Savior Complex

by

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Introductory Letter

Savior Complex is the prologue and first three chapters of a fantasy novel which follows Vivlan, a young con man who flees his country after stealing his mentor's most prized possession in hopes of proving his skill and uncovering said mentor's mysterious past. While fleeing, he is invited by an old friend to take part in the last con he will ever need to pull— the training and consequent manipulation of the crown prince of their neighboring kingdom, Neevos. Neevos is a society which revolves around physical strength and mental resolve. In order to climb social rankings, the next in line to a position would propose a "challenge:" an arranged fight to the death to overtake the position of power. The cold and reclusive prince challenges his mother, the queen, and the people of Neevos race to find some sort of influence over him in hopes of changing their country in ways they see fit. Vivlan is forced to transfer the skills he learned through small schemes of loaded dice games and the occasional bribe to a nation-wide stage: navigating the choppy world of politics, all the while chasing his real goal of finding out who the man who raised him really is.

I always wanted to be a writer. I did not know that you could go to college for Creative Writing, but I pictured becoming an author after stumbling through college with one major or another. This idea was planted in my mind when a friend of mine's brother began writing a post-apocalyptic book in the fifth grade. I was entranced by his ideas and imagery, and I realized I wanted to create stories like that too. Kind of cockily, I remember thinking *I could do better than that*. So, I took up a stack of orange sticky notes, and began writing a post-apocalyptic story. During our

independent reading periods in our reading class, I would write. I worked on a very poorly written piece of fiction, and at some point a classmate asked what I was doing and wondered if they could read it. I let them, and soon everyone in my class was taking turns during our reading time to read the story, which in retrospect made absolutely no sense. I wrote in short spurts all the way into high school, my writing typically focusing around whatever I was feeling at the time, though the stories were never about me. In my senior year of high school, I was in both a reading and writing rutt. I simply did not care. One day I was messing about online and saw that a book series I'd seen now and then on social media was only 99 cents on kindle, so I went ahead and bought it.

That began my obsession with the *All For The Game* series by Nora Sakavic, and rekindled my love for writing.

Now, technically, it is not a well written series. It's filled to the brim with spotty exposition, almost every situation is hard to believe once put under even the smallest amount of criticism, and sentences are often redundant and repetitive. But, I was obsessed. I still am. There has never been a book, much less a series, to capture my attention so quickly and so fiercely. I read the trilogy in three days, and since then have most likely re-read the series about ten times. The plot was meh, and sections dragged, but I was enamored with the characters. I had never seen characters with such drive and complex layers to their morals and personalities. The characters believed in themselves and each other so passionately that I had no choice but to care for them, no matter how fantastical the material. It was leaving the young adult fiction world behind and moving into aggressively adult topics. My pieces of fiction that were inspired by these characters are the pieces I submitted to get into Purchase's Creative Writing program.

This past year has been very transformative for me in terms of my interests and passions. I have been interested in psychology for quite some time, and last winter I got to explore this fascination first hand through a job working in a group home with foster and at-risk children. There I saw and experienced the effects of abuse and trauma on the juvenile mind. Whenever they would eventually leave, either to a foster home, another group home, a juvenile facility, or a detention center, I was left wondering what would happen to them afterwards. Their parents were often victims of abuse themselves, and their altered view of the world caused their children to become neglected and/or abused. Due to my experience there, and my interests in writing tending to fall more on the psychological thriller side, I decided to focus on the effects of childhood trauma on the adult mind. Vivlan's primary character arc explores the way he navigates his trauma and the way sees the world around him because of it.

The characters and world I center my story around are largely influenced by the written works of C. S. Pacat. In her worlds, power struggles are the primary focus, and these dynamics (these balances and lack thereof) correlate directly to societal standards and outlooks. Media that I favor often spotlights rivalries between two people with directly conflicting values. They usually want the same thing, but believe that their specific tactic is the only valid way of going about it. Their race to be the best drags them both to the bottom, where tragedy always awaits. *Savior Complex* explores societal, political, and interpersonal power dynamics. The novel's focus will be on Vivlan and Ara: on Vivlan's road to power and Ara's steel will to stay on top. The excerpt itself, though, dives into Vivlan's thinking process and his internal struggle over whether he should put he and his interests or others first.

I have always had trouble staying motivated, especially when it comes to writing. The thing that is keeping me going so far concerning my senior project is my care for the characters and world. The world and plot are very new and exciting, but the main character, Vivlan, is a character I created in ninth grade. He has jumped from world to world with me, but I have always been scared to use him. I did not know where he belonged. I finally bit the bullet and decided to use him as a main character (while originally he was a side character at best) and decided to flesh him out beyond being a cagey asshole who was bad to be around. I already had to come up with an entire new world with entirely new cultures and societies, so picking a character I knew a bit about made it easier for me to shape the world.

When even my passion for my characters is not enough to get me writing, I am inspired to continue because of the progress my writing has amounted to since coming to Purchase. On a line level, my work has greatly improved. I want to see this skill grow. I want to be able to read my work and see a story well-written and worth reading. I have always been scared of under-explaining, and since middle school my tendency to over-explain only makes the writing hard to read, and confuscates whatever point I am trying to make. It's something I have worked on these past couple of years, and continue to push through.

With my senior project, I hope to write a story my fifth grade peers would have enjoyed, even if it is a bit too adult for them. I also hope to do justice to early stages Vivlan, who deserves to be portrayed as fully as can be.

Savior Complex

The night of his death, Vivlan drew himself a bath, lit a candle, poured his most expensive wine, and sat on the tub, awaiting the reaper. Death was not something the young man was afraid of. In fact, it was something that he looked forward to— had planned for— which was why he grew agitated with every second he was still alive.

He was to die five minutes ago. He was still very much there. Give it another ten and people would start to notice.

He had left his partner for the heist two floors down in the vault, having promised him a drink if he let Vivlan take look-out duty. Creedos agreed to it quickly enough, mumbling about his aching back and how he was too old to be jumping around playing spy anyway. Vivlan had already diverted the guards' attention to the party raging below, after a drink spilled on the right person at the right time had caused the inebriated partygoers to get rowdy. Vivlan was doing all the grunt work, the least the old man could do was let Vivlan take it easy now that all was left was for Creedos to get their prize and get out.

Vivlan thought it was amusing, their mark. A jewel. How cliche could they get? A pretty jewel owned by a pretty noble embedded in a pretty necklace locked away in a pretty tower for safekeeping. All they needed was a witty sidekick for comic relief and black clothing. Vivlan did not mind the theatrics, though.

The jewel was never his target.

It was easy to slip the jewel into casual conversation with Creedos over dinner in the man's house. The old man never sat at the table, and liked to balance his bowls and plates on his bare thighs as he read, like a true man from Neevos. Vivlan had never been to the country, having lived his whole life in its enemy nation of Faiorle, but was used to their odd ways having grown up around the man. Vivlan, unwilling to totally debase himself despite his comfortability, sat at the table, and broke apart a roll with his fingers as he mentioned his boredom. They had not pulled a scam in a while. Their funds were running a little low. Winter was quickly creeping up on them and unlike in Neevos, where the sun always shown, they would need thicker clothing to keep warm. There was a celebration at Rylesth Tower at the end of the week, celebrating the coming of a new season. The Rylesth daughter would be debuting a new necklace, a pretty little blue thing from the capital, an engagement gift from a duke. Even at sixty with a bum leg and bad attitude and library big enough to entertain a man for life, Creedos was easy to get interested in a hustle. His stubborn personality made it clear why he was the one that had been in the business the longest. Even if Vivlan was just some kid off the street, even if Vivlan was testing his station by talking so casually with his mentor, a source of income was a source of income. Vivlan said it would look nicer as a bunch of coin than around someone's neck. Creedos agreed. Creedos made the plan as he always did, citing Vivlan's inexperience compared to him, and Vivlan created another.

It was a plan meant to fail.

Vivlan traced his hands over the dagger that laid across his lap on the tub, checking again that it was sharp enough. The small amount of blood it drew from the tip of his finger each time he made contact indicated that it was, but he was not convinced. He only stopped messing with it when he

considered it could become dull by using it too much. He knew it would not, but he was not going to risk the slim chance it would. He wiped the excess blood away in the bath.

Creedos, a very physical man, took to staking out the place immediately after Vivlan proposed the heist. Getting an idea where the vault was, getting an understanding of the security's severity. Vivlan was just the help, so he left him at the house.

Vivlan did not live with him. He did not have a room of his own, or any belongings worth protecting stashed away. He had never asked to be given a home and Creedos had never offered. The man kept him at arm's length, and despite the fifteen years of knowing each other, Vivlan did not feel like they had grown any closer despite working together all that time. All Vivlan knew about him was that he was a good liar and did not look people in the eye. Neevans did not live in Fairole— it was that simple. Most Fairolans had never seen one in person. Only criminals that got into serious trouble in their home country risked living in Fairole, and the man fit the image of a stereotypical Neevan criminal to the t. The Neevans were big, barbaric animals who prized physical strength over everything. He looked like he could crush someone's head between his hands. He sold fruit out of his home, and his store was unpopular. He had jagged scars on his arms. He was a good speaker, and waved his hands around like a politician. He stood like he owned the world. Vivlan had relatively free range of his house, but was not allowed in the back room. Creedos avoided talking about his past.

Vivlan was no longer a child, had not been for years, but could not help feeling like that was how Creedos saw him. Still the little boy starving on the street because he could not even swipe a pear without being caught.

He could faintly hear the music from the party, a servant's hands gliding over the strings of a *kathrel* with an expert's touch, and one of The Rylesth's acquaintances or another belting mangled lyrics to a hymn no one had heard since the start of the new century.

He heard nothing else, except for the party. No commotion. There was supposed to be a commotion by now.

He noticed his hands shaking against the bath that he leaned against, and pressed them a bit harder into the marble, only the threat of hurting himself too soon keeping him from gripping the cold metal of the dagger in his palm compared to the tub. Pain had always calmed him in some way. It was consistent. Simple. If you got hurt you knew exactly what you were going to feel. Not knowing was fun, but it was not comforting.

He made a decision while Creedos was out that day. He went into the back room. He was tired of not knowing. Of feeling less. He wanted to show Creedos he was worth something. That he could reach him. He took something big, too big, and now his time as a free man was running out, each moment spent in Fairole, another closer to its owner noticing its lack of presence. Usually he was smarter. Took from people he did not foster relationships with. He played the long game of niceties, crafting alibis, letting loose the spare lie about his name or hometown. Not this time, though. He had never lied to the old man. Not in a way that counted.

Creedos tended to shuffle away into the triple locked back room at the end of every week after his late evening swig of rum. He would stay there till morning. If Vivlan was going to die, he had to do it before the weekend came tomorrow.

Fairolè was getting old anyway, he reasoned. Creedos was not his motivation behind everything. There were only so many mongers and hagglers to trick, so many hides and wines to steal. The market people were beginning to recognise him. He had always considered himself a good thief, but his hubris ran strong. He was too drawn to jewels and skirts and sashes. The extravagant and avant garde. He needed a new environment, and if the belongings he took from Creedos' desk said anything, it was that Neevos was as new as it could get. That there was a past there he could dig up. He wanted recognition. He wanted to show Creedos he was a force to be reckoned with. He was going to reveal Creedos' past and shove it in his face.

Vivlan was confident in his lying. He was not one to get caught— but Creedos was on a whole other level. He would notice soon.

As he did his rounds earlier in the night, cheering loudly and proposing toasts and flirting with guests who were far too above him in class for it to be appropriate, he whispered into a certain servant's ear what time they should alert the guards that something seemed off upstairs. No one was supposed to be on the top floor, but on a quick errand to the daughter's chambers they thought they saw the lights on in the bath. The vault looked to be unguarded, did they know why that was? The servant he had paid off some days earlier did not react except for a small nod before disappearing into the crowd. That was not part of Creedos' plan

A small clink of metal behind the wooden door separating the baths from the hallway. A hushed voice, giving an order.

Finally.

When it was time, and he backed himself into the stone wall and onto the windowsill as the wind behind him whipped against his back, the cold spray of the sea rocketing up the cliff from down below, he realized for the first time that he might have been nervous. He heard the waves battering violently away at the cliff below. He heard the odd bird calling in the dead of night. He heard the slight shift in metal against metal as the guards prepared their poorly planned sneak attack, and thought he could hear Creedos' heartbeat two floors below, a slow and steady thing, just seconds before the other set of guards would walk in on him with the jewel in his hands. Vivlan closed his eyes, remembered how much he hated the ocean, and did not let himself hear the way the dagger slid across his arm, splitting the skin apart. Blood gushed into the bath, and he smiled despite himself as it mixed with the water, the red wave expanding and spreading. It would look worse than it was. Good.

As the door opened, he smeared his arm against his neck, and was able to just make out the shocked faces of the men who had barged in, swords thrusting, taking in the sight of the blood and blood and blood seemingly gushing from his neck, before he dropped the dagger, closed his eyes, and leaned backwards, falling into the ocean below.

Chapter 1

Vivlan was sopping wet.

"You are late."

The man who pulled him onto the ship's deck loosened his grip and Vivlan slumped to the floor, shivering as he struggled to recover the oxygen lost in the ten-minute swim from cliffside to the colossus vessel that waited below. He let himself lay there for a second, two, brain frantically categorizing any injuries or slip-ups. Other than the salt in his eyes, fresh cut, and what he assumed to be the onset of hypothermia, he would be fine. His vision would clear in a few blinks, the wound would be bandaged, and he would warm up once he was out of the wind. Physically, he had been worse.

A solid clap of a hand on shoulder was the only warning before he was ripped off the ground and slammed into some semblance of a standing position against the rail of the ship, only the blind grabbing onto of the barrier milliseconds before impact sparing his back from most of the pain. Whatever breath he recovered in his moments horizontal was forced out. The answering chuckle lost some of its sincerity at the noise as the large hand retreated to the man's side, sliding into a jacket pocket. Vivlan grit his teeth against the new discomfort of standing on a rocking ship and shot the man a look of annoyance.

"Another second and I would have hit the rocks," Vivlan said.

"Caught you, did I not?"

The man's grin could be heard in his tone, the foreign accent stumbling over every other syllable failing to cloud his obvious good mood. He leant leisurely against the post behind him, stance loose and carefree, not giving any indication that he also was fighting the waves seconds ago. Vivlan believed he himself was a good height. Built enough. The man, Kin Day, was a giant. A self-satisfied one at that. No matter how many times they had met, he could not help but feel at least a little intimidated. Kin Day's eyebrows and lips were so turned up at the edges that he almost looked cocky. Almost.

Vivlan raised his eyebrows back at him.

"You almost did not."

"I would not drop you. Come, let us dry."

He offered a hand over to him, but Vivlan waved him off and pushed himself up and away from the rail, locking his knees momentarily to stabilize himself on tired feet. He begrudgingly took the towel Kin Day handed to him and wrapped it around his arm to staunch the bleeding as Kin Day began to lead him across the ship to the doors leading below deck. Before reaching the stairs he glanced up and was met with the daunting underside of the cliffs, the moonlight bouncing off of the water creating rapidly changing shapes on the rocks. His reservations concerning enlisting Kin Day's help were proved unfounded as the ship was successfully anchored in the alcove below the palace, the only place a boat as big as Kin Day's could avoid being immediately spotted. The noise from the guards ceased immediately after Vivlan recovered from the fall into a net Kin Day and his crew had secured on a jutting cliff face not far below the window. Kin Day did not seem bothered by how off course the trip to the island of Thousill where Vivlan waited was going to make him if the smile plastered to his face

meant anything, or how long they would have to remain anchored before they could set off without the threat of someone spotting them looming quite literally above their heads.

He would not have asked his closest friend if he had a choice, but his choices were limited. Their easy friendship springing from boyhood was the only other relationship he had been able to foster for more than a year, making him the only person Vivlan cared to trust. Not that he believed there were plenty of people out there plotting his downfall, but Creedos' child rearing made him cautious.

"I appreciate you not dropping me," Vivlan commented in his friend's language, Kiimnan, mostly joking, and used the end of the towel to wipe the quickly drying salt from his face. "Do not strain yourself speaking Fir. I do not need the captain being so focused on speaking that he forgets to command the ship."

Kin Day raised his arm as if to clap him on the back again, but seemed to think better of it and instead returned his arm to his side, throwing the door below open with the other.

"Good, I was running out of words I know," Kin Day said, smile widening. "Fir makes no fucking sense. I sound like an idiot whenever I try to say anything."

"You sound less like an idiot each time you try," Vivlan lied.

"Sure."

Kin Day took one step down before turning back to Vivlan and looking past him, over his shoulder. He shouted something in Kiimnan too quick to catch, to a crew member behind them. The woman securing something or other to a sail dropped her task and saluted Kin Day, eyes nervously

glancing to Vivlan and then quickly away, returning to her work. Vivlan kept his eyes on her. She was purposefully avoiding eye contact.

"I am retiring to my office. Once you finish up, stop by and bring this man some proper clothes," Kin Day ordered before continuing downwards.

"Proper clothes?" Vivlan mumbled, somewhat insulted, scanning his outfit and flattening the wet material on his skin. Kin Day was right. Vivlan's clothes were gaudy when held to Kiimnan standards, serving as a brilliant waving red flag to anyone who spotted him that something was not quite right. Especially considering a Fairolan just "died" from falling into the water conveniently next to a Kiimnan vessel. Though Ko Su, the country where Kin Day and his crew hailed from, was on good terms with Fairolè, they were not exactly on *could you give me a ride* terms.

Vivlan followed Kin Day below deck, taking one long last look above. He thanked Creedos' misplaced trust and the incompetence of the Fairolan military for Thousill soon becoming a thing of the past. He expected to feel something, looking at his country for the final time, but there was nothing. No tugging of the heartstrings, no turning of the stomach. Fairolè had nothing left to give him. All he had were memories of screwing people over, stealing too much money and blowing through even more, all under Creedos' eye. He could not take credit for a single thing he accomplished, not really. He could not pull anything big. He was bored. He needed a challenge.

Now, Neevos. Neevos was a challenge.

Neevos held exactly what he was looking for.

Life below deck was a different world from that above. Crew members that stiffly carried out duties without another thought above sprinted up and down the narrow corridors below, shouting

and throwing what looked to be weapons to each other, just missing Kin Day and Vivlan as they came down the steps. A few stopped when they noticed the former, but they only gave him a quick nod and "Captain," before running off. This portion of the crew also avoided eye contact, but it was more out of necessity of watching where they were going than not approving of Vivlan's presence. Someone to his left vaulted over a crate, and spoke to Kin Day in rushed Kiimnan that Vivlan could not make out. Kin Day's smile which seemed to be permanently affixed to his mouth fell slightly. He nodded, and the crew member ran off deeper into the bowels of the ship, knocking over one of the many lamps attached to the walls lighting up the dark corridors. Rather than fixing it they grabbed it and disappeared behind a door. He had not been on the ship many times before, only now and then when the trading ship still belonged to Kin Day's father and they would dock at the Kiimnan Embassy where Vivlan lived as a kid. He remembered running up and down the corridors much like the crew now, zipping from hall to hall, seeing who could go the fastest without tripping up or slamming into a wall. He remembered playing pretend in the endless rooms, acting as pirates or kings or thieves, saving each other from evil monarchs and great monsters, which he did not ignore the irony of now. He did not remember the textile merchants having so many weapons. Vivlan cast his eyes up towards Kin Day, hoping to find some sort of answer on the man's face, but Kin Day continued forward, so Vivlan continued as well.

He followed Kin Day behind a heavy curtain that separated the halls from a small room at the back of the ship. It was only because of the quick flash of light streaming in from the corridors before the curtain fell that he noticed someone else was in the room with them. She sat in the Captain's chair, eyes closed, faintly backlit by the moon's glow painting the windows behind her. If she were anyone

else, he would assume she was asleep. Long lean limbs sunk into the cushions like she was an extension of the piece. At the sound of the curtain shifting her dark eyes shot open, quickly narrowing and focusing on them distaste.

"Ti Ra Mal," Vivlan said, opening his arms wide in a welcoming gesture. "What a nice surprise. I did not know they let you leave your dungeon."

She ran a slow hand over what little hair she had on her head and stood, lip curling as if she had a bad taste in her mouth. They all noticed the lack of honorifics in his greeting.

"I am going to say this in your language so there is no room for confusion," she said slowly in perfect Fir, leaning forward and planting her hands on the desk. "You should consider yourself very lucky you are a friend of the Captain's. If it were up to me, I would have let you drown."

Kin Day stepped forward and cleared his throat.

"I would appreciate it if you did not immediately threaten one of my guests, Lord Ti Ra Mal."

He leant forward on the table, mirroring her stance. While he looked casual in the lean, relaxing into his position as if he were talking to a close friend, she was rigid and still at the desk, more than just physically out of her element. Her sharp gaze remained on Vivlan for a tense second or two before obediently lowering and turning to Kin Day. She nodded and stepped back from the desk, shoulders immediately falling under her leather armor as she bowed and made room for him to pass. He gave her a much smaller nod before stepping to the ornamental chair, stopping momentarily to light the oil lamp on his desk. Her gaze remained on him until he was seated. Vivlan lingered at the entrance, eyes flickering between the two.

“I meant what I said earlier— I honestly did not think they let you leave the prison. Ran out of bad guys to punish?” Vivlan quipped, attempting to get an explanation going, meeting her glare with an unimpressed glance. He expected his friend to jump in and explain away the border lord’s presence. He was not one for throwing surprises at people. She and Vivlan had only met once before years ago, but the meeting had not gone well. The room remained silent though, save for the soft crackle of flame in the lamp. He looked between the two again. “Do not tell me you are here to comply?”

“She is,” Kin Day said. Vivlan blanched as he watched Kin Day reach below the desk and open a drawer, slipping out a rolled up piece of parchment and holding it out to Vivlan. Vivlan did not move. Kin Day placed it onto the desk. “She has agreed to the plan. She will allow us to sail under her flag for easier access into Neevos. Her reputation as a lord has more sway there than mine as a merchant.”

“How did he swing that? Promised to put you in the inheritance?” Vivlan reclined against the wall behind him, the damp clothes pressing against his shoulders only uncomfortable enough to make him shift slightly. “I have already been promised the boat, so if you are banking on that you might as well back out now.”

“Viv,” Kin Day warned, holding up a hand. It was an empty threat, but Vivlan tamped down on the more snarky thoughts coming to mind for Kin Day’s sake. He could practically see her hair bristle on her head, like a cat raising its hackles, ready to pounce. Whatever affect Kin Day’s words had on her before had dissipated. She looked one wrong move away from striking him down if she were not so dignified.

“The Captain requested my assistance. That is enough for me.”

Something crashed in one of the hallways. Vivlan ignored her presence.

"I told you I did not want her here if we did not need her."

"We do."

"Believe me when I say I am *not* worried about when we get there. Just got to get out of the immediate area. I will survive the extra day it will take if we stick to the coast. I do not care if she can swing us a shortcut. Send her home."

Kin Day gave what Vivlan assumed was supposed to be a discreet, somewhat worried look to Ti Ra Mal, as if they both knew something he did not. Something he would not like. He already was not a fan of the additional company.

"What has changed?" Vivlan asked.

Neither of them answered. Ti Ra Mal momentarily broke his gaze and looked to Kin Day. It was almost shocking how quickly her body language changed when addressing him, everything going straight and tight, channeling the trained soldier she was. It was the same way she reacted to Ky La, Kin Day's late father. Her respect must have stemmed from the same reason why Vivlan decided to keep in contact with them. They were good. Honest. They were something hard to find in all of their lines of work.

It was exactly why she was not a fan of the professional thief.

"Why is Neevos on high alert?" Vivlan asked. "So that is what all the fuss out there is about?" He nodded towards the hallways they passed through.

Kin Day sighed and ran a hand across his face as if trying to wake himself up, nodding. Vivlan could see the age on him now, sitting. Dark circles under his eyes, the hard set of his jaw. The past five years had changed him more than he expected. Vivlan did not feel that changed.

"Unfortunately. I was hoping to get you out of here before things got too hectic, but," he trailed off, waving a hand in the air in a vague gesture. He reached beneath his desk and recovered a quill and a jar of ink. He unrolled the parchment he pulled out at the start of the conversation and spread it out over the desk revealing a detailed map, its crinkled edges trying to roll up being flattened by Kin Day's hands. Vivlan only saw a quick flash of the map, but Neevos' sharp edges and enormous lakes were easily recognizable. The thing that stuck out was the large circle aggressively scored onto the paper surrounding Agoras, the kingdom's capitol.

"They starting another war?" Vivlan quipped.

Ti Ra Mal let out a loud breath through her nose. Her face twisted up in thought momentarily, then her lips turned in on themselves, producing an ugly scowl. Whatever she decided on, she was not happy with it. She nodded to herself.

"The Prince has proposed a challenge," Ti Ra Mal said.

"A challenge," he said blankly.

She said the word again, this time in Fairolan.

"Fuck," Vivlan said.

Kin Day chuckled dryly.

"Exactly my thought."

Vivlan peeled himself off of the wall and brought the map closer to him, eyes flitting over the page. All of the waterways into and around Neevos were crossed off in large, swooping x's. Neevos' transportation relied heavily on canals and boat travel, and Kees, the city mentioned on every one of Creedos' documents, was blocked off from every direction. With it being completely inland, even if Kin Day managed to get him to the nearest coast, there was no way to get to Kees without using the waterways.

"*Fuck*," Vivlan said again.

"We still have time to replan," Ti Ra Mal said. Kin Day shook his head.

"What good even are you if we can not use your waterways?" Vivlan asked, rounding on her and trying to find anything in her expression that would explain. Why they were trying to keep this from him, when this happened, what they thought would constitute as a plan *now*. She gave him nothing. He turned to Kin Day. He had the tact to look at least a little ashamed.

"Vivlan, I promised I would get you to Neevos, and I will. But, for now, we cannot get to the coast. Cannot risk it. Crew's already jumpy and I am not getting them involved in all of that Neevan politics and backstabbing. Honestly, if I was not helping you I would already be in Len Da Jixta rearranging my trade routes since Neevan unrest is gonna cut down a lot of my revenue." He tapped his finger on the roughly shaded fort on the Neevan-Kiimnan border. "Luckily, Lord Ti Ra Mal and I had a conversation before I headed up the cliff, just after we heard the news. As long as she gives us the go ahead, from where we are now we can get to Len Da Jixta in a couple of hours and send you on your way from there. For established official business she can use the waterways. There are a group of Kiimnan Ambassadors set to head to Neevos' capitol from the fort tomorrow morning. You can hitch

a ride with them. I know it is not what we agreed upon but... I heard talk of a possible challenge, some weeks ago, and of the Neevan people getting on edge, but I honestly did not think it would happen. If I knew I would have told you. Now that I know, I wanted to tell you when we were alone, but..."

"I know, I know," Vivlan said, unable to keep the underlying agitation out of what he meant to be a reassuring gesture, watching as the previously agreed-upon plan fell apart in front of his eyes. He had people he was supposed to meet up with in Kees. He did not want anyone except for Kin Day to know the specifics of where he was going.

"What does the challenge mean for my plans? After I get to Kees, I mean," Vivlan said, picking up the quill and tracing a line through the country. It did not have any ink on it, but it helped him visualize the path into Kees. He scanned the land by the water, trying to find something they missed. Anything that was not Len Da Jixta. There had to be something. Ti Ra Mal could not be willing to go along with this with so little pushback.

"Well, there has not been a challenge in decades. Even the Neevans are catching up to modern times and toning down the cruelty, but from what I managed to scrounge up before we left Len Da Jixta was that as of yesterday the crown prince publicly proposed a challenge to his mother, the standing leader of Neevos. In three months they are going to have what is essentially a fight to the death—"

"In true Neevan fashion—"

"And whoever comes out un-impaled gets the position. It is an ancient tradition that has mostly faded out, but it is not exactly against any law to move up through the rankings that way. It has the nation spiraling, with Neevans questioning every other Neevan's alliances, whether it is towards

The Queen or The Prince. From what I can see at the border not a single one of them trusts the other. Their naval unit has closed off every waterway to keep an eye out for any potential uproar."

"They really are ruthless, huh," Vivlan murmured. He would not call himself a "good" person by any means, and did not surround himself with the like, but he knew the things he did were wrong. Neevans had been killing each other for power ever since they became their own nation as far as Vivlan knew. Every good Fairolan knew the basics, but he did not attend tutoring sessions as a kid so the specifics were hazy. What he knew for certain was that the Neevans prized physical strength and endurance over all. It did not matter how much money you had or how smart you were— at the end of the day if you were strong enough to defeat your opponent, you are the one that survives. You are the one who gets to keep living. No amount of money or intelligence will save you if you are dead. It was part of why Vivlan was drawn to Neevos. Fairolans did not care about strength. Everything was about everyone else. Helping others out through charity and financial support.

Being kind to others never got him anywhere.

"So, Len Da Jixta," Vivlan muttered, resting his finger on the little fort that was drawn there, nothing else on the map giving him anything to work with without having to walk the whole way, "that is the *only* option we have right now?"

"Just take the deal, Viv," Kin Day said not unkindly, ever a man to avoid conflict, leaning forward in his seat and crossing his arms on his desk. "It will save you a lot of time. I know you want to get settled there as soon as possible, especially with all of this." He did another one of his vague gestures in the air. He was not looking at him anymore.

"That is breaking more than a few laws. She just implied I would get you killed. She requested permission to change the plan that you two already agreed upon. This does not add up."

"It was not something I wanted to bring up, but my captain has forced my hand, it seems." She paused. "This is not something I am doing out of the kindness of my heart. If I get seen with you on my ships, the Captain has insisted on taking the fall as it was his plan. I do not have a full proof way to prevent him from attempting to do this. I do not want to see that happen. So, if we do this, for my troubles, there is something you will do in exchange.

"You will not be going to Kees. You are going to Agoras, and you will stay there."

"The *capital?*" Vivlan spat.

"It is not ideal but..." Kin Day trailed off.

"I picked Kees because—" he stopped. He did not tell his best friend why he was really leaving Fairole. He was not going to. He knew how it would make him sound.

I stole my mentor's prized possessions so I could find what he was hiding from me and usurp him.

He settled on something else.

"I want a new start. Kees is the only place in Neevos that has at least a speck of diversity. If I screwed over every single person I could find in that town, I would still be able to blend in as some merchant or run-off. Agoras is run like a military state. It is so deep inland I would be the only Fairolan there. One bad scam, everyone knows my face, and you want me to do something for you just to get a bunch of Neevans breathing down my neck?"

It was a good reason.

"Like I said, not ideal."

"No it is not," Vivlan said sharply. After a second he looked to Kin Day guiltily for the harshness of his voice. He hoped he took the slight frown for the apology it was. "So, my plans are getting disrupted all because a kid decided to get all stabby on his mom? Mature of him," he ground out, pushing the map back across the table.

He took a breath and turned to the window to peer into the darkness, imagining seeing Neevos coming up in the distance. His stomach turned, but when he tried picturing Fairolè, all he could see was Creedos forced onto his knees in the vault, hands roughly tied behind his back. His stomach dropped and his entire body tensed. He was not sure if it was guilt. Neevos was bad, but it was not Fairolè.

He let out a long, slow sigh.

"Fine. Agoras. I can do Agoras. What do you want me to do?"

"Well," Kin Day began, his voice falling into something gentler. Vivlan would have found it annoying if he did not know it was coming from a genuine place of concern. "Unlike his mother, The Prince is very... private. No one knows anything about him. If he wins, there will be no one to challenge his power until he has an heir or he appoints someone to be his second in command. *If* he does. The Neevans will be stuck with him, no matter what he decides to do with their country.

"Then there is the fact that if he wins, those who helped him along the way will get to share in that victory, specifically the second in command. It is all about bonds there. It is not just education or status or race, even blood at some point— If someone manages to get close enough they will have some major influence on him. If you can get in good with him now, get him to trust you, you are set for life. Maybe he is even gullible— at least that is what I would be hoping for if I was a Neevan looking for a

chance at power and to change things as I see fit. Though, you would have to be pretty tricky to get to that point. And if he loses, well, you would not want to stay in Agoras for too long. I have never heard the supporters of the loser turning out too well."

Vivlan narrowed his eyes.

"I gotta say, I do not think I like what you are insinuating."

Kin Day pushed his chair away from his desk and stood, before coming around and leaning back against the front, facing where Vivlan stood at the doorway. Kin Day nodded towards the seat in front of him. Vivlan did not move. It was a wonder they remained friends for so long. Perhaps it was the years apart. Kin Day rolled his eyes, but shrugged and continued.

"I am not insinuating."

Vivlan jutted his chin towards Ti Ra Mal.

"This her idea?"

"Partially."

Vivlan crossed his arms and ignored the tugging at his cut.

"I do not know if this got lost in translation, but I left Fairolè to go somewhere no one knows me, where no one *will* know me, and you want me to drop everything and infiltrate his social circle to get in as his second?" Vivlan asked incredulously.

Ti Ra Mal scoffed, breaking away from the wall and stepping towards him. She was not standing at her full height before. Now she towered over him, but he only felt annoyance bubble up inside of him at the look of scorn on her face and her play at dominance.

"Of course not. There is a woman who works in the capital as a part of the Queen's council, Brya. *She* will be his second in command. You will assist. I have seen you fight. Your technique is deplorable and your reckless style shows you have no consideration for those around you when you get your hands on a weapon." He heard Kin Day shift against the desk, the wood groaning under his weight, and Vivlan turned his gaze to the wall. His eyes caught momentarily on something that hung above Ti Ra Mal's head, but he turned his gaze back to her own as he became aware of the pain shooting up his arm, and found that his fingers had been digging into the wound. He loosened his grip slightly. "*But*, you *can* fight. More importantly, due to your complete lack of style or form, you fight unpredictably. Even Neevans who are experienced in Fairolan fighting will not know how to get a read on you."

"I am really hoping there is a point here."

"You will act as a run-away from Fairolè who got caught up in some trouble and owes a debt," she said. "Brya is allied with the blacksmiths who will provide the weapons for the challenge back in the capital who will take you in as a servant and grunt worker. This particular group is the one who will provide the weapons for the challenge. A viewing of the weapons will be arranged, and you will perform a demonstration for The Prince's council, then The Prince. He will be intrigued and take you on as a trainer as an act of defiance against his mother. This will cause controversy and catch the attention of the general public. And when he wins the challenge, hopefully in part from getting *something* useful from you, Neevans may be inclined to view Fairolans in a higher light since one helped their king."

Vivlan forced himself to look at her, then to Kin Day. Her murderous gaze had faded, and was staring at Vivlan expectantly. The plan was all ifs and whens. It was almost nothing. He could work around that. Maybe there was someone in Agoras connected to Creedos. That was not what bothered him, though.

"And why would I care about what happens to a bunch of Neevans?"

"I would not put you in this situation if I thought you could not handle it," Kin Day said.

"That is your sales pitch?"

"Yes," Ti Ra Mal said. Vivlan looked to Kin Day searching for some sort of support, but was met with the same expectant stare. The only thing that had changed was that Kin Day was handing him a pack of bandages and coverings that he pulled out presumably when Vivlan left the room. Kin Day had noticed his wound had reopened. Of course he had. Vivlan took the coverings, but tossed them onto the chair next to him. It was not that bad of a wound.

"What do you even get from this? I know you do not like me."

"You are right, I do not. But I like Brya, and I like my people. You are collateral damage."

Kin Day frowned. Ti Ra Mal sent him a quick apologetic look, but continued.

"I would prefer we bring you back to Fairolè. I made my stance clear with the Captain far before we arrived on your shore. But, I will support him. If we will not bring you back, I will make you useful. The Neevan people have been growing upset with their leadership for a long time now, and with The Crown Prince proposing a challenge, well, they are not going to get a better chance to finally have a say in what happens to them. The smoother things go in Neevos, the easier it is for me and Len Da Jixta. A revolution raging outside of my walls will not comfort my people."

"And what exactly is in it for me?"

"Other than safe passage to your new life?"

She took long, slow steps to close the distance between them. Her gaze raked over him in distaste before she put a gloved hand on his shoulder and pressed down. She was strong, but she was only squeezing enough to create a dull pain where her fingers laid. The armor and gloves and boots she wore were made for close combat. For putting your hands on your opponent. It was nothing like the decorative metal Fairolan soldiers and guards sported during their lazy shifts and lackluster arrests. Her weathered leather fit her like a second skin. She looked dangerous this close.

"Next time you fall, I will catch you."

She let go of him and her hand fell to rest on the hilt of her dagger. She did not step back to her post at the wall.

"You get that new start you wanted," Kin Day added. "Imagine getting the better of a prince."

He had already been imagining it, somewhere deep down and buried. Beneath the confusion and racing of his mind to parse all of the information he had been given, he was thrilled. He did not have the image or interest in the bigger picture required for politics, but he had always been drawn to the corruption. The mind games. Everything was wrong and everything was a scam. Dressing as a guard and confiscating a low level thief's revenue was one thing. Acting his way into the most prestigious circle in the country was a dream. He would be set for life. He would make *history*.

Now that would get Creedos' attention.

Vivlan had his suspicions about Creedos' past. Though the man did not speak of it often, he did hold it in a high light. He supported their Queen, did not like The Prince. Thought him immature.

Said that he is happy with his life in Fairole, but left Neevos because he did not have any other choice. This was all Vivlan could get from multiple drunken conversations over the years, but he had not had the chance to look over every single thing he took from Creedos. There could be so much more about Neevos in there. About The Prince.

Despite everything, he felt a smile force its way onto his face. He broke away from Ti Ra Mal and stepped to the chair Kin Day had offered earlier. He felt *giddy*.

"You are appealing to my bad nature. That is cheating," he said.

"Is it working?" Kin Day asked. Vivlan shrugged, half-collapsing into the chair. The pressure of the chair rubbing his shirt against his skin made him realize the salt water was drying into an itchy crust, raking sharp crystals into his back. His good feeling faded. "Come on, this would help me out a lot."

Vivlan distracted himself from the sensation by stripping the bandages from his arm. Kin Day tried again.

"I *need* this to be you, Viv. You are the only one I can trust."

At Vivlan's silence, he cleared his throat.

"Lord Ti Ra Mal, give us a second?"

The room was still for a long moment. All he could hear were the footfalls of sailors beyond the door and the slow lapping of waves against the ship.

"Of course, Captain."

Vivlan did not look up from his arm until he heard the curtain shift behind him.

Kin Day deflated the moment the curtain fell shut. He was keeping himself together by sheer force of will. His shoulders slumped and his chin fell to rest against his chest, a long sigh pushing its way out of his lips. Vivlan watched as his fingers clenched around the desk's edge, as if steeling himself for something. Kin Day pushed himself from the desk and sat down next to Vivlan in the accompanying chair and took the wrap of bandages from Vivlan's lap, beginning to separate them into strips on the arm rest, ripping them apart with his teeth. Vivlan let him work, leaning back in his seat and giving him his arm begrudgingly.

"How does this help you?" Vivlan asked.

"I... I cannot tell you that now. Have I ever given you a reason to not trust me?"

"Other than today? Not really." The frown was back, even though Vivlan was shooting for sarcasm. He shook his head, and tried for a gentler tone.

"I can take care of myself, Kin."

Kin Day sighed again while his fingers continued to work.

"I know. I know you can. I just..."

"We are not kids anymore. I do not need to be protected."

"I know."

He worked in silence as Vivlan finally let himself take a good look at the room, no longer focusing his energy on the angry lord. The office was mostly the same as Ky La had left it, except for the addition of a painted portrait of himself that now glowered down at Vivlan from the wall where Ti Ra Mal stood earlier. Ky La's dark eyes bore into him, and Vivlan shifted in his seat, the judging gaze

weighing on his chest like someone was pushing into him. Vivlan averted his eyes, turning them to the man's son.

"What are you even getting out of this?" Vivlan tried again. He could not help the question. Kin Day was not the type to get involved in the complicated and tangled world of politics if he could help it. He always preferred helping out on the floor, interacting directly with the men. Kin Day began placing the coverings along his arm. It stung, but only to the point of being unpleasant.

"Well... the knowledge that I am helping someone out who needs it." Kin Day tapped his knee, and then met his eyes. "And I am not talking about her. If you do not want to do this for her, or yourself, fine, then do it for me."

"As, what, payment for keeping me out of trouble?"

Kin Day rolled his eyes, though there was no malice behind it.

"Oh, I never kept you out of trouble. I cleaned you up afterwards. Things have not really changed that much, huh?" There was a pause. "Viv, this would help me out a lot. I cannot lose Neevan business. If this fails, I am leaving thirty people without jobs, and nowhere to go. Not to mention he would be pretty mad at me." Kin Day nodded his head towards the portrait, which Vivlan had not seen him acknowledge until then. Vivlan did not turn his head to look up at him. He had the idiotic idea somewhere in him that Ky La would be looking back. He knew it was irrational, and impossible, but he did not push past it.

At the lack of movement Kin Day stared at him for a bit, then leaned in and laid a hand on his shoulder. He tensed at the touch, but allowed it.

"I am sorry. I should not have brought it up. That is on me."

Vivlan shrugged him off.

"You do not get to apologize. He was not my dad."

Kin Day nodded in some small sort of agreement, and finished smoothing the bandages down.

"You know I do not think you are to blame, right?"

Vivlan shrugged again, turning his gaze to the ground.

"I am gonna do it. For you, and for me. Honestly? It sounds fun."

"Fun?"

"Interesting," Vivlan corrected. As he peeled himself off of the chair he held out a hand to Kin Day. Kin Day grabbed it and hoisted himself up. He pointed behind him towards the door, letting go of him as soon as he was mostly vertical.

"I am still very salty. I would love to dry off and pass out as soon as possible."

Kin Day raised his eyebrows in a kind of *oh really* look. It was sarcastic as all hell. It was not something Vivlan was used to on him, but he did not find a problem with it.

"I think I can manage to get that arranged."

Kin Day led him out of the room and down another flight of stairs, this one leading into almost complete darkness. He struck up a match and lit a lantern that hung at the bottom of the entryway. The staircase opened up into an expansive, heavily decorated room which's main feature included an expansive, low to the ground bed, the types of which Vivlan had only seen in rich people's apartments and homes, tied down with ropes and hinges that swayed with the movement of the ship. Paintings and scrolls and tapestries were nailed into the walls, and a deep red fluffy carpet covered the floor, excluding directly next to the stairs where an assortment of boots and slippers were haphazardly

thrown about. Everything about the room screamed Fairolan nobility. The only thing suggesting otherwise was the pale panel at the bottom of the stairs, where scratched into the wood were the words *Captain's Quarters*.

Vivlan smirked at Kin Day next to him.

"I thought you were more humble than this."

Kin Day pushed him playfully, the unexpected force combined with the unsteady rocking of the ship almost sending Vivlan stumbling to the floor. Vivlan dug the toe of his boot into the carpet to keep himself from falling.

"I let myself indulge now and then."

Kin Day stepped to a dresser strapped to the wall with cords from every available surface on its sides. He pulled the top drawer open and tossed a pair of nightclothes at him. Vivlan caught them easily, ignoring the sharp contrast in the quality of the threadbare clothes to the room's effects, and set them down on the foot of the bed. He had not been invited into a room this nice at any point in his memory. It was always through some sort of lie or bribe or sneaking in on his part that he was able to see the typical Fairolan garish design sense up close. The colors and designs were offensively bright, yet somehow comforting, exactly the types of things a young him pictured himself having when he got older. Vivlan closed his eyes, and let his legs give out underneath him so he fell back on the bed, the mattress bouncing satisfyingly with his weight. He stretched his arms out above him and rested his head on his hands, sinking into the bed. Kin Day snorted. Vivlan cracked an eye open and glanced over to him, now casually propped against the dresser, amusement plain on his face.

"Yes?"

"You are lucky I am already offering my room to you for the night, otherwise you would have just ruined my bed."

"I—"

"And I do not want to hear any push back, okay? I do not care what you have to say, you are sleeping here. We both know you are not going to get any kindness out there. Let me at least be kind to you for a bit."

"I was not going to turn down a nice bed. If you showed me this and told me I would be sleeping in some hammock I think I would lose it," Vivlan said, half-joking. Kin Day chuckled and gave him a quick wave in his direction before nodding to the stairs.

"I will have one of my sailors get some hot water for you to get cleaned up with. Let them know if you need anything. They can get a fire started in here if need be," he said, before turning and heading up the stairs, leaving him to the little slice of luxury. He only had a moment of silence before he heard Kin Day's heavy footsteps on the stairs again.

"Hey."

Vivlan craned his neck to where he reappeared in the doorway. Vivlan thought he was pretty good at reading people, specifically Kin Day. They had known each other since they were kids. In all that time he had never heard him tell a lie, had never seen him be cruel as all kids could be. When Vivlan was running away from home, tripping kids in the markets, Kin Day let him stay with them in the ship and picked the kids up when they fell while distracting Vivlan with a game or stories from the sea. He was an open book. He was kind. He was good. Vivlan could not make out the expression on his face.

“Do not worry about Ti Ra Mal. She just…” he waved a hand around, as if it would help him finish the thought. “She is stubborn. She will warm up to you eventually.”

“She does not worry me.”

A pause.

“I will leave you to get changed and comfortable. We are docking in Len Da Jixta in the morning, and you will go straight to the boat from there. Nice and simple.”

“Nothing is ever that simple.”

Kin Day smiled.

“No, it is not.”

Chapter 2

Vivlan wrapped his hair around his palm as he pulled it through the leather cord, tightening the knot on his head to keep the heavy bun back and in place. It was a decent attempt at matching the Neevan style. Like a plant. Overripe and past ready to lose its fruit, beginning to sag with the weight. Only a hair tickled the back of his neck by the end, the rest slicked and strung tight. He turned to the body length mirror placed in his rooms with a sigh. With a reluctance he ran hands over the new hairstyle, trying to get a feel for the brittle texture. Kin Day mentioned off-handedly that it should be cut, as it was the popular look, but when his expression slipped before he could catch it he did not push it.

It was odd seeing himself in the mirror. The person he saw did not look like him. The black eyes that squinted critisizingly back appeared smaller and naked without their paint. His gaze lowered to his now unpierced nose and chapped lips actively curling into a sneer. He seemed paler without makeup on his cheeks. Looked almost sick. The hair he spent an hour poking and prodding at, tucking it into its cord was already beginning to frizz. The Faiorlan climate was cold and unforgiving. During winter he kept himself locked away inside, reading and studying and playing with Creedos when he was young, which had transitioned into messing with the old man with age. He had never liked the climate, everything too cold, too stiff, but he decided the humid heat was much, much worse.

After a long, unsatisfied look at himself he turned the mirror to face the wall, moving to finish the preparations for the evening. He felt lucky having a few more minutes to himself before he was needed. As he scanned the room to triple check he was not missing something, he attempted to

condition himself to his now slightly hindered walk in order to accommodate for the new ways clothes stretched and pulled at his body. If his eyes felt exposed, his body might as well have been skinned. He was not self-conscious, but there was no pretense for this back in Fairole. The thin cloth scratched skin as he adjusted the fabric on his shoulders, struggling to straighten the askew pin holding his top up so he could retain at least some semblance of pride in his appearance. As he stepped to the bed to grab what was left of his belongings, he could feel how skin tight the fabric below the navel was, and not in a fun way.

He had worn worse. Done worse. But at least those times, he got to choose what he would lower himself to playing along with. Things were very quickly slipping from his control. He would get things in order once he was settled in Agoras. It would be easier once he was away from Kin Day and would stop feeling guilty about lying to his face. Sure, Kin Day had a vague idea on his relationship with Creedos and was somewhat aware that Vivlan was running into problems in Fairole, but as long as Vivlan had a say in it, Kin Day would think he was heading off for nothing more than his own enjoyment. He felt he would be crossing a line if he actually exposed his friend to that side of him. The side that needed to be acknowledged. Praised. Better.

Vivlan could handle himself just fine.

Kin Day left that morning after a brief goodbye, trudging up the white shore of Len Da Jixta and to Ti Ra Mal's fort. From the ship he could only make out the tops of sun bleached trees waving hazily over the sand. Ko Su did not look like much. It was to look at. Bustling markets and hagglers shouting across the aisles and children running errands for their guardians were the usual at home. The constant snow did not stop Fairole from brimming with color and life. There was never not a bird to

be heard, or a group of people filled with liquor joyously heading to their next drinking destination. The plant and animal and social life stubbornly refused to wither and die in the cold.

Everything here looked like it had been dead for years.

Once Vivlan took a deep breath, two, and slipped the few things he decided to keep— a discreet Fairolan sheath, a deck of cards, the ring and ledgers— into his boots, he went above deck. Whatever crew had been maintaining the ship that morning had wandered off into the dining quarters, and a small boat was now tethered to the side of the ship. It was as small as he expected considering who was allowing him , but with the sail and oars and a supply chest taking up half the space, it appeared to be standing room only, unless people wanted to get real comfy with each other real quick.

He took the rope ladder down and got comfortable against the back rail. There was no one on the Ko Su horizon. He had not seen anyone on deck, or in the water. Something felt wrong. There were two Kiimnan ambassadors that were meant to meet him there. In fact, they should have been at the boat far before he was. He knew next to nothing about boats so he couldn't prepare for the trip beyond showing up— he did not even know what had to be done in general, but he assumed it was more than just lifting anchor and drifting down the nearest canal.

He only heard the footsteps because he had been listening for them. They were soft up on deck, only distinguishable by the occasional brush of sole against wood. The planks did not even creak. He would have thought he imagined them if he were not already on edge.

He did not have to look up to know who it was.

"Thought you were with your captain. He get sick of you already?"

"I am not here to argue," Ti Ra Mal said. "I am here to warn you. Get out of the boat."

“Nice to see you, too,” Vivlan mused, continuing to look out over Ko Su. He had no objection to getting back on deck considering the uneasy feeling building in his stomach, but his aggressive dislike of her made him want to be difficult. “Warn me of what?”

“Get out of the boat.”

“Warn me of what?”

The only sound for a long moment was the lapping of waves against the wood, the world around them coming to a still before the boat lurched to the side with the sudden addition of her weight, having skipped the ladder altogether and settled for jumping down to meet him. His grip on the rail was the only thing that kept him from tumbling into the water. The drop did not seem to affect her of course, standing tall with her hands resting on her belt, perched on the chest she landed on, sizing him up through lowered brows. She looked unimpressed with what she saw.

“I want to make something very clear to you.”

The last thing he wanted to do at the moment was get into a pissing match, much less with her, alone, in a place he did not know well enough to have a substantial escape plan. There were supposed to be people there.

He doubted that was a coincidence.

“Does your boyfriend know you’ve wandered off?”

“I would suggest you take this seriously.”

He bent down to adjust his boot strap and thumbed the sheathed dagger up and into his sleeve.

“I think we have different ideas on who and what warrants seriousness.”

He was backed into a corner, both literally and figuratively. He wouldn't find allies in Ko Su, and he doubted the crew that wouldn't come within ten feet of him would be much help. He wouldn't have to fight his way out, she was not naive enough to attack, but having a weapon in his hand made him feel better.

"I am not cruel, and I am loyal," she continued as if he never spoke. The glare she gave the horizon was cold enough that the words she left unsaid were almost audible. *Unlike you*. "So, I will give you context as to why what happens next will happen. Maybe it will make things go more pleasantly on my part."

He expected mercenaries to begin hopping out of barrels, or assassins to breach the water and lunge for him.

"This, *all of this* here, is far bigger than anything you could imagine. Bigger than you, than me, than the Captain. The fate of our countries and a good many lives rely on this going smoothly. In order for Ko Su to thrive, we need to make sure we know exactly what is going on in Neevos.

"I am not leaving our futures up to you."

Ti Ra Mal turned to him then and stepped off the chest. She lifted her foot and opened the lid with her boot, revealing mounds of Neevan coin. He felt faintly dizzy at the sight.

"You will not be going to Agoras. You are not going to be a part of this. My ambassadors will take you into Neevos and from there you will take this very generous gift and live out the rest of your days in Kees or whatever hovel you decide to hide away in. You will forget everything we planned and you will stay far, far away from The Prince, Agoras, and the Captain. We will not see each other again."

With an amount of strength he had not expected from her, she slid the chest closer to him.

All he could think was that he should've seen it coming.

Everything the night before was too clean. She accepted it all too easily. Made too many excuses why she would think it advantageous to have him on her side. She made no effort to hide that she thought he was a liar out for his own gain. She was not wrong, but he wouldn't do that to Kin Day. He agreed to help him— he wouldn't betray that. He was not scared of her.

"Are you bribing me?" was all he could say for a second, his mouth having sudden trouble catching up with his thoughts, unable to take his eyes off of the gold despite the obvious threat. What was in front of him was more than he had ever seen in his life, in his possession or not. No matter how good he made it or lucky he turned out, he did not predict things turning out that financially good for him... well... *ever*.

That was not what he should be thinking about.

After a moment of silence and her blank stare boring into his face, the reality of the situation sank in, and he was not thinking about the money anymore.

She was right— she was loyal. She was loyal enough to go above her role model's head to do what she thought would benefit him most. How exactly it would was yet to be determined.

"So, just to make sure *I am* being clear," he said into the silence. "All of that last night: the arguing with Kin Day, the saying you will make me useful, the manipulating me into getting involved in the first place, the *plan*— that was all for, what? For show? To act like you were going along with what he wants?"

"Yes," she said.

“Why?” he asked, voice more genuine than he meant. Just because he should have seen a betrayal coming did not mean he did. He had not prepared for another sudden change of plans. He had not prepared for being backstabbed so quickly. Kin Day had lulled him into putting his guard down for a second. He knew better than that. “You do not like me, fine. But why do all of that? Do you think you are looking out for him by getting rid of me?”

“Yes,” she said again.

The casualty with which she replied was infuriating.

“Was any of what you said last night true?”

“Everything except for your participation. He worries about you, which is why he wanted to assign you a role. Tuck you away until the storm passes. What he doesn’t know is that this storm will not just pass. What he doesn’t know is that I already had someone in mind to corrupt The Prince. they are not Fairolan, but they will do. The Captain will not notice it is not you fulfilling the role until the three months have passed. He will think you ran off. It will hurt him, but it will secure what we have been working for.” Something in her eyes shifted. "He will be better off, but I think we both know you already knew that.”

He felt like he had been slammed in the gut.

There was movement up on deck. A couple of footsteps, hushed voices, some clinking together of metal and shifting of crates. Ti Ra Mal did not look up, kept her focus on him, but she noticeably stiffened at the sound. She was not expecting visitors, either.

The thumb that had been securing the dagger to his wrist loosened, allowing the metal to slide into his palm. The conviction she had that she was right was pissing him off. He would not do

anything drastic; knew that whoever was above would side with her over him if anything were to happen, no matter the context.

"I promised him I would do it," he settled on.

"This is bigger than a promise."

"You've said that." Another silence. "And I would do anything you say because?"

"You will do what I say because my contacts have been told to dispose of you if you get in my way. There is no trick you can pull in Neevos that I will not see through. The role was never yours to begin with." She paused. She nudged the side of the chest with her foot.

"Take the money. *Get that new start you wanted*." She knew she had him trapped for the moment. She was gloating. It did not fit her.

"You will not be happy with the results if you try putting me on a leash," he said.

She shrugged, an almost painfully casual gesture for the rigidity she held herself with.

"Maybe not, but I will do what I have to to protect him."

"He can take care of himself. He is smart."

"He is *good*." She had not slipped up until then, everything strict and orderly and detached. Even the pride in her knowledge that she was perfectly screwing him over was tamped down and controlled. She was the perfect soldier. This was too personal. Her eyes widened slightly, an eyebrow twitched, but she quickly returned to a conditioned blank slate and continued. "There are very few men that can be called good." She moved away from him then, peering over the horizon. "You can thank yourself for that."

It was a nothing statement that would hold no weight to an onlooker. It was a vague dig, but he could tell by the cold fire in her eyes that she knew exactly what she was implying.

It would've been smart of him to keep his next thought to himself. He was outnumbered if the people on deck were drawn down to them, and his weapon was useless compared to the artillery on board. He was better than this. This was not the end of the world— he had been insulted before. He would find his way out. He would keep his promise, and in order to do that, he had to get out of there alive.

Unfortunately, he did not know how else to deal with her other than egging her on either. He did not know how to respond to the double-crossing he had willingly blinded himself of. He was getting tired of the hostility and the side stepping and the gall of her to get between him and Kin Day.

"Going behind his back. Your beloved Ky La would think you a coward."

She was on him. Her hand was inches from grabbing him by the neck before he realized what was happening and ducked to the side, leaving her to run into the rail behind him. The impact was loud enough to alert the people above, an audience of two craning their heads over the side of the boat to see the commotion. With his eyes locked on her, he couldn't tell who the newfound company was— couldn't tell if they were her people or not— so he did not risk following through with the violent retort he desperately wanted to give, and let the hit to his ego sink in.

She placed her hands on his chest and pushed, slamming him into the side of The Rilun. He let the shove happen, but put up enough resistance that she had to strain herself to get him to hit the hull with a *crack*.

“do not say his name. You dirty his legacy every time you speak,” she snarled, yanking herself away from him as if she were burned as soon as he was still against the wood. She wiped her hands on her front and readjusted the armor on her chest. Whatever anger escaped then was carefully shelved away back inside of her— if he had not been the target of it, he wouldn’t have thought she had lowered herself to violence.

“My Lord? Is everything okay?” a voice called from above. Ti Ra Mal did not take her eyes off of him and under her gaze he forced himself not to move, the dagger burning in his hand. He was not hurt.

“Of course. Fetch the ambassadors and prepare the ship for take off,” she called back, neutral. There was a hum of agreement from the voice, then the heads vanished from his periphery. When their footsteps quieted and a door fell shut he removed himself from the wall, back twinging slightly from the impact. Okay, so a little bit hurt. She moved away from him as well, quickly stepping to the rope ladder and hoisting herself up a rung.

“So that is it? I fuck off and disappear?” he asked as she began to climb, as if the conversation was over.

“Yes.”

“Or I die,” he said.

“Yes.”

Ti Ra Mal stopped at the top and glanced down at him. She did not tilt her chin up and sneer as if he were a bug smeared on the bottom of her boot like he expected. Instead, her eyes softened and

fell in a look he knew well from years of living on his own. Exhaustion. She was not about to lie down and take a nap, but she did not seem as capable at slitting his throat as she did just before.

"Do not act like you are suffering because of this. I am being more merciful than I should." She nodded to the coin left in the chest beside him, her voice just quieter enough than usual to be noticeable. If she had any feeling for him other than hate, he would have convinced himself she was sad in some way. "You will have everything you will ever need. You will land on your feet somehow."

Ti Ra Mal finished climbing, then lifted herself onto the deck and out of sight.

"This is you catching me when I fall, huh?" he called after her, stepping onto the ladder as if closing the distance would change anything.

There was a long pause.

"Yes, it is."

It was not until he heard the heavy slam of a door falling shut that he allowed himself to breathe again. The resuming of breathing shifted slowly into small, shallow quick breaths, then tightness in his head, then finally giving up on maintaining an appearance for the no one around and dropping onto the deck.

As he settled into the wood, the dagger he forgot he was still holding shifted in just the right way to catch the sun's light and blind him with an aggressive flare. He plunged it into the top of the rail beside him, a moment of rage exposing itself, then retreating. After further breaths, deeper and more satisfying, he eyed where it lodged, handle still shaking with the force. The weapon would be useless now, edges dulled and sides scratched and smeared. He took it out of the wood and laid it across his stomach anyway, feeling oddly exposed without the false security it provided him.

It was not until the two Kiimnan ambassadors eventually made their way down the ladder that he got moving again. The dagger returned to its sheath and he asked an at first startled, then reluctant ambassador for some food and water in the most charming voice he could manage, and backed away into his corner to waste his time away on the trip to wherever they decided they were going to dump him.

He made himself look away from the pale beach with its sickly trees and rolling dunes as they set sail, and focused his eyes on the ground. There was an idiotic, childish hope, there and then gone, that Kin Day would come striding over the hill and yell for them to stop. He would come to say goodbye and wish him luck, could not let his friend leave so quickly, and then Vivlan would find a way out of this for the both of them.

Vivlan knew better than that, though, so he kept his gaze lowered and retreated inside himself to plan.

He was not going to disappear himself into an obscure Neevan village and work up to the grand plan now that he knew there was one. He had no idea what danger Ti Ra Mal saw that he did not, but she would not have gone behind Kin Day's back so blatantly if whatever was happening wasn not putting him in danger. Her strategy existed for a reason. Somehow, winning The Prince's favor meant that Kin Day would be safe.

Kin Day believed that he was good. He believed that Vivlan was more than some scraggly thieving kid after coming to know him beyond whatever front he put up. He must have believed that Vivlan was worth something, having come all the way to help him when he was dealing with more than his own fair share of troubles.

He is good.

Kin Day was wrong the night before when he said that things had not really changed since they were kids. They had. He was not going to let Kin Day hide him away so he could lick his wounds. He was not going to let himself fall into anonymity and stand in another's shadow. No matter what was going on behind the scenes, Vivlan was going to protect him. The only person who cared for him would be safe.

And he would show up Creedos.

That meant finding a way to get in with that prince.

He could not help thinking about Creedos, then, in the silence of the journey, save for the groaning of the oars and splashing of small waves. When they first met, the old man ran a fruit stand in front of his home and left it often unattended, trading in genuine customer interaction for a mug of nauseatingly fragrant mulled wine, propped on a stool in his doorway, nose deep in a tattered Neevan novel. Vivlan passed by his stand nearly every day when he began living on his own, and it was not hard to clock that the man was oblivious to his surroundings when he had a book in hand. It took customers a good couple of attempts at talking directly to him for him to notice they were there, if they managed the courage to approach.

But Vivlan was hungry, and had been taking from the same places for too long. His face was getting too familiar. A scrappy kid with a nervous look in his eyes and no guardians or friends in sight was easy to recognize. Fairole saw children as more of a communal responsibility than a familial one, and he was definitely not part of the community. No one knew him, and everyone was supposed to

know everyone. He overheard the adults on his last street talking about some of their food going missing, so he decided to change where he would get his groceries.

This was a new street with new people. He had to try, no matter how scary the man looked.

When he finally got the courage to go to the stand, forcing his way into a group of kids passing it on their way home from lessons, and triple checked that the man was not looking, he slipped a frozen pear into his coat and continued on. It was a cold day, and he did not have gloves. His hands were chapped and clumsy, and he just missed the pocket. The pear tumbled harmlessly into the snow right by the man's feet.

Large furry eyebrows shot up from behind the book and the man looked around for a second, trying to find the source of the interruption, before his eyes caught on the small boy frozen in place a couple feet away. The group of children had carried on without him, not entirely sure why he was walking with them in the first place, so Vivlan was alone, wide-eyed and slack-jawed and guilty looking, and had no idea where to go from there. He had never been caught before. He was certain that the man was deep in his story, bent over in his chair as if to get closer to the words, beefy fingers tapping along the spine in anticipation the way they did when he was coming up on a good part. He had no idea where he went wrong, but he knew that he just ruled out all of the shops on the stretch as possible places to get food. The man was going to plaster a picture of his face on every shop door, making sure that sellers would keep their eye out for him.

And then the man laughed. It was quiet at first, stifled and choking like he was trying to keep it in, but at Vivlan's face of confusion to the reaction it exploded, doubling him over on his stool. The loud, uproarious chuckles bounced off the walls of the packed street with such aggression that Vivlan

bet the people in the town over could hear him. Since he did not know how to react to that, he turned on his heel and ran.

In his panic he forgot that the roads would be icy and immediately slipped and lurched forwards, slamming his face into the brick side of the Neevan's house. A blinding bolt of pain rocketed up his nose and sent him to the ground, blood already beginning to stain the snow below a deep red. By the time he had realized what happened he was already struggling to his feet. Head spinning he pushed himself off and away from the wall, preparing to book it, but the next thing he knew he was being scooped up by large, capable arms and being carried into the house. He pounded on the man's back, trying to squirm out of his grip, but all he was met with was the rhythmic bouncing of the man's chest against him, the laughing having increased in intensity during his attempts to escape. The movement shook him enough that he felt nauseous and had to keep himself still once he was placed onto a plush couch to keep himself from vomiting.

The man, now blood-covered from Vivlan's broken nose, held both of his hands up in that "I mean you no harm" type of way and backed up, giving him space.

There was silence for a while, the two staring each other down. Vivlan was not sure if he was being held hostage or not, so he was not going to start the conversation.

"You okay, little one?" the man eventually asked, a concerned but mainly amused look on his face. He either did not have an accent or it was excellently suppressed.

"No," Vivlan spat, annoyed by the question given the painfully obvious answer. He was scared of the man, but he had never been nice, even in the name of self-preservation.

The man had the dignity to keep his laughter in that time and waved him off, which Vivlan still found insulting, before retreating into what he assumed to be the kitchen. He offered Vivlan a bag of ice and a cloth, and after a solid amount of ignoring the man on Vivlan's part, he helped clean him up. And even though Vivlan reflexively kicked him in the crotch when the man set his nose, at the end he gave Vivlan a pear.

He learned that the man, Creedos, was in exile like everyone thought, but he was not a violent criminal out to catch his next victim. Before the old man got caught up in some vague treachery he refused to elaborate on, he was apparently a politician and courtier that made a living disposing of all the negative effects the Neevan political world had on their people. He specialized in fast talking and knowing everything there was to know about everyone, but got too close and "did something he was not supposed to." He also had a mouth on him. He thought Vivlan's stubbornness was amusing, and after learning Vivlan was for the most part on his own, brought him under his wing and taught him how to survive.

He was not looking for a parent, he just enjoyed the company, found that lying got him more than telling the truth ever did, and spent the night on his couch more times than not. He did not like staying in one place for long, and Creedos did not fault him for that. He even praised him for the instinct, though he said the rest of Vivlan's instincts could use some work. As long as Vivlan did not pry into his past, he wouldn't pry into his, and they lived in relative harmony. It was nice.

He was not sure if the old man would be proud of or angry with him for having stolen his signet ring and ledgers, especially since he was about to use them to get closer to the crown than he ever

was. Most likely pissed, especially since he was most likely imprisoned by now, and well knew that Vivlan had double crossed him.

But Creedos had connections and Vivlan was going to exploit them until they ran dry.

He mentally cataloged everything he had that he could use to his advantage. He had quite a few Neevan signet rings, including Creedos' which he had not been expecting. He had more than enough to at least get him some sway in the odd place here or there, and now an entire chest of coin, but when it came down to it, he was still Fairolan. No one would be convinced to go along with anything he said no matter what status he showed them, especially since most of the trinkets he had belonged to Neevan nobles that were still very present figures and could refute the statement that they were "gifts" in a day's notice. He also was not completely sure they were real. Plus, no matter how strong he liked to think he was, there was not a reality in which he could carry the chest on his own.

There was nothing he could do with an immobile chest of coin, a vague understanding of the Neevan language, and a revealing outfit that could get him where he needed to go, especially while having to stay out of Ti Ra Mal's way. Luckily, he was not an idiot. He had a couple of things on him that would sway things aggressively in his favor if things got tight. Well, if he found what he was looking for, that is. He did originally have a plan before Ti Ra Mal came in and ruined everything.

They were only half a day into the trip when the ambassadors began to steer the boat to the side of the canal and dropped anchor. It was shallow water, so he thought the anchor was not necessary. They had stopped before, pausing to look over maps and take retreats to the bathroom, but once the boat docked the ambassadors simply looked at him. One of them nodded his head to the shore.

"This is it."

It was at least a three day's ride to Agoras.

"You are not serious."

It was a moot point. Everything they were doing was in accordance with Ti Ra Mal's orders. She would drop him as far away from the action as possible, and check him off her checklist, hoping to never think of him again. She probably enjoyed it, knowing she finally got rid of him. The horizon on either side of the canal consisted of nothing but empty fields, and he knew northern Neevos was not nearly as populated as the south. There could be no one around for miles and miles, and once you did stumble across someone, they did not make for the most amiable company. Especially not towards a Fairolan. If it was not happening to him, he would have thought it was funny.

At their blank faces he stood and put his hands on the chest. He stared at it, hoping an idea would come to him. It was technically his, but it was also technically too heavy for him to carry. Unfortunately, it was too valuable an asset to leave behind. No matter how much a Neevan hated a Fairolan, they would most likely do *something* for him in exchange for a fortune. Just a tenth of the chest could change someone's life. It was definitely changing his, though at the moment it was just making it more difficult.

First thing he had to do was get it on land.

First he tried picking it up from the bottom, and was immediately convinced he was going to throw his back out, so he stopped. Next he grabbed a handle and pulled with everything he had, planting his feet on the railing for leverage, but the unpleasant screeching the metal edges of the chest

made against the deck was not worth enduring. How Ti Ra Mal moved it earlier he had no idea, much less with just her *leg*.

The two ambassadors sat there and watched him struggle to move it.

"Could you at least help me pick it up?"

They looked at him, the chest, each other, and then back at him.

"that is not part of our job description," one of them said.

Vivlan actively forced himself not to roll his eyes. There *was* a lot of money in the chest. More than he needed. He sighed.

"I will let you keep some."

Proving that anyone could be bought, the Ti Ra Mal supporters hoisted the chest onto land, scooped up enough gold back into the boat to lighten his load substantially, and wished him well as they moved on, exactly in the direction he needed to go.

They left him with almost exactly half. That was one large asset down the drain. He did come out of the situation without a broken back or dislocated shoulder, though, so he considered the exchange about equal.

There were no buildings or roads in sight, so he stretched, silently hoped that everything wouldn't immediately fall apart, and began to lug the chest across the countryside.

It was a good hour of manual labor later that he came across a dirt road. It looked for the most part unused, but it proved that people existed in the area at some point. Farther along, a few buildings were scattered along the stretch built in the traditional Neevan style, flat topped and sun baked, and all

looked a bit off, though Vivlan was not sure how. If he was not desperate he would have assumed it a ghost town and continued on, but he was desperate.

He dropped the chest in an overgrown patch of shrubbery behind a house and considered it hidden. He began a slow loop around the few buildings, peeking in dusty windows and being met with nothing but dusty floors and old furniture. Every door that was not completely ripped off its hinges had graffiti on it or was adorned with termites. The realization that he was completely alone hit him suddenly. There had never been a moment in Vivlan's life where he was not surrounded by people— a day did not go by without him accidentally shouldering someone or a vendor did not force a free sample on him. Even on the smaller fishing islands and up in the Great Mountains there were always others to keep you company. You did not need to interact with them, but you knew they were *there*. He decided he did not like the feeling.

The last building on the stretch was bigger than the others. The thing that caught his eye was not its row of relatively clean windows, its multiple floors, its uncharacteristically wooden exterior— it might have had a meticulous squatter— but instead a horse tied to a pole out front, chewing happily away at its feedbag. She was a big, beautiful thing, dressed in black revelry, void of the thick film of grime that covered the town. Only a sprinkling of mud had made its way onto her ankles, and even then it looked like she had been recently wiped down. Well taken care of. Wealthy enough owner. He would have just gone ahead and rode her the rest of the way down if he could get into Agoras by himself.

On the side of the building, grazing in the shade, stood two horses like her, just as spotless, just as large, latched to a partially-covered wagon. There was plenty of room to stash a chest and a passenger.

As he walked up to the front door he noticed the pale gray of a ripped off insignia on her jacket. It was carefully covered by swirling, intricate golden designs. Hard to notice unless one looked at it right on. They were stolen, but none seemed in any form of distress, so it had been a while since they'd been relinquished from their former owner's care. It calmed some repressed nerves to see such a blatant example of larceny. A criminal was easier to bribe.

Worst came to worse, he still had his dagger.

The door groaned under his hand and he stepped inside.

None of the ten or so occupants bothered to look up from their drinks or games at his entrance. It reminded him only vaguely of Fairolan taverns, lacking all of the spectacle and trinkets and performance that made up the norm in his home country. Vivlan assumed that if he came in wearing his skirts he would be beaten up.

It was easy to pick out the man he wanted. Roughly tanned and sun splotched, a wide brimmed straw hat covering his eyes as he downed his alcohol of choice, a deep black thing that he could smell from the door. Vivlan only caught the side eye he threw him because he was looking for it. The man's jacket sprawled out on the bar matched the patterns on the horses.

Chapped lips pulled back as Vivlan approached. Vivlan smiled.

"I have a proposition for you," he said.

The man sneered. He was missing multiple teeth.

"And who the fuck're you supposed to be?" he grumbled, reaching for another glass of the black stuff on the bar. At first his words barely registered as Neevan, the accent thick and abrasive. Whatever dialect he learned from Creedos was clearly a few steps removed from the man's. The Neevan Vivlan learned was strung together by curved lips swelling around rich, flowing vowels and soft consonants. No matter how angry he managed to make the man, Creedos never managed to sound more than annoyed while speaking the language. It was a tongue meant for the passive aggressive, not the loud. If he were a more sentimental person he would call the language beautiful. The poorly tanned man in front of him spoke it like he had a mouth full of bread. Vivlan doubted he would be able to understand him if tried saying something in Fir, the amount of sounds made from a brushing contact with teeth impossible to make with him missing the primary component. The man narrowed his eyes. "You a Fairolan spy?"

"I would not be a very good spy if you thought I was a spy," Vivlan said.

Eyes narrowed further. He leant forward in his stool, wandering eyes regarding Vivlan in a lazy, heated stare. They caught on Vivlan's mostly exposed chest, then somewhere further down, shamelessly lingering before flicking back to his face. Vivlan did not roll his eyes. The attention was familiar, but disappointing. He liked attention, thrived on it, and was not above the more intimate bribe, but his arms were beginning to ache and he wanted to avoid exploring any route that would make him any more exposed than he already was. The man was not worth the hit to his ego. He would rather steal the horses and get lost in the desert.

"You from the capital?" the man asked, not bothering to hide the suspicion in his voice as he stood and shrugged on his jacket. The tavern continued on around them, and no one so much as

glanced in their direction as the man walked out without paying. He did not seem to care if Vivlan was following him or not. Vivlan followed him.

"No."

"You sound like you from the capital."

"I am pretty sure I am not."

Creedos was from the capital. Vivlan would have to find an excuse as to why his Neevan was so aggressively southern.

"I need passage to Agoras."

The man snorted and began to untie the horse at the front. "What? Your magic run out or somethin, boy? can not teleport?" It was a common rumor in Neevos that Fairolans had magic. Vivlan assumed it was either because of their avant garde fashion sense or because Fairolans actually used their brains. He *had* done a few fortune telling bouts when money was tight, but no one really believed them. They just wanted someone to tell them what to do. At Vivlan's lack of response he continued. "Why would I do shit for you?"

I have money.

I will suck you off?

Neither option particularly excited him. He chose the lesser of the two evils.

"I have roughly 30,000 coin in a chest with your name on it if you can get me down there in three days or less. All of it was legally acquired from Ko Su and I have the signet ring to prove it. All you have to do is let me stay in your wagon for a bit."

It was always the eyes that gave people away. The man shifted his hat on his head and darted his gaze to the ropes, but not before his eyes widened slightly at the amount.

The man led the horse to his wagon and hooked her ropes to a latch on the back. Vivlan watched.

"Who said I am going down there in the first place?"

Playing hard to get. Fine.

"The 50,000 coin I will give you. Get me to Agoras and it's yours."

"You have it on you?"

"Behind that house."

A flick of the hand west. The man nodded.

"Can not get you inside the city. that is not negotiable."

Of course it was not. Fucking Neevans.

One of the few things Vivlan was able to find in Creedos' house that gave him any hint about his past concerning Agoras was a business name and address located just East of the capital. The ledgers Vivlan took showed that he had sunken a lot of money into it. *Nikla's.* What they did specifically he was not sure, but their product did a lot of crossing over the capital's border. By mentioning Creedos' name he could maybe get in through them. He could even play the *I am in debt and running away from my problems* card if he wanted to debase himself. If that did not work he would find a way to get his money back from the man who was noisily hoisting himself up onto the wagon's front, taking the reins in his hands.

The man cleared his throat. He was looking at Vivlan again, a small smirk playing on his lips. He was not looking anywhere eye-level. Voice pitched a little low he said, “I will get you right on up to the border for a little something extra.”

Having decided what his limits were this time around, he ignored the heat in the man’s tone and did not acknowledge the implication. He had already put money on the table, so he would have to stick with money.

He really did not want to use one of his strongest bargaining chips so early, but he was not in the position to get to Agoras any other way. With a sigh he dug his hand into his boot and brought out the leather bag of signet rings. When he poured them into his palm to show him, they twinkled under the summer sun. The man squinted at them.

“Get me to the Eastern gates, and I will give you these too.”

A bit disappointed, but not totally uninterested: “They real?”

“Took them myself.” Kind of.

He looked at him for a long time, trying to find the catch. Either not finding one or not thinking Vivlan a threat if there was one, he grunted and grubbily snatched them out of his hand, pocketing them in his satchel. He burped.

“Fucking Fairolans.”

He waved vaguely towards the back of the wagon. As Vivlan trekked his way to where he had hidden the chest and did his best to load it into the wagon, the man fiddled with the reins and began to hum a song that sounded like one he had heard in his late childhood. A Neevan tune he couldn’t identify.

As he settled in the wagon, careful to keep his back to the wall and his gaze split between the man and the open back, a small part of him ached as he acknowledged how close he was to being the richest he had ever been. Having money was all he wanted for so long. It let him do whatever he wanted whenever he wanted. It was freedom. Of course he loved the game of getting it through convoluted means, and the thrill of running and hiding and outthinking, but it had always come back to having something to hold him up. When you were on your own, truly on your own, all you had was you and your resources. Money was a nice resource.

If he needed the money back, or the fake rings, he would find some way to reacquire them. It was illogical for him to carry around that much anyway, and he would have to scout out the city before finding a good place to stash it. Giving it to the man was as good as anything.

Money was not his priority anymore.

He still had the papers and the ring that mattered. He still had his own goal. And a friend's goal.

"I promised I would help him," he said lamely to himself, the gold coin blinking at him as the cart jerked forward, the sun rays dappling over their reflective surface. The gold of course did not answer, and he closed the chest and chose not to look back.

Chapter 3

The first thing he noticed was that the sun seemed closer than usual.

Each day they got closer to their destination, the more grateful he was that he'd forced himself into Neevan clothes. If he wore his usual layers of coats and furs he would've baked to a crisp within the hour or suffocated in the unbearable humidity. It made sense why Neevans were pinned as assholes. Vivlan would be snappy too if he felt like the sun had a personal grudge against him.

The days blurred into each other in the heat. He made himself sleep during the day, saving himself from actively confronting the weather, but mostly because he did not trust the man not to dump him and ride off with his money if he did not keep a consistent eye on him.

He was considering passing out shortly after the third day began, the old man having woken up from his painfully loud sleep, when the wagon lurched to a stop. He was on his feet in less than a second, body going on autopilot. The sky was still dark, and whatever beasts existed in the Neevan wilderness were still prowling in the pre-dawn. Crickets made a frenzy in the long grass, their loud chorus beating senselessly in his ears.

"We're here."

Vivlan's limbs ached as he pried himself from the wagon. He had not stood since the previous morning, and was grateful for his chance to finally get moving. Muscles popped as he stretched and glanced at their immediate surroundings, giving the man his nicest smile before the man snapped on the reins and continued down the stone road.

The first thing he saw were the gates. Neevos was mainly small mountains interspersed with large flat spans of flattened rock and sand and fields of wildflowers, so the giant metal pillars reaching into the sky caught the eye. It reminded him of a fortress. From where they stopped he could not see an obvious entrance.

Vivlan did not think they were that close to the ocean, but seagulls soared above and called out. The street he was left on had buildings that looked like marble, with curtains covering holes which he assumed were to be windows and doors. The bleached stone houses tightly packed the sprawling, maze-like streets. Unsurprisingly there were not many people around in the early morning. The sun was just beginning to creep over the horizon, a warm pink glow falling on the white stone. A cat skittered past a doorway before disappearing into the dark of a nearby alley.

He searched for a *Nikla's*.

Vivlan did not think it was a brothel. Close. It had most of the signs. The alley was easy to miss, narrow and right off the edge of the cobbled street. The moss-covered brick hid itself away towards the back and lacked windows and outside lights, making it hard to see unless one was actively seeking it out. *Nikla's* was written crudely on a paper above the actual door. The blue cloth tacked to the building said it was somewhere where people could find pleasure, and the eye slot on the ornate metal door said it was exclusive. Where each country's cultures and traditions differed, it seemed like blue fabric on walls meant sex. It was nice to know there was some consistency, not that he sought out things like that, but found it hard to believe the weird old man whose favorite activity was hunkering down to read a history anthology would be investing his hard earned funds in something so controversial. Well, at least in Neevos. Maybe a reason he left was to pursue sex in peace. Vivlan

shivered at the thought and cast it out of his mind. It was the last thing he wanted to associate with the old man. He would do anything for the building to not be a brothel.

Based on how Vivlan looked, hair slicked to his forehead in wiry spirals and once white shirt soaked through with dirt and sweat, he was not a high paying customer. In fact, he was officially broke. Sweaty and gross and dehydrated and definitely not Neevan, he did not know how he would be received if he just walked in, so he made sure to slip on the ring before knocking on the door.

Despite the early hour the eye slot opened with a *clack*.

A painted eye flicked over him. Regarded him flatly.

"We do not serve you here. Leave."

The slot shut.

Vivlan stood there for a second. This was his only lead. He knocked again.

It opened again. The woman spoke again, this time in heavily accented Fairolan.

"Leave."

In Neevan :"I am looking for the owner of this establishment. I have questions about a man named Creedos."

The slot slammed hard enough to echo through the alley. The cat he saw scitter by yowled. He was not banking on that working, but at least he now knew their thoughts on Fairolans and that Creedos was not a name they were looking to hear.

He began to concoct an actual plan in his head, starting with breaking and entering, before he heard some shuffling coming from behind the door. After a second the door opened, revealing an older, haggard looking woman in a robe, a foot shorter than him and blonde hair tinged with gray.

"Creedos?" she said slowly, hands reaching towards him but not quite making contact as neither of them made a move forward. The way she said it made him want to look back at his papers. Find another place to find answers. He wanted to know Creedos' past. Wanted to beat him at his own game. Wanted to feel good about himself.

Also he had to get into Agoras.

"Yes." Still Neevan, but now a bit hesitant. Now seeing her as a whole he saw the paint on her face was smudged, her hands were wrinkled, her lips turned down. She looked tired. "Do you know him?"

She opened her mouth to say something, lips sticking together as they pried apart, but froze when her eyes caught on the ring.

"I have not seen this ring in years," she marveled, suddenly unhesitant, grubby fingers grabbing for his hand and turning it over with hers. She reached to touch it, but stopped, as if she would taint the insignia. Bright blue eyes glanced up at him, wide in an emotion Vivlan could not place. "You could not have gotten this from him. How have you gotten this from him? It can not be."

She continued to mumble under her breath, looking at him, then the ring, then him in some type of panic.

"Why not?"

"He would never give this to anyone. Not unless..." she trailed off, eyes seemingly glassing over. Then, a smile. Yellow teeth flashing. A wolf's grin. Vivlan did not want to be there anymore. *"Is that monster finally dead?"*