The Serkonan Affair

by acogna

Summary

When Corvo Attano is chosen as Royal Protector, no one expected a series of unfortunate disasters to follow. But after the death of her father and many strange assassination attempts, Empress Jessamine Kaldwin must survive the trials before her, with her Lord Protector by her side, all while uncovering the feelings of her own heart. A tale of the Empire's most scandalous and controversial affair, with an unusual twist.

Another one of the countless takes on how a poor low-born Serkonan became the protector and paramour of the Empress.

Notes

This story will tell of the events prior to the first game, and a trying explanation on how Corvo became the Royal Protector and Jessamine's secret boyfriend, with added incentive but keeping true to the lore. This story starts in the year 1816, about twenty-one years before the game. There are also a lot of OCs in this story, just to give you a heads up.

Most of this is just basically a big history lesson of the Isles, and I've been doing major research for this to keep it as accurate as possible: reading the timelines, solving for ages and dates, and brushing up on cultural ethics such as coronations and imperial politics, just to name a few.

I hope I meet your expectations. Enjoy the ride!
Part I: The Royal Protector

Chapter Summary

In which we are first acquainted with our young Serkonan boy, and we are exposed to the wounded pride of a Royal Protector.

Chapter Notes

Before we start, cool fact: did you know that it's possible for a Royal Protector to be female?

AN AUDIOGRAPH RECORDING FROM EMPEROR EUGHORN JACOB KALDWIN I TO EMPRESS CONSORT BEATRIX BLAYNE KALDWIN

Hello, Beatrix. I have no time to write you a letter, so I thought it would be easier for me to send an audiograph. Feel free to use my player.

Negotiations with Duke Theodanis Abele and the aristocrat Marko Nervetti are going rather well. I simply have to stay a few more days in Serkonos before we can seal the agreement together with his small council. We're currently securing trade routes along the seas and discussing problems on economic foundation, and perhaps subjects on immigration and the like. I'm sure we will come to the most satisfying of conclusions, but I know things like that aren't meant to pique your interest.

I've been long-time friends with old Theo. And Marko Nervetti himself is indeed an agreeable man and a good friend of the Duke. He's proven himself a good citizen and his hospitality is of immense value, even secured me a stay at his lavish estate in Karnaca. Security here isn't much of an issue, as the Duke has appointed to me several guards, and, with the accompaniment my own Royal Protector, you may consider me far from harm's way.

However, one cause of alarm may be this certain gang that lay a few ways from the gallows of Karnaca: the Cavyerli Gang, whose main purpose is said to be the usurpation of the government of Serkonos. Fear not, however; the Duke informs me that their latest activity was more than a few months ago, and he assured me that the Grand Serkonan Guard has been watching their every movement.

Send my regards to Jessamine, tell her I love her. My stay may prove very interesting yet, and I hope to see you soon. Oh, Beatrix, I miss you already.

Marko Nervetti, his daughter Gisella, the Duke Theodanis Abele, and the Emperor sat in a brightly lit hallway at a small and circular table in the Nervetti Residence. The view overlooked the grand landscape of Karnaca, with its birds flying overhead and its buildings stretching over to meet the waters of the sea. The sun was rather cold that day, covered with clouds, but its mild heat was still evenly spread throughout the city. Nervetti was busy sipping his tea as Euhorn looked at his own cup to see that was still full to the brim and growing rather chilly, while his Royal Protector Ivanna
Varinox was standing behind him drinking her own cup, somewhat satisfied by the wisp and sugary taste of the drink. Gisella was mixing her second glass as the Duke was too busy trying to suppress his yawns.

"Does the tea not satisfy you, Your Majesty?" Nervetti frowned with concern. "I can call upon a servant to make another drink of your choosing, if you would like something else."

"No, the tea is fine, I was just..." the Emperor didn't complete his sentence and instead moved to another topic that was less awkward for the conversation. "Theo, I read the documents you gave me the other night."

With her nose to the rim of the teacup, Ivanna made a small frown.

"And?" the Duke grinned in anticipation, clasping his hands together. "What do you think of it, Your Majesty?"

Euhorn put a hand to his face and stroked his chin, running his fingers over the makings of a golden beard. "I...I'm not entirely confident over the subject of a Royal Protector for Jessamine; she's too young to be making the choice."

"Really, Your Majesty? Because I was thinking she's just about the right age," Ivanna suddenly spoke to the Emperor as she put down her teacup, her voice cold and intent. "Remember, you chose me as your Royal Protector when you were only a young man."

"Ah, yes..." Euhorn recalled with a straight face. "I was twenty-five, an unusual age. Maybe it was because I became Emperor so suddenly after the Olaskir line fell. But Jessamine is only twelve; I know she's in the right age, but she's not even the Empress yet."

"But please, Your Majesty, I recommend you take consideration in the offer, at least," Nervetti smiled, trying to hide the fact he was basically pleading. "The Duke says that this particular soldier is one of the best guardsmen that Serkonos has to offer, and I myself even saw him take down Cavyerli gang soldiers outnumbered four to one. His skill is absolutely impeccable, I promise you."

"He's also an Officer in the Grand Guard," his daughter Gisella added excitedly, her locks of blonde hair bouncing happily in their tight twist. "He won the Blade Verbena at sixteen years old, too; can you believe it, Your Majesty? You do know about the Blade Verbena...it's one of the most famous sword dueling competitions here in Karnaca. And in our entire history, he's the youngest one to ever win it!"

Ivanna raised an eyebrow curiously.

"Is there a chance that I can meet this man, perhaps?" Euhorn asked.

"Yes, of course, Your Majesty," Nervetti said jovially. "In fact, we've arranged for him to meet you today. I can assure you with the utmost confidence that he will not disappoint."

Ivanna crossed her arms. "You all certainly think the world of him. I hope he won't betray my expectations, and trust me, Master Nervetti, you've set them up rather high."

The Duke took a sip of his tea. "If you set your expectations even higher, Lady Varinox, he will still exceed them."

The Royal Protector bowed her head. "I do hope you're right, Your Grace."
"Don't take too personally Ivanna's behaviour," Euhorn said to his company as if his Royal Protector wasn't there, smirking as she frowned. "If she's acting coldly, that means you haven't done her wrong."

Ivanna rolled her eyes as Gisella gave off a laugh.

The rest of the conversation was casual chatter: society in Dunwall, traditions in Serkonos, the perks and advantages of being the Royal Protector, and so on. But at the back of the Emperor's mind, he was still very much curious over the identity of the soldier, and that was all he could think about during those moments accumulating to his visit. When he read over the documents that the Duke had given him the other night, it was letter upon letter of recommendation from Theodanis, regarding how well of a swordsman this soldier was, and how he could handle himself in a fight. It seemed he was very much impressed by this young man's abilities in combat, and he even recommended him to Euhorn as the future Royal Protector of his young daughter, the heiress Jessamine Kaldwin. Of course, Serkonan ethics took great importance to offering the best skills they had to anyone they felt would best benefit from it, and the Emperor took great interest to this cultural diplomatic gesture.

Euhorn had to admit, when he was waiting there at the table, enjoying tea with Nervetti and the Duke, waiting the soldier they believed to be Serkonos' best, he didn't know what to expect when one of the Grand Guard came through the large doors and announced clearly in a loud voice:

"Lord Marko Nervetti and his daughter Gisella, Duke Theodanis, Lady Varinox, and His Imperial Majesty Emperor Euhorn Kaldwin, I present to you Officer Corvo Attano."

And as the doors opened wider, two more figures walked in: one was clad in the uniform of a Grand Guard Captain, and the other was sporting the shabby and dirty attire of the Grand Guard Officer. But what caught Euhorn's attention was the latter one, the man he assumed to be Corvo Attano.

He looked young, at least eighteen years old, with his long brown hair in tangles and waves tied messily into a ponytail at the back of his head. His skin was touched a soft colour of tan, his eyebrows thick, and his face was gaunt even in youth while his uniform was much like the disposition he gave off; it was dirty and wrinkly and even had some splashes of dry blood on the sleeves and hem. His hands stood motionless at his side, and his eyes were the dullest yet most striking thing about him; from behind stray locks of hair that fell before his face, they were ringed with dark circles and were the colour of the blackest, darkest shadows in Dunwall. At a certain degree, he was handsome, attractive to some extent, but he was not in any way good-looking in the eyes of the Emperor.

"Hello, then, Corvo Attano," Euhorn began, his expectations both fulfilled and betrayed at the same time. "I've heard so many things about you, all of them praise, and it's certainly...well, interesting to make your acquaintance."

Corvo deeply bowed his head, his Serkonan accent heavy, his voice low and husky, almost like that of a man infected with disease. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

Euhorn stood there silent as if expecting more from Corvo, but then Nervetti leaned in closer to his ear and whispered, "He's a man of few words."

The Emperor kept this in mind and nodded absentmindedly.

"Finally good to see another renowned soldier on this side of the world," Ivanna walked towards Corvo and held out a hand for him to shake. "My name is Ivanna Raye Varinox, Royal Protector to
His Majesty Emperor Euhorn Kaldwin. It's finally good to meet you, Corvo."

Corvo frowned and looked at her hand like it was a foreign object he had never seen before, but reluctantly shook it. Ivanna nearly flinched under his touch, for his hands were rough and callous, true hands of any lower-class Serkonan. As she retracted her palm, she tried to discreetly wipe the dirt she may have accumulated from him on her coat as she made her way back to the Emperor.

"Hello again, my darling Corvo!" Gisella exclaimed coyly, walking over to him before offering her hand for him to kiss. He bent and put his lips to her palm quite briskly before standing upright again. "Do you fare well? Did you miss me?"

"I fare just fine, my Lady," Corvo said, giving her a ghost of a smile. "It's a pleasure to be in your father's house again."

Gisella tiptoed and pressed a kiss to his cheek before giggling and skipping back to her seat; Ivanna was busy cleaning her hands to notice the young lady's infatuation.

"Would you like some tea?" the Duke asked Corvo.

Corvo shook his head. "No thank you, Your Grace."

The Duke put aside the kettle and silence reigned over the table for a very uncomfortable moment.

"Well, Corvo, I assume you know of the correspondence Duke Theodanis Abele sent to me about you," the Emperor said matter-of-factly, breaking the silence. "He wrote quite a lot, actually; he said your skills with a blade are absolutely outstanding, and it's quite impressive that you managed to impress such a starch individual like old Theo. He even says that your abilities in combat match that of Ivanna here."

The Duke frowned while Ivanna gave a vain scoff in response.

Corvo glanced emotionlessly at the Royal Protector's disgusted face before replying. "The Duke exaggerates my skills, Your Majesty; I don't believe I'm anywhere near the abilities of the Royal Protector herself."

Ivanna smirked, as if to say: 'At least you know your place, Serkonan worm.'

"Come on, Corvo, don't be such a sombre fellow," the Duke encouraged him. "There's a reason I recommended you to His Majesty, and it was certainly a good one."

"There are ways to prove it," and the Emperor turned to his Royal Protector. "Ivanna, I'd like you to spar with Master Corvo here, will that be alright?"

Ivanna's eyes were wide with surprise and her brows were knitted in disdain more than confusion, but if her Emperor ordered anything of her, she would do it without hesitation. She bowed her head and took a glove from her coat pocket. "Anything His Majesty commands, I will do."

Corvo looked as bewildered as she did, but he was in no position to deny the Emperor's request and walked a few steps away from their small table. Ivanna stood at the end of the hall, putting on the single glove on her left hand as she drew what seemed to be a scabbard from her belt. With the flick of it, a sharp, single-edged solid red blade smoothly emerged and she held it out, readying her stance. Corvo, meanwhile, pulled out the simple steel blade of an Officer from his belt.

"Am I allowed to wound him, Your Majesty?" Ivanna asked the Emperor calmly, as if she asked the question on a daily basis.
"To a minimal amount, Ivanna," Euhorn replied. "I don't want any more accidents happening again."

**Accidents?** Corvo let out a nervous breath.

"Begin."

Corvo didn't even catch the Emperor's signal when he saw Ivanna rushing towards him. He only parried just in time before pushing her off; as he swung his blade to try and hit her cleanly in the shoulder, she moved back, dodging his hit and while she thrusted. Their spar was a series of blocks, failed counter attacks, and swings, but no one laid a scratch; it was almost as if they were equal in strength. Corvo had to find a hole in her defence if he wanted to turn the tide of the battle in his favour and luckily, there was a time he did. Corvo waited until the Royal Protector pushed him back as to counter attack; when she lunged, he ducked, making her miss, then landed a hard, clean kick on her calf. She grunted in pain, but spun backwards and pushed his sword upwards to catch him off-guard. When they both finally regained their balance, she had her blade against his neck, while he pointed his blade towards her sternum.

A draw.

Nervetti, Gisella and Euhorn stood with mouths ajar. It was only until the Duke started clapping vigorously that any sound came from anyone. Corvo sheathed his sword and offered a hand as a gesture of respect, but she ignored his action and began wiping the dust from the back of her coat.

"Unbelievable," Euhorn was surprised that he managed to make the words come out of his mouth.

"Unbelievable indeed," Ivanna muttered under her breath, sheathing her own blade.

"Perhaps my own Royal Protector has lost touch of her skill," Euhorn teased her.

"Perhaps I'm simply too tired from the journey here, Your Majesty," Ivanna breathed, with an undertone of anger.

"So, the verdict?" the Duke asked the Emperor.

"Well, just as I expected: you're never wrong," Euhorn waggled a finger at the Duke, but the latter's smile began to fade as the Emperor continued. "Although, I'm not fully confident into putting the life of my daughter into the hands of a...foreigner—forgive my mistrust, it's nothing personal—so I'll keep an eye on Corvo for a few days, and by the end of my stay, I'll see if he leaves to Dunwall with me or stays here in Karnaca."

The Duke nodded, his tone slightly disappointed, try as he might to hide it. "Of course, Your Majesty, we understand."

Corvo, still devoid of any expression whatsoever, bowed his head. "Thank you, Your Grace, Your Majesty," —a glance at Ivanna— "and apologies for any harm that I inflicted upon the Royal Protector, physical or otherwise."

Ivanna didn't even look at him and simply wrinkled her nose in disdain.

"Corvo," the Duke called, standing up from his chair. "A private word with you, please. And Marko, if you'd come with me."

Corvo nodded obediently. He, the Duke, the nobleman, and the nobleman's daughter walked outside of the hallway and into a separate room as Ivanna's eyes followed them out the door. Once
the guards shut the Emperor and the Royal Protector in, she poured herself another cup of tea as Euhorn was trying to read her blank expression. She had been his bodyguard for longer than he ought to remember, and she was the closest he could ever get to having a second daughter. She was not just the shield of Dunwall; she was family. And just like any family, he knew exactly when she was upset.

"What's wrong, Ivanna?" Euhorn asked.

Ivanna stayed silent, trying to find the words as she picked up her cup. "That…that couldn't happen…it's impossible."

"What, you having a draw with a common Serkonan?"

"Yes, Your Majesty, exactly," Ivanna retorted then took a sip of hot tea. "A Royal Protector can't just lose like that. It's undeserving of the title given to me. If I can't defeat a simple guard like him, how can I…?"

Euhorn heard her falter and paused to look at the pained face of his Royal Protector. "You feel ashamed, don't you?"

Ivanna bit her lip, closed her eyes, and nodded with such little effort, Euhorn barely saw it.

"Come, now, don't be," Euhorn tried to comfort her. "You have to accept that sometimes, there will be people better than you, and that's alright."

"But there can be no one better than me, Your Majesty," Ivanna protested, gazing intently at him. "I'm your Royal Protector, I'm supposed to act as the sword and shield of the Empire itself! How can I do that now knowing anyone as simple as this Serk can defeat me at a sword fight?"

The Emperor looked at Ivanna straight in the eye. "Remember, dear, he isn't a common Serkonan; look, he's even caught the attention of a meticulous fellow like Theo, and you know how hard it is to impress him. Besides, have I even thought of stripping you of your rank? You're still my Royal Protector, aren't you?"

Ivanna looked like she was going to swallow her tears. "Yes, Your Majesty, but I…I lost…"

Euhorn sighed patiently and his tone changed to that of a parent comforting a crying child. "You treat it like you lost. Oh, Ivanna, if there's always one thing about you, it's that you always let your title get to your head. It's always 'Royal Protector' this, 'Royal Protector' that. Your position is one of skill and right, but it's also of personal business. I wouldn't have chosen you if you weren't prepared of the things to come when I finally became Emperor. Plus, you've been my bodyguard for nearly two decades; you think a mere draw in a spar will change all that?"

Ivanna shook her head and gave her Emperor a smile. Euhorn stood up and offered her a hug, and she found comfort and happiness in facing the draw only when she was wrapped up in the Emperor's arms.
Part I: The First Move

Chapter Summary

In which we discover the chemical properties of chokedust, and our young Serkonan boy says yes to the choice that he cannot deny…or rather, has no choice to deny.

Chapter Notes

Yes, Euhorn's Royal Protector is a girl! I've read so many pre-storyline *Dishonored* fanfics where Euhorn's Royal Protector is always a man, and where Jessamine's Royal Protector is old so he has to retire to give Corvo the position; I reversed this trope and made the Emperor's Royal Protector a young woman. (Although, I wouldn't really consider her young per se; she and Corvo are ten years apart, so in the last chapter, she would be around twenty-eight.)

I imagine her to look a little more like Emily does from the second game, with the same coat (although different coloured) and hair. My main inspiration from her personality and later, her "you're-such-an-idiot-but-we're-friends-I-guess-and-I-have-to-tolerate-your-constant-bullshit" relationship with Corvo comes from Tess from and her dialogue antics with the protagonist Joel from *The Last of Us.*

The franchise was seriously lacking one or two good people to push Corvo into his mood of "I-lost-all-my-fucks" from the first game. I mean, have you seen this man's hair? Samuel Beechworth looks better than he does.

And don't worry over Jessamine! She'll be appearing in the next chapter. She'll be a tiny girl.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THE CODE OF THE CAVYERLI GANG

ONE. The system is corrupt and full of the rich filth. Only when the poor have the same opportunity as the rich will Serkonos be able to uncover its true potential.

TWO. The poor are the true holders of the power. The rich only abuse it.

THREE. Unity is the cornerstone of each individual. If unity is achieved in two or more persons and they are potent with determination, nothing will stand in their way. Fraternity is the heart of victory.

FOUR. The Cavyerli are the harbingers of justice and change, the sword and armour of the poor. We serve to protect the weak and topple the arrogant.

The Emperor was delighted to go on a chaise tour around Karnaca, and the Duke was happy to
accompany him. Serkonos was home to many beautiful and industrial wonders; its architecture differed from the urbanisation of Dunwall, and there were trees around the mountains where numerous plantations thrived. Ivanna herself wanted to see more of the city, but she did not enjoy the ride as much as she hoped to.

Maybe it was because that Serkonan Corvo Attano was with them.

Just the fact that he rode in the same carriage as the Emperor tensed her fingers and made her reflexes ready, just in case she was to draw out her sword if he was going to pull off a stunt of treason. Unlike the benevolent Euhorn, Ivanna had no trouble brewing a hostile attitude to the soldier; just the fact that he managed to give her a draw in a swordfight definitely wounded her pride, even with the Emperor's words comforting her troubled consciousness.

The last stop of the day was an evening dinner at one of Duke Theodanis' good friends', Lady Cremona, an old kindly woman and head of one of Karnaca's richest families. Once he came to her grand estate by the edge of the city's bay, the Emperor was greeted and received well by the Lady; most of Serkonos' gentility were invited as well and shook his hands, introduced their kin, and made effort to give him small talk about his stay and his purposes for so. Unsurprisingly, among the guests were the Nervettis, and Marko Nervetti brought his wife and his two children: the aforementioned Gisella Nervetti, and another young man who looked identical to her, perhaps her brother.

The moment Corvo stepped out of the chaise, Ivanna noticed, he was nearly ambushed by a young girl, the young woman whom she later recognised as Gisella, as she ran at him and nearly tackled him with a hug. He seemed rather frightened and shocked by this display of affection, but when he broke from their embrace, he grinned a small smile, leaned towards her, and gave her a kiss.

Ivanna raised her eyebrows in both surprise and curiosity. Well, wasn't that interesting? Looks like the Serkonan worm had his own connections with the aristocracy…specifically, intimate connections.

(They were probably more intimate than she already thought).

The dinner went without any skirmishes and complications. Ivanna stood like an obedient shadow by the Emperor's side the whole time, eating little, talking only when she was spoken to, and glaring at people who she knew would have something insulting to say to Euhorn. This wasn't a good day for her, but that didn't mean she was going to make this a bad one for His Majesty.

After the dinner, there was a quaint yet extravagant after-party at the foyer. Lady Cremona, whenever she wasn't conversing with her other guests, often stayed with the Emperor to introduce him to her other friends and acquaintances. Corvo ventured off on his own, but somehow always managed to be in a place Ivanna would spot him, with his arm looped around Gisella's like a gentleman. The man she assumed to be her brother was laughing with him with a glass of Serkonan wine in his hand. In comparison to the Nervettis' pristine clothing, rich trimmings and neat hair, Corvo looked like someone from the gallows; his clothes were stained with splatters of blood and mud and his hair stuck at odd angles like a bird's nest. Ivanna could feel second-hand embarrassment for him, if only he hadn't ended their fight in a draw, that is. But oddly, the Nervettis barely seemed to care. It was almost as if they were old friends.

And maybe they were.

"My dear, you've been rather quiet since we came here," Euhorn suddenly said, breaking her train of thought.
"Sorry, Your Majesty, I must have..." Ivanna tried to find the right words, exhaling a shaky breath she didn't know she was holding. "I'm just distracted, is all. I'm no cause for concern."

"Ah, so this is the Lady Ivanna Varinox!" Lady Cremona exclaimed with a smile on her face. "I almost didn't notice you, forgive me. It's so refreshing to see a female Royal Protector after all these years."

Ivanna took her hand and shook it, grinning as well. "Thank you, my Lady; it's a pleasure in itself to be in your house and presence."

"I hope you're enjoying yourself, at least," Lady Cremona replied, gesturing to the banquet table to the side. "Would you like something to eat or maybe drink? This is here is Serkonan wine from my own plantations."

Ivanna shook her head. "It's rather alright, my Lady, I rarely drink in the presence of my Emperor."

Realisation slowly dawned on Lady Cremona's face. "Ah, I understand. Just feel free to take any food you feel you might fancy."

The Royal Protector nodded and bowed. "Thank you, my Lady."

Lady Cremona turned her attention back to Euhorn. "Anyway, as I was saying, Your Majesty..."

Ivanna tuned out their conversation, and there it was; she felt something was wrong.

It was that feeling, a mixture of dread, anxiousness, and readiness that was enough to make the hairs on her neck stand on edge. It was probably born into her, like an instinct, as her family came from a long line of Royal Protectors; it was the smell of rain during the calm before the storm, the soft hum of the ground before the earthquake, the cocking of a pistol and smell of gunpowder before the shot. She frowned, scanning her surroundings as she walked, trying to pinpoint just what made her nerves stand on edge—

"Lady Ivanna!"

Ah...shit.

Ivanna turned to see Gisella waving at her, approaching with both Corvo and the man she shared a likeness to.

"It's so good to see you again!" she beamed, bobbing her head up and down like a young child. "I thought you weren't going to come."

"Well, I must always be in the company of His Majesty, so..." Ivanna shrugged and the sentence trailed off naturally. "I trust you're enjoying yourselves?"

She clutched Corvo's arm tighter, Ivanna was afraid it might come off. "Oh yes, we are! Aren't we, Corvo?"

Corvo gave her a small smile. "We are."

She giggled and nestled her head on his shoulder, staring up at him dreamily. Ivanna could almost vomit.

The man identical in appearance to Gisella suddenly offered his free hand to the Royal Protector. "I'm sorry; I believe we haven't been acquainted before?"
Ivanna didn't know why she hesitated to take his hand, but she knew a second she wasted staying there with them was a second away from the Emperor. He was disappearing too far into the crowd, but she couldn't leave an introduction like this; curse common court etiquette!

She smiled nervously. "I don't believe so."

"Well, my name is Eliseo Nervetti," he introduced himself; his Serkonan accent was even more obvious when he said his name. "I'm Gisella's older brother."

"A pleasure, Master Nervetti," she replied, shaking his hand, realizing that she was just too far away from the Emperor. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I should—"

A woman's scream pierced the air.

Guests and gentility began running towards the doors, yelling hysterically, toppling tables and smashing glasses in the process, tripping over their silk pants and satin tablecloths as they pushed the exits wide open, bulldozing servants and guards as if their lives meant little to anyone. Ivanna, as if reflex, flicked her fingers and drew her mechanical sword. She had no idea what was going on (other than congratulating herself for predicting a vague mishap only minutes before it unfolded), and attempted to dodge the fleeing aristocracy; she failed at times, as she was occasionally shouldered by some bulky man, but she was able to regain her balance and flowed against them, running towards whatever they were fleeing from. She lost Corvo and the Nervettis after the chaos unfolded, but they mattered little now; all she cared about at this point was that she was far from the Emperor.

And that was bad.

"Your Majesty?" she yelled as loud as she could, trying her best to let her voice overpower that of the discord around her. "Your Majesty?! Your Majesty!"

Ivanna went on forward, making sure her blade didn't cut anyone by accident. Then, when she reached a point where the crowd cleared and left her behind; she saw exactly the threat at hand.

Men dressed in dark hues: black pants, shoes, long-sleeved shirts, gloves, and hoods, were jumping and emerging from the crevices in the flamboyantly-designed ceiling. The only parts of their skin that weren't covered by any dim article of clothing were their faces, concealed in masks. They all brandished swords, with daggers and pistols that lay strapped to their belts; with those weapons, they continued to fight off the guards that were doing a terrible job of holding them off. Bleeding corpses and severed cadavers were scattered all over Lady Cremona's marble flooring; the worst part about that was the guards' bodies were more than the enemies'.

"Come on," Ivanna groaned exasperatedly, realizing that the attackers were now advancing towards her.

She didn't need this. She only wanted to ensure the Emperor's safety. If she was going to die here, she would—

Wait, she wasn't going to die.

She wouldn't die gutlessly like this, to a pathetic syndicate of mysterious attackers. She was the Royal Protector, for the gods' sake.

She smirked as the first one came at her. He ran with his sword pointed at her forehead, and she simply ducked and swung her sword in a circle, cutting him straight down his torso before she stood upright and moved towards more of them casually like a walk through the gardens. The
second one swung and she simply parried him and pushed him away, plunging her own sword through his neck. The third one jumped from above, and she nearly got her head pierced with a dagger if she hadn't sidestepped; she reversed her grip on her hilt and swung backwards, cutting off his head.

This was easy; their movements were slow and predictable. But more of them began to resurface from the shadows of the foyer, their numbers slowly surrounding Ivanna like a mouse to a litter of alley cats. This was going to be too much if she would let this drag long enough. Soon, she counted twenty, and more and more began spilling in; there were probably about fifty of them. Not even she could handle that many men, even with the assistance of guards. She knew what she had to do, because even if it was a completely stupid plan, it just might work.

As the assailants began to corner her, she picked up a broken bottle of Lady Cremona's Serkonan wine that rolled on the floor, and, reaching into her pocket, she brought out chokedust mines and began to put them on every single place the surface of the bottle allowed. On its mouth, she put an arc mine.

Euhorn completely lost her.

As the crowd flowed through him like a turbulent river, he was screaming for Ivanna's name. But the other panicked yelling and hollering easily overshadowed his thunderous voice, and he was confused as he was frustrated. The one moment he needed his Royal Protector during this trip, she was gone and away from his company—

A callous hand grabbed his wrist tightly.

Euhorn nearly jumped in shock and struggled to get away from his attacker. He couldn't even see his visage because the faces of the crowd easily blurred it away. "Unhand me, you vile—!"

"Your Majesty, it's me."

For some reason, this man's voice, despite its soft calm tone, was so audible even in the chaotic multitude.

"Corvo?!" Euhorn asked, when the Serkonan's face became visible. "What are you doing here? There were men that just came, and…"

"Your Majesty, we have to go now," Corvo pulled him through the crowd; like a boat anchoring itself onto a moor, his grip was the only lifeline the Emperor had at the moment. "This place isn't safe."

The crowd cleared for a while, and the Emperor could now clearly see Corvo's gaunt face. "But Ivanna is in danger, Corvo, we can't just—"

"Your Majesty, get down!"

Corvo pushed aside Euhorn as one of the masked intruders ran towards the Emperor. Corvo drew his sword and parried him just in time, making the assailant fall back. Just as he was getting his balance, the Serkonan slashed swiftly, cutting his torso in one fluid movement. The attacker crumpled to the ground and dropped dead.

Euhorn was speechless. He was shocked out of his blank reverie when Corvo grabbed his wrist again.
"Your Majesty, we need to go," Corvo stressed, and this time, Euhorn didn't complain.

He let Corvo guide him through the wild mob.

She had four seconds to move.

Four—

She looked back at the exit of Lady Cremona's foyer, and she saw the guards were escorting the last of the guests out; hopefully, among them would be the Emperor and Lady Cremona (apologies to her for this horrid idea). The impact of this wouldn't be able to reach them if she launched the bottle far enough from the unfortunate party invitees.

Three—

She threw the bottle as far as she could. The assailters began to run after her as she began to sprint like her life depended on it (which it did) towards the exit. The guards knew just what she was doing and made a tiny gap in the doors just small enough for her to get through. She didn't know if she would make it in time, but she was sure as hell that this would work now.

Two—

She made it through the doors and barred them shut with one of her throwing knives. Together with the guards, she tried to usher the guests as far as she could from the manor, and they only made it a few steps down before she knew. It would be enough.

If there was one thing she remembered from eavesdropping on those crazy doctors in the Distillery District, it was that chokedust was extremely flammable.

One—

The doors shook. The glass shattered. The women screamed.

She used her body as a shield from the debris that were to fall. "Everybody d—!

A massive explosion burst through the roof of Lady Cremona's foyer.

"Are you angry at me?"

Ivanna looked back at Corvo, sitting on the couch. They were in one of many parlours in the Nervetti residence; the cloudy sunlight was sickly, floating through the glass windows before casting faint shadows over the furniture. The Royal Protector was looking out of the large window that showed her a full view of Karnaca. In the distance, she could see what remained of Lady Cremona's manor after the skirmish a few days ago: a smoky pile of ash that was currently being cleaned out by the cranes and carts.

Whoops.

"No, I... I can't be," Ivanna sighed angrily, crossing her arms as her fingernails dug into her skin. She closed her eyes and tried her best to resist the urge punch him; her head was already throbbing just thinking about it. The doctors said she should rest, but she wasn't doing a good job of it.

"I know you are," Corvo answered matter-of-factly, as his tone always was. "You can hate me all you want. Make it easy for yourself. It's not like it'll be any different."
"Look, I really can't be mad at you," Ivanna retorted, turning to lock eyes with him intently, and for a moment, she could see the sorrow. "You...saved the Emperor's life." She turned back to gaze out at Karnaca; even if it was a city that could do better, it was at least a more preferable option than looking at his annoying face. "If anything, I should be grateful to you."

"Then why aren't you?"

She shut her eyes. "Because rescuing the Emperor is supposed to be my job, damn it."

Corvo shuffled in his seat, unable to find an immediate answer, looking at his injured wrist. His left hand was slightly burnt from the explosion, and now, it was covered in bandages, courtesy of Gisella and her being overprotective. If there was one thing this girl was excellent in, it was her current studies of the medical field. (Besides her looks, obviously.) That girl wanted to become a medic in the future, and she wasn't too far off from that goal.

"I'm sorry," he said, the only thing he could say at that point.

"Don't apologise," Ivanna retorted again. "I don't want to hear you apologising. You did what you could." She paused for a while, letting a shaky breath escape her. "If it wasn't for you, the Emperor could be dead now."

Corvo looked up at her.

"He told you already, didn't he?" Ivanna glanced sideward at him.

"Yes, he did," Corvo replied solemnly. "I know you don't like me coming with you."

Ivanna stayed silent.

"I'll try my best not to be a nuisance, then," he continued, looking down at the floor.

"Oh no, you should continue to be a nuisance," he didn't know by her tone if she was mocking or complementing him. "Maybe then the Emperor can regret his decision and kick you off Dunwall Tower himself."

He frowned at her, both confused and insulted.

Ivanna rolled her eyes. "Don't look so sullen; that's actually an honour, where we come from."

He stood by the docks at dawn. Ivanna and Euhorn had already boarded moments prior, and soldiers of the Royal Guard began to ascend the ramp to the ship. Corvo was still, the crisp morning wind whipping around his shabby coat, the cold breeze tickling the skin on his face; his gloved hands were warm, but he constantly fidgeted and continuously opened his palms to flex his fingers. He had tried to tie his hair when he woke up, but it was useless, as stray strands began to scatter over his forehead and cheeks, even in a ponytail. The Emperor told him the other day to pack all of his possessions because he was never coming back to Serkonos; however, Corvo had such little belongings that they were all able to fit in one small bag that he slung over his shoulder. It wasn't even as heavy as he thought it would be; the contents of which were just his clothes, weapons, and a few official documents that he needed, like his passport and his certificate stating his position of Officer in the Grand Serkonan Guard, a position he resigned from just a few days ago.

He didn't know what to feel, looking up at the steel ship emblazed with the insignia of two golden swans, the symbol of the Crown. It seemed like a monster, casting gigantic shadows in the dawn
light, just as the sun was rising above the sea. Both trepidation and excitement began to brew at the pit of his stomach; he could smell the saltiness of the sea, of freedom, of a second chance.

"What are you waiting for, my sweet Corvo?"

He turned around to see the only two people who came to see him depart. One was Alfeo, his dear friend ever since his childhood, a young man just about his age with pale skin and bright red hair. Freckles dotted his cheeks, but trails of dirt coated his hands and face. He was sporting dingy attire that could have been mistaken for rags at a faraway glance, and his arm was looped around the second person's shoulders, comforting her. Gisella was clutching a handkerchief tightly to her chest, her white dress billowing around her like silk in the wind. Her blonde hair was up in a bun, but stray tresses of it were beginning to break loose with assistance from the morning sea breeze. Tears were starting to form at the corners of her eyes as she desperately tried to hold them back.

Corvo sighed and put a hand on her shoulder. Just yesterday, she was the happiest girl in the world, but now she had never looked so sad in her life.

He turned over to Alfeo. "Take care of her for me, alright?"

Alfeo raised his hands and began to do fluid and precise movements with them, flexing his fingers and opening his palms to convey silent messages. 'I will. Do not worry, friend.'

Alfeo had probably been his only companion that had been with him throughout his whole life. Corvo was there when Alfeo could still speak, he was there when they were running through the streets, tossing a stolen Tyvian pear back and forth as they laughed, he was there when the Cavyerli Gang caught them cornered in the alleyway, he was there defenceless, forced to watch as the mysterious masked men opened his friend's mouth and cut out his tongue for his vulgar language towards their precious code. Corvo was there when Alfeo was learning sign from the Grand Guard, slowly making his fingers more adept to the complicated symbols. He even remembered the first sign he made to his mute friend, the last he one he used in that sentence: two index fingers locked against each other tightly, a metaphor and a symbol at the same time.

Friend.

Corvo nearly felt himself well up with tears just recalling years of their camaraderie in a matter of seconds. Alfeo gave him a smile, as he knew he was, and pushed Gisella forward as to help Corvo comfort her.

"Don't cry, Gisella," Corvo coaxed kindly, reaching a hand up to her cheek to wipe away a tear that slid down her face.

"I'm just..." she managed to mutter, her voice choked with tears, wiping away the corners of her eyes with her kerchief. "I'm so happy for you, my darling Corvo...I'm so happy."

Hearing her voice pained him, as much as he hated to admit it. "Then don't cry for me. I'll write you both, I'll write to you the moment I land."

Gisella couldn't help it anymore and burst into a fit of sobs, covering her face as she began to take gasps of breath. Corvo gathered her in his arms and kissed her forehead, trying his best to calm her down.

"I'll miss you..." Gisella looked up to him, sorrow in her eyes. "I'll miss you so much."

"I will too," Corvo offered her a smile, and she couldn't help but return the action, albeit her grin was weaker than his.
Corvo turned to his friend when he saw his hands move rapidly again.

'Don't worry; she can always visit you. She's rich enough to anyway.'

Corvo stifled a laugh as Alfeo parted his lips in a smile before continuing.

'But I can't. I'll never see you again.'

The smile from Corvo's face began to disappear, but Alfeo's grin grew wider, as if smiling was the only way to keep at bay the urge to cry.

"Do I really have to wipe away your tears too?" Corvo joked, making Alfeo shake his head, chuckling silently. "Come here."

The two friends hugged each other, for what would probably be the last time they would see each other. He didn't know how long they were locked in an embrace, but when they broke, Alfeo was already beginning to sniffle.

"Alright, break it up, you two, before you start kissing," Gisella added, making the three friends laugh.

"But I really will miss you all," Corvo returned the serious mood.

Alfeo raised his hands and began to sign again. 'Again, I'm so sorry Paloma couldn't come, Corvo.'

Corvo's stopped for a while. He had always wanted to see his mother at the sendoff; she was so proud when he won the Blade Verbena, so much so that he entrusted her to keep safe his trophy inside the walls of their home before he left. But she was ill so often and he could do little to cure her, so it was really no surprise that she didn't come to say goodbye. But it still broke Corvo's heart a little bit.

"It's fine, really," Corvo reassured them, pausing bringing the two in for another hug. "I'll...be off then. This is goodbye."

He began to wave at them as he made the trek towards the sea, moving closer and closer to the pier where the boat was waiting, his boots making the wooden docks creak under his wight. But before he could even step on the plank that would take him to the ship, a shout stopped him completely.

"Corvo!"

Corvo spun around, but all he felt was his body collide with another's and someone's pair of lips on his. Gisella brought him into an embrace, pulling his face closer as she deepened the kiss. Once she broke, she hugged him tightly, and he was still in so much shock that he didn't know what to do, his eyes still wide and the sugary taste of her breath on his lips.

"Don't forget us," she whispered into his coat. "Please don't forget us. Don't forget Alfeo and Paloma...don't forget me, please don't forget me. I love you, I love you, I love you...my darling Corvo, my dearest Corvo, my sweet Corvo..."

He grabbed her shoulders and pushed her away, looking intently at her sorrowful eyes before leaning in and kissing her again on the lips and then on her forehead. "I'll never forget them and I'll never forget you. I love you, Gisella. I'll see you again."

Gisella hugged him one last time before he began walking up the plank, waving his last farewells at Alfeo and Gisella. The ship would set sail. He would be going away from home.
Something was getting on Ivanna's nerves.

She had spent nearly a decade of her life serving as Royal Protector, and she knew when something was amiss. It was a gut feeling she had whenever someone spilled poison into the Emperor's cup, or whenever a riot was about to crowd outside Dunwall Tower. It was something that perhaps developed through her years of experience, and it was a sense that all the Royal Protectors had before her. And now, she was feeling it again. Perhaps it had to do with the obvious stranger that was accompanying him during the rest of the Emperor's stay in Karnaca and was now going to Dunwall with them.

Corvo Attano.

Not only did she absolutely despise him for humiliating her in front of her Emperor and the Duke, but there was something off about him. Perhaps it was because of his suspicious appearance or his country of origin (no prejudice intended), perhaps it was because the Emperor gave him too much of his trust, perhaps more than any other person he had seen him give trust to. Perhaps it was because if the Lady Jessamine was to choose him as Royal Protector, he would be the first one born outside Dunwall, or outside Gristol, for that matter.

Admittedly, he did save the Emperor.

But still.

Chapter End Notes

EDIT (22nd December, 2016): After doing more canon study over the new info given us in Dishonored 2, turns out that Beatrici left the Attano household before Corvo got shipped off to Dunwall. So I fixed it and later the note you'll find at the start of Part 2.
Part I: Gold and Teal

Chapter Summary

In which we visit the city of Dunwall decades before its fall to the rats, discover the stakes of competition and what it means to protect with sacrifice, and we meet our young heiress for the first time ere long she is crowned Empress.

Chapter Notes

If you've noticed, I've divided this story into parts; that's why chapters are marked like "Part I" and so on so forth. There will be a total of five, like some mediocre Shakespeare play.

The names in this chapter might drive you crazy, though. Think of this part of the story as The Hunger Games meets The Selection meets Dishonored. Actually it's less of The Hunger Games (aside from the training part) and more on The Selection, seeing as how the choosing of a Royal Protector is basically a pageant, but instead of judging your ability to look pretty, they basically judge your ability on how fast you can slit a man's throat under fifteen seconds.

FROM THE PRIVATE JOURNALS OF EMPEROR EUHORN JACOB KALDWIN I

3rd Day of the Month of Earth, 1817

My little Jessamine has tuned twelve years old mere hours ago. We held a small ball for her birthday celebration and invited some friends and a good number of lords and aristocracy, but I cannot forget the fact that the older she grows, the more she becomes a target to the enemies of Dunwall. Although I know she will be a worthy heir and a good Empress, I do not trust the environment that she grows around. This city is full of corrupt people and disease and plagues I am trying to free it off; I only hope that when the time comes for her to choose a Royal Protector for herself, that she will choose rightly. I believe Beatrix and I have raised her well, and I know she will make one of the finest and best Empresses that Dunwall has ever seen.

The first ones to step into the grounds of Dunwall Tower were the Emperor, his Royal Protector, and Corvo, the latter of which looked around the gardens as if he had never seen such bright sunlight and such spotless granite. Euhorn, from the moment he went through the waterlock gates, had been bombarded with questions and status reports from countless men and women who seemed to anticipate his arrival. It was all very new to Corvo, it was different from the way they did things at Serkonos; but then again, the moment he had agreed to the deal that the Duke presented Emperor Euhorn, the moment he said his goodbyes to Alfeo and Gisella, the moment he stepped onto the Gristolian ship, he was no longer in Serkonos. He was now a part of Dunwall, a part of the great barge that kept the Isles afloat.

He tried to block out the horrible noise of chatter that surrounded him when he heard the high yet
silvery voice of a girl through the raucousness of the small crowd.

"Father! Father!"

Corvo could see the multitude part to give way to a young girl not older than twelve, with her hair tied up in a spiral and an outfit of teal with trimmings of gold, the colours the Serkonan recognized now to be the colours of the royal Kaldwin family. The girl rushed over to the Emperor, gave him a kiss on the cheek, and hugged him. She was accompanied by an extravagantly dressed woman who shared in her facial likeness, with a maid following close behind her.

"I missed you, Father," she beamed up at him, gazing at the Emperor. "You were gone for quite a while."

"I was just gone for a few weeks, my dear; that isn't long," the Emperor replied.

"She was often worried about you," the woman said, kissing Euhorn before hugging him.

"And were you, Beatrix?" the Emperor asked.

Beatrix smiled and said nothing, but apparently, her flushed face to him meant a thousand words.

"Where's Ivanna?" the girl asked, stopping to look around at Euhorn's entourage of guards and soldiers, trying to find a face in the many that surrounded her.

"I'm here, Lady Jessamine!" Ivanna surfaced from the crowd, then smiled as she knelt to welcome a hug (and Corvo then noticed that it was the first time she had seen her smile). "I'm here!"

"Ivanna!" the girl yelled with glee and ran over to the Royal Protector to give her a large embrace. "Ivanna, welcome back! I felt very lonely without you."

"I know you did," Ivanna replied, standing up. "I missed you too. Now go on to your father; I'm sure you have plenty of stories to tell him later."

The girl smiled at the Royal Protector and ran back to Euhorn and Beatrix, the former of which was already sauntering to the Tower proper and entertaining all the questions being thrown at him by the small crowd. The young girl held the Emperor's hand and strode alongside him across the granite gardens that led into the grand palace; as she looked back, she managed to lock eyes with Corvo, and she gave him a look that was neither disgust nor sympathy, the kind of look you would give a man if he ate all your food without consent. She quickly tore her gaze from him and continued her walk through the gardens.

"That's Jessamine Kaldwin," Ivanna said at Corvo's side, answering the question he didn't want to ask. "She's to be the next Empress after her father, and you're to be one of the candidates she will choose to be her own Royal Protector."

Corvo nodded in understanding, but frowned in confusion. "She's very young."

Ivanna seemed to be hiding her annoyance behind a sardonic grin. "Yes, that's why even the Emperor hesitated in bringing you along before, but a dinner banquet and a rescue later, here you are now," The Royal Protector sighed. "There's too much chaos in Dunwall even without you, and as much as I hate to admit it, the Kaldwins need a good fighter to protect them. The Emperor is looking for all the warriors he can, and the lack of them is already a serious problem the Council can't stop blabbering on about. In comparison to the twenty-four candidates His Majesty chose from, now we have seven, and including you."
Corvo looked at Ivanna then at the floor, trying to prevent making eye contact with her as they walked behind Euhorn and Jessamine through the gardens.

"You won't become the Royal Protector just by entering the Tower and being chosen," Ivanna continued. "Well, you have to be chosen in order to get the position. First, you'll stay in the Tower for about a year and a half, honing your skills and getting used to the atmosphere. After the Choosing Ceremony, it will then take a month for the transition; the new Royal Protector has to be tutored on the court and the responsibilities the position demands, then the inauguration ceremony will happen during the Month of Songs. But, I will have to introduce you to the other candidates later. Perhaps after dinner, or maybe later when I tour you around the Tower."

"Thank you," Corvo suddenly stated, quite shocked by her hospitable display that seemed to oppose her cold demeanour towards him.

"Don't thank me, thank the Emperor," Ivanna scoffed. "He told me to be cordial towards you, and I can't disobey a single command from him. You're lucky he likes you."

Corvo paused for a while, and it was obvious he was struggling to find the words. "But…I really am sorry, by the way."

Ivanna raised an eyebrow. "About what?"

"About what happened at Serkonos. The draw."

Ivanna cracked a satisfied yet sadistic smirk; it was obvious she was mocking him. "Ah, yes…that. That was quite an awful experience. I nearly cried, you know…I feel absolutely horrible about what you did."

Corvo stared at Ivanna as if she had suddenly started talking about the detailed vivisection of a man. "It was only a draw; what more do you want me to do?"

"Just one thing, really," Ivanna's voice grew darker as she shot an intimidating glare at Corvo. "Do not spread any rumour of my draw to you at Karnaca, do not go around talking about it to the Royal Guard or any member of the Court like it's some sort of achievement. Once I figure out you did, I'll forget to be hospitable, and since the Emperor empathises with me, it wouldn't hurt him as much if he'll sail you back to Serkonos."

Corvo blinked, obviously disturbed by the manner in which she spoke. "You…have my word. Thank you for being nice."

Ivanna flashed a sincere smile, but all Corvo could get from it was the feeling of hostility. "Please, think of me as your worst nightmare, maybe then we could get along. Remember now, Corvo; this isn't Karnaca anymore. There are enemies far more dangerous than the Cavyerli Gang lurking in the shadows of Dunwall."

It had been about three weeks since Ivanna fulfilled her promise to him. When he had first arrived at Dunwall Tower, she had assured him that she would show him the other candidates that were competing for the position of Royal Protector. Ever since then, Corvo felt uncomfortable living in the residence of the Emperor; despite his own private room a cosy bed, good food, and many more luxuries he could barely dream of back home, the only thing he could remember was that if he wasn't chosen in a year's time, he would bring dishonour to Karnaca, to Serkonos as a whole, for being the first and last representative as a candidate for Royal Protector his Isle had. He was perhaps the only good reflection of Serkonos because everyone in Dunwall, or everyone in the
Isles for that matter, thought Serkonos was all merchants and whores. If he was going to screw this up, it would mean the end for whatever little good reputation Serkonos was clinging onto helplessly.

Whenever he had spare time during the day, he would peruse through the Tower library and read on and on about the lives of the Royal Protectors before Ivanna. There was a long line of them, many of them men, occasionally women, who either died valiantly in battle, resigned due to them not being able to protect the leader they were assigned to (then commit suicide; what a horrible twist of fate), or mysteriously disappeared without a trace. There were many common things between them, he noticed, two of which remained prominent: the first was that there were a few Royal Protectors with the surname of Varniox, which, in it being a coincidence or not, was Ivanna’s own name; the second was that all of the names listed in their memoirs were Gristolian names, or they were born in some remote town on the isle of Gristol. There was no Royal Protector that came from Tyvia, Morley, or Serkonos.

That meant if he was to win the choosing, he would be the first Royal Protector born outside Gristol.

The only thing strong enough to pull all the negative thoughts and pressure from his mind was to take walks around the gardens, maybe even sit in the gazebo and watch the construction of Kaldwin’s Bridge along the Wrenhaven River. The scent of the flowers and grass was always enough to bring him home. Since the Tower acreage was sometimes open to the public, there were days where he could see some commoners talk with each other on the terraces and elevated surfaces about the grounds, interacting with their own class, and every so often, with the aristocracy that came to pay the Emperor a visit. Often times, he would see the Lady Jessamine there as well, accompanied by her own governess, and the young girl was always at a far distance every time they saw each other. She was a very shy creature, and whenever they locked eyes, she would always draw her gaze back and ask for the teacher to escort her inside.

Then the day of introduction finally came, and he was right to be afraid.

One night, Ivanna called everyone down into the grand hall for what she called 'a friendly introduction', which meant, by her word, that it was anything but friendly.

Corvo stood in one of the grand halls of the Dunwall Tower, the Royal Protector in front of him as she stood before six other men and women in a straight horizontal line, clad in beautiful robes of varying colour; whether they were teal and gold, white or red, or even green and yellow, all of them were dressed in bright hues. Ivanna, in comparison to them, however, was clad in a midnight blue coat, with purple cuffs and other muted tones; the only bright thing on her person was the golden emblem of the Kaldwins that was emblazed on the back of her jacket. Corvo, obviously, was the worst of them all; the only speck of colour on him was the yellow trimmings and edges on his black coat; from his shirt to his boots, everything was a darker shade than grey. Because of this, the six people before Ivanna often looked at him with sharp, judging eyes.

"Now then," Ivanna spoke to the six, "I'm not sorry that I had to disturb you at such an hour, because we have another candidate to welcome. I assume you've seen him before or you've brushed by him along the aisles. He's different, so be nice to him; I don't want to see any severed limbs or missing eyes on the day of the Choosing, alright?"

"And what makes him so different then?" a young man with red hair asked with a snobbish air in his words.

"See, this man here," —and Ivanna put a hand on Corvo's shoulder— "isn't from Dunwall…or anywhere on Gristol, for that matter. He's from Karnaca, the capital city of Serkonos."
The six exchanged glances and whispers.

"And," Ivanna spoke up, hushing everyone, "he's been chosen personally by the Emperor himself, after saving his life from the ambush of the Cavyerli Gang."

And this was where whispers became complaints and frowns became scowls, only occasionally lit up faces of amusement. Corvo tried to take pride in that because, after all, it was a valiant move, but instead he fought to overcome the anxiety that was brewing at the pit of his stomach.

"I'd like you all to say your names and your ages to our new candidate here," Ivanna continued, "and he'll return the favour. Let's begin."

The blonde woman on the left most of the line spoke first. "My name is Elyza Wallerman, twenty-three years old."

Then brunette girl to her right came next. "My name is Jaqueline Arkwright, twenty years old."

Then the snobbish redhead from earlier. "My name is Braddock Swindlehurst, eighteen years old, and I won't be chosen over something that looks like it crawled out of the Coldridge Prison sewers."

Corvo frowned.

"Braddock, that's enough," Ivanna reprimanded, allowing the others to continue.

The short boy with black hair came next. "My name is Von Ogden, twenty-two years old."

Then the taller one with blond hair. "My name is Daniel Roscoe, nineteen years old."

Then the last one, a second girl with brown hair. "My name is Stefany Maynard, twenty-five years old."

Ivanna nudged Corvo at the back, prompting him to introduce himself. "My name is Corvo Attano, eighteen years old."

Another exchange of murmurs and glances. The one who looked the most upset by this fact was the one with red hair, the one Ivanna called Braddock, who apparently was the same age as the Serkonan. They were both the youngest among all of the candidates.

"Alright now, that's all I wanted to interrupt you for," Ivanna said, silencing them all. "Go back to your rooms and get some sleep. Next week, we'll have our combat session. So I expect you all to be on your best behaviour. Am I understood?"

"Yes, Lady Protector," they all answered in unison.

"Dismissed."

The six then went back into their respective rooms, vanishing behind the lavish doors of the Tower as they all cast him looks of varying emotion, whether they were disdain, pity, or maybe even infatuation. Corvo tried to look at the floor as to avoid any gazes that were being shot at him. Maybe that was enough embarrassment and anxiousness for the day.

"You look exhausted," Ivanna said, facing him, scanning his outfit. "And certainly dull, too. Don't you have any more clothing with a bit of…colour?"

"Dyes are rather expensive in Karnaca," Corvo answered monotonously.
Ivanna rolled her eyes, as if she already knew he would answer that. "Of course, that explains it."

Corvo, without another word, followed closely behind the Royal Protector, and he began to understand that in a culture such as Gristol's, apparently foreigners weren't given such a warm welcome. Ever since Ivanna gave him the room that was farther from the other candidates', he understood it would be both stupid and rude to ask as to why. She escorted him to his dorm and turned the knob.

"Here you are," Ivanna opened the door. "Get some sleep, you look awful. And if you need anything, there are always maids prowling about the hallways."

"Thank you, Royal Protector," Corvo held the doorknob of his room. "And goodnight."

She said nothing as she casually walked away, not looking back, but she waved a hand at him.

The training room exceeded Corvo's expectations, maybe because he was so used to the dirty and muddy streets of Karnaca being his grand arena. The whole room was made of glass and marble, with racks for rapiers and blades and even targets for archers with their crossbows. The ceiling was high, with a few chandeliers that weren't lit dangling from it, as the morning sun through the skylight and windows was enough to provide a substantial amount of light. There was even a small balcony near the top of the room where some of the nobles and maybe even the royal family could watch as soldiers trained below.

Corvo was the last to arrive, even if he didn't sleep the night before; he most likely lost track of the time and simply enjoyed wallowing in his own boredom, watching the night sky come and go. He even remembered distinctly at some early hour when the sun wasn't even up yet that a maid came over and gave him the attire that he was to wear for the sparring. He found it completely odd-looking, though, with its teal fabric and gold-rimmed edges, but when he put it on, he realized that it snugly fit, and gave him enough room to move around well.

Upon entering the training room, he realized that all of the other six candidates were already there, dressed similarly to him, and they were either practicing crossbow aim or testing out their blades' sharpness on cloth dummies. He didn't know why they were all staring and stopped just to look at him, but only when the Royal Protector behind him stepped forward to make herself visible did he understand.

"Good morning, everyone," Ivanna said, clasping her hands behind her back, watching as the six fell in the same horizontal line in front of her (and Corvo had to follow suit and stood at the edge of the row). "I suspect you all had a good night's rest. And you'll regret it if you didn't sleep well, because you'll need the energy for today."

Corvo felt the smallest tinge of regret gnaw at his head.

Ivanna turned around and looked up at the balcony. "The Emperor and Empress are here to watch your performance today, accompanied by their daughter, Lady Jessamine Kaldwin, who will be picking one of you in a year's time to serve as the next Royal Protector."

Corvo followed Ivanna's gaze, and sure enough, he saw Euhorn there with his wife beside him, his bright eyes staring down upon the candidates, and hanging on to the balustrade was the girl Corvo saw when he first entered Dunwall Tower. She was waving excitedly at all of them, and Corvo couldn't help but smile at her, even if her gaze wasn't on him but on Ivanna. The Lady Protector couldn't resist and waved back at the young heir.
"So this is how it will be," Ivanna faced the candidates again. "You'll get the weapon of your choice, a spear, a sword, cutlasses, whatever you want. Then I'll pair you with each candidate, and you'll battle each other out in the typical outline of a tournament. That means you'll be three pairs. And since we're uneven in number, winner number one will fight winner number two, and winner number three will fight Master Attano here."

Corvo blinked in confusion.

"Why does the Serkonan junk dog get to skip a step, hm?" Braddock sneered. "Why can't he fight fairly like the rest of us? Is it just because he's Serk?"

Ivanna shook her head with a frightening smile. "Oh, dear Braddock, you have no idea what he can do. I've seen him fight first-hand, and if he'll become your opponent, you'll be grateful that he didn't come in earlier."

Corvo raised an eyebrow as Ivanna turned to him and flashed him the briefest of grins. Did she just…complement him?

"Ugh, whatever..." Braddock groaned.

And so it began. Wallerman was paired with Maynard, Roscoe with Arkwright, and Swindlehurst with Ogden. All of them used swords, Corvo noticed, except Elyza Wallerman, who used twin cutlasses. As he was watching the other candidates, he mentally took note of each of their movements and committed them to memory, trying to match them with the correct way of countering and identifying their weak spots while he stood waiting for his fight. Ivanna, who acted as arbitrator to the rounds, often glanced at Corvo, only to see his brows furrowed in concentration. Years of training the Royal Guard clued her in and she immediately knew what he was doing.

"You're reading their movements, aren't you?" she reprimanded him, whispering harshly into Corvo's ear. "That's cheating."

"It isn't cheating if you gave me this privilege to watch them, am I right?" Corvo looked at her intently, and all she did was scoff.

He paid his attention back to the three fights as they were being performed. He said his observations aloud in his head, hoping that they would come back to him when it was his turn to fight.

A win for Elyza Wallerman. She uses double cutlasses that are able to block counters and blow opponents backwards, giving her a break in the defence area to strike; she advances too much on the right foot and depends too much on the motion of spinning. First, hit the elbow joint and tackle the right foot, knocking her off-balance. Disarm her if possible. Finish with a blow to the neck or stomach.

A win for Daniel Roscoe. He uses a double-edged blade good for swiping and parries, allowing for smoother counter attacks; the weapon is obviously a heavy type, making his movements easily predictable and sluggish. First, dodge all possible swipes until he's tired out from the weapon's mass, and easily move behind and strike the nape. Finish with a blow to the middle of the shoulder blades or cut to the waist.

A win for Braddock Swindlehurst. He uses a single-edged sword, and fights with the unique strategy of continuous offensive attacks that are difficult to parry or block because of their rapidness. It will difficult to find an open spot, but it is possible to disarm him when he swings his sword as to perform a spinning blade attack. Do this by twisting his elbow and a punch to the
The second row of victors lined up and Corvo joined them as well. Ivanna assigned Corvo's opponent to be Elyza Wallerman, and Braddock's to be Daniel Roscoe. The second round commenced. It was his battle with Elyza that came first.

Corvo seemed to have neither underestimated not overestimated Elyza. She was the one who advanced first and most of the time, moving in spinning motions, fast and precise that Corvo had difficulty blocking them all; plus, it was hard for him to try and regain his balance during the short intervals she wasn't attacking. He couldn't counter her either, as it was difficult to find an open spot in the defence when the ends of her swords were almost always inches away from his nose.

"What's the matter, sweetheart?" she taunted, but her sugary voice made it evident that she was more than interested in simply getting to know Corvo through just a swordfight. "Can't break in? Don't worry; tonight, I'll let you break in all you want."

Corvo frowned, and he didn't know if it was in concentration or confusion.

"Stop flirting with the enemy, Lyz!" Stefany Maynard teased from the side-lines.

"Focus, Wallerman, or you'll lose!" the Royal Protector crossed arms and reprimanded, but Corvo could hear the tones of a laugh.

"Fine then!" she seemed to whine, then continued to attack as vigorously as she had before.

It was getting harder and harder to block her attacks, and Corvo knew he couldn't keep up with this forever. He was forced to go with his initial plan. As Elyza was reforming her stance, he lunged at her and with his forearm, twisted one of her elbows into an awkward position, moving her hand and making her grip on the sword lose. She gave out a wheeze of pain as he kicked her right leg and rendered her out of balance; he finished her off with a strike to the stomach using the blunt side of his blade.

The round was over; Corvo had won his first battle.

All of the other candidates (other than Braddock) had their mouths ajar in shock, and even Elyza's eyes were wide and her face flushed as she was being helped up by the Serkonan. Braddock, trying to be as unimpressed as he could, rolled his eyes and put his hands on his hips impatiently, as if he was itching to fight Corvo himself. From above, the Emperor himself clapped in merriment.

"Astonishing, amazing!" Euhorn praised, smiling. "What did I tell you, Ivanna? He's truly a great gift from Serkonos!"

"Indeed, your Majesty," Ivanna gave him a weak grin; she only took delight in seeing her Emperor smile.

The second battle came next. Braddock won against Roscoe by a close margin, although the battle didn't take as long as Corvo's. Braddock seemed to be a difficult opponent, with a few holes in his defence with a strong offensive manoeuvre. There would be some places Corvo could poke into to ensure victory, but there would still be plenty of casualties and risks he would have to be willing take. Battling Braddock wouldn't be as simple as the one with Wallerman; he was definitely an adversary to not be underestimated.

Then it was their battle came next. All the candidates were well convinced that both Braddock and Corvo were equal in strength, and it would be that climactic battle to settle their differences once and for all. Even young Jessamine, who often got bored watching the Royal Guards train in the
courtyards, was leaning over the railings, her eyes wide in anticipation.

Ivanna raised her hand. "Begin."

Similarly to his fight back in Karnaca, he only heard the starting signal when his opponent began to lunge at him. Corvo parried just in time but he didn't have enough strength to push back, so Braddock continually pressed forward. The Serkonan twisted his grip on his sword in order to get out of their deadlock, sliding his sword against the blade of Braddock, then spinning around to try and hit him in the back. But Braddock ducked fast enough and kicked Corvo at the back of his knee, making him fall; if he hadn't moved back fast enough, his nose would have been cut off by the sharp end of Braddock's sword. The battle continued like that: failed counter attacks, melee punches, and the sliding of steel against one another. There was a point when Braddock began panting, and Corvo was sweating as he tried to hide the fact that he was basically heaving for air.

"I've had enough of this!" Braddock screamed exasperatedly. "I won't lose to a Serk!"

Corvo found his manner of speech eerily similar to that of a more hyperactive Ivanna, and was slightly insulted by the derogatory manner in which he said the word "Serk", as if he was referring to some low-life rat. He tried to regain his composure, then relaxed himself and readied his stance.

"Prove your word then," Corvo taunted.

Braddock smirked, happy to oblige. But unlike his earlier attacks of lunges and fast movements, he began to saunter towards Corvo, switching his grip on his blade constantly as to distract the Serkonan. Backhand, forehand, switch of the hand, backhand, forehand, backhand. Corvo knew this trick; it was something that the guards back at Karnaca used to do in order to mislead their opponents into anticipating a strike. Corvo knew just how to reciprocate that move properly; he bent and held his sword so that its point would be facing the floor. It would take timing and incredible risk to do this; one wrong move, and he would get a nice bloody face scar.

The candidates held their breath, Ivanna narrowed her eyes in curiosity, the royal family leaned forward in anticipation, Braddock was drawing closer—

When Corvo was directly under him, the former pushed the hilt of his blade upwards, hitting Braddock's blade and knocking him off-balance. He fell flat on the floor, losing his grip on his blade as it slid across the small arena. Corvo finished by pointing the tip of his blade to his neck.

Ivanna raised her right hand. "Point, Corvo Attano!"

The candidates hooted in celebration for his triumph, while Euhorn himself clapped happily, pleased heavily by the spectre of Corvo's fighting skills. Ivanna herself tried to hide a smirk while she put her hands on her hips; the Serkonan offered a hand to Braddock, but unlike the Royal Protector's prior dismissal of the gesture, he took it and used it to help him stand up.

Corvo looked up to the balcony of the royal family, and he managed to lock eyes with the young Jessamine, the girl who would, if he was successful in all this, become the heiress whose life he would become responsible for. He gave her a smile and a deep bow, and, for the first time, she gave him a wide-toothed grin and an enthusiastic wave. It was the first smile she had given him.
Part I: The Honour to Remain

Chapter Summary

In which the blossoming rapport of our young Serkonan boy and our young heiress is burdened and dependent on sealed envelopes passed back and forth in the hands of the baker's apprentice, and we are finally revealed the banes of undecipherable handwriting.

Chapter Notes

To make a confession: I've been reading *The Selection* series in order to get inspiration for the whole "choosing-a-soulmate" thing. I'm being a bit more patient with it than I ought to, but notice that I'm not dwelling too much of the luxury specifics being given out to the candidates. Oh, no, good sirs and madams; we're delving into what *really* matters here.

We're now taking a little segue from the murderous and killing lessons and taking time with the little interactions between Corvo and Jessamine before the Choosing Ceremony, where one of our candidates officially becomes Royal Protector.

Not to spoil you or anything, but it's Corvo.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**AN AUDIOGRAPH RECORDING BY MISS ADELAIDE RAVENS REGARDING LADY JESSAMINE KALDWIN**

*Lady Jessamine turned thirteen years old just yesterday. I gave her a textbook as a birthday present; quite pathetic I know, but she actually treated it as an item of immense value, much to my astonishment. She put it together with her other books, a collection that she had been building up over the years, and we shared her cake as we continued to discuss the history of Morley that afternoon.*

*She's a sweet girl. I've never been this lucky as to tutor the daughter of the Emperor, and, as I can infer in her little mannerisms, she has proven herself capable of being in a position of leadership; she's courteous, kind, thoughtful, and often prioritises the needs of other before her own wants. It's hard to find those characteristics in the hard-hearted gentility of Dunwall, so how much more the daughter of an Emperor?*

*I'm blessed to have known her for all these ten years. They have been long and hard, with their own trials and sufferings, but they have been well-spent moments; I feel I might have learned from her more than she has learned from me.*

A Fugue Feast passed by. It had been ten months.
And he missed home.

Unlike the warm air of Serkonos, the cold walls of Dunwall Tower were indifferent and unfeeling, and kept away the humid sun away as if it was a garish plague. The marble halls were cold, the red wine lacked tannins, the velvet carpets were too leathery and the chandeliers too blinding. Although he was more than familiar of the map of the immense towers, of its rooms and corridors, of the servants' names and how to address the Emperor and Empress properly, the more and more he began to adapt to Dunwall, the more he realised that he was changing into something the city wanted to mold him into, something he didn't want to be. Perhaps he missed his simple lifestyle in Karnaca, perhaps just longed for the simple company in the streets or the dingy walls he used to call a home, perhaps he missed the roguish company he recognised as his friends. He wrote often to his company back in his hometown, and they wrote to him back, but the letters almost felt empty and devoid of emotion, despite their heartfelt wishes and love. Their handwriting on paper lacked the true experience of familiarity and friendship he always knew and yearned for. He missed Beatrici. He missed Alfeo. He missed Gisella and her affectionate company. (Was this sexual frustration talking? Maybe so, as he hadn't had any intimate connections with women as of late.)

The only thing that reminded him of home was the garden at the rooftops. It was lush, green, full of flora that bloomed everywhere. The scent of dew on the grass in the early dawn and the sweet aroma of the flowers was enough to bring him to the green grasslands and trees of the neighbourhood plantations in Karnaca, a place he never thought he would miss so much. Whenever the candidates were busy resting, drinking wine or having chats with the Dunwall aristocracy, Corvo would walk about the gardens, sinking the sights of the city overhead, and sitting by his favourite bench, the one underneath the shade of the marble gazebo.

The other day, he remembered, he was sitting on his bench, watching the boats on Wrenhaven River sail under the construction of the huge metal bridge that hung suspended over its tranquil waters. He was toying with his dagger, a beautiful thing made of Tyvian Ore, crafted by the finest blacksmiths in Karnaca. It was a gift from Gisella Nervetti and her family.

He smirked. Gisella Nervetti. Gods, he used to be such an idiot in his youth; he liked to think that he was at least a little wiser than he was before he started to craft a close relationship to her. Now that it had been ten months, he had gone and reviewed their whole relationship in its entirety, and gods, he missed her—

"Adelaide, please…I can't…"

Corvo turned his head to the side, where he saw the young Lady Jessamine with her governess, a young woman clothed in white and grey, walking along the garden paths a few strides away from him. He managed to lock eyes with the older lady, Adelaide, who gave him an awkward smile; she was holding onto Jessamine's hand as the heiress tried her best to hide behind her governess' legs. The Serkonan continued to stare them down with bewilderment.

"I'm sorry, she's just shy," Adelaide explained, looking down at Jessamine.

She peeked out from behind her tutor, nervously shaking her head at Corvo. "I-I'm not supposed to speak with you."

Corvo scratched his chin in confusion; about a few months ago, this was the girl that was waving to him after he won the sparring competition, smiling like she had the world given to her on a silver platter. But ever since then, their relationship began to rot because it hadn't been attended to; it had just been brushes in the hallway and shy glances from her end of what he assumed to be their own rapport, until it faded back into nothing.
"I won't hurt you, if that's what you're afraid of," Corvo reassured.

"No, I really can't," Jessamine pushed, looking almost sad.

Corvo parted his lips as if to speak, but she ran back to the Tower in haste, refusing to know whatever he had to say, leaving her governess alone with him. Adelaide sighed and looked back at where the Emperor's daughter fled off to, attempting to follow when she stopped herself after a few steps.

"Do I look that threatening?" Corvo stood up from his chair, looking down the pathway Jessamine ran.

"No, Master Attano, it's simply…" Adelaide tried to find the words and let herself falter. "His Majesty didn't tell you yet, did he?"

"No, whatever it is you're talking about," Corvo crossed his arms, his confusion growing with each second.

"I thought the Lady Protector informed you before," Adelaide replied, frowning at the Serkonan.

"She must've left me out intentionally, or I wasn't listening."

The governess gave off a sigh. "If I remember correctly, the Lady Jessamine is prevented from talking to any of the candidates until the 1st Day of the Month of Nets, in which she has to interact with them during a scheduled basis until the Choosing, to get to know them personally."

Corvo blinked. That's why the Lady seemed so quiet, even among the other candidates.

"She mustn't simply pick a Royal Protector based on combat skills alone," Adelaide continued, "she should be able to build a relationship of trust between her and the candidates until she finds a more favourable one amongst them."

The Serkonan nodded in understanding. "It's quite a while until the Month of Nets."

"Yes, precisely about seventeen days away. Not to mention that you still have to wait for the schedule to come out, and you might not even be first. Patience is a virtue as it is a skill and talent."

Corvo huffed and looked away, trying to lose his line of sigh with the steel framework of the building bridge over the river.

"Why so sombre-looking, Master Attano?" Adelaide frowned with concern at him. "Either way, it's mandatory that you must speak with her. Although admittedly, I feel like you're one of the only candidates who expresses some sort of care for meeting her. Don't worry, I won't hold it against you; it's one of those special skills that girl has. She can make anyone fond of her in a matter of days."

"Like magic?"

"Not magic, Master Attano; it's called charisma."

Corvo sat in the comfort of his quarters, reading one of the books on his shelf as the dark night sky began to fill with sick grey clouds that blocked the moonlight.

It would be fourteen days until the Month of Nets.
He didn't understand why it was so important to him that he would meet and finally talk to Lady Jessamine; after all, everyone was going to do it, he wasn't some sort of special case. Maybe it was because he felt that they should get to know each other more, or it was his usual thirst of curiosity to be quenched. Who was this Lady Jessamine? Who was she behind her title and her family name? Why did she need a Royal Protector so badly if Ivanna could fill in that position just fine? What was her favourite colour?

He didn't need to know everything, but just enough to know if the girl he was being told to serve was worth his respect. In that sense, it might have sounded rude, maybe even arrogant; true, she was an heiress, a future Empress, another person in the long line of rulers that would govern the Isles, but if this was going to be the girl that he was going to protect literally until his dying breath, then he was going to have to know if she was just some snot like the disposition of Dunwall's high society gave off. She didn't seem like it, however, but there seemed to be some sort of—

A knock on his door interrupted his train of thought.

He got up to answer it, expecting the Lady Protector at his doorstep, but to his surprise, he had to look down in order to properly answer.

Standing in front of his room was a young girl about Jessamine's age, perhaps a year older, clad in the royal chefs' uniform, complete with stripped shirt, pants, and a white, stained apron. Her hair was short and dark, her skin was pale and wan, and her dull eyes were ringed with black circles that probably signified she didn't get a generous amount of sleep. In her slender hands, perhaps her only defining feature, she held a white envelope lined with stripes of gold and teal, which she flipped constantly to read the lettering at its back.

He recognised her barely. If he remembered correctly, she was the baker's apprentice.

"You're Master…Corvo Atteno, right?" she read aloud from the envelope, her voice wobbly, but hoarse and mature.

"Attano, yes," he corrected her pronunciation.

"This is for you," she handed over the envelope to him, and he reluctantly took it. "It's from Jessamine."

"Lady Jessamine?" he frowned, looking at the flap to see his name written in a hand that was both fluid and scraggly, like that of a child trying to write script. He could see why the girl mispronounced his name; it was because the 'a' in his surname looked like an 'e' due to the handwriting.

"Yes, she told me to give it to you," the girl said. "But don't tell anyone. It's a secret."

"A secret, hm?" Corvo scanned the envelope again.

"By the way, I'm Delilah," she introduced herself, her voice quieter when she said her name. "Jessamine said if you wanted to reply, you should write a letter and give it to me."

Corvo crossed his arms; the fact that she called the heiress 'Jessamine' so comfortably when on a normal day he was forced to call her 'Lady' simply unnerved him.

"Yes, she told me to give it to you," the girl said. "But don't tell anyone. It's a secret."

"And why should I give it to you when you could just read it and disrespect my privacy?" he asked skeptically.

The young Delilah gave him a snotty little smirk. "You can't approach her, but I can. Besides, do
really think me *that* rude? You really shouldn't be threatened by a little girl like me."

He opened his mouth to reply, but shut it once he realised that his retaliation was both pathetic and horrible.

"You know what?" she said apologetically, holding up her hands as if in surrender. "We shouldn't be fighting. We should be friends." She pointed her thumb to her chest. "I'm the only connection you have to Jessamine, and one of her few good friends in this Tower. I want to increase that number."

Corvo was confused by that innuendo. "So you want to help her become friends with me?"

She nodded promptly. "Precisely that. She's a good person; she deserves more than boring ladies and lords as company."

He shifted his standing position. "And what makes you think I'm not boring?"

Delilah gave him a baffled smile, as if he was asking the easiest question in the known world. "Are you kidding me? Other than Braddock Swindle-whatever, you're the most interesting Royal Protector candidate I've seen. Word's been going around the servants ever since you bested him during that one tournament; some say back when you were the head of the Grand Serkonan Guard, there was one time you killed off ten men with only three knives."

"Actually, I was just an Officer—"

"And there was that one rumour that says when you rescued the Emperor at that one banquet, you cut of this man's head with a blunt bread knife." She tapped her finger on her chin thoughtfully, and before Corvo could speak, she beat him to it. "Is it true that Serkonans keep the heads of the men they killed on a special shelf in their houses?"

"I…what?" he asked, his perplexed face barely satisfied her. "No…no we don't; where did you hear that?"

"I heard it from one of the chefs—"

"Forget it; that isn't even important," he sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose before waving the envelope in front of her eyes. "Where do I find you so I can give the reply?"

"You can find me in the Tower kitchens most of the time. If I'm not there, I'm usually in the gardens tending to the roses." She gave him a wide smile as her head tilted to the side curiously. "I love roses."

That last phrase didn't fit the sentence that well, and the tone in which she said it sent his nerves crawling, but it didn't sway him as much as he thought it would. "Very well. Expect it tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," she reiterated as he retreated back into his room. "Goodnight, Attano!"

He didn't reply, but she was kind enough to close the door for him. He walked over to his table and turned on the lamp; instead of using the letter opener that was somewhere inside one of the many drawers in the desk, as he was lazy to get it and found it quite useless, he carefully opened the envelope and brought out the neatly folded parchment inside. The paper itself smelt of lavender, and gods, he was so close to falling into some trance if he inhaled it too much.

He opened it and tried as best he could to decipher the heiress' hand.
Corvo Attano,

I am sorry for my otherwise rude and scared behaviour earlier in the gardens. I am not too keen on breaking the traditional guidelines of the choosing of a Royal Protector, but Father's rules are Father's rules.

But there was nothing said that I could not write to my candidates. So, let us start from the beginning.

My name is Jessamine Kaldwin. I turned thirteen years old during the Month of Earth, on the 3rd Day, to be specific. I love talking walks in the Tower gardens and my favourite colour is yellow; my favourite subject is history and I like to eat the small little cakes that my friend Delilah Copperspoon bakes for me. (I bet you have met her; tell me how she is like! She is my best friend here in the Tower.)

I know I am nearly a year late in telling you this, but I was absolutely delighted by your win in the training room. It has been so long since I have seen someone fight that well; and this is coming from someone who watches Captain Avery train nearly every day. That is a compliment.

I wrote to you because I wanted to get you to know you better, and that is also why Delilah is acting as our courier. Unlike the other candidates, you are by far one of the most interesting. It has been a very long while ever since a foreigner from another Isle became a Royal Protector candidate; then again, there has been no one who was not Gristolian who became a Royal Protector. I am not sure if you will become the first. I guess that is up to me. My patience does not outweigh my curiosity.

I await your reply. You are a very strange face amongst all the competitors, and I am a rational soul as to question why.

Yours faithfully,

Jessamine Kaldwin

Her childish signature was written more neatly written than her whole letter combined, appearing as just simple scrawl, but the loops and curves in her name were pleasing to look at.

Earlier, he found it a tiring thought to actually think of what to write back, then go through the trouble of phrasing it politely for the sake of her position in the regal state of court, but now, he was probably more delighted by this charming letter than he thought he should have. He didn't know if it was because the Lady Jessamine was flattering him, or because it was just adorable that she took time to give him this.

He took out a paper and pen from the drawers of his desk.

"And remember, my Lady," Adelaide said, stacking up her books neatly on the table. "Review your Serkonan history. It's not that bad, but there were a few mistakes in your answers earlier, more than that of all the other Isles."

"Yes, Adelaide," Jessamine sighed in relief, knowing her daily lesson was over. She stared at her books, the words spinning in her head, making it ache mildly.

"Don't be discouraged, my dear," Adelaide comforted her. "You'll be doing better next time. We should take a break."
"I agree," the heiress sighed and put her head on the table, stretching out her arms across the desk. "I'll be back then in...how many minutes would you like?" Adelaide stopped by the door, opening it halfway.

"Whatever you see fit," Jessamine replied, looking out of her long windows, watching the slow movement of the Wrenhaven River.

"Would fifteen minutes be enough?"

Jessamine nodded, trying her best to smile, despite her tired mental state.

"Very well. I'll return shortly then, my Lady."

The governess closed the door, leaving Jessamine alone in her room. She stared out onto the horizon of Dunwall, lined with tall buildings and chimneys. The cloudy day brought no sign of rain, but the grey clouds blocked nearly all rays of sun. Along the river, she saw the construction of the bridge her father ordered to be built; its steel skeleton was already being completed and forged with each passing day.

She closed her eyes and tried to leave her mind blank, clearing it out to rest her head from information overload. She stayed like that, motionless, meditating, almost dozing off into a little nap before a knock sounded on her door.

"Adelaide?" she asked, rubbing her eyes. "It's barely been five minutes."

The door opened, and in stepped the young Delilah Copperspoon, a white envelope in her hands. She waved it happily, as Jessamine gasped and ran over to her friend. After a brief embrace, the baker's apprentice handed over the letter to the heiress.

"He gave it this morning," Delilah stated, clasping her hands at her back.

"Thank you, my friend," Jessamine gave her a smile "I'll give you the reply maybe later this afternoon."

"Understood," Delilah opened the door. "The usual place?"

"The usual place."

Delilah left the room, allowing Jessamine to rush to her desk and open the letter to read it. Seeing his handwriting for the first time was clearly interesting; it was harsh, violent, sharp, almost like an animal's claw marks, all the more so his signature at the bottom of the note, which looked more like random slashes of ink than a name.

Her Imperial Highness Jessamine Kaldwin,

Madam:

At first I was filled with dread at the thought of sending you notes in secret, as this violates the many terms your father the Emperor has set for the traditional choosing of your Royal Protector, but, of course, I could not resist replying to your letter once it amused me so. Let me begin by introducing myself in the same manner you have in your previous note.

My name is Corvo Attano. I am about nineteen years old, and I will turn twenty by the 25th Day in the Month of Nets. My favourite places in the Tower are the gardens by the waterlock and my own
room; my favourite colour is black (if that indeed counts as a colour; Ivanna corrects me often by saying it is a shade, not a colour). My best friends currently reside back in my hometown: Alfeo Pozzi, Gisella Nervetti, and her brother Eliseo. I come from the capital city of Karnaca in the Isle of Serkonos, and it has been my home ever since; well, that is, until I came here.

If I may inquire upon one thing, however, it is why, among all the candidates, did you choose me to be the most interesting. I have known myself for longer than you have, and I cannot find one thing certainly likable about myself. If this is the case, then how more so the daughter of an Emperor? I simply must know why; this is an option to answer, to comply with my requests is mandatory in comparison to yours.

Also, may I request that your friend Delilah Copperspoon should be able decipher believable rumours from plain ridiculous tales.

I have the honour to remain Your Highness' most humble and obedient subject,

Corvo Attano

Delilah acted as an agent of intersession, delivering letters and running in-between Jessamine's quarters and the Tower dorms all while catering to the commands of the chief baker, her teacher. She found it almost adventurous, however, since she felt that an entire relationship hinged on her sprints through the palace.

The letters were very few, but they continued to flow for the past days.

Corvo Attano,

I thank you humbly for your letter; you truly do not understand the happiness I felt upon receiving it. Reading your hand was such a pleasurable experience, seeing as how you rarely talk; I can only infer that your words flow well and better on paper. And although you stated in your previous note that it is mandatory for me to answer your questions, I feel obliged to do so anyway. It is the least I could do for you.

The reason, Master Attano, that I find you interesting is the fact that you look different from all the other candidates. In comparison to their bright clothing, yours is dull; in comparison to their fair complexion, yours is tan, in comparison to their confident demeanour, yours is quiet and humble. I have rarely seen Royal Guards of that behaviour, so imagine my surprise to have one of my Royal Protector candidates as such!

I apologise if you misread that and feel offended. One can decipher what I wrote as racial prejudice, and I mean no such thing.

Yours faithfully,

Jessamine Kaldwin

Her Imperial Highness Jessamine Kaldwin,

Madam:

I deeply apologise for the tardiness of this reply. I know you have been waiting for this letter for nearly a week, as our makeshift courier Delilah tells me over and over. Although, you must understand, the training that the Lady Protector puts us under is usually so vigorous and tiring
that I often feel too fatigued to write back. However, it was always my intention to reply, and I didn't intend to break that promise.

On a personal note, I know your interest in me has nothing to do with racial prejudice. Although I do find it flattering that you find me indeed interesting, I, for one, must admittedly say that there is nothing at all interesting about me. I am just like any normal Serkonan merchant, who came from a poor family in Karnaca. Most of the locals from the Isle would tell you that their situation is similar to mine.

I hope you receive this in time, and that I have the luxury of which to write more.

I have the honour to remain Your Highness' most humble and obedient subject,

Corvo Attano

Corvo Attano,

If you may have noticed, unlike before, I took it upon myself to become spectator to some of your training sessions, since as of late, I have taken an interest to them. I assume now since you train early in the morning, you have become acquainted with Joshua Avery, the Captain of the Royal Guard. Respect the man; he has quite a lot of experience in combat, as much experience, I dare say, that can compete with that of Ivanna. Many of the candidates say he is quite the fetching young man and I, as a young lady of their calibre, am inclined to agree.

Next time you train, you will be pleased to know that I am a part of your small audience up in the balustrade. Wave at me, if you are not busy trying to not die. I do not want a head rolling simply because you want to catch a glance.

Yours faithfully,

Jessamine Kaldwin

Corvo Attano,

This may be the last of the letters that I may send to you. Father has already become suspicious of my constant borrowing of his stationery to write this. So do not be surprised if I do not reply after this last note, although a reply would be appreciated greatly.

The first week of the Month of Nets will come in just a few days. The schedule will be released soon, as I have overheard from Ivanna and Father. I do not know if you are the first, but I guarantee you, I will give you a present during our first meeting. It will be a surprise, so do not inquire what it is.

I am excited to see you soon.

Yours faithfully,

Jessamine Kaldwin

Her Royal Highness Jessamine Kaldwin,

Madam:
Nothing can be more said from my end of this delightful rapport except the aforementioned thought that I am looking forward to our meeting. I thank you for your time. It is truly a great privilege you bestow upon me to write and maintain some sort of secret relationship. The thrill has been short, but enjoyable.

I have the honour to remain Your Highness' most humble and obedient subject,

Corvo Attano

Then the scheduled meetings with Jessamine were released on the 1st Day of the Month of Nets. But, apparently, Corvo had to wait a week. The day he would meet the heiress would be the 8th Day, as the first person to meet her was Elyza Wallerman. So he waited. It was a week without letters, without Delilah, without even a sight of the Lady herself. He was surprised that he didn't grow insane over those seven lengthy days. Adelaide was right; patience is a skill, but skills can be acquired.

Then the day came suddenly, faster than he expected it to come. Corvo felt like this was the moment that all his months in Dunwall culminated to. He was supposed to leave a good impression on her, he knew. All the candidates knew.

Last time, Lady Jessamine invited Elyza to her parlour. But this time, the heiress invited him to the gazebo in the garden, where she first spoke to him, where they first locked eyes.

That day, he dressed up well in a coat that Ivanna had left him with earlier that morning, one with muted teal hues, probably since she was tired of his wearing black every time he was called for attendance. So he put it on and wore a simple dress shirt, pants and boots, and looked at himself in his dorm mirror. He had tried his best to tie his hair into a ponytail, but most of the short locks fell in front of his face messily. He grimaced at his own appearance, but left the room anyway, since there was nothing he could do to fix his horrible untidy self. It marked the beginning of his defeatist approach towards this endeavour.

The gardens were empty, devoid of any guests or aristocracy that it would be filled with on a normal day, and they were replaced by men of the Royal Guard to protect the heiress. A handsome man in the Captain's uniform was pacing in front of the pathway, and his face lit up in both relief and annoyance when he spotted Corvo, accompanied by Ivanna, stepping out into the grounds.

"Corvo, there you are," the man said exasperatedly, wiping his face. "Gods, you're fifteen minutes late."

"Fifteen minutes, Captain," Corvo reiterated, walking along the path to the gazebo as the Captain and Ivanna followed him.

"This is Lady Jessamine we're talking about," the Captain stressed.

"Captain Avery, please," Ivanna retorted before he could complain again. "Corvo's been with us for nearly a year, you must have gotten used to his mannerisms. Particularly that of tardiness."

"I haven't," Avery sighed again before gesturing to the gazebo. "She's waiting there. Be nice, I don't want to clean your blood off that expensive marble."

Corvo inhaled sharply and nodded, stepping a few ways before the steps of the gazebo. Ivanna and Avery didn't follow him and instead conjured up their own conversation and commentary about his unsettled disposition as they walked away.
The gazebo that he thought used to be his haven in a foreign city became even more daunting now that this was his rendezvous point with her, the young girl who, if he was chosen (with an unmistakeable emphasis on 'if') to become her bodyguard, would be the heiress whose life he would become responsible for. Its white columns became threatening, and its steps even higher than he thought they were. The guards that were posted at its foot moved aside to give him room as he walked up, then closed him in, sealing him inside like some caged animal ready to meet its doom.

When he thought it couldn't get worse, all of his tension multiplied when his eyes landed on the girl sitting on his bench.

It was an odd feeling, looking at her from this close. Normally, she would be feet away from him separated by the rules of court, an armada of guards, or his general unethicality, but now he could observe her in great detail. The young girl was wearing all black, with her dark hair tied into a tight bun at the top of her head, secured by a gold pin. Her smooth face and bright eyes were masked behind a book so much so that she didn't even notice him come in; Corvo was too nervous to even bother wondering what she whatever she was so immersed with. On her lap, he noticed, there was a box wrapped with black paper.

He had to clear his throat for her to look up.

"Oh!" she exclaimed with surprise, upon recognising his person. "I didn't…notice you come in."

"You looked like you were enjoying your book, my Lady," Corvo bowed his head, trying his best to suppress his smirk.

"This thing?" she held up the book she was reading earlier, a leather-bound monster of a book with its title embellished in gold on the cover: 'The History of Dunwall by Walpole Burnham'. "It's for my lessons; it's nothing, really."

He nodded, secretly uninterested.

"So," she started. "Do you want to start all over again? No more notes?"

Corvo couldn't help but stifle a small laugh. "No more notes, Your Highness."

"Alright," Jessamine sat up straight, lifted her chin up, and grinned, and putting a hand on her chest, spoke proudly. "My name is Jessamine Kaldwin, heiress to the throne of Dunwall."

Corvo bowed an inch too low, his tone intent and true. "My name is Corvo Attano, one of the candidates for you to choose as Royal Protector."

Jessamine scooted over to the side and patted the side of the bench she left empty. "Come, sit."

Corvo, frowning reluctantly, hesitantly complied with her command. He sighed as he sat down, staring at the small little boats sailing along the Wrenhaven. They sat in silence for a while before she perked up again in surprise.

"I almost forgot," she handed over to him the wrapped black box, and, as he took it into his calloused hands and inspected it like it was some kind of packed explosive, she bobbed up and down in excitement. "Your birthday is on the 25th, am I right? Happy birthday."

He looked at her as if he knew she had stuffed dead rats inside. She gave him such an innocent grin that it could be considered with malicious intent.
"My birthday isn't for another week," he said curiously. "Will I die if I open this?"

"It depends on whatever you define 'dying' as," she explained. "Just open it. You'll never know if it's that pair of shoes you've been wanting since you were a boy."

Corvo blinked curiously as he began to unwrap the black paper that bound his apparent gift.

Jessamine's smile grew wider as he completely peeled off the wrap to reveal a thick black leather book with its title bright on the spine: 'The History of the Karnaca and the Serkonan Peoples by Walpole Burnham'. He frowned in discernment as he leafed through the contents of the publication, catching a few familiar names and wars and years, complete with neat footnotes and bibliography.

"You always said you did like black," she commented as he browsed through the page of the list of Dukes. "I tried my best to look for one with that cover. It wasn't easy."

Corvo was so overwhelmed by her act of kindness that he closed the book and put it on his lap, opening his mouth and closing it again in an effort to try and say something that would break the silence; this happened many times until he was able to taste a pathetic gratitude at the tip of his tongue. How pathetic was it that the heiress, the person in a position higher than him, someone he was there to impress, was the one giving gifts to please him?

"Thank you, Your Highness, this is…" —and the words disappeared again— "…this is wonderful. I'm sorry I came without something in return."

She shook her head. "Don't worry; I didn't expect you to bring anything. Besides, it's the least I can do for your strenuous efforts in sending me letters despite your hectic schedule."

She expected him to answer or carry on the conversation, perhaps by remarking or commenting on his aforementioned hectic schedule with Ivanna and Avery, but instead, he said nothing and put the book beside him on the chair. Her brows knitted in confusion; usually it was the candidates that would initiate conversation, not her. He really was different.

"You're the silent type, I can tell," Jessamine interrupted the serenity. "You don't talk a lot."

"I don't like talking sometimes," Corvo licked his lips, looking at his fidgeting hands. "Besides, what else do I have left to tell Her Highness? You have all my letters."

"True, your language seems more complicated and longer on paper."

"You said it yourself: my thoughts flow better on paper. So there's nothing left for me to say."

"But I don't know enough for me to really 'know you' as a person. You should open up and talk to me and introduce yourself; that's the reason you're here right now."

"And that's the reason you sent letters as well, Your Highness. Silence is necessary for a good meditative soul."

She raised her eyebrow at him. "And you're a good meditative soul?"

"I like to think of myself as one," he replied, the corners of his mouth turning up into a small smile. "Well, in comparison to everyone else here in this Tower."

Jessamine's smile reversed itself into a discontented frown, and her tone turned bitter as well. "Oh, so everyone in this hectic Tower indulges themselves headfirst into their work, too busy to mind
themselves and their spiritual health, something that obviously outweighs their jobs, jobs that are basically responsible for keeping this whole Empire on its feet…and that's a bad thing?"

Corvo froze; he might have struck a nerve in her there, and that wasn't good. Still, it didn't erase his stunned expression upon realising she was a thirteen-year-old who was aware of the responsibilities her position entailed in the Dunwall government; when Corvo was thirteen, he was busy stealing a crate of pears from their neighbour the merchant. He sat for a few moments in silence, trying to find out what to say.

"I didn't mean it like that, my Lady. Silence should be integrated into their work system, not so much as an everyday requirement that would completely erase their efforts in government."

Jessamine looked up at him with a discerning gaze; Corvo looked back at her with a raised eyebrow.

"You're very odd, you know," Jessamine commented. "When I was with Elyza, she was trying her best to adjust to topics that she thought would interest me…books, history, and the like. And here you are talking to me about your political opinions."

Corvo smirked. "Aren't I charming?"

Jessamine's smile returned. "No."

He sighed in reply and opened his book again, browsing through a few of the pages. Jessamine looked over his shoulder a bit and pointed to a name on one of the latter pages.

"I know this one," she said, and he read the name as she recited it. "Cremona. They're one of the richest families in Karnaca, and they own one of the oldest wine plantations in Serkonos. I heard there was an incident how many months ago where their latest heir's manor just detonated." And she leaned back and gestured with her hands an explosion. "Boom!"

Corvo watched as he drew back her hands and shake her head in remorse, as if she could have done something but failed to. "I heard that's where you saved Father. You were ambushed by…" she counted on her hands, "ten men or so, I think. Then you pulled these daggers from your scabbard and just eliminated them. Delilah told me you cut off their heads to display on your home shelf."

"I…don't do that," he frowned. "Nobody in Serkonos does that. Don't listen to Deiliah; all of those rumours aren't true."

"But it's true you saved Father, right?"

He looked at his hand, where, if he concentrated hard enough, he could still feel the burn of the explosion, the bandages on his hand. "I did. But I just saved him from one man, with a sword. That story's changing with every single retelling."

As he clenched and unclenched his fist, all of a sudden, he felt small arms wrap around his chest, and when he looked, he saw that she was hugging him. He blinked curiously.

"Then thank you," she whispered.

He couldn't help but smile a bit and pat her shoulder; this was perhaps the only intimate contact they ever had throughout the entire conversation, and he was probably the first to ever get her to hug him. "You don't have to thank me, Your Highness. It was something anyone would have done."
"But you, of all the Serkonans in that party, of all the people in the world, were right there, at that exact moment, for you to save him."

"And here I am because of it."

**EDIT (8th March, 2017):** I am indeed aware that, in the canon material, Delilah is ousted from Dunwall Tower at around this time. However, since she continually appears later on in the story in a bunch of different scenes, consider her prolonged cameos here the only aspect of this fic in which it is canon divergent. Damn Arkane and their shoehorns.
Part I: The Choosing

Chapter Summary

In which a miraculous (or disastrous) choice is made, depending on your level of xenophobic attitudes.

Chapter Notes

Well, I have nothing much to say here, because the title is pretty self-explanatory. I also replaced the excerpt in the beginning to Shake a speare.

AN EXCERPT FROM THE PLAY 'A SCANDAL IN BALETON' BY SIR WALLACE SHARROW
(Act III, Scene X)

PLEBIAN 1:

Hush! the man speaks!

The crowds fall quiet as ALLRIC steps onto the platform.

ALLRIC, to the crowd:

I stand before the crowds of Baleton, dear people of this town, a new man!
A changed man, a creation of the stars themselves crafted and reformed into
A suitable steward and servant to thee, dear public.
For it is as universal a truth as the seasons' change, as the heavens in the sky,
As the rain doth pours in the wet months and the ice freezes and grips the heart and tongue,
As the Morley flowers bloom and the songs of the whales of the floating abyss,
That I love one of thine, a true daughter of Grristol and Baleton, the Lady Pheobe, the fair
Maiden and child of the magistrate of your blessed city! The lady I myself do not deem
Worthy enough for me to marry. A woman as beautiful and alluring as her endless love
The people. I am too poor of soul to receive her loyalty, her great riches, her fair hair and eyes
And heart, but I will accept thy proposal for my great love for her and her great love for me.
Rest assured, turbulent crowds of Baleton! I shall care for her until my dying breath, and
Offer each drop of my blood to her. I shall sacrifice myself for her and for thee, O demanding crowds,
O selfless people!
The person in the mirror was very different from the young man who had first entered the Tower about nearly two years ago. He had the same tan skin, the same dark hair, and the same dark eyes, but he had changed. There was a new light that shone in him, some certain light of wisdom that he could never acquire had he stayed stuck in Serkonos. He knew now of details in politics, history, he had evolved into someone his younger self wouldn't be able to recognise.

Even physical appearance-wise, he was now another person; his shabby clothes were now replaced with the typical uniform of the candidates, coats and shirts of teal and gold, with high boots and even leather gloves. His hair had grown longer and wilder, and most his locks were able to be tied into a ponytail at the base of his head; he had cut most of the stray tresses so it would look neater. His jawline was beginning to grow stronger, and his arms definitely felt leaner and muscular, thanks to the rigorous training that Ivanna put him and the candidates through nearly every day. When he looked back at his own reflection, he felt as if he was looking at, for the lack of a less poetic term, a familiar stranger; a man that he was able to recognise and dismiss without hesitation, a man he was able to call himself and not himself.

After fixing his collar and returning his own gaze in front of the mirror for a while, he walked towards his door, he scanned his room with his eyes, trying to commit the whole scene to memory; if today was the day that he would lose, he wouldn't be chosen, this would probably be the last time he would enjoy such luxuries, probably the last time in his whole life that he would be able to set foot in the Tower.

He took a deep breath and, turning the handle of his door, left his room, unsure everything he had ever known.

Lady Jessamine liked him, he was sure.

But why was he scared?

As far as he was concerned, she enjoyed his company. They met and talked only during their scheduled dates, but he had made the most of those hours whenever they were together. He remembered, on one particular occasion, when she was late instead of him, since she had brought to the gazebo an entire table, and about seven of her lesson books. She spent the entire afternoon teaching him about geography, history, even skimming through a few pages of his new history book. She was trying to make him pronounce Tyvian names, helping him recall the towns of his own Isle, and, sometimes, he was tutoring her with her Serkonan pronunciation. The delight on her face that day obviously stemmed from the fact that she was now the teacher instead of the student, and it lowered Corvo's self-esteem, to some extent, that this thirteen-year-old knew more about the world that he did.

Despite this, he liked their meetings. It served as rest sessions between the harsh training sessions and tournament spars and bickering from both Ivanna and Captain Avery.

Lady Jessamine understood him more than anyone in this damned Tower; not in the sense that she went through the same experiences he did, but because she made such an effort to sympathise with his difficulties in this millennial endeavour. She knew that he was being treated differently from the other candidates because he wasn't like them; he wasn't dressed in colourful clothing and didn't drink expensive wine. He wasn't being prejudiced in any way, but there wasn't a day when he wasn't reminded that he was Serkonan, and, therefore, already at a great disadvantage when it came to becoming Royal Protector.

She liked him because he was different.
He took a deep breath as he fell in line with the other candidates. They were all wearing the same uniform of teal and gold, their hair done up nicely like his. Ivanna was wearing a dark coat, pacing in front of them with her hands clasped behind her back. Her hair was tied up in a tight twist at the back of her head, and her eyes shone with anticipation, her face gleaming with an expression of both pride and excitement that Corvo had never seen before.

They were all standing behind the large doors that led to the throne room, and they were shut tight, as if their future lay behind it, as if the moment that all their efforts culminated to were just mere footsteps away.

"Now," Ivanna began, scanning each of the seven individuals in front of her. "It's been nearly two years since you all first set foot in the Tower, nearly two years since you came here untrained, naïve, unprepared for the trials that would be laid before you. But now, looking at all of you here, I am confident that whoever Lady Jessamine will choose, she will choose rightly. All of you are more than qualified now, and the decision is out of my hands." She gave a warm smile, a genuine one. "I can only wish you luck."

He could feel all the other candidates take deep breaths like he did. Then she turned her back on them, and pushed open the doors.

The throne room was no new sight to him, but it always left him breathless. From its chandeliers to its vast space, it was both daunting and inviting. It wasn't empty that day either; it was filled with all different kinds of citizens, though most of the ones he could recognise were the upper-class men of Dunwall, with the occasional member from Parliament and some ordinary plebeians who only wished to see the ceremony unfold.

The candidates walked along the carpeted aisle, with Ivanna behind them. They formed a line in front of the throne and before the crowd before getting on one knee and keeping their heads low. Ivanna straightened her body and stood between them and the royal couple, who were seated on their respective chairs, with their daughter standing in front of them. The most extravagant-looking figure in the room was Jessamine, who was wearing a grand cape and layer upon layer of cloak. Her chin was high and her hands clasped in front of her, looking more like a queen indifferently watching an execution.

Corvo swallowed the nervousness that was building in his throat.

Ivanna bowed promptly before announcing in a loud voice: "Your Imperial Majesties Euhorn Jacob Kaldwin and Beatrix Blayne Kaldwin, Your Imperial Highness Lady Jessamine Kaldwin, and the ladies and gentlemen of the Court of Dunwall, I present to you the candidates of Royal Protector for the Lady Jessamine Kaldwin.

"May the candidates please rise."

And they obeyed her and rose, standing straight.

Jessamine climbed down the stairs from the dais that raised the thrones from the floor, her voice as clear as Ivanna's, as silvery as her father's. "I accept the candidates for my Royal Protector, and now will choose one to serve in the position from henceforth until the day they fail or the day I die."

Corvo could hear his heart bursting out of his chest. The way her words were obviously rehearsed and yet so official-sounding began to drive daggers of regret through his brain. He heard them being spoken countless times, but only then did he realise how much gravity he held. He tried his
best to desperately shake them off.

"And may Her Imperial Highness choose rightly," Euhorn announced to his court.

"May Her Imperial Highness choose rightly," the court answered back.

And thus began the longest two minutes in Corvo's life.

He remembered months before when they were rehearsing for the ceremony that he was instructed to always look at Jessamine as she would pace about and observe them, but for some strange reason, staring at her became the most uncomfortable feeling in the world. He felt like she was the Outsider, waiting for the decision that would either set his heart and soul at peace, or send him to suffer eternally in the emptiness of the Void. As she walked about in front of them, she looked at them straight in the eye, and on more than one occasion, he locked eyes with her. In those brief seconds, he could see that she was having trouble deciding between all of them, he could see the uncertainty in her poignant yet noble expression, and that made him nervous. Moments before, when he was standing behind the doors to the throne room, he was so sure that he would be chosen, since he was confident that she liked him the most, but then why was it that all of a sudden that confidence decided to leave him right then and there?

There was a possibility that he would lose.

The beating of his heart grew faster whenever he realised that she looked longer lay longer at the others instead of him; he saw her pleased expression when he looked at Elyza and Braddock, her nose wrinkle in disappointment at Von, and so on so forth. When she turned her head in his direction, he shot his line of sight away, not wanting to know what sort of judgment she would pass upon him.

But there was something else in her gaze. That same reassurance was still there, that same compassion was still there. It was the light in her eyes she always gave him whenever he expressed his insecurities about being a foreigner in such a strange city, whenever he would berate himself for even agreeing to the deal that the Duke proposed that sent him there in the first place, whenever he had lost all confidence during those days in which Avery would win in a swordfight during the morning training routines.

She still liked him because he was different.

Jessamine walked back to the centre, standing before all her candidates with her eyes looking ahead. She clasped her hands at her back as everyone held their breaths in anticipation for her to speak.

"And it is today that I have chosen who will become my Royal Protector henceforth," she announced clearly for everyone to hear, "and it is with great certainty, confidence, and pride that I choose Corvo Attano to become my Royal Protector, to serve me and the Kaldwin name until death."

Ivanna's smile turned into a scowl. Even the Emperor and Empress looked up with wide eyes.

There were gasps then murmurs then clamours and complaints. He was numb.
Part I: Born to Be

Chapter Summary

In which we discover the strenuous subjects of which a Royal Protector must be educated in, of which are: history, marksmanship, and empathy.

Chapter Notes

I wrote a biographical sketch. I had to read a bunch of Wikipedia articles in order for me to sound objective and straight to the point. It was hard, and I seriously tried to suppress my word count on this one.

Also, who wants the history of pistol mechanisms and locks? You sure don't. But guess what? You'll learn a few things about history and thank me later. (Also realistically: gun recoil won't kill you, despite what is said in this chapter. It will only cause you some intense shock and will blow you back a bit, but this can easily be avoided if you keep a level stance.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THE BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF FRASER ALON VARINOX, TAKEN FROM 'THE LIST OF RULERS AND PROTECTORS' BY FRANC WEYVARD

Lord Fraser Alon Varinox (4th Day of the Month of Harvest, 1748 – 15th Day of the Month of Clans, 1801) was the Royal Protector of the 11th imperial regent. He acted as bodyguard to the late Empress Larisa Olaskir I, serving in the position from his inauguration on 1st Day of the Month of Songs, 1783 until his resignation in 1801, making him the 10th Royal Protector overall. According to historian Sir Walpole Burnham in 'The Royal Protectors: Lives of Service and Sacrifice' (1802): "Despite the murky rumours that surround him and the reputation that clings to him like river krusts to this day, Lord Fraser Varinox remains, in the eyes of Dunwall and the rest of the Isles, one of the finest and most respected and revered names serving under his title in the history of the known world."

Born into one of the most prominent clans in Dunwall and raised to carry on its name into another position of Royal Protector, Varinox was raised in combat and received his alma mater from the Academy of Natural Philosophy, where he graduated with honours in a course of Metaphysics. He began his career as a Captain of the Dunwall Military then went on to becoming the Royal Protector of Empress Larisa Olaskir when he was thirty-five years of age. He retained his position until in early 1801 when a scandal broke out that he and the Empress were in an affair, which, according to him was "completely untrue in every sense of that word". Despite this and the fact that he had a wife and daughter, his letters and journals suggest that though he may have held strong affections for the Empress, she did not reciprocate his feelings and treated him harshly because of them. Many believe that this was the reason he resigned from his position on the 20th Day of the Month of Seeds, 1801. Whether the Empress forced him to or not is unknown.
Only a few months later, on the 8th Day of the Month of Clans, the Empress was assassinated in broad daylight, and until this day, the identity of her killers remains a mystery. Varinox followed only a week later, when his body was found washed up on the banks of the Wrenhaven near Clavering Boulevard. Until now, the Varinox family refuses to disclose the reason to his death, although some speculate that this was due to his guilt of his failure as a Royal Protector. An autopsy conducted later that day declared him dead on the 15th Day of the Month of Clans, and his cause of death was filed as drowning.

"By the Outsider, what *is* this word?" Adelaide pointed at a very inscrutable figure amongst the other inscrutable figures as she slid back his paper.

Corvo picked up the paper on the table and blinked, trying to remember just exactly what he wrote. Unwilling to admit even he didn't understand, he only sighed and shook his head, leaning back on his chair.

"I don't remember," he replied.

"Great," Ivanna groaned, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Even he can't decipher his horrible handwriting."

Jessamine's governess Adelaide Ravens, Ivanna, and Corvo all sat at a table inside the Tower library, surrounded by a labyrinth of shelves filled to the brim. As the midmorning sunlight went through the high windows and cast lazy shadows over the piles of books stacked up on the desk in front of Corvo, Adelaide was busy reading in-between his papers and the number of history books sprawled out in front of her.

 Needless to say, Corvo was horrible at history.

It had only been a week since the Choosing Ceremony, and true to Ivanna's word nearly two years ago, the would-be Royal Protector would have to undergo several trials, lessons, and court tutoring before they would be officially sworn in and inaugurated. The Serkonan was expecting something difficult, sure, like taking out three people all at once in a practice yard, but this was agony. By the Void, the whole baptismal thing he had to undergo with the Abbey days ago wasn't as stressful as this. He didn't expect to be holed up in a dusty library, surrounded by books that he knew he would use as pillows at the sight of the first paragraph. But apparently, lessons on the history of the Isles and memory of the names of the previous imperial regents and Royal Protectors were a necessary asset (even though he knew it would never be useful at all, though Ivanna was there to disagree).

Ivanna was assigned by the Emperor to take care of Corvo, thereby responsible for the preparations and the month of transition. She already had it set from the very first day of recruiting: Miss Ravens would be tutoring on history, etymology, and etiquette, Captain Avery would be on fighting and combat training, while Secretary Varnham would be for the basics of court such as reports and politics, and the structure of the Parliamentary Council.

Corvo did horribly on all aspects of those teachers…well, save for the training with Captain Avery, which was more or less satisfactory. But the Lady Protector herself had second-hand headaches whenever Secretary Varnham was trying his best to teach the Serkonan the difference between a legislative body and a judiciary body.

Then again, how couldn't he not when currently, he was doing miserably on the history of his own Isle?

"It's spelled Abatangelo, not Abategelo," Adelaide corrected, her fingernail right beside the error
on his paper. "Gods, I pity the poor soul who has to read your handwriting on a daily basis. I mean, your reports, Lord Attano, they have to be…" —the governess paused, trying to find a word that wasn't too insulting— "...understandable."

Corvo frowned. "So my handwriting is shit."

"Yes, exactly!" Ivanna chimed in with sardonic glee, saving Adelaide the burden of having to explain that yes, his handwriting was shit.

"Lady Varinox, please, some decorum," Adelaide intervened before it became another argument. These two bickered more than they should have, and they shouldn't, considering that in three weeks time, Corvo would officially be in an equal position to that of Ivanna's. They were supposed to be partners, not adversaries.

Ivanna restrained herself from making another snarky remark as she crossed her arms and turned away, leaning her body on the table.

"Here, Corvo, you need a break from Isle history," Adelaide took out another paper and slid it to him. "Let's go back to memorising the different Royal Protectors."

Corvo let out an unhinged groan. Ivanna tried to hide a smirk.

"Ah, there you are," Avery chimed as Ivanna and Corvo came into the training yard. "I was beginning to think that you wouldn't come, seeing as how Corvo enjoys sitting his lazy ass on a library chair listening to Varnham or Ravens dwell on and on about politics and which breakfast spoon to use."

"Har har," Corvo let out a fake laugh.

The dawn air of Dunwall was cold, and it would warm up in a while when the sun would finally resurface from the chilly horizon. The waters of the Wrenhaven were still, the grounds were quiet, and the lights from the palace were very dimly lit as the maids and butlers inside were making the morning preparations and the breakfast for the royal family to eat. Jessamine and her parents were still snuggled in their cozy satin sheets while Corvo and Ivanna were getting ready for exercise. The world was unfair in a number of strange ways.

"Alright, let's begin," Avery clasped his hands at his back, facing the guards in the courtyard that were already beginning their stretching and plyometric exercises.

From laps to arm stretching, about a dozen of them were already sweating, preoccupied by their own tiredness. Corvo watched silently from over Avery's shoulder as Ivanna stood at a respectable distance from the two men.

"So, who do you want me to fight today?" Corvo asked, eyeing a soldier at the far right who was doing sit-ups. "I haven't fought with Linton yet, or—"

"You're not fighting anyone today," Avery interrupted, spurring confused looks from the Serkonan. "I was planning on a full-on lesson routine, and it's going to be quite the fun exercise, so I don't want to be tiring you out." Then he bellowed to his soldiers: "Attention!"

The soldiers immediately got up from whatever they were in the middle of and fell in a straight line in front of the Captain in a matter of seconds.

"Yes, sir!" they answered in unison.
Corvo raised his eyebrows in both amusement and awe, because no matter how many times he watched over the morning routines, he was always impressed; the soldiers in the Grand Serkonan Guard never fell in attention this fast.

"At ease, men," Avery stepped forward, and their posture seemed to relax, albeit they still stood straight. "I'll dismiss you from laps and basic exercise today; my priority now is instructing our incoming Royal Protector here," —and Avery gestured to the Serkonan— "Corvo Attano."

All eyes were cast upon him; the only thing he managed to do was nod his head in acknowledgement. Their eyes were so steely and devoid of any form of emotion that he couldn't tell if he was being judged or not. At least they were a tad bit more merciful that the council when it came to discrimination; they didn't make it obvious, even if they were remarking silently to themselves how uncouth his posture was, or how his messy hair tangled itself in the ponytail behind his head.

"Now," Avery walked along the training yard, still addressing the guards, "if you could all stand to one side and set up the targets on the edge right there."

At his command, the men began to move and brought out wooden cut-outs of human figures with targets and bullet holes on their heads and chests, which they placed right on the far perimeter of the yard.

Avery removed his gloves and stuffed them into his pocket. "Oh, and Linton?"

A guard approached him. "Yes, sir?"

"Bring out the flints and the hybrids. Ah, and make sure the hybrids are the new ones."

"Yes, sir."

As the guard disappeared into the makeshift arsenal and the rest of the men lined up to the side, Avery waved over to Corvo and Ivanna, and the two walked over to the Captain. The Serkonan looked at the five targets on the other side of the yard, trying to calculate their distance judging by how far the guards lined up and the estimated length of his stride.

"Fifteen feet," Avery answered the question just as Corvo was about to say it. "Usually, the soldiers and I do ten, but I feel like you're a man who likes a bit of a challenge."

Corvo could only nod, squinting to look at the targets painted crudely on the cut outs. Many holes were made close to the bullseyes but only about three or four holes made it through correctly.

"So this morning," Avery stated, "I'll be teaching you how to shoot a gun."

Corvo frowned. "But I already know how to."

"Of course you do," Ivanna said, rolling her eyes. "He'll be teaching you how to use a real gun, not one of those sad makeshift things they give you back at Karnaca."

The soldier Linton approached the three, then set down a table and two small briefcases. Avery opened both of them to reveal different pistols; all of them were wooden, fashioned with odd pieces of metal meant to absorb recoil and to assist with accuracy. Corvo had never seen that much gold carved onto a gun before, since the only weapons they were able to use back in his days as an officer were crude handguns.

"You were an Officer in the Grand Serkonan Guard, weren't you?" Avery picked up a pistol and
"Yes, Captain," Corvo replied.

"Then this is what you're used to shooting," Avery held it up for Corvo to see: a wooden gun with a curved handle and pieces of metal jutting from the trigger around the barrel, but unlike the guns Corvo was used to seeing, this one was embroidered with the gold symbol of the two royal swans. "It's a double-barrel flintlock pistol; an old thing, really. Boorish, hard to reload, and extremely noisy."

Then without warning, he pointed at the target and shot, igniting a small yet very loud explosion of smoke and sparks from the barrel even before the bullet hit a few inches next to a target on the head. Corvo and some of the soldiers at the side jumped in surprise, but Ivanna and Avery barely flinched; the latter blew on the barrel as a few wisps of smoke escaped from the muzzle.

"And it'll take another seven seconds to reload, with the biting and gunpowder taste in your teeth," Avery put the gun back on the table and picked up another one beside it. "$\text{No one wants that.}\$"

Corvo nodded, still shaky from the bang of the shot.

"But this one," Avery tapped the barrel on his palm; a thick-chambered pistol with the same swan symbol and a comfortable grip, but metal supported its rear and head. If anything it looked simpler than the other one. "$\text{This, dear boy, is what happens when you raise the lovechild of a wheel and a percussion lock: a City Watch pistol. It's what we call a hybrid; less reloading time, still raucous but a bit quieter, and most importantly—}\$"

And again Avery pointed the gun at the target and pulled the trigger, and with a blast, a bullet flew from the barrel and made its mark right next to the hole he made earlier, making Corvo jump again.

"—a shit ton of firepower."

Avery took a pellet from his pouch and began to reload the gun just as the Serkonan was blinking back his shock. It was definitely more powerful than the flintlock, despite its softer blast. He couldn't help but feel his bones shake at the sight of it.

"You'll be teaching me how to shoot that?" Corvo frowned.

"Don't make such a fuss over it," Ivanna scoffed.

"Here, take this one," the Captain handed him another pistol of the same kind. "$\text{The recoil is still pretty hard to take in, but keep a level footing and maybe you won't break your arm off.}\$"

Corvo shuddered as his hands coiled around the smooth wooden handle, taking in its weight.

"Maybe?"

Avery sighed in exasperation. "$\text{Just aim the gun, man.}\$"

Corvo complied and set his feet apart, pointing the barrel at the target in the middle.

"Look at the target and focus, Attano," Avery picked. "$\text{The gun will pack a nasty bite, so make sure that you'll be ready for the force that bounces back. This isn't a child's toy. Keep your aim steady… and stop shaking, damn it.}\$"

Corvo exhaled anxiously, trying to calm himself.
The Captain stood back. "Fire when you're ready."

Corvo took a deep nervous breath and narrowed down his gaze until he could see the bullseye right in front of the barrel. There was nothing to be scared about, he told himself constantly; the guns in Serkonos were a hell lot more dangerous, and all he had to do was shoot. Steady your aim and pull the trigger, that's what they taught him at the Guard: steady your aim, relax, and pull the trigger, and you can't miss.

He pulled his feet apart and as he exhaled, he pulled the trigger.

A sound of a bang echoed through the yard. The smoke that erupted from the barrel wasn't a new scent, but it was the force that pushed his entire body back that nearly caught him by surprise enough to almost let go. He kept his footing in place, that was good, but the shaking of his bones was slowly dying down as he relaxed his stance and let his arms hang at the sides. The recoil was definitely much stronger than that of the pistols he was used to back at home, but the thrill that this one sent through his body was almost exhilarating.

Upon looking at the target he struck, Ivanna's eyes widened and she blinked in astonishment. Even some of the guards whispered amongst themselves.

"Well, damn me to the Void," Avery raised his eyebrows as he put his hands on his hips, looking at the target. "We got ourselves a natural marksman."

Right smack in the middle of the circle, Corvo's shot had made a hole. A perfect bullseye.

"The reports are a very essential part of the lifestyle of a Royal Protector," Varnham began, putting the folder he was holding down on the desk. "They are a conduit through which you make orders and see them executed, in the most formal way necessary."

Corvo sat obediently on a desk in one of the many Tower parlours, the midday sun slowly transforming into another lazy afternoon. Ivanna, the sole guardian she was, paced around the desks and watched from the distance as Randolf Varnham, the appointed secretary of His Majesty, was bringing out documents forth from his table and laid them out in front of Corvo for him to construe.

"Reports and commands are one and the same, if an individual happens to perceive that sort of perspective on the matter," Varnham explained, fixing the papers. "You are required to make formal statements and requests via reports when not in an emergency situation."

"Then what counts as an emergency situation?" Corvo asked.

"Oh, I don't know..." Varnham paused a moment to think of a scenario, "say, the Tower is under a terrorist attack, or the city is on fire. Oh, come on, Corvo; you're not that unintelligent."

"You might want to rethink your words, Secretary," Ivanna joked from the corner of the room.

Corvo glanced at her without any emotion on his face. By now, he was used to her constant insulting, and completely drowned them out in the sea of stress that was accumulating as the days drew closer to the inauguration ceremony. He knew she wasn't fooling anyone; the nearer they got to the end of the month, the more her stress began to show through the composed expression she seemed to always mask herself behind. He wasn't good at reading people, admittedly, but he was damn sure that Ivanna was going to break anytime soon.

The Secretary scoffed in response to Ivanna's banter.
"Anyway, Corvo," —and he turned the papers around for Corvo to see— "you are permitted to write three kinds of reports, two of which are directed towards lower position, and only one to a higher position."

Corvo knitted his brows together as he looked at the documents. "Higher position?"

Varnham pushed his glasses up higher the bridge of his nose. "Well, yes. As a Royal Protector, you are responsible for the safety of your assigned imperial regent, making you one of the most powerful men in Dunwall. All military and criminal affairs are under your jurisdiction; why, even the general of the navy submits to you! I think that the only person higher than the position of Royal Protector is the imperial regent themselves!"

Corvo's eyes widened; he had that much power resting on his shoulders? He just thought that the Royal Protector was there to block attacks from incoming assassins and organise guard patrols or whatever they told him when he was back at the Guard, not handle economic and political affairs. It was a realisation that was dumped on him like a bucket of cold water: beside Euhorn and his family, Ivanna could possibly be the most powerful person in the Isles.

And in a few weeks time, he would have that power as well.

"Is this true?" he asked Ivanna, still unable to comprehend that he managed to jump from low-life Serkonan street fighter to the second-most powerful man in the known world just because a thirteen-year-old girl said his name in front of a crowd.

Ivanna raised her eyebrows, as if that was the easiest question in the world to answer. "Yes."

Corvo tried to hide the fact he was taken aback.

"Didn't I tell you before?" Ivanna frowned, trying to re-examine her memories. "The position of Royal Protector entails an awful lot and demands more than it gives, actually. True, you get all the luxuries of a high-class citizen, but it comes tedious training hours and constant stress…not to mention if your imperial monarch dies on your watch, it will become your responsibility."

The Serkonan leaned back in his seat, unable to make of all the concepts that were floating around in his head. He was having difficulty setting all in: the fact that he was a powerful commander of any and all matters under the sky, that he could enjoy the lavish lifestyle he and his sister always used to long for, that he could be jailed and executed if Lady Jessamine was accidentally stabbed through the heart while she was simply holding a bread knife.

Corvo's expression went blank with fear.

"Oh please, my Lady, don't scare him," Varnham shook his head.

"Are you serious?" Corvo managed to make the words come out, at last.

"Of course we are, Master Attano," Varnham said, almost sounding insulted because he wasn't being recognised as austere. "Everything your teachers do, everything Lady Ivanna does, everything that the Emperor and Empress conduct with regards to you is for the sake of the heiress. Lady Jessamine's life rests in you and the knowledge we gift you with."

Corvo let out a sigh as he rested his backbone on the cushion of the chair.

"Which reminds me," —he turned over to Ivanna— "Lady Varinox, if I may ask, when will we begin the rehearsal and mock ceremony for us to teach him the process of the inauguration?"
"I wasn't able to organise it just yet," came Ivanna's reply. "Avery and Miss Ravens are as equally busy as you, so the slots in which all three of you are vacant are near th—"

The door to the parlour opened unexpectedly, and first came lavish red shoes, followed by a head of ashen tresses, and an attire of pink satin. The Empress stepped in gracefully, dressed in silk and velvet. She was quickly followed by a handmaiden dressed in black who rushed to her side, closing the door behind her as she entered. Corvo, since he was the only one seated, immediately rose and bowed along with Ivanna and Varnham, and only when the Empress nodded her head were they able to rise.

Corvo never really understood how the Empress could be so unrealistically beautiful. Her fair skin, dark hair, and blue eyes, together with her slender face and svelte form, made her easily one of the most elegant and gorgeous women in the entire city. Even the way her face lit up when she smiled made anyone easily forget their troubled thoughts and simply share in the happiness she wanted you to feel.

"Your Majesty," Varnham spoke up.

"Hello, everyone," Empress Beatrix chimed. "It's all so good to see you. I was wondering if I could talk privately with Master Attano. I will bring him to the library once I'm finished here, so you can meet us there, if you wish to continue your lesson."

"Of course, Your Majesty," Ivanna bowed and she and the Secretary, the latter of whom gathered his documents, walked towards the exit and disappeared with a click of the door.

All was fine, then Corvo suddenly froze as he realised that he was alone in the room with the Empress, the wife of the Emperor Euhorn Kaldwin, and he was completely unaware of whatever he did to attract her attention. She certainly had much better things to do, like attend her husband's council meetings or care for her daughter instead of wasting her time talking to some low-born Royal-Protector-to-be.

The Empress sat down on a chair. "Oh, do sit, Master Attano. I have matters to discuss with you."

And aside to the handmaiden: "Gertrude, could you get us some tea, please?"

The handmaiden bowed and left swiftly.

Corvo obeyed and sat on the sofa opposite to her, the only thing separating them was a wooden table that sat between them. He tried his best to find the swirls in the wood entertaining; he knew it was definitely out of his etiquette if he was to lock eyes with her, let alone speak first, so he let the silence envelop them for a few heartbeats. Without looking at her face, he noticed that the Empress sat up straight, an ankle tucked behind her foot, with her hands folded neatly on her lap. She was intensely regal, even the down to the way she positioned herself on a chair.

"You're a very quiet boy," the Empress commented, mirth entangled in her words. "Rarely do I see this type of decorum in a Serkonan, forgive me. It is only a slight interest."

Corvo frowned at his hands, tasting his words multiple times to rid them of any misunderstanding before talking slowly, annunciating his words carefully. "I'm sorry, Your Majesty, have I done something wrong?"

"No, of course not," Empress Beatrix shook her head. "I only came to acquaint myself properly with you. I rarely have the time to nowadays, and with Euhorn and Jessamine in the council meeting, I finally have a chance to meet you professionally." She giggled a light laugh. "Besides, I need to know the young man who will end up protecting my daughter for the rest of her life."
Gertrude returned, carrying a tray with two cups and a teapot. Corvo watched as the maid assisted the Empress in pouring her cup, and stirring it before moving at the side as Beatrix took a sip.

"Would you like some?" the Empress gestured to the platters.

Corvo knew enough of court manners as to never deny a privilege that the royal family offered him, so he took a cup and platter, then poured some hot tea ever so slowly, only holding it in his callused hands. It was still too hot to drink.

"You must understand," the Empress spoke up, "my daughter is going through strenuous trials as well as you. She's handling council meetings with her father now, and she's learning more and more about the consequences of the decision she made of choosing you."

Corvo's heart stopped; Jessamine was suffering and enduring trials because she chose him? All the lessons he was taught through those weeks ingrained in his consciousness the only reason he was in the position, the only reason he would exist for now until death, was to protect her. He should have never boarded that ship when he had the chance, if only he knew that he would be putting the capabilities of a thirteen-year-old heiress at their limit.

"She's..." Corvo managed to murmur, and if he put any more pressure on the cup he was holding, it would break. "Because she...?"

"Relax, Master Attano, she's doing just fine," Beatrix reassured.

"Your Majesty," Corvo tried to hide the fact that his voice was shaking, "if I may ask for something."

"Yes, what is it?"

Corvo took in a deep breath to try and quell the loud nervous beating in his chest. "People like Braddock Swindlehurst and Elyza Wallerman, those are the people meant to be Royal Protector. But she chose me, of the six candidates that were more deserving than I ever could be in a lifetime."

The Empress blinked. Corvo took another deep breath.

"Do you think Lady Jessamine chose right? Do you think I can become something I was never born to be?"

The Empress stayed silent for a heartbeat. Two heartbeats. The tea was finally warm enough to drink, but he didn't sip any of it and put it on the table.

"Do you want my honest answer?" she spoke.

The Serkonan hesitated for a split second, then nodded.

"The world is full of uncertainties, Master Attano, so no: I feel as if you will become an inadequate Royal Protector."

Corvo tried to blink furiously, preventing himself from showing weakness in front of the Empress. He asked for her opinion; he had no right to accuse her against it just because it wounded his pride. This was like asking a lion to spare a rat just because the latter wanted a second chance to live.

"Look at me, Master Attano."
He did. He shot his head up, and looked the Empress right in the eye. Her blue-coloured irises seemed to bore into his soul, but the smile that came with it seemed to speak otherwise.

"You weren't born to become the Royal Protector," she continued, her voice motherly, "but that doesn't mean you don't have the potential to become one. Jessamine was born to become an Empress, but whether she becomes one that is loved or one that is hated all depends on her."

Corvo exhaled a shaky breath, grateful that at least, that her words reassured his ability. "I just…I don't understand why she chose me."

"An heir needs no justification as to why they chose a Royal Protector. They only need shoulder both the burdens and blessings that come along with the name that they appoint by their side."

"An heir needs a justification as to why they chose a Royal Protector!" one of the men, Vaine, slammed his hands on the table. "This is beyond unacceptable! This simple 'chance of fate' excuse isn't going to cut it this time."

Jessamine buried her hands in her face. Her father, seated at the head of the table, was busy trying to pacify at his council that was constantly arguing with him; papers were flying everywhere, the glasses of wine and whiskey on the table were near empty, shouts overpowered one another, and the maids that stood to the side found themselves flinching in shock every time someone raised their voice. It was only in Parliament when Euhorn's men forgot they were talking to an Emperor and instead, spoke with him like they would a subordinate. To criticize the Emperor was part of the job. But years of sitting at her father's side during his chaotic meetings accustomed her to the true anarchic side to the peaceful term of Emperor Euhorn Jacob Kaldwin the First.

This time, it was her fault.

"A Serkonan!" a second, Hallward, threw up his hands in the air. "It could have been Morely, even Tyvia, by the Outsider; at least Tyvians have a little more educational background and etiquette! But a Serkonan? He could've been the son of a whore; do you really want someone like that protecting the heir to the throne?"

Euhorn pinched the bridge of his nose. "Gentlemen, can we just—?"

"This is something history has its eyes on, Your Majesty," a more diplomatic soul, Farifax, spoke up. "The very first time that someone outside of Gristol became a Royal Protector."

"Exactly, damn it!" Vaine retorted. "Serkonos will be sure to brag on and on about this like some air-headed bird. And what's worse is that we can't recall this, even if we could. Do you want a war with Serkonos?"

"I'm sure that will be an easy-fought war," a random voice perked up from the back, and everyone went into another frenzy of yells and expletives.

"Everyone, please!" Euhorn's plead went without notice and he sat back down.

"Come on, Your Majesty," Morgan Pendleton sipped his glass of brandy like a gentleman; he and his twin were probably the calmest faces in the disarray. "Do you really think that a poor-born, low-life bastard of a man could serve in your court? Think about your daughter."

Jessamine looked up, trying to blink back tears. Euhorn was trying to hide the concern in his expression.
"Damn, and I put all of my money on that Swindlehurst boy," Custis Pendleton added. "Oh, well; you can't have everything." He leaned over to his brother and his voice shrunk into a whisper that Euhorn couldn't pick up. "But I'm willing to bet that if that Varinox woman did was she was meant to do and lie down on a bed, then I'm sure this naïve twat of an heiress would pick her child."

Morgan wickedly snickered. Jessamine's eyes widened as her ears flushed. The anger that was building up inside her had to be dimmed down; it was unethical for a lady of her position to suddenly yell at two Parliamentarians. Euhorn groaned as he massaged his temples.

"How could we even make sure that he isn't here to assassinate someone?" another shout, Gardiner, caught the attention of everyone in the room. "He could survive a few more years into his term then all of a sudden, we could have the Lady's blood on his sword! And that's giving him the benefit of the doubt; he could go after the Empress, even you, Your Majesty…and what's stopping him from all three of you?"

The council clamoured in agreement.

"Or all of us!" Hallward added.

The clamour grew louder. The Pendletons were laughing, the Parliament was howling with angry complaints and insults and just plain prejudice, and her father sat back helplessly, unable to keep them under control. Jessamine clenched her fists.

This was enough.

The shattering of a glass shut everyone up and turned their heads over to the heiress, who was standing up in front of broken shards of a wine glass on the table. Even the Pendleton twins had their eyes wide in bewilderment. She had a frown on her face and a small little cut under her left eye, which began to bleed. Euhorn, finally tranced out of his stunned expression, opened his mouth to comment on it, but the defiant face Jessamine masked prevented him.

"This was my choice to make!" she said loud and clear for the entire parliament to finally pay attention to her. "This was my burden to carry. I'm aware that your job entails you looking after me and my father, but there are some matters in which you can express your opinions and leave alone for the regent to decide. For the Outsider's sake, it was called a 'Choosing Ceremony' for a good reason!"

Everyone seemed to shrink in their seats while Jessamine stood upright, slamming her hands on the table, her slender fingers just inches away from the shattered glass.

"The nerve of you all!" she continued. "How dare you speak to my father about this matter in such a vulgar manner! In fact, you should be speaking to me. Either way, any position and opinion you give me will be discarded and declared null and void in my eyes. My decision was and will be final."

The council was silent. Jessamine felt like crying.

"I need no reason to legitimise myself and my reasons for choosing my Royal Protector," she finished, trying her best to blink back the tears that were dying to be released. "My business is mine, and yours is yours. I will not relent to any of you, or preserve my reputation just because a group of discourteous and horridly stuck-up men who call themselves a Parliament tell me so."

Jessamine sat back down, suddenly aware that all of the council's eyes were upon her. She sniffed and wiped her eye when she felt the faintest drops of water leak from the corner of her eyelid. It
was her against the world now, left alone to push reason after reason just to protect herself from the criticising eyes of the council.

But all of a sudden, she felt her father's hand on her shoulder. She looked up to see Euhorn rise from his chair, looking at his council intently.

"You heard my daughter," he announced, his tone as regal as it was frightening. "If you have any complaints, say them now."

The silence was deafening. Countless minutes passed, and the only sound from the Parliament was a raucous cough.

"I thought so," the Emperor said in mock disappointment. "Dismissed."

When she was reminded she had to make preparations for the inauguration ceremony, Ivanna organised everything so they could begin rehearsing by tomorrow, if she was lucky. But for now, she had to pick up Corvo from the library, fresh out of another brain-hurting session from one of Adelaide's lessons. The Royal Protector wasn't there to watch over him, but she assumed he did just fine…or at least endured just fine.

She wasn't surprised when she saw his slouched form over the table, sleeping on an open book just as Miss Ravens was fixing her things. After a few conversations exchanged and farewells said, Ivanna offered to return the books so that Adelaide could rest, and the governess left their company. The sun was already setting just as Ivanna was piling up the last few stacks, and Corvo yawned as he resurfaced from his pillow of words.

He didn't say anything as he watched her reach up and insert the books in the proper shelf, eyeing her sleepily.

"Finally," she sighed exasperatedly. "I was wondering if I had to pull you back to your dorm myself."

"I can manage," he replied, resting his head back on the book.

The silence lasted for about a heartbeat before she spoke again.

"Discuss anything interesting today? Or did you just sleep through another lecture like you always do?"

"We learned about your father."

Ivanna's blood froze.

"Let's not talk about it," he sat up, leaning against his chair, suddenly regretting that he said it.

"No…no, we can talk about it all we want!" Ivanna said with sarcastic glee, obviously trying to hide the fact that she was annoyed and bothered. "In fact, since you know so much about him now, let's talk about how much of a lying cheating asshole he is!"

Corvo closed his eyes and tried to shut her anger out. "Ivanna, please—"

"You read about him, did you?" she continued, her voice cracking at times. "You read about how much he left me to rot together with my mother, how he basically abandoned the people he loved to get to someone who didn't love him back? He deserves a worse death than just drowning. He
deserves to see me and my mother cry. He deserves the worst. That dishonest, no-good, bastard…"

Corvo heard her walk over to the table and she dropped all of the books on the desk. When he opened his eyes, she was sitting in front of the books, covering her face with a hand.

"The books say he was a great Royal Protector," Corvo said matter-of-factly.

"The books don't say shit," she spat back. "The books don't say anything about what he did to the Varinoxes. To us. He made us look like fools, the selfish prick."

Corvo sighed. "Ivanna…"

She turned away, making sure his back was to him. "The reason I became Royal Protector, the reason I wanted to be chosen so badly…I wanted to bring back honour to the name. He made us lose it by chasing after the Empress who had stolen his heart and used that as an excuse to leave us to suffer without him." Her voice was on the verge of tears. "He didn't know what he had. I'll never forgive him."

"I shouldn't have brought it up," Corvo apologised. "I'm sorry."

Ivanna said nothing.

"I never…" Corvo hesitated, taking a deep breath, "I barely had a father."

Ivanna turned a little, only to reveal that her eyes were already pricked with tears that she was desperately trying to hide.

The words naturally spilled from his mouth. "They said my father suddenly died in some accident. And the only parents I ever had were my mother and sister; it was just the three of us. Then my mother became sick and my sister left us."

He paused to see if he solicited any reaction from her. When there was none, he continued.

"I'll never know loss like you would, but know you're not alone when it comes to never having someone you know should care about you."

She sniffed, and the faintest traces of a smile graced her lips. It was an awful feeling, having to sympathise with him, but he was making the effort now, and she wasn't so low as to not meet him halfway.

"You know," she chuckled, "it's times like this when you seem less of a moron…when you actually care people."

"It's also times like this when you seem less scary," Corvo returned, smiling.

"Don't push it," she replied, wiping her eyes. "I'll forget to be nice."

The corners of his lips turned up in a smile. "Sure you will."

She stood up, rolling her eyes. "Now come on, let's return these books so you can get to dinner in time."

Chapter End Notes
Some other fun facts about the position of Royal Protector:

- Based on the many things implied to us about Dunwall's government, Beatrix is actually not an empress simply, but an empress consort (basically a fancy term for the wife of an emperor). She doesn't wield any power or military influence, but she does have the same social status and title as her husband.
- The Royal Protector position was made as a result of the Morley Insurrection, the first Royal Protector possibly being Corvo or the whoever the Royal Protector of the Empress Larisa Olaskir was. Though the notes you find in the game are quite vague about it, the note The Tower of Dunwall (click to read the note) says that "repeated assassination attempts, near the end of the conflict with Morley, resulted in the creation of the Royal Protector position, with each ruler choosing his or her own Royal Protector after careful consideration." So, do what you do.
- Despite this, there seems to be contradicting evidence as stated in the document The Royal Protector, whereupon it states that "while most of those chosen as Royal Protector have been men, several times throughout history, a woman has served well in the role." That implies that the Royal Protector position existed for a very long time already, as "several times throughout history", there have been women Lady Protectors.
- It's this, or you ask Harvey Smith. I'm just as confused as you are. Either way, I just threw a bunch of these things together and rolled with it.
Part I: Inauguration

Chapter Summary

In which our young Serkonan boy is finally welcomed into a new home and a new life.

Chapter Notes

I based Corvo's vows and the ceremony proper in this chapter on the traditional knightng ceremony of the Medieval Ages called the 'accolade'. It was 'ye old traditional thing' with the whole "Arise, Sir *NAME OF KNIGHT*!" Only I changed it so that it would fit the industrialised age of Dunwall.

Here, ladies and gentlemen, is where we conclude Part 1. See you on the other side!

AN EXCERPT FROM AN ADDRESS FROM EMPEROR EUHORN JACOB KALDWIN I REGARDING THE DUTIES OF A ROYAL PROTECTOR

I believe that the Royal Protectors, at their very hearts, are bodyguards, plain and simple. But they are different; because unlike bodyguards, they are given much more responsibilities that require a certain level of trust only obtainable through closeness of experience. A bodyguard is not sent to go on dangerous errands that most men would cower from, a bodyguard is not someone to depend on for an opinion, a bodyguard will not put their life on the line as much as a Royal Protector will.

Some people say it's because of their duty to sacrifice their lives for the sake of Dunwall, others say it's because they've grown fond of the ruler they serve: I too treat my own Royal Protector, Ivanna Varinox, like my own daughter. But what sets apart a Royal Protector from anyone in the Isles is the special relationship they have with whomever they protect.

They are willing to go to great ends, to sacrifice their lives to keep their ruler in power. That is why a Royal Protector is the noblest soldier of all.

Standing there, in front of the throne room door, in his crisp new uniform, he took deep breaths in anticipation. This was it. This was what he had been destined for. Born to do. Lived to do and will die doing.

He had stood before these doors approximately a month ago as a candidate, a poor Serkonan boy who could never dream of being dressed in such fine silk, who could never imagine to be in such a fine palace, who could never wish to be standing where he was now. But he would have never guessed that a few well-enunciated words coming from the royal mouth of a thirteen-year-old heiress would change his life forever. No one had guessed. But the reality was as tangible as the handles of the doors only three strides away. This new reality was there, just waiting to unfold. It seemed almost impossible: all of the circumstances leading up to this moment.

His heart was pounding in his chest like the clamour that waited beyond those doors. His new
future. His new life.

"You can breathe, you know."

He looked to the side where Ivanna stood, her hands clasped behind her back, her dark hair pinned in a swirl at the back of her head, her jacket and uniform very similar to his. But unlike him, her eyes were calm, almost happy, and there was a glimmer of a grin. She should be damned to an eternity of suffering in the Void for being so stoic and composed while he, a young man of nineteen, was quivering in his boots with his heart in his throat.

He inhaled and tried to exhale his nervousness, but it didn't work. The smell of his breath was a mixture of both excitement and trepidation, exhilarating and daunting at the same time.

"How did you manage to do it?" he suddenly asked, his legs shaking.

"Do what?"

"Calm yourself." He hated admitting any weakness to her, because she would laugh at him or think badly of it, then berate him for not doing any better. She always did say constantly that a Royal Protector had no business showing any flaw or fear, no matter how large they claim it to be.

Her standards were high, but Dunwall's were higher.

She sighed, looking at the ground. "You don't."

He misheard her, he was sure. "You what?"

"You heard me," she reiterated, even clearer. "You don't. You're not calm. You're not supposed to be calm when you're standing here, waiting to become the shield of someone else. When you're kneeling there, in front of the person you're life is currently being sworn to. You worry, and it's natural."

This was hard hearing something as soft as this from her, Ivanna Raye Varinox, the Royal Protector to His Majesty Euhorn Kaldwin the First. Other than the time where her emotions broke in front of him in the library nearly weeks ago when she spoke to him of her traitorous father, she had never opened up to him. Her words were always as sharp as the mechanical swords he had difficulty learning how to flip, and as fatal as his own accuracy using a City Watch pistol. And now they sounded so similar to that of a mother lovingly lecturing her son. It was strange.

"At the back of your mind," she continued, not locking eyes with him the whole time, "you keep thinking: 'what if she got into an accident and it still wasn't my fault?' 'What if she gets sick and dies, will I still be responsible?' 'What if she falls down the stairs and breaks her skull wide open?' 'What if she's assassinated and I fail to protect her?'

He could imagine those scenarios running through his mind, and that definitely did not help. She could catch some sort of plague and then die within a couple of days, yes, but that was a sickness: something far beyond the control of a man like him. But then if she fell down the stairs, perhaps, and did break her skull wide open, was it still his fault that he overlooked the fold in the Tower carpet she tripped over? What if a group of rebels took the Tower by storm one day then grabbed her and plunged a sword through her stomach; would he still be responsible even if he was never there?

His complexion paled.

"Great, thanks for making my nervousness so much better," he mocked.
"You're welcome," she replied with the same sarcasm, and her tone turned stern once again. "But let me talk on a more serious note.

"Before we step in there, before I offer you to the Lady Jessamine, you have to understand: the moment she asks you to rise, the moment she asks you to face the court and present yourself fully, the moment you bow and the moment they cheer, you're no longer who you were before. You become something else. You become a Royal Protector, whether the world wants you to or not."

He knew that very well, but hearing her say it comforted him in a strange way.

"I became Euhorn's bodyguard at a younger age than you," she shared. "I was fifteen, and even more scared than you are now. And let me offer you one piece of advice that I wish I knew all those years ago."

He allowed himself to look at her face, her slender cheekbones and critical merciless eyes. They now shared the light of a mentor, of a teacher.

"The life of a Royal Protector must be one that inspires and leads sacrifice. You're protecting an heiress, one of the most important people in this known world; it's no surprise we need a skilled warrior to save her from the ills that seek to harm her. She chose you and it's because she chose you that she knows you are capable of doing the job right. She knows that there is no one in the world more fit to do this than you.

"The most respected and revered of all Royal Protectors are those who die fighting for the regent they protect. So until you die for her, until you bleed every last drop of blood flowing in your veins for her, then you are not truly a Royal Protector. All the years to come serving her are just a preparation for that moment."

Even though she was talking about something as grave as death, here she was, smiling, looking at him like she was a teacher and he, one of those bright students from the Academy of Natural Philosophy, with his diploma in hand, walking right into the mouth of the world, with its sharp teeth and venomous saliva, ready for the trials before him, never to return to those dingy walls of the classrooms as the same man.

Proud.

"Well, that's oddly comforting," he commented sardonically, as if it was the only thing keeping his happiness at bay.

"Oh, hush," she sighed, offering her elbow as he inserted his hand into its crook. "Today's your big day. I want you to smile."

The corners of his lips turned upward, paired with a hike of an eyebrow as if asking her if it was enough. The roll of her eyes was enough of a yes to him. And when she nodded at the guards, the doors swung open. The lights were blinding.

She wasn't scared of Dunwall. Dunwall should be scared of her.

But she didn't want it scared, she wanted it prospering, celebrating, with no corruption and disease and ill. She didn't want to be a dictator, an absolute ruler, because there would be no voice coming from the people to prove all that was fair and true. She wanted her people to respect her: the true dream of every single regent in the world. But above all, she loved Dunwall, flaws and all, and she wanted it to love her back.
She could feel that love, standing there before the kneeler in front of the court, cloaked in the family colours of teal and gold. The crowds were animated, talking and criticising at the same time, but she had no fear for their complaints and judgment; instead, she stood with her chin high and back straight, gloved hands clasped at her front: the posture of any good heiress. Her hair was crowned with jewels while her mother and father sat on their thrones above the dais, like lions watching their cub hunt for the first time.

She remembered her father telling her all those years ago that when she came of age, she would choose her Royal Protector to serve her until death, and from then on, she was trained on the Protector's responsibilities to her and to Dunwall. Just a few weeks ago, she was taught how to inaugurate him properly, but instead of the Serkonan in question kneeling before her during their practices, it was her father, teaching her how exactly she had to lay the sword on his shoulders and the oaths she had to memorise.

She thought she would end up regretting her decision. The aristocracy of Dunwall had a habit of finding flaws even in the most beautiful of things, as if each wealthy family in the Estate District were competing with each other, trying to find out how much mistakes they could spot every time Euhorn decreed a new law. And she was scared that the gentility might do that to her too, not to mention that much was expected of her, being the only apparent heir to the throne to succeed her father.

But the upper-class could have their days. This alone was hers.

The doors to the throne room opened, and a loud fanfare played throughout the court. The crowds turned to look at the short procession of people. First came about six well-uniformed men of the Royal Guard, followed by Captain Avery dressed in blue and yellow, his hair combed to the back of his neck and his eyes proud, carrying a drawn mechanical sword in his gloved hands. After the guards took their positions next to the royal family and Avery beside the kneeler, the multitude watched as the person of the hour stepped through and strode along the carpeted aisle, linking arms with Ivanna.

Jessamine tried to hide her frown.

Of course, they made him dress well; the clothing he sported was specifically tailored for him to wear, and had been crafted for weeks to match the flamboyancy of the occasion. White dress shirt and dark pants and boots, with a coat and vest of teal and an ascot and hem trimmings of gold. But it wasn't the uniform that made her furrow her eyebrows.

It was the fact that they made him cut his hair.

In truth, she always liked it whenever he had tried to lasso his unruly hair in a ponytail, and she had hoped that he would have kept his hair that long. But when Ivanna let him step forward with his head bowed, she noticed that his slicked back tresses fell short and curled at his nape.

They almost locked eyes, but she couldn't read his face with his visage covered with a bow too low. Allowing a breath to fill her lungs, she collected herself and let Secretary Varnham at the side begin the ceremony.

"Your Imperial Majesties Emperor Euhorn Jacob Kaldwin the First and Empress Beatrix Blayne Kaldwin," he announced, loud and clear, "Her Imperial Highness Lady Jessamine Kaldwin, ladies and gentlemen of Dunwall, good morning.

"Over the course of the years, many warriors have come and gone, their names enshrined on graves, inspiring others and leading lives, but no other soldier can come as close as the rank and
honour that follows the name of the Royal Protector. They are the strongest of the strong, the swiftest of the swift, the most skilled and adept soldiers that have ever existed in the history of the Isles, destined to shield and protect the regents who are the future of our world. Their cause is nobler than any other man who wields a sword a weapon.

"Today, ladies and gentlemen of Dunwall, we will welcome another man into the ranks of the Royal Protector. Thus we have assembled Their Imperial Majesties, guard and soldier alike, and the rest of you to act as witness to this inauguration."

Then Ivanna stepped forward, hands clasped behind her. Jessamine was amazed on how still and stiff she could be.

"Your Imperial Majesties," Ivanna said, "now before you comes Master Corvo Attano, hailing from the city of Karnaca, Serkonos, former Officer of the Grand Serkonan Guard, who will be inaugurated as the Royal Protector to Her Imperial Highness Lady Jesasmine Kaldiwn."

Corvo stepped forward; with his head still bowed, he placed his knees on the kneeler, his hands clasped in front of him, head low, in front of Jessamine. It was act of presentation, of giving oneself fully to the throne. She couldn't help but feel that his long months in the city changed him somehow, and maybe they transformed him into something too proper that it erased any and all traces of humility that came from his poor-born lifestyle, a kind of rare humility she liked.

"Bring forth the sword," she commanded.

Avery stepped forward and bowed from the waist, raising his hands so that she could pick up the weapon. It was to become Corvo's sword, one that he customised himself; heavy and light at the same time, and when she held it up for all to gaze upon. She could see an eye and half of her red lips in the reflection of the steel.

"Corvo Attano," she said for the whole of the court to hear, "you have been chosen by me, the heiress to the throne of Dunwall, to become my Royal Protector henceforth until the day that you die. You have accepted this privilege upon yourself, and have shown willingness to take up the hilt of this sword, thereby becoming a sword and shield to the Empire.

"Do you swear by all that you uphold that you will honour, revere, and protect myself and the Empire of the Isles?"

He took a deep breath. "I do."

The Serkonan accent laced through his low words and still choked his vowels. It was refreshing to see that it hadn't changed.

"That you will honour, revere and protect the Kaldwin name and the people of Dunwall and the Isles?"

Another short pause. "I do."

"That you will take upon yourself the strenuous and significant responsibilities of a Royal Protector?"

A silence. "I do."

"That you will take to your heart our noble causes, and die for our beliefs for the good of your name and the good of the Empire?"
A moment of tranquility. "I do."

She then held the sword and placed the flat edge of the blade gently on the first shoulder, then lifted it and did likewise on the other.

"The citizens of Dunwall bear witness to my proclamation," she announced, the edges of a smile through her lips, "that on this day, on the 7th Day of the Month of Songs, in the year 1817, that I, Lady Jessamine Kaldwin, heiress to the Empire of the Isles, proclaim you Royal Protector.

"Arise, Master Corvo Attano!"

And as he slowly got up from the kneeler, they locked eyes, and she could see him, for the first time in an entire month, smile. His eyes were bright with a joyous mirth and his mouth curved up in a no-teeth grin. The crowd behind cheered on with claps and hoots and hurrahs. From behind, Beatrix couldn't help but let out a proud and quaint laugh, while Euhorn tried his best to supress his happy tears. Ivanna from behind let out a happy chuckle from ear to ear, while Avery, Varnham, and Miss Adelaide Ravens in the throng of people, clapped as they cherished their month of hard work finally become something worth it in the end.

As the crowds continued to applaud, Ivanna stepped forward and presented the official brooch of the Royal Protectors, an ornament made of gold: a shield with the symbol of a sword crossing a crossbow bolt. She pinned it on the pocket of Corvo's coat, but since he was very much taller than her, she inserted its notch little bit lower than where she was supposed to put it.

Jessamine drew back and returned his grin, the cheers of the crowd blurring away until it was just him in front of her, standing still, now a member of the court, her protector.

There was no doubt about it. She had made the right choice.
Part II: A Gift From Home

Chapter Summary

In which we return to our young Serkonan boy four years later as he celebrates his twenty-third birthday, and his unexpected surprise gift is five days late.

Chapter Notes

We made it to Part 2! This is where Jessamine and Corvo's romance starts to bloom… or something. There's a time-skip; Corvo and Jessamine would be around twenty-three and seventeen years old respectively.

Also, remember that one state dinner where Custis Pendleton blatantly insulted Jessamine to her face then Corvo handed his ass to him?

Yeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh.

A LETTER FROM ALFEO RICCI TO CORVO ATTANO

19th Day of the Month of Nets, 1822

Corvo,

You may have noticed that on the envelope flaps, I've written 'DO NOT OPEN UNTIL THE 25TH DAY OF THE MONTH OF NETS', but knowing you, you are probably reading this before the 25th.

I am glad that you are doing well in Gristol. I know that you are probably happy serving a higher cause as the Royal Protector, and that is indeed a righteous code to strive for. But all I ask for is that you do not forget me, Gisella, or Karnaca. Never forget that you come of Serkonan blood, never forget that you grew up in the streets and fought your way through, no matter how painful it is. I know it may cause you discomfort or hurt, but I cannot stress how important it is you remember your roots. It will always keep you as the Corvo we all know and love. You should reply more to Gisella's letters; she often asks me about you.

I hope you can tell me more about Dunwall, and I would love to hear more about the Lady Kaldwin in your letters. Speaking on the subject of women, you are growing quite old, and as your good friend, I would highly advise you to get married soon, while you are young and handsome, as age will betray you the more you wait. (Well, as if you will get married quickly with a face like that. How I miss teasing you.)

Enclosed in this envelope are about two hundred coins as my gift. Today is a very important day in your life, and I hope you spend this money well and enjoy yourself.

Happy birthday, my dear friend Corvo.
Your friend who misses you,

Alfeo Ricci

He was rereading the rest of the letters that had come all the way from Serkonos to his bedroom, full of greetings, congratulations, and wishes to come, with pouches of money, food, and other gifts. The one that lifted his spirit the most, however, was the one in his friend's Alfeo's fluent writing. It just reminded him of how he used to watch as he would scribble down notes as their form of communication because of his muteness, back home in Karnaca. His handwriting was similar to his sharp, crooked lines that must be read twice before finally deciphering it like code, but unlike his own hand, it was much neater, and his letters were smaller and more delicate in comparison to his own crass scrawl. Even the way he signed 'Alfeo Ricci' was flowy and neat, while his own signature looked like he could have ripped the parchment whenever he underlined the bottom of his scraggly name.

There were about a few more unopened envelopes, and he was about to go through the rest of them before he heard three knocks on his door. His delayed reaction of saying 'come in' faltered when the door creak open only to reveal that the Lady Jessamine let herself inside.

She took in a sharp breath when her eyes darted over to the papers on his desk. "I'm sorry, Corvo, I must have interrupted something—"

"No, Your Highness, it's alright," Corvo immediately stood up and cursed himself for not attending to the door, then cursed himself even further when he realized that he basically cut Her Imperial Highness off. "Did you need something?"

She stepped into the room and closed the door behind him, clutching the book she held to her chest. "Not exactly, Corvo, I just wanted to see you for a while. I was concerned that you were not present in the foyer earlier; I thought something had happened to you."

"I've only been here reading letters, that's all. Nothing you have to concern yourself with."

"Oh, I see," Jessamine sat at a chair and crossed her legs elegantly, picking up the first letter closest to her. "May I?"

Corvo made a small nod.

"I've only been here reading letters, that's all. Nothing you have to concern yourself with."

"I'd agree, Your Highness," Corvo said, a ghost of a smile appearing on his lips for only a brief moment.

Both of them stood in silence for an uncomfortable moment, and Corvo paced around his room, occasionally staring at Jessamine, her figure illuminated by the afternoon sun that wafted through his bedroom windows.

It had been four years since he had been inaugurated as her Royal Protector, and, like everyone who had known her, he was astounded at how fast she grew. The gawky and young girl he had known then was replaced by the stoic and charismatic young woman in front of him. As embarrassed as he was to admit it, he was with her throughout her entire stage of puberty; he even witnessed many things that a young man—a poor Serkonan one, to add—shouldn't have been exposed to, among which were things that the Royal Physician called her 'menarche' when she was about thirteen (whatever that was, he didn't want to know), acne, and violently turbulent moods.
Corvo had been with her through her ups and downs, through her tribulations, when it came to both physical and emotional stress.

However, one of the few good things that came out of that awkward phase of juvenescence was that she had grown from a shy grey bud to a blossoming red Tyvian rose. It was a fascinating procedure to watch, (although, at times, it had its drawbacks); what was beautiful about it was that it was a gradual process, and it required patience. And it was a well-earned reward that came from waiting. She obviously grew taller, her hips and waist began to curve, her breasts formed, her jawline and cheekbones had grown more slender and prominent, and even the way she held herself in court or dealt with him had become more professional and less childish. What hadn't changed, however, was the charming light in her eyes, the royalty in her step, and that smile that always seemed to change any negative disposition into an optimistic one. Her kindness had not wavered, her benevolence never disappeared, and her undying sympathy for others had gained her more than a respectable reputation in the eyes of the citizens of Dunwall. She had grown into an alluring mix of both the beauty of her mother and the statesmanship of her father.

On a personal note, he had never had a friend as close as Jessamine was to him. The years with Alfeo didn't even come close to what had been built between him and the heiress. Protecting her wasn't a tedious job or a tiring chore anymore. It became an obligation that had to be done because she had cared for him, and he for her. It was the very least he could do.

He didn't know how long it was until Jessamine stood up from the chair and exhaled with anticipation.

"Well, Corvo," she smiled, handing him over the book she was holding earlier, the one with thick leather covers, gilded binding, and smooth white pages. "I just…came here to give you this. I thought you might like it."

Corvo frowned in confusion and took the gift reluctantly, reading aloud the title that was embossed into the front flap. "The Young Prince of Tyvia."

Jessamine shrugged, almost like she was flustered. "Admittedly, I am not the most knowledgeable about which types of books are to your liking, but if you'd like anything else to read that isn't too detailed on the…" —Jessamine blushed as Corvo raised an eyebrow curiously— "...sensual matters, just tell me and I'll be happy to get you anything you like."

"Thank you, Your Highness, but this is already a rather nice gift," Corvo looked at the book before setting on his desk.

Jessamine nodded as if in relief, clasping her hands at her back as she made her way to the door. "That's good, I thought you weren't going to like it."

She paused briefly and turned away, trying to hide her face from his eyes. "It's my gift for you. Happy birthday, Corvo."

He managed a small smile. "Thank you, Your Highness. You're too kind."

She returned his grin. "Nonsense, you deserve plenty of gifts. I only wish it was in my power to give you more."

He nodded. Then followed another uncomfortable pause.

"Well, I should be going now," Jessamine opened the door herself before waving. "Goodbye, Corvo, and have a splendid birthday."
He barely had the time to react when she shut the door, leaving him in silence to decide what he should buy with the two hundred coins his friend gave him.

The Emperor said that later that night, he would be holding a dinner with some important aristocratic guests, prominent names that the poor of Dunwall associated with wealth. There were many complaints from from the upper-class of Dunwall regarding the manner in which Emperor Euhorn ran the Empire, and, of course, the biggest complainers were the aristocracy, the ones susceptible and adept in the talent of observation and gossip. So, in order to clear the subject, the Emperor invited most of the gentility for a diplomatic talk, to listen to their complaints and address them in a civilised manner. Everyone was advised to dress formally, and, the Royal Protectors were not exempted from this.

Ivanna waited in front of Corvo's door for nearly half an hour before he finally emerged, and even she raised her eyebrows in amusement when her eyes scanned what he was wearing: a beautiful leathery black calf-length coat, with a high collar, breast buttons, and long folded sleeves. Ever since his inauguration, he had kept his hair short and slicked back at the Lady Protector's whim. For the dinner he decided that his tresses would be as neat as it was then; he even shaved the stubble he had been growing just for the occasion.

"You look..." she was trying to find a word that was both complimentary and insulting, "overdressed."

"So do you," he replied, fixing the sleeve fold on his left arm.

He was not entirely wrong either. She wore the brightest teal blue jacket she had, with yellow edges and black gloves. She had her hair tied up neatly, without a lock of hair out of place. Her face was devoid of any red rouge or white powder whatsoever, and she looked as she always had on any day. Corvo didn't complain, however, because she was already an attractive woman without any accents.

She forced a dry chuckle as both of them began to walk down the hall. "We have to be. That coat is nice, where did you get it?"

"It was a birthday present."

"Pretty expensive-looking birthday present. I remember...your birthday was just...how many days ago? Less than five, I believe."

Corvo nodded.

"Was that Lady Jessamine's gift?"

Corvo looked absentmindedly at the trimmings of his jacket. "It was my friend's."

"Then what did Lady Jessamine get you?"

"A book, 'The Young Prince of Tyvia'."

Ivanna blinked, tried to hide her uncomfortable expression, and looked at Corvo curiously. "She... gave that book to you?"

Corvo nodded again, devoid of emotion.

"Don't read that, it's bad for you."
A deep chuckle erupted from his chest.

Ivanna frowned at him, but all he could do was raise an eyebrow and smile. "I'm serious, Corvo."

"I could lend it to you if you want. I'm finished with it anyway."

Ivanna rolled her eyes as Corvo suppressed a smirk.

Although they were both equal in rank, there was a sort of unspoken rule between them, in which Ivanna was the one with the most authority, since she was the one with the most experience being a Royal Protector. Corvo had to return his reports to her, he needed her permission whenever he did something, and the guard patrols he proposed weren't promulgated with her and Avery's say.

There were still many things Corvo had to learn, but he was doing well adjusting throughout the yearst times. He was sometimes doing well as a bodyguard.

Sometimes.

"I heard Lord Edgar will be in attendance at the dinner today," Corvo teased.

"Oh, hush," Ivanna retorted, her ears flushing.

Lord Edgar, some sort of 'gentleman caller', as he was referred to often by the baker's apprentice Delilah, was the impersonation of Ivanna's big fat lies. He often came to the Tower with flowers, and whenever he saw Corvo around, he asked for Ivanna. Gods know what they talk about in that one parlour upstairs. Corvo loved risks, but he wasn't going to eavesdrop on any conversation with Ivanna. He didn't want to die young.

"I've never really gotten the chance to talk to the man," Corvo mused aloud, inciting sharp glances from his partner.

"And why should you?"

"I don't know," Corvo shrugged, "but can you promise me one thing?"

"And that is?"

"When you two finally get married, can you name your first child after me?"

Corvo was punched in the chest and the breath was knocked out of him near instantly.

"Presenting: His Imperial Majesty Emperor Euhorn Jacob Kaldwin the First, and his daughter, the Lady Jessamine Kaldwin."

The doors to the grand dining room opened wide, allowing the Emperor to walk in, his daughter Jessamine following close behind. Their respective Royal Protectors stood close by their sides; Ivanna followed behind Euhorn, keeping close to him at a respectable distance of a few paces, while Corvo and Jessamine appeared to be more intimate in contact, as he had his arm looped around hers as she was guided through the doors.

Corvo had seen the Emperor dressed in more extravagant attires than the one he had chosen for that night, but it was still extravagant nonetheless: dark colours with a high-collared cape and his blond hair cut short neatly. Jessamine, meanwhile, had her own dim palette like her father, but instead of a cape, she had gloves.
Everyone sitting at the dining table stood up in order to pay their respects to the Emperor, bowing as he passed them by. He sat at his chair at the very end, with Ivanna sitting on his right and Jessamine to his left, while Corvo himself sat beside the Emperor's daughter.

Once Euhorn took his place, the servants set the food on the table, and everyone began to eat. There were courses from all over the Isles: Tyvian fruit, Serkonan sausages, and many more exotic dishes that graced the table. Upon request, the aristocrats were poured Tyvian wine, cider, or water to drink, whatever suited their tastes more. Corvo only took some of the Serkonan blood sausages, and the blend of spices and the taste of the meat were all nostalgic and reminded him of his home more than ever.

Unlike the Emperor and his daughter and the rest of the guests, Ivanna and Corvo ate little, and once they were done, they stood up and circled the long table as the servants took their dishes away.

As the Serkonan moved around, he realised he couldn’t recognize most of the aristocracy of Dunwall, and he was only able to name two prominent families that stood out from the rest: the Boyles and the Pendletons.

The Boyles were all women, almost identical in features; same dark conniving eyes, same brown hair, same deceiving mannerisms. What set the three ladies Boyle apart were their clothes. He knew Waverly was the youngest, then Esme, and finally Lydia. But they were dressed in black, red, and white, and he couldn't tell which was which. They all eyed the guests and exchanged whispers, perhaps silently judging them, and Corvo only hoped that none of those whispers were about him.

Then there were the Pendletons. Like the Boyles, there were three of them. Lords Custis and Morgan were twins, wearing identical suits, with the former wearing black and the latter wearing white. The Serkonan knew them as heads of Parliament. Their brother Treavor, four years their junior, was busy poking away at his plate, trying to sneakily eye one of the Boyle sisters; it was until the one in black looked towards their direction that Treavor tore his gaze as his ears flushed red.

Corvo tried to hide a smirk. Ah…adolescent love, the cause for much unneeded emotional stress and burden.

The chatter at the table was interrupted when the Emperor hit his wine glass with a fork three times as a chime. Everyone fell silent.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," Euhorn began. "I do hope you enjoy the dinner that I’ve prepared for you. I’ve called you here all for a special reason, and I am assured you are aware of that which I gathered you here for. But unlike most of you, I don't hold parties without good cause for doing so."

The Boyles frowned at that statement. Corvo couldn't tell if that was a compliment or an insult.

"So now," the Emperor leaned on his chair, "I have been informed on the many complaines that you, the gentility of Dunwall, have against me, regarding the manner in which I run this city, the Isles, and, more importantly, regarding my behaviour towards the aristocracy…you, my dear guests. So instead of me sending the City Watch to tear down your doors and arrest you, like a 'horrible' emperor would, I invited you all here. Indeed, I am a merciful ruler, aren't I?"

All the guests' eyes widened or narrowed in shock.
"Excuse my father's wording," Jessamine spoke up in near rebuttal. "He often puts situations to exaggerated extremes."

Corvo caught a Pendleton twin, maybe Custis, roll his eyes. His twin tried to hide a sneer as their younger brother looked upon them as if in embarrassment, almost like he was afraid to share in their family name.

Euhorn picked up his wine glass and swirled it. "From here on, you are allowed to make complaints and we, as an organised court, will address the issued brought before us."

Ivanna cleared her throat, and all the eyes darted to her. "May the Lord Protector Corvo Attano and I advise you that although you are given the privilege to speak to the Emperor in such a… crude manner, we suggest that the guests use kind and respectful language when addressing him and his daughter, else you want the complaints you have addressed to us."

Corvo crossed his arms. He could feel some guests shrink in their seats.

The Emperor spread his hands. "Let's begin, then."

A young man sitting a few chairs down the Boyles raised a hand before standing up. The Emperor had to lean a few ways forward to see him.

"Ah, the first brave man," the Emperor chided. "Your family name?"

"Blair, Your Majesty," the man spoke again.

"Voice your complaints then," the Emperor mused.

"Your Majesty," he stated, "the main complaint that my family and I would like to voice out would be regarding the construction of the sewage system by the border of the Estate District."

A clamour of murmurings and agreements passed around before Blair spoke again.

"I think something that we can all agree on is the status of the construction," he continued. "We do know one of your main priorities as Emperor is to ensure the hygiene of the people and indeed, reinforcing the crumbling sewers is something that must be given priority, but oh gods, Your Majesty, the deafening sound of construction is too much at four in the morning! And the smell!"

Some guests added clamour to the silence. Even the Pendleton twins offered a scoff in agreement.

"You said you were a Blair, am I correct?" Euhorn frowned in discernment, hushing the crowds a bit.

"Yes, Your Majesty," the young Blair replied.

"Ivanna, do you know where the property of the Blairs is located?" Euhorn asked, raising his voice a little so that his Royal Protector near the end of the room could hear him.

Ivanna stopped pacing to think for a while. "I do believe that they live close to the Draper's Ward, Your Majesty."

"Ah, no wonder," Euhorn shook his head, as if he was an idiot for forgetting such a trivial matter, then addressed the young Blair once again. "I'll see to it that you're relocated to a better place that's far from the construction."

Blair's eyes widened; he obviously did not like the idea of leaving his house to go someplace
entirely. "B-But…Your Majesty—"

"I'll have it done within…two days, is that alright?" Euhorn cut him off, then rolled his eyes at the young man's expression. "Oh, come on, don't look at me like that, boy. What else do you propose then? Because I won't remove the construction workers. They either leave and you suffer because of the lack of a sewage system, or you move."

Blair opened his mouth as to protest against something, but then he simply nodded. "Alright then, Your Majesty. We appreciate your effort of our relocation immensely."

The young man sat back down. The gentility whispered amongst themselves, but Euhorn paid no attention to whatever they said. Jessamine sat uneasily in her seat while Corvo kept his expression hidden beneath scrutinising eyes.

"Who's next?" Euhorn took a sip of his wine just as a man raised his hand.

"Excuse me, Your Majesty," a man about twenty years Corvo's senior stood up three chairs down the Pendletons.

His outfit and demeanour and the way he held himself straight clued Corvo in: he was a soldier. Somewhat in his forties with a gaunt face, the man clasped his hands behind his back, wearing the epaulets of someone of high esteemed rank, or at least someone close to the top, as far as Corvo could remember from his lessons with Secretary Varnham.

"Ah, yes, finally, something a little bit more interesting," Euhorn chimed. "Your name, officer?"

"Commodore Havelock, sir," the soldier replied.

So he was a marine; Corvo raised his eyebrows in interest.

"Yes, Commodore, what is it?" the Emperor asked.

"Well, this was more of a large-scale request than a personal one," the commodore continued, "but I come here as a representative of the navy. Our only concern is the decrease in the budget that we've had as of late, and if His Majesty would allow it, we'd like to ask for more funds coming from the government as to expand our naval troops."

The guests whispered amongst themselves; some said it was awful that the navy didn't get as much economic funding as the other branches of military, and then there were those that argued that spending money on the marine troops was an absolute waste of time, seeing as they barely got anything done. Corvo heard all this circling across the table, and he could see the expressions on Ivanna's face that helped him guess she was listening as well.

"That's quite a bargain you have there," Euhorn leaned forward. "Although I will admit to my budget not focusing much on the navy, I, for one, don't see much of a reason as to why. If you could indulge me, Commodore, I'd be pleased to send extra money to your Admiral."

Havelock stood there motionless, until his face perked up as an answer came to him. "We aren't recruiting as much as troops as we used to, Your Majesty, and the quality of the ships we use are dropping by the second. We only manage to repair the ones with holes in their hull, but there are already countless ships that are beyond repair."

More whispers. Jessamine glanced at her father.

"Well, that seems reasonable enough," Euhorn up his glass. "Rest assured, Commodore; I'll inform
your Admiral on the change of your monetary funding. Just make sure you don't waste it all in one go, am I clear?"

"Yes, Your Majesty, and thank you very much for your efforts," the Commodore tried to be professional but his smile was showing as he sat back down.

"Alright, let's get on with it," Euhorn put a piece of Serkonan sausage in his mouth.

A few more people raised their hands this time, but the Emperor gestured at the one closest to him to speak: one of the Pendletons. Corvo was only a few chairs behind them; Ivanna was across, directly behind the Boyles.

"Ah, Lord Custis," Euhorn swallowed, his call near sardonic. "I assume you have another list for me to procure for you on a silver platter, yes?"

"Not necessarily you, Your Majesty…” Custis grinned; he didn't even stand up.

"Our question more concerns your daughter," his twin Morgan finished.

Jessamine looked up from her plate. The young Treavor Pendleton nearly choked. Corvo flinched.

"With all due respect, Your Imperial Majesties, we'd simply like to be informed on something rather personal," Morgan said slyly, which meant that he paid no respect at all, only faked it.

"That is…” Custis exchanged mischievous glances with Morgan, "regarding the progeny of the Kaldwin name."

Jessamine frowned in confusion and her father looked as puzzled as she did. Ivanna inhaled sharply and tightened her lips into a thin straight line. Corvo could only guess what the Pendletons were talking about, and by his guess, it wasn't something that should be spoken about so casually in front of the regents.

"What do you mean?" Euhorn stifled a nervous laugh.

"Well, we all are aware that the Lady Jessamine is already coming of age," Morgan tried to hide his snickers, "so we'd only like to inquire about when the court will begin proposing suitors for her. We look forward as to seeing an heir from her."

Custis finished: "If she has the…assets to attract a man. And the experience to produce one."

The table went silent. Jessamine's eyebrows slowly raised as her lips parted, as if she was trying to either find a calm response to reply, or completely destroy him with a collected comeback. But she said neither. Even her father had his eyes wide and his mouth was itching to say something, but nothing came out. Ivanna took in a deep breath, trying collect herself. No one spoke at all, but everybody in the room already knew just what the Pendletons had insulted. Corvo's hand twitched.

He was close enough.

Custis' head suddenly slammed into his plate, making wine glasses topple over and covering the side of his face with mushed meat and squashed fruit and vegetables. Before another heartbeat was let lose, his chair swung backwards with his choked yell and the chair hit the floor; he was suddenly on his back, the trauma of Dunwall Tower's wooden tiling making his head spin before he had the strength to get up.

Corvo released his grip from Custis' collar and closed and opened his palms, satisfaction and
adrenaline running through his bloodstream despite his calm composure.

Guests gasped and even Ivanna's face froze with horror. Euhorn raised an eyebrow in curiosity while Jessamine leaned back on her chair, trying to act calm and impressed when the truth was she was both shocked and oh-so **terribly** impressed. She could have called him off, but then again, she could shove the twins back in the place they truly belonged. She puffed up her chest and sharpened her cold gaze back at the three brothers Pendleton.

Before Custis could let out another cough and yell, before Morgan and the young Treavor Pendleton could even rise from their seats to help him up, the Royal Protector stooped down and dragged Custis to his feet, with the nobleman staggering to gain balance as expensive food now turned to mush slid down his furious face and expensive black suit. Then Corvo grabbed the collar of his neck and began to walk towards the door.

"Don't you dare touch me, you Serkonan mongrel!" Custis yelled, but squirm as he might, Corvo's strength was much greater than the nobleman's and his struggle was in vain. "Get your hands off me! *The guards will hear about this!*

"The guards," Corvo said coolly, "answer to me."

"Brother!" the young Treavor Pendleton ran after the Royal Protector.

"Where do you think you're taking him?!!" Morgan yelled, pulling on Corvo's arm as if he thought it would help loosen the grip on his twin. "Release him! *Now!*"

Corvo shoved aside the squabbling Pendletons at his side like he was swatting flies as he walked all the way to the end of the room, dragging Custis like he was a corpse across the polished dining table floors, his arms flailing as the guests and the Emperor and his daughter and Lady Protector watched in silence.

The guards standing at the doorway at the end of the dining room opened the doors as Corvo shoved Custis outside. As the Pendletons and the Lord Protector disappeared with a slam of the door, the guests hushed themselves to listen to the quarrels that were going on outside. Jessamine and her father couldn't hear what exactly was being said, but it seemed as if Corvo was trying to dismiss the brothers, and was waving over a guard to escort all of them out. After several heartbeats, the doors opened again to reveal the Serkonan stepping into the room alone, with all eyes upon him. He was unfazed, however, and, with his hands behind his back, shrugged.

"We *did* warn you," he said matter-of-factly.

Jessamine spoke after that, and the table's heads turned to her as she raised a glass of cider. "Shall we continue?" And she pressed the glass to her soft lips and drunk two sips.

"…with respect to the City Watch, Your Majesty," the young Ogden lady said as Euhorn leaned on his armrest, struggling to listen.

"Of course we understand your issues, Lady Ogden," Euhorn replied, "but my sincerest apologies are intended when I say that I cannot revoke this situation. The guards are free to patrol wherever they please."

Lady Ogden tried to hide her disappointment. "Then may you at least inform Captain Strudwick on the matter? That City Watch Captain is no more a soldier than he is a layabout drunkard on Clavering Boulevard."
Euhorn ignored the latter insult. "I'll be sure to let him know." He flashed Ivanna and Corvo glances. "I see it fit that the Royal Protectors can do that just as well?"

"Yes, we can, Your Majesty," Ivanna replied.

It had nearly been an hour, and Corvo had to admit, even he could see the guests were getting tired. But no one was done just yet, because hand after hand was being raised, and the complaints were piling in even with the dishes cleared away. Corvo's steps became of more entertainment, and he began to count how many scuff marks he was making on his new boots. He eyed Ivanna on occasion, who also looked as equally tired, but she was doing her best not to show it, and, unsurprisingly, she often stared at a man seated at the far corner of the table: Lord Edgar. Jessamine was already trying to fight sleep, whereas Euhorn was looking too tired to care about whatever the guests were saying.

Corvo tried to find ways of entertaining himself, such as watching the Ladies Boyle try not to nod off and the guards do their rounds, or maybe looking out the window to watch the cloudy night sky. The moon was pale against the dark blue expanse of infinity, the stars almost like the dock lights in the distance of the docks back home at Karnaca, twinkling like they were lost in the—

A dash of black interrupted his view for what seemed to be a second. Corvo blinked, and he was met by the shallow stars of Dunwall's night. It was enough to raise his suspicions. Damn him if he wasn't attentive; it was better to be worried over something small than to be worried over nothing at all.

"Ivanna, something's wrong," he said once he was standing beside her.

"Are you bored again?" she asked.

"No… really wrong, I think I saw something," he muttered, near sleepily.

"Fine," she sighed, keeping her hand on the folded blade at her waist. "I'll tell the guards to do their rounds and be on the lookout; you stay here and make sure nothing bad happens to Lady Jessamine or the Emperor."

Corvo nodded. Ivanna gave Euhorn a bow, and only when she was acknowledged by a nod was she able to exit through the doors.

The sound of the doors closing. A silence. Then the sound of his heartbeat. The dinner drowned out naturally.

One. Euhorn waved his hand in a dismissive gesture, as he always did whenever he was tired of something.

Two. Ivanna's footsteps began to vanish along the cold halls of Dunwall Tower until he couldn't hear them anymore.

Three. A noble put down his glass of Tyvian wine and spoke about something that the Emperor said earlier about the lack of trade routes going to Morley.

Four. The woman he was speaking to replied that he was biased because his father came from Morley.

Five. The man denied it.

Six. The woman called his bluff.
Seven. Footsteps outside, most likely Captain Strudwick's by the delay of the stride.

Eight. It was definitely Captain Strudwick; that voice could only belong to the Captain of the City Watch.

Nine. Jessamine leaned over and whispered something to her father.

Ten. Euhorn shook his head and began to whisper something back.

Eleven. The shadows seemed to grow darker.

Twelve. Barely anybody touched the Serkonan blood sausages.

Thirteen. One of the Ladies Boyle laughed, the one in red…Esme, or Lydia.

Fourteen. The stone walls of Dunwall Tower seemed to grow warmer.

Fifteen. There were strangers.

Corvo's eyes shot open.

In one fluid movement, he rushed to the guests, taking his foldable sword from his belt and flexing it with his fingers, unsheathing a long steel blade.

"Everybody down!"

All the guests rose to their seats in panic andducked under the long dining table, covering their heads and screaming in hysteria. Then the windows crashed, glass scattering everywhere and on the tablecloth, showering transparent shards of glittering and dangerous tiny mirrors across the room. A figure clothed in black swung from outside and nearly kicked Corvo in the chest, if not for a last minute and well-timed duck.

Then more and more black figures poured in from the window in the same manner, and Corvo could feel as if he could recognise their movements and immediately know their identity, if not for the white masks that covered their faces. And as the chaos unfolded around him, he remembered. He saw those masks too much times in his life to not have it burned on the back of his head. It was Karnaca, the day he first saved Euhorn. The day he landed a spot as a candidate for the Royal Protector. All those years ago and they reappear now like ghosts bubbling from a heretic's cauldron.

Guards were already helping escort guests out, but everything happened almost like a blur in time, too fast and too much. Captain Strudwick burst into the room and tried to draw his pistol, but a bullet stopped him and the guests screamed. He died before hitting the ground. As the Royal Protector began to stand up, he caught from the corner or his eye one of the men standing on the dining table, cocking something inside his coat before his stretching arm brought out a gleaming silver messenger of death. And he was getting ready to point it at Jessamine.

A gun.

Without wasting another second and without thinking otherwise, Corvo got up and ran as fast as he could to the table, leaping onto the varnished surface. Then standing in front of the attacker, the Serkonan forced the masked man's arm to point to his shoulder. But the Royal Protector was too late to manipulate his movements and a loud bang erupted through the air, shattering a ribcage bone inside his chest. The pain shot up his torso and blood began to stain the hole in his new coat, but that mattered little now. He had to make sure that he showed no sign of pain.
Still holding the masked man's arm, the Royal Protector brought the attacker closer until he was able to stab him with his sword and throw him aside. As more and more men standing on the table made their way towards Corvo, the Serkonan moved aside, parrying and locking his swords with them, drawing his pistol to shoot the man in the far back about to grab the young Sir Blair. With precise movements and cuts, Corvo began to weave his way through the masked assassins, with one hand on his blade and the other clutching the bleeding wound at his abdomen.

It hurt. It burnt like the Void was trying to swallow him whole. But Lady Jessamine and her father needn't know.

Corvo dodged as an assailant tried to swipe at him and easily cut his abdomen with a crouch. Another attempted to sweep him, but Corvo jumped and somersaulted, driving his blade into the attacker's throat as he landed. But as he was regaining his balance, he was too late to notice a third man draw his sword and swing it down upon his head—

The doors to the dining room burst open a second time and a gunshot took the third man out. He fell to the floor with a red hole where his eyeball used to be.

Corvo's gaze darted to the dining room entrance, where Ivanna stood with a smoking pistol, men of the Royal Guard at her back spilling in to help combat the assassins and usher the last of the guests out.

"Don't sit there like an idiot!" Ivanna ran over to Corvo, helping him up.

The two Royal Protectors ran over to their respective imperial regents; Corvo helped up Jessamine from her frozen state of shock and Ivanna helped support a stunned Emperor Euhorn. As the guards continued to hold back the masked men and as the aristocrats were being evacuated, the regents were on their way out, running through the lavish corridors of the Tower that led to the safe room, accompanied by their Protectors and a few men of the Royal Guard.

"C-Corvo, wait…I'm…" Jessamine struggled to keep up with the quick jogs of her Protector.

Corvo released his hand from his bullet wound. "Faster, my Lady, I can carry you—"

He was interrupted by her gasping as her fair skin paled. "Corvo! Y-You're bleeding!"

The Serkonan looked to his calloused hand, stained with blood—his blood—and then to his wound, which was burning like mad, red and scarred by a piece of cold metal lodged into his stomach muscle. He tried to disregard the pain as much as he could, and despite her looks of horror, he scooped her up in his arms and ran as fast as his strides could carry both of them.

Chapter End Notes

Yep, we started this part with an ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT ACTION SEQUENCE to wake everyone up.

If you remember Farley Havelock from the Loyalists, then you're definitely asking why he's here. He said in the first game that he visited a state dinner where he and Corvo first met (here's the link that proves it), and I just combined the two state dinners into one.
And some minor spoilers for this story: the Outsider doesn’t appear (sadly), but you will see a character in a few chapters that I'm confident you're familiar with.
Part II: Captivity

Chapter Summary

In which we are exposed to the situation of being kept in a lavish cage, and notice, along with another familiar damsel, that our young Serkonan boy is no longer simply a boy.

Chapter Notes

I've also replied to your comments, and I'll make it a habit to reply to your comments now because I want to keep in touch with y'all.

The relationship will evolve from here on out. If before you were attacked by platonic feels, get ready to be hit in the face with the romantic and sexual tension sledgehammer.

AN EXCERPT FROM THE NOVEL 'CIVIL MANNERS' BY KOLBY ATKINS

"You can't keep doing this," Lorrie shook her head, sitting on his bed as her fingernails kept digging in her hands, and she was certain they were about to bleed.

Flynn paused clenching his free fist as he locked the door. "They'll be coming for you. I have no choice."

"I'm a prisoner, then!" she yelled suddenly, grabbing the bars and making him jump in surprise. "A prisoner in my father's house!"

"Like I said, this isn't my choice to make!" he yelled back at her. "What do you want me to do?! Let you die?!"

Lorrie bit her tongue and tried her best not to cry there and then. "If you really loved me, you'd let me out."

Flynn paused and looked at the key in his hands. In what seemed to be a final goodbye, he toyed with the key and tossed it out of the window. She swallowed her gasps as she heard it bounce down the stone of the tower, until it couldn't be heard anymore. Lorrie looked at the man with a betrayed expression, unreadable yet still trying to look for any sliver of pity in his heart.

"Then it was a good thing you broke my heart that night," he replied coldly. "I'm not sorry."

Before she could find the words, he closed the door, leaving her alone to corrupt herself into insanity.

Jessamine's sleeping quarters was slightly larger than his own, but definitely more grandiose; it had a plethora of bookshelves, a writing and vanity desk, massive wardrobes to accommodate her
extravagant amount of clothing, a corner full of mirrors, and even a large balcony that was nearly as big as a servant's bedroom. The silk curtains adorning her bed, the walls, and the whole colour scheme of the room, were the same hues of the family crest: teal and gold. He sat at her table, reading the open book on it as he took a drag on the cigarette between his sinewy fingers.

"Don't bother finishing that; it's an awful book," Jessamine said from the corner of the room.

His head spun to see his Lady sitting by the bed, browsing through the sketchbook that Delilah had left her to try and quell her lethargy. Ever since the assassination attempt on Euhorn and his daughter, the royal family had been locked up in their bedrooms and continued to run the Empire from the comfort of their sleeping quarters. It was to keep them from further danger, as the City Watch and the Royal Protectors were doing heavy adjustments on the overall security should another attempt to claim the Emperor's life happen. It had been about three months since a group of masked felons burst through the windows of a state dinner, and Jessamine was the first to grow tired of this constant isolation. The only time she was allowed to leave her room was if it was an extreme emergency, and even if so, she was always accompanied by about two-dozen guards with her Royal Protector standing behind her, like a looming shadow that would never leave her side. She even bathed with a maid in her company, as if she was a child of seven, so that in the event of an ambush, the servant would be able to alert the armada of guards that patrolled the Tower hallways.

It was unnerving and extremely uncomfortable. How was it even possible to ensure the confidence of the people of Dunwall after an attack like that if she was caged up in her own home like some depressed lark?

Because she never left the room, Jessamine was dressed simply, with her hair tied in a neat swirl and her pants and blouse looser and less constricting than the outfits she would usually wear at court. No jewels dangled from her neck, hair or ears, and if one happened to glance at her for a mere second, she looked more like those well-dressed servants at a Boyle party than an heiress.

He picked up the book he saw earlier and looked at the cover, reading its title aloud. "Civil Manners by Kolby Atkins."

"It's more of a waste of time than a book," she commented.

He put the cigarette to his mouth and inhaled to fill his lungs with toxic, then let tendrils of it escape his lips as he spoke. "Then why're you reading it?"

Jessamine scoffed at his ignorance. "As if I can do anything else."

He bit his tongue and mentally reminded himself to never ask any obvious questions such as those that would turn her mood sour. Then again, her mood had slowly begun to grow more irritable with each passing day. And he knew why.

He didn't answer her and paced around her room, suddenly catching his own reflection in her mirrors.

He wasn't wearing his heavy uniform coat, as he was being called for meetings around the Tower almost every minute, and it would be easier to move about without it weighing down his shoulders. All he was sporting was his white buttoned undershirt, his black leather vest, and the pair of dark pants he didn't remember washing recently. His hair had grown longer, the dark circles around his eyes more prominent, and stubble began to eat away at the skin of his jaw. He reached up with his free hand and began feeling the rough surface of his chin and around the perimeter of his lips.
"When was the last time I shaved?" he said absentmindedly to himself. "Months ago?"

"Don't you have time to?" Jessamine asked.

"Not really," he continued to feel the makings of his growing beard.

Jessamine cast her eyes towards him and began to scan him head to foot. His years under her had done his appearance well, that much she could say. She had always forgotten how dauntingly tall he was, and how beautiful the tan of his skin was in comparison to her own pale complexion. The sharpness of his jaw and the lines of his cheeks and nose grew rough and angular as opposed to the smooth curves of his lips and neck. The locks of his brown hair that he often slicked away from his face were now beginning to fall in front of his eyes in a messy yet surprisingly charming way, and his growing stubble seemed to frame his visage rather nicely. His shirt and vest didn't help hide the grooves of his muscular chest and arms, and even the way he paced about and strode through the room radiated an air of undeniable confidence. His professional years in the Tower transformed a gawky young foreigner into a featly mature guardian.

He was very handsome. It was a truth that she acknowledged long ago and during the many times her eyes would lock with his. But the more she thought about it, she realised that she was admitting it to herself more often than usual, and that it actually began to fuel something that made her heart beat louder in her chest every time he was near.

"Your Highness, if I may ask something of you," Corvo suddenly spoke.

"Yes, what is it?" she nearly retorted out of shock.

"I was thinking..." he scratched his chin, and it was almost adorable, how he kept hesitating, "...in the light of recent events, it would be a privilege to have you over for self-defence training."

Her eyes lit with interest. "Oh...what do you mean?"

"Things like," his eyes darted to the side, giving him time to think, "oh, like how to fight in the event that an assailant has you in his grasp."

She cocked her head to the side. "But that won't be necessary. You'll always be there to guard me."

He raised an eyebrow. "And in the event that I'm not?"

She tightened her lips into a thin line. Damn his attractive wit.

They both sat in silence; she continued sorting through the sketchbook as he finished his cigarette and smothered what remained onto the ashtray on her desk. She found solace in the placidity of the quiet, as they both didn't say anything that would put her into another uncomfortable position. And luckily, before he was about to even open his mouth, her bedroom door opened, and they both turned to see Ivanna there, who bowed promptly after her sudden entrance.

"Your Highness," she said curtly.

"Ivanna," Jessamine bowed back, still trying to recover from the shakiness she felt from earlier.

"I need to borrow Corvo for a moment," Ivanna explained, then turned to the other Royal Protector. "We have another meeting with Captain Avery. He's requested for us."

"Right now?" he frowned, and the exasperated tones were obvious in his voice.
"Yes, right now," she shot back at him, as agitated as he was. "Let's go."

He sighed in annoyance. "We just spoke with him about an hour ago."

"Yes, and we're going to him again an hour later. I know you're as tired as I am, but have I complained? No."

He rolled his eyes but yielded to her, as he always had. "Alright, we'll go." He bowed together with Ivanna at Jessamine. "Your Highness."

Jessamine lowered her head to return the farewell. "Don't be too hard on yourselves."

"We won't, Your Highness," Ivanna reassured. "You have our word."

Ivanna then guided him out of the room and closed the door, leaving Jessamine alone with her boring papers of correspondence and her own thoughts which she longed would leave her mind at peace. Her eyes wandered around the room before settling down on the book he had picked up: Civil Manners.

Maybe she should give it another read. She had nothing to do, anyway.

He was attracted to her. That much he could admit.

The time he spent with her was relaxation from his laborious schedule. When he wasn't attending meetings or training guards, he was in her room, providing her with conversation that she was deprived of. It was true that he enjoyed her company immensely, entertaining himself with their discussions and talks, and he found himself enchanted by her voice, her smile, and her disposition. He was absolutely charmed by her.

(But strictly by his bounds as a Royal Protector. He tried to keep his feelings of admiration strictly platonic, with respect to her position and to his. He wouldn't dare venture that far into putting his thoughts of her into the light of…indecency.)

Sadly, he understood if she didn't feel the same way about him. She was an heiress, next in line to the most powerful position in the Isles; how she felt about him should be the last thing on her mind. But the more distant he was from her, the more she plagued his thoughts.

A future Empress was supposed to be beautiful, he knew that. And she was. He had seen her in extravagant blouses and expensive attire that even he couldn't dream of owning, but he found her more alluring when she dressed simply like in those days: when her hair wasn't tied up in complex swirls, when her face wasn't painted with white power and rouge. But whether she was lavishly dressed to attend court meetings with her father or wore unadorned blouses with her hair tied plainly, what remained constant was how brightly her face lit up whenever she smiled. Her laughs and giggles were better than any of the symphonies he heard echo through the court room during one of Euhorn's balls, and no matter how many times he would take her hand to kiss the smooth skin of the back palm of her hand, he could never reimagine how soft and delicate her slender hands were in comparison to his calloused fingers.

Other than being resplendently gorgeous, her mind had to be one of the sharpest in the city. He could recall those days with ease and laugh at himself; those days when he was just inaugurated into the position of Royal Protector who still was adjusting to the lavish lifestyle of Dunwall, when she was but a young thirteen-year-old girl who had just lost a mother. Until now, she remained to be that bright young lady, her tongue as sharp as any silver knife and yet as sweet as Tyvian fruit, both wounding and caressing. Unlike him, she had little experience in the battlefield, but she
wielded the power of words, a weapon that he knew would take decades of mastery.

If anything, he was grateful to have her in his life.

Something changed in how he looked at her, and what was worse was that he knew. When she was younger, he gazed upon her as an heir, a future ruler of the Isles, and how his purpose was to serve as the shield between her and the dangers of Dunwall. But as she and their relationship matured, he quickly began to realize just how captivating, and gods, how beautiful she was...how her eyes softened and hardened with the tone of her voice, how her chiding gentle laugh could stop his heartbeat, how her smile stole whatever breath would remain in his lungs.

He was attracted to her.

"Corvo?"

His mind was shocked out of its reverie as it returned to Captain Avery's office, and thus appeared its varnished furniture, velvety chairs, and high bright windows. Joshua Avery sat across the Royal Protectors, who took their seats before his table, with the new City Watch Captain standing at his side. He raised an eyebrow with concern at the Serkonan, who looked like he was recovering from a daze.

"Sorry, I..." he massaged the bridge of his nose. "I didn't get enough sleep last night."

Ivanna tried her best to swallow an exasperated sigh.

"Right...listen, Corvo," Avery leaned forward on his chair, "if you don't feel alright, I understand."

"No, I'm just..." Corvo retorted suddenly. "I'm fine, Captain."

Avery nodded with hesitation. "Very well then. Let's resume.

"As I was saying earlier, I'm repositioning half of the rooftop guards out onto the riverside area of the Tower, as to overlook the sewage systems in case anyone thinks of going through there. The hole that's left behind will be for the archers and watchmen to look after from below; the area includes the rooftops of the royal quarters and the offices, plus the foyer and banquet room."

"I still think that's unwise, Captain," Geoff Curnow, the young new head of the City Watch, protested, pointing towards the map that lay over the table. "Look here...this is the area that you'll leave behind if you move the guards over to Wrenhaven. Are you really going to risk that many men just to guard the river?"

"It's smart," Corvo agreed with Avery. "The Tower's sewage systems are interconnected, but unlike the vents, they're much wider. A full-grown man can fit inside its pipes. Anyone can sneak into the Tower through the sewer."

"If they managed to find the right equipment," Curnow rebutted.

"True, but it isn't worth risking about half of the guards to one post," Ivanna crossed her arms. "Aren't the sewage works still under construction? They can't possibly go through there."

"Fine," Avery yielded, leaning on his chair. "We'll do an inspection over at the pipes. But if they are under construction, we're moving the guards to the other side of th—"

"Captain! Captain!"
He was interrupted by his door opening as someone burst into the room. It was the Captain's second-in-command, Lieutenant Levitt, a young sixteen-year-old girl with wild brown hair. She was holding something in her hands, waving it as to attract the attention of everyone in the room as members of the Royal Guard waited obediently outside for her. She ran in, cutting in-between the Royal Protectors and the City Watch Captain in what should have been a rude gesture if not for the tone of urgency in her voice and the large bag she put on her superior's table.

"And this is?" Avery inquired, furrowing his brows at his lieutenant.

"It's…evidence," the Lieutenant panted, out of breath.

"You aren't being any more specific," Avery leaned over the bag, opening it and reaching inside.

"And besides, couldn't this wait until I was done talking with Captain Curnow and the Royal Pr —?"

Avery cut himself off and frowned at the object he had brought out and laid on his desk for everyone to see. Avery turned it around so that the item would face the Royal Protectors; Ivanna's widened as she slowly began to realize what it was, while Curnow muttered curses and turned his head away. Corvo, meanwhile, blinked in confusion because he couldn't recognize the object. But Avery didn't allow him to ask, for as the Serkonan opened his mouth, the Captain interrupted him.

"Lieutenant, get word to the High Overseer," he instructed as he stuffed the evidence back in the bag. "Tell him we need to talk. The Emperor and his daughter should know about this as well, and I expect the Royal Protectors can inform them just fine."

His Lieutenant shot him a confused look. "But Captain—"

"But nothing!" he retorted. "That's an order, Marni."

The Lieutenant was terribly puzzled, but she couldn't disobey him and gave him a nod. "Yes, Captain."

Etched onto the thick white paper were markings of lead, crossing over one another and curving against each other to make the beautiful sketch of a blooming rose. Underneath the harsh lines of grey was the smooth and hostile signature of her friend in pencil.

'DELILAH C."

The baker's apprentice sat on Jessamine's bed, the afternoon sounds of the Wrenhaven's waves faint against the sounds of pencil upon paper. As Jessamine sat prim and proper on a chair, back straight and hair pinned up neatly, Delilah took to detail each line on Jessamine's face, each lock of hair over her brow, each movement the heiress' hands made, and immortalised them in grey marks on her sketchbook. Jessamine was looking over the first of Delilah's collections of miscellaneous drawings as the latter was sketching her, and the rose one just so managed to catch her eye.

"I like this one," Jessamine remarked, holding the book up for Delilah to see.

"Ah, those were the best ones in bloom," Delilah smiled, smoothing the rough edges of Jessamine's jawline. "Mrs. Nell takes good care of the roses. I should bake her a little cake sometime."

"She would appreciate that, yes," Jessamine said absentmindedly as she flipped the page, her eyes now glossing over the monochrome Wrenhaven as it was seen from the edge of the gardens.

"This Tower is full of beautiful things," Delilah said to no one in particular as she shaded in the
Jessamine nodded, trying to find the reflection of the Estate District in the grey river of Delilah's sketch. "It's a shame."

"Hm?"

"What you said, I mean."

"Ah…" and Delilah flicked her wrist, making the sharp edges of Jessamine's neck and shoulders.

Jessamine turned the page again to see many human figures scattered about the paper, almost as if Delilah had been doodling, except art like this could never be considered a mere doodle. They were forms of a woman sword fighting and standing, almost as if Delilah had frozen time when the subject was engaged in combat. Only upon scrutinising the austere face and sharp eyes of the woman did she recognise the person that the baker's apprentice had been drawing.

"It's Ivanna," Jessamine was impressed. She looked so real, so lifelike, in mid-jumps and dives and sword-holding poses.

"I always liked her; very mature, stoic," Delilah stopped drawing for a moment and pointed at one of the Ivanna figures closest to the edge of the paper. "My favourite is this one."

And it had to be Jessamine's favourite as well. The expression on the Lady Protector's grey face, the folds in her clothing, and the extreme detail Delilah put when it came to the slenderness of her fingers and face; she was in the middle of flicking her sword open, so her fingers were paused in a way that would show the lines in her hands and the bends in her thin knuckles.

Delilah picked up her papers again and continued to draw Jessamine. "Tilt your head up a little, please."

Jessamine did. Delilah uttered a quick thank you before the heiress turned another page.

There were, again, multiple figures on the page, similar to that of Ivanna's poses earlier. But these ones were off a man with a lean build, broad shoulders and sinewy hands that were drawn elegantly in Delilah's art style. Even the sword the figures held in their palms. Thick jawlines, mangy stubble, and growing nape-length hair etched in lead, with folds in the coat billowing with movement and creases on the sleeves of the dress shirt.

Right.

"Ah, yes—" Delilah squeaked, near embarrassed. "Don't mind those, I was trying to rush as I finished them."

"These are…" Jessamine managed to tear her gaze away from the sketchbook and to Delilah. "This is…"

"I drew Lady Ivanna; I couldn't leave the series unfinished," Delilah bashfully smiled. "I didn't like the way these ones turned out, but they're still better than the ones I did before. I'm satisfied nonetheless."

"No, don't, they're…nice," Jessamine managed, looking back to the sketches. His eyes looked so lifelike, the lines on his face, even the dark shadows around his visage.
"Those are just studies," Delilah brushed away, outlining the curve of Jessamine's nose. "You know, I actually got him to pose for me. It's one of my better works, if I do say so myself." The baker's apprentice put the end of her pencil to her lip in thought. "I wonder how he had the time to. I stood there sketching him for what seemed to be nearly an hour, the other day."

Jessamine tried to quell her excitement. "You had him do a portrait? Do you have it?"

"It's the one on the next page," Delilah went back to drawing the heiress.

Jessamine's fingers were shaking with trepidation as she turned the page.

Oh.

Oh, dear.

There, taking up the whole space, was the figure of the same man, standing before the bright window of a parlour. Because the light was against him, most of the work was shaded in dark grey, including the silhouette casted upon him. He seemed to be avoiding the gaze of the artist as he looked to the side, the harsh curves of his nose and chin, the shaded stubble biting at his at handsome face. He was fixing the lapels of his large coat over his broad chest, and the folds and creases on his arms and sleeves were accented perfectly in the shadowy light. Jessamine noticed the small detail of the harp beside him, so this was drawn in the music room, she deducted to herself. His slicked hair fell in front of his forehead and curled gracefully at the back of his neck, his legs stretched out comfortably. And the detail to his hands…the lines on his tendons and knuckles and the marks on his lean fingers…oh, gods.

Delilah's work did him justice. Too much justice, she could say. At the bottom, the proud signature of 'DELILAH C.' made its mark to show that its artist was truly a master of keeping beauty in the captivity of paper.

Jessamine could feel her face burn.

"Delilah, I…" the heiress could hardly believe herself. It was just her Royal Protector. Why was she burning?

He was so beautiful.

"Jessamine, are you alright? Or is it just because…" Delilah frowned, looking up from her work to see that blush had conquered the pale skin of her friend's face, then it slowly dawned on her with a mischievous smirk, driving Jessamine to grow paranoid. "Ah…ahhhh, I see…"

"S-See what?" Jessamine stammered, trying to maintain her breaking composure.

"You, dear Jessamine," Delilah had a teasing tone to her voice and mirth in her dark eyes, "are infatuated with someone."

"I am not!" Jessamine retorted.

"Oh, yes, you are!" Delilah laughed. "And what a surprise! It turns out that you have some caged feelings for your Royal Pro—"

"I am not infatuated with anyone, Delilah!" Jessamine interjected, blushing violently. "Gods, it's just…"

"Oh, come now, Your Highness," Delilah's grin grew. "Admittedly, he's very good-looking indeed.
A few times, I see him turn a few maids' heads! It's no surprise he's turning yours."

"I don't have any fancy with my Royal Protector," Jessamine huffed.

Delilah held up her hands in defeat. "Alright, say whatever you want to say, but…let's make a bet."

Jessamine's interest was caught. "Very well. What is it?"

"Corvo asked you to come with him for self-defence training, am I right?"

"A few days from now, yes."

"Well, I'll wager. If you catch yourself blushing in his presence, if you feel your heart pounding next to him, if you realise how badly you just want him to—"

"Get to the point," Jessamine flushed.

Delilah raised her brows. "If you realise you do have feelings for him, you owe me…let's say…one of your hairpins."

It was an odd request, but Jessamine didn't lose anything of much value if she won a hairpin. "Alright then. If I win?"

"Then you get my ration of cakes for a month."

Jessamine nodded defiantly. "It's a deal, then. But don't expect that I'll be giving you any hairpin at all."

Delilah twirled her pencil in her graceful fingers. "Oh, I don't lose that easy, Jessamine."

Jessamine held up her head defiantly. "We'll see about that."

"Straighten your back."

She did. "Oh, right. Sorry."

Delilah drew the curve of her shoulders and back in one line. Her open sketchbook lay on Jessamine's lap, the pencil portrait of Corvo Attano in the music room next to the harp, looking outward. But the heiress was already thinking of which hairpin to give her friend.
Part II: The Heretic

Chapter Summary

In which a suspect is discovered, wrongly accused, put in jail, tortured, and forced to admit to a crime he did not commit; and no, it isn't who you think it is, don't get too ahead of yourself.

Chapter Notes

You were either smart enough to figure it out, waited until I would reveal to you, or you just couldn't care, but the aforementioned mystery person is finally revealed. Notes on canon accuracy and study at the bottom for you canon nerds out there.

This is a lengthy chapter, and yes, this is a filler, so I'll be posting the new chapter within a few days. Triggers up ahead for blood and gore and foreshadowing. You have been warned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

AN AUDIOGRAPH RECORDING BY OVERSEER ALDEN COLLINGWOOD

COLLINGWOOD: Today is the 18th day in the Month of High Cold, the year 1821. We're finishing out our last sweep over the Flooded District in search for the heretic assassin, who is said to bear the Outsider's mark. Any or all rumours are being treated with doubt, and we have no solid evidence so far. We haven't even seen the assassin yet. It's been nearly two weeks, and I'm sick of this place. The men have grown restless too; three have died, and four more went missing, the stars bless them. Only about ten men remain, and that's a bad sig—

(Sounds of the door opening loudly.)

AN OVERSEER: Brother Collingwood!

COLLINGWOOD: Yes, what is it? Can't you see I'm recording someth—?

AN OVERSEER: All of the men are gone! They've all disappeared, or whatever happened to them! Someone even dismantled the music box! I ran up here as fast as I could; there's an intruder in the base.

COLLINGWOOD: What?! Then why won't you be able to take care of him instead of running to me like a coward?

AN OVERSEER: I-I didn't know what to do, I—

(The sound of metal piercing through flesh, and a curdled scream. Thuds on the floor, the yells of Collingwood, slow footsteps.)

STRANGE MAN: Overseer Collingwood.
COLLINGWOOD: H-How did you...sneak through them? Someone was playing the damn music box, it's impossible for you to get here!

STRANGE MAN: He turned around. Fatal mistake. Maybe yours isn't heeding warnings.

COLLINGWOOD: N-No...please no! NO! AAAHH—!

"Corvo, are you ready to go?"

Corvo flattened the collar of his long black coat and stared at Ivanna, who was waiting by the chaise as he was rushing down the stairs of Dunwall Tower. The Lady Protector was impatient as always, crossing her arms as she clicked her tongue, leaning in a lax manner against the carriage doors. When he finally stood before her, she shook her head as a frustrated mother would and pulled up his collar up higher again, much to his annoyance. He hadn't noticed before then, even though he often stood next to Ivanna countless times, but he was taller than her by a considerable height, tall enough that she had to stretch her arms just to be able to reach the top of his head to ruffle his hair.

"Why must you always do this?" Corvo groaned exasperatedly.

"Because you look like you're going to a Boyle party when you dress like that," she brushed the imaginary dust off his shoulder. "Look...less decent. It's an interrogation, not a ball."

He said nothing as one of the Overseers assigned to escort them opened the chaise door. Ivanna was about to step in and he was about to do the same.

"Corvo?"

Ivanna's foot was already in the chaise when both Royal Protectors turned around to see the Emperor's daughter there by the stairs, walking towards them with her eyebrows furrowed in anger. Both Corvo and Ivanna tried to discern through the interactions they had with Jessamine during that morning what had incited her apparent fury at them.

"Your Highness," Corvo's voice turned wary, suddenly aware of how he was supposed to keep his assignment a secret from her. His absence should have gone unnoticed, but for some reason, she was here. "Is something wrong?"

"You know very well what's wrong," Jessamine frown deepened as she stood in front of him with her arms crossed. "What do you think you're doing?"

"You know very well what's wrong," Jessamine frown deepened as she stood in front of him with her arms crossed. "What do you think you're doing?"

"My Lady, don't worry about me and Corvo," Ivanna said in the coaxing and kind voice she always used on the Emperor's daughter. "We're simply going to the city to check on some business."

"And I know the very businesses, Ivanna," Jessamine put her hands on her hips. "Please drop the act; I know Father sent you to investigate on the heretic prisoner. I'm no gullible fool. Why did you keep this a secret from me?"

Ivanna blinked. "We never thought of you as such, my dear. We just...didn't want you to get involved in it. You're already in a dangerous position as it is, and we're trying to find answers; we don't want what happened a few months ago to repeat itself again, for you and your father's sakes."

"Well, even if I am in a dangerous position, I have you to protect Father and Corvo to protect me," Jessamine said confidently, as if it was a truth that was universally undisputable.
"And that's our purpose, yes," Corvo suddenly spoke, "but a Royal Protector can only do so much, Your Highness."

Jessamine opened her mouth as to say something, but then closed it as her lips formed a thin line. For the first time in months, Jessamine had no reply to rebut in an argument. And from her Royal Protector, no less.

"We need answers, Jessamine," Ivanna spoke in a kinder tone. "And we may be one step closer to getting them if we do this."

"But what if this prisoner isn't the person you're looking for?" Jessamine retorted. "What if he had nothing to do with the assassination attempt and you're condemning an innocent man?"

"We'll know if the man is guilty or not," Ivanna answered. "Don't worry, we'll see to it that justice will be delivered."

Jessamine nodded in defeat. Interrogations, no matter who was being asked questions or who was inquiring, always made her mood sombre and melancholy. She believed that violent means should be a last resort, and not the first option; it would always be easier to speak to a man given kindness rather than a man given scars.

The Emperor's daughter bowed her head in a quick motion. "Thank you, Ivanna. Goodbye. My apologies, but to wish you luck in this endeavour is...too inhumane for me to grant."

The Emperor's Royal Protector nodded in understanding. After Jessamine gave Ivanna kiss on the cheek, the latter entered the chaise from the other side and slammed the door behind her. The Serkonan was about to open the other side before Jessamine's words stopped him again.

"Corvo."

He turned to look at her beautiful face as she fidgeted with her hands.

"Can you do me one thing, at least?"

Corvo bowed his head and looked at her expectantly. "Yes, Your Highness?"

Jessamine sighed as to recollect her thoughts before speaking. "Please don't kill this prisoner without any reason to. No matter how cruel and horrible you think he is, if you have no reason to take his life, I beg of you, please do not."

Corvo looked at a sad heiress with unreadable eyes, then slowly took her hand and pressed it to his lips. Unlike most nobles and guests who would usually kiss her knuckles when they were given the honour to greet her like that, her Royal Protector normally kissed the palm of her hand. And the strange thing was that she never offered her hand for him to take, and he often just took it without warning as a gesture of both greeting and parting between them. Not to mention that she had not reprimanded him for such an unusual gesture.

"You don't have to beg, Your Highness," Corvo held her hand carefully, as if it was made of porcelain. "If you say so, it'll be done."

Jessamine smiled gratefully. "Thank you, Corvo."

He stepped into the chaise and after Ivanna and Corvo waved the young lady goodbye. The carriage rode off into the landscape of the dim city.
Normally, the Royal Protectors weren’t sent to the office of the High Overseer unless Euhorn needed an escort to be able to speak with High Overseer Campbell, or they had to pick something up and act as courier to the Kaldwins. This had not been their first time into the massive complex of an office, but Corvo still couldn't fathom its gigantic size. With its high walls, barbed perimeter and prowling guards, it looked more like another section of Coldridge Prison than the headquarters of the clergy. Even as Ivanna and Corvo got off the chaise and walked towards the building across Holger Square, Corvo could hear the faint sounds of hounds growling and barking, and the constant chatter of the Overseers, some trying to overanalyse the Seven Strictures, or simply talk about what dinner would be tonight.

The Royal Protectors were guided with an Overseer escort through the ginormous building, straight to the area leading to the interrogation room. The hallway leading to its door was heavily guarded, and even Captain Curnow was there standing by the entrance of the aisle.


"Captain," Ivanna returned the greeting. "Are they already inside?"

"Yes," Curnow began walking them to the interrogation room as some of the Overseer escorts followed behind. "High Overseer Campbell is there already and he's ready to begin the interrogation. All he's doing is waiting for you in the second floor."

"Good," Ivanna pulled the cloth pooling around her chin over her nose to form a half-face mask. "Corvo, pull up your hood."

Corvo frowned in confusion. "What?"

Ivanna didn't hesitate to turn around instantly and yank his hood over his head. Corvo grunted in frustration as she continued to follow the Captain.

"This is unnecessary," Corvo put his hand over his head, ready to push it off.

"You can disobey any of my orders at any given time, Corvo, but not this one," Ivanna said sternly. "This assassin's been a thorn in the Abbey's side for as long as I can remember, even before you came here to the city." And she leaned closer to whisper in his ear. "He deals with witchcraft… black magic, as some call it. They say he can teleport from the ground to the rooftop in the blink of an eye. I don't care if any of this is real or not…don't show your face. The assassin must only know you as the Royal Protector; not by your name, not by your identity. I won't risk it."

Corvo hesitated for a while, but in the end, he yielded to her and pulled the hood so far over his head so it would cast shadows over his eyes.

Curnow led them to the end of the hall and opened the door for the Royal Protectors to go up, and closed the door behind him as they hiked up the flight of stairs. Upon arriving, they saw the High Overseer in his vibrant red garments, surrounded by many more of his subordinates, wearing their emotionless, golden masks. Curnow cleared his throat, and the High Overseer turned around, scrutinising the both his guests with watchful eyes.

"Ah, and here are the Emperor's witnesses, the Royal Protectors themselves," Campbell greeted. "Come, you're just in time."

Ivanna and Corvo looked over the balcony and through the prison bars into the interrogation room below. In the middle of the spotlighted room was a chair, surrounded by guards with their swords already drawn; circling the centre was another Overseer, but he had with him a strange metal
contraption strapped to his chest, and he held its crank as if in anticipation. Bound and cuffed to the chair was a man in a red Whaler uniform, and visible on its leather hem were splatters of blood. He was breathing heavily through the mask filters, as if in wheezing pain, and the glove on his left hand had been removed to reveal a strange black mark on his skin.

Upon scanning his eyes over the mark, Corvo shuddered suddenly, and Ivanna shot a concerned look at him before he reassured her with a glance and a nod.

"Alright, let's begin," Campbell inserted a blank audiograph and placed it in its player. He wound the knob a few times before speaking coherently and clearly for the machine to pick up his voice.

"This is High Overseer Thaddeus Campbell, and today is the 1st day of the Month of Harvest, 1822. We'll be interrogating one of the most dangerous nonconformists the Abbey has ever encountered: the heretic assassin. Brother Alastair, remove his mask."

One of the Overseers stood before the assassin, held him by the chin, and unfastened the Whaler mask off his face. The assassin inhaled a deep gasp of breath that seemed as he had resurfaced from drowning, and his breathing grew slower, more audible, but heavier. The Overseer stepped back to reveal the face of a young man, fairly handsome if one happened to look at him long enough, whose strong jawline and facial structure marked the age of someone who had lived to see two decades, at least. However, his short dark hair and thick furrowed brows, the gaunt lines on his cheeks and nose and the dark circles surrounding his eyes made his true age ambiguous to anyone. His breathing was raspy, his disposition fatigued; he looked up at the High Overseer with a pitiful expression, but there was a dark light behind his silent plead that screamed defiance.

Corvo looked at Ivanna, who inhaled sharply but softly and covered more of the bridge of her nose with her scarf.

"Hello there, I hope you're comfortable," Campbell called with his hands behind his back. "I'm High Overseer Campbell, but I'm sure you know who I am, and where you are. We've all anticipated this chance to talk to you; look, even the Kaldwins' Royal Protectors came here too just to get the information they need.

"Now, this whole interrogation sequence is being recorded through an audiograph; I thought I might just inform you," Campbell patted his machine as it continued to make chips in the slate. "Also, please forgive me for the extra number of Overseers adding to our surveillance, and I'm sure you understand why. There are the ones around you now, some here on top with me, and plenty more in the hallway. We even have Captain Curnow and the Royal Protectors present, so I suggest you watch your behaviour."

The assassin tore his eyes from Campbell, looked down at his bound hands, and tried to shake free the left one, the one with the mark. Suddenly, much to Corvo's surprise, the black symbol on his hand began to glow and smoke, and all of the Overseers stood ready to attack, but then a shocking wave of noise blasted through the air, sending sounds of low hums and odd notes floating throughout the interrogation room. Corvo and some of the Overseers had to cover their ears because of its loud volume, but it seemed to have a different effect on the assassin; as the strange Overseer from earlier wound the crank on the machine strapped in front of him, the music coming from it grew more violent in nature, sending the assassin into a fit of screams and struggling, and there were moments where he even tried to tear himself from the chair, hopelessly wanting out. It seemed to inflict some harmful doing only on the assassin and no one else in the room, Corvo deducted…perhaps it had something to do with the mark.

Maybe that's what branded him a heretic.
The Overseer released the crank and the noise stopped; the assassin stood panting helplessly in his chair, his throat hoarse from screaming, and his wheezes accompanied by coughs. His hands gripped the armrests in rage as the Overseers around him grew more relaxed. Corvo tried to avert his eyes, but like some sick attraction of disease, he couldn't stop looking at him.

"Don't try and call your ghostly friend for help," Campbell said, full of disdain. "We have the Holger's Device with us, so you'll focus more on answering our questions, yes?"

The assassin said nothing, his heaving form still wheezed like an old bag of air.

"Now, let's begin," Campbell flipped over a few papers on the desk. "Tell us your name."

The whole room fell quiet until the only thing that everyone could hear was the assassin's heavy breathing.

Campbell sighed exasperatedly. "I'm asking for a name, it shouldn't be too hard a question. Unless, of course, you want Brother Emerson to play his tune again."

Another moment of silence. Campbell was a tad bit impatient when it came to asking again, and he was about to open his mouth to command Emerson to crank the machine, but a croaky, rough voice from down below said in the clearest yet most indiscernible way:

"Daud."

Everyone, even the Overseers in the room with him, fell silent and turned towards the assassin, who looked up towards Campbell, his gaze more piercing.

"It's Daud," the assassin said again, clearer this time.

"Daud..." Campbell said aloud as he jotted it down on a paper. "Where do you hail from?"

The assassin diverted his gaze from the lights.

"I mean from which Isle you were born in," Campbell clarified upon realizing that his question was too vague to answer.

"Serkonos," the assassin replied.

Corvo tried his best to hide his shock. So he was from Serkonos too...maybe when he was just a child, he could have passed this assassin along the alleyways of Karnaca and he wouldn't have known. He began assessing his memories as a boy, trying to find a face similar to the assassin's, or how he would have looked like in his youth. Maybe the son of that fruit vendor, or the brother of that one maid, perhaps one of those many faces of children he had wrestled with in the mud for a scrap of bread and blood sausage. But he could find no one.

Ivanna shot a quick glance at Corvo before she cast her eyes down at the floor.

Campbell's lips made a thin line as he continued to write on his paper; for some reason, this interrogation was too easy, and the High Overseer had enough experience dealing with tight-lipped prisoners that a man spewing information like that was too suspicious.

"Alright, you were from Serkonos. Where were you born, then?"

"Can't recall the name of the city."

Campbell stared at Daud blankly. "Then from which isle do your parents come from?"
Daud’s calloused fingers gripped the armrests. "I never knew my father."

"And your mother?"

"From Pandyssia."

Campbell scribbled more details into his chart. "Where did you grow up then?"

"Different towns around the Isle. There was no city to call a permanent home."

Campbell wrote down the last of the details on a new prisoner's information sheet before picking up another blank form. "Good, we're done with the basics. Now, the only reason we've brought you here is so that the Royal Protectors can inquire about your involvement in the assassination attempt of Emperor Euhorn Kaldwin. We can interrogate you some other day, when we're not wasting the Royal Protectors' time. After this, the Overseers will escort you to Coldridge Prison, where you will stay until we have the need to ask about your cases of heresy against the Abbey."

The fact that he was going to be sent to Coldridge Prison didn't even bother the assassin; it was the fact that the Emperor's name was mentioned. Daud furrowed his brows, as if in confusion.

The record for the newly made audiograph jutted out of the machine, full of arranged holes. Campbell removed it carefully, slipped another blank one in, then turned the knob and it continued to record.

"Lady Protector," Campbell nodded at Ivanna and she stepped forward. She made sure that her mouth was always covered by the cloth mask she wore as she clasped her hands behind her back.

"We are here on direct orders of His Imperial Majesty the Emperor," Ivanna began, in the militant tone she always had whenever she was training the guards, "so it would be efficient for both of us if you will answer out questions truthfully and without delay.

"Many in Emperor Euhorn's court are aware of the work you do, assassinating officials and other nobles for whatever purpose you deem righteous; whether it's for personal gain or vigilante justice, we don't care. I'm sure you also know of the assassination attempt that nearly took the Emperor's life about a few months ago, in which ten people had been killed, and about forty-three were injured, of which the Emperor is included. When we asked most of the court members about this, they were confident you were behind it, as it's a well-known fact that you're the leader of a syndicate of a group of assassins with similar professions and abilities like yours.

"So did you stage the assassination attempt?"

Daud looked down and still didn't reply.

Ivanna leaned closer to the bars and repeated her words again slowly. "Did you stage the assassination attempt?"

The assassin didn't stir.

Campbell stepped to stand beside her. "I bet you're dying to hear another melody from Emerson, yes?"

Daud inhaled sharply and slowly, but unlike before, he didn't say anything.

"Very well," Campbell turned to the Overseer. "Emerson, play it."
The Overseer cranked the music box, and another string of low reverberating notes erupted through the air. Daud began clawing at the armrests and kicked wildly, flailing in his chair but he could not escape. His breathing had grown wilder, deeper, faster, and he tried holding his breath and wheezed often, as if trying to choke back his screams. The music stopped, and once again, he was breathless and broken, and what's more, there was blood dripping out of his nostrils.

"Are you ready to answer?" Campbell asked.

Daud looked up at Ivanna. "I'd say that I was never involved in any of this, but you'd accuse me of lying."

"How do we know you're telling the truth?" Ivanna glared at him.

"Because you have no evidence that I was responsible for all of this. You're accusing me of a crime I never even thought of committing."

"But we do have evidence," Ivanna turned to Curnow. "Captain, if you will."

Curnow walked towards the Lady Protector, holding a leather sack, the same leather sack Lieutenant Levitt brought into Captain Avery's office days ago. Ivanna then reached inside it and brought out an object the assassin couldn't identify in the dark. Only when she stepped a few ways forward could he see a dirty Whaler mask in the light, caked in copious amounts of blood, with a small paper attached to its filters. Daud inhaled sharply and leaned forward, struggling nervously.

Campbell smirked. He was caught.

"We found this on the roofs at Dunwall Tower," Ivanna raised the mask in the air for him to see. "It was covered in much more blood, and came with this note." She turned over the mask so the assassin could clearly read the large black letters:

'YOUR EMPEROR WILL DIE.'

Daud shook his head. "No…no, whatever you think of all this, it's a ploy. I've been framed; you have to trust me—"

"How can we trust you?" Ivanna interrupted, her voice was loud and cold. "One of your men nearly killed the Lord Protector, and you expect me to trust you?!"

"I don't know a thing about this," Daud pulled himself forward. "This is evidence is set up against me. I wasn't anywhere near Dunwall Tower that day, and every single one of my men were under my watch and were unable to leave without my permission. I wasn't involved in any of this. I don't know how to prove it to you, but I'm innocent."

Ivanna frowned. Corvo pulled his hood further over his face.

"And besides," Daud's voice grew calmer as he leaned on his uncomfortable chair. "If you think I did try and kill the Emperor, why don't you just charge me of treason now and just execute me?"

"We need to hear it, straight from you," Campbell hit his audiograph machine twice with a knuckle. "Just for evidence that you did it so it's official we didn't publicly kill you for nothing."

Daud's brows furrowed and clenched his jaw. "But I didn't do anything."

Campbell was getting impatient. He crossed his arms and said nothing for a while, prompting the Captain, the Royal Protectors and many other Overseers to look at him expectantly, as if he was
planning something, or was trying to think of a good enough string of insults and curses to spew at Daud.

"Would you like Brother Emerson to wind the music box again, High Overseer?" one of the Overseers beside Campbell suggested politely.

"No, no…I thought of a better idea," Campbell tried to hide his malicious grin, and Daud below inhaled slowly in nervous anticipation. "Let's do this the old-fashioned way. Brother Wyndham?"

One of the Overseers standing next to Daud's chair stepped forward. "Yes, High Overseer?"

"Take out your sword and put it against his temple."

As the Overseer obeyed and put his blade's tip at the edge of Daud's right forehead, the assassin tried to hide his trepidation. Corvo clenched his fists; he lived long enough in the streets of Karnaca to understand what was going to happen.

"I'll reiterate the Lady Protector's question," Campbell's voice was like that of one of the torturers at the Tower's underground chambers, low and daunting. "Did you stage the assassination attempt?"

Daud looked defiantly at the High Overseer, trying to gather willpower for what might come, ever silent. Brother Wyndham looked at Campbell expectantly and, when he was given the nod from his superior, dug the short point of his blade slowly into the assassin's temple.

Daud writhed in agony, but his screams were surprisingly quieter than most who would undergo the same torture. The metal cuffs clanked against his wrists and his ankles were probably bruised from kicking the restraints that bound his legs to the feet of the chair. The sword, agonisingly slowly, moved downward, blood flowing forth from the long deep wound that was slowly being made. Brother Wyndham stopped cutting at a spot near the far corner of his eye. When the Overseer drew back, Daud was trying his best to suppress his groans of pain.

Corvo could see Ivanna trying to hide her disturbance with an indifferent expression.

"Do I have to ask again?" Campbell said, louder this time, obviously angry at Daud's persistent endurance. "Did you stage the assassination attempt?"

Daud's voice was throatier this time, as an effect from bottling up screams. "How many times am I going to tell you before you get it through your head? No, I didn't."

Brother Wyndham pointed his sword at Daud's face, but this time put his sword under his right eye. "Should I make it slow as well, High Overseer?"

Campbell shook his head. "Make this one quick. But make it long."

The Overseer nodded, and without warning, slashed his sword across Daud's face. It left a lengthy and grotesque scar, which ran from his eye to his collarbone, crossing his cheeks, chin, and neck. The sword even cut through his high collar and slashed through the fabric without effort. What the Overseer had left behind was an ugly bleeding cut that began whose dripping blood began to cake his face. It was then that Daud released the loudest and most painful scream that anyone in the room heard from him, and he didn't scream just once. He struggled and shook and yelled, his voice growing weaker with each scream but increasing in volume. Only after he had taken in many gasps of air wheezing helplessly did he fall completely silent.

"I don't think he's in a position to talk anymore," Ivanna commented to Campbell.
"My apologies that he wasn't more of an asset to your cause, Lady Protector," Campbell sighed disappointingly. "I'm sorry he was a waste of your time and my effort."

"He was a waste of time, wasn't he?" Ivanna replied. "A stubborn yet interesting waste of time."

Campbell huffed and paused in a rather quick moment of thought. "He won't be of use to us anymore, seeing as how he won't even bother to talk, even with a wound on his face. Well, we can get our information about the Outsider one way or another...maybe we'll try one of his assassins, or that old crazy Granny near the Distillery District."

"What do we do with him now, High Overseer?" Brother Wyndham asked Campbell.

Campbell clasped his hands at his back. "Kill him."

Brother Wyndham gripped his sword and held the sharp end of his blade before Daud's neck. The assassin inhaled and braced himself, and as the Overseer prepared to slice—

"Don't."

Everyone in the interrogation room turned to Corvo, who stepped forward to stand beside Ivanna and Campbell. The Lady Protector blinked curiously; she didn't notice until then that it was the first time he talked since the interrogation began.

Campbell frowned in confusion. "But Lord Protector, he serves of no use to us anymore—"

"I have orders from Lady Jessamine to spare him no matter what his intentions were," Corvo interrupted, gazing at the High Overseer. "Unless you want to disobey the commands of Her Highness, then feel free to do so, but at the cost of your position or your life."

"Right, of course," Campbell said, trying to hide his frustration behind his bow. "Brother Wyndham, release him."

Brother Wyndham stepped back and sheathed his sword. Daud looked up at the second floor to try and recognize the figure of his apparent saviour in the shadows.

"There's no denying your word enunciation, Lord Protector," Daud's voice was clear, but weaker. "You're from Serkonos too, aren't you?"

Corvo nodded, making Ivanna glare daggers at him. "Karnaca."

"I might've been there a few times," Daud said nonchalantly, as if the city brought back some of his fonder memories. "So you're the new Royal Protector of Lady Jessamine...I've heard plenty about her. She's a sweet girl; beautiful, too. She'll make a wonderful Empress."

Corvo said nothing as Ivanna suddenly grabbed the sleeve of his coat and pulled him down so she could whisper harshly into his ear. "What do you think you're doing?"

Corvo didn't reply to her and instead locked his eyes with Daud.

"You're an interesting man, Lord Protector," Daud observed aloud. "I hope our paths never cross again."

"And they never will," Corvo replied.

"Come on," Ivanna put a hand on Corvo's shoulder. "We're done here."
Captain Curnow led the two Royal Protectors out of the interrogation room, leaving Campbell alone deciding if he should disobey the Lady Jessamine's orders and gain immense satisfaction from Daud's death, or obey and let the greatest enemy of the Abbey out of the palm of his hand. The High Overseer sighed in defeat chose the latter.

Chapter End Notes

Yep, it's Daud.

I'll try and validate his involvement in the pre-game storyline. This is all canon, by the way, and I used the game, its wikia, and Harvey Smith's tweets as reference.

Daud was of Pandyssian blood from his mother, hailing from Serkonos. Following the official timeline and some simple math, Daud was about sixteen years old when he moved from Serkonos to Dunwall, so he most likely arrived in the year 1811, (his birthday is the 13th Day of the Month of Ice, 1795) and would have spent around eleven years in Dunwall before 1822. He was also marked by the Outsider by the year 1820, the year he began working as an assassin and created the Whalers. In this chapter, he's twenty-seven years old.

With regards to the Overseer music box that's been mentioned in this chapter: the music box had probably been created by the very first High Overseer and founder of the Abbey of the Everyman Benjamin Holger (which is why it's been called "Holger's Device" by the High Artificer Bartholomew), meaning it had maybe existed before 1837. And speaking of the Overseers, the High Overseer in 1822 was still our ever-hated Thaddeus Campbell (who acted in the position from 1818 to 1837).

Lastly, one of the more interesting things I noticed about Daud was the long ugly scar that runs from his right temple all the way down to his neck (at least, that's how it looks like in the concept art). But admittedly, he is pretty good-looking. Better-looking than Corvo, I might say.

And if any of you still aren't satisfied by this stuff: hey, what would be cooler than a pre-established relationship of Corvo and Daud before they actually go on a sword-to-sword blink-to-blink showdown a few years from then? :D
Part II: A Dagger of Tyvian Ore

Chapter Summary

In which our young heiress is subjected to self-defence against a future assailant (and against her heart), while our Serkonan Lord Protector faces trials of his own.

Chapter Notes

I did some research on how to fight using a dagger (I had to practice grip with a bread knife), and how to escape chokeholds for your self-defence reference in this chapter. Just enough positions for awkward sexual tension.

Also, because the second game is inching closer and closer with each passing day, I may be updating twice every week. MAY.

MASTER ANTON SOKOLOV'S NOTES ON THE PROPERTIES OF TYVIAN ORE

Although I am aware of the properties of Tyvian Ore, being born in the Isle myself, I have known very little of its abilities, and thus, I will begin to state what I have gathered over my past months of research. (Take note that these findings may be corrected with additional information later gathered.)

Tyvian Ore is rather uncommon, but not rare, in a typical Tyvian marketplace or trading post. The mining companies from the Isle are rather wealthy, as the Ore is a good conductor for electrical currents and is more durable than any metal yet found. It is because of these reasons that the Ore is rather expensive locally, costing about twenty coins for its average weight pieces; as far as my research tells me, its most expensive selling price is found in Serkonos, where a few grams can be sold for about fifty to seventy coins, depending on how much is being sold.

It is also more favourably used for sabres and bladed weaponry. For instance: the Abbey of the Everyman equips its clergymen, the Overseers, with blades made out of Ore. In the case of scientific interests, Tyvian Ore is one of the hardest minerals in the Isles, and thus can be studied in terms of molecular compatibility and pressure effects, and its malleability and plasticity remains yet to be discovered.

The young Geoff Curnow knew his job was something that came out of surprise. The late Captain of the City Watch, Captain Strudwick, one of the fallen men shot fatally during the attack on the Emperor during that infamous state dinner, was the soldier who used to be in his place, the stars keep him. But Curnow was only one of those men who were destined to be simply an officer of the Watch until the day he himself died for the Empire, but he never thought that he would be suddenly promoted. Either way, he had to carry on the flare in a dark time.

The hounds were coming for him now more than ever.
"Captain," a man of the Royal Guard saluted him as he climbed up the stairs and stood on the roof of Dunwall Tower.

"At ease, officer," Curnow commanded, shielding his eyes from the garish sun that shone mercilessly down on them, bright and cold. The winds that whipped around him brought him the stink from the Wrenhaven and the smell of the sea.

As he walked along the roof, guards prowled about, pistols at their sides, watching out for any suspicious personnel. Curnow strode along the grounds with two more of his Watch guards following as he was doing inspections of the rounds. Avery already put the new set of men on the rooftops to watch the sewers as they were under construction, and Curnow was given orders from his superiors the Royal Protectors to validate the positions and posts they were at.

"And I assume you're the officer in charge?" Curnow raised an eyebrow at a Royal Guard with dark brown hair.

"Yes, Captain," the man saluted, then offered his hand. "Officer Dalton."

"Pleased to meet you, Officer," Curnow shook his hand. "I'm only here to scan past the numbers, so the sooner you answer the questions, the sooner we can both go back to doing what we're doing."

"Yes, Sir."

"So," Curnow began walking around, looking at the rounds each man was making. "How many men do you have in total?"

"Twenty, Sir."

"And they're all from the Royal Guard?"

"The best of the best, Sir."

"They are aware of their positions?"

"Yes, Sir."

Curnow caught then from the corner of his eye a number of men abandoning their positions and running to a spot where soldiers began to crowd, somewhere close to the battlements along the edge of the rooftop. More and more of the Royal Guard slowly began to accumulate there until it caught Dalton's attention.

"You'll excuse them, Captain," he apologised shamefully to Curnow, then ran after his men and began to reprimand them, thinking the Captain couldn't hear. "What do you think you slackers are doing? And with the Captain Curnow here no less!" He entered the circle and broke it open, shoving some of the soldiers aside. "What are you all—?"

The Officer cut himself off as his face turned grim. Curnow, frowning, walked towards the crowd of soldiers and they immediately moved aside as the new Captain of the City Watch went into the clearing. And there he saw, sitting in the middle of the Tower roof tiles, a mask. Curnow picked it up slowly.

A plain white porcelain mask with dark cut-outs for eyeholes and black lips twisted into a cruel malicious grin. Even without eyes, it looked like a menace just waiting to see how your blood would spill over its white cheeks and face.
Curnow put it down.

"Bring it to the Royal Protectors," Curnow commanded, turning around and making his way towards the stairwell.

Officer Dalton was stunned. "But Sir—!"

"The Royal Protectors need to see it before anything else," Curnow said through clenched teeth. "I don't know if you were at that state dinner, Officer, but I saw that mask only once in my life. Bring it to them."

"There you are," Corvo smirked, fixing something that was laid out on the small table in front of him. "I thought you were never going to come."

Jessamine shot him an exasperated look and crossed her arms, walking towards him. "You told me to come. It's not like you gave me a choice."

He blinked. "Her Highness always has a choice."

She stood next to him in the training yard, which was empty and devoid of anybody, not even Ivanna, save for the occasional Royal Guard who did his patrol round on the far side of the area. The noonday sun poured its cold and harsh light all over the shrubbery and daunting walls of Dunwall Tower's new fortifications: alarm bells, dead spotlights, and more soldiers than usual stalking through the area as if they were an armada of tigers looking for one small mouse. The Royal Protectors and the rest of Dunwall's military were now more than paranoid, but they had a reason to. No other assassin had come that close to killing a regent ever since Empress Larisa Olaskir.

On the table, Jessamine noticed, were guns of different calibre, small pistols amongst large ones. And when she glanced at the far end of the training ground, she saw her Royal Protector was practicing aim, because all of the targets had bullet holes scattered on them. The bullseye marks were probably his recent doing.

He put the gun he was using back down on the table and began packing them into a small wooden case. "Shall we begin, Your Highness?"

Jessamine nodded as her arms lay limp at her side.

He carried the table to the far corner of the perimeter where it wouldn't disturb them. Then she watched as he took the middle finger of his glove between his teeth and began to tug at the leather that covered his hands. Once he got the first glove off, revealing slender and rough palms, he took the other one off easily. It never really occurred to her as an important detail, but he had such nice hands. She clenched her fists, trying to stomp all thoughts from her mind of how his hands felt like whenever he put a friendly touch on her shoulder, an arm around her waist to escort her somewhere or even something as simple as his fingers interlaced with hers whenever she asked him to swear a promise. So warm, so comforting, so strangely sensual.

It seemed so innocent before, so why…?

When she thought it couldn't get worse, he peeled the large Royal Protector's coat off his shoulders then body before hanging it on the small table, making his broad shoulders roll, exposing the grey vest that hugged at his lean torso and a white dress shirt underneath. As he began to fold his long sleeves up his elbows and before her eyes could continue venturing into forbidden territory, she turned away and felt her face burn.
Corvo had been in her presence nearly every day. Scratch that; every day of her life, every waking hour of every moment, he was there at her side. So why was it that only now, when he was alone with her, in a courtyard, under training exercises for her safety, no less, did she notice how incredibly and dashing fine-looking he was? Was he always this handsome, or was it just the sunlight in her eyes?

"Alright, let's do this," he spoke, and she turned. Horrifying mistake.

His hair was messily slicked back and the beard he made no effort to shave began to gnaw at the remaining tan skin of his jawline. The gaunt lines that carved his face, the sharp edges of his nose and jaw and the dark gleam in his eyes made him look so raggedy, so dishevelled, so...roguishly dreamy. As he adjusted the sword at his belt, she noticed that his dress shirt made wrinkles as it folded at the crook of his elbow, exposing lean and muscular forearms that were almost always hidden underneath that black expanse of a coat.

(Damn, then; she should order him to get rid of that coat. The first law she would make when she becomes Empress? Change the attire of the Royal Protector into something that...exposed more.)

Her face grew hot.

"Now then," he began. "I know you don't like using guns, so I thought...it would be more probable for you to wield a dagger."

"And you thought right," Jessamine replied. Why did her voice shake just then?

"But I'll give you something special," he reached into one of the small sheathes in his belt and brought out a sharp blade made of steel so polished it might as well be silver, with etchings of ore on its hilt and beautiful designs carved onto its patterns. "It was a gift from...someone I knew. Tyvian Ore: compact, hard to break, and valuable."

Jessamine inhaled sharply; she could be exposed to all the riches her father could afford, and yet she had never seen any weapon this intricate.

"I-I can't just...Corvo, this is beautiful, I can't simply take it," she stuttered.

"My Lady, I insist," Corvo handed it over to her, almost as if he was forcing her to hold it.

"Corvo, I—"

"Take it, Lady Jessamine," he said near forcefully, and the stubbornness in his stunning eyes clued her in that he wasn't backing out.

With reluctance, she took the dagger from him, and her fingers grazed the rough surface of his palm. She could feel herself tremble nervously, and she didn't know whether it was because she was holding a weapon that could essentially kill a man, or because she was standing next to a very attractive one.

"A dagger is the most basic of weapons," Corvo began, striding away from her by a few ways, brandishing another knife from his belt. "It's also one of the riskiest. The reason why people prefer guns over swords is because guns put distance between you and the enemy. The more distance between you and your opponent, the safer you are. But the closer you are, the more dangerous. Even a sword is better to use than a dagger, because swords are swift, efficient. You can still kill instantly with a sword. But you can't kill instantly with a dagger."

Jessamine looked at the glistening dagger of Tyvian Ore. This intricately detailed lovely thing...
could end a human life so agonisingly slowly.

"So let's start on grip," he stood next to her and showed her how.

"This is the way you hold a knife," he explained, pointing at his hand. "Keep the blade the same angle as your knuckles here. And don't hold it too low, or too high. Your thumb goes right there, on the knuckle of your third finger."

She nodded and tried to copy his hands, her fingers feeling the cold metal on the hilt of the blade.

"No," he immediately interjected, using one hand to fix her grip. "Your thumb goes here. And keep your fingers tight and relaxed."

As his slender digits continued to fix her own, she tried to suppress a shiver. His hands were so warm, and the magnificent sculpture of his palms and knuckles...she would have thought the stars above crafted them. She blinked furiously and felt her face grow red.

Still standing beside her, he continued. "So you're right-handed."

She nodded.

"Then you keep your left foot forward," he said, doing exactly that as she followed. "If you move forward, spring forward. Lunge. The left foot must always be in front of you."

She nodded again (and cursed herself for being so stupidly silent) as he walked a few strides away from her as he continually flipped the dagger forehand, backhand, forehand, backhand, so quickly, she thought he might wound himself and his beautiful palms.

"I assume you don't want the first point of offense in the battle to be yours?" he asked, almost like he was gaining consent.

"I came here to be taught self-defence, not offense," she retorted, grateful that she remembered her vocal chords actually worked.

"Very well," he exhaled through his nostrils.

And he gradually took his stance, his left arm, the one not holding a dagger, held in front of him, guarding his upper body.

"This is a typical dagger stance," he continued, prompting Jessamine to follow his posture: bent knees, crouched back, and hand in front of chest. "Your raised hand must always be covering your torso; it's supposed to be for protection of your vital organs near your chest.

"An assailant would probably attack first with a stab," he continued to step towards her until he was right in front of her form, and he drew his dagger arm back, ready to thrust forward. "You need to think fast here, read your opponents movements. So when I thrust," —he slowly moved the dagger towards her— "you grab my arm," —and without warning, with his free hand, he nabbed her tiny wrist and pressed it to the forearm that wasn't holding a weapon— "and push it away. This gives you an opening, a chance to hit my chest or my neck."

Her fingers brushed against the hard skin of his arm before she pulled it back, and she could feel his hardening muscles contract under her touch. Her gaze was flickering away from his face to his chest then back to the arm he had instructed her to hold. She was burning.

"Let's try that again, slower," he walked away and regained his former position.
"Alright," she answered, steadying herself.

And just as he said, he lunged at her slowly, and his arm thrusted towards her. Distracted as she was, by the focused look in his dark eyes, or by the tautness of his torso muscles underneath his chest, she was still able to grab his arm and push it to the side, and she moved her own hand upwards so that the blade of the Tyvian Ore dagger was right next to the side of his neck.

"Good," he breathed, the corners of his mouth twitched up in a smile, and suddenly, she was aware of how close his mouth was to her face. She could smell tobacco in his breath.

Her heart thumped in her chest so loudly, she was surprised he didn't hear it.

"You don't always have to hit the neck," Corvo drew back and stood upright, in front of her as he tapped the flat side of his dagger to his thumb as he faced her.

"If you want to stun your target long enough for you to get away, you have to aim at their vital organs." He gestured to his chest, so there was no way she could avoid looking at his muscular torso now. "The upper body houses the lungs and heart. This is mostly fatal, if you hit here. But below, near the abdomen, are the stomach and a few other main arteries and veins. Not damaging enough to be deadly, but deadly still."

Her mind was scattered everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Oh, he was just a touch away, she could just imagine her thin fingers tracing over the groves of his well-sculpted chest, the carving of his abdominal muscles and lean neck—

"I don't like this," she shook her head, trying to distract herself through conversation. "Is it possible that I can simply escape from someone without having to harm them?"

His eyes scrutinised her words. "Hmm, you're right. Let's see...a scenario where a weapon is unnecessary..."

"D-Do you have something in mind?" she stammered idiotically.

He blinked a few times, as if he got a perfect idea, but sighed. "I do, but...forgive me for this, Your Highness."

And she frowned. "Forgive you? What do you m—?"

Suddenly, he moved behind her and wrapped an arm around her neck, his other hand grabbing his own wrist in order to tighten it. He let enough room so her airway wasn't constricted, and it also allowed her to take a sharp and silent breath in. Her cheeks were on fire and her fingers were trembling; she let go of the dagger, and it fell to the floor with a pff as it hit the sand. A true damsel-in-distress scenario. With his body behind hers ever-so closely, she could imagine herself shutting her eyes, leaning back, and allowing him to just take her. But equanimity, as she knew, was the most important aspect of being an heiress; she was only lucky that most of her life was centred around keeping oneself calm in dangerous situations.

"This is a Tyvian chokehold," he explained, his balmy poisonous breath against her nape. "It doesn't kill; only block your airways enough for you to lose consciousness. Now focus, Lady Jessamine, this is extremely important."

She could faint. Well, she wasn't going to have a hard time focusing if the form of his chest muscles wasn't pressed against the sensitive skin of her back. She could feel each edge of his body
through the folds in her clothing. Gods, he was so warm. How could she even pay attenti—?

"First, grab my elbow," he commanded, and she did, her scrawny fingers clawing at the crook which encaged her head. His muscles were so hard against her soft skin.

"Then tilt your chin downward so I'm not holding your neck."

She complied again, and pressed her chin towards her collarbones. But with her nose against the hot skin of his arm, she accidentally inhaled the virile smell of perspiration mixed with cigar ash. She melted.

"Move your foot behind my leg."

And she tried, but the problem was her leg was too far from his, and she nearly fell and lost her balance as she tried to hook her ankle behind his foot.

"Careful," he breathed. She swore to the stars, his mouth was right beside her ear.

"Corvo, I-I can't—" she started.

"Then slowly," he said more intently.

She still couldn't find his ankle, and what was worse was that the more she attempted to hook her ankle behind his, the more she pressed into his body. This was agony.

Then she found the leather of his boots, thank the stars. She hooked her foot and made a small step behind him.

"Now turn," he said. "Sideways. Use all of the force you have to turn."

She did. She made her body move to the side in order to knock him off-balance, but his grip on her was just too strong. She was just flailing like some caught river krust struggling for dear life.

"Corvo, please, this is—" she faltered again, picking up the pieces of her failing composure.

But she asked for this. Was Delilah even right? Was this really the beginning of some stupid crush on her Royal Protector?

"The attacker isn't going to make this easy for you, Lady Jessamine," he continuously insisted. "Catch the assailant off-guard."

She tried again, but was no use. She was so frustrated. Frustrated at herself for letting her silly feelings get in the way of something as serious as defence training, frustrated at Corvo for being so attractively ravishing, frustrated at Delilah for affecting her previously respectable vision of her Royal Protector, now tainted with girly infatuation and smitten affections.

"Come on, Lady Jessamine," he pushed, his grip on her tightening even further. "Wait until the time is right to—!

With every single rage-filed bone in her body, she moved her feet and threw him off her, and with a hand on his arm, grabbed him and pulled him across her so he landed on the ground in the wake of dust. He grunted as he hit the floor and clenched his teeth as he shielded his eyes from the sun.

She was happy she succeeded…but for about three seconds before she realised she could have harmed him.
"Corvo! Oh, gods, I didn't mean to…" she bent to help him up, but he waved, supporting himself up with an arm.

"I'm fine, Lady Jessamine, that was…" he let an exhale free and gave a rich smile. "That was good. Good."

She felt the beaming of pride run through her bloodstream. "You did say to catch you off-guard."

He huffed. "I did, didn't I?"

They stood there for a while, her on her feet while he was sitting on the sandy surface of the training grounds, for gods know how long. She thought he would affirm her, give her another beautiful smile, and maybe pat her on the back in congratulations, but none of that happened and neither of them made a move until an officer of the Royal Guard was seen running towards them, looking like he was on the verge of breaking down from exhaustion. Corvo frowned and got up to his feet, dusting his vest as Jessamine looked as bewildered as he did.

"Lord Protector, there's something…" the soldier panted, "…something Captain Curnow wants you to see."

"You can tell Curnow to wait," Corvo strode over to his desk and closed his briefcase with a click of the fasteners. "I'm busy training with Her Highness."

She blushed. It might have been a small thing, but still: he chose her over Curnow. (Then again, it was practically his job to.)

"He insists, Master Attano," the soldier protested. "It's new evidence regarding the identity of the assassins."

Corvo brushed some hair away from his handsome face. "What of it?"

The soldier looked like he was trying to choose the words that hurt the least. "He says that…we might know the Isle of which the assassins came from based on the evidence. A-And he said the results might be of particular interest to you as well."

Corvo froze. Jessamine saw his shoulders rise.

"Tell Curnow I'll be right there," Corvo said as he collected his case and looped his coat around his arm. And to Jessamine: "I'm sorry, my Lady, something's come up. Another time, perhaps?"

She smiled and gave a quick nod of the head, grateful that she didn't have to endure any of that pleasurable torture anytime soon. "That would be alright, yes."

"Corvo?"

His eyes suddenly snapped open, and his gaze gravitated towards Ivanna, frowning in concern. He almost fell asleep as they were walking. This wasn't a good sign at all.

"You don't look very well," Ivanna shook her head.

"I'm fine," he replied, his voice weaker and hoarser than usual.

"Oh, yes," Ivanna shot back, crossing her arms, then echoed back in a purposefully horrible deep voice and terrible fake Serkonan accent that was supposed to mimic him. "I'm fine, Ivanna; no need to pay attention to my obviously declining health.' Your favourite pair of words." She
followed with a scoff. "I'm fine, indeed. Or as I like to call them, your favourite pair of lies."

Corvo didn't reply and instead frowned at her mockery.

"This insomnia problem is getting serious," Ivanna reprimanded. "You better do something about it; otherwise, I'm going to ask the Royal Physician to intervene."

Corvo groaned. If there was anything he hated more than his sleeping problems, it was that irascible old man Anton Sokolov barking insults and curses down his back. He missed the old Royal Physician; at least he didn't go about the palace frowning at every single annoying thing.

"I'll try to get some rest tonight, then," Corvo said.

"Try?" Ivanna raised an eyebrow.

Corvo shrugged. "Would you rather that I say yes and lie?"

"Is this about the evidence they found on the rooftop yesterday?"

Corvo mood dropped stayed silent.

That mask, that horrid white mask that he only saw the assassins wear, was from his hometown. His Isle. He could recognise the simple paintwork and contortion of expression. The same masks used for the celebration of the Fugue Feast in Serkonos, the same masks that appeared at the state dinner months ago, were the same masks that had attacked the Emperor when he was in Karnaca all those years ago during the first time they met. It was hauntingly familiar and sickening. Like Serkonos was beckoning home the child that tore apart other kids' limbs out on the muddy streets.

Ivanna knocked on the doors to the Emperor's office, and only seconds after did she swing them open. Euhorn sat at his desk, reading the piles upon piles of papers that scattered the tabletop, while his daughter helped Secretary Varnham sort through his files. The whole room stopped just to watch the Royal Protectors step in, then quickly resumed its hectic system once Corvo closed the door behind them.

"You called for us, Your Majesty?" Ivanna asked.

"Indeed I did," Euhorn said matter-of-factly, trying to hide his tone of frustration. "I just need you to do a few things for me, is all."

"Your Majesty, is everything really alright?" Corvo inquired after Ivanna.

Euhorn didn't look up from his work. "Oh, everything's fine, dear boy…other than the fact that Parliament has gone up in flames ever since the day that they found that evidence. Jessamine's been trying to defend you in the Council, you know. It's been hard for all of us."

Corvo tried to steal a glance at the heiress, but she wouldn't meet his eyes. Her face was red with blush and she tried to desperately hide it with the papers she was holding. She had been fighting for him against those horrid and rabid animals that Dunwall called their Council? It was embarrassing enough as it was, and what a way for role reversal: she had been protecting him when it should normally be the other way around.

He bowed his head low. "I'm sorry, Your Majesty, it was my—"

"Don't apologise, Corvo, the last thing I need is an apology from you," Euhorn reprimanded, looking through his papers.
"Is there anything we can do to help?" Ivanna prompted.

"Yes," Euhorn didn't look up from his work. "Go to the Council right now and tell them not to make a decision without my consent or I will have their heads. Give these papers to them; it'll keep them busy. Pacify them if you have to, maybe throw out a Northrop or two to stir up some trouble. Contact Duke Theodanis about this and inquire him about the matter. Oh, and send correspondence to the Pendleton twins for a tally on the voters."

Ivanna took the papers and she and Corvo made their way to the door—

"Not you, Corvo, I want you to stay."

Corvo stopped dead in his tracks at the Emperor's words froze him. Ivanna left the room, giving him a look that spoke of pity more than anything else and mouthing a quick 'Good luck,' before vanishing behind the closing door. The Lord Protector turned to Euhorn and kept his head low.

"Is there something I've done wrong, Your Majesty?" he asked.

"No…no, actually, I just need you to hear something," Euhorn filtered through the documents until he found the right one. "Ah, here it is. Secretary, have you read this yet?"

Randolf Varnham shook his head. "No, Your Majesty."

"Well, no matter," Euhorn read aloud from the document for all in the room to hear. "Listen to this: 'The High Parliamentary Council of the Imperial Crown of the City of Dunwall has therefore opted to suspend,'—Euhorn put emphasis on the word 'suspend'—"the services of the Royal Protector Master Corvo Attano, who is off Serkonan descent, until further notice. The reason of which is due to the newly-found evidence regarding the assassination attempt on our Emperor Euhorn Jacob Kaldwin the First on the 3rd day of the Month of Rain, 1822. The evidence assumes that the assassins who strove to kill the Emperor were also of Serkonan heritage, and that because a Royal Protector is from Serkonos as well, he must be kept under special surveillance until the court finds him free of regicidal intent.' How foolish!"

Corvo held his breath and kept his eyes downcast.

"Ah! And here's another senseless one," Euhorn cleared his throat. "This one says: 'The Emperor's daughter, Lady Jessamine Kaldwin, brought up arguments the other day against the Parliamentary Council regarding the innocence of her Royal Protector, Corvo Attano, who many now suspect to be the mastermind behind the staged assassination attempt on Emperor Euhorn Kaldwin the First. Her arguments, according to the Council, have been considered without evidence and based on emotional attachment rather than logistics, thus proving her statements null and void.' The Emperor scoffed. "Can you believe this nonsense? How on earth am I supposed to run this city if my Council keeps making rubbish like this? Do they really think I'll sign any of these?"

Jessamine clenched her fists around the book she was holding. "And they still have the nerve to call me 'Lady'."

"B-But the evidence that the assassins are Serkonan isn't confirmed, Your Majesty!" Secretary Varnham protested. "There are still files from the Overseers stating that their heretic assassin and his group of killers are the ones behind the attempt—"

"No, they're right," Corvo interrupted suddenly. "The masks the assassins used were definitely of Serkonan origin. They're the ones painted and used for the Fugue Feast in Karnaca. I saw the evidence myself."
Jessamine shook her head in defeat. "Corvo…you didn't do this…it's not you…"

The look in her eyes tore him to pieces. He still didn't understand why the Emperor's daughter, of all people, would care enough to redeem his already damned soul. She spoke up for him at the Council, trying to clear his soiled reputation, and yet it was all in vain. And she knew. He couldn't allow her efforts to go wasted. Even if he would do her a kind deed every single day for the rest of his life, it wasn't enough to pay back what she was doing for him in front of her father's Parliament.

"And I know it isn't me," Corvo finished for her. "But somehow, all of this evidence is pitted towards me. Your Majesty, please, I beg of you, I'm innocent."

"Listen, Corvo..." Euhorn locked eyes with him, and spoke almost in the tone of a father. "I trust you. My daughter trusts you. And I'm confident that you didn't do this. In fact, I would think of you the last person to ever stage such a crime. But that doesn't mean I still don't have the right to accuse you. If the Council finds something and turns the argument to proclaim you guilty, if all of Dunwall is convinced that you were behind the crime, even I, the Emperor, am powerless to stop you from being sent to Coldridge Prison."

Corvo gravely nodded his head. "I understand, Your Majesty."

"Good; and watch your back, Corvo," Euhorn waggled a finger at him. "I don't want to see my daughter's Royal Protector publicly executed because of a crime he didn't commit. You're free to go."
Part II: Mirages and Acceptance

Chapter Summary

In which our Serkonan Lord Protector and his heiress undergo strenuous tests of the heart, accompanied by the occasional perverse and decadent fantasy.

Chapter Notes

Sexual tension? Sexual tension.

Admittedly, in this chapter, some of those scenes (yep, you know the ones I'm talking about, you silly) are described in detail, but nothing too explicit, so be sure to read with caution if you don't like that stuff.

THE RESIGNATION LETTER OF FRASER ALON VARINOX

16th Day of the Month of Seeds, 1801

My dearest Empress Larisa Olaskir,

Though you are already aware, I am writing to inform you of my resignation from the position of Royal Protector. My last day of being officially in this position will be on the 20th Day of the Month of Seeds, 1801, four days from today.

The reason of which I resign is [This part of the letter is scratched out in ink blots and violent swipes of a pen, making the writing almost unreadable.] You already know why I am going to resign. We both know. I do not have to elaborate on a matter than I know disgusts you.

Please acknowledge this letter as my official notice for my resignation. I have been thankful of this privilege and blessing as serving as your Royal Protector, and despite everything you have told me and everything that you say I am, nothing will be the same ever again. I am truly sorry about the matter which concerns my dismissal from your services and I hope this is not repeated again, by the succeeding Royal Protector or any other future Emperor or Empress. I know how long you have waited for this day. Relish in this victory. You have earned it.

Despite all this, my affections for you remain the same. I will not waver. I will not change who I am, not even for you. I love you. This remains a fact.

I have the honour to remain Your Imperial Majesty's obedient servant,

Fraser Alon Varinox

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Ever since as far back as the assassination attempt, which was more or less a year ago, she was plagued with sleepless nights and dreams she couldn't imagine herself thinking off. These were horrid thoughts, lusty illusions that diseased her mind, and though she often found extreme delight
in thinking of such, she would always reprimand herself for even mentally bringing it up. She would get a sermon from the Abbey if they found her thoughts.

A future Empress had absolutely no reason for wanting such scandalous desires.

But sometimes, in the dead of night, whenever those dreams took form of a forbidden fruit, she couldn't fight and could only succumb to the grand temptations her subconscious conjured; she had no choice but to let those illusions take control of her.

She would be lying in a bed of soft satin, letting tendrils of Serkonan silk flow through her fingers, allowing the scent of rose petals float through the air and send her into an almost trance-like state. The thing was, she was never alone in those dreams; there would always be a man in the bed next to her, but she couldn't identify his face, or even recognize the startlingly familiar baritone of his smoky voice, but oh, gods…did it even matter? How could she care when his callous hands began to trace through every inch of her body, making her skin curdle with excitement? How could she care when the aroma of tobacco in his warm breath and the odour of his natural virile musk filled her lungs? How could she care when his bristly stubble tickled her chin and his rough lips so desperately tried to kiss her own?

She would caress his nape and grab a fistful of his dark hair, pulling his indiscernible face closer to hers, kissing him fervently, passionately, hard. His mouth would be gasping for breath during the seconds they broke, and she would feel his chest heave above her lithe body, his warmth surrounding her, carefully holding her as if she was made of fragile glass. His mouth would slowly leave her face and begin to move downwards, decorating the curve of her neck with more kisses, the rough makings of his beard against her smooth skin; she would only moan softly, closing her eyes and letting the toxic venom of lust poison her mind. Sometimes, a hand would go between her legs. It was all so unbearably erotic. The Abbey would kill her. Then again, the Abbey didn't exist in her dreams.

"Your Highness," he would groan ever-so softly, his warm breath sending shivers down her spine. "Mmmhn, Your Highness…"

She would sigh quietly in response, trying to find her voice tangled in the pleasures of ardour. "Nnmhh…mmnh…Corv—"

Her eyes shot open.

And there she would sit, on her bed in her dark room. The sugary dust of the dream would settle and vanish around her. She would look around, trying to bring her mind back to broken reality, making sure that all memories from dreams such as those would slowly vanish, when in actuality she would lie down and try to recollect as much as she could. Though her bed was large, her sheets were cold. There was no man.

"Say you love me," Flynn pleaded, grasping her hands as if his life depended on it. "Please, Lorrie…"

Lorrie bit her lip and cast her eyes downwards, shaking her head. "Flynn, I…I don't…I'm sorry…I —"

"Then lie to me," Flynn interrupted, his face only inches from hers.

"Flynn, I…" Lorrie tried to regain her composure before taking his hands in hers and kissed them, but her action of endearment had gone without any true emotion from her, and it was slowly
breaking Flynn's heart. "I love you."

That was it. Flynn tried to choke back tears.

Lorrie didn't know what to do. Her mind was everywhere, trying to piece back the broken man that was trying his best not to weep in front of her. She couldn't lie to herself, nor could she let Flynn suffer the damnable punishment of heartbreak. In the heat of the moment, her impulses forced her to do the first thing that came into her head: she grabbed Flynn's face and kissed him.

He didn't know what came over her, his eyes wide in surprise, all he felt was the heat of her breath and the texture of her skin...he deepened the kiss, holding her nape gently and bringing her face closer to his. Confusion filled him more than anything else, but how could he protest? She was here, before him, sending doses of excitement through his body and

Corvo wrinkled his nose and closed the book, standing from his chair. Sitting outside on his balcony during a rainy night in Dunwall should have calmed his senses, but he chose a horrible book to read from, basically souring his mood in the process.

Jessamine was right; the book was horrible.

Corvo's birthday had passed about a few days ago, and like his all other birthdays, it was more of a private affair: just the way he wanted it. Despite this, it was an eventful experience, celebrated by Ivanna, the Royal Physician Anton Sokolov, the Captains Curnow and Avery, the baker's apprentice Delilah Copperspoon, and, of course, the royal family, just to name the prominent guests. His gift from Jessamine, as expected, was a copy of 'Civil Manners' by Kolby Atkins. She had always given him books for birthday presents; he even had a whole shelf in his room full of them.

He sighed slowly, scratching his chin and running his fingers through his hair. It was colder that night because of the downpour, the sounds of the Wrenhaven's waves and the beat of the rain were calm and slow. The city lights in the distance seemed to twinkle like stars. It was chillier than usual, or maybe it was just because he was only wearing his buttoned undershirt and a pair of pants.

It wasn't even the Month of Rain yet, but the hard drizzle was tapping loudly on the rooftops. It was almost peaceful.

Ever since he could remember, insomnia had been his chronic problem. He rarely ever slept and could spend whole weeks without even so much as a nap. Although there were days when he was simply too tired to do anything at all, the most he had probably ever slept was a couple of hours, and could replenish a day's worth of energy by only resting for a few minutes.

Every night, he asked himself: was he sleepy?

He paused and checked himself.

This night, apparently not.

"Corvooo…"

He frowned and turned around, looking into the darkness of his room, illuminated dimly only by the lamp on his bedside table. As he poked his head inside, his eyes searched through the shadows, trying to find the person who had called his name, or at least he thought had called his name. It sounded like a woman, in an almost honeyed, singsong voice. He went into room, walking slowly, his boots making soft sounds against the cold floor.
"Corvooo…come here…"

And there, in front of his bed, he saw a shape outlined by the soft light of his lamp, a woman, whose face was covered in shadow. She wore nothing but a corset and her intimates, baring her arms, shoulders, and legs, or as far as the light allowed Corvo to see. Her skin was fair but not pale; her hair was dark but not black. He grew even warier, opening and closing his sweaty palms, warming up his reflexes should anything happen out of surprise. What was horrible about this was that her voice sounded so familiar, almost as if Corvo could name its mysterious speaker, but it was like he had heard it only now. It was at the tip of his tongue, but he could not recognise it.

"Just a little closer, my dear," the woman lifted an arm and curled her finger coyly, as if beckoning him to approach her. "I don't bite…well, unless you want me to."

Corvo had so many questions floating through his mind (one of them being why, of all reasons, he was so attracted to this stranger), but the first one he was able to string into a coherent sentence was: "Who…are you?"

The woman giggled, taking a step towards him. By the Outsider's eyes, even the way she walked was familiar. "Does it even matter to you?"

Corvo couldn't reply to that. He was blinking furiously and the heat was rising rapidly to his face. He was fidgeting unnecessarily, felt his fingers twitch as if in agitation, and he even felt himself shaking his head unconsciously, as if denying the indecent scenarios that began playing through his head. He began to wonder how this woman's breath tasted like, the texture of her skin and hair, and the sounds she would make if he would press his lips to the curve of her neck. Gods, if Jessamine could see him now, she would—

She took another step forward; she was only a stride away. "Come now, Corvo, admit it."

Corvo frowned; his voice had grown hoarse, for some reason. "Admit what?"

He couldn't do anything, not even move his arms to push her away. The woman took one last step, and she was already before him, her hands snaking up his chest, crawling past his neck and clawing at his nape, leaving his skin burning. She pulled him downwards, seeing as how the bun of her hair was at the height of his mouth, and pressed her lips to where his jaw met his neck. She began to nibble at his ear and quietly whispered:

"You love me."

*Love her?* Even with her body was pressed to his, he couldn't even *recognise* who she was. But his heart began to palpitate wildly in his throat, and it became so hard to breathe. He could feel her hands crawl and entwine themselves with the burly locks of his hair, her cold nails against his scalp, and her lips were gradually moving upwards, leaving trails of rouge kisses on his skin as she crawled up towards his jawline and cheeks. He shivered and let out a shaky breath.

"I don't…" he began, but he made the mistake of taking in a breath of her, inhaling the aroma of roses and lavender that seemed to send him into a reverie.

All his questions drowned in his mind and he gave in. He sighed in pleasure, and he could feel her chuckle against his chest. He didn't know what kind of spell overtook his subconscious, but he could feel incredible urges of desire surge through his body. One of his hands flew to hold her waist, while another wrapped around her shoulders. He was trying to pull her closer, but she was already too close.
"Say it, Corvo dearest," she swooned, her lips just inches away from his. Gods, he could even feel the warmth of her breath. "Say you love me."

"I..." he tried to form the words, but his tongue was tangled in a spiral of confusion and utter lust. "I lo...I love you..."

The woman hummed in satisfaction and finally laid her lips gently on his, closing the last gap between them. He could taste the salty rouge as she tried to smother his mouth with it, leaving a good amount of red pigment on his face, then bent and deepened the kiss, trying his best to desperately cling to her as they both tried to gasp for air in between. He could feel her tongue slide into his mouth and trace over his own, he could taste the sweet sugary flavour of her breath, he could feel the warmth radiating from her body and the sound of her fast heartbeat in sync with his. All of these only worked to fuel his lascivious desires. He hadn't felt this way ever since...actually, even Gisella had never made him feel this way. Who cared if she was a stranger, who cared if he didn't recognise her voice? He couldn't allow a single second with her to be wasted. He couldn't.

She broke from him and, with his hand in hers, walked him gently towards his bed before pushing him on its soft silk sheets. He tried to get up but she quickly crawled over him, adorning the crook of his neck with more kisses as she straddled over his waist with her legs. He inhaled slowly as her slender fingers began to gradually unbutton his shirt, allowing his body to immerse itself in an almost dormant state of ardour. Something began to tighten down there, and he was confident she could feel it. The woman sighed into his neck, tracing her hands over the groves of his muscles in his chest, tangling the fingers of a hand into his chest hair.

"Oh, gods..." he groaned softly, reaching up to cradle her nape and pull her closer towards him.

She laughed quietly and sighed into his ear. "Do you love me, Corvo?"

With all of these thoughts swimming in his mind, how could he even come up with a tangible answer? "Of cour...course I do..."

With a free hand, she lifted his chin and softly kissed him. "Do you really love me, Corvo? With all your heart?"

He closed his eyes and let himself go deeper into the trance. "I do...Lady Jessamine, I—"

His eyes burst open.

No wonder that voice sounded so familiar.

He bolted upright, but everything was gone. He reached down to touch his chest, but his shirt was buttoned up until his neck. He staggered to get up from the bed and nearly stumbled out of it, looking into his long mirror at the edge of the bedroom, but there were no marks of rouge kisses: none on his lips, jaw, or neck. The woman was gone. It had all disappeared.

It was a dream.

But why did it...seem so real?

He let himself come back to reality, trying to recall if those moments of lust were actually real or just another figment of his imagination. After scolding himself mentally for being such a creepy sexually frustrated idiot, he paced about, groaned exasperatedly and wiped his face, tracing a hand over his stubble. The only thing that marked his face was the dark circles that surrounded his eyes.

Maybe he should get some sleep.
Jessamine tried everything to relax herself. She paced about her room, lay on her bed, read a book, and went out to the balcony to inhale the fresh air.

But nothing. Nothing could distract her anymore. She had to face the truth head-on.

How could she not have realised it sooner? How could she have been so blind? It was so obvious.

It was the palpitation of her heart every time he walked beside her, it was the way his hand held hers so affectionately and gently, it was the way their eyes locked, it was the way his hand ran over his hair just to brush stray locks from his face, it was the deep smoky baritone of his voice, it was the way he chuckled or walked or inhaled tobacco from the cigarette at his fingertips. It was the trembling of her hands every time they touched his, it was the way he took a bullet for her during that assassination attempt, it was his warmth whenever he hugged her close, it was the innocent touches that she deemed more than casual. It was the way the corners of his mouth turned upward into a smile.

And by the Outsider, that smile.

Her cheeks flushed just thinking about it.

It was why she was so nice and patient towards him where she should have been angry. It was why she always cherished his company, no matter how brief. It was why she laughed at every single horrible joke he said. It was why she tried to clear her busy schedule as much as possible just to make time for him. It was why she always liked listening to his voice drawl on and on, regarding whatever topic he spoke of. It was why she nearly sacrificed her dignity as an heiress just to defend him against her father's unjustly council time and time again.

She covered her face with her hands and felt it burn with blush. Being around him used to be so easy; when she was but a child of thirteen, she could approach him for any type of conversation and embrace him without a care in the world, but nowadays she had to taste her words thrice before saying them and hesitated to even look at him, lest approach him.

She could almost form an image of him in her head; tall, lean, relaxed, with his hair slicked backwards, stray locks falling in front of his eyes, with a growing beard that he probably shaved about a month ago, with his intent dark eyes, with his long black coat, with his slender fingers holding a cigarette, putting it to his lips before blowing out tendrils of grey smoke.

All she could think about was kissing those lips. Would they taste of tobacco?

This wasn't anything like the pathetic adolescent crushes she had on noblemen's sons and the good-looking Captain Avery, this was something more than that.

She shook her head and straightened her mouth into a thin line.

Stop it. This is wrong. This is improper behaviour for an heiress, a future ruler of the Isles.

No. No, no, no.

Enough of this nonsense, absolutely not, unacceptable—

Then she felt a great burden vanish off her shoulders.

She owed Delilah a hairpin.
"Get up."

The dusty taste of the sandy floor of the training yard filled his mouth. He coughed as he staggered upward, his vest suddenly heavier than he remembered as he clenched his sword until his knuckles whitened, Ivanna standing before him as an opponent. He regained his balance and swept the stray stands of his hair away with a hand, eyes narrowing in concentration. If he focused hard enough, he could see her as he saw her nearly all those years ago: sparring in Nervetti's residence, in front of the Duke, Gisella, and the Emperor, all watching. But now, instead of them, it was the huge number of soldiers, Avery and Curnow, with Ivanna beating him to the ground.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Lady Jessamine overlook the spar from a balcony of the Tower, her friend Delilah Copperspoon holding a tray of sweet delicacies for her to eat as she stood beside the heiress. The baker's apprentice sported a small gold pin adorning her already short hair. As Jessamine's deep green eyes scanned the training grounds, as the hot sun burned his face and caused sweat to roll down his forehead, he let out a choked sigh.

"Come on, man!" Ivanna taunted, her anger to exaggerated extremes. Even she was affected by the humid weather and had discarded her teal coat, and sported only her dress shirt and tied her hair up messily. "You're better than this! What happened to that Serkonan boy that Lady Jessamine was proud of, huh? Where the fuck did he go?!

"He was dishonoured," Corvo panted rather stupidly.

"Like the Void he was!" Ivanna frowned. "Prove to me that pathetic boy isn't the one standing in front of me!"

He rushed towards her and their swords locked, then pushed away as he dodged her downward swing. After she thrusted, he moved to the side, then ducked as she moved her sword sideways. He made no effort to fight with his own weapon.

"Draw your blade, damn it!" Ivanna yelled, pushing him back.

But his mind was somewhere else entirely.

He could not be attracted to his heiress. In any way. It was horrid, taboo, completely wrong, but a sick and twisted part of him found enjoyment in his feelings for a loving a woman like her. How her lips would feel against his, how she would say his name against the skin of his chest…oh, it was agony.

He barely dodged a swipe.

And utterly disgusting.

His position entailed professional relations, and he was only there to act solely as her bodyguard, her shield, not some suitor on one knee giving her flowers. In fact, his upbringing should be added to the already many reasons why it was a horrible idea to fall in love with her. He came from a poor family with no trace of nobility in his blood whatsoever, he had no money in his name to speak of, he was from Serkonos: the most poverty-stricken wasteland to ever exist in the Isles, and, to add, he was about seven years her senior, so even that didn't feel right.

He blocked Ivanna's slash and slid under her attack, moving behind her.

Not to mention that she was so much more than a woman to exploit because of sexual frustration. She was an heiress, a person destined to rule the Empire, soon to be the most powerful woman in the world. She wasn't some maid looking for an exciting arousing encounter, nor was she one of
those guests at a Boyle party who loved to flirt and expected everyone to leave it at that. She was someone to uphold, to support, to praise; he would die before he would do anything to harm her. Many other men were more worthy than him to marry her, even court her: rich young handsome sons of nobility who came from distinguished family names, princes and heirs and barons. He was never going to be among them. Impossible things could happen, yes, like the poorest boy in the world becoming the bodyguard of a soon-to-be Empress, but then there were things that were foolish to think of attaining.

Ivanna spun around and he nearly met her blade with his nose if not for a well-timed duck.

But damn him to the Void if he denied everything he believed in about her, everything he already knew as true. She was beautiful, intelligent, and the dark glint in her lovely eyes that made his heart burn only strengthened his affections towards her. It was painful, but the pain was so sweet, it was all worth it. She was all worth it. He had to swallow it, to eat it, to bear it in agony. Admitting it and keeping it to himself was a far better fate than admitting it to her face. He would suffer every single trial in the world if it meant to keep her comfortable and away from harm. To endure every single pain that was targeted at her was part of his job, and that included heartache. His dedication wouldn't waver. Not now.

He tried to floor Ivanna, but she shoved him aside with a strong kick to the chest as he rolled up to his feet.

There was no use denying any of it anymore. He would be thrown into the Void, and the Outsider could eat his heart out all he wanted. Right there and then, in the heat of a spar battle, Corvo Attano, the Royal Protector of the heiress to the throne of Dunwall, finally confessed to himself that he was in love with the Lady Jessamine Kaldwin.

Something was lifted off his chest. His vest didn't feel as heavy as it did before. The corners of his lips turned into a smile—

Ivanna knocked his knees with the hilt of her sword and his head hit the ground with another thump. From the corner of his eye, he saw Jessamine bite her lip and shake her head. She retired into the confines of the cage she called Dunwall Tower, and she and Delilah disappeared behind the teal curtains.

He groaned.

"Get up," the Lady Protector shook her head. "Ah, you useless piece of mess; you aren't done just yet."
Part II: The Month of Rain

Chapter Summary

In which the wrathful fires of desire are finally quelled in the blissful cool showers of the Month of Rain.

Chapter Notes

You've been waiting for this, and so have I. Let's not make this any more complicated than it is: someone's getting kissed. In the most cliché way since that one Nicholas Sparks-based movie which is based off that one Nicholas Sparks book and whose titles are the same and rhyme with "the votebook".

Oh, yeah. You know exactly what I'm talking about.

ANONYMOUS POEM, SAID TO HAVE BEEN WRITTEN IN MORLEY

There is truly something about the Month of Rain,
When the boats all return from a lonely Ocean,
Tossing across tempestuous waves of motion.
They sleep on hard mattresses to ease every pain.
   But now they are here.

There is truly something about a warm embrace,
From fire in her throat and hot sparks in her breast,
And the maddening aching you feel in your chest,
   That might almost seem like a delirious haze.
   But now she is here.

There is truly something about a vast night sky,
With the soft light the of stars shining on white stone,
   Or the feel of rich velvet and musical tones.
They sing mystical songs for the gulls that soar high.
   But now he is here.

There is truly something about the way he smiles,
With his hands against the fragile bones of your hips
How your soul ignites when your skin touches his lips.
You wish these covert trysts would last more than a while.
   But here you are home.

Secretary Randolf Varnham was the most loyal man under the Emperor, and that much Corvo knew. The Secretary was trustworthy and kind; and although jittery and anxious most of the time, he did prove a diligent servant. Jessamine enjoyed his company immensely, and whenever Corvo
was busy doing other things and could not be in her presence, she found entertainment in engaging conversation with her father's secretary. In fact, the Royal Protector could almost be jealous with the amount of time they spent together. Although he wasn't much of a threatening figure, he was someone to depend on. The Emperor did favour him a lot, and it was no surprise he got a birthday party all to his own, all expenses paid by Euhorn himself.

So the day of the grand ball came on the weekend before his birthday: the 2nd Day of the Month of Rain.

The Tower, on that special night, was alight with a flurry of lights, sounds, and people, colours of every single hue under the stars were invited and meshed themselves with the alluring symphonies of the waltz playing in the foyer and the bottles of champagne being popped open. The aristocracy of Dunwall forgot their hatred of Euhorn and one another for one night and danced all their worries away, smoked until their heads were clouded with tobacco, and drank as much as their livers could handle. Only one of the Boyles attended the party, probably Esme, the sister known as the promiscuous social butterfly that every drunken man was just willing to give pollen to. The young Treavor Pendleton was the only one from his family that came to sign the guest ledger, though Corvo anticipated that long ago because of his brash move towards his brothers at that state dinner. But Treavor didn't mind, actually, and spent an ample amount of time ranting to Corvo about how horrid his siblings took that action, and how delighted he was in seeing them embarrassed.

The night was not quite young and not quite old just yet. Music floated through the hall as the Serkonan made his rounds about the ballroom. Ivanna was busy trailing by the Emperor's side, swirling her wine in her glass as she blushed red talking to Lord Edgar, the gentleman who was didn't leave her company through the whole affair. It was quite odd, seeing the usual steely Lady Protector melt into a girly fit of blushes and giggles whenever Lord Edgar laughed. She might as well marry the man.

Euhorn himself was trying his best to act sober under the influence of whiskey, and he was a master of deceiving his guests; that or he had an incredibly admirable alcohol tolerance. His cheeks were beginning to redden against the stark white and gold of his rich robes, but his guest didn't pay attention as they swarmed towards him like moths to a whale oil flame, trying to engage him in conversation.

The man of the hour, Secretary Varnham, was busy chortling with his friends from his old class back when he was a student at the Academy of Natural Philosophy. That crabby old geezer Sokolov looked like he was competing with no one in particular on how many glasses of brandy he could finish within the span of the night. Varnham, luckily, was a man known throughout Dunwall for not even smelling a drop of alcohol in his life. So, glad to say, he was but one sober soul among many sauced faces, and he seemed to delight in the spectacle of his friends and classmates stumbling along the Tower's lavish ballrooms asking a couple of girls over for a dance with slurred and straightforward insults.

But Corvo could have stayed by Jessamine's side the whole time. The thing was that she didn't allow him to, saying that this was one of those parties that he should enjoy himself without the burdens of work weighing down his shoulders. Even when he insisted he wouldn't mind and that it was in his mandate to be next to her at all times, she commanded him, and he couldn't disobey. So with much reluctance, he kept his distance. But that didn't stop him from catching her figure in the crowd constantly.

She was beautiful. Gold and white silk and cotton against the stark brown of her hair, tied up in complex swirls and braids that kept it neat and out of her face. The night blue eyeshadow that painted her eyelids, her fair face, and the rouge that made her lips more full and red…she was a
born muse among mortals, walking along the foyer engaged in blessed conversation with a few young men and women that fluttered around her like they were butterflies and she was the most exquisite flower in the world.

As the night went on and on and as he finished parting with the sister of young Blair after a dance, Corvo decided that one partner was enough waltzing for one night and retired at a time to drink perhaps a glass or two of whiskey. But from the corner of his eye as he stood watching the dance floor, he caught the figure of the beloved heiress smiling, gliding with glee across the ballroom. But her Royal Protector nearly choked on his drink.

She was dancing with another man.

The man she was currently moving gracefully across the foyer with was someone who wasn't a complete stranger to Corvo. He recognised him as Kerr Geary, son of the late Lord Geary, as far as Ivanna would inform him on the complex connections of the aristocracy. That sly light in his eyes was his most defining feature.

"Had enough dancing for tonight?"

He looked to his side to see Delilah Copperspoon, the baker's apprentice, smirking with mischief as she popped one of the sweet tarts she baked for tonight's occasion into her mouth. He also noticed that the gold pin she had worn before was used to hold up all the short strands of her hair.

"Dancing isn't a forte of mine," Corvo took a sip of whiskey from his cup. The sharp taste numbed his tongue.

"That's a shame," Delilah laughed, crossing her arms. "I would have loved to see you trip over yourself. Who was your partner? The Blair sister? Hmph…wonder if she still has any feet after you've gone and stepped on them until they've broken off."

"Then I'd ask you for a dance. You'll never walk again."

"Not in your wildest dreams, Attano." Corvo continued to look discretely at Jessamine, who was laughing and smiling as she twirled in the arms of Geary. Alright, so Corvo didn't have the right to be envious. She wasn't his. By the Void, he didn't even have any claim to have her as his. He barely admitted any feelings for her, let alone any romantic intention, and it was absolutely stupid as to claim ownership of somebody who was, by the law, his only superior in the known world. The heiress, the future ruler of the Empire of the Isles. She was too far from his reach, but that didn't stop him from loving her. It should have been the same force to squash the idea of distrust from his mind with no mercy.

"Ahh…somebody's jealous…" Delilah suddenly teased, making the tips of Corvo's ears flush.

"No, I'm not," he said, trying to find his calm. "I'm only watching her from afar tonight; she wants me to keep my distance."

Delilah scoffed. "You worry too much."

"It's my job to worry. Just wait until that Geary boy takes out a knife and stabs her through the ribcage, then we'll see who worries too much."

"But maybe you're after Sir Kerr for other reasons, hm?" Delilah nudged him with an elbow. "Maybe because he's dancing with your dear, sweet Jessamine."
The way she put emphasis on the words 'dear' and 'sweet' was almost unnerving (but true). "He might have evil intentions."

Delilah raised an eyebrow. "Those evil intentions being inviting her to a dance?"

He didn't answer.

The music stopped as all the dancing couples bowed in an act of end and parting. Kerr bowed a little lower than Jessamine did, and the couples began to switch their partners as the musicians began to tune their instruments to play another waltz.

"There you go," Delilah prompted, "ask her to dance."

Corvo shot her a glance like she was suddenly going to cast a spell and possess him.

Delilah's eyebrows hiked up. "It wouldn't hurt to try, now would it?"

Of course, the baker's apprentice was right, but he didn't want to admit that. As she disappeared into the crowd and waved him a hand in a gesture of goodbye, he strode across the ballroom over to where Jessamine was, then offered a hand and a deep bow. Ah, yes…now he remembered why he was grateful when Jessamine requested that he keep his distance.

It was because he became a blundering idiot when he was at least three feet away from her.

"Oh, Corvo!" she sounded surprised. "I thought you were…well…"

"Your Highness," he said, intently, surprised he didn't stutter or choke on his words. "May I have this dance?"

Her smile lit up her entire face and her eyes were kindled with a gorgeous fire. She tangled her gloved hand in his and he nearly melted. "I would love to."

And the music began, a slow composition with three beats in one measure, a note on each step. Corvo took note of the count mentally in his head as he nodded along with as little movement as possible. He tried to savour the moment as best he could, but it was all going to be worth it, just as long he didn't step on her immaculate feet. Concentration in the training yard, whenever he was dodging swipes and arrows, was nothing compared to this.

One, two, three…one, two, three…

He bowed, she bowed back. And she gingerly placed her left hand on his broad shoulder as he took her right in his. One of his arms swerved around to catch the back of her waist and he nearly lost it right there and then at the touch of the soft satin of her blouse against his hands. Composure, composure, Master Attano, was everything. The music began to make them move.

If there was one thing he was he took for granted when he was being training for Royal Protector in the timespan of a month, nearly all those years ago, was the dancing lessons that were given by Miss Ravens. He, the governess, and Ivanna were standing in this very ballroom, except that it was empty back then, and Miss Ravens would always reprimand him whenever he stepped on her foot.

"Turn around, Master Attano, lead your partner," Miss Ravens had gestured to the area around her. "A dance is the most crucial thing for a lady, representing a silent gesture of respect, fondness, and care."

He turned around and nearly missed stepping on Jessamine's foot. He often stumbled and tried his
best to match his movements as she flew by the floor with ease he could only wish for in his wildest dreams. He raised his arm and she twirled around, the gold trimmings in her dress catching the bright lights that dazzled around them, but he nearly stepped on her foot as he caught her again. How was he so bad at this?

"Sorry," he apologised quickly.

"It's alright, Corvo," she smiled, returning to his arms.

"A typical ballroom dance has three beats, and it's very simple to follow," Miss Ravens had pointed to her feet and began to glide through the varnished clean floors. "Step, one, two…step, one, two…step, one, two…remember, timing is everything, and movement is crucial. In fact, it's almost like sword footwork, so it shouldn't be that difficult for you. Every single arm gesture or position you make means something to your partner. Be conscious."

His arm caught her again as she moved closer to him, her long blouse spinning like a glimmering train of cloth. She moved with him, like two beats of a heart follow consecutively after the other, like the waves of the Ocean follow the curvature of the distant shore. He was actually shocked at how his movements were less brash than he expected; perhaps it had something to do with his unwavering consciousness over his movements.

"A dancer who is impetuous will gain no respect from the women he waltzed with," Miss Ravens had taught. "You must focus on your feet and the music, but most of all, learn to have fun. A woman will always know if you're too stiff or too tense even when her hand touches your shoulder."

"Relax, Corvo," Jessamine laughed. "You aren't going to hurt me."

The small warmth of her body against his crisp new uniform nearly set his chest ablaze. It was hard keeping a professional disposition; he wondered how she was able to bottle up her feelings of anger and happiness in front of a stern Parliament when he himself struggled immensely to keep his affections in chains when the woman he loved was waltzing with him.

"My previous dancing partner would say otherwise," he joked.

She flashed him a smile. "Well, as long as you enjoyed yourself."

"I am now," he said, earnestly, honestly.

She twirled around him and the music began to reach a very calming crescendo of a flurry of notes and slurred chords. The other couples around them, the drinks, the lights, the clinking of glasses and the smell of alcohol all vanished away until the ballroom was empty and it was just her and him. Her head was pressed against his chest as they spun in repetitive circles, leaning on his shoulder in what seemed to be a mediocre embrace.

"You have been my Royal Protector for years and yet..." Jessamine sighed, her arms tightening in a hug around Corvo's lean body, "this is perhaps the first time I have truly ever danced with you."

"It doesn't have to be the last," Corvo replied, closing his eyes and inhaling the scent that clung to her: bits of champagne conquered by hypnotic Pandyssian flowers.

He twirled her around and uncoiled her from himself until she was an arms-width apart from him. The music slowed to a halt and the (sober) guests were applauding the dancing spectacle. He stood face to face with her, eyes locked, hands limp at the side, Corvo's heart pounding violently in his chest with a strange jovial feeling hovering about his nervous mind. He wasn't too sure about her.
"Corvo," she said as the clapping died down, stepping closer to him, making his breath hitch again. "There was…something I was meaning to ask you about, something that I hoped we could speak together in priva—"

"Ah, there you are, Your Highness," the young Kerr Geary at the side interjected rather brusquely, offering his hand. "If I may again ask for the next dance?"

It broke Corvo's heart that no matter how badly she wanted to decline, she couldn't because the satisfaction of her partners' face was always worth it in the end. With a smile, she took his hand and he gingerly kissed it. A foreign kind of anger bubbled at his throat.

"It would be a pleasure, Master Kerr," she said, and they walked towards the centre of the hall, hand in hand.

She didn't notice Corvo slip away into the crowd.

He had stood there at the side-lines, watching them dance for what could have been nearly an hour, her words plaguing his thoughts. What in the Void was she going to talk to him about? Was he bothering her? Was he being too strict, too overprotective, too nervous? As always, alcohol was the only answer to the solution, as it was the most illogical and yet most effective answer for any solution, so he began to drown in glasses of it as Jessamine danced with Geary across the ballroom floor, each glass representing each step they took together. The whiskey had dulled his vision a bit and began to slur his voice and strides, but he was still sober enough to notice that she had vanished from his line of sight once the music had stopped, right after she had finished dancing for the umpteenth with the Geary specimen.

She was missing.

Corvo's natural senses kicked in and he began to move through the crowds, his eyes sharpened themselves into picking up movements that might have belonged to her—a swish of cloth, brown pinned-up hair, fair skin—but none of those things were truly the heiress. The dizziness aftereffect of the whiskey was slowly being replaced by an all-too familiar anxiousness that he had felt many times before but had never gotten used to.

He never should have trusted the Geary boy.

But from the corner of his eye, he caught a sliver of two figures standing in the gazebo outside in the garden. When he finally focused and looked out the window, sure enough, he could identify the pristine white of Jessamine's blouse and the dark expensive suit of the Geary specimen. From the little Corvo could see, they were holding hands underneath the dark of the sky, the moonlight providing little illumination as if was slowly being choked by rainclouds. The Geary boy leaned closer to Jessamine's head and she moved away, throwing her head back as she laughed.

Oh, fuck no.

Corvo, without further delay and a hand ready on the hilt of his mechanical sword, stormed out of the ballroom and into the gardens, taking long and intent strides on the pathways towards the gazebo. Jessamine, since she was directly facing him, was the first to react, and raised her eyebrows in attention once she saw him approach.

"Oh, Corvo, there you are…" she said rather softly as her Royal Protector entered the shade of the gazebo.

"I should be saying that to you, Your Highness," Corvo replied rather harshly, but with his
intentions bearing well. "I was concerned; you left without telling me."

She flushed red. "A-Ah, yes! Well, about that…"

"I sincerely apologise, Lord Protector," the Geary boy bowed in response, and it slightly irked Corvo that he finished her sentence for her. "It was my fault that she left without notifying you, so please, do not persecute her for something she hasn't done. We were only speaking about—"

"Kerr, dear, could you meet me back inside?" Jessamine huffed, putting her arms around herself and turning away, her tone of voice rather irritated. "I must speak with my Royal Protector in private. It will take only a moment."

"Of course, my Lady," the Geary boy nodded.

And after a kiss of her hand and a shallow bow, he walked out of the gazebo, through the gardens, and back inside the ballroom. It was just them now, just him and the woman that he hated to love. The clouds loomed over the moon. There was no more light across the marble flooring, only the low growl of the distant thunder.

"I do hope you have a good reason for interrupting me, Master Attano," Jessamine looked out at the Wrenhaven, at Kaldwin's Bridge. He was startled at how she addressed him in such an unfamiliar and professional manner.

"I could be asking you the same thing, my Lady," Corvo shot back, trying to be as polite as possible, "when you ran off earlier without me knowing."

"And so?" she faced him, her brows furrowed. "Do you need to know every single one of my whereabouts?"

"Yes, I'm supposed to know," Corvo retorted, trying to keep his anger to a minimum. The woman he was speaking to wasn't Jessamine, this wasn't the heiress he knew and fell in love with; it was a mask she had put up to defend herself from…well, whatever he was doing that threatened her. He had to break that mask off.

She scoffed snobbishly and turned back, avoiding his gaze.

"Who was he?" Corvo asked, and though he didn't say his name, it was obvious from the bitter tone of his voice that he was speaking about the Geary boy. Then again, of course he knew who he was, but he wanted to hear it from her.

"No one you have to know." She released a sigh. "Why must my affairs always be known to you?"

"For the sake of your safety, Your Highness."

She frowned. "And does the identity of my dancing partner compromise my safety? I think not, Lord Protector."

He opened his mouth to protest, but closed it immediately when he realised just why he was so angry at the Geary boy for no particular reason other than the fact that he was dancing with his heiress.

Alright, so he was jealous. So fucking what? He deserved to be.

"Your Highness," he sighed and turned his back on her, ready to leave her presence, maybe forget over a couple of drinks.
"Oh, for...no, I..." he heard her voice soften. "Gods, Corvo, I'm sorry, I-I didn't mean to...I was just angry. I didn't mean any of that."

There she was. The heiress he was willing to give everything for: his honour, his life, his being.

He turned his head to look at her from the corner of his eye. "I remember earlier you wanted us to speak alone?"

She exhaled shakily. "Yes, I recall."

"Is this what you wanted to talk about?"

She shut her eyes and her fingers tightened around her arms, shaking her head as she stood still. It hurt him to see her that way: in pain. "Corvo, I...I trust you. Ever since you became a part of my life, I have never trusted anyone as much as I trust you."

He furrowed his brows and turned so he would be fully facing her. "What do you mean?"

She took a reluctant step to him. "I-I know that you have your priorities, and I have mine, and I know that you are the only person in the whole world who can keep me safe, who can..." —she released a nervous breath— "who I am sure I can give myself wholeheartedly to."

Corvo was as flustered as he was horribly confused. "My Lady, I don't....understand what you're —"

"Corvo, you belong to me, don't you?"

And they looked at each other. The dark and brilliant green of her eyes caught him off-guard and he fell in love again. A wave of emotion washed through him, something he knew he should never surrender to, but there was a small part of him that knew exactly what she was talking about, a part of him he chose to ignore and persecute.

"My Lady, I..." he began, but his words did him no good. She was already less than two strides close.

There was a silence as they looked into each other's eyes. The thunder rumbled and with it came the sound of a light drizzle. A good subject-changer.

"Let's go, Lady Jessamine," Corvo took her hand carefully and began to lead her out of the gazebo. "The rain's coming soon; we have to get you back inside."

A few steps outside the shade of the gazebo's roof, she stopped walking. Then he stopped walking. They stared at each other for what could have been centuries as the drizzle slowly began to evolve into a downpour, such as the Month of Rain dictated, but neither of them moved from where they stood. The rhythm of the drops of water splashing on the pavements, on the fabrics of their clothes and on the dryness of their hair mimicked the palpitation of his heart. His new coat was beginning to grow heavy with water, and his neatly combed hair was being frizzled by the rain. Drops of it rushed over his face, his hands, but it couldn't douse the burning sensation that enveloped his chest.

"Corvo, you don't understand how long I have waited for this," she shook her head, admiration shining in her eyes. It scared him.

"Don't make me do this, my Lady," his whole being ached as he poured all the regrets that ate him from the bottom of his heart. "I can't...for the love of the gods...don't do something that you'll end
up hating me for. I can't accept this…I don't deserve you. No man like me ever deserves you."

"Corvo, please..." she begged, taking a step towards him.

But she was standing there as the thunder roared, her luscious brown hair falling apart with each shower of precipitation as the white of her clothes turned darker with each raindrop, the rouge of her lips and the eyeshadow on her face slowly melting off as it slid down her cheeks like blue and red tears. Her mask was shedding. The downpour grew stronger, violent, but he could hear her clearly.

"Corvo," she reiterated, her vowels enunciated so that he would never mishear her ever again, "you belong to me, don't you?"

She was so beautiful. He would die for her.

He surrendered.

"I…I do…" he managed to speak, captivated not by the flawless goddess but by the ruined mortal standing before him. "I do. I belong to you."

She stepped towards him, and he let her. "Corvo, I have never met a person, in all my life, who ever made me feel whatever I feel for you. I no longer care about whatever they want to say, whatever you have to say, one thing remains constant, and it's something I can ignore no longer."

He wanted to say something, anything, that could match her beautiful words, to give back to whatever she was doing to him. But he stood there stupidly as she continued to close the gap that lay between them. She took her hands in his, and, leaning towards him, buried her face into his chest, and paralysed him, body and soul, as the words left her lips like blessings from the stars themselves:

"I have always been enamoured with you, Corvo…I…I love you."

The world froze. The beating in his heart quelled and the rain, albeit loud, seemed to disappear. He couldn't feel anything for a moment.

Then it washed over him. Like water from the heavens.

She tilted her head up to look at him in the eye, whatever remained of the curls of her hair met exactly where his mouth was. He drowned himself in the gorgeous face of his heiress, the falling pieces of her mask.

"Corvo?" she murmured, deftly, lovingly. "May I ask you for something?"

"Anything," he replied, and he was willing to sacrifice his all for her right there and then, to keep her safe.

"Kiss me," she whispered, moving her face closer to his.

And in the rain, both of them soaking wet, with their absence from a birthday ball, no less; he leaned forward and caught her lips with his, for the first time that would grow into many more. Of course, like everything, he didn't expect it like this. But, oh gods, he melted in her arms. Flames of desire he had barricaded for how many months spread through his body as he shut his eyes and deepened the kiss. Her lips were soft, warm, the taste of champagne filling his mouth; her hands flew to his hair and tangled her fingers into it, desperately pulling him towards her as he—
"No, stop," she broke away, her expression fearful.

"My Lady, I…shit…" he cursed, covering his face with his hands, his kiss-swollen lips trembling and struggling to make the words. "My Lady, I…I've been meaning to tell you, for so long…and I'm so sorry, I love you."

She she shut her eyes as she dove towards him and held him close in a tight embrace. He wrapped his cold arms around her. The wind howled and the thunder boomed.

"Fuck…" he didn't know where the words were coming from, but he let them go, whispering them into her hair. "I don't know when or how it began, but I've always been in love with you…I've always…I love… I love you…"

Then, out of nowhere, he heard soft giggles against the wet fabric of his coat. Then it turned into beautiful laughter. She hugged him and he hugged her back; he was filled with some sort of odd euphoria he never felt before, and something new and wonderful ran through his bloodstream, a feeling he had never felt in his entire life. He pressed his forehead against hers as they laughed like fools, her breath cold and wonderful against his wet skin. The sound of their chuckles echoed between the raindrops as he spun her around and around, getting more soaked with each turn and kiss and embrace.

When an eternity passed, the lanterns from the party seemed to beckon at them amidst the thunder and foggy storm, like the Kingsparrow Island lighthouse to a distant boat in the Ocean. With his arm around her shoulders in a gesture to escort her out of the gazebo and back into the Tower, he lifted the collar of his coat over their heads and used it as an umbrella as they walked through the gardens back to the ballroom. She smiled against his shoulder as he put an arm around her body, and they were even closer than they had been before. Their clothes were wet to the hem.

Ivanna would be pissed.
Part II: Trysts

Chapter Summary

In which our Serkonan Lord Protector and our young heiress struggle to keep their relationship a secret, and someone in the Tower is destined to find out the truth behind it.

Chapter Notes

The actual romance begins. I know, it took this long.

This is miscellaneous fluffy stuff that will come before the sadness. Just a fair warning, though: there will be some angst in later chapters, but, before that, let's all laugh and raise our glasses in merriment and pretend it won't come.

FROM THE PRIVATE JOURNALS OF BEATRIX BLAYNE

15th Day of the Month of Seeds, 1795

Mother came to me today and told me that Lord Fairclough intends to marry me, and though my expected choice is to accept, I had to explain to her why I could not. I had to admit that another nobleman, Lord Euhorn Kaldwin, had also proposed to me prior.

In truth, I favoured Euhorn above my other suitors. He was everything they were not. He was charming, witty, terrifically attractive, and actually made an effort to understand me. Before, I had viewed him simply as another person to add to the queue of the men waiting for my hand in marriage, but only then, when I spoke to my mother that night, did I realise just how much I was fond of him. He would ask me for every dance, he would laugh with me as we walked down the estate gardens, he would be the first to visit every morning and be the last to leave at night. I know Mother only liked him because his kin was close to the line of the Empress, but I fancied him for different reasons. I loved him.

One night, I remember distinctly, the night we first kissed on the patio, we talked of the future, as if we had an idea of what would happen. He said that if we were to marry, he would want of nothing more than our growing old together. That if we were to have children, we would have a daughter and name her Jessamine, then a son named after him.

Jessamine was a beautiful name. I've always loved the way it slipped off his tongue so gorgeously.

Something was wrong.

It was Ivanna's job to sense that first-hand, but something was definitely wrong. It wasn't in the sense of "the-whole-empire-will-fall-apart" sort of wrong, but more along the lines of "something's being-hidden-from-me" sort of wrong. And it was still a sort of wrong that made her panic.
internally. Being a Royal Protector for majority of her life accustomed herself to knowing everything, and absolutely everything, that regarded the Emperor, meaning that she must know everything about the Empire itself.

Ever since Secretary Varnham's birthday party, things have been very strange in the past year.

Jessamine had been acting...odd. Never mind, that word was an understatement. She was acting completely unlike herself at times. She laughed loudly as if wanting the whole city to hear it, she woke up in the morning later than usual...and not to mention she was gone for hours on end at least once a week and Ivanna couldn't find her. Whenever she searched, the Emperor's daughter wasn't in her bedroom, nor the courts or dining rooms or parlours, not even in the garden, her one favourite place in the whole Tower.

Corvo had been acting even stranger than her. He smoked significantly less, so much so that sometimes, the smell of tobacco in his bad breath couldn't be picked up, and he was actually a little more approachable and less intimidating than before (if that was even possible). And whenever Ivanna walked by his room late at night, she could hear him snoring. He was actually sleeping.

(Now, that was something to actually be grateful for, but still.)

Perhaps something was just going on; maybe Jessamine was being influenced by Corvo's rowdy behaviour, and maybe he was actually getting used to the formalities of court life. But that didn't explain why he was more polite and jovial, and it definitely didn't explain her occasional giddy mannerisms.

Was there something going on between them?

No...no, no. That's ridiculous. Besides, it was too soon to jump to conclusions. What would the future Empress of Dunwall even see in a brash, impetuous, and irresponsible insomniac like him?

Ivanna investigated. Just in case. You can never be too safe when it comes to an heiress.

"Hurry, Corvo," Jessamine was already at the top of the stairs. "Come, faster!"

Corvo was halfway up the staircase when he saw the shadows flickering in the throne room below him. He waited a few heartbeats before springing up and joining his heiress as they wandered the empty halls of the Tower. He shouldn't have agreed to this; abandoning the throne room in the middle of a court assembly, allowing her to wander about with her Royal Protector as her only company. It was romantic, yes, with the thrill of a sinful tryst through and through, but it didn't stop him from being nervous. It had been instilled into his bones for years.

"And you're sure no one will miss us?" he stopped walking.

"I'm sure," she said, rushing, with an undeniable certainty in her sweet voice, as a hand hovered above a door in the hall. "Now come, precious seconds are being wasted."

She opened the door, and the room was too dark to be discernible; the only lights were coming from the window, borrowing the glow of the lamps that hung around Kaldwin's Bridge during the night-time. Everything else in the area was cast by shadow, but judging by the position of the room in the Tower, it was most likely Ivanna's office.

The door closed behind him, shrouding him and his heiress in the shadows of the room. And when his eyes flickered towards her svelte form, her neat hair, crisp clothing and sparkling eyes, outlined by the cold night light of Dunwall, his heart skidded to a halt and he was forced to take a deep
How was it, in the whole world, that a beautiful, majestic, regal, and goddess-like woman chose to love him?

He didn't deserve her.

He heard her chuckle as she began to prowl towards him.

"My dear Lord Protector…" she cooed, wrapping her arms around his nape. "So cautious…so worried…"

Her eyes were so alive. So full of light and love and laughter, as deep and green as the mountains that carved the coastline back home in Karnaca. Eyes that would be the death of him. Her red lips parted as their corners drew into a smile, an admirable mirth in her soft giggle.

She leaned upward, her breath against his stubble and neck. He could almost praise the stars above. The smell of her hair was as close to exotic Pandyssian flowers as he could get, and the soft skin of her hands against the leathery fabric of his coat was tantalising. Pacifying his impulsive actions towards her was by far the hardest battle he had fought, in all his life. And those were words coming from a veteran of wrestles, swordfights, and other physically painful endeavours, such as one particular bullet to the ribcage. This was worse, because each battle ended up in a loss.

Leaning down, he pressed his lips to hers as she let out a moan, cupping her face and furrowing his brows as she deepened the kiss. Her hands flew to his collar, aggressively dragging him down towards her as he forced her soft lips against his own. Her breath smelt of honey, her lips tasted of wine. Each sigh between the breaks, each finger entangled in his hair, each soft call of his name was a gift from the gods.

Then he pulled his mind out of the clouds and his eyes burst open. He drew back, pulling his arms to his body as he took a step towards the wall, away from her. His mouth was trembling and so were his calloused hands. His face was flushing.

"Oh, Corvo…" she smiled, her palms against her soft cheek as she let out a soft laugh.

He used a hand to wipe a few stray stands of hair out of his forehead, sighing. He then took her hand gingerly and began to lead her towards the door. "We've been missing for too long, Jessamine; let's go back downstairs."

"I told you before: no one will miss us," she stopped, making him stop as well. She pressed a kiss to his cheek. "We only started, and if you leave now, I'll have you sent to prison for being a horrid tease."

Her cheek kisses soon begun to take his lips again as he desperately tried to push her back, but his battle-hardened hands were weak against her soft ones. He knew this was wrong, and what they were doing was wrong. Then again, he was too much in love to deny her this. He was willing to take the hit of every single sword, every single bullet, and every drop of poison that was otherwise aimed at her. He felt the thrill take him again, euphoria clouding his mind.

Then he heard footsteps coming up the stairs.

"Jessamine, wait," he said breathlessly, grabbing her shoulders and detached her from him as he shot his gaze at the door.

She looked at him with annoyance. "Not again, Corvo…"
"I hear someone coming," he said worriedly, taking her hands in his. "Jessamine, we have to leave now—"

Ivanna opened the door and turned on the lights.

Her office was empty, but she couldn't help but feel something had been disturbed. It was probably the unease that settled in her when she had second thoughts about the strange voices she heard as she was hiking up the stairwell. Closing the door behind her, she walked towards her desk and began to filter through her documents, looking for the ones that Euhorn had requested for.

It was then that she saw something of a hand flicker in the window.

She shot her head up, frowning at the glass windowpanes that reflected the light of Dunwall nightscape. She walked over to the sills and put her hands on them, gripping them with icy fingers before sniffing the air that stunk of waste and piss and the residue of tobacco, the latter most likely the fault of one of Curnow's Watch guards. Was it an assassin scaling the walls? A killer just waiting to strike her at her most vulnerable?

She stood there for a few minutes before shrugging the sight off as a figment of her over-reactive imagination. She groaned, took the papers that she was originally there for, then shut the lights and closed the door.

Meanwhile, Corvo was crouching by a jut in the Tower, sighing in relief once he heard the door slam shut. Jessamine, who was bundled up in his lap, held securely by his arms, burst out in soft laughter. Their hearts were racing, their beats in sync.

"Corvo, may I ask you something?"

Finally…they had been quiet for too long. With her arm looped in his, Corvo and his Lady were walking along the gardens, the orange sunset casting long grey shadows across the grass and white marble. Her head was leaning on his shoulder, and their strides were uniform. Her body was pressed to his, side by side, and she would have kissed his cheek, had the Royal Guard shifts turned away to the other side of the Tower.

"Yes?" he replied.

She avoided his gaze and felt herself blush. This was absolutely stupid, but she had to know. "Have you ever been in love before?"

He paused for an uncomfortable while, then gave her a stunning smile. "Do you mean before now?"

She flushed then let out an annoyed breath, both unsatisfied and flattered by his answer. "I'm asking a serious question."

"And I answered seriously," he replied, then stopped himself for another long moment of silence. "But…well, it's a long story, Jessamine; I wouldn't want to bore you with my life."

In their company, when it was only him and her, he had dropped all titles of 'Your Highness' and 'my Lady' and called her by her name, and it never sounded sweeter than when Corvo said it. "You rarely tell long stories, let alone one about your previous life. You keep to yourself too much with regards to your life in Serkonos."

He turned to look at her; her eyes were bright with amusement, and he sighed, letting his shoulders
"If it's personal," she added, "I understand."

He shook his head. "No...you do make a point. But don't say I didn't warn you."

"Remember when we used to exchange letters, and I mentioned a girl named Gisella Nervetti?"

She could barely recall the name. "Yes, I believe so."

"When I was a very young boy, I used to hold such strong feelings for her. It was actually nothing but a stupid infatuation, but I was so smitten by her." He shook his head with a smile. "Gods, I was such an idiot back then."

"And you are not one now?" she replied, smirking.

He let out a breath and nodded. "Fair point."

"Gisella was about two years my senior, not to mention her family was damn rich while I was born lower-class. She barely knew I existed. Outsider's eyes, she didn't even know my name until I won the Blade Verbena."

He paused to think again, giving Jessamine enough time to her own thoughts. The Blade Verbena...the tournament he won that made him an officer of the Grand Serkonan Guard, which attracted the attention of the Duke, which made him recommend Corvo to Euhorn, which brought him to Dunwall to be picked as her Royal Protector. It was such a startling thought that their meeting was built solely on coincidence, being there at the right place at the right time.

"When I won the tournament, Gisella and I were formally introduced, and gods, Jessamine, she was horribly in love with me...and I'm not exaggerating here either."

"Horribly in love?" she reiterated, her voice shaking.

"When I was out during shifts, she would be waiting for me to finish; she always invited me to dinner with her family, and it even got to a point when her brother grew concerned for her. That Tyvian Ore dagger I gave you? That was a gift from all the money she'd been saving for herself."

Jessamine felt a brew of jealousy bubble at the pit of her stomach, and she tried to suppress it as best she could; other than being such an informal grudge to hold for a lady of her calibre, it was pointless to hate the woman who had fancied him in the past. The dagger of Tyvian Ore than she treasured dearly because it came from him was actually a token of affection from the girl he loved before? Was she supposed to feel betrayed?

He began to look distressed. "Soon, we were engaged in a real relationship. And we thought it was love. But then she grew near mad. I didn't like to think of her as...obsessed, but now that I think about it ..."

Jessamine blinked rapidly, trying to review her relationship with Corvo over the course of the year, observing the patterns through their own relationship to see if there was something similar in Gisella's infatuation with him with her own feelings.

"The last time I saw her was by Karnaca's docks, before I got on the boat to Dunwall. She was there to say goodbye."

So it was indirectly Jessamine's fault that they separated. It would sound horrible to say good
"Did anything...intimate happen between you two?" she asked, her face hot.

Corvo's brows knitted together. "And why would you want to know that?"

She held her chin up, keeping her pride above all despite her embarrassment. "Transparency between two individuals is the key to a successful relationship, is it not?"

"Well...when you put it that way..."

She shot him an exasperated look. "Corvo, I'm not a child. I'm almost two decades old, and more than capable of handling mature conversation."

"And yet you're still my lovely heiress," he smirked, making her head spin wild. "I don't want to spoil that pure head of yours."

"I may be your heiress," she said coyly, albeit with a professional air, "but I will become Empress one day. And might I ask the Royal Protector to stop avoiding my question."

He tightened his lips into a thin line, and his face scrunched up into a tired smile. "If my heiress commands." He paused to take in a nervous breath. "The night before I was supposed to leave for Dunwall, she nearly forced me to..."

She could see Corvo's face flush. He was always so adorable whenever he was flustered.

"Forced you to...?" she continued.

"I think I told you enough," Corvo evaded.

"You have already spoken too much, Corvo, you have to tell me," Jessamine's brows furrowed as her smirk widened. "That's an order."

Corvo groaned in defeat and complied with her. "Fine, she forced me to bed her."

It came out so suddenly and the shock took a while to settle in, but she could see his irritation leave as the corners of his mouth lifted up into a small smile. "Well, I can't say it wasn't an unpleasant experience...in fact, I'd like to say that it was probably the first time that I actually had no self-control when it came to—"

"Spare me the details, please," Jessamine interrupted him; now it was her turn to blush furiously.

Corvo's chuckle was rich with mirth. "You asked for this, my Lady."

As attractive as he was whenever he threw his head back and bared his teeth in a smile, accompanied by the melodious song of his laugh, she was so annoyed by him that she could only cover her face, like it was the only way to make sure the heat flooding her cheeks would stop.

Corvo and Jessamine were on the way to the gardens, no doubt. If there was one thing they probably had in common, it was their love for that garden, (even if Ivanna had no idea why).
Luckily, she was able to catch them in one of the hallways just before they went there; she called out them and ran through the corridor, grabbing Corvo's shoulder to turn him around to face her when he didn't respond.

"There…you are," she said breathlessly, putting her hands on her hips. "I've…been going around the Tower looking for you."

Corvo shrugged. "Well, you found me. Problem solved."

Ivanna frowned and looked him in the eye, straight annoyed. "Gods, I would hang you out to dry if it wasn't feeling nice today. But it's not you I'm after." She turned to Jessamine and lowered her head. "My Lady, I must speak with you."

Jessamine's expression was piqued in interest. "Is it urgent?"

Ivanna thought on how 'urgent' was used in her sentence. "Maybe, but I still have to speak to you nonetheless."


Her Lord Protector nodded, took her hand and kissed her palm, as he always had whenever he was dismissed from her company. But the gleam in his eyes wasn't simply of respect; something else was hidden there, something more than admiration. "Your Highness."

He turned around and walked down the hallway, disappearing behind the many the passage towards the foyer, leaving the Lady Protector and the heiress alone.

"So what is it, Ivanna?" Jessamine asked, folding her hands in front of her. "Is it something concerning my father?"

"Not necessarily, my Lady," Ivanna shook her head. "It's concerning Corvo."

Jessamine blinked in interest. "Corvo?"

"Yes, Your Highness. More on your…relationship with him."

The heiress gave a small smile, but she was trying to hide the fact that her voice was shaky, either from held-back laughter (or fear). "What about our relationship?"

Ivanna gave her a concerned look. "I've been having suspicions about the both of you. I just wanted to ask if…" —the Royal Protector sighed, scratching the nape— "you won't like this…"

Jessamine frowned. "Ivanna, you are not being very clear."

"Your Highness, are you in a romantic relationship with him?" the Royal Protector nearly retorted.

Jessamine seemed to have flinched, but she calmed down and answered in a very nonchalant tone. "We're very close, but…not that close, Ivanna. We remain to be good friends."

Ivanna raised an eyebrow, and the fact Jessamine was still trying to hide it from her continued to fuel her frustration. Her volume continued to grow louder with each sentence. "Even when you two are gone for hours on end without anyone knowing your whereabouts? Even when Corvo just so happens to talk about you more than often during the rare moments when you're not with him? Even with both of your late unusual behaviours? Don't think I don't know what's going on between you."
Jessamine slowly began to realise just what she was talking about, and her brows furrowed and she shouted in rage. "Ivanna, how dare you accuse me of such things! What kind of thoughts and indecorum lead you to thinking I'm in an affair with my Royal Protector?! I'll have you sent to Coldridge Prison for this and have executed for your insolence!"

Ivanna narrowed her eyes and spread her hands. She knew Jessamine long enough to know she was simply acting. The heiress wasn't like this; she wasn't one to show her power by yelling angrily and ordering people around, she was patient and only raised her voice as a last resort. Jessamine would rather take her life than take another person's. Ivanna was going to call her bluff, even if she would be possibly risking her rank.

"Fine, then," Ivanna said calmly, shrugging, trying her best to be lax. "But at least I'll die knowing I wasn't wrong, Lady Jessamine. Any fool with eyes can look at you two and see out that there's more to your relationship that just an heiress and a bodyguard. I've seen the way you look at him and the way he looks at you. Your Highness, you long for each other."

Ivanna knew those last words hit the Emperor's daughter right in the heart. Jessamine struggled to keep her false anger up, as usual. She could never stay angry at Ivanna. Her temper slowly died down and melted into sadness, and the heiress buried her face in her hands, trying her best to suppress her tears. Ivanna, as unremorseful as her usual demeanour was, felt horrible for doing this to the young girl she always cared about.

Jessamine's tried her best to choke back her sobs as she raised her eyes to her father's Royal Protector. "Ivanna…Ivanna, please don't tell Father, please…please don't tell Father—"

"I won't, Lady Jessamine; I'm not that cruel," Ivanna cut her off before her apologies got even more desperate. "I'm so sorry, my Lady; I won't say anything, I won't yell at you again. Just…tell me the truth, alright?"

The heiress looked at her, almost as if she was pleading. "I just...Ivanna...alright, I...we've been together since the Month of Rain last year. Please don't tell Father. Please, please….Ivanna, please don't tell Father…"

"I won't, my Lady, now calm down," Ivanna took her hands and used her handkerchief to wipe Jessamine's cheeks. "I won't tell him. Your secret's safe with me."

Jessamine nodded and hugged Ivanna tight. "I should not have yelled at you like that."

"No, I'm the one who shouldn't have called you out so angrily." Ivanna laid a kiss on her forehead. "Don't worry, my Lady. After this, I'll talk to Corvo and make sure that he'll never ever break my precious heiress' heart."

Jessamine stifled a laugh. "He'll be horrified if you'll do that."

Ivanna gave her a smirk. "Good, that's what I intend. And keep it a better secret next time, hm? Even the stupidest of the Royal Guard will know if you're planning a tryst if you're this bad at concealing an affair."

The Royal Protector also had more questions, the more prominent of which was why, by all the gods and the Outsider himself, did she love Corvo Attano, of all people, and what exactly did she see in him that would make her want to be with him.

Jessamine had little to no flaws. But now, she had one: her taste in men.
"Ivanna?" Corvo asked, peeking into her office.

"Ah, just the man I wanted to see," he could hear her voice coming from behind the desk. "Come in."

Corvo stepped into her office. It was a room identical to his, albeit neater; the papers on her desk were filed, the books piled in fixed stacks, and the shelves that lined the walls were arranged in alphabetical order. The long windows that he had once hung out of let in cloudy sunlight, illuminating the chairs in front of the desk at the centre of the room. All Corvo could see of Ivanna was the Kaldwins' swan symbol on the back of her coat, as she was standing behind her leather seat, looking overhead at the painting that hung behind the desk. He found himself looking at it as well.

It was a large rectangular canvas, the emotionless faces of Euhorn, Beatrix, and a very young Jessamine painted in dull and dreary colours against a dark backdrop scene of the Tower parlour. The royal family was dressed in the most extravagant of their clothing, as Euhorn was wearing a flamboyant robe that Corvo only saw him wear during his own inauguration. Beatrix was dressed in layer upon layer of silk and satin, her hair done up with jewels and pins. The child Jessamine looked the most bored, but her eyes conveyed the most expression among the three figures, an expression of both fatigue and sadness. Before he was about to open his mouth asking who painted it, he spotted the sharp and unforgiving signature of the Royal Physician Sokolov at the bottom of the portrait.

"Lady Jessamine was only…ten years old, I think," Ivanna answered his invisible question, "when this was painted."

"The Emperor let you keep this in your office?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied almost coldly, her back still talking to him. "Before the Empress died. It's an old portrait."

Corvo's eyes wandered up to meet Beatrix's. She almost looked so full of life, but her pale skin was painted with cold brushstrokes. He could see why the Emperor gave it to Ivanna; after all, who would want to see a portrait of your dead wife every time you wandered into your office?

"Take a seat," she said.

He complied and sat on the only chair there, the one directly facing her table. He was growing more and more concerned on why she wasn't showing her face, but he knew her long enough that she wasn't in the mood to answer that sort of question.

"What did you call me for?" he inquired, leaning back. "Do you need me to send files? Pacify the Council? Give documents to Lady Jessamine?"

Her shoulders seemed to rise as she inhaled upon hearing the word 'Jessamine'. "No…no, nothing that easy. I just wanted to ask you some things. I hope that won't take too much of your time."

Corvo tried his best to hide a scowl.

She gazed up at the painting. "What do you think of Lady Jessamine?"

"What do I think?" he reiterated, following her gaze upon the pale face of Jessamine in the canvas. "Well, she's…"

He paused unexpectedly; how should he describe her in a way that wouldn't be vague, and at the
same time, not as detailed as to give away their affair? Ivanna wasn't a fool; she would know if a person was lying just by letting them give off a few words.

"She's a good heiress. She's kind, compassionate, just. All things a future Empress should be."

"Gods, Corvo, don't answer me like you're writing some test," Ivanna retorted almost violently. "Don't tell me what you want me to hear; tell me what you think."

Damn, she was better than he expected it to be. "What if my test answer is what I really think?"

"Well, there's nothing I can do about it. But I can't help but feel that there's more to that."

Corvo felt anxiousness grip his throat. Suddenly, his breathing grew deeper and his heart began to beat in so loud in his chest, he was surprised Ivanna didn't hear it.

"Admit it, Corvo."

Well, shit.

"Admit what?" he frowned, trying to keep up this ruse.

"Drop the act, for both our sakes," she pressed. She was growing more impatient and he could hear it in her tone.

He gripped his knees, attempting to dispel his stress. "Ivanna, I have no idea what you're—"

A dagger flew by Corvo's face, cutting only a few strands of loose hair before striking the wall behind him. The knife was only inches away from hitting his eyeball, and it grazed his skin but barely. Ivanna froze in her throwing stance, her arm outstretched, annoyance carved onto her face, ire in her eyes.

"I'm quite disappointed, Corvo," Ivanna said softly, retracting her hand before looking at the knife stuck in her wall. "Let's make this easy for the two of us, yes? I don't want more holes in my wallpaper."

He was still stunned by the wind that flew past him; hell, he was thankful that all it did was leave a thin mark on his cheek.

"You don't have to lie to me," Ivanna's tone was calm but still had undertones of stress, frowning as she crossed her arms. "Didn't your little lover tell you already? She spilled everything to me."

Corvo opened his mouth to protest against the claim she made, but he didn't want to upset her further.

"Lady Jessamine is a wonderful girl, don't get me wrong," she continued. "She's beautiful, bright, well-equipped to run this Empire. But I seriously question her taste in secret lovers."

Corvo shot a frown at her. She only gave him a sarcastic smile.

"So you know," Corvo finally spoke, resentment in his voice, prepared for the screaming session that would follow. "Have you told the Emperor yet? Or do you want to make this more of a scandal or a rumour for everyone to hear? Maybe keep this over my head for me to do your disgusting bidding?"

"What? No! By the Outsider, I'm not that evil, Corvo," Ivanna raised her eyebrows in amusement. "I'm on your side, remember? Gods, you don't know it, but I do have a sense of humour."
Corvo watched as she drew out another throwing knife from her belt and put it on the table, within reach for the both of them.

She looked at him with an unreadable expression, one between irritation and satisfaction. "I promised her I won't kill you; your secret's safe with me. I just have one condition, and it should be easy for you…unless you choose to defy it."

"And that is?" Corvo asked.

In a movement too fast for him to read, Ivanna grabbed the knife on her table and pointed it to his neck, only inches away from piercing his flesh. The names of adept men who would beat him in a fight could be counted on a hand, but he was pretty sure Ivanna was at the top of that short list. The closest he ever got to winning a swordfight with her was probably that duel years ago in Karnaca. The more he thought about it, maybe that victory was just a simple stroke of luck.

"If you betray her," she threatened, her tone was menacing, even intimidating, "if you crush her feelings under your fancy boots, if you even think of throwing her heart out for the river krusts to eat, I'll make damn sure that you'll never see the light of day again. You break her heart, I break your bones. Are we clear?"

Corvo blinked, unable to say anything at all, so did his best to nod without moving his head too much, else he wanted his throat pierced.

"Good to know," she smiled, drawing the blade from his neck and sheathing it. He exhaled, as he was holding his breath the whole time that dagger was pressed to him.

"Did you really have to do that?" Corvo pressed his fingers to his neck, looking up at Ivanna, irked by her violent display.

Ivanna shrugged. "How else was it going to leave an impact on you?"

He didn't want to say it, but he knew exactly why she was acting this way. This wasn't the first time Ivanna had been exposed to an affair involving a Royal Protector and regent. The first time she had been, however, was traumatic for her. Her father hadn't been so lucky when it came to his relationships with the Empress.

He stood up. "If that's all you've called me for, can I leave now? I have business to take care of."

Ivanna raised an eyebrow. "Don't refer to Lady Jessamine as a business."

Corvo deadpanned. Ivanna let out a silent laugh.

"Fine, you can go." She sat back down at her desk, sorting through her files as he proceeded out; he opened the door before her voice stopped her again. "Oh, can you be a gentleman and get the throwing knife on the wall? Thank you."

Corvo rolled his eyes and obliged, removing the dagger off the wall before plunging its blade into her desk. She gave him an exasperated look, but all he did was give her a sardonic smile before finally leaving her office, closing the door behind him.
Part II: The Second Move

Chapter Summary

In which two graves are dug and two hearts are broken.

Chapter Notes

Fast forward a year into the future, where Jessamine is twenty years old and Corvo is seven years her senior.

I'm sorry. I'm so very sorry.

FROM THE PRIVATE JOURNALS OF EMPRESS LARISA OLASKIR I

7th Day of the Month of Clans, 1801

The great banquet will be held tomorrow, and though I know it is an affair that provokes nervousness within me, I cannot help to think that a miracle has happened. Finally, Fraser Varinox is gone from my life, and with him, a new line of Royal Protectors can be finally chosen. I care not about Dunwall's opinion of the Varniox clan and their years of service to the Empire; I only care of the horridly sickening affections a specific one of their own held for me. Good riddance.

The Morley Insurrection is reaching its height, and now, more than ever, is a time to call for a peaceful era or progression and prosperity. The Empire will rise from this troubling time anew, with greater goals to strive for and development within our grasp.

[This entry is the last of the Empress, as she was assassinated by mercenaries from Morley the next day, on the 8th Day of the Month of Clans, 1801.]

Breakfast was a very normal affair, most of the time. There would usually be some report of complaint from the gentility that came in together with Euhorn's medication and tea, or Curnow would burst through the doors to inform the Royal Protectors regarding his and Avery's updates on the identity of the mysterious Serkonan killers as the sugar passed around the table. But the masked assassins were closer than ever. They would deal the blow that they had been waiting for nine years to make.

Ivanna and Corvo usually took their breakfast hours before that of their regents, so they were standing beside them when it was finally their turn to eat. Euhorn was busy reading Council reports given to him by Secretary Varnham as he drank his already cold prescription tea. Jessamine was busy picking at her eggs as she exchanged smiling glances with Corvo, who was busy talking to Ivanna. Royal Guards were prowling the hallways outside, as the new shifts dictated, and the Royal Protectors were attentive even in their conversations, ready to draw their blades at any given
moment. But they brought very little with them, and only a pistol and sword hung at Corvo's belt.

"Is Parliament still making it hard for us?" Corvo heard Jessamine ask, drinking a sip of her scalding tea.

"Apparently so," Euhorn coughed, glancing through the papers. "The Pendletons are making it hard for us with their damn voting bloc." Another hacking cough. "Those twins are the nerve of me."

Jessamine shot a concerned glance at her father, and so did Ivanna and Corvo, for a brief moment. His illness was slowly worsening with each day, and his medication was growing more plentiful. Master Sokolov was doing all he could, but at the end of the day, the only thing that they were able to do was drag on the Emperor's numbered days.

"Can't you suspend them from office?" Jessamine asked after a short silence.

"I can, actually," Euhorn leaned back on his chair. "Outsider's blood, I can have them executed, even. But no...they're good Parliamentarians, and effective as well. They appeal most to the gentility, and it helps us get the votes we need. So as annoying as they are, they prove to be useful on occasion."

Jessamine frowned. "Their brother seems a more worthy individual for the position of Prime Minister."

"Who? Treavor Pendleton?" Euhorn's coughed as his golden brows knitted together. "Oh, dear daughter, he's too young to take office. Perhaps when his brothers are dead will he inherit the position."

"I do recall reading a few news lines saying that Parliament is blossoming under your rule, Your Majesty," Ivanna added, crossing her arms.

"I'm not really doing anything, only pacifying them from killing each other, at best," Euhorn gestured with a hand.

"Have you ever considered an absolute monarchy?" Jessamine inquired her father.

"Many rulers have, including me, at one point," Euhorn sipped his medicinal tea. "But not after the Morely Insurrection does it seem all that appropriate anymore."

"Father, that was years ago."

"And yet it is because of that Insurrection that Empress Larisa Olaskir was murdered, allowing us to take power. Never underestimate the value that history has upon the present, Jessamine."

Jessamine sighed and poked at her eggs with her fork again. "I will never understand why people just...kill each other. Why can't everyone settle differences through diplomacy or communication instead of swords?"

Corvo's heart softened. If she was to become Empress, her rule would be one where no person in jail, be it because of skirmish or scandal, would be executed. No one would die unnecessarily on her watch. She hated to watch people die. She hated hearing people die. She hated death.

"It's because people like me exist, my Lady," Corvo replied as his conversation with Ivanna died down. "Large gaps created in the world breed conflict."

"But it is still not cause enough for assassination," Jessamine looked him, her gorgeous eyes
locking with his.

The corners of his mouth tweaked in a smirk. "When you've lived your life in a poor land like Karnaca for eighteen years, come to me and tell me that the rich don't make your blood boil."

She leaned back in her chair, unable to reply, and watched as her father flipped the page of the report as he let free another cough from his chest.

"Oh, and Ivanna," Euhorn suddenly said again, hoarsely, "I heard that your Lord Edgar had some interesting things to say to you the other day."

Ivanna's face flushed. Corvo frowned in confusion.

Jessamine smiled behind her tea. "I think it's quite sweet."

"Easy for you to say, Your Highness," Ivanna cast sly glares at her Lady and at Corvo.

"I don't understand; what happened?" Corvo asked, brows knitted like the ignorant fool he was.

"Lord Edgar proposed to her yesterday," Jessamine put down her cup and flashed a big grin at the Lady Protector.

His face dropped.

"He what?" Corvo exclaimed, his eyes wide.

"Oh, please," Ivanna was blushing. "It isn't much of a big deal."

"It is for you," Euhorn took his own cup and raised it like he was giving a toast. "Finally, after twenty years, a Varniox will marry and produce another good line of heirs to serve the prestigious name."

Ivanna let a small laugh escape her as she bowed her head. "Thank you very much, Your Majesty. I finally won't be the only living Varinox any longer."

Euhorn sipped his tea and chuckled. Of course, it was breakfast. Who could ever think of assassination at breakfast?

Our killers do, apparently.

The windows that had been newly repaired only months after the state dinner affair crashed and shattered open once again. A black figure with that grotesque white mask smiled upon Jessamine's screaming face as his dark boots landed on the table. The assassin drew his blade as he ran towards Euhorn, but he was quickly parried by Ivanna, who pushed him off-balance.

"Get the Emperor and Lady Jessamine out!" Ivanna yelled at Corvo.

Corvo quickly pulled Euhorn and Jessamine out from their seats, rushing to the door. But then just as he was making his way, two more assassins burst in through the windows. One of them drew a pistol and fired at Corvo, making him scream in pain as he clutched the fresh bullet hole that tore a hole in his shoulder.

"Corvo!" Jessamine yelled, trying to help him up.

"I'm fine, Jessamine, just..." he pushed open the doors to the hall, where two of the Royal Guard were already planning on making their way in. They took the Emperor and his daughter in their
"Get them to the safe room," Corvo commanded, flicking open his mechanical sword with his dexterous fingers as he let his wound go; the pain faded away little by little. "Request for backup. And find out where in the Void these assassins are coming from."

"Yes, sir, Lord Protector," one of them answered as they ran up the stairs away from the dining room.

"Corvo!" his heiress yelled, struggling against the guards as they went away, her tears threatening to spill. "Corvo, no! No! Please don't! Don't take me from him! Corvo!"

Jessamine was screaming his name and making an effort to flail from the guard's grasp, crying as she called out for him. It was almost a relief to see her disappear up the stairwell, away from sight. He could almost shout at the rage he felt that he had to do this. He didn't like seeing her like that.

Pulling a pistol from his belt, Corvo aimed then fired, taking out an assassin that was already making his way into the room, staining his loathsome white face red as he fell to the floor. Ivanna skidded off as she pulled the tablecloth, flooring all the assailants that stood on the table top. She stepped to the side as Corvo shot them all in the forehead, their limp bodies staining the lacquered wood red, mixing Euhorn's cold tea with their blood. The second wave would be coming soon.

"More of them are on their way," she walked towards Corvo, reloading her crossbow as she tried to hide the limp in her step. Her face was filled with bloodied cuts, her uniform stained, and her hair dishevelled.

"What happened to you?" he asked.

"One of them broke my leg; what happened to you?" she returned the question, scanning the wound at his shoulder.

"A pistol," he replied.

"I'm down to three bolts, do you have ammunition on you?" she inserted her arrow into the slot of her crossbow.

He reached into his pocket, but it was empty. It suddenly occurred to him that he had brought nothing to breakfast except his sword and pistol. His expression said it all.

"Shit," Ivanna cursed.

"Well, we're fucked," Corvo muttered as the next wave came in.

"Don't say that," Ivanna reprimanded, and it was almost comforting, how near casual she was.

Four more assassins went through the holes made by their predecessors as they swung into the room, drawing blades and guns. Ivanna tossed him her crossbow as he caught in mid-air, shooting two of the assassins dead in their tracks. She rolled across the floor and, flicking her fingers, snapped the hilt of the blade closed with her hand. The sword slid out, cutting through the four legs that were right in front of it. As the assassins howled in pain, she got up and, attaching a spring razor to one of their backs, pushed them to the side, where their limbs were torn apart by sharp threads of uncoiling metal.

"Excellent," Ivanna mused, retrieving her crossbow from him as she reloaded it with her last arrow.
"Last week's practice run was better," Corvo smirked, his sword gleaming in the morning sunlight.

Six assassins came through the windows, and they were much quicker than the others. Before anyone could react, two of their pistols shot Ivanna on the arm as the second one went through her stomach. She grunted in pain and fell to the floor as she clutched her bleeding abdomen. Five of the Royal Guard arrived just in time and held them back long enough. The assassins must have trained well, because they were slowly turning the tides of the battle in their favour. Corvo rushed to her and hovered about, putting his arms around her to—

"Don't touch me, Corvo," Ivanna pushed him away hard, and he was startled at her harshness; she was even more austere than before.

"Ivanna…" he muttered, "you're hurt."

"I…" she drew her hand back, and her trembling fingers were coated in her blood. It was almost as if she hadn't seen it before. "I…I'm fine…"

"My favourite pair of lies," Corvo tossed her his pistol, and she caught it midway, and, recognising her own words leaving him, she gave a weak smile. "Let's go."

She cocked the pistol and aimed, then shot an assassin in the neck.

Corvo moved forward, his shoulder still burning like the Void was swallowing it whole, but he was mowing down assassins just as fast as they were coming in. But the more he felled, the more that entered. The backup wasn't coming as soon as it was, and whatever troop was trying to stop the assailants from continuously pouring into the room was failing miserably. The Lord Protector kept on commanding soldiers to request for backup, but they were all shot down just as their hands held the doorknob. Ivanna was slowly being ganged up on and a few more bullets were lodged into her back, accompanied by her bottled-up grunts. From the original five, they were down to two guards. Seven more attackers entered.

From the corner of Corvo's eye, one of the remaining Royal Guards screamed as one of the assassins drove his dagger into his throat. Corvo was still deep in shock and stood there, suddenly aware he and Ivanna were with nearly ten assassins, then a white mask went through him and cut his stomach and arm. It was hardly deep enough to be deadly and he returned the favour with a pistol he found on the floor, but his entire chest burned. He grunted as he crouched, trying to stand up. He had never seen this much blood on him.

Corvo rushed quickly to Ivanna at the other end of the room, who was currently occupying four killers. Before he could get there, one of them drove his knife into her arm and another thrust his sword right through her abdomen. She gagged and choked on her own blood before screaming defiantly and mowing them all down with one well-timed swipe of her sword.

As the last guard was handling the rest, Corvo sped over to Ivanna, who slumped and hissed in pain when Corvo put a palm on her shoulder. He quickly retracted his hand and nearly gasped when he saw her face was riddled with dirt, blood, and scars.

"Ivanna, come on…" he helped her stand up, clasping her hand because her life depended on it. "We have to—"

She grunted in pain and he put her down again; she looked at the wounds that riddled her body and her coat and sighed painfully. He couldn't blame her, however. This was all too much to handle. Even Royal Protectors were human, and they had their weaknesses. Ivanna had hers, and Corvo hated seeing them.
"Listen, Corvo," she said weakly, "I want you to grab Officer Hayes and then run, as fast as you can, out of here. Get to the Emperor and his daughter; they need you now more than ever. Don't even call for backup on the way out."

"What about you?" Corvo breathed worriedly. His own wounds were the least of his worries; his superior's life was dangling off the edge of the Void.

"I'll be fine…" she panted, grabbing her sword on the floor as the last Royal Guard, Officer Hayes, blocked a swipe and narrowly dodged a bullet at the edge of the room.

"You're lying," Corvo shook his head, and he realised just how much his favourite pair of lies had such immense gravity. "I'm not letting you do this, Ivanna. Come on, let's hoist you up and get ourselves to safety before it's too—"

"Will you just listen to me for once in your life, damn it?!" she yelled hoarsely at Corvo. "Another wave is ready to come in and you want me to abandon post?! I know I'm asking a lot from you, but I just…"

A pause. The world seemed to slow down.

"I want you to leave me."

He knew it.

"Ivanna, I'm not letting you do this," Corvo insisted, grabbing her hands; they were wet with blood, both hers and not hers. There were many times during the years he served as her subordinate that he wanted her gone to get rid of the constant chores she sent him on, but not like this. Never like this.

"Take care of Euhorn and Jessamine for me, alright?" a tear slid down her cheek. Ivanna never cried, and seeing her like this, weak and pathetic, nearly forced Corvo to shed his own tears. "If you break Jessamine's heart, I'm coming back to get you from the grave. Always listen to whatever Avery and Curnow send you to do. Tell Edgar I love him, and that I'm sorry."

"Ivanna, no…" he clenched their hands. "No, no, no, no—"

Ivanna looked up and they locked eyes. Unlike Jessamine's deep green ones, Ivanna's were a pale grey. They were fogged up with tears that cleaned the dirt and blood that stuck to her face as they flowed down her cheeks. Her voice was sincere, true, and reassuring.

"And thank you, Corvo. It's been long and hard, but I'm so damn proud of you. You're ready to do this alone. I know you are. I didn't spend all those years training a Serkonan dirt boy for nothing."

That was it. A tear slid down his face and Corvo clenched his teeth. He shut his eyes and Ivanna pushed his hand away and as he struggled to stand up, she put an arc mine on her chest. Then, fervently, almost feeling, she looked at Corvo sadly, smiling. Corvo nodded. He knew what to do and what he was going to lose.

He had four seconds to get out.

He had four seconds to get out.

Four—

Corvo complied, for the very last time. He dove towards Officer Hayes and grabbed him by the waist; the Serkonan floored the assassin he was fighting as he sprinted towards the doors. His body was aching and it hurt again as another assassin drove a bullet through his leg, but he kept running
with all the rage, the festering grief that consumed him.

Three—

Hayes looked around and, seeing the dead bodies of his comrades mixed with that of the assassins, he covered his mouth and suppressed a scream. Corvo grabbed the doorknob as he flung the banquet doors open, holding the young Officer in his throbbing arms as he closed his eyes, his tears staining Hayes' dark hair.

Two—

Ivanna stood up, the light arc mine was blinking rapidly. Three assassins simultaneously stabbed her through the chest with their blades, her mouth slowly dripping with blood. But she held her ground. She wouldn't fall.

One—

It all became a blur. Corvo turned around and saw Ivanna standing there, suffering, defiant, ready to die for her Emperor. Her face was bright. She bared her teeth in a beautiful smile, the most ethereal and magnificent smile Corvo had ever seen her in, and barely said a word.

The arc mine burst into flames. The banquet hall was flooded with fire as Corvo jumped from the force of the explosion, and clutched the Hayes boy to his chest. They landed on the floor with a hard thud that probably cracked one of Corvo's ribs as the debris of whatever remained of the banquet flew around them. The marble of the foyer was cold against his blood-stained coat.

"Your Majesties, the Lord Protector can be visited now," one of the manservants opened the doors to Euhorn's sleeping quarters, and he and his daughter sighed in relief.

Jessamine got up from her father's desk as Euhorn stopped pacing around her room. The manservant led them through the guard-crowded hallways as chattering servants and maids were anxious to get some gossip on the incident. It was already noontime, and it had been hours since she last saw Corvo. All this time, she had been thinking about him, praying to the stars above to save his soul. She knew that it was part of his mandate to die for the Crown—he even said it in his vows all those years ago—but she never longed for a time like that to happen. And now, one of those many days had come to rock their relationship to its core, and she was at least glad he made it through that inferno alive.

She heard an explosion a few hours ago. That had her worried.

Jessamine and her father burst into Corvo's room, and there he sat on the bed, his dress shirt was crisp white and new, his face was clean and his hair was tied messily into a bun at the back of his head, but parts of his cheeks, nose, neck, and arms were wrapped in bandages. His eyes looked like they were red and puffy from crying as a nurse continued to wrap his forearm as a long streak of red began to blot through the white bandages. The Royal Physician, Anton Sokolov, stood in front of a desk with an array of blood-stained steel tools, looking at a tray that held various pieces of shattered metal coated in blood next to a pair of medical tongs.

Jessamine knew what that meant.

"Corvo! Thank the stars," Euhorn sighed in relief as he ran a hand through his golden hair.

"I thought…I really thought that you…” Jessamine faltered as she approached him, hugging him slowly. As he wrapped his arms around her lithe body lightly, she nearly broke into tears. "I-I heard
the explosion, and I thought—"

She stopped herself, and she could feel him smile; his beautiful voice brought her comfort. "I'm fine, Lady Jessamine, I only—agh!"

He winced in pain as she tightened her hug, and she drew back just as he began to massage it carefully.

"He should watch out during battles, unless he wants his next one to be his last," Master Sokolov ran down through his charts. "Let's see…two bullets found in his torso area, one lodged near his tibia bone, a few cuts on his cheeks, large ones on his stomach and abdomen, and minor burns on his face, neck, and arms."

"Gods, Corvo…" Jessamine put a hand to her lips, her shoulders rose in concern; he was willing to do all that…for her and the Crown? Then to Sokolov: "Will he be alright?"

"Fear not, Jessamine," Sokolov stroked his coarse beard. "He'll be fine in a couple of weeks."

Then it hit her with a large smack to the face. "Wait, w-what about Ivanna?"

Corvo's face seemed to fall. He exhaled shakily and shut his eyes. "I-I'm sorry, but t-that explosion earlier…she had an arc mine and she…she told me to escape, and I just…" he covered his eyes with a hand, "oh, gods…Ivanna…she…"

Oh, no.

Jessamine's heart sunk to her boots. Seeing her strong Royal Protector near tears shattered her soul into pieces of glass. Her gaze immediately went to her father, whose eyes were wide and his hands were shaking. Then after a long moment of silence, he was the first to speak.

"I knew this day would come. I expected it long ago, that this would happen." Euhorn walked over to the window of the room and massaged his temples. "And I…I always knew that she was the type to recklessly…"

The Emperor faltered, covered his mouth with a hand and his shoulders started to shake. The anguish began to run down his gaunt face.

A few weeks passed. The funeral was a nonevent and quiet because there was no body to bury. The guards were strengthened around the sleeping quarters. Jessamine cried for three nights, while her father stayed silent. He barely left his room, and only asked for the occasional bottle of Tyvian Red to be delivered to his chamber door. Corvo, upon orders of the Royal Physicican, was to do no strenuous activity until his wounds healed; otherwise, it would be as if he was going into a battle half-dead. He often stayed with Jessamine, comforting her over the loss of a Lady Protector. But he never saw Euhorn, nor was he called for. He was allowed to enter his room at any given time, that was what the mandate of a Royal Protector called for, but he never did.

There was one occasion when it happened, however. It would be his last.

"I think he hates me," Corvo said suddenly, pouring out a glass of whiskey for himself on her desk.

"He never hates," Jessamine pressed her legs to her chest as she curled up on her bed, blinking furiously. The sky was cloudy outside, and covered the moon. "My father is never the type to hate, only to disagree."
"Then he disagrees with me," Corvo drunk the whole thing in one shot. The alcohol burned his throat.

"You cannot change what happened, Corvo," she shook her head. "It's alright."

"It isn't," he shut his eyes and wrapped his fingers around the glass, and it could break if he added more force to it. "It's my fa—"

"It's not your fault," Jessamine interrupted for him, looking at him with a mixture of sadness, love, and pity.

"But I could've helped her," he locked eyes with is beautiful heiress. "I should've stayed behind and—"

"Corvo, stop; please, stop…" Jessamine shut her eyes and put her hands at her ears.

"Jessamine, I…" and there he went again, his tongue slipped and the memories slid from his fingertips like blood flowed from them. He sat next to her on her bed, covering his face as he sighed. "Jessamine, I…I'm sorry…I—shit…"

Jessamine uncurled herself from the corner of her bed and put a hand on his shoulder. "It's alright, Corvo…these days have been hard on my father just as they have been hard on you." His hands uncoiled from his face to reveal sad eyes. "Sokolov already said you have to take care of yourself, and I don't want whatever happened to Ivanna to happen again. What we have to focus on now is how to prevent these measures instead of worrying on them."

"Spoken like a true politician," he joked, earning a weak laugh from her.

He put his hand on the bed as to support himself as he leaned back, and she placed her fingers over his. They locked eyes and stood motionless for a few heartbeats. Her fingers were so warm, so soft, and he curled his callous ones around hers. His pulse slowed down; he was calm. After night and night of the miserable bereavement, she was the only happiness he had left in the Tower, the only thing that kept him fighting, the only reason he had to live at this point. A warm glow flooded through him as he used a hand to cup her cheek, and he stroked a thumb over her immaculate cheekbone. Her gaze had not wavered. They leaned in closer and closer and as—

"Lord Protector," a manservant burst into Jessamine's door. "His Imperial Majesty requests for your presence."

Corvo drew his hand and flexed his fingers, seeing as how he was sitting next to his heiress. He pressed his lips into a thin line; Jessamine was better at hiding her annoyance.

"Next time, knock," the Royal Protector growled through gritted teeth. "You startled the Lady."

The manservant bowed. "Y-Yes, I am sorry about the inconvenience, but it was a matter of great importance, the Emperor said."

The Serkonan stood up slowly, trying to hide his grunts of pain as he did. "Tell him I'll be on my way."

"Do you need some assistance walking to get there, Master Attano?" the manservant frowned in concern.

"No, I don't," Corvo shot him an exasperated look. "I'm that old yet."
"I'm coming with you," Jessamine swung her feet over the edge of her bed.

So together with the manservant and his heiress, he left the room.

As he walked along the hallway towards Euhorn's bedchambers, he took notice of the guards' shifts and made many mental notes to improve them. Then, knocking on Euhorn's lacquered door thrice with his knuckle, he opened the door.

"Come in," he heard the Emperor's feeble voice speak from inside, and he pushed open the doors.

The Emperor of the Isles sat there, by his desk, reading a book that he slammed shut as his daughter and her Royal Protector walked into the room. His night garments seemed dirtier than usual, his skin more wan than it was fair, and his golden hair had lost its shine and lustre. The manservant closed the doors as he left, and Euhorn opened his arms, allowing his daughter to fall into his embrace as Corvo watched.

"Father, please take care of yourself," Jessamine whispered as they broke, staring into her Euhorn's dark green eyes, just like hers. "The thought of seeing you like this…"

"I'm fine, Jessamine," he kissed his daughter's forehead as he got up, pacing towards the windows. Corvo hadn't noticed it before, but the manner in which the Emperor walked really clued people in that he was aging very quickly, and fervently ill. "You don't have to worry about your elderly father."

"You called for me, Your Majesty?" Corvo stepped forward, hands behind his back.

"Ah, yes…Corvo," Euhorn looked like he almost forgot, and he filtered through the papers on his messy desk, scattered with documents and empty bottles of wine. "I wanted to call you in for you to sign these."

Corvo picked up one of the three papers the Emperor handed to him. "And these are?"

"Succession papers," Euhorn replied, and a knock landed on his door. "Read them and sign. I'll get that."

Corvo and Jessamine watched for a while as Euhorn staggered weakly towards the doors, and the Serkonan began to fiddle with a pen at the Emperor's desk while he scanned through.

This document is to confirm that the Royal Protector Master CORVO ATTANO, twenty-seven years of age, Serkonan, referred to here as the LORD PROTECTOR, will succeed as a member of the Royal Protectors and receive all the estate and property of Lady IVANNA RAYE VARINOX, who has no living heir or any direct heirs in her name, and will be referred to here as THE DECEASED. In the absence of an heir and as requested by the High Parliamentary Council of the Court of Dunwall, the remaining estate of the deceased will NOT go to her fiancé, Lord Seamour Edgar, but instead to her peer, the Lord Protector. Listed below are the properties to which the he is able to receive as a successor:

The remaining estate and money of the Varinox family amounting to nearly two million five hundred thousand coin (2,500,000), the estate and house proper of the Varinox family (address and photos attached), the assorted weaponry and armoury of the

He stopped reading as he heard the same manservant from before enter the room and place upon the Emperor's beside table a tray that contained another empty glass and a fresh bottle of Tyvian Red. Euhorn was already uncorking the bottle, much to his daughter's exasperated sighs as the manservant stood to the side, obediently in attendance. The Emperor poured out a glass of wine
thirstily.

Then suddenly, the manservant took something from out of his coat, making Corvo jolt upright, and Jessamine gape back in bewilderment: a small blue vial of...something. The manservant smiled wickedly as the Emperor choked on his wine.

"Long live the Cavyerli Gang!" the manservant yelled as he gulped down the contents of the vial. His eyes then suddenly rolled back and the smile disappeared from his face, replaced by wan skin and limpness in motion. He collapsed onto the floor, dead.

A feeling of trepidation hovered about the room.

"Your Majesty!" Corvo ran towards the Emperor, completely ignoring the body as the muscles in his leg began to ache again. "Shit, did you drink...?"

Euhorn's eyes went wide with shock as he sat down on his bed in defeat, staring at the half-empty glass of Tyvian Red. Jessamine put a hand around her mouth to hide her shock as the three all locked eyes. A heartbeat passed. Then the Emperor began to cough. Cough more violently than before. His hands began to shake and his breathing grew into painful wheezing. Blood threatened to spill from his lips as he hacked away, crushing a hand to his chest as if it would help dullen the agony he was feeling.

"Corvo!" Jessamine rushed over to her father's side and began to massage his back as he spat out blood onto his white sheets. "Corvo, get Master Sokolov now!"

Corvo wasted no time bolting out of the room and through the halls to get to the Royal Physician's laboratory. His feet, chest, and legs were hurting now, but that was the least of his worries.

More days passed of nothing but bedside visits and cold hands and coughs and pale skin. Then the sad news came to them many mornings later through the Anton Sokolov's data charts and sobbing nurses. Emperor Euhorn Kaldwin the First passed away in his sleep, on the 19th Day of the Month of Darkness. He died exactly two weeks after his own Lady Protector. They said he was smiling when he passed. But his daughter didn't even say goodbye.

Then it was her turn to lock herself up in her room. Occasionally, he would come to kiss her goodnight and watch until she slept, but then again he knew that she wasn't much in the mood for anything that would cheer her up at this point.

Six nights after the Emperor had passed, Corvo found himself standing in Ivanna's office, the office that would officially become his after Euhorn signed the papers that would proclaim all of the property she left behind his as a succeeding right, since there was no one left in the Varinox family to bequeath it to. It was night, and he turned out the lamps that hung on the chandelier overhead so the shadows would hug him. There was an old painting of Ivanna done by the Royal Physician a few months ago that he requested to be hung in the opposite wall, and he could feel her pastel grey eyes boring at his back. The lights that floated about Kaldwin's Bridge lit the Wrenhaven with a ghostly glow. He smothered the remaining butt of his cigarette into the ashtray and looked blankly out the window.

It had been a long while since he felt grief. Come to think of it, he never had. He was far too young when his father died in that lumber accident, and he wasn't there to witness his mother pass away because of her illness. He was far too apart from Beatrici to tell if her leaving from his life was grief or not, and Gisella had not died (as far as he was concerned), and even if she had and her family had not written him, then he was far too engrossed in his relationship in Jessamine to go
back to caring about her. (She probably forgot about him as well.)

But Ivanna and Euhorn…were different. Ivanna was the closest to a mother, to a sister, to a friend, he would ever have. Euhorn was the damn Emperor of the Isles, and the first one to truly accept him for who he was and gave him, the lowest of the low, a shot at the life he needed and deserved. And now they were gone.

He should have listened to Ivanna more when she was teaching him how to file paperwork, because now he was going to do it on his own. He should have listened to her when they were doing assassination simulations in the training yard, because now he was going to be teaching it to the new guard recruits. He should have listened to her laughs, he should have paid attention to her smiles, to her professional mannerisms and scolding and the breathing down his neck, because as annoying as it was, it was now gone. He should have listened to the Emperor's ramblings, because he never knew how entertaining they were to listen to. He should have paid attention to the whiskey brands he was recommending him, because he was never going to get them again. He should have listened to the advice he gave, because it died with him.

And he was never going to get them back.

He covered his eyes with a hand and sighed. Then the tears flowed and he sobbed into his palms. His shoulders shook as he tried to cry quietly. Ivanna's portrait's pale grey eyes looked indifferently at him, unaware he was mourning because he lost her and their Emperor. He had failed.

The second funeral was a grand affair. The sun was clouded by equally melancholy rainless weather as the procession was a dozen carriages of flowers and soldiers long. There were so many flowers, people thought that they uprooted an entire Tyvian plantation of roses for the event. During the procession, Jessamine was walking right behind her father's paraded coffin as Corvo stayed exactly two steps behind her and one to her left, while an armada of guards surrounded her. These assassinations were to be tolerated no longer.

Jessamine was beautiful, but her eyes were no longer red. She had been crying alone for gods know how long, and she had run out of tears to shed. Her extravagant robes shifted from her normal colours of teal and gold into a shadowy and dull black. The citizens of Dunwall they passed by all had their faces twisted in grief and throngs by the thousands marched together with their Emperor for one last time. It was a sea of people in black, under a dark sky.

Jessamine's speech was typical, and so were the other Parliament members'. Euhorn was buried in the Imperial Crypt, his coffin sealed in the shade of a beautiful marble cavity. As High Overseer Campbell conducted rites and the whole city stayed quiet in a moment of prayer for the repose of their dear Emperor, the world stood still. Multitudes and influxes, rich and poor alike, laid their garlands of flowers at the stairs of the grave. Jessamine laid a bouquet of flowers and Corvo followed her up the stairs and assisted her in putting the large clump of Morley lilies at the foot of his engraved name.

The ceremony was dismissed after all the rites concluded. The crowds dispersed in tears. Corvo and Jessamine rode back to the Tower on a carriage, and the lack of conversation disturbed them both as the brougham trotted along Dunwall's streets. They were both silent for too long.

"I'm sorry," they said at the same time, then locked eyes. Then looked away.

"This means you'll be Empress, right?" Corvo asked, looking out the window.

"Yes," Jessamine replied. "And I know I'm ready."
"What about you?" she stared up to his eyes, tears threatening to break free. "Are you ready to take on the burden of being a Royal Protector alone?"

He turned back to her and gently took her gloved hand in his, then pressed it to his lips. His tone was the same as that when he was taking his Royal Protector vows. "For you, I'm ready for the whole world to come and send all its assassins all at once. I will not let this happen again. Not to you."

The sky turned darker. Thunder rumbled ominously in the distance.

A sea of black and blue surrounded him, and he was breathless, like he was inhaling and exhaling waters of the great infinite Ocean. His chest was no longer hoarse with coughing. He floated around in an empty abyss of nothing. He could feel dark eyes bore into his soul, his mind, and the voice of a young man nagged at his senses, promising him relief when the Void would eat him whole. He reached out into the darkness, blindly, helplessly, and his hand met that of a woman's, her battle-scared fingers against his gaunt ones. Their arms entwined themselves together, knotting so that they would never float apart. He pulled her into a tight embrace and kissed her forehead tenderly, gently, for the last time. They smiled.

A great light swallowed them as gold flowed through their empty bloodstreams, as their bones shone brilliantly like billions of stars.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so I may not be totally sorry. But that last part was sandwiched in last minute and I sobbed like a wee baby as I wrote it.

Euhorn was fun to write, but time to say bye to our old Emperor; the stars keep you, Your Majesty, you'll be sorely missed. I thought of him as a mix of different types of kings and rulers, but more of a comforting and good father. I didn't put as much emphasis on him as I wanted to throughout the course of the story, and I hope I did his character enough justice to match the legacy he left with his name. Dunwall seems to think of him as a pretty rad dude, and I do as well.

Ivanna, too, was a pure experience. She's unlike any other OC I've ever written, and, unintentionally, she became one of the hardest ones I had to say goodbye to. As I continued to write her, it occurred to me that she's the exact opposite of Corvo; he's doubtful, worried, poor, and lowly while she's confident, assured, rich and of high-status. The only thing they have in common (other than their position) is their strictness to rules, something that Jessamine dislikes when it comes to their relationship. Sad face.

Have some tissue for you, maybe a hot cocoa. Did any of you also notice the parallel? That Corvo had to get out of the room in four seconds because of an arc mine and that's what Ivanna had to do also in the second chapter all those years back? Alright, but...h-hey, Dishonored 2 is coming out in 8 days, isn't it?
Part II: Attendance

Chapter Summary

In which our young heiress becomes Empress.

Chapter Notes

Well, you got out of it! Yeah, okay, so you're crying a river of tears, but hey! At least you're out!

With regards to the title of heiress before Jessamine grows out of it: I've read a load of fics on this site to notice that most of the refer to Jessamine as "princess". I kept to the title of "heiress" because there really is no right way of saying what the child of an Emperor is. For instances: in Austria, they were called Archduke/Archduchess; in Hungary, it was Prince/Princess; in Japan, it's (Crown) Prince/Princess. Since no one in the game proper calls Emily any of these things, referring to her as "Lady Emily" instead, I decided to stick with it.

This is basically the coronation scene, and I based the ceremony proper on the ceremonies of coronation of British monarchs, seeing as how Dunwall is based off London (and Edinburgh), cities found in the UK. They have a Clocktower, for crying out loud; could you be any more English?

We're halfway in. Part 3 (of 5!) will take over from here, and I'll be posting the next Part after I finish Dishonored 2!

AN OLD SERKONAN FOLK SONG

Pray the winds are merciful
And that they'll take me home.
Pray the lights are lit for me
So I won't feel alone.

Pray the waves are kind to me
And that they'll be my guide.
Pray they love you like I do
And bring me to your side.

Pray the stars are bright tonight
And that they'll shine in view,
Pray they'll help me find my way
And take me home to you.

Pray that you still love me dear,
And gently kiss me so.
Pray that you will hold me close
And set my heart aglow.

She took deep breaths. In and out. In and out. The doors were gleaming from the inside, their lights threatening to burst them right open. But they waited patiently for her command, as the whole city would, as the whole Empire would. The day had come.

"You were born into this world," she remembered her father saying to her when she was only but a child of ten, "as a ruler. You were born with the blood of an Emperor in you, the blood of royalty running through your veins. To deny this is to deny who you are, so accept this burden, this blessing, whatever you choose to call it, because it is what you are. You were born to do great things. And the day will come when you will take my place, and become Empress of whatever you see."

"But Father," her ten-year-old self had asked naively, "will you be there when I become Empress?"

He had looked at her with his deep green eyes and smiled sadly. "No, I won't, Jessamine. I'll be gone by then, and that's the reason you must take my place. Two rulers cannot exist at the same time."

She had pouted. "But I want you to see me become Empress. I want you to be there at the coronation."

The Emperor had smiled. "And I will, my darling. I'll be there, my hand on your shoulder, guiding you. I wouldn't miss it for the world."

She shut her eyes and focused. Was her father here now as he was then? Was there going to be a comfortable hand on her shoulder as she walked down the aisle? It seemed stupid, but the more she focused, the more she could feel the sensation of a strong, hard hand on the shoulder of her teal and gold regalia, gentle and firm, supporting her, there for her.

No, wait…there really was a hand on her shoulder.

Her eyes snapped open and gravitated towards her Royal Protector, standing beside her and looking down at her with concern.

"Are you ready?" he asked, comfortably, lovingly. She could cry.

He was dressed in formal robes, similar to the ones he wore to his inauguration when he was still nineteen, white and blue and yellow, the family colours. Crisp leather and cotton with a high collar and buttoned vest, with his scabbard hanging at his side. His hair had been cut nearly, and he had shaved. But he was still resplendently gorgeous, and gods, how his smile managed to lift any heaviness in her heart.

But that was on a normal day. On this one, the eyes of the Empire would be watching her as she took her first steps towards a new rule, a new chapter in the history book of the world. She was more than an heiress at this point, more than an Empress-to-be. She was a game-changer.

The coats and regalia Jessamine wore truly wore down on her shoulders. Heavy layer upon layer of cape and blouse of blue and gold, with a gigantic white fur collar around her neck and her hair done up with jewellery fastened between locks. The train that flowed behind her was made of rich velvet and silk and trailed many feet behind her, like the Wrenhaven during its glory days. No inch of her skin was left uncovered, even her hands were concealed behind white gloves. Her face was painted with blue shadows and rouge and powder. She looked like a goddess among men.
She exhaled shakily as a response to his question. "I…to tell you the truth, I'm rather terrified."

"That's normal," he reassured her, clasping his hands to his back. "You're not supposed to be calm. I won't tell you to relax, because that's useless, but breathe and focus."

She did as he said. She breathed and focused. Maybe her father would be in the crowd.

"I'm ready," she announced, and Corvo smiled.

The doors opened.

The lamps shone like light from the stars.

The fanfare played, the crowds cheered. Confetti sprayed through the immaculate floor of the throne room, scattering across the red carpet that she treaded on. The people at the side, Parliamentarians, friends, citizens, poor and rich alike, smiled and cheered her on with each step she made towards the throne that sat on the end of the hall. An army of the Royal Guard followed behind her, with her own Royal Protector standing like a shadow two steps at her back. Many other young women, her handmaidens, also dressed well for the occasion and followed behind at a uniform length, holding the train of her capes carefully as to not let it slide insipidly through the great hall.

Since she was the last at the procession, the rest of the procession before her waited there; several more of the Royal Guard, Captains Avery and Curnow, Secretary Varnham, the Prime Ministers Custis and Morgan (in their adorable matching suits of white and black), and the High Overseer Thaddeus Campbell, who was donned in his bright flamboyant patterned red robes for special ceremonies. He was holding the doctrinal book of the Abbey in his gloved hands as an Overseer stood at his side, holding a cushion on which a simple crown of gold sat on the teal velvet.

Because Euhorn's death came at such a short notice, the ceremony was a little less grandiose from that of previous regents. It took a month to prepare, when it would usually take five. Dunwall, however, pushed for the coronation forward, having being traumatised when two of its most recent rulers died of assassinations; first the Empress Larisa Olaskir and then Jessamine's father. They couldn't stand having another four weeks without an Empress. The ceremony had to be done earlier than usual as to reassure the people that there was still a Kaldwin in the line, and that the family would continue to rule and bring prosperity that Euhorn had promised them.

She reached the end of the hall, a few steps below the dais where Campbell and the throne stood, waiting. The fanfare stopped and silence reigned the large hall.

"Today, citizens of Dunwall, and the Empire of the Isles," the Secretary Varnham announced, "we will crown a new Empress, a new ruler to lead the Isles to an age of progression, prosperity, and peace, in our time of darkness and to act as our beacon of light during these perilous times in our history. Before us comes Her Imperial Highness Lady Jessamine Kaldwin, daughter of the late Emperor Euhorn Jacob Kaldwin the First, and the late Empress Beatrix Blayne Kaldwin."

Jessamine knelt at the feet of the High Overseer, her head bowed. Corvo stood to the side, obediently, loyally. She memorised the vows many times before, and she nearly forgot them over the loud beating in her heart.

High Overseer Campbell recited from his large book. "The Lady Jessamine Kaldwin kneels before us, the city of Dunwall, a humble ruler, ready to receive the crown and all the power that comes as the next Empress of the Isles." Then to Jessamine: "Is Your Highness ready and willing to take upon the oaths of regency?"
She closed her eyes and bowed her head lower. "I am willing to take the oaths."

Then they began. She could hear her heart beating, and the oaths recited.

"Do you solemnly swear by all that you believe in to govern the Empire of the Isles: Grtsol, Serkonos, Tyvia, and Morley, and all its territories and possessions in accordance with the laws and cultures of our lands, truthfully, dignifiedly, and honourably?"

"I do," she answered; her loud voice surprised even herself.

"That you will use the imperial powers vested upon you by the High Parliamentary Council of Dunwall, by the Empire and by all that you rule and govern, for the sake of justice, integrity, and honesty?"

"I do," she repeated, good and true.

"That you will use your authority within the boundaries of the law and use it to uphold the sacred doctrines of the Abbey of the Everyman, and maintain its religious importance throughout the Isles?"

"I do," she replied, carefully, diligently.

"That you will use your limited time as Empress to better our great Empire, to steer it towards the direction of development and progress, and to continue to stress the evil of corruption, greed, and falsehood?

"I do," she answered, finally. That was the last oath.

High Overseer Campbell shut his book and handed it to a waiting Overseer as the one holding the crown stepped forward. He took the golden coronet in his gloved hands and stepped a few ways down to carefully place it on her head. She could feel the cold metal grace her scalp and a strange kind of feeling flooded through her. All her doubts and anxiousness disappeared, and her body was awakened by a sense of duty, of honour. She was going to serve the people of the Isles—her people—until the day she would fall like her father, until the day she would wilt on her deathbed, until she would die.

She lifted her head and opened her eyes. Campbell had moved aside so that her path going up to the dais was clear. She could see the throne before her, a beautiful lacquered chair of blue and gold, with the Kaldwin insignia blazed upon it in threads of yellow. She walked up the stairs proudly, each step on the carpeted floor taken with deliberate movement and precision. Then she lowered herself on the chair and eased herself into it; the humongous throne that used to be her father's now fit her snugly, as if it was made for her.

No one in the room was higher than her. Campbell, Varnham, Avery and Curnow, Corvo, the brothers Pendleton, the rest of her subjects and her citizens...they all stood below her, eyes gazing up at their new ruler, their new Empress.

She breathed and a familiar aura settled around her. The crown was light on her head. She was ready for this.

"I now present to you Empress Jessamine Kaldwin," Campbell announced, "the First of her name, ruler of the Empire of the Isles. Long may she reign!"

"Long may she reign!" the entire court echoed back at her, and all she saw was smiling faces.
Her father was watching, from somewhere in the crowd. He could see her and he was grinning like a proud fool. She was sure of it.
Part III: Coveting

Chapter Summary

In which our Empress and Serkonan Lord Protector each want something...more from their relationship.

Chapter Notes

Hello, and welcome to Part 3! This is where the drama starts and the plot actually thickens.

Another timeskip as well; this time, of one year. This chapter is long and full of happy stuff before the WRECKING BALL OF ANGST comes in and destroys me and destroys you. There's also this piece of unused Jessamine audio from the first game I stumbled upon looking through the Dishonored Wiki that made me cry a little; do yourself a favour and not listen to it. By that I mean please do, break your own heart.

Also, triggers for loss of virginity are mentioned here. You have been warned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

EMPRESS JESSAMINE KALDWIN I'S SPEECH DURING THE FIRST DEATH ANNIVERSARY OF EMPEROR EUHORN JACOB KALDWIN I AND THE LADY PROTECTOR IVANNA RAYE VARINOX

Citizens of Dunwall, plebeians and aristocracy, my Parliamentary Council and staff men, and all members who call this city a home, good morning.

I know how it feels to have lost someone you love, and I feel that sensation of grief today more than ever. One year ago today, we lost an Emperor, a spokesman, a politician, a friend, and a father; one year ago today, we lost one of the best Royal Protectors that Gristol had seen, ending a great family of bodyguards that have guarded the great regents of the Isles for generations.

Today, we remember them as they want us to remember them. We remember not the mishaps that have claimed their lives, but remember the safety precautions we have taken so their fate will not befall you. We remember not the many other deaths of the City Watch that gave us safety, but remember their great legacy to protect both me and you even to this day. We remember not the sadness that claimed our hearts, but remember the triumph that we have gained from rising from this dark age in our history.

On this day, we remember my father, His Imperial Majesty Emperor Euhorn Jacob Kaldwin, the First of his name, and his loyal and valiant Royal Protector, Lady Ivanna Raye Varinox. May the stars bless and keep them.

She threw down the papers onto her desk in frustration, sighing as she rubbed her eyes. "By the
Void, why can't they just *listen to me* for once in their lives?"

Corvo exhaled from his cigarette and turned around to look at Jessamine from the other side of her room; she was standing next to her work table, the bright glow of the candlelight by her desk illuminating her exhausted form. Her voice was choked with so much anger and frustration that he was concerned…well, as if he wasn't concerned for every single thing about her, no matter how small and petty it was, like if she was missing a fork at a banquet, or if a servant forgot to bring the right type of whiskey. The incident that claimed Euhorn's and Ivanna's life left him with trauma. It left Dunwall and her precious head in ruins.

He heard her sigh as she leaned back, massaging her temples. He opened his mouth as if to ask if she was alright, but he already predicted that first of all, that was a stupid question to ask with regards to the situation, and secondly, he already anticipated her reply of: "I'm fine…of course I'm fine, there's no need to worry about me, Corvo." It made his heart ache thinking about it.

But until the day the Void would pull him into the abyss, he would dote on her like there was no fucking tomorrow.

"Jessamine…" he coaxed, leaning back on his own chair as he eyed her with perturbation, smoke trailing gently from the cigarette at his fingertips.

"Corvo?" she sounded shocked to hear him, for some reason. "I…I'm sorry, I thought you went off and retired, I heard the doors open, and…"

"Yes, that was me coming in; I'm on shift," he blinked, curious as to why she didn't know that he entered; was she that fatigued?

Ever since the assassination of the Emperor, Corvo required himself to attend the guard shifts every time his Empress retired to sleep; from nine to two in the morning, he would be in her room to watch her, and the guards would take over from two to seven so that he could get some sleep as well.

"I'm sorry, I'm just…" she shook her head and took in a big breath of air.

And why was she apologising? Corvo watched as she paced about her room, and there were certain angles in which the light would shine on her properly enough for him to see her face. In comparison to the firm neat twist that her hair was usually in, adorned with pins and jewels, her locks were fashioned into a cruel bun at the top of her head. Even her eyes were ringed with dark circles and her face was growing into an unhealthy pale shade that most powder layers would have trouble concealing. She was trying to blink back the sleep that so obviously beckoned to her, and it made Corvo's chest hurt so much so see his Empress like that: weary, feeble, lethargic.

It had been a whole year since she was crowned the new Empress of the Isles, and the transitions were so sudden and the adjustments were too fast, that even he was surprised on how she was able to cope with them with the astounding speed that came. She didn't need the brunt of the hard life, she deserved so much more than stacks of paperwork and hours of Council meetings full of piss-all vermin who shot down each request and government projects she spent days issuing. He would burden all of it, if he could. But a Royal Protector can only do so much.

Corvo ran a hand through his face, tracing the growing stubble he forgot to shave last week. "It's Parliament, isn't it?"

She stopped walking and looked at him, smiling with sad eyes. "What else, Corvo…what else?"
"Those bastards," Corvo murmured to himself, but he was aware that his Empress could hear him. "If I had the chance to wipe those grins off their wrinkly sly faces, I'd take it any day."

He heard Jessamine giggle, and his heart skipped a beat at the thought that he managed to get a laugh from her in a foul mood. "You wouldn't really do that."

"I haven't tried."

He moved to the side of the couch so that she could sit next to him, and she took place at his side, nestling herself in his hold and wrapping herself in the warmth that resonated off his body. He curled an arm around her shoulders and pulled her closer as she hummed in delight, then he pressed his lips to her forehead, inhaling the oils she used to make her hair smell immaculate. The scent of lavender. It wasn't the lavish parties and secret sneak-offs that set his heart beating; it were these miscellaneous comforts, her in his arms, curled up on her couch as the darkness of Dunwall waited outside to be conquered by the dawn.

They lay motionless like that for what seemed to be centuries. Then everything seemed to disappear, until it was just him and her and the sound of her heartbeat next to his tightening chest.

"Corvo…?" she asked suddenly.

"Hm?" he pressed his mouth to her hair.

"Do you ever think about…what Ivanna would do if she was still here?" she pulled her arms closer to her. "Do you find yourself asking what she would do in a given situation?"

Ivanna Raye Varinox. The only woman in his life he would ever consider his combatant equal, position and all. It had been a year, but without her voice yelling commands and her berating wheezing down his throat, the Tower was quiet. Her office, which now became his, was ghastly with silence, the portrait of her done by Anton Sokolov as the last picture of her to ever exist in the world. There were times when he hated her in the past, but that all outweighed the fact that she dedicated the latter part of her life to Corvo. She spent every single drop of sweat and blood to make him someone suitable for the court of Dunwall, for Jessamine. And it was no easy task transforming a poor Serkonan teenager into a Royal Protector. And yet she did. He could never, in his life, be as great as her.

"Every damn time," he closed his eyes, trying to picture Sokolov's portrait in his head.

"I wonder what Father would do if the Council denied him," Jessamine nearly whimpered. "He never faced that kind of problem before; they always seemed to agree with him. How did he do it?"

"Charisma," he replied, as if it was easy.

She let out a heavy breath. "Oh, Corvo, what should I do?"

"Yell at the Council and have every single one of them fired," Corvo replied as a joke with a straight face, "then have them executed."

"I'm not that kind of Empress."

"I know you aren't."

She let out a chuckle. "If only the Council would listen like you do to me…and only I could talk to them like I comfortably do to you."
"Then at this rate," he brushed his nose against her eyebrow, grinning wickedly as his voice turned smokier, "you'd be kissing them senseless."

"Oh, please, spare me," the blush that coloured her face made her look more adorable than she already was.

He took a drag from his cigarette, and he let the drug of white leaf tobacco swim through his lungs before parting his lips as to let it escape. Soft fingers suddenly brushed against his hand, then she held his palm and brought it to her mouth, putting her lips to his cigarette and inhaling before blowing white smoke towards his face. He inhaled deeply, but it smelt different, however: toxic mixed with the sweet fragrance of her breath.

A few months after the death of her father and she began asking him to teach her how to smoke, something he probably shouldn't have done, but he did anyway. On occasions they sat together in a parlour, lit by the dying light of the sunset as they shared a bottle of Tyvian Red and perhaps a cigar or two.

"You know what I hate about the Council?" Corvo looked up to her intricately detailed ceiling.

"Do tell," he could feel Jessamine smirk.

He put the cigarette to his lips again. "That they allow suitors into the Tower."

Jessamine laughed softly. "That is not much of an issue to dote on, Corvo."

"It is to me," he admitted.

It was true. Ever since the Council allowed Jessamine's suitors to travel to Dunwall, standing next to her in the throne room had become a nightmarish experience. Man after man, boy after boy, began to decorate the throngs of the great hall, adding to the long queue that was waiting for Jessamine's approval and hand in marriage. Sons of aristocrats, long-lost princes and men of title and honour, accompanied by their families who looked so rich that their wealth might as well be spilling out of their ears. Every time a new specimen knelt at the foot of the throne and offered some sort of gift to her—sometimes a painting and portrait, other times a box of jewels, or metal or riches—every time the specimen would declare his 'undying love' for the Empress, Corvo felt nervousness brew at the bottom of his stomach and willed himself not to draw his sword and slaughter every single man in the room.

He recognised a few, on occasion. The son of the King of Tyvia, Prince Fedorov VI; the son of the King of Morley, Prince Meyrick VII; the son of the wealthy Stirling clan of Morley, Bruce Stirling; the son of the old Vavilov clan of Tyvia, Artur Vavilov; and, to his surprise, one of the nephews of old Duke Theodanis Abele, Vieri Abele.

They all had good intentions, yes, and they loved the Empress as much as he loved her.

Still, he all wished them a fiery death in the Void.

"The Council can't call them back, just like that," Jessamine sighed against his dress shirt. "It would be rude and tactless, among other things."

He laid a tender kiss on her eyelid. "But who needs marriage when you have me?"

Jessamine let out a small giggle. "Pretences, Corvo, pretences."

Corvo wrapped his arms around her even tighter, and she snuggled into his embrace.
"I haven't slept in two days…" she muttered sleepily into his shirt as he rubbed a hand on her shoulder. "Two days."

"Then sleep," he prompted, fixing his position so that her head would be comfortable on his chest.

"What about the paperwork?" she mumbled.

"The paperwork can wait, your sleep cannot. Besides, you more than deserve a good night's rest."

"Mmm, I guess you're right," she pressed her lips together and curled up in his embrace, resting next to him peacefully on the couch. "Goodnight, Corvo."

"Goodnight, Jessamine."

In a matter of minutes, her breath grew calm and her heartbeat slowed down, and faster than Corvo expected. When what seemed like a decade passed by, and the night grew dimmer, he struggled to free himself from her body carefully, then carried her in his arms like he would an injured man or a bride, with her head leaning against his shoulder and the back of her knees against his fingers, and laid her carefully on her bed. After pulling the sheets over her body, he laid his lips on her forehead before walking towards the balcony, snuffing out his finished cigarette on the ashtray before stepping outside.

This wasn't her first time at a Boyle party; she remembered distinctly that she had been here once, when her father was still alive. She was also acquainted well with one of the hostesses in particular: Lydia, her name…or was it Waverly, or maybe Esme? The one fond of white.

Anyway, one of the Boyles.

She should have gotten used to the coin that the gentility of Dunwall splurged on a daily basis, but no better use and waste of money could compare to that spent in a Boyle party. It wasn't corruption, she constantly had to remind herself: it was a garish and gaudy display of wealth, and nothing more than that. Let the Boyles do whatever they wanted; just because they were rich didn't mean that they didn't deserve the freedom to do what they wanted to do.

Nothing was left out; from the wine to the food and even down to the costumes that the hostesses wore, it was the most expensive of items money could buy. Years of being exposed to court helped her harness the power of conversation to its pinnacle, listening to people as she picked carefully what to talk about, and what words to use; how to read body language and tell if someone was straight lying to her face. In truth, there were only two things Jessamine found solace in whenever it came to those parties: the fact that her only sole purpose there was to mingle with the gentility (no matter how much she disliked a few number of them, try as she might not to), and the wine (because despite the Boyle's annoying lavish spending, they had some damn good wine).

Jessamine went around the place, occasionally talking with some guest who walked by and exchanging greetings with the host(s), and her Royal Protector's only duty was to follow her exactly two strides behind, his hand always hovering by the scabbard attached to his belt. Many times did she catch herself looking back just to glance at him whenever she was walking or busy talking to some gossipy wife of a distillery owner. But he was always standing there, drinking wine, maybe even exchanging a few words with Lord Brisby. She tried to justify it to herself by simply 'checking if he was there', but her mind couldn't fool itself.

Often times the party offered many flamboyant distractions like food and wine and the glitter that hung about everywhere. And that was an extremely good thing…because she was so horribly
distracted by her own bodyguard.

Half the reason she liked going to Boyle parties was because Corvo made an effort to actually dress well. He looked almost like a gentleman, with a neat pressed black suit, his long coat a little bit more extravagant in detail and design, and the only weapons he carried around hung on his belt: a pistol and a sword. He always looked a tad bit over shabby whenever he was at the Tower, like he slept in his dress shirt, put on his coat and called it an outfit. But with his growing hair slicked back to show his forehead and gleaming eyes, his chin shaded with neatly-shaven stubble, and his lips turned into a rugged half-smile, she found it a miracle that she could manage to keep entertaining people without her face burning off whenever he looked at her.

She remembered she was in a conversation with Lady Adelle White and Miss Catherine Northrop. As they began to naturally converse with each other as the topic trailed off, she looked back, even though every bone in her body told her it was a terrible idea, and spotted Corvo next to the banquet table, filling a glass of wine for one of the Boyle sisters he was speaking with…the one in red, whoever she was. Apparently, the Lady Boyle told him something amusing, because as he handed over her drink, his shoulders shook and a smile blossomed on his handsome face. She could almost hear the chuckle erupt from his chest.

Exhaling through her nostrils, she tried to prevent her eyes from wandering elsewhere, but the more she told herself not to, the more her gaze began to traverse away from his gorgeous face down to the outline of his neck, then to the gilded pattern of his vest and the crisp sleeves of his suit. She felt her cheeks grow hotter, but it was extremely difficult to tear her eyes away once she began imagining her hands tracing over the muscly torso underneath that dress shirt, the sinewy arms that filled the sleeves of his coat—

"Upon my word, is that Master Attano?" Lady White followed her gaze, her greying eyebrows contracting as to squint at the distance. Jessamine shot her head back, her cheeks as red as the costume Lady Boyle was wearing.

"Master Attano?" Miss Northrop tiptoed so she could look at the crowd. "Is that him? The one in black? The one next to red Lady Boyle?"

"Ah, yes—" Jessamine nearly retorted in reply, despite trying to act as natural as possible.

"He's quite a nice fellow," Lady White took a sip of her whiskey. "Last time at another Boyle party long ago, I had the opportunity to speak with him. He can't quite hold much of a conversation, but compensates as a well-mannered young man."

"Oh…oh my!" Miss Northrop crushed her chest with a hand, her cheeks colouring, but her eyes lighting up with a coy air. "The maids do tell the truth, he is dashingly handsome!"

A quiver of nervousness began to shake Jessamine's bones. "O-Oh, well…yes, I can agree with you there."

"Your Majesty, you're quite the lucky woman to be having him as a bodyguard," Miss Northrop continued, and Jessamine had to admit, seeing her swoon over him was quite entertaining; in fact, it reassured her, strangely. "I mean, my Lady, if I was in your position, he'd be doing more than guard my body."

Lady White nearly choked on her drink. "Catherine!"

Jessamine couldn't help but laugh. Now that was hilarious.
"What?" Miss Northrop continued, free of any guilt whatsoever. "I'm being honest. This is my first time seeing him, after all; I thought they were exaggerating when they said he was attractive, but I never thought…Outsider's blood, what a fine man indeed!"

Jessamine looked back at Lady Boyle and Corvo, the former of which flipped her hair with a gloved hand and placed her spider-like fingers on his chest, leaning her face closer to his. Jessamine felt the thinnest smudges of jealousy at the bottom of her throat; she could practically smell the aroma of sex resonating off the noblewoman. But the Royal Protector, his face spelling the fact that he was uncomfortable, removed her palm from his collar then said something that obviously made her upset. Bowing his head as she nodded, she left him there at the banquet table, ready to sensually exploit another good-looking guest.

Jessamine nearly breathed a sigh of relief.

"Don't go saying things like that, Catherine, they're embarrassing," Lady White reprimanded.

"Well, won't you admit it?" Miss Northrop prompted. "At least Her Majesty was able to say that he was gorgeous."

The Empress gave a small smile, blushing. Well, yes; she said he was gorgeous, but what they didn't know was that if she would say it to him, he'd return with "I should be saying that to you," before she'd be rewarded with a flurry of light kisses over her eyelids, neck and lips. She could feel herself melt with happiness just imagining it.

"He is attractive, yes," Lady White relented, "but not as much as for me to say lewd things like that."

Then a low soft-spoken voice: "Your Majesty?"

Jessamine nearly gasped with shock; she barely even heard his footsteps. All three women turned around to see Corvo standing directly behind Jessamine, his hands folded at his back, like a servant waiting for a command. His eyebrows were perked in attention, his posture erect and his handsome face alight with anticipation. Miss Northrop's cheeks began to glow red as she inhaled sharply; Lady White was afraid she might black out right there.

"Oh, Corvo, I…" Jessamine took a moment to collect herself, breathing in and out, then motioned to the women with her. "I assume you've been acquainted with Lady White before?"

"I have," Corvo bowed. "A pleasure to see you again, Lady White."

"The feeling is mutual indeed," Lady White returned, nodding her head.

"And this," —Jessamine gestured to the young lady Northrop— "is Miss Catherine Northrop. Her father serves at Parliament."

Corvo offered another one of his alluring half-smiles and a shallow bow. "A privilege, my Lady."

Northrop giggled and tried to hide her burning cheeks with a reciprocated bow that was three inches too low. Her voice reeked of coquettish undertones. "Oh…Royal Protector, what a pleasure."

"Erhm…Corvo," Jessamine spoke up near suddenly. "May we have a private word?"

She tried furrowing her brows and biting her rouge-coated lips as to try and clue him in, but apparently, his bewildered expression clearly didn't understand. "Of…course, Your Majesty."
Jessamine gave a slight nod at the two women, and they bowed back. Once she looped her arm into the crook of Corvo's elbow and they were about seven strides away from the ladies, she could still hear the residue of their conversation, as if they thought they weren't in earshot anymore.

"Could you be calm, for once in your life?" Lady White reprimanded a swooning Miss Northrop.

"Oh my, oh my!" Miss Northrop giggled. "Outsider's eyes, if all the men in Serkonos really look like that, then I might as well retire to Karnaca early!"

Corvo frowned; he could clearly hear them as well. "What were you three talking about?"

Jessamine stuck up her nose in the air. "I could ask you the same thing with Lady Boyle."

The tips of his ears flushed. "Ah, Miss Esme….it was nothing of importance."

Jessamine decided to pretend and buy his lie, walking towards the door to one of the many balconies in the Boyle Manor with her head bowed, unwilling to carry on that conversation because she knew well where it went. Jessamine acknowledged it long ago: just because she and Corvo held trysts, just because they loved each other in secret, didn't meant that he wasn't invincible from being stolen. A lovelier noblewoman at another Boyle party could lure him into the smoking room and they could envelop themselves in each other's arms and be doing the Outsider knows what. He could say that he loved her and no one but her, but Corvo Attano, her Lord Protector and beloved paramour, was still a man.

And he was not stupid either. He knew he was good-looking, and the many women who often came to swarm at him whenever he entered the throne room often testified to this fact. He often exchanged winks, smirks and many more facial expressions of intimacy with many other people, not just his Empress. Whenever Jessamine was at the Council, conducting meetings with Parliament, she could catch from the corner of her eye a few teasing maids and a small number of young women, sisters and wives and daughters of Council employees, eyeing her beloved Royal Protector with an insatiable curiosity that seemed closer to sexual interest than anything else. She didn't want to admit to being jealous; a woman of her calibre should not stop so low as to have innocent young lades executed just because she was afraid that they were exchanging flirty glances and bedroom romances with the man she loved. But damn her to the Void if she didn't feel like something was being stolen from her every time he spent hours talking to any other woman but her.

He opened the door to the balcony for her and she stepped outside, taking in a breath of fresh air before being dazzled by the floating lights and balloons that shone overhead. She nearly ran to the balustrade and gripped it until her knuckles whitened, trying to prevent herself from doing it. She didn't want to look at him. It would be far too dangerous.

Don't do it. Not now. Not while there are prying eyes and gossiping tongues. Not while you're here on professional terms, not while he's here to perform his duty and—

"Jessamine?"

Her head whirled to look behind her. A mistake.

His furrowed brows and dark eyes shone brilliantly, reflecting the flamboyant lights of the manor. He was walking towards her, closing the gap between them until all that was left was a stride and he would be close enough to press his mouth to her forehead. He knew when she was distressed; there was that worried tone that was too familiar: Corvo being Corvo. His lips were parted as if more words of concern were pressing against the roof of his mouth, hands handing helplessly at his side.
He was so handsome. Beautiful. She could die.

"Jessamine, are you unwell?"

Everything about him became attractive, even the coaxing in his voice. The fact that he was fearful for her. Was willing to die for her. It might have been a job to him, but for her, it was so much more than a service to the Empire. It was a personal service to quell the loud beating in her heart. She turned away, feeling her face burn.

"Jessamine, if you aren't feeling alright, we can go back to the Tower."

The way he said her name. Every syllable coated in a Serkonan accent that he was desperately trying to hide, choked with enunciated vowels and stressed letters. Her lungs seemed to grow and her breathing became heavier as she exhaled a shaky sigh.

Don't do it now. Not now. Not now. Not now.

_Do it now. Now. Now. Now._

"Jessamine, please, say someth—"

He couldn't finish. Another pair of lips flew to silence his, her hands clawing at his nape and undoing the neat locks of his hair that he combed into place. She could feel the muscles of his shoulders tighten in shock as his feet staggered to support them both, her body leaning against his own, too close. She only intended it to be a quick nip or a chaste peck that lasted only a few seconds, but the faint taste of the whiskey on his lips and the feeling of his smoke-filled breath against the skin of her face became overwhelming. Tangling her fingers into his tresses, ticking her cheeks with the rough texture of his growing stubble, she began to devour him.

She was his. She was jealous. She was the owner of his heart and being. She was envious of every single woman who set their eyes upon him with lust. She was only human. She was all those things and more.

But just as she was beginning to pull away, she felt a strong arm loop around the thin of her waist and hoist her upwards, another hand at the back of her head, pressing her closer to him. He shut his beautiful eyes, knitted his brows and began to take back with an eagerness that even she found surprising. She could feel her body being shadowed by his form as he arched over her, cramming her lips to his own, consuming them greedily. His tongue slid into her mouth, and she let out a soft moan that she thought only she could hear, but she was mistaken.

No matter how angry he made her, she always ended up forgiving him in the end. How couldn't she, when she was poisoned by the taste of his toxic breath in her lungs?

Then his eyes widened as he pulled away suddenly and spun around, touching his kiss-swollen lips with a hand as he panted, out of breath, disappointed. She immediately felt the regret well up in her chest as she clenched a fist. There she went again, forcing him to do something he didn't want to. She couldn't let the words leave her mouth.

He looked around, flexing his fingers as he paced about the balcony, his voice hoarse. "Do you think any of the guards saw us?"

"They won't mind, wherever they are," she dismissed as she found her voice, and she was angry that it was a jealous one. "They are probably all inside, waiting for a chance to flirt with Lady Boyle."
His eyebrows raised in near amusement, the smile turning into a smirk as he faced her. "Oh, so that's what this is about? Miss Esme?"

"Corvo?! I-I… I would never—!" She stopped herself, blushing at her bodyguard with a frown that she prayed would fool him. Oh, gods, what embarrassment she would face if he knew.

"Then if for no reason other than jealousy, we should stop now," he pushed her away. She couldn't tell if he was serious or just easing her.

She raised her chin and didn't move, trying to eye him with a lascivious glance. "Well, if I said I was jealous, would you kiss me again?"

He pondered on that for a while, confused eyes paired with faltering lips she was aching to have on her own. Perhaps he thought teasing her further brought her entertainment, which it did, only it brought more annoyance than satisfaction.

"No," he replied bluntly.

She flashed him an exasperated look. "Come now, Corvo… we're alone, and—"

"Later," he growled; his lips appeared beside her ear and kissed the area where her jaw met her neck. Her eyes fluttered shut and a silent moan left her open mouth.

"I'll come to your room tonight," he whispered into her hot skin. "Be patient."

She was breathless and managed a nod as she looped her arm around his again, his hand hovering over the doorknob that led back to the party.

"Corvo, wait."

He shot her a glance, and he almost looked endearing, so clueless, with traces of red smeared over his mouth.

She pulled a handkerchief from the pocket of her blouse and began to wipe the remaining traces of her rouge from his lips. He ended up taking the handkerchief carefully from her porcelain hands and wiped over his mouth brusquely, looking at the piece of cloth only to see smudges of scarlet dotting white, like blood.

"Is it gone?" he asked, handing over back her kerchief.

"Yes," she replied, smiling.

"Your rouge looks so much better on you than me," he joked, and she laughed.

He opened the doors and they stepped back into the masquerade without masks. No one suspected a thing.

There were many things that Corvo did that he didn't want to, things that his Empress commanded of him that he would gladly do even if he hated to. He had stayed with her for about eight years, and there was a plethora of her absurd requests that he kept stored in the archive of his memory. But, by far, this one was the most peculiar and the most forbidden.

And what was worse was that he accepted it.

He sat up in his bed, the night air outside was cold in comparison to the warmth that lingered on
his sheets. The satin of his blankets pooled at his waist, brushing past the skin of his bare chest as the lights from Kaldwin's Bridge cloaked the room with a soft beam of white against the shadows. The area in the bed next to him was warm, his pants and coat were scattered on the carpets, and so were a woman's corset and blouse. The white silk sheets were stained with a little amount of blood.

The regret began to flow through his veins as he pinched the bridge of his nose and groaned. His muscles began to ache. Why, by the Outsider himself, did he accept this damn command? True, the prying eyes of Euhorn and Ivanna were up there with the stars, but that still didn't stop him from feeling like a lusty pervert. Then again, she had requested it, and he was only doing as she commanded. She told him to take the budding rose she presented, the only thing she had to give that cannot be requested for or taken away without consent, nearly seven days ago. It took him three to discern whether or not he should have done it, and the deed was done that night.

Then again, he felt awful. A low-born poor Serkonan, even if he was the Royal Protector she loved, should never be the given the privilege of being the first to take that rose from her. It was an honour as it was an achievement. She loved him, and he would never know why. It was done anyway. There was no turning back. Nothing had separated them anymore, not even threads and cloth. That night had made him feel like a virgin, all the fumbling and stammering and awkwardness. True, when he was a young man, sex was not an unfamiliar concept to him, but he had never made love to a desirable woman before. He used to think that the prostitutes back home in Karnaca meant the same thing, but he only realised now that it was different.

"Corvo?"

He looked to the side and she had stirred, her head still on the pillow, facing him as her black hair cascaded down like a waterfall of ink. Her deep green eyes matched that of the seaweed on the low tidal waves of Karnaca, her voice soft and melodious. Her naked body, a work of fleeting fair art, lay hidden underneath the sheets, with a foot and an arm sliding out as she moved.

Her pale hand touched his own, and he no longer shivered at it.

"Do you…regret what you did tonight?" she asked sincerely.

"Only if you do," he replied sincerely and shut his eyes. His senses were dormant. "But it can't be undone, Jessamine, you need to know that."

"I know," her arms snaked around his and she pulled him closer as she leaned against his chest. Her skin was warm and soft against his hard and muscly torso. "But why me?"

"Why you?" she let out a soft laugh, as if it was the easiest question in the world to answer, and to her, perhaps it was. "Because I love you, Corvo."

He was quiet.

He wanted to say that he loved her as well, but he couldn't.

"I have waited for so long..." she murmured to his shoulder. "Ever since we vowed to love each other...when we kissed in the rain and I...I knew my first would be you. I would patiently wait for Father to die the throne and for me to become Empress so that Master Sokolov would not tell him that I was taking a medication of Moon-flower tea."

So that's why she had been calm as of late. She was drinking Moon-flower, strong-smelling stuff from Pandyssia that helped lessen the chance of conceiving. Corvo cast his eyes down and blinked slowly. She had been waiting for nearly three years for this, and if she had chosen to deny her...
"I know this isn't the most comfortable of choices you have made," she continued. "But you have been nothing but kind to me, and you have no idea how happy you have made your Empress." She closed her eyes and her lips formed an alluring smile. "Thank you, Corvo."

In the end, he was always doing this because he loved her. And he was only a blessed soul that she loved him back. He shut his eyes as well and curled his body around hers.

"Anything for you, Jessamine."

They were quiet for a while.

"So…how was it?" Corvo asked, mystified at himself for suddenly speaking.

"It was…" and she faltered, trying to find a word. "A new experience."

"Was it painful?" he asked shakily. Earlier, she said that she read through some of the books in the Tower and they had said that the first time was always painful. He informed her that it was only painful if the man wasn't gentle, and he had willed every bone in his body while he was in the act not to let his libido get the best of him. Her wants were more important than his pleasure.

She shook her head. "No…you did just fine."

He breathed a sigh of relief as it began to flood through him. Her body rose up to kiss his cheek.

Chapter End Notes

And how's Dishonored 2? I'm currently playing it, so no spoilers, for everything that is good and pure, I beg of you. Other than that, I'm curious as to who you chose: Corvo or Emily? Leave it down in the comments if you want; meanwhile, I chose Emily!
Part III: The Third Move

Chapter Summary

In which our Serkonan Protector's relaxation time is unexpectedly interrupted, the Captain and his Lieutenant testify the Empress' scandalous intimate relations with her bodyguard, an assassin tries his shifting hand, and our adversary is unveiled.

Chapter Notes

The plot begins to thicken, and the thriller-mystery (and some comic relief) begins!

Have fun with this chapter; you won't see another one like it again in a very long time.

A LETTER FROM DUKE THEODANIS ABELE TO THE EMPRESS JESSAMINE KALDWIN I

Her Imperial Majesty Jessamine Kaldwin,

Madam:

I write this to give my consolation and, once again, my sincerest apologies for the loss of your father the Emperor and his Royal Protector nearly one year ago today. I had no ill intent driven towards you, I am sure of it, as Euhorn was one of my closest allies and a trusted friend. His daughter should be of no exception. The Cavyerli Gang and my intentions, despite our being born in the same Isle, do not share a common goal.

As you requested, I have mobilised the Grand Serkonan Guard to apprehend the Cavyerli Gang within Karnaca. Strangely, however, I must inform you that all traces of them have disappeared within the city. Their hideouts are empty, their captured have escaped, and there is not a single person in Serkonos who has come up to my office to inform me about their activity in weeks. It is almost like they have never existed. Despite this, I will stay true to your wishes and continue my search.

Our minds are far from thought of insurrection and rebellion. Serkonos will never leave the side of the Empire of Gristol and the Isles. That is my fair pledge until the day that I die.

I have the honour to remain Her Majesty's most humble and obedient servant,

Theodanis Abele, Duke of Serkonos

Tanned sinewy fingers wrapped around the faucet handle and twisted it, allowing the sound of running water to echo around the large and empty bathroom, filling in the white marble tub that sat in the corner. Hot steam rose as the scalding water was slowly climbing up to the halfway point. The tall shaded windows were dark with late night atmosphere, so judging by the guard shifts in the gardens outside and the distant chimes of the Clocktower, it was most likely eleven o'clock.
Corvo let out an exasperated sigh as he peeled the large Protector's coat off his shoulders. He continued onwards, stripping himself slowly, removing his boots, then unbuttoning his vest then dress shirt, unknotting his tie, then removing his socks and pants. From the far edge of the room, the wall mirror reflected back at him all of the new scars he had gained over the years, white healing skin against the hard muscles of his chest.

He looked at his tired face, all the dark circles in his eyes and his scruffy beard and wild hair. Ivanna always did reprimand him for growing out his hair, and had him cut it every month so it would stay short, while Jessamine liked it longer. So, with Ivanna gone, he began to grow it again to its former length, and the end of his locks already brushed by the end of his neck, long enough to tie into a small ponytail.

Another sigh escaped his chapped lips.

With slow movements, he turned off the faucet and lowered himself into the tub, the mildly scalding water seeping over his cold skin. He let out a groan in pleasure as the water went up to his collarbones, and he shut his eyes and let the steam fill his broken lungs.

This was more like it.

A shadow darted through the gardens of Dunwall Tower. He held a sword in a hand, and drove it through the body of a guard standing unawares; when he dropped, he ran over the bushes and fences, dodging the watch lights and line of sight of the other men with crouches and fast soundless sprints. He ran up to another unaware guard and slit his throat, making sure that there were no screams that escaped his mouth. None of the other Royal Guards who prowled the grounds noticed him as he threw the body over the fence, and it landed with a soft splash into the Wrenhaven.

The shadow latched himself onto the juts and architecture of Dunwall Tower, scaling the walls and jumping through the balconies to get to the wing that he wanted, careful to make sure that his boots made no sound against the floors, that his mask covered his loud and tired breathing, that his sword didn't rub too hard against his leather scabbard.

"Hey, Captain?"

Avery put down glass of whiskey and looked up at his Lieutenant, Marni Levitt, who was busy sorting through the files that sat on his desk. The shadowy night sky of Dunwall shed little to no light through the windows of his office; the artificial glow from the lamps at Kaldwin's Bridge in the distance provided them instead. The papers Levitt held in her hands were all files they could get on the Cavyerli Gang, the primary suspect they had to the assassins that were constantly harassing the Kaldwin name. Ever since a year ago, when Euhorn's manservant poisoned him then committed suicide, they were working non-stop to drive the masked syndicate into the corner. It all added up: the attack on Lady Cremona's manor in 1816, the framing of the Whaler group led by the heretic Daud in 1822, the masks that they left behind, then the assassination of the Emperor and his Royal Protector just years ago.

Their most convincing lead had now become an apprehending mission. Avery and Levitt had spent blood, sweat, and sleepless nights in exchange for their capture.

"What is it?" Avery responded to his Lieutenant's question as he leaned against his chair.

"Can I…" Levitt looked away, her wild brown hair tracing her movements with bounce, "can I ask you a controversial question? If it's alright with you."
Avery stared curiously at her; though Levitt was the same age as the Empress and had the fighting prowess of a Varinox, she was often insecure when it came to speaking to positions in authority. Outsider's blood, Avery and Levitt had been partners for years, and she was just starting to reciprocate his cordial approach to their brother-sister relationship.

"Yes, go for it," Avery half-listened, picked up a paper and scanned through it; a small map of a district in Karnaca, marked with the possible hideouts of the Cavyerli.

Levitt let out a nervous sigh and rubbed her nape. "This…might be weird."

"Come on, out with it already."

Levitt locked eyes with her superior and spoke slowly and awkwardly. "Do you think that… y'know…the Empress and Master Attano have a…?"

Avery raised an eyebrow. "Have a…?"

Levitt looked uncomfortably at him and gestured further with her free hand. "You know… a…thing…going on?"

"A thing going on?" Avery reiterated, trying to catch on.

"Do you think they might be…?" Levitt glanced at everywhere but Avery, moving often and fidgeting with her uniform. "In some sort of…secret relationship…or something?"

Avery blinked; now he wasn't expecting that.

He let out a loud laugh, drinking a sip from his burning whiskey. "Really, Marni? I thought you were better than to gossip with the bakers."

"No, this time, I'm convinced!" Levitt said with a confidence that was too unlike her. "I mean, it all adds up, if you really think about it. The evidence just falls in place, and it might be true."

"You shouldn't be wasting your time on rumoured affair nonsense."

Levitt crossed her arms and looked defiantly at her Captain. "But the evidence, Captain, the damn evidence."

Avery spread out his hands as he pushed his back further into his comfortable seat. "Alright, lay it out on the table."

Levitt paced in front of his table like she was interrogating him. "Have you ever noticed that Master Attano never leaves the Empress' side? Ever? Like he would rather die than stay at least five feet away from her?"

Avery scoffed. "That's what a Royal Protector's supposed to do, Levitt. That's his job. Besides, I think that whole poisoning thing with the Emperor and the ambush on Lady Varinox left him traumatised."

"It's not just that, Captain," Levitt smirked. "He never leaves Her Majesty's side. Dawn to dusk. Ever."

Avery frowned. "Ever?"

Levitt's smirk grew wider. "Ever."
Even in the bathroom…? Wait…did they bathe together?

"I call bullshit."

"You notice how he's always following her up to her room?"

Avery ran a hand over his growing beard. "Oh, I don't know…maybe it's because their rooms are on the same fucking floor?"

"Ever done rounds on that floor?"

Avery hesitated to shake his head, but did so anyway.

"Well, I have," Levitt leaned closer to the table and lowered her voice to a near whisper as if someone was in the room, listening to them. "And I remember a few weeks ago, when I was walking through the main hallway one night, I saw them kissing."

Avery shot an exasperated look at a wide-eyed Levitt.

"You're kidding me, right?" Avery sighed.

"Why would I lie to you?" Levitt frowned, then got up, spreading her arms as if to help him visualise the Royal Protector canoodling his Empress. "Like…he had her pressed against the wall and she was—"

"Spare me the damn details, Lieutenant, Outsider's blood," Avery waved his hand in dismissal, trying to avoid picturing the Royal Protector nibbling away sensually at the Empress' neck. "That could've easily been one of the guards and his lady friend trespassing in the wing."

Levitt’s eyes lit up and raised her pointer finger. "Aha! But do any of the guards don the coat of the Royal Protector?"

Avery didn't want to lose a fact battle. "Fine, it could have been the Royal Protector, but there's no way in the Void that the woman could be the Empress."

"You weren't there to hear her voice, Captain."

Avery let a tired sigh escape his nostrils as he sat back, hands crowned in front of his face like a pyramid.

"And I remember this one night," Levitt continued, "I was checking the rounds when I heard them doing…" Levitt flushed suddenly and stopped herself.

"Do you ever finish your sentences?" Avery chastised.

"It's just that they were like…" Levitt clenched her teeth in embarrassment, "...really...explicit-sounding things."

Oh.

Avery frowned. "What?"

"I'm not joking, alright?" Levitt defended when she saw the accusing look in her Captain's eyes. "Like…I even heard Master Attano's name…being moaned…and the walls were shaki—"

"By the gods, Marni, watch your damn language! Don't narrate to me some smutty novel," Avery
interjected, his face burning. "Are you really telling me that the Empress of the Isles fornicates with her Royal Protector?"

Levitt shrugged innocently. "It's not like it hasn't been done before."

Avery massaged his temples. "Outsider's blood…"

"Do you even see how they look at each other?" Levitt pressed on. "I'm telling you, Captain, there's something going on, and I'm getting to the bottom of it."

"It would be great if you had this much determination when it comes to this Cavyerli case," Avery joked with a serious face.

"But don't you ever just…want to question them?" Levitt gestured off with her hands again. "The Empress denies every single suitor brought before her, Master Attano seems awfully aloof except when he's with her, and they're together too much, even for a Royal Protector…"

As Levitt's list went on and on and as he naturally drowned it out, Avery didn't want to admit that she could possibly be right. He had been there to witness the very birth of their relationship, from the Choosing Ceremony to the inauguration to the coronation, the assassinations and everything in between, not to mention that one incident during Secretary Varnham's birthday ball years ago when they came into the foyer soaking wet and laughing like a bunch of drunkards. They were close, yes, as they had to be. But there was….something off. Something odd. Something…added.

That's when Avery heard a thud against his window.

His head snapped to the panes and his Lieutenant followed his gaze, but they were met with nothing but the night sky of Dunwall and its skyline. The Captain swore he saw something move…the swish of a coat, and a gruesome smile of a mask.

"Did you hear that?" Levitt asked the question he already knew the answer to.

Avery stood up from his seat, his gaze still locked with his blank window. "Get backup to the Empress' bedchamber."

Levitt dropped all the papers and sprinted out of his office.

The shadow pressed himself into the darkness of the Tower walls as he stood on a balustrade, his breathing heavy and his heart busy with nervous palpitations echoing in his throat. That was too close a call; one wrong move and the damn Captain of the Royal Guard could have seen him. He heard the Captain's door open then close raucously; that meant backup was coming, so he had to move faster than them.

When he calmed down, he pressed on. He was able to avoid the watch lights with ease and slit a few throats here and there, but it was all useless unless he did what he was there for. The vial of poison was cold against the pocket of his coat, in the event of a capture. Making his way to the right side of the Tower, he stopped and rested at a windowpane, prepping himself for the large jump he was going to have to make.

The shadow spotted her, finally, through the foggy lens of his spyglass, from the edge of the opposite balcony he was crouched against. His eyebrows furrowed in focus as he put the small telescope back in his pocket, drawing his grappling hook in his hand. Through her translucent curtains and dim lights of her room, he could see her clearly.
Empress Jessamine Kaldwin.

Jessamine could feel someone watching her.

She got up from the desk in her room and opened the door to her balcony before drawing back the curtains. She poked her head out and narrowed her eyes at the rooftops of the Tower, making sure that the movements that she swore she saw were just a trick of the eye.

This wasn't good.

Earlier she heard Corvo in his bathroom turn on the tap, so he was probably bathing, and busy; ever since the death of her father, Corvo insisted that his room be next to hers, with only one door separating them so that in the event of an extreme emergency, he would be only one knock away. (It also made concealing the trysts easier, as she could easily enter his room without having to sneak through the corridors.) There was also an army of guards patrolling the corridors outside her bedchambers, so an assassination attempt wouldn't be a problem.

But if they were as many as they were last time…

The dagger of Tyvian Ore that Corvo gave gleamed menacingly on her table top, right beside the Council proposals. She frowned at it, and it frowned back.

After staying motionless for a while, she shrugged it off and closed the door to her balcony.

But it wouldn't shut.

She frowned, twisting the knob as she tried to find the click that would make the latch fit in. She looked up through the small window to see if there was something outside obstructing the lock mechanism… and someone was holding the knob closed.

She was met with a cruel white mask of the Cavyerli.

Jessamine let out a scream as the assassin burst into the room, kicking open the door as she fell backwards. But Jessamine, despite her fear-rushed mind, was able to notice that he wasn't dressed like any of the other Cavyerli Gang members she encountered before. Instead of a typical suit, this one was wearing a long black coat with a hood over his head, with leather boots and a grappling hook. But his attire was still all as black as the Outsider's eyes, and that gruesome white mask still had that twisted smile on its face.

Avery and Levitt were sprinting across the Tower; curse the architect of this damn thing for making the offices an entire wing apart from the bedchambers. They had ten men with them, their swords brandished, hurried their pace as the neared climbed up the stairs to the floor where the Empress' room lay. The Captain's heart was thumping in his throat, the hilt of his blade cold against his fingers. Even Levitt barely had time to tie her hair up in a neat bun, as it was messily assembled into some sort of wiry mess of brown strings at the top of her head. Being presentable to the Empress was the least of their worries. If they weren't fast enough, there probably won't be an Empress to be presentable to anymore.

Then they heard the scream of a woman.

"SHIT!" Avery and Levitt yelled at the same time.

Every single guard with them sprinted like mad dogs up the staircase.
The assassin scanned her room and the damage he had done to the door, giving Jessamine enough time to scramble upright to nab the golden dagger on her desk. Before the assassin could confront her, however, three guards spilled into her room, one of them reaching out towards her to escort her out. But before he could even touch the Empress, a crossbow bolt went through his eyeball, and a small trace of blood stained Jessamine's cheekbone as she let out another scream, the guard's dead body falling to the floor.

The other two guards advanced towards the assailant as Jessamine stumbled her way over to the door. The assassin put his grappling hook into his belt, reloaded his wristbow, and drew a long and crooked blade, sweeping the guards with inhuman speed, giving him enough time to slit their throats in one neat cut.

Jessamine was nearly to the door before a crossbow bolt landed next to the wall, where her head could have been if she had just moved three inches to the left. She looked behind to see three dead bodies all over the floor, with the grotesque Cavyerli mask marching over to her, bits of his white face red with blood. The blade in his hand was stained red.

Jessamine was shaking. She had no voice to scream with, no strength to push the assassin back or position to command him to stop, but she had enough composure and bravery to reach slowly for the dagger that was right there—

The door to her room burst open again, and something stepped in between the assassin and her person, pushing him back with such intense force as to nearly knock him off his feet. Before she could process whatever happened, she saw in front of her the tan skin of a scarred and bare muscly back, then long and dark hair soaked to the tips and sinewy arms. Corvo stood in front of her straight from his bath, brandishing his mechanical sword in a hand, the other holding the towel that was tied around his waist.

(Technically, he was wet and basically naked in her own sleeping quarters, and she would have blushed like some perverted maid if it wasn't such a dire situation.)

But much to their surprise, the assassin seemed to relax and stood straight, sword hanging limp at his side.

"Ah, the Royal Protector, Master Corvo Attano," the Lord Protector's name fit perfectly into the masked man's Serkonan accent, but the title didn't; his tone was sarcastic and threatening, low and ghastly. "I never thought I would be so honoured with your presence."

"Cherish it while you're still standing on two feet," Corvo growled back, voice hoarse, suddenly tenser than usual.

The assassin advanced towards him and struck; Corvo reciprocated the actions with a flurry of parries and swipes. The assassin was cut here and there, and one of Corvo's blows was enough to knock the hood off his head, revealing a thick mop of dirty blond hair. The assassin had barely landed a hit on Corvo before he was cut in the arm, making him let go of his sword with a grunt, as Corvo pushed him out towards the balcony. The Royal Protector, standing by the broken doorway to the terrace, pointed his sword at him. The assassin raised his hands up as if in surrender.

"And you're letting me go?" the assassin asked.

"What gave you that idea?" Corvo sneered, his other hand stretching out as to guard Jessamine, who was standing behind him. The assassin noticed this.
"Because I'm not here to kill your damn Empress, as much as it'd be easy to shoot her with a wristbow at the moment," the assassin continued. "I'm just here as a messenger. I mean no ill intent. So it would be nice to do a fellow Serkonan a favour and spare me."

No ill intent meant that three guards would lose their lives?

Jessamine took in a sharp inhale.

The assassin reached into his coat, making Corvo wary again, but all he brandished was his grappling hook and a piece of paper, the latter of which he dropped onto the balcony floor, fluttering down onto the marble tiles like a bird's feather.

"May the seas bring me to you, Lord Protector," the assassin bade goodbye. He shot his hook up on the other side of the building. "Our paths will meet again."

"They won't," Corvo spoke intently, scarily.

Jessamine could feel the smile on the mask become something genuine. "Corvo, my dear boy. They will."

But before Corvo could say another word, the assassin jumped off the balustrade, the grappling hook swerving him all the way to the opposite side of the building, his mop of blond hair blowing in the Dunwall night wind as he swung behind the thick walls of the Tower.

Corvo let out a frustrated sigh.

"Your Majesty!" a young woman's voice yelled.

Captain Avery and Lieutenant Levitt suddenly appeared at the door, accompanied by a number of guards, who looked in shock at the bloody spectacle in Jessamine's room. (It puzzled Jessamine how they weren't bewildered by a shirtless Corvo in her room. Then again, he came straight from a bath into an assassination attempt.)

Levitt held her sword, brandished in her hands. "We heard you scream and we came as fast as we could!"

"That's been taken care of," Corvo responded.

"Where are the assassins?" Avery asked urgently.

"There's only one; he's on the opposite wing," Corvo instructed, pointing at the direction the assassin ran in. "Go now!"

Avery, Levitt and their men rushed through the hallway, leaving Jessamine and her Lord Protector alone in her room.

With her hands wrapped around her shaking form and with Corvo panting fatigued in the wake of a battle, her eyes began to scan over the scars that burned his body, the bullet holes from the assassination attempts and various cuts and white lines across his chest that probably had their origins from the dirty streets of Karnaca. They were all spread out evenly across a hairy and muscular chest and a well-carved set of abdominal muscles, dripping with drops of fresh bathwater mixed with a little bit of sweat, his arms thick and sculpted like a work of art of an ancient god on display at a conservatory. The towel he was holding at his waist slipped through his fingers on occasion, only to have him pull it up again, exposing a few lines that went beyond midriff into forbidden territory.
Ah, yes.

He huffed and flicked his fingers, sheathing back his blade as he was on his way out.

"Corvo…" she managed weakly, her cheeks burning off her face.

This wasn't the first time she had seen him without a shirt—Outsider's blood, they've already made love many times before—but the sight of him undressed like that triggered a forbidden pleasure that sent her insides rotting.

"Corvo," she tried again, blood rushing to her stomach, "erhm—"

"I'll send a guard over to escort you to the safe room," Corvo walked towards the door. "Do not leave it until you have my say. Stay here, I'll follow Avery and Levitt."

"Yes, uhm…Corvo, you…" she said feebly, "you might want to put a shirt and pair of pants on before you do."

Corvo stopped completely and stood there motionless for a few heartbeats before letting out a nervous chuckle. "A-Ah, yes. I'll do that."

He entered his room through the door that connected it to Jessamine's, and disappeared behind the walls. Thinking he was out of earshot (which he wasn't), he yelled very, very loudly through the walls: "Fuck!"

Avery frowned at the piece of paper before putting it down on his desk. Levitt, the Royal Protector (fully clothed in a dress shirt and a pair of old pants this time), and the Empress herself all gathered in the Captain's office just as the bodies were being cleared out of Jessamine's room. Only hours after the assassin came and everyone was just beginning to calm down…that is, until the letter the assassin dropped was read.

The Empress sat on a chair in front of the Captain's desk, fidgeting with her hands as Corvo paced behind her, constantly putting a hand on her shoulder every time he walked past. Levitt was rubbing sleep from her eyes. But everyone was terrified. They could all hear the guards outside do a crucial inspection of the whole Tower in the wake. The Captain of the Royal Guard looked over the paper that the assassin dropped again, the best piece of evidence they had. The handwriting was crude and barbaric, as if someone was writing it in a rush, and the ink blotted often, making a few words hard to decipher.

We have finally revealed ourselves after years of our plague onto your family and the Empire: we are the Cavyerli Gang, and we have come all the way from the far city of Karnaca, Serkonos to claim what you have stolen from us. You have one chance, and one chance alone, to stop our torment: you must surrender to us the Royal Protector Corvo Attano, alive, in good health. We will return with him to Karnaca and you will never see him again, and in return, we will leave and cease our torture onto your name.

If you agree to this deal, bring Corvo Attano to the old Department of Investigation building by the border of the Rudshore Financial and Distillery Districts, and hand him over to us without any skirmishes or treachery. If you refuse, the agony will continue until there is no one left to succeed the Empress to the throne. We will hunt down the Kaldwin clan to the last child.

You have been warned. Heed us.
"I don't...understand this," Jessamine covered her mouth with her hands as she looked forlornly at the floor. "Why would they want Corvo?"

"Nationalistic reasons?" Levitt suggested. "He is Serkonan after all, Your Majesty...maybe they just want him back."

"And they're willing to kill men for that?" Avery scanned the note again. "One of them committed suicide for this, not to mention all of the men that casualties they had during all of those assassinations. That was a lot of blood spilt, and for what? For Corvo?"

Avery and Levitt slowly moved their gaze at the Royal Protector, and he frowned in response.

"You're seriously thinking I'm behind all this?" Corvo shot back with disdain. "I've been Royal Protector for ten damn years; if I was going to get rid of the Kaldwins, I would've done it sooner."

"Then why are they going after you?" Avery asked. "You obviously mean something to them."

"I don't even know who they are," Corvo retorted, trying to keep his violent impulses pacified. "The only thing I do know about the Cavyerli from back home is that they had a penchant for harassing the nobles, the Duke's family, and anyone who stepped in their way. Outsider's blood, back when I was still an Officer, I saved the Empress' father from their attack when he visited Karnaca."

Everyone stayed silent. Jessamine closed her eyes and let out a sigh.

"But..." Corvo seemed distressed as he looked out the window, frowning and deep in disturbing thought, as if he was reviewing bad memories. "The assassin, the one that came here tonight...I swear, I've heard his voice before."

Avery and Levitt perked up in curiosity. The Empress' eyes flew open.

"You...met him before?" Avery reiterated. "Do you remember where?"

"No, I..." Corvo covered his eyes with a hand as he struggled to remember. "I just...it's so familiar, on the tip of my tongue, but I just...I can't..."

Avery sifted through his documents. "Either way, he must be a special member of the gang. Three guards at once, then four to one later on the rooftop. He's got a talent for killing. Not to mention his coat probably marks some sort of position of authority."

"The leader?" Levitt suggested.

"Most likely, or perhaps someone close to the leader," Avery answered. "A subordinate, perhaps."

"We're going to have to rearrange the guard shifts again," Levitt sighed. "Then reinforce training schedules, and secure the Empress' room—"

"There's no need for that," Corvo turned to look at the window in Avery's room, his face to no one. "I'm going to surrender myself to the Cavyerli."

Everyone's eyes widened. Jessamine stood from her chair immediately and rushed over to her
"No, you will not," Jessamine commanded, her voice as austere as her position and her face as grieving as her heart. "You, Corvo Attano, will not, under any circumstance, leave this Tower and surrender yourselves to those criminals."

"What other choice do we have, Jessamine?" Corvo turned towards her, eyebrows furrowed, and his handsome face twisted into a frown. (It slightly irked Levitt how casually he called her 'Jessamine'.) "Do you just want me to sit here and battle assassin after assassin, with the possibility of you dying at the hands of one of them, rather than have all of this avoided by just handing me over? Your life is more important than mine; it's a small price to pay."

"Don't say that," Jessamine retorted violently. "Don't you ever say that to me."

"You don't even know if the Cavyerli will keep their word," Avery proposed.

"They will," Corvo said intently. "Serkonans never go back on a promise."

Levitt spread her hands. "But they're criminals—!"

"I said they will." Corvo's steel gaze silenced the Lieutenant.

"Corvo, I will not let them have you," Jessamine narrowed her angry eyes and jabbed a finger into his chest. "If you even think of sneaking off to meet them, I will make sure that there will be an armada of guards on your tail. This is a command from your Empress and to disobey is treason. I will strip you of your rank and title and have you thrown into Coldridge Prison if you chose to ignore my instructions! Do I make myself clear?!"

The room was silenced by Jessamine's reprimand. Corvo looked at her ire gaze with blank eyes, took both her hands in his, and kissed them fervently, his gaze never leaving her eyes. Jessamine's steely expression softened as the supple skin of her fingers met his lips.

"Yes, Your Majesty," he said finally, voice soft and humble.

(Levitt raised her brows triumphantly at Avery as if to say, 'See? I told you they were in a secret relationship.' Avery scoffed and brushed her aside with a hand.)

"If you will excuse me, Captain, Lieutenant, Corvo..." she bowed curtly. "I do not wish to take part in the conversation further. I will retire for the night."

"A guard will escort you back to your room," Avery nodded to her. "Goodnight, Your Majesty."

"Goodnight."

Before Corvo could mutter another word, however, his Empress disappeared behind the doors and they slammed shut, leaving his heart to go back to its normal and monotonous beat.

"So what's the plan now?" Levitt crossed her hands, forcing Corvo to look back at them.

"They gave us the location of their hideout, didn't they?" Corvo put his hands on his hips.

"The run-down Department of Investigation building," Avery read from the letter, squinting at the writing to make sure he read it right.

"Great," Corvo huffed, pacing about as he tapped his fingers on his parched lips. "We'll send a squad of the most elite of the guard to finally apprehend the Cavyerli. They have to be the most
elite, otherwise we won't make it far into the hideout."

"You are aware that they're going to be more than ready for us, right?" Levitt raised an eyebrow.

"That's why we're bringing the elite guards," Avery began to write down the proposal. "A squad of twenty-four will be good enough, and the Lieutenant and I are coming to accompany them."

"What about Curnow?" Levitt asked.

"We need him to stay here," Corvo confirmed. "If the assassins use this as a diversion, we need at least one person back here to guard the Empress."

"Are you coming as well, Corvo?" Avery asked.

Corvo paused and, looking out the window almost as if in reverie, let a heartbeat pass.

Three heartbeats pass. A full thirty seconds of nothing but cold and distant silence.

Avery exchanged confused glances with his Lieutenant.

"Sorry," he replied finally, "I have…private business to conduct on that night. I can't come."

"So it's settled then," Avery clapped his hands once in confirmation. "I'm setting the mission to mobilise in a week while they assemble the guards. We'll finally get rid of this plague once and for all."

A few nights later, and the Month of Ice spilled in like an avalanche of cold climate into Gristol. It never snowed in Dunwall, but it was chilly enough to almost mistake the weather for so. People began going out with layers of coats and scarfs and hats, and breaths were being materialised into thin air. The Wrenhaven was slowly being frozen into place. The nights were even colder, and a mist hung about the city during the dead hours, barely muffling the far chimes of the Clocktower. The Month of High Cold only acted as a harbinger, a warning of what was to come. The Month of Ice was truly the coldest time of the year.

Corvo touched the windowpane of Jessamine's room, and his fingers nearly numbed from the chill. The night mist was threatening to break the glass wide open. The Empress sat on her bed, her nightgown forcing her to sit properly, as his dress shirt had the first three buttons undone, exposing his collarbones and a bit of the skin of his chest. The fireplace in the corner crackled with vigour and provided some sort of unfamiliar warmth. Her eyes wandered over to scan his shadowy figure, his hair fashioned into a crude ponytail at the back of his head. She always liked it when his hair was long.

"You should sleep," he suddenly said, startling her quite a bit.

"How can I sleep when at any given moment you can pull a cowl over your head then go out to surrender yourself to the Cavyerli?" she retorted quickly.

He turned his head to face her, and his beautiful eyes caught her off-guard.

"I won't, Jessamine," he said intently, and her heart melted.

She didn't want to let him go. His heart was hers and hers alone. She was becoming the Gisella Nervetti she didn't want to become.

She shot her eyes down and began bunching up her sheets between her fingers. Corvo walked up to
her and pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead, then sat beside her on her mattress as she leaned towards him, his chaste kisses growing with fervour. Soon they scattered over her eyelids, nose and cheekbones, and she let out little bits of laughter as his stubble tickled her cheeks. Then they landed on her lips, but they stayed there, and she sighed into his mouth, his movements more gradual and sensual as he leaned towards her and began to kiss her jawline.

"Do you…" Jessamine whispered, letting out a silent moan as he traced over the pulses on her neck. "Do you ever…miss your home?"

"My home?" Corvo stopped and breathed into her skin, pressing his mouth to her shoulder. "You're the only home I've ever known."

Her heart grew wings and soared out of her chest as she let out a breathless laugh. "Corvo…"

He chuckled.

"I mean…Karnaca…do you miss Karnaca?"

He frowned and drew himself back, his thick brows furrowed as he entwined his fingers into hers. "I…" he started, "…well, Karnaca's done me more harm than good, but it's made me into what I am today. If anything, I should thank it…for bringing me to you."

She looked gently at him, her heartbeat in sync with his, eyes pleading, unlike an Empress should. "Then don't leave me, Corvo…please don't leave me…"

His head shot up, they locked eyes, and she was lost in the night sky of his dark gaze.

"You are all that I have left…" Jessamine begged, tightening her fingers around his own as the tears threatened to spill from her eyes, the raw emotion welling up in her chest, like a drowned whale song. "I don't want you to leave…I need you here with me, Corvo…I love you…"

He sighed and pressed another kiss to her forehead, and the warm glowing feeling that spread through her was already too familiar to be considered true.

"I won't ever leave you, Jessamine," Corvo whispered. "I'd never leave you. I…" —a pause, and godly smile— "…I love you too."
Part III: Concurrent

Chapter Summary

In which a life is made, a life is ruined, and a life is lost...simultaneously.

Chapter Notes

We see here in this chapter the Rudshore Financial District in its glory days. You might know it as the Flooded District, but it was only called that before the water barriers broke and washed the place up. It's actually based off the Thames Barrier breaking in London. (And you thought Dunwall couldn't get more British.) So before it became a hiding place for Daud and his squad, it was a place where bankers banked and aristocrats lived. That means if the Estate District is the nice relaxing Portland in Oregon, the Rudshore Financial District is the bustling and busy New York City.

Trigger warnings up ahead for gore, violence, and (not that much) explicit sexual content. And this is long than I thought it would be.

And don't you even think of skipping the fight scenes to get to the smut (and yes, how my futile attempts continue to make me cringe). I linked the dialogue together so you'll be forced to read the fight scenes whether you want to or not.

You'll know what I'm talking about when you read it.

Sorry for the late update, but Merry Christmas. My gift to you? Angst and smut, just as you wanted.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

AN EXCERPT FROM THE NOVEL 'THE YOUNG MAID FROM MORLEY' BY KOLBY ATKINS

Klara gasped silently as his lips ran over her neck, then down the curve that led to her shoulder as he began to peel off the collar of her maid uniform. His hands began to wander, leaving fire in their wake as she arched towards his eager body.

"M-Master Alger..." she whimpered, helpless as he began to peel more and more of her garments off.

"Shh...Klara, love..." his voice was low, smoky, seductive. "We have precious seconds to spend, and I'm not going to let a single one go to waste." 

"Oh, Master Alger..."

The black and white maid uniform dropped to her feet, and Klara was standing in before him in nothing but her brasserie and bloomer. He licked his excited lips as she was being burned under his cold gaze.
"On your back now, darling," Alger purred, towering over her and pushing her towards the bed as she lowered herself onto it.

"M-Master Alger, they could find us," Klara moaned as Alger began to unbutton his shirt.

"I wouldn't be too worried about that, my sweet," Alger peeled off his dress shirt as he gnawed at Klara's neck. "They've all been taken care of."

"Oh...M-Master..."

But she didn't notice that the closest of his bedroom was leaking with blood.

Corvo watched as the twilight was slowly settling into deep night time. He skipped on dinner earlier to check the guard shifts for the third time, and to oversee the departure of the elite guards, Avery, and Levitt by the waterlock. He stood there, his coat billowing in the cold wind as the guards began to get into the large boat provided them. Levitt was busy checking their attendance as Avery was finalising his preparations.

"I'm sorry I couldn't come," Corvo apologised to the Captain. "I know I could've helped, but..."

"Please, Corvo, it's fine," Avery brushed him aside. "Curnow could use some help back here anyway. And the Empress won't be alone, at least."

Corvo smiled innocently, but dirty intentions flooded his mind. By the Void, she'd be anything but alone tonight.

"All aboard!" the conductor yelled as his hand hovered over the lever that would drain the water down into the Wrenhaven.

"Let's go, Captain!" Levitt yelled from the boat.

"Well," Avery breathed, smiling at Corvo, "I guess I'll be going."

"Take care, Avery," Corvo shook his hand and reciprocated the grin. "I'll see you back here."

Avery pulled the high collar of his Captain's cloak over his neck as he climbed into the boat. It disappeared down into the waterlock tower as the sound of warning buzzers filled Corvo's ears, the night growing old. There was a tiny nagging doubt in the Royal Protector's mind as he went back into the Tower, a nagging doubt that told him that he should have helped them. But then again, the boat had already set sail and was en route to the Rudshore Financial District. He couldn't go back now even if he wanted to. The regret began to flow through him already, and maybe he could make up for this tonight; maybe Jessamine would help him feel better. (It was partially her fault, after all.)

The stars began to make themselves visible as murky reflections on the river.

In the distance, a masked figure in red waited on top of the building, crouching as he watched the Imperial lifeboat swerve under Kaldwin's bridge through the Wrenhaven. The hilt of his sword was cold against his gloved fingers, and the chilly winds blew past his hood; his mask made his breathing raspy and his words a little bit more choked. He was able to identify through his spyglass the symbol of the Kaldwin swans on the side of the boat, about two dozen from the elite squad, and the blond tuff of hair that belonged to the Captain of the Royal Guard. It looked like they were sailing into the passage between the Distillery and Rudshore Financial District.
Another masked figure in dark blue materialised from ash beside the first in red, kneeling as if he was waiting for an order.

"What now, Daud?" the figure in blue asked behind his whaler mask.

"Get Noland and Brenton," the red figure replied, "then follow that Imperial lifeboat through the rooftops. And don't let them see you."

"Understood," the Whaler nodded and then disappeared again.

Curnow bowed curtly and left the Royal Protector after their conversation to strengthen guard rounds in the gardens in balconies. With Avery and Geoff gone, he headed up the stairs to his own quarters. The Clocktower in the Estate District chimed eleven in the night, as the inspections he had overlooked took more than hours to correct to the last step and patrol. The lights were still dim in the wing corridor when Corvo knocked twice with a knuckle on his Empress' door. There was no answer, only the sound of shuffling inside.

He knocked again. "Jessamine?"

No response. He grew worried, but it wasn't like him to burst into a woman's chamber without her permission.

He knocked again with more urgency. "Jessamine?"

No response again.

Ah, to the Void with it.

He opened her bedroom door quietly and entered, then closed the door behind him. The room was even dimmer than the hallways, with only the lowly lit bedside table lamp and the embers of the hearth as the only sources of light, casting dim shadows all over the room. The only thing that caught his attention, however, was his Empress' back that faced him. She was sitting on her bed (whose sheets had changed, he suddenly noticed, from the normal cotton to expensive satin), dressed in a very lascivious nightgown of translucent Serkonan silk, silk that made faint glimpses of her skin visible through the taffeta, and he tried his best not to let his gaze wander away through to see whatever lay beneath it. He could smell the perfumes she used for her skin from where he was standing, and his cheeks heated up when she turned towards him. Her gorgeous face was alight with mischief…rouge lining her lips and her hair coated in scented Pandyssian oil.

She was beautiful, voluptuous…insanely and perfectly fuckable—

"Oh, there you are, my darling Lord Protector…” she purred, stretching her soft bare legs onto her bed, batting her long black eyelashes as she gave a sensuous smirk.

Corvo felt his chest tighten and the nervousness trickle down his back.

"I…” Corvo managed to say, miraculously, his face hot and disposition bothered as he anxiously scratched his nape. "Erhm…Jessamine…what do you think you're doing?"

"I'm mooring the boat," Levitt whispered angrily at the Captain when he asked what she was doing.

Avery ran a hand over his face and lit the whale oil lamp, casting a soft blue glow over the two dozen soldiers from the elite that were with them. They were all standing by the docks of the canal,
exchanging nervous glances behind their scarfs and high collars, watching as their superiors Avery and Levitt argued over something as simple as a boat.

"Leave it," Avery marched on and the other guards began to follow his pace.

Levitt grumbled. "Come on, Captain…we'll need the boat for when we get back to the Wrenhaven."

"There's going to be an escort boat waiting for us at the end of the Distillery District, and that's why I'm telling you to fucking leave it, Lieutenant," Avery sneered, swinging the lamp back and forth.

"But what if Cavyerli find it?" Levitt shot back, her brows furrowing as she stepped towards her Captain in rage. "If they find the boat—"

"Which they won't—" Avery interrupted.

"But they don't know we're coming!" Levitt gave off a quiet shout.

Avery thought on that for a while and paused, blinking at his dark reflection in the freezing waters of the canal that led straight to the Wrenhaven. The waves were gentle and the boat copied their movements, as if waiting eagerly for a command from Avery as everyone did.

"Let's not do something we'll regret," Levitt crossed her arms.

Jessamine laughed at her Royal Protector's chastising and got up from the bed, prowling towards him. She could feel him scanning her from head to foot with his scrutinising eyes, eyes that never missed a single flaw in guard shifts and in sword defences, eyes that sent shivers through her. She didn't stop until she wrapped her slender arms around his neck, and, almost automatically, his warm sinewy hands rested at her waist. She could feel him trembling; there was a hesitation in his words, his breathing was shaky and the atmosphere that hung about his Royal Protector's coat was cold. He was too tense, taut, like a rope stretched too far, ready to snap.

(It was probably her fault. Good.)

"Come now, Corvo…" she cooed, pressing her red lips to the area where his jaw met his neck. She felt him melt in her arms, and a shaky sigh escaped him as she giggled against his neatly groomed beard. "Let me help you relax…"

"I don't…" he muttered, dreamily, attractively, as if his mind wasn't in the right place. She pressed his body to his, and she could already feel him growing hard. She let a smug laugh go.

"Jessamine," he panted, his face burning (either from embarrassment or because his member was tightening), "wait…"

She detached herself from him and took both of his arms in hers, walking him towards her bed until she was sitting on it and he was standing before her, as if he was ready for any command that would leave her royal mouth. His eyes watched her worriedly, and she could see that he was desperately trying to fight the hunger for her that consumed his insides. She had to help him let that hunger go. She wanted him to devour her tonight, she wanted him inside her. Oh, to imagine the bursts of pleasure going through her!

"What's with…this?" he gestured around him and at her, eyes furrowed, face crimson with blush. "And Outsider's blood, what are you wearing?"
She picked up the Serkonan silk that trailed from her dress between her fingers, the fabric soft against her skin. "Well, I heard you weren't busy tonight, and I thought that we might enjoy some...quality time together, hm?"

His brows seemed to furrow and he locked eyes with her, dark irises boring into her soul. Maybe that wasn't a good enough reason for him, so she quickly thought about another justification just as quickly. But before she could protest further, he chuckled darkly and gave her a grin, a grin that squeezed her heart and made her throat warm. A grin that made her hunger grow even more.

"Well...I can't deny my Empress," he drawled maliciously at her, and the way he used the word 'my' made her head swim in ardour instantly. "But you shouldn't have done all of..." —he gestured again around at the bed, her clothes, and the room's overall ambiance— "...this. You don't need to be presentable to me. By the Void, if anything, I should be the one making myself presentable to you."

"Alright..." she mused, then a horribly brilliant idea crossed her mind, and a wide smirk spread across her face. She could feel Corvo's nervousness radiate off of him. "If that is indeed the case, then, I want you to take off your clothes."

"You heard me," Avery reiterated again his command to the Lieutenant. "Go around the corner and inspect it if it's clear."

Standing by the intersection of the asleep Financial District buildings, Avery, Levitt, and their soldiers waited by the entrance to Commerce Street, the main road that ran through the entire District. Crouched up in an alleyway, the elite soldiers all watched as Avery and Levitt bickered again; first, they argued over a damn boat, to which the end solution was to finally sink it, then after only a few treks into the District, they were fighting again over an inspection. The soldiers didn't know if it was a typical antic of theirs, or if they were really at odds with each other.

Levitt gaped back at him and raised her eyebrows. "And it has to be me? Send someone else, Outsider's eyes. Send yourself!"

"You're smaller than I am; even if someone noticed you, they would think they're seeing a simple shadow," Avery's face was twisted into an annoyed frown in the soft glow of the whale oil lamp he held in his gloved hands.

"But it's dark out there!" Levitt protested.

"Don't be such a child," Avery sighed. "Look, if I give you the whale oil lamp, will you go?"

Levitt sardonically bowed to him as if he was an Emperor. "If my superior commands."

Corvo flashed an uncomfortable smile at Jessamine, who was obviously too excited for this. She sat upright on her bed as her hands pawed at her bare thighs, the silk of her dress tickling the skin of her arms and abdomen every time she moved. She looked expectantly at her Lord Protector, like a hungry lioness stalking a gazelle, ready to watch whenever he wanted to start.

She was at least grateful that the coat of the Royal Protector had no buttons, otherwise it would have been more arduous for her to watch him as he shed article of clothing after clothing. He gradually shrugged himself out of the coat, his broad shoulders rolling with a grace that could probably match that of his sword duel dances, and his sinewy arms and lean chest emerged from
the dark cocoon of a coat that he dropped to the floor. His physique was more visible without the opaque-ness of his uniform, and she could already see the outline of his chest muscles beyond his white dress shirt and waistcoat.

She remembered to wet her lips. He spread his arms as to ask if she was satisfied. She shook her head.

"Waistcoat, tie, then dress shirt," she instructed, her fingers eager on the skin of her thighs.

Corvo looked bewildered.

The corners of her lips turned up into a smile as she brushed a stray lock of hair from her face. "This is a command from your Empress. To disobey is to commit treason."

"You're going to live to regret abusing this kind of power," Corvo laughed.

She would.

He began unbuttoning his grey waistcoat, and it was as slow and painful as she was expecting it to be. She knew that he was constantly eyeing her, reading her expression to see if it was pleasing enough for her, and when it wasn't, he went even slower, well-sculpted fingers working against his uniform. She was fighting her own urges, making sure her hands didn't travel between her legs. Something was already tightening between her thighs, making her squirm impatiently.

Discarding the waistcoat together with his uniform, he began to undo the knot of his ascot tie that hung around his neck, and what made this horrible for Jessamine was that he kept eye contact with her the whole time. He looked arrogant, cocky, horribly beautiful, smirking with that disgusting charm that she found to be absolutely irresistible. She wanted him for herself and herself alone. She bit hard down on her lip as she began to wriggle on her bed, eager to have his body consume hers.

He threw the length of his gold tie together with his coat and waistcoat as he began to take off his boots. Her breathing grew unconsciously heavier once he was standing in front of her in nothing but his loose trousers and tight dress shirt.

He was so close, she wanted to taste him.

"Am I done yet?" he asked with a faked innocence.

"Don't stop now!" she giggled, like she was a girl of sixteen and not twenty-two. "You've already gone too far."

"Keep going!" Avery yelled at his Lieutenant, who just rolled her eyes.

Levitt went out into the open, her fingers wrapped around the handle of the lamp and her breath warm, bouncing off the scarf that covered her mouth and nose as the cold air hovered around her. The dim blue light that emanated from the lamp was chilly against her pale skin, making her blade glint pathetically against the midnight background of the dormant Financial District. Most of the money of Dunwall, one way or another, ended up in the houses and banks of these aristocrats; this was the boat that kept the city's sturdy economy afloat, and it's what fuelled most of the greed and thirst for power and wealth as well. Her footsteps, quiet through the usually busy streets, were already halfway through crossing the road.

Then that's when Avery, from where he stood, spotted something on the roof.
It was a figure, crouched against the flat rooftop, almost invisible in the darkness of the night. Avery was about to command one of the men to look into it, but he stopped once the figure vanished into a small burst of ash.

Shit.

Avery panicked and tried to look around for the figure again, then spotted him as he reappeared on the lower ledge of the building, his blade drawn, drawing closer and closer to Levitt. But he couldn't speak. If he was to yell at Levitt and warn her, gods know what would happen to her if the figure made a move too fast for him to catch up with.

But then Levitt, the vigilant soldier she was, spotted the figure just as he was on the ground and prowling towards her, like a cat stalking a mouse. Levitt moved to the side and drew her crossbow, shooting one of her sleeping darts towards him. But the figure stepped forward and dodged, moving closer to her. Avery was about to make a move and command the elite guards to rush to the Lieutenant's aid, but the figure held up his hands and dropped his blade once he was standing directly in front of Levitt.

"I don't want to hurt you," the figure rasped, his voice choked and deep. In the soft light of the whale oil lamp, Levitt could make out the sharp lines of a hood concealing a whaler mask.

"And why should I trust you?" Levitt drew her crossbow, reloaded one of her lethal crossbow bolts, and pointed its tip at his chest. She knew exactly who these masked assassins were. She was afraid, definitely—those stories that she was told, rumours of dark magic and Outsider worship fuelled her wary mind—but she wasn't going to let any of that show.

"Because I know you aren't alone," the man in the whaler mask replied. "And I know this place more than you do."

Levitt wasn't convinced, and the Whaler knew.

"You know, I can see the Captain and the rest of your men back there," the Whaler said, and Levitt followed his invisible gaze back to a worried-looking Avery, together with the elite. "Why don't you bring them over?"

Levitt shot her eyes back to the Whaler. She could sense him smirk as she turned up the brightness of the lamp, fully illuminating the whaler's figure further. His robes, unlike the Whalers dressed in grey and navy blue she saw in investigation sketches, were a dark and cruel red.

Levitt waved her hand frantically; Avery could take a hint and commanded his men to move forward, joining with Levitt at the midway point of Commerce Street, almost like some kind of makeshift parlay. In this case, to any naïve onlooker, Avery and Levitt had the confidence for a win, since they were twenty-four elite men strong. But everyone was aware that the Whaler was more at an invisible advantage.

"I don't want to make this more complicated than it has to be," the Whaler gestured with a hand, making everyone flinch a little. "I want to help you."

"And why?" Levitt retorted rather nervously. "You think we don't know about your leader and your little syndicate of sorcery?"

The Whaler paused to contemplate what she had just said. "Of course I know who both of you are. And the reason I want to help you is to clear out our name. We had nothing to do with the assassination of the Emperor, and the assault on his daughter. But no one is going to believe us..."
unless folk like you from the Royal Guard confirm it was never us."

Avery blinked curiously at the assassin. "So you were framed by the Cavyerli during the banquet all those years ago."

The Whaler made a small nod. "They took a mask from the spares, coated it in blood, attached a note and waited for Curnow to find it. And since then, no one took our word for it; we know you keep all the information about the Cavyerli all bottled up and classified, so no one outside the Tower knows about it. The citizens of Dunwall blame us even though we haven't done anything."

Levitt drew back her crossbow and stared at the Whaler like he had just transformed into an actual whale. "But…you did murder a lot of people. It's not like anything is different from what it was before."

"I'd want to be blamed for something I did rather than something I never even thought of doing," the Whaler responded. "I may look like a criminal to you, but I do have a sense of justice."

Avery exchanged blank looks with Levitt.

The assassin drew back his hood and unfastened the buckles of the mask at the back of his head. Pulling the contraption from his face revealed the visage of a gaunt man with dark hair, darker eyes, and wan skin. On the right side of his face, an ugly white scar ran from his temple and vanished behind the high collar of his shirt.

Avery's hands twitched. He had seen this man only once in his life, when he was a younger captain, during an exposure training trip when he was paired up with a squad of Overseers to apprehend a criminal they called 'the heretic assassin.' It hadn't ended up well, and their commander, Overseer Collingwood, was found with the blood on his cut of his throat drying the next day. The Captain had only seen this man from a distance during the fight, without a mask or scar on his face, but with a strange mark on his hand glowing and smoking through the fabric of his gloves every time he appeared from one point to another, almost like an ungainly wraith.

"It was getting stuffy in that thing," the Whaler looked at the mask as if it was an ancient artefact.

Corvo pompously remarked about his coat as was unfolding the sleeves of his dress shirt, slowly undoing the buttons that concealed him from her. How she despised that shirt, how it always managed to cage the body of her attractive Lord Protector. As he worked from the top down to the bottom, he exposed more of his flesh with each one undone; first the outline of his neck, then his sharp well-sculpted collarbones, then his chest and the rest of his abdominal muscles. He peeled off his dress shirt and his numerous scars emerged on his naked torso, scattered everywhere as evenly as his chest hair, as he fixed the crumpled sleeves before tossing it to the side. All hard muscle and sharp angles, broad and thick, she drank in the view.

Up until that moment, she had seen him without his shirt less than ten times. The first time was when she was sixteen and accidentally walked into his bathroom just as he was stripping down to take a shower one night; the second was the first time they had made love; the sixth, maybe, was when he had combated the elite assassin that had burst into her bedroom weeks ago straight from his bath. The rest were all the past times they had made love and all the trysts in between.

She had always thought of scars as grotesque or ugly. But looking at Corvo without his shirt made her think about what kind of punishment the Overseers would sentence her to if they ever had the power to read her mind during those instances. Oh, how disgusting and revolting. Her head had gone cloudy, her breathing heavy, and her senses heightened. Corvo seemed just as oblivious, as
always. He was adorable that way.

"Come here, Corvo..." she urged, eyes half-lidded, beckoning for him to advance towards her as she retreated on her large bed.

He frowned at her, his lusts fighting against one another. He was resisting the feelings that were dying to be released.

"Jessamine, just hold on for a minute," he stopped.

Levitt's eyes widened as everyone stopped, and she nearly dropped the lamp in shock. "Y-You're..."

"Let's not delve into the formalities of names, alright?" the Whaler shot her a look, and she was paralysed with fear. "I know yours, you know mine. Enough said."

"So you're actually going to help us?" Avery clarified.

"I wouldn't call it helping," the Whaler shrugged. "More like...minimal assistance."

"Yeah," Levitt put her hands on her hips. "Helping."

The Whaler opened his mouth as if to retort, but then waved a hand and pressed his mouth into an annoyed thin line. At least Avery and the Whaler related to one thing.

"You might not know it, but you've been stalked by Cavyerli men the moment your boat sailed into Agroosh Way," the Whaler continued. "If it wasn't for my men, you'd be dead by now. I've been taking them out left and right."

"So they've been expecting us," Avery ran a hand over his cold face.

"I can only get you to the secret entrance of the Department of Investigation for your 'parlay inspection' or whatever you choose to call it," the Whaler fixed the straps on his mask. "I know everything about the deal: the bodyguard for the Empress's safety; I also know that the Empress isn't one to give up her bodyguard so easily."

Levitt nudged her sharp elbow into Avery's side and wagged her eyebrows at him. Avery rolled his eyes.

"The Cavyerli'll be expecting you to go through the front, so I suggest you take the backdoor by Ebenazer Causeway," the Whaler continued. "My men'll make sure that there won't be a Cavyerli runt to bother you on the way there. But once you enter the Department to make your 'negotiations', you're on your own. I'll secure the way there, but the Whalers won't involve themselves with whatever your business is with the gang. I'll get you in then get you out."

"You're being too damn nice for an assassin," Avery crossed his arms. "What's the catch?"

"The catch?" the Whaler raised an eyebrow. "Clear the name of the Whalers once you file your reports."

"Deal," Avery said without a blink of a hesitation. Levitt didn't protest either.

"Thomas," the Whaler said, and another assassin materialised behind him from ash, kneeling at his feet at a respectable distance. This one was in blue.
"Yes, Daud?" the mask's filters made the assassin's young voice more nasal.

"Take the rest of the men and position them to scout for Cavyerli rooftop watchers," Daud commanded. "I'll join you in a minute to take up the sharpshooters by Agroosh Way."

"As you wish," the assassin replied obediently, before bowing curtly and disappearing into a fit of ash.

"We'll be in touch," Daud looked back at both Avery and Levitt. A strange mark on his left hand glowed bright briefly through the leather of his gloves before he vanished into ash as well.

"I shouldn't have done that," Avery murmured to himself once the long silence settled in.

Jessamine laughed at Corvo's mutterings and leaned over to him, pressing a chaste kiss on his lips.

"You are beautiful," she sighed into his neck as she felt his muscles relax under her touch, his body leaning towards hers. "You beautiful man. There is absolutely nothing you have to be ashamed of."

He let out a gruff groan and returned her kisses, gnawing at her lips with his own, climbing on top of her on the bed as he began to devour her slowly. She spread out on her sheets as her hand began to curl around his shoulder then nape, pulling him even lower towards her, his hard muscles tightening under her soft touch. The tips of his growing hair tickled her eyelids and she could feel the warmth of his body envelop her own, the smell of an afternoon musk filling her lungs with a familiar euphoria. His stubble pricked her skin and sent little giggles to escape her lips.

She began to grow even more desperate. She wanted more than this. She wanted to be helpless, with nothing but his touch guiding her, with nothing but his hands holding her naked body, with nothing but him.

Her hands flew to his hair and ran her fingers greedily through his scalp, pressing her towards him, harder, catching his lips viciously and kissing him hard. His brows furrowed as he leaned in closer, his tongue darting into her mouth, and she could taste a faint touch of whiskey, conquered by the strong scent of tobacco he was breathing intimately into her lungs. She could feel his arms on either side of her, making sure that he wouldn't crush her with the weight of his gorgeous body. But she wanted to be crushed. She wanted to be destroyed.

She let out a moan as lips left hers and began to nibble at her jawline, then down to the crevice of her neck. Her useless hands began to fumble at the belt holding up his pants as he bunched up the silk chemise at her waist so he could pull it above her head.

"You have no idea…" he whispered huskily into her ear, seductive, smoky, dark, "how long I've waited for this."

"This entire night was spent with us running around in circles, and now, there it is," one of the elite guards, Boatwright, whispered to his companion.

Avery and Levitt tilted their heads upwards just to get a good look at the old abandoned Department of Investigation building, the former base of operations for the Royal Spymaster during Euhorn's reign. Ever since Jessamine appointed her Royal Spymaster and commanded him to take residence in the Tower instead, the Investigation building had been useless after the relocation of the troops, and it was going to be demolished to be the future building site of another aristocrat's bank. Still in pristine condition, with marble columns and high windows, not a single light came from any of its panes, and the bronze falcons, the symbol of the now extinct Olaskir clan, who
built the office, had been corroded to green rust as they continued to guard the doors with unwavering discipline. The construction of the Chamber of Commerce building a few blocks away from it almost looked pathetic to its ruins.

"Finally," Boatwright's partner sighed in relief.

In front of the troops, Levitt struggled to keep up her short strides with the Captain's.

"Do you really believe them?" Levitt asked, the cold mist of her breath fogging the air, faintly illuminated by the lamp in Avery's hands.

"Believe who?" Avery asked. "The Whalers?"

Levitt nodded.

"It's not like we have a choice at this point," Avery replied gravely. "If they say Cavyerli members are after us, might as well take their word for it. They wouldn't come up with shit like that and waste their time and ours unless they were telling the truth. Besides, there isn't much to gain from their end of the bargain except their honour back. If anything, we gain more than them."

Levitt's brows furrowed. "But...they're criminals."

"And so are the Cavyerli," Avery retorted. "There's not a lot separating those Whaler assassins from the Cavyerli; the murder, the masks, the violent actions. There are only two things that make them different: the Whaler assassins have witchcraft on their side, while the Cavyerli directly declared war on the Kaldwin name."

"I think if given the chance, the Whalers might as well do that too," Levitt grumbled.

Almost as if on cue, the Whaler that Daud referred to earlier as Thomas materialised right beside Levitt, making her jump a little. He began walking with the Captain and his Lieutenant through the quiet street of Ebenazer Causeway.

"Outsider's blood, give us a warning or something next time!" Levitt breathed through her nostrils, pushing a hand to her heart as if to quell the jump in her pulse.

"Captain," Thomas said through the filters in his mask; Avery hadn't paid attention to it before, but judging from Thomas's stature and voice, he couldn't have been older than sixteen. "Daud's telling me the job's over; you've reached the Investigation building and we're being called off."

"Great..." Avery groaned.

"Not to worry, though," Thomas reassured, "the area's clear of Cavyerli sharpshooters and ambushers. Thing is, they know you're coming without the Royal Protector, and they're not too happy about it."

Levitt huffed, her breath forming mist in the cold air.

"Shit, I knew we should've come up with a decoy or something," Avery mumbled absentmindedly to himself.

"Well, the only thing I can do is hope your mission goes well, I guess," Thomas shrugged.

"Show us the back door then, and give our thanks to Den, or whatever his name was," Avery blinked, his scarf muffling his words.
"Daud," Thomas corrected.

"Whatever," Levitt replied in Avery's stead.

Thomas pointed down an alleyway close to them. "Follow that path to the back door; it's wooden, large. You can't miss it. Right there."

Jessamine gasped silently and cradled Corvo's head to her neck as he sucked on her skin with wet lips, careful to make sure he left no visible marks else they wanted whispering maids and high-collared outfits tailored.

"R-Right there…" she panted, breathless, "mmph! Corvo, right…there…"

The sheets were pulled up to his waist as he hovered above her, beads of sweat already dotting the crevice of his neck as he began to bite into the warm flesh of her collarbones. Her brasserie, camisole and bloomers lay discarded next to his uniform on her couch. The light of the lamp was already dim against the beautiful tan of his skin; he smelt of virile musk, of adrenaline, of tobacco smoke and everything she ever wanted. She slid her fingers through his scalp, pushing him closer to her when she already knew they were close enough. He travelled even lower as his back arched, scattering gentle kisses over her sternum and breasts, his fingers teasing over her already wet folds.

"You rogue…" she muttered against his hair. "You scoundrel…a-ahhh…"

He was pushing himself inside of her, his rhythm trying its best to be as constant as she wanted it to be. Her body was quick enough to catch up to his, and soon they were able to find a stride that they were both comfortable in.

"Ohhh, Corvo, please…" she furrowed her brows and purred, her voice helpless and weak as she automatically arched towards him, bucking her hips wildly.

"Shhh, Jessamine…shhh," he hushed, moving up again and silencing her with a kiss. Her moans were weak against his lips.

"I said: shhh!" Avery hushed his Lieutenant and the noisy guards as he pressed his ear to the wooden back door.

Despite it being smaller than the front doors, the back was nearly just as large, standing thrice Avery's height. Through the old wood, he could hear nothing, but he swore to the gods above that there was the shadow of something ticking, or something counting down, like some sort of timer. But now that he was close to the door, there was nothing but daunting silence.

"What is it, Captain?" another guard, Cooke, asked with a concerned face.

"I swore I…" Avery chose his words carefully, because if he said he had suspicions, the guards would be standing on edge and wasting all of their adrenaline. "I heard something."

"Heard something?" Levitt raised her eyebrows.

"I don't know, it might just be me," Avery picked up the lamp at his feet. "There's just something really sketchy about this whole place."

"Do you really think that this is the hideout?" Levitt gestured to the whole building, with its dark windows and cold atmosphere. "I mean, look at this place. It's abandoned and empty."
"Maybe that's what they want you to think," Avery paced about in front of the door. "Who knows? If we open that thing, we'll be hit by a dozen trigger traps or something. The whole place will burst into flames and they'll never find your body."

"That sounds a little too extreme."

Avery frowned. "You take a look at Lady Varinox's grave and then tell me that it's too extreme."

Levitt cast her eyes downward and a collective silence went through the elite guards.

"Now then," Avery's gloved hand hovered above the doorknob. "So they know we don't have Master Attano, and they know that we've had help from the Whalers. What reason do they have not to shoot us?"

"Hostages," Boatwright shrugged. "If they're even interested in acquiring one."

"Captain, this is risky," Levitt urged.

"I know it is," Avery retorted, frustrated and angry with himself and the scenario. "But we're here to take out the Cavyerli once and for all, apprehend the leader, even if it means that we'll have some casualties in the end."

Levitt and the soldiers were silent.

"The goal is the leader of the gang, or at least, one of his subordinates," Avery muttered against the wood of the door. "Look for men of different attire, in coats. If we manage to strike even one of them and take them hostage, the mission will be a success."

The guards nodded.

"And try not to be afraid," Avery advised. "The Whalers took out most of their sharpshooters, so the base could be devoid of any of their best soldiers. Their leaders could be asleep, best-case scenario."

"And it they aren't?" a third soldier, Haywood, asked nervously.

"Then go all out," Avery said, noticing the gravity in his words. "You aren't all labelled elite for nothing. Not to mention you have a Lieutenant and Captain with you. This should be a piece of cake."

The soldiers were silent. But Avery was anything but confident.

"Here we go," Avery said slowly.

His hand twisted the knob of the backdoor and he pushed it a little bit ajar. And that's when he heard the ticking again like an insane metronome, louder than before, and hundreds of red lights flashing in the dark inside, piled next to the undeniable blue glow of a pile of dangerous, flammable, and unsustainable containers of whale oil.

Oh, shit.

Avery ran from the door and ushered his soldiers out. "Get down! GET D—!"

A large explosion ruptured the Investigation building.
"Don't stop, don't...oh—!"

Her lips parted as she threw her head back, inhaling a large gasp of air that she expelled slowly, through moans and whispers of his beautiful name. Her hands struggled to keep him near her, her entire body tightening, fingers running over clumps of chest hair and tense muscles as he reached his own climax. She could feel him supress a shiver as a warm feeling shot up her stomach, her head swimming in clouded thoughts of lasciviousness and sin. She tried her best to keep up with his own stride as his rhythm grew more rapid and his breathing heavier and huskier. Euphoria spread through her veins and she lost her tongue.

"Cor...Corvo..." she mewled, and he exhaled shakily in response. "Corvo, I-I...I'm..."

"Stay with me..." he rasped, silencing her with a kiss as the first wave hit. "Stay with me."

"Outsider's blood, Marni, stay with me!" the Captain tried his best to make his Lieutenant stand amidst the rubble of the Investigation building's broken marble columns.

"I-I can't, Captain," Levitt hooked her arm around her weak Captain's shoulder as he tried his best to make his aching muscles work, pulling her up from the ruins. There was blood dripping from his temple, dirt staining both of their uniforms, and her leg dangled weakly.

Small patches of fire were lighting up the Rudshore District sky, burning around them as the remaining of the elite troops began to get up from the debris. The heat around him was a different change from the cold that had plagued the peaceful air from earlier; there were aristocrats screaming in the background, evacuating from their homes with paintings and books and purses bundled up in their thin arms. Avery counted twenty of the elite that were recovering. But then, just as they were beginning to gather near him, Cavyerli men ambushed the remaining men that were too far away to call for help. Make that sixteen.

"I think it's broken," she murmured worriedly, looking at the awkward position her leg was in.

"Shit," Avery cussed, looking out in the shadow of the Investigation building.

"You could say that again," Thomas muttered next to Daud just after the latter cursed to himself.

The two of them stood on the Rudshore bank, the tallest building in the Financial District, surrounded by a few more Whalers. They had heard the explosion, and they were watching the fires from afar. Daud clenched his fist, the Mark smoking and glowing through his leather gloves, the flames reflecting off the lenses of his Whaler mask.

"I'll get them out," Daud looked to Thomas. "Look after the rest of them and get the recruits back to the hideout. I'll join you shortly."

"Understood," Thomas nodded, and the Mark on Daud's hand flickered with a bright light and smoked briefly before the leader vanished into a burst of ash.

The Whalers sat in silence for a while.

"Do you think that they'll honour their end of the bargain?" one of the Whalers in their company, Noland, asked.

"I think that keeping our word to the Whalers is the least of our problems now," Avery answered.
Levitt's question, eyes flickering though the fires.

He could see the Cavyerli regroup at the destroyed entrance of the structure, where they all surrounded a figure that was emerging out of the flames, almost like some kind of entrance of a legendary hero. The first silhouette appeared and he could make out the figure of the white mask and a long black coat—the assassin that had assaulted Jessamine and sent them the letter, the man they nicknamed the subordinate, for the lack of an epithet. But he was walking alongside a figure he couldn't recognise, a Cavyerli mask concealed in another large coat, but unlike the subordinate assassin, this coat was larger and had flecks of grey and red, with an insignia sewn at the side: four knives striking through a heart. He walked with an undeniable assuredness, a sword that looked like it was made of gold in his gloved hand.

That must be the leader.

"Captain," Boatwright stood beside Avery, the side of his face slightly burned, but he looked alright.

"Take the Lieutenant," Avery handed Levitt over to Boatwright, who bundled her up in the soldier's arms.

Once his arms were free, Avery's eyes met that of the black mask of the Cavyerli leader. The remaining sixteen men gathered around the Captain.

"I want you to leave and file the report," Avery commanded, knowing it would be his last. "I'm looking at the leader of the Cavyerli Gang right now."

Levitt, Boatwright, and the rest of the elite followed Avery's gaze. The leader was twenty strides away.

"There isn't much time," Avery hurriedly said. "Take the remaining men and get out of here. I'll finish the leader off."

"Oh, fuck no, Captain," Levitt shook her head anxiously. "You aren't doing this without us."

"If there are no survivors, then there won't be a report!" Avery yelled. Fifteen strides.

"We don't care about the damn report; you'll die!" Levitt screamed. Fourteen strides.

"Even if I do, the Cavyerli leader is going down with me," Avery nodded. "A small price to pay."

"Damn you to the edge of the Void, Captain!" Levitt wailed, tears streaming down her dirty face. "Damn you! I'm not letting you do this!" Nine strides.

"I'll be alright, you worrisome bother," he urged, giving Boatwright his mechanical sword hilt. "Take this and go now!"

Boatwright, the sheathed sword in hand, hesitantly followed the order, the soldiers obeying him as they were making their way through the debris and fire. Levitt was screaming his name, cradled in Boatwright's arms like a helpless baby with that broken leg. It was their last moment of seeing each other, after nearly a decade of comradeship. In every spar, in every evidence presentation battle, in every argument they had, he had always won. It was time for him to throw in the towel and give her this one.

"Levitt!" he yelled, and her teary face shot up to lock eyes with him. She was a child, too young,
but ready to go on through the world alone.

This sounded stupid. Eight strides.

"For the record, I do think Corvo and the Empress are totally fucking!"

But she flashed him a smile, as if the world wasn't burning around him, as if he wasn't in danger. And she and the elite were vanishing behind the shadows of the flames.

"I told you so!" she laughed, and she laughed until she was out of sight.

Jessamine giggled against the soft fabric of her pillow, her fatigue lulling her to sleep, finally. The sky was still dark outside. Corvo sat up on her bed, exhaling tendrils of smoke as he smothered the remainder of his cigarette on the ashtray on her table.

"I'm sleepy," she muttered absentmindedly to her sheets.

"Of course you are," he leaned to her and kissed the side of her forehead. She hummed in delight.

"What a night, hm?" he smirked, gathering her into his sinewy arms.

"Oh, shut up," Levitt sneered at the red Whaler, Daud, as he asked that snarky rhetorical question, escorting the elite out of the inferno through the alleyways of the Financial District. He had appeared only minutes ago. "You saw the fire, you're here to help us. So why don't you go back and help the Captain instead? We're fucking fine."

"That wasn't part of the deal," Daud's voice was more choked behind his mask. "The deal was I help you get to the building, then I get you home."

They made a left, then a right. Levitt could feel herself getting heavier in Boatwright's arms as she could hear the waterways of the Financial District; they were closing in on Agroosh Way. Her vision was getting hazy with tears as she saw the fires growing stronger, lighting the night sky with sparks as they set her down on a boat. The elite began to spill in and propped her up comfortably on one of the chairs as Daud took the helm. The motor roared with a pathetic growl and it began to speed away from the hellfire, away from the District and into the embrace of the Wrenhaven's faint lights.

"You bastard," Levitt sobbed. "You're a mad son of a bitch."

"Doing only what a deal entails, kid," Daud shook his head. The regret began to eat away at his heart as the cold winds returned. "It's nothing personal."

"This isn't the first time we've duelled, Captain," the subordinate drew his sword, his familiar Serkonan accent grating on Avery's ears. "But it certainly will be the last. Try not to embarrass me while my superior is watching, will you?"

Avery flashed his gaze at the side, where the Cavyerli leader waved a gentle hello with his free hand, the rest of the Cavyerli watching from behind him. The Captain furrowed his brows as his knuckles tightened around the hilt of his dagger.
"Why don't you just kill me now with your numbers then?" Avery shot.

"We may be a syndicate, but we do have a sense of honour," the subordinate said matter-of-factly. "Let's begin."

Their swords clashed on the battlefield of debris and fire. Swipes were exchanged, parries were blocked, and Avery dodged the swings just as the subordinate sidestepped his thrusts. They were equally quick, smart, unpredictable, and fast. Avery was forcing every inch of his body to live, to make it back to Levitt and the crew, to make sure that the Void would damn him before he would make his Lieutenant file that report alone. She was still too young; he didn't want to abandon her just yet.

With all the determination flowing through his blood, Avery yelled and kicked subordinate in the face, and the masked man was too late to dodge. He fell to the floor with a grunt, and the sword flew from his hand. The Captain, tired, hurting, angry, walked over to the fallen body of the subordinate, a part of his mask cracked to reveal his mouth, the tanned skin and lips of a typical Serkonan. Avery raised his blade above his head.

"This is for the Emperor and the Lady Protector," he announced, and he brought down the—

The bright voice of a woman interrupted him. "And this is for Corvo."

A raw pain suddenly erupted through Avery's chest, then he felt warm blood leak down from his lips to his chin, staining the subordinate's mask with a fresh drop of red. He looked down and saw the sharp point of a blade that pierced through his chest, coated in his blood.

The blade drew back and he fell to the floor, his back landing with a thud on the rocky debris of the Investigation building. His gaze was turning blurry, his chest was burning, his eyesight slowly vanishing with each second, but he could see the Cavyerli leader, wearing that gruesome smiling white mask, helping up the subordinate with a hand, holding the golden sword stained with Avery's blood in the other. The leader pulled back her hood to reveal a mop of golden blonde hair, tied in a crude bun, and she knelt in front of him, tilting her head to the side as she giggled with a creepy, girlish charm.

"You didn't bring him like we agreed we would," the leader said sweetly, her honeyed Serkonan accent was a humongous lie. "You didn't bring Corvo. It's a shame. I would have let you go, and you wouldn't have had to die."

"I'd rather die than hand him over to freaks like you," Avery muttered with his dying breath.

"Good for you!" the leader said cheerily, and very strangely, genuinely. "You do get to die. Tell the Outsider I said hello when you meet him."

The leader got up and commanded her troops to follow Levitt. Avery took one last breath and closed his eyes. He felt his senses die away, one by one, until the crackling of the fire vanished away.

He opened his eyes again only to be met with a big expanse of nothing. There was nothing but blue, as blue as the Wrenhaven, as blue as the sky, bluer than the Ocean and the whales that floated around endlessly in them. He couldn't inhale and stood there, motionless, still. Then the cold voice of a young man echoed in his ears:

"What a shame, Captain. And guess what? You were right."
"Right about what?" Levitt murmured sitting up slowly as she looked at Daud strangely.

"Right that I was a bastard and a son of a bitch," Daud focused his gaze on the horizon; the waterlock was nearing them, and the cold skyline of Dunwall Tower pierced the young morning sky. "Both literally and figuratively."

Levitt stayed silent.

"I couldn't help your Captain," Daud said rather pathetically. "I'm bound by the laws we've set."

"I understand," Levitt said emotionlessly. She was numb.

The boat stopped near the waterlock and Levitt pressed the button, waiting for the signal to be activated. Daud went to the corner of the boat, and his body began to shift into ash—

"You did what you could," Levitt said to him, devoid of feeling, yet her intentions genuine. "Thanks."

Daud nodded and disappeared from the boat just as the waterlock sirens blared and the boat ascended up to the Tower.

Corvo made sure he was quiet as he buttoned his shirt and put on his pants, careful that he wouldn't wake Jessamine. Tying his boots messily, he went out of her room and quickly fastened the buttons of his coat as he ran down the stairs of the sleeping Tower. Dawn was emerging from the farthest corner of the horizon, turning the shadows faint and the sky pink with a harsh hue.

There had been a report of a fire in the Rudshore District. And the elite men had just returned.

"Shit," Corvo cursed to himself as he ran down the foyer stairs, buttoning his dress shirt. "Shit, shit, shit."

Pulling his coat over his shoulders, he sped walk through the gardens and saw a medical team of nurses and the Royal Physician greet the elite soldiers as they spilled out of the waterlock gates into the grounds of the Tower. The orange light of the emerging sun highlighted their scars, their burns, the dirt and blood that stained their uniforms. Corvo counted only sixteen of them, from the original twenty-four that departed. His breathing grew heavy and his heart was beating fast.

He shouldn't have abandoned them.

Levitt emerged from the gates as well, being cradled by a nurse. Her leg appeared to be broken, and dirt mixed itself with the burly locks of her hair. She looked fatigued, her eyes dead and puffy, as if she had cried the Wrenhaven River. In her dusty hands, she was clutching the hilt of a sword as if her life depended on it. Corvo's eyes flickered over the hilt and his heart nearly stopped just as the waterlock gates slammed with a loud shut. He caught the name embedded into the hilt's side.

JOSHUA C. AVERY.

"Levitt," Corvo rushed over to her, and the Lieutenant turned her head weakly to the side, and did her best to make a pathetic salute in front of the Lord Protector.

"Good morning, Master Attano," she murmured, her voice cracked.

"Where's Avery?" Corvo looked around, but he saw no sign of the Captain. "Shit, where in the Void is Avery?"
Levitt only closed her eyes very slowly, shook her head, and handed over to him the hilt of the sword. Corvo took it in his shaking hands and exhaled, trying his best not to scream.

Chapter End Notes

Also, I've finished playing Dishonored 2, and I've got some commentary. As a standalone game, it's brilliant. Writing, dialogue, even Corvo and Emily's power tree upgrades are more than something I've looked forward to. And the new locations and people bring up a little more spice to the place. I've finished the game in low chaos, and I have never teared up more than I thought. Good game, good game.

**SPOILERS AND META START HERE.**

I know all about the whole Delilah Kaldwin thing. You know, the one where she told us that she's actually the bastard daughter of Euhorn and a kitchen maid, plus the fact that Jessamine lied plenty of times about about her and cheated her and how Delilah's grown a rage for her. (Confused? If you want to catch up to speed, it's all here on her wikia page.) This canon evidence came after this fic, so I'm just going to assume Delilah's a big fat liar and get on with it. It's not like I'm going to change all of this because of one tiny nitpick.

Okay, so I *may* write something new in the future, but that's up to me.

People are already calling Euhorn an abusive and creepy father, and that may be right in the real spectrum of Dishonored canon. So I'm guessing that ever since that information came into light, this fic is considered canon divergent? I don't know anymore. But damn, if all of my hours speculating and doing character sketches and study isn't wasted for nothing.

And this is why I'm pissed. Euhorn was always hinted as a good father and a good leader who cared for his people, and he was one of the best Emperors that the Empire ever had. It was because he started the Kaldwin name on such a good term was what put so much pressure on Jessamine when she became Empress. So it kind of felt like the whole "Euhorn is actually a cheating husband and neglectful father" was completely out of left field.

I *do* understand that Jessamine was a spoiled brat (something I regretfully didn't put too much emphasis on in this fic), but she rose from that to become a leader with empathy and care and disliked death. So that's the only thing I can probably accept from this clump of "canon."

**SPOILERS AND META END HERE.**

So, whether you finished the game, don't have it, or are somewhere lost in Jindosh's mansion, tell me your opinions of the game in the comments. I'd love to hear what you'd say.
Part III: Red Strings

Chapter Summary

In which a plan is made and a heart is broken.

Chapter Notes

HAPPY NEW YEAR! Hope 2017 doesn't suck!

You know me. After the semi-happy stuff comes the angst. Come on, guys, it's been months; how are you not expecting it at this point? Remember that no couple goes without some bumps in the road.

Also, if any of you are interested, here's the canon height of Corvo and Jessamine (using the actual game mods).

PIERO JOPLIN'S NOTES ON THE BEHAVIOUR OF THE PANDYSSIAN ROSEWATER FLOWER

Like all ecosystems, Pandyssia is no exception when it comes to the plane of competition. Everything, from the smallest shew to the tallest tree in the canopy, is a warrior of a long-fought war: the presence of species against species for the sake of survival of the fittest.

However, there is one exception to this rule, one species so special that it depends on its own kind in order to thrive in the wild. This species, Rosas Agacuasetum, otherwise called the Pandyssian Rosewater flower, grows in pairs, with one pink flower and one white flower that are always found alongside each other; a pink flower will always have a white counterpart, and of all the Rosewater flowers found, there has been no exception to this rule.

This flower also has a special ability, and it is noble to an extent: since the flowers' roots are entwined with one another, then can sense if their counterpart is dying, either from lack of sunlight, dehydration, or any other natural or industrial cause. Once they sense that their partner is in need of nutrients, it will secrete a deadly poison hormone through its xylem and kill itself. Once the sacrificial flower is dead, the rotting corpse will provide nutrients to the soil around it, rejuvenating the flower counterpart.

It seems almost sad that flowers gain more of an understanding when it comes to a relationship than we humans, rational beings, do.

Jessamine slammed the door with a raucous bang and he had his back to her, wiping his face with his hands. The twilight was cold outside, the windowpanes of his room fogging up the glass as the sun was beginning to drown itself onto the horizon of the Wrenhaven. It was his room, but she couldn't feel like it was still her territory, still a part of the Tower of which she had full control. He was powerless now and she knew it.
"I cannot believe you!" she yelled, and it was obvious she had been crying, with her voice choked and breaking on occasion, so there was no use hiding it. "You…you…! I never should have…argh!"

He stood there, still and stoic, even in the face of his own fault and humiliation; it could almost be admirable that he still held on to a shred of hope that he didn't know he had left. He still kept his honour intact, despite the fact that he knew this could very well be his last night as a Royal Protector (or maybe even as a fortunate man, alive and breathing and not in exile). Casting his eyes to the floor, he barely looked at her, in comparison to that night where he had kept his unwavering cocky and beautiful gaze on her, as he stripped article of clothing after clothing, climbing over her body and smothering her with wet kisses and—

No, no.

White hot rage consumed all that and let it to die in the violent beating of her heart.

He took advantage of her. He chose to make love with her and drown himself in feelings of lust and fleeing pleasure, maybe looking for a cheap fuck to quell his sexual appetite, when he could have helped out Avery and Levitt and maybe even save the Captain from his mysterious death. Yes, she heard about the explosion in the Rudshore Financial District. There were no casualties among civilians but there were eight corpses of elite guards found, as far as the morning report said.

Lieutenant Marni Levitt, Avery's only lieutenant, together with the remaining survivors, claimed the Captain dead, even if they couldn't find his corpse.

What have the Cavyerli done to him?

Jessamine sighed into the hair and tried to cry, but the tears had dried up.

She heard him let out a breath. "Listen, I—"

"No, shut up!" she yelled suddenly, and she was nearly scared at herself for raising her voice so suddenly. She saw Corvo flinch and his eyes were wide, some sort of unnatural fear burning in them.

In all their years of being together, it was only now when he was exposed to the fullness of her wrath. A wrath that does not forgive nor forget.

"Corvo, please," she shook her head, suddenly afraid of her own voice, her own power. "Just…I don't want to talk about anything right now."

"You know I did something wrong," she heard him take a step towards her, but she did not want to turn lest she would see his face. His voice was different, almost like she had heard it when they first met by the gazebo; timid, afraid, unlike him. A stranger. "I mean…we should be talking about it."

"I don't want to talk about anything, Corvo; haven't I made myself clear?" she hissed through gritted teeth as she buried her manicured fingernails into her skin. Her rage at him was growing by the second, and she didn't know what was fuelling it.

"How else are we going to go through this together?" she heard him take another step. "How are we going to fix us after this?"

"Us…?" the word died on her lips as she whirled around to face him, her eyes shut as her knees trembled. "You really think…this is about us?"
Corvo did not reply and shifted in the silence. The rage spilled into her veins and she pushed him away with her hands, looking up at him, finally. As she expected, the pity in his eyes killed her, but it was not enough to quench the ire that engulfed her blood. Eyes that would normally bring her joy brought her irritation. His handsome face, that would normally make her melt, made her want to grab his scalp and shove him out the window crashing into the gardens below. There were boundaries to his abilities and privileges as Royal Protector and he crossed the line. There were no excuses for such insolence.

"Your selfishness cost Avery his *life!*" she yelled, and the tears flowed. "You gave in to your temptation which cost the lives of eight men! And your sexual hunger cost the repair of a good number of homes in the Rudshore Financial District! I was just some excuse! You *abused* my affections! How *dare* you!"

His brows suddenly furrowed and the fear in his eyes was suddenly replaced with a feral anger she knew she would come to cower away from.

"What do you think of me as?" he growled, towering above her, baring his teeth like a cornered wolfhound. "What in the Void do you think of me as? Some god? Do you really think that my being there with Avery and Levitt would've saved us? I knew nothing else and I would be going blind there too. I wouldn't be of any help. I could've *died* there."

"It would be better that you died there with Avery than sleep in the comfort of my chambers! Fought like a man! Like the Royal Protector I chose, the Royal Protector you were meant to be!"

He gave off a sarcastic laugh, and the fact that he was fighting back at her made her bones shake, but whether in fear or anger, she didn't want to know. "Oh, so Her Imperial Majesty would rather I die. So I *am* nothing to you. I'm just your Royal Protector, some meat shield to guard you from arrow showers and incoming bullets." He frowned at her and his vexation managed to match hers. "Our love is nothing, then. Our love means *nothing* to you, isn't that ri—?"

He was cut off as the hard smack of a slap went across his face. Jessamine felt the flesh of her palm sting as the shock settled in and she drew back, gasping and covering her mouth as more tears spilled across her cheeks. She had not meant to do that, she had not meant to hurt him. But Corvo was still, as ever, his eyes cast to the floor as he touched his cheek, his flesh red.

"Oh, gods…" Jessamine muttered, "gods, I…"

Corvo did not look at her. He stood up straight and let out a sigh, all the anger drained from his face as he looked at the spot in front of her. She nearly locked eyes with him and she wanted to forgive him, she never meant for it to go this far and she certainly would never get too mad at Corvo as to go that far. But she let her emotions get the better of her and she wished she could just grab his face and kiss him and it would all be over.

But, alas, it cannot be. A man was dead because of his actions, and whether Corvo's intentions were selfish or not, he had to atone for them. Just because she loved him did not mean he was free from her judgment.

She turned away and looked out her window, the dusk growing into night. "Leave me alone, Corvo. Please."

There was the sound of shuffling clothing; he must have bowed. "I'll send a guard patrol to look after you in my stead. Goodnight, Your Majesty."

*Your Majesty.* He had not called her that when it was just their private company ever since she was
eighteen. They had grown *that* close. And now, it was gone.

She heard the doors open and close, and only when she knew that she was alone did she begin to sob out her annoyance, frustration, grief, and sorrows into her hands.

Avery's funeral affair was attended by the entirety of the Royal Guard and was conducted on a fair chilly cloudy morning. Everyone was in black scarves and fluffy collars and dark coats; Jessamine herself wore a large brimmed hat that was probably an intentional clothing choice as to make sure she never locked eyes with Corvo, who stood there the whole time three steps behind her.

Like Ivanna's funeral, there was no body to carry and bury, but the Overseers still conducted their own rites as best they could in the absence of a cadaver to anoint and bless. After the religious ceremony, Marni Levitt, now the newly appointed Captain of the Royal Guard by order of Her Imperial Majesty Jessamine Kaldwin the First, stepped up on the podium and relayed her speech. Well, it was more *hobbled* up the podium, seeing as how her leg was still broken and she had to walk with crutches; picturing the new face of the military defence of Dunwall as a lame was such a pathetic and pitiful sight. The speech itself was nothing out of the ordinary, but the spectators could clearly see she was trying to hide her sobs. There was a masked emotion that was pushing to be seen.

It had been a week since the explosion at the Financial District, and yet Levitt went through immense changes. From her original Lieutenant uniform, she now sported the distinct stripes of a Captain complete with a medal hanging on her breast pocket. Her eyes had lost their childish lustre, and her bushy brown hair was now cut into a short fringe that barely past her chin. Doctors had to come up to her bedchambers every single day to check on the progress of her broken limb. With her demeanour now more serious than it was before, she could scare maids in the hallway with only a glare, and she was almost like Ivanna in a way, only Ivanna actually could smile and laugh sometimes. There wasn't a moment where Corvo saw her grin anymore. He had not only killed Avery, but a buoyant innocence that the Tower came to treasure.

During her accolade to Captain, Jessamine distinctly remembered that Levitt wouldn't accept a new sword. Instead, she would wield the sword of Joshua Avery, her predecessor. She said that he had given it to her before they last saw each other, before they were separated by the fiery inferno that set the Financial District skies ablaze.

"Joshua Camron Avery was more than my predecessor in terms of rank," Captain Levitt was ending her speech. "To me, he was like a brother, a confidant, a friend. Someone to trust and hold dear, someone to depend on for opinions, for laughs and advice. He was, and forever will be, one of the best Captains to ever serve in the Royal Guard, and I can only hope that in my lifetime, my legacy will dare to match his."

Jessamine released a sigh as the emotionless applause greeted Levitt on her way down. Corvo couldn't help but feel that the speech was intended to teach him a lesson as well.

It had been three days since Corvo and Jessamine last spoke to each other. As odd as it was, Levitt was already mature enough to know that she shouldn't pry into the matters concerning the Empress and her Royal Protector. Whatever "romantic relationships" they had was none of her business, and even if they were sexually involved, which she already treated as gospel truth ever since Avery chose them as his last words. It was almost pathetic of him. Then again, she used to be a pathetic lieutenant as well. If only she took her paperwork and training more seriously, then maybe she could have saved him.
She let all those regrets go. There was no use wallowing on them if they wouldn't bring Avery back.

It was because of so that Levitt had to supress her inquisitive mind when Corvo suddenly came into her office one night.

"Levitt?" he poked his head in, standing at her doorway as she sifted through her paperwork.

"Lord Protector," she lifted herself on her crutches, then stood up in attention as he let himself in, peeling off his gloves to reveal his slender well-carved hands.

"Listen," the Royal Protector folded his gloves neatly and removed the creases that emerged on the finger areas. "Tonight, I'll be conducting some private affairs."

Levitt blinked and tried not to make any assumptions. "Oh."

He must have caught her expression, because he frowned in response. "Not those kinds of affairs, Levitt. Outsider's blood."

She felt herself flush. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"It's fine, I—" and he let out an exhausted sigh, his eyes darting over to the board on the corner. There lay a number of pictures tacked messily and without order, and a few newspaper clippings of Serkonos' newspaper *The Karnaca Gazette* with regards to the disappearance of the Cavyerli. There were sketches of hooded men and a picture of the Investigation building, then a map of the Rudshore Financial District with cross marks and circles over different street names. All of these things were strung up with red string, interconnected like a web of deceit, to converge in the centre where a large piece of paper read: "WHO ARE THE CAVYERLI?"

She could barely recognise Avery's handwriting anymore.

The many sleepless nights she spent on this case were not worth it. More investigations just led to more questions which, in turn, led to more disasters. It was like the Cavyerli knew that they were driving the Royal Guard in circles and they intended to keep it that way.

"Are we any closer?" Corvo stepped towards the board, his eyes locked with the sketch labelled "the Leader," done in Sokolov's lead pencil: the figure of a hooded woman with her mouth and nose hidden behind a white mask, and one fierce eyeball peeking out from behind the darkness.

"No," Levitt wiped her face with a hand. "I have to conduct some interviews with the witnesses tomorrow, then deploy suspect search teams. We don't even have a suspect, can you believe it?"

"Don't worry," Corvo put his hand on Avery's large question. "This is coming to an end sooner than it ought to."

"Is that a plan in mind?"

"With regards to my private affairs, yes."

Levitt nodded. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

Corvo diverted his gaze away and toyed with his gloves. The young Captain noticed as well that though his movements were acute and swift as they should be, his eyes were tired and dark circles grew around them. His hair was a mess and his stubble was growing into a thick beard. It looked
like he hadn't slept in weeks, and maybe that wasn't an assumption at all.

"Tomorrow, I'll be out for the whole night," he began. "I have business to conduct in the Rudshore Financial District on my own terms. That means that the Empress shouldn't know about my absence. Are you following me?"

Levitt connected the dots and already figured out just what it was he was going to pull off. "I think I get what you're trying to do."

"Good," Corvo huffed, seemingly nervous. "With that, in my quarters, there will be items on my desk. I need you to give them to Jessamine when she wakes up the next morning. Do you understand?"

Levitt nodded again, trying to ignore the unease she felt when she realised just how casually he said the Empress' name when people who would often pronounce it would be scolded and looked down upon because they hadn't addressed her with respect. That wasn't mentioning the serious case of disobedience that his "private affairs" would entail to his position and status as Royal Protector.

"Excellent." Corvo wrung his hands then opened the door to Levitt's office; she could clearly see that he had more to say.

"Anything else, Sir?" she prompted, hoping that he would open up.

He opened his mouth to speak, but then quickly shut it and shook his head. "No; that'll be all, Captain."

He had one foot out the door, but she couldn't help but feel that there was something hidden in his agenda. It wasn't necessarily bad, but she wanted to hear him say it either way. She had the right to. She was now Captain.

"You really do care about her, don't you?"

_That_ stopped him in his tracks.

His head whirled towards her, and Levitt just stood there with soft eyes, free of guilt. She couldn't read his expression. If he was going to have her dismissed, so be it. At least she was going to fall telling the truth.

"What do you mean?" he frowned, faking cluelessness.

"Come on, Sir," Levitt continued, looking into his eyes, and only found the empty light of loneliness and an undertone of loss. "You obviously care for the Empress."

"It's…" he faltered, licking his lips as he turned around and looked at the board in disappointment—at himself and at the case. "It's my job to."

She crossed her arms and guessed. "You haven't been talking to her often, have you?"

Corvo pocketed his hands; his (more than usual) aloof demeanour already confirmed her suspicions. "Ever since the Rudshore fires and Avery's death, we've kept our distance. She's so distressed, and I want so badly to make up for this whole mess, I'm willing to do anything."

Levitt put a hand on his broad shoulder. "Even go through this?"

"Even go through this. And the Void, if she commands me."
She couldn't help but admire his determination. Whether it was because he loved her (which was definitely it) or because he was so dedicated to his job, it was almost rare to see the conviction and resolve that Corvo had in the people of Dunwall, even in guards.

"I'm in no position to argue," Levitt shrugged, "but if you're seriously thinking of doing this, then I'll do the best I can to help."

Corvo smiled, for the first time in days, she took note. "Thank you, Levitt. This means a lot to me."

"To her," she corrected slyly.

"No…if she found out about this, she would kill me."

"I bet she would do worse."

He let out a chuckle.

Then the weight of the Cavyerli's words began to sink in and she began to visualise the aftermath of his actions. "But…this means that if you'll do this, you're going away. This is the last time I'll see you again."

Corvo's smile lost its joy and ended up becoming sombre. "I know."

"And it's the last time you'll be seeing her—"

"I know," Corvo said intently. "I've gave it some thought and I've made up my mind."

Levitt hugged her arms and looked down at his boots. "This means goodbye, then."

"I guess it does." He paused for a while. "And thank you for your years of service. Avery would be proud."

The thought of Avery alone was enough to bring a small smile to her face. "Thank you, Master Corvo. It's been an honour meeting and serving you as well. May the stars guide you."

He gave a sad grin and a nod, then closed the door behind her. She was going to ask about his saying goodbye to the Empress, but she knew that he had a plan. Besides, he wasn't going to die just yet.
Part III: Flowers

Chapter Summary

In which our Serkonan Lord Protector seeks his own retribution, a heretic assassin wishes him luck, and he falls into the maw of a monster more familiar to him that he thinks.

Chapter Notes

This is where the whole 'wandering-through-the-streets' part happens, see nearly every Dishonored fanfic I've read. You know, the one where he dresses up like Garett from Thief, then goes stealing things for the good of the public and punching people in the face…just like Garett from Thief.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

AN AUDIOGRAPH RECORDING BY CORVO ATTANO FOR JESSAMINE KALDWIN, MEANT TO BE HEARD POSTHUMOUSLY

Jessamine, if you're hearing this right now, it means Levitt gave this to you, which meant something bad probably happened to me. Maybe I'm injured horribly, maybe dead or missing, or I went back to Serkonos entirely…well, whatever the reason, I've gone from your life. And I'm never coming back.

I'm so sorry for doing this to you. I never meant to abandon you, but we both knew it would happen sooner or later. We knew that there would come a time when I would prove myself as a Royal Protector and do something valiant, or whatever. If there was one thing I remember about Ivanna, it was that like…minutes before my inauguration all those years ago, she said that if I can't die for you, I haven't lived my purpose as a bodyguard and a…*sighs* A friend? I think I can say friend.

*Chuckles* But both of us know the truth, don't we?

Look, if I've ever done you any wrong, in any way, whether I offended you somehow, or I misunderstood you, I ask for your forgiveness. If I can't do this as a Royal Protector, let me do this...do this as someone who loves you. If I was killed protecting you, you can grieve, but please, by the Outsider, don't feel bad for me.

Your Majesty, you have no idea how much I think of you, every day; you're always on my mind, and know that I'm willing to anything to keep you safe. Jessamine, I love you. *soft laughter* I love you so much. Take care. Run this Empire like you meant to. Run it for me.

He buttoned his shirt, but it was hard putting the right row of buttons into the slits in the middle of the night, as he only used the dim light of the moon to guide his fingers. When he finished putting on his pants and high leather boots, he donned his long dark coat, a coat he remembered he had never worn ever since he got it, due to its extremely odd design: large hood, long hem, numerous
knife pockets, and made from a very flexible fabric that was more or less quiet in movement. It fit snugly on him, he noticed; neither too loose or too tight, but he hadn't drawn up the hood as to wrap the grey scarf around his neck and face. The Month of Ice was ending, but the cold hadn't left Dunwall just yet.

Then he took his knives and put them into the pockets, and hesitated to clip his sword to his belt. No...this mission required stealth; a sword would make too much clamour. Although he felt near helpless without his main weapon, he knew it would be efficient if he didn't have it. He counted six daggers that he kept on his person; the longest blade he had was a stiletto dagger, whose edge was sharp but thin, hidden in the sleeve of his right arm.

He put on his hood and briefly looked at himself in the mirror; he appeared almost invisible against the dim environment of his room, blended in the shadows like some ghostly apparition. He sighed to himself before opening the door that separated his room from Jessamine's, and he entered her quarters silently.

Her room, as always, looked more than pristine. If anything, he probably spent more time in her bedroom than in his, whether to provide her intimate company or to just help her with sorting documents. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness and he closed the door behind him quietly, he saw lumps under the satin bed sheets stir. He nearly froze with anticipation before soft mutterings of incoherence floated through the room, before the sheets lay still.

Creeeping over to her bedside, making sure that his shoes didn't make a sound against the floor, he slowly removed the blankets that concealed her visage, revealing the dormant face of his Empress. Her eyelids were closed and her lips were parted slightly, allowing her to breathe softly into the cosy fabric of her pillows. Her long dark hair fell in lengthy tresses across the bed, without tangles or burly coils. Occasionally, her eyeballs twitched beneath her lids and her brows furrowed as if in focus, as if in a dream. She was more attractive in sleep, more beautiful even without the rouge on her cheeks or her hair tied up in complex swirls and tight styles.

While he loomed over her like a shadow, he could help but let a sigh out as he felt the butterflies in his stomach tickle his throat, as he reached out and passed his fingers to push stray locks of hair away from her gorgeous face.

He was in love. *They* were in love.

*Were.*

He made such a damn mistake letting his own selfish wants poison it.

And he was going to make this right.

With his free hand, he pulled down the scarf that concealed his mouth and bent slowly, giving her a gentle kiss on the forehead before donning the sheets back on her, like he was tucking in a child before she went to sleep. The sensation of her skin against the chap of his lips was a feeling too familiar to him, it haunted him. She smelt of lavender.

*Gods, the smell of lavender...*

He drew back the shawl over his mouth and turned around to exit, but a familiar touch that brushed his arm completely froze him in his place. Then came the almost inaudible moaning and a voice that paralysed him.

"Corvo, is that you?"
He turned his head to see her half-lidded eyes staring up to meet his own, her hand outstretched over the bed in order to reach him. Her expression was that of a person in trance, half dreaming, half awake. For a few seconds, he felt relief that she almost didn't know who he was.

"Where are you going?" she asked again, softer this time, sleep still drowning her words.

"I..." he managed to speak, trying to find the right excuse at the tip of his tongue. Maybe her sleep-induced consciousness was something he could use to his advantage. "I was just...going to get you flowers. I thought it would be a nice thing to do for you, after our little argument."

She blinked, trying to decipher if his message was worth trusting. Then she shook her head and turned away, her back facing him. "Liar...you may be many things, Corvo, but you're a horrible liar."

He sighed quietly in defeat, shifting his weight onto his other leg, looking around the room. He had nothing left to say, except the one thing he knew to be true. If he was going to die, at least he was going to die doing what was expected of him, what she would have wanted him to do.

"Your Majesty, I'm sorry. Forgive me, please." A pause.

_Say it. Say you love her, damn it. Say you lov—_

"Sleep well."

He saw her shoulders rise gradually, as if she was inhaling sharply.

That was it. He could leave the world in peace now, even if she would curse him to the grave. He turned back and began walking to her balcony, looking out at the late nightscape of Dunwall. He closed his eyes and took in a deep breath, then climbed up onto the balustrade. The breeze whipped around him, fluttering his hood and coat.

"Goodbye, Jessamine."

When she heard the sounds of the wind and the grunt of a jump, she bolted up and looked around, but her room was empty. He was gone.

Boots clamorous against the rooftop tiles of the steep architecture of Dunwall, coat swishing in the cold night wind and flying behind him like wings of cloth whenever he jumped across an alleyway, Corvo leapt over balustrades, juts, and flooring, making his way through the Estate District, through the rooftops towards the steel giant of Kaldwin's Bridge. The knives were light in his pockets, his breath warm against the skin of his face, the scarf that covered his mouth fuzzy, tickling the skin of his chin. The wind howled in his ears every time he made a large jump and every time he dangled over the edge of a building and pulled himself up, his heart thumped in his throat whenever he recovered his footing on the marble pillars.

Kaldwin's Bridge was easier to navigate on high ground, with its metal beams and interconnected support system. He never thought that he would be this close to the sky, to the giant steel monster he often saw through the large windowpanes of Dunwall Tower. The spotlights and prowling guards made it difficult to traverse easily. Because being dressed up like some robber leaving the Estate District then being caught by the City Watch wasn't the thought that scared him; it was the fact that they would unmask him, find out he was the Lord Protector, then return him back to Dunwall Tower, where Jessamine would be waiting to scream at him again for leaving when she specifically told him before Avery's death that to leave the Tower would be identical to committing treason.
"Sorry, Jessamine…" he whispered into the night air as he jumped from a metal beam of Kaldwin's Bridge to another balcony of the Rudshore Financial District, on the other side of the Wrenhaven.

Running along the sleeping Rudshore District, the moon slowly being choked by cold clouds, all he knew was that the Cavyerli had themselves bottled up inside the old Department of Investigation building, a building whose back entrance reportedly exploded the day that Avery supposedly died.

Corvo stopped running as he reached the edge of the building, the darkness at the bottom of the alleyway calling out to him.

He basically sent Avery to his death. He could have helped him. They could have fought together, and even if they didn't fight, he could have stayed with him. Yes, he was supposed to pick Jessamine above all else, but not when it came to matters such as these.

He sighed and jumped across to the other rooftop.

In the distance, he could make out the figure of the Investigation building, a large behemoth of a structure with tall windows and marble pillars, making it look like a part of Dunwall Tower was ripped off and thrown over the Wrenhaven to land there. The figurehead of a rusty bronze falcon stood at the prow, a testimony to the eternal legacy of a dead bloodline. The Olaskirs meant well, but their promises were either empty or cut short by the death of their virgin heir.

Before he jumped across another alley he saw a flicker of something on the roof on the other side.

Corvo stopped again.

There was a foreign sort of warmth in the air.

Pulling the cowl-mask over his nose quietly, he crouched on the flat rooftop, slowly drawing the thin stiletto from his arm brace as he tightened his grip over its hilt. He furrowed his brows as his sharp eyesight slowly adjusted to the darkness of the Financial District, waiting.

Suddenly, a shadow materialised from behind him and tried to swing its sword to cut, but Corvo was fast enough and sidestepped. With his free hand, he grabbed the shadow's neck and pinned him on the ground; the shadow let go of his blade in shock and fell with a thud on the rooftop, Corvo's hunched over him, like a lynx over the carcass of a gazelle, gloved fingers tightening around the shadow's neck, the sharp end of his stiletto inches away from skin.

But then the spotlights from Kaldwin's Bridge softly illuminated the shadow, revealing the figure of a hood and whaler mask through white outlines of light.

Corvo's eyes widened.

"Ge—Get off of me!" the man in the whaler mask rasped through the nasal filters, trying to push Corvo off him.

Corvo stumbled off as the Whaler got up, dusting his grey uniform. It was insane, how quiet the Whaler was; he barely heard a sound even if he could have been standing directly behind him, and the distance he should have snuck was completely soundless. Corvo had seen a mask like that years ago, when he was watching the heretic assassin get tortured and interrogated for the identity of the Cavyerli, when Ivanna and Euhorn were still alive. But even though Corvo knew who the real assassins were back then, he approached the Whaler with caution.

"What do you…think you're doing?" the Whaler panted, waving his hands as to make a greater emphasis; unlike the heretic assassin, this one's voice was young.
"I was…" Corvo tried to find the right words, "well, you were trying to kill me."

"I was trying to capture you; it's very different," the Whaler picked up his sword on the rooftop and sheathed it, sighing in defeat. "Daud's going to be disappointed in me."

Corvo perked up at the familiar name. "Daud?"

"Yes, Daud," the Whaler crossed his arms. "He's been keeping an eye on you ever since you left the Tower. The team and I have been following you across the city, and let me just say: for an old man, you run real fast."

Corvo brushed the old man compliment aside (if it was to be considered a compliment) and frowned. "You've been following me?"

"As was Daud's orders," the Whaler looked away. "I was supposed to take you to see him, but…I guess he already knows I failed."

Corvo looked away and back at the dark silhouette of the Investigation building. "He's your leader? Then he knows why I'm here."

"Yes."

"What does he want?"

The Whaler shrugged. "I don't know. I only do as I'm told."

Corvo sheathed his stiletto back into his arm brace. Sure, he couldn't trust the Whalers, but he was quite curious as to see whatever the Void the heretic assassin Daud wanted from him. The last time they met was nearly five years ago, before the trysts with Jessamine, before Ivanna and Euhorn, before Avery. If the Whalers had any ill intent to the Crown, the young grey Whaler could have just struck Corvo there and then instead of giving him detail after detail in what seemed to be a very uncomfortable cordial manner. It was unnerving how indiscreet the Whaler was being.

"Then take me to him," Corvo said.

The Whaler faced Corvo again, and he could see his ghastly reflection in the eye lenses of the mask. "Then can you pretend that I got you captured just like he wanted?"

Corvo couldn't help but smile; he reminded him so much of Levitt during her younger years. "You lost fair and square…besides, didn't you say he probably already knows?"

"True, but it was worth a try," the Whaler replied hopelessly. "Let's go then. Put your hand on my shoulder, and I'll take you to him."

Corvo did as he instructed, and the assassin began to resonate with some strange kind of aura, something foreign, something dark and forbidden. The Serkonan tried to suppress the shivers that went through him as he felt himself slowly disappear. Was this the power that the Abbey despised? The power that labelled them heretics?

Then they vanished off the rooftop in a flash of ash.

"Here he is," the grey Whaler materialised behind his master, who was waiting on a rooftop closer to the Investigation building. He pushed Corvo towards him, and the Lord Protector nearly stumbled off the rooftop at the sheer force that Whaler shoved him at.
It was then that Corvo was suddenly aware of two things—one was that he was on a different rooftop entirely, and the other was that he was directly behind a man in red, but who radiated a different kind of aura entirely, one that marked respect and years of fighting and scratches and struggle. And from the angle that Corvo was standing from, he could visibly see that the red Whaler had no mask, but the view of his whole face had been obscured.

"Good job, Thomas," the red Whaler said without moving. "You can join the others; I'll be with you shortly."

Thomas nodded and barely said a word before he disappeared again into a burst of ash.

Corvo was slowly recalling that time he oversaw the investigation of the heretic assassin, and how the Abbey kept calling him a nonconformist, an outcast. Looking at the supernatural abilities of the Whalers, then at their master who was standing in front of him, it was no wonder that they were considered such a dangerous threat. They had strange witchcraft on their side, something Corvo didn't want to question. He was at a horrible disadvantage, and he kept thinking on how lucky he was that it the red Whaler who was in chains when he was interrogated. Gods know what he could have done if he wasn't put under such harsh restrictions.

"You must be Daud," Corvo readied his hands in case something went wrong, keeping a level stance.

"Nice to see you too, bodyguard," the red Whaler replied, a strange sort of mirth in his croaky voice. He turned his head a little to look back, but Corvo could see nothing.

The image of his visage avoided him; he could recall his voice, but not his face. It scared Corvo; how he referred to him as 'bodyguard' instead of his formal title of Royal Protector. (Then again, the titles were almost closer than synonyms, and yet as different as teal from gold.)

"You know what I'm here for," the Royal Protector said.

The red Whaler turned him and made a small nod, but Corvo tried to repress a shiver at the sight of his face.

The red Whaler looked older than he remembered, with more lines on his skin, wilder brown hair, and the soft makings of stubble eating away the wan skin of his jaw. But then there was that long ugly scar that ran from his temple down his cheek, the remnants of a secretive and violent Abbey, now white with healing flesh to immortalise his crimes and visibly show his status as an outcast. Despite this, Corvo had to admit that he was handsome, at least, in comparison to the men that the Royal Protector was accustomed to training; broad shoulders, dark grey eyes that were too familiar, stoic expression, choked hoarse voice, and an overall enigmatic disposition that would leave anyone at unease.

Corvo let out a breath.

"You need to get to there." Here he jammed his gloved thumb at his back, pointing at the old Investigation building. "A couple of Royal Guard-looking folk also wanted to get there a few weeks ago." Daud shook his head. "It didn't end well."

Corvo tried to swallow the guilt that pressed at his throat.

"You could've been there, you know," the Whaler continued to press, as if he was a part of Corvo's demons, all-knowing of his flaws and tangible enough to strangle. "The poor lieutenant; she broke her leg in the explosion, and now she's all alone. All because you wanted to seduce an Empress."
Corvo was silent. A chill went through him, the ghost of Jessamine's fingers through his hair. He tried to push it away.

"I hope fucking her was worth the Captain's life," Daud mercilessly went on. "Hope she tasted good enough to abandon your squad. I know a thing or two about comradeship, bodyguard; and none of this death would've happened if you stayed with them. Instead you chose more sensual company." He scoffed, and Corvo could practically hear his smirk. "What the fairer sex does to a man, am I right?"

"Shut up," Corvo retorted, the guilt transforming into a white hot anger that balled his fist. "Shut the \textit{fuck} up."

Daud could take a hint and kept quiet…for a while before speaking again. "We all have our flaws, bodyguard. You aren't perfect. Your Empress isn't perfect either."

"And you are?"

A pause. "No."

The wind blew through them, occupying the silence that they left behind.

"Sorry I couldn't do anything about the Captain," Daud spoke again. "We had a deal. I was to guide him through the Financial District and he was to clear our name from the dishonour forced on us. He didn't survive the explosion that cut the Investigation building in half."

Corvo looked at the Investigation building, where a large hollow hole had made itself by the west side of the structure, complete with weak bricks and a gaping, open hole that opened up the entire interior. He wanted to release his rage onto Daud for abandoning the Captain during the direst time of his need, but then again, Corvo was in no position to complain; he abandoned the Captain even without the latter's knowledge.

"So what do you want?" Corvo asked.

"Other than our name cleared, I want the Cavyerli dead," Daud continued. "They've forced my men out of the Rudshore and we're busy trying to find shelter in this damn city. I don't care about whatever the Empress has against them, I only care that she does something about it. I'm only doing this because I want them out of here. I'll do you a favour, and just this one."

Corvo sighed. "Thank y—"

"And don't think I'll do this again," Daud added. "My 'kindness', or whatever you choose to call it, ends here. Enter the building through the north entrance; they'll be expecting you to go up front."

"Do they intend anything hostile?"

"No," Daud shrugged. "For whatever reason, they don't want to kill you. I don't know why."

Corvo released a shaky breath.

Daud crossed his arms. "I think they want to talk to you."

The Royal Protector scoffed. "Avery wanted to talk, look what happened to him."

"I mean…serious talk. Negotiation. A real parlay without any tricks up the sleeve. Honest dealings."
"But you're a cutthroat. What would you know about honesty?"

Daud smirked. "More than you, bodyguard; and that's saying a lot."

Corvo couldn't answer.

"I'm not one for politicians much, but..." Daud's hand began to glow in an odd light, smoking through his leather gloves, "let me be honest here: I like the Empress. She's onto something really big. I think she's going to be the one to bring Dunwall out of the shithole it's sinking into, and this is coming from a crook."

Corvo was speechless.

"So, for the love of the gods, you have one damn job, and do it right," Daud looked intently at him, and Corvo found himself paralysed by the striking grey in his eyes, grey that he only saw in the austere irises of the long-gone Ivanna. "Protect her. It'd be a shame to see her die so young."

Corvo flexed his fingers and managed a nod. "You have my word."

Daud disappeared into a flicker of ash, leaving Corvo alone on the rooftop, the cold wind whipping around no one but him. The path to the Investigation building was clear. It was quiet.

He stepped in.

At first, it was dark. He couldn't see an inch in front of his face, and the only sense that was actually working was his hearing. He couldn't smell, taste, or touch anything within range, and the sound of his boots striding against cold stone was the only thing that echoed throughout the empty cavity of the place. He thought he was safe, so he sheathed his dagger, and pulled down his cowl.

He thought.

One of the watch spotlights suddenly blazed to life and illuminated him form a balcony above. He covered his eyes with a hand and squinted, trying to find out who it was that tuned it on. But the only thing he was met with was whisperings and audible complaints.

"There he is."

"All this, for him?"

"You've got to be joking."

"Shut up."

"Finally."

"I hope this was worth it."

Before Corvo could raise his voice, however, all the whisperings were interrupted by a woman's laughter. The watch light was bright enough to shine upon a Cavyerli member standing next to it, in a more flamboyant coat than the rest, and a mop of golden hair flowing behind her white mask.

The Serkonan swore he heard that laughter before.

"Corvo Attano, you've finally come back to us, to me," the Cavyerli woman purred and crushed her gloved hands on her chest. Her voice was so familiar it bothered Corvo so much that he couldn't
remember it. "Oh, how I've missed you. You look as handsome as when you left."

Corvo tried to find a face behind the mask. "Who…are you?"

The Cavyerli leader tilted her head and leaned against the balcony before vaulting over it and sticking a landing, a small gust of wind creating a little shockwave around the compound before the she stood upright. She continued putting one foot in front of the other, closing the gap between her and Corvo. He couldn't move.

"My darling Corvo, my dearest Corvo," she cooed, "did you really think you could run away from me?"

But before he could even react, something large hit him on the back of his head, and he spotted the white mask and black hood of the subordinate assassin before he succumbed to unconsciousness.

Jessamine usually woke up on her own terms, or when a handmaiden knocked on the door to wake her up for another talk with her Privy Council or a tedious court hearing, or perhaps an appointment with some ambassador or suitor. So imagine her surprise to find out that, other than the morning sunlight wafting through the windows, she was awoken by a knock on the door that turned out to be no other than Captain Levitt and her crutch.

"Good morning, Your Majesty," she bowed her head quickly. "Sorry to disturb your sleep."

"Hello, Captain," she greeted, then blinked slowly at the items that Levitt held in her hands. "What are you here for?"

"The Royal Protector asked that these things be dropped off to your bedchambers in the morning." Levitt gave her the items just as she dictated them. "An audiograph recording and a bouquet of flowers—Pandyssian roses."

Jessamine took the audiograph file but blushed as she bundled the roses in her arms, inhaling the sweet scent that clung to their multi-coloured petals. So he did keep his promise to bring her flowers; how sweet of him! Oh, how she wanted to forgive him…if only it was that simple—

Wait, that meant that last night wasn't just a dream.

Dropping the audiograph and flowers, she bolted through the Tower and burst into Corvo's bedchambers, only to find that they were empty. After dressing up hastily and asking Curnow and Levitt, Corvo hadn't begun the morning training routines and the guards were waiting for him. He was supposed to be there two hours ago.

He vanished without a trace.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was supposed to be posted a month ago, and I apologise for its lateness.
In return, I give you a cliffhanger. I love you guys. :3
Part III: Role Reversal

Chapter Summary

In which the protector is the one in need of saving, and not the other way around.

Chapter Notes

Okay, I'm dishing out the last of the bad stuff before leaning in towards the good. This whole thing's got to go somewhere.

AN EXCERPT FROM THE PLAY 'THE OLD KING OF FRAEPORT' BY WALLACE SHARROW, ACT II SCENE IV

Enter CORMAC, crowned king, and JENSEN.

CORMAC (aside):

Where hath the noble kind gone? Banished to the stars and ne'er to return to this cursed earth? To stay aloft and gloat to the stars higher than all the skies only for a fathomless eternity? To leave thy common folk to reap the seeds of madness and to suffer the toil of the soil? Cursed be ye who know of our endless journey through this foggy abyss we call the Void and yet pay us no eye!

JENSEN:

A pardon o'er my words, kind lord, but they who know not of our plights exist no longer. Who are they to gain a blessing from the fires in the night have they not been a kind soul in the life preceding?

KING CORMAC:

You ignorant cur! Spite me not and cease thy biting babble! They exist and drive madness mad! Where then were thy kind souls when my wife, the star of my own sky, sheathed her own steel messenger of death inside her heart, her dagger piercing not her own flesh but mine own? Where then are the good souls that must grant the fortunes I so rightfully deserve when the course of my life is speeding towards misfortune?

JENSEN:

Kind sir, you wear the crown on your head. Art that not a fortune?

"Unbelievable, no-good…I never should have left him alone even for a second!" Jessamine muttered to herself. Pacing around her office, the morning light that wafted through her wide windows seemed to mock at her displeased nature.
"My Lady, please, you need to calm down," Levitt, who was leaning on the bookcase at the edge of the room, said in a concerned tone, as equally worried as her Empress but with a more composure. "We can't think of a plan if you—"

"Have the search patrols arrived yet?" Jessamine interjected.

"I'm afraid not; maybe they'll come in a few more minutes."

Jessamine groaned in displeasure.

"They're trying the best they can, Your Majesty."

She wiped her face with a tired expression and refused to look at the captain. "I just…how could he?" Her gaze snapped over to the flowers sitting on her table. "And you knew?"

Levitt raised up her hands as if in surrender. "He didn't tell me anything; only that I was to deliver these items to you. I wasn't informed of his agenda."

Just as Jessamine was to complain again, Geoff Curnow burst into her office, sweating like mad just like he had run the whole course of Dunwall Tower up to her office (and with the look on his face, perhaps he had).

"Your Majesty," he paced into the room, wringing his hands nervously, fully aware that Jessamine's wary eyes were upon him. "We just received word that Corvo's being held by the Cavyerli Gang inside the old Investigation building, heavily guarded by a good number of Cavyerli men. Whether as a hostage or not, we aren't sure."

"Oh gods!" Jessamine covered her mouth and felt the blood drain out of her face. The shock began to eat away at her bones and she collapsed onto her chair, looking blankly at the scattered papers that lay on her desk, whose words of ambassador meetings and whale oil rationing mattered little to her now.

He went and struck the deal? The deal she commanded him specifically not to strike? Even if it was at the cost of his own life and their love and her sanity?

"If we have to move, we must move now, Your Majesty," Levitt prompted her when she was quiet for too long.

Jessamine, Levitt, and Curnow all waited in the silence of the imperial office until the Empress got up, calmly, and paced towards them, defiance shining in her green eyes.

"You're going to get him back."

The first thing Corvo did was wake up.

Then he felt the ropes that bound his hands and feet, and the crushing cold of the air around him. As he regained his senses and gathered his thoughts back into his aching mind, he realised with dread that he was strapped to a table, his coat and weapons discarded, illuminated by the watch light that he had been blinded by mere unconscious hours ago. The windows were boarded up, but peaks of sunlight gave him a taste of the morning outside, a morning he knew he wouldn't live to see any longer. He was still in the Investigation building, as told by the shape of the windows and the marble on the floor, but he was anything but sure of his life now.

"He's awake," he heard someone call, and the face he could best match it with was that of the
Then there was the sound of shuffling and there were two emerging figures that surfaced out of the shadows. One was the subordinate, with his hood pulled down to reveal short blond hair, walking alongside the leader of the Cavyerli, who was noticeably much shorter than him, standing side by side. But their only difference was that the girl, the leader, walked with a confidence so assured that Corvo couldn't help but feel his heart pump nervously in his throat with each step she took towards him.

"My darling Corvo," the girl purred, her mask smiling menacingly at him, in a voice all too familiar. "It's been too long."

"Who…" he managed to mutter, the question that wanted above all else to be answered, "who are you…?"

Somehow, the grin of her mask grew wider, despite being simply a stationary wisp of black paint on a white shell. "You still don't know who I am?"

He wanted to ask how can he, while she was wearing a mask, but his tongue was numb and he was in no position to ask more questions.

"Don't worry, Corvo," the subordinate said with a voice that was meant to comfort, but he wasn't in any way reassuring. "You're in good hands. We aren't going to hurt you."

Corvo turned his head a little to the side to look at the ropes that bound his wrists, and the burning sensation he felt upon attempting to twist out of them. "Are you sure of that?"

"This is only a temporary predicament," the subordinate said again.

Corvo blinked weakly at the covered faces of the two people standing in front of him. "Does this mean you'll keep your promise? You'll stop the harassing the Kaldwin name?"

"Of course," the subordinate replied, circling around the table. "The deal is done and we have you. There's no need of any violence anymore."

The obvious realisation hit Corvo like a brick. "It wasn't Jess and her family you were after…it was me all this time…"

He could sense that the subordinate smirk. "About time you figured it out."

Corvo closed his eyes; he was too tired to even think.

"Rest now, dear," the leader traced her gloved fingers over his jaw, and her cold fingers, like thin strips of ice, made him shiver. "You'll be home before you know it."

There was a comforting strangeness in them that lulled him to sleep.

Levitt stood by the edge of the empty throne room, watching as the Empress paced nervously and angrily in front of her throne, frowning at the floor and occasionally glancing at Levitt, who stood there leaning on a pillar as to support her weight.

"We understand your reason for being furious at Master Corvo," Levitt approached with caution, "and as to respect your privacy, I will not ask. We'll go to retrieve him as soon as we can."

"Good," Jessamine retorted with a startling amount of self-apatth. "Make haste as well; I don't
Levitt sighed as the Empress wiped her face carefully. "I know the Royal Protector matters to you more than I can understand, and we will—"

"He matters to me little," Jessamine's manicured brows furrowed as her gaze snapped back at Levit. "And we leave it at that. I don't want to further delve into this conversation. Are we clear?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Levitt bit her tongue and let her fingers weave around the handles of her crutches, looking down at the embroidered rugs of the throne room like a child who had just lost an argument. The captain didn't know much about the falling-out that had occurred between Jessamine and her Royal Protector shortly before his mysterious disappearance, but she was more than certain that they refused to talk because of something such as that, as far as Corvo's stoic disposition would allow.

"Marni?" Jessamine asked, her voice a little bit softer as she faced her throne, her gaze away from her.

"Yes, Your Majesty?" Levitt perked up her head again; she wasn't used to her Empress calling her by her first name.

"I'm sorry I snapped at you; I must have…" she sighed and her face fell into her hands, "…I don't have much control over my temper lately. So much has been going on in such little time, and I know you are doing your best to keep me safe." Jessamine turned around to lock eyes with Levitt, and the latter was incredibly overwhelmed at how piercing her green eyes were. "But ask, sincerely, that you do this for me."

Levitt took a moment to recollect her words before nodding. "I understand, Your Majesty. You need not ask; only command and we will do."

It was a nightmare: flashes of dark shadows in the forms of ghouls and ghastly creatures that swarmed him and threatened to eat him whole. What was worse was that they shared the sounds of Avery and Jessamine, constantly screaming at him in a mix of their voices that was grating to the ears and echoing their dark call in his mind.

"Why?" the shadows cried. "Why did you leave me? Why did you abandon me like this? I hate you! I hate you!"

He let out a pained yell and knelt on the floor, his chest heavy and his ears ringing.

"Hate!" the ghouls chanted demonically. "Hate, hate, hate, hate!"

"Stop!" he pleaded, covering his ears in vain. "Please!"

"Hate!" the ghosts continued mercilessly. "Hate! I hate! I hate! I—!"

Corvo woke up with a start: sweating, panting, and tired out of his own lack of breath. The noon was slowly turning into a low and lazy afternoon outside, but the entire Investigation building was dark. Still strapped to the chair, he could still feel the ropes burning against his skin as he struggled in vain. The subordinate and the leader of the Cavyerli was nowhere in sight.

He had to find a way out of here. Even if Jessamine would kill him if he would go back to the Tower, there was a good chance he would never see her again if he continued to stay stuck to the
table like a meal ready to be cooked.

Looking down at his boots, he could feel the cold metal of a secret dagger pressing against his ankle. Trying to wriggle his shoe out of the hole it was encased in, he reached forward as much as he could and violently jerked his foot back as if he was kicking something. Using the momentum of his movement to try and slide the dagger out, he could see the hilt of the steel knife peeking out from the top of his boot. This was going to work.

Pulling his boot again to try and jerk it back into the whole, the dagger slid a little bit more, and the blade was now fully visible. He drew his foot back again: just one more time and it would—

"Corvo! Glad to see you're finally awake."

The subordinate's voice brought him back and he pushed the dagger back into his boot using the rope as a medium. From the corner of the room, the subordinate materialised from the shadows, as if he had been standing there the whole time, watching Corvo try desperately to escape, or if he had appeared suddenly like some wraith.

"Had a good morning's rest?" the subordinate asked, and his mask made it seem like his question was that of concern, and maybe it was.

"Hardly," Corvo replied coldly.

"That won't be a problem," a new voice said standoffishly, and the leader appeared from the shadows in the same way her henchman had. Her voice was off, as if she had pieces of food stuck in between her gums that hindered her from speaking quite clearly.

"The boat's ready," the subordinate told his superior, but the way his mask was looking at Corvo's so eerily made it seem as if she was talking to him. "All of the men are waiting for us down the stream along Agroosh Way. It'll take us to the trawler."

"Excellent," the leader nodded. "That means that we'll have to hurry it up."

Corvo was lost with all of these things being thrown at him, and could only squint in confusion as the two Cavyerli members talked on.

"Well, we best be on our way," the leader tilted her head. "Untie him."

Without any further questions, the subordinate took a dagger from his side and cut the ropes that bound Corvo's feet, then his hands. As he sat up, the Royal Protector suddenly realised that not only did his rope burns sting terribly, but it also occurred to him that he was hungry, thirsty, and lethargic.

"Let's get this over with," the leader said, holding the edge of her mask with a hand.

"Over with?" Corvo echoed, "what do you m—?"

Before he could finish, he suddenly felt another body collide towards his own, and when his senses were able to perceive just what happened, he was staring right at the dark eyes of a Cavyerli mask, but his mouth was enveloped in another's. He realised with shock and utmost disgust that, though her mask was only pulled halfway up her face to conceal her eyes and thus her identity, the Cavyerli leader was kissing him on the mouth, hard.

Before he could push away, she grabbed his collar and pulled him in closer, opening her wet lips and darting her tongue into his mouth. Though his moans were more in that of complaints than in
pleasure, he felt something enter his own mouth through her, and the bitter taste of something enveloped his tongue and generated a foul sensation. As she pulled away, he began to hack out whatever she had put in his mouth, and she hid the grin she sported behind her mask once again. But no matter how hard he coughed and spat, the taste remained there. It began to travel towards his stomach and caused a searing pain in his abdomen, forcing him to bend down and groan.

"You..." he growled, standing up and prowling towards the leader and her henchman, but as soon as his feet touched the ground, his legs couldn't support him and he collapsed, as if his muscles had failed to function.

"It's working faster than I expected," the subordinate remarked.

"What did you..." Corvo tried to reach out to them, but his arms lost their feeling and he fell face-flat, "what did you do to...to me...?"

"Blue Bastillian lily extract pills," the subordinate replied matter-of-factly. "Able to cure the yellow rash disease with just the right dose, poisonous in copious amounts."

Corvo hacked away at his lungs until bits of blood began to drip on the old marble floors. The taste of iron mingled with the salt, and the two together were beginning to fill his mouth with a bothering aroma.

"Like its taste?" the leader mocked him, laughing as his line of sight began to spin wildly, like he was looking into a reflection in a pond. "Don't worry, love; this little a dose won't kill you. If our calculations proved to be right, at least."

"You..." Corvo's mind began to numb, but the rage began to bubble, "you...you fucking... bastards..."

"We can explain more of it on the way home," the leader turned heel and waved her hand. "Come on, pick him up."

The subordinate knelt and tilted his head, as Corvo's vision began to fade to black, all he could see was the deathly mask of the assassin and the girly giggles of the leader. His sensation of touch had already numbed and he couldn't move his arms, so he didn't feel a thing as the subordinate picked up both his arms and proceeded to carry Corvo on his shoulders, like a corpse instead of a—

The loud sound of the Investigation building's doors being kicked open startled both the leader and the subordinate, enough for the latter to drop Corvo down to the floor, which made him grunt in pain, as his spine had not been completely numbed yet. With his fading eyesight, Corvo lay on his side enough to see dozens of soldiers in blue infiltrate the building, shooting the two Cavyerli leaders and engaging them in swordfights.

The Royal Guard.

"Shit!" the subordinate yelled, or, at least, that's what Corvo thought he had said due to his hearing becoming fainter and fainter.

Corvo's eyelids grew heavier, and soon, all sound became near throbbing, as the only things he could hear in his hollow body were the sounds of his raspy breathing and his heartbeat, which was slowing down at a terrifying rate. But he remained conscious enough to see a young soldier standing by the doorway, with three legs instead of two. As soon as the soldier spotted Corvo and began hobbling towards him, the Royal Protector began to realise that the third leg was actually a crutch, and that the short hair of the soldier meant that he was not forgotten in Dunwall Tower.
"Master Corvo!" the Captain of the Royal Guard yelled at him as a guard began hoisting his body up so that he was cradled being carried. "Master Corvo, can you hear me?"

"Marni…what…?" Corvo murmured. "I…Jess told…she…"

"Master Corvo, can you hear me?!" she seemed to yell louder, but it was drowned out in the sound of his echoing heartbeat. "Master Corvo, what's happened to you? Master Corvo!" Then to the guard holding him. "Get him to the medics. See that he gets the attention of Master Sokolov in the Tower immediately."

"Yes, Captain," the guard nodded, and Corvo's body was carried carefully through the battle towards the exit of the Investigation building.

The last thing Corvo saw was the blinding light of the afternoon sun over the skyline of Dunwall before the inky blackness that took him captive.
Part III: Bile

Chapter Summary

In which the physical ails hinder any reconciliation whatsoever.

Chapter Notes

Warning for graphic depictions of medical gore, vomit, abortion, and general grossness. You have been warned.

It's occurring to me now that more and more people are beginning to guess who exactly the mystery leader of the Cavyerli is. Oh, how fun it is to watch you all gamble! Maybe most of you are right!

MASTER ANTON SOKOLOV'S MEDICAL NOTES ON THE CONDITION OF EMPEROR EUHORN JACOB KALDWIN I

10th Day of the Month of Darkness, 1825

The nurses and the Royal Protector bring in the Emperor's unconscious body to me during the waning hours of twilight. There was blood spilling from his mouth and an irregularity of breathing, coupled by intense sweating and vomiting. My initial thought was that it was an acute response of his body to his lung infection, but upon inspections and tests done earlier tonight, the source of the problem is a severe poisoning. The root of which still remains unknown.

Do digestive tests tomorrow and analyse saliva and vomit contents for any poison samples or present bacteria.

11th Day of the Month of Darkness, 1825

Blood samples have been taken. The tests I have conducted just now reveal that his red blood cells have seriously decoloured and are shrivelled up, containing little to no nutrients. The amount of oxygen in his blood also remains to be very low. Apply iron supplements to food intake and confer with the bakers and chefs later tonight about an iron-induced diet.

There appears to be something of a faint poison extract hidden within the plasmids of his bloodstream. Conduct more tests.

14th Day of the Month of Darkness, 1825

The poison appears to be some sort of blue Bastillian Lily extract: poisonous plant, mild medicinal and hallucinogenic drawbacks. Antidote must be developed.

16th Day of the Month of Darkness, 1825

An antidote is impossible, as the serums to counteract the toxic fluids of the flower's stigma are not
strong enough.

The Emperor's stomach has grown even more acidic than before, and mild symptoms of ulcers have been shown. Coupled with this, his lung system appears to be worsening, as his trachea is slowly beginning to collapse on itself. The only option left is surgery, though this is extremely dangerous at this point, and his idiotic Privy Council opts not to for the sake of his life.

18th Day of the Month of Darkness, 1825

I watched earlier today as the Lady Jessamine sat by her sickly father's bedside, crying in his arms. His voice has severely weakened and his muscles have deteriorated. He looks no more like an Emperor.

19th Day of the Month of Darkness, 1825

The nurses found the Emperor this morning, cold, not breathing: dead, presumably from his sleep.

Another failure.

It came as an alarm to Anton Sokolov, just as the Royal Guard busted into his office and demanded medical attention for the Royal Protector at about fifteen minutes before two in the afternoon; the Royal Protector being—by the way—someone that Sokolov deemed very healthy, with his habits of athleticism and lifestyle that demanded physical prowess, but Corvo looked dreadful, hanging like a limp ragdoll in the soldier's arms: marred skin, bleeding mouth, dirt and bruises scattered all over his face, coupled with matted, unruly hair, and twitching muscles.

The nurses wasted no time laying him flat on his bed in the Tower, cleaning him up from the dirt that was smeared across his face, measuring his pulse, his heartbeat, and inspecting if his lungs were still functioning. Anton Sokolov frowned at his notebooks and papers, and went in between scribbling away at his desk to attending to the body of the Royal Protector. Despite this, his breathing pattern was incredibly sporadic, he was sweating like mad and his fingers were trembling, all while he was unconscious. Occasionally, he coughed, as if he was going to wake up, but his eyes never opened and instead a burst of blood shot out of his mouth and scattered across his lips and bed sheets. Quickly wiping it off so that he would not choke on his own phlegm and blood, a nurse was assigned to constantly clean his mouth every so often.

The Royal Physician saw something similar before: the condition to Euhorn from all those years past. Maybe the blood results later would match with the Emperor's, which would be bad, considering that Sokolov was incapable of making a working antidote.

From outside, he could hear the maids, the manservants, the bakers, the guards, and even the Captains Curnow and Levitt themselves wait in dread from beyond Corvo's chamber doors. It was a slow process which had to be done incredibly fast, and he was just grateful that his assistants were able to move quickly and efficiently. After disinfecting the many scars they found across his body, they bandaged half of his torso and made him force-drink Redcore flower extract. Then his muscle tension began to settle and his breathing was brought back to its slightly irregular interval.

Though Corvo was still unconscious, Sokolov and his assistants let out relieved sighs, as did everyone who attended the emergency health response. His condition was far from better, but at least he had been stabilised.

It had been an hour afterwards; with the nurses already assigning each other shifts as Sokolov was busy writing down his prescriptions and notes about his condition. He sat next to the Royal
Protector's bedside, watching as his breathing became wheezes and his peaceful expression contorted into frowns; sometimes he wiped the sweat off his brow or measuring his heartbeat. Once the small crowd accumulating outside Corvo's bedroom had dispersed, Sokolov was free to take out his notebook and write down his diagnosis.

9th Day of the Month of Ice, 1826

The Royal Protector was ushered in today after an emergency call-in: sweating, coughing of blood, weak muscles, and sporadic breathing. I have seen similar conditions that have come from the files of the Emperor's condition (which caused his death). I have taken vials of blood samples to be conducted later. His condition has been stabilised, as his body has shut down in order to combat the disease inside him. I fear that this dosage is much more potent than

Sokolov stopped writing just as the doors parted gently. The two nurses in the room and the Royal Physician stood up when they realised that it was the Empress standing at the door, Levitt accompanying her side.

"Jessamine," Sokolov offered a bow of the head; he never called her Empress or any of those fancy titles sycophants dressed her with; she was only the leader of an empire, not a goddess. "You're rather late."

"As I intended to be," she said apathetically as she strode into the room, arms wrapped around herself, face devoid of emotion, as her green eyes cast themselves onto Corvo's body. "How is he?"

"He's fine," Sokolov groaned, crossing his arms. "Well, 'fine' wouldn't be the word I would use, exactly. His digestive system is only beginning to collapse on itself and he coughs up blood every once in a while. I won't sweeten my words, Jessamine; it's very bad. He's very lucky he's still alive."

From the corner of his eye, he saw her shoulders stiffen; try as she might to hide her emotion, Sokolov was still much older than her and thus, much wiser. He could tell if she was lying, or if she was keeping secrets or needed counselling. He was much more to her than simply a doctor and scientist; in their spare time, they shared cigars and advice over as many topics as there were stars in the sky. Most of her decisions as Empress were heavily influenced on the proverbs and experiences he told her over whiskey and smoke. If anything, he was the closest thing she would ever have to a father at all.

He lay his sculpted fingers onto the blood vials. "I took some blood samples from him earlier, and I'll see if I can formulate an antidote."

Her brows furrowed. "Antidote?"

"He was poisoned with the same thing that caused your father's death," Sokolov went on. "Blue Bastillian Lily extract: valuable as a very strong antibiotic, but can kill healthy cells when used in large doses." A sigh as Sokolov watched the Royal Protector lie motionless. "I know Corvo's a healthy man, and more virile and physically fit than most. But I'm not confident about this case. The dosage that was given to him was much more than the one given to your father, and look at where your father wound up in."

Jessamine's fingers flinched. "So…does this mean Corvo will…?"

"I'm still unsure," Sokolov turned to face the Empress, whose steel emotionless face looked like it was holding back a dam of tears. "We only know that his body has gone in a state of unconsciousness until he has recovered, which is the only natural response his body can
accomplish as of the moment."

"What do you mean, exactly?" she looked at Corvo, refusing to meet Sokolov's eyes.

"A coma, Your Majesty," Sokolov said, and the gravity of those words began to settle into everyone in the room. "He's in a coma. And for how long, I don't know."

The only proper response to that was silence. There was a flicker of an emotion on Jessamine's face, then it disappeared as fast as it appeared.

"Very well," she nodded, blinking furiously, trying to keep a stoic face still. "Thank you, Sokolov. For all of your service to me."

"It's the least I could do, Your Majesty." Sokolov gave a mechanical bow. "Would you like the nurses and I to leave you with him for a while?"

"Please," she said, and approached the bed with a very lissom and yet melancholy grace. "Levitt, wait outside."

"Your Majesty," Levitt took her leave, and held the door open for Sokolov and his assistants, then closed it behind her as they waited in the hallway.

The Captain leaned against the door, while the nurses paced about and wrung their hands as they looked to their superior for any sliver of emotion, but Sokolov was careful to show none. He was aging more rapidly than he could have ever imagined, and every time he walked he could feel his joints creak under his weight, but if there was something to him other than his sharp mind and brilliant wit, was his sense of hearing. And standing outside the door to the Royal Protector's bedchamber, there were faint sounds that he caught with his acute senses; he was not surprised to find out that one of them were the sounds of sobbing. Shortly after followed the choked words of the Empress.

"It had to be you," she said, the sarcasm still evident despite her tears. "Of course it had to be you. How could you do this to my heart?"

Then the sound of bed sheets ruffling; she probably took a seat right next to him on the bed.

"You always found a way to make me ache for you," she laughed sadly to herself. "Now Sokolov doesn't even know if you will make it. First my mother, then my father, Ivanna, and now you. And oh, gods…you, you, you..."

And there were no more words; only sad whispering and soft cries. It reminded Sokolov of the day before Emperor Euhorn died, when Jessamine was still a child and not a child at the same time, where they knew that he only had mere days to live and the poison had taken control of his whole body; it was Sokolov's first and most dire failure as the Royal Physician, and he could never forget that afternoon on the 18th Day of the Month of Darkness, and how the cloudy sun wafted into Euhorn's room, illuminating his pale face and erratic breathing. Sokolov was allowed to stay in the room this time, and it was probably for the worst, as listening to little Jessamine say her premature last words was one of the most heart-breaking experiences Sokolov had to endure.

Kneeling next to her dying father's bed, with his wan eyes shut and his broken chest rising and falling with the beat of his failing heart, Jessamine took his cold hands, and Sokolov could see that his weak fingers were trying to grasp themselves around her own. The Royal Physician could only close his eyes and keep his own sadness at bay.

"Father, I..." she sighed and sobbed, "I'm so sorry...it will be hard for me to let you slip away...but
if you want to go, I won't stop you."

His lips moved as if he wanted to reply to her, but a soft cough left instead.

"Please, don't…" Jessamine bowed her head. "Let me say my goodbyes, I need you to…"

Before she could continue, a soft pat on her hand forced her to look up. And what met her eyes was the soft smile of her dying father, smiling with a confidence that assured her that he would live for centuries.

"If I have to be ready to succeed you," Jessamine wiped the tears off her eyes. "I will do anything to bring pride to the Kaldwin name. I am ready."

With a gentle stroke of her hand, her father mouthed very slowly: 'I know you are.'

And she cried, cried as hard as the sobbing Sokolov could hear through the Royal Protector's room at that very instant. Not much has changed in the young Empress; though her disposition grew more serious and her appearance more radiant, she still had the most fragile heart in the entire Empire.

It was a week after Corvo went into a coma; the guard shifts were more aggressive than before, and both Curnow and Levitt made weekly schedules on when to act as the temporary Royal Protector (and they prayed fervently to the stars that it was a temporary predicament). However, it was the same week that Jessamine noticed that it should have been the week when her bleeding started. But she woke up to find her drawers completely clean and her disposition troubled. Then again, most of her nurses reassured her that bleeding could come late due to stress or immense emotional trauma, and Jessamine clearly suffered the latter, after what Corvo had put her through. Still, though; her bleeding had come at a regular schedule ever since she first had it, and it kept her worried consciousness on the brink of its sanity.

The second week came, and still her bleeding was late. Sokolov and his nurses were too busy to consult since most of their time and attention was spent on making sure that Corvo was still alive and at a stable state. But the Royal Physician was still able to answer her questions whenever she asked, saying that it was probably a stress withdrawal from the runaway Royal Protector, like everyone said.

"It may be an effect of stress, but I have my theories," he had said as he put another drop of Blue Bastillian lily extract on a petri dish with Corvo's blood sample. Jessamine stood to the side as he looked through his microscope and adjusted the knobs.

"What suspicions?" Jessamine asked.

Sokolov drew his bearded face away from the lens and shrugged. "You wouldn't like me for saying so."

"Just say it, Anton."

He rubbed his hands thoughtfully, pondering carefully, like he did whenever he was talking to a noble he detested and wished to not offend him. "Your Majesty, have you ever had any intimate connections with a man as of late?"

"Anton!" Jessamine blushed, covering her mouth. "I never—!"

The Royal Physician laughed with a kind humour, like he enjoyed teasing his Empress. "Then, if
'you never,' there's nothing to worry about." He turned back to his microscope. "If your bleeding is still late by the third week, please consult me again."

The third week came along; her bleeding did not come, Corvo's condition did not improve, and Sokolov was busier than ever. But the real problem had come one morning during that third week, when the Royal Physician's hypothesis had finally come to a reality.

Jessamine woke up late, even though she had specifically slept at a certain time the night before so that she could rise on schedule. Despite this, the moment she opened her eyes and sat up on her luxurious bed, hearing the nurses pace outside in the hallway as to attend to Corvo next door, she felt something rumble in her stomach as if she was hungry for weeks on end, even though she knew she wasn't. Then, all of a sudden, a salty tinge filled her mouth and as her eyes widened with shock, she scrambled up and out of her bed, rushed to her bathroom, and expelled her vomit in one giant groan over the toilet.

"Ah, I see…" Sokolov mused aloud, tapping his fingers on his chin as he scanned Jessamine from head to toe. "Did you feel hungry before you vomited? Any pain?"

"No," she answered to both questions, rubbing her fingers nervously in front of her. "What does it mean?"

"One of two things," Sokolov paced about his laboratory, "one might be is that you might be experiencing some sort of odd genetic disease, like some sort of gastric phenomenon that's never been discovered before."

Jessamine gulped nervously at the prospect of being sick with some incurable disease when she had no children to succeed her and a bedridden Royal Protector. "And the second?"

Sokolov seemed to hesitate, something he rarely did in front of her. "The second might be you're pregnant."

The word seemed to bring a hush to the large laboratory of the Royal Physician, but Sokolov's expression was unreadable, a blank face that expected Jessamine's eyes to widen and for her words to falter. It was an unthinkable thing: accusing your Empress of being with child, but Sokolov was still no-nonsense in his talk and he'd rather be damned to the Void than spew a lie. She blinked furiously and struggled to get any word out from her mouth. Both of them kept quiet as the dust settled and Jessamine took a soft step back.

"Pregnant?" Jessamine reiterated, very softly, as if the word itself was something she could never say in her whole life.

"Let me ask the question again," Sokolov said as he clasped his hands together, enunciating the syllables slowly. "Have you ever had any recent sexual encounters with a man before today?"

"I…" and she faltered, not wanting to tell the truth. *Oh gods, if he knew—*

"It's a simple nod or shake of the head, Your Majesty," Sokolov shrugged. "You don't have to tell me who the man is, but I need to know if there's a baby inside you."

"And so what if there is?!" Jessamine retorted rather violently, almost screaming at him, enough to make Sokolov widen his eyes and drop his grin into a thin straight line on his face. He watched as his Empress then drew herself back into her insecure position of wrapping her arms around herself and look away; her voice dropped into something of a whisper. "And so what if I'm with child?" Tears began to spring at the corners of her eyes. "The whole world will shun me. Their Empress is
Sokolov sighed and rubbed his thumb over his fingers before gingerly putting a hand on her shoulder. "But what else can they say? You cannot stop a hypocritical and sycophantic court from spewing out judgment after judgment, whether true or false. I'm surprised that they haven't used this information before the moment you expressed to them that you denied all your suitors."

She said nothing, and he cleared his throat and continued. "If it's any comfort, I can continue to monitor you for a few weeks then we can decide what to do regarding your condition."

Jessamine nodded carefully and muttered a thank you so soft, Sokolov couldn't hear it.

Sitting in a parlour that afternoon, watching as the industrial fumes coming from the factories of Dunwall mingled with the white clouds, Sokolov and his Empress sat at a desk. The former was halfway through a cigarette and just finishing his second glass of whiskey while Jessamine took neither of these vices and instead stared blankly at her stomach, knowing that it could possible lead to disastrous long-term effects on the being growing inside her. The Royal Physician had just come from his laboratory in an attempt to create an antidote for Corvo, who had gone for about a month and a half in intense sleep; a dirty lab coat hung from the backrest of his chair.

Sokolov looked at Jessamine, who avoided his gaze constantly. "If you wish to see to it that this doesn't grow into a scandal, we could undergo a safe operation that would—"

"No," Jessamine said sternly, almost like she spat the word to his face. "This child isn't getting damned for my mistake. The very least I could do is let it live." Here she patted her stomach gingerly. "The Pendletons always wanted me to have a child. Those disgusting little weasels finally get what they were asking for."

Sokolov paused for a while. "Even with the backlash from your merciless court? The rumours form the maids and household?"

Jessamine scoffed apathetically. "As if they haven't been doing that for years already."

Again, Sokolov hesitated before asking another rather touchy question. "Was it a... forceful encounter with a man?"

"No," she shook her head, the tears falling down her face. "He had my consent." Covering her eyes with her perfectly manicured hand, she continued to cry. "Oh gods, he had my consent... perhaps we were careless that night and I..."

"So you've been seeing this man for a while then?"

Jessamine nodded slowly. "I knew something like this would happen, but I never thought that I'd be unprepared for it."

"Is he a suitor?"

The Empress shook her head. "No... we've been seeing each other for quite some time."

"Does he know about it?"

She shook her head.

"And yet you are confident that he's the father of your child?"
"I've known no other man I've loved."

And they were quiet for some time. Jessamine kept her eyes on the Wrenhaven, recalling just how tedious it was now to wake up in the morning; the first thing she would do is empty out her stomach in the bathroom, spend the day in a fluctuation of moods, take naps even when she was unaware of it, only to sleep like a cat for nearly hours on end to feel sleep-deprived when she woke.

"Is it the Royal Protector?"

And Jessamine finally looked at Sokolov, at his curious stare and a cloud of cigar smoke hovering about his head. For about a sliver of a second, her lips parted, as if she was going to say something, but then they shut just as quickly and her eyes turned as steely and reserved as they were before. But still, she didn't reply and sighed into her face, the tears threatening to spill from her eyes again; all Sokolov could do was pat her back and console her troubled mind.
Part III: The Royal Protector's Secondary Oaths

Chapter Summary

In which a reconciliation and forgiveness comes in the form of a new life.

Chapter Notes

Originally, this chapter was to be divided into two, but they would be too short. So have a super huge mega chapter to make up for my absence.

Hope you all missed Corvo. :3

A LETTER WRITTEN BY FRASER ALON VARINOX TO THE EMPRESS LARISA OLASKIR

Your Imperial Majesty,

I write this with the most soul-profound apologies and darkest regrets that plague you. I know that you have requested for this to be brought to light more than simply a few weeks ago, but I did not wish to dishearten you any further. I write this because it is the truth, no matter how you have come to know it or how it might have disappointed you, disgusted you, or hurt you.

I have been in love with you since the moment you chose me. I have had undying affections for your very essence and being. Standing in your presence is already enough to make my head spin and my heart beat wildly. I have not felt this way about any woman before, not even my wife of many years has come to make me enamoured in this way.

This must have not been a surprise to you. My affections have been quite obvious, even for me. My intentions for writing this is not to distance yourself from me (though I am sure that you will), but to only bring a situation that you wish to learn about.

Do not say I did not warn you.

I have the honour to remain Her Majesty's humble and obedient servant,

Fraser Alon Varinox, the Royal Protector

When he finally came to his senses, feeling his cold blood rush through his empty vessel and his strained muscles under his control, the first thing he did was open his eyes, only to be met with an infinity of blue, as far as any human gaze could see. He took a deep breath and smelt nothing and felt nothing. There was no sky and no Ocean, only a refreshing hue of blue that moved and sounded as slow as a whale swimming through the deep.

Was this the Void?

Was he...dead?
As he gathered his broken consciousness and began to stand up, he looked down only to realise that he was standing on a tiny rocky islet, big enough just for him that seemed to be floating on the eternity of blue nothingness. Looking down at his clothes, he saw he was sporting that dark attire he wore when he went to the Cavyerli and traded himself for the Empress's freedom, like a fool.

*The Cavyerli...*

The moment that word resonated in his thoughts, he felt a pain erupt in the middle of his chest, like someone was jamming a spear straight through his torso, as a salty and disgusting taste filled his throat and mouth. He could only react with his pained body enough to kneel when he fell, coughing out and hacked away to try and get the awful sensation out of his tongue. But the more he coughed, the more blood spilled out from his lips, up until a point where his blood pooled in front of him, like a puddle in the rain enough to see the deep blue nothing reflected back at him. His wan face stared back at him, his hair messy, his eyes tired. Even breathing was painful. Shaking his head and gripping his fingers, he only wished that this was the Void so that he could die. Dying was much better than this agony.

But when he opened his eyes again and looked into the puddle of his blood, he saw his reflection again, but he was not alone. Staring back at him in the red mirror was a shadow of a young man with pitch black eyes. But when he looked up to see the spot where he should have been, he was met with nothing.

"Look at yourself," the shadow that looked like a young man spoke, with a voice that couldn't have been older than twenty. "Pathetic, weak, and terrified of a force you don't even know. How could you, the greatest warrior in all the Empire, have come to this?"

He tried to reply, but all that came out of his mouth was another stream of blood.

"And now, look at where you are," the shadow continued, mockingly, almost. "Close to death's door. This is the path you chose, the selfish one that brought consequences upon everyone. And now the final choice: would you like to go back, or die here and now?"

More blood cleared out of his throat, but for once, his tongue was freed and he could only manage two words that were barely audible: "Not now."

"Very well," the shadow looked impressed, and vanished from the reflection. "I don't expect to see you anytime soon, but how tempting it is to reveal myself to you. What path will you choose, I wonder? I hope the path you choose will be one where we will meet again."

And a great darkness overtook him.

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Three months didn't seem like a long time to Corvo, probably. The man was in a coma; disregarding all of the jargon the nurses and Sokolov used to describe his complicated diagnosis, it was basically like having a really long nap. So if he was to wake up (the key word in that phrase being the word "if") anytime soon, it probably would seem like he just woke up after a night of melancholy drinking.

But to Levitt, three months seemed like an eternity. At the very most, a couple of years.

Seven weeks after the incident—that is to say, a month and a half after Corvo fell into his condition—her broken leg had fully healed and she could walk around the Tower normally, but her mind was far from troubled. As she often took shifts with Curnow as temporary Royal Protectors, she had to sleep in a chair outside of the Empress' room. Sure, she had never been allowed to sleep in
the West Wing of the Tower, where the royal family slept, and a chair there would be enough luxury, but her nightmares did not let her sleep in peace. Night after night, she would wake up to a start after having dreamt horrible images of Captain Avery's burnt, tortured face being dragged into the centre of the Void by a swarm of white masks, then she would come to her senses and cry into her sleeve bitter tears of regret and anguish.

If only she was strong enough back then, maybe Avery wouldn't be watching over her ass and watch over his own. Maybe he would have lived. Maybe she wouldn't have a broken leg or cut her hair or treated everyone coldly because the only person who made her feel like she was everything and nothing at the same time was now gone. And she had taken his place; politics was cruel that way. It was a wonder how the Empress managed to live day in and day out knowing that it should have been Euhorn in her place. Her being Empress was a living tombstone and tribute to her dead father.

During her night shifts, Levitt would sometimes look down the dark candlelit hall to Corvo's door, where nurses would usually enter then leave just as quickly, except they had bloody bandages with them when they left. Looking at Corvo's door now made her feel nothing; only her aching regret and her mixed emotions. Ever since the day Corvo was admitted, she had only seen him once, when she accompanied the Empress the day he had arrived after Sokolov's emergency operation. To see the strongest guard in the Empire bedridden, bloodied, and scarred, made her heart plummet to her boots. If he couldn't beat the Cavyerli, how much more her?

And there was that matter about the implied affair going on between him and the Empress. She didn't want to believe what the Empress told her about him. That the reason why Avery died was because of his negligence as a Royal Protector.

"That night, he only thought of himself," she had said to Levitt, "and it cost Avery his life. He chose to help himself, and not you. In the end, it was both of you who paid the price for his mistakes."

The situation behind it was more than vague. But the Empress seemed to be enraged at him for something, and so she was inclined to believe that Avery's death was Corvo's fault, whatever she said about it. But it seemed nearly impossible; how could a selfish circumstance lead to Avery's demise? She was in no position to ask. But the Royal Protector wasn't there the night that they went to the Cavyerli base, and that he had "private matters" that he had to take care of…

No, presumptions were for another day.

The Empress herself was in more of a worse shape, if Levitt could say so. She was bedridden for days on end, almost like Corvo, and she could only attend a handful of meetings during a day without having to retire every so often. There was a train of nurses that followed her everywhere, and as the Captain stood outside her door, she could hear the sounds of vomiting and coughing. Her raven-black hair had lost its shine, her beautiful skin was now pale, and her emerald eyes were laden with dark circles. She ate less, and so her face was getting thinner (even though at the dinner tables, she seemed to eat twice as much as before), and her voice was almost weak. Were these perhaps the side-effects of the damage Corvo had done to her mind? Was she going insane? Was she going to become a mad ruler like all of Wallace Sharrow's plays?

"Marni?" the Empress asked suddenly, interrupting her train of thought.

The Empress was lying down on her bed as she gazed sleepily at the couch where the Captain lay. The latter stood up almost immediately; she got used to the Empress calling her by her first name.

"Yes, Your Majesty?" Levitt leaned forward.
The Empress tilted her head to the side, so that she wouldn't lock eyes with the Captain. "I know you have a million questions you want to ask. I can't promise that I know the answers to all of them, but I will try."

Levitt gulped nervously. "Y-Your Majesty, I wouldn't—"

"You want to know," the Empress interrupted, facing her, and once again, Levitt was caught off-guard by her vibrant green eyes. "There's nothing wrong with that." She gestured towards the bed. "Come, sit with me."

Levitt hesitantly approached the bed and sat on its edge, looking at her Empress as she closed her eyes, waiting for her question.

"What…?" Levitt started, "what's going on, Your Majesty? You haven't been yourself lately…are you sick?"

A small smile graced the Empress' lips. "In a way. That isn't even putting it lightly, Marni. So many things are happening…and I just want someone by my side."

The Captain looked out the window. "But you do…or at least, you did. But I'm sure Master Corvo will get better."

"And if he doesn't?"

Levitt tried to think on her feet, and rummaged for an answer in her messy head. "Then you still have me. And Curnow…and everyone here at the Tower and the Empire who still loves you and cares about you."

"I wish Corvo is still part of that group if he wakes up." It disturbed Levitt that she chose to use the word 'if' instead of 'when."

"Do you think, Your Majesty," Levitt asked out of curiosity, "that you would forgive him for what's he's done to you after this is all over?"

"I don't even know what to hate him for, what to forgive him for," the Empress shook her head and shut her eyes, then looked to Levitt. "Why? Would you forgive him for what he's done to you?"

Levitt opened her mouth to respond, but no answer came out and she shut her lips in a thin line.

There was an uncomfortable silence, and the Empress' face went blank, like she already knew that her answer deep inside. Levitt and the Empress looked out the window to Kaldwin's Bridge and the Distillery District beyond it. It was the Empress who broke the silence with a rather odd question.

"If I had a child, what would you name it?"

Levitt chose to answer the question directly first before coming up with assumptions again. "Osric, if it's a boy. Lela if it's a girl."

The Empress paused for a while, as if to think about a gruelling decision, then gestured for her to come closer. "I trust you, Marni. Let me tell you a secret."

Levitt frowned in confusion, but she put her ear closer to the Empress' mouth. And as the soft words echoed into her mind, she drew her entire body back and blinked furiously, watching for any expression in the Empress' eyes, but all she could see is the face of someone both hoping for delight and despair. She couldn't judge the Empress; despite her titles and expectations, she was
only human and yearned for longing, like so many. There would be many who would condemn her for this truth; so many that would judge and call her names that the prostitutes at the Golden Cat would rather be called.

Levitt was not one of those people.

The Captain gave a small smile and whispered very softly. "Congratulations."

Avery would be rolling in his grave.

It was on the last day of the last week of the third month when it happened.

There was a schedule that the nurses followed everyday ever since Corvo's admittance. In the morning, a nurse would come to dress his wounds then infuse a blood sugar solution to keep his digestive system working, give him a sponge bath, extract a little bit of his blood for Sokolov's antidote. Then later in the evening, another nurse would come to dress his wounds again. They followed a shift routine to make sure that Corvo did not go unwatched.

There was a young nurse, Angelica, who took the morning job that day. Carrying her tray with a small basin and fresh bandages over her shoulder, she walked into his room, smiling gently at the Royal Protector's sleeping figure; though he was in a coma, he did look rather peaceful. She set down the tray on the table on the far side of the room, so that her back would be facing him, as she began to fix the blood sugar solution in a syringe and unwrap the bandages neatly.

"Good morning, Master Attano," she said to his sleeping figure, aware that he was unable to answer as she soaked the sponge in the basin. "I hope you're having pleasant dreams in there. The Empress is rather worried about you, you know; you should get better soon. But in the meantime, would you want anything?"

"A glass of water would be nice," came the unexpected reply.

Her eyes widened as her fingers froze, and, like she knew a ghost was standing right behind her, she turned her head ever-so slowly to the Royal Protector's bed. And there she saw Corvo Attano, lying on his mattress like an old man; his wounds healed, but his body feeble. His hazel eyes opened as he offered a weak smile.

The startled nurse burst into a sprint and ran out the door, yelling for Sokolov's name down the hall and waking up everyone in the process.

Two nurses helped Corvo sit up as another nurse raised glass of water to his lips. He took it carefully with his slender hands and gulped down the contents slowly. Sokolov sat at his bedside together with his assistants, watching intently as the Royal Protector drank.

"How do you feel?" Sokolov asked.

"Like I just came straight from the Void," Corvo said feebly, with a croaky and hoarse voice, wetting his lips. His body was quite thin as he had lost a lot of muscle, and his movements lacked the deftness and swiftness that were formally in him.

"Are you hungry?" Sokolov asked again.

"Quite," Corvo replied.
"It's only normal; your digestive system is just only recovering," Sokolov informed him. "Luckily for you and your health, your coma gave me just enough time to develop an antidote to the poison given to you. It will be given to you in a daily dosage via injection; hopefully that'll take care of the problem."

"Thank you," Corvo replied, resting his head on the pillow by his back. "Thank you so much. I don't know how I should repay you."

"Making sure you don't do another stupid stunt like this is enough for me," Sokolov's snarky remark was only half a joke; Corvo really put the poor man through some much unneeded stress.

There was silence as the nurses finished with him and left the room, leaving the Royal Protector alone with Sokolov. Despite recovering from what seemed to be death, Corvo's vision was only adjusting, and the blurry images were starting to grow outlines, and he could at least hear voices well. But there was the only thought on his mind.

"What about the Empress?"

"The Empress?" Sokolov raised his brows. "Well, she's…distancing herself from you. I'm sure you understand why. She told me about your disobedience, among other things."

He sighed into his hand, his head throbbing. Of course she would tell Sokolov. "I was an idiot to ever do that to her. How is she ever going to forgive me?"

"That's for you two to deal with, not me," Sokolov shrugged. "Once you regain the strength in your legs, I suggest you man up and talk to her. It should take about two weeks? Three weeks?"

Corvo said nothing, so Sokolov went on, avoiding his eyes as he fixed up the trays that the nurses left behind.

"She's also told me about you two," he went on, making Corvo's eyes grow wide.

No, she wouldn't…

"She's told you about…us?" Corvo said softly, his world crashing down. The secret, now gone. "How could she…I thought I could…"

"You were gone for about three months, Corvo. That's an awful long time to go without someone you can share some secrets to."

Corvo's eyes went over to his sculpted hands as Sokolov stared straight at a wall.

"Well, even if she didn't tell me, I would've known either way," the Royal Physician chuckled. "Come on, Corvo, I'm not a stupid man."

"Are we…really that obvious?"

"That or I'm too smart."

Corvo sighed and leaned backwards, closing his eyes. For once, he wished he was back in the Void.

"When you're well, you two should really talk." Sokolov paused again, as if contemplating something. "You really had something special. It's the kind of love that people are willing to go through lifetimes for."
Corvo scoffed with a bit of sarcasm as Sokolov began to exit the room. "What, the forbidden kind?"

"No," Sokolov opened the door, then smiled. "The compassionate kind."

Before Corvo could even comprehend that, the door shut, sending a sound that reverberated through the silent room.

"I know what you did that night."

Corvo turned in alarm at Levitt, sitting by his bedside, with the blank look she always now had on her face, instead of her bright smile. Her visit had come unannounced, though her leg looked better than it did last time; she could even walk and run long distances. But he'd heard stories of how she was the temporary Royal Protector while he was out of commission, and to have someone like her protect someone as important as the Empress, to have the one woman he loved so dearly trust her with her life…

Trust was something he had to earn back from his Empress' heart. And it wasn't going to be easy.

"The Empress told me," Levitt continued in Corvo's silence, eyes refusing to lock with his. "She told me everything. Why you couldn't come with Avery and me that night. Why you lied to her… and me, and him."

And how he hates that word now: lied. He shut his eyes and wished it was over, but she went on.

"I won't accuse you of anything," she said, her voice and face expressionless. "I can't accuse you of anything. That was months ago, and I've changed. And you've changed. For better or worse, I don't care."

Every time he moved, he could feel the sheets against the cold skin of his legs and chest, and he's always reminded of how weak he was, how many mistakes he's made, and how physically painful those consequences were. There was a brief silence; he couldn't look at her. Now was the time.

"For what it's worth," he breathed, near quietly, letting go of the words carefully, "I'm sorry. For everything."

For the first time, he turned to Levitt, with her short hair and Captain's uniform, a remnant of her own dead superior. Her back was facing him, and he could see her shoulders rise, as if she was inhaling sharply.

"I understand if you don't want to forgive me," Corvo let the words flow out, like he did whenever he was full of emotion and refused to cry, "I understand that I did something horrible, and if you'll hate me for the rest of your life, then go ahead. It's something that I won't hold against you."

There was another silence. And Corvo looked up at Levitt just in time to see her face. It had been three months, and she looked exactly the same, but there was something mature in her blue eyes, something that had killed the childhood within her. Every single memory of an innocent glee during the more joyful times at the Tower was now gone. But then tears sprung at their end, and she wiped them away viciously, like she would be relinquished of her position if she would cry in front of him.

"I can't forgive you for what you've done," she said gravelly, and yet with so much withheld emotion. "Whatever happened that night…will stay with me until I die."
And she paused sniffing and combing back her stray locks of short hair. He remembered with regret when it was long, and how he would always recognise her running down the hallways of the Tower because her long hair flew behind her in a lengthy ponytail. Her smile every time she would race into Avery's office and bring a report. Like Avery, those memories were dead now.

"But..." she followed up, turning her gaze to his bedside table, full of bloody bandages. "I can't stay mad at you forever. I know you're better than all those mistakes, Master Corvo. You always have been. And you can overcome them now."

Corvo felt the emotions well up in his throat. He didn't deserve this. He looked down and shook his head, whispering 'no' constantly, like a cursed mantra. Then suddenly a hand grabbed his arm, and his gaze shot up to see Levitt, crying, her face burning with defiance. His heart shattered into pieces right there.

"I believe in you," Levitt whimpered with strength through her tears. "I'm placing my trust in you one last time. Be the Royal Protector I know you are. Don't fail me again."

And before he could react, she embraced him tightly and sobbed into his shoulder. He could do nothing else but hold her tight as she wept for herself, wept for Corvo, for her Empress and for Avery. Corvo shut his eyes and the tears wouldn't fall, but he held her close as she hugged him tight, like she would lose him like she lost Avery if she were to let go.

Two weeks had passed. With a good diet, obedient nurses, and strict sleeping schedules, Corvo was able to recover well, although he wasn't holistically healthy yet. He was still a little feeble and had a small limp when he walked, though he was already able to stand at the end of the first week, and walk after the second. The mirror at the edge of the room was something that he constantly practiced hobbling to every day, like he was a toddler relearning his first steps. However, the reflection that had greeted him upon reaching the end was often not a happy one.

Though he was still tall, his tan skin had now become wan and sickly, and whenever he lifted his shirt what met him were a few edges of bone and ribs through his stretched-out skin. His hair was matted and had lost its lustre, and even his dark-ringed eyes looked back at him pathetically. It would take a while until he could truly be called a Royal Protector again.

The sick days passed briskly. But the only thing he longed for was to meet his Empress once again with an open heart and a bended knee. To apologise for his misdeeds and shortcomings, as he should.

To say that he hadn't seen the Empress in a month was both a truth and a lie. In physicality, he did see her often every time he glanced outside in the hallway and she just managed to pass through, and their eyes would lock and she would look away just as quickly as she came. But there was something different about her; perhaps it was the invisible anger that burned on her face whenever she glanced his way, or her paler skin, but he was eager to know what was going through her head during the days he was gone. There was a hole in his chest where his heart used to be, and it beat with a palpitation he felt that was far too intense for his weak body to handle whenever he thought of her. Despite her tired appearance and aloof disposition, he still longed for her. He wanted to be with her again, but he didn't know how.

His lucky chance came that she requested via Captain Curnow that they talk by that week's Saturday. It was something that Corvo prepared for immensely, practicing his apology lines and getting ready for every single question that she would ask, up until they became the mantra he repeated to himself constantly in his sleep. Then the moment he woke up on that day, and waited for anxiousness to arrive at him later in the day, he ate his lunch with worry and paced about his
room carefully. It was about noon a few moments after his meal when Levitt came to pick him up.

Since he was still weak and his fingers weren't as dexterous as they used to be, the Captain helped him to button his dress shirt carefully.

"Nervous?" she asked, working her way upwards to his collar.

His reply came in the form of a worried sigh.

Levitt looked up at the face of the Royal Protector, and watched him as he constantly licked his lips, blinked furiously, and wiped his face like he was sweating even though it was still cold. The first time she'd seen him this way was during the first presentation of the Empress' suitors: a nervous wreck, unlike his usual silent and stoic self.

"You know," she said as she reached the halfway point, "the Empress is nervous too."

"That isn't really reassuring," Corvo admitted, and Levitt scoffed with a smile.

"If it's any solace," she reached the end of his collar, and because of his height, she had to tiptoe a little to smoothen out any wrinkles, "she hasn't seen you in a while either. And she doesn't like to admit it, but I rather think that she misses you."

Now it was Corvo's turn to scoff—sarcastically, this time, as she took his coat from the bed. "I'd like to believe that."

Levitt took great care guiding each of his long arms into the holes of his coat and helped him fix how it looked like on him. It was not the Royal Protector's coat, for that one was too thin for the weather. It was something similar to a thick banyan, not too heavy for his feeble muscles.

"Do you have any doubts?" Levitt asked quietly.

"So many…" he breathed, "I have so many."

"Like what?"

"I fear she won't love me again."

"And if she doesn't?"

Corvo shrugged.

"But you still love her, right?"

Corvo was silent.

"Come on, let's go." And Levitt took his arm and led him outside his door, carefully and slowly to make sure he wouldn't trip.

As servants and maids and nurses passed him by through the corridors of the tower, they bowed and greeted him with a smile. The halls, floors, walls, lights, and windows, seemed almost foreign to him, like he was seeing the Tower for the first time in ages, like when he was a young man, waiting to be picked as a Royal Protector. The path they were taking was one towards the gardens. And when they opened the doors to the outside, standing there at the landing when they swung open, was a figure that he thought he would never see looking at him with her green eyes ever again.
Jessamine.

The name sounded foreign to him, even now.

Levitt carefully gave Corvo over to her Empress, and she took him gently in her arms. He shuddered at her warm touch; it had been so long since she held him, since her gentle hands ever grazed his skin, and he felt a small shudder grow though him as she kept him by her side. The Captain dismissed herself with a bow, so that they were free to talk and walk about the gardens in the cloudy, cool noon air.

The gardens had never felt this uneasy before. When he was still a candidate for Royal Protector, the shrubbery, trees, the smell of grass and the Wrenhaven used to be an escape for him, something to remind him of Karnaca and home. But now, they were tainted with soiled memories, and as he and the Empress walked slowly through the groomed pathways, they were silent. The remnants of the cold wind from the Month of Ice blew through them gently, and he could only shiver in his thick coat as his Empress stood there, motionless, expressionless, away.

Occasionally, he glanced at her, only to be met with a distant ruler of four different nations that he would only meet in his wildest dreams. Brown hair tied in a neat bun without any lock out of place, a beautiful black coat with a fur collar that covered her neck, and fair skin that seemed a little bit paler than he remembered. And her eyes—oh gods, her eyes—were the things that changed the most; the brilliant green in them had dulled into a more boring shade, and they had lost their spark, the look in them that would make his heart beat wild in their midnight trysts.

But they still made his heart beat wildly now, even if they didn't look at him.

Nothing had changed. He was still a fool for her.

One of her hands was wrapped around his arm, clinging to him, like she would collapse at any moment; her other hand was pressed to her abdomen. And from the movement of the way she walked, maybe she was sick with something that she caught while he was asleep. And how badly he wanted to speak to her! All of those rehearsed lines and answers to her invisible questions vanished in his head and he lost all confidence. It was like he was around her as a child again.

The first time, again.

They didn't talk at all as they strolled around the garden and ended their little pathway in the gazebo, standing there next to her. It reminded him of the time they met and she, a young child and not even an Empress yet, gifted him a book on Serkonan history (one that he still had with him and treasured greatly), the time he had found her together with another young bachelor during the birthday ball of Secretary Varnham and where he kissed her in the rain. Was this gazebo about to witness the culmination of their relationship as well, and stand testament to a love that couldn't be?

Her arm was just about a stride's distance from him, and her body was still, as she shut her eyes and wrapped her arms around herself. Was it better to speak from his heart, to apologise before things got already even worse than they were now, or to keep his mouth shut and let them stay like this—uncomfortable yet quiet—for the rest of their lives?

"Your Majesty, I..." he said before he could even decide; his mouth, the traitor it was, "I don't know what to say to you that I know won't upset you. The words I have for myself aren't kind, and I'm not at liberty to say anything at all to gain your sympathy.

"I'm... a fool," he continued, the words spilling out again, saying everything he knew to be true, at least. "I'm an idiot, I'm a selfish bastard, I'm everything the Council used to say about me and
more. All those insults are true. I didn't think about myself and I'm sure I didn't think about you. And gods, I know I don't deserve you, I never deserved you. But if you could listen to me just this last time, I could die in peace."

Her eyes flew open, staring into the distance, but she still refused to look at him. That meant she was listening. He went on.

"Avery's dead because of me, Levitt's like this because of me, your heart's broken because of me. If only I was there that night with him, and died in his place, he'd be alive and Levitt wouldn't cry herself to sleep every night like she does now. You wouldn't have mourned for him like you did, you wouldn't have lost anyone close to you. And up until I went to the Cavyerli, I was plagued by thoughts of him, every single night.

"I won't even try to justify what I did, going to the Cavyerli. It was one of the most horrible decisions I ever made in my life. I thought I could save you, like I've always saved you, but I let it get to my head. I was wrong. I was always wrong. Gods, I'm always wrong."

And he buried his face in his own hands, his feelings pricking at the sides of his eyes, so he couldn't see the Empress turn her head to him, her eyes still apathetic but slowly cracking under the surface. He didn't expect his chest to feel this heavy.

"And I..." he covered his eyes, shutting them hard, "I know I don't deserve this position anymore. I don't deserve to serve you, to fight alongside righteous people like Levitt and Curnow. Sokolov's told me what the Council said, and how they expect me to resign after this. And I know you want me to leave you after what I've done. I know you want me to. But I'm staying."

From the corner of his eye, he saw his Empress swallow hard.

"I won't relinquish this position," he went on, looking straight at the Wrenhaven, his voice slowly cracking. "You'll have to kill me to get someone else to swear those oaths. I know that I've run out of chances to prove myself to you, so I won't ask for that. Let me stay with you; just... just let me stay by your side."

He turned to her and saw her expression contorted into one fighting sadness. He saw the tears pool at the corners of her eyes as a hand covered her mouth, her shoulders shaking. He wanted to reach out and touch her, but he felt like if he were to reach out and even put a finger on her imperial clothing, she would wilt and die away, like a rose who would be gone too soon.

"I won't pretend to know what's going on," he shook his head and went on. "I won't pretend to know what you're going through. I've been asleep for...for months and I...after all of this, I just want to stay with you. I need you, Your Majesty, I need you."

And she began to breathe heavily, blinking furiously and staring out, refusing to say a word, still. She began to calm down.

"I..." and he let it go, until all the waterfall of his emotion was dried up to the last drop, "I still love you."

And there was silence. He shut his eyes and waited for the Void to swallow up the world whole at that very moment; it was much better than standing next to her. They stayed still until he could feel the world spin under his feet, and hear every single creak his weak bones made inside his trembling body. His breathing, his heartbeat inside his empty ribcage, the rush of blood through his veins. It grew to a point where he could hear the rushing of the Wrenhaven, that the whispers of a human being sounded like the loud majestic song of a whale.
"I'm pregnant."

His eyes flew open and gravitated towards her, and he could see on her cheek, a single tear was flowing down towards her jaw, even if she stared out away from him. She was fighting to be strong; and oh, how she was much stronger than he was, in ways that he can't imagine.

Before the words could even form in his mind, and even before his reaction could come, she turned to look at him, with her trembling lips and shaking body, and her eyes said everything that hadn't been said. Sorrowful eyes and yet so full of mercy that Corvo could feel his tears returning, not allowing them to flow. In those green eyes was something that he never thought he would see in his life, something he could never even envision in his grasp, even for a young poor boy from Karnaca who became a Royal Protector: forgiveness. And with her dark clothes, teary eyes and trembling shoulders, she was so beautiful.

Suddenly, before he could react, she flung herself at him and wrapped her arms around him and pressed herself close, and sobbed into his chest: sobbed like a young girl who lost her mother, sobbed like a young heiress who lost a father, sobbed like an Empress who lost everything she loved in the world. And though he was stunned, he put his arms around her and hugged her tight, holding her and inhaling the scent of her he missed so much and the shape of her he used to know during their nights together. The sound of her cries and the feeling of her lithe limbs cradling him was a sensation he never thought he needed. And at that point, he realised just how much of himself was in her soul, in her life.

"Thank you," she whispered into his shirt, nuzzling his coat with her nose, "thank you…for not leaving me when I need you the most."

He couldn't help but smile; a great weight fell of his shoulders and he felt like a banished peasant, welcomed back home. "I would…never leave you, Jessamine."

She pulled back, her tears still flowing, looked him in the eye, smiled wide and laughed. And he swore at that moment, that his spirits flew and went up to sing with the stars. Picking her up gently by the waist, he lifted her and spun her around, as far as his strength would allow him. As the laughed and their coats billowed in the wind, he set her down gently and, with his hand, traced her jawline with the genteel of a man holding porcelain. Then he took her face and placed a kiss on her lips. It was not chaste nor was it lustful, and they stood there, motionless, as the world spun by.

When they broke, Corvo's head spun wildly; he could only recall the taste and feel of her lips barely, as if he was blessed with the sensation for the first time, like he remembered them through a dream. But hen they broke, he was greeted by her shocked face, and he immediately took a step back, away from her; a sense of dread overcame him.

"I-I'm sorry, I…" he faltered, and pushed the stray locks of his hair out of his face. "I…fuck, I shouldn't have…"

And she said nothing in reply; she only stood there, eyes wide, touching her lips.

He looked her in the eye, hands trembling. "If there's…Jessamine, if there's one thing I won't do: I will never touch you without your permission, ever again."

She took his hand from his side very carefully and, surprisingly, held it with both her tender palms, staring at it without expression, but her voice was calm and nurturing. "At least hold me, just for this moment."

He was more than happy to obey. He took her body gently and held her close, the sensation of her
body against his was a natural phenomenon. He had feared most of his memories of her would be lost in that coma, but some of them were brutally, painfully, real. And those memories were the ones plaguing him the most during the days that led up to this moment. But only then, when it was just the two of them, under the gazebo, hugging each other close, those memories became real again.

"How old is the child?" he asked, pressing his mouth to her hair. To ask if he was the father would be rather rude, but he wanted to be sure that it belonged to him. He knew Jessamine was not the type to be unfaithful, but he was gone for quite a while, and a lot could happen then.

"According to Sokolov, three months," Jessamine whispered. "I want it to be a boy, so he'll have your eyes."

*Thank the stars, it's his child.* He gave off a sigh of relief. "Really? I'd like it to be a girl, name her Drexel."

She gave off a short but adorable laugh and, for once, he wanted the Void to stay its apocalyptic hand, if only for a few moments.
Part III: Emily

Chapter Summary

In which a new life is born and a new promise is made.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the absence! I know I'm focusing on other fics at the moment (most importantly my BATB one since it's kind of short), but have this for the time being. It's the end of Part 3.

Part 4 will be incredibly short; we're talking only three chapters worth of Part 4. But they'll be the longest and most intense chapters, so while I'm busy finishing off my other stuff and drafting them, have this short snippet. Until then, I am determined to finish this story, come hell or high water.

Corvo awoke to the sound of Jessamine screaming. He didn't have to check his clock, only the guard shifts outside, to note that it was sometime around eleven in the evening. The rain had begun to pour down relentlessly, even if the Month of Rain had just begun, and though on a normal night the sound of the raindrops on the roof of the Tower would lull him to a comfortable sleep, the weeks leading to that night had been anything but comfortable.

He had found himself dozing off when he heard his Empress in pain, and immediately he jumped up from the armchair he was sleeping in and rushed to her room, which was already surrounded by an armada of nurses. He barely even had the time to get his coat, he noticed, when the draft blew through the hallways and chilled him to the bone through the thin fabric of his dress shirt. Standing there by the frame of the door, he could only see slivers of her figure through the small crowd of nurses; she was sweating and holding onto Levitt's hand as the midwife standing at the foot of her bed was talking to her as she was nodding fiercely. Before he could push himself further in, a nurse had advised him to stay outside the Empress' quarters for the time being, and he would be called in once they were done.

And with that, he was shut outside her door.

The temptation to just burst inside was real. Leaning against the wall of the corridor, arms crossed, with his fingers tapping nervously on every surface he could find, he grew increasing anxious with each nurse that would come into Jessamine's room with a water basin. He could hear her screaming beyond the walls, and he would do anything to be by her side through this hard time, as he should.

In truth, however, he had already been trying to make up for his comatose absence by being by her side as much as possible through the grueling trial of her pregnancy. Soon, the truth began to leak out through rumour-high Parliamentarians and finicky maids, and people had begun to lose their already waning trust in the Empress. The situation only worsened when she began to show, with her abdomen already increasing in size, and she had begun to seclude herself in the Tower, not showing herself to the public; this was a terrible decision, according to the Privy Council, as it
would mean that the people would begin to make their own judgments based on their suspicion, which was not entirely wrong. The support that she previously had from the citizens was decreasing as the resentment she garnered was increasing, and there were news clippings and gossip columns that were already beginning to question the identity of the father to her unborn child.

He remembered that particular morning, when she saw that article in *The Dunwall Gazette*, and she angrily threw the paper across the dining table as she shouted livid complaints to no one in particular. As he comforted her over the spilled coffee and soiled muffins, he had also read the article as she grumbled to him about how she should have shut down that propagandist, dishonest newspaper a long time ago.

There were many names enumerated in the suspect list to the father of Jessamine's child, and he could almost be enraged at the amount of people she was paired with or accused of having a relationship with. He caught some of the names of her suitors, but he also caught the name of the late Captain Avery (which must have infuriated Levitt, no doubt, to see the name of her honourable captain slandered in this way), and even Captain Curnow (who he was sure was more offended at the prospect of even laying a finger on the Empress).

But then, he didn't know what to feel when he saw his name among the suspects to the father of her child.

It wasn't that they were being obvious, no. They both made plenty of precautions as to make sure that their secret relationship stayed a secret. But there were times when he began to doubt if he was really careful in making sure he didn't mark her neck with bites that he gave her from their tryst that one night, or if the discreet touches in the hallway or under the dining table were actually discreet at all. Now, with the birth of this child, it could only solidify all of the people who began to look at him as a paramour to the Empress a solid fact. It simply gave them more evidence, and gave him less of an argument.

He could almost hate himself for being too callous and too preoccupied with himself, that tragic night nine months ago. Perhaps he was too careless or both of them forgot about actually not making her conceive. Either way, there was nothing he could do to stop him from blaming himself, no matter what Jessamine could say.

Could he blame the child? No, he answered to himself, he could never blame the child for his own faults. They were his and his alone; no other human should atone for what he had done.

"Master Attano?" a small voice peeked through the door of Jessamine, nearly startling him as he got up from the wall; it was Louisa, the midwife. "She's done, Sir. The birth was a success."

He huffed a sigh in reply as he wiped his tired face; he hadn't slept in nearly five hours, after they had timed the start of Jessamine's going into labour. The guard shifts in the hallway told him it was most likely two or three in the morning. "Great….that's great. How is she?"

"She's doing well," Louisa smiled. "She'll have to rest the following week, and we'll have to inform Master Sokolov about her condition so he can monitor her if ever she or the baby have problems."

He nodded; most of those words went right through his ear. "Jessamine's alright?"

"Oh, she's doing well," Louisa replied. "Her pulse is good and her colour is better than average, for someone who just gave birth. She'll have to rest tonight and the rest of the week, though."

"That's fine. What about the baby?"
"The baby is healthy as well," Louisa clasped her hands together as she leaned back on the door, pushing it open a little. "Would you like to see them?"

Corvo took a large gulp and flexed his hands. He was about to see his own child, and whether or not he was supposed to keep it a secret, he didn't bother to hide the fact that he was nervous. With an apprehensive nod, he stepped inside, and Louisa was kind enough to close the door behind him.

The room was occupied with only two nurses who smiled as he entered; one was busy cleaning the basins of water and blood in the corner, and the other was assisting her with folding the stained nightwear of Jessamine. Corvo was a battle-hardened soldier, taught to kill and to protect all his life, but seeing this much blood could make him squeamish. On the bed, illuminated by the bedside lamp which cast warm shadows all over the room, was Jessamine, clothed in a new nightgown, with the covers pulled up to her waist. He could almost sigh in relief at the fact that she was breathing, and the look in her eyes when he turned to her made his heart melt, as it always did and always will. She smiled at him as he approached and knelt next to her bedside, brushing a stray lock of hair away from her face. Though she was pale, sweating, and tired, she was smiling, and whether it was because the trials or pregnancy was over, that was all that mattered to him.

But what he noticed only later was that lying on Jessamine's chest, being cradled by her arms, was a small bundle of...something moving, swathed in blankets of white. As he raised his head and she moved it a little ways into the light, he could make the figure of small hands opening and closing and a head, with bright twinkling eyes and small coos and cries that were as delicate as the sound of the rain outside.

"It's a girl," Jessamine whispered. "Would you like to hold her?"

Corvo's entire being was shaking, and with a nod, he carefully took the baby in his arms and gazed at his daughter properly for the first time.

She had fair, unblemished skin, bright eyes, and a voice as clear as it was soft-spoken and unintelligible. Her fingers, despite being little, were well-carved and angular, full of vigour as she tried to reach out and touch his face. There was a restless kind of spirit in her, tenacious and daring, and whether it manifested in her little movements and sounds, it was evident.

It was then that Corvo was conquered by a strange feeling that welled in his chest. He was suddenly aware of the fact that this baby, this small, tiny, helpless human being, was born of his own blood. Secret or not, known to many or little, this was his child. And when he looked at her, there was this sense of both trepidation and an indescribable amount of joy that overtook his bloodstream. He could be scared, that was true; this child had taken his heart at a mere glance and should anything happen to her, it would completely ruin him, but that sense of fear was immediately conquered by the oath that he swore then, that he would never let anything harm her, not a hair on her head would be touched by anything terrible in the world. The happiness that grasped him filled him with a beautiful feeling of bliss, of love. He couldn't think of anything better in the world than to give everything for this child, for his daughter. He had immediately fallen in love with her, and every sound she made, every mannerism she did with her little fingers as she reached up to grab the long strands of his messy hair, made him want to love her even more. He was willing to move mountains, to drink oceans, to die, for her.

"Corvo," Jessamine sounded like she was laughing, from the mirth of her voice. "You're tearing up."

Corvo immediately went to touch his eyes with his free hand, only to discover that the edges of his eyes were wet with tears. He let out a chuckle at his own emotional vulnerability, and didn't mind that it was a baby that brought it out, of all people that would.
"She's beautiful, isn't she?" she smiled softly.

"She is," Corvo was transfixed by the lovely features of his daughter. "She gets it from you."

"But you know," she whispered, so that of all the people in the room, only he could hear her, "she has your eyes. I'm grateful for that."

He looked into her eyes more carefully, and noted suddenly that unlike Jessamine's beautiful green irises, his daughter's were brown, a light hazel, the colour of the bark of the trees back home in Karnaca, eyes like his. It made him charmed by her more.

"I love her," Corvo let the words spill. "I love her so much."

"What would you like to name her?" Jessamine asked him as she looked up.

A thousand names spun through his mind, but he thought that he could never match her loveliness, and yet he blurted the first thing that he thought struck him. "Drexel." Then it hit him. "On second thought, never mind; that's a terrible name."

Jessamine giggled. "No, that's fine. I was actually thinking about how Emily would sound."

"Emily," he tasted it on his tongue, and looked at the baby, who could only coo in affirmation. "That's beautiful."

"I've thought of her full name," Jessamine leaned back on her pillow. "Emily...yes, Emily Drexel Lela Kaldwin. She'll retain the name Kaldwin so she could inherit the throne."

It didn't offend him one bit that she didn't use the name Attano, because then it would give her away to the terrible grasp of rumour, and it meant that Dunwall had no heir. He would rather that she take her mother's name instead, give her a life of luxury and freedom, even at the price of his ownership. He was willing to let this child live her life without ever knowing the true identity of her father, and though it would pain her, it would hurt her even more if she would learn the truth. Both Corvo and Jessamine knew in that silence that she should only know when one of them was gone from the world, and hopefully, that wouldn't come soon. Until then, if it was to ever come, she would live in the sheltered life her mother felt she deserved, a life that Corvo wanted her to have as well. He wouldn't settle for anything less.

"Oh, Corvo..." she sighed, closing her eyes as the baby tried to reach out at Corvo. "I'm so happy..."

He could only listen and smile in affirmation, as the nurses shuffled in the corner, as Louisa fixed all of her materials, as the infant sounds of his daughter bubbled in his arms, the rain poured on outside, in the cold night air of Dunwall. It was on that day that the next heir to the Kaldwin line was born, and a vital catalyst in the events of the world to come came into life.

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