgust showing through. “It doesn’t seem like he’d ever get over you even if the world ends, Mikleo!”

“I’m more afraid of Heldalf… how he might use Malfus for his own ends…”

“Well, I’m not afraid of raising an army to meet the Silver Falcons in a real battle! I don’t care how long it takes, I’ll make certain he and Heldalf learn a lesson they won’t forget!”

Mikleo put a finger on Sorey’s lips to shush him. “Enough of that, Sorey. You hate war as much as I do. Don’t let anything stir you in that direction whether it’s me or anything else. ‘Cause I just won’t allow it, all right? I’d rather die than see you get killed or anyone else killed for something so stupid…”

“Love isn’t stup—”

“It is when you can’t tell the difference between what it is and what it’s not,” Mikleo interrupted, his voice almost shaking. “Besides, power isn’t supposed to cause people to suffer for whatever reason. More than that, I don’t want to live my life thinking that my happiness is more important than
anybody else’s. And I don’t want to love knowing those same feelings caused a lot of pain.”

Sorey stared hard at him, his lips suddenly taking on a full smile.

“W-what now?” Mikleo muttered. “You think that was funny?”

Sorey pouted playfully. “Not really…”

“Then what?”

"I really do love you, you know."

Mikleo froze. He averted his gaze, unable to look straight into those summer-green eyes that shimmered with so many emotions. “Gods, you’re really such a dork. Makes me wonder what I ever did to deserve you.”

“That hardly changes anything,” Sorey whispered, nuzzling Mikleo’s nape. “Because everything you say, even when I disagree with it, takes my breath away.”

Mikleo elbowed his rib, face hidden in the shadow of his hair. “I think we really need to get out of here if we have any plans of escaping our pursuers at all.”

Sorey wrinkled his face. “All right, all right. My reality check just happens to be slower than usual. But before that…”

Sorey wrapped the cloak around Mikleo tightly, fastening the shoulder clasps but refusing to meet Mikleo’s gaze. Then with a shy, half-smile that spoke whole volumes, he brushed Mikleo’s lavender eyes with his lips, pressing their foreheads together.

“I just want you to know that I love you so, Mikleo. And I won’t get tired of saying how much I do every single day.”

Mikleo felt his heart stir with a deep, fluttery feeling of something right locking itself in place. It felt like every missing puzzle piece has just wedged itself in, making whole what once was lost and incomplete.

“I… you know my feelings more than I do, Sorey, I’m sure about that. But right now, going back to the palace is your only chance. If even half of Kreveldor should go looking for us…”

“I go where you go. That’s not something I can change my mind about.”

“But I can’t—I won’t be going back—I just can’t-”

“I’m not forcing you to. We go back only when you’re ready. Right now, all I want is one thing…”

Sorey went down on bended knee, his face raised up to gaze at Mikleo with all the emotion he could muster.

"Sorey, w-what do you think you're doing-

“Like what I said before, I only need you to make me yours… and for you to let me follow you for as long as I breathe…”

Mikleo’s eyes widened. He has heard Sorey confess the same thing, but, somehow, this time sounded a little different, ominous, almost frightening.
He sighed, trying to shake off those feelings that made him want to cry and get angry at the same time. “Sorey, no matter how many times you say it, let me remind you that I’m clearly opposed to this plan of yours. You have obligations… duties… you can’t just drop your kingdom and your family like a bad habit or like you’re just about to go on a camping trip, I thought that was clear—”

“That was clear…” Sorey whispered breathlessly. “I’m a good listener after all…”

Mikleo averted his face. “No, please, I can’t accept this plan of yours.”

Sorey exhaled loudly, letting his frustration be heard. “Seriously, do you really expect me to just up and leave after what just happened between us? You’re my responsibility…”

“Shut up, Sorey, it’s not like I’m asking you to be anything—”

“But I want to be, Mikleo!” Unperturbed emerald eyes held Mikleo’s gaze. “If you’re starting to think I’d settle with a long-distance relationship, I’m telling you I won’t have it, all right? I can’t imagine you traveling without me to keep you safe and warm.”

Mikleo grunted a little sarcastically. “Right. As if I can’t afford a fur coat to keep the cold away.”

“Your man is better than a fur coat, and that’s something I can prove to you,” Sorey whispered back, sneaking a hand up Mikleo’s knee, then his thigh. Mikleo was quick to slap it away.

Sorey laughed playfully, knowing that Mikleo’s incredulity was more a show of stubborn pride than sincere disbelief. “Besides, I made you a promise and I intend to keep it. Because that’s what promises are for, right?”

Mikleo tried to steel himself. “Promise or no promise, I won’t allow it. An Overlord answers to no one, Sorey. You don’t have to bind yourself to anyone needless—”

“Not when it comes to you.”

“No, I’m no exception! I’m your subject, someone who serves your purpose. I can’t be a liability, nor should I allow myself to be one,” Mikleo told him, trying to look calm despite the stubborn gaze that met his.

“I only get weak in the knees whenever you’re around, but you’re anything but a weakness that burdens me,” Sorey whispers faintly, reaching out to caress Mikleo’s cheek fondly. “And that’s because I belong to you now.”

"You don't understand..."

Sorey shook his head, and for the first time Mikleo found himself looking into defiant emerald eyes. "I do understand, so please hear me out! An empire’s an empire whoever sits on the throne, but right here, right now, I’m your Sorey, and nothing will change that. I might lose the crown someday, in fact I might lose more than the crown, but I can promise you one thing…”

Sorey’s heart was racing and his breath was coming in spasms beating down his chest, but he wouldn’t let those stop him from saying what has been in his heart and mind for the longest time.

“You won’t ever ever lose me, Mikleo. No matter what happens, even if the world ends right now, I’ll remain yours… and yours alone.”

Mikleo sighed, shaking his head. “Oh god, you’re impossible, do you know that?”
Sorey smiled a little shyly this time, but his eyes shimmered with the same heated intensity. “Maybe? So please…” Sorey stood up finally, reaching out to cradle one, pale cheek against his palm. “Let us be together from now on.”

Despite himself, Mikleo couldn’t help leaning into Sorey’s cupped hand, knowing how his flushed face must betray his real feelings by now. “Really stubborn, aren’t we?”

“I guess?” Sorey smiled with the softest of chuckles. “Because I know I can’t ever hope to win against you if I’m not.”

“So…” Mikleo relented, giving a hopeless sigh. “What’s the plan then?”

Sorey drew out a short, folded parchment from under his belt, unfolding it carefully under the pale flickers of moonlight piercing the tattered canopy above their heads. “Thought you’d never ask. Good thing I had us covered.”

“A—a map?”

“Uh-huh. All the ins and outs of the palace grounds. I’m pretty sure we can find a better and quicker way out of here.”

“Sheesh, you really are sneaky sometimes.”

Sorey grabbed Mikleo’s hand and pulled him closer for a kiss. “You better get used to it soon, though liking it is better, don’t you think? After all, it has some practical uses too… like right now…”

Under the pale stars, Mikleo muttered a low ‘yes’ before Sorey took his mouth and let the map slip from his fingers in the breathless silence of that muffled darkness, a darkness that was about to be the longest in many days to come.

The wind felt a little rough as the evening got colder and gusty winds began blowing from the north as the season always lets it at this time of year. Mikleo couldn’t believe that he would one day find himself up and about in a real adventure, with no less than the most important royal figure in the entire west, if not the entire continent of Glenwood in tow.

Currently, that important royal figure looked edgy but rigidly alert as he slid his body against the wall and made his way slowly around the rustic barn they found in the middle of the field they had just managed to cross. The trek was difficult on foot, but Mikleo was more than relieved to see the wooden signs and landmarks indicating they have just gone over the border of the first town outside the palace walls.

Sorey made a signal for him to enter the unlatched gate that was in fact low enough to enable one to jump over it. The fact that it wasn’t secured at all almost seemed too good to be true as Mikleo hesitated, running toward Sorey with careful yet fluid steps.

He bent low to match Sorey’s wary posture. “What exactly are we doing—”

Sorey put a finger across his lips only to lean forward and kiss him on the cheek.
“It’s all right, love. We’re going to steal some horses.”

Mikleo didn’t know if he should get mad about the stolen kiss or the unexpected term of endearment that came with it, or the plan that Sorey had just divulged to him.

“Steal horses? Have you ever done this before, your Majesty?”

A lock fell as he spoke. He wasn’t confident that Sorey could actually unbolt the huge doors but he did.

“See? That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

Mikleo looked at him disapprovingly. “Stealing is wrong.”

“It’s just a lock.”

“Right. Didn’t know you’d be so good at such things.”

“Geeking on ruins for hours must have its advantages, don’t you agree?” Sorey smiled, waving a tiny, scissor-like instrument in front of Mikleo as if to take pride in his improvised tool.

Mikleo looked away. “Just so you know, I’m not entirely convinced that we should be doing this. God knows you’re more of a treasure hunter than a thief.”

“Oh, it's just a matter of applying the same principle, isn't it? I enter, I take, I leave.”

“Sure, Sorey. Any idea what comes after when you get caught?”

Sorey sensed the incredulity in Mikleo’s voice, but his expression remained unperturbed as he trained his eyes on the darkness ahead of them. So far the red-painted barn and its homely yard was the first resting spot they came to after crossing a huge, seemingly endless wheat field. On foot, the distance between the surrounding towns and the castle walls—including the fields and marshes lying in between—had seemed endless, almost making them both want to lie down carelessly and take a much-needed rest.

Only the idea of the bishop’s best knights keeping to the shadows and hounding their every step made them eager to push forward.

Then again, if Sorey were exhausted, he certainly didn’t show it. “I’ve read about something similar, at least. That must count, right?”

“Yeah, must be The Wayward Steward and the Landlord’s Daughter. I doubt if romance novels even know what they’re talking about.” Mikleo didn’t sound convinced at all.

In the dimness, Mikleo thought he saw Sorey’s cheeks heat up. It made him vaguely wonder what part of the conversation or the novel had been responsible for that.

“Just stay right here. I’m going in.”

“S-Sorey!”

In a matter of seconds, Sorey had slipped into the semi-darkness, leaving Mikleo standing outside the huge doors, mouth wide open.

This is insane…
He was just about to mutter something utterly useless but hopefully profound when a hand grabbed onto him.

“Whatcha guys up to?” the question was hoarsely worded, gruff and thick with an accent Mikleo almost expected.

The face of the sudden intruder was hidden in the shadows of a hood much like his, so there was no way of knowing whether the intruder was any more threatening than his voice made him out to be.

“Stealin’ in the middle of the night, huh? Folks here ain’t so stupid! You think we’d let fuckin’ lowlifes such as you breeze in here without payin’ for what you’re takin’!”

Though taken by surprise, Mikleo was all ears as he regarded with wary eyes the cloaked, hooded figure in brown sackcloth. From the uneven pitch of that raw, but slightly lilting manly voice, it was easy to tell that the speaker was probably younger—if not his age at the most. To say the least, there seemed to be a raw, almost youthful quality to that voice that drew the image of someone brusque and inexperienced rather than seriously scary.

The impression managed to set him at ease. If they happen to cross paths with anyone from the court—whether an ordinary knight, a palace guard, or a spy for the King’s Own—he and Sorey will definitely have hell to pay.

Before he could say anything though, Sorey had his arm on the guy’s neck, pushing him effectively far away from Mikleo and down onto the ground. His legs have been pinned below Sorey’s as well.

The young man struggled vainly, and in the process his hood had been thrown off. Fine, blond hair spilled onto freckled cheeks, blue eyes looking up at Sorey with a startled, yet furious glare.

“Get yer fuckin’ dirty hands off me, thief!”

“Hey, mind your manners! I haven’t done anything to you yet!”

Mikleo couldn’t believe Sorey even said that. To think that it was obvious what they were after, trespassing into someone’s property in the middle of the night and breaking a lock just now.

The blond raised an eyebrow, sensing something off. Then his mouth opened wide and his eyes bulged.

Mikleo felt something cold hit him hard in the gut. Sorey’s accent… The kid must’ve known they’re not from…

“Y-yer Majesty?”

It was too late. The kid was smart enough to make that conclusion given a few hints. Then again, with what Sorey was wearing, it was pretty obvious he was no blacksmith’s son, shoemaker’s lackey, or country peasant to begin with.

“N-no, no, you’re obviously mistaken. It’s not like—”

“Yer brooch, yer Highness.”

Mikleo remembered. Only the Prince would be wearing the clear, sparkling emerald set in a delicate gold filigree that was a sacred family keepsake and treasured relic worthy only of the kings and heirs of Kreveldor.
“My great, great grandfather was a jeweller, m’lord. I’ve a grandmother who keeps a copy of it—wears it on a glove as a token—says it’s special ‘coz the design was ours to begin with…”

Mikleo was amused at the way the boy’s lips curled over the secret as if he could lose his head any moment if he said anything more than he did. Keeping his observations subtle, Mikleo couldn’t help stashing that detail into a corner of his memory just in case they might find some use for it.

As for Sorey, he felt for the jewel that was pinned so close to his throat he could almost feel it whenever he swallowed. It was an ornament he had ever so often been asked to wear with his suit and tunic whenever there was a formal occasion he needed to dress for. And tonight was no exception. He had, after all, just left his own engagement ball, the one that the kingdom must have been preparing in secret for months as a special surprise for his coming-of-age, and which must have started a few hours ago without him.

Vaguely he wondered if the ball had even started. He was almost certain the entire palace had already become aware that he and Mikleo were missing.

That reminder just struck a bolt to his heart.

“Look, if you’re certain about that, lend me some horses. Make that an order.”

“S-Sorey!” Mikleo couldn’t believe he was hearing this.

“We can’t outrun the knights otherwise,” Sorey reasoned, neither changing the stern intonation nor tenor of his voice. He didn’t even dare take his eyes off the young man as he kept his gaze on the blond, freckled-faced youth, his rigid posture shielding Mikleo from the upstart’s impertinent gaze.

Mikleo understood the need for it, of course. But that gruff tone, the indifferent stance… it takes getting used to. Still…

“We can at least pay him.”

Sorey’s eyes looked sharp. “That we must. But giving up the best he’s got for our sake is not a choice. I really hate forcing anything on anyone unnecessarily, but under the circumstances, we won’t get very far without horses. I’m sure those falcons won’t even think of chasing us on foot.”

Mikleo understood that too, but for some reason, he didn’t like the idea of anybody else—an outsider they’ve just met—being a privy to their situation and getting involved.

Sorey took Mikleo’s hand. Unlike his voice and the metallic sheen in his eyes, his touch was warm, smooth… tender.

“Keep this for me,” Sorey whispered, holding out the clear, emerald stone the other boy had been staring at. “Anyway, I think you should have it as a personal keepsake.”

Mikleo tried not to look flustered as he felt the boy’s eyes on him. The blonde was giving him a look that was confused and a little surprised.

He slipped Sorey’s emerald brooch in a pocket under his inner garments. The boy’s eyes wouldn’t leave him. Mikleo gazed back, intending to return the unwelcome stare with a stern and haughty one to make himself just a little bit more intimidating if nothing else.

Just then, a gust of wind threw off his hood as he was about to seriously give that thought a try.

Sorey couldn’t help but notice how those intense blue eyes sparkled and those freckled cheeks
flushed a bright red. Then the blond boy stood up, dusted his knees, and rubbed his hands against the fabric of his overalls.

With an awkward, lopsided grin that was almost a smile, he reached out a hand to Mikleo.

“Uh, err, my name’s Halden. Halden Feldspar. Yours is?”

Mikleo stared at the hand, but before he could think of anything to say, Sorey had already pushed himself in between them.

“I don’t think we have time for introductions. I really need those horses right now, all right?”

It was easy to tell Sorey’s not in the mood for taking no for an answer. His lips were set on a grim line and his summer-green eyes looked sullen, almost several shades darker than their usual shine.

“Yer horses are in the stable. We ain’t got nothin’ in there but the old mares. Ain’t good enough if yer runnin’ from real knights. Them mares might slow you down more.”

Sorey raised an eyebrow. “Care to show us where to find your better horses then?

“Uh, follow me… no I mean… this way, m’lord.”

Mikleo almost felt himself smile. The boy was trying too hard to be polite.

“Uh, if I may ask… how old are you by the way?”

Mikleo’s eyes widened at Sorey’s question. What the hell has that got to do with anything?

“Turned seventeen two months ago. I was hopin’ to see the Knight Steward, Sir Trellthyr of the House of Asfern. Around here he’s the one to see if anyone wants to work at the palace grounds servin’ the royal knights, yer Highness. You see, I was hopin’ to be a Silver Falcon someday.”

“That’s pretty ambitious,” Mikleo couldn’t help saying.

The boy looked over his shoulder to meet Mikleo’s surprised gaze. “Around here, working fer knights is the only way you’d ever hope to meet them nobles.”

Sorey noticed the deep, scarlet blush again. It was annoying, if not irritating, especially when the flustered looks seemed obviously directed at someone who’s not supposed to be on their receiving end.

Sorey cleared his throat. “If you’re serious about that, you better train yourself to stay alert and focused. Getting distracted too easily is a bad habit.”

Now that is something Sorey had no right to say. Knowing him, Mikleo is almost certain the prince is no better than the target of his criticism when it comes to distractions. In fact it would be a terrible lie, if not an understatement, to say Sorey has never been distracted by anything at all.

“Am not worthy of thy counsel, m’lords, but I shall take that to heart,” the young man replied humbly, but with the slightest tinge of amusement in his voice that Mikleo sensed, together with the silent stare that made him just a little bit self-conscious.

Sorey slowed down his pace until he fell in step with Mikleo. “You all right? We can stop for a bit and get something to eat while we’re here.”

“Sorey… I don’t think that’s a good ide—”
“If you’d let me, yer Majesties, I can cook something up… err… but most we have are vegetables. Potatoes, tomatoes, some lettuce… ‘cept for some cherries in the pantry…”

“Ch-cherries?” Mikleo couldn’t help becoming suddenly attentive.

“Yer cravin’ for some, m’lord? I’ve saved lots of ‘erm for the festival… I make ‘em into pies… tarts… some rolls, they’re all better with cherries and… you like ‘em syrupy too?”

Sorey frowned. “We’re not here to indulge in anything fancy. We have knights on our heels.”

But the young man wasn’t paying attention to anything coming from Sorey. “Uh, my lord, I didn’t catch yer name?”

Mikleo was surprised to find the young man staring openly at him, glistening blue eyes as soft and fond as a morning ray of sunshine on a clear spring day. For some reason, it was hard to look away.

“Mikleo.”

“Mikleo’s a nice name, m’lord.”

“I think it best we stick with formalities,” Sorey couldn’t help emphasizing by giving the young man a twitching glare. “He’s a Prince of Kreveldor too, you know.”

“Though the nobles we’ve come across on our trip to the guilds for tax payin’ mostly mention only the great King Odelius, Prince Sorey… and Bishop Heldalf. That man in particular, the bishop…” the blonde seemed to emphasize that word more than the others. “… his name’s always spoken around ‘ere. I guess people are much afraid of ‘im. Says he’s a powerful sorcerer, not just a church noble or the King’s right hand…”

“Heldalf is just... Heldalf.” Sorey’s voice was almost bitter, and his expression could barely hide his scowl. "I don't care whatever else he is.”

“Sorey—” Mikleo breathed low.

“I know.” For a moment, Sorey couldn’t help looking worried as he turned to Mikleo, unable to hide the concern that had begun to overwrite itself over anything else whenever worry or anxiety threatened to overcome him. But now a deep, persistent urge nagged at him and without him knowing, his hand reached up to touch Mikleo’s cheek. A simple touch, a brief contact, a moment where skin grazes skin—it was all he needed to be reassured, to banish the aching fear within him that needed to feel Mikleo’s presence, to make sure he’s right there beside him, that he’s perfectly safe…

But halfway through the motion, he realized he needed privacy to be able to do that. It seemed impossible to resist the temptation of touching what his heart already knew was rightfully his—what his soul has just claimed to be his and no one else’s—but he knew there was no room for that right now.

He sighed deeply as his arm fell to his side. Mikleo gave him a disconcerted look, full of tender concern and curiosity.

He felt remorseful. “Mikleo, you must really be hungry. Sorry, I was pretty inconsiderate not to notice… and it’s not like I don’t worry at all because I do. I should be paying more attention…”

Mikleo looked down at his hands. There was something very gentle and tender about the way Sorey said that which made his insides tingle. It was also clear to him what Sorey had almost been tempted
to do, and though it was nothing but a frustrated gesture now, it meant everything to him…

“L-look, I’m just as worried as you are,” he whispered back to Sorey, glad that his voice wasn’t shaking. “While we’re on the road, it’s hard to pay attention to anything else.”

Sorey’s eyes bore into his. “Yeah, but if you’re hurting or anything… whatever it is, I’d feel better if you let me know. I worry about that too… a lot more than anything else…”

Sorey found orbs of the deepest sapphire scrutinizing him unabashedly. “Pretty close—you two are.”

“W-what do you—”

“Just that yer closer than most brothers I know m’lords…” the young man was quick to clarify, averting his face and looking far ahead of him instead. “As a matter of fact, I’ve three younger brothers and they’re as clingy and annoyin’ as hell. Noisy ones too. Always messin’ with my cookin’ before I was done.”

“Must be more fun than you’re willing to admit, I bet,” Mikleo found himself saying.

“That it is, an’ won’t deny it either,” the seventeen-year old added with a rueful but pleasant chuckle.

Mikleo smiled back. “You must be a very thoughtful and considerate young man yourself.”

Sorey’s eyes widened. It was the first time he has heard Mikleo being this interested in a conversation with someone else… well someone else other than him of course.

“They brothers are fun. Will miss them a lot too.”

“Uh, you’re not—I mean—we thought they live here with you,” Sorey managed to say out loud despite being aware that inquiring into someone’s private matters might offend.

“Uh, they do,” he said with hesitation. “But I guess I’m the one leavin’ them boys behind…”

Mikleo walked past Sorey and surprisingly caused the young man to halt in mid-stride as he planted himself firmly in his way. “You’re not planning to leave with us, are you? We’re not here to have an adventure. You can get killed if you even dare get involved in what—”

The young man smiled, and when he did, his freckles made his face even more boyishly charming. “You put things together quickly, m’lord. But y’see, ain’t got anythin’ better to do around ‘ere. Besides, ain’t gonna give you yer horses and yer cherries if you can’t do me that small favor, my prince.”

Sorey didn’t know what irked him more—the atrocious proposal to let him run away with them in exchange for badly needed provisions or his calling Mikleo ‘my prince.’ He got in between Mikleo and the young man, his face aglow with suppressed annoyance.

“Look, we never said you can impose your conditions in exchange for what we’re asking for!”

“Sorey!” Mikleo held him back, clamping a hand on his shoulder. “Let’s discuss this calmly, all right?”

“And what if I refuse, yer Majesties? Yer outlaws by the looks of it, if Bishop Heldalf’s knights are after you. Turnin’ you over would be the wisest decision… and this village is more afraid of the Bishop than you.”
Sorey had a mind to march right into a fight with a ready fist when Mikleo stopped his hand. “We negotiate, all right? No use making things uglier than it already is when we have other things to worry about.”

“Mikleo, this upstart fellow deserves a good hit to make him realize who he’s talking to!”

“Sorey, I’m pretty sure he knows perfectly who he’s talking to, but he’s right, whether we find his terms acceptable or not,” Mikleo told him as calmly as he could, keeping his voice low. “Besides, you’ve already convinced me how badly we need those horses. So it’s horses we’re gonna get even if I have to give away everything I have with me at the moment.”

“That would be so awfully gen’rous of you, my prince. I’ll take that as a promise for keeps.”

Sorey slipped past Mikleo—Mikleo didn’t know how Sorey did that, it happened too fast—and punched the young man in the stomach before Mikleo could get in the way, forcing the blonde to stumble on his heels backwards, his body hitting the ground with a heavy sound. He seemed strong enough to control the pressure of that hit though, as he readily got up and steadied himself even as part of him reeled from the force of the blow.

“You don’t demand anything from Mikleo, you hear me?” Sorey was panting, his voice low and deep, like a rumbling growl at the back of his throat. “You say anything more, and I won’t hesitate to hit you again.”

“Gods, Sorey!” Mikleo held onto Sorey’s shoulder, his face stricken with numbing shock as he watched Sorey’s face grow livid.

The young man simply returned the crown prince’s glare. “I don’t really mind gettin’ hit by you, m’lord. Jus’ tell me what’s up with yer bein’ so protective of yer brother when he looks perfectly able to fight if he wanted. You either lookin’ down on ‘im—which is strange when you care awful lot about ‘im—or must be somethin’ else?”

Mikleo’s eyes froze. “It’s settled. You’re coming with us then.”

Sorey swallowed hard, almost biting his tongue. “M-Mikleo!”

“It’s a small favor, Sorey! Besides, you’ve already punched him. We owe him that at least. On top of everything else, we might really need an extra hand.”

He turned around to face Mikleo, arms flung wide-open in protest. “Look, are you suggesting it’s my fault? I can’t believe you’re taking his side—I mean—Mikleo!”

Mikleo turned to face an angry, hurt, and terribly confused Sorey. “It’s nobody’s fault. And we’re losing a lot of precious time here. I don’t intend to have you two wake up the entire neighborhood over a stupid argument.”

“St-stupid what!” Both boys didn’t have time to look at each other as their voices chorused at that mild accusation, their tone betraying more hurt than annoyance.

“Shush you two! Gods, this feels like having in tow a couple of toddlers from the nursery,” Mikleo muttered, his usual, benign expression now marred by a deep frown. “Let’s just get some horses and take off as quickly as we can. Whatever needs to be settled would have to wait until we’re safely out of here, all right?”

“Where are we supposed to be headin’ then?”
Mikleo has been considering things since the fight started and knew that in terms of experience, he and Sorey were no match against the young fellow. Though only a month older than Sorey and about a full year younger than him, the young man seemed to have enough confidence to be unfazed by their royal status—as if, with the exception of such a trivial fact, he personally believed he exceeded them in all other things that matter, such as practical wisdom and survival skills.

In a world that values such endowments more than artistic refinement and esoteric knowledge, Mikleo must concede that his and Sorey’s overnight decision to live outside the palace and travel to places they’ve never even seen must be beyond absurd. It almost sounds like two infants proposing to take a dip in a sea of rabid sharks.

But that moment’s realization is all it took to spur Mikleo in a direction that would take the matter a step closer to his and Sorey’s goal.

“Halden Feldsparr, is it?”

The young man’s eyes widened with surprise, as if it was the first time he’s heard anyone say his name.

“That I am, my prin—”

“Take us as far as you can, with the best of your horses. I intend to keep my promise as long as you stay with us.”

Sorey looked panicked. “You can’t—no way, Mikleo!”

He gave him a look of annoyance. “Sorey, your objections are not helping at all!”

In the next second, Sorey had Mikleo by the wrist, his expression cold and almost angry as he turned him around. Something about this particular young man staying with them, talking to Mikleo like this, being this near to Mikleo is making him feel—

“I don’t like it one bit, Mikleo!”

He gets a frown and a heated stare. “You will, Sorey, if nothing goes wrong.”

“How can we be sure of that when we don’t even know if we can trust this guy!”

“Trust is something people earn by adversity. We can’t trust anyone anywhere until we learn to fight a common enemy.”

“Hey, that’s a lot of theory there, and to think you always say I read too much!”

“I’m more worried about what’s gonna happen in the next few hours than who’s gonna win this argument!”

“Listen, I’m just worried you’re making rash decisions here, Mikleo!”

“And I really appreciate your having so much faith in me…”

“Mikleo, that’s not it! I’m just—gods, can’t you see I’m worried about you—us—I mean—sheesh, I don’t know how to say it, but I’m sure you understand!”

“You’re not the only one, Sorey, ‘cause I worry too… But see, there’s nothing more I hate than seeing you take everything upon yourself! We need allies, we need—” Mikleo sighs and lets out a deep breath. “Whether you acknowledge it or not, we’re going to need as much help as we can find
if we’re planning to do this until you make up your mind about going back to the palace without me. I’m still hoping you’d choose the better alternative.”

“I believe I just did. That’s why I’m here… with you.”

At that point, Sorey felt like grabbing Mikleo by the waist and kissing him right there and then to erase all the hurt and confusion that was making him reel against Mikleo’s words. He never wanted anything more than to stay beside him. King or no king, he wants Mikleo close enough… near enough to touch, to breathe in, to kiss, to fondle, and yes… to make love to…

He wanted nothing more than to bury himself inside Mikleo… to sink his most secret desire into the deepest part of him and engrave his memory into his soul… so they would always be together.

But he knows just as much that those intimate wishes of his would have to wait—for how long, god only knows.

The gods must also know how selfish it is of him to cling to Mikleo this way, endangering a kingdom’s future by his sheer, stubborn, irrational desire to follow Mikleo to the ends of the world if need be.

Then again, how can he not want Mikleo and still be Sorey? Mikleo has always been a part of him, not because he needed to, but because he had chosen Mikleo to be that kind of influence, that kind of power in his life. And to hell with everything else… because nothing exists if Mikleo ceases to be in this world.

And if anything should happen to Mikleo… by all the gods there are, Sorey knows he’d make every man pay for it…

He would tear heaven and hell and all the worlds in between to make his anger and grief be known for all eternity.

But for now, he can try being patient. He sighs low and deep, letting his gaze shift to the blond, young man whose clear blue eyes seem just as honest as they are evasive. “All right. But I have my own conditions as well.”

His proposal was met with a quick assent. “You’ll have horses and food—as much as we can carry for the long trip ahead, and whatever else you have in mind right now that I can provide—”

Mikleo’s breathing trembled and in the next second, his hand was at the young man’s collar, his knuckles suddenly white with the force of his grip.

Sorey stared hard in disbelief as he tried to step in between them. But Mikleo gestured him aside with a glare. “Stand back, Sorey!” Without sparing Sorey another glance, Mikleo turned to the young man, who a few minutes ago he had been defending against Sorey’s suspicions.

This time he met the young man’s mild surprise with a face as bold and determined as a taut bow.

“Your speech, young Feldsparr,” he hissed, emphasizing the age difference between them that put him at an advantage. “All this while, were you just pretending to be some countryside fellow—”

The young man shook his head with the slightest grin. “Truth be told, I’ve been living here all my life… as a knight.”

“Say what?” Sorey drew his sword in a flash as his other hand pushed Mikleo behind him.
“I’m a knight of the Velvet Rose, but I’m here under the orders of the leader of the Scattered Bones…”

Sorey pointed the sword at his midriff. “And who in Maotelus’s name is that?”

“Prince Sorey, we are under the command of Rose Sparrow, captain and leader of the largest mercenary guild in the continent, and doubtless the only force that stands between the Throne, the Bishop, and the war.”

Sorey’s eyes widened in shock. He put himself firmly in front of Mikleo. “I don’t think we’re interested in making friends with your lot. You’re rebels, bandits, hired assassins…”

“Thieves, cutthroats, and some of us used to be bride-snatchers as well, your Majesty. We underworld scum go by many names. But before anything else, we’re the best mercenaries who’s ever held a sword—the only ones who can best a Silver Falcon at any time of day and in any battlefield, likewise.”

“Whatever you are, Mikleo and I do not intend—”

“Do you even have a choice, your Highness?” the young man interrupts, sapphire eyes ablaze. “If I may ask, do you even have any inkling how big your own empire is? We’re almost a thousand miles from the nearest port on any side from here, and in between are forests with hundreds of militarized borders. We have a deadly desert wasteland in the south and leagues of empty ice in the north. And have I mentioned the howling mountain chains of Tarnesia in the west and the ghoul pits and ravines of Tiamat east from here? I’ve accompanied not only humans but seraphim around many parts… more than you have, that’s for sure.”

“I don’t believe you. I think you’re saying that to make a fool of me,” Sorey moved back a little, his sword unwavering in its deliberate aim. “Besides, how can liars speak the truth after admitting falsity?”

“I admit nothing. Disguises are lies, but you have to have one to survive in this world. Even rich folks put on disguises. I’m no different.”

Mikleo was still incredulous. “Why do you have to tell such elaborate lies, then? That’s the most suspicious thing of all…”

“Perhaps, but I’d rather save the explanation for later. What I want to know is whether you two have even fought hellions before.”

Sorey raised an eyebrow at that. “I’ve heard of them at least.”

“And I’ve heard you’re the best swordsman in the land with the exception of General Zaveid. Or should we say Seraph Zaveid? Yet you have not been in any real battle or have seen one to call yourself a proper swordsman. As of now you’re nothing but a sheltered, over-protected royal brat trying to act like the prince that you should be. If that insults you, I suggest we carry on this conversation as soon as we arrive at the port where a ship has been waiting to take you out of here. There is no other way you might escape your better pursuers and find less dangerous hunting grounds.”

“Hunting grounds? What do you mean?” Mikleo still couldn’t believe the dramatic change he has just seen, as if the young man they had been talking to before was just a mirage.

“You’re the hunted, the prey, of course. And your hunters are rabid wolves… guided by a terrifying army of falcons.”
“Hell, you’re not telling us where to go! Mikleo and I have our own—”

“Forgive my saying this, but that’s nothing but sheer impudence, your Majesty! Fifty thousand troops will be at your heels by dawn. That’s more than the number my father had to face during the great campaign up north against the Northern Alliance of Helmsdall with twenty thousand troops under his command! But even when he brought home nothing but impossible victories, the King had the Platinum Knights disbanded ten years ago.”

Mikleo held Sorey’s sword by the hilt, staying his arm as Sorey turned to look at him in surprise.

“Mikleo, don’t tell me you believe him.”

“It wouldn’t hurt to listen.”

“I don’t want to wait for that. I can’t let him endanger you too.”

“Sorey… just give him a chance.”

Mikleo continued to gaze at the young man. “If you know as much about the Battle at Helmdall’s Peak, it wouldn’t be surprising if you personally knew anyone among the Platinum Knights—”

“That I do. My father is no less than General Sergei of the Platinum Knights of Rolance…”

Sorey’s sword wavered but only for two seconds. “You don’t use such names in jest, I’m warning you…”

“I do not, my lords. I hold my father in high esteem next to none.”

“Oh gods, you’re either such a good liar or you’re far too honest for your own good,” Sorey lowered his sword, not quite ready to sheath it.

“You’re the one to talk when it comes to being honest,” Mikleo found himself whispering breathlessly. Whether it was meant as a banter or an honest criticism was left undecided as Sorey shrugged that off, trying his damnedest best not to look too hurt.

Sorey decided to sheath his sword at Mikleo’s urgent prodding. “Fine, I guess I’d rather have that than false praises. That aside…” He throws the other young man a stern look. “Let’s get your horses—if they’re in fact even yours?”

The blonde nodded. “They are, my lords. None of the things I’ve told you from the start is untrue, not even the name Halden Feldspar or the fact that I desire to be a member of the Silver Falcons… not to serve them, but to accommodate my own ends.”

“Well, care to explain yourself a bit then?” Mikleo pouted a little, his curiosity having completely overtaken his self-imposed courtly manners. “General Sergei Strelka has no son by that name…”

The young man reached out for Mikleo’s hand to kiss it. “To begin with, I’m Kylen Strelka of the House of Rall-ga’thur. Just two days ago, I succeeded my uncle, the Grand Duke of Ral-ga’thur of the second Province of Malgovia, as his only legitimate successor.”

“You’re a duke?” Sorey’s eyes held nothing but disbelief.

“There was an agreement between my father and my uncle that the son who follows the eldest in succession should acquire such a title from the other if either one of them fails to have a legitimate heir by the time of his death. As tradition likewise dictates, my older brother is to remain with the
House of Strelka to carry my father’s name and title as his proper heir.”

Mikleo nodded slowly. “I think I heard of such practices before among the older families of Hyland and Rolance.”

“Come to think of it, you do look familiar.” Sorey scratched his cheek.

“The resemblance, now that you mentioned is, is a bit astounding if I may say so.” Mikleo had a speculative look in his gleaming eyes as well.

The young man waved them off, finding their stares almost too honest to be offensive. “My older brother would have taken my place if he were not the first son and child at the same time, which binds him as heir to our father’s name and title only. To that end, I no longer belong to my father’s household and was allowed to take the duke’s family name and the name he had chosen for his heir —hence the name I’ve given you, Halden Feldsparr, when I introduced myself. I was almost worried you might recognize it, and when you didn’t, I was both relieved and rather disappointed, to be honest.”

“Hey, don’t expect us to know the name of every duke in the kingdom, especially one who’s been proclaimed only two days ago!”

The young duke understood that much, doing his best to suppress a smile at the crown prince’s almost childish outburst. “Point taken, your Majesty. Besides, I’ve spent the better part of my life outside my father’s household. You could say I was the black sheep of the family because I’ve been with the Scattered Bones since I was about eight years old.”

Mikleo gave him a surprised look. “You’re not saying you ran away from home?”

“I could not live with the knowledge that my mother remarried barely a month after my father’s death. When I learned that my father must have been murdered by a hired hand rather than killed by mortal injuries received in his last battle, I was resolved never to return to my father’s house until I’ve learned the truth of it.”

“I think I understand that…” Mikleo said thoughtfully, feeling a light touch on his shoulder. Mikleo just shook his head. “I’m all right. For some reason I understand what he’s gone through.”

“By the time I turned thirteen, I was already a herald. In less than a year I was knighted by no less than Lord Dezel of the Order of the Velvet Rose. Of course, in a manner of speaking, heralds are two ranks lower than knights. Even so, I’ve already been carrying out the same tasks as a mercenary, and my first battle was at the border town of Asfern, the last town that spans the north separating this continent by sea from Helmdall…”

“Well, the name Feldsparr does ring a bell…” Mikleo started, “… but I’ve heard nothing of the Scattered Bones or the Order of the Velvet Rose, have you?”

Sorey just remembered something, but all he could do was nod a bit apprehensively.

“Besides, what we want to know is why you need an elaborate disguise and give us aid at the time we need it most? Although I can’t help but sympathize, there isn’t enough evidence to blot out suspicion of your real motives,” Mikleo told him, trying to steel his gaze.

“The Scattered Bones have their own interest in this, no doubt. That is why Lord Dezel asked me to make certain your purpose and to give you reassurance that the Scattered Bones are willing to help, should you need it. Likewise, I cannot reveal my reasons without ascertaining the purpose behind your escape, and whether you are privy to the Bishop’s or the Chancellor’s will. As common sense
dictates, we mercenaries and outlaws are opposed to whoever allies himself with the Chancellor and the Bishop. We feel that the empire shall be betrayed by them soon enough.”

“That said, shall we address you as Halden Feldsparr or—”

“I think it best that you call me by my other name when I’m under the Scattered Bones. I prefer Kylen, my prince.” He kneels in front of Mikleo and takes his hand. “This shall be our formal introduction, Prince Mikleo.”

“That said,” Sorey muttered, grabbing Kylen’s hand as he wedged himself in between the two. “You don’t mind shaking my hand too, do you? I hate to break you two up, but we need those horses now. The empire and all its problems might have to wait until we’re miles out of reach.”

Mikleo gave Sorey a quick, sidelong glance. “Are you even all right?”

Sorey pouted. “I guess? But we need to talk. Later.”

Mikleo couldn’t ascertain the reason for Sorey’s petulant mood. He raised an eyebrow. “Well, whatever’s eating you must be something we can discuss as soon as we get these things settled.”

“Just the two of us, all right?” Sorey felt like he needed to insist.

Mikleo sighed. “Oh god, you make it sound like I did something so wrong that needed a scolding.”

“Don’t know about that,” Sorey muttered, folding his arms across his chest with a slight huff.

“Whatever.” Mikleo looked away, finding the sky remotely interesting even when the full moon basked everything in soft, resplendent light that some hours ago appealed to him as ethereal, almost romantic…

“We go this way quickly, my lords,” Kylen beckoned to them, his face still boyishly unassuming despite the re-introductions that revealed his true identity.

Walking side by side but without even sparing each other glances, both princes followed quietly into the darkness, barely aware of the silent silhouettes fleeting and swaying with an invisible will around them.

Malfus would have knocked off each and every wine glass within reach if Bishop Heldalf had not been there in time to restrain him in the most subtle way he could.

“This is neither the time nor place…”

He was interrupted by a loud crash followed by a booming voice that came from down below where most of the guests were, speaking in hushed voices that were mostly audible anyway from the balconies above.

“The crown prince—that is, the renowned heir of Kreveldor and no less than our royal princess’s fiancé—has just taken off without proper notice! How dare he humiliate the alliance between our two kingdoms in such a manner and in his own engagement no less!”
The entire room grew still, the apparent commotion now replaced by a stony silence that seemed to stretch for hours. Malfus found himself snickering even as he tried to contain his own inner fury when he leaned a little over the bishop's shoulder to ask in a hushed whisper.

“The hell with Erinvale’s whore… who is that pig-headed boor, Heldalf?”

“Pay him no mind,” Heldalf answered, forcing himself to get used to being addressed without the proper honorifics by the insolent apostle-candidate standing next to him. Training as his successor to the bishop’s throne, Malfus would have done better as Kreveldor’s heir, being next in the line of succession as the King’s eldest nephew. But then Sorey came, borne through Heldalf’s own intervention, which would have been considered suspicious in itself were the bishop not the next most powerful man in the empire, second only to the overlord himself.

As rumors have it, anything the bishop says has the power to bend the will of councils and alliances, including the King’s Own. But this time, that particular man chose to remain quiet, languishing in the shadows of a balcony overlooking the scene of uproar.

Malfus groans as another screeches a loud, almost yelping “Aye” to what was said earlier. It was obvious how the tides had turned to make the Princess of Erinvale the center of distraction if not attention. Unfortunately, Kreveldor’s own counsels could only offer half-hearted apologies and vague explanations to staunch further protest.

Malfus’s sharp, blue eyes seemed to penetrate even the darkest of shadows as they lingered on the scene below. He could see Princess Alisha surrounded by imposing knights in black armor, at the head of which was the tall, reputable lady-knight general of the House of Ladylake herself, Maltran of the Black Titanium Knights. Something about the woman piqued his interest… not that he finds her attractive in that way. He sensed something about her which was a little more than extraordinary, yet not quite supernatural still… an energy signature that smelled almost faintly of ash, wet bark, and cold clay.

The stench of Malevolence clung in the air around her, and Malfus knew far more than common sense that none can sense such things quite as naturally or easily as he can.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of glass crashing, of sharpened spears meeting, of iron and metal clashing in a desperate attempt to contain chaos or aggravate it. Malfus groaned as Heldalf merely looked on, his face a passive mask of hardened restraint.

Below them, the Black Titanium Knights who have completely surrounded their princess had begun to raise their unsheathed swords against the spears of the Knights of the Silver Falcons.

“Aren’t this the perfect time to grace them with your appearance? You can try giving your knights an order or two, starting with that man,” Malfus suggested, eyes squinting at the sight of the one who created the initial uproar. “That man is annoying. If somebody isn’t going to slit his throat right here, I will.”

“He’s just one of the ambassadors from Princess Alisha’s court, a man who goes by the name of Lord Trelvik,” Heldalf whispered with another impassive grin. “He will die by dawn, I assure you. These things should not be allowed to fester long.”

Malfus regarded the plump, brightly-dressed man in his forties with something akin to the disgust of one who has just squished a fat fly between his palms. “His badmouthing sickens me. Who do they think they are, coming all the way here to grovel upon the Prince’s feet for a chance at marrying off their maiden whore? I pity their princess… that she should have to stoop so low for someone like Sorey. He’s not even what they think he is. You know it as much as I do, Heldalf, right? After all, it
“is your own doing… the answer to all your prayers.”

“Restraint they say is the essence of manhood. Thou shalt not speak of truths that put you in danger.”

Malfus grins. “Indeed, you have been holding onto the Insidion this long without being found out. I wonder how you’ve accomplished that?”

“The methods are irrelevant. I need its power to summon his soul back into this world.”

“And now that you have the Shepherd back, then what?” Malfus seemed bored to tears as he asked this as if he knew the plot well before Heldalf could answer that question.

“The Dark Shepherd will rise. And with him the new Lord of Calamity… a stronger one… someone who will not only bring chaos within order, but unite both forces so that all things might be reborn and reshaped as they should.”

“Do you not even fear the Insidion’s power? It has killed gods and seraphim alike. It seethes with the deepest anger, hate, and rage that’s been sealed from the very beginning of time, before light and dark were divided…”

Heldalf hazards a wan smile. “I am amazed at how much the awakening within you has progressed. You speak of a knowledge that not even the most ancient texts contain except as puzzles that have no answers. Without a doubt, you are indeed the Divine Mystic, the one to complete the Trinity…”

“I didn’t know you have entertained the slightest doubts about me, Heldalf. Surely, my twisted mind is more than convincing?”

“Still, you need to stay away from your weakness… until the awakening is complete.”

Malfus’s lips curled into a wicked grin. “When have my personal concerns been yours to decide? You should know more than I do why Mikleo is the only thing I will not—never—give up…”

“The Insidion will claim him from you. Then where will you be when that happens?”

“I will fight it.”

“You will lose.”

“And why is that?”

“Because I have a theory, Malfus.” Heldalf begins to smile, but it was a sad, beguiling smile that seems to convey secrets darker and heavier than the weight of all the sins and corruption of the world.

Malfus feigns disinterest. “Gods, am I supposed to not know this? You’re forgetting I’m the Divine Mystic, the one true Sage whose knowledge must surpass all things—”

“Except that of your own fate. There is something not even you are allowed to know… and that is the knowledge of your true origin, including your own future in all this.”

“I will claim my own future! I will not be the weak Shepherd that Sorey is and can only be! I will surpass that man in all things… to be able to take what was mine from the beginning of all this!”

“Do you know why you can never be the Shepherd, Malfus?”

“Shepherds are merely the puppet-masters of the seraphim! I do not envy Sorey’s weakness.”
“But Sorey is different from all Shepherds. He and the Insidion have been borne from the same desire... to protect the Child of Light and Dark, the Child of Eternal Shadows... the sacrifice that made the gods and the seraphim survive through the centuries...”

“You lie, Heldalf...” Malfus was seething now, his face livid with undisguised hate. “You claim knowledge, but the truth, is you cannot know something I don’t! I’m the Divine Mystic, I’m part of the Trinity and I shall awaken to my power soon enough to crush even yours!”

“It is your power that I doubt, Malfus, never your resolve.”

“You are one, condescending demon, Heldalf.”

“You are right in something at least. I am a demon. The Lord of Calamity is just one of three that had been awakened within me. I wish to reunite with my other selves, just as your essence seeks the two other parts of you that shall complete you.”

Heldalf then turns to give Malfus a look of serious apprehension. “As you can see, you’re not the only one who is part of the Trinity...”

Malfus gives him a scornful glare. “The Mystic Trinity, the Trinity of Chaos, and the Divine Trinity... whether the world needs all nine masters or fools not even the gods can tell...”

“Yet only one shall succeed where all others must fail.”

“As if you have the right to speak of others’ failures...” Something within Malfus begins to recognize the logic, the pattern hidden in what Heldalf had been so evasive about, and his eyes glowed with revulsion. “You may have been the Lord of Calamity, but even you were weaker than Sorey himself! As such you’ve allowed yourself to be beaten by him and his pathetic horde of squires and seraphim—”

“My defeat was the key that made me understand why things have to be purified so that both Light and Dark may exist anew...”

“Your paradoxical statements give me headaches.”

“You rely on knowledge too much without thinking. Have you even considered why Shepherds exist? Why there is Malevolence that needs to be purged, and why there is so much evil no matter how hard both humans and seraphim have tried to purify it?”

“That’s because they’re all weak just like you, Heldalf... weaker than all the Malevolence that has existed from the beginning.”

“It is the enemy’s weakness that keeps the Insidion sealed. In war, no country invades another that’s too weak to fight. No battles can be fought if there is no rival who wants to oppose the greater power. The Insidion needs a vessel who can summon both good and evil... For as long as light and dark are divided, the seal will remain. Polarities such as good and evil would always be weak because their powers are complementary, never stronger or weaker than the other.”

“So you’re saying that Shepherds merely restore the balance between such forces, purifying what needs to be purified to keep things even—good and evil, light and dark...”

“Balance keeps any single power from taking absolute control. Peace and harmony negate power, but it cannot defeat it alone. By working towards a state of balance, Shepherds have managed to keep the world safe from the Insidion that sleeps in the hidden womb of all creation... the child of all the errors of man’s beginnings... the dark, hateful secret even the gods feared to remember...”
Malfus slowly begins to realize what he has been missing. “The death of all Shepherds must then be accomplished no less by someone good… someone infinitely good, but nevertheless tainted with a desire so strong, so persuasive that he loses any self-awareness of his true purpose.”

“It is in paradox, they say, that true wisdom may be found.”

Malfus shakes his head. “Right. As if there are such things as innocent murderers or pure-hearted sinners. It’s as absurd as wishing for a saintly demon to be so kind as to kill for the good of the world.”

Heldalf’s eyes shimmer with a desperate yearning to speak, but he lets his lips thin with suppressed anticipation instead. “To learn beyond knowledge, we must observe things as they come to pass. Only then may we realize whether the impossible is truly so or just a mere excuse for ignorance or fear.”

Malfus smiles. "The impossible... who would imagine that such things are exactly why humanity can never win? Their weakness is what makes them helpless against their fate. As for us, neither god nor seraph, we wield the kind of power that none has yet foreseen..."

If only winning is all that matters... Heldalf winces stepping into the cloak of darkness that seems to be waiting at the other end. And losing the only other consequence...

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While Mikleo and the young man claiming to be Sergei’s son busied themselves with picking the right horses to take with them, Sorey noticed an adjoining room that was dimly-lit as if a small fire had been left burning within the enclosure. What seemed strangely inviting about it was the feeling of warmth it exuded; it was more appealing than the dark, musty coldness that greeted them as they entered the stables, which was stacked with enough hay to last an entire winter and to which clung the somewhat earthy stench of horse dung.

Pushing the sliding wooden door a little farther to let himself in, Sorey knew he was looking at something he hadn’t quite seen before.

The room had a high ceiling from which hung strips of leather of various lengths. They have been tied around logs horizontally suspended halfway from the ceiling down to the smelting pits below where a hard, flat surface displayed a homely clutter of various blades—knives, daggers, chipped swords that seemed to have grown rusty either from lack of use or overuse."

“Do you have sword smiths working here?”

Kylen had heard Sorey’s voice from afar and headed in his direction, following his gaze as he entered the lighted enclosure.

“This barn has been part of the House of Strelka for ages. My grandparents ventured into crafting jewelry for the royal families, but my ancestors were originally sword smiths. I guess that’s how we got involved in war and politics… You can see up there,” he told Sorey, gesturing with his hand to one of the leather straps that hung loose from a log, “… that blade used to be my father’s sword, the same one that led him to victory against those fifty thousand troops I’ve mentioned a while ago. I’ve been trying to re-forge it for years now, but every time I get down to working on it something comes up and I have to set it aside for later… It’s been almost a year since last time I held it…”
“I thought you haven’t planned on returning to your father’s house until you’ve learned the truth about—”

“I did. And that’s why I came back. The reunion didn’t turn out too well, not that I expected it to. My older brother punched the daylights out of me. And my mother was in hysterics for days. It was a mess, but it’s all right now, I guess.”

“I’m glad to hear it. But if you’re saying you learned the truth about your father…”

“Which I plan on telling you later. It’s a long story, your Majesty.”

“I suppose. Whatever it is, I sure hope you’ve moved on. Grudges aren’t worth keeping…”

“True enough. Maybe?”

“Maybe? Gods, you’re just as stubborn as Mikleo, I think!”

Kylen smiled at the way Sorey kept his gaze on the broken blade even as he laughed heartily. Not that he could stop the crown prince from being curious. Each of the two parts of the broken sword he had pointed out to him was held by a strap of leather, the sword having been broken in the middle from the hilt. As Sorey kept his gaze on it, the two parts dangled in silence, not even moving against the slight wind coming through.

Sorey considered it for a moment, feeling a slight unease but also a strange kind of awe and excitement at the possibility of gauging real battles from the study of such historical artefacts as swords and war relics.

_Must be heavy… that much at least I can tell…_

The young duke left Sorey to his musings and walked stealthily back to the stables.

Mikleo almost jumped when he felt a hand on his waist. That touch was hardly familiar, making him defensive all of a sudden.

But the hand was quicker than he could ever be. It held onto him tightly, one hand going to his throat as a hungry mouth kissed his mouth, his neck savagely.

“Don’t squirm or your prince would find out what we’re doing…”

Mikleo held his breath, but not his disgust. “Who are you really?”

“I am what I am… and this is just taking what you promised. I’ll touch you no more… if I can help it.”

“You’re scum…”

“And you’re too beautiful to resist.”

Mikleo’s eyes burned as he resisted the urge to struggle too strongly and make a commotion that might alarm Sorey.

Kylen grinned at him, his boyishly innocent face unfazed by Mikleo’s churning revulsion. “I just hope we don’t get into trouble with such lovely company.” Kylen let him go at that, releasing him as swiftly as he had claimed him.

Mikleo hissed at him as he glanced at Sorey, making sure he was too far to hear their whispering.
“You try that again and I’ll—”

“I won’t touch you in any other way or even try to hurt you, my lord if I can help it. I’m just looking for inspiration, and to be honest, I’ve been curious about you for the longest time. I would like to know at least to what sort of divine fate I’m about to entrust my life, my service, my entire future no less—from this day forward until the end.”

Mikleo eyes him critically, visibly seething with rage. “I’m certain we won’t be needing you that badly…”

“Don’t be too confident,” Kylen tells him with the mildest of chuckles. “Our journey will take us into territories you have not imagined exist… where even seraphim are afraid to walk… Your prince will not survive without people to guard his back—and yours.”

“You’re making this all up…”

“Rose Sparrow is an ally who knows a lot of scum like me who can provide access to routes around highly-guarded borders. But she won’t be of any use until we get to the Port of Volgeirn. That’s eight hundred miles from here. Anything can happen in between, and we’re about to take the longest route just to avoid half of those things we don’t want to see or fight unnecessarily.”

“You don’t seem like a royal duke if you’ve been around that much.”

“Fate has a nasty way of turning things around for better or worse. I became duke just a couple of days ago, but I was a free man before then, and I intend to be a free man from here on. I hate stuffy titles and women bore me to death. I guess you know my preferences…”

“We’re not talking about that ever.”

“I think I just tasted his scent on you…”

Mikleo’s lavender eyes glared daggers at the duke. “You’ve got a lot of nerve to assume you know—”

“Cold-blooded murderers like me don’t assume ever. Rather, I know these things, after all I’m an Adept if you’ve heard of one. I’ve been with the Scattered Bones since the day my father has been murdered…”

“Officially, General Sergei died from battle wounds—”

The young duke shook his head. “Some court physicians can be bribed, and military medics are notorious for poisoning anyone who questions the orders of either the Bishop or the Chancellor. Military tactics can be rewritten, treaties dissolved underhandedly if they so desire. You must know what a shrewd and scheming snake Heldalf is yourself, after all, you practically live under the same roof.”

“All I know is that I smell trouble when he’s around.”

The duke reached out to touch Mikleo’s cheek. Mikleo flinched, swatting his hand away. In the next second, Kylen had him in his arms, locking his lips with Mikleo’s in a desperate and hungry kiss.

Mikleo pushed against the knee wedged between his legs. Somehow, having another man do exactly the same thing Sorey did stirred his insides, filling him with a churning revulsion that almost paralyzed the rest of him as he struggled against the tight, unwanted embrace.
“What an angel... you feel so good... so perfect...”

Mikleo stumbled backwards, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. “I’ll kill you—”

“Not when I’ve already got a hold on you...”

“You don’t know what you’re saying—”

“Testing me, are you?” Kylen chuckles as he pulled Mikleo back, breathing kisses along Mikleo’s nape as he trapped him between his thighs, pressing Mikleo hard against the prominent bulge of his manhood.

“I know for a fact you’d do anything for your prince even if it means giving your all... because he’s your everything, am I right?”

Mikleo shuddered. “Your accusations are delusional.”

“Love is delusional. You’d sacrifice yourself for something ain’t rewarding in the end.”

“Shut up!”

Kylen lets him go, licking his bruised lips. “Prince Sorey doesn’t stand a chance without me on his side. And I ask only so little in exchange for my services...”

Mikleo felt his eyes sting with suppressed tears. “I won’t be your whore...”

“You don’t get to decide that. I’ll make sure to bed you at least once before this is over.”

Mikleo’s eyes flashed a brilliant shard of silver light. “I’d rather die before that happens.”

“I believe that won’t happen. Not when your prince needs every little help he can get, and you know that yourself. Otherwise you wouldn’t be so damn protective of him.”

“You underestimate him. And you’re forgetting I’m older than you.”

“Age doesn’t count,” Kylen hissed reproachfully. "When my father was murdered, I was only seven years old, barely old enough to take care of myself, but I had to run away from home and be man enough to survive without help. Since that time I've been fighting ‘things’ you and your sheltered prince might have not even seen or heard before. It was by sheer chance and pure luck that I was able to meet Sir Brad Sparrow, leader of the Scattered Bones during that time. He used to be a Platinum Knight of Rolance and knew my father well. They fought side by side at Helmdall's Peak against the Black Skull Knights of the Northern Alliance. When he passed away, his daughter Lady Rose Sparrow established the Order of the Velvet Rose, together with Lord Dezel who now leads it."

"How does that differ from the Scattered Bones?"

"Knights like me may be mercenaries to people like you, but the Scattered Bones ain't bothered whether you think of them as scum. They prefer to remain part of the underworld for a lot of reasons, and I won't deny the convenience of knowing how filthy, murderous scum think... I mean, let's face it, when you're up against an enemy of superior strength, one thing you can do is to take advantage of those who hate that enemy just as much as you do."

"What's that got to do with me and Sorey?"

"Our spies have sensed your escape from the palace and informed my Lady of the possibilities of
working with you. We don’t know much about you and your prince’s plans, but we’re ready to take every opportunity that comes our way if such gets us closer to our own goal.”

“Which is?”

“We have a common enemy within the palace walls. You should know by now who that special person is.”

“The Bishop is not someone you can trifle with. He has the Silver Falcons and the King’s Own to back him up.”

“And we’ve got two princes and a handful of seraphim on our side. Not bad, isn’t it?”

Mikleo huffed. “But Sorey and I have plans of our own.”

The young duke took one step forward and in mid-stride grabbed Mikleo’s wrist without warning.

“So you’re planning to be his whore for nothing?”

Mikleo flinched visibly, eyes burning like live coals. “You watch your words—”

“No, I prefer watching you, m’lord. I’ve been watching you for the longest time… and believe me, I know pretty well where you go, what you do, what things you eat, what books you read… I’ve been a spy for the Scattered Bones for as long as I can remember, and I’ve been following you and your prince for just as long. You may be older, but I bet you know nothing of the world that I’ve seen and killed so many times you can call me a bloody murderer, put me in jail, and throw away the key for all I care.”

“Don’t touch me,” Mikleo hissed in warning.

Kylen grinned at him. “Forgive me, my sweet prince, but like what I told my captain, I handle this under my own terms. Make no mistake, though I’m a duke in name and title, I’m still the underground mercenary-knight and outlaw that I’ve always been since I became part of the Scattered Bones. I don’t care much for nobility and your fake virtues and arrogant hypocrisies. I take what’s mine and enjoy it like I should. And that—” He suddenly inclines his head, pushing his knee between Mikleo’s thighs as he leans forward, their noses almost touching. “—that includes you.”

Mikleo bit back his lips as the duke leaned forward to kiss him. He chuckled at Mikleo’s futile attempt to resist his advances as he cupped Mikleo’s manhood that felt delicious against his knee.

Mikleo bit him savagely, pushing him back with all the strength he could muster despite the shock and fear that made him shiver with weakness. Strangely, his efforts only made Kylen smile with a hint of humor in his eyes.

“You’ll relent when the time comes. And I’ll be right here waiting for you.”

Mikleo rubbed his wrist as soon as he was able to wrench his arm free from the young duke’s grip. “You said love is delusional. Can’t expect a fucking bastard to understand something so sublime, I guess. I think in most things you’re nothing like your father who—”

A hand suddenly clamps his throat and Mikleo finds himself reeling backwards. “I’m younger and I’m trying to be patient, but say that again, and I’ll rip your guts right here right now as much as I would your body and soul, you hear?” He then licks Mikleo’s jaw with a satisfied groan. “Believe me when I say this—that I haven’t wanted anything so much as ravishing the likes of you, m’lord, inside and out. I suggest you prepare yourself ‘cause the day I take you is the day you ain’t gonna have nothin’ to say to your prince.”
Mikleo stifles a cry as a hand strokes him between his thighs, and a hungry mouth covered his lips.

Kylen breaks the kiss and releases him. “That was good.”

“I can’t believe you can do these things and speak the way you do like it’s nothing!”

“I’ve had a rough life, Prince Mikleo—a life of struggle, danger, and disappointment such that you haven’t seen nor felt before. This is nothing compared to what I’ve seen others do... but believe me, I can be gentle when I want to. I promise to treat you like a princess on our first night.”

Mikleo tried desperately to ignore the panic that took hold of him then. “I don’t believe you’re capable of carrying out your threats.”

Kylen snickered. “Maybe I should tie up your prince and do you in front of him to make myself clear? I’ll rip you and ravish you in front of him and watch him cry like a wounded beast. Yer ready for that, m’lord?”

Mikleo noticed how the duke’s speech style reverted to that of his uncouth self during his more intimate attacks. Whether he simply imagined it or not, the young duke seemed conflicted, struggling to suppress something within him by making excessive threats and brutally assaulting him. Mikleo knew Kylen deserved no sympathy even if such were the case, but he could not deny either that Kylen could not stir him as madly as Malfus did. Unlike Malfus, there was no deep, desperate, or foreboding evil in Kylen’s presence, in the way he touched and spoke to him even if his words were no less coercive and malicious than anything Malfus might have said before. That day he was assaulted by him, he remembers being so afraid… so afraid that he felt his soul crumbling, withering away like dune against a desert storm…

He stepped away from Kylen just as Sorey appeared from behind him.

“Hey, you two, what have you been discussing that’s so important?”

Mikleo looked away. “Nothing much. Besides, I can tell you later.”

“Is that a promise?”

Mikleo tries to smile. “Uh, if the horses are ready there’s no reason to stay here longer than we need to.”

“I thought you were hungry… Kylen said he had some provisions, didn’t you?”

Kylen shrugged. “They’re all packed and ready. But I suggest we head out a little later… I’m sure the search parties are now heading this way and in two hours the countryside will be overrun by them, all too eager and energetic to find you during those first few hours. Given the state you two are in, it doesn’t seem like you’d be able to endure an hour’s ride, and on top of that, we can’t risk getting into a chase since there’s no way the Scattered Bones can give us cover until we reach the port of Volgeirn. That’s the deal as far as I know.”

“So what would you have us do? Wait here ‘til they sneak in on us?”

Sorey held Mikleo by the shoulder. “There’s no way I’m going to let them take you back, you know that, right?”

“We don’t have time to discuss this. We should be riding out by now.”

Kylen chuckled. “This barn ain’t as shabby as you think it is. We have basements big enough to hold
six horses and some raw supplies…”

“ Weapons you mean,” Sorey quipped, his tone serious but a little excited too.

“I’ll be on the lookout for any parties while you take the horses down the underground cabin I’ll show you and take a much needed rest. I’ll give the signal as soon as we’re clear to go.”

“Why should we even take your word for it?” Mikleo asked, glaring down at the young duke.

“No, you don’t have to, but who else can you trust?”

“He’s right, Mikleo. Besides…” Sorey turns to the young duke with a stern expression. “Make a wrong move, and I’ll see you back in the palace dungeons.”

Kylen grunts. “That sounds like a threat.”

“It is,” Sorey confirms without blinking. “But for now, we can pretend to trust each other and suspend disbelief. Let’s just see how far we can stretch this game until we’re ready to believe in each other as real friends should.”

“All right, I get it.”

Kylen walks them to a nearby haystack and bends to feel something on the ground underneath. His fingers trace an unnoticeable groove in the wooden floor boards and suddenly he was lifting what seems like a round door with no handle but a mere tiny slit where nothing but two slim fingers might fit.

“It’s been here for ages and so far no one has suspected it being here. My father knew we might need this ourselves and had only mentioned its existence to me and my brother. No one else would know where to find this.”

“And where is your older brother, by the way?”

“Abroad. He’s on a mission for the Order, and there’s nothing Lady Rose might ask that he could refuse anyway. As for me, they’re pretty lax on the new duke of Malgovia… probably thinking I’m still gallivanting and celebrating my good fortune to be anywhere near home or this place. Besides, nobody cares about young dukes these days… hardly anyone might even recognize me. My absence shall not be missed, so giving myself any name at this time would be very convenient.”

Sorey seemed very satisfied with that explanation. He looked at Mikleo over his shoulder.

“You look like you really need a good meal and a well-deserved rest.”

“Which reminds me… the saddle bags I’ve packed have a few things you might find decent enough to eat. I’ve also added some cherries for your benefit. I’d spare you a few hours… and I knock before I peep.”

Sorey almost blushed at that. “That counts as courtesy, I guess.”

“Thanks,” Mikleo muttered dryly at the young duke, averting his gaze. He lets Sorey pull him close and they descend into the semi-darkness below with Sorey ahead by one step.

“Oh, and sweet prince Mikleo, fair dreams to you.”

Mikleo ignored that as Sorey pulled him farther down, both of them reaching the bottom of the stairs safely with Kylen and the horses trailing them.
Kylen passes the reins to him. “Remember what I said. I’m only letting you tonight.”

Mikleo felt his skin crawl as he turned his face away, wanting to hide the *real* meaning those words have between them.

Sorey stepped forward and gently took the horses’ reins from him. “Here, let me. You go ahead and rest.”

“My, my, always the kind and attentive brother, aren’t you?” Kylen chuckled as he proceeded up the stairs and back into the stables above them. He peered into the basement one last time.

“A few hours is all I can give you. We leave before dawn.”

The door closes and Mikleo finds himself torn between keeping quiet and screaming his head off.

“Something the matter?” Sorey asks, noticing Mikleo’s mood. After tying the horses to a far-off corner of the basement that served as a makeshift stable and storage room, he brought back with him a loaf of bread and some cherries, which he found among the saddle bags that Kylen had loaded with all sorts of emergency supplies. When he didn’t get an answer, he set down the bread and cherries on a piece of brown paper to the side and turned to face Mikleo.

Still not getting any response, Sorey reached out an index finger and lifted Mikleo’s face by the chin, letting those lavender eyes meet his direct gaze.

“I’m right here, Mikleo, all right? I’m not much, but you can depend on me to protect you. I won’t let them hurt you, not a chance.”

Mikleo lets out a slow sigh. “I know and besides, it’s not like I have a right to complain either. This was my idea to begin with.”

“Don’t be too harsh on yourself…” Sorey tells him, one hand going to Mikleo’s waist as soon as he was certain from the noises above them that Kylen couldn’t be anywhere close within hearing. He looked around quickly, taking in the size of the room and the slight scuffling sounds the horses were making with their hooves as they tried to find a place to lie down among the hay.

Sorey chuckles as Mikleo lets his hand slide a little lower, stopping just above his hip bone. “This isn’t so bad. Besides, I did say I wanted to be alone with you for a while…”

Mikleo felt Sorey’s hot breath graze his nape, followed by lips that nibbled the tip of his right ear. A rush of fever immediately took over his body, making him shiver, his knees becoming suddenly weak and wobbly beneath him.

Sorey continued to stroke his hip as his lips moved down Mikleo’s ear to the slender curve of his neck and by then he had to reach out and hold Mikleo by the shoulder so he could turn his body toward him and see Mikleo’s face.

As soon as silvery lavender eyes met his emerald gaze, Sorey moved his other hand up to caress Mikleo’s back, tracing a line from his slender shoulder blades to the slight dip just below his waist at which point he could feel the sloping curve of Mikleo’s body molding itself against his pliant touch. Though this tempting shape was calling out to him, making him imagine Mikleo against the wall grinding against his hardened urges, he suppressed a heavy groan and instead moved his hand further up to Mikleo’s nape. In the next second, he was pressing his weight against Mikleo’s upper torso as his mouth swooped down on those pink, inviting lips, his mouth crashing onto Mikleo’s mouth with a desperate force that made Mikleo reel backwards, breathless against that kiss.
Sorey quivered as he suppressed a moan when he felt Mikleo’s tongue against his own. He couldn’t believe he was tasting this much of Mikleo, who allowed him entrance to that sweet, willing mouth of his with gentle thrusts that explored all the tastes and textures it could find within.

Mikleo moaned when Sorey’s right hand ventured farther down, finding the treasure that quickened both their heartbeats.

“Sorey…” Mikleo could only whimper vaguely as that same hand cupped his manhood. It lavished slow, gentle strokes on his quivering flesh, making it throb desperately for release. Sorey pulled back gently to meet Mikleo’s languid gaze.

“Tell me right now if it’s not all right…” Sorey exhales in Mikleo’s ear with a heavy, panting sound. “… ’cause I don’t think I can stop myself from here if you don’t.”

Mikleo thought of Sorey’s hands, Sorey’s body molding itself gently, yet insistently against his own desire and remembered Kylen’s more wanton, more violent caresses, those hard kisses that bruised him from within. He wanted to forget all of that, wanted to drown only in Sorey’s scent… in his sweat… in his sweet, sweet seed that told him clearly how much he was loved, and how much his body craved only Sorey, to belong only to him and no one else.

Mikleo touched the buckle of one belt where Sorey’s hand rested. “I want you to do it… I want you to be the only one, Sorey… the only one to take me… the only one to make me yours.”

Sorey’s eyes widened. Something in the glimmer in Mikleo’s lavender eyes told him that ‘doing it’ meant something more than being together the way they were together, bonded skin to skin a few hours ago. It meant being so much more…

It meant going all the way… inside Mikleo… to claim him absolutely, permanently…

To make Mikleo his and no one else’s.

Not that Sorey had not wanted it, imagined it, lusted for it. With Mikleo he could hardly be innocent.

What was stopping him was the urgency in Mikleo’s voice. It seems as if he was running away from something, running from some nameless fear that was bound to catch up with him.

Could it be Malfus? Or did anyone give him reason to be so afraid… to feel the urgent need to be bound to him as if that alone is sufficient reassurance?

Of course a better part of him wanted to take advantage of that fear, that vulnerability. He would never regret it, that much he knew, and he would never get tired of Mikleo that much was certain. But no matter how he rationalized it, he could not help feeling guilty.

It felt wrong. It felt selfish. It felt so… unfair.

He could use this moment to tie Mikleo to his side forever even if he wasn’t entirely sure how deep Mikleo’s feelings were for him. Of course he could make himself convincing, offer Mikleo everything—even the entire world if he could have that as overlord of Kreveldor, but would that make Mikleo happy?

Would that be enough to keep his heart from loving someone else?

Haven’t all the past kings failed in that regard? Haven’t they forced themselves upon the women they loved only to realize that love cannot be bribed by a simple promise of power, wealth, and status? Haven’t all their kings lived loveless, empty lives, drowned in illusions of desire that their harems
tried to compensate for?

Is love a compromise? Is lust something you can enjoy without love? Don’t hearts and souls beat as one in lovemaking, so that the body simply follows the call of the heart to it?

“Sorey… I-I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have, I mean—we don’t have to if you don’t feel ready—”

“N-no, that’s not true, I-I’ve always been ready, I mean…” He pulled Mikleo down—or rather, their bodies sank onto the hay-littered floor as easily as imitating a dance they’ve seen a million times—then Sorey began pulling down Mikleo’s breeches, his fingers immediately going for the belts that imprisoned them.

“I just want you to know I’ll always be waiting for you, Mikleo… It doesn’t matter whether it’s today or tomorrow or a hundred years from now because I’ll always want you… so I hope letting me do this means you want me that way too…”

Mikleo found the courage to let his hand slip lower, down Sorey’s hip to the space between his legs. Sorey’s manhood was a hard swell by now, almost ready to burst out of his breeches. It was a tempting vision, a seduction that told Mikleo he was wanted and desired, like a hunger that burns within a starved wolf.

A groan from Sorey made Mikleo hesitate but only for two seconds. He moved his hand to the base of that huge, throbbing swell, cupping it gently, delicately, until Sorey pressed his hand over Mikleo’s hand and moved it back and forth against his rigid desire.

The motion was repeated several times, Sorey’s pace quickening as Mikleo felt the bulge grow and stiffen beyond what he thought was possible, making his own cock quiver just imagining it.

He could feel a slight moisture seeping through the fabric, thick and hot and a little sticky and silky to the touch.

“Feels good, that—that’s how much I want you… oh god!”

Sorey suppressed his heavy moan by taking Mikleo’s mouth, muffling his grunts with a deep, bruising kiss that left both of them breathless and panting. Mikleo lifted his hip up to help Sorey as his eager fingers worked their way through the belts, finally getting to the part where Mikleo’s erection formed a healthy, tempting bulge beneath the remaining fabric that kept it imprisoned.

Sorey got up and started undressing himself the moment he realized he was too hard to wait any longer. Mikleo could only watch as the fabric gave way to that innermost private part that he still hadn’t quite gotten used to seeing, that intimate part that leaped out of the tightly stretched fabric, throbbing and swelling with desperate urgency.

When Sorey joined him in that state of obvious arousal, Mikleo felt his own cock respond with a throb, making him look away in embarrassment. But Sorey turned his chin toward him to meet his eyes with an unflinching straightforward gaze before taking his mouth to kiss with a hunger that was savage and needy.

Mikleo uttered a strained gasp the second their heated peaks came into contact with each other. Seeing Sorey’s desire leap so eagerly out of the confines of his breeches was seductive, so temptingly inviting that he could not help but arch his hips to meet that protruding desire. Mikleo welcomed the burning friction with a deep, desperate moan that prompted Sorey to deepen the kiss, his body pressing Mikleo down on the floor until he was sprawled completely beneath him, legs open wide and pressed around Sorey’s hips.
Sorey slid down and began pulling down Mikleo’s breeches inch by inch with deliberate slowness, lips trailing kisses on every inch of skin uncovered. Mikleo shivered when he felt a familiar wetness envelope his cock, then realizing what Sorey was doing, he closed his eyes and held onto Sorey’s shoulders as he felt his desire throb and peak against the movement of lips, of tongue, of teeth that grazed and caressed his aching need.

What he wasn’t ready for was the feel of something slender entering him below, something that moved in and out of him in a way he has never felt before.

Sorey moved up and kissed his neck, then the erect buds that peeked from his parted tunic. He grazed his teeth on the round, pink flesh, playing at the tiny nubs with his tongue before taking them in his mouth.

Mikleo shivered beneath him, suppressing his moans by biting on his arm. Sorey licked him ravenously as his fingers continued to enter Mikleo in swift, rapid strokes.

“Sorey… st-stop I can’t anymore… please…”

Sorey lifted himself up and the gap between their bodies suddenly left Mikleo cold and frustrated. He cocked one eye open only to find Sorey staring at the fingers he had pulled out of Mikleo.

“I think you’re wet enough…”

Mikleo didn’t understand what that meant until he saw Sorey put the same hand around his beating cock. Holding the rigid peak in a tight grasp, Mikleo saw him descend, eyes languid with repressed yearning.

The moment Sorey’s hardness entered him, Mikleo gasped, a strained, whimpering moan coming out of him as Sorey thrust into him slowly, sinking ever so carefully into the deepest, most secret part of him.

It was Sorey’s turn to suppress a deep, guttural groan as Mikleo tightened around him, clamping onto his thick, bulging manhood.

“S-so hot… so tight… oh god…”

Mikleo panicked. “I-I’m hurting you—”

Sorey panted. “N-no, no… it… it just… feels so good…”

Mikleo blushed. “Sorey…”

“Oh god… I want… I want to move inside you now. Can I, Mikleo?”

There was no way he could say no to that, not when his own manhood felt so close to giving in to that aching desire to release itself.

“You might have to… hurry… Sorey… I-I feel so close…”

Sorey felt another jolting spasm clench his cock so tightly he had to stop thrusting to regain some self-control. He panted with a moan, breathing hard against Mikleo’s neck. “Oh… oh… when you do that… it… it makes me want to come…”

“S-sorry…”

“Don’t say that…” Sorey whispers hoarsely, sinking his mouth on the side of Mikleo’s neck,
nibbling and biting him there. The nibbling was almost making Mikleo ticklish until Sorey began licking his earlobe. “I want to come so badly… please…”

Mikleo closed his eyes. “Come for me then. Come for me, Sorey…”

Sorey lifted Mikleo’s chin to him, meeting his gaze directly. “I’ll have to thrust into you many times… far deeper than I had and more… Are you sure you’re ready for that?”

Mikleo only saw emerald—bright, brilliant emerald shining down on him—so sweet, so innocent, so mesmerizing and tantalizingly kind and honest and full of love. How could he imagine saying ‘no’ to that?

With a nod, Mikleo closed his eyes. “I want you, Sorey… I want only you…”

Sorey intertwined their fingers. “I love you… and I want only you… always you…”

The first thrust wasn’t as deep, letting Mikleo feel only a slight discomfort. But as the thrusts increased, their bodies joined in the rhythm of Sorey’s rapid, desperate motion on top of Mikleo, he began to feel a tightening, burning, agonizingly deep and bruising pain that almost made him shout.

Sorey held him by the nape, one hand tightening around his waist as he aligned himself once more against Mikleo, entering him in fast, jerky movements that increased the friction between their bodies. Mikleo’s aching moans were lost in the deep grunts coming from Sorey as he sank himself more deeply than he ever had in Mikleo, then quivering and shivering violently, his swelling cock had finally found its awaited climax, spilling hotly and thickly inside Mikleo’s burning core.

Sorey groaned long and hard his release, his entire body becoming rigid as his cock convulsed. Even through Sorey's heavy breathing, Mikleo could hear his name spasm and shuttle through the sobbing, shivering cries of pleasure Sorey tried to muffled against his skin.

Then as Sorey stroked him, Mikleo came at the same time, his own moans of pleasure joining Sorey's. As Sorey's liquid fire shot into Mikleo, Mikleo released himself onto Sorey's urgent fingers, still wrapped around his spilling, throbbing shaft.

“I-I’m sorry… I’m sorry… it must hurt a lot…” Sorey said in between gasps, his head sinking farther into the crook of Mikleo’s neck as he let his orgasm subside.

Mikleo shook his head, feeling a delicious sweat cool his skin. “I wanted this to happen… I just… well… I hope I wasn’t a disappointment…”

Sorey turned to face him, bangs dripping with sweat as he traced an invisible line down Mikleo’s forehead to his lips. “No way… you’re the best thing that ever happened to me… and I won’t forget you—this—I won’t ever forget this and how much I wanted you… and how perfect you always are and will be…”

“Only in your imagination,” Mikleo quipped, knowing how embarrassing Sorey’s cheesy confession was.

“Better than my imagination…” Sorey said quickly, taking Mikleo’s mouth to kiss.

“I certainly hope so…” Mikleo muttered, feeling drowsy and limp in Sorey’s embrace.

“Lay your sleeping head, my love…” Sorey whispered, and Mikleo recognized that line immediately from a poem they both loved. “And I will upon thee prove… that my love is calmer yet stronger than the moon…”
“Aye, aye, my one, true knight…” Mikleo playfully quipped, following the undeniably romantic tenor of those lines.

In the deep, despondent darkness, shadows moved invisibly, watching how two destinies might come together like a miracle that only happens once in eternity.

And in that eerie darkness, an eerie smile appears subtly yet certainly, whispering “fair dreams” like a promise spoken in jest, like a vow meant to be broken under a sky of shattered stars.

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