Immunity: Part I

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Summary

PART ONE: SLASH: Raised in the slums, away from his scheming relatives, a prince grows up dreaming of revenge. However, blood is power, and despite his royal lineage, Ezra isn't an Elemental. Or so he believes. When he reencounters his darkly enthralling uncle, he finds himself facing new, enigmatic possibilities and unlocked powers. He soon realizes he doesn't want to kill his family. He wants to beat them at their own game.

Notes

Hello. Thank you all for your interest! This is truly a beast of a story. I am expecting five parts! Also a HUGE thank you to my beta, Selethe, who has done a simply amazing job! Any errors you see are probably my fault for f'cking with the edited version.

Warnings: Very Slow Burn: Implied incest (but it really, isn't, promise!). Slash [M/M]. Future angst/gore. Death. Also: This is not going to be a healthy relationship. Granted, there is no rape or non-con. Not even infidelity. But there will be manipulations and immoral actions between the two characters involved. If this disturbs you, please find something else to read.

DISCLAIMER: Because this is original work, I ask you not to post any part of this story elsewhere without my explicit permission. Thank you ♥
“Well? Are the rumors true, Josiah?” the King of Concordia inquired, closely examining the man standing before the throne.

“Rumors?” Josiah repeated the word derisively. “I’m afraid I don’t dwell in the grapevine as you do, King Calder. I am entirely clueless to your insinuations.”

Positioned at the king’s left-hand side, Ember lowered her lashes, darkly amused at her elder brother. When they were younger, Josiah’s guiltless face and his remarkable ability for lying had continuously deceived their caretakers. Even now, as his young, innocent appearance cooled into mature indifference, it remained difficult to discern any trickery from her brother.

Calder was unimpressed. “They say you’ve been aiding the Noir Users.” Calder’s eyes hardened when Josiah remained aloof. “The Magi,” he emphasized firmly.

“That certainly is a fascinating speculation.”

Ember hoped it was just that. A speculation.

It had been nearly five years since he declared his intentions to travel. She drank his appearance, regarding him, studying him. With long, black hair and menacing eyes, Josiah had the model appearance of nobility. However, he was no mere aristocrat. He was the crown prince—no—the king of a dead, defeated empire. He had the remarkable ability of balancing both a polished air of gentry and an intimidating aura of cruel power.

Her brother had always possessed an air of frigid cruelness. However, it seemed, after just five years of separation from him, his ominous aura had only grown. She could not put her finger on the change.

“So you’re denying it,” her husband stated, glancing at Ember and back toward Josiah.

A few crimson-clad guards, assigned to Josiah’s security detail, tittered behind her brother. In turn, Josiah inclined his head marginally, his orange eyes alight with something only he was privy to. “My people,” here, he looked pointedly at Ember, a cruel-sort of reminder that she was a foreigner here. Even if she did sit upon a throne. “Are still recovering from the war they waged with your people. I would not aid the Magi and put what little resources we have remaining in jeopardy.”

The war between the Igni Empire and the Unda Kingdom ended more than five years ago.

Both sides experienced heavy losses, but in the end, the victory belonged to the Unda people. As a token of a peace offering, Ember, the sole princess of the Igni Empire, agreed to take King Calder’s hand in marriage. Subsequently, the two, battle-weary cultures merged as one nation. Calder had even renamed the kingdom to Concordia in order to represent a new age of peace and unity.

Unfortunately, the Igni people and the Unda people couldn’t have been more different from one another. One from the south, one from the north. One originating from desert-like climates, the other culture rich with generous lakes and mountains. One fire. The other water. Relations were
unsteady. Tense.

No matter.

Ember firmly believed her son would bridge the gap between age-old enemies forced to live in the same kingdom.

“Our resources are your resources,” Calder said. “Now that your people are rebuilding in Concordia, the resources and militaries of both of our empires are one.”

Orange eyes narrowed marginally. “You would like to believe we are united, but my people are looked down upon by your people.”

“It will take time,” Calder insisted calmly. “You came to tell me that the Igni Empire can be rebuilt, but that will take a considerable amount of labor, gold, and restoration. Let your people continue to rebuild here. Eventually, acceptance will come and they will consider Concordia their home.” He considered the detached Igni king. “Because of your father’s unfortunate passing, you are now their king.”

“A title that no longer holds any merit,” Josiah stated.

“Merit enough that your people will always address you as their king,” Calder asserted. “Instead of traveling and dwelling over the ruins of the Igni Empire, perhaps you can be a leader for your people and reassure them, here, with your presence.”

Ember bit the inside of her cheek at the patronizing tone.

While she agreed with her husband, she knew Josiah was a prideful man.

The Igni king smiled thinly, his gaze piercing. “It is simply an honor to receive your counsel, Your Majesty.” Sarcasm, heavy and acidic, dripped from his tone. “Regrettably, you are the ruler of Concordia. I find it doubtful that my word holds much, if any, sway.”

Calder’s pale hair veiled his expression as he gazed down at Josiah. “Of course it does,” he said. “Why do you think I agreed to wed Ember? A king and queen of both races is a sign of unity. And one day, our son, a descendant of both races, will rule Concordia.”

Josiah took a step back, feigning surprise. “A son! How could I have forgotten?” He looked at Ember. “How very rude of me. A congratulations on your conception of the royal heir.”

“Four years too late,” she informed stiffly. Her brother’s sudden smile chilled her to the bone, yet she remained deadpan. “Would you like to meet him?” Ignoring Calder’s sharp look, she nodded to the female caretaker by the side-entrance. “He is nearly five. I have told him a great deal about you. He’s eager to meet his uncle.”

“You speak highly of him,” Josiah perceived. He turned away from the retreating servant and assessed her. “He is not just the pawn of the kingdom, but—”

“My son,” Ember asserted heatedly, “Is not a pawn of this kingdom. He will grow to love it and the people within it. Only he will have the strength to truly unite our people.” She breathed steadily. “I would appreciate it if you would cease your traveling and stay in the palace. He could use another guardian.”

Josiah looked slyly at Calder. “A guardian is a position of trust.”
“You mistake me for your enemy,” Calder responded smoothly. “I only want what’s best for our kingdom and for my family.”

Josiah hummed thoughtfully before pivoting the conversation. “Two high nobles from different races have never conceived a child before. I wonder at his potential. Tell me, is he a fire or water Elemental?”

Upon Josiah’s inquiry, Ember and Calder looked at one another.

Josiah was correct.

No others of royal blood from two different races had ever conceived a child. Moreover, because Elemental magic was only prominent in royal and noble blood, one could only speculate on the outcome of a child between Ember and Calder.

“He hasn’t displayed any signs of either Element,” Calder said rigidly. He did a very impressive job hiding his true disappointment on the subject. “The Healer believes he doesn’t possess any specific branch of the Elements.”

Josiah’s eyes became half-lidded and he looked away, bored. “What a shame.”

Shifting, he touched his sword’s hilt underneath his cloak. He appeared every bit of an unleashed demon prince, impatient and tired of the current state of affairs. Ember found his nonchalance an insult. Her brother grew up around power. The only people he surrounded himself with were those exhibiting impressive strength. He refused to see the benefits common-folk had to offer.

“He is your nephew,” she said coldly. She ensnared his attention and held it, finding herself unafraid of his intense concentration. “He may not be an Elemental, but he possesses such an endearing quality. You will do well to worship him, Josiah.”

The arrival of the royal prince interrupted Josiah’s retort.

Ember turned, smiling widely at her son.

Whenever in her son’s presence, she found herself admiring his beauty. Even if he was still just a child, she could see the man he would grow to become. He was a proud carrier of both the Unda and Igni qualities. His coloring was Igni, with tanned skin and his black, loose curls. His facial features were a perfect blend of his parents, with his father’s almond eyes and chiseled jaw, and his mother’s high cheekbones.

The only trait not inherited from either parent were his eyes.

Framed by dark lashes, they possessed an ethereal quality.

She assumed it was an Unda trait, as they were a very pale blue. However, during her excursions around the Concordia capital, Ember had never seen the shade replicated.

Josiah moved, becoming far more animated than Ember had ever remembered. She immediately stood up, panicked at the unhealthy way he focused on her son. Calder also sensed the change in Josiah’s conduct, for he stood up beside her, his eyebrows furrowing.

“You have created a beautiful son for me,” Josiah exclaimed. He crouched down and held out his hand to the child hiding behind his caretaker. “Come here, child.”

“Created for you?” Calder demanded spitefully, his tone rising. “What are you—?”
“He is my Chosen,” Josiah claimed. His tone may have been casual, cool, but the possessive undertone was undeniable.

**Chosen.**

Ember took a step back, falling into her throne with unbridled shock and disgust. She didn’t know much about Chosen, only the whispered fables, but she understood enough that her entire being protested against the very idea.

Chosen existed solely for Elementals. A Chosen could be another Elemental or they could be a simple commoner. They were the compatible match for an Elemental, a conductor, able to increase their partner’s Elemental powers just by mere proximity. Chosen weren’t common and they were treasured above all else.

But it was impossible. Not her son, not her child.

**Not to Josiah!**

“You’re wrong,” Ember proclaimed fiercely. She clutched the armrest on either side of her, glaring at her brother. “You must be speaking of the caretaker.”

Orange eyes pinned her with a look of disdain. “My Element is drawn to the child.”

“You are his uncle.”

“Half-uncle,” Josiah corrected callously. “If you have forgotten, your mother was a glorified whore. My mother was a pureblood royal.”

Her cheeks scorched at the insult. The last time he had cruelly denied their status as true siblings was before her marriage to Calder. She would not stand for this. She would not see Josiah lay a single finger on her son.

“Ezra,” she called firmly. She caught the eyes of her son. “Come here.”

“Ezra,” Josiah purred victoriously.

Her brother reached out and grabbed the young child by the robes, forcibly preventing him from running to Ember. With greedy hands, he captured Ezra’s face and cradled it tenderly.

“Do you know who I am?”

Ezra pouted at the rough treatment, but blinked away his tears. “Uncle Josiah.”

“That’s enough,” Calder ordered.

Around the throne room, the Concordia guards advanced closer to the royal family, placing their hands on their staffs, ready to defend Ezra. Just as they closed in, however, Josiah’s personal guards were quick to protect their Lord’s unprotected back.

Josiah hardly paid much attention to his surroundings and only pressed closer to Ezra’s upturned face. His long, tapered fingers covered the majority of Ezra’s small cheeks and proceeded to curl into the child’s hair with a sense of rightful ownership. The Igni king exhaled affectionately across Ezra’s face, his long braid falling over his shoulder in his persistence to lean closer.

“I see much potential in you, young one,” Josiah declared softly.
Ember desperately clutched her throat, too overwhelmed to form a coherent rejection to Josiah’s smothering proximity to her son. She could see Ezra’s cherub face frown as he stared up at his uncle, his child-like innocence contrasting sharply to Josiah’s malevolence.

Beside her, Calder’s expression bordered something frightening. She had never seen him appear so appalled, so angry.

She truly feared his reaction.

“Where is your proof?” Calder’s voice cut through the tension of the room. “Where is your proof that Ezra is your Chosen?”

“Proof? There will never be any proof,” Josiah chastised, keeping his attention on the precious creature in his hold. “If Ezra truly is not an Elemental, he will not feel the connection to me. You will just have to take my word.”

“Release him or my men will have your head.”

Ember could only sit and watch the interaction between her husband and brother. No matter how much she distrusted Josiah and his motives, she knew Ezra wasn’t in any physical danger with him, especially if her child was his Chosen.

However, she couldn’t say Calder felt the same.

Already, the tranquil fountain in the throne room slushed with angry and turbulent waves. If Calder attacked with his Elemental magic, Josiah would meet it with flames. Ezra would be stuck in the middle of two extremely powerful Elementals. Josiah must have foreseen the impending danger too, for he sighed dramatically and released Ezra.

The action took Ember by surprise. Typically, Josiah was the last to relent, even if there were innocents who’d suffer.

The young child staggered back a step, appearing uncertain if he should stay at Josiah’s side or run to his mother. Taking advantage of the child’s hesitation, a blue-clad guard pulled Ezra by the arm and led him to his mother.

Grateful, Ember reached down and gathered her son in her arms, cocooning him against her chest.

Calder stood on the last step of the dais, appearing uneasy, yet far more collected. “Having a Chosen does not require a committed bond. You can go your separate ways and still live a fulfilling life.” His lips sneered. “You are a powerful Elemental, Josiah. You do not need Ezra to advance your powers.”

Josiah straightened from his bowed position and swept the tail of his cloak behind him. “It’s very pleasing to see you so ruffled, Calder.” He smiled wickedly. “However, who said I didn’t want Ezra merely because he is my other half? Perhaps I wish to have him for simple companionship. It’s clear we are fated for one another, no?”

Calder growled lowly. “I highly doubt you care about such whimsical and romantic—”

“He is but a child,” Ember bellowed, clutching Ezra closer to her bosom despite his stiffening form. “Have you no pride, no honor?”

“He is a child,” Josiah agreed. “But he is also a child who will grow into an adult and mature handsomely. And as my Chosen, I have every right to claim him.” He raised a simple eyebrow at
Calder. “Just minutes ago, you reassured me I wasn’t your enemy. Now, it seems as if you’ve changed your mind.”

Calder’s face was hard, but he slowly exhaled to force away his temper.

He smiled thinly at Josiah. A forced smile. “You are not an enemy.”

Hardly buying the king’s front, Josiah matched Calder’s smile with one of his own. “Then I shall honor Ember’s request.” He bowed mockingly to his sister. “I will stay in the palace and become one of Ezra’s guardians.”

Something passed between Josiah and Calder as they gazed at one another and Ember was hesitant to label it as a challenge. She tightened her arms around Ezra, refusing to let him be a game piece between his father and uncle.

Over Ezra’s bowed head, Ember watched as Josiah exited the throne room, moving like a corporeal shadow. Her fingers dug into Ezra and he released a whimper of discomfort.

That man would not ruin her son. He would not touch her son.

“Leave us,” Calder ordered the guards around the throne room. The King of Concordia turned to look at his wife and son. “Give him to me, Ember. You’re stifling him.” He made a move forward, reaching for his heir.

As the doors slammed shut behind the guards, Ember turned her torso away from Calder, denying him Ezra.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Calder scolded with a hint of hilarity. “Give me my son!”

With as much dignity as she could manage under the weight of her child, she stood from her throne. “Get rid of Josiah and then you can see your son again.” Over the top of Ezra’s loose curls, she pinned her husband with a lethal glare. “I don’t want Josiah anywhere near Ezra.”

“I understand your concern.” Calder reached for Ezra, his fingers just skimming the child’s leg before Ember turned away once more. “But Josiah is a pivotal figure and necessary for reconstructing Concordia. The Igni people will ease under his presence.”

“My presence should be enough,” she argued coldly. “My child—”

“Our child,” Calder corrected sharply.

Ember tossed her head with agitation. “Ezra should be all that is needed for the Igni people. He represents hope, unity. Josiah represents the old ways. Corruption and war.” Her arms ached from Ezra’s weight, but she only kept holding him.

Calder nodded, evidently favoring the calm approach over expressing his ire. “Yes, but Ezra is not old enough. The Igni elders will want a familiar face as they adjust. The last thing we need is an uprising between the Unda and Igni people. Josiah, no matter how many tricks he has up his sleeve, is useful to me alive and here.”

Ember parted her lips in a mocking smile. Slowly, she set down a squirming Ezra and nudged him toward the side entrance.

“Go see Anna, my son.”
His beautiful, pale eyes looked at her and Calder, clearly sensing the antagonistic air between his parents. Frowning, he silently ran towards the side entrance. Once he was out of her line of sight, Ember turned back to Calder, noticing the man’s taut expression. Stepping closer, she grabbed his petulant chin. Her polished nails curled into manicured talons as they clutched his face.

“Do you love me?” she breathed in question.

He had such a handsome face, a face Ezra would more than likely inherit. The chiseled jaw and the wide, angular planes of his visage were all indications of nobility, of high aristocracy. She could stare at Calder for hours and never grow bored at the sight of the fine specimen she was able to wed and bed.

“You know I love both you and Ezra,” Calder reasoned calmly.

“No Ezra, just me,” she insisted heatedly. Could her husband truly express his feelings without mentioning the son she brought into this world? “Do you love me?”

“Yes,” the King of Concordia admitted, though he had a hard edge to his tone.

Ember’s painted lips pursed as she loomed closer to Calder. Her hands were greedy and skillful, raking seductively down his chest. “I wonder…” she mused huskily, “If your love for me outweighs your love for mind games. Surely you do not enjoy the sick games Josiah has to offer over your own family.”

“I want my family safe,” Calder stressed, insulted, though, he didn’t pull away from her. “I need Josiah here for a short time. In the interim, we will appease him. We will make him comfortable and allow him time with Ezra.”

Through lowered lashes, Ember gazed intensely up at her husband.

Her nails plucked at his robes purposely catching the skin beneath. “I hope, for your sake, Calder, that you can dispose of him when the time comes.” Flashing a coy smile, she patted him once on the chest and turned to leave. “You will not see your son until my brother is gone.” Her heels tapped the ground smartly as she crossed the throne room.

“You cannot and will not keep my son from me, Ember.”

Despite the threat in his tone, Ember did not turn around nor respond.

He was so sure of himself.

Nevertheless, Ember was even surer of her own abilities to get what she wanted.
1 Chapter One

15 years later...

“Kid, I need your help with this,” Keegan requested.

“You always need help,” Micah replied coolly.

Micah ignored the boy next to him in favor of making last minute changes to his report. Eyes obsessively skimmed over the neat penmanship, searching for any error. It had to be perfect. Perfection was the only way to get accepted into Unda’s Military Academy. Living in the slums of Concordia’s outskirts hardly got one recognized, after all.

Throughout his childhood, he and his mother had moved region to region. While he understood it was imperative they kept moving, it was beginning to take its toll on his mother.

The woman, who once lived a life dripping with luxury, was deteriorating. The illness inside of her grew steadily worse. It was impossible to heal her, not only because of the lack of money, but because they had waited too long to get her analyzed.

His gloved hands curled into fists.

He hated being helpless.

What little healing he could offer his mother wasn’t enough. Her continued state of weakness was just a reminder of his failures.

“Look. Micah.” The boy tapped his arm. “We’re both Igni and that means we need to work extra hard—harder than those who live at the capital. They even rejected you five times.”

“Four times,” Micah corrected without looking at his classmate.

“Same thing.”

Setting down his pen, he surveyed the boy next to him.

Keegan was a poverty-stricken twenty-four-year-old who had applied to Unda Academy over seven consecutive terms. Like Micah, many of the intelligent students living in the outskirt regions tried to apply to the academy in hopes of scholarships. However, it seemed only a couple of students per term were selected, and that was usually because they had connections in the military.

“What is your point, Keegan?” Micah inquired tiredly.

“We should work together.” Keegan plopped down on Micah’s desk. “You may be a perfectionist, but there is one thing you aren’t all that great at.”

He paused dramatically, as if waiting for Micah to either inquire over his declared flaw or grow upset over the prospect of having any sort of weakness. When Micah simply offered a slow, unimpressed blink, Keegan sighed, disappointed.

“Grammar,” he revealed triumphantly. “If you help me with the analytics, I’ll proofread your report before you send it in.”
If it had been anyone else, Micah would have been suspicious of his motives. Why wouldn’t they intentionally revise the grammar poorly while reaping Micah’s help? But this was Keegan, the same stubborn kid who refused to leave Micah alone, no matter how coldly he treated him.

“Come on. I’ll even make you dinner. I know your mother isn’t feeling well—”

“I don’t need your charity. Neither does she,” Micah hissed angrily.

Standing abruptly, he gathered his things and left the study room. Skillfully avoiding the loose and damaged floorboards of the rundown school, Micah breezed past the empty classrooms and out the front door.

An excess amount of pride stiffened his spine as he crossed the barren landscape.

If there was one thing his mother constantly nagged him about, it was his posture. While he actively concealed his royal lineage, refined posture was something even the poorest of individuals could possess and master.

“Not everyone has ulterior motives!” Keegan called after him. The boy’s shoes scuffed the dilapidated steps as he hurried after Micah. “I know it’s hard for you to understand, but there are people out there who are friendly just because they want to be.” Throwing an arm around Micah’s shoulders, he tugged the younger man against him. “I’m trying to look out for you, kid. I’ve known you for three years and you have yet to relax and let someone else take the reins.”

Despite the extra weight around his shoulders, Micah managed to keep his pace.

“Relax,” he repeated scornfully. “There is no reason to relax and there are no reins, simply because I have everything under control.”

Keegan sighed and lapsed into a pensive silence.

They walked through the wasteland of Region 20, encountering nothing but dried weeds, cracked earth, and barren, naked trees. The only redeeming quality to their region was the freshwater well and the few crops that grew readily in the desert climate.

The decrepit school they attended was the only institution located in the sprawling region. As such, not many children had access to it. What students could attend had to share the sparse resources. Considering the capital provided these resources, little care was exhibited for their quality or quantity.

Region 20 was an outskirt region, after all.

“Well, I hope you can trust me someday.” Keegan remained persistent. “You may be reserved, but I see your redeeming qualities. They’re the things that make everyone drawn to you, you know, even though most are forced to admire you at a distance.”

“That’s ridiculously whimsical,” Micah said, insulted. “They can’t possibly see anything in me because those things don’t exist.”

“Untrue. Something definitely charms bystanders, not just me.” Keegan reached out and pinched Micah’s cheek affectionately. “Of course, it could be this pretty face of yours.”

Micah turned and coolly assessed the young man beside him.

Like the majority of the Igni population, Keegan possessed the golden skin and dark hair. The boy,
like all boys—men—his age, strived to grow their hair to resemble the notorious, proud warriors of their time. Repeatedly, Keegan expressed fierce complaints about his hair’s inability to grow. It barely touched his shoulders and had been that way since Micah knew him.

Aside from the hair dramatics, Keegan’s finest quality was his large, beaming smile. Despite the hell he lived, despite the suffering, it was rare to see the boy without a cheek-straining grin. Micah had never encountered anyone so wholesome.

At times, he wondered if he could confide in the boy.

A gentle probe at a distance, of course.

“Why do you want to attend the academy, Keegan?” Micah asked casually.

Keegan visibly mulled over the question.

Unda Academy—since renamed Concordia Academy, yet no one referred to it as such—was the largest and most prestigious military school in the kingdom. With latest lectures and top-rated professors, the academy provided students with the opportunity of a promising career. Education aside, it also appealed to future military men who wished for positions of high ranking.

Students were grouped in teams based on skill level and were then sent out on missions. Though Concordia Academy was a prestigious school that appealed to brainy students, most of those applicants were rejected because they did not want to fight in the military.

It was a double-edged sword. To learn, one must fight for Concordia.

“I want to fight and defend my kingdom, but I’d also like a respectable job after I graduate,” Keegan intoned as if this were something he’d repeated several times before. “I want to support my family now that my dad is getting older.” A heavy pause stretched before Keegan switched on the hysterics. “I also want to see the palace and the capital! I mean, we get free food and board on scholarship. Three meals a day? Comfortable beds? It’s hard to imagine.”

A predictable answer.

Micah wondered if it was an honest one.

“What about you? Why do you want to attend the academy?” Keegan asked, clasping Micah heavily on the back. “I know you’ve been taking sword lessons with Master Idris, but I imagine you’d make a good professor someday.”

Micah shrugged off Keegan’s arm and increased the distance between them.

“Because I’m bored.”

And he was.

After years of stories of the legendary Josiah and Calder, Micah wanted to confront them face-to-face. He’d been taught the necessary evils of each man and the prospect of interacting with them was... stimulating.

Challenging, but exciting.

“That’s not an answer, Micah.” Keegan suddenly appeared serious as he eyed the other male from the corner of his eye. “What’s your real reason?”
Curling a hand more firmly around his textbooks, Micah focused on the stiff, dead grass. Internally, he debated with himself. If, for some reason, they were both accepted into the academy, Micah could use an ally.

He raised his chin and looked directly at the other boy.

“I find it tasteless how the Igni people are still being treated as outsiders in Concordia, even after twenty years of peace.”

No matter where the Igni people relocated, they were always looked down upon for their culture, race, and their losing status after the last war. As a result, the Igni people built villages outside Concordia’s capital just to escape the heavy discrimination.

All of it was pathetic.

“I hate the royal council and the king. They spend money on their citizens at the capital but can’t spare a penny to those of us who have built homes in the outskirts. They work behind the scenes to make the poor poorer and the rich richer.

“The nobles are self-entitled bastards who get positions of power through lineage, not hard work. If it were up to me, I would give power to those who have the dedication to make our kingdom less skewed. I would eliminate bloodlines and nobles. I would give everyone a fair chance at succeeding.”

Judging from Keegan’s taken aback expression, Micah figured he’d given the boy more than enough to ponder over.

Yes, it was passionate tirade on the governing body. Yet… it was all true.

Even Keegan had to acknowledge that much.

The boy blinked, his expression grim. “I never knew you felt so strongly.” Amber eyes roamed Micah’s expression. “So then you want to be a politician after you graduate?”

Micah exhaled in amusement, stuffing his leather-clad hand in his pocket. One did not simply become a politician. They were appointed as esteemed members of the court, of society. They were influential figures of the capital.

He set his sights ahead, staring numbly at the approaching village. Sheds and crumbling structures lay slumped. The government hadn’t even given them enough to fix up simple buildings, let alone build new, necessary, constructs like a proper doctor’s office.

“All the things you said are true. You’d make a good politician, Micah. Of course, your social skills may need some improvement…”

The last bit was added lightly, but held some truth.

Micah hummed lightly. “I hate politics.”

Silence stretched before Keegan inquired further. “Then what?” he asked at length. “You’re talking treason, kid. If you don’t want to fix it through political means then what the hell are you planning to do with that pent-up aggression?” Keegan leaned closer to Micah, a worried frown on his face. “Assassinate them?” he asked with worry.

At Micah’s hard look, Keegan paled.
“You’re kidding me!”

“I’m not going to assassinate them, Keegan,” Micah reprimanded darkly.

“You’re hands are scarred, aren’t they? That’s why you wear those gloves all the time. And your mother…”

“Don’t even finish that—”

“You’re not all-knowing, so stop guessing,” Micah whispered icily.

Keegan was intelligent, but Micah hadn’t imagined he’d be so observant.

However, the boy was only half-right. Micah was of both Igni and Unda descendant. And he didn’t hate the Igni people for what his uncle did. Just as he didn’t hate the Unda people for what his father did.

“Micah.”

The smaller male hardly batted an eye as he ducked away from the reaching arm.

“Drop it, Keegan.” He pivoted toward the opposite side of the village, leaving Keegan standing solitarily behind. “Meet me at the bazaar tomorrow at noon. I’d like to get our applications sent as soon as possible.”

As he walked through the slums of Region 20, he considered Keegan’s reaction. While it wasn’t what Micah had anticipated, it hadn’t been a complete failure either. It seemed as if the boy agreed with the capital’s corruption, but overall, Keegan appeared more concerned with Micah’s safety than the issue itself.

He couldn’t really fault the boy.

Keegan didn’t know the extent of Micah’s abilities. And for some, unexplainable reason, without encouraging it himself, Keegan actually cared for him.

Scoffing to himself, he ducked down a set of stairs.

He entered the dark tunnel and into the cell-like apartment building. As he strode down the corridor, he passed several rooms, their doors open wide to circulate the stale air. Smells of frying foods and raw, human odor wafted in the air. Though he hadn’t eaten all day, the smell was enough to curdle his appetite.

Considering most the residents had little to steal from, most doors stayed open at night with no lock. Of course, crime was extremely high in Region 20 and Micah always remained vigilant by keeping their door shut.

“Hello, Mother,” he called, entering their apartment.

Setting his pile of books by the door, he forced his eyes to adjust to the dark.

Their living arrangements were abysmal. It was a small studio equipped with a tiny bathroom and a
kitchenette. A mattress lay haphazardly on the floor in what was, he called with wary amusement, their great room. Judging from the darkness and the scent of sour sickness, he presumed his mother hadn’t moved at all today.

He withheld an irritated sigh.

The relationship he shared with his mother was… complex.

At times, he hated her ferociously, suspected her of deceit, but most the time, her manipulations were enough to stimulate feelings of reluctant respect and admiration. He was anxious to leave her behind, yet he also felt guilty. A part of him believed it was his duty to take care of her, to make her better. She depended on him at times, and as much as he hated admitting it, he depended on her as well.

It was a collection of messy, contradictory emotions.

He wondered if Ember had planned the codependency from the start.

No. There was no thought of if, rather, she most certainly had planned it from the start.

Switching on the light, Micah entered the apartment. He closed the door behind him and approached the curtain that separated the kitchen from the back of the apartment.

Pulling the curtain aside, he stared down at her.

She was asleep, her long hair strewn across her pillow. Her color was a bit off and there were frown lines creasing her face. Nonetheless, she didn’t appear to be in pain, and she didn’t seem to have a fever.

Just as he was about to shut the curtain, she called out to him.

“Ezra.”

He froze. His hand fisted furiously in the curtain. She hadn’t called him by his given name in months. Typically, she used the name ‘Ezra’ when she felt especially nostalgic. Even so, she knew how much he detested it.

“I’m here,” he responded tightly.

It was best not to show her how affected he was.

He observed her closely, knowing his scrutiny bothered her, but remembering Keegan’s observation from earlier. Scar tissue puckered and disfigured the entire right side of her face, even turning one eye milky and blind.

According to Ember, Josiah had delivered a cheap shot across her face. Micah imagined Ember just hadn’t been prepared to go up against her brother—the very same man who was renowned for his dueling skills in both Elemental magic and with the sword. Fortunately, she had managed to turn away in time, effectively damaging one side of her face rather than the entirety.

“Come here,” she coaxed weakly.

Keeping her eyes closed, she held out a frail hand.

Kicking off his boots, Micah approached her and kneeled next to the mattress. Accustomed to her ‘sick’ days, he obediently pressed his cheek against the sweat-smelling sheets and allowed her to
run her fingers through his hair.

“Did you eat today?” he asked. “I can make broth if you’re not too hungry.”

“You have such gorgeous hair, my son.” She disregarded his question and tugged affectionately at the loose curls. “You really should grow it out.”

Micah narrowed his eyes before closing them. “And be like everyone else?”

Ember continued to caress Micah’s hair, having heard his response countless times before, yet continued to ask the same question repeatedly.

He laid there, enduring the touch. Since Micah was a young boy, Ember had always used physical contact as a control mechanism. As a child, after a particularly brutal lesson, he would obediently kneel as she stroked his hair. During those times, his hate for her had softened into eventual forgiveness.

“You are completely different from them, Ezra. No one is quite like you.” She lapsed into a temporary silence. “Have you finished your application yet?”

“Someone from school is going to assist me with the grammar and essay design,” he replied formally. “Otherwise, it is completed.”

“A friend?” she exclaimed with humor. “Is it a young lady?”

“No, nothing like that,” Micah argued, his body tense as he kneeled next to her prone form. “He’s just a schoolmate.”

“Keegan?”

He sighed. “Yes, Keegan.”

Clearly, his mother was in better condition than earlier that morning. She’d be well enough to eat dinner. His thoughts revolved around the possibilities of what to cook. They had but a few scrapings leftover from yesterday, so it wouldn’t be anything that would fill their stomachs.

What little gold Ember had stolen from the palace was nearly gone. She usually performed chores for the people of Region 20 in order to pay for one meal a day, but it wasn’t enough. Never enough.

“When you get into the academy, I want you to stay clear of your uncle.”

Micah’s mind briefly blanked from the suddenness of Ember’s statement.

It was unlike his mother to be so blatant.

“Don’t refer to him like that,” he argued ardently. “Josiah is of no relation to me.”

“He’s a member of the royal council and he’s a very prominent figure in the military. I have reason to believe he is going to be the new Chairman for Concordia Academy.” Ember sounded crestfallen. “It can’t be avoided, Micah. The academy is your only chance of infiltrating Concordia’s elite. He will recognize you as soon as he sees you.”

“That’s impossible. My eyes are charmed yellow and my name—”

“It doesn’t matter. None of that matters.” Her hand slackened in his hair. “Calder was looking for a
biracial child. Disguising you as a full Igni was for our convenience to prevent questions.”

“Then how would Josiah know my identity?”

The news was certainly a hitch in his plans. If Josiah was so close to the academy, that meant there was a possibility Micah would have to interact with him sooner rather than later. There would be no time to watch him, observe him. Micah would need to be on guard from the start.

“He claims you are his… Chosen.”

Nothing had ever surprised him to the point of speechlessness, and he was even ashamed to admit he stopped breathing for a moment or two. It was inconceivable to think he was destined for his uncle. That he belonged to anyone.

It was *degrading*.

Ember continued quietly, “It was the crux of the issue fifteen years ago. It was why your father planned to use you and why Josiah refused to let you go.” She took a shuddering breath, a dramatic woe. “It still horrifies me to think what would have happened if he got his hands on you those many years ago. He would have twisted you into something completely unholy.”

Turned away from her, Micah’s lips twisted into a smile.

Ironic, considering she’d done enough to warp him into something unholy.

Acting his role as the loyal, loving son, he took her hand and squeezed it. “But he didn’t get me all those years ago. You were strong enough to stop him. I admire your strength and your endurance to forge a new life for us.”

Although partially an act, some of it was true. Ember had risked all the security, all the luxury, to protect Micah from Calder and Josiah. She could have ignored everything and sacrificed her son in exchange for guaranteed comfort. Nevertheless, in the end, Ember chose Micah’s wellbeing over hers. He admired her for that, but Ember also had her own agenda.

In the end, he went from living in a palace of three manipulators to just one.

Perhaps if Calder and Josiah hadn’t betrayed her, she would have raised him differently. But she’d been so hurt, so deceived, that she’d dwelled for years in bitter hatred.

Micah was Ember’s means of revenge, control, and closure.

She opened her eyes, her lone, gold eye settling on Micah. “You are my greatest blessing.” She pressed a hand against his cheek. “Don’t ever doubt my love for you. If I had to go back and do it all again, I wouldn’t change a thing.”

He didn’t know the extent of what happened fifteen years ago. Sometimes he dreamed of that night, always ending at that moment when he was enclosed by flames. Someone was always there, reaching boldly into the fire and rescuing Micah from the stifling heat.

The king told the public that Queen Ember had perished in the flames.

The prince was lost, taken.

Naturally, the search parties had died long ago.

Throughout the years, Ember tutored him in the ways of politics, manipulation, and proper
etiquette. He grew up detesting both Calder and Josiah, but also idolizing them. As he grew older, however, he found himself eager to interact with them, to see if he could keep up with them.

“I was naïve for the majority of my adolescence,” Ember continued. “Despite it being an arranged marriage, I thought there was only good in Calder. And in spite of the fear I held for my brother, I just believed he was wrongly perceived.”

Micah propped his chin upon his open palm, giving her his undivided attention. He wondered if she would say what was on her mind or if she would leave it for him to interpret.

“Despite my naivety, I firmly believe I raised you with your eyes wide open.”

That was an understatement.

“I knew you are destined for great, but precarious things. You cannot trust anyone, Micah. But always maintain a friendly demeanor and do your best to help those in need.” Her lips pursed and her one eye flared with such strong intensity. “I don’t ask things of you often, but I want you to promise me you will never, ever give into Josiah. He’s manipulative, charismatic, powerful, and he’ll do anything to lure you into his hands. Don’t ever let him touch you sexually, do you understand?”

Extremely insulted and embarrassed, Micah pushed off from his position on the floor.

“You underestimate me,” he whispered coolly. “How weak do you think I am to succumb to his advances? My own uncle?” he spat, sickened.

He wasn’t very familiar with the subject of Chosen. All he really knew was that he could increase the man’s power if they ever initiated a bond. Micah refused to give Josiah higher ground than he already possessed, let alone more ammo to weave his manipulations.

Learning he was Josiah’s Chosen was insult enough. Submitting to the man would be a fate greater than death.

“I don’t underestimate you.”

“Then why wait all these years to tell me I was his Chosen?” Micah demanded. “All those years of conditioning me into the weapon you want me to be—”

“You are not a weapon!” she exclaimed fiercely.

Micah almost believed her.

Bracing her arms on the mattress, she struggled to sit up.

“I needed to prepare you for what’s out there, especially Calder and Josiah’s true nature. You may be leaving for the academy, Micah. I didn’t want to send you in blind.” Her expression softened. “Would you rather I had let you grow up oblivious?”

He turned away from her, both of them already knowing the answer to that.

Leaning against the far wall, he ignored her silent amusement.

All those lessons, all those discussions, only led to one result: infiltrating the elite in order to gain the trust of Calder and Josiah. Only then, according to Ember, could he eliminate them.

For the first time, in a long time, he full-heartedly agreed with his mother.
Not only had the two royal men betrayed his mother, but they also scarred her, ruined her. Moreover, they had given Micah this life. A life of slums, danger, and insecurity. They damned him to years of hell with a bitter woman, a woman who took away his childhood, who corrupted and warped him.

In the end, he respected and cared for his mother enough to fulfill her request.

And he’d do so with honor.
2. Chapter Two

The hand stroked his cheek softly before proceeding to brush aside a few loose strands of his hair. Micah closed his eyes into the affectionate touch, never feeling as warm nor as comfortable as he did just then. Somehow, through the warm-haze, he was able to discern that he was dreaming.

It was one of those dreams again. The dreams that made him feel so good, but disenchanted at the same time. No matter what he did, he wouldn’t wake up until the flames engulfed him.

His body was tiny as it sat upon the man’s lap.

“What did you do today, Ezra?”

But that voice. Even after years of dreaming it, the voice always sent a startling thrill down his spine. It wasn’t a deep baritone like most of the strong warriors of the kingdom. Instead, it was softer, almost menacing in quality and every bit serpentine. Many would find the voice alluring and captivating, a weapon in its own right.

Micah opened his eyes, squinting at the desk in front of him.

There were so many rolls of parchment scattered about. He couldn’t focus on one document in particular. In his child’s mind, all the words blended together. There was no hope in discovering this man’s secrets. In any case, he doubted such captivating mysteries would be recorded through the written word.

“Swimming,” Micah replied softly with a voice of a child. “I hate swimming.”

The man chuckled pleasantly. “You’re part Igni, child, of course you don’t like the water.” His fingers ruffled Micah’s hair. “If you don’t like swimming then what do you like to do?”

“I like to play games,” Micah proclaimed proudly.

“My, my. What a coincidence.” The fingers stopped cascading through his hair. With an embrace from behind, the man gathered Micah closer and placed his lips near the child’s ear. “I like playing games, too.”

“What kind of games?”

Bright, naïve eyes craned back in order to catch a glimpse of his uncle. All he could see was the single black braid slung over a broad shoulder and the dark, majestic robes.

“What kind of games?” the man repeated pensively. “Well, that depends on my opponent. I like challenging games. I enjoy making things happen through the actions of other people. The stronger the opponent, the sweeter the taste of victory.”

Back then, as he was just a child, Micah had never understood his uncle.

Now, he was able to discern Josiah’s words as the words of a master manipulator and a very cruel and cold-hearted individual. While Micah was intelligent and aware of the basic forms of
manipulation, something told him he would never be able to dethrone a master at the game without killing him first.

“Oh.” The child-Micah sighed in frustration at his uncle’s complicated response. “I like playing hide-and-seek. No one can beat me. Even the caretakers can’t find me for bath time. Would you like to play with me?”

Finally, he wiggled enough out of Josiah’s embrace to look his captor face-to-face.

Looking past the handsome, but cold features, all Micah could gape at were the fascinating eyes. They rivaled the color of the strongest and fiercest flames, somehow appearing even more concentrated when they looked at Micah.

White teeth clenched into a smile and Josiah shook his head. “It wouldn’t be fair to you.” He tightened his arms around Micah. “In the end, no matter where you hide from me, I will be able to find you.”

The scene changed again and Micah stifled a scream when the fire surrounded him. The heat was unbearable. He hated it even more than he hated the water. Suddenly, through the flames, a hand reached out to grab him, to save him, to—

“Micah!”

He jerked awake and flinched from his mother’s reaching hand.

She appeared startled, but her expression warmed into one of understanding. “You need to get up,” Ember insisted. “You have to get to work.”

Micah squinted at her, rolling on his side to peer at the wristwatch.

His stomach plummeted when he realized he was going to be late. Scrambling from the pile of blankets, he stripped from his flannel pants and pulled on his trousers. “Why didn’t you wake me sooner?”

Ember sat on the edge of her mattress, her face pale. “I just woke up myself,” she confessed. After lacing his combat boots, Micah stood and threw on his black tunic. He grabbed his cloak, hesitating, before looking at his mother from over his shoulder. In a moment of devotion, he wrapped it around her frail shoulders. Cool mornings usually warranted a cloak, but his mother needed it more than he did.

“Maybe you should get some fresh air,” he suggested mildly. “Staying cooped up in this hole probably isn’t doing you much good. Just stay warm.”

His mother smiled and touched his hand with her cold fingers. “You are too sweet.”

He smirked past the cynicism. No one would be inclined to agree with that portrayal, least of all her. “I’ll bring you home some lunch,” he promised. “And I’ll pick up a few groceries with today’s pay. We can make a good dinner tonight.”

Micah removed his hand from her shoulder and hurried to the door.

“Say hello to Master Idris for me, won’t you?”

Without responding, Micah raced out the door and down the long, dark underground complex. It
took only three bounds up the flight of stairs before he reached the streets of Region 20. Despite it being early morning, there were several people roaming the marketplace and searching for goods. He bypassed the wagon of tomatoes and the over-exuberant vendors, mulling over the dream he had this morning.

The memories weren’t anything new. He always had dreams about his father or Josiah.

However, this dream was disquieting. He didn’t know if Josiah had truly said those things, or if Micah’s imagination had conjured up the ending conversation. If Josiah could really find Micah no matter where he hid, as his dream-self boasted, then he would have found Micah a long time ago.

Whatever the reason for his dream, it was best to keep an extra eye out.

Slowing, Micah came to a steady stop in front of the tavern.

Like all the other establishments in Region 20, the tavern’s structure was barely standing and built mostly underground. There was no sign over the door, yet the locals didn’t need signs and Region 20 hardly received outside visitors.

Assertively, Micah walked inside and slid the door shut behind him. The darkness engulfed him and it took him a moment to adjust his eyes to the dim lighting.

“You’re late.”

Hardly fazed at the deep, gruff voice, Micah gracefully descended the steps that led into the underground tavern. “It won’t happen again, sir,” he responded promptly.

His charmed yellow eyes swept the length of the tavern, observing his surroundings.

While a few tables dispersed across the floor, the majority of the seating was at the long, curved bar. Typically at this hour, no one was drinking.

This morning was an exception.

The patron at the bar wore a deep, hooded cloak and did a suspiciously good job of keeping in the shadows. Considering the figure sat close to Micah’s boss, Idris, it was probably one of the old man’s shady acquaintances from the war. While cagey, Micah was quite used to the occurrence.

His master was a high-ranking officer in the Unda/Igni war. Seeing as Idris had fought for the Igni Empire, the losing side, it was understandable he would have rebel friends wanted by Unda’s elite.

“How the hell can you work overtime if we’re supposed to spar this evening? That doesn’t count as overtime, boy.”

Two years ago, Micah had stumbled across Idris by chance. He’d been looking for work, hoping to get his hands on any extra gold he could find. Despite Micah’s young age, Idris had allowed him to work at his tavern. However, if Micah had anything to say about it, Idris only let him work at the tavern as a favor to Ember, his not-so-subtle infatuation.
The first time Micah was rejected from Concordia Academy, Idris offered to give Micah sparring lessons after work. They started with staffs and eventually progressed to swords. What started with one or two lessons a week advanced to five days a week.

Micah leaned against the counter next to Idris and sized up the tall, brute-like man.

“I’ll scrub the floors, but I can’t spar after work today.”

Idris ran a hand through his greying beard, staring at Micah with a cantankerous glower. “What can you possibly be doing that’s more important than sparring?”

Raising a haughty eyebrow, Micah challenged Idris’ heated stare with icy nonchalance. “I have some personal matters to take care of.”

Idris didn’t need to know about his mother’s worsening condition. It would just make things uncomfortable.

Micah studied Idris closely, easily noting the man’s anxious air. Whenever Idris was on edge, he tended to grow irritable. Looking for the source of his unease, Micah spied the long object wrapped in cloth underneath the counter.

Clearly, the mysterious stranger at the bar delivered it to Idris.

Angling his head toward the foreigner, Micah locked eyes with nothing but bottomless darkness.

He frowned, not particularly pleased that he couldn’t see the man’s face underneath the hood. For all he knew, the stranger could be an old man or even a high-ranking member in Concordia’s capital. Nonetheless, Micah would need to tread sensibly around this stranger, especially when Idris also seemed unsettled by the man’s presence.

His pale eyes landed on the bottle of wine next to the stranger’s tumbler. Flashing a victorious smirk, Micah leaned against the bar across from to the cloaked-figure and reached for the onyx wine bottle. He had ways to narrow down this man’s identity.

“Ever since I started working here, this bottle of wine has gathered dust.”

Though Micah couldn’t see underneath the man’s hood, he was aware of the stranger’s undivided attention. He leaned closer against the bar, casually trying to catch a peek underneath the hood and feeling extremely uneasy with each inch closer. His curiosity was too great to suppress.

“I imagine you’re from the capital,” Micah continued, entirely undaunted with the lack of response. “We don’t get many visitors from that far out.”

Idris cleared his throat next to Micah. “Don’t pry, boy!” he admonished harshly. “He’s here on my behalf.”

Micah swept his eyes across the stranger’s cloak, noticing the fine weaving. The finery of the cloak and the expensive wine had Micah deducing that this was someone a bit more treacherous than he had originally believed. Maybe this wasn’t one of Idris’ old, rebel acquaintances. Maybe this was someone that Idris felt obliged to serve because of the difference in social class.

Immediately releasing the bottle of wine, Micah retreated casually, but quickly.

Was this what his subconscious was trying to tell him? Did Josiah’s men find out his location? It was certainly a possibility, but Micah didn’t want to jump to conclusions or draw attention to
himself. Ember wasn’t in any condition to move to another region.

Just as he was about to duck into the backroom, Idris called him out.

“Micah, catch.”

Turning in time, Micah reached out instinctively and caught the clothed, rod-like object that had rested underneath the bar. The weight was familiar, but he made no move to unravel the cloth.

Instead, he looked imploringly at his master.

“It’s a gift for you. A congratulation on being accepted into Concordia Academy. I was going to give it to you tonight, but you had to make things difficult.”

A gift.

Micah blinked down at the object in his clenched fist. Besides his mother, he couldn’t remember a time someone had gone out of their way to present him with a gift. He tried to keep face, but he didn’t know if he succeeded.

“I haven’t been accepted into the academy yet,” he rebuffed uncomfortably.

It was two weeks ago that Micah had worked on his application with Keegan Flint. They had mailed their submissions together, still not hearing back as of yet. Both his mother and Idris seemed to believe this time was it. This time, he’d be accepted.

Idris shrugged once, his face dismissive. “Just open the damn gift, kid.”

Not needing to be told twice, Micah untied the string, pulling the cloth away from a beautiful, but familiar sword.

After unsheathing it, Micah cupped his palms underneath the sterling-silver blade, marveling at the sheen and the flawless perfection. It had the familiar face, the familiar serpent-like hilt with the familiar emerald gemmed-eyes. It was entirely Igni-crafted, with white gold trimming around the serpent pommel, but… it couldn’t be…

“But this… this is your…—”

“It is,” Idris acknowledged, watching as Micah absorbed the weight and feel of the blade. “It’s the sword I used in the last war. My friend here is a blacksmith at the capital and fixed it up for me.” He motioned toward the hooded figure at the bar. “I never missed my target with this blade. Neither should you.”

It wasn’t easy for Micah to be impressed or grateful, but he could comfortably admit when he felt flattered. During their lessons, he had always admired Idris’ sword.

As he looked up, however, he immediately perceived the strain in Idris’ expression.

He faltered. Unsure.

“I can’t accept this, Master.”

“Nonsense,” Idris argued. The tension around his eyes cleared and he smiled roguishly. “You’re the best student I’ve had the opportunity of teaching, boy. I would be honored if you would take it and use it on your own journey.”
“Thank you, Master Idris.” Overwhelmed, Micah bowed low at the waist, keeping his head down until he recovered. He refused to show weakness in front of his master, in front of anyone. He certainly wouldn’t want Idris to see his deplorable appreciation.

Idris chuckled, nudging his palm against Micah’s bowed head.

“None of that,” he admonished affectionately. “Go wash the dishes. There is a mess back there from last night.”

Before Micah had a chance to respond, the tavern door opened with a loud bang. He straightened abruptly, feeling the unease wash him cold.

Something wasn’t right.

Attentively, he gazed up at the door, observing the young boy as he clambered down the stairs with vigorous leaps and bounds.

“They’re here!” The boy exclaimed breathlessly. Fear and excitement danced across the boy’s cherub features as he stumbled to a stop in front of the bar. He gazed at Idris. “Guards from the capital are here, in Region 20! Royal guards even! King Josiah!”

Micah swallowed his bile, noticing Idris appeared just as horror-struck. His master turned his gaze on the hooded figure at the bar, his anger obvious and potent.

“What are you playing at?” Idris accused sharply.

Micah quickly attached his sword holster around his waist, placing his hand on the hilt for a swift draw. He’d be a fool to overlook the way the tavern’s atmosphere darkened, the uneasiness originating from the stranger at the bar.

The man bowed his head.

With long, tapered fingers, he caressed the bottle of expensive wine. Those were the fingers of a high noble, not a blacksmith. One of the fingers in question lifted and pointed at Micah.

“You have outlived your usefulness. The boy is trained and ready.”

Despite the cold, sinking sensation, it really was unsurprising.

To hear him.

To see him here.

The tavern door opened a second time with exceptional vigor. Micah shifted his stance, defensive, on edge. Heavy boots from numerous bodies trekked down the stairs, nearly causing the whole underground tavern to tremor as they blocked the only exit. The child was right. Their deep, crimson robes signified their allegiance to Concordia royalty.

To Josiah specifically.

There were rumors that favored members of the military climbed the ranks and mysteriously disappeared to become royal guards. Their work was shroud in mystery as they carried out direct orders from Calder or Josiah.

One of the guards, who was clearly the captain, inclined his head towards Idris. “Idris,” the man drawled the name with scorn, as if he were personally affected by the bartender’s very presence.
“It’s been too long.”

The captain was of Igni descendant. His long, black hair was pulled into a high ponytail, the traditional hairstyle for elite and decorated soldiers. For being in the position of such power, the man was young and drenched with egotism and pride.

Micah felt his chest constrict with disgust.

These men wore wealth and entitlement like a second skin.

Idris stood shell-shocked, regarding the captain with single-minded intensity before refocusing on the cloaked figure Micah knew to be Josiah. His hard, weathered features were set, twisted into a semblance of disorientation. “I thought we had a deal,” Idris growled with accusation.

Josiah cocked his head to the side, a gesture of mock consideration. “We did. I gave you the option of immediate execution or the chance to train him. You chose the latter.” He chuckled insincerely. “Did you think, by choosing to train Micah, that your treachery would be excused? Forgiven? You simply prolonged it.”

Standing, Josiah lowered his hood with intentional slowness.

A sly, conceited smirk settled faintly across the man’s lips. Deep, fathomable eyes regarded Micah with attentive obsession. His stare was bright, focused, the eyes of a predator, of a master manipulator who finally unveiled his prized marionette.

Despite the fear for both his mother and himself, Micah raised his chin and met the stare. He wasn’t a young child anymore. Josiah did not intimidate him. This was the man he was destined to dethrone, to outsmart.

Josiah smiled thinly, seemingly thrilled at Micah’s direct challenge.

“You worked for Josiah?” Micah asked Idris, tearing his eyes away from the Igni king to look at his master. “All this time?”

If what Josiah said was true, that meant that the Igni king had quietly tracked Micah’s movements for quite some time. After all these years, moving village to village, he and his mother believed they were covering their tracks and shaking off possible surveillance. It was quite possible Josiah had dictated their movements from the start.

Turning his cheek on the enemies before them, Idris’ expression tempered.

“I had no choice,” he responded quietly. “But it didn’t change anything, Micah.”

That was all Micah needed to hear.

He wasn’t naïve. Many people were often manipulated into doing things against their will. In Idris’ case, he would have been executed if he hadn’t agreed to teach Micah how to use a sword. But that hadn’t changed all the good deeds Idris had done for Micah and his mother.

He tightened his hand on his sword, deciding to defend Idris.

Moreover, as much as Micah loathed considering it, he was Josiah’s Chosen. Such information was useful and it gave him an advantage. As long as Josiah had a sliver of interest of increasing his level of power, he needed Micah alive to accomplish it.
“Endearing,” Josiah mocked, looking between Idris and Micah. “I’d hate to drive a wedge between the two of you, but I’m afraid it’s time to part ways.” He turned his shoulder on the bartender. “I will be waiting outside. Finish the job.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

Micah hardly had time to marvel at the man’s nerve before the four guards shifted, their eyes focused exclusively on Idris. The captain held out his hand, an aura of immense power shifting across the small, underground tavern.

Idris had no chance of fleeing, not against a fire Elemental.

Micah stepped closer, reluctant to use his power, but grudgingly understanding it was the only way to protect Idris. Mirroring his enemy’s posture, Micah raised his arm, his hand pointing toward the captain as an act of challenge.

The captain paused.

Even Josiah glanced over from the top of the stairs, aloofly intrigued.

“Micah,” Idris cautioned. “Do not—"

“Run, you idiot,” Micah hissed, keeping his eyes on the amused captain.

“Silly boy,” the captain goaded with a haughty air. “What do you think you could possibly do? You aren’t an Elemental. Step aside before you hurt yourself.” Behind him, the other guards shifted, merriment evident across their expressions.

Micah held on to his anger and harnessed his hatred.

These people were animals. Mere cattle.

The captain then dismissed Micah by refocusing on Idris as the man withdrew a dagger from his back pocket. Though it was such a small, insignificant weapon against Elementals, Micah knew his master could and would cause a significant amount of damage.

“Don’t you know alcohol and fire don’t mix, Master Idris?”

Idris did not flee as Micah requested.

Rather, he lunged toward the guards with a throaty, desperate growl.

Micah exhaled with frustration and hurriedly moved alongside Idris. He sprinted to gain momentum and leaped high enough to land on top the bar. As his boots slammed on the counter, glass shattered piercingly across the tavern before raining to the ground.

Surprisingly, Idris bypassed the captain of Josiah’s guards, the easiest target of the group. Instead, he downed an unsuspecting guard by throwing a dagger into the man’s temple. Pivoting and dancing on his heels, the old Igni warrior withdrew another dagger from his sleeve, immediately becoming the subject of the captain’s ire.

Hands twisting with elaborate movement, the captain sent a wall of flames toward Idris’ dodging and twisting form.

Taking it as his cue to intervene, Micah thrust out his hand and focused. He’d only practiced a few times with his mother, who was also a fire Elemental. Yet, she was an Elemental years out of
practice, and this was a full-fledged and powerful warrior.

His worry was for naught, for as soon as he reached for the cold, it washed through him and froze the adrenaline in his body.

Gradually, the wall of flames conjured by the captain slowed their advance.

The tavern dropped in temperature and the flames slowly transformed into a wall of frost. The chunk of ice groaned loudly as it thickened to its core, eventually turning into a frozen sculpture of earthy flames.

“An ice Elemental!”

“Impossible!”

“Fools, there is no such thing!”

Micah dropped his arm and the sheet of ice crashed to the ground.

Hardly waiting for the shock of his enemies to wear off, Micah jumped off the bar, the sound of his feet hitting the floor muffled out by the endless shattering of ice. He unsheathed his sword, and with a flash of silver, the blade swung expertly at the captain.

The sword, recently sharpened, eagerly honed in on its target. Micah braced his weight on his front leg, bending only slightly at the waist, a perfect finishing posture to his sword execution. The arm that held his sword extended and angled behind his back, having just finished concluding its swing.

Behind him, a soft thump could be heard as his enemy’s hand fell to the ground.

A breath.

Two.

The captain suddenly screamed in sheer fury.

Through lowered lashes, Micah watched as another wall of flames came at him. This time, without having to worry about Idris, Micah dropped to the ground, positioning his sword just right in order to execute a tight roll.

As soon as he finished his tumble, he leaped from the ground, gaining extra height and momentum. Without any sort of hesitation, and only a slight grin of exhilaration, Micah flew through the flames unharmed, his sword trained on his enemy on the other side.

Warmth tickled his skin as the flames embraced him. True to his birthright, however, he was immune to the power of both water and fire Elementals. As he emerged from the other side of the flames, he witnessed the white, horror-stricken face of his prey.

“Fool,” Micah breathed, ecstatic as he landed gracefully on his feet. “Not so special now that your Element doesn’t work, are you?” He quickly twirled his blade around and slammed the hilt of his sword against the guard’s temple.

“Remarkable, extremely impressive,” Josiah praised, his unobtrusive voice somehow cutting through the commotion of the tavern and freezing his men on instant.

Micah whirled around, watching as the Igni king glided down the set of stairs. The man’s eyes
were aflame as they avidly appraised Micah. There was hardly any concern for his fallen men and only extreme excitement over what Micah had to offer in terms of power, of sheer talent.

“Unfortunately, as much as I would admire watching you further, I am pressed for time. And Master Idris’ execution is well past its due date.” His raven-colored braid curled over his shoulder as he turned his attention on Idris.

Josiah lifted a long-fingered hand and a subtle glow encircled his fingertips.

Wisps of white light interweaved seductively around Micah’s feet. He backtracked, alarmed, never having encountered magic being performed. This was not Elemental magic. This was sorcery, real magic that originated from Noir Users.

Before Micah had time to react, his body weakened considerably. His hand trembled uncontrollably in effort to remain clutching his sword. Unfortunately, the magic was stronger. As the weapon clattered to the ground, he followed soon after.

He lay there. His mind and body shocked.

The guards, the ones still conscious, jeered at Micah’s sudden immobility, though Josiah was quick to silence them.

Pressing his cheek to the ground, he remained helpless as Idris stood unmoving above him, his chin lifted high as he accepted his fate. Josiah wasted no time conjuring up a blue flame, before promptly tossing it in Idris’ direction.

Micah squeezed his eyes shut, feeling something akin to grief as he watched his mentor crumble vulnerably to the ground. From Ember’s teachings, he recognized the purple flame as a simple, but effective way to kill and torture a victim. The flame was small, yet it carried a substantial amount of heat. The victim’s internal organs would gradually burn away. It would be a few minutes, maybe even an hour before the victim passed away.

Each second alive would be an endless hell they couldn’t escape.

As the guards discussed the fate of the child, who still cowered in the corner of the tavern, Micah reached towards his mentor. Hoping he didn’t catch his enemy’s attention, he dropped his hand upon Idris’ scarred and wounded chest and cleared his mind. Clearing his mind proved to be a challenging feat considering Idris’ deafening screams.

While Micah was a child born to both a powerful water and fire Elemental, he had never inherited his parents’ powers. In fact, he wasn’t even sure he was an *ice Elemental*.

He was just gifted with the power of immunity, that’s all.

When it came to healing, he had the gift to absorb the damage done to a victim like a typical water Elemental. Unfortunately, when he healed, he wasn’t immune to the Elemental magic as he would have been first handedly. Whatever pain, whatever damage was inflicted on the individual he was healing, would be transferred to Micah.

And he’d feel every bit of pain.

Doubtless of the consequences, he stubbornly absorbed the heat from Idris’ chest. He’d practiced on his mother long enough to learn to absorb only the internal damage and not the superficial scars or wounds.
His breathing hitched when the flames engulfed his chest.

Idris stirred, his screams of pain beginning to lessen. He turned his head marginally, meeting Micah’s pain-filled eyes.

“My mother,” Micah rasped. “Look after her.”

Josiah would undoubtedly take Micah from Region 20. A part of him wanted to die from the pain before the Igni king had any chance of implementing whatever sick game he had in mind for Micah. But above all else, no matter what happened to him, he wanted his mother safe.

Micah’s hand fell from Idris’ chest and he curled in on himself.

“D-don’t underestimate him,” Idris shakily warned. “Josiah is not who he says he is. The Magi, Micah, watch for the Magi—”

Whatever Idris meant to say was met by deaf ears.

Micah whimpered. His lungs burned, his ribs roasted, and his heart beat frantically. He tried to hold it in, he tried to withstand the pain, but it was too much. With a high-pitched scream, Micah blacked out everything but the pain and the desperate hope that Idris would make it out alive.
3. Chapter Three

When the rhythmic stirring came to a sudden, unexpected halt, Healer Destan looked up from the unconscious boy and toward his apprentice.

Healer Kendra’s hold on the stirring rod slackened as she looked fearfully at the entrance of the compartment. Curious, he turned, his eyebrows climbing when he saw the dark figure waiting at the threshold. It was rare to see such an influential man concerned with recovering patients, but then again, this was a special patient, was it not?

“Lord Josiah,” he greeted casually. “Good that you’re here.”

Taciturn eyes leveled the female Healer with an impatient stare.

Ah, secrecy. Right.

Healer Destan nodded to his assistant. “I will take it from here, Kendra.” The young Unda Healer abruptly nodded and fled the room. Destan sighed, watching the blonde-haired woman’s hasty retreat. One of these days, he was going to have to teach her that the patient’s needs came before self-preservation.

“How is he?” The Igni king inquired.

Destan clicked his tongue and pressed a hand against the child’s forehead.

“You were fortunate bringing a medical team on your excursion, My Lord. Otherwise, you would have certainly lost him.” His fingers gently patted Ezra’s forehead. “He is still recovering. It’s remarkable, the boy’s ability. Frightening and disconcerting, yes, but also remarkable.” Used to the man’s quiet demeanor, Destan continued. “I helped him come into this world as a newborn. It never crossed my mind to test the boy’s tolerance to Elemental magic. I’d never needed to use it on him as a child, as he was always a very healthy boy.”

Demonstrating, he conjured up a small, innocent sphere of water. With a silly grin, he splashed it toward Ezra. As soon as it encountered the finely sculptured face, the sphere of water disappeared like smoke. Even the pillow around his head remained dry, unaffected.

“Fascinating!” In all his years, he’d never… “But it does come at a terrible price.”
“He’s immune to your healing,” Josiah conjectured correctly.

Destan nodded distractedly. Most water Elementals, who chose not to embrace the offensive side of combat, decided to learn the ways of healing with their gift. Once a prosperous warrior himself, Destan had willingly left behind the prestige of a warrior to learn how to heal. He never looked back. It was the best decision he’d ever made.

“I am fortunate to have access to the alternative healing remedies the Igni people brought with them when our kingdoms united.”

Before gaining the water Elementals as allies, the Igni people relied on tonics and salves for healing. That, in itself, was an explanation of why the Igni Empire had fallen before Unda. The Unda people could heal faster with water Elementals. In the end, they had outnumbered the Igni Empire quite significantly.

“You were able to create a tonic for him, I imagine.”

“Yes,” Destan confirmed, glancing toward the workbench. “We are also creating a tonic for him to ingest during the next few days. He will need to take it as instructed in order to fully heal his internal organs.”

He looked back down at the child. It had only been a few hours ago when they’d carried the young man aboard the train. The boy’s screams were both piercing and hoarse as he grabbed at an imaginary infliction on his chest. It had taken Destan a few minutes of intensive questions before he understood the situation.

They were lucky they had enough supplies on the train to treat Ezra. Lord Josiah really had no idea how close they were to losing the royal heir.

“What else?” Josiah suddenly demanded, easily noticing Destan’s reluctance. “Were you able to deduce how it happened?”

The Unda elder nodded. “It is called Exsequor Healing.”

The Igni was silent for a moment. “To follow,” the man identified the delineation with ease.

Destan chuckled. “You’re correct. Exsequor means ‘to follow’, but in this case, it translates into, ‘I follow or accompany to the grave’. The Healer, in this case, Ezra, is taking the pain from the victim and transferring it to himself.” He turned, catching the dark, ominous look across Josiah’s face.

“That is an incredibly reckless thing to do. It’s a habit that needs to be broken.”

“Most definitely,” the Healer agreed full heartedly to the man’s observation. “I’ve seen Exsequor Healing before with children of water Elementals.”

When a water Elemental conceived a child with a non-Elemental, their offspring could be one of three things; a full-blooded Elemental, a child who exhibited absolutely no signs of harnessing the Element, or a hybrid of sorts. Most hybrid children could not conjure enough water to successfully battle, so they often tried healing. Thus, the term Exsequor Healing originated.

“However,” Destan started, “What little healing these hybrid children can accomplish is a backlash on their own person, though, it’s not quite as severe as this.”

“Meaning?”
“The Exsequor Healers I’ve come in contact with experience pain for a few moments before the small traces of water magic in their bloodline absorbs it away. In Ezra’s case, he has the ability to absorb the wound, the internal damage, but not recover. Whatever water magic King Calder passed on to him is insignificant.”

Josiah seemed to digest the information given to him before he gestured to the boy. “The scars on his hands. How old do you imagine they are?”

Destan frowned at the sudden change of topic, peering down at the fingerless gloves. He hadn’t noticed the gloves earlier, as he was too busy stabilizing the child. He reached for them, his fingers barely brushing the leather before the sleeping boy curled his hands defensively. It was a strong defense mechanism and an indication of extreme self-consciousness.

Destan’s curious nature got the best of him. He reached for the boy’s hand again, establishing a solid hold on the glove before unfastening it. As he tugged it off, he paused at the pale and glimmering scars. “Oh.” He breathed, touching the scars. He grinned tightly as Ezra pulled away from him again. “Undeniably caused by fire. I would say they’re quite old. Perhaps older than ten years?”

Looking at the motionless figure of the Igni Lord, Destan realized Josiah was waiting for him to piece together something vital. When he mentally calculated Ezra’s age, and the estimated time of the scars, it came to him quickly. He grunted in surprise, turning back to Ezra and touching the scarred hands once more. Studying them, he could only image the pain the boy had gone through.

“He tried to heal Ember as a child,” Destan concluded. “That night they escaped the palace, he wanted to heal his mother from the wounds she sustained from you.” He wouldn’t elaborate much on the event, as he didn’t want to misstep with Josiah.

“I’m certain that was the case,” the fire Elemental mused, looking down at Ezra. “As a child, he was rather expressive and gentle. He would have seen his mother’s pain and reached out to touch her, wanting to make her ‘better’. Yet, instead of just transferring the damage internally, he also incurred the external injuries, the scarring.”

Destan nodded sharply.

“It is likely he practiced throughout his childhood,” he said. “He was able to take the internal damage today without incurring a superficial wound on the outside.” He tossed the leather glove on the nightstand. “I’m certain I don’t have to stress how dangerous this ‘gift’ is, My Lord.” The Unda Healer pivoted around to peer at Josiah. “The internal bleeding, the scarring, the secrecy, it all spells trouble. The term Exsequor has never held such literal meaning until now. This boy will follow the victim to the grave, only in this case, he would take the victim’s place.”

Josiah glided away from the door and came to a stop at the foot of Ezra’s bed. His eyes were harsh as he assessed the sleeping figure. “He has a few weaknesses we need to address,” he acknowledged. “I will need to work with him.”

“As will I,” Destan volunteered. “I can teach him how to take only a margin of the pain and not the entirety.”

Orange eyes flashed at Destan, instantly putting the Healer on guard. “I plan to teach him how to put a wounded animal out of its misery, not heal it,” Josiah informed sharply. “Do not encourage the boy to commit suicide.”

Sensing he had overstepped his place, Destan conceded. “Of course.” He bowed his head.
Josiah didn’t appear to be listening.

His full attention belonged to the young man on the bed. Something menacing churned in those eyes before they shuttered and turned detached.

In the end, Josiah inclined his head. “Just don’t make him your lab rat, Destan.” He turned his heel and swept toward the compartment door. Before he exited, he paused, his back facing the Healer. “While you’re at it, make sure you take that silly charm off his eyes.”

Destan whirled around, nodding once as he observed the sleeping child. Eye charms were parlor tricks performed by people with the ability to practice sorcery. Unfortunately, eye charms, if worn too long, could damage the lens of the eye. Checking the boy’s eyesight needed to be added to the growing list, along with an in-depth checkup of his nutritional measurements.

The boy appeared a bit too scrawny for the age of twenty-one.

* * * *

Shame colored Micah’s cheeks as he dropped the staff again. Trying to avoid Master Idris’ gaze, he stooped low to pick up the weapon. Just as his fingers curled around the staff, however, a heavy pressure applied itself to the back of his neck, stilling him.

“Never lose focus. Never give your enemy such an advantage. You’re dead.”

Micah dismissed the staff altogether and straightened. “We’re only sparring and you are not my enemy. Maybe if you’d just let me pick up the staff without interference, I can learn this faster.”

Idris’ battle-weary face scowled at Micah’s stubborn pride. With a powerful sweep, he knocked Micah’s feet out from underneath him. The young teen lost his balance and landed hard on the ground.

He hissed in pain. In humiliation.

“The only way to excel in combat is to practice as if you are in combat, silly boy!” Idris rammed the end of his staff right between Micah’s legs, just a hairbreadth away from his groin. “You have too much pride. Lose it now!”

Micah pressed his lips together and stood calmly from the ground. He brushed off the back of his trousers and leveled Idris with a look of disdain. “Forget about this. All I need is a job at your tavern. I don’t need to learn how to spar.” With one last superior sniff, Micah turned his heel and made a move to leave the tavern.

“Just how many times have you applied to Concordia Academy? And got rejected thereafter?”

Micah stopped in his tracks. “Twice. But you knew that already, didn’t you?” he inquired slyly.

“Twice you were saved from bruising your ego and damaging your pride. You better thank the high gods you weren’t accepted.”

That got a rise out of Micah. He pivoted around, furious. “Excuse me?”
Idris grunted, running a hand through his short, greying hair. “Concordia Academy isn’t only about education, boy! It’s a military school.”

“I am well aware of that,” Micah replied promptly, reverting back to his casual drawl. “Did you think my intelligence is just as bad as my sparring? Of course I knew of the military influence. The academy offers the students—”

“Yes, yes, they tell applicants that swordsmanship will be taught to all the new students.” Idris pressed the end of his staff into the ground and leaned his weight against it. “That’s rather irrational of you if you believe the majority of the new students haven’t already learned how to wield a sword. Most of the children are of noble blood. They would have been training since a child.” He thrust his thumb toward a motionless and coldly observing Micah. “You’re already at a disadvantage because of your poverty. You aren’t an Elemental and you aren’t of noble blood. Your intellect probably isn’t all that great either.”

Micah pressed his feet together, straightening to his full height. “What, exactly, are you trying to—”

He cut Micah off.

“...You think you can go places with just book smarts, boy? You’ll struggle at the academy if you enter without sparring skills. Everyone will look down on you. You’ll be years behind those who received special training as children. By the time you catch up, your reputation will be soiled.” Idris raised his eyebrows. “You have the arrogance and attractiveness of a noble, though. Maybe that will give you a few bonus points... just probably not the kind of points you’re looking for.”

Micah stood there, Idris’ harsh, but true words sinking in. He’d never thought about the other students before. For all the speech, the etiquette, and the educational lessons his mother had given him, he’d believed he was already ahead. But all those children of nobles, of the elite society, they’d be getting the same lessons. He’d be on equal, if not lower ground than those other students.

He’d be at a disadvantage.

Idris sighed and pushed off from his staff, approaching Micah. As he placed a hand on the younger man’s shoulder, his face softened. “Pride is good to have, Micah. But before you can have pride, you need to learn how to fail.”

“Were you ever as bad as I was?” Micah countered.

The old warrior chuckled merrily and nodded. “Oh yes. It took me years to learn. And after I learned, I pushed myself harder, hoping to get some sort of leverage against those that were Elementals.” His yellow eyes were kind, warm as he ruffled Micah’s hair. “Don’t be afraid to fail in front of me. I’m only trying to make you stronger.”

Micah stared into Idris’ eyes, his respect for the man finally establishing. “I understand, Master.”

The loud clap of thunder stirred Micah from his deep sleep. He inhaled deeply, hesitantly, hoping the pain he’d become accustomed to was no longer present. When the sheer agony did not spike, he exhaled with relief.

Micah hadn’t expected Josiah and his men to succeed in healing him on time. The pain had been unbearable, but he distinctly remembered swallowing something that froze his insides and kept the flames at bay. He also remembered a man with long, blond hair standing over him. The man’s
white robes had indicated that he was a Healer, a highly educated Healer at that.

Slowly, Micah blinked open his eyes, catching the light dancing across the ceiling. He furrowed his brows, looking above his bed and taking note of his surroundings. He was on a train, he realized, and the flickering lights on the ceiling came from the passing streetlamps.

Micah contemplated the high window above his bed before sitting up. He’d only been on a train once, and that had been years ago.

Standing up sluggishly, he planted his feet near the headboard. On his tiptoes, he stared out into the dark atmosphere. Lightning veined across the sky and outlined the large, ominous clouds in the distance. The light patter of the rain against the windows turned soft, silent, before a gust of wind caused a downpour to smear the window, making it impossible to see clearly.

Micah pressed a hand against the glass, marveling at how fast they were going. Used to the slow speed of horse and their inner-region transport system, he could not fathom moving at this speed. In the outskirt regions, technology hadn’t become nearly as advanced as it was near the capital.

Keeping his attention on the passing scenery, his thoughts wandered.

He was finally alone. He had finally broken ties with his mother. Undeniably, he was elated with the idea, yet at the same time torn with guilt and uncertainty. Her fate—Idris’ fate—would remain elusive to him. He did not anticipate Josiah telling him the full truth of what happened to them. Until he had evidence of their fate, Micah would trust that his mentor and mother were alive.

As for Josiah, and what the man intended to do with him, Micah did not know. He had no way of bracing himself for what would come his way. He’d planned to keep his distance originally, but that was impossible now.

Josiah was already a step ahead in their game.

“Just like a stray kitten,” the voice droned from the shadows. “Restless and curious.”

Micah stared out the window, his pulse spiking in shock before beginning to regulate.

Gradually recovering from the surprise, Micah masked his emotions before calmly turning toward the figure at his bedside. He hadn’t seen the man there. He hadn’t even sensed him. It dawned on Micah that his training was in effect now. Since a child, he knew this day would come. It both thrilled and terrified him. Dealing with Josiah would be extremely challenging, however, it was a challenge Micah readily accepted.

He needed to keep his surprise, his emotions in check. Each word, each expression would be calculated and appraised. A slip of concentration would be enough for Josiah to take advantage.

As Micah slowly sat back on the bed, his face remained clear of any worry, of any vulnerability. From here on out, he wouldn’t let it show how much he wondered about the fate of his mother and Idris.

“Josiah,” Micah acknowledged neutrally.

Looking at the man, Micah wondered how he could have missed his presence. Power shrouded the king, yet there was also something else around the man. It was dangerous, ominous, and it made Micah sit up and stay on guard. Something told him that if Josiah wanted to be overlooked, he could accomplish it. When he wanted to be noticed, it would be impossible to look away.
A faint smile traced the man’s lips as Micah stubbornly held on to the silence. “Not a single query about Master Idris or your mother? Impressive.” Something shifted in Josiah, almost as if the man realized Micah wasn’t as hopeless as he’d feared. “You were raised adequately. The least I can do is give my sister some credit.”

“Some credit?” Micah repeated dryly, amused despite himself. “You’re being rather partial. Who else would deserve that credit?”

A predator-like gleam brightened the man’s eyes. “As a child, you were around me for a time. As you know, children’s minds are so very malleable. Easy to mold and shape.”

They lapsed into silence once again, Micah trying to adjust to the situation, and Josiah merely observing him. They were both testing the waters. Not quite used to the other, but both destined to interact with the other.

Micah ran a critical eye over the Igni king, trying to keep his face deadpan under the man’s fixated scrutiny. From his memories of his uncle, Josiah appeared the same. Unmarked by time. His features were still lineless, his eyes still intelligent and focused. Everything about him held the same intensity, not even Micah’s dreams had exaggerated the man’s dark allure.

Josiah traced a single finger against his bottom lip. “You’ve grown handsomely,” he remarked blatantly. “Just how I imagined you would.”

Micah cocked his head to the side, smiling grimly. “Would you also give yourself credit for that… uncle?”

Serpentine eyes widened a fraction over Micah’s cheeky comment before they narrowed with glee. “You do appear far more Igni than you do Unda, one of the reasons you were able to blend in so well in the outskirt regions.”

“But that didn’t hinder your efforts of finding me, did it?” Feeding the man questions was easier for Micah, at least in this stage.

Josiah hummed pleasantly, as if sensing the question-and-answer technique was Micah’s way of growing accustomed to the coherence of their interaction. “I once told you I could find you anywhere.”

Micah mused over a question he wouldn’t have asked otherwise, but his curiosity won out in the end. “How long have you tracked us?”

“Several days after you stepped foot outside the palace walls,” Josiah replied truthfully without any sort of hesitancy. “I had men and women assigned to live around you with each new village. Your mother could never identify moles. She was entirely clueless.”

Micah pondered on this for a moment, instantly wondering why Josiah kept his distance and why he humored his mother into thinking she’d gotten away. The feelings this discovery invoked were nearly debilitating. Why would the man leave him with an unstable mother? Why would he allow Ember a victory? Unfortunately, it was a conversation for later.

“And Calder?” Micah inquired stiffly. “Does he know as much as you do?”

He needed to know how much Calder and Josiah interacted.

“Calder didn’t have the necessary tools to find you. I did,” Josiah claimed, continuing his examination of Micah.
It was a vague answer. It didn’t give Micah any indication to how much Josiah confided in Calder and it didn’t tell him if his father had any sense to his current location. From what Ember told him, Josiah and Calder never played on the same field. They were hardly allies unless it suited their own gain.

Micah clutched the bedsheets but kept his gaze cool, unperturbed. “And what kind of tools would those be?” he asked.

It couldn’t be manpower. Calder had the same number, if not more, men at his disposal. It wasn’t gold, considering Calder certainly had more of that. As far as power was concerned, Micah assumed they were equals in that as well. Both were powerful Elementals. Both were infamous with the sword and battle strategy. There was only one thing that Josiah possessed as an advantage over Calder, and Micah was willing to call the man’s bluff.

“I wasn’t aware that Chosen came equipped with tracking abilities.”

Micah had taken the chance and addressed the unspoken issue hovering between them. He wanted to pretend he was unconcerned over the idea of being Josiah’s Chosen, no matter how ill he became at the thought. Otherwise, if he kept quiet on the matter, refusing to even acknowledge it, it would give the man something to use against Micah.

Unexpectedly, Josiah stood from his chair. With a ridiculous amount of grace, he placed one hand on the bed and angled his body closer to Micah. A single finger brushed against the younger man’s thigh, a seemingly accidental touch, but intentional in every way. Micah tried not to flinch at the contact and found it even harder to remain neutral.

He didn’t think he succeeded.

Josiah positioned his face on equal level with Micah, their eyes calmly battling the other. “She actually told you.”

Josiah’s earlier indifference was gone. In its place was wicked amusement. He reached for Micah’s chin, his fingers dancing away at the last moment to curl into the younger man’s hair. There was nothing sensual about the touch, but rather heavy with the insinuations of cruel mockery. With a sharp tug, he pulled Micah’s head back, exposing his throat.

Micah tried to conceal how uneasy he was with the contact, with the proximity. No matter how alluring it was to be close to someone so influential, Josiah’s aura smothered him, overwhelmed him. Never before had Micah interacted with someone as powerful as this, as dominant as this. He still had a lot to learn.

Josiah knew it too.

Those burning eyes looked straight through Micah, discovering every flaw, turning over every weakness. Seeing it all and identifying what it all meant. “You have nothing to be terrified about, child,” Josiah mused slyly, recognizing his uncertainty, his unstable footing. “I have no interest in bonding with someone so weak.”

It was both a relief and an insult. Micah glared defiantly up at the Igni man, hating him more than ever. “I find that a relief,” he replied through clenched teeth. “Consider it mutual.”

With one hand still curled in Micah’s hair, Josiah lifted his other hand and patted his cheek contemptuously. “Don’t be so insulted, Ezra,” the man chastised unconcernedly. “You’re an impressive surprise, but you have a ways to go. You’re completely under your mother’s thrall.”
Abruptly, he released Micah. The younger man struggled to recover. He watched through shuttered eyes as Josiah withdrew, all but merging back into the shadows. “I’m not under anyone’s thrall,” Micah informed briskly, wondering if he sounded too defensive. He wasn’t defensive. He needed to clarify. “Nor will I ever be.”

Josiah looked at him and then chuckled. “Come now, my sister was entirely unbalanced when she left the palace. It wouldn’t surprise me if she told you what was convenient to her cause. You pitied her and became her little weapon.”

With a silent step closer, Josiah peered relentlessly down at Micah. His dark cloak moved against the sheets on the bed, swallowing the end of the mattress in a black void. Everything about his presence was suffocating, overpowering. Josiah’s presence turned Micah’s blood cold.

Sadly, he enjoyed every minute of it.

“Perhaps I’m wrong,” Josiah mused. “I will not pass judgement until I reacquaint myself with you. I imagine we will have some fascinating discussions in the near future. Until then, get some rest.”

Micah strained his eyes, only seeing a weak outline of the man as he retreated toward the exit and out the compartment.

Waiting a minute after Josiah’s departure, Micah slumped against his pillows and stared at the ceiling, his eyes unfocused. Many things remained unanswered and he was just as clueless about his situation as he was before their conversation. Moreover, interacting with Josiah was what he expected, just as stimulating and every bit exciting. Despite his unsteady footing opposite the other man, he had relished it. He knew he’d enjoy it, but he didn’t know he’d enjoy it that much.

He would have to be careful.

Curling his shaking hands into fists, Micah exhaled slowly, marveling at the unfamiliar situation. Adapting to his current, unknown situation shouldn’t be too problematic. After all, acclimating to new circumstances was second nature to him after relocating to a new village several times as a child. However, underneath his elation at the new situation, he felt the growing nostalgia over his mother.

Was it wrong for him to miss his mother’s abominable presence?

Yes.

Pale eyes stared at the blackness. He thought it was rather ironic that he missed the woman who had molded him into such a twisted, unhinged individual.

It really must run in the family.

Chapter End Notes

Next update, which should be next week, or the week after, I hope to post two chapters. Again, sorry for any errors in this update.
4. Chapter Four

The dull ache in his chest was still prevalent that morning. Considering it wasn’t anything like the excruciating pain he’d endured yesterday, Micah couldn’t complain.

Sitting at the edge of the bed, he marveled at the mattress and the plush pillows. The last time he’d slept on a mattress was at a derelict hostel a few years ago. Typically, his mother always claimed the mattress and Micah had never expected anything less. He’d only seen a small section of the train, and already, it possessed far more lavish items than he had the honor of possessing his entire lifetime.

Next to the bed lay a black and gold military uniform.

Micah’s assumptions proved accurate, then. Josiah planned to take him to Concordia Academy. He would recognize that uniform anywhere, as it was on the propaganda booklet when he applied each term.

It was a handsome uniform. Included with the uniform were fitted black pants with knee-length combat boots that buckled below the knees. A form-fitting jacket was worn over a standard blouse and black tie. Gold trim outlined the jacket’s lapels and a black belt fit around the middle. White gloves completed the ensemble.

He stared at the uniform, wondering if Josiah had put it there to test his obedience.

Not caring for the man’s intentions, as he was more than eager to attend the academy, Micah donned the uniform. As he bent down to buckle his boots, he spied a sword lying on the ground at the foot of the bed. Frozen, Micah gazed at the familiar object, feeling something tighten in his chest. He reached for the sheath and held it tenderly, his fingers deliberately running the length of the scabbard.

This was unquestionably Idris’ sword.

Micah remembered the strain around the man’s eyes as he offered the gift. At the time, he hadn’t understood the man’s reluctance.
Now, he had his suspicions that Idris had sensed his impending execution. A master traditionally presented his sword to his prized pupil when their lessons commenced. Idris seemed surprised over Josiah’s attack, but Josiah undoubtedly gave him the order to present Micah with his sword. That should have been enough forewarning. Yet, even with the premeditative warning, Idris had decided to stay in Region 20.

Micah withdrew the blade from its scabbard, silently vowing that he would wield Idris’ sword with integrity and proficiency. He’d make his master proud by honoring his memory and his teachings.

As the silver blade reflected his image, Micah suddenly noticed his eyes.

Someone had removed the charm. Instead of the warm gold, they were now a pale blue. With his black lashes, the light color contrasted sharply, making his gaze sharp and entirely unnerving.

Too unique.

Too noticeable.

Slamming the hilt back into the scabbard, Micah lay the sword on his mattress before making his way to the compartment door. He tugged on the white gloves and tested the door handle with his forefinger.

Surprisingly, the door opened, allowing him to exit.

Micah kept his steps light and his posture regal. As he swept noiselessly down the corridor, he observed the room up ahead. Several people gathered, their crimson robes signifying their allegiance to the royal guard, but their laid-back postures a clear indication they were not on duty. A number of them were either reading, eating, or dozing. A few were even engaged in a card game.

Micah stopped briefly in the entrance of the common area.

From the corner of his eye, he noticed Josiah sitting to his right. The Igni king seemed engrossed in his work, hardly giving Micah proper acknowledgement. Nevertheless, the man was most likely aware of his presence, just as Micah was responsive of Josiah’s proximity.

Blissfully ignoring the stares and the glowers from the royal guards, Micah narrowed his sights on a man and woman on the other side of the divider, near what looked to be the dining area. Judging from their white and blue attire, they were the Healers who worked on him yesterday.

The heels of his boots struck the floor as he passed the critical gazes.

He hardly worried.

He was above them anyway.

As he passed by one of the guards, his eyes wandered to the man’s hand, noticing the bandaged stump. Clearly, this was the captain from the tavern. He met the captain’s fiery glare with a blank stare, feeling the hostility exude from the warrior. He would certainly need to watch his back with this one. Just because the Igni guard lost his hand did not mean he also lost his desire for retaliation.

Micah offered a coy smile before turning his attention to the two Healers. He wasn’t in any mood to socialize, but these two would serve his purpose well. He had questions.

The female became aware of him first. Her eyes widened and her cheeks colored.
Micah would acknowledge her last, as he knew proper etiquette demanded him to speak to the head Healer first. As he planted his feet together in front of the white-haired Healer, the man finally looked up from his ridiculously oversized tome. Dark blue eyes widened a fraction and the man hurriedly scrambled to his feet.

A gesture of reverence.

An inappropriate gesture between a simple commoner and a ranked Healer.

“Ez— Micah,” the man recovered sloppily, instantly spurring Micah’s close regard. He held out his hand, appearing far too exuberant. “It’s good to see you up and about. I was just going to check up on you, but I’m afraid I got preoccupied with my text.”

Micah grasped the man’s hand and shook it thrice. He was familiar with Keegan’s cheerfulness back in Region 20, but this Healer was on a completely different level. Even when quietly standing, a nervous, excited energy seemed to cloak the man, causing his limbs to twitch relentlessly. Nevertheless, Ember always stressed the importance of manners, no matter how painful it may to act on them.

“I wouldn’t have been able to do much of anything without your work, Healer…”

It took a moment for the man to grasp what Micah was insinuating. “Healer Destan,” the man supplied happily.

Micah bowed his head. “Thank you, Healer Destan.”

He then turned to look at the silent female. Another thing his mother educated to the point of monotony was the proper way to treat a woman. One thing in particular was the way to greet a woman for the first time. He held out a hand to her, and much to his relief, she had enough common sense to place her fingers upon his glove. Grasping the small hand, Micah looked into her eyes.

“And you are?” he purred.

Pink stained her already rosy cheeks. She exhaled shakily and tried to smile past her nervousness. “Kendra…”

She was smitten with him, he noted jadedly. She was relatively pretty, a few years his senior, but she appeared young enough to be a healer-in-training.

“Thank you for your hard work as well, Healer Kendra.” He bowed lowly at the waist. His lips gently brushed against her knuckles, not too much to be personal, yet still personable enough for gratitude.

Healer Destan gave a bark-like laugh and clasped Micah on the back.

“A chip off your old man’s block, I’d say.” He gestured to the bench. “Please, sit.”

Micah smiled thinly and took the offered seat. He watched the male Healer through lowered lashes, drawing the obvious conclusion that Destan knew his past. Not only had he almost addressed him as ‘Ezra’, but he also indicated he knew Calder. Both this man and Josiah knew his birthright. Micah just hoped the information would stay between the three of them and didn’t extend to the royal guards as well.

“Eat,” Destan encouraged, motioning toward the table in front of him.
Micah had noticed the table earlier, but hadn’t truly taken it in. Now, it took a great deal of effort not to show his surprise over the sheer amount of food. “Is this a usual amount for breakfast?” he asked casually, suspending his disbelief.

Destan leaned forward and whispered, “I suppose it’s one of the perks of traveling with royalty.” He reached for a bowl of fruit. “Your stomach needs to grow accustomed to the capital’s rich fare. I would suggest eating fruit for breakfast, soups, and breads for lunch and dinner. We can see how you feel after a week before starting on heavier dishes.”

“Region 20 doesn’t have a wide variety of foods, do they?” Kendra asked.

Micah accepted the bowl of fruit and stabbed a peeled item with his fork. “No, we don’t. I don’t recognize half of the dishes on the table.”

“Really?” she seemed generally surprised. “What do you usually eat?”

He was more than aware of the heavy silence coming from the other side of the common area. The guards were feigning disinterest, yet they were clearly listening in. They were easily entertained.

“Shallots and tomatoes, sometimes almonds,” Micah responded airily. He looked at her, catching her eyes before she glanced away. “Occasionally, we’d hunt wild boar for meat and dehydrate it for jerky. Unfortunately, many of the hunters preferred selling it to traders, who in turn sell them at the capital.”

“And fruit… desserts…”

“All expensive rarities,” Micah humored her. “With the exceptions of apples.”

Destan spoke up. “Region 20 is close to the old Igni Empire, Kendra. They generally experience warm, dry climates.”

Kendra grabbed something from the table and set it next to his plate. “Then you have to try the chocolate turnover.” She flashed Destan a defensive look. “Just one won’t hurt him.”

“Maybe just half,” Destan suggested.

“It looks lovely,” Micah declared tensely, staring down at the triangle-looking pastry.

He found it difficult to share her enthusiasm, especially when he had lived in poverty for many years. Children grew up not knowing the taste of chocolate. They grew up malnourished and starved of proper diets. Meanwhile, the citizens near the capital gorged themselves on table spreads full of foods. They probably threw away most of it, unaware of the people who constantly died of starvation around the less-funded regions of Concordia.

They also seemed ill informed. Blissfully ignorant.

As Micah popped a grape in his mouth, he became aware of the eyes on him. He turned, catching Destan’s fascinated stare.

“Tell me, what is the extent of your powers?” Destan grabbed a glass of water and set it next to Micah. “I’ve heard you are an ice Elemental.”

Micah looked over at the guards, unwilling to speak about his abilities.

“Don’t worry about that lot,” Destan declared, sensing Micah’s reluctance. “They’re loyal to Lord
Josiah. If he doesn’t want information to leak out, they’ll be tightlipped.” He tapped the glass. “You’re immune to my healing and other forms of Elemental magic.”

Micah cursed mentally. He knew he was immune from Elemental magic, but he hadn’t realized that included healing as well. It would certainly explain the smell of tonics when he woke up. Immunity to healing was certainly a weakness. His enemies would be able to injure him and Micah would be at a disadvantage because it took time to heal, unlike others whom could heal quickly by water Elementals.

“Can you turn it into ice?” Destan persisted, obviously not willing to give up.

“I can’t,” Micah replied curtly. “I can only turn things to ice if they have been manipulated first by either a water or fire Elemental.”

“Interesting,” the Healer mused. He reached over and touched the glass of water, using his Elemental magic to make the water bubble and sway. “Can you do it now?”

Such childish entertainment…

He supposed the curiosity was only natural.

Clearing his face of any displeasure, Micah reached over and settled his palm over the sloshing water. Instantly, the glass fogged and the water became a chunk of solid ice. The glass then shattered a moment later, spitting Micah with several shards. He blinked and wiped a hand down his face, smearing the tiny blotches of blood with his gloves. Really, he should have seen that coming.

“Oh Varuna!” Destan cursed. The Unda Healer quickly picked up the pieces of glass and placed them into a basket.

Micah watched him, thinking it was slightly amusing hearing the curse word Varuna. Varuna was the name of the water god the Unda people worshipped. Where Micah grew up, as most of the citizens of Region 20 were of Igni descent, they worshiped the fire god, Agni. Ember never found much reason to pray or worship Agni. In fact, she was rather cynical of the whole thing.

Micah had to agree with her.

“Are we close to Concordia’s capital?” Micah inquired after Destan stopped fumbling with the broken glass. He wanted to steer away from their current conversation and get some of his own questions answered.

Kendra reached over Micah’s shoulder and opened the curtains. “We should arrive by this evening. Look, you can see it in the distance.”

Disregarding his breakfast, Micah stood and approached the window to get a better angle. It was raining outside, yet he could still see the landmarks. The bridge they traveled on arched high above a body of water. It was the largest source of water Micah ever remembered seeing. In the distance, mountains stretched high into the sky, their peaks boasting whitecaps, apparent even in the grim, rainy weather.

Kendra proved correct in that the capital was not too far.

Buildings outlined the horizon near the mountains. Buildings so tall, so strong, Micah had trouble imagining them. He moved closer, hoping to get a better perspective, a better view. His breath fogged the glass as he stared stonily at the capital. This was his inheritance. His mother robbed him
of his childhood, a childhood he could have experienced here.

A part of him knew he had a rightful claim to this city, this kingdom, but it was too alien to him. Too surreal, intangible. Ember never dwelled too long about what would happen when he accomplished his task of ridding both Josiah and Calder from their positions of power. Perhaps she knew Micah would never succeed, or perhaps her thirst for revenge prevented her from teaching him how to be a good king.

No matter.

He had no intention taking the throne.

“You’ll be there soon enough,” Healer Destan informed hastily. “You need to eat.”

Micah pulled himself away from the window, acknowledging he had stared for far too long. As he moved to sit again, he caught Josiah’s gaze from across the compartment. The king held his book aloft, yet his orange gaze penetrated straight through Micah. Nothing could be read from his expression. Then again, emotions were never discernable from Josiah’s expression unless the fire Elemental deemed it appropriate.

Matching the man’s expression with his own indifference, Micah sat back down and grabbed the bowl of fruit. The questions he had intended to ask the Healers didn’t seem quite so pressing anymore.

He would get information eventually.

He just wasn’t in a hurry.

* * * *

It was hard veiling his initial reaction when they finally arrived at the capital.

The palace was the first thing he observed. It was impossible not to admire first. While it was a distance away from Micah’s current position, it stood tall and dominated over all the other buildings. Pale stone and glass were the two materials that made up the castle’s exterior walls. Its architecture was domineering and impressive, something Micah could not remember recalling as a child.

Concordia Military Academy was the second structure he spied during his quick inspection. Contrasting the palace, dark stone and metal masked the academy’s exterior. It was large compared to the nearby structures, peculiar in its geometric shape, but not even close to the impressive sprawl of the palace.

Micah received only a few stares as he followed Healer Destan and Kendra to the row of black carriages. Dressed in his academy uniform, he supposed it was a bit early in the year to be donning the attire. In addition, it didn’t help matters to follow the royal guard. Fortunately, Josiah had gone ahead of the group. The Igni Elemental most likely wanted to avoid drawing Calder’s attention to Micah as much as possible. It proved that Josiah was keeping him a secret for now and that he had not disclosed Ember and Micah’s location to Calder these past several years.

“You’re in the last carriage, Micah.” Healer Destan placed his hand upon Micah’s shoulder. “We will meet at the academy.” He offered Micah a warm smile, as if Micah actually relied upon physical and emotional comfort.
Nonetheless, Micah supplied a quick nod of acknowledgement and approached the last carriage. Nonetheless, Micah supplied a quick nod of acknowledgement and approached the last carriage. Unfortunately, he wasn’t alone.

“Welcome home, Ezra,” Josiah greeted with false cordiality.

Recovering from his initial surprise, Micah climbed into the carriage and shut the door behind him. Once he settled opposite of his uncle, Micah smiled humorlessly. “Are we headed to the palace?”

Josiah hardly took the bait. “Concordia Military Academy.” The carriage jerked forward, obediently following in line with the rest of them. Micah regarded Josiah, just as the man regarded him. “I want you to forget everything Ember ever told you.”

The fire Elemental’s words took Micah by surprise. He stared, unable to respond adequately. Josiah hardly appeared mocking, and every bit… solemn. There was still a smolder of intensity and wickedness in his eyes, yet Micah acknowledged the absolute seriousness.

“I understand you want to play, as do I, but now is not the time to extract any sort of vengeance.” Josiah crossed his legs and cupped his hands over his knees. “Now is your chance to learn and make a name for yourself. Do not ruin it.”

Micah blinked.

“You’re not ready,” Josiah continued. “I admit that you are far more refined than I imagined you’d be, but when it comes to Calder and myself, you are the furthest away to slitting our throats as you could possibly be.”

“I appreciate you honesty,” Micah whispered sarcastically.

“When you are ready, when you are able to outmaneuver us, I want you to do so out of your own, personal vendetta.” Josiah tilted his head ever so slightly. “It pains me to know you operate under Ember’s hysterical and inane accusations. You only live to accomplish what she trained you to accomplish. But there is so much more to your destiny.”

At his sides, Micah clenched his fists.

Josiah was, in all actuality, taking the role of a guardian, not an opponent. There was a possibility that this could be a manipulation tactic, but Micah was at a loss of what it could accomplish.

“I am not—”

“You are,” Josiah uncrossed his legs and leaned toward the stony, unemotional Micah. “Tell me, Ezra. Did Ember ever tell you why you were conceived in the first place?”

Pale eyes narrowed. “To unite the Unda and Igni people.”

“Exactly,” he purred. “And did Ember ever discuss a future where you successfully united the two cultures together?” Josiah reached forward and placed a possessive hand on Micah’s knee. “Or was that vision simply lost amongst extracting revenge?”

“I know exactly what you’re doing. It won’t work.”

The Elemental exhaled with amusement. “I only speak the truth. Judging from your response, she never once encouraged you to take the throne for yourself.” As if it were stating its claim, the hand on his knee burned. Micah sat motionlessly, staring at Josiah in silence. “You are the rightful
heir.” Josiah took back his hand. “I’ve read all of your application essays throughout the years.”

Micah quirked a brow. “I’m flattered.”

White teeth clenched in a predatory grin. “You have good ideas and strong opinions. You are your own identity. It’s time you discover your path, not finish your mother’s road.”

“Just as long as it adheres to your plans?”

“Of course,” Josiah agreed easily.

The young man sat quietly, mulling over Josiah’s words. In all actuality, Josiah hadn’t said anything Micah hadn’t known. He knew Ember wanted revenge. He knew he’d been a simple tool since his childhood. To Josiah, Micah was a windup doll, viewing the world with only one duty, with one mission to complete.

However, if he destroyed Josiah and Calder, what would come after? Micah faltered at the image, never really imaging a life after Josiah and Calder. He was surprised at the panic he felt, the blackness, the emptiness.

He breathed evenly, not giving anything away from his expression. “If you knew where Ember and I were all this time why didn’t you take me away?” Micah inquired stiffly. It was hard to conceal the bitterness. “You claim my mother was—”

“Unbalanced? She was.” Josiah examined Micah closely. “I didn’t want Calder to have you and I couldn’t take possession of a child without him taking notice. I had to wait until you were older so you could blend in with my military. I was confident enough that you could shake Ember’s influence by the time I collected you. I am not too sure now.”

Micah’s eyes flashed. “You put us through hell. You put me through hell by leaving me alone with her. I have my own reasons to want to see you destroyed.” His comment was enough to silence Josiah, at least for a fleeting moment.

The fire Elemental deliberated Micah, his face a mask of porcelain. “Be that as it may, you still aren’t ready.” Josiah leaned against his seat. “I want your word that you’ll focus on excelling at the academy. You’ll forget about your silly vengeance and learn. I want a worthy partner, child, you are far from that yet.”

“Opponent,” Micah corrected. “Not a partner.”

Josiah’s eyes lightened into something akin to fondness. “Opponent or partner, you still aren’t ready.”

“Will I meet Calder before I’m ready?”

“No.”

The stern, firm response surprised Micah. It was unanticipated that Josiah would broadcast a weakness. He refused to let Calder claim any part of Micah, least not until he accomplished whatever it was he wanted to accomplish.

“It will eventually come out, don’t you think?” Micah goaded. “Healer Destan already knows who I am. Your royal guards know about my immunity to the Elements. And you removed the charm on my eyes.”
“There are hundreds of biracial citizens in the capital. I hardly doubt the topic of your eye color will come up in any social circles besides the ladies' gossiping table.” At Josiah’s tone and comment, the back of Micah’s neck flushed. “As for my royal guards, I picked my most loyal servants. They, unlike the lady gossiping table, will not talk.”

Servants, Micah noted subconsciously, not soldiers.

“As for your abilities…” Josiah trailed off, his voice growing husky, hoarse with renowned interest. “No matter how impressive they are, reserve them for when you’re alone with me. You are good with the sword and your words. That should be enough.”

Micah shifted, once again noting a peculiar phrase. “Reserve them for you?”

“You and I will be having our own, private lessons.”

The carriage stopped in front of the academy, yet Micah was too distracted with Josiah to study the intimidating building. He struggled for an eloquent response as Josiah made a move to escape the carriage.

“Lessons…”

Micah trailed off as he watched Josiah open the door and step gracefully from the carriage. This wasn’t going according to plan. But then again, whatever plans he had conjured during his time with his mother really weren’t realistic, were they? Josiah proved far more capable than Micah initially anticipated. The man was always one-step ahead, or more appropriately, three strides ahead.

“Ezra,” Josiah murmured quietly from outside the carriage. “Your time with your mother was spent pitying her for the situation your father and I put her through those many years ago.” The fire Elemental grabbed the door to the carriage and leaned inside, his voice only meant for Micah’s ears. Orange eyes gazed fervently up at the younger man, their eerie sheen all but smoldering in the dank atmosphere of the carriage. “But would you pity her if you found out she started that fire?” Josiah pitched his voice even lower, causing the hair on Micah’s arms to stand. “Would you pity her if you knew she put you in the flames?”

Micah jerked, seeing red. “You bastard—”

“I was too late,” Josiah continued calmly, intently, hardly bothered by Micah’s anger. “I was in a panic when I ran to your nursery, thinking I’d lost you. Imagine my surprise when I saw you sitting untouched, yet frightened in the flames.”

It was lies.

All of it was lies.

“You may think I’m your enemy now, but I refuse to experience that desperation of losing you again. Your protection is my top priority. I can’t say your mother ever felt the same.”

“You’re lying,” Micah whispered.

Josiah stared intently at Micah before he chuckled. He took a step back, regaining his egotism. “Believe what you’d like. But ask yourself how your mother knew of your immunity. How did your mother know how to train you?”

He left Micah then, gliding toward the academy with his flock of crimson-clad guards at his heels.
Micah stared after him, his mind oddly blank.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter should be up in a few minutes… (:
5. Chapter Five

Micah was grateful he was able to observe the academy before the other students arrived for the next term.

There was something oddly lulling about his boots echoing throughout the silent and still corridors. No one was around to observe his dumbfounded expressions. No one was around to witness him walk into dead ends and retrace his steps.

It had taken him days to map out and memorize the floorplan. The building was constructed into the shape of a cross with four separate wings. One wing for each cadet year and one for the instructors.

Each wing housed study rooms, bedrooms, and large bathrooms.

In the middle of the building, there were numerous levels. Classrooms took up the majority of the upper levels, while he discovered an expansive training arena and an array of other amenities down below. On his third day at the academy, he stumbled across the library. He had intended to visit the expansive library that morning and spend the day reading in blissful solitude.

Unfortunately, Healer Destan intercepted him in the corridors and introduced him to the massive infirmary instead.

The infirmary wasn’t exactly on his list of things to see.

“It will only be a bit longer,” Healer Kendra reassured.

Micah, dressed in a flimsy infirmary gown, eyed her impassively. “You said that over an hour ago, Healer Kendra.”

Her cheeks flushed red at his taciturn drawl. She looked at him before quickly busying herself with something on her charts. “We are waiting for Lord Josiah. He requested to be present for the results. It appears as if he’s running late.”

Micah withheld a scowl. He hadn’t seen his uncle since the man brought him to the academy. Besides Healer Destan showing him where he would take his meals for the day, Micah had no one to keep him company besides the ghostly presence of the cleaning staff.

“We just want to make sure we can take care of everything now instead of asking you to come back.” She composed herself and looked up at him.

He smiled thinly at her close observation.
“You don’t like Lord Josiah, do you?” she inquired.

Micah’s smile widened. “Why would you assume that?”

Kendra placed down her clipboard and glanced at the backroom where Healer Destan had disappeared through several minutes earlier. “Just a wild guess.” She pointed to her mouth. “Your lips get tighter each time he’s mentioned. Unlike most people, who seem to either fear or revere him, I can sense your displeasure.”

He inclined his head, amused. The female Healer was far more observant than he had foreseen. Either her observational skills were above normal, or he was doing a poor job of masking his true feelings. Neither option sat well with him.

It meant he was subpar.

“We have our differences,” he said eventually.

Her eyes were extremely curious. “It isn’t every day the Igni king travels to the outskirt regions to collect a student for the academy, especially considering the academy term doesn’t start for quite some time.”

“I’m interested to hear your speculations.”

Kendra took a step back, flustered at Micah’s intense look. “Sorry.”

Withholding a sigh, Micah turned away and scrutinized the well-lit infirmary. Everything looked so clean, so sterile. So white. He could inhale and detect the stringent cleaning solution used throughout the room. There were several metal-framed beds against the wall and Micah wondered how busy it got during the school year.

Destan was still nowhere nearby; neither was Josiah.

He turned back to Kendra. “You don’t need to be sorry for anything.” He softened his voice, slowly luring the confidence and reassurance back in her stance. “You’re very observant. I’m just curious to know what you, and most likely the royal guard, believe.”

Kendra kept her eyes fixed on the rickety bed frame. “I’ve been sworn to secrecy, so it doesn’t really matter, does it?” She tucked a piece of loose hair behind her ear. “The royal guard would never dare to go against their vowed secrecy either. They’re too afraid of Lord Josiah. Rightfully so.”

Micah placed his hands on his lap, sensing her discomfort on the subject. It was obvious she did not know the full story, or more appropriately, Healer Destan hadn’t confided in her. She only had her suspicions and assumptions. Nothing concrete. Yet Micah assumed she was probably close to the truth regarding his identity.

“Are you normally based at Concordia Academy?” Micah questioned, managing to change the subject and sound intrigued at the same time.

She perked up and established eye contact. “Yes.” Her shoulders straightened and she gestured towards her sky-blue robes. “It will be my second year here and my fifth year working under Healer Destan.”

“Fifth year,” he repeated, sounding impressed. “After this year, you will be a full-fledged Healer able to take on your own apprentices,” Micah surmised. “You look awfully young to achieve such
a prestigious title. It’s extremely impressive.”

She simpered under his praise, under his gaze, just as he expected she would.

He harbored no ill feelings towards her. He just wasn’t interested. Aside from her surprisingly intuitive observations, she was predictable. The conversation was predictable.

“I will have my hands full this year,” she responded joyfully.

That stirred his attention. “It gets busy at the academy infirmary?”

“Oh yes.” She smiled mysteriously. “Lots of students get injured.”

He watched her closely, wondering if she were simply jesting for his sake. However, upon closer inspection, he noticed her unfocused eyes, as if lost in a very fond memory. Evidently, she found pleasure in other people’s pain. Well, wasn’t that interesting?

“Thank you for keeping Mr. Egan company, Healer Kendra.” Destan entered the main infirmary with Josiah trailing at a distance. “Though I dearly hope you are not scaring him too much before the term begins.”

She started, “He doesn’t seem the type to spook very easily, Healer Destan.” Upon noticing Josiah, she curtsied awkwardly in greeting. “My Lord.”

Micah watched the exchange with amusement. The female Healer rushed from the room as soon as Destan excused her. Considering her turned back, he wondered if he needed to reevaluate his opinion of her. She was certainly bashful and easily intimidated, yet there seemed to be more to the woman.

“Micah.”

His attention honed sharply on Destan as the man pulled up a chair and sat opposite of him. With Micah perched at the edge of the flimsy mattress, he felt as if he were a small child, awaiting his doctor’s stern chastising. It didn’t help matters he was still in his gown. Or that Josiah remained looming just behind Destan.

Micah still hadn’t come to terms with Josiah’s admission about his mother. He’d contemplated the information given to him and acknowledged the possible truth to his uncle’s words. As a child, he remembered the fire. Moreover, he remembered someone—Josiah—reaching boldly into the flames to pull him to safety.

Furthermore, Ember hadn’t known about his immunity at the time.

Micah wondered why he refused to accept that she’d willingly burn him alive. It was difficult to swallow and he knew he’d have to face the truth one day.

“Every student is required to have a thorough physical inspection upon admittance to the academy,” Destan started professionally, though as always, there was a hint of good-natured humor in his eyes. “I appreciate your cooperation today with Healer Kendra.”

“And do all the students need to share their results with the Igni Lord?” Micah inquired lazily, looking up at his uncle. “I am twenty-one-years-old. He is not my guardian.”

Destan opened his mouth readily, though Josiah beat him to it.
“You are under scholarship. My scholarship. Therefore, so long as you are in my military academy, you answer to me.”


Destan cleared his throat and shifted in his chair. “I have to say, you are very healthy, Micah. We found no irregularities. You are, however, as expected, malnourished. There are supplements I will give you to correct this. I trust you are adhering to your diet?”

“Fruits for breakfast, soups and breads for lunch and dinner,” Micah responded promptly, his attention lowering to Destan’s hands.

“Good, good.” The man cleared his throat once again, as if he could sense the unpleasant tension between nephew and uncle but desperately wanted to pretend it wasn’t there. “Your eyes need correcting from the misuse of the eye charms placed on them. Water magic will not work, however. There is slight scarring on the retinas…”

He continued talking, though Micah found his interests focused on the rough hands of the Healer. Healer’s usually had softer hands, well-manicured fingernails and smooth skin. Destan, however, had noticeable calluses on specific fingers.

“Micah?”

Micah looked up, unable to stifle his observation. “You were a warrior, sir?”

Destan blinked, startled.

“Your hands,” Micah elaborated. “Are rough from holding a staff.”

Water Elementals often fought with staffs. It was easier to channel the water magic with a long weapon, as opposed to the swords the fire Elementals preferred. Water was smooth, graceful. Staffs replicated that continuous movement.

“It was not my proudest moment, but yes, I was a warrior in the Unda military.” The man seemed uncomfortable, his face a fascinating mix of emotions.

“At least you fought for the winning side,” Micah commented lightly, glancing slyly at Josiah.

His uncle simply raised an eyebrow at the goading.

“In war, Micah, there is no winning side,” Destan commented fiercely.

“Don’t be so melodramatic,” Josiah admonished. “It’s war. It holds a purpose.”

Micah stiffened and gazed at Josiah, hating that he agreed with the man on something. War had many casualties and brutal consequences, yes. However, there was oftentimes a reason to go to war and defend a nation, defend its people.

Deep orange eyes met his and Micah looked away, disinterested.

“Now that we are on the topic,” Destan started brusquely, clearly changing the topic. “Hands oftentimes show us scars of our past. Brutal reminders of mistakes or perhaps victorious scars of accomplishments.” Here, he looked pointedly at Micah’s hands.

His spine stiffening, Micah curled his fingers into fists and narrowed his eyes sharply. “I am not having this discussion.”
“Oh, but you are,” Josiah interjected smoothly.

It was an intervention, Micah thought, highly amused despite his anger. He chuckled under his breath and shook his head.

Slowly, his fingers uncurled from their fists.

“You tried to heal Ember as a child,” Destan observed wisely. “When you left the palace, Lord Josiah said you were completely unharmed. Conversely, Ember was not. You tried to remove the scarring from her face, and in turn, it scarred your hands. You have the ability to heal like a water Elemental. It is so very impressive, but it is so dangerous.”

Micah remained silent.

“Unfortunately, you do not possess enough water magic. You absorb the damage to a victim, but you do not recover yourself. It’s called Exsequor Healing, Micah.”

He knew all this. Let them talk. Let them express their disappointment. It wasn’t as if he’d do it often. He respected and admired Master Idris enough to sacrifice himself to see him live.

A hand suddenly slapped upon his knee, startling Micah back into the present.

He looked up at Healer Destan. Gone was the good-natured Healer. Micah only saw an experienced, weary warrior.

“I anticipate that you will do great things for this kingdom, Ezra.” The hand tightened on his knee upon addressing him by his birth name. “But you are immune from quick, easy healing. Promise me you will not sacrifice your future by trying to heal others.”

No one had ever looked at him as if he would truly accomplish great things. Granted, others had admired him, fancied him, and lustfully claimed he would be something significant someday, but no one had truly expressed their utmost confidence in him. Micah struggled with himself in the face of Destan’s battle-weary face.

It reminded him of Idris.

He found himself nodding mutely.

“Promise me.”

The hand on his knee tightened and Micah found his voice. “Yes, sir.”

Destan nodded and stood from his chair. Micah didn’t dare look at Josiah, as he was surprised by his own actions. Destan had taken him completely by surprise.

“You can get dressed, Mr. Egan. I see no need to conduct further tests. I need to speak to Lord Josiah briefly.” The Healer paused at the foot of the bed. “Make sure to see me before you leave. I have the supplements you need to take daily.”

“Noir Users.”

Destan stopped suddenly at Micah’s comment. He turned and looked at him, his eyes creased with uncertainty. Magi were not a popular topic by any means. Most avoided mentioning sorcery at the capital, especially around authoritative figures.

“What about them?”
Micah looked at Josiah. “It works on me. Sorcery. I’m not immune to it as I am with Elemental magic.” He referred to Josiah’s magic back at Idris’ tavern, trusting his uncle to understand his reference. “Do Magi practice healing magic?”

“Healing is impossible for a Noir User,” Destan informed tautly.

Shadows shifted across Josiah’s face. “You must understand that Noir Users are destructive,” he said quietly. “They enjoy inflicting pain. Darkness. Torment.”

Micah quickly grasped his meaning. “Healing would be far too empathetic for them,” he deduced. “Virtually impossible.”

Josiah inclined his head. “For the most part, yes, but I would not say it is impossible.” He bluntly ignored Healer Destan’s look of surprise. “Noir Users do not practice healing, but it’s something a skilled Magi could explore.”

With stern, pointed looks, the two men turned and retreated across the infirmary. Micah stood up and gradually got dressed in his academy uniform, all the while watching as the two entered Destan’s office. From the corner of his eye, he observed Josiah and Destan speaking in hushed, hurried tones. Clearly, they were discussing him.

He fastened his belt and contemplated sorcery.

Besides simple parlor tricks, which still wasn’t very popular, the kingdom of Concordia frowned upon sorcery. Micah imagined that several people knew of Josiah’s abilities, but not many often addressed the issue. From what Micah knew from Ember, Josiah discovered magic after the war and before Micah’s birth. He later denounced any ties to sorcery, claiming he’d had a lapse in judgement during a vulnerable time.

Those who practiced sorcery called themselves Noir Users or Magi. Legends depicted them as being cruel and ruthless. Sorcery did not come easy to those with a kind heart. Moreover, Healer Destan and Josiah only confirmed his suspicions. Magi were unable to practice light magic, simply because it went against their very nature.

However, that didn’t mean Micah couldn’t learn it for himself. He detested being the only individual who was immune to healing.

It made him weak. It made him susceptible to future threats. He could not settle for that.

Unfortunately, Magi were rather scarce in this day and age. Ember had said they were once a thriving culture, but their recent inactivity indicated they had either disbanded or they realized it was imperative to be a bit more clandestine with their practices. No matter, he anticipated there were other ways to learn sorcery without seeking out a Magi instructor.

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“I want to set a few ground rules before term starts.”

Micah clasped his hands behind his back and faced Josiah’s desk. “Ground rules,” he repeated doubtfully. “I hope you are not referring to our unique situation. Rest assured, I will not sneak into your rooms at night or call you my beloved Chosen in front of the others.”
Josiah’s whole body turned motionless at the sarcastic retort.

Slowly, he looked up at Micah, his eyes leisurely raking across the younger man’s body. “Someday, hopefully.”

Micah chose to ignore the way his ears turned hot, but rather recoiled at the man’s response. “Someday, most definitely not.”

Josiah lowered his pen and reclined in his seat. He pressed a hand against his mouth as he considered Micah intensely. “You do not know me. I do not know you. Those are the only ground rules you need to remember.” He then hovered over his paperwork once more. “Be that as it may, I’ve taken the liberty of signing you up for classes.”

“Good.” Micah nodded sharply. “I was worried I would have to do it myself.”

Josiah stared at the paper in front of him. Judging from his unfocused stare, he wasn’t focusing on anything in particular. “You must have inherited your sarcasm from a distant relative, child,” he murmured to himself.

“I prefer the term cynicism.”

Josiah placed a hand on the desk and looked up at Micah. “Endearing, more like.”

“Now who’s being sarcastic?”

For a moment, Micah preened for taking Josiah off guard. The Elemental had grown accustomed to Micah’s solemnity and seriousness. The man knew how to interact with that. A more open, and dare Micah say it, pleasant façade seemed to unsettle Josiah. Micah had many masks. He was still debating which one to use with Josiah.

More appropriately, he was still debating what he should do with his uncle. The man was oppressive, domineering, and cunning. The latter trait was the reason why it was difficult for Micah to acknowledge Josiah’s intrigue. It was fun to interact with the man. But was that intentional on Josiah’s part?

“Six classes,” Josiah went on to address the subject of his classes.

“Four is the suggested number,” Micah countered, his mind sharpening on the fact that Josiah seemed utterly serious. “Six—”

“Is too challenging for you?” the man inquired innocently.

Micah’s shoulders stiffened and he held out his hand. When Josiah handed him the parchment, he ran a critical eye over the neatly penned classes. Most classes were advanced economics. Moreover, all six courses were core classes suggested in later years of the academy.

“I don’t anticipate you will have the opportunity of attending all three years at the academy,” Josiah informed. “I assure you, you will not be the only first year cadet taking these classes. Other noble children expect to climb the ranks quickly; therefore, they will take the most critical courses.”

“Of course they anticipate climbing the ranks,” Micah commented tensely. “They were born with a silver spoon in their mouths.”

“You were born with a gold spoon in your mouth.”
Micah lowered the course list and gazed unhappily at the older man. “Yes, well, I do not claim entitlement and expect special treatment, do I?”

Josiah seemed delighted. “Many children of noble blood have no childhood to speak of. At a young age, they are trained relentlessly to be the best. They have reputations to uphold and family traditions to honor. They are hard workers.”

Micah placed the course list upon Josiah’s desk, expertly reining in his temper. “And then they grow into greedy, dishonest old men who are only out to protect their own reputations and who practice fraudulent maneuvers to keep their family honor,” Micah said, playing on Josiah’s earlier assertion.

The man pressed a hand against his mouth, his orange eyes aflame with amusement. “I cannot argue that,” the fire Elemental approved. “The point I was trying to make earlier was for you to view your fellow classmates with unbiased eyes. Catch them before they turn into those greedy, dishonest old men and guide them to your liking.”

“Is that what you do?” Micah countered slyly. “With your young, royal guards? A firm, guiding hand? The ones you refer to as your loyal servants as opposed to loyal warriors?”

A long finger pointed at Micah. “I’m talking about you influencing the students. Alas, I am a noble child who turned into a greedy, dishonest man.” He smirked. “I’m afraid it is far too late for me.”

“You forgot old.”

“Old,” he repeated with scorn. “I may be your senior, but I am not yet an elder.”

A humorous grin crossed Micah’s lips before he could censor it. Fortunately, a knock sounded at the door before Josiah could draw attention to Micah’s naked expression.

“Come in.”

Micah stiffened as a man opened the door. He was dressed in the ordinary, dull grey robes assigned to academy staff, the same sort of people Micah had passed in the hallways on several previous occasions.

“Dinner is prepared, My Lord.”

“Thank you.”

The man bowed and departed.

Josiah then stood from his desk. “You will be taking your meal with me tonight.”

Interacting with Josiah for an unspecified amount of time was not something Micah had on his agenda.

Ever.

Nonetheless, he followed the fire Elemental, not wanting to express his distaste. They entered a private dining room that would have been more appropriate in a small manor than a military academy. Considering Josiah’s standing as Igni king and the Chairman of Concordia Academy, Micah assumed these were Josiah’s personal quarters.

Luxurious benefits obviously came with status. Dark pillars decorated the room with ivory paneled
walls. Marble dressed the floors beneath finely spun area rugs. The furniture inside the room was both massive and imperial.

Suddenly, a fire lit behind Micah with a mighty roar. He turned swiftly, observing the large, oppressive fireplace. He could comfortably walk inside the hearth and the flames would engulf him whole.

“Still leery of fire, I see.”

Micah’s gaze returned to the Igni Lord. “I am certain the majority of those who cannot wield the Element are leery of fire.”

“Most fear it, yes.” Josiah stood at the head of the table and motioned to the seat to his left. A silver tray occupied both positions at the table and smelt suspiciously good. “But many who do not wield it also worship it. They recognize it as a blessing from the gods.”

Micah approached the offered chair. “Ah, yes, Agni, the fire god.”

A slow, lazy smile crossed Josiah’s mouth upon Micah’s scorn. As his eyes turned half-lidded, he considered Micah with a certain, unexplained intensity. “Ember did not raise you to worship him.”

It was not a question, but rather a statement. “As a child, my sister was a fierce and devoted believer. In the Igni Empire, those with royal blood were expected to submit to religion. It was our way of life.”

“Typically, when one experiences the trials in life, without the divine confidante they relied upon, they grow a bit jaded over the whole matter,” Micah said tensely. “Besides, how can I worship Agni and not Varuna? I am a child of both.”

“Sit.” Josiah looked pointedly at Micah’s chair. “Be that as it may, at the capital, religion is imperative just as it is political. I suggest you consider which god you wish to follow and identify with before term begins.”

Sharp alarm coursed through Micah at Josiah’s words.

Not at the mention of worshipping a god, but by the man’s sharp, authoritative command to sit. No matter how much he despised Josiah, every single instinct, nurtured by his mother, said proper etiquette was to allow the Igni king to sit first. He was the highest decorated man in the room. For Josiah to stand while Micah sat first indicated the man’s reverence.

With a stiff spine, Micah sat in his chair, staring straight ahead. From the corner of his eye, he watched Josiah settle at the head of the table, exuding amusement.

Undoubtedly, Josiah delighted in taking Micah off guard.

“Healer Destan indicated you could eat something more substantial for dinner tonight.” Josiah picked up his glass of wine and continued to watch Micah relentlessly. “You probably don’t remember, but as a child, you adored fish.”

As Micah considered the plate of food, a migraine suddenly blossomed behind his eyes.

He frowned, feeling his head swell painfully.

“Judging from your reaction, I take it you no longer find it satisfactory.”

Micah pinched the bridge of his nose, a brief, moment of weakness as he struggled to pull himself
together. Now wasn’t the time to let a migraine overcome him. He needed his wits about him in Josiah’s presence. The man was initiating some sort of courting. Conversely, Micah knew it wasn’t simple courting. With Josiah, things were never that simple.

Simple actions were oftentimes twisted with the seeds of immorality. The man was watching, judging, feeling out Micah and sensing his limitations. The last thing Micah needed was to give the man any further things to critique.

Dropping his hand, he appraised the dish. “Honestly, I don’t recall having it.” He picked up his fork and pressed the prongs against the tender fish fillet. “It smells delicious.”

The lemon-glazed fish sat upon a bed of long-grained rice. A batch of stemmed vegetables sat to the side of the plate, their green hue vibrant and exotic to Micah’s eyes. Fish was strictly a capital delicacy, as there was a shortage in supply. As he teased his tongue with a sample, he paused, considering. It was incredible.

“It’s satisfactory,” he said flippantly.

He took another bite, and then another, proving it was more than just satisfactory. He didn’t care how he looked devouring the meal. It was an indulgence on his tongue.

“Besides your friend from Region 20, you will be one of the older cadets entering their first year,” Josiah said. “Most enter the academy at the age of eighteen. Taking six core classes will keep you busy and get you up to speed.”

Micah impaled a vegetable and stilled. “My acquaintance from Region 20,” he corrected stonily.

Josiah preened. “Oh yes. Acquaintance. Keegan Flint, correct? The poor, Igni boy who admires you. The eldest of five children, nearly an unheard amount of offspring in present day. I had to reward the family somehow for procreating more Igni youth.”

Turning, Micah locked eyes with deep, sadistically amused eyes. There were many possibilities why Josiah accepted Keegan into the academy. The fire Elemental could consider it a favor. In which case, Micah had to repay. Alternatively, he identified Micah’s affection for the other boy and planned to use it to his advantage. To exploit.

On the other hand…

Micah detected the possessiveness in Josiah’s tone. That particular emotion did not bode well for anyone, least of all Keegan. No matter what kind of affection Micah held for Keegan, he imagined Josiah did not take kindly to any sort of competition that split Micah’s attention.

Instead of voicing his suspicions, Micah simply smiled. “That is very generous of you.” He turned back to his meal, blinking slowly to try to alleviate the painful headache. His stomach churned with nausea. “Keegan is very loyal to his people. You will find him to be a good soldier.”

The ringing in his ears intensified, as did the migraine.

“I do not doubt that.” A pause. “Are you alright, child?”

Micah set down his fork. “Why did you learn sorcery, Josiah?”

Sweat gathered at the back of his neck and he feared he could not hold down the fish. Across from
him. Josiah sat perfectly still, his eyes sharp, seeing everything, observing everything. His own plate remained untouched as he favored his wine. For a crazy moment, Micah wondered if the man poisoned him.

“You do not look well.” Josiah stood up. “I will send for Destan.”

“No.”

Micah was surprised when his voice came out firm and authoritative. Josiah raised a simple eyebrow, though he slowly sat back down. Something danced behind his eyes, a sort of grudging respect as if Micah had passed a particular test.

He didn’t dare consider what private test he passed.

Least of all a test belonging to Josiah.

“I’m fine.” Micah feigned nonchalance as he picked up his fork and took another bite. “I’m beginning to think you are intentionally avoiding my questions about Magi.”

“Your curiosity will be your undoing,” Josiah countered quickly, almost passionately. Josiah was a man who never revealed his passion unless it was in battle. “Noir Users are not a topic meant to have in the open. It is frowned upon severely at the capital.”

“I know that. But we are behind closed doors and many people know you harness the ability of sorcery,” Micah pointed out calmly. “If you think my actions need correcting, then correct them by sating my curiosity.”

“Did Ember not instruct you on this particular subject?”

“If she had, I would not stoop so low and ask you.”

Josiah chuckled. “I enjoy your spirit and sharp tongue.”

That was something about Josiah that Micah found charismatic. The man cloaked himself with secrecy, yet he was not afraid to admit when something pleased him. He was especially open to when Micah tickled some sort of corrupt chord within him.

“Being around men who kiss the hem of your robes all day would make you appreciate a disrespectful tongue every now and then.”

Behind Micah, the flames brightened upon his admission. Clearly a result of Josiah’s pleasure.

“What would you like to know?” the fire Elemental inquired, finally turning his attention to his dinner. He picked up his cutlery and held it aloft. “I will tell you what you want to know about Noir Users, but I do not appreciate your interest. I don’t want you studying sorcery.”

“Why?”

Orange eyes flashed aggressively. “That is not your path.”

Micah was startled at Josiah’s fervent response. “You underestimate me.”

“No.” Josiah lost his fire and took a bite of his dinner. For a long moment, he did not speak. He simply savored the food. “I do not underestimate you, but rather you underestimate sorcery. You will want a taste, but as soon as you get that taste, you will want more. The temptation for power will turn into compulsion. Compulsion will turn into greed. Greed will blacken your soul.”
“Does that mean your soul was already black when you learned sorcery?” Micah drawled. “Or are you immune to the tragedies of us mere mortals?”

Micah watched as Josiah indulged in his meal, taken aback when the man closed his eyes with pleasure. Either he enjoyed the fish that much or he found Micah’s sarcastic quip humorous.

Micah suspected it was a combination of both.

“You are a delight.” Josiah opened his eyes slowly. “Just like any other, I was corrupted when I dabbled in sorcery. After the war between the Unda and Igni Empire, I decided to travel. I visited many regions and came across a group of Noir Users.”

Reluctantly, Micah honed his attention on the man. Ember’s stories never depicted Josiah in a good light, but they had always fascinated Micah. He was curious to hear about Josiah from the man’s own perspective.

“At the time, the Igni citizens were adjusting to Concordia. My father was still the Igni king and worked alongside Calder to settle the people. I felt confident enough with the situation to leave for an extended amount of time. I lost track of time with the Magi.” He paused, looking up at Micah. “They are very organized people. They have ways of persuasion and seduction into the dark. I was intrigued. Very intrigued. I wanted power.”

“More power than you already had?”

Josiah was a very influential commander and warrior during the war. Even Ember admitted as much. Though very young, his people still followed him out of respect and admiration for his skill with fire magic. For his swordsmanship.

“I had just lost a war.”

Micah contemplated. “You phrase that with singularity. It wasn’t just you.”

Josiah pressed his lips together and smiled. “Aren’t you the affectionate one?” He cut into his fish. “I encountered the Magi during a time I felt inadequate. I was still very young. Vulnerable. An individual is far more susceptible to their influence when they are weak. I thought I was with them for a few months, but in reality, I studied under them for three years. I don’t remember much. As though it were some sort of fevered, exhilarating dream where I learned great, but terrible things.”

Micah frowned.

Josiah’s descriptions were vague, nearly poetic with cliché descriptions of a time buried beneath hazy recollections. Was he lying to scare Micah? Then again, there was the slim possibility he was being truthful and he hadn’t remembered much at all.

“Where did you discover them? The Magi?”

Josiah eyes sharpened on Micah. “Near the Eurus Empire.”

The Eurus Empire was located far from Concordia. It was a region that accommodated the air Elementals. Usually passive and liberal, air Elementals rarely engaged in war and would easily overlook rogue Noir Users.

Or perhaps embrace them.

“What made you escape their influence?”
“My father—your grandfather—succumbed from lasting injuries he’d sustained during the war. The palace summoned me back to the capital to help heal my nation and to look after you. I had a new responsibility. Once I distanced myself from the Noir Users, I turned lucid. After I realized they played on my vulnerability, I wanted vengeance. I made a few enemies with the Noir Users.”

Micah nodded and finished the rest of his vegetables, ignoring the very profound migraine behind his eyes. “Intriguing story. Someday, I hope to hear the real version, Uncle Josiah.” He looked at the man, catching his gaze. “Perhaps when I’m old enough.”

Orange eyes narrowed. “That is the true account.”

“Well, it certainly had its desired effect. I am scared senseless.”

Josiah made a noise in his throat, a very unimpressed noise. “Fool.”

Micah eyed the other man severely, placing down his cutlery. “When you can tell me the real story, perhaps I will respect your warning. In the meantime, I refuse to have a weakness no one else has. I will learn sorcery if only to figure out how to heal myself.”

“You are not weak. You are much like the Igni warriors before we united with the Unda people. We had to heal from tonics and medicines.”

“Which is why you lost the war.”

Josiah leaned against his chair, a minor stiffening to his shoulders. “Where did you inherit your thick-headedness from, child?”

“Probably from the same ancestor who passed down their sarcasm.” Micah stared at his empty plate and maneuvered his utensils until they crossed over the dish. “Thank you for dinner, but I really should retire for the night. May I be excused?”

He could not hide his disappointment.

Josiah was not telling him the truth about his encounter with the Magi. Micah couldn’t exactly blame the man. They weren’t on an intimate level. Divulging secrets about their past did not come until phase two of their relationship, he supposed. However, if Josiah was going to warn Micah away from something with such passionate conviction, he needed to put a bit more effort into the reason.

“Go.”

Micah placed down his napkin and stood. Crossing the dining hall, and approaching the door, he tugged at his collar. He was eager to bury himself in his sheets and sleep off his headache.

“Ezra.”

Micah’s hand paused on the door handle.

Turning, he observed Josiah, noticing the man continued to face forward with his back to Micah. A long-fingered hand caressed the top of his wine glass and tiny sparks of flames danced across the brim.

“There will be consequences if I find out you are dabbling in sorcery.”

Micah pursed his lips, ready with a quick insult. Only, it died on his tongue when he sensed the
foreboding threat in Josiah’s tone. The small hairs on the back of Micah’s neck stood and the flames in the fireplace grew stifling.

Throwing one last look at the motionless man, Micah opened the door and escaped into the hallway. With each step he took away from the dining room, the pounding behind his eyes lessened and the ringing in his ears ceased.

He was far more tired than he’d thought.

Rubbing the bridge of his nose, he stumbled toward his bedroom, Josiah’s threat lingering persistently at his heels.
He’d gotten accustomed to the solitude and the quiet halls.

He would miss it.

For over two weeks, with the exception of the academy servants, he hadn’t encountered another living soul. Josiah, Destan, and Kendra remained elusive. The three individuals understandably had other duties that kept them away from the academy. In Josiah’s case, he didn’t want to draw Calder’s—or anyone’s—attention to Micah. After all, Micah was just an ordinary student under scholarship.

At first, he had delighted in Josiah’s unannounced absence.

Yet, as the days stretched, Micah couldn’t help but to think of the man regularly. Trivial and silly sentiments. He unmistakably enjoyed the man’s conversations to the point of dwelling over the possibility of seeing him again before term. In an attempt to ignore Josiah’s phantom presence, he’d taken advantage of his seclusion. He thoroughly ventured through the library and studiously prepared for his classes. He had roamed the hallways and assessed the training arena.

The sleep was good, the food endless. The showers luxurios.

His only complaint was that he grew stir-crazy.

While there were days he lingered outside, inhaling the fresh air, something prevented him from crossing the barrier into the public streets. It wasn’t that he was scared or forbidden to do so. Josiah never told him he could not leave academy grounds. No, what held him back was the overwhelming anticipation. When he stood at the perimeter, his pulse had hammered and his hands trembled with excitement.

It was the unknown.

As anticipating as it was, he was not ready to take the next step.

That night, as he approached the expansive dining hall, Micah straightened his uniform and ran a hand through his hair. Voices reverberated across the walls, nearly startling him with the volume.

Tonight, the first year cadets would have a banquet dinner.

They would chat amongst each other, mingle, hear a welcoming speech, sit through introductions,
and gorge themselves silly. It was meant to be an *ebullient* meal. Almost a sacrificial event. For tomorrow, things would change dramatically. During the next few days, instructors would send students home. Some students would quit voluntarily. Tensions would rise and rivalries would cultivate.

Tomorrow, the first years would perform extensive tests of skill.

These tests placed each student into an appropriate group. Groups, or more suitably, *teams* were established based on skill level. It was important to get a good score, and, in turn, an elite team. For these teams were permanent and vital. After all, the academy sent teams out on real missions.

A pair of students suddenly brushed rudely past him and entered the dining hall. Not once did they glance in his direction or issue an apology. Micah stared after them, noticing their long, blond hair and their proud postures.

Nobles, clearly.

Micah lingered near the dining room, bracing himself for the politics, the forced social interaction, and the cordial facades. Throwing back his shoulders and adjusting his own posture, Micah stepped across the threshold and stood at the edge of the stairs. His attention fell near the head table where a handful of instructors gathered.

As if possessing a gravitational pull, his eyes locked immediately with Josiah.

Of course his uncle would be attending the banquet. It was foolish of Micah to be unprepared with his presence. The man was Chairman of the Academy. If nothing else, he would enjoy observing the crop of fresh blood that would soon be under his influence.

Micah bypassed him casually, as if he did not exist.

After all, it was Josiah’s *ground rules*. In the man’s words, Micah did not know him and he did not know Micah. Nonetheless, the man’s attendance caused a bizarre, pathetic thrill to ignite in his stomach.

Most of the instructors were of Unda descent.

Micah did not study them, rather, he observed how the students clumped in obvious cliques. In the middle of the room, it was evident the children of nobles gathered. They stood amongst the round tables and spoke reservedly to each other. A few tapered off in conversation and looked his way. Their gazes sharpened, drawing attention from their peers.

Micah did not preen under the attention. He remained deadpan as he deliberately scanned the room. No matter if Josiah mocked him on the subject, Micah’s appearance was exotic—aristocratic—and it drew more attention than just the *ladies’ gossiping table*.

He walked down the three steps, his strides purposeful, yet graceful.

A young man, who lingered solitarily at the outskirts of the room, held and garnered Micah’s attention. There were other students sitting by themselves at the outer tables, looking every bit uncomfortable and out of place. They were either scholarship students or citizens near the outskirt regions.

Most of these students were Igni descent.

Things never changed. The Igni citizens were always poor, underprivileged. Unda people were
always rich, entitled. Despite Josiah’s attempts, Micah would always remain bitter about the social classes whether the noble was a child or an adult.

“Is this seat taken?” he asked, curling a gloved hand around the back of the chair.

“No, go ahead. It’s unoccupied,” the young man replied courteously, not even glancing in Micah’s direction as he fiddled with the satin napkin. The piece of cloth no doubt held the boy’s attention for its luxurious sheen.

Micah smiled thinly and pulled out the chair next to the Igni boy. As he sat, he studied his companion’s side profile.

Still, the boy remained uncomfortable.

Nearly bashful.

“It’s not like you to sit by yourself during any sort of social event. Keegan.”

“Micah!” Keegan turned towards Micah so fast his fingers clumsily knocked the polished dishware against the glass of water. Fortunately, besides the loud clatter that broadcasted across the hall, the water remained upright and intact.

“Hush,” Micah chastised quietly in face of Keegan’s frenzied passion. “Know your surroundings. Now is not the time.”

Knowing they’d garnered attention, Micah calmly reached for his glass of water and took a sip. He kept his attention on the glassware, admiring the ice cubes’ sheer quality. They’d even placed a small piece of lemon inside the glass. The yellow fruit was ridiculously vibrant. He didn’t really understand the use of the lemon, though he had to admit it had a good taste.

“Know my surroundings,” Keegan repeated with disbelief. Fortunately, he whispered to Micah, clearly realizing the error of his ways. “I thought you were dead. We all did.”

Micah placed down the glass, savoring the tart taste of unbridled curiosity. He had to ask. He had to. Josiah wanted Keegan here for a reason and he knew Micah would not be able to contain his curiosity regarding this particular issue.

He relented.

Josiah could win this round.

“What happened to my mother? To Idris?”

Keegan exhaled heavily. “We didn’t recover any bodies from Idris’ tavern. But we couldn’t locate him afterward, either.” He paused for a long moment, as if struggling how to proceed with the next bit. “There was also a fire in your apartment complex, Micah. Your mother… well, there were numerous casualties.”

The other boy didn’t want to say it, though Micah knew they’d found a female body in his old apartment. He stared at the polished silverware. A sense of despondent emptiness settled inside his chest and consumed him whole.

Subconsciously, his eyes sought Josiah. The Igni lord was engaged in conversation with an instructor. Josiah may have brought Keegan here for many reasons, yet Micah knew one thing. Ember was alive. So was Idris. Josiah wanted Micah to believe his mother was dead. A fire. Ember
Josiah wouldn’t be satisfied with setting her aflame with an Element she’d embraced since childhood. He’d make her suffer.

“I’m sorry, Micah.”

“Don’t be,” Micah responded quietly, unperturbed. “My mother was responsible for her fate. For our fate.”

Keegan looked pointedly at his hands, as if the scars hidden beneath the gloves were to blame. And they partially were, he supposed. Micah would never underestimate Keegan’s observational skills. The boy had his downfalls, yet he was perceptive.

“So they accepted you at the academy despite Ember’s past?” Keegan leaned closer to Micah, his breath blowing warmly across his ear. “Have you stayed here since the incident?”

Turning, he observed the other boy.

A true smile crossed his lips at Keegan’s curiously concerned expression. “Consider me under surveillance until I can prove my loyalty,” he fibbed lightly. “This stays just between the two of us.”

“Demonstrating your loyalty will prove challenging,” Keegan countered breathlessly. “Considering your distaste for the capital.”

Micah laughed. He had to.

“I’m glad you’re here, Keegan.”

“I can’t believe I’m here. It’s surreal.” Keegan looked over his shoulder at the other cadets. “What do you imagine? Maybe a dozen students here are on scholarship. A dozen out of hundreds who had applied? I made it. We finally made it.”

Josiah plucked Keegan from the sheer number of applicants with cruel intentions.

Micah decided he would never tell him the truth behind his admission into the academy.

The room began to fill with more students dressed in their new uniforms and groomed their very best. Micah figured there was close to sixty students inside the hall, the great majority in the middle of the room, socializing amongst familiar peers.

A young Igni man sat at their table, and then another.

Micah nodded to them curtly. Like all the other misfits, they appeared out of place and clammed.

“If I may have your attention.” A tall, aristocratic Unda man stood at the front of the room. The instructors and other figureheads sat behind him at a long table. “Find a seat.”

Micah tore his gaze away from the immaculate man and toward the newest occupant to their table. It was a young woman. He blinked at her lazily. It wasn’t common for women to enroll at Concordia Academy. The capital had a plethora of other, notorious academies for women. Unlike most men, however, Micah harbored no prejudices towards females who chose roles that differed from the norm. He imagined Ember had a hand in this perception.

However, this was not an Igni woman.
This was a noble. An Unda woman.

Very unusual.

She’d taken the last spot at their table, appearing slightly flustered. Micah would have to observe her next time she interacted with the others. He was curious to see how the males of similar social status treated her. Considering they did not offer her a chair at the inner tables suggested they did not look highly upon her presence at the academy.

Her dark eyes locked with his and Micah inclined his head politely.

She turned away coldly, but looked back at him as if taken aback. Her eyes narrowed as she studied him, a curious lift to her eyebrow.

“You are all present tonight because of your hard work and your impeccable dedication.” The Unda male continued from the front of the banquet hall. “Unfortunately, your hard work does not end here. It only intensifies. This is where we separate those who deserve to serve Concordia and those who should focus their efforts elsewhere.”

The man, like most of Unda descent, had blond hair and blue eyes.

He really should be nothing spectacular.

Yet, there was something eye-catching about him that Micah could not place. He was striking, with long hair falling down his back like any typical warrior. The strands were paler than most, their platinum pallor an attractive shade. He was undoubtedly patrician with his sharp features. His eyes, just as blue as any Unda citizen.

What made him different, Micah deduced, was the sharp, wicked gleam in the man’s gaze.

There was a certain intelligence veiled beneath seductive normalcy, as if he played an important role but held far too many secrets to play seriously. Micah assumed he made it his mission to uncover as much as he could about all individuals. The man would enjoy knowing everything about everyone.

“I am Councilman Sachiel,” he introduced himself silkily. “Regrettably, I do not hold a teaching position here at the academy, but I oversee its operations alongside Lord Josiah.”

There were instructors at Concordia Academy.

And then there was the royal council.

Micah knew just general information about the royal council, who often served as counselors to King Calder. Josiah was on the council and now Micah knew another face.

Sachiel pressed his lips together and smiled. “Where are my manners?” He bowed low and motioned theatrically toward an unimpressed Josiah. “As many of you know, this is Lord Josiah, the General of Concordia’s military. He has graciously accepted the position of Chairman to Concordia Academy this year. We are very pleased to see a familiar face occupy the position.”

Polite applause reverberated across the hall, Micah reluctantly following their lead.

Josiah offered a small wave. Otherwise, he remained seated with the rest of the instructors. Clearly, Sachiel was the face behind the first year banquet. Probably for the best. Micah could not picture Josiah in Sachiel’s position. Far too much impiety would seep through.
A plate of salad suddenly appeared in front of him.

Micah watched as the academy staff delivered the first course to the students. It was a plethora of grey robes as they balanced salad in both hands while interweaving between tables.

“I had expected more, I guess,” Keegan whispered to Micah while looking pointedly at the green lettuce and plump, ripe tomatoes.

Micah smirked. “This is only the first course.”

Keegan blinked. “Oh.” He watched as Micah picked up the appropriate fork and mirrored his actions. “You’ve been at the capital longer. I’ll just follow your lead. Let me know if I do something stupid, yeah?”

“I’m afraid it’s far too late for that.”

Keegan cracked a wide grin at the honest reply. “I’ve missed you, Micah.”

“Introductions will resume after our meal,” Sachiel informed, his tone somehow blending in with the lulling, inviting atmosphere of dinner. “Please enjoy the food and the company.”

A glass of red wine soon appeared in front of Micah. Unlike Keegan, who gawked at the free and unrestricted liquor, Micah simply moved it aside to access the dinner rolls.

“Lord Josiah,” Keegan suddenly breathed in admiration next to him. He adopted a look of awe and wonder. “I can’t believe I’m actually seeing him right now! He’s a lot younger than I imagined he’d be.”

“He just turned seventeen when the war concluded with Unda. He was so young when he fought for his Empire,” one of the Igni students responded to Keegan’s overzealous claim. “One of the most notorious warriors of Igni history. It’s a rarity considering his royal status. Not many princes and kings engage in warfare. We all look up to him.”

Micah chewed contemplatively.

It was unsurprising to hear such veneration directed toward Josiah. Ember informed Micah many people worshipped and respected the man to the point of fanatical obsession. It was just unnerving to hear the praise in person. Especially when Micah knew what truly lay underneath that powerful guise.

“I’m Aiden, by the way. From Region 10.”

The boy appeared younger, at least younger than Keegan and Micah. He was thin, yet he had plump cheeks. A baby face. His eyes were dark amber and his black hair hung past his shoulders.

“I’m Keegan, and this is Micah. We’re both from Region 20,” Keegan replied amicably for the both of them. He leaned forward, his nervousness clearly gone. “I assume you’re on scholarship? Region 10 borders Region 20. Both regions are impoverished.”

Micah glanced at the female from the corner of his eye, noticing her detached, cold expression as she daintily ate her salad. “And you are?” he asked quietly, Keegan and Aiden talking zealously enough to drown out his words to everyone but her.

Her shoulders stiffened and her attention remained on her food. “Talia Bay,” she replied shortly. Her blonde hair was tied tightly at the nape of her neck, exaggerating her feminine features. She
had a square jaw, he noticed, something that gave her a unique appearance. Almost a commoner’s appearance.

“I assume you’re from the capital,” he continued easily, hardly perturbed by her cold and abrupt behavior.

After all, he was a master of icy frontages. Everyone else seemed like mere novices in the art.

Her fork paused over her plate. “Why would you assume that?”

“Well you are, aren’t you?”

The blonde-haired girl gazed at him harshly. “Yes.” She considered him, her eyes tracing over his impassive expression. “I would assume you are from the capital as well, considering your appearance, though your friend confirmed you are an outsider.”

An outsider. That was a new one.

Micah raised an unimpressed eyebrow. “We all have curious assumptions, don’t we?”

He dismissed her formally and focused on his food for the remainder of the meal. Keegan and Aidan did enough talking for all five occupants at the table. Micah simply observed quietly, keeping his senses open to the surrounding tables.

As the main course concluded, some sort of poultry dish, Micah felt the unmistakable sense of being watched.

He followed the pull, locking eyes with Sachiel.

The councilmember sat next to Josiah at the head table. Though he engaged the Igni king in quiet conversation, his eyes observed Micah attentively. A hand went up to Sachiel’s mouth as he leaned closer to Josiah, veiling his words from possible onlookers. Josiah appeared unbothered at the proximity, though Micah was quick to take note of the malevolent glint in the man’s eyes at whatever Sachiel whispered.

Micah stiffened, looking down at the dessert.

His stomach protested. He’d eaten far too much already.

“Are you going to eat that, Micah?”

Wordlessly, he passed the dessert to Keegan.

* * *

Another year with another harvest of new students.

Sachiel observed the younglings through the guise of polite interest. Internally, the sheer monotony of the scene before him caused him to submerge in the thickness and infinite currents of dullness. Every year, his hopes festered and swelled with whimsical desires that things would be different from the preceding year.
Each year, he chastised himself for such impulsive expectations.

As he gazed out at the first year cadets, he found the scene repetitive, monotonous. The same predictable pattern. Entitled students of Unda descent gathered in the middle of the room and fragranced the air with their noble blood and their dripping wealth.

Scholarship students of Igni descent peppered the outskirts of the room, scenting the room with their filthy poverty and fragile naivety that they could make a difference in the world. That their brilliance could make an impact at the capital.

Granted, there were exceptions to the repetitive pattern.

A handful of Igni students were noble and rich. Just like every year. Sachiel could identify each student as a son to a wealthy nobleman from the capital.

He sighed softly, nothing short of a breathless exhalation.

All the same.

With the exception of him.

Sachiel stared unabashedly at the young, biracial man sitting proudly at one of the Outskirt tables. The boy’s posture was not stiff, though he had remarkable poise and regality for a child born in poverty.

Sachiel prided himself with having very few weaknesses.

Unfortunately, beauty was at the top of that cursed list.

He was fascinated with attractive things, objects, and people. As the years went on, not many things held his attention as they once had. With his position of power, he’d encountered far too many pretty possessions. He’d grown immune to their effects. However, this young man rekindled Sachiel’s weakness.

The cadet appeared older than his peers, certainly in his early twenties, as apparent in his confident self-awareness. His dark hair was shorter, clearly a deliberate effort to rebuke the traditions of long hair worn by male warriors.

That defiance, in itself, intrigued Sachiel.

There was an overall aura of rebelliousness around the young man, tempered down with proper breeding and cold features. Very cold, yet remarkably attractive features.

Sachiel turned to Lord Josiah, an exclamation at the tip of his tongue. Only, Lord Josiah’s eyes already focused on his own. The man stared levelly at Sachiel, as if he’d been watching him observe the first-year cadet and did not approve of where his thoughts were taking him.

“My Lord,” Sachiel addressed in astonishment. “He—”

“Do not,” Josiah interrupted coolly. The Chairman turned back to his dinner, dismissing Sachiel curtly.

For a moment, the Unda man considered the reaction he garnered from the normally impassive Igni king. For many years, he’d worked alongside Josiah, so much so that he could acknowledge and respect the man’s powers and intellect. Not normally one to tolerate the Igni race, Sachiel
respected the man as much as he respected Calder. He knew never to deceive Josiah, nor attempt to cross the man.

Alas, for the many years he’d known the man, Josiah was never one to show his hand.

By dismissing Sachiel’s attempts to talk about the boy, Josiah revealed he did not approve. It was all very intriguing. Did the Igni lord already scope out the boy himself? It was something worth investigating and Sachiel was eager to find answers.

Even if that meant toeing the line with Lord Josiah.

“I was just going to express my thoughts regarding him.”

“There is no need to speak, Sachiel,” Josiah admonished nonchalantly. “You expressed your thoughts clearly on your face.”

“Was I that conspicuous?” Sachiel inquired airily, knowing it to be untrue. After all, he was raised properly. Not by barbarians. “I appreciate the observation, My Lord, and will adapt appropriately in the future.”

The boy in question suddenly looked up, snagging Sachiel’s undivided attention.

But those eyes.

Stubborn, familiar, and utterly captivating.

Sachiel covered his mouth, hiding his leering amusement. “You know my fascination with beauty is not of the physical nature, though I must say, he could be an exception.”

It was a lie.

He just wanted to observe Josiah’s reaction to his words. No matter how attractive an individual, he had no interest touching them as long as they were students at the academy. Sachiel had his morals, after all. Boundaries needed to be kept. No, his interest in the young man was purely fascination and intrigue.

Josiah remained deadpanned, but his eyes sparkled dangerously.

Sachiel nearly purred with delight. Yes, the nameless young man was a mystery he would most definitely unearth.

“I’m only jesting, My Lord,” Sachiel soothed slyly, tickled he received such a reaction from the man, no matter how subtle. “Though, I will have to throw an early bid in with the instructors. I have found my frontrunner.”

Every year, the instructors and members of court enjoyed casting bets on who the top student would be for the year. Typically, it was a well-known name, an heir of a prominent family. This year, however, Sachiel felt like stepping outside the box.

He wanted to be bold. He wanted to create havoc.

He wanted fun.

“You don’t even know the name of your frontrunner,” Josiah countered scathingly. “A bit too early for a bid, especially based on a pretty face.”
“I admire your good tastes, My Lord. Pretty face, indeed.”

Sachiel stood up and placed his dinner cloth near the uneaten dessert. There was already a sweet taste on his tongue and he intended to savor it. Spoiling it with the noxious chocolate of the capital just wouldn’t do.

“I believe I will make my rounds and get the name of my frontrunner.” He tucked in his chair and paused. “Unless, of course, you already know his name.”

Josiah pointedly ignored Sachiel as he reached for his fork.

Hardly deterred, Sachiel made his way down to the tables of first-year cadets. As much as he desired to approach the enigmatic young man first, Sachiel knew he must keep up appearances. Though Lord Josiah knew his intentions, he did not want the others to know.

He greeted the children of notable politicians first. Inquired after their families and their studies. They replied with respectable aloofness and a hint of intimidation.

Sachiel preened.

It would seem his reputation had not dwindled over the years. Such a fortunate thing, for he had not changed.

Slowly, he weaved through the inner tables, looping back towards the outside of the room. His attention remained respectfully affixed on the student he engaged in conversation, though he remained aware of the closing distance between him and his intended target.

Finally, after what seemed to be an agonizing wait, he approached his last table.

“Talia Bay, a pleasant surprise.” Sachiel placed a hand on the back of his prey’s chair while facing Delmar’s daughter. “I hadn’t realized you were attending the academy.”

Another interesting student, he supposed. Delmar Bay had two sons and a daughter with his second wife. Talia was his firstborn child from his first wife, an incident he wasn’t inclined to share with others. Sachiel was surprised he allowed his daughter enroll at the academy. However, he supposed much of the decision rested with Talia’s formidable mother.

“Yes,” the girl replied, lifting her chin. “I’m looking forward to my first year here, Councilman Sachiel. It’s an opportunity I am fortunate to have.”

A politically correct response. A predicted response.

“We are very happy to have you, of course.”

He paused.

He allowed a respectable amount of time to pass as he savored the prodigious taste of exhilaration, of unbridled excitement. There was something frustratingly sensual about wanting something so bad and denying oneself the pleasure. However, today, Sachiel gave into temptation.

He looked down at the boy.

The eyes looking up at him were blue, very pale, but undoubtedly Unda blue. Yet, the hair color and the sun kissed skin indicated Igni descent—lighter in color, yes, but darker than the typical Unda paleness. Sachiel admired the mixed heritage.
Exotic, most definitely.

“And who might you be?”

The boy’s thick, dark lashes lowered, as if coy, yet his eyes were bright with sharp intelligence. “Micah Egan, sir.”

_Micah. Micah Egan._

A name with an ambiguous origin, not a typical Unda or Igni name.

Ever since the Unda and Igni cultures combined into one, there were several citizens with mixed heritages. This boy was not a rare specimen by any means. Sachiel had seen many biracial offspring since the end of the war who possessed exotic features. What made _this boy_ unique, however, were his painstakingly aristocratic features and his eyes.

Familiarity itched at the edge of his conscience.

Sachiel pushed it aside in favor of casually nodding to the boy. “What region do you come from?”

“Region 20,” Micah responded. “I am here on a scholarship.”

Region 20, one of the furthest regions from the Concordia capital. Sachiel struggled to imagine such a boy growing up in slums and filth. In poverty and ruins. It did not conjure itself.

“I imagine you are also from Region 20,” Sachiel stated to the boy sitting next to his intended prey. They’d seemed familiar with one another, not an ordinary occurrence during the first few hours of the banquet, especially amongst scholarship students.

“Keegan Flint, sir. And yes, we’re both from Region 20.” The boy, a typical Igni, had an air of enthusiasm about him. Not to mention an air of naivety.

Sachiel observed the two slyly.

Both opposites.

One was also a weak link Sachiel could exploit if need be. “I am certain you both will enjoy the trips into the capital. A very unique and exhilarating experience for those who come from the outskirt regions,” Sachiel commented airily. “Assuming, of course, you make it past the trials.”

Willfulness and a glint of challenge crossed Micah’s expression. “Keegan and I will most certainly enjoy the trips into the capital. We’re looking forward to them.”

_Defiance._ It hung and suspended in the air.

A very sweet aroma and fragrance.

There was no _if_. There were no assumptions that they would not make it. He possessed an air of unrelenting confidence and promise as he boasted his imminent success in the trials. Sachiel fed off the boy’s victory and made it his own.

“We shall see.”

Sachiel stiffly spoke to the other two Igni students before making his way back towards the staff table. On his way to gloat to Lord Josiah, he paused and leaned down to whisper to Instructor Bryce.
“I will place twice my annual wager on Micah Egan, the boy from Region 20.”

Bryce narrowed his eyes at the early bid, but nodded nonetheless. “I will make note.”

As Sachiel turned back to his seat, he overheard Bryce and his fellow instructors speak quietly amongst each other. Flabbergasted. Intrigued. Scandalized. It was unusual for early bids, especially bids of such hefty sums on outskirt scholarship cases.

Overjoyed at causing such an uproar, his eyes fell on the royal flag hanging proudly at the back of the room. He admired the majestic blue and the passionate red colliding and creating an explosion of regal amethyst in the middle. Two powerful kingdoms united after centuries of antagonistic relations.

His spine suddenly stiffened and his breathing turned still.

That irritating familiarity encased and engulfed him with suffocating remembrance of a time long ago. His memory brought him back to a long lost child with angelic, cherub features and ice-like eyes who was destined to seal the two races together as one.

_Ezra, crowned and destined prince._

The royal heir and also, amusingly so, Lord Josiah’s Chosen. Sachiel had been close to King Calder during the earlier years. He’d interacted with the young Ezra a handful of times. He considered the deep purple of the royal flag, pleased his interest revolved around a lost, royal heir and not a simple commoner. The boy truly was a rare amethyst.

King Calder would be most pleased to learn of his son’s presence.

And yet…

No. Sachiel would not deny himself this game. He wanted to see how this played out.

He pivoted and approached his chair, a light smile gracing his features. He’d gotten his wish. Already, this year proved to be far more interesting than previous years.

He was eager for it to begin.
**Immunity Seven**

Chapter Notes

Thank you for the reviews. This chapter is unedited ;) My apologies. BTW- I love my readers for being so observant. As I mentioned, Keegan is perceptive, but many of the readers were concerned that he did not notice Ezra’s change of eye color. He did, I assure you. That will be addressed next chapter.

Enjoy.

7. Chapter Seven

“My hand aches.” Keegan paused. “But last night was the best sleep I’d ever had. The beds are extremely comfortable! And the showers? I didn’t think I could ever get out!”

In the hall, a chorus of scornful laughter sounded upon Keegan’s admittance.

Micah looked apathetically at the group of blond-haired students as they gestured towards him and Keegan. Their expressions ranged from hilarity to aversion as they watched the two scholarship students pass. Talia stood amongst their group, positioned at the outskirts, desperate to be a part of them but no doubt an outsider. She looked at Micah, her mouth scowling and her eyes averting.

“Enjoy it while you can,” one of the boys remarked spitefully. “You and pretty-boy may be smart, but as soon as we start the physical assessments, you’ll be eliminated and sent back to the desert.”

Keegan’s face turned crimson and he pursed his lips, ready to deliver an insult.

Micah curled a hand around his elbow, tightening his hold until Keegan looked down at him.

“They’re not worth it,” he murmured. “They have to find a way to cover their asses for their uninspiring academic scores. Let them overcompensate and sound important.” He’d said it loud enough for them to overhear. By the time they registered his comment, Micah was already around the corner and down the corridor.

“Sorry,” Keegan murmured quietly. “I forgot our surroundings again.” He seemed uncomfortable. “All of this is so new. What they take for granted is precious to me.”

While Micah understood Keegan’s enthusiasm, as he experienced them himself the first few weeks alone at the academy, the boy was too outspoken. Lavish amenities to Keegan were ordinary and expected items to others. Raving about them only drew attention to his disadvantaged social status.

“How do you think you did on the exam?”

“Which one?” Micah asked, noticing a crowd of cadets gathered in the dining hall. “They all blended together by the fourth exam.”

After waking up at dawn and inhaling breakfast, they’d started their entry exams. With the
exception of four fifteen minute breaks, and a light, hurried lunch, the first-year cadets had been taking exams all day. By their sixth exam, stomachs growled throughout the testing hall and the students grew restless in their seats.

The exams covered everything from language to math and even history. Instructors would post the results tomorrow morning and rank the students based on their overall scores. As soon as the scores posted, they would start the process of arranging the cadets into teams based on physical assessments.

Until then, Micah looked forward to eating dinner and reading in the library.

“You’re right,” Keegan murmured. “I don’t even remember which subject gave me the hardest time.” He touched his stomach with a heavy groan. “I can’t even think straight until I eat.”

Micah narrowed his eyes as they entered the transformed dining hall. The tantalizing smell of food wafted the air, tempting all the students and their empty stomachs. Yet, there wasn’t nearly enough food for the hoard of hungry first-year cadets.

The head table was arranged ornately with hors de ’oeuvres and wines. Only, there were no instructors present.

The delectable scent emanated from the head table and the hungry students pressed closer, their curiosity and skepticism falling way to ravenous hunger. Trepidation kept them from touching, however, and they stood around and waited for further instruction. Behind the head table, the heavy curtain from last night’s banquet fell way to a wide, peripheral observation window. It overlooked the large arena down below where the track and other various yard equipment loitered.

The tables the students sat at yesterday were dressed up further with ridiculous amounts of satin cloth and gold-encrusted silverware. In the middle, pens and parchment lay out, though Micah couldn’t understand the purpose.

On the other side of the room, a huge, black screen hung on the wall.

The object was completely foreign to Micah.

“What’s going on?” Keegan asked aloud.

“For the next forty-eight hours, you’re going to be entertainment for the high nobles,” a young man spoke next to Micah. He had the typical blond hair of the Unda people, yet it was cut short, shorter than Micah’s.

“I don’t quite comprehend,” Keegan replied slowly.

Micah grimaced, having an assumption.

“Some instructors, various councilmembers, and high nobles attend this event every term. They place bets on their chosen cadet. High stakes, apparently. Lots of gold. Bragging rights and entertainment.” The other boy shrugged, a very non-aristocratic gesture. “I dropped out early last year and trained harder to make a second reappearance.”

Keegan appeared aghast. “I’m going to make a fool out of myself. In front of nobles,” he whispered.

“You are not,” Micah reprimanded firmly.
He watched the students talk amongst each other. Most of them appeared to know the general turn of events, at least the children of the capital. The scholarship students, on the other hand, appeared utterly confused at the state of the dining hall.

Why hadn’t Josiah informed Micah of this spectacle?

It disgusted him. Their plight was a mere show for rich, bored aristocrats.

An imposing man suddenly walked into the hall, his stature entirely all bulk. Micah could only stare in cynical silence, never having seen a man of such sheer size. His shoulders were absurdly wide and the short-sleeved tunic he wore revealed his bulging arms. His face was cruel, scarred on the left side, and entirely worn with sun. He was of Igni descent with thinning hair combed back into a low-slung ponytail. It looked slightly ridiculous, though another look at his burly arms quelled any amusement on Micah’s end.

“Attention.” The man hadn’t screamed, but his deep, baritone tenor was enough to reverberate across the entire hall and rattle the expensive dishware on the tables. “I am Instructor Candace.”

Upon hearing the feminine name associated with such a hulking giant, a solitary, throaty snort sounded amongst the crowd of students. The instructor—Candace—immediately zeroed in on the cadet who had emitted such a sound. Micah didn’t turn his attention to the culprit. Instead, he watched as the instructor’s eyes narrowed, as if he were making a mental note of the disrespectful student’s identity.

“I’m sure you’re all hungry after such a long, productive day,” Candace said, his tone full of scorn and cynicism. Clearly, he found all-day exams menial. “Unfortunately for you, food will not be provided until after I’m through with you. By the end of the trials, I will be your most hated adversary.”

He smiled then.

“All of you will perform an array of assessments that will test your skill and physical aptitude. The fun and games are over. Your life will now rely on the team you’re assigned to in these next few days.”

His announcement set a certain gloom in the air. No matter how much they wanted to celebrate on finally making it to the academy, they had to repress their high spirits and acknowledge the gravity of the situation. Despite the nobles thinking this as entertainment, it was imperative they remain focused.

“I suggest you push your ass as far as it can go to get on a good team.” He motioned towards the side doors and towards the grey-clad staff worker. “Follow him.”

Without offering much more in way of explanation, Candace disappeared amongst the crowd of anxious first-year cadets.

Micah and Keegan followed the students through the corridors. Oddly enough, it was silent with only an occasional whisper. As they marched through the dimly lit corridor, there was a sense that things were about to change. The air was heavy with anticipation and stale with the unknown.

Micah couldn’t wait.

He found it amusing that some of the cadets raised their chins superiorly, clearly self-assured they knew what was to come. And they did, he supposed. They had an unfair advantage and their scores would reflect positively.
A familiar voice suddenly flooded the hallway. “Line up here! Wait your turn. We are going to go quickly!” Healer Kendra ushered the crowd of students against the wall.

They all followed her instructions and she grabbed the first student by the bicep.

“She’s beautiful!” Keegan confessed breathlessly.

Micah quirked a disbelieving eyebrow, watching as the first student in line dwarfed the female Healer. With her pinched and stern expression, Kendra appeared rather angry today. Considering there were so many students surrounding her, she most likely wanted to appear professional and capable despite her young age.

“You don’t think so, Micah?”

Scoffing at Keegan’s sharp disbelief, Micah shook his head. “I suppose she’s attractive, yes.”

“All of them are attractive,” Keegan whispered. A flush stained his cheeks as if he’d just confessed to something scandalous. “The Unda people, I mean. Or…” he cleared his throat nervously. “The women. Their blonde hair.”

Micah shifted, choosing not to respond to Keegan’s awkward fumbling. He did not share the other boy’s enthusiasm when it came to Unda women. He supposed he really didn’t understand infatuation of any sort, whether it be for a male or female.

If they were beautiful, they were beautiful. No sense to really fantasize and fumble from afar. Romanticizing the same gender was not unheard of. In all actuality, it was quite common. Society, however, expected males and females to settle down and start a family. Both parties had to marry into respected lines and carry on their family names.

Micah pondered.

He supposed he was sexually attracted to both sexes if the situation warranted it. He had experience with both sexes, but found men more desirable. If they proved worthy enough, their mind especially.

For a moment, he grew distracted, recollecting the night on the train when Josiah made an advance. Granted, the man had intended for it to be a mocking sort of tease, though Micah remembered the alien tightening in his lower stomach when the hand ventured near his thigh before anchoring in the roots of his hair.

“Focus on what’s ahead,” Micah admonished Keegan, yet he was talking about himself.

What was he? A foolhardy teenager who just discovered his hormones?

The back of his neck turned warm. He was a fool.

“No need to be so worried, Micah.” Keegan ruffled his hair, having mistook Micah’s frustration with nerves for the upcoming trials. “You’ll do just fine.”

Micah moved calmly away from the offensive hand and patiently waited for the line to get shorter. Fortunately, the students moved quickly, for a few minutes later, the boy in front of him disappeared inside the room with Kendra. At his sides, his fingers tapped the seconds. He barely got to thirty.

“Next!” Kendra hollered. Besides the softening of her eyes, she remained cordial and professional
as he entered the room. To an outsider, it was if she were not familiar with him. “Name?” she prompted as soon as the door shut behind him.

“Micah Egan,” he replied curtly.

“Region?”

“Region 20.”

“Age?”

“Twenty-one.”

She wrote furiously and motioned toward the scale. “Please strip down to your undergarments and step on the scale.”

He disrobed quickly, handing his uniform to the assistant standing near the scale. After stuffing his clothes in a numbered cubicle, the assistant read off the number on the scale before promptly pushing him against the wall to check his height.

In a whirlwind, and nearly naked, Micah then stumbled into an adjourning room.

“Igni?”

Micah examined the man standing across from him. “Pardon me?”

The man looked up from behind a massive table, impatiently scanning Micah’s lithe stature. “I’m assuming you’re Igni, no?” Without studying Micah too much further, he tossed over a black tunic and black pants. “Please dress quickly and grab your size shoe from the wall. Go through the next door.”

Micah accepted the clothes, shouldering on the tunic while stepping into the pants simultaneously. Both articles of clothing were relatively form fitting, yet flexible enough to allow a free range of movement. Grabbing the appropriate shoes and socks from the shelf, he walked into the next room, only for a man to bombard him with papers and sharp-looking pins.

“Hold still.”

The pins poked his chest as the man ungracefully attached the number thirty-eight to the front of his shirt.

“Turn around.”

Micah scowled, following the order as his back received similar treatment.

“Stand against the wall.” The man pointed towards a mark centered on the floor and in front of an ivory curtain. “Toes here on the line. Stand tall. Look forward and into the lens.”

When the man ushered him to the spot, Micah finally took note of the other men flying around the room in a flurry of papers and short, brisk orders. There were foreign machines set up around the room, churning and making loud noises. They were huge. He felt as if he stepped into another world.

“Here.”

The persistent hand on his shoulder nudged him towards the line, clearly not finding Micah’s pace
fast enough. Just over the man’s shoulder, Micah caught sight of a black screen that was similar to the one in the banquet hall. On the screen, a familiar face peered back at him.

It was the student who’d stood in front of Micah. On the screen, the boy appeared perplexed and confused, his eyes wide and his mouth slack with surprise. It would have been amusing if Micah didn’t feel the exact same way. Next to the boy’s picture, his name, age, race, height and weight appeared.

“Done!”

The man at one of the odd contraptions ripped out a large, clear-looking object from the machine and waved it towards another man. Said man collected it from his hand and raced wildly from the room. Micah stared at all this, trying to recollect it into his memory for later. This was clearly new technology. Aside from the fast train, he wasn’t privy to modern-day equipment.

In a way, he felt inept.

“We don’t have all day, kid.”

Trying not to appear too irritated at the impatience directed towards him, Micah stood at the assigned spot and stared into the odd-looking contraption. It appeared like an enormous glass eye. The man behind the machine held up a hand, his thumb settled over an odd button.

“Smile.”

Micah hardly did that. He had an idea where this portrait was going and he didn’t want to look like the kid in front of him, completely and utterly taken off guard. He kept his expression deadpan as he stared into the glass eye. Without warning, the contraption flashed brightly, momentarily blinding him. Glass shattered somewhere in the distance and a hand landed on his shoulder.

“You’re done.”

The hand pushed him a bit too roughly, urging him out of the room. Micah bit the inside of his cheek at their rudeness, but soon found himself with the rest of the students. They loitered in the corridor, waiting for the others to finish. Some of them appeared just as taken aback as he felt, though Micah was sure to school his features.

Keegan appeared a moment later, his face ashen as he patted his numbered tunic. “I have no idea what just happened,” he whispered to Micah, intentionally pitching his voice low. “First, I had to get naked in front of that girl—”

“Don’t be so silly, Keegan,” Micah interrupted. “She is a Healer and familiar with the human body. Besides, you were in your undergarments.”

He stared at Micah. “I had no undergarments on when she told me to undress.”

Micah turned and冷ly assessed the other boy. “Why on earth would you—”

“I like the way it feels, alright?” Yellow eyes narrowed.

Micah turned away, wondering why he even bothered with the other boy’s company. Keegan was improper and recklessly exposed during social interactions. He lacked finesse and the sweet, tantalizing mystery of not expressing every single emotion that flittered through his head.

“Micah.”
Yet, his resolve crumbled at the teasing tone. “Hush,” he muttered.

Keegan laughed. “You should try it some time, kid. Let the poor guys breathe from time to time, eh?”

The rest of the students finally lingered into the corridor, fully outfitted in black or white tunics and a number on their chest and back. Micah observed their strained expressions, amused the academy wanted to cause further segregation by color-coding the students by their race.

He wondered at Josiah’s intentions with the kingdom. Why hadn’t the man attempted to close the divide yet?

A stomach grumbled loudly.

“What are we waiting for?” one of the students bemoaned.

“The noblemen have to place their bets after seeing our physical statistics, of course,” another boy responded. “They probably already have our test scores. Now they need to pick their favorite based on intuition alone.”

“Intuition if they pick you, maybe,” a blond-haired boy reprimanded. “Common sense for most of us. If they’re smart, they will put their gold on a well-known name. They would have known us since birth and followed our training. We’re superior.”

Micah gazed steadily at the boy who spoke, unimpressed.

The boy’s eyes suddenly caught Micah’s unwavering stare. “What? Is the truth hard for you to hear?”

“You’re so sure of yourself, it’s rather remarkable.” Micah pressed his lips together and smiled. “However, you should know that those who are most boisterous in their assertions are the weakest in their actions.” Around him, the Igni students perked up, intrigue washing their features.

The boy took an advancing step forward, spurring Keegan to step protectively next to Micah.

“What’s your name, kid?”

Kid.

Micah pacified him with an answer. “Micah.” He quirked a brow. “And you are?”

The boy smiled unkindly. “You’ll find out when I receive top ranking cadet, Micah.” He winked then, an arrogant sort of gesture, before turning his shoulder dismissively.

“His name is Nereus Edlen,” Aiden, the Igni boy who sat with them last night, informed quietly. “Apparently, his father is on the royal council. The boy next to him is Kai Edlen, his cousin. Both their fathers are high-ranking officials in the court.”

Keegan laughed. “You are quick to learn the gossip around the academy, I see.”

Micah phased them out, watching the two blond-haired men, clearly the ringleaders. He remembered Nereus as the one insulting them in the corridor after the exams. Apparently, he was the outspoken cousin. He also appeared younger, only because his body seemed disproportioned with long limbs and a long neck. Kai, however, had Keegan’s build. He was tall and broad-shouldered, evidently going through puberty much earlier than his blood relative had.
Kai Edlen locked eyes with Micah, his gaze narrowing with contemplation and then displeasure.

Josiah told Micah he could catch them young and prevent them from turning into their fathers. Yet, as Micah considered the close group of noble children, he doubted that he could reverse the several years of grooming and brainwashing.

What had Josiah said before? Oh, yes.

Children had such malleable minds, after all.

How could Micah redact their teachings?

“What are you loitering around the halls for?” Instructor Candace appeared out of nowhere, his ferocious voice nearly cracking the foundation of the academy. “Get the hell out of here and out into the arena!”

They started running immediately.

Micah followed the others, not entirely sure which way to go. The sensation of being plucked from the comfort of his own world and being placed in another realm only intensified as they stumbled into the arena. It was dark outside. The glass dome above was proof enough as it reflected the night sky.

Only, the lights inside burned with startling clarity. Almost daylight intensity.

He stared at spotlights, ignoring the slight discomfort in his eyes. He noticed more than simple torches generated the yellow flames. It was technology again, he supposed. He’d seen smaller lights burn from electricity before, but never of such startling magnitude. He had to read up on them. The library had to have books on modern-day inventions.

Perhaps he could also find the details behind the glass lens that took instant portraits.

He did not appreciate being naïve or oblivious in any situation. It wasn’t in his nature for events to take him by surprise. So far, the proceedings at the academy left a bitter taste in his mouth for effectively taking him off guard.

“Micah,” Keegan called to attention, his tone thick with dread. “Not only are the nobles watching, but the older cadets are in the stands.”

Micah could no longer suppress his curiosity. The older students who observed were not in the banquet hall overlooking the arena. Rather, they congregated together in the stands, a short distance away from the track. They weren’t dressed in uniform, though classes for the upperclassmen hadn’t started yet.

“Don’t pay them any attention.” Micah appraised the group, pleased to see an equal blend of both Unda and Igni. “They are just curious of the outcome.”

“Easy for you to say…” Keegan trailed off and Micah shook his head, amused.

Let them all watch. Let the nobles bet their gold.

“You’ll be running two miles.”

Some students made small noises of exasperation. Both Candace and Micah scowled at the outspoken cadets. Did they not realize they signed up for a military academy? Physical exertion
would be a regular.

“Tomorrow you’ll be wishing you were running two miles, I assure you.” Instructor Candace moved to the side of the track and motioned towards the starting line. “Eight times around. Don’t think of skipping a lap. I have eyes watching every one of you. They will be timing you and counting your laps.”

Candace held up his hand, gathering the students at the line.

“I suggest.” His eyes roamed across the expectant soldiers. “You start slow and warm up your muscles. Save your energy and finish. Those of you who don’t finish will not enjoy breakfast at the academy tomorrow.”

He dropped his arm and the students took off.

Micah shuffled awkwardly with the others.

It was the academy’s goal to test the students’ endurance and mentality by thrusting them into an unfamiliar environment with unideal circumstances. By denying them food, they’d weakened their bodies. By throwing them into an unknown situation with strange and alien surroundings, they’d rattled their mentality. They were all adults now. They had a capital to defend. The council and the instructors wanted warriors. Not coddled children.

Micah understood their objective, but it was a disgrace to get politics involved with gambling and wagering. Nevertheless, perhaps that was intentional as well. After all, it was enough to get Micah riled up.

He supposed the other students felt the same.

Humiliated, meek, and unworthy.

Nonetheless, this trial was obtainable. Running was familiar to him. It should have been familiar to the other students from the outskirt regions as well, especially with empty stomachs and fatigue weighing down their limbs. It was nothing new.

Yet, as the laps continued to stretch, the Igni students fell behind.

Pacing himself, but also not far behind the lead of other students, Micah glanced back at the stragglers. Looking past Keegan, who stubbornly remained a few paces behind Micah, he observed the pack of students with black tunics. Their faces were entirely flushed red, their chests heaved, and they looked pathetic.

They were mentally, emotionally, and physically exhausted. They still had four laps to go and Micah didn’t know if they would make it.

He turned back forward, exhaling with controlled frustration. A purely selfish side of him wanted to ignore their plight. It would be easier. No one expected anything less from him than to think about his own scores. Yet, he wanted a balanced number of Unda and Igni cadets to make the final cut.

While some of the students behind him weren’t particularly good at running, they might be impressive in other areas. Micah wanted to give them the chance to prove themselves. He wanted to see if there were any useful allies in the group of sufferable, pathetic-looking cadets. In order for that to happen, however, they needed to pass the first day.
He fell back, slowing his strides.

Keegan made a noise of discontentment.

“Keep going, Keegan,” Micah ordered as the other boy faltered.

“You were my encouragement!” the other boy argued, unnaturally upset.

For a moment, Micah absorbed Keegan’s raw frustration, never having witnessed that side of the good-natured boy before. Though it was intriguing, Micah pushed it aside in order to focus on his task.

He submerged himself into the clump of black tunics, becoming one of them. “You all look weak,” he stated loudly enough for the students in the back to hear. The only response he received was heavy breathing and wheezing. “You’re going to lose at something you’ve been doing all your life?”

He started to increase his pace, pleased when the others subconsciously picked up their own speed. Little by little, he coaxed them faster.

“How many days have you gone hungry because there wasn’t enough food?” he inquired. “Those days, we still had to push ourselves to keep moving, no matter how dire the consequences. This is no different.”

“They’re betting against us,” Aiden contended. “It’s discouraging.”

“It should be encouraging,” Micah reasoned. “They have no idea how we grew up and how resilient we are. Instead of proving them right, I imagine proving them wrong would be far more satisfying and worth more than their menial wagers.”

Much to his pleasure, they picked up their pace, enthused by his words. There were still stranglers behind the group, though Micah couldn’t — wouldn’t — do much more. If they wanted to fail, he would let them. He’d already tried his best to encourage them. To push them. If they lacked the drive, even when stimulated, they did not belong at the academy.

Some white tunics fell behind.

Micah pushed his group faster.

They seemed exhilarated as they passed a few noble children. Keegan remained ahead of them, but only by a short distance. He kept glancing back, his temper clearly fading into bemusement.

Two laps to go.

Micah kept his attention on the lead. More appropriately, the young man who led.

Kai Edlen remained at the front, his cousin trailing behind him by a short distance. Micah mentally calculated the distance and the speed required to catch up. He would need to make his move shortly. He was confident he’d encouraged the others to finish by their own means. He shouldn’t have to hold their hands across the finish line.

The balls of his feet slapped the soft pavement and accelerated him forward.

“Make your move now,” he ordered the others. “Give it your best.”
Breaking free from the crowd of cadets, Micah pushed his legs faster. As he ran past Keegan, the boy hooted for joy and followed frantically at his heels. They were used to this. Instead of soft pavement, they’d had to navigate through deep sand or dry earth. Instead of climate-friendly weather, they had to push themselves through relentless heat and sun.

The hollow emptiness in his stomach was a familiar passenger.

A familiar weight.

It only fueled his need to run faster, to prove them all wrong. The nobles trained for this, though they hadn’t lived every day with this familiar feeling of emptiness, of suffering.

Micah barely comprehended the students he passed. He forgot his surroundings, he forgot the consequences, and he forgot the other students. He focused solely on catching the boy at the front, and above all else, surpassing him.

He crossed the starting line for the last time.

Only one more lap remaining.

Throwing caution to the wind, he pushed his legs even faster, hardly feeling his pulse as it beat too quickly to catch. He looped around the curve of the track, his eyes focused determinately on Kai’s shoulders. He barely recognized when he passed the outspoken Nereus Edlen, though he heard the boy curse loudly and pound his feet quicker behind him.

Micah chuckled deliriously and closed in on Kai.

The boy glanced back, spying Micah’s looming figure. Futilely, Kai attempted to quicken his pace, though he’d pushed himself far too much in the beginning to accelerate much more than his current speed.

Micah, however, had determination in spades.

He fell into stride next to Kai, locking eyes with the boy for a brief moment. The Unda cadet scowled and turned away, stubbornly pushing his legs faster, quicker. Micah thought it delightful how obvious the boy hoped to advance.

He was no match for Micah.

Picturing himself back in Region 20, Micah sprinted. Pushing past Kai, he took the lead. When that wasn’t enough, he broke past his limits and accelerated himself around the last curve of the track. Though he didn’t look over his shoulder, he could imagine them all.

All following.

All trying to catch up.

Watching him from a distance, yearning, hoping, yet never touching.

The sensation was powerful and it tasted so sweet on Micah’s tongue. He would never forget this feeling of total domination. To know he encouraged some of them to follow only intensified that feeling of victory. Yet, his mother warned him about power-hunger and the corruption associated with it. This sweet, nearly orgasmic sensation was dangerous and he needed to practice caution.

Nonetheless, it was only running.
It was only a race.

He crossed the finish line well before any of the others. The sounds, the smells, and the sense of awareness suddenly rushed back at him. He could hear wild cheering and hollering from the older students observing. He could hear the shoes slap the soft pavement behind him. Glancing back, he was surprised to see the line of Igni students stretch further in the lead than he'd predicted.

Keegan finished behind the two Edlen cousins and two more Igni cadets followed just after.

Nereus Edlen’s face was crimson as he spat words to his cousin.

He batted away Kai’s restraining hands as he rushed towards Micah. “You cheated!”

“Cheated?”

“Yes,” Micah drawled, clutching at his shirt around his hips. “I blatantly cheated.”

Despite his cousin’s attempts to hold him back, Nereus remained stubborn in his pursuit to undermine Micah. He advanced quickly, his eyes resolute. Micah simply turned his shoulder on the boy, not wanting to start a fight. Not here. Not under these circumstances. This was a noble child, after all. Surely, they had more restraint than to fight in public.

Unfortunately, Nereus did not fit in the general aristocratic mold.

“You’re a desert rat.”

The hand reaching for his shoulder was a perfect shadow on the track. Micah watched the hand’s descent, frowning as he felt a strong wave of antagonistic hatred channel at his unprotected back. It might not have been reaching towards him with the intentions of harming, but just the thought of it touching him at all got under his skin.

Acting on instinct alone, Micah grabbed the hand as soon as it came within proximity and bent at the knees. Using his pent-up adrenaline, he yanked the arm forward and abruptly tossed the boy over his shoulder. Nereus landed on his back, breathless, shocked.

“Don’t touch me,” Micah informed the boy coldly.

He stepped over the idiot, humiliating him further.

Walking into the inner field, he tried to relax both his pulse and tight body. As he struggled to deescalate his mind, he almost missed Keegan sprinting past him. The sound of skin hitting skin instantly snagged his attention.

Whirling around, he watched as Nereus withdrew his hand from Keegan’s face. Micah stared for a moment, realizing Keegan had readily jumped in front of his unprotected back to take a hit. An ice-like sensation washed his hot adrenaline cold and Micah sprinted across the short distance to interject himself between the two.

The sensation he felt was somewhat new, though it was natural enough in its ferocity to indicate it was always inside of him.

Protectiveness.

He never knew he was capable of such an emotion, yet, as he brought back his fist, he realized it came readily and instinctively. Just as it did when he protected Master Idris at the tavern. It came
almost too instinctively, like that of an animal backed into a corner, forced to savagely defend itself.

Only, he was defending Keegan.

Nereus dodged the strike, but Micah was ready with his opposite fist. His left knuckles caught Nereus with a sharp undercut, sending the boy stumbling backwards.

The other cadets came running.

Instead of joining in the fray, they pulled back their respective classmate and defused the situation. Micah allowed Keegan to pull him away, already ashamed of his actions. He was far too old to get into fistfights, especially fistfights observed by high-ranking adults.

Josiah was going to have a field day.

Kai Edlen scowled fiercely at Micah. “I’d say keep your dogs on their leash, but clearly the master can’t even keep himself restrained. I suppose I shouldn’t have expected anything less from desert dwellers.”

“Your cousin attacked first because he lost a race,” Keegan retorted angrily. “And he’s a coward for attacking turned backs!”

A slow, thunderous clap sounded across the stadium. Micah glanced around Keegan, watching as Instructor Candace approached the group. He appeared mildly frustrated, but oddly enough, a wide grin stretched across his lips. That smile, in itself, was far more horrifying than his anticipated anger.

“Stars of the show,” he praised with a low whistle. “Finished the race first and will be the first ones eliminated from the academy.” He pried his hands apart from their final clap and pointed right at Micah. “You four will come with me.”
Chapter Notes

Do not... get used to the length of this chapter ;) I combined two chapters for a 4th of July treat (granted, it’s two days later, but hey…). Huge thanks to those of you who are reading and reviewing. And an even bigger thanks to Selethe who is able to beta and put up with me simultaneously. She wasn’t able to fully edit chapter nine, so blame the errors on me.

Enjoy.

8. Chapter Eight

“Stop… shifting.”

At the cold command, Keegan abruptly realized his knee bounced uncontrollably and he hastily stopped moving. “We’re going to get expelled from the academy,” he explained in an oddly pitched voice.

Kai Edlen had already exited the office a few minutes earlier. Besides the dark expression on Edlen’s face, Keegan couldn’t tell what had transpired inside that office. Not only did they face possible banishment from the academy, but the man inside that office also petrified Keegan to the point of nausea.

Josiah. The true King to the Igni people.

“We’re not going to get expelled.”

Keegan rubbed his sweaty palms across his trousers and looked at the younger man sitting beside him.

As usual, Micah was the picture of serenity and composure. He ran a critical eye down Micah’s face, pausing briefly over the pale, blue eyes. He’d noticed their unusual color right away at the banquet, though Micah hadn’t mentioned anything about it and Keegan figured his friend would tell him when he was ready.

The circumstances surrounding his mother also puzzled Keegan. Micah hadn’t seemed that upset over his mother’s death. Nor the fact that he was forced to attend an academy with his supposed enemies. The day Micah left, the day the fires raged across Region 20, many citizens had spied Josiah’s royal guard. King Josiah was somehow involved in the mess and Keegan could not fathom what Micah’s mother had done to warrant such a powerful man’s attention.

“Keegan.”

He turned, staring into Micah’s arctic gaze. “What?”

A hand landed on his knee, immediately halting the restless bouncing that had started once more.
“We’re not going to be expelled. Relax.”

“I’m meeting him face-to-face. Alone.”

Somehow, interacting with King Josiah petrified and thrilled him far more than getting naked in front of that pretty, blonde-haired Healer this afternoon. At the time, he hadn’t imagined anything more humbling. Or humiliating. Fortunately, he would have clothes on with Lord Josiah.

Something ugly twisted Micah’s usual attractive features. “That’s why you’re nervous? To meet him?” He withdrew his hand and leaned further against his chair, away from Keegan as if he carried an unpleasant odor.

For a moment, Keegan stared, feeling a fond grin pull the side of his mouth. If Keegan didn’t know any better, he would have guessed Micah to be a spoiled and arrogant noble, the same sort of people the boy vehemently disliked. Only, he did know better. Just like Keegan, Micah had struggled through his own trials.

No, Micah was not spoiled, nor was he arrogant.

He was proud and he wore a pretty porcelain mask to veil the ugliness life had thrown at him.

The door opened again and Keegan stiffened as Nereus Edlen pointed at him.

“You’re next.” Without so much as another word, the boy walked off.

The heavy, consuming nerves caused his stomach to bubble and growl audibly in protest. He stood up, cradling his abdomen. Sharing a look with Micah, he hoped the boy could loan him his impassive composure, at least this once. Only, Micah raised an unimpressed eyebrow and nodded towards the open door.

“Make sure you kiss his robes properly upon greeting.”

Keegan seethed. “You’re a sarcastic bastard.”

“Were you expecting words of comfort?” Micah smirked and crossed his ankle on top his leg. A gesture of nonchalance. To further the image of indifference, the younger man slung an arm around the top of the vacant seat, his expression smug in light of Keegan’s apprehension. “He is your hero, after all.”

Keegan’s hands trembled as he dropped them at his sides. He straightened his spine and turned towards the door with trepidation. As he looked over his shoulder one last time, he caught Micah looking after him with a peculiar, soft expression. Almost like concern.

But that couldn’t be.

Micah scowled a moment later and the illusion was gone.

Perplexed, Keegan entered to office. What did Micah have to be worried about?

“Please shut the door behind you, Mr. Flint.”

Upon hearing the voice, a slow, nearly seductive chill glided down Keegan’s spine. Never before had he heard Lord Josiah speak. The tenor wasn’t feminine nor masculine, but rather serpentine in quality. Soft, dangerous, and ambiguous.

Avoiding looking in the man’s direction, Keegan shut the door and his hands fumbled awkwardly
with the handle. Not knowing what to do. How to do it. When to do it.

_Oh, Agni_, he was ridiculous.

“Take a seat. Please.”

Keegan forced himself away from the door, his eyes traveling in a wide arc to observe his surroundings properly.

It was a very large office, though he hadn’t expected anything less for the Chairman of the Academy. There were two stone pillars in the room with a small basin in front of each. The basin housed a unique, purple flame that instantly warmed the room to a comfortable heat. While others may have considered it too warm, Keegan found himself often cold since he’d arrived at the academy.

Stumbling his way to the chair, he sat down.

Behind the desk, there were large bookcases filled with a respectable amount of tomes. A few knickknacks filled the shelves, though Keegan figured they were just for decoration and passed down throughout the years from one chairperson to the next.

Finally, when he could no longer avoid it, his gaze landed on the figure behind the desk. Keegan’s pulse raced wildly as fathomable, orange eyes assessed him silently.

For years, he’d always wanted to meet this man. Now, it felt as if he were the center of the man’s attention.

Josiah was not an overly attractive man like Micah and some other men Keegan noticed around the academy. He had aristocratic features, yes, timeless features, but what snagged Keegan’s undivided attention was Lord Josiah’s presence. The man’s aura was far too large for any room. It stifled Keegan. Intimidated and awed him.

He could only stare, his hands trembling on his lap.

“You look nervous.”

Keegan flinched. His pulse seemed to race faster now than it had during the race. “I- I am. Nervous that is. Really nervous, actually.” He laughed once, though instantly regretted it as Josiah continued watching him dispassionately.

The man kept his hands clasped in front of his mouth while his gaze dissected Keegan.

Little by little.

Forcing his eyes away from the orange gaze, he studied the black military uniform that dressed the man’s lithe form. He was a decorated warrior, as seen clearly by the medals and the stripes across his shoulders. The long braid carelessly slung over his shoulder also screamed royalty. As it was, only royals could wear their hair braided like that.

As a kid, Keegan remembered he and his siblings had worn their hair in such a way to play warriors and princes. Their parents had reprimanded them at the time, proclaiming it was a crime to parade as royalty.

Keegan couldn’t believe he was _here_, in front of royalty! Wait until he told his brothers!
Did the Edlen cousins feel this way? Or were they accustomed to interacting with royalty because of their own, noble blood? No matter how many times someone crossed Josiah’s path, Keegan couldn’t imagine anyone growing used to the man’s presence.

It was frightening.

“Why are you nervous?” Josiah inquired quietly.

Keegan licked his dried lips. “I’ve always wanted to meet you, My Lord.” He lifted a hand, realizing it was trembling and hastily scratched the back of his neck to hide the obvious. “Obviously not under such conditions, but it’s an honor.”

Josiah was silent for a moment, frozen in his intensity. “I am always delighted to meet a fellow Igni.” He cocked his head ever so slightly. “Yet I am skeptical of your admiration. Your… companion holds little regard for me. I assumed you felt the same.”

For a moment, Keegan faltered with bemusement. “Oh.” His eyes widened. “Oh! You mean Micah?”

Josiah did not respond. He simply regarded Keegan patiently.

Keegan shrugged his shoulders, shifting awkwardly in his chair. He cursed Micah, not knowing what to say or how much he was supposed to know about the situation with his mother. “Actually, Micah doesn’t talk about you very often, My Lord. If at all.”

Orange eyes creased marginally at the corners, though Keegan did not know whether it was out of amusement or anger.

He supposed his comment was crass and dismissive, especially to a royal.

For another agonizing minute, Josiah regarded him before looking down at his desk. Unclasping his hands, his long fingers touched a few scattered papers. Once he aligned them perfectly, he finally addressed Keegan. “You are correct that the circumstances surrounding our meeting are not ideal. In a controlled and official duel, fighting is encouraged. It is not, however, to be mistaken for schoolyard bullying.”

Keegan flushed hotly. “I understand, sir, My Lord.”

“If I catch wind of another episode like the one I witnessed today, there will be severe consequences, I assure you.” He did not look up, but his tone promised retribution.

“It will never happen again.”

Josiah hummed deeply in his throat as if he did not believe Keegan but would humor him nonetheless. “Aside from that uninspiring quarrel, your performance today was rather impressive. You’ve garnered attention from quite a few nobles by placing fourth.”

Keegan’s head spun wildly. “I- I did?”

Josiah finally looked up at Keegan. “It is always imperative to have friends in high places, Mr. Flint. If your current streak continues, and they are impressed enough, they can get you into very respectable careers after your time at the academy.” He looked down at his papers. “You wish to teach?”

“It’s… it’s a consideration right now. I just want a good job to support my family.”
Josiah’s eyebrow quirked and Keegan blinked rapidly, oddly reminded of Micah. He blinked again and it was gone. Surely, it was a trick of a nervous mind. But he could have sworn…

“It says here you have four siblings.”

“I do, sir.” Keegan inclined his head. “My parents are getting older. I’d like to be able to get a respectable job in order to support them as they have supported me and all of their children.”

Josiah glanced up at him. “How very noble of you.”

For a moment, Keegan wondered if that was a contemptuous comment, but dismissed it as Josiah offered a very small, pleased smile. “I- I couldn’t have done any of this without Micah.”

Josiah’s gaze suddenly sharpened and the room warmed uncomfortably. The smile on his face seemed to freeze uncannily. “I am recognizing your strengths right now, Mr. Flint. There is no need to bring up Mr. Egan.”

Keegan wondered if he should drop it. He’d struck a nerve in the other man and he didn’t understand why. “And I’m grateful for your notice, My Lord, but I really couldn’t have done it without him. He motivated all of us today. He’s a good kid.”

Josiah reached over and placed a hand on top his desk. “I am uncertain of your intentions, bringing another student—”

“I know he’s in trouble!” Keegan blurted like a fool. His eyes widened in horror when he realized he had interrupted a king. He kept going out of shock. “I don’t know what happened with his mother, but I know you’re keeping an eye on him because of her. But he’s good. I promise. He’d never do anything to undermine you.”

The older man regarded Keegan coolly before a pleased chuckle sounded. “Undermine me,” he whispered thoughtfully. “I’m sure it has never crossed his mind, no.” Josiah suddenly smiled and it was every bit frightening.

Keegan stiffened in his chair, the air abruptly leaving his lungs.

Agni! What had he done?

Garnering praise for something he credited to Micah made Keegan uncomfortable. The kid had encouraged all of them today. Without Micah, Keegan wouldn’t have finished nearly as early as he had. He also felt as if he’d stepped over a line. He should have never addressed the issue between Josiah and Micah’s mother, especially when he did not know the details. However, to think that King Josiah was keeping an extra eye on Micah didn’t sit well with him.

He had to defend his friend.

“It seems the two of you are very close.”

“Close enough… I think…” he squeaked.

Josiah lowered his head, yet his eyes levelled with Keegan’s. “I imagine life in Region 20 was far from pleasant. I’m interested in knowing more about that and your relationship with Micah. Why don’t you tell me a little bit more about yourself, Mr. Flint?”

The room, which had been comfortable in the beginning, was now unbearable. Keegan pulled at his collar, sweat gathering at the back of his neck and at his brow. He’d talked too much, he
realized. He’d put himself in this situation. “What would you like to know, My Lord?”

Josiah lowered his gaze predatorily. “Everything.”

Suddenly, a searing pain erupted behind his eyes and Keegan’s mind buckled into complete and utter compliance.

* * * *

After what seemed like an eternity, the door finally clicked open.

Micah stood at attention, suspiciously watching as Keegan stumbled from the room, his expression slack and his face pale. Unfocused eyes settled near Micah, though he truly did not seem to see him.

“You’re next, Micah.” Keegan motioned down the hall with an impatient hand. “Going to catch dinner before they close for the night. Famished.” Like a ghost, the boy breezed past, his movements stiff and robotic.

Micah charged inside the room and slammed the door behind him. He focused on Josiah with single-minded intensity as he swooped near the desk. “What did you do to him?”

Josiah seemed pleased, yet his face was unreadable. “He wanted to reassure me of your virtue by expressing how much he trusted you.” He lifted a hand and gave a little wave. “I insisted he tell me everything.”

“Tell you everything.” Micah repeated as he came to a stop in front of the desk. He placed his hands on the edge and leaned towards the man. “What does that entail, exactly?”

Josiah inhaled deeply and leaned back in his chair. “A few honest questions. Nothing he will remember come morning. He will be back to his normal, naïve self.”

Stunned, Micah could only stare.

Did Josiah possess the ability to persuade others on a subconscious level?

He removed his hands and took a step back, uncertainty pulling at him. Yet again, he remembered Josiah’s supremacy, his sheer and sophisticated power. Micah could delusion himself as much as he liked. In the end, however, Josiah held all the pieces.

For now.

Micah sat in the chair, trying to reign in both his uncertainty and temper. “Do you do that often? Force people to do things they don’t want to?” He cocked his head to the side, curious. “Do you perform that magic on me? And I just don’t remember?” he asked, remembering his headache the other night while dining with Josiah.

The man crossed his legs and regarded Micah closely. “It is a trick I do not succumb to often. I’ve never used it with you, no.” He clasped his hands over his knees, his eyes relentless as they watched him. “I consider it a weakness. If I cannot make someone do as I please, I resort to coercion and magical means.”

Micah preened. “You couldn’t manipulate Keegan to give you what you wanted.”
“He is rather virtuous.” A pause. “And I was impatient.”

“Don’t play with him,” Micah warned, remembering Keegan’s unfocused and glazed eyes. “I don’t know why you brought him to the academy, but don’t play with him.”

At the emphasized warning, Josiah blinked slowly. “And why shouldn’t I test him? He is ignorant and inexperienced, both catalysts when it comes to revealing loyalty’s true strength. Considering you are the royal heir, it is my job to test those you surround yourself with.”

“More like eliminate everyone around me so you’re the sole option.” Micah narrowed his eyes. “And do you have my best interests in mind?”

“Silly child,” he whispered. “You are mine. I would never put you in harm’s way.”

“Unless it was to make me stronger.”

In response, Josiah smiled cruelly.

With teeth.

Micah sat back, unsteady. He took a moment to gather himself. It had been weeks since his last interaction with Josiah. He’d forgotten how mentally exhausting it was, just as it was stimulating. He looked down and curled his fingers into fists, hating how good he felt in this man’s presence. Undoubtedly, there was the strong sensation of hatred and loathing, but it was sharp enough that it felt good.

Did that make him a twisted individual?

Looking up, he looked into equally roused eyes.

Yes, he was a twisted individual, but at least he was among like-minded company. He’d never consider treating others like this. He’d never consider being himself with others. Perhaps that was what Josiah was hoping for, what he was expecting.

He had Micah all to himself.

“You certainly created quite a stir today,” Josiah continued, carrying the conversation in a new direction. “Are you identifying yourself as an Igni? From the observation room, it appeared rather valiant of you to encourage them.”

“I don’t identify myself with any race,” Micah countered. “I wanted to give them the chance to prove themselves. In order to do so, they needed to cross that finish line.”

“Your efforts are better well spent on the cadets who have trained and flourished at the hands of skillful instructors since childhood.”

“Like the Edlen cousins?” Micah inquired with an obvious curl to his lip. “I disagree. They leave me underwhelmed. There are others with raw talent.”

“Oh? And what does your pet have that’s worthy enough for your attentions?”

“Keegan,” Micah corrected, “is brim with intelligence. No one has yet to touch that brilliance and make it flourish, yet he most likely scored near the top of the class during exams. He’s also loyal to a fault. That is something you cannot breed nor ingrain with expensive tutors.”

Something flashed behind Josiah’s eyes. “Do you consider yourself loyal, Ezra?”
His jaw clenched at the given name. “In order to be loyal, you first need a cause or person worthy to follow.” Micah looked pointedly at Josiah. “I have yet to encounter anything that demands such loyalty.”

“Besides him.”

Josiah’s interest in Keegan was dangerous and unjust. Micah flirted with the opportunity to enrage the man further by playing on such insecurities, but decided against it. Just as Josiah mentioned earlier, Keegan was innocent. He did not belong in this mess.

“I am protective of him,” Micah admitted, sidestepping the question.

A knock rasped sharply on the door, interrupting their verbal spar. Micah looked away, well aware of Josiah’s continued surveillance as he called the visitor inside the room. Taking a calming breath, he watched as the academy servant entered with a silver tray. Upon Josiah’s nonverbal wave, the man set down the tray directly in front of Micah.

With a whirl of grey robes, the man disappeared immediately after.

“Eat,” Josiah commanded. “You must be hungry.”

He was. Micah examined the platter of creamy soup and the plump, freshly baked bread roll. It was nearly the size of his head and cut in half with butter and herbs slathered on each end.

His stomach tightened. “Do the other students get to eat?” Micah asked, cautious.

Josiah smirked. “Very considerate of you to think of your peers, child, but yes, they are eating. As we speak, high nobles are approaching their prized stallions and also giving them proper nutrients.”

Micah reached readily for the spoon and dug in. “Should I expect Sachiel tonight?”

Silence met his inquiry.

After swallowing the rich soup, Micah looked up, noticing Josiah’s stony, brilliantly masked expression.

“You’ve noticed his fascination,” the man stated.

“Fascination?” Micah set down his spoon and grabbed the bread. “Is that what we’re calling it?” He ripped it apart eagerly and stuffed it into his mouth, far from ashamed to eat like a savage in front of Josiah. “He wasn’t very inconspicuous during the banquet dinner.” Indeed, he remembered Sachiel’s focused intensity yesterday. He’d questioned it, but had later dismissed it as simple interest.

After all, he hadn’t done much of anything to garner the man’s close attention.

“He interacted with you as a child. As Ezra.” Josiah paused. “Be careful with him. Do not presume you can play on his ignorance. He is far more dangerous than you think.”

Micah swallowed the soup. “Of course I will be careful with Sachiel. I never underestimate opponents.”

Josiah appeared to deliberate Micah’s comment. “Should I feel threatened you already consider him worthy enough to call an opponent?”

“I didn’t consider you the jealous type.”

Micah paused at that, reminded once again at the large advantage he had over Josiah. And large it was. Josiah did not like anyone close to Micah. It was evident with Keegan and it was evident with Sachiel. It was almost disappointing how Micah could identify such weakness; then again, Josiah had many weaknesses of Micah’s he could exploit.

Keegan being one of them. His mother and Master Idris another.

This revelation only evened the playing field.

“What did Master Idris do to warrant execution?” Micah forced himself to ask.

He remembered, when he was about to pass unconscious at the tavern, Idris tried to warn him about Josiah. There was something about the Magi, something about Josiah. Micah hadn’t asked what Idris had done to warrant Josiah’s wrath, simply because he knew what type of response he’d get in return.

Josiah did not disappoint.

“Betrayal is betrayal no matter the reasons behind it,” Josiah replied ambiguously. “We are not speaking of Idris, but of Sachiel and the importance of staying away from him. I shouldn’t have to stress how imperative it is that Calder remains ignorant to your presence.” Josiah uncrossed his legs and straightened. “He only wants you for your blood.”

With his spoon, Micah poked the round balls of what appeared to be flour and yeast in his soup. He then proceeded to play with the chunks of chicken. “You mean my father would use me for my mixed race?” he asked with exaggerated disbelief.

He knew that, of course. Ember had told him that almost daily.

Josiah was not entertained. “Your father would keep you in a gilded cage.”

“I know that.”

The man raised an eyebrow. “I don’t think you do.” He clasped his hands on top his desk. “He would have never allowed you a chance to experience the true realities of life. You would have grown up selfish, spoiled, and privileged.”

“But I didn’t,” Micah retorted quietly but with fire.

“Yet you still have much more to learn and experience.” Josiah regarded him closely. Always closely. “It is imperative you stay away from him and his cage.”

Micah rolled a chunk of bread into a perfect sphere. “He will find out sooner rather than later, I imagine. We’re not exactly hiding it well.” He looked up at Josiah. “Sachiel knows I’m Ezra, doesn’t he? He’s on the royal council. Will he tell Calder?”

“No.” It was a bit startling to hear the utmost certainty in Josiah’s reply. “Sachiel is loyal to Calder when his own inquisitiveness is not in the way. He finds amusement in small things,” Josiah said. “I imagine he would rather watch events unfold than spoil the surprise. That is, unless he grows bored.”

“Well.” Micah gazed down at his half-eaten soup. “In order to keep his silence, we just need to make things more interesting for him, then.”
He looked up, snagging Josiah’s close regard.

“Practice caution with him,” the man warned again.

Micah simply smiled in response. Councilman Sachiel seemed like an interesting individual, someone Micah would be inclined to know better. The man was a rare breed. He was a person who foresaw a catastrophe, but wouldn’t say anything in anticipation of standing back and watching things unfold for his own entertainment.

He was a snake. Very similar to Josiah.

“He is close to your brother as well.”

And then time stood still.

Micah hurriedly looked down at his dinner, trying to veil his surprise, though Josiah was better than to overlook such a raw, unfiltered emotion.

“You didn’t know you had a brother. Half-brother, of course,” Josiah informed. “He is a year younger than you, yet he is in his third year at the academy.”

“Did Ember know?”

If his half-brother was a year younger than Micah that would indicate Calder had committed infidelity. Ember had never mentioned a sibling. Micah hadn’t known. There was never any talk about a royal prince, though he supposed royalty was never a popular topic amongst the outskirt regions. If anything, Micah’s elders only mentioned Josiah and Calder in passing.

Josiah clicked his tongue. “She found out.” He paused. “Unfortunately, it is quite common for royalty to have a harem of concubines. Your mother was a result of one herself.”

“I find that distasteful.” Micah sat back, no longer hungry.

He didn’t understand why the news affected him so much.

“I full-heartedly agree with you, child. I would never tolerate infidelity.”

Micah looked up at that, recognizing it as a warning aimed at him. He smirked through his quickening pulse, acknowledging the darkening aura around the man. “Well, we won’t have to worry about that, will we? I am too weak for you, as you so claimed, and I have no desire to be with you.”

Josiah smiled lazily, his eyes half-lidded with pleasure. “Let us hope, for your sake, that if you say it enough times, you may actually start believing it.”

Ruffled at the arrogance, Micah stood up. “Are we finished?”

Josiah rose from his chair as well and stepped around the desk.

He approached Micah with slow, measured steps, his body moving fluidly. Micah bit the inside of his cheek as the man crowded him, causing his stomach to tighten agreeably. Warm hands grabbed his jaw and angled his head up to meet his eyes. He was too close. The man’s dominant aura pressed around him, a suffocating reminder of who the bigger predator was. He backed Micah up until the back of his legs hit the desk, caging and imprisoning him.

“No more fist fighting,” Josiah murmured softly in warning. “It makes you look like a commoner.”
His hand tightened. “You impressed me today. Keep doing so.”

Micah hated it.

He hated the man’s smugness. He hated how his body reacted positively towards Josiah despite loathing the man. He hated how his eyes drifted lower, towards the smirking lips, wanting, needing to close the distance.

Micah grabbed the man’s braid and pulled on it. Hard.

Josiah was forced to bend his neck, their noses nearly touching.

“If I continue to do well, it’s my own doing. Not because you willed it.”

The orange eyes seemed to brighten into a shade of crimson. Instead of growing irritated at Micah’s challenge, it had clearly excited him further. His fingernails dug into Micah’s jawline, nearly melding against the bone. “And yet, I will always be in the back of your mind.”

Josiah broke first.

He released Micah’s jaw and Micah quickly released his hair. He pushed past the older man and hurried toward the door without making it obvious. He was sure, however, that his haste was evident to both of them, especially the man at his back. With how hard his heart pounded, Micah barely heard Josiah’s chuckle follow at his heels.

It frightened him with how much he wanted Josiah’s contact.

He’d wanted to do things he promised himself he’d never want.

Especially with that man.

It wasn’t until he was down the hallway did he realize he had a very painful migraine behind his eyes. He paused, pressing his fingertips against his temple, feeling as if his skull was about to split into two.

This happened once before. Both times, he was alone in Josiah’s presence.

Micah frowned into the dark corridor. It had to be the man’s power. He’d certainly keep an eye on it in the future and investigate it further.

Leaning against the uneven stone wall, he replayed the events that transpired inside the office. His eyes unfocused as he remembered Josiah’s reaction upon Micah’s challenge. No matter how in control the man claimed to be, Micah had an adverse effect on the Igni king. Both of them were affected by each other, only, Josiah was not fearful of the attraction. He was eager.

Micah, on the other hand…

He raised his hand, observing the white gloves covering the gruesome scars. Slowly, he flexed his fingers and curled them one by one. He needed more confidence. He needed to accept the attraction.

It was there. It was pointless to deny it.

Throwing his hand down at his side, Micah continued down the corridor. A small, satisfied smirk lifted the corner of his mouth. He found himself looking forward to future interactions with Josiah.
They were fun.

9. Chapter Nine

The way they moved was fluid. Gorgeous. Breathtaking.

Micah stared at his competition, unable to look away. While they were his least favorite peers, their swordsmanship style was immaculate. Since Micah had dwelled in the outskirt regions his whole life, where the Igni technique heavily thrived, he’d never seen anyone perform the Unda form.

He had never known it was so calm. So fluid. Like water.

Unda warriors were often times water Elementals. When it came to combat, whether it be swords or staffs, they would impersonate the continuous movement of their Element. Igni warriors, on the other hand, often channeled aggression and rage into their form. Much like fire.

“It is a style I imagine you would wield especially well. Already a picture of exquisite splendor, the Unda form would only enhance your allure and turn it precarious.”

Micah blinked as the voice sounded behind him. Turning, he observed Councilman Sachiel standing serenely behind him, his hands clasped patiently behind his back. Though he spoke about the Unda students, his eyes focused on Micah.

“It’s a beautiful form,” Micah agreed carefully.

He was one of the last students to arrive at the arena, having just finished his swimming trial. Yesterday, the instructors transformed the arena into a plethora of obstacle courses and other miscellaneous trials for the students.

Today, however, mats and low stages decorated the stadium.

Unnervingly enough, even the observation stands looked a bit dressed up, as if they were expecting royalty and an excessive number of individuals to view the trial. It was their last day of assessments. More specifically, a sword tournament was their very last chance to turn the tables. Two days ago, over sixty students started the trials. Since then, instructors sent several students home or they’d quit voluntarily.

Micah imagined several more students would go home after this event.

Sachiel observed him carefully, paying special attention as a few water droplets fell from his damp hair and down his temple. “Swimming didn’t go so well,” he stated knowingly.

Micah’s mouth twitched. “What place am I now?”

“After the swimming trial, you are down to thirteenth.”

Micah turned his cheek, bitterness pulling at him. He knew the swimming trial would negatively
affect his score. Micah hadn’t submerged himself in water since a mishap at a botanical garden several years ago.

“I had anticipated such a turnout,” Sachiel stated casually, reading Micah’s cold detachment. “You are a desert rat, after all. I am just grateful you didn’t drown. Throughout the years, drowning transpired a few times with other Igni students. It’s why there is help near the pool.”

‘Desert rat’ was an insult Micah heard from the noble children quite frequently these past couple days. Only, as Sachiel said it, he made it sound like a matter of fact. A simple observation and not at all derogatory.

“Yes, well.” Micah paused as he watched as some students sparred poorly. “It’s fortunate no one could observe. I might as well have been drowning with how poorly I swam.”

Sachiel chuckled pleasantly. A polite laugh. “Then I am glad to have missed the spectacle.”

Today, Sachiel was dressed in light grey robes with royal blue lining the hems. Half his hair was pulled into a tight knot, allowing the rest of his hair to fall straight down his back. He appeared rather serene, though his eyes sparkled mischievously. Micah was reminded of his conversation with Josiah the other night.

Saintly appearances aside, this man was a deceiving schemer.

“I am teaching Kai Edlen how to wield the sword,” Sachiel confessed, watching the eldest Edlen spar with his cousin. “I’m afraid that he’d be far better off using the Igni form. His father refused to consider the possibility, however. Not entirely surprising.”

“Why do you imagine he’d benefit from the Igni form?”

Micah regarded the broad-shouldered Unda cadet. The boy’s form was solid and impressive. His movements were smooth and captivating.

“The Unda technique requires a very level head and a calm countenance. Kai is rather aggressive and temperamental when pressed into a corner. It’s a habit of his I have yet to shake.”

Micah narrowed his eyes marginally. Had Sachiel intentionally given Micah something to use against Kai during the tournament? It was quite the revelation and a damning weakness.

“I would imagine most warriors grow aggressive when they are forced into a corner.”

“No, it is imperative Unda warriors remain composed.” Sachiel inclined his head, looking pointedly at Micah. “I’ve observed you these past few days. You would be a model student to learn the Unda technique.”

He pressed his lips together. “I’m afraid it’s too late to switch styles.”

Almost as if he were a bloodhound who caught whiff of something captivating, Sachiel stuck his nose in the air as he regarded Micah. “You are good with the sword?” he asked, excitement hovering beneath his carefully crafted guise. “Who was your instructor?”

Micah smirked. “An old Igni warrior from Region 20.”

A pleased hum sounded from Sachiel. “You’re allowed your secrets.” He dropped his hands from behind his back and stepped closer to Micah. “Though it’s tasteless behavior to address so publicly,
I must confess that I have invested in your success in these trials. For the whole term, actually.”

“Oh?” Micah inquired casually, focusing on the students.

“While you think it’s too late to alter your technique, you are still so young.” Sachiel paused, letting a moment of silence grow heavy between them. “I imagine you will do well today. In return for your excellent performance, I would graciously lend you my services as an instructor. It would be an absolute privilege.”

Sachiel could sugarcoat his words as much as he wanted, but Micah knew the man was bribing him. Trying to dangle a prize in front of his face.

The man wanted him to win today.

Micah continued to watch the students, mindful of Sachiel’s scrutiny. The man’s offer was appealing, especially when Micah felt drawn to the Unda technique. If others—like Kai Edlen—were his pupil, Sachiel was most likely in high demand amongst the elite. Yet, he realized that Sachiel’s offer was also about self-interest.

It wasn’t about the wagers, the gold, or the high prestige of succeeding over the other nobles, but rather the benefits of being closer to Micah. More specifically, being closer to Ezra.

What better way than to become his instructor? His master?

“I’m not saying that you will adopt the technique well, if at all,” Sachiel continued when Micah remained quiet. “But it is something worth exploring, I believe.”

Sachiel’s blue eyes dilated at the bold inquiry. “Doing the same thing every year grows repetitive and mundane. Many noblemen placed gold on Kai. Just as they bet on all my previous students.”

The man leaned forward, readily invading Micah’s space. “The taste of something new and uncharted brings me far more excitement than the humdrum of repetition.”

“And I suppose playing with fire only sweetens the taste of new and uncharted endeavors?”

Here, Micah looked pointedly over Sachiel’s shoulder.

The councilman turned, spying Josiah standing at the doorway. The Igni king stood with two other men, though his eyes focused intently on Sachiel.

Sachiel cocked his head marginally, gazing thoughtfully at Micah. “The more fire, the sweeter the taste,” he agreed softly, cementing their private and unspoken communication.

They both knew Sachiel was privy to sensitive and private information.

Oh, but Micah liked Sachiel. The man was bold.

So very bold.

In an uncharacteristic gesture, Micah laughed.

“Councilman Sachiel, you know the rules.” Josiah appeared behind Micah, only a hairbreadth away from contact. “No rendezvousing with the students before the trials.”

From the corner of Micah’s eye, he watched as a group of noblemen walked into the arena and
towards the observation stands. A few older students trickled in, clearly intent to watch the proceedings today up close.

“My apologies, My Lord,” Sachiel drawled, his voice dripping with utmost respect. “I am simply wishing Mr. Egan luck.” The man frowned. “Although my well wishes would have been better suited before the swimming trials, I believe.”

Sachiel laughed then, a hearty, mannerly laugh.

It drew attention from a few curious onlookers, exactly what Micah imagined to be Sachiel’s intentions. Across the way, Kai turned and observed the trio. While his upbringing prevented him from scowling outright, his irate eyes relayed just how he felt about the scene. It was his master, after all, chumming with his competition.

Sachiel walked off, preening under the eyes of the cadets.

“I suggest you grab a partner and warm up, Mr. Egan,” Josiah instructed as he casually breezed by and followed Sachiel. “You have many points to reclaim after your inadmissible performance this morning.” Without so much as another glance, Josiah left Micah standing alone.

As the Igni king approached the observational stands, a group of noblemen immediately surrounded him and competed to snag the man’s undivided interest. Micah considered the wretched display, wondering how Josiah could surround himself with so many politicians and insincerity. They flocked obsessively to his status and his power, hoping beyond hope to obtain a sliver of his attention. Of course, they did it in such a way that was not sniveling, but rather controlled and superior.

Micah considered them rats cloaked in finery.

“Do you have a partner?”

Tearing his gaze away from Josiah, Micah looked down into the defiant eyes of Talia. The girl was the only female remaining amongst the first-year cadets and he imagined she ranked in the top twenty overall.

She raised her sword. “All the others seem to have a sparring partner already.”

Her blonde hair was soaked as she evidently gathered it into a severe bun at the nape of her neck. Not a single hair dared to defy her strict restraints. Clearly, like Micah, she was one of the last students to perform the swimming trial.

Just over her shoulder, Keegan caught his eyes and waved his sword apologetically, already engaged in a one-sided duel with Aiden. While Keegan had no ability with the sword, Aiden appeared rather proficient.

“Alright,” Micah agreed.

Talia turned her heel and led him towards an unoccupied mat.

A few students watched them and snickered to themselves. Micah ignored them, not understanding their bigotry. They no doubt found Talia’s presence a joke, perhaps even an insult. Clearly, no one thought highly of her scores or gave her any sort of credit for standing tall in face of their skepticism.

Micah wasn’t especially fond of the girl because of her attitude, but he would acknowledge her
Talia clenched her jaw as she looked down at the skirt. It was of modest length, but surely, it was limited in terms of movement. “We were required to wear our uniforms for this trial.” Here, she looked enviously at Micah’s trousers and knee-length boots.

“I’m surprised the academy even made a female uniform.”

He ran his eyes down her form, imagining how uncomfortable it must be. Especially for sword combat.

“I don’t have much of a choice, now do I?” She raised her sword and readied herself in a starting position. “I need to warm up properly. Can you do this? Or will my outfit be too much of a distraction for you?”

Micah hardly even blinked at her crass. “I don’t know,” he said dryly, his eyes running down her figure. “Your knobby knees are certainly a siren’s call.”

His comment took her off guard.

A blush stained her cheeks, yet she schooled her features well enough. “Amusing.”

Choosing to let the topic go, Micah twirled the sword around in his palm and mirrored her readied stance. The academy loaned out the swords to the students today, not permitting their own blade within the confinements of the arena. Micah supposed it made sense. The instructors wanted everyone using the same blade, with the same weight and balance to gouge a student’s aptitude.

Still, the blade felt very cheap in his hand, but the balance was acceptable.

Talia made the first move, her form impressive.

He hadn’t expected it.

They traded hits and Micah gradually increased his pace and pushed her limits. She moved with him, her footwork solid. Obviously, Talia had her own private instructor that knew how to use her small stature to her advantage.

However, as Micah sparred with her, his movements careful, he noticed her discomfort. Her body was stiff and inflexible. Despite her bravado with wearing a skirt, it clearly made her uneasy. Her movements relayed just how uncomfortable she truly felt over the prospect of dueling so vulnerably.

His sword intentionally brushed across her exposed leg, earning a startled yelp in response. He then adjusted his grip on his sword and abruptly knocked her hold loose. Her sword fell to the ground in a matter of seconds.

Talia stared at the sword on the mat before looking up at him, focusing intently on his eyes. “Who are you?” she accused quietly, yet her tone was full of incredulity. “I find it unlikely you are just an outskirt scholarship student. You’d be more like your friend over there.”

By over there, Micah assumed she meant Keegan.

“And you aren’t just a girl, are you?” he countered. “See Healer Kendra and ask for appropriate
clothing. You’re movements are stiff and constricted.”

“It’s not appropriate for women to wear trousers.”

Those words sounded ludicrous coming from her mouth. As he looked at her, he noticed her futile glance towards the stands. Quite a few noblemen and older students filled the benches, making it impossible for Micah to pinpoint the specific person she sought.

No matter.

“I wasn’t aware we were judged on how well we stayed within social norms, but rather how fiercely we could fight to defend the capital.” He pointed his sword at her. “You don’t strike me as someone who concerns themselves with adhering to society’s restraints.”

She stared at him silently, her expression hard and unpleasant. Without another word, she bumped shoulders with him, exiting the arena. Micah watched her go, amused despite himself.

What an unpleasant woman.

“Congratulations. You succeeding in chasing her off only after a few minutes together, whereas it’s taken us months to try to accomplish the same thing.”

Micah turned, coming face to face with Kai Edlen.

“You don’t appreciate her being here?” he asked, already knowing the answer. These past few days, he’d seen how the nobles spared her little attention, treating her more like an outsider than a fellow student. No matter how much Talia tried to be a part of their clique, turned shoulders or complete disregard always greeted her.

Kai turned up his lip. “The military academy is no place for a woman.”

“From what I’ve seen, she’s far more capable than the majority of the men.”

He laughed then, an unkind little chuckle. “Half these boys don’t even belong here.” The noble lifted his sword. “Would you like to spar? During the small foray with Talia, your form was a bit lazy. I could give you a few pointers before the competition.”

Micah’s form… lazy?

What would Master Idris say if he heard such insolence?

Micah mulled over Kai’s invitation, or more appropriately, his sly insult. The boy no doubt felt intimidated by his master’s interest with Micah. Though he wasn’t as ill-mannered as his cousin, Kai needed to learn some humility.

From the quick glances around the arena, Micah knew there weren’t many students who could match Kai with the sword. They were all still raw and inexperienced. Idris was a harsh master. He expected excellence and he expected continuous improvement from Micah. If Micah wanted to put Kai in his place, he needed to tread carefully.

He wanted to bend the boy’s back, not shatter him.

“I’d be most honored.” Micah bowed at the waist with a flourish.

Kai watched him carefully, perhaps wondering if Micah was mocking him or being sincere.
“Where did you learn how to wield the sword?”

“An old Igni warrior in Region 20.” Straightening from his bow, and acknowledging the irony of royalty bowing to a commoner, no matter how noble, Micah gestured impatiently with his sword. “I hear Councilman Sachiel instructed you?”

“Only for the past few months,” Kai confirmed. “I had an instructor before him, simply because Master Sachiel was preoccupied instructing the prince. He has since moved on and accepted other students.”

The boy had too much self-importance.

Haughtiness.

Conversely, as Micah considered him, he realized that it was inbred. Kai Edlen did not know any other way to speak with others but with utmost pride. His words and tone were matter-of-fact, dripping with a certain arrogance that set Micah’s teeth on edge. He was arrogant without even trying to be.

Micah lowered his lashes. The boy probably grew up hearing nothing but praise, nothing but self-assurance of how well he was doing. How spectacular he would become amongst a world of lesser beings.

“The prince,” Micah repeated, feeling his tongue grow heavy.

“Oh yes. Prince Ladon.” The boy then looked pointedly into the stands and time froze for Micah.

He hadn’t expected to encounter the prince for quite some time after Josiah pronounced his existence. After all, they were years apart in the academy. Slowly, he turned, spying the prince amongst the crowd of other spectators. Though he wore the same black and gold uniform as the other cadets, his aura indicated to strangers that he was untouchable and detached from the rest in terms of social class.

His skin was pale, like most Unda citizens, his hair even more so.

His eyes, even from a distance, was the deepest shade of sapphire Micah had ever seen. With his shoulders thrown back, the prince observed the other cadets with a mask of indifference. A pale braid slung carefully over his shoulder, a sign of his royal standing.

Micah’s spine stiffened as he turned back to Kai.

There was an odd sensation in his stomach. It was dark, heavy, and bitter. There was also… abhorrence. So hot in its consumption, it almost took Micah by surprise. Never before had he felt this way towards a stranger. Granted, Ember tried to alight this same hatred in him towards Calder and Josiah as a child, though it never truly took root.

“Let’s spar,” Kai requested with impatience. “We don’t have much—”

A shrill whistle sounded across the arena.

All eyes turned to Instructor Candace as he stood on top the tallest dueling stage in the arena. He waited until silence encompassed him before nodding his satisfaction. “On the wall, you will see the matchups of today’s trial.”

Keegan bumped his shoulder into Micah as they settled near the stage. “Ready, kid?”
Micah’s lips twitched at the boy’s good humor. He wasn’t particular anxious about the upcoming trial, rather he still dwelled over the presence of his half-brother. His eyes continued to flicker over to the boy, seeing nothing but Calder’s infidelity and an obstacle.

When he realized the reason behind his distaste, he wondered why he cared.

He never intended to take the throne, no matter how much it belonged to him before this… this boy.

“You’re all big boys.” Candace paused. “And girls.”

Micah turned to see what caught the man’s attention, observing Talia as she entered the arena, this time, appropriately clothed with combat boots and trousers. Her eyes settled on Micah and she nodded sharply in acknowledgement, her jaw set relentlessly.

“Because of our trust in your maturity…” here, Candace paused, his tone heavy with sarcasm. “We have given you real swords for combat. Any significant blood drawn during the match will automatically disqualify you from the trial. Any loss of limb will send both parties straight home.”

Focusing intently on Candace’s words, Micah mulled over the warning. Already inexperienced, the students would grow petrified of possibly cutting off their opponent’s limb. Or even drawing blood. Such hesitance would make them even more susceptible to losing a duel.

Micah remembered his first time dueling Idris with real blades. He’d been petrified of harming his master. Unknowns to him at the time, he was the one who should have been petrified, having too many scars and near misses to count.

“Your goal is to disarm your opponent.” He paused. “You have all done well so far.” Candace, for the first time since the beginning of the trials, sounded sincere. “Ten more cadets will be cut after the tournament. After which, teams will be assembled and the real work will start tomorrow.”

All the students stared at him in silence, the spectators even more quiet.

“Well?” Candace barked loudly. “What are you waiting for? Go!”

Keegan and Micah shared a look of quiet amusement before they headed towards the large canvas on the wall. The canvas revealed a bracket with all the students’ names and their assigned mat for each match. Around the canvas, a few grey-clad staff workers loitered nearby. Clearly, they were the scorekeepers who would update the bracket after each match.

Micah’s first match was with someone he hadn’t interacted with yet.

The match ended within seconds.

The next ended the next.

Swordplay was not fancy, but brutal and callous for Igni warriors. Micah found no reason to extend the duel any longer than necessary for the spectator’s entertainment. His goal was to end it quickly in order to advance to his next competitor.

Often times, he had to wait on the sidelines for his opponent to finish their current duel.

The matchups were almost challenging in the sense that most students did not know how to wield a sword, having assumed the academy would teach them. Because of their inexperience, Micah almost feared they would hurt themselves in an effort to defend against him.
Fortunately, the more matches he won, the better the competitor. They provided more of a challenge. Some were even impressive with their form and ability. His matches went from lasting seconds to minutes, though he did not exert himself nor immerse into his Igni form. The observers probably weren’t impressed with Micah.

Yes, he won quickly, but he did not provide flourish or entertainment.

Only a particularly good opponent could lure out more from Micah.

He kept an eye on Kai, watching as he dueled his cousin. They were nearing the end of the tournament and the eliminated students crowded the large stage Kai claimed for himself and his opponents.

Kai liked the drama.

He liked being the center of attention.

Unfortunately, because there were only a few students remaining, Micah also had to move his duels to the front of the arena and closer to the stands. He found himself waiting for his next opponent on one of the lower stages, feeling the eyes of the curious onlookers who weren’t absorbed with Kai and Nereus’ match.

He stood tall under their scrutiny, keeping his eyes stubbornly on the duel.

Nereus was good. Surprisingly good.

Micah titled his head, watching the pair closely. Both cousins wanted to win. Their practice spar during warmups did not compare to this. They both kept their composure ice-like, and yet, Micah could read the tension in their expressions. Kai was weak on his left side, but Nereus failed to notice. One important quality of a warrior was the ability to read an opponent. Nereus seemed to lack that particular insight and it would cost him the duel, no doubt.

“Distracted again, I see.”

Micah suddenly took note of Talia standing on the stage opposite of him. “With you standing across from me, Talia? Never.”

Her eyes narrowed at his flirtatious remark, not in the least bit impressed nor flattered. Instead, she lifted her sword and bowed low at the waist, a proper tradition to begin the duel. Micah simply followed her lead while maintaining steady eye contact.

Her ears turned red and her eyes squinted further.

Slashing her sword in front of her body, she ran towards him.

Micah, pleased, positioned his feet in a suitable stance and met her attack with a block. She was a fierce little thing. A head shorter than him, and weighing a lot less, she had strength Micah wouldn’t have imagined just by looking at her. Yet, there she was, standing opposite of him and holding her ground as he pressed resistance against her blade.

He tested her strength, further pushing his blade against hers. Talia surprised him by sliding her sword off his and pivoting around his reach, assaulting him with an array of attacks.

Micah met each fierce strike, blocking each one with practiced ease.
He allowed her to back him towards the edge of the platform, knowing her intentions of using the surroundings to her advantage. However, if Idris taught him one thing to the point of monotony, it was to be aware of his surroundings.

Talia knew exactly where to hit his blade. Each strike reverberated across his sword and caused his arm to vibrate. Of course, that could be due to the cheap sword and the poor artisanship, but he credited her strength and precision as being the cause. She was good. She had a lot of potential.

Unfortunately, she wasn’t there yet.

Micah knew when the back of his heel nearly hit the edge of the platform. One more step and he’d be an idiot and tumble off. He lulled her into a sense of self-assurance, a sense of control, before making his move.

When he was sure he deceived her, he pivoted expertly, trading positions with her.

Her eyes widened comically and panic wrinkled her expression. Rather unexpectedly, she took the end of her sword and slammed the hilt into his stomach. Micah wheezed in surprise, his lungs temporarily stunned as pain tremored through his abdomen. He barely had a chance to recover before turning and blocking the strike aimed at his turned back.

A cheap, but understandably desperate assault.

He then went on the offensive.

Talia remained persistent, refusing to be the defending opponent. She alternated between defense and offense, her strikes beginning to drift lower. Awkwardly, Micah fumbled to block the low hits, knowing the exact moment when Talia realized that he was not experienced fighting against smaller opponents.

Against Idris, Micah was always the smaller opponent.

To switch roles… well… it was not easy.

Suddenly, Talia struck. She slid to her knees and speared her sword toward his exposed abdomen. Acting on instincts alone, Micah pushed off his dominant foot and spun in the direction of the oncoming sword, just barely avoiding it.

Idris tried to shake his habit of leaping in the air.

Igni warriors did not leave their feet.

Ever.

Only, he was desperate now.

Carefully holding his sword in front of his body, he executed the jump, landing gracefully on his pivot foot as he faced Talia. He blocked her recovered onslaught, caressing his blade against hers before abruptly manipulating her hold. He forced her arm in a high arc, before abruptly twisting it around.

Her sword clattered to the stage and he pressed the tip of his sword against her neck.

She stared, wide-eyed, her face vulnerable for the first time. Her chest heaved as she recovered her breath. In the bright lights of the arena, visible sweat beaded just at her hairline.
“That was impressive,” she whispered. “That jump.”

“Impressive, maybe, but risky,” he responded, lowering his sword as he heard a distinct sound of polite clapping from the onlookers. He’d forgotten they were present. “You did well. Must be those trousers.”

Talia actually scoffed. “I wouldn’t have gone as far as I had today if I would have remained passive.” Her mouth twisted sourly, as if she’d tried too many of the capital’s lemons. “Thank you, Egan.”

Micah watched as she bent low to retrieve her sword. “Where did you learn how to fight?”

Her eyes shuttered. “My mother.”

Her response was clipped and short. Evidently, she wasn’t inclined to discuss the topic further and he would not press. Not when he had his own things to hide. Everyone was allowed an ambiguous past.

As Micah climbed down the platform, he endured Keegan’s heavy shoulder clap. “That was amazing!” Keegan grinned broadly at Micah’s detached expression. “Looks like you’ll be facing the winner of Kai Edlen’s match for the championship.”

During Micah’s match with Talia, Kai had won his round with Nereus.

Currently, somehow, Aiden lasted long enough to stand opposite of Kai. The Igni student appeared intimidated and sloppy against Kai. Micah hadn’t seen much of Aiden’s matches today, as he was too preoccupied with his own competitions, but the boy obviously had enough talent to make it this far in the competition.

He just didn’t stand a chance against Kai.

As it was the last duel before the championship match, all eyes were on the pair of first-year cadets. The intimidation factor probably set Aiden off balance as it was. The boy wasn’t accustomed to attention. Unfortunately, Kai took advantage of the boy’s weaker frame of mind by accelerating and prolonging the experience. He was toying with the boy. Mocking him. Humiliating him.

Amused jeers from the onlookers spurred Kai to continue his onslaught.

Aiden fumbled with his sword, diving on his knees to grasp it before it hit the ground. The boy looked up at Kai’s towering figure, his face red out of mortification and exertion.

“Keep hold of your sword, boy. I’m not through with you yet!” Kai bellowed.

The crowd cheered loudly.

Kai beamed.

Micah cast a cold eye across the ecstatic observers in the crowd. This was no longer a healthy competition between students for the first ranking cadet, but rather putting an Igni man to shame.

_Igni and Unda_. Their war ended years ago, yet the antagonist relationship continued to thrive under a thin veil of political harmony. Unda won the war. They were the superior race. The superior class. They would constantly strive to remind the Igni citizens of this fact.
“Tasteless,” Keegan whispered next to him. “Poor Aiden. His dad, who was a soldier in the war, taught him how to fight. He is quite proud of his father.”

Micah watched Kai. His initial plan was to bend the boy’s back. Now he wanted nothing more but to shatter it.

His mother would frown. Scold him for such behavior. It was not fitting to extract such blatant, public revenge. Yet, sometimes it was required to set an example to others. Micah firmly believed society needed to be shaken to its core. In order to bridge the gap between the two races, there needed to be a cruel wakeup call.

Though Micah was biracial, he would represent the Igni people when necessary.

Aiden’s humiliation lasted for several more minutes before his sword dropped from his hands and Kai quickly pressed the point of his blade against the boy’s throat. At his sides, Aiden’s hands trembled, yet his chin remained raised proudly.

Clapping thundered across the stadium, declaring Kai as the second participant for the championship match.

“Micah…” Keegan started hesitantly.

They watched as Aiden walked down the platform and submerged himself with his fellow peers. His face remained closed but he accepted their well wishes with dignity. Just down a ways, Kai accepted the congratulatory handshakes and the vigorous praise.

“Yes, Keegan?” Micah inquired lazily, waiting for the boy to give him false consolations or something silly like a good luck.

Only, Keegan turned to him, his yellow eyes bright and focused. “Treat him like he treated Aiden. Yeah?”

Micah blinked slowly, relishing Keegan’s lust for vengeance and storing it into the back of his mind to savor later. The boy had some surprises up his sleeve, it seemed. He wasn’t entirely guiltless. “I hadn’t planned to do it any differently.”

“Egan! Edlen!” Candace barked loudly over the noise of the stadium. “Get up there!”

Micah made his way up to the platform, well aware of the cadets watching his ascent with forbidding. His boots struck the stage, testing its bounciness with a displeased air. It was too soft for his liking, but he would adjust. He walked to one side of the platform, glancing towards Kai Edlen. The boy’s over exuberant peers continued to surround him and he intentionally took his time.

He wanted to make Micah wait for him.

No matter.

One could try to humiliate, but it all depended on how the intended victim recovered.

Well aware of the heavy observation from the nobles on one side, and his nervous classmates on the other, Micah struck a proud, yet lazy form and remained completely still. He kept his eyes straight ahead as he contemplated the upcoming match. This could go well, or, quite possibly, it could go terribly. He never tried to humiliate someone during battle. Idris would never encourage it, but then again, Micah had a sense his old master would approve in this particular case.
As he stood there, lost in his contemplations, Micah became oversensitive to a specific pair of eyes that settled on his turned cheek.

He just barely discerned Josiah from his peripheral vision, yet the man’s unwavering regard felt like a hot iron. Micah grew displeased when he felt his pulse pound rigorously in his chest, evidently a direct consequence to Josiah’s attention. Having such an authoritative man’s complete and utter regard was twistedly flattering.

Of course, Micah would never admit that to anyone, least of all himself.

“Edlen!” Candace’s roar was enough to shake the stage. “Now!”

Kai eventually joined him on the platform, a self-serving smirk in place. “My apologies to keep you waiting.”

Micah slowly refocused his eyes and broke from his immobile stance.

“Apologies accepted.”

The other boy faltered at Micah’s unpredicted response, for it was a response filled with equal haughtiness and superiority. Recovering quickly, Kai bowed to Micah.

Micah offered the same, short, choppy bow. He then executed the traditional Igni pre-form with precision and impeccable grace. Micah was not partial to performing the Igni stance to signal a start of a duel. He found it flashy and a part of him felt wrong for using it when he was not pureblooded Igni.

Warriors of old executed this as their starting stance all the time.

Micah twirled his sword in front of his body before raising it behind his back, positioning it similar to a scorpion’s tail as he lowered in a proper stance. Someone in the stands hooted twice with wicked approval.

Never one to be outdone, Kai executed the opening form for the Unda technique. It wasn’t nearly as flashy, but it was graceful, a good representation of their Element.

For a moment, Micah and Kai faced the other, both poised in their stance.

The crowd was silent, enthralled.

Traditionally, the Igni warrior would make the first move, but that was not Micah’s style. When Kai realized an attack was not forthcoming, he slashed his sword through the air and charged across the platform.

Micah blocked the overhead attack before countering with one of his own.

Excitement spurred his movements enough to channel the necessary vehemence of the Igni form. His footwork was impeccable, a very imperative aspect with Igni warriors. Typically, they were smaller than the Unda male. Their fighting style relied on aggressive attacks and quick footed defense.

He relentlessly attacked Kai’s right side, forcing the boy to use his energy by defending his strong side. He got the boy comfortable with the repetitive routine, remaining a persistent annoyance until Kai fell serenely into his trap.
When Kai grew blind in his confidence, Micah attacked his left side ferociously.

His weak side.

His attack was so sudden, so strong, Kai’s sword slipped from his hands. The young man shouted his denial and reached for it ungracefully, nearly slicing his hand on the blade. He grabbed the hilt before it touched the ground and whipped around to attack Micah.

Only, he slashed at empty air.

To the other boy’s surprise, Micah waited calmly across the platform.

He could have taken Kai out easily in his moment of weakness.

Instead, he just chose to humiliate.

Twirling his sword lazily, Micah watched as a lovely pink stained the boy’s face. “Keep hold of your sword, boy.” Micah raised his sword arm and pointed his weapon at Kai. “I’m not through with you yet.”

Disbelief suspended heavily across the arena as Micah uttered the same taunt the boy had used earlier on Aiden. Disbelief soon morphed into earsplitting cries of both outrage and elation amongst the spectators. The most outraged individual in the arena, however, was Kai.

He roared loudly, his noble guise slipping completely as he charged at Micah.

Micah grinned inanely and rushed to meet the boy at the center.

Now this was more like it!

He met and blocked each of Kai’s frenzied attacks, dancing and pivoting around the boy to mock him further. Kai’s strikes no longer were precise and controlled. If Kai managed to hit his mark, his rage was so great, Candace’s warning about loss of limb certainly wouldn’t have mattered. As it was, most the time, Kai’s attacks swooshed through empty air and he hastily had to redirect in order to block Micah’s well-timed counterattacks.

Sachiel was correct.

The boy grew far too aggressive when backed into a corner. It wasn’t anything like the Unda technique when he grew agitated.

Mirth, so strong with its intensity, nearly suffocated Micah. He couldn’t help it. It was too easy. It wasn’t as if he were so superior to Kai, it was simply because Kai had such a large weakness when it came to battle temperament that Micah could easily take advantage.

Kai left himself open quite painfully as he focused on disarming Micah.

Micah darted underneath the strike and appeared suddenly at Kai’s unprotected back. He kicked the boy’s legs out from underneath him and nudged him in the back. The blond-haired cadet fell forward on his knees, stilling unnaturally when Micah’s sword pressed against his exposed neck.

A cruel smile curled the edges of his mouth as he considered the defeated boy at his mercy. Power surged through him as he stood over his prey.

It felt so good.
As focused as he was, Micah snapped out of his reprieve when a solitarily pair of hands clapped at his victory.

A bit dazed from his battle lust, he looked up at an elder Igni man who had stood up from the stands. Around the man, other Igni nobles soon joined in the clapping. The students, who’d grown quiet with surprise, were now congratulating him from the edge of the stage.

Micah removed his sword from Kai’s neck and stepped back. He’d almost forgotten why he set out to beat Kai, having nearly lost himself in the excitement of a competitive duel.

Through blank eyes, Micah watched as Kai slowly pulled himself off the ground. The boy turned to face him, regarding Micah coolly and far more composed than anticipated. Something shifted in the young man’s gaze as he held out a hand.

“Good match. Egan.”

Micah deliberated both the hand and the boy. He was well aware of the scorn directed towards him by the others. They recognized his victory for what it was. Retaliation. Kai must have acknowledged it as well, only, there was no anger, no fierceness.

Just a reluctant acceptance.

Perhaps Micah had underestimated the boy’s character.

He shook the hand. “It was the most challenging match I’ve encountered today.”

Both tense, they turned and walked down the platform. Micah submerged himself within the sea of antagonistic faces, realizing he hadn’t won a simple sword duel, but rather fueled a dying flame left unattended for far too long.
10. Immunity Ten

“I acknowledge what you did for me.”

Micah and Keegan both turned toward the voice, their mouths occupied full of food. Aiden approached them purposefully, having found their hidden alcove within the maze of the academy’s massive layout.

Instructor Candace had called for a short recess after Kai and Micah’s duel. Food, in massive quantities, was made available for the cadets as they waited for the instructors to deliberate the teams. The observers from earlier were sent home and the students, who did not make the final cut, were told to pack their things.

Having both succeeded in the trials, Keegan and Micah had grabbed a heaping plate of food and ducked out of the dining hall before the other cadets made an appearance. Micah wanted to eat without disruption and Keegan was more than willing to accompany him.

Across the room, Aiden focused intently on Micah as he clicked his heels in a proper stance and threw back his shoulders. It was as if he were confronting an old adversary and wanted to appear his very best. “I acknowledge it and I am thankful for your consideration,” he said, pitching his voice deep and formal. “Nevertheless, I don’t think it was your place to retaliate.”

Keegan stirred, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “Now you—”

“I agree,” Micah interrupted.

Keegan paused abruptly, looking at Micah with disbelief. Slowly, he settled back down, preoccupying himself with securing his plate of food from its near spill over the edge.

“If it was a focused attack on you and your pride, I agree, it wouldn’t have been my place to retaliate for you.” Micah stared at the Igni boy, noting the obstinate pride. He must have inherited it from his warrior father. “But you and I both know it wasn’t a personal humiliation, don’t we?”

Aiden’s scowl tapered just marginally.

“It was the typical humiliation of the Igni race. I know.” He lifted his chin. “But you aren’t Igni, are you, Micah?”

Micah was unimpressed.

He felt Keegan’s sudden attention as he watched, waited.
“What?” Aiden demanded, reading Keegan’s silent unease. “Anyone who thinks differently is blind. You have pale skin for a desert dweller. And really… a blue-eyed Igni?”

Micah scoffed, only because he realized this was what Josiah wanted all along. To spark controversy. The man claimed his eye color would not be a factor, but clearly, it was so much more than a passing conversation piece at the gossiping table.

“I am biracial,” he confirmed casually. “That does not mean I can’t represent the Igni people. They are a part of me, after all. I had every right to defend my people against the stereotypical dishonor.”

Aiden did not seem pleased.

Micah considered him. “Are you upset I took away your vengeance?” he asked quietly. “Or are you upset that I’m half Unda and dared to consider myself as one of you?”

“Aiden,” Keegan reprimanded, upset at the mere possibility. “Micah is the only one capable of defending us against the likes of Kai and Nereus Edlen and all the other nobles. Let’s try to be supportive instead of tearing him down, yeah?”

Aiden looked down as if to compose himself. “Someday.” He clenched his fists at his sides. “Someday, I will be strong enough to defend the Igni people myself.” He looked up at Micah, his yellow eyes piercing. “I apologize for appearing ungrateful, Micah.”

Micah could not relate to Aiden’s plight, though he understood it. After such a humiliating event, Aiden had wanted to conquer Kai and take his own revenge. When Micah defeated Kai in such a way, Aiden felt an equal weight of both satisfaction and jealousy. The jealousy no doubt burned the other boy, consuming him whole and feeding his anger.

“But you should know,” Aiden continued, “I’ve heard things from the nobles after your match. They won’t take the defeat lightly. Not only did you win against Kai, but you also insulted him in front of everyone. You took away his honor. His pride. You need to watch yourself.”

Micah pressed his lips together and smiled.

Before he could respond, however, Keegan beat him to it. “We will both watch his back, eh, Aiden?”

As much as he wanted to interrupt and reassure them he did not need their protection, Micah held his tongue. He wanted to see Aiden’s reaction, more appropriately, his response.

Aiden nodded once. “You’ll need people looking out for you.”

What kept him silent was purely diplomatic. He wanted Aiden to feel useful. He wanted Keegan to feel useful. Moreover, he wanted to give them purpose and a sense of control. While he would be just fine by himself, he wanted the Igni people to start standing up for themselves and gaining confidence.

“I appreciate your thoughtfulness,” Micah said quietly. “Both of you.”

He met Keegan’s eyes, noticing the curiosity hovering shyly below the sense of duty. The boy wanted to know things. Perhaps he had wanted to know things for quite some time but had remained silent in confidence of Micah. Considering how observant he was, Micah assumed Keegan was merely waiting for his answers.

Unfortunately, Micah had no intentions telling Keegan about his heritage. Not now. It was for the
best. For both of them. “I suppose we should head back to the arena?” He threw his plate away in one of the trash bins. “We’re finally going to get our teams.”

“I’m looking forward to it.” There was an obvious sour note in Keegan’s tone.

Micah watched as the larger boy brushed by him and into the corridor, his face crafted from solemn stone.

Sharing a look with Aiden, Micah followed Keegan. “Quite frankly, I’m surprised you’re still enrolled, Keegan. What, with your performance with the sword?” Micah inquired teasingly, intentionally upsetting the other man further. “But,” he started in all seriousness, “there were more than two dozen students eliminated. You’ve proved to be an upstanding cadet.”

The other boy flashed him a look. “I’ll be grouped together with other, low-ranking students. When it comes to trials out in the real world—"

“You won’t be sent on missions unless your team is ready,” Aiden interrupted. “The academy is going to teach us how to wield the sword properly. It’s not as if we’re going to war tomorrow.”

Keegan flashed a semblance of a smile, though it came out as a grimace. He looked at Micah. “We won’t be on the same team.”

Micah turned his cheek. “You’re being awfully sentimental, Keegan.”

The trio of students lapsed into silence as they made their way back to the arena. As Micah mulled over Keegan’s behavior, he realized he could not blame the boy. Instructor Candace frightened the students to try their best, least they end up with a bad team during real life missions.

However, Aiden was correct. The academy would not send students on missions if they were not prepared. Keegan and his team had more than enough time to improve themselves.

As they entered the arena, the stands were empty and most of the cadets lingered near the high dueling platform where Councilman Sachiel stood proudly. To the side, across the arena, the instructors gathered and quietly conversed amongst each other.

Micah’s eyes flitted across Josiah, touching on him briefly before looking away.

The Igni king would make the whole ‘nonchalant act’ far more convincing if he didn’t always look as if he wanted to consume Micah whole.

As he approached the group of students, he received an array of greetings. From hostility to admiration, Micah soaked it in with a certain level of detachment.

Sachiel smiled slyly at Micah, his expression rather greedy. “This year, we will arrange teams by a method we’ve tried only once in the past.” He lifted a hand and encompassed the empty space next to him. “If Mr. Egan and Mr. Edlen could join me up here, please.”

As Micah walked up the platform, the arena grew silent. The students were nervous, he noted with an observing eye. As he and Kai settled on either side of Sachiel, the students’ necks craned back to look at them with veiled trepidation.

A hand clasped Micah on the shoulder and the fingers tightened possessively. “Mr. Egan won this year’s top-ranking cadet, but only by a very slim margin,” Sachiel informed coolly. “Because Mr. Edlen was especially close to the lead, the instructors and I have decided to assign them captain of two separate teams. They will get to choose the members of their team.”
Whispering and futile glances started.

Micah wasn’t sure what to think of the turn of events. From what he remembered hearing, the instructors usually assigned teams based on ranking and skill level. This year, it seemed as if the instructors expected the captains to build a strong team with capable members of varying skillsets.

In itself, this was a test just as well.

“Each team will have eight members. The instructors will assign teams to the remaining students who are not selected by either Micah or Kai.” Sachiel tightened his hand on Micah’s shoulder before he dropped it at his side. “Why don’t you start, Mr. Edlen? Pick one and Mr. Egan will go next.”

Kai lifted his chin. “Viktor.”

Surprisingly, he hadn’t picked Nereus, but rather the Unda student with short hair who’d returned after voluntarily quitting trials last year. The young aristocrat joined the stage next to Kai, his small frame dwarfed by the tall noble.

Sachiel nodded to Micah, indicating him to pick a student.

All expectant eyes turned to him.

Well, he didn’t have much of a choice, did he? “Keegan.”

Keegan perked up and hastily climbed the stage to stand next to Micah.

“This isn’t about picking friends,” Kai hissed out, unexpectedly upset. Why, Micah could not fathom. “You want a strong team, not a band of followers!”

Micah simply lifted an eyebrow. “I believe this is my team. I make the decisions.”

Kai exhaled through his nose and turned stiffly to the crowd of students. “Wayde.”

Micah blinked, startled when Kai bypassed his cousin yet again. Nereus Edlen stood amongst the other students, his expression hard and uncaring as another cadet joined the stage with his blood relative.

Bypassing Nereus, Micah considered the students.

“Aiden.”

That particular pick was not out of friendly comradeship, but rather of intrigue. The boy was both prideful and determined. For an Igni scholarship student, the boy was also good with the sword. Good enough, at least, to make it to the final rounds.

“Cain,” Kai said firmly. Another Unda student joined the stage. He appeared older than all the other first-year cadets in attendance. His stature was tall, taller than both Kai and Keegan, and impressively bulky. His face, however, appeared to possess a gentle-sort of glow.

Micah hardly had to consider the students to know his next pick. “Talia.”

There were noises of disbelief and protest. Just as Micah predicted, Talia’s back was straight with pride as she ignored those around her. Perhaps her shoulders were a bit too stiff and her face too pinched, for Micah could see she wasn’t as unaffected as the part she played.
“Eight to a team, correct?” Kai inquired.

Sachiel merely nodded, watching the proceedings with great amusement.

Kai clasped his hands behind his back and stood tall. His chest puffed out as if he were readying himself for a confrontation. “Then my next pick is Egan.”

Silence and confusion ensued.

Micah merely lifted an eyebrow.

“Oh?” Sachiel inquired, his tone pitching high with unbridled humor. “I’m afraid Micah is already on a team, Mr. Edlen. Perhaps you can pick another hopeful student?”

Kai appeared determined. “I pick Egan and his group of… misfits.” He stubbornly avoided looking at Micah. “I want a strong team. He is the strongest and I want only the best.” He challenged Sachiel. “That makes eight members. Well within the guidelines.”

Sachiel turned to the other instructors. “Give me a moment.”

He then walked off the platform and joined with the others.

Micah watched their short, quiet exchange. He didn’t have a particularly strong opinion about Kai’s decision, though he was incredulous. Kai demanded Micah on his team with a spoilt tenor and a possessive sense of ownership.

Despite all that, he hadn’t picked his cousin to be on his team. Had Kai planned this as soon as he heard he would not be on Micah’s team? If that were the case, he intentionally slighted his cousin. After all, Nereus and Micah did not get along, and apparently, he’d rather have Micah on his team. Which would explain why Kai felt perturbed when Micah picked Keegan, a member who would undoubtedly bring down the team.

Sachiel walked back to the platform, a certain spring to his step.

“As long as Mr. Egan is accepting of the proposal, it will be allowed. You two would be co-captains.”

Co-captains.

Micah actually sneered. “No.”

Kai’s eyes were on him like glue. “Afraid of a little partnership and collaborating?” He smiled darkly. “And here I thought you were good at everything, Micah.”

“I have no qualms about partnership and collaborating, all depending on who said partner is.” Micah inhaled evenly and looked at Keegan, Aiden, and Talia. “Thoughts?”

Talia and Keegan both expressed their consent with a subtle nod. Aiden, however, had a sour look on his face over the prospect of teaming up with Kai Edlen. The boy simply shrugged, looking anything but pleased at the turn of events. They were a helpful lot. Micah looked back out at the students, coming up short on who he would pick for the remainder of his team. A few students he recognized as having skill, but otherwise, he did not know their names, nor their character.

“Mr. Egan.”

He turned his attention to Sachiel, watching as the man inclined his head in a gesture of polite
impatience. Just over his shoulder, Edlen stood stiffly, his expression closed off.

“We are awaiting your decision.”

They were, weren’t they? Micah contemplated the situation, trying to put himself in Kai’s shoes in order to determine an ulterior motive. This could certainly be a ruse in order to destroy him further down the line. But at what ends? Kai was asking to start a team with Micah. Said team was just as vital to Kai as it was to Micah.

Clasping his arms behind his back, Micah readjusted his footing and nodded once. “Co-captains it is.”

He didn’t trust the boy. Judging by the slow, unimpressed glance he received in return, Kai did not like him nor trust him either. In fact, the other boy’s expression was so incredibly strained, Micah wondered what had crawled up his nose and died.

“Well.” Sachiel clapped Micah on the shoulder again, a branding-sort of gesture. “Why don’t the members of your team get accommodated in your new room? Get to know one another. Henceforth, you will be the gold team.”

The gold team.

Concordia Military Academy clearly didn’t strive for originality, did they?

Micah was the first one off the platform, having no interest in staying behind to watch the instructors assign the remaining students their teams. As he glanced over his shoulder, he noticed Kai had stayed behind with the three students he selected. Talia, Keegan, and Aiden filed behind him, causing further segregation.

Micah was never one to believe in hasty foresight, nor give his ambiences any sort of weight, but if he were that kind of person, he would assume the gold team was going to experience a very cruel wakeup call in terms of collaboration.

* * * *

All grade levels were dwelling within the academy now, but the corridors were utterly silent at this time of night. Micah supposed there were curfews in place, yet the instructors did not communicate anything to the first-year cadets. The rest of his teammates were in bed, sleeping stubbornly. Kai and his three followers hadn’t joined them until much later that night. By the time they made an appearance, the others were already half-asleep in preparation for tomorrow’s classes.

Micah had his suspicions about Edlen. He just needed someone to either confirm or rectify his assumptions. Hence his slow gait towards the one office he promised himself he would never approach out of his own, free will.

The Chairman’s office.

Josiah.

At the mere thought of seeing the other man, Micah’s pulse raced unevenly. He wondered at his body’s reaction and then hastily pushed his uncertainties away. It was a simple conversation with the man. Nothing else.
He’d promised himself he’d embrace his attraction to the other man, but that didn’t mean he had to act on it.

As Micah neared the corridor for faculty staff, he overheard hushed voices. Slowing, he peered around the corner, watching as a handful of students entered Josiah’s quarters. Judging by the lines on their school uniforms, they were older cadets who all harbored the swagger of someone with self-proclaimed importance.

Something ugly twisted in Micah’s chest as they walked into Josiah’s office with a sense of entitlement and belonging. This wasn’t their first evening entering those rooms.

“Royal guards in training,” a voice whispered behind him.

Micah turned, ducking away from the corridor leading to Josiah’s room and finding himself facing Sachiel.

The councilman stood half-cast in shadow, his expression rather sinister and pleased at the same time. “Lord Josiah finds them young and trains them to be loyal, though he doesn’t need to train them very hard in that regard.” Sachiel smiled. “His aura is intoxicating, don’t you think? It is contagious and euphoric. It leaves one yearning for more and more.”

The crimson-clad guards. Of course.

Micah figured Josiah selected most of his guards when they attended the academy, yet something still sat wrong with him. He didn’t understand its origins, nor the anger directed at Josiah.

Jealousy?

“The military is Josiah’s hunting grounds for followers,” Sachiel continued. “However, that’s not to say King Calder doesn’t have an influence at the academy. Just as Josiah, Calder has his own crop of younglings ready to salivate at his heels.”

Micah pushed away his petty emotions and honed his attention. Interacting with Sachiel while he was distracted would certainly spell disaster. “You think they’re still plotting against each other. Calder and Josiah.”

Sachiel seemed content at Micah’s remark. “They have never stopped.” He raised a pale hand and motioned down the corridor. “Let’s take a walk.” Pausing, he looked at Micah’s motionless form. “Shall we, Your Highness?” The man then bowed lowly.

Micah lifted a lip. “Do not mock me.”

“I am sincere.” Sachiel straightened and regarded Micah through lowered lids. “It is…” he trailed off for a moment of contemplation. “Good to see you again, Prince Ezra.” With a graceful tilt of his head, the blond-haired man gestured once again down a dark corridor.

Despite his better judgement, Micah followed the man.

As they walked in silence, he considered the nobleman at his side.

In so many words, Josiah did not want Micah around this man, which was more than reason to seek Sachiel’s company. It enticed him. Interacting with someone who knew the real Calder, the real Josiah, and the real Ezra. Relying on Josiah alone to feed Micah’s thirst for
unmasked conversation grew restraining.

Perhaps that was why the man did not want Micah interacting with Sachiel. It took Micah’s attention away from him.

Sachiel led him outside and Micah inhaled the brisk evening. He hesitated briefly as the older man led him down a set of stairs that curled around the back of the academy.

“I believe our conversation should be conducted in total seclusion, don’t you?”

It was a challenge if Micah ever heard one. He bounded down the steps, the heels of his boots slapping the cracked pavement. They twisted past the academy and towards a secluded garden. Stopping just at the opening of a gnarly maze, Micah noted the uncut hedges and the withering vegetation. Evidently, the foliage noted the change of season and refused to flourish in such undesirable conditions.

Sachiel raised a hand, ensnaring Micah’s instant attention. “May I?”

The hand hovered over his face, ever so near. Micah gestured dubiously with his head, something between a nod and a shake. No one had ever asked to touch him as if he were some sort of exotic animal.

Sachiel took his reluctance as invitation.

His fingertips grazed Micah’s cheekbone before curling across his jawline. The man’s pupils expanded largely, leaving little to no blue iris. As the hand grew bolder, Sachiel’s breathing turned shallow and short. “You are a perfect blend of your mother and father,” he spoke hoarsely. “Very beautiful. Very aristocratically unique.”

Micah stepped back as the thumb brushed underneath his eye. He wasn’t uncomfortable with Sachiel’s focused attention, nor his obvious excitement, he was simply eager to get his own questions answered.

“How did you know who I was?”

“You don’t remember me, which is understandable. You were so young.” Sachiel raised his eyebrows, his hand falling down at his side as if sulking. “As a child, your father hired me to be your tutor in both swimming and fencing.”

Swimming.

Micah laughed once at the irony.

“I was around you often,” Sachiel confirmed further. “Not many were allowed the honor. You had a distinct appearance as a boy, it has only enhanced since then.” He paused. “During the banquet, Lord Josiah’s reaction to my inquisitiveness only confirmed my suspicions.”

“Oh?” Micah inquired cynically. “I hardly doubt he gave much away.”

“When you have been around him as long as I have, you will notice subtle signs. Subtle warnings. Clearly, he feels an extreme sense of ownership over you.” He smiled maliciously. “You are, after all, his Chosen. Tread carefully, Ezra. He may seem casual in his observance of you, but I am certain he has eyes everywhere.”

Micah tried not to let the man’s warning get under his skin. Yet it exasperated him anyway.
“You’ve told Kai Edlen who I was,” he accused, changing the topic.

Sachiel took a step back, his smile only widening. “On the contrary, my words to Kai after the duel were very ambiguous and confidential.”

“Nevertheless, you told him something about me.”

There was no reason why Edlen would swallow his pride so quickly and ask to be on the same team as Micah. It was the reason he sought out Josiah tonight. Aside from inquiring after the lessons Josiah mentioned earlier, Micah had wanted to know if the Igni king had any notion of Sachiel opening his mouth about sensitive information. However, now that he thought about his methods, what better way to get his answer than confronting the individual in question?

It made Micah realize he needed to find his answers. He could not, should not, rely on Josiah for all his inquiries.

After all, Josiah had a way of twisting things to his favor.

“After the duel, I told Kai to keep close to you. That you would be a force to be reckoned with one day.” Sachiel lifted his palms in a gesture of surrender. “He’s a smart boy. Both his cousin and father negatively influence him, yet he came to his own decision to join teams with you. That was entirely his idea.”

“You’re fond of him.”

“Very much so.”

Micah regarded Sachiel closely. “And you overestimate me.” He glanced away and considered the thorny brush of a once, thriving vegetation. “You have high expectations.”

“The game you are playing with Josiah leaves me perplexed,” Sachiel confessed. “Why hide who you are? I realized your mother wished to hide from Calder’s wrath, but you are clearly away from her wrongdoings now.”

“I am not ready to face Calder just yet.” Micah could feel Sachiel’s renowned focus. The man’s close observation burned into the side of his cheek, shredding him away layer by layer.

“Are those your words or Lord Josiah’s words?”

He tore his eyes away from the thorny mess and refocused on Sachiel.

How could he explain that his mother shaped him for a specific mission since childhood? A mission that turned out to be a whimsical smokescreen, conjured by an unbalanced and wronged individual. Ember built Micah with intentions of carefully destroying both Josiah and Calder with fine detail and political maneuvering. She, however, did not prepare him for actually loving and hating Josiah’s company. She did not prepare him for finding his own identity, his own footing.

Here at the capital, he was gradually finding himself. His own identity.

And it was fun.

Moreover, with Josiah’s revelation… that his mother was responsible for that fire so many years ago… that she had tried to kill him… It was enough to reset Micah’s outlook, even if it wasn’t entirely true.
“I am uncertain what role I wish to play,” he worded carefully. “Until I decide what I want, without Calder’s influence, I will continue the charade.” He knew what he’d like to fix in terms of the corrupt and segregated capital, but the very idea of actually taking the crown… of facing Calder right now…

He didn’t want it.

As much as he hated to admit it, he was… fearful of the prospect.

Sachiel was quiet for a moment. “You have so much power at the tips of your fingers and you don’t even realize it.” He shook his head. “Calder and Josiah are brewing their own schemes. Someday soon, it will detonate. You are the tipping point.”

“I don’t know what I want yet,” Micah repeated with finality.

“Josiah sunk his claws into you first,” the older man continued fervently. “Realize this, Ezra. His views are not exclusive, nor accurate. Before you adopt his beliefs, see the other side. See Calder. Moreover, before you renounce it, see the other half of your heritage.”

Everything the man said irked Micah, simply because he knew it to be true.

He didn’t want another situation that mirrored his blind upbringing with Ember. Yes, he had an odd fascination with Josiah, and he was especially partial to the man’s beliefs because Micah lived those suppositions firsthand. Nevertheless, Sachiel was right. Before he made any sort of vital decision, he needed to see the other side. See the nobles.

The very idea made him sick with abhorrence.

“I am not a marionette, Councilman Sachiel,” Micah informed coldly. “I’d like to believe I know when the strings tie around my limbs in an attempt to influence. That includes both you and Josiah.”

A snake-like smile graced Sachiel’s lips. “We will see, won’t we?”

Sachiel may have identified potential within Micah, but the man clearly thought he was naïve as well. The last image Micah wanted to portray to others was nativity. As a royal heir, as someone who may once take a position at a throne, he did have power others wanted to maneuver for themselves.

He couldn’t really trust anyone fully, could he?

The idea washed him cold with isolation, although he willingly embraced it. Delighted in it, even.

Sachiel cupped his hands behind his back and took a few steps to the left. “While you are contemplating what you want in terms of a future, there is nothing wrong with making yourself stronger, is there?”

“That’s what I’m anticipating,” Micah responded with a clipped tone.

“Then my offer still stands with teaching you the Unda form.” Sachiel inspected a dry, wilted rose with rapt fascination. “You are a child of both races. You possess Calder’s unmatched grace, yet you fight just like your uncle. It’s a mirror image, really.”

Micah twitched at the comparison. “And how does Josiah fight? Like an Igni?”
The man laughed at Micah’s instant suspicion. “You are both merciless and cruel. You play cat and mouse with your opponent.” Sachiel sighed dramatically and reached for the dead rose. “If you are such an obvious mix of both races, why not learn both techniques and create something new?”

Sachiel clearly wanted an excuse to be close to Micah.

Yet, who said Micah couldn’t take advantage of Sachiel just as well?

The idea of learning both forms and intermixing it into something new tempted him very much. Meanwhile, he would have possession of Sachiel. Micah did not know just yet, but Sachiel would pose as either a valuable ally or a noteworthy opponent. No matter the outcome, it was vital to keep the man close.

“Okay,” he agreed, watching as the man stiffened marginally with unmasked surprise. “After all, I’d like to see what makes your teachings to be in such high demand.”

Sachiel closed his fingers around the rose and abruptly plucked it from the vine. “What are you insinuating?”

“You were unavailable to tutor Kai Edlen for years. I heard you were busy instructing Prince Ladon.” Micah watched the man carefully. “You must be good if the crown employs you to teach their heirs.”

Sachiel slowly turned and observed Micah. “You are either trying to stroke my ego or gain information on Ladon. A pity, as I would enjoy a good ego stroking, yet I’m certain it’s the latter.”

“You’re correct.”

The older man considered Micah’s confident stance before stepping closer. Using the same hand he clutched the dead rose, Sachiel cupped Micah’s jaw. He leaned in close, his eyes drifting low before locking eyes with Micah’s unblinking gaze.

Did the man intend to shake him with his immediacy? Seduce him?

No matter the intentions, Micah remained unflinching. He wasn’t so easily rattled.

A pleased smile crossed Sachiel’s mouth at Micah’s detachment. “Ladon is a conversation for next time,” he murmured pleasantly. “I look forward to our training. I will touch base regarding a time and place, yes?”

Micah was unbothered with the contact and the obsession. Both elements were nothing new to him, yet he never considered appeasing the other party as he did now. Sachiel was attractive. He was influential in his own right. Moreover, Micah was not overwhelmed with him as he was with Josiah. He felt comfortable taking control of Sachiel.

Testing his limits, Micah closed the gap further, nearly touching Sachiel’s lips with his own. He kept his eyes on the other man, sensing the other’s excitement, his arousal.

“That’s acceptable,” Micah whispered.

He fed off the other man’s heat, acknowledging the hold he had over him, over others. It was a certain power Micah never took for granted, though he realized how effective it was. He wasn’t an overtly sexual person, but there was something intoxicating about this. This sense of control and domination. He could get dangerously accustomed to this.
Before he could act on it, Micah stepped back and turned his heel.

Micah may be unfamiliar with certain events, people, and aspects, but that did not mean he was naïve and acquiescent. He didn’t want Sachiel—or anyone—to underestimate him and take him lightly.

He was strong enough to stand alone.

* * * *

Dressed in nondescript clothes, he blended in remarkably well with the public.

Clarence hadn’t felt so invisible in ages. Drowning another ale, he wiped his face with his sleeve, not caring if he looked like a barbarian. He’d experienced enough humility over the past few weeks. He didn’t give a damn about pride, about honor. Like-minded company surrounded him anyway. Like-minded scum.

“I’ve had enough of your explanations and stories,” he murmured bitterly. “I really don’t want to hear anymore. Just give me the damn powder. I’ll do it.”

The woman, who sat directly to his left, appeared amused. Why shouldn’t she be amused? She’d just disclosed the fact that his whole life was a grandiose joke. From the very start, he’d been played, his movements dictated.


Clarence gestured to the bartender for another ale, avoiding the woman next to him as if she were the plague. “Upset? You just informed me my fiancé is your daughter and ally whom you instructed to stay close to me.”

“The Igni Lord kept a close eye on you. There was no other way to keep in contact but plant her at your side.”

“But now he isn’t?” he growled. He squinted, trying to form a more coherent inquiry. “He’s no longer keeping a close eye on me?”

“He’s been distracted.”

Upon the mention of Lord Josiah’s distraction, Clarence grabbed hold of the refilled ale and nursed it greedily.

“Considering your parentage, he had to keep a close watch over you.” She paused. “Understandable. He did well twisting you into his prized warrior. You forgot your ties to your family and renounced them without any sort of evidence he was telling the truth.”

“It’s not as if my father or mother ever tried to reach out to me.”

“As if they could,” she argued. “Your mother and father were lost. Besides, Lord Josiah made you feel important. His attention made you feel invincible. You were very young when he took you in. I can’t imagine how tightly wrung you were. Now he has discarded you and revealed his true colors.”

“I’m still in a high-ranking position.”
She smiled at his petulant tone. Leaning further against the bar, she shifted to face him fully. “For how long will you occupy this… high-ranking position before a younger, more complete man comes along?” Her eyes dropped to his hand, or there lack of.

Clarence curled his remaining hand around the cold mug.

“There are other ways to be powerful,” she whispered seductively, her tone musically enchanted. “It doesn’t require a sword or two hands.”

For a moment, he lost himself in her eyes, feeling the compelling pull. The invisible draw ensnared him with greedy whispers of temptations and promises of unlocked power. Hurriedly, he shook his head, knowing better than to look her in the eye. He’d fallen for the same trick with her daughter—his fiancé. “Yes, and look at where that power got my parents.”

“Mother,” she corrected, earning Clarence’s sharp regard. “You father is a good man, but very simple. He was displeased with the path your mother took, but decided to stand by her doubtless of his reservations. I’d say he’s much like you. Shuffled around by all the big players of the game. Used until he is no longer required, like most simple game pieces.”

Clarence shifted irritably.

“A very sad existence. But you can avoid his miserable fate.”

“That’s my father you’re talking about—”

“A father you always cursed without even hearing the truth,” she interrupted his angry tirade. “Fortunately, he’s still around. You can reconcile.”

“I said I would do what you asked of me,” Clarence spat bitterly. “You can stop playing around in my head.” He glowered at the array of bottles behind the bar. “Why do you want me to administer that to the kid anyway?”

“To cause an even larger distraction. What better way to distract him than endangering his distraction?” She appeared elated. “Be sure you only administer the amount I suggested. No more. We do not want him dead. Do you understand me?”

“Clearly.”

Pressing the appropriate amount of gold coins on the bar, he stood. He accepted the pouch she placed on his vacant stool and turned to go.

“Clarence,” she called melodically.

He stopped, clenching his jaw.

“Your father may be simple and disposable, but at least he’s bold enough to seek retribution. I appreciate you doing the same.” She approached his turned back. “While you may not reconcile with your mother as you will undoubtedly do with your father, at least you can hold a part of her with you.”

He looked down at the small, leather-bound journal in her hand.

“Your mother,” she woman started sorrowfully, “Was a wonderful student. Perhaps you can follow in her footsteps, no?”
As Clarence accepted the journal, the woman brushed by and left the tavern.

Holding the book that once belonged to his mother, he submerged in the feelings of gutted betrayal and loss. Closing his eyes, he inhaled the warm leather, cursing the king he’d willingly given his life and limb to.
**WARNING:** Filler chapter *hides face in shame*. It needed to be done, I swear. I hope that I can get the next chapter out within the next few days to make up for it ;) Cuz the next chapter will for sure tickle everyone’s fancy. I think...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

### 11. Chapter Eleven

“Where is Edlen?”

They didn’t seem to hear him. Otherwise, they were intentionally ignoring him.

Undoubtedly, it was the latter.

Micah watched Cain and Viktor fly hurriedly across their side of the room, stuffing things haphazardly into their school bags. Both their uniforms were askew, and while that was nothing new for Viktor, whom apparently favored the unkempt and nonchalant aristocratic appearance, the prim and proper Cain seemed just as disheveled. Almost as if they were in a hurry to avoid Micah completely….

Next to Micah, Keegan shifted uncomfortably. “I don’t think they heard you, Micah.”

Under the watchful eye of Aiden and Keegan, Micah crossed the room and abruptly cut off Viktor and Cain as they tried to exit their quarters. He appraised the two Unda cadets, sensing their awkwardness.

“Where,” Micah started icily, “is Kai Edlen?”

Cain and Viktor glanced at one another.

“Probably at breakfast,” Cain, the largest first-year cadet, responded with a low, baritone voice. “With Wayde.”

Micah frowned. “Is that what this technique is all about? Do all four of you stick together in pairs or in a group? Do you believe it will prevent me from approaching any of you?”

Viktor ran a hand through his short, messy hair. It looked ridiculous standing on end, entirely disarrayed.

“We just really need to get to class. We slept in late—”

“Class doesn’t start until eight,” Micah interrupted tightly. “You have thirty minutes remaining before the first bell.”

“We haven’t eaten.”
Shaking his head, bitterly amused, Micah stepped aside to allow the juvenile duo to pass. “If you see Edlen, which I imagine you will, let him know we are training tonight. We need to start working together as a team. It is imperative we learn each other’s strengths and weaknesses.”

“He has an appointment tonight with his father,” Viktor yelled over his shoulder on their way out the door.

Micah stared after them.

Speechless.

“Perhaps you should give them a week to adjust, Captain,” Talia muttered indifferently as she breezed by him. She fastened her tie around her neck, her book bag dangling clumsily from her elbow. “They have to lick their wounds before they can play nice. You’ll see.” With that, she departed their quarters just as abruptly as Cain and Viktor.

When Talia meant ‘they’ had to lick their wounds, Micah hadn’t realized she meant all the aristocrats at the academy, not just the nobles on his team.

That morning, exactly a day after the trials, he walked down the corridors and endured the concentrated attention from the other students.

Keegan and Aiden both grabbed a quick bite to eat before they attended their first class. Micah, who normally did not care to eat breakfast, chose to venture out by himself. Never one to fret over the frivolous sentiment of needing a companion in a sea of predators, Micah hadn’t worried about walking the halls alone.

He still didn’t. Yet it was painfully evident that he’d incurred the instant recognition from the rest of the academy, even those who did not observe the final trial. Familiar with attention, but not to such a degree, Micah forced himself to remain deadpanned.

It took effort. Especially towards the nobles who levelled him with looks of animosity.

He’d humiliated one of their own.

Their reaction was fair and expected. It was just difficult to keep his own scorn from showing.

In his pocket, he carried the list of his six courses. The six courses Josiah selected for him. Upon thinking of his half-uncle, Micah turned bitter and forced himself to consider the upcoming courses instead. Economic Policy was his first class of the day. He anticipated there would be several upper-class cadets attending the same seminar as opposed to first years.

While Keegan was scholarly brilliant, the education in Region 20 was, admittedly, dismissal. The other boy played it safe with his selection of courses this term. Unlike Micah, whom Josiah cryptically indicated would not spend all three years at the academy, Keegan planned to attend until graduation. The other boy wanted to know everything he’d missed growing up in the outskirt regions in order to establish a respected instructor position in the future.

Micah knew Keegan would have succeeded in advanced courses.

Perhaps he could convince the boy to sign up for more challenging courses next term.

“Congratulations on making the gold team, Captain Egan,” one cadet called to his back.

Turning, he spied a passing Igni student. He nodded once in acknowledgment, though the Igni man
did not stay and chat. The two other cadets, who accompanied the third-year student, were also of Igni descent. Their glances towards Micah were heavy with fond appraisal.

He knew the consequences of his actions yesterday. He knew, once he humiliated Kai in retaliation, that there would be reactions. He understood there would be cries of outrage amongst the Unda elite and nods of approval from the Igni citizens. Just his brief commute down the corridors relayed as much.

Before he entered the economics classroom, someone stepped in front of him, dwarfing him and easily blocking his way. Micah was of average height for an Igni male, almost equal height with Josiah, yet the man across from him was abnormal.

He looked into the eyes of cruel blue.

“So you aren’t entirely Igni, are you?” the cadet remarked, scrutinizing Micah’s attractive features. “They said you were a desert rat, but there are obvious superior traits in you.”

Superior traits…

“Race is irrelevant when it comes to superiority,” Micah responded promptly. “I am a desert rat. And I was superior in the competitions that established first-ranking cadet.”

“You better watch yourself, boy.”

The number of bars on his uniform indicated his seniority. At least a third-year, and, according to the medals, honored with his skill. As much as Micah wanted to be intimidated, he couldn’t help but feel embarrassed for the other man. Such schoolyard bullying tactics were underwhelming to Micah. Hardly effective.

“You may be biracial, but you have declared your loyalty to the Igni side.” A smile, not particularly attractive, stretched the other man’s chapped lips. “And the Unda elite have declared you their enemy.”

“I think that should suffice for a reprimand,” a voice interrupted the strained confrontation between Micah and the nameless Unda cadet. “A reprimand that doesn’t even belong to you, I should say.”

Turning, Micah spied Wayde—one of Kai Edlen’s teammates—standing solitarily to the side. In his palm, he clutched a rather large, gourmet-looking muffin. His stance was picturesque of a model aristocrat. Straight, taut, yet somehow entirely graceful with his long, remarkably skinny limbs. His hair, a sharp contrast to his two teammates this morning, gathered neatly at the nape of his neck where he collected it in a low-slung ponytail. He had rather wide eyes, Micah noted. Blue—just like any other Unda noble—yet somehow prettier in their calamity.

“Wayde—”

“His uniform,” Wayde interrupted, not once looking in Micah’s direction. “Is the same as yours, is it not?” Without waiting for a reply, Wayde continued. “As such, you are both on the same side. Perhaps it’s time to reunite with the rest of our comrades and realize we are fighting for the same thing. The security and safety of Concordia.”

The older cadet and Wayde stared each other down.

Micah wasn’t especially pleased someone thought it necessary to fight his battles. However, he remained passive, entertained with Wayde’s diplomacy. He certainly hadn’t expected such
common sense to spew from a noble’s mouth.

The unnamed cadet scoffed. “So much for trying to defend our own kind.”

“As I said, the handling of this situation doesn’t belong to you, but rather to Kai.”

“Edlen handled it well, didn’t he? Joining teams? That will show them,” the third-year cadet spat with disgust, his lip curling excessively for embellishment. Without remarking further, the man turned his heel and entered the classroom with his peers.

Micah looked after the group, hardly threatened when they all turned to gaze at him with unbridled dislike.

“Let me make one thing clear, Egan,” Wayde started, drawing Micah’s attention. He didn’t appear especially happy with his decision to defend a desert rat in front of the other aristocrats. “I will always—always—be loyal to Kai.”

“I hadn’t realized that was ever in question,” Micah drawled wryly.

Ignoring his sarcastic tone, Wayde stepped closer, his tall, long-limbed stature all but looming over Micah. “Kai joined teams with you for a reason. As such, you are a member of my team and I won’t stand by and watch them tear you apart.”

A bit of an exaggeration, Micah mused, but decided to hold his tongue.

Wayde’s hand suddenly grabbed his wrist and placed something in his hand. “Don’t skip breakfast, yeah?”

Looking down, Micah spied the muffin. As he looked up, he observed Wayde entering the classroom. He immediately noticed the blue, satin ribbon that held his hair together at the nape of his neck. Ridiculous and flamboyant—not many noblemen chose to secure their hair in such a way. It just fit Wayde’s overall impression.

Dainty.

Pretty.

An exasperated scoff escaped Micah’s lips as he also entered the classroom.

He passed the front of the room and ventured near the back, settling next to a dark-haired boy who hunched over an open book. Ten minutes remained before the start of class, so Micah amused himself with examining the students who entered the room. Placing his muffin at the corner of his desk, he immediately took notice of the cadets’ dilemma of where to sit.

Was it wrong of him to find it so entertaining?

Those who made a move to sit next to Micah paused upon noticing him, before hurriedly retreating to the front of the room.

“I hadn’t realized a mutt like you could cause such a segregation,” the boy next to him murmured to his book. “Further segregation than what existed before, of course.”

Micah studied the third year. Long bangs fell over his eyes as he continued to peer exclusively at his book. Upon first glance, Micah had assumed he was an Igni student. The dark hair indicated desert region, yet, the boy’s skin was very pale.
As the student looked up, Micah found himself staring into dark blue eyes.

A biracial student… the first Micah had encountered.

“I have to say, if anyone can create a stir amongst the nobles, it’s you,” the cadet continued. “You have extremely impressive swordsmanship. During the war, my father was an Igni warrior. He had high praise for your duel yesterday.” The boy flashed a soft, fond look before he looked pointedly at the other students. “I believe the noblemen are so insulted because you are biracial and had the audacity to pick the inferior race over them.”

By unveiling Micah’s true features, those were exactly Josiah’s intentions.

When he registered the boy’s comment, Micah immediately tensed. “In their eyes, the Igni people may be the inferior race.”

The other boy frowned. “But they are inferior. Always have been.”

Micah cast him a cold look and turned his cheek. “Then you are ignorant.”

“Or perhaps it’s you who is naïve and ill-informed,” the other cadet countered stubbornly. “The Igni Empire was constantly full of poverty and riffraff. What you see in the outer regions is probably what the whole Empire resembled at their height.”

The instructor strode into the classroom, immediately quieting the students.

As he began taking roll call, Micah dwelled in contemplative silence, wondering why the cadet’s words got under his skin. Even if the words were true, it still didn’t explain the discrimination. It didn’t change the deplorable way the Igni people were treated in their new kingdom after the war. It did not make them inferior.

Micah tucked the information away to ponder later.

It was time to focus on his studies.

***

“Instructor Isla?”

Surprised, Isla looked up from sorting through the contents across his desk and immediately smiled once he saw Micah.

He nodded once to himself, as if privately coming to an agreeable conclusion in his head. However, to be fair, Instructor Isla nodded to himself quite frequently during lectures. Micah noticed the impulse a week ago when classes began, wondering if it was a result of nervousness or simply a tick he’d possessed since adolescence.

“Cadet Egan,” Isla greeted pleasantly in turn. Gathering a stack of parchments, he placed them in his leather bag. “What can I do for you?”

The students who filed out of the classroom offered them lingering stares. Brows rose and the stares grew icy, envious. Micah enjoyed establishing a good relationship with his instructors, impressed with their intelligence and ability to pass said knowledge on to the students with
engaging techniques.

Concordia Academy boasted they had elite instructors. Micah pleasantly discovered that was no small boast.

As such, he was engaged in his classes. He paid close attention to the instructors and volunteered readily when the situation arose. Typically, his answers were often times sophisticated, drawing the immediate ire of his fellow cadets and fond approval from his instructors.

Micah identified his classmates’ irritation, but cared little for the envy.

He was here to make himself better, not dumb down for others.

“When you circulated the syllabus on the first day of class, I looked forward to the alternative forms of government you outlined,” Micah started. He gazed down at the mentioned syllabus, wrinkling it with his gloved fingers. “The Terra Kingdom and the Eurus Empire. I was pleased to see it a topic so early in the term.”

As if anticipating where the conversation was going, Instructor Isla looked down and away, busyling himself once again with packing up his things. He gave off the impression of cold disinterest, though Micah was hardly bothered by the act.

“So far, your lessons have been greatly informative and detailed,” Micah continued without any sort of hesitancy. He knew what this was about, but he wanted to hear it from Isla. “Yet, when we broached the topic of the Terra Kingdom and the Eurus Empire, your methods turned extremely vague and simple. Very basic.”

At the mention of Concordia’s neighbors to the west and east, Isla stiffened.

He glanced at the door of his classroom, before refocusing on Micah. “Those topics were meant to be vague and simple, Mr. Egan.”

“Democracy intrigues me,” Micah pressed insistently, citing the reason behind his extreme interest. “The Terra Kingdom holds a unique, democratic government, I read. Not much is known about them—”

“And rightfully so,” Isla interrupted quietly. “They keep to themselves.”

The Terra Kingdom settled to the west of Concordia and boasted earth Elementals. Micah couldn’t find much information on the kingdom besides the fact that nature integrated deeply within their culture.

“They keep to themselves? Or do we stifle the information?”

Isla smiled uncomfortably before fastening his bag. “I’d say a little bit of both, Mr. Egan. Today, we learned the negatives of each governmental structure. We learned why democracy has its shortcomings. We learned why the High Priests in the Eurus Empire would never function well in our capital. Yet, which governmental structure did I miss?”

“Monarchy,” Micah replied softly. “Intentional on your behalf.”

“Exactly.” Isla nodded firmly.

“You also intentionally bypassed the positives to each governmental structure.”
“What would you anticipate being a negative to a monarchy, Mr. Egan?”

“Repression and censorship.” Micah shifted until his hip leaned against the instructor’s massive desk. “It’s understandable why you evaded the benefits of the High Priests and democracy. Understandable, yet also disappointing.”

A flicker of a tense smile followed by an even tenser laugh. “I do not only have eager ears ready to absorb my teachings, but also eager ears ready to report back to the royal court if I inspire any sort of rebellion by suggesting I support any other government than the crown.”

Micah frowned, understanding Isla’s apprehension. He could certainly see the children of high nobles reporting to their fathers if such an event arose. “A pity one would consider history on governmental bodies as indication you support some sort of rebellion against monarchy. It reinforces my belief that royalty would like to keep their people stunted and repressed. Blindfolded.”

Another nod.

Then another.

Micah watched as Isla struggled to control his impulsive nodding. He observed the situation unabashedly, wondering if he’d caused the nervous tick.

Isla turned his shoulder on Micah, trying to recover himself. He ran a hand through his short, greying blond hair. Micah found it fascinating that the scholars of the capital typically wore their hair short, as opposed to the young men and warriors who kept it long for status.

“C-careful, Mr. E-egan,” he cautioned with a stutter. “I was once like you.” After recovering, Isla turned back around to offer a genuine smile. “Too smart for my own good. I thought I was the only one with my eyes wide open. Only, I had a colleague I was very close with who spoke too openly at one of her lectures. She disappeared from the academy the next day. I learned my place and I hope you can caution your own tongue.”

Micah frowned. “It’s unfortunate it has to be that way.”

Isla picked up his bag and moved away from his desk. “It has been this way for several regimes, Cadet Egan. No government is perfect. They all have their own, individual flaws.” He approached Micah and placed a hand on his shoulder. “But there may be a reason why the Terra Kingdom has had decades of peaceful accord.”

“Democracy?”

“One can never truly know,” Isla replied quietly. “The only way to understand how the Terra Kingdom operates is to experience it for oneself. You won’t find it in books.”

“Not many are welcome in their territory.”

“On the contrary,” Isla murmured, “They welcome all, yet visitors are closely scrutinized. They do not trust us and we do not trust them.”

Isla patted him on the shoulder before turning to leave the empty classroom.

Micah slowly filed after him, his mind petulant.

Calder and the dozens of kings before him did a very impressive job censoring the kingdom. It was
no wonder there was little change in the capital. Monarch rule was all encompassing. They refused to allow their people to study the neighboring kingdoms in depth, afraid it would spur differing views and rebellions.

Micah had been especially interested in learning more about the Terra Kingdom. They did something right. Whether it was their governing body or something else entirely, Micah would never know without seeing it for himself.

That was probably something he’d never have the chance to do.

Passing the dining hall, Micah ventured into the lower levels of the academy. He’d already eaten dinner before his evening class and now made his way to the training rooms where the rest of the team gathered.

Just as Talia had suggested, Micah had given the nobles a week—nearly two—to lick their bruised egos and regather their pride. Fortunately, during the past week and a half, Micah had been busy with avoiding Josiah, his demanding class schedule, and subsequent homework assignments. He hardly had time to dwell over Kai Edlen’s continued elusive ways.

Advanced courses certainly lived up to their name. The material was intensive and the homework was challenging. His most demanding class, Psychology and Economics of Beliefs, required at least two hours of work each night. Eventually, once Micah got into a rhythm, he refocused on training.

Sachiel nor Josiah had approached him about individual lessons. Figuring the first man was busy at the palace, and the latter man amused by Micah’s intentional avoidance, he focused on the training of his own team. While the cadets had sword combat during the day, it was one thing to be good at wielding a sword and another to work well with a team. He’d asked Wayde that morning to deliver a message to Edlen.

They were to meet in one of the training rooms for a session that evening.

Glancing at a wall clock, Micah acknowledged he was a few minutes late. No matter, at least they would all be in one place at the same time. He hadn’t seen such an occurrence since the day Sachiel made them select their teammates in the arena.

As he opened the door to their assigned training room, he balked.

Keegan and Aiden were on the mats, boots and socks abandoned against the wall. Keegan had Aiden in a headlock. The smaller man flailed his arms, his face entirely red and swollen from the pressure around his throat. Their swords lay forgotten a distance away, clearly not holding their attentions.

No one else occupied the room.

Keegan abruptly dropped Aiden. “Micah!”

“Where are the others?” Micah demanded stonily.

Keegan laughed tensely and rubbed the back of his neck. “Hate to break it to you, kid, but they aren’t coming. Only Talia showed up and she left a bit ago.”

“That’s not stating the obvious,” Aiden muttered as he struggled to his feet. He lunged at Keegan, who easily jumped away from the assault.
“Where did Talia go?”

“Dunno,” Keegan panted, keeping his eyes on Aiden. He jerked in the direction Aiden feigned and chuckled under his breath for falling for it. At his sides, his hands clenched. “She said something about getting proper training done.”

Micah stared at the two idiots, wondering why he even bothered.

Turning, he left the room and walked the halls of the training wing.

It took several failed attempts of finding Talia. He walked in on several team practices before finally locating her in the smallest training chamber. She was the sole occupant of the brightly lit room. Stripped from her school uniform, she performed an array of sword techniques in front of a floor to ceiling mirror. Her jaw clenched noticeably when Micah invited himself inside, yet she made no move to stop her exercises.

He stopped directly behind her. “I had to speak to one of my instructors. I apologize for being late.”

Talia grunted. “Doesn’t matter anyway, does it? The others didn’t show up.” Sweat glistened off her collarbone and haloed her forehead. Clearly, she’d been working hard, eager to better herself.

Micah found he respected her for that.

“Do you know why they didn’t show up?”

She frowned at her reflection before clearing it away with a mask of impressive stoicism. “To be honest, I have separated myself from them after the trials. It only took several occurrences for me to finally realize they were trying to ostracize and criticize me.”

“Criticize you because they felt threatened by a female stronger than them.”

Dropping her sword by her side, she turned and faced Micah. “I was an idiot.”

“For?”

She looked down at her training trousers and combat boots. “For trying so hard to fit in where I don’t belong.” Dark eyes caught and held Micah’s stare. “When you came around, you bucked traditions and stereotypes. It was…” She made a face. “Inspiring.” Without another word, she turned a slim shoulder on him and raised her sword to resume her exercises.

Micah observed her with a small smile. She executed ironic elegance and practiced poise for one who turned into a spitfire during battle. “My, that will probably be the first and last time you compliment me.”

“Most likely,” Talia replied assuredly. “Not something you should get used to.”

“Would you happen to know where Edlen is?”

With her knees bent and her sword positioned over her head, Talia stiffened and met Micah’s eyes through the mirror. “I may,” she replied tentatively. “Are you planning on confronting him about his lack of spine?”

“I may,” Micah mimicked her earlier ambiguity.

Talia straightened once again. “I’ll tell you only if you bring me with.”
“A bit of a sadist, aren’t you?”

She smiled tightly. “You have no idea.”

Grabbing her jacket and shouldering on her holster, she sheathed her sword and pushed past Micah on her way out the door. Amused, he followed her down the corridors. He admired the way she walked. It was a self-confident, yet angry strut. For such a small thing, she certainly knew how to carry herself.

“He typically visits Nereus in his rooms.”

“You mean hides in Nereus’ rooms,” Micah contradicted.

Talia glanced at Micah from over her shoulder. “No.” Turning back around, she led him toward the first-year wing. “Nereus’ father, Muriel Edlen, has opted to invest some money into Nereus’ living quarters. The silver team has quite the accommodations and it attracts several nobles from all years.”

Micah could only imagine what he was about to walk into.

As Talia opened the door, uninvited to the silver team’s quarters, Micah’s assumptions proved accurate. The room was ridiculously extravagant. Military quarters couldn’t quite describe the inside of the room. Tapestries, chairs with expensive upholstery, and tables with gleaming polish all fit inside the room. Somehow, the room appeared larger than what the gold team possessed, who only had bunkbeds as furnishings.

Several men occupied the room. All blond men.

The smell of liquor was strong; the smell of cigars was stronger.

Micah stared in disbelief, in disgust. He really couldn’t believe it. The sound of laughter and conversation quieted as Talia and Micah entered. All eyes turned in their direction. Through the haze of the cigar smoke, Micah discerned Kai Edlen sitting next to his cousin and Wayde. Further in the room, a distance away, sat Viktor and Cain.

“Talia Bay!” a young man called with appreciation. “You look radiant tonight.”

“Must be the sweat,” Talia replied ominously. “That’s what usually happens when you exert yourself in training, Myers. Something you probably will never experience.”

“Why did you have to bring the cur, Bay?”

Cur. With the increase of biracial children, there was bound to be a derogatory name to rise from the ashes. The term cur extended from hounds. Dogs. Mutts who were unattractive, inferior, and mixed breed. Someone had the notion to insult biracial humans the same way. Talia appeared aghast with a look in Micah’s direction, though he hardly reacted as he stepped further into the room.

Such names were meaningless to him. No matter if it was derogatory or not, all that mattered was how he reacted to it.

“Nice, cozy accommodations, Edlen,” Micah praised, lingering near the table where Wayde and the two Edlens sat. Several upper-classmen also lingered around the room. He could not identify them by name, but he’d seen a few in his classes.
Fortunately, Ladon—his *half-brother*—was not inside the rooms.

“What are you doing in here, Egan?” Kai demanded lazily. His eyes were a half-lidded. Perhaps he wasn’t drunk, but buzzed enough to loosen his tongue and make him look ridiculous to sober observers.

“Seeing what my team thought more important than training.”

Here, he looked at Viktor and Cain. Both men had the audacity to look away, guilty and a bit embarrassed over the implications. Considering the two cadets were sitting a distance away from the tables, it appeared as they were not important enough to sit next to Nereus and Kai Edlen. Wayde, though.

Micah observed the way Wayde hovered and stifled Kai. The two were inseparable. They tried to act nonchalant about their friendship, as most nobles were not *clingy*, yet the two men were especially close, it appeared. He wondered if the friendship was politically driven.

“We’re prepared enough,” Kai replied.

“Oh?” Here, Micah looked pointedly at Wayde, remembering his unimpressive performance during one of his duels. “From my position, it appears as if there could be more work done to improve our… weak spots.”

Wayde grimaced.

Kai stood up in defense of Wayde. “Egan, you’re not welcome here. Get out.”

“Come now, Kai. Where are your manners?” Nereus intervened smoothly, forcing his cousin to sit back down. “Let the poor boy stay. Sucking off the instructors all week must exhaust him. Pour the man a drink.”

Talia shifted. “Maybe we should go,” she whispered to him, clearly appalled.

“Is that how you manage to skirt by, Nereus?” Micah inquired innocently as he ignored Talia’s obvious air of discomfort. “Taking a dick in the mouth? I suppose we all have to be good at something to succeed in life. I just never assumed, with your *impressive* arithmetic skills, that you’d take that route.”

Chortles sounded across the room. Evidently, they all knew how poorly Nereus performed in mathematics.

“I’m not the one who has his nose halfway up their asses, Egan,” Nereus shot back.

“Jealousy never does look good on nobility,” Micah murmured.

Nereus flushed an ugly pink. “As if I would be jealous of a half breed.”

“No, I don’t suppose you would be.” Miah made a show of looking around their quarters. “Not when daddy takes care of everything from your grades to the pretty little furnishings in your military quarters.”

“That’s quite enough,” Kai interrupted as Nereus opened his mouth with an immediate insult. “It’s the start of the weekend, Egan. I’d already made plans tonight when Wayde delivered your message.”
Next to Edlen, Wayde appeared genuinely uncomfortable. He glanced once at Micah before looking back down at his tumbler. In addition to Viktor and Cain’s repentant expressions, it appeared as if Kai’s followers weren’t as passionate about the purposeful avoidance as their leader. Micah would never get them to turn from Edlen, however. He knew, while they did not necessarily agree with Kai’s methods, that they were entirely loyal to their comrade.

“Tomorrow then,” Micah said.

“Make that Sunday.”

Murmurs of appreciation sounded throughout the room as Kai put Micah in his place.

Aware of Talia’s sharp regard, Micah simply smiled and cocked his head to the side. “Whatever works in your busy, time-consuming schedule, Mr. Edlen.” He turned his heel and approached the door. “Just know that if things go wrong with the team, it’s on your hands. I’ve done my part.”

Ridicules spread from noble to noble as Micah exited the room. He paid them no heed as he slammed the door behind him.

Immediately, he incurred Talia’s look of disappointment. “What did you expect to happen, Talia?”

“He’s in a pissing match with you,” she informed unhappily. “You let him win.”

“I let him win?” Micah repeated dubiously. “This is not a pissing match.” He walked down the corridor, towards their own quarters. A second later, he realized that Talia did not accompany him. Turning, he sought her figure in the dark corridor. “This is about Edlen trying to reconcile with his noble allies.”

“Whatever it was, you could have done better.”

Without another word, Talia stalked down the opposite corridor. Micah considered her silhouette, bemused. He didn’t understand what she’d wanted from him. A showdown? A duel? Some sort of verbal sparring match?

It hadn’t mattered.

Kai and the others missed training on Sunday anyway.

Chapter End Notes

*Oh, but the academy is watching, Kai…*

*As I mentioned in the beginning, I’m sorry for the interlude-like chapter, so I *hope* to get the next chapter out soon(er). It does have Josiah in it (briefly, at least).*
I fucking love my readers. You guys are seriously the **best**. As promised, here is an early chapter.

**Warnings:** Unedited…. With the exception of my rum-hazed mind looking over things. What can I say? It was Saturday night.

12. Chapter Twelve

Another week went by, as did another.

The nobles remained stubborn.

As did Micah.

He kept busy avoiding Josiah and concentrating intensely on his schoolwork. He also read up on modern technology in his free time and made a few more feeble attempts to get to know his teammates. All of them, with the exception of Keegan and Aiden, continued to ignore his efforts at unification. Edlen, and his three loyal aristocrats, remained elusive.

If the other boy’s mission was to avoid breathing the same air as Micah, he’d excelled beautifully these past four weeks.

Despite his exasperation, Micah was reluctantly impressed. Who knew someone could be so immature and childish to the point of skillful and impressive elusion? The boy and his trio of Unda cadets ate at different times, showered at different times, and stayed up late to study in living quarters belonging to their peers.

Then again, Micah was doing the same thing with Josiah, wasn’t he? Avoiding him out of some foolish sentiments of jealousy and petulance, all because the man scouted and spent time with potential **followers** when he could be giving Micah lessons.

Nonetheless, the situation between Josiah and Micah was entirely different from Kai and the team. Josiah was not seeking him out. As Chairman of the Academy and King of the Igni people, the man did not eat meals with the cadets. He did not teach. He did not loiter around the corridors or attend classes. He did not practice combative exercises with all the first-years.

In fact, Josiah probably wasn’t even aware of Micah’s stubborn avoidance.

In which case, Micah felt silly.

Granted Josiah warned him in the beginning that they would need distance. No one could know about their familiarity with the other. Yet, Micah felt a pull towards the other man, an insistence to be close. To interact. He despised the feeling immensely and wondered if it had to do with his status as Josiah’s Chosen, a topic he remained entirely clueless over.
Then he thought of Sachiel’s comment the other night at the academy garden. Everyone within Josiah’s proximity experienced the overwhelming need to be closer to the man and immerse himself or herself within the manipulative web he spun. To think Micah was just like them made him furious. He was not a commoner who salivated over the presence of someone more powerful. He was not, nor would he ever, be such a simpleton.

Aside from his peculiar desire to see the man, Josiah also mentioned he would give Micah lessons. Yet, both Sachiel and Josiah hadn’t approached Micah about training. In fact, he hadn’t even seen or heard from Sachiel since that night outside the academy.

It was all very strange.

Had he somehow turned Sachiel away with his moment of seductive defiance? He hadn’t thought so. He’d sensed the man’s palpable excitement during their interaction. Sachiel appeared rather prevailing and untouchable with his political mask and infamous dueling skills, yet something told Micah the man would enjoy succumbing.

Succumbing to someone he thought worthy enough. Beautiful enough.

Perhaps Micah wasn’t at that point just yet and Sachiel thought him too bold.

“I mean… why did he decide to combine our teams together if he doesn’t want anything to do with us?” Keegan muttered.

Micah looked over his textbook. Keegan and Aiden were sitting together at the only table in their room, hunched over their abandoned coursework. Just down the way, Talia sat on the highest bed bunk with her back turned toward the door and her teammates. A book propped at her elbow, but Micah knew she hadn’t turned a page in quite some time.

Like Micah, she usually kept to herself.

After several attempts to unify the team, Micah shut down, unable to find a lick of concern if they got along or not. Keegan and Aiden got along famously, as Micah imagined they would, simply because Keegan was able to get along with just about anyone. Micah even witnessed the other man interacting with other cadets in the corridors, jumping from student to student, engaging them with starry-eyed and enthusiastic conversation.

Keegan was a people-person.

He tried to lure a reluctant Micah along with him and introduce him to others, which Micah tolerated, only because it was Keegan. One of the fortunate things to come from Keegan’s forced conversations was getting to know more of the cadets at the academy.

Micah soon realized many of them were decent people, at least the cadets that were not highbrow aristocracy.

“He didn’t want competition, that’s why,” Aiden responded automatically with an air of someone who thought they knew everything. “He knew Micah would always pose as a threat, so he decided to combine our teams together.”

Both Keegan and Aiden looked over at Micah, though he stubbornly kept his attention on his book. It was a reasonable deduction, he supposed. If he hadn’t already known Sachiel said something to Kai, Aiden’s theory might have held some weight.

“At any rate, Kai’s reputation is failing miserably,” Aiden turned back around and fiddled with his
parchments. The boy always got excited over gossip. “It’s why he’s trying to avoid us. He thinks it will create some distance and reestablish his standing. Nereus isn’t too happy with him, but he has a strong team, so what does he have to complain about?”

“We have a strong team,” Keegan countered.

Micah couldn’t help himself. He chuckled darkly.

“That’s not creepy at all,” Keegan admonished. “What’s so funny, Micah?”

Across the room, Talia glanced over her shoulder.

Micah set down his book, forgoing the in-depth history behind electric lighting and the camera. He wasn’t particularly interested in the technology, anyway, just as long as he knew what the objects were called and the general idea of how they functioned. A camera, though. How very interesting! A major improvement from oil paintings.

“We have strong individuals clumped together with varying degrees of skill,” Micah corrected. He stood up from his bed. “We have no team. We have no sort of connection. None. We wouldn’t last a day together out in real battle.”

As soon as the words left his mouth, the door to their quarters opened abruptly.

Kai Edlen walked inside, followed by his three ‘chosen’ members. Edlen’s expression, while properly schooled, held a hint of uncertainty. The reason behind said uncertainty was none other than Instructor Candace and Instructor Wilkinson following the cadets into their rooms. At their presence, Talia, Keegan, and Aiden all scrambled up and stood at attention.

Across the room, Viktor lunged to shut the lid of his trunk. Unfortunately, several pieces of rumpled clothing prevented the lid from closing entirely. He stood in front of it with a blameless expression.

Micah planted his feet firmly, his posture stiff with compliance.

“At ease.”

Something was not right.

He could feel it in the air. He could sense Kai’s doubt.

“There is a slight problem in Region 5. A village near the capital. A very minor issue that can be resolved by our resident gold team.” Candace walked down the aisle between the bunk beds and cast sharp observation to each cadet. His mouth twisted sourly in distaste. “It will be your first mission.”

A real mission.

From the corner of Micah’s eye, Keegan stiffened, his face growing pale.

“I was under the impression we did not receive missions until we were ready, sir,” Micah probed, his voice respectful but curious.

Candace rounded on Micah instantly, towering over him as he peered down his nose.

“Until you were ready?” Candace barked. “Verify your source, Cadet Egan. You’re in the military! You are not a virgin preparing for your first time. You’ve had four weeks with your team. That is
plenty of time. As you are the first-ranked team at the academy, your crew will receive their mission earlier than the rest.” The Igni instructor turned his heel and made for the door. “Be sure to impress. You will be graded and evaluated. More importantly, your lives depend on working together as a team. On your way to Region 5, Instructor Wilkinson will brief you on the mission. You will leave immediately.”

Micah and Kai exchanged a look, one stubborn, the other condescending.

* * * *

Instructor Wilkinson was a waif of a human being. A very pale, thin, and watery-like man.

Micah listened as the scholar briefed the nervous students about a group of rogue citizens who had taken a small sector of Region 5 captive and caused a disruption. They had weapons and they held the capital responsible for their people’s ‘suffering’. They wanted a response from the capital, but until then, they would keep the villagers incarcerated.

“There are five rogue operatives.”

Just five, he said. Wilkinson said if there’d been more, they would not have sent a team of first-year cadets to take care of the deflectors. By ‘take care of’ Micah knew he was heavily insinuating execution.

No talk. No compromise.

After all, why would the academy and the capital send cadets to negotiate with rebels?

The mention of killing a group of strangers set his team further on edge.

Micah pinched the bridge of his nose, anticipating a total failure. He’d killed before, but it was a feeling that constantly plagued him. Not necessarily for the worse, as the act was justified, but it was still a sensation he would never forget. It had opened his eyes to the sheer control he held in his palm. A life was fragile. So easily crushed. His team would never be the same after this, he knew. This was no longer about fun and games, no longer about competition and who came out on top. This was real. This was reality and they were not prepared for it.

Wilkinson cautioned the risks involved, further scaring the others.

He then stood up and left the first-year cadets to mull over the situation.

Next to Micah, Keegan trembled noticeably.

“I- I don’t even know how to wield a sword properly,” he whispered to the group of grim-looking cadets.

“That is your captain’s fault,” Kai accused disdainfully. “You should have never been elected as a member of the gold team. You were a bottom-ranking cadet. Your nose should be permanently buried into a textbook as opposed to combat. The team you were meant to be on probably won’t receive a mission until next term.”

He then muttered something about said mission probably being escorting the elderly across the
Micah offered him a cold look. For the past four weeks, they practiced sword techniques and studied combative strategy with various instructors. While Keegan had improved significantly from his first day, he was nowhere near the level of true combat.

Micah reached over and covered Keegan’s knee with his hand. “I will cover you.”

“Which distracts you, one of our best fighters,” Kai reprimanded sharply. Though his tone immediately set their teeth on edge, he did have a rational point. “We need your focus on the radicals, Egan, not playing bodyguard to our weakest link.”

Micah’s attention narrowed on Kai. “Now you want to talk systematics?” he asked quietly, his tone ice-like. “I’ve spent the last four weeks trying to get our team unified and familiar with each other while you’ve been avoiding us and playing the simpering politician. Who, exactly, is the weakest link? I’d say you were a detriment to our team.”

Before Kai could respond, Viktor chimed in.

“You’re right, Micah,” he said, looking pointedly at Micah. “My loyalty was to Kai, and while I understand the reason behind his actions these past few weeks, they were politically motivated. We should have considered all sides of the situation. Now we’re on a train headed to our first mission and we know nothing about each other.”

Out of all the students Kai selected to be a part of his team, Micah was far more interested in getting to know Viktor. The boy constantly tried to rebuke tradition, whether it be in cutting his hair short or wearing his uniform purposefully askew. He strived to stand apart. Micah wanted to know if that desire was truly engrained on the boy’s conscience, or if it was a juvenile act of defiance against a relative in his life.

Cain, the bulkiest and oldest first-year cadet, grunted. “I agree.”

Kai appeared positively furious. “You are ignorant to our position. All of you!”

Next to him, Wayde remained tightlipped, his displeasure obvious. Whether he was displeased with Viktor and Cain for standing up to Kai, or simply disappointed in the situation as a whole, Micah did not know. He assumed it was the latter. Wayde possessed some common sense, doubtless of his admission he would support Edlen no matter the circumstances.

The gold team remained silent after Kai’s outburst, not knowing what to say or how to remedy the situation. It was too late, anyhow. They were four weeks too late. No amount of bonding over a short train ride would suffice.

They were just… too late.

Micah realized there might have been political factors involved in Kai’s decision to remain distant. He understood that and acknowledged the need in such a high-class society. However, this was military academy, not political court. Kai’s intentions were there, self-intentions, more like, but he fell short.

It wasn’t long before the train came to a screeching halt.

Micah stared at the wall across from him, forcing himself to calm. It would be counter intuitive to let the others see his gloom and careless attitude. “Talia is an overall good warrior, as is Aiden,” Micah murmured steadily. “Keegan isn’t good with the sword, but he’s observant. He should stay
back with someone on your team and serve as a lookout in case there are more than five radicals.”

His eyes fell on Wayde. The boy hadn’t impressed Micah very much with his sword abilities.

In response, Wayde grimaced at him, taking insult in the prospect of staying behind.

“Not going to happen. Wayde will stay with us,” Kai retorted fiercely, motioning to a grim-looking Talia. “She should stay back with your impotent cadet.”

Micah took a deep, steadying breath, torn between two decisions. He could either inforce his will on the boy, certain it would work, though it would take some time. Alternatively, he could just forgo the arguments and agree to Kai’s decision. Though they were one team, they were informally two teams forced to work together.

This was Kai’s decision.

“Fine.” Micah stood up and adjusted the sword holster across his back. “Talia or Aiden will stay with Keegan.” He looked at the two. Both were impressively skilled with the sword. It didn’t matter to him. “Make your decision. Quickly.”

“I will,” Talia consented, appearing rather dissatisfied.

He nodded his gratitude before motioning for them to stand. “Stay close. Keep an eye out on anything suspicious.” Bypassing Edlen, he neared the exit to the train. “I want all of you to work together. It will be difficult, but you must kill those who oppose you. This is the capital’s request. We can talk about the consequences later.”

The three followed close at his heels, resembling a group of frightened pups fresh from their nesting environment.

He pursed his lips at their smothering proximity. This was also his fault. While he grew frustrated at Kai’s continued evasive ways, he should have still trained exclusively with his own team. Made them stronger and more confident. The realization equally shocked and disappointed him.

He was a fool.

Such an idiot…

Pausing, he turned to look at Aiden and clapped him on the shoulder. “If you are forced to kill, can you do it? Or do I need Talia at my side?”

The boy’s baby-face scrunched up and his cheeks turned red. “I can.”

Micah glanced at Talia. The girl nodded sharply, her features a mask of schooled impassiveness. She would kill if the situation demanded it. Aiden, on the other hand, Micah had doubts. It would be a good test for him tonight.

“If I sense any sort of hesitancy, you will stay back with Keegan while Talia takes your place at my side.” He peered into the stubborn, golden eyes of Aiden. “Do you understand this, Aiden? No protests during battle. You do exactly as I say.”

Keegan caught his eye. The boy looked at him oddly, but with a spark of admiration.

“I understand, Micah,” Aiden responded tightly. “I can and will do this.”

He was fortunate to have a team that actually adhered to his orders, at least.
Kai threw him an unfathomable look before stopping at his side. “It appears as if Instructor Wilkinson will not accompany us,” Kai observed, glancing towards the door Wilkinson disappeared through earlier in the train ride. “Neither will he give us a game plan on how to proceed.”

“I believe he already did,” Micah injected. “Kill all five members of the rebellion.”

Kai turned and inclined his head to meet eyes with Micah. “That simple?”

“That’s it,” Micah confirmed dully, resisting the temptation to truly inquire after Kai’s nonchalance on the mission. Killing five people was not ‘that simple’. Micah had no doubt that the team was unprepared for this. “Is your team ready?”

Either Kai did not notice the mocking in Micah’s inquiry, or he skillfully overlooked it.

“We’re ready.” He pulled on his white gloves and his three team members did the same at his back. “Let’s get this over with, shall we?”

Acting as if he were unfazed with the prospect of this mission, Kai opened the doors to the train and exited first.

Micah followed soon after.

Region 5 was not at all similar to Region 20 or even Region 10. While it was an outskirt region to the Concordia capital, it still possessed life, it was still close enough to the capital to indicate generosity. It was dark outside with the late hour, but Micah discerned the green grass and the small streams across the town. The train depot was on top a hill, allowing them to overlook the town below. Only a few lights shown from inside small homes and shops, the only signs of civilization.

Everything was hushed, quiet.

Their boots struck the paved road as they descended the hill and approached the heart of town. At least their steps were synchronized and uniform. Little did their enemies know that they were hardly in sync and every bit uncoordinated.

Micah gazed ahead, though he was aware of the small shops he passed.

Bakeries, clothing shops, and cafés.

Taverns, fresh produce stands, blacksmiths, and infirmaries.

Why there was a small rebellion, he could not fathom. Other regions had it worse off with poverty and famine. This region seemed to possess a flourish of food, resources, and gold. Even a very small touch of nobility. Their buildings did not crumble, their people were not homeless, and they had a variety of businesses that appeared very well off. Perhaps other villages located in Region 5, further from the capital, were worse off. However, this one seemed quaint and charming.

“Why would they rebel?” Keegan inquired with disbelief, mirroring Micah’s thoughts.

“Just keep your eyes open for any surprise attacks,” Edlen chastised sternly. “People always have to gripe about something and will blame the government for their troubles. It does not matter why but rather how well we eliminate the rebellion.”

As soldiers, they did not question the ones in charge. Micah knew well enough that the capital
eliminated rebellion activity as soon as it cropped into existence. They extinguished the flames before they could fan and grow. A smart move. Other than their intolerance of rogue activity, the capital was relatively lax with their stipulations. They allowed regions to do as they pleased and stayed out of their business. However, that was half the problem.

Their indifference towards the outskirt regions created problems.

As they neared the heart of town, Micah immediately took note of the unusual hush. Their enemies knew they were here. They would have heard the train stop, surely.

Just as the thought occurred to him, figures emerged from the building up ahead.

Micah threw out his hand, motioning for Keegan and Talia to stay back.

“A bunch of soldiers-in-training,” one of the men hissed with displeasure. He and his four comrades were dressed entirely in black with tactical fabric wrapped around their heads to create a shemagh, a heavy scarf usually worn in the desert. While their mouths and noses were covered, their bronze skin and golden eyes indicated they were of Igni descent.

“Who were you expecting? King Calder himself?” Viktor inquired, amused.

Kai shot him a fierce look, immediately silencing the boy’s mirth.

Micah tried to separate himself from the others and encourage them to space out and surround their enemies. Only, as he moved, they subconsciously moved with him. He had half the sense to scold them, though it would not be wise in front of their enemies.

Said enemies had swords strapped across their backs and they watched the cadets wearily.

“The capital insults us by sending cadets.”

Instructor Wilkinson said no negotiations. He said to take care of them.

Keeping silent, Micah cast a look around the town, noticing a few faces peering out of their windows. They did not seem distressed like normal hostages would appear, but rather curious and eager.

“You see?” one of the rebels inquired loudly, speaking as if he had an audience.

Maybe he did. As if drawn by the man’s voice, more faces pressed up against the windows of neighboring shops and studios. Micah had a very discerning feeling about the situation. His hands clenched at his sides, ready to draw his sword.

This was not a test by the military.

He’d known that before, but a part of him had wondered if this were simply an assessment put on by Instructor Candace to evaluate their strengths and their weaknesses. But no. This was real. He could sense the group’s antagonistic emotions and their frustration. He could see the village, as a whole, stirring with anticipation at what was to come.

“No type of negotiation, no sort of compromise!” the man continued. “They send their trainees to do the dirty work, hoping for a quick elimination.”

Micah took a deep breath. “Edlen.”

“I sense it,” the boy murmured quietly. “Retreat?”
“Micah, look out!” Keegan yelled.

Micah withdrew his sword quickly but turned too late. He thrust out a hand, desperation licking at him in hopes of somehow fending off the man. Fortunately, Kai’s sword swung in front of him and blocked the attack coming at his back. The attacker, a sixth and unaccounted for opponent, stumbled backwards, flames suddenly engulfing him unexpectedly.

He screamed piercingly and dropped to the ground, trying to set himself out.

Not having much time to consider the inexplicable outcome, Micah dropped his arm, blinking in a daze, before refocusing on the five individuals across from him. They all charged at once.

One of the rebels was also a fire Elemental.

Micah took a step back, wondering if he should intervene with his immunity abilities, but Kai charged forward and met the man’s flames with his own Element.

He hadn’t known Kai was a water Elemental.

Not all nobles were Elementals, though it appeared as if Varuna had blessed Kai.

“She’s a fire Elemental. Spread out!” Micah yelled at the cadets.

They hastily followed his instructions, forcing the rebels to fan out. Micah ducked below a well-aimed strike, drawing his blade across the man’s stomach. Blood fountained and Micah wondered why he felt a strong spike of eager adrenaline at the sight. He wanted this. He yearned for this. It felt good.

His feet felt light as he danced around his opponent, catching him in vulnerable areas with his blade. The battle lust Micah experienced nearly suffocated and deafened him to everything but his steady and even heartbeat. The poignant sensation left him pleasantly breathless.

After trading a few lazy hits with the man, Micah soon realized he was playing with his weaker opponent. In the academy’s dying gardens, Sachiel compared Micah’s style of combat to Josiah’s cat-and-mouse flair. Realizing it was a weakness in battle, especially with a weak team relying on him, Micah abruptly brought back his sword and beheaded the man.

He avoided looking at the carnage and instead searched for his team.

He focused on Aiden.

The boy struggled.

Dodging past Kai and his opponent, Micah zeroed in on Aiden’s opponent and slid next to the boy. He wasn’t entirely familiar with teaming up during a duel, though Aiden appeared relatively appreciative at his interference. The boy stepped back, allowing Micah to take control of the situation. The opponent wasn’t very strong and Micah deduced the problem almost instantaneously.

Aiden didn’t want to kill the man.

Angry the boy declared himself ready, when, in fact, he was not, Micah caught his opponent across the chest with his blade. In the man’s moment of weakness, Micah shoved him with his foot and towards an unsuspecting Aiden. The chest wound wasn’t lethal, but it would slow him down. For now.
“Now, Aiden.”

It would have been an easy strike for Aiden. The man was unprotected and in pain.

Was Micah cruel for forcing Aiden’s hand?

Perhaps.

Though he didn’t need to ponder too hard on the dilemma, for Aiden trembled and his hand turned slack. His sword dropped to the ground and their opponent turned to him, recognizing the unprotected cadet across from him. Before the man could act, Micah’s sword drove through the man’s chest, right below his ribcage.

“I’m sorry, Micah. I’m sorry.” Eyes wide, Aiden stumbled back, shaking his head as the man collapsed heavily to the ground. Stepping back ungracefully, Aiden grabbed his fallen sword, intentionally avoiding Micah’s piercing stare.

“Go join Talia and Keegan.” He turned his shoulder dismissively. “You’re a detriment to the team.”

None of the cadets were ready to take a life, Micah mused as he considered the last three rebels. It was a mess. The team looked unsynchronized and sloppy in their reservations. He understood the uncertainties over killing someone without knowing the cause, but when the enemies fought with intentions to kill, it should have spurred some sort of defensive instinct to do the same.

Kai, who impressively fended off the fire Elemental, did nothing more than defense. As much as Micah wanted to linger on that particular duel, he forced his attention to the others. Viktor fought alongside Cain, the latter seemingly the only one eager at the prospect of a fallen life, for his strikes were fierce and lacked hesitancy.

Across the way, Wayde seemed adept enough, though as he parried, he tumbled on his own feet, a humiliating and novice mistake.

Agni! What an idiot.

Fear suddenly took precedence over Micah’s frustration when Wayde’s opponent took quick advantage of the boy’s mistake. Micah lunged hysterically toward the other boy, nearly tripping over his own feet in his haste.

He was too late.

It happened so fast!

“No!” Micah screamed shrilly in denial, not recognizing his own voice.

Still too far away, yet desperate in his attempts, Micah reached for the boy uselessly as Wayde’s opponent grabbed his long, blond hair and jerked his head to the side. The man’s blade then cut across the cadet’s throat, producing a spray of blood that hit Micah in the face.

A scream of pure and unfiltered fury reverberated across the town as Cain sprinted forward and attacked Wayde’s opponent.

In one last moment of recognition, Wayde’s eyes widened in shock. Micah reached clumsily for the collapsing boy, pressing his gloved hand against the gushing and bleeding neck. He fell to the ground with Wayde, cradling his head. His white gloves instantly turned dark crimson as they
hovered uncertainly over the cadet’s neck. The boy spluttered and heaved, staring desperately at Micah.

“I can’t,” Micah whispered, though he did not know the reasoning behind his denial. He couldn’t heal this. He couldn’t. His hands shook madly as the blood seeped between his clasped fingers. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

The light in Wayde’s eyes abruptly dimmed. Permanently accusing as they stared up at Micah.

Kai screamed in despair.

Looking over, Micah hissed between his teeth and waved an arm. “Watch out!”

Kai, distracted with Wayde’s fall, left himself exposed to an attack from the fire Elemental. The wall of flames blossomed angrily towards Kai’s unprotected side. In a weak attempt at defense, the boy lifted his arm, his uniform catching instantly.

Micah stumbled to his feet and sprinted over, throwing himself against Kai. He cloaked Edlen like a blanket, his immunity of the Elements instantly protecting them from the onslaught of fire. However, Kai’s arm remained burning fiercely. The blond-haired boy screamed hoarsely, summoning enough water and clumsily extinguishing the flames.

Together, Cain and Viktor managed to take down the fire Elemental by executing a blitz attack, the latter finally mustering enough courage to implement the killing blow.

Micah remained sitting on the broken pavement, smelling burnt flesh and the overwhelming scent of blood.

He had expected them to fail, but this…

While the rebels were dead, they’d lost one of their own.

Across the way, a woman stumbled outside one of the neighboring shops, instantly setting the cadets on edge. She bypassed their stiff forms and collapsed to her knees, sobbing uncontrollably over one of the rebels.

After a few moments went by, more civilians escaped their hiding places. Micah stood up, hauling Edlen to his feet. With the exception of contemptuous and revulsion-filled stares, the civilians left the military cadets alone as they dragged the dead rebels from the streets. Micah watched them numbly, wondering if they’d used these men to speak for them.

To voice their protests against something they deemed unacceptable.

Micah never did hear their voice.

Their protests.

“Let’s go,” he ordered sharply.

While the civilians were compliant now, he could not guarantee they would stay that way. He dropped Edlen’s undamaged arm and motioned to Keegan, who stood shell-shocked next to the grim-looking Talia and Aiden.

“I need help moving him.” He bent down and grabbed Wayde’s legs. “Someone needs to support his shoulders—"
He stopped abruptly when Cain bent down low and picked Wayde up off the ground. Carrying the limp body bridal style, the large-statured cadet began the trek towards the train. Micah looked after the man, noticing the set shoulders and the white face.

Edlen started crying.

Micah rubbed a blood-soaked glove against his forehead, following Cain. They’d messed up. Utterly. The walk back to the train was agonizingly long. Micah dwelled with his decisions, his mistakes, things he should have done differently. Things they all could and should have done differently since day one.

Instructor Wilkinson greeted them when they returned. He ran a critical eye down Wayde’s lifeless form, offering a strong, displeased frown, before wordlessly ushering them aboard the train.

It was an excruciating trip back to the capital.

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Micah stood at attention with his hands clasped behind his back. Instructor Wilkinson told them to wait in Josiah’s office when they’d returned to the academy. Upon arrival, Healer Kendra gathered Wayde’s body from Cain and tried to convince Kai Edlen to accompany her to the infirmary to heal his scorched arm.

The boy vehemently declined, choosing to stay with the rest of the team.

The office was empty and void.

It was a very late, or more appropriately, an early hour. The rest of the students were sleeping, as were the instructors.

Micah stared at the empty fire basins and the unused textbooks. Next to him, he could feel the waves of melancholy from his team members. They blamed themselves, he knew. Aiden for his foolish claim he was ready to kill, Keegan’s inability to fight, Talia’s regret of not joining in, and Edlen… Well… the boy had sobbed uncontrollably on the way back to the capital.

Micah suggested Wayde stay back with Keegan, hadn’t he? He had identified the unassuming skills the boy possessed with the sword and felt he was not ready. He’d tripped on his own feet, for Agni’s sake.

He’d been right.

Unfortunately, he didn’t feel nearly as victorious as he’d thought he would.

The door to the office abruptly crashed open. If possible, the cadets straightened further upon the arrival of Josiah, Instructors Wilkinson and Candace. Micah stared ahead, unsurprised when the fire basins alit with deep, crimson flames upon the arrival of the Igni king.

Josiah sank in the chair behind his desk.

Steepling his fingers beneath his chin, he surveyed the first-year cadets assembled before him. Wilkinson and Candace took position near the side of the room, caging the cadets in under a sharp, relentless observational ring. “Wayde’s family is assembled in the room next door.” Josiah paused for a long moment. “We have yet to tell them that their son has passed away during his first
mission for the military.”

Upon Josiah’s quiet admission, the students flinched.

“Would you like to tell me what happened?” Josiah inquired.

His voice was ice-like.

Micah stared stubbornly at the far wall, his expression crafted from stone. He refused to speak. Accusations would fly, or even worse, he would take all the blame in an act to spare his team the humiliation and the regret.

No one spoke.

“Instructor Wilkinson?” Josiah prompted.

The waif-like man stepped forward, readily eager to please the Academy’s Chairman. “Failed to form a proper perimeter. Failed to assess the circumstances before approaching the enemy. Failed to observe their surroundings. No teamwork to speak of with the exception of Viktor and Cain. The cadets learned all these necessary requirements during the first two weeks of combative lessons. They failed all of them.”

Micah turned his head and pinned the man with a cold look.

Wilkinson was there the whole time, simply observing the situation to report to the academy. How could he sit back and watch a student die at the hands of rebels? How could he recount the situation with a perfect balance of blandness and factual intrigue?

“Anything to add, Mr. Egan?” Josiah questioned, noticing his reaction.

Micah’s eyes flittered away from Wilkinson’s pinched expression and towards Josiah. His eyes barely skimmed the man before refocusing on the far wall. “No, sir,” he responded distantly. “His account is accurate.”

“They were hesitant to execute, even when the rogue operatives were lethal in their approach,” Wilkinson added. “Again, there were exceptions to this. Micah and Cain were readily able to eliminate their opponents. The others were skittish and defensive, causing major distractions and an extreme lack of uniformity.”

“It’s my fault,” Edlen suddenly blurted.

Micah took a deep breath and slowly exhaled with exasperation. “What good is it, to place the blame on yourself after everything has already transpired? It will not bring Wayde back.”

“I know, Egan!” Kai retorted viciously. “But before the mission, I avoided—”

“We did not train as we should have,” Micah interrupted calmly. He unclasped his hands from behind his back, allowing the crimson-stained gloves to drop at his sides. “There was a distinguishable rift between our teams. Correcting it will be our top priority after tonight. We were not synchronized, nor prepared. It cost a student their life. That burden and mistake rests on all our shoulders, not anyone individually.”

“Spoken like a true captain,” Candace said without any true approval.
“The fact of the matter is that we knew your team’s shortcomings before the mission,” Wilkinson informed crisply. “Which is why you were sent on said mission.”

Micah paused at that before stirring angrily. His eyes locked with impassive orange. “You knew our shortcomings and sent us on the mission?” he demanded furiously. “How can you play with the students’ lives like that?”

A hand came out of nowhere and slapped Micah across the face.

Hard.

His vision spun and he heard Keegan gasp pathetically.

“Watch who you’re talking to, boy.”

“Instructor Candace,” Josiah crooned frostily. “That was uncalled for.”

Though his tone was cold, the temperature in the room seared with sudden heat. As Micah touched the moisture beneath his nose, he was unsurprised to note the blood. It blended in well with Wayde’s blood, only, it was much lighter and fresher.

“I apologize, My Lord. He should know his place.”

Josiah appeared unexpectedly irate. “He is aware of his place.” His eyes focused on Micah. “To answer your question, Cadet Egan, you are adults now. You’ve pledged your life and your loyalty to the capital. If we notice a weakness you do not correct, we will. The situation was extensively monitored and scouted beforehand. A team of your caliber and shortcomings should have easily been victorious. And yet, you were not.”

The Igni king rose from behind his desk. “Mr. Edlen will be stripped of his captain status for his erroneous and careless behavior,” Josiah informed. “Mr. Egan will be your sole captain.”

Edlen stood at attention. “I would like to inform Wayde’s parents of his passing, sir.”

Josiah gazed at him, unimpressed. “I can smell the infection in your body from here. You will go to the infirmary immediately before amputation is required.”

Kai didn’t dare argue.

The Igni king looked at each of the students. “Get out of my sight.”

They scattered quickly, though Micah lingered, immediately earning him a sharp look from Josiah.

“I would like to inquire after Councilman Sachiel’s absence. Sir.”

Sachiel was the academy’s face. He should have been there tonight to meet with Wayde’s parents.

Josiah leaned back on his heels, a small, forbidding smile crossing his lips. “You would, wouldn’t you?” Aware of their audience, Josiah was quick to veil his glee. “It has come to my attention that Councilman Sachiel had little to preoccupy himself with. I sent him on an assignment. He won’t be back for quite some time, I’m afraid.”

A chill raced down Micah’s spine as he stared at Josiah.

Somehow, the man knew.
Somehow, he had known about Micah’s conversation with Sachiel.

Mocking eyes absorbed Micah’s expression. “If that’s all, Mr. Egan?”

“That’s all,” Micah responded heatedly, turning his back on the man. The man’s actions were far clearer than a slap to the face. Josiah was putting Micah in his place by exercising his authority. He had enough control and power to send Sachiel away, simply because he wanted to eliminate him from the picture. Micah was powerless to stop it.

How was he supposed to rise up to this challenge?

He didn’t know. But he had to find a way.

He walked out the office, his mind rather blank, his emotions haywire.
DISCLAIMER: As some of you may have noticed earlier, I am referencing some Hindu gods in this story (Agni, Varuna, etc.). Other than their name and element, I am not basing them off the real deal; therefore, I am not trying to emulate the Hindu religion in this story. At all. Or any real life religion, for that matter! Thank you!

13. Chapter Thirteen

Once a month, Concordia Academy held liturgy.

The academy expected all cadets to attend.

Today was their first liturgy and Micah couldn’t imagine better timing. His team hadn’t slept well the past few nights, still haunted by their mission and their comrade’s gruesome death. News of the incident traveled quickly across the academy and gossip eagerly raged.

Enduring the looks, the talks, and the accusations hadn’t been easy for some members of the team. While Micah could shoulder the attention, he knew the others had trouble dealing with Wayde’s absence and functioning under the negative scrutiny. Liturgy would at least soothe their troubles, at least for an hour or two.

Micah wasn’t so fortunate.

He wasn’t a religious individual. While he acknowledged the existence of the gods, or, more appropriately, the fables of Agni and Varuna, he did not practice any sort of worship. During this morning’s service, however, he would have to choose one god over the other. Fortunately, it would be a short service, as only the first-year cadets would attend today in order to receive their blessings from their respective god.

“Considering you’re a child of both Varuna and Agni, who are you going to pledge yourself to?” Keegan whispered as they stood in a line with the other first-year cadets. “You never really seemed interested in Agni back in Region 20. Will you identify with Varuna?” He seemed especially interested in Micah’s answer, judging from the way he gawked.

He still hadn’t asked after Micah’s parentage, nor his mixed race. He simply accepted it with open arms and pretended as if he did not have burning questions. Encountering someone like Keegan had to be especially rare. People typically felt slighted, perhaps angry when they did not receive answers. Keegan was Keegan.

He just waited patiently for Micah to open up on a topic that was clearly sensitive.

“Neither one sounds remotely encouraging,” Micah responded emotionlessly.

Keegan looked at him irritably. “Maybe religion will do you some good, Micah.” He studied the group of cadets in front of them and then craned his neck around to study the ones standing behind.
“I find praying to Agni comforting. Though he doesn’t always answer my prayers, he has blessed me with a good life. I can’t thank him enough.”

Micah pursed his lips. Displeased. “Perhaps your good luck and good fortune is due to your parents’ hard work, not the work of an unsympathetic god.”

“Micah,” Keegan said in a controlled voice. “Don’t take religion away from me.”

The boy then turned his shoulder dismissively.

Micah inclined his head, acknowledging and understanding Keegan’s angry frustration. As Josiah mentioned earlier, it was crucial Micah choose a god and relate to said entity. It was entirely political. After all, religion was important to a great deal of people. They credited Agni or Varuna for their fortune and would often pray to the gods to help them through tragedies and hardships.

As the line inched closer to the vicar who performed the blessings on the new cadets, Micah examined the large sculpture of Varuna. According to legend, the water god, unlike his fire counterpart, was tranquil and serene. He was easy to please and he loved his people. Micah could relate to Varuna far more than he could relate to Agni.

Agni was short-tempered and his rage was wicked. Unlike Varuna, Agni was hard to please, though his loyalty was fierce and enduring. There were far more rituals to appease Agni than there were rituals performed in Varuna’s name.

Agni and Varuna were both a part of birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, deaths, and births. In fact, Ember told Micah that Calder had baptized him under both Agni and Varuna when he was born. Unfortunately, Micah didn’t think the academy would appreciate him stepping out and trying to receive two blessings today.

Such an act was a bit too bold.

At least for now.

As Micah watched the vicar trickle water down Kai Edlen’s forehead, he assessed the rest of the chapel.

A corridor attached the chapel to the military academy, however, it was its own, separate building. There had to be hundreds of rows of pews inside the chapel, certainly far more than needed for the academy. Micah knew there were not that many cadets enrolled at the academy to fill even half the pews. Everything about the chapel reeked of gold. It reeked of exhausted resources, just like the academy itself.

Splendor and extravagance.

Even the aisle Micah stood waiting was excessively decorated with a long, richly sewn rug. As his eyes took in the grandiose stage where the vicar gave his serums, he paused on the sculptures of the two gods before gazing straight above his head. The geodesic ceiling was incredibly high and architecturally stunning with dark wood and gold leaf. Instead of depicting a god on the canvas-like ceiling, Micah observed the vibrantly colored fire colliding with equally vengeful water.

It was a tribute to the elements.

Elementals, to be precise.

Most all Elementals were nobles, yet, not all noblemen had the ability. As such, it was an
uncomfortable topic among some families. There were rare exceptions that some Elementals were commoners, however, if one were to trace back the bloodline of any Elemental, there would undoubtedly be noble blood—even if it was distant.

Micah’s attention then landed on the front pew, where several instructors gathered, yet his eyes focused on just one individual.

Josiah.

Micah stiffened as he experienced an array of emotions towards the older man. He was angry with him, certainly. Yet, there was something sickly satisfying at the man’s bold challenge by sending Sachiel away from the academy.

Indisputably, Josiah was predictively possessive. It was a trait Micah could play on if he so desired. Nonetheless, by engaging further with the man, he would initiate more contact, and a part of Micah didn’t want to delve deeper. Josiah was dangerous. Though Micah was his Chosen, he knew the Igni royal would not let that stop him if he deemed retribution necessary.

Moreover, Micah didn’t want to grow more attached than he already was.

His indecisiveness on what to do with Josiah only extended the time Sachiel remained away. He had to decide what to do. How to do it. And then he had to anticipate and plan for the consequences.

“Aiden feels pretty bad about the mission,” Keegan suddenly admitted as he turned back around. Clearly, Micah hadn’t upset him enough about religion to continue the silent treatment. “You should talk to him about what happened. Work through it.”

Work through it?

“He should feel bad,” Micah retorted dispassionately. “He lied to me.”

Keegan ogled. “He thought he could succeed, Micah. He was wrong. I don’t think it was deception on his end, but rather a calamity.” He paused. “There were a lot of things that happened on that mission that we’re still trying to wrap our minds around…”

Micah quirked an eyebrow as Keegan trailed off dramatically. “Like?”

The other boy glanced around at the other students. None of them proved to be eavesdropping. “The man who spontaneously burst into flames? Or maybe the fact that you and Kai survived, unscathed, after a fire Elemental assaulted you with flames?” Keegan suddenly appeared excited. “Are you a fire Elemental?”

“No,” Micah replied instantly without any sort of hesitancy.

He was just as confused over what happened as his teammates. Other than feeling a tremor of panic for being so foolishly unaware, he hadn’t experienced any surge of power that would suggest he’d tapped into an undiscovered Element.

The other boy appeared disbelieving. “You can always talk to Kai about being an Elemental. I’m sure he’d help you try to uncover your powers. I heard, in rare cases, it sometimes takes years for Elementals to discover their powers. Sometimes into adulthood. Not all show signs at birth—”

“You’re next,” Micah calmly interrupted the enthusiastic man, motioning toward the waiting vicar.
As if he’d ask Edlen.

Upon Micah’s comment, the other man whirled around and flushed darkly, hurrying towards the statue of Agni. Rather abruptly, he kneeled and lowered into a subservient bow. As Keegan straightened from his position, the vicar dipped his fingers in the bowl of damp ashes and drew a small, charcoal mark down Keegan’s forehead.

It was over before Micah could determine which god to choose.

As the vicar motioned him forward, Micah climbed the set of stairs and approached Varuna. He’d recognized himself as Igni far too often since arriving at the academy. Perhaps it was time to start incorporating his Unda heritage. After all, he and the water god were both fluid, both calm. The water god was easy to please, as well. He would willingly accept Micah’s late initiation into worship.

On the other hand…

When had Micah ever taken the easy way?

As the vicar reached for the basin of water to give him Varuna’s blessing, Micah paused suddenly, looking toward Agni’s statue. They depictured the god as having two heads and a mane of long, flowing hair. Flames engulfed the bottom half of his torso, veiling the god’s feet, though Micah studied the four, exposed arms.

Something drew Micah towards the fire god.

Perhaps it was the fact the god was very difficult to satisfy and he viewed it as a challenge. Maybe it was Micah’s early memories of Ember falling to her knees and sobbing prayers to an imaginary fire god who had never answered her desperate cries.

No matter his reasoning, he redirected himself towards the well-crafted statue of Agni. The god’s relentless gazes appeared to watch his approach. As he fell to his knees, Micah maintained the god’s stare. Like the students before him, he lay out his arms in front of him and bowed low to demonstrate his worship.

There was always the question of whether gods were real or not.

They said water and fire Elementals were descendants of the gods themselves. That the gods blessed their offspring and their worshippers with such power and good fortune. Even those who did not possess an Element could receive a god’s favor. Micah doubted their existence, yes, but he would play the part as Josiah suggested.

As he straightened from his bow, the vicar murmured a blessing in a different language and pressed a thumb full of ashes against his forehead. The ashes were dead, collected from a fire extinguished long ago. However, as the vicar stained his forehead with the ashes, Micah’s skin prickled uneasily.

Almost spitefully, as if to scold him for his politically driven devotion.

Micah stood up, walking in a daze.

He tried to stop himself, he promised himself he wouldn’t, but in the end, he locked eyes with Josiah. The man did not hide his close regard as Micah walked down the aisle. The hairs on the back of Micah’s neck rose at the unfathomable emotion in Josiah’s gaze. Whatever the man felt, it was powerful. And so very infatuated. No matter how much he wanted to turn his cheek on the
man, Micah could not look away.

He stared stupidly.

He yearned to speak with the man unguarded, unobserved, but he refused to bend first.

“Micah?”

He turned at the sound of his name, staring uncomprehendingly at Viktor. The boy raised his eyebrows at Micah’s blank stare before motioning toward the other members of their team. They were all sitting together on a pew situated away from the other cadets.

“We saved you a spot next to Kai.”

Indeed. As he tore his focus from Josiah, Micah noticed the intentional spot left vacant between Edlen and Keegan. It did not escape his notice that Kai and his chosen teammates decided to sit with them on the side of the chapel housing the majority of Igni students. Withholding a sarcastic quip, Micah shuffled into the pew and settled down next to Edlen.

The boy looked at him from the corner of his eye. “You have a habit of staining your gloves, don’t you?”

Micah looked down at his gloves, noticing the black soot from wiping the ashes off his forehead. He vividly remembered his other gloves stained an ugly, deep crimson with Wayde’s blood. It wasn’t an easy image to erase from his mind.

He imagined it was currently what Edlen was envisioning.

“White is hardly a practical color for military gloves.”

Kai made a sound in his throat before refocusing on the students receiving their blessing. At his side, his arm hung limply. The smell of strong tonic oozed from underneath his uniform and Micah assumed the limb was nearly healed, thanks to water magic. The other man had kept to himself the past couple days, lost in his silence, his gaze nearly always unfocused with loss.

In the evenings, after classes concluded for the day, Edlen had always seemed to escape to their rooms. Micah tried not to feel anything when he observed Edlen sitting at the edge of his mattress, his expression haunted and firm. The proud aristocrat always emitted an aura of unapproachability during those quiet times of reflection.

His gaze always remained unwavering as he focused on Wayde’s empty bunk.

Yesterday, several nobles were absent from the academy, apparently attending Wayde’s private service. Oddly enough, Edlen hadn’t been gone as long as the others had. He’d returned with a pinched and grey expression before hiding somewhere by himself.

“I was thinking, Micah, that we could train this evening?”

Micah peered down the pew at Aiden, the one who suggested training on a day students were instructed to study and worship, not train. The Igni boy looked expectantly back at Micah. One would be a fool to overlook the crushing guilt in his eyes and the way his shoulders remained tense and uptight. Next to him, Talia looked up from her lap and observed the situation.

“Are you asking, Aiden? Or suggesting?”
Keegan appeared unhappy with Micah’s clipped response.

Aiden’s cheeks flushed red. “Suggesting?” he replied uncertainly. “With your permission, of course.” He looked around at the rest of the team. “I think we have a long way to go. It’s what… it’s what we should have done weeks ago. Yeah?”

And so they finally broached the topic…

“Training can only help you so much, Aiden. If you are too afraid to harm another, or take a life, you will always lose in battle.”

“Micah,” Keegan admonished fiercely.

Micah’s eyes crossed in order to stare at the line of ashes on the boy’s forehead. He wore it like a badge of honor, as if Agni personally put the ashes there. “Keegan,” he responded calmly. “It’s true.”

“We were all hesitant to kill on the mission,” Edlen interjected. “It was our first time extracting that level of violence.” He paused, watching Micah closely. “Which makes me wonder when and who your first kill was, Egan. It certainly wasn’t yesterday.”

He turned, engaging in a staring contest with sharp, observant eyes. Micah’s lips curled upward with wary amusement. “Why? Did your affluent tutors not bring you desert rats to practice on?”

“That’s unfair, Micah,” Viktor chided.

“He’s right, though.” Surprisingly, the typically quiet Talia spoke in defense of Micah. “This is military school. The capital’s enemies are our enemies. We strike them down before they can strike us down.”

“Easy for you to say, Talia,” Viktor whispered fervently. “You didn’t even fight.”

“I was told to stay back by my captain,” she countered. “Rest assured my sword would have never hesitated in ending the life of a rebel.”

“Maybe you should have stepped in sooner, then,” Aiden snapped angrily. “After all, your captain also said he wanted you at his side if I failed to perform. Odd how you only listened to half his order.”

“And leave Keegan unprotected? It’s not as if you could handle his protection.”

Edlen looked challengingly at Micah as if to question how he would proceed with the current state of their team. Micah didn’t think the boy had any right to question the wellbeing of the team. He was no longer captain. And rightfully so. Quite frankly, Micah believed the team needed to express their concerns and frustrations. It was a step towards recovering from the other night’s tragedy.

However, they’d spent the past couple days dwelling in their guilt. Enough time had passed.

“But you—”

“What about you, Cain?” Micah interrupted Aiden as the boy made to cut down Talia once more. “What are your thoughts about the mission?”

The large man stared straight ahead, his expression relatively blank despite his team arguing around him. The man glanced at Micah, then to Kai, before turning back to consider the statue of
the water god. “I miss Wayde.” He placed his hands calmly in his lap. “Kai, Viktor, and I grew up with him. He was…” the man trailed off quietly. “He left too soon.”

Micah regarded the older cadet thoughtfully while the rest of the team quieted with somber deliberation. Cain was the quietest member of the team, aside from Talia, yet he seemed to possess a particularly gentle outlook.

With the exception of combat.

Cain was the only other cadet who could execute a killing strike. Micah had deliberated this quite heavily the past few days. It wasn’t because Cain was bloodthirsty. Nor was it because he was especially prone to violence as his large, intimidating stature suggested. No. It was because he was protective. A fierce predator readily defending his charges.

“He did leave too soon,” Micah agreed quietly. “We all feel responsible in some way for what happened during the mission, and rightfully so.” From the corner of his eye, Aiden hunched in on himself. “We all carry the responsibility as a team.” Micah looked at each of them, trying to emphasize his point. “Our mistakes resulted in the death of a member and that is something we can never go back on. What we can fix, however, is our weaknesses and strive to be stronger. Together.”

His eyes zeroed in on Aiden and Viktor.

“And I’m not asking you to condone killing.” He bit his tongue as he said the next bit. “I understand the hesitation you all faced, but it’s something you need to get over. It’s battle. They knew the consequences when they decided to rebel against Concordia. They knew the consequences as soon as they attacked to kill.”

Aiden nodded and dropped his gaze to his gloves.

“We will train tonight,” Micah continued, leaning back against the pew. He refocused his attention on the remaining students in line. “No excuses. You will all be there.”

He could feel Keegan beaming happily at his side and withheld the temptation to grimace at the other boy. Encouraging speeches were simply words coated with far too much sentimentality for his liking. Nonetheless, Micah acknowledged their usefulness, especially in this situation.

Kai continued watching him when the other members of the team preoccupied themselves with observing the blessings.

“Yes, Edlen?” Micah drawled.

Kai’s eyes lingered on him. “He was right,” he murmured quietly before turning forward. “You are full of surprises.”

This time, Micah did sneer.

He could only assume Kai was talking about Sachiel.

He could only assume Kai was talking about Sachiel.

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Keegan curled his hand around the wrinkled parchment in his trouser pocket.
Self-consciousness and doubt nagged persistently at his mind as he stood with the rest of the team. Until he learned more basics with the sword, he would remain a detriment to the team. He knew that. Acknowledged that. He’d felt like a large weight during their first mission. Someone had to babysit him. Micah had tried to give him the task of lookout, but Keegan hadn’t ever felt as useless as he had that night.

From the sidelines, he watched as Micah and Kai argued heatedly about the systematics of a team formation and the benefits of having one versus not having one. They would never get along, Keegan mused. Yet he imagined they’d grow close. Not become friends, per say, but something with enduring loyalty to offset the strong, antagonistic feelings they had for the other.

He didn’t know what to call it. Friendly rivals? That held some sort of poetic flair he didn’t think appropriate in their case. Perhaps something along the lines of adversaries who had to fight on the same side?

Whatever it was, Keegan contemplated on his envy and his incompatibility with Micah.

Kai Edlen may be a spoiled noble, but he was very impressive with the sword. Keegan watched tonight as Micah and Kai dueled with one another, the latter seemingly practicing his battle temperament. Only Edlen would have the ability to match Micah and fight by his side. It was something Keegan wanted for himself. Something he believed would benefit Micah in the end. What better partner to have in battle than one you could trust fully?

It was a position he wanted. Needed.

The other members of the team stood by idly, watching the two bicker back and forth. Overall, they had a good training session. Micah walked them through drills and exercises that even Keegan could participate in. His muscles were pleasantly sore, his mind exhausted. He would feel it tomorrow.

“This isn’t going anywhere further tonight,” Aiden muttered next to him. He looked pointedly at Keegan. “We’re all waiting for you to say something. Micah seems to tolerate your suggestions more than he does anyone else.”

Keegan noticed the other four members were looking to him. He stiffened, not knowing what he thought about their view on Micah. While Micah was often times stubborn and authoritative, he wasn’t he?

“Micah?” Keegan’s call was lost. “Micah!”

Micah turned, his pale eyes flashing impatiently. “Keegan.”

Keegan smiled at the younger boy, not at all intimidated by him. Despite the boy’s ferocity and cool, almost emotionless countenance, Micah also had a bleeding heart. The whole team saw the evidence of that yesterday when he reassured them at the chapel.

“Let’s break for the night, yeah?”

Kai Edlen grimaced at him from over Micah’s head.

A small sigh escaped Micah’s lips as he gazed at the rest the team. With an air of nonchalance, he placed his sword in his back holster and nodded. “Let’s resume this tomorrow.”
Slowly, the team piled out of the training room, either heading to the showers or grabbing a bite to eat at the kitchens. “Oi, Keegan,” Aiden called near the door, looking imploringly at him. “You’re coming, right? Chanson’s rooms?” He cast a shifty eye across the others, as if poorly veiling the fact that he and Keegan were not planning on anything dishonest.

Keegan didn’t think gambling and drinking constituted such entertaining guilt.

As much as the idea appealed to him, as he’d gotten very skilled at the capital card games and won some gold, he had other plans. “Go on without me tonight,” he called back, glancing at Micah, who remained entirely ignorant. “I have some other plans.”

Aiden appeared unhappy but left without arguing. Edlen sauntered out last, looking between him and Micah, his features twisting with something akin to condescending amusement. Keegan didn’t appreciate the look. It was as if the noble found Keegan’s attempts to remain close to Micah juvenile and pathetic.

Keegan turned his shoulder, choosing not to read too much into it. Across the room, Micah unnecessarily straightened the mats to where they were before they began training. Leaning against the wall, with his arms crossed over his chest, he smirked at Micah’s tight jawline and unnaturally bright eyes. Before he could say anything, Micah beat him to it.

“Why didn’t you go with Aiden?”

Keegan blinked. He hadn’t realized Micah had been aware. “I wasn’t in the mood,” he explained.

“You—”

“You are entitled to spend time with your other friends,” the other boy informed. He lifted a mat and tossed it on top a stack of others. “You’re well-liked across the academy. Surely you find them to be better company than me.”

For a moment, Keegan struggled with what to say. He scoffed with disbelieving humor. Did the boy not see that the other cadets really liked him? That they wanted to spend time with him just as much as they wanted to spend time with Keegan? Micah just made things difficult. He liked to close himself off and appear untouchable. He liked to hide himself away. While that defense mechanism worked warding others away, Keegan found it silly. He just pushed through Micah’s walls with little care.

“I wasn’t in the mood,” Keegan repeated instead, knowing Micah probably wouldn’t understand that he just wanted to spend time with him tonight. Lately, he felt distant from the other boy. And Micah would find that sentiment silly. “You look upset.”

That earned him a blank look. “Do I?”

Keegan knew Micah’s frustration had nothing to do with friends, but rather a specific, blond-haired aristocrat. “You usually never let things get under your skin. But Edlen has succeeded…”

Micah’s lashes lowered with aversion. “You give him too much credit, Keegan. As if he would be the exception for my tight control.” He nudged a mat against the wall with far too much vigor. It ruined his nonchalant act. “He just believes he has experience when it comes to combat, but he lacks common sense.”

Pushing away from the wall, Keegan motioned to the exit. “He can be a bit of a pain, I agree wholeheartedly.” As much as his selfish side wanted to drive a further wedge between Edlen and Micah, his common sense won out. The team needed to be strong and unified. “But I think he
could offer some good input.”

Micah hardly blinked as he made his way over. “Input, yes. Decision-making? No.”

Keegan scoffed, fighting the urge to ruffle Micah’s hair. The boy hardly appreciated when he did that. “As long as you hear him out, kid.” Keegan smiled thinly at Micah’s poorly veiled irritation. “I’m hungry. Let’s say we head to the kitchens?”

“We ate before training.”

“Yes, but we burned off the biscuits and gravy because of training. Nothing wrong with a little after-training snack, is there?” Keegan smirked. “Besides, I know when you like something. You definitely enjoyed dinner tonight.”

They walked down the corridor and towards the kitchens.

Next to him, Micah smirked softly. “It was passable.”

“Passable,” Keegan repeated, impressed despite himself. “The only thing you deem passable is fried boar. It’s something the capital will never serve, I’m afraid. At least not how Region 20 prepared it. So you’re stuck with second helpings of biscuits and gravy.”

They lapsed into a silence. Keegan subconsciously touched the wrinkled parchment through his trouser pockets once more and debated on broaching the subject with Micah. He really should. He wanted to ask Micah many things, actually, yet he knew some topics were not easily approachable. How did he go about asking Micah about his father? Who was obviously Unda? Where was his father? Why had Micah been in Region 20, hiding as an Igni boy? To avoid Lord Josiah’s attention? What had his mother done?

“Keegan,” Micah drawled aloofly, suspiciously. “What is on your mind?”

He flinched. Was he that transparent?

“Nothing, kid.”

“Hm.”

Keegan shifted, ready to take out the parchment. “The thing is…” he paused, struggling to find the right words.

As they descended a set of stairs, he noticed movement from the corner of his eye. He turned towards Micah, barely able to comprehend the figures closing up behind his friend. They reached for the younger boy, grabbing him by the scruff of the neck and smothering something over his head. Almost instantly, Micah sagged.

Keegan stumbled on his own feet before a heavy force slammed into the back of his neck and a sickly sweet toxin filled his nostrils.

His world spun wildly. His instincts fled.

Time and reality blurred and Keegan drifted.

Everything seemed meaningless, humorous. Laughter, so thunderous with its buoyancy, burned his chest and throat. He kept laughing. His throat turned raw. He laughed harder, hoarser. His feet moved randomly and he did not decipher people, nor objects. Everything appeared warped and
brightly colored.

His body was as light as air. He’d step and his knee would buckle and give out.

*Micah.*

Keegan clawed at the walls while his limbs shuddered with forced laughter. He couldn’t get out. He couldn’t escape the gnarly mess of fog and intoxication. In the back of his mind, he knew this was alarming. He knew he needed to help his friend.

*Keegan…*

“*Keegan.*”

Light shone directly in his eyes and he reared away. A cold hand grabbed his jaw and refocused his attention. Something wet and refreshing raked his mind, causing goose bumps to crawl leisurely down his spine. Slowly, his mind sharpened and awareness returned. Deep, blue eyes stared back at him and the face of a pretty woman stared back.

A familiar face.

“*Keegan,*” she called pointedly with a prominent frown. “*How are you feeling? You were poisoned with a large dose of Dulcis Waters.*”

Keegan winced, having no idea what that meant.

His throat was raw.

Looking down, he noticed the blood staining his fingers and the cracked, stubby nails. Just over her shoulder, Keegan took notice of Kai and Talia standing in the corner of the infirmary, watching him carefully. Next to them, the clock struck fifteen past midnight.

His blood turned cold.

Two hours.

He’d been lost in his mind for over two hours, when in reality, it felt like mere minutes. Conversely, he could feel the excruciating time lapse in the stiffness in his muscles. He vaguely remembered the overwhelming sense of timeless suffering. The very thought of that dark intoxication made him shudder with horror.

The intoxication hadn’t been the happy kind he received from alcohol, but he vividly remembered the overwhelming and forced mirth in his chest. His chest seized and he tried not to think about being prisoner in his own mind. It had been horrifying. Even now, his mind still struggled to steady itself.

With the exception of Healer Kendra, who crouched down in front of him, and Talia and Kai, the infirmary was silent and empty. His breathing came out heavy, forced with realization. “*Micah,*” he rasped hoarsely, looking around. Maybe he’d missed him in one of the beds.

“She wasn’t with you,” Kai replied sternly, straightening and pushing off from the wall with sudden alertness. “Was he?”

Healer Kendra stood up in a flurry of blue robes. “*Do you know for sure he was targeted?*”

Keegan couldn’t help himself. He buried his face in his hands and sobbed dryly. Emotions curled
relentlessly in his chest and he had no control over any of them. “It seemed they were focused on him,” he said through his sobs. “They put a bag over his head and dragged him away. I don’t remember anything else.”

“Mr. Edlen,” Kendra called. “I need you to get Lord Josiah. Quickly!”

Glancing up from his hands, Keegan watched as she raced across the infirmary and disappeared into the back room. He shared a look with Talia and the girl shook her head, appearing rather grim as Kai quickly left her side.

“Dulcis Waters is consumed by the nobility for a cheap thrill,” Talia informed quietly. She crossed her arms over her chest. “The consumption is looked down upon by mostly everyone because it’s a drug that is extremely poisonous and addictive.”

“Why would they poison themselves?”

Talia grimaced. “In low doses, it’s a euphoric release. If left unattended, however, it can kill the user. Only water Elementals can extract it from the system before it takes root, which is probably why you’ve never heard of it. The Igni people would not dare to ingest it and leave their life in the hands of their supposed enemies.”

“Micah…”

“Healer Kendra will save him in time, Keegan.” She watched as Kendra rushed back into the infirmary to grab something before racing once again into the back room. “It’s clearly a cruel prank by the noble students to get back at Micah for top cadet and probably for what happened with Wayde.”

Keegan shook his head. “It’s tasteless.”

“Tasteless, but things will be okay,” she reassured him. Or herself. “We’ll extract our own sort of revenge for what they did to him and you.”

Whatever he intended to say next abruptly left his lips as the dark figure entered the infirmary with Kai trailing behind. Keegan stared at the man, his jaw slack when the power encompassed and smothered the room. It almost stunk, in a pleasant, but stifling way.

Josiah’s piercing eyes settled on Keegan. Keegan found himself speechless.

“It’s Dulcis Waters, My Lord,” Kendra informed hurriedly as she rushed back into the room. “Only a water Elemental can remove the traces of the poison before it settles in the lungs.”

Something passed between the two, something hidden with a great deal of forbidding realization. Possessing an air of tight control, Lord Josiah turned and flicked his wrist. Small blue flames ignited on the ground and created a trail out the infirmary and down the hall.

Keegan sat up suddenly, severely alarmed. It wasn’t the odd flames, but something else shifted in the room. Looking wildly around the infirmary, Keegan’s survival instincts arbitrarily kicked in. Perking at the edge of the mattress, he considered possible areas to hide, none of them offering him the level of protection he required.

Something was not right.

Danger!
“All of you back to your rooms,” Josiah instructed the three students as he hurried toward the exit of the infirmary. “I don’t want to see any of you when I return here.”

Keegan’s skin prickled unpleasantly, but as soon as Lord Josiah left the room, his body and mind deescalated to its normal state. The temptation to flee no longer caused his muscles to tighten unpleasantly. However, apprehension still made him tremble.

Something was not right.

This was more than just a case of finding Micah. Healer Kendra appeared too aghast and distraught for his liking.

“Micah Egan is a member of our team,” Edlen informed Kendra with an air of superiority. “I believe we have a right to be here and see to his recovery.”

With a touch to her throat, Kendra motioned toward the empty doorway. “You heard Lord Josiah. His word is final.” Dropping her hand, her expression hardened as she approached the students. “This is a serious crime with very severe consequences. Practice discretion, but if you hear any whisper of who did this, report it immediately.”

“We will,” Talia coincided.

The Healer’s face softened before she shooed them out. “Now off you go.” Her eyes immediately fell on Keegan. “Rest up. The toxin is out of your system, but it is still vital to get some good sleep after what you’ve gone through.”

Sleep?

Keegan stopped at the doorway and looked down the cold, dark corridor. The majority of the trail Lord Josiah summoned was gone, yet a few blue flames smoldered sparsely before blinking out of existence. There was no trace of the man, though Keegan desperately wanted to race after the dying flames and retrieve Micah.

Sleep would not come tonight.

* * * *

“Hurry. He will not be distracted long with the boy.”

The two figures obliged, treating the luxurious, white stone with intricate lines of charcoal. The palace walls were silent and unnervingly still. Inside the throne room, which typically saw a frenzy of activity during the day, was empty of all royals and high aristocracy. The guards outside the doors were unwillingly compliant to the intruders’ presence. They wouldn’t remember anything come morning.

Gradually, the figures finished their task.

With cautious movements, they gently lay the expensive rug over the markings. “They should hold long enough.”

“Long enough until he figures it out, you mean.”
“It doesn't matter. We don't need them in place long.”

Skepticism hung in the air, yet there was no more conversation. The small group shuffled through the shadows and left just as swiftly as they arrived.
Immunity Fourteen

Chapter Notes

I am not a medical expert, nor do I claim myself as one. What happens in this chapter is probably extremely unrealistic. Mr. Google researched the procedure in this chapter; therefore, there are possibilities of erroneous information. Do not take it as guidance to perform your own procedure =)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

14. Chapter Fourteen

The barbed wire was like a crown of thorns and a cruel mockery of manipulated twine. With the wire wrapped tightly around his arms, his captors lifted his limbs in a ridicule of a broken marionette, pulled by relentless and cruel strings.

A punishing puppet master.

Micah was past the point of scheming up poetic metaphors to his abductors’ intentions. All that mattered was that he’d lost feeling in his limbs long ago due to their painful and purposeful arranging.

Positioned on the ground next to the dying and gnarly maze of the academy’s gardens, Micah could only stare blankly at the other side of the hedge. One leg curled inward and the other, by painful contrast, curled outward. His left arm stretched far above his head while his right arm angled awkwardly to the side. A fitting position for a discarded toy.

He’d tried to move to a more comfortable position long ago, but the bindings were tight and the barbed wire dug agonizingly into his skin. If he wanted to move his legs, he’d have to put all his weight on the wire holding his arms up.

He’d attempted to do so, ignoring the pain, but it’d been futile.

Whatever drug they’d given him no longer caused his world to spin and his emotions to flare. When they’d first hung him here, he hadn’t remembered much besides the bag over his head. There was a distant memory of smelling something sickly sweet, and Micah vaguely recalled his captors’ awkward fumbling as they restrained him against the maze.

They’d hadn’t spoken to him. They hadn’t done anything especially damning, just humiliating.

They’d left him here to die.

Micah blinked sluggishly, his body shuddering madly. Despite his senses returning to him, the drug was still in his system. His entire body flushed with sweat, though he was cold to the bone. Small tremors shook his frame and a fluid-like heaviness settled in his lungs. Every time he breathed, his lungs rattled. He couldn’t seem to take a full breath, and when he managed, he would cough dryly.
He was tired.

Micah closed his eyes against the pain and the cold.

He should have sensed the attack before it happened. He should have fought harder against the attackers. His sword remained sheathed and attached in his back holster, a sign he hadn’t even lifted a finger against the captors. Yet, the toxin he inhaled instantly numbed his reflexes and shrouded him in a reality not quite real.

His face burned with humiliation.

He was a fool.

Weak.

Blue flames suddenly appeared around the corner of the maze and curled lazily around him like a serpent’s tale. Micah stared at them unseeingly. They were small, hardly even an inch high, yet they shined with startling intensity.

Either his attackers were returning or worse…

He stiffened in displeasure as the man came around the corner. He hated that Josiah saw him like this. It was beyond mortifying. Micah’s body strained against the restraints, ignoring the blood as it dripped from his left wrist and cascaded down his face like tears.

In a flurry of dark robes, Josiah stopped before him.

The silence and stillness was deafening.

Time came to a sudden halt as Josiah fell to his knees before Micah, the action appearing particularly powerful in its reverence and esteem. The Igni lord could have cut him down from the restraints while he remained standing. Micah wouldn’t have expected anything less. Yet, he kneeled amongst the flurry of his blue flames, gazing up at Micah.

Micah, who focused intently on Josiah’s dark clothing, gradually raised his gaze to the man across from him. He couldn’t summon his dislike for him, for he was too preoccupied with the startling concentration across the man’s face. Josiah reached for him, trailing his fingers just barely across Micah’s cheek.

“I will find the men who did this to you and they will suffer immensely.”

Micah sensed the utmost sincerity in those words and knew it to be true.

A hiccup escaped his mouth.

And then another.

He couldn’t breathe.

He closed his eyes tightly against the fatigue and the lack of oxygen. With a rustle of robes, Josiah shifted closer, cradling his face. Lips pressed firmly against his sweaty and bloody forehead while the barbed wire around his limbs turned brittle and shattered under Josiah’s sorcery. Micah fell forward, shamelessly burying his face into the crook of Josiah’s neck.

The man abruptly wrapped his arms around him and lifted him from the ground. Though they were nearly the same height, Josiah carried him with ease. Whether he was annoyed at Micah’s heavy
panting against his throat or not, he did not adjust his positioning.

“Do you know who did this?”

Micah barely heard the question, nearly comatose. “I was weak.”

Josiah was silent for a long while. In a rare act of affection, the man spoke through Micah’s veil of lingering unconsciousness. “You are a great deal of things, Ezra, but weak isn’t one of them. For one so young, you’ve greatly exceeded my expectations.”

* * * *

It was a repeat of their first encounter, though Micah Egan was just as unconscious to it as he was this time around. At least this time, he was not screaming in pain and clawing at his chest, but rather gasping for air.

Truthfully, Kendra didn’t know which she preferred.

She placed down the needles she had sterilized, watching as the Igni lord glided into the infirmary and slammed the door closed behind him. Usually fearful of the man, she tolerated his presence tonight, simply because she knew the severity of the situation. Cradled against the man’s chest, Micah did not move.

As Lord Josiah lay him fluidly on the bed, the boy’s face was unnaturally white.

Healer Destan, who had arrived quickly after receiving the call, hurriedly hovered above Micah and touched his forehead. His expression turned grim. “Fever. The poison has settled into his system.” He licked his lips, a habit, Kendra knew, that spoke of his anxiousness. “His hiccupping and shallow breathing indicate the fluid is in his lungs. A sign of progression.”

“A progression that can be stopped,” Lord Josiah said with a hint of threat.

Kendra was very glad she called for Destan. She wouldn’t have been able to work under these specific conditions.

“It is a water Elemental drug, My Lord,” Destan replied somberly. “It is a drug specifically unique to the Unda people. Typically, only water Elementals can extract the drug from an individual before it settles in the system and acts as a poison. You see, once they inhale the drug, it travels through the bloodstream, giving the user a euphoric release. If it is not extracted in time by the water Elemental, it will gather around the user’s lungs and gradually become a lethal poison.”

Destan placed a hand on Micah’s forehead. “In Mr. Egan’s case, the drug has progressed to a poison. Now that it has settled and materialized around his lungs as an actual toxin, I firmly believe we can extract it through traditional methods. I have called for assistance with this.”

“If we would have gotten to him sooner—”

“It wouldn’t have mattered.” Destan shook his head. “We would have been powerless to extract it from him with his unique… condition. If we had gotten to him sooner, we would have had to wait until it progressed. I hope, for his sake, the poison is centralized.”

Quickly looking away from Josiah’s sharp regard, Kendra focused on Micah’s comfort. Reaching for the young man, she unbuttoned his uniform. As she peeled off his dark jacket, she noticed the
blood and the ripped fabric of his white tunic. There were holes pierced into his wrists and biceps, as if a thorny vine or barbed wire had wrapped snugly around his limbs.

She tutted, grabbing the disinfectant and swabs. It was unusual healing this way. Slower, clumsier, and uglier. Micah could possibly scar this way and Kendra thought he was far too attractive to have blemished skin. Her eyes fell on his bloodstained face, noticing the especially handsome features slack with something akin to death.

But he was not dead. Not yet. No matter how painful and shallow it sounded, she revered the sound of his breathing.

It indicated life.

It represented chance. A chance they had to save him.

“Healer Kendra, please prepare the chest tube insert. You can deal with the wounds later. They are not pressing at this moment.”

Draining the lungs by inserting a chest tube was very new to her. Water Elementals who dabbled in healing learned specific techniques based on their abilities. As there were enough water Elementals in the field—an esteemed position among nobility now that there was no war—healing the traditional way was a dying art. Moreover, there was no one like Micah Egan who resisted Elemental magic.

As far as Kendra knew, Destan was also inexperienced with the traditional method, though he seemed in control of this situation.

She watched as he disinfected the skin on Micah’s chest.

“Will we use anesthetic?”

“I’m afraid we don’t know how anesthetic or pain tonics will react with the poison in his system. Let’s hope he’s in a deep sleep. Otherwise, this will be unpleasant for him.”

Across the room, Josiah settled in a chair and watched the proceedings closely. Kendra looked away quickly, her body trembling with unexplained panic. She felt insignificant and small under his intense gaze. Any mistake she made, he’d see it.

He’d pounce.

Trying to phase out his regard, Kendra focused on her task. After disinfecting the tools, she handed Destan a scalpel and the chest insert. He bypassed the tools and conjured a sphere of water. Kendra knew what he was hoping to achieve. He was looking for the precise area the fluid pooled in Micah’s lungs. But would it work if Micah was immune to their power?

Destan probed the sphere in the air and sent it on a dizzying spin.

As the sphere spun, it flattened. Under Destan’s guidance, it suspended over Micah’s chest, humming and possessing a life of its own as it searched for a coagulation of fluid across the lungs. If it worked, it would reduce in size and hover over the area of concern.

Only, it continued to spin, taking far longer than anticipated.

In a rare act of frustration, Destan growled and flung his hand to the side. The sphere splattered across the wall and dripped down the walls of the infirmary.
Destan held out his hand, taking the scalpel. Kendra watched in concern, knowing the man was just as inexperienced as she was to heal this way. Though he possessed far more knowledge on how to heal the traditional way, there were boundaries. Without their gift, it was as if they had to heal blind.

“Do you want to wait for—?”

“No. This needs to be done immediately. His pulse is slowing.”

As soon as the words left his mouth, Kendra’s fingers were against Micah’s pulse. She gazed at the clock, her hopes crumbling as the pulse beneath her fingers refused to regulate.

Josiah stood.

“Destan,” Josiah called softly. His tone was lethal. “Do you need further encouragement to succeed?”

“I know what’s at stake, My Lord,” Destan said sternly, pressing his hand upon Micah’s chest. “Varuna help us all,” he pleaded to the god as he dug his scalpel into the young body beneath him.

The doors to the infirmary slammed open once more and Kendra sighed, never having realized how much she would appreciate the appearance of an Igni Healer. The man was familiar to her, though she did not interact with him often. She knew he held an esteemed position to the Igni royal family before and even after the war.

“Agni,” the man cursed. “Drop it.”

Healer Brenton closed the doors behind him and offered a quick, respectable bow towards Josiah all in a matter of seconds. He appeared suddenly beside Destan and surveyed the situation. He was an older man with fine wrinkles carving deep into his face.

“He needs to be elevated, Destan.” He set down his bag and fished out a set of gloves. “Dulcis Waters, correct?”

“Yes.” Destan set down the scalpel and reached for Micah. “A progressed stage.”

“Let me make that determination.”

Kendra helped prop more pillows underneath Micah’s unconscious form, elevating his torso at a sharper angle. Destan did not appear dejected at the reprimanding, but rather grateful of the interruption.

Brenton listened to Micah’s chest with a stethoscope. “You are right.” He motioned to Kendra. “Time is critical. The fluid is centralized in his left lung. Raise his left arm and tuck his palm behind his head. Use restraints if needed. He must remain in position.”

She quickly grabbed Micah’s tie and used it to restrain his arm in position.

“I brought a numbing agent. Slather it near his ribs. Then identify the fifth intercostal and midaxillary line. The skin incision has to be over the rib and in between the midaxillary and anterior axillary lines. Below the intercostal level.” Brenton flicked his wrist and a sphere of fire hung suspended above Micah, allowing for extra lighting.

After Kendra applied the numbing agent, Destan marked the area where the insertion would occur. He handed the scalpel to Brenton, who had just finished assembling the chest tube and preparing
the tray of sterile gauze and the appropriate instruments.

She watched as the Igni Healer conducted a deep incision down Micah’s side in the same direction of his rib. Discarding the scalpel, Brenton then reached for a clamp and bluntly dissected a tract in the tissue by opening and closing the clamp.

Kendra stared, fascinated.

Never one to be squeamish over blood and gore, she couldn’t help but be mesmerized.

“It’s entirely barbaric,” she admitted aloud as he took his finger and probed it inside Micah. While she was familiar with healing with her Element, she could not dispute the raw power of traditional healing. She now understood Destan’s fascination with learning Igni healing.

It was powerful.

Bloody.

“The insertion of the tube must be as close as possible to the upper border of the rib,” Brenton informed. “It will minimize the risk of injury to the nerve and blood vessels.” He then grabbed his clamp once more. “You must enter the pleural space.” By now, blood coated Micah’s side from the gaping, grisly wound. “You need to apply force for this and a twisting motion,” Brenton instructed an observing Destan and Kendra. “You must be in control. Entry too far into the chest could result in damage to the lung and diaphragm.”

His wrists moved as he twisted the closed clamp into Micah’s side.

“A rush of air and fluid will be your indicator you’ve succeed.” Brenton sounded pleased when a rush of fluid seeped from the wound. “Open your clamp while inside the pleural space and withdraw. This will enlarge the dissected tract through all layers in the chest wall, allowing for the chest tube passageway.”

A soft exhalation sounded from Micah and Kendra moved away from the instruction to focus on him. Destan would inform her on the procedure later.

Her professional countenance softened when she saw the tear escape the corner of Micah’s eye. Pressing a hand against his forehead, Kendra brushed aside his sweaty hair and marveled at his hot skin. They were wary giving him any sort of tonic just in case it interacted negatively with the Dulcis Waters. However, if they did not act, Micah could very well succumb to the infection inside his body.

Her fingers dropped lower and cradled his head as she checked his pulse.

Frowning, she dug her fingers deeper into his pulse point, panic setting in. Her eyes landed on Lord Josiah, the blood in her veins turning to ice as realization settled across the man’s face. He stood up slowly and glided towards the doors to the infirmary.

“We need to stabilize him, Destan,” Kendra informed. “Quickly!”

“We’re draining the poison around his lungs,” Brenton said. “Hopefully by the time a tonic reaches his system, the poison will be out of his body.” He nodded to Destan. “Give him the tonic. His fever is too high to risk not giving him anything.”

“We’re losing him,” Kendra urged as Destan hurried to gather the tonic.
From the corner of her eye, she noticed Lord Josiah slipping out of the infirmary. She didn’t understand. Kendra possessed knowledge she shouldn’t about Micah and Lord Josiah. She’d sworn to keep such information to herself. The two possessed an intimate relationship. So why now, when Micah struggled for life, did he leave?

Did he feel too powerless? For a man in possession of such infamous power, the Igni lord undoubtedly felt useless standing on the other side of the room, watching events unfold. Yet, it was a crucial time in Micah’s recovery.

Stabilization.

Destan returned, opening the stopper of the prepared tonic and tipping Micah’s head back to administer it.

Before the start of the school term, Destan instructed Kendra to brew as many tonics as possible for this very reason. Micah may need last-minute treatment. Moreover, it was always ideal to stock up on tonics, even if a water Elemental could heal without them. Ingesting or applying tonics, in addition to water magic, helped speed the process of healing for the patient.

“That will centralize the infection and eliminate it,” Destan informed as he rubbed Micah’s throat to force the liquid down his esophagus. “Let us hope we were not too late.”

Kendra hovered uncertainly over Micah’s head, her hands still situated near the young man’s temples. She watched as Brenton secured the chest tube before cleaning the area and covering it with gauze.

“So this is him,” Brenton murmured fondly, his eyes settling on Micah’s face for the first time that night. “He appears unassuming.”

Unassuming?

Kendra held her tongue, knowing it was not her place to speak about private matters involving the royal heir. However, as she looked down at Micah, she realized that this was the first time Brenton lay eyes on him.

He looked dead. Broken. His eyes were not open to deliver their usual spark of focused intelligence and defiance. A trait that undoubtedly held many captive. Micah was anything but unassuming. He had a way of making people want to venture closer, a way of making them want his attention, yet keep their distance out of uncertainty.

Micah appeared coolly untouchable, though, at times, she could see he possessed an air of compassion.

Destan laughed once. “Don’t let his crippling weakness fool you. The boy is quite capable, let me reassure you.” He looked towards the area Josiah once occupied. “Lord Josiah knows it. We should take initiative from that.”

Brenton inclined his head with agreement. “If My Lord thinks highly of the boy, then I will certainly reconsider my initial judgement.” The old Igni Healer removed his gloves after making certain the chest tube was in proper and stable place. He then raised the bed sheets and settled them just under Micah’s chin.

“It will be interesting,” Brenton murmured quietly as he studied Micah’s bloodstained face. “To see what changes will sure to come with his reappearance at the capital. I cannot think King Calder will remain ignorant of his son’s presence for long.”
“There are plenty of people already suspicious of the boy’s identity,” Destan confirmed. “He’s brought attention to himself as being biracial and the top of his class. Lord Josiah has kept his distance from the boy to remedy gossip, though the talk has tempered only slightly.”

“Only slightly,” Brenton repeated thoughtfully. “I imagine, whomever did this to him, was well aware of his status as the royal prince and his immunity with the Elements.”

Kendra and Destan both looked at the man sharply.

“The boy recently humiliated the noble children for the top position as first-year cadet,” Destan informed. “It is likely a cruel prank from them to reestablish their standings.”

“Perhaps.”

Brenton wiped his hands clean with disinfectant wipes. He said nothing more on the topic, but rather, focused on setting out ingredients on the table. The tonic ingredients appeared foreign to Kendra, though she figured it was an old Igni brew.

She watched him steadily, unnerved with his insinuation. While there were a handful of people who knew Micah’s real identity and ability to withstand the Elements, all of them were sworn to secrecy. Kendra could not fathom Lord Josiah’s reaction if Brenton’s prediction proved accurate. It was an assassination attempt on the royal heir.

“What are you brewing?”

“A tonic to release the toxins inside the boy’s body.” Brenton motioned Destan over. “If we got to him sooner, I would have started with this. However, I did not have any prepared and it would have taken too long.”

She watched the two men brew the tonic together while she sat next to Micah. His breathing eventually evened out, yet his fever remained high. Kendra combed over his unruly hair with her fingers and worked to clear his face from blood. As she watched the clock and continued to check his pulse, her optimism faltered.

His fever should have drastically died by now, only, it was just as strong.

“He’s not taking to the antibiotics,” she whispered to her mentor.

Destan appeared at her side quickly, replacing her fingers with his own. He watched the clock as it ticked down the seconds, his eyes turning distant. “I know he isn’t immune to tonics and medications. It should have worked.”

The Igni Healer bottled the tonic and shook it ferociously. “Let us administer this and then give him another dose of antibiotics.”

With the help of Kendra, they got Micah to swallow the tonic that would eliminate the toxins from his body. It had to be similar to antibiotics, though she knew it specifically centralized and eliminated poisons. Micah’s body remained limp. Heavy. He did not stir as they jarred him from the pillows and lay him down further on the mattress.

His breathing grew deep and slow, his color becoming paler. They could not stabilize him fast enough.

The ball of fire Brenton conjured suddenly extinguished, as did the other lanterns lit across the infirmary. Kendra turned at the sudden darkness, spying Lord Josiah standing near the doors. Next
to him, a frail, cloaked woman stood.

“Out,” Josiah whispered.

The three Healers paused in their ministrations, clueless.

A long-fingered hand lifted and pointed to the doors. “Get out,” he ordered once more, this time with far more authority.

Kendra stood under Destan’s impatient hand to her shoulder. The hairs on her body stood on end as they approached the door and closer to the two figures shrouded in darkness. The woman, with long, stringy blond hair, had a hood covering her features. Kendra’s instincts told her to flee.

And flee quickly.

“Micah…” Kendra trailed off.

“I believe he is in capable hands,” Destan informed stiffly, most likely just as unnerved as Kendra. “We just need to wait.”

* * * *

Micah stirred from the warm daze of nothingness at a sudden, soothing presence. It seemed familiar somehow, at least familiar enough to arouse his consciousness. Their footsteps were light next to the silent glide he’d come to recognize as Josiah’s gait.

“Poor soul.”

It was a woman with the softest, most musical voice he’d ever heard. Micah wanted to stretch towards it like a deprived flower reaching desperately for a sliver of sun.

A hand covered his forehead and stroked back his unruly, loose curls. “He has grown faster than I had expected.” She sounded deeply amused. “I will credit your sheer determination. I often forget how stubborn you can be.”

“He has matured quickly, though it takes extreme persistence from both him and I.”

“As I’ve warned you before…” she trailed off mysteriously. “This is good for you. It will test your patience.”

“I knew you’d be mulling about nearby,” Josiah said quietly with a crushing ferocity of anger. “Couldn’t help yourself to watch a tragedy of mine to unfold, could you?”

“Always the pessimistic.” Her hand continued to pet Micah. “Perhaps I wanted to watch my son grow. I confess myself attached when he was born. He is destined to possess enough beauty to bring you to your knees and enough power to put you in your place.”

Josiah did not respond for quite some time.

And then, “I have foreseen it.”

“Alas, it appears as if half his soul is already dwelling in a warm, blissful place. He is content and rather happy there. He has no qualms leaving this place behind and embracing death. Many of us are not so inclined to follow his same willingness.” She laughed. “Do not get upset, I will bring
him back. Just this one time.”

“There will not be a next time.”

“No, there will not. For next time, I will bring him with me promptly.” Her voice turned hard and Micah shied away from her. The voice, which was once pleasant, took on a condescending tone, as if Josiah were a mere, insignificant insect under her powerful influence. “His soul belongs to me when you cannot properly hold on to him. I will gladly take him.”

“He was created for me.”

Possessive. Rightfully angry.

“By me,” she countered haughtily.

The two fell into a stalemate or perhaps a mutual understanding.

A hand uncurled from his hair and slid down to the side of his cheek, turning his head to rest firmly against the pillow. His eyes slowly opened and he looked up at a woman with long, white hair and pale, ice-like eyes. His eyes, a part of him whispered, though he was in no frame of mind to grasp and hold that piece of information.

He would not remember any of this when he woke.

With child-like wonder, he reached toward her, needing to be closer. Wanting to be closer.

She smiled kindly as his fingers touched her cold cheek. “Not yet, my sweet darling.” Her smile turned forlorn as she sat on the mattress and peered down at him. “I’m afraid I will have to summon the rest of you back here.”

When she frowned, he frowned.

With a delicate curl of her wrist, her long fingers pressed against his temple. Then something horrible happened. A weight, so heavy with its force, slammed into his chest with startling suddenness. He blinked at the feeling, his toes and feet turning cold, his whole body turning heavy and sore.

Pain was back. Cold was back.

Horror.

He choked out a desperate sob and shuddered with discomfort.

“Hush, hush, my son,” she soothed mournfully as she embraced him into her cold embrace. He sobbed uncontrollably. “I know this world is a cold, dark place. But you are not alone in the darkness.”

She lay him back down, covering him with a heavy blanket.

“Rest, Ezra.”

* * * *

Much later that evening, orange eyes gazed down at the palace floors. To an outsider, the dark figure appeared to be looking at nothing in particular, perhaps even appraising the fine details of the amethyst and cream-colored rug sent over as a gift from the Terra Kingdom. Rather suddenly, a
slow, contemplating smirk curled the edges of the man’s mouth.

Clasping his hands behind his back, Lord Josiah turned his shoulder on the concealed runes, leaving them undisturbed.

Chapter End Notes

Hm. Short chapter. Next chapter makes up for it (its a beast in length and far more exciting because Ezra is actually *awake* in that one and looking to spill some blood). Maybe I can post it sooner than later? I do have a warning (maybe not a warning, but an... informative comment?). Things will progress rather /quickly/ from this point forward. What can I say? I was excited to write Part 2.
'ight: There is a high probability I won’t get time to update next week(end), so I tried to get this one out there for you guys to enjoy. There will undoubtedly be mistakes, but it is a nice chapter to end on, I think. A double-update weekend!!

Have a good week!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

15. Chapter Fifteen

“Yes?” Micah inquired wryly when he felt the stares. “What is it?

Looking up from his eggs, he gazed at the trio of Unda students who’d sat across from him that morning at breakfast. Their faces were a mix of frustration, anger, and guilt. Micah didn’t find he had much, if any, energy to decipher the reason behind their mood.

“We may have found a lead to who was behind your attack,” Viktor informed.

Micah lowered his gaze to his breakfast, suddenly uninterested. “Oh?”

The situation, or more appropriately, the attack, as his team liked to call it, happened several days ago.

He’d been too weak to move during his first day of consciousness. His second day of consciousness, Healer Destan and Kendra refused to let him leave the infirmary. The two Healers fed him enough tonics to upset his stomach. He spent most the day kneeling in front of the toilet and far too fatigued to care at how much fluid expelled from his mouth.

His wounds tingled with the salves. His chest burned with the memory of the forced chest tube insert.

He hadn’t remembered much about the events aside from the bag over his head and inhaling the sweet toxin. There was pain, he remembered. A discarded puppet. A glimpse of Josiah on his knees amongst blue flames. Unimaginable warmth. Subsequently followed by cruel and very real cold. However, the thing he remembered the most was the sheer humiliation.

No, humiliation was a tame word for what he’d experienced.

Dishonor, more like.

Micah imagined he hid it well from his team. It was vital he remain emotionless, detached, and nonchalant to the true vulnerability racing through his veins. It suffocated him to the point of fanatical obsession. Eventually, the degradation and shame led way to anger. He needed to extract
his own vengeance. If he let enemies walk over him and take advantage of his weaknesses, it
would only invite others to do the same.

“...member of Nereus’ team was found with a supply of Dulcis Waters,” Edlen explained quietly.
He looked at Talia and Keegan when Micah remained silent. “As we all know, Egan isn’t an
especially popular student amongst the noble children.”

“I’d say he’s rather infamous, really,” Aiden pipped in cynically.

That comment earned him a wide and approving grin from Viktor, who was normally the
outspoken and cheeky member of the team.

“On top of what happened with Wayde…”

Edlen trailed off hoarsely, watching as Talia tinkered with the black ribbon tied to the hilt of her
sword.

Cain had insisted they honor Wayde in some fashion. He’d braided a black ribbon for members of
the team and attached it to the hilt of their swords. Micah discovered his braid looped around his
sword after he left the infirmary, realizing the young man must have visited him when he hadn’t
been awake at the time.

“Keegan was attacked as well,” Micah said objectively.

It was another reason he felt so consumed with his hatred. Keegan had been innocent. Talia
claimed she’d discovered Keegan in the corridors after training further that night. She and Kai had
happened upon Keegan wandering around aimlessly for two hours alone. If they hadn’t found
Keegan in time, the other boy would have died without proper treatment.

It was one thing to attack Micah. At least he deserved it in some fashion.

Keegan…

Micah’s fingers tightened around his fork, not minding as the metal dug painfully into the small
joints in his palm.

“Keegan was attacked by proxy,” Kai reasoned. “Considering how you were dragged away from
the academy, it was a centralized attack, Egan. Lord Josiah had to search you out. The nobles feel
inferior to a desert rat. Pride is hard to swallow, so they’ve decided to take the easy way out to
establish their dominance over you.”

“Yes, but we all know Micah isn’t an ordinary desert rat, don’t we?” Viktor’s grin was nearly
malicious in its humor as he gazed intensely at Micah. “More like a noble kicked to the sandbox.”

Besides Aiden, who’d inquired immediately after the trials, this was the first time any of his
teammates acknowledged his mixed race. Aloud and so public.

“I’m no noble,” Micah denied.

His teammates regarded him doubtfully.

Of course it was Viktor to push. “You don’t need to be so ashamed of your mixed heritage, Micah.
After the war, there were many biracial children born as a result of our two capitals uniting in
celebration.” He paused, curiosity making his eyes glow wildly. “Is your mother or father Unda?
Who separated with whom? Or was it one of those heated, passionate affairs?” Viktor wiggled his
“Viktor,” Kai reprimanded sharply. He gazed irritably at the boy sitting next to him before looking back at Micah. “No matter, Lord Josiah is questioning Nereus’ whole team right now regarding the attack.”

“Is he?” Keegan suddenly spoke up, having been quiet all morning. He seemed far too interested in the prospect of Josiah. Every time someone mentioned the Igni lord, his spine stiffened and his mood soared.

Micah found it revolting.

Josiah hadn’t visited him at the infirmary, extending the weeks of their impasse. Healer Destan confirmed Josiah found him and delivered him to the infirmary in time to perform the procedure. Other than that, Destan was tightlipped about the details of the event, choosing to say they summoned an Igni Healer to assist in the procedure.

Micah didn’t know what he felt about Josiah’s insistence to keep a distance.

On one hand, he was grateful with the distance. Sachiel warned him about the possibility of Josiah stifling him with his own beliefs and manipulating him to his cause. Micah needed to see both sides of the coin, after all. With Josiah, the man dominated Micah’s focus. The Igni king had also slapped away Sachiel’s influence by summoning the councilmember away on an assignment. That action alone spoke volumes of Josiah’s preconceived authority over Micah.

It set Micah’s teeth on edge. Both with irritation and pleasure.

Two could play at that game.

“Yes, he is,” Edlen responded casually. “Nereus was the one who found the Dulcis Waters and reported it directly to the Chairman.”

Talia made a disbelieving noise in her throat. “Deflection?”

“Nereus wouldn’t be so foolish,” Kai defended his cousin.

Micah could feel Keegan’s attention on the side of his face. For the past few days, the boy remained stubbornly quiet and smothering. Observant, really. Considering Keegan was already observant without trying, Micah grew paranoid.

Everyone believed the attack was a schoolboy prank gone wrong. They all believed Micah took a few days to recover due to a complex infection the water Elementals eventually healed.

In all actuality, they were wrong on both accounts.

He was still recovering. His side was sore, near his ribs and chest cavity. The salves and tonics Healer Destan gave him sped up the healing process, but not nearly as quickly as one would heal from a water Elemental.

The wounds on his wrists and arms remained violently red and visible. The punctured wounds across forehead healed slowly and he muttered something about infection and slower healing rate to his teammates when they’d inquired. Fortunately, the majority of the wounds were close enough to his hairline to shield from prying eyes.

Micah had to shower in the infirmary to prevent his team from seeing such blatant signs of his eyebrows.
weakness. It was disgusting. Revolting to be so exposed and defenseless. If more people became privy to his immunity of healing, things would not work out to his favor. He’d be vulnerable and many would look down on him.

As for his teammates’ belief that the attack was a result of a schoolboy prank, well…

“I think it’s time we head to our first class.” Micah placed his utensils down properly before motioning across the dining hall. There were hardly any cadets sitting at the tables. “We are already running late.”

At his suggestion, Aiden ran off first, Talia at his heels. If anyone on the team was a stickler for the rules, Talia and Aiden fought furiously for the position. Cain was a reluctant third. Viktor and Edlen were above the rules. They lagged behind intentionally, slowly standing from their seats and tinkering casually with their bags.

Keegan, well.

Micah cast a sidelong glance at the boy, knowing and acknowledging Keegan’s fierce loyalty. No matter what Keegan’s initial instincts were, he would always question himself if he saw Micah doing the exact opposite.

“I’d like to talk to Edlen alone,” Micah requested.

His announcement earned him disbelieving looks from Viktor and Keegan, both cadets pausing and turning immobile as a result. Kai remained rather impassive, appearing unsurprised at the request. Only after he nodded to Viktor did the boy reluctantly leave the dining hall.

Keegan suddenly leaned down and placed his lips near Micah’s ear. “Don’t do anything stupid, Micah.” Without another word, the boy turned his heel and followed Viktor toward their first class.

Micah watched the older boy depart, knowing all too well Keegan had seen through Micah’s strategically placed masks these past few days.

“You have a good dog there, Egan,” Kai observed.

“I can say the same about you and Viktor, Edlen.”

The two observed the other narrowly, Micah losing his steam first. He had no intentions fighting with the Unda cadet today. He stood up from the table and gathered his books, placing them underneath his arm. “I have a request for you,” he said neutrally.

“I don’t owe you anything,” Kai responded sharply.

And with such startling abruptness. It almost took Micah off guard.

“Don’t you?” Micah paused in buttoning his satchel, looking pointedly at the other boy.

He observed the slight coloring high on Kai’s cheeks as the boy remembered. He had to remember. His refusal that he owed Micah anything came too quickly. They both knew Micah saved Edlen during their first mission, preventing the flames from burning him alive.

“This is the one and only time you can collect on that,” Kai responded briskly. “After all, I could turn the tables and use it as blackmail.” The boy’s long, blond hair fell over his shoulders as he leaned closer to Micah. “I’m sure others would be interested in knowing how the flames danced off you. As if you were untouchable.”
Micah laughed hollowly. “If you threatened that, I’d burn you alive.”

Kai tutted his tongue. “What do you want, Egan?”

“What I’m going to ask must remain between the two of us.” Micah straightened from his position, throwing his satchel over his shoulder. He stopped inches from Kai, looking up at the boy. “Do you understand?”

His tone infuriated the other boy, he knew.

Kai’s left eye twitched, though he made no other indication of his frustration. “Just get it over with.”

Micah exhaled softly. “Where do the royal guards stay? Their location?”

Surprise flitted across Kai’s expression before he hastily closed it off. He gazed down at Micah, contemplating, before a small, almost spiteful smile stretched. “That answer depends on your specifications, doesn’t it?” he asked. “What royal guard? Are you talking about Lord Josiah’s puppets? Or King Calder’s boot-licking hounds?”

Micah felt imaginary wire curl around his limbs at the mention of puppets.

The mortification was back.

Refocusing his attention, he considered the other boy, intrigued. Kai’s description of the royal guard was nearly treasonous. He not only spoke dismissively of the royal guards, but also of Calder and Josiah. He recognized the guards for what they were. Marionettes. Mere pieces in Josiah and Calder’s private game.

Alternatively, perhaps ‘puppets’ and ‘hounds’ were truly what others called them.

“The puppets,” Micah specified.

Kai’s eyebrow quirked. “Well they don’t all bunker together, now do they? They do not attend military academy as we do. If Lord Josiah needs them, he summons them. They have lives. They have homes. Families. It depends on which puppet you are inquiring about.”

And why. The unspoken question hung, suspended in the air.

“You do realize that Lord Josiah would have your head, don’t you?” Edlen pressed. “Like King Calder, Lord Josiah sees an attack on any of his royal guards as a personal attack on him.”

“That’s what I would imagine,” Micah responded quietly in order to hide his glee. “I want to find the captain of his royal guards.”

Kai blinked and laughed. “You must be joking.” The Unda student looked around the empty dining hall and refocused his attention on Micah. “You’re not joking,” he observed solemnly. “How do you know he was responsible for your attack? It seems a bit… juvenile for the captain of Lord Josiah’s royal guards.”

“I cut off his dominant hand before term began,” Micah confessed impartially. “I felt the stump of his arm press into the small of my back during the attack. I know it’s him.”

He was impressed with Kai’s ability to link his interest over Josiah’s royal guard to the perpetrators of the attack. Kai was anything but dim. He knew the reasoning behind Micah’s inquiries.
Kai grew hesitant. “It was a prank, Micah. With Dulcis Waters.”

“It was attempted murder,” Micah retorted swiftly, unwilling to say more on the topic of his immunity. “You and I both know there were complications with the healing. If they hadn’t found Keegan and I in time, we could have died. I can ask someone else—”

“I will tell you,” Kai interrupted sharply. “Under one condition.”

“I was unaware you held a position to negotiate terms.”

“Well, I do.” Edlen took a step closer, intentionally stepping on the tips of Micah’s boots. “I go with you.”

Micah reared away, disgusted. “I don’t think you can handle what I intend to do.”

“You’re clearly still wounded,” Edlen pointed out hastily. “You try to hide it, but your movements were tight during training, as if in pain. I don’t know what happened the night of the attack, but it clearly wasn’t something you could recover from quickly. Like your friend, Keegan. He was out of the infirmary in only a few short minutes. You need someone with you.”

Micah mulled over the negotiation term.

Edlen was partly right.

Micah hadn’t recovered yet. Nonetheless, he was certain he could prevail with or without assistance. However, Kai was rather persistent on this. He was also curious. Curiosity left unattended could turn unpleasant. Especially from someone like Edlen.

“You do realize I may do something extremely unethical?” Micah asked. He squinted at Edlen. “Far more unethical than killing opponents on the battlefield.”

He left that open for interpretation.

Edlen did not disappoint.

The other cadet sneered at the insult. “I’ll show you the captain’s location only if you take me with you. That’s all I can offer.”

Micah lowered his lashes and smiled. “We leave tonight.”

Without another word, he turned and walked out of the dining hall. He had no qualms telling Kai his intentions tonight. Though they hardly got along well, Edlen was not a squealer. Something told Micah the boy also enjoyed the idea of excitement a bit too much.

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“You’re not telling me where he resides until we get there,” Micah deduced as they rode side by side in a carriage.

It had been virtually impossible to leave the team behind tonight. Keegan watched them closely all day, expecting them to team up and abandon everyone. While they had done just that, Micah wanted the others utterly ignorant to their intentions. Eventually, he and Kai were able to escape
when the team went to bed.

“No, I’m not.” The Unda aristocrat adjusted his dark clothing. “We could have left a lot earlier if it wasn’t for Keegan. I’m sure he’s already knocking on Lord Josiah’s door as we speak.”

Micah smiled with teeth. Keegan would appreciate any opportunity he could get approaching Josiah. “I wouldn’t doubt it. Which means we need to move quickly.” He looked out the carriage window. “I could have told him what we had planned tonight, but he would have caused a scene with his disapproval.”

“He knows exactly what we’re planning.”

“Oh?” Micah raised his eyebrows, turning away from the cityscape. “Is that an indirect compliment towards Keegan?”

“Hardly.” Edlen scoffed. “The whole academy knows Lord Josiah let Nereus’ team walk away unpunished, which means the perpetrators are still out there.” Kai flashed him a look. “ Doesn’t take a genius to know where you sauntered off to tonight.”

Micah simply hummed in his throat. After they’d left the academy, they had walked a good distance in the city before Kai had hailed them a carriage. As much as Micah had wanted to stand and observe his surroundings, he knew time was of the essence.

The Concordia capital was enormous. Probably as large as an entire region. Not simply a village. Moreover, everything was crammed together with intricate towers, small manors, vendors, stadiums, and other buildings Micah could not discern from the carriage window. Ember may have explained the capital in her bittersweet tales during his youth, but it couldn’t compare to seeing it himself. He could not look at one place long enough, fearing he would miss another spectacular sight.

Everything was so neat and picturesque.

Some buildings seemed to exude more power and influence than others did, yet everything was architecturally appealing.

The roads were cobblestoned and there were paved walkways alongside the storefronts. The further they traveled toward the heart of the capital, the more Micah observed electric streetlamps, yet they were still the minority amongst typical gas lanterns. There were tall trees growing in the middle of the walkways, making Micah wonder at the reason behind their existence. Aesthetics?

Trees and greenery was not typical in Concordia, rather, they boasted far more hills, which incredible buildings lay claim upon, distant mountains, which were uninhabitable due to the cold climate, and lakes. The lager bodies of water loomed predominantly just outside the capital walls. Within the massive capital itself, especially near the military academy where ground level was low, there were gaps of buildings to accommodate ponds or small, reaching streams that disappeared far off into the distance and beyond the walls encasing the large capital.

Nearer to the heart of town, where elevation remained high, there were no bodies of water. However, Micah still spied plenty of fountains and synthetic pools that lit up with fancy lanterns and sculptures of the great egret—the spirit animal that represented Varuna. Small, charming bridges arched above these pools, another feature he imagined was all about aesthetics. The bridges served no purpose beyond entertainment for citizens to walk over and enjoy the
glimmering water below.

In the enchanted glow of the capital evening, Micah saw influences of water and Varuna everywhere. As they passed a rather large fountain, Micah observed the gentle ripples of water highlighted by the subtle glow of gas flames. Unexpectedly, the sight soothed him, drew him in.

A great white egret statue stood on top the fountain, its wings open to reveal incredible feathers and a modest wingspan.

“You should get out more,” Kai commented distantly, addressing Micah’s expertly veiled fascination with the passing capital.

Micah turned to scorn the other boy, though Kai was not looking at him, but rather out his own window. They were both dressed in undescriptive black clothing with a shemagh tied around their necks. The piece of tactical fabric would cover their faces when they entered their destination. It reminded Micah of the rebels in Region 5.

It was the best they could accomplish, as clothing accessories were scarce at the military academy. They needed something to hide their faces.

“I haven’t had the opportunity to ‘get out more’.”

Kai blinked indolently. “The academy occasionally schedules trips into the capital. The cadets tour the vendors and shops.”

Micah did not respond to that, fearing their conversation delved into something far more pleasant than he desired with Kai Edlen. They lapsed into another bout of silence as the carriage slowly navigated through the roads of the capital.

“How did you avoid those flames?” Kai asked quietly, shattering the pleasant silence.

Micah pursed his lips.

“Are you a fire Elemental?” Edlen persisted.

“Edlen,” Micah whispered in order to avoid snapping.

“Egan,” Kai countered bolshily. “I think it’s a reasonable question.”

“Reasonable? Yes. Intrusive? Quite.” He fiddled with the sword holster across his back, making sure it was tight and secure. He did not want it falling off in battle and hindering his arms. “What did your father think of your decision to choose a desert rat over your own cousin?” He’d posed the question in order to demonstrate how tactless questions could be.

Kai, however, was having none of it. “Well, he was furious, of course, and mentioned things about family dishonor,” he replied as if it were obvious and not a personal question in the least. “Though Councilman Sachiel calmed him down somewhat and applauded my maturity skills to merge teams with only the best.”

Micah gazed at him, unimpressed. “You do realize how brattish you sound, don’t you?”

Kai remained unaffected. “It’s all part of the pretense,” he whispered. “But you know what it’s like to play a part, don’t you, Micah?”

His gaze sharpened on the boy. Sachiel reassured Micah he did not tell Kai about his real identity.
The boy couldn’t know, yet he was unusually perceptive. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“You play the part of a poor, underprivileged scholarship student from the outer regions, one who empathizes with the Igni race, but we both know it’s a bit more than that.” Kai narrowed his eyes. “You try to fit in, but there is something about you that stands out irritatingly. It was enough to draw Sachiel in, wasn’t it?”

“Sachiel finds anything fascinating that doesn’t fit the general mold.”

Something seemed to amuse Kai greatly. “You said it exactly, Egan.”

The carriage stopped and Micah was the first one to exit the interior. He stepped out into the chilly night air, craning his neck to observe the massive church across from him. The fire god, Agni, stood mightily in front of the church, his presence massive and commanding. Sculptured out of granite, his features mirrored the statue inside the academy’s chapel. Only, unlike the academy’s chapel, he did not have to share his platform with Varuna.

Clearly, the church Agni protected at his back was where the Igni people worshipped. In fact, as Micah gazed around the street, he noticed a certain desert-like feel to the architecture of the buildings. A very distinct difference from the buildings he’d observed on the way here.

“This district is where you will see the majority of Igni aristocrats.” Kai stopped next to him after paying the carriage driver. “Though King Calder and many of the members of the royal council tried to avoid segregation, a bit bled through as our people rebuilt the capital.”

There was an entirely different world outside the walls of the academy.

Micah realized he’d only touched the barest surface of society.

He never felt so small, so naïve. There was still so much more he had to learn and see.

“But Clarence does not reside inside Agni’s Chapel,” Kai informed Micah with amusement, touching his shoulder to draw his attention. “Rather, in Lord Josiah’s barracks.”

“Clarence,” Micah repeated, testing the name on his tongue. “Barracks.”

His skepticism soon fell way to wonder as Kai led him towards a very distinct, impressive building. Building wasn’t the correct term for it, however. It appeared like a gargantuan metal statue of a serpent’s head. The serpent’s mouth opened wide, revealing two impressive fangs and a deep cavern. Micah stared stupidly, impressed and utterly fascinated.

He had believed, with the amount of buildings nearby, an underground structure was not feasible.

That it would eventually collapse all the other buildings in proximity.

“Desert rats and their underground structures,” Kai murmured, watching Micah’s expression. “It is rather impressive, though, isn’t it? I don’t think anyone with Unda blood has ever seen the entirety of the barracks. Lord Josiah designed it himself and probably has several secret passageways. He’d never allow his royal guard to be trapped underground.”

Secret passageways were a necessity in such a structure. Micah thought back to his living arrangements with his mother in Region 20. Several levels were underground and it possessed an array of different escape routes to above ground.

The Igni people had lived underground for centuries. They knew how to build sturdy and complex
underground structures. Especially here, in the Concordia capital, amongst potential enemies, Josiah most likely felt it imperative to erect escape routes.

“Have you seen inside?” Micah asked.

The other cadet seemed rather knowledgeable about Josiah’s private base.

“When I was younger, I toured the base with my father,” Kai shared. “When it was finished, Lord Josiah conducted private tours of the structure. It’s not as large as you’d think, but then again, Concordia has a shared military now. A separate base for all the Igni warriors would arouse suspicion, don’t you think?”

“And does King Calder have his own base? For his royal guard?”

The other boy’s face lit up. “Yes, closer to the palace. Not as unique, but it is just as magnificently built.” Kai paused when he realized he sounded like an exuberant child. He cleared his throat to recover his bearings. “The military has their own barracks as well, of course. It’s closer to the academy.”

Micah wondered how many members there were of Josiah’s and Calder’s royal guard. There couldn’t have been many. As Kai pointed out, they had a joint military now.

His eyes roamed over the serpent. It was dark outside, but the light from the enormous fire pit revealed fine details etched across the outside of the snake. Scales, split-pupils, and immaculate, careful detail.

The desert serpent.

It was the insignia for the centuries-old Igni army and Agni’s spirit animal. Micah wondered how Josiah received Calder’s blessing to construct a building representing the old army in the middle of the capital. Knowing Josiah, he probably built it with the purpose of reminding his people of their ferocity before they lost the war.

They probably would have won the war.

If it hadn’t been for healing.

Micah mulled over his last thought, sinking into reality. It was a very damning weakness. Immunity to healing. Now that the Igni people united with the Unda race, they received the privilege of their allies’ powerful healing abilities. No one was quite like Micah in that they relied on traditional healing.

His enemies would prey on that weakness. Proper retaliation was vital.

“Having second thoughts?”

“Actually,” Micah drawled. “I’ve only been encouraged.”

Kai smirked. “Then let’s go.”

Before Kai ventured towards the barracks, Micah grabbed his shoulder, startling the other man. “I want to make sure you realize what you’re doing,” he said seriously. “This is not a prank, Kai. I intend to hurt someone.”

“Hurt? Or kill?”
The question took Micah off guard. His hand tightened on Kai’s shoulder before he dropped it at his side. He felt enough humiliation to kill Clarence, certainly. Not only had Clarence identified Micah’s weakness and used it against him by stringing him up like a discarded toy, but he’d attacked Keegan as well.

“Kill,” Micah informed coldly.

He should have killed the captain back at Master Idris’ tavern when he had the chance. Clarence pledged his loyalty to Josiah, yet clearly, that loyalty did not account for much. Micah didn’t want Josiah to catch wind of this, least the man act first and take Clarence for himself.

It had to happen now.

Kai inclined his head. “Someday you’ll have to tell me how you were able to take off his hand, but I suppose that’s up there with explaining how you avoided that fire Elemental’s attack.” He scoffed at Micah’s taciturn expression. “Then let’s go.”

He and Edlen wrapped the tactical shemagh around their faces as they approached Josiah’s base. Their boots barely made impact on the pavement as they neared the entryway of the serpent’s mouth.

“No guards?”

“Like I said,” Kai started with irritation, his blue eyes flashing towards Micah. “No one is stupid enough to attack Lord Josiah’s royal guards.” He faced forward but then turned back to Micah. “No killing besides Clarence.”

Micah bristled at the command. Insulted. “Obviously.”

He didn’t want to start an all-out war against Josiah’s royal guard. He came here for one man’s blood. Nothing more than that.

Following at Kai’s heels, Micah kept pace as they snuck down the staircase leading underground. The walls were incased with a metal-like material and the sconces on the walls illuminated a great majority of the corridors.

Micah did not like the brightness and then the sudden pockets of darkness as they passed between sconces. It shed light on their forms as they raced through the corridors. Kai didn’t seem to know where he was going, for he led Micah down a corridor, only to backtrack and lead them deeper underground.

“Kai—”

“Hush,” the boy interrupted as they climbed down another set of stairs, further down into the abyss. It was like a quiet and still perdition. “It was years ago. Captain’s quarters. Can’t be too hard to find, can it?” He laughed through his scarf.

Micah found no amusement in the situation.

An uneasy feeling settled in the back of his mind. It felt like eyes.

Taunting. Cruel.

“Hey!”
A crimson-clad guard rushed at them from the end of a corridor and Micah ran to meet him. They both withdrew their swords at the same time, only, as the guard swung, Micah ducked, feeling Kai directly behind him. A second later, the sound of Kai’s sword clashed with the guard’s strike.

Micah engaged in combat with the second guard who ran from a room, watching as two others followed their comrades into the corridor. Four. Not as many as he expected. Not as many as he preferred.

Enraged and eager, Micah lost himself in the battle. The guards were fierce with their fighting style, worthy opponents, most definitely. Micah could stretch his abilities and test his limitations against Josiah’s guards. He ducked, parried, and blocked, all the while, trying to get close enough to knock them unconscious. When the strike was to immobilize, not kill, the fight advanced the level of difficulty.

The sound of a body fell behind him and Micah knew Edlen downed his opponent without the use of his water Element. Micah tuned himself with Kai. Somehow, in the tight, dim corridor, the two cadets, who normally were at odds, synchronized without the barriers of murder, of killing. They had a common goal, a common goal they could both agree on tonight.

As a result, they harmonized.

Micah twirled around a guard Kai distracted and slammed the hilt of his sword into the man’s temple, instantly knocking him out cold. The next one, Micah assaulted with an array of attacks, taking the man off guard with the quick pace. Kai lunged—taking over—and Micah fell back, focusing on the last man.

While Kai specialized in quick and rapid attacks, Micah focused on the languid traps. It was Kai’s job to tire them out, to put them on edge, while Micah would swoop in for the lazy and unsuspected snare. It was supposed to be the opposite. Considering the fighting style they both were supposed to emulate, Kai should have been the lazy and calm attacker, while Micah should have been the frenzied assailant. Yet, as they fought together, they fell back into their natural pace of things, balancing each other out.

It wasn’t long before the last two guards were on the ground.

Edlen gazed at Micah through the heavy scarf around his face, his eyes narrowed as he contemplated. Micah knew exactly what was going through the other boy’s mind. He felt the same. An unlikely kinship despite their major differences.

“We need to move quickly.” Kai tore his gaze away from Micah. “They probably won’t be out for too long.”

“They led us right to our destination.”

At first, Kai did not understand Micah’s statement. Only, as he turned towards the room the guards came running from, comprehension crossed his features. Micah pushed past Kai and entered the captain’s quarters, a sour taste in his mouth at the scene. The room was destroyed with open drawers, overturned furniture, and clothes everywhere. Broken and shattered objects lay strewn across the floors, forgotten and abandoned from their owner.

“Varuna,” Kai cursed. “He ran! He was actually guilty!”

Withholding his own verbal frustration, Micah stepped inside the quarters, staring at the vacancy. His eyes ran critically across the objects strewn everywhere. It certainly appeared as if the man ran.
“I don’t have a good feeling about this, Egan,” Kai spoke to his back. “Let’s leave.”

He did not blame the other boy for feeling that way. An odd sensation of dread filled the air, bringing forth a sense of unsettlement. However, a small, leather-bound book caught Micah’s eye. He walked across the room and crouched next to the open armor. Reaching underneath the piece of furniture, Micah pulled out the old book.

The pages were open to an old drawing of a beautiful, pentagram amulet.

At the top of the page, it read:

To Cage a Monster

Micah grimaced before closing the book and stuffing it into his back pocket.

Hurriedly, he stood and joined Kai at the doorway, not knowing what he felt. He was upset at Clarence’s absence, understandably, though he could hardly feel disappointed when the peculiar sense of doom filled the air with tyrannical oppression.

They hurried down the twisting corridors, back in the direction they entered. As they passed the lit sconces on the walls, they extinguished one by one. “Run faster,” Micah advised, having a strong sense of what approached.

Or more appropriately, whom approached.

A small chuckle reverberated across the metal corridors at Micah’s trivial suggestion. At his side, Kai seized up and collapsed, nothing having ever touched him. Before Micah could reach for his fallen comrade, the corridor shrouded in complete darkness. His breathing hitched before quieting. He straightened, listening to his surroundings. His skin prickled, sensing the stare, the obsessive regard.

A swoosh of air was his warning to react.

Acting on instinct alone, Micah withdrew his sword and blocked the hit in one, faultless swoop. The strike… well, he had never felt something so powerful before. His arm tingled from his wrist all the way up to his shoulder. Micah rotated his body as another strike came, trying to absorb the power with his stance.

His pulse ran up his throat.

He was dueling Lord Josiah, the King of the Igni race. The ruler of a defeated empire. An infamous opponent. The ultimate legend young boys impersonated during their childhood sword fights.

“If you want to intrude on someone’s territory, child, you need to first find the master and best him in a fair fight,” Josiah instructed apathetically. “Not run with your tail tucked between your legs.”

The sconces on the wall lit just enough for Micah to see his surroundings. Josiah seemed to tower over him, using the shadows to his advantage. Just as suddenly, a flash of silver caught the torches as the Igni lord’s blade descended for another attack. Micah leaped backward, lowering in a stance to avoid the hit.

Without a moment’s pause, he lunged forward on the balls of his feet, his heart hammering painfully in his chest. Not out of fear, but out of complete and utter exhilaration.
Micah put all his effort into sparring with Josiah.

He’d never tried so hard to best an opponent in his lifetime. Not even Master Idris. His hits were well aimed and commanding, his reflexes were honed, and he did not blindly walk into Josiah’s carefully constructed traps. Evidently, this was the best he’d ever dueled. He was faultless. He was a worthy opponent. As they danced through the corridors and twisted gracefully around the other with unparalleled speeds, there were moments Micah observed Josiah actually putting forth an effort to fight him.

The man was not simply toying with him. He was not holding back.

Only, Sachiel’s words came back to Micah with startling clarity.

He and Josiah fought identically.

He was fighting a mirror image who was older, wiser, and stronger.

Sweat beaded down Micah’s temple as he comprehended the tipping point to their duel. He grunted as Josiah nudged his stomach with his foot, sending him backpedaling. The man then twirled his sword around in a flashing silver arc, jabbing the blunt end of his blade against the healing wound on Micah’s ribcage.

“Bastard!” Micah snarled as pain erupted.

A hand grabbed his shemagh, tearing it off before promptly shoving him against the wall. Micah panted, his body stirring from adrenaline to something much darker as Josiah settled authoritatively between his legs. Caged between the wall and the Igni king, Micah glared defiantly as the man’s hand greedily cupped the base of his jawline and around his neck.

Josiah’s expression remained rather impassive, though his orange eyes gleamed corruptly. “Ah,” he breathed with smug approval. “There are those stubborn eyes I adore so much.” He leaned closer, his breath readily intermixing with Micah’s and matching his quickened pace.

The man’s attention then drifted lower, towards his mouth, and Micah’s chest lurched with unrestrained anticipation. The frustration he felt for this man was overpowering, yet so was the desire to close the distance.

Unexpectedly, Josiah did just that.

Micah’s stomach tightened pleasantly as the man claimed his lips. Like a fool, he nearly whimpered in delight as the hand tightened almost painfully around his throat and forced his head back further against the wall. Dominant. Controlling. Micah wanted to extract his own dominance, though he hardly had the chance.

The lips were bruising, possessive, and it was over before Micah could comprehend.

He blinked up at the Igni king, scowling.

“A slip of restraint on my end, child,” Josiah murmured with apology, loosening his hold on Micah’s throat. “You are rather delectable at times, especially when you attempt to challenge me by taking out my men and thinking you can kill my captain.”

“Your captain,” Micah spat furiously, “nearly killed me.”

Josiah’s gaze was calculating. “I know.”
“Why does that not surprise me?” Micah reared away from the hand and fought to move away from Josiah. The man held him firmly against the wall, however, unwilling to give him the room he decreed. “Are you the one that took him?” he demanded.

“I’m afraid he possessed enough intelligence to run.” A smile. “I will catch up to him.”

Micah’s jaw clenched at the notion. “I want to extract my own revenge.” His eyes refocused on Josiah’s face, ignoring the giddy flutter in his chest at how close they were. Finally. “I don’t think you have as much claim to him as I do.”

“On the contrary,” Josiah started dangerously, “Not only has he betrayed me, the master he swore to serve loyally, but he attempted to kill my Chosen.”

“Let me have the last strike,” Micah requested, raising his chin stubbornly.

Something seemed to please the man greatly. Whether it was Micah’s cold-blooded desire to end a life or something else entirely, Micah did not know. Josiah was always a mix of darkness and amusement.

“You have yourself a deal,” Josiah murmured. “Look at this. If you’d come to me sooner, you could have avoided unnecessary struggle.” His opposite hand found and pressed against the bandaged wound on his chest. “It has set you back.”

“You always seem preoccupied with others. I wouldn’t want to bother you,” he said vindictively. However, as soon as the words left his mouth, he didn’t understand why he’d said it aloud, especially to Josiah’s face. It still bothered him when he remembered all those students strutting into Josiah’s office as if they actually belonged there during a time Micah wanted the man for himself.

Comprehension crossed the older man’s features.

Josiah placed a significant amount of weight against him as he leaned down and hovered near his ear. “They mean nothing.” His breath was just as warm as it was fervent. “You know this, silly child.”

Micah flushed, hating that the man thought he needed reassuring; hating that he did need reassuring over something so petty. He reared his head back and forcibly met eyes with Josiah, needing to change the subject in order to reestablish equal footing. “I’m not going to rely on you for everything.”

Josiah tutted. “I would be disappointed if you did.” He released Micah’s neck. “That doesn’t mean I can’t assist when I deem it necessary.”

“Then I want you to bring Sachiel back.”

All the things that upset him about Josiah came vomiting out of his mouth. He hadn’t spoken to the man in weeks and all the pent up frustration came out. Unfiltered. However, unlike the mention of the cadets taking up Josiah’s time, the mere mention of Sachiel seemingly upset the man.

“Now is not the place.”

His words were like ice. Certainly enough to give Micah pause. Gaining enough mobility in his limbs, he pushed past the man and ducked beneath him. He didn’t need to stand here further and let Josiah dictate the conversation. Before he could go far, a hand slapped around his wrist and yanked him back.
“Do not leave angry,” Josiah hissed. “We will talk about Sachiel another time. Tomorrow, yes? Before dinner, you will come to my quarters.”

Micah stared stubbornly ahead while Josiah took position at his shoulder. He didn’t know whether to scoff at the invitation or welcome the chance to talk without a filter to him, to anyone, really. It had been weeks since he could be himself.

“Fine,” Micah consented stiffly.

The hand opened up around his wrist, allowing his freedom.

“Return to the academy. Bring your pet with you.”

The mounted sconces in the corridor all brightened back to their original brilliancy. As Micah turned, he was unsurprised to note Josiah nowhere in sight. On the ground, Kai made a noise in his throat, spurring Micah into action. He wrapped his shemagh around his face quickly and reached down to tug on Kai’s arm.

“Come on!”

“What—?”

“You tripped on your own feet like a novice, Edlen,” Micah insulted, hoisting the aristocrat to his feet. “We need to hurry.”

“I did not!” Kai’s eyes flashed angrily at the insinuation he would be clumsy enough to trip. However, he took Micah’s insistent tug in stride and hurried with him outside Josiah’s private base. The other man didn’t need to know the Igni king had knocked him unconscious.

Some things were better left unsaid.

* * * *

He’d been so close. So close.

Clarence closed his eyes against the pain, the disenchantment. He’d went against their directive and administered more drug to the boy than instructed, just to sate his petty revenge. Instead of letting the boy loose in the academy halls, he’d dragged him away to string him up and humiliate. He’d cherished the desperate sounds that escaped those lips. Admired the way that lithe body moved to his will. He’d wanted to do more. He’d wanted to take total control, yet somehow, he’d resisted the urge and merely roped him in the gardens.

However, after realizing his misstep with the boy’s attack, he’d felt apprehension nipping constantly at his heels. Upon realizing what it was, who it was, he’d decided to abandon post.

Only, as he had rummaged through his belongings just hours ago, it’d been too late. Clarence sniffed, remembering turning around, only to find the embodiment of evil standing indolently in the doorway with a sinful smile across his lips.

He should have done it sooner.

He realized his calling far too late in life.
While hesitant at first, Clarence eventually looked through the leather-bound book that had belonged to his mother. Some of it had been in a different language, yet, as he divulged through the pages, he felt a connection establish with her memory. The pages drew him in and offered temptations he hadn’t realized he’d desired.

The woman at the tavern was right. There were other means to be powerful. Not just powerful, but unstoppable. He’d wanted that. Realized he needed it. For as he fought the malevolence at his doorway just hours ago, his meager fire Element hadn’t been enough. Not when the man was a legend Elemental, a master in the art.

The cold cement dug into his naked back, hardly causing him discomfort. Cold and numbness posed little threat to him. They were petty things—mundane things—compared to the open skin over his chest cavity and the blood cascading across the floor.

Across the room, the door opened, and he stepped inside.

Clarence shuddered with horror.

“Where were we?” the man asked pleasantly.

Lord Josiah stepped over him, staring down at his half-naked form with malicious delight. Clarence had known the Igni king possessed a cruel streak, yet never before had he directed said cruelty towards him. He never imagined it would turn out this way. Ever. Only, as Clarence stared up at the man he’d known since a child, he noticed the Igni king was in a far better mood than before the interruption.

He scowled, knowing exactly what caused such uplifted spirits. “I should have slit that bastard’s throat when I had the chance!” he screamed hoarsely, suddenly enraged. “If it’s not me, I assure you, he will be skinned alive.”

That child.

That boy!

His left hand curled into a fist at his side and his right stump experienced a phantom pain. Never before had he hated someone as much as he did Ezra. That spoilt child who expected all others to bend before him. The spoilt child who’d destroyed Clarence’s life. He had so much left he wanted to do in life! It was all gone because of that royal spawn.

Josiah smiled. “One thing I admire about you, Clarence, is your obligation to own up to what you’ve done. You are not denying any of your transgressions. It is a refreshing change from typical guilty parties.” His smile dropped and something darker took its place. “The one thing that damns you, however, is touching what belongs to me. Did you really think you could get away with that?”

“As I said before, it should have been a quicker, more guaranteed death.”

Josiah hummed in consideration. “That it should have been, but I imagine they instructed you otherwise, no?”

Clarence’s eyes teared up from the pain of his open chest. They told him to administer the Dulcis Waters on Ezra. That’s what they’d wanted, after all. He did not question their motives. They also told him to tread carefully, that Josiah was a monster, wrongfully gifted by the gods and immortalized with great, but terrible power. A creature.

Besides Josiah’s unmatched abilities, Clarence never saw evidence in the past that supported their
claims. He knew it to be true, however. He’d now seen the evidence. Heard the stories. Somehow, Ezra also played a vital role.

They did not tell him much, afraid for a situation like this to happen.

Clarence suddenly realized the importance of their decision to keep him in the dark.

Josiah’s spidery hands reached down and touched the crown of his head. “He was easy.” Clarence whispered with defiant glee. He knew he faced death. Why try to act civilized? “Your boy? So easy to take down. I imagine he would bend to anyone’s will. He’d spread for anyone too. With a face like that, that’s all he’s good for.”

The hand on his forehead turned motionless, as did the man above him.

Clarence’s mirth abruptly vanished when everything turned dark and the man above him morphed into something inhuman. Beastly. Orange eyes of high Igni nobility darkened into a blood-orange. Darkness cloaked the man’s form and his very presence grew malevolent. Clarence shuddered, losing control of his bladder as fear and horror struck him so very deep. Never before did fright leave him breathless and shaken.

_Daemon_!

They were right. All along!

“Go ahead and kill me!” Clarence screamed shrilly through the horror, through the piercing headache behind his eyes.

He’d never wanted death so badly.

“Oh no,” the soft, silky tone of Josiah was no more. In its place was a distorted, vindictive voice. “While the Noir Users are resourceful, they are also arrogant. They kept you in the dark about a great deal of things, yet I imagine, after they see you continuing to stand by my side, unharmed, you and I will delve into more details of their plan.”

Clawed fingers pressed against Clarence’s exposed rib, applying enough pressure until it snapped cleanly in half. “You are also alive because I enjoy extracting pain on those who’ve wronged me.”

Clarence screamed.

“You are alive because he wishes to be the last one to strike you down. What he desires, I will readily grant.”

Another rib.

“And you are alive… to give me all that information inside your weak mind.” The clawed hand haloed his skull once more, crushing it and deforming it.

Clarence never knew pain before. As his skull crumpled and cracked, he realized he’d underestimated their warnings about Josiah. Clarence realized too late that he wanted to embrace his mother’s path in order to avoid his father’s fate. A fate of abuse and endless manipulation by larger players. A fate of a simple and disposable game piece.

He’d just wanted to be in charge of his own destiny.

Now, he knew Josiah was going to immortalize him into a mindless marionette.
It was his last thought before all went black.

Chapter End Notes

No. There are no vampires in this universe o.O No werewolves. No mermaids or genies.
Big thanks to *Selethe* for editing the chapter!! *Swoons* However, I did add….err… ^quite a bit^ after the editing took place. Therefore, any mistakes that you see in this chapter are mine alone. Sorry, Selethe. D: I’m like the worse person to beta for, I know.

16. Chapter Sixteen

“Councilman Devereux will see you now, Mr. Edlen.”

Kai nodded sharply to the butler. He stood from one of the several chairs positioned on either side of the long corridor. A rich, mahogany wainscot clashed opulently with the deep cherry and gold-patterned walls. As he straightened his tailored coat, his attention lingered on the gold frames hanging on the walls, focusing specifically on the largest painting.

Stilling, he stared.

He’d seen it dozens of times before, yet, in the past, he’d always walked by without a second glance. It was an old adjournment to the wall, as noted by the use of oil paints. If it had been newer, it would have been a colorless photograph like some of the other pieces in its immediate proximity.

Kai was glad it was an oil painting.

Photographs, though entirely realistic and lifelike, did not possess the color of *life*.

He stared into the blue eyes of his lost friend, feeling the familiar sting of guilt accompany the hollowness. He nodded to himself, to the portrait, and then walked away.

Raising his fist, he knocked resolutely on the closed doors. If Egan could confront his attacker in such a foolhardy, yet inspirationally courageous way, Kai could do this just as well. He had intended to do it earlier when he’d last seen Councilman Devereux at Wayde’s service. However, his courage fled and he, too, fled the service far earlier than expected.

“Come in!”

Clasping both handles, he pushed open the double doors and stepped into a parlor decorated for royalty. Leather and dark wood were the two materials that made up the confinements of the large space. He smelt something distinctively musky and spicy, drawing the immediate conclusion of cigars being the source.

Behind the desk, a greying man sat. “Kai. What a pleasant surprise.”

Ervin Devereux then looked to the side, drawing Kai’s attention. He turned, pausing when he saw their company. Said man stood from his chair on the other side of Ervin’s desk, offering a faint,
strained smile upon Kai’s entrance.

“Father,” Kai greeted tensely. “I hadn’t expected to see you here.”

“Likewise,” Seaton Edlen responded just as stiffly. He turned and gazed pointedly at the ticking clock standing pompously at the other side of the parlor, near the massive fireplace. “We are not scheduled to meet for another three hours. I was under the impression I would pick you up from the academy and bring you home from there.”

“An impulsive change of plans,” Kai replied. “I would have informed you after I met with Councilman Devereux.”

Said man offered an edgy chuckle. “Call me Ervin, please, young Edlen.”

Seaton and Kai exchanged another long look, one man displeased and the other guarded. He was not on good terms with his father at the moment. Oddly enough, that thought brought forth a surge of adrenaline through Kai. He’d dreamed about this since a child, hadn’t he? Everyone tripped over their feet to blindly follow Seaton. Kai had seen this. Observed this. He had desperately hoped he didn’t look as foolish when he grew into adulthood.

Perhaps he still had a chance to be his own man.

“Ervin,” Kai addressed politely, inclining his head as he turned to the master of the house. “I appreciate you accepting my call, especially considering the late notice.”

Ervin was a tall, thin man. He hadn’t been a warrior in the Unda/Igni war, yet he was a water Elemental who had passed on such inheritance to his only son. His hair was balding near the top of his head, yet he continued to pull back his hair into a tight, severe pony at the nape of his neck.

Though aging, he was an attractive noble who seemed to embrace each wrinkle with refined grace.

The man stood up and reached out to shake Kai’s hand. “I will always make time for you, Kai.” He then motioned to the chair opposite of him. “Please sit. Can I get you anything to drink?”

“I will have to decline, but thank you for the offer.”

Kai sat upon the leather chair, touching the polished arms nervously before curling them onto his lap.

From the corner of his eye, he watched as Seaton reclaimed his position. Ervin was lower in standing than Seaton; he wouldn’t dare ask him to leave the room even if this was his home. No matter. Kai wanted his father present. He had no qualms about what he was about to say and it would be preferable if Seaton was also privy to his confession.

“How is the academy treating you, Kai?” Ervin inquired bitterly. The way his expression clouded, one could assume he felt a bit hostile toward the academy. “How is your team?”

“We are all missing Wayde, unquestionably,” Kai said softly. “He would have made a good addition to the team. There is an obvious bareness where his presence should be.” He shifted. “That is why I am here, actually.”

As if he hadn’t heard the sincerity or the somber tone in Kai’s words, Erwin stirred into a new topic. “I heard they took away your status as team captain.” He shook his head and narrowed his eyes on Seaton. “That Josiah,” the man spat. “I don’t understand why His Majesty allows the man such positions of esteem. The Chairman of the academy?”
“It’s to humor the man and the Igni nobles. They have been growing restless as of late,” Seaton drawled in explanation. “It also keeps Josiah preoccupied. Do not doubt His Majesty’s decision, Erwin. He holds just as much sway over the academy as Lord Josiah.”

Seaton’s reassurances did nothing to extinguish the cruel hatred in Erwin’s eyes at the mere mention of Lord Josiah. Kai stiffened, knowing why Devereux felt so strongly in his animosity. “Even so.” He leaned back in his chair, as much as his nobility standing would reasonably allow. “They named that—that biracial boy as the captain.”

“Micah Egan,” Kai supplied impassively.

“How is he doing?” Seaton questioned slyly. “What a very peculiar specimen he is.”

Erwin pressed his lips together. “No doubt a bastard, spawned from a noble’s indiscretion and a commoner’s wanton ways. His father was undoubtedly an Unda noble, who then turned his back on the woman carrying his bastard. That is the most common story I hear in court when it comes to biracial children. When our two kingdoms merged, the Igni women always did possess a certain allure. Raucous young men couldn’t help themselves in terms of celebration.”

“He is around that age, yes,” Seaton responded. “He is far too attractive to be a commoner.”

Unsettled with the direction the conversation was headed, Kai barely remembered to school his features.

“What else can you tell us about this boy, Kai?” his father asked. “We heard quite a bit about his academic marks and we witnessed his incredible swordsmanship.” Here, the man’s tone tightened, no doubt recalling his son’s humiliating defeat. “We heard he was recently subjected to a healthy dose of Dulcis Waters.”

“He was administered the drug, yes.” He looked to Erwin and then his father. “Several claim it was a hoax pulled by noble cadets, though the culprit has yet to be caught.” He sniffed superiorly and tugged at his gloves. “Micah Egan is a severe and professional man. He makes a good captain to our team.”

He did not owe his father anything. He knew what they were angling toward achieving. Gossip on the mysterious biracial cadet who made waves at the military academy within the first few hours of enrollment. However, Micah Egan was his enigma. Kai was gradually collecting the pieces that made up Egan’s character. He would then start exploring anonymities like his upbringing, his parentage, and his odd abilities.

Seaton couldn’t have Egan.

“A very mature response from you, Kai,” Erwin proclaimed. “You are learning to be very politically aware.”

“With all due respect, Councilman Devereux, Cadet Egan isn’t why I came here today.” Kai set down his hands once more and lifted his chin to survey the man on the other side of the desk. “I came here to discuss your son.”

Raw sorrow crossed Erwin’s expression before it was gone instantaneously. “What about Wayde?”

Kai inhaled deeply and curled his hands into fists. “Your anger toward Lord Josiah is understandable, however, it is misplaced,” he said. He watched as a ripple of disbelief crossed Erwin’s gaze. “You see, he wasn’t responsible for Wayde’s death. Neither was Egan. In fact, if I would have let Egan do his job as co-captain, I firmly believe Wayde would still be alive today.”
The words tasted heavy on his tongue despite practicing them several times before he arrived today. It had taken him a few tries to say them without flinching, even more so without feeling the drowning, suffocating sensation of guilt.

The words were harsh, so very harsh, but so very true.

He had to live with himself for knowing he was to blame. It was that simple. It had darkened a part of him, shaken him to his very core to know his past blindness was the sole reason he’d lost a true, good friend. Finding such loyal and sincere individuals amongst aristocrats was a rare and honorable discovery.

Erwin shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

Seaton stirred, displeased at the words coming from his son. “Kai—”

“I am to blame for Wayde’s death,” Kai said firmly, maintaining eye contact with Wayde’s father. “I examined every scenario and thoroughly dissected every past action to try to reassure myself I wasn’t at fault. However, in the end, I realized, by putting political means before our team’s wellbeing, I was an extreme detriment to our team’s success—failure in this case. We didn’t train as we should have. I avoided the members I thought less superior. I intentionally opted to surround myself with peers of similar political prestige as opposed to planning team regimens with Egan. We were unprepared for a mission that we should have conquered.”

Silence met his statement as the two men stared at him with various degrees of disbelief.

“And despite Wayde identifying the error of my ways, he continued to stand by my side and support my decisions in public.” Kai slowly stood from his seat when he realized there would be no further discussion from Erwin or Seaton. “He was truly a good person, Councilman Devereux, and I took advantage of that.”

He turned to Seaton, inclining his head in face of his father’s discontentment. “I will see you at home, then.”

In the heavy silence of the parlor, Kai bowed shortly to Erwin before turning and walking toward the doors. The sound of the ticking clock was in line with each step he took away from the heavy, unimpressed stares. Oddly enough, Kai found his pulse just as steady and in harmony with the natural flow of time itself.

“What do you possibly gain by admitting this to me?”

Kai paused at the door upon Erwin’s inquiry.

“Closure.” And the ability to move forward. He glanced at the man from over his shoulder. “For the both of us.”

As Kai exited the parlor and walked down the corridor, he felt Wayde’s eyes on him. He turned, meeting the blue gaze and feeling the familiar hollowness, but strangely enough, the sting of guilt did not make itself known. A heavy acceptance settled into his gut as he absorbed Wayde’s immortalized features before forcing himself to continue forward.

* * * *
“Silver team is gloating, as is the bronze team.”

“They passed their missions without losing a member of their team.” Viktor scoffed indignantly. “They have every right to gloat. For our past performance, it serves us right to listen to their snide comments in the corridors and in class. Until we can prove ourselves again, we have to bear it without complaint.”

Micah tried to ignore his team’s pessimistic comments, preoccupying himself with correcting Keegan’s form. He dropped his sword to his side, instantly stopping their mock duel as the boy continued to make the same mistake. Repeatedly.

His patience wore thin.

“This way.” Micah grabbed Keegan by the hips and rotated him while nudging his back foot simultaneously. “While you want a wide, sturdy stance, you don’t want to leave yourself too open. You would be cut down immediately.”

“Sorry,” the boy was quick to apologize, clearly discouraged.

Micah removed his hands from Keegan and took a steadying breath, realizing his tone may have been a bit too harsh. “You don’t need to apologize, Keegan, you’re still learning. It is only natural you make mistakes.”

He gazed around at the others, noticing a nagging absence. He’d been waiting for over an hour for Kai to show up to training. In the interim, Micah decided on the pairs the team would form during battles and requested they spar with their partner.

Talia and Cain seemed to be a natural pair, as did Viktor and Aiden. While Kai would be with Micah, that left the awkward decision of where to put Keegan. Instructor Candace informed Micah they would not receive another member to replace Wayde, which was an acceptable decision in Micah’s opinion. Right now, the team was steadily growing acclimated with one another. Replacing Wayde, whom several were still mourning, would not be the best option.

Therefore, he decided to place Keegan with Talia and Viktor, intentionally separating the older cadet from Aiden. In battle, Micah imagined the two would dwell far too much on the other’s safety, obscuring the necessary detachment one needed to harness during combat.

Seeing as Kai was gone today, Micah decided to spar with the boy himself.

Keegan had improved with the sword, yet even Micah could not ignore some lethal habits he’d picked up. Such as leaving himself too open. His footwork could use some help and Micah quickly showed Keegan exercises to perform on his own to improve his coordination. The other cadet absorbed Micah’s teachings readily.

Casting a critical eye across the team, he paused on Viktor and Aiden, the two who had paused in their exercises to gossip.

Viktor happened to look over, blanching when he realized he’d incurred Micah’s chilly, disapproving stare. He and Aiden hurriedly resumed their duel, working especially hard. Periodically, both of the cadets glanced over to see if Micah had looked away, only to realize that he didn’t intend to let them off the hook so easily. He kept observing the two, growing sadistically amused when he realized his continued scrutiny caused their movements to be tight and on edge.
“Viktor,” Micah barked across the training arena, incurring a flinch from the other boy.

Viktor paused in his duel, offering Micah an irreproachable grin. “Yes, Captain?”

Kai was typically the one to punish Viktor during their sessions. He assigned the other cadet laps around the training arena when the other boy didn’t take things seriously enough. Micah could see the defeated slump in Viktor’s shoulders as he anticipated his punishment. For a moment, Micah allowed the anticipation to mount.

Instead, he asked, “Where is Kai?”

Viktor slumped further, clearly relieved. “His father requested his presence at home.”

“Can he do that?” Micah wondered aloud. “Take him from the academy?”

“As long as it doesn’t interfere with his grades or assignments, certainly.” Viktor shrugged. “Besides, his father holds a position of power. He’s on the Royal Council, which means he can pull some strings.”

“Pull strings,” Micah repeated dubiously. “You mean bend the rules.”

Viktor seemed amused. “When it comes to nobles, it’s the same thing.”

The cheeky comment did not warrant a reply. Micah pondered Kai’s absence. They had returned to the academy last night without further detection. Not even the team seemed aware of their midnight exploitations. With the exception of Keegan, of course. The boy hadn’t spoken at all today and he was especially sullen.

“I need to end training early tonight,” Micah announced to the members of the team. Immediately, they all relaxed their stances, relief washing their expressions. “All of you should head to dinner. Take a bit of a break and catch up on your studies.” It was nearing the end of dinner and Josiah specifically said he wanted to meet Micah before dinner.

He really didn’t mind making the man wait.

“Is this because your partner in crime isn’t here?” Viktor inquired innocently, never one for tact. “Can’t plan a training session without Edlen, Micah?”

That got a rouse out of Talia as she and Cain approached the others. “Considering Micah is always the one to come up with the drills we do during practice, I hardly think that’s a rational deduction.”

“I’m only joking, princess.”

Micah withheld a sigh and sheathed his sword into his holster.

“I might as well tell you all that Kai’s father is asking him to drop out of the academy and become a member of court.” Next to the outspoken Viktor, Cain quirked a disbelieving eyebrow. “The royal council is stirring as if there is trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?” Aiden asked excitingly. “War?”

“General political unrest, I’m sure,” Viktor responded vaguely, proof he did not know the reason behind the disturbance. There were times Viktor just liked to boast he knew something the others
“I was under the impression that someone had to attend Concordia Academy for three years in order to get a respectable position at the capital,” Keegan said.

“For students like you and those two?” Viktor pointed at Micah and Aiden, clearly identifying the less fortunate students out of the bunch. “Yes, that’s about right. For people who have proper channels and connections? Graduating is not essential. It’s why there are not many second and third-year cadets.”

Keegan and Aiden appeared repulsed.

Micah sympathized with them.

They worked hard to receive the opportunity to attend the academy while others took their enrollment for granted. Others, meaning the nobles. Micah considered it a loss of resources by accepting students who clearly were not attending to better themselves and their future. Such a waste. Less fortunate men and women, who did not have such luxury, could fill such positions and actually benefit from the academy’s prestigious resources.

“Have a good dinner,” Micah told the team in effort to distance himself from their gossip. He was pressed for time and they were rather outspoken tonight with their wild theories and speculations.

On a positive note, at least they were getting along. For the past few training sessions, Micah watched as the members of the team grew closer. They began to get to know one another, appreciate, and embrace the differences they all offered to the team dynamic. It was a relief, really. All Micah had to do was coax their potential. It was fortunate he did not have to plan exercises around the emotional and mental side of team bonding, but rather systematics and skill.

“Oh.” He paused. “Cain, will you stay behind and make sure Viktor and Aiden complete ten laps around the room?”

Cain nodded firmly as Viktor made a loud noise of protest.

Micah grinned, ducking into the corridor.

He did not get far.

“Micah.”

Upon Keegan’s call, Micah stopped suddenly and contemplated the far wall. He’d wondered when this conversation would happen. Unfortunately, it came when he was pressed for time.

“Keegan.” He turned to give the other boy attention.

“Where are you headed to in such a hurry?”

If it had been anyone else who asked the question, Micah would have responded acerbically. The invasion of privacy got under his skin and agitated him further. No one had a right to question his whereabouts or his motives. Instead, he suffered down his immediate response. This was Keegan, after all.

“Don’t worry,” he started. “I will be within the academy’s walls all night.”

“Like you were last night?”
“Keegan,” Micah crooned softly, warningly. “Don’t do this.”

Keegan moved so he stood in front of Micah, using his height to his advantage. Physical intimidation was an uncharacteristic move from the other boy. “Is it wrong of me to worry about you?” he asked. “Especially after what happened with us—with the Dulcis Waters—is it really that surprising I would worry about where you disappear?”

“It’s not wrong for you to worry,” Micah said, unsettled with the prospect of someone worrying. “You just need to trust me.”

The other boy did not appreciate the comment. “It bothers me that I can’t be the one that goes with you on these… exploits.” Offense crossed his features. “I understand I would be an impairment to you, that you had to bring Kai for his ability with the sword, but I will get better. I promise. I’m working really hard right now to improve so you can have someone trustworthy at your side.”

Micah hadn’t anticipated that response from Keegan.

It truly took him by surprise. He thought Keegan would be upset that he would even consider extracting revenge. The boy knew the reason Micah disappeared last night, yet here he was, expressing his disenchantment for not accompanying him. It was… unexpected. The boy’s unfiltered determination more so.

“I didn’t know you felt that way,” Micah said quietly.

Keegan scoffed and preoccupied himself with adjusting his sword holster to escape his awkwardness.

“Well I do.” He glanced at Micah. “I wish you’d trust me enough to tell me what’s going on as well.”

“And you will know everything eventually,” Micah reassured. However, most things he did not understand himself. How was he to explain any of it to Keegan? “As you already assumed, Kai and I left the academy last night to look for the man who drugged us with the Dulcis Waters. Unfortunately, by the time we arrived, he was already gone.”

He had no qualms telling Keegan about this, especially when Clarence also attacked him. Micah figured that if he were open about this particular event, it would make up for keeping Keegan in the dark about other things, namely his origins.

“Who was it?” Keegan asked, his eagerness evident.

“His name is Clarence. He is a member of Lord Josiah’s royal guard.” Micah glanced over his shoulder, noticing the other members had yet to leave the training room. “When he came to collect me from Region 20 before term, we got into an altercation and I cut off his dominant hand. This was clearly retribution.”

Keegan mulled over that for quite some time. “And I was just a bystander?”

“It appears that way, yes.”

“And he was gone before you got there.” Keegan frowned. “Do you think Edlen tipped him off?”

Micah blinked, suddenly taken off guard. “Why—why do you believe Kai would do something like that?”
Keegan gazed at him oddly, as if he did not truly understand Micah’s question. “Well he’s a noble. I know how much you distrust and dislike them, Micah. I have to agree with you on that particular perception. Aiden also shares your same beliefs. A lot of us do.”

A lot of us.

There was an odd sensation inside Micah upon hearing Keegan’s words. For a long moment, he didn’t know what to think or how to respond. He recalled the speech he gave to Keegan earlier in Region 20 before term began. Undoubtedly, his words and tone were enough to convey what he truly thought of nobility and aristocrats.

That certainly hadn’t changed, had it?

No, not really.

So why was he taken aback by Keegan’s attempt to align his beliefs with Micah’s own?

Because, he realized, not all nobles were as vile as he would have liked to assume. “Kai is—” Micah paused, grimacing. “Edlen is a part of our team now, Keegan. I don’t truly see him as a noble, but rather as a teammate we need to rely on and to trust until he proves otherwise.”

Keegan inclined his head, pondering something a great deal before he reached out to ruffle Micah’s hair. He ducked down the corridor before Micah could protest. “I know you’re trying to unify everyone, but I still know your reservations on trusting nobility. As I said before, I’m taking steps to get better. I promise I’ll stand at your side, kid.”

Something ugly twisted in Micah’s stomach at the promise.

In a rare act of admiration, Micah called out. “Keegan.” The boy stopped and turned towards him, expectant. “I don’t want you to be my sword. Your strengths lie elsewhere. Just knowing you always have my back is good enough for me.”

Keegan smirked. “But not good enough for me.” He winked in order to hide the bitterness surely bubbling beneath the surface. “I will be your right-hand man sooner than you think.”

This time, Micah could not stifle the exasperated sigh.

Stubborn.

He walked down the opposite corridor, contemplating the boy. Surrounded by a team with very high skill-level, Keegan most likely felt incompetent and pressured to excel at a faster pace than his teammates. Even Aiden, who was also an outskirt student, had a father who’d taught him how to fight. Since the trials, he’d only grown as a warrior and fine-tuned his skills. Though he had a ways to go, he remained levels above Keegan, who was a mere beginner.

A part of Micah felt responsible for the boy’s delicate frame of mind.

As Edlen callously pointed out during their first mission, Micah made an error by selecting Keegan for the gold team. He’d done so out of friendly loyalty, not because he thought Keegan could excel well with the others.

It was something to keep an eye on, lest Keegan push himself too hard.

Sooner than he would have preferred, he arrived at Josiah’s quarters. As he recalled their interaction yesterday, he anxiously straightened his uniform. It was unsurprising their reunion had
been a mess of angry frustration and adrenaline.

And the kiss—well, he wasn’t going to dwell over the action. While pleasant, he knew exactly what Josiah had been feeling, simply because he’d felt the same. There was just something about fighting with the other man, something darkly arousing and persistently infuriating. He hadn’t known what to do with the unresolved tension, so Josiah had decided for the both of them and closed the distance.

He wouldn’t argue against another, similar occurrence.

Realizing he was all but preening his appearance, Micah forced himself to stop with a scowl. Planting his boots firmly next to the closed door, Micah raised his fist and knocked quietly. He didn’t know what to expect from Josiah tonight. Considering they would broach the topic of Sachiel, a mental challenge would undoubtedly take place.

Josiah opened the door, gazing first at him before assessing the empty corridor just over his head.

He pulled the door open further, allowing him entrance. “You’re late,” he said in way of greeting after closing the door.

“I had to run training by myself,” Micah informed, following the older man as he led him into a back room and towards his personal quarters. “Kai’s father is trying to influence him to forgo his education at the academy and enter the political court.”

Josiah led him down a corridor. “Would you consider that a loss?” he inquired without turning around.

“Yes,” Micah replied honestly. “He’s my best fighter. We’ve been able to set aside our differences since our first mission.” Sensing the man’s amusement at the mere mention of the first mission, Micah narrowed his eyes. “I’d like to know what they were rebelling against in Region 5.”

“Feel guilty for taking a life, Ezra?”

“If they were innocents, I’d undeniably feel some sort of regret.”

“No matter their intentions of rebelling, can you truly call them innocents when they made the first move to kill?” Josiah asked. “Lethal action against uniformed Concordia military is an automatic call for execution. Did they or did they not attack you with intentions to kill? Or was it truly a peaceful and diplomatic demonstration?”

Josiah paused in the corridor leading into his personal quarters. He turned and appraised Micah impassively. In turn, Micah kept his own expression schooled as he considered the man’s words.

The man was right in that they’d attacked first. The sixth man had intended to behead Micah when his back was turned.

“You’re saying Calder would allow for peaceful demonstrations?”

“He does,” Josiah confirmed. “But when a group of men band together and shut down businesses for days on end and hold citizens hostage, no matter how friendly they may be toward said hostages, it requires action. When the same group of men band together and cloak their identities and arm themselves with weapons, and subsequently attack military members, it is a rebellion.”

Micah understood the logic, he also found himself agreeing with it. However, what he found most interesting was Josiah’s personal take on the matter. “You clearly agree with Calder on this
subject.”

“Any king, any monarch, would agree with Calder on this subject,” Josiah said firmly. “No matter how much they may dislike each other.”

Clearly, he’d picked up Micah’s intrigue regarding his decision to side with Calder on something—anything—for that matter.

“I do not disagree with the methods the academy instructed us, but I am simply curious to know what their reasons were for rebelling,” Micah said. “There had to be something they expressed.”

Josiah cocked his head to the side and scrutinized Micah closely. “A very prominent and well-liked figure of their village was withholding tax money to the capital. He was in charge of collecting the taxes and kept a large portion for himself over several years, claiming their village deserved far more monetary means than allowed.”

“He was caught.”

Josiah hummed with agreement. “And later sentenced to several years in prison. A few members of the village refused to accept our findings and demanded his release with threatening letters to the capital. When they didn’t receive the response they desired, they decided on a more… eccentric plan of action.”

So they were idiots, Micah deduced with a sinking sensation in his gut.

Threatening letters to the capital? An impromptu rebellion with just fueled rage?

“They weren’t even warriors.”

Orange eyes gazed at him keenly. “They weren’t even proper warriors, no. As I said before, it was a task attainable by the gold team.”

Without another word, the man turned and continued down the corridor.

Micah slowly followed him, contemplating the information given. They could have avoided Wayde’s death entirely if they’d properly trained together even just once or twice. They should have annihilated that group. If they faced the same group today, Micah had no doubt they would succeed where they’d failed weeks ago.

Josiah made a disinterested sound in his throat. “As for your teammate, Mr. Edlen, nobles of such caliber often do not graduate from the academy. They apprentice under their relatives with the intentions of eventually taking their place in court.”

“So I’ve been told.” Micah entered a familiar-looking dining room with the tapestries, the pillars, and the detailed architecture. “I’ve also been told there is… unrest in the court. Would you happen to know what that would be?”

“Are you asking me for inside information?”

“That depends. Are you going to use it against me and then request compensation?”

Josiah smiled with teeth, clearly pleased with the question. “Sit.”

Micah hesitated near his chair, recalling the first time he’d dined with Josiah. It still unsettled him that Josiah insisted he sit first. Maintaining eye contact, Micah sat before the Igni king, disobeying
several protocols in just one motion.

“There is movement in the Terra Kingdom. The stirrings of a civil rebellion.” Josiah watched Micah settle before he sat at the head of the table. “It makes Concordia anxious.”

That gave Micah a heavy, startled pause.

“The Terra Kingdom?” he repeated with sharp, incredulous skepticism. He frowned with deep contemplation, remembering his conversation with Instructor Isla at the beginning of term. “I’ve always assumed they were one of the most peaceful kingdoms. War and rebellions a nonexistence.”

Granted, while he did not know much about them, he knew, as well as most, that something about the Terra Kingdom worked remarkably well for the citizens. But a civil rebellion? For a kingdom normally cloaked in secrecy and passiveness, the civil rebellion must have been a serious conflict for other nations to hear of it.

“Time is typically a catalyst for change, even after centuries of peaceful accord and harmony. Mankind is an evolutionary creature, after all.” Josiah’s tone seemed jaded and weary. “The Terra Kingdom is torn between revolutionizing or remaining stagnant with their old traditions and values.”

“But it hasn’t come to civil war yet.”

“No.” Josiah’s eyes glimmered. “But it may.”

Micah doubted it. It just seemed entirely ironic that they’d have issues now after so long. “And why does a civil war within their own kingdom make Concordia nervous?”

“We are an advanced kingdom.”

Micah mulled over Josiah’s vague comment, easily deducing the unspoken reason. “Those individuals in the Terra Kingdom, who want change and advancement, consider Concordia as means to obtain quick knowledge.” Micah raised an eyebrow. “That doesn’t mean their approach towards us will be hostile with intentions to take. It may merely be curious. Earnest.”

Josiah laughed once.

A dark, bitter-sort of laugh.

“No, their approach may not be hostile, but Concordia is known for being avaricious and pompous. They will not take kindly to the Terra Kingdom’s request for knowledge. After all, we, the old Igni Empire, only wanted water.”

And that’s all it came down to, wasn’t it?

There were rumors of why the Unda and Igni war truly began, truths and facts buried underneath wild speculations. However, Ember and Josiah both lived the war and they both knew the true reason behind the war’s origins. The Igni people discovered a severe depletion of water and considered the Unda Kingdom their only possible answer.

Only, the Unda capital denied their cry for help.

As a result, the Igni people initiated war by delivering the first set of casualties.
“Now we have so much water, we take it for granted.” Josiah’s finger dipped into his water glass and flicked it, as if disgusted. “Though we lost the war, we got what we desperately needed. Consequently, we are the inferior beings in a pretentious kingdom, forever haunted and reminded of our humility and failure.”

Despite the wretched outcome of the war, Micah grew amused at Josiah’s ominous features, reminded of a fallen warrior who would never recover from his defeat, who would never tolerate kneeling with submission.

“Your hands were out, begging, beseeching.” He earned Josiah’s instant refocus. “Unda would not simply give you what you wanted without first teaching you your place.” Micah smirked. “Though cruel and unjust, it is an ingenious political maneuver. It was their resource. They didn’t need to share. They would make sure you came to grudgingly accept that fact.”

Something akin to sinful pleasure churned in Josiah’s eyes as he stared at Micah. Fixated.

“My question is…” Micah shifted in his seat, trying to peer behind the man’s barriers and see that brilliant, cunning mind. “What do you plan to do about that, Josiah? I’ve experienced the humbling sensation of humiliation and it did not sit well with me until I sought retribution. I imagine you are just the same.”

He knew Josiah would not take endless humiliation from the Unda people in stride. He was scheming up something, always scheming.


Micah deflated, unsurprised to find amusement in the other man’s gaze as he denied him what he wanted. Someday, Micah would find out what Josiah had in mind for Calder. However, in all actuality, Calder was probably one-step ahead of Micah in determining what the Igni lord had planned.

Withholding his frustration for another time, he gazed down at his plate and the uninviting pasta. The white sauce was nearly solid and the meat appeared lifeless, pale. It churned his stomach.

“It’s cold.”

“You’re late.”

“Are you not a fire Elemental? Is heating a plate of food a trying feat?”

“An unnecessary waste of energy.”

Micah exhaled in amusement, bypassing the food and the wine to grab the glass of water. “I’m not hungry anyway.”

Josiah hummed. “You came for the company.”

“I came for Sachiel.”

As predicted, that got a rise out of the Igni lord. The man’s shoulders stiffened just barely, though the temperature in the room warmed significantly. Micah felt the migraine crawl up the nape of his neck and thud noticeably behind his eyes. He had assumed his headaches were a result of Josiah’s
power, his temper.

This only proved it.

The man’s face was a mask of casual indifference, though his orange eyes were alight with fire-like ire. “Yes, let’s talk about him.”

Unexplainably, Micah grew eager at the man’s precarious tone and the way his anger beat warmly across his face. He clenched his teeth and tried to fit the grin, though he realized he failed when Josiah focused intently on his mouth.

“Amused, child?”

“More or less,” Micah admitted quietly. “I wasn’t aware Sachiel intimidated you enough to send him away. You essentially showed your hand and your weakness.”

“You’ve inherited his unhealthy obsession and he is too bold with you.”

“I find him fascinating,” Micah confessed, watching as the orange eyes narrowed. “He is rather open about his intentions and does not shy away from his corruptive nature.” He paused. “But he is a simple man. Not nearly as complex and challenging as you are.”

“Flattery will not bring him back,” Josiah warned.

“How did you even know about our conversation?” Micah demanded. “You were with your puppets at the time. You couldn’t have known.”

“I have eyes everywhere.”

That did not surprise Micah in the least. Sachiel warned him of the exact same thing that night. “Clearly not everywhere at all times,” he countered, speaking specifically of the situation with Clarence and the Dulcis Waters.

The man’s lips pursed with displeasure. “I cannot watch you at all times.” He reached for his wine, caressing the stem, but not picking it up. “I explicitly warned Sachiel not to step over the line and he chose to disregard my warning. A suitable punishment was in order.”

“You’ve established your control and authority, Uncle,” Micah said firmly. “Now I’m asking you to bring him back.”

Is your hand out, begging? Beseeching?” Josiah inquired lazily.

Micah faltered at the word usage, secretly delighted the man used his earlier comment in this context. It fit, certainly. His hand was out begging and Josiah would only comply once Micah knew his place. Just like the Unda people and the Igni citizens. While Micah already acknowledged the man’s authority, he could sense there was something else.

“What do you want in return?”

Josiah’s fingers paused in their ministrations and his eyes glimmered. “Your chastity.”

That gave Micah pause. “My chastity?” He laughed through his startled disbelief, his whole body flushing hot with the insinuations. Josiah wanted his sexual loyalty. “I think, in this situation, a better word to use is celibacy.”

The older man did not appear amused. Far from it. “You are not a virgin.”
Micah grimaced. “No. But you knew that already, didn’t you?”

Josiah watched him silently. “Who?”

The back of his neck prickled unpleasantly and something tightened in his stomach at the man’s tone. “That’s not important.”

“On the contrary,” Josiah whispered.

“You don’t know them. It doesn’t matter.”

“Them.” Josiah repeated the word as if he were a predator roused upon a single command. “Who?” he asked again.

“It’s something I’d rather not relive, if that’s okay with you,” he said, forcing out sarcasm and forcing his mind away from that particular memory. It was not his first time that he recalled, but rather the first time he’d thought he’d lose his virginity. By force. “Unless you want to tell me all about your past liaisons.”

At Josiah’s look, Micah realized the man was about to do just that.

“Actually, I don’t want to know about them,” he clarified hurriedly. He didn’t want to know about Josiah’s previous trysts. It didn’t sit well with him for reasons he did not want to explore.

Josiah lifted a hand and waved it carelessly as if to tell him they were insignificant conquests. “Who was this man?”

“I lost my virginity to a woman,” Micah stated matter-of-factly.

“Perhaps,” Josiah mused, gazing at him intently. “But something else has riled you up. Not just the memory of an awkward first time with a woman, but a memory forced away to the deepest recess of your mind. Am I right?”

“Celibacy,” Micah started firmly, bringing them back around to the intended topic. Josiah just wouldn’t drop it. “You want my word I will remain celibate. In return, you agree to bring Sachiel back?”

Josiah’s eyes unfocused just above his head. Suddenly, there was a slight tightening around his mouth and the headache behind Micah’s eyes grew nearly unbearable. Micah hissed in pain and cradled his head.

“Was it forced?” the question was asked with deadly calm.

Micah choked. “You—”

His hands dropped from his head to grip the edge of the table. Fury caused his hands to tremble and he stood up, unable to reign his control. He remembered Keegan. He remembered Josiah having the ability to pry information from unwilling sources. “When you start prying around in my mind, we’re done.”

Micah moved to the door, his strides stiff and angry. As he turned the doorknob, he realized it had somehow locked, though it had no sort of locking functionality on the handle.

His palm splayed the door and he leaned forward, breathing steadily.

Gradually, when he knew he salvaged enough control to act like a civilized human being, he turned
and stared at the man at the table.

Josiah continued to sit undisturbed with his back facing Micah. He sipped at his wine and swirled the glass languidly. “We’re not done,” the man countered self-assuredly. “Simply because I cannot read minds. I’ve also told you that I would never use my persuasion to coerce information from you.”

Micah stalked toward the man, feeling caged.

Feeling trapped.

“You are an open book to me,” Josiah declared serenely. “I don’t need mind control to know you were taken advantage of.”

Bending at the waist, Micah settled just inches from the other man, peering at his averted features. He breathed in the other man’s spicy aroma. Filled his lungs with it. “I wasn’t taken advantage of,” he declared fervently, strongly. “I was very young. It would have been my first time, forced, yes, but I was strong enough to defend myself.”

Josiah’s lashes lowered, a seemingly peaceful gesture, before he moved. His hand quickly grabbed Micah’s face, holding him captive by hooking his fingers into his skin. They were both at awkward angles, though that didn’t stop Josiah from tilting his head back and gazing down at him.


His eyes slanted with decadent pleasure and Micah subconsciously followed suit. Any other man in his position would rear away and tremor with the uncertainty of such immorality and corruptness. Only, for Micah, the man’s sadistic glee became his own, entwining through his very conscience and alighting parts of him he never knew existed.

It was a dark sensation, Micah acknowledged, and he bathed in it readily. There was more to Josiah, he knew. The man wore a polite veil to hide his true depravity. He desperately wanted to pull back the well-sown fabric and peek at the restrained and bound monster.

One day.

One day he would see that darkness in whole.

“Just a dagger through the chest,” Micah admitted quietly. “I watched him bleed out.”

He paused. His eyes shuttered as he remembered the irregular spurts of crimson spewing from the chest cavity upon each dying inhalation. That color, though. That deep, fathomless crimson—nearly onyx—forever remained his favorite hue.

Josiah exhaled slowly, delighted, and applied pressure to Micah’s jaw. It was enough to bring him to his knees before the Igni king. The long-fingered hand removed itself from his face and curled greedily around his throat instead.

“For what purpose do you want Sachiel, child?”

Micah wanted an ally. An ally against both Calder and Josiah. Though the prospect of turning Sachiel away from Calder was challenging, he knew he could seduce him to his side.

He didn’t tell any of this to Josiah.
“I want to learn what he has offered me,” he settled for a half-truth instead.

“The Unda form.” It was not a question. “Your lessons will be inside the academy walls and I will monitor you closely while in his presence. No excursions outside together without my permission.”

Micah nodded once to show his consensus. “I want you to train me as well,” he requested. “I know I’m not an Elemental, but I’d like to test my boundaries with my immunity to the elements. Ember tried, but she was out of practice and ill.”

He couldn’t conjure ice by himself.

During showers, he tried to turn the water into ice but found he couldn’t even drop the temperature. He knew, based off previous training with his mother, he could only turn an Elemental’s power into ice as long as it was already manipulated. Moreover, though he was attracted to Josiah —his mind in particular—he could not recognize something foreign that indicated this man was his Chosen. Recognizing one’s other half was an ability belonging only to Elementals. Briefly, he wondered how potent the sensation was to Josiah.

What, inside child-Ezra, identified with the man all those years ago?

“But training would ruin your determination to avoid me,” Josiah mocked.

So the man had noticed his avoidance.

Frustrated, albeit feeling a bit silly for his attempts of eluding the man, Micah twisted out of Josiah’s grasp and stood from the floor. He towered over Josiah, noticing the man’s rather unperturbed expression at the shift of ground.

“Is that a yes? Or a no?”

Josiah lifted a hand to cover his mouth, his eyes alight with amusement. “Your lessons with me are a definite. However, the when is still indefinite.” Upon seeing Micah’s darkening expression, Josiah tutted. “You and I are due to have intense lessons. You are not quite ready for them. Learn what you can with Sachiel and then we will talk again.” He inclined his head towards the door. “Go. If you hurry, you can catch a warm dinner.”

Micah considered the man before him, wondering if he should press the subject of lessons or address the topic of Clarence. Josiah promised him the captain’s life. Surely, if the man had possession of Clarence, he would not hide the fact.

In the end, Micah turned and left the room.

Overall, he was pleased with how the night turned out.

Besides his moment of crippling weakness as he recalled a memory buried long ago, he’d held his own against Josiah. It was becoming easier to interact with the Igni lord. Whether that was because he was growing stronger—both mentally and emotionally—or because he’d become accustomed to Josiah, he was undeniably pleased with his progress.

He remembered their first interaction on the train to Concordia capital.

Back then, he’d been out of his depth, buried beneath layers of his mother’s anger and beneath his concern for the fate of her life and the life of Idris. After pushing away worries he could not control, and finding his own identity, it proved to be the answer in grabbing hold of his unsteady surroundings and conquering them assertively.
As he walked the corridor, he mulled over the unrest in the Terra Kingdom, his teammates, and the possibility of losing yet another member. If they lost Kai Edlen to the royal court, Micah doubted they’d stay the top ranking team for long.

They just weren’t ready to function without Kai.

A new training regimen would be vital. Creating a regimen that covered the holes of two missing members would take time and creativity. Perhaps he needed to speak to Instructor Candace about the possibility of allotting them more time before they received another mission. Or more likely, at least one member from another team, which, he supposed, would be equally jarring to his team, who had steadily grown familiar with each other.

With his mind heavy with possibilities, Micah entered the dining hall.

Things would progress naturally. It would be best to let things take their course without too much interference.
Immunity Seventeen

Chapter Notes

Thank you, Selethe, for editing the chapter!! Any mistakes you see are mine!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

17. Chapter Seventeen

Their eyes were haunted.

Jaded.

For weeks, Sachiel stared into their lifeless eyes, fathoming and speculating how a living soul could appear so dead. So dead, yet still harboring flames of vile immorality. Dead eyes were set upon faces so dirty, race became ambiguous and the level of depravity committed became the only way to identify each man and woman.

Lord Josiah had assigned him to Region 0.

Region 0, and all its glory, contained prisoners of both Igni and Unda descent within its mighty walls. Personally, if Sachiel had his way, he’d eliminate the pathetic souls who committed crimes messily enough for others to witness and execute a prosecution. Truly, who hasn’t committed a crime? A mere murder?

Nobles evaded punishment frequently, though he supposed they were smarter than the commoners inside those walls. Smarter and far more prestigious. Unfair, certainly, but the kingdom couldn’t have criminals running amok, could they? There had to be limitations.

Region 0 had deplorable living situations, yet they had a semblance of freedom. Freedom through manual labor. They cultured crops and livestock and built a great deal of things for the people of Concordia. As King Calder said, it was more productive having working prisoners than wasting capable hands by hanging them at the noose.

Still, it cost valuable resources keeping them caged inside those walls. Security, gold, food, and manpower all poured into Region 0.

Lord Josiah claimed he wanted Sachiel to assess the situation in Region 0, to affirm things were running smoothly under the new warden. However, once the three-day assignment turned into several weeks, Sachiel recognized the assignment as punishment for his intimate conversation with Prince Ezra.

The food was terrible, the military accommodations were common, and Sachiel constantly had to separate petty quarrels. Such ugly surroundings were unacceptable. He could have entreated to King Calder. The Concordia King would have immediately removed him from Region 0. However, Sachiel waited patiently.

He wanted to see how long it would take Ezra to recognize the sway he held over Josiah. Currently,
as he stood gazing into the enchanting, pale eyes, Sachiel wondered if, even now, the boy truly comprehended how much Josiah doted on him.

_Doted._

Sachiel knew the Igni man would fall to his knees for the boy. Yet, with that knowledge, Sachiel grew apprehensive. Lord Josiah would surely recognize his behavior as a weakness and try to level the playing field. Just as long as Ezra emerged from the other side, breathing and bleeding, Josiah would not be above putting the boy through misery.

“What, exactly, did you agree to give Lord Josiah in return for my homecoming?”

Ezra’s eyebrow quirked, just barely. “We haven’t finalized the details just yet.”

The young man was such a pretty sight to come back to.

Sachiel arrived at the capital several days earlier. Just yesterday, one of Josiah’s puppets contacted him and requested he report to the academy to train Ezra. He was not a fool. With lessons situated in the main arena of the academy, Josiah, or one of his henchmen, had many areas to observe undetected. The stands were massive and the observational windows above were tinted and obscured.

Josiah would not allow him total leeway with Calder’s royal heir.

Understandable, yes.

Ideal? Certainly not.

Standing across from Ezra, he contemplated the boy. Dressed in his training uniform, he appeared at ease and prepared to absorb his teachings. Sachiel immediately focused on the black braid hanging forlornly from the cadet’s sword.

“I heard about Wayde,” Sachiel said hollowly. “A pity.”

It truly was. Wayde, like Kai, possessed high standing in the aristocratic world. Both of them had different ideals, different opinions from the norm. They’d bonded since childhood over their distaste of their fathers. Together, they would have made the political court _tremble._

Ezra shifted. “An unnecessary death,” he murmured quietly. “But a death that was not meaningless. It served a purpose.”

“A purpose that shouldn’t have been needed in the first place.” Sachiel stepped towards Ezra. “I was told Kai ignored your attempts to unify the team for weeks. It is disappointing to learn he needed a death of a good friend to remedy his ways.”

Indeed, when Sachiel returned to the capital, Seaton Edlen informed him that Wayde’s father went on a rampage after his son’s death. The man wanted the names of Wayde’s teammates. He wanted revenge. Moreover, he wanted revenge against Josiah for allowing a mission of such magnitude.

Sachiel reminded Seaton that Ervin Devereux spoke of treason by threatening Josiah—even in such context. He also reminded the man that cadets were legally bound to serve the military as long as their names were on the enlistment documents. They pledged their lives. Their freedom. All for Concordia and their military. Missions were a normal occurrence.

Sachiel then learned Devereux’s temper stifled after a surprise visit from Kai Edlen. Apparently,
the boy had approached Devereux and personally shouldered the blame of Wayde’s death.

The boy’s maturity these past few weeks impressed Sachiel greatly. Pleased him beyond measure.

During his run-in with Kai at the Edlen manor, the boy also told him a few interesting things about Ezra—Micah.

“Kai had his reasons.” Ezra was a picture of calm.

“Fear of alienation in the political courts by choosing you over his noble peers? Yes.” Sachiel studied the boy’s blue-blooded features, trying to engrain them forever in his memory.

“Nonetheless, what happened with Wayde further alienated him.” He shook his head, desiring to change the subject. It was morbid and it did not fit the mood he wished for their first lesson.

“Kai also informed me that Lord Josiah’s captain attacked you with Dulcis Waters.”

Ezra excelled at appearing bored and impassive, though he also possessed an aura of tantalizing mystery. He’d be a master in court. Sachiel vowed to stay close enough to see Ezra grace the politicians with his charismatic presence. His angelic features would fool them. The boy possessed a sharp tongue and he was particularly intelligent. Considering his parentage, his ancestry, really, it did not surprise Sachiel that Ezra was a natural born politician.

Sachiel just needed to educate him a bit more. Take away the outskirt-region naivety and give him a taste of the corruptness of the capital.

On the other hand…

Perhaps Sachiel was just as fooled with that pretty face as any other. After all, Lord Josiah was Ezra’s uncle and Chosen. They most likely interacted often. Did Ezra possess far more depravity than Sachiel presumed? He had seen a glimpse of something sinister weeks ago at the academy’s garden maze.

He hungered to see it again. Craved it, even.

Such a sentiment was often beneath him.

“Yes. A minor grudge. An act of retribution.” Ezra pressed his lips together and offered a semblance of a smile. It was deliciously dark. “I took his hand. He wanted to drown my lungs. A fair trade, I imagine.”

“Kai claimed he was gone by the time you arrived at Lord Josiah’s base.” He narrowed his gaze, watching the boy closely. “I assume you are upset at his disappearance.”

Ezra watched him just as closely, perhaps noticing his sly insinuating. “Josiah is hunting for him.”

Just as Sachiel assumed. Unknowns to both Ezra and Kai, Clarence was presently at the capital and still serving under Josiah as his captain. Fascinating. Obviously, Sachiel was not privy to all the information, but he wondered what Ezra’s reaction would be when he found out his Chosen was keeping truths from him.

No matter. He’d see soon enough.

He looped a single finger around the edge of Ezra’s belt and pulled the boy forward. Subtly, he inhaled the young man’s scent, finding pleasure in such a trivial act.
The boy smelt of fire. Of heat.

Very faint, but identifiable.

Such a scent was painfully familiar to Sachiel during the war. He boasted the ability of smelling the fire Elementals long before they made an appearance. Undoubtedly, the faint traces on Ezra were a result of Lord Josiah’s smothering. Sachiel chuckled under his breath as he unhooked the prince’s sword holster.

Maliciously, he wondered how Josiah would maintain his greedy claim on Ezra when the boy no longer attended the academy.

After all, Calder would be most pleased to have his son again after so long. Unlike with Ladon, Calder’s bastard son, whom temporarily reserved the position of an uncrowned and undeclared heir, Sachiel doubted Calder would allow Ezra to attend the academy. Someone conceived for such a vital position as Ezra’s would be best kept protected.

Upon brief deliberation, Sachiel supposed, with being Ezra’s Chosen, Josiah would find no qualms maintaining his proximity to the royal heir. No matter Calder’s gripes.

Ezra tilted his head, his gaze calculating as he silently surveyed Sachiel removing his sword holster.

“You will not need this for quite some time.” He threw the sword across the mats and turned his back. “Are you familiar with the staff?”

Picking up the weapon, he threw it at Ezra.

The boy caught it expertly and adjusted it correctly.

Yes. He knew.

“Unda warriors prefer fighting with the staff. We will get you accustomed to the form before starting you on the sword.” He raked his eyes down the young man’s agile stature. “I don’t anticipate it will be long.” Whomever trained the boy did so well. “I will test your reflexes and your speed.” Sachiel grabbed his own staff, eager to spar. “Other than your fighting style mirroring Lord Josiah’s own, I don’t know much about your boundaries. Your weaknesses.”

Originality was another reason Sachiel wanted to teach the royal heir.

As a child of both Unda and Igni descent, and as a necessary bridge between both communities, it would not be enough for him to emulate just one race. He needed an advantage over his uncle and father. As of now, the boy could merely pass as a young Josiah.

Surely, both Calder and Josiah would prey upon this particular fact.

That was unacceptable.

Sachiel vowed to teach the boy the importance of using his diverse background to his advantage. He needed to be stronger than Calder and Josiah. He needed to master both styles and create something new.

Something unpredictable.

Ezra twirled the staff in his hand and lowered into a defensive stance. His pale eyes sparkled with a
sensation Sachiel knew all too well. Eagerness. Anticipation. Sachiel knew the royal heir would be bloodthirsty in combat mode. He heard it from Kai and he saw evidence of it himself. In answer, Sachiel’s fingers tightened on his staff, trying not to let the male temptress distract him.

He had a reputation to uphold, after all. He needed to knock the royal heir off his feet to show the boy he was worthy enough to be his master.

As he feinted and lunged, he realized the task might not be so easy.

Ezra was no typical student.

Ezra was shorter, though as Sachiel went underneath to block the boy’s— the young man’s— overhead strike, he had to direct his eyes upward. Ezra gazed down at him, his eyes half-lidded with controlled predatory glee.

Sachiel felt his pulse speed up as he hastily redirected his approach.

Not a student, but an opponent.

The young man was fast. Quick. While Sachiel’s unfamiliar attack and fighting style took the other man off-guard, he had a rapid recovery and a fierce stubbornness. Energy. Quiet passion. Sachiel couldn’t quite remember experiencing such battle hunger from any other. The Igni form was ingrained in every aspect of the younger man’s movements.

Sachiel was very familiar with the Igni style. He knew how to defend himself against it. Yet, as he countered, Ezra demonstrated an unheard of resiliency.

He’d aimed to knock the man off his feet.

Only, Ezra was like a feral cat.

Graceful and determined to land on his feet each and every time.

Sachiel’s slammed his staff against the back of Ezra’s legs, knocking the young man off his feet. For good measure, he aimed a hit at Ezra’s chest, hoping to catch him in the air and put him down for good. Only, Ezra blocked the attack to his chest and determinedly twisted his body in the air, landing on one foot and pivoting around to reinstate his stable footing. Sachiel released a low breath and distanced himself, steadily circling the young man.

A miniature Josiah, indeed.

Just as frustratingly persistent as his uncle. Just as tenacious as his father.

A mess of proud and thoroughbred genetics. Poor boy.

Sachiel adjusted his hold on his staff, amused despite himself. “Who was your instructor?”

Ezra did not watch him circle, yet his set shoulders indicated he paid special attention to Sachiel’s every move. “His name is Atesh Idris.”

Alarm washed Sachiel cold.

He hadn’t thought the man survived. His steps faltered for just a moment, though he recovered lest Ezra take notice of his surprise.

“Lord Josiah’s man. A very infamous warrior during the war,” Sachiel informed with reluctant
deference. He had noticed the distinct pride in the young man’s tone upon speaking his master’s name. Clearly, Ezra thought highly of the man. Who wouldn’t? “Many claim he taught Lord Josiah how to fight as well. It is no wonder you share the same fighting style as your uncle.”

“Josiah trusted him, then,” Ezra stated.

Sachiel eyed the royal heir skeptically, wondering how much the man truly knew. While Ezra did a fabulous job veiling his intrigue, Sachiel couldn’t help but to sense palpable waves of curiosity hit him across the face. Was it supposed to stay private? He did not mind infuriating Lord Josiah by speaking and mingling with Ezra, but when it came to past betrayals, he acknowledged it was not his place.

Unfortunately, for Ezra, Lord Josiah probably wasn’t too forthcoming with details.

“I do not know much about Idris and Lord Josiah,” Sachiel informed.

Ezra slowly looked at him from over his shoulder. Other than intense scrutiny, Sachiel could not discern any sort of emotion on the young man’s expression. He tried not to shift under the stare, somehow feeling as if he were being judged, as if his skin peeled back to reveal layer by layer for proper inspection.

“Do you truly not know much about the situation?” Ezra inquired quietly. “Or has Josiah successfully tucked your tail between your legs?”

Sachiel stared.

Then he preened.

Oh, the young man was lovely.

“Come.” Sachiel adjusted his staff. “We are not through sparring.”

Ezra swung his staff and lunged at him. Remaining cool and collected in face of the other man’s furious and impressive attacks, Sachiel quickly took hold of the situation. He’d gotten a feel for Ezra’s strengths and weaknesses. Now it was time to take the upper hand and move forward.

He caught Ezra across the ribs unawares and disarmed him.

Almost too easily.

Pain rippled across Ezra’s face as he went down hard. As his hand reached for his chest, his long-sleeved tunic pulled back marginally, allowing Sachiel a glimpse of red, healing flesh across his wrists, just above his gloves. Ezra shot to his feet within seconds of landing, appraising Sachiel with a renowned sense of respect and appreciation.

Sachiel, however, continued to stare at the mat, his mind processing what he’d just witnessed. Kai told him Ezra saved him from the brunt of a fire Elemental’s flames by simply tackling him to the ground and covering him. Moreover, the attack with the Dulcis Waters happened long enough ago that a water Elemental would have healed all damage done. All wounds.

His mind immediately placed the pieces together.

Varuna, Sachiel cursed the god with true surprise.

Ezra was immune to the elements.
“I would have dropped far earlier if we were using swords,” Ezra admitted, his eyes appraising Sachiel with interest. “I suppose you are worth keeping around.”

Sachiel refocused on Ezra immediately, holding his tongue from accusations, questions, and foolish remarks. The speculations entering his mind were rather wild, however. He was brimming with curiosity. He wanted to know more.

“It is you who is worth keeping around,” Sachiel managed to say.

Ezra’s eyes narrowed just marginally. “Is something wrong?”

Smart boy. “Everything is just fine. Remarkable, even.”

Indeed, they were just fine. For once, Sachiel could not foresee the future, could not anticipate what was to come. What should have unnerved him, simply excited him.

* * * *

Micah walked into his team’s quarters, only to find a bottle of liquor stuffed quickly underneath the bed. Six faces peered at him innocently and he stared back, not knowing whether to enter the room or retreat and study in the library.

This did not look promising.

“It’s only Egan.” Kai grabbed the bottle from underneath the bed and motioned towards the door with an impatient hand. “You can shut the door, desert rat.”

Viktor snickered and held out a glass. “We’re celebrating.”

He should have retreated when he had the chance.

Instead, Micah closed the door behind him. “What is there to possibly celebrate?” He didn’t mean for his tone to be abrasive, though it had been a long night and his chest burned near his ribs. While the team got along far better than originally, they still had a long ways to go. Nowhere near the celebratory mark.

“Wayde’s birthday,” Cain informed sadly.

Micah watched as Kai poured a small amount of amber liquid into a glass before sliding it across the floor. Micah stared down at the offering before looking up and locking eyes with the blond noble. Tonight was the first time Kai graced them with their presence in over a week.

Kai lifted his glass in a silent toast before taking a sip.

“Plus Kai is leaving us.”

Micah narrowed his sights on Viktor as the boy tipped back the liquid, a chaser to his loud revelation.

A silence hung in the air after the admission and Micah realized they were all looking towards him, anticipating his reaction. They’d already known. Talia sat on a low bunkbed, near the circle of men lounging on the ground. Next to her sat a glass of untouched liquor. She clutched a textbook.
as if she wanted to absorb it, though her attention was focused intently on Micah.

He sighed and grabbed the glass at his feet. “And we are… celebrating his departure?”

Kai leaned against Talia’s bed. “We’re celebrating Wayde. I’m not leaving until the end of term. No need to get all choked up just yet.”

Micah bypassed Keegan and settled on the mattress next to Talia. She stiffened but did not protest his proximity. It was frustrating how reserved she was with the team. Though Cain was just as quiet, Micah knew Talia carried something on her shoulder. Perhaps with time, she’d soften.

“So you’ve decided to help your father in court.”

In anticipation of a civil uprising with the Terra Kingdom. The speculation was still hard to swallow for Micah. It disappointed him, really. Here, he thought he’d uncovered the secret to a long-lasting, peaceful community. He supposed he could monitor the situation through Josiah. It was a relatively safe topic for them to discuss and it had the potential to be educational.

He also imagined Josiah would be upfront about the Terra Kingdom, unlike other topics, such as Idris. No matter. Sachiel proved to know something. If Micah could somehow break Sachiel down, he could find out Idris’ past discretions.

Kai smirked. “My father said my reputation has already suffered enough during my first term at the academy. He can’t imagine me staying for all three years.” He gazed down at his glass. “I agreed to attend court with him if I could finish the fall term. Becoming active in politics is something I do want to explore. It is sooner than I imagined, but it will do.”

Viktor took another swig of liquor, his face pinched and grey. He was clearly upset with the news, as was Cain, who mulled somberly at his side. Keegan and Aiden shrugged as Micah looked their way.

“I heard Councilman Sachiel is teaching you the Unda form,” Kai said. Perhaps it was his way of changing the subject. He accomplished the task brilliantly as all eyes refocused on Micah. “He told me today at the manor.”

Viktor snorted. “Tread carefully with Sachiel, Micah.”

Here, the boy winked.

Kai turned venomous eyes in Viktor’s direction. “Don’t disrespect him,” he reprimanded sharply. “He’s a good man. A very respectable master and combative warrior.”

“I’m not disrespecting him,” Viktor protested lamely. “But you knew all about Sachiel before he started training you. I think Micah should know about him before he places too much trust in the man.”

At the mention of gossip, Aiden eagerly leaned forward. “What about him?”

Normally not one to participate in gossip, Micah found himself interested in hearing more. He hadn’t thought Sachiel had any sort of taint to his name. Aristocrats clearly respected the man enough to hire him to teach their esteemed heirs. According to Sachiel himself, Calder had even hired him to tutor him—Ezra—as a young child. He’d also instructed Ladon.

Kai and Viktor shared a look, the former severe and the latter a bit too tipsy.
“Just that he fiercely despises women. Finds them vile. He—”

“I think that’s a bit extreme, don’t you think?” Kai interrupted harshly.

“I think it’s a fair and reasonable observation.” All eyes turned to Talia, who’d surprisingly sided with Viktor. Closing her book, she sat up, clearly passionate about the current topic.

“Talia,” Kai said somberly. “It’s not like that.”

“Sachiel comes from a long line of aristocrats,” Talia began, ignoring Kai’s attempted placations. “Before the war, he never showed much interest in settling down with a respectable noblewoman. Social circles claimed he had scandalous affairs with married men and young, notable warriors. At the time, he was single, so no one truly ostracized him for his behavior.”

Keegan snorted.

Micah couldn’t exactly blame him. It sounded silly.

“After the war, Sachiel became infamous for his skills. He returned a war hero and a legend. Yet, even that wasn’t enough for his father.” Talia grimaced. “Like many other nobles, the head of the family will refuse an heir the inheritance if they do not marry into a respectable line. So, Sachiel found himself a very influential woman despite his interests lying elsewhere.”

Here, she looked pointedly at Micah.

He assumed she implied Sachiel preferred men to women. Nothing too damning about that. Micah found he mirrored those sentiments and society was not harsh on same gender relations.

“Even before they married, many knew how Sachiel felt about women. He found little to appreciate and he often made his opinion very clear during social events.” She paused. “Rumor has it that his wife continued to miscarry. After years of trying, she finally succeeded in carrying full term. It was at that time Sachiel’s father passed away. He gave everything to Sachiel, pleased to see his son securing an heir.”

Her tone was bitter, derisive, as if it was a personal wrong against her.

“As she went into labor, she gave birth to a stillborn.” Talia looked at Kai. “Records indicate Sachiel’s wife died in childbirth. Others claim Sachiel killed her, finding no point keeping a woman around who couldn’t accomplish her one duty. Childbearing. He hasn’t remarried since and he returned to his promiscuous ways.”

“And just as Talia mentioned, it is gossip, rumors, and speculation,” Kai said.

“Come off it,” Viktor insulted. “He never denies it. Everyone knows it’s true. And Micah better be aware of it considering…”

Micah raised his eyebrows. “Considering?”

Viktor flushed and shrugged, grabbing for the bottle of booze.

Only, Kai snatched it away from his groping hand. “Considering Micah is handsome? And Sachiel would have his wicked way with him?” He sneered at Viktor. “I think you’ve had more than enough booze tonight.”

“Shut up, Kai!” Viktor’s face turned brick red with humiliation when Keegan and Aiden burst out
laughing. “Anyone who doesn’t think Micah is attractive is obviously lying!”

Kai laughed loudly and Micah took his first sip of the whiskey.

He had a headache.

The story about Sachiel’s past was intriguing and it truly sounded like something the man would do. Though it was unfortunate, it did not change Micah’s perception of the man. At all. He always knew Sachiel harbored something sinister. Who was he to judge based on gossip and speculation? Perhaps none of it was true. Perhaps they were half-truths buried beneath exaggerated fables.

“Why do you always wear those?” Viktor suddenly asked.

Micah slowly lowered his glass, noticing the boy’s attention fixated on his fingerless gloves. From the corner of his eye, he saw Keegan shift uncomfortably.

“You’re full of energy tonight, Viktor,” Micah drawled.

“Probably not a fashion statement. They are ratty and need of replacing. And I notice you wear them under the academy gloves,” Kai concluded, squinting at Micah smugly as he sided with Viktor. “We’ve told you about Sachiel, I think you can at least give us a few things about yourself, Egan. No one but Flint knows anything personal about you.”

They were all interested. All of them watched him keenly.

What a silly thing to be interested over.

Micah laughed once and unfastened a single glove despite his internal reservations and self-consciousness. With a ridiculous show of false bravado, he held up his hand, showing them all the marred and ugly flesh. He tried to avoid looking at his hands whenever possible, but in the light of their rooms, they looked even more hideous than he remembered.

“Is this what you were losing sleep over? Why I wear gloves?”

“Wicked!” Aiden gushed, standing up and running over. “You were burned by a fire Elemental, weren’t you?” He grabbed Micah’s hand, not noticing the flinch, and studied the pale and shiny scars across his skin. “Judging by the age of the scars, it happened a long time ago!”

It was easier to agree to Aiden’s conclusion than to explain that he absorbed his mother’s burns inflicted by Josiah. Staring at the scars, he suddenly felt marked —branded—by the man.

“Was it your father?” Viktor wondered. “Your mother was Unda, wasn’t she?”

“Viktor,” Kai scolded with exasperation. “What dramatic episode are you implying?”

“My father is Unda and my mother is Igni.” Micah pulled his hand back from Aiden’s awed examination. “And no, the scars were not from either of my parents.” Indirectly, yes.

Viktor deflated as Micah destroyed his illusory suppositions. “Well? You made it sound as if they are both alive. What are their names? I hardly think there is an Unda man living in Region 20.”

Micah could not withhold an exasperated sigh this time.

He caught Kai’s eye, noticing the deep contemplation across the boy’s face as he observed the scars on his hands. The boy witnessed the flames dance off him during their first mission together and relentlessly questioned him about it. Seeing the scars on Micah’s hands would set him back
from discovering the truth. At least for quite some time.

“What about you, Viktor?” Keegan suddenly intervened. “What’s your story?”

“Me?” Viktor ran a hand through his short, choppy blond hair. “Well, I’m the fourth and youngest. Both my parents are from the highbrow nobility.” He flashed a grin. “That’s all.” He looked back at Micah. “No mysterious parentage or scars to boast about.”

“Nothing to hide, except a crush on your team captain,” Kai leered.

“And a determination to stand apart from his older siblings,” Micah guessed, looking pointedly at the boy’s short hair and permanently askew uniform.

Viktor grimaced but did not deny it.

“What about you, Kai?” Keegan asked. Either Keegan was truly interested or he wanted to continue to direct the conversation away from Micah’s upbringing. A fond smile crossed Micah’s lips as he considered his loyal ally. The boy was too good to him.

Kai exhaled and tipped a bit more whiskey into his glass. “Only child with overbearing parents. Same with Cain.”

Cain frowned. “It’s my mother who is especially overprotective.” He pushed his glass towards Kai, silently asking for a refill. “It’s why I entered the academy so late. She didn’t want to extract her talons from me. My father participated in the war, so he’s pleased I’m here.”

“Aiden?”

Aiden shrugged, falling back to the floor next to Keegan. “Eldest of two boys. My mother died when we were young. So my father and grandparents raised us.” He looked at Keegan. “You’re the eldest, yeah?”

“Eldest of five sons.”

Viktor whistled. “And I thought I was the most unfortunate…”

“Talia?” Micah inquired.

When the Unda students suddenly stilled and stiffened at his question, he turned to look at the girl next to him, noticing a sullen expression across her pert features. Then again, when wasn’t Talia upset about something?

“I am the eldest,” she replied tightly. “And I have a younger half-brother and a half-sister.” Talia grabbed the book again, using it as a shield. “What about you, Micah? Did your parents have any other children?”

Micah instantly thought of Ladon. He smiled thinly and stood up.

“A half-brother.” That earned him a sharp, disbelieving look from Keegan and a considering stare from Talia. He lifted his glass and finished the rest of his drink. “Happy birthday, Wayde.” He set the glass next to Kai. “And congratulations on your…” he trailed off, his eyes level with Kai’s own. “New endeavors, Edlen. But I still get you for the next couple months and I expect you to give me your all.”

Something seemed to please Kai, for the other man’s eyes brightened and he smirked. “Yes,
Captain.”

Micah straightened. “I’m taking a shower.” He cast a look around at the other team members. Some had glazed eyes— others did not. “Stay inside the room if you are going to continue drinking. You know we’re not allowed alcohol.”

“Watch out for Sachiel lurking in the showers!” Viktor called gleefully at his back.

“Or more believably, watch out for Viktor,” Kai countered.

“Shut up, Kai!”

A chorus of laughter followed Micah out of the room. He shook his head as he shut the door, staring into the dark corridor. His eyesight gradually adjusted enough to see the dark figure standing just down the hallway. It was not Sachiel, nor Viktor, but rather an ambiguous form with too dark of features.

“...age...”

Micah frowned and took a step toward the figure. And then another. The voice was warped, uncanny, and nearly inaudible.

“Cage,” the figure urged with a whisper. “...onster...”

As Micah closed in quickly, reaching for the hooded figure, it disappeared abruptly. His fingers groped at the empty air, caressing nothing but a distant memory. He gazed around the corridor, not seeing or hearing anything out of the ordinary. He considered the broken words, easily putting them together.

To cage a monster.

He remembered the leather bound book he picked up in Clarence’s quarters. On the open page was a picture of an amulet. Writing had been scribbled all over the page, but at the top, the lettering clearly spelt ‘To Cage a Monster’. Micah hadn’t had the opportunity to look at the book further. Every time he found himself inclined to do so, his hand hovered over the cover, feeling uneasy and unsure.

If something—a hazy and undescriptive figure— wanted him to look at the book, he felt inclined to do the exact opposite. He was not a fool. Some objects had to be cursed. If it came from Clarence’s room, in an exact position for Micah to find, he had no doubt that there was something larger at play.

Something… sorcery. From the brief glance he’d given the book, he had identified runes, amulets, and other hair-rising sketches. Noir Users were involved, certainly, and yet, Josiah’s captain had not struck him as someone with ties to the Magi.

He cast one last look across the corridor before making his way to the showers.

Chapter End Notes

Those of us who know of Harry's mistake by engaging Tom Riddle's diary would applaud Micah's decision to separate himself from the book he found. Yet- perhaps
that decision may come back to bite him in the ass? Who knows. Then again, maybe he just saved himself a lifetime of misery.

Next Chapter: Time skip!!! We're leaving everyone in a good place. Let's leave them there for some time and then check back with them ;)

18. Chapter Eighteen

A sword clattered to the ground followed by an overzealous *whap*.

“You did it, Keegan!”

Looking over his shoulder, Micah calmly surveyed the pair of exuberant Igni students. Keegan stood victoriously across from Aiden, the latter not appearing crestfallen over his defeat. Instead, his grin nearly cracked his face into two. True pride. Micah found himself mirroring the sentiment, appraising Keegan fondly. The boy finally did it. Granted, Keegan was drenched with sweat and appeared as if he’d just overexerted himself, but that was a familiar sight these past few weeks.

Keegan was determined. His determination paid off, it seemed. Micah’s earlier uncertainties about his overenthusiastic claim that he’d improve his swordsmanship abilities had since quelled. Evidently, he shouldn’t have been concerned. Everything worked out in the end.

“You’ll be good enough to beat Micah and Kai in no time!”

“Doubtful,” Kai muttered quietly.

Micah turned away from Keegan to level an unimpressed look at Kai. The young man simply shrugged in turn, continuing to polish his sword petulantly. He could not hide the way he kept glancing ever so often at Keegan as the two Igni cadets resumed sparring. Blond brows furrowed doubtfully.

“He’s come a long way,” Micah stated.

Kai grimaced. “I suppose.”

“What’s the matter, Edlen?” he inquired slyly. “Intimidated?”

The Unda man simply laughed. Bitterly. “Of what?” Grabbing the polish from Micah, he reapplied more on his rag. “He’s already screamed his intentions loud and clear. To all of us. He wants to be your right-hand man in battle. Considering I’m leaving in a few weeks, he should find the position vacant and ready just in time.”

Micah hummed low in his throat as he detected the very faint echoes of jealousy. As he finished cleaning his own sword, he swung a leg over the bench and straddled it, watching the team practice together.

They’d come a long way in the past several weeks.
They all had.

He marveled once again over Keegan. The entire team showed progress, but Keegan demonstrated particularly large strides. Micah could hardly comprehend the boy’s steadfast commitment and progress. Not only was he taking dueling lessons with Instructor Candace and the other first-year cadets, but he also dueled frequently with other students in his free time.

With his incredible progress came a renowned sense of confidence. Micah could see Keegan’s evolution of self-importance. Now that he could prove himself with the sword, the other man finally felt as if he should be a member of the team.

“So you’re still planning on leaving us?” Micah inquired distantly, surveying the team.

Kai’s jaw clenched and he focused on working a particularly stubborn mark on his blade. He rolled the rag once, twice, occupying himself for quite some time before replying. “You know that answer. Why ask it?”

Micah smirked. Pleased. “To see how long it will take you to admit you don’t want to leave the academy.” He turned, watching the other cadet closely, gauging his reaction.

“It’s what my father requested. It is what I want,” Kai informed tensely. “Flint isn’t the only one who has improved considerably these past few weeks. Sachiel tells me you were born to be an Unda warrior. It seems I need to get ahead of you somehow, so I might as well establish a position in court before you graduate.”

“You and I both know someone of my pedigree would only succeed on the battlefield. No high court for desert rats,” Micah replied evenly. “You won’t have any competition from me.”

Kai paused, keeping his attention on his sword. A strange emotion crossed his features, something akin to disenchantment.

“Maybe.”

He went back to polishing, well aware of but ignoring Micah’s scrutiny.

The past several weeks were rather routine and repetitive. They trained together as a team, ate together, attended classes, and Micah would train with Sachiel three times a week.

At first, he felt uncomfortable with Sachiel’s style of instruction. The man put him through drills that were more like dancing without a partner. It took several tries for Micah to put together the steps and the footwork, but when he did, he realized it was all about the rhythm, the continuous movement of water and the Unda form.

Dancing without a staff or any sort of weapon transpired the first week. He’d had to endure Sachiel’s taunting eyes as the other man plopped down on a bench. Often times, the man preoccupied himself with something that required a lot of paperwork, while other times, he had the audacity to eat a light dinner and sip tea while Micah humiliated himself on the mats. When Micah fell behind, or his steps turned uncoordinated, Sachiel would clap his hands loudly to the rhythm, spurring a tense jaw from Micah as he complied and forced himself to follow Sachiel’s lead.

Micah knew the first week was Sachiel’s favorite.

Eventually, the man allowed him the staff as a dancing partner during the second week.

He stepped in as Micah’s opponent during the third week of their training.
For the most part, Sachiel remained particularly professional during their lessons and hardly ever talked about anything other than technique. He did not budge an inch when it came to the subject of Idris. He kept conversation strictly on combative form, the team, and the occasional mention of politics. He was a good instructor, a very good instructor.

Micah recognized why his name was in high demand amongst the aristocrats. Under Sachiel’s influence, the Unda form came easy to him. It was as if he were meant to learn it from the start. For the first time in his life, he related to an Unda tradition far better than he did the Igni equivalent.

“My father…” Kai started deliberately. “Would like to meet you. He was hoping for a meeting sometime after term ended.”

Micah refocused on the boy with razor sharp attention. “Oh?” he crooned, charmed.

Kai stiffened. “I was not the one to kindle his interest.”

“Yes, because we both know you’d never speak highly of me to others.”

“It will undoubtedly come to a surprise to you, Egan,” Kai started, his tone heavy with sarcasm. “But not everyone views you in a godly light. You may have the looks, but that just makes people hate you more.”

That made Micah pause and his amusement pique. He leaned closer to the other boy, laughing under his breath. “Overbearing fathers and pompous nobles don’t intimidate me, Edlen. I’d be more than happy to meet his acquaintance.” Micah stood up from the bench and twirled his sword. “I’m going to test the others on the team. You just sit there and wallow.”

“I don’t wallow.”

Micah smirked as Kai’s words followed him to the others. He circled the two groups, surveying their form and their agility. He was testing their endurance. They had just completed a vigorous run around the lower levels of the academy before returning here to spar. Judging from their flushed cheeks and the sheen on their skin, they were pushing themselves.

While their form wasn’t as clean as it was after a slow warmup, he was pleased to see they were not sloppy.

They were not in their assigned, combative pairs today. He’d let them choose their partners, and the partners they selected only cemented Micah’s decision to assign them pairs that were not predetermined based off friendships.

There were reasons some cadets worked better with others.

He prowled behind Cain and Viktor, smirking at the latter’s blanch when he sensed Micah’s presence. Expertly, he cut in between the two, focusing on the smaller cadet. Viktor was a very good warrior, yet when he fought with Cain, he tended to relax and let the other man pick up the slack. As Micah assaulted him with an array of attacks, Viktor seemed taken off guard at the change of speed, most likely contributed to not giving his all with Cain.

“Lose the slack next time, Viktor,” Micah murmured, disarming him and turning to Cain.

Cain. Cain was a power fighter. He was not about form or finesse, though he was not uncoordinated or ungraceful. He would work well with any other member of the team, yet Micah preferred to pair him with Talia to lend her his strength. As Micah engaged the man in combat, he grinned at the power behind each hit, forcing his feet into an acceptable stance to absorb the blows.
The one downfall with Cain was his tendency to hold back on his teammates. Micah still remembered Cain's ferocity during the first mission. His lethality. The man was a cruel fighter and that did not bode very well for friendly duels. Micah believed, by training the man in endurance and form, he would still improve on the battlefield. One did not have to win mock duels to progress as a warrior.

“Good footwork.” Micah twirled his arm around Cain’s, disarming him.

He then turned around, instantly locking eyes with Talia’s stubborn stare. She’d been the third partner to Viktor and Cain, opting to take her turn later. Instead of resting, she’d decided to continue running around the training arena, her drenched tunic indicating she cared little for restraint.

She raced towards him, drawing her weapon.

Micah met her, anticipating the low hits and recovering well. Talia was a smaller version of Kai. Both cadets relied on the immaculate Unda form, yet they were so angry and fierce. Their temperament in battle was impressively animated. Talia’s short stature allowed her to take her taller opponents by surprise by aiming low. While he was familiar with her style, others would not be.

She had an advantage in battle.

Yet, he still preferred she be with Cain, just in case her energy and her quick speed could not compensate against a power opponent.

Micah smiled thinly as they continued the mock duel. She refused to relent. She wanted to beat him. Best him. It would have been an engaging duel, however, Micah had two others he needed to critique.

“Good.” He caressed her blade before stepping away. Crossing his sword over his torso, he surrendered. “I will call that a draw.” She appeared sour. “Go duel with Kai.” He looked pointedly at the other man who remained sitting and observing. Edlen merely lifted his brows at the suggested order. “You two should practice together more often.”

Turning his shoulder on their less than enthused expressions, he closed in on Aiden and Keegan. Two cadets who should never be paired together in battle. Aiden typically forced Viktor to carry his own weight and vice versa. They had a private competition, Micah noticed. Both men were relatively similar, yet for whatever reason, they often enjoyed a rivalry.

Micah grinned at Keegan’s eager expression. “I’m saving you for last.”

He turned into Aiden’s strike, blocking it with ease before countering with his own. Aiden was a proud fighter who undoubtedly tried to emulate the style of his father. Unlike Kai’s pride in battle, which Micah was gradually working on, Aiden did not get furious with slipups. Instead, he grew shaky and it ruined his confidence.

His Igni form was exceptional. His posture and stance strong. Against stronger opponents, however, he seemed to struggle. However, with Viktor at his side, and their rivalry in place, Aiden no longer seemed to concentrate on just his opponent, but rather his desire to best Viktor.

They were a natural pair.

Granted, the weaknesses he noticed with each member of the team eventually needed to be addressed and improved. They could not rely on their partners forever. Micah wanted to make them
stronger individual warriors.

But that would come with time.

As he forced Aiden into a corner, the man’s movements turned stiff and choppy. His confidence waned and Micah quickly disarmed him, choosing not to prolong the situation. “Work on that confidence, Aiden.”

Turning, he observed Keegan lowering into a readying stance, his eyes brighter than Micah had seen them in a long while. He grinned, pleased at this change. Micah threw out his sword, their swords clashing before Keegan twisted his wrist, sending Micah’s sword in the opposite direction.

“Cadet Egan.”

Keegan’s expression fell as the loud voice reverberated across the training room. Micah turned toward the door, spying Josiah standing at the entrance with Instructor Candace by his side. They both wore their official military uniforms. Ranking bars, medals, and all.

Micah leaned away from Keegan as they, along with the rest of the team, stood at attention.

He hadn’t interacted with Josiah since he’d convinced the Igni king to bring back Sachiel. The other man’s absence bothered him, especially considering Micah wanted to know his progress of finding Clarence. Especially when he just wanted to interact with him. However, he knew Josiah had duties at the palace. His frustration was petty and it was an inconvenience. Moreover, he was not dependent on the man, nor did he ever want to become reliant. He was growing stronger on his own and with Sachiel. He did not need Josiah.

Yet, that alien and sick thrill curled pleasantly in his stomach as Josiah’s attention landed on him. There was no denying the attraction and tension, though Micah would never allow it to consume him whole.

Josiah lifted a gloved hand and motioned him forward.

Micah approached the men under the diligent eyes of his team members. Their curiosity was palpable as Instructor Candace ushered him outside the training room and into the corridor. Two individuals greeted him outside the room. A man and a woman. The man was squat with spectacles, the woman tall and thin. Both Unda and both scholar-like.

Upon seeing Micah, the female stiffened and raked her eyes up and down his form. “What kind of men do you breed here, Lord Josiah?” she mused. “I approve.” Her eyes then landed on Instructor Candace. “Although any man in uniform is rather dashing.”

Josiah’s expression was dark, shuttered. “Cadet Eagan, this is Professor Arno.” He then gestured to the man. “And Professor Firth.”

“You may call me Loire, Cadet Egan,” she mused.

Micah considered her stoically, unimpressed. He supposed she was attractive, though he was more inclined to notice a man’s attractiveness. Her hair was loosely pulled back to the nape of her neck and her face was fair and finely sculptured. He contorted his features into something a bit more approachable.

“A pleasure to meet you,” he responded politely.

“After your unfortunate performance earlier in the year, Instructor Candace and I believed it was
past due for a redemption mission.” Josiah stood with his hands clasped behind his back, his stature powerful and authoritative.

He looked at Micah alone, as if the others were merely invisible. There was something alluring about playing parts, Micah mused. In public, they met the cues, they acted their roles, yet in private, it was an entirely different dance. A debauchery enjoyed by just the two of them.

Micah loved every minute of it.

“Professors Firth and Arno need to travel to the Sanctuary Region in the west,” Josiah continued. “There has been… conflict in the west.”

The Terra Kingdom.

Micah inclined his head to show he followed the depiction. Inside, his mood soared. He’d always wanted to go to the Terra Kingdom. He couldn’t believe he actually had the opportunity! Granted, the sanctuary region was not officially the Terra Kingdom, but it was an extension. It would sate at least a sliver of his curiosity.

“In this Sanctuary Region, there are artifacts and old scripts of the four kingdoms. King Calder would like a few priceless items recovered from the Unda vault before the conflict in the west grows out of control.” Josiah tore his eyes from Micah and looked at the professors. “Only Professors Firth and Arno can access the vault and they need escorts.”

Micah’s mind spun wildly as he absorbed Josiah’s words, picking them apart and analyzing them carefully. Immediately, his suspicions heightened.

“Are your men ready, Egan?” Candace barked out in question.

“My team is more than ready to take on another mission, sir.”

“The military and myself will be accompanying you,” Josiah informed. “Reports have indicated the Terra Kingdom is a nonthreat at the moment. We don’t anticipate any hostile attacks, though it is best to arrive prepared.”

Micah nodded. “Understood, sir.” He paused. “When do we leave?”

“Tonight.”

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It was almost like déjà vu. Only this time, the train ride to their mission was much longer than their first assignment. Micah had to sit amongst his teammates’ nervous energy for days.

They’d boarded the train late evening and slept through the night. After breakfast, they fiddled with their gear and attempted to read in the compartment that housed Josiah, Instructor Candace, and the two professors. There was a fair amount of military men in the cramped compartments in the back of the train, though Micah’s team had the opportunity to sit up front.

Josiah’s presence alone caused his team to shift uneasily.

They hadn’t said a word all morning, well aware of their audience and the upcoming mission.
Micah leaned over the table and quietly helped Viktor with his assignment. Keegan normally donned the role as the team tutor; however, Viktor had specifically approached Micah today. He didn’t know if Viktor feigned ignorance to arithmetic problems intentionally to get Micah’s attention, or if he truly was a lost cause.

As Micah looked up, he caught Viktor watching him intensely and not the parchment. He suddenly realized Viktor’s issue with arithmetic questions were not out of any lost cause, but because he was a very, very foolish individual.

“Viktor.”

The boy grinned wildly at Micah’s tempered warning. “Yes, Micah?”

Exhaling, Micah pushed the parchment towards the boy. “If you were paying attention, you can complete this problem on your own.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Across the way, Kai scoffed under his breath. “You play right into his hands, Egan.”

Viktor’s grin turned wicked, though his attention remained fixated on the parchment in front of him. “I appreciate your patience and time, Micah. There is nothing underhanded about my intentions, I assure you.”

“Just focus on your work,” Micah reprimanded the boy. He stood up and moved away from the Unda hellion and toward his own school assignments. He had an essay to write and several chapters to read before they returned to the capital. Unfortunately, he didn’t get very far in his work, for Keegan caught his attention from across the aisle.

“What are the pairs when we arrive at our destination?”

Micah looked at Keegan and then continued to work on his problems with controlled ire. It was quite some time before he responded. “You already know the pairings, Keegan. They are the same as they are in practice. You are with Cain and Talia. Aiden and Viktor are together. Kai is with me.”

A book slammed loudly on the table, drawing everyone’s startled attention. Rather uncharacteristically, Keegan stood up, his temper flaring. “I’m ready, Micah!” He shook his head as if to expel a particular thought. “I’ve trained so hard for this. I want to be by your side for this mission. I want you to see the hard work I’ve put into this.”

Silence met his angry retort and Micah simply watched him coolly.

“Probably not the best place, eh Keegan?” Aiden whispered.

Keegan glanced hastily towards their other compartment companions and flushed hotly at the attention. He cleared his throat and hurried away from his team and down the corridor towards their sleeping quarters. The door slammed shut behind him.

“And here I thought we only had one girl on our team…” Viktor mused.

“Tactless, Viktor,” Talia spat.

“Off to coddle him, Egan?” Kai accused, watching as Micah stood with unhappy eyes. “It’s what he wants. I don’t see why you encourage him so much.”
Ignoring Edlen’s spiteful comment, Micah followed Keegan into the back compartment. He could feel the eyes boring into his back, but as soon as the door shut, the shadows and stillness engulfed him. As he reached for the door to their sleeping quarters, he took a deep, calming breath before opening it.

“I’m sorry,” Keegan blurted out as soon as Micah entered. The other man remained sitting on the bottom bunkbed, avoiding eye contact. At his sides, his hands clenched and his shoulders appeared rather droopy with shame.

“Anger happens to the best of us.” Micah walked over to the adjacent bunkbed and sat facing Keegan. “But you hardly ever give into temper outbursts, Keegan. This was obviously a concern you should have approached me about earlier.”

Naturally, he was upset with Keegan. The boy had questioned him in front of Josiah, Candace, and the two professors. As well as the rest of the team. However, Micah would not show his anger unless the situation warranted. With Keegan, Micah could get away with a calmer approach and still get his disappointment across. Besides, Keegan’s humiliation was instantaneous. The other cadet knew he’d slipped.

Keegan leaned forward and cupped his knees, squeezing them. “This has been eating away at me since you left the school with Kai on your vengeance, Micah.” Doleful amber eyes looked up at him. “I’ve told you that.”

“I remember,” Micah replied stiffly. “Don’t presume I have a bad memory.”

“It’s just that…”

Micah’s eyes lowered.

“It’s just what?” he pressed impatiently.

Keegan was being especially peculiar today.

“The more I try to look at this from an outside prospective, the more I feel as if you have a… unhealthy effect on people, Micah.” Keegan shifted under the incredible look. “At first, I thought it was just me,” he said hurriedly. “That maybe I had an unhealthy sort of fascination with you. But the more I actually look around, the more I actually talk with other, the more I realize that everyone you touch in some way constantly vies for your attention.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Micah said.

“It’s not,” Keegan responded heatedly, his cheeks flushing red. “The whole team competes for your attention. Even the instructors and other students at the academy appreciate you. Micah, you have some sort of enchantment that draws people in and—consumes them.”

Well that was just silly.

He said as much.

Keegan shook his head, frustrated. “Maybe it is silly,” he said. “But I know it’s true. You possess a cold and detached façade that makes it seem as if you don’t see us. I’m concerned for you. The attention you get may not always be in the best light, especially if they think they are being ignored.”

Micah saw many things, but he did not see the correlation between Keegan’s delusions and reality.
What Keegan described was a psychological illusion usually presented with kings and lords. Their people saw their power, their indestructibility, and preened with the irrational need to become someone important to those powerful figureheads.

However, that sort of enchantment came with *proclaimed* titles of power. Like the nobles flocking around Josiah during the first-year cadets’ final trial, hoping to catch his attention. It did not happen to nameless students whose only power was swordsmanship skills and high academics marks.

Leaning forward, Micah clasped his hands together and chose to approach the situation with an unbiased view. Declaring Keegan’s beliefs irrational again would only subject them to an endless loop of arguments. After all, Keegan seemed rather passionate about this particular concern.

“You’re right,” Micah admitted. “The team tries very hard to catch my attention. However, I am their captain. It is only natural they strive to succeed with me.”

Keegan flushed an even deeper shade of red. Out of anger or embarrassment, Micah did not know.

“You don’t believe—”

“But you’re wrong about one thing,” Micah interrupted. “I do pay attention. I pay very close attention to the team. I try not to play favorites, but I do watch each of you closely. I know you, particularly, have made leaps and bounds with the sword.” That seemed to temper the other man’s automatic argument. “I’ve seen you practice through the blisters on your hands,” Micah said. “I’ve seen the way you’ve limped to classes and the dinners you’ve missed. You’ve pushed through the pain and discomfort just to get better at something you’ve always wanted to excel at.”

“I—I never said anything. I never told you—”

“You never needed to.” Micah paused. “I saw all of it. It—you—have impressed me.”

If anything, Keegan appeared remorseful and uncomfortable. For a long moment, he did not speak, but rather focused on his hands. “I’m sorry for questioning you in front of the others.”

“You’ve already apologized.” Micah clicked his tongue in disapproval. “I don’t want to hear it again.”

“Then why don’t you trust me to be at your side?” Keegan asked slowly with a hint of hesitation. He knew he was pushing the topic, yet clearly, he needed to know *why*. “We’ve known each other for years, kid. I thought you’d appreciate me doing better so we could work together.”

Micah wondered when he decided to play the role of a caring, considerate friend, but he pushed the thought away. This was Keegan. Keegan would always hold an exception with Micah.

“We are working together,” he answered calmly. “When we return to the academy, you and I can practice together and get familiar with each other’s style of fighting. Kai is leaving us after this term so the team needs shifting. A real mission, however, is not the time to experiment with new pairings.”

Keegan nodded with consensus, finally looking up and catching his eyes. “You’re right. Now isn’t the time. But I do look forward to finally sparring against you, Micah.” He stood up and neared the door to their sleeping quarters. “I know how much this conversation made you uncomfortable, but I do appreciate it.” Here, he winked and left the compartment before Micah could retort.

Staring at the closed door, he contemplated.
Keegan appeared rather adamant about the enchantment scenario.

“You appear conflicted.”

The sudden weight and warmth next to Micah startled him. He turned, locking eyes with amused orange, feeling his pulse hammer uncomfortably in his throat. He held his tongue, knowing any sort of acknowledgement of surprise would be the man’s win. What kind of sorcery allowed invisibility? How often did Josiah implement it?

“Something Keegan said,” Micah responded evenly, gazing suspiciously at Josiah. “How long have you been here?”

“Long enough.”

The man sat stiffly with one ankle resting atop his leg. He appeared settled, as if he’d been there since the start of the conversation, though Micah was willing to bet the man appeared only when Keegan exited the compartment.

“Mass obsession,” Micah started quietly, looking back towards the door to where Keegan once stood. “Is usually a result of social titles and status, is it not? Take away the title and the king just because another man. People are drawn to titles proclaiming power, authority, influence, and money.”

“Or physical beauty.”

Micah grimaced at the implication. “Not on a mass scale,” he retorted sensibly. “Physical beauty is often subjective and dependent on the individual in question. Someone I view attractive may be rather plain and average to others.”

“Where are you going with this, child?”

“Keegan claims I have an enchantment over others.” Micah stood up. “That I have an unhealthy effect on people I come in contact with.”

“And you believe him.”

“No.”

“At least to the point that it unsettles you.”

“I’m not unsettled,” Micah disputed. “I am merely considering what aspects would draw people, on a mass scale, to obsess over an individual.”

“Perhaps it is not so much a mass scale as it is an individual obsession.” Josiah stood from the mattress and loomed over Micah. Clearly, the man was finding the whole conversation entertaining. “The boy is uncomfortable with his feelings. He would like to think he is not alone in his fascination, but among similar concurrence.”

“Keegan is many things. Obsessed is not one of them.”

“Then how would you explain this mass obsession to your person?”

Micah looked up at Josiah, petulant. “There are many sorts of magics and enchantments I am not privy to, which is why I’m asking you.”

“What would someone benefit by casting an enchantment over you?”
Micah exhaled with frustration and turned his back on the man, feeling silly for even asking. Feeling silly for even considering Keegan’s passionate speculation. Yet, there was something there Micah could not quite grasp. A feeling of sorts. An intuition. Josiah wasn’t making things easy by skirting the issue. Was it intentional? Alternatively, did the man truly find no reason to dwell on such a sentiment from someone like Keegan?

A hand cupped the nape of his neck, tightening around him like a collar. “I suppose he is not entirely alone in his captivation of you,” Josiah breathed in his ear. “I have missed you.”

“I can’t say the sentiment is mutual.”

Josiah exhaled hotly across the back of his neck, a small sign of his dark amusement in face of Micah’s blatant irritability. “What will it take for that sentiment to be returned?”

The hand not occupying his neck touched his bicep and elbow lightly before hovering just far enough away to be a tease. Micah stared straight ahead, trying not to feel the way his body trembled deep inside with something akin to want. The man behind him was hardly doing much in way of physical contact, the hand was far too light—not even touching, and yet, those small, nearly inconspicuous touches still set his skin aflame.

Agni, he was a fool.

The only thing that ruined the sensual and affectionate embrace was the greedy hand tightening further around his neck, holding him in place, imprisoning him. “What would make me return the sentiment?” Micah turned as much as the hand would allow him. He met Josiah’s eyes, their lips a mere breadth away. “I want to know what artifact you want.”

Josiah stared at him in silence.

Micah smirked hungrily.

“Come now, Uncle,” he taunted seductively. “Officially, it may be your military, but that doesn’t mean the Igni lord would accompany military rats on a relatively innocuous mission. A mission that indicates little threat from the Terra Kingdom despite whispers of civil uprising. Only, said mission is to Unda’s vault of priceless artifacts and scriptures. Imagine that.”

It was all too convenient.

“To ensure your safety.”

Micah withheld the urge to laugh. “Unlikely.” He pursed his lips. “Which leaves me with my original question. What artifact do you think you could take without first-year cadets and two professors noticing?”

Pleasure and intense appreciation brightened Josiah’s eyes upon Micah’s goading. The hand around his neck moved up to rake through his hair. Fingers grabbed and knotted his roots, turning him around forcibly and pushing him against the cabin’s flimsy wardrobe. Micah nearly purred at the man’s rough treatment, pleased he garnered such a reaction from the normally reserved man.

“When I look at you, my initial thoughts are entirely primitive,” Josiah explained quietly. With his hands no longer touching Micah, he advanced slowly, caging Micah against the wardrobe. “There is a wholly consuming need to claim every inch of you as thoroughly as possible. It takes a great deal of restraint to hold it down and regain my… rationality.”

Micah forced himself to remain impassive despite the delectably depraved words.
“I don’t take you as the kind of man to deny yourself what you want.”

He said it to be a tease. It wasn’t as if Micah were truly humoring the idea of having sex with Josiah. Was he? After all, consequences would arise from such an event, wouldn’t they? Ember told him as much. Warned him. Not only would Josiah gain more power from their initiated Chosen bond, but Micah would also find it difficult to look at himself again. It was far too soon. Far too easy for Josiah. He had to make the man struggle first.

Josiah offered a small, cruel smile. “You cannot handle me in that capacity.” He seemed amused at something only he knew. “You are not ready, I assure you. I would…” he trailed off, clearly trying to find the appropriate word. “Extinguish you.”

“Extinguish,” Micah repeated, disappointed at the turn of events. He tried not to feel insulted. “I don’t follow.”

“I don’t imagine you could,” the older man replied.

While Josiah’s overwhelming presence took a great deal to tolerate and withstand, Micah believed he’d adapted well enough. He’d come a long way since his first interaction with the man those many months ago. Yet, clearly Josiah did not believe he’d come far enough. They were back to their initial play, weren’t they? Josiah didn’t want someone so weak.

Frustrated he was even entertaining such a notion of getting closer to Josiah in that capacity, Micah pushed away from the man. He wanted to tell himself he was more upset with Josiah’s continued underestimation of him.

He couldn’t handle Josiah? Hadn’t he proved himself capable of doing just that all these months? What more did he need to do? Why did he even care to learn the answer to that?

“Now I’ve upset you.”

Micah’s stare was cold. “Upset me? You don’t have the ability to upset me when my expectations are so low to begin with.”

Josiah frowned, watching as Micah put further distance between them. His eyes were sharp and focused intently. “In due time, everything will become clearer.”

“What does that even mean?” Micah pressed.

Someone banged on the door to the sleeping quarters before it sprung open without invitation. Aiden stood on the other side, his expression contorted uncertainly. His eyes remained fixed on Micah, evidence Josiah had disappeared once again. “Talia.” Aiden motioned down the corridor with an anxious hand. “Professor Firth is basically interrogating her woman to woman.”

Micah blinked, uncomprehending.

“About female things,” Aiden stressed. “It’s making everyone uncomfortable. I don’t know how much longer Talia can last without drawing her sword.”

Sighing, Micah followed Aiden out the sleeping quarters and down the corridor. He brushed aside his conversation with Josiah and the disappointment he felt. Everything is how it was supposed to be. This distance was required between himself and Josiah. It was needed. He shouldn’t care what the other man felt, simply because he felt the same.

A bond was out of the question.
Upon arrival to the compartment, he witnessed the males sitting as far away from Talia as possible with expressions of discomfort and mortification as they preoccupied themselves with their coursework. Talia sat stiffly, her nose pressed deep into her textbook as Professor Firth sat next to her. The female professor crossed her legs smartly, revealing shapely, smooth legs. Even her blouse revealed far more of her than Micah wanted to see.

He was not impressed, though he caught several of his teammates’ lingering stares.

Upon seeing Micah, the professor straightened and smiled genuinely. “Cadet Egan, I was hoping to ask you a few questions.” She motioned towards the spot next to her. “I don’t typically encounter biracial men of such…” her eyes leered. “Prestige.”

Viktor and Aiden snickered at Micah’s stiff back.

“Tell me, what race do you identify yourself with? Though your skin is far lighter than the typical tanned of the Igni citizens, your coloring is predominantly of the desert region. Except the eyes, of course. They are rather unique.”

Micah stared at her, his temper falling flat as he recognized her sincere curiosity.

Her attractiveness diverted most away from her true character. They saw her physical appearance and did not correlate her as an academic. Yet, her eyes brimmed with unbridled interest and her social cues were rather blunt and awkward, like most typical scholars. Just over her shoulder, he could see her companion, Professor Arno, watching the proceedings with unsuppressed curiosity.

Micah tempered his automatic response.

He approached her slowly. “I will tell you everything you need to know about living as a biracial citizen,” he started sincerely. “As long as you tell me everything King Calder wants out of that Unda vault and their purpose.”

Firth frowned. “I am not obliged to give out that information.”

Micah leaned forward and smiled softly. “Well then, I suppose we’re at a stalemate then, Professor Firth. As much as I’d like to trade information, my team and I need to resume our studies.”

A blush stained her cheeks at his proximity and his smooth tone. “Fair enough, Cadet Egan.” She stood, forcing Micah back a step. “I suppose another time then?”

He grinned, watching as she rejoined her partner.

Viktor whistled as he turned back to his team. “Well done.” As Micah settled amongst his teammates, Viktor crowded him. “Tell me, Micah,” he whispered with an undertone of huskiness and femininity. “What is it like to experience two, dominant races battling around in your subconscious? Does the Unda typically win? Or the Igni?”

They erupted into poorly stifled laughter.

Hardly amused at their childish wit, Micah caught Keegan watching the proceedings with a grim and contemplative expression on his face. As he caught Micah’s stare, he offered a semblance of a smile, though it came across as a grimace.

Whatever concerns Micah may have addressed with Keegan didn’t appear to have eased the boy’s uncharacteristic restlessness.
For what seemed like a first time, Micah was clueless how to remedy a situation.
Deserts and canyons made up the majority of the south’s landscape. In the north, where Concordia’s capital was located, distant mountains and lakes were the primary topography. For the first time in his life, Micah witnessed the endless, grassy meadows and trees of the west.

There was also an abundance of hills. Many hills. Enormous mounds encased the train tracks on either side, dwarfing them as they passed. They also passed through several tunnels, reminding Micah the Terra people lived underground, just like the Igni Empire of old. He’d never seen so much green. So much wildlife.

Nature in such abundance was remarkable and wholly impressive. Micah sat stiffly on the bench, fully outfitted and equipped as he studied the passing scenery with rapt attention. The rest of his team sat with him, quiet and not quite enjoying the scenery like Micah.

They were nervous.

Fidgety.

“For being desert rats, you’re probably overwhelmed with so much living nature,” Kai observed, breaking the silence as he watched Micah, Keegan, and Aiden. “Your slack expressions say it all. Then again, your expressions are typically always slack.”

“Concordia isn’t exactly known for its greenery either,” Cain muttered quietly.

Kai offered the older man a look of derision. “More so than the Igni Empire.”

“They’ve never seen the Igni Empire,” Talia amended smartly with a vicoritious smile twisting her mouth. “That was destroyed during the war, Edlen, and they’re too young to have seen it before.”

Micah smirked as Kai shifted with frustration. “You know what I meant, Talia. The more appropriate term would have been desert regions, then.” Kai quickly took note of Micah’s amusement and turned to him fully. “Is something funny, Egan?”

“I always find pleasure when you’re corrected, that’s all.”

Kai’s expression darkened and turned slack. “You—”

He immediately trailed off as the train screeched to a descending speed. They all peered out the windows, seeing a flash of brilliant blue sky and emerald greenery before it all went black. As the train stopped inside a dark tunnel, the engine hissed loudly, as if breathing with relief after the long trip. Micah stood up, touching his sword over his shoulder with apprehension.

“No reason to be alarmed!” Professor Arno declared loudly in the darkness. A pleasant and excited giggle accompanied the reassurance. “This is our stop. Just wait until you see their welcome!”

His enthusiastic voice came from the opposite end of the compartment, though Micah could not see a thing. Although Arno declared the situation harmless, he couldn’t help but to panic as one of his major senses became useless. There was a certain vulnerability of being underground with no sense
He didn’t like it.

He felt buried alive.

When the train hissed and decompressed, they waited in silence for what seemed like minutes. Micah twisted relentlessly, impatiently. The rest of his team stayed silent and still, most likely feeling just as agitated.

Dim lighting suddenly blinked on.

Micah stiffened in surprise when Josiah appeared right in front of him, somehow navigating stealthily and gracefully in the blanket of pitch-blackness. Some members of his team also flinched at Josiah’s sudden appearance, just as unnerved over the unexpected appearance.

The man smirked and reached out to pat his cheek. “You wouldn’t do well in Igni territory, Cadet Egan.”

Micah grimaced, deciding not to remind the man he’d lived partially underground with Ember in Region 20. Then again, the underground apartment complex had working lightbulbs and a sense of home. A sense of familiarity. Even in pitch darkness, he could always find his way to his mother.

Something heavy pulled at his chest at the mere remembrance. A bittersweet reminiscence, a twisted betrayal.

He forced it away hastily.

No. He did not like the dark.

Josiah turned to look at the other members of the team, catching their eyes before they looked away in complete reverence. “I need to make one thing clear,” he murmured. “King Calder has emphasized the top priority as being the safe return of the artifacts.” Here, he looked pointedly at Micah. “Do you understand?”

Micah immediately comprehended the order.

The lives of the professors came second. The artifacts came first.

“I understand, sir.”

Josiah smiled thinly at Micah’s strict, professional tone. “For necessary backup, Instructor Candace will stay back with the military.” He moved away from Micah and approached the door to the train’s exit. “As I said before, we consider Terra a nonthreat as of now. The last thing we want to do is reveal our military force to a peaceful kingdom.”

Professors Arno and Firth hurried ungracefully to the front of the compartment in order to take position behind Josiah. Both professors seemed to shift eagerly with excitement for what was to come. Micah noticed Firth had changed clothing to something far more conservative. She donned a long-sleeved dress that fell to her ankles and a headscarf to cover her blonde locks.

Micah looked at his team and leaned down to their level. “You understand the orders, correct?” he inquired quietly, looking at each one of them. “No matter what happens, no matter whose life is at risk, our top priority is to safely return King Calder’s artifacts.”
“We all heard Lord Josiah,” Kai drawled. “We’re not thick, Egan.” Yet, even as he said this, a look of sudden realization crossed Keegan and Aiden’s faces. Just as Micah predicted, they hadn’t understood Josiah’s earlier order. “Well, some of us aren’t that thick,” Kai corrected, having seen their unsettled realization. “We understand and will follow your lead.”

Dismissing his typical flare for animosity, Kai stood up and shouldered into a professional and authoritative role. An unofficial co-captain. He motioned the others to stand, seemingly impatient with their lack of alertness.

The door opened to the compartment and Josiah stepped out first.

Micah and the others followed behind the two professors, stepping into an earthy tunnel. Immediately, his nostrils flared, detecting something moist and rich. Clean. He could only assume it was rich, earthy soil. Above, lights knotted through twine, appearing like small, twinkling stars. He only allowed himself a moment to admire the illuminations, though he thought them particularly enthralling and peaceful.

“King Josiah,” a man with a heavy, foreign accent bent at the waist. “Terra welcomes you and your troop. Unfortunately, Chief Heres could not make it today. I am Delegator Barth and I will be escorting you to the sacred vaults.”

On the train, Micah learned a bit more about the Terra Kingdom from Professor Arno. Apparently, the Terra Kingdom did not title their ruler as King, but rather Chief. Their democracy was also far more informal than the Concordia royal court. Their citizens voted for the leaders who represented them. The Chief did not hold singular power like a monarch, yet he was a figurehead for all the people and all the delegators.

Micah also noticed they addressed Josiah as King, though the man was now a lord.

Micah ran a critical eye across Barth’s plain, flowing robes. For being a delegator, he was dressed ordinarily. Earthy tones and commonplace material made up his wardrobe, along with the three men at his back. All men had very dark skin, far darker than the typical golden skin of the Igni people. Their heads were free of hair, bringing attention to the sharp and handsome planes of their face.

“Send Chief Heres my regards,” Josiah responded evenly. “You’ve met Professors Arno and Firth, I believe?”

Firth and Arno clasped their hands to their chests and bowed simultaneously.

The Terra man laughed pleasantly and nodded. “Yes, yes,” he bowed back. “A pleasure to see you both again.”

“The pleasure is all ours, Delegator Barth.”

“This…” Josiah placed a hand on Micah’s shoulder and pulled him to his side. Claiming. Possessive. To an outsider, it was a casual gesture. “Is a group of cadets from Concordia Military Academy. They will be accompanying us to the vaults today.”

Micah quirked a brow at Aiden as the boy bowed in a similar fashion as professors Firth and Arno. Upon seeing the rest of his teammates remaining solitary, and stiffly unbending, Aiden straightened quickly, a flush darkening his features. Military—swords—were not supposed to engage in political gestures. They were simply lethal decorations for the use of their kingdom.

Barth appeared taken aback at Josiah’s words. He raised his palms and looked at Micah’s sword.
“No, no need for military.”

“They are here under my direct orders.” There was no room for arguments as Josiah dropped his hand from Micah’s shoulder and stepped toward the exit of the tunnel. “I believe you are a busy man, Delegator Barth. We shouldn’t take up too much of your time.”

Still appearing unsettled with the presence of Micah and his team, Barth hurried after Josiah, falling into step with him as they walked out of the tunnel. The three men who accompanied Barth waited to take up the rear of the group. With Kai at his side, and the five others trailing at their heels, Micah followed close behind the two professors.

Josiah was right.

They didn’t appreciate any sort of military encroaching on their terrain. If Instructor Candace and the rest of the military got off the train, Delegator Barth would have likely grew offended enough to block their access to the vaults. In any case, as Micah stepped out into the open, he could see no signs of impending civil war.

He blinked past the sudden onslaught of sun and light, raising a gloved hand to shield his eyes as he observed his surroundings. Sparse, stone buildings stood amongst high, grassy hills. Said grassy hills were lush with grass that waved tranquilly in the breeze, turning the deep green a shimmery silver. There were hardly any structures. It was so bare. So… desolate. But a beautiful desolate.

The air was fresh. The landscape vibrant and wild.

In the far distance, Micah could see a very large, imposing building on the horizon. Considering the vaults were located in Terra’s outskirt village, Micah assumed the solitary building was the Terra Kingdom’s palace. It stood out amongst the sea of isolated greenery, its structure impressive. A symbol of power and prestige, he supposed.

Delegator Barth led them up a hill and towards a deteriorating castle. The gray, stonewalls crumbled at the base of the structure and lay in abandoned piles amongst the fields. There was no longer a roof over the castle, but a solid door remained intact.

As they climbed up the decomposing staircase, they passed a statue that indicated it was once a majestic piece of work. Now, it was in shambles. The statue was a woman, beheaded and armless.

Micah assumed it was Prithvi, the goddess of earth.

Back at the capital, any sort of vandalism or mistreatment to Varuna or Agni statues resulted in serious penalties. Micah wondered if this kingdom merely lost interest in the goddess they worshipped, or perhaps they found little reason to construct statues when the majority of their living was underground.

Across the hilly landscape, disintegrating structures lay claim all over the overgrown meadows. Something told Micah they weren’t recent demolitions, but rather deteriorated from the force of time itself.

Delegator Barth led them through the crumbled castle and towards a set of stairs. Micah hesitated just briefly as they descended down the steep steps and into a dark, fathomless hole. The temperature, which was mildly pleasant above ground, seemed rather cool the further they descended.

It was black again.
Micah grabbed the railing next to him, wondering why the others did not grab awkwardly for support or voice their discomfort. He supposed they were far more professional than that.

Ahead, a lantern lit and Barth lifted the small source of light.

“Only a bit further, mind you,” he informed as they continued down the dark, earthy tunnel.

Micah didn’t know what to expect when they reached the end of the tunnel. Yet, after what seemed like eternity, they finally reached a set of doors that Barth pushed open with a grandiose shove. Micah’s pupils dilated as he took in the sight in front of him, realizing he hadn’t prepared himself for what would lay in front of them.

“Varuna!” Viktor cursed loudly.

Josiah turned back to gaze at the boy coldly. He then looked to Micah, wordlessly telling him to control his men.

Micah could hardly blame the boy at his shoulder.

It was…

It was incredible.

He felt like a child, shell-shocked and speechless as he gazed around at his surroundings. They had entered an underground village. A village. Not just a simple structure. When he learned the citizens of the Terra Kingdom lived underground, he had assumed most of the markets and other various buildings remained above ground while living quarters were dug deep beneath the earth for cool climate.

But not here.

There were small homes made from earth with small fences to keep livestock at bay. Further down the way, Micah could see vendors and markets, their merchandise ranging from colorful fabric to massive pastries. As he gazed up, he had to crane his neck far back in order to stare at the… sky?

A sky created from earth.

It domed far, far above the village, appearing structurally solid. Small, twinkling lights decorated the earthly sky, the same ones he’d seen in the train tunnel. Near the tall, earthy ceiling, there were platforms of what appeared to be gardens. Several holes pierced through to above, pouring sunlight down upon the crops and upon the village below. Men and women stood high on these platforms, barely visible from where Micah stood. He watched in fascination as the ground parted with the movement of their hands, manipulating it expertly.

Earth Elementals!

They weren’t pompous nobles who decided to build their own throne of self-importance. Oddly enough, they were getting their hands dirty and providing for their community with their powers.

Rich laughter greeted Micah’s ears and a hand clapped solidly across his back. “It appears as if your men are wet behind the ears, King Josiah.”

“Wet would be an understatement,” Viktor muttered behind Micah.

Micah blinked back to reality, grounding himself back in the present. He offered a small smile to
Delegator Barth, acknowledging that his reaction, as well as his team’s reaction, would indicate naivety and ignorance. “It’s a beautiful village, Delegator Barth,” Micah praised.

The man smiled and nodded his head. “That it is, my boy.” He moved away from Micah and resumed his position next to Josiah. “If only you could stay and see the capital. It is far more extensive and spectacular.”

Micah avoided looking in Josiah’s direction, though he sensed the man’s stare.

It was impossible not to be taken aback by their surroundings. Shrouded in mystery, the Terra Kingdom kept their world a closely guarded secret. At least Professors Firth and Arno seemed just as captivated and they’d seen this all before.

They continued down the dirt pathway and towards the heart of the village. Micah tried not to observe his surroundings too closely, though he smelt the baked bread and heard the excited chatter of the villagers as their group passed. He followed the professors, studying Josiah as he engaged Barth in light conversation. The Igri lord was professional and cold. Micah found he liked that about the man. Josiah did not sweeten his tone or actions to appear well-liked.

He was just Josiah, a decorated warrior and an esteemed royal from a conquered empire.

Childish laughter suddenly resonated through the air just before a small body knocked Josiah off course. The boy then pushed his way through the crowd of adults, forcing Arno to dodge rather comically.

Micah had no time to recover as the child knocked into his legs. He found himself falling to his knees and staring up at the child, instantly focused on the bright, green eyes. The boy was young, possibly around six or seven-years-old.

He laughed pleasantly down at Micah, his round, juvenile teeth flashing. “For you,” the boy declared in a high-pitched voice.

Micah nearly had to go cross-eyed to look at the crystal thrust in his face. It was very pale blue and especially clear, almost ice-like. Looking away from the crystal, he studied the boy’s face, realizing the laughter fell abruptly from the child’s expression. Green eyes watched him closely, seeming far too old.

Micah could only stare, something odd and hot overcoming his mind and body.

A hand suddenly grabbed him from underneath his arm and hauled him none too gently to his feet. Micah floundered, his mind foggy as he looked up at Josiah. The man’s expression was pinched and focused intently on Micah, as if searching for something.

The child laughed again and pressed the crystal into Micah’s palm, offering a defiant look in Josiah’s direction. “Like your eyes,” the child claimed. “Like ice.”

Without another word, the boy ran off, his tawny-colored robes flying after him.

“I apologize,” Delegator Barth bemoaned with a nervous chuckle. He simpered toward Josiah and nodded his head subserviently. “The children rarely get outsiders visiting our kingdom. They are merely curious.”

Micah glanced first to Josiah, who stared after the child with chilling concentration, then to Barth who appeared rather uncomfortable.
“No harm done,” Micah reassured firmly, pulling his arm from Josiah’s grip.

That seemed to spur the man to recollect himself and move back to the front of the group. All eyes watched the older man, taken aback at his uncharacteristic behavior. Lord Josiah never stepped outside his well-maintained boundaries in public. Micah glanced after the child, wondering what it was about the boy that shook Josiah from his political guise.

“How come I didn’t get a crystal?” Viktor lamented to Aiden. “My eyes are blue.”

“Silence,” Kai instructed sharply.

The team continued through the market square without any further complications. Micah kept his fingers around the crystal, wondering at Josiah’s reaction. More importantly, he wondered what danger—if any—the child posed. Besides that brief moment, with his eyes locked with the boy, he hadn’t felt anything particularly threatening. The stone he clutched also felt harmless. Innocuous.

“Are you with us?” Kai inquired quietly. “Or should I have Keegan join my side?”

Micah refocused on the man to his right, sneering at the sarcastic tone. “The only way Keegan will be at your side is if I move you to the back, Edlen.”

Kai smirked, pleased.

Strangely enough, Delegator Barth led them down a tight alleyway and towards a crude-looking lift. He took out a key from his robes and inserted it into the lift. With an ancient groan, the contraption’s door slowly opened.

“I’m afraid we will need to take two trips.”

There was a brief intermission as the group split into two groups. Micah and Kai accompanied the first group into the lift. As they descended deeper into the earth, he found the rest of his team watching their descent through apprehensive eyes.

For over centuries, these vaults remained located in Terra’s Sanctuary Region. On the train, Professor Firth explained these vaults weren’t only secure, but the Terra citizens were peacekeepers of the four kingdoms and welcomed visitors of all races after proper screening. Unlike the other kingdoms, no wars were ever recorded in their peaceful dominion.

Until now, the other three kingdoms saw no reason to change tradition. Moreover, while artifacts from various kingdoms stayed underground, nothing particularly priceless remained in the Terra Kingdom.

“It is unfortunate King Calder seeks to remove items from his vault,” Delegator Barth said as the lift sluggishly jerked its way down. “Chief Heres considers it a sign of Concordia’s mistrust in our abilities to guard century-old secrets.”

“Nothing like that,” Professor Firth reassured quickly. “King Calder simply wants repossession of a few items, nothing more.”

“I’m sure there have been whispers,” Barth continued quietly. “Whispers of unrest in our lands. We have heard these rumors as well. There are groups of radicals, yes, but nothing we haven’t handled before. I hope you can relay this message to Calder, King Josiah.”

Josiah was the perfect image of an understanding comrade. “It would be my pleasure.”
The lift emerged from the darkness and stopped abruptly on the next level.

As they exited the lift and waited for the others to arrive, Micah observed his surroundings. The room wasn’t nearly as large as the village above. The ceilings were lower and there seemed to be a large well in the middle of the chamber. It omitted a soft, blue glow, drawing attention to the four corridors leading separate directions. One north, one south, the others east and west.

Kai and Micah shared a look.

Behind them, the lift eventually came to a rocky halt, expelling the rest of their group. His team hastily filed behind him, their eyes cautious as they took in their surroundings.

Delegator Barth led them through the tunnel that stretched north. As they twisted through the winding tunnel, Micah felt the hairs on his neck stand. Small, dim torches lit the tunnel walls, creating odd and misshapen shadows. A glance over his shoulder confirmed his team, and the three Terra men, followed closely behind.

Nothing seemed amiss, though there was a hint of uncertainty Micah could not shake.

Several minutes passed before they reached the end of the tunnel.

A massive door with impressive, incarnate carvings stood opposite of them. Micah studied the carvings, unsure what they meant—if anything. The only thing that stood out were the three, separate keyholes.

Appearing acquainted with the proceedings, Professor Firth removed a key from her long robes and stepped up to the door. Inserting the key, she turned the lock and stepped aside. Unsurprisingly, Arno and Barth each had possession of the remaining keys. When all three locks were turned, the door leisurely creaked open. Micah strained his eyesight, catching sight of shelves upon shelves of old tomes.

As Kai and Micah attempted to follow the others inside, Barth held up a hand.

“This is as far as I will permit, gentlemen.”

Micah resisted the temptation to scowl, though he understood the necessary precautions. He inclined his head, toeing the threshold inside the vault. It wasn’t as large as he imagined it to be, though it was filled to the brim with items. A part of him whispered that everything inside that vault was his birthright. Just as well, so was the south corridor that would eventually lead to the Igni door.

It all belonged to him if he so desired.

All that knowledge… centuries and centuries of teachings were inside that room. Micah nearly trembled with the thought of obtaining even just a sliver of said information.

His gaze fell on a large mirror, instantly concentrating on the reflection. Within the confinements of an exquisite gold frame, a dark shape moved within the mirror. The shape appeared relatively human, though a sinking darkness settled in Micah’s stomach as he watched it move. In the mirror, the figure turned and grabbed a pendant from a neighboring shelf. Said pendant caught the illumination of the wall torch and glimmered radiantly through the glass.

Micah stiffened as he recognized the five-pointed star.

He knew that pendant.
The leather-bound notebook he found in Clarence’s living quarters contained a sketch of the exact same pendant. *To cage a monster.*

It was a replica.

Micah watched as the dark figure pocketed the pendant and turned around, locking eyes with him through the reflection. The figure’s eyes were red, split-pupiled, and glowing. Micah stared, every single hair on his body rising with horror and unexplainable alarm. He blinked rapidly and the figure morphed into Josiah.

Just Josiah.

Micah’s breath shuddered shakily as Josiah smiled knowingly. Orange eyes—not red—narrowed in contemplation, as if he knew exactly what Micah witnessed in that mirror.

However, not even Micah knew what he had observed. Quickly, he ducked further away from the Unda vault, trying to steady his racing and uneven pulse. Clearly, the mirror was enchanted. *How,* he did not know. Evidently, it could play tricks on his mind and his emotions. He’d never felt such power before, such sheer darkness.

Was the pendant cursed? Alternatively, did the mirror reflect Josiah’s corrupted soul?

That, he did not doubt, yet he knew there was more to it than that. Had this all been an elaborate ruse? Josiah couldn’t get into this vault without Calder’s expressed permission. The two professors had the keys, as did the Chief of the Terra Kingdom, who had passed it on to Delegator Barth for the day.

*Whispers* of rebellion and civil uprising, indeed.

For a moment, Micah wondered if there really was such a thing, or if Josiah constructed a clever deception. While Professor Firth indicated there was nothing particularly priceless in these vaults, Josiah found *something* important.

He laughed softly.

He couldn’t help it.

“Egan,” Kai called, squinting at him. “What’s so funny?”

Micah shook his head, gazing back at the vault. The man could be brilliantly deceptive if he wanted to be. As much as it frustrated Micah to remain in the dark, he couldn’t help but to appreciate the man’s cleverness. Such darkness and inexplicable deceptiveness should have unnerved Micah.

It only thrilled him.

If Josiah truly wanted Micah to remain ignorant, he would have tightened the blindfold. He wouldn’t have brought him and his team to the Terra Kingdom. Moreover, he wouldn’t have risked Micah catching sight of the pocketed pendant. Instead, the man’s wrists flicked intentionally as he lobbed crumbs of finely wrapped hints and signals in Micah’s direction. Like a master luring and training a pet. He had high expectations of Micah collecting and assembling the thrown morsels in their proper place.

Rumors of a civil uprising would have to be elaborate enough to convince Calder of the severity. Elaborate enough that others would believe the anecdotes and forgo century-old traditions by
extracting items from the Unda vault.

Micah marveled at the preplanning it must have taken on Josiah’s end. Just to get his hands on a meager pendant.

However, it wasn’t just a meager pendant, was it? It was Josiah’s planning… wasn’t it? Delegator Barth indicated he’d heard the same rumors and disagreed with what they entailed. There was no civil uprising. Nothing more than typical. Who else would spur disbelief over the stability of the Terra Kingdom? Disbelief enough that even King Calder would believe? Moreover, how did the pendant correlate with the diagram in the notebook? Did Josiah even know Micah had possession of the notebook? After the apparition in the academy corridor, Micah was leery of even touching the book again.

Perhaps he needed to reconsider his decision.

He needed to know what the pendant was and understand the coincidence. Someone was playing him and he did not appreciate it.

“Micah.”

“It’s nothing,” Micah responded to Kai distantly.

Something inhuman suddenly screeched through the tunnels, grating uncomfortably against Micah’s senses. His hands twitched at his sides, wanting to cover his ears, but managing to keep them firmly near his holster.

Turning abruptly, he stared into the dark tunnel.

The screech tapered off, though the offsetting presence remained. A cold, deathly chill swept down the tunnel, strong enough to ruffle Micah’s hair and extinguish the torches on the wall. He stood immobile in the dark, glad the others had enough sense to remain quiet. A blinding light suddenly blinked into existence behind Micah, shedding light on two hooded figures further down the tunnel.

Two of the three Terra men sprinted after them and Micah cursed. He turned, spying Josiah holding the new source of light. The man then flicked his fingers, sending flames to each individual torch. Behind the Igni lord, the two professors scrambled out of the vault, their knapsacks appearing full.

Delegator Barth hurriedly shut the vault door with a slam. “Who—”

“Now is not the time for speculations,” Josiah interrupted, pushing past Micah. “Unless we want to remain cornered prey, I suggest we move.”

Micah stayed behind and trailed the two professors as closely as possible. Their trinkets, after all, were his main priority, even if this might be an elaborate setup by Josiah.

His team fell into place around him, taking up the rear and both sides. He cast a look in their direction, taking note of their alert postures and their focused eyes. They moved together as one and they remained collected despite the situation.

A significant improvement from their first mission. Micah grabbed the hilt of his sword, ready to withdraw it as they neared the entrance of the underground tunnels. In the middle of the chamber, the blue hue from the well-like contraption radiated across the tunnels and illuminated two limp figures.
“No!” Barth tore apart from the others and ran toward his two, downed men.

Micah lunged away from his team and grabbed the very edge of Barth’s flailing robe. As soon as his hand tightened around the fabric, the man stumbled awkwardly. Dust rose violently in the air, as did a disbelieving hiss of infraction as Barth made heavy contact with the ground.

“Do not,” Micah warned vehemently, looking down at the shell-shocked man. “Charge straight into danger, Delegator Barth.”

As soon as the words left his mouth, an invisible force knocked into Micah, sending him soaring off his feet. He flew through the air and hit the ground hard, rolling several times before coming to an abrupt halt. The world spun and he squinted past the nausea. Figures with dark-colored clothing crept stealthily from the shadows. They carried swords, though Micah assumed they had the ability to extract damage using other means.

Noir Users?

His sore body protested as he scrambled quickly to his feet. His attention immediately honed in on an object tossed towards his team, resembling a hand-held explosive. It was modified, however, as it spiraled with an intelligent sense of purpose. A familiar-sounding screech resonated through the tunnels as the airborne weapon closed in on his team.

Fierce panic set in.

As he rushed forward, he knew he’d lose them.

They were powerless against something like this.

Throwing his hands out desperately, frantically, he vaguely recognized the temperature across the tunnels plummeting significantly. Through the visible cloud of his breath, he witnessed the water well shudder violently in the middle of the chamber.

Water abruptly burst from the well’s depths and Micah reached towards it hysterically, urging it to swallow the explosive. A sensation of sheer power overcame him as the water obediently followed his command. Only, as it curled into the air and engulfed the weapon, time stopped. The water solidified and creaked until it was a frozen tendril emerging from the deep well.

Not quite acknowledging the feat he’d just accomplished, Micah tore across the tunnel and withdrew his sword.

With a frenzy, he attacked the first enemy, refusing to let them recover. Kai joined him immediately, and surprisingly enough, Keegan was next to recover. There were only three adversaries, but they were dangerous enemies with unfamiliar gifts and weapons. It made him feel uncertain and cautious, which only made him fight harder. He never wanted an enemy to take control over him or his emotions. Only, as Micah brought back his blade to gut his opponent, the man disappeared.

They all did.

Micah whirled around, frantically looking around the tunnel and trying to spy the shadowy figures. His adrenaline was high and his breathing was deep and heavy. With his bloodlust roused, it was a jarring sensation to have it suddenly stifled.

Barth stated the obvious. “They’re gone.”
It was if they were never there in the first place. Only, the evidence of their presence remained behind. The two Terra men stayed motionless on the ground and the frozen spiral of water remained unmoving. Micah’s attention fell on the chunk of ice, locking eyes with Josiah who stood underneath the frozen sculpture. The man’s stare smoldered. Micah’s spine stiffened at his profound attention, never having seen the man appear so…

Hungry.

Josiah’s lips thinned and he smiled sinfully.

Alarm spread through Micah and he stopped breathing. Uncertainty settled inside him, resting and familiarizing itself within him. Its heavy weight quickly turned warm and mutated into something akin to anticipation.

Wicked intrigue.

He could see the aura of malevolence around Josiah. It was palpable and directed keenly towards Micah. Instead of shying away, Micah wanted to walk into it, submerge himself with it and become familiar with the depravity. He wanted to mirror it with his own. Standing across from Josiah, he realized the man was shroud in mystery and carried enthralling secrets. Somehow, with the intensity he watched Micah, he felt as if he were the center of those enigmas.

Prized and possessed.

“Micah?” Keegan’s voice inquired somewhere in the distance.

Josiah’s expression altered into his typical, cool façade and he turned away, instantly grounding Micah back into the mundane hum of reality. Feeling as though he were severed from a strange, but compelling bond, he turned, disorientated. There were times he felt a strange sensation come over him. He’d only experienced it once before, but it was as if he and Josiah were the only ones existing in this world.

Others were mere entertainment.

Insignificant.

The sensation unnerved him, simply because he did not feel as if it stemmed from his own conscience. No, he knew he did not feel that way about others. The sentiment was strong, however, and it threatened to consume him whole at times.

“Micah.” A hand landed on his shoulder, pulling him further back.

He exhaled evenly, forcing the fog to dispense. His attention landed on Keegan, watching as the boy looked between him and Josiah.

“Are you alright?” Keegan asked quietly.

Micah adjusted his stance and sheathed his sword into his back holster. “Just fine considering the circumstances.” He peered at Keegan, noticing the boy’s tenseness. “Relax, Keegan.”

Turning away, he studied his surroundings, realizing the others still appeared rather dazed at the mysterious enemies. Their breath, he realized, still came out in visible clouds, though the temperature had warmed considerably.

“What was that?” Barth demanded. “Noir Users!” He crouched next to his motionless men and
pressed his fingers into their pulse points. From his expression, they were dead. “You brought them here,” he accused loudly, looking between Josiah and the two professors. “For years they remain inactive, their numbers too small! Now all of a sudden, they come here. The same day you wish to withdraw items from the Unda vault?”

Micah pondered the man’s words.

He’d assumed the Magi were great in numbers, not small.

Inactive, yes, but…

The delegator stood up and violently motioned to the solid block of ice. “Who did this?” he demanded loudly. “Which one of you did this trickery?”

Trickery?

Micah’s team stared listlessly at the man before glancing around at the others. He caught Kai’s eyes and noticed the boy’s heavy frown.

“That’s more than enough, Delegator Barth,” Josiah ordered sharply. “We are taking our leave.” He looked at the two professors who lagged behind. “Now.”

Arno and Firth clutched their knapsacks, staring at the sheet of ice with awe. Distractedly, they followed Josiah to the lift, though it appeared as if they wanted to stay behind and study the frozen tendril of water.

“Yes,” Barth nodded sharply. “Leave. I don’t want you returning! Ever!”

Micah motioned for his team to follow. Quickly. They hurried to the lift, marching inside with Josiah and the professors. After making certain they were all accounted for, and unharmed, he joined them.

It was nearly anticlimactic as the lift sluggishly jerked its way back towards the village. Micah stared straight ahead, mulling over the situation. Delegator Barth was correct. They’d lured the Magi into the Terra Kingdom. Not they, he supposed, but Josiah. Micah had no doubts that the Noir Users were after that pendant. He wondered again how Clarence knew the Magi. It had to be some connection, considering the leather-bound book in his private quarters.

Moreover, how did Josiah tie into everything?

Micah figured he’d eventually find out, though the curiosity ate at him.

As they traveled back to the train, Micah also pondered over his feat today with the water—with the ice. A part of him denied the fact he was responsible. After all, he would have had to manipulate the water as well. That would have made him a water Elemental.

Or an ice Elemental.

In which case, Josiah was lying about their status as Chosen. Because only Elementals could feel the bond, could acknowledge the irresistible connection, not commoners. However, the more he thought about it, the more he realized that his attraction to Josiah was getting fanatical and rather distracting. Could he be experiencing the instant bond Elementals felt towards their Chosen?

He felt better thinking that was the case.
Yet, as they boarded the train, Micah couldn’t shake the uncertainty that things weren’t exactly how they seemed.
“They call them funnel cakes, Micah!”

Micah offered Viktor an unimpressed look as he reluctantly brought the piece of cake up to his mouth. As he tasted the deep-fried pastry, his taste buds instantly swelled as the powdered sugar and the plump, lightly crisp dough hit his tongue. It was sweet, he noted. Almost too sweet. No. Not almost. It was definitely too sweet.

“You can dip it in this.” Aiden held up the small container of amber liquid and shook it tauntingly. “Syrup.”

“Syrup,” Micah repeated dimly. “That is all sugar.”

“Well that’s the point, isn’t it?” Viktor inquired, ripping off a large piece of the twisted pastry with his teeth. “Sugar. Fat. Deliciousness.” He soaked an entire piece of pastry with syrup and somehow managed to stuff it in his mouth without any dripping down his chin.

Kai and Micah watched him through unconvinced eyes. Just over Viktor’s shoulder, Cain, Talia, and Keegan all ate their cakes with pleased silence, wiping their sugar-stained military gloves on their thighs and staining their pants white. Talia seemed especially content with the cake, for she stared forlornly at her empty dish.

Men and women swarmed around them on the streets, bumping shoulders with several people and hardly apologizing for their rude behavior. Micah stood stiffly against the wall next to the funnel cake stand, waiting for his team to finish their food. He watched the citizens of Concordia walk in hoards and stand in line at vendors for ridiculous amounts of time.

All for food coated with grease, salt, and sugar.

Today, in honor of Concordia’s twenty-two-year anniversary, the military academy gave the cadets free reign across the capital. It would have been enjoyable if so many people did not crowd the streets and pathways. Micah could not get a good sense of the capital and its buildings with so many street vendors selling goods and merchandise. It was noxious. Loud. Sweaty. Overtly busy.

“Glowering at them will not make them leave,” Kai informed pointedly.

Micah leveled the boy with a blasé look. “It’s hardly enjoyable exploring a new territory with so many people doing the same.”
“You don’t need to be so cynical. It’s a day of celebration. Of course there will be people out celebrating the kingdom’s anniversary.” Kai gestured toward the team. “Nevertheless, they deserve a bit of a break. With getting back from the Terra Kingdom this morning and all. Fall finals are coming up as well.”

“Points taken, though it still doesn’t eliminate the crowds.”

Kai shook his head with exasperation. “Take advantage of our generosity today, Egan. Why don’t I treat you to some funnel cake?”

“I’d rather rot my teeth elsewhere.”

“You’re rather chipper today.”

“He’s been like this since he woke up,” Viktor volunteered cheerfully. He paused dramatically. Everyone knew he was about to say something foolish. “You could almost say he’s as cold as... ice.”

Silence met his overzealous statement and Keegan shook his head, disapproving and exasperated at Viktor’s audacity. The rest the team looked shyly between Viktor and Micah, as if all harboring the same secret and were too timid to mention it.

Micah rubbed his mouth.

He then laughed quietly. “Your similes need improvement, Viktor.”

“Yeah,” Viktor agreed, nodding solemnly. “I’ll work on that.”

They did not need an explanation. Micah truly did not understand the extent of his powers himself. Explaining it to them would be counterintuitive. He had to applaud their insight, however. They were not ignorant nor naïve. They all knew he was the one responsible for conjuring the ice during their mission.

They just expected too much.

Yes, he knew he’d been responsible. How, he did not know. Did that make him an ice Elemental? Alternatively, had someone manipulated the water first, which allowed him to transform it into ice? Kai, the only water Elemental on their team, did not seem forthcoming with any sort of explanation, which led to Micah’s confusion. If Kai hadn’t manipulated the water well, who had succeeded in rousing it from the well?

Keegan caught his eye and considered him forlornly. The other boy stood up, his disappointment clear and profound at Micah’s continued vagueness. “Let’s get going, yeah? I heard there were duels.”

“Not just any duels,” Viktor gushed. “Prisoner duels!”

With the others in tow, the group of five hurried further down the street, eagerly talking about duels and the possibility of participating. Micah slowly filed after them, well aware of Kai following at his heels.

The boy did not speak, he simply observed.

Micah didn’t know what he preferred: an insulting Edlen, or a quiet, attentive Edlen. He wondered if he could convince the other cadet to go on without him. He was tired. Exhausted. They’d just
gotten back to the capital not even hours before. Micah wanted to read Clarence’s journal, about the ritual and the pendant that Josiah grabbed from the vault.

He possessed so many pieces to the puzzle. He just needed time to sit down and thoroughly piece everything together.

Only, before he could turn and let Kai know his intentions, a voice rang out through the crowded streets.

“How is the chest, Mr. Egan?”

Pausing at the peculiar inquiry, Micah searched for the source.

A man stood at an open shop front, one of the only vendors without any customers. From the looks of it, he sold an array of tonics and herbs for medicinal purposes. He was a Healer, Micah realized. An Igni Healer. Vaguely, he remembered Healer Destan explaining he had to bring in an Igni Healer for assistance when Micah was poisoned with the Dulcis Waters. The man standing lazily at the counter was clearly the Healer in question.

Leisurely approaching the apothecary, Micah examined the man. “It has healed well.” The Igni was elderly with lined and weathered features. “I understand I have you to thank?”

“Brenton,” the man introduced himself gruffly. He did not offer a hand in greeting but rather assessed Micah as if he were a particularly odd tonic ingredient. “Dulcis Waters is a nasty drug. You nearly choked to death on the liquid in your lungs.” He squinted at Kai, who hovered at Micah’s shoulder. “Find the perpetrator?”

“Work in progress,” Micah responded stiffly. He was well aware of Kai’s close attention. “Not many customers today?”

Brenton scoffed bitterly and straightened from his slouched position against the counter. “I wish it were an anomaly, but it’s a common occurrence nowadays.” He stroked his beard and glanced at the swarming crowds over Micah’s shoulder. “Traditional healing is a dying art. All these water Elementals are taking over with their elaborate healing techniques.”

A loud clatter sounded from the back of the store before a head appeared behind Brenton. “Grandfather, we are out of aloe.”

Pale, amber eyes then locked with Micah.

And then the world abruptly buckled.

When the team dragged Micah out of the academy after their arrival at the capital, he’d expected to tag along, albeit reluctantly. Granted, a part of him had been curious about the capital, having only experienced it in the dark as he and Edlen passed the scenery in a carriage. He’d expected crowds. Loud noises. Yet, never did Micah expect to encounter this.

As he locked eyes with the man behind Brenton, Micah’s vision tunneled until he saw nothing but the young man across from him. Gravity urged him closer until he found the counter digging into his hipbones, preventing him from moving closer. Across his arms, goose bumps flared and he suddenly felt a rush of unlocked power.

Power.

Such power.
Something inside him reached for the man across from him. Something whispered, taunted, tempted him with power he never knew he harnessed. This man standing across from him was the answer to all his questions. This man could grant him more of this tantalizing power. It was only a taste, a taste of something bigger. Micah’s eyes unfocused and he suddenly wanted it all.

“Let me introduce you to my grandson. Haken.”

Haken…. was his…

Haken was his Chosen.

Micah opened his mouth and tried to pull his senses back under control. Unfortunately, refocusing was difficult to accomplish with all the disquieting realizations. A rush of anger accompanied his awe, his trepidation. Micah really was an Elemental. An ice Elemental! Moreover, Josiah had lied. Micah did not belong to the Igni king at all.

So why did Josiah claim him as his Chosen?

Before, when his mother revealed to him that Micah was Josiah’s Chosen, Micah thought the situation upsetting—but inevitable—that his blood relative turned out to be his Chosen. It had been out of his control. Out of anyone’s control. It had been the result of the force of nature itself. However, now it was entirely bizarre that his uncle would claim a bond to his child nephew, especially when said bond did not exist!

With the realization came sudden and overwhelming disenchantment. He was angry, so very angry, yet… he couldn’t help but feel betrayed and disappointed that he wasn’t tied to the man that had intrigued him from the start. The same man that had drawn him, enticed him. Josiah wasn’t a fatherly figure by any means. Not even an uncle. He’d been an enigma, a powerful, dominant man whom Micah secretly enjoyed being destined to. He could play with the man easier that way. He had something Josiah wanted.

An elbow dug painfully into his back, bringing him back to reality.

“A pleasure to meet you,” Micah forced out with the aid of Kai. “I—I really must get going.” He nodded sharply to Brenton. “I thank you again for treating me, Healer Brenton.” Without waiting for a reply, he turned his heel and abruptly fled.

“Wait!” Haken yelled.

Kai made a noise of confusion. “Egan—”

“Keep going, Edlen,” Micah urged Kai.

The sensation of discovering a Chosen was far from satisfying, not at all like the romantic fables and narrates of old. Never before had he felt so power hungry and reliant. He considered another person as the key to becoming better. How pathetic.

How utterly insulting!

Most Elementals considered Chosen blessings from overgenerous gods. An honor. After experiencing the initial interaction for himself, however, Micah, considered Chosen as means to an end and an unambitious way to achieve higher power. They were a crutch, someone to depend on. Micah would become stronger through his own means.

No shortcuts.
Absolutely no shortcuts. The emotions he felt were all so _vile_. So very weak and repulsive.

“Wait!” Haken suddenly appeared in front of Micah, out of breath and blocking his way with an extended arm. “You- you…” the man trailed off and tried to reassemble his control. He offered a nervous grin but then frowned immediately after with confusion. “We’re Chosen—”

“No,” Micah cut off swiftly. “We are not.”

“You feel the connection, I know you do.” Haken peered at him closely through a pair of thin-framed spectacles. “Are you a fire Elemental?” he paused, considering Micah’s eyes. “Or a water Elemental?”

Haken appeared a few years older than Micah. His dark brown hair was medium in length and hastily pulled back at the nape of his neck. A few determined strands fell into his face, drawing attention to his noble features. There was nothing particularly attractive about him, nor sinister, Micah observed gloomily. He seemed relatively _innocent_.

Micah shuddered at the prospect of such boredom.

Josiah would eat Haken alive.

Then he wondered why he cared what Josiah would think. The man had lied to him about this bond.

Reaching out, Micah grabbed Haken by the front of his tunic and pulled him close. “We are not Chosen,” he whispered icily. “Even if we were, I have no interest in forming any sort of attachment.” He stared at the other man. “And if you value your life, I suggest never approaching me again. Ever.”

Because if Josiah caught wind of Haken’s identity…

“Very hostile, Egan.”

“Hostile,” Micah agreed full-heartedly as they moved past a dumbstruck Haken and down the crowded street. “But more than necessary.”

Kai was silent for just a moment. “So you are an Elemental.”

“You already knew that. Didn’t you, Edlen?”

“An ice Elemental.” A pause. “There is no such thing.”

“Or so we’ve been led to believe,” Micah replied stiffly.

In the sea of clumsy and chatty people, Kai grabbed his elbow and hauled him close. The blond-haired noble stared down at Micah, stepping in close and pitching his voice lower. “What are you?” he demanded fiercely. “You were immune to those flames during our first mission. You needed _traditional_ healing. Moreover, you can conjure ice as an Element. Is this how all the biracial children are?”

Someone bumped into them, and Micah bit his tongue.

The smell of human bodies and fried-smelling food wafted through the air. He was grateful it was a mild, cool day, otherwise the stench would have made him sick.

Curling a hand around Kai’s wrist, he firmly removed the boy’s hand from his person. “I don’t
know,” he emphasized firmly by tightening his grip on the man’s wrist. “You want answers, but I can’t help you if I am just as ignorant as you are.”

Nevertheless, Kai’s speculation brought a certain clarity to the situation. Other children born to two races could harness the same power. It suddenly seemed to explain a great deal of things. It also seemed to reassure Micah. The other man might be right. If a child was born to one or two nobles, who had the gift of controlling an Element, perhaps they, too, had this power. This ice-like ability. This immunity!

The power he harnessed shouldn’t be feared.

Perhaps it was the start of a new race.

“Elementals aren’t just born randomly, Egan,” Kai murmured quietly, yanking his hand from Micah’s hold and repositioning it by his side. He made sure to keep from touching Micah when the smaller male exhibited so much defensiveness. “They are not commoners. They are of noble blood. That means your mother and father were Elementals. Or someone in your family. They had to have been. Just who are they?”

“Oui! Are you two fighting again? Can you just… kiss and make up for once?” Viktor asked, inserting himself forcibly between both Micah and Kai with an exaggerated wiggle to his hips. He balanced a tray of food with one hand and a grease-stained bag in the other. “The duels are about to begin. I’d like a good seat. Yeah? Last year, I had to sit so far back, I couldn’t see a thing!”

Kai and Micah grimaced at one another before reluctantly following Viktor and the other cadets toward the coliseum. Casting a suspicious look around his surroundings, Micah stopped abruptly.

“Where is Keegan?” he asked sternly.

“Right here!” Keegan swam his way through the crowd, his tall and bulky frame easily knocking people out of his way. He cast Viktor a victorious grin that left Micah feeling rather apprehensive and suspicious.

“What are you up to?” Micah inquired lowly.

“Nothing,” Keegan replied harmlessly. “Shall we?” He motioned to the entrance of the coliseum.

Much to Micah’s chagrin, the team ushered him forcibly inside the stadium over an hour before the duels actually started. A respectable amount of people already filled the stands and Viktor quickly claimed a spot as close to the stage as possible. Micah sat stiffly, unhappily, as crowds upon crowds entered the arena after them.

As Viktor rambled on and on about the duels, Micah zoned out and mulled over the dark sensation he felt over the recent happenings.

Undoubtedly, he felt enraged.

Fooled.

He could not shake it. He drowned in it. Suffocated. The entire situation asphyxiated him. Trying to inhale deeply to clear his lungs, Micah stared across the stadium, unfocused, unhinged. Maddened. He tried to reign his temper and immediate impulse over today’s discoveries. After trying to stifle his temper, he realized the last thing he needed was to confront Josiah when he wasn’t thinking clearly.
However, his questions ate away at him until they were the most prevalent thing on his mind. Why? Why, why?! What advantage, exactly, would Josiah gain by deceiving him in that way? Did he want a claim on Ezra—the royal heir—in order to remain close to him? To manipulate him to his causes? A way to pronounce his entitlement to Prince Ezra and discourage all others away? A way to keep himself in court? A way to make himself just as equal in standing as the royal heir?

Apparently, he believed he had an advantage in court if he made Ezra his. It was all political!

“Is everything okay, Micah?”

Micah slowly turned to look at Talia, who peered up at him closely. “Just fine.”

She hardly seemed convinced. “You seem distracted. It’s not like you.” The Unda female turned her cheek, her pale features appearing rather pinched at the topic at hand. “You know you can trust us, Micah. We’re a team now. We’re here for each other.”

He did not respond, simply because he did not believe it warranted a response.

“In the beginning, you were there for all of us. Every single one of us,” she continued quietly, her voice nearly drowned out by Viktor and his excited chatter to both Keegan and Aiden. “You wanted a team environment. That extends both ways, you know.” She paused. “I’d like to help you the same way you helped me.”

As much as her comment meant to him, Micah could not get past his anger at Josiah. “I appreciate your concern, Talia,” he responded gently. “When the time is right, I will come to you.”

His attention, however, immediately focused on a figure clear across the stadium. Those in the man’s close proximity all stood from the stands out of respect and reverence. As the man glided down the stadium’s aisles, Micah noted the startling poise and pride. Only one other man carried himself like that, and that was Josiah.

Yet, this wasn’t Josiah. This man had long, pale hair styled into a braid that fell down his back. Even from a distance, Micah could tell the material of his robes were expensive. The colors were vivid—a royal blue and deep gold. The man’s features were sharp, cold, and exclusively handsome.

Calder.

Micah stared obsessively, watching as his father sat upon an intricately carved chair, which gave him an optimized position to watch the duels. Surrounding him were a posse of men and women who tried to appear just as important. From advisors and councilmembers, to the navy-clad royal guard, they all paled in comparison to the King of the Concordia Empire.

Blatantly, Micah stared, feeling something in his throat at the sight of the man. His father.

Just down the way, close enough to appear unified, yet far enough to indicate two, separate powers, Josiah sat. Like Calder, he had his own flock of sheep.

Micah narrowed his eyes. Separation under the smoky veil of unanimity.

Concordia was doomed.

One day, both Calder and Josiah would grow tired of the restraints and the forced concord. They’d
spread their limbs and tear past the restraints with ease and startling destructibility. For two races with such a long history of brutal wars and animosity, it was doubtful a unification would last long. With the way the two kings acted in public, and with their distinct, separate band of followers, anyone would be a fool not to predict imminent self-destruction.

Tearing his gaze away from his father, Micah observed the packed stadium. Perhaps he should have paid more attention to Viktor’s overenthusiastic description of these duels. He hadn’t believed such an event would draw so many spectators.

Like royalty.

There were also many cadets from the academy in the stands, though their black and gold uniforms were nearly lost amongst the sheer number of other observers.

“They use prisoners as the opponents,” Viktor informed, probably for the fourth time that day, yet the first time for Micah. “These aren’t just any prisoners, though. They get trained year-round for this very purpose.”

“Prisoners fighting against other prisoners,” Micah injected. “Sounds thrilling.”

Noticing Micah’s sarcasm, Viktor scowled from his position on the bench. “Obviously, you haven’t been listening to me, Micah! These are volunteers fighting against the prisoners for eternal glory.”


“These duels only happen on Concordia’s anniversary. Volunteers hardly ever win.” Viktor busied himself with another tray of food on his lap before dipping something in sauce. “If the prisoner wins consecutive rounds, he walks away free. But if the volunteer wins, they receive a huge sum of gold and a top position with King Calder’s personal guard.”

“Sounds more like a punishment to me,” Micah murmured.

That earned a startled laugh from Talia and exasperated looks from the others. Viktor thrust the tray of food in Micah’s direction. The boy hadn’t gone one second without stuffing his face with an array of greasy or sugary foods. “Try a potato skin, Micah. You’re rather miserable company today.”

“Occupy his mouth for a while,” Kai added.

“Well,” Viktor paused for a long while and ran his eyes across Micah’s face with exaggerated desire. “I’d like to occupy his mouth.”

That caused a chorus of boisterous laughter amongst the team, both scandalized and impressed with the innuendo. Micah endured Viktor’s playful wink, not at all bothered by the boy’s obvious flirtations. Or attempts of flirtations.

“Crass,” Talia declared, glaring disgustingly at Viktor.

The boy then winked at her.

Despite himself, Micah grabbed a piece of potato from the tray, inspecting it closely. He’d never seen potatoes cut into mere slivers and deep-fried. The amount of salt sprinkled on top seemed appallingly overwhelming. He hesitantly tried it, faltering at the taste.
Well…

It certainly wasn’t bad.

Viktor, who’d watched Micah closely, laughed with victory. “I knew I’d get you to like something today!” He opened up the bag at his feet, forgoing the potato skins on Micah’s lap and pulling out something entirely new for himself. “Enjoy, Egan.”

Down below, as a man walked into the center of the stage and welcomed everyone, Micah busied himself with the potatoes. His current mood prevented him from enjoying the mockery below, though, when they brought out the prisoner, his attention refocused.

There was something disquieting about the man. The prisoner was a very large Unda male. His shoulders were ridiculously expansive and his limbs solid and bulky. A scar ran down his face, appearing old as it nearly splintered his face and lips into two, separate divisions. The crowd roared loudly as the prisoner’s shackles clattered to the ground.

At the sight of such a fierce man, Micah watched the expressions of exhilaration crease the spectators’ faces. Tattoos marked the man’s bare head, their markings so faint, Micah could hardly distinguish them from his position. The name of the first volunteer rang across the stadium and an equally imposing man walked down the steps of the observation stands. Though he swaggered confidently onto the dueling stage, the events that followed were anything but assertive.

It was a one-sided duel.

The prisoner toyed with his opponent for a long while, knocking him all over the stage and controlling the swordfight. As the prisoner leered, Micah instantly noticed the exposed gums and the lack of teeth.

When the prisoner deemed the duel over, he deemed it over.

Micah stared, wide-eyed and in disbelief, as the man shoved his sword down his opponent’s throat. With an unforgiving yank, the prisoner then withdrew his sword, blood and gore showering across the dueling stage.

The crowd went wild with glee, jumping to their feet.

Nausea churned Micah’s stomach at the sight. That’s why there were so many spectators, he realized. These duels were to the death. Humans couldn’t possibly pass up a chance to watch such carnage, could they?

Pathetic.

Utterly and completely pitiful.

He remained sitting as those around him stood up in approval. Why did they feel it acceptable to cheer such a pointless, gruesome death? Possibly because the victim volunteered and the killing was authorized by law. It was a social norm. Next to him, Talia shook her head, remaining on the bench.

Further down, Keegan issued a startled, horrified cry. “You didn’t tell me these were death duels!” the boy shouted, grabbing a cheering Viktor around the arm. He nearly yanked the smaller man off his feet. “You didn’t tell me! I thought… I thought it was a regular duel, otherwise I wouldn’t have volunteered!”
The entire team all screamed at once.

“You volunteered?” Viktor exclaimed with high-pitched horror. “I was joking when I suggested you should do it! I never expected you would actually volunteer!”

Micah stood up abruptly, dropping the tray of potatoes on to the ground. Anger made his movements jerky as he shoved Viktor until the other boy collapsed onto the bench. “He’s from the outer regions,” he hissed furiously. “How could you overlook his naivety?” He turned to Keegan. “And how could you be so stupid?”

“Micah, I…” Keegan shook his head, his words drowned out by the loud crowd.

“Keegan Flint! From our very own Concordia Military Academy!” A voice announced loudly, rising above the deafening ruckus of the spectators who’d only grown louder upon the announcement of the next volunteer. A cadet!

“Leave!” Micah ordered, grabbing Keegan’s arm.

“It’s a binding agreement,” Kai injected uneasily. “When he signed his consent, he agreed to all liabilities. They’d track him down with severe consequences.”

“Death?”

“It’s possible. It’s never happened before. Or they’d just force him to do what he signed up for.”

Micah stared into Keegan’s desperate eyes, angry beyond anything he’d ever imagined. His hands trembled. His whole body trembled. Keegan seemed to recognize his fury, for he dropped his gaze shamefully and shuffled resolutely near the set of stairs. It was as if the boy truly thought Micah would actually let him walk out there and face death.

Reaching out, Micah snagged the boy’s hooded poncho, holding him back. Without waiting for compliance, Micah unfastened the piece of dark clothing and proceeded to don it himself.

By now, the crowd quieted significantly, and gradually lowered back into the stands.

“Micah—”

“Sit. Stop drawing attention.”

Talia buried her face into her hands and the others, surprised by the intensity in his tone, followed his order. Keegan only sat back down when Micah put a firm, nearly violent hand on his shoulder. Pulling his hood over his features, Micah made for the stairs. Only, a hand around his wrist held him back.

Surprisingly, Edlen held him back. The man stared at him intensely, clearly unable to say what was on his mind.

Micah took pity on him and spoke first. “You know I’m the only one who stands a chance, Edlen.”

Edlen bared his teeth like a rabid animal. “You have no chance!”

“Stop being dramatic,” Micah avowed with false bravado, pulling his hand away.

Turning his back from his traumatized team, he stepped resolutely into the middle of the staircase. As he walked down the stairs, he drew eyes from all across the stadium. Micah did not hesitate, though his body washed cold with the stifling attention. Earsplitting jeers spread like wildfire
across the stadium at his unassuming stature. They were displeased. Mocking.

Across the coliseum, he looked at Josiah, noticing the man watching him indifferently. To an outsider, he was an unbiased spectator, unfamiliar with the cadet called to duel. His eyes, however, sparkled angrily and focused relentlessly on Micah’s cloaked figure.

Micah supposed the man was beyond livid. Not only would Josiah soil his reputation if he saved Micah in the midst of battle, but he’d draw Calder’s awareness. The questions would arise and their ploy would be over.

No, he corrected himself.

Josiah’s ploy would be over.

Nonetheless, Micah had no intentions on letting it get that far. He’d be damned if he relied on Josiah to rescue him. The man’s repute would suffer briefly, yes, but not nearly as much as Micah’s reputation. If the public found out Josiah saved the royal heir, they’d view Micah as weak. They’d also view Josiah as his close ally, an assumption he did not want the public to make more than they already would. If his identity ever came out, his past actions already indicated he sympathized far more with the Igni students than the nobles. Something he was sure Josiah had intended from the start.

Prince Ezra had to remain neutral between the two races.

Otherwise, his existence was irrelevant.

When he realized he contemplated a future of actually sitting on the throne, Micah’s mind abruptly turned silent with unease.

“Good luck, kid,” the announcer, an Unda man, hailed. He raked his eyes down Micah’s lithe figure and tried to peer at his face from inside the deep hood. “You’ll need it.”

Micah gazed at him coolly. Just over his shoulder, men dragged the previous volunteer off the stage, discarding the broken corpse cruelly over the edge of the platform. With a hollow and sick thump, the corpse hit the ground.

Like trash.

“Go on.”

A hand touched his back and nudged him onto the platform. His combat boots created a resonating sound as they stepped onto the stage. The jeers and boos from the crowd eventually turned insignificant as his pulse raged wildly in his ears. Gradually, he walked into the center of the platform, his strides cautious.

Hesitant.

He couldn’t remember the last time he felt so small.

So unconfident and nervous.

The prisoner leered at him as he approached. “I didn’t know the academy enlisted children,” he goaded, his voice rough—scratchy. “Poor thing. Did someone dare you to volunteer today?”

“Something like that,” Micah responded, thinking of Keegan and Viktor.
Assuming things went well, he would wring their necks after the duel. Nevertheless, Micah had a strange sense that things would never be the same after this. It was a sensation of impending doom and torment. His stomach curled uncomfortably. His skin broke out in cold perspiration. Even his fingers trembled.

The prisoner scoffed and bowed low.

Mocking.

Smirking.

Micah stood across from him, soaking in the sight of such a degenerate man bowing down low. His own waist inclined, acknowledging the necessity of dueling etiquette.

Turning his heel, he approached his side of the platform and withdrew his sword. Unable to hide his curiosity, his gaze climbed up towards the spectators, looking specifically at King Calder. Micah’s pulse jumped at the man’s total attention, only, the attention was uninterested, unfamiliar. Near his shoulder, Councilman Sachiel sat, appearing just as apathetic.

Before the end of the duel, Micah was sure Sachiel would recognize him.

Micah stopped.

Gradually turning, he spied the prisoner doing the same on his end. Taking deep, steadying breaths, Micah lowered into the traditional starting position for the Igni form. Upon seeing this, the crowd grew louder—more eager.

More eager for his imminent death.

The announcer swaggered out near the center of the platform and raised his arm high in the air. The crowd immediately silenced in anticipation.

Throwing down his arm, the announcer ran off the platform.

And the prisoner charged at Micah.

Micah’s legs suddenly grew too heavy.

*Agni,* what was he doing? He trained years to be where he was, so why did he feel rooted in place, unable to move out of sheer and overwhelming uncertainty? Forcing himself to move, he ran awkwardly towards the prisoner, ducking quickly under a strike and throwing his blade out in an attack. The man blocked it with ridiculous ease and Micah took several steps back at the force of the defense.

He stumbled back further as the man ambushed him with an array of assaults.

His power was great, crushing.

Micah somehow managed to stay on his feet, though most his recoveries were clumsy, unsteady. Just as the man did to the volunteer before, he played with Micah. He gave him hope for recovery, but then quickly took it away. Frustrated with Micah’s ability to always land on his feet, the man roared and charged, colliding bodily with Micah. His shoulder slammed in Micah’s lower abdomen, flipping him cleanly over his back and onto the platform.

After landing on the bouncy stage, Micah’s dull eyes stared up at the sky. The platform shuddered
and vibrated from the ferocity of the screams throughout the stadium. The cheers were
unsympathetic and eager.

Hardly receiving a chance to recover, a hand curled around his neck and picked him off the ground.
Micah wheezed, black dots dancing in his eyes. With a vicious laugh, the man tossed him aside
like a ragdoll.

Landing awkwardly on the stage, Micah shuddered and got on his hands and knees. Having bitten
his tongue during the impact, blood streamed from his mouth and stained the cloth platform. Just
over his shoulder, the prisoner screamed with victory and threw his hands in the air to rouse the
crowd. The people responded with more cheering.

And more cheering.

Micah glared at the crimson liquid, realizing his team was watching this pathetic display. They
looked up to him as their captain and leader. Josiah was watching this. Calder. Sachiel. Moreover,
the entire Concordia capital.

What was he?

A victim?

“For you.” He felt the press of the crystal against his palm. “Like your eyes.”

The child-like laughter reverberated across his mind, stilling his body. His palm tingled at the
memory of the crystal, wishing he hadn’t stashed it away in his nightstand, but rather kept it on his
person. It had given him confidence. His eyes unfocused as he remembered the power running
through his veins after conjuring the ice.

“Not like that,” Sachiel scolded. “You do not control the Element. Nor does the Element control
you. You must create a balance. A rhythm that you will both succumb. It’s like a dance, Ezra, a
dance to seduce the flow of power and control.”

“But I am not a water Elemental.”

“It does not matter,” he answered. “Every successful Unda warrior learns to strike the balance
and dance the right steps. You need to have trust in the form. Let it guide you.”

Amongst the jeers, Micah hastily pulled his hood back over his face. He struggled to his feet and
stared at his opponent. He’d been too worried about defense and keeping up his guard. His form
suffered—became ambiguous and inconsistent—just because he feared his opponent and his
opponent’s strength. Unsurprisingly, fear had crippled him.

Throwing out his arm, he readjusted his sword and his stance. He harnessed his confidence, that
same confidence he felt in the tunnels after conjuring the ice. The same confidence he felt while
sparring with Sachiel. A sense of calm anger thrummed beneath the surface of his skin.

No one could play him.

Not this man.

Not Josiah.

His opponent turned back towards him, having successfully fueled the crowd to their feet. Once
the Unda prisoner realized Micah was ready for more, he charged. Micah bounded to his toes and
channeled his cold aggression into his attacks. The man was stronger, but Micah was faster and far more nimble. As he altered between the Unda and Igni form in quick intervals, the prisoner grew agitated.

Confused.

Around them, large flakes of snow drifted down from the grey skies, a typically unheard of occurrence anywhere but the distant mountains.

Micah paid it no heed as he pushed himself faster.

Unless absolutely necessary, he would not block the man’s strong attacks. It spent his strength and took away from his offense. Instead, he moved his body and took advantage of his quick feet and quicker recovery.

Micah found the more he forced the prisoner to strike, and meet empty air, the weaker the man became. The bald-headed man also became slower to recover from the empty strikes. As long as Micah continued to keep his speed, he knew he’d eventually conquer. He smirked darkly at the thought.

“You haven’t won yet!” the man roared, surprising Micah as he knocked his sword from his grasp.

His blade crossed to his left side in midair, leaving Micah’s torso wide open.

A breath.

A pause.

Micah snatched his blade in the air with his left hand and proceeded to stop the man’s attack with an upward block. He stared into the surprised eyes of his attacker before rotating his wrist and trying for an inside attack.

The prisoner scrambled back ungracefully, flicking his sword out in a desperate block. Micah kept on him, assaulting him rapidly with his left hand. A part of him knew it wasn’t a wise move—to use his left hand—not with Calder in the audience. Not when Ember warned him against it. Not when he’d tried so hard to hide it all this time. However, he needed to win and his left hand was stronger.

A rare trait passed down to him by his father.

The prisoner fell back, losing his finesse, his footing. Micah danced around him as a predator would his weakened prey—eager, hungry.

Vicious.

His blade cut a wound near the man’s ribcage and another near his upper chest. Vividly, he remembered the prisoner shoving his blade down his last opponent’s throat. A suffering and painful death was inevitable. He’d be a spewing geyser by the time Micah was finished. Delivering a very deep slice to the prisoner’s upper back, the man roared.

He whirled around, trying to attack Micah, but found nothing but air. Turning again, the man could not recover in time as Micah suddenly appeared before him.

Spinning his sword in his palm, Micah slammed his blade up through the man’s neck. With an exaggerated yank, Micah removed the sword from the prisoner and slammed his boot against the
man’s chest.

With a nudge, the man toppled over.

Micah stared at the dying man, intrigued as the blood stained a fresh layer of snow a very vivid crimson. His eyes then rose to the skies, watching as the large snowflakes turned smaller, sharper.

Ice-like.

He lifted his palm, catching a flake on his glove. An odd sensation washed through Micah as he stood above the man and beneath the snow that would undoubtedly bend and move to his desires. All this was his doing.

His power. His strength. His creation.

Micah dropped his hand as he finally snapped himself back to reality. The screams of utter surprise and exhilaration from the spectators were deafening. He turned, securing the hood more firmly around his features as he gazed toward Calder.

He had eyes only for Calder.

The man stood slowly from his chair, his expression grey and disconcerted. In a very un-King like gesture, Calder leaned forward, bracing his hands against the stone barrier to the platform below. The way he looked at Micah made it seem as if he could stare into his very conscience. With his brows furrowed, Calder’s lips parted.

Throwing his sword across his body, Micah executed an overzealous bow.

He then turned and made for the exit.

“Stop!” Calder yelled, his voice muffled amid the crowd.

Micah walked faster.

“Seize him!”

Upon the thundered command, Micah started running. He sprinted past the gates of the platform and slammed his shoulder against the waif Unda announcer. The man squawked and tumbled from the ledge, falling to the pit where the corpse lay. A quick glance over his shoulder confirmed Calder’s personal guards jumping over the ledge to the platform below.

Micah bulldozed his way through the crowd, enduring the cheers and uninvited pats on his back from the ignorant spectators. Out of nowhere, a body knocked its way in front of Micah and began shoving people out of the way with his water Element.

Kai.

The other boy grabbed him around the scruff of his poncho and dragged him along, fighting the crowd and somehow managing to escape through the doors of the coliseum. Behind them, the rowdy crowd swarmed. It would take the guards awhile to break through.

“Unbelievable,” Kai yelled, pulling him along and dodging through alleyways with a sense of familiarity. “You’re unbelievable, Egan. You’ve been holding out on me.”

Micah allowed the boy to pull him along, recognizing that Kai knew his way around the capital. They would undoubtedly gain distance from Calder’s royal guard.
“Left-handed. Who would have thought?”

Micah narrowed his gaze on Kai as the boy tightened his hold almost painfully. “I prefer the term ambidextrous.”

“Right.” The boy’s tone was clipped, short, and angry. “I know exactly who you are. And judging from the reaction your duel garnered from royalty, I imagine your father also has a good idea who you are.”

“All the more reason to keep running.”

Kai suddenly turned and pushed him into the side of a building. He loomed close, his features contorted irately. “Everything all makes sense now. What upsets me is that you kept it from us. You’re the royal heir! The…” Kai trailed off and shook his head in disbelief. “The royal heir!” he said again.

“Stop.” Micah pushed at Kai’s chest, forcing the boy back a step. “I’m not ready for that yet. Can you possibly wrap your mind around that, Kai? That I don’t want to sit on the throne and constantly be watched?”

For a moment, Kai appeared as if he wanted to argue. He then deflated and shook his head. “Now isn’t the time to talk about it, Egan, but I’d like to hear more about it. Agreed? There is obviously more to the story that I don’t know about. Until then, I’ll keep this to myself.”

Micah did not agree to any sort of conversation, but inclined his head.

“Do the others know?”

“Unlikely.” Kai turned and led Micah further down the alleyway and zigzagged down a vacant backstreet. “Everyone was too impressed with your form switching between Unda and Igni to notice when you switched hands as well.”

“Everyone but you,” Micah commented, reluctantly impressed.

“Everyone but observant high nobles and King Calder,” Kai murmured quietly. “Even if commoners managed to take notice, it’s not a topic of interest. Noblemen, however, know very well that Calder and his predecessors are the only warriors who are left-handed. In order to be compared to royalty, many nobles have trained endlessly to make their left hand dominant.”

That did not surprise Micah.

Far too many people were shallow. All just to gain a higher ground of social status.

“I told the team to meet us near the funnel cake stand,” Kai suddenly explained. “We can’t outrun Calder’s men and we shouldn’t try.”

Easily picking up the unspoken words, Micah scoffed darkly.

“You want them to take Keegan.” He narrowed his eyes. “He would break under Calder.”

“Or maybe you underestimate him, Egan. He’s loyal and he will not give up your name. Many people don’t know the real reason Calder wants possession of the champion today. Keegan’s ignorance will play to his benefit. He’ll think Calder wants to punish you and him for identity fraud.”
Upon Kai’s comment about underestimating Keegan, Micah opened his mouth to argue. Only, he reluctantly realized that was true. A part of him did underestimate Keegan, especially in this situation.

Though Kai right. Keegan was loyal to a fault.

“Unless, of course, you have a better idea?” Kai inquired sarcastically. “Calder knows you’re from the academy and has connections to a Keegan Flint.”

No, Micah imagined Calder would find Keegan doubtless of how fast they ran. He had no other ideas. If Keegan did a good job convincing Calder of his story, perhaps Micah wouldn’t have to worry about his father taking notice of his presence in Concordia. It all depended on how much effort Calder extracted sniffing out deceit.

They hovered near the funnel cake vendor, not having to wait long before the rest of the team showed up.

Their expressions were exhilarated, perhaps a combination of the duel and the proceeding conflict. Keegan, however, appeared crestfallen as he spied Micah. He shuffled closer, hurriedly taking the hooded poncho from Micah’s outstretched hand. Clearly, Kai had gone over the plan with the team before they left the stadium.

“I’m sorry—”

“Don’t apologize again,” Micah interrupted, his voice a bit too cold.

Keegan grimaced. “I—I really thought it was a regular duel. I wanted to show you how far I’ve come with the sword, Micah. I didn’t get the chance to do that during our mission to the Terra Kingdom.”

Micah looked hard at Viktor.

The boy suddenly lost his grin and glanced away.

“The blame is not entirely on you, Keegan,” Micah said, looking pointedly at the instigator of the group. “Fortunately, it turned out as well as it could have.”

“Except they are going to catch on that it wasn’t me.”

Micah grabbed Keegan’s shoulder and squeezed reassuringly. “I know you can do this. We’re in this together.” Just down the road, Calder’s guards appeared. “They can’t do anything if they have no evidence, Keegan.”

He stepped back as the guards sprinted towards Keegan.

The boy glanced over his shoulder and stiffened. Keegan then looked back at Micah, a wide, beaming smile noticeable from beneath his hood. “Thank you, kid. You’re always there, protecting.”

The team stumbled backwards as the guards violently pulled Keegan into their custody. Micah stood tall, watching the exchange through dissatisfied and disapproving eyes. The guards paid him little heed as they roughly pulled Keegan down the road. Micah looked after them, feeling unsettled at Keegan’s distance.

“Funnel cake?” Viktor inquired innocently.
Micah turned and sneered at Viktor’s apologetic expression. “What happens to Keegan is on your hands.”

Micah turned his heel and ventured back to the academy.

The rest of the team slowly filed after him.

Chapter End Notes

I just wanted to let you all know....... I had zero life this weekend. Zero. I need to distance myself from this story for just a tad bit ;) I will probably finish posting Part 1 next weekend during Labor Day, but boy...

o.O
21. Chapter Twenty-One

Keegan shifted under the azure gaze, unable to gauge what the king was thinking. Then again, he didn’t dare examine the man’s expression. His observation would be both blatant and disrespectful.

Guards dressed entirely in navy blue stood along the walls of the throne room, their expressions all impassively similar. Their eyes, Keegan noted, stared straight ahead—like dutiful dogs ready to act on their master’s call. Keegan hurriedly moved his gaze back over to King Calder. The king sat upon his throne, his cheek and jaw resting against a propped up hand, the epitome of sophisticated boredom and contemplation.

Keegan dropped his attention to the gleaming floors.

Everything was polished, blindingly lavish, and intricate. He was afraid to breathe and dirty the place.

Though he’d always wanted to step inside the palace, he hadn’t imagined it would be under these circumstances. Like his meeting with Lord Josiah, this situation wasn’t exactly what he pictured when finally meeting the king. Agni. He was a fool. He never even anticipated he’d actually meet the king. Ever.

“So you… ran.”

Keegan nodded. His poncho pooled around his arms as he lowered further into his bow. “Yes, Your Majesty,” he coincided. Kings were addressed as majesties. Princes had the title of highnesses. It was knowledge from his mother he never thought he’d need. “I was uncertain about your intentions.”

He owed this to Micah.

Wincing, he recalled the boy’s angry and disappointed features at the coliseum. He would never be able to erase that image from his mind. Micah was like a brother to him, and family was the most important thing to Keegan. He’d been an idiot. He knew. He just found the idea of the duel a prime way to compete. To demonstrate his skill. He hadn’t even anticipated he’d win. He hadn’t known the true circumstances surrounding the duels, so hyped up from Viktor’s wild tales and excitement.

Despite trying his hardest to be the best, he continuously disappointed Micah.

And Micah had every right to be disappointed.

“My intentions,” Calder repeated with an incredulous whisper. “Everyone knew my intentions. The winner of these matches receive quite the hefty sum in gold and a position with my royal guard. Surely, you knew?”

Keegan glanced up at the king, taken aback at the man’s immaculate features. The king reminded him of someone, though his contemplation abruptly vanished as he desperately tried to conjure a
response to the man’s inquiry.

He decided to settle with the truth. “No, I didn’t know of the rewards. I’m from the outer regions. I—with all due respect, Your Majesty, I never wanted any of that. The gold. The fame… the recognition.” Keegan licked his lips nervously. “My actions were only to impress someone of importance to me. That’s all.”

“Aw. I see.”

Silence cloaked the throne room once again, and Keegan felt King Calder dissect him with a searching gaze. Nothing revealed in the royal’s tone or his expression to indicate he did or did not believe Keegan’s story.

Earlier, when Keegan lowered his hood after King Calder’s command, he discerned the dissatisfaction and heavy suspicion across the man’s face. Clearly, whatever King Calder expected to find, Keegan certainly was not it. The king had whispered to someone long ago and they’d gone off running to fulfill the man’s request. Since then, Keegan and King Calder’s conversation had been sparse, clipped, and formal. Nothing said between the two was instrumental, nor revealing. The man hadn’t asked him much about the duel or his abilities.

Keegan suspected the man just wanted to keep him kneeling.

Waiting.

A sort of punishment.

The heavy-set doors suddenly opened and footsteps clicked across the tiled floor. Keegan glanced over his shoulder, not recognizing the Unda male who confidently approached the king’s throne.

“Your Majesty. What you requested.”

The man bowed low before handing a folder to the king. Calder accepted the file and sorted through the contents with deliberate slowness. Keegan winced. Kneeling this long hurt his knees and back, but he didn’t dare stand without proper consent. The Unda man who walked into the throne room measured Keegan narrowly, sizing him up. Or more appropriately, sizing him down.

Calder’s lips pursed and he seemed preoccupied with something in the folder. Without saying anything, the royal studied the contents with a very peculiar expression.

Eternity stretched before the king spoke.

“So it is you.” Between Calder’s two fingers was a small black and white photograph of Keegan taken just before the trials. “Keegan Flint, aged twenty-four. Igni.” He dropped the photograph back into the folder. “Says here you are the eldest of five. Region 20.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“A very desolate region with hardly any nature and far too much heat. I’ve only been there a handful of times myself,” Calder murmured more to himself than to Keegan. “A first-year cadet of the gold team.” He clicked his tongue. “Very impressive. Is it not?”

A time went by before Keegan realized the man was asking him a question. “I—I’m sorry?”

Calder calmly closed the folder and leaned forward in his throne. “You are only a first-year cadet, yet your performance today was enthralling. Impressing me is a remarkable feat for one so young.
Tell me, who was your instructor?”

Keegan stiffened. “An old warrior,” he replied vaguely. Micah used it all the time. “From Region 20.”

“There are several rebels in the outskirt regions, Your Majesty,” the Unda man declared with a snide air. “It’s no surprise they are training the children. Uprising, surely.”

Calder suffered a sigh and handed the folder to the man.

“Leave us.” He then looked at the royal guards. “All of you.”

It seemed to take forever for them to leave, but as soon as they did, Calder stood from his throne. Keegan watched as the man’s long, luxurious cloak traveled behind him as he walked down the dais and towards his kneeling form.

“You can stand, Mr. Flint. Next time, when greeting royalty, taking a knee and bending your neck should suffice.”

Keegan’s face flushed hot. Here he was, draped against the floor as one would worship a god. Clearly, the king really had kept him in position as a punishment. While grateful at the reprieve, Keegan grew unnerved as he stood and found Calder inches from his face. They were exactly the same height, though they couldn’t have been more different in appearance. Calder’s skin was porcelain-like. His eyes blue. His hair platinum blond. His pockets full of gold, riches, and entitlement.

“The man who fought today was shorter,” Calder observed softly. “He also had a slight—lithe build.” His eyes traced Keegan’s shoulders. “Your shoulders are too broad.”

Keegan nearly whimpered.

“I noticed, simply because I marveled at such strength one of that size could achieve.” Calder’s expression was a mask of cold stone. “He switched aggressively between two, entirely different forms. A feat I have never seen accomplished successfully before today. If I ask you to duel me, Mr. Flint, would I see such skill as I had earlier today?”

He spoke with a crispness and a confidence that Keegan found riveting. Though he spoke quickly, he annunciacted each word as if it were the most vital part of the discussion. It was impossible not become fixated.

“I…” Keegan dropped his gaze, unable to hold the king’s stare.

“Tell me, was he biracial?”

Keegan’s eyes widened at the question and he grimaced at the man. “No!”

“Agni, did he just yell at royalty?”

Calder studied his horrified features closely before turning his shoulder and walking towards the fountain. “Perhaps it is wistful thinking on my part,” he murmured quietly, his soothe, calm tone complementing the gentle ripples of the running water. “I thought, maybe, my son would be right under my nose. It has been so many years. It would be easy to lose faith if I didn’t know for certain Varuna would bring him back to me.”

A shock nearly caused Keegan to flinch. “Y-your son?”
He hadn’t expected that.

“Yes.” Calder touched the flowing water. A stream of water entwined through his fingers like an obedient serpent. “Ezra.”

The story of Prince Ezra and Queen Ember was a well-known tale, but very ambiguous and tarnished with wild speculations. Someone had abducted the prince and many people presumed he was dead after all these years. Some claimed the queen went insane and burned down her son’s nursery. Others say there was an unnamed Igni who could not tolerate the unification of two, separate races and started the fire in hopes of destroying the biracial child.

“But the capital proclaimed Queen Ember dead,” Keegan said. At the sight of Calder’s slow, calculating smile, Keegan’s entire body washed cold. No!

He was so stupid.

His comment would indicate he’d seen Queen Ember—or rather—Micah’s mother. Whom, Keegan fretted, just very well could be the queen. She went by another name…but…but why would Micah lie about his history? Why would Lord Josiah kill his own sister and hunt down his nephew just before term started? Was it true? Had she gone insane and started the fire herself?

She hadn’t seemed especially unstable when Keegan interacted with her. If anything, she was extremely polite and genuinely kind.

“Yes, Ember was proclaimed dead by the capital, though her body was never recovered.”

Calder turned and deliberated Keegan. The man stood primly and properly, harnessing a surprising aura of unattainable superiority. He was extremely handsome, a level above all others, and yet, he also carried a unique aura Keegan could not place. Something remarkable and awe-inspiring. Graceful. Imposing. Intimidatingly beautiful. He supposed such an aura came with the title of royalty. It was no surprise men and women groveled at the feet of monarchs for centuries.

“My son, however, was officially declared missing.” Calder took a measured step closer to Keegan. “I have no ill feelings towards the queen, and I especially do not have any ill feeling towards my son, who is entirely innocent in all this. I only wish to be reunited with him.”

“I’m sorry,” Keegan apologized, feeling his heart twist for the man. For the possibility of it being true and denying a father the chance of seeing his missing son. “I have never met Ezra.”

Calder’s face hardened and his eyes turned cruel. “Severe consequences will follow if I find out you’ve been withholding information from me, Mr. Flint.”

Despite his pulse hammering crazily in fear, Keegan lifted his chin without hesitation. “I don’t know Ezra,” he repeated. Firmly this time.

For Micah.

The king surveyed him in silence for a long while, his hard expression morphing into intense scrutiny. After a great, uncomfortable silence, his lips then twitched vindictively as he lifted a hand and pointed at the door. “Your loyalty is very admirable, though I have no need for it now. You are
dismissed.”

Keegan stood shell-shocked before regaining enough sense to retreat. Hurrying to open the door, he hastily dodged out of the way as royal guards and other members of the court filed uninvitingly inside the throne room. Nearly tasting liberty, Keegan propelled clumsily out of the room as soon as the last man entered.

However, a voice stopped him cold.

“Oh! And Mr. Flint?”

Keegan whirled around abruptly, his pulse in his throat as he faced the expectant king. Had he forgotten to bow? Kneel? Was he supposed to formally bid farewell to the king? Freedom had been so close. Across the door’s threshold, Keegan watched as the man held a photograph aloft between two gloved fingers.

He hadn’t realized the king had taken anything out of the folder.

“Give my fond regards to your captain, Micah Egan. Yes?”

Without any further comment, one of King Calder’s advisors slammed the door on Keegan’s shell-shocked expression. He stood there for a long moment, unable to move.

Unable to breathe properly.

“Agni!” he cursed loudly.

Curling his hand into a fist, he pressed it against the door to the throne room. He stood there for quite some time, drowning in the hopelessness and despair. When he realized the situation would not change, Keegan dragged himself away from the room and made his way toward the exit of the palace. He could not appreciate the grandiose surroundings, for his mind was in complete turmoil.

Could it be true?

Could Micah really be Prince Ezra?

The implications hurt him. Micah had lied. Lied by omission. Moreover, the lies hadn’t just started. As soon as they met, years ago in Region 20, the lies would have begun with Micah’s name. His mother. His background. The silence behind his scars and his mother’s scars.

It hurt Keegan. Devastated him, really. Even frustrated him. Not many children had skin tones hovering perfectly between gold and porcelain. When he reencountered Micah the first night at the academy, and seen the blue eyes, he should have put the pieces together then. Why would Micah hide his racial background and pretend he was Igni all those years? He should have put the pieces together when Micah conjured the ice during their mission at the Terra Kingdom. To harness such a power, ones parents had to be powerful Elementals.

No. No.

He felt the ghostly sensation of Micah removing his heavy poncho just hours ago. He remembered his friend donning the article of clothing and hesitantly making his way down the staircase of the coliseum. To an untrained eye—to an unfamiliar eye—no one would notice Micah’s reluctance as he approached his opponent. His uncertainty.

In the end, however, one thing remained clear.
Micah risked his life to save Keegan.

No. He couldn’t be hurt. This wasn’t about him. If King Calder was correct, and Micah really was Ezra, then Keegan knew his friend had his reasons for keeping it secret. There were things Keegan wasn’t privy to, and he acknowledged it wasn’t his place to know them. When Micah felt comfortable, he’d approach him voluntarily and Keegan would make sure he remained standing beside him for support.

As he walked down the palace steps in a dazed—shocked—state, a figure moving in the shadows nearly startled him. Upon recognizing the man, Keegan sagged with relief. “I think I screwed up,” he admitted to the man. “I think I put Micah in danger.”

His main concern was Micah’s safety.

It always would be.

The man ran a hand across his scruffy beard. “When it comes to Micah, danger is inevitable no matter the source.” He placed a hand on Keegan’s shoulder and squeezed reassuringly. “Tell me what happened.”

Keegan recounted the whole tale as he followed the man down the streets.

After his recount of the day’s events, he paused and considered his instructor. “When can we tell Micah that you’re at the capital, Master Idris? He will be more than relieved to know you’re alive and well.”


* * * *

Micah paced and then he paced some more.

Keegan remained absent.

Gone.

He stared at the empty space before him, trying to stifle his agitation. He considered going to Josiah and asking the Igni lord to check on Keegan at the palace. However, he couldn’t bring himself to do that yet. Not only was Josiah expecting him to do just that, but Micah wasn’t in any disposition to ask the man a favor.

Not after…

Two hours had passed since they dragged Keegan away. Micah would resort to such measures if it stretched to three. That was how seriously he took Keegan’s safety. He’d be willing to face Josiah and pretend as if he didn’t know the lies the man fed him about their status as Chosen.

Retreating to the library, and managing to shake the team’s close and curious attention, Micah considered the leather-bound book in front of him. Collapsing in a chair, his fingers touched the cover. As the pads of his fingers brushed the leather, the hairs on his arms rose and he felt goose bumps claim his skin. Taking a deep breath, he kept his hand on the cover just to prove to himself
that nothing would happen.

Despite the feelings of disquiet, nothing out of the ordinary transpired. It remained unassuming. Simply an inanimate object. Only, he knew it harbored an abundance of secrets.

Secrets that connected to the Noir Users.

And Clarence.

And Josiah.

How were they all connected?

Forgoing his reluctance, Micah grabbed the book and flipped through the decrepit pages until he found it. There were all sorts of intriguing diagrams and sketches, but Micah bypassed all of them until he discovered the familiar piece of jewelry. The pendant. He studied the five-pointed star inside the circle, noting the small, detailed runes around each of the star’s edges.

His eyes skimmed over the crooked and wiggly writing.

As he read the words he could recognize, his unease disappeared and amusement took precedence. The author literally meant to ‘cage a monster’. Yet, in this case, as he read the description of the pendant, the monster referenced a daemon, an entity capable of either pure goodwill or pure immorality. The pendant was means to capture a malevolent daemon, using willing sacrifices.

Micah squinted at the words, noticing the ritual’s foreign language.

He could not identify it.

Did people really believe this?

_Did Josiah?_

Micah couldn’t imagine someone of Josiah’s… caliber believing in such ridiculousness.

What did Josiah want with a pendant that would capture daemons? Why did the Noir Users want it? Why did Clarence have possession of this journal? He clicked his tongue, disappointed and just as ignorant as he was before. Micah refused to believe Josiah wanted to obtain the pendant for his own agenda, which so happened to be at the same time as the Noir Users’ quest to obtain said pendant. The Magi had appeared out of nowhere in the sanctuary vaults and retreated rather quickly. It was almost as if they hadn’t expected to see Josiah there.

The shadowy figure in the academy corridor, who’d contacted Micah, had to have ties with the Noir Users. The figure had mentioned this ritual. The ritual that would leash a daemon. It was almost as if the Noir Users wanted Micah to know about this. Moreover, Josiah flashed the pendant in his direction, almost encouraging Micah to connect the dots.

It was all silly.

Flipping back to the beginning, he spied a name scrawled inside the cover with particular care.

_Shula Idris._

Underneath the name Shula, an additional name scrawled in new handwriting.

_Clarence Idris._
Feeling rather nauseated, Micah traced the words, unable to believe there was a correlation between Clarence and Master Idris. If Master Idris were an enemy of Josiah’s, why would the Igni king take the man’s son—or kin—and give him the title of captain to his royal guard? Unless, of course, all this was a twisted game to Josiah.

Means to a perverse entertainment.

Was this what Idris was trying to warn Micah about that day at the tavern? He’d mentioned something about Josiah and the Noir Users. Josiah even admitted he’d made enemies with some of the Magi after realizing they’d attempted to use him all those years ago. Maybe all this was Josiah’s attempts to thwart the Noir Users again. Perhaps he was trying to stay ahead of them by foiling their attempts.

But how could he know about their plans? As much as Josiah seemed to possess a ridiculous amount of foresight, he wasn’t that good. Moreover, just what were the Magi’s plans? How was Idris tied into all this? Micah wondered who Shula was to his old master. Was she his wife? His sister? Did that make Clarence his son? Nephew? Master Idris tried to warn Micah about something, something about Josiah.

He stilled and stared unseeingly at the journal.

They didn’t honestly think Josiah was—

“Micah.”

Micah looked up, startled to find Keegan standing before him. Though he felt greatly relieved, he simply stood and offered a small smile.

“I see you made it back in one piece.”

Keegan nodded but he appeared troubled. “I don’t know how well it went. Actually, probably not very good,” he confessed breathlessly. “King Calder is a hard man to read. I think he may be suspicious of you—I mean us—but we can remedy this, Micah.”

Micah stared, not knowing what to think upon the boy’s admittance. He wanted to know more details. He wanted to know what Calder was like. What they spoke about. He wanted to know all the specifics, but how could he request such a thing while keeping his distance from the entire situation? Perhaps it was time he told Keegan who he was.

“There is something I need to show you.” Keegan was a mix of nervousness and eager anticipation. His body angled towards the door of the library, clearly expecting Micah to follow right now.

Such exuberance.

Micah frowned doubtfully. “Keegan—”

“Please,” the boy interrupted fervently. “I’ve trusted you this far, Micah. Now it’s your turn to trust me. I really think I have a solution to this whole mess.” He frowned. “I’m responsible for putting you in this situation, after all. Let me fix it.”

There wasn’t anything remotely close to deception on the boy’s expression. No lies. No dishonesty. When Micah looked at the other man, he saw nothing but a genuine need to help. For a moment, he admired such transparency, such desire to do good. He really had no choice, did he? He’d follow Keegan, if only to remain a protective shield at his side.
“Alright.”

Micah pocketed the journal and trailed Keegan from the library and towards the back entrance of the academy.

He was not entirely pleased when they walked outside and onto the streets of the capital. His instincts warned him this was not right. Yet, a small part of him urged him to continue. This needed to happen. Otherwise, it would find another way to come back at him. Like the journal. He’d ignored it when he should have taken advantage of it and sought his answers sooner.

Moreover, he wasn’t one to turn away from an imminent challenge when it arose.

As he ran a critical eye across Keegan’s confident gait and at ease expression, it was clear Keegan put himself in a situation that needed remediating. If the other man really was this self-assured about what they were about to face, Micah needed to take action.

“Keegan,” he called carefully. “What are you planning? And what transpired with King Calder that makes you think I may be in trouble?” He couldn’t fathom Calder expressing so much that Keegan, a normally naïve man, would take notice. Calder would play sly. He would poke and prod Keegan if he felt the situation warranted. The king, however, would not outright reveal his intentions to Keegan. Would he?

Clearly, something had happened at the palace.

Sequentially, Keegan was apprehensive enough to brainstorm possible actions.

“It’s… well…”

The boy trailed off as he led him to an old storage facility situated only a block or two from the academy.

Placing a hand on the door, Keegan turned to observe Micah. His expression was nothing short of optimistic anticipation. “You’re going to like this.” Removing his hand from the door, he ruffled Micah’s hair, knowing how much the younger man detested it. “Relax, kid. I finally think I did something right by you. It only took a few months.”

Micah grimaced as Keegan removed his hand and turned towards the door. “Stop.” Keegan became motionless, squinting uncertainly at Micah. “I never took you for such a shallow person.”

An awkward silence ensued as Keegan leaned against the doors to the storage building. His expression appeared indignant, surprised.

“I don’t understand, Micah.”

“Ever since you’ve come to the academy, all I’ve heard from you is your desire to get better. To become stronger. Not for yourself, but for me.” Micah took a step forward. “Are you so fully consumed with that need that you can’t possibly do better for yourself? How does my approval impact you so wholly?”

“I want to be your equal.”

The confession shocked Micah into silence.

He was speechless as the words shook something inside him, struck a chord within him.
“I never considered it the way you described it,” Keegan continued quietly. “Maybe my goals aren’t entirely self-preserving, yes, but I’m not a self-preserving person. I’ve taken care of people my whole life. My family. My friends. Protection is my primary goal.” He watched Micah closely. “I consider you family, Micah, and that means I want to protect you.” He scoffed once. A bitter laugh. “You make that impossible. I always find myself making mistakes and falling further behind my goals.”

Micah, feeling rather petty for accusing Keegan of such poor character, shook his head. Of course Keegan wasn’t shallow. Keegan was Keegan.

Wholesome. Honest.

“You’re not making mistakes,” Micah corrected softly. “You’re learning, Keegan, which means you’re progressing.”

“Yeah, well, it’s difficult keeping up with you.” Keegan shrugged, appearing uncomfortable with the conversation. “I want you to trust me enough to come to me about things, even if they’re difficult to discuss.”

Keegan suddenly moved forward and pressed his hands on Micah’s shoulders. “If there is one thing I learned by coming to the capital, it’s that this is a very dark world.” His expression turned solemn—shadowed with depravities that hadn’t been there back in Region 20. “I want you to know that there’s at least one person who is always looking out for your best interests.”

Micah looked down, unable to hold the boy’s stare.

The extent of Keegan’s affection left him feeling undeserving. As he stood under Keegan’s heavy palms, he felt the boy’s lightness beating warmly across the shadows within him. For just a moment, he felt a light attempt to flicker back, an answering affection to Keegan’s presence. He wanted to tell the boy how much the confession meant to him.

However, the words felt uncomfortable on his tongue.

“Come on.” Keegan removed his hands and shoved open the door. He winked knowingly at Micah, as if understanding his silence and recognizing it for what it was. “I wanted to get this off my chest for a while. To tell you that I’ve been taking private lessons.”

“Private lessons,” Micah hedged carefully, his mind racing quickly. Things suddenly clicked into place and he was more than willing to follow Keegan into this situation.

Keegan had been in danger for a long while now. His naivety was once again the catalyst for whatever was to come.

“With the sword.”

Keegan stepped into the dim storage building and gestured to all the surrounding junk. Above, the bare rafters groaned as the outside winds grew stronger. Cold air seeped fervently through the cracks of the old structure, whistling eerily. Shrilly. Micah did not find the structure impressive, nevertheless, even in the dark, Keegan’s face revealed a sense of connection.

A sense of intense pride.
“Who, exactly, is instructing you?” Micah asked, but he already knew the answer.

He shifted his stance, reaching behind his shoulder to caress the hilt of his sword in reassurance. When he left the man, they were close allies. Master and student. Mentor and protégé. Since that day, Micah thought of him often, the man’s fate weighing heavily on him, yet he could never ask Josiah for answers in fear he would not hear the truth.

Had their relationship changed since that day in the tavern, since the day Micah placed his hands on his dying chest and absorbed the damage onto himself?

Yes. It had.

Undoubtedly.

“I am.” Idris revealed himself directly across from Micah.

Self-loathing curled in Micah’s stomach for not seeing things sooner. Keegan had improved remarkably fast with the sword in such a short amount of time. While Keegan’s fighting style mirrored several other Igni warriors, it did have an echo of familiarity. A familiarity Micah should have noticed and inquired about earlier. Keegan would have trusted Idris. Agni, Micah trusted Idris. Yet, Keegan would be so ignorant, that he’d just remember the Idris of old who’d given them free booze and loaned them a sympathetic ear back in Region 20.

Micah did not know what he felt seeing Idris.

Was he a friend? An ally against Josiah? Or an enemy now? If Micah hadn’t found Clarence’s journal, he would probably be more inclined to appreciate Master Idris’ sudden reappearance.

Now, he felt apprehensive.

Something was not right. Things did not fit together.

“Master Idris approached me a few months ago,” Keegan admitted. “He wrote me a letter and explained his situation. How he was hiding from Lord Josiah. He didn’t know how you’d take his presence, but he said he wanted to speak with you directly.” The boy glanced at his instructor. “He said Lord Josiah would hardly let you out of his sights.”

“You’re right about that,” Micah whispered, never looking away from the older male. “Unless Josiah saw me leave with someone he trusted.”

From the corner of his eye, Keegan frowned.

“It’s good to see you again, Micah,” Idris murmured in way of greeting.

He appeared exactly as Micah remembered. Tall, broad-shouldered, proud. His scruffy beard had more grey and his short hair seemed to have grown a bit. He seemed ratty, roguish. His yellow eyes focused intently on Micah, the fine wrinkles at the corners more pronounced than ever before. He appeared older. Resigned.

“I can’t exactly say the same,” Micah replied. “Not with your shady behavior. Hiding behind Keegan and luring me here through him? That leaves a bitter taste in my mouth.”

“No,” Keegan argued hotly. It appeared as if he did not appreciate the tone of their reunion. “He was unsure how to approach you, so I volunteered to bring you here, Micah. Not him. We just want to help with your situation—”
“I have no situation that needs solving, Keegan, only one that you conjured,” Micah countered, upset. “You should have told me Idris was at the capital.”

“And you should have told me you were Prince Ezra.”

Blinking, Micah sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose, unsurprised Keegan knew his identity. Why did everyone feel so upset that he kept that bit of information to himself? Did they not realize how sensitive the information was? He did not want people to know. He didn’t want to acknowledge it, why should others?

Yet, as he looked at Keegan, he saw true disenchantment across the boy’s face.

Immediately, he felt guilty. It was an unfamiliar sentiment for Micah. “Yes,” he admitted tightly, realizing Keegan was right to point out his failings. “I should have told you. I should have told you many things from the start. We wouldn’t be in this situation if I was honest about everything.”

“Keegan did the right thing by bringing you here tonight.” Idris nodded to said boy, which earned him a tight grin in return. A praise from a master was always cherished. “You’re going to find yourself trapped in a game of tug-of-war between Josiah and Calder. It is not a situation anyone could reasonably withstand while maintaining their sanity.”

“Sanity is often overrated and subjective. What is sane to you may be sheer insanity to me,” Micah responded stiffly. “What do you suggest then, Master Idris?”

Idris paused, as if considering the right words to use in order to convince Micah.

“Unfortunately, the situation is not as black and white as we would like.”

“Of course it’s not.”

Idris exhaled levelly and offered Micah a fond look. “The situation you are in is not black and white, Micah, simply because the man proclaiming himself to be Lord Josiah is not truly the man who was born as Josiah.”

Micah hardly even paused to absorb the words. He took them in stride and further connected the loose ends. “You think him a daemon,” he surmised aloofly, immediately, remembering what he read in Clarence’s journal. He repositioned his hand on the hilt of his sword and turned to leave. “Evidently, I still possess far too much sanity to listen to this.”

Only, as he made to leave, his feet remained stubbornly in place.

He looked down, just barely making out the dark markings across the filthy ground. With his boots planted directly in the middle of the pentagram, an unforeseen force kept him solidly in place. A circle incased the star and Keegan and Idris stood outside of it, a good distance away from stepping inside.

Micah’s eyes unfocused and a cool anger settled in his chest.

“You…” he trailed off, nearly out of breath with his fury. “Plan to sacrifice me?”

Aside from his disappointment for being foolish enough to step into a trap, no matter how unfamiliar he was with these particular traps, Micah couldn’t help the bitter resentment at the betrayal. He’d saved Idris’ life. Laughing hollowly, Micah blinked away the stubborn moisture in his eyes. This was how the man intended to repay him. Killing him in some sort of ritual.
“It’s a necessary sacrifice,” Idris replied steadily, seemingly unbothered.

Next to the man, Keegan appeared perplexed. He studied the markings on the floor, as if finally noticing their presence. He shook his head. “I—I don’t understand!” he looked at Idris accusingly. “You said you could help Micah!”

“And I am.”

Judging from the sincere tone, Idris truly did believe he was saving him.

“It is sad you actually believe that,” Micah said.

“The daemon has taken an unquestionable interest in you.” Idris planted his feet outside the rune with a sense of resolve and unquestionable duty. Like that of a soldier. “I served under Prince Josiah before the war began. He was an adolescent then. I trained him when he was a young boy. I know that man is no longer the same person I vowed to protect.”

After acknowledging the impossibility of moving, Micah decided to waste time.

As much as he hated admitting it, Josiah would arrive shortly. The man was far too overprotective of Micah to overlook this.

“In what way is he different?” Micah inquired.

Idris inclined his head gravely. “After the war, Josiah decided to travel. I, along with other guards, followed him on his expeditions. It wasn’t ideal when he settled with the Noir Users, not after the stories we heard, but he insisted that he learn and master their powers.

“After a couple years in their company, Josiah began dabbling in some very dark rituals. It is from my understanding, that one evening, a ritual went awry and a daemon took possession of him. As the Magi failed to expel the daemon from Josiah, the beast then turned hundreds of Noir Users to ashes in his fury. He levelled the entire terrain to dust!”

“From your understanding,” Micah repeated gruffly, hardly believing. One did not level an entire society to dust. “That indicates you were not there to witness the possession yourself.”

“Not that night, no, but there were survivors. Afterward, his interests from before the incident no longer engrossed him. The attachments he held no longer seemed significant. And above all else, he was more powerful and far angrier than ever before. He viewed it as a betrayal when I confronted him about the situation with the survivors at my side.”

Which would explain why Josiah forced Idris to travel to Region 20 to train Micah.

As Micah recalled, Idris chose instructing over immediate execution.

“From the fables, it has been said daemons were entities created by the gods,” Micah recited resignedly. “Mediators—guardians—between mortals and the powerful deities. Daemons are good beings. They do not destroy hundreds of men and women.”

“Yes.” Idris nodded once. “They were once divine and diplomatic creatures.”

“But you’re going to tell me that has changed.”

Keegan looked between Micah and Idris, his posture stiff, uncertain. He took a few steps away from Idris, though the older man didn’t seem to notice.
“They say the daemons grew jealous of the gods and fell to the darkness. They want to create havoc on our world and bring destruction to men.” Idris’ expression darkened. “That night, when the daemon took possession of Josiah, the survivors claimed he turned into a shadow distorted by pure evil. When they looked at him, they felt nothing but the all-consuming sentiment of horror.”

Micah did not want to believe anything the man said.

He did not believe in gods, deities, or daemons. He believed in magic. Magic clearly powerful enough to corrupt humans enough to give them a corrupt soul. Yet, he couldn’t help but to remember what he saw in the Unda vault. More specifically, what he saw within the mirror’s reflection. The glass reflected an image of Josiah that was not man. Not human. Micah remembered the dark figure and the sense of unexplained dread. The hairs had risen across his body and he had to step away to compose himself.

Idris described the very same figure.

He looked down at the markings on the floor, giving them more consideration. He didn’t know how to describe what he saw in the Unda vault. He did not know how to explain the Noir Users witnessing the same image.

Whatever the explanation, the Magi—however many remained of their kind after Josiah’s massacre—had reason to fear the Igni king.

They truly thought they could perform a ritual to stop him.

Micah wasn’t too certain.

“The daemon wants to use you, I imagine. To try to take control of the kingdoms,” Idris said, drawing Micah’s reluctant attention. “We tried to warn you.”

“We?” Micah pressed. “I never imagined you to be the Magi type, Master.”

Idris shifted and offered a small, nearly approving smile. “I am not practicing, but I do assist from time to time. The Noir Users tried to warn you about the daemon,” he corrected.

“With the apparition at the academy,” Micah murmured, unimpressed as he remembered the nearly inaudible words from the shadowy figure. “What did you expect me to do with that bit of information, exactly? Conduct my own ritual?”

“We needed you to keep an eye on the pendant. Aware.”

“Josiah has possession of it. You think I could have stolen it from him?” Micah shook his head, amused. “If what you said is true, and he really is a daemon, how do you possibly think I could have extracted that pendant under his surveillance?”

“As I said before, he has an unhealthy obsession with you.” Idris touched his scruffy beard, stroking it out of unease. “You could have managed. Fortunately, we had another pair of eyes on the situation. It worked out in the end.”

“Clarence is your other pair of eyes,” Micah deduced darkly. “Unfortunately for you, he left the capital before Josiah recovered the pendant.”

Idris did not respond. A small grin lifted his mouth, proving Micah’s assumptions were not necessarily correct. Candace left the capital, did he not? That’s what his empty room suggested. That’s exactly what Josiah told him.
“And why the attack with the Dulcis Waters?” Micah demanded. “If you needed me alive for this ritual, you played a rather risky game by poisoning me.”

“You were responsible for the Dulcis Waters?” Keegan exclaimed in disbelief.

Idris appeared genuinely uneasy. “It was not my idea, but it was vital we distract Josiah long enough to plant seeds of doubt over the Terra Kingdom. We needed the vaults opened, and the only way to open them was to stoke the king’s suspicions over an uprising. The Magi implanted runes in the palace. All it took was one suggestion before it fueled into something larger.”

So the Magi fueled speculations over a civil war in the Terra Kingdom.

Perhaps a bit of Josiah and the Noir Users, Micah supposed, remembering Josiah’s sly insinuating the night he invited Micah to dinner. Somehow, someway, Josiah must have realized the Noir Users’ intentions. He wanted the vaults opened just as well to get his hands on the pendant first. While the Noir Users were also present at the time of the extraction, they hadn’t anticipated Josiah’s presence.

Yet, Idris indicated the pendant was accounted for.

The last time Micah saw it, Josiah had possession.

Didn’t he?

“Moreover, drugging you with the Dulcis Waters also displayed what lengths the daemon would go to keep you alive,” Idris explained somberly. “He did not disappoint. He will sniff out this ritual, with you as the sacrifice, and come willingly.”

“And you think Micah is the key to banishing this… daemon.” Keegan appeared agitated. “Is this ritual going to kill him?”

Silly boy, Micah admonished fondly.

He could not fault Keegan for falling into this. The other man was painfully naïve. It was Micah’s fault for allowing his ignorance.

“The ritual is not for banishing the daemon, but rather for controlling it,” Idris corrected. “The ritual requires a willing sacrifice. Micah walked into the rune without objections and his free-will intact.”

Micah smiled darkly. “Is ignorance truly a willing subject, Idris?”

“It will have to do.” Idris replied gruffly. “You are also a blood relative of the daemon’s host. Blood magic will reinforce the ritual’s strength and prove as a powerful conductor. The entity will not be able to hold possession over Lord Josiah.”

A chuckle escaped Micah’s lips and he shook his head, hardly believing.

People actually believed these things.

How silly! How utterly absurd!

“All this, just because Josiah matured into his powers and his cruelty. How old was he? Early twenties?” Micah continued to shake his head. “He is a very powerful man with a dark disposition. He gets bored easily when there is nothing to challenge him.”
It suddenly all made sense.

Micah could not imagine harboring such power and intellect without challenging conductors. Josiah—especially with his dark nature—would grow destructive when bored. He was recklessly volatile. Several months ago, when Micah arrived at the academy, the man claimed he’d recognized the Magi for what they were. Deceptive individuals with intentions to use him for personal gain. Perhaps, when he realized this, he’d massacred them out of revenge.

It was far more believable than a daemon possessing him.

To think… Micah interacting not with his uncle all this time, but an entity.

“It is far more than that, boy, and you know it,” Idris retorted heatedly. He took a step closer, becoming more animated. “Darker forces are at work. How do you explain the slaughter of the Noir Users? He took away an entire culture—a whole society—with one strike! Hundreds of men and women! He took away my young child and raised him to be a mindless marionette!”

“Oh, there it is,” Micah crooned pleasantly. “Your son. This is about your son.”

And whomever Shula was.

Idris wasn’t upset that Josiah slaughtered the Magi. He was upset that Josiah took Clarence. Raised him under manipulations and lies. “But your son has since recovered from such mindless upbringing, hasn’t he?” Micah continued indifferently. “He shook off Josiah’s influences and turned out to be a vengeful-seeking Magi fool, just like his… mother? You must be proud.”

“He should be proud.”

All eyes turned to the newcomer and Micah stiffened with surprised disbelief.


Keegan remained stubbornly in place. “I’m not leaving you, Micah.”

To Micah’s dismay, Clarence waltzed confidently into the storage building, wearing his crimson robes that declared his loyalty to Lord Josiah’s personal guard. It was if he’d never left the capital. But that couldn’t be possible. Yet, how else could Micah explain his well-kept appearance? His crisp, clean robes? And the silver pendant dangling from his fingers? The pendant, Micah realized, was the very same one Josiah pocketed at the vault.

Impossible.

Clarence could never challenge Josiah and win.

Something else was afoot.

Micah took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He tried to gather his abilities and reach for his ice Element. He frowned when nothing happened, attempting to gather his emotions of anger and betrayal, of fear, hoping to garner a reaction like last time in the sanctuary vaults. Yet, not even the temperature dropped.

“Clarence, you did well.” Idris accepted the swinging pendant, blindly believing his son could truly best Josiah. What fools. What idiots. “We will be able to imprison the daemon.”

“You used me.” Keegan trembled as the accusation left his mouth, his words wobbly, his features
torn with shame.

He looked at Micah with extreme repentance.

Micah gazed steadily back.

“Partly,” Idris admitted with what sounded like true regret. He turned to Keegan and offered something akin to warm regard. After particularly intense lessons, he used to offer Micah the same expression. “You’re a good kid, Keegan. I don’t want you wrapped up in this. I gave you means to defend yourself and I will continue to instruct you to achieve success.”

“Success,” Keegan repeated the word as if it were vile. “I trusted you to help me with Micah, but you’re just as corrupted as everyone else.” He advanced towards the rune, his brows furrowed with determination. “You’re all crazy. You can’t really think—”

A blade slid through Keegan’s chest cavity with a sickening, gruesome suction.

It happened so suddenly, so unexpectedly, Micah shuddered with horror and blinked rapidly to process what he was seeing.

A quivering breath trembled past Micah’s lips before he cried loudly in denial. He watched hopelessly as Keegan fell to the ground like a broken and discarded toy. And wasn’t that just what it was? Keegan was the naïve pawn—taken full advantage of by the larger players. Insignificant after he accomplished his task, though no one truly understood the light they had callously snuffed from existence.

Micah heaved wildly in despair and fell to his knees.

“No, no!” he sobbed.

“Kid,” Keegan whispered with pained affection, looking imploringly up at Micah. His mouth formed something inaudible before his body turned slack.

Bright, beautifully innocent eyes dimmed and turned lifeless.

An extinguished flame of purity.

Something ripped painfully through Micah’s chest at the sight of Keegan, leaving an awful and deep hollowness in its wake. Micah trembled and shuddered, unable to grasp the level of despair that shocked his senses and left him breathless. This was… this wasn’t something he knew how to deal with.

“His death was meaningless! I said to keep him alive!” Idris snarled at the dark figure as it stepped out from behind Keegan’s limp form.

“He was not as compliant as you described to me. You would have never been able to retrain him, Idris. He was loyal to the prince.”

It was a woman.

She sheathed her weapon and grabbed the pendant from Idris’ slack hands. Around her, three other figures emerged from the shadows, dressed entirely in black. They were younger. They had to be just children when Josiah had massacred the Magi. Appearing almost green with inexperience, they approached the pentagram with a sense of reluctant duty. Wrapping the pendant around her neck, the older woman motioned to the vacant position around the pentagram.
“Idris, we need to do this quickly.”

Idris tore his gaze from Keegan, intentionally avoiding Micah’s eyes, before halfheartedly following the impatient order. As soon as the man was in position, the atmosphere suddenly grew heavy with magic.

“They say patience is a virtue. That when a man—or woman—masters patience, they are a master of everything else,” a voice crooned silkily from the shadows. “Perhaps it is a virtue you should have mastered in the sixteen years of planning your revenge.”

Josiah stepped into the light, his eyes drinking in the rune on the ground. Though he stood next to Clarence, the royal guard did not seem threatened by the Igni king’s presence.

Either the Noir Users did not notice or they were too flustered to care.

“Everyone is in place. Everything has been prepared,” the woman responded assertively. She appeared especially confident, even when Josiah stood a few feet away. It was almost as if the rune protected her. “I’d say my patience has paid off especially well. And you are too late.”

Josiah appeared entirely unbothered by her goad. He gazed around at the other Noir Users with a tight, displeased upturn to his lip. “I was hoping to draw the last of the true Magi out from their hiding places, but alas, it seems the smart ones stayed away while I lured mere novices of the art. Novices who could not even cover their runes with proper concealment charms.”

He lifted a hand and motioned to Micah.

“And a blood ritual,” he observed. “Pity you’re using a half-connection. My blood ties with the prince are distant. Weak. You were better off using his mother, though even that may have proven frivolous, I heard she’s gone missing.” He stopped at the very edge of the rune, as if the grey lines prevented him from moving closer.

Micah stared at his legs, unable to muster enough energy to look at the man upon mention of his mother.

“It will work,” the female Magi assured. “You’ll be under our command now. A prisoner inside the body you stole long ago. A fitting punishment after nearly wiping out our people.”

Josiah chuckled, delighted.

Micah finally looked up at him, locking eyes with the man.

“I’d give you a warning, a threat, but that would indicate I’d want you to stop.” Josiah’s eyes gleamed sadistically and his voice was but a mere whisper. “Please, keep going, you foolish, pathetic animals.”

Micah dropped his gaze and looked towards Keegan, noticing the limp, outstretched hand. The boy’s fingers dug near the edge of the rune. It appeared, in his last moments, he’d scratched enough of the rune to break the perimeter.

One last act of defiance to prove he wasn’t disposable.

Micah hurriedly looked away, a dry sob stuck in his throat. The warm affection he felt for the boy was a painful reminder. A reminder of the severed bond than would no longer be requited.

The woman at his back called Josiah’s bluff and began to recite a chant. The language was foreign
to Micah’s ears, though he felt a breeze of something uncanny stir throughout the building. Static filled the air and the small hairs on his neck rose in response. The dim torches nearby flickered out, but reignited quickly.

Micah remained on the ground, sensing Josiah’s extreme amusement from the edge of the rune. It was if he were a spectator, allowing the doomed show to play out to the end.

The woman tapered of powerfully, clearly finishing the incantation. Only, everything remained as it was. The magic hovered and swelled in the air, successfully conjured, but lacking the proper tools to work.

“The rune,” Idris noticed from across the pentagram.

One of the Magi, closest to the broken perimeter, quickly crouched down and tossed Keegan’s body aside as if it were common debris. Something stirred dangerously in Micah at the spectacle. He rose from his position with the deliberateness of a roused predator, his body trembling with unrestrained hatred and rage. He focused on the man with single-minded intensity, watching as the Magi closed the rune with a piece of charcoal.

A meager piece of charcoal to remedy Keegan’s last act of defiance.

As the Magi straightened from his squat, the sound of ice creaking disrupted the small storage building. The man cried out in shocked pain as he reached for his motionless legs. Only, before his fingers could encounter his legs, his arm stopped moving in midair and turned unnaturally stiff.

“W-what?”

He screamed.

The man’s screams ended abruptly and his face turned unmoving. Frost crept across his features, tightening them into an eternal mask of incredulity. Out of a sick sense of curiosity and retribution, Micah lifted his foot and slammed his boot against the man’s chest. With an echoing and empty thud, the solid mass hit the ground, but did not shatter as Micah hoped it would.

Disbelieving murmuring sounded behind him.

“Oh dear,” Josiah tutted, appearing positively gleeful. “It looks as if you are down a man.” He placed a hand on Clarence’s shoulder. “May I suggest Clarence? He has been ever so patient these past few weeks.”

From the corner of Micah’s eye, he watched Clarence jerk abnormally.

And jerk again.

“You were afraid I’d turn him into a mindless marionette, isn’t that right, Idris?”

Clarence tremored and vibrated, his appearance melting away and revealing something gruesome. It was if Josiah stripped away a glamour and revealed what truly lingered beneath the grandiose image of perfection. The captain’s eyes popped unnaturally from their sockets, bringing attention to his deformed and sunken skull. His robes were not pressed and spotless, but rather torn from his body and stained heavily with blood.

Micah observed the open chest cavity and the way a few ribs were pried open. The man had to be alive purely by Josiah’s magic.
Idris cried out in despair, rivaling a dying animal.

“I think I turned him into something far worse, no?”

The sight was grisly, though Micah felt a spark of satisfaction after what the Magi did to Keegan. To Micah. They were rather good at warping an innocent bystander into a position that suited their end goals. Josiah merely returned the favor with Clarence.

Recognizing the situation was futile, even with the rune now closed, but still not functioning as intended, the lead Magi dropped her book to the ground. She screamed with unrestrained hatred, throwing her hands out towards Micah. The wave of energy soaring towards him was a last ditch effort to extract some sort of vengeance.

Something she believed would hurt Josiah.

Stepping back, Micah braced himself, clueless how to defend against magic. Nevertheless, he would not raise his hands or cower pathetically. He’d stand and meet the attack with stubborn acceptance. Only, her force hit an invisible barrier and ricocheted into the rafters. The rebounded magic caused wood to explode and collapse. As debris rained down vengefully, Micah dodged hastily out of the way.

“That is where I draw the line, my dear,” Josiah hissed, losing his composure and turning into something nearly unidentifiable. “Our fun is over.”

Fire spread wildly.

It encircled Micah and extended high into the air. He whirled around in a tight circle, desperately searching for an escape but realizing Josiah had encaged him. He reached for the flames, knowing he was immune to the Element, but quickly drew back his hand when he felt the oppressive and dangerous heat.

Impossible.

Magic?

A sudden sensation of malevolence hit him hard.

It was enough to bring him to his knees.

Micah braced himself with his hands, staring into the flames as screams of terror rose above the roaring fire. He trembled, closing his eyes against the disquieting sensation. A migraine with severe intensity blossomed inside his skull, making him dizzy, nauseous.

He dropped further to the ground, sweating.

Drained.

The hand reaching for him inside the flames was the last thing he remembered. He could only compare it to the fire years ago in his nursery.

Josiah had reached for him then, too.
Aw, aw. Next chapter should be up shortly...... within an hour or so.
22. Chapter Twenty-Two

Waking up was inevitable.

The greedy and consuming hands of unconsciousness loosened their hold from his subconscious and tossed him carelessly back into reality. A heavy weight of doom held him down, reminding him of the events that transpired. Gradually, he opened his eyes and submerged readily in the melancholy. The anger and the loss.

Micah braced his hands at his sides and slowly eased himself into a sitting position. He was in a bedroom and he knew immediately it belonged to Josiah.

His hands curled at his sides and he breathed in deep.

Keegan was gone.

Micah forced away the suffocating sorrow and embraced his anger instead. Said anger centered on a specific man, seeing him as the direct reason for tonight’s events. Whether his anger was justified or not, whether Josiah deserved the brunt of the blame or not, Micah found it the easiest to hold the man responsible.

Unfortunately, before he could get a hold of his feelings, the door opened and the object of his resentment entered.

Josiah gazed levelly at Micah, reeking of smoke, fire, and death. “Very unfortunate that the fire was not put out in time,” he said casually. He stepped further into the room and closed the door behind him. “By the time it was extinguished, two bodies were discovered. Tomorrow morning, I imagine they will identify the victims as a first-year cadet and a wanted Igni criminal. Conclusions will be drawn, though no one will fully understand the circumstances.”

Despite the sick sensation in his stomach, Micah remained impassive. “And the Noir Users?”

“Nothing left of them to discover,” Josiah informed.

Micah blinked emotionlessly, watching as Josiah removed his cloak. “And Clarence?”

“The same.”

Throwing his legs over the edge of the mattress, Micah readied himself to leave the room in a hurry. He did not want to be in Josiah’s presence. However, dizziness hit him hard, preventing a quick escape.

Lowering his head, and bracing his arms on the mattress, Micah basked in the helplessness and the anger. He let it simmer unpleasantly until he could no longer contain it. “Clarence was here, at the capital, this whole time,” Micah accused quietly with the lethality of a poised serpent. He looked up and met Josiah’s eyes. “When I confronted you about him, you lied to me. You said he ran, but
you kept him here as an undead pet.”

“So I did.”

Josiah removed his gloves and tossed them on the end table. He continued to gaze at Micah unabashedly, appearing entirely nonchalant about the whole thing. Yet, one could argue, with such startling intensity in his regard for Micah, he was anything but dismissive of the situation.

“You overrode his mind and made it your own,” Micah deduced. “You got inside his head and found his secrets. You knew the Magi wanted that pendant before Calder even acted on the rumors in the Terra Kingdom. You knew Clarence was going to meet Idris and the Noir Users at that storage facility with the pendant. You had all the pieces and you let them unravel.”

“I did,” the man repeated.

Micah saw red. Throwing his arm through the air, he screamed, “You didn’t tell me!”

“Sometimes, Ezra, it is vital to find things out yourself.”

“This isn’t a game. I was entirely clueless!” Micah stood up from the bed, shaking with either fatigue or anger, he did not know. “How can you test me on things I am completely ignorant on? Did you think I’d foresee these events and stop them?”

Josiah appeared unimpressed with his anger.

“I did not expect you to know everything, but I had anticipated you would have more foresight. You had Clarence’s journal, after all. You saw the pendant. You knew your friend was getting suspiciously good with the sword. Moreover, you kept him unaware. If he was as loyal as you claim, then you should have explained your situation to him.”

Micah shook his head unable to believe it.

Not wanting to believe it.

Not wanting to hear the truth.

“You are angry,” Josiah observed with one look down Micah’s trembling frame. “Though it is poorly directed at me. In order to keep up, you must be quicker. You are angry with yourself for overlooking so many indications.”

“I’m angry…” Micah trailed off with a shaking exhalation. “At your blatant deceit.”

Josiah did not appreciate the comment. “It was essential I lie about Clarence. You were adamant in your vengeance. Though I was impressed that you discovered his involvement in your attack, I needed the boy for information. It was also vital he remain unharmed in order to lure the Magi into a false sense of reassurance. He served his purpose. I was able to eliminate the Noir Users, though they are not the ones I had hoped were behind this debacle.”

“If you had explained it, instead of treating me like an ignorant child, I would have understood,” Micah whispered icily.

“I treat you like no such thing. I am here to make you better,” the man reprimanded.

Micah looked up and smiled twistedly. “You claim you don’t treat me like an ignorant child.” He raised to his full height. “Then tell me this. What are you, exactly? Were the Magi correct? Are
you daemon?” At Josiah’s look of irritation, Micah pressed onward. “Idris said you destroyed all but a few Noir Users with just one strike.”

“And I am disappointed in myself for not destroying them completely.” Josiah took a step closer. “They deserved their demise. As I told you before, I realized the true depravity of their ways. After years of finding myself entrapped by poisoned temptations of power, I woke up to the unsettling realization that I was a mere toy. They’d hoped to use me to gain control over the kingdoms. Such uncivilized animals were controlling me.”

Josiah laughed then, a dark, sinister laugh.

Micah was unmoved. “Then if you’re not a daemon, and you’re just a man, then how do you explain your fascination with me? Your nephew? Is it merely political? Seems a bit... repulsive to play that angle on a relative, especially when you also requested my celibacy.”

Orange eyes narrowed. “I beg your pardon?” he inquired dangerously.

It was Micah’s turn to laugh.

Gleeful. Victorious.

A part of him had wanted to keep his discovery to himself, to play on it later when it best suited him, yet his anger got the best of him. “You see, I am an Elemental.” He paused for emphasis, relishing in the sense of extreme pride that statement brought with it. “You and I? We are not Chosen. I found my Chosen, and it certainly is not you.”

Something satisfying twisted in his stomach at the dawning realization across the man’s face. It was not a welcoming sight in the least, rather it caused his pulse to race in fear, but he grew elated.

He wanted to dig that bit of knowledge deeper into Josiah until it stung the man.

Josiah appeared positively lethal. “Who?”

Micah approached the door under the very focused eyes of Josiah. “Perhaps you can piece it together on your own, Uncle Josiah. Just as you expected me to do amongst your deception.” Reaching for the door, Micah paused. “You lied about everything. You lied about Clarence and our status as Chosen. You kept me in the dark about Master Idris and your true history with the Noir Users.”

Turning, he was unsurprised to see Josiah standing just a breadth away with a harsh mask of impassiveness.

He did not allow the man’s smothering proximity to stop him.

“The largest betrayal to me, however, was not the lies, but your inactivity. Whether it be in some perverse desire to teach me something about loss, I will always consider you solely responsible for the death of someone I deeply care about.”

His voice broke as he spoke of Keegan.

He felt the tears, hot and persistent behind his eyes.

“In order to grow stronger, you must break first,” Josiah responded levelly, gazing at Micah as if he actually understood what he felt. “Amongst the sharp and precarious debris, you must get on your hands and knees and collect the pieces to reassemble yourself.”
Micah shook his head in denial and opened the door. Before he left, he turned once more to Josiah. “Contrary to what many believe, what was once broken —shattered— and crudely put back together, is never truly strong again. It is a fragile state, a mockery of what it once was.”

“Do you consider yourself shattered, Ezra?”

“No.” Micah offered a semblance of a smile. “I consider our relationship shattered.”

With a satisfying flick of his wrist, he slammed the door closed and retreated from the situation. He buried himself deep within his mind, hoping beyond hope he never had to emerge from this comatose state.

It was better not to feel.

Or analyze his emotions long enough to realize that underneath his anger at Josiah, there was the sharp, suffocating sensation of self-blame.

* * * *

“Keegan was a very bright student…”

Micah sat stiffly on the pew, eyes staring straight ahead at nothing in particular. He certainly didn’t give any sort of attention to the instructor who spoke words about Keegan as if he actually knew him. The man knew nothing.

Concordia Academy hosted Keegan’s funeral service. When Wayde died, his family held a private service in the capital. Considering Keegan’s scholarship status and his financial situation, the academy readily accepted the duties of celebrating his life.

The chapel was full of cadets, all dressed in their formal military uniforms. Buttons polished. Gloves bleached white. Boots shining. All the instructors attended—as did the Chairman of the Academy. Micah did not look Josiah’s way. Having the man present at Keegan’s funeral was insulting enough. He’d never give the man any sort of recognition.

Up near the front, Micah observed Keegan’s father with his second eldest son. Though they were not crying, Micah could see their overwhelming grief in the way their shoulders set heavily.

A stifled cry sounded to Micah’s right. He looked at Viktor, noticing the boy burry his face in his raised arm. Next to Viktor, Aiden did not appear much better. Micah caught Talia’s regard and turned away.

His team took the news of Keegan’s death hard.

As they should have.

Keegan constantly went out of his way to befriend them all. They would have recognized—just as much as Micah—that Keegan possessed a certain disposition that was undeniably charming.

They had questions, however. As did the rest of the academy. They all wanted to know why Keegan was in the storage facility with Idris. It was shady behavior and Micah hated that there were rumors of Keegan’s character. Questioning the situation was one thing. Doubting Keegan’s
morality was another. Though his team kept their inquiries to themselves, they would eventually find out the truth. He did not intend to keep them in the dark as he had with—

Micah looked down at his lap.

He could be angry with Josiah as much as he liked.

The man deserved it.

However, a crushing truth remained a persistent itch in the back of his mind. It was exactly as Josiah said earlier. Micah was just as responsible for Keegan’s death. Keegan, who was already ignorant, was vulnerable to deception because Micah kept him that way. He’d kept Keegan in the dark about so many things.

His attention refocused on the vicar, who lit a large flame in the ceremonial basin.

The flame reminded Micah of the night Keegan died.

The vicar grabbed a leather pouch from the podium and untied the strings with deliberate slowness. Grabbing a pinch of powder, the man threw it inside the basin. The flames turned a vivid, beautiful lilac.

It almost hurt to look at them.

“Today, we will say goodbye to a warrior, a friend, a son, and a brother.” The older man turned to address the mass of assembled military students. “Pray with me now. Let us light his way to Agni, as Agni welcomes him to his new home.”

As heads bowed in reverence to Agni, to Keegan, Micah stood up.

Foolish.

“Micah,” Kai reprimanded with a harsh whisper.

Bypassing the boy, Micah walked down the aisle, turning his back on the ceremonial flame and the praying vicar. It was not in disrespect to Keegan, but rather the unnecessary praying for Agni to accept a child into the afterlife. Why should they have to plead with Agni to accept Keegan? Someone who’d been loyal not only to his friends, but to his god of choice.

Keegan had believed in all this. He’d been devoted. He had placed so much reverence in Agni during his lifetime and boasted about how good it felt praying to the god. Where had that gotten him, exactly?

An early death.

Just like Micah’s mother and her miserable fate. During his childhood, he watched her rapely, observed as she cried to a god and relied on him to change their fate. Upon Agni’s silence, Ember turned into a husk, a bitter, broken woman. All of it was silly. Pointless. A smokescreen for mortals to hide what they really felt over death. Mortality was difficult to swallow for some. Believing in an afterlife was a temporary balm.

Closing the door to the chapel, Micah walked down the steps, his body stiff.

He crossed the lawn, barely breathing as the ache grew heavier in his chest. He couldn’t breathe.

Stopping a good distance away, he turned and examined the chapel’s heavy-set doors, feeling as if
Keegan were back inside. The boy would be disappointed Micah had left during a ceremony that would undoubtedly be important to him. Nevertheless, he’d disappointed Keegan enough in his lifetime.

Once more surely couldn’t hurt, could it?

Amusing how Keegan always came back to him after all the disappointments. As loyal as ever, Keegan never seemed to let his frustrations cloud his view of Micah. The other man would always be there, a solid and familiar presence at his side.

Micah felt as if he’d taken Keegan for granted. He felt as if he greedily took Keegan’s presence, but never reciprocated with truths, with the same amount of loyalty and care. He remembered the warm hands on his shoulders that night outside the storage facility. He remembered the reassurance and the ferocity in Keegan’s tone as he promised Micah he’d always be there to rely on in this dark, cruel world.

Sentiments like that were weak and silly.

Or so he’d heard.

Then why had Micah felt an overwhelming sense of strength and indestructibility when Keegan said the words? Such feelings shouldn’t have brought confidence, but it had. Recalling them now just made the hollowness consume him whole. The pain as fresh as ever.

He didn’t know how he remained standing.

Surely, the ground opened up beneath him.

“The kingdom mourns the loss of one so young,” a man said somberly next to him.

Micah blinked rapidly, trying to erase the evidence of unshed tears. When he managed to gain control of his expression, he turned and locked eyes with Calder. Shock paralyzed his senses, though he was quick to look back at the chapel, lest he reveal his stupid surprise. The man had appeared out of nowhere, or perhaps Micah was far too gone in his thoughts that he’d overlooked the overwhelming presence of royalty.

Yet, there his father stood on military grounds.

On Josiah’s territory.

He felt Calder’s stare brand across his averted face. Not knowing how much Calder knew, Micah decided to feign ignorance, but he knew, without a doubt, that Calder must have known. Why else was he here?

“It wasn’t his time,” Micah agreed softly.

“During the very brief time I knew him, it was abundantly clear how loyal he was to his friend. Even to the point of blatantly lying to a monarch,” Calder mused with just an appropriate amount of soft amusement. “He seemed like a bright, honest boy. I am truly sorry for your loss. For the kingdom’s loss of what he could have been.”

Micah nearly crumbled at the words.

He looked. He had to. Calder caught his stare, never having looked away in the first place. Micah observed his features up close, feeling a sense of familiarity and seeing half his features mirrored
back at him.

It was undeniable they were related.

Micah glanced over Calder’s shoulder, spying movement. There were a handful of royal guards, and surprisingly enough, Sachiel. Dressed in all black, Sachiel merely nodded to Micah, his expression solemn.

Irrefutably, Calder knew.

He knew everything.

“I believe you’ve been acquainted with Councilman Sachiel?” Calder asked, not needing to turn and see who garnered Micah’s attention.

Micah turned back forward, watching as people emerged from the chapel. “I have.”

They stood side by side in silence. Calder did not seem obliged to look away, his eyes weighing heavily on Micah. “It has been a long while, Ezra,” the king said quietly. “There is much I wish to ask you. And yet, it would be extremely discourteous and ill-mannered to say what I truly wish to say to you at this moment,” he professed. “You are grieving and my intentions are indecently selfish.”

Micah frowned at the words, not expecting them.

“I will step aside and give you time. I just needed to see the truth for myself today. Go. See your friend off.”

The unexpectedness of Calder’s actions nearly caused Micah to gape like a fool. Upon his father’s arrival, Micah had felt the imaginary fingers tightening around him like a greedy fist. Only, Calder surprised him by suddenly releasing him, the fingers drawing back and setting him free. The action was unanticipated.

Micah’s attention honed suddenly on the pair of men who trailed behind the succession of people, accepting condolences from complete strangers. He straightened, keeping his eyes averted from Calder’s scrutiny.

He was in no condition to interact with his father and keep up.

Before Calder could retract his offer, Micah took a step toward the chapel. “I appreciate your consideration of the circumstances,” he replied formally. Too formally. He glanced at Calder and hastily bowed at the waist. “If you’ll excuse me, Your Majesty.”

What else did he say in a situation like this?

Without waiting for a response, Micah walked quickly across the commons and towards the grieving men. He felt Calder’s stare on his back and knew it would never leave him. It really was inevitable that Calder found out about him. Nonetheless, he struggled with how he felt on the matter. While Calder was surprisingly sympathetic and attentive, there was more to it than just simple consideration. The man had recognized Micah’s distraction, yet he wanted to make it abundantly clear that he knew of his presence.

Calder wasn’t going anywhere anytime soon.

“Micah.”
Keegan’s father met him halfway and placed a hand on his shoulder. Either he did not notice the way Micah stiffened or he overlooked it. Sun and age weathered the man’s face, reminding Micah of Keegan’s promise to provide for his parents when they grew older. Something had to be done about that. Even if Keegan was…

No longer here.

“I’m sorry,” Micah apologized tightly.

Mr. Flint smiled bitterly and clapped him roughly on the shoulder. He then pulled Micah in for a firm embrace. “My boy…” the man whispered, his voice wispy with emotion. “My boy loved you very much, Micah.”

Micah closed his eyes briefly. “I know he did. Just as I know how much he loved his family.”

Over his shoulder, Keegan’s brother nodded once to Micah, his hands preoccupied with holding the urn of Keegan’s ashes.

“What was he doing?” Mr. Flint inquired desperately as he pulled back from the embrace.

“Taking lessons with Master Idris,” Micah replied using a half-truth. “Keegan…” he trailed off, finding it difficult to inhale properly. “He didn’t see Idris as the enemy. You would have been proud of him. He made remarkable progress with the sword.”

“But someone clearly did not appreciate the partnership,” the man snarled. “It takes a certain kind of person to burn innocents to the ground.”

Micah nodded. “I’ll find out who did this.”

His mouth felt like cotton. His tongue felt heavy. The person who killed Keegan was already dead. Destroyed and wiped from existence by a very angry Igni king.

Keegan’s father hardly appeared reassured. He appeared haunted. “Don’t be a stranger, Micah.”

The man squeezed his shoulder once more and gradually moved past him. “Visit us. Please.”

Keegan’s brother reached out and ruffled Micah’s hair.

The gesture caused Micah’s spine to stiffen and his pulse to stop. He stared at the other boy, seeing nothing but Keegan staring back at him. Like a pair of ghosts, father and son moved further down the pathway, enduring condolences, but making it no secret they just wanted to leave as soon as possible.

Micah did not linger.

He retreated as quickly as possible from the chapel. Subconsciously, his hand reached for his hair, feeling the ghostly fingers ruffle affectionately through his scalp.

* * * *

He didn’t know what it meant.

Sitting on his bed, Micah stared at the pendant cupped in his palm. The familiar pentagram
gleamed maliciously up at him. Just the sight of it alone made him ill with the memories. He had discovered the pendant waiting for him on his pillow. Clearly, Josiah left it for him. He just didn’t understand why.

Why?

The pendant thrummed pleasantly with magic and Micah grew leery holding it. Under Josiah’s instruction, Clarence Idris most likely delivered the pendant to the Noir Users that night to conduct the ritual. The ritual that had been performed successfully, but had still failed. Now, Josiah wanted Micah to have possession of it.

Frustrated, Micah opened his nightstand drawer and threw it inside with the blue crystal he had received from the Terra Kingdom. He was in no mood to dissect the inner workings of Josiah’s mind right now.

Across the room, the door opened and closed quietly.

“I didn’t think you’d be back here,” Kai declared, making his way towards Micah. The Unda man sat on the bed opposite of him, unabashedly observing him.

“I don’t have many other options,” Micah responded evenly.

Kai was silent for a moment. “Have you heard the news?” Upon seeing Micah’s apathetic expression, Kai smirked. “Lord Josiah has temporarily stepped down from his position as Chairman. Councilman Sachiel took his place. They said it was voluntarily, but my sources tell me that King Calder strongly suggested it. This comes at a time when people are starting to talk about the reappearance of the royal heir.”

Micah ignored the last bit. “Calder can’t make Josiah do anything he doesn’t want to do,” he said.

Kai quirked an eyebrow. “You’d know, I suppose.”

Micah looked sharply at the other man. Kai met his stare arrogantly, hardly intimidated. Unfortunately, out of the entire team, Kai was quick enough to put all the pieces together and discover his parentage. Something told Micah he would refer to it as often as possible just to goad him.

“I also plan to stay at the academy for the full year,” Kai informed conceitedly.

“What does daddy think of that?”

“He applauds my decision. There is no immediate threat with the Terra Kingdom, after all. Besides, you are in no position to hold the team together, Egan. You’ll need me.”

“I appreciate the concern.”

“Concerned? I am merely looking to reestablish my captain position.”

Kai’s tone lacked its usual arrogance and bite, destroying the illusion and shedding light on what this conversation really was. Pity. Concern. A way to stand by Micah without it being too obvious or sentimental.

Micah clasped his hands together and leaned forward. “Reestabishing your captain position may be easier than you think, Edlen.”
“Oh?” The blond-haired man frowned. “How is that?”

Micah’s attention landed on the nightstand. “I don’t think I’m coming back.” He hadn’t said it before, not even to himself. Yet, the idea brimmed as a subconscious thought—a tantalizing impression not quite formed. Saying it aloud cemented the impression into something solid and concrete. Yes. He wanted to do this.

Kai laughed once. “Don’t be ridiculous, Micah. Where would you go?”

“I think, ‘anywhere but here’, appropriately describes my intentions.” Micah stood from the bed. “I want to find my mother,” he said. It was a lie and he immediately regretted delivering it to Kai after what had happened with Keegan. While he was curious to know where she was, as she hadn’t been with Idris, the very prospect of finding her made him sick with confused repulsion and unease. He didn’t know what he wanted to do with her.

He didn’t know what he’d say when he saw her again. He didn’t know what she’d say or do that would undoubtedly make him feel guilty enough to stand by her side, trapped once more.

“I want to learn things,” he revised deliberately.

“What kind of things?”

“Things that will make me better. Stronger.” His attention once again refocused on the pendant inside the nightstand.

Kai shook his head. “You’re already at the top of the class, Egan. You’re swordsmanship is perfect. You were utterly fantastic during the duel at the capital.”

“It’s not enough.”

“Not enough? You’re not making sense.”

“Not enough to be on his same level.”

The other man mulled over Micah’s vague statement before frowning. “Josiah? Or your father?”

Kai ran a hand across his naked, smooth jaw. “Or is this about losing Keegan? You were with him when he died, weren’t you? You probably feel—”

“Incompetent?” Micah finished vehemently.

“You’re being ridiculous,” Kai insulted. “You’re irritatingly good at everything you do, Egan. Stop feeling sorry for yourself.”

It was easy to tune Kai out. The idea was ludicrous, yet Micah reluctantly acknowledged that Josiah probably wasn’t human. As much as he hated agreeing with the Magi about anything, he wanted all the facts. What Micah saw in that mirror down in Unda’s vault was not a pure entity. It was dark and it was frightening.

Micah needed to conduct his own research. He needed to know what Josiah was in order to proceed. Unfortunately, demonology was a branch of Noir Magic. He doubted the capital held the knowledge he was looking for. In order to understand Josiah, and the game he’d willingly walked into, Micah needed that knowledge. In order to obtain it, he had to search it out.

“Micah.”
“Kai,” he mocked.

Edlen appeared frustrated. “You didn’t hear anything I said, did you?”

“Something about self-pity,” Micah responded aloofly.

“Your father knows who you are. Nobles are talking. Gossip already started. He won’t let you go, especially not when he just found you again.” Kai shifted with frustration. “He’ll have eyes on you now.”

Escaping Calder was another excuse to leave. Calder discovering Micah’s identity had been a possibility, but Micah hadn’t anticipated it would happen so soon. All because he used his left hand during a duel. His father had sniffed him out, not at all fooled by Keegan’s act. Micah wasn’t ready to face Calder and all that it entailed.

He was poorly prepared.

“Egan.” Kai grabbed the edge of his sleeve and pulled him closer. “Sit.”

As much as he preferred to stand and pace, he followed Kai’s insistent pull and sat down next to the other man.

“I know what kind of griever you are,” Edlen said quietly, turning completely serious and losing his egotism. “One too proud to succumb to tears. You’ll think it’s a weakness and counterintuitive. Instead, you’ll want to do something reckless to take your mind off him. Anything to escape his memory.”

Micah blinked at the far wall before turning and appraising Kai.

“I sobbed when Wayde died,” Kai continued, hardly bothered by his confession. “You saw it. Everyone saw it. And I did a lot more crying behind closed doors. It was liberating for me to grieve him, because when I finished crying like a damn child, I understood the best way to honor him. I had to fix what destroyed him.”

“Our team dynamics,” Micah surmised.

“That and politics,” Kai added sourly. “I made a vow to myself long ago that I wouldn’t let politics rule common sense. I seemed to have forgotten that when I enrolled at the academy. So caught up with the court’s opinion. While I fixed what destroyed Wayde, I kept him with me all this time. I wasn’t scared of his memory. It was if he were here with me.”

Micah traced Kai’s stern features, amused despite the somber situation. “I appreciate this heart to heart, Edlen,” Micah murmured, encouraged when he spied the pink blossoming high near Kai’s cheekbones. “It really proves we’ve taken the next step in our relationship.”

“Yes,” Kai exhaled with frustration. “My point is that everyone grieves differently. I think, in your case, an escape is appropriate, but not running away. That is cowardly.”

So it was.

No matter how much he teased the boy about it, Micah appreciated Kai’s interference. It was easy to grow overwhelmed with all the things here, at the capital, he wanted to run from. Only, he wanted to run away for all the wrong reasons. He didn’t know how to confront and deal with everything here. Instead of centering and preparing himself to face these things, he was prepared to avoid it.
As Edlen appropriately named it, it was cowardly.

“We have quite a bit of time between terms,” Edlen started again, this time adopting his typical air of snide. “I think that should suffice for you. And I’d like to come with.”

That took Micah off guard.

“No.”

Kai’s eyes flashed. “Why not?”

“No.” Micah stood from the bottom bunkbed and loitered near his personal belongings. He ignored Kai’s regard as he began refolding a shirt. “The whole point of going away between terms is to recollect myself. Alone.”

“Please, don’t sound so melodramatic.” Kai stood and approached Micah. “It’s not as if I’m Viktor or Aiden. I’m not going to constantly talk your ear off.”

“Judging from this chat, you have revealed a new side of yourself. And it’s talkative.”

Edlen scowled and it was ugly. “Someone had to talk some sense in you, Egan. Next time, I will gladly do it by physical force than a diplomatic discussion.”

Micah scoffed. “As if you could truly exert any sort of physical force.”

“Clearly, you’re far more gone in your grief than I thought possible,” Kai countered, yet his tone was playful as he rose up to his full height. “Remove that pretty crafted Igni sword from your hands and you’d be defenseless against me.”

Micah glanced at said sword, feeling a sense of bitter resentment as he looked at Idris’ sword. He could hate the man all he liked, yet it did not change the reasons why Idris did what he did. He did it for his son, for revenge against something he could not understand. He’d also expressed his grief over the man Josiah once was and truly believed his prince, his king, was possessed by a monster.

There were so many factors leading to Keegan’s death, and Idris was just another person responsible. Micah did not blame Idris solely for what happened, but that didn’t mean the betrayal was any less difficult to swallow.

Instead of wielding his master’s sword with honor, Micah would feel rather empty when he used it again.

It would be just a sword.

Re focusing on the conversation, he smirked at Kai. “I never thought I’d hear your declare anything Igni-crafted as ‘pretty’.”

“Unda-crafted swords are sensible and superior. Blacksmiths did not feel it necessary to disguise defects with flashy design, simply because there are no defects.”

Micah laughed loudly at Kai’s sheer audacity. “Now who is the delusional one? When the two kingdoms merged together, the Unda people couldn’t wait to get their greedy hands on Igni-crafted swords.”

“Yes, to take away their weapons. Wouldn’t want a civil uprising.”

“Oh, so that was the deliberate intention?”
The arrival of Viktor abruptly robbed Edlen of his retaliation. Micah and Kai both turned to observe the lithe man as he stumbled his way into their quarters. Bloodshot eyes looked at them before turning to consider his bunkbed. He then refocused on Micah. With clumsy movements, Viktor clambered towards him.

“Micah,” he slurred.

“Viktor.” Kai stood in front of Micah and intercepted the boy by the shoulders. “Are you an idiot? You’re drinking in public?”

Micah edged around Edlen, watching as the aristocrat grabbed a wrapped bottle from Viktor’s hands. It was open and even Micah could smell the strong whiskey from a good distance away.


Inconveniently, Talia, Cain, and Aiden all entered their quarters, appearing just as worse for wear. Fortunately, they were not stumbling drunk like Viktor, but their moods were palpable enough to bring Micah back down to the pool of despair. He hadn’t realized the positive affect Edlen had on him.

“Talia, shut the door,” Micah ordered firmly.

She looked between Viktor, Kai, and the open bottle of booze before abruptly shutting the door behind her. “Someone mentioned he was drunk,” she whispered. “He’d been wandering the training rooms and talking to Keegan.”

Viktor gave up wrestling for the bottle and abruptly dropped to the floor. Micah watched his descent, knowing something weighed heavily on the other man. Viktor had been close to Keegan, but not to the point that he’d be in this condition. If anyone would be stumbling drunk in the corridors, it would be...

Micah glanced at Aiden.

The Igni boy had his arms crossed over his chest, a defense mechanism. Aiden caught Micah’s stare before turning his cheek stubbornly. Amber eyes burned with revulsion.

“You said...” Viktor trailed off, drawing Micah’s attention once again. The younger man huddled against the foot of a bunkbed and stared miserably up at Micah. “You said that if anything happened, it would be my fault.”

A heavy silence filled the room as the team all stood apart and wordlessly observed.

They really did stand apart. It was ironic how Wayde’s death brought them together while Keegan’s passing had the adverse effect. Talia huddled stubbornly in the corner, refusing to look anywhere but at Viktor. Even Cain, who typically hovered in the middle to bridge gaps, backed himself against a wall and remained forlorn.

And Aiden... Micah knew the other boy blamed someone for Keegan’s death and it was not Viktor. The boy’s blame aptly centered on Micah.

Kai was right.

Micah couldn’t run away from everything, especially with his team like this.

“I can’t lose you too, Micah.” Viktor rolled his head back against the footboard, desperately
gauging Micah’s reaction. “I didn’t realize that would happen to Keegan.”

Micah dropped into a crouch in front of Viktor. “You’re an idiot for what you pulled with Keegan at the coliseum, Viktor.” He paused. “And as easy as it would be to place the blame on you for what happened with Keegan, this had absolutely no ties to the duel.”

The blond-haired cadet hardly seemed relieved.

He appeared miserable. His unfocused eyes tried to stay on Micah, yet they drifted deliriously.

“Give me some of that, Edlen,” Micah requested, holding out his hand.

“Egan,” Kai started disapprovingly.

With one look from Micah, however, Kai relented. He gave the bottle to Micah, who then took a large swig from the whiskey. It burned pleasantly and he took another large gulp.

It warmed his insides and he savored the effect for quite some time. “Keegan hated this stuff,” he said fondly, pulling the bottle from the paper. He shook it, watching as the bright, amber liquid sloshed. It was still a bit more than half-full. “He preferred wine, but he wanted to appear capable when you all drank it together.”

After taking another swig, he passed it to Kai. The man looked down at the bottle before hesitantly bringing it up to his lips and following suit. He sat down with Viktor and Micah, holding out the bottle.

“Cain.”

The large, brute-like cadet approached the circle of grieving men and accepted the bottle. As he settled on the ground, he looked imploringly at Talia after taking his share.

For a long moment, she did not appear as if she would join. “I hate the stuff too.” Despite her protest, she dragged her feet over and sat next to Micah. She made a face as she swallowed the amber liquid. “But there is nothing wrong with celebrating Keegan.”

“Celebrating? Is that what we’re doing?” Aiden inquired bitterly as Talia turned to him and offered him the bottle. “Or are we drowning our guilt with the bottle, Micah?”

“Aiden,” Kai snarled fiercely. “Now is not the time to point fingers.”

“Now that Keegan’s not here, you quickly took the position as Micah’s right-hand man, didn’t you, Kai?” Aiden countered heatedly, his words as unpleasant as his tone and expression. “One could say you’re also celebrating, but for an entirely different reason. No more competition for you, eh?”

“Aiden!” Talia and Cain both chorused in unison.

Micah took the bottle from Talia’s hands and drank under Viktor’s observation.

“It’s true. Edlen has underlying motives,” Aiden responded defensively. “He saw what Keegan and Micah had and he was jealous he couldn’t have it. Like all nobles are—”

“Get out,” Kai demanded with a quiet hiss.

“But look at where Keegan’s friendship with Micah got him,” Aiden persisted, his voice cracking. “Dead. Under suspicious conditions. They discovered his body in the debris of a fire with the remains of an Igni rebel. We’re talking about Keegan. Someone so entirely good. Do you want to
end up the same, Edlen?”

“I said get out.” Kai shot to his feet, but Micah grabbed his arm, holding him in place.

“He’s just grieving in his own way,” Micah murmured quietly, gazing pointedly up at Kai. Reluctant understanding crossed the aristocrat’s expression as Micah used his earlier words about mourning against him. “Let him get it over with.”

Kai offered Aiden one last warning look before lowering back to the ground. He then grabbed the bottle from Micah’s hand and drank a significant amount.

Across the room, Aiden’s face crumbled at Micah’s surprising consideration.

“I hate you, Micah.” He turned and sniffed in a sob, as if he were trying to prevent it. “For being so irritatingly perfect.” He raised his forearm and covered his face. His entire body curled in defeat and his shoulders trembled with suppressed cries. He angled toward the door, as if he desperately wanted to leave, yet a part of him realized he had nowhere to go in such a moment of weakness.

Micah took pity.

“Aiden,” he called out, earning unhappy expressions from Talia and Kai. “We are all grieving here. Sit with us and have a drink. In a few minutes, you won’t care who your companions are, as long as it is with like-minded company.”

Aiden turned back around, his face dry, yet full of sharp anguish.

Micah felt a hollow thud resonate in his chest at the sight. Taking the bottle from Kai, Micah waved it towards the Igni boy. Surprisingly, Aiden approached and collapsed in the circle of his teammates. After accepting the bottle, he drank from it as if he were a parched man discovering the rare gem of water.

“Not all of it,” Talia protested, taking the whiskey.

“I have more,” Viktor confessed, his words still slurred. “My brother sends them.”

After hearing that, Talia emptied a bit more of the bottle before passing it back to Cain. Viktor stood from his position and made his way unsteadily towards his trunk to retrieve another bottle from his belongings. Micah shook his head, though his senses were too far gone to care about Viktor’s private stash.

“You really don’t blame me, Micah?” Viktor inquired with a small, child-like voice.

“Viktor, for the last time, I don’t blame you.”

Micah accepted the new bottle of whiskey from Viktor and opened it. The cork stopper made an audible popping sound throughout their quiet quarters. Their room seemed larger than typical. Emptier. Desolate. It was almost uncanny how large it appeared without Keegan.

“Make sure to thank your brother for us,” Cain murmured appreciatively, accepting the bottle after Micah took his share. “His distillery business is thriving, I assume?”

“Thriving is one way to put it,” Viktor muttered, sounding envious, but there was a lick of pride he could not contain. “He wouldn’t send me free bottles of booze every month if his business was suffering. He’s pretty proud of himself.”
Micah glanced at the bottle, noticing the elaborate and pretty label. “He’s in the distillery business?”

“Yeah. First born son. Heir. My parents weren’t entirely impressed with his decision to enter the booze world. He makes a good whiskey, though, don’t you think?”

“Good? I’d say impressive,” Micah complimented.

Viktor beamed.

“As long as it does its job…” Aiden trailed off, his expression slacking with numbness, a direct mirror to what they all felt at this point. “It would sell fast in the outer regions, I’m sure. Don’t you think, Micah?”

“Undoubtedly.” Micah paused, watching as Kai drank from the bottle and patiently waiting for his turn. “Although they may not appreciate where it originated.”

“Always the segregation,” Kai complained. “Capital doesn’t like outer region goods. Outer region doesn’t prefer anything the capital sends for goods.”

“You’re assuming the capital actually sends goods to the outer regions,” Micah mused, his tone alighting with amusement. “We get a few fruits. However, the majority is liquor that we don’t need. It always sits, untouched, at our local taverns.”

“You used to work at a tavern? Keegan told me,” Aiden murmured.

“I did. Capital booze was always the last used. Or used as fire accelerators.”

They laughed as if it were some joke he’d attempted to use. They were too far gone to recognize the truth.

“Here’s to Keegan.” Cain held up the bottle of whiskey in a semblance of a toast. “A very impressive scholar. He always seemed to help us with our studies, especially Viktor’s studies.” He ignored Viktor’s noise of disparity. “He showed impressive aptitude.” Taking a swig, Cain passed the bottle to Aiden.

“To Keegan,” Aiden choked on his own words, his eyes swelling with tears. “To a good friend and an impressive spar partner who advanced leaps and bounds on pure determination alone. He ended up challenging me at the end. His excitement was contagious.”

Kai received the bottle next. He looked down at the whiskey, his expression creasing with contemplation. Eventually, he held the bottle aloft, mimicking Cain in his invisible toast to their missing teammate. “To Keegan Flint,” he said softly. “For showing us that there was more important things to life than mere politics and social status.”

Talia accepted the bottle and lifted it proudly. “Keegan…. was a gentleman and a rare ally who did not choose to do things out of selfish means, but out of the true goodness of his heart. He will be greatly missed.” She took a swig, closing her eyes against the burn, against the pain, before offering Micah the bottle of whiskey.

He wrapped his fingers around the neck of the bottle and nodded.

He could see Keegan sitting across from him, an impish, fond smirk across his face. His amber eyes bright, shinning with good intentions.
Micah lifted the bottle towards Keegan’s intangible form, feeling the fingers through his hair as if they were real. “Keegan,” he addressed hoarsely, knowing his words would crack and sound pathetic, but not caring in the least. “Kid. You naïve, stupid idiot who always assumed the best of everyone and their intentions,” he croaked. “To my… my brother I never knew I had until it was too late to appreciate.”

He drank until he could not feel any sort of sense.

Until he felt numb.

It was the only way to forget the sound of a blade suctioning through Keegan’s chest.

Under the bath of the strong, afternoon sunlight, the lunch bell tolled shrilly. The mourning cadets of the gold team ignored the summoning and continued to pass the whiskey bottles between each other, celebrating the life of a friend that would no longer grace them with his bright and infectious presence.

The world suddenly seemed much darker.

End of Part One.

Chapter End Notes

I don’t really know where she went, lol, as it has been a few weeks without contact, but I will dedicate this to Seleton, my beta who encouraged me to take the giant leap and share this with everyone.

This is also dedicated to all of you who made it worthwhile. Reading all your thoughts and comments were so fun. =) A reward in itself. Maghetaaa also sketched a picture of Ezra and Josiah that tickled me! ;-) I will have to find a place to post the artwork and share with the rest of you.

I’m not entirely sure what I’m going to do with Part 2. I had played around with publishing these on Amazon/Kindle or continuing on my current path on AO3. Would you rather binge-read it in one go? Or the chapter-by-chapter we have established with Part 1? I’m leaning toward the latter, at least for Part 2, and may reconsider things for Part 3-- Part 5? Who knows how many parts there will be, WTF.

Anyway, thank you for reading. And commenting. ♥

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!