taking back the crown
by orphan_account

Summary

Crown Prince Sorey of Rolance has always been a dreamer, an idealist who dreams of a world where people are free and no meaningless wars can claim anymore lives, innocent or not. So it's natural that he plans on pursuing friendly relations with Rolance's sworn enemy, Hyland, when he becomes emperor.

Obviously, that's not what happens, and instead of ascending to the throne as emperor, Sorey finds himself bound in chains, his authority as Crown Prince stripped away from him, and sent to Hyland as a slave to its own Crown Prince, who's well-known for his unrelenting hatred for Rolance.

Can anything get worse than this? Apparently, yes.

Notes

oops.
Chapter 1

The first thing Sorey notices when he wakes is that he's gagged.

That, and his arms are bound behind him. He groggily sits up, groaning when pain cuts through his senses. Sorey's head is pounding, and it's not because he was forced again to drink until he passed out last night. No, not at all: he took a painful blow to the head. It's a sneaky, dishonourable thing to do in a fight, but then again, a one against ten fight isn't fair to begin with. Sorey shakes his head, trying to clear his mind, and he forces himself to open his eyes and adjust to the darkness. He's in a small, dark room, that's for sure, with only a barred window behind him, a closed, metal door, and nothing else. There's nothing to find about in this room, even a way out, because the binds around Sorey's arms are chained to the floor. He exhales through his nose, obviously stumped about his situation.

He doesn't know what's going on, and he needs to find out. Sorey has to; he has no other choice. As he thinks that, the metal door opens with a shrill, metallic creak. Sorey rapidly blinks, eyes adjusting to the harsh light as Symmone and an unknown soldier enter the room. There's a moment of silence, bright green looking at clouded violet, then Sorey lunges forward.

Symmone doesn't even flinch, even with Sorey's harsh glare, as the chain on his binds holds him back. She's smiling that usual, lazy smile she wears, but against the light, it's much more taunting, evil.

Somehow, that's one thing about her that Sorey finally learns.

"Take the gag off," Symmone orders, and the soldier obeys, warily stepping towards Sorey to remove the gag. He lets him, and when it's taken off, he takes a quick moment to feel his mouth again, making sure there's nothing missing (a tooth, perhaps?), and relishing in the smallest freedom granted to him. Sorey then takes a deep breath, calming himself.

"You know you're going to be beheaded for this, right?" Sorey starts, slowly, "even I can't do anything about it. This is treason, Symmone."

Symmone smirks. "Oh, I won't be, Shepherd," she says in a mocking tone, and Sorey fights the urge to grit his teeth. 'I've been sent here to check on you. As things look, you have not the slightest idea what's going on." She shrugs. "But that's to be expected from a naive little child like you, who loves to play prince."

"Just," Sorey growls, "get to the point already."

Symmone laughs, and Sorey realises that he's been clenching his fists behind him. He forces himself to stop. "You're actually cute when you're mad," she says, "but you're right. My master won't be happy if I take too long tormenting you." Sorey freezes at that, and he narrows his eyes at her.

"What do you mean?"

"Your father, the Emperor, is dead, Your Highness," Symmone says with a smile, and it gets wider as Sorey eyes widen. His feels his blood run cold. "And Heldalf has claimed the throne---you're no longer the Crown Prince of Rolance, slave."

Sorey struggles desperately against his binds again, pulling against the chains as Symmone turns to
leave the room. "Wait!" he screams, and he feels the thick leather bite against his skin. "Symmone, stop!"

"He's noisy," Symmone tells the soldier on standby.

"Symmone!"

"Shut him up, will you?"

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Sorey wakes again with his head hurting and mouth gagged, and he has to wonder for a moment how many times he's going to be hit on the head from here on out. Hopefully not that much, and that he'll be able to escape soon. Sorey slowly sits up, and while he's still bound in chains and completely immobile, he realises he's no longer in the dark room he was in, and that he's been cleaned and changed.

Although, if he has to be honest, he much prefers the black shirt and pants he's been wearing before, despite them being caked in dirt and blood.

Sorey's skin has been oiled, showing off his tanned skin and muscles much better against the light, and obviously for that to be seen, his clothing is...much more revealing. It's almost like he's been forced to wear a rag of expensive silk, meant to cover only the intimate part of his body, and Sorey has to admit: he feels humiliated, and that's before he realises where he is.

He's in a lit hall with pedestal lining the halls and nothing else, and while he's not on one---being chained to the floor and all---Sorey feels dread and disgust crawl on his back. Despite the lack of decoration to identify the room, he knows this place. He's been here so many times, disgust churning in his insides whenever they tell him to choose a woman to bed for the night, and he always, always chooses one and sets her free that night, making promises to free her fellow slaves when he becomes emperor, because it's all he can do for now---though Crown Prince, he's still practically powerless in the state's affairs.

---Sorey is in a showroom for slaves.

Sorey has made the promise to abolish slavery so many times, confident that he'll be able to do it---he's the Crown Prince, for Maotelus' sake---but how can he abolish slavery once and for all, when he himself is going to be made a slave?

He struggles again in his binds, desperate to break free. He has to get out of here; he has to. Sorey needs to get to the bottom of this, to make Heldalf stop, whatever this is he's doing. There has to be a reason. Sorey still can't---won't believe what Symmone told him. His own brother, betraying him? Even if they're not truly brother in a sense, with different mothers and years separating them, Sorey knows Heldalf loves him, and he does, too. Heldalf was the one who taught Sorey everything he knows, from sword fighting to the belief he's held on his whole life: that everyone deserves to live and to truly know what freedom is.

So, why---?

Sorey's despair is cut short when the grand doors leading to the showroom open. He looks up, and he sees Symmone enter the room with two soldiers as escorts and an older man who has his own pair of escorts as well. The man's clothes is vastly different from Symmone's simple yet elegant clothes: full of details and laces and straps, and it tells Sorey enough about this man.

He's from Hyland.
"This is the gift?" the man says, and Symmone smiles her creepy smile at him before replying.

"Yes. Dashing, isn't it? Our Emperor himself chose this. Be grateful."

"He's bound and gagged," the man points out, and for emphasis, Sorey pulls against the chains, looking hard at the pair as the man takes a step back. "He's wild!" he cries, and Sorey flinches at that. He's not an animal. Symmone shrugs, obviously entertained, and Sorey redirects his stare at only her instead.

"He's a prisoner punished to be a slave, and untrained," she explains. "Isn't that better, though? Won't your Prince be pleased breaking him and bending him to his will? We heard he likes that."

"The Prince merely toys with everything he gets like a spoiled little brat," the man says, "but I suppose he'll make good use of a slave gifted by Rolance." he looks at Sorey, who returns his gaze, and the man studies him this time, though still keeping distance. "He is of good taste, I'll give Emperor Heldalf that." He pauses, and then, "he wears feathered earrings."

Sorey blinks, and he realises that yes, he does still wear his earrings. They haven't removed them. He's had them since childhood, really. They're his most well-known feature---even the feathers are in his crest.

Symmone merely shrugs. "Our late prince was popular among the masses." Late Prince---"Feathered earrings are just as so. You want to take them off?"

There's a moment of silence before the man shakes his head. "Let them be. The Prince decides what he wants to do with them. I have no use altering something that's not for me."

"Then you accept this gift for the prince, Chancellor Bartlow?"

"Yes, yes," the man, Bartlow, says, waving his hand in dismissal as he turns to leave, and Symmone follow with a knowing look in her eyes. "What is the slave's name?"

"Whatever the Prince wishes," she replies, stepping away from the doors to let Bartlow pass. "But the Emperor suggested to name him Sorey." She looks at Sorey, her smile taunting. "If you look closely, the slave heavily resembles our dead Prince. I'm sure His Highness would love it."

Sorey doesn't hear what Bartlow says, as he has already left the showroom, and Symmone lingers for a moment, still looking at him with that deprecating smile before she slithers out, and once again, Sorey is alone in the showroom, struggling in his restraints.
Mikleo rolls his eyes before releasing his arrow. It’s a bullseye, and Zaveid whistles again.

“Nice.”

“Won’t you shut up?” Mikleo says, turning to look at Zaveid, and the soldier just grins at him. He
puts down his bow to the nearest table, takes off his quiver and his glove before tossing all three to Zaveid. He easily catches them as Mikleo huffs. “Fine, but I won’t go to the harbour to see Bartlow; I’ll only see my gift, whatever it is. Would that be good enough?”

Zaveid shrugs, making his way to Mikleo’s locker by the entrance of the shooting range. “I believe so. I don’t think the Regent wants any formality, just word that you didn’t start any trouble again.”

Mikleo crosses his arms, and he leans against the table where he had put his bow as he watches his captain put away his things by stuffing them into his locker. “The gift, what is it? Do you know?”

Zaveid pauses for a moment, thinking, then he slams Mikleo’s locker shut with unnecessary force. Mikleo frowns. He has given up telling Zaveid off about that awful habit, and it’s just a matter of time until they have to replace his locker again. “I believe it’s a slave, Your Highness.”

Mikleo takes a second to process that, then he raises an eyebrow at Zaveid. “A slave? We don’t do slavery.”

His captain snorts, shaking his head. “Yeah, we just hire pets.”

“I don’t do that, either.”

“And it’s not that popular a practise anymore,” Zaveid agrees. “You’ll figure out what to do with him, eventually,” he says. “He’s from Rolance, given to you as something for you to do whatever you want. Make him suffer, or something. Hell, kill him already and get it over with. It’s not like they’re going to throw a fit because you killed what’s already yours.” Mikleo just stares at his captain, and Zaveid stares back at his prince. “…What?”

Mikleo sighs, and he pushes himself off the table he’s leaning on. “Uncle won’t allow that,” he says. “Rolance won’t, but he certainly will. Something about maintaining a good image.” He scoffs. “Our image to Rolance is just as ruined as their image is to us. It doesn’t really matter at this point.

“Bring the slave to a room near mine, and I’ll see him,” Mikleo orders, walking past his captain and out of the shooting range. “And Zaveid.”

The soldier stops on his tracks, looking at Mikleo as he expects an order, so he continues. “Touch me again, and I will stab your hand. Again.”

“Ouch,” Zaveid replies as Mikleo continues walking. “Okay, I won’t do it again. I should’ve learned from last time.”

“You really should have.”

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At least, Sorey decides, Hyland’s Crown Prince is kind enough to give him a lavish room, and by lavish, he means really lavish. This is not a room for a slave, with its intricate wall carvings and expensive furnishing. Servants had even treated his wounds that were the result of his thick restraints on his arms and gave him proper clothing, much to his relief. Two guards are stationed outside, meant to make sure Sorey doesn’t try anything. Besides that, no one could’ve suspected that this is a slave’s room, until they see the chains cuffed around Sorey’s right ankle and to the floor and the leather restraints on his arms.

He sits in his bed, marvelling at the silken sheets on his bed as well as the soft, velvet pillows. This is too generous, he thinks, for a prince who hates Rolance to his very core. Sorey knows Crown
Prince Mikleo’s hatred for Rolance, ever since the war that claimed Crown Princess Alisha’s life. He’s never known it personally, though; he wasn’t in that fight, but he could imagine the grief Prince Mikleo experienced after his dear sister’s death.

It was one thing he was hoping to fix when he’s crowned emperor, but of course he’s going to meet the Crown Prince like this. Of course.

His thoughts are cut short when the door to his room opens. Sorey blinks, and for a moment, he stops thinking, and maybe his mouth hangs slightly open at the sight.

With an air of grace and elegance, a fair-haired man enters his room. Young, maybe the same age as Sorey, and fair-skinned with sophisticated amethyst eyes and lithe build. With his bangs slicked back, Sorey can see the golden circlet resting on his forehead, and really, even without the high-neck regal clothes and twin capes and that one piece of expensive jewellery, it’s easy to tell that he’s Mikleo, Crown Prince of Hyland.

Mikleo raises an eyebrow at him. Sorey snaps back to reality, and only then does he realise that Mikleo has a soldier with him. Long haired, tanned, and for some reason, topless, the only reason Sorey is able to identify him as a soldier is the way Mikleo addresses him, in Hyland’s native tongue. Sorey understands the conversation, though; he learned the language in anticipation for the day they meet.

“Captain, this is the slave?”

The tanned man nods. “This is him, Your Highness.”

“What of the Chancellor?”

“Already left,” the soldier replies, and he looks at Sorey, narrowing his eyes before motioning at him. At first, Sorey can’t tell what it is the soldier is trying to tell him, until he realises, oh, he has to greet the prince.

He’s not sure what it is that’s stopping him, though: the fact that he doesn’t know how, or the fact that he’s never a slave.

Sorey decides that it’s both, despite the urge to please the lovely prince. This is the man he wants to make peace with, but they’re not supposed to meet like this.

They’re supposed to meet on equal grounds: an emperor meeting a king.

The soldier slaps a hand to his forehead, obviously disappointed at Sorey’s lack of reaction, but Mikleo ignores him, and he approaches Sorey, kneeling in front of him. Amethyst eyes study him for a moment, and Sorey notices Mikleo’s eyes flicker to the side, before looking back at him.

“What’s your name?” Mikleo asks, still in Hylandic, and Sorey purses his lips for a moment, not knowing what to say. What’s he supposed to say? Hi, I’m Sorey. My brother betrayed me and gave me to you as a gift. Nice to meet you.

That will yield disastrous results.

The soldier behind Mikleo makes a face. “I don’t think he understands, Your Highness,” he supplies helpfully, and Mikleo sighs. Sorey shakes his head, though, and Mikleo blinks.

“No, that’s---” Sorey starts in Hylandic and promptly stops, not knowing what to say. He doesn’t know what name to give, but he remembers Symmone’s words.
“...My name is yours to give,” Sorey says, slowly. There’s a moment of silence, Mikleo considering his words for a moment, thinking, and Sorey fidgets in his bed. This is awkward, with the Prince kneeling in front of him, and him sitting in the bed. This is awkward, indeed.

“Ah,” the soldier suddenly says, and Mikleo turns to look at him, and when he speaks, his tone is laced with irritation.

“What now, Zaveid?”

“Chancellor Bartlow says that Emperor Heldalf suggests to name him Sorey,” Zaveid says, “after the dead prince.” Then he looks pointedly at Sorey. It takes him a moment to realise that Zaveid is looking at his earrings.

Mikleo looks back at Sorey, tilting his head to the side, before a small smile graces his lips. Mikleo smiles so sweetly, so innocently, that when he reaches out a hand to caress Sorey’s face, he leans into his touch instinctively.

Mikleo’s hand is soft.

Then his fingers close around Sorey’s earring and tears it off his ear.

Sorey yelps in pain, immediately flinching away from Mikleo as he stands up, looking at the earring in absolute disgust. In the middle of Sorey’s repulsed reaction, he hears Zaveid remark “ouch.” Mikleo then subjects the look at Sorey, whose eyes are wide at the Prince in shock, his ear bleeding profusely.

“Sorey it is, then,” Mikleo says, “I hope you know how glad I am he’s dead. I just wish he died by my hand.”

He turns to face Zaveid, and he tosses the ruined earring to him. “Tell Uncle I’m grateful for the gift, but I don’t need trash in my manor,” he tells his captain. “He can have him. He can even fuck him senseless if he wants. I don’t care. Just get him out of my manor.”

Sorey watches Mikleo leave the room, not sparing him another glance. There’s silence, and his ear is throbbing painfully. He’s sure a chunk of flesh the earring clung to was taken off along with it, but he’s most likely just overreacting, his mind still in shock at what transpired. His shock is definitely obvious in his face, as Zaveid sighs after a moment and runs a hand through his hair. He pockets Sorey’s earring before coming towards him.

“Yikes,” he says, and he reaches out to Sorey’s other earring, and he instinctively flinches away from Zaveid, too. At least Zaveid has the courtesy to retract his hand, raising it in surrender.

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“Relax, kid. I’m not the Prince,” Zaveid reassures. “I ain’t yanking the other one off. Maybe you want me to take it off for you so you don’t look like an idiot having a bleeding ear and an earring on the other. It gets obvious you had the other forcefully pulled off, and that’s embarrassing.”

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Sorey is still for a moment, but he eventually nods, and he lets Zaveid carefully take the other one off. Once it’s done, he fishes out a handkerchief and offers it to Sorey. He just stares at it, though, until Zaveid realises his arms are still bound behind him.

“Oh.” And Zaveid awkwardly presses it against his injured ear. “Yikes,” he says again.
“…Thanks,” Sorey replies.

“Don’t mention it,” Zaveid says. “Man, he tore you a new one.” Sorey keeps his face passive at that remark. “Sorey, huh? That’s like, a taboo word in his household. Congrats, kid, you’re the family’s black sheep.”

It does not make Sorey feel better. “He wants me out of his manor, and possibly his life.” Hopefully he gets to leave Hyland, too.

“Yeah, but no can do,” Zaveid replies. “The Regent won’t let that happen. Whether the Prince likes it or not, you’re stuck here.” Zaveid shrugs. “I even suggested he kills you so you don’t have to suffer so much.”

Sorey sputters at that. “What?”

“…Never mind,” Zaveid immediately says. He retracts his hand, and he looks pleased when he finds that Sorey’s ear is no longer bleeding. “You owe me a handkerchief, kid,” Zaveid says. “I’ll send a medic to take care of that, and for formality’s sake, I’ll tell the Regent about what the Prince said. He’ll say no, I know; I’m a boring adult, too, and I really feel sorry for you.”

Before Sorey can say anything else, Zaveid leaves and closes the door behind him, and he hears a click, probably Zaveid locking it from outside.

Chapter End Notes

lockers are not a thing during the medieval ages. do not trust me. i also tried to google if ears bleed when the earring gets forcefully torn off and i cant find anything. so i just assumed the stupidest: yes they bleed. a lot. or maybe not. i dont know. sorry.

i love zaveid. hes great. i hope nothing happens to him. also sorry for mikleo. he has reasons, i swear, and hes nice, or zaveid wouldnt only get a knife in the hand with how he behaves around mikleo. honestly, zaveid is the walking definition of "yikes."
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes.

Nothing happens after that fateful encounter with Mikleo. A medic did come to treat Sorey's ear. His ear managed to heal with little to no problems. Just a stitch to close the gap that was made after Mikleo tore his earring off, and he's good as new, mostly. But after that, and the days that follow, nothing happens. Sorey thinks it's been three days since then, three days entirely full of nothing. He sleeps, he watches the clouds drift by from his barred window, he eats, and, actually, trying to figure out which era mostly influenced the detailed and lavish carving in his walls is a great pass time. With the twists and curls of the carvings, Sorey is definitely sure Era of Asgard has no place in the Hylandic arts, mostly because geometrical patterns and shapes were what flourished in Asgardian arts, and---

Ugh. It's three days of nothing and no human interaction whatsoever save for the servants coming and going to do their job, and they don't even respond to Sorey's hellos. Does he expect them to respond to what he thinks about the carvings in his walls? No. Even the soldiers stationed outside his room aren't as friendly as Zaveid is, so that's a no go for information collecting, too. They don't talk. At all. Or maybe Sorey just needs to press his ear against the door to hear them, if he can even reach his door. The chain limits his movements.

So it's nothing, basically.

It's afternoon. In an attempt to dodge the harsh rays of the afternoon sun, Sorey's face is buried into the soft pillows when he hears his door open. He looks up, and his face immediately lightens up when he sees Zaveid walk into the room. The older immediately stops walking after seeing Sorey's face, and he frowns.

"Stop looking at me like that," he says, and Sorey slowly puts his head down and against the pillows, peeking silently at the soldier. Zaveid's frown turns into something unreadable, for some reason. "Stop looking at me like that," Zaveid says again, "I'm not into guys, and definitely not teenagers. Geez, you're about the same age as the Prince."

It's Sorey's turn to frown, and he raises his head from his pillows before sitting up. "What? I'm just glad to see you again! I've been sitting here doing nothing for three days. Day and night. Alone. It's insane! I'd like at least a book to read."

Zaveid makes a completely revolting sound. "Ugh, of all things, you ask for a book?" he says. "By Maotelus, don't tell me you're one of those guys. You're one hell of a slave."

"What?"

"Forget it," Zaveid grumbles. "I'm here to get you. We're going out."

Sorey blinks. "Really?"

"No," Zaveid replies, "just you. Not me. The Prince summons you to the monthly banquet." He pauses. "You're freaking lucky it just so happens when you just got here."

Sorey blinks, confused. That does not make any sense. Zaveid walks out the room before he can say anything, though, and servants rush in to his room. One unbuckles the chain around his ankle while another works with the binds on his arms.
"Don't do anything funny," Zaveid calls out. Sorey can hear his muffled voice opposite of the door. Of course, Sorey thinks with a sigh. He won't attempt escaping like this.

After that's done, the servant that took off his binds covers his eyes with a blindfold, and it doesn't take long before Sorey realises they're undressing him. He feels his cheeks grow warm at this; he's never had any servants undress him like this, not since his childhood. He'd stopped the habit long ago.

He first thinks they're going to bathe him right here, and he thinks that's going to be really messy, but he feels a cloth draped around him, then he's being led out of his room.

Sorey tries to count every step and take note of every turn. This might be his only chance to know the manor's twists and turns and make his own mental map of it, at least until the bathroom. It turns out fruitless; Zaveid manages to startle Sorey, telling the servant they're going the wrong way, and then he doesn't know where they're going anymore. He sighs when he hears heavy wooden doors being pushed open.

He steps into the baths, still blindfolded, and the first thing he notices is the warm, moist air. The blindfold is taken off, and Sorey finds himself blinking, surrounded by smooth, untainted marble. The deep concave in the middle of the baths is filled to the brim with warm water, and to the side of it is an assortment of oils and soaps. Sorey hears the servants leave the room, and he blinks, a bit astonished. They're letting him use a luxurious bath like this?

"Hey," a voice says behind him, and Sorey jumps, turning behind him so fast the cloth draped around him almost falls off, and he clutches onto it like his life depends on it.

"Zaveid!" Sorey almost shrieks, and the other looks just as surprised as he is, though Sorey can't even imagine why Zaveid will look so surprised.

"What the hell?" Zaveid says with a frown, "what's getting you all jittery?"

"You're in the baths with me," Sorey points out. "You don't just walk in on someone bathing!"

"So? You haven't even started yet. You're getting all embarrassed being seen naked by another?" Zaveid scoff. "You're acting like a cherry boy who hasn't been laid yet." When Sorey just stares at him, though, it's Zaveid's turn to get embarrassed. "Oh my God."

Sorey can't deal with this, and they've only talked once before. "What are you doing here?"

Zaveid looks absolutely relieved with the question that he answers immediately. "What, you think no one's gonna make sure you don't do anything fishy and try to jump out the window naked?"

"So you're here to guard me."

"Duh, and the Prince wants to get all nice with you and dump this to your tub." He shows Sorey a waxed cube. Well, he thinks it is; he's not sure what's this supposed to be.

"What's that?"

"Scented oil. I think it's one he uses," Zaveid explains, and he walks past Sorey to throw it into the water. Sorey watches it melt into the warm water, and he can smell something akin to lavender or anemone. It smells good. "Nice, eh?" Zaveid says. "It's supposed to relax you or something. Your arms are probably aching so bad from being bound for so long, so this should help."

"Oh," Sorey says, and he finally decides to take off his cloth and dip himself into the warm water.
As soon as he's soaked in, he sighs, feeling the tension in his body disappear. "This is kind of him," Sorey says, and he hears Zaveid snort behind him.

"He lets you bleed and is more than okay with you getting done by his uncle, but he gives you a scented oil and you call him nice," Zaveid says, obviously taken aback by Sorey's statement, but he sounds amused. "You're something else, but I guess he's merciful now and then. You enjoy your soak, kid. Make it count. Maotelus knows when's the next time you get to bathe again."

Sorey turns to see Zaveid making his way out of the baths, and he calls out to him. "I thought you're going to keep an eye on me."

"I don't think you're the kind of guy to jump out the window naked," Zaveid says, and honestly, he's right. "And you were screaming a while ago. We're not going to have fun here."

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Sorey falls asleep in the middle of his soaking.

At least he didn't drown in his sleep. Someone pats a hand on his shoulder, and he jolts awake. Blearily blinking, Sorey looks around his surroundings, completely confused. Marbled walls and warm water, where is...?

He turns behind him, and he sees two servants standing, waiting for him. One holds a cloth to dry himself with, and the other holds a box almost as big as his torso. Sorey blinks, and it takes him a moment to remember the situation he's in.

Well, then.

He splashes water onto his face to wake himself up before standing and stepping out of the water and onto the marble floor. The servant with the cloth steps forward, about to dry him, but Sorey raises a hand. "No, I'm fine. I'll do it myself. Thank you."

The servant blinks, and he looks at his companion with the box, who looks back at him. He returns his gaze to Sorey before nodding, and he hands him the cloth. Sorey goes to mind his own business, drying himself off, while he hears the two servants busy themselves with the box. He supposes the box has what it is he's about to wear, and he hopes it's just as decent as his clothing before.

He...doesn't get what he's hoping for. While technically, Sorey is fully clothed, it's excruciatingly thin, exposing him fully well enough, save for the intimate parts of his body. It's a simple thin white garb, looking like a chiton, and one of the servants steps closer to him and clasps an earring on his uninjured ear. It's a bit heavy, and when he looks at the mirror handed to him, Sorey finds that it's gold, embedded with diamond.

Sorey looks at the servant incredulously. "Slaves here wear this?"

The servant is quiet for a moment, but he replies, eventually. "There are no slaves in Hyland," he says, matter of factly, "there are pets, and they wear jewellery. You are technically considered as one."

It doesn't make sense to Sorey, but he supposes he'll understand soon enough.

The jewellery doesn't stop there. They clasp a golden brace around Sorey's left wrist, and it's peppered with fine stones: sapphire, ruby, amethyst. The amethyst stones make Sorey think of Mikleo's eyes, and he frowns before shaking his head. The fingers in his right hand is filled to the
brim with rings of gold with different stones, and he's made to wear a golden bracelet of diamonds on the same wrist. Three golden necklaces that hang loosely around his neck, a golden armband and a golden earcuff that they put at the top of his other ear, a good distance from his wound.

They're kind of heavy.

Sorey is clenching and unclenching his right hand, testing the feel of the rings when he feels a sharp bite of cold on his ankles, and he flinches. He hears chains cling at his movement, and when he looks down, sure enough, his ankles are cuffed with chains made of gold. Again. This is too much gold for his tastes.

"I really don't mind getting chained and all," Sorey says, "but this stuff is too heavy. This isn't really practical."

The servants look at each other. "You're the Prince's pet," replies one of the servants, as if this isn't that hard to understand.

That really isn't much of an answer for Sorey, but before he can say anything else, the servants bow before him and they hurry out of the room. He frowns. Everyone seems to like to walk out on him before he can say anything else.

Zaveid peeks in from the wooden doors a few seconds later. He blinks, and he stares at Sorey for a moment before making a face. "That's a lot of gold."

"I know," Sorey says dumbly. Zaveid chuckles in response.

"Well, you know, you're the Prince's property, so you gotta look, well." Zaveid steps into the baths before giving Sorey a once-over, and then he scratches the back of his head. "I was gonna say presentable, but considering that thin veil you call clothing, I guess I'll just go with expensive."

"I don't really think this is clothing to begin with," Sorey says before sighing. "Is there anything else? I really want to get this over with and return to my room."

"I thought you wanna go out?"

"Not anymore."

--

The walk to the banquet is pretty eventful, to say the least, thanks to Zaveid. Sorey is still blindfolded when they traverse through the courtyard, and Zaveid literally won't shut up, successfully distracting Sorey from trying to take note of the steps and turns they take. He thinks Zaveid is doing it on purpose. Though Zaveid treats him like a friend, Sorey supposes that's much more loyal to his prince.

It's a long walk, but they eventually reach the venue. He's expecting a grand hall with a long table filled with food, the nobles sitting the table and being served by servants, with music playing in the background. With the blindfold taken off, Sorey finds he's in a place that looks like a dome, with a circular stage in the middle, like a ring, and the dispersed seats surrounding it are lined with luxurious tables and velvet sheets covering them.

The nobles are seated, though, eating, chattering, and being served. The ring is being scrubbed clean of red stains.

Sorey blinks.
"What's---"

"He's over there," Zaveid points out, interrupting Sorey, and he follows Zaveid's line of sight. Sure enough, standing out from the rest of luxurious nobles, Mikleo is seated in a grandiose seat that looks almost like a throne, the wood of the seat intricately carved with curls and vines and painted silver and the cushions coloured sky blue. It complements Mikleo's scheme of soft blues and yellows, and Sorey knows that Mikleo knows he belongs there.

Except, he doesn't really look that happy. He sits like he owns the place, which he technically does, but he looks bored out of his mind, his right arm propped against the chair's arm and his head leaning lazily against his hand. He even yawns at one point, and one of the nobles sitting near him says something. Mikleo just smiles at him in reply before his face defaults to absolute boredom again.

There's another throne-like chair to his right, the colour of gold and velvety red, but it's empty.

"Sorey," Zaveid says, pushing Sorey a bit rougher than he probably intends to, and he stumbles a little forward. "The hell are you staring at for? I know he's pretty and all and he's totally owning it, but don't forget that guy unapologetically tore your goddamn ear off. Don't keep him waiting. Go there."

That's exactly why he's actually still standing here, Sorey wants to point out, but he keeps his mouth shut and heads to Mikleo.

His entrance catches the nobles' attention, and they all watch him with interest in their eyes. The whole place quiets for a bit, but not quite, and even though a lot of them have already taken notice of Sorey, Mikleo still seems completely unaware of him.

It's irritating, if he has to be honest.

It's not until Sorey's already by the golden chair that Mikleo notices him. He looks up, blinking at Sorey, and his lips curl into a small fond smile. Sorey doesn't like it.

"Here you are," he says, almost cooing, and Sorey hears a few aristocrats giggle behind him. "I've been waiting for you. You like my gifts?"

It takes Sorey a moment to realise Mikleo means the jewellery, and he thinks for a moment for an appropriate answer. "Not quite," he admits, and Mikleo raises an eyebrow. "I'd love more silk and laces."

Mikleo stares at Sorey for a moment, and he huffs, though not out of irritation. The smile is still there, and he waves his hand off, as if in dismissal. "Sure. You like expensive clothes; you'll have it. Next time, darling."

It doesn't sound endearing at all. It sounds deprecating, and Sorey hates it, he realises, but there's nothing to be done about it, at least for now.

"Come sit with me," Mikleo tells him, and when Sorey stares at him, he can tell that Mikleo is trying not to roll his eyes at him. "In my chair. It's spacious enough, or do you want to press your face against my thigh?" He crosses his legs, as if for emphasis. "I don't really mind. I quite like my space here, you know."

Sorey takes a moment to force himself not to clench his fists too tightly, and he sits in the chair with Mikleo, although making sure not to sit too close to him. With that, the attention on them is finally gone, and noise soon returns to the room.
"I'm glad you know well enough not to sit too close to me," Mikleo says, his voice low. "Don't be too difficult. I don't have the patience to deal with you right now."

Sorey tries his hardest not to sigh, but he probably fails when Mikleo adds, "I'm just as tired of this as you are, so shut up."

"...What am I doing here, anyway?" Sorey can't help but ask. "You don't want to see me; it's better to have me kept locked up in there."

"Unlike you, I have appearances to keep up," Mikleo replies, obviously irritated. "They want to see the slave Rolance gave me, so here it is." He pauses. "Now shut up."

"I thought you're going to have me publicly executed," Sorey mutters. "I think I'd like that better than sitting with you."

He realises too late that saying that is probably a bad idea, as Mikleo unhooks his legs and sits straighter. he runs a cold finger down Sorey's bare back, and Sorey shivers when he feels Mikleo's breath against his ear. "We can have that," he murmurs, and Sorey turns to him, eyes wide, as Mikleo leans back and calls for a servant.

"He wants a fight," Mikleo says with a smile. "Is the next one ready? Call off whoever you think is the weaker one. They can have a go next time."

"I didn't--"

"Quiet now," Mikleo tells him, and he puts a finger against Sorey's lips. The noble seated to Mikleo's left leans towards him, and she whispers, though it's useless; Sorey can hear her well enough.

"You're putting him there?"

"Relax," Mikleo tells her, still smiling as he draws his finger back and away from Sorey. "He's got a thing with a bit roughhousing. I suppose it's a Rolance thing. It's why I love him."

Sorey feels dread churn in his gut, and he can't help but think about the red stains he's seen being scrubbed off the ring when he entered. This isn't good. Whatever show it is that Mikleo is absolutely bored of, it's not good, and not because it's boring.

Saying that was absolutely a bad idea.

Chapter End Notes

id·i·ot
/ˈɪdəʊt/
noun, informal
- sorey
Sorey still vividly remembers the day he managed to beat Heldalf in an unarmed fight.

He’d been teaching Sorey how to fight enemies in the case that he finds himself in a situation where a weapon was unavailable to him, and he showed him what to do when he’s up against someone bigger than him. Sorey was a natural with weapons, well-versed with a sword and decent with a bow and arrow, and despite his young age, still a budding teenager at sixteen, he’d already been in spars against the Platinum Knights and had won against them, and everyone knew it wasn’t only because he was the Crown Prince. The downside of this talent, though, was that Sorey didn’t seem to know how to properly throw a punch.

So that’s what Heldalf taught Sorey, and after months of always hitting his head against the ground, Sorey finally managed to get his brother’s own head to hit the ground.

The feeling of pride that rushed over him was something he definitely wouldn’t forget. After all, this was his older brother, general of the Platinum Knights, and the most talented man he’s ever known. Sorey had always aspired to be like him, so well-versed in battle and with admirable leadership capabilities.

He always thought Heldalf was more fitting for the crown than him, and that’s one reason for Sorey to continue pushing himself to the limit, to better himself.

They were both panting and heavily sweating by the end of the spar, Sorey grinning so widely and Heldalf just smiling tiredly at him, getting himself to sit on the ground. He told Sorey then, his tone amused, “are you sure that’s not a fluke, little brother?”

Sorey paused at that, and he said, “no! Not at all.”

Heldalf’s smile grew wider then, and Sorey offered him his hand so he could pull him up and they can go and tell Father about Sorey’s achievement that day.

When Heldalf took Sorey’s hand, though, he pulled him down, his hand taking a fistful of Sorey’s hair, and he shoved Sorey’s face against the ground.

He passed out on the spot. Heldalf warned him of being too trusting afterwards, when Sorey had woken up in the infirmary groaning in pain and his nose broken, face bruised and lower lip cut---not something you’d see from a spar. Just because the opponent was down didn’t mean the fight was over, Heldalf had told him.

He hadn’t really thought too much about the gesture since then. After all, it was a lecture that Sorey had to learn.
It feels a hundred times lighter when they took off the golden chains around his ankles and the necklaces. It’s not that Sorey hasn’t carried anything heavier, but wearing them had been such a strenuous thing to deal with, so, really, it’s not his fault that he gamely stepped towards the servant that was to take the jewellery off, despite the threat of a death match awaiting him.

He stands at one end of the ring, to the side near Mikleo, trying not to fidget and keeping his mind from wandering far off. The dome is filled with noise, aristocrats gamely chatting about the upcoming fight. While he’s confident with his abilities as a fighter, he can’t stop looking at the dried stains that the servant earlier wasn’t able to clean off, and he wonders if his own blood is going to mix with them. Sorey feels nauseous, and he’s sure it’s because of what’s about to happen. He’d picked up a few things from the chattering nobles, and while he hears that the duels held don’t always end with one of the participants dying, Sorey is aware Mikleo wants to make sure this fight ends up exactly like that, preferably with him the one being dead.

How he would do it, though, Sorey isn’t sure; Mikleo has been sitting in his magnificent chair this whole time.

Mikleo is sitting up straighter now, his face lit up with interest. He no longer looks like he’d rather die eating rat poison than be here, and he seems much more animated conversing with his fellow nobles. Their eyes fall on each other, Mikleo’s delicate eyebrows raising, and he smiles.

“Die for me, won’t you?”

Sorey looks away, clenching his fists, as he hears Mikleo’s soft laughter amidst the noise. He closes his eyes, taking a deep breath, and he tries to ignore the prince’s presence behind him.

No, Sorey bitterly thinks. He won’t die for Mikleo. Not ever, not in a million years.

Sorey doesn’t realise when his opponent enters the ring and only notices him when the overseer of the match announces his presence. He opens his eyes and looks up, and perhaps a bit too fast that his head spins for a moment, and for a second, he gapes, staring at the man towering in front of him.

The man might be a mercenary, a brute, who knows. He looks down at Sorey with cold eyes, with the slightest spark that he knows is the intent to kill— he’d seen that look, in the soldiers’ eyes that were sent to capture him in his own manor. If you can’t kill him, capture him.

Sorey purses his lips, taking a step forward just as the overseer instructed. His opponent is bigger than him, muscular, older. It’s easy to tell with his scars that the man is no stranger to fighting, meanwhile, the worst Sorey remembers getting is a broken nose.

He’d have to exert his best, then, and he can do that. He’s still in top shape, nothing in his body that can drag him down. Sorey can do this.

They squat in the middle of the ring, arms around one another. The dome fills with more noise, the audience getting livelier as seconds pass. Sorey looks determinedly at his opponent, while he just looks at Sorey with a passive, uncaring face.

The overseer lifts the red cloth, and drops it.

Then the man grins wickedly.

The first heave, Sorey can handle. The man pushes at him, and his feet drag across the floor, but
Sorey recovers, managing to push back. The audience cheer, but he determinedly ignores them, putting all his attention to the man in front of him.

The second heave, though, is when things don’t go the way Sorey wants to.

The nausea he’s felt a while ago is still there, keeping his mind from focusing in the fight. Not only that, his body feels sluggish, slower, and weak. He knows the man is stronger than him, but he also know that he is stronger than this.

Something’s wrong.

The man pushes against Sorey. He struggles to keep his ground, and soon his feet are dragging again across the floor, but this time he’s unable to stop it. The man, then, pulls him back, and he spins to throws Sorey behind him and across the ring, like he’s just a ragged doll.

He lands on his back with a thud, and the air is knocked out of him. Sorey’s head is spinning, and he knows it’s not because he hit his head. He can’t bear to think about it, though, to figure out why, because the man is already approaching him fast, and Sorey has to get up and defend himself.

Sorey is back on his feet when the first punch comes flying. He manages blocks it, his arms coming up in front of his face. The force is enough to drive Sorey back, and he stumbles, losing his footing for a second, but it’s still a second wasted. Every moment counts, and the man knows this very well. He takes advantage of Sorey’s one second misstep.

He takes hold of Sorey’s shoulders, and he kneels him hard on the abdomen, just below his ribs.

Sorey gasps, choking as his body involuntarily bends forward. The man hit him hard and deep, and Sorey feels bile threatening to rise to his throat, then he feels a hand clutch on his hair, the man forcing him to look up at him.

He takes a second too long to register what’s going on---one moment the man is grinning down at him, then suddenly he’s going down to the floor again, and he can faintly taste something like metal, the side of his face feeling strangely numb. Sorey coughs, blinking blearily as he struggles to push himself off the ground, and he sees drops of red on the floor.

Blood.

There’s a blunt force hitting him on the stomach, and it’s strong enough to throw him sideways. There’s a stinging agony on his stomach, and he can’t fight the bile rising to his throat anymore. Sorey coughs out his lunch to the floor and feels the burn run through his throat. He’s not yet even done throwing up when the man kneels beside him, a sickening amusement in his eyes, and in a desperate attempt to get him away from himself, Sorey holds in his vomit and tries to crawl away from him.

It’s useless, obviously. The man takes hold of Sorey’s hair yet again, and with a deep rumbling voice, says to him, “didn’t your parents teach you manners? You’re not supposed to throw up your food.”

Sorey’s eyes widen in horror, realising what the man is about to do when he drags him back to where they were, at the small puddle of vomit Sorey deposited. He writhes and thrashes against the man’s hold, but it does nothing. It’s completely useless, and Sorey can do nothing as the man drags his face against the puddle.

It’s revolting, absolutely disgusting and nauseating, that even though Sorey tries so hard not to throw up again, he does anyway, and the fluid sprays to the side as his face is pressed against the
wet floor.

The audience is going wild in the background, a mix of repulsion and amusement filling Sorey’s ears as the man draws him away from his own vomit, throwing him again. Sorey lands on his stomach, groaning, trying to wipe the fluids from his face as he tries to stand again. Then something heavy lands on his back, and he violently falls back to the floor with a gasp.

The man has stepped on him, successfully keeping him pinned to the ground, and with increasing panic, Sorey realises that the man is steadily putting all his weight on him. He closes his eyes shut as he writhes underneath the man’s foot, feels as if his ribs are going to crush underneath the man’s weight, and he’s having a harder time breathing as each second passes, from gasping to wheezing, and stop, stop, stop—

Mikleo’s voice cuts through the noise, as if the lively audience is silenced, only a white noise, and Sorey can only hear the prince.

“Go die, now, Sorey.”

He thinks of Zaveid, and how he reacted when Sorey had called Mikleo kind. Zaveid had snorted, amused, and he recounted how Mikleo had torn off his earring and stated how he didn’t care about the Regent bedding Sorey, but Sorey had called him kind when he---

All thoughts cut short, Sorey snapping his eyes open through the blinding pain. He gasps again underneath the man’s weight, realisation of what’s really happening occurring to him so suddenly, all at once, that his mind clears, even for only a moment, and one thing comes to him: anger.

Sorey grits his teeth, forcing himself to push against the unbearable weight, even when his body protests, as another thought comes to him: Zaveid throwing the scented oil he called into Sorey’s bath water and leaving as soon as possible, his reasoning implied that he trusted Sorey enough not to do anything, all the while completely.toying with Sorey’s trust in him.

Zaveid had been in on it, too.

Sorey isn’t in this fight because he said something incredibly stupid; Mikleo planned this—he planned this. It’s been his intention all along. It’s not because the nobles insisted on seeing Sorey. He means to get Sorey killed, here and now, and even if Sorey hadn’t said what he said, Mikleo would’ve found another way to get him into this.

---How could someone be so spiteful?

Through his anger and despair, Sorey manages to lift himself up against all odds, winning against the man’s weight, and he immediately rolls from underneath the man’s foot and as far away as possible. He hears the man’s land on the floor with a loud, audible thump, and Sorey immediately forces himself on his knees, and then he’s standing up, forcing himself to breathe through his mouth.

He opens and closes his right hand, feeling the heavy rings that line his fingers, and he closes his hand into a tight fist.

The man glares at Sorey, and he returns it, feeling his anger bubble within him. He can’t fight; this whole thing was rigged so he can’t fight, and his only hope to win this is to land one, decisive hit on the man, but how is he going to do it?

Sorey remembers his lessons with his brother, the spars and the sweat and the heat, and he bends his knees, putting himself in a better position to defend himself. He inhales, ignoring the nauseating
stench of his own vomit, and exhales, makes himself calm, desperately trying to clear his clouded head. He can do this, and he will.

The man charges at him, but Sorey remains still, his right fist at the ready. Sorey watches the man closely as he comes towards him with his own fist ready to hit. He’s still, steady, watching the man until he’s at an arm’s distance, and then---

Sorey side steps to the left just as the man throws a punch. He steps in close to his opponent, and with all the strength his drugged body could muster, Sorey swings his fist straight to the man’s throat.

There’s a garbled, chocking sound from the man as he falls to his knees, a hand on his throat and looking wildly at Sorey. Meanwhile, Sorey stumbles back, and he purses his lips before raising his left arm, the one with the golden cuff full of precious stones, and he swings it hard against the man’s head.

There’s the sickening sound of skull hitting hard metal, and the man falls to the ground, unmoving.

The dome is silent. Sorey stares at the man’s body before he turns to look at the prince sitting in his measly snowy throne.

Mikleo’s legs are crossed, his left hand resting against the intricate armrest. The interested look in his face is gone, replaced with a passive, unreadable expression. It makes a small part of Sorey feel pleased that he managed to wipe that smug, deprecating smirk off Mikleo’s face.

In the silence, though, Sorey realises that even though he feels good that Mikleo is displeased at the outcome, he can’t say the same towards the audience. Sorey is aware of his place---a Rolancian slave winning against a Hylandic fighter sits poorly to a Hylandic audience’s tastes. It doesn’t end with Sorey winning the match, no. Common sense tells him that, and the gears in Sorey’s mind work to think of what he should do, but the solution he comes up with sits awfully to his own tastes.

Sorey forces himself to walk, his feet dragging across the floor and his body protesting any more movements. He walks and walks, until he’s standing in front of Mikleo, and he throws himself on his knees, gritting his teeth at the pain.

“This…fight,” Sorey forces himself to say, and he ignores every single protest his mind makes. “I’ve won for you, Your…Your Highness.” A deep, shaky breath. “I…I wanted to please you. Have I…done well?”

The silence continues to persist, but now there’s a soft murmuring among the nobles. Sorey still doesn’t dare look up, his eyes still locked on the floor, and he hears Mikleo call for a servant, asking him for something.

“Hm,” Mikleo says, tone contemplative, “not quite.” And Sorey forces himself not to haul himself up and punch Mikleo right there and then. He’s patient, he’s too soft, everyone had always told him, but this is too much. “There’s one last thing I’d like you to do, and then I’ll be happy.”

If Mikleo wants Sorey to kiss his shoe, he’d do it, if only to finally get out of here and to get very far away from him, but Mikleo doesn’t move, and instead, he drops a knife in front of Sorey.

“I don’t mean to offend you. I should’ve known better, but I placed my bet on that man, and although I don’t mind losing a few gald over a silly bet, I’m very disappointed in him,” Mikleo coolly says. “Kill him.”
Sorey’s eyes widen.

Some nobles laugh at Mikleo’s statement, as if he just made a very funny joke. Sorey’s breath hitch at the thought, daring to look up and stare at Mikleo with wide unbelieving eyes. The prince looks down on him with a knowing smirk, and Sorey’s gut tighten at the sight. Mikleo knows; he knows that Sorey can’t possibly kill, that he hit the man’s throat to incapacitate, not to kill, and he’s using it against him. If Sorey kills, it’s a guilt that will eat at him until he self-destructs, but if he doesn’t kill, it’s a direct disobedience that might even be punishable by death.

This is wrong.

This is wrong.

Mikleo has him. It’s a checkmate. There’s nothing Sorey can do.

Sorey would rather die than kill.

He opens his mouth, about to tell Mikleo off, when a female’s voice cuts through the air.

“Your Highness.”

Mikleo freezes, and Sorey stops, too. It’s as if everything stops. Mikleo’s smirk disappears, replaced with a tired, inconvenienced look, as if he’s been interrupted from his daily routine of making people’s lives miserable. Mikleo turns to look at the one who called for him, and Sorey follows suit, blinking at the lovely woman standing before them. Her unbelievably long hair is tied to a high ponytail, and even then it still reaches the floor. Her red dress is awfully intricate, with laces and details on every part of her dress possible. With her soft, kind-looking face, she doesn’t seem like she belongs to this place that’s full of snakes.

“Lailah,” Mikleo nonchalantly greets with a tilt of his head. “I see you’re here. I can only assume this means Uncle’s back from town hopping with Bartlow?”

Lailah frowns at him in response. “Chancellor Bartlow, Your Highness.” Her eyes wander towards Sorey, and she gasps, a hand coming up to cover her mouth. “Oh, my!” she says, and then she looks behind him and sees his fallen opponent. “Oh, dear. Another one of this? That man is not dead, is he?”

Amidst the silence, Sorey finds he’s the one answering. “…No,” he slowly says. “He probably… has a concussion…though.”

“And you don’t look better off yourself,” Lailah replies, and she herself jumps into the ring to check Sorey. She’s warm and smells of roses, and Sorey can’t help the sudden relief rushing to him that he almost falls over, but Lailah holds him. “You don’t smell very good,” she remarks.

“I threw up.”

“---So?” Mikleo suddenly says, leaning back into his chair. He looks annoyed. “Is Uncle back or did he send you here earlier than intended?”

“He’s back, Your Highness,” Lailah says, and she wobbles along with Sorey to keep him upright. Sorey hazily blinks. He finds it harder and harder to stay awake. “As his adviser, I told him he has to come back to Ladylake after leaving three days ago with Chancellor Bartlow.” She pauses. “I didn’t think we’d come back to another bloodbath, though.”

“This is a monthly tradition among the nobles, Lailah,” Mikleo reminds her, and she shakes her
“Which I’ve been petitioning to stop!” Lailah retorts, and she looks accusingly at the seated nobles before looking back at Mikleo. “You agreed to this, Your Highness. What changed?”

Mikleo doesn’t answer, but he doesn’t really have to, as Sorey almost falls face-first to the floor, and Lailah hauls him up. In response, a servant immediately goes to help her keep him upright. She sighs. “It’s a topic we’ll have to put off, I’m afraid,” Lailah says, and she tells the servant to call for men to get the unconscious man and Sorey to the infirmary. “The Regent has sent me here to ask you about the slave,” Lailah says after the servant left. “How is he doing? Is he well?”

Another silence.

“You’re holding him,” Mikleo says, without any hint of remorse whatsoever, and Lailah pales.

“Oh,” she says, “oh, my. Your Highness, the Regent won’t be happy about this…”

It’s the last thing Sorey hears before his vision goes completely black. At least, he thinks, by the looks of it, Mikleo has crossed a line of what he’s allowed to do with Sorey, and somehow, suddenly, everything is worth the trouble.

Chapter End Notes

i feel the need to say this, since there are people reading this who are familiar with captive prince: while most events in this fic are derived from the trilogy, the whole noncon/dubcon thing is totally uncomfortable to write for me (and this is sormik jfc i cant subject them to that kind of stuff), so yeah. here it is: where the graphic violence warning comes in. not like the trilogy isnt violent. nice.

(also: shameless advertising) if u want to see me talking about this fic (or just my trash in general, though i rarely post fics HAHA) u can follow me on [tumblr](https://www.tumblr.com) and [twitter](https://www.twitter.com). i need ppl appreciating my stupid shit. also, if u feel like, ur more than free to send me prompts i need to kick my ass to get to writing.
Chapter 5

Sorey never really thought that he'll hate waking up so much with every fibre of his being---he loves mornings and admiring the lovely sunrise, the shades of orange and red mixing with the soft blues of the sky a sight to behold---yet here he is, groaning as loudly as he possibly can, trying to shield his eyes from the sunlight that's filtering through the curtains. He should probably ask to have his bed moved, if possible.

He can't help the change of attitude towards morning, this particular morning, to be precise. Sorey's head is pounding harshly; his brody protests angrily with every movement, and somehow, Sorey mysteriously lost a tooth. Luckily, it's not one of his front teeth, but he doesn't remember getting a tooth knocked out during the fight.

\textit{The fight.} Sorey groans again at the memory, turning on his stomach to bury his face into his pillows. That's right, the fight. That almost killed him, in the most excruciating way possible. Sorey can still feel the faint throbbing of pain with every rise and fall of his chest. His body is mostly bruised, he finds when he sits up. Faint purples and blues line his arms, and he almost winces when he peeks down through his shirt to only to see the same shades of blues peppering most of his upper body. It's a sad sight, really, until he realises: his arms are no longer bound.

Sorey blinks, and he tries to peek at his door to see if anyone is stationed outside. Through the small, translucent window on his door, halfway covered by a silk curtain, Sorey doesn't see anything that may be soldiers guarding him. He bites his lips in contemplation, then he throws himself to the floor, not without wincing of course, and checking the locks of his on the floor as the one shackled around his ankle. The locks need a key, obviously, and Sorey raises his head, green eyes scanning the room for something that he can use as a lockpick. Sorey knows he's being too hasty about this, but it feels like it's the only chance he has of breaking out of here. If he can at least manage to take the cuffs, then it's most he can ask for. He'll figure out the rest later. Sorey surveys the floor and through the places his chain allows him to reach. Even the smallest of metal scrap that he can fashion to a lockpick will do, but it seems that's already asking for too much. The room is despairingly clean. He's shoving half of his body underneath his bed, still searching for something he can use as a makeshift lockpick, when he hears the door click and swing open.

Sorey jumps under the bed and promptly hits his head.

He groans, a hand on the sore spot as he slumps to the floor in defeat. The sound of the door opens halts for a moment, then it resumes, the creaking much slower than before.

"Are you alright?"

It's a voice he's heard before. Soft and kind and very worried. It's the one he heard in the ring, which definitely stopped him from getting himself killed.

Sorey scrambles from under his bed to look at Lailah, who's looking at him with a small, amused
smile. He's not really sure what to do. She said in the ring that she's the Regent's adviser, so wouldn't that mean...?

Sorey finds himself kneeling before her, head low, and eyes at the floor. If there's anyone who deserves a gesture of respect, it's Lailah, and Sorey would like to think that the Regent would be, too.

Lailah gently puts a hand on his shoulder. "Please, look up," she tells him, and Sorey does.

She's smiling gently, a soft twinkle in her eyes that puts Sorey at ease. She motions for him to sit on his bed, and he follows, the chain on his ankle dragging across the floor as he walks back to his bed. When he's finally seated, Lailah goes and sits beside him. She looks at Sorey for a moment, studying him, and she smiles again but wider this time, more relieved.

"You look much better than yesterday, and the day before that," Lailah says. Sorey blinks for a moment, processing what she had just told him, before his eyebrows raise in surprise.

"Huh?"

"You're unconscious for two days," Lailah explains. "I suppose the emotional and physical fatigue from that fight have been too much, but you're looking very healthy now." She giggles. "Seeing you crawling around with your newfound freedom with your arms was a delightful sight to see."

Sorey flushes, embarrassed. At least she doesn't suspect he's looking for something that he can use for a possible breakout.

"So," Lailah continues, her small smile still in place. "Sorey, isn't it? Is that your real name?"

Sorey freezes, and then, trying to pass it off as nonchalance, he shakes his head. "His Highness decided to call me that," he decides to say. It isn't a lie, after all. The scar on his ear is a reminder of it.

Lailah nods. "I see. I'm Lailah, the Regent's Court Adviser. I've come here to..." she hesitates for a moment, "the Regent left the very day you've arrived and wasn't able to see." She puts her hands on her lap, and the smile is gone, replaced by a frown instead. "He left strict orders that you are to be treated well because you are a gift from the Emperor of Rolance. He's clearly agitated at the state you were in." Lailah sighs. "Only three days, and the Prince has done inexplicable again."

Again? "Has the Prince always been like this?"

"You can say he gets a 'kick' from riling his uncle," Lailah says, and she sighs. "It's been like this for a while now. I suppose you won't really notice. The Regent was gone, along most of his Guard, but their schism also runs deep in both the Prince's and the Regent's Guards. Maybe you'll see more of it now that he's back." A pause. "Let's talk about why I'm here now, Sorey. As mentioned, the Regent is upset about what the Prince has done, and he'd like to discipline the Prince. I'm here to inquire a few things, if you don't mind."

Sorey slowly nods his permission, and Lailah's lips curl into a small smile again. "Great. First things first. You're young, about eighteen, perhaps?" A nod. "Have you served in the military, then?"

"For a short time, yes. I---" Sorey pauses, looking at Lailah. It's probably not wise to share too much information, whilst his identity as the real Sorey gets find out. "I was," he tries again. "I served a few months before the war started." Because a king should learn how to lead his own army, his father had told him. Sorey remembers leading his own troops in the border, and he
remembers personally reporting to his father about the rising tensions there and how he handled them. He was promptly told that he'd done his job splendidly, and that he should return to the palace. That was a few months before the war broke out. He was still sixteen, then.

Lailah doesn't press further, though, and she thoughtfully nods. "I see. What is done if a soldier disobeys an order?"

Sorey takes a moment to think about that. He's not sure why Lailah is asking about this, but it doesn't seem to hurt to tell her. "A public flogging," he hesitantly says, "then the soldier is turned off."

Lailah looks thoughtful at his answer, considering his words. "A public flogging. Hm..."

If Sorey has to be honest, though, it's something he disagrees with, but it's a military procedure that reinforces discipline and obedience, or so that's what they like to tell him. He likes to think there should be at least another way doesn't involve public humiliation...

Public humiliation. He suddenly remembers Lailah's words, about disciplining Mikleo, and he frowns. "Wait, you're not going to---"

"No, of course not," Lailah says, her eyebrows raising in surprise. "We don't flog our own prince, but something must be done. The Regent thinks it's time to do something about His Highness'...destructive nature, and I and the rest of the Council agree." She purses her lips for a moment. "As much as I love the Prince as if my own kin, I have no other choice. He's been very difficult, and in two years' time, he'll ascend the throne. His attitude is not fit for a king. The Regent doesn't want to waste any more time being too lenient with him, and he thought we can consult you about it."

Sorey blinks. "Me?"

"Yes. Your answers are enough for it." Lailah rises, then, and Sorey follows suit. She's smiling her kind, bright smile again. "Thank you, Sorey, for humouring me, and I'd like to apologise in behalf of the Regent for the Prince's actions," Lailah says, and her voice is so kind, so easygoing, that Sorey smiles widely, too.

"No, that's..." He's not really sure what to say, but he shakes his head. "You're welcome," he says instead.

"Hm, you're such a pleasant companion, Sorey," she says, still smiling. "Well, I have done all I need to do. A physician will come see you. Don't be too difficult, alright? You might get something worse than your bruises if she gets mad."

Sorey nods. "I won't be. Thank you, um, Lady---"

"Just Lailah," she says, "Formalities aren't really that important to me, but I'm glad you're still aware of your place here."

Sorey bristles at that, and he nods again. Right, he's still a slave. Lailah may be nice, but she still sees him a lowly slave. Lailah tilts her head to the side, a small frown etched on her face.

"I'm sorry, Sorey. I didn't mean it that way..."

"No, it's fine," Sorey says, and he tries to smile again. "Your kindness and thoughtfulness is a refreshing experience for me. It's all I can ever ask for in this place. Thank you."
Lailah is quiet for a moment, but she eventually nods, albeit slowly. "I'll see you, then, Sorey. Do get better soon."

Sorey watches as Lailah makes her way out of his room. When she opens the door, though, she finds Zaveid standing outside. Zaveid blinks, and so does Lailah, then he smiles widely at her.

"Oh, hello, Lady Lailah."

"Zaveid," Lailah returns, and then she walks past him. Zaveid watches her, and his face feints hurt.

"Ow, no hello? That's cold."

Lailah ignores him.

Once she's gone, Zaveid turns to Sorey. The smile is still spread across his face. "She's shy." Sorey doesn't respond to that, so he sighs. "Ah, well, let's get straight to business.

"What did you tell Lailah?"

Sorey frowns. He sits back on his bed, looking at Zaveid. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean," Zaveid says. "There's a reason she's come here. Snooping about what the Prince was up to the past three days the Regent was gone, I'd wager, especially after what happened in the ring."

Sorey feels anger bubbling inside him, remembering the events before he was brought to the ring. The words just come out of him, and he almost regrets it.

"Then that's all the more reason not to tell you."

Zaveid stops at that, and he frowns. "Sorey, you should know better than to go against your prince."

"He tried to kill me," Sorey points out, hands curling into fists. "And you were in on it. He almost succeeded." There's no reason for him to side with Mikleo, after all he's done, but especially when the Regent acknowledges that he won't be a fair ruler of Hyland like this. Surely even Zaveid understands that.

The look on the soldier's face says otherwise, though, but he does sound confused when he says, "what?"

"Why do you act ignorant?" Sorey says, and he tries to tone down the irritation in his voice. He fails. "the baths, Zaveid. The scented oil is drugged. No wonder you left immediately after putting it into the water."

Zaveid is quiet for a moment, looking down and contemplating Sorey's words, and when he talks again, he sounds uncertain. "I didn't---"

He stops, frowns again. Zaveid returns his gaze at Sorey. "Is that what you told Lailah?"

Sorey is quiet. Zaveid decides that's not the answer he's looking for, and he steps towards Sorey. "Is that what you told Lailah?" Zaveid repeats, and Sorey looks away.

The captain of the Prince's Guard is agitated by this. Zaveid takes Sorey's arm, and he grips it tight. The pain, intensified by his sore and bruised arm, shoots through Sorey's body. He yelps and tries to yank his arm from Zaved's grip, but the other holds it firmly. The pain worsens by the tug.
"Zaveid---"

"You better start spilling, kid," Zaveid warns. "Or I'll---"

Something must've hit him in the back, because Zaveid yelps, and apparently it's painful enough that he lets go of Sorey's arm. Zaveid turns to look at the one who hit him, but as he does so, something swings to hit him right on the face, and he falls to the floor with a groan.

The thing that hit Zaveid is an umbrella, and a girl is holding it. Sorey blinks at her, unconsciously rubbing his arm. She...doesn't really look any older than him, considerably shorter, even. Short blonde hair, wearing a flowery pretty dress, one hand wearing a brown glove, and brown boots. They clash, but somehow, she makes it work. On her side is a cart full of medicines. She's frowning at Zaveid.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she says, tapping her umbrella impatiently against the floor. Zaveid cringes at her, apparently for being caught redhanded. "Stop making that face at me." Her frown deepens to a scowl. "How dare you lay a hand on my patient. I'll gouge your eyes out with my umbrella if you don't leave within three seconds. One."

"Okay, okay!" Zaveid frantically says as he scrambles to stand up. This is a sight: the captain of the Prince's Guard being threatened by a little girl, and he's actually horrified. "You don't have to do that, Edna. I'm just doing my job!"

"Two."

"Ugh," Zaveid says, and he slithers out of Sorey's room without sparing them another glance. The girl, Edna, rolls her eyes, and she walks towards the door to kick it shut. Sorey flinches at the sound.

"What an asshole," she mutters before turning to look at Sorey. She raises an eyebrow at him. "So? Tell me where it hurts, and I'll take care of it. That's my job, so talk."

Sorey's not sure if he likes her company better than Zaveid's. He misses Lailah. "You're the physician Lailah is talking about?"

"What do you think?" Edna replies, unimpressed. "Stupid. What's the name the Prince gave you again? Sorey? After the dead prince. Stupid Sorey. Stupey." Sorey cringes at that. Now he has a nickname less than five minutes after their first meeting. This is awkward. "I'm Edna, the Prince's personal physician. Be grateful I'm even talking to you. Now, you want my service or not? Where did Zaveid hurt you?"

"He...He didn't hurt me," Sorey mutters, and Edna groans.

"Ugh, don't tell me you're one of those guys. Why is masochism even a thing? Is that your kink?"

Sorey sputters at that. "That's not---"

"Whatever."

"Me."
"Very helpful." The sarcasm is dripping a lot in that one. It kind of makes sense now that she serves Mikleo. They're a bit alike. She lets go of Sorey's arm, much gentler this time, and she stands up, walking to her cart. "Go take off your shirt and lie down on your stomach," she orders. "Let's work on those bruises. Lailah keeps pestering me to make sure you recover fast, so I guess massages are in order."

Sorey lies down as he's told, a small smile in his lips. Lailah, huh? "She sure is nice."

"I guess," Sorey hears Edna says, as well as her going through her things in the cart. "She's nice but annoying. She likes to fuss over anyone she thinks needs fussing. First it was the late Queen, then the Prince for a few years, and now you." Sorey hears something popping open to his side, then after a moment, he feels something cold being applied to his back. He flinches at the sensation. "Don't move, Stupey," Edna scolds, her hands working to spread the salve across his back. It smells oddly of pine, or sage, or maybe a mix of both.

"This is an arnica ointment," Edna says, still spreading the medicine on his back. "Well-known to treat bruises and stuff."

Her hands start working after that. Edna applies pressure to the right places, working to undo the knots in Sorey's muscles that he's not even aware of, and he feels himself relax. It's quiet for a moment, Edna massaging him and Sorey with his eyes closed. Edna runs her hands down his back, pressure steady, and Sorey contentedly sighs.

"You sound like an old man," Edna remarks, and she takes Sorey's sore arm next. He chuckles.

"I think the fight in the ring made me older by thirty years."

Edna makes a hum of acknowledgement, her salve-coated fingers pressing against Sorey's palm, then she presses against the back of his hand before working upwards and towards his forearm. Her hands skirt around his bruises, still applying pressure but not enough to hurt. It feels nice.

"you're great at this," Sorey decides to say, and he doesn't see it, but based on Edna's reply, she may have rolled her eyes.

"Of course. I'm a physician. It's in the job description. Are you an idiot?"

Oh, right. "Sorry," he mumbles, embarrassed. "I just thought I should let you know. My body felt like dying the other day." He hears Edna breathe out a laughter at that, and he smiles. There's a brief moment of silence.

"Um," Sorey starts again, "you know, you're a physician working for the Prince," Sorey says, "but you look too young to be a Royal Physician. That's really cool. How old are---"

Edna presses a bit too hard on a bruise, and Sorey jerks in his bed, followed by a series of ow!'s and please stops for a minute straight, then Edna continues her massage, seeming unperturbed by what she just did. "What were you saying?"

"N-Nothing."

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"There," Edna says, lightly patting on Sorey's arm. He's lying on his back now, having told by Edna to turn so she can reach his other arm. He opens his eyes, blearily blink at the light before turning to look at the physician. He must have fallen asleep. She's already packing up, as much as putting away a small round container counts as packing.
"Thank you, Edna."

"No need to thank me. It's my job. I'm paid to do this," she replies, picking up her umbrella from the side of Sorey's bed and putting it in her cart. She goes and opens the door before returning and putting both her hands on the handle, and she gives Sorey a look. "I'm leaving now. I'll tell the servants to get you crushed parsley to rub on your bruises. It will smell bad, most crushed plants smell bad anyway, but that will get rid of the bruises faster, so don't complain. Hot compress will help, too, so I'll tell them to get you some as well."

Sorey mutely nods, sitting up as he watches Edna push her cart out of the room. She goes back to pull the door close, and she looks at Sorey for a second before she smiles. It's small, almost unnoticeable, but it's there.

"Take care."

She slams the door closed, and Sorey flinches at the sound again.

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It's quiet.

After Edna left, servants came to bring Sorey his breakfast, then they cleaned his room, fluffed his pillows, then left. Sorey is left alone again.

He lies in his bed, staring at the carved walls in his room. Swirly and full of circles, the carvings seem to emphasise grace, and Sorey tries to remember which era it was that had this kind of style.

He can't seem to remember.

He decides to go back to sleep.

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He wakes up to his door opening very loudly. He's startled from his sleep, and Sorey tries not to scowl at Zaveid as the older man stares him down. He crosses his arms, and then uncrosses them, then he frowns. Sorey blinks, trying not to yawn.

"Is something wrong?"

"No." Zaveid pauses. "Yes. I have no idea it was drugged."

Sorey blinks again, and then he sits up, rubbing his eyes. "Is this why you barged into my room?"

"There's something else, duh. I'm not allowed to go here anytime I please."

A pause. "Oh. Okay." Silence, and Sorey realises that Zaveid might have been sent by Mikleo earlier to interrogate Sorey about his talk with Lailah. That doesn't sit well with him. Nevertheless, he decides not to bring it up. "So? Why did they send you here for?"

"What, that's it?" Zaveid says. "You almost died, and you were mad."

Sorey shrugs. "I'm not mad anymore," he says. In the end, he can't blame Zaveid if he's been tricked by Mikleo, too. It doesn't seem too out of character for the Prince to deceive even his most loyal servants. "I didn't tell Lailah anything, if that will put your mind at ease."

Zaveid is quiet for a moment, and then, "I guess, but that will change soon."
"Servants will come in to change you again," Zaveid explains when Sorey gives him a confused look. "You're being summoned to the court. Looks like the Prince is going to get his ass handed to him."

Chapter End Notes

you ever think about how sorey sleeps a lot when he's stressed out? me, too, sorey. i've been sleeping a whole lot lately, too, and i know it's because i've been so stressed lately. ah, life.
Sorey wonders how Mikleo found himself a fiercely loyal servant in the form of Zaveid.

Maybe it’s because he’s pretty, Sorey thinks. Zaveid said at one point that he doesn’t like men, but Mikleo’s beauty is unmatched, not even Lailah can compete, though she is beautiful. Add in his slender curves that are only emphasised by those ridiculous belts, at first look, no one would think that he’s a man at the early cusp of adulthood.

But then again, Sorey wants to give Zaveid a bit more credit than that. His loyalty aside, the fact that Zaveid is the captain of the Prince’s Guard is enough to say of his military prowess. Sorey would love someone like Zaveid in his service, if he ever gets out of here, anyway.

“You’re not angry that the Prince used you?” Sorey asks Zaveid when he’s at the baths again and servants are dressing him. Zaveid is leaning against the smooth marble walls of the baths. His presence doesn’t disturb Sorey anymore; he’s resigned himself to a fate where people will be seeing him naked a whole lot.

Zaveid shrugs in response. It’s not really much of an answer to Sorey, but Zaveid remedies that soon enough.

“I thought it’s something His Highness will do, so no, not really. If my name gets dragged in the mud for it, then so be it.” That blind faith in Mikleo is really, really admirable, if not dangerous. Sorey has to wonder what kind of things Zaveid is willing to do for him.

The servants finish changing him, but it doesn’t feel like it’s finished. It’s not the lack of jewellery; he’s had enough of this, but it’s the lack of clothes.

“H-Hey, wait!”

One of the servants stops in his tracks, and he looks startled. Sorey takes of step towards him, and the servant flinches back. He visibly deflates at the fear in the servant’s eyes, and this is when Zaveid steps in.

“Sorey, calm down. What’s wrong?”

He looks at Zaveid, and he wildly gestures at himself. “This.”

His upper body is not clothed, and a silk white cloth draped around his intimates is all he has. It’s held in place with a golden pin and a heavy belt made of golden threads. The lack of upper body clothing seems to be the only reason why Sorey is even wearing twice the golden jewellery he wore in the ring: they’ve woven a golden thread with dangling gemstones of varying kinds onto his hair; because his injured ear has fully healed—or at least has healed enough—they’ve clapsed three different golden earcuffs to his once injured ear. The same dangling diamond earring is worn on his other ear, the same jewellery worn on the same place. He wears a thick, golden collar peppered
with rubies and which, he realises, has a long chain attached to it. The fingers on his left hand now wear rings, too, and both his arms now wear a golden armband. There’s golden paint on his face and across his bare chest, though the paint avoids the bruises that pepper along his chest, creating various, irregular patterns across his skin.

Gold, gold, gold. They’re what his clothes are at this point. Sorey knows he should get used to this, but when he’s made to look at his reflection, he finds that his green eyes stand out too much among the glittering yellows, and it scares him: other than the feathers, his emerald eyes are his other most well-known feature.

They wouldn’t easily figure him out just like that, though, would they?

“Can’t we do anything about this, Zaveid?”

Zaveid sighs, crossing his arms. He looks at the servant and points his chin at the exit. “You’re dismissed.”

“Zaveid—”

“Sorry, kid,” he says as the servant finally leaves the baths in hasty steps, “I like you and all. You’re, like, the nicest kid I’ve ever had the fortune to meet, but you keep forgetting you’re a slave,” he tells Sorey with a frown, and Sorey bristles. “You don’t act like a slave most of the time. It actually makes me wonder who you were before you got your ass here, but reality check: whoever you were in Rolance isn’t who you are in Hyland. Can you keep the complaints to yourself? Even I find this ridiculous, but I guess it’s because I haven’t seen any pets running around that much anymore.”

Sorey keeps quiet, then, eyes rightfully cast at the marble floor. There’s an awkward silence, and Zaveid sighs. He fishes out a long cloth from his pocket, and he looks back at Sorey. “‘Kay, kid. Close your eyes, and don’t move too much. I’d hate to ruin that gold paint on your face.”

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“Pets,” Sorey says when they’re already out of the baths and on their way to where he’s being summoned to. He’s blindfolded, as usual, and Zaveid pulls on the chain on his collar as they make their way through the palace, though not so much, just enough to guide Sorey through the dark. Zaveid makes a hum of acknowledgement, and Sorey continues. “I keep hearing about the term, but I don’t think I understand it.”

“Ah,” Zaveid says, then Sorey feels the collar pull to the side. He slowly turns left. “Pets. Hired entertainers, or something like that. Although the entertainments are more, uh, sexual in nature, and their services are usually strictly for their master only. It’s contractual, too.”

It doesn’t entertaining, to say the least. “The Prince like to call me his pet, but he doesn’t seem to like me in his bed.”

A snort. “What, you to be in his bed?”

“Not really.”

“I figured as much,” Zaveid says. “Well, it’s not news he doesn’t keep pets to begin with. He just calls you a pet because, well, I actually don’t know.” Zaveid pauses. “Because it’s less hassle to pronounce than slave?”

Sorey doesn’t comment on that. “I’m guessing he’s why the practise isn’t that popular anymore.”
“More like he’s why pets are more discreet now than before, really. Just because it’s not popular doesn’t mean it’s not done anymore.”

The conversation dies down, then, and they continue their way through the palace. A few minutes later, after a series of turns and watch your steps and I can’t see s, they arrive at their destination.

When Sorey enters the court he’s summoned to, Zaveid in tow and holding the chain that connects to his collar, Zaveid takes off his blindfold, and he finds that’s entered what feels like is going to be a public trial.

A public flogging, he told Lailah. Well, this is the closest they’ll get.

The first thing he notices is the number of courtiers seating among the jury, though he feels they’re as an audience and not at all involved in what’s about to take place. Then he sees the familiar long white hair and red dress, and Sorey finds Lailah seated among a group of men, all wearing medallions, and he sees Chancellor Bartlow, too. He realises then that’s the Council, and sitting in front of them, in the golden throne, is the Regent.

The Council and the Regent, the seat of power in Hyland until Mikleo turns twenty one.

The Regent is not at all what Sorey expects him to be. He’s young, with shoulder-length brown hair that’s yet to grow silver. His face is free of fine lines that one would easily find in an ageing royal, and he doesn’t even have any facial hair. Sorey would’ve thought the Regent and Mikleo don’t have any physical resemblance, especially with the Regent’s brown flat hair and Mikleo’s silvery tousled hair, but the Regent looks at him as he enters the room, and Sorey finds the same amethyst eyes Mikleo has. He wears clothes with intricate patterns and belts, the colour scheme red, and his cloak, though the colour of black and gold, has patterns reminiscent of the Shepherd in the legends. The Regent is covered in red and black, whereas Mikleo, whom Sorey sees standing in front of him but still a ways from the throne, is covered in soft blues and yellows. They clash in colour, and Sorey can tell they’re going to clash here as well.

Mikleo stands straight, shoulders squared, like he’s about to get into a fight. He doesn’t turn to look at Sorey, even though all eyes are on him---it almost reminds Sorey of when he first stepped into the dome a few days ago. With the amount of gold Sorey wears, he beats even the most overdressed noble in the room. Sorey stands out too much, and he feels overly conscious of all the eyes that study and the golds on his body. The Regent even does the same, his amethyst eyes giving Sorey a once-over with a look of disapproval on his face, and Sorey remember why they’re all here in the first place. The paint seems to emphasise much more the shades of blues and purples across his chest and back, and he realises that maybe that’s the point.

Zaveid stops walking at one point, and he pulls at Sorey chain once before he immediately stops. They both stand just behind Mikleo. A herald steps forward to call out Mikleo and his titles.

Mikleo steps forward, and so does Sorey. He kneels, while Mikleo looks like he’s squatting in front of the Regent before standing up again.

The fight starts.

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“Uncle Michael,” Mikleo says. His tone is flat, empty, and though Sorey doesn’t see the look on his face because he remains kneeling, he can tell that Mikleo’s face is just as devoid of any emotion as his tone is. The Regent raises his chin, an eyebrow raising to acknowledge his nephew.
“Nephew,” the Regent, Michael, says. “You may have an idea why we’re here.”

“My pet requested a fight in the ring and won.” A lie; Mikleo merely twisted Sorey’s words to make it seem like that. Even though it wasn’t exactly his intention, Sorey can’t exactly explain his words away as him wishing to die rather than sit with Mikleo if they ever ask him. He forces himself not to frown.

No one asks Sorey about it, however. Michael replies to Mikleo’s words, not even sparing Sorey a look. “Not without horrible consequences.”

“He’s fine, however,” Mikleo says. “Not dead, only with bruises, and a lost tooth, I heard. It’s not my fault my pet wanted a fight and earned bruises from it. I don’t see the problem,” the Prince says, as if the bruises Sorey earned are a result of him tripping over his own feet and falling over a flight of stairs. “Unless you count his lost tooth as a problem. Does he want his lost tooth replaced? I can give him mine.”

Sorey makes a face at that, but he sees Lailah shoot him a look, and he tries his best to school his face to a straight, unreadable expression. The Regent, however, breaks the passive look he’s since starting the talk with Mikleo, and he frowns.

“You know how the practise is slowly being put to a stop. I recall you agreeing to it.”

“Is that the point of this? Very well. I realised we needed entertainment, Uncle,” Mikleo says. “The nobles agree so. I provided entertainment, and allowed my pet’s request. I believe I’m being wrongly judged here.”

And with that, Sorey realises, the audience’s sympathy is on Mikleo. The Regent is trying to punish Mikleo in public for no reason, and this is just a waste of everyone’s time---it’s what everyone’s seems to think with how their faces are pulled into varying frowns.

Sorey feels cold creep on his back as he tries not to look up and stare at Mikleo. The Prince knows what he’s doing. Maybe this is a bad idea; he’s playing everyone in this room.

But the Regent only looks unimpressed. “Are you? We’ll see.” He motions his hand. A man steps out from the side, just near the rows of seats where the Council is sitting, and Sorey blinks. He’s the man Sorey had fought in the ring.

He looks fine, save for the bandage around his head, Sorey finds with relief. The man’s eyes flicker towards Sorey, then to Mikleo, and he frowns.

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“The Prince,” the man says, “he offered me gald along with my freedom if I manage to kill his pet.”

Sorey’s eyes widen at that, at the realisation that Mikleo planned his death every step and even tried to hide his tracks after failing by trying to order Sorey to kill the man. There are no surprised gasps from the audience, but the frowns etch deeper, and Sorey realises that the audience no longer sympathise with the Prince. With a twinge of horror, Sorey wonders if this is something that always happen in the court, precisely between Mikleo and the Regent.

Hyland’s politics is horrifying.

Mikleo, upon realising the situation, opens his mouth to speak, but the Regent cuts Mikleo off. His amethyst eyes look on at Mikleo with disapproval.

“Nephew, it’s not just about the entertainment,” he interrupts. “It’s a part of it, yes. I wondered
what changed your mind, but to bring in unnecessary bloodshed to kill a gift from Rolance’s
goodwill?” Michael shakes his head. “There’s a lot of thing wrong here, I’m sure everyone thinks
it. Look at the slave, covered in bruises, unconscious for nearly three days, all because of my
nephew’s petty hatred of Rolance. I know that his opinion of Rolance isn’t news to everyone
anymore.”

Mikleo doesn’t say anything.

“I’ve left orders to treat your gift with respect, and what did you do in my absence? Attempted to
kill him by securing his demise in bloody entertainment, and I know there’s more to it.” Then the
Regent looks at Sorey. “Slave, speak.”

Sorey hesitates, and he looks at Mikleo, but the Prince doesn’t turn to look at him. He still stands
straight, proud, his posture perfect, and Sorey remembers their first meeting, how Mikleo tore his
earring off, and then in the ring, when he looked at Sorey with that degrading look and how he
asked Sorey to die for him. He remembers how Lailah smiled so kindly at him and apologised for
how Mikleo acted towards him. He remembers how Lailah thinks Mikleo, as he is now, isn’t fit to
be king and how the Regent thinks he has to be taught a lesson.

Sorey talks.

“He drugged me in the baths,” he says, “before I was brought to the ring.” He sees Lailah put a
hand over her mouth, her expression that of surprise. Chancellor Bartlow is frowning, and so are
the other members of the Council. Sorey continues. “He used his unknowing captain to do it and
tricked him into throwing some unknown drug into my bathwater.”

Michael’s eyes flicker from Sorey to Zaveid. “Is that true? Speak.”

It doesn’t take Zaveid a heartbeat to reply. “No.” And Sorey turns to look at him, eyes wide. “The
slave lies. I know what I was doing. The Prince is---”

“Zaveid doesn’t have anything to do with this,” Mikleo cuts off. His tone is still calm and
collected, inconvenienced at most, and Michael turns to look at his nephew. “Don’t listen to that
idiot. He only does as he please.”

“Your Highness---”

“Zaveid.” Mikleo finally turns, and he looks at Zaveid, raising an eyebrow at him. “Won’t you
shut up?

The silence that follows only means that Zaveid does keep quiet, and Michael returns his gaze from
Zaveid to Mikleo.

“The slave doesn’t lie, does he?”

“I wouldn’t say he lies,” Mikleo says coolly, “merely misinformed. There is no drug. It was
something I myself use; a gesture of goodwill from me. Perhaps the effects were a bit too much for
him.”

“A gesture of goodwill,” Michael repeats, “before you bring him to his demise.”

Mikleo opens his mouth for a reply, perhaps another well-crafted retort, but Michael interrupts
him.

“No,” Michael says, “that’s enough excuses, Mikleo. Do you think I’ll tolerate even more of this?
You avoid your responsibilities in court and in the border, and now your disobedience threatens the fragile alliance with Rolance. You may be the Crown Prince, but this is crossing the line, and something must be done. I’ve met with the Council and decided your punishment.

“Your lands in Marlind, Guriel, and Lefay are forfeit, and you no longer have access to the galds and troops in both lands.” Shock ripples across the audience, though none of the nobles voices their objection. Looking at the crowd, Sorey sees some who are agitated at the Prince’s punishment, and most who look as if they’ve seen it coming. In that moment, Sorey realises the divide among them: those who support the Regent and those who support the Prince. Mikleo’s support are very small in number. “You’ll find your income diminished because of this, and you now have to personally petition me for expenses.” A pause, and Michael levels his gaze on Mikleo. “Be grateful you retain Elysia, and that we have not taken this decree further.”

“Be grateful I retain Elysia,” Mikleo repeats, and though there’s no difference in his tone, it keeps Sorey on edge, “which you can’t take away by law and has no own troops or even strategic importance?”

“Do you think it please me to do this?” Michael says. “Mikleo, you’ve done this to yourself. Perhaps if you shoulder your responsibilities and do your duty, not just here but also in the border at Camlann as well, then I will restore your lands to you without second thoughts.”

“I believe there’s an old caretaker in Elysia,” Mikleo says, “Zenrus, I believe. An old friend of my mother. Shall we ride to Camlann together? We can share armour.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Michael replies, obviously exasperated by Mikleo’s antics, “I’m more than willing to loan you troops if you ever decide to do your duty.”

“Why should I go to Camlann,” Mikleo says, “when at Heldalf’s word, you roll over?”

Michael grips the armrest of the throne tightly, and the cool expression breaks. He’s angry. “You say this is a matter of national pride, but you’ve barely lifted a finger in service. Shall I repeat your list of offenses? You disobey my orders for fair treatment, you bring in unnecessary bloodshed, you avoid your in court and in the border.” Michael pauses. “Shall I continue, nephew? The list is endless.”

“The truth is,” Michael continues to say, “all you’ve done is act out of petty malice against Rolance, something I’ve already mentioned before as well. We’re done with this, Mikleo. Embrace the slave, and we can end this.”

Sorey blinks at that, dumbfounded at the Regent’s words. That can’t be real, can it?

He feels the soft pull on his collar by Zaveid, and Sorey slowly rises. He expects Mikleo to balk at his uncle, to throw out another well-crafted excuse to not do it, but Mikleo just looks at his uncle, and then, to Sorey’s surprise, Mikleo turns and approaches.

He hears Zaveid step away behind him, giving them both the space they need, and Mikleo stands in from Sorey, looking at his face, studying him. Mikleo looks at him with a sleepy interest, as if he’d like to take his time with this, then his lips curl into a small smile. It makes Sorey nervous.

Mikleo leans forward, lithe hands resting themselves against Sorey’s shoulders, to give Sorey’s cheek a kiss. It’s practically nonexistent; Mikleo’s lips don’t even brush against his cheek. He leans a bit further towards Sorey, and he finds that Mikleo smells faintly of lavender and roses.

“Do you know?” Mikleo murmurs, barely audible, and definitely unheard by anyone else but
Sorey. “All this paint makes you look like a gold digging slut.” Sorey’s eyes widen. “What reward are you getting from speaking? Gald?” Mikleo makes a soft gasping sound, as if hearing dirty gossip. “Fucking Lailah, perhaps?”

---And Sorey violently jerks away from Mikleo.

The golden paint on his shoulders and face is smudged now. Sorey stares at Mikleo, his eyes wide, absolutely revolted at the Prince. Sorey has unconsciously backed away from him. Mikleo, on the other hand, looks back at him, his hands still hovering in the air where he has placed them on Sorey’s shoulders. Sorey sees the golden paint straining porcelain skin.

Mikleo raises his eyebrows at him, slowly moving down his raised hands, and he turns to the Regent.

“Witness this, Uncle,” Mikleo says, voice laced with hurt and injured innocence, “my pet’s actions. You never did inquire the reason behind my action, and assumed them born out of my hatred for Rolance.” He shakes his head. “You should know me better than this.”

And yet another counter. Sorey briefly remembers Heldalf’s words to him, the day he had won again Heldalf then found himself face full of sawdust: just because the opponent is down doesn’t mean the fight is over.

Michael is quiet for a moment, then, “fine. The events in the ring are a result of the slave’s disobedience. Assume this a result of your disobedience as well, Nephew. Learn from this and grow.”

Mikleo looks down to the floor with umbled grace, feigning defeat. “Yes, Uncle.”

--

The hearing is ended after that. Michael rises from the throne, and so does the Council from their seats, and they all follow him out of the room. Mikleo stays in his place, watching them as they pass by him, one by one. Lailah passes by Mikleo, then Sorey, and he sees that there’s troubled sympathy etched across her face, her green eyes staying on Mikleo, and Sorey tries his best not to glare at Mikleo’s petty head.

Mikleo doesn’t deserve that look from Lailah, not after what he said.

Moments after, the nobles watching the little show between Michael and Mikleo begin to file out of the room, and then it’s just Sorey and Mikleo. Well, there’s Zaveid.

He’s not really sure what to do now that everything is done. “...Your Highness?”

“Zaveid,” Mikleo says, and he turns to regard the soldier. He holds out his hand, and Zaveid stares at it. “Well?” the Prince says, not even glancing at Sorey, as if he’s not there. “Give me the chain, silly. Didn’t you see? My pet and I have reconciled.” Sorey wants to scoff at that. “Give me the chain, and return to your post. The festivities will begin shortly.”

Zaveid gingerly hands the chain to Mikleo before bowing and making his way out of the room. Mikleo stops him, however.

“So,” he says, and he hesitates for a moment before frowning at Zaveid. “You didn’t have to do that.”

There’s, surprisingly, a softness in his voice, Sorey realises, and he searches Mikleo’s face. There’s
no soft look to match the momentarily softness in his voice, however.

“Don’t do it again.”

There’s a moment of silence, and then Zaveid snorts, his cocky attitude resurfacing. “You’re kidding, right? I’ll keep doing it until I get myself killed. I’ll excuse myself now, Your Highness. Have fun in the gardens.”

And Zaveid leaves the room.

Silence takes over for a few seconds again before Sorey speaks. “You protected him.”

“Did I?” Mikleo says, and he walks past Sorey. He violently tugs on Sorey’s collar, and he stumbles to follow Mikleo. “I’ll be troubled if I lose my captain,” Mikleo says, voice as cool as ever. “As you know, I no longer have any troops.”

Another silence, and then, Sorey grits out, “is that what you think of Lailah?” She’s nothing but kind; to hear Mikleo speak like that of her sparks anger in him—no one deserves something like that, especially not Lailah. Mikleo decides to ignore his question, though, and instead he continues to talk about Zaveid as if Sorey never mentioned Lailah at all.

“You do know he doesn’t appreciate your attempt to bury me in the mud, and to think you even tried to bring him into it.”

Sorey purses his lips, frowning, but he replies anyway. “Someone has to point out your sickening tendencies, but I should’ve known he’ll cover your atrocities.”

A breathe of laughter, and Mikleo turns to look in front, continuing to walk leisurely out of the room. The grand hallways are empty, save for the very few soldiers lining the halls, and Sorey wonders how many of them he can take on if he’ll attempt an escape.

Mikleo seems to read his mind. “Forget it,” he says, “you won’t even get past that door if you try.”

“And why is that?”

“I’ll kill you myself.”

Sorey pauses at that. He knows better than to underestimate his opponents, but Mikleo looks so fragile, and undoubtedly easy to overpower. “If you wanted to, you could’ve done that a long time ago.”

“I could have,” Mikleo agrees. “But you seem to have forgotten already about my uncle.”

They walk out of the hallways through a giant intricate arch, and Sorey finds himself walking barefoot in the palace gardens. It’s a lovely place; flowers of varying kinds fill the gardens, planted onto ground in various patterns across the soil to create a design highly Hylandic in taste: in short, colourful curves and twists are found throughout the grassy field. Lights are hung on the sidewalks, providing soft lights as the sun sets across the horizon. It’s a wonderful sight, made ugly with Mikleo’s presence.

“What I need,” Mikleo says, “is a reasonable excuse that even Uncle has to agree with, and I promise you I’d slit your throat before you can even lift a finger.” He pauses, and he tilts his head at Sorey with a smile. “On another note, let’s do go back. Attempt an escape,” Mikleo offers, still smiling, “so I can finally kill you.”
Sorey decides it’s time to drop the subject. He doesn’t think he can handle Mikleo threatening to kill him with a sweet smile on his face. “Why did you bring me here?”

If Mikleo is amused by his attempt to change the subject, he doesn’t show it, and he goes along with it instead. “I’m feeling particularly generous after losing lands and income,” Mikleo replies. “Don’t you want some fresh air? I bet you miss it. You don’t have to be shy.”

They come across a bench, and Mikleo sits in it, casually putting the chain down to his side. He leans onto one hand, looking at the ongoing festivities. Sorey remains standing.

It’s a silence after that, not one he’ll consider awkward but also not comfortable. The noises are on the other side of the gardens, and Sorey sees the cluster of courtiers, chatting with wine glasses in their hands, servants running here and there with food and drink to serve. Sorey briefly wonders if this is something held everyday.

The silence stretches on, with neither of them speaking, and it makes Sorey highly uncomfortable. He doesn’t want to be near Mikleo’s presence any longer than he has to, and he has an inkling feeling Mikleo is completely aware of it, relishing in his discomfort instead.

“Your Highness,” Sorey hears someone say behind him, and he tries not to cringe. It’s Lailah.

Mikleo slowly turns to look at her, and he smiles so pleasantly, so kindly, as if he hasn’t just spoken so cruelly of her. It makes Sorey feels sick; he can’t even tell if Mikleo is genuinely pleased to see Lailah or if it’s just an act, but knowing Mikleo, it’s definitely just an act.

“Hello, Lailah,” Mikleo greets, and she smiles at him before walking towards him. She turns to give Sorey a nod of acknowledgement, and he nods back, before she stands before her prince.

“I believe there’s a conversation in order?” Mikleo says, his tone a teasing one, and Lailah chuckles.

“Yes, of course. There’s no other reason for me to come here. Perhaps you’d like to gaze at the stars instead?”

“Of course. With a knife, preferably. You know how I hate pleasant conversations.”

Lailah shakes her head, amused, as if Mikleo hasn’t just implied a threat against her. “You know that’s not possible, Your Highness.” A pause. “Do you mind if we talk, just the two of us?”

Mikleo raises an eyebrow at that, but he stands, picking up Sorey’s chain. He calls for the nearest soldier that’s under his command, and he tosses it to her. “Look after him. If he tries something funny, feel free to beat him.”

“Your Highness…”

“It’s just a precaution,” Mikleo tells Lailah, and he looks at Sorey before he takes Lailah’s hand and leaves with her.

Their idle chatter isn’t something worth listening in as they walk away from Sorey, but he hears Mikleo’s voice travel through the air one last time, and the words he utters make his blood run cold.

“So, Lailah, are the other slaves Rolance sent anything of worth?”
mikleo's pov next chapter!! and this one might even be posted shortly. i already have it written and just needs to be put onto the computer, but i need a Break after this one SO. yeah.
“So, Lailah, are the other slaves Rolance sent anything of worth?”

Lailah pauses at that, and as they walk away, she spares a glance at Sorey, whom she finds is staring hard at the ground. She looks at Mikleo with a small frown on her face.

“Your Highness,” she warns, and Mikleo shoots her an inquiring look.

“What? I haven’t seen them, you know. Are they all the same as the one I have?” He scoffs. “If so, don’t you think Rolance is mocking us?”

Lailah slowly shakes her head, redirecting her gaze back to the gravel path they walk in. “No. They’re of fine quality, I heard. Quiet and submissive. Beautiful, too.”

“You heard,” Mikleo repeats. “So you haven’t seen them.”

“No, she admits, and she returns a greeting from a passing courtier. Lailah sees her with her pet—if the small, almost unnoticeable yet expensive earring has anything to go by. Fancy jewellery has always been what separates the pet from the courtier.

Mikleo, however, pays the courtier and her pet no mind. They walk in companionable silence for a few minutes, slowly approaching the gathering far from where they originally were, until Mikleo breaks the silence.

“I’m sorry,” he says, so suddenly. It takes Lailah by surprise, and she tilts her head to the side, confusion apparent on her face as she looks down at him. He’s almost nineteen, yet he still stands shorter than her. Lailah can’t help the fondness spreading in her being whenever she looks down at Mikleo, even though she’s well aware that the Prince is so dangerous and lethal.

The Prince, for some reason, seems embarrassed. “I’m sorry,” he says again.

“If there’s anyone you should apologise to,” Lailah says, “shouldn’t it be Michael?”

Mikleo is silent for a moment, then he shakes his head before rolling his eyes. “Never mind. I’d die first before I say anything of the sort to my uncle.”

Lailah frowns. Why does the Prince have to be so difficult? “Your Highness…do the proceedings earlier not mean anything to you?”

“It can’t be meaningless to me,” he replies, “I lost my lands.”

“You know that’s not what I mean.”

“We’re not here to talk about that, are we?” Mikleo says. “So? What is it?”

Silence. Lailah does her best not to wring her hands together under Mikleo’s gaze. “Actually, it’s
what I want to talk about,” she says, “about your behaviour during the proceedings.”

A scoff. “So in the end, it’s about me not playing niceties. I believe I’ve had enough of that with my uncle today. Anything else?”

“Nothing more,” Lailah says, and she can’t help the disappointment seeping in her voice. “I see trying to change your mind will be fruitless. I understand now that what the Regent has done to discipline you had been a waste of time.”

Mikleo is quiet as they join the gathering, and Lailah sees him lift a hand to take a martini glass from a passing servant. He stares at it, tilting the glass here and there, amethyst eyes observing the swishing alcohol before he takes a drink. “Not a waste of time, no,” he says after drinking. When Lailah blinks at him, Mikleo continues. “It’s true I’ve had enough of it. I hate to admit it, but Uncle’s right. I’ve been avoiding my responsibilities as Crown Prince.” Mikleo pauses. “Perhaps I can start with the trade negotiations with Lohgrin.”

Lailah beams at Mikleo, almost looking as if she’d hug him, but she knows better than to do that. They’re in a public gathering, and Mikleo absolutely hates being touched to begin with. Even so, it’s perhaps the best thing she’s heard today. Maybe it’s still not too late for the Prince to change heart. He still has two years, after all.

“Oh, Your Highness….” Lailah says, her smiles wide. “Michael will be happy to hear this.”

Mikleo makes a face. “Will he be? That’s not really part of the plan, but I suppose your smile is the prize I was after.”

Lailah giggles, and, hearing the orchestra playing in the middle of the gardens, she hooks her arm around Mikleo’s he raises an eyebrow at her, and when she grins, Mikleo’s eyes widen.

“A dance, please, Your Highness?”

“No.”

He dances with her, anyway.

--

Mikleo hates gatherings. It’s draining, to say the least. At least Lailah is a pleasant companion, and a good shield against talking to any of the other nobles. He knows that after what happened today, he should go out of his way to shore up support, talk to the nobles into having their sympathy for him, but Mikleo thinks he’s done enough of it during the proceedings itself; the Rolance slave was the scapegoat, after all.

The slave. Right, he forgot about him. Mikleo left him in the hands of one of his soldiers, and then he went and completely forgot about him. It doesn’t matter, really. They’d bring him back to his room after leaving without any orders for hours. Although, honestly, Mikleo prefers that they leave him outside under the harsh bite of the old. It would’ve been nice to know the slave is suffering from the lack of clothes. It was the Regent’s order that he was dressed like that, anyway. Mikleo couldn’t care less.

---Is that what you think of Lailah?

For the rest of the evening, Mikleo tries not to think about what the slave said.

The night has long been asleep, the small gathering finally finished and the nobles long gone from
the gardens. Mikleo steps into his room, undoing his collar with a sigh, and he finds a servant standing by the entrance of his walk-in closet, a bundle of nightclothes in his arms as he awaits orders. It’s time to head to bed and then deal with the headache that will come with the new day. Tomorrow, rearrangements will be made now that Mikleo is severely lacking funds. A cut with his income means less servant, less soldiers, less everything. Mikleo wishes he could rid of the slave this way, but he’s not that lucky.

He takes of his golden circlet and puts it down his table at one side of his room, opposite of his bed. Mikleo holds up his arms and looks at the servant.

“Go on. Attend me.”

Before the servant can even take a step forward, however, there’s a knock on his door, and the servant stops, looking at Mikleo for orders.

Irritated, Mikleo calls out, “come in.”

The door opens as he turns, and of course, it’s Zaveid. He always has a knack for interrupting him every single time he’s about to relax himself.

Mikleo scowls. “Zaveid, it’s fucking past midnight. Can’t this wait in the morning?”

Zaveid shrugs. “Apparently not.”

“What, Uncle summons me? Tell him I’m already asleep so I can finally sleep.”

“No, it’s not the Regent.” Zaveid pauses. “The slave wants to talk to you.”

“What?”

“The slave wants to talk to you.”

“I heard you, idiot,” Mikleo says, his irritation taking a turn for the worst. He puts a hand on his temple and massages it, and he waves at the servant with his other hand. “Leave us.”

The servant does, not without putting down Mikleo’s nightclothes on his bed of course.

“What the fuck is his problem?” Mikleo hisses when the servant is finally out of the room. Zaveid uselessly shrugs instead, and Mikleo tries not to growl at him.

“I don’t know,” Zaveid says, and he stares at Mikleo. “Come on, don’t look at me like that! He keeps insisting, and besides, you did tell me to tell you whenever he’s doing something fishy.”

“And you think him wanting an audience with me is fishy?”

“With how he hates being around you, yeah.” A pause. “No offence, but if I were in the slave’s shoes—or I guess feet; he’s barefooted—I’d hate being around you, too.”

Mikleo narrows his eyes at Zaveid before walking past him and out of his room, not even bothering to redo his collar. “Zaveid, if you weren’t the captain of my guard, I would’ve slaughtered you,” he says behind his back as he makes his way to the slave’s room. Zaveid seems to bristle at his words.

“Yikes.”

--
The slave is sitting on his bed when Mikleo enters. He looks up at Mikleo, and he returns the look. There’s silence for a moment, then the slave rises from his bed and then, to Mikleo’s surprise, he kneels in front of him, head lowered.

Mikleo stares at him for a moment. “This is new.”

“I want something,” the slave says, and Mikleo takes a second to process that.

“You want something.” Mikleo tilts his head. “Hm, let me guess: you want the chain removed, or the soldiers guarding you lessened. Perhaps you want a weapon, too? Unfortunately, my lack of resources can’t provide you that.” He scoffs. “What do you take me for, an idiot? You’re wasting your time, you pathetic scum.”

His words seem to have an effect on the slave, but even then, he keeps his head down. “That’s not what I want,” he forces out, “I want you to help the Rolance slaves that are in possession of your uncle.”

Mikleo raises an eyebrow at that. “And why would I do that?”

“You get something in return.” The slave pauses. “Obedience.”

Mikleo pauses at that. Obedience. The slave is offering his submission in exchange for the other slaves. He keeps quiet, and the slave continues.

“I’ll do whatever you want,” he says, “anything. Hurt me, humiliate me, kill me. I don’t care. I’ll even throw myself to the sword. Just---” he grits his teeth, “help them.”

“Help them,” Mikleo repeats, “in exchange for your obedience.”

“I…don’t think the slaves with your uncle are being treated well,” the slave says. “Do something about it, and the bargain is made.”

There’s a stillness in the air, and Mikleo crosses his arms, a small laughter coming from him. “You’re worried about the mistreatment of Rolance slaves?” he says. “On my end, I didn’t think it possible to train the will out of a man, but your disgusting country managed. Congratulations, your compassion rings false.”

“That’s something I---” the slave starts, raising his head to look at Mikleo, but he stops, and he looks down again. “I never agreed with it,” the slave says, softly. Mikleo blinks. “But I never had the power to do something about it. Even so, slaves are never mistreated in Rolance.” There’s another silence, Mikleo looking down at the slave, his lips pursed. The slave continues. “I talked to one of the slaves by chance, and I found out that her handler took a heated iron to her leg to see if she can follow an order to keep quiet. Rolance will never do that. Complete submission is something I don’t agree with, but it’s a pact: give up free will in exchange for perfect treatment. Hurting someone who can’t fight back, that’s---” The slave pauses, and Mikleo sees his hands curling into fists. “Please, help them. They’re innocent, unlike me. They can’t fight. They’ll serve you willingly and without question, and I will, too. I’ll do anything, just please help them.”

Silence takes over, with Mikleo looking down at the slave, and the slave still looking down at the floor. The slave’s hands are curled into tight fists, and he’s breathing heavily. Mikleo realises, after a moment, that the slave is shaking. He remembers his sister Alisha; her fists curled into fists as she argued with the Council. This war is meaningless. What we need to do is to negotiate with them; to strike a bargain. Yes, I’ll do anything so no one has to get hurt. I will not allow you to abuse those who won’t fight.
Mikleo looks behind Zaveid, who raises an eyebrow at him.

“Leave us.”

Zaveid blinks, and he opens his mouth to say something, but in the end, he decides to follow Mikleo’s order and leave the room, closing the door with a soft click. Mikleo looks back at Sorey with a small frown.

“You’ll really give up your pride over a handful of slaves?” Mikleo asks, and Sorey nods. “Why?”

“Because,” the slave almost growls, but he forces the words out as calmly as possible in his language, perhaps unconsciously. “I’m stuck here and have no power even on my own self. I have no other way to help my own countrymen.”

Mikleo blinks, his mouth slightly open in surprise, as he looks down at Sorey. Then, Mikleo leans against the wall nearest to him, and he crosses his arms.

With the smallest twinge of regret in his voice, he slowly says, “I’m afraid you overestimate my influence over my uncle.” The slave stops at that, and Mikleo continues. “But you’ll offer yourself for a handful of slaves.” He pauses. “Truth be told, I don’t care what my uncle does with a bunch of slaves, but this is an interesting deal you’re offering.” He narrows his eyes at the slave. “If I find out, however, that this is a trick, I myself will make sure to make their life a living hell, and you’ll have a front row seat in their suffering.”

The slave frowns at that. “Do you think I lie?” He pauses. “Do you think I’m tricking you in behalf of your uncle?”

Mikleo pushes himself off the wall. “Well, you sold me off in front of every noble that lives in Ladylake.”

“I only told what I thought was the truth.”

_He has a point_, Mikleo’s mind helpfully supplies, but he ignores it.

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” Mikleo says. “The deal has been made. I’ll keep my word, and you keep yours.”

He makes his way out to the door, and he’s reaching for the knob when he hears Sorey mutter two words.

“Thank you.”

Mikleo freezes for a moment, his lips drawing into a thin line, before he takes the knob and turns it, opening the door and leaving the room with a quiet thud of the door behind him.

--

Mikleo wakes up with a start, his eyes staring wide at the blue silken sheets hanging overhead from the posts of his bed. His breathing is uneven.

He’s startled from sleep by nothing, as what’s been the norm for him for two years now, going three, but he just can’t seem to get used to it. Mikleo turns to his side as he tries to even his breathing, his legs tangled amongst soft silk bedsheets. His hand reaches out to push the curtains on his bed aside, and he smiles warmly at the soft rays of sunlight filtering through his window.
Mikleo sits up on the side of his bed, slowly removing himself from sleep with every blink. A hand is rubbing unconsciously at the nape of his neck, feeling the rough, uneven skin against his hand, and when he finally shakes himself fully awake, Mikleo goes straight to his closet.

The routine is something he’s used to now; Mikleo never calls for a servant in the morning, and so always spent them changing on his own. He unlaces the thin nightshirt from the collar all the way and takes it off, and he takes a moment to stare at his own reflection and the dark patterns on his skin in the mirror before taking out another high-collared garment, the colour of blue and patterned with white across the chest and yellow on the hems, and wearing it. His black knee-length pants are replaced with loose, white ankle-length pants.

He leaves his room with a yawn, and he’s greeted with lively bursts of movement among his servants, going here and there, carrying boxes, greeting him as they scurry by. It takes a while before a servant approaches him and apologises for the long wait, but Mikleo waves him off and inquires of what’s happening.

The servant blinks. “Your Highness, you’re moving from your manor to the prince’s residences in the palace.” A pause. “…Remember?”

Mikleo pauses at that. Oh. And now his morning is ruined. His eyes flicker at the slave’s room at the end of the hall before looking back at the servant.

“Has my pet been moved already?”

A nod.

“I see. Well, am I supposed to head straight to the palace and have a lovely breakfast with my uncle?”

“Breakfast has been prepared in the dining hall, Your Highness, and you may still bathe in your baths. You may leave anytime you wish.”

“Hm,” Mikleo says, “may I not leave instead? I quite like my house.”

The servant balks at him.

Mikleo sighs. He supposes his sarcasm is really only appreciated by Zaveid and Edna. And sometimes even Lailah. “Never mind. Accompany me to the dining hall and attend me.”

--

“Lailah, I need to talk to you.”

Mikleo leans against one of the posts in Lailah’s grandeur dining hall in her manor, completely dressed in his usual princely clothing. Though the sun is up, it’s still early in the morning, and usually, not most courtiers would be awake at this hour, but not Lailah, and certainly not him. Even if he wants to, Mikleo hasn’t had the luxury of sleeping in since two years ago.

Lailah looks up from her food and stares at him, her eyebrows raised. She’s still dressed in her nightclothes, which shows off her flawless shoulders and legs. As expected, her clothing is red, as is the usual. Her manor is draped in red, really, and if Mikleo didn’t know better, he would’ve assumed she’s a total supporter of the Regent.

Which she isn’t. She’s loyal neither to the Regent nor to Mikleo, only to the crown; she just so happens to love red.
“Your Highness,” she says, and then her lips form a small pout. It’s cute. “Don’t you know better than to stroll into a woman’s house without announcing yourself? Where are your manners?”

“Sorry,” Mikleo hastily says, obviously not sorry, and Lailah huffs. He smiles. “Sorry,” he says again. “I purposely told your servants not to inform you.”

“To catch me in my natural habitat?” Lailah says, and Mikleo looks at the dining table. Sure enough, it’s lined with lots of pastries. Typical Lailah. She leans in her chair to peek behind him. “Zaveid is not with you, is he?”

“Oh, God, no,” Mikleo dramatically says. “Lailah, you should know me better than that.”

Lailah giggles at that, and she waves a servant on standby. “Please get the Prince something to eat.”

She actually could’ve just offered one from her numerous pastries on the table, but Mikleo supposes all of those are for herself. “It’s fine; I’ve eaten already.”

“Then something to drink,” Lailah corrects herself. “Champagne? Or would you like a cocktail instead?”

“Water.”

“I should’ve known you’re going to be so boring this morning,” Lailah says, and she laughs when Mikleo makes a face at her. She pulls the chair beside her and pats the velvety cushion of it with her hand. “Have a seat, Your Highness.”

He does.

Lailah returns to her food as Mikleo makes himself comfortable in his chair. “So? What is it that you want to talk about?”

So straight to the point. “Already? Aren’t you going to ask if I already moved out of my manor?”

“Yes, but I was hoping you’d give me reason to complain, but never mind.”

A breath of laughter. “So tell me what it is you want to speak of, and I’ll listen.” She takes a bite out of her steak.

Mikleo takes a moment to actually say it, but eventually, he does. “The slaves that are with my uncle.” Lailah looks at him, her mouth closed as she chews on her food, but the look in her eyes urges Mikleo to continue. “I heard one of them took a stroll in the gardens last night. Is that true?”

Lailah takes her table napkin to wipe her mouth. “I don’t know. I think so. I believe they’re rarely out of the Regent’s pets’ residences.”

Hm. “Is that so?”

“I’m not a reliable source of information about them,” Lailah admits. “Even I am not permitted to the grounds for some reason.”

For some reason. “Do you think they’ll allow me to go see the slaves?”

Lailah studies him for a moment, then, “Your Highness, you’re not going to cause another trouble,
Mikleo raises an eyebrow at that. “No,” he says. “I have no reason to. I just wish to see the slaves.”

“You don’t do things just because of idle curiosity,” Lailah points out. “There’s always a reason.” Dammit, she’s right. “I don’t want to pry, but you leave me with no choice. Perhaps it was a bad idea to come to me asking about them.”

Mikleo purses his lips, leaning into his seat. She’s right. He should’ve just gone straight to the pets’ residences instead of asking Lailah about them. Somehow, he’s not thinking straight; Mikleo would like to blame Sorey for it.

He sighs. It’s a lovely morning to deceive people, and he just has the luck that the first one is going to be Lailah. “I’d just like to confirm something.”

Lailah raises an eyebrow. “Something?”

“I heard Uncle isn’t using them,” Mikleo says. “I’m curious as to why. Do you think Rolance really sent us low-tier garbage? Wouldn’t it be a shame if, somehow, it gets find out that Uncle is covering up Rolance’s distasteful deed?”

Lailah frowns. “So you are planning to cause trouble.” She sighs. “Your Highness, it’s still too early for this.”

“From your words, though,” Mikleo says, gears turning in his head, “I can only assume that the slaves they sent really are garbage. Why else would you be worried?”

Lailah pauses at that, and her frown etches deeper. “I didn’t mean to imply that.”

“But that’s what I hear,” Mikleo says, and he rises from his seat. “Well, I’ve done all I need to do here. I was fine just knowing from you, but I suppose I’ll go and see the slaves myself. Maybe if I like one of them, I’ll ask Uncle for them.”

Lailah stares at him. “You hate Rolance and anything from it.”

“I do,” he says. “But when you lack finances, it’s hard to be a picky eater.”

He didn’t really mean to lie to Lailah like that, but he had no choice at the moment. It’s not as if he can tell her about the slave’s plea---she’s not pledged her loyalty to him like how Zaveid had, and even then he’d like to do this without involving anyone else. It’s easier for the Regent to catch on when there are people who know, and he can’t have that. Mikleo sighs as he leans into his seat, eyes watching the scenery go by as his carriage leaves Lailah’s manor to head straight to the palace.

Perhaps Mikleo can count himself extremely lucky that he’s moving to the palace at the moment. He doesn’t have to make up an elaborate excuse to go anywhere near his uncle’s domain, and he can probably walk in easily into the pets’ residence, if Lady Luck continues to smile down on him.

---Hah. Yeah, right. Mikleo spat on Lady Luck once, and she hated him since. It’s not going to be easy finding a way to see the slaves.

He already has a plan on what to do to help them: once he confirms that Sorey isn’t lying to him, he’ll use Lohgrin’s delegate to get the slaves out. Mikleo knows Lohgrin’s culture is mostly
influenced by Rolance, and they, too, make use of slaves. Though normally a neutral country, Lohgrin has close ties with Rolance due to their location, so any noble from Lohgrin should be aware how much of a fine quality a Rolancian slave is, especially one that’s from Pendrago itself.

It’s easy, to be honest. Befriending the delegate and seeding the idea to ask for the slaves into his head the whole day shouldn’t be that hard, and Mikleo might even find himself an ally he can use later on. In the end, Mikleo gains much more in this than just a lowly slave’s obedience; he just has to play his cards right and to not get caught.

Not get caught. Right. Mikleo frowns as he gets off his carriage and stands in front of the palace’s gargantuan doors. He’ll figure out a way in to the residences soon enough.

--

Crossed spears prevent Mikleo from entering the pets’ residences, and he frowns at the stationed soldiers.

“Excuse me?”

“Apologies, Your Highness,” says one of the guards. “We’re under strict orders not to let anyone in.”

“Even me?”

“Even you.” Not even a moment of hesitation. Mikleo’s frown deepens.

“Well, let me in. I’m here to view the slaves my uncle received. I’d like to ask him for one.”

“We can’t allow that,” says the same soldier, “unless the Regent himself says so.”

What a fucking douchebag.

Mikleo takes a step back, regarding the soldiers coolly. Neither bucks under his gaze, until he says, “I wonder how your peers will react if they find out you’ve fathered an illegitimate child.”

An absolutely baseless bluff, directed at both of them. It’s a shot in the dark, but one Mikleo has hit so many times he’s honestly wondering why none of these bloody men can keep their cocks in check, and it works. Both soldiers react, but so differently. To Mikleo’s disappointment, the one he’s hoping to squash under his foot is the one innocent of the accusation, his bulging eyes looking at the other soldier, who seems to immediately try to curl in on himself.

Either way, Mikleo smiles.

“Scared?” he coos, tilting his head to the side. Of course Mikleo know how much of a taboo bastardy is; it’s the only reason why courtiers keep pets of the same sex. The soldier purses his lips, but the other soldier---the only Mikleo calls a douchebag---steps in.

“I’m afraid it’s time to leave, Your Highness.”

“What, you’re protecting him?” Mikleo baits. “You really shouldn’t; you know how everyone hates this kind of stuff. Your career is over for even trying to cover for him, but then again.” Mikleo pauses, studying both soldiers. “I guess it’s pretty nice sucking his dick, hm?”

Both soldiers recoil, stepping away from him, and Mikleo’s smile grows wider.

Humans are so easy to read.
“You know, I just want to see the slaves,” Mikleo casually says, as if he hasn’t said anything so life shattering a while ago. “I don’t really know why you’re making this so difficult. What do you think I’ll do, break a vase and blame it on the slaves?”

Silence.

“Let me in,” Mikleo says, his tone firmer now. “We can forget I said anything.”

There’s a moment of hesitation, but eventually, the spears blocking his path are lifted, and Mikleo nods at them.

“See? It’s not that hard.”

He walks past them and into the pets’ residences, not sparing them another glance. The place is no different from any parts of the palace, not even the prince’s residences, Mikleo finds with irritation. The only thing that differs it from his apartments is the red banners hanging all over the place, as most in the palace, anyway. The Regent’s colour is everywhere, and Mikleo has to resign himself to seeing the atrocious colour every single day until his ascension.

His ascension, in two years’ time. Mikleo briefly wonders if he’ll make it that long.

It takes him time, but Mikleo eventually finds them. The slaves are at the far end of the residence, all locked up in a single room. He dismisses the guards in the vicinity, and he enters the room. Immediately, all slaves stop whatever they’re doing, and they all throw themselves to the ground. Mikleo crosses his arms as he studies every single one of them in the room. All prostrated to the ground, their heads so low it seems like they’re kissing the dirt, and Mikleo remembers Sorey’s words.

_They’ll serve you willingly and without question._

He’s quiet for a moment, then he tells them to sit up, in Hylandic.

They don’t move.

Mikleo raises an eyebrow at this, and he tries again, this time in Rolancian, and they react. The slaves slowly straight themselves up, but they remain kneeling and looking to the floor, and Mikleo realises that maybe part of the reason they’re being mishandled by the handlers is the language barrier. He frowns at this, and he wastes no time to do what he needs to do. He can’t stay here for too long.

“Who among you met my slave in the gardens last night?” Mikleo asks, in Rolancian. “Brown hair, green eyes. Obnoxious with the gold jewellery. Whoever you are, raise your head, and the rest of you, return to what you were doing before I arrived. Do not mention me to anyone else.”

The slaves slowly rise to their feet and, with a deep bow, left. Only one remains kneeling, looking at Mikleo with wide, honey eyes. Her brown curls reaches her back, and truly, Mikleo thinks, with her full lips and flawless chocolate complexion, she is lovely, and so are the other slaves.

“Rise,” he says, and she does. As she stands, Mikleo sees a familiar dark scar on the side of her thigh, only visible hen her dress crumples as she moves. Mikleo holds her nervous gaze, and he smiles, kindly. Mikleo watches as her nervousness slowly washes away.

“Let’s have a talk, shall we?”

Unfortunately for Mikleo, Sorey really isn’t trying to trick him, after all.
im super struggling with chapter 8 for some reason? so i wrote a quickie which is also known as: partly the reason why zaveid is so protective and fiercely loyal to mikleo feat alisha. mentions of her anyway. i wasn't sure if i wanted to post this here but after posting it on tumblr my brain was like 'u posted it in this shithole why not in ao3' and i was like 'ok'

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s kind of weird for Zaveid to watch Mikleo grow from an awkward little princeling with a crazy admiration for his sister to an unforgiving, lethal force that can take on even him and win. It’s honestly a scary, surreal thing to experience.

When Princess Alisha was still alive, Zaveid was in her service in her Guard. He’s not the captain, sadly. That was Eizen, but he thinks he would’ve been captain if Eizen wasn’t the captain. Now, though, Eizen could be captain in Mikleo’s Guard, and he won’t complain. That’s how much he misses his friend.

—But that’s not the point of this, so never mind. Take two.

When Princess Alisha was still alive, Zaveid was in her service in her Guard. She was an admirable princess. The wellbeing of her people and maintaining the slowly crumbling peace with Rolance were always her priority, and she was more than ready to fight the entire Council, literally and metaphorically, to make sure the Council won’t persuade the Queen to pursue war against Rolance.

The Queen was always smarter than that, though, so it’s mostly fine; her sibling who is now the Regent wasn’t and still isn’t, but that’s also not the point of this, either.

Zaveid was personally asked by the Princess herself to look after her brother, and it’s through this order that he found himself, well, not exactly stalking the Prince, but it definitely felt like that.

Mikleo had always admired Alisha. There’s always a sparkle in his big amethyst eyes that Zaveid had learned to liken with the actual stone when he talked about her, and he was always so proud to call himself her little brother, even though he and Alisha had different fathers and he’s only treated well because he took after the Queen more than Alisha did. He’d tottle after her with books in his scrawny arms to ask her to read for him, and she’d always humour him, even for a few minutes, even when she had no time to spare for him. Mikleo was more than happy to have her attention on him, no matter how short or how hasty she was every single time.

Alisha, to her credit, always made up for lost time with her brother when night fell. She’d sneak into Mikleo’s room and stay there until sunrise. Zaveid, in all his time snooping around whenever Mikleo was concerned because he never minded his own business (no, he was just doing his job), knew how Alisha never used her bedroom and always spent the night in her little brother’s room.

Of course, Mikleo grew, and he was a lovely young teen with snark as his main personality trait, something Zaveid could tell he definitely took from his uncle, but the habit of Alisha spending the night with her brother never ceased.
Of course, that started rumours.

Of course, Zaveid knew better than that. They almost never slept, because they liked arguing over the Shepherd’s legend. Mikleo learned to draw, and Alisha was always his muse. Alisha taught Mikleo what she knew of handling spears and swords and bows. Mikleo was clumsy with spears and a natural with swords, but he was an outstanding genius with a bow. It proved to be a helpful talent in hunts.

It was always a pleasure to watch the siblings bond and learn things from each other, but of course those who never knew better liked to twist things to a more gruesome tone, but perhaps it was just the corrupted nobles who wished to taint Alisha’s reputation. While Zaveid and the members of the Princess’ Guard knew better and always defended their Crown Princess, the rumours didn’t quiet down.

In the end, it was Mikleo who decided to stay away from Alisha.

“Why do you care? You’re just a soldier,” was what Mikleo said when Zaveid had the brilliant idea of talking to him about it. “Leave me alone.”

Mikleo was sitting in one of the benches in the palace gardens with no soldier or even a maid with him. He was holding a book, and Zaveid really should know better than interrupt the Prince while reading, but he realised that Mikleo had been on the same page far too long, mulling and muttering to himself with a small frown on his face. It was why he thought of talking to Mikleo in the first place.

Despite the snarky remark, he was pouting, and it reminded Zaveid that he was just fourteen and already being thrown into Hyland’s cruel politics, ill-equipped and painfully innocent. It sat awfully in Zaveid’s tastes. It shouldn’t be that way; he was just a kid.

“Because,” he replied to his sulking prince, “your sister Alisha is sad, and she wants to know why you started locking your door.”

Mikleo stopped thumbing the same page in his book, and slowly, he looked up at Zaveid. Mikleo scowled at him. It wasn’t that threatening. In fact, it looked cute. “Isn’t it obvious? I’m a child, but I’m not stupid. They’re using me to ruin my sister’s reputation.”

“No, but the people do.”

Zaveid realised his mistake immediately after that: Mikleo was just fourteen, but his young mind already understood how things worked in the court and helpfully supplied him the things he had to do. Mikleo already knew he had to make do with what little he had, or else, everything Alisha had worked so hard to build would easily crumble.

The truth didn’t matter, as long as that hideous rumour held the tiniest possibility to be true, her efforts to put off war will be ignored by the nobles. Mikleo was just fourteen, but he already knew he had to make sacrifices.

That wasn’t right. It shouldn’t be that way.

Zaveid remembered how weirded he was with Alisha’s order to look after him, but now he understood. Someone had to look after Mikleo in Alisha’s constant absence, else, Hyland will find a way to make him self-destruct at such a young age.
Zaveid wasn’t the best guy at the job. After all, all he did the whole time before this was watch the Prince from the shadows, but now Zaveid would have to try his best.

“May I ask to stay with you, then? Your sister told me you hate being alone.”

“That was when I was seven.”

There was silence for a moment.

“Okay, you can stay.”

Chapter End Notes

this couldve been longer but i cant do that bc id be adding spoilers super duper relevant to the story lol
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If someone had told Sorey the night he met Mikleo that he's going to be on his knees begging for the Prince's help, he would've been very confused, accompanied with, "why would I do that?"

Because, really, why would he do that? Mikleo seems to be the kind of person who likes to watch people suffer and who definitely refuses anyone's plea for help. Besides, if Sorey will ever need help, he'll never ask it from Mikleo. He's not even in the list of people Sorey would dare ask for help, with Heldalf at the bottom of the list.

Somehow, it's what Sorey exactly does, anyway: on his knees begging for Mikleo's help. What's more surprising, though, is that Mikleo agreed. Sorey doesn't really think that his offer is worth anything, but he's not going to question it, not when he knows Mikleo will keep his promise, and that's another thing that Sorey never really thought will happen. If someone had told Sorey the night he met Mikleo that he's going to put his absolute faith on the Prince and leave the lives of his countrymen in the hands of the man who will try to kill him soon enough, he would've been very confused, accompanied with, "why would I want to do that?"

In the end, it's what he exactly does, but he's not going to sweat over the details. What's important is that the slaves will be given the care they truly deserve, as he had promised the slave he met in the gardens, Rachel, and it's going to be the first promise he ever made to a slave that he'll get to keep.

For the first time since he came to Hyland, Sorey can sleep soundly.

The day after that eventful night with Mikleo is, for a lack of a better term, uneventful. Since Mikleo has lost lands and income, he and his entire household are to move to the prince's residences in the palace. Sorey's new room is virtually the same: the same wall carvings, the same silk bedsheets, the same but newly installed chain on the floor, and the same guards outside his room. Sorey spends the rest of the day sleeping, then, thinking about what Mikleo plans to do to help the slaves. He personally prefers that Mikleo doesn't do anything that has something to do with deceiving people, as he's prone to do, but Sorey supposes he'll just accept things as they come.

The next day is different. Sorey is roughly woken up by a familiar figure hunched over him. In the dark, because of the closed curtains over his window, Sorey can't see who it is, but all it takes him is a few blinks and his eyes adjusting to the dim light to see that it's Zaveid who's woken him up, staring at him intensely with his hazel eyes.

"Uh..."

"Raise and shine," Zaveid flatly says in the dark, still looking down at him with so much intensity, Sorey can't help but curl in on himself. It's actually a scary thing to wake up to.

"Um," Sorey says, "thank you, but, uh, can you not glare at me like that...?"

Thankfully, Zaveid seems to understand, and he leans back as Sorey sits up, a hand running through his bed hair. He yawns, and he rubs his eyes before looking back at Zaveid.

"Um, good morning." A pause. "What time is it?"
"Early," Zaveid says, and Sorey blinks at him. "It's early in the morning, okay? Maybe three hours after sunrise."

"It's not... It's not really that early anymore."

"Whatever." Zaveid huffs. "Look, you'll be brought breakfast, then you'll be prepared for the occasion today. Don't be too difficult, okay? I won't be sticking around to make sure you don't scare the servants with your incessant complaining."

Sorey takes a moment to process this. "Occasion?"

"An ambassador from Lohgrin has arrived to discuss trade negotiations," Zaveid explains, "you'll be serving the Prince during the discussions. Don't fret; I come with good news: you will not be going there with just a silk rag around your hips."

Sorey hasn't really thought or cared about that, actually. That fact alone surprises him. He asks something else instead. "Why would the Prince want me there?"

"Hell if I know," Zaveid says. "Stop asking questions. Didn't I tell you to stop that already?"

"You told me to stop complaining."

"Same thing," Zaveid says, exasperated. He frowns. "I'm not sticking around here any longer. Wait for the servants, and I'll come back to take you to the Prince when you're ready."

"Is it busy out there with the ambassador?"

"Man," Zaveid says, and for the first time, Sorey realises, he sounds irritated. He doesn't answer Sorey's question, and instead, he leaves the room without any more words. It's silent, and Sorey purses his lips, his heart sinking when he remembers Mikleo's warning: Zaveid isn't happy with how Sorey acted in the proceedings.

That's a considerable change of attitude towards Sorey, but he supposes it's his own fault for speaking against Mikleo. It should've been obvious already that Zaveid will be mad with him. After all, the soldier called Sorey a liar and tried to defend Mikleo. A warning from the Prince isn't really needed; it doesn't take a genius to figure out Zaveid's opinion about the whole thing.

A servant comes in to serve Sorey his breakfast, and he stares at his food for a minute before sighing and digging in. Well, that's one and only friend lost. It was fun while it lasted.

There's nothing too interesting that happens afterwards. Sorey has his breakfast in silence, and he takes his bath in silence. It's actually a pretty lonely routine, and Sorey realises just how much he took Zaveid's presence for granted. It's way more awkward being alone with the servants than with Zaveid hanging around with them.

Sorey is pretty sad about the losing Zaveid, until the servant presents him clothes.

Clothes, as in actual clothes. A white long sleeved shirt, high-collared with laces, and black pants. There are also belted boots deep brown in colour for him to wear. Sorey blinks, staring at the wardrobe far too long than normal, before looking at the servant, confused.

"I am to wear these?"

Because apparently the concept of Sorey going out to the public appropriately dressed is so unfamiliar to him now at this point that the servant unwittingly looks at him with what might be
sympathy.

This is awkward.

"Yes," the servant answers anyway, to spare Sorey the humiliation, probably. "The Prince's orders. Then you are to put this tailcoat on as well as the usual diamond earring." Right, the heavy golden earring with the enormous diamond. It's a symbol of his status as the Prince's pet. Still, though, this is infinitely better than the awful silk rags he's learned to call his public clothing. "If you need help with the laces, I may help you."

Hylandic clothing is so complicated with the laces and belts. As it turns out, his white shirt is supposed to be laced all the way to the collar, and Sorey practically begs the servant not to close his collar; he'll choke. The cuffs of the sleeves have to be laced closed as well, though he's not as uncomfortable with it as it had been with the collar, it still weirds him out. He'd loved to have the sleeves rolled to up his arms instead, but he's not allowed to do that. The pants don't have any unnecessary laces save for securing it around his waist, thankfully.

The tailcoat, Sorey finds, is a sleeveless one. It's deep violet in colour, with a single tail that has a pointed end. Gold embellishes the hemline of the garment, and intricate curves pattern the back all the way to the tail. Somehow, the curvy, geometric-like patterns reminds Sorey of the Shepherd. Despite the patterns, it's simple by Hylandic standards, especially if Sorey were to stand beside the Prince with all his belts and twin capes, or even Lailah with her intricately detailed dress that Sorey always has to wonder how the tailor managed to sew it.

He's tightening the belt around his left boot when the door opens, and Zaveid walks in without any word. He looks at Sorey for a moment, then he whistles, startling Sorey.

"Oh, that looks good on you," Zaveid explains when Sorey shoots him a look. "The Prince himself chose it. I guess his sense of fashion isn't limited to belts."

Sorey is pretty sure Mikleo is going to get mad at Zaveid when he hears that. He decides he won't tell Mikleo. "He chose the clothes himself?"

"He did," Zaveid says, and he pauses. "If it weren't for the giant obnoxious earring, it's pretty hard to tell you're a pet." Zaveid frowns. "You look like a noble instead."

Sorey freezes, and he looks up from his boot to stare at Zaveid for a moment, and the other just raises an eyebrow at him instead. "What?"

"N-Nothing," Sorey stammers, looking down at his feet and hastily shoving the other boot on. "Let's---Let's get to the Prince quickly. He's not going to get mad that I'm taking too long, is he?"

Zaveid stares at him for a moment, still frowning, and even though he's supposed to be mad at Sorey, he doesn't call Sorey out on his obviously nervous behaviour. "I doubt it," he says instead, "but I guess it's better to see him earlier."

Sorey mutely nods, finally securing the belt around his right boot, and he stands from his bed. Zaveid brings out the blindfold that Sorey has been very familiar with already, motioning at him to come to him.

"Alright, let's go."

When Zaveid said he's going to bring Sorey to Mikleo, he already assumed Zaveid is going to take
him straight to the banquet where the nobles involved in the negotiations would normally be, but the walk is surprisingly very short, and when Zaveid takes off Sorey's blindfold, he finds that he's in Mikleo's room instead.

The room is enormous, although that's already to be expected; Mikleo is the Crown Prince, after all. A quick glance around the room tells Sorey that Mikleo's not in here.

Zaveid pushes Sorey into the room. "Don't try anything funny," he warns, "I'm not the one who's going to kill you if you do, but you'll wish it would've been me." Then Zaveid closes the door.

Sorey stares at the door for a moment before turning around to study his surroundings. It's a room that's obviously meant for a pampered and spoiled prince: the room is extravagantly decorated. Intricate golden carvings and patterns are etched on the walls, fancier and more detailed than the ones on the walls in Sorey's room. Beside him is a reclining couch the colour of blue and silver and a table with carvings of vines and leaves etched on its legs. On top of it are numerous books fanned open, as well as blank parchments of papers and a quill and ink. There's an archway painted gold just a few ways from Sorey and the reclining couch, and though he can't see what's past it due to the curtain obscuring his view, he has a guess that it might be the dressing room due to the lack of closets and mirrors in here.

The large canopy bed is raised on a platform on one corner of the room, on the same side as the archway, and cloths of varying shades of blue and gold and silver are swathed all over it, and the canopy is so big and tall that it makes Sorey think it looks like a carriage made of cloth that's used as a bed instead. Opposite of the bed and lined against the entire wall, Sorey sees with profound interest, are fancy bookshelves stacked with books. There's a chair and a table with books and papers as well, and surrounding them are various furniture and random items ranging from vases to old crumbling ceremonial swords. They're...really interesting, to say the least. They look like artefacts salvaged from old ruins, and Sorey dares to take a step towards the table to get a better look at the items.

When he's closer to them, however, something else catches his eye instead, and Sorey turns to stare at the stained glass on the wall near the bed. It's placed in a way so the bed can easily hide it when one walks into the room, but in this angle by the bookshelves, it's easy to see it.

The geometrical shapes and straightforward lines on the glass clash against the curves and swirlly patterns normally found in Hylandic art, and in this case, the carvings in Mikleo's room. The same could be said about the stained glass's colours: while Mikleo's room is swathed in blue and silver and gold, the colours on the stained glass are of varying shades of brown and rust, the colours intensified by the sunlight filtering through its translucent glass. If it isn't nicely hidden by the large canopy bed, it would have stuck out like a sore thumb in the otherwise fancy room.

Anyone might say that the stained glass is an ugly addition to the Prince's room, but Sorey knows better. The design is painfully familiar, something he's seen numerous times in his favourite book that he's absolutely sure he can draw it with his eyes closed. His chest is filled with fondness and adoration for the stained glass window.

With complete awe, Sorey recognises the stained glass to be a mural of the Shepherd. An exact replica of it, made into stained glass and installed in the Prince's quarters as a window. Though the size is considerably smaller to accommodate the limited space offered by the wall, the details are exactly the same as Sorey knows it. He's completely overwhelmed by what he's seeing that he's not sure what he's supposed to do. It's just---so brilliant. It's so lovely and so beautiful that Sorey completely forgets that this is the room of the man who had been hell bent on trying to kill him and might still be.
Good Lord, Sorey never wanted to drape himself over a window so much until now.

"...What are you doing?"

Sorey jumps, and he spins to find Mikleo standing behind him, his arms crossed. He's still not dressed for the occasion: he's wearing a pale blue undershirt with puffed up sleeves and white pants with what seem like blue waves decorating the ends. He's barefoot. Mikleo even looks as if he's just fresh out of the baths with his damp unkempt hair and flushed skin, like he's been in the hot humid air of the baths for too long.

Sorey gapes at him, until he remembers that he's in Mikleo's room. He does the first thing he remembers that he has to do as the Prince's slave: he kneels to the ground, his head lowered.

There's silence for a few moments.

"Stand up," Mikleo says, and Sorey does. The Prince looks completely unimpressed with the little show he displayed, and he raises an eyebrow at Sorey. "So? What were you doing?"

"Um," Sorey starts, suddenly embarrassed. "Admiring your window." A pause. "You believe in the legend of the Shepherd?"

Mikleo stares at him for a moment, and he looks at the window for a second before looking back at Sorey. He doesn't answer Sorey's question. Instead, he steps uncomfortably close to Sorey, studying him, and he reaches out for Sorey's earring.

Past experience makes Sorey flinch away from Mikleo, but it doesn't stop Mikleo from doing what it is he plans to do. Sorey closes his eyes shut, expecting the worst, until Mikleo casually flicks the earring. Sorey opens his eyes, blinking at Mikleo as he feels the heavy weight of the earring swing back and forth on his ear.

"You look fine for a slave," Mikleo nonchalantly remarks, but he doesn't let Sorey process what he said. "But that's only what you are: a filthy slave. Know your place, you hear me? I'm not doing you a favour, and your promises are worth less than the dirt under my shoes, and so are you. Am I clear?"

Mikleo is barefoot, though. "As day."

"Don't speak unless I tell you to. Don't defy me. Roll over if I say so. If I tell you to go die, go die. Understood?"

Sorey wants to say he doesn't want to go die just yet, but he knows Mikleo is going to wring his neck if he says that. "...Yes."

Mikleo seems satisfied with his reply, and he takes a step away from Sorey, turning around and heading towards the reclining couch and table filled with scattered books and papers. He bends down to pick up the scattered papers. It's kind of weird watching Mikleo clean up.

"I've spoken to Mayvin of Lohgrin," Mikleo says, picking up a stray paper and adding it to the stack he's holding in his hand. "And I believe he may be persuaded to ask for the slaves as part of the trade negotiations. Lohgrin holds the same attitude towards slaves as Rolance, am I correct?"

"You are."

"Yesterday was mostly spent seeding the idea into his head, but it seems I didn't have to do it in the first place; he's interested with the slaves already, and all I had to do was to encourage him."
Mikleo puts down the stack of papers on the table, neatly arranged, and he takes the bottle of ink to rest on top of them as paperweight. "The deal is finalised tonight. If Mayvin insists strongly and I support it, Uncle will most likely allow him to have the slaves as some sort of a permanent loan or something that looks like that to avoid offending Rolance."

Mikleo raises a hand to rest at the back of his neck, unconsciously rubbing it, and that's only when Sorey notices it: the patch of dark, broken skin that runs across his nape and his shoulders until his clothes obscure how far it goes. It's an odd contrast to his lovely porcelain skin. Sorey has perfect view of it now that Mikleo's back is turned to him and his loose clothing exposes most of his shoulders. Sorey's never seen it before. Somehow, Mikleo's tight, high necked clothing suddenly makes sense to Sorey.

"You'll accompany me to the entertainments," Mikleo is saying, "Uncle has this habit of...What are you spacing out for?"

Sorey blinks, and he finds Mikleo frowning at him, the books and papers that were once laying haphazardly on the table now neatly stacked on one side. His hand is still on his neck. Sorey isn't sure what to say. It feels like an insensitive thing to ask, but he doesn't know what else to tell Mikleo, either.

"I'm sorry. It's just...," Sorey starts, and he hesitates. "It's nothing. Please continue."

Mikleo narrows his eyes at him, until he realises what he's been doing this whole time. He immediately drops his hand, and without another word, Mikleo heads straight to his walk-in closet. In his absence, Sorey purses his lips, suddenly very uncomfortable in the room. Even looking at the mural doesn't ease his nerves.

Mikleo returns several minutes later, and now he's fully dressed in his usual princely clothes: from his high collar and six belts and twin capes down to his shiny brown shoes. His silvery hair is neatly slicked back, his golden circlet resting nicely on his forehead. No longer is the scar visible, but it's still clearly the elephant in the room.

Sorey doesn't say anything about it.

Mikleo doesn't say anything about it, too, and he continues as if nothing happened. "Uncle has a habit of doing business in relaxed environments. You'll help me further appeal to Mayvin about the slaves, and if everything goes well, we'll go to view them. They'll be at ease knowing you're there, and they'll be able to charm Mayvin into practically begging for them. Once Uncle gives in, then it will be done." Mikleo pauses. "Nothing will go wrong here, unless somehow you end up spilling our plans to Uncle, then consider your countrymen left for dead. So you better keep your mouth shut."

Sorey purses his lips, and he mutely nods at Mikleo. He doesn't plan to, and he'll definitely do his best to keep quiet. The last thing he wants is for this to fail. Mikleo seems to have perfectly set the whole thing up, and all Sorey has to do is to not talk unless he has to.

It really shouldn't be that hard.

Mikleo is satisfied with his answer, and he throws something to Sorey. He easily catches it, and looking at the item Mikleo threw him, he balks. He looks up at Mikleo, who only raises an eyebrow at him.

"Well? Wear it."
It's the collar Sorey wore when he was summoned to the court, the one full of rubies and connected with a golden chain. He stares at it for a moment, before resigning himself to the fate of being practically dragged around by Mikleo.

At least his clothes are nice.

--

"You're bringing him with you?" Chancellor Bartlow asks, eyeing Sorey warily. Although he's nicely dressed, it seems all Sorey is to the Chancellor is a wild, untamed animal. It makes him want to frown, but Mikleo simply pulls on his chain once, and it's enough of a warning for him to remain passive or Mikleo is going to pull harder.

"Why not?" Mikleo simply says, expression carefully schooled to a cool, uncaring expression. "We're on better terms now, and really, he looks nice in Hylandic clothing, don't you think? I personally love it. I'm sure Prince Mayvin will agree as well."

Sorey remembers how Mikleo said he looks fine, though it was immediately followed by insults, and he tries not to grin then. He allows himself the smallest luxury of thinking that maybe Mikleo's words aren't just him outright lying to the noble. Maybe.

The Chancellor doesn't seem to be buying it, though, and he frowns at Sorey before looking back at Mikleo. "I believe it would've been better if he just stayed covered in gold paint and silk cloth. It's far more fitting for a barbaric slave fitting for the ring."

A reference to the fight in the ring, though Sorey was mostly beaten up in that fight. He can't even imagine how a two-hit win is anything close to barbaric. Sorey can imagine Zaveid bristling at the Chancellor's words. *Yikes.*

Mikleo just smiles, though, like he's heard a bad joke and is only smiling at said joke to be polite. "Nonsense," Mikleo says, "he's not that barbaric at all. He's a sweetheart. You'll see." And Mikleo tugs at Sorey's chain as they leave the Chancellor to his own devices. Once they're out of the Chancellor's earshot, Mikleo's pleasant smile devolves into an annoyed frown. "What an annoying old man," he mumbles, mostly to himself, and Sorey can't help but agree.

"He likes to call me an animal."

"I suppose it's because you are," Mikleo replies, and Sorey allows himself to frown this time. He doesn't know why he first thought Mikleo really thinks he looks good.

They enter the banquet hall, and there they find two members of the Council already situated on the banquet table. Sorey can tell the Chancellor Bartlow will behind be the third one. Lailah isn't around. As it turns out, there will be a reception taking place, then the banquet itself, then entertainments, before finally the negotiations. Truth be told, Sorey never really found negotiations like this that enjoyable back in Rolance, and he can tell the same thing is going to happen here, perhaps multiplied with Mikleo with him.

It doesn't take too long before the Lohgrin delegates arrive, and the one called Mayvin stands out among them. Silver-haired with a really nicely trimmed beard, Mayvin is old, but not the usual kind that's already past way their forties. Mayvin is a finely built man who carries himself with purpose. He's a noble, though he's not dressed in fine clothing. Instead, his clothes are those meant for an explorer who's spent most his life travelling the world, and that's when Sorey realises that the rumours about Mayvin in Rolance are true: he chose to be an ambassador travelling all around the world instead to be a king.
Sorey has always admired Mayvin for such courage, but despite his love for history, he knows he can't bring himself to do the same thing, especially now.

When Mayvin lays his eyes on Mikleo, he grins, obviously pleased with seeing the Prince. Mikleo smiles back, and he comes to greet the noble.

"Mikleo," Mayvin says, and Mikleo returns the greeting.

"Hello, Mayvin," he says, and Sorey can't help but notice the lack of honorifics. "Uncle seems to be delayed. Would you join me and my pet outside and enjoy the fresh air in the gardens?" Sorey thinks the Regent isn't delayed, though; perhaps he's already on his way, and Sorey resigns himself to listening to Mikleo lie about a great number of things. It's time for Sorey to get used to it.

Mayvin grins at the invitation. "Of course." And he motions at one of his servants to come with them.

That's how Sorey finds himself strolling in the gardens with Mikleo; him and the servant trailing behind as the two courtiers lead the way, chatting about anything.

Except, their conversation is truly interesting, and Sorey finds with surprise that Mikleo hasn't uttered a single lie yet. They talk of history and ruins, of theories regarding different eras that flourished before them. Of course Mikleo is interested in this kind of thing; the carefully maintained relics and numerous books and the stained glass window in his room say it all. It's no wonder he and Mayvin hit it off nicely. Sorey listens to their conversation with absolute interest.

"Numerous accounts tell of an era when Hyland and Rolance were of one kingdom," Mayvin is saying, and Sorey agrees; he's read about that one, too. "What do you think?"

"Personal opinion aside," Mikleo says, "I believe it's true. I have some artefacts and evidence that hint on it. The most notable example would be the Shepherd's mural found in the old ruins near Mabinogio fort."

The one that Mikleo has a stained glass replica of. Mayvin nods, looking at Mikleo with approval.

"Rolancian art and Hylandic art is so different; it's a surprise to find one that greatly resembles Rolancian art in Hyland. I believe there'd be more if ruin expeditions are allowed here in Hyland."

That's true. Maybe even back then, the arts were probably mostly Rolance in nature, until the kingdom split into two nations and Hyland adapted a more delicate yet intricate art style that consists of twists and curves---more seraphic in nature.

They suddenly stop walking, and Sorey blinks, finding that Mayvin and Mikleo are looking at him. Mayvin has an interested glint in his eyes while Mikleo...well, he's just looking at him. Then Sorey realises he must have mused his thoughts out loud.

"O-Oh, uh," he stammers, looking down. "I'm sorry. I've spoken without thinking. That's---"

"No, no, you're thinking!" Mayvin says, suddenly excited, and he looks at Mikleo with a grin. "I didn't know you have a pet like this. He seems educated."

"He is. There's a lot of books to read in my room," Mikleo says immediately, though flatly, but Mayvin doesn't seem to notice it. He looks back at Sorey.

"Is that what you think, son? What else do you have in mind?"
And that's how Sorey got dragged into an intellectual discussion about the possibility of Rolance and Hyland being one kingdom once. Mikleo hasn't glared at him nor pulled at his chain ever since he accidentally spoken in the middle of Mikleo's conversation with Mayvin, and Sorey is going to count that as a win for now. He kind of feels bad for the unknowing servant dragged with them.

"Speaking of Rolance," Mikleo says, cutting off a fruitless argument about the very first Shepherd being Rolancian. "You've been there recently, I hear. What news do you have?"

Sorey stops, looking at Mikleo. He doesn't look back at him, and instead, his eyes are trained on Mayvin. It's pretty obvious that the topic isn't brought up just to get Mayvin to shut up. Sorey holds his breath for a moment, suddenly nervous at what news Mayvin can possibly bring.

The question makes the explorer frown a little. "Have you seen Pendrago?" Mayvin asks, and Mikleo shakes his head. "It's a beautiful city. It's history that you can walk in and relive, with beautiful skies and awesome structures. But it's dark when I've come to visit. The whole country is still mourning the loss of its old King and Crown Prince. You'd know how it is." There's silence for a moment, Mayvin looking as if he's said something terrible. "Apologies. I may have crossed the line there."

"No, it's fine," Mikleo says, his tone dismissive. "They're in mourning?"

"Yes," Mayvin says, "the nation is in a state of unrest, too. More than half of the nobles were in support of the late Prince. You can imagine how upset they are when Prince Sorey died and Heldalf became emperor."

Threats of a civil war. Sorey feels his blood run cold. Mikleo, on the other hand, just tilts his head to the side.

"It's not as if it's Heldalf's fault the Crown Prince died." A pause, and his lips curl into a smile. "Perhaps there are rumours."

"There are," Mayvin agrees. "His legitimacy is not exactly the issue, though not everyone accepts it. Everyone knows how he was born to a concubine because the Queen couldn't bear a successor for years, and honestly, it's understandable, but that's only part of what's causing unrest among the nobles." Mayvin pauses, and he looks troubled. He no longer looks carefree like he has before. "Rumours are circulating how the Crown Prince's death was no coincidence. That Heldalf may have taken advantage of the confusion after the King's death and killed the Prince."

It holds some truth. Sorey is not dead, obviously, but he didn't even know his father had died until he was in chains, mocked by Symmone. It happened so fast; it's no doubt it's exactly what Heldalf did, counting the time away until their father died and striking when he finally drew his last breath. It sits awfully in Sorey's tastes.

"I don't believe it, though," Mayvin says, "I was there, and I saw Heldalf in his grief. It was genuine. I'm aware of his close bond with his younger brother, too. It couldn't have been true."

Mikleo, despite the terrible news, looks amused, but Sorey supposes he'll take delight in hearing about the problems Rolance is currently facing. "I wouldn't say that," Mikleo says, "they're exactly the type to feint kindness, welcoming their enemies with open arms before stabbing them in the back."

Says the one who did the exact same thing to him, Sorey wants to say, his hands balled into fists.
He wouldn't say the same about Heldalf, but he knows his friends are the most loyal, trustworthy people he has the privilege of knowing. Sorey knows better than to view people in stereotypes, but for Mikleo to say such a thing---it's hypocritical, a rather perfect example, even.

Mayvin, though, just looks disheartened at Mikleo's words, and perhaps there's even a twinge of sympathy. "I understand," he says, his tone that of regret, "what took place in Glaivend Basin was truly in poor tastes. If Lohgrin weren't a neutral nation, we would've come to your aid."

Sorey stops at that, looking at Mayvin with quiet surprise. It was war; losses were made, and though Sorey wasn't there, he knows Rolance won and took Camlann back, which is rightfully theirs. It's the most awful way to end conflict over lands, but it's a reality that's been happening for decades, centuries even. War itself is in poor tastes, something Sorey himself wants to put a permanent stop to, but he can't seem to properly comprehend what Mayvin is implying with his words. Rolance taking back what's stolen from them is in poor tastes? How so? Because war sparked when Hyland retaliated with an attack? He's aware of how Hyland was trying to trespass Rolancian lands; Sorey was in the border and drove away the Hylandic trespassers himself. Sorey knows Rolance only fought in self-defence.

What does Mayvin mean?

Before Mayvin can say anything else, though, a servant comes running to them, obviously out of breath. "Apologies for the interruption," the servant says, "but the Regent has send that he is awaiting you inside."

"Oh, dear," Mikleo says, still pleasantly smiling. "It seems I've kept you to myself too long, Mayvin."

The worry lines in the explorer's face disappear, and he chuckles. "Well, the time was pleasantly spent, nevertheless. You and your pet are both intellectually stimulating to speak with."

And with that, they make their way back inside.

--

The Regent's face upon seeing them enter is that of disapproval, but it disappears when his eyes flicker to Mayvin. Formal greetings are made, Mayvin's servant excuses himself, as what etiquette dictates, but Sorey knows he can't do that, lest he has to bodily wrench the chain out of Mikleo's hand.

After formalities are done, the Regent says, "could you excuse me and my nephew for a moment?" And his gaze moves to rest on Mikleo. Mayvin excuses himself, then, good-naturedly, and Sorey supposes he is to do the same, but instead of letting him go, Mikleo's hold on the chain tightens.

"Nephew," the Regent starts, "you're not invited to these discussions."

"Am I not?" Mikleo says, feigning surprise and hurt. "I told Lailah I'm coming." He makes a show of scanning the area around them, before looking back at the Regent, a small frown on his face, though Sorey can tell he's just doing it to further annoy his uncle. "I'm not surprised she didn't get to tell you, though. She's not here. Is she grounded?"

"Mikleo, this is a serious talk between men," the Regent says, irritation in his tone, "this is no time for childish games."

"I fairly recall being told to take my responsibilities seriously. Remember? It was even in public, and you came out of that scolding richer by three estates and enough revenue to choke every horse
in the stables."

"If I thought you really come here to do your duties, then I'd welcome you with open arms, but I know you," the Regent says. "You have no interest in talks of trade. You've never applied yourself seriously to anything in life."

"Haven't I?" Mikleo says, his eyebrows raised. "Then there's nothing to worry about, Uncle."

There's silence afterwards, completely uncomfortable to Sorey, until the Regent narrows his eyes at Mikleo and says, "I expect appropriate behaviour."

"Of course."

They don't immediately follow the Regent after that, with Mikleo staring at the back of his uncle, and Sorey looking at him.

"...You know," Sorey starts, "things would be really easier for you if you stopped baiting him."

Mikleo turns his gaze to him, cold and sharp, before turning back and following after his uncle. He harshly tugs at Sorey's chain.

"Won't you shut up?"

Chapter End Notes

im so pbbfffpbb over this idk aaaaaaaaaaaaaa im going to sleep
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

i had so much fun writing this that i lost control halfway through the chapter. i hope u guys have fun reading this too

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everything goes as Mikleo told him. He didn't tell Sorey though that he's sitting in the long table along with him and the other courtiers.

He sits beside Mikleo, though there's a considerable distance between them, while Mikleo sits beside Mayvin. The Regent and the Council, three of the members anyway, are seated at the same side of the table, the Regent sitting beside Mayvin. The rest of the courtiers are on the opposite side of the long table. Sorey would've thought it weird that he, a pet, is sitting with them, until he sees an elegantly dressed girl approach one of the courtiers at the far end of the table, and then she places herself in the noble's chair, and she kisses her quite intimately.

Oh. She's a pet.

Closer inspection makes Sorey realise that not all sitting in the table are nobles. The difference between a pet and a noble is almost unnoticeable, but it's there. While the nobles lack gaudy jewellery, their clothing is expensive and elaborate, whereas pets wear simpler yet elegant clothing and wear expensive jewellery.

---Like Sorey and his heavy diamond earring that easily sets him apart from them all. It's just like Zaveid said; the pets are just more careful in Mikleo's presence. A kiss is already the most daring any noble's pet can do in front of Mikleo. Sorey is more than happy not to wonder about what they do when Mikleo isn't around.

Sorey feels like his seat is an awkward arrangement, made worse by Mikleo actively ignoring him and being engaged in deep discussion with Mayvin about numerous things: history, trade, cultures, and practises among nations. Sorey doesn't mind listening in, though, if he ignores the knowing looks from the nobles. Mikleo knows what he's talking about, knows how to talk. He's good at it. Surprisingly, he's been pleasant to Mayvin; it feels as if he's an entire different person altogether. He even laughs at one point, and that's when Sorey decides Mikleo is more dangerous than he first thought he is. He's...very charming without trying. Sorey has to remember this is the same man who tore his feather earring off, and it ruins his appetite for food.

Mayvin is a man with an open mind, and when the conversation touches the topic of slaves and pets and their differences, he talks with honest interest, listening to Mikleo without any hint of disgust or anything of the like. He looks at Sorey at one point, though.

Mikleo isn't as discreet with his opinions as Mayvin, however. It feels like a bad idea to be so vocal about what he thinks about slavery to someone from a country with slaves, but he manages to express his thoughts without being outright offensive. Mayvin even smiles, and it weirds Sorey out.

"So your pet," Mayvin says, his gaze moving from Mikleo to Sorey. "Isn't he the slave Rolance
"He is," Mikleo says, looking at Sorey. "We were off to a rocky start, but now I can see what a prize he is." He smiles, and Sorey tries not to frown at him. "Obedient and well-versed in history and lore. He's a good boy."

"Perhaps he has the stamina to keep up with you the whole night?" Mayvin's tone is teasing.

Mikleo smirks. "Of course. The tale of the Shepherd is not something to take light of."

Sorey flushes at Mayvin and Mikleo's banter, and he decides to put all his attention to the food in his plate instead. He remembers asking Mikleo if he believes in the Shepherd, but Mikleo didn't answer him. He supposes what Mikleo said in reply to Mayvin is an answer to his own question. It's weird to know that someone in the form of the most vicious man Sorey's ever had the misfortune to meet shares the same passion as he does.

Sorey picks at his food as conversation throughout the hall continues on. There's not much to do on his end but wait until the day is over. It's as boring as he expects it to be, but it's something he'll power through if it means securing the slaves a way out of Hyland. It's the least Sorey can do for them.

He makes the mistake of looking up and gazing through the nobles again. Sorey sees one of the pets sitting beside his master, looking at Sorey with interest, and the pet winks and presses his fingers to his lips. He blows Sorey a flying kiss.

Sorey sputters and looks hard at his plate, shoving a spoonful of food into his mouth. He doesn't look up from his food again.

--

So far, Sorey is doing great at staring at his food like they hold the secrets of the universe that he doesn't look up when Mikleo and Mayvin finally discuss about the slaves.

"I believe you'll finally make up your mind when you see them," Sorey hears Mikleo say, "I know you've been interested since I mentioned them to you, and I promise that you won't be disappointed if you ask for them."

"I can tell. I already told the Regent," Mayvin says with a hearty laugh. "Your pet is enough to convince me, although I believe he's unique among the slaves Rolance has sent."

"He is," Mikleo agrees. "Raw and untrained. Maybe even a virgin for someone who's never been a slave." He puts a hand on Sorey's arm, and he smiles knowingly when Sorey looks at him with a small frown. "Are you?"

"Uh."

"Brilliant." Mikleo looks at Mayvin, still smiling. "He's shy. It's an easy answer."

Mayvin laughs, and Sorey turns a dark shade of red. Mikleo's hand is still on Sorey's arm, and it takes him all his willpower not to wrench his arm away. When Mayvin is distracted by other matters, namely by matters of trade with the Regent and hopefully insisting very much to loan the slaves, Sorey takes his chance to lean towards Mikleo with a frown.

"Did you really have to do that?" he says, voice hushed, and Mikleo turns to him.
"Sure," Mikleo quietly replies, still smiling. He looks amused. Sorey isn't. "He likes you. Isn't that what we want?"

Sorey hesitates for a moment. "Yeah, but---"

He's cut off by Mikleo lifting his hand from his arm and tucking a stray lock of brown hair behind his ear. Mikleo's fingers brush against Sorey's jaw, before pressing them against Mikleo's lips then on his. His smile is soft, patient.

"Later tonight, okay?" Mikleo says as he pulls back, loud enough for most people near them to hear, and Sorey, taken off guard by what just happened, mutely nods.

Mikleo returns his attention to his guest, who's looking at them inquisitively. "He got offended by what I said," Mikleo says, sounding as if he just calmed down a very difficult child. "He wants to prove me wrong."

Mayvin just chuckles. "I guess he's hiding more than just theories." And Mikleo smiles.

Sorey, still surprised by what Mikleo did, leans back to his chair blinking, and then seeing the other nobles' looks, he quickly realises he's not the only one taken aback by what happened. It's very easy to tell that Mikleo hasn't done anything like that before. Then Sorey remembers Mikleo hates keeping pets, hates seeing pets being all affectionate with their masters, and that's enough for Sorey to think that this is important enough for Mikleo to go so far as to pretend he has an adoring pet that he loves. He...might as well do the part.

How does one be an adoring pet, though?

Sorey remembers the pet that blew him a kiss, and he's absolutely revolted at the idea. Him, blowing Mikleo a kiss? He might as well poke his eyes out.

Then again, Mikleo seems fine with completely ignoring Sorey throughout this whole ordeal. The nobles slowly return to their conversations, moving on from the small spectacle Mikleo and Sorey have shown, and he decides to return to picking on his food.

--

Because there's a short time before the entertainments, the banquet hall is mostly empty, and Sorey is given the freedom to roam around.

---Which is honestly something he's always asked for. Sorey can choose to wander around the palace and find the quickest exit, and because he's free, no blindfolds, no chains, and no Zaveid to guard him, Sorey can easily just walk out of the palace and return to Rolance. It's so easy now, so close, but Sorey can't do that, not until Mayvin has left Hyland with the slaves, and that's pretty much the only reason why he's free to begin with.

There's nothing to do but to wander around aimlessly, taking note of every passageway, remembering where he's come from, because the last thing Sorey needs is to get lost. This is the first and perhaps the only time he's allowed to walk around without a blindfold, and he's going to make the most of it. Sorey knows he can easily make a mental map of the whole palace. Taking note of all the possible exits is a no-brainer, too. Letting him free like this is probably the worst mistake Mikleo has made so far.

It doesn't mean he's not easily distracted, though. The palace has lots of what could be artefacts as decoration. Sorey spends a good chunk of his free time studying a vase situated on a pedestal that might depict a scene from the Era of the Gods when a servant comes running to him. He's out of
breath. Luckily, the servant's footsteps easily snaps Sorey out of his thoughts, and he blinks at the heaving servant.

"Is something wrong?"

"The Regent...," the servant breathes out, and Sorey gives him the time he needs to recompose himself. When he's calmed down, he tries again. "The Regent has sent for you."

Sorey's eyebrows raise at that. "The Regent?"

"Yes," the servant replies. "I apologise for not finding you soon; he has sent for you ages ago."

Sorey looks around his surroundings before realising he's pretty far from the banquet hall, and judging from the servant's hurried footsteps and heavy breathing a while ago, he's been looking for Sorey all this time.

He may have kept the Regent waiting for too long.

"Oh, no," Sorey says, "um, where? Can you lead me there? I'm so sorry I made you run all over the palace looking for me."

The servant is more than happy to lead Sorey to where the Regent is. After a moment, Sorey finds himself walking into a small gathering in a different room not far from where the banquet was held. The Regent, upon seeing Sorey, dismisses the nobles he's talking to, and then they're alone.

Sorey kneels down in greeting, head lowered, and the Regent speaks.

"It's a surprise to see you intimate with my nephew in just a short time." A pause. "You've taken him?"

Taken him?

It takes Sorey a moment to realise what the Regent means, and he tries to fight the warmth that threatens to spread on his cheeks. "...No, Your Highness."

He seems to consider Sorey's words for a moment. "I see, then what changed?"

Sorey remembers Mikleo's words: unless somehow you end up spilling our plans to Uncle, then consider your countrymen left for dead.

He hesitates, not knowing what to say. This is something he's not very good at; lies and deception have never been his forte. Still, Sorey has to come up with something believable, or else everything will fall apart. The slaves will rot here, abused by their handlers. He can't have that.

"I'm in the Prince's service," Sorey starts slowly, "I've been taught that lesson the night after the proceedings."

There's a silence after that, the Regent most likely processing his words, and then, "so he's taken you."

Sorey bristles. He doesn't even know what he's trying to imply with his words, but it's certainly not that. "...Yes." Ughhhhh.

The Regent is silent for a moment, and Sorey wants Mikleo to come anytime now and save him, which makes him realise just how deep the grave he's dug for himself is. This is not an ideal situation. Sorey very much wants to get out now.
"I'm almost disappointed," the Regent says, and Sorey very much is, too, "if you've given yourself in just like that. Mikleo needs a steady influence, someone close to him with his best interests at heart, who can guide him and will not be swayed."

"Swayed?"

"Mikleo is charming if he wishes it," the Regent says. "His sister was a natural leader, and she can easily inspire loyalty among her troops. Mikleo has a superficial version of his sister's gifts, which he uses to get his own way. If there's someone who can get anyone he struck to bend for him, it's my nephew." The Regent pauses. "Where's your loyalty?"

Sorey knows right there and then that he's being given a choice. Despite his answers, the Regent seems to want Sorey on his side, and truthfully, he wants to be there as well, very much. Better to stand with the man who already earned Sorey's respect long ago and who is served by an honest and kind person like Lailah. He can't do it, though; Sorey can't choose to be on the Regent's faction, not when Mikleo is working to free the slaves from the abuse they're in. Sorey hasn't forgotten the horrors Mikleo has done to him, of course, and Mikleo has this sick pleasure of humiliating him, but even then... even then... even then ---

"I---" Sorey starts, "I'm not...the man you're looking for. We're not close. I'm only his plaything to toy with. I have no influence over him."

The Regent looks at him for a moment, and slowly, he nods. "I see. You're honest." He's not. "That is good to know. That will do for now." The Regent pauses. "Go fetch Mikleo for me. I prefer he's not left with Mayvin for too long."

Sorey steps out of the room, feeling dizzy. He didn't think he'd get out of that encounter alive. After inquiring a few servants, Sorey finds Mikleo leaning against the doorway to the banquet hall, frowning. He sees the Regent already sitting beside Mayvin, chatting. When Mikleo looks up to Sorey, he can already tell he's in trouble.

Mikleo pushes himself off the doorway and walks past him, tugging on his arm.

"What the hell did you tell my uncle?" Mikleo asks when they're far from the banquet. Sorey hesitates for a moment, and looking away from Mikleo's icy gaze, he answers his question.

"I said you took me from behind."

"Are you---" Mikleo starts, and when he sees Sorey turning red, he runs a hand down his face with an exasperated grunt. "You could've said anything but that."

"I-I was panicking."

"And I should've known better than to leave you alone," Mikleo says, very, very irritated. "Pray to the seraphim Uncle actually believed the bullshit you fed him, because there's no way I would've done that. Not to anyone, especially not to you."

Sorey winces. "I was panicking," he says again, and Mikleo scowls.

"Do you think the slaves you promised to save will forgive you if they find out you broke your promise because you were panicking?"

"I," Sorey starts, and he grits his teeth. "I'm sorry! I tried what I could, but that's the best I can go with. You're right; you shouldn't have left me alone. I can't lie to save my life." Sorey looks hard at Mikleo. "I'm not like you."
Silence takes over that, Sorey looking down at Mikleo, his hands balled into fists. Mikleo looks up at him with an expression he can't read. The noises and the soft sounds of entertainment from the banquet hall can be heard, Mayvin's laughter ringing out from the room and into the hall they're in, and Sorey closes his eyes. He promised obedience in exchange for the slaves' freedom from their abusive handlers. He snapped at Mikleo for being right.

This is it. Mikleo is going to hit him and call off the deal. He'll be dragged back into his room and the slaves will still be abused. It will all be his fault.

"...If we want Uncle to buy the lie you've told him, we have to take this up a notch," Sorey hears Mikleo say, and he opens his eyes, looking at Mikleo with surprise definitely written on his face. Mikleo isn't looking at him, instead, his arms are crossed, looking down to the floor as he thinks of their next course of action. Sorey thinks Mikleo must've stabbed him, and he's actually dreaming this as he makes his way to the afterlife.

"...What?"

"You told Uncle we've slept together," Mikleo says, looking up at Sorey with a frown. "I hope you know that will start rumours and awfully ruin my reputation. I'm sure you don't mind that, but it'll be worse if he finds out you were lying. For the both of us."

Sorey doesn't like this. "Then...Then what should we do?"

"It's simple, really," Mikleo says as he looks past him. His lips curl into a sly, condescending smile as he looks back at Sorey. "Pretend that you're hot for my cock."

"What---"

Mikleo's hand closes around the chain hanging from his collar, and he pulls Sorey towards him, his other hand grabbing a fistful of brown hair. Next thing he knows, Mikleo's kissing him.

His lips are soft.

"Your High---" Whoever it is that's arrived behind them promptly stops, and Sorey takes the chance to push Mikleo away, eyes wide. He can't fully comprehend what just happened.

Mikleo, though, looks behind Sorey, and he frowns, looking as if he's been interrupted from something very important. "What?"

Sorey decides to look behind him, too. It's the same servant who was looking for him, very pale and trying very hard not to faint right there and then. "A-Apologies, Your Highness," the servant says, "I, uh, didn't mean to---"

"No, no! It's okay," Sorey reassures as he takes a step forward. "What's wrong?"

The servant decides to look at Sorey instead, and it's probably the best course of action right now. He looks like he's going to die from fright. "The...The Regent sends for His Highness. It's t-time to go back, he says."

"Okay," Mikleo flatly says. "We're going back shortly. Tell Uncle I'm just a little bit busy." He looks at Sorey.

The servant is more than happy to oblige, and he leaves in a hurry. There's a silence for a few seconds, and then Sorey spins to look at Mikleo, wide-eyed.
"What the hell?"

"What?" Mikleo says, then he scowls. "You think I enjoyed every second of that? You dragged me in the mud with your pathetic lie. You're not the only one who loathed every single second of it." He stomps past Sorey, obviously agitated, and then he pauses. "Don't come back to the banquet anymore. Go straight to my room."

"What?" Sorey says, "I thought I'm going with you to view the slaves."

"Change of plans. I'm very irritated right now, thanks to you, you goddamn idiot." Mikleo turns to glare at Sorey. "If you're worried that the slaves won't be at their best without you, then you're full of shit. They can handle themselves just fine without the presence of another slave."

Sorey just stands there, mouth hanging open in surprise as he watches Mikleo make his way back to the banquet. His arm is wiping his lips very furiously. Sorey frowns, and he lifts a hand to wipe his lips, too.

Somehow, the taste of vanilla on his lips stays. Sorey should probably ask for water to get rid of it.

---

Sorey isn't sure if he's allowed to read a book in Mikleo's absence. It's definitely tempting; Mikleo has a lot of it filling the bookshelves, and he still at least has a dozen of books resting separately on both tables. It's really, really tempting, but the last thing Sorey wants is to further experience Mikleo's wrath, so he just sits in the reclining couch and wastes the seconds away, waiting anxiously for the Prince to arrive.

It's odd, how Mikleo still hasn't called the deal off. He had every reason to; Sorey gave him all of those reasons, but Mikleo still decided to help him with the slaves, going so far as to risk his reputation and helping Sorey clean up the mess he made. Although, Mikleo has a pretty good reason to do so: if the Regent finds out Sorey had been lying, he's not the only one screwed, Mikleo is, too.

Sorey sighs.

No doubt Mikleo wants him killed after all this is over. The thing is, though, that's not going to happen. He had the freedom he needed to learn the ins and outs of the palace and to decide on an escape route. All that is left is to make sure the slaves will be safely out of Ladylake and Hyland. At the smallest chance of escape, Sorey will take it.

Mikleo will not be able to kill him.

Satisfied with that knowledge, Sorey continues to spend the time sitting in the reclining couch, waiting for the sun to set and for Mikleo to arrive.

---

Sorey gets woken up by the sound of the door opening, and he blinks, finding Mikleo enter the room with a sigh as he undoes his collar. A quick look at the window tells Sorey that it's already nightfall. He didn’t realise he fell asleep. He looks back at Mikleo, who looks at him and frowns.

"It's done," Mikleo says, taking off his circlet and tossing it without care onto the table. Sorey gapes at his words. He runs his hand through his hair, messing up the style he's had the whole day, and his bangs sway to the side. "I've arranged for you to meet Mayvin tomorrow morning. He'll ask you information about the slaves and transporting them." Sorey can't actually believe what he's
hearing. Mikleo continues. "Apparently they didn't have any handlers on their way here."

Sorey stares at Mikleo, who's busy taking off a shoe and throwing it straight through the archway to his dressing room. He processes the words Mikleo has told him, and he smiles, truly. Sorey is overwhelmed by happiness and relief. He hasn't felt so happy ever since he's gotten here. It's just---words can't describe this.

"You...actually did it," Sorey breathes out, and Mikleo looks at him in the middle of throwing his other shoe. "I...Oh, Maotelus, thank you."

Mikleo raises an eyebrow at him, and he throws his shoe to his dressing room. It lands in the room with a faint thud. "Of course," Mikleo says, dryly, "it only took my reputation and dignity to do it. 'Thank you' isn't enough for that."

Sorey flushes. "I...You're right." He pauses. "What do you need me to do?"

"Die."

Silence takes over after that, Sorey staring at Mikleo. Is he joking? He’s not joking. He turns pale. The Prince, however, just rolls his eyes, and he lifts his arms, showing the buckles of the belts hugging his torso.

"Attend me, you idiot."

Chapter End Notes

...this chapter is surprisingly short compared to the recent ones but i have so many things to say about this
-mayvins fucking innuendos (hah see what i did there)
-"r u a virgin?" "uh" "brilliant"
-sorey still cant make a decent lie that wont screw everyone over
-idx abt u but i personally feel this chapter was wild
-also man, theres this one scene im so annoyed with. you can definitely tell which scene i was talking abt if u read the book. it felt like i stole it from the book itself.
Damn
Sorey learns pretty fast that wherever he goes, court gossip is something he'll never escape. Not that he's involved in Hyland politics to care; he's just a slave whose human interactions are limited to the servants who don't talk to him, but the rumours are about him and Mikleo anyway, so that's enough reason for him to care.

He first hears about the rumours from Zaveid, who really looks like he's more enthusiastic about it more than anything. Talk about a really awful captain.

"What the hell, Sorey," Zaveid tells him for the umpteenth time that morning, and Sorey just can't find the appetite to eat his breakfast, anymore. Why is Zaveid even ranting to him? "Do you have any idea just what kind of nasty stuff people are saying about you and the Prince?"

"Please don't tell me," Sorey mutters.

Zaveid does, anyway. "They say you and His Highness are..." He makes really crude gestures with his hands, and Sorey buries his face in his hands with a groan. "And one of the servants even caught you two making out in the hallway! What the hell? Is that true?" Zaveid pauses, as if remembering something incredibly grotesque, which it probably is. "Wait, I know it is true. That smug look the Prince sent me when I told him about it says it all."

Sorey sputters, finally looking up at Zaveid, his mouth hanging open. To say he's flabbergasted doesn't even do it justice. "What?"

"He looked so smug," Zaveid tells Sorey. "He reminded me of a kid who can finally tell his friends he's no longer a virgin."

Knowing that might've been also be Mikleo's first aside, Zaveid's metaphors are awful. Sorey knows he messed up badly for telling the Regent that he and Mikleo are in a sexual relationship, but isn't the universe being far too unforgiving with this punishment? Sorey feels like natural selection is coming for him.

"I really would've been far better off not knowing that," Sorey says. He definitely doesn't want to hear anything about Mikleo's sexual undertakings, but he has a feeling he's going to hear a lot more about it and not from just Zaveid. "What are you doing here, anyway?"

Zaveid pauses. "Oh, right," he says, and Sorey tries not to bury his face in his hands again and groan. "After breakfast, you're gonna talk to Mayvin about the slaves." Now this is a topic Sorey would love to talk about. "There's no hurry, though, as long as you don't go there in the afternoon, because there'll be another feast held."

Another one? Hyland sure loves her parties. "Even after the one held yesterday?"

"It will just be for the evening, unlike yesterday," Zaveid explains. "You're coming with the Prince again for that."

Sorey makes a face at that. He really doesn't want to go anymore. "Can I say no?"
"No." Figures.

With a sigh, Sorey redirects his attention back to his breakfast, picking at it with an obvious lack of enthusiasm. "It's weird you're talking to me about the rumours, though," he says. Zaveid made it pretty clear yesterday that he found Sorey's actions during the proceedings unforgivable and therefore cut off any friendly ties he had with Sorey.

"Are you still mad at me?"

There's a silence in the room after that, the only thing filling it is the sound of Sorey's utensils hitting against the plate. He doesn't look up to see Zaveid's expression as the other, probably, contemplates his question. And then, when Zaveid finally answers, he only has one word to offer Sorey.

"Oh."

Oh?

Sorey raises his head to look at Zaveid, and true enough, he looks kind of sheepish. It takes Sorey a moment to realise what Zaveid even means by that, and when he does, he's completely dumbfounded.

"...You forgot you're supposed to be mad at me."

Zaveid laughs when Sorey points it out, and he frowns. That's not really funny. "I'm old. I forget stuff!"

"No way."

"Yes way." Zaveid pushes himself off the wall he's been leaning against, grinning at Sorey. "The shock of what you and the Prince did to piss off the Regent is far more important than my anger at you, you know!" Why is Zaveid like this. "If you want, I can still be angry with you. I don't mind."

Sorey is really, genuinely, tempted to say yes, just for Zaveid to drop the topic with Mikleo already, but he's pretty sure he's going to feel bad about it. "...No."

"I figured," Zaveid says with a cheeky grin. "You look so tormented, so I'm going to leave you alone and have your breakfast in peace." Finally. Thank you. "I'll come back when you're ready to go."

Sorey doesn't say anything, and he only watches Zaveid as he makes his way out and closes the door, locking it from outside. It's silent for a moment, and then Sorey makes the deepest, loudest sigh he could muster, lying back down in his bed and staring at the ceiling.

That is the weirdest way to reconcile with a friend.

--

Mayvin's room is just the same as Mikleo's in terms of gaudiness, but it's smaller and there's no stained glass mural of the Shepherd nor a mess of ancient artefacts crowding one side of the room. Truth be told, when he stepped into the room, Sorey expected to find Rachel or any one of the slaves in Mayvin's bed and clothes strewn haphazardly on the floor, but there's nothing; the bed is empty, and Mayvin is sitting in the couch, still dressed in his nightclothes and reading a book.

That's how Sorey knows that Mikleo had chosen the perfect person to give the slaves to. It makes
dealing with the rumours about them much more bearable.

Mayvin looks up to find Sorey by the doorway, and he smiles. "Sorey," he greets warmly, and Sorey smiles before dropping to the floor in greeting.

"Prince Mayvin," he replies, and he hears Mayvin laugh from the couch.

"Just Mayvin is fine. Stand up, Sorey, and sit with me here."

A prince regarding a slave in equal terms and even inviting him to sit in the same couch, despite not being his property. And no mention about the crude rumours, thank Maotelus. Mikleo really chose a kind person for the slaves. Sorey stands, and seeing that Mayvin already moved to give Sorey space, he goes to sit in the couch.

The morning is lovely.

"I'm sure you already know why I requested to see you, just the two of us," Mayvin says, and Sorey nods, so he continues. "It seems the Prince isn't as well-informed about the slaves as I hope you would be, so I'd like to know everything you know about palace slaves."

Sorey is more than happy to. The questions are mostly about their training. Which languages were they trained in? The Lohgrin language and all provincial dialects, of course. They're also well-versed in the languages north of Rolance and Lohgrin, but not the dialects, only enough to be able to understand. They don't know anything about Hylandic. No one thought they'd ever need to. What were they taught about Lohgrin? Culture and practises and etiquette unique to Lohgrin. They also know the local dances. Mayvin can expect them to properly entertain and please without any boundaries crossed or accidentally offending. Do they know how to entertain not just courtiers from Rolance and Lohgrin but also from other nations? They do, so long as they have a proper grasp of the noble's culture and language, which, Sorey is confident, they actually have. They're more learned about culture and etiquette than any slaves outside the palace.

Mayvin is actually impressed by this, and he says it's something to expect from slaves trained in Pendrago.

"It's a shame Hyland doesn't see their worth," Mayvin tells Sorey, "and that they're being abused because of it."

Sorey glumly nods. "Hyland isn't a slave nation," he tells Mayvin, "but even so, they still treated the slaves like..." Like dirt, but he can't bring himself to say it. Mayvin, thankfully, seems to understand what Sorey means.

"That is true. I'm grateful to Mikleo for numerous reasons because of that." Mayvin considers Sorey for a moment, and then, "so you're not one of the slaves to go with me?"

Sorey is startled by the question, and how he wishes he could go with Mayvin. He's confident he can tell the truth to Mayvin, and he knows Mayvin can help, even if by just allowing him to return to Rolance. However, the heavy weight of the diamond earring tells Sorey that no, he's not one of the slaves to leave, and he only smiles regretfully at Mayvin.

"No, I'm not," Sorey tells Mayvin. "I'm not a property of the Regent: the Prince owns me."

"You are," Mayvin agrees, leaning into the couch. He puts his book down to his side. "Yesterday, I didn't know your name. Perhaps it was rude of me to never even ask for it." It's not something Sorey is bothered one bit, though. Mayvin was carried away by the conversation, and so was he. "I didn't really think much of what Mikleo had said about Heldalf, but now it makes sense, at least a
Mayvin pauses, and he looks at Sorey again, this time, studying him. Sorey tries his hardest not to look away from Mayvin, whilst he offends him, but he doesn't like where this is going. He holds his breath.

"To send a prisoner turned slave to the prince of what once an enemy nation and telling him to call the slave after his deceased younger brother...that does not sound like he's in mourning," Mayvin finally says, and he looks away from Sorey with a sigh. Sorey lets himself breathe again.

"I've never met the young prince, but I also have never met the Emperor until the funeral anyway. Even then, I can easily tell the divide among the people. The late prince was truly loved."

There's silence for a few moments, and Sorey looks down at his hands. Even after his supposed death, the people he loves still loves him back. It twists his heart painfully. Sorey doesn't know what kind of a ruler Heldalf will be, but in the end, it doesn't matter. He wants to go back soon, to take back what's stolen from him or maybe not at all.

All Sorey knows is that he just wants to return home.

He releases a shaky breath. "Do you...Do you think, Mayvin, that Prince Sorey is alive? That the Prince's funeral is a lie?"

Mayvin looks at him in confusion, and Sorey bites his lower lip as he returns the Prince's gaze. "Is that what you think?" Mayvin asks.

"I...I suppose," Sorey says, and he tries not to wring his hands under Mayvin's inquiring gaze. He's not sure if this is a good idea, but his heart compels him to do it, that Mayvin can help, and... "I...I-I think there's something I need to tell you."

The look on Mayvin's face urges Sorey to continue, but even then, he doesn't know how to tell him. Heldalf truly isn't in mourning. I'm the real Sorey. I need your help to free me.

"...I'm---"

"Your Highness." A knock on the door. The words are in Lohgrin's language. "I've brought the fruits you've asked of me."

Mayvin looks past Sorey and at the one who intruded upon them, and Sorey, his heart falling at the interruption, looks behind him as well. In the end, though, he can't get himself to be upset at the situation.

Rachel stands in the doorway, her lovely dark complexion glistening against the soft morning light and her brown curls tied up in a neat ponytail. She wears a simple yet lovely orange dress, long enough to hide the burn on her thigh. Her wrists are cuffed by simple gold---the real symbol of a slave---and true enough, she holds a basket of fruits. Her hazel eyes lighten up significantly at seeing Sorey.

"S-Sorey!" she loudly says, obviously taken aback, but she immediately blushes and looks down to the floor in apology. "I apologise, Your Highness," she tells Mayvin in his language. "That was rude of me."

Mayvin, though, just smiles good-naturedly. "I see you know each other," he says, looking at Sorey.

"Oh, um," Sorey starts, and he smiles widely and nods. "We do! We only met once, though."
Mayvin nods in understanding before looking at Rachel, who's still looking down at the floor. "Look up, Rachel," Mayvin says, and she follows. He beckons to her to come to them. When she does, he gently takes the basket from her. "Thank you, Rachel," Mayvin says, and she blushes as she smiles back. "It feels as if you want to talk to your friend. I'll give you two time alone with each other. I'll be off to my bed to enjoy my book and fruits. And Sorey, you can leave anytime you please afterwards. You don't have to ask for dismissal."

Mayvin rises from the couch, and he brings his book and basket to his bed. Nestling comfortably, he pulls the curtains around his bed closed, and then he's gone, probably eating his fruits now. Sorey looks from the bed to Rachel, smiling and patting the couch to tell her to sit.

"Is Mayvin kind to you and your companions?" Sorey asks when Rachel sits in the couch, though he already knows the answer to that. Rachel nods, smiling shyly, but Sorey can tell the bubbling joy in her eyes.

"Yes, he's very kind," Rachel answers. "He promised to take care of us. He treats us fairly and kindly. I am so filled with joy, Sorey, I..." Tears well up in her eyes, but she blinks them away, smiling brightly at Sorey instead. "You kept your promise... You're just like your namesake. I've only heard of Prince Sorey, but I know he's just like you." Then her smile turns melancholy. "I wish I was able to meet him."

She's talking to him right now, though, and it hurts Sorey to know that Rachel doesn't know. He knows he could tell her, but he'd rather she remain ignorant, whilst she accidentally bring Mikleo's wrath towards her, if he ever finds out.

Mikleo...that's right. Even though he's cruel in his own, snake-like ways, he's the one who made this conversation possible. "Prince Mikleo," Sorey says, and Rachel looks back at him. "I asked for his help. He's the one who helped me keep my promise."

"Prince Mikleo...," Rachel says, and she softly smiles, as if recalling a fond memory. "Yes, the Crown Prince. Is he your master?" Sorey nods, and she sighs in relief. "I'm glad. You're very lucky. He's very warm and kind."

Sorey blinks. Mikleo, kind? And warm, apparently. He never thought he'd hear someone describe him as such. "He is?"

Rachel nods, and she blushes again. Sorey realises then just how easily and hard she blushes. "Yes. You didn't know? He went to see us in our room, even though soldiers always kept us locked up. He smiled warmly at us, and he spoke so softly." She looks down at her hands, her smile no longer melancholic. "He held my hand. It's soft and warm. I thought a seraph was holding my hand."

It's truly weird to listen to someone talk about Mikleo as such, that someone will even go and call him a seraph. He's far from that, really, and Sorey likes better to think that he's a hellion instead. Sorey doesn't say anything, though. Mikleo is a good liar, and if there's anyone he can fool into thinking he's nothing but kind, it's those who never knew better.

He lets Rachel think of Mikleo as such and that Sorey is in good hands. He knows it wouldn't sit well with Rachel knowing his master is a serpent disguised as a beautiful young man. It also probably doesn't hurt to continue to indulge her talking about Mikleo.

"Why did he go see you?"

"He asked about you," Rachel says. "About the night we met in the gardens." To make sure Sorey wasn't lying to him. It makes sense that Mikleo didn't believe him at first. "And he warned me
about yesterday."

"Yesterday?"

"That we will be viewed, and that our handlers might shame us in front of Prince Mayvin," Rachel
say. "I was scared when he told me that, but he held my hand and promised that he'll be there and
you will be, too, and that I should do my best." She pauses. "He said that if I hold onto hope,
something good will come out of it. Always."

Sorey stares, not knowing what to say. Rachel's words are something he didn't expect. Mikleo went
that far? It's something he couldn't properly take in. The idea of Mikleo talking about hope when
all he'd done to Sorey was attempt to crush any hopes of him returning to Rolance is a lot to
process.

Mistaking his silence to go on, Rachel continues. "I didn't mind you weren't there. That happens
sometimes," she says, "but he was there, watching me. He was standing behind Prince Mayvin and
the Regent. He was quiet, but he was smiling at me, silently encouraging me. Then he helped tell
Prince Mayvin about our situation." Sorey first thought that Rachel can't get any more redder, but
she does, and she is obviously embarrassed. "He...He was my hope, then."

Sorey stares at her for a moment, blinking, and then she looks up at him, her soft smile devolving
into a small frown. She looks confused. "Did I say something wrong?"

"Oh, no," Sorey says, shaking his head and clearing his head of too much thoughts in the process.
"I was just surprised, I guess."

"Surprised?"

"Um," he says, "I know I shouldn't be. Prince Mikleo..." Sorey pauses for a second. "He always
knows what he's doing."

"He does," Rachel agrees. "So you'll be staying here, after all?"

"...Yes," Sorey says. "It can't be helped. I'm not the Regent's property, after all."

"That's...That's true, but since your master is the Crown Prince, there's nothing to worry about."
Rachel's smile is scalding, but Sorey smiles back, keeping the loneliness bubbling within him
behind closed doors. "His Highness will take good care of you."

Sorey only nods. Rachel doesn't have to know.

No one has to.

--

The talk with Rachel keeps him distracted. Though the servants are the ones dressing him,
sometimes he'll miss an instruction they tell him about the laces or he'll space out far too long, and
then it's really awkward for all of them. In the end, Sorey decides to just let the servants leave
everything to him, and he reassures them he'll tell Mikleo not to get angry at them for leaving him
to figure out the clothes on his own. It's fine; the clothes he is to wear is almost the same as the
clothes he wore yesterday, except the tailcoat is golden in colour, the patterns coloured white, and
he has an ascot

Sorey doesn't know how to wear an ascot.
When Mikleo himself comes to pick him up, irritated that Sorey still isn't in his room, he finds Sorey still desperately struggling with the accessory. Mikleo frowns, and Sorey remembers how Rachel called him a seraph.

"Where the hell are the servants?" Mikleo asks.

"I, uh," Sorey starts, "told them to go away."

"Go away?"

"Not in those words exactly!" Sorey says. "I told them I can do this on my own, and they shouldn't worry! I'll be okay."

Mikleo's eyes study him for a moment, looking down and up. Then he raises an eyebrow at Sorey, obviously unconvinced. "You don't know how to wear an ascot."

Sorey bristles. Did he wear it that wrong? "I-I'll figure it out, eventually! I used to wear these all the---" He abruptly stops himself, and then he's staring wide-eyed at Mikleo. Oh, no. Oh, no. "Please help me," he immediately blurts out.

Mikleo stares at him for a moment, his arms crossed, and then he rolls his eyes. "No," Mikleo says. Sorey sighs in relief. "Don't wear it anymore. Let's go."

Sorey blinks. "No collar?" he asks. Mikleo stops in the doorway, and he turns to look at Sorey. "You want to wear it? I don't mind." Mikleo pauses, and after a moment, he smiles. "You know, maybe you should. They like talking about your collar and how much I like seeing you wear it."

Sorey makes a face at Mikleo, who looks incredibly amused for some reason. "No, never mind."

He may have imagined it, but Sorey thinks he hears Mikleo snort on the way out of the room. He decides not to comment on it.

They don't go to get the collar, thankfully, and when they finally arrive at the venue, Sorey quickly learns that when Zaveid said dinner, he really means lunch until dinner, and it's in the gardens. It should've been pretty obvious, actually, since he's being dressed up during the afternoon. Thankfully it's not that hot out; the winds are even cool, actually, carrying the sweet scent of the flowers. Sorey loves it.

The tables are elegantly dressed, with expensive cloths over them as well as lovely flowers arranged as centrepieces. Tapestries depicting beautiful scenes are hung on the trees surrounding the venue. In the middle, surrounded by the tables scattered about, is a raised stage which Sorey can easily tell will be where the orchestra plays for the rest of the day. The instruments are already there, but not the members of the band. There's still not much people, actually, mostly servants still prepping the area milling about, and there are very few nobles there. One of them is Lailah.

It seems Mikleo saw her, too, because he stops. Sorey does, too, just trailing behind Mikleo. He's quiet for a few seconds before he turns around and snatches Sorey's left hand with his right hand, and Mikleo laces their fingers together. When Sorey blinks at Mikleo, very confused, Mikleo frowns at him.

"We have appearances to keep until Mayvin leaves, remember?" Mikleo reminds Sorey, and he practically drags Sorey with him towards Lailah.

Lailah doesn't take too long to notice them. She smiles widely when she finds them, and she walks
towards them to close the gap immediately. Lailah eyes their linked hands, and she sends Sorey a knowing look before looking at Mikleo.

"Hello, Your Highness," Lailah chirps, and it's so easy to tell she's in a good mood. "I see you're early. Can't wait to dance with Sorey?"

"No," Mikleo immediately answers for the both of them. "I just want to get this over with so I can go to sleep instead."

"With Sorey?"

"Lailah...," Sorey can't help but mutter, and she giggles.

"I apologise," she says. "It's just a pleasant surprise to see that the Prince has taken a liking to a pet. It's been long overdue, you know."

"Not overdue," Mikleo says with a frown. "I just hate all the pets in the court. They're obnoxious and have no class despite their pretty faces."

"And Sorey isn't?"

"He's something else," Mikleo answers with a shrug. He doesn't look at Sorey.

"Well...I suppose you can say that," Lailah says with a small nod. "But perhaps you say court pets are obnoxious because you haven't looked hard enough? Mine is such a sweetheart."

Sorey blinks at Lailah, obviously taken aback with her words. "You...have a pet, Lailah?"

"Why yes," Lailah says. "She prefers not to get involved in the court, though, so she mostly stays at home, in my room."

That's...a surprise. She certainly doesn't look like someone who'd hire pets in the first place, but he supposes the concept of pets are as deeply engraved in Hyland as slaves do in Rolance and Lohgrin. Sorey tries not to frown. "I didn't know that."

"You don't really know anything," Mikleo tells Sorey, sounding exasperated, and Lailah chuckles.

"Well, I'll leave you two now. I still have to attend to the preparation of the feast." She looks at the set up currently finished. "As you can see, we're still not ready. We're supposed to start in an hour or so anyway."

Mikleo huffs. "That long?"

"I did tell you to know the schedule of events for the Lohgrin delegates this week, Your Highness," Lailah says with a patient smile. Sorey has a feeling it's something she always uses around Mikleo. "Stroll the gardens, or spend time in the library. Though I doubt an hour will be enough once you're too engrossed with what you're reading."

"I guess the library will do," Mikleo says, and Lailah nods at them before excusing herself. Sorey and Mikleo watch as Lailah departs, heading to the biggest group of servants waiting for another set of orders. Then Mikleo wrenches his hand away from Sorey's hand and wipes it on his sleeve. This time, Sorey lets himself frown.

"Want to go to the library?" Mikleo asks, successfully cutting Sorey off from whatever it is he's about to say. Sorey mutely nods, and he follows Mikleo as he leads him out of the gardens and
back to the palace.

"By the way," Mikleo says, "she doesn't have a pet. She has a cat."

--

The library is huge.

It probably takes up an entire wing in the palace, which isn't that much of a big deal. The palace is huge, anyway. The library is a giant dome. The windows are situated high above the second floor. A giant chandelier made of crystals of varying shapes and sizes hang in the middle of the room, reflecting the sunlight and providing the library with soft lights. Bookshelves are everywhere: lined neatly against the walls, lined to form aisles, and lined back to back and against each other. Tables are situated in the middle of the room. Most is just the traditional table and chair pair, but in one corner is what looks like a lounge, with cozy couches and small tables situated in front of them. Sorey thinks that all that's needed is a fireplace. The second floor is only a balcony that goes around the room; the only bookshelves there are against the walls. It has no tables; all of them are in the first floor, apparently.

The library, despite its sheer size, looks empty and unattended. Mikleo leaves Sorey alone and immediately goes to one section of the library, and he disappears, never coming back.

At least that's what Sorey would like to think. After a few seconds, he hears loud sounds from where Mikleo disappeared to, most likely Mikleo carelessly dropping every single book he wants to read and making his own book fort there. It's something Sorey himself will do.

The loud sounds continue for a few more minutes, and Sorey, not knowing where to find the history section of the library and very curious about what Mikleo is doing, goes to where the Prince is.

To his surprise, Sorey is actually right, and he finds Mikleo stacking books to the right side of his mini throne. Mikleo stops, and he looks at Sorey.

Sorey looks back at Mikleo, then at the stacked books.

"You work fast," Sorey can't help but remark. Mikleo already managed to make the left armrest and backrest. Once he's finished with the right armrest, he'll be done. Mikleo ignores his compliment, though, and he glares at Sorey.

"Shut up," Mikleo says, and he goes back to his work. Sorey can't help but find his childlike behaviour as funny and oddly out of character, but he keeps it to himself, and he invites himself into the aisle where Mikleo is in instead. Considering Mikleo hasn't yelled at him to leave yet, Sorey decides to push his luck a little bit today. Daring, but he won't try to cross a line here.

"Is this the history section?"

"It is."

"Oh, I wondered where it is a while ago. I should've known you'd be there, too."

Mikleo doesn't answer, still busy with his throne. Sorey's fingers brush against the books lined in one of the bookshelves before taking one out. The Era of the Gods: a Memoir.

"What do you think about the Era of the Gods?" Sorey asks.

"That's odd to hear from someone who believes in the Shepherd."

"I didn't say it's not real."

"You called it a 'silly children's tale.'"

"That's the general consensus. A lot of people don't believe in the Shepherd."

"Okay," Sorey says, looking up at Mikleo. His legs are tucked underneath him, his arm propped against the book armrest. He looks engrossed in his reading, but considering he keeps answering Sorey's questions, he's probably not that into it. "What do you think?"

Mikleo looks up at him before raising his book to show Sorey what he's reading, and Sorey realises that the space where he took his book from has another missing book. Mikleo is reading the same book he got.

"It's fascinating," Mikleo says, and there's something in his expression that Sorey can't properly put to words. Awe, perhaps? It's weird. "It's good to read about it, about humans and seraphim living together in peace." He puts down his book, and he redirects his gaze back to it. "I used to believe the same thing can happen between----" Mikleo pauses, his expression suddenly blank, and instead of continuing, he turns a page in his book. He doesn't say anything more.

Sorey, though, doesn't seem like he wants to drop the subject yet. "Between?"

Mikleo ignores him.

Sorey is crestfallen about it. He thinks there's something there that can make him understand Mikleo, even for just a little bit. He believed in coexistence at one point. Between what, though? Rolance and Hyland?

Sorey still believes in that. It'd be hard, really, really hard, but still possible. Maybe. He wants to hope and believe it's possible, and he remembers his conversation with Rachel.

"You talked to Rachel," Sorey suddenly says, not thinking about it. Mikleo doesn't react for a moment, but he does, eventually.

"What about it?"

"You told her not to give up hope," Sorey says, and he sees Mikleo stop at that. He continues. "She didn't give up hope, and now she's with Mayvin, along with the others. She said you're the hope she needed all this time. She's grateful, and so am I."

Mikleo breathes out a laugh. "Save it," he says, "for someone who deserves it."

"Are you saying you don't deserve our thanks?"

"That slave doesn't know better," Mikleo says, "so I'll let it slide, but you know I only did that because we had an agreement. If you didn't strike a deal with me, I would've been more than happy to let them rot in that room." He turns another page. He's a fast reader. "Save that thanks for someone who'll happily help you without their own goal in mind."

Sorey purses his lips together. That's...That's true. He knows that, but he thinks Mikleo doesn't
have to go as far as offer Rachel the support she needs. There would've been other ways to get Mayvin to ask for the slaves. More convenient ways than smiling at a slave and holding her hand and making her feel safe.

It's weird to think it, but Sorey thinks Mikleo is lying.

"She called you a seraph," Sorey decides to say, and this time, Mikleo chuckles.

"That's adorable," Mikleo says, looking up from his book with a wry smile. "I think, though, that if a Shepherd were to look at me, they'd see a hellion."

"That's what I thought, too."

"Well, at least there's one thing we agree on."

But hellions can be purified, Sorey wants to point out, and malevolence isn't as easy as black and white. Even people who hurt others has something pure and good-natured to believe in.

In Mikleo's case, what is it that he believes in, though?

Sorey doesn't say anything else, and so does Mikleo. Maybe trying to figure what goes on in that pretty head of Mikleo's is what Sorey really means by pushing his luck. In the end, though, it doesn't matter. Once Mayvin leaves, they'll return to their antagonistic relationship, as it should be, and Sorey is more than free to attempt escape again.

For now, he has to be the obedient dog everyone thinks him to be.

--

That obedience is tested the same day, when night has fallen.

Despite Mikleo's want to extricate himself early from the party, he doesn't get to, having been pulled into conversations he obviously doesn't want to have. It's one thing Sorey notices about him today, among other things: he's good at talking, but he hates talking. He loathes it, even, yet instead of being the sharp-tongued courtier he's mostly known as, he talks to the other nobles with a pleasant smile.

He has appearances to keep, Sorey remembers Mikleo telling him once.

"Until when do we have to do this?" Sorey asks when Mikleo pulls him behind a tree. When Mikleo stood up from his seat, pulling Sorey with him, the other nobles immediately gave way for them, and Sorey supposed this is his other use other than keeping the Regent clueless about the scheme he and Mikleo have going: getting the courtiers away from Mikleo.

"Until tomorrow," Mikleo says, letting go of Sorey's hand and making his way back inside the palace. Sorey follows him. "We'll hold a hunt for Mayvin, and then the day after tomorrow, he leaves."

So just another day, then, and it's all over. That's fine; Sorey can wait for another day.

With all nobles in the gardens, the only people inside the palace are the guards on duty and a few servants. Mikleo easily makes his way back to the Prince's residences, and with that, Sorey supposes it's time to call off the day. The earlier they end the day, the faster Mayvin leaves.

That doesn't happen, though.
Sorey notices something is different when they finally enter the Prince's residences. The hallways are empty, eerily empty, and that's already uncharacteristic of the place; the last time Sorey made his way here freely, which was when Mikleo shooed him away from the banquet, the halls were chock full of guards that struck even Sorey as weird. It's already late into the night, but even then, it doesn't seem much of a reason to leave the area empty, even if Mikleo isn't here.

To anyone, this might be a chance to escape, and Sorey might have taken it if Mayvin already left with the slaves, but even if Mayvin already did, something about this doesn't feel right. Sorey looks at Mikleo, who's stopped walking at some point.

"Your soldiers leave your apartments when night falls?"

Mikleo takes a second too long to answer. "No."

Sorey understands, then, and the attack comes from above.

The assailants were well-hidden in the ceilings; the palace's ceilings are high enough with unnecessary curves that one could easily hide in, if they even reach it. The assassins, two of them, jump down with their blades out, and one has theirs straight for Mikleo.

Sorey can tell they were expecting the Prince to be alone and unarmed, but he's neither.

Mikleo blocks the incoming blade with his own dagger that slipped right out of his sleeve, and the force of the impact drives him back with a yelp. Alarmed, Sorey takes a step towards him, but the second one appears to his side and attempts to subdue him.

He takes a quick step back as the blade slices through the air, and he dodges to the side when the assassin tries again. Sorey can hear sounds of blades clashing not too far from him, quick and fleeting, and he forces himself to redirect his attention to the assassin that attacked him. He and the assassin are a good distance away from each other, studying each other for a moment. Their metal-plated mask obscures their face. No armour, just leather dyed deep brown, exactly what an assassin would wear. They carry a sword at their hip. That slows down their movements, but they're still ridiculously fast.

The real problem here, though, is that Sorey is the only one unarmed here. He's not even going to wonder why Mikleo has a dagger hidden in his sleeve; it's working to his advantage, anyway. He can't hope to steal the assassin's sword and use it against them; all Sorey can count on are his own reflexes and battle training.

The assassin dashes towards Sorey, their blade ready to slice through his flesh, and he takes a defensive stance. Sorey easily dodges the series of slices with every back step and side step, but it forces him on the defensive. He can't even take a step towards them; they'd come at him and immediately distance themselves before going back for another strike. If Sorey can't get near them, then he just has to make them get near to him, on his call.

The clashing of blades behind him ring in his ears. It distracts him for a moment, and he slips and stumbles. His opponent easily catches on, and they immediately take advantage of it, going in for the kill.

They drive their blade towards Sorey, aiming somewhere on his chest, but he immediately steps to the side and takes the assassin's outstretched arm before kicking their leg to topple their balance and twisting their arm behind them. He pushes them down to the floor.

Sorey breathes out his relief. They fell for his feint.
The assassin lands with a thud, groaning as Sorey pins them down. Their blade has slid off somewhere, and his hands tightly hold the assassin's wrists.

"Who sent you?"

If the assassin is going to answer, they don't get to do it, as there's a scream that catches Sorey's and their attention, and Sorey looks up just in time to see Mikleo knock the dagger out of his opponent's hand with his blade. Smoothly changing his grip on his blade so it faces downwards, he swiftly takes a step towards the unarmed assassin and drives his blade in between their shoulder and neck.

The assassin under Sorey's weight struggle against him, screaming a muffled no, and Sorey's own eyes are wide as Mikleo violently jerks the blade still lodged into his enemy's flesh towards him. Blood spurts from behind the assassin, and they limply fall to the ground as Mikleo quietly steps back, his footsteps light and unhurried, looking down at the unmoving body.

Mikleo takes a moment to acknowledge the assassin still under Sorey.

"Don't go screaming like that when you were the ones who attacked first," Mikleo coolly says, kicking the corpse to face up before bending down and pulling his blade out of the body. He studies his bloody dagger before clicking his tongue with an annoyed frown. The blade is damaged, and he tosses it away and picks up the blade that originally belonged to the assassin he killed. He turns and looks down at the remaining assassin condescendingly. His clothes are free of any stains, except for the shoe that he used when he turned the body over. Mikleo looks at Sorey, and he sees that there's a gash across Mikleo's left cheek. It's bleeding.

"Pull them up."

Sorey sucks in a shaky breath, knowing what it is exactly Mikleo intends to do, and then, "no."

Mikleo narrows his eyes at him, and Sorey fights the urge to shudder. "Pull them up, Sorey."

The use of his name makes his blood freeze. Sorey can feel the hairs on his skin stand on their ends at Mikleo's voice, the sudden rush of fear telling him to follow Mikleo, but he fights it and holds Mikleo's murderous gaze instead.

"No," Sorey says, as firmly as he can manage under the Prince's icy gaze. "We can interrogate them instead. Find out who sent them after you."

The suggestion doesn't budge Mikleo one bit, no matter how sound it is. Sorey wants to think the Prince is more logical than this, smarter than this, but he can never tell what's going on in Mikleo's mind. All he knows is that there's a dead body behind Mikleo, and he looks down at Sorey with a stone cold gaze that tells Sorey his willingness to kill.

"So you're disobeying me," Mikleo says, raising an eyebrow at him. "You have nerve, especially when Mayvin hasn't even left Ladylake yet." Mikleo pauses. "Pull them up, Sorey."

When Mikleo changes his grip on his blade is when Sorey realises that if he says no again, he has given Mikleo a reasonable excuse to kill him.

Mikleo, for all his unforgiving viciousness, is still giving him a choice: it's this assassin or all of them, him, the assassin, and the slaves.

It's just one life, one that tries to bring down everything Sorey worked hard so far. If Mikleo died then Sorey will be blamed and then executed, and that's if the assassin doesn't kill him first; if Mikleo died then there's a chance the slaves will be recalled from Mayvin in suspicion of treason,
given Sorey's affiliation with them; if Mikleo died then Sorey will never get back to Rolance; if Mikleo died then all this will be for nothing.

It's just one life that Mikleo wants snuffed out. It's nothing compared to what's really at stake if Sorey refused him.

Sorey hesitates.

And that hesitation is enough for the assassin to shake Sorey off them. He lands on his side with a yelp, and he hears the sound of a sword unsheathing. Sorey scrambles on his knees and sees the assassin take a swing towards Mikleo. He takes a step away from his assailant, raising his dagger to block, but the sword's long reach and momentum manage to knock his blade off his hand.

The assassin changes their grip on the sword, two hands on the handle. Mikleo's expression changes. Sorey launches himself off his feet and runs. The assassin drives the sword towards him.

---And Sorey feels the sharp sensation of the sword piercing through him.

Chapter End Notes

sorey got the pointy end of the stick lol
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

(throws the original trilogy out of the window) My City Now

in other words this is where im finally ditching the whole "im deriving events from the books itself bc im Not Creative" and taking everything into my own hands. now none of u can second guess me, unless im that predictable. Oh Well. time to die

edit:

okay that one ^ was written on the day after the previous chapter was posted, when i still thought ill get around to posting the new chapter the next day, but life likes surprises so.

ohhh my god. that was like a whole week of Nothing, and thats awful. our house is undergoing renovation and they kicked me out of my room bc theyll repaint it, and you know when you end up being in your parents bedroom: its Stressful(tm)

anyway! i sure am glad to get this out of my system. this chapter went through a lot of rewritings and revisions, and even then, im still not that happy with how it turned out. :c i even originally planned this to have zaveids pov, but i just couldnt get it right, and i cant get a time to myself to clearly think things through because being in my parents' room for the entirety of the week was very annoying.

i tried my best, I Swear, and as an apology for the (very)((VERY)) late update, have an almost 10k update ENTIRELY in mikleos pov. have fun and thank you for sticking with me so far! im really grateful for all them kudos and comments (especially comments)((i am needy look at this im telling you to comment on my fic))(((do it)))

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mikleo has always known that there’s going to be another attempt, but even so, he had always, always thought Zaveid will be with him when it happens. Throughout the fight with his attacker, Mikleo is waiting for Zaveid to burst into the hallway, Siegfried blazing, ready to shoot the assassin to death. The whole time, he is hoping---and he never hoped for anything that much anymore.

The realisation still hasn’t fully dawned on him---what with his mind completely set on not dying---when the assassin manages to cut his cheek. There’s a fleeting thought that it’s going to make a scar---another to be added to the sickening pile of scars he already has---and then the realisation that Zaveid will not come fully snaps him out of it.

Then Mikleo is angry. The slave refusing to follow him makes him angrier, furious.

“Pull them up,” Mikleo has said, swinging the blade he picked up once to test it. The grip is something completely foreign to him---and for a good reason: the dagger is not Hylandic. He changes his grip on it and looks down at the slave.
He doesn’t do things for only one reason; he does things for many reasons, all of them beneficial to him. This one is no different. That assassin has to die not only because he’s angry. There’s a lot of things at stake with this assassin living, talking, so if this good for nothing slave just fucking listens for once---

The slave hesitates, and that would’ve been a good thing if he weren’t so easy to read that someone underneath him can even tell he’s hesitating. They shake him off. They knock off Mikleo’s dagger with their sword. His eyes widen, then he hears the slave running---probably away from this whole thing, and he sees the assassin drive their sword towards him.

Mikleo is already cursing every single person in this hellhole of a palace when he realises the sword hasn’t pierced him. Instead, Mikleo finds himself staring at said sword sticking out of the slave's back, blood pooling around it and staining his golden tailcoat red.

The slave protected him.

The assassin tries to pull the sword out of him, wiggling the blade to pull it out and perhaps stick it into the right person this time, but the slave doesn’t let them. Instead, he leans towards the assassin, his hands gripping the blade tight, as he forces the words out.

“---You’re not…going…anywhere.”

Those words are enough to spur Mikleo back into action.

Mikleo snatches his dagger from the ground before dashing towards the assassin. Instead of trying to pull the sword out of the slave once again, the assassin lets it go and narrowly avoids being gutted by Mikleo. They stumble back, a few ways from Mikleo, and finding their discarded dagger, they immediately pick it up.

Mikleo hears the slave crumple to the ground, the sword left within him clinging harshly against the floor, but he doesn’t look back. Instead, his eyes remain fixed on the assassin, who’s looking back at him as well. There’s no time to waste; he has to finish this fight quickly.

The assassin strikes first.

Mikleo takes a step back and catches the blade with his own, the assassin’s dagger hissing harshly against his ear as he pushes it away from him with his own dagger. He throws the dagger off the assassin’s hand with enough force to make the assassin stumble for a moment, and Mikleo takes a quick step towards them, his dagger ready to finish them off with one strike, but his enemy recovers faster than he anticipated.

A hand hits Mikleo across the face, and then another, and he easily falls to the floor. He hasn’t even managed to push himself off the ground when he feels the assassin on top of him, and a hand grips his left hand so tightly, he yelps. The assassin harshly slams his hand on the ground once, twice, thrice, and when Mikleo tries to retaliate by punching the assassin with his right hand, they catch it with his free hand with another death-like grip. They hit Mikleo’s left hand against the floor for the fourth time, and then for the fifth time with so much unforgiving force, and Mikleo groans, finally letting go of his dagger.

He tries to lift his hand to take the dagger again, but the unbearable pain that shoots across his hand makes him stop. It’s easy to tell what the assassin did with how his wrist starts to discolour: they broke Mikleo’s wrist.

With his left hand useless and right hand caught in the assassin’s grip, Mikleo can’t fight, and he
can only watch with coiling contempt as the assassin takes his abandoned dagger. The slave’s limp body is only just a few paces away from him, and it’s honestly annoying to think about it: that he’d die with the Rolance slave he hates so much and knowing that he died trying to protect Mikleo.

The assassin raises the dagger, and when Mikleo thinks it’s going to pierce his throat, he hears a loud voice booming across the hall and swords being unsheathed. The assassin promptly stops.

Zaveid and three soldiers from his Guard arrive at the scene, their swords unsheathed and Zaveid’s Siegfried ready to fire, and Mikleo takes the chance to snatch the dagger from the startled assassin’s hand with his free, albeit injured, hand. He ignores the hissing pain that forces him to drop the blade again, and he makes a clumsy attempt to kill the assassin. The blade only pierces through the assassin’s shoulder, and they hiss before standing up, the blade stuck to their shoulder.

There’s a deafening sound that echoes throughout the Prince’s residences: Zaveid firing his gun, but apparently the assassin is impossibly hard to hit, and within seconds, they’re gone, escaping by breaking through the nearest window, leaving in their wake a dead suspect, a broken wrist, and a dying slave.

With a gasp, Mikleo quickly scrambles to his knees and is beside the slave a few seconds after, looking at his injuries. The sword is lodged just below his ribs, and blood continues to seep out of his wound. His breathing is shallow, his skin deathly pale. If Mikleo’s knowledge about efficiently killing people is as spot on as he likes to think, it’s possible the sword may have hit an organ, the closest being the liver. He takes a breath and looks at the slave’s face. His eyes are closed. Unconscious, then. That’s not good. At the very least, Mikleo should be able to control the bleeding. He stares at his left sleeve, loose and hanging on his arm, and he starts tearing it off.

Something in the back of his mind is protesting strongly against this—why is he even doing this? He wants this man dead—but he ignores it, focusing on tearing the cloth that makes his left sleeve instead.

“...What...,” Mikleo suddenly hears, and he realises the slave is still conscious. This makes things easier. He’s looking at Mikleo with unfocused, clouded eyes, blinking slowly at him. He sounds tired instead of, well, usually stabbed people sound fine when in shock, not even realising they’ve been stabbed sometimes. Perhaps his state is something a little bit like that. “...What are you...doing?”

“Saving you,” Mikleo simply answers, finally managing to tear his sleeve apart, and he presses the torn cloth against the wound. He can hear Zaveid’s voice ringing in the background, screaming, shouting orders. Mikleo ignores it, and he sees the slave wince. “Stop moving. You’re going to make this worse.”

The slave makes a face at that, and it irritates Mikleo. Even in the middle of dying, he still finds time to make faces at Mikleo. What an idiot.

“That's...That's funny....,” the slave manages to say in between breaths. He tries to laugh, but it sounds guttural instead. It tempts Mikleo to shove the bloody cloth into his mouth instead. “I thought...you want me...dead?”

He does, more than anything else in the world, but he'll be lying even to himself if he says he doesn't know why he's doing this. He is tempted to drag the sword across the slave’s body and cut him into two, though, just because the slave won’t shut up. “Shut it,” Mikleo says instead, “I’m trying to control the bleeding here. As you know, I'm not very good at patching things up, only at tearing things apart. I might accidentally end up killing you. So shut up.”
It seems that works, because the slave is quiet for a moment, then the slave’s gaze travel down from Mikleo's face. He sucks in a breath, and with a frown, Mikleo realises the slave is staring wide-eyed at the sword still lodged in him. Mikleo moves his left hand to lift the slave’s face and redirect his gaze back to Mikleo, ignoring the angry, painful protest his hand makes. As much as he’d like to move his good hand instead, he can’t leave the wound unattended.

“Don’t look at it,” Mikleo tells him. “Sorey,” he says, firmly, to get ahold of Sorey’s attention, “just look at me.”

Sorey does.

“Your Highness,” Zaveid says, kneeling beside them. He doesn’t look at Sorey. “I already sent people to look for the suspect, and Edna’s on her way.”

Mikleo pauses for a moment. He forgot Zaveid and some soldiers are here. “Go meet her and bring her here now,” Mikleo orders. “I don’t care how you do it. Carry her or throw her like a javelin if you have to. We can’t leave him unattended any longer.”

Zaveid hesitates, and Mikleo looks up from his work to glare at him. “What are you hesitating for?”

“I can’t leave you alone here,” Zaveid replies, and true enough, it’s just the three of them in the hall. “That will be negligent of me—-”

“You,” Mikleo interrupts, and he can’t really help the aggressiveness in his tone as he continues, “have been negligent. My left hand is broken and there’s a sword inside my pet. Get. Edna. Now.”

Zaveid purses his lips, and he stands and leaves the apartments in a hurry. Mikleo watches him leave, and when he’s gone, Mikleo looks back at Sorey.

“You’ll be fine,” he tells Sorey, and, for some reason, Sorey smiles at him. It’s weak and shaky and a pathetic sight to behold, but he’s smiling.

Mikleo decides, then, that Sorey is weird.

“I didn’t...think---”Sorey stops, and he looks like he’s in pain, his initial shock finally wearing off, so Mikleo shakes his head.

“Save it for later.”

—

“If you weren’t the Prince,” Edna is saying as she dresses his left hand in a splint, and Mikleo is pretty sure she’s trying so hard not to glower at him, “and if your hand wasn’t injured, I would’ve slammed it so hard against the table already.”

“Doing that would be unnecessary,” Mikleo replies dryly, crossing his legs as he leans on his right elbow propped against the armrest. Sorey is asleep in the bed nearest to the doctor’s table, lying on his side, his bare back turned to Mikleo. The stitches on his back where the sword pierced out of his body is a gruesome sight. “That’s how my hand broke.”

“Then stop moving your hand too much, you jittering pipsqueak.”

“Pipsqueak,” Mikleo repeats, unimpressed, and he tears his eyes away from Sorey to stare down at Edna, who’s sitting in front of him. She looks up at him, and he looks down at her. They go at it
for a minute straight.

Edna frowns and looks back down at her work, tugging at Mikleo's splint. He smirks.

“I guess I proved a point.”

“You didn’t,” Edna says, still frowning. “You just annoyed me.”

“Hm.”

She tugs at his dressing a bit too tightly for comfort, and Mikleo flinches in his seat. He glares at her, and she clicks her tongue.

“I was expecting something funnier than that.”

“You have guts,” Mikleo says, “but you also know you’re not going to expect anything like that from me anymore.”

“I suppose,” Edna says, and she loosens the dressing once more. “You grew up too fast for comfort.”

“Did I?” Mikleo says as he shifts in his seat, his left hand still in Edna’s own hands as she inspects her finished work. “Uncle has always told me I’m immature. Very, might I add. Unbefitting for a king.”

Edna nods, though Mikleo thinks it’s to herself instead of as a reply to what he just said, and she gently returns his hand to him. She quickly turns to her parked cart to go through her mess of things there.

“Don’t you dare move your hand,” she says behind her, and Mikleo freezes mid-raising his left hand. Edna turns to face him again, this time with a long cloth in hand, and Mikleo frowns at it.

“What’s that?”

“A cloth to fashion to a sling,” she replies, and she stands to tie it behind his neck and forces his arm into it.

“What the fuck—”

“So you won’t keep moving your hand,” Edna cuts him off. “You won’t stop picking at it or moving it. This’ll limit that.”

“It’s not very restrictive.” Mikleo notes, with a hint of sarcasm, moving his arm to emphasise his point, but Edna shakes her head.

“It is. You’ll see.”

Mikleo makes a face at that, but he eventually shrugs and settles back into his chair with a sigh, relishing in the cool temperature. The infirmary is cold, like how he remembers it, really. It’s not much of a surprise; the infirmary is built in a clearing that leads to the forest, and the cool forest wind visits the place every so often. It’s no wonder it’s the coldest area in the palace. It’s the only thing Mikleo liked throughout his stay here back then.

Though it’s been almost three years since he’d been here, he can tell nothing much changed. There aren’t any new additions other than new beds, and the infirmary is just as white as he remembers: white walls, white floors, white curtains, white beds. White, white, white. It makes the tables and
medical cabinets stand out too much that it hurts the eyes because of their varnishes. Edna’s table is in one corner of the room, near the biggest window, her cart parked against her chair. There’s also a cart parked beside Sorey's bed, and in it are two basins, one with towels stained red and the other with red water, and a bunch of silvers and threads that she might have used for patching Sorey up. The sword that ran him through is leaning against the cart. Edna cleaned it after she extracted it out of Sorey.

“You haven’t really told me yet how it went,” Mikleo tells Edna. “You kicked me out of the infirmary without even giving my hand another glance, after all.” She’s rearranging her messy cart when he says that, and she pauses.

“Sorey?”

“Obviously.”

“I’m sure you'll figure out he’s fine, eventually,” Edna says as she returns to her cart. "Check his bed. You'll see.”

Mikleo raises an eyebrow at her, clearly unimpressed. She's skirting around her boundaries here. “Edna. I’m serious.”

She stops, and she slowly turns to look at him. “Right. Apologies, Your Highness.” Edna says. “He’s fine, like I said. Luckily, no organ was hit, so there’s nothing to worry in the internal department. It was dangerously close to his liver, though. You almost got that one right. What’s there to worry about, though, is the risk of infection. There’s a high chance he’s going to get sick a lot if there’s ever a threat of it, and we’ll have to keep cleaning his stitches until it heals. That’s going to take a long time, too.”

Sounds like a whole lot of hassle. Maybe Mikleo should’ve let Sorey die. “How long do you think it will be?”

Edna shrugs. “The average would be around one or two months. He’s a soldier, isn’t he? He’s probably healthy enough to get better sooner than expected.” She pauses. “Which reminds me, that cut on your cheek is actually pretty bad. It holds the risk of infection too if you don’t clean that regularly. Use the ointment I gave you after baths. Got it?”

“Yeah,” Mikleo says, waving it off. There’s something else much important to focus on here. “Will you allow him to be moved to my room?”

Edna blinks, and for the first time in months, Mikleo caught her by surprise. It soon turns to a smug look, though, complete with a shit-eating grin. “Why? You gonna take care of your boyfriend?”

Mikleo rolls his eyes. Here she goes again. “No. I don’t want Uncle coming in anytime asking him stupid questions. Will you allow him?”

“What will you do if I say no?” Edna challenges. Mikleo pauses and pretends to think about it, just because.

“I’ll make you say yes.”

Edna huffs. “Like you’ll actually give a choice,” she says dryly. “I will, of course, but that means disinfecting your whole room and throwing away a whole lot of your crap there.”...Oh. “You still up for it?”

That...actually makes Mikleo think twice. He might have let his hesitation show on his face,
because Edna adds with a hint of amusement, “I can keep them for you if you want.”

“No,” Mikleo immediately says with a frown. “I don’t trust you with them. They’re not toys.”

“Right,” Edna says, “because centuries old stuff are the key to life, even if they are toys.”

“Key to history,” Mikleo corrects her, still frowning, “and that kendama is not just a---” He pauses, realising what Edna is trying to do, and he sighs. “We’re going to drop that conversation there.”

“Of course,” Edna says, and she sounds disappointed. It’s probably the best tone Mikleo can ever get from her. “I can’t get you all riled up anymore.”

“Try other topics,” Mikleo helpfully suggests, “maybe my sister? That’s really going to get me riled up and furious.”

Edna opens her mouth to say something, but she stops, and she looks behind him and then back at him. “He’s here,” she says, and Mikleo turns and finds Zaveid standing in front the thick wooden doors of the infirmary. Mikleo has barely lifted a finger when Zaveid kneels down in greeting, his head low.

“Your Highness,” he says in greeting. Mikleo doesn’t answer, standing up instead to walk around his chair, and he leans against the backrest as he crosses his arms. He watches Zaveid closely. He normally doesn’t do stupid shows like this, preferring a much more familiar way of greeting instead of the respectful and distant kind, as everyone, even Lailah and Edna, does. There’s literally only one reason why he’s bothering with this.

“Well,” Mikleo starts, “here’s someone who knows he failed me.”

If his words have any impact on Zaveid, he doesn’t show it. His head remains low, and he doesn’t look at Mikleo. There’s a moment of silence.

“Edna,” Mikleo says, his eyes still trained on Zaveid. “Leave us.”

Edna hesitates, if the stillness that follows is anything to go by, and though his voice is still calm and controlled, his next words carry a hint of warning to get out or face my wrath. “Don’t make me repeat myself.”

A few seconds later, Edna’s chair clatters gently behind him. “Apologies,” Edna says as she walks past him and towards the wooden doors. “I’ll show myself out.” And she pauses for a curt nod before opening the nearest door and leaving. Mikleo hasn’t been looking at her, still staring at Zaveid.

“Stand, Zaveid,” Mikleo says, and he pushes himself off the chair and approaches Zaveid as he follows Mikleo’s order. Mikleo stands before his captain, and when Zaveid is in his full height, he barely has a moment to breathe when Mikleo slaps him across the face, and then again to the other side, snapping Zaveid’s head to the side.

Mikleo breathes, and he feels his heartbeat is steady.

“You were supposed to protect me,” Mikleo says, his hand curling into a fist. “You promised.”

Zaveid looks back at Mikleo, but then he looks down, away from Mikleo’s seething gaze, and this is---this is wrong. Zaveid is guilty of breaking his promise and that’s---

"I did,” he says, softly, and then the passive expression he holds breaks, replaced wholly by one of
gilt. "Your Highness---"

"Stop," Mikleo says. "Stop." He takes a step back, shuts his eyes tightly and breathes. His heart is racing. "I---"

_Kept waiting for you, _he almost says, _you didn't come._ Because Zaveid promised him he’ll protect him, those years ago, when Zaveid found him with the Queen’s blood clinging to his skin and hair and hands, with blood and tears and smoke mixing and mashing together, with the skin on his back feeling as if it’s melting off him and all he had been doing was scream--_

"I'm---dying---"

"You're not. We'll get you out. From now on, I'll protect you. I promise. Mikleo---"

His chest tightens, and he feels like dropping to the floor instead of---_whatever_ he was trying to do with Zaveid.

Mikleo can’t think right now.

Zaveid doesn’t see it, though. Of course, he doesn’t---no one ever sees it---but he knows he has a sin to ask forgiveness for. He knows very well his mistake, and Mikleo opens his eyes to find him kneeling again on the floor, his right fist curled so tightly his knuckles are turning white. Mikleo doesn’t really understand what he’s saying---the pounding in his head is too much for him to register anything---but he knows, somehow, Zaveid is still asking for forgiveness, for a second chance. Despite the mess of scattered thoughts in his mind, he remembers Zaveid's words after the proceedings, loudly and cockily reminding him of his promise.

"I'll keep doing it until I get myself killed."

Mikleo doesn’t say anything; he can’t trust himself to do it right now. Hell, he can’t even _think_, and he only stares down at Zaveid, who hasn’t moved since. He opens his mouth, closes it, rinse and repeat, and, using all his willpower to move himself and not throw up right there, he leaves the infirmary instead.

--

The night is almost over. Mikleo has been awake the whole time since the assassins attacked, and he's exhausted. The panic attack made it worse, and right now, the thought of throwing up in his own room and calling it a night, vomit on his floor be damned, sounds wonderful. He's sure the hunt will be called off, and the Lohgrin delegation will leave early instead. It's not safe for Mayvin to stay here, at least that's what common sense will tell everyone. Personally, it's the only good thing that came out from all this.

He practically drags his feet on the way back to the Prince's residences, and when he's there, he finds his apartments tightly jammed with soldiers from his Guard, as it should be, as what he was expecting to see when he returned here with Sorey. There are no traces of the attack in the hallway leading to his room, the body and weapons already taken from the scene and the blood scrubbed clean. The only hint that something went wrong here is the broken window that the assassin used for escape. They’ll most likely replace the broken window tomorrow.

Mikleo finally reaches the door to his quarters, and when he turns the knob and opens the door, he realises that the night will just get progressively worse.

Uncle Michael is sitting in the couch with a sleeping Lailah, a book in his hand. It takes Mikleo a second too long to realise that some of the soldiers standing watch by his room are from the
Regent's Guard, and his mood successfully takes the turn for the worst.

"What," Mikleo forces out, with as much venom as he could muster, "are you doing here?"

The Regent looks up from his book, and Lailah startles herself awake, but when she sees Mikleo, she snaps out from her drowsiness. She immediately stands up.

"Your Highness!" Lailah cries, and she really does look close to crying. She rushes towards him, holding the sides of his head with both hands, checking him, and she really looks hurt and worried over his state. Saying that Lailah's genuine concern for him has soothed Mikleo's wracked nerves is an understatement. He feels refreshed, and, more than anything, relieved. It makes him realise though that he's much more tired than he originally thought.

"You have an awful cut on your cheek," Lailah notes, her eyes and tone telling Mikleo of her great concern. Her hands have travelled from the sides of his face to his shoulders now. "Oh...! They broke your arm, too? Oh, Your Highness, I---"

"Relax, Lailah," Mikleo says, a smile slowly spreading across his face. He can't really describe the relief he's feeling despite the Regent's presence in his room. It's just too much than what he deserves, really. "My arm isn't broken, just my hand. Edna says the sling will keep me from moving it around. She's agitated with my movements, apparently."

"Ah, but still...," Lailah mutters, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "I---We were so worried! Especially when you haven't come out of the infirmary ward for so long, I..."

"I'm fine," Mikleo says, still smiling. "I'm not the one stabbed, you know? Have you heard of what happened to Sorey?"

"Sorey...," Lailah starts, and she gasps. "Sorey! He was there when it happened? What---"

"Lailah, that's enough," Michael says, closing the book and putting it down on Mikleo's table. Mikleo makes a mental note to throw it away. "Nephew, I'm glad to see you're fine. Does anything hurt?"

"No," Mikleo answers as Lailah steps away from him to let them talk. "Now what brings you here?"

"I came to see how you were doing, of course," Michael says. "The alert was a real cause of concern. I see there's nothing to worry about your wellbeing, though. You're capable of defending yourself."

"I am," Mikleo says. "Killing me is close to impossible. Two lousy assassins are nothing." Mikleo pauses, slightly tilting his head at the Regent. "It will take more than a few dirty tricks and a hundred men to kill me."

Michael doesn't say anything in reply, and instead he stands up from the couch. "Nephew, you know why I'm here."

"...Of course," Mikleo says, forcing himself to keep himself in check. He doesn't need to rile up the Regent tonight. More importantly, he needs to keep himself composed. Failing to do any of this will just drag the night longer. He just wants to go to sleep now. "As much as I'd like to tell you everything, I'm afraid we'll have to suspend it for tomorrow, or I guess later. It's near dawn, isn't it? I'm too exhausted to recall everything that happened tonight."

It's not a lie, really. He was so close to throwing up at the Regent, and it really was a great
temptation, but Lailah's presence kept him in check. Michael takes his words into consideration, and after a moment, he nods.

"It's been a very long night for you," Michael finally says. "Rest, Nephew. It's going to be busy tomorrow. Will you go see the Lohgrin delegates off?"

"I'll see what I can do," Mikleo says, "but I can't make promises. I might sleep in, you see. Then again, you probably won't be happy about it."

"Normally, I won't be," Michael admits, "but tonight is a special case. Don't force yourself if you can't make it. Sleep the whole day if you have to."

Mikleo nods. "Thank you, Uncle."

Michael nods back at him, and he makes his way out of the room. Lailah starts to follow suit, but Mikleo stops her, taking her wrist with his hand. She turns to look at him, worry gracing her features once again.

"Your Highness?"

Mikleo lets go of her wrist, and it takes him a moment to speak, peeking behind her. Michael is gone, along with his soldiers. He has nothing to worry about.

"Lailah," Mikleo starts, "can you----" he pauses, hesitating, but he manages to continue. "...You don't mind staying the night with me? I really...I really feel like throwing up right now."

Lailah doesn't really have to be asked twice. She immediately nods, and, with a soft smile, she reaches out to brush the bangs off Mikleo's forehead and plucks his circlet off. He realises then he's been sweating bullets all this time. It's...kind of embarrassing.

"Sit in the couch, Your Highness," Lailah tells him as she gingerly sets his circlet onto the table. "I'll fetch something for you to deposit what's been upsetting you. I know you don't call for servants very often, so I'll help you with everything you need tonight, so please don't worry." She pauses, suddenly remembering something, then she fishes out something out of her pocket and takes Mikleo's hand to firmly press it against his palm.

Mikleo blinks at the object, and he looks up at her. "A crumpled paper crane?"

Lailah smiles. "I know what you're feeling, and it might be worse when I'm gone, so please hold on to this until I come back," she says. "I'll be back soon, and perhaps I'll make you a brand new paper crane. Would you like that?"

It takes Mikleo a moment to answer, Lailah looking at him so patiently, but he eventually nods, his fingers closing around the paper crane. "Okay, I'll...I'll hold on to this."

Lailah's smile grows wider, and before Mikleo knows it, she's ruffling his hair very gently. "Okay, Your Highness," she says, taking his hand and leading him to the couch to sit down. "I'll be quick."

The whole time Lailah is gone, Mikleo is curled up in the couch, his hand holding tightly onto the crane like his life depends on it, and maybe, in a way, it does.

--

Mikleo wakes up to Lailah humming to herself and sitting in the couch with her hands busy with folding papers. The table is peppered with dozens of paper cranes. The curtains on Mikleo's bed
aren't closed, and with the amount of light trespassing Mikleo's senses, it's easy to tell that the sun is already high up in the sky. It's afternoon. Mikleo pushes himself off the bed, sitting up, and he blinks groggily at Lailah, who already saw him awake. She smiles warmly at Mikleo.

"Your Highness," she says, "good morning."

"Good...." Mikleo starts, and he squints at Lailah. He realises that she hasn't changed from her clothes last night, meaning, she probably hasn't stepped out of his apartments, maybe even his room. "Good morning."

"Do you need water? Food? Can you stand?" Lailah asks as she rises from the couch and makes way to his bed. Mikleo only gets top open his mouth before she cuts him off. "Oh, let me get water for you. Hold on."

Mikleo can only blink as she hurries to pick up a pitcher of water and a glass on his other table, the one settled nicely by his bookshelves, pouring water into the glass, and then she's back again at his side. "Here you go."

Mikleo stares at the glass for a moment, and he gingerly takes it and drinks it all in one go. Okay, so apparently he's parched. He returns the glass to Lailah. "Thank you."

Lailah nods, still smiling, and she sets the glass onto Mikleo's nightstand and sits on the side of his bed. "Breakfast?"

"Later."

"How are you feeling, then?"

It takes Mikleo a moment to answer that. Truthfully, he still feels a bit off. It's nothing he can't handle, though, so it's what he tells her.

"I've dealt with worse things," he adds.

Lailah nods again. "Well, then," she says, "perhaps you'd like news of how the day had gone while you slept? I feel you'd like that."

Mikleo does, actually. "What news do you have?"

"Well," Lailah starts, "Mayvin has left Ladylake this morning. As expected, the hunt was cancelled, and he was advised to leave as soon as possible."

"Any news of the intruder?"

Lailah's smile disappears, and she sighs. "It's believed the intruder already left Ladylake, Your Highness."

Mikleo frowns. Well, it's a shitty news, but not unexpected. He has a feeling that assassin has been secured a way out, whether or not they succeeded in killing him. He shakes his head and moves on to their next topic.

"Sorey?"

At the mention of Sorey, Lailah's smile returns again, and she tilts her head to the side. "Not a peep, Your Highness," she says. "Edna told me to go away, though, before I can get a closer look, but I believe Sorey is doing fine." Oh, then she left his apartments, only to come back right away...
“Edna informed me he still hasn't woken up, and she has a feeling he'll take his time doing so. Maybe in a day or two.”

Figures. Sorey sleeps like a log when injured, apparently. It's not exactly a bad thing for someone who's recovering from a life-threatening injury, but it sure is inconvenient for Mikleo. Perhaps he should look at it this way: the longer Sorey sleeps, the more reason for the Regent to keep his distance from Sorey, and by extension, him. Actually, maybe Sorey shouldn't wake up anymore.

"Alright, thank you, Lailah. Anything else?"

"Not anymore, no," she says, and then she pauses, remembering something, and then, "it's not...news exactly, or perhaps it is, but Zaveid was hanging outside of your room this morning, asking for your audience." Lailah pauses, and she looks worried, or maybe just curious. This is Zaveid they're talking about, after all. "He looks...hmm, I'm not sure how to describe it. Lost? Confused? Something like that. Truth be told, it's quite uncharacteristic of him."

Mikleo blinks, and with a sigh, he drops back down into his bed. Right, Zaveid. Last time they talked, he shut down and left Zaveid alone without any words. Truthfully, he doesn't want to see Zaveid just yet, but considering Zaveid ended up being in the, um, crime scene, the Regent will seek him out, or worse, had already sought him out, Mikleo can't really put off confrontation like he wants to.

Truth be told, Mikleo can't do anything he wants to, anymore.

"Lailah," Mikleo says, still lying down in his bed, "thank you for everything, but I have one last request. I…hope you don't refuse me."

Lailah blinks at him. "Your Highness, I can't imagine why I'll even refuse you. Go ahead and ask."

"...Right," Mikleo says. Of course, she won't, but she's probably going to do it really hesitantly. "Um, can you go and fetch Zaveid for me?" Lailah stares at him. "...Or, actually, just go see him, and tell him I summon him. You can also get a servant to bring me breakfast. Thank you, Lailah."

--

Zaveid arrives exactly after Mikleo finishes his breakfast, or lunch, whatever this is now. He's breathing hard, and it's enough to tell Mikleo he really tried his best to get here as fast as he can. That gives Mikleo reason not to yell at him. Yet.

"Your Highness," Zaveid says, and he goes to kneel down, but Mikleo stops him.

"No, stop. Stop that," Mikleo says, his hand on his temple as he walks away from his breakfast on his table to sit on his bed. "Get up, don't do that. It freaks me out."

Zaveid raises his eyebrows at him, but he follows, straightening himself once again, and he stares at Mikleo. There's a few seconds of silence.

"...Hey," Zaveid says instead, and it's really, really awkward. It's honestly a first between them. Even when Zaveid finally introduced himself, back when Mikleo was just fourteen, there's not even an ounce of discomfort. Mikleo sighs.

"I forgive you, okay?" he finally says, and he realises it's not that hard as he first thought it will be. "I know you didn't mean it, and I just---" Mikleo stops, and he shakes his head. His uncalled behaviour isn't something that he can just explain away. He was wrong, and admitting it is the first thing to do here. "I was wrong," he simply says.
Zaveid, though, doesn't look like he thinks the same thing, and he frowns. "For slapping me? I didn't really think you were wrong for doing that," he says. "I did almost let you die, you know. Just because I was somewhere else doesn't mean I don't have a job to protect you. I am the captain of your Guard, promises aside." He looks at Mikleo's sling. "That thing pretty much reminds me of how I screwed up my job."

"Yeah, but---" Mikleo stops, and he runs his hand down his face. This really isn't the time to argue about who is wrong right now. "Just forget it," he says. "Has Uncle come to see you yet?"

"...No," Zaveid slowly answers, crossing his arms. "So straight to the point... you got something on your mind?"

He'll pretend he didn't hear Zaveid mutter that second one. "There's always something on my mind," Mikleo grumbles. "Listen, if Uncle asks anything about what happened, kindly leave out the part where you found the assassin trying to stab me," he tells Zaveid. "Make sure the other guards with you know about this."

Zaveid is quiet for a moment, then he nods. "Got it, but..."

"What?"

"Mind telling me why?"

"Do I have to?" Mikleo says, obviously mocking, but Zaveid just raises his eyebrows at him. He scoffs. Zaveid sure gets over things pretty fast. Mikleo did say to 'just forget it,' though.

"Fine. The daggers are from Rolance."

Zaveid blinks, and surprise is very evident on his face. "What?"

"I'm pretty sure you heard me," Mikleo says. "I did get hold of one of the daggers during the fight. From the grip all the way to the blade's tip, it's reeks of Rolance through and through. Not to mention the sword that gutted Sorey with Edna. The design is Rolance in nature."

"Rolance sent the assassins?" Zaveid says. "No way. That's---"

"Impossible," Mikleo finishes. "Rolance is this close to falling into civil war. It's what Mayvin said. Attempting to kill me now is suicide."

"It's going to break the treaty, and Rolance is gonna go down hard if that happens," Zaveid says. "So someone's trying to start another war between Hyland and Rolance?"

"With my death, no less," Mikleo says dryly, "it's a sure way to get Hyland to break the treaty and start a war. Alisha..." Mikleo hesitates, but he shakes his head and continues. "Alisha wouldn't want that. Even though the treaty is a bunch of half-hearted bullshit made at the expense of her death, even though I actually think breaking the treaty is a great idea, we can't let it happen."

"We can't," Zaveid agrees. "Man, I really like it when you contradict yourself."

Mikleo narrows his eyes at Zaveid. "What do you mean?"

"You hate Rolance," Zaveid points out. "So much that you almost got your gift killed. That was pretty slick, by the way. And then suddenly, here you are, saving the pet you tried to kill, trying to stop a war threatening to brew again." Mikleo is pretty sure Zaveid would have laughed if he didn't scowl at him. "Which reminds me. Does Sorey know what's happening?"
"Sorey?" Mikleo says, and he scoffs. "He doesn't really get to know anything if he hasn't even woken up yet."

"He's not awake yet?"

"No," Mikleo says. "Look, we're getting out of topic here. Do you know what you're supposed to do?"

"Not tell the Regent about the assassin trying to kill you," Zaveid answers. "I got it down, Your Highness. Don't worry. Is that all?"

"Yes," Mikleo says. "That's all you have to do. Don't screw it up. You did not find me struggling against the assassin, and you only saw the assassin escape through the window."

"Of course," Zaveid says. "I totally did not see the assassin straddling you."

"Don't make it weird, what the hell."

This time Zaveid laughs. It's loud and, honestly, annoying, but it makes Mikleo smile. "You're boisterous."

"I know," Zaveid says," and I'm glad you forgive me."

Mikleo blinks, and after a second, he shakes his head. "That's enough," he says, "and just so we're clear, I am also glad I didn't decide to stab you when you entered the infirmary. You're dismissed."

Zaveid snorts, shaking his head in amusement, and he bows to Mikleo before making his way out of the room. He stops under the doorway, though, and when he turns to Mikleo, the goofy smile isn't there anymore.

"Say, Your Highness," Zaveid says, "do you have an idea who could be behind the attack?"

Mikleo stares at him, hesitating for a moment, but he answers, eventually. "No," he lies. "I don't have any suspects."

Zaveid takes his answer with a contemplative look, and then he finally excuses himself and leaves.

Silence returns to the room quickly enough, and Mikleo leaves his bed to call for a servant to prepare the baths for him. Across his room in the hall is an opened window. The sun isn't that far up in the sky anymore, slowly descending now, and Mikleo realises he hasn't really done that much today, having spent half of the day sleeping. He hasn't been summoned to the court yet to talk about the attack, and he's actually not sure if he should consider that as a good thing or not. All he knows, though, is that the Council should definitely not know the truth about the attack. They'd be more than eager to take the chance to break the treaty, despite their petty dog-lapping appearances, and this is more than just preventing the war...

Mikleo closes the door, and he turns to look at the stained glass mural of the Shepherd on his wall. It's mostly obscured by the bed, but he can picture it in his mind: the hero who raises the sacred sword, and taking the seraphim with him, the Shepherd shall descend and exorcise the vile calamities in the world.

It's a children's fairytale, he had told Sorey.

If only the world is as easy as black and white, and if only it's so easy to hold on to his hatred as much as Alisha held on to her kindness.
So much is at stake here. His hatred isn’t enough to get him through this.

Mikleo decides to see Sorey after his bath.

--

With Sorey asleep and without any sign of regaining consciousness soon, Mikleo had been frolicking in the idea that the Regent will leave Sorey alone. Clearly, he’s very wrong.

He finds Michael talking to Edna when he entered the infirmary. He doesn't see Sorey right away, because he's been hidden away by dividers with their curtains closed. Edna sees him first, then Michael, turning around to look at him. Mikleo tries not to frown.

"Uncle."

"Hello, Nephew," Michael says with a nod. "Coming over to see your pet?"

"Yes, and to have my hand checked." He raises his left arm---still in the stupid sling---for good measure. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see how your pet is doing, too," Michael says, "but it seems he's still asleep. He likes to take his time waking up, doesn't he?"

Mikleo shrugs instead of answering him, and he steps into the room and closes the heavy wooden door. It moves with a heavy creak before closing. "I see. Is that all?"

"Yes," Michael says, "but since you're here, I should also let you know that the court discussions regarding the attack will be held tonight, after dinner. You took your time sleeping, too, you know."

"Perhaps I should bring tea for later, then," Mikleo says, "to keep myself awake. Would the Council like some, too?"

"Not at all," Michael says, "I will see you later."

Mikleo steps aside to let Michael take his leave, and he and Edna watch as he closes the door behind him. There's silence for a moment before Edna scoffs.

"Have your hand checked, really?" she says. "The whole time I was talking to you about your hand, you looked like you'd rather eat it."

"Shut it," Mikleo says. "And I was serious. I like my hand useable, after all."

"If you listen to what I said---" Edna stops, and she rolls her eyes. "Whatever. You got a point, anyway. You haven't been using your left hand like I told you to not do, have you?"

Mikleo purses his lips and is quiet for a moment. "...No," he says, eventually. Edna raises an eyebrow, unconvinced. "I wasn't! And it's actually working, what you said about the sling."

"I told you," Edna says. "Just don't do anything too rigorous, and your hand should be good. You can go back to pulling bowstrings in no time if you keep up not being a dick."

Mikleo frowns, and he looks at what should be Sorey's bed, only surrounded by a bunch of dividers and curtains. "You made Sorey his own room."

"I did," she says. "He's my only patient, after all."
"I think that's why the dividers aren't exactly necessary here."

"Whatever," Edna says, and she moves to return to her seat by her table. "It's just been a day since you broke your hand and I had it checked, but come here anyway."

He does, and Edna takes his arm off the sling to check his hand.

"So did you really come here to see Sorey?"

"...I did."

"Oh, wow," Edna says, undoing the dressing around his hand and splint. "Gonna see if you can yell at him yet?"

"Yeah."

"Too bad." Edna carefully turns his hand around, looking at it closely for anything. Damages, maybe? ...She implied this is stupid a while ago, and she's probably right. "He's still snoozing. You know he mumbles a lot in his sleep?"

"No. Unfortunately, I don't enjoy watching him sleep."

Edna rolls her eyes, and she redirects her attention back to redressing his hand. "He said you suck in his sleep."

"Did he?"

"No."

Mikleo smiles. "It would've been funny if he did."

"Because it's true?"

"Absolutely."

This time, it's Edna who smiles. "Okay, smartass, there's nothing wrong with your hand. You can have it back." She leans into her seat and tilts her head towards Sorey's direction. Mikleo follows. "You still gonna move him to your room?"

"Maybe not," Mikleo answers, slipping his hand back to his sling. "If he's asleep, there's nothing Uncle could get from him. Did Uncle ask you anything?"

"He did," Edna says, and when Mikleo turns to her and narrows his eyes at her, she immediately adds, "do I look like I know anything? I just told him he got stabbed. That's all I know, anyway, then he had the sword taken away."

"Ugh, dammit. Mikleo should've taken it back with him last night. Whatever, it doesn't matter that much, anyway. It'll be a little harder, but he can still convince the Council that there's no need to wage war against Rolance."

Edna pauses, and she stares at him for a moment. "Maybe you should give him more credit. He really looks worried."

Mikleo stares at her, too, and instead of saying anything, he stands to walk towards Sorey's bed, pushing the closed curtains aside. He hears Edna sigh behind him as he looks at Sorey.

Well, true enough, Sorey is still soundly asleep, and now he has a shirt on. Black, and oddly familiar. It must be from one of his old clothes when he first got here. He still has his back turned
"You're supposed to have dinner now," Edna reminds Mikleo, and he shrugs.

"Tell the servants to bring my dinner here, then."

"You're going to have dinner here?"

"Why not?" Mikleo says with another shrug. He turns to look at Edna. "I need to talk to Sorey before the hearing. I have a feeling he'll wake up tonight."

"Going to shake him awake?" Dryly.

"No," Mikleo says with a frown. "I just---go get me dinner already."

--

He's actually right.

Edna left to have her own dinner, leaving Sorey with Mikleo because "it sounds like a good idea." Mikleo is already done with his, reading a book about various injuries that he found lying haphazardly on Edna's table, when Sorey wakes up. He doesn't see Sorey wake up, actually; he hears it. The confused whine he hears from the closed curtains tells him so.

Mikleo closes the book, tossing it back to the table with a soft thud, and he hears Sorey yelp at the sound. He gets off his seat to push the curtains aside.

"Don't move," Mikleo tells Sorey, but he frowns when he finds that the other already pushed himself off the bed, sitting on one side instead. Well, whatever, Mikleo supposes. "What the hell?"

Sorey turns to look at him, and he looks surprised, eyebrows raised and mouth agape. It's not unexpected, to say the least. "...Your Highness?"

"Slept well?" Mikleo asks instead. "Surprisingly, only a day has passed since you were gutted. We all thought you're going to take the whole week sleeping."

"Where are we?"

"Infirmary."

"...What are you doing here?"

It's asked incredulously. Mikleo raises an eyebrow at that. "...I'm here to kill you while no one's around and you're still injured," he says. "Now go lie down so I can stab you."

Sorey blinks, and then he looks stricken, and---wow, did he buy that? Mikleo stares at him for a second, and then he shakes his head.

"Stop looking at me like that," he says, and he follows with a sigh. "I did not go through the trouble of providing you first aid just to get you killed afterwards. Now, to be serious, go lie down before you do something that might tear your stitches. You're not healed yet."

The stricken look on Sorey's face disappears, but then it's replaced with a small frown. "Your sense of humour is a bit skewed," he tells Mikleo, but he lies down anyway on his side with a sigh. He faces Mikleo.
"It's sarcasm."

"I don't think I deserve that one," Sorey points out, still frowning. "You know, you can't blame me for being confused seeing you here with me. You kind of hate me, remember?"

Mikleo rolls his eyes. "Unfortunately, my hatred for you and Rolance isn't that important to me right now. Want to help me avoid another war?"

Sorey pauses at that, and he looks at Mikleo, confused. "What?"

"I'd like to think you're not as stupid as you make yourself out to be," Mikleo says, and he turns to drag his chair beside Sorey's bed. Sorey just frowns at him again, though.

"If you're talking about the attack," he says, "now that I think about it, you have that one coming..."

At those words, Mikleo can't help but smile wryly. The words sting, but for reasons Sorey most likely doesn't mean. "Believe me, I know," Mikleo replies. He and Zaveid knew all along, had been anticipating it since the first attempt. It's partly why Mikleo was furious with him for not being there. "Do you think this is the first?"

Sorey is quiet after that, his expression contemplative, taking his words into consideration, and Mikleo watches in amusement as realisation slowly dawns on Sorey. Mikleo would've laughed at his face, but something like this isn't to be laughed at. Mikleo knows that too well, of course.

"...Those scars on your nape," Sorey finally says, quietly, and Mikleo's small smile grows wider. He leans into his seat, making himself comfortable, but he's already far too aware of those scars that run down his back and right arm. They're dark and rough and leathery, a disgusting and ugly contrast to his fine milky skin. He's spent all these years trying to hide them, to pretend they're not...

It doesn't matter, though. Sorey saw them before.

"You know," Mikleo says, "arson is such a messy and inefficient way to kill anyone. It worked on my mother, though, and those scars you saw? That's not all of it." He pauses, and he tilts his head to the side, his gaze at Sorey deprecating. "Imagine that, and then a few days after, you hear of your sister's death."

Sorey is quiet, his face pinched to an expression of---sympathy, and the amusement in Mikleo's expression disappears. Mikleo doesn't need that, and definitely not from him.

"That's...," Sorey starts, struggling with words, "I'm..."

"I don't need it," Mikleo cuts him off. "That doesn't matter. You know what matters? Someone sent people to kill me."

Sorey still looks conflicted, but eventually he lets it go, and he focuses on the matter at hand instead. "That's...yeah," he says, and then he stops suddenly, as if remembering something, and whatever it is seems to have freaked him out. "I remember. The sword... where is it?"

"Taken away," Mikleo replies, and he doesn't stop Sorey when he struggles to push himself up to sit again. He doesn't really care if Sorey ruins his stitches, actually. Edna shouldn't have left Sorey alone with him.

"Oh---Oh, no," Sorey mutters. "The sword, it's---"
"Rolancian," Mikleo says, and he remembers the time when Sorey's eyes widened at the sword still in him. "I know. A dagger used by one of the assassins was left in the scene, also from Rolance. It's easy to assume that the assassins were sent by Rolance, hm?"

Sorey looks to be in a panic. It's a funny sight, really, but Mikleo doesn't comment on it. "But they can't afford that," he says, his tone urgent. "Not after what Mayvin said. Listen---"

"I'm not stupid," Mikleo interrupts. "It's why I'm talking to you in the first place, and, by the way, why I wanted that assassin killed."

Sorey stares at Mikleo, and he buries his face into his hands with a groan. It's the posture of a man who knows he screwed up. "I was wrong."

"You were wrong," Mikleo agrees. "And here I am, cleaning up the mess you made. You have no idea how much I want to just let the whole chaos that will most likely result from your fuck up ensue." He pauses. "I can't afford it right now, though. As you know, someone---"

"Wants you dead, a whole lot," Sorey mutters against his hands. He slowly looks up at him with a grim look. "Plan A didn't work, so Plan B is to get you killed in the middle of war," he says. "Sounds grandiose and a whole lot of hassle, but as things look, it might actually happen. Is that what you're avoiding?"

"Mostly, avoiding the war comes last."

"Of course," Sorey grumbles. "You'd like to see Rolance burn, but you can't do that if you're dead." He sighs. "What do you need me to do?"

Mikleo smiles. "You know me so well. Now---" Mikleo stops, and he eyes Sorey's side. His shirt is coloured black, sure, but Mikleo can't help but notice there's something dense on one part of Sorey's shirt. "I think there's something wet on your shirt."

"Huh?" Sorey looks down on where Mikleo is looking, his hand reaching to feel the side of his shirt. "Oh, that's---oh."

"'Oh'?"

"I'm bleeding."

"You've got to be---I told you not to move!"

"You didn't stop me when I sat up!"

"You're blaming me? That's---oh, go die."

"Wha---I didn't---where are you going? Please don't leave me!"

Chapter End Notes

cliffhanger? kind of. lol. OKAY HERES THE THING: as much as i want to return to my crazy super fast update schedule(?), as far as i know, i still cant, not until renovation with our house is finished, so! im really sorry!!! at least i outlined the entire first half of the fic!!!!! and its going to be epic!!!!!!!!!!
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

a bunch of truth bombs dropped in the form of mikleo pissing off sorey pissing off mikleo \( \_\_\_\(\Upsilon\)_/\_/

Chapter Notes

this will be most likely my last update for the week (zaveid voice) Yikes

It turns out that Mikleo didn't actually leave Sorey to bleed to death, because after a few minutes, he returns to the infirmary with Edna, who's frowning behind him, and she scowls when her blue eyes land on Sorey, then at his blood stained hand that's been trying to stop the bleeding all this time.

Sorey gets nervous for all the good reasons. Edna looks really, really mad, and with the way Mikleo drapes himself in another chair far from his bed, Sorey has a feeling that 1) Mikleo doesn't care, 2) Mikleo knows Edna can't do anything to him that might be taken as an open slight against him and the crown, and 3) Mikleo likes that Edna is going to chew Sorey's head off instead.

Even with all the threats of war and and to Mikleo's life, he still enjoys screwing around with Sorey. Needless to say, Sorey is not having fun.

"You bloody idiots," Edna barks at the both of them, and she practically tears Sorey's shirt off him. When he looks up, Sorey finds her glaring daggers at him. He immediately looks down. "You wake up and the first thing you do is ruin your stitches, and you." She turns to redirect her glare at Mikleo, who's sitting in his chair with his legs crossed so nonchalantly. It may or may not have pissed Edna off more. "You just let him do what he wants!"

"Well," Mikleo flatly says, accompanied with a shrug. "I guess that means it's a bad idea to leave him alone with me."

"Ugh." She snaps her head back to continue glaring at Sorey, and he tries his best not to whimper. "Stop curling in on yourself. What are you, five? Let me see your wound."

Sorey lets her, straightening himself up as she kneels to get a good look on his wound. Mikleo looks like he's trying not to laugh, and Sorey frowns at him before he feels a sharp pain shooting from his wound. Edna's doing her check-up very aggressively. "I'm---ow! I'm sorry."

"Shut up, you idiot," Edna says, still frowning. "Your wound reopened. Congratulations. You're the stupidest idiot I ever had the misfortune to take care of, and you're a worse patient than the Prince."

Sorey bristles. Harsh.
"Well, in Sorey's defence," Mikleo chimes in, "I couldn't move much that I even needed physical therapy. If I could, I would've done more than just complain."

"No one's asking," Edna says with a roll of her eyes, and after neatly folding Sorey's shirt, she firmly presses the cloth against his wound. "Hold it. Keep the pressure going. You're not that stupid to not know how that works, right?" Sorey nods, replacing Edna's hand on his wound. "Good. I'll get water and a bunch of cloths before I stitch that close again." She stands and turns to look at Mikleo. "Don't do anything stupid, Your Highness."

Edna leaves the infirmary mumbling about stupid, idiotic teenagers and how she really needs to have her own sink and the cabinet filled with clean cloths again now that she has a patient to take care of, and despite her small size, she manages to slam the heavy wooden doors shut. Needless to say, Sorey flinches at the loud, booming sound.

Mikleo tilts his head at the doors before looking at Sorey. "That went well."

"That could've been better," Sorey corrects him. He sighs. "I-I thought she's going to tear apart the stitches on my back out of sheer anger."

"She might, if I weren't here," Mikleo says with a hint of amusement, and Sorey frowns at him. "Don't look at me like that," Mikleo tells him. "Look, let's get back to business. I doubt we have much time left."

"...Why?"

"I'll be off to report to the Council and Uncle about the attack soon," Mikleo says, standing up from the chair he sat in and moving to sit back in his chair beside Sorey's bed. His voice is hushed. "This is asking too much from you---you are fucking awful at this, I know---but if Uncle or anyone from the Council, even Lailah, comes to ask about what happened, I need you to lie and tell them that those assassins came for you, and I was caught up in it."

Sorey blinks, and he opens his mouth, only to close it. He frowns. Mikleo needs him to lie? Even to Lailah? "Can't we tell the truth to Lailah?" Sorey asks. "This might be easier if she knows the truth behind this. She'll listen to us."

Mikleo raises an eyebrow at him. He sighs, running a hand through his hair before frowning at Sorey. "Remember when you suggested something, and then everything went wrong, and now you have a hole on your abdomen and I'm telling you to lie to Lailah?"

Sorey stares at him, and then, with a sigh, he nods. Mikleo really made his point with that. He takes Sorey's nod as the answer he's looking for, so he continues. "You are completely useless at lying, so listen to me closely." Before he continues, though, Mikleo warily eyes the cloth on Sorey's abdomen. "You're still bleeding?"

"I---Yeah? A little bit. It's not as bad as before. I got this," Sorey says. When Mikleo just looks at him, though, he frowns. "I'm not feeling lightheaded, which will make me not understand whatever you're saying and promptly screw up your plan, if that's you're asking."

Mikleo slowly nods, and then, after a quick peek at the wooden doors, he starts talking. Mikleo gives him a thorough but quick instruction on what he's supposed to say, what to answer to a question, what to do with every possible situation that may come up, and, for the first time, Sorey appreciates the complicated way Mikleo's mind works. Every question Sorey asks Mikleo has an answer to, and every problem he brings up Mikleo has a solution to. Being thorough is an understatement; Mikleo is practically predicting every problem Sorey can possibly run into, and he
knows exactly what to do about them. He completely has the whole thing down.

Mikleo's maze of a mind is an admirable thing if you weren't the one trapped in it.

Mikleo is in the middle of telling him to stop freezing up every single damn time he thinks he's already caught when there's a soft, muffled knock on one of the doors. They both look at the doors, well, Mikleo does; Sorey can't see past the curtains, and he doesn't think he's allowed past the dividers. He looks back at Mikleo instead, who's staring at the doors with a small frown on his face. It's highly doubtful that the one knocking is Edna. Even if her hands are full with the stuff she meant to get, Sorey has a feeling she'll just kick those heavy doors open like they weigh nothing at all. The one knocking is definitely someone sent by the Regent to get Mikleo.

Mikleo seems to think the same thing, because he eventually stands from his seat, and he looks back at Sorey. "Looks like we're done here," Mikleo says. "I'll send someone to look for Edna. As much as the privacy is appreciated, she's taking her sweet time getting back here." He looks down at Sorey's abdomen, eyebrows raised. "Still bleeding?"

"Yes, because the wound is open," Sorey says with a sigh. "You can go. I'll be fine."

Mikleo stares at him for a moment before shrugging, and soon enough, he's gone. After a few minutes of silence, Sorey still trying to get the bleeding in control and, admittedly, slowly starting to feel a little off, Edna finally returns with a servant in tow, her arms covered by a bunch of clean, white cloth.

"The Prince is gone?"

"Yeah," Sorey says. "Can you...Can you fix this now? I really feel like going back to sleep now."

Edna rolls her eyes. "It's my job, so I'll eventually do it, idiot. Go lie down."

--

Sorey stares at Edna. Well, not in the creepy way; it's just that per Edna's orders, he's to lie down on his side, facing the doctor's table. Apparently, he'd been lying on the wrong side all this time. There's really nothing for Sorey to busy himself with, and... maybe it's kind of creepy just watching Edna and nothing else.

Edna finally looks up from the book she's reading with an exasperated sigh. She turns to look at Sorey.

"Go to sleep," she says.

Sorey makes a face at her. "I can't sleep."

"Didn't you just tell me you feel like sleeping?"

Oh. She's right. "...I guess I don't feel like sleeping anymore?"

Edna stares at him for a moment before clicking her tongue and going back to her book. The cover says it's about various injuries. It probably covers a whole lot of those in detail; it looks to be a pretty thick book.

"Is that a good book?" Sorey asks instead. Edna shrugs.

"It's a necessary book to me," she answers, her eyes still trained on the book. She turns it to the next
"Although, actually, I've read it cover to cover many times I can recite all this in my sleep. I need a better hobby."

"Get a new book?"

Edna closes the book, and she puts it on her table. She leans back into her chair with a sigh. "Maybe. But they're such a rarity these days, medical books more so." She pauses, like she remembers something, but she frowns. "The Prince likes to collect books, and sometimes he literally sneaks out of the palace to meet a bunch of travelling merchants to buy or trade books. He's a big nerd."

Sorey smiles. This is a good topic to talk about, to know more about Mikleo. So far, all he knows about the Prince is that he always knows what he's doing. It's a scary trait to have. "I noticed. He has an entire wall lined with bookshelves filled with books and artefacts. It's really cool."

"Cool," Edna repeats dryly, and she finally turns to Sorey with a look he couldn't read. "Ew," she finally says, and...huh? "I see. No wonder the Prince took a liking to you despite the fact he tried to get you killed. You like books, too?"

"Sure."

"History?"

"Yeah."

"The tale of the Shepherd?"

"Absolutely!"

Edna rolls her eyes. "So he found his match. Finally. Lucky for him, I guess."

Sorey makes a face at that, and he can't help but ask a little bit more. "Is he...is he that hard to woo? You make it sound like he's a bit difficult to deal with." Understatement of the year. Sorey himself knows how difficult Mikleo can be, but he has this impression that Mikleo at least knows to present himself differently in public. The way he dealt with the courtiers during the party before the attack is a good example of it.

Edna smirks, though, like she's about to tell him a big secret. "He is. I mean, you know, it's not a secret that he's pretty and has a way with words. Intelligent and smart. You'd know it." Edna's right; he would. "He'd have someone to court him once in a while. You don't see him get nasty with people outside the palace, but he somehow always manages to get every single one of those men and women to give up on him without throwing away his wholesome image of being perfect." Edna pauses. "You ever met someone who can turn down anyone and still have them helplessly pining for them?"

"...No," Sorey slowly says, Edna shrugs.

"Well, now you know someone." Edna looks at Sorey with a hint of amusement, like suddenly, just talking to him is a funny thing. "Who knew all one had to do is say 'hey, I like books' to get him all over them."

Sorey blinks, and, realising what Edna is talking about, he flushes deep red. She's still smirking, and she knows what she's doing. Sorey's not sure if that makes things worse. "That's---" Sorey mumbles. "You got it all wrong..."
"Oh, do I?" Edna says, feigning innocence. "Really? I seem to recall a servant catching you two in the hallway. Maybe you two should be more discreet."

"Edna..."

"Humour me," Edna says. "I saved your life, after all. So you've seen the Prince naked?"

"Wha--" Sorey starts, and he frowns at her. "You can't use the 'you owe me' card just to gossip."

This time, it's Edna who frowns at him. "Do I look like someone who gossips?"

Sorey stares at her for a moment, and he can't believe what he's hearing from her right now. "I mean, you know, you're asking if I've seen him without clothes!"

Edna seems to pause at that, and she's quiet for a minute, staring at Sorey, unimpressed, then when it finally clicks on her, she just blinks.

"Oh."

"'Oh'?!"

Edna at least looks apologetic, but her words don't seem to imply the same thing. "No, stupid," she says. "I'm not asking about what you two do when no one is looking. I don't really care about that."

She pauses. "Although I guess I could've worded that better."

She really could've. "So what are you supposed to ask me if not that?"

"With all those rumours going around and how neither of you denied it, I just assumed you at least saw him topless," Edna says, and then she frowns. "Ugh, now I feel gross. What I meant to ask is if you already saw his scars."

Sorey blinks at her for a moment, and he remembers when Mikleo was smiling at him, wryly, like the whole thing was something to laugh at, and at that time, Sorey wondered with horror just what exactly Mikleo was forced to go through when Sorey was just sleeping blissfully in his quarters with wonderful news about their victory.

Was the fire by Rolance? Did they do it? Was Sorey, in a way, just as responsible for it as the ones involved in the war for not knowing better?

Something must have slipped on his face, because Edna looks away, and she picks up her book instead to continue reading. "Never mind. Forget it."

"I...I haven't seen them," Sorey admits. "...Are you worried about his scars?"

Edna shrugs. "I'm his doctor, so naturally, I am," she says. "It's been years since then, I shouldn't even be worried, but he hasn't seen me about them when he's supposed to be."

She pauses, glances at Sorey, but the look on his face urges her to continue. "Burns are dangerous business. He had the worst case; it's practically a miracle he didn't die, maybe not because of the burns themselves, but because of so many complications that should have followed after. Have you seen someone burned? And I don't mean the kind where you accidentally touch a hot glass of water, I mean actually set on fire. It's gross and awful. I can't even begin to describe it.

"When your skin is burned, at least in the same level as his, there's no way to bring your skin back
to its former look, nor would it be as sturdy as it used to be. Even if it seems like they're healed---
which they don't really look like; they still look fresh and gross---I still have to check those burns
regularly, make sure there's nothing that can cause any unforeseen complications."

Edna pauses, tucking a stray hair behind her ear. Her lips are curled downwards. "Ever since I
deemed him healed enough to leave the infirmary, the Prince never went to see me for regular
check-ups, and admittedly, it worries me until now. It could mean he'd been dealing with pain he
has no idea what to do about, although knowing him, he'd just ignore them like nothing's wrong.
He likes to pretend those scars don't exist, always covering them up with long sleeves and tight
collars." Edna scoffs, turning the page in her book quite aggressively for someone who's only
supposed to be reading. "What an idiot. I hate him for it."

There's silence after that, Edna reading her book with a frown and Sorey just looking at her. He
remembers the time when he first saw Mikleo's scar---or at least a small part of it---and how he
immediately went and changed and actively pretended nothing happened. Sorey never saw Mikleo
in loose clothing, always with sleeves to cover his arms and a collar to cover his neck. The only
time he ever saw Mikleo without a collar was the time he saw his scar, and even then, Mikleo wore
sleeves.

Sorey attended Mikleo once, too, and he only let Sorey take off his outer clothing before going to
his dressing room on his own. He never really questioned it; Sorey thought Mikleo hated him so
much he'd rather take off the rest of his clothes by himself.

He knows better now, though. A lot of the things Mikleo did suddenly made sense. His hatred
made more sense.

"You shouldn’t have known that," Edna says, still frowning. "But someone has to know,
eventually. No one tells him off for the stupid crap he does, and it’s very frustrating that he just
does whatever he wants." She pauses. "Either way, it’s not like he’ll listen, so forget about it."

"Don’t you…," Sorey says, "don’t you think you should tell him? That you’re worried."

Edna looks at him, and she shrugs. The frown still hasn’t left her face. "It doesn’t matter at this
point."

She looks back at her book and turns a page, and by the looks of it, that’s that.

Sorey sighs, and he closes his eyes. Mikleo is out there artfully lying to everyone on court, just to
cover for Rolance, the one he hates so much, the one that took everything from him and left him in
such a state. Sorey didn't even dare to imagine that things will come to this, that he and Mikleo will
have to work together just to stop a war that should've been in Hyland's favour---

Sorey snaps his eyes open, his mind coming to a halt at the thought. It would've been in Hyland's
favour if war broke out. It's why Mikleo is confident the Council will take the smallest chance of
breaking the treaty. Sorey realises, with horror, that trying to spark war wouldn't just be about
dragging Mikleo into it and getting him killed. It's also a chance to finally take over Rolance now
that it's in disarray.

The person who sent the assassins to kill Mikleo is Hylandic, and, possibly, a court royal.

"Edna," Sorey urgently breathes out, pushing himself up. Edna turns to glower at him, but seeing
the look on his face, she promptly stops, and with a frown, she leaves her chair to help him sit up.

"What? Does something hurt? That's why you shouldn't get up. I'll get you something to ease the
"No, no," Sorey says, taking Edna's wrist to stop her from leaving. She stops, thankfully. "I need to talk to the Prince."

"The Prince?" Edna shakes her head. "He's in the middle of proceedings, remember? They won't be done until later. It's going to be late, then."

Sorey grits his teeth. This can't wait. Mikleo has to know. Edna seems to notice his impatience, because she shakes her head again.

"You're getting agitated," Edna says. "Look, just rest. Don't stress yourself out. I'll make sure he comes here immediately after the court hearings. Just lie down for now."

Sorey looks hard at her for a moment, but he eventually relents. She's right. There's nothing for him to do right now but wait for Mikleo to come. He sighs and nods, and Edna straightens herself up, flattening the crinkles on her dress.

"I know," she says. "I'll get you some soft foods to eat, and then some Valerian tea to drink. It doesn't work immediately, but it should be a start."

Sorey watches as Edna rearranges his pillows, propping them up and against the headboard, and she helps him lean against them. He sighs, content. This is a better arrangement. Edna nods at him, her hands clutching the curtains of the divider. "I'll be back."

--

Sorey startles himself awake. It's dark in the infirmary now, all torches without any fire. The only source of light is from a lantern safely hanging beside his bed, away from the tables and even the curtains. The small bowl of porridge that he barely touched sits cold on his nightstand. His cup of tea is empty. It's the only thing he had.

Sorey isn't sure where Edna had gone. He carefully straightens himself up, his hand reaching out to push the curtains aside, and true enough, the infirmary is empty. Edna isn't here. It must be because he had been asleep this whole time. Of course she has to go to sleep at one point, too. By the looks of it, it's well past midnight.

Edna said she'll make sure Mikleo is here after the proceedings. Sorey doesn't want to doubt her, but he is alone right now. He doesn't think she'll be the type to worry about waking people up, or even Mikleo, for that matter.

Sorey sighs. It's not like he can trust himself to properly get up and make his way out to look for Mikleo. He's pretty sure he's going to drop straight to the floor like a rag if he attempts to. Maybe he'll just go back to sleep.

Just as he's about to lay back down, though, he hears the heavy wooden doors creak open. Sorey blinks, and he strains his neck just to see who it is that entered the infirmary. He sees a few soldiers enter the room, holding torches for light, and Sorey is pretty sure that Mikleo, throughout his visits here, hasn't brought any guards with him, even Zaveid.

There's only one person with guards who'd even bother to see him, Sorey realises with dread. It's the Regent.

Michael stops in front of him, and while the urge to kneel in front of him is pretty strong, Sorey is sure Edna is going to tear him a new one if he ever dares to leave his bed, so he does the next best
thing he can do: he bows his head to the Regent.

"Your Highness, good evening," Sorey says.

Michael considers him for a moment before nodding to himself. "Not allowed to leave the bed, I see."

"No," Sorey agrees. "Edna is going to be mad at me if I do."

"You've been expecting me?"

"No," Sorey says. "I've been startled awake."

It's not exactly a lie. While Mikleo did tell him that the Regent might see him, the one Sorey is expecting right now is Mikleo, and, well, he's not here. The Regent thoughtfully nods, and he glances at the wooden doors before looking back at Sorey.

"Well then, I suppose the doors need some oiling," the Regent says. "Slave, do you know why I'm here?"

Sorey would've said no if Mikleo didn't tell him, actually. "No, Your Highness," he says anyway. The Regent nods.

"I see. I'm here to ask about the attack," he says. "I'd like to know what you saw and experienced during it. Will you tell me the truth?"

*Don't dawdle*, Sorey remembers Mikleo telling him, *that means you're hesitating. Answer quickly and firmly*. "I will," Sorey says, looking up at the Regent. He nods.

"That's good," the Regent says, and after a moment of silence, "tell me everything, then."

And Sorey recounts the event that never happened.

The attackers came from above and targeted him, and Sorey was unarmed. Mikleo was, though, he always carried a dagger with him, and he intercepted the first attacker's blade. The other one targeted Sorey while Mikleo was occupied, and even though Sorey tried to defend himself, he can't really do much against an armed opponent that's hired to kill.

He'd been stabbed, then, and he doesn't really know how Mikleo had his hand broken. He passed out soon after the sword ran him through.

The Regent is just looking at him the whole time Sorey "recounted" the whole thing, and in the dark, it's really hard to see the expression on his face. Truthfully, it kind of makes Sorey nervous. Truthfully, he wishes he could pass out like he did in the story Mikleo made up.

It's quiet for a moment, the Regent still looking at him and Sorey trying not to squirm under his gaze until he says, "why do you think Rolance has sent assassins to kill you?"

Sorey catches his breath, and he forces himself to *not freak out*. "I was a prisoner before I am a slave and pet," Sorey says, remembering what Mikleo told him. "I've made an enemy of my own countrymen, but not the court itself, and the Prince's opinion of Rolance isn't a secret. I believe that my enemies thought the Prince will have my head after I was given to him."

"Mikleo tried to," the Regent says, and it looks like he's buying this lie Sorey is telling him. "It didn't work. Now you two are intimate. Your enemies aren't happy with it."
"I believe so."

"Am I to assume the Emperor doesn't know of this?"

"Yes. I doubt the Emperor knows of this."

"So Rolance's royal court is innocent," the Regent says. "I see. He gave my nephew a troublesome gift, though."

Sorey purses his lips, and he looks down quietly. There's another moment of silence.

"I'm surprised," the Regent says, "that he'll go so far to defend Rolance during the proceedings. I thought he'd be the first to jump on the smallest chance of declaring war against Rolance."

"The treaty is important to him, despite his initial actions," Sorey says. It's another thing Mikleo told him to say, just in case. Another lie, he supposes. "The late princess fought for it."

"She did. That's true," Michael says. "But it's still not enough to convince me."

Sorey pauses, and he looks up at the Regent. What?

"I think there's something wrong here," Michael says. "I trust your judgement, though. Despite what you say you are, I believe you are fair." Sorey blinks at Michael, not making any sense of what he's saying. Mikleo didn't mention anything like this, and Sorey didn't think he'd ever hear the Regent saying anything like this, either.

"I'll get straight to the point: I truly believe you are the one who can look after my nephew and make sure he won't stray. Especially now that he seems to care for you."

Sorey remembers the time the Regent talked to him about the exact same thing, too, and he only stares at him.

The Regent is giving him the same choice again.

"Perhaps you still think you're not up for it?"

Sorey hesitates. "I really..."

"Uncle?"

The voice is hushed and, surprisingly, tired. The Regent turns to look at who's definitely Mikleo, and soon enough, Sorey sees him stand near the Regent, looking at the both of them. "Might I know what's going on here?"

"I've come to hear the slave's account of the attack."

Mikleo tilts his head. "And what do you find?"

"Nothing. What he says matches yours as far as I'm concerned," Michael says. He glances at Sorey before looking back at Mikleo. "I'll take my leave, then. It's late now. Go to sleep, Nephew."

Mikleo doesn't say anything, and he and Sorey watch as Michael leaves the infirmary. Once he's gone and the doors are closed, Mikleo drops himself into the bed nearest to him. It's the one on the other side of the doctor's table.

There's silence for a moment, and Sorey is the one who breaks it. "I need to tell you something."
"Yes, I know," Mikleo says, but he doesn't make a move to sit up. He's still halfway sprawled in the bed, his feet still touching the floor. Sorey frowns.

"I'm serious."

"Then tell me. I didn't come here to sleep here, you know."

Sorey still continues to frown at Mikleo, but eventually, he relents. "The one behind the attack," Sorey starts, and Mikleo just hums in acknowledgement. "I-I think they're Hylandic, maybe one from the court. What do you think?"

Mikleo breathes out a laugh, and he sits up, his lips curled up into a sly smile. "Wow," he says, sarcastically, but before he says anything else, he shakes his head, but he's still smiling. "Good job figuring that part out," he says, and Sorey has a feeling he toned down the sarcasm a whole lot there. "Did you think I don't know?"

Sorey pauses at that, and, running a hand down his face, realises that yes, of course Mikleo knows. The fact that he keeps himself armed even within the palace is enough to tell Sorey of it. Why else will Mikleo keep himself armed in his own home, of all places, where he's supposed to be the safest?

It's simple, really: because the person who wants him dead is also here, because he almost died in his own home, once, and the scars he keeps hidden regularly remind him of it.

Sorey looks down at his hands, and he's almost scared to ask it, because he has a feeling he already knows the answer, like it's there, lurking in the back of his mind ever since he realised that the suspect is Hylandic, but he doesn't think he can acknowledge it just yet. "Do you... know he might be...?"

"Not 'might be','" Mikleo says. "I know for a fact he 'is', and he’s done it, once. Why do you think I hate my Uncle so much?"

Sorey stares at Mikleo, wide-eyed. He...He kind of thought about it, but...

No. It's obvious, right from the start. No one else is going to benefit from the Prince's death other than him, who will be crowned as King as the closest relative to the Crown Prince. If that happened, then no one else will benefit from Rolance's downfall other than the newly crowned King of Hyland.

It's obvious, from how he keeps asking Sorey to spy on Mikleo for him, and, Sorey knows for sure, how he was possibly asking everyone in the scene for evidences that can convince the Council to break the treaty and wage war that will force Mikleo to take the front lines and, most definitely, die.

Mikleo had been living with someone who'd been planning his death, who'd done it once already, and it killed the Queen and left Mikleo with scars.

In a way, Sorey suddenly understands Mikleo's situation. He'd been ignorant before it's too late, but the pain of knowing that someone you trust had been deceiving you all along, and to think that Mikleo knows all this time...

How can he deal with it? Sorey can't even bear to remember what Heldalf did to him.

"I...thought I was just overreacting when I thought it," Sorey admits, his voice soft, "but I guess I just never knew anything."
"You don't," Mikleo agrees, his tone cold. "You don't know anything. Who says this is all of it?"

Sorey slowly looks up at Mikleo. "What?"

"See?" Mikleo says, and he clicks his tongue. He's irritated. "You're incredibly naive, it's amazing. There's so many things unfolding, even before Heldalf was crowned Emperor. Even before all this." Mikleo raises an eyebrow at Sorey. "You're a soldier, you said, yet you weren't in this stupid 'war' that most Rolancians keep saying. What do you know about three years ago?"

"I---" Sorey starts, and he feels his palms sweat. Mikleo is challenging him, getting dangerously close to his secret. He doesn't know what to do. "Hyland and Rolance waged war over Camlann---"

"Wrong," Mikleo cuts off, looking agitated. "Is that what the late Emperor and the Platinum Knights told everyone in Rolance?" Mikleo scoffs. "Bullshit."

"The Platinum Knights don't lie," Sorey says, glaring at Mikleo. His wound is starting to feel irritated, but he ignores it, preferring to prove Mikleo wrong instead. "They have a code of honour, and they follow it with pride---"

"Do they?" Mikleo barks back, and he laughs. "It's just another bunch of disgusting horse shit. Who was the general of the Platinum Knights before the late Emperor died? Wasn't it Heldalf?" At this Sorey stops, staring wide-eyed at Mikleo. Upon noticing this, Mikleo smiles. "See? You also don't think it's just coincidence that the late Emperor and Prince Sorey died the same night. Thinking that it's just some twist of fate that Heldalf ended up taking the crown is stupid and ignorant."

Mikleo made his point loud and clear, and Sorey grits his teeth. "What," he finally says, "what are you even trying to tell me?"

"You don't know anything," Mikleo says, "and you're too powerless to do anything without me." He stands from the bed, running his hand through his silvery hair. He's not wearing his circlet. Mikleo turns away from Sorey. "And you know what? Neither of us wouldn't be in this fucking situation if Prince Sorey wasn't too stupid to let himself be killed. If he knew anything that’s been going on, even back then. He knows jack shit, either. Like you. People who let themselves killed like that are the stupidest, most useless kind of people who can never do anything right." He laughs. It makes Sorey's blood boil, makes him want to make him stop. "They just like to make promises, with stupid ideals that will only get themselves killed. Those kinds of people deserved what they had coming."

Mikleo starts to make his leave. Sorey's hands are curled tightly into fists, and he bites his lips so hard he can taste blood. What does-- What does Mikleo know? He knows nothing. It's not---It's not wrong to make promises, to give hope to people who needed it. Didn't Mikleo make promises, too? To Rachel, and he kept them. Sorey will, too. Those promises he made, he'll keep them. He can, and he will. He will get out of here and take back what's his, and his ideals will be realised.

Sorey will do it. For all those slaves he promised, for everyone who still believes in him, even for Mikleo, just so Sorey can prove to him it's not stupid or ignorant to believe in what’s right.

"You," Sorey starts, and Mikleo stops walking. "You don't know anything about Prince Sorey. You've never even met him."

"I didn't," Mikleo says, turning to look at Sorey. In the dark, he can't see the expression Mikleo wears. The lantern's soft light doesn't reach far. "I can see Alisha in him, though," he says, his voice distant. "She was stupid, too."
Mikleo turns around once again, to leave for good, and without thinking, Sorey moves out of his bed, almost tripping on his own feet, his body refusing to cooperate with him. He only manages a few hurried steps before he has to sit down onto one of the beds. With this, though, without the dividers, he can clearly see Mikleo opening the wooden doors.

"Wait," Sorey says, ignoring the protests his wound makes. "You didn't...You didn't tell me how the Princess died."

Mikleo is quiet for a moment, his hand on the doorknob, and then, "ambushed, under the pretence of peace talks regarding the dispute over Camlann."
"You know," Edna tells Sorey as she sets down his Valerian tea for the morning on his nightstand. The sun is pretty high up now, the sunlight filtering into the room a little bit harsh. It's not that early anymore. Despite the harsh sunlight, Edna's face is blank, as is her default expression, actually. Her gaze moves from the tea she set down to Sorey, who's only been looking at her curiously. "You've been awfully quiet and still for the past two days that it's scary."

Sorey smiles. It's small and sheepish. "Is it that weird?"

Edna takes her time to reply, sitting in her chair as she taps her chin, as if she's actually thinking about it. At this point, Sorey knows she's just doing it for the sake of sarcasm. "I fairly recall telling you so many times not to move so much, but two nights ago I found you sprawled on the floor with your stitches---both front and back, by the way---ruined. You can't really blame me."

With a soft chuckle, Sorey scratches his cheek, embarrassment in his tone as he says, "I guess you could say I learnt my lesson since then."

"Did you?" Edna dramatically sighs. "Finally."

Sorey laughs, and he takes his tea from his nightstand. As usual, the aroma is rich, and it's actually enough to relax him. The same night she found him and his stitches were remade, Edna gave him another cup, and she said she brewed the tea herself after he asked her about it.

...Which reminds him. "How did you know I needed help?" Sorey asks Edna after his first sip from his tea. "I'm pretty sure I didn't make any sound." Even after he gracelessly fell down trying to get back to his bed. "Was it the guards?"

"No," Edna replies, and she takes her book from her table, holding it with surprising care. Sorey realises it's a different book now, this time about herbs. Didn't she say new books are hard to come by these days? "The Prince nicely woke me up in my room and nicely told me to, and I quote, get my fucking ass to the infirmary. Then I found you on the floor moaning about how you're going to die." She shrugs, glancing at Sorey. "And now I haven't seen him around this wing since then. ...Wait, did you two argue?"

Sorey purses his lips, looking back at his cup. Steam rises from his tea, curling and moving with his every breath.
What happened two nights ago firmly reminded Sorey of Mikleo's hatred for him and Rolance, especially now that Sorey knows his reasoning behind it. To hear that even after all that, Mikleo sent Edna to attend him...

Sorey shakes his head. Mikleo is hard to understand, and he'd rather not try to think too much about him. "...I guess you can say that?"

There's uncertainty in his tone as he says it. It's not exactly an argument, but he's not really sure how to word it to anyone else, either. "It's mostly just him telling me how much of an idiot I am."

"Of course," Edna says, rolling her eyes before going back to her book. She takes a random piece of paper from her stack and her quill that's left inside a bottle of ink. "That's a hobby of his. I'm not surprised you got the same treatment." She finally opens her book, flipping it to a random page, or at least Sorey thinks it is. "Don't think too much about it."

Too late, Sorey wants to tell her. He had been thinking about it, and he had been questioning all he knows about Rolance. He looked up to his father and Heldalf, looked up to the soldiers of the Platinum Knights. Sorey always watched them train and march with stars in his eyes, at least it was what Heldalf always told him. The Platinum Knights had pride and honour, so did his father---that's what Sorey had always known.

To think that they'd deceive and kill someone who never wished harm...

That someone---Princess Alisha was a mystery to Sorey. He'd never known her personally, only by word of mouth, and he always heard that she was a lovely woman and a soft princess, and that her daring to take the front lines in war is very laughable that it's no wonder she died.

It's not exactly a good thing to hear about her, because they implied she was incompetent because she was a soft hearted woman, but after what Mikleo said, Sorey can't exactly imagine how she can possibly survive an attack when all she had been expecting were negotiations for peace.

In a way, maybe those things he heard about her in Rolance were true, that Alisha was a kind and fair princess. She only wished for peace, and his father and the Knights...they used the peace she sought to kill her and possibly force Hyland into giving up Camlann and forge a treaty. There wasn't even any war in the first place.

It's...distasteful; it's in poor tastes. Mayvin was right for saying that, and it makes Sorey realise that everyone else but him had known of what really happened.

They truly made him ignorant and stupid, and begrudgingly, Sorey had been thinking all this time that Mikleo was right about everything.

Sorey's perspective has always been wrong all this time.

"You're making a really ugly face," Edna suddenly says, and Sorey blinks, looking away from his tea to look at her. "And you're clutching your cup too tightly," she adds. "Just a bit more, and you're going to break it."

Sorey looks back to the cup in his hands, and, with a sigh, he puts it back on his nightstand. Edna just watches him do it. There's a small, almost unnoticeable, frown on her face.

"Whatever the Prince said," Edna says, "don't think too much about it. You make awful faces that it makes me nauseous."

Sorey smiles at Edna's attempt to comfort him, but he decides not to comment on it. He's sure she's
just going to be mad at him if he does. "Sorry," he says instead. "A lot of things he said were right, though. I'm just... reflecting on it."

"Well, that's a pretty intense look for someone reflecting," Edna says, redirecting her gaze back to her book. "And I didn't think he can say anything worthwhile when he's angry."

"Maybe you actually just haven't experienced a verbal lashing from him."

Edna breathes out a laugh. "You're right, I haven't. I have a feeling he'll hit the sorest spots if I'm unfortunate enough," she says. "Then again, I'm not stupid enough to piss him off. I'm fine just hearing about people's experiences with the Prince's wrath, thank you."

There's silence after that, though not exactly an uncomfortable one, and Sorey leans back on his pillows as he stares at the intricate carvings on the ceilings. He figured he wanted to stop thinking about two nights ago, but he went and did it anyway. He knows the truth now, and in a way, he kind of accepts it, but it still feels so surreal. There've been more than one occasion where he hoped he's just dreaming and that he's sleeping in the infirmary. It's wrong, though, to think like that, and if Sorey really wants to change something, anything, then he has to start with wholly accepting this whole thing as the truth. Otherwise, he's stuck in the past, and he might even continue the cycle of hatred between Hyland and Rolance instead of stopping it. It's not what he wants.

Sorey takes a deep breath. "...I think I want to talk to the Prince."

"When I said to not think about it, I meant beating yourself up over whatever you did to warrant his anger and scathing words, not forget that he's angry with you."

Sorey frowns at the ceiling. "Yeah, but---"

A muffled knock on one of the thick wooden doors interrupts Sorey, and while he wants to redirect his frown at the door, the curtains blocking his view stops him from doing it. He looks at Edna instead, who's already standing from her chair with a sigh, and she disappears from his line of sight. A few seconds later, Sorey hears the familiar creaking of the door, and then another familiar voice, warm and kind.

Sorey can't help his smile when he hears Lailah greet Edna.

"Didn't I tell you to go away before?" Sorey hears Edna grumble, and then Lailah giggles. He hears the doors being closed, then there's footsteps across the room towards him.

"Oh, but that's almost a week ago. I still can't see him?"

"I guess you can. I already closed the door with you in here, didn't I?" Edna sounds exasperated. She walks straight to the dividers surrounding Sorey's bed and pushes the curtains open all the way, and then Sorey sees Lailah standing a few feet away from the edge of his bed. There's a hand over her mouth, trying to hide the smile across her face.

"Good morning, Lailah!" Sorey chirps, and he watches as her smile grows wider, her green eyes brilliant.

"Oh, Sorey!" Lailah dashes beside him, taking Edna's chair to his bed and sitting in it, and she gingerly takes his hand. Her hands are so soft. "I'm so happy to see you're doing great," she tells him. "I wanted to see you for a while now, but I just can't find the time."

Sorey nods, still smiling. "I'm just glad to see you, too, Lailah."
Edna clears her throat behind them, and when they look at her, she points her thumb towards the
doors. "I'll go out to get Sorey breakfast. Lailah, you want anything?"

"Cake?"

"...Sure." Edna looks at Sorey. "Finish your tea."

Lailah looks back at Sorey when Edna is gone, and her bright smile turns melancholic. It makes
Sorey think that Edna has an idea why Lailah is here.

"There are so many reasons why I wanted to see you," Lailah says. She's still holding Sorey's hand.
"Of course, to see how you're doing is one of them, but more importantly, I want to express my
wholehearted gratitude for protecting His Highness." Her eyes glisten with unshed tears, and she
blinks. "Thank you."

Even though he'd like to smile for her, the small frown is something Sorey can't help. Sorey did
what he did to make sure the slaves can leave Hyland safely, not for Mikleo himself. "Lailah..."

"I understand you don't like him," Lailah says. "I know, Sorey. Appearances must be made to
impress the Lohgrin delegation." Sorey gapes at her, surprised. She knows they were lying? Does
he know about the slaves? "It's something that must be done to satisfy the Regent," Lailah
continues, and Sorey realises that she still doesn't know any better. He doesn't know whether to be
relieved or not. "So for you to go this far for him...I'm just..." Lailah sniffs, and, oh...Sorey doesn't
have anything to offer to her.

"I'm fine," she says, as if reading what's in Sorey's mind. "Words can't describe how happy I am to
know that the Prince is fine, and you, too, after what you've done to protect him."

"It's not...," Sorey starts, "it's not some sort of martyrdom or anything, Lailah." He did it for his
own interest, he wants to say. It's the truth, but with how Lailah looks at him with such gratitude in
her eyes, it makes Sorey feel awful, even if he did it to help a couple of abused slaves.

"Even still," she says. "I wondered what kind of reward to give you. I even consulted the Council
and the Regent, but I don't think they're interested in rewarding a slave..." Lailah looks crestfallen
about it, but she shakes her head. "I'd give you jewellery, but nothing can really top that diamond
earring you wear. I don't have anything to give you."

"I-I don't really have any use for jewellery to begin with," Sorey says. "Or any reward, really. You
don't have to!"

"You put your life on the line, though," Lailah says. "Even the Prince hasn't done anything?"

He angrily told Sorey a whole lot of truths, complete with taunting and degrading talks, if that can
be considered a reward. "He knows I don't have any need for something like that."

Lailah huffs her cheeks, her eyebrows furrowed as she thinks, and it's such an amusing sight. "Oh! I
know," she says, letting go of Sorey's hand to clap her hands together. "I'll tell you a secret, then. It
was just between me and the Prince, and now I suppose you're in on it, too."

Sorey blinks, and he shakes his head, feeling nervous. "I don't think you're supposed to tell me if
it's a secret..."

"No, no. It's okay, don't worry!" Lailah says, and then she leans towards him, her hands resting on
the edge of his bed. Her voice is hushed when she speaks again. "The Prince used to have his hair
long. Maybe about..." Lailah leans away, and she points at her hip. "This long! The Princess loved
Sorey blinks at Lailah as she leans towards him again. Mikleo with long hair? It's... not that hard to imagine. Sorey has a feeling it suits him. "After the...fire a few years ago, he keeps it short, but you know, we had a bet, something that's just between us: starting this year, he'll grow his hair again, and then it should be long enough for me to style for his coronation, two years from now."

Lailah's smile is so wide and contagious, Sorey can't help the smile on his face, too. She looks very excited about it. "I already have so many ideas for his hair for that special day. He'll be so lovely."

Sorey has a feeling that Mikleo will really be, if only because of Lailah. Three years, including this year, sounds so short for his hair to reach the same length as it used to be, though. How long will Mikleo's hair be by then?

"I hate to be the one to bring it up," Sorey says, still smiling, "but what happens if it's not long enough to be styled?"

At this, Lailah's smile turns to a small frown, but not the angry kind; she's thinking, her index finger tapping against her chin. "Oh, my," she finally says after a moment. "We haven't talked about it."

Oh, Lailah. "That doesn't really make it a bet, does it?" More like a promise, Sorey thinks, and he can't help but remember what Mikleo said about promises, that it's nonsense and stupid, as if he thinks they're meant to be broken.

Sorey is sure, though, that this promise he made to Lailah is something he's hell bent on keeping, because keeping it meant that he survived, that he won.

"Maybe you should keep it that way," Sorey says, and Lailah blinks at him. "I'm confident he'll make sure you'll get to see his hair long again."

Lailah smiles again, nodding. "Yes," she says. "I think so, too, and, hmm, actually, I'm not so sure anyway who wins if his hair gets long enough for me to style it."

"The both of you, maybe?" Sorey suggests, and Lailah claps her hands together again, nodding.

"I suppose that's right!"

Conversation flows naturally between them afterwards. They talk about many things, like the tea Edna gives him and Lailah says she would love to have a cup of tea brewed by Edna, or Sorey's wound and he shows the wound to her, just because she insists. She doesn't look at least bothered by seeing such a gruesome wound.

"You know," she tells Sorey at one point. "I've been a soldier once, too, long ago."

"...Really?" Sorey is in awe. Seeing Lailah in armour with a sword would be such an impressive sight.

"Yes. I suppose those were my days of glory." She sighs. "But I guess I just spend my days now in lovely red dresses and making sure the Regent makes all the right decisions."

Sorey's smile to that is halfhearted and melancholic. He knows he's not in any place to ask her about it, but he does, anyway.

"Say, Lailah," Sorey says, "where does your loyalty lie?"
Lailah blinks, obviously startled by the question, and she softly smiles. "If you're asking whether I'm on the Regent's side or the Prince's side, it's neither," she answers, without any hint of hesitation. "I'm loyal only to the crown and to Hyland, but when the Prince reaches maturity and ascends the throne, that's a different thing already."

"I suppose it is," Sorey says.

Edna returns not too long after that, while Sorey and Lailah are talking about baked desserts. She has Sorey's food and Lailah's cake on a tray, and she's frowning.

"Edna?" Lailah says, looking at her worryingly. "Is something wrong?"

"Not really," Edna answers, and she sets down the tray on her table. "I just saw the Prince yelling at someone on the way here. It looks like he is in a foul mood again."

"He's been like that since the other day," Lailah says before sighing. "It happens. It's nothing new."

"Gee," Edna says before looking at Sorey. "Wasn't he mad at you? He wasn't this pissy two nights ago."

Sorey blinks, and he flushes. "Um, it's mostly why I want to talk to him..."

"Oh," Lailah says, tilting her head towards Sorey. "That's fine, don't worry. It's not your fault. I'll talk to him for you."

Lailah stands up, straightening the crinkles of her dress as she does so, and she nods at Sorey. "As much as I'd like to stay longer, I'm afraid I have to go. Get well, soon, alright Sorey?"

"I will."

"And make sure you don't tell anyone what I told you. You know, the bet." Sorey sees Edna raise an eyebrow at that, and, looking back at Lailah, Sorey finds she's grinning widely. "If you tell anyone, you'll surely be in a hairy situation!"

Sorey blinks, and he slowly nods. "Sure, don't worry."

A second of silence, and then Lailah huffs. "I thought that was clever."

"What is?"

Edna snorts. "Whatever joke that is completely flew over his head. Just go already."

Lailah frowns at Edna, but she smiles at Sorey before fishing something out of her pocket and taking his hand. She presses something on his palm, and it turns out to be a small paper crane. Sorey blinks at it before looking up at her.

"My final reward to you," Lailah says, smiling. "Next time, I'll teach you how to make one. Perhaps the three of us, the Prince, you, and me, in a paper crane session. I'll teach you two how to make one. How about it? You two can make up that way."

Huh. He and Mikleo talking their differences out while folding oddly-shaped paper cranes. It's a funny thought, and definitely impossible, but maybe Sorey can go with it. As long as he can talk to Mikleo, he supposes.

"Sure," he says, "I'd like that."
Lailah nods at him, and then at Edna, and soon enough, she's gone. Edna hasn't even gotten back in her chair though before Lailah comes rushing back, and she gingerly picks up the saucer with the cake from the tray.

"I forgot this," she says, apologetic. "I'll see you soon, Sorey, hopefully with His Highness." Then she's out of the infirmary again.

Edna glances at Sorey, unimpressed. "She loves her cakes," she says.

--

Three days have passed after Lailah visited, and there hasn't been any sign of her, or Mikleo, for that matter. He asks Edna once if he can see the Prince, and she goes and does what he asks of her, since she did it once anyway, but after a good amount of waiting, Edna comes back with only a message from Mikleo.

"He says go eat a dick," Edna tells Sorey with the flattest expression possible. Sorey runs a hand down his face, sighing.

Alright, so he supposes he won't be seeing Mikleo anytime soon. It seems he didn't agree to the paper crane making session Lailah talked about.

The days go by uneventfully, quickly turning to weeks, and soon enough, to a month. Zaveid drops by now and then, sparingly, just for a quick hello before leaving again. Lailah visits once, too, but not to teach him how to make paper cranes and just to see how he's doing. She still wants it to be the three of them. The only one Sorey has for company is Edna, and her time with him even starts to decrease the better his wound gets.

It's kind of lonely, and it also makes Sorey antsy sometimes. He misses swinging a sword and shooting an arrow. Heck, even a spear sounds wonderful to hold right now, even though he's absolutely terrible at wielding one. A ride through the clearing and to the forest on a horse sounds wonderful, too, and Sorey realises he really hasn't been in top shape for a while now. He's been stationary the whole time he's here; the most he had done was the fight at the ring, and even then, that was really terrible.

Sorey also realises that he's only been here for, maybe, two months at least, going three, the last month spent in bed because of his wound. So much had happened.

It's surreal.

"I keep forgetting to ask it," Sorey says, one evening. He's clear to move around now as long as he doesn't do anything too rigorous, the pain in his wound just a dull, almost unnoticeable throb on his side. He's leaning outside the window to watch the sun set.

He hears Edna shift in her seat, the sound of a page turning as she does so, accompanied with a quill scratching against paper. Edna's studying. It's what she does now every time she's in the infirmary with him. "What?" she says, and Sorey turns to look at the book she's reading.

"That's a new book," Sorey says, "about medicinal herbs. Where'd you get it? You said new books are hard to come by."

"I borrowed it, obviously," Edna replies, still not looking up from her book. "I asked the Prince, and then he made fun of me before telling me to look in the library." She makes a face at that. "I completely forgot the palace has a library."
Sorey chuckles as he pushes himself off the window, walking back towards his bed and sitting down. "That can't be helped," he says, "the library doesn't look like it gets a lot of visitors. It looks completely deserted the last time I visited." That was one time, with Mikleo, and he saw him making a throne with books. Oddly enough, the memory makes Sorey smile. "Do you know the Prince makes book thrones?"

Edna stops at that, the tip of her quill pressing against the parchment on top of her book, and she looks up at Sorey before smirking. "What a big baby. Does Lailah know?"

"No idea," Sorey says, still smiling. "Perhaps not. I guess this is a secret between us now."

Edna snorts. "Wait until Zaveid finds out, and the entire Prince's Guard will be all over how 'cute' that is."

Sorey's smile drops. "Please don't tell Zaveid."

Edna opens her mouth to say something, but there's a loud and harsh knocking on the wooden doors. Blinking, Sorey stands to open the doors himself, but she stops him.

"No," she says, her blue eyes hard on the doors. It makes Sorey nervous. "Sit on the bed."

Edna approaches the doors, and the knocking turns into loud banging. Sorey purses his lips, his grip on his bed tight, but he just waits to hear Edna open the doors, because even until now, the dividers aren't still removed. Sorey hears the loud creaking sound of the doors, and then there's shouting.

"Where's the Prince's pet?"

"What are you---" Edna is cut off with the sounds of swords unsheathing, and she yelps. Alarmed, Sorey is immediately on his feet, and he hastily makes his way out of the dividers.

"Edna---?!"

She's standing by the doorway, forced in place by a sword held by a soldier in red livery on her neck, her hands tightly gripping her dress. Two more soldiers enter the room.

Red livery. Soldiers that belong to the Prince's Guard wear livery the colour of blue. These men, they're---

Sorey gapes at the approaching men. "You're..."

But before he can even finish his sentence, one of the soldiers hastily takes a step towards him and hits his abdomen with the pommel of his sword. The dull pain on his side suddenly blossoms into the stinging, unbearable kind, and Sorey falls to the floor with a gasp. Amidst the pain, he can still hear Edna scream ahead of him.

"What are you doing?! He's still injured. Who let you in? Your Regent won't save you from the Prince's wrath!"

The soldier who hit Sorey snorts, and he pulls Sorey up with his arm. He stumbles. "Your Prince can't do jack shit," the soldier says. "On your feet, slave."

Sorey looks wide-eyed at Edna, who looks just as confused as him but very agitated. "...Edna---"

"Get up," the soldier barks.
"Sorey, follow him," Edna softly says, her expression dark. To the soldier holding her in place, she says, "let me go with him. He's still not healed." She pauses, and she looks at the one who hit Sorey. "Please don't hurt him. He'll follow you."

Sorey stands up, as fast as he can, and he and Edna are led out of the infirmary by the three soldiers, swords on their back.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

(draws lots of arrows around major character death tag) haha

this is a surprisingly very short chapter, especially when u compare it to the other chapters. now i kinda wish i actually had this put in the prior chapter, but oh well.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the end, Sorey and Edna can only exchange worried glances as the Regent's men continue to lead them somewhere at sword point. Sorey isn't familiar with this part of the palace, and the longer they walk, the more worried he becomes for not knowing where they're headed. For some reason, they haven't seen any soldier who's from the Prince's Guard. Every single guard they've come across is part of the Regent's Guard, and knowing the true nature of the Regent makes Sorey dread for the worst.

What's happening?

Should...Should Sorey even dare and attempt to fight them off and find Mikleo? Is this some sort of coup d'état? An uprising against the Prince? That doesn't make any sense; Mikleo isn't even king yet to warrant that kind of thing, and even if that's the case, Sorey knows Mikleo can easily suppress it---he has the smarts and cunning to do it, even if he has to do it by himself.

There's---There's something else. He's not sure why, but he thinks Mikleo could be in trouble. What he's having a hard time figuring out is what trouble it could possibly be that Mikleo can't extract himself out of that even the Regent's men don't have the slightest fear of the Prince, laying a hand on Sorey, a property of the Prince, just like that, even insulting Mikleo.

Sorey purses his lips before glancing at Edna. She's looking straight ahead, briskly walking, and she carries herself like a soldier that it makes Sorey fear her umbrella. It's probably secretly a sword. She doesn't look at him this time, so Sorey looks straight ahead, too, but suddenly hesitating, and he feels the sword point dig into his back.

"Move it, you goddamn slut."

"That's not very nice," Edna flatly says, and the other soldier shoves her forward instead.

"Don't make us change our mind and dump you in the dungeon instead, little girl."

"Can't we at least know what's going on?" Sorey immediately says, his eyes wide at Edna, who's already scowling, and he makes sure he's walking at a pace acceptable to the soldiers. He doesn't really want to push his luck too much by straggling around. "Where are you taking us?"

"You'll find out soon," one of the soldiers says. "Now move."

The rest of the journey is spent in silence, with tension high. Every now and then, the soldiers shove Sorey around, even Edna, and he has to send her a series of pathetic stares to beg her to keep her mouth shut. Sorey knows she has a bunch of creative things to say to them, but by Maotelsus, not now, not when they're actually holding the risk of being killed.
Soon enough, though, the unfamiliar hallways turn familiar, and with every step and turn, Sorey realises they're on their way to the court, where the Regent confiscated Mikleo's lands for almost getting Sorey killed, and he notices immediately that the grandiose doors are open, and courtiers, servants, and soldiers---even some from the Prince's Guard---are crowding the area.

They're still a ways from the court room itself, but because of the open doors, Sorey can almost make out most of the people situated in the middle of the room. There's the Regent sitting in the throne, looking agitated, the Council that looks like they're on edge, like each of them are walking on a tight rope. Lailah isn't with them.

Standing in front of them is a man with a familiar mop of silvery blue hair---it's Mikleo, Sorey realises with relief that takes him by surprise, but what's more surprising, is that Mikleo's arms---stained with blood---are bound behind him. His hands are covered with blood so fresh that it's staining Mikleo's back.

Sorey hears Edna curse beside him, and she sounds more confused than ever. The closer they get to the court room, the louder they hear the people inside talking.

"---Of my men," the Regent is saying. "You killed three of my men, Mikleo."

"What?" Edna mutters beside Sorey, obviously taken aback, while he stares at Mikleo, wide-eyed. Mikleo replies as if what the Regent accuses him of isn't a big deal at all.

"They drew their sword and attacked me," Mikleo says, calmly, "but if you want a reason that isn't about disrespecting and pointing a sword at the Crown Prince, which I believe is punishable by death, then someone has to answer to what happened in the stables. Weren't those useless men drinking their time away when they're supposed to be on duty, guarding the stables?" The calm, collected tone in Mikleo's voice breaks, replaced with pure unrelenting anger with his next words.

"They let Lailah die."

The words hit Sorey so hard that he almost chokes, his head suddenly spinning with disbelief. Lailah---dead? How could---why?

She wanted to teach him and Mikleo how to make paper cranes; she was looking forward to styling Mikleo's hair for his coronation.

Dead. Sorey just saw Lailah a few days ago. That's not---that can't be true---

"Move it!" One of the Regent's men pushes Sorey into the court room, and he stumbles. The soldier takes Sorey by the arm and drags him to where Mikleo stands, and he throws Sorey to the floor. He's on his knees, his eyes wide on the floor, and slowly, he looks up and towards Mikleo. He finds the Prince looking down at him, and he sees blood smeared across Mikleo's left cheek, a stark red stain on porcelain skin. It manages to cover the long scar on his cheek. His clothes are caked with dirt and blood, and there's something dark and forlorn in Mikleo's eyes that tells Sorey that this is true and this is happening: Lailah is dead, and they're blaming Mikleo for it.

He used to hate the looks Mikleo always subjects him to, and he hates the look Mikleo is subjecting him to right now, because for the first time since they met, Mikleo looks vulnerable, and it only cements the fact that Lailah passed, somehow, for some reason. Murdered, definitely, and they're pinning the blame on Mikleo. It doesn't help that he's covered in blood, and Sorey desperately hopes that none of those red stains belonged to Lailah, especially the ones on his hands.

Mikleo blinks, his expression turning grim for a second, and he looks away from Sorey to bark at
"What is he doing here?" Mikleo asks the Regent. "He has nothing to do with this."

"No?" Michael says, and he still looks angry. His words have venom in it. "Do you really think that we'll just buy whatever lies you throw us, Mikleo? We're not stupid."

Mikleo pauses at that, and he narrows his eyes at Michael. "You still think I killed Lailah?" He scoffs. "Is this the best you can do, Uncle? Try again, because her death means nothing to me. I gain nothing from this but a valuable asset lost. Killing her is not an option to me."

"Is that the truth, really?" Michael challenges, and he looks at Sorey. "You may lose a valuable asset, like you say, but that can be easily fixed."

Mikleo laughs, bitterly and scornfully, cracking at the edges. How long had he been standing here, relentlessly being told that he killed a person so kind to him? Mikleo may have spoken crudely of Lailah once, when they were forced to hug, but with how Lailah sincerely talked about Mikleo, and then knowing their 'bet', Sorey knows Mikleo cared for her, too.

Knowing Mikleo, he'd rather keep his kindness to himself, but he still cares. There's practically no other reason why Edna and Zaveid and Lailah would even bother with him.

He's still---Mikleo is still kind, in a rather twisted and darker way.

"Are you telling me that I want Sorey to replace, Lailah? I wouldn't do such a thing," Mikleo says. "But give me more credit than that. If I want Sorey to replace anyone in the Council, I'd kill Barthlow."

The said Chancellor winces, and he looks at Michael. "Your Highness," he says, very agitated at Mikleo's words. "Do you understand this? He admits to killing the Council if it means putting that---that slave into court. He killed Lady Lailah!"

"I did not kill Lailah," Mikleo practically snarls at this point. "It doesn't work to my advantage. Use that flesh in your skull that you call a brain, Barthlow, or is it rotting already?"

Barthlow glares at Mikleo before looking back at Michael. "Your Highness!"

"Chancellor, quiet," Michael tells Barthlow. "Your taunts only drive your reputation further into the mud, Mikleo. You forget that this is a trial to prove your innocence and your worth as a king to everyone in the palace."

Sorey blinks, and he remembers that the doors are open, and the place is crowded with people, not just courtiers. He looks behind him, and he sees Edna standing not too far away from him, her expression grim and her grip on her umbrella too tight. Zaveid---he's not around.

The expressions on everyone's face is just as grim as Edna's, if not worse. Their Crown Prince is being tried for murder of one of the members of the Council. The Regent has always told everyone that Mikleo isn't fit to be king, and now this trial is the last step to hammer in that thought into everyone's heads.

Mikleo is still under the Regent's rule. If he doesn't manage to prove his innocence, then he'll be killed, his crime being high treason, and his reputation completely and utterly ruined.

Sorey bites his lips, hard, his hands curling into fists. He's here, in the court beside Mikleo, yet he can't do anything but watch the Regent drive Mikleo to a corner before squashing him under his
boot. Sorey is still completely and utterly useless. No amount of acceptance and realisations can change the fact that he's still a measly slave with no power over anything.

"All you do," the Regent says, "is treat everyone like dirt, Mikleo. You have no care for others other than yourself."

"That's not true."

The entire court stops, and suddenly, all eyes are on Sorey, and he realises he spoke without thinking. Even Mikleo is looking at him, surprised, and then it changes to a glare.

"What are you doing?" Mikleo demands, but Sorey determinedly ignores him, glaring at the Regent. He hears a sword unsheathing behind him, a soldier stepping forward to probably put him in his place, but the Regent raises his hand to stop the soldier.

"You're wrong," Sorey says. "You can't say someone has no care for others but himself when he has an entire troop of men fiercely loyal to him." The Prince's Guard under Zaveid's leadership is perhaps the most loyal troop of soldiers he's ever seen. Sorey has a feeling it's because of Zaveid, who has already openly admitted that he'd do practically anything for Mikleo. If only he's here, Sorey knows he'll jump at the first chance of proving Mikleo's worth as a king. "You can't inspire loyalty if you're an inexperienced, spoiled brat," Sorey continues. "The Prince isn't like that. He's a survivor with a brilliant mind, and he's hardened by his experiences in the past. You forget that he lost his mother and sister in the span of a week."


"No," Sorey says, still not looking at Mikleo. "I was wrong, about many things. The slaves that Mayvin asked for. They were abused, and the Prince was the one who secured them a way out of this...place. He promised them kindness and freedom, and he delivered."

"Sorey."

"Who cares about a handful of slaves?" Barthlow asks, looking hard at Sorey. "Who cares about what the Prince's pet thinks? You're speaking out of line, you---"

"Chancellor, stop," Michael interrupts. He eyes Sorey carefully. "Your loyalty is to the Prince?"

"I find that he's deserving of it," Sorey answers.

At this, Michael looks conflicted for some reason, and one of the Chancellors looks angry, his hands curling into a fist as he says, "this is what we feared."

Sorey blinks, confused, and he looks up at Mikleo, whose eyes look tired and resigned, even when his face holds an expression of calm and collected. Sorey looks back at the Regent and the Council, wide-eyed. What's...?

"We're not stupid enough to randomly blame Lailah's death on you, Nephew," Michael says, his expression dark. "We have evidence of the truth. One that you can't deny." He gestures at a servant. "We found this at the scene of the crime."

The servant steps forward, gingerly holding something with a cloth, and upon closer inspection, Sorey realises it's a bloody dagger. The hilt is coloured gold with blue decorating the pommel, with intricate carvings on it. It doesn't make any sense to Sorey, but to Mikleo, it does.

He stares at the dagger for a moment, and then he looks up at the Regent.
"That's not mine."

"It's yours, Mikleo," Michael says. "You have a collection of it. It's the kind of dagger you keep under your sleeve."

Sorey blinks, and he remembers the dagger Mikleo discarded after killing one of the assassins, and with horror, he realises that it was never thrown away afterwards. They took it to use it against Mikleo.

"I killed a couple of soldiers," Mikleo says, "with the same kind of knife. Not Lailah, never Lailah. I wouldn't even dare. Is this trial now about the soldiers who tried to kill me?"

"We have the dagger you used against the soldiers," Michael says, and true enough, another servant presents another dagger of the same look. "Trying to use two different knives is smart, but using two different knives of the same kind isn't. This carelessness is your downfall, Mikleo."

Mikleo grits his teeth. "That isn't---"

"It all leads to this, no matter what you say, we have solid evidence to prove you wrong," Michael says. "You said that you are no match to her as she was a veteran soldier, but she died of exsanguination a dagger severing an artery on her back. It's a clever and cunning way to kill someone more powerful than you. The dagger is yours, and we have a clear motive here: the slave."

"You believe Barthlow's bullshit? You think that actually make sense? Listen to yourself. I wouldn't do such a---"

"Not that," Michaels interrupts. "What Chancellor Mathias said. What we feared, ever since we found out that you and the slave are intimate, is that you'll be swayed by him."

Mikleo's eyes widen. "No."

"Tell me, Mikleo," Michael says, "the truth, and I'll give you a chance to be pardoned. Is the slave a spy sent by Rolance?"

Sorey's eyes widen at the question. That's...this is the reason he's here: to be used against Mikleo. Everything brought into this court is to be used against Mikleo. Did the Regent finally decide to put him into the line of fire after he announced he chooses Mikleo over him? The Regent has no use for Sorey anymore, and now he's going to discard him in the cruelest way possible. All Mikleo has to do is to say that he's been used. It's practically the only way for Mikleo to get himself out of this. They have perfectly set him up on this, have perfectly framed Mikleo for killing Lailah, of all people. He'd have a ruined reputation, but he can work on it again.

Sorey glares at the Regent. "I'm no spy for---"

A kick on his side is enough to make him stop and double over. Sorey hears Edna protest at it, her boots stomping against the floor, and it's a small relief, that somehow, after all that's happening right now, she still gets mad at his wound being abused like this.

He grits his teeth and shuts his eyes, tightly. Mikleo had lasted this long. He won't let things end like this, and he has no reason to salvage Sorey out of this. He'll take his only chance of survival. He'll live, but it's over for Sorey.

With regret, Sorey realises he'll never get home to Rolance.
Mikleo takes a deep breath. "...No," he says, and Sorey opens his eyes to stare at him, taken aback. No, no; what is he doing? "He's not a spy sent by Rolance. He hates the empire with every fibre of his being."

"Why do you lie?" Michael says, and he looks genuinely heartbroken, but Sorey knows better. Sorey and Mikleo both do. "Going so far as to defend him, Mikleo, you're being tricked---"

"I am not being tricked," Mikleo says. "What I say is the truth. He's not a spy, I was not tricked, and I did not kill Lailah. My loyalty remains in Hyland." He pauses, his eyes looking over the Council before settling into a glare at the Regent. "You truly believe that I'll screw over the country my sister fought so hard to protect? Think well and hard over this."

There's silence for a moment, Michael quiet and Mikleo glaring at him, and then he regards the Council.

"What do you believe?" Michael asks.

"The Prince lies," Mathias says, his expression remorseful. "His words are convincing, but the evidence more so."

Mikleo opens his mouth to say something, but then he decides against it. Sorey’s eyes dart from Mikleo then back to the Council, disbelief evident in his face.

No.

"I second that," Barthlow immediately says, his glare not leaving neither Mikleo nor Sorey. "I won't have a king who kills his own countrymen and spreads to a filthy Rolancian slave, either. His words do not hold any truth to it."

No.

The rest of the Council follows suit, their expressions varying from regret---like Mathias---to anger---like Barthlow---but all of them deemed Mikleo as guilty. There's no objection from the audience, even from the Prince's Guard. Sorey can't---won't believe this.

"The Council and I have decided," Michael says, his expression crestfallen. It angers Sorey. "The Prince is guilty of killing Lady Lailah, a member of the Council and the Regency's State adviser. His crime is high treason against the current ruling power of Hyland."

Mikleo breathes out a heavy sigh as the Regent speaks, his shoulders released of tension he's been holding for so long. He's tired.

He's given up.

"He'll be stripped of his title and his claim to the throne. He's of no title and no privilege."

This isn't right; this can't be happening. Mikleo still must have something else up his sleeve. Things can't just end like this. He still has a promise to Lailah.

---Lailah, oh, Lailah...

"And lastly, as written in our law---" Mikleo closes his eyes, his expression oddly at peace, as if he's savouring every word the Regent utters. "---Anyone guilty of high treason will be executed by the guillotine."
Mikleo opens his eyes, unflinching and posture still proud, and he holds the Regent's gaze as he says, "you'll be facing execution in two days' time, Nephew, and so does your pet. At dawn."

---

Everyone who's still loyal to Mikleo is to be taken in and executed, to make sure there's no threat of any uprising. It's why Sorey is also sentenced to death, for openly declaring his loyalty to Mikleo.

Only a few remained steadfast in keeping their allegiance to Mikleo, and true to the Regent's word, they're also taken away. Zaveid's loyalty to Mikleo isn't exactly a secret, and because he's missing the whole time, even now, he now has a bounty on his head. Edna wasn't one of the loyalists. She renounced Mikleo right there in the court, holding his gaze as she said, "I don't want to serve you anymore. I didn't think I'd get say that, but I did."

Then she stumped her way out of the court, Mikleo watching her as the soldiers took him and Sorey out of the court and into the dungeons.

The dungeons are cold and dark, the only source of light are the torches dispersed sparingly across the hallways. He and Mikleo are taken deep into the dungeons, far from the surface, and then stopping in front of a cell, they open its rusty metal door before tearing Mikleo's circlet off his forehead. With a snort, the soldier who took the circlet threw it to the ground and stomped on it with too much force, and Sorey sees it bent and out of shape once the soldier withdraws his feet.

They throw Mikleo to the cell, and then Sorey to the one opposite of Mikleo's.

There's a long stretch of silence, then, even after the soldiers' footsteps stop echoing across the cold and damp hallway. Sorey can't bear to think right now in this silence, so he looks around his cell, his last bedroom before he finally dies. There's nothing of worth to note. There's a bunk bed, awfully maintained, and a copper pot on the far corner of the room. He has a feeling it hasn't been cleaned for a long time. That's...pretty much it. The walls are cold to the touch, so is the floor, and Sorey doesn't have much to see.

It's a gloomy room to sleep in while waiting for his gloomy end.

"That was a good fight," Mikleo suddenly says, his voice echoing in the hallways. There's no soldier to tell him to shut up. He says it so casually, like he's talking about a fist fight he just witnessed. "But you were dumb enough to butt in."

Sorey's expression is pinched at Mikleo's words, and he sits down on the floor to hug his knees close to his chest. Mikleo's right. "I shouldn't have done that," he says.

"I know you'll regret it," Mikleo says. "Too late, though. Now you're going to die a worthless death. Thinking of crawling back to my uncle?"

Sorey frowns. "No," he says, "I don't want to. I meant I shouldn't have talked. It's because of me that everyone thought I'm...using you, whatever that means." He pauses, and he sighs. "You would've at least a better chance at clearing your name if I kept my mouth shut, like you were telling me the whole time."

There's another silence after that, and Sorey can faintly hear the sound of water dripping at the far end of the hallway.

"No," Mikleo eventually says. "It doesn't matter if you talked or not. The whole thing is planned. All I did was drag it longer and dig my grave deeper. Neither of us can do anything."

"You could've, though," Sorey says. "The Regent gave you a chance to redeem yourself."

"At your expense."

"But---" Sorey pauses, making a face at Mikleo's words. "...Does my wellbeing even matter at this point? You should've taken it."

Another moment of silence, and Sorey hears Mikleo shift in his cell. "I can't, not after Lailah spent an entire month insisting we make paper cranes together," Mikleo says, softly. Sorey's heart twists at his sombre, melancholic tone, more so at the mention of Lailah. "I...I told her yesterday that we'd make those cranes together today, if that will finally make her stop bothering me." A dry, humourless chuckle, sounding fragile as glass, vulnerable, and Sorey closes his eyes at the first threat of tears. "I did look forward to it, you know. I think I'd make better paper cranes than you."

Sorey smiles ruefully at Mikleo's words. "You still want to make paper cranes?"

"Yes, I---" Mikleo's voice finally cracks at the last bit, and he stops talking. There's a suffocating silence, one that Sorey can't handle at all, because he vividly remembers Lailah telling him a few days ago how she's this close to getting Mikleo to agree, her warm voice ringing in Sorey's ears, and they'll make paper cranes together, surely.

Just a few more prodding, Sorey!

He can't breathe, and he gasps, choking, his vision blurred by tears. Lailah---she had nothing to do with this silent war between Mikleo and the Regent. Mikleo kept her in the dark; she didn't know better, the most she had known was that he and Mikleo lied about the attack---

Blinking his tears away and failing, Sorey looks up at the ceiling. There's nothing to see. "Lailah knew that we were lying about the attack."

Mikleo doesn't answer right away. It's awfully quiet in his cell, but Sorey knows better, especially after his voice gave him away. He answers, though, eventually.

"I know," Mikleo says, his voice distant. "I wish she didn't. I wish she didn't ask me. I wish---" He takes a deep breath, desperately trying to be quiet, but Sorey still hears it, and he breathes out a soft laugh, self-deprecating. "This is what happens when someone decides I'm worth their time, Sorey," Mikleo says, and the way he says it sends a pang to Sorey's heart. The feeling is heavy and painfully dull, and more so when he realises that Lailah lied to him about whom she was loyal to. Lailah was loyal to Mikleo in the end, and Mikleo seems to believe it's what killed her.

"Edna did the right thing renouncing me. Zaveid disappearing is stupid, but I expected it from him." He pauses. "I thought I did a great job making you hate me, but you still ended up in this place with me, like an idiot."

"I don't regret it," Sorey immediately says, with no hint of hesitation whatsoever, and Mikleo sucks in a breath.

"You're ridiculous," Mikleo mutters. "You're truly, utterly---" And he hits his door. The metallic sound of fist hitting metal echoes across the hallway. Sorey doesn't flinch. "Why don't you hate me?"

Sorey purses his lips, and he doesn't answer right away. He'd thought about it, for a long time, and he already decided that he doesn't hate Mikleo. He might have, if he was still the same unknowing and ignorant princeling still stuck within Pendrago's walls.
"I can't, even if I want to," Sorey finally says. "You made me question everything I know, and to tell you the truth..." Sorey looks at his closed door, wishing that he could see how Mikleo looks right now. "I like people that challenge my perspective on things.

"That doesn't mean I condone all you've done, though," Sorey continues when Mikleo doesn't say anything. "It's just that...you reminded me that humans are so complex and confusing, that we're both the worst and best creatures to walk the earth."

Sorey's eyes are still trained on his door, thinking that Mikleo might also be staring at his own door, perhaps sitting on the floor, too, his amethyst eyes red-rimmed because of shed tears. Mikleo crying sounds like something straight out of a fairy tale, but the way his voice trembled as he talked about Lailah is enough to remind Sorey that this is the man who'd lost far too much throughout his life. He's sure Mikleo had his fair share of tears already, and then some more, because of this tragic turn of events.

"...I didn't take you to be the weird, poetic type," Mikleo says after a dragged out silence, and something Sorey has said must have struck something in Mikleo, because there's the smallest bit of amusement in his voice, no longer dry and tired. It makes Sorey smile, even if just a bit.

"I'd like to be poetic at least once before I die."

"Giving up already?"

"I don't really want to," Sorey says, "but this place has 'game over' written all over it."

"I'm pretty good at dragging on games far longer than necessary," Mikleo says. "And I don't really like this place that much."

Sorey perks up at this, hope suddenly blooming at the back of his mind. Sorey doesn't really like this place that much, too. He'd like to get out as soon as he can. He's pretty sure it's something they both can agree on. "You're thinking of something."

"I'm always thinking," Mikleo kindly tells him. "I like to believe I'm pretty good at it."

"You are," Sorey agrees, moving to sit against the door instead, the closest he could get to Mikleo. "...What's on your mind?"

He can practically hear Mikleo smirking with his next words. "I hope you don't mind me crashing in your room tonight."

Chapter End Notes

The Real Fun Begins

truthfully, i honestly think this chapter wouldve been far better in mikleos pov, but his mind is literally running at 13902490 miles per hour in this chapter im surprised he didnt shut down like he did with zaveid in the other chapter so we cant really go with that /

also, okay okay, can i just say that the comments in the last chapter is suddenly very overwhelming for me to reply to one by one?!?! so im just here to say thank you very very much for your comments they really make me happy!! im grateful to yall and
honestly when i tweeted about wanting a captive prince au for sormik no one literally gave a fuck (actually even until now when i mention some things about this au in twitter hahahaha) so the comments just really drives me to continue and always do my best!!! thank you guys i love yall so much

you can always find me both on twitter and tumblr if you guys are interested on some other shit im up to when im not writing this fic lol
The stables feel empty. There are the horses, of course, but there's no sign of any people here, even the guards, though it's not something new in this place to begin with. Mikleo takes a step into the building and immediately smells the tough scent of hay and horses. It's a bit dark, some torches left unlit, but that's nothing new, either.

"Lailah?" Mikleo calls out, making his way further into the stables, looking for her. Why she'd even be here when he already told her yesterday that they can finally make paper cranes is beyond him---her horse isn't stationed here to begin with---but that's why he's here anyway, to find her so they can get over with the paper crane session she'd been gushing about.

Mikleo stops in front of a stall, where a horse whinnies and stomps her feet at seeing him. With a smile, Mikleo greets the horse and reaches his hand out to pat her muzzle. She immediately stops, deciding instead to snuggle into his hand.

"Hey, girl," Mikleo softly says, almost cooing. She's a wonderful Pinzgauer, practically rare with her unique blue roan coat, her proportion perfect for hunting and sports. She's his favourite horse, really, and he'd always known he's her favourite, too. There's nothing better than knowing what you feel for someone (or a horse, in this case) is mutual. It's pretty great.

The petting is cut short, though, when his horse leans away from his touch, returning to whinnying and stomping her feet again, shaking her head at the direction that's further down the stables. Mikleo frowns. She's agitated, or perhaps she's trying to tell him something.

"I'll be back," Mikleo says, giving her a final pat on the muzzle before turning on his heel to walk further back in the stables. The other horses pay him no mind, while the others whom he have ridden on at least once seem to react at seeing him. He can't tell if they just don't like him or what; he's fairly sure none of these horses has been aggressive to him, ever. It's unsettling, to say the least.

Closed doors that lead to the hay storage greet him at the end of the stables, and Mikleo sighs. Lailah has no reason to be here. She might have come to see Mikleo's horse; he had been neglecting her for a good amount of time now, actually. It's thoughtful of her, but her presence might have disturbed the horses instead. Considering Mikleo is practically the only person here, Lailah must have left already.

With a shrug, Mikleo turns around to leave, and he takes a few steps before something wet splashes underneath his shoe. He frowns, lifting his shoe. In the dim light, it's hard to see what's on the ground at first glance, easily ignored and overlooked, but now that Mikleo's whole attention is on the ground, he can easily see it.

Blood.

It's a small puddle of blood, the rest of it smeared against the ground, creating a trail. Mikleo spins,
eyes wide on the sawdust-coated floor leading to the hay storage, and he sees the red stains leading to the closed doors.

Before he can even properly think about it, he's already running towards the doors, his heart beating fast as he tries to lift the heavy plank keeping the doors closed as fast as he can.

It's hard labour, but he eventually does it, the thick flat wood falling to the ground with a loud thud, and Mikleo pushes the doors open with a grunt, his palms already sweating, his breathing heavy. His head hurts.

The doors open, and Mikleo stumbles for a moment before regaining his balance. He can hear the pounding of his own heart as he quickly scans the room. Hay, hay, hay, and then red. Red cloth. Light, silvery green hair. A hand sticking out of a stack of hay.

Lailah.

"...No," Mikleo breathes out, and he tries to go towards her, but his whole body won't work with him. He's frozen up in place. Thoughts clash in his mind, fighting, telling him to run and not to run.

No, no, stop. Not now.

Mikleo gasps, his chest constricting. He can't breathe. He has---to go, but to not go. Lailah...he has to go to her but he can't stay. He has to leave her---no, stay with her.

He feels faint.

Mikleo closes his eyes, a hand lifting to press against his forehead as he takes another deep breath. He takes a careful step forward, and then another, and then, opening his eyes, he's already sprinting towards Lailah, all thoughts thrown out of the window.

He knows; they've set him up. Men from the Regent’s Guard will be coming any moment now to catch him here with her, but he can't leave her just like this.

Mikleo drops to his knees beside Lailah, who's been lying unmoving on top of a small stack of hays. The golden brown straws are dyed deep red. Lailah isn't breathing.

"Lailah," Mikleo says, hushed, frantic, and for the first time after so long, he doesn't know what to do. His hands hover in the air, too scared to do anything, like a touch from him will burn her to ashes.

"Lailah."

She doesn't answer.

A strangled noise escapes him, and Mikleo chokes, his vision blurred with tears. He shuts his eyes tightly, desperately trying to stop the sobs that threaten to escape his throat. This can't---No, this is happening. It happened. The moment he let himself trust her already sealed her fate. He can't---even hold her. He won't allow himself. She doesn't deserve to be held by him. This is---his fault---Always his fault.

He shouldn't have. He really shouldn't have. He's done something unforgivable. He regrets it. He's so sorry for bringing her into this. He should've known better. After all this time, after everything, he should have known better---
"L-Lailah...," Mikleo chokes out, the tears that he'd been trying to keep at bay finally breaking through. "I'm so---"

*Sorry---*

No amount of apologies will bring her back, though.

Mikleo hears soldiers outside the storage, hurried footsteps echoing across the stables. He opens his eyes and looks at Lailah better, his sobs slowly dying out after the threat made itself known. He takes a deep breath, and then, in a self-deprecating whim, he decides to look at her face. He almost, *almost* regrets it.

Her face is deathly pale, all life completely gone from her once rosy face. Her once pink lips are the colour of pale, ugly purple, and her eyes are open, staring lifelessly into nothing. Her green eyes are dull, without light and usual brilliance they had, and releasing a shaky breath, Mikleo allows himself to touch Lailah, just this once, to close her eyes.

The soldiers enter the storage, and Mikleo turns to look at them, gaze sharp. Five, all of them armed. All wear the Regent's colour. No armour, just the livery. They don't even look at Lailah when one of them announces, "he killed the Regent's Adviser!"

Three draw their swords without hesitation; two look confused and take a step back instead.

That's fine. Mikleo knows who deserves punishment, then.

There's an old saying, though it's actually a law followed by civilisations from the past: an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. Three soldiers are nothing compared to what they took, but it's all there is, unfortunately.

Mikleo isn't exactly old fashioned, but just this once, he'll let that old saying dictate what he's supposed to do. His dagger slides from his left sleeve as the soldiers take a step towards him.

They will all remember this.
When night fell, or at least Sorey thinks it has, Mikleo asks the soldiers who brought them dinner if they can move him to Sorey's cell. Obviously, they say no at first, they're not stupid, now shut up, but Mikleo insists, very nicely, by the way, that he's going to die anyway, can't he at least spend his last days with someone who truly cares for him?

One of the soldier scoffs, and Sorey thinks that they still won't allow it, but then he hears the door to Mikleo's cell being unlocked, and then after a few seconds, his own door is being unlocked, too.

His door opens with a loud, metallic creak that it hurts his ears, and then Mikleo is being shoved inside Sorey's cell.

"There," says the soldier who pushed Mikleo in, and then he looks at Sorey before looking back at Mikleo. "Now shut up and fuck his brains out."

"Sure," Mikleo says with a smile. "Want to watch?"

Sorey and the soldier make a face at him, both equally unimpressed at Mikleo's words, but the soldier more disgusted. Without any other words, the soldier closes the door shut, and there's the sound of the door being locked from outside.

After a moment of silence, Mikleo frowns before looking at Sorey, gesturing at the locked door. It takes Sorey a moment to realise that the soldiers haven't left yet, most likely standing watch like they're really supposed to, and then it's his turn to frown.

"What now?" Sorey mouths at Mikleo, who only shrugs. They can't really do anything with those soldiers still around. Why won't they leave yet? They were more than happy to leave him and Mikleo alone to talk for hours on end before this.

Mikleo remains standing by the door, frowning at it while Sorey moves to sit on his bunk bed. Geh, hard and lumpy. He'd rather sleep on the floor at this point, but the floor is too cold he's sure he'll catch a cold if he even dares to lay down there for just a few seconds. At the sound of the bed creaking, Mikleo turns to look at him. Sorey raises his eyebrows at him, his gaze inquiring, and though Mikleo doesn't say anything, his eyes light up with an idea, and then he makes his way towards Sorey.

Smoothly and quietly, Mikleo slowly pushes Sorey down into the bed with a mischievous smile, and he himself climbs into the bed, then on top of Sorey, straddling him. Sorey is very, very confused by this. What is Mikleo planning? He opens his mouth to ask what exactly is going on when Mikleo---goddammit, Mikleo ---makes the loudest and most dramatic moan ever.

"What the fuck," Sorey hears one of the guards say outside, and then Mikleo is grinning on top of him. He leans down towards Sorey, breath tickling Sorey's ear as he speaks.
"You know," Mikleo says, his voice low and hushed. Only Sorey can definitely hear it. "He did say we should fuck."

Sorey almost chokes on his own breath. "What---"

Mikleo's fingers find their way to Sorey's sides, digging into them, and Sorey gasps, squirming underneath Mikleo. He's---oh, by Maotelus, he squeaked---he's ticklish there! He did not sign up for this. Sorey's hand shoots up to take hold of one of Mikleo's hands, but he slaps it away. Sorey's face is pinched, and he has a feeling his face looks as if he just took a big bite out of a lemon.

"Your---Highness---"

"Mikleo," he interrupts Sorey, his voice loud and breathing heavy, though with the look of pure amusement on his face, most likely because of his amazing discovery that is Sorey's ticklish points, it's pretty obvious the laboured breathing is just an act. "I have no title anymore, remember? And---ah---" Another loud and pitched moan. Mikleo is really into this. Sorey is going to strangle him after this whole charade. "I like it when you call me by my name."

"They got them up pretty fast," Sorey hears one of the soldiers say, and he sees said soldier take a peek at them before immediately looking away. Alright, Mikleo on top of him suddenly makes sense. The other soldier makes a strangled sound. Mikleo looks at the door and makes a point to moan again, his fingers moving against Sorey's sides, and Sorey ends up squealing and gasping for breath, desperately trying not to laugh out loud. He wants to die.

"I can't do this," says one of the soldiers in the middle of Mikleo's another dramatic moaning, and Sorey hears him shifting outside, keys ringing as he moves. "Let's just leave them like we did hours ago. I did not sign up for this."

"Sure, you did," says the other, dryly, footsteps telling Sorey that he's following the soldier that's trying to leave the dungeons. "You let the prisoner into his lover's cell, didn't you?"

"I didn't think they'd be shameless," the soldier says, and there's a laughter that keeps at it until it disappears, along with the footsteps and the ringing keys. Mikleo stares at the door for moment, and then he gets off Sorey to peek through the small, barred window on the door.

"They're gone," Mikleo says as Sorey sits up with a groan, wrapping his arms around himself as if he's protecting himself from Mikleo. He looks at Sorey with a smirk, no way apologetic about what he just did. "I told you that will work."

"You didn't tell me anything."

Mikleo raises his eyebrows at that. "We got what we want anyway, so it doesn't matter," he says with shrug, walking to sit beside Sorey on the bunk bed. He looks at Sorey for a moment. "I didn't know you're ticklish."

"It's not that important," Sorey grumbles. "It's not like you'll get anything from knowing about it."

"Well, for one, I would've known about those sounds you made earlier."

Sorey runs a hand down his face. He's not going to talk about this. There are more important things here than the fact Sorey is ticklish on his ribs underneath his arms.

"So what's the plan of action, Your---" Sorey pauses, frowns. He's not sure if Mikleo actually meant what he said a while ago, but finally dropping the honorific sounds like a great idea. 

"...Mikleo?"
Mikleo gives him a long look, and Sorey would've thought that calling him by name is an awful idea if he didn't shrug like it's nothing. "There's no plan of action."

Sorey blinks. "What?"

"We wait," Mikleo tells him, lifting his hand to take something tucked in his collar. "It's not much of an action like you expect."

"...Okay," Sorey says slowly, watching as Mikleo's fingers dig into his collar and fish out something from it. "How long are we going to wait?" And for what, exactly, but Sorey knows there's a reason Mikleo is here, and it's not to moan and to tickle him.

"Just an hour, at least," Mikleo says, looking at what he just took from his collar before handing it to Sorey. He takes it, and he finds it's a rolled piece of paper, too small to easily hide. "Because we can't unlock our door from inside and we can't reach through the window to unlock the door ourselves, someone has to do it for us," Mikleo explains as Sorey unfurls the paper. He frowns.

"The letter is in cipher."

"Of course it is," Mikleo dryly says. "It's from the one who'll get us out of here. They're asking to make sure the soldiers won't be here when they come. I found it hidden in my dinner tray."

"From one of the Regent's soldiers a while ago?" Sorey asks. "Can they be trusted?"

"Not them," Mikleo says. "Probably whoever arranged our dinner. Someone had their fingers crossed when they pledged allegiance to my uncle, it seems."

Probably? That makes it sound like Mikleo didn't even know about this. This isn't originally what he's planning to do. Either way, from how Mikleo gamely made all those sounds and even made Sorey do it, he has a feeling those soldiers won't be coming back any time soon. "So...you know who sent this?"

"No," Mikleo replies. "There's no name. I don't blame them. I'd do the same thing myself."

Sorey looks at the letter once again, studying the cipher. It uses the alphabet of old Glenwood. Sorey knows the old alphabet, but this letter doesn't follow the rules of the ancient tongue. To Sorey, it looks a bunch of gibberish. It's not the kind of cipher found in ruins and the like, either.

It takes Sorey a good amount of time to realise it, spending the whole time trying to crack the cipher instead, but now he has a hunch why Mikleo has no problem trusting a letter sent to him by someone anonymous. "You made this cipher yourself?"

"I did," Mikleo replies, looking at Sorey impressed. "Not everyone in my Guard knows it, just a very, very select few. Some of my notable servants know it, too."

One of them is probably Edna, and definitely Zaveid. Sorey hopes it's Zaveid who's coming to help them. "It's interesting," Sorey says, grinning. "Now that I've been staring at it this whole time, it looks kind of familiar. It's like a mix of the ancient ciphers in Galahad ruins and the one by Mabinogio fort."

Mikleo smirks. "You know what you're talking about."

"I do!" Sorey says, and he can't help the excitement lacing his tone as he talks. "Look, just give me a moment. I'll crack this in no time."
It's a good way to pass the time, at least. Having no papers to write his ideas down makes it harder for Sorey to solve the cipher, but it's a challenge he had gladly accepted already. Mikleo doesn't say anything the whole time, and he only listens as Sorey talks about what he thinks this line means and how this one definitely means that.

"I think I got it!" Sorey announces after a despairingly long time, jumping out of the bed to stand in front of Mikleo, his hands on his hips. "Look, listen." Sorey clears his throat, and he raises his hand to look at the now crumpled small paper.

"Your Highness, know that you have not lost all those who believe in you. We will aide you with your escape. Expect me within an hour at least after receiving this, but I can't do anything with guards. Please clear them out if you can." Sorey looks at Mikleo, with a small frown. "They were pretty straightforward," he says. Mikleo nods.

"Duh," he says. "Letters of this nature tend to be straightforward so the reader knows they mean business."

"So did I get it right?"

"You did." Mikleo tilts his head to the side. "I guess that means I make shitty ciphers, then."

Sorey laughs as he sits beside Mikleo again, rolling the paper to return it to Mikleo. He takes it without any other words and puts it back into his collar.

"I don't think you're bad at it," Sorey says. "I just happened to really know about it."

"How much do you know about ciphers, then?"

"A whole lot," Sorey says. "I know the old alphabet and the ancient tongue, and every single ciphers discovered in all presently dated ruins in Glenwood."

"So you mean most in Rolance?"

Sorey pauses. "Yeah," he says. "It's not like Hyland allows ruin expeditions, so not all ruins there are presently dated anyway."

"That's true."

Silence fills in between them afterwards, though, oddly enough, it's not uncomfortable. It's weird, how, suddenly, conversation between them flows smoothly. Sorey wouldn't even think they'd have a pleasant talk like this. He turns to look at Mikleo, who's looking down at the floor instead, at his feet actually. He took his shoes off at some point. His amethyst eyes blink at every curl of his toes.

"By the way," Sorey says, and Mikleo makes a sound of acknowledgement. "You said 'probably' a while ago when we're talking about the letter. You didn't plan this?"

"No," Mikleo replies, pulling a leg up to hug against his chest. "I...didn't think there'd be anyone left to help."

Sorey purses his lips and looks straight ahead him instead. Truth be told, he'd like to give Mikleo's supporters more credit than that. Someone would've been clever enough to at least help their Prince out from within the Regent's faction, right? ...Then again, that will seriously take a whole lot of courage, especially with how openly purged Mikleo's support is. Even if they'd love to help Mikleo, fear will take them over instead. For Mikleo to think that there'd be no one to help is not unexpected, to say the least.
Sorey remembers when he had been in this situation, with his arms bound and locked in a room, too, and no one came for him. It makes him glad that Mikleo still has people to help him and to support him.

Sorey smiles. "Must be nice to know one of your supporters is going to bust us out, huh?"

"I suppose," Mikleo says. "It's a far preferred method than what I originally came up with. Quieter and cleaner than my plan."

"What was the original plan, anyway?"

"I get them to let me out, then I bash their heads in and take their key. I let you out."

Sorey blinks. "Are you serious?"

"Yes."

Sorey grimaces. Knowing Mikleo, it's definitely something he can and will do, and it's going to be such a gruesome sight. "I guess those soldiers are lucky someone sent a message."

"They are incredibly lucky, I'm jealous."

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It takes them a whole lot of waiting. An hour already passed, as what Mikleo announced just a while ago, which promptly made Sorey realise he's been counting the time away, and really, Sorey doesn't have the same kind of patience and self-control Mikleo has. He's really something else.

"Do you think they got caught?" Sorey nervously asks. He's standing by the door now, peeking now and then to see if there's anyone coming. There hasn't been anyone coming. Mikleo simply shrugs, his chin resting against his knee as he hugs his leg close to his chest. He actually hasn't moved from that spot and position.

"If they don't come here by breakfast tomorrow, then we drop that plan and work out something else."

"...That long?!"

Mikleo sighs. "Look, I count the time, but I can't tell what time it is. I don't even know if it's sunset already."

Sorey visibly deflates at that, deciding to look back outside. He tries to peek out again when he hears footsteps, and soon enough, he can see light from the far end of the dark hallway. He spins to warn Mikleo, but obviously the other already knows about the approaching person, and Mikleo immediately gets out of the bed and pulls Sorey towards him. They trip and stumble back into the bed, Sorey on top of Mikleo, but neither move. Mikleo stares at the door as light filters through the small barred window.

It's quiet and tense for a moment, and then, "Your Highness?"

They both sigh in relief, and Mikleo pushes Sorey off him and heads straight to the door, peeking through the barred window. "It's me," he says, and the person outside sighs.

"Oh, good. I thought I was at the wrong cell. I can't reach the window to take a look."

"You're at the right cell, Attak," Mikleo says. "You can't stay too long here. It's dangerous. Let me
out and we can talk when we're safely out of here."

Attak gamely does as he's told, and there's a bunch of clicking before the door swings open. It's loud and really frightening and that's really going to attract attention.

"Ta-da," Attak says. "I picked the lock!"

"We have to get out of here," Sorey immediately tells Mikleo as they step out of the cell. Mikleo frowns at him.

"What do you think we're doing?" Mikleo says, and he redirects his attention to Attak. "You got weapons for us?"

"Aye!" Attak brings out what looks like two sticks swathed in cloth, and unfurling it reveals two short swords. He hands both to Sorey and Mikleo.

Mikleo takes a quick swing, and so does Sorey, relishing in the sensation of a blade in his hand again. It's been so long.

"Not my kind of blade," Mikleo says, sheathing the sword. "But beggars can't be choosers. You know how to wield that thing, Sorey?"

"Yeah," Sorey says, far too enamoured by the blade. He sheathes the sword to secure it on his hip. "It feels like forever since I held something like this."

"Just don't forget it's for killing people. We're going to fight for our lives if we get caught," Mikleo says, and he looks at Attak. "Lead the way out."

Attak leads them to a direction opposite to where he came from, and instead of going up, they go further into the dungeons instead. Attak is the only one with a lantern, so when they pass by a torch, Sorey stops to take it. Mikleo looks at him.

"What?" Sorey says, holding the torch in front of Mikleo. "We need light."

After a moment, Mikleo looks ahead of him and follows Attak. "We do."

"The path will lead us to the Aqueducts," Attak tells them, his small feet pitter-pattering on the ground. He's such a small, cute little guy, maybe up until Mikleo's chest, with a big hat thing that looks like a loaf of bread and big dark brown eyes. Sorey will be lying if he said he doesn't want to cuddle him. "And then the Aqueducts will lead us outside, near the lake. There are clothes there to change into, and a carriage will be waiting near the Shopping District to get you out of the city."

He turns to Mikleo, grinning. "We got this all planned out, Your Highness! We got you!"

Sorey doesn't see Mikleo's reaction to Attak words, but he himself smiles. We, Attak said. That means there's still a whole lot of them who support their Prince. It's a heartwarming thought. It makes Sorey think they still have a big fighting chance in this. It doesn't look too impossible now, at the very least.

The deeper they go into the dungeons, the smaller and steeper the path becomes. Attak has no problems squeezing through the smaller paths, Mikleo just a little bit, and sometimes they have to help Sorey squeeze himself through. It's not exactly fun, with the walls damp and sometimes dripping water. At this rate Sorey is going to be wet and sneezing. At least Mikleo seems to find Sorey's misery amusing.

The sight of more water is an easy sign that they're nearing the Aqueducts, and true enough, upon
reaching a dead end, they see a big stone against the wall, and Sorey and Mikleo both push it out of the way to reveal a big, gaping hole. A peek through it tells Sorey it's quite a drop into cold waters.

"So in the end we're going to get wet," Mikleo says, unimpressed, and Sorey shrugs.

"It doesn't really matter to me. I'm already wet."

"You don't say."

Sorey drops down first, taking the lantern with him to provide light for Mikleo and Attak for when they jump down. He lands into the Aqueducts with a loud splash, water flapping all over, and with a frown, Sorey realises that the water reaches up until his mid-thigh. He can hear the sound of running water everywhere.

"No monster to eat us alive?" Mikleo calls down at Sorey, waving the torch at him, and he lifts the lantern towards Mikleo's direction.

"No," Sorey says. "Not sure, though. You think there might be a giant goo monster that can multiply to eat us?"

"Well, if there is, I hope it eats you first before we can even drop down there." Mikleo eyes the water warily, looking at Attak before looking back at Sorey. "How high is the water? Can Attak jump down there?"

"It reaches up until my thighs, so..." Sorey pauses, thinking, then he shakes his head. "He's fine. He's not that short, you know."

"Nope, I'm not!" Attak agrees, and before Mikleo can say anything else, he jumps down with a holler. With a sigh, Mikleo follows, extinguishing the torch and throwing it for Sorey to catch before dropping down.

They walk through the water in comfortable silence, Attak leading the way again with his lantern and Sorey at the back with the torch newly lit. The Aqueducts is amazing. It's only supposed to be an underground canal to transport water from the nearest water source, but its sheer size and intricate carvings on the walls make it more than that. This is one of the oldest ruins in Hyland, definitely older than the monarchy itself. If not for the waters running in every way and the lack of light, this place could be easily mistaken for an underground palace.

"The Vivia Subterranean Aqueducts," Sorey mutters, his eyes wide as he takes in their surroundings. "Oh, man, it's just as amazing as the books say. No, wait, it's even better. I can't believe I'm inside. I'm soaked in Aqueduct water!"

"Is he an idiot?" Attak asks Mikleo.

"H-Hey!"

"No, he's just a foreigner," Mikleo dryly replies. "Then again, I can't blame him. It's also my first time here." He sighs, and dreamily, Sorey might add. It's scary hearing it from him. "This place is lovely."

"...Oh," Attak says, "well, I guess it's not that weird if the Prince likes it."

At least Mikleo understands. "Attak, you sound like you've been here before," Sorey says, hastening his pace to match it with Attak's. Now Mikleo's lagging behind, and with a frown, he catches up, too, and then Attak is between them. Attak nods at Sorey, puffing his chest out, as if
walking in a sewer is something to be proud of. Then again, this is the Aqueducts. Sorey would swim in here if he can.

"Sure thing! Many times! I wouldn't be leading you guys out here if I haven't," Attak says. "This place has been my playground since I was a kid. I know this place like the back of my hand. Let me tell ya, it's just as big as Ladylake, with a bunch of waterways branching even outside the city. You know, I'd bring you to one of them for a straight exit out of Ladylake, but they're all locked up."

The rest of the journey in the Aqueducts is spent with Attak talking about his time in the Aqueducts, and he explains how the lake surrounding Ladylake is the city's reservoir, though it doesn't really take a genius to figure that one out. There are three main branches that split into smaller ones to bring the water into the city, and these three branches are located in the Nobles' District, the Shopping District, and the Lower District. They're on their way to the one that leads to the Shopping District, because it's still a few hours away from midnight, and that district is the most populated one. This way, it'll be far easier to blend in the crowd and find the carriage that's meant to bring them out to the city.

"Am I to assume the entire Normin clan is behind this whole thing?" Mikleo asks Attak as he and Sorey push open the doors that will eventually lead to a smaller pathway. They're almost there, Attak told them. Once they squeeze through this one, they'll come out of a small entrance just near the lake.

"Yup!" Attak says, practically bouncing in place. Sorey and Mikleo manage to open the doors now, and Sorey lets him pass through first, then Attak. "The Normin clan, and a few others, too! They'd rather stay anonymous, though. The Regency is out to get every supporter of Your Highness, you see."

"I'm aware," Mikleo says, "you're putting your lives in danger, just to help me. I owe you and your family for that, Attak."

Attak just snorts, though. "I'm your loyal Royal Cook!" he says. "And my family has been in service to your father's family for generations now, Your Highness. You can't possibly doubt our loyalty."

"Even if it means dying for someone like me?"

Sorey blinks at that, and he stares at Mikleo, who hasn't looked back at Attak. He's looking straight ahead, the lantern in his hand, walking without any hesitation whatsoever. He purses his lips and continues to listen instead.

Attak, though, answers without any hesitation, either. "Of course! You're our Prince, through and through."

Mikleo is silent for a moment, and then, eventually, he nods. "Thank you."

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"Oh, crap," Attak says, very and definitely nervous. "Oh, crap, oh, crap, oh, crap."

"Attak," Mikleo says, pulling him down behind him. "Shut up."

"We're screwed! They found out before we can even get out of the Aqueducts. They're going to find us, and then---"

"If it comes down to it, we fight our way through," Mikleo says, and he looks at Sorey. "You're not
going to just play sword with them, are you?"

"No," Sorey says. "We can't afford that."

"Good."

They're all crouched behind a giant trash bin in an alley in the Shopping District. Though they managed to get out of the Aqueducts undetected and changed to a much better and cleaner clothing, upon entering the Shopping District, they find the whole area closed and devoid of any people, patrols riding through town to look for them. Word of Mikleo's escape spread like wildfire, it seems, and Ladylake is on lockdown. It's pretty obvious they won't be finding their carriage anytime soon.

"Where to, now?" Sorey asks, glancing at Mikleo. He's crouched beside Sorey, frowning, his left hand on his sword on his hip, ready to draw at any moment. He wears simple traveller's clothing: dark blue long sleeved tunic, brown gloves, leather belt, white pants, and black high laced boots. He has a pale blue scarf wrapped tightly around his neck, most likely to make up for the tunic's lack of high collar, and it's long enough to be used as a hood to hide his notorious silvery blue hair.

It's just simple clothing, not any fancier from Sorey's own clothes, with his blue, buttoned up shirt with belts on his sleeves, black pants and white boots, yet Mikleo makes his clothes look expensive. It probably has something to do with his amethyst eyes.

After a moment of silence, Mikleo looks at Attak, who looks like he might faint at any moment.

"Do you guys have a backup plan?"

"...No."

Sorey makes a face at that, while Mikleo sighs, running a hand through his hair. "Alright. Where do you think the carriage would go, then?"

"...Maybe somewhere the carriage won't be found?" Attak sounds unsure. Sorey and Mikleo exchange looks. This whole thing is starting to fall apart. No, it's already falling apart. Sorey sighs.

"Should we go back to the Aqueducts?" Sorey asks, and Mikleo makes a face.

"I like the Aqueducts," Mikleo says, "but I like my warm clothing better."

"...Me, too," Sorey agrees, because being warm and dry is more important than making it out of Ladylake alive, apparently. Sorey will take it. "We wait until sunrise?" He raises his head to look at the sky. It's still very dark, still many hours away from dawn. They can't possibly sit here and do nothing until then. They'll be found this way, and that's not something they want.

"No. We have to sneak our way to the gates," Mikleo says. "We can use the alleyways to leave the Shopping District, but for the Lower District..."

"The roofs," Sorey says, looking down to face Mikleo, and he blinks at Sorey. "The roofs," Sorey says again. "We can navigate the Lower District through the roofs. There aren't much alleyways there, I think, and it's risky walking down the street. Going through the roofs is the best bet we have."

"We're climbing up?" Attak asks, wide eyes blinking, and Mikleo shakes his head.

"Just us," Mikleo tells him. "Attak, you've done enough. We'll take it from here, and if we're lucky enough, we'll find the carriage." He pauses, and he lowers his head, just a little bit. "Thank you,
"Aw, gosh, Your Highness," Attak says with a smile, a little too loud for both Sorey and Mikleo's comfort, and Mikleo puts his hand over Attak's mouth.

"Shut it," Mikleo says, frowning. "Look, go back to the Aqueducts. Hide there until sunrise. Keep your lantern off. Got it?"

Attak nods, and Mikleo takes off his hand and points to the end of the alley, where they came from. "Go. Stay safe."

Attak nods again, and then with quick pitter-pattering of his shoes, he's gone. Mikleo stares at where Attak had gone for far too long before looking at Sorey.

"Let's go."
"Can I open my eyes yet?"

Alisha giggles, and she shakes her head before realising that Mikleo can't see it. She tries again. "No, not yet," she tells him, and this time, her hands move from his shoulders to cover his eyes instead, to make sure he wouldn't peek. "Be patient, Mikleo. You'll be allowed to open your eyes soon."

Mikleo pretends to dislike it by pouting, but the bounce in his steps as Alisha guides him through the dark makes it pretty obvious that he's excited. She smiles. Her little brother is so cute.

"Aww, why not? We've been walking a whole lot already."

"Oh, please," she replies, and she wheels Mikleo to turn a corner, then out of the grand hallways of the Princess' residences and straight to the gardens. "We just got out of my apartments, you know."

Mikleo parts his lips to say something, but when the cool, autumn wind hits him, he squeals in excitement instead, jumping once. Alisha almost lets him go as she stumbles with him. "We're outside!"

Alisha laughs as she tries her best to keep her brother to stay put. "We are, okay! Now stop jumping so we can get you to your surprise. You'll love it."

Mikleo stops bouncing in place, and he lets Alisha guide him through the way again. The glee in his voice as he points out every single thing he hears isn't mistakable this time; he really is excited for whatever Alisha has in store for him. It makes Alisha just as gleeful as well. Mikleo hasn't been in the happiest of moods since his father died. To see him back to his usual bubbly attitude around her...
"Ah, we're here," Alisha says, and they both stop. They're standing in a clearing in the gardens, where the wind is the coolest and where the path leads to the woods. It's the highest point in the city, a small hill where it's easy to view the lake surrounding the city as well as the small forest clustered at the end of the Nobles' District. It's a marvellous sight, really, but it's not what Alisha wants to show to Mikleo. If anything, he's the one who showed it to her.

The marvellous view isn't what she wants to show to him; it's merely a background to really bring out the beauty of the gift she has for him.

She uncovers Mikleo's eyes, taking a step back from her brother, and her hands clasp together behind her back.

"Okay," Alisha says, and she, too, feels the excitement bubble within her. How is Mikleo going to react to her gift? "Open your eyes now."

Alisha watches Mikleo open his eyes, and when he squeals and jumps and runs to her gift, she can't help her laughter at the sight. Mikleo stands in front of the gift, still bouncing, and when he turns to look at her, his eyes are wide and sparkling with awe and mirth. It's a look Alisha will always remember.

"It's a pony!" Mikleo screams, his voice high pitched with happiness, and he turns to look at the pony again before bouncing in place. "It's a pony!" he says again. "You got me a pony! Ah, she's so small and pretty!"

Alisha giggles, her wide smile filled with fondness for her brother, and she walks towards him as he continues to jump in place. "Yet she's still much bigger than you are," she says. Mikleo doesn't react to her jab at his height, still so engrossed with his pony. She can't blame him; his pony really is pretty, with her blue roan coat and all. Her coat is a rare kind, and one that Alisha thinks really compliments Mikleo.

Mikleo is already petting his pony, so gently despite his outburst a while ago, and the pony reciprocates by nuzzling his hand and proceeding to lick him. He giggles, and it's so bubbly and childlike---one Alisha hasn't heard for what feels like a long time since the death of her stepfather, Mikleo's father---she wishes it's something she could record and listen to forever. It's impossible, though, and Alisha can only have the memory safely stashed away in the back of her mind, one that is meant for her memories of her brother.

"What's her breed?" Mikleo asks, trying to climb up his pony, and Alisha helps him do so. "You know blue roan horses are very rare, right?"

"Of course I know," Alisha says, and she secures Mikleo in his saddle, making sure he's properly seated and everything. The last thing she wants is Mikleo falling off his first pony. "She's a Pinzgauer. The only one I found from the horse merchant I visited. She's very expensive, and not only because she's young."

"How expensive?"

Alisha laughs. "You know I can't tell you that."

Mikleo huffs at that, feigning irritation, but he smiles again and leans forward, hugging his pony by the neck. Alisha watches Mikleo with a small smile. He's already attached to his horse. She knows he'll take good care of her.

"We're going to be best friends," Mikleo tells his pony, and he leans back to pat her mane. The
pony replies with a huff, and Mikleo laughs.

"What will be her name?" Alisha asks, and Mikleo takes a moment to consider it, his brows furrowed together as he thinks, his small hands clutched tightly on his pony's reins.

"Alicia."

"Alisha?"

"Alicia."

"You named her after me."

"I did not." Mikleo pouts at her, but after a moment, he hesitates. "...Is it bad that I did?"

Alisha giggles, and it turns to laughter when Mikleo turns red. "Oh, no, not at all!" Alisha immediately says when Mikleo suddenly looks upset. "It's not at all bad. In fact, I'm happy."

Mikleo blinks. "Really?"

"Yes," Alisha says, and she steps towards Mikleo and his pony to pat her gently on the neck. "That means you'll remember me when I'm not around. Hm, in a way, I can be with you like that. Would you like that?"

Her brother looks away from her, turning red again as he shyly nods. "Yeah." Mikleo pauses for a moment. "Maybe you should name your horse Mikleo, too, or something like that. I want to be with you too when you're riding to meet with Rolance and doing princess stuff away from home."

Alisha laughs, and Mikleo pouts. "I'd love to, but she's a girl, and she has a name already."

"...You never told me her name."

"Would you like to know?" Mikleo nods. "Her name's Mikaela."

"Mikaela?"

"Mikaela."

Mikleo stares at her for a moment, and then, when it finally clicks, his amethyst eyes widen at her. "You named her after me!"

Alisha laughs. "Yes, you see?" She can't really reach to ruffle Mikleo's hair, sitting on Alicia and all, so she settles with resting her hand on his thigh instead. "You're already always with me without you even knowing it."

Mikleo is quiet for a few seconds, and he moves his pony away from her, huffing. She can tell he's embarrassed. "You're so sappy, Alisha."

She breathes out a laugh. "You and I had the same thought, though. You're just as sappy as I am."

"Yeah, well," Mikleo says, "I've taken after you!"

Before Alisha can say anything else, Mikleo digs his heel into Alicia, and then he's running off. Alisha blinks, watching Mikleo ride his pony down the hill, a big grin on his youthful face, and she smiles. Mikleo's father promised him to bring him a horse from when he comes home from his journey, only to never return. Keeping Uncle Luzrov's promise is the least she can do for her.
brother, and now she hopes that with this, Mikleo can finally move on. He's too young to be trapped in the past like this, to lose people like this. A lot of children can't lose people like he and Alisha did, and it's why she has to finally seal the peace treaty with Rolance once and for all.

Alisha sighs. She'd protect him and his happiness, like how their mother protected hers.

"Happy twelfth birthday, Mikleo. May you grow up surrounded with love and happiness." And she'd work hard to make it happen.
Sorey and Mikleo uneventfully navigate through the alleyways in the district, with Mikleo leading their way. An hour has probably passed since they parted ways with Attak, and since then, it's been awfully quiet between them. The only things that fill in the silence between them are the sound of water splashing as they step on puddles scattered throughout the alleys and the sound of hooves clattering against the cobblestone roads through town—patrols hunting for them. Neither of them are the kind of sounds Sorey is quite fond of.

"...Will Attak be alright?" Sorey decides to say, just to start a conversation. He is worried about Attak, anyway. He's careful not to step into another puddle of dirty water. Soggy boots are the last thing he wants, really.

Mikleo, on the other hand, seems like he already disregarded the whole thing he said about keeping dry, walking into the puddles and sending the water splashing everywhere. He's obviously doing that on purpose, as if he's just playing around. Sorey keeps his distance because of that.
"...He'll be fine," Mikleo replies, his tone flat, and he kicks a puddle of water that he steps into. That really looks disgusting. "He can take care of himself."

"I guess," Sorey says, though he sounds doubtful. It makes Mikleo stop and turn to him, a brow raised. "It's just that since they found out we're gone, wouldn't that mean they'll most likely search the Aqueducts? I doubt it's a secret that the dungeons are connected to it."

Mikleo frowns, then, and he turns to continue walking. Sorey follows. "He'll make it." Mikleo's tone is firm and confident. "He knows the Aqueducts better than anyone else." Mikleo pauses, and when he speaks again, he sounds as if in awe. "Maybe he's something like a sewer rat."

"Is that supposed to compliment him?"

"Sure. If he's not a sewer rat, that means he can't navigate the Aqueducts for shit."

Sorey frowns at that, and realising that Attak may most likely accept the "compliment" starry eyed, being such a loyal and trusting servant to Mikleo, Sorey decides to let it go. It brings up another question, though.

"So you taught Attak your cipher? He did say his family's been in your father's service for generations." Saying it out loud now makes Sorey realise how silly that question is. Mikleo did say he taught the cipher to his most loyal servants. It's pretty much a given that a member of the family that's been serving him for generations would know, right?

Except, apparently, that isn't the case. "No," Mikleo says, and Sorey blinks. "I didn't. It's an obvious choice that I wanted to avoid."

An obvious...

Sorey releases a shaky breath at the realisation. The Normins are fiercely loyal to Mikleo's father and him, and now that Mikleo's escaped---

"They'd be the first suspects, wouldn't they?"

"It's why I will beat up whoever wrote that message for Attak. I don't care if they're loyal to me."

Sorey purses his lips, his heart sinking at the thought that an entire family would be in jeopardy because they stayed true to their loyalty. *Even if it means dying for someone like me?* Mikleo's question makes so much sense now. It's not just something hypothetical---it's a question about something inevitable, and it makes Sorey wonder if Attak really understood what he just told Mikleo then.

"Attak won't be fine," Sorey says. "Even if he could hide until the morning, he'd have nowhere to return to."

Mikleo doesn't reply.

It's a sour thought, and it makes Sorey realise that this is how things will be until Mikleo is caught, dead or alive. "If that's the case, then we should've---"

Whatever Sorey is about to say is cut off, because Mikleo takes a step back and drags Sorey with him back to the direction they came from. Sorey almost stumbles, taken off-guard by the rough movements. His frown is a combination of confusion and exasperation. "Mik---"

"Shh." Mikleo pulls Sorey into another path, one that they passed by, pressing Sorey and himself
against the wall, and at the far end of the path is an exit that leads to the streets. Horses carrying soldiers run by the exit, their hooves resounding throughout the area until they disappear. Mikleo looks at Sorey. "They figured out we might be here," he explains, and true enough, as soon as he says that, Sorey hears a couple soldiers talking, their armour clattering as they walk. There are two of them, it seems. They could fight them if it comes down to it, but the soldiers are wearing armour. By the looks of it, they're well aware of Mikleo's lack of hesitation to kill anyone who lets him.

"We can't fight them," Sorey says, and Mikleo nods, tearing his eyes away from the path they've come from, which is illuminated by the lanterns of the quickly approaching soldiers. Mikleo pushes himself off the wall, and immediately spotting the dumpster a few ways from them, Mikleo takes Sorey's wrist and pulls Sorey along with him again. Needless to say, when the soldiers pass by and shine their lanterns towards where Sorey and Mikleo are, both are pressed against the dumpster, holding their breaths. Though they're perfectly hidden from the soldiers in the alleys, they're completely exposed on the streets' side. All it takes for them to be discovered is for a patrol to pass by.

"Ya think the Prince really is still around?" one of the soldier says, his light still shining on their way, and Mikleo curses under his breath. "Kinda doubt it, really."

"Who fucking cares," Mikleo mutters against Sorey, frowning, and Sorey decides that pointing out that everyone cares is going to be a bad idea. "Just get the fuck out of here."

"Who knows at this point," the other soldier says, and with the way Mikleo's face is pinched, it's easy to tell that he's trying his best not to groan. "Ain't it gonna be nice to find him, though? We're gonna get ourselves some neat reward if we bring him back."

Huh. There's a reward for bringing Mikleo back. It's not surprising anymore that they've put a bounty on his head. Out of morbid curiosity, Sorey wonders if he himself has one, too. The first soldier snorts, and then he takes his lantern away from the pair's direction as he turns. Unfortunately, the other doesn't follow suit. It grates on Mikleo's nerves. Understandable; they really can't afford to stay here. Maybe they should just continue their way through the streets...

"I don't even wanna," the other says, "you heard about what happened to fuckin' Luis? They said the Prince castrated the asshole. Fucking brutal. Served him right, though; I hated that guy."

And then the remaining light's gone, and Mikleo cautiously moves from the dumpster and back to their original path as the two soldiers continue on walking away, their armours noisily clinking. Sorey trails behind him, his eyes wide. When they're far from the pair of soldiers is when Sorey speaks again, his voice hushed.

"You castrated a guy?"


"I mean, well, excluding psychopathic, I'm not saying you kind of killed three people, but---"

"Fuck you."

--

This whole escapade is getting more and more dangerous. Like Mikleo had said, they've figured out that they could be here, and so soldiers have come patrolling the alleyways as well. Sorey and
Mikleo had to hide in every bloody dumpster they find, and those things are scarce. What happens if they have to hide somewhere and there's no dumpster? They can't really afford to fight the soldiers, either. This is really, really bad.

Breathing inside the dumpster feels like suicide, actually. Sorey has a hand clamped over his nose and mouth in a desperate attempt to filter the disgusting air. It's not working. He isn't sure if he should be envious of Mikleo's ability to breathe in the toxic air in this thing and act like it's nothing at all. Then again, Mikleo is too busy frowning at the soldiers just outside their hiding place to even bother being disgusted with the smell. He's disgusted enough with the soldiers, apparently.

"What should we do?" Sorey asks against his better judgement. Mikleo clamps a hand against his mouth in reply, not at all sparing him a glance as he continues to watch the two soldiers through the small opening on their dumpster. A few minutes pass, and Mikleo sighs, opening the dumpster and getting out of it. Sorey follows suit. The soldiers they're hiding from are gone.

"One more hiding in a dumpster and I'm punching my own face," Mikleo says, and Sorey blinks at him. It's a bit tempting to shove Mikleo back into the dumpster.

"...Then I guess we should avoid them at all costs." Sorey leans against the dumpster with a sigh. Fresh air is wonderful. "Like I said, what should we do?" It's probably time to get out of the alleys. They've spent so long than necessary here already, by the time they reach the Lower District, it's probably already daybreak. There's no way they could sneak through the rooftops like that. Mikleo, though, seems to have something else in mind.

"We have to stay here a little longer."

"...Why?"

Mikleo looks at Sorey for a moment before redirecting his gaze back into the alleys. He starts heading back, and Sorey has no choice but to follow him. "There's somewhere we have to go."

It's all Mikleo says on the matter, and Sorey decides not to press further. He'll find out, eventually, but, really, this has to be worth all the trouble.

The thing with the dark back alleys of the Shopping District is that all these brick buildings are various shops, sometimes houses, with back doors lining the walls Sorey and Mikleo pass by. It takes far too many close encounters with patrolling soldiers to reach this one back door Mikleo insists on going to. It's nothing unique, just another dirty door like all the others, and a quick peek at the sign tells Sorey that it leads to a boutique. Sorey blinks. What are they doing here?

"Keep watch," Mikleo tells him, and then Mikleo starts scrounging the area in search for something, patting the ground, looking under the dirty rug lying in front of the door, opening the trash bin situated beside the door. It makes Sorey cringe.

"What are you looking for?"

"A key," Mikleo simply answers, looking up from the trash bin with a contemplative look. "The owner leaves his key around here. It has to be here somewhere..."

Sorey looks at the direction they've come from, wary of any soldiers that may come their way, before looking back at Mikleo. "Maybe don't look inside the trash bin. Who puts their key inside that anyway?"

"...Fair point."
It's when Mikleo starts moving the trash bin that Sorey hears them: soldiers, coming from the direction they came from. Sorey immediately starts helping Mikleo move the bin. It's heavier than it looks.

"They're coming," Sorey warns, and Mikleo rolls his eyes as he continues to push the bin. It makes low scratching sounds against the ground. It really scares Sorey. "We have to hurry."

"I know. Shut up."

"What if the key isn't under the bin?" They can hear the soldiers talking now, their armour-clad footsteps echoing throughout the alleyways. Mikleo only raises an eyebrow at him.

"Chin up, won't you?" Mikleo lifts Sorey's chin with a finger before crouching. Redirecting his gaze to the sounds, Sorey's horrified to realise that the soldiers are much closer than they first seem; he can already see their lanterns' light.

"Mikleo---"

"It's here, okay?" Mikleo straightens himself up, key in hand, and then he's already at the door, shoving the key into the doorknob. It immediately clicks open, and Mikleo swings the door open, pulling Sorey with him as he enters the shop. Sorey sees the soldiers enter the alleyway they're in before Mikleo closes the door and locks it with a sigh. He turns to Sorey.

"We're here."

Sorey tries his best not say anything about being a captain and being obvious. It works, for the most part. "What are we doing in a boutique?"

Mikleo walks past him, shoving wooden mannequins aside as he makes his way to yet another door, and Sorey realises they're most likely in the storage room of the store. With the key he has, he opens the door and coolly makes his way inside, as if he's entering his own home. Following Mikleo, Sorey finds a small store with racks of clothing neatly arranged in rows. On the right side of the store, lined against the walls, are shelves filled with clothes ranging from cheap linen to expensive silk, while on the left side are stalls with closed doors. The display windows are covered with cloth.

Mikleo lights a lantern he found somewhere and places it on the counter, which happens to be just beside the door they came from, and he leans onto it.

"Change of plans," Mikleo tells Sorey, "we won't make it out of this district on time, so we have to make do." Okay, but that doesn't really explain what they're doing here. For some reason, Mikleo gives him an annoyed look, as if reading his thoughts. "Look, we have to get out of here undetected. Sneaking around is out of the question, so we'll have to leave in a way we can openly roam around under the sun and still not get caught." Mikleo gestures towards the store. "This is the only way we can do that."

"...Disguises?" Sorey blinks as Mikleo nods. He hadn't really thought it that way, and he supposes that actually makes sense. It's pretty clever, but then again, Mikleo is clever. It's not really exactly a state secret.

He looks over to Mikleo, who's also looking at him, his eyebrows furrowed and a hand under his chin. It's a look he's seen before, one that means Mikleo is probably thinking of doing something he doesn't want to. The orange light that the lantern emits makes Mikleo's normally amethyst eyes look more reddish in colour; his frosty blue hair reflecting the light looks like snow peppered in
ambers, and Sorey realises there's no way any disguises can hide such outstanding features the Prince is definitely known for. The pale scar across Mikleo's left cheek doesn't really help matters, either.

"Well, it's a good idea," Sorey decides to say, and Mikleo blinks at him. "But your hair and your eyes...they make you stand out a whole lot."

Mikleo stares at him for a moment, and then Mikleo smirks. "We'll see about that."

The next few minutes are spent going through every article of clothing in display, with Mikleo on one part of the store with the stalls and Sorey on the other. His instructions are simple: just get something that an average civilian would wear, but aren't his clothes right now enough?

No one has seen him wearing this, after all. Maybe all Sorey needs is a traveller's cloak, and he could get that on one of the racks next to the shelf full of cloths.

He's making his way to another set of clothes when he hears Mikleo on the other end of the shop. "Fuck," Mikleo says, shaking the door on one of the stalls. "It won't open." Then he kicks it. Sorey jumps and glances at him. It's kind of hard to see him with the lantern's soft light, but he looks really annoyed.

"Are you okay?"

"Do I sound like okay?" Mikleo kicks the stall again. "The key I have won't open the stalls."

"I think that one can only open so much doors."

Mikleo glares at Sorey. "Shut up." He gathers the clothes he left lying on the floor---a whole lot of clothes, for some reason---and stomps towards a corner of the store where the lantern's light doesn't reach. Just like that, Mikleo is out of sight, and Sorey sighs, redirecting his attention back to the task at hand.

Cloak, cloak, cloak...Hmm... Sorey takes out a brown traveller's cloak from one of the racks. He can't exactly tell from which material it's made, but it feels soft in his hands, yet seems sturdy enough to last harsh weather conditions. It even has a hood. It's perfect for travellers---or refugees, in this case.

With the cloak in his hands, Sorey wonders about what they're supposed to do once they're out of Ladylake---if they're out of Ladylake, anyway. Does Mikleo have any plans? What about...What about Attak and his family? His other supporters that are about to be executed? With Mikleo's escape, it's no doubt they'll have his supporters executed today, to scare anyone who's thinking of siding with the Prince. Won't he and Sorey do anything about it?

The questions and worries hurt Sorey's head instead, and he sighs, shaking his head. Mikleo has plans, no doubt about it, but he has a feeling that none of it involve helping anyone who are now in Michael's mercy. The plan that he knows so far is to leave Ladylake and leave everyone behind. Truth be told, it's not a plan that he likes.

A sharp, rattling sound on Mikleo's side startles Sorey out of his thoughts, and then he hears Mikleo yelping. He turns, and he sees that one of the hatstand that's situated against one of the store's posts is lying haphazardly on the floor, the hats on display scattered about.

"Wh---Goddammit," Mikleo practically growls from the dark corner he's in, by the display windows. "Sorey!"
"I didn't do anything!"

"Are you saying a fucking rat pushed that down?" A pause. Where did Mikleo even get that idea? Although, it's not that farfetched... "You know what, don't answer me. Pick it up. We don't want to leave this place messy."

Sorey sighs, and he moves to pick up the lantern from the counter before going towards the fallen hatstand. He returns it to its original place and bends down to pick up the scattered hats, leaving the lantern hanging on the hatstand. As he's gathering the hats, Sorey hears something scrambling on his far right, and he looks up to find an actual rat squeezing through the ajar door that leads to the storage room.

_Holy crap_---it's probably the size of Sorey's arm. No wonder it managed to knock the hatstand down.

"Oh, gods." Sorey stands up, his eyes wide at the door where the rat had run into. The hats are left on the floor in favour of telling his companion about the rat. "Mikleo, you're actually r---"

He turns to look at Mikleo, and he promptly stops, the sight of Mikleo's back taking the better of him. Edna had said about how gruesome and gross they are, and Mikleo had said that what he saw back then weren't all of it.

Now that he's staring at it, Sorey isn't exactly sure he agrees with Edna, but Mikleo is right---what he saw back then, in Mikleo's bedroom, isn't all of it. It's barely a part of it.

The scar starts from Mikleo's nape---the one Sorey's seen before---and spreads across his shoulders and throughout his back and right arm. It ends halfway through Mikleo's forearm, disappearing into pale, smooth skin, but it goes beyond his back, the extent of it obscured by Mikleo's pants. It looks textured yet stretched out, folding with Mikleo's movements, and the pale red of his scar seems intensified by the lantern's soft orange glow. Patches of Mikleo's normal, unblemished skin peppers the lower left part of his back, but for the most part, his back is nothing but a huge leathery scar, maintained with today's best medicine, and even then it still looks as it had always been: a burn, a life-shattering one.

Mikleo turns.

And he stops, his amethyst eyes widening at Sorey a little, surprise flitting through them before they return to their sharp, unreadable gaze. He lifts his chin, his hold on the cloth he's unbuttoning visibly tightening as he completely turns to face Sorey. He presses himself firmly against the wall.

If it weren't for the forceful display of coolness, Sorey would've thought Mikleo is settling in for a fight. He realises his mistake, then, and he takes a step back.

"I---I'm sorry, I didn't mean to---"

"No, no," Mikleo says, waving his words off with a small, dry smile. "I know that look. So?" He crosses his arms, the cloth covering his bare chest, and he tilts his head at Sorey. "What do you think? It's pretty disgusting, isn't it?"

That...That isn't even the first thing that came across Sorey's mind. He curls in on himself, uncomfortable. "...No, I didn't think---"

"Hm, then, horrifying? Revolting? SICKENING?" Mikleo pauses. "GROSS?"

Sorey almost flinches, remembering Edna's words, but he shakes his head. "No, none of those." He
dares to look at Mikleo, and he instantly regrets it, looking away immediately from the chilling coldness in Mikleo's eyes. It feels as if it's cutting through him. Sorey feels as if he's been put under a scorching spotlight, slowly being peeled off. Mikleo's cold gaze scalds him.

"Then what is it?" Mikleo says.

"I...I don't know," Sorey admits. "I didn't think of anything." Just that Edna is wrong.

It's silent for a few moments.

Mikleo releases a breath, pushing himself off the wall, and he turns away from Sorey, continuing to unbutton the cloth he's holding without any other words. Oddly enough, he has his back turned to Sorey. His shoulders are stiff.

Common decency tells Sorey to take a step back and leave Mikleo alone, but it doesn't feel right. This whole thing doesn't feel right: the way Mikleo spoke of his scar, the way Mikleo looked at him, like...like that look really isn't meant for him, at all.

Like Mikleo is looking at a mirror instead.

And Sorey realises that what Edna said about Mikleo pretending his scars don't exist isn't true at all. Mikleo doesn't pretend they're not there; he just accepted it's something he'll never get rid of, ever, and he hates anyone who looks at him the way Sorey might've done.

Sorey takes a deep breath, and taking the traveller's cloak he had taken before, he slowly approaches Mikleo and gently drapes the cloak over Mikleo's shoulders. Mikleo stops.

"...I'm sorry," Sorey says, quietly, and it feels as if Mikleo stops breathing.

There's a moment of suffocating silence, Sorey scared he might have done the wrong thing, after all, but Mikleo finally sighs, his shoulders relaxing as he does, and he frees a hand to clutch the cloak tightly.

"Just fix up the damn hatstand."

--

Sorey doesn't dare look at Mikleo's direction again for the remainder of their time in the boutique. He cleans up the scattered hats, returning them to the hatstand, and then he sifts through the rack where he found the cloak in hopes of finding another one of similar style, just in case Mikleo decides to keep the cloak he gave him. He finds one, though it's much stiffer compared to the first. It doesn't really matter, though. As long as it's something he can use. He puts it on, securing the cloak with a pin, and puts his hand on his hips with a huff. There's no mirror to view himself, but nevertheless: he's ready for adventure!

And then he spends his remaining time in the boutique watching the night through the display window.

As it turns out, they spent far too much time in the boutique. Sorey is watching Ladylake slowly wake up, mildly disturbed at the sight of people slowly setting up their shops and stalls, when he feels a hand on his shoulder.

Sorey yelps, stumbling away from the display window, and he spins to find a girl staring at him. A quick scan around the store tells Sorey that Mikleo is nowhere to be seen, and then with the way the girl is staring at him, clearly unimpressed, Sorey can only balk at her, realisation sinking in
very slowly.

She's wearing a mauve dress, overly simple yet still very Hylandic: high-collared with long sleeves and trailing with laces, but nothing to make it stand out in a way Hylandic fashion is notable for. Her long brown locks are swept to one side, tied in a loose ponytail with a white fluffy ribbon. She's carrying Sorey's cloak in one hand. With her amethyst eyes and flawless, soft-looking skin, she's a pretty girl, *really pretty*. Though it makes the scar on her left cheek stand out.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," the girl, no, *Mikleo*, says, and he raises an eyebrow at Sorey. Surprisingly enough, his voice is a wonderful alto when paired with a girl's face. He raises the cloak at Sorey. "I'll be keeping this, by the way."

Sorey blinks, still taking in Mikleo's appearance, and he slowly nods. "...Okay," he says, and he blinks again. Mikleo looks really different. "...I almost didn't recognise you."

"That's the point, genius." Mikleo gives Sorey a once-over before frowning. The intensity of his frown is still inherently the same. "You didn't even change and just donned a cloak."

At least Sorey flushes at this. He scratches his head, embarrassed. "Um, I didn't think I have to. No one practically knows me in Ladylake, right?" He pauses. "And you still stand out even like this. I doubt anyone will look at me."

Mikleo stares at him for a moment, then he shakes his head. "Not quite," he says, and he takes a step towards Sorey to pull his hood over his head. The gesture confuses Sorey for a moment, until he reaches a hand out and tucks Sorey's diamond earring under the hood, hiding it from sight. Mikleo takes a step back.

"Your earring will draw a lot of attention," he says. Sorey frowns.

"Then I should take it off."

"No."

"But---"

"No."

Mikleo turns to leave the boutique through the back door, and Sorey supposes that's that. He doesn't really want to argue with Mikleo, either, especially since he had already angered the Prince just a little while ago. He can try again next time. He follows Mikleo, who's already at the exit, his hand on the doorknob. Mikleo glances at him.

"Ready to go?"

"Yeah."

Mikleo turns the knob and swings the door open, and they find a man crouching in front of the doorway, searching for something by the trash bin.

Mikleo freezes, Sorey's eyes widen, and the man looks up at them. Sorey can clearly see the wide range of emotions flitting through the man's face until it settles with anger.

"Who the hell are---"

Mikleo cuts the crouching man off with a hard kick on the abdomen, and the man topples
backwards with a yelp. For good measure, he approaches the man, stares at him, and kicks him again. There's a moment of silence.

"Sorry, Charls," Mikleo tells the unconscious man, and he looks at Sorey. "Help me hide the body."

--

"Will, uh, Charls be alright?" Sorey asks, his gaze lingering at the boutique across the street before looking at Mikleo. He's putting on his cloak, because apparently 'it's cold'. It's not exactly a surprise; it's still dawn, and early mornings like this are usually the coldest. There are already a few people out, setting up their shops and stalls, bringing out their merchandise. Soldiers are still up and about, but none of them has yet to give them as much as a glance. It's a great comfort for him, considering they tied up an unconscious man and left him locked up in his own shop. It does wonders to Sorey's conscience and, to an extent, his nerves. He means that in a bad way.

Mikleo doesn't look at the boutique and keeps his attention on his cloak, pinning it closed over his shoulder. His long fake hair falls gracefully over his shoulder as he moves.

"He'll be fine," Mikleo answers as he finishes securing his cloak. He straightens himself afterwards, and he tucks a stray strand of hair behind his ear as he starts to make his way down the street. "I kicked him, Sorey. I didn't kill him," he adds.

Sorey follows him with a small a frown. Well, Sorey supposes he has a point, but he missed Sorey's point, actually. Sorey is pretty sure that man is going to be really angry. Nevertheless, he drops it. "How did you know about Charls, anyway?" Sorey asks instead. "And his boutique. You even know about his key.

"Long story," Mikleo says, and he smiles at a passerby who greets him good morning. Said passerby completely ignores Sorey. "But the short version is that he found me hiding in his trash bin once--I found his key there, by the way---and then I always dropped by the boutique since."

Why was Mikleo...? Actually, maybe it is a long story, and Sorey decides not to ask. It makes him really curious, though...

Alright, fine, he'll bite. "Why were you hiding in his trash bin?"

Mikleo looks at him, his eyebrows raised. "Well, since you asked..."

As it turns out, it's really just a short story made long because Mikleo decides to add detailed descriptions of his surroundings that time. It's about how he used to sneak out of the palace all the time when he was younger and how he always ran away whenever the patrols are out to look for him. Mikleo hid in the trash bin where he found the key to Charls's boutique, and then Charls himself. The man was nice, and since then, every time Mikleo sneaked out of the palace, he always visited Charls. He never knew Mikleo was the Prince.

Truth be told, it's interesting to listen to, even though Mikleo is purposely making it sound absolutely boring with his monotone voice and very detailed description of the trash bin's smell, because it's the first time that Sorey sees Mikleo talk about himself without being so hateful. He's relaxed and at ease, and though he sounds bored, his hands are moving animatedly. It gives away that he actually likes talking about it, fond of it, even.

Sorey never thought he'd see a side of Mikleo that's not calculating and cold, and this conversation reminds him that Mikleo had been a kid once, too, tells him that Mikleo had been playful and
innocent, maybe a bit mischievous, too.

They were not that different, and Sorey wonders how things would've been if they met in far better circumstances, in a time where there's no war to worry, no lives to fight for, and no lives to lose.

Sorey realises that would've been impossible. This war between Hyland and Rolance had been going on even before they were born.

Mikleo stops in the middle of saying how he thinks Charls probably keeps a giant rat as a pet, and he blinks, staring at a cart across the street. After making a mental note to tell Mikleo that he's actually right, Sorey stares at the cart as well. It's chockfull of boxes that are most definitely merchandise. Two horses are on the reins, and seating on the driver's seat is a man that looks in his early thirties. Jet black hair, with a well maintained beard. He's well-muscled and a little big, but he still looks someone that anyone can trust their warehouse details to. He's looking amused at a man and woman talking to the owner of the stall that the cart is parked in front of. It seems like they're travelling merchants who had come here to deliver supplies to some vendors. With the way the girl turns and slaps her companion's back heartily, who only frowns at her, Sorey can only guess they're already done with their deliveries and are going to leave the city now.

"That's our ride out," Mikleo suddenly says, and he straightens himself, his smile changing, and he shoves his sword to Sorey. "Hold this."

Sorey does, and he only watches Mikleo as he lifts his skirt just a little bit and jogs to cross the street and towards the merchants that are already boarding their cart.

Sorey watches Mikleo waving to them and stopping in front of the cart to stop the merchants from getting their horses to move. The girl jumps off the cart to talk to Mikleo, who's already smiling so sweetly to her. The girl looks pretty young, maybe just a few years older than Mikleo, with short red hair with beads to decorate the hair on the sides of her face. Her blue eyes look friendly enough, but Mikleo looks pretty guarded despite his carefree smile at her. The girl's lips are curled into a cat-like smile, and she crosses her arms as Mikleo talks to her and definitely lies about why they need to hitch a ride with them.

The girl nods, once, twice, and she looks at Sorey when Mikleo points at him, then her hands are on her hips as she nods again. She spins to face the two men in their seats, and she tells them something before looking back at Mikleo and pointing her chin at Sorey. Then she gets on her cart again as Mikleo makes his way back to Sorey.

"She said yes," Mikleo tells him, and Mikleo takes his hand and pulls him towards the back of the cart. "We're riding in the back of their cart. There's not much space, but we can still sit on the edge."

"And she agreed to let us ride for free?"

"No." Mikleo takes hold of one side of the cart's opening to pull himself up. Sorey does the same, and they both sit there, their feet dangling. "We'll figure out a way to pay for the ride."

"Our seats are like this," Sorey says, his voice hushed so the merchants in front won't hear them, "yet they expect a pay? Don't you think they're ripping us off?"

"Beggars can't be choosers, and it's not the ride we're paying for. It's their free pass. The soldiers won't care so much about inspecting your cart or your wagon if you're a merchant."

"You lovebirds ready to go?" The girl calls out from the front, and Mikleo turns to give her a smile,
if she can see Mikleo past all those goods, anyway.

"Yes! Thank you for letting us ride with you, Rose."

"No problem, Mikaela," the girl, Rose, says. "Can't say no to a pretty girl like you, anyway," she adds with a laugh. "Get the horses going, Eguille!"

"You better hope this is a good idea," a gruff voice says, and Rose laughs.

"Oh, shut up, Dezel. That's not a good thing to say about our customers. We can't let a young couple's day be ruined, you know."

There's a lot of things Sorey wants to ask right now, and it's quite apparent in his face when Mikleo turns to look back at him. Mikleo frowns. "What?"

"So what did you tell them, Mikaela?"

Mikleo glares at the use of his fake name. "I just said we're supposed to be in our honeymoon, but our cart broke down and we really want to go to our picnic."

"Honeymoon?"

"It's a good way to make them stop asking too much questions. It's a personal, intimate thing. They won't pry."

Sorey sighs. Why does Mikleo always know what to say? "I guess you make a good point."

Mikleo smirks, looking away from Sorey as the cart starts to move. "I always do."

--

The ride across Ladylake is pretty uneventful. There's not much conversation between Sorey and Mikleo, both deciding this may be their only chance of rest, but even then, neither falls asleep.

Mikleo looks like he really wants to, though, and for good reason: Sorey is sure he hasn't had a wink of sleep since yesterday morning, having spent probably half the day defending himself against the accusation of being Lailah's murderer. It's definitely draining, the stress and the devastation of what happened to Lailah definitely taking the best out of Mikleo, and Sorey winces at the thought, remembering Lailah. They still can't properly mourn Lailah, not yet, not until they're safely out of Ladylake.

The sun is already rising when they finally get out of the Shopping District and enter the city's Lower District. By that time, there are already people walking about and more carts and wagons running down the streets. Soldiers still patrol the city in groups or pairs, walking down the sidewalk or running on their horses in the streets, and Ladylake is more alive than before.

Not Mikleo, though. When Sorey tears his eyes away from the city to look at Mikleo, just to see how he's faring, he realises Mikleo is much more worn out than he first lets on. Mikleo is slumped against the nearest box, his eyes half-lidded, and he's zoning out, looking as if in a trance. He doesn't even notice Sorey calling out his name until Sorey puts a hand on his shoulder, and he flinches.

"Are you okay?" Sorey's face is pinched with worry. "You look tired."

"I'm fine." The answer comes much faster than Sorey anticipates as Mikleo recomposes himself,
and any hint of weariness whatsoever completely disappears from his features. "I'm fine, just..." Mikleo pauses, and he frowns before shoving Sorey's hand off him. "I'm fine. Worry about yourself."

Sorey frowns, and he shakes his head. "You've been awake working to the bone since yesterday morning."

"As you are."

"I spent an entire month resting until yesterday afternoon. I've had enough rest to last me another day." Sorey pauses. "Look, you should sleep. We still have an hour before we reach the gates, I think."

Mikleo gives him a long look, and Mikleo redirects his gaze back to the city, looking hesitant. "...I might fall off if I fall asleep."

Sorey stares at him for a moment, then he breathes out a laugh. It earns him a glare from Mikleo. "S-Sorry, it's just---" Sorey can't help the amused grin on his face. Mikleo doesn't look amused, though. "I didn't think you'd actually worry about something like that."

"Shut up."

"Right, sorry," Sorey says. He's still smiling, though. "If you're worried about that, I can make sure you don't fall off." When Mikleo narrows his eyes at him, Sorey raises his hand, puffing his chest out. The look of someone definitely trustworthy. It's not as if he actually thought of shoving Mikleo into a dumpster. "Trust me!"

Mikleo doesn't say anything for a moment, his eyes still narrowed at Sorey, then he sighs, leaning against the box again, and Sorey knows he's earned his first ever win against Mikleo. "If I fall off, I'm going to kill you."

Sorey chuckles, shaking his head, and he moves to sit a little bit closer to Mikleo. "You won't. Don't worry."

Mikleo doesn't say anything else, and a few minutes later, Sorey feels a heavy weight against his left side. Mikleo is fast asleep, his head leaning against the boxes behind them and unconsciously leaning his body towards Sorey. He looks oddly at peace, his face clear of any lines that Sorey would've thought are a result of his incessant frowning, and for the first time since their first meeting, Sorey thinks he really is beautiful.

With a sigh, Sorey's hand moves Mikleo's head to lean against his shoulder, and he watches as the sun continues to rise, slowly enveloping the city with its warm light. Children's laughter fills the air, the adults' chatting mingling with it, and if Sorey closes his eyes and lets the noises get the better of him, he'd think he's back in Pendrago, sitting in a chair in the balcony of his bedchambers and enjoying the view of the city sprawled across the horizon. He doesn't close his eyes, though, and even without his imagination, Sorey can clearly see how beautiful Ladylake, the Aquapolis, is.

Mikleo shifts a bit, still asleep, and strands of his chestnut wig falls over his face. Sorey brushes them aside for him before looking back at the city with a sigh. The city really is beautiful, and this isn't how he thought he'll be leaving Ladylake.

--

When they arrive at the gates, Mikleo is still asleep, and Sorey figures he'd leave it that way. From what he remembers from the books he's read, past the gates is a long bridge that connects the city
to the lake's shore, since Ladylake is a city built in the middle of the lake. So, basically, Sorey and Mikleo aren't to get off Rose's cart until they reach the end of the bridge. Mikleo can still have his sleep.

The bridge is impressive, wide and huge and can accommodate about five lanes of carriages, it seems. Two lanes are occupied by passing carts and carriages, and soldiers line the fences of the bridge. Sorey looks to the side, at the lake surrounding the city, and the morning sun makes the blue lake shine and shimmer under its soft light. To say that it's a lovely view is an understatement.

With a smile, Sorey looks away from the lake to look at the slowly receding gates of the city, and his eyes flitter towards one of the soldiers stationed near the cart's lane. The soldier, whose visor on his helmet is lifted, happens to look at Sorey, too, and in less than a second, Sorey visibly pales as both he and the soldier recognise each other.

He's the soldier who dragged Sorey from the infirmary and threw him beside Mikleo.

Sorey's breath hitches as the soldier's eyes widen, and then he's shaking Mikleo awake.

"Mikleo---"

"Hey! Stop the cart! That's the Prince's bitch!"

"Mikleo."

The cart stops just as Mikleo wakes up, and Sorey immediately tears his attention away from him as the nearest soldiers unsheathe their swords. Sorey jumps off the cart, the movement taking the hood off his head and revealing his diamond earring, and, apparently, that's the cue the soldiers are waiting for to attack.

"Get him!"

Sorey breaks into a run.

This is bad, *this is bad*. Mikleo isn't with him, but the soldiers seem to have their attention on him as he darts across the bridge, all their swords out and ready to slice him to two. It's the plan, really, so they'd leave Mikleo alone, but what makes this harder is that Sorey is running in the middle of traffic, dodging incoming carts and narrowly avoiding a head on collision with horses. He'd move out of traffic, he *really* would, but this is a preferable place to run in than the side of the bridge, where soldiers are waiting for him.

Sorey stumbles for a moment, and he would've fallen if a hand didn't manage to catch his hood and pull him up, and Sorey almost chokes on his cloak.

"Get up, *get up*, you clumsy little---" It's Mikleo, Sorey realises as he pulls Sorey back on his feet. His wig is gone, and his sword is missing its sheath, blood dripping down the blade. It's easy to deduce Mikleo managed to make his first kill of the day, despite the soldiers being armoured.

"Come on, Sorey!"

"If you just let go of my---"

Mikleo lets go of his hood in favour of catching an incoming blade with his own, and Mikleo kicks the attacking soldier before running his sword through the soldier's breastplate. "You know how hard it is to fight soldiers in armour? In a dress? Draw your fucking sword! And fucking run!"

Sorey does what he's told without thinking, drawing his blade and proceeding to run. Mikleo
catches up a moment later, running beside him and scowling. His skirt is torn all the way up on the side, and Sorey sees he's wearing his pants and boots underneath.

"Good fucking job leaving me the fuck alone there, asshole." Mikleo shoves a soldier aside. Sorey winces at his words, but not before meeting a soldier's blade with his own and kicking them away. How are they suddenly catching up with them? Is it because Sorey stumbled?

"I didn't mean it. I thought they just had their eyes on me!"

"Well, they hadn't, moron!" Mikleo stops, and Sorey does, too, eyes wide at the soldiers in front of them, all wearing the Regent's colour. Turning around, they see that soldiers are also gathering to block their path. They're surrounded. There's no way to go. They can't fight all of them, either.

Mikleo takes a deep breath. "Shit."

"...Yeah."

A soldier steps forward, his sword raised. Despite their overwhelming number on the two, he looks kind of nervous. "Give up, you're surrounded. You can't...you can't escape."

Neither of them says anything, and Mikleo looks at the fence of the bridge, then towards the lake. He looks at the soldier as Sorey slowly realises what it means. Oh, oh, Maotelus, no.

"Fuck you," Mikleo says, and he starts running to the side of the bridge, definitely to jump off the bridge and into the lake, and Sorey runs after him, not to follow him but to stop him.

"Wait, wait, wait!" Sorey grabs Mikleo's back and pulls him away from the fence. The soldiers run to close in on them.

"What the fuck are you---" "I can't swim!"

"Well, I can't, either! Do you see me hesitating?"

That's not a comfort! Not at all! "I'd rather die fighting than drowning!"

"Stop them!" one of the soldiers screams, and they all move in to attack.

"For fuck's sake." Mikleo shoves Sorey off him, elbowing him in the abdomen and firmly reminding Sorey that he's not completely healed yet, and he's about to dive into the lake when they hear a gunshot echoing across the bridge and horses whinnying.

There's the familiar sound of wheels running, and they hear a soldier shouting from a distance, ordering the running cart to stop, but since said cart suddenly springs into view anyway, forcing the soldiers in the scene to flee the vicious cart's path and even throwing some of them off the bridge, it's obvious that the cart's driver did not listen. The cart screeches to a stop in front of the pair, and Sorey, still on his knees groaning in pain, groggily looks up at the driver.

Sitting in the driver's seat is a man with short, silvery green hair tied in a half pony, wearing a half-open black jacket, and with a gun in his hand. His hazel eyes look down at Sorey, then at Mikleo, and a grin spreads across the man's face. If the cocky grin isn't enough to tell Sorey who it is, then the tattoos on the man's bare chest is. He'd seen them far enough times than he'd like.

"Pretty lady needs a ride?" Zaveid says, still grinning at Mikleo, who glares at him.
"Shut up."

"Yeah, yeah, 'thanks for showing up, Zaveid'," Zaveid offhandedly says, and when he sees some soldiers approaching, the grin disappears, and he points his gun at the soldiers. "Another move and I blow your brains off," he warns, his tone menacing. "I'm a good shot." He looks back at Mikleo, his gun still pointed at the soldiers. "Get Sorey and hop into my sickass cart, princess."

Mikleo does so without another word, pulling Sorey up and shoving him into the cart. He climbs up after. Sorey is lying on the cart's floor, and though he doesn't see anything, he feels the cart move. He sighs.

"Thanks for showing up, Zaveid," Sorey mumbles.

"Say that when no one's actually running after us," Mikleo says, looking outside with a frown. "Ah, shit." And he ducks, avoiding an arrow that flies into their cart, and it narrowly misses Sorey's head by a small distance. Sorey pales.

"Oh my god."

"What?" Zaveid says, looking at them, and seeing the soldiers from across the cart's opening, he makes a face. "What the fuck. Here." He tosses his gun behind him, and if Sorey hadn't caught it, it would've hit his face. "Use that, Your Highness."

"You're giving Mikleo your gun?"

"Sure," Zaveid says as Sorey sits up and hands Mikleo his gun. Mikleo studies it, a small smile gracing his lips. "I'm a good shot, but he's a better shot."

Mikleo raises the gun with both hands, eyes sharp, and Sorey sees there are about five soldiers on their horses following them. That huge amount of number of soldiers surrounding them on the bridge, only to send five on horses after them? They're halfway across the bridge now. After a moment, Mikleo pulls the trigger.

The recoil pushes Mikleo backwards, and Sorey steadies him, watching as Mikleo's shot hits one of the soldiers right between the eyes. He falls off his horse, and then there are four of the soldiers left. Mikleo lifts the gun again and shoots, the recoil not putting him off-balance this time. The gunshot is deafening. Mikleo does it again, and again, picking off the soldiers one by one. No shots are missed.

Wow, Zaveid is right. Mikleo is good.

When the last soldier is shot, Mikleo drops the gun and scrambles to Zaveid. They leave the bridge and enter what Sorey think may be Lakehaven Heights. "Get off the path."

"What?" Zaveid says, not looking at Mikleo.

"Get off the path!" Mikleo barks, pointing at somewhere. "Head there, to the path going to Lefay."

"Seriously?"

"Zaveid, holy shit." Mikleo sounds exasperated. "Just do it."

Zaveid does.

The ride is quiet after that, not counting the times the cart violently shakes because it runs over a
few rocks and stones. Zaveid's gun has been long returned to him, and it reminds Sorey of Mikleo's skilful handling of it. He looks at Mikleo, who's sprawled on one corner of the cart, his eyes closed. He discarded his dress long time ago and went through the supplies Zaveid has to look for a shirt to put on. There's nothing that could cover his scars, but his cloak can fix that problem.

Though Mikleo's eyes are closed, Sorey can tell he's still awake. "That was pretty good, the way you handled the gun."

Mikleo cracks an eye open, and he looks over at Sorey. He shrugs. "I've practised with it a few times, when archery gets a little boring for me."

"Without my permission," Zaveid adds. "He kept stealing it. That was the first time I let him have his way with it."

...That actually explains Mikleo's wry smile, then. Mikleo scoffs, closing his eye. "Whatever."

Zaveid laughs, and then it's quiet once again. Looking outside the cart, Sorey sees they're way off the path, and there's nothing to see but trees all around them. The sun is high up in the sky now, the harsh sunlight filtering through the trees.

"What I said about Attak," Mikleo suddenly says, and Sorey looks at him. His eyes are still closed. "I meant it. He'll be far safer without us."

Sorey purses his lips for a moment, and he nods. "I kind of figured that out, too."

Mikleo nods, and there's another moment of silence.

"So, kids," Zaveid chirps, and the cart rattles again. Mikleo groans, and he puts an arm over his eyes. "You told me to go to Lefay, but I doubt that's really our destination. Where are we going?"

Sorey looks over to Mikleo. There's silence for a moment, but Mikleo eventually removes his arm from over his eyes and stares at the cart's ceiling.

"It's an obvious answer, so obvious they won't even think I'd go there," Mikleo says, and Sorey blinks, confused.

Zaveid, though, seems to understand what Mikleo exactly means. "Seriously?"

"Yeah," Mikleo says. "Seriously. We're going to Elysia."

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