Summary

Taken as a prisoner to the powerful Kingdom of Auvradevas, Prince Jongin of Warinia struggles with droves of Auvrans and faces great adversities. But the greatest of them come from within as he falls for the man who invaded his home.

Adrian, the Crown Prince of Auvradevas, a mighty Godblood, finds himself in quite the conundrum when his destiny clashes with his blooming unlooked-for affection for the feisty, spirited princeling.

In the midst of a deadly plague, the Godblood is torn between love and duty.
NOTES

DAYS

Jorrdag 1st day of the week
Livathdag 2nd day of the week
Faandag 3rd day of the week
Ikthadag 4th day of the week
Merdag 5th day of the week
Chaqdag 6th day of the week
Kvadag 7th day of the week

PLACES

Auvradevas
Warinia
Othadia
The Vrilehm Mountains
Ukheston
Reashokar

NOTEWORTHY CREATURES

Baashere Adrian’s Pet Tiger
Zairvoth The Wyvern Deathlord
Kairvos The Wyvern Guardian of the Seven
Tuzmuul Adrian’s Manticore Champion
Sea Wyrm A Sea Monster
Other Indigenous Animals e.g. Elephants, Wildcats, Buffalos

Dark Sylphs Female Spirits

Spellsingers Sirens of Seduction

Auvradevas, Year 5102, 1st Jorrdag

The air was heavy in the gloaming. Stars, illuminated. Sky, as dark as the eternally flowing Dkithia River. The wind carried an intoxication with it, a perfume not known to mankind. The scent of the ocean, the taste of sea salt hovered in the air. He knew she was here.

The drapes swayed with the wind and Raagathor looked up from his parchment, gently setting the quill aside. He waited for her appearance, eyes keen on the open doors of the balcony. It had been a year since he had given himself to such a seraphic insobriety, since the night the Goddess of Sea and Light had joined him in his bed and lain with him in the absence of his Queen. He had not forgotten the smell of her hair, the paleness of her skin, the taste of her lips, the heat of her insides. Her gaze flowed like water, her touches were as untamed as the waves of the sea. No mortal matched her divinity. Not even Ivoarel.

“Raagathor,” she said, her voice as free as the wind, sweet as honey, steady as the mountains, clear as the sky. The King raised his head and regarded her calmly. Unlike the first time he had seen her, she was attired. Her long, blue dress flowed like a cascade, her luscious black hair resting upon her humble breasts he knew the taste of. Her lips were in the hue of a red rose, her green eyes spoke volumes. Her skin had a silver glow about it. It almost looked like a fish’s scales.

In her arms, she bore a naked babe, sound asleep.

“You have returned at long last,” Raagathor said, rising from his chair.

“And I have come bearing you a child,” she replied with a small hint of a smile on her full lips. Raagathor’s eyes fell on the babe once more.

“Nay, it shan’t be,” he gasped.

The Sea and Light Goddess approached the mortal man she had bedded for a child. “He will be known to all of mankind. His name will be heard and worshipped all across the Nine Realms. He will bear many titles. The conqueror of realms. The champion of men. The defender of women. The saviour of people. The slayer of kings. The victor of wars. The son of all. Dragovan.”

Raagathor’s jaw loosened as he studied the babe. He held his arms out and the Goddess handed him the babe. “You have given me a son,” he said breathlessly. “To what do I owe you this favour?”

“It is not a favour, Raagathor. It is a blessing. He will see greatness. But beware. Teach him to war and rule. He will win you many victories. He will be the King of Auvradevas and more. But his fate will meet his flaw in time. And it will be his only shortcoming. Until then, he will thrive.”

“What do you mean?!” the King rasped.

The Goddess smiled. “I will come for him when he meets his death. The return of Zairvoth will mark the beginning of his end.”

Raagathor’s eyes bulged out in disbelief. “Zairvoth? The Wyvern Deathlord? He has been dead for
centuries! He has become nothing but a legend. How can he return?” A small hope sparked in him. The dragons had been extinct for aeons. They would not return unless the Gods were waging a war on mankind.

“He will be your only hope then, King Raagathor,” the Goddess said. “Seek Kairvos in the Vrilehm Mountains when Zairvoth returns.”

Kairvos. The Wyvern Guardian of the Seven Gods. Raagathor knelt before the Goddess to beg. “I beseech you, mighty divinity! Nay! You shan’t send those foul man-eaters back to roam the ground!” As much as Raagathor wanted to live in a time that saw the greatness of dragons, he knew he was incompetent to battle even one. He’d have to live in fear. His people would have to live in fear. Nay, he would not have it!

“This is his destiny,” the Goddess replied. A strongbox then appeared in her hands. She held it out. Raagathor eyed the black star sapphire ring the strongbox bore. “When Zairvoth comes, he will bring the plague of Wyverns with him. This child will then be your only hope. Because he is my son, he will always have my grace. In a time of dire need, Tuzmuul will come to his aid. But be warned, Raagathor. Should his heart waver, should it bloom for another, he will face a choice he would not have the foresight to make. Heed my warnings, Raagathor. Prepare yourself for the return of Zairvoth.”

Raagathor dropped his gaze to the babe. Dragovan. When he lifted his head, the Goddess had left and he knew it was the last he would see of her.

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Warinia, Year 5119, 38th Kvadag

“It’s a boy,” the healer said.

Chivrun’s heart leaped to his throat as he gripped the royal healer’s hands and thanked her immensely. “How is my wife?” he inquired when he did not see a smile on the healer’s face.

“My Lord,” the healer began in a small voice. “I am sorry.”

Chivrun withdrew his hands and stared at her in horror. “What is the meaning of this?!?” he rasped as cold moth descended upon his heart. “Has she not survived it?!?”

“Nay, nay, My Lord,” she amended quickly. “She is weak, but she will be all right with time.”

Chivrun breathed again. “Then what is the dolour on your face for?” he demanded, scowling. “Has something happened to the child?”

“The babe is healthy,” the healer reassured him. “However, there is a slight… complication.”

“Spit it out!” he ordered.

The healer sighed. “The child is an androgyne.”

Chivrun’s heart stopped. He staggered a step back and gaped at the healer. “An Aevayl?” he gasped. “He is cursed?!”

“He is blessed, My Lord,” she said. “He is mostly a boy. He has... some of the female sexual organs. When he is older, we could tell whether he might be able to bear children or not.”
Chivrun clasped his hands to his face. “Kathraz were supposed to be extinct. How is this possible?”

“Perhaps in Warinia, they may be extinct. But a few still remain in silence throughout the Nine Realms.”

“If he turns out to be a breeder, oh, he will be hunted down by fiends! He will never be safe!”

“It is best then that this stays a secret,” the healer advised.

Chivrun nodded his head hastily. “No one else must know. Ever.”

* * *

**Warinia, Year 5126, 9th Merdag**

“Jongin, you shan’t run! You may fall and hurt yourself,” Jihee screeched behind him as she chased him through the hallway.

Holding the dress’ skirt up, Jongin skipped as fast as his short, tiny legs could carry him. He giggled back at his sister before he came to a halt when he almost bumped into a servant.

“Prince Jongin,” she rasped and smiled at the dress Jongin wore, the dress Jihee had made him wear for her entertainment. She then picked a knob of sweetmeat from the tray she bore and held it down to Jongin, who ate it straight from her hand. He grinned brightly at her in gratitude. His father strictly forbade him from consuming too many sweets in one day, but the servants were kind enough to sneak him some sweetmeats every now and then.

He muttered a whispery thank you and raced through the hallway again before his sister could catch him. He liked wearing the dress, he decided. It was light and comfortable.

He stopped in the corridor outside when he heard voices from the bailey. His father was talking to two men, one tall and lean, the other even taller but sinewy. They must be in their early twenties.

Jongin went to stand by a pillar to get a better look at the taller, sinewy man. His black hair was short, shoulders broad, neck thick. He was so handsome, Jongin thought. So, so, so handsome. He did not look like a Warinian, he was too big to be one.

“I got you!” Jihee jumped Jongin from behind and Jongin hissed at her, shoving her away with his small hands.

“Shush,” he hissed and returned his attention to his father and the two men. They were having a hushed conversation. Jongin wasn’t interested in it, anyway. He kept his gaze steady on the dark-haired man. That moment, he realized that he often found tall, muscled, dark-haired men very attractive. His cheeks crimsoned, and he felt shy, embarrassed. He wanted the man to notice him.

Jongin frantically looked around and beamed when he looked at the rosebush nearby. He leaped to it and hastily plucked a flower. “Ah!” he yelped when a thorn pricked his forefinger.

“Jongin!” Jihee cried and tried to take the pink rose away to examine Jongin’s wound.

“Nay!” Jongin grated and desperately looked towards the handsome man, who had disappeared along with his companion and Jongin’s father. Frowning, Jongin looked down at the blood trickling from his finger and the flower.
CHAPTER ONE

Warinia, Year 5138, 23rd Livadhag

The ground beneath their feet quaked. Crevices formed on the ceilings, stretching like limbs of death. Glass shattered to smithereens. The continuous skull-cracking boom deafened all momentarily. Walls crumbled, cries broke, the fortress was bulled through, and within a few more heartbeats, everyone knew their kingdom would be taken.

Auvran warhorses bolted through the streets, trampling everyone that tried to obstruct. Warinian soldiers lay dead, strewn all over the ground, Auvran silver arrows jutting from their backs, sword gashes adorning their dead bodies. The roads were painted with the blood of the innocents. War cries exploded like an extension of a thunder. The city bell pealed like a death knell. Dirt and sand swirled in the air the Auvran army rode through like savages. Fires rose and licked walls of Warinia that was engulfed by a chaos she hadn’t been honed to confront. The peaceable, beautiful, tranquil, small agricultural Kingdom of Warinia was now infiltrated and ruined by annihilating barbarians. Her halcyon ambience wrung into a bloody furor.

The war was being won by the aggressors and there was nothing that the Warinians could do to prevent the inevitable. For as long as the Auvrans were led by their indomitable, undefeatable commander-in-chief, they would continue to conquer all realms they set their hearts on. Warinia would be an easy win for them.

Jihee clutched at her dagger at her brother's side. Her eyes were burning red with tears of guilt. She would blame herself for this, he knew. She would assign the fault on herself for displeasing the King Raagathor by refusing his marriage proposal, thus spawning the Auvrans’ sudden ambush and invasion to capture the Kingdom of Warinia through annexation.

“My Lord!” the herald screamed as he burst into the safe chamber.

Jongin turned, tearing his terrified gaze from the window. His hand was steady at the hilt of his dagger, which he was taught well to wield for defence, but never for offence.

“Speak!” Jongin’s father, the King of Warinia, commanded in a trembling voice.

“They have… destroyed the fort,” the herald said, his face covered in beads of sweat. He was shaking and Jongin knew it wasn't because of the rumbling ground.

“Nay,” the King let out and sank in his throne.

“We must fight!” Jihee cried. “We cannot surrender, Father!”

Jongin agreed with his sister. He'd fight if he had to. He’d never bow to those barbarians. But his father was wiser than them all. He’d have the final say and it would be just.

A palace guard spilled into the room, quaking with fear. “The Auvrans have surrounded the palace, My Lord!” he announced.

Jongin looked at his father, who had his eyes clenched and head hung.

“Sire!” the guard yapped, his patience running thin. He needed orders now. “He is on his way, My King.”
The King’s eyes flung open. “Who is?” he inquired.

“The… The Godblood, sire! The Crown Prince of Auvradevas! He is leading the army. He’s already conquered almost all of Warinia!”

Jongin’s heart sank. He knew what that meant. If his father didn’t surrender now, he’d have to face the Auvran Crown Prince in a battle and it was a battle easily won by the Auvran. And losing equated death.

“Father,” Jongin spoke for the first time since the invasion broke out. He knelt before his father and held a hand to the old King’s knee. “We shall yield.”

His father swallowed and stroked a side of Jongin’s face endearingly. Then nodding, he turned to the guard and herald. “We will surrender. Declare the usurpation of the Kingdom of Auvradevas and affirm their dominion in Warinia,” he ordered. “Her King relinquishes her.”

The guard and herald looked as taken aback as Jihee. But they scurried away at once to make the announcement.

Jongin rose to his feet and glanced out the window. The Warinian flags were being brought down and the Auvran gonfalons were raised. His home was destroyed, occupied, and besmirched by the impurity of the Auvrans. Cheers coursed through the victors upon the declaration of submission, all crying praises for one name: Prince Adrianus Dragovan of Auvradevas.

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The sweet, prickling smell of wine rolled through the palace. The songs and cheers hadn’t stopped even as night fell. All resisting Warinians were imprisoned while serving women and boys of the royal household were sent to be locked in the safe chamber where Jongin and Jihee remained.

Auvrans took over and occupied the palace, tainting every brick of the once quiet haven of peace-keepers with their sacrilege and debauchery. It made Jongin sick to his stomach. But he did not waver. He’d still fight them if he must.

Their father had left to confront the King of Auvradevas and his second-born, Prince Evzenius, who had arrived a few moments ago. Nobody had seen the Crown Prince who had won yet another victory for his father after the total annexation of Warinia. Jongin held nothing but contempt and utter hatred for the warrior, who was revered, lionized, and worshipped all across the Nine Realms. If it weren’t for him, Auvradevas would not have become irrevocably and indisputably unrivalled over the past few years. She would not have had the audacity to wage war on a peaceful kingdom like Warinia.

In just a decade, the ruthless prince had expanded the Auvran Kingdom almost to the Third Realm, making Auvradevas the nonpareil, strongest, vastest kingdom of all. Though Auvradevas overflowed with golds and gems, monumental buildings, impenetrable fortress, enormous army, it was most known and celebrated for her heir, who would one day rule her. And he was believed to be a Godblood, having the blood of a God, gracing him with unparalleled strength and brawns.

The conqueror of realms. The champion of men. The defender of women. The saviour of people. The slayer of kings. The victor of wars. The son of all. The Godblood. Adrianus Dragovan Raagathor, the Prince of Auvradevas. Jongin longed to meet the warmonger, the merciless barbarian who was a poor excuse of a prince and spit on his face. He wanted to hold the belligerent prince at the tip of his sword and demand him to answer to all the atrocity he had done. All the innocent lives he had sacrificed in his endeavour to conquer all nine of the Nine Realms.
“This falls on me,” Jihee muttered as she took her seat among her ladies-in-waiting. Her white gown was stained with dirt and tears.

“It doesn’t,” Jongin said as he paced the chamber restlessly. Some of the serving boys offered him comfort and food to eat, but he refused. Jihee hadn’t eaten anything either. None of them had. How could they stomach food in these shambles?

“It does,” his sister argued. She was only two years older than Jongin, but her careworn expression made her look several years older. “I should have thought twice before sending the message of refusal. I should have just agreed to marry him.”

Jongin could not ever picture his sister married to that old bastard, who called himself the venerated King of Auvradevas. He adopted a crouch before his sister and took her trembling hands. “Nay, you shan’t have to,” he whispered. “It’s about time someone stood up to that chauvinistic swine.”

Warinia was one of the few kingdoms in the Nine Realms that had forsaken her repression of women. For years now, there had been a freedom of religious beliefs, and equality between men and women was continually practised in Warinia. Choosing a member of the same gender for a partner was not denigrated in this kingdom. But if she were now in the clutches of Auvradevas, changes would be made, and all of their freedom would be snatched away.

“It had cost us our peace and home,” Jihee said with limpid eyes. She looked almost afraid, and Jongin had never seen her this vulnerable.

“Sister,” he called, grabbing her shoulders. “I will not let any harm come to you. And I will try to my last breath to bring the men responsible for this to justice. Injustice never wins.”

“What would happen now, My Lady?” a serving girl timidly asked Jihee. “Must we give in to the Auvrans’ cruelty?”

“Nay,” Jihee rasped. “We will never. But for the time being, we shall wait for the King to come back to us.”

“His Highness is no longer the King,” a serving boy said, frowning deeply.

Jongin rose to his full height with a tight jaw.

A moment later, the doors banged open and a few gasped as the fully liveried Auvrans strode into the chamber. They were barbarically large, dirty, and hairy. Jongin grimaced at the stench they reeked. Sweat, blood, wine, and arrogance.

“It is time to rejoice!” one of the Auvran pigs cried joyously, raising the winecup he was holding. He was bulky with thick muscles and bore horrid scars on his awful-looking face. He carried the sun and lion crest of Auvradevas on his chest. As he downed the drink, the wine dribbled from the corners of his mouth and dripped from his chin.

Jongin clenched his jaw.

“Warinia,” the man cooed as his men circled the room, lounging on settees and pallets as they deemed fit. Serving girls and boys recoiled from them at once, gathering near their prince and princess. “Even the name of your delicate Kingdom sounds beautiful and sweet.”

The man caught one of the serving girls and grappled her waist, yanking her close to him by force. She wriggled and flinched but did not pull away. Or perhaps she couldn’t.
Jongin settled his hand on the grip of his dagger and leered at the Auvran man with narrowed eyes.

The man laughed when the serving girl whimpered with tears when he groped her breasts. He pushed her away and started towards the others, who stood trembling in a corner. Jihee’s was hardened and her jaw was locked. Jongin said nothing. He watched. Glowering.

The man skipped from one serving girl to another, groping them wherever he pleased. He stopped to slide a boot up a serving girl’s gown, along her leg. She broke into tears immediately and started to beg. The man grabbed her by the hair and shoved her aside before turning to a serving boy.

He clicked his tongue, surveying the shuddering boy from head to toe. “I’ve heard. Warinian boys are said to look, shiver and moan as prettily as the girls. I am not disappointed.” He raised a hand to stroke the boy’s cheek. “Don’t you boys bend for men? Shall I show you how a real man fucks?”

The boy hissed and twitched away from the touch. That earned him a brutal backhand across his face that sent him staggering. Jongin almost lunged at him, but he stood his ground as his blood continued to burn his veins.

“You bitch,” the Auvran man spat. “You should only be so lucky to have Prince Evzenius’ Auxiliary touching you, you filth.”

Jongin had not expected anything less. The man had to be related to the royal family. All of Auvran royal family consisted of unjust tyrants.

The man drank more and moved to his next victim. It was another serving boy and the Auvran did not hesitate a single heartbeat when he drove his hand between the serving boy’s thighs and clamped him. A pathetic squirm escaped the serving boy’s mouth before he went down to his knees.

Then smirking, the Auvran beast turned to Jongin. His eyes widened, and his brows rose in either excitement or surprise. He swilled the wine, spilling most of it on his chest, and approached Jongin.

“You must be the Warinian Princeling,” the man said, stopping before Jongin, who looked up to glare into the Auvran’s eyes. “And the Princess.” He regarded Jihee with a wide grin. “His Majesty has plans for you, so I shall leave you untouched.” When he turned to Jongin again, he licked his lips. “What a rugged beauty indeed.” He whistled and lifted a hand.

Before it even reached Jongin’s face, Jongin seized the man’s wrist and twisted it, drawing his dagger. With a swift move, Jongin pinned the man’s hand on the table beside them and drove his dagger through the back of Auvran’s hand, forcefully enough for the dagger to pierce through the wood of the table. A sharp cry broke from the man’s throat as the other Auvran soldiers lurched forward.

Jongin spat on the Auvran bastard’s face before he was arrested.

* * *

He stood in the throne room that once belonged to his family. It was now stained by the Auvran pigs. Wine flowed everywhere. Auvran soldiers drank and cheered for their King.

Jongin looked to his father who was silent at the Auvran King’s side with his head hung in disappointment. He then turned his hard gaze to the King of Auvradevas, King Raagathor. He was fairly aged but looked regal nonetheless. The golden crown on his head spoke volumes. Some called Raagathor a madman for believing that Wyverns from the olden days would return to plague the Nine Realms. Jongin, as a kid, had heard many stories of the Auvran King’s irrational paranoia. But with years, Raagathor seemed to have come to his senses and his attention had shifted to revelling in
the victories his son brought home.

On his other side, in the throne that used to be Jongin’s, his son was perched on, sneering at Jongin with scorn and conceit. He was Prince Evzenius, the second-born, Jongin realized at once. A true warrior and the Slayer of Kings would not slouch like that. He certainly would not sneer at a defenceless man in shackles. Prince Evzenius was not short of brawn nonetheless. He was a big man. His long dark hair was tied, half up, half down at the back. He must be in his late twenties. He still remained in his battle raiment.

In the corner of dais, stood a man twice the King’s size. He was attired in a black uniform. The King’s Guard. At his hip hung a silver sword, bigger than the ones carried by the common guards and soldiers. He wasn’t unpleasing to look at, but he was large and terrifying, most probably in his late thirties.

Jongin straightened and did not look weak or pleading. He kept his gaze straight and hard, unwavering. However, his heart hammered against his chest. The metal shackles around his wrists were heavy and they were only worn by criminals who had already been tried and investigated. Jongin stood there in shackles with his hands bound before he was even tried. It was injustice at its best and he really was not surprised as it was expected of these barbarians.

The King cleared his throat and raised a hand to quiet the room when Prince Evzenius’ Auxiliary entered with his injured hand wrapped in rags. The Auvran winced when he met Jongin’s gaze and snarled, holding his pierced hand to his chest as though to show off and garner sympathy.

Pathetic fools. All these Auvrans.

“I had not been anticipating a trial on the first night of my occupation of your beautiful kingdom,” King Raagathor said and Jongin glanced at him with an indifferent expression. “But I cannot overlook this crime as you, Prince of Warinia, have attacked one of my men following your surrender. This speaks of your defiance and what do you have to say for yourself?”

Jongin kept mum, gritting his teeth. He was already in shackles. They didn’t want him to plead innocent or guilty. They’d punish him either way.

“Silence will not help you in this situation, Princeling,” King Raagathor added.

“If I may speak, My Lord,” the Auvran Jongin had attacked spoke. His King nodded. “I was only ordering the servants to move to their quarters, Your Highness. When I politely asked the prince to remove himself from the chamber, he refused, and he attacked me, Your Majesty.”

Jongin almost snorted. Of course, they’d buy anything this swine told them.

“Knifing his hand for such a trivial matter will not go unpunished,” King Raagathor snapped. “You no longer answer to your court, but mine. Do you understand? And punishment will be meted out to all erring men and women in my Kingdom under my rule. Regardless of the status of their birth.”

“How just of you,” Jongin scoffed and it sparked a wave of gasps around the throne room. Jongin’s father pinned him with a horrified look.

“The disrespect!” Prince Evzenius’ Auxiliary yapped.

King Raagathor shook his head and sighed. “Do you still not plead innocent?” he asked with a hint of finality in his tone. “Very well. You have attacked Jevar, Prince Evzenius’ Auxiliary after pledging your obedience.”
Jongin turned to look at Jevar, who smirked at him.

“You are either a madcap or dauntless,” the King said, smiling down at Jongin. “A trait my son would value.”

Jongin glanced at Prince Evzenius and grimaced. For a moment, a jolt was sent down his spine when he thought of what the King might have in mind. But he realized Auvrans did not bed men. Such acts were punishable by death in Auvradevas.

“I am in a rather joyful mood and I think we have had enough killings for one day, don’t you think? But you shall not be left unpunished.” He paused, studying Jongin from head to toe. Then scratching his grey beard, he said, “You’d make a great candidate for an Auxiliary for Adrian.”

Jongin’s eyes widened. That was far worse than bending for Prince Evzenius! “I’d rather die,” he spat, and the throne chamber reverberated with laughter. The King eyed him with amusement. “I will never agree to be your beast of a son’s slave!”

The laughter died for a moment, replaced by a wave of coos. Jongin’s father looked frightened.

The King smirked. “I believe you are not in a position to negotiate the terms of your punishment. I will gift you, the Warinian Prince, to the conqueror of your beautiful kingdom. This will be the prize I give to my champion!”

A cacophony of cheers followed. The Auvran pigs slammed their tankards and drank like animals.

“Whatever he may choose to do with you is up to him. If he refuses to take you as an Auxiliary, I am certain you’d be plenty of help amidst the slaves,” the Auvran King added.

“I plead, My Lord!” Chivrun cried and fell to his knees before King Raagathor. Jongin gripped his fists and lurched forward, only to be shoved back by the guards. “Please, do not make him do this! He is naught but a child! I beg your pardon! I beg for your mercy on his behalf!”

“Father!” Jongin roared and clenched his jaw. “You shall not kneel before these barbarians!” He then faced King Raagathor. “If you have the courage to present me before your abhorrent, tyrannizing son, then do so. I will assure you that I shall wait for the day of his downfall.”

The King and the Auvrans laughed. But there was a sudden twist in the King’s expression.

“Father,” Prince Evzenius called. “This is hardly a punishment. We all know Adrian would disregard this like it is a child’s play.”

“For your sake,” the King said to Jongin. “pray that he does not disregard this. If he does, you may serve Jevar for the rest of your life.”

Jongin gritted his teeth. He would prefer death over serving any of these bloody Auvrans any day.

“Bring the prince to his chamber. You will leave with us to Auvradevas.”

“Nay!” Jongin’s father bellowed, crying. “Pray, do not take him away from us.”

King Raagathor paid him no heed and ordered the guards to escort Jongin away. His shackles were not released even when he reached his chamber. The guards closed the doors and it was then when Jongin realized that his freedom had been snatched away from him for all eternity.

He made a promise to himself then. He would make Adrianus Dragovan pay for his deeds and sins.
C H A P T E R T W O

Auvradevas, Year 5138, 25th Faandag

The day he left Warinia, he was not given even the harmless chance of bidding his sister and father goodbye. He did know how they fared or if they would be all right in his absence. All of Jongin’s liberty and privileges were ripped away from him in mere moments. All that he had left was his name and his right of birth.

His hands were in shackles once more as they sailed to Auvradevas. Warinia was now in the clasps of Auvrans and Jongin, as her prince, had been helpless. He could not save her.

Auvradevas was a kingdom known to and revered by all in the Nine Realms. All but Jongin. He wished the kingdom would burn to the ground, along with her rulers.

The dock was crowded by Auvrans with flower garlands and jewels, all hailing their Crown Prince’s name. Jongin disembarked the ship with the rest and looked around while men and women showered the warriors with flower petals and offered young women, meat, and gold for their victory in acquiring yet another kingdom. Jongin looked around. Only Prince Evzenius and his swine of an Auxiliary were present, leading the men towards the horses that awaited them. The victorious prince and the King Raagathor were nowhere to be seen. Perhaps they had arrived sooner.

Jongin, unfortunately, had not had the opportunity to meet Prince Adrianus Dragovan yet. He wished he never would.

As he was dragged through the dense crowd, he realized that no one recognized him. Either that or they simply were not paying him any attention.

“You will ride with us,” Jevar ordered, reining a horse close with a cunning smirk on his face.

Jongin opted to stand with the rest of the Warinians the Auvrans had enslaved. “I prefer to march with my people,” Jongin answered in a flat voice. Jevar scoffed.

“Suit yourself, Princeling,” Jevar scoffed mockingly as he mounted his horse. Jongin sucked in a breath and looked at the Warinian farmers, servants, and priests. His people bowed their heads towards him and Jongin frowned in shame. He was their prince and yet, he could not do anything to save them. He looked down at the shackles binding his hands together. Right now, he needed to be saved, too.

Auvradevas and her people were nothing like Warinia. The buildings were tall, solid. There wasn’t a patch of grass. The air was dry, dirty. The sun scorched here. Streets were bustling with vendors, merchants, and bruisers. Horses coursed through the city, children played with wooden swords, whores swarmed the balconies of the brothels, the Auvran warriors whistled at them, the fresh smell of corn bread swirled in the air. The Auvran gonfalons stood tall in every corner.

Jongin realized how little he had seen in this world. He hadn’t travelled beyond the Fourth Realm. His father always forbade him to wander too far away from home, especially after Jongin’s mother had passed. He had not seen half of what his sister had. And in all his travels, Auvradevas was absolutely the most mesmerizing kingdom of all. Regal, strong, impenetrable. Just like her champion, Prince Adrianus Dragovan.

Jongin gritted his teeth. Where was the owner of the name everyone was wailing with reverence?
Was he just a myth, Jongin wondered and felt foolish for it.

He knew they were expecting him to fear. He wasn’t afraid. Even if he were, he’d die before he’d show these men that he feared them, feared being so far away from home, his family.

He braved his heart. He would live through this.

“Move along!” a guard yapped and shoved him forward. The chains of his shackles clanked. He refrained himself from scowling at the guard.

The city was thronging with people, horses, wagons, and in the distance, elephants. Jongin swallowed to wet his parched throat. Dirt and sand stuck on the sole of his bare feet as he was forced to walk to the royal palace.

Jongin looked ahead at the palace. His jaw fell slack a little. Even from here, he could tell that the palace was vast, unbelievably huge. Its towers stood tall and proud, its stronghold impregnable. Guards stood along the battlements of the palace’s walls, catapults, longbows, and arrows constantly at the ready.

Jongin’s breathing quickened. He knew that once he crossed that drawbridge, he might never go home. But what was the point? He didn’t have a home to go back to, anyway. These Auvrans had taken it away from him, leaving him with nothing but the memories he cherished.

He did not remember his mother very well, for that she had passed when he was still very young. But he had grown up with his sister and devoted father dotting on him relentlessly. Warinia was once a free kingdom. Now, it was trampled on by the Auvran troops. And he had one person to blame for that.

The sole of his feet was sore, blistered. The discomfort made his eyes water, but he did not shed a single tear. He had not eaten well in the past few days while they sailed. He ate, drank, and slept enough to stay alive. He was a prince and he would not let these Auvrans take that right away from him. Warinia would never be theirs and neither would her prince.

Jongin’s heart froze when he had finally crossed the drawbridge and was now forced to a halt. He looked up at the elephants and then raised his gaze higher to stare at eagle perched on the highest tower, leering down. When he dropped his head again, he was met with the arrival of King Raagathor, who proudly took his position on the dais of the bailey. Royal umbrellas were held over him, protecting him from the fierce, unforgiving sun. Unlike the last time he had seen the King, Raagathor was attired in his full kingly outfit, in the hues of the royal flag—red and yellow. The medallion resting against his chest was the Auvran royal emblem, the head of a lion. And like the cream of the crop, the golden, bejewelled crown sat on his head in an imposing manner. Auvrans were all about crowing their glory and prosperity. The King was impeccably dressed for it, in that case.

Prince Evzenius dismounted his horse and bowed before his father before taking the King’s side. The Prince’s dastard Auxiliary, Jevar, proudly positioned himself at Evzenius’ side. Now, there was just one piece missing to the puzzle of tyranny.

By the drawbridge, the commoners gathered in a cacophonous crowd. The guards warded them off with spears, swords, and crossbows.

The King honoured the troops formally by greeting them with a wave of his hand. A wave of cheer carried through. Raagathor’s eyes eventually fell on Jongin, who stood out like a sore thumb amidst the crowd, clothed in his deep purple tunic. The King’s eyebrows furrowed in a frown. He turned to
the nearest guards.

The pair of guards then approached Jongin. “You are summoned to the front,” one of them told him.

He regarded them with a repulse, scowling, and when he didn’t move on his own, the guards clutched at his arms and forcefully dragged him forward. Jongin struggled for a moment before realizing that his efforts were futile with these barbarians.

His chest heaved in outrage as he was shoved to stand before Raagathor.

“This,” the King announced, his voice loud enough to faze the elephants. “is a token of the grand prize my sons had won me and Auvradevas!” He clapped a hand proudly on Prince Evzenius’ back. “I am pleased to introduce to all of you, the Princeling of Warinia, now condemned to the servitude of the royal Auvran household!”

Jongin’s blood boiled. He felt his cheeks and ears grow redder with every cheer he heard.

“Release him. He is not a captive here,” the King ordered and much to Jongin’s displease, it was Jevar who stepped forward with the keys. The half-bald bastard cooly smiled as he lewdly groped Jongin’s hands under the pretence of releasing the shackles. His bandaged hand twitched uncomfortably and Jongin pridefully simpered at it.

“Smile, Princeling,” Jevar purred, unlocking the shackles. He ran his stubby fingers along Jongin’s sore wrists and that was when Jongin lost the last of his cool as he spat on the Auxiliary’s face.

Jevar stumbled a step back, wiping the spit off his cheek as the guards lurched forward while the crowd laughed in amusement. King Raagathor was smiling, stifling a laughter, too.

“I chose well,” the King said, waving the guards to stand down. Jongin’s chest heaved as he glowered at the King. “Perhaps he rather fancies the shackles.” He smirked and nodded at Jevar who took the tacit order and locked the shackles back on Jongin’s wrists.

Jongin begrudgingly hated his own temper. He stared at the heavy shackles and the thick chain connecting them.

“Have him washed and clothed accordingly to be formally presented to my son tonight,” the King said.

His order was received by the old man who was quietly standing behind the King. Raagathor’s trusted Auxiliary and Counsellor, Scholar Helathor, Jongin recognized. The man was really aged, the wrinkles on his skin and the grey of his hair spoke of his experience in greatness. Jongin, out of respect, bowed his head curtly at the man. He knew well to pay respects to those who deserved it and Scholar Helathor was celebrated all across the Nine Realms for his wisdom. Kings and queens from countless kingdoms were willing to pay in ships of gold for Helathor’s counsel, but it was nothing Auvradevas could not give.

But Helathor was clothed in a simple grey robe and wore no adornment. He certainly did not look like a man who coveted gold. Jongin wondered how else the Auvran King could have managed to buy the scholar off.

The guards shoved Jongin towards the Counsellor as Raagathor proceed to deliver his speech on welcoming his troops back home with victory.

Jongin faced the scholar as the guards took his sides, pinning him with a menacing look. He’s not a captive, the King had said. Jongin almost yapped back Raagathor, demanding what else could be
held here against his will be called if not that.

Helathor’s weathered eyes raked Jongin from head to toe and there was a shift in his careworn expression. “This way,” the man said in a coarse voice and held an arm out.

Jongin clenched his jaw. He glanced at the drawbridge, the gate that was now being lowered and locked. The last of his freedom was now gone. He swallowed a sob and dragged his blistered feet to follow Helathor, but the instant the guards gripped his arms, he growled at them.

“Take your filthy hands off me, you goddamned Auvran!” he barked at one of the guards, who stared back at him in complete shock.

King Raagathor paused his speech as all attention turned Jongin once more. The guard backhanded a side of Jongin’s face and as Jongin staggered back, he swallowed hard while his head spun, blood pounding in his ears. It did not hold him back. He quickly lunged at the nearest guard and swung the chain of the shackles around the guard’s neck. Gasps and hasty orders followed. Jongin paid no heed as he yanked his shackles back, tightening the chain around the guard’s neck.

“Do not harm the Princeling!” Raagathor snarled at the guards that drew their swords.

Jongin eyed the guard’s sword at his hip. Sucking in a sharp breath, he released the guard’s neck to quickly go for the guard’s sword, but that instant, not only did the guards freeze in their positions, Jongin was forcefully hauled by the chain of the shackles, and his weight was dragged along with the sudden tug. All breath was knocked out of his lungs when his side crashed against a wall, his hands slightly raised at the same level he had lifted them while trying to get the chain off the guard’s neck. He tried to pull his hands down but failed. Only when brought his head up to look at what was holding his hands in place did he notice the silver arrow that had struck through the loops of the chain, the arrowhead driven into the wall.

Nobody’s attention was on him now. All heads had turned away. And then almost immediately, the commoners on the other side of the gate and everyone in the bailey exploded with cheers and gasps, all raising whatever they held in their hands to hail. Something bitter twisted in Prince Evzenius’ face, Jongin noticed. King Raagathor’s lips curled into a proud smile behind his thick grey beard.

The drums were beaten, and songs of praises were sung as a greeting. Jongin turned his head halfway around to look at the cause of this sudden uproar. His jaw loosened a little when his eyes fell on the man walking towards them. Each of his strides was taken with confidence, he strutted like he owned the earth he walked on. Unlike the rest of the royal family, he was clothed in a deep blue embroidered tunic that hugged his well-muscled body like a second skin. The black trousers were tight around his powerful thighs. The unlaced part of the tunic displayed the deep cleft of his tanned chest. His footsteps resonated on the ground. His broad shoulders carried his heavily-built body with no effort. He was tall, nay, he was a giant beast. His torn raiment displayed the solid muscles of his body, his arms thick and brutal. His black mane was a glory itself. A thick scruff covered his sharp jaw. He had a sharp nose, too. And he was possibly the most handsome man Jongin had ever lain his eyes upon. The long, huge gold sword hung at his hip like it was forged just for his hand to wield. On one hand, he gripped the golden bow that looked too heavy to be borne by an ordinary man. And on the other, he held the leash of the tiger that was strutting at his side. The chatoyancy in their amber eyes was not their only similarity. They moved with fluid grace, both of them, muscles taut, careful, each step predatory and majestic. Both a beast. Both as deadly as the other. They strutted. They prowled. One preyed on quarries. The other preyed on realms. The snarling tiger, reaching almost half its master’s height, kept everyone at bay, even as the people continued to cheer.

The slayer of kings. The saviour of people. The conqueror of realms. By the Seven, he was truly no ordinary man. The grace of Gods was heavy on his shoulders. He had divine blood running through
his veins, it was palpable in his gaze, his strides, his name.

“Prince Adrianus Dragovan Raagathor of Auvradevas!” someone roared, and cheers followed.

Jongin wished he had his dagger right now. He wanted to try to free the chain of the shackles from the arrow stuck on the wall, but he could not move. At the same time, he could not take his eyes off the feral beast and the tamed animal that walked at the beast’s side obediently.

Kings and princes often had dogs and owls for a pet in the Nine Realms, even snakes, the craziest of them. Not bloody tigers.

The Crown Prince did not even spare Jongin a glance as he dropped to a knee before King Raagathor to pay his respects. The tiger sat down beside him in obedience.

“Father,” the prince said when the drums and cheers died, and his deep voice had a shudder surging down Jongin’s spine. He settled the golden bow at Raagathor’s feet, still keeping his head low.

“Rise, my champion,” King Raagathor said. “I was wondering where you had gone.”

“I was away assigning posts, My Lord,” he answered briefly.

“Ah, of course,” the old man hummed. “And you haven’t arrived a moment too soon to witness this hysterical debacle caused by the Prince of Warinia.”

“I heard,” the Prince said in the steadiest voice Jongin had ever heard. He rose to his full height and his amber eyes turned in Jongin’s way.

Jongin felt foolish, weak, and ridiculous, having to meet the enemy of his existence in such a vulnerable state and embarrassing position. But most of all, his heart was hammering against his chest when he realized the Crown Prince of Auvradevas was glaring directly at him. He briefly turned his gaze to the tiger and it looked like they were having an unvoiced agreement. The Auvran Crown Prince then released the leash and though the tiger did not even move an inch from where it sat, everyone took a step back in alarm.

The beast was now approaching Jongin, his eyes boring into Jongin’s quivering ones. For a moment, Jongin braced himself for a blow, he really did not have much faith that he’d survive one if it came from this beast, but the man strutted right past him and stopped only to yank the arrow out of the creviced wall. The tug looked effortless, but the silver arrow snapped in half, releasing the shackles’ chain. Jongin lowered his arms to his sides. But before he could relax his arms, the Auvran Prince grabbed the shaft of the arrow still pierced through the chain loops and began to bend it. All that Jongin could do was gape at the huge, scarred hands twisting the arrow around the chain to tighten it so that Jongin would not be able to move his hands too far apart from one another. A black star sapphire ring glimmered on one of the Auvran Prince’s fingers. Jongin lifted his eyes and they were levelled with the golden medallion of the Auvran insignia resting against the full, thickly padded chest. Before he could raise his head any higher to look at the Crown Prince, the guards were ordered to take him away.

“I present to you my champion, your commander-in-chief, Auvradevas’ future King, who had won me yet another treasure, expanding the Auvran dominion to the Third Realm, my son, Adrian!” Raagathor roared. Drums, trumpets, and the people’s ovations thundered and bellowed. Adrianus Dragovan’s name was hailed repeatedly and steadily like the recurring waves of the ocean that never ebbed. “Tonight, we shall dine with the best of wine and women! Tonight, the people shall feast like royalty, too! Tonight, we will celebrate both my sons, Adrian and Evzen!”
Jongin tried to glance back to catch a glimpse of the Crown Prince, but it was to no avail as the guards dragged him away.
Jongin barked and bared his teeth at every servant that came at him. He had no idea which part of the unbelievably enormous palace he was in, but he was now locked inside the bathing chamber with servants and guards, who were trying to get him to strip down and jump into the large pool of warm water that smelled like roses and honeysuckles.

He helplessly looked down at the shackles that were now tightened together, thanks to the arrow wound around the chain. He was not sure why he was so taken aback and astonished that the Auvran Crown Prince had managed to pull such a stunt. The man was notorious all through the Nine Realms for his apodictic unprecedented strength. And his style had a league of its own. But perhaps Jongin had not expected the man to be so simple, calm, and extremely quiet, even though every single of his actions and movement could silence anyone into a state of trance. He appeared to be humble, even though nothing about his body and deeds in war resembled even the slightest of humility and modesty.

“He’s as stubborn as a pack mule!” he heard a guard bay on the other side of the door. Must be the one Jongin had hit with the back of his hand. “As small as he may be, he’s as insufferable as a peppercorn! Permission to use force, Helathor.”

The doors swung open and Jongin looked at Scholar Helathor, who entered with such a grace in his strides. He had his hands at his back as he approached Jongin.

“It is nothing but a simple bath,” the Counsellor said. There wasn’t a hint of a smile on his face, but he did not appear to be hostile. Jongin eased his fierce scowl. “I hope you will cause no further difficulty. Elsewise, I must have the guards throw you in the water.”

Jongin’s scowl tautened again. He surveyed the large men in the room and burned in embarrassment at the thought of having to strip before them. He did not like the idea of standing bared before the predating gaze of these disgusting Auvran men. He had never felt comfortable bathing or changing in front of male servants. When he turned ten, he had finally mustered the courage to ask his father to get rid of the menservants and replace them with aged women as attendants and chambermaids. Not only were the male servants too rough for his liking, he had always felt uneasy and anxious around them.

“Release these first,” he demanded, holding his hands out.

The Counsellor regarded the shackles with scrutiny. “I’d be happy to. But do you promise me your obedience?”

Jongin gripped his jaw, but he nodded curtly. The Counsellor then ordered a guard to unlock the shackles. When they finally came off Jongin’s wrists, he sighed and rubbed his reddened wrists. At times like this, he hated how sensitive and tender his skin was. He hated being defenceless and vulnerable. But almost all Warinians were loose-limbed and soft-skinned. That was how they were. And that was how he was brought up, too. No amount of swordfight or husbandry could thicken their skin.

Auvrans were the antithesis of everything the Warinians were. Unfortunately, this was a disadvantage for the Warinians.

“Now, the King expects you to be present at the feast tonight. You shall be introduced to Prince Adrian along with the rest of the candidates for his Auxiliary,” said Helathor.
Jongin scowled. “Why would he even choose me to be his Auxiliary?” he spat. “I am clearly not exactly the Auvran companion material.”

“A member of the royal family can have more than one Auxiliary,” the Counsellor said. “While one may act as a personal guard, another Auxiliary may have the role to offer counsel. As a future King, it is advisable for the Prince to appoint more than one Auxiliary.”

“Is that what you are? The latter?” Jongin asked.

The scholar smiled. “Perhaps. But your concern should be on what qualities you possess to impress the Prince.”

“I don’t wish to impress that bastard.”

Gasps surged among the servants. The guards were smirking at Jongin and his audacity. Helathor smiled wider. “How refreshing to have a contradicting mind in the palace,” he chimed.

“Why hasn’t he already chosen an Auxiliary?” Jongin asked through his teeth.

“He had an Auxiliary. The boy died at a very young age in a battle. The Prince never took another since. The King likes to keep the traditions running in the family. Have all your questions been answered? Would you mind taking off your clothes and stepping into the water?”

Jongin clenched his fists. “I do mind,” he snapped, glowering at the guards and manservants.

Helathor glanced back at the guards and bowed his head. “Ah.” He turned to the other men and calmly said, “I will keep an eye on him. You may stand guard outside.”

The guards looked wary and unconvinced. But they seemed to trust Helathor enough that they followed his order and ushered the servants to leave as well.

“All right now?” the scholar asked.

Jongin did not respond as he turned to face the pool. He was definitely not in the mood for a bath, but he’d like to wash the grit and muck from his body. So, he convinced himself that he was not choosing to bathe for the Auvrans, but for himself.

Helathor was not watching him when Jongin started to pull off the dirty tunic and step out of the trousers. He descended into the pool and let out a sigh of relief when the warmth of the water caressed his skin. He washed himself thoroughly using the wormwood oil, all the while trying to think of a way to escape from here. Well, even if he did escape, where would he go? His home wasn’t even his home anymore.

He thought of his father and sister. He frowned as misery filled his chest. He missed them. He knew he’d never see them again unless he was freed from here. But he doubted that would ever happen. If Adrian did not choose him as an Auxiliary, he would be enslaved to serve the household, and considering what Helathor had just said about Adrian not wanting an Auxiliary, his chances were now rather slim. Perhaps becoming a slave for the household would be better than to forgo his pride and serve the barbaric Crown Prince as his companion.

But Jongin was disheartened by the fact that he had overestimated his ability. He wanted a fair fight with Adrianus Dragovan, but now that he had met the man in the flesh, he knew a fair fight with him would result in Jongin’s inevitable defeat. It would not take Adrian two mere heartbeats to end Jongin.
The Prince lived up to his name, all right.

Helathor handed him silks to drape around his wet, bare body when Jongin climbed out of the pool.

“The women will attend you,” the scholar said. “Would that be all right?”

Jongin glowered, but he bowed his head. He wondered why Helathor would do that for him.

The female servants entered the chamber, bearing a lacy, white prayer dress, meant for Auvran women. Jongin glared at Helathor. “Nay! What is the meaning of this?” he growled.

“I was ordered to have you presented in this,” Helathor said.

“You can forget about it!” It was a gesture of humiliation. A metaphor for the subjugation of Warinian men. Not only an insult to all of Warinia and her men but a great disrespect to femininity and womanhood. Auvrans saw women as nothing but the bearer of their offspring, a sexual relief, and an item of weakness. They used women and femininity as an insult, an intolerable disparagement. Jongin fumed, anger numbing his brain that instant. How dare the King of Auvradevas cast such aspersions! Dastard barbarians, all of them!

The scholar heaved a sigh. “You will either put this on or you will be brought to be presented before the King and his court in nothing,” Helathor said and there was a hint of pity in his voice. Jongin knew the orders were not coming from the old man, but how could someone as wise and consummated as he serve a kingdom so uncivilized and uncouth?!

Jongin shuddered. He gripped the silks tightly around his naked body. He was not uncomfortable wearing a dress, but he would not do it just so the Auvrans could have a good laugh.

“The evening will end before you know it, Princeling,” Helathor said. “Bear with it.” He took the heavy dress from the servants and held it out.

Jongin knew he had no option. The thought of being dragged out of here unclothed horrified him. Clutching the silks with one hand, he accepted the dress with the other. He dropped the silks and pulled the dress on. It was too huge, too much fabric, he thought he was wrapped in a tent. It drooped at his shoulders. But it was lighter than it looked. The hem reached the shin of his skinny legs and the long sleeves were loose around his arms.

The servants then dried his hair, dribbled a few drops of scented oil in it before carding their fingers through it to neaten it. Jongin was not given any shoes to wear. A silver dust was drawn along his lower eyelids. He had seen some of the Auvran women wearing it on their eyes on his way to the palace. The servant rubbed a finger on Jongin’s neck to smear the strongly perfumed oil. Daylily, Jongin recognized the scent immediately. His face withered when he remembered his mother used to smell like daylilies all day. It was her favourite fragrance. It epitomized devotion.

“Do not fret,” Helathor said and Jongin raised his head to look at the old man, who was smiling softly upon noticing the distress in Jongin’s face. “The King still recognizes you as the Warinian Princeling. No harm will come to you unless you ask for it. I would advise you to be on your best behaviour, for your own sake, Prince Jongin.”

Jongin did not want to be on his best behaviour. These men had snatched his home away from him, enslaved him, insulted him. He had nothing more to lose. But he knew far worse fates awaited him if the Crown Prince refused to select him for an Auxiliary tonight.

He pulled the sleeve on his shoulder when it sagged again. His sister rarely wore dresses, but he recalled having worn one of her dresses when he was a child as they ran around the palace, fooling
the newly appointed servants introducing Jongin as Jihee’s baby sister. He never knew he’d be played as a joke like this now.

“Don’t I get a pretty necklace to go with this dress?” he asked Helathor in a mocking snort and the servant girls giggled. Helathor’s eyebrows rose in surprise. If Jongin were to be taunted, he’d at least make sure that his state of helplessness would not profit to the Auvrans’ amusement. “Should I twirl for the King and his godawful sons?”

“I was indeed warned about the fact that you have a dangerous mouth on you,” Helathor said, smiling. “I shall let you rest until the feast. There is Warinian ale and a platter of roasted figs, in case you get hungry.”

With that, Helathor left and Jongin was escorted back to the bedchamber.

* * *

The exotic song played by lyres and lutes filled the corridor. Jongin decided that Auvrans, as philistine as they were, had good taste in music. Unlike the heavy, clamorous song that was sung and played earlier in the bailey, this song coming from the great hall was melodious, but lively nonetheless. Meant for merrymaking and debauchery, no doubt.

There were metal cages built on top of several towers. Jongin wondered if there were other wild, dangerous animals, such as the tiger he had seen with Prince Adrianus earlier, kept in the palace. But why were the cages built high up on the towers? They were enormous too, big enough to fit at least five fully grown elephants.

He also wondered the myth was true after all. The myth that Adrianus Dragovan was half god. He certainly had the looks and records for it. If he were, what was he doing amidst mortal men?

The guards that escorted him to the great hall had their hands ready at the hilt of their swords. Jongin smirked to himself. Whether he was in a dress or not, he had the guards daunted.

As the sun sank in the horizon, the day’s heat ebbed to a delicious warmth. The fierce hues of the sky were rapidly dissolving into the evening, painting a canvas for the stars to shine. The sweet fragrance of hot wine swirled in the light air, mixed with the perfumes of courtesans and prostitutes.

Every servant and guard that Jongin walked by regarded him with a shocked look, but he persisted in holding his head high. Wearing a dress did not and could never disparage his honour. He’d never give the Auvrans that satisfaction.

As he followed the guards towards the great hall, he glanced over the balustrade of the corridor when he heard a hearty laughter from the ground below. He came to an abrupt halt to gawk at the tiger that skipped around like an excited cat and growled when a cube of meat was tossed at it.

It leaped on its hindlegs and caught it before prowling in circles, its dark amber eyes keen on its master. Jongin could not see the smile on Adrian’s face as he had his back turned towards Jongin, but he heard Adrian’s orotund voice.

“You never do tire, do you, Baashere? Have you missed me?” Adrian chuckled and tossed the tiger another lump of meat. He was clothed in a much simpler tunic now—black with unfussy gold embroidery.

Auvrans were generally strange and vociferous, but the Prince Adrianus was a whole new kind of oddity. He had a pet tiger, for Seven’s sakes!
“Keep moving,” a guard snarled at Jongin.

He proceeded towards the great hall. What was Adrian doing down there instead of being present at the celebratory feast that was being held on the account of his name and recent victory?

Jongin reminded himself that this man was the sole purpose of Auvradevas’ pre-eminence in the more recent years, the reason why the Auvrans no longer feared opposition from the other kingdoms in the Nine Realms. The reason why Jongin had lost his home, his family, his throne.

The great hall was crowded with ministers, courtesans, dancers, musicians, guards, and other court members. The Auvrans quaffed the sluicing wine and pigged on the roasted meats. Almost every man in the room had a courtesan on his lap. Even Prince Evzenius. His Auxiliary, Jevar, held two women at once, his mouth drooling at the sight of the scantily clad prostitutes.

For Jongin, this was what nightmares resembled.

Three of the King’s wives sat on the dais, all looking dull and bored. Raagathor had many daughters and sons, but only Prince Evzenius was born to him and the Queen. That was, of course, assuming that the rumour that Prince Adrianus was born to Raagathor and a Goddess was indeed true. That should rightfully make Prince Evzenius the Crown Prince of Auvradevas. But even Jongin recognized Prince Adrianus to be a worthier ruler of a kingdom that thrived under his lead. Without Adrian, Auvradevas would still be a relatively subservient kingdom.

Jongin clenched his jaw when he remembered Raagathor was demanding Jihee to become his fourth wife. Jongin had heard that the Auvran Queen, Raagathor’s first wife, had been on her death bed for many years now. She was ill and Raagathor was looking for a worthy wife to replace her. But as soon as Jihee had refused his proposal in the most demeaning way possible, the King shifted his heart from the Warinian Princess to the Warinian Kingdom. Or perhaps, it was the kingdom that he had coveted in the first place and wished to obtain through marriage.

All eyes eventually turned in Jongin’s way when the King ordered the musicians to stop. Men stopped fondling the courtesans’ breasts to sneer at Jongin.

A small smile tugged at a corner of the Auvran King’s lips. “I hope you like the dress,” Raagathor said.

Jongin smirked back defiantly. “Yes, thank you. I find the material very comfortable and the colour complements my skin rather well,” he replied in a steady voice.

Laughter followed. The King’s wives stifled a laugh behind their hands. The King himself grinned while Prince Evzenius and Jevar glowered at Jongin. “I see you haven’t forsaken your arrogance.”

“Do not confuse arrogance with self-respect, Your Excellency. But then again, I believe you and your people are more of an expert in vanity than dignity,” Jongin retorted and the court members howled in amusement.

“I applaud your courage and fortitude, Princeling,” the King said. “But perhaps, you shan’t confuse confidence with foolhardiness. I am a patient man. However, my lenience has its limits.”

Jongin bowed his head coyly. “Give me back my kingdom and send me home. And I shall give you my word that I’ll be out of your hair, Your Majesty.”

Raagathor, unsurprisingly, did not smile this time as the noblemen sniggered around him.

“Really beautiful… for a boy. The dress suits him,” Jongin heard one of the men at the table say.
“It would have been a treat for His Highness if he had been a woman,” another uttered sotto voce.

Raagathor shifted his weight on the throne and cleared his throat. “Princeling, in case you have missed to notice, you have no kingdom to call yours anymore. Your plight is no different than of an exiled highborn. With time, your title will be stripped off your name. Nobody would even remember who you were. Not even your own people.”

Those words did what a week of the Auvran tyranny could not. They finally crushed Jongin’s spirits. His heart clenched painfully when he realized the King spoke the truth. He felt childish for thinking and hoping that everything would go back to the way it was before.

The King’s Guard muttered something to Raagathor and the King nodded his head. “Bring them in, Zayrse,” Raagathor told the King’s Guard.

He then rose to his feet as eight men gathered around Jongin. They were clothed in rich, opulent tunics with silver swords and battle scars all over their face. They were all taller, bigger than Jongin, save one boy, who stood quietly with his head hung. His pale skin, rosy cheeks, singular facial features suggested that he was from the Kingdom of Othadia from the Sixth Realm. He could not be any older than Jongin himself. Nineteen at most. He looked scared and nervous, like a fish out of water. Was he also a candidate for Prince Adrianus’ Auxiliary? He did not look like he was of noble birth. His roughspun tunic hinted at his modesty and reticence. But he did not exactly appear to be a lowborn either. If he were, he would not be standing here in the first place.

Amidst the men, Jongin stood out like a sore thumb in the white dress. The men pinned him with a sidelong glance and a mocking smirk. It was then when Jongin understood that he was meant to be the laughing stock. He was never brought here to be chosen as Adrian’s Auxiliary. This was all for Raagathor and the other Auvrans’ amusement. He was brought here to stand with these highly qualified men to be the butt of a joke. He swallowed the sob that rose in his throat when he saw Prince Evzenius and Jevar’s smug grins.

Everyone was laughing at him. Everyone but the Othadian boy and the King’s Guard, Zayrse, who just generally had a stoic face all the time. The Othadian eventually raised his head with his golden hair curtaining his emerald eyes. He was beautiful, young, and scrawny. What fate had landed him here, Jongin wondered.

“Where is he?!” Raagathor crowed at Zayrse.

The King’s Guard bowed his head. “I have sent for him, My Lord,” he answered in a coarse voice. Everyone returned to their merrymaking while they waited for Adrian’s appearance.

“Do you have a cunt under that skirt I could fuck?” one of the eight candidates hissed into Jongin’s ear. Jongin turned and faced him with a hard glare.

“I would need to be dead before I let someone as ugly as you near it,” Jongin spat back and the man gulped hard, looking away.

Jongin turned to look at the Othadian boy who was smiling at him. “You don’t look awful in that dress, by the way,” the boy said with the sincerest tone Jongin had heard in a while. “Your Highness,” he added after a pause.

“Not anymore,” Jongin sighed.

“It is still better than to be disowned by your family and sent to a foreign kingdom to serve,” the boy muttered, lowering his head again.
Jongin studied the boy’s unblemished skin that probably had never seen a day of labour. “Why are you here? I mean, here,” he asked.

“I am a scholar,” the boy admitted embarrassedly.

Jongin’s eyes widened. “You are young.”

“I am twenty-four.”

For a moment, all that Jongin could do was stare at the boy. “Nevertheless, you are still quite young to be a scholar,” he said.

“I am one of the youngest scholars in Othadia.”

Jongin understood why the boy was here, then. He was gifted in the field of wisdom. The Auvran King collected all that was adroit and beautiful across the Nine Realms.

“I’m Awyen Greendane, by the way,” the boy introduced himself.

“I’m—”

“Prince Jongin Chivrun,” the boy cut him off, smiling pleasantly.

“Just Jongin,” Jongin corrected him, his heart sinking.

The doors opened after a while and the noblemen stopped to greet their Crown Prince that sauntered in without any fuss. Jongin’s gaze relentlessly followed Adrian who paid no attention to the ministers as he strode straight towards the throne dais. He kept a steady hand on the grip of his golden sword when he stopped before his father and knelt, bowing his head.

“Rise, Adrian,” Raagathor said.

The men gawked stupidly at Adrian in awe while the courtesans and other noblewomen sighed in envy of not owning Adrian’s heart. If he had one at all.

“You are late to your own feast,” the King said, frowning.

“I was with Mother, My Lord,” Adrian answered. Mother. Did he mean Raagathor’s sickly first wife, the Queen of Auvradevas?

Jongin wished he could see Adrian’s face, not his back for once. He also wished the bastard hadn’t been so tall. He observed the Auvran Prince’s hair. It reached the nape of his neck, but it wasn’t as long as Jongin thought it was. It looked silky and soft, though.

He bit his tongue. Why was he admiring this monster’s hair?! He looked away.

“No matter,” Raagathor sighed. “Now that you are here. I have a few announcements to make.”

He lifted his winecup and draped an arm over his son’s broad shoulders. Adrian turned to face the court and his eyes immediately fell on the whitest dress in the hall. His eyebrows drew into a frown as his eyes roved on Jongin.

That instant, there was little that Jongin could do to not blush and lower his gaze. The fine hairs on the back of his neck rose and he felt himself shudder. He gripped the skirt of the dress in his fists and focused on his breathing. He did not want to raise his head and meet Adrian’s gaze again, but he did it, anyway. Appearing weak would be far worse than appearing embarrassed.
Adrian was no longer looking at him.

“Two very important announcements,” King Raagathor proceeded. “First, the King of Othadia has agreed to strengthen the alliance between our two kingdoms through marriage! His daughter, Princess Edothise, will be my son, Adrian’s first wife!”

Winecups were raised and congratulatory cheers were chimed. Adrian looked straight ahead with his hands clasped at his back. There wasn’t any readable expression on his face, which resembled a completely blank slate. Perhaps it wasn’t news to him. But he certainly did not look like he was jumping with joy over the announcement of his marriage with Edothise.

“Secondly,” Raagathor said and the cheers quieted down. “you will choose your Auxiliary tonight. Perhaps more than one if you deem them worthy. I had handpicked the best, one from each of the Nine Realms.”

Jongin almost snorted. Was he the best from the Third Realm, then? He did not qualify to be an Auxiliary. He was not a scholar, he was definitely no warrior. But people often said that he had a mouth that could scorch souls, so perhaps that was his best quality. He still believed that he was here for as a joke.

“This is my gift to you,” the King said, clapping a hand on Adrian’s back.

The Crown Prince bowed his head at his father. “I must refuse, Father,” he said. Raagathor did not look surprised. Jongin’s heart leaped. What was he hoping for? That Adrian would choose him? Nay, being a slave would be better than to serve that beast. But what worried Jongin was Raagathor’s warning about him becoming Jevar’s slave should Adrian not pick him.

“It is about time you found yourself a companion, Adrian,” the King said calmly. “Even the mightiest hero needs his friends and confidantes. And nay, wild animals and the sea do not count.”

Adrian smiled and Jongin blinked. The beast just had smiled.

“Thank you, Father,” Adrian said. “But I have no need for an Auxiliary right now.”

Jongin grew anxious as he glanced to Jevar, who had his hand in a courtesan’s skirt.

King Raagathor shook his head in disappointment. “Very well,” he said.

“If nothing more, I’d like to take my leave, My Lord,” Adrian requested, and his father frowned deeply, but he did not voice an objection as the Prince bowed and turned on his heel.

“Well, now what?” one of the candidates muttered.

Jongin glanced to Awyen and found the boy turning paler than he already was. If his family had disowned him, what was Awyen going to do now? Jongin knew the boy would have a position on the council if he really were as smart as he claimed. It was Jongin whose fate was hanging on the verge of ruination.

“What is this fucking eunuch even doing here?” a man spat at his side and Jongin’s ears rang. He briefly glanced at the man scowling at him before his eyes shot over the crass Auvran’s shoulder and landed on Adrian, who had stopped dead in his tracks all of a sudden.

The moment Adrian turned his head in the men’s way, the muscles in Jongin’s body felt limp and weak as Adrian’s eyes lit up with ferocity. He was glaring directly at the man who had disparaged Jongin.
“Did you borrow your mother’s dress? Come on, lift it up. Show us what you have under it,” the man further taunted and Jongin took a step back when the Auvran held a hand out to grab the skirt.

Jongin’s eyes flit back to Adrian, whose face now resembled a vicious beast, ready to pounce on its victim. His jaw was clenched as tight as his fists. Then without a forewarning, he strode towards Jongin.

“Let’s see, shall we?” the Auvran pig cooed and the other six men joined him in his laughter. Jongin did not retreat this time as he kept his gaze steady on Adrian who was now approaching them, his strides full of rage, as though he were on a warpath.

His hand flew up to the Auvran pig’s shoulder and when the latter turned around to face his Prince, Adrian spared him no mercy as his hand struck a side of the man’s face, sending him crashing to the ground.

Awyen gasped behind Jongin, who did not dare turn a hair. The music died once more as all heads turned to gape at Adrian. King Raagathor’s eyes were narrowed. Prince Evzenius was scowling. Noblemen stood, their faces struck with terror, as though they were the ones Adrian was about to kill.

“Take your clothes off,” Adrian ordered through his teeth and the Auvran man looked up at the Prince in a state of horror, dazed and jaded as blood oozed from his nose.

“Y-Your… High… ness,” the man stuttered breathlessly, still struggling to pick himself up from the floor. The fear for death was palpable in his bloodshot eyes.

“Must I repeat myself?!” Adrian roared, his voice thundered to the ceiling of the hall and Jongin jumped.

The man obeyed at once and shakily took his coat off. Adrian wrenched it from his hand and held it out to Jongin, without even looking back at the younger. Jongin snapped himself out of the trance and took the coat. Adrian then waited until the Auvran had stripped down to his undergarment to bend down and grip the man by the neck to haul him up to his feet.

Jongin gritted his teeth. Adrian was an abhorrent brute after all.

“You will do well to remember that I will slice your throat if you ever pull a stunt like that in my presence, understand?” Adrian snarled under his breath and only released the other Auvran’s neck when the other frantically nodded his head in agreement.

When he turned around, his brutal expression softened a little when he faced Jongin. Standing this close, Jongin could finally see that Adrian’s eyes weren’t amber. They were exactly like the black star sapphire ring he wore on his finger—black with the shimmer of gold. Jongin had never seen anything quite like them before.

Save me, Jongin thought, looking up into Adrian’s eyes. He felt even smaller before the towering man. Right now, only the Prince could save him from Jevar or some other dire fate that awaited him.

And as though Adrian had heard the tacit plea, he blinked twice. He then turned to face King Raagathor, who seemed to be rather invested in the fiasco happening before his eyes.

“Father,” Adrian spoke without diffidence. Jongin thought he felt Adrian’s voice resonate down his own spine. “I’d like to take the Princeling of Warinia as my… page.”
As the evening came to an end, the night stretched endlessly and Jongin soon found himself pacing the bedchamber, restlessly waiting for Prince Adrianus to show up. He was escorted to one of the private chambers and was told to expect Prince Adrianus.

The Auvrans had practised companionship for many, many centuries. Jongin vaguely knew what being a royal family member’s Auxiliary entailed, but he had no real clue of what a page of the Crown Prince necessitated. The thought almost made him wish that he had just become Jevar’s slave. Somehow being Adrian’s personal attendant and errand boy sounded a lot worse than being a slave.

Nay. This was his chance. His only opportunity to get under Adrian’s skin.

And if he succeeded, he could not only have Warinia back, he could also destroy Adrianus Dragovan. He clutched at his dress as he sat on the edge of the bed. He needed to be careful now. He had to play his hands cautiously, prudently.

He thought of the look Raagathor had when Adrian had announced that he had chosen Jongin to be his page. Not his companion, his Auxiliary, but a mere flunkey, a page. The Crown Prince must have at least twenty pages. The King had looked complacent and cool, as though it was precisely what he was expecting or even anticipating. Jongin wondered what had been running in Adrian’s head at that moment.

Why Jongin out of all the other men who were far worthier to be his page? Was it because he had taken sympathy on Jongin? Was the beast even capable of compassion? Why could he not have just chosen Jongin as his Auxiliary in that case? Why insult Jongin by picking him to be his page, a bloody servant?! And Awyen. What became of him now?

While all these questions nagged at him, he also calculatedly thought about how he could turn this situation to his own advantage further.

He looked at the coat Adrian had given him lying on the bed. Had the Auvran Prince just defended Jongin’s honour? Adrian’s fury had not seemed like it was orchestrated just for a show. Jongin knew it was only a small glimpse of the monster Adrian really was. For some odd reason, Jongin wanted to see the man in action and find out whether the praises that came with Adrian’s name were true for himself.

He sighed. Sleep was starting to tug at his eyelids as he dropped his gaze to his blistered foot. For now, he knew he was safe. For now. But what if Adrian turned to be his worst nightmare? He must stay strong no matter what. Right now, befriending and getting on the Auvran Crown Prince’s good side would bode the best for Jongin. Even if it required him to play pretend. Even if it required him to act as Adrian’s servant.

He distracted himself from the thoughts for a very brief moment to look at the portraits and other artworks around the chamber. Everything about Auvrans was loud. But the bedchamber was white and gold with very little decoration.

As he reclined on the bed, his stomach grumbled. He had eaten a couple of roasted figs earlier but that had been hours ago. The bed was a puff of cloud to lie on after days of sleeping on pallets on the ship. Jongin was not sure if he were even allowed to sleep on the bed, but he did not really care. If it annoyed the Auvrans, he’d happily do it.
Just as he started to drift off, he was startled awake when the doors slammed open. He shot upright at once and looked at the strapping man that walked in. Adrian’s eyes darted to Jongin at once and he froze.

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Jongin rose from the bed. He laced his fingers together at the front and lowered his head slightly. A few weeks ago, if someone had told him that he’d be standing in the same chamber as Prince Adrianus Dragovan Raagathor of Auvradevas, the conqueror of realms, he would have snorted. Jongin never thought he would meet the man in the flesh in his life, he was not sure he even wanted to. Of course, before Adrian had led his barbaric troops to invade Warinia, Jongin might have entertained the idea of praising Adrian for his victories. But now, he wanted nothing more than to see Adrian’s undoing and end. The denouement of his saga.

Adrian cleared his throat before speaking. Jongin raised his head to meet Adrian’s uncanny eyes, which now looked partially honey-brown. “We are square,” Adrian said monotonously and Jongin stared at him in confusion.

“We are square.”

“I have offered you my protection to recompense the injustice meted out to you, Princeling,” the Auvran Prince added, his eyes constantly gazing at Jongin’s dress. Jongin lost it then. “Need I remind you that you and your men stole my land, my home, barged on it like the uncouth oafs you are, your boor of a father enslaved me, humiliated me and my people, took me away from my family, made me a servant? Your protection is nothing but a lousy compensation for your atrocity and villainy!”

He panted once he was done, his blood pounding in his ears. Adrian did not look shocked. His eyes narrowed, as though he were brooding about what Jongin had just recklessly spat. Jongin kept his eyes steady on Adrian’s hands, expecting him to go for that huge, golden sword hanging at his hip any moment now to behead Jongin.

When he did not move, Jongin pushed his luck further, his chest filled with infuriation that needed to be released.

“You are called the saviour of people,” Jongin huffed. “when in reality, you are a certified murderer.”

Adrian’s jaw tightened then. But he still did nothing.

“You have not offered me your protection. You stand by and watch the disparagements cast on all that’s inferior to your superiority,” Jongin said, his breathing ragged. “You are a corrupted Prince, who is way too bumptious and arrogant for his own good! You do not care for anyone besides your own people! You’d destroy everything in your path to achieving supremacy! You are a greedy man, like your father, and all of the Auvran ancestors!”

The plan was to befriend Adrian. But Jongin could not help the anger that surged through his veins. Adrian’s silence only drove him further towards insanity.

“So, nay,” Jongin panted at length. “We are not square.”

Adrian then moved forward, closing the wide distance between them. Jongin froze. Now that Adrian was edging closer, he looked much bigger and Jongin grew tenser with every step that Adrian advanced.
By the Seven, what had Jongin done… He was going to die in here and no one would know.

When Adrian halted only a foot before him, Jongin lifted his head and looked up at the taller man. His heart was now thumping for a whole different reason. There wasn’t a window or a balcony Jongin could even escape through. Not that he thought he could outrun this man, anyway.

He did not lower his eyes this time. He scowled into Adrian’s eyes and studied the incomprehensible eye colour for a moment.

Adrian’s lips parted, but before he could say something, they were forced apart by the violent quake as a thundering bellow of a monster deafened them momentarily.

Glasses and vases shattered as they crashed on the floor. A decanter of wine spilled. Jongin gasped sharply at the rumbling ground as he lost his footing and stumbled. Adrian’s strong arm came around Jongin’s body at once before he could fall on his rump. Adrian accidentally clutched at the laces of the dress on the back and yanked them, ripping them, as they stumbled together.

The dress tore at the back and Jongin did not think twice as he struck Adrian across the face with his hand as hard as he could. Adrian released Jongin at once and retreated a step, his eyes bulging out in disbelief, his jaw slack.

Jongin, on the other hand, realized that he had just slapped the Godblood warrior, the august Prince Adrianus Dragovan, the slayer of kings, the conqueror of realms. He swallowed.

Fortunately for him, Adrian shifted his attention to the cacophonous bellow and the quaking ground.

“My Lord!” a guard cried as he burst into the chamber.

“What is happening?” Adrian demanded.

“It-It-It’s a…” the guard could not finish, and another bellow followed. Jongin clasped his hands to ears and clenched his teeth.

Adrian stormed out of the chamber at once as more guards gushed in to get him. Jongin, without hesitation, ran out as well, wondering what was making the head-splitting noise. It almost sounded like he was in the belly of a hungry monster.

The palace guards and a few of the warriors from the barracks had gathered around the courtyard. No one but Adrian was present from the royal family.

Adrian stopped at the corridor with the rest of the men to gaze up at the night sky. Jongin’s eyes followed.

The shrill caterwaul was louder than a thunder. The ground shook beneath their feet. And amidst the blanket of darkness, the sky was, a mighty creature hovered.

“By the Seven,” a guard let out shakily as the men slowly began to retreat. Adrian stood stone-still, gaping up at the sky.

Jongin, paralyzed and suffocating in astonishment, gawked at the Wyvern, as dark as night, that began to descend to the ground. His breathing quickened, he heard his own heart drum in his ears.

“It’s a Wyvern!” someone cried. “Run for cover!”

Adrian was not moving. Jongin desperately looked at him and then back at the Wyvern diving
towards the palace. He then glanced down at Adrian again. Finding his voice, Jongin shoved Adrian’s by the arm to snap him out of his trance and crowed, “Do something!”

Adrian blinked at Jongin blankly. Then he looked up at the Wyvern again. This time, he clenched his jaw and sprinted towards the bailey.

“Alert the men on the battlements!” he cried his orders as he bolted across the scampering guards and servants. The scene quickly fell into utter chaos, everyone screaming in terror and panic. “Ready the catapults! Light the fire! Get the King to safety!”

The alarm bell pealed in the city. Torches were lit, cries and shrieks came from the city as the people scuttled and scrambled to save their lives.

Adrian leaped over the balustrade of the corridor and landed on his feet before he raced towards the bailey the Wyvern was targeting at. Jongin picked the skirt up and hurried past the scurrying crowd, running after Adrian.

What was his plan?! He was mighty, but how could he defeat a bloody Wyvern?!

Jongin looked up at the beast as he ran. The black Wyvern’s scales glimmered in the moonlight. Its horns were as regal as the rest of it.

The first set of boulders that was launched by the catapults missed the Wyvern. Arrows and spears shot at it failed to pierce its scales. This was the end. A Wyvern had been sent by the Gods to plague mankind again.

Thousands of years ago, in a time that was now forgotten by all, the Nine Realms were infested by Wyverns. Their nests were never empty, safe up in the Moirzal and Vrilehm mountains. It was a time Gods and Goddess often came down to the ground from heavens. Wyverns had been the guardian of men. All except one. The Wyvern Deathlord fed on humans and their souls. The final battle to defeat him had been victorious for the Wyvern Guardian, who had banished him from the Nine Realms.

Wyverns and Sea Wyrms had been nothing but a lore to scare children. Until now.

“Jongin!” Awyen hollered from the other end of the corridor and Jongin ran towards him, stumbling a few steps along the way as the ground continued to shake.

“Are you all right?!” Jongin gasped when he reached the Othadian.

Awyen nodded, his eyes full of dread. “Did you see—”

“Yes,” he panted. Everyone had seen the Wyvern now. Jongin turned to look at the bailey. All attempts to harm the Wyvern was futile.

Zayrse caught Awyen’s arm when he showed up in the corridor. “Take cover,” the King’s Guard commanded before he bolted towards Adrian, who was still giving orders to the guards.

The cages on the towers were now unlocked. Jongin’s eyes widened. The cages were built to capture Wyverns, he realized. How foolish of everyone who had called Raagathor a madman for believing the Wyverns would return.

The Wyvern roared, the wind of its flapping wings propelling everyone aside as it landed on the ground at last. Zayrse took Adrian’s side and they drew their swords. Under the moonlight, Adrian’s golden sword glistened as he stood his ground without an armour, without any other defence. Even when the guards were terrified for their lives, they followed Adrian and took their positions,
crossbows, swords, spears, and halberds at the ready.

Blood splattered everywhere when the Wyvern made its first attack on the guards. Its violet eyes were as fierce and menacing as its sword-sharp teeth and claws. It slithered through the men and killed them through their screams of agony. Blades and arrowheads ricocheted, failing to penetrate the scales.

Jongin ran out of breath just from witnessing the Wyvern’s wickedness. He would not survive tonight. No one would. The Nine Realms was meeting its end.

“Come!” Awyen called, tugging at Jongin’s arm to haul him into the palace.

Jongin pulled himself free and hurried to the other side of the corridor when Adrian sheathed his sword and went hell for leather as he raced up a tower’s outer stairs after taking a grappling hook from a guard.

Midway on the stairs, he paused to smile at the Wyvern. He was… smirking at a god damn dragon! Then placing his curled fingers between his lips, he whistled, as though to gather the attention of a dog.

The Wyvern turned its head and looked at the Auvran Prince. It was then when Adrian swung the grappling hook and shot it right at the Wyvern. An air-rending, strident bellow came from the Wyvern, its cry jarring to Jongin’s senses when the hook struck through the web of its wing.

Adrian grinned, twirling the rope of the hook around his arms as he turned and proceeded down the stairs, lugging the Wyvern behind him. The beast caterwauled and planted its claws into the ground, but it gave in when Adrian tugged at the hook, causing a tear in its wing.

And then it began to flap its wings again as Adrian reached the ground. When he lost his grip on the grappling hook tether, the Wyvern rose to its legs and a low thrum coursed through its belly and throat.

“Adrianus!” Zayrse howled.

Jongin unknowingly gasped, reflexively lurching forward when the Wyvern roared, breathing out a flood of fire. Guards dashed wailing, parts of their skin and livery torched.

Adrian still stood, unmoving as the firebreather turned towards him. It was then when the black star sapphire ring on his finger glowed as ferociously as his eyes and his entire left arm lit up like a piece of an incandescent star, all the way to his shoulder and a small part of his chest.

Everything slowed around them as Adrian regarded his illuminated bluish-white arm and stared at his palm. It looked as though the arm was kissed by the star, illumined by its fire.

The fire streamed around him, leaving him unscathed, without even a scratch when he lifted his bluish silver arm, which seemed it like it was part of a ghost, to block.

The Wyvern snapped its jaw, head still lowered to the ground, its violet eyes fixed on the Godblood. Adrian, though in his stupor of confusion, drew his sword. It was his turn now.

He swung the sword and bolted towards the Wyvern. His arm grew dim before the luminescence completely died out, along with the ring. The Wyvern started to lift its head, but it was forced back down when Adrian stepped onto it, vaulting over its head. He grabbed onto one of the Wyvern’s horns and bounded off its head before landing on the back of the Wyvern’s neck.
Silence followed the last bellow the Wyvern let out which sounded like a word when Adrian drove his sword into the Wyvern’s nape, bringing it down at last. Dragon blood spurted all over Adrian when he withdrew his sword, holding onto the horn for support as the Wyvern collapsed on the ground.

Corpses and blood lay on the bailey, along with a dead Wyvern.

No one cheered. The horror was thick in the air. Jongin could not remove his eyes from Adrian who calmly climbed off the carcass of the dragon he had just slain. He wiped the dragon blood from his face as his breathing steadied.

Servants and guards came out again, all rubbernecking at the Wyvern and Adrian in wonder. The commoners gathered at the gate to gawp at the dead dragon.

Jongin was almost certain he had been holding his breath this entire time.

Zayrse walked over to Adrian’s side, wearing an astounded expression. He plunged his sword to the ground and knelt before the Auvran Prince.

Everyone mimicked the King’s Guard at once. Everyone but Jongin. He wanted to kneel, he wanted to praise Adrian for his might and grandeur. But he couldn’t.

“How… did you…” Zayrse began and trailed off. Adrian glanced down at his hand and arm.

He looked so lost in his own thoughts, that he quietly walked away, bathed in blood, lugging the stained sword with him. The world as they knew had just come to an end.

Jongin stood by to watch the guards approach the Wyvern reluctantly after a moment. When they were convinced it was indeed dead, hurrahs and laudations were cried before they turned to lament for the lost guards.

“She just… killed a Wyvern,” Awyen said and Jongin jumped with a start, turning to look at the Othadian. “A Wyvern…”

Jongin could not find his voice. All these people had survived because Adrian had been here. The same luck would not be extended to everyone in the Nine Realms.

King Raagathor, his three young wives, Scholar Helathor, Prince Evzenius, and Jevar only showed when it was all over. The guards remained close at their sides. They stopped in the corridor to stare at the Wyvern in wonder. Raagathor’s eyes sheened with fright and guilt. He had been right. His foolish blathering was proven to be true. The Wyverns had returned. He had locked himself away in safety while his son had risked his life to save Auvradevas from this man-eater.
Auvradevas, Year 5138, 25th Chaqdag

For the past two days, Jongin was paid very little attention as everyone’s interest had shifted to more pressing matters at hand. He had thought he would see Adrian again and sooner, but he didn’t. He was moved to the servants’ quarters and was given two sets of page’s simple clothing to wear. He often heard the servants talk, ignoring his entire existence in the corner of the room where he spent all of his time, sitting on his pallet.

Envoys and heralds were being sent to all the kingdoms in the Nine Realms apparently, calling for an immediate council regarding the attack of the Wyvern. That aside, everyone in the palace was now calling Adrian the “Wyvern Slayer”. This Jongin agreed wholeheartedly with. He had seen the Crown Prince drive his majestic sword through the scales of the Wyvern. He shuddered every time he thought of it.

He looked down at his roughspun tunic and frowned. On one hand, he deplored about his ill fate. He was a prince. Now, he was in rags, thrown to sleep on an uncomfortable pallet. Even that, he had no complaints with. But his privacy was taken away. Everywhere he turned, he thought someone was watching him, waiting to pounce on him. And on top of all, he missed his father and sister greatly. Here, he knew nobody, no one was his friend.

But with hindsight, his problem was trifling compared to what was happening around him in Auvradevas. The Wyvern had chosen to attack the First Realm foremost. He wondered what King Raagathor’s next move would be now that his prognostication was proven to be true.

The servants’ quarters were a series of dank rooms in the basement. Each room was shared by six to eight servants, lackeys, and pages. Jongin had only exited his room four times in the past two days, only to fetch something to eat from the serving table outside when he got really hungry and to use the garderobe.

No one spoke with him. They were either intimidated by the fact that Jongin was a prince or they were just snubbing him out of disgust. He didn’t care. It was better if they never talked to him.

He looked up at the small light that came from the lantern hanging in the corner. The clout on his bed was a miserable replacement for a blanket. He hugged his knees closer to his chest, leaning against the wall.

The door creaked open and Jongin raised his head to look at a familiar fair head. Awyen grinned at him as he entered with a small trunk tucked under his arm.

“What are you doing here?!” Jongin rasped, unable to hide the excitement of being able to see a familiar face down here at last in his voice.

Awyen looked around the room for a moment before he plumped on the vacant pallet across Jongin’s. “I am moving here!” he exclaimed, beaming from ear to ear.

Jongin’s heart jumped. “Really?!“

Awyen nodded his head. “Scholar Helathor offered me an apprenticeship to become a librarian in the royal library! I asked him if I could stay with you and he agreed!”
“A librarian,” Jongin echoed, frowning. Well, what was he expecting? Of course, Awyen would be trusted with such a position. He was a scholar. “You are indeed fortunate.”

Awyen smiled. “You are more so! Last time I checked, you have the honour of personally serving Prince Adrianus! My word, I never dreamed I’d be blessed enough to see him wield the Azurewrath!”

“The Azurewrath?” Jongin asked, feeling somewhat slightly foolish for not knowing what that was. Well, he was clearly not as argute or well-informed as this Othadian scholar was.

“His sword! The Azurewrath. It is also called the Ravager of Eternal Sorrow.”

Jongin’s face scrunched up in distaste. “That fits his character rather well, then,” he muttered.

“The word is that Adrianus sequestered it from the King of the Ysomathar Mountains after slaying him. He had only been eighteen then!”

“I won’t be surprised if it were true.”

Awyen fell silent, noticing the dismay in Jongin’s responses. “I’m sorry,” he said at length. “You must detest him… for what he did to your land and people.”

Jongin burrowed his chin between his knees and lowered his gaze. “He is worshipped like a God when all that he does is tyrannize those who cannot match his strength and might,” Jongin said bitterly.

“He is a God living among men. Everyone believes it now,” Awyen said. “You saw what he did that night. You saw what… he was that night. He is no mere mortal. People worship him to be in his good graces. He had won this kingdom pride and power. He had proven that night that he is a Godblood. The Son of the Goddess of Sea and Light.”

“And he slaughtered many others in the process, destroyed homes, families. He might be a hero and a God to others, but he is a bully and a brute to me. Nothing more.”

Awyen did not argue. He bowed his head and still smiled. “Did you see how surprised he looked when he… that… thing happened to his arm? I don’t think it has ever happened to him before. When he marries the Princess Edothise, our kingdoms will be united, and a temple will be built for him in Othadia as well.”

Jongin let go of his resentment then and asked, “How is… she?”

“Who? The Princess Edothise?”

Jongin nodded.

“You haven’t met her?”

Jongin shook his head.

“She is the fairest, single most beautiful woman I have seen in all of Othadia. Graceful, kind-hearted, generous.”

“Would she not be terrified to marry such a beast?”

Awyen laughed. “I think every woman in the Nine Realms would want to be his wife.”
Jongin shrugged. “I suppose.” He bit his lip, wondering if he should confide in Awyen. Well, he did not have much to lose, anyway. “I… slapped him the night the Wyvern’s attack.”

Awyen’s eyes popped out. “What?!”

Jongin sighed. “I am suddenly thankful for the Wyvern… Elsewise, I might have died that very night.”

Awyen was stifling a laugh. “You… slapped… Prince Adrianus?”

“Right on the cheek,” Jongin admitted embarrassedly.

“Had he done… nothing?”

“Nothing thus far,” he said. “I am certain he had forgotten about it and me amidst this entire Wyvern fiasco.”

Awyen nodded curtly. “I heard that King Raagathor is urging Prince Adrianus to journey to the Vrilehm Mountains,” he then whispered.

Jongin arched an eyebrow. “The mythical mountains that can never be found by men?”

“By unvirtuous men.”

“No man is virtuous. Especially not him.”

Awyen sniggered. “Haven’t you heard the hearsays?”

“What hearsays?”

“Prince Adrianus, as a Godblood, abstains. Everyone says that he is puritanical and is saving himself. You know, he can’t afford to have his soul or body tainted if he wants to join the Seven.”

Jongin almost choked. “Now, that is the best idle hearsay I’ve heard about him,” he scoffed.

“It could be true. All Godbloobs back in those days were celibates until they were either married or accepted into the heavens.”

“People really do speculate a lot about this man, I almost feel sorry for him.”

Awyen laughed. “I still can’t believe you had hit him!”

Jongin smiled to himself, dropping his head. Well, now he had one friend here. “Raagathor might have good reasons if he wants his brute of a son to journey to the Vrilehm Mountains, that is if he could find it in the first place. He had been right about the Wyverns returning.”

“The King already knows where to start. He had apparently been seeking the mountains for years. He has clues, names, knows people who can show Prince Adrianus the way.”

“Is he going, then? To the Vrilehm Mountains?” Jongin asked, eyebrows raised in curiosity.

Awyen shrugged. “I don’t know.” He settled his trunk at the pallet’s side and rose to his feet. “I ought to get back to the library. I will see you later this evening?”

“I will not be going anywhere,” Jongin said. Awyen flashed one last grin before he disappeared through the door. Jongin wondered whence Awyen had gathered all this information.
The door swung open after a long stretch of time and Jongin thought it was the servants returning to their beds. The night could not have fallen so soon.

A couple of palace guards barged and scowled in Jongin’s way. “Up,” one of them ordered.

Jongin pushed himself to his feet and blinked at them blankly.

“You have been summoned by Prince Adrianus,” the other spat and caught Jongin’s arm.

Jongin fiercely yanked his arm free and snarled at the Auvran. “I can walk on my own,” he snapped.

The guards did not force him, though they looked murderous. They ushered Jongin out of the room and escorted him upstairs. He climbed two flights of stairs before reaching the second floor of the palace.

His heart raced in his chest. Adrian summoned him? Was it to return what Jongin had given him? Jongin mentally prepared himself to have his head detached from his body.

“Move faster, Warinian!” the guard hissed.

Jongin rolled his eyes at the Auvran. “In case you haven’t noticed, I have shorter legs. This as fast as I can move,” he retorted, and the guards fixed him with a strange look, but they did not make a reply.

When they reached the chambers, secluded in the south wing, the guards posted outside opened the doors to let Jongin in. With great hesitancy, Jongin entered.

A lump rose in his throat when he squinted in the dark, staring at the drapes pulled tight together, not allowing even a drop of sunlight into the chamber. He slinked further and found himself peeping through a doorway. He blinked at Adrian who was on his knees at the bedside, holding onto an old, frail woman’s hand. A healer, clothed in a white robe, was applying a simple on the woman’s forehead.

Jongin’s eyes widened when he finally realized that the woman was Raagathor’s first wife, Queen Ivoarel of Auvradevas. He stuck close to the doorframe to observe covertly. She had her eyes clenched tight, her hand unmoving Adrian’s gentle grip.

Even the mighty Godblood knelt before his mother. But she was not even his real mother. And yet, he was the only one here at her side.

“She will be all right,” the healer said as he packed his simples. “We should let her sleep.”

Adrian did not reply. His full attention was on Ivoarel. Then after a moment, he muttered a thank you.

The healer took his leave but paused when he noticed Jongin’s presence. He said nothing and silently left the chambers.

When Adrian rose to his full height, Jongin quickly stepped away from the bedchamber. He awkwardly waited for Adrian to come out. When he did, Adrian only turned around and calmly looked at him after shutting the bedchamber doors.

Jongin nervously chewed on the inside of his cheek. The Auvran Prince studied him for a moment. “If you are going to hit me, then do it quick,” Jongin spat through his teeth and Adrian looked surprised.
His eyebrows furrowed. “I am not going to hit you,” he said.

Jongin blinked. “Oh…”

Adrian huffed a sigh and moved to stand by the windows. He drew the drapes apart and gazed outside. “I believe we didn’t finish our conversation the other night,” he muttered.

“Well, you had other important matters to take care of,” Jongin replied and swallowed. Should he compliment Adrian for defeating the Wyvern? For bathing himself in dragon blood? For proving that he was a Godblood? That he had the blessing of the sea and light? “What did you need me for?” he asked coarsely instead.

“You called me an oaf,” Adrian said, his tone sounded light and even lively. He kept his back facing Jongin as he continued to leer out the window.

Jongin gnawed at his lip. Was Adrian expecting an apology? In that case, he was wasting his time. Jongin remained tight-lipped.

“I have been called many things, but an oaf is… most certainly not one of them.” He scoffed and turned around, facing Jongin with half a smirk. Jongin shivered at the smug smile. “No matter,” he sighed. “I have called you here to tell you that as a page, you have your duties to fulfil every day. I have asked Helathor to guide you while I’m gone.”

“While… you’re gone?”

Adrian’s eyes narrowed. “Yes. If you do what you’re supposed to do, you will not be bothered.”

What was Adrian doing, ensuring that Jongin was taken care of while he was away? Jongin was not his responsibility.

“Where are you going?” Jongin demanded and when Adrian did not answer, he asked, “The Vrilehm Mountains?”

After a moment of reluctance, Adrian nodded.

“What if more Wyverns attacked the palace?!?” Jongin grated. “What if they come when you are not here?”

“I can’t just stay put and wait for them to come attack.”

Adrian had a point. Jongin fell mumchance as Adrian rested his left hand on the hilt of his sword, Azurewrath.

“The Vrilehm Mountains are said to be hidden in the Third Realm,” Jongin said. Adrian nodded. “Will you be journeying alone?”

Another nod.

Jongin worried his lower lip as he thought about the chances of him surviving here without Adrian. Even if another Wyvern did not attack, he was almost certain Jeyar or someone else would bring him harm. Besides, if he could get to the Third Realm, he could even see his father and sister again!

“Take me with you,” he blurted out and Adrian cocked a thick eyebrow. Jongin sucked in a trembling breath and said, “I know the Third Realm as well as the back of my hand! I know its people.”
Adrian scoffed. “If I needed a cicerone, don’t you think I would appoint the best wayfarer in the Third Realm?”

Jongin clenched his jaw. “I am your page. You must surely need help on your journey!”

“I really do not. And even if I did, you’d be the last lackey I’d pick to bear my belongings.”

That was an insult. Jongin disregarded the fact that his physical strength had just been slighted and said, “If you truly wish to recompense for what you did to me, then take me with you!”

That seemed to have prevailed on him. He pinned Jongin with a steady glower. “Is that all you want?” he asked.

Jongin bowed his head. “You won’t even have to protect me. I swear by the Seven, I won’t stand in your way. I know you have some divine decree or whatever to fulfil. You won’t even notice that I’m there.”

Adrian looked offended. He cleared his throat. “You do not fear for your safety and life? The journey will indisputably be dangerous,” he said.

Jongin almost snorted. “You had taken my freedom and home away from me. A life without them is meaningless, anyway.”

Adrian looked guilt-stricken for a beat. “For what it’s worth, you ought to know that I had no partake in your humiliation.”

“But what you did had made it possible.”

That, Adrian did not voice an objection to.

“Send me back to my family,” Jongin said, trying his luck. He worried for his father and Jihee. What if a Wyvern attacked Warinia? No one would live through it. Dread filled Jongin’s chest again.

Adrian’s expression hardened. “I cannot. I hadn’t brought you here. Without the King’s word, I cannot send you back. You are here as a punishment for a crime you committed against a royal Auxiliary following your immediate surrender.”

“Then take me with you on your journey as your flunkey,” Jongin said, scowling. Since Adrian was not planning on killing Jongin anyway, he might as well play his lot.

Adrian sighed. “Are all Warinians as difficult as you?”

“Only the prettiest, I presume,” Jongin answered cockily. Adrian outstared him, probably not finding Jongin’s humour funny.

The doors opened and Jongin turned around with a start to see King Raagathor enter. “Ah, there you are,” he told Adrian before his gaze shifted to Jongin. When Jongin glared at him, refusing to bow, Raagathor asked, “What are you doing here, Princeling?”

“I was about to order him to draw me a bath for when I return to my chambers, Father,” Adrian answered before Jongin could say something he might have regretted. Then when Adrian looked at him, Jongin took the hint and started towards the doors.

“How does Ivoarel fare now?” he heard Raagathor inquire behind him.

“She is asleep,” Adrian answered.
“I see.” There was a brief pause. “Adrian, I don’t think it’s prudent to wait for the affirmation from the kingdoms. You ought to set forth to Vrilehm at once. Before people find out that you will be leaving us unguarded.”

Jongin did not hear Adrian’s reply as he walked out of the chambers.
CHAPTER SIX

For quite a long stretch, Jongin wandered around the south wing of the palace, hesitant to ask the servants and guards he walked by to direct him towards the Crown Prince’s chambers. He was not even sure if he were actually expected to draw Adrian a bath, but it could be a great opportunity to confirm that Adrian had agreed to let Jongin tag along on his journey to the Third Realm.

However, Jongin was also sulking about the fact that he was ready to follow Adrian as a mere page. Well, whatever to get away from this place and closer to home.

Raagathor had a point. If people knew Adrian was leaving to the Vrilehm Mountains, there’d be chaos. The paranoia and fear for their lives would cause quite a commotion when they found out their protector, their saviour was about to journey away from Auvradevas. The news of the attack of the Wyvern and of its defeat would soon be spread all over the Nine Realms. Adrian should leave before he gathered too much attention.

After much reaming around, Jongin was almost certain that he had wandered too far away from the south wing and was now lost. He should have just waited for Adrian.

He paused in the corridor when he spotted Jevar in the courtyard, groping a consenting chambermaid, who was blushing and flirting back, looking rather pleased to have captured the Prince’s Auxiliary’s attention. Jongin turned around and proceeded into a different hallway.

He soon found himself approaching an enormous, fancy-looking door that reached all the way up to the ceiling. The guards standing by it pinned him with a grave look. Jongin huffed in disappointment and turned around. He was forced to a jerky halt when he almost bumped into the large man, clothed in the familiar black uniform.

Jongin raised his head and blinked at Zayrse, who scowled down at him. Swallowing, Jongin said, “Good evening.”

Zayrse raised an eyebrow. By the Seven, this man must have never smiled a day in his life. The jagged scar that ran across his left eye, all the way from the corner of the eyebrow to the cheek made the man only look more terrifying.

“You’ve been wandering around here for quite some while now like a newly born duckling,” the King’s Guard said, and his voice sounded hoarser this close. “Are you lost?”

Jongin’s cheek grew hot in embarrassment. “Actually, yes,” he muttered, and Zayrse crossed his arms over his chest. “I was told to draw the be—” he cut himself off. Addressing Adrian as ‘the beast’ in front of this other beast would probably not be wise, considering the helpless situation Jongin was in. “I am looking for Prince Adrianus’ chambers.”

Zayrse studied him from head to toe. “You were the Warinian Princeling in the dress that night,” he said. Were the Warinian Princeling? Jongin frowned. “This is the royal family quarters. You’re in the right place.” He then pointed at the western hallway. “Straight down the hall, there is only one door at the end. You’ll find His Majesty’s chambers.”

Jongin nodded and started past the King’s Guard. He glanced back at Zayrse once before he picked his way through the hallway. He found the chambers unguarded, unlike the rest of the rooms in the south wing. Of course, why would a Godblood need incompetent palace guards to protect him?

Jongin let himself into the chambers and made his way to the bedchamber foremost. He found a
couple of chambermaids changing the linens, puffing the velvet cushions, lighting the lanterns and candle holders, and burning sages alongside incense sticks.

The bedchamber was not as ostentatious and extravagant as he had surmised it would. White and light shades of blue and grey painted the chamber. It felt peaceful and serene just to stand in here. Almost everything in the chamber reminded Jongin of the ocean.

The chambermaids glanced in his way and upon noticing the page’s tunic he wore, they averted their attention. Jongin let out a sigh of wonder when it registered to him that he was actually standing in the great Prince Adrianus Dragovan’s private chambers.

Sure, Jongin was born a prince, too. But he was the Prince of a very small kingdom that played no real importance in the Nine Realms. The Kingdom of Warinia had been rather secluded, albeit unwarlike compared to the rest of the kingdoms in the Nine Realms. Most of it probably did not recognize Jongin.

For a prince so insignificant, being acquainted with the cachet Godblood Prince was an honour. It might have even been a pleasant experience if only Adrian hadn’t been the main reason the Auvrans had daringly taken Jongin’s home away. And with his championship, they would continue to expand their puissance.

Jongin walked around the bedchamber for a moment before heading out to the balcony. It was facing the palace’s barbican. He then made his way into the study devoted to shelves of books and a desk of parchments. Did Adrian really read all these books, Jongin wondered.

When he found the bathing chamber, he frowned at the clear water in the golden framed pool and the white lotuses floating on the water surface. The bath was already drawn. Jongin supposed he did not have much to do here.

He exited the bathing chamber and saw a line of six rather young female servants waiting outside. What sort of man could possibly need six women to attend him? But then again, considering Adrian’s size, strength, and divine prerogative, it seemed reasonable.

Jongin spun around when the doors opened, and Adrian strutted in. He stopped in his tracks and blinked at Jongin upon noticing his presence. The servants and chambermaids bowed, but Jongin crossed his arms over his chest. Adrian’s eyes narrowed.

As though they had received an unvoiced order, the servants attended the Auvran Prince at once when he walked into the bathing chamber. Jongin stalled a moment before following.

The servants’ hands were steady as they removed Adrian’s sword belt and elaborate surcoat. Jongin stood by the entry and unconsciously moved to lean against the doorframe as he watched the women undo the laces of Adrian’s tunic, almost unblinking. He raised a hand to the doorframe, blood rushing to his cheeks as it usually did when he was embarrassed. Adrian’s back that was facing Jongin as the tunic came off was full of battle scars, painted by the tip of blades and arrowheads. Not even a Godblood was entirely invincible. His shoulder blades were strong and powerful, the back muscles solid and firm. His upper body was considerable wider than the lower, his shoulders were a religious commandment on their own. His skin, tan as the very ground Auvradevas was built on.

The servants could not help themselves as they slyly grinned at each other behind Adrian’s back while dipping their fingers in the pitcher of warmed oil. They lathed Adrian’s arms and body with it. His bronze skin glimmered darker now and Jongin forced himself to stop ogling the robust man.

Jongin hadn’t had his body touched by anyone but himself since he was fifteen. The thought of
taking his clothes off in front of others and letting his body be touched had him shuddering. But Adrian seemed rather comfortable with the ladies oiling him up like a horse gear. The servant girls seemed extremely content, too. It was then when Jongin realized that all six of them had the laces of their bodices, exposing almost half of their plump breasts. What were they hoping for? That Prince Adrianus, a Godblood would somehow fall for their beauty and take them for a wife? They were all but mere servants, perhaps they simply hoped to be taken to his bed. But according to what Awyen had relayed, that was highly unlikely. Adrian would not forsake his puritanism for a couple of serving girls.

It was still very entertaining to watch. Jongin almost scoffed out loud when one of the servants sighed heavily, dragging her greasy hand along the cleft of Adrian’s back. Did Adrian even realize how mad he was driving these women? They looked like they were ready to jump on him the instant he allowed it.

“That’s enough,” Adrian said coarsely. “Leave.”

They took their leave at once, three of them looking rather disappointed. When Adrian turned around to face Jongin, his shirtless body well-oiled up now, he jerked his chin towards the door.

Jongin shut it.

“I have thought about it,” Adrian muttered after a while. Jongin tried to keep his eyes to himself, but he couldn’t. They often stubbornly ventured to the slanted scar on Adrian’s chest and the scar on the side of his ribs. His abdominal muscles were a sight to see, all right. The man was a God. In every sense.

In comparison, Jongin was reminded that he was a trivial mortal, royal blood or not. Now, he was not even a prince. And on top of that, he was an aberration of nature, an abomination, cursed. His walls weren’t as thick or sturdy as he believed they were. He tried not to think of it. His father, after Jongin’s mother had died, always reassured him that someone would truly love and cherish Jongin for everything he was. A damnable Aevayl and all.

“What is your intention behind wanting to follow me to the Vrilehm Mountains?” Adrian asked, not noticing Jongin’s silent wonderment with his body. Jongin wondered if he himself would be so comfortable baring his body like this in front of Adrian.

He raised his eyes and scowled at the beast. “I do not wish to stay behind with these barbarians, like your brother’s wretched Auxiliary. You offered me your protection. You cannot just abandon the responsibility and leave me to vultures.”

“So, it is about saving your own skin,” Adrian said expressionlessly.

“Why else would I want to be associated with **you**, the man who destroyed my home and took my land away from me?”

Adrian nodded. “A fair request,” he sighed. “However, if you get yourself killed on this journey, it will not be my responsibility.”

“Of course,” Jongin agreed.

They stood in an awkward silence for a while until Jongin grew significantly uncomfortable that he almost told Adrian to put a shirt on. But instead, he cleared his throat.

“Are you… really a Godblood?” Jongin asked, as though to solve the biggest mystery there was.
With an eyebrow arched, Adrian said, “Have I not manifested it clearly enough?”

Jongin pursed his lips. Adrian was answering his questions. He was letting Jongin stand in his private bathing chamber while he stood all oiled and shirtless. He was considering allowing Jongin to be the only person to tag along with him on his journey. He hadn’t beheaded Jongin for slapping him… yet. Was it a sense of responsibility and guilt for what he had done to Jongin? But there must be thousands of his victims he should feel guilty for, in that case.

“Have you ever… met your real mother? Is she really the Goddess of Sea and Light?” Jongin asked.

Adrian looked at him like he had said something comically ridiculous. But he answered, anyway. “I only see her in my dreams.” There was a slight hurt on his face. Jongin wanted to ask why he was doting on Ivoarel, who wasn’t even his mother, then. “Is there anything else you wish to know?”

Jongin swallowed and shook his head. “Oh. I am your… page. I am not sure what that entails in this household.”

Adrian sighed. “See Helathor,” was all that he said before he turned his back to Jongin and started undoing the laces of his pants. Jongin, tensed and startled, hurried out of the bathing chamber.

* * *

By the time Jongin returned to the servants’ quarters, only morsels of stale bread were left over. He frowned at them as he picked them up before grabbing himself a tankard of water. It seemed fair. He hadn’t worked at all today. This was what he deserved. He silently started towards his room, cupping the bread scraps in one hand, as he avoided the servants gathered in their usual lounging space.

He found Awyen on his pallet in the room and started to smile. Awyen raised his head and waved Jongin over excitedly.

“I saved some pottage for you,” the blonde Othadian said, handing out a bowl to Jongin.

His stomach grumbled as though on cue and Jongin looked up at Awyen with watery eyes. “Thank you,” he whispered. “Thank you so much.”

Awyen looked surprised, but he responded with a smile before returning to his own bowl of pottage. “Where were you?”

“The beast had summoned me,” Jongin said, wolfing down the food in hunger. He ought to do some work hereafter. He did not like the idea of sharing the servants’ food and ration when he hadn’t worked for it.

“Oh! He didn’t hurt you, did he?” Awyen gasped.

Jongin shook his head. “He is a Godblood. I just confirmed it with him.”

Awyen grimaced, as though Jongin had wasted one of his three wishes. “Of course, he is. What were you expecting? Why did he send for you?”

“To tell me that he’ll be gone and that Helathor will guide me.”

“Helathor is a very nice man,” Awyen commented randomly. “He’ll be gone? To Vrilehm?”

Jongin nodded. “I asked him to take me with him.”

Awyen’s eyes widened. “Did he agree to it?”
“I think so. Unlike you, I am here after committing a crime. I would not be safe here.”

“Now, you seek the protection of this beast?” Awyen asked, smirking.

“It is only fair, considering how he took my protection away from me in the first place.”

Awyen shrugged. “Be safe. But I suppose no one is really safe anymore.”

Jongin heaved a sigh. “Will you take me with you to see Helathor tomorrow?”

“I can take you with me to the library. I’m not so sure he’d be there.”
CHAPTER SEVEN

Helathor looked surprised when Jongin entered the library alongside Awyen. For a moment, Jongin tore his gaze from the scholar and fixed it on the towering bookshelves and walls of books.

“Well, hello,” Helathor chimed and smiled at Jongin.

Jongin bowed his head.

“He had wanted to see you, Helathor,” Awyen said at his side.

“You can get to work,” the scholar told the Othadian, who nodded and scampered away after flashing Jongin a bright smile. “What brings you here, child?”

Helathor’s gentle tone reminded Jongin of his father. “The… Prince told me to see you,” he said.

“Ah, yes,” the scholar replied. “I believe you are ready to take up your duties as a personal page.”

“Whatever to earn the food put on the table,” Jongin said.

Helathor smiled, still. “Well, as a page, you are expected to serve your lord at all times. That includes delivering messages, keeping his weapons and armour shined, and do everything he needs you to do. Of course, I do not think he expects you to master the skills immediately. His leniency is rather extensive, you need not worry.”

Jongin silently watched the scholar study the map spread out before him on the desk. “May I ask you something?” he asked.

“Go ahead.”

“Why do you serve the Auvrans? You are one of the most celebrated scholars in the Nine Realms and yet, you stand for these barbarians?”

Helathor straightened up and faced Jongin. “What do you stand for then, Princeling?”

“I stand for peace and justice,” Jongin spat.

“Two of the most fragile things,” Helathor said, smiling again. He turned to gather a few rolls of parchments. “Here. Take them to Adrian’s study and then recover the ebony lyre from the minstrel’s gallery. That should be in the west wing near the courtyard. Deliver it to the Crown Prince’s bedchamber.”

Jongin did not get his answer from the scholar as he sighed and took the bundle of rolled parchments. He struggled to hold them all in his arms, meandering his way out of the library.

Adrian wasn’t in his chambers when Jongin entered it to leave the parchments. Earlier today, Jongin had heard the servants talk about the Wyvern being skinned today to harvest its scales and flesh. Perhaps that was where Adrian was today. Or he was away plotting how to annex kingdoms that weren’t his.

Jongin soon found himself traipsing along the courtyard garden as he headed towards the west wing of the palace.

“Well, well, well. What is the lost pup doing here?”
Jongin stopped and turned to glare at Jevar, who was coolly approaching him. His hand was now scarring and again, Jongin felt proud of himself. His eyes followed the hand when Jevar raised it, smirking.

“I believe I haven’t given you your comeuppance for this,” the Auxiliary spat as he edged closer.

The servants and guards that passed by paid no heed to them. Jongin grew restless as he started to retreat.

Jevar pinned him to a wall. Gods, he smelled worse than a swine. “Not right now. Not today,” the man said and Jongin glowered back at him. “But soon. The world is coming to an end, Princeling.” He raised a hand to grip Jongin’s tunic. “No one cares what happens to you or anyone. I will make sure that I kill you before a Wyvern or even the fucking Gods try. And it will be the worst kind of death.”

He pulled back a little and his eyes raked Jongin from top to toe. His smile was cunning then. Jongin shuddered. He almost shoved Jevar away, but the Auvran withdrew on his own when the air around them quaked at the sound of the beast’s growl.

Jevar spun around and Jongin’s eyes fell on the handsome, but ferocious tiger. It snarled at Jevar, its golden leash unbound. For every slow, careful step it advanced, Jevar reluctantly stepped away from Jongin.

Jongin stood frozen. He wasn’t sure he could even outrun the tiger. These bloody Auvrans! Bloody Adrian! Who would leave a bloody tiger unleashed?!! Who would even own a tiger for a pet?! Of course, Jongin preferred Jevar’s tyranny over having to become the tiger’s lunch.

Jevar cursed under his breath as the tiger continued to advance, baring its teeth. Its shoulder blades moved calculatedly, its head lowering, as though it were ready to pounce. Jevar might survive its weight, but Jongin was markedly smaller than the beast, way smaller.

Then Jevar ran, like a bat out of hell. Jongin grimaced at the man before turning his attention to Adrian’s pet tiger. Jongin was almost tempted to hold a hand out to it, as though that would calm it. However, the tiger’s tight jaw loosened, and it rose to its full height. Its hardened gaze softened as it sat down. With its head slightly tilted to the side, it stared at Jongin.

Jongin swallowed and stood stuck between the wall and the tiger, not having the courage to even turn a hair. He wasn’t sure he was breathing. No one was going to help him. The tiger’s tail was swaying in excitement. Its ears twitched when he heard the click of someone’s tongue.

“Baashere,” Adrian called and Jongin craned his head up to look at him. He was grinning cockily, leaning over the corridor up above on the second floor with his elbows resting casually on the balustrade. He clicked his tongue again and the tiger skipped around before racing over to the ground below the corridor. It restlessly paced here and there, often leaping on its hindlegs to get a better look at his master standing on the level above the ground.

Adrian then tossed the beast a knob of meat and Baashere caught it. How long had Adrian been there? Had he deliberately released the tiger? Did he see what Jevar was doing? Jongin finally relaxed and moved away from the wall. Adrian’s eyes flitted to him and a corner of his lips quirked up into a smirk.

Jongin rolled his eyes and ignored it, trying to seem calm, though his heart was thundering in his chest. Did Adrian notice the fear of death in Jongin’s face a moment ago? He kept his eyes on
Baashere as the tiger leaped up the stairs, running back to his master.

Jongin almost crashed into a servant girl and she pinned him with a scowl. He bowed his head in apology and proceeded towards the minstrel’s gallery. Baashere pounced on Adrian when he reached the Godblood and Adrian laughed, hugging the tiger that stood almost as tall as him. By the Seven, Godbloods were strange and haughty.

When he found the gallery, the guards let him in without asking any question. Jongin met the keeper and asked for the ebony lyre Helathor had requested. The keeper then directed him towards a room in the gallery.

“You have to find it here,” the old man said.

Jongin’s jaw fell slack as he gaped at the heaps of junk and unusable musical instruments. “How am I to find it in these piles?! I don’t even know what it looks like!”

The keeper sneered at him. “It is a lyre. And it is ebony. Good luck.”

Jongin pouted. Wyverns were attacking them. Why the bloody hell would Adrian need a lyre at a time like this?! Sighing, Jongin started to dig through the rummage.

* * *

“They would have to,” said one of the cooks when Jongin entered the servants’ quarters, dragging his weight tiredly. His shoulders were sore from sorting through the mountains of metal junk for hours. He had missed lunch and he almost missed dinner. But he had found the lyre at last, though he hadn’t placed it in Adrian’s bedchamber as ordered yet. He thought he’d get dinner before the food ran out.

Jongin gathered a piece of bread, some honey berries, and a slice of meat on a wooden plate before he started towards his room. He was not welcomed to eat the table. He hoped Awyen had returned.

“A sin offering is a must. The Gods are angry!” a servant yapped frantically. “They would not have sent us a Wyvern to plague us if we hadn’t angered Them!”

“I am almost certain we’d have a sacrificial rite,” another said.

Awyen looked up from his book when Jongin joined him in their corner of the room. “You look exhausted,” Awyen remarked, smiling tiredly himself.

Jongin huffed, shoulders slumping. “Helathor made me dig through fourteen piles of junk for this lyre.” He held up the black, dull lyre with all its strings snapped.

Awyen laughed. “At least you didn’t have to sort five hundred books.”

“Nightmare.”

Awyen let Jongin in silence for a moment. The servants were still chatting outside.

“What is today’s dose of gossip?” Jongin asked Awyen, who somehow, had all the details.

Awyen frowned then. “The Soothsayer visited today. He said that the future is dark and that the Gods are angry. They had sent down a Wyvern as a warning. Our sins need to be washed by the blood of an offering.”

The Auvrans were very superstitious. They worshipped the Gods in all the wrong ways and it was...
another reason to despise them. Most of them believed the Seven could be appeased by blood libation.

Jongin found it hard to swallow his food suddenly. “Please, do not tell me the King is considering this.”

Awyen looked uncomfortable. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? You know everything, don’t you?”

Awyen blushed. “Nay… But I think there’d be a rite. Along with the celebration for Prince Adrianus’ victory over the Wyvern. We’d dine on the meat of the Wyvern.”

“This is atrocious,” Jongin muttered. “They cannot sacrifice an innocent to feed their nonsensical beliefs!”

“They have been doing this for centuries.”

“Does the Soothsayer believe the Wyverns will stop coming if there’s a life sacrificed??”

“Apparently so.”

Jongin clenched his jaw. He did not know what to think. It was wrong. So wrong. Just because it was their way and their tradition, it shouldn’t have to justify. Why was the so-called saviour of people doing nothing about this? What a hypocrite Adrian was. He used his brawns for all the wrong deeds. It made Jongin’s blood boil.

“Where are you going?” Awyen asked when Jongin rose to his feet.

“I ought to deliver this,” he said, waving the lyre in his hand. “You should sleep.”

“All right. Good night.”

He wondered how his father was doing without him. He had no idea what these Auvranks could have done to him. They wouldn’t have hurt him since he had surrendered and recognized the Auvran dominion in Warinia. But still, Jongin hoped he’d get to hear from his family soon.

The palace was still shaken from the Wyvern attack, but everyone seemed to be back at their duties. He heard a few of the evening guards in the hallway conversing about the feast and rite that would take place to celebrate Adrian’s victory. The page’s tunic meant Jongin’s presence could be disregarded like he was non-existent. Some of them were also talking about King Raagathor taking two servant girls to his bed tonight. It was sometimes hard to believe that Adrian shared Raagathor’s blood.

When he was finally in Adrian’s bedchamber, he did not find the Auvran Prince there. He angrily hurled the lyre on the bed and huffed furiously for a moment, glaring at the balcony. He wondered if there was any chance for him to escape without the guards on the battlements shooting him down. He would not even reach the gate.

“I wouldn’t try it if I were y—” Adrian was cut short when Jongin gasped, almost jumping out of his skin, and spun around before the back of his hand slammed a side of Adrian’s face.

Jongin gasped again, clasping his hands over his mouth as his eyes bulged out. Adrian grunted, holding the corner of his jaw that was struck mercilessly. Jongin then shook his hand vigorously when he felt the knuckles sting.
Panting hard, Jongin tried to calm his racing heart and took a step back, holding his throbbing hand to his chest. Was his face made of stone?! He watched Adrian’s cheek redden under the trimmed beard.

Gulping, Jongin looked up at Adrian’s astounded eyes. “Y-You… You should know better than to jump someone like that,” Jongin accused him and Adrian looked even more surprised. “F-For… a Godblood warrior, you have r-rather poor reflexes.”

“Should I expect you to hit my face every time we meet?” Adrian asked, scowling now. But he still did not look like he was about to wring Jongin’s neck. “My apologies, I am not used to having my pages slap me across my face.”

“Well, I am quite used to slapping pretentious bastards across their faces.”

Adrian arched an eyebrow. “Pretentious?”

Jongin gave him a black look. “I must return to my pallet before everyone’s asleep.”

He started past Adrian, but he was forced to a halt when Adrian grabbed his arm. He quickly released it when Jongin gasped and yanked his arm back. For a moment, Adrian seemed embarrassed. It was difficult for Jongin to believe that this man was the same man who had taken down a Wyvern the other night.

“I’ll need my arrows picked up from the smith tomorrow,” Adrian said, clearing his throat uncomfortably.

Jongin tried not to scowl. This was his job now. He could not afford to mither about it. His fate could have been a lot worse. “Where will the smith be?”

“Ask Hel—”

“Do you not know where he’d be?” he barked, and Adrian frowned.

“Well… You’ll find him in the east wing, in his forge.”

Jongin nodded curtly and paused. “You are taking me with you, aren’t you?”

The Prince did not answer. Instead, his eyes idly bored into Jongin’s. “How well can you fight?” he asked.

“I’m a decent swordsman,” Jongin admitted. “Well enough to defend myself.”

Adrian considered it. “Better with a sword or a bow?”


“A shield?”

“Workable.”

Adrian nodded and stepped aside, as though he had heard what he wanted to hear. Jongin wanted to ask him about the rite everyone was talking about, but perhaps this wasn’t the time. He had already backhanded Adrian and tried to provoke him repeatedly. This would have to wait.
Auvradevas, Year 5138, 26th Ikthadag

No matter how hard he tried, this Othadian game just wasn’t something Jongin could win. But he enjoyed the way Awyen giggled every time he won. Over the past few days, this incomprehensible game had become their favourite pastime whenever they weren’t summoned to run errands alongside sharing stories about their past adventures. Naturally, Awyen had more input than Jongin.

“You never told me why your family had disowned you,” Jongin said that evening after dinner while they played Awyen’s favourite Othadian game, flicking the small pebbles they had collected from the ground.

Awyen sighed. “I suppose I could tell you…” he drawled and withdrew his hand from the pebbles. He looked around to ensure no one else was in the room. Then clearing his throat, he muttered, “I had… met someone back at the college I studied in.” His cheeks grew red and he kept his eyes low as he spoke. “It… It was a… man. He was only visiting for a few weeks but… we fell in love.”

When he looked up at Jongin, as though to check for signs of disapproval, Jongin gave him none. Not only were Warinians openly accepting about it, Jongin had noticed the way Awyen looked at certain attractive Auvran men.

“And your family found out?” Jongin asked.

Awyen nodded. His eyes welled up with tears then. “They called me a Kamthir and… threw me out of the house when I returned home from my scholarship.”

Kamthir. An ugly term to call men who slept with men and women who took women for lovers. Such a term was forbidden to be uttered in Warinia. Jongin felt sick to his stomach when he heard the word of disparagement.

Warinians had a beautiful name for it. Alsiramene. It meant the children of the Alsira, the water nymph who was childless as she had taken a mortal woman to be her lover, according to the folklores.

“What made you come to Auvradevas, then?” Jongin asked.

“I was acquainted with Helathor. He taught me for a couple of moons at the college. I thought if I came here, he’d help me out. Then I met the King. He thought I’d make a fine candidate for the Prince’s Auxiliary.”

“And what of this lover of yours? Do you still see him?”

Awyen blushed. He shyly nodded his head. He did not seem sad here. He even looked liberated. Quite the contrary to what Jongin was feeling for himself.

“He is an Auvran, then?”

“Yes,” Awyen admitted embarrassedly.

Jongin smiled. “I am glad for you.”

“Really?” he asked, eyes widening. “You hate the Auvrans, don’t you?”
“I do. But I like you.”

That made Awyen grin. “Not all Auvrans are bad, you know. He certainly isn’t. He cares for me.”

“As he should.”

Though Jongin was happy for Awyen, a part of him also dreaded that the Othadian might be heading for a heartbreak. Because by the end of the day, Auvran men always took wives and kept their affairs with other men a secret. On the other hand, Jongin envied Awyen a little to have found love, even in this wretched place.

“What about you?” Awyen asked, leaning back against the wall, loosely tying his arms around his legs.

“What about me?” Jongin said, arching an eyebrow.

“What was your family like? King Chivrun and Princess Jihee. I haven’t had the pleasure of meeting them yet, but I’d heard they were great rulers.”

Jongin could not help the frown that tugged at his brows. “I miss them,” he muttered. “I haven’t gone a day without them… Father even takes me on all of his journeys.”

“You were young when the Warinian Queen passed, right?”

Jongin nodded. “Five.”

They sat in silence for a moment. Awyen then asked, “I’d love to visit the Warinian temples one day. I heard they are very peaceful.”

“They are,” Jongin said. “I spend all my free time there. It was one place where I did not have to worry about not belonging.”

“Why wouldn’t you belong elsewhere?”

Jongin pursed his lips. When he did not give an answer, Awyen did not press for one.

“King Raagathor was courting your sister, wasn’t he?” the Othadian asked instead. “Instead of her, you ended up here.”

“I’m glad she didn’t marry him. But she would have if she had known the Auvran King would wage war on us.”

“I’m sorry.”

Jongin sighed, aimlessly drawing patterns on the ground with his bare finger.

“Do you have a sweetheart, then?” Awyen asked, his tone sounding a little mischievous.

Jongin snorted and shook his head. “I think you would have known that too if I did.”

Awyen laughed.

The guard that barged in ended the conversation between them and they sat up stiffly. “You,” the guard bayed at Awyen. “get up.”

Jongin scowled at the guard and shot up along with Awyen. “What do you need him for at this
hour?” he demanded as the guard grabbed Awyen by the arm.

“That’s none of your concern, Warinian,” the guard spat at him and started to haul Awyen out of the room.

Frowning, Jongin sank back in his pallet.

* * *

The next day, everywhere Jongin turned in the palace, talks about the rite and feast rose. It was tomorrow night if what he had heard from the gossiping bunch of servants in the kitchen was true.

After he had run an errand for Helathor to fetch the set of quills from the minstrel’s gallery, he returned to Helathor’s desk in the library and desperately looked around for Awyen.

“Where is he? Awyen?” he asked Helathor at last, placing the box of quills on his desk.

Helathor looked up from his books and arched an eyebrow. “I was about to ask you the same thing. Does he not sleep in the same room as you?”

Jongin’s stomach knotted uneasily. “A guard came in last night and took him away.”

Helathor hummed in response. “He must be busy elsewhere, I presume.” He returned his attention to his books. “Now that you’re here, find Adrian and hand him this, will you?”

Jongin accepted the scroll Helathor handed him. “Directly to him?”

“Yes.”

Jongin huffed. He hadn’t seen Adrian in days, not even in his chambers. He turned to leave but paused momentarily. “Is it true that the sin offering rite is taking place tonight?” he asked the scholar.

“Best you keep your head out of their affairs,” Helathor muttered without raising his head.

Jongin scowled. “You are a practical man. How can you allow this to happen?”

Helathor sighed and glanced up at him. “It is one old man against a kingdom of warriors. What are the odds, Princeling?”

Jongin gripped his jaw and bowed his head before turning on his heel.

He started looking for Adrian. He could be anywhere in this palace. But just to be safe, Jongin checked his chambers first. He was out of luck.

When he headed out to the courtyard, the guards turned him away. Jongin perked his head and gaped at the preparation for the feast. Were they holding it outside on the courtyard? A ring of drums and gongs were placed around dais where the seven Menhirs, representing each of the Seven, stood. Long tables, ceremonial chairs, and satins and silks were being arranged accordingly under the scorching sun. It seemed there’d be a festive celebration tomorrow. Was the feast to celebrate Adrian’s victory just a coverup for the sin offering rite? To hell with these Auvrans. It wasn’t any of Jongin’s business. If they were going sacrifice one of their own, Jongin should be happy about it. But he wasn’t. What if the Auvran was an innocent? What if he or she had a family to feed?

He turned around to leave when he saw Prince Evzenius around a group of guards.

“Hey, you!”
Jongin turned and blinked at Prince Evzenius who had hollered. He looked behind him just to make sure he was the one the Prince was calling after. He hugged the scroll to his chest and walked over to the younger Auvran Prince in the corridor. Fortunately, Jevar was nowhere around.

“Yes?” Jongin asked.

Evzenius pinned him down with a hard glare. He looked nothing like Adrian, Jongin realized. But he was exceptionally good-looking in his own mortal way. Jongin understood why many hailed Prince Evzenius as the second best. In Prince Adrianus’ presence, Prince Evzenius was outshone. But alone, even Jongin marvelled at the man’s mightiness and beauty. He had never paid much attention the second-born prince but now that he had no other option but to look up into those two pools of blue eyes, he was conscious of how handsome Prince Evzenius was.

Evzenius was almost as tall as Adrian, his body slightly less muscled than his older brother. While Adrian’s eyes were incomprehensible, Evzenius’ were as clear as the sky. He wore a fine stubble; his hair was always half tied every time Jongin saw him. Unlike Adrian, Evzenius was usually clothed in heavy raiment and always wore his golden circlet around his head.

“I happen to have spilled my wine on my boot,” the Prince said, smirking, as he handed his winecup to a guard sneering at his side.

Jongin dropped his gaze to look at the wine smeared on Evzenius’ boot. He frowned. “What do you want me to do about it?” he asked, raising his head.

Evzenius scowled. “You should address me the way you should address the Auvran Prince,” he chided.

Jongin grated his teeth together in exasperation. “All right. What do you want me to do about it, you smelly pig?” he spat.

Evzenius’ jaw dropped and the guards around him lurched forward at once but stopped when Evzenius halted them. “He’s my brother’s pet,” the Prince hissed at them. Pet. Jongin wanted to slam the scroll he held across Evzenius’ head. “You will pay for that,” he growled, taking a step closer. He raised a hand to Jongin’s tunic and clutched at it.

“Evzen!” Adrian’s voice boomed into the corridor.

Evzenius did not look away from Jongin’s eyes immediately. He glared for a moment before he released Jongin’s tunic and angrily turned around to face his brother.

Adrian held a loose expression as he approached them. He clasped a hand to Evzenius’ shoulder and said, “Father’s expecting you.”

“Your page is insubordinate, Adrian,” Evzenius said, smiling smugly again.

Adrian glanced at Jongin. “Is he now?” he chimed.

“No matter,” the younger sighed. “Can your presence be anticipated at the feast tomorrow?”

Adrian’s face twisted in discomfort. “You’ll cover for me, won’t you?” he asked, grinning coyly.

Evzenius groaned. “For a price as always, of course.”

“Name it.”
“I’ll think of something.” He paused to pin Jongin with a sidelong glance before he walked away with his guards.

Adrian kept his eyes on his brother’s back and only turned his attention to Jongin when the latter shoved the scroll into his stone-hard chest. “Scholar Helathor told me to give you this,” he grumbled and did not wait for Adrian’s response as he stomped away.

When he glanced back over his shoulder, Adrian had already disappeared.

* * *

Jongin returned to his room after bathing and washing his clothes, only to find a few of the servant girls giggling about the lords that would be present tonight at the feast. They painted their lips and eyes, loosened the laces of their bodices.

The evening had fallen and Jongin hadn’t been summoned all day. When he went to look of Helathor in the morning, the scholar hadn’t been in the library. Awyen still hadn’t returned and Jongin grew more restless with every beat that passed without any news about the Othadian. What had the guard done to him? Perhaps Jongin could ask Adrian. A favour. But why should Adrian help him at all? He was a page, Adrian was his lord. Not the other way around. Adrian had already done him enough favours out of pity and guilt.

But Jongin dreaded about Awyen. The feast was tonight. He wanted to be nowhere near it, although all the servants were excited to be there. There’d be dances and musical performances, they said.

Jongin sat down on his pallet and helped himself to one of Awyen’s books while the girls continued to doll themselves up, hoping that the lords would take interest in them tonight. They ignored Jongin’s existence as always.

One of them was called Riolda, Jongin thought. He didn’t know the other two. Riolda was decently beautiful. She was also quieter compared to the others. She was the only one who smiled at Jongin whenever they met at the food table.

She was looking at him now and Jongin drew his gaze up from her skirt to blink at her face. She smiled, and he smiled back. She then withdrew from the other girls and approached Jongin with a stick of kohl in her hand.

“Where is your friend?” she asked, lowering to a crouch at the side of Jongin’s pallet.

Jongin frowned. “I… don’t know.”

“Well, he’ll be back. Don’t worry. Servants here are sometimes held up in the chambers for days.”

“What do they do to you?” Jongin asked worriedly.

“Well, that depends,” she said. She grinned again. “I saw you the first day you came here. I envied you,” she laughed.

“You… envied me?” Jongin straightened up and set the book aside.

Riolda nodded. “You were prettier than most of us.”

Jongin’s cheeks burned. “Oh… The dress.”

“You are the… Warinian Prince, aren’t you?” she then asked in a low whisper.
“Was…” Jongin muttered, lowering his head.

“Well, you could be worse off,” she said. “Here.”

Jongin flinched back when she took his chin in her hand and started drawing the kohl along his lower eyelids. He froze, eyes rolling up. He blinked when she was done.

Riolda grinned, her cheeks rosy. “Beautiful!” she declared and sprung back up to her full height.

Jongin couldn’t tell if she were poking fun at him or if she were being genuine. But he wanted to know if he really looked beautiful.

Drums thundered in the courtyard and the girls hopped to their feet. “It has started!” a servant boy yelled outside in the hallway.

Riolda paused at the door and looked back at Jongin. “Are you not coming?” she asked.

Jongin shook his head.

“There’ll be Ukheston dancers,” she said. When Jongin did not respond, she shrugged and leaped away.

He tried to sit still and ignore the music that boomed around him. When his curiosity finally peaked, he rose and slowly made his way out of the servants’ quarters.

Everywhere he turned, the hallways were empty, save the guards that were posted outside the chambers. Everyone had gathered in the courtyard.

Jongin finally arrived at the scene and he stopped dead in his tracks when the onslaught of colours and music took over his senses. He thought his blood was now pounding in sync with the beat of the drums as he joined the crowd surrounding the courtyard.

The tables were thronged by lords and ladies. Raagathor, his wives, their children, and Prince Evzenius sat on thrones, their Auxiliaries standing at their sides. Zayrse was stock-still behind Raagathor’s throne. There was an unfamiliar old man sitting among them. His robe and the mark on his forehead suggested that he must be the Soothsayer. Helathor and Adrian were the only ones absent. Adrian must take pleasure in ignoring feasts and celebrations thrown for him.

Just as the loud, thunderous song, the Ukheston performers cavorted with an energy that could be used in a war. The Ukheston Kingdom was known for her brilliance in the art of dance and theatre. The female dancers were clothed in skirts, the men shirtless. Their faces were painted with bright, colourful patterns, and they sported ornaments and jewellery Jongin did not recognize. The women’s hips were adorned by fine gold chains, the men had designs inked to their chests.

As they gambolled in a circle, clapping their hands simultaneously, the crowd cheered, raising their winecups. The tables were full of meat and wine that never stopped flowing.

One of the dancers capered over to the seven standing stones and dropped to her knees to cry out her praises. Jongin looked over at Prince Evzenius who looked bored. Jevar at his side was eyeing the female dancers like a hawk every time they lifted their skirts.

When the song’s pace picked up, the Soothsayer shot up to his feet and he bowed before Raagathor before he wended his way to the Menhirs. He stood among the standing stones. He picked up a book from the lectern and started screaming orisons to the night sky. Torches of fire were lit and everyone cheered louder.
This was not how Warinians communicated with the Seven. Never this loud, bright, and aggressive. It almost made Jongin want to yell at them to stop. But the performance was indeed entertaining.

“We know You are angered!” the Soothsayer howled. “Please, accept our offering to appease Your rage!”

Jongin’s heart dropped to the pit of his stomach. The performance ended with a head-splitting boom and the dancers stepped aside.

“We beseech Your forgiveness, oh merciful Seven!” the Soothsayer cried more frantically. He then put the book down.

Everyone’s head turned to the girl the guards hauled to the dais. She was sobbing weakly, as though she no longer had the strength. She was forced to her knees before the golden, bejewelled vessel on the ground. Her hands were shackled behind her.

Silence rolled over the courtyard now and only the girl’s muffled cries were heard.

“Please, please, please,” she begged in raspy whispers. Nobody looked like they heard it. Jongin’s breathing quickened and his hands balled into fists. Nay, they wouldn’t do it. They wouldn’t. Someone would stop it.

Nay, they wouldn’t do it. They wouldn’t.

Jongin broke down in a state of trauma at the sudden upheaval when he saw Awyen shoved to his knees beside the girl. His face was completely ashen, his golden hair fell over his half-lidded eyes. He was breathing heavy, his cheeks stained with unchecked tears. He knew what was about to happen to him. Everyone did.

“The blood of a virgin and a man,” the Soothsayer announced to the Gods as he unsheathed a golden dagger. He grabbed Awyen’s hair first and ruthlessly yanked it back to expose Awyen’s neck. “I offer You this man’s blood!”

The scene shifted at once when Zayrse gasped and lurched forward, his hand ready at the grip of his sword. “Like hell you are,” Zayrse growled at the Soothsayer and drew his sword.

“Zayrse!” Raagathor yapped, looking incredibly confused. “You will stand down now or I will have you charged with treason!”

Zayrse swallowed hard and glanced at Awyen once more. Awyen had his head hung, but he eventually raised it, only to look at Zayrse. Then clenching his teeth menacingly, the King’s Guard lunged at the dais, but before he could even reach Awyen, the guards pounced on him all at once and hauled him away.

“Nay!” he roared, plunging a fist into a guard’s skull when his sword was confiscated by force. A guard’s blade gashed Zayrse’s back and Awyen broke into a helpless sob again.

“Flog him until the skin on his back comes off!” Raagathor ordered the guards. “My apologies, Soothsayer. Proceed,” he told the old man as Zayrse was dragged away. He snarled and still fought like a wild beast even when he was held at sword-point.

The Soothsayer grabbed hold of Awyen’s hair again and brought the dagger to his neck.

“Stop! Stop!” Jongin cried, shoving through the servants. “Please!” He crashed to his knees on the
ground and panted heavily. “Please! Do not harm him! Please! I beg of you!” he bellowed at Raagathor, who gawked at him with wide eyes. “Take me! Take me in his place! Please! Let him go!” He quickly thought of something to convince the King to reconsider. “You wouldn’t want to harm an Othadian with your eyes on a marriage alliance with Othadia’s Princess! This will be a scandal you cannot afford, Your Highness!"

Raagathor blinked blankly. He looked up at Awyen and then back at Jongin. “You think I haven’t thought of that?” the King laughed. “He ran away from Othadia.”

“That doesn’t make him any less Othadian!” Jongin screeched. “He will be of use to you, My Lord. He is a scholar! One of the wisest! I, on the other hand, have no purpose to fulfil. I am of no use to you or your kin. I beg of you. Take me instead of him.”

The King regarded him with curiosity and disbelief, as though he did not believe that Jongin would actually do it. Jongin did not believe that he could do it either. But right now, he could not think. All that mattered to him was to save the one person who cared for him here.

Raagathor waved at the guards. Jongin was yanked to his feet and he was brought to the dais.

“Nay, Jongin,” Awyen croaked out weakly when he was pulled away as Jongin took his place. Frowning miserably, Jongin looked into the vessel beneath him. His heart was now thundering for a completely different reason.

He was scared for his own life now.

“You will do,” the Soothsayer said, grinning. He took hold of Jongin’s hair at the back of his head and arched his neck, pushing Jongin to bend over the vessel. Tears brimmed in Jongin’s eyes and he clenched them tightly, already inviting the darkness. He thought of his father and sister. Then he thought of Adrian. None of this would have happened if Adrian had never been born.

Jongin felt the tip of the dagger press into a side of his neck and as the Soothsayer began to draw it across his throat, the small cut stung. A warm drop of blood trickled down his neck. Jongin tightly gritted his teeth.

He wasn’t sure what death sounded like, but it certainly did not sound like the murderous roar of a tiger.

His eyes flew open and his heart stopped for a moment when he saw Baashere racing through the crowd like a maddened bull, his jaw snapping open with a stentorian roar. Screams broke in the crowd as the noblemen and women scampered away.

The feral tiger bounded off the ground and pounced on the Soothsayer and Jongin sprung up to his feet before helping the girl at his side to rise. He fought for breath as he pulled the girl and Awyen off the dais with him.

Baashere gnawed mercilessly at the Soothsayer’s neck as the man screamed for help.

“Baashere!” Adrian’s commanding voice coursed through the chaos and he immediately had everyone’s eyes as he strutted towards the dais. His tiger climbed off the heavily wounded Soothsayer at once at Adrian’s order.

Jongin could not swallow the lump suffocating him. Adrian calmly ascended the dais, but he wore a death-dealing, ferocious scowl. Neither Raagathor nor the guards had the audacity to stop him then.

The Soothsayer whimpered, holding up a hand. Adrian gripped his jaw tighter and with one smooth
move, he drew his sword and drove it downwards, through the Soothsayer’s chest.

Then withdrawing the bloody sword, he pointed it threateningly at the guards holding Zayrse down. “Away from him,” he ordered the guards, who instantly obeyed and released Zayrse.

“What is the meaning of this?!” Raagathor gasped.

“You wanted a sin offering,” Adrian snarled at his father. He waved his sword at the dead Soothsayer. “You have it.” He sheathed his sword and climbed down the dais along with Baashere. He stroked the tiger’s head as he approached Jongin. “I expect you in my chambers tonight and don’t make me wait.”

With that demanding command, he turned and walked away.

Jongin finally breathed, even though he felt sick and almost heaved when he looked at the corpse on the dais. He turned to Awyen and the poor traumatized girl.

“Are you all right?” he panted.

Awyen shakily nodded his head and the girl collapsed against Jongin, who quickly curled an arm around her waist to hold her up. He wondered if Adrian would be celebrated for what he did now.
In a bloodbath, the feast had ended. But it was still a better ending for Jongin. He had heaved twice but his stomach still ached in discomfort. He made sure Awyen and the girl had drunk and ate enough.

“What did they do you?” Jongin whispered to Awyen as the latter defeatedly reclined in his pallet, shivering like a leaf. He did not harbour the strength to speak. Jongin drew the blanket over him. Some of the servants weren’t sleeping and were staring at Jongin. Including Riolda.

He then turned to the girl. He had let her lie on his pallet. She needed it more than he. “What is your name?” he asked.

“Di-Diante,” she whimpered.

“You are safe now, Diante. Sleep,” he said. He briefly recalled his sister who used to offer him comfort whenever he woke up crying from a nightmare.

She nodded and clenched her eyes. She looked young. Couldn’t possibly be older than fifteen.

When he rose and turned around, the servants looked away. then one of them, whose name Jongin hadn’t learned, said, “That… That was a brave thing you did there.”

Jongin pursed his lips and nodded at the middle-aged man.

Another woman stood up and smiled at him. “We wouldn’t have done it, son,” she said. “Not even for our own kind. Yet you were a prince…”

Riolda winked at Jongin proudly.

“You are now one of us, too,” the woman added. Jongin’s heart fluttered. Well, at least something good had come out of offering his neck to be slit open.

“I must leave them for a moment. Will you look after them?” he asked.

“Of course,” Riolda said.

Jongin bowed his head in gratitude and headed out.

What should he say when he saw Adrian? Thank you for saving his and his friend’s lives? Why had he saved them in the first place?

Jongin uncomfortably winced when he felt the cut on his neck sting. He had never seen so much blood and murder in his entire life compared to what he had seen just in two weeks here in Auvradevas.

It was a close call. Tonight. Awyen could have died. Zayrse could have been whipped to death. Jongin could have died. It would take some time for all of them to recover from the trauma. Jongin had had a taste of the fear of death tonight.

So, should he thank Adrian for saving his life? For murdering someone so cruelly? The Soothsayer deserved it. Jongin shivered when he thought of how many throats the man must have slit in the name of the Gods.
He quietly slinked into the chambers and searched for Adrian. He found the man outside on the balcony with Baashere relaxing at his side. He was staring at the kingdom before him, leaning over the railing of the balcony while the tiger wagged its tail. Could no one question him for killing the Soothsayer? Who would dare question the only man in the Nine Realms that could save him from the plague of the Wyverns?

Jongin wanted to clear his throat to make his presence known, but he couldn’t find the energy. He silently stood and watched Baashere’s ears twitch.

Then mustering the courage, Jongin muttered, “What did you need?”

Adrian did not move a muscle. Jongin thought of turning around and leaving, but he didn’t. Then at length, Adrian turned around and faced him. “This murder you approve of?” he asked in a flat voice and Jongin frowned.

“He was going to kill innocent people,” he argued weakly. Adrian looked at him vacantly for a long moment. “It doesn’t change the fact that you are a monster.”

That instant, Adrian looked hurt and Jongin almost regretted saying it. “If Evzen hadn’t come to me and told me what a fool you were to have volunteered to take that servant’s place on the dais, you could have been dead now.”

Jongin scowled. “Why do you care if I live or die?”

“I do not,” he spat. “But I do not need that sort of blood on my hands.”

Jongin scoffed and let out a dead laugh. “You already have too much blood on your hands. Mine would be insignificant.” He paused. “I was not expecting you to come save me.”

“I know,” he sighed. Adrian closed the distance between them and Jongin tensed up. Baashere hadn’t fallen asleep, but he kept his eyes close. The night air was light and hot.

Jongin nervously flinched when Adrian lifted a hand. He froze and frowned at Jongin. Then with caution and hesitancy, he brought the hand a side of Jongin’s neck and brushed his fingertips along the cut. Jongin shuddered and shied away from his touch.

Adrian quickly dropped his hand and harrumphed. “Get that looked at.”

“It’s just a scratch,” Jongin murmured.

“Aren’t Warinian boys supposed to be really delicate?”

Jongin grimaced at Adrian. “Delicate?”

Adrian let out a heavy breath. “Must you take offence in everything I say?”

“That’s because everything you say is either condescending or completely irrelevant.”

Adrian blinked in shock. “You know, no one speaks to me the way you do. Especially considering how much older I am than you at age.”

“Big day for you, then,” Jongin scoffed and turned on his heel. Despite everything, he was smiling to himself.

“I called you here to let you know that I have decided to let you go with me. To the Vrilehm Mountains.”
Jongin stopped and faced Adrian again. “Really?”

“But I need you to understand that this is the last of the favours I will do you. If you get into trouble hereafter, you are on your own.”

“Why did you even save me tonight?” Jongin asked, glowering.

Adrian licked his lips and ran one of his large, calloused hands through his hair. “Why don’t you just be grateful for it and thank me instead?”

“I was caught in the situation in the first place because of you.”

Adrian snapped then. “Your kingdom would have been taken with or without me! If not me, then someone else! You had poor defence lines, a stronghold, and garrison that were as useless as a knife is to a babe. Warinia was a kingdom that would have been usurped by another sooner or later. You were fools if you believed in peace. Peace is often obtained through terror. I have no obligation to answer to you, do you understand? You are here as a punishment for a treason you committed. Even so, I am humouring you. If you are to be big on righteousness, you should have gotten down on the battlefield and fought for your kingdom. Instead, you had your tail between your legs and had hidden away in your tower like a poncy little princess. And your father simply relinquished his kingdom and people. You were unworthy rulers and Warinia was vulnerable. This is what happens when you couldn’t breed warriors. How could you, when your men lay with and bend for other men?!”

Now, he sounded like a true Auvran. He dispelled all of Jongin doubts and convinced him that he was no better than the other Auvran pigs.

“You should have just let me die,” Jongin spat as his eyes stung with fresh, hot tears. “I will never thank you for what you did. The whole world might worship and fear you, Adrianus Dragovan. But to me, I see you for who you really are. Just a remorseless, bloodthirsty, arrogant bastard. I will neither praise nor fear you. If you are truly a Godblood, I’d renounce the Gods with all my heart and faith.”

Adrian pursed his lips with a lockjaw. His gaze was intense, but he said nothing more. Jongin understood that men like Adrian murdered without batting an eye. They’d still sleep soundly with all that blood on their hands. Jongin wanted nothing to do with men like that. But unfortunately, he had no other option. Nevertheless, he would not put his pride aside and nod his head to everything Adrian said just so that he could be in the Godblood’s good graces, as Awyen had said.

“You test my patience,” Adrian said when Jongin started to leave.

Without giving him a response, Jongin strutted out of there.

He found a quiet and dark spot to sit at under the stairs to the basement and hugged his knees tightly to his chest. He finally gave in to the sorrows that were eating him from the inside and broke into tears.

* * *

“I brought you sweet combread and pottage,” Jongin said as he crouched at Dianté’s side on the pallet. “Eat some.”

She accepted the bowl and dug into its content like a famished wolf at once. “Thank you,” she mumbled, greedily swallowing.

Jongin smiled at her, studying her red locks of hair and freckled cheeks and nose. He then glanced at
Awyen’s empty pallet. He had left early in the morning to get on with his daily duties at the library, in spite of his fatigue and state of trauma.

“Are you from around here?” Jongin asked once he thought the girl’s hunger had been satiated.

She nodded. “Y-Yes.”

“Does your family live nearby?”

She hesitated to answer. “I… I don’t have a family. I am a… slave. I serve the Kanelos.”

Jongin frowned. He wondered just for how much gold pieces her master could have sold her to be sacrificed. “It is all right. You are safe now,” he reassured her.

She looked up at him and managed a faint smile. “Thank you.”

“Ah!” Riolda exclaimed as she approached them with a folded servant’s gown her hands. “You ought to get out of those.” She jerked her chin at Diante’s stained gown and handed her the new one.

“Thank you,” the girl muttered shyly.

“The palace can never have too many servants. Just steer clear of Prince Evzen’s disgusting Auxiliary.”

“You really should rest for a couple of days,” Jongin advised her.

The day went on. Jongin was now smiled at by the servants and he was even welcome at the food table to eat with the others. During lunch, he tried to learn all of their names. He shared his room with Contos, Riolda, Eudora, and Melanctha, he learned. And they were all chamber servants. Riolda and Eudora were Prince Evzenius’ chambermaids and both proudly confirmed that Prince Evzenius was generous in bed.

After lunch, he let Melanctha, the oldest woman in the room, to look at his wound at the neck. Then he proceeded to the library to see if Helathor had errands for him to run for Adrian today. He really hoped none of it would require having to confront Adrian face-to-face.

Some of the guards even bowed their heads at Jongin when they walked past him. Eudora had told Jongin that everyone now not only held him in high regards because of what he had done to save Awyen, but also because everyone believed that he was Adrian’s favourite page and that Adrian doted on him.

He halted at the mouth of the library’s hallway when he saw Awyen silently weeping in Zayrse’s arms. Zayrse was still in his King’s Guard uniform, so Jongin assumed Adrian must have managed to either convince or threaten Raagathor into keeping him.

Jongin’s heart swelled as he watched Zayrse protectively envelope his arms around Awyen. The man hadn’t cared for his own safety last night when he sprung into Awyen’s defence. Of course, Jongin had been indisputably surprised when he realized that Zayrse was the man Awyen loved, but now, he feared for both of their safety. Questions of Zayrse affection for Awyen would soon arise and when they do, Jongin doubted Adrian would save them, then. Last night, he had given substance to evince his disdain for the Alsiramene.

“I must go,” Zayrse told Awyen, brushing his lips against the trembling Othadian’s temple. “I promise you. I will not let anyone harm you for as long as I live.”
“I fear for you,” Awyen whispered, lifting his head from Zayrse chest to look up into the man’s eyes.

“I will be all right, Awyen,” the King’s Guard said in a hoarse voice. “If… it all comes to worse, I promise you, I will take you away from here. We will leave.”

“You shan’t have to,” he whimpered. “You shan’t have to choose me over serving your King.”

“Stop talking bilge!” Zayrse chided and cupped Awyen’s cheek to wipe the tears away. “They will come for you, Awyen. They will demand to know what kind of familiarity we share. You mustn’t tell them, do you understand?”

Awyen nodded meekly.

After drawing the blonde boy into a tight embrace, Zayrse walked away. Jongin then approached Awyen, who was wiping his cheeks with the sleeves of his tunic. He jumped a little when Jongin raised a hand to his shoulder.

“Jongin,” he gasped.

“It’s all right,” Jongin muttered. “I will not tell anyone.”

“Nay. It isn’t that,” Awyen amended quickly, his voice thick with a sob. “I know you will not… He is very thankful for what you did last night.”

“It is Adrian we should all be thankful for,” Jongin admitted begrudgingly.

“I wish I could see him and thank him personally… But Zayrse says that Prince Adrianus is in trouble, too. F-For…” he trailed off and Jongin understood.

“He’s a Godblood, Awyen. And a very important one at the moment. Don’t worry. They would not dare do anything to him.”

“If it weren’t for him, you would have been… killed… and they would have… flogged Zayrse to death,” Awyen said and his eyes welled up with tears again. “I owe him my life.”

Jongin felt guilty when he heard Awyen say that. He was right. Adrian had saved them and though not from a gigantic beast, but for a more personal reason. He would not have done it for just anyone, would he? Jongin did owe him his thanks but his pride was in the way.

“Can you tell him that I thanked him?” Awyen asked.

Jongin nodded his head sourly. “Of course.”
Auvradevas, Year 5138, 27th Jorrdag

With the beginning of a new week, the talk about Adrian’s misadventure gradually came to an end in the palace. Jongin heard from a few of the servants and Awyen that Raagathor was furious at his Crown Prince for causing the mess at the rite and that he needed to answer to the court for his uncharacteristic behaviour. Awyen worried that Zayrse would also be brought before the court for a trial. If he were found guilty, he’d be thrown into exile or worse, guillotined.

Jongin kept his head low for the past few days. Helathor summoned him a few times and he even praised Jongin for his courage. The rest of the time, Jongin spent it in the room with Dianté, who was finally smiling and talking. Riolda often joined them in their conversations, too.

"Is the Temple of Klaia really on top of the mountains in Warinia?" the smith asked as he busily prepared the package Helathor had sent Jongin to fetch for Adrian.

Jongin smiled at the old man. Though many worked at the forge, the man usually was seen on his own when he was dealing with weapons for Adrian. “Yes. You haven’t been there?"

The smith shook his head. “I haven’t stepped a foot out of Auvradevas, child,” he sighed, locking the large black case on the workbench. Jongin wondered how he’d be able to lift it on his own. He also wondered what the case held.

“It’s a beautiful temple,” Jongin muttered.

“I wish to spend my old days there,” the smith said and held out the case.

Jongin grunted and almost dropped it when his arms gave in. He quickly recovered and bore the hefty case out of the smithy after bidding the smith a good day.

He knew Adrian would not be in his chambers right now. So, he did not need to feel anxious about confronting him. He had been actively avoiding the Prince out of guilt. The things Adrian told him weren’t right, but Jongin had been too prideful as well.

“Need help with that?” a guard offered when he saw Jongin lugging the case up a flight of stairs. Jongin politely refused, although his arms and abdomen were beginning to hurt.

He still managed to drag the case all the way up to Adrian’s chambers. He ignored the gossiping chambermaids as he settled the case at the bedside.

“Can you imagine?” one of the chambermaids cooed. “Being taken as His Highness’ consort?” She hugged the pillow and squirmed. Jongin almost laughed out loud.

“Quit daydreaming, Melinai,” the other chambermaid snorted. “You are not the Princess Edothise.”

“I only need to throw on a fancy gown and with a diadem, I’d be just as beautiful!”

“Do you think it’s true that,” she paused to lean in and whisper. “he’s… impotent?”

Jongin choked on his breath.

Melinai shook her head furiously. “Are you mad?! Some of the girls who saw him bathe… said
he’s…” she trailed, biting her lower lip. Her cheeks crimsoned then, and she was smiling embarrassedly.

“What?!” the other girl rasped.

“They said that he’s just as big down there.”

“Oh, Gods. If only we’d been fortunate enough to wed him,” she sighed. “The wife of a Godblood. I would bear so many of his children.”

“Have you seen him with his little sisters and brothers? He’s so gentle with them. Makes me wonder what an amazing father he’d be.”

“Prince Evzen isn’t so bad.”

Melinai smirked again. “He most certainly isn’t,” she sang. “But he is no Prince Adrianus. All the servant girls know what a champion Prince Evzen is when it comes to lovemaking, but nobody knows what Prince Adrianus is like. I would love to have the honour of being the first to know.”

“We all would, Melinai. But we can only dream.”

Jongin clasped a hand over his mouth to muffle his laughter as he retreated from the chambers. Well, one could dream, he supposed. He had now learned that Prince Evzenius was a lover, a passionate man, while his brother, Adrianus was the exact opposite.

* * *

When Jongin returned to his room that evening, he found Diante, Riolda, and Awyen on the floor, engaged in the Othadian game. Jongin frowned when he realized Diante was winning.

“Jongin!” Awyen exclaimed, finally smiling again. “They learn fast.”

Jongin joined them. Diante had washed her hair and without all the soot and muck, it shone bright red. “You mean to say I learn slow,” he shot at Awyen.

“Nay. You can’t learn.”

The girls sniggered and Jongin faked a pout. He watched them finish their game silently, hugging his knees to his chest. It was nice. He had his own group of friends now. Well, he was still a servant but compared to everything that was going around him, his fate did not seem so miserable. He ought to take every ounce of happiness that he could get.

“So, when were you going to tell us?” Riolda asked Awyen after a while, smiling smugly.

Awyen raised an eyebrow at her. “About?”

“You and the King’s Guard. What is there between you two?”

Awyen tensed up at once. His eyes flicked to Diante, then to Jongin, who blinked. Awyen licked his lips and let out a nervous laugh. “There is nothing,” he lied.

“Oh, you need not lie to us, Awyen,” Riolda said. “Everybody is talking about it, you know. They have three theories. One, you are Zayrse’s secret brother. Two, you are Zayrse’s secret son.” Awyen’s face scrunched up in disgust then. “Three, well, this is what I believe in, you are his secret lover.”
Diante looked confused. “The King’s Guard?” she asked. “The one that went berserk that…” she trailed off, hanging her head. Jongin draped an arm around her shoulders.

“So, which one is it?” Riolda chimed, extending a hand to ruffle Awyen’s hair.

“You are… not disgusted?” Awyen asked her in a whisper instead of answering her question.

“By the Seven, nay!” she gasped. “I know I am an Auvran but I do not share many of their values.”

Awyen smiled at her.

“Riolda!” Eudora cried as she burst into the room, her face struck with horror. “All of you! You must come see this!”

They sprung up to their feet. “What is going on? Why do you look like you have seen a Sea Wyrm?!” Riolda demanded.

“There is a public flagellation in the bailey right now!” Eudora grated. “Prince Adrianus has accepted the punishment for committing lese-majesty at the trial earlier! Thirty whips!”

Jongin’s blood ran cold. *Nay.*

Not only were the commoners gathered at the locked gate to witness the flogging, they were as silent as a grave. Jongin squeezed through the crowd with his heart hammering against his chest. Raagathor stood on the balcony above alongside his wives. He looked disappointed and hurt.

Jongin thought he might just faint with heat and the silent crowd suffocating him. His heart was close to leaping out of his chest.

Adrian emerged through the crowd and he unbuckled his sword belt before handing the Azurewrath over to a page boy. Then taking his tunic off, he proceeded to the wood post. His blank face gave away nothing. His body did not seem tense.

“This has never happened before,” Riolda exhaled in disbelief.

“He had never disgraced the King before,” Eudora added at her side. “He agreed to take the whips meant for Zayrse, too.”

Jongin fought for breath. His eyes were bulged out. He wasn’t sure if he were more intrigued or terrified. But why wasn’t he happy, satisfied that the man who ruined his life was about to be flogged? Why couldn’t he breathe?

Jevar was the one holding the bullwhip, twirling the grip around his hand. There was a hint of a smirk on his lips. He’d forever be known as the man who had the honour to flog the Godblood.

“*And punishment will be meted out to all erring men and women in my Kingdom under my rule. Regardless of the status of their birth,*” King Raagathor had said. And it applied to his own son, too.

However, this was an injustice. Adrian had saved three lives that night, perhaps more lives which the Soothsayer could sacrificed in the future had he lived, and Adrian was now being punished for disgracing the supreme ruler. Why was he even accepting it?! No one would dare fight him if he refused!

Jongin was on the verge of screaming but he bit his tongue and silently watched as the others.

Adrian held onto the wood post and pressed his forehead against it, his eyes closed. Jevar gave the
bullwhip an experimental swing. Satisfied, he stepped closer to the Crown Prince.

The first strike boomed all across the bailey and people gasped. Jongin wasn’t sure if he weren’t one of them.

Adrian did not turn a hair. He held still as the whip left an immediate mark on his back. Jevar looked annoyed that his strength hadn’t been enough to break Adrian’s skin. The second and third strikes were twice as powerful.

Fourth. Fifth. Sixth. Seventh. Eighth. Ninth. Tenth. Adrian finally growled at the eleventh when the bullwhip struck his flesh that was gashed open. Blood ran down his back and Jongin realized his own cheeks were warmed by his tears.

Jevar was exhausted by the eighteenth whip. He paused to catch his breath. Adrian’s fingernails were digging into the post, his body doused in sweat and blood.

He’d survive it, everyone knew. But it did not make it any easier to watch. Barbarians. Merciless barbarians. All of them. And Jongin would be no better than them if he just held his silence and watched this happen before his very eyes. Even if it were happening to a man he detested.

But he could not interfere. The courage and compassion he had when Awyen was in harm’s way were not there for this man.

At the thirtieth whip, Adrian let out one final groan. His back was completely ruined, but he still stood. The wood post he was gripping onto was close to snapping. The guards rushed to his sides and braced him at once. His eyes were barely open, and he let himself be dragged away towards the healers’ quarters.

* * *

The silence in the palace felt like grief, as though everyone mourned what had happened to their hero. Jongin wasn’t sure why he felt the grief, though. Perhaps it was guilt.

No one spoke in the room even as the morning came. Contos and Melanctha had disappeared before Jongin had even roused. He glanced over at the pallet Riolda and Eudora now shared with Dianté. It was empty, too. Awyen sat up and looked at Jongin with drowsy, limpid eyes.

Once bathed and clothed, they did not fetch breakfast and headed straight to the library.

“Nothing will happen to Zayrse,” Jongin assured Awyen upon noticing the look of worry on his face.

“I am not thinking about Zayrse,” Awyen muttered. “These men are cruel. They had the heart to dishonour the man who’d save us all.”

Jongin frowned when the image of Adrian’s bleeding back flashed before his eyes. His heart clenched.

They paused at the entrance of the library when they saw Zayrse in the middle of a conversation with Helathor. Jongin gaped at them hugging a moment later. Then smiling weakly, Zayrse walked away from the scholar.

He halted in his strides when he noticed Awyen and Jongin. He turned to Jongin and bowed his head. Jongin quickly bowed back. Zayrse subtly brushed his fingers against Awyen as he squeezed past him.
Awyen sighed loudly and waved Jongin goodbye before venturing into the library. Jongin started towards Helathor.

“You are well-acquainted with the King’s Guard?” he asked the scholar, who arched a grey eyebrow.

“He is my son,” he informed and Jongin’s mouth fell hanging open.

“I… I had no idea.”

Helathor chuckled but the laughter quickly died. “I do not have any errands for you to run today. I believe you understand what your responsibilities are as a page now. You ought to be by Adrianus’ side at a time like this.”

Jongin lowered his head. “I didn’t… think this would happen when he saved us.”

“I owe him. For saving Zayrse’s back. And I mean it in the most literal way. I have never seen him speak so irascibly and with so much rage.”

“At the trial?” Jongin rasped.

“He was furious that Raagathor had allowed you to be harmed when he had taken you as his.”

Jongin felt his hairs raise at the back of his neck when he heard Helathor say that. His throat burned. It was an irrational feeling.

He wondered if Helathor knew about his son and Awyen. He also wondered if Helathor served Auvradevas because his son had chosen to serve her.

“Princeling,” Helathor said. The title now sounded foreign to Jongin. “Adrianus told everyone that he’d be taking you as his page on his journey to the Vrilehm Mountains. Is this true? Have you agreed to it?”

Jongin nodded. “I asked him.”

“Hmm,” the scholar hummed, scratching his beard. “Ought to be mindful, then. Especially considering you bear a grave secret with you.”

Jongin froze. He blinked vacantly at the old man and frowned. “What… What do you mean?”


“I do not… understand what you speak of, Scholar Helathor,” he said shakily.

Helathor edged closer and drew Jongin into an embrace. “Do not see yourself as abhorrent. All Aevayls are beautiful and gifted. You are too, my child.”

Jongin could not move or swallow as Helathor pulled back. Blood rushed to his cheeks and dread filled his chest. “Please,” he began in a raspy whisper but stopped when Helathor raised a hand.

“I want you to know that. In case you don’t choose to return.”

Jongin pursed his lips. He was not planning to return. That was when he realized when he left here with Adrian, he might never see Awyen or the servants, or even Helathor.

“Off you go, then,” Helathor said.
Jongin diffidently bowed and proceeded to Adrian’s chambers. How could Helathor have known? He would not tell anyone, would he? He would have already if that had been his intention.

The heavy scent of burned sage hung in the air when Jongin entered the bedchamber. It masked the metallic stench of blood. His stomach tossed when he found Adrian reclined on his stomach on the bed. The sound of his heavy, steady breathing filled the chamber. He was asleep.

The healer at the bedside was stirring a liquid in a cup with a common wormwood stick. He looked at Jongin and walked over to him immediately.

“Ah,” the healer said. “I was just about to call for a page.”

Jongin accepted the cup when the healer held it out to him. “What am I to do with this?” he asked in a low voice, careful not to wake Adrian up.

The healer held a finger up as he fetched an earthenware crock of simple.

“I have already applied it on his wounds last night. It needs to be applied a few more times. He is very… reluctant to have it,” the healer said, frowning. “Make sure you apply it on his back. When he rouses, have him drink this feverfew tea. He doesn’t want me here. He has never been fond of bitter medicines or healers, for that matter.”

Jongin cocked an eyebrow. Was Adrian afraid of healers? That seemed rather… childish.

As the healer left him alone with the slumbering beast, Jongin ambled to the bedside and stared at Adrian’s face for a moment. He was sleeping. Gods, Jongin didn’t know why that surprised him so much. Everyone must sleep. Even Godbloods.

But Adrian looked so serene when he was asleep. His stubble had grown into a beard now. He had his hands tucked between his face and the pillow, sleeping soundly. This could be someone’s chance to kill him.

Jongin shook that thought away and slowly sat on the edge of the bed. He paused to see if the shift of weight on the mattress had woken Adrian up. It hadn’t. Jongin quickly dipped his fingers into the simple and hesitantly brought it to Adrian’s back.

This might not be a good idea. He knew startling Adrian in his sleep could end in mishaps and regrets.

But he could not help it.

He let his fingertips brush Adrian’s skin between the cuts. Adrian’s back muscles were thick, firm. His shoulder blades were sharp, strong. Jongin’s heart skipped a beat every time he looked at the wounds. A common man would not have survived the flagellation. They didn’t really give him anything he could not take.

Even so, Jongin lamented. Why did he feel sorry for this man?

Adrian twitched and let out a coarse moan with his eyebrows drawn together in a scowl when Jongin’s forefinger skimmed a jagged wound that was covered by an herb simple. He did not rouse, still and kept his eyes closed. Jongin carefully applied the simple with extra caution.

Adrian hissed and drowsily mumbled, “Be gentle.”

Jongin blinked, his fingers frozen on Adrian’s back. He then drew them to the wound on Adrian’s
shoulder and Adrian hissed again.

Jongin scowled now. “You are a child,” he snapped, and Adrian finally cracked an eye open. He glared at Jongin.

“I still do not hear a thank you,” he groused and clenched his eyes shut again.

Jongin gritted his teeth, deliberately using more force than necessary to spread the simple over his wounds. Adrian growled now, his eyes flying open. He caught Jongin’s wrist in a fierce grip.

Jongin wanted to hit himself for letting a shaky whimper break from his throat when Adrian’s hand tightened painfully around his wrist. Adrian quickly released him and dropped back on the bed. He exhaled heavily and closed his eyes.

“Thank you,” Jongin muttered at length. “For… saving Zayrse.” For Awyen’s happiness, but he let that part out.

“I did not do it out of love for that Kamthir,” Adrian murmured, keeping his eyes shut. Jongin dropped his head. Of course, he wasn’t expecting Adrian to accept and embrace the Alsiramene—he was an Auvran after all. But it still had Jongin crestfallen. He didn’t quite understand why.

“You saved him nonetheless,” Jongin said.

Adrian did not reply immediately. “You need not thank me on his behalf.”

“Then thank you. For saving me.”

Adrian looked up at him. Jongin glanced away and hoped that he wasn’t blushing, though his cheeks were hot. Adrian was silent, as though he were waiting. When Jongin brought more of the simple to his back, he did not protest. Instead, he closed his eyes and relaxed.

* * *

Auvradevas, Year 5138, 27th Faandag

Perhaps he hadn’t expected Adrian to be out of bed so soon, perhaps he had wanted the man to be in bed for a little longer. But he felt disappointment tug at his heart when he entered the bedchamber and found Adrian on his feet while the servant girls attended him.

Once he had pulled a shirt on, instead of a tunic, he dismissed the servants and walked over to Baashere, who was impatiently waiting for his master to entertain him on the balcony. Adrian must have had someone bring his tiger over.

Last night, Adrian had fallen asleep with Jongin in his chamber, perched on his bed with Jongin’s hand on his back. He was either really exhausted or he trusted Jongin enough to show him a glimpse of his vulnerable side.

“Did you drink the feverfew tea?” Jongin asked Adrian, not bothering to announce his arrival since he knew Adrian was aware of it.

Adrian stroked Baashere’s head before turning around to face Jongin. He hadn’t laced his shirt up and Jongin helplessly marvelled at his abdominal muscles and toned chest for a moment.

“I had one of the servant girls drink it,” Adrian said nonchalantly and Jongin glowered.
“Why would you—”

“Fetch that case,” he said, nodding at the case Jongin had brought him yesterday.

Jongin huffed but obeyed. He dragged the case over to Adrian with all the strength he had and when he straightened up, he saw Adrian stifling a laugh. “I get it. I’m delicate,” Jongin groaned at the man and rolled his eyes.

“Your words. Not mine.”

“Half of them were actually yours,” Jongin grumbled.

Adrian ignored him and opened the case. Jongin momentarily shifted his attention to Baasheer, who yawned and settled on the floor. He looked back at the content of the case and gaped in awe.

Adrian drew out the large bow and examined it. Jongin could not decipher what sort of material it was made of. It looked like wood, but it was almost grey in colour. Was it stone? No one would lug around a bow made of stone.

“It’s made from the Wyvern’s bone and scales,” Adrian said, as though he had tasted the confusion in Jongin’s head.

“Oh.”

“My father thought it would be an honourable accolade for my victory over the Wyvern.”

Jongin bit his lip. “It was… impressive,” he muttered, and Adrian glanced up at him. “You were impressive the night you defeated the Wyvern.”

Adrian blinked in surprise as if he had not expected a praise from Jongin.

“Has it… happened to you before?” Jongin asked. “The arm.”

Adrian shook his head, briefly glimpsing at the ring on his finger. “I had never done or felt anything like that before. I… I think it was my mother… offering her aid.”

He sighed and drew a longsword from the case. It was silver, the grip bore the Auvran crest, the lion’s head. The blade looked light and easy to wield. Adrian held it out to Jongin.

Jongin stared at him with wide eyes.

“It is for you,” the Auvran Prince said in a low voice. “You’ll need a weapon if you are to journey with me.”

Jongin’s heart fluttered. Of course, he had fantasized countless times of a handsome, dark-haired, tall, broad-shouldered prince courting him with flowers and valuable gems. But Adrian presenting him a longsword to set forth on a possibly perilous journey had just about the same reaction.

“You’d trust me with a sword?” Jongin asked. “Do you really have that much faith in me?”

Adrian smirked. “I have faith in me.”

Jongin scoffed and took the sword. It was light after all. It almost felt like another limb.

“Give it a swing,” Adrian said.
Jongin did and he felt embarrassed to do it in front of the man who wielded all sorts of weapons so gracefully without breaking a sweat.

But Adrian wasn’t sneering or mocking him. He focused on Jongin’s hand around the grip. “Loosen your little finger and tighten your thumb,” he said. “Gives you a better grip if the sword slips. Like this.”

He clasped his hand around Jongin’s hand on the grip and pulled him close. Jongin’s breath hitched and he looked up at Adrian’s black-amber eyes. Then noticing how close they stood, Adrian cleared his throat and released Jongin’s hand.

“You must have had a lousy combat instructor,” Adrian harrumphed, rubbing the back of his neck.

Jongin lifted the sword and held the tip to Adrian’s chest. Adrian froze and Baashere yawned again before collapsing on the ground to relax. By the Seven, Adrian had so many scars on his body, Jongin thought, instead of thinking about killing Adrian.

Adrian casually shoved the sword away with two of his fingers and took a step forward. He halted when a guard entered without knocking.

“My Lord,” the guard gasped, bowing. “The King has summoned Your Majesty.”

Adrian scowled at the guard murderously. “I am preoccupied. Tell him I am yet to have recovered,” he snarled.

“M-My Lord. It is urgent. We have received an urgent missive. There has been a Wyvern attack in Ukheston. An entire village has been wiped out.”

Jongin went still and so did Adrian for a moment. Then they exchanged a final glance before Adrian stormed out of the chambers.

This was it. Jongin glanced down at the sword in his hand. This was the beginning of his journey with Adrianus Dragovan.
Reashokar, Year 5138, 29th Merdag

The path struck eastwards. The opaque river coursed violently along the path to the village. Stones and grit made the road they walked on uneven. Apart from the road, all else was brown and green, trees and shrubs.

A pair of violet butterflies flitted across the air before landing on a bunch of wildflowers. Branches of Oosredil, a species of red flower only found in the Third Realm, adorned the shrubs. Wild cottontail rabbits chased one another in the field of Oosredils. Jongin’s hands itched to pluck one of the red flowers for himself, as he always liked to whenever he found them on his journeys with his father. They smelled wonderful. It was a subtle fragrance found in no other flower. It was a symbol of home. Home was still so far away, though.

The ship had dropped them off in Reashokar, a Kingdom in the Third Realm, but nowhere near Warinia. Reashokar was territorially much smaller when compared to Warinia, a whole lot more underdeveloped and backward. Forests, rivers, and caves dominated most of Reashokar—her towns and villages consisted of huts and cottages.

The sky was bright and cloudless, the uninterrupted blue stretching endlessly up above. The blinding light of the sun blessed the ground. Birds soared and chirped cheerily, greeting the morning with their songs. Jongin’s legs were already sore from having walked miles from the dock and there were still miles to go.

Adrian strutted a few paces ahead with his bow slung over his back along with a quiver of silver arrows. His sword, the Azurewrath was hanging at his hip. The Auvran Prince was clothed in a simple wayfarer tunic, only a few sizes larger than Jongin’s own roughspun tunic. Seeing the Prince in such an attire usually worn by commoners was strange, but even a commoner’s tunic looked amazing on him. Jongin understood that Adrian’s plan was to lay low and travel without attracting attention to himself. It was safer and easier this way.

He had let Jongin lug most of his belongings behind. Jongin tried to not grumble or scowl at the man as he obediently did his job. He was brought along with Adrian to be his page, wasn’t he? But something told Jongin that Adrian was enjoying this all too much from the way he smirked every now and then, stealing a glimpse at Jongin, who was struggling.

A couple of weeks ago, the news of a Wyvern destroying an entire village in Ukheston had shaken everyone up in the palace. The news came with the affirmation that Wyverns were indeed plaguing the Nine Realms now. And without Adrian to save them, they were hopeless.

In all of this, not once had Jongin heard Adrian express any objection. He bowed his head to every order given to him by his father, the King Raagathor of Auvradevas. For a Godblood, for the mightiest man in all of the Nine Realms, Adrianus Dragovan was immensely unselfish and benevolent, putting himself forward to battle fearsome Wyverns and save all of the Nine Realms without worrying much about himself. He might have waged too many wars, killed too many souls. But he was heeding his father’s needs and dreams. It made Jongin wonder what Adrian’s own dreams were.

Jongin stopped before a wooden signboard when he saw it. They were heading towards a village called Kilveinath. In the west, there was a town called Ag Midgol.
“You best keep up if you don’t want to be left behind in the middle of nowhere,” Adrian called out to him. “Wolves lurk around here even during the day.”

Jongin gasped and quickly hurried after Adrian, as fast as he could with the weight of Adrian’s belongings. He grunted and huffed tiredly when he caught up with the Auvran Prince. That was the first time Adrian had said anything to him since they boarded the ship in Auvradevas. He had said, “Careful,” when Jongin almost slipped on the ship. And ever since, he hadn’t spoken to Jongin.

He was glad Adrian had kept his word. And even gladder that he had given Jongin a sword. He glanced down at the lightweight silver sword hanging on his belt.

A merchant walked past them, whistling a cheery tune.

“Good day, traveller,” he greeted Adrian casually, completely unaware of who Adrian really was.

“Good day to you, too,” Adrian said, flashing an easy smile that was rarely seen.

Jongin still hadn’t learned anything about the Prince in the past fortnight, save for what he and everyone else already knew. They were now alone. Neither of them knew for how long. Though Jongin was determined to find a way back home so that he could see his family again, he knew it wouldn’t happen anytime soon. Perhaps it would be a good pastime to get to know the Godblood. Did he even want to?

Low-level Auvran guards swarmed the Third Realm since it was now under the Auvran dominion. Reashokar was no exception. However, none of them seemed to recognize Adrian. Of course, there was no reason they should. These guards could have never even seen Adrian up close.

The afternoon sun began to scorch them. Adrian drew a cowl over his head and Jongin drained the waterskin to wet his parched throat.

When they reached the entryway of Kilveinath—a wide arch made from slabs of stones—they were halted by the guard stationed at the entrance.

“State your business for entering the village,” the guard demanded.

“We are travellers, seeking accommodation for the night,” Adrian said in a cool manner.

The guard did not look convinced. Adrian then tossed him a silver piece and the guard nodded before letting them pass.

“What are we doing here?” Jongin asked Adrian in a low voice as they proceeded into the village. Children cooed and giggled as they skipped around, playing with stones and slingshots. Farmers were busy with their crops and smiths working their metal and leather in their shanties. Wives entertained their husbands with drinks and songs while domesticated dogs yapped at the chickens.

Adrian did not answer his question.

All eyes fell on them as they ambled through the village. Some stared at Adrian’s magnificent size, others marvelled at Adrian’s bow, which was made of a Wyvern’s bones and scales. Children ran to hide behind their mothers’ skirts when Adrian looked at them. Jongin smiled to himself.

Houndshear Tavern. Jongin arched an eyebrow at the Godblood when they came to a halt at the
steps of the shoddy inn. Did Adrian really bring them here for shelter and rest? If so, Jongin was immensely thankful for it. He could use a good sleep on a bed right about now. But before that, he desperately hungered for a hearty meal and a cold bath.

Adrian pulled the cowl down as he entered the inn and held the door open for Jongin to follow, bearing the knapsacks carrying their clothes and other necessities.

Jongin’s lips instantly stretched into a grin when he heard the lively music in the inn, played by a group of men.

“He clamoured at the bear,
Who was nowhere near fair.
Roar and a growl,
Its breath was foul!”

The bard screeched, playing the lute excitedly. The tune mellowed thereafter.

“The hunter begged for his life,
Said he had to return to his wife.
But dear old Mister Grizzly,
Who laughed rather grisly.
Looked at the man and carefully said,”

The bard’s voice softened and the others leaned in towards him, as though they were anticipating a secret to be divulged.

“Oh, Hunter. It’s time that you fled.”

Jongin laughed, bobbing his head to the beat of the drum and clapping his hands together as the song continued.

The inn was empty otherwise, poorly-lit, considerably small, and reeking cheap mead.

A middle-aged man glanced at Jongin and Adrian from the counter and flashed a toothy grin. “Welcome!” he exclaimed. “Welcome to the Houndshear. What would you like to have, gentlemen?”

Adrian cleared his throat before speaking. “We would like to rent a room, please,” he said.

“Of course. And perhaps a meal? Your companion seems rather famished.” He smiled at Jongin, who mirrored the man’s kind smile that reminded him of his father.

“Lunch and dinner,” Adrian ordered.

The innkeeper bowed his head. “This way.” He ushered them towards a hallway, helping Jongin with the knapsacks. “Where are you travelling to?”

“Saweth in the Fourth Realm,” Adrian lied. Or perhaps it wasn’t a lie. Jongin had no clue. Adrian wouldn’t tell him anything.
“Ah, I see,” the innkeeper drawled. “A copper piece for our finest room.” He opened a door and beamed proudly. Jongin peered in and frowned. Not only was the room in such a poor shape, there was only one pallet.

Adrian paid the innkeeper with two copper pieces.

“Very generous,” the innkeeper chimed, pocketing the copper pieces immediately. “We have room in the stable for your drudge.”

Jongin stilled. He then glanced at Adrian in horror and saw the Auvran Prince smirk deviously. “Is that so?” Adrian said, looking at Jongin now.

Jongin clenched his jaw, desisting himself from wanting to hit Adrian in the face.

“How about a bath instead?” Adrian said and Jongin’s fear was eased. “He shall share a room with me.”

“Very well. But unfortunately, we do not provide baths here. The garderobe is behind the door down the hall. The river is free for yours to use at the end of the village, though.”

Jongin frowned. He did not like the idea of bathing out in the open.

“Thank you,” Adrian replied.

“Shall I bring a bottle of mead to your room?”

“That won’t be necessary.”

The innkeeper then bowed and left them to themselves, shutting the door behind them. Jongin finally dropped everything he carried on the ground and hurried to the basin. He cupped some water before splashing it on his face. He washed his hands and forearms, enjoying the cold water on his dry skin.

When he turned around, his eyebrows furrowed in a sad frown. Adrian was already settled on the pallet with an arm thrown over his eyes. He had discarded his bow and sword and undone the belt of his tunic. Jongin blinked at the man, studying him for a moment.

Had his back healed completely now? Was he afraid of what the journey had in store for him? What was his plan if and when someone recognized him?

Jongin wasn’t sure which caused him more astonishment and disbelief. The fact that the conqueror of realms, champion of men, defender of women, saviour of people, slayer of kings, victor of wars, son of all, the Godblood, Adrianus Dragovan Raagathor, the Crown Prince of Auvradevas was resting before his eyes, in a shabby inn, or the fact that Jongin’s hate for this man, who stole his home and took away his family, was beginning to fade.

He quietly sat down on the floor and drew his knees to his chest, watching Adrian sleep for a moment. Adrian’s breathing shallowed and his chest rose and sank steadily. He was tired, too. His beard was thicker now. His hair was longer, almost reaching his shoulders. The unlaced tunic put the deep cleft of Adrian’s chest on display. His body alone was a work of art. He barely fit in the pallet—one of his knees was raised while his other foot was hanging over the edge of the pallet.

Jongin looked away with reddening, hot cheeks when he realized he was ogling a sleeping man. Adrian had been nothing but kind to him from the moment they met. He had not only defended Jongin’s honour, but had protected him from harm time and again. Even now, he had brought Jongin along just for the sake of protecting him. For all these reasons, Jongin found his heart softening for
this man. And it felt dangerous.

He rubbed his sore knees and leaned against a wall. He supposed he could take a nap but sleeping in
the same room as this beast somewhat discomforted him. However, convincing himself that he
couldn’t be anywhere safer than this place, with Adrian, he decided to close his eyes and let sleep
claim him.

* * *

He woke to the sweet smell of dry-roasted figs. Jongin sat up on the pallet and rubbed his eyes on
the hilt of his palms before raising his head to glance around the room. Then blinking in confusion, he
wondered how he got on the pallet. He had fallen asleep on the floor. Where was Adrian? He had
left the Azurewrath and his bow in the room.

Jongin rose from the pallet and dug through one of the knapsacks for the only other tunic he had
packed for himself. He got rid of the sweat-doused tunic and changed into the new one. He shaved
his face again, though he had already shaven yesterday in the ship. Once he felt as clean as he
possibly could at the moment, he let himself out of the room. A boy was playing flute in the dining
area. Lanterns and torches provided enough light in the room. Jongin wondered how long he had
been asleep. Was it dinnertime? Had he missed lunch?

His heart finally calmed when he found Adrian at a table with the group of minstrels that were
singing earlier.

“It’s not every day we see a strapping man like yourself saunter into Kilveinath,” the drummer said.
“Are you perhaps an Auvran?”

Adrian shook his head with nonchalance. His eyes eventually lifted towards Jongin. He quickly
turned his attention to the platter of food on the table while the other men raised their tankards.

Jongin joined them and shyly took his seat beside Adrian on the bench.

“What about your quiet companion?” the bard inquired with a friendly smile. “He looks nothing like
an Auvran.”

“I’m a Warinian,” Jongin said before Adrian could answer for him. It seemed harmless to divulge a
few truthful details about himself to these cheery lot of men.

“That explains plenty,” the man laughed. Jongin hungrily eyed Adrian’s platter of food. Without
even looking up at Jongin, Adrian slid the platter to him.

Jongin hesitated for a moment, worrying his lower lip. He didn’t mind eating his portion of food
from Adrian’s plate since he was his page after all. Besides, he was starving. But he had been a
prince who had lavish food served to him. He tried not to be too bothered by the fact that he was
about to eat an Auvran’s leftovers and decided to satiate his hunger first.

He surveyed the glazed meat and figs alongside brined potatoes. He helped himself to a piece of stale
bread and took a humble bite from it, holding it with both hands.

Then he tasted the meat. The flavour and texture were strange to his tongue. But it wasn’t
unpleasant. It was roasted with herbs and glazed in mint-honey butter.

“Keep a weather eye out for the wolves on your way. They’re menacing creatures,” the bard
advised. “Not that it would matter now that we are all doomed by the Wyverns.”
“I could not believe my ear,” another said. “I still can’t. And I won’t until I see a Wyvern for myself.”

“Is it not enough that the beasts are plaguing the First Realm?” the bard said. “The Godblood defeated one of them. He’d save us if he isn’t too busy bedding all the women in the realm.”

Jongin leered at the bard.

“Do you think it’s true that he takes women from every kingdom he conquers?” one of the other men asked.

“If I were a woman, I’d want him to bed me, too,” the bard chortled and Jongin felt more embarrassed than Adrian seemed to be.

“I think you are about done here for the night,” the innkeeper yapped when he showed up with a tankard of mead for Jongin. “Go home to your wives. And here’s your wage for the day.”

Once the minstrels were paid, they took their leave.

“Can I get you anything else?” the innkeeper asked with a coy grin. Jongin expected Adrian to say nay, but he was surprised when Adrian gestured the man towards the bench on the other side of the table.

The innkeeper looked baffled for a moment. Jongin silently ate, licking the sickly-sweet butter from his thumb.

“How about fifteen gold pieces for your daughter?” Adrian asked and Jongin almost choked on the potatoes. He coughed and Adrian pinned him with a sidelong glance. He then handed Jongin the tankard and Jongin quickly drank from it.

The innkeeper’s face scrunched up in confusion. “Pardon me?”

“You are Dundor, am I correct?” Adrian said, shifting his gaze back to the innkeeper.

The man nodded, his eyes narrowing. “How do you know my name, traveller?”

Adrian fished out a pouch of coins and tossed it over to Dundor. “I believe you know where I can find Circe.”

“Circe?” Dundor gasped, his eyes immediately bulging out in horror. “She… She is my daughter.” He lowered his head and sighed.

“I need to talk to her.”

Dundor shook his head. “She’s not here.”

“That’s what I heard, too. You are her father. Certainly, you must know where she had disappeared to.”

Dundor kept mum, looking rather nervous and agitated. And a little saddened.

“Of course, I have other ways of making you talk,” Adrian threatened in a voice and a tone that Jongin had never heard. Was he speaking as the Auvran commander-in-chief now?

The threat seemed to have shaken Dundor. He swallowed hard and lowered his voice before saying, “I’m afraid I can’t help much. She was… taken by the Trolgar Clan not long ago.”
Adrian looked surprised.

“I’m afraid my dear little Circe is… good as gone,” Dundor muttered and sank on the bench defeatedly. His wrinkled face paled at the memory of his daughter. Jongin’s heart clenched when he realized his own father would be mourning so.

“Are you certain that she is good as gone?” Adrian asked.

Jongin then scowled at Adrian. Could he not perceive the distress in the man’s face? Dundor looked close to tears.

“We are very sorry for what happened to your daughter,” Jongin said in a murmur, cutting in. The man blinked at him in shock for a moment before the corners of his lips curled in a tender smile.

Jongin had heard all about the Trolgar Clan’s villainy. The clan consisted of man-eaters. To some, they were real nightmares. To others, they were subjects of folklores meant to scare children. The Trolgar Clan worshipped evil and fed on human blood. They kept prisoners and harvested their blood little by little until they died on their own. No one dared enter their sanctuary, let alone fight them.

Adrian scowled at Jongin. But his hard expression quickly softened when Dundor said, “Thank you.” Adrian turned his face away from Jongin. “Why are you looking for Circe? She was a foolish little girl, who blethered too much for her own good. She went chasing a hare one day and… she never came home.”

“She was the orphans’ caretaker, yes?” Adrian asked.

“Yes, she was,” Dundor answered. “She believed in all sorts of fables she told them.” He hung his head. “I miss my little Circe.”

Jongin blinked away the tears that stung his eyes. Would his father be missing him, too?

“She may still be alive,” Dundor said miserably. “But there is nothing I could do about it. Nobody could do anything.”

Jongin looked at Adrian then. Someone could. He could. The Godblood could. Adrian saw Jongin staring at him with hopeful eyes.

Please, Jongin begged tacitly. And just like the first time Adrian had protected Jongin’s honour at the feast the day he came to Auvradevas, something shifted in his ruthless expression.

Adrian kept his head low for a beat. Then lifting it, he asked, “Do any of you know where I could find this Trolgar Clan?”

Dundor gaped in surprise. “Why do you ask, traveller? By the Seven, you do not have a death wish, do you?” he rasped.

“Answer him,” Jongin prompted. “He would your daughter back if she’s still alive.”

Adrian cocked an eyebrow at Jongin.

Dundor snorted out a chuckle. “You may be all tough and stalwart. But the Trolgar Clan is deadly. They are merciless man-eaters.”

“The Gnuulk Cavern,” said the boy who was playing the flute until a moment ago. He stood up from
his chair and walked towards them, sporting a frown.


“Nay, father,” the boy said before facing Adrian. “I had heard my sister talk about the Vrilehm Mountains. She said that she would venture there someday. If you bring her back, she could tell you. I was… there when the Trolgar men took her. I had fled, she hadn’t.” He dropped his head low and snivelled. “The Trolgar Clan is said to dwell in the Gnuulk Cavern. No one dares to even go near it. It’s southwards to the village. The Trolgar Clan only comes to hunt after dusk.”

“Do not listen to him. He is as foolish as his sister,” Dundor said. “Circe is not coming back. You will get yourselves killed if you go to get her.”

Adrian finally huffed out a sigh. “Thank you for the dinner,” he said and rose to his feet.

“Your money,” Dundor gasped and held the pouch of coins back to Adrian, who politely refused to accept it.

“Be sure to get my drudge anything he wants,” he said and Dundor turned his gaze to Jongin momentarily. With that, Adrian proceeded towards the room.

Jongin wondered if Adrian planned to rescue Circe. If not for Dundor and Circe’s brother, then certainly to get more information about the Vrilehm Mountains.

Jongin washed his hands once he was done with his meal and looked around the empty inn. The gentle scent of Oosredils wafted in the air and Jongin’s heart leaped when he found a bunch of them in a vase. He plucked a stalk of the flower from the vase and inhaled its scent sharply, brushing the petals to his lips. When Dundor bid him good night, Jongin retired to his room. He wasn’t sleepy but he needed to have a talk with Adrian.

Fortunately, Adrian wasn’t asleep. Unfortunately, he was changing.

Jongin, caught in an awkward situation, froze in the doorway when he saw Adrian taking his tunic off and trading it for a nightshirt. He left it unlaced as he glanced back at Jongin.

Jongin deliberately brought the flower to his nose to distract himself from the solid muscles of Adrian’s exposed chest and abdomen. Adrian was staring.

“I like the smell,” Jongin clarified Adrian’s unspoken doubt and walked into the room. He then took a small seat on the edge of the pallet and watched Adrian wash his face with the water in the basin. “Why are you looking for the girl?”

Adrian straightened up and dried his face with a towel. “She has information about the Vrilehm Mountains. My father had already gathered much information. It all only recently led to this Reashan girl. But before he could bring Circe over for an interrogation, she disappeared and… well, the Wyverns attacked. I decided to take over. It is faster this way.”

Jongin was surprised that Adrian had answered him. “Oh,” he muttered, dropping his gaze to the Oosredil. He fiddled with the petals for a length before sticking the flower behind his ear. He raised his head and found Adrian gawking at him. Jongin blinked. Why was he staring so blatantly? “Um… So, are you going to the Gnuulk Cavern?” he asked to divert the attention.

Adrian snapped out of his trance and looked away, clearing his throat. “I shall leave at dawn.”

“I’m going with you,” Jongin said.
Adrian frowned. “Absolutely not. You’d be a hindrance if nothing else.”

A moue puckered Jongin’s lips and a scowl furrowed his brows. Adrian looked at him again and stared at the red flower snuck behind Jongin’s ear. He harrumphed and averted his attention to the blanket on the pallet.

“I’m going,” Jongin asserted.

“Have you always been so darn stubborn about everything?”

“You have to let me put my sword into some use,” Jongin said, smirking. Adrian did not find it humorous. “I was a prince. Of course, I was stubborn about everything.”

“You were a spoiled child, whose whims were constantly catered to,” Adrian said as he spread the blanket on the floor.

“As if you weren’t,” Jongin scoffed.

“I wasn’t,” he said and held out his hand, pointing at a faint scar on his palm. Jongin’s eyes moved from the scar to the rest of Adrian’s calloused hand. He was tempted to feel the roughness against his own soft fingers. He then stared at the black star sapphire ring. “I was torched with a branding iron when I was seven for letting a sword slip from my hand.”

Jongin looked at Adrian again, his heart sinking a little. “Who could do that to a child?” he whispered, glancing back at Adrian’s hand. Adrian quickly retrieved it and sighed.

“It does not matter. I was not a spoiled child. Auvrans know little of pity and compassion.”

Jongin removed the flower from his ear and watched Adrian recline on the blanketed floor. Was he letting Jongin sleep on the pallet?

“And yet, you took pity on me,” Jongin uttered under his breath after a moment.

Adrian’s amber-black eyes turned to him once more. The silence stretched between them and Jongin kept his gaze low, twiddling with the Oosredil.

“It looked nice on you,” Adrian said drowsily.

Jongin looked confused. “What?”

Adrian took the flower from Jongin’s hand and replaced it behind Jongin’s ear. Jongin felt his heart skip a beat as the tip of Adrian’s fingers lightly ghosted over the shell of his ear. Adrian then dropped on the blanket again and turned his back to Jongin.

There were so many things that Jongin wanted to ask Adrian. The man slept in the presence of Jongin who despised him. Swords and arrows were close at reach. It wouldn’t take a lot of effort to kill a man in his sleep. Was it faith in Jongin or confidence in his own strength? Either way, it made Jongin wonder why he wasn’t planning on trying to flee while Adrian was off his guard. He wanted to see his family, of course. But he was also curious about how the Godblood was planning to save the Nine Realms from great Wyverns.

For now, he let Adrian sleep soundly. Their adventure had now begun and Jongin had no idea where this would lead him. Hopefully, not too near Adrian.
After hours of wandering about the south of Kilveinath, looking for the Gnuulk Cavern, Jongin finally plumped on a log to catch his breath. Adrian came to standstill and frowned at Adrian.

“It’s not even noon,” the Godblood said.

“I’m tired,” Jongin huffed and massaged his ankles. “I have never walked so much in my entire life.”

Adrian stared. “You wanted to tag along,” he accused.

“I just need a short rest, okay?” He uncorked the waterskin and downed whatever water there was left. Adrian glared now.

“It’s not wise to exhaust your supply water so soon,” he chided.

“I’m thirsty!” Jongin yapped. He understood. Adrian saw him as this loose-limbed, cosseted boy that was used to being wrapped in cotton wool. Well, he was. “I’m not… used to this,” he admitted after a while.

Adrian crossed his arms over his chest. He had brought both his bow and sword along. Jongin brought his own sword with him, too—not that he thought he’d put it into any use for as long as he was bearing Adrian’s company. The rest of their belongings were left back at the Houndshear Tavern.

“What are you used to, then?” Adrian asked.

Jongin squinted at the morning sun. Earlier today, he had roused to the sound of Adrian getting ready at the crack of dawn. They hadn’t said anything to each other as they quietly slinked out of the inn. Jongin wondered if Adrian were trying to make conversation with him right now or if he were really curious.

Jongin shrugged, casting his gaze to the grass beneath his feet. “I read a lot. I spent a lot of time in the library. I also liked praying. Unlike Auvrans, we pray in silence and tranquillity. I loved going to the temples. I met farmers and priests, heard their plaints and grievances. I used to play games with my sister. She was always better than I was at swordfight.” He paused for a beat. “If she had agreed to marry your father, we would have been a family right now.”

He brought his head up and found Adrian still looking fixedly at him. His piercing stare made Jongin’s cheeks hot. Adrian’s eyes were completely amber now, glimmering under the sun.

“My father wanted to attain Warinia through marriage,” Adrian said. “If your sister had agreed, things would have been different.”

“She has her own mind, her own will, and her own dreams,” Jongin argued. “She has no obligation to indulge your greedy father in any way. I’d rather lose the kingdom than have her lose her self-respect.”

Adrian appeared to be a little puzzled. “I’ve heard that Warinian women strode pridefully and independently. They are allowed to speak their mind. Where I come from, women are not given such prerogative.”

“I’m aware. You use them as nothing but items of pleasure in your beds and as sacrificial goats,” Jongin said spitefully. Adrian’s frown deepened.
“I have never seen any women in such a light. I grew up with two sisters of my own. Now, I have seven younger sisters. I would never want them to forsake their dignity, not even for the kingdom.”

Jongin was rather astonished by the sincerity in Adrian’s eyes and voice. “Then you must understand why Jihee had every right to refuse your father’s hand in marriage.”

Adrian nodded his head. “I was just saying that... I wouldn’t have led the annexation of your kingdom if she had agreed.”

“Well,” Jongin harrumphed and jolted up to his full height. “what’s done is done. Your greed and duty to honour your father blinded you. There is nothing you could do to rectify that.”

“You still resent me,” Adrian said calmly.

“I am without a home. Thanks to you.” He turned on his heel and stomped away. Adrian said nothing in return as he quietly trudged behind.

They walked another mile before coming to a halt when they met a roadside trader, selling an assortment of gimcracks. Jongin eagerly eyed black leather choker on display. He remembered Jihee loving collecting choker necklaces just to put them around Jongin’s neck. Gods, how he missed her...

“Can I ask for directions, trader?” Adrian asked the old man.

A silver moon-like pendant hung on the choker necklace. It looked pretty, Jongin thought.

“Where are you heading?” the trader asked.

“The Gnuulk Cavern,” Adrian replied. The trader looked spooked as his eyes fell on Adrian’s golden sword, which was anything but subtle.

“Do you see that mount there?” the trader said, pointing at a mountain nearby. “You’d find the Gnuulk Cavern there.”

Adrian then immediately started to walk away. Jongin did not follow. Instead, he ran towards a shrub of Aaronna flowers and plucked a stalk before returning to the trader.

Aaronna did not smell as pleasant as Oosredil, but it was certainly more beautiful and was used as an ingredient in food and drinks. The purple on its wide petals blended with a faint hue of pink that faded into white.

Jongin adopted a crouch and handed the flower to the old trader, flashing a toothy smile. The trader mirrored his smile and accepted the flower. “Thank you,” Jongin said.

“Thank you, son,” the trader echoed.

Jongin bounced back up and turned towards Adrian, who had stopped and was now observing Jongin with intent.

“You don’t give another man flowers,” Adrian spat as he turned his back to Jongin and started strutting away.

Jongin’s face wilted. “It is a nice gesture,” he muttered.
“Giving men flowers?” Adrian snorted mockingly. “You Third Realm men are strange.”

Jongin gripped his jaw. “I’ll keep in mind to never give you a flower,” he said and walked ahead of Adrian. “Son of a baboon.”

“What did you say?” Adrian grated at his back.

Jongin kept silent for an instant as he stomped faster and harder. “Nothing!” he barked, pouting viciously. He saw no harm in giving men flowers. Let the great Adrianus Dragovan be darned if he thought it was a blow to his masculine pride. Jongin loved giving men he found charming flowers. It was a habit he had picked up in his early childhood. He gave guards, monks, even servants flowers if he found them admirable. And he liked it when they ruffled his hair appreciatively in return.

He remembered how disgusted Adrian sounded when he spoke of the Alsiramene—whom he regarded as Kamthir. Jongin’s stomach churned uncomfortably and he didn’t know why he felt disappointed about the fact that Adrian detested the Alsiramene.

They walked more and it felt like it had taken forever to reach the foot of the mountain. An overcast soon darkened the sky. The sun hid behind fat, grey clouds. A raindrop kissed the tip of Jongin’s nose and he gazed up at the sombre sky.

A sudden, harsh grip on his arm forced him to a stop and Jongin hissed a little. Adrian quickly released his arm upon realizing he was hurting Jongin. He then jerked his chin ahead and Jongin followed his gaze.

Bile rose to his throat when he saw the skulls fencing the entrance of a cave, stuck on the tip of sharpened wood posts. Jongin’s stomach heaved.

“This is as far as you go. Stay here,” Adrian said.

Jongin scowled. “I will not. Out here, I don’t have to play your drudge.” He drew his silver sword and brandished it. “I can help you.” He immediately felt foolish for saying it because Adrian looked amused.

“You really are stubborn and reckless, aren’t you?” Adrian scoffed.

“Persistent and self-willed,” Jongin corrected.

“These are man-eaters. Do you think you have the stomach for it?”

“You underestimate my level of endurance, Prince Adrianus,” Jongin mocked.

“Very well,” Adrian sighed and drew his bow. “Can you at least stay behind me?”

That order Jongin was happy to oblige. He started treading on Adrian’s footsteps. His footsteps weren’t as light or quiet as Adrian’s, but his lithe, lightweight body was an advantage compared to Adrian’s monstrous physique.

Adrian nocked an arrow as they neared the cave’s entrance. Jongin retched at the pungent stench of blood and desecrating corpses. The light faded and Jongin felt the horror surge down his spine. The eldritch dark cave chilled his blood. Even so, he wasn’t entirely terrified. He knew that for as long as he stuck close to Adrian, he’d be safe. Even in somewhere as sinister as this cave.

They moved with stealth. Adrian readied his bow and arrow. The quiet was macabre. Perhaps he should have just waited outside. Was Adrian unnerved by any of this? If he were, he was really good
Jongin paused in his tracks when he heard a noise echoing from one of the tunnels lit by torches. He swallowed and leaned in closer to the entrance of the tunnel. His body paralyzed when he saw a bald man—clothed in wolf pelts with a sallow, scaly skin—arching over a corpse, digging into its flesh.

A hand clapped over his mouth before he could scream at the horror. Jongin looked at Adrian with bulging eyes and panted against Adrian’s palm that covered more than half his face. The sword in his hand trembled. Then withdrawing his hand, Adrian nocked the arrow and drew the bowstring.

The arrow struck through the back of the man-eater with perfect precision. Letting out a muffled groan, the man-eater collapsed on the ground. Jongin looked at the corpse and turned away at once. He had almost no hope for Circe now.

Adrian arched an eyebrow at Jongin, whose complexion had paled. Clearly, none of this shook the Wyvern Slayer, the mighty Godblood. But Jongin was neither of them. He had overestimated his level of endurance. Nonetheless, he would never want to seem weak in front of Adrian and prove the man right. So, he rolled his shoulders back and gripped his sword again.

With a hint of a smirk on the quirked corner of his lips, Adrian led the way. Jongin feet felt heavier with every step he advanced. The fine hairs on the nape of his neck rose. The torches provided little to no light in the cave. Adrian came to an abrupt halt and Jongin almost bumped into his back.

Adrian drew another arrow and before Jongin could discern what he was aiming it, the Auvran Prince released the bowstring. The arrow drove through a man-eater’s head and brought it to the ground instantly.

A vicious growl thundered around them and Jongin jumped with a start, grabbing a fistful of Adrian’s shirt at his back. Adrian turned his head halfway around to glance at Jongin and the younger quickly retrieved his hand, looking embarrassed.

Adrian nocked an arrow and shot it at the man-eater that had spotted them. They proceeded further into the cave. Jongin gripped his sword with both hands. The cave reeked of blood and rotting flesh.

He struggled to take his steps in the dark when there were no torches lit as they took a turn. Jongin stumbled a few times before he decided to swallow his pride for a while and hold onto Adrian’s arm. Adrian moved instinctively and with great caution even in the darkness.

The Godblood uttered no objection when Jongin held onto his arm. He stilled for a beat but quickly recovered and proceeded onwards. Jongin kept a small fraction of his attention on the way Adrian’s firm muscle flexed under his hand.

A cacophony of incoherent chatters amplified and reverberated through the cave walls. There were more than twenty man-eaters, all cavorting around a small fire. Adrian traded his bow for the Azurewrath. In the corner, a handful of men were held captive in a cage made of bones. And amidst the men was a girl, covered in muck, blood, and grit. She was limp against the cage, drowsy and unmoving. She reminded Jongin of Diante.

One of the man-eaters scrunched up its nose. It turned around and looked directly at Adrian. Then crying out a shrill shriek, it drew all of the man-eaters’ attention to Adrian. Sighing loudly, Adrian brandished his sword and stepped forwards. Jongin did not dare move.

The first man-eater to reach Adrian was beheaded with an effortlessly swing of the Azurewrath. Within moments, Adrian had slaughtered every last one of the man-eaters and was bathed in their
blood. Then he turned to the cage to release the crying prisoners.

“Circe?” he asked the girl as the rest of them scampered away and she weakly nodded her head. Sheathing his sword, Adrian lifted the girl in his arms.

When Jongin reached the river, Kilveinath was asleep, save for the chirping crickets, croaking toads, and the Houndshear Tavern, where Dundor was probably still shedding tears of happiness over having his daughter back safe in his arms. Jongin could not stop thinking about the joy he had seen in Dundor and Lem’s faces when they saw Adrian enter the village with Circe in his arms.

The villagers had deemed Adrian as a God in that moment. They gawked at him, who was drenched in man-eater blood, bearing a little girl in his arms, with astonishment. Jongin saw the gratitude and veneration in their eyes. Adrian had returned every single one of their praises with a kind smile. It was then when Jongin realized how singular Adrian was—not because he was a Godblood, the Crown Prince of Auvradevas and was prophesied to save the Nine Realms from the Wyverns. But because despite all that, he was humble.

Jongin had thought he was the only royalty who could adapt to the austere life of a servant so easily. But Adrian was better than him. He even slept on the cold hard ground, ate morsels of stale bread to sate his hunger, walked miles barefooted, and rubbed shoulders with peasants, farmers, slaves, noblemen alike.

“You stand by and watch the disparagements cast on all that’s inferior to your superiority. You are a corrupted Prince who is way too bumptious and arrogant for his own good. You do not care for anyone besides your own people. You’d destroy everything in your path to achieving supremacy. You are a greedy man, like your father, and all of the Auvran ancestors.”

Jongin remembered saying all that to Adrian a few weeks ago. Today, Adrian had saved an entire village from the tyranny of the Trolgar Clan and had given back a father his joy. In spite of Adrian’s own agenda, he had gone through all that hardship to save the girl. And even if he had done it to get the information of the Vrilehm Mountains from Circe, he was doing it to save the Nine Realms. He wasn’t doing anything for himself. Had he ever done anything for himself, Jongin wondered. Did Adrian have his own longings?

While everyone saw this God in him, Jongin saw a quiet, self-effacing man, who did not like gathering attention to himself, even though it often found him on its own. Jongin saw a gentle happiness, a satisfaction in the way Adrian had smiled when he returned Circe to Dundor. He wondered how many had seen that Adrian.

Jongin detested himself for this feeling he was nurturing for the man that had destroyed his and many others’ lives.

Shoving his thoughts of Adrian aside for a moment, Jongin looked around him. Upon confirming that no one but the stars and moon were watching, he carefully unbuckled the belt of his tunic. He set the footwear aside and stepped out of his pants before taking the tunic off. He just needed to quickly wash the stench and sweat from his body.

He climbed into the water and shuddered when the cold water slapped against his skin. He descended below the water surface and submerged his head to wash his hair. The current was
deceptively strong. He scrubbed his skin with his hands when he resurfaced. He gazed up at the moon, washing the back of his neck.

He froze with his heart in his mouth and eyes popping out when he heard a rustle. If only he weren’t so terrified, he would have climbed out of the river. He gasped quietly and sank in the water until half his head was submerged when he saw Adrian emerging from the trees, carrying his blood-stained sword and arrows.

Adrian paused on his way when he spotted Jongin in the water. His gaze was steady and Jongin’s skin was searing hot even in the cold water. He hoped Adrian would just turn around and leave, at least for a while.

However, Adrian wended his way to the river, averting his eyes from Jongin.

Jongin, immediately tense with agitation and anxiety, desperately looked down to make sure the water concealed his bare body. His mouth turned dry and he gulped nervously as Adrian crouched on the riverside and began to unsheathe his sword. He was still covered in dried blood and dirt.

Adrian silently washed the blood off his sword and silver arrows. Once he was done with that chore, he rose to his full height and started undoing his clothes’ laces.

Jongin’s heart leaped. Nay. He cleared his throat, hoping that it would get some of Adrian’s attention. It did. Adrian looked over to him.

Biting his lip, Jongin lowered his gaze. “Can you… come back later? After I have bathed?” he asked politely in a shaky voice. He didn’t dare raise his head and look at Adrian’s reaction.

He received no reply for a long stretch and Jongin’s heart thumped faster. It was not fair to ask the man that had toiled the most all day to wait, but Jongin needed to get out of this freezing water and doing that while he was stark naked in front Adrian’s eyes was definitely not an option.

“Or,” he began once more. “just turn around so that I can get out of the water and get my clothes.”

He brought his head up and saw Adrian staring at him in bewilderment with his shirt unlaced. Jongin’s eyes fell on the cut on the side of Adrian’s waist. He licked a bead of water that dripped from the tip of his nose and landed on his lips. Adrian blinked at him suddenly and turned his back to Jongin.

Jongin still did not move, though. But he assured himself that he could trust Adrian’s integrity and decency. Jongin charged out of the water and hurried up the riverbank before gathering his clothes. He quickly yanked his tunic on and then pulled on his pants. When he had clothed himself again, he coughed coyly.

“You can turn now,” he said, but Adrian turned towards the river instead of facing Jongin. As the Godblood began to strip down, Jongin headed for the inn.

Lem welcomed him instead of Dundor. Jongin inquired about Circe and Lem informed him that she was sleeping now and that Dundor was at her side. Jongin was then offered a free meal and drink, as a token of appreciation. Jongin had done so little to save Circe, though. So, he refused the food and wished Lem a good night before proceeding to his room.

He should let Adrian sleep on the pallet tonight, he decided. He picked up the wilting Oosredil he had left on the pallet earlier today before he left the inn as he took a seat. He smelled the flower. Its fragrance was faint.
“What am I doing?” he questioned himself, lowering the flower and hanging his head. He had come along with Adrian for his own safety and to get closer to home. He could even run away now. It might even be a good riddance for Adrian. But he no longer wanted to.

His eyes were leaden with sleep. Tomorrow, he knew there would be more of women fawning over Adrian’s brawn and the mysterious traveller’s heroism. Not that he thought Adrian would entertain any of them, though.

Just when he was about to recline on the blanket that smelled like Adrian, the door creaked open.

Adrian set his sword and arrows aside, his hair still damp and water rivulets trickling down his chest. He grabbed his nightshirt and started to pull it on without heeding Jongin.

“Wait,” Jongin rasped and Adrian froze.

He rose to his feet and closed the distance between them. Frowning at the deep cut on Adrian’s waist, he brought a hand up. The moment stilled between them when Jongin’s fingers brushed the skin around the wound. It was hot. Adrian’s skin was always hot.

Jongin raised his head and locked gazes with the taller man. Then clearing his throat, he retrieved his hand and said, “You should have a healer look at that.”

Adrian’s jaw clenched. “Nay. No healer. I’m fine.”

Jongin smirked then. “Ah. It had slipped my mind that you fear healers.”

Adrian scowled. “I do not...”

“It’s all right, Prince Adrianus. Your secret is safe with me,” Jongin chuckled and sank back to the floor.

Adrian looked at the pallet. “You can sleep—”

“I’m good right here,” Jongin said, smiling.

Adrian did not argue. He pulled the nightshirt on and settled on the pallet. As usual, the silence hung heavy between them. Jongin decided to break it.

“What you… did today was… wonderful,” he said in a low voice. Adrian turned to face him with an arched brow. “You brought a daughter back to her father.”

Adrian stared at him again with a steady intent look and Jongin sighed, glancing away in embarrassment. “You miss your family,” Adrian said.

Jongin kept mum. Then at length, he whispered, “Very much.” He blinked the tears in his eyes away. “The thread of fates is so strange and unpredictable,” he laughed.

“How so?” Adrian asked.

“I have never even dreamed of something like this ever happening.”

“Something like this?”

Jongin licked his lips. “Making conversation with a Godblood, the hero of the Nine Realms, in the dead of the night in a shoddy inn while looking for clues to find the mythical Vrilehm Mountains to defeat bloody Wyverns.”
Adrian smirked. “Well, I have never imagined anything like this either.”

They gazed into each other’s eyes for a moment. “Can I… ask you a question?” Jongin asked when the moment had passed. Adrian nodded. “Why… haven’t you taken an auxiliary? Helathor told me that… you used to have one when you were younger and that he… had died in a battle.”

Adrian’s face paled. He sighed and tucked an arm under his head for comfort. “I did not believe anyone could replace him,” he muttered.

“Absolutely no one in the Nine Realms? Your father had found some of the strongest men.”

Adrian shook his head. “I mean, by brawn, yes. Many could match and outdo him. But… they wouldn’t be him. He was… my best friend. My brother. Evzen and I were brothers by blood. It wasn’t like that with him. He and I were…” he trailed off with a heavy breath. That moment, Jongin saw the grief in Adrian’s eyes. And for some odd reason, he wanted to take that grief away.

“I… don’t really know what it feels like to lose someone you care about so much,” Jongin admitted. “My mother died when I was very young. Honestly, I don’t remember anything about her. But I’m sure things would have been drastically different had she been alive.”

Adrian held onto Jongin’s gaze. “I’m sorry,” he said and Jongin felt his heart clench.

“Can I ask you something else?”

Adrian scoffed and smiled. “I never knew you were so curious about me. I thought you wanted nothing to do with me.”

“Well, I might as well get to know the Godblood when I have the chance.”

Adrian’s smile broadened. “What is it?”

“Um,” Jongin drawled. “You said that you see your mother in your dreams. What does she tell you?”

Adrian hesitated to answer now. “She tells me… that she’s waiting for me and that she… is always looking out for me.”

“Do you think she helped you that night when the Wyvern attacked? The way your arm…”

Adrian sighed. “Perhaps.”

Jongin realized that Adrian’s eyes had gone limpid with worry now. So, he opted for a lighter topic. “Do you really abstain?”

That made Adrian laugh and his deep voice tickled Jongin’s spine. “That is my favourite hearsay about me.”

Jongin’s eyes widened. “So, you are not a celibate?!”

“I am most certainly not,” he snorted. “But I would not bed just anyone.”

Jongin’s cheeks reddened. Where had the courage to ask such questions come from? He could not believe himself. “Are you content about taking the Princess Edothise’s hand in marriage, then?” he asked in a small voice.

Adrian’s eyes narrowed. “It is the furthest thing from my mind right now. I have Wyverns to battle
for the time being."

“But you did not refuse when your father—”

“I would wed her when there’s peace again,” he said.

Jongin looked into Adrian’s eyes. “Do you… want that?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, do you want… any of this?”

Adrian’s eyes narrowed. “Why wouldn’t I?” he said with a sense of finality in his tone and it was a hint for Jongin to stop asking questions.

Frowning with a racing heart, Jongin shifted on the floor, his back facing Adrian now. He regretted asking that last question because he did not want to hear an answer to it. He had somehow known that the answer would hurt him.

He concentrated on Adrian’s ragged breathing for a long while. The Auvran Prince did not sleep either, even though he was exhausted. He was lying too close, Jongin was beginning to feel the warmth of Adrian’s body against his back. Perhaps he never should have gone with Adrian. Jevar might have caused him harm if he had stayed back in Auvradevas without Adrian’s protection, but at least it would have been better than catching these strange feelings he had never felt before.

He tried to not to think too much about it. It might just be some physical attraction, nothing more. Adrian detested the Alsiramene. Harbouring and nurturing such feelings for him would not be worth it. Jongin held a hand to his chest, unable to close his eyes. His heart pounded against his palm.

The straw in the pallet rustled and Jongin stayed still as Adrian jolted up and stormed out of the room without a word.

* * *

“Have some more, darling,” Dundor said gently, scooping up another spoonful of pottage. Jongin stopped at the door and smiled at the innkeeper. “Oh, come in.”

Jongin entered. He greeted Circe with a nod of his head. Now washed, he could see that Circe and Lem looked uncannily alike. Circe’s hair was longer and she was slightly shorter than her brother. That aside, there was nothing that could tell them apart.

“How are you feeling?” Jongin asked Circe.

The girl looked up at him and smiled shakily.

“We cannot thank you enough,” Dundor said.

Jongin blushed. “I didn’t really do anything,” he replied. “You owe your thanks to… him.”

Dundor grinned to himself and fed Circe another spoon of pottage. Jongin bowed his head and left the room. He wasn’t sure where Adrian was. He hadn’t returned to the room even as the morning came.

“Have you seen… my master?” Jongin asked Lem when he found him at the counter.

“Oh, good morning!” the boy sang with a sprightly grin. “You didn’t know? The entire village saw
him sleeping on a tree last night.” He laughed and Jongin’s eyes widened. “I just saw him head for
the river.”

Jongin muttered his thanks and started towards the river. The morning was bright, warm. He saw
cows lazily grazing in a field of grass. Hens pecked on the kernels from the ground. Children’s
laughter filled the light air. He saw a wife kiss her husband goodbye as he left for work, carrying a
pickaxe. Must be a miner.

His attention shifted to the two boys shoving a little girl away, snatching the wooden sword from her
hand. The girl did not cry. She snarled at them and bounced back up to grab her wooden sword
back.

“You’re a girl!” one of the boys cried, refusing to return her sword.

Jongin huffed and walked over to them. He took the wooden sword away from the boy and handed
it back to the girl. The boys stared at him in shock for a moment before they scurried away.

Smiling at the little girl, Jongin crouched to the ground and said, “I am glad that you picked yourself
up when they pushed you down and fought those naughty boys back.”

The girl beamed brightly at once. She looked proud. “Thank you, stranger,” she cooed and skipped
away with her toy sword.

Jongin proceeded to the river, hoping that he would just bump into Adrian halfway. He was curious
about what Adrian’s next move was.

He came to a halt when he heard a group of women giggling and whispering by the river.

“Do you think he’d look at me?” one of them asked excitedly.

“Oh, by the Seven, look at him!” another sighed in admiration. A series of giggles followed.

“What if he’s married?”

“No you think he’d care? Why couldn’t there be more men like him in Kilveinath…”

Jongin gripped his jaw. He edged closer to the women to look at whatever they were squirming
about. He was expecting Adrian to be bathing in the river or to be climbing out of the water like a
hero, naked and flipping his hair back or something.

But he was surprised when he found Adrian sitting on the riverbank with his arms loosely hugging
his legs. He was staring vacantly at the flowing river. His hair was still damp, his nightshirt unlaced,
and his boots taken off. The Azurewrath was resting on the ground at his side. He looked so peaceful
like this. Not waging war somewhere and killing monsters. He seemed content.

“You should go and say hello, Ursa!” a woman cried, pushing another forward.

“No! Are you mad?! You go,” Ursa rasped, though her cheeks reddened.

Jongin cleared his throat, his eyebrows furrowing into a scowl. The women jumped and gasped at
him. They immediately scampered away and Jongin approached Adrian.

“You seem to be lost in your thoughts,” Jongin remarked lightly.

Adrian did not budge. He continued to look straight ahead with an expressionless face. Jongin let out
a sigh and sat beside him. Hugging his knees to his chest, he gazed at the river, too.
“I’m sorry,” he said after a while. Adrian finally glanced at him with an arched eyebrow. Jongin looked away, flushed. “If I had said something presumptuous last night.”

Adrian scoffed then. “You had called me a bumptious oaf,” he said with a soft laugh that fluttered Jongin’s heart. “I do not think you could say anything more presumptuous.”

Jongin burned with embarrassment. He was surprised that Adrian remembered that comment. “What are you worried about the Wyverns, then?”

“I’m thinking about Baashere,” he said and tossed a pebble into the water.

Jongin almost laughed, but he could only stare at the man in amusement. “I have heard of kings having tigers and lions for pets. But I have never heard of any obeying their master like… Baashere does.”

Adrian smiled a proud smile. “I’ve had him since he was just a little cub.”

“Not just that,” Jongin said. “You are a man worthy of his loyalty.”

Adrian blinked. Jongin realized it was the first time he had ever said anything kind to Adrian. It was his first praise. Adrian turned his head away, picking up another pebble.

“I like him,” Jongin admitted.

Adrian laughed, looking flattered. “He likes you, too.”

Jongin faked a gasp and chuckled. His heart felt light and burdened at the same time. Here he was, smiling at the man he had sworn to hurt. Instead, he was hurting himself.

“I worry about my family, my people, too,” Adrian said at length. “While I’m not there… I fear something might happen.”

“Do they worry for you?” Jongin asked.

Adrian stilled completely and he dropped his gaze so low that Jongin thought he had said something wrong again.

“Queen Ivoarel must worry for you,” Jongin said when Adrian gave no answer.

Adrian lifted his head and squinted at the sun with his thick eyebrows drawn together. “I wouldn’t know,” he said. “The last thing she said to me was that she hoped me to perish and that the throne truly belonged to Evzen.” He laughed and rose to his feet. He dusted the grit from his pants and pulled his boots on.

Jongin gaped at him. He couldn’t tell if Adrian were mocking him or if he were serious. “She… said that?” he asked, frowning.

“You know nothing about me, Princeling.” Adrian sighed, taking his nightshirt off to rinse it in the water. Jongin stared at the bullwhip scars on Adrian’s back and felt his stomach knot uneasily.

Jongin hurried to his feet and blocked Adrian’s path when the man began to walk away. “But I saw how you care for her,” he said.

Adrian shook his head. “She is my mother, regardless of what she may think of me.” With that, he brushed past Jongin, carrying his shirt in one hand and the sword in the other.
Jongin stood there for a moment, completely baffled. All this while, he had believed that Adrian was a brute with no compassion. Now, he was proven wrong. So wrong. He was trying to be a good son, nothing less. But even so, when there was an injustice, he had stood against his father and the entire court. Jongin had seen Adrian hold his mother’s hand so gently even when she had uttered such venomous words to him.

Sure, Adrian was a hero, a war champion, a Godblood. But Jongin was beginning to see his heart and was falling for it.

* * *

Circe kept her head low, refusing to meet Adrian’s gaze. Jongin kept half of his attention on Adrian and the girl, and the other half on his meal. He gnawed at the honeyed meat, leering at the ginger cake that was waiting for him. Dundor had thrown him and Adrian a small feast to show his gratitude.

“The inn’s never been this full,” Lem commented, twiddling with his flute. Jongin glanced at the women that were ogling Adrian lasciviously, whispering lewd remarks among themselves as they drank spiced ale. They paid for more snacks and drinks just to stick around and try their luck with Adrian. Adrian, however, paid them absolutely no attention.

Dundor finally sent them away when evening fell. Jongin enjoyed his Aaronna tea Lem had made for him.

“Time for bed, Circe,” Dundor said.

Adrian looked at the innkeeper with a sharp glare. “I’d like to talk to your daughter for a moment if that’s all right with you,” he told Dundor.

Though the innkeeper frowned, he knew he owed Adrian this more than anything. Adrian had come looking for Circe. Jongin stayed put while Dundor and Lem left the dining area.

“You know who I am, don’t you?” Adrian asked Circe in a low, firm voice.

Circe did not respond immediately. But she eventually nodded, still not meeting Adrian’s eyes. Jongin put the tankard down and watched them.

“Then you know what I could possibly be here for,” Adrian added. “You are a clever girl, in spite of what everyone else believes. You are no fool.”

“I…” Circe spoke up for the first time today. Jongin’s attention peaked. “I had heard that the Godblood had saved Auvradevas from a Wyvern.”

Adrian smiled at her then. “You’ve spoken of the Vrilehm Mountains in the midst of Auvran guards.”

Circe bowed her head. “I swear by the Seven, I do not know where it is. I met a rhymester in Ag Midgol a few moons ago,” she muttered. “He told me that he knows where to find a map that led to the mountains. He said there’d be gold there. The home to the Wyverns in the olden days.”

“Who is this rhymester?” Adrian asked.

“Brelges,” Circe whispered. “People call him a madman but he knows. He knows. And he is a friend.”
Adrian digested the information for a moment before he rose to his feet. “We ought to get moving,” he told Jongin.

“Now?” Jongin asked.

“We shan’t waste time.”

* * *

“I will never forget what you have done,” Dundor said as Adrian and Jongin walked out of the Houndshear Tavern. Adrian did not bother to help Jongin with the knapsacks and Jongin refrained himself from growling at the man. “Please, accept this as a token of my appreciation.”

Jongin glanced at the saddled tawny mare waiting outside the inn.

“I cannot accept that Dundor,” Adrian said. “It is too much.”

Dundor looked pleased that Adrian seemed to be impressed. “Oh, please. I beg of you to rid us of her,” he laughed. “She is very recalcitrant. Her name is Thelme.”

Adrian frowned. “Thank you.”

Jongin sighed in relief. This way, he would not have to walk all the way to the town nearby. He settled the bags on the mare that pranced a little. Adrian caught the horse’s head and stroked her nose. She huffed but quickly mellowed in Adrian’s touch. Adrian smiled at her. He must love animals, Jongin thought.

“Houndshear will always be open to you,” Lem told Jongin. After saying his goodbyes to the lad, Jongin turned to the mare.

Adrian and Jongin stared at each other then. They realized they would have to ride together. There was no doubt that Adrian was the better rider. Jongin looked petulant when Adrian mounted the mare first.

Then without looking down at Jongin, Adrian held his hand out for Jongin to take.

Jongin, with his heart jumping to his throat, slid his hand onto Adrian’s calloused hand. His hand was dainty, his finger slender, against Adrian’s. His heart did all sorts of embarrassing things when Adrian wrapped his huge hand around Jongin’s hand and hauled him up to mount the horse.

“Hold on,” Adrian said as he reined the mare to move towards the stone arch at the village’s entrance.

Jongin scowled. “Nay,” he said firmly and even leaned back so that his chest wasn’t brushing Adrian’s back.

Whatever happened, he promised to himself that he would never hold onto Adrian.

Jongin roused to the sound of temple bells pealing and the cold wind of daybreak slapping against
one of his cheeks. His other cheek was warm, resting against a hard, hot surface. He moaned sleepily and grunted when his body jerked forward. He gripped whatever that he was holding onto tighter when he realized he was still on the horse.

It was then when it dawned on him that he was leaning against Adrian while he was asleep with his face pressed on Adrian’s back and arms wound around Adrian’s waist. He was paralyzed for a moment.

His eyes flung open and he blinked rapidly to clear his blurry vision. Ag Midgol was a lot different than Kilveinath. The first light of the day washed over the town. The cottages were bigger, the wells were deeper, the soil more fertile. There was even a temple on top of the hill.

Adrian reined the horse to a stop and Jongin’s heart thundered so hard that he was sure that Adrian would be able to hear it. Adrian said nothing even after they had stopped. He waited, aware of Jongin’s consciousness.

Clearing his throat, Jongin unlocked his arms around Adrian’s waist and jolted back. Some guards glowered at them. Ag Midgol was also under Auvran dominion now.

Jongin did not dare turn a hair for moments. He felt embarrassed. He had fallen asleep on Adrian’s back and he prayed that he hadn’t drooled on the Godblood.

Adrian was waiting for him to dismount. Jongin quickly jumped off the horse and rubbed his eyes on the hilt of his palms. Adrian dismounted behind him.

“Are you hungry, girl?” Adrian asked.

“Yes,” Jongin sighed, holding a hand to his stomach. He turned around and found Adrian staring at him with his hand frozen on Thelme’s nose. Jongin wanted the earth to swallow him up then and there. “Oh, you were talking to her.” He scratched the back of his head and looked away before Adrian could notice his reddened cheeks.

He silently followed Adrian as he started towards a vendor stall by the well, dragging the mare with him by her reins.

“Just passing through,” Adrian informed an old lady when she inquired of their business in the town.

Some of the townspeople gawked at Adrian while they started the day busily. Vendors put their merchandizes to sell on display in the market. Jongin bowed at a priest before turning his attention to the fruit stall Adrian had stopped at. He purchased two mountain figs.

Jongin’s heart warmed childishly when Adrian handed him one of the figs. “Thank you,” he whispered shyly as he accepted the fruit with both hands.

Adrian then turned to the mare and fed her the other fig. Once his followers were fed, Adrian faced the fruit seller again. “Where can I find Brelges, The Rhymester?” he demanded.

The fruit seller cocked an eyebrow. “You mean, Brelges, The Loony Old Fool? He’s probably singing nonsense up by the temple,” said the fruiterer.

“And the town stable?”

The man directed Adrian towards the stable.

Adrian drew the cowl over his head as he started towards the stable. Jongin followed at Thelme’s
side, taking a bite of the sweet fig. He observed every tall, dark-haired, olive-skinned man his eyes fell on. He used to find many men charming and handsome. But now, he thought they had nothing on a man like Adrian. Adrian was unmatched—his skills, his might, his appearance, and his strength of character.

He’d be damned if he ever let Adrian know that.

Adrian found Thelme a stall to rest in and some water for her to drink. While he groomed her and helped her settle in, Jongin waited outside, gazing at the town.

He then wondered what Adrian thought of him. Sure, Jongin had completely different opinions about the Godblood a few weeks back. He even hated himself for the way he felt about Adrian now. But he was curious about what Adrian’s views were on him.

“You are a heavy sleeper.”

Jongin jumped and spun around to face Adrian. “Uh,” he drawled. “I…”

Adrian smiled smugly at Jongin’s embarrassment. “You also make these little whimpering noises.”

Jongin’s face died. His felt his heart ache then. His jaw felt so tight that it made his head hurt. He outstared Adrian with blood pounding in his ears.

Adrian had said nothing that should make his heart swell so. But it did. And it was painful. It had come out of nowhere and Jongin had never thought something so trivial could spark a fire within him like this.

Adrian must have noticed the struggle in Jongin’s expression, he harrumphed and started walking away. It took Jongin a moment to snap out of the stupor and hurry after Adrian.

Was it right for him to feel this way? How could something so meaningless seize his breath? Adrian could even be mocking him. But he wasn’t. There was nothing but sincerity in those dark amber eyes when he said that. He was paying attention to Jongin while he slept.

They climbed up the stairs to the temple in silence. Unlike in Kilveinath, not everyone took interest in them. People only heeded them to look at Adrian and his golden sword.

Adrian ignored the priests and priestesses he passed, but Jongin paid them his respects. He had missed praying to the Seven in silence, in a temple, and receiving the priests’ blessings in return. He paused at the entrance of the temple and frowned sadly.

Would Adrian mock or rebuke him if he prayed? Jongin decided that even if he cared, he would not let, not Adrian, but anyone dictate his beliefs.

He knelt on the ground before the temple and pressed his hands together, bowing his head with his eyes closed. He prayed silently for a moment, praying for the welfare of his father, his sister, his people, his friends, including Awyn, Riolda and Diante. He then thought of Adrian unconsciously. Did he want to pray for this murderer?

His heart bared open and in that moment, he prayed for Adrian’s happiness, too.

He cracked his eyes open to a priestess blessing him with a white flower. Jongin rose to his full height and turned to see Adrian waiting for him. Though he had expected Adrian to be angry or annoyed, he only looked surprised.
Jongin sighed and walked towards the Godblood, placing the flower behind his ear as a habit. “I haven’t prayed in weeks,” Jongin told Adrian when he caught up with him.

Adrian was looking vacantly at the flower behind Jongin’s ear. Then shaking his head, he turned on his heel and stomped away.

They wandered aimlessly for a while before they finally found Brelges petting a stray cat while singing an incomprehensive song behind the temple where no one frequented.

He was an old man, older than Dundor, dressed in rags. He had a wonderful singing voice, though. It made Jongin stop in his tracks and admire the song.

“Brelges?” Adrian called and the rhymester looked at him, grinning as he continued to sing. “Your friend, Circe sent us.”

Brelges stopped his song and laughed at Adrian. “I heard that she was taken by the Trolgar Clan! Is she home again?!” he exclaimed loudly.

Adrian nodded his head. “She told me that you knew of a map to the Vrilehm Mountains.”

Brelges’ lips stretched into a mischievous grin. “So he comes, seeking the treasure!” he sang. “But is that what you truly want—are you really sure?”

Jongin smiled at the rhymester. He was a funny man. Adrian looked a slightly vexed.

“I would be grateful and offer you anything you desire if you’d tell me where I could find the map,” Adrian said.

Brelges guffawed, holding his stomach. “What I desire! Oh, boy, I know what your heart desires, do you want to know, I’ll be honest—I am no liar.” He clicked his tongue and skipped around Adrian.

Adrian clenched his jaw. “I know of other means of making you speak, Brelges.”

“Now, there’s a threat. Oooh, look at my cold sweat!”

Jongin laughed uncontrollably and Adrian frowned at him.

Brelges turned his attention to Jongin and beamed. “There it stands, oh, mighty God. So close at hand! The little voice in your heart, says take it before you fall apart!”

Adrian snapped then. He grabbed the rhymester by the rags he wore and yanked him close. “Enough with your rhymes. Now, speak,” he demanded and Jongin knew he was ordering the man as a Crown Prince, as the Auvran commander-in-chief now.

Brelges chuckled. “You come seeking the mount. But beware of the sins you must count. Quick, riddle me these three and the answers shall be your key.”

Adrian released Brelges and scowled. “Go ahead,” he spat.

Brelges sang in excitement. “Death to the stars and moon, buds blossom into full blooms.”

Adrian’s face crumpled with confusion. He parted his lips to say something but snapped them shut again. He rubbed his temples in frustration. Brelges laughed.

Jongin stared at the rhymester. He then shifted his gaze to the sky. “Death to the stars and moon,” he muttered to himself. As the night ends, the light of the moon and the stars died out. It marked the day.

The rhymester cried out a laugh and nodded his head. “Smart lad,” he said. Adrian pinned Jongin with an astounded look. “The horizon shows you the way, the season tells you what day. I am joy, woe, rage, and fright. Without me you’ll never feel right.”

Jongin glanced at Adrian, who stared at him instead. Brelges winked at Jongin.

Casting his eyes low, Jongin thought about it for a moment. “Horizon shows the way… East, west, north, south. Season tells what day… Spring, summer, autumn, winter. Joy, woe, rage, fright.” He looked up at Brelges. “Four. The answer is four.”

“Brains and brawn, thoughts and thew!” the rhymester chimed. “Here’s the last, answer me fast. A mother’s gift. A child’s right. A devotee’s privilege. A fool’s weakness. A man’s strength. A woman’s touch. Two hearts’ desire. Two souls’ sacrifice. Don’t fool yourselves and deep in your hearts, tell me what dwells.”

Jongin did not have to think much for this. And from the way Adrian was looking at him, he knew neither did Adrian. Jongin kept silent, turning his head away.

“Love,” he heard Adrian answer.

“Ah, you say so. And the first light will show,” Brelges finished with a bow. “And that is all I know.” He waved his hand at them and cavorted away, whistling.

Adrian started after him but stopped. He sighed. “I don’t think we’ll get anything else out of him,” he said.

“He said the answers are our key,” Jongin replied. “Dayspring, four, and love.”

“Those could mean a million different things,” he grumbled.

“They have to be connected to one another.”

Adrian turned and faced Jongin with an arched brow. “You’re quite the little scholar, aren’t you?”

“They weren’t that tough,” Jongin said defensively. “What now?”

Adrian exhaled a loud breath. “We ought to get some rest and figure this out first.”

* * *

“We could really use Scholar Helathor’s help right about now,” Jongin said as they jostled through the crowd in the market. “Dayspring, four, and love. You’re right. They could mean anything. How do you know you could believe the rhymester? He could have been lying or misleading us.”

Adrian was not listening to him as he had his face scrunched up in concentration. The cowl pulled over his head made it impossible to read anything else.

The townspeople bustled about the market while vendors cried out prices, promoting their merchandizes. The morning sun blazed in the sky like a golden medallion. Jongin was surprised to see how composed Adrian was, brushing shoulders with commoners, in spite of being a Godblood.

Jongin’s stomach grumbled and clenched. The scent of bugbear candy and tea-smoked buns swirled in the air. His mouth watered. He looked at the food stalls and sighed.
Adrian had stopped, too. He was staring at Jongin when the latter looked at him. Jongin frowned. He wasn’t used to starving. For the first few days in the Auvran palace, it had felt strange when his stomach grumbled. Hunger had been a stranger to him. Food found him before he even asked all his life. He never had to seek out food.

Adrian meandered his way to the food stalls and Jongin followed. He purchased two skewers of bugbear candy and handed one Jongin. Grinning from ear to ear, Jongin quickly took a bite of the spicy candy. He cleaned the skewer while Adrian paid the vendor. He then leered at the skewer of bugbear candy Adrian was still holding.

Blinking at the way Jongin was eyeballing the skewer, Adrian held it out to him. Jongin bit his lip but shyly accepted the other skewer, too. Adrian looked away with a hint of a smirk on his lips and bought three tea-smoked buns.

They proceeded to the outskirts of the town after fetching Thelme and found shelter under the shade of a tree. Adrian tied the mare’s rein to a branch and took a tea-smoked bun for himself before handing out the rest to Jongin.

They ate in silence for a moment as the soft wind whispered against their cheeks and tousled their hair. The leaves on the tree danced to the flow of the wind. Adrian leaned against the tree and sighed heavily once he was done with his food. He gazed ahead at the farmhouses outside the town.

Jongin watched Adrian instead, taking small bites of the dry bun. He wondered what Adrian would look like without the beard. Probably a lot like Prince Evzenius. His eyes wandered to the slit of Adrian’s shirt where he had left it unlaced. It displayed the scar on the Godblood’s chest. Jongin then wondered what Adrian’s breaking point was. Every man had to have a weakness. A fault. A flaw. There was no question that Adrian was physically undefeatable and his body had taken and could take unbelievable amounts of suffering an ordinary man could not. But what would break his perfect composure and bring out the beast in him? Or destroy him completely?

Why hadn’t anyone figured that out? Was Adrian so good at hiding it? Or perhaps he really had no weakness.

Jongin had been staring at Adrian for so long, so lost in his own thoughts that he had not noticed Adrian had turned to stare back at him. Jongin licked his lips and glanced away. He took another bite of the bun.

“Thank you,” Adrian said and Jongin’s eyebrows rose. “I wouldn’t have… figured that out on my own.”

“Oh,” he muttered. “It was nothing. We still don’t know if it’s going to help us. Don’t you think it would be quicker and easier if you had brought help?”

“I cannot put anyone in danger for my destiny. It has to be me.”

“You think this is your destiny?” Jongin asked.

“It is my calling. It is what I was born for.”

“Did your mother tell you that?”

Adrian did not answer. Then at length, he said, “You shouldn’t have come.”

“That was my choice,” Jongin said. “I’d rather die on this journey than bow my heads in fear to the Auvrans.”
Adrian frowned. “You don’t have to fear us all. I was the one who ruined you. Your resentment should be for me.”

Jongin remained silent. He didn’t want to say anything that he would surely come to regret. They sat under the tree as the sun rose. Adrian eventually reclined on the grass and threw an arm over his eyes to block out the sunlight. He hadn’t slept all night, Jongin realized.

While Adrian slept, Jongin petted Thelme and fed her one of the apples Adrian had stocked up for the mare. He then watched Adrian for a long while, admiring the little hair on Adrian’s chest and the way his chest and abdomen heaved steadily as he breathed. He stirred a few times, shifting his head uncomfortably on the grass. Jongin was tempted to slide a knapsack under Adrian’s head for a pillow but he didn’t want to wake the man up. The sun washed over Adrian’s mane-like hair and bronze skin.

Jongin huffed and dropped his gaze to his palms. “What am I doing,” he whispered to himself. He tried to avert his attention to something else. Anything else. He thought about the riddle answers for hours.

The sun began to descend in the sky as the noon passed.

“Dayspring, four, love,” Jongin muttered. They had to lead to a map. Which meant he should think in terms of a location. “Four…” Perhaps the Fourth Realm? Dayspring. Dawn. Dawn in the Fourth Realm? What role did love play in any of this?

“Love, love, Fourth Realm, Dawn, Dawn,” Jongin chanted, leaning his head against the tree. Something that signified love, perhaps. What was in the Fourth Realm that signified love?

Jongin’s eyes bulged out and his heart skipped a beat. Gasping, he pulled away from the tree and crawled over to Adrian.

“Wake up!” he cried, shaking Adrian up with a hand splayed on the Prince’s chest. Adrian jolted up at once and his hand reflexively flew to a side of Jongin’s waist to catch him when Jongin almost fell back, startled. Jongin’s hand fistled Adrian’s shirt by the chest as Adrian’s hand painfully clutched at Jongin’s waist. That was when Jongin grunted and his free hand struck a side of Adrian’s face. With a start, Adrian released his waist and drew away from him.

Jongin froze, retrieving his hands. He paused and waited to see if Adrian would hit him back. Adrian didn’t. The man only gaped at him in shock.

“No, you wake up like an animal?” Jongin said and Adrian glared at him, rubbing a side of his jaw that Jongin had slapped.

“Do you always wake up like an animal?” he spat through his teeth and ran a hand through his mussed hair. “What happened?”

“Oh, yes,” Jongin rasped and knelt politely before Adrian. “I think I figured it out!”

Adrian blinked. “What?”

“The riddle. They were clues! Four—the Fourth Realm. Dayspring—the Temple of Dawn in the Kingdom of Ruvraeshara, which is in the Fourth Realm.”

Adrian’s eyebrow rose in scepticism. “What about love, then?”

“The Tree of Mydimeia is at the Temple of Dawn! I have seen it!”
“Mydimeia? The Goddess of Love?” Adrian said, looking rather surprised and impressed.

“Yes,” Jongin said, nodding. He pushed himself up to his feet. “The tree is the symbol of love. That’s it! Of course, I am not entirely certain. I could be completely wrong. But it makes sense.”

“It does,” Adrian admitted and stood up. “How far is Ruvraeshara from here?”

“Um,” Jongin hummed, looking at the sun. “It’s due east of the north of the Third Realm. If we rode without rest, we could reach Ruvraeshara in three days.”

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Ruvraeshara, Year 5138, 30th Ikthadag

His back was sore, stiff, and aching. But he knew Adrian’s back was probably in a worse shape since he had not only been riding without rest but was also bracing Jongin’s weight whenever Jongin leaned against him to sleep.

They had stopped a few times on the road to rest in the past three days. They filled their waterskin when they found rivers. They met a few merchants and travellers along the way. Other times, they stopped so that Adrian could catch a few winks while Jongin kept an eye on their food supply and horse. But Jongin usually had both his eyes on Adrian.

He felt sleep tugging at his eyelids. Though they had reached the Kingdom of Ruvraeshara, they were still in the outlying districts of the kingdom. There was still a long way to go to reach the Temple of Dawn.

The night was nearing its end as the first light threatened to brighten the sky. Jongin kept falling against Adrian, thanks to a sleepless night.

“Sleep if you want to,” Adrian said.

“My back… hurts,” Jongin mumbled tiredly.

The mare came to a halt then. Jongin drowsily lifted his head and blinked his limpid, sleep leaden eyes. “Get down,” Adrian said.

“Why?”

“Get down,” he repeated.

Sighing and half yawning, Jongin dismounted the horse. He stretched his arms and grimaced when his back stung in agony. Adrian held a hand down to him after scooting back on the horse. Jongin looked at him confusedly.

“Ride at the front,” Adrian said.

Jongin was far too exhausted and sleepy to argue. He took Adrian’s hand and let himself be pulled up onto the horse again. He was clearly small when compared to Adrian’s extraordinary size. He wouldn’t be blocking Adrian’s view.

He leaned back against Adrian’s chest as the horse began to move again. He felt Adrian’s heart beat upon his shoulder blade. He smiled, his eyes falling heavier. He rested his head on Adrian’s chest.
and drifted off to sleep.

* * *

Jongin woke to the intoxicating scent of Adrian’s skin, which he had grown very familiar with in the past three days. Jongin no longer smelled like himself. He smelled of Adrian, constantly wrapped in his warmth.

That wasn’t the only thing he had roused to, though. A lively music played around him and there was a cacophony of voices. His eyes fluttered open and he was instantly attacked by the vicious brightness. He raised his head and looked down at Adrian’s arms securing him in place as Adrian kept his grip on the horse reins. He felt Adrian’s beard graze against the back of his head.

Around him, as the mare strode through the village, men and women scuttled furtively. Some stopped to gawk at them. Ruvraeshara resembled Warinia in many ways. Its lush green fields and the sea reminded Jongin of home. The air smelled of the sea, he could almost taste the salt on his tongue. He had been here once, specifically on a pilgrimage with his father. But it was many years ago.

He shuddered when he felt Adrian’s breath against the nape of his neck. He did not dare turn and look at the man, they were apart from each other by a hair’s breadth. Jongin was suddenly extremely conscious of Adrian’s legs around his. He clenched his teeth when he realized his rear was pressed into Adrian’s crotch.

His breathing quickened and he was close to breaking a sweat. Fortunately, Adrian pulled over. Jongin got off the horse before Adrian could tell him to. He did not meet Adrian’s gaze as he scrubbed his face with his bare palms, hoping that his cheeks were not embarrassingly crimson.

He then brought his head up to greet the Ruvraens, who were rubbernecking at them with curiosity. Ruvraeshara was a kingdom, far smaller than Warinia, situated close to the sea. Unlike Warinians, the Ruvraens were primitive. They lived in huts and wore simple clothes. They hunted and fished for food. And like Warinia, all were equal and free here. Jongin looked at the young boys, clad in women’s tunics, earrings, and necklaces. They even had their eyes lined with kohl. Some girls wore hunting raiment, carrying bows and arrows. Most of them were fishermen and fisherwomen, however. The Ruvraens had a queen, who lived in the longhouse. She was the widow of the king that preceded her.

The kingdom was dominated by women. There was a widespread belief that the Kingdom of Ruvraeshara was bedevilled by Spellsingers—Sirens of the sea that seduce sinful, lustful men to the sea after nightfall. Countless men had drowned to death and the Sirens continue to take the Ruvraen men as they please.

Jongin bowed at the people and they returned the kind gesture. Adrian’s eyes were boring into the Ruvraens as more of them came out of their huts to greet the travellers. The music died as people gathered around them.

“This is a kingdom?” Adrian asked in a low whisper.

“There are many kingdoms like this in the Fourth Realm,” Jongin replied.

“I see why my father takes so little interest in the Fourth Realm,” he scoffed.

Jongin frowned. Sighing, he turned to the woman that approached him with a bowl of candied flower petals. Jongin took one and thanked her. Adrian refused.

“Where do you come from?” the woman asked, noticing Jongin’s distinct features.
“Warinia,” he answered, knowing that he could not lie his way out of this.

The woman smiled. “Our homes are yours if you haven’t come bearing malice with you.”

Adrian’s attention was elsewhere. So, Jongin answered instead. “Nay, certainly not. We have come hoping to enter the Temple of Dawn.”

The woman’s expression turned bitter at once. The others began to murmur in detestation.

“We would not cause you any harm,” Jongin said quickly.

“You have come with blades and arrows,” the woman spat, glowering at Adrian. “An Auvran would not enter our temples without ill intentions.”

Adrian scowled at her with a lockjaw.

“Then let me,” Jongin said, removing his sword belt. “I’m a son of the Warinian land. I would never intend to besmirch your hallowed grounds.”

Adrian caught Jongin’s arm harshly and Jongin looked back at him, wincing. Adrian’s eyebrows were knotted in a vicious glare. “Nay, you will not,” he said strictly. “This isn’t your calling.”

It felt like a punch to the gut. “Have you no faith in me?” he asked.

Adrian pinned him with a hard look. “There is no reason for me to trust you,” he said a moment later and released Jongin’s arm.

Jongin’s heart wilted. He understood why Adrian thought so. There was no reason for Adrian to trust him. If Jongin had been in Adrian’s shoes, he wouldn’t trust him, too. But it still hurt him. His chest felt tight.

“Turn around and go the way you had come in,” the Ruvraen woman said.

“Please,” Jongin begged. “Provide us shelter for the night, at least. We have travelled far for days without proper rest and food.”

The woman looked at him with pity. She turned to the others and they nodded their heads. “Very well. We open our homes to you tonight. You will eat and dance with us,” she said.

Jongin smiled and bowed his head. “Thank you very much.”

A boy stepped forward and took Thelme’s reins. “He will take your horse to the stable,” the woman informed, discerning the distress Adrian’s face. “Come.” She led them towards the longhouse. “I’m the Ruvraen Queen.”

“Your Majesty,” Jongin rasped, completely surprised. The woman looked nothing like royalty. Jongin vaguely remembered her late husband when he was the king. But he hadn’t had the chance to meet the Queen in person until now.

“Oh, please. Call me Aunike. I am happy to welcome you. It is always nice to welcome a Warinian.”

Adrian felt slighted, his wry face was conveying annoyance. Jongin would have found it comical if only he weren’t so desolated by what Adrian had just told him.

“Where are your men?” Adrian asked confusedly.
Aunike sighed. “Most of them are at sea all day. They return home with the day’s catch and we celebrate every night for what the Goddess of Sea and light has blessed us with.”

Jongin glanced at Adrian to see if there was any sign of pride in his eyes when Aunike spoke of his mother.

“Where is the Temple of Dawn?” Adrian asked Jongin once Aunike was strutting ahead of them.

“On the beach. We cannot enter until they allow us to enter,” Jongin answered without an enthusiasm in his voice.

“We are wasting our time,” Adrian spat under his breath.

“You could tell them who you really are,” Jongin suggested.

“They’d loathe me just as you do,” Adrian scoffed. He was right. These people valued peace above all. They detested barbarians like the Auvrans. They surely would not welcome a leader of wars in their kingdom, let alone allow him into their temples.

“You know of other methods, surely? Doesn’t your hand itch to get what you want the instant you want it? Isn’t your sword waiting to obey your orders?” Jongin muttered, sounding harsher than he intended.

Adrian stared at him and said nothing.

Jongin huffed heavily. “You have to earn their trust.”

“I am trying to save them from the Wyverns and the rest of the Nine Realms for centuries to come,” he snorted arrogantly.

Jongin stopped in his tracks and faced Adrian with a grimace. “You’d save us from the Wyverns, only to destroy us with your own hands?”

He did not wait to hear Adrian’s response as he hurried after Aunike. He was hurt, yes. His words were now uttered out of frustration.

“Come on out,” Aunike told the children hiding inside the longhouse. They looked terrified as they stepped out, all gaping at Adrian with so much fear in their eyes. “It is not polite to not to say hello,” she chided her children.

One of them came forth and shyly looked up at Jongin, clasping his hands together by his chest. Jongin smiled wide as the boy reminded him of himself when he was little. The boy was clothed in an oversized tunic with bangles around his ankles. His heart felt incredibly light, then. The boy’s blue eyes were full of wonder.

Someday, Jongin wanted a child of his own, too. Someone that would love him for everything he was.

Another child was forced to greet Adrian. She looked up at the towering beast and burst into an immediate cry before she ran to hide behind her mother.

Adrian looked stumped and vexed.

“You are very pretty,” the other girl said to Jongin, smiling pleasantly.

“So are you,” Jongin told her and the little girl giggled.
People stood on the street, all still curious about the newcomers. Another woman approached Adrian and offered him a bowl of water. Adrian accepted it and quickly downed it.

Everyone laughed and Jongin did, too. Adrian froze with his eyes widening.

“It is for you to wash your feet with before you enter their homes,” Jongin explained and Adrian frowned. He took his boots off and washed his feet with another bowl of water.

Jongin jumped when a young woman ruffled his hair from behind. She and her group of female friends laughed. “We won’t bite,” she said. “You must come with us! Can we take him with us, mother?” she asked Aunike.

“Make sure you do not bother him too much, Xylina,” Aunike said.

“We will ready him for the celebration tonight,” Xylina said.

“Uh, wait,” Adrian began when Jongin was hauled away by the girls.

“You look famished. Come,” Aunike told Adrian and ushered him into the longhouse.

* * *

The last light of the day had drained away as the night fell. The sound of the waves, the chirping of crickets, the soft murmur of the wind mingled with the slow beat of the drums. A fire was built in the middle of the street and everyone had gathered around it—some lounged on the ground, some dancing cheerfully. The children held hands as they capered in a circle, giggling. Women danced with their husbands, who had returned from the sea. There were women who danced with other women and boys who danced with other boys.

The air was damp. There was an assortment of seared fish, wormwood drink, and fruits. The music was both lively and gentle.

“Here,” Xylina’s brother placed a circlet made from flowers on Jongin’s head. Jongin laughed and thanked the boy.

“Shall we?” Xylina asked, grinning at Jongin proudly.


It had been a while since he had been around so many women. His sister loved dollying him up with the help of her chambermaids. Xylina and the other girls had helped him bathe and shave before they clothed him in a loose, flimsy tunic that drooped at his shoulders. They hadn’t given him his pants to wear, so Jongin was unclothed from thighs below. Then they adorned him with a choker necklace and kohl, which Jongin was happy to wear. He did not refuse when they slid wooden bangles around his ankles. Xylina reminded him greatly of Jihee. Especially when she laughed.

He was unbelievably homesick.

“Imagine the beast with this,” Xylina told Phryne as she adjusted the flower circlet on Jongin’s head and they snickered. Jongin laughed as well when he pictured Adrian with one.

They made their way to the fire where everyone was gathered. Jongin’s eyes immediately found Adrian amidst the men, holding a tankard. He was listening attentively to the men talk about how brutal the sea had been to them today. It seemed that the Ruvraens had accepted the Auvran or they
were at least being incredibly friendly to him. Some of the girls and the boys were ogling Adrian while they ate and danced.

“Ah, there you are,” Aunike said when she saw Jongin. He received many compliments from women and men alike. He smiled, realizing that it had also been a while since he had felt this good about himself.

He glanced at Adrian again and his heart skipped a beat when he found Adrian looking directly at him. Adrian’s jaw was slack, his face a blank slate. There was something like wonder in his eyes. His expression softened as their eyes lingered on one another.

Jongin, embarrassed and flushed, clutched his tunic at the front with both hands and hung his head as he took his seat with Aunike and her children. He helped himself to a chunk of mountain berries and ate in silence while the men began to sing.

“Aren’t Warinians graceful dancers?” Aunike said, smirking. Jongin blinked at her. Yes, they were, but Jongin would never dance in front of Adrian.

He stole a glimpse of Adrian again before quickly looking away. Adrian was still staring at him. Jongin’s heart raced faster and his throat felt tight.

“Let’s dance!” Xylina exclaimed and yanked Jongin up to his feet.

“Oh, nay,” Jongin gasped.

“Come on!” She hauled him to the fire and held his hands. Jongin sighed and decided to dance along. His movements were slower than Xylina’s, but when he soon got the hang of it, he laughed and twirled around with her.

He was sobbing air, guffawing at the top of his lungs by the time Xylina slowed down. She drew away from him momentarily and hurried to Adrian.

Adrian tore his gaze away from Jongin at last and fixed it on Xylina. He looked shocked when she caught hold of his hands and started to pull him to his feet.

“Does the Auvran have it?!” a man caterwauled.

Adrian sighed and rose to his feet. He was a prince after all. Of course, he could dance.

But instead of dancing with him, Xylina dragged Adrian towards Jongin. Although many were dancing and singing, their attention was now on Adrian and Jongin.

Xylina caught one of Jongin’s hands and yanked it. Jongin grunted as he lurched forward and halted with a jerk when he ploughed into Adrian. The Godblood caught him by the waist with a firm arm. His heartbeat stopped.

Jongin raised his head and gazed up at Adrian as Xylina leaped over to dance with Phryne. She drew Phryne into her arms and playfully kissed her on the lips.

Adrian did not withdraw his arm from Jongin’s waist, his strong hand pressed against the small of Jongin’s back. Adrian’s eyes were staring down into Jongin’s. Again, in that moment, Jongin was reminded of how small he was in Adrian’s arms. His body burned against Adrian’s stone-hard chest.

Then as though he were scorched, Adrian broke away from Jongin. He harrumphed and rubbed the back of his neck while Jongin gnawed at his lower lip, casting his eyes to his bare feet.
When he looked up again, Adrian had taken a woman for a dancing partner. Jongin swallowed the lump in his throat and returned to Aunike. He kept his gaze low at all times, not wanting to see how close Adrian held the woman.

“Help!”

The music died when the shriek was heard. The woman was short-winded when she reached them, looking horrified.

“What has happened?” Aunike asked.

“I–It’s… Ilos! The Spellsingers! They are taking him! He wouldn’t listen to me! I barely managed to flee!” the woman cried.

“Get the spears and bows!” Aunike ordered. The men stayed put while the women prepared for a fight.

When Adrian started to follow Aunike, one of the men halted him and said, “It is no use. The Spellsingers would warp our minds and seduce us. The men cannot fight them. They fear no one but the Goddess of Sea herself.”

Adrian’s eyebrows were drawn together in a frown. Jongin watched the women spring into action as they sprinted towards the beach. Adrian balled his hands into fists at his sides and shoved past the men.

Jongin’s eyes widened and he quickly chased Adrian.

The Sirens were singing when they reached the beach. It did not sound like a song, but more like a cry of distress. Jongin clapped his hands over his ears. But the boy who was halfway submerged in the ocean, ignoring the waves that slammed against him, seemed to be held spellbound by the song.

He could discern the Spellsingers clearly. They were ill-defined watery figures of women, floating and swimming in the sea.

“Nay,” Adrian said softly, raising a hand to Aunike’s shoulder when she nocked an arrow to shoot at the Spellsinger.

Aunike gawped at Adrian as the Godblood calmly went after the boy. The song stopped and the Spellsingers froze. In the darkness of the night, as the stars witnessed, Adrian’s left arm lit up and illumined the water. The women on the beach gasped while Jongin kept his eyes on Adrian without blinking.

The Ruvraen boy snapped out of his trance and began to drown. Adrian pulled him out immediately and returned him to the shore before he turned to the Spellsingers again.

“You will beset this water no longer,” he ordered the Spellsingers—as a Godblood, as the son of the Goddess of the Sea and Light. As the luminescence of his arm died out, the Spellsingers screeched in dismay before they dissolved and disappeared with the waves.

Adrian returned to the shore, drenched in seawater. The women dropped to their knees and called out prayers. All but their Queen.

“What is your name?” Aunike demanded, awestruck and dumbfounded.

Adrian exhaled heavily. “My name is Adrianus Dragovan. Son of Raagathor.”

“I know that I am not welcome here,” Adrian said. “But I swear by the Seven that I have not come here to tyrannize you or your people, Queen Aunike.”

“It is the truth,” Jongin added. “He has come to visit the Temple of Dawn.”

Aunike returned her gaze to Adrian. “A Godblood. On my land,” she said with wonder. “You have saved us from the Spellsingers. I cannot return such a favour.”

“I wish to see the Tree of Mydimeia in your temple, if you’ll allow,” Adrian said, bowing his head.

Aunike considered it for a moment. “You are journeying to save us from the Wyverns. Is the hearsay true?”

“Every word,” Adrian replied.

“Then I would be honoured to let you into the Temple of Dawn, Prince Adrianus.”

The night was still very young when the temple doors were opened and they were welcomed into the sanctum of the Goddess of Love.

The Tree of Mydimeia stood like a regal monument in the middle of the temple. The pink blossoms that shed from its branches were scattered all over the ground. It was a sea of pink blossoms.

On the one hand, the Ruvraens seemed sceptical. They did not believe that the Spellsingers were gotten rid of for good. And on the other, they wanted to believe. They wanted to rejoice. But they flocked the temple now, curious about what the Godblood’s intentions were, entering the Temple of Dawn.

The lanterns and torches were lit. Adrian circled the tree, frowning deeper with each step he took. Then with a defeated look, he turned to Jongin.

“I see no map,” he said.

Jongin stepped closer to the tree and brushed his fingers on the bark. “Perhaps I was wrong,” he told Adrian. He thought of the riddles again. “And the first light will show,” he murmured to himself. He turned to Adrian and said, “Let’s wait until dawn.”

“Why?” Adrian asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“The temple usually opens at dayspring, yes?” he asked Aunike, who nodded her head, still finding all of this very amusing. “The rhymester had said that the first light will show. Let us wait until first light.”

Adrian sighed. “Very well.”

“And while you wait, sleep shall keep you company,” Aunike advised. Neither Jongin nor Adrian protested. They were tired and they needed a good night’s rest.
Quiet and peace wove through the night. Though Jongin was asleep on his feet and entirely fatigued, sleep did not come to him. Aunike had given him and Adrian a spacious room and a couple of pallets to sleep on in the longhouse. Jongin was grateful that the same kindness she showed the Crown Prince of Auvradevas was extended to him, too.

“Thank you,” Jongin said as he returned the flower circlet and bangles to Xylina when she sauntered in. When he started to take the necklace off, she stopped him.

“Keep it,” she said.

Jongin smiled. “Thank you. For… everything.”

Xylina grinned sheepishly. “I must apologize. All of us believed that you were… the beast’s lover.”

Jongin choked on his breath and gaped at Xylina with wide eyes.

“But now that we know the truth, we do feel a little foolish,” she laughed.

“Nay,” Jongin muttered shakily. “It is… nothing of that sort.”

Xylina nodded. “Did the Spellsingers really leave for good?”

Jongin shrugged. “I believe only time will tell.”

Xylina sighed. “I shall wake you before dawn.”

“Thank you,” he said again.

Once Xylina had left the room, Jongin reclined on the pallet and wondered why Adrian hadn’t joined him. What he had done tonight with the Spellsingers was impressive. He was becoming increasingly more Godlike each passing day. Perhaps it was because he was nearing the fulfilment of his destiny.

It felt a little ridiculous when Jongin realized all that he ever thought of these days was Adrian. And his heart broke a little since he knew that he had no room in Adrian’s mind, let alone his heart.

What was he thinking… Jongin shook his head as he sat up. He wanted to stop feeling these feelings. He wanted to stop thinking about the man he was supposed to detest day in, day out.

He thought of the way Adrian had held him and looked into his eyes by the fire earlier. His heart clenched painfully. It was not fair. Why would the Gods continue to punish him so?

He watched the dancing flame of the burning candle and drew his legs to his chest, resting a cheek on his knees. His energy drained away, little by little. All his life, he had dreamed of a love that would complete him. But this… this was hurting him.

He was falling in love with Adrian.

He blinked the tears that stung his eyes away, not wanting to shed them. He would not weep over something he had no control over.

Tomorrow, if there was nothing on the tree that could lead them to the Vrilehm Mountains, Jongin saw no point in letting himself suffer further by being at Adrian’s side. Adrian was right. This was his destiny, not Jongin’s. He would ask Adrian to free him. He would beg him to let him go. Even if
Jongin could no return home to his father and sister, he’d survive in some corner in the Nine Realms.

He rose from the pallet and went looking for Adrian. Fortunately, he did not have to wander too far away as he found Adrian perched on the doorstep, looking lost in his thoughts as usual.

“Are you not sleepy?” he asked without glancing at Jongin.

Jongin wished he had worn some pants, but darn Xylina. He walked over to Adrian and sat down beside him. “What happens if we don’t find the map to Vrilehm tomorrow?” he asked Adrian in a low voice.

Adrian heaved a sigh. “I’d have to start from the beginning. There is no time to waste. A Wyvern could be attacking somewhere as we speak.”

“Does it have to be you?” Jongin whispered and Adrian turned his head to look at him at last.

He stared at the necklace choking Jongin’s neck for a moment before he lifted his eyes to Jongin’s lips. Then blinking hard, he looked away. “Who else could it be?”

Jongin was mumchance for a beat as he surveyed Adrian’s face. “What are… your dreams?” he asked at length.

It took Adrian a moment to give him a reply. “Why do you ask?” He kept his voice low as he spoke. It sounded gentle. Loving. Jongin felt his chest warm.

“You said that I know nothing about you,” Jongin muttered. “Does anybody?”

“I do not have any dreams,” he said gruffly. Then in a calmer voice, he asked, “Tell me what yours are.”

Jongin stroked his bare legs up and down, worrying his lower lip. “I had dreams. I wanted an adventurous life,” he whispered. “To be someone my people would look up to. Be a kind prince. I wanted to… fall in love along the way. Make a new family... And I’d grow old. Happily.”

He lifted his gaze and saw Adrian staring at him, unblinking. “You want so little,” he said after a while.


Adrian shook his head. “Not all the mortals I know covet so little.” He glanced back at the longhouse. “These people… They are happy with what they have. I know noblemen and peers of the realm who can never have enough even when they have plenty. They always want more.”

“Like your father?”

Adrian pursed his lips. He sighed. “Like me. You had said before. That I am greedy like my father. A corrupted prince.”

“Do you believe that you are one?” Jongin let out. “Can you at least answer me this honestly?” He paused to see if Adrian would respond. He didn’t. “Why did you stop the sacrificial rite that night in the palace and took all those whips? For a mere slave? Out of guilt? Or perhaps as punishment for what you did? To me? To my kingdom? Why do you put up with me and my whinges? Why not just drive your sword through my chest and be over with it? Doesn’t that come easily to you?”

Adrian met his gaze. The air between them stilled. “Why do you do this,” he asked in a whisper,
frowning angrily as he raised a hand to cup a side of Jongin’s face. The world froze around them. Jongin’s breathing quickened as he leaned into Adrian’s touch, the ecstasy of finally feeling Adrian’s rough hand against cheek filled his head, a longing sated. The hand that had wielded countless swords and broken monsters’ bones held Jongin gently, with great caution. Adrian’s amber eyes bored into Jongin’s, searching his soul. “when you hate me so? Why do you torment me like this?”

Jongin mustered the courage in that moment. He raised a hand and pressed his fingers to Adrian’s chest. He parted his lips, panting softly. “I do not…” he trailed off in a trembling breath, his lips inches away from Adrian’s.

He felt faint and muzzy, reeling with fatigue and elation. He could not believe this was happening. He had never let another man touch him like this. Not even his shadow. But he wanted this. He hungered for it like his life depended on it. He longed to feel Adrian’s lips against his. He wanted Adrian.

But not before he was convinced that Adrian was sincere.

“You need to know something,” Jongin said in a raspy breath. Adrian did not pull away. His breath was grazing Jongin’s cheek. “I’m… an Aevayl.”

Everything stopped then.

Adrian was unmoving as if he were rooted to the spot. He slowly withdrew his hand from Jongin’s face while Jongin frantically looked for any hint of disgust in Adrian’s eyes. He saw disappointment and consternation instead.

His heart shattered into smithereens when Adrian jolted up to his feet and stomped away from Jongin, with his hands fisted at his sides.

* * *

Jongin’s silent sobbing whispered into the breeze. Though he had been resolute in his determination to never give in to his tears, he wept uncontrollably while replaying the way Adrian had looked at him when he had confided in the man with such a precious secret. He had unbosomed himself to Adrian, only to be regarded with such scorn.

An onslaught of hurt and confusion brought him to his weakest. He cried to the sea, the sound of the waves muffling his cries. He sat on the beach as the night faded, finally breaking down. The exhaustion was deadened by the overwhelming heartache.

“There you are,” he heard Xylina’s voice and quickly wiped his cheeks before he rose.

“Is the sun coming up?” he asked coyly in a thick voice to mask his misery.

Xylina stopped in her tracks when she noticed Jongin’s puffy, red eyes and tear-stained cheeks. “By the Seven, are you all right?!” she gasped.

“Yes, yes,” Jongin said and managed a small smile. “It is nothing.”

Xylina frowned at him. But she did not press him any further. They barely knew each other but the concern was palpable in her face. “They’re opening the temple.”

Jongin nodded and followed her.

Adrian was already standing by the tree. Jongin kept his head hung, not wanting to ever see that
horrifying look in Adrian’s eyes again.

As the sky softened into a deep blue, streaks of yellow and orange took over the horizon. The first light touched the temple foremost. Jongin’s eyes followed the sunray and where it touched on the Tree of Mydimeia. He blinked at the golden thread that formed on the tree bark.

“There,” he said, pointing at the curvy golden line on the tree, illuminated by the first rays of the day. Adrian looked puzzled when Jongin glanced at him for confirmation.

“What?”

Jongin pointed at the golden thread. “Here. Do you not see it?”

Adrian blinked vacantly. “Nay,” he said.

“We do not see anything,” Aunike said.

“I do,” her youngest son whispered.

“I do, too,” another child cooed. Jongin sighed in relief. He wasn’t seeing things that weren’t there.

“The light’s shifting,” someone warned in the crowd.

“Hold on,” Xylina said and raced into the temple before returning with a piece of parchment and a stick charcoal. “Draw what you see.”

“That is a clever thought,” Jongin commented and lowered to the ground immediately. He copied the line as it was on the tree. As the sun shifted upwards, the golden thread disappeared. Jongin stood back up and turned to Adrian half-heartedly. He did not meet Adrian’s eyes as he handed him the parchment.

Adrian studied it for a moment. “Why couldn’t I see it?” he asked, as though to himself.

Jongin recalled what Awyen had told him. “The mountains can only be found by the virtuous,” he murmured and walked away.

* * *

“Wait,” Adrian called behind him but Jongin did not heed him as he strode towards the longhouse along the beach. “I said wait.”

Jongin hissed when Adrian grabbed hold of his arm and spun him around. “You’ve got what you want, don’t you?!” Jongin cried and Adrian instantly released him. “Find your mountains and save the Nine Realms. Be a hero, be a god. Fulfil your destiny. I am done.”

When he spun around to walk away, Adrian caught his arm again. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“I am leaving,” Jongin said as a tear rolled down his cheek. “You’ll just have to kill me if you want to stop me.”

“Enough,” Adrian spat through his teeth. He sucked in a deep breath and said, “I’m sorry.”

Jongin wasn’t sure what he was sorry for. But it didn’t change anything.

“I… I’m not a… Kamthir,” Adrian said diffidently, refusing to look at Jongin’s eyes.
Jongin scoffed, rolling his eyes. “If you say so.” He turned on his heel and when Adrian seized his arm again to stop him, Jongin’s hand flew up to hit him across the face.

But he was taken aback when Adrian caught his hand before it could even touch his cheek. He then held Jongin’s hand gently against a side of his jaw and Jongin shivered when Adrian’s beard pricked his palm.

“But does it matter whether I am or not?” Adrian whispered, releasing Jongin’s hand. “We started this journey together. You are not leaving midway. Take it as an order or a plea, I do not care.” With that, he brushed past Jongin.

“Does it matter whether I am or not?”

* * *

Jongin kept his attention on Thelme as he stroked her mane while saddling her. Adrian was still studying the line Jongin had drawn, believing strongly that it was the map to the Vrilehm Mountains. But how could a jagged line lead to anything? It was another clue.

“Where are we going?” Jongin asked when Adrian walked over to the mare, sliding the parchment into his satchel. He did not answer Jongin’s question as he turned to greet Aunike and the rest of the Ruvraens.

“Good luck on your journey,” she said, smiling. “I had thought ill of you and your people. I apologize for that.”

Adrian returned her smile. “Thank you for the food,” he said, looking at the knapsacks. “And your hospitality.”

“You have made our water calm after decades,” she said. “We will forever be grateful for that.”

Jongin turned to Xylina, her siblings, and her friends. He hugged them goodbye and thanked Xylina again for the necklace, which he did not plan on taking off for the time being.

Everyone hailed Adrian’s name once as he mounted the horse. Jongin ignored his hand when he held it down to him and climbed onto the horse on his own, though with a little struggle.

He was a mess, his head in a complete muddle. Was he a fool for believing that what happened last night was real or was Adrian deliberately trying to make him a fool?

Waving this kingdom goodbye, they set forth towards another.

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Yaebrilan, Year 5138, 31st Jorrdag

Yaebrilan was a district on the border of Warinia. It was less populated than the rest of Warinia and consisted mostly of mountainsides, rivers, mines, and forges. There was a small hamlet nearby,

When they stopped, Jongin dismounted the mare and stretched his back. Adrian tied Thelme’s rein to a tree before he started towards the river. Jongin followed.

They had not said a word to each other in over two days. Jongin had nothing to say and Adrian
probably did not wish to talk to an Aevayl, anyway. What stumped Jongin was that why Adrian insisted on keeping him at his side. For someone to lug his bags around? Or did he have other plans for Jongin? He seriously doubted the Raagathor would chide Adrian for losing a page on his great journey to find mythical mountains and save the Nine Realms from Wyverns.

But he was certain about one thing. Adrian was going to pretend that whatever that happened that night, the moment that he had held Jongin so close, had never happened.

And now, they were in Warinia. This was a surprise for Jongin. While the capital city of Warinia might still be a long way, he was in his kingdom. This was all rightfully his land. But he could not be happy about it.

He looked at a miner exiting a mine, pushing a wheelbarrow and wondered if the miner would be able to recognize him. Jongin doubted it. He was once this land’s Prince. Now, he was a nobody.

He crouched at Adrian’s side and stared at the Godblood splash water on his face before drinking some of it. Adrian’s gaze darted to him eventually.

“What are we doing here?” Jongin asked.

Adrian did not answer. He rose to his feet and started back to the horse. Jongin sighed and went after him. What was his resentment toward Adrian now? Could his grievance be justified? It was just a moment of vulnerability for the both of them. Adrian’s lips might have lied when he said that he was no Alsiramene, but his eyes had not when he was holding Jongin.

Whatever it was, Jongin could not be bitter about it forever. He had to let it go. He could not force feelings that weren’t there. But he was immensely grateful for Adrian not bringing up the fact that Jongin was an Aevayl. Nevertheless, Jongin felt foolish to have disclosed the truth about himself to an Auvran so carelessly. What if Adrian intended to harm him now? If he did, he probably would have accomplished it by now.

Jongin raised a hesitant hand to Adrian’s back and felt Adrian twitch under his touch. He withdrew his hand immediately, hanging his head and Adrian turned around.

Jongin struggled to find the right words to say. “Let me go,” he said in a pleading whisper at last, without raising his head. “Please.”

Adrian was silent. Jongin’s chest felt tight.

“If your father asks, tell him I’m dead and that you couldn’t save me,” Jongin said. It did not feel like a lie. He did feel dead, numb with pain. And Adrian was refusing to save him.

“Every time you say that,” Adrian said in a ragged breath and Jongin looked up at him, eyes glistening with tears. “I am anguished.”

Jongin blinked in confusion. “Wh… What do you…”

“When you say that… I’d kill you, that I wouldn’t save you…” Adrian looked hurt as he spoke. “Do you really believe that… I’m that sort of a monster?”

Jongin’s heart stopped. “Nay,” he gasped. “I never meant it… I…” he stammered and choked on a sob. He had never seen Adrian look at him like that. With so much confusion and hurt behind those eyes, which haunted Jongin his sleep.

Adrian drew a sharp breath and carded his fingers through his hair. “If you want to leave so
desperately, then, by all means, leave. You do not have to beg me to release you. We both know that you have never been my servant and I have never treated you like one wholeheartedly.”

His words stung. Jongin swallowed his tears and kept mum for a moment. He felt like a kid being reprimanded and his rancour towards Adrian mellowed into something more painful.

Adrian looked down the road. He then handed Jongin Thelme’s reins. “Ride for a day and you’ll reach the capital of Warinia.”

Jongin kept his apologetic eyes on Adrian for a long stretch before Adrian turned on his heel and started towards the forest surrounding the hamlet with his bow, arrows, sword, and knapsacks.

Jongin snivelled and rubbed his nose, blinking the tears in his eyes away. He had asked Adrian to let him go and the Godblood had. Then why couldn’t Jongin turn around and ride away?

Thelme nudged her nose into Jongin’s arm and he stroked her mane. The desire to get away from Adrian had left him a very long time ago. But he had asked Adrian to free him, in hope that Adrian would not send him away.

He sighed and pulled the mare’s reins, starting towards the woods, pursuing Adrian. Thelme whinnied at his side but followed obediently. Though Jongin maintained the distance between him and Adrian, he knew Adrian was aware of Jongin following behind him.

Adrian came to a halt when he reached a grassed ground by the river. Gripping his fists, he spun around. Jongin froze as Adrian stomped over to him with a ferocious scowl plastered on his face. Jongin flinched and shuddered, dropping his head in inhibition and meekness when Adrian aggressively snatched the horse reins from his hand and tied it to a tree.

In that moment, Jongin stayed quiet. He realized that Adrian was distressed and that he had lost his cool. He said nothing to Jongin as he dug into the knapsacks for the tent fabric.

Jongin sucked in a shaky breath and wiped a tear from the corner of his eye before he found a tree and sat against it. He quietly watched Adrian snap the tree branches to pitch the tent.

They hadn’t the money to afford an inn. They had spent all they had for food on the road.

Adrian spread a threadbare blanket on the ground in the tent and lit a candle.

“Are you going somewhere?” Jongin asked in a timid voice.

Adrian neither answered nor spared Jongin a glance as he stomped away, leaving Jongin in the company of the trees and river.

* * *

The sky had darkened. The nightingales sang with the crickets while the wind howled. It was a symphony orchestrated by nature and the night. Adrian still hadn’t returned. Jongin tried not to brood over why he had taken off so abruptly or where he had gone.

He had bathed in the river and shaved. He then washed and wrung his two tunics and pants before leaving them to dry on the grass. Without a tunic to jump back into, he ruffled through the knapsacks and fished out one of Adrian’s clean shirts. Adrian would not mind sharing, surely. Jongin pulled the shirt on and surprised that the hem of the shirt almost reached his knees, he decided to forget about the pants.
He thought of removing the necklace Xylina had gifted him, but forsook the thought when his attention shifted to his roaring stomach. He found a stale piece of bread in one of the knapsacks and ate it, sitting in a corner of the cramped tent, watching the candle’s fire flicker.

Why did he leave when Adrian had let him go? Or perhaps had Adrian let him go knowing that Jongin would not leave? Jongin no longer minded being Adrian’s servant. He even thought that he would happily serve Adrian if Adrian wanted it. Because he knew that Adrian would treat him with respect and would never slight him. He would not mind serving only Adrian within four walls.

He sighed, realizing that he had let his thoughts wander again.

If he were planning to stay, then he ought to be useful to Adrian. He picked out the parchment he had drawn on and scrutinized the line. When he finally gave up, he curled up in a ball, cocooning himself in the frayed blanket and drifted off to sleep.

He woke again in the dead of the night when he heard the heavy footsteps.

The tent rustled and Adrian crawled in, dragging his weight like he was half dead on them.

The scent of mint and sage filled the tent instantly. Jongin stirred and sat up, blinking his heavy eyes sleepily. He then eagerly glanced at the wrapped food in Adrian’s hand. He looked up at the man.

Adrian was completely dishevelled. He smelled of sweat and ashes. It was still somehow pleasant. His bloodshot eyes were drooping with exhaustion and his shirt was an untucked mess, its sleeves rolled up to his shoulders.

He held the bread out to Jongin.

“Where… were you?” Jongin asked hoarsely, wondering how Adrian had bought the bread since they had already exhausted their money supply.

Adrian huffed tiredly as he lounged on the ground and collapsed on it immediately, throwing an arm over his forehead.

“Have you eaten?” Jongin asked. When Adrian did not answer, Jongin sighed and took a bite of the bread. “So, you’d feed me and not talk to me?”

“You were the one who was threatening to leave,” Adrian said in a gravelling voice.

Jongin swallowed the masticated bread and stared at the huge man sprawled on the ground, inches away from him. “You were ignoring me,” he muttered, lowering his head.

Adrian was silent then. A few long moments passed between them and Jongin drew his knees to his chest, hugging his bare legs. Adrian’s shirt smelled like him—like the ocean. Jongin nuzzled into the sleeve and sniffed it.

Adrian sat up after a while and kept his unwavering eyes on Jongin. “I do have dreams,” he said. “But I never wanted anything for myself.”

Jongin discerned the dread and hesitation in Adrian’s expression. He heard the anxiety in Adrian’s voice. “I have never prayed for myself,” Jongin admitted in a whisper. “For my own happiness.”

“Who do you pray for, then?”

The air in the tent was calm. It was quiet. Jongin could hear Adrian’s ragged breathing from across
the room. “Everyone else,” he muttered, his lips quivering a little.

“Everyone?” Adrian asked slowly. His eyes were a pain to look at. They bored into Jongin’s like they could pierce through his soul.

“I pray for you, too,” he said. “Not that it would matter. You have all of the Nine Realms worshipping you. My prayers are insignificant.”

Adrian clenched his eyes for a moment and took a few deep breaths.

The moon was full and bright tonight. The night was tranquil. The sweet song of the nightingale lulled the forest creatures to sleep.

Their eyes lingered on one another.

Though words weren’t uttered, they communicated.

Jongin only hoped that Adrian understood him.

For the first time, Jongin saw Adrian hang his head in embarrassment as he held a hand out. Jongin’s eyes dropped to the fine silver chain that glittered on Adrian’s blistered palm. Jongin gasped and jolted up to his feet.

He crossed the distance between them and took a closer look at Adrian’s hands, ignoring the silver chain. “What happened to your hands?” he rasped, gaping at the blisters and bruises on his hands.

Adrian frowned. “It’s nothing,” he said. “I worked a little for the miners and smiths to earn some money to buy food.”

Jongin’s heart raced in his chest. “So, you worked all day? You hadn’t even rested after riding for more than a day!”

“It is nothing,” Adrian said, looking down at the chain in his hand.

“I understand that you are a Godblood, but you are also part human. You do not need to toil this hard to feed me.”

Adrian looked annoyed then. He raised the hand that was holding the silver chain, as though he wanted Jongin to pay attention to the chain and not his hands. Jongin arched an eyebrow.

“What?” Jongin asked.

Adrian, flushed and humbled, let his gaze fall to Jongin’s uncovered legs. “It was the first time I had earned by working on my own,” he admitted. “It’s an anklet. I… I saw it in the hamlet and… it reminded me of you… You look at things like this with so much want in your eyes…” He paused, licking his lips. “I… got it… for you.”

Jongin felt the sparks in his brain and the knife in his heart. The air was knocked out of his lungs as his body stilled, face washed blank. His voice failed him. His blood pulsed in his temples.

Adrian looked at him and the candle’s flame danced in his eyes. The loose grin playing on his lips was anticipating Jongin’s reply. With his heart hammering against his chest, Jongin gawked at the anklet in Adrian’s hand.

That instant, Adrian crumbled all of Jongin’s walls. He waited for Jongin to say something but his eyes kept falling to Jongin’s foot, as though he were tempted to put it on Jongin himself.
This man had taken everything away from him. But he was now giving Jongin something that he had earned by himself. Not as a Godblood, not as the Crown Prince of the most exalted kingdom in the Nine Realms, not as the Wyvern Slayer. But as a man. Nothing more and certainly nothing less.

Jongin lifted a foot and pressed its sole to the left side of Adrian’s chest. Though Adrian froze with surprise, he did not voice an objection. In that moment, neither of them was greater than the other. In that moment, Adrian had surrendered his pride, his power and held Jongin’s foot to his chest, against his heart.

He slid a gentle hand along the calf of Jongin’s leg and cupped it. Jongin closed his eyes, his breaths coming out in short, raspy gasps. Adrian bowed his head, his beard and lips grazed the shin of Jongin’s leg as he fastened the anklet around Jongin’s ankle. His heart was thundering hard against the sole of Jongin’s foot.

Adrian drew his rough hand along the instep, caressing the arch of the foot. Jongin lowered the foot and adored the silver anklet for a moment. Then looking down at Adrian again, he fell to his knees on either side of Adrian’s legs. The air warmed between them, seizing their breaths.

Jongin straddled Adrian, bringing his hands to Adrian’s shoulders first before he slid one of them into the Godblood’s hair. Adrian raised his hands to Jongin’s waist and his fingers possessively gripped Jongin’s hips.

Jongin drew one of Adrian’s hands to his face and leaned a cheek against Adrian’s blistered palm. He sighed, eyes closed. How he had longed to feel these hands against his skin…

It felt strange. Wanting and letting a man touch him, wanting to bare himself for this man alone. The comfort that had never been there before was begging him to open himself up for Adrian. It was clear to him then that his heart, body, and soul thirsted, ached, and lusted for Adrian.

“Jongin,” Adrian breathed out, his arm snaking around Jongin’s back, as he lifted his head, eyes keen on Jongin’s parted, panting lips. Although that was the first time Adrian had ever said his name, it sounded beautiful familiar on his lips, as if it belonged to him.

Adrian leaned in and his breath tickled Jongin’s neck when his lips brushed against Jongin’s throat. Blood stirred fiercely in Jongin’s loins as his stomach flipped. His cheeks, ears, and nape burned when Adrian pressed a soft kiss to the front of his throat.

He trembled like a leaf, burying a fist in Adrian’s hair. Adrian tugged at a lace of the shirt and loosened it. He then lowered his lips to Jongin’s collarbones. Jongin moaned softly, biting his lower lip. He tightened his fingers around the long strands of Adrian’s hair and descended on Adrian’s lap.

His lips brushed Jongin’s innocently and the world simply fell away. Jongin felt Adrian’s heartbeat against his chest while their lips were lost on one another. Adrian’s beard grazed Jongin’s cheeks as he kissed him. His warm lips caressed and savoured Jongin’s trembling ones. Eventually, Jongin moved them to kiss Adrian back.

They came apart for a moment, fighting for shallow breaths. There was both excitement and fear in them. Their fingers fumbled for more skin to explore. Adrian’s hand drifted from Jongin’s hip and dropped to his thigh. Jongin shuddered, whimpering weakly against Adrian’s scorching lips. Adrian’s calloused hand against Jongin’s smooth, unblemished bare skin both soothing and brutal.

When their lips met again, the kiss was fiery, full of fervour and desperation. Adrian swallowed Jongin’s moan as he sucked on his lips, one by one, leaving them throbbing and swollen.
Adrian began to rise, hoisting Jongin up with him as Jongin locked his arms around the Godblood’s thick, strong neck. Adrian gently laid Jongin on the blanketed ground without breaking the kiss. Everything felt new, odd, wonderful. Jongin, having run out of breath, began to steal Adrian’s air, pressing his tongue against Adrian’s. His hands stroked Adrian’s chest, wanting more warmth to taste. He slipped his hands under Adrian’s shirt then and pressed them on Adrian’s stone-hard abdomen, feeling the shape of the taut, solid muscles there. Adrian caressed Jongin’s thigh delicately as if he were worried that his mere touch could hurt Jongin.

When they were completely out of breath, Adrian released Jongin’s lips to let him catch his breath. Jongin’s half-lidded limpid eyes were frozen on Adrian’s as he panted, sobbing for air. Adrian held his gaze as his hand slowly moved to the inside of Jongin’s thigh.

His breath hitched and he hid his face in the crook of Adrian’s neck. He would not refuse Adrian if he wanted Jongin right this instant. But it was clear that Adrian was not planning to go too far. But far enough.

“I want to know,” Adrian whispered into Jongin’s ear.

Jongin let out a feeble noise, whimpering as Adrian’s fingers ventured deeper. They skimmed his testicles and the soft grunt that escaped Adrian’s throat then almost drove Jongin over the edge of sanity. He shivered under Adrian’s massive, strong form, feeling both incredibly safe and undeniably exposed.

“Adrian,” he gasped, mewling shakily when Adrian’s fingers brushed his sheath, the vulva between his testicles and orifice. He panted heavily, burying his face in Adrian’s chest. His blood violently swirled in his nether regions, prickling his sheath. Adrian gently stroked the lips of the sheath, experimentally at first, then lustfully, wanting it. He was careful, gentle, hesitant.

“So… beautiful,” he exhaled into Jongin’s hair and a breathy moan broke away from Jongin’s tightly pursed lips. “Jongin…”

“Oh,” Jongin moaned as Adrian rubbed the outside of his sheath. He did not care how Adrian wanted him. He would relinquish himself and his virtue to Adrian without a second thought.

“I had never wanted anything for myself,” Adrian whispered, echoing what he had said earlier. “until I met you.”

“Have me, then,” Jongin said breathlessly, looking at Adrian with teary, tired eyes.

Adrian stroked Jongin’s sheath with the back of his fingers and clenched his eyes for a moment, as though to relish the warmth. Then opening his eyes again, he muttered, “I want to… But only when I can give you myself.”

It saddened Jongin to hear that. Adrian was serving everyone else in the Nine Realms, unable to pursue his own dreams. He too, like Jongin, wanted so little.

They kissed once more. It was languid this time, cautious. Jongin floated in elation as Adrian’s fingers touched him where he wanted the most and their lips danced to an erotic choreography.

Outside, the night deepened into nothingness. And in the tent, two hearts were beating against one another, each heading for a heartache of its own.
Sunlight poured into the tent through the slits. The branches were rustling to the flow of the morning wind. The gentle murmur of the river created a calm ambience.

Jongin wished that this lasted forever. Adrian’s soft snores were a lullaby on their own. Jongin had been awake for hours and he had been watching his man sleep in silence.

*His* man. Was Adrian his man now? Jongin grinned like a child at the idea. He did not care whether Adrian was a Godblood or a Crown Prince. He had fallen in love with a simple man named Adrian, a traveller.

They had done nothing but kiss and feel each other all night. All his life, Jongin believed that he was an abomination, a subject of disgust. Androgynes—the Aevayls—were abhorred, treated with disdain. And the breeders among the Aevayls, their children were hunted and killed, most at birth. Jongin had grown up with this fear of being discovered, of being destroyed.

But Adrian had touched him there and it was a declaration of his acceptance towards who Jongin was. It was sincere, beautiful, and real.

Jongin fingered the fine hairs on Adrian’s chest, exposed by the unlaced shirt and smiled. Gods, this man was gorgeous.

He crawled out of the tent stealthily, careful not to wake Adrian up. He still felt all fuzzy and warm between his legs where Adrian had stroked him all night long. Of course, Jongin had wanted to return the favour of giving Adrian some pleasure, but the Godblood had seemed rather content with just kissing and touching Jongin.

Jongin washed up in the river and knelt on the riverbank for a moment, watching the birds soaring in the clear blue sky.

He wondered if Adrian would still wed the Princess Edothise of Othadia when all was over. Had last night meant a great deal for Adrian as it had for Jongin? Adrian abstained and he had a strong self-restraint. But he couldn’t hold himself back completely last night. It must mean he felt something for Jongin.

Wild hares hopped about the riverside while Jongin adored the silver anklet around his ankle, smiling. It was simple, clearly not showy or ostentatious. But it was Jongin’s most priceless possession.

He lifted his gaze to the river once more. It was a jagged river with many turns and crooks. It reminded Jongin of the golden line he had seen on the Mydimeia.

He froze.

His eyes bulged out.

Jolting up to his feet, he raced back to the tent and scavenged through knapsacks, looking for the map. Adrian stirred and roused to the ruckus Jongin was making.

“What are you doing?” he asked, raising a hand to Jongin’s back.

Jongin did not answer immediately as he spread the map on the ground and then grabbed the parchment. Placing the parchment on top of the map, near the map of the Third Realm, he studied the rivers.
Adrian sat up and watched him curiously.

“Oh, dear Gods!” Jongin screeched excitedly, pointing his forefinger at the Sraemn River, the longest and widest major river in all of the Third Realm. The river on the map was an exact copy of the drawing on the parchment. “It’s the Sraemn River!”

Adrian blinked drowsily and surveyed the map and the parchment for a moment. “Wow,” he let out, the corners of his lips quirking into a proud smile. He looked at Jongin and ruffled his hair. “What would I do without you?” he laughed.

“You owe me a crown, Prince Adrianus,” Jongin joked.

“And a throne by mine,” Adrian replied and rolled up the map. He curled his hand around the back of Jongin’s neck and leaned in for a gentle, chaste kiss.
Outskirts of Warinia, Year 5138, 31st Merdag

Sraemn was easily recognized as the longest river in all of the Nine Realms. It started from the Yqaldir Mountains of the Third Realm and coursed all the way to the Tuhena Sea of the Seventh Realm with countless tributaries. It was the backbone of many agricultural kingdoms, such as Warinia herself. Many legends and folklores were sprouted from this very ancient river, most of which were about Sraemn, the God of Harvest and Fortune.

One could feel the beat of the river’s current on the sole of their feet and in the flow of their blood in their veins. Its water was clear, unlike most rivers. The sun pierced through the uncalm surface, illuminating the pebbles and rocks lying on the floor of the river. Sour Silkweed bordered either side of the gentle stream, flocks of Eeplosses winged about the welkin, eager to return to their nests as the sky darkened. Eeplosses were merciless grey birds that preyed on smaller ground animals, such as rats and tree frogs. But they dreaded humans and steered clear of their path. The air was cleaner here. The serenity blanketing the riverside was breath-taking. This was home. And home was the most beautiful place on the ground.

Not too far from here was the capital of Warinia. Unfortunately, the river would not lead them there. Not today. Although his actual home was so close at hand, the desire to return to it had somewhat waned. Perhaps he had found a new home. Nay. He had most certainly found a new home in the man he was leering at right this instant with his heart fluttering the wings of a butterfly.

Adrian stood on the rock on the riverbank, gazing into the horizon as the wind stroked the long strands of his glorious black mane. There was glory in his stance, a magnificence second to none. His transcendence contaminated all that surrounded him. Jongin marvelled at the Godblood. Adrian was certainly part God, there wasn’t a shadow of a doubt about that. But in the past few weeks, Jongin had come to learn that Adrian was more human than anyone. He had desires, he had dreams, but most of all, he had locked them all away. Nothing made him more human than that simple sobriety. However, a couple of days ago, he had yielded to his wants a little when he kissed Jongin in the tent. When he had let his hand wander between Jongin’s legs and stroke him where Jongin had dreaded would sicken Adrian. When he whispered Jongin’s name again and again like a silent prayer into his ear. When he held Jongin in his arms when Jongin roused in the morning.

Ever since Jongin let himself worship the man openly. While the rest of the Nine Realms worshipped him for being a nonpareil warrior, the Crown Prince of Auvradevas, the mighty Godblood, the Wyvern Slayer, Jongin worshipped him for his infectious strength of character when he was not away executing his father’s orders or trying to please his father. With Jongin, Adrian was himself. And by Gods, Jongin was falling so deeply for this man. Every moment with him felt like a homecoming.

Adrian had plenty of reasons to harbour misgivings about following the stream up north in the Third Realm when Jongin suggested it, but he did not. He trusted Jongin’s percipience and acumen, which he had come to know of latterly. There was no denying that Jongin knew things he apparently did not. Adrian was not the bumptious and arrogant prince Jongin had surmised in the beginning. There was nothing vain about the man. Apart from all that, they had nowhere else to start either. Whatever the Tree of Mydimeia was supposed to lead to, it had something to do with the Sraemn River.
“Hey, Son of Zhesaris!” Jongin called, patting Thelme’s shoulder as she nudged her nose against his head. “Get down from there before you fall and break something of yours.”

Adrian glanced back at Jongin with an arched brow and an easy smirk sitting on a corner of his lips. “You have grown rather bold lately, Son of Chivrun,” Adrian said as he leaped off the boulder and started towards Jongin.

“I am motivated,” Jongin said and pursed his lips at a weak attempt to hide his smile. He released the mare’s reins to crouch and cup some water in his hand. When he rose to his full height again, Adrian froze in his tracks, eyes narrowing.

“Don’t you dare,” the Godblood warned.

Jongin raised an eyebrow. “Is the God of Sea and Light afraid of a little harmless water?”

Adrian scoffed. “As a matter of fact, I am not a God yet.”

Jongin lowered to the ground again and cupped more water before hurling it at Adrian. The latter sprung back and dodged it with a victorious, complacent grin. Annoyed, Jongin jumped up to his feet and kicked the water in Adrian’s way, which he immediately rued as the water splashed on Adrian’s shirt—the one that had been drying for an entire day. Adrian bit his lower lip and glared at Jongin.

“It didn’t look good on you, anyway,” Jongin said with a nonchalant shrug.

Adrian looked down at his wet shirt and sighed. “You are right,” he said and closed the distance between them. “We ought to pitch the tent here. It is getting darker.”

Jongin frowned, feeling a little let down. In all honesty, he was hoping for Adrian to play around for a while. But he supposed Adrian was not some puerile adolescent to be interested in amusing himself.

“Have you been here before?” Adrian asked as he tethered Thelme to a tree. Jongin did not answer as he stared at the flowing river. Nay, he hadn’t been here to this exact spot before. Yes, he had been to the Sraemn River several times before. He wasn’t sure which answer Adrian was looking for or if he were even wanting one.

He did not hear Adrian’s footsteps when the Godblood crept up to him, but he spun around upon catching a whiff of the singular oceanic scent of Adrian’s skin. It was an intoxicating scent that none but the sea itself had. Clearly, Adrian had not been expecting Jongin to catch him sneaking up on him because he laughed and fidgeted for a fleeting beat before he bent and swept Jongin off the ground, lifting him into his arms.

Taken aback, Jongin gasped and clung onto Adrian’s shirt. His heart sank when the Auvran Prince began to walk into the river. “Nay, do not—” Jongin started and struggled to free himself.

Adrian chuckled, tightening his arms around Jongin’s legs and back. He did not stop even when he was knee-deep in the water.

“Adri—!” Jongin cried but before he could protest any further, Adrian threw him in the river.

The water slapped against his back as he fell into it. Jongin drew in his breath sharply when he resurfaced, completely soaked.

Adrian was not laughing. He was smirking. It was even worse.
“That ought to teach you to never raise my hackles,” Adrian said, holding back a laugh. “Come on.” He offered Jongin a hand and pulled him up to his feet.

“You are a cruel man,” Jongin said, scowling as he shivered with the cold wind blowing against his wet skin. Adrian draped an arm around his shoulders, ushering him to the riverside. There was a sudden guilt in Adrian’s expression when Jongin’s teeth clattered.

“I did not mean to use my strength against you,” he said quickly once they were out of the water. “I’m... sorry.”

Jongin stared at him for a moment and then he smiled, shaking his head and shoved Adrian by the chest lightly.

Fireflies flickered outside the tent while the faint light of candle filled the inside. They had Stickweed Nuts and Pepper Plums for dinner. It was not the most satiating meal, but it was filling enough. Besides, food was the last thing on their minds right now.

Jongin’s tunics and pants were drying outside in the subtle night wind. He had borrowed one of Adrian’s worn oversized shirts and dried his hair. Now, they lay on the blankets with Adrian’s arm pillowed under Jongin’s head as the night flitted by.

They would be few more miles closer to the Vrilehm Mountains tomorrow. The fear of all of this ending filled Jongin’s chest every time he thought of it. But it apparently was not affecting Adrian the same way. Or Adrian was simply not thinking about this ending. He looked far too exhilarated and over the moon to be worried. Jongin wondered what ran in Adrian’s mind now, this very instant.

Well, it was not too hard to guess. Adrian had his hand experimentally caressing a side of Jongin’s waist and his eyes pierced into Jongin’s while Jongin rested reclining on the ground. Jongin had to extol the man’s fantastic self-restraint.

“When I got caught, the servant did not report to my father. But I felt horrible,” Jongin narrated. “So, I waited for the right time when my father would be in his best mood and I told him that I had broken his favourite vase.”

“Did he punish you for that?” Adrian asked.

Jongin’s eyes widened. “Punish me? Gods, nay.”

Adrian looked slightly baffled. “My brother and I were often punished when we disappointed our father.”

“How cruel,” Jongin let out.

“Yes,” Adrian chuckled. “One time, I was an abetter in one of Evzen’s romantic endeavours. I think she was a noblewoman visiting from Vokithia. She was almost twenty years older than Evzen, but was absolutely prepossessing. I was thoroughly entertained by Evzen’s weak attempts and decided to abet him.”

Jongin listened, smiling, running out of breath every time Adrian flashed that easy, sincere smile. Heavens, he looked so happy. Let Adrian stay this way forever, please…
“When Father found out that Evzen had bedded the Vokithian lady, he was beyond enraged. I had my part to play in it, of course.”

“What did you do?” Jongin asked, truly intrigued.

“I…” Adrian began, stifling a laughter. “I helped him seduce her. Let us leave it at that.”

Jongin did not press him. “How did your father punish you?”

“Oh, we had to stand under the scorching sun for an entire day without any food or drink.”

Jongin gasped. “That is preposterous!”

“Well, Evzen threw a fit and was let off the hook sooner than I.”

Silence followed. Jongin was thinking about the day Adrian took those whips to his back for saving his life. Adrian was an Auvran. Wrongdoers were penalized mercilessly in Auvradevas. Be it God or mortal.

“Has your… your mother talked to you lately?” Jongin inquired in a low voice, staring back into Adrian’s amber eyes as Adrian hovered above him, leaning on the elbow of the arm Jongin’s head was resting on.

Adrian sighed heavily and brought his hand to Jongin’s face. He softly stroked Jongin’s cheek. He was experimenting. There were caution and curiosity in every one of his touches. It was as though he were trying to figure out Jongin’s skin. Or memorizing it. Or slowly learning and making it his own. He lightly brushed a lock of hair out of Jongin’s forehead and traced the vein on Jongin’s neck and the choker necklace with his fingertips. Jongin shuddered.

He liked it. Adrian liked it immensely. He was enjoying it, taking pleasure in simply feeling the smoothness and warmth of Jongin’s skin. It was like something holy for him, a hallowed ritual, a sacred blessing. And though it was clear that he wanted more, he was better at holding himself back. They touched lightly, kissed lightly, shared each other’s desires lightly. They were treading lightly. Both afraid of getting their hearts broken.

“She has,” Adrian answered, his gaze drooping to Jongin’s collarbones. He felt them, too. Jongin’s breathing quickened and he wished Adrian would stop touching him because he could not concentrate on anything but Adrian’s calloused hand against his bare skin at the moment.

But he had questions he needed answered.

“What did she say?” Jongin asked. He wanted to know if the Goddess Zhesaris had said anything about him to Adrian. Why would she talk to him about a mere mortal? But Adrian was her son after all. She certainly must care about whom his son was currently besotted with.

“Nothing important,” Adrian muttered. He was keener on Jongin’s neck and lips than the conversation. “She said she knows what she says every time she visits me in my dreams.”

“And what is that?”

Adrian hesitated to answer. “That I will soon join her.”

Jongin frowned. “What does that mean?”

“Nothing.”
“Nay, tell me,” Jongin prompted, pressing a hand into Adrian’s chest.

Licking his lips, Adrian moved his hand back to Jongin’s waist. From there, he slowly drew it to Jongin’s bare thigh. Jongin’s breath hitched. He wanted Adrian to talk. So, he would not react until Adrian had given him what he wanted.

“Tell me,” he urged him again.

Adrian exhaled exasperatedly. “Gods do not live on ground,” was all that he said, sounding a little piqued.

He needed not say more. Jongin understood. Or more like his foreboding was validated. His stomach knotted. Of course, it was all very hypothetical—they did not know for certain that it would happen. Adrian would first need to demonstrate that he was worthy of being a God. And as much as Jongin selfishly wanted him to fail, it was more important to mankind that he did not.

“Nothing else?”

Adrian shook his head. He cupped a side of Jongin’s face and bowed his head. A raspy breath escaped Jongin’s lips when Adrian’s beard grazed his neck before Adrian’s lips kissed the corner of Jongin’s jaw.

“Had she… said never anything about me?” Jongin asked.

Adrian hummed in response as he took a moment to pepper Jongin’s neck with exploratory kisses. Jongin gasped and shoved Adrian back to look at him.

“What did she say?!” he screeched.

Adrian shrugged. “That I shan’t let my heart waver for you.”

Jongin cocked an eyebrow. “Is it…? Wavering?”

Adrian’s steely gaze gave away nothing. “Do you delight in making a monkey of me?”

Jongin let out a snorty laugh. “I actually do,” he chortled. “But I am not teasing you this time. I really do want to know.” He splayed his fingers on Adrian’s chest and looked earnestly into the Godblood’s eyes.

Adrian swallowed as his eyes dropped to rake Jongin’s lips. “It is,” he admitted in a whisper. “And it feels… strange… Mysterious.”

Jongin stared at the man wordlessly for a moment. He was sure Adrian could hear his racing, thundering heart right now. “I know,” Jongin murmured. He knew the feeling all too well.

“Have you… never felt this way before?”

That was Adrian’s way of asking if Jongin had ever had another man in his life before. Jongin tried to not to take offence in it. It was a harmless curiosity and a fair one, too, and he believed that Adrian would accept him even if he had been another man’s. Just as he knew Jongin knew that he knew Jongin would accept him even though his heart had been pining for another for so long.

“I would not be lying here with you if I had,” Jongin replied.

Adrian looked guilt-stricken. “I did not… mean it that way.”
“It is all right,” Jongin reassured him. “My chastity and virtue are all that I truly own to relinquish to the man who’d love and wed me, as my father had always reminded me.”

Something painful twisted in Adrian’s expression. He looked rather queasy with this new divulgence and Jongin bitterly regretted uttering it. He wished he could pick the words up and shove them back in his mouth.

“I cannot promise you one of them,” Adrian said truthfully and Jongin respected him for it.

He smiled at the Auvran Prince and said, “I know.” He ran his hand through Adrian’s hair and then his trimmed beard. “I would not ask you for it. It was just a fantasy from when I was younger.”

“Tell me more of your fantasies.”

Jongin considered them for a moment. He had many. Some were not so innocent and he wondered if Adrian would be humoured by them. He decided to play safe instead. “I always dreamed of taking a tall, dark-haired man for a lover.”

Adrian laughed. “You ask for so little.”

Jongin smiled. If only Adrian knew of how many dark, filthy desires Jongin had nursed within him. “I really do.”

“I suppose we have that arena covered. What else?”

“Hmm,” Jongin drawled. “When we were children, my sister and I would wager on who’d have the dreamiest husband.”

Adrian’s eyes widened in surprise. “You were a cheeky one even as a child?”

“The cheekiest,” Jongin chuckled. “My father often hazarded a guess that I would fall for a warrior, even though I actively spoke against warfare. I’d swoon over every handsome man I see on my path, especially a strapping one. I was easily impressed. But none interested me enough for me to give myself to them.”

“If you were so easily impressed, why had it taken me so goddamn long to impress you?” Adrian asked and Jongin gawked at him in bewilderment. What was he saying? “And you would… only take one lover?”

This Jongin could answer with absolute certainty. He nodded his head. “Perhaps my heart may want another but my body would only be for one.”

Adrian gave the same twisted expression again. He was already feeling in the wrong. And it was beginning to hurt Jongin. The guilt and reluctance were apparent because, perhaps, Adrian was not planning on giving himself only to Jongin.

He was a God. He did not belong only to Jongin.

Jongin turned his face away, flushed and blushing. He never thought he’d be having such intimate conversations with Adrian, the man who had destroyed Jongin’s home.

He wanted to talk about something else. Anything else. He did not want the romance to end when it had not even started. He did not want to scare Adrian right away.

“Did you… like it?” Adrian asked before Jongin could say something to avert his attention. The
diffidence in Adrian’s usually composed voice was charming, though a little intimidating.

Jongin blinked at him in confusion—*What do you mean?*

Adrian slowly drew his hand along the underside of Jongin’s thigh and Jongin crimsoned deeply when he realized what Adrian was referring to.

“I had never…” Jongin began and paused as his voice broke. “No one has ever…”

Adrian pressed his lips to Jongin’s ear and endearingly whispered, “I relished every moment of touching you.”

Jongin burned in embarrassment. How could a man admit to such a thing so blatantly? At times like this, Jongin was reminded of the fact that Adrian was nonetheless a brutish Auvran. The outspokenness and confidence in Auvrans he hated. But they were worn in an impeccably good fashion by Adrian.

People had seen the fire Adrian was on the battlefield, they had seen the ruthless Godblood facing a ghastly Wyvern, but only few must have seen this vulnerable, transparent side of him.

“Had you not found it… bizarre?” Jongin asked.

Adrian brought his head up and frowned down at Jongin.

Jongin gulped. “I mean, touching me… like that. I am a man and an Aevayl at that. Had that not… staggered you in the least?”

Adrian looked at a loss for words. “I…” he began but pursed his lips again. His hand was idly resting on Jongin’s knee now. *Say something, please,* Jongin quietly beseeched. Such a silence terrified him. He remembered sobbing for air, on the verge of tears, as Adrian gently caressed his sheath—a part of him that manifested the distinctive uniqueness of his body and desires. Jongin had put on an undisguised exposition that it was the most sensitive, most vulnerable part of him, in faith that Adrian would never take advantage of the admission. It was what made Jongin who he was. It was all that Jongin was. And he wanted to be accepted that way.

“I thought you were beautiful,” Adrian said at length with a frown furrowing his brows deeper. “And the way you… bloomed when you were touched there… it was so… beautiful.”

Adrian watched tears well in Jongin’s eyes. He then held a side of Jongin’s head in his hand and his lips met Jongin’s. It was all that Jongin wanted that moment. The reassurance. The solace. Heaty breaths were exchanged as they fought for each other’s air, tongues pressed against one another. Jongin’s lips throbbed, crushed under Adrian’s. The world stopped spinning around Jongin. He heard nothing but the rhythmic beats of Adrian’s heart coordinated with his own. Like a choreographed dance. He felt Adrian’s warmth enveloping him. He savoured every bit of the kindness in the kiss. But wanted more. So much more. And if this instant, if Adrian wanted to claim him, Jongin would contently yield himself, his body, everything he had to this man with profound, barefaced desperation. He would allow Adrian to penetrate him, ruin him, destroy him, and resurrect him again.

Everything burned, he thought he was on fire. He never knew passion, lust, and desire could also be as deadly as they were galvanizing. None of his fantasies could match this. This was real. This was shattering him, pulling him apart into pieces. He wanted Adrian to fill him, to overwhelm his senses, to blind him with an appetite that could never be satiated, to make his skin smell like the ocean too, to make promises he’d never keep all night long, to press deeper and deeper into his body until there
was nothing left to venture. And when it all came to an end, he wanted Adrian to leave him a token of their intimacy.

It was all, perhaps, too much to ask for.

When Adrian came up for air, breaking the kiss, Jongin raised his head, chasing for more. He caught Adrian’s lips between his once more and kissed him painfully hard. He wanted all of Adrian’s walls to crumble and have him want Jongin like his life depended on it. He wanted to find himself through Adrian. A purpose, a life, a destiny.

It felt like a whimsical, quaint tale. Until a handful of weeks ago, Jongin had wanted nothing but to witness the glorious moment of the Crown Prince Adrianus Dragovan of Auvradevas’s downfall. But this instant, he had taken a shine to the man with every bit of his soul. Perhaps that was how inebriating Godbloods were. They could simply make any mortal drunk with such an obscene, filthy lust if they will.

It was either that or Jongin was heading for his own demise by falling in love with this man. Every moment with Adrian seemed monumental in his head. Jongin was aware of how fraught with ache and hunger he was and checked himself. He was no longer gainsaying his desperation for himself to be taken, owned, and crumpled.

Adrian seized one of Jongin’s hands and pinned it to the blanketed ground. The kiss turned firmer, stronger, needier, more demanding. Jongin cared little for his lungs as they screamed for some air. He whimpered out a soft moan when Adrian sucked on his bottom lip, his teeth grazing the tender petal.

“Jongin,” Adrian puffed, holding Jongin down when he pulled away. They were both out of breath, but Jongin was fighting for it.

“I am yielding to you, Adrian,” Jongin blurted out in frustration before Adrian could pull further away. The imprudence suddenly did not frighten him. He had said it, now it was out there. He could not go back, might as well march forth. “Have me.” It sounded like a plea bordering on order, but he did not care. He only hoped that Adrian realized how low Jongin was stooping to beg for the man to take him. He was unabashedly offering himself up to Adrian, setting his pride aside. It was deadlock breaking for Jongin. He only wished Adrian saw how desperate and willing he truly was.

The lust swimming in Adrian’s own eyes was just as undeniable. But he did not make any further advancement. He gazed into Jongin’s eyes forlornly for a moment before he pulled completely away and sat up.

Jongin, crestfallen, held his hand to his chest and tried to pacify his thumping heart. His swollen lips were still aching for more. And he was certain Adrian’s were, too. So, why was he so reluctant? Whatever they did here, in this tent, in the middle of nowhere, safeguarded by these countless trees, roofed by the endlessly stretching heavens, nobody would know but them. Nobody needed to know.

His mother would know.

Jongin sat up beside the Auvran Prince and hung his head. “Please, do not leave me to ponder in the dark,” Jongin pleaded in a whisper. “What are you thinking? Tell me.”

Adrian did not meet his gaze. “I do not wish to deflower you,” he said.

The straightforwardness in his words was immodest, unflinching. It made Jongin wilt with shame. “Is that all?” he pressed further.
Adrian sighed and looked at him. “I am not sure I can be the man you want me to be.”

Jongin bowed his head. “You are to be a God. I understand. Gods do not… stay with the mortal.” He knew Adrian was holding himself back because he did not wish to let Jongin down or play him false by breaking his unwavering faith. Even so, Adrian had not been able to completely stay away. He wanted Jongin. Perhaps not as much as Jongin wanted him.

“And you are not… like everyone else.”

Frowning, Jongin searched for something to read in Adrian’s remorseful expression. “Speak plainly, please,” he snapped.

“I mean to say…” Adrian paused, rubbing the back of his neck. “Forget that I mentioned anything. I didn’t know what I was saying.”

It was very uncharacteristic of the Godblood to be so careless with his words. Adrian was flustered.

“Do you repulse me for being an Alsiramene?” Jongin asked glaringly.

Adrian blinked at him.

“Or does the thought of you being one terrify you so?” Jongin added with a sullen scowl tugging at his eyebrows and lips.

Then it was Adrian’s turn to glower. “I have told you before that I am not that,” he spat defensively.

Jongin scoffed scornfully. “You would deny your feelings for your fallen Auxiliary, would you not?”

Adrian snarled at him, looking as though he were slapped by a ghost. “Do not speak of him,” he threatened.

Jongin clenched his jaw. “Why? Do I open a closed wound or am I creating a new one? You still harbour so much grief and refuse to let anyone else take his place because you truly did love him, did you not?”

“I’m not a Kamthir!” he bayed, gritting his teeth. There was sheer anger right now. It was a side of him Jongin had yet to see. But it did not subdue him. If anything, it provoked him.

“A Kamthir, you say? In simpler words, filth,” Jongin said, words full of venom now. “You were… kissing me a moment ago. If you still do not accept the fact that you are one yourself, you must either take me for a woman and you do not identify me by my actual gender or you are in denial. Which is it? If it is the former, if that is the reason why you found the uncanny part of me ‘beautiful’, I’d rather you never come to my side ever again.”

Adrian should have hurt him, hit him, gutted him, killed him. But he stood and left the tent without another word instead. Jongin sat in an uneasy silence for a moment. He felt his heart breaking a little. How did everything that was so sweet only a moment ago turn so sour on such short notice? They were melting in each other’s embrace and now, everything they had built so carefully between them had been crushed. Jongin was to take the blame. He should have stayed silent. He would have endured anything, but he would never be forced into submission and he would never lose his self-respect to unwarranted discrimination and disgrace. Adrian needed not be with Jongin if he truly revolted his kind.

Jongin looked down at the silver chain around his ankle. He finally gave in and broke into a sob,
hugging his knees to his chest.

* * *

Later that night, as sleep finally began to tug at Jongin’s eyelids, he was roused by the rustling noise Adrian made when he crawled back into the tent. He was mumchance for a long while and Jongin silently watched him without sitting up from where he lay. Jongin was done weeping, his head was clearer and his heart heavier. He knew what he wanted now. The way Adrian had acted earlier seemed to suggest that he was more okay with the fact that Jongin was part feminal than with the fact that he was mostly a man.

As much as he had begun to worship and was profoundly, undoubtedly enamoured by Adrian, he wanted to dispel every doubt there was between them. He needed to be sure that Adrian was sure. And if the Godblood weren’t, Jongin wanted no more of this.

He was determined. But he did not know if his determination would plod on with perseverance.

Jongin sat up. “You would take a wife,” he said in the tiniest voice. Adrian was listening, though he was not looking. “You might join your mother and become a God that you long to be. But if you do not, you would take a wife. Perhaps the Princess Edothise of Othadia as you have already agreed to wed her. You would rule most of the Nine Realms with her at your side when you have stretched your dominion that far. You would have sons and daughters to succeed you. They would carry your name with pride.”

As soon as he said it, his voice faltered and his heart clenched. It prompted him to foolishly think of a scenario in which he and Adrian would have a child of their own, and the child would never be allowed to carry Adrian’s name with pride. He immediately dismissed the thought.

“Perhaps you’d take more wives, as have all the kings that precede you. You’d have a family, you’d save face for generations to come. You would have made both your father and mother proud. You need not be condemned to humiliation for my sake. I do not wish it upon you. If you are simply lusting after my body only because I happen to be available, then by all means, take me and toss me away when you are done right this instant. I will not voice a single objection. But please, do not give me these hopes to cling onto. They are crushing me. Do not blandish me with your honeyed words if you know I’d end up hurting in the end.”

Jongin finally took a breath, realizing his cheeks were stained with tears. Adrian kept mum, his eyes lowered and unfocused.

Then eventually, when Jongin was beginning to think that the Godblood would not reply, Adrian said, “I have never thought ill of you. I do not detest you. I wouldn’t have lain with you that night if I had.”

Jongin knew he would not get anything else out of Adrian. He reclined back on the ground and turned his back to Adrian, silently crying himself to sleep.
Warm summery wind kissed upon his face, the perfume of a bevy of Oosredil swirled in the sultry air, waifs and strays sought protection in the sun speckled shades.

Mirth filled Jongin’s chest like a blithe festivity. He was close to tears. Of course, he was not exactly home, but this was his kingdom. *Had been* his kingdom. He had been born on this very land, raised with its protection. He loved it, cherished it with all of his heart. Warinia had been his first love in countless ways. He had grown up amongst this lush greenery and cultivated fields. The mountains, the rivers, the sky, the air, the ground, the trees, the grass, the people, the kindness Warinia offered—he had fallen in love with all she had to offer.

He realized he was beginning to feel the same way for Adrian. Which was why it had hurt him so much when his home had qualms about accepting himself.

Perhaps it was the joy of having stepped foot on the Warinian land again, or perhaps it was the pain clutching at his heart, but a warm tear trickled down his cheek and Jongin wiped it away quickly.

The morbid chill that had never left him since last night continued to spook him. He was glad that they were travelling on foot today because he wanted to be as far away as he could from Adrian. He was embarrassed and regretful.

What was the point of even following him anymore? Jongin could leave, Adrian had long given him the liberation. It would not make much difference if he left. But this was their journey. They had started it together and Jongin wanted this to be a pleasant memory he could revisit every now and then.

The thought of Adrian turning into a mere memory pained him. He chided himself when he woke in the morning and did not find Adrian in the tent. He should have said nothing. He should not have insisted on bandying words. He hated himself for it. Things that seemed right last night felt foolish and unnecessary today.

Jongin wished he could turn back time and rectify his stupidity. He wanted Adrian to talk to him again. But he found no courage to stride a few steps ahead and tap on Adrian’s shoulder and say, *‘Talk to me, you’re killing me with your silence.’*

Perhaps Adrian was thinking the same. Maybe he wanted Jongin to speak first. Or maybe he wanted nothing more to do with Jongin. Or he was staying away from Jongin because he really was guilty of everything Jongin had accused him of last night.

Jongin earnestly hoped that was not the reason.

While they walked alongside the river on the path to a village in Warinia for some food and rest, with Adrian and the mare a few paces ahead of him, Jongin tried to get his thoughts straightened. The past few days had been a complete muddle, he had been completely overwhelmed by all these new feelings and Adrian’s undivided attention, he had not been able to sort his thoughts out. It felt like a break from conflicts that had now come to an end.

He wondered if he truly believed his own words— *‘If you are simply lusting after my body only because I happen to be available...’*  

Was that really the reason why Adrian was giving him this doting attention? It was cruel of Jongin to
pin Adrian with such unsparing accusations. He frowned and fought the urge to hit himself in the head.

“Does it matter whether I am or not?”

Nay, it did not, Jongin thought. It did not matter whether Adrian was or not. Jongin had no right to tell him who he was. He had overstepped his boundaries there. He surely would not like it if someone told him who he was and should identify himself as. Why should he expect Adrian to welcome it?

The acceptance would come eventually. He would accept who he was with time. But it was not Jongin’s place to patronize and treat with unforgiving condescension.

There. Done. Jongin had placed all the blame on himself. He had somehow managed to convince himself that he was in the wrong. That rarely happened. It never happened before. But Jongin was willing to go to any level of desperation at this point for Adrian. Now, he just needed to apologize and everything would go back to the way it was.

Jongin’s pride held him back.

He also wanted Adrian pushed to his absolute limits. He wanted to see how far would Adrian go to suppress his desires. Jongin’s insidious intentions were now bordering on cunningness. He liked it. Driving Adrian mad for him had a nice ring to it. At least then, maybe the idea of marrying some princess would not cross Adrian’s mind. He would be wrapped around Jongin’s little finger and not away usurping kingdoms or seducing women.

So, he’d let Adrian suffer a bit, he decided. He would apologize once his appetite to see Adrian at the end of his wits was assuaged. Meanwhile, he needed to drive Adrian to the edge of sanity and that could easily be done in a cold tent in the middle of a starless night and all of a sudden, Jongin would be so hot that he would remove all of his clothes and lay naked before Adrian. He could watch but never lay a finger on Jongin. His mighty walls of restraint would eventually crumble and he would come crawling. It was a devious, brilliant scheme. Jongin grinned to himself. He was setting a trap for the Godblood. His sister would be proud of him.

“What am I thinking,” he huffed to himself and shook his head. Since when had he become such a hopeless, demoralized intrigant? He wanted Adrian to like him, not fear him. He did not want to seduce Adrian like that. Though the idea of a Godblood fearing such a harmless mortal amused Jongin greatly.

When they reached the village, Adrian asked around for an inn. A red-haired villager told him that the Houndwallow Alehouse was just on the corner. Then Adrian inquired if he could find any petty jobs in the village to earn a little wage. The villager considered Adrian’s powerful built and incredible height for a moment, surveying him from top to toe.

The villager scratched his thick red beard and said, “A man with a size like yours may be of help at the forge.” His familiar accent was music to Jongin’s ears.

“I would not mind anything,” Adrian assured him. Jongin frowned. He did not fancy the idea of Adrian toiling or shedding sweat for the sake of providing him with good food and a good night’s rest. Especially now that he was not even interested in talking to Jongin.

But the fact that Adrian was willing to work his fingers to the bone for Jongin still warmed his heart. And consequently, his cheeks.
Jongin heard his stomach roar like a wild, starved tiger. He clasped a hand over his stomach as he whiled away the time, perched on the edge of a well in the middle of the village. Nobody paid him or the mare waggling her tail at his side any attention while they guarded their belongings and Adrian’s Azurewrath.

A mongrel snarled at Thelme, popping out of nowhere. It was all skin and bones with wide, agog eyes. Jongin bit his lip and glanced around. He then jumped off the well and crouched before the mongrel.

The dog flinched at his first touch but eventually leaned into it once Jongin began to scratch it behind its ear. A soft laughter escaped Jongin when the mongrel kicked its hindlegs in delight.

When Jongin brought his head up, he was met with a little girl watching him. He smiled in her way and she blushed.

“Is he yours?” he asked the girl, who nodded in return. She walked over to them and knelt beside Jongin to pet the mongrel.

She shyly smiled at Jongin when she was convinced that Jongin was nothing short of friendly. “Bad boy,” she chided the dog.

“Nay, it is all right,” Jongin said and scratched the mongrel’s chin. “What is his name?”

“Mugs,” the girl said, smiling.

“Good boy, Mugs,” Jongin chimed and rose to his feet. The girl picked the dog up in her arms and disappeared into one of the cottages. Jongin returned to the well and patiently waited for Adrian to return.

The sun had shifted in the sky, the wind was heavier, the air was muggy. Jongin’s heart ached to venture a little further and find hills, shrubs, trees, roads he missed so dearly. But he knew Auvran guards would be swarming their recently acquired kingdom. It was not safe for either him or Adrian to get closer to the capital.

Jongin stared at the hard-baked ground before he eventually lifted his gaze and saw Adrian return to the blacksmith’s forge, bearing steel rods, too many and too heavy to be borne by a common man, on his shoulder. He looked out of breath, completely bathed in sweat. The sweat beads trickled down his shirtless, bronze body. The solid muscles on his abdomen, back, arms, and Gods, yes, his heaving chest, were firmly defined. His suntanned skin glistened with muck sweat that dripped from the tip of his nose and dribbled down his temples and the cleft of his back and chest. Jongin felt his heart do all sorts of embarrassing things while his blood stirred violently in the nether regions. He dropped his gaze, utterly ashamed with his cheeks burning hotter under the scorching sun.

He tried to avert his attention. He tried to focus on the familiar air, the quiet in the village, the mongrel that fled its house once more, the woman who fetched water from the well after pinning him with an odd look, the two kissing boys at the back of a cottage, the meowing cat. Within moments, his eyes darted back to the forge when he heard the thundering clangs of metal.

His heart leaped to his throat and he thought he might just swoon and pass out in this brutal heat. The blacksmith and his apprentice were gaping at Adrian as he placed the sword on the anvil to edge hammer it. He then picked up the hammer and struck the sword repeatedly. Jongin gawked at Adrian’s flexing biceps and his breathing shallowed. Adrian raised his head and looked directly at
Jongin, who quickly turned his head away, swallowing hard.

He had been astonished by Adrian’s body before. But now, he thirsted after it, worshipped it, and appreciated it. His own body was reacting strangely to even the sight of Adrian’s. It seized his breath and made him sweat. Perhaps it was the afternoon’s heat. *Yes, blame it on the heat,* Jongin thought.

By the time Adrian’s shift ended at the forge, the sun was beginning to sink in the sky. They had taken a day off from travelling. Jongin assumed that it was for a respite before they’d wander too far away from civilization. Even so, it seemed rather foolhardy to waste an entire day.

Adrian had earned a couple of coins more than what was initially agreed upon. Warinians appreciated good work and Adrian had delivered faultlessly. Gratified, Adrian bowed at the blacksmith before he took his leave from the forge, pulling his shirt over his sweat-stained body. Jongin looked away once more.

They meandered their way through the village towards the inn. On their path, some stopped to look at Adrian and Jongin, none recognized their exiled Warinian Prince. Mostly because they were keen on Adrian.

“Is he perhaps an Auvran?” some speculated.

“What a man,” others revered.

Adrian did not seem like he was paying any of them any heed as he walked past them with Thelme’s reins in his hand. Adrian’s gaze eventually fell on the couple of boys canoodling against a fence and he looked away at once. Jongin frowned. He could not tell if Adrian’s flushed expression answered to humiliation or disgust. Well, Jongin’s answered to envy. He looked at those boys sharing their love for each other out in the open and envied them. Love was indeed too beautiful to be hidden away.

Jongin glanced at Adrian’s free hand at his side and reminisced the moment when Adrian had held his hand two days ago while they walked among the trees, alongside the Sraemn River. Adrian had hesitated at first as their knuckles brushed. Jongin still remembered the way his heart had thumped, every inch of his body wanting Adrian to take his hand. And when he did, Jongin thought that the simple, innocent gesture spoke volumes and was more sacred than a kiss itself. Their interlaced fingers fitted well with each other just as their locked lips.

Now, it felt like a dream that Jongin had woken up from. Was Adrian even feeling all this anguish? Was his heart also breaking? Was he also distressed by the dark night of his soul as Jongin was? If he weren’t, then there could not be a crueller man.

When they reached the Houndwallow Alehouse, a farmer with a wheat stalk dangling between his teeth greeted them. Adrian introduced himself as a wayfarer and Jongin as his drudge.

“An Auvran?” the farmer asked with an arched eyebrow.

Adrian’s face pulled in discomfort. “And if I am, would your inn not welcome me?”

The farmer smiled. “If it were even an *enemy* who knocks on our door, we’d invite him in and offer him a tankard of ale.”

As such was the Warinian shibboleth. Jongin smiled with pride on his lips, Adrian gaped with astonishment.

Jongin still hadn’t a clue why Adrian had decided to wander away from Sraemn. Was it really for
rest? The Godblood certainly did not seem like he needed any. Was it for Jongin, then? If that were the case, then Jongin was slowing Adrian down.

“Let me take her off your hands,” the farmer grunted and took Thelme’s reins. “You look starved, girl.”

Inside the inn, the innkeeper regarded Adrian’s mighty size in incredulity but snapped out of her trance when Adrian asked for a room and some food. Warinians were generally smaller in size but they weren’t as small as they appeared in Adrian’s presence. Jongin, for one, had gotten very used to Adrian’s large hands, broad shoulders, and thick chest.

Once Adrian had paid the price for a one-night stay, they were led to a room. It was cosy, to say the least. The pallet was also big enough for two. Adrian settled his bow and sword in a corner before removing his shirt.

Jongin opened his mouth and closed it again. He stood by the door and silently watched Adrian wash his face, arms, and chest with the water in the basin. When he was done, he stood still, shoulders slouching forward, head hung, and hands gripping the edge of the basin. What was he thinking, Jongin wondered.

There was no other way. Jongin needed to speak first or his head would explode.

“I’m… sorry,” he muttered. His heart was clamouring inside his chest.

Adrian did not reply, though his back muscles tensed. Then pulling away from the basin, he pulled his shirt back on and threw a cowl around his head, as though to hide his face. “I suggest you get some sleep,” he said, grabbing the bow and quiver of arrows on his way out.

“Where are you—” Jongin began but Adrian had long disappeared by then.

He stayed up for a while. The innkeeper came in with a hearty meal later that night and Jongin ate as much as he could stomach. He waited some more, fiddling with the anklet around his ankle. He had received many gifts since the day he was born from commoners and royalties alike. But this cheapjack anklet was the most priceless of them all.

Adrian had claimed Jongin the instant he had put the anklet on him. Then he had taken Jongin’s face in his hands and kissed his lips to seal the deal. He had lain Jongin down and touched him. Jongin palmed his face and took a deep breath. He was eventually tired of waiting, so he reclined on the pallet and drifted off to sleep. At least Adrian was talking to him.

* * *

“Good morning,” the innkeeper greeted Jongin when he walked out to the dining area. He bowed his head and returned her smile sleepily. “Sleep well?”

“Yes, very well,” Jongin said. The pallet had done his spine some good. His body felt incredibly well-rested, though the same could not be said for his heart. Adrian had not returned all night.

“Breakfast?” the innkeeper offered.

“Please,” Jongin said and found a seat at the table the farmer he had met yesterday was seated at. He was sitting with a pair of young boy and girl. They smiled at Jongin warmly.

“That is very charming,” the girl remarked, pointing at Jongin’s necklace.
“Oh,” Jongin let out, touching the pendant. “Thank you. It was given to me by a friend in Ruvraeshara. He bit his lip. “May I ask you something?”

The farmer and the young pair blinked. “Go ahead, son,” said the farmer.

“Has… everyone been all right here in Warinia?” Jongin asked. “After the Auvran occupation, I mean.”

The farmer huffed. “It pains us to see the Auvran flags and insignia everywhere in the capital. But away from it, nothing much has changed. Except that we pay a higher levy now.”

Jongin frowned. “That must be tough on you.”

“It does,” he admitted and then sighed.

“And what of the… King?” Jongin asked carefully.

The farmer shrugged. “We haven’t seen or heard from His Majesty ever since the Prince was enslaved by the ruthless Auvran King and taken away from Auvradevas.”

“That’s enough, Niangih,” the innkeeper said as she served Jongin with honey bread and fig puree. “Let him eat.”

Just when Jongin began to dig in, the inn’s door swung open and Adrian sauntered in, dead on his feet. He looked at Jongin with limpid eyes and then at the rest of them.

“Ah, you’ve returned,” the innkeeper said, smiling. “How about you join us for a morning meal?”

Adrian did not decline. He set his bow aside and sat at the table. Jongin was itching to ask where Adrian had been all night, but Adrian was not even sparing him a glance.

“Here. Have some,” the innkeeper offered him some honey bread.

“Thank you. Warinian hospitality is as infectious as they say,” Adrian commented and the farmer smirked at him.

“Niangih was just about to tell us the legend of the God of the Sun and the God of the Moon!” the young lad cawed, drumming his hands on the table.

“Ah, yes,” cooed the farmer—Niangih.

“The legend of the God of the Sun and the God of the Moon?” Adrian echoed confusedly. Jongin knew the tale all too well. It was a famous Warinian folklore. He doubted the story would have reached a kingdom like Auvradevas.

“In the olden days,” Niangih began. “when the ground was walked by giants, behemoths, faeries, and nymphs, men were just beginning to thrive. At the time, men could even conceive children.”

Jongin looked at Adrian to find any sign of detestation. He found none, as Adrian seemed indifferent.

“Men conceived children?” the girl gasped.

“Yes, yes. They were called the Reziwinians. Some are rumoured to still exist in some corners of the Nine Realms,” Niangih said and Jongin felt oddly guilty. He tried not to show it. “But that is a story for another time. Centuries after these days of magic and mystics, men were at war with each other.
Kings battled kings, brothers fought brothers, the greed for power and prosperity grew among them. Seeing how repulsive men have become, the kind creatures of magic slowly began to disappear, one by one. The God of Sun sneered at the corrupted morals of mortal men and decided that he would no longer bless them with his light. And without the sun, there can be no more moon to brighten the night. Worried, the God of Moon decided to have a discourse with the God of Sun to convince him to reconsider his decision to darken the world. Though they had been consociates since the beginning of time, the God of Sun had never seen the God of Moon’s face and likewise. They always faced each other’s backs. And when for the first time they had met and spoken to each other, the God of Moon fell for the God of Sun almost instantly. He professed his love for the God of Sun, who in return was utterly abashed and taken aback. He had not been used to such an attention. So, he told the God of Moon, “I have never been looked upon or admired by naked eyes as yours.” To that, the God of Moon asked if he would like the mortal men to look at him. The God of Moon laid one simple condition—if he succeeded, the God of Sun owed him his first kiss. Once again, nonplussed and curious, the God of Sun agreed. That very day, all men in every realm gazed upon the sun and relished it. Overwhelmed with joy, the God of Sun did not only give the God of Moon his first kiss as promised, but also his heart.”

“How?” the girl asked. Adrian was as engrossed as the younglings were in the storytelling. “How could the men look at the sun and relish it?”

Niangih grinned. “It was an eclipse. The men adored the sun through the moon.”

“I can’t believe it! That is bloody romantic!” the boy sang.

Adrian had dropped his attention to the food. Jongin stared at him blatantly before sliding a hand under the table and caught hold of Adrian’s. The Godblood’s head shot up and he turned to Jongin. Oh, how he missed Adrian’s rough hand against his skin already.

And then Adrian retrieved his hand from Jongin’s light grip, breaking Jongin’s heart a little more.

“We ought to get going,” he said and stood.

“Have you slept?” Jongin asked but received no reply as Adrian stormed away.

“You know. You look rather familiar,” Niangih said and Jongin froze. He blinked and smiled weakly. “Or, I may just be getting old.”

Jongin rose to his feet and excused himself.

How could Adrian not notice that this unwanted tension between them was making everything so much worse? Or perhaps he did and chose to do nothing about it. It wasn’t Jongin who was avoiding him, but it was the other way around. Adrian simply did not wish to entertain Jongin anymore. Sure, it had been Jongin’s demand, only if Adrian had such ill intentions. So, did he really have such foul intentions? Was that what he was trying to prove?
They had stocked their food supply up with whatever there was left after paying for the inn. Thelme looked just as well-rested as Jongin was. Unfortunately, the same could not be said for Adrian. The fatigue was clear in Adrian’s heavy struts and slumped shoulders. Jongin worried that the Godblood’s body might give in to exhaustion any moment now.

The river hummed at their side. The morning was still young. The village was already way behind them. Every step they took forward, Jongin dreaded that he would never see Warinia again.

Adrian had a greater calling. He was about to battle Wyverns and save the world. Jongin should cut him some slack and stop expecting the Auvran Prince to think of nothing but Jongin all the time. But it was not fair. Because Jongin was thinking of nothing but Adrian all the time. It was beginning to hurt his head. He was bordering on obsession, he knew. He was young and it was the first time he had ever experienced anything like this. To have Adrian shut him out completely all at once, all of a sudden was killing him.

Jongin came to a standstill when Adrian did before him. Why had they stopped, Jongin wondered and peeked at what had Adrian gawking.

The prancing black horse was bore the Warinian royal emblem on his chest. He whinnied and shook his mane as his rider dismounted. Jongin’s eyes shifted from the horse to the rider. Though a cowl hid her face, it was clear to see that she was a woman. She carried no weapons, so it was safe to assume that she wanted no trouble.

She stopped, facing Adrian. Then she removed the cowl. “Jongin,” she rasped breathlessly, looking over the Godblood’s shoulder.

Jongin’s knees turned weak and his lost his presence of mind for a moment as his jaw dropped, his eyes nearly popped out, and his throat tightened. “Jihee!” he cried at last and bolted past Adrian before jumping into his sister’s embrace. “Oh, dear Seven, I cannot believe it is you.”

He sobbed then. So did she. Oh, how he had missed her perfume, her light caresses, her kind words, her playfulness. “How are you, brother?” she asked, drawing back a little.

“Forget about me. How are you? And Father?” he puffed out, wiping the tears from his cheeks.

Jihee hesitated to answer. She snivelled and smiled, gently stroking Jongin’s hair. “It feels weird now that Warinia is no longer ours… Father and I are aiding the less fortunate ones. The… Auvran guards at the palace are…” she trailed off, dropping her gaze.

“What are they doing?” Jongin demanded.

Jihee sighed. “They are pitiless. They take our servants, humiliate them, abuse them as they wish. And no one is allowed to ask a question against them or their cruelty. Father had even suggested that I leave Warinia for good. But this is my home. How could I abandon it? And leave Father behind?”

Jongin felt his blood pounding in his ear. It curdled with anger and exasperation. He gritted his teeth, balling his hands into fists. “What of the people?”

Jihee shook her head. “They are all tyrannized in the capital. You do not want to hear of the Auvrans wickedness and savagery.”

His heart clenched. “What are they doing? Tell me, Jihee.”

“They barge into homes and… take men’s wives, publicly punish men and women who are married to their own. They are brutal against all the Alsiramene.” Her eyes welled with tears as she spoke
with so much pain. “They are also stepping into our temples and treating prayers sacrilegiously. Now with the Wyverns, they are even more reckless, believing that none of them will survive in the end… I never thought I’d see you again. A day hasn’t gone by without Father and I thinking of you, weeping over your safety.”

And here Jongin was, worshipping and falling in love with the man who had made all this brutality possible. How could he? How could he ever let himself derive pleasure from such an abhorrent man, who destroyed peace and people, but called himself a saviour? Jongin felt a greater disgust and contempt for himself than for Adrian right now. How could he forget himself and the inhumanity Adrian endorsed? How could allow himself to be adorned by this unjust and dastardly Godblood? His furious gaze dropped to the anklet. He wanted to rip it off and hurl it into the river.

“We can’t let this happen,” he told his sister in a shaky voice, eyes blinded by fresh tears.

“There is nothing that we can do… They have already besmirched our land with their atrocity. You should not have returned, brother.”

“How did you… know that I was here?” he asked when he finally realized it.

Jihee lifted her eyes to Adrian. Jongin glanced back at the Godblood, who was letting Thelme refresh herself with the water from the river. “Why are you with him?” Jihee asked, frowning disappointedly now. “I heard that he’s on a journey to find the Vrilehm Mountains to defeat the Wyverns.”

“He is,” Jongin muttered, holding his sister’s hands. “We are.”

Jihee pinned him with a confused look. “He sneaked into the palace last night,” she whispered. “And delivered me a message, asking me to meet him here before noon.”

Jongin gaped at her, taken aback by this new information. “He had? But…”

He looked back at Adrian once more. The man wasn’t watching them. Instead, he busied himself with stroking the mare’s mane. Jongin’s eyebrows furrowed. What was Adrian trying to achieve? What was his angle? What was the point of all this? Did he do this for Jongin’s happiness? Why could he not see that he had already destroyed all of Jongin’s happiness?

Nonetheless, he had given Jongin an opportunity to see his sister again. For that, he was thankful. But he decided to never let him know. If it hadn’t been for him in the first place, there would not have been a need for any of this right now.

“I must go,” Jihee said, squeezing Jongin’s hands.

“Nay,” Jongin let out as a plea. “Do not go.”

“Father doesn’t know that I am here. I should leave before someone finds out. I would not want you in trouble either.” She took Jongin’s face in her hands and pressed a kiss on his forehead. “Take care of yourself, little brother.”

Jongin caught her wrist and refused to let go, as he once had when he was a child and Jihee had to leave Warinia for a couple of weeks to visit a shrine in the Fourth Realm.

“I will let Father know how you fare,” his sister said and caressed Jongin’s cheek before she pulled her hand away. She then glanced at Adrian, bowing her head curtly. It was not a gesture of respect but of gratitude. Then blinking the tears in her eyes away, she mounted the horse.
The sun was searing as the noontide came. Jongin, perched on the rock, had his arms loosely locked around his knees while he aimlessly stared at the river with an absolute vacancy in his eyes. The fact that he had deserted his self-respect for a little fling with the Godblood put him to shame. He had not been himself in the past few weeks. As he began to see the kind side of Adrian, he had completely disregarded the abhorrent one. How did he let himself be convinced that Adrian was simply executing his father’s orders in all of his usurpations and wars? Adrian was a man of his own mind and a bloody Godblood at that. He could have prevented all of this if he had put his heart to it. But he hadn’t. He had played his hand in this barbarism and Jongin should never have to forgive him for that.

“We have to get moving,” Adrian said behind him in a low voice.

Jongin clenched his jaw. He glared at the silver chain around his ankle. Then with a powerful tug, he ripped it off his ankle and jolted up to his feet. “Nay,” he spat through his grit teeth and hurled the anklet at Adrian with more force than necessary.

Startled, Adrian stared at him. He lowered and picked the chain up from the ground.

“I will not go with you!” Jongin yapped. “Not any further.”

A frown pulled Adrian’s eyebrows together. He looked hurt. Good.

“What were you trying to do, letting my sister and I meet for one last time? To say goodbyes? Did you think it would make up for the countless acts of barbarity on your account?! I must thank you for it. Because I have finally woken. I have understood that this is what you do. You are a Godblood, you are impossible to be detested. I had been weak, I had let all these meaningless feelings cloud my judgment. You can kill me if you want, but I will not move another inch with you. You may save the Nine Realms from Wyverns. But you cannot save them from the despotism you have exemplified. Besides, I do not wish to be a distraction. Therefore,” he caught his breath. “spare me and go ahead.”

Adrian’s face had paled and wilted. He kept his doleful gaze steady on Jongin, his hand wrapped around the snapped anklet. “My destiny is a distraction. Not you. I hope you know that,” he said at length and turned his back to Jongin.

“Would you leave your destiny for me, then?” Jongin hissed, grinding his teeth.

Adrian faced him once more and frowned. “I would lay on the cold hard ground, eat nothing for days, break my skin and bones to be with you. But I cannot choose my destiny. Every waking moment, I rue the fact that I am a Godblood. Had I been a mortal man, had I been a simple man, I could have been the joy in your life. But I know that I am not and will not because I am who I am. Just as how you are who you are. You saw the part of me that wasn’t godlike or even admirable, for that matter. You looked at me the way... no one else does. I wanted to show you what I am when I’m not a prince and you have seen it.”

Jongin thought of the blisters on Adrian’s hands and the fatigue in his eyes. He still hadn’t caught a moment of sleep for over a day.

“With you, I feel as though all those years of innocence have returned to me. I do not wish to tarnish or ruin you, Jongin.” He paused. “You were right. I should never have... Especially when I knew that you would most certainly get hurt in the end... My judgment had been clouded, too. I forgot that I cannot want and have... what I wish to cherish.”
He looked away momentarily and drew a deep breath. Jongin hadn’t moved. His head was spinning.

“I am a vile man, as you have already pointed out many a time,” Adrian added. “I warred, I conquered, I killed. It was all that I knew how to do. My mother had given me to my father for this very reason. So that I would be ready when the time comes. Still, it is no excuse and I do not have an apology. I had wanted you, among many other things, since the first time I met you. You are not a body that is readily available for me. I do not have the audacity to take you like that, trust me. But the instant I realized that you harboured such misgivings, I knew staying away from you is the best option. I had touched you and I had tainted you… I am truly sorry for that. I wanted to give you so much more than what I had taken away from you. But if you wish to part ways now, I will not stand against it.”

After throwing all that at Jongin, the Godblood walked away and began to pitch the tent with exhaustion weighing on his shoulders. It was clear that Adrian did not want a fight right now. He was tired and sleepy. Jongin, on the other hand, was in a mood for one. How could Adrian do this to him again? His honeyed words and steely gaze… They were poisonous.

* * *

“You know you want to forgive him,” Jongin said to himself, studying the moon’s reflection in the river. He picked up a pebble and tossed it into the flowing water. “But why?”

Thelme was asleep and so was Adrian inside the tent, he believed. He, however, had forsaken sleep and was talking to the river, the moon, the trees, and the stars, but mostly to himself as the night deepened.

“You want to walk away, so why haven’t you already?” he muttered, hugging his knees tightly to his chest as the dry, cold wind billowed his tunic. “What is holding you back?”

He had seen his kingdom snatched away from him right before his eyes. He had witnessed the bestiality of a Wyvern. But none had shaken him as had his muddled, incomprehensible feelings for Adrian.

“If you were a simple man,” Jongin sighed. “I would have loved you. We’d lay on the cold hard ground together. I wouldn’t have asked for anything more.”

The wind kissed his cheeks.

He glanced back at the tent. ‘I am truly sorry for that…’ He had apologized for touching Jongin, as though it had been a mistake, as though he were held accountable for it. Disheartened again, Jongin rose from where he sat and started towards the tent.

Adrian was sound asleep with an arm thrown over his eyes and shirt unlaced. His chest rose and fell like a beautiful crescendo. He had the other arm stretched, as though to pillow Jongin’s head as it had in the past few days.

What a huge man, Jongin mused to himself as he removed his pants and crawled into the blanket, carefully avoiding Adrian’s outstretched arm. Cocooned in the blanket, he watched Adrian sleep. His eyes ventured to Adrian’s collarbones, then the lines of the Godblood’s abdominal muscles, the sharp waistline, the trail of hair beneath his navel that disappeared beneath the waistband of his trousers, the scars along the ribs.

What do I want, he asked himself. Do I want to stay away from him because I loathe him or do I want to stay away from him because I want him to feel the agony I feel?
He hesitantly brought a finger to brush a lock of hair from Adrian’s cheek. His fingertip grazed the beard and he found himself gently stroking the bearded jaw with the back of his fingers. Adrian had gone out of his way, wasted a day of his journey, to bring Jihee to her brother. It was an attempt to make things right. He was trying. The effort was applaudable.

He withdrew his hand when Adrian stirred. Sighing, Jongin idly stared at nothing for a moment. His head was telling him *nay, this is bad*. But his heart was contradicting everything his head told him. He sat up and looked at the sleeping man once more. He wanted to find out just about how much Adrian wanted to have him.

He knelt up and hesitated for a brief moment. Then mustering the courage, he climbed atop Adrian and straddled his hips before lowering down to sit on Adrian’s lower abdomen with his burning hot hands pressed onto Adrian’s stomach.

Adrian roused slowly and removed his arm from his face. His eyes fluttered open lazily and instantly fell on Jongin’s naked thighs on either side of him. He lifted his gaze and met Jongin’s with a flabbergasted confusion.

“Jongin,” he began in a hoarse, sleepy voice but Jongin hushed him, bringing both of Adrian’s hands to his thighs. He closed his eyes momentarily and savoured the rough fingers, blistered palms against his unblemished skin. Adrian twiddled with the hem of Jongin’s tunic, gnawing at his lip nervously.

They were both painfully aware of the raw heat of Jongin’s crotch on Adrian’s abdomen and Jongin’s shaft that was beginning to harden. He did not really care how Adrian chose to have him. He could penetrate him in any way he wished, Jongin would not dare to oppose. He wanted Adrian to hold him by his erection, slide his long fingers inside him through the opening of his rear, or better, just slide himself into Jongin’s sheath and deflower him, tear the vestigial membrane of his sheath. Jongin drew his hands up to Adrian’s chest. “I had surrendered my body to you the first night you had touched it. So, take all of it,” Jongin whispered as Adrian propped himself up on his elbows.

He wanted to. Adrian wanted to it. And the appetency for it was palpable in his golden-black eyes. His fingers were eager to breach past the hem of Jongin’s tunic. “I’m… afraid,” he muttered, eyes fixed on Jongin’s parted, quivering lips. “that if I start, I won’t be able to stop.”

Jongin’s stomach twisted agonizingly. The Gods knew how much Jongin wanted to be dirtied, claimed, and ruined right now. He brought their lips close as he leaned in. “I will not ask you to stop. I promise,” he breathed against Adrian’s lips and dragged his hands up the Godblood’s chest to wind them around the back of his neck.

“Jongin,” Adrian murmured, his lips lightly brushing Jongin’s like the tip of a feather. “I want to. Believe me, I do.” He cupped a side of Jongin’s face and Jongin hated himself for leaning into his touch and craving for more. “But not yet. Not while you are angry and reckless. We would both come to regret it.”

Jongin could never understand how could a man have so much self-restraint. “Why do you torment me so?” Jongin asked, voice breaking with a sob. His eyes brimmed with tears. He was tired of everything. He wished the Wyverns would just destroy the Nine Realms and him with them. It sounded childish and reckless, as Adrian had pointed out, but Jongin was just tired. These feelings had worn him out.

“Do you think I don’t feel tormented?” Adrian exhaled, wiping away the tear that rolled down the corner of Jongin’s eye with a thumb. “I have never wanted to fall like this for someone. I never asked for any of this. But I knew. I knew. That you were the one for me since the first time I saw you,
standing grumpily amidst all those men with that charming scowl on your face and a pout on your lips, clad in a dress, which you proudly and unabashedly wore. You stood up for yourself and against tyranny even when you had no power. The heart and courage you had to save that servant boy at the rite, the little things you deem so beautiful and worthy of your attention, the arrogance you strut with, the kindness you shower everyone with regardless of their birth right... I am done for, Jongin. You have succeeded. You have managed to make a Godblood’s strength, determination, and beliefs flounder.”

Jongin clenched his eyes. His heart swelled. Adrian was clear about what he wanted and did not want. It was Jongin who hadn’t figured that out.

Adrian’s hands shifted to the small of Jongin’s back. He sat up and shifted to carefully lay Jongin down on the blankets beside him. Jongin voiced no protest. He was both embarrassed and flustered.

“Let us fall in love in the midst of this morbid chaos,” Adrian whispered into Jongin’s ear. His beard pricked Jongin’s cheek. “It shall be a blessing for me in a sea of anathemas.”

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Somewhere in The Third Realm, Year 5138, 32nd Livathdag

Neither knew how much further they needed to go. Neither knew if the Sraemn River would indeed lead them to the Vrilehm Mountains. But they strode on. This was their only option. It was Adrian’s destiny. There was no other way.

“What happens if Auvradevas, Gods forbid, is attacked while you are gone?” Jongin asked, glancing down at Adrian, who was ambling alongside the mare Jongin was riding.

“I have given them orders to prepare for a war,” Adrian answered. “It is the best we could do.”

“You are expecting a war, then?”

“I know that there is one.”

“How?”

Adrian pinned him with a sly smirk. How do you think?

“Your mother told you,” Jongin said.

Instead of answering, Adrian wandered away from the path to pluck a wild flower, grown in the thick of rocks. He then reached up to stick it behind Jongin’s ear. Blood filled Jongin’s cheeks and he blushed fiercely when Adrian smiled at him.

“Why couldn’t anyone else go on this journey?” Jongin asked to avert the attention so that Adrian would not notice him blushing.
"I have told you before. It has to be me."

"Oh, yes. It is your calling."

Adrian shook his head, still grinning. "You find it silly."

"I do not," Jongin said. "You are a Godblood after all. Who would dare refute a God?"

"You."

Jongin stifled a smile by glancing away. He then reined Thelme to a stop before dismounting the mare to walk by Adrian’s side. Things were better, smoother between them now. They had not touched each other for the past couple of days. They travelled in silence most of the time, but when they tired of the silence, they talked about things that mattered little, though they were not exactly empty talks. For instance, Jongin had learned that Adrian’s favourite fruit was Crimson Pear and he disliked reading and studying but was forced to take up much swotting because he was a prince. Contrarily, when Jongin told him that he loved reading, Adrian had made this snorting sound, implying that he expected just as much.

Last night, as they lay in the tent, maintaining a safe distance from each other, Adrian had narrated the story of how he had gotten Baashere. Jongin told him that he had always wanted a pet dog but he thought it was cruel to keep a free animal restrained.

Jongin removed the yellow flower from his ear and inhaled its fragrance, bringing it to his nose. "It smells wonderful," he commented.

Adrian looked embarrassed. "Do you like it?"

Jongin nodded. "Thank you." He wanted to ask Adrian to return the anklet Jongin had so heartlessly thrown away, but he could not find the face.

"I have never plucked flowers before," Adrian chuckled as he strayed from the river. He crouched before the shrubs near the trees and picked a few more flowers. Once he had gathered a nosegay, he walked back to Jongin and handed him the flowers.

Jongin blinked at him, accepting them. "And here I thought you did not fancy the idea of men giving other men flowers."

That reddened Adrian’s cheeks like cold water. He rubbed the back of his neck. Jongin smirked. "If you could bring yourself to have eyes for the son of a baboon, I could learn to give men flowers," he said and it was Jongin’s turn to blush.

"I had not meant it when I said that," he muttered.

"Oh," Adrian said and edged closer. Jongin retreated until his back was pinned against a tree. His heart raced childishly. "We both know you most certainly had."

The Godblood raised a hand to the tree at a side of Jongin’s head and closed the distance between them. He could probably hear Jongin’s heart now. Jongin turned his face away, hugging the flowers to his chest.

Then Adrian gently took hold of Jongin’s chin and turned his head so that he could meet Jongin’s eyes. "Can I," he said in a whispy breath, lips already brushing Jongin’s. "kiss you?"

*Can I kiss you...*
Oh, how many times Jongin had dreamed of something like this…

*Can I kiss you…*

*Can I touch you…*

*Can I make love to you…*

*Can I stay…*

These were questions that needed no vocal answers. *Yes, yes, yes, yes. Always, yes.*

Jongin almost closed his eyes as Adrian’s hot breath brushed his lower lip. But his eyes flung wide open instead.

That was when he noticed a shadowy figure move behind the trees. He slipped away from Adrian and stared at the branches.

“What is it?” Adrian asked.

“Did you see that?” he gasped.

Adrian followed his gaze and arched an eyebrow. “See what?”

“Something moved… Something was watching us.”

“It’s almost dark,” Adrian said. “It was probably some wild animal.”

“Nay,” Jongin harrumphed. He looked closely at the trees and gasped when he saw a pair of pointy black wings, slightly bigger than a butterfly’s, flutter behind a tree. He drew his sword.

Adrian laughed behind him and brought a hand to Jongin’s shoulder. “I see it, too.”

“Where are you going?!?” Jongin screeched when Adrian started towards the woods.

Adrian stopped before a tree and held a hand out. *What is he doing?!* Jongin moved a little closer.

His mouth fell hanging open when Adrian coaxed a humanlike creature—no bigger than the size of a mouse—with wings to his hands. It was black, even its wings, its pointy ears, and its long hair.

“What is this thing?” Jongin let out and the creature looked up at him with wide, angry eyes. It hissed at him. Then out of nowhere, more appeared, like bats on a cold night.

“Relax,” Adrian said. “They are Dark Sylphs. Entirely harmless.”

“For a Godblood, everything is harmless.”

“Barring a certain plush-lipped Warinian boy, though,” Adrian countered and Jongin rolled his eyes, though his heart reacted thusly.

“Are they faeries?” Jongin inquired as the Dark Sylphs gathered around Adrian.

“Legend says they are the evolved species of Glow Piskies from the olden days. With time and the corruption of men, they lost their light and became the Dark Sylphs, mere female spirits of the air.”

“Can they talk?”
“I think they would have by now if they could,” Adrian sighed and let the creature go.

“I wonder who are telling all these stories, then.”

Adrian turned around and faced him with an amused smile. “They would not let us into their territory. Let us leave.”

Jongin was still astounded by the flitting creatures. They were waiting, all staring at Adrian.

“They are looking at you,” Jongin informed Adrian.

Then one of the Dark Sylphs flew ahead, stopped, looked back at Adrian, and jerked its head forward, as though it were trying to lead him somewhere. Adrian had realized it, too. With his eyebrows scrunched up in either perplexment or curiosity, he wandered after the group of Dark Sylphs.

After a moment of reluctance, Jongin put the sword away, grabbed Thelme by her reins and followed.

“Where are they taking us?” Jongin whispered to Adrian, taking hold of his arm.

Adrian briefly glanced at Jongin’s hand on his arm before looking at the Dark Sylphs again. “I don’t know.”

“What if they are luring us into a trap to make us their dinner?”

Adrian laughed despite himself. He pulled his arm free from Jongin’s grip only to curl it around Jongin’s waist. “You’d make a far tastier meal than I.”

“Do not jest,” Jongin hissed sourly. “Why have I never seen them? Why hasn’t anyone?”

“They only show themselves to those they wish to see.”

“You are a Godblood, so you get the free pass?”

“Precisely.” Adrian winked.

The Dark Sylphs eventually came to a stop as the sky darkened. Jongin gawked up at the two enormous trees leaning towards one another, forming a colossal arch that was curtained by vines.

Then without a forewarning, the Dark Sylphs disappeared into thin air. Jongin and Adrian exchanged a baffled look. Adrian took the mare’s reins from Jongin’s hand. “Don’t tell me you’re thinking of going through that,” Jongin rasped.

“You’re welcome to wait here,” Adrian said.

Jongin scowled. “Nay.”

Smiling to himself, the Godblood pushed the vines aside and entered the arch. Jongin worried his lip and tentatively followed Adrian. He had been expecting something either grand or completely desolate on the other side of the arch. What he found was nothing short of breath-taking.

There were two conjoined hills, not large enough to be considered as mountains. The tip of the hills was surmounted by snow and hazy mist. Jongin’s attention turned to the ruined staircase around the first hill, leading to the summit. His jaw fell slack.
“Is this…” he let out in awe.

“I think so,” Adrian muttered. “Come on.”

They started up the stairs, taking each step with great caution and care. Adrian constantly had a hand held out to Jongin, in case the latter needed support.

“The Dark Sylphs showed you the way,” Jongin remarked, hugging his body with his arms. Each step they advanced and ascended, the air around them turned heavier and colder.

“I hadn’t anticipated it either,” Adrian admitted. “Careful.” He took hold of Jongin’s hand and helped him leap up a couple of broken steps.

“What do you think you’ll find up there?”

Adrian shook his head. “I do not know. But whatever it is, it is our last hope.”

“You are our last hope.”

A small smile curled the corners of Adrian’s lips. “I take it that you no longer wish for my death.”

Jongin’s insides twisted unbearably. He had wished for Adrian’s demise once, yes. But now, even the mere thought of losing him agonized Jongin and killed a part of him. He hadn’t realized that he had stopped in his tracks until Adrian turned back at him with an arched eyebrow.

“Are you all right?”

Jongin looked up at the man with eyes stinging with tears. “I beg of you. Do not say such a thing,” he beseeched in the smallest voice. Adrian blinked blankly.

“I did not say it to give you offence or to wound you, I’m sorry.”

“Nay,” Jongin said. “It isn’t that. I have been such a person that wished death upon you. And I despise myself for it. I am sorry.”

Adrian smiled and walked back to Jongin. He took Jongin’s face in his hands and kissed his forehead. Jongin thought he might just melt in Adrian’s embrace, even in this cutting cold.

“I deserve it,” Adrian muttered. “Do not hammer yourself for it.”

“Nonetheless—”

“Shh,” the Auvran Prince hushed him. “Whatever the outcome may be, I am overjoyed and grateful that I had journeyed thus far with you. Godblood or not, I am also a man who can err. And I have erred. If you could find it in your heart to forgive me…”

Jongin knew he would forgive Adrian in a heartbeat. And it would not be right. “I am nobody to forgive you, Prince Adrianus Dragovan.”

Adrian still smiled. “We shall see about that.” He took Jongin’s hand and led him further up the stairs, grabbing Thelme’s reins with his other hand.

* * *

“I must rest,” Jongin huffed breathlessly with his teeth clattering.
He panted hard as he plumped on one of the steps and wrapped his arms around his trembling body. They were halfway up to the summit and the sun was already coming up. It was getting ridiculously cold and Jongin needed more warmth than the lousy, tattered blankets he was already swaddled in could provide.

“You… go ahead… I’ll wait h-here with the horse,” he said and snarled begrudgingly at the driving, bitter wind.

Adrian decided to give Jongin and Thelme the break they needed. He downed some water from the waterskin before handing it down to Jongin, who took a small sip. Adrian then settled beside Jongin.

“I can’t believe we have found the Vrilehm Mountains,” Jongin said under his breath.

“I had expected something… more resplendent,” Adrian said and Jongin laughed.

“Me, too.”

“Well, these mountains were majestic with many shrines and Wyvern nests back in those days. It was the home of the Seven. Now, I suppose it is a hallowed ground that needs to be out of mortal men’s reach.”

Jongin burrowed his chin between his knees and bit his lip to keep his teeth from clattering. He wondered what Adrian’s plans were if they found nothing on the summit. Would the Gods, including Adrian’s mother, help him at least then?

“There must be something more… resplendent than this,” Jongin said. “Something… bigger. It can’t be this anticlimactic, could it?”

Adrian’s concentration was elsewhere. He was not even listening. Jongin raised a trembling hand to Adrian’s arm. The Godblood flinched and glanced at him.

“Everything will end well,” Jongin said, noticing the worry in Adrian’s eyes. “You would win against the Wyverns.”

“I am not brooding over that,” Adrian said, smiling faintly.

Jongin blinked. “What then?”

Adrian licked his lips. “Even a day with you when it all ends is enough for me.”

Jongin outstared at the Godblood. Why would he say such a thing? Why was he so keen on seeing Jongin so utterly broken?

“A day,” Jongin repeated in a whisper, hanging his head. It was more than enough. A day when Adrian was only Jongin’s and belonged to no one else.

The first light of the day touched every crevice on the ground. Hues of pink, deep orange and red were splashed across the sky. They watched the sunrise in silence as the sunlight bled over everything that the heavens protected. The sky was on fire. The night had waned and daylight spilled into the woods beneath them.

Jongin shuddered when Adrian palmed one of his cheeks. He faced the Auvran Prince nervously. The sunlight was dancing in Adrian’s dark eyes.

“Can I kiss you?” Adrian asked again.
Jongin grabbed Adrian’s shirt by the chest. “Yes, yes,” he let out. You do not have to ask. I am all yours.

The sun was the first witness to their kiss. Adrian’s lips were warm against Jongin’s quivering, cold ones. It was chaste and languid, like the first time they had kissed. Adrian was not planning to deepen it. Once he was satisfied, he broke the kiss.

“Soon… You and I,” Adrian whispered against Jongin’s lips, hand firmly holding a side of Jongin’s head, fingers gripping his hair.

Soon. You and I.

They watched the sun climb up the sky for a few more moments before they rose to their feet and proceeded up the stairs.

Jongin tried to keep up, though he had run out of breath and was shaking uncontrollably by the time they reached the summit.

There was a ruined shrine in the middle of the blankets of snow. The wall of the shrine roofless shrine bore inscriptions of an ancient language.

“It is the language of the Seven,” Jongin said.

Adrian knew that. He made no comment. He silently trudged over the snow while Jongin stayed put with the mare by the stairs. He strode like a warrior on a warpath to conquer an entire realm. There was always grace in his struts, but right now, as he approached the derelict shrine, his shoulders were squared and there was pride, strength, and solidity in every step he advanced. He looked ready for a fight with another God.

In the mist that swallowed them, Adrian’s arm, starting from the left side of his chest, glowed up. The blue incandescence reminded Jongin of the sea and the starlight. Adrian did not pause to scrutinize it.

He dropped to his knees before the wall and drove his glowing left fist into the ground. The snow gusted around him, clearing the mist. Jongin’s heart almost leaped out of his chest at the roaring sound of Adrian’s fist striking the ground like a thunder that could split the sky in half.

Disbelief and anxiety washed over Jongin when he realized he was in love with a God. This was who Adrian truly was. He was no simple man and never would be. It felt wrong and reprobate to not only want him but to lust after a mighty God. But on the other hand, Jongin’s chest warmed at the thought of Adrian, mighty as he might be, was gentle and loving towards a valueless mortal.

Adrian rose back to his full height as the writings on the shrine’s wall began to light up. Jongin gawked stupidly at the inscriptions as the howl of the wind loudened. It began to bellow.

Only when Adrian gazed up at the sky did Jongin realize it was not the wind that was howling, but the Wyvern that slithered past the clouds. Its unrestrained bellowing sent a chill down Jongin’s spine. As the terror filled him, he looked at Adrian to see if he had drawn his bow and arrow or sword. He hadn’t. Adrian simply observed the Wyvern diving towards the summit.

Thelme whinnied in horror and pranced uncontrollably. Jongin tugged forcefully at her reins and stroked her nose to pacify her, though his own heart was about to burst.

The Wyvern, its scales in the colour of pale limestone and dusted with moss green, landed a few feet before Adrian, planting its claws into the snow. Its horns were smaller than the Wyvern that had
attacked Auvradevas, but it was just as majestic. Each spike on its tail was larger than a fully grown horse.

Jongin glanced at Adrian again with his eyes bulging out and heart hammering against his chest. He was ready to run, of course. But the winged beast was not menacing them. It made a low growl, its fiery yellow eyes keen on Adrian. It sidled around Adrian, surveying him and his glowing arm.

Then with one gentle move, it bowed its head to Adrian before it pushed off the ground and winged its way back up in the air. It soared away and disappeared amidst the clouds.

Jongin sat against the stairs as Adrian pitched the tent on the small, flat ground they could find. They had decided to rest before wending the rest of the way down tomorrow when the sun came up again.

The cold was unbearable, even though they were no longer near the summit. There was little that Jongin could do to keep himself warm. Not for the first time, he hated himself for being all skin and bones. At this rate, he thought, he might just shiver to death.

Once the tent was up, Adrian held a hand down to Jongin, who took it and let himself be led into the tent.

“What happened?” Jongin inquired when he tired of waiting for Adrian to explain.

Adrian settled on the makeshift bed of blankets and sighed. “That was Kairvos, the Wyvern Guardian of the Seven,” he said.

“How do you know?” Jongin asked shakily.

“He told me.”

Jongin chewed on the inside of his cheek and took his seat beside Adrian. The heat that radiated from the Godblood was inviting and tempting. Jongin had to clench his shaking hands to refrain them from reaching out and grabbing Adrian for his warmth.

“You could understand Wyverns, then?” Jongin asked shakily.

Adrian nodded. “It surprised me the first time I found out.”

Jongin slid a little closer to Adrian until their knees were brushing. Adrian seemed too lost in his thoughts to have noticed. “The first time? You mean, when you first killed the Wyvern in Auvradevas?”

Adrian nodded again.

“It spoke to you?”
Another curt nod of his head.

“What did it say?”

Adrian exhaled heavily and leaned back on his hands. “He said Zairvoth will return.”

Jongin stared at him wordlessly.

Adrian caught his glance at last. “Zairvoth, the Wyvern Deathlord. He was the first to turn against the Seven and consequently, mankind. Kairvos had defeated him before the Seven banished him.”

“What does he want now?” Jongin asked.

“To claim what wasn’t his in the first place.”

Jongin drew his knees to his chest. “And Kairvos? What did he say?”

“He said that he would come to my aid when the time comes... Which means, I’m all on my own until then.”

Jongin went stiff. “So, that’s it?” he spat, discerning similar disappointment in Adrian’s expression.

Huffing tiredly, Adrian collapsed on the blankets and threw an arm over his forehead. “We have to head back to Auvradevas forthwith.”

“So... there will be a war, after all.”

Adrian did not answer. Jongin lied down beside him.

“Why couldn’t Kairvos defeat just Zairvoth again?” Jongin asked.

“Because Zairvoth has an army. This is no longer Kairvos’ land for him to protect. This is... my land. This is the land of the men. The Seven do not meddle with it anymore.”

“Aren’t you... afraid?” Jongin asked in a low whisper.

Adrian looked at him with an amused smirk. “I am,” he said. “For the ones I love.”

Jongin reddened at that. “You will win,” he said.

“How can you be so sure?” Adrian asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“Because it is your destiny.”

* * *

The wintry breath of the wind whisked away every heat there was. Jongin was restless in his sleep, hanging on the verge of consciousness. His toes were as numb as the tip of his nose.

Tomorrow, they would set forth on their journey back to Auvradevas. Nothing would ever be the same again. Jongin knew he would miss sleeping in a tent, lulled by Adrian’s soft snores and heavy breathing. They would never sleep on the same bed, at each other’s side again.

There was also another option. Jongin could part ways with Adrian now that their journey had reached its bathos of an ending. This could not be the end. Though they had found the Vrilehm Mountains after many impediments, this did not seem like a proper ending for them. Was Adrian
thinking the same? Jongin doubted that he would be on Adrian’s mind right now. The Godblood had plenty on his plate to eat through.

Adrian was not asleep but Jongin could not tell for sure since he had his back facing the Godblood, curled up in a ball.

“Are you cold?” Adrian asked, breaking the silence.

Jongin grumbled with a lockjaw. Of course, he was cold. Why would he be shivering and hugging himself like a snake clutching at its prey otherwise?

“Are you asleep?” Adrian asked.

Jongin shook his head without turning around to face him.

Adrian shifted behind him and propped himself up on an elbow. “Will you… return to Auvradevas with me?” he questioned in a quiet voice.

Jongin turned and blinked at the man. “Do you… want me to?”

Adrian lowered his gaze to Jongin’s crimsoning cheeks. “You know that I do.”

Jongin turned away from Adrian again and closed his eyes.

“I want you safe,” Adrian whispered. “And I can keep you safe if you’re with me.”

When Jongin did not reply, Adrian brought a hand to the side of Jongin’s waist. Shuddering, Jongin clenched his eyes tighter.

“For as long as I can,” Adrian said. It was a promise. “Don’t… leave.” That was a request.

Here, in this tent, so far away from civilization, Adrian was all Jongin’s. But the moment they return, Adrian would once again be a Godblood that would save the Nine Realms. He would be the Crown Prince of Auvradevas who belonged to his people.

Jongin curled his freezing hands into fists and held them close to his chest. Adrian withdrew his hand from Jongin’s waist and let out an audible breath.

* * *

As the night wore on, neither caught any wink. Both dreaded what was in store for them in their future.

“You are shaking like a leaf,” Adrian said, as though he had just noticed it.

“Unlike you, I do not have a tonne of muscles to keep me warm,” Jongin whined and blew into his hands to take the chill off his numbing fingers.

“I believe I have enough to keep us both warm.”

Jongin looked at him and scowled. “Nay,” he said firmly.

Adrian sighed and sat up, taking his shirt off. “Let me—”

“I do not want to!” Jongin growled and moved away from Adrian.
Frowning, Adrian said, “What is the matter? You will not sleep in this cold.”

“Then I’ll stay awake.” He’d rather not sleep at all and freeze in the cold than to have Adrian’s bare body hold him all night long. Not that Jongin was not lusting after it, he was, and that was the problem. He would not want to do anything embarrassing without Adrian even touching him properly. He did not want Adrian to see how desperate he was. Not after Adrian had refused him two nights ago.

“Don’t be so stubborn,” Adrian said, taking hold of Jongin’s hand.

“Haven’t you heard, Prince Adrianus? I am rock-ribbed. That’s how I ended up here in the first place.” He grunted and yanked his hand free, but when Adrian tried to grab hold of it again, he hissed and his hand flew up to strike across Adrian’s face.

Adrian caught his hand before it could slap his cheek and smiled cockily. Frozen, Jongin gaped at the Godblood. Adrian brought Jongin’s hand to his lips and kissed his palm.

Jongin’s face warmed and he felt his heart flutter when Adrian’s beard tickled his fingers. He shied away, sucking on his bottom lip.

“Is it your first line of defence? Hitting everyone who irks you across their face?” Adrian scoffed.

“Actually, yes,” Jongin muttered and withdrew his hand from Adrian’s grip.

“I promise by the Seven, I will not let my hands wander. You have the word of a Godblood,” Adrian swore and reclined on the blankets. Jongin, after a moment of compunction, reluctantly fell at Adrian’s side. He savoured the heat from Adrian’s body and curled closer to the man, resting his head on Adrian’s chest. Adrian then wrapped an arm around Jongin’s back.

“I do it because… you can take it,” Jongin admitted diffidently in a weak voice. His senses were overwhelmed by the scent of Adrian’s bare skin. Gods, he smelled wonderful. Jongin wished he could sew the smell onto his own skin.

“I can take more than a slap on the cheek,” Adrian replied.

“I can see that,” Jongin said, tracing the bullwhip scars along Adrian’s ribs with a finger. He felt Adrian shudder under his touch. Jongin liked it. He liked it when he could make the Godblood meek for his touch.

“But speaking of how you ended up here in the first place, what had Jevan done?” Adrian inquired.

Jongin felt sleep tugging at his eyelids. He hummed in response with his fingers ghosting over Adrian’s stone-hard abdomen, skimming the muscular lines there. “He tried to touch me.”

“So, you stabbed his hand?”

“I wanted to chop his hand off.”

“You should have,” Adrian spat through his grit teeth. There was a brief stretch of silence. “So, you probably would have cut my face if you had had a knife in your hand when I accidentally held you that night.”

“Probably,” Jongin drawled, nuzzling into Adrian’s deep sternum. “Aren’t you more worried about defeating Zairvoth?”
“I am worried. But I am also confident that victory would be mine because like you had said… it is my destiny. That I am sure of. It is only fair for me to worry more about something I am not sure of.”

“Do you mean your fate with me?”

Adrian’s silence was a clear yes.

“What of your fate with the Princess Edothise, then?” Jongin asked under his breath. “Would you still… marry her when you return since you are already promised to her?”

Adrian remained mum for a long moment while Jongin listened to the rhythmic beat of his heart.

“It does not matter whether I do or not… for two reasons,” Adrian replied just when Jongin began to believe that he would not receive an answer.

“Two reasons?”

Adrian pressed his hand to the small of Jongin’s back. “Firstly, my heart already belongs to you. And secondly… I might not remain on ground when I have defeated Zairvoth.”

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**Auvradevas, Year 5138, 34th Jorrdag**

Drums were struck, trumpets were blown, bells pealed, guards announced the return of the Crown Prince. Adrian handed Thelme’s reins to a guard and ordered him to take her to the royal stable and give her the best care.

The palace servants gathered in the bailey and cheered for their Prince’s return. Hope sparkled in their eyes. The Godblood had come back to save them, to protect them.

Adrian was no longer only Jongin’s.

Disheartened by the welcome Adrian received, Jongin fell behind a few steps with his stomach clenching. The balmy climate of Auvradevas made his insides twist. Adrian paused in his tracks to glance back at Jongin with a rueful frown.

Soon. You and I, Adrian’s eyes promised. Jongin trusted them. He smiled weakly and painfully, bowing his head.

Adrian gasped when he was pounced on by Baashere out of the blue. “Baashere!” he exclaimed and laughed, crushing the tiger in his embrace.

“Brother!” Evzen’s voice coursed through the crowd before the man himself appeared with an easy smile that resembled Adrian’s. “Welcome back.”

Adrian accepted Evzen’s half embrace and patted on his brother’s back. “Have you missed me?”
Evzen snorted and rolled his eyes, though in a very princely manner. He had chopped his long hair off. Jongin blinked at him in surprise. Prince Evzenius’ hair was now short at the sides and long enough at the front to curtain his eyes.

“You smell worse than a pig,” Evzen told his brother. His gaze briefly flitted to Jongin and he grimaced. Jongin must look worse than a pig stained by mud. “Father is waiting for you.” He started ushering Adrian into the palace.

Jongin held his ground, unsure of what he should do next. He wanted to follow Adrian, as he had all these weeks, but he knew he could not. Not anymore. Here, he was a servant. He was nothing but Adrian’s page who served at his orders.

“Adrian!” a small girl cried in excitement as she sprinted towards Adrian.

“Cristella,” Adrian called and dropped to his knees to claim her in his arms. She was one of his sisters. “Did you take good care of Baashere?”

“Yes, I did!” the girl rasped, giggling hard. She ran her tiny hand through Adrian’s mucky, sweat slicked hair. “You are dirty.”

“Filthy.” He deliberately squeezed his sister tighter in his arms. She groaned and cried, shoving him away.

“Stop monkeying around, Cristella,” one of Raagathor’s young wives chided when she showed up in the corridor. “Let your brother catch his breath.” She then smiled at Adrian as he rose to his full height. “I am happy you have returned safely.”

“Little could harm the Godblood,” Evzen commented with a scoff and it was Adrian’s turn to roll his eyes.

All the while, Jongin silently watched. He did not fit in with this family. And Adrian was certainly not only his.

“How is Mother?” Adrian inquired as he walked away with Evzen, heading towards the throne chamber alongside Baashere, without sparing Jongin another glance.

This was it. If Jongin had not already endured the pain of a heartbreak, he was about to.

* * *

“Bloody Seven, you’re back!” Riolda screeched and jolted up to her feet when Jongin entered the room. Diante gasped, clasping a hand over his mouth. Eudora, Contos, and Melanctha looked just as surprised.

“It is great to have you back, son!” Melanctha declared and gave him the first hug.

“Truth be told none of us was expecting you to come back,” Eudora remarked.

“Yeah,” Contos added. “We had wagered that you’d not survive, let alone return!”

“Hush,” Riolda barked at them and smiled at Jongin endearingly before she offered him a gentle embrace. When she pulled back, she smirked at the necklace around Jongin’s neck. “I see that you had quite a good time.”

Jongin removed the necklace at once and sank in his pallet if it were still his. “Something like that,”
he muttered bitterly.

“Is everything all right? You are back in one piece. We ought to celebrate that,” Eudora said.

Jongin sighed. He should not react so sourly. It was not fair to his friends, he should take his sorrow out on them. So, he managed a small smile.

Diante crawled to his side and played with his hair for a moment. “It’s longer,” she commented.

“So, tell us!” Melanchtha cawed. “How was the journey with Prince Adrianus?"

“I will tell you everything,” Jongin promised. Well, not everything. But he was certain his adventures in the past few weeks would be deeply appreciated. “But first, I need a bath, some new clothes, and rest.”

“Not before you fill that stomach of yours,” Contos said.

Jongin glanced around the room. Awyen’s pallet was gone. “Where is Awyen?” he asked.

The servants exchanged glances. Jongin raised an eyebrow.

“Um,” Riolda began. “He left.”

Jongin blinked. “He… left?”

“Well, the word is that he is a Kamthir and was sleeping with the King’s Guard,” Eudora said, shrugging. “When he disappeared, so had Zayrse. So, we all believe that they had eloped together.”

Jongin’s heart sank. “They ran away?” he muttered.

“Yes,” Contos sighed, scratching his half-bald head.

“So long they are happy and healthy,” Riolda cut in, scowling at Eudora.

“I still can’t believe Zayrse left all this behind for an Othadia simpleton,” Eudora said. “A boy at that! He would certainly be hanged if he ever dared to show his face in this kingdom again.”

“Are you jealous?” Riolda scoffed. “Is it not enough that you have already lain with Prince Evzenius? Must you lay with every man in the palace?”

That silenced Eudora. She huffed exasperatedly and stormed out of the room.

“Don’t mind her,” Riolda told Jongin and knelt at his side. “You should take a warm bath. I shall get you a new tunic to wear.”

* * *

“So, you have found the Vrilehm Mountains!” one of the servants, whose name Jongin had not learned, gasped at the table where everyone sat for supper.

Jongin had missed the comfort all of them offered. “It was more like it had found us,” he replied and took a bite of the corncob.

“Where is it, then?” another inquired.

“We really do not know,” Jongin answered, unsure of how much he should divulge about the
location of the mountains. “It just… appeared out of nowhere.”

“Tell us more about the Trolgar Clan,” Diante requested.

“Did the Prince lay with any women in the villages?” Eudora asked.

“You are indeed very fortunate to have travelled so far for so many days with a Godblood,” another chimed in.

“And have returned,” Melanctha added.

Jongin smiled at them, though his heart was wrapped in the cold. He felt something amiss, as though he had misplaced one of his limbs. He wondered what Adrian was up to. He was probably resting, too. Or spending time with his family. He had no reason to think of Jongin anymore. He had plenty of other responsibilities.

“What will he do about the Wyverns?” a servant asked.

Jongin shrugged and shook his head. “I am a mere page. I do not know what runs in his mind,” he said and stood.

“Go, son. Get some sleep,” Melanctha suggested, noticing the fatigue in Jongin’s eyes and weight on his shoulders.

* * *

A week passed. Jongin impatiently waited for the first half of it for Adrian to summon him, but when he wasn’t, he headed up to Adrian’s chambers himself, only to be disappointed when he did not find Adrian in.

He had eventually learned that Adrian had not been in the palace for over a week. He supposed Adrian was away rallying the Auvran army and giving out orders for the preparation to face the brewing war with the Wyverns. Jongin doubted he would see Adrian anytime soon.

The news of the war would spread like a wildfire in no time when it left the palace and there would be chaos among the people. They would flee the kingdom and their homes, seeking refuge in other kingdoms. The servants were already panicking over the fact that Adrian had come home emptyhanded from his journey to the Vrilehm Mountains.

Meanwhile, Jongin was actively avoiding all the guards and servants who came up to him, inquiring about what they had found on the mountains and if it would help them get rid of the Wyverns. Jongin did not know how much he should say and shouldn’t. Adrian hadn’t left him any orders.

He headed up to Adrian’s chambers once more today to see if he were in. He wasn’t. Disappointed again, he wended his way to the library. He missed Awyen, but he was glad that the boy was at least happy with the man he loved. He wished the best for both Zayrse and Awyen, though not everyone in the palace shared his sentiments. He often heard the servants and guards talking about how much of a filth Zayrse was and how foolish the King had been to have trusted his safety with a depraved Kamthir.

He knocked on the open door before entering the library.

“I was awaiting your visit,” Helathor’s voice resounded past the bookshelves and Jongin jumped, startled. The aged scholar emerged through the bookshelves with a welcoming smile and an outstretched arm.
Jongin bowed his head. “I should have dropped by sooner, but I wasn’t sure if you’d be in,” he said.

“I hear that your endeavour to find the mountains was successful,” Helathor remarked and perched on the edge of his desk. “But he has returned with his heart heavier than it was when he left.”

Jongin oddly felt guilty for that accusation. “How do you mean?” he asked coyly. Helathor smiled that *all-knowing* smile.

“Come. Sit with me,” he prompted, patting the desk beside him. Jongin obeyed. “You are both disappointed with your journey.”

Jongin kept his gaze low.

“Or perhaps with the return from it,” Helathor chortled. “He doesn’t eat or sleep or even sit for a break. He has been running here and there like a cat on hot bricks. He is worried, he fears for everyone. What if he fails…”

“He will not,” Jongin said.

“He will not,” Helathor agreed. “I see that you have changed your attitude about him.”

Jongin turned his face away, flushing. “I… I am sorry about… your son.”

Helathor heaved a sigh. “He had chosen his fate. He had chosen to follow his heart. One cannot choose who to fall in love with.”

“You do resent him for being… an Alsiramene?”

Helathor laughed. “He is my son. How can I ever resent him for being himself?”

Those words comforted Jongin greatly. “Can I ask you something?”

Helathor smiled wider. “You want to know how I know that you are an Aevayl.”

A chill surged down Jongin’s spine. He glanced around the library just to be sure nobody was in earshot. “Yes.”

Helathor rose from where he sat. “It takes one to know one.”

Jongin blankly stared at the scholar for a moment. His head spun a little when he tried to solve the puzzle. “You’re…” he trailed off, voice breaking.

The smile on Helathor’s lips did not falter. “Many, many years ago, I was also as forlorn and insecure as you.” He patted gently on Jongin’s shoulder. “But I too had found someone who loved me for who I am. And it was all that mattered.”

With that, the scholar turned and disappeared between the bookshelves. Jongin sat still and stiff on the desk for a measurable length with blood pounding in his ears.

* * *

That night, Jongin thought about ‘It was all that mattered,’ endlessly. So long there was just one man to love and cherish him as he was always, nobody and nothing else mattered. He would be happy. Was Adrian truly that man? Could he *always* give Jongin such a reassurance and happiness?

*My heart may want another but my body would only be for one.* Was he ready to give his body
completely to Adrian now? Now?

Long when Adrian was gone, Jongin might meet a simple man. Someone who could give him everything he ever wanted. Love and security. Nothing more. He might even be happy, bear a child, have a poor but beautiful life.

“Diante,” Riolda whispered in the dark when she quietly slinked into the room when everyone else was already asleep, save Jongin.

Diante moaned drowsily as Riolda squeezed into the pallet beside her. “What is it?”

“I just heard the King and Princess of Othadia will be arriving sometime next week.”

“Oh, my,” Diante gasped.

“Shh,” Riolda hissed.

“Isn’t she Prince Adrianus’ betrothed?”

“Yes.”

“Will they get married, then?”

“I don’t know… I think so. They say Princess Edothise’s beauty is unrivalled. She is a wondrous match for the Prince.”

“Eudora must envy her.” They giggled quietly and stopped when Contos clicked his tongue to chide them.

“I would like to see the first time Prince Adrian swoon over a woman,” Riolda muttered.

“Has he never been with a woman as everyone says?”

“I doubt it,” Riolda said. “But he hadn’t been with Eudora, that is for certain. Because if he had, she’d be running her mouth, gloating over it to everyone in this palace.”

Diante laughed softly. “If Princess Edothise and Prince Adrianus married one another, we would soon have a new princeling to coddle in the palace!”

Jongin clenched his eyes and silently cried himself to sleep.

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Auvardevas, Year 5138, 36th Kvadag

He felt sick, exhausted, and beyond heartbroken, longing to see Adrian again. Didn’t Adrian long to see him? Jongin knew he was being selfish. There were dangers brewing on a larger scale and it was
ridiculous of him to mourn over something so trivial.

“Jongin,” Contos called when he entered the room and found Jongin sitting in a corner with a book Helathor had loaned him in his hands. The book on Mountain Imps did little to keep him distracted from his heartache.

“What is it, Contos?” he asked, rising to his feet.

“I need to help Tyrek with a chore. Can you deliver this to the Prince’s chambers? The royal tailor sent them.” He handed Jongin a wrap.

Jongin’s heart skipped a beat and his face lit up. “Is he back?” he gasped. “Is he in his chambers in right now?” He could not believe his ears. His body vibrated with a joy that was far too intense for words.

Contos face scrunched up in confusion. “I meant Prince Evzenus’ chambers.”

Like a flower in autumn, like a bride marooned by her groom on her wedding day, Jongin dulled. “Oh.”

“You are not busy, are you?”

He shook his head and agreed to deliver the wrap to Prince Evzen’s room.

Soon. You and I…

What made everything so much worse was the fact that Jongin missed Adrian terribly. He would never forget the last time Adrian had held his hand while pressing a kiss to his cheek.

Jongin felt like a damfool to have thrown away the anklet Adrian had gotten him and felt even worse when he did not have the courage to ask it back. Now, he was left with nothing of Adrian’s remembrance, except for the nosegay of the now dried flowers, which Adrian had picked for him, that lay safely in Jongin’s trunk in the room.

Unlike Adrian’s chambers, there were guards posted outside Evzen’s. They instantly recognized Adrian as his personal page and allowed him in.

Jongin paused for a moment to glance around the bedchamber. He had expected the rooms to be grander, but they were just as penny plain as Adrian’s. The only difference was the choice of colour for the sheets, drapes, and walls. While Adrian’s were shades of blue, grey, and white, Evzen’s were pale yellow and white.

He could help the curiosity that loomed within him and wandered a little further into the chambers. They smelled of heavy perfume and roses. Of women. He peeped into the bathing chamber and stared at the rose petals floating on the water surface of the pool. He could easily picture Evzen and some women of his taste in it.

Shaking the untoward thought away, Jongin returned to the bedchamber. The doors opened then and he froze when he heard a cacophony of laughter. Prince Evzen’s voice was one among the blend of female voices.

“And that is the way to my bed,” Evzen drawled drowsily and the girls giggled.

The Prince came to an abrupt halt, his half-lidded eyes widening at the sight of Jongin when he
entered the bedchamber with two young women in each of his arms. They must be newly appointed servants.

“What are you doing here?” Evzen rasped in surprise.

Jongin held up the wrap at once and blushed when he saw Prince Evzen’s hand unconsciously wander to one of the women’s hips. “I had come to deliver this,” Jongin muttered in a shy voice.

Evzen reeked of the thick smell of rich mead. His hair that was usually well-kempt was mussed and slicked with sweat. He was drunk.

“Oh,” the Prince mumbled and surveyed Jongin from head to toe. Then shrugging in a very unprincely manner, he ushered the women to his bed. “Well, now that you’re here, attend me.”

Jongin blinked.

“Aren’t we here for that, Your Highness,” one of the women said, taking the liberty to splay her fingers over Evzen’s chest.

“You are my guests here,” Evzen purred into her ear and made her shudder with a simple caress of his breath. Jongin thought of this as a once in a lifetime experience—witnessing the renowned libertine in action. There was no doubt at this point that Evzen had made a name for himself. Nay, many names. Charming libertine, lover of women, prince of passion and debauchery. He was everything Adrian wasn’t and it was not a fault. Jongin had heard that on a battlefield, though outshone by his elder brother, Prince Evzenius’ calibre was in a class of its own. But in bed, he was second to none and was unrivalled. He was both a warrior and a lover.

The servant girls speculated plenty about Adrian. But they bruited Prince Evzen’s concupiscence abroad day and night, almost to the extent that Jongin had to leave the place to get some quiet. Sometimes, Jongin even wished that Adrian had shared half of Evzen’s passion for love. But Adrian was a God of self-restraint, he was impossible to be provoked.

“What are you waiting for?” Evzen said as he lounged on the bed with the women. Jongin dropped his gaze to Evzen’s boots. He gripped his jaw.

“I am not your servant but your brother’s page,” he spat through his teeth and the women gaped at him in shock. Evzen did not seem taken aback. He was either expecting such a harsh response or he was so drunk that he did not seem to care.

The Prince clicked his tongue and laughed. “Hasn’t the doddering old man Helathor informed you that while my father and brother are away, I am the Prince Regnant? Or plainly said, the stopgap?”

Jongin’s throat tightened. He was tempted to ask when Adrian would return. Evzen would know, wouldn’t he?

There was a chance that Evzen might succeed his father and be crowned as the King of Auvradevas should Adrian relinquish the throne to join his mother. But that was not the reason why Jongin was setting the wrap aside and sinking to his knees to unlace the Prince’s boots.

“I have heard the rumours,” a woman mumbled, sliding her hand into Evzen’s overcoat. “I am honoured to pleasure Your Majesty tonight.”

“So am I,” the other chimed in, unlacing her own bodice.

Jongin raised his head and found Evzen paying attention to neither of the women. His piercing blue
eyes were focused on Jongin instead. He was scowling, his hands idle on the women as they undressed themselves for him.

Jongin dropped his gaze and worked on removing the Prince’s footwear. Once he was done, he rose to his feet again, hanging his head. Evzen was Adrian’s brother and if Adrian cherished him, Jongin could find a soft spot in his heart for the younger Auvran Prince, too.

“Do you require anything else… Your Majesty?” Jongin asked.

Evzen did not answer immediately. He was staring, Jongin knew, even though he had not raised his gaze to look at the Prince’s icy cold eyes. They were poles apart from Adrian’s own warm, amber eyes.

Jongin lifted his gaze to look at the Prince again. The servant girls were touching his body, lifting their own skirts, brushing their lips against the slight growth of stubble on his recently shaven jaw, each desperate to get his attention. Jongin surveyed the Prince’s face and realized he and Adrian looked very much alike, though Evzen’s features were more cunning and sharp. He was very handsome, just like his brother. But he looked more human, a little ordinary. Not that it was a bad thing.

Evzen was probably gauging Jongin’s own looks since he was staring as well. Then clearing his throat, he turned his attention to the woman straddling him. Jongin did not want to bear witness to what followed, so he turned on his heel to leave.

“I haven’t given you permission to leave,” Evzen said and Jongin frowned. “That is lese-majesty, in case you weren’t aware.”

“What do you need me to do, then?” Jongin snapped in a tone harsher than he had intended.

Evzen pulled himself away from the women, much to their dismay, and stood. “Why don’t you attend me?”

Jongin’s face scrunched up in discomfort. He looked at the thick layers and laces atop Evzen’s shirt. It was clear to him that Evzen was keen on bullying him, just as he had tried to during their first meeting. Jongin, as his old self, would have thrown a punch on the cocky Prince’s face. But he was emotionally beyond exhausted to play games. If Evzen would delight in stepping over the meeker ones, then so be it.

He closed the distance between them and began to undo the laces and golden buttons of Evzen’s overcoat. He kept his eyes low at all times. Auvran men were generally large in size, but Evzen too, like his brother, was a strapping tower, though slightly sinuous compared to his Godblood brother. Jongin wondered why he was drawing all these comparisons between Adrian and Evzen. It was the height of his longing for Adrian.

“I see why the guards muckrake about your… feminine touch,” Evzen said under his breath and Jongin felt his soul desert his body for a moment. He looked up at the Prince with wide, shocked eyes, his mouth going dry. His fingers were paralyzed on Evzen’s undershirt.

Do not respond, Jongin told himself and hastily undid the rest of the Prince’s shirt with shaky fingers.

“When you are not biting or barking, you surely are soft-spoken and… gentle,” Evzen whispered. His breath against Jongin’s forehead reeked of alcohol. “Like a woman.”

Jongin withdrew his hands and stepped away. As much as he tried not to look flustered, his burning
red cheeks gave it away. “Wi-Will that… be a-all?” he stammered, casting his gaze so low.

Exhaling a loud sigh, Evzen dropped back on the bed and gathered the women in his arms. “Yes, you may go.”

Jongin spared not another moment in the man’s chambers and stormed out of there as fast as he could.

He believed them. He now believed everyone who said Evzenius was a libertine like no other.

* * *

“Do you not want to know where the Vrilehm Mountains are?” Jongin asked Helathor while he was helping the old man sort the scrolls. Helathor arched an eyebrow at him. “I mean, you are the only one who hasn’t asked me that.”

The scholar laughed despite himself. “I am an old man. What could I possibly achieve seeking out the mountains?”

“Aren’t you curious if there are golds and gems there? That’s what the guards and servants asked me.”

They sat on the floor of the library with books and scrolls strewn around them. A couple more days had passed and there was still no news of Adrian or King Raagathor’s return.

“Nay,” Helathor huffed. “A wise man would know not to expect riches.”

Jongin handed him another pair of scrolls on the Sixth Realm.

“Ah, yes,” the scholar gasped all of a sudden and stood.

Jongin followed him to his desk and stared at Helathor pick up a book. He turned around and handed it to Jongin. “Thank you. The books you lend me keep me entertained. I am grateful.”

“This is not a book I’m lending,” Helathor said, flashing that all-knowing smile again. “I had found it on my desk last night. It is addressed to you I believe.”

Jongin looked at him in shock. “What?” he muttered and flipped the cover open.

‘The Tale of the Water Nymph.’

And below the title:

For the day, I wait.

Yours, Dragovan.

* * *

He held the book close to his chest. He was unable to wipe away the foolish grin on his face as he meandered his way back to the servants’ quarters. He had not even begun, but he knew that he would reread the pages endlessly until the day they would be in each other’s arms again. For the day, I wait.

He was on Adrian’s mind. For now, that thought alone was enough.
Jongin came to a halt when he crossed a familiar door. It was the ill Queen Ivoarel’s chambers. The guards eyed him with scrutiny. Jongin decided that he did not care enough for Ivoarel, who had slighted Adrian for the sake of her own blood. But on the other hand, he understood that every mother would want her own child to rule an entire dominion—not some by-blow Godblood, who had stolen everything from the rightful heir of the kingdom.

Even so, he could garner the sympathy for the woman. Adrian was a better man than Evzen could ever be. He would make a great king one day. Jongin realized he was being childishly bitter towards an old, sick woman.

He headed to his pallet, where he spent the rest of the night with a candle at his side, savouring every word in the book Adrian had gifted him.

“What are you reading?” Diante inquired in the dark.

“You’re not asleep?” Jongin asked, putting the book away.

She sighed and sat up, tying her red hair up. “Nay. What are you reading tonight, then?”

“I believe it is a tale about how a Water Nymph fell in love with the God of Sun."

“Oh,” Diante muttered. “Have you ever been in love, Jongin? You were once a prince… Surely, you must have courted someone.”

Jongin laughed softly. “I have neither courted or been courted.”

Diante bit her lip. “Is it… true that Warinian men… lay with men?”

“Do you want to know if I lay with men?” he asked, smiling. Diante did not answer. Jongin nodded and she smiled.

“I do not detest the Kamthir,” she whispered. “I wish for your happiness.”

“And I yours,” Jongin muttered, extending a hand to hold Diante’s.

* * *

Jongin woke up with a jolt to Eudora’s shrill cry.

“Wake up! Wake up, everyone!”

“What are you screaming for, Eudora?!” Melanctha snapped as she roused and sat up on her pallet.

“Is it a Wyvern?!?” Contos gasped.

“Nay!” Eudora cried excitedly. “The Othadian King and Princess are here!”

Jongin’s eyebrows furrowed into a scowl and yanked the blanket over his head as everyone hurried out of the room.

“Jongin?” Riolda called. “Are you not coming?”

Jongin did not reply. He clenched his jaw, grinding his teeth angrily. It wasn’t fair. His breathing quickened. Why was this happening to him?

“Jongin?” Riolda said and pulled the blanket away from him. Jongin sat up and rubbed his eyes.
“Are you all right?”

“Yes,” he spat. “I do not wish to see them. Can I go back to sleep now?”

Riolda frowned and returned his blanket to him. “You seem upset.”

*I am upset. Upset that Princess Edothise is here. She is going to steal Adrian away from me. She will be known all over the Nine Realms as Adrianus Dragovan’s wife while Jongin would be nobody. Why should I care if she is here?*

“Nay,” he muttered. “Just a little… sleepless.”

Riolda did not buy it but she did not press the matter any further. “All right,” she said. “Go back to sleep, then. I’ll tell you what all about it in the morning.”

He lay quietly in the empty room. He was sure all of the servants’ quarters were emptied. They were all excited to meet their future Queen, the future wife of their Prince, the future bearer of a Godblood’s heir. Jongin wished to die right this instant before any of it came true.

EDOTHISE. She was quickly the talk of the palace. The talk of Auvradevas. Commoners constantly gathered at the gates to catch a sight of the Othadian Princess, who would soon wed their Crown Prince. The servant girls were already talking about how the romance between Edothise and Adrian would bloom, and how it would the romance of the century. It would be written as history.

From what Jongin had heard in just a day since the Princess’ arrival, Edothise was an incredibly well-mannered woman. She had brought her own bow and quivers of arrows. She loved hunting as much as she loved archery.

And yes, everyone Jongin turned to talked about her unparalleled beauty.

“Have you met her?” Jongin asked Helathor the next day as they strolled in the courtyard garden.

“Yes. I welcomed her this morning when Prince Evzenius failed to make an appearance,” he sighed like a disappointed father. “She is resting. If you wish to see her, you may do it in the feast the King has planned.”

“The feast?” Jongin asked.

“Once he and Prince Adrianus have returned, of course.”

Jongin swallowed and mustered the courage to say, “When… are they returning?”

“I am not sure,” was the disappointing answer.

“How… is she?” Jongin asked, circling back to Princess Edothise.
Helathor smirked. “I am not a man who relishes the beauty of a woman, but I can tell that she is absolutely enchanting.”

“Is she… a good match for… him?”

Helathor pinned him with a sidelong glance. He smiled. “I do not know, for that, I can’t tell what is in Adrianus’ heart.”

“I thought you knew everything,” Jongin grumbled and Helathor laughed.

“I like to think so, too.” He exhaled tiredly and sank on a bench in the garden. “Could you do me a favour?”

“Of course.”

“My knees would not allow me to march all the way up to grab Evzenius by his ear and drag him out of bed. Will you fetch a servant to do it, please?”

Jongin frowned. “I… I can do it. I mean, not grab him by the ear but…”

Helathor bowed his head. “Thank you.”

Jongin started towards Prince Evzen’s chambers hesitantly. If the man had not even shown up to welcome his brother’s future wife, the celebrated Othadian Princess and her father to his own home, Evzen must have either been completely drunk and sloshed last night or he was with company. Could he not care enough to have the courtesy to be a polite host? That was both brazen and foolish of him. His careless and devil-may-care attitude must have gotten him into a lot of trouble in the past.

“Oh, little lamb is lost.”

Jongin came to a standstill when he heard Jevar’s voice reverberate in the hallway. He gripped his fists and turned around to face the man.

“Long time no see,” Jevar chimed as he edged closer. “Did you miss me, little lamb?”

Jongin rolled his eyes and spun around. “Ah!” he rasped when Jevar grabbed hold of his wrist mercilessly and shoved him back until Jongin’s back crashed the wall.

His heart began to pound and he desperately glanced at the guards stationed in the hallway. None was even looking at him. They were turning a blind eye to everything that Jevar did.

He faced Evzen’s Auxiliary again with fear building in his chest. Jevar would not do anything. Not out in the open in broad daylight with so many witnesses. He wouldn’t.

Jongin tried to slip away but was forced to a stop when Jevar caught his arm and twisted it painfully. Jongin whimpered, his eyes watering.

“Let go!” he growled, clawing at Jevar’s chest.

“Isn’t this why you stabbed my hand? Because I was trying to do exactly just this?” Jevar said in a low, threatening murmur as he pressed a hand to Jongin’s stomach. “Do you also cry like a whore when you bend for men? I know how filthy you Warinian bitches are. Why don’t you show me how filthy you can be? Why don’t you spread your legs? Get down on your knees and suck my cock? Isn’t that what you like?”

Jongin looked at the guards again, hoping that at least one of them would help him.
“Don’t look at them, darling,” Jevar scoffed. “They would not dare question the Prince’s Auxiliary. Oh… and your precious saviour isn’t home either.” His grip on Jongin’s arm tightened as he began to haul him towards the stairs.

“Nay, please!” Jongin cried.

“I told you I’d make you pay. You can cry as loud as you wish. No one would come help.”

Jongin thought of the idea of being locked up in a room for days while Jevar ruined him, punished him in the worst ways possible. And nobody would know. Nobody would do anything. He could scream for help and no one would dare to stand up for him.

Nay, Helathor might. Riolda, Contos, Melanctha, and even Diante might.

“He will kill you when he comes to know,” Jongin warned in a hiss and Jevar stopped. He released Jongin’s arm and faced him with a raised eyebrow. “So, you better start running.”

That took the composure away from the mad fool and his hand flew up. Jongin staggered a few steps and his head spun for a moment when Jevar backhanded him mercilessly across his face.

“We’ll see about that,” he spat and almost seized Jongin’s arm again.

With blood trickling down the corner of Jongin’s lips, he jumped back and bolted away from Jevar and the stairs. Jevar laughed sinisterly and whistled.

“You love to keep things entertaining,” he sang.

Jongin fled as fast as his feet could carry him. The side of his face that was struck throbbed painfully. He paid it no heed. Where could he run? Jevar would come for him eventually. Helathor and the servants could not protect him forever. How could Adrian just leave him unguarded when he knew Jevar had the vindictive intention of making Jongin pay for the humiliation he had suffered?

He only stopped when there was nowhere to run at the end of the hallway. The guards outside Prince Evzen’s chambers did not question him when he pounded his fists on the doors. Jongin wasn’t sure what he was doing. Evzen would not help him, why would he? If he kept a repulsive man like Jevar as his Auxiliary, Evzen probably endorsed his actions.

Nevertheless, Jongin had nowhere else to run. If anything, Evzen was the only one who could order Jevar to stop right now.

But the doors did not open. Jongin broke into tears when he looked back at Jevar, who was approaching him with a cunning smirk.

“By the Seven, why are you so fucking loud?!” Evzen roared half-asleep in a hoarse voice when he yanked the doors open at last.

Jongin lost his footing as he was leaning against the doors and fell onto the Prince. Evzen, shocked and confused, immediately embraced Jongin in his arms as Jongin panted against the Prince’s bare chest exposed by his unlaced shirt.

“What the…” Evzen let out as he caught Jongin.

“Please, please,” Jongin begged in a sob. “Help me.”

Evzen raised his head, eyebrows pulled together in a baffled frown, and looked up at Jevar. Then
when Jongin gathered his strength to pull away from the Prince, Evzen continued to keep a protectively arm curled around Jongin’s waist as he scowled at the blood oozing from Jongin’s mouth.

Almost instantly, Evzen’s face reddened like a lit matchstick thrown into a vessel of flammable oil. He looked as murderous as Adrian was during the night of the rite when he had ruthlessly killed the Soothsayer.

“Do you have a death wish?!” he snarled at Jevar, hands balled into fists.

“Oh, come on, brother,” Jevar groaned. “I was just playing with him a little bit.”

“If my brother comes to know of this, do you think he would hesitate to slit your fucking throat?!” He withdrew his hand from the small of Jongin’s back and raised it Jevar’s neck.

The Auxiliary froze, eyes popping out as Evzen tightened his grip around his neck. The guards were now alert, ready to arrest Jevar if he even made the slightest movement against the Prince.

“I know I wouldn’t if I were him,” Evzen said through his teeth and released Jevar’s neck, shoving him back. “You will do well to remember to stay the fuck away from him or you’d have me for an enemy, Jevar. Let go of your petty thirst for vengeance.”

Jевar stumbled as he retreated. He pinned Jongin with one last glower before he turned on his heel and stomped away.

Jongin finally breathed. He knew Jevar would come for him again, now that he was only aggravated by this new humiliation. But for now, Jongin was safe. He was safe in the sphere of an unexpected ally.

He looked at Evzen wordlessly as the Prince shut the doors of the chamber and stood with his back facing Jongin for a moment, drawing a few deep breaths. He had just gotten out of bed. His shirt was drooping at the shoulders, his hair was a mess, he smelled like a night-old wine.

“Th-Thank you,” Jongin whispered.

Evzen turned around with a frown. “How did you survive that long on the journey with my brother if you couldn’t even defend yourself against a middle-aged man?!” he snapped at Jongin furiously.

Jongin flinched and dropped his head, feeling like a child rebuked by his elders.

“What did he do to you?” the Prince demanded.

Jongin did not answer.

“What was he planning to do to you?” Evzen asked. “Wait, I could second-guess.” He exhaled a heavy sigh.

Jongin shuddered and almost pulled his hand back when Evzen’s fingers brushed his. But he could do nothing when the Prince harshly seized his hand without relenting. Evzen glared at him.

“Quit twitching like a bloody virgin and sit down,” he ordered, dragging Jongin into the bedchamber.

Jongin grimaced at the man’s flagrant, rude, brave blatancy, but obeyed his orders and perched at the foot of the bed while Evzen momentarily disappeared. “Do you have something against virgins?”
Jongin asked, blinking vacantly at Evzen who returned with a wet towel.

Evzen laughed and looked Jongin amusedly. “I do not like them,” he said. “In my bed, I mean.” He dropped to one of his knees before Jongin, much to the latter’s surprise, and brought the towel to Jongin’s chin. Jongin flinched again and Evzen arched an eyebrow. “They are too loud with too many whinges. Fussy and finicky. I like it simple, easy, and fast.”

Jongin turned florid. He did not want to hear such things. Evzen was tainting him with just his brass-necked attitude and shameless words. “You don’t… have to,” Jongin muttered as Evzen wiped the blood from his lower lip with the towel.

“You attract trouble better than I,” Evzen said, smirking.

“Oh… I’ve heard of it all,” Jongin said in a low voice. He wanted to focus on anything but Evzen’s fingertips brushing his lips.

“How old are you?” the Prince inquired suddenly.

Jongin swallowed. He had not thought about it for a very long time, but now that Evzen had mentioned it… “I turn nineteen… next week.”

Evzen’s eyes widened. “Nineteen… I thought you might be younger,” he said with a smirk. “I was involved in countless scandals at your age.”

“You had also won many battles at that age,” Jongin said.

Evzen looked pleasantly surprised by that comment. He smiled, not that cocky grin, but truly a grateful smile. “It is not something others pick up on. Usually.”

“Because they are too busy hailing your brother.”

Evzen just smiled. He did not look like he envied Adrian. “Funny coincidence. I turn thirty next week.” He rose to his full height again. “But it isn’t a time for celebrations, is it? We don’t even know if the world will live to see tomorrow.”

And something told Jongin that Evzen loved living life on an edge like that. Never knowing what would come next.

Jongin glanced up at the tall man and dropped his gaze once again when they fell on Evzen’s beautifully sculpted body. “But your brother would get married. There would be a celebration.”

“That is because he is going to a war,” Evzen said as he tossed the towel aside. “He needs to leave his legacy behind, wouldn’t he?”

Jongin supposed so. His heart ached again.

He jumped and almost gasped when Evzen’s warm fingers touched his cheek. The Prince immediately retrieved his hand and snorted out a laugh. “Like a virgin,” he remarked and stepped away.

Jongin gulped and stood up. “I… I was supposed to wake you up and… I…” he trailed off as Evzen shamelessly began to undress before him. Jongin quickly turned his back to the man and closed his eyes. “Scholar Helathor wants you to come down and… uh, meet the Othadian King and Princess Edothise.”
“Oh, yes. I heard they’ve arrived,” Evzen said.

“I shall be going, then.” Jongin hastily started towards the door.

“See you around, Jongin.”

* * *

Though Jongin was not entirely surprised that Evzenius knew his name, it did astonish him that the Prince remembered it.

A wild thought came to him the next day as he sat idly on his pallet, nursing a tankard of lukewarm water. It would be wonderful if he and Evzen could become friends. Not only would that offer Jongin some protection from Jevar, but being around Evzen also tended to Jongin’s heart that was longing for Adrian. It would be nice to have more powerful allies in the palace and Evzen certainly seemed like a potential candidate.

That evening, while Jongin helped the palace gardener to pluck the bloomed flowers, Riolda jumped him from behind and squeezed him in her arms for a stretch.

“What are you doing here?” Jongin rasped.

“Just passing by,” she said, grinning. “I have to head up to Lady Doria’s chambers in a moment. She frowned at Jongin’s bruised cheek. “How could you be so clumsy to have fallen down the stairs? Look at your pretty face bruising.”

Jongin chuckled and handed her a flower he had just plucked. “Will you marry me?”

She grinned and accepted it. “Of course! When is our wedding, honey? Oh, look!” she gasped and turned Jongin around by the shoulders. Jongin’s eyes instantly fell on Evzen and the tall, dark-skinned, full-breasted, curvy-waisted woman at his side. They were engaged in a quiet conversation, both smiling endearingly at each other.

“Is that…” Jongin let out, unable to blink his eyes.

“Princess Edothise,” Riolda whispered. Could Edothise also make Adrian smile the way she was making Evzen? “They make a fine couple, don’t you think?”

Jongin tore his gaze from the Princess and fixed it on Riolda. “What are you blathering about?”

Riolda sighed. “I know, I’m silly. Not any woman could look so compatible in Prince Evzenius’ arm, you know. They’d make a finer couple if you ask me. But you can’t do anything if she is destined for the eldest Prince.”

Jongin glanced at Edothise again. She was indeed as beautiful as everyone said. And at Evzen’s side, she did look like a perfect match for him. That instant, something devious loomed in Jongin’s head. This was good. This was wonderful. If there was a scandal with Prince Evzen and Princess Edothise’s names involved, she would not be allowed to marry Adrian!

* * *

“You sent for me?” Jongin said, entering the library. He found Helathor at his desk as usual.

“Ah, yes. The messenger had just brought this in,” the scholar said, jerking his chin at the parcel on his desk. “I believe it is for you.”
“For me?” Jongin gasped and unwrapped the package at once. He found a lyre in it and his heart swelled when he saw the name carved into it. *Dragovan.*

Jongin looked at Helathor, who had returned his concentration to his books. Was he really not going to question the proximity of Adrian’s relationship with Jongin? Certainly, he must have noticed something.

“Oh, and,” the scholar said when Jongin was about to leave. “I have received news that he returns home in a couple of days.”

** * * *

By now, Jongin had learned exactly when the wine and sweets would be delivered to Prince Evzen’s room. When the cook was not looking, he had managed to slip a note under the wine ewer. It read, *Meet me in my chambers tonight—Edothise.* The guards and the servants who saw Evzen sneak into Edothise’s chambers in the dead of the night would do their job and spread the news of the scandal.

Only when the cook handed Jongin upon his request the wine tray did the feeling of guilt strike him as he realized how desperate and debased he had become. He paced out of the kitchen restlessly, wondering if he should remove the note. It was wrong. So wrong. And he would surely be caught. Would Evzen spare him if he found out? What was he thinking…

Evzen had shown him kindness and this was how Jongin repaid him?

Disgusted with how low he had stooped, Jongin took the note away and crumpled it. The guards opened the doors for him upon noticing the tray of wine.

He entered and looked around for Evzen before finding him on the balcony. Jongin cleared his throat to get his attention.

Evzen turned around and eyed the ewer of wine first before he looked up at Jongin and blinked in surprise. “I thought you did not like serving me,” he said with a mocking edge to his tone.

Jongin shrugged. “I was not expecting to find you alone.”

Evzen tried to look offended, but he laughed. “I deserved that.” He walked over to the table where Jongin had set the tray and picked up the wineglass before filling it. “You must think I’m this debauchee.”

“I’m not the only one who thinks that.”

Evzen downed the wine and nodded his head. “Your candour is refreshing, though I could have you beheaded for insulting me.”

Jongin tried not to look intimidated. “You are a prince… Why do you… ruin yourself like this?” he asked but was not expecting an answer. Evzen dropped to the floor and rested his arm on one of his knees, smirking up at Jongin.

“I like it when people ask me that question,” the Prince chuckled and drank more.

Jongin scowled. “Why does it only have to be your brother that needs to save the Nine Realms? Why does it have to him that always puts his neck on the line for everyone else?”

“Haven’t you heard, Princeling? He is the mighty Godblood,” Evzen drawled disinterestedly. Jongin opened his mouth to argue but stopped himself when Evzen continued. “I am no match for his
calibre. I had stopped trying to keep up, to be better than him a very long time ago, little puppy. If I’m to be bad, then let me the absolute worst. I don’t give a fucking damn.”

He refilled the wineglass and drained it repeatedly.

“You see, he is loved. By everyone,” Evzen added. “Even you. I actually thought you would continue to hold onto your grievances and hate him. But see. That is how great he is. You would love him eventually. Everybody does.”

Jongin scowled harder. “That is because he is a great man. There is good in him. You do nothing but waste away your privilege by sleeping around with every woman you lay your eyes upon and drown yourself in wine.”

“It does not matter. We are all going to die in the end, anyway.”

“Do you not care for your people?”

“Do they care for me?”

Jongin frowned now. “I pity you.” Evzen looked up at him. “Not because you have grown up in the shadow of your brother but because you have lost your self-respect. You and I both know that you are a better man than this. Why do you try so hard to be the bad guy?”

“Because I am one!” Evzen shouted and jolted up to his feet. “Get the hell out,” he ordered and shoved past Jongin. He paused, shoulders squared and taut. “This is what you become when everything you ever want is given away to your brother, whom you used to love with your every breath.”

Dianté’s eyes were round and wide as she eagerly watched Jongin play the lyre. It was a tune Jihee had taught him. He used to play it with his father after dinner almost every night.

Dianté, Melanctha, and Eudora clapped their hands when he was done. Contos and Riolda were not back yet.

“Wonderful!” Dianté exclaimed. “Where did you learn to play so well?!”


“Too bad now you’re running petty errands and washing dishes,” Eudora laughed.

Melanctha shook her head and scowled at the girl. “He is still royal-blooded, Eudora. Never forget that,” she warned her.

“Nay, it is all right,” Jongin said, putting the lyre away. Eudora was jealous that Prince Adrianus had gifted his page with such an extravagant lyre.
There was a sudden commotion outside and they heard gasps.

“Your Majesty!” Jongin heard the head cook screech in the other room.

“What is going on?” Eudora muttered to herself and hurried out of the room. Jongin rose to his feet and wondered who had come down to the servants’ quarters. A moment later, Eudora returned to the room with a sour moue on her lips. “Jongin, His Majesty is… asking for you.”

Whose Majesty, Jongin wondered as he nervously stepped out of the room. He could not believe his eyes when he found Evzen seated at the servants’ table in the common area, laughing with a few of the cooks who were arm-wrestling.

“Oh, come on. Somebody,” Evzen prompted as he brought his hand forth, ready for a wrestle. The cooks looked hesitant, though they were all big and beefy enough. “I would have come down here sooner had I known of all the fun you are having.”

Jongin crossed his arms over his chest as a cook accepted the challenge and clasped hands with the Prince. Whispers and gasps followed.

“I have never thought he would…”

“Is he really holding Nilos’ hand?”

“What is he doing down here?”

“How could he…”

Some were astounded, others were terrified.

It was an easy win for Evzen, who barely even tried. The cook looked slightly disappointed with his defeat but was happy to have clasped hands with the younger Auvran Prince.

“Can we offer you a tankard peasant ale?” Melanctha asked nervously.

“Bring me two,” Evzen said without it sounding like an order, though Melanctha was happy to obey. Evzen’s wintry blue eyes eventually spotted Jongin among the surprised crowd. He smiled and Jongin’s heart skipped a beat.

Once he had drained the two tankards of cheap ale Melanctha, he rose from the table and walked straight towards Jongin. “I need to speak with you,” he said. That was an order. With that, Evzen coursed his way out of the servants’ quarters.

Eudora grabbed Jongin by his tunic’s sleeve when he started after the Prince. “Since when did you two become friends?” she hissed under his breath.

“Yes, since when?” another asked.

Jongin shrugged and hurried after Evzen. Really, since when had they become friends that Evzen was willing to come all the way down here to summon Jongin himself?

The night was rich and bright. The muggy air was soothed by the gentle night breeze. When Jongin caught up to Evzen, the stars in the sky above danced in the Prince’s clear eyes.

“I apologize for… what I said last night,” Evzen muttered, as though he did not wish to disturb the silence of the night.
Jongin shook his head. “I should be the one to apologize. I keep forgetting that I’m no longer a prince of a kingdom, who could voice my thoughts as they are.”

Evzen smiled. “But you are not exactly a servant who couldn’t either.”

Jongin laughed humourlessly. “Look at me and say that again,” he said, looking down at his roughspun tunic and bare feet.

“Okay, perhaps,” he sighed. “But you are still every bit of a prince I am. Certainly, even more.”

Jongin blushed at that. Evzen looked away, rubbing the back of his neck. They ambled along the corridor in silence for a length. “Can I ask you something?” Jongin said, deciding to break it.

Evzen bowed his head.

“Why do you keep a pig like Jevar as your Auxiliary? Nobody likes him.”

Evzen laughed through his nose and ran a large hand through his short, dark hair. “I do not like him either. But I think you’re clever enough to surmise why I keep him.”

Jongin pursed his lips for a moment. “So that people would also repulse you?”

Evzen’s silence was an agreement. Jongin frowned. He came to a stop and so did the Prince. “What is it?”

“Why?” Jongin asked vaguely, wanting to see if Evzen would answer.

The Prince let out a heavy breath. “Do you know my mother?” he asked.

Jongin blinked. “I… I’ve seen her once with your brother.”

“Ah, yes. My brother, the saint. I hate my mother.” He started walking again, leaving Jongin astonished with that blatant confession.

“Why do you hate her?” Jongin rasped when he caught up with him.

“When we were kids, she always treated Adrian like he was a dreg in the family, regardless of the fact that his birth was way above any of ours. He was a Godblood, for fuck’s sake. My mother loathed him for it. She would feed me and let him watch in hunger. And then I grew older and realized what an utter bitch she was. I was less than five years old when I used to hide away food that was given to me and I would sneak them into Adrian’s room at night. We’d eat them together while his bloody tiger would snarl at me. My brother, like the sentimental fool he was, kept circling my mother’s feet like a puppy longing for some motherly affection. Meanwhile, everyone thought I was this spoiled brat, the mommy’s boy, who cared nothing for his brother. Nobody saw the side of me that was kind because they did not want to see it. People have this established set of beliefs that a second-born like me would always begrudge his brother’s achievements, want everything his brother had. To be honest, at first, I didn’t. Then I began to. Because he was getting everything I wanted.”

They walked into a poorly-lit archway without a soul in sight. Their breaths resounded in this empty dark corridor.


Evzen laughed. “Why would I want the throne? That entails responsibility and duties I do not fancy.”
Jongin blinked confusedly. “What then? The fame?”

“The adoration he was showered with,” Evzen said. “The ability to win over anyone.”

Jongin swallowed. “You cannot blame him for that. He is the son of a goddess.”

“I know,” he sighed. “I do not blame him for anything. But what made me so furious was that… the things I wanted so badly were the things that reached him on their own and he did not even want them.”

“I don’t think he’s as complicated as you think he is,” Jongin muttered.

Evzen scoffed. “Is that what you learned about him during your days with him?”

“Yes… That and more.”

Evzen stopped in the middle of the corridor and faced Jongin. “People have heard his story and they will continue to hear more. I suppose my… resentment lies with the fact that mine will forever be an unsung saga.”

“It does not need to,” Jongin said, regretting the step he had advanced because now, they were standing so close to each other that he could feel Evzen’s breath on his cheeks. “You do not know… what you are destined for.”

Evzen’s eyes bore into Jongin’s, his eyebrows knotted together. “How do you do that?” he whispered.

“What do you mean?” Jongin asked.

“You make me talk… Pour my heart out… Without even batting an eye,” the Prince exhaled, closing whatever distance that was left between them.

“Your… Your Highness,” Jongin began breathlessly as he retreated. He stopped when his back was pressed against the corridor’s wall.

His entire body froze and he fought for breath when Evzen leaned into his ear and whispered, “Unveil yourself to me.”

Jongin raised his hands to Evzen’s chest. He could not find the strength to push him away. His head swam in confusion and wildness. He clenched his eyes. His breath hitched when Evzen’s a day-old stubble grazed his cheek painfully.

“Show me what lies beneath your beautiful,” Evzen murmured as he pulled back and Jongin dared himself to open his eyes again.

Then without a warning, Evzen’s lips crushed Jongin’s. His hands gripping Jongin’s hips slammed him further against the wall, knocking all the wind out of Jongin’s lungs.

He gasped against Evzen’s warm mouth when the Prince hoisted him up from the ground. Jongin grabbed onto Evzen’s shoulders, clutching at his overcoat, and wrapped his legs around Evzen’s waist.

“Please,” Jongin panted and wanted the ground to swallow him up right there when he let out a moan as Evzen caught his lower lip between his teeth. He was rough, brutal, heartless. His hands were gripping the back of Jongin’s thighs. His kiss was ruthless, unkind, fiery. They left Jongin’s lips
throbbing and swollen, and his knees weak and wobbly.

When his hunger was appeased, he released Jongin back to stand on the ground but did not pull away. He panted, resting his forehead against Jongin’s. “Damn it,” Evzen breathed out. Then shaking his head, he pulled back and walked away.

Jongin sobbed for air as tears welled up in his eyes. He slid down the wall and sank to the ground, wrapping his arms around his legs to stop himself from shaking.

He was not sure what terrified him more. The fact that Evzenius had just kissed him or that Jongin had thoroughly lost himself in the kiss.

* * *

“What happened to you?” Riolda asked the following morning while Jongin helped her and a few of the other servants set up the tables for the feast at the courtyard tonight.

Adrian was returning today. But it was hardly on Jongin’s mind right now.

“Hmm?”

Riolda’s eyes narrowed as she handed Jongin another set of plates. “You look like you’ve been spooked.”

He had. He had been completely spooked.

“I heard it from Eudora that Prince Evzenius had come looking for you last night,” she added, placing the fingerbowls in their places. “Did something happen?”

Jongin looked around him and bit his lip. He released it when he recalled the way Evzen had bitten his lip last night. It made him blush with shame. He needed to get this out of his system and get a reality check. “I have to tell you something,” he whispered to Riolda after making sure no one was paying any attention to them. He could trust Riolda with his secret.

Riolda grinned. “Oh, my God. What happened?”

Jongin licked his lips and hated it when he was reminded of the way Evzen had swiped his tongue along his lips. “He… kissed me.”

Riolda did not seem shaken. She laughed and shrugged. “I knew it,” she muttered.

Riolda’s eyebrows rose. “What?”

“Haven’t you heard? He is the Prince of Mischief, alongside many other titles. It is hilarious when you think about the striking difference between the titles he has earned and the sort of titles his brother has. Sorry, I’m blabbering. Anyway, you blush like a virgin every time you’re around him. He probably did it to play with you.”

That made sense. And it made Jongin angry.

“How could he just play with someone like that?” he spat through his teeth and returned the plates to Riolda.

“The real question is… was the kiss really as dreamy as it is hyped up to be?”

Jongin swallowed his tongue and scowled at her. “Haven’t you done it to know it yourself?”
“Nay. So, tell me. Did you like it?”

Jongin shook his head and walked away from her as she continued to giggle.

He marched straight up to Evzen’s chambers and knocked on the doors. He wasn’t sure what he was mad about, but he would love to break Evzen’s handsome face.

The guards glared at him when Jongin pounded his fists harder on the doors.

After a while, Evzen opened the doors. His puffy, heavy eyes, dishevelled shirt, messy hair, the smell of sex that still clung to his skin suggested that he had just roused.

“Jongin—” he began but was cut off when Jongin’s hand struck a side of his face. The guards lurched at him at once but stopped when Evzen ordered them to stay put. “Well now, that’s what I call a rude awakening,” the Prince mumbled in a rough voice, rubbing the side of his jaw that was slapped.

“Damn you, Evzenius,” Jongin spat and stomped away.

Jongin restlessly waited through the day for the sound of the trumpets that would announce Adrian’s return. He had decided the first thing he would do upon his return was kiss him, etch Adrian’s scent back onto his body. Then he would tell Adrian what Jevar had done. Then he would nag Adrian for leaving without saying goodbye. Then he would kneel and beg Adrian to make love to him.

“Are you thinking about the kiss?” Riolda asked when she found Jongin pacing the room.

He looked up at her and scowled. “Can you quit reminding me of it?”

“Oh, come on, Jongin. You should be honoured to have tasted the Prince’s lips.”

“So does the larger fraction of women in Auvradevas,” Jongin spat.

“You’re pretty like a girl. He probably took a liking to you.”

Jongin clasped his hands over his ears. He did not want to hear anything about Evzen or the kiss ever again. What hurt him the most was that it probably had meant nothing to Evzen. Nothing but a joke.

Did it mean something to Jongin, then?

Nay, it did not. It did not.

“Does he…” Jongin said. “fancy men?”

Riolda shrugged. “Not that I know of. But like I said, he’s a lover of all things pretty and you most certainly are pretty.”
Jongin groaned. He did not want to think of Evzen.

*Show me what lies beneath your beautiful…*

Gods, what a sweet-talker he was.

Jongin froze for a moment as his mind blanked when he heard the trumpets and drums.

“Oh, they’re back!” Riolda gasped and caught Jongin’s arm to haul him out of the room. They raced to the corridor of the bailey where everyone was already gathered. Below in the bailey, the Othadian King—a bearded, skinny old man—and his daughter, the ravishing Edothise stood with the rest of Raagathor’s family, save Evzen. He was nowhere to be seen.

Jongin’s gaze darted to the black horse that bolted across the drawbridge and his heart thundered. A sob rose in his throat as he gaped at Adrian dismounting the horse and greeting his family with an encouraging grin. He was clothed in his battle raiment with the Azurewrath hanging at his hip.

Raagathor followed shortly after and dismounted his own steed. He marched straight towards the Othadian King and embraced the old man. “Good to see you again, my friend,” the Auvran King said. He looked worn out but excited nonetheless.

“I finally have the honour to meet my son-in-law,” the Othadian King said, patting Adrian’s on his arm. The Othadian herald started to announce the presence but his King halted him. “Let me introduce you my daughter, Edothise Lizandra Castellanos.”

Jongin wanted Adrian to look up and look at him.

Soon. You and I…

Edothise curtsied before Adrian, smiling bashfully. Adrian returned her smile kindly and bowed. Jongin’s felt his heart break a little.

“And let me formally present you your son-in-law, Castellanos,” Raagathor said. “Adrianus Dragovan.”

“I think we are all well familiar with his name by now, Raagathor,” the Othadian King laughed. “How many Wyverns are you ready to slay for my daughter?”

There was humour in the King’s tone.

“This is marvellous,” one of the servants whispered.

“No number will be a match for your daughter’s excellence, Your Majesty,” Adrian replied.

“That is the correct answer,” Castellanos laughed. Edothise blushed. “Come. Let us go inside and we have much to discuss. How was your journey, Adrianus?”

As they started towards the entrance, Adrian said, “I will join you in a short while. I must wash this grit and muck from my hair first.”

“You can do that later,” Raagathor said.

“It is no trouble. Let him be at ease first,” Castellanos said. “Run along now, son.”

Adrian bowed once more before he took his leave. Jongin began to pant. He turned around to race to Adrian’s chambers at once but froze when he heard Raagathor huff angrily.
“And this is my tardy younger son,” he said and Jongin peeked over the balustrade to look at Evzen, who had just shown up.

“Father,” Evzen sighed and hugged him. “Good to have you home.”

“I am surprised you came down to welcome me home,” Raagathor joked. “Oh, Castellanos. I’m sure you’ve already met my other belligerent son.”

“Oh, yes, I have,” the Othadian King scoffed. “A very charming, mischievous young man. Prince Evzenius Dragovan Raagathor.”

Evzen smiled and bowed his head.

Jongin blinked, paralyzed in the spot as the rest of the servants hurried back inside.

“Jongin, come fast,” Riolda said, tugging at his arm.

“Wait,” he rasped. “Is… Prince Evzen’s middle name also Dragovan?”

Riolda nodded. “Yes, why? Didn’t you know? I do not think he takes pride in it since his father always told him it is a name his brother shared with him generously.”

Jongin thought of the book and the lyre that had ‘Dragovan’ signed to them.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

He raced to the chambers. Not for the first time, he was grateful that no guards were stationed outside Adrian’s chambers. He was out of breath by the time he had burst through the doors and hastily browsed the chambers, fighting the urge to cry out Adrian’s name in desperation. He had already gathered enough attention when he left the crowd abruptly and bolted towards Adrian’s chambers. He needed not attract any more. He was not sure what had him short-winded and gasping for air besides the running. Did he really miss Adrian so? He was certain to lose his mind when this implicit ownership he had over Adrian was transferred to Princess Edothise in a few weeks’ time. Jongin would soon become no one. Again.

Misery filled his chest then. He beseeched the Seven to somehow halt the desolation that was in store for him. He was not ready to relinquish Adrian to another person. He was not ready to experience the same grief he had undergone when he was forced out of his home, driven away from his family, accept the yielding of his kingdom. He did not wish for an ill fate for the Princess, but Gods, he hoped she would just disappear. But then again, if not Edothise, then some other princess. Adrian would take a mortal wife and have a child with her.

Let the Wyverns destroy the Nine Realms, Jongin thought bitterly. He realized how selfish and sour falling in love had made him. He did not really care at this point. He needed to do something to keep Adrian and he was willing to take any measure. Even if it meant it would land him straight at the gates of hell.

He checked the bedchamber first and he was right to do so. His breath seized as he froze by the doorway when he saw Adrian stroking Baashere’s head, perched at the foot of the bed.

He looked dirty, tired, but content to be back home nonetheless. Jongin wondered if he had acquired any new scars during his absence and decided that he would figure that out later when Adrian took his soot-covered shirt off.

The tiger’s low purr sent a shiver down Jongin’s spine. He was hit with a pang of jealousy as he leered at Adrian’s large hand carding through the velvety striped fur of his pet tiger. Then with a small smile quirking up the corners of his lips, Adrian raised his head and greeted Jongin with a warm gaze, which Jongin instantly melted for.

Gods, he did miss Adrian so.

He could not calm his palpitating heart that was about to leap out of his chest. He grew hot and red. He dropped his head and tried to think of something to say that would sound both welcoming and not desperate.

Adrian rose to his feet and crossed the distance between them. The smell of his skin was like a slap to Jongin’s senses. He had missed the scent of ocean, the salt of sweat and sea that lingered on Adrian’s skin, he missed the prickling beard which had grown scruffier now. And most of all, the Seven knew he missed running his fingers through Adrian’s oh-so soft hair. It was also longer now.

He lifted his gaze just enough to meet Adrian’s chest that was exposed by the half-undone dirty shirt.

“I had ordered the servants to leave me, in hope that you’d follow,” Adrian said in a voice that snatched Jongin’s breath. It was not fair. It was so not fair that Adrian had such an effect on him. A word, a caress, a blunt kiss was enough to bring Jongin down to his knees. He was not sure how significant himself would be to Adrian when the latter took a consort.
The thought made him cringe. He lowered his head. “You left… without a word.”

“And I am terribly sorry for that,” Adrian sighed. “I had to leave in the dead of the night and I could not… It is no excuse.” He huffed defeatedly and raised a hand to cup a side of Jongin’s burning face. “I am sorry to have worried you. And I can promise you that I have had my fair share of punishment.”

“Oh, yes?” Jongin asked coyly, trying to keep his eyes from wandering to Adrian’s chest and hand that was now sliding down Jongin’s hip tentatively as Adrian drew him close.

“Not a moment passed when the thought of you did not suffocate my every breath,” Adrian whispered and Jongin winced, looking up at the Godblood with blood thrumming in his ears. Did Adrian miss him just as much? “I should not have left you. I had hoped Helathor would have kept you company.”

Jongin hummed in response, bringing a hand to splay over Adrian’s chest. He relished the warmth in his fingertips and palms for a moment against the light sprinkle of fine hairs. “Helathor and a few other,” he muttered. “Jevar for instance…”

Adrian’s eyebrows pulled into a frown. “Had that swine done anything to you?”

Jongin turned his face so that Adrian could get a view of the fading bruise on a corner of his jaw where Jevar had struck. He did not want to seem like a whiny child, but he wanted Jevar to suffer Adrian’s wrath and have his deserved comeuppance. That and Jongin wanted to know how far Adrian’s protectiveness extended for him.

He received an answer almost immediately when Adrian’s eyes narrowed into a menacing scowl, as though he were ready to stride up to Jevar and drive his sword through the man’s skull.

He moved, withdrawing his hands from Jongin. “Hold on,” Jongin rasped and halted him. Adrian clenched his jaw, hands fisted.

“I will see to it personally that he has his hands cut off,” he spat through his teeth.

“And it can wait,” Jongin said, though the idea of Jevar having his hands cut off somewhat made his stomach turn. He curled his fingers around Adrian’s thick, powerful neck and brushed his hair. “You have a feast and your bride-to-be awaiting you.”

Adrian groaned and Jongin thought it was the most attractive noise he could make. “Then it must all wait,” he stated and pulled Jongin towards the bathing chamber. Jongin nervously followed, holding Adrian’s hand.

“How did your work go?” he inquired.

“A little less than hopelessly,” Adrian admitted. “I am not sure we have the resources to fight off an army of Wyverns.”

“You defeated one on your own,” Jongin said.


Jongin tried to think of a solution or at least a word of consolation. But then he realized there was nothing that he could suggest which Adrian would not have already thought of. “You are expecting Othadia to aid you.”
Adrian stopped by the pool that was filled with warm water and lotus petals. He faced Jongin with an unreadable expression. “If the Nine Realms wants to continue living in peace, they must all aid me in any way they can. Othadia is no exception but King Castellanos is known for being rather stingy and calculative about exhausting his kingdom’s resources or lending his army. Even if it is for the greater good. He would want something hefty in return.”

“What more could he possibly want when you are literally saving the entire world from becoming a feast table for the Wyverns?”

Adrian smiled at that. “Oh, how I’ve missed your knack for biting mordacity,” he chimed and took Jongin’s face in his hands. He leaned down and pressed a chaste kiss on Jongin’s lips. It was abrupt and brief. Jongin barely had the time to react. He wanted to yank Adrian back to his mouth when the Godblood stepped away. How could a man like him possibly have so much self-restraint? Jongin was losing his mind here. At this rate, he might as well just strip his clothes off and beg Adrian to fuck him until he screamed.

But it must wait. Amongst other things.

“I need to be attended,” Adrian said with a cocky smirk.

Jongin blinked at him. “Since when do you luxuriate in such indulgence?”

“Since I have a pair of eager hands desperate to feel my skin.” He took Jongin’s hands and brought them to his shirt.

Jongin bit his lip, letting his fingers tangle themselves around the laces. “To be fair, you have more than a pair of hands desperate to feel your skin,” he said, flushed red.

Adrian smiled and dipped his head. Jongin shuddered and clenched his eyes tightly when Adrian placed a kiss on a side of Jongin’s neck. His lips were a soft contrast to the roughness of his beard. Jongin, utterly distracted by Adrian’s hot breath that travelled down his neck, worked on unlacing the shirt.

When he was done, he shoved Adrian back lightly and retreated a step. He cleared his throat and hoped he was not blushing too deeply. “You should bathe fast,” he said shakily. “Everyone will be waiting.”

“And they can wait. I am the Crown Prince and a Godblood at that. They would not try to take offence.” Adrian hooked an arm around Jongin’s waist and pulled him close until Jongin was pressed against his bare chest.

“I think it was proven otherwise when they held you to a post and flogged your back,” Jongin said, frowning at the harsh memory.

“They never would have dared if I had defied,” Adrian murmured, eyes keen on Jongin’s slightly quivering lips.

“So, why didn’t you?”

His lips curled into a smirk. “You could say that I was seeking attention.”

Jongin looked at him confusedly. Whose attention could the Godblood, the Conqueror of Realms, they Wyvern Slayer be seeking when he had absolutely all the attention a God could gather?

“What?”
“It made you look at me with kindness, did it not?” Adrian let out, stroking Jongin’s cheek, fingers skimming the faint bruise.

Jongin could not have possibly gotten any redder. “You don’t mean to say that you had the skin of your back peeled off in return for my sympathy.”

“I was desperate,” Adrian said. He was smiling, holding Jongin in his hands, as though the world was not ending and that he did not have a war to fight, not with men but with beasts of the sky.

“You are expected at the courtyard. You best not be tardy to dine with the Othadian King. I should leave you to wash,” Jongin mumbled and pulled away. As much as he wanted to stay here or even join Adrian in his bath, he knew he should not. It would certainly lead to an intimacy neither of them was prepared for now.

Adrian did not let Jongin’s hand go immediately. “Very well. But will I have you to myself tonight?”

Those words were enough to rile Jongin up. He crimsoned and hoped that Adrian realized how starved he was for his touch. Tonight, tomorrow night, any night, Adrian could have Jongin to all himself. But he doubted he’d be needed every night when Adrian got married to Edothise.

“Of course, Your Highness,” Jongin said and pulled his hand free. He did not want to seem sad in front of Adrian. He smiled and pressed a kiss on Adrian’s scruffy cheek before leaving the chambers.

Servants gathered in the corridors, each settling in their favoured position to witness the night and the feast and the rich noblemen and women. The courtyard was bright and colourful with a splash of lanterns and flowers. Jongin stayed by Riolda and Eudora, who were gossiping endlessly about Lord Talia’s affair with Lady Meci, Lord Jos’ wife. Jongin only took interest when the subject of their conversation shifted to Prince Evzen.

“He is particularly handsome tonight,” Eudora commented with a giggle. “I wonder which lucky lady will manage to steal his attention.”

Jongin’s gaze followed Eudora’s and he found Evzen looking painfully bored at the feast table with Jevar standing behind his chair. Evzen’s eyes were surprisingly not wandering to any of the women, who were fighting for his attention. Jongin wondered how far in the Nine Realms did Evzen’s reputation of a playboy and an excellent lover in bed stretched. Jongin had certainly been a victim of his seduction and it made him both furious and miserable that Evzen had the heart to play with his feelings like this.

Were there feelings involved in the first place? Jongin had looked for a friend in Evzen in the absence of Adrian, but he did not think he felt anything more for the carefree libertine. Not until he was kissed senseless in the dark with Evzen’s mouth claiming Jongin’s like it rightfully belonged to him. Like the throne Adrian was entitled for. Jongin would not deny that he had felt something. He was just not sure what something entailed. It happened without a forewarning and left Jongin all the more baffled about Evzen, who was notorious for being torturously transparent. But Jongin could not figure him out. Evzen was the best puzzle there was. He called himself a lover of women, preened on his insouciant, carefree attitude, and eccentric personality, but when in reality, he was troubled by grievances with his brother, the injustice thrown in his way, the attention that was never given to him, and he also went around kissing boys?
Jongin shook the thought away. He did not want to think about the spoiled Prince. If he had someone like Jevar at his side when he slept soundly, he could not be all that good of a man. Jongin was wrong to have judged Evzen with kindness. He had been right the first time. Evzenius was nothing but a waste of space, a decorative item that was meant to look pretty but without much of a worth.

He had not realized that he had been staring the Prince so visibly until Evzen looked at him and flashed a seductive grin. Jongin scowled and looked away, shifting his gaze to the women and men dancing in the courtyard.

When Adrian finally showed up, fashionably late as always, everyone stopped to look. He had trimmed his beard, combed his hair, put on a deep green and gold coat with black breeches. The gold medallion shone against his chest while the golden circlet, embedded with black star sapphires like the ring he wore proudly. He looked like a king.

Princess Edothise rose with her father to invite Adrian properly to the table. Adrian took Edothise’s hand and kissed it, smiling politely as he guided her back to her seat before taking his own at his brother’s side. Edothise’s dark skin failed to hide her blush. She adjusted her expensive gown and fixed her diamond necklace before looking up at her fiancé. She smiled. She was beautiful. She was well-dressed and well-mannered. And the word was that she would make an excellent consort in the court. She was a perfect match for Adrian.

Gods, she was a princess. Of course, she was beautiful, rich, and perfect.

Jongin regarded his own roughspun tunic and the dirt caking beneath his fingernails with repulsion. He missed wearing pretty clothes and jewellery. He missed looking pretty. He used to be a prince who might have been worthy enough to be Prince Adrianus Dragovan’s consort, but now, he was nothing but a slaved servant with no title to his name.

“They are a good match,” Riolda remarked. Jongin drew a breath and moved away from there. He found a much more secluded, dark spot and watched the rest of the feast in silence. He tried to keep his concentration on the dancers. Oh, he certainly missed dancing, too. He missed being a prince who might have been worthy enough to be Prince Adrianus Dragovan’s consort, but now, he was nothing but a slaved servant with no title to his name.

It felt a knife to the gut when Adrian led Edothise to the floor for a dance. Jongin curled his fingers tightly and bitterly watched Adrian settle his hand on Edothise’s hip while the other held her hand securely. He was even staring into her eyes, like any proper gentleman leading the dance should. But it still made the green-eyed monster eat at Jongin’s gut like a famished beast.

“Can I have this dance?”

Jongin jumped and spun around with a start, hand instantly flying up to shove the man back. Evzen chuckled when he caught Jongin’s hand against his chest. Glaring, Jongin yanked his hand back. He had not noticed Evzen excusing himself from the table.

“Nay,” Jongin spat and begun to walk away. But Evzen’s powerful grip on his arm stopped him and slammed him against the wall. Jongin snarled and grimaced. Though he trusted Evzen to not to do anything foolish in the midst of so many people. But there was no telling what ran in the erratic man’s head.

“You are upset,” Evzen said in a low voice, which was mostly muffled by the music of the lyres and
lutes. “Is it with me or with the kiss?”

Jongin swallowed as Evzen edged closer, pinning Jongin against the wall like he had that night before he had his mouth all over Jongin’s.

“What had I done to deserve that slap?” he asked, rubbing a cheek, as though to make a point that it had hurt. “Did you not like it? The kiss?” He leaned in so close that Jongin could practically taste the remnants of wine on his breath. He arched deeper into the wall but it was not exactly getting him away from the blue-eyed bastard. “You certainly seemed to have enjoyed it that night.”

Jongin hated how small he was compared to both Adrian and Evzen. At least with Adrian, his size did not seem like a disadvantage. With Evzen, Jongin certainly wished that he was taller and bigger.

“It was not the kiss that unsettled me. Not as much as your perversity and tendency to play with innocent hearts, at least,” Jongin spat.

Evzen blinked at him in confusion. “How do you mean?” he asked, taking a step back.

“The lyre and the book. Were they from you?” he asked in a harsh tone.

Evzen smirked lightly. “Did they delight you?”

Jongin huffed furiously. “What would be the need for you to offer me such intimate gifts?”

Evzen laughed. “I am known for my largesse, haven’t you heard, Princeling?”

“I appreciate them, but spare me, Your Highness. I do not wish to play your ribald games.” He started to walk away when Evzen held him back again.

“Neither the gifts nor the kiss was meant to hurt your feelings. It was not at all my intention. While the gifts had been intentional, the… kiss had not. I do not know why I lost my control… Believe me, it had taken me by surprise, too. I am not playing any ribald games with you.”

Jongin stared at the man. He looked and sounded sincere, but Jongin was all the more confused now. “What do you want with me, then?” he asked, truly curious about what Evzen’s real intentions were. Certainly, even a prince as laidback as Evzen had something better to do than pester a mere servant.

“Nothing,” Evzen said earnestly. “Perhaps I wish to form some sort of acquaintance with you but none of it is planned, I promise. I just hope you would not avoid me hereafter.”

Jongin surveyed the Auvran Prince and sighed. “Then you mustn’t do anything friends would not do.”

Evzen started to smirk. “Friends? I like the sound of that. Very well, Princeling. You have my word, I will not come near you with anymore lewd intentions.”

“What do you mean anymore?”

Evzen’s smug grin widened.

Jongin cast his gaze low, shaking his head. “I apologize for hitting you.”

“I had it coming, I suppose. It will remind me to not to go about kissing pretty virgin boys next time I’m tempted to.”

Jongin rolled his eyes. He turned his back to the Prince and searched for Adrian in the dancing
crowd. He could not find him. Edothise had returned to her seat at the table. Baashere was gone, too.

“If you are looking for my brother, he must have left to take care of the tedious matters of court,” said Evzen. “There is a boring meeting tomorrow morning.”

Jongin looked at him and shook his head again. “I am not looking for him… His Highness.”

Evzen simply smiled and squeezed Jongin’s shoulder, which might leave a bruise behind, before he walked away.

* * *

For the most part, Jongin was mad at the fact that Adrian had not been allowed to rest, even though he had literally just come home. He had court duties to take care of, that Jongin understood and empathized with, since he had never been a fan of court duties himself. Adrian must have a lot on his shoulders right now, juggling with his responsibilities towards the kingdom, the troops, the Gods, with the Wyverns also into the bargain. He needed a consort for political assistance now more than ever. It was the right time to get married. And it would happen very soon, too.

Jongin quietly paced the bedchamber as the night wore on. The feast had ended a while ago. He had seen Raagathor retiring to his chambers with his wives earlier after bidding the Othadian King and his daughter a good night. Evzenius managed to score himself the prettiest damsel in the crowd tonight and Jongin knew they were busy in Evzen’s chambers this very moment.

With the festivity wrapped up, the night turned quiet. Jongin felt sleep tug at his eyes. Most of the palace was asleep. He wondered if Adrian decided to sleep elsewhere tonight or if he were still away working, burning the midnight oil.

Jongin just earnestly hoped that Adrian was not burning it with Edothise at his side. He sighed and waited with his patience running thin. He looked at the bed and stared at it for a moment. His mouth turned dry when obscene images of him sweating and moaning under Adrian, skin-to-skin, invaded his thoughts.

Though Jongin had had fantasies of him yielding to men before, nothing had burned him this hot. He would remember to yell at Adrian later for both making him wait and rendering him so sexually frustrated. Jongin had not been used to waiting on someone. He was a prince, people waited on him. But now that he was stripped off that title, he might as well get used to not having his demands fulfilled immediately.

On top of that, he was waiting on a Godblood that was supposed to save all of Nine Realms after all. He could wait a little longer.

But when he was finally convinced that Adrian might not retire to his bedchamber tonight, Jongin decided to head back to the servants’ quarters, so that no one would catch him sneaking out of the Crown Prince’s chambers in the dead of the night.

He slipped out of the chambers and started wending his way towards the staircase when he stopped abruptly in his tracks as he heard Edothise’s voice in the hallway, shortly joined by Adrian’s.

“We do have the expertise you need. I am certain Father would be happy lend a helping hand,” said Edothise.

“Thank you for counsel tonight, Princess Edothise,” Adrian said. “I truly appreciate having a second opinion, one that isn’t too far-fetched or self-interested, as, you may have noticed, my father’s court tends to function.”
Edothise smiled. They came to a standstill and faced each other. Adrian mirrored her smile generously and she blushed. “I just hope to be as much of help as I can be. But even I know that there isn’t much that I can do to help a mighty Godblood. I am a mere mortal after all.”

That had Adrian floundering for a moment. He chuckled softly and said, “Believe me. You have a far better talent than I when it comes to politics. You’d make a fine consort.”

Jongin almost heard his heart shattering. Anger, jealousy, grief, misery, all overtook his emotions at once. He wanted to both punch a wall and break every knuckle there was in his hand, and break into an endless sob where someone could never find him. Either way, he wanted to feel a pain greater than this.

Adrian had no qualms with marrying Edothise or anyone else, for that matter. But had he even considered how Jongin felt about this arrangement? Did he know how tormenting it was to watch someone else put her brand on him and claim him as his? Not just only legally, but looking at the way they had quickly become friends, it might soon involve feelings, too. Where would Jongin stand then? Completely out of the picture, that was where.

He should not whine too much. It was a wonder enough that someone as nonpareil as Adrian gave someone as meek and unimportant as Jongin his attention for as long as he did.

“It still feels like a dream, Your Highness,” Edothise sighed, lowering her head. “I am honoured that you have considered me a worthy consort.”

Adrian’s lips pressed into a thin smile as he tied his hands at his back. “As I said, Princess. You are far better than I at politics. I was once told that I am oaf that was good for naught but wield a sword.” He laughed.

The princess looked astonished and a little a horrified. “Oh, my. Who would even dare…”

“Well, there is someone who does,” he let out. “I shall bid you a goodnight here, Princess Edothise.”

“Oh, please. I would prefer you call me Edothise, Your Highness.”

“Then you must certainly forgo the formality altogether.”

Edothise smiled a smile that would have the King’s court at her feet. “Very well, Adrianus.”

Jongin clenched his jaw and marched forward. He needed to get to the stairs and he was in no mood to have a private conversation with Adrian right now. He would like to very much cry silently into his pallet and be mad at Adrian forever.

Edothise glanced at him first before Adrian’s followed her gentle gaze. “Jongin,” Adrian muttered, frowning.

Jongin did not meet his gaze. He bowed before the Princess when he reached them in the hallway. “Good evening, Your Highness.”

Edothise was mumchance for a moment. “By the Seven, you are the Prince of Warinia,” she rasped at length, mustering Jongin from top to toe.

“Was, Your Highness,” Jongin corrected and pinned Adrian with a sharp look. A pang of guilt flashed in Adrian’s eyes. Good. Let him feel horrible, Jongin thought.

Edothise looked at him with pity. “I am sorry,” she said and there was sincerity in her apology. She
was a woman that was difficult to be hated. She was everything—and more—a King could look for in a consort and the people sought in a Queen. Jongin envied her, but he could not bring himself to despise her.

He sighed and bowed his head. “Thank you, Your Highness.”

“It must have been difficult for you,” she said, frowning.

Jongin looked at Adrian. Then back at Edothise. “I should get back to my bed, Your Highness. It was a pleasure meeting you.”

“Likewise, Princeling… um, Jongin. Is that your name?”

Jongin nodded. “I shall leave you two to yourselves then, Princess Edothise.”

He brushed past Adrian without sparing him another look. He could not look. If he did, he would break apart. He had thought he would take it all easily. After all, the world was ending and there were more pressing issues that needed his attention. But after seeing the way Adrian smiled at Edothise, Jongin knew that soon, he would become as insignificant as a whisper in a windstorm.

“Jongin,” Adrian called in a gruff voice as Jongin reached the stairs.

Jongin turned and faced him, eyes darting to the guards at the doors before they landed on Adrian. “Yes, Your Majesty,” he muttered sullenly.

Adrian blinked and sighed. “You are upset.”

Jongin swallowed and cast his gaze low. “Nay, I’m not,” he lied and added, “My Liege,” when he saw a guard looking in their way.

Adrian glanced back at the guards, who immediately averted their attention. “I need you in my chambers,” Adrian said, his voice steady and firm. It sounded like an order given to a servant.

Jongin scowled at the Godblood and hoped that it was enough to spell his infuriation and disapproval. “I am sure you need sleep and rest more, Your Highness.”

Adrian huffed out a disgruntled sigh and took hold of Jongin’s arm.

“Adrian,” Jongin grunted in a low whisper as Adrian started hauling him up the flight of stairs. People would talk. Although Jongin was now recognized as Adrian’s personal page, no Prince would be this familiar with his page. And Jongin would not deny that he would very much love to sabotage Adrian’s marriage to Edothise, but he would not want to tarnish Adrian’s name in any way. That aside, if Adrian were to go to war with Wyverns, his marriage to Edothise would be immensely beneficial to the kingdom’s welfare and political stability. In case anything hapless was to happen to Adrian.

Jongin did not protest too loudly as he was dragged to the far end of the hallway. Not only because he needed to be cautious, but also because he was too sad to fight. Anger subdued into something even more pathetic and miserable. He wanted to just be left alone and brood about his fate over and over until he was convinced that he would not have a happy ending with Adrian, and it was okay. He could not ask Adrian for things that were beyond Adrian’s power to give.

What were exactly the things he wanted from Adrian?

To be married like how Warinians men married each other? To have a small, but beautiful wedding
by the greenest hills and freshest rivers? To let Jongin bear his first heir? To live in a place where no one and nothing could separate them? To go on a couple more adventures before settling down with a family of their own? To come home every night to Jongin and warm his bed for cold nights?

Even if the Wyverns weren’t threatening to destroy the Nine Realms, even if Princess Edothise were not marrying Adrian, none of this was possible. Jongin was no longer a prince, he held no title, owned no land, no power, no sovereignty. Adrian was the Crown Prince of the most powerful kingdom in the Nine Realms. He was the son of Zhesaris. Even if he cancelled all this out, there was still the fact that they were both men. As an Auvran, Adrian would never take a husband. He would take a wife, who would bear him the royal heirs. He would not be the first king ever who took an Aevayl for a consort. It was against the law.

And Jongin was certain that Adrian did not love him enough to yield so much. He was not even sure that Adrian loved him at all. Perhaps this was just a ride of thrill for him. Perhaps he would have a happy married life with Edothise and not a single thought of Jongin would cross his mind.

When they reached the empty hallway where the painting studios and sunrooms were, Adrian drew Jongin into one of the sunrooms and closed the door, locking it.

Orange and red cushions, soft maroon beds, bright gold silks, and a couple of green chaise lounges were sprawled over the floor of the sunroom. Vases from the Fifth Realm adorned the corners, holding Wildfire Blooms, a type of indigenous plants of Auvradevas. Jongin gazed up at the glass roof and let out a deep breath in awe. The nights in Auvradevas were often incredibly starry and bright, they were absolutely stunning. He wished he could give each and every flickering star his attention, but there were countless of them, spread over the night sky like tiny crystals on a blanket of leather.

He was met with a far more arresting sight when he turned his gaze to Adrian. He was still clothed in his green and gold coat, and black breeches, but he had removed the medallion. Jongin wondered when he had done that.

“You. You are. Jongin knew how childish it would sound if uttered out loud. So, he kept mum, pursing his lips together, trying to come up with a better answer. “Nothing is,” he lied and it was a weak lie.

Adrian’s eyes narrowed. “I have kept you waiting,” he said, as though he had figured out the answer himself. Except that it was no longer the reason why Jongin was upset. “I’m sorry. I even left the feast early to get my work done, so that I could join you sooner. It somehow dragged longer than I had expected. Believe me, if Princess Edothise hadn’t been there, I might have just gone without a wink tonight.”

“Oh, I believe you,” Jongin muttered and bit his tongue. He had not meant to let that slip and he certainly had not wanted it to sound so bitter. Adrian started to stare. How clueless could this man be? It did not take a genius to understand that Jongin was jealous. Or did Adrian have the notion that Jongin would not stoop so low? In that case, the man could not be more wrong. At this point, Jongin was ready to stoop as low as he possibly could. He was jealous, he was angry, he was disappointed, and he felt like a brat. His sister used to point out what a spoiled, greedy, stingy, demanding brat he
was. Jongin begged to differ. His greed was not avarice. His greed was justifiable. His greed was fair.

He only wanted what was his to remain as his. He did not want to relinquish his ownership over anything or anyone. He was willing to share, but they could not take away what was his from him.

Adrian groaned. “I am certainly not fond of this temperament of yours,” he said, edging closer.

Jongin retreated to the beds on the floor. “It is probably not wise for us to sneak around the palace like this.”

Adrian’s lips quirked up. “I know that I am not my debauched brother, but I am capable of sneaking around, too.”

“You are definitely not Evzen,” Jongin scoffed. “He is indeed far more long-headed and astute than you are… Definitely not slow and oblivious to everything that matters… And oh, what will your beautiful betrothed think of it if she comes to know that you have been sneaking around with a boy, a page, an outcast?”

Adrian stopped and his eyebrows drew into a frown. He was silent for a stretch before he scrubbed his beard and let out a heavy breath. “Is that what this is about?”

Jongin hung his head. He did not need Adrian to tell him how childish he was being. He already knew. Adrian was expecting Jongin to be an adult as he was and handle this situation sensibly. But all that Jongin really wanted to do was throw tantrums, hurl plates at the walls, rip clothes apart, and hit Adrian repeatedly until the man was covered in ugly bruises.

He sighed, shoulders slumping in defeat. He was exhausted. He should just stand in a corner and simply be a bystander, watch how everything unfolded before him without any active participation. That would make everything easy.

“And since when do you call my brother, ‘Evzen’?”

Jongin could not stop the blush that took over his cheeks then. “We… We’re friends now,” he said. It was not a lie. He should probably tell Adrian about the kiss but he was just not sure how to broach the topic.

Adrian raised an eyebrow. “That so?”

Jongin sighed and perched on a small corner of one of the beds and hugged his knees to his chest, keeping his eyes low.

Adrian removed his overcoat and sank on the bed at Jongin’s side in his shirt. “Talk to me, Jongin,” Adrian said in a soft voice, lifting his fingers to brush Jongin’s hair at the nape of his neck. Jongin shuddered but kept his head low, even as Adrian’s calloused fingers lingered on his neck. “Don’t keep me in the dark, waiting for me to guess what runs in your mind. I really am not that long-headed, as you have so descriptively put.”

Jongin smiled faintly. “I’m sorry for saying that,” he murmured.

Adrian’s breathing was always heavy and loud when he was sleeping or concentrating. He was concentrating now. He was trying to figure Jongin out. “It is my marriage to Princess Edothise that troubles you after all, is it not?” he said at length and let his hand droop to Jongin’s back, stroking it gently. It made it all the more difficult for Jongin to stay mad at him.
“I know. I know, it is childish. I know that it is unfair to begrudge you for something you can’t really help. You are the future King of Auvradevas first, a simple man with needs second. I’m sorry that I sound like a rotten brat.”

Adrian did not respond immediately. Jongin looked up at him at last and saw Adrian smiling at him sleepily. Jongin blinked in confusion. Adrian’s hand rose back to cup the back of Jongin’s neck. “Is it cruel that I delight in your distress?”

“It would be beyond cruel,” Jongin grumbled.

Adrian laughed and closed the small distance between them until his breath was ghosting over Jongin’s cheek. “Do you like me that much, Jongin?”

Jongin clenched his teeth. This was precisely the conversation he had thought—and hoped—they would be having tonight in Adrian’s bedchamber before he had seen the way Adrian had smiled at and appreciated Edothise. It was like a damp towel on hot skin.

Not that his dampened mood helped stop the hardening shaft and loosening sheath with Adrian purring against his ear. His gruff voice and shallow breaths, his flexed muscles that were waiting to tauten, his deep sun-kissed skin tempted to sweat all night, his large hands longing to hold Jongin in spots that would make him squirm… Gods, Jongin was going straight to hell for all the filthy thoughts that flooded his mind.

“It’s not about how much I like you,” he said, utterly distracted by Adrian’s beard that was now tickling the sensitive skin beneath his earlobe. “And I don’t really like you that much.”

Adrian laughed against Jongin’s neck. “Of course!” he exclaimed and curled an arm around Jongin’s waist at the back. Once the laughter had died, Adrian sighed. “Won’t you look at me?”

Jongin did not want to look at him. Because if he did, he might either break into a sob or pounce on Adrian and beg him to fuck him, and neither sounded like a respectable course of action. He was sure that Adrian was well aware of the fact that Jongin was ready for the taking, but perhaps he was waiting for Jongin to declare it explicitly once more.

“Jongin,” Adrian breathed out and lightly held Jongin’s chin to get him to face him. Jongin met his gaze and frowned. “It is a marriage of convenience. She would make a fine queen regnant if… if things take a less fortunate turn.”

“Why is Prince Evzenius’ crown off the table?” Jongin argued.

Adrian looked taken aback. “He is interested in neither the throne nor duties it entails. He had made it very clear that he wants no part in politics.”

“That’s because none of you has given him a chance yet.”

Adrian’s face scrunched up in both confusion and irritation. “Has he told you anything? How deep is your friendship? He is not the type to rub shoulders with servants, unless he means to take them to his bed, of course.”

Jongin dropped his gaze again. Adrian regarded him as a servant too now. Well, what was one more grievance to add to the ever-growing list…

“I understand him. Rest assured, he certainly does not wish to take me to his bed,” Jongin said. “It has always been your song that was sung everywhere. Have you ever considered the fact that he has grown in the shadow of his unassailable brother? Has any of you? And by right and the Auvran law,
he should get the throne. You were born out of wedlock, even if it were to a goddess. It is not fair for
you to steal what’s rightfully his just because you are of God’s blood. He might not be a warrior as
good as you, but he is possibly one of the best warriors among the mortals. The Gods have not
kinged the mortals in ages and they should not have to. This is his land. He should have been
groomed to succeed Raagathor. The ruling right lies with him. But he could never prove to be a
better King than you when you could do everything he can with more efficiency, just because you
are a Godblood. The Azurewrath looks good in your hand because you are born with such a right.
But he could pick up a rusty old sword and fit right among the common people because he is one of
us. Had he been the Crown Prince, I doubt he would have terrorized Warinia and I doubt that I
would have become a servant. Which means I would not have had to endure any of this while you
happily proceed with your life.”

There. It was all out of his system. He was not even sure why he was trying to argue for Evzen. He
did not want, he did not really care. He just wanted Adrian to feel crippled with guilt and remorse.
He wanted Adrian to realize that he was in this spot all because of him. He wanted Adrian to know
that he was held accountable and it was not fair to just abandon Jongin. He was responsible for
Jongin. He needed to pay. He needed to recompense.

The hangdog look in Adrian’s expression felt like a momentary victory. Yes. Yes, feel bad. You will
not marry some woman without all this guilt weighing your down.

Adrian retrieved his hands that were lingering on Jongin’s body and sat straight, staring at the floor
now. He looked so woebegone for a moment that Jongin began to feel sorry. But it was too late. It
was all out there.

“Happily,” Adrian echoed and hung his shaking head. He ran a hand through his long hair and
exhaled heavily. “Perhaps you may not be familiar with the feeling, but try to picture yourself
standing in a cage full of starving lions, that are ready to pounce on you any moment now. And you
have one way to get out of the cage, but you must get through the lions to get to the exit. But if you
even so much as turn a hair, you’re as good as dead. Can you picture that?”

It was a question and he needed an answer.

Jongin nodded embarrassedly.

“Now, imagine yourself in the same situation, but with two children in your arms. You can save
them and get them safely to the exit, but you might not make it. How does that feel?”

Jongin lowered his eyes, crestfallen. He was a horrible, selfish person.

“I’m trying, Jongin. Every breath I take, every waking moment, every heartbeat. I’m trying. I need to
ensure that my people will be safe when the Wyverns come. I might not make it and that is why I
need backup plans. And believe me, I am not happy with my life right now. If you cannot
understand that…”

Jongin’s eyes welled up with tears. He looked away. He felt like a child being reprimanded for
taking a sweetmeat from a stranger. He wanted to pick his words up and burn them in his mouth.

“My mother keeps warning me to remove you from my thoughts while I work, but the Seven know I
have tried and failed. You are there, in every thought, in every prayer. I see a red flower and I think
of you. I see shiny earrings and I think of you. I smell Oosredil and I think of you. And Gods, every
time I look at the moon, I think of you.”

Jongin remembered that night all too well. They were sitting by the Sraemn River, eating Rootnuts
they had salvaged from the forest floor. The moon was full. Jongin stared at its reflection on the flowing river. Adrian was staring at Jongin blushing.

“What don’t you watch the moon? It’s pretty tonight,” Jongin said, just to get Adrian to look away so that he could breathe again.

“I have the better end of the deal. I am looking at something prettier,” Adrian mumbled.

It felt like another life.

Jongin wanted to apologize but he was not sure which part he was sorry for. Probably all of it. Or maybe he was only sorry for being self-centred and wanting to make Adrian feel bad.

It was funny how he always got his instant comeuppance after some evil deed. The Seven must hate him. Adrian’s mother must hate him.

“Ad—” he was interrupted when Adrian rose to his feet abruptly and grabbed his coat. Then without giving Jongin another look, he stormed off.

He must be hurt.

Jongin wished someone would cut his tongue off. Only he could wound a Godblood with just words. It also gave him a little hope. His opinions mattered to Adrian. What Jongin thought of him mattered to him. Otherwise, he would not have taken offence in it (and had graciously spared Jongin’s life). But perhaps Jongin should stop taking Adrian’s leniency for granted.

He shot up and bolted out of the sunroom, chasing after Adrian.

“Adrian,” he gasped and Adrian came to a halt before turning around. “I’m sorry.”

“I know,” Adrian said. “I do not blame you for the way you feel. If anything, I am held responsible for everything anyway… I have a terrible headache. I ought to get some sleep before presenting myself before my father’s court tomorrow.”

“Oh,” Jongin let out and felt stupid for it. Oh. That was all that he could come up with when Adrian was being the bigger man for being so understanding. Jongin really hated himself. Adrian must think of him as a spoiled, young brat too now. Unlike Edothise, who was wise for her age, shrewd and a better match for Adrian, a better investment.

Adrian opened his mouth to say something but he didn’t. He bowed his head and turned on his heel, walking away.

Jongin returned to the servants’ quarters with something worse than misery. He felt like a sinner that offended all the Gods singlehandedly. He no longer felt like crying. He wanted to drown himself. He wanted to punish himself. It would have been so much better if Adrian had just yelled at him. Instead, he had treated Jongin with the same kindness as ever. A common man could never impose such restraint on himself. Adrian did not only suppress his sexual desires but also his tendency to lose his temper. Except that one time when he killed the Soothsayer for trying to kill Jongin.

Was Jongin perhaps asking for too much? Was the reason why they fought more than they professed their affection for each other?

“Are you not sleeping?” Diante asked in a moany whisper.

Jongin leaned against the wall and said, “Nay.”
Diante sat up. “Me too. What are you thinking about?”

“Why is it that we hurt the people we love the most?”

Diante was silent for a moment. “I don’t think it is right that we hurt those we love. It must be the wrong kind of love if we do that. But I’m just a foolish country girl. What would I know about love,” she laughed quietly.

Jongin sighed and closed his head, pressing the back of his head on the wall. “Not that it matters. We’re all going to die when the Wyverns come anyway.”

That silenced Diante altogether and she did not say anything more.

Jongin returned to his room after taking a bath in the morning only to be surprised to see everyone up and about, scampering over the dinner tables outside the rooms. They were laughing and whistling.

“What is going on?” Jongin asked as he pushed through the crowd.

“Ah, there you are,” Melanctha gasped and yanked Jongin by the arm. “I think he has come for you again.”

“Pardon my audacity to ask, Your Highness, but we could not hold our curiosity back,” said Reginald. “Is it true that the Princess Liana of Vilantha is a former lover?”

“She and her mother,” Evzen answered and the crowd went wild again. The men laughed and winked while the women blushed and bit their lips. “But I believe it is the mountains in Vilantha that were the true beauties.”

“I am a Vilanthian,” Reginald said. “Raised in Auvradevas.”

“My, my,” Evzen said from where he sat on top of the table with his legs crossed like a crude soldier, with a tankard of servant mead in his hand. “I love your people’s story about the Glass Prince and your exquisite foods. Of course, the women, too.”

Reginald looked flattered and honoured. He grinned from ear to ear to receive the compliment about his kingdom.

What was Evzen doing here again today? That too this early in the morning. Jongin would have expected him to be hungover and in bed all day after the feast last night. But he was truly surprised to see the Prince down here, rubbing shoulders with servants, as Adrian had said.

Jongin looked around. Maybe Evzen was trying to court a servant girl.

“He’s here, Your Majesty,” Melanctha said with a bow. Evzen’s eyes darted to Jongin at once and he jumped off the table.

He flashed a grin that was too difficult to not to return. Jongin smiled and frowned when he realized Evzen was grinning at his hair that was wet and mussed from the bath. Jongin quickly carded his fingers through the clumped strands and approached the Prince.

“Good morning, Your Highness,” he said. “Were you looking for me?”
Evzen shrugged. “Not particularly but good to know that you thought that I would come looking for you.”

“Okay, then,” Jongin turned around to leave but, as he predicted and anticipated, Evzen caught his shoulder and stopped him.

“Very well. May I have a word with you, Princeling?”

Jongin sighed and pretended like he neither had the mood nor the time to entertain the Prince. He would give anything to just talk freely to a friend and not have his emotions spoil the day ahead for once.

The servants’ whispers followed them as they wended their way out. They wandered to the courtyard and received a few odd glances from guards.

“Is your father and brother with the court?” Jongin inquired.

“Yes.”

“And why are you not?”

Evzen pinned him with a smirk. “I am not needed there and neither do I want to be needed there.”

“That is a lie,” Jongin said. The Prince did not reply. “Why did you want to see me?”

“Oh, yes,” he exclaimed. “I heard a little bird tell me that it is your birthday next week.”

Jongin blinked. “Oh, I had completely forgotten about it. Is that little bird Helathor?”

“Yes. He somehow knows everything.”

“You and Helathor seem closer than I thought.” Helathor was definitely an accomplice in Evzen’s effort to get the lyre and book to Jongin.

Evzen shrugged. “The old man needs a hobby. And so do I.”

“So, I’m your top prospect?”

Evzen winked and came to a stop in the corridor. “You did not like my presents.”

“I did not say I did not like them,” Jongin said. “I loved them. And I’m sorry I was harsh about it last night. It just took me aback and I was… confused.”

“Confused about why I gave you such gifts?”

“Yes.”

“Plainly speaking, I take pity on you. Hold your horses, I know your guts are hard enough to refuse any sort of sympathy but I just wanted to do something. Don’t ask why, but it was meant to be a sincere gesture. I will not do it again if you do not like it.”

Jongin respected that. If only Adrian was as good as Evzen at expressing his thoughts and feelings. If only Adrian was as transparent and easy-going as his brother. If only Adrian was as debauched as Evzen…

He doubted Adrian knew that it was his birthday in a few days.
“I have no better way to ask this, so here it goes,” Evzen said. “Is there something you want for your birthday?”

Jongin laughed. “Tread light and carefully, Prince Evzenius. You might give the palace a new gossip about you with all the attention you are showering me with.”

Evzen made a sound of dismay. “I have stopped caring about the gossips after that one incident when I was five.”

“What incident?” Jongin gasped, leaning against the balustrade.

“You don’t want to know.”

“You were five. I am sure it is safe for my ears. It would certainly be better than all the other gossips I’ve heard about you.”

Evzen crossed his arms over his chest. He was not wearing his circlet today. Or an overcoat. He had opted for a simple black shirt with silver embroidery and a silver chain for his neck. “I had a sweet tooth. Hardly my fault. I stole the entire jar of Blue Orchid Sweets from my father’s concubine’s chambers. I did not know there were sweets for... more intimate purposes.”

Jongin burned with shame first before he burst into a roaring laughter when he pictured a younger Evzen devouring an entire jar of sweets that were meant to make lovemaking more exciting and well, sweeter. He had heard of the odd sexual fixation, in which a knob of preferred flavour of a specially made sweet was inserted into the vagina of a woman and was licked up by her lover as it melted in the heat.

“She was a Hwakoran,” Evzen groaned.

“I can tell,” Jongin laughed and coughed until his eyes were brimming with water and stomach was hurting. “The entire jar?” he asked just to confirm it.

Evzen smirked and cast his gaze low. He lifted a foot and rested it against the wall, arms still crossed. A few stray strands of his dark hair fell over his eyes and he brushed them away.

He waited until Jongin was done with his laughing and mocking. Then with a more serious face, he said, “I know this is your first birthday so far away from home and your family... under very different circumstance. I don’t know you... So, I don’t know what you like.”

“You got it right the first two times,” Jongin said and smiled. “But I do not want anything.” There was nothing that you could give me. “Thank you. I cannot express how happy just your offer has already made me.”

“Well, there might be things I could want from you for my birthday.”

“I have two tunics and two pairs of pants. What could I possibly give you?” Jongin chuckled. Evzen just smiled.

“Very well,” he sighed and pulled away from the wall. “At the second bell on your birthday, meet me at the stairs to the dungeons southwards.”

“Huh?”

Evzen winked and patted on Jongin’s shoulder with more force than necessary. It was surely to bruise now. “And wear thicker layers.”
“I just told you I only own two tunics,” he rasped and caught Evzen’s arm when the Prince began to walk away. “And what are we doing on my birthday?”

“I asked what you wanted, so now it’s up to me what to give you.”

“I told you I want nothing.”

“And when have I ever listened to anyone?” He winked again and took off.

* * *

Jongin was thrilled, to say the least. He was eager to find out what Evzen had planned for his birthday. It was the nicest gesture ever. The fact that Evzen was not obligated to celebrate his birthday, as his people and the servants in the palace in Warinia used to be, made it all the more precious. Jongin was beginning to appreciate Evzen and the promising friendship that was budding between them.

But he also could not help but wonder if Evzen’s intentions were all purely sincere or if he had a hidden agenda. However, it sounded like utter nonsense. Why would Jongin play any role in any of his agendas?

The rest of the week went by fast. Jongin saw little of Adrian, only when he was sometimes summoned by the head cook to deliver a tray of wine and snacks to Adrian’s chambers. Even then, most of the time, Adrian was either absent or too busy in his study to even spare Jongin a glimpse. Baashere was starting to feel neglected too and he seemed more impatient than Jongin, growling and snarling endlessly at his master. Jongin was tempted a few times to interrupt Adrian but he did not know what he’d say. So, he silently left, saving it for the next time. It was clear that Adrian did not want to talk to him.

Instead of brooding over Adrian, Jongin started spending more time with Helathor in the library and with Riolda and Diante when he was in his room.

“What are you reading?” Riolda asked one evening when she found Jongin on his pallet with a book in his hands. Helathor had lent him the book.

“The Dead Lands,” Jongin answered. “It’s about all the mighty kingdoms and realms that are no longer remembered. Some don’t even believe these existed in the first place. They are deemed to be mythical in many cultures.”

“Oh, that’s interesting,” she drawled, tying her hair into a bun.

“The Land of Servanya is particularly interesting,” Jongin muttered, returning his attention back to the book. “Nothing is known about the ancient kingdom except for the fact that it was in the times of the Faes.”


Jongin snorted at her. “Wyverns exist. And I have encountered the Dark Sylphs first-hand. Who are we to say that Faes didn’t?”

“So you say,” she chimed.

Jongin rolled his eyes. “Fine, don’t believe me.”

“Riolda!” a servant yapped at the door. “Both of you. They need more servants for dinner. Make
haste.”

Jongin huffed heavily and rose to his feet before following Riolda up to the kitchen. There were too many dishes tonight. Jongin wondered what the occasion was. He had not heard the servants gossip about anything recently. About anything but Adrian’s upcoming wedding, that was.

He was directed towards the main sunroom. He hesitated. He looked down at the two carafes of violet on the tray he was bearing. Riolda carried a platter of cheese. Two other servants were holding bowls of candied flower petals.

When he entered, he found members of the royal family settled on the beds and chaise lounges in the sunroom. Raagathor and his wives, their adolescent children who were old enough to drink, Helathor, Jevar, the royal Healer, King Castellanos and Princess Edothise of Othadia, and Adrian. They were talking, chuckling, and having a good time. Prince Evzen was missing.

Adrian was half reclined, half sitting up, propped on one elbow with a winecup in his hand. He looked at ease. He had not looked so relaxed the whole week. Perhaps he would be finally ready to talk to Jongin again.

But then he looked up at Jongin walking in with the carafes of wine and his face died. He sat up and stared at Jongin.

Jongin’s attention shifted to Jevar, whose predatory scowl began to threaten Jongin. He quickly decided to put the carafes where they needed to be and turn to leave. That was when Jevar stretched his leg and Jongin tripped over his boot.

It had barely registered to him that he had dropped face-down on the hard marble floor when a sharp pain stung his nose and the loud noise deafened him momentarily.

“By the Seven!” someone yelled as the carafes shattered on the floor, spilling the contents first.

Jongin’s head continued to spin and he felt someone grabbing hold of his arms to lift him up. His tunic was now drenched in wine and the blood that was oozing down his nose.

“I’ve got him,” Jevar said, his grip tightening around Jongin’s arms. “What a clumsy one.”

Once Jongin’s vision cleared and his head stopped spinning, it finally registered to him that he had broken his nose by tripping over Jevar’s foot. His knees hurt but the pain in his nose was greater. He was also acutely aware of Jevar’s hand that was groping his ass as he ushered him to the door.

“Someone clean this up!” Raagathor ordered.

Jongin clasped a hand over his nose and mouth as Riolda rushed to his side. “Are you all right?!” she gasped.

Jongin shook his head lightly, still dazed by the impact. He shoved Jevar’s hands off him and pinned him with a merciless scowl. “Bastard,” he hissed under his breath and most of it was muffled by his hand covering his mouth.

He glanced back at Adrian on his way out. Adrian was on his feet, staring at Jongin with narrowed eyes. But he had not moved otherwise. Why was Jevar still alive? Why isn’t the Azurewrath piercing through Jevar’s neck already? Why hadn’t Adrian at least put a fist through his skull?

Jongin broke into a sob when he and the servants were alone in the hallway. He was in pain, yes, but the sadness was even more unbearable.
“Oh, Jongin,” Melanctha said when she found him. “Let’s get him to the healers.”

Adrian no longer wanted him and it had all been Jongin’s fault.

* * *

“Here, son,” Contos said, handing Jongin a slab of cold meat wrapped in a cloth. Jongin let Diante help him press the meat to his nose.

“How are you feeling now, dearie?” Melanctha inquired from her pallet.

Jongin could only tip his head slightly with the meat pressed to his face.

“That son of a bitch,” Riolda spat. Eudora at her side flinched. “It was Jevar, that pig. I saw it. He tripped you on purpose.”

Riolda was not the only one who had seen it. But unlike Adrian, Riolda did not have the power to do anything about it, but she had rushed to Jongin’s aid at once nonetheless. But Adrian had stood by and watched, as though it were just some small accident involving some servant he did not really care for.

“Do you have a row with him?” Diante asked.

“Jongin had stabbed his hand. That’s what landed him here in the first place,” Eudora explained. Diante’s eyes widened in surprise. “A broken nose is a better deal, if you ask me.”

“Go be a cunt elsewhere, Eudora,” Riolda snapped and Eudora grimaced at her. Then scowling, she stormed out of the room. Jongin cringed. He did not like seeing them fight. But they fought all the time and still somehow managed to stay friends. Eudora was not anybody’s favourite, though.

Jongin pushed the raw meat away from his face and thanked Diante for her kindness. She said that he had done the same for her when she was in a bad spot. As Jongin lay down, Melanctha snuffed out the candle and pulled the thin blanket over Jongin.

“Let him rest. If you need anything, let us know,” she said.

Jongin was grateful. He was particularly grateful for Melanctha. She was like a mother he never had the grace of growing up with.

Jongin could not sleep. He restlessly tossed and turned for hours. Contos’ snoring made the night worse. The healers had advised him to take enough rest, even though his nose was not *that* broken. He needed answers. He needed reasons. Excuses, apologies, explanations, lies.

He was willing to accept anything. Just make the nausea of desperation stop.

He rose from his pallet and slinked out of the room. He limped his way to Adrian’s chambers. His knees were bruised and swollen, so was his chin and nose. As much as he never wanted to get out of the servants’ quarters again, he needed to know why Adrian had not reacted tonight. He wanted to know if he still had a place in Adrian’s life and heart or if that spot was now occupied by Edothise.

He made a mental note to never say anything more than what was necessary. He did not want to hurt Adrian. He had already done enough of that.

When he reached the chambers, he paused and decided to knock. He could not remember if he had ever knocked on this door.
There was no answer. Adrian was probably still with his family and family-to-be.

Jongin turned around, walked to Prince Evzen’s chambers, and told the guards that he would like to see the Prince. He receives a no in reply and a brief explanation that the Prince gave them orders to not let anyone in and that he was busy.

That could only mean one thing. Jongin’s heart sank deeper. He headed back to his room and curled up on his pallet, hoping that all these feelings would have waned by tomorrow morning.

* * *

When his birthday arrived, Jongin had roused at the first bell and bathed, jumped into the finer tunic between the two and headed to the south dungeons that were derelict and abandoned.

He sat on the stairs and waited for the second bell. Most of the palace was still asleep. He was not sure if he could count on Evzen to show up this early in the morning when even the sun had not come up.

Then he heard footsteps.

He jolted up to his feet and looked at Evzen approach him with a torch in one hand and a folded cloth in the other.

“Hey,” he said cheerily and his voice echoed through the dungeons. “How is your nose?”

“You know about it?” Jongin asked.

“Yes, I heard all about it.”

Jongin wanted to ask why did Evzen keep Jevan as his Auxiliary but he decided that it was far too early in the morning to have that conversation. Besides, he was more curious about other things.

Evzen handed him the folded cloth. It was a cloak. “Is this my birthday present?” Jongin asked confusedly.

Evzen let out a soft chuckle. He pulled his own cloak over his head. He was also wearing dark clothes, nothing too elaborate. He almost looked like a commoner. “Nay, but put it on. And follow me.”

Jongin did as he was told. “Where are we going?”

“To the city.”

“What?!”

“Shh.”

The sun scorched everywhere its rays touched. Crowds flowed like the Mersani Waterfall and gushed in haste everywhere Jongin turned. The Auvradevas Capital was city like no other. The people made the city. One would not be able to hear their own voice in this cacophony.
Jongin struggled to keep up with Evzen in the merciless crowd. He was drenched in sweat and the sun was still climbing up the sky. It would get hotter as the noon approached. He was tempted to remove the cloak, not that anyone would recognize him anyway. But he did not want to risk Evzen getting caught.

A man snarled and hissed profanities at Evzen when the Prince slammed shoulders with him. Jongin laughed silently. If only that man knew he had just called had the young Prince a *rude motherfucker* for not looking where he went.

Jongin took everything in. The heat of the city, the bustling people, the crying vendors, the brawling street duellers, the wailing babies, the colourful dancers in the alleys, the gambling drunkards, the angry woman yelling at her husband’s mistress, the subtle warm wind that was both soothing and vexing.

These were not peaceful people. They liked noise, they enjoyed discord. It was their way. Jongin found it fascinating.

He paused in the middle of a busy street to watch a dance performed by an olive-skinned, beautiful woman, with a waist as slender as a cat’s elbow. The men tossed her a few copper and silver pieces. She was beautiful. So beautiful that Jongin thought even he might enjoy a good time with her.

“Keep walking, sunshine,” Evzen said when he stopped to come back for Jongin. He seized Jongin’s arm and dragged Jongin with him.

“You won’t tell me where we’re going,” Jongin complained.

“You are very impatient, you know.”

“So I’ve been told. But please, tell me where we’re going.”

“In a moment, you’ll see for yourself.”

Jongin sighed and looked down at Evzen’s hand around his arm. He only released it when they reached a fountain.

“Here,” Evzen said and Jongin arched an eyebrow.

“I am not sure you can give me the fountain.”

Evzen laughed. “I could if I wanted to,” he said and continued in a whisper. “I *am* a prince after all.” He adjusted the cloak over his head. “This is the centre of the city. Today, this city is yours. Do anything, *everything* you want to do.”

Jongin’s eyes widened. “You are not joking.”

“I’m not. I will pay for everything.”

“I can be rather expensive, Your Majesty.”

“Oh, I know all about your reputation and expensive tastes, Princeling.” He smirked. Jongin wondered just about how much of his time did Evzen devote to learning new things about Jongin. “I have come prepared.”

“It isn’t fair. There is nothing I could give you in return,” Jongin said.

“I do not expect much in return. And do not worry about it. It is your birthday and you must do all
the wildest things your heart desires.”

It was very tempting. Jongin wanted to be free to do anything he wanted. He knew he would get into a lot of trouble if people back at the palace found out but since he was in the grace of not one but both the Princes, he could get off unscathed.

He took Evzen’s arm and pointed to the alehouse. “Let’s start there,” he announced.

“It’s not even noon yet and already in the mood for booze?”

“I’ve had a tough week,” Jongin grumbled.

“Fair enough.”

* * *

They drunk. Well, Jongin drunk. Evzen watched mostly with his head low. Once Jongin had decided that he had had enough, but not enough to make more than just slightly tipsy, they made their way out of the alehouse. Jongin skipped through the streets like a child high on sugar.

He realized that he was the happiest he had been in so long. Just being away from the palace, from Adrian took off so much burden from his chest. He felt lighter, happier.

He needed to be away from Adrian. He needed his thoughts of Adrian to desert him. For a day, at least.

He recalled what Diante had said. They should not hurt each other. It was the wrong kind of love if they did. Perhaps they were both better off without one another. Adrian should just get married to the Wyverns and kill Edothise. Or kill Edothise and marry the Wyverns. Or marry Edothise and kill the Wyverns. Jongin did not care.

If Adrian did not care about him, then Jongin did not care about him either. It was better this way anyway. Jongin should have just gotten away while Adrian had given him the chance. But instead, Jongin had let his love for this cruel man cloud his judgments. He wanted to be with Adrian, married or not. He had been ready to settle with just an affair, a dirty secret. But if Adrian had grown tired or bored of him, then Jongin would gladly step away.

“Buying anything, boy?” the vendor asked and Jongin realized he was staring at the pink, white conch he had on display. It was pretty and pitiful. It was as useless as Jongin’s existence in Adrian’s life.

He dragged his gaze to the pretty necklace. It was made of steel and cheap gemstones.

“Do you like it?” Evzen asked.

Jongin thought of the anklet Adrian had given him, which Jongin had thrown away. He wanted it back. But he did not know if Adrian still kept it.

“Nay,” he said and turned around to face the Prince. “Let us get more drinks.”

Evzen laughed. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“Let’s get you something to eat first.”
“Crabs! And pickled radishes!”

They ate seared river eels and roasted figs instead. It was the street food of the capital. Jongin did not complain. He loved it. And he loved all the crude jokes Evzen told him while they wolfed down the meal.

They stopped by several street performances and enjoyed them thoroughly. Jongin even got Evzen to throw in a few coins.

And neither noticed the time flying by. The sky began to darken as the sun sank. Vendors closed their stands and went home. The streets became less and less busy. The heat of the day was slowly disappearing, replaced by something cooler and calmer.

Evzen let Jongin have his drink at last.

“You are a good friend,” Jongin drawled as he nursed another pint of cheap beer. “Although I probably would not have befriended you had I still remained a prince.”

“You still are a prince,” Evzen said. “My father can strip off the title from your name but not the blood from vein.”

“Quite a poet you are,” Jongin chuckled. “Must be useful in the bedchamber.”

“Immensely,” Evzen joked. “Now, why won’t you befriend me if you weren’t in this situation? Am I that unworthy of your friendship?”

“For starters, you are an Auvran. We would have nothing in common. Sharing a common interest is important to establish a good friendship. But… I would have definitely fancied you in other ways.”

That seemed to have sparked Evzen’s interest. “Care to elaborate?”

Jongin grinned sheepishly. He was not drunk yet but with a couple more pints, he might get there. “You know what I mean.”

“So, what did I do wrong now? Do you not fancy me now?”

Jongin laughed. “You are certainly the most handsome man I have met.”

“Do not forget I am not my brother.”

“Nay, nay. I promise you, you are the most handsome man I have met. Your brother is very handsome, but you are more… earthy.”

Evzen scoffed. “First time someone had preferred me over Adrian. What an odd feeling it is.”

“I wish I were half as good as you at courting people,” Jongin groaned suddenly.

Evzen rolled his eyes. “I think you’ve had enough to drink. We ought to get back before they lock the tunnels.”

Jongin agreed, though he did not want to go back. He never wanted to go back. Not to the palace, not to Adrian, not to the wedding preparations, not to avoiding Adrian, not to Jevar. Oh, Jevar.

Jongin stopped in an alley and confronted Evzen. “You are a bad person,” he mumbled.

Evzen stopped in his tracks. “I must admit, they are not the words I was expecting to hear at the end
Jongin shook his head, pressed his hands to Evzen’s chest and shoved him back until the Prince’s back was against the wall. “All of you are. Bad people. Your father, your mother, your Auxiliary, you… Your brother! Rotten! Unbelievable! Darned!”

Evzen listened.

“Jevar… He is the worst of all. He constantly harassed me. He hurt me. He threatens me. And I know that I am not his only or his most unfortunate victim. You must know. You know it all. And yet, you enjoy the company of such a dissolute asshole. He is your Auxiliary! And that is where he gets his courage from. You have never tried to stop him. You don’t care! You are just as horrible as he is. A rotten degenerate!”

“I owe him favours,” Evzen said. Such a simple answer. That justified it all, then? “And I’m sorry. For what he has done to you.”

“Nay, you are not. None of you is or should be. It is not your business,” Jongin spat and began to pull away. “And what is your reason for befriending me? What do you want from me?”

Evzen frowned. “You are drunk.”

“Nay, I’m not. I am sober. Very sober.”

“That’s exactly what a drunk would say.”

Jongin groaned and shoved Evzen back up the wall. He stared at Evzen’s piercing blue eyes, his scruffy jaw, his protruding throat, his long neck, his full lips. The women he had lain with were indeed very lucky. Even if he weren’t a prince, he would have no trouble attracting women—and men, if he were to swing that way—to his bed.

“It is a good birthday,” Jongin mumbled, body pressed against Evzen. “I can’t thank you enough.”

Evzen laughed. “A moment ago, you called me a rotten degenerate. And now you are thanking me. I have never met a person like you.”

“You can tell that I am not bliss.”

“Certainly not. But you could be a blessing nonetheless.”

Jongin blushed. He wanted to lean in and kiss those lips staring at him in the face. He wanted to lick Evzen’s long eyelashes. He wanted the tip of their noses to rub. He wanted to feel the scruff on Evzen’s jaw on his cheek. Most of all, he just wanted to kiss someone so hard to erase all the remnants of Adrian on his body.

And he hated how much Evzen actually looked like his brother. “Why did you kiss me that night?” Jongin blurted out.

Evzen pursed his lips and exhaled through his nose. He was now looking Jongin’s parted lips. “Because I wanted to,” he admitted.

“Because you wanted to.”

“Because I wanted to,” he repeated.

“You fancy women… I am no woman,” Jongin muttered. He was not at all a woman, he did not
want to be a woman. He liked being a man, he identified himself as a man, but if he were identified as a woman for being an androgyne, he would have no problem with it too.

“I never said I knew why I wanted to,” the Prince clarified.

Jongin hated how ambiguous and vague both Evzen and Adrian tended to be. “Do you want to kiss me now?”

Evzen was not caught off-guard by the question. He did not seem taken aback. But he was silent. His eyes remained on Jongin’s lips. “You did not want me to approach you with lewd intentions.”

“But when have you listened to anyone?” he said, using Evzen’s own words. Jongin was already leaning in, standing on his toes. He just needed a distraction. A good one.

But Evzen slipped away.

“As tempting as this is,” he said. “we should get you back.”

Jongin sighed. “All right.” He took Evzen’s arm and let himself be steered back to the palace.

Upon reaching it, they snuck through the secret passageways and back in the dungeons, Jongin reached up to kiss Evzen on his cheek.

“Thank you for a marvellous treat. I could never repay you the kindness,” Jongin whispered.

Evzen smiled. “I had a very good time myself, too.” He fished out the silver necklace Jongin had been leering at earlier and pressed it into Jongin’s hand. It was nothing expensive, but Jongin loved it all the same. “Happy birthday, Jongin.”

Jongin retreated to his room with a silly smile, pocketing the necklace. He did not like Evzen the way he liked Adrian, but if they were to be friends, he might just end up liking Evzen more than he liked Adrian for a fun company. Not that it would matter anymore, anyway. Adrian had already tired of Jongin’s company.

A few guards he ran into the hallways scampered away with a gasp when they saw Jongin. What is that all about, Jongin wondered. Another guard spotted Jongin from the stairs and turned around to run back up.

“Jongin! Oh, bless the Seven!” Melanctha gasped when Jongin entered the room.

“Where have you been?!” Riolda screeched, jumping up to her feet from the pallet she shared with Diante. Even Contos and Eudora were still up.

Diante ran into his arms. “We thought something had happened to you!” she cried.

Jongin felt a pang of guilt. “I am sorry,” he said quickly. “I did not think that my unannounced absence would worry you. I am truly sorry for having caused you the distress.”

“Never mind our distress. The guards have been ordered to search for you high and low, in every corner of the palace and if you are not found within the next hour, they have orders to go into the city!”

Jongin blinked. “Whose orders are these?”

“His Majesty, Prince Adrianus’, of course,” Contos said. “He had lost his mind for a moment when he heard you had gone missing. We have never seen him so flustered and furious.”
We thought he might just kill us for not noticing that you were missing until only a few hours ago,” Melanchtha added.

“I swear I heard him say that he will kill Jevar for sure, though,” Eudora said.

Jongin could not believe his ears. All this ruckus just because Jongin had gone missing for a day? A mere page not showing up to his duties was hardly a situation necessitated such drastic measures. Had Adrian really lost his mind? Didn’t he have Wyverns and a marriage to take care of?

Nay, he must have been worried.

But why should he? Did he just stand by that night and watch Jevar not only hurt Jongin right before his eyes but also touch him so inappropriately? Or was Adrian playing the clueless card again?

A guard barged into the room then and demanded that Jongin followed him at once. Jongin knew where he needed to go.

Only when he reached Adrian’s chambers did he realize that he reeked heavily of sweat, alcohol, and the heat of the city. There were still a few hours left until his birthday was over. But he was not expecting a birthday wish from Adrian. If anything, he was already looking forward to an argument.

He found Adrian in his study, leaning over his desk with a half-empty carafe. He must have been drinking. He had his hands on the desk and his back facing Jongin. His shoulders looked tense.

“Where were you?” he demanded without turning around.

“Am I obligated to tell you?” Jongin retorted.

Adrian straightened up and turned around. Anger flashed in his bloodshot eyes. “Yes, you are. Answer the question.”

Jongin clenched his teeth. “Why do you care? I believe you have more important matters that need your attention. Do not burden yourself by worrying about me.”

“You fucking idiot,” Adrian spat and hurled the carafe at the wall. Jongin shuddered and froze in his shoes. He was pretty sure his heart had stopped beating for a moment. His blood turned cold and his head pounded. He had never seen Adrian completely unhinged like this. He would admit, he was close to tears. He was thoroughly intimidated by the way Adrian was now glaring at him. He thought he might not make it out of these chambers alive.

But he’d be darned if he ever let his fear show. So, he gritted his teeth and stood still.

“You can never understand, can you?!” Adrian snapped and Jongin flinched.

“What I can understand that I am a waste of your time. So, please spare me. I do not want to wear you out,” Jongin said steadily in a much calmer tone than he had initially thought of using. But he did not want to aggravate Adrian’s pique at the moment.

“You were the one who said that I am not worthy of the throne. You were the one who can never seem to look past my mistakes. You were the one who kept blaming me for everything every single damn time. You were the one who continuously pointed out that disregarding the fact that I am a Godblood, I am worthless. Don’t you fucking dare pin it all on me. If your intention was to break me from the beginning for your revenge, congratulations, you have done it. I am losing my sanity over you.”
None of this was true. But he had never thought about how Adrian might have taken it all. How he might have misinterpreted it all. Perhaps Jongin still resented Adrian for what he had done to Warinia, to his family, to him. Perhaps that was the reason why Jongin took pleasure in hurting Adrian from time to time. So that he knew what it felt like. Hurting over things and people he loved.

Jongin was panting. He was running out of breath. He needed to get out of here before he passed out or suffocated to death. He did not want to listen to another word Adrian’s had to say. He was also not in the state to argue back. He could not even think straight. If he opened his mouth, he would, without a doubt, say something he would come to regret.

So, he dared himself to move and walk away. He was shaking like a leaf. He was close to breaking a sweat.

“Don’t you fucking walk away,” Adrian spat as he crossed the room, grabbed Jongin’s arm and slammed him against a sideboard. Jongin rasped at the pain when his back rammed against the edge of the sideboard. “How do you like me when I have no self-restraint?” Adrian asked through his teeth, grabbing Jongin’s chin and jaw in a hand.

Jongin did not even try to break free because he knew it would be a futile effort. At least he would die in the hands of the man he loved.

“Believe me, Jongin. You wouldn’t like me if I shut down the mortal part of me. If you think I am revered for being a Godblood, you are wrong. You have only seen the mortal side of mine and I’m letting you see a glimpse of the mess I can truly be.”

“You’re hurting me,” Jongin squirmed as his eyes glistened with tears when Adrian’s grip on his arm tightened.

As soon as Adrian released his arm, Jongin tried to slip away, but he gasped when Adrian slammed him back against the sideboard and curled his hand around Jongin’s neck.

His breath was laced with wine. He was breathing fire. He wanted to crush Jongin’s neck.

But he didn’t. He kept his grip light around Jongin’s neck as he slid another hand down Jongin’s ass to clutch at the back of his thigh. He hoisted it up and raised Jongin to sit on the edge of the sideboard. His hand around Jongin’s neck moved to cup a side of his jaw.

Then without an ounce of mercy, Adrian’s mouth crashed against Jongin’s, cutting off the air supply to his lungs. Jongin clenched his eyes tightly and fisted Adrian’s shirt with both hands as Adrian kissed him ruthlessly. Tongue swiped along Jongin’s lips, teeth bruised them, beard pricked his cheeks, breaths mingled. He tasted the wine from Adrian’s lips when he slowly began to kiss him back.

Adrian broke the kiss all of a sudden, leaving Jongin heady and breathless. He was about to pull away, when Jongin locked his legs around his waist and gripped onto the back of Adrian’s thick neck. He slid his fingers into Adrian’s hair and clutched at it. No, he was not going to run away this time.

“Fuck me, please, Adrian,” Jongin begged in a raspy breath, arching his body into Adrian’s, lips brushing Adrian’s. “Please. Please. In any way you want. Please.” He’d say it a few hundred more times if it would do the trick.

Fortunately, Adrian did not make him beg further. He ripped his shirt away and discarded it on the
floor before claiming Jongin’s mouth again. Jongin felt the bare skin of Adrian’s chest with a hand while the other splayed over the Godblood’s shoulder blade.

Without much effort, Adrian wound an arm around the back of Jongin’s waist and secured the other hand under one of Jongin’s thighs before lifting him from the sideboard. He did not break the kiss as he bore Jongin to the desk, which was the closest compared to the bedchamber. Jongin did not care. Fuck him anywhere, the desk, the floor, against the window, all of them. He just needed Adrian inside him before he could embarrassingly come in his pants.

The smell of Adrian’s skin was flooding his sense just as intense as the kiss that was all spit, heat, breaths, tongue, and teeth.

However Adrian wanted him. Did it matter? It didn’t. If Adrian were to deflower him, Jongin would happily bloom for him this very instant.

As he was lain on the desk, Adrian shoved the rolls of parchment off the desk and ferociously tugged at the laces of Jongin’s tunic. Jongin splayed his fingers over Adrian’s skin—chest, back, abdomen, anywhere his hands could reach. He wanted to feel Adrian sweat above him while completely ruining him.

Burying a fist in Adrian’s hair, Jongin drew him down for another deep, fiery kiss that left his lips swollen and throbbing. A raspy moan escaped Jongin when Adrian latched his lips and teeth to Jongin’s neck, his beard grazing Jongin’s collarbone, hands fumbling with the waistband of Jongin’s pants. Both their breaths were laced with alcohol, both their bodies hungering with fire and desire. Hands sought more skin, throats sore from the desperate but silent groans for

Adrian clutched at the undersides of Jongin’s thighs and yanked him close. The desk was uncomfortable, to say the least, but Jongin could not care less. The discomfort would be nothing compared to what was in store for him.

Jongin had always known that when the time came, he would need to shed his guard, break down his walls, and divest himself of his diffidence and humility. He just waited for the right man. Up until now, he never had been able to imagine submitting himself this way to anyone. But this instant, he was willing to give himself up completely. Was it confidence or determination? Or it was perhaps the reckless courage fed by the alcohol in his system.

Adrian growled out a throaty groan when Jongin caught Adrian’s bottom lip between his teeth and bit into it, sinking his fingernails into the taut muscles of Adrian’s abdomen.

“You’re going to pay for that.” Adrian panted breathily into Jongin’s ear before his tongue swirled around the earlobe, sucking it into his mouth. Swallowing hard, Jongin locked his legs around Adrian’s waist while Adrian’s hand yanked Jongin’s tunic up. He shuddered as Adrian’s rough fingers skimmed his stomach and chest. Adrian then slowly slid down Jongin’s body and pressed a soft but firm kiss on Jongin’s flat stomach, lips sensuously brushing the skin above Jongin’s navel.

Jongin tensed then. He had a fair idea of what might come next. It wasn’t as though he weren’t ready to bare himself for Adrian, but it also meant never being able to go back. Not that Jongin wanted to go back.

Adrian’s lips ghosted over Jongin’s navel as he slowly lowered the breeches. Jongin whimpered out a moan when Adrian’s beard smarted his skin on the hip. He already wanted to scream out Adrian’s
name and beg him to destroy him.

Adrian then bestially tugged at Jongin’s breeches before warm tongue glissaded along the hipbone as his hands cupped the calves of Jongin’s legs, drawing them up. Jongin planted his heels into the edge of the desk and spread his knees apart. He then brought a shaky hand to Adrian’s hair and clutched at it gently. It seemed to have driven Adrian slightly further over the edge of his sanity.

He paused for a moment, taking shallow breaths, as his eyes raked Jongin’s dishevelled appearance. They mustered every exposed skin and then glistened with a voracious lust. Jongin looked away from them, biting his swollen lip. He wanted to know what ran in Adrian’s mind in that moment, though it wasn’t all too difficult to come up with a few suppositions. He just wondered if Adrian wanted him as much as he wanted Adrian.

How do you like me when I have no self-restraint?

Gods, Jongin wanted nothing more than for Adrian to lose every last silver of his self-restraint.

Jongin could not bite back on the loud moan that surged out of his mouth when Adrian slithered back up and licked his nipple before peppering his chest with rough, wet kisses. Jongin gripped onto Adrian’s shoulder, eyes clenched tightly as Adrian drew his mouth along Jongin’s sternum, stomach, and eventually, reached the base of Jongin’s partly hardened shaft. Jongin’s fingers tightened around the strands of Adrian’s hair when the Godblood lightly tongued the foreskin. A jolt surged down Jongin’s body when Adrian kissed the skin where his thigh met his crotch. The intimacy of having Adrian kiss such a sensitive area left Jongin a panting mess. He withdrew his hand from Adrian’s hair and covered his mouth with the back of the hand to muffle whatever moans that might betray him.

Adrian hooked an arm under Jongin’s thigh and left a trail of kisses on the inside of it. Jongin did not dare look at him or his eyes that were heavily lidded, focused on every inch of Jongin’s skin his lips touched.

With his toes curled and heels pressing into the wood of the desk, Jongin bit onto the back of his hand and writhed as Adrian bowed his head. Jongin moaned at the warmth that caressed the edge of his sheath. Adrian’s tongue lightly and cautiously licked outside of the slit between his testicles and anus. The adrenaline that pumped through his veins seized his breaths. It was nothing like he had ever experienced or even imagined. He had of course fantasized about it but the real deal was so much more stimulating and surreal. It felt like his blood was on fire. He gasped for air, fighting shy of the cries that were threatening to embarrass him. While his cock turned flaccid and limp and his testicles contracted, his vestibule loosened. The tip of Adrian’s tongue slid in gently and licked the vaginal orifice.

“Adrian!” Jongin gasped sharply, a hand gripping Adrian’s hair as his body arched off the desk. Adrian brought his head up and pinned Jongin with an indescribable look. His eyebrows were drawn together, his eyes were fixed on Jongin’s. Jongin fought for breath, hand sliding from Adrian’s hair and drooped down the Auvran Prince’s bronze chest and abdomen.

“Say my name again,” Adrian exhaled, hands stroking the underside of Jongin’s thighs. If it were possible for Jongin to flush any redder than he already had, he would have. He looked away and shivered when he felt Adrian’s lips brush his sheath again. He clenched his teeth and let out a muffled cry as Adrian tongued his opening.

“Adrian, oh, please,” he moaned in short, desperate breaths, thrusting against Adrian’s tongue. “Please.” He didn’t even know what he was pleading for but his mind had long turned into a blank slate. He needed to feel Adrian inside him, buried to the hilt.
Jongin rested his feet on Adrian’s shoulders as Adrian curled his arms around Jongin’s thighs and drew his hands up the sides of Jongin’s torso. “You’re so beautiful,” Adrian whispered and Jongin croaked out an involuntarily moan when Adrian’s hot breath stroked his vulva before he tongued it again, smearing it with his saliva until Jongin was almost dripping wet between his legs. When he mustered the courage, he clasped his hands to the sides of Adrian’s head and drew him up to kiss him. He tasted himself on Adrian’s lips, in his mouth. The ferocity receded and Adrian’s touches turned gentle as though he were drunk. He kissed Jongin firmly and savoured the tenderness. His hands slipped under Jongin’s back and he scooped the younger boy up into his arms.

Jongin had his tunic sleeves still clinging on his arms, though the unlaced collar had the shoulders drooping, exposing most of his chest, as Adrian bore him to the bedchamber without breaking the sloppy kiss. Jongin bare legs were wound around Adrian’s waist for support as he held onto the Godblood’s powerful neck.

He didn’t know for how long he’d have Adrian for himself. But he planned to hold onto the man for as long as he could.

Upon reaching the bed, which Jongin had fantasized of lying on copious amount of times, Adrian climbed onto it and carefully reclined Jongin on the silk sheets. Candleflames flickered in the dim-lit bedchamber. A calm susurration sang in the wind that gushed through the open balcony doors as the moonlight poured in.

He splayed his fingers on Adrian’s sharp shoulder blades as Adrian disconnected their lips to lick and suck on Jongin’s neck, leaving splotches of red behind.

Adrian knelt up between Jongin’s knees and tugged at the hem of his tunic. Jongin raised his arms to let him pull the tunic off. Now that he was completely doffed off his clothes, he looked at Adrian with a frown. He still had most of his clothes on. Adrian licked his lips and swallowed hard, his gaze abusing Jongin’s naked body thoroughly. It made Jongin want to sink into the sheets but also at the same time, he wanted Adrian to undress him further with his eyes, though there wasn’t an article of clothing left on his body.

He sat up and hooked his fingers into the waistband of Adrian’s trousers. He looked up at the Auvran Prince with parted, panting lips and glistening eyes. Adrian looked down at him fixedly before he dipped his head and stole a feathery kiss, entangling his fingers in Jongin’s hair.

Jongin dropped his gaze again. By the Seven, he could worship Adrian’s body for days. He could kiss and lick every hardened skin, every jagged scar, fresh and healed. He raised his head and kissed under Adrian’s bearded chin before he dragged his mouth down Adrian’s throat. Adrian kept his hand cupping the back of Jongin’s head as Jongin lowered his kisses to Adrian’s collarbone and then to the deep cleft of his chest, which he spent a moment worshipping and licking before he bent lower to kiss the rock-hard muscles of the Godblood’s abdomen. When he finally reached the fine trail of hair beneath Adrian’s navel, a rush of both excitement and anxiety overwhelmed Jongin. He nuzzled into the hairs while his fingers worked on unlacing the trousers.

They would take this slow after all. The transition from extreme desperation to torpid languidness was titillating in its own way. Jongin palmed Adrian’s crotch over the thick fabric of the trousers and sighed shakily when he realized how hard the man already was. He was suddenly thankful for the lack of brightness in the room. He was embarrassed enough.

As he drew Adrian’s trousers down, he gulped tensely at the thick, swollen, long length of the Godblood’s leaking cock. Adrian’s hand slipped from Jongin’s hair as Jongin bent over, lowering his head. He pulled the calloused hand along Jongin’s protruding spine and Jongin shuddered when the fingers touched his tailbone. He tried to avert his attention from Adrian’s finger, which was slithering
down the cleft of his ass. Sucking in a trembling breath, Jongin took Adrian’s pulsating cock in his fist and looked up at Adrian.

Adrian cupped a side of Jongin’s face with his free hand and ran his thumb gently along Jongin’s lower lip, parting his lips, as though to encourage him. *That’s it. Go on...*

Jongin sucked the tip of Adrian’s thumb and watched the man’s eyes widen with desire. Jongin slowly pumped Adrian’s cock with one hand and then a moment later, with both hands. His mouth turned dry and his throat felt parched as he stared at the precome that leaked from the slit of the cockhead. Jongin was then overwrought with an intense thirst that prompted him to lean in and press the tip of his tongue into the cock’s slit.

A glorious groan broke from Adrian’s throat as he clenched his eyes and threw his head back. Jongin panted, swallowed, and tongued the slit again, slowly at first, licking up the precome. It felt dirty but not as dirty as Adrian’s finger that was stroking the rim of his anus. His head spun, his ears were clogged with the beautiful sounds Adrian was making.

“Oh, fuck,” Adrian breathed out when Jongin wrapped his lips around his swollen cockhead, tongue pressed to a thick vein on the underside of the erection. Jongin sank as low as he could and he felt a little disappointed when he couldn’t get too far before Adrian’s cockhead slammed against the back of his throat. He pulled back and fought the urge to cough with his spit dribbling down the corners of his sore mouth. He looked up at Adrian with a frown and the Auvran Prince smiled before he bowed and kissed Jongin on the lips.

Jongin took Adrian back into his mouth and winced as the corners of his lips stretched painfully. He felt like a novice, an inexperienced fledgling as he sucked the cock, eventually realizing that it was still hardening. He began to emotionally ready himself for the onslaught of pain that was coming for him. Adrian tightened his grip on Jongin’s hair to hold Jongin’s head in place before he slowly pulled himself out of Jongin’s mouth. He then drew Jongin up for another messy kiss.

As Jongin lied back down, Adrian descended on him and kissed him deeply. Then stroking Jongin’s thigh that was loosely curled around Adrian’s hip, he whispered against Jongin’s lips, “How do you want me, Jongin?”

He mewled out an answer with Adrian’s cock rubbing against his vulva. “Take me.” *Deflower me. Destroy me.*

It was an offering to a God. An oblation a mere mortal could present to a God. Perishable humans offered their greatest, most valuable possessions to the Gods, in hope to gain their grace. Jongin’s most valuable possession was his chastity. It was all that he had left to offer the man he loved and worshipped. And all that he asked in return was a token of their intimacy.

Adrian straightened up and knelt between Jongin’s legs, stroking Jongin’s hipbones before he reached for the bedside drawers. He fumbled briefly to find a canister of scented oil. Jongin’s shoulders tensed but his vaginal orifice was loosening up with every ragged breath his lungs exhausted. He watched Adrian with his heart in his throat as Adrian messily dribbled a generous amount of oil on his palm and stroked his cock with the oiled hand.

Adrian then bent low between Jongin’s thighs and his tongue swirled erotically all over the sensitive orifice. Blood rushed to the nether regions once more before he took Jongin’s lips again, hands gripping Jongin’s legs as Jongin locked them around his waist, bracing for it. Adrian’s mouth kept Jongin distracted for a moment but Jongin was extremely aware of Adrian’s cock that was starting to prod into the warm opening.
It began with discomfort, but it was not as painful or agonizing as Jongin had anticipated. He let out a cry that was swallowed by Adrian and bit into Adrian’s lip as he slid all the way in. He froze momentarily to let Jongin get used to the sensation. Jongin wasn’t sure if he’d be able to. He clenched his teeth when Adrian broke the kiss to let him catch his breath. He tried to focus on something else, anything else. But he could not distract himself from the feeling of being penetrated. It felt like he was being slowly, mercilessly impaled. He tried to relax but he couldn’t stop the tears that trickled down the corners of his eyes.

And then as Adrian started to slide in and out of him while kissing him, coaxing wonderful noises out of Jongin, which he never knew even existed. “Adrian,” he sobbed and sank his teeth into Adrian’s shoulder.

Adrian breathed out a subtle groan and slowly picked up the pace of his thrusts. Discomfort lingered but every time Adrian’s cock slammed harder into him, he was overwhelmed by the pleasure that he never could have imagined. Following the beginning of the contractions, he cried out a string of moans and Adrian started to thrust deeper. He brought a hand between them where they joined and placed his fingers along his sheath, gasping out moans as he felt Adrian slide in and out of him, his cock slithering between Jongin’s fingers. He was flushed with embarrassment as he continued to enjoy the feeling of Adrian’s cock sliding between his fingers as it thrust into him.

All wind was knocked out of his lungs. His mind was in a constant state of delirium. He was clutching at the sheets, digging his fingernails into Adrian’s back, drawing them down forcefully, not caring an ounce about the long, bleeding marks he was leaving on the Godblood’s back. Adrian was his, his body belong to Jongin as much as Jongin’s belonged to him this very moment. Their skins slapped against one another, lubricated by the sweat they were bathed in. Jongin screamed out Adrian’s name repeatedly and his moans resonated within the walls of the chamber.

Their mouths eventually found their way to one another and Adrian kissed him violently, thrusting harder. His hand caught Jongin’s and pinned it to the pillow. His grip was brutal. He was sobbing for air, groaning like an animal. He even almost bit Jongin’s lip at a point as his thrusts turned ruthlessly unstinting without restraint. He peaked then, bursting inside Jongin, filling him with warmth. Jongin rasped breathlessly at the sudden sensation, which was both intruding and inviting. His mind blanked and his vision blurred momentarily as he tried to take in what had just happened.

Adrian collapsed on top of him and panted, catching his breath while Jongin laid still, worried that if he moved, he’d spill, though it was unlikely to happen with Adrian still buried so deeply inside him.

Like the calm that came after a storm, they mellowed into a state of languor. Adrian’s grip loosened around Jongin’s hand as he dropped his face against the crook of Jongin’s neck and breathed raggedly, completely covered in sweat and exhaustion.

When they had come down from their high, Jongin softly stroked Adrian’s hair, attempting to come to terms that a life was forming inside him. He could almost feel it, his body shifting to welcome an inhabitant, another soul. Perhaps that was why he had broken into tears.

“Jongin?” Adrian exhaled, lifting his head and cupping Jongin’s cheek. Jongin turned his face away, quickly bringing a hand to wipe the tears but Adrian beat him to it when his thumb gently wiped away the tears. “What’s wrong?” he asked worriedly. “Did I… hurt you?” A heartbeat, then he added, “Too much?”

Jongin shook his head and mustered a smile through the tears. “I’m happy,” he gasped out and winced, licking his lips when he realized Adrian was growing limp inside him. He silently prayed that Adrian would never pull out, or at least tonight.
Adrian smiled and kissed him. “Should I…” He began to shift but Jongin caught his arm.

“Nay, please,” he begged.

Adrian indulged him and settled his head on the pillow right next to Jongin’s head, his body still crushing Jongin’s under it. Not that Jongin minded it in the least bit.

“You’re still throbbing.” Adrian whispered with a wry smirk, eyes closed as though he were ready to drift off to sleep. “At this rate, I might just be aroused again while being inside you.”

“Be quiet, please,” Jongin mumbled, cheeks burning once more in embarrassment. The Godblood’s smug smile widened but he commented no further. Adrian fell asleep eventually while Jongin stayed wide awake, savouring every moment that went by with Adrian softening inside him. His weight, on the other hand, was a little difficult to handle after an hour. But Jongin did not plan on waking Adrian up. He loved the way Adrian breathed heavily against his cheek and neck, the way his beard grazed his skin lightly too much to stop it all.

Fatigue got the best of him at long last and he soon fell into a drowsy sleep.

* * *

He stayed slumped against the wall for a long time, clutching his stomach. The sun had come up. He was still sore and tender. He had counted the bruises on his body and felt them throbbing beneath his fingers. But of all the marks Adrian had left, the one that mattered the most was already growing inside him.

When Jongin stepped back into the bedchamber, clad in nothing but Adrian’s oversized shirt from last night, which he had found in the study on the way to the garderobe, Adrian stirred on the mattress and huffed out a rough breath before he cracked an eye open and greeted the bright, warm morning with a grim scowl. He squinted at the sunlight flooding his room before he frantically looked around, as though he had just suddenly recollected last night’s events.

Jongin stood at the doorway with his arms crossed over his chest and he smiled shyly when Adrian’s eyes spotted him. “Good morning,” the Auvran Prince muttered in a gravelly, sleepy voice and flashed a smirk that had Jongin blushing instantly.

“Good morning, Your Royal Highness,” Jongin said and limped his way back to the bed when Adrian shoved the eiderdown aside, gesturing Jongin to join him. Jongin had a feeling that he was coming down with fever and he could barely walk straight. It was all very uncomfortable and distressing, but it was worth it.

“When did you wake up?” Adrian inquired as Jongin climbed on top of him and straddled his hips before sitting down on Adrian’s stone-hard stomach. He licked his lips and drew his hands up Jongin’s thighs, pushing the hem of the shirt up.

“Long before you roused,” Jongin mumbled, pressing his hands on Adrian’s chest. He traced a scar there with his fingers before he pulled them down to Adrian’s abdomen and heard Adrian sigh as the man leered at Jongin’s exposed shoulder, collarbones, and sternum—thanks to the half-laced shirt.

Something like worry overtook Adrian’s expression as he gently caressed a side of Jongin’s waist. “How are you… feeling?” he asked quietly.

Jongin grinned and leaned down to kiss his man on the mouth. “I feel fine, you big lug,” he muttered against Adrian’s lips and felt Adrian shake with laughter under him.
“You have certainly grown rather condescending recently.”

“I have always been condescending,” Jongin retorted, straightening back up. “If I’m being honest, I’m a lot nicer now. I never used to respect big lugs like you, let alone allow them into my bed.”

“Technically, it is my bed,” Adrian scoffed. His hands were keen on groping Jongin’s ass as they slid around Jongin’s waist. “But I’d be more than happy to share its ownership with you.”

Jongin dropped his gaze. “I believe you already have a prospective candidate for that, one against whom I cannot challenge,” he said under his breath and Adrian’s hands froze on the small of Jongin’s back.

“Jongin—”

Jongin quickly shook his head and managed a faint smile. “Nay, I do not wish to talk about this. I will be all right. Sooner or later.”

Adrian sat up and took Jongin’s face in his hand. He drew a hand unconsciously to Jongin’s stomach and Jongin could not help but shudder. He knew it was foolish to think whatever that was running in his head but he just felt it. “Listen,” the Godblood began. “I have a duty towards the people. I have a duty towards the Nine Realms. I have a duty towards the Gods.”

“I know,” Jongin murmured miserably.

Adrian pressed a kiss to his forehead then. “But I also have a duty towards the person I love,” he whispered.

Jongin stared into Adrian’s dark amber eyes for a moment. He was certain Adrian could hear or even feel how fast and loud Jongin’s heart was beating. “I won’t ask for anything else from you,” Jongin promised, eyes welling up with tears.

“If only I could give you myself,” Adrian let out and kissed Jongin’s eyes and the tears on the lashes. “I would do it in a heartbeat, Jongin.”

“I know,” Jongin purred and brushed his lips against Adrian’s bearded cheek. “I won’t ask for anything more,” he repeated. He could do this. He could share Adrian. He could learn to live with it. “I only want you to stay.”

Adrian buried his face in Jongin’s neck and said, “I want that, too.”

Jongin was about to tell Adrian that it had been his birthday yesterday when a sudden rap on the doors broke the moment. Before neither of them could react, the doors were pried open and Evzen strode into the bedchamber yelling, “Brother! What are—!” he stopped himself as his jaw fell slack when his gaze fell on the occupied bed.

Jongin frantically got off Adrian and the bed in a wild frenzy before hastily adjusting his shirt. He was mortified, unmoving and unbreathing for a moment as Evzen gawked at him and then at his brother. Jongin wished the ground would swallow him up right there and then.

Adrian looked tense at first but he drew a breath and ran a hand through his hair, cursing under his breath.

“Well,” Evzen breathed out. “What a sight… to behold.”

“Evzen—” Adrian started but Evzen cut him off.
“You missed the morning banquet,” Evzen said. “But I can see that you had… other commitments.” He glanced at Jongin and all that Jongin wanted at the instant was to die.

“This isn’t what it looks like,” Adrian said, sitting up on the edge of the bed.

“Oh, really?” his brother scoffed. “So, you’re stark naked with a potential hardon, your chamber reeks of sex, you literally had the boy mounting you like a stallion a moment ago, and this isn’t what it looks like?”

Adrian had no comeback. He rubbed his temples exasperatedly. “You’re… not going to tell anyone, are you?”

Evzen arched an eyebrow. “Like who? Your fiancée who’s waiting for you downstairs to join her in breakfast while you’re up here having it off with your page?”

“Cut me some slack. It isn’t like I have never caught you in such a compromising position before,” Adrian shot at his brother, glowering.

“Sure, you have. But need I remind you that I wasn’t shagging a boy half my age with my marriage around the corner and a world to save? Are you forgetting that you could be thrown into exile for going against your own law?!”

“Get out, Evzen,” Adrian sighed tiredly.

Evzen still looked spooked as he grimaced at Jongin. Then shaking his head, he turned on his heel and stormed out of the chambers.

Jongin was frozen at where he stood. How was this going to affect his friendship with Evzen? And more importantly, would Evzen tell?

Adrian rose from the bed and closed the distance between them. “You look horrified,” he said as he cupped Jongin’s face in his hands.

Feeling a little short-winded, Jongin managed to find his voice again. “I am... mortified. Will he…”

“Nay, he will not,” Adrian said. “And even if he did, I do not care.”

Jongin looked up at the Godblood and frowned. “You will be punished for laying with a man… How can you not care?”

“They would never dare to antagonize the only Godblood who could save them from Zairvoth,” Adrian said with a conceited smile. “I need you to know that I’m not the kind of man you thought I am. I am not afraid of admitting who I am… Be it a Kamthir or… How did you call it?”

“Alsiramene?”

Adrian’s smile widened. “Yes. Alsiramene… Sounds beautiful. I do not care, Jongin. I desire you, I want you and I don’t care what that makes me. No one could tell me that I shouldn’t feel these things for you. Believe me, I’ve tried telling myself that many a time.”

Jongin leaned in and buried his face in Adrian’s chest as a sob climbed up his throat. “I’m sorry about last night,” he muttered as Adrian enveloped him in his arms.

“I am, too,” he sighed. “I shouldn’t have… said what I said… I shouldn’t have hurt you. I’m so sorry.”
Well, Jongin wasn’t all too sorry about it since it had led to everything else that had happened last night, but he did not like the fact that they had argued.

“‘I was just so worried,’” Adrian added. “‘With everything that’s been going on… I don’t wish to lose you, Jongin.’”

It was then when Jongin decided that he would stand by Adrian no matter what. He might be devastated along the way but he realized it was a price he was willing to pay. To share just a small proportion of Adrian’s life.

The week went by without much fuss. Jongin did not have the opportunity to see neither Adrian nor Evzen except at dinner last Faandag when he was told to help serve. Adrian had diligently avoided looking at Jongin except when he stealthily stroked the back of Jongin’s thigh when no one was looking. It was a comforting gesture. But Jongin could not wait until they would have each other again. Evzen, on the other hand, had been indiscreetly staring at Jongin the whole time. But he had not told anyone about Jongin and Adrian.

Adrian had been spending most of his time away from his chambers with Edothise and her father. According to Eudora, there were negotiations going about. Adrian and Raagathor were trying to convince King Castellanos to lend his army for the war. Castellanos, of course, was hesitant and reluctant. He could not leave his own kingdom vulnerable by loaning Auvradevas his army, even though Adrian was practically trying to save all of the Nine Realms. Nevertheless, he was not a God. He was just a Godblood. There were certainly chances of him failing. That said, pinning their all hope on him would be reckless. Besides, Castellanos wouldn’t be interested in the negotiation if he didn’t come out as the benefiting party in the end.

With the wedding only a few days away, the palace was busy with wedding preparations and the servants were allowed little rest from time to time. Jongin tried to not to brood over it. He knew Adrian was spending more time with Edothise. He knew he was overwrought with jealousy. But most of all, he was unable to contain his emotions. He felt unhinged, his mind mired in a constant nebulous confusion. Adrian was all that he thought about these days. Every waking moment was devoted to Adrian.

“Jongin,” Riolda shouted in the hallway and Jongin snapped out of his trance. He glanced at her and frowned. “I have been yelling your name for quite some time now,” she said.

“Oh,” he let out. “I’m sorry. What did you need?”

Riolda cocked an eyebrow. “I need you to put the flowers up as soon as possible so that I can polish the railing.”

Jongin looked down at the basket of flowers he was holding. He shook his head lightly and sighed. “Sorry. I will have it finished soon.” He climbed up the ladder and resumed his work.

The great hall was crowded with servants and guards. They only had a couple of days before the wedding and there was still so much to do. “Jongin,” Riolda called again.

“Yes?”

She leaned against the wall and looked up at him. “Are you all right?”
Jongin swallowed and nodded. “Yes, why?”

“Because you look ill and distracted.”

It took Jongin a moment to respond. He was sure if Riolda could notice the difference, it would not be long before everyone else did, too. “I am fine, Riolda,” he told her, sounding unconvincing.

“Well, I hope you will feel better before the wedding, considering that you must play a big role,” she said and Jongin looked at her confusedly.

“How do I play a big role?”

“You are Prince Adrianus’ page, aren’t you?”

“So?”

“The Prince’s page would be the one bearing the rings.”

It felt like a kick to his guts. His stomach clenched and an overwhelming nausea made him want to throw up. He quickly climbed down the ladder before he could fall from it and handed Riolda the basket. “Excuse me,” he blurted out and shoved past her, sprinting outside.

He didn’t manage to get to the loo before he bent over the shrubs near the corridor and heaved. His throat burned as he coughed and crouched on the ground. He felt sick, he had been feeling sick ever since he had spent the night with Adrian.

He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and closed his eyes, taking a few deep breaths. He then clutched his tunic by the stomach and swallowed with difficulty.

Aevayls were not fertilized the way women were. Most Aevayls rarely had the ability to bear children but those who did, they could be impregnated in the matter of hours. Jongin knew a life was already growing in him. He hadn’t been thinking straight at the time. All that he knew was that it might have been his only chance and he had taken it. But now that he had the time and the mind to think of the consequences, he knew that he could not stay here for long. It would not be safe.

Should he tell Adrian? No, the baby should not be his responsibility. It would not be fair for Jongin to burden Adrian with this among all the other things that needed Adrian’s attention.

“Bad lunch?”

Jongin shot up to his full height and spun around to see Prince Evzen staring at him. “Um… yeah,” Jongin let out, wiping his mouth again.

“Someone’s going to have to clean that up,” Evzen said.

Jongin frowned but he glanced at the puddle of vomit on the ground by the shrubs and grimaced. “I will… do that,” he muttered and knelt on the floor to scoop up the upchuck with his bare hands but he froze when Evzen caught his wrist.

“Stop,” the Prince said, scowling. “Get up.”

Jongin blinked in confusion but he rose to his feet. “I will get a bucket and some water.” He started past the Prince but Evzen seized his arm.

“Someone else will clean it up or I’m sure my brother’s pet tiger will have it for supper.”
Jongin made a face.

Evzen then sighed. “Are you sick?” he inquired.

Jongin shook his head. “I just have an upset stomach.”


Jongin almost choked on his spit. “Prince Evzenius—”

“I am not all that surprised, Princeling,” Evzen muttered, releasing Jongin’s arm. “I sort of suspected it but… I’m not sure why I acted that way. It isn’t as if I don’t have many secrets of my own and… laying with men is hardly thin on the ground in the palace but… I suppose I’m bitter for no reason.”

“Please, do not be,” Jongin pleaded.

“I’m not sure who seduced whom but—”

“I am almost very sure it was your brother who had seduced me,” Jongin said and Evzen’s lips slowly stretched into a lively grin. Jongin smiled back. “But on a serious note, it’s not… like that.”

“You mean to tell me that you are in love with each other?”

Jongin fell silent.

Evzen breathed out heavily. “What or who my brother does in his bed is anything but my business. However, I worry for… you. He may be a Godblood, but he is an Auvran. A future king at that. Even if he doesn’t manage to transition to a full God, he would still remain as the King of Auvradevas with Princess Edothise as his Queen Consort.” He raised a hand to Jongin’s shoulder. “You shouldn’t get your heart broken that way, Princeling.”

“I do not need to hear this,” Jongin murmured, lowering his head.

“I think you do,” Evzen said. “I only see you getting hurt in every of set of conditions. How clichéd is your love story,” he scoffed. “The victim falls for his assailant. Do these stories usually have a happy conclusion?”

“I thought we were friends,” Jongin said, frowning sadly.

“We were,” Evzen sighed. “We still are. Which is why I want you to rethink your decisions. I hope you realize that the best you could ever be to my brother is a dirty secret.”

Evzen was right. Jongin needed to hear that. He bowed his head. “I should return to my chores, Your Highness,” he said in a low voice.

Shrugging, Evzen turned on his heel and walked away with his hands clenched into fists at his sides. Jongin heaved a sigh and frowned at the vomit on the ground.

* * *

He spent the evening in his room with Diante, idly staring at the same page of the book Evzen had gifted him for the past hour.

“I do not like your colour,” Diante commented, looking up briefly from her knitting.

Jongin ignored her and rubbed his stomach. Evzen had been right. But Jongin had decided that he
could endure it, he could live as a ‘dirty secret’ if it meant he could remain at Adrian’s side. But for how long? If Adrian managed to defeat the Wyverns, there was a big chance that he would not return to live among the mortals. But if he chose the ground, then he would be eventually crowned as the King of Auvradevas. He would have a wife who would bear him heirs. What of the child Jongin might possibly be carrying, then?

Another dirty secret.

“Jongin, are you crying?” Diante asked and Jongin immediately looked away, blinking his eyes fast.

“Nay,” he lied. “It’s just… dust.”

The door swung open all of a sudden and a guard stepped in. “You,” he said, pointing at Jongin. “You’re summoned to the eastern sunroom.”

“By whom?” Jongin asked.

“You don’t ask questions, boy. Get your ass up.”

Jongin was in no mood to bicker. He rose to his feet and followed the guard to the sunroom where he met Adrian, Evzen, Jevvar, Edothise, Castellanos, Raagathor and his wives, along with Helathor and the King’s council.

“You ask too much, Castellanos,” Raagathor said with a sigh.

Evzen was the first to notice Jongin’s presence but he quickly turned his attention back to the exchange between his father and the Othadian King.

“Pledging his allegiance to the Othadians?” Evzen told Castellanos. “Is it not enough that he is already very altruistic to risk his life in order to save all our asses from the beasts of the sky and the Wyvern Deathlord? Now, you’re being greedy.”

“Evzen,” Raagathor chided him and Evzen pursed his lips with a lockjaw.

Adrian was quiet but he had a narked expression, eyes focused on Castellanos.

“Father, maybe we should reconsider,” Edothise said.

“I do not ask for much,” Castellanos said. “Promising me the Auvran compliance and her Crown Prince’s allegiance in return for a significant fraction of the Othadian army is hardly unreasonable.”

“You are asking me to acquiesce my disavowal of my own kingdom’s honour,” Adrian said. “I am marrying your daughter. Is that not enough?”

Hurt crossed Edothise’s expression then.

“Marrying my daughter ensures you the stability of your monarch in your absence. And of course, an heir. But if I were to lend my army to fight a flight of dragons, I need to be assured that it is in the best interest of my kingdom.”

“He will not accept the Othadian supremacy,” Evzen argued.

“Quiet, Evzenius,” Raagathor hushed him and then turned to Adrian. “I don’t see any real threat here. The Othadian army would be of great value to us, Adrian. And you could use all the help you can get.”
Adrian was now considering it. He raised his head to look away and his eyes widened when they landed on Jongin who was quietly standing the corner to be noticed.

Unfortunately, Jevar noticed him next. “Oh, a lost birdie,” he said and stood up. “Come, join us.” He walked over to Jongin and curled an arm around Jongin’s back, ushering him towards Raagathor.

Jongin was tempted to shove Jevar’s hand off him and punch his teeth in but he did not find the strength. He wriggled out of the wretched bastard’s grip and mustered Adrian’s furious glare.

“You summoned me, Your Majesty?” he said, bowing before the Auvran King.

“Yes,” Raagathor said. “My son has no Auxiliary and he had appointed you as his official page. Which means you would need to participate in the wedding.”

Jongin instantly looked at Adrian with a pathetic frown, begging him tacitly to put a stop to this. It was terrible enough that he had to hand the man he loved over to some woman and now he had to bear their wedding bands?

“Father, he need not do that,” Adrian said.

“What do you mean?” his father asked, raising an eyebrow. “Who would do it, then?”

“We have a staff of over three hundred in the palace. I don’t know, it does not matter. Let Jevar do it, for god’s sake,” Adrian shrugged. Jevar grimaced confusedly and Evzen looked like he was finding this amusing. “It’s the last thing we should be having a discourse about right now. I’m not sure we should even be having a wedding this big with the whole world threatening to fall into chaos.”

Princess Edothise looked disappointed. Jongin felt sorry for her that instant. She would be trapped in a loveless marriage just for the sake of fulfilling her duties as a princess and a daughter. But perhaps it was only loveless on Adrian’s side.

“Adrian, you are the Crown Prince of Auvradevas. Your wedding should be bigger than this and if we had the—”

His father started but stopped himself when Adrian pushed himself up.

“I will think over your proposal, King Castellanos. We will speak more of this when I return. If you’ll excuse me for a moment, Princess,” he said and bowed his head to Edothise before he started towards Jongin. “Have a word with me outside, will you?”

Jongin nodded and muttered, “Yes, Your Grace.”

Evzen rolled his eyes and drained his winecup.

“Thank you,” Jongin told Adrian once they were in the hallway.

Adrian glanced at the guards and scowled so hard until they took the hint and left them alone in the hallway. “I’m sorry,” he muttered, taking hold of Jongin’s hand. “I do not want you to be a part of any of this.”

“It’s all right,” Jongin lied, lifting a hand to Adrian’s chest to feel his heartbeat. After a moment of hesitation, he said, “I… have something to tell you.”

“What is it?”

Jongin gnawed at his lip and at length, he smiled sadly and shook his head. “It can wait… I just hope
you would make the right decision about accepting the Othadian supremacy.”

“Do not worry yourself about that. I will deal with it.” He stroked a side of Jongin’s face and brushed his hair. “You need a haircut,” Adrian whispered, smiling lovingly. It made Jongin’s heart flutter.

“You need a shave,” Jongin said, scratching Adrian’s bearded chin and chuckled when Adrian laughed.

“You are a horrible influence, Son of Chivrun,” Adrian drawled, leaning closer.

“What?”

“I could not focus on anything. Darn the Wyverns, darn the Deathlord, darn the kingdom… All I have been thinking about, honestly, for the whole week is you… and that night…”

“Believe me. It is all that I have been thinking about, too,” Jongin breathed out, eyes fixed on Adrian’s lips.

“I must go now,” Adrian sighed and withdrew. Jongin’s heart sank a little. “I wish to see you sometime before the wedding ceremony. Please.”

Jongin nodded. “I will find you.”

Adrian gave Jongin’s cheek one last caress before he sauntered back into the sunroom.

* * *

That night, when Jongin returned to his room, he found a plate of honey bread and some cheap butter waiting for him by the pallet. He found no appetite to stomach any form of food. If anything, he wanted to throw up whatever that was left in his stomach. He pushed the plate away and quietly settled in his pallet. He tried to sleep and sleep came easily to him that night.

In his slumber, he was met with a hazy figure of a women. He realized that he was standing on the beach with warm, soft sand running between his toes. The breeze combed his hair and kissed his cheeks. It felt too real to be just a dream. It was like one of the beaches in Warinia. So peaceful, so calm. The ocean was as beautiful as the night.

“You will be his undoing if you told him,” a voice said.

Jongin looked in the way of the woman again. He could not make out her face. In fact, he could not perceive anything about her appearance except the fact that she was a woman. He just… knew it.

“It is his destiny. Do not meddle with his fate,” she said in a harsh tone.

“I… I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Jongin said, taking a step closer to the water. “Who are you? Whose fate do you speak of?”

“You mustn’t let him choose you or his child that grows inside you. If you do, you will cost the Nine Realms their peace and my son’s providence. You are not worthy of all that.”

Jongin woke up with a jolt. He gasped in the dark room and panted, wiping the sweat beads collected on his forehead. He glanced around. Everyone was asleep.

Son.
On the day before the wedding, Jongin found himself nervously knocking on Prince Evzen’s door with a shaky fist. He did not like how things had turned out between them. He did not want Evzen to think ill of him, though that shipped might have sailed a long time ago. He wasn’t even sure why Evzen’s opinion of him mattered so much.

When the door opened, Jongin looked up at the Prince with a guilt-ridden look. He didn’t know what exactly he was guilty for either. “Good evening, Your Highness,” Jongin muttered, bowing his head coyly.

Evzen eyed the hallway guards and sighed, holding the door open. Jongin entered the chamber and fidgeted with his own fingers, worrying his lower lip. “Look,” the Prince said, shutting the door behind him. “You don’t have to do this. I don’t need to hear a justification. Like I said, it is not my business.”

“I know,” Jongin murmured. “I just… don’t want you to… treat me any differently. Or your brother, for that matter.”

“He does blokes,” Evzen scoffed. “That’s hardly any surprise. I knew he and Karl fucked like a billion times right under our father’s nose.”

Karl?

Jongin opened his mouth but was interrupted by Evzen’s hand that caught his wrist. “I do not care about who Adrian fancies. The truth is…” He paused and drew a breath as Jongin stared into his brilliant baby blue eyes. “I have grown to care about you.”

Jongin swallowed and withdrew his wrist. “And I am thankful for it. You cannot possibly imagine how much I value your friendship and your kindness. Please, Evzen,” he begged. “Please, do not see me any differently.”

Evzen expressionless stared at Jongin’s face. First at his eyes, then at his lips, which had tasted Evzen’s before. Then he looked away, huffing exasperatedly. “I don’t see you any differently. Don’t worry. But I also know that I… should keep my distance now.”

Jongin’s eyebrows furrowed. “Why? I would never… Please, do not… Do you find me so repulsive now that I lay with a man that you don’t even want to be near me?”

“It’s not about you lying with men,” he spat through his teeth, scowling. “It’s about…” he trailed off, shaking his head. “Forget about it.” He retreated to the door and forced it open. “You should go.”

* * *

The next day, Jongin wished he could run away as far as he could from the palace. He did not want to hear people talk about how beautiful Edothise was or how wonderful the day was about to be. He
He sat on a corner of his pallet and clutched at the tunic by his stomach. He knew for sure now that he was carrying. He had a couple of months before he would start showing. If the healers back in Warinia were right about Aevayl pregnancy, he’d have two mouths to feed very soon and he wasn’t sure just for how long he could keep this a secret.

He cursed himself for nothing thinking any of this through. He did not regret it but this surely would make everything a lot more complicated.

The wedding would take place during the sunrise. Jongin was awakened by all the noise in the palace. Also, he could not sleep with all the heat and the nausea. He took a brief, cold bath and went up to look for Adrian. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to see Adrian a few hours before his wedding but this might be his last chance to steal a kiss from the Godblood before he would officially and legally become another person’s.

He was crestfallen when he could not find Adrian in his chambers. He desperately hoped that he had not missed Adrian. And then he heard Adrian’s voice in the hallway.

“Well, I just came to say congratulations. There is no need for us this contention between us,” an old nobleman told Adrian, who looked like he was about to punch through a wall. Jongin did not recognize the nobleman but Adrian did not seem all too happy to meet him.

“Now that you have, you should be on your way,” Adrian spat sourly, clutching his hands at his back. Jongin was briefly distracted by the black, white, and gold coat Adrian was clothed in. Jongin had never seen him in such an opulent clothing. He looked like a king. The high collar of his coat was adorned with fine gold chains. The pearl buttons on the coat’s lapels glimmered as did the moonstones on the golden coronet on his head. The black sleeves of the coat fitted Adrian’s arms, giving his solid biceps a whole new level of definition. Jongin’s breathing shallowed.

“Adrian,” one of Raagathor’s young wives called when she found him in the hallway. “What are you still doing here? Head down to the great hall. Your father is waiting for you. King Castellanos’ family has also arrived.”

Adrian glared at the nobleman who bowed and took his leave. The Godblood then turned around and paused when his eyes fell on Jongin. He quickly turned to his stepmother and said, “I will be there in a moment.”

“You better not be late to your own wedding, son,” she grumbled and hurried away.

Adrian then marched over to Jongin and took Jongin’s hand. Jongin smiled up at the man and drew his hands down Adrian’s chest, smoothening his coat. “You look so… handsome,” he muttered, grinning up at his lover.

Adrian smirked. “I know.”

Jongin groaned, rolling his eyes. “Remind me to never stroke your ego again.”

“Too late,” the Auvran Prince sighed. He then glanced around as though to check if anyone was present. When he was ascertained that they were alone, he seized Jongin’s wrist and started hauling him towards the end of the hallway.

“Where are you taking me?” Jongin rasped. “You have to go get married.”

“In a moment,” Adrian muttered and came to a halt by the closet. He prised the door open and
yanked Jongin in. For a length, Jongin stumbled and blinked rapidly in the dark while Adrian slammed the door shut and locked it.

“What are you—” Jongin began but was cut off with a moan when Adrian’s mouth crashed against his as Adrian’s hands gripped the sides of his waist, ramming his back against a wall. Something clattered, fell to the ground, and probably shattered. Adrian pressed harder against Jongin, kissing him mercilessly, hands looking for skin to touch. Jongin gasped for air, robbing Adrian of his breaths as their tongues fought for dominance.

Jongin clutched at Adrian’s coat collars while Adrian hastily removed the coronet from his head and started to unlace his breeches in a feral rush. Jongin heard the coronet hit the ground as he blindly kissed Adrian until they had both run out of breath. Adrian pulled back with a soft gasp and a thin string of saliva connecting their lips. He slid his hands into Jongin’s pants at the back and gripped his ass fiercely, coaxing a throaty moan from Jongin.

“Adrian,” Jongin gasped, gripping onto Adrian’s shoulders, careful not to crease his coat. “We can’t—”

Adrian cut him off, sealing Jongin’s lips with his own again as he yanked at the laces of Jongin’s pants with one forceful tug and shoved them down Jongin’s hips. He then hoisted Jongin up, pressed him harder against the wall, and secured his arms around Jongin’s thighs to hold him up.

He could barely see anything in the dark as he clung onto Adrian’s neck and gripped his hair. He let out a soft moan when he felt Adrian’s cock prod against his sheath. The thrill of fucking his lover, who was about to be married to someone else in a few moments, aroused Jongin in a way he had never imagined before. But then the guilt washed over him. The guilt of taking another person’s husband. He felt impure and filthy.

“Oh, Adrian,” Jongin panted when Adrian spat onto his fingers and smeared the spit on his cock. He then gripped Jongin’s thigh again and silenced whatever protest Jongin thought he might have had the strength to voice with a vicious kiss.

Gnashing his teeth, Jongin held onto Adrian’s shoulders as Adrian thrust all the way in. “I need you to know,” Adrian rasped in a breath, lips and beard brushing Jongin’s cheek. “that I wish it were you.”

Jongin whimpered out Adrian’s name into the Godblood’s mouth when Adrian claimed his lips once more. His back was slammed harder into the wall with every thrust. It wasn’t like the first time. The discomfort was quickly replaced by pleasure as Adrian throbbed and swelled inside him.

His body burned with desire, although he could not possibly think of anything more intimate than being joined with the man he loved and yielding his body to him unconditionally. But he needed more. The hunger was insatiable.

When they were done, Adrian helped Jongin lace his trousers before he drew Jongin for a deep, lazy kiss. Jongin picked up the coronet and placed it back on Adrian’s head. He then took Adrian’s hand and held it tightly for a moment. It was then when the sorrow finally struck him. It was as though reality had walked into the room and slapped him across the face at last.

He did not try to control the tears that broke from his eyes as he buried his face in Adrian’s chest and sobbed unchecked.

“Jongin…” Adrian exhaled, nuzzling into his hair. “This marriage means nothing.”
It meant a lot. Adrian might not see it but Jongin knew that he could never assert the ownership Edothise could over Adrian henceforth. And Jongin, who was carrying Adrian’s child, would have nothing. In the end, all that belonged to him was always torn away from him.

“I’m fine,” he rasped and withdrew, snivelling. He looked up at Adrian in the darkness with watery eyes and smiled, hoping that Adrian saw the smile and not the tears. “Go.”

Adrian pressed a firm kiss to Jongin’s forehead and whispered, “Until I’m back in your arms…”

As soon as he was gone, Jongin sank to the ground and hugged his knees to his chest, waiting for the faint pain to subside. He would be okay. He could endure this. After all, he wasn’t the centre of the world. If not Edothise, then something else owned Adrian. Like the Nine Realms, the people, the worshippers, the Gods. Adrian would never belong to just Jongin and…

He slid a hand over his stomach and swallowed. He finally dawned on him that this was all happening. He would not stand between Adrian and his destiny, and he would let this child either.

You mustn’t let him choose you or his child that grows inside you.

All wasn’t lost, though. He smiled at the thought that he would have something for his own and no one could ever take it away from him. If things were different, if Adrian were able to give himself to Jongin, they would go away. They would build a small cottage in the forest where they would raise their baby together. Adrian would always come home to him.

His dream involved a Godblood deserting his duty to the world and to the Seven. He could never ask that of Adrian. The Goddess Zhesaris had warned him. He could not be Adrian’s downfall. He would never forgive himself if he were.

He picked himself up and limped his way out of the closet. He hoped his lips weren’t too noticeably red or swollen. But it didn’t matter. Everyone was at the great hall, witnessing the wedding of the century. Jongin wanted to be nowhere near it. He would rather return to his corner in the small room, curl himself into a ball and cry himself to sleep, even though the sun was only starting to rise.

He halted in his tracks when he found an old man perched on a bench in the corridor that led to the kitchen. It was the old nobleman Adrian was talking to earlier. Jongin licked his lips, staring at the nobleman, who seemed to be distracted by the chip on his wooden cane.

When curiosity got the best of him, Jongin approached the man. They must be the only ones in the palace besides the guards who were not swarming at the great hall, hoping for a glimpse of the exchange of vows.

“Do you want something to drink?” Jongin offered as a way to announce his presence. The nobleman looked up at him in a slight panic. But he managed a smile and shook his head.

“I believe I best be on my way,” the man said, exhaling a heavy sigh.

Jongin tiredly rubbed the back of his neck. “You wouldn’t mind me asking… who are you?”

The man arched an eyebrow at him.

“I just overheard your conversation with… the Prince earlier,” Jongin explained.

“And you are?”

Jongin cleared his throat. Perhaps he should introduce himself as the exiled and enslaved Prince of
Warinia. But he went with, “I’m His Highness’ page.”

The nobleman fell silent. Jongin took his seat on the bench and they quietly watched the birds lined up on the balustrade. “Are you also not allowed to attend the wedding?” the man asked at length, breaking the peaceful silence.

Jongin shook his head. “It’s not like that.” He could hear the commoners’ cheering at the gates that accompanied the pealing bells. “Prince Adrianus did not seem happy with your visit.”

“Of course,” the man scoffed. “He still thinks of me as the monster that abused his best mate.”

Jongin blinked confusion. “What?”

“Little Karl was a handful. I had to be the stricter parent since his mother had run off with a bastard. Karl hated me and thusly, Adrianus did, too.”

“Who is… Karl?” Jongin asked.

The nobleman looked at him with a smile. “I have tried to apologize many times after Karl’s death… Adrianus was like a son to me, too.”

Only after a moment did Jongin understand what the man was talking about. “You mean, his former Auxiliary,” he gasped. “Karl…”

“Karl never would have stepped on the battlefield if it weren’t for his obsession with Adrianus. I have forgiven Adrianus for being the reason for my son’s death. Why couldn’t he forgive me?”

Jongin was mum as the man rose to his feet and walked away with the support of his cane.

* * *

“Oh, Jongin!” Diante cried when she spilled into the room with Riolda and Melanctha. They had all dolled up beautifully with their best gowns and shoes. “Why didn’t you come with us?! Oh, it was beautiful! Melanctha even teared up a little. Eudora found a really charming Othadian man to dance with! Lucky her. Oh, and the dance! Prince Adrianus and Princess Edothise were wonderful dancers. They must have fallen in love with each other during the dance itself!”

Jongin put down the book he had recently borrowed from Helathor and decided to give Diante his attention for once, even though everything that she was saying cut him like a knife. “Didn’t you dance?” he asked, sitting up on the pallet.

Riolda scoffed as she neatened her hair. “Nay, she was too busy pigging out on the food,” she said and tightened her bodice.

“You should come to the banquet tonight, darling,” Melanctha said as she took her seat beside Jongin, frowning. “Are you all right? You’ve been looking bloodless for a while now.” She raised a hand to Jongin’s forehead as though to check for fever. “What’s wrong?”

“There’s nothing wrong, Melanctha,” Jongin lied and shied away from her hand. “Tell me more about the wedding.”

“It went… fast,” Riolda said. “If you ask me, it seemed like the Prince could not wait for it to be over.”

“Nay!” Diante protested. “It was beautiful and lovely. And Gods, their kiss! I wish I were Princess
“Edothise.”

“Everyone wishes they were her,” Riolda snorted.

Jongin shrugged, tilting his head to the side. She was right. Even he wished that he were her.

“She will soon get ready for her wedding night,” Diante mused, sounding like she might swoon from all the excitement.

“You ought to calm yourself. You are not invited to the wedding night,” Riolda joked and grabbed Diante’s arm. “Come on. We should get back to the banquet. Are you sure you don’t want to join us, Jongin?”

Jongin shook his head. “You go on. I think I’ll head up to the library for a while.”

Once he was left alone again, Jongin started towards the library using the stairs in the south, which was less frequented. Diante’s voice continued to echo in his head. It was their wedding night. It was not fair that Jongin was so resentful about a wife rightfully claiming her husband.

He was not expecting to find Helathor in the library but he was glad that he did. The old scholar greeted him with a warm smile.

“How are you, Jongin?” he inquired as Jongin approached his desk.

“I’ve had better days,” he admitted.

“I was expecting the Prince’s page to be present at the wedding.”

Jongin tiredly sat down on the floor beside Helathor’s chair and sulked. “Can I ask you something, Scholar Helathor?”

“Hmm.”

“Do… Gods… talk to mortals? In our dreams, perhaps.”

Helathor looked at him with an arched eyebrow. “I believe They can talk to anyone if They wish to. But we are mere mortals. Not all of us possess such divine privileges. Nonetheless, the Gods and Goddesses are nearer to the ground than we think. We share a century with a Godblood. That should say plenty. Why do you ask, son?”

Jongin pursed his lips and shrugged. “Can I ask you another question? A more… personal question.”

Helathor shifted in his seat to face Jongin. “I will try to answer it.”

Clearing his throat, Jongin asked, “Were you… scared when you… were carrying Zayrse? Were you scared that people might find out and they’d try to hurt you?”

It took Helathor a moment to respond. “I was scared,” he said at length. “I was indeed scared that I will be discovered by men who loathed our kind. My lover wasn’t around at the time. I was in hiding… Zayrse was born in a cave. But I wasn’t afraid for my safety. I was mostly scared for him.”

“Where was your… lover?”

There was hurt in Helathor’s eyes then. “We loved each other greatly. But when it all boiled down to this one moment where he had to either take the responsibility for both me and our child or abandon us and live a carefree life, he chose the latter. I could not blame him. I choose not to blame him. I
raised Zayrse on my own and I am proud of who he is now.”

Jongin smiled shakily. “I wish I had gotten to know him a little better. It would have been nice to have him around especially with that pig Jevar still here,” he muttered, recalling how nice and beautiful Awyen was. He wished he had had more time with them both. And then he prayed that wherever they were right now, nothing but joy and peace came to them. In a way, he envied them.

“What is running in your mind, son?” Helathor asked, sounding a little concerned.

Jongin hugged his knees to his chest and sighed. “I don’t know what is my purpose anymore… I was forced to leave my home, my kingdom, my birthright. And now, I’m… I’m here, unsure of where I must go next. A mistake after a mistake. It was all my fault. I had brought it all upon myself.”

Helathor looked at him with pity then. He exhaled heavily and stood up. “I shouldn’t be telling you this. But some of the servants are fleeing the kingdom before the Wyverns could attack… before the war could happen. There are ships that could take them far away from Auvradevas and even the First Realm.”

“But why? Adrian would win the war.”

Helathor closed his eyes momentarily. “The prophecy is that his… death is inevitable. He must die to join the Gods. The Goddess Zhesaris will only claim him then. He will die in the war facing Zairvoth. The King suggests that it might perhaps be prudent for the people to seek refuge elsewhere.”

For a measurable length, Jongin could do nothing but gawk at the scholar in utter horror with his heart in his mouth. “Nay, that cannot be true!” he exclaimed, jolting up to his feet. Helathor blinked in surprise. “This is not true! He cannot die!”

“Son,” Helathor said, raising a hand to Jongin’s shaking shoulder. “Calm down. I never realized you cared for him so.”

Cared for him? Jongin would lay down his life for Adrian. But he took a few breaths and calmed himself. “I’m sorry…” He leaned back against the edge of the desk and swallowed a sob. “Does he… know this?”

Helathor nodded his head. Jongin’s heart clenched as if it was being crushed under a boot. “We do not know if his death would follow Zairvoth’s defeat. You should leave, Jongin. Back to Warinia if nowhere else. I can help you arrange a place to stay.”

Jongin lowered his gaze, trying to fight the tears. Without saying anything, he took his leave and dragged himself to the great hall. His heart ached as though it were pierced by a million shards of glass. Instead of walking through the main entrance, he wandered into the balcony of the hall where the servants had gathered.

Leaning over the railing, his eyes frantically searched for Adrian. When he spotted the Godblood almost effortlessly in the crowd that seemed rather dull compared to Adrian’s grandeur, his body fell limp. Adrian and Edothise sat in their thrones side by side, sharing a winecup. Adrian smiled at everyone who approached him with gifts and well wishes. Edothise’s lady-in-waiting whispered something into the Princess’ ear that had Edothise giggling and glancing at her new husband shyly. Adrian eventually looked at her and flashed half a smile.

It finally dawned on Jongin that, no matter what, Adrian would never be his. If not to Edothise,
Adrian belonged to the Gods. Why would Adrian ever choose Jongin? His existence had a purpose, a destiny, whereas Jongin had lost all of his. He fisted a hand around his tunic by the stomach, gripping his jaw. That was not true. He had a purpose now, didn’t he?

Adrian raised his head and his golden-black eyes easily found Jongin in the impossibly thick crowd. His face tautened with alarm and then softened with something like guilt. Jongin held his gaze for as long as he could before Edothise stole Adrian’s attention once again.

The lively music soon turned mellow as the wine continued to flow ceaselessly. King Castellanos was gloating about how his daughter was now the wife of a Godblood and King Raagathor, on the other hand, was gloating about how mighty his son would be in the brewing war against the Wyverns.

Jongin left. He could not bear to listen to any of it any further.

Drought came with the heatwave. The week quickly turned even more insufferable for Jongin. His throat was parched at all times. The guests from Othadia caused more work for the servants. Extra work was often accompanied by sleeplessness. Soon, Jongin was walking with swollen ankles and sore feet. The worst part of it all was that he was beginning to believe that he was only servant now. Every day that went by was another step away from the life he used to know.

That afternoon, he was forced to serve the royal family. He was not complaining since it meant he would get to see Adrian. But curse his stars, Adrian did not make an appearance. And much to his dismay, Edothise was there, flaunting the shiny new rock on her finger.

“Was he gentle to you, sweetheart?” her mother inquired at the table and Edothise blushed. Jongin tried to act like he wasn’t listening and he was also aware of the two pair of painfully blue eyes that were staring at him. He eventually glanced at Prince Evzen, who smirked at him and took a sip of his wine.

“Mother, please,” Edothise hissed.

“When are you moving into his quarters?” her mother asked.

“I believe she already has,” Evzen scoffed and everyone fixed him with a shocked, appalled look. “Oh, that was an inappropriate remark but asking your daughter if her husband was careful while putting the rod in the slot while many of us are trying to enjoy our venison isn’t?”


“Where is Father?” he asked Jevar, who was standing at his side.

“I think he is at a meeting with Prince Adrianus,” Jevar answered and it was then when Jongin realized the bastard was leering at him.

“What is my brother doing?” Evzen sighed coyly. “Instead of romancing his beautiful new bride, he is away plotting against the Wyverns.”

Edothise smiled to herself, bowing her head at the compliment. Jongin did not think that he held such an intense hate towards the woman but he couldn’t stop himself from glaring at her. First, she was making sheep eyes at Adrian. Now, she was making them at Evzen, too. It made Jongin want to ram his fist against the wall.
He realized his fit was due to a hormonal rage. He felt childish for even holding a grudge against Edothise, with whom he had no direct qualms with.

“And to answer your question, Mother, I do not think it is necessary for me to move into his quarters,” Edothise said with the grace and poise Jongin was starting to forgo. It would not be long before he stopped reminding himself that he was a prince. Unless the King of Auvradevas reinstated his title, Jongin would just remain a servant and an outcast.

“That must certainly be convenient for some people,” Evzen commented with a snide tone, casting Jongin a condemnatory look that had Jongin dropping his head. “You’ll have to excuse me.” He rose from his seat and bowed his head before meandering his way out of the dining hall.

“We must apologize for his erratic behaviour and unrestrained tongue,” one of Raagathor wives said.

“It’s all right,” Edothise replied with a kind smile. “His humour is refreshing.”

“Let us speak more of your night, Edothise,” her mother said. “Tell me. Was he gentle?”

Edothise’s dark skin could not hide her blush. “Yes, Mother,” she muttered under her breath. “He was gentle.”

Jongin slipped away from the other servants and hurried out of the hall as fast as he could. He did not wish to hear another word of Edothise’s copulation with the man he loved.

He had promised himself that he would not let any of it bother him. But listening to everyone talk about it every single moment of the day made him sick and queasy. Or perhaps the baby was blameworthy for that. Either way, it made Jongin want to stick his head in the ground.

He decided to rest in the corridor as he leaned against a wall and panted, hoping that the nausea would go away along with the unbearable sweltering heat. It was then when he heard a low guttural purr and he froze for a moment with his heart hammering against his chest. Then slowly, he turned to look at the beast at his side.

Baashere stared at him, tilting his head from side to side. His long, thick tail swept the marble floor as he watched Jongin intently. Jongin glanced around to look for Adrian but he was once again let down when he didn’t find the Godblood.

“Hey, boy,” Jongin told Baashere and adopted a crouch. When he gathered the courage, he stretched an arm and held out a hand to the tiger. Baashere sniffed his palm and retreated a step with disappointment. Jongin smiled. “You haven’t been getting a lot of attention from him either, have you? Bad Adrian. We both deserve better… We three deserve better.”

“That’s strange.”

Jongin shot up to his full height and spun around to find Evzen standing behind him. “What is?”

Evzen jerked his chin at the tiger and said, “The jerk never lets me near him. Or anyone except Adrian. He seems to like you.”

“I wouldn’t say… he likes me.”

“Trust me,” he scoffed and pulled up his shirt sleeve. Jongin never noticed the fade scar on his arm but it looked like the repercussion of angering a certain striped beast.

“Is it the first time you could not seduce someone with your charms?” Jongin joked, smirking.
Evzen smirked back. “Not the last time, anyway.”

Jongin blinked.

“You weren’t seduced by my charms,” Evzen sighed.

Jongin chuckled. “Oh, I was.”

“Not enough for me to upstage my brother, apparently.”

Jongin pursed his lips in silence. He turned his back to the Prince and crouched again to lift a cautious hand to Baashere’s nose. The tiger blenched and Jongin withdrew his hand quickly. But when he extended it again, Baashere stayed still and closed his eyes. Jongin’s breath caught as he gently stroked the beast’s forehead. His coat was rougher than it looked. Jongin breathlessly grinned, scratching Baashere’s neck.

He didn’t know how he was even able to smile. He was supposed to be upset, sad, and furious. Instead, he felt hopeless and tired. He should be mad at Adrian for not telling him that he would have to die in the battle against the Wyverns. Jongin understood that his death would signify a rite of passage rather than the end for Adrian but he could not help but think that he was completely left in the dark. It was no longer just a possibility. It was an inevitability. Adrian would leave him, no matter what. He could not stay on the ground.

“Jongin,” Evzen called in a low voice. Jongin shuddered and flinched when he felt Evzen’s warm fingers brush the nape of his neck. “Are you all right?”

Jongin retrieved his hand from Baashere’s thick fur and knelt on the floor, gasping for air. “Y-Yes,” he panted. The heat overwhelmed all of his senses. His head spun.

“Whoa,” Evzen let out as he caught Jongin by the arm when Jongin staggered a step and almost lost his footing. He clutched at the Auvran Prince’s shirt by the shoulder and tried to steady himself.

“You should lie down.”

Jongin did not voice an objection. He nodded his head shakily and started to pull away but he stopped when Evzen’s arm snaked around his waist. “I can—”

“Nay, you can’t,” the Prince cut him off and ushered Jongin towards the tower. “Are you coming, Stripey?” he said, looking back at Baashere, who eventually tagged along behind them.

Jongin did not make it too far before the heat got to him completely and out of breath, he blacked out. The last thing that registered to him before he went out like a light was Evzen wrapping his strong arms around his collapsing body.

* * *

When he roused, he was met with the calm light of the evening moon that streamed through the open balcony doors. It took him a moment to realize that he was cocooned in layers of feathers and silk. He sat upright with a jolt and rubbed his eyes on the hilt of his palms before frantically glancing around the bedchamber. He recognized Prince Evzen’s bedchamber almost instantly.

He gazed at the balcony. Perched on the edge of a bench, Evzen tossed Baashere a lump of raw meat. The tiger caught it from where he was relaxing on the floor, wagging his tail lazily.

“I hate you, by the way,” Evzen muttered and launched another cube of meat at the beast. Baashere looked disinterested but he contently chewed on the meat before licking the top of his paw.
Jongin pushed the covers aside and climbed out of the bed. Baashere perked his head and looked in Jongin’s way, alerting Evzen. The Prince glanced over at Jongin. Though his expression softened a little, he did not bother to respond to Jongin’s smile.

Jongin sighed as his smile faltered. “Thank you,” he said in a throaty whisper, approaching the balcony.

Evzen turned his attention back to Baashere. “You don’t have to thank me, Princeling,” he said, his tone lighter than usual. “How are you feeling now? I had the servants bring you some ginger tea.”

Jongin glanced back at the cup of tea on the bedside table. “Thank you,” he said again. When Evzen did not reply, Jongin frowned and decided to take his leave. “I… should probably go, then.”

As he started to turn around, Evzen shot up from the bench and shoved past Jongin to wash his hands in the basin of water. Jongin bit his lip and started towards the door. But he paused and clenched his fists.

“You hate me too, don’t you?” he blurted out. Evzen turned and faced him with a cocked brow. “I’d understand if you do not wish to be friends with me anymore.”

He did not wait to hear Evzen’s reply, not that Evzen looked like he was going to give one anyway. But before he could reach the doors, Evzen crossed the room and caught Jongin’s arm. “I do not… hate you,” he said and Jongin turned around to face him. “Gods, I would never…” He stopped himself to suck in a deep breath, eyes closed. He released Jongin’s arm and stepped away. “Go on.”

Jongin opened his mouth but he didn’t know what he should say. Evzen was holding back and Jongin didn’t know what or why.

As he stormed out of Evzen’s chambers, he wove his way to Adrian’s. He didn’t care if he’d have to wait all night long to see Adrian.

He was surprised to find the guards at the doors. Adrian never had never appointed any guards to his chambers before. Jongin nervously approached them, worrying if he no longer had the permission to enter Adrian’s chambers now that he possibly shared them with his new wife.

But the guards opened the doors for him without asking questions. He didn’t manage to take a step into the chambers when he was stopped by Edothise’s voice.

“Jongin,” he heard her say in a calm and gentle voice. Clenching his teeth, Jongin turned around and bowed at her.

“You are doing here?”

Edothise offered him a pleasant smile. “Oh, please. Such formalities are not necessary between us, Prince.”

She was nice. Incredibly nice. It wasn’t fair for Jongin to be so bitter towards her. “I’m not a prince anymore,” he mumbled, lowering his head.

“What are you doing here?”

Jongin tensed. He gulped and looked back at the chamber doors. “I was… looking for… Prince Adrianus. To see if he needed anything.”

“Oh, of course. You are his page. It had slipped my mind.”
Jongin licked his lips and nervously fidgeted with the hem of his tunic.

“He is not in there, by the way,” Edothise said. “And he will be spending the night in my quarters.”

Jongin looked up at her with tired eyes. “Yes, Your Highness,” he muttered and started past her. “I ought to get back to my room. Have a good evening, Princess.”

“I hope you do too, Jongin.”

When he returned to the room, only Riolda was there, seated on the pallet she shared with Diante. “Jongin,” she rasped. “Where were you?”

“I was… It doesn’t matter,” he said and took his seat on her pallet.

“Jongin,” Riolda murmured, frowning as she took his hands. “What is going on with you? You have been awfully quiet recently and you prefer to be alone. Did we do something to hurt you?”

“Nay, not at all,” Jongin said quickly.

“Then tell me what’s wrong.”

Jongin chewed on the inside of his cheek for a moment. “I have to… tell you something.”

“What is it?”

“But before that,” he said, lowering his voice. “Did you hear that some of the servants are fleeing?”

Riolda nodded her head. “Don’t tell me you are planning to do that, too.”

“I am considering it,” Jongin sighed. “I should have just left when he gave me the chance…”

“Who? Prince Adrianus?”

Jongin nodded.

“Then why did you stay?”

Jongin could never tell her the real reason why he chose to stay. “I didn’t… really have anywhere to go. But I don’t see why I should stay here any longer. It would be better if I left. And perhaps, you should too. It’s not safe here.”

“This is my home, Jongin. Where will I even go?” She smiled sadly. “But if you wanted to leave, I will pray for you and I wish you the best.”

“I have to go,” Jongin said to himself mostly. He could not bear to watch Adrian sacrifice himself. He also needed to protect his child, the only gift he could ever give Adrian.

“I understand.”

He was on the beach again that night. Zhesaris was standing at his side. The water gently caressed their feet before receding. “I will not ruin him,” Jongin muttered. “You have my word.”

Zhesaris kept her cold gaze ahead. “I will come for his child when the time comes.”
“What?” Jongin’s blood ran cold. If only he had been able to move, he would have run as far as he could from the Goddess.

“He does not belong with a mortal. I can provide him with greatness.”

He… Him…

“It is my child,” Jongin snarled, gritting his teeth. “You will not take him away from me.”

Zhesaris laughed like the chime in the wind. “You do not even love him. You will never love the child. You will grow to resent him.”

Jongin clenched his eyes and when he opened them, he was met with the thick darkness of his room. He buried his face into his pillow and wept silently.

He then rose from the pallet and quietly made his way out of the room. Once he had managed to sneak up the stairs, he headed for Adrian’s chambers. The guards once again did not stop him when he entered the bedchamber.

It was empty. Adrian must be spending the night at Edothise’s quarters after all. Jongin longingly stared at the bed and reminisced the night he had spent with Adrian in it. He dragged his weight to the bed and climbed into the sheets. A bead of tear rolled down a corner of his eye as he nuzzled into the pillow and willed himself to sleep.

* * *

He woke to a warm arm wrapped around his body and a pair of lips brushing against the back of his neck. He had barely roused and he hadn’t even managed to crack an eye open, but he recognized the smell of the skin easily. It smelled like the ocean.

“I love you, Jongin,” Adrian breathed against his neck, sneaking a hand into Jongin’s tunic to splay his fingers over Jongin’s stomach. Jongin’s throat tightened as he croaked out a soft moan. It was ridiculous but he was worried that Adrian might feel the life growing in him as he pressed his hand harder against Jongin’s abdomen.

When Jongin finally managed to open his eyes, he squinted at the bluish luminance he was surrounded with. It was Adrian’s arm.

“I want to make love to you,” Adrian whispered into Jongin’s ear before he moved to kiss Jongin’s neck. “I want to come inside you, I want to be inside you, Jongin.”

Jongin clenched his eyes and pressed a side of his face into the pillow as he felt Adrian bring a hand to his hip. He gently massaged a corner of Jongin’s waist before he slid the hand into Jongin’s pants to draw it low. Jongin bit onto the sheets when he felt Adrian’s cock press into the cleft of his ass.

“I… I want you, too,” Jongin moaned sleepily, pushing his ass back to grind against Adrian’s hardened member. “Please…” he panted. “Adrian… don’t… leave.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Adrian let out as his fingers glided from Jongin’s tailbone to the sensitive rim of muscles of the opening. “I have missed you.”

Jongin lifted his head and turned it halfway around so that his lips could meet Adrian’s. “Stay with me,” he whispered against Adrian’s mouth. “Just for tonight.”

Adrian kissed him firmly but gently, hands fumbling to undress Jongin under the sheets.
Jongin lied on his stomach and closed his eyes as his breathing shallowed. The bedchamber darkened as the moonlight faded. Adrian removed his own shirt before he descended upon Jongin. Caressing a side of Jongin’s torso, he kissed along Jongin’s spine, all the way down to his tailbone. Jongin’s moans and whimpers were muffled by the pillow as Adrian sank lower to lick along the ass cleft.

“Adrian,” he exhaled, gasping for air. Adrian pressed his chest and abdomen tightly against Jongin’s back while taking Jongin’s hardening cock in his hand. Jongin shivered and wrapped his own hand around Adrian’s.

They made lazy love all night long and as the sun came up, Jongin fell asleep in Adrian’s arms, hoping that when he woke up, Adrian would still be there, buried inside him with his skin smelling like Jongin. Zhesaris was wrong. How could Jongin not love the child he had made with the man he loved more than his own life?
Fortunately, he knew this was not just a dream, although it felt a lot like one. His dreams were never this pleasant. Adrian’s warmth that cocooned Jongin in the morning as the summery breeze spilled into the chamber through the open balcony door. The soothing morning sun danced behind Jongin’s closed eyelids, coaxing him to open them. He did not want to, worried that if he did, the warmth would disappear.

His spent, bare body was sore under the covers, swollen at more than one place. There would be bruises, he was certain. And he’d wear them with pride, if only he could. The wondrous smell of sweat, ocean, and sex hung heavy in the air. Jongin could never get enough of it. Oh, what he’d give to have the scent of Adrian’s skin painted on his own for good…

The previous night had not entirely been sleepless after Adrian had joined Jongin in his bed. They had ventured into an arena they had formerly been strangers to. Adrian had been careful, in spite of his insatiable hunger for Jongin’s comfort in that moment. It was as though he wanted to erase every trace of Edothise, his wife, and bathe himself in Jongin. Twice, they had done it last night, attempting to get as much as they could out of each other. Jongin had been delighted to please the Godblood in every way he wanted and did nothing but ask for more when Adrian penetrated his ass first before he took Jongin again, piercing his sheath. Through the pain and discomfort, Jongin had surrendered and wanted more.

With indolent languor his eyes fluttered open to the brightness of the sunny morning. He noticed they were not alone in the Godblood’s bed. Raising his head, he glanced over at the striped beast, curled comfortably in a nest of crumpled sheets on the bed near its master’s feet.

“Baashere,” Jongin whispered in a coarse voice before briefly looking at Adrian, who was still sound asleep, facing down on the bed with an arm snuck under his face. The magnificence was contemporaneous with serenity.

The tiger lifted its head and blinked at Jongin languidly, wagging its thick, long tail. Jongin sat up quietly, making minimal movements, careful not to wake Adrian up. As much as he wished this moment would last forever, he was well aware that it would not. It was only a matter of time before someone knocked on the door and asked for their Crown Prince. Maybe it would be Princess Edothise. Jongin selfishly and repulsively hoped that she would find them together in bed. He then let the vile thought go, realizing that his revulsion for the whole situation of Adrian being married to her would only hurt Adrian. And that was the last thing he wanted.

He tugged at the covers and peeped a foot out, curling his toes towards Baashere. The tiger stared at them and huffed heavily through its flaring nostrils, now blinking in boredom. Jongin grinned at him, edging his foot closer to the pet’s tail.

Annoyed, the tiger pulled its tail away, thumping and shaking it hard on the bed. Pushing his luck, Jongin was. But he believed Baashere would not harm him as long as he was in Adrian’s vicinity. “Come here, kitty,” Jongin breathed out silently, holding the sheets to cover his lower body as he reached for one of Baashere’s hind legs to stroke its paw. The tiger kicked his hand off the instant Jongin’s finger touched one of the beans of his paw and snarled at him.

Jongin pulled back and pouted.

“It would be such a shame if you became my pet’s breakfast.” Jongin jumped in his seat when he heard Adrian mumble sleepily in a gruff voice without opening his eyes or looking at Jongin.

Jongin felt the blood course to his cheeks and warm them as he hung his head and fiddled with his fingernails, gnawing at his lower lip. “Did I… wake you up?” he asked quietly.
Adrian exhaled loudly and cracked his eyes open, squinting to look up at Jongin. He did not answer as he shifted closer, draping an arm across Jongin’s knees before he settled his head on Jongin’s lap, face down.

Jongin froze, fingers trembling for a moment. He then slid them into Adrian’s hair and rifled them through the silky strands. All while Baashere lowered his head back to the bed and clenched its eyes. “This is… delightful,” Adrian murmured, his own eyes shut tight, too. Jongin drew his hand to the Godblood’s heavily-toned back and traced the dimples on his sharp shoulder blades with a finger. “What is?” Jongin let out, still trying to tease Baashere with his foot stuck out of the sheets.

“This,” Adrian muttered. “You. Us.”

Us…

Jongin almost snorted at the juxtaposition of the situations. The calmness of the morning was a harrowing contrast to the chaos and discord they were struggling with internally. As Adrian snuggled closer to his stomach, he froze, heart suddenly racing with anxious ferocity. It was not as though Adrian could hear or feel the life growing inside Jongin, he knew that. But it still unnerved him immensely.

To come to think of that, how would he broach the subject of his considering leaving Auvradevas? Would Adrian be understanding in any way? Would he let Jongin go? Perhaps it would be better for everyone if he left without saying anything. But he would be tormented for the rest of his life, knowing that Adrian resented him for such a betrayal.

Baashere growled when Jongin stuck his toe into the tiger’s paw.

“Baashere,” Adrian chided lazily without opening his eyes or lifting his head off Jongin.

“Don’t upbraid him,” Jongin muttered, letting his gentle fingers poise over Adrian’s muscled back. “I am the one who’s provoking him.”

Adrian scoffed out a soft laugh. “You’re always the one who’s provoking every virile male in your path, aren’t you?”

Jongin blushed. “Not… every male.”

“I mean it in a good way.” He shifted and laid the back of his head on Jongin’s lap. His eyes then flung open to meet Jongin’s, a small smile quirking the corners of his lips. “I certainly am not complaining.”

Jongin cupped Adrian’s bearded chin with one hand and slid the other into the Auvran’s hair. “Are you sure, oh mighty Godblood?” he purred, slowing bowing his head to lean in to Adrian’s lips. “You are pleased with my provocations?”

Adrian hummed, smirking. “Certainly. Especially those of last night’s… It is a torment I derive great pleasure from.”

That had Jongin blushing harder. “Then shall I torment you more today, My Lord?” He teased, lips ghosting over Adrian’s.

Adrian’s breathing shallowed, his chest rising and falling faster. Their breaths mingled as their lips barely brushed. Then in a low, raspy voice, he whispered, “Torment me all you want, my love.”

Oh, how Jongin loved wrecking the Godblood’s restraints and bringing him down to his knees… Just as their lips almost touched, Jongin straightened up and pulled away, smiling mischievously. “I’m still completely sore,” he exhaled, running a hand down Adrian’s bullneck and chest, all the way down to his rock-hard abdomen, thickly padded with muscles. “Still throbbing… in both.”
Adrian’s stomach retracted deep when Jongin splayed his fingers over it, slowly edging the trail of hair that disappeared beneath the sheets.

“Bold you are, teasing a Godblood like this,” Adrian huffed, a hand reaching up to curl around the back of Jongin’s neck before he pushed himself up and pressed a kiss to Jongin’s collarbone. Shuddering, Jongin clenched his eyes and gripped Adrian’s hair as Adrian kissed along a side of his neck. “We shan’t do this now,” Jongin mumbled, shivering every time Adrian’s beard pricked the soft skin of his neck. “The servants will come to attend you soon.”

“I have ordered them not to come in until I summon them,” Adrian breathed against a corner of Jongin’s jaw, kissing it. “What about… your wife?”

Adrian stopped and pulled back, frowning. “What?”

Jongin looked away, a hand resting on Adrian’s heaving chest. “Your… consort has the prerogative of… sharing everything that’s yours.”

Adrian sat up and collected Jongin’s face in his large, rough hands, drawing it up to meet his gaze. “Nay. Not everything,” he let out and brushed his lips on Jongin’s forehead. Jongin clung onto Adrian’s wrists and stared into the Godblood’s bicoloured eyes for a moment before he leaned in and buried his face in the crook of Adrian’s neck. “I love you, Adrian,” he said in an undertone.

Adrian withdrew and lightly kissed Jongin on the lips. It felt like the lingering brush of a feather. The breaking the kiss, he rested his forehead against Jongin’s.

“Why don’t you… get into the water with me?” Jongin smiled. “Should I attend you, Your Grace?”

Adrian let out a scoff before he climbed out of the bed, rubbing Baashere’s head. “Nay,” he said and bent low to scoop Jongin up into his arms. Gasping, Jongin held onto the Godblood’s bicephalic arms. “I’ll attend you, My Prince.”

“Adrian,” Jongin laughed as his lover bore him into the bathing chamber in his arms.

The water was a colder than he thought it would be. But he was not complaining. It was certainly the warmest water to have touched his skin in a while. Besides, he had Adrian’s strapping body and strong limbs to keep him warm underwater.

“Ask me anything you want,” Adrian said suddenly, smiling like an idiot in love.

Jongin blinked as he draped his arms around Adrian’s neck, his back pressed against the edge of the pool. “What?”

“Go on,” the Auvran Prince insisted, his mouth dangerously close to Jongin’s. “Tell me whatever that you desire. I’ll get it for you.” Jongin snickered. “What if I wanted… the Pearl of Malefona?” “I’ll get it for you,” Adrian said, looking so smitten, so in love.

“Really? You’d fight Sea Wyrms and ruthless pirates across the Malefona Seas for me?” “All of them,” Adrian said it like it was a promise.

“What if I wanted the Faerandelian King’s favourite pet hawk?”
“I will get it for you,” the Godblood mewled, tilting his head to kiss Jongin’s neck.

“They say he has killed more men than the God of Death of himself.”

“I’d have his head at your feet if you asked.”

“What if I wanted to the sky?” A moan then escaped his throat when Adrian sucked a spot on his neck. “The moon? The sun? The seas?” he breathed out, arching his neck back to allow Adrian more access.

“I’m going to make them your slaves even if I have to battle the Seven for them,” Adrian panted against Jongin’s reddening skin while his hands slipped into the water and crawled around Jongin’s thighs, slowly climbing their way up to his ass. Clutching at Adrian’s damp hair, Jongin sighed, eyes lidded and cheeks burning. “I do not wish for any of those,” he said and let out a shrill gasp when Adrian slid a finger along the cleft of his ass and rubbed the sore and loosened orifice. “Adrian.”

Jongin dropped his face onto the Godblood’s shoulder and muffled a moan as Adrian drew his finger further down to his sheath.

“Look at you, my plucky, valiant little dove,” Adrian teased, whispering into Jongin’s ear. “I have barely touched you, and you’re already a wreck.”

Jongin sucked in a sharp breath when Adrian hoisted his legs up, gripping his thighs, and pressed into his crotch. Curling his bottom lip between his teeth, he stifled a moan, entangling his fingers in the wet strands of Adrian’s hair as the Godblood peppered his neck with rough kisses.

“You are neglecting your duties as the Crown Prince of Auvradevas by squandering your morning here with me, Prince Adrianus.”

“Can I not have one morning for myself?” Adrian groaned against Jongin’s cheek before filling it with sloppy, warm kisses.

“That would… be very selfish of you and you are not a selfish man,” Jongin said, struggling to form the words, distracted by Adrian’s hardening shaft pressed against his crotch, leaving almost no room for the water to glide through.

“Perhaps I am digressing. Losing the thread I hate the most about myself,” Adrian muttered, his grip tightening around Jongin’s thighs.

“You do not hate that about yourself,” Jongin said and Adrian pulled back a little to look into his eyes. “And you will… never be selfish, Adrian.”

“I am committing infidelity to be with you, breaking my oaths,” Adrian said, suddenly in a sterner tone. “Is that not selfish enough?”

Jongin cupped a side of Adrian’s face and ran his thumb over his beard. “Do you… regret it? Are you guilt-ridden about what… we’re doing?”

“I am conflicted,” Adrian admitted. “You cannot deny that this is unfair to Edothise.”

Jongin lowered his gaze. “I don’t… think it’s fair.” As much as he wanted to push the Princess Edothise off a boat, he would not do it. There were grievance and envy in his heart, not vengeance.

“Then you can understand how I must feel, can’t you? Even if you detest Edothise.”

Jongin slowly nodded his head and met Adrian’s eyes again. “Adrian… if it makes you feel so conflicted, then I wouldn’t… perhaps we… shouldn’t. And I do not detest her. I… want to be her. I covet what she has… rightfully. But I do not want you to feel this way. If you’d rather I stay away… then…”
He trailed off as Adrian’s eyebrows furrowed into a scowl. He half-expected the Godblood to bite his head off but when Adrian lurched forward, he crushed Jongin’s lips under his with a scathing kiss. “All Nine Realms should envy you,” Adrian said, hooking an arm around Jongin’s waist. “for that you’re the one who has my heart, Jongin. You are… my happiness and I haven’t had much of that in my life. The people hail my name, sing my praises, raise my ensign. They do not bring me joy. But… this.” He kissed Jongin’s forehead and each of his cheeks before claiming Jongin’s lips briefly. “This is what truly makes me happy. You. Being with you.”

Clinging onto Adrian’s shoulders, Jongin brought their lips together again in a heated, passionate kiss that left a low thrum in the back of his head. He did not break the kiss as Adrian collected him into his arms and bore him to back to the bedchamber, both their bodies slick with water rivulets. The dampness on their skins seeped into the rumpled sheets when Adrian dropped Jongin on the bed and pulled back from the kiss to venture down Jongin’s body, pelting every inch of it with searing kisses.

Jongin fisted his hands around the sheets, biting into his lower lip as Adrian lowered to his stomach. His back arched off the bed when he felt Adrian lips press against the planes of his belly. Adrian lifted his gaze and leered at Jongin with profound and marked lust. Loosening one of his hands around the sheets, Jongin brought it to the back of the Godblood’s head.

“Keep going,” he panted breathlessly and saw Adrian smirk with mischief. “You have gotten quite accommodated yourself to ordering the saviour of people, the Crown Prince of Auvradevas around, haven’t you?”

Jongin smirked back down at him. “I believe I have, Son of Zhesaris.”

Adrian licked his smiling lips, curling his arms around Jongin’s thighs as he lowered between them and laid a few more kisses along Jongin’s waistline before he went lower. “Oh, dear Gods,” Jongin gasped, eyes almost rolling back. Adrian was in no way merciful when it came to lovemaking, and Jongin would not be complaining if only it did not feel so good that it had to be a grave sin.

His grip tightened around the Auvran Prince’s hair, his breaths short and ragged. The heat of Adrian’s mouth breached the insides of his sheath with the fiercest of caresses while his hands gently stroked Jongin’s thighs. Then kissing the insides of them, Adrian rose back up to kiss Jongin full on the lips. Jongin tasted himself on Adrian’s lips.

“I want you,” Adrian rasped into his mouth, grinding his pulsating cock against Jongin’s crotch as Jongin locked his legs around the other man’s waist. Then grabbing Adrian’s shoulders, Jongin shoved him hard and plopped him onto the bed before climbing atop the Godblood, straddling his hips. Adrian huffed heavily, bringing one hand to clutch at a side of Jongin’s waist while gripping the wooden headboard of the bed above his head with the other.

“You are going to send me straight to hell,” Adrian said, chest heaving in both arousal and excitement.

Jongin bit his lip teasingly and leaned forward. As their lips met with a mere brush, he whispered, “I beg to differ, Adrianus Dragovan. I’m going to show you the heavens.” He straightened up when Adrian attempted to catch his lips between his own. Then reaching for the almost exhausted canister of oil, he held Adrian down with a hand on the Godblood’s broad chest. While he applied to oil he dribbled onto his palm on Adrian’s thick cock, Adrian lightly held onto the corners of his waist. Jongin swallowed with blood stirring viciously in his crotch, realizing that Adrian was being careful not to bruise him with just his grips.
His hands were savagely large on the sides of Jongin’s slender waist, his thumbs almost pressing into Jongin’s ribs. Adrian watched with great intent as Jongin’s hands stroked his cock, slicking it with enough oil. Then rising to his knees, Jongin rubbed the head of Adrian’s oiled cock against his sheath and ass repeatedly, goading the Prince’s grip on his waist to harden.

“Bloody…” Adrian trailed off, eyes shut and breathing kindled.

Jongin felt his own desires spiking. Unable to hold them back any longer, he lowered down on Adrian’s erection, taking it all in until the Godblood was buried to the hilt inside him. As he slowly began to rock his hips, Adrian sat upright, sliding a hand to Jongin’s back. “I’m yours, don’t you ever doubt that,” Adrian promised in a groan and tilted his head to kiss Jongin’s neck. Clenching his eyes tightly, Jongin dug his fingernails into Adrian’s shoulders, picking up the pace of his swaying hips. “I know,” he moaned in a gasping breath and let Adrian smash their mouths together for a consuming kiss.

* * *

He had lost track of the time when he awoke again. This time, it was to a cold but painless sting to his ankle. With somnolence, he drowsily lifted his head and blinked his heavy eyes at Adrian who was kneeling at his feet, holding one of them to his chest.

“What are you doing?” Jongin drawled in a sluggish voice.

Adrian smiled at him. Jongin’s barely open eyes moved to the silver chain Adrian was hooking around his ankle.

“Is that…” Jongin began, sitting up with the sole of his foot pressed against Adrian’s chest. Baashere, who was lounged on the floor, wagging its tail, watched its owner with keenness.

“I thought you might want it back,” Adrian said, gently lifting the foot from his chest to his lips.

Jongin’s heart almost leaped out of his mouth when Adrian kissed along the sole before he crawled over to kiss Jongin lightly on the mouth.

“You… kept it,” Jongin breathed out in surprise.

Adrian blinked. “Of course… I did,” he admitted, looking a little embarrassed. “Did you not… want it back?” Jongin could not hide the smile that invaded his face. “I do. Oh, Seven, I do!” Adrian puffed out a guttural laughter when Jongin pounced on him, tackling him against the bed. “I’m glad I kept it, then.”

Grinning from ear to ear, Jongin nestled his head on Adrian’s chest. He gazed out the open doors of the balcony. The sky was darkening.

“Did we… spend an entire day in here?”

“Nay,” Adrian muttered, pecking the top of Jongin’s head. “It is about to pour. They’re overcasts.” Jongin raised his head, now frowning at the fat, woebegone grey clouds that were ready to weep at any moment. “Rain? In Auvadevas?” he asked, settling his head back on Adrian’s chest. Adrian was silent for a length before he said, “It’s a bad presage.”

Jongin looked up at him, placing his chin on the Godblood’s sternum. Adrian seemed worried, his eyes narrowed, eyebrows furrowed.

“You don’t know that,” Jongin whispered. Adrian met his gaze. “I do.”
A lump rose in Jongin’s throat. “Did your… mother say something?”

“They’re coming, Jongin,” Adrian said sternly now. Then he quickly sighed and shook his head, closing his eyes. “It could even be tomorrow.”

“Is that why… you’re here with me? This moment? Because you’re worried it could all end tomorrow?”

Adrian’s eyes flew open to look at Jongin’s again. “You’re upset?”

Without replying, Jongin dropped his head back on Adrian’s chest. “What will happen?” he asked instead. “When… If you become a God?”

He heard Adrian swallow hard. “I will serve the Seven for… all eternity.”

“For all… eternity?” “Yes.”

“Will you come back to the ground to… have mortal children like your mother did?”

“I won’t. I can’t. Only the Seven can do that.”

“That hardly seems fair.”

Adrian chuckled at that. “Well, I did not create the world. The Seven did.”

Jongin exhaled heavily. “What do you think it’s like… living with the Seven?”

“I… don’t know. My mother tells me stories sometimes. She says… Hareus is not fond of Godbloods. He treats them like… well, servants.” “Hareus. The God of Fire and Sky.”

“Yes.”

“Does he not have children of his own?” “None of them do.”

“What do you mean?”

Adrian took a breath. “We are their children until we become Gods. Then they… spawn new children on ground when it’s necessary.”

“When it’s necessary? Do you think Zhesaris knew that the Wyverns will return? And that’s why… you’re here? Because… the Seven needed a… Godblood on the ground to protect the realm?”

Adrian did not answer immediately. “I would believe so,” he then muttered at length.

“What sort of… God do you think you will be?”

“I have inherited my mother’s blessings. But I do think… I am myself own self. I am not all her.”

Was he? Or would he also abhor the idea of them having a child together like his mother?

“And… did your mother tell you anything else?”

Could she have told him anything about the child? She could not have. It would play against her if she did.

“Nay, not recently,” he said and curled a tight arm around Jongin’s body. “And I do not wish to see her when I’m with you.”

“Really?” Jongin scooted upwards to nuzzle into Adrian’s neck. “Do you mean that?”

“You are more important to me than anyone else, Jongin.”

That made Jongin ponder in silence for a while. He then lifted his head to brush his lips against Adrian’s bearded cheek. “Then why?” he whispered.

Adrian turned to face him. “Why?” “Don’t leave me, then.”

Running his fingers through Jongin’s hair, Adrian said, “You don’t
I have to do this either way. For peace, for you.”

Jongin could not find valid argument points to contend Adrian on that. If Adrian did not save them, no one else would. Then the ground would become a graveyard fashioned by the man-eating Wyverns.

“I understand,” Jongin said.

He slid a hand into Adrian’s and stared at their size difference. Adrian’s palm engulfed all of Jongin’s hand.

“This is a fascinating ring,” Jongin commented, twiddling with Adrian’s black sapphire ring he never took off. “It’s the same colour of your eyes.”

“It’s given to me by my mother,” Adrian said. “What? That… explains.”

“Yeah.”

He then reached for Adrian’s other hand, noticing that he was not wearing his wedding ring.

“Where’s your wedding band?” Jongin questioned.


“When you’re a Godblood preparing for a war with ancient firebreathers, no one really cares if you’re wearing your wedding ring or not.”

“But why aren’t you wearing it?”

Adrian huffed. “Because I don’t want to.”

That made Jongin smile. He laced their fingers together and watched Adrian’s fingers tighten around his. “What if… there were no Wyverns plaguing us? What would you do then? Would you stay on the ground with me? Will you… be with me?”

Or would you hide forever?

After a long moment of contemplation, Adrian ended up not answering as he sat up on the edge of the bed and hung his head.

“You would not,” Jongin answered for him. “You would still be crowned as the King of Auvradevas. Edothise will be your Queen amidst your other wives who’d bear you heirs. And I, at most, will be one of your filthy secrets that keep your bed warm and suck your cock when you reckon needed.”

Adrian sharply looked back at him with a pained scowl. “Why are you doing this right now?”

Jongin shoved the sheets aside and started to climb out of the bed. “I don’t know what I was thinking,” he scoffed, gathering his clothes to get dressed. “Wyvern or no Wyvern, you are not mine.”

“I am,” Adrian spat.

Pulling his pants on, Jongin faced Adrian with a glower. “Nay, you are not, Adrianus. You are not my husband, you are not my lover to the world, I am not your consort, Gods, you do not even deem me worthy to be your Auxiliary. How exactly are you mine?”

“Adrian rose from the bed and caught Jongin’s arms. “Those things do not matter.”

“They do to me!” Jongin yapped and yanked his arms free to pull his tunic on.

“Fuck,” Adrian cursed in a hiss and seized Jongin’s arm again. “Please, do not do this, Jongin. I do not wish for us to fight. Especially with what little time we have left.”
Jongin stared at the misery in Adrian’s eyes. His indignation waned. “I should… go,” he then said quietly, dropping his gaze.

Adrian released his arm. “I am sorry for… hurting you.”

Jongin nodded curtly once before he started for the doors. He paused in his tracks. He wanted to tell him. The words were already bubbling in his chest, rising all the way up to his mouth, clinging on the tip of his tongue. He wanted to say it out loud. He wanted to announce it to the entire world, to all Nine Realms that he was carrying Adrianus Dragovan’s son.

“Jongin,” he heard Adrian call in a soft voice.

He did not look back at the man as he hurried out of the chambers as fast as his limping legs could carry him. The relentless and unforgiving night and morning took a toll on him, no doubt. He’d be limping for days in discomfort.

“Oh, Prince Jongin.”

He stopped abruptly and spun around, blinking at the Princess Edothise as though he had met a ghost. “Your… Highness,” he stuttered and bowed uncomfortably. “It’s… just Jongin.”

“Oh, yes,” she said, approaching him in the hallway with a pleasant smile. “I saw you just walking out of Prince Adrianus’ chambers. Is he… awake?”

Jongin hesitated to answer. “Yes… But he does not wish to be troubled at the moment. He’d probably be out in a while.”

The Othadian Princess sighed heavily. “He left my quarters rather early last night,” she started musing and Jongin wanted to cover his ears. Edothise then stopped to survey Jongin from head to toe. “Are you… all right?”


“You look a little… dishevelled is all.” She smiled.

Jongin fisted his hands behind his back. “I… hadn’t the chance to bathe this morning. I wanted to make sure… His Majesty has his summons fulfilled.”

“I see,” the Princess said. “I pity your plight, Jongin.”

Jongin pursed his lips.

“No one should have to go through what you are put through,” she added, sounding genuinely sympathetic. Oh, she knew nothing. “Thank you… Princess,” Jongin muttered. “I must… go now.” “Oh, yes, of course.”

Bowing his head once more, Jongin turned on his heel and headed down to his room in the basement.

The smattering rain that brewed on the oddly cold horizon with a rumbling thunder and a lightning that split the mighty sky in half quickly intensified into a world-shattering storm. The bad presage Adrian had conjectured was imminent in the storm that lasted the rest of the week. Adrian was not the only one who believed the storm was ominous. Some of the servants spread gossips such as the Seven are angry. First the Wyvern, now the storm that destroyed houses and prevented the seafarers from going to the sea. What would come next, they pondered. Perhaps this was the end of the world, others surmised.

Jongin saw little of Adrian the following week. Every time he went looking for the Godblood, he was told that Prince Adrianus was away with King Raagathor. In his absence, Edothise gave out orders and all in the palace were required to defer to them without defiance.
The nights were almost as cold as winter in Warinia. The pallets and fleecy blankets did little to keep them warm. The mornings were full of grouses and lamentations. The Auvrans were unaccustomed to the cold and the mugginess.

“You can tell chaos comes our way,” Melanctha remarked one night following a screaming thunder and a howling wind in the storm outside.

Jongin shuddered, cupping a hand over his belly protectively when another thunder quaked the very ground he was seated on. He aimlessly fiddled with anklet around his ankle, which no one seemed to have noticed.

“It’s just a storm, Melanctha,” Riolda grumbled from where she sat on her pallet, sewing a skirt. “ Compared to the Wyverns, this is not the worst calamity Auvradevas has seen.”

“I am with Melanctha,” Eudora said. “Everything feels wrong. What if… Prince Adrianus does not save us in the end? What if he… fails? What if he is incapable of defeating the Wyverns? What if he loses the war?”

Jongin scowled in her way. “Do you doubt his ability now?” he shot at her.

Eudora turned to him with a lour. “We are pinning all our hopes to continue our existence on a single man. Am I wrong to have my qualms?”

“He’s not just any man,” Jongin huffed furiously. The room turned quiet. “If you are doubting him, then why don’t you do something to save us all? Instead of just sitting here and carping about his incapability unnecessarily? Do you not see that he’s giving up so much to be a God to all of you? To be your saviour?”

Eudora gaped at him with her mouth agog. “I…” she let out, frowning. Then glaring, she rose to her feet. “What is he giving up? He is going to be a God for fucking sake. And do not bite my head off. I am just saying what everyone is thinking!”

“Then perhaps you should all just let the goddamn Wyverns drag you to hell,” Jongin spat back. He panted hard and leaned back against the wall, clutching at his tunic over his belly. He felt queasy with bile rising up his throat.

Eudora fell silent. Clenching her fists around her skirt, she then stormed out of the room.

Melanctha shook her head as she went after Eudora. After a moment, Riolda crawled over to Jongin’s pallet.

“Hey,” she called softly, extending a hand to stroke Jongin’s arm. Jongin swallowed a sob and looked at her with tears glistening in his eyes. “What’s been going on with you?” she asked. “You have been capricious lately. And… quieter than usual, although your skin looks incredibly flawless now.” She grinned. “Is everything all right? I mean, besides the obvious. We are not exactly in paradise, I know.”

Jongin lowered his head, eyes closed. “I am fine, Riolda,” he lied bluntly.

He heard Riolda sigh and squeeze his shoulder gently. “Are you still thinking of leaving?”

After some hesitation, Jongin nodded his head shyly. “But I do not wish to talk about it right now.” “All right, Jongin. I understand.” She sighed. “But I’m here if you ever need to.” She then rose and returned to her own pallet.

Jongin wished he could tell her. He wished there was someone he could talk to. He wanted to be near his own family right now. He wondered how his father and Jihee would react to the news of his pregnancy. They would be supportive, he was convinced. The thought swelled his nausea tenfold with homesickness.
He reclined on the pallet, facing the wall, and buried his face in the thin pillow that soaked up his warm tears.

* * *

The storm continued to terrorize the ground the next morning. Jongin roused early and headed for the library where he could sulk without an audience. However, much to his dismay, Scholar Helathor was present, rifling through scrolls at his desk. “Good morning, Jongin,” Helathor said without looking up from his scrolls.

Entering the library, Jongin scratched the back of his head. “Good morning,” he muttered as he approached the scholar. “Um… Do you know if… he’s back?” Helathor raised his gaze with an arching eyebrow. “Nay, I believe he hasn’t.”

Jongin hung his head, gnawing at his lip.

“I have a book that could interest you,” Helathor then said and held out a book to Jongin.

Accepting it, Jongin managed a smile. “Thank you.”

“You look better when you smile, son,” the scholar commented and Jongin looked away, flushed and embarrassed. “Does he not tell you when he leaves?” Jongin’s eyes widened first. Then he shook his head slowly. “He… never does. And I don’t think he should inform his page of… his… of what he…” he stuttered and trailed off, noticing Helathor’s penetrating, all-knowing gaze.

“You are his page. He should be taking you with him if anything. Your responsibility is to aid him anywhere he is.”

Jongin sighed.

“Have you thought about what I told you?” the old man asked.

Jongin aimlessly glanced around the library. “I have,” he let out. “And?” He met the scholar’s eyes again. “I want to… go away.”

Helathor bowed his head understandingly. “I can arrange a ship that could take you away to the Third Realm as soon as the storm settles.” His heart railed against his chest. “How long will that take?”

Helathor was momentarily lost in his own thoughts. “There is no telling when the storm would end, and the calm would come again.”

“I can’t stay here for too long,” Jongin said. “None of us can.” “Nay, you do not understand,” he muttered to himself, turning away.

“I will see what I can do,” the scholar said. “to get you out of here forthwith.”

Jongin did not reply as he politely took his leave and ambled out of the library. Later that day, he was summoned to the kitchen for an extra pair of hands to help with lunch since quite a number of servants had come down with the flu due to the cold. Jongin was not complaining. He was bored out of his mind being holed up in his room all day, moping over his future. His baby’s future.
I will come for his child when the time comes.

He could not shake Zhesaris’ voice from his head.

“Careful with those,” the cook told him as he handed a couple of salvers. “They’re hot.”

When he sauntered into the dining hall, he stopped to look at Prince Evzen seated across Edothise and her parents. At his sides, Raagathor’s three wives and their children sat.

“Do you have no interest in the monarchy, Prince Evzenius?” King Castellanos asked.

“Move,” another servant hissed at Jongin, nudging him forward. Jongin silently placed the salvers on the table and caught Evzen’s eyes briefly before he stepped away.

“Nay, I do not,” Evzen said, taking sip from his winecup.

“Might I ask why?” the Othadian King inquired curiously. “Considering that you are, in many ways, the rightful heir to the throne.”

The Prince shrugged and smiled cockily. “If I had fought for my claim on the throne, would you have married off your daughter to me instead? Then I do greatly regret not having done so.”

Jongin’s eyes flitted to Edothise, whose dark skin hid her embarrassed well, a soft smile curling the corners of her lips.

King Castellanos and his Queen laughed. “You are always a jolly company to have around, Evzenius,” Castellanos commented. “But do keep in mind that you are trifling with your brother’s wife.”

“I am aware of that,” Evzen said playfully. “Which is why I am only trifling with her.”

The servants giggled behind their hands while Edothise stifled her own laughter.

“I was warned that you are quite the libertine,” Castellanos said.

“Ah,” Evzen let out, smirking. “I believe my reputation has been undersold.”

The King eyed him whimsically. “Any idea when your father and brother will return from the garrison?”

“Not exactly,” Evzen replied. “The sea levels are rising. Our fleets of ships and the soldiers need better accommodation in this storm, and Adrian and Father are looking for solutions.”

“And you are here in the security of your palace walls, chasing after a good time with the servant girls?”

Evzen simply smiled and said, “Us both, I believe, King Castellanos.” He then rose from his seat as Castellanos’ face crumpled with shame. “You must excuse me. I have forgotten that there’s something more important than idle chitchats that needs my attention.”

Bowing his head once to the Othadian King and Queen, he turned to Edothise and took her hand to kiss the back of it before he strutted past the line of servants. He eyed Jongin once and beckoned to him to follow.

Jongin took a step forward but halted with arrant surprise when a guard burst into the hall, requesting Prince Evzen’s presence at the gates.

“Why?” Evzen asked.

“Prince Adrianus has returned and so has the King, My Lord,” the guard rasped. “Prince Adrianus is hurt.”

“What?”
Without dawdling, Evzen raced out of the dining hall at once. Edothise and the others shot up from their seats and hurried after them.

When Jongin started, he was stopped by an older servant. “Where do you think you’re going?” he spat. “Clear the table.”
Blood drummed in his ears and he frowned at the table, then at the doors. “I—”

“Get to work!”

He’s hurt. He’s hurt. How hurt was he?

The walls of the hall were suddenly stifling. His hands trembled as he quickly picked up the plates and salvers along with the other servants.

Hugging them to his chest, he hastened out of the hall and down to the kitchen where he hurriedly dumped the dishes before he ran back up.
He stopped in a hallway when he heard Prince Evzen’s voice amidst a few others.

“It is unlike you to be so reckless,” Evzen snorted. Jongin edged a little closer to the flock of servants and guards who were crowding the hallway, gawking at the royal family gathered in the corridor.
“It is nothing,” he heard Adrian say before he saw the Godblood, towering taller than everyone else around him, drenched in the rain. Jongin rose to the tip of his toes to get a better view. Raagathor was nowhere to be seen.
His heart dropped to his stomach when he noticed the long, bleeding gash on Adrian’s arm, all the way from his shoulder to his wrist. Blood dripped from his fingertips, staining the carpeted floor of the hallway.
“I was not paying attention,” Adrian said. “I am all right.”

“Please, let me through,” Jongin grunted and shoved past the crowd. As he emerged from it, Adrian’s gaze immediately flung to him.

“Jong—” he stopped himself when Princess Edothise took hold of his arm gently and looked at him worriedly.

“You still need medical attention, Adrian,” she said firmly.
A little out of breath, Jongin stepped forward and winced at the bleeding flesh that was cut open. It looked like the ministrations of a brutal blade. The metallic stench of blood turned Jongin’s stomach.
“You,” one of Raagathor’s wives called Jongin. “Take his belongings. Don’t just stand there.”
Jongin blinked at her.

“I said I’m fine,” Adrian interrupted. “And I can go to the healers myself.”

“I can accompany you,” Jongin said quietly, trying to not show the tears in his eyes. He knew how much Adrian detested the healers and medicines, which was total absurdity considering that he was a mighty Godblood. But he would not want Adrian to be alone.
Adrian looked down at him, frowning. It was then when Jongin realized that they almost never communicated, despite Jongin being his personal page, in the presence of his family.

“That will not be necessary,” Edothise said, her hands curling
around Adrian’s bloodied hand. “I’ll be with him.”

“You really do not have to,” Adrian said, already starting towards the infirmary.

Evzen stopped him and unbuckled Adrian’s sword belt, taking away the Azurewrath. “Let your wife worry over your health and safety, brother. Delight in it,” Evzen said, smiling smugly. As Adrian walked away to the infirmary with his wife, Jongin stood stiff and numb, still trying to digest everything that had just happened before him, hoping Adrian would at least spare him one last glance. But he did not.

“There you go, page,” Evzen scoffed, and Jongin turned to look at him with limpid, miserable eyes. He staggered a step back when the Prince shoved Adrian’s sword against his chest.

Jongin wrapped his arms around the heavy sword and hung his head as the rest of the royal family and crowd dispersed.

“It certainly is nice to have a wife to care about you, isn’t it?” Evzen muttered with a lopsided grin. Jongin stared at him wordlessly. “Wife, Princeling. She is his wife. They’re married. She wears his ring. They said their vows. Their marriage was consummated. There cannot be a better revelation for you than what just happened. Open your eyes.” His tone softened as he leaned closer. “You do not deserve to be my brother’s secret little doxy, Jongin. Even if he’s the son of a Goddess.”

With that, Evzen walked away, shoulders squared and taut.

Jongin stood in the deserted hallway for a moment too long before the strength in his lanky arms was exhausted by the weight of the Azurewrath. He then headed up to Adrian’s chambers to deposit the sword where it belonged and leave. And then leave for good.

* * *

It was nothing like he had ever felt before. Anger, resentment, misery, jealous, pain, grief… He wanted to abandon every silver of his rational being and break apart. Although Adrian’s actions were reasonable and fathomable, it still did not set Jongin’s mind at rest or convince him to stay calm and not be harrowed with a heart-breaking unfairness. That was it. Adrian was unfair. His hands were tied in that situation, Jongin understood that. But it did not hurt any less, knowing that, in spite of having born as a prince of a kingdom with the purest of Warinian royal blood, he was unworthy of Adrian’s amity and respect in the perspective of Adrian’s family. He was now a simple servant Adrian would not dare associate himself with in public. Not to mention there was no way in hell Adrian would let the world know that he lay with a man. Evzen was right. Jongin did not deserve to be Adrian’s secret little doxy, even if he were a Godblood, revered by all. Telling Adrian that he was pregnant would not change anything, unless for the worse. And apart from all that, would Adrian even accept a child borne by an Aevayl? There was a better chance of him accepting a child with Edothise.

“The storm is calming down,” Contos said that night, the candleflame flickering in a corner of the room.

“Nay, it isn’t, Contos. Quit blethering, you old clod,” Melanchta shot back at him.

“Nay, it is,” Contos argued. “I can feel it. I can… hear it.”

“Well, the rest of cannot,” she scoffed. “Now, enough with the claptrap and go to sleep.”
“Jongin,” Diante called in a sharp whisper.

Jongin turned on his pallet to face the girl.

“Can I borrow your book if you’re not reading it?” she asked, smiling.

Nodding, Jongin grabbed the book Helathor had lent him from the side of his pallet and handed it to Diante. “It might be a little gory for your taste,” he said.

Diante snickered. “I think I can handle a little gore after what I’ve been put through.”

The door was prised open then and a guard stepped in. “Prince Adrianus’ page is summoned to his chambers,” the guard said.

Jongin sat up.

“At this hour?” Eudora remarked from the pallet she shared with Riolda and Diante.

“You don’t question me, bitch,” the guard spat at her.

Jongin walked over to the guard at once. “Don’t speak to her or anyone in here that way,” he told the guard, scowling.

“Or what?” the guard harrumphed.

“Or you will hear the same thing from your Prince Adrianus but in a rather less kindly manner.”

That seemed to have threatened the guard enough to back off, though not without a few hushed curses.

Jongin kept his clammy, shivering hands balled when he wended his way up to Adrian’s chambers. As much as he did not want to see Adrian right now, he was not in a position to refuse an order. And as much as he wanted to yell at Adrian right now, Jongin realized that he no longer harboured the energy for it. It was the same every evening now. The baby took up every ounce of the energy the food and water he consumed created, leaving him thoroughly inebriated and fatigued at the end of the day.

When he arrived at the chambers, he froze at the doors. He heard Edothise’s voice and chiming titters.

“Do you think he would warm up to me sooner or later?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” Adrian answered dully. “He does not warm up to people easily.”

“I see. But I have never seen anyone pet a tiger the way you do.”

Baashere. They were talking about Baashere.

Nay, Jongin thought furiously. She would not steal Baashere away from him, too. Then a moment later, he felt stupid for feeling such envy over something so petty.

What was Edothise doing in Adrian’s chambers, anyway?

With anger bubbling in his chest, Jongin entered the bedchamber and found the Othadian Princess perched on the edge of Adrian’s bed while Adrian stood near the balcony, gazing out at the pouring rain and inky black sky. Baashere was at his side doing the same.

He instantly turned around and met Jongin’s wrathful eyes. He looked just as surprised and flabbergasted as he was earlier. His wounded arm was now bandaged.

“Ah, you’re here,” Edothise said, and Jongin turned to her confusedly.
“What is she doing here?” Jongin asked Adrian instead, his words thick with rancour and animosity along with some fatigue.

Edothise rose from Adrian’s bed and stared Jongin down with a black look. “I beg your pardon,” she said. “Did you just ask what I’m… doing here?”

“Jongin, you should go,” Adrian blurted out, tensing up.

“Nay,” Jongin growled. “You summoned me all the way up here and now you want me to just go? I suppose I am servant to you after all, aren’t I?”

There was an immediate reaction in Adrian’s expression. Hurt. He opened his mouth to say something but didn’t.

“I was the one who summoned you,” Edothise said, interjecting them as she approached Jongin. She was now scowling. “You are his page, so I thought you would know where to put his weapons away.”

She beckoned to the bow and quiver of arrows on the floor.

“And I accidentally dropped a simple,” she said, and Jongin’s eyes fell on shattered glass canister and the small puddle of liquid on the floor. “I told the guard to fetch a servant, too.”

“Don’t worry about it, Your Highness,” Jongin said, gnashing his teeth. “I’ll do it.”

“Oh…”

Jongin grabbed the bow and the quiver first, setting them aside in a corner before he started towards the spilled canister.

“You don’t have to do that,” Adrian interfered just as Jongin dropped to knees and started picking up the glass shards. “Jongin,” he then snarled through his grit teeth.

“It is fine, Your Grace,” Jongin panted out, silently sobbing for air. “I might as well get used to this.”

“Edothise, if you don’t mind, could you… excuse us?” Adrian asked his wife politely. Oh, the well-bred, well-mannered asshole.

“Of course, Adrian,” the Princess said and closed the distance between her and her husband. With a smile, she kissed his cheek and pulled away. “I hope you heal soon and… good night.”

Adrian bowed his head. Jongin almost scoffed out loud.

As soon as they were left alone, Adrian strode over to him and caught his arm to haul him up. “I said don’t,” he spat.

Jongin yanked his arm back and quickly wiped the tear that trickled down his cheek with the sleeve of his tunic. He jumped a little when a thunder roared outside. Then he proceeded to collect the broken canister pieces.

“What are you doing?” Adrian asked, his tone calmer and more confused. “Jongin?”

Without an answer, Jongin angrily picked at the sharp fragments with more force than necessary until one of them slit one of his fingers.

“Ow,” he gasped and retrieved his hand to look at the blood oozing out of the cut.

“Bloody fuck,” Adrian spat, seized Jongin’s wrist and pulled him up to his feet. Without releasing the wrist, he examined the cut on Jongin’s finger, frowning forlornly. “Are you insane—”

Jongin withdrew his hand from Adrian’s grip and crouched back to pick up the rest of the glass shards and set them aside on the bedside table. He could no longer bite back on the tears that betrayed his eyes and rolled down his cheeks.

Baashere came to his side and watched him intently before he nudge his head into Jongin’s
Jongin’s shoulder and rubbed against it as an endearing gesture. “Jongin!” Adrian then bellowed ferociously. “Enough!”

This time when he tried to grab hold of Jongin’s arm, Jongin sprung up and struck a side of Adrian’s face with the back of his hand. It staggered Adrian into utter shock and silence. Jongin broke into a sob as he lunged at the Godblood again and slapped him across the face once more, smearing the blood from his finger on Adrian’s cheek. Then he shoved Adrian back, fingers clawing at the Auvran’s chest.

“Let the world end!” he cried. “Let the Wyverns kill us all. Let the Seven take you away from the ground! Let us all die! But I cannot share the man I love with another. Not with your zealots, not with your people, and certainly not with Edothise! You cannot lie with her and then take me to your bed. You cannot treat her as your counterpart, your better half before the rest of the world but tell me that you love me behind closed doors within four walls. It isn’t fair. You are a coward. You might be a God, but you are a coward!”

He did not wait to hear Adrian’s response as he spun on his heel and marched out of the chambers. He did not stop until he reached the courtyard and stood in the middle of the brutal downpour, drenching himself in the merciless rain.

He wept, cried, screamed and no one heard him in the discord of the storm. His cry for help was as insignificant as a whisper in this rainstorm.

He had some energy to spare after all. And he exhausted every last bit of it by venting the fury within him. He was angry at himself most of all. He was the one who had willingly given his heart to someone who played with it carelessly. He was the one who yielded to a man who would never be his. He had known of the consequences and yet he had done it.

“Jongin!” he heard Adrian’s voice thunder over the howling wind and pattering rain.

“It’s okay,” Jongin cried back to him, turning around, blinking the raindrops from his eyelashes. “You don’t have to… justify yourself. I’m tired, Adrian. I can’t—”

“Please, get inside,” Adrian prompted as he stomped over to Jongin. “Nay.”

“Why the hell are you always so stubborn?” the Godblood chided. “Do you think I like doing this to you? It is hurting me more than it’s hurting you, Jongin. When you get mad, you throw a fit. I can’t even do that. I cannot afford to shut down the way you do. And do you know how much more agonizing that is? I thought you understood, Jongin… Even when the entire world didn’t, I thought you did.”

“I… I do,” Jongin said loud enough for Adrian to hear him in the impassioned uproar of the thunderstorm. “But I never dreamed of… love being so… complicated.”

“Neither have I,” Adrian said, crossing whatever gap there was left between them. “I never thought I could ever… love like this. No Godblood or God has ever… fallen for a mortal like I have. But I have, Jongin. I love you with every piece of myself that only I own. And it’s all yours. I promise you.”

Jongin thought the last of his strength was depleted but then Adrian kissed him, taking his face into his hands. The rainwater skidded past their mouths like a cascade as Adrian desperately kissed the droplets from Jongin’s lips, his thumbs pushing back the wet locks of Jongin’s hair draped over his cheeks.

In the dead of the night, Jongin once again conceded defeat to the honeyed words of the barbarous Godblood he loved, the kiss—the eye of the murderouse storm.
Jongin began shaking the instant they found shelter in the palace stables. The place stank, but Jongin hardly minded. He waited Adrian to shut the doors of the stable before lighting an oil lamp. They stood in silence for a long moment while some of the horses whinnied softly around them. Jongin looked around for Thelme. Failing to spot her, he turned back to Adrian. He wiped the water rivulets from his face with his hands and hugged his quaking body, clenching his chattering teeth. Sighing, Adrian brushed past him and found an empty stall. “Come here,” he called kindly. With hesitance, Jongin walked over to the stall and stood still while Adrian gathered some worn-out rags and spread them over the straw on the ground. He then faced Jongin with a careworn expression.

“Maybe we should go inside and get you warm,” said Adrian, touching Jongin’s waist with a hand.

Jongin quickly shook his head and sat down on the makeshift bed. “I don’t want to,” he murmured in a shaky breath. “I don’t want to go back there just yet.” Adrian lowered to his knees and peeled his wet shirt off, discarding it on the ground. Jongin eyed his bandaged arm and frowned at the blood stains.

“You’re bleeding,” he rasped, bringing a hand to Adrian’s abdomen. “What happened to your arm?”

Adrian gave his arm a brief once-over and took hold of a side of Jongin’s head. Jongin helplessly leaned into the warm touch. “Just an unfortunate day at the garrison.”

“It looks bad.”

“It looks worse than it is. Please, don’t worry.”

Eyebrows knitted in obvious worry, Jongin laid a hand over the bandage. “I want to worry about you, Adrian,” he said. “And I should be allowed to. Won’t you give me at least that right?”

Adrian gave a cut to the quick look. Jongin fell silent.

“You have all the right, Jongin,” he muttered, keeping his gaze sharp and steady. “I know you wanted it to be you back there when Edothise accompanied me. “Trust me. I did, too.”

Jongin closed his eyes. “But you didn’t do anything to manifest that, Adrian. I do not think you understand how I feel.”

“I cannot feel what you feel, Jongin,” he said lovingly. “But it doesn’t mean that I overlook or slight your pain. I want to be with you to ease all that pain. Every time I leave, I cannot wait to be back in your arms and it is all that I think about.”

He wrapped his other hand around one of Jongin’s and lifted it to his lips to kiss Jongin’s injured finger.

“Nothing hurts me more than knowing that you’re hurting and I’m incapable of doing anything to stop it,” Adrian said and brushed his lips on the cut again. Jongin pulled the hand away from Adrian’s lips and slid it into the Godblood’s wet hair. “I’m sorry,” he said, and he meant it. “I shouldn’t have called you a coward and pulled that stunt in front of Edothise.”

When Adrian suddenly quietened, Jongin averted his gaze, refusing to let Adrian look at the tears welling up in his eyes. Was he even angry anymore or was it just despair? He was too enervated to think and to fight the tears.
As he began to weep, Adrian pulled him close and kissed his temple. Burying his face in the Godblood’s chest, Jongin sobbed in gasps, letting every last one of his walls down. While he wept unchecked, Adrian held him gently without uttering a word.

Then when Jongin had finally simmered down, though barely regaining his aplomb, he pulled back and snivelled, wiping his cheeks. He found Adrian’s dark eyes glistening before the Auvran blinked the tears away. He then sealed Jongin’s mouth with a kiss and gently pushed Jongin to recline on the straw-strewn ground. Once all their soaked clothes had come off, Jongin thawed into the ground as Adrian slid into him with nothing but sweat, spit, and the dampness of rainwater.

* * *

Spent and war-weary, they lay in the dark and quiet of the stable, their limbs tangled around one another. The silence was more discomforting than dull ache in Jongin’s hips. Adrian was driving into a moment ago.

Jongin decided to break it, his head resting atop Adrian’s sweaty chest. “When do you think the rain will stop?”

Adrian took a moment to reply. “I don’t know.”

Exhaling laboriously, Jongin sat up and vacantly stared at the purpling cut on his finger. Then he felt Adrian’s hand press against his back. “Talk,” he heard the Godblood say.

Jongin glanced back at Adrian, who sat up and sighed. “What?”

“Tell me everything you want to tell me,” said Adrian. “I want you to talk to me. What’s grieving you. What I’m doing wrong. What I can do to rectify it. Tell me, Jongin. Don’t suffer in silence, especially when I’m here for you.”

Taking that as a point of departure, Jongin said, “I don’t think you are here for me, Adrian.” He looked away, bowing his head low.

“I’m… I don’t know. I know that it’s unjust of me to want this in a dire time like this. And I feel horrible for wanting you all to myself. You are doing everything you can, I know. But sometimes, it feels as though… I love you more than you love me.”

“Jongin—”

“Nay, let me finish,” he cut Adrian off. “I am not accusing you of not loving me. Nevertheless, I am willing to do more for you than you would for me. I do not your grand gestures, Adrian. I would profess my love for you even if the world would stone me to death. That is the kind of person I am. But you… You don’t understand how hurtful it is to know that you would rather take a wife and pretend to be someone else than to admit to the world that you are an Alsiramene and you love an Aevayl. You say that all of this is your destiny, but you desire to become a God. It is what you dreamed of. You want the people to worship you. You want the Seven to revere and respect you. You said you aren’t selfish. But perhaps you are,

after all. When you asked me what my dreams are, you found them mundane. Because your dreams are… not what mortals covet.”

He chose his next words carefully.

“I realize I cannot be a part of those dreams,” he let out. “What are you saying, Jongin?” Adrian
Jongin swallowed and clenched his eyes. “Do you remember when you said that I could ask anything, and you’ll give it to me?”

Adrian stiffened. Then in a murmur, he said, “You want me… to let you go.” Jongin lifted his teary eyes to meet Adrian’s. He could not recognize the reaction Adrian’s ashen expression emoted.

Adrian turned his face away and sat in what felt like an unbreakable silence. But he soon spoke again. “Where will you go?”

That was what he had to say after Jongin told him he wanted to leave? “I don’t know. Helathor says that he could get me away from here.”

Adrian set his jaw tight and scrubbed his face with his palms. “So, you have discussed about this with Helathor first before telling me. Or are just informing me out of courtesy?” Jongin blinked. “Nay,” he breathed out. “It is not like that.”

“Then what is it like, Jongin?” Adrian spat, turning to him with a glower. “Am I the last to know of your little scheme to flee? Am I such a tyrant to you that I have driven you astray?”

“Adri—” He stopped with a gasp when Adrian caught his wrist in a grip.

“Can you go on without me? Because I cannot without you,” he snapped, fist tightening around Jongin’s wrist.

Jongin stared at him, mouth agape. “You will choose to be a God. You cannot be with me, anyway. And… you did say that if I wanted to leave, you’d let me.”

“That was before I fell this hard for you, Jongin,” he snarled. “Regardless of whether or not I will become a God, can you live without me? Just answer me that question.” Jongin looked at him in pain and with tears. “I will… have to.”

Adrian released his wrist and pulled away, gazing blankly into the dark. His breathing was ragged and laboured, no different from a horse’s. Jongin turned away and shed a few tears in silence.

A moment later as Adrian’s breaths steadied, he said, “If that is what you truly want,” he said and rose to his full height, putting his clothes on.

Jongin could not believe his ears. He gawked at his heartless lover in astonishment. “Is that all?” he asked, a palpable tremor in his voice.

Adrian paused to look down at him.

“Is that all?” Jongin repeated, his heart pounding with a gruelling ache. “You won’t… stop me?” “What can I possibly do to stop you?” Adrian asked with a frown on his brows. “You have made up your mind, haven’t you?” Jongin scoffed, though a tear trickled down his cheek. “So, this is the love you have for me. You would rather watch me walk away than admit to the world that I am your lover.”

“That has nothing to do with this.” “It has everything to do with this, Adrian. If even you would not be my support, then I truly am on my own.” But worst of all, he did not even have the solace of his child’s father.

“You don’t get it,” Adrian growled. “I can’t do what you want me to do.”

“You are a Godblood. What are you afraid of? The Auvran law or your worshippers’
“condemnation?”
“Jongin.”

“Nay,” Jongin said and rose. “You want me. But you want to be just your secret. I can’t be your secret, Adrian. My love for you is too real for that.”

look.

“Fuck,” Adrian swore and stormed out of the stall without another

* * *

The end of the week came with the news of a flood that killed hundreds of Auvrans on the outskirts of the city. Farmers and fishers mostly. Jongin heard the other servants talking about how King Raagathor was losing his sanity with the ceaseless storm.

The Othadian King and Queen, and their guards were unable to journey back to Othadia. The roads were flooded, the heavens continued to weep, the crops died, the waves were untameable.

Then even more bad news came. A missive reading that there had been a Wyvern attack in the Kingdom of Dtriaka in the Eighth Realm.

That night, no one slept in the palace. Servants gathered around the furnace in the kitchen that kept them warm. The King gathered his court to discuss solutions to this cataclysm. Priests and Soothsayers were summoned to carry out rituals that would appease the Seven’s anger and pave a safe path for their soldiers to war with the enemies of the Nine Realms.

Nothing stopped the cloudbursts.

“Look at you, shaking like a leaf,” Melanctha said as she draped a blanket around Jongin’s shivering shoulders. “Why don’t you move a little closer to the furnace.”

Jongin smiled and shook his head. “I’m fine, Melanctha. Thank you,” he muttered and turned back to the cook, who was singing a doleful, sombre song Jongin had never heard before.

Adrian had not tried to see him since their rift in the stables two nights ago. And every day that went without Adrian summoning him up to his chambers doubled Jongin’s anxiety and agitation. What if Adrian had finally tired of him and his whinges?

Oh, to the Seven we pray, Please show us our way, In the kernel of a disarray, In You our hopes we lay.

The song was accompanied by the gentle plucks of the lute.

Jongin slid a hand into the blanket he was cocooned in and rubbed his protruding belly. It was growing. He could feel it now nudging into his palm when he touched it. His baby is growing. It would not be long before someone noticed his swollen belly. As the days passed, he began worrying more and more. For his own safety and the safety of his child.

His torpid and weak state did not help either. There was soreness everywhere in his burning body. Nonetheless, he tried to help the other servants as much as he could to not to seem like he was lazing around for food since his master hadn’t summoned him for work.

“It’s sad for the families of the people who died in the flood and the Wyvern attack,” Jongin suddenly mused out loud and Riolda arched an eyebrow at him.

“It’s sad for the family of anyone who dies,” she replied in a murmur. “Will the monarch compensate for those families?”

Riolda looked at him funny. “The King did not murder them.”

Jongin frowned. “But it is still a monarch’s duty to care for the people’s welfare.”
“I know,” she sighed. “But they cannot recompense everyone by exhausting the government funds, can they?”

Jongin supposed they could not, especially with the hefty expenses of a brewing war. But there must still be some way the monarch could aid the poor victims of the calamities.

His eyes eventually caught the man looming in the shadows at the mouth of the kitchen. Evzen stood by the door and listened to the song with a pleasant smile on his face before he turned it in Jongin’s way.

He then nodded his head sideways, beckoning Jongin to follow him.

Jongin silently excused himself, hugging the blanket around his shoulders, and went after Prince Evzen.

They walked out to the corridors that was deserted to the night and the cold of the downpour. Evzen leaned over the balustrade and grinned at the rain.

Jongin joined him at his side and they watched the rain go pitter-patter on the ground for a long, quiet moment.

“How have you been?” Evzen inquired at length.

Jongin exhaled a heavy breath and said, “I have had better days.” “I suppose we all have,” Evzen sighed as well. He then turned and faced Jongin. “I apologize if I had hurt you that day.”

Jongin shook his head. “You weren’t saying anything that wasn’t true.”

Licking his lips, Evzen looked away once more. “I care for you, Jongin. In spite of what you may think of me.”

“I do not… think anything of you.”

Evzen laughed with a cocked brow. “Really? You think absolutely nothing of me?”

“Well, I did not mean it like that. I think you are… a good man… with good intentions. A little rough around the edges but still a decent enough man.”

“I’ll take the compliments,” Evzen said and Jongin smiled. The conviviality gradually died from Evzen’s expression, replaced by something more earnest and serious. “I had missed you, Princeling.”

Jongin felt his heartbeat quicken then. He was happy to know that there was at least one person who was thinking of him. That was not fair. He knew Adrian was thinking of him, too.

“I had missed you too, Prince Evzen,” he admitted embarrassedly.

“I heard that you’re leaving as soon as the storm ends, and the seas are calm again.”

Jongin froze. “Did… Helathor tell you that?” He had forgotten that the scholar and Evzen had quite a rapport.

“He was not meaning any harm, do not fret. He wanted at least one friend sending you off with a goodbye.”

That warmed Jongin’s heart. “So, you are still my friend?”

Evzen smiled and stepped closer. Jongin stilled when the taller man held up a hand to his face, cupping his cheek. His soothing blue eyes bored into Jongin’s, as though they were searching for answers.

He then withdrew and dropped his hand from Jongin’s face. “You will always have a friend in me. 
What do you need me to get you for your journey?”

Jongin let the blanket fall to the ground as he lurched forward and threw his arms around Evzen. Startled by the sudden embrace, Evzen froze.
“Thank you,” Jongin mewled.

Evzen slowly enveloped Jongin in his strong arms. “I hate that you are hurting because of him.” Pulling back, Jongin sniffed and picked up the blanket to cover himself again.
“Also, you’re burning up,” Evzen remarked offhandedly. “You are running a fever, Princeling. Perhaps a visit to the infirmary will not be a bad idea.”

Jongin knew he was running a fever since the night he was drenched in the rain. But it was nothing serious. He did not want to hog up space in the infirmary and use up the medicines when they could be of more use to the servants who had a worse condition than him.
“I’d survive a couple of nights of torpor,” he told Evzen. “I’d rather not bother the healers. They are already too busy with the other patients.”
“Don’t be silly,” Evzen kindly chided. “I will have them tend to you.”

“Nay, please,” Jongin insisted. “It’s not that bad. I just went out in the rain and caught a cold. It’ll wear off in a day.”

Though Evzen did not look convinced, he did not try to persuade Jongin any further. “All right. But you don’t play the martyr if your health worsens, do you understand? Ask for help. Mine, especially.”

Jongin smiled. “I will remember that.”

Evzen took a breath and nodded once before he strode past Jongin.

All of a sudden, Jongin’s chest felt light. As though he could breathe again in the heavy, clogged air of the night. He stared into the rain and wondered if Adrian were doing the same this very moment, thinking of Jongin.
Can you go on without me? Because I cannot without you…

Jongin refused to believe it. Adrian’s heart and character were strong enough to tough out and withstand any sort of obstacle. Going on without Jongin would be not as challenging as Adrian made it out to be. And when he became a God, he would not even remember Jongin’s name.

While he was lost in his thoughts, his eyes landed on the flickering flame of a torch in a corridor far ahead that led to the stairs of the bell tower. Jongin blinked his narrowing eyes to get a clearer sight through the flurry of rain.

It did not look like a guard on patrol. After a moment of scrutinization, he realized that it was a woman. Her dark skin was instantly recognizable.

What was Edothise doing out here at this hour, Jongin wondered, as she wended her way up the bell tower. The light of the torch soon died, and Jongin returned to the kitchen to join the rest of the servants again.

For the next two days, Jongin stayed curled up in his pallet, swathed in blankets Riolda, Melanctha, and Dianfe had lent him when they found out that he had come down with a fever.

Frida, Nilos’ wife, a servant, who also doted on Jongin as Melanctha did, brought him a brew to ease his soreness and reduce the fever. It helped a little but not enough for him to walk straight or relieve
the bleariness of his eyes or the heaviness of his head. When he finally began to worry that his child
might be suffering the consequences of his fever, he decided to see the healers.
Riolda accompanied him to the infirmary that evening, constantly
keeping an arm wound about Jongin’s waist to keep him steady.

Much to their dismay, there were already far too many patients for the infirmary to accommodate
when they arrived there. The healers were not ready to attend to a page’s ailment, so they dismissed
him, saying that he would get better on his own in a few days.

“Assholes,” Riolda swore under her breath as they started back to the room. “You must tell Prince
Adrianus that you are sickly. He will do something.”
Jongin shook his head weakly. “He has a lot on his plate.” “You are also his responsibility, are you
not?”
“I am no one’s responsibility,” Jongin muttered, his throat sore. “The
healers are right. I will get better in a few days.”

“I will try to get you some Feverfew tea,” Riolda said, stroking Jongin’s back as she steered him
towards the basement.
Before they could even reach it, Jongin staggered to a stop and bent over, retching hard before he
threw up into a bush.
Riolda quickly grabbed the back of his neck and patted his back.
“Holy Seven,” she rasped as Jongin heaved his dinner. “There, there.”

With the sour aftertaste of vomit in his mouth, Jongin straightened
up and gasped for some breath. “I’m sorry,” he said apologetically.

“Don’t be,” Riolda said and took hold of his arm. “Maybe a squeeze
of lemon might help with the nausea.”

Jongin was not sure if it would. He did not care. He wanted to get to his bed and sleep forever. Not
that sleep would be any comfort right now, anyway.

“Come on,” Riolda grunted and ushered him past the courtyard, actively avoiding the rain. “Oh.”
She then came to an abrupt halt and Jongin also stopped to look at what had stopped them.
Adrian.

He was with Evzen and Edothise, engaged in a conversation that had his eyebrows knotted in a
frown. Jongin felt sicker.
Evzen. He said that he would help if Jongin needed him to. For the sake of his unborn child, Jongin
decided to swallow his pride and hold out his hands.
He retrieved his arm from Riolda’s brace and started wobbling towards Evzen. The agony was far
too brain-numbing for Jongin to concern himself with Adrian’s presence there.
Evzen caught him approaching immediately and zoned out of the conversation he was having with
his brother and Edothise. He frowned in Jongin’s way.
Adrian quickly followed his distrait brother’s gaze and his eyes
widened, finding Jongin.

“Prince Evzen,” Jongin croaked meekly.

“Jongin, are you all right?” Evzen asked, stepping forward at once with a hand catching Jongin’s
arm when the latter faltered a step.

“I’m ill,” Jongin said. Even his breath felt too hot to graze his
It was not fair of Jongin to use his friendship with Evzen to get a “special treatment” while the other servants suffered. But they were not responsible for another life that was growing inside them. Jongin would never forgive himself if he let anything happen to his baby due to his pride and sense of justice.

“I can see that,” Evzen said.

“The healers are too occupied,” Jongin muttered, his blurry eyes briefly moving to Adrian, who gawked at him in stupefaction.

“Do not worry,” Evzen then reassured him. “Come with me. I’ll have the healers tend to you in no time.”

“Thank you.”

He took a step to follow Evzen and the world started to spin around him, engulfing him in a whirlpool of sickness. When he teetered, almost dropping to the ground, Adrian caught him and lifted him into his arms.

“Brother,” Jongin heard Evzen protest.

“I’ll take care of him,” Adrian said. The roughness in his voice reverberated down Jongin’s body.

“I will get the healers,” Edothise said.

“Nay, I will summon them myself,” Adrian said sternly and started towards the staircase with Jongin in his arms.

Jongin buried his face in the warmth of Adrian’s chest and closed his eyes.

* * *

When he woke, he wasn’t sure if it were night or day. It was dark. He was lying on something far softer than his straw pallet. The room smelled of the ocean. And Jongin instantly knew that he was in Adrian’s chambers. His head felt lighter. His mouth no longer tasted like sand. He sat up and glanced around the dark room.

“Go back to sleep.”

He turned with a start and found Adrian perched on a chaise lounge, slouching and stroking Baashere’s thick fur as the tiger slept on the floor at Adrian’s feet.

Jongin glanced at the ewer on the bedside table and smelled the fragrance of Feverfew tea wafting in the air. There was something sticky on his forehead, too.

“The healers applied some balm to lower your body temperature,” Adrian said coolly as he rose from the chaise lounge and walked over to the bed.

Did Edothise know that Jongin was resting in Adrian’s bed? Jongin almost laughed at his own pettiness. Of all the things, this was the thought that bothered him the most? Edothise?

“Here,” Adrian said, pouring Jongin a cup of the tea. “Drink this.”

Jongin did not argue as he accepted the lukewarm tea and tossed it back in a single gulp. It was bitter and unpleasant.

Adrian then lowered to sit on the bed, running a hand through his hair. “How are you feeling now?” he inquired, finally meeting Jongin’s gaze.
The eye contact did not last for that Jongin looked away. “Better,”
he murmured.

“You slept through the whole night and morning.” Jongin’s eyes widened. “What?”
“I’m glad you did,” Adrian said, his tone contrite and gentle. “Rest some more.” He then stood back
up.

“Where are you… going?” Jongin asked in a small, timorous voice.

Adrian drew the eiderdown over Jongin again and pulled away. “I have matters to attend to. I told no
one to come in while I’m gone. But Baashere will keep you company.”

Jongin glanced over at the dozing tiger. Then licking his dry lips, he
said, “Like how a predator keeps his prey company for lunch?”

A light banter, Jongin thought, might defuse the tension. But Adrian had no plans on entertaining it.

He continued to stare at Jongin with an impassive expression.

Jongin lowered his head. “Can we… talk?”

“When I return,” Adrian said point-blank after a few heartbeats of silence. He did not say anything
more as he strode out of the bedchamber.

Jongin sank back into the bed and snuggled into the eiderdown,
basking in Adrian’s scent.

* * *

He was awakened later that day by a tickling growl and a foul breath huffing against his face. His
eyes slowly flickered open to the velvety wetness rubbing against his cheek and the beast’s striking
eyes.

With a startling gasp, Jongin jolted up and backhanded the beast that was hovering on top of him on
its nose. Baashere growled in pain and leaped off the bed at once, blinking hard. He then quickly rubbed his
nose with a paw, as though to soothe the pain on the side of his nose Jongin had struck.

“Oh, Gods, I’m sorry,” Jongin rasped and crawled out of the bed. Kneeling on the ground, he
cautiously approached the tiger. “Are you… okay?”

Baashere did not look at him as he continued to lick his paw and rub his nose repeatedly. When he
was finally done, he turned his lazy gaze to Jongin, who lifted a careful hand to the tiger’s powerful
back to stroke his winsome, striped coat.

Though he expected Baashere to bite his hand off, the tiger sat still and let Jongin pet him.

Jongin grinned like a fool, making himself comfortable at Baashere’s side. He soon planted both of
his hands in the beast’s luscious fur and scratched it excitedly.

Within moments, Baashere was melting on the floor, rolling from side to side, demanding Jongin to
scratch him harder.

“Your master hasn’t been paying you much attention either, has he?” Jongin laughed, dragging his
fingernails along Baashere’s tailbone as the tiger stretched.

Once they were both fully awake, Jongin rose to his feet and glanced at the closed doors of the
balcony. It was still pouring hard.

His stomach grumbled, and he clasped a hand over it. Baashere looked up at him with a start, eyes
wide and ears sticking up.

“Your master’s baby is hungry,” Jongin muttered and started toward
the doors. Baashere surprisingly followed.

It was really late, Jongin was not sure he could get anything to eat in the kitchen. Perhaps there
would be some morsels of bread and leftovers he could get his hands on.
The hallways were as empty as they usually were at nights, barring the guards who were stationed
outside the chambers. But none of them bothered Jongin or pinned him with a stink-eye like they
normally did. Jongin realized that they were hesitating to even look at him.
He looked down at Baashere, who strode with majestic pride and resplendent poise, each of his
strides taken with a predatory instinct at his side. Jongin stifled a smile.
Like master, like pet, Jongin thought. Only a moment ago, Baashere was at his most vulnerable,
baring himself to Jongin to please him. But the instant he stepped out of the chambers, he once again
strode like a beast worthy of bearing the title of a Godblood’s loyal companion.
Behind closed doors, Adrian bared himself to Jongin, too.

He frowned at the thought of Adrian. He was not sure where he stood with Adrian now. Did Adrian
detest him now? Did he believe Jongin was capable of going on without him?
Jongin was uncertain if he, in fact, could. But he would have to. For the sake of his child.

Baashere followed him into the kitchen. “Shh,” Jongin told the tiger, looking around to see if he
could find anything to eat. He moved quietly, careful not to wake the cooks up.
Baashere, on the other hand, skipped around with excitement until he found a slab of leftover turkey
placed on a shelf above his reach. He rose to his hind legs and clung onto the shelf with his front
legs, his nose twitching eagerly.
Jongin grabbed himself half a loaf of bread and hurried over to Baashere to steal him the meat.
Baashere lowered back to the ground and nuded his nose into Jongin’s hip, demanding the meat.
“Come on,” Jongin whispered and stormed out of the kitchen with
the bread and the hunk of cold turkey. Baashere galloped after him.

When they found a good, secluded spot outside the kitchen, Jongin plumped on the floor and tossed
Baashere the meat. The tiger gnawed into it greedily at once.
Jongin tore a piece from the bed and chewed it with difficulty. Although he was never a picky eater,
his appetite was constantly dampened these days. He wondered how much of it had to do with the
fever and how much of it was due to his pregnancy.
He glanced over to Baashere, who was now busy licking his mouth
clean.

“I think I will name him Nacius,” Jongin said, caressing his belly. “I always dreamed that if I had a
son, he’d be called Nacius. Nacius Dragovan.”
It probably was not advisable for him to stay out in the cold for long. Baashere waited patiently until
Jongin was done eating. Then deciding to return to Adrian’s chambers, Jongin stood up from the
ground, dusting the breadcrumbs from his pants.
“Let’s head back,” he told the beast. “He will not be happy with either of us if he knew we took
off.”
He paused, however, when he saw a small fire guttering in the corridor of the bell tower. It was
Edothise.
“What is she… doing up there?” Jongin mused to himself, eyebrows scrunched up in concentration,
and watched her disappear up the stairs. When Jongin started towards the bell tower, Baashere
quietly escorted him.
As he reached the bell tower, he was jerked to a stop when the tiger caught the sleeve of his tunic
between its razor-like teeth and tugged at it. Jongin panicked for a moment before he noticed that
Baashere was not attacking him but stopping him.
“Let go, boy,” Jongin said and pulled his sleeve free.

He then peered into the corridor and found a handful of Othadian guards, who usually accompanied
Edothise and her parents, roaming the area.
“What are they up to?” Jongin muttered and slipped past the corridor when the guards were
preoccupied with cursing the rain. Baashere followed suit, his footsteps just as light as Jongin’s. What could Edothise possibly be doing up in the bell tower? Jongin was very certain that there were Auvran guards placed up there. But it did not seem like there were any tonight. Baashere wagged his tail wildly as he hurtled after Jongin up the tower stairs. But the tiger eventually came to a stop and flopped on the stairs.

“Tired?” Jongin asked in a whisper. “Stay here.” He left Baashere behind and proceeded up the rest of the stairs. By the time he reached the first floor of the tower, he was short-winded. He slowed his pace as he edged closer to the only room on the floor. It had to be a respite room for the guards. The door was almost shut close, a small gap leaving it ajar. He was right, there weren’t any palace guards in the tower tonight. Who could have given them orders to leave their posts? He froze dead to the ground when he heard a string of obscene moans and the sound of creaking woods coming from the other side of the door. His heart almost stopped.

With hesitant steps, he neared the room. The noise loudened. With his blood thundering his temples, he slowly pushed the door open.

Jongin blanked, his mind unable to sort out a reaction. His eyes assessed the sight before him with confusion and horror.

Jever had Edothise’s hair caught in a fist, her skirt lifted, and her bodice unlaced. Bent over a table, Jever thrust into her from behind as she cried out in pleasure. Then straightening up, she curled an arm around Jever’s neck and pulled him down for a kiss.

When she drew back, her eyes instantly darted to the intruder at the door.

“Nay,” she gasped and pulled away from Jever. “Jever!”

Jongin blinked, mouth agape and body trembling. Jever turned to him and gawked at him in something like terror. The terror swiftly transformed into rage.

“You little bitch,” he spat and drew his sword as he started for Jongin with wrathful stomps.

Though Jongin registered that he had to run now, he could not move his feet. He did not stand on a very high moral ground, as he himself was having an affair with another woman’s husband. But still, he did not understand why Edothise would do this being Adrian’s wife. And of all the people, it was with this swine Jever?!

“He’s going to kill you,” Jongin blurted out without a forethought.

Edothise fixed her clothes, her face horrified and eyes almost popping out. Jever gripped his jaw.

“Nay. Because you won’t be alive to tell him.” Jongin turned on his heel then and fled, racing towards the stairs. “Guards!” Jever shrieked, alerting the Othadian guards.

Jongin jerked to a halt and panted, realizing that he would be seized by the guards if he ran downstairs. So, he turned to the staircase that led to the floors above. Jever relentlessly chased after him, grunting like a feral animal.

“I’m going to skin you alive and hang you like a dead pig,” Jever called out as Jongin bolted upstairs.

Nay, nay, nay. What have I done…

Jever would not let him get out of this tower alive. And there would not be many places he could run to when he reached the top of the tower. And no one would hear him cry for him in this storm either. He heard the guards pursuing him with heavy, loud footsteps.

I’m going to die.
He never thought his death would be in Jeyar’s hands after all. The man who started it all.

With his heart clamouring in fear and blood pulsing viciously, Jongin stumbled onto the second floor, sobbing for air and with tears streaking his cheeks. He did not want to die like this. “You never should have come up here, Princeling.” Jeyar cooed, the threat as real as the danger Jongin’s life was in at the moment.

He was right, Jongin never should have gone up there.

The second floor had no rooms for him to hide in. Old, broken furniture and weapons thronged the area, smothered in dust and cobwebs. He sucked in a sharp, thick breath when he spotted a blunt halberd. In an attempt to reach it, Jongin knocked over a table and took a dive onto the ground. Falling on his back, he mewed in agony, sobbing hard. When he tried to push himself back on his feet, he hissed at the sting in his ankle. The guards gushed onto the floor after Jeyar, and Jongin stood paralyzed.

“I won’t tell anyone,” he bleated, weeping, pleading. “I swear, Jeyar. I will tell no one.”

Jeyar smirked. He raised a hand and said, “Remember this?” He pointed at a scar in his palm. “I finally get to pay back for what you did.”

Jongin dragged his hurt leg to retreat a few steps. “Please,” he begged in a tiny voice.

Jeyar clicked his tongue, shaking his head as he advanced forward. “I’m going to make sure that it hurts like a bitch.”

He swung his sword and Jongin clenched his eyes. That was when the head-splitting roar halted everyone in place. Jongin’s eyes flung open to see Baashere pouncing on the guards, ripping their necks off at once.

There was nothing but belligerence in the beast as it struck the men down with the sheer weight of its paws and strength of its jaw. Its roars thundered louder than thunder itself. The guards retaliated immediately, lunging at the tiger with their swords.

“Nay!” Jongin screamed when one of the blades lacerated a side of Baashere’s ribs.

With a shrill growl, Baashere turned and attacked the guard who had cut him. “Kill that thing!” Jeyar ordered, maintaining a safe distance from the tiger.

Jongin turned and grabbed the halberd before lurching forward to Jeyar. “Stop it!” he cried, swinging the halberd at Jeyar as Baashere continued to snarl at the swords that wounded him. “Don’t hurt him!”

Jeyar blocked the blow and disarmed Jongin with ease. “Oh, so you’ve developed an affection for the beast,” he scoffed.

“You are the beast!” Jongin bayed, snivelling pathetically. He then cried once more, begging the guards to stop.
Baashere’s final roar killed a part of Jongin’s own soul as a guard drove his sword through Baashere’s body and kicked the tiger to the ground.

“Nay!” Jongin screamed, watching Baashere fall to the floor, his beautiful fur now blotched with horrid blood.

“Now, it’s your turn,” Jevar said and stepped forward.

Jongin turned and ran as fast as his tired legs allowed him. He cried for help, choking on his sob. Jevar calmly walked after him. “No one will hear you, Princeling,” he said. “Not in this goddamn rainstorm.”

The bell.

Biting his tongue, Jongin raced up the remaining stairs and reached the bell. He almost caught its rope when Jevar tripped his foot, causing him to drop to the ground.

“I’ll see you on the other side, Prince Jongin of Warinia,” Jevar spat and flourished his sword.

Jongin grunted and cried as he struggled to crawl toward the bell, stretching an arm to grab the rope of the bell. As soon as he caught it, he tugged at it with every silver of strength he had left. The pealing bell almost deafened him.

He was going to die. He was going to die.

And then the roar disrupted even the cacophony of the storm. Baashere, bleeding and wounded gravely, leaped off the ground and sprung on Jevar, latching his teeth around Jevar’s neck before he snapped his jaw and severed Jevar’s head from his body.

Jongin, breathless and in disbelief, gawped at Jevar’s decapitated body collapse on the ground along with his severed head in a pool of blood.

Baashere took a few wobbly steps closer to Jongin before he too dropped to the ground beside Jongin.

“Baashere,” Jongin let out, voice thick with sob, when he finally found it.

Baashere’s breathing shallowed, the white haw of his wondrous eyes curtaining them as he slowly closed them.

Jongin let his tears fall uncontrolledly, sliding an arm around the tiger’s grubby, bloodied coat of fur and buried his face in Baashere’s neck. He continued to sob until the tiger stiffened, breathless and lifeless.

Even when he heard footsteps approach him, he did not part from Baashere.

“Jongin.”

Jongin finally lifted his head to look up at Adrian, who was staring at his fallen companion with a heaving chest.

“Baashere,” Adrian let out, dropping to his knees.

“He… protected me,” Jongin said quietly and hugged the unmoving body of the tiger again. Adrian held a hand to Baashere’s head and curled an arm around Jongin to hold him close. They then silently sobbed in each other’s embrace. The storm had died, leaving nothing but an ominous quiet behind.
Shuddering in the eiderdown, Jongin idly stared at the clear morning sky through the balcony door. He could hear cheery voices from the courtyard, the servants were relishing in the end of the murderous storm and the sunlight that returned to them. Jongin refused to believe that the end of the storm brought good tidings.

No matter how much he tried to shake himself out of it, he could not recover from the shock of last night’s events.

Jevar was dead. Most of the Othadian guards were injured severely. And Baashere…

Baashere.

When Jongin was not occupied with his own grief, he noted that he had never seen Adrian cry. Not like this. He had never seen Adrian mourn. And a part of him knew that Adrian would have mourned losing Jongin all the same.

He blamed himself for causing Adrian this grief. If it weren’t for his inanity and lack of foresight, Baashere would have been alive.

Adrian returned to the chambers after a very long time, wearing a forlorn expression. It was devastating to look at.

Jongin sat up straighter on the bed and stared at him.

“How are you?” Adrian inquired with a hoarse voice, walking over to the bed.

Jongin lifted a hand and wrapped it around Adrian’s. A reluctant moment later, Adrian lowered to take a seat on the bed. “I’m sorry,” Jongin breathed out, eyes stinging with fresh tears. “If it weren’t for me—”

“Don’t, Jongin,” Adrian cut him off with a hand cupping Jongin’s face. “I would have lost you if Baashere hadn’t…” He closed his eyes and swallowed hard. “But you’ve lost him now.”

A tear dribbled down Adrian’s cheek and Jongin leaned in to kiss his lidded eyes one by one. “He was my first… friend,” Adrian muttered. “He was always there.”

“I know,” Jongin replied, placing a kiss on Adrian’s cheekbones. “I know how much you loved him.”

Adrian slid his hand around the back of Jongin’s neck, pulling him closer. “Edothise admitted her crime,” he then said.

Jongin pulled back, blinking away his tears. “What did she say?” Adrian struggled to get the words out. “That she was with Jevar.” Dropping his eyes, Jongin squeezed Adrian’s hand in his. “And?” “I am pleading my father to offer her amnesty,” Adrian said. “And Jevar’s family will not be compensated. The King and Queen of Othadia were to return home as soon as the trial is over.”

“Wait, you are pleading for her amnesty?” Jongin scowled and retrieved his hand. “Why would you do that?”

Adrian gave a hurt look. “I do not have the morale to punish her while I committed the same crime. The only difference is that she got caught and I didn’t.” “It’s different, Adrian. We love each other.”
“I was still married to her by law.” Adrian hung his head. “And now, I am dissolving our marriage.”

“What?” Was that even possible? In Warinia, marriage annulments were scarce, although permissible. But Jongin was not sure about the Auvran law. “She is renounced from my court and dismissed as my consort,” Adrian sighed. “Castellanos is not at all happy with his daughter right now.”

“Oh.”

Adrian’s limpid eyes met Jongin’s again.

“Did… Prince Evzen… say anything?” Jongin asked. “About his… Auxiliary?”

“He is glad that you’re safe. That was all that he said to me.”

They sat in silence for a long moment. Jongin was already missing Baashere watching them from where he sat in his usual spot near the balcony.

“The rain has stopped.” Adrian remarked at length. Jongin kept his gaze low. “It has,” he murmured. “My father would summon you as a witness at Edothise’s trial. I don’t want you to get sucked into this.”

“I don’t want to either,” Jongin said. He already had enough on his plate. He could not deal with this now.

Adrian turned his face away. “I made arrangements,” he said sotto voce without looking up. “Helathor will help you get there.” “What do you mean, Adrian?”

“I want you to be safe. There is a spot for you in a ship that will take you as far as to the Ninth Realm when the seas have calmed. You must leave forthwith.”

Jongin’s throat closed. “When is… forthwith?”

Adrian planted his face in his hands. “Tomorrow. At dawn.”

He could not bring himself to say anything and the grieving silence took over once again.

It was Adrian who spoke after a while. “Are you disappointed that I’m offering Edothise amnesty?” Jongin did not know how to answer that question. He knew that he had no right to be upset over what Edothise had done to Adrian. If anything, he was glad that their marriage was about to be annulled. But his conscience kept telling him that Baashere would still be alive if that bitch had never married Adrian in the first place.

“Is it fair?” Jongin asked. “Do you really care for her that much?”

Adrian looked surprised. “Nay, Jongin. I can forgive her because I never felt anything for her. I don’t care who she screws because… I don’t love her. Gods, I never even accepted her truly as my… wife. Every time we tried to get intimate, I stopped in the middle. I tried to be with her but all that I could think about was you.”

An explosion of emotions struck Jongin dumb that instant. “Do you mean to say that you… never actually…” Jongin trailed off and Adrian shook his head.

“Not all the way, nay. You are really the only one I want to be with.”

“Adrian…” Jongin suffered from a momentary shortage of breath. He should tell Adrian. He should let him know that he was carrying their child. This was his last chance.

But he had given the Goddess Zhesaris his word.

“You should leave,” Adrian then said. “Get as far away as you can from Auvradevas.” Jongin bit the inside of his cheek. “So… you’re letting me go?”
“You will be happier and… perhaps safer. I should have had the courage to have done this a long time ago.”

Jongin took hold of Adrian’s wrist and pulled his hand away from his face. Adrian turned to him, his eyes sorrowful and red. He was heartbroken.

Pushing the eiderdown aside, Jongin knelt up on either side of Adrian and descended down his lap. He slid one of his hands into Adrian’s hair and held a side of Adrian’s face with the other, wiping the tear from his cheek.

It had Jongin’s own tears falling. Adrian, hands on Jongin’s back, closed his eyes and leaned in. Their lips brushed gently first before they pressed for more heat. Jongin quietly cried but tasted the salt of Adrian’s tears on their lips.

They broke apart for some air, but neither of them let each other go. “Will you… make love to me?” Jongin pleaded in a soft mewl. One last time…

Adrian brushed his lips on Jongin’s eyes, kissing away the tears clumping his eyelashes together. Then grappling an arm around Jongin’s waist, he laid Jongin down on the bed and straightened up to pull his shirt off.

He bowed again to kiss Jongin’s neck, and Jongin moaned at his beard grazing the skin until it turned red. “If I had lost you,” Adrian huffed against his neck, hooking his fingers around the hem of Jongin’s tunic before lifting it over his head and tossing it to the ground. “I would have hunted Jevar down to the underworld and ripped his spine out.”

Jongin believed Adrian completely. He also noticed the apprehension in Adrian’s scowl. He feared for Jongin’s safety.

While Adrian worked on ridding Jongin of his pants, Jongin’s fingers fumbled around the laces of Adrian’s breeches. Their lips found each other again.

They took it slow. Slower and gentler they had ever been. Neither of them wanted it to end so fast. Jongin memorized every etch of Adrian’s lips on his skin, everywhere they touched and kissed him. He crimsoned and blossomed against the white sheets that soaked the tears that rolled down the corners of his eyes.

When Adrian dragged his kisses to his belly, Jongin bit his lip to muffle a whimper. And when he was finally penetrated, he hung onto Adrian like there was no tomorrow, his nails digging into Adrian’s back, his moans begging Adrian to not to stop and never pull out.

He confessed his love for Adrian one final time in a raspy whisper before he surrendered to the exhaustion.

* * *

As he returned to the basement later that day after Adrian had taken off without a word when he was asleep, Diante jumped on him and giggled.

“The sun is back!” she exclaimed.

“Diante,” Melanctha chided her and tore her away from Jongin. She, Contos, Riolda, and Eudora stared at him wordlessly for a moment.

“Is it true?” Eudora asked at long last. “Were you there when Prince Adrianus’ pet killed Jevar?”

“Did the Princess really… have an affair with him? Did you witness it?” Contos asked.

Jongin could not entertain them with answers while he was grieving so painfully. He retreated to his pallet and sank in it, hugging his knees to his chest.

“Leave him be,” Melanctha ordered. “He must be quite shaken right now.”
Riolda came to sit next to him on the pallet. “Are you all right, Jongin?”
Jongin looked at her and thought that he would miss her greatly. He would miss everyone, even Eudora. Without replying, he leaned into Riolda’s embrace and broke into a sob.
“There, there, son,” Melanctha said and draped her own arms around him. “It’s all going to be all right.”

Yes, it will.

* * *

When the dawn broke, Jongin slid out of the room without making any noise to wake the others. He wanted to see Adrian one last time before he’d join Helathor down in the bailey where Adrian said a carriage would be waiting to take him to the dock.
Dejection weighed him down when he could not find Adrian in his quarters. Had he not returned all night or was he avoiding Jongin?

Crestfallen, Jongin wended down to the bailey empty-handed. He was taking nothing with him apart from the anklet he wore.
A carriage and Helathor were awaiting him there. And much to Jongin’s surprise, so was Prince Evzen.

He did not know what overcame him as he vaulted forward into Evzen’s embrace. “You have no idea how happy I am to know that you are safe,” Evzen said, wrapping Jongin up in his arms.
Jongin shed a few tears against the Prince’s chest before he pulled back. “I’m sorry about… Jevar.”
“I would have killed him myself if he had hurt you, Jongin,” Evzen spat. “The tiger got to him before I did.”
Jongin heaved a trembling breath at the frightening memory of Baashere’s death. “What are you doing here?”

Evzen then smiled. “You need a friend to bid you farewell, don’t you?” He took Jongin’s hand and ushered him toward the carriage.
“Are you certain you want to leave, son?” Helathor asked. “It would not be easy to return once you board that ship.”

Jongin hesitated. He should not be. He had to think of his child before anything. It was not safe for an Aevayl in Auveradevas. He would go somewhere where it would be safe for him to birth the child and raise him.

He would never give him away to Zhesaris.

“I am certain.”

Evzen’s lips stretched into a weak smile. “Don’t do this for him. Do this for you, Jongin.”
“I am,” Jongin said.

Holding the carriage door open, Evzen raised Jongin’s hand to his lips and kissed the back of it. “Be safe, Princeling. And try to find your happiness.”
Jongin went in for another hug before he withdrew with tears sheening his eyes. “I can’t thank you for everything you’ve done for me, Evzen.”
“I wish there were more that I could have done for you.”

Jongin did not ignore the look of desolation in Evzen’s icy eyes.
More than two tears were broken, Jongin understood.
He leaned in for a kiss on Evzen’s cheek. “Goodbye,” he whispered. Evzen cupped Jongin’s cheek
in his hand for a moment. “Goodbye, Jongin.”

* * *

By the time they arrived at the dock, the sky had brightened, and the sun was clambering up the horizon. Ships were ready to set sail, the wayfarers kissing their wives goodbye to voyage back to the ocean for rewards after weeks of troubled waters. The smell and the salt of the sea drifted in the air along with the much-missed humidity.

Jongin nervously exited the carriage and turned to Helathor who held out a knapsack. “You’ll find some necessities in here to help you out,” the scholar informed him.

Accepting the knapsack, Jongin quickly examined its content and frowned at the scholar when he found a pouch full of gold coins. “I do not need this,” he complained.

“You will need some money to buy food and accommodation when you reach your destination. There is also a map in there so that you do not get lost. The Captain will make sure that you end up where you want to be.”

Jongin did not argue. He understood that he would need the money until he found a job to support himself. “Thank you.”

Helathor careworn face managed a smile. “Take care, son.”

Jongin returned the smile and bowed his head, hugging the knapsack to his chest. “Goodbye.”

With that, he turned to the ship Helathor directed him towards.

He paused to gaze at the bustling dock and then at the sea that awaited him. His heart swelled in pain. He would never love someone the way he loved Adrian, he thought. He began to board the ship.

“Jongin!”

He halted in his tracks and spun around to look at the warhorse that was riding towards berth. His ears almost rang when he noted the rider.

He thought his heart could burst in happiness as Adrian dismounted the horse without even hitching it to a stop and sprinted towards Jongin.

“Adrian?” Jongin let out confusedly, albeit in ecstasy.

Everyone at the dock turned their attention immediately to their Crown Prince racing through the dock without catching a breath.

He only stopped when he reached Jongin and took Jongin’s face in his hands.

“Adrian, what are you doing?” Jongin gasped, eyes widened with surprise. “I have to go.”

“Nay, you do not,” Adrian panted. His face was scarlet with elation and trepidation. “I love you,” he proclaimed out loud.

Jongin gaped at him, thunderstruck. “Adrian…”
“I love you, Jongin. And I cannot live without you,” Adrian said. “I swear to you that I can’t. You are the realest thing I have ever touched. My love for you is just as real as your love for me.”

Jongin dropped the knapsack to press his hands to Adrian’s chest and fist his shirt there. “What are you doing? Adrian, people are watching.”

Adrian clenched his jaw, his grip on Jongin’s face tightening. Without a forewarning, he rammed their mouths together and kissed Jongin out in the open, in the midst of hundreds of spectators, hard and firm and reassuringly.

Jongin simply melted into the kiss. He could cry, scream, die right now. He wouldn’t mind.

Breaking the kiss, Adrian rested his forehead on Jongin’s and said, “You are the only meaning I have to my life. Not my destiny to become a God.”

Jongin drew back a little and took hold of Adrian’s hand. “I’m not the only meaning you have to your life,” he said, bringing Adrian to his belly. Adrian looked at him in confusion. “I am with child, Adrian. Our child.” The words almost refused to come out of his mouth. He dreaded. He dreaded that when he sought for a reaction, he’d see disgust in Adrian’s face. However, Adrian only responded with disbelief.

“How?” he breathed out, looking up from Jongin’s belly.

“I didn’t know I could either,” Jongin panted. “But… I am… pregnant.”

Adrian did not pull away. What pulled them apart a moment later was a thunderous bellow that darkened the sky with overcasts.

“What’s happening?” someone shrieked from the crowd. “Is the storm back?” another cried out inauspiciously.

Adrian tightened his hand around Jongin’s, gazing up at the sky. “Nay,” he exhaled. Another bellow rumbled followed by a monstrous roar that boomed across the sea.

The alarm bells pealed from the towers as warning horns blared through the city.

“Get cover!” Adrian shouted, tugging at Jongin’s hand. “Alert the army!”

The people scrambled at once, screaming and crying, searching for refuge.

Adrian came to a halt and Jongin looked up at the Wyverns soaring towards the dock and the city. “By the Seven,” Jongin rasped, gawking at the Wyvern-infested sky.

There were at least thirty of the mighty man-eating firebreathers.

Adrian released his hand and stared at the bellowing Wyverns that were winging their way to the ground. The world was quickly falling into chaos and Jongin saw the end of it all coming for them. “Jongin,” Adrian called and took hold of Jongin’s head. “You must go.”

“What are you going to do?” Jongin wept, winded and puffing. “I love you. And I’ll be back to you even if it takes another life.”

“He was cut off by a searing kiss that felt both like a promise and a goodbye.

“Go now,” Adrian prompted him and shoved Jongin towards Helathor. “Go!”

“Come, son,” Helathor gasped and pulled Jongin away.
Adrian drew his Azurewrath and started towards the tallest berth. Jongin did not avert his gaze from Adrian and the Wyverns as one of the latter descended to the ground first. It was larger than rest, mightier, scarier. Its scales and spikes were as dark as night. The other Wyverns followed its commands.

Zairvoth.

It roared down at Adrian, plummeting right towards him.

That was when a fair-scaled Wyvern appeared from the heavens, diving down to the ground, crashing against Zairvoth with a ground-shattering roar.

Jongin recognized the Wyvern instantly. Kairvos.

Staggering Zairvoth back with a claw in the dark-scaled Wyvern’s chest, Kairvos thrusting the Wyvern Deathlord into the sea. Their thunderous bellows roared through all of Auvradevas as they grappled at each other, their fiery breaths gushing out of their fanged mouths like a flood.

“Jongin!” Helathor screeched when Jongin stopped.

Wyverns descended on the ground with thuds that shook all the stood on it. With shrieking cries and blazing breaths, they destroyed all in their paths.

“This way!” Jongin gasped at Helathor, ushering the scholar towards a building.

They stumbled to a stop, crashing the ground when a Wyvern landed before them, roaring menacingly. Behind them at sea, Kairvos and Zairvoth battled once again, diving into the water.

“Oh, Seven save us,” Helathor begged as Jongin helped him up to his feet. The Wyvern advanced toward them, loosening its jaw. They would all be dead even if the army made it here.

Just as it almost got to them, it was forced to a stop by the Azurewrath which Adrian drove into its throat.

“Adrianus,” Helathor huffed while Jongin stared breathlessly at Adrian’s glowing left arm. He turned around to meet Jongin and Helathor with glimmering, lit up eyes.

Adrian turned to the sea. “Zairvoth!” he called, driving his sword into the ground.

Kairvos retreated, heavily wounded with a side of his wings torn.

And Zairvoth shifted his attention to Adrian.

“If I am your enemy, take me first!” Adrian shouted at the Wyvern Deathlord.

With a piercing roar, Zairvoth confronted Adrian, its wings flapping to keep it afloat.

Jongin felt his heart stopped.

And so did everyone who worshipped Adrian as a God.

A gush of fire streamed out of Zairvoth’s throat and engulfed Adrian, who stood still with his chest out and hands wrapped around the grip of his sword.

“A Adrian!” Jongin cried and jerked forward only to be held back by Helathor and the other men, who tried to drag him away to safety. “Nay! Nay! Adrian!”

A lightning cracked the sky then and a thunder followed, quaking the ground. The sea cavilled with anger.

Adrian perished in the fire. He… died.

Jongin yanked himself free and dropped to his knees, feeling nothing but numbness and emptiness.
Zairvoth rose to the sky and bellowed triumphantly.

“This is the end,” a man said as Wyverns continued to menace in the background. “The Godblood had failed.”

The waves in the sea began to cavort belligerently as the clouds grumbled. Darkness fell over the realm like a blanket.

Zairvoth staggered with hesitance all of a sudden as the floor of sea quaked.

A booming roar was accompanied by the enormous creature that sprung out of the water. It had a mane, head and the body of a lion with the wings of dragon and the tail of a scorpion.

It was a Manticore, which Jongin had only read about in old books and folktales.

Ascending to the sky with extraordinary speed and strength, the Manticore struck Zairvoth with the scorpion telson on its tail. Zairvoth quickly retaliated, shooting a breath of fire in the Manticore’s way.

It then summoned the other Wyverns for help with a bellowing command. The Wyverns on the ground flitted back up to the sky to fight back the Manticore.

Struck down, the Manticore dived into the ground, and as it picked itself back up, its amber eyes instantaneously reminded Jongin of Baashere and they found Jongin at once.

“Look!” someone yelled, pointing at the rising sea. Rolls of thunderbolts froze everyone in place.

Then with a stentorian eruption, the water burst up to the sky in head-splitting waves that took the form of a stud of warhorses, their eyes glimmering like two beads of blue star.

Their reins were gripped by the watery, glowing God-like being that surfaced from the sea, his eyes just as blue as his troup of horses. In his other hand was a celestial trident only a God could have forged. The armour on his prodigious body was no different. He was a God.

Lightning strikes and darkened sky mantled around the God and the water horses. Godly Sea Wyrms circled around his feet in the sea and Kairvos joined the God’s side.

“Zairvoth!” the God thundered, and the mortals recognized their saviour’s voice instantly.

“Prince Adrianus!” they cried in reverie and relief, all lowering to their knees.

“I, Adrago, Son of Zhesaris, Goddess of Sea and Light, command you to retreat to your banishment!” the God warned, pointing the tips of his trident at the Wyvern Deathlord. “Should you defy, I will wash your sins off this land with your blood.”

Zairvoth shrieked in defiance. The water horses neighed almost as loud as the Wyverns. Releasing their reins, Adrago unleashed the horses unto Zairvoth. The sea then raised the God high as he flipped the trident in his hand.

“Today will be the end of your tyranny, Zairvoth for that your soul will spend eternity in nothingness,” Adrago roared and launched the trident towards the Wyvern Deathlord.

While his horses charged into the fire Zairvoth breathed, extinguishing it to wisps of smoke, Adrago’s trident drove into Zairvoth’s throat. Then leaping off the water plinth, Adrago vaulted to Zairvoth and caught the staff of his trident, driving it deeper into Zairvoth’s shrieking throat. The instant Zairvoth fell, crashing into the water that drowned and took him away, Kairvos commanded the other Wyverns to leave.

The ground fell silent as the sea steadied. In the middle of it, the God Adrago stood, gripping the trident and looking down at his devotees.

“He saved us,” a woman said.

Adrago’s burning blue eyes found Jongin as the Manticore joined the God’s side, flying over to him.

“All hail the God Adrago!” people began to cheer and revere him in tears and blood.
Jongin could not look away from his eyes that were only looking at him. “Adrian,” he let out as the water began to swirl around the God.

Then as the people hailed his name with a ferocity that would last for centuries from now, the waves and the sea buried Adrago, submerging him to the realm of the undersea. While everyone around him rejoiced, Jongin broke down and lost his consciousness.

When the chaos came to an end and peace was restored, temples and statues were erected from the ground to worship their new God, Adrago, who had saved the Nine Realms from the plague of the Wyverns.

The wind was steadier than it had ever been in a long time. The ships sailed again. The sky smiled upon the mortals. The Seven looked after them. With their new saviour, the people lived in quiet and peace, believing that they were safe from the Wyverns now.

Two moons passed and the ship Jongin boarded finally reached his destination in the Fourth Realm. His belly was now too swollen to be invisible to the naked eye. But the sailors did not think much of it. They just thought Jongin was stout. Jongin did not try to convince him otherwise.

He spent the night he arrived in the Fourth Realm on a beach, sleepless and sick. He looked at the ocean every day, almost every waking moment. He waited. And waited. Adrian never came back to him.

The Fourth Realm was a green land, full of forests and mountains. It was almost as serene as Warinia. Jongin looked up at the cliffs overlooking the sea. He would spend the remainder of the night meandering his way up to the lowest cliff.

When he finally reached the top, he plumped on the ground to catch his breath and a rest. The sun was coming up, the sky of the dawning day purple and tranquil.

He cried in silence, each tear for the day he had spent longing to see Adrian again.

The sea.

He rose to his feet and walked to the edge of the cliff to look ahead at the vast expanse of the waterbody.

“I need you,” he whispered, the breeze gently carding through his hair.

“The child will do you no good."

Jongin could no longer muster to courage to be surprised. He turned around calmly and met Zhesaris. She was truly a Goddess of such beauty. Surreal, divine. Ruthless.

Her gown was sewn with water and light. The regal crown on her head matched the colour of her piercing eyes.

“I will take him,” the Goddess said. “He belongs to me.”

Jongin clasped a hand over his belly. “He is mine. And Adrian’s.” “Adrian is no more,” Zhesaris said sternly. “He fulfilled his destiny and the child must fulfil his.”

Jongin turned his back to the Goddess and faced the sea again. When he closed his eyes, the wind gently caressed his cheeks. “I’d rather die than be orphaned all over again.”
“You do not have the courage for that,” Zhesaris accused.

“You do not know me.”

With those final words, Jongin tilted forward and fell off the cliff.

When his body hit the word, it spasmmed and it felt as though every bone in it was snapped in half. He did not fight the darkness that started seeping into his senses and the water that slid into his lungs. As his death neared him with a suffocating finality, Jongin let go.

A powerful arm grappled around his body then. Jongin felt a pair of lips kiss his own before he caught a gasp of air. The sky, brightening rapidly, blinded him for a moment. Pebbles on the shore prodded into his back.

A hand with a familiar roughness stroked a side of his face, waking him to the day. Jongin’s vision gradually cleared and he met Adrian’s dark eyes and then his smile. “Adrian?” Jongin croaked out, his throat sore and tight. As he lifted a hand to Adrian’s bare chest to feel his heartbeat, Adrian cupped the back of Jongin’s head and said, “Even if took another life, Jongin.” “Is this the path you choose?” Jongin heard Zhesaris’ voice, angry and resentful. Adrian did not tear his gaze away from Jongin, although Jongin’s flitted weakly to the Goddess. “I would rather be a mortal and love him forever than be a God and watch him suffocate every single moment of his life.” “You are throwing away all that you ever dreamed of for a mortal, Dragovan,” Zhesaris spat. Adrian brushed strands of wet hair from Jongin’s forehead and kissed it, holding Jongin close to his chest. “You’re my dream now,” he whispered, splaying his fingers over Jongin’s belly. This could not be a dream, could it?

Jongin sat up and gasped out a sob, dropping his face against the crook of Adrian’s neck. “Is this… real? Are you… real?”

“You never deserved to be a God to them,” Zhesaris swore and disappeared in whirls of light. Jongin pulled back and gaped at Adrian again, searching for his soul in his eyes. He was not glowing. He looked… him. It was him. In the flesh. “It really is you,” Jongin rasped, clinging onto Adrian’s neck.

“And forever.” Adrian promised with a smile and kissed him.

THE END

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