

Evil 571

Chapter 571 - 571: One last figure.

"Make sure you don't forget anything," Matthias leaned on the railing of the ship's deck as he watched Rasmus and the others board the ship. "This is going to be a long journey, this is going to look too suspicious," he pushed himself away from the railing and approached Rasmus. "Is this really necessary?" He arched his brows and glanced at the four navy ships that were going to escort his ship and Ferdinand's ship.

"It is, it should be enough to make us feel safe. After all, the Asghar family wants Anastasha dead," Rasmus answered and watched Anastasha and her people go down into the ship's cabin.

"I don't think the Navy would be able to stop the assassins. If those assassins had decided to kill those marines, they would kill them without a problem," Matthias pointed out and glanced at the naval ships with their magic weapons ready.

"That makes it even better. If the assassins killed them, I could use it against the Asghar family. But, I don't think they would be stupid enough to involve the whole navy fleet. So, as I said, it should be enough to make us feel safe. The journey should be smooth without any problems," Rasmus patted Matthias on the shoulder and walked to the edge of the deck, looking at the dock where Carrion and Erlina stood.

Rasmus stared at them without showing any expression, but Erlina's was different. She was still staring at him with a cold expression, especially after their private conversation. Nobody knew what had happened between them, but it was obvious that Erlina was angry with him. When Rasmus nodded at them, Erlina looked away as if she didn't want to acknowledge it.

Carrion glanced at Erlina and could see the glimpse of pain, sadness, and perhaps betrayal. He had never seen Erlina be so emotional toward anything or anyone, not even toward him, not at this level. But seeing her like that, Carrion realized how much Rasmus meant to her.

"I don't know what's happening between you two, but are you sure you want to see him off like that?" Carrion asked in a gentle voice.

Erlina shot a glare at Carrion for a moment, but then she closed her eyes as if she was regretting it. She took a deep breath and placed her hand on his chest as an act of apology. She sighed as she slowly opened her eyes and turned her head to look at Rasmus. Unfortunately, Rasmus was no longer there, he had gone into the ship's cabin.

"IF I EVER SEE YOU AGAIN, YOU OWE ME AN APOLOGY!" Erlina shouted her lungs out as she stared at the ship, everyone was startled by her voice and looked at her with a confused look, even Carrion was baffled and tried to calm her down by placing his hand on her arm. "DO YOU HEAR ME! RASMUS!" She shouted once again, but this time her voice trembled as if a dam was about to break.

Rasmus smiled as he walked into the cabin, he could hear Erlina's voice loud and clear since he had sensitive ears.

When the ship began to sail, Erlina couldn't help but shed a single tear that she immediately wiped away before Carrion could notice it. She sought Carrion's hand and held it as tightly as she could, because she didn't want to feel alone. Carrion looked at her with his aching heart, and he slowly wrapped his arms around her and caressed her back silently.

"Why did you shout like that?" Carrion asked, his voice barely above a whisper as he looked down at Erlina. "Why did it sound like he wouldn't come back?" He furrowed his brows and made Erlina look up at his eyes.

"I don't want to talk about it right now, please?" Erlina muttered and clenched her fists on Carrion's chest.

"Okay, let's head back..." Carrion nodded with understanding and guided Erlina home.

Matthias put down the East Neva map on the big square table where Rasmus, Anastasha, Aris, Rullein, Serena, and Javi were standing around it. The map was the newest edition based on territorial wars that had been happening in the past year.

"So, the main question is where are we going to land this ship?" Matthias asked as he looked at Anastasha and Rasmus. "I'm pretty sure that we won't be going straight to the Asghar territory, right? I mean we could use this strait to go straight to the Asghar's territory, but I don't think that's a good idea," he added.

"Why is that? Is it because you're scared?" Rullein chuckled.

"Well, that's the main reason, but because right now there's a conflict between the Khan Empire and the Sultans. The Khan Empire has been trying to expand its territory, using this strait as a passage for them to go straight to the lands that owned by the Sultans without having to go through land where the Asghar family owned. At the same time, both the Khan Empire and the Sultans have reinforced their walls along the shoreline, and every ship that goes there would be destroyed. The only ships that allow to move in and out the strait are the navy ships," he explained.

Rasmus hummed and looked at the waterway that went deep into the Khan Empire's land and at the same time, the exit was where the lands that the Sultans owned while the middle belonged to the Asghar family. He looked at the northeast area of the map beyond the land that was owned by the Asghar family, and that border was where the main conflict was.

"What's your plan? Which side do you favor the most? The Sultans or the Khan Empire?" Rasmus glanced at Anastasha with his brows raised.

"Neither, but my plan is to go... here..." Anastasha tapped the map to see where a piece of land was in the Sultans territory, and it was written on the map that the land belonged to the Ashenvale family.

"The Ashenvale? For what reason?" Rasmus furrowed his brows because one of his former students, Valari was an Ashenvale. "You're using my connection to secure yourself from problems?"

"Our problems, Count... our problems," Anastasha smiled, the smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Well, I did my research on your past when you taught those extraordinary students of yours, the Angelis, the Sancticus, the Ashenvale, the Ravenshroud, the Suncrown, and the Wyverncrest. Six young figures that you have taught, somehow, they have become a part of the history you're trying to write. You have most of them in the history, I guess isn't it time to add the last one in the book?" She playfully smirked at Rasmus.

Rasmus thought about it for a second and then he nodded in agreement. Anastasha winked at him, knowing exactly how he thought of the situation and knowing that he wouldn't mind it at all because he would gain a lot of things from this as well.

"Well, now it's my turn to ask you, Count. How are you going to play the board? To be the hand that moved the pawn or be the king in the board? Just a heads-up, playing behind the curtain will gain you zero impact on this continent because all the power comes from the crown everyone wears not the whispers," Anastasha stared right into Rasmus's eyes with a serious expression as she pointed at her head.

"Then I'll play along," Rasmus answered without hesitation and stared back at Anastasha.

Chapter 572 - 572: Self-consuming.

Everyone gathered on the deck and watched as the two naval ships sunk five suspicious ships with no banners that were approaching. Of course, it was a bit extreme, but both Rasmus and Aris could sense killing intents from those ships. Rasmus was the one who ordered the naval ships to sink them, and it was revealed he held power over them because Arka agreed to lend his fleet for Rasmus to use as he pleased.

"Another failed attempt to get rid of me, I'm grateful, Count," Anastasha stood beside Rasmus and watched the bodies float on the sea with their separated limbs around the debris.

"I'm curious why you have those bodyguards of yours with you if they can't even handle those assassins?" Rasmus asked and glanced at Anastasha's personal bodyguard, the only remaining one, Andrei.

"If loyalty can be bought, I would have thousands on my side, Count. Unfortunately, it's not, and the ones that are loyal to me are... the leftovers, the weakest among their peers. They knew that, and they were fine with that as long as I paid them more than their worth," Anastasha answered, her lower face covered by an unfolded fan, her gaze focused on those bodies on the water, realizing they were assassins based on their bodies.

"And you believed all of them are truly loyal and not a spy to keep an eye on you? If your father could infiltrate the elite assassins that belonged to your brothers, I think it wouldn't be hard for him to infiltrate your people," Rasmus raised his brows and looked at Anastasha.

"Then, should I kill him?" Anastasha glanced at her most loyal guard, Andrei. "Andrei, take out your life for me," she ordered.

Andrei bowed his head and grabbed a dagger before he slit his own throat without hesitation. Everyone on deck was petrified when they witnessed what had just happened. On the other hand, Rasmus' eyes lingered on Andrei's twitching body, not yet dead, but soon to be.

"Thank you for serving me well, Andrei," Anastasha stared at Andrei, knowing he was still capable of hearing. Not long after she uttered her words, Andrei's body stopped twitching and completely stiffened, dead from blood loss. "Who's next, Count? I can tell the remaining people I have to kill themselves," she raised her brows as she stared into Rasmus' eyes.

"That doesn't answer or prove my question, neither does it solve the issue of the matter," Rasmus said with a serious expression.

"So I just killed Andrei for nothing?" Anastasha tilted her head and kept staring into Rasmus' eyes. "But isn't my action answered, proved, and solved the issue? All I have to do is to get rid of everyone because I never trusted anyone in the first place. What I showed you wasn't loyalty because that doesn't exist, what I showed you was obedience," she folded the fan and smiled coldly at Rasmus.

"You want to erase bloodbaths in your own family, but you won't hesitate to kill due to lack of trust. If you can't trust your brothers once you take the seat as the head of the family, how could you prevent the bloodbath when you never trust them? Would you take back your words and kill them when it was necessary?" Rasmus asked with a serious expression.

"If I stripped them from power and influence, they would rely on me to live. They would be desperate enough to become obedient, and someone who lacked the ability to stand on their own, they lacked the fangs, claws, and jaws to hunt," Anastasha watched the soldiers carry Andrei's body away from the deck.

"Nature always finds its way, don't try to alter nature when you can't control it fully, and you will never be able to control nature completely," Rasmus warned.

"Exactly, Count..." Anastasha smirked as she closed the distance between them. "My brothers will always have the resentment toward me in the end, and I'll let them find people they can use, they can

rely on other than me. I can use their blind resentment to involve other powers into the entangled mess and I will devour them and make myself grow more powerful and then? Obedience will be the only solution for them," she whispered, revealing her ultimate plan.

Rasmus narrowed his eyes when he heard the whole pattern of Anastasha's system. He saw a self-sustaining, self-consuming, and self-sufficient system that it looped back to itself. The system controlled the imbalance, and it produced an inevitable reaction, then it became a conflict, and that conflict was what Anastasha was looking for. She observed and monitored the conflict, and that was when she began to select which side or power she needed to consume to maintain the conflict. That was when she grew more powerful while the conflict stayed to feed her endlessly.

"A loop to that can make you grow endlessly," Rasmus nodded with understanding. "East Neva is the perfect place for such a system. Your system is almost impossible to break," he was fascinated when his brows furrowed and eyes narrowed.

Anastasha tapped Rasmus' chest with her folded fan and her smile became genuine joy the moment she grinned. She admired Rasmus' sharp mind that he could see through her plans and her system so effortlessly.

"A self-consuming system that relies on nothing but itself. A system grows and adapts to stay necessary, but if a system stays the same but not at the same time? They will obey it, and depend on it," Anastasha smirked and chuckled softly.

Rasmus finally realized how dangerous Anastasha was as an individual. She wasn't blinded by power, she was the one who created power and consumed it. She wasn't naive, she wasn't as shallow as he had thought she would be when she wanted nothing but to break the tradition of her family. She had shown that she planned to rule over East Neva through stable chaos within her system.

"Ouroboros..." Rasmus muttered to himself when he realized that it was similar to the symbol of self-sustaining, and that it was a snake as well, just like Anastasha.

"What did you just say?" Anastasha stared into Rasmus' eyes with her eyes wide open.

"Ouroboros?" Rasmus raised his brows, and he could see the shock in Anastasha's face.

"How did you know about that?" Anastasha asked as she gripped Rasmus' wrist. "Who told you about that name?" She tightened her grip on his wrist, her eyes searched his eyes for an answer.

"A long time ago, I don't remember. Why?" Rasmus asked with a serious expression. "Don't tell me, that the blood of the Celestial Beast that runs in your veins is Ouroboros?" He stared into Anastasha's eyes.

Anastasha stared into Rasmus eyes and found no deception or lie but truth and pure confusion. She let go of Rasmus' wrist, and then left without saying a single word back into the cabin.

The way Anastasha reacted to his question, he was convinced that he was right about it. It was no wonder that Anastasha could come up with such a system that perfectly fit in East Neva. However, the fact that it had a similar meaning to mythology and had the same name, it was unnerving and unbelievable.

Chapter 573 - 573: A change of pace. (End of Volume.7)

"Wake up lads, we are about to arrive at the Maloses Port, the third biggest port in the continent," Matthias informed as he knocked on the door. "Keep your hands in your pockets or someone might steal anything from you, including your underpants," he jokingly said before he walked away to go to the deck.

Rasmus glanced at the door when he heard Matthias' voice, and then he closed the notebook that he held. He stored the notebook in his spatial ring while he stared at Rullein sleeping on the bed while hugging a bottle of whiskey. Aris on the other hand, she was enjoying her cup of tea, her gaze fixated on the tea, realizing why humans loved tea because she was addicted to it in the past few days.

"Is there a specific reason why Rullein has been sleeping lately?" Rasmus asked as he stood up and grabbed his suit that he had put over the backrest of his chair. "I thought spirit didn't need sleep," he muttered and put on his suit.

"I believe it has something to do with her current state because she's too weak to maintain her human form. She's not asleep nor she's awake," Aris answered as she grabbed a teaspoon and then threw it at Rullein. Rullein immediately deflected the spoon before it could hit her head. "You can say that her body is aware, but her mind isn't. She's also listening," she pointed out.

"I see, let's go to the deck," Rasmus walked to the door and watched Rullein stir in her sleep and slowly open her eyes as she sat up.

The three of them walked up the stairs and saw everyone was already gathered on the deck. Serena, Javi, and Daryus were standing next to each other, and he could listen to their conversation about the Maloses Port, a place that held a grim history behind its success. However, Rasmus saw Anastasha standing with her personal maid, staring at the land in the far distance without saying a word. He decided to approach her since she had been hiding herself in the past two days ever since their last conversation.

"Count..." Anastasha said without looking back at him, noticing that Rasmus was approaching. "Are you ready to join the warfares?" She glanced over her shoulder with a smirk on her face.

"No, not yet," Rasmus shook his head. "I know almost nothing still about this continent, so I'll take it slow by meeting the Ashenvale family first," he pointed out as he stood beside Anastasha.

"You know you have walking encyclopedias around you, right? Javi, the assassin of the Sand Tower that has killed countless powerful figures and knows the secrets of each nation. Doctor Daryus who has traveled many corners of East Neva continent, saving people's lives no matter who they are. Lastly, me, a woman who was raised and taught to rule over nations both the north side and the south side," Anastasha looked at Rasmus with a playful smile on her face before she unfolded the fan and covered the lower half of her face.

"I know, but I want to see it from other perspectives, especially those who have strong biased, not just the truth," Rasmus nodded with understanding. "Truth doesn't drive people as strongly as bias. Learning people's way they think directly is better than just stating facts about them," he added.

"So that's your method? I'm flattered," Anastasha stared into Rasmus' eyes, seeing no lies or deception in them. "Maybe I should watch you closely to understand what kind of dangerous man you are, Count," she chuckled softly as she folded the fan.

"I don't think that's a secret to begin with," Rasmus responded and watched dozens of ships go to and leave the port.

"Ahh, speaking of secret..." Anastasha clapped her hands together as she turned to look at Aris, Rullein, and Serena. "Do you know the secret way of getting recognized so easily here in East Neva?" She raised her brows.

"What secret?" Rasmus brows furrowed and she could see the mischievous in her eyes.

Anastasha walked past Rasmus and then approached Aris, Rullein, and Serena. Rasmus watched her and listened to her words, wanting those three to follow her. After they agreed, the four of them walked toward him with Anastasha standing in the front.

"Well, you remember that I mentioned that all powerful families have many wives? What I'm trying to say is..." Anastasha paused and then her hand pointed at Aris', Rullein's, and Serena's faces with a smile on her face. "Make them your lovers and you'll be immediately recognized and even respected. The prettier your lovers, the higher your status among men," she revealed.

Rasmus stared at Anastasha's face, and he didn't see any lies or deceptions. He then looked at Aris, Rullein, and Serena, the three powerful figures that were recognized by their achievements and their powers. He didn't even try to consider the suggestion because the whole world already knew their identities and their relationships with him.

"I know what you're thinking, but that doesn't matter, Count. You're surrounded by beauties, and whether you like it or not, people will look at you because of these women. So, might as well let all of you play the part. There's no harm in it, right?" Anastasha smirked as she unfolded her fan to cover the lower half of her face. "You said it yourself that you wanted to observe the people and their biases, this is the easiest and fastest way," she pointed out and winked at Rasmus.

"You know it's not a bad idea," Serena spoke as she stared at Rasmus. "I don't mind playing as your lover, after all, my status as Saint is useless here," she pointed out.

"Me too, I don't mind it. I mean we slept more than once already, so I think I can play the role perfectly," Rullein grinned as she stared at Rasmus.

"I failed to be a leader in West Neva, and I know that I'm not the type who can take command. I have been by your side the longest, and we both have done things and pretend to be something, this is no different," Aris said with a straight face.

Rasmus looked at them for a moment before he glanced at Anastasha with her playful smile as if she knew that this would happen. Still, the choice was his, and the way Anastasha used his words against him was quite fascinating.

"If all of you are fine with it, there's no reason to waste this opportunity," Rasmus nodded with understanding.

"Then, it's all set," Anastasha clapped her hands with a huge smile on her face. "Now, let me do some makeover for these ladies. They will be ready before we arrive at the port," she chuckled and then signaled those three to follow her into the cabin.

(At the same time, in the frozen sea in the North)

Sanya landed on the vast frozen sea, her eyes roaming around the eerily quiet place. She could sense traces of demonic energy, and then she glanced at the big crater in front of her. Her expression was impassive, but she was disturbed by the fact that the corpse of a True Dragon that Aris and the others had killed had disappeared.

"There's no sign of it coming back to life..." Sanya muttered as she looked at the crater. "Someone knew the location and decided to dug it out. Someone that's powerful enough to absorb a True Dragon..." She narrowed her eyes as she looked at the sky, seeing the traces of demonic energy.

"It's definitely not her..." Sanya crossed her arms, knowing the beings she had encountered so far didn't have that kind of demonic energy, especially not Satan. "Someone else did and I was too late," she sighed and flew away, knowing that the Dragon's Maw could be in danger.

(At the same time at the gate into the South Neva Union)

The gatekeepers were asking questions to everyone that tried to enter the headquarters. They had been asking the same eerie question that required them to ask any visitors. They asked every visitor if they were an angel or not, and so far, nobody said yes or even tried to give an ambiguous answer because the visitor would be interrogated and even kicked out from entering the headquarters if they did.

"Next..." the guard looked at the two men riding their horses that were going to enter headquarters.

The two men didn't even get down from their horses when the guards were standing in front of them. The guards shared a look, sighing quietly, knowing that the visitors could be arrogant pricks, and there were many people like that.

"What's your purpose of visit?" The guard asked as he stared at the two men.

"We have an important message to your leader," the man with thick eyebrows, eyelashes, and curly black hair said, his voice calm and monotone.

"Are you an angel?" The guard asked again, his voice was as monotone as the man before him, already knowing the answer.

"Yes," The man answered without hesitation.

At that moment the two guards' faces turned pale and their heads slowly turned to look at each other. They raised their brows, asking if they heard it right, but when they both obviously heard the same, they turned to the other man. The other guard gulped and asked the same question.

"Are you an angel?" The second guard asked in a trembling voice.

"Yes," The second man answered without hesitation.

"Oh..." The second guard gulped once again, a bead of sweat falling to his chin. "Please, come in and follow me..." He said and let the two men walk through the gate.

Chapter 574 - 574: The arrivals.

Thalior stared at the two men who were standing in front of him. He observed both of them and found that they looked like normal people, nothing different about them. Although they looked normal, Thalior noticed that those two hadn't made any facial expressions, they were completely still and stiff

like a statue when they were standing. It was eerie and unnerving to be standing among angels, beings that were said to be the most powerful beings after Gods.

"Please, have a seat," Thalior offered for the second time. "It must be uncomfortable to be standing all the time."

"We are fine standing like this, Archduke Thalior. We are here not for pleasantries, we are here to convey a message, an offer," the man with curly black hair answered, his gaze never leaving Thalior's as if he was learning and observing his existence.

"An offer?" Thalior asked, trying not to seem intimidated or anxious.

"For the safety of humankind, our The Prince is offering you a Dome of Peace," the man with long gray hair answered, his gaze identical to the first man that stood beside him.

"Wait a moment, I don't understand a single word you said. What's the Dome of Peace? And who's The Prince you're talking about?" Thalior furrowed his brows as he looked at both of them with a confused look.

"As we said, we are here to convey a message and an offer. We have conveyed our message and the offer. If you want to know the detail, we will send you someone else," the man with black curly hair replied.

"Or you may come to visit us," the man with gray hair offered.

Thalior was speechless, not knowing what to say because for the first time, he spoke with a higher being, and they were nothing like humans by the way they spoke. He tried to not offend them or annoy them with questions, knowing what they were capable of.

"I understand. We would love to speak with someone else because we might have so many questions to ask," Thalior said as he looked them in the eyes for a moment before he averted his gaze. Something was off with the way they stared at him, and it gave him a chill down his spine.

The two men nodded with understanding and then they walked away toward the door. However, the man with black curly hair stopped mid-way and slowly turned around to look at Thalior.

"How did you know that we are angels?" The man asked, his expression still impassive.

"Count Rasmus Blackheart mentioned something about you," Thalior answered, giving the answer that Rasmus wanted him to give.

"Rasmus Blackheart," the man with gray hair repeated.

"What did he say about us?" The man with black curly hair asked.

"He didn't say much about you because he said he knew nothing about angels, but he said that we need to be cautious because we have encountered many powerful beings in the past year, and we are all walking on an eggshell," Thalior answered without hesitation.

"Thank you for the information, Archduke Thalior. We will send someone very soon," both men talked in unison and in sync and then left the room.

As soon as Thalior was sure he was alone and closed the door behind him, he let out a shaky sigh. His heart was beating so fast that he could feel blood running through his veins. He had experienced fear many times, especially after everything that he had encountered, but this one was the scariest thing he had ever encountered so far.

He sat at his desk, hands clasped together and pressed against his forehead as he tried to calm down. He remembered what Serena had told him about angels, and he never thought the angels were exactly like what she had described.

"Emotionless, lifeless, merciless, thoughtless..." Thalior repeated the words like a mantra, the words that Serena wanted him to remember.

When he was about to stabilize, someone knocked on the door, and it was enough to make his heart race once again and he felt cold on his fingers and toes. However, when he heard Erlina's voice, his

shoulder slumped and sighed in relief. He allowed Erlina to come in, and he didn't bother to hide his anxiety from her.

"Those two..." Erlina closed the door behind her. "They're angels?" She asked and observed Thalior's expression, seeing the anxiety and fear on his face. "Seeing you like this, it seems they didn't do anything to you, Your Grace," she raised her brows.

"Yes, and I'm fine," Thalior nodded with his eyes closed. "They came to convey a message and an offer," he revealed.

Erlina arched her brows as she approached Thalior's desk.

"Please tell me the details, Your Grace," Erlina said with a serious expression.

After Thalior shared what had happened a few minutes ago, Erlina realized this was exactly what Rasmus had warned her about. She also remembered that he wanted her to play safe knowing that Videl might look for her and Carrion. She knew how dangerous it was if she decided to take the risk to find the cult and the angels, but she wanted to do it.

"Let me be the representative for the Union," Erlina offered with a serious expression.

Thalior was surprised that Erlina volunteered to visit the cult and the angels. He wondered if it had something to do with Rasmus, wanting her to keep an eye on them.

"No, I'm not doing this for Rasmus," Erlina said before Thalior could ask the question. "I'm doing this for my own benefits, ours too, and the people. I don't think they're trying to do any harm to us, but if we play our card carefully, we can try to secure our position and influence here in South Neva," she explained as she clenched her fists.

"You associate with Count Blackheart, and we both know that the cult and him don't really have a good relationship. If they decided to use you, Count Blackheart won't be able to save you," Thalior stared into Erlina's eyes. "But, you said that you're doing this on your own accord? Does that mean Count Blackheart doesn't know that you're going to do this?" He furrowed his brows.

"Yes, he doesn't know and I'm going to do this for myself and for my husband. However, I will also help him to understand them and what their plans are. That also applies to us," Erlina answered and nodded.

Thalior rubbed his nose bridge, thinking for a moment knowing that this was too risky. Deep down, he knew that his fear wasn't about Erlina's life but Rasmus' reaction if he found out that she was in danger.

"Then I'll let Commander Uriel come with you. Both of you will be representatives for the Union. I know your skills, and I can see that you understand the risk. I'll prepare the letter and inform Commander Uriel. You can wait in the meantime," Thalior nodded with understanding.

Erlina slowly stood up from the couch and then lowered her head before she left Thalior's office. Thalior rested his head against the headrest, his gaze lingered on the chandelier.

"I really need a drink..." Thalior sighed as he closed his eyes.

(At the same time at the Maloses Port)

All the merchants, the townspeople, mercenaries, and everyone that were near the harbor were looking at Rasmus with their mouths gaping. They saw Rasmus unboarding the ship with naval ships in the background, but their eyes lingered on the three women who walked on either side of him with two of them wrapping their arms around his. The three women wore black Bedlah, revealing their curves, their navel, and the high cut of the skirt that revealed one leg, and to add another alluring appearance on them, they had a black scarf that covered their lower half of their faces.

Aris, Rullein, and Serena were fine wearing those because in the first place, they didn't care about others' opinions. An Aristoria who enjoyed experiencing new things, a Dark Spirit who would do things as she liked, and a soul that had spent her whole existence in Hell until two years ago she came to the world where she meant to be. Three women who had spent their whole lives in solitude and finally could express themselves in any way they wanted.

It was enough to make all men feel weak on their knees, but then the final punch to the gut appeared. Anastasha Asghar unboarded the ship and slowly stood beside Rasmus. The whole port went silent, something that had never happened before, and slowly but surely everyone averted their gazes, lowering their heads. The world knew about the infamous Asghar family, but the Eastern people could smell the blood, could see the corpses, and could hear the screams when they saw Anastasha.

"Isn't this a bit pointless if you decided to reveal yourself? Making these three to wear something like this when you're the very reason that makes people look away," Rasmus said as he glanced at Anastasha.

"Well, let's just say I also want to be a part of the fun," Anastasha chuckled softly as she smiled at Rasmus. "It's not really pointless when they have seen me walking and standing beside you. In the end, you'll be the one they'll talk about, the mysterious man who captured three beauties and one Princess," the smile slowly turned into a smirk as she stood in front of Rasmus and gently rested her hands on his chest. "We will turn this continent upside down, just like you did to the first two and a half," she winked.

Chapter 575 - 575: Ambush.

A total of five carriages left the port with the Blackhands riding their horses and guarding the perimeter around the carriages, the horses that Rasmus had bought. Their destination was Araknum City, the city that was owned by the Ashenvale family. The journey would take them a whole week, meaning there would be a lot of assassination attempts to get rid of Anastasha.

Rasmus was listening to the current state of the Ashenvale family. With the rapid growth of the Urion businesses, the Ashenvale had lost at least five percent of their power in East Neva. With the support of two Sultans, the Urion family easily monopolized those two kingdoms, kicking the Ashenvale from their lands.

"What's the origin of the Urion family? It looks like they're so eager to push the Ashenvale's influence and power. As far as I know, the Ashenvale never had any major conflicts that made them look bad," Rasmus looked at Anastasha, who was reading a small piece of paper that she received from a mysterious person before she left the port.

"It has to do with their lineage. The Ashenvale is a descendant of the Urkman family, the founder and the first Sultan that ruled half of East Neva back then under the Great Yunas Empire," Anastasha answered, her eyes focused on the piece of paper with her stoic expression.

Rasmus hummed and he had read about the Great Yunas Empire back then in the Gratlan Academy's library. There were so many volumes of encyclopedia that recorded every major event that happened back then. The empire that was formed three hundred years ago and fell a hundred years ago. However, he didn't have the chance to read everything and only read half of the first volume of the encyclopedia.

"For the reason behind the Urion family's ambition, it's because the Urion family is also a descendant of the Urkman family. The family that fell due to the power struggle, the one who caused their fall? It was the Ashenvale," Anastasha revealed and put away the paper.

"So it's an act of revenge. But you're coming with me? I remembered you're quite close with the Urion family, the one you introduced me back then, Usman Urion," Rasmus furrowed his brows and looked at Anastasha, who was deep in thought.

"Oh, that man. He's just like me, remember? He doesn't want to be a part of the family power struggle. An outcast with a desire to live without fear of knowing that a dagger might cut their throats when they close their eyes," Anastasha answered, and finally looked at Rasmus. "Soft by choice is self-explanatory."

Rasmus understood the circumstances since it was a common thing in Neva and on Earth. Then he suddenly felt something was off about his surroundings that he had to look out the window. He looked out the other window to check that side as well, and it was the same. Anastasha who saw him move from one side to another, she couldn't help but ask.

"They're not assassins?" Anastasha asked, knowing that something was coming toward them.

"No, they don't have that intense killing intent," Rasmus shook his head. "There are a lot of them, too many..." He pointed out as he looked at the top of the cliffs.

"Ahh, so it's the infamous bandit group called the Scorpion Tails. The notorious bandit group around here that has been roaming around for the past five years," Anastasha answered, but her expression was too calm and too relaxed. "They're the Urion family's dogs. Sabotaging, plundering, and even killing their competitors's goods and merchants," she pointed out.

"I see, what do you want to do?" Rasmus glanced at Anastasha.

"Well, you're going to choose a side with the Ashenvale family, right? And as you know, I chose Usman over the other brother, which mean these bandits are a sore in the eye. We can just make some excuses if somehow we decided to change side temporarily that those bandits chose the wrong victims," Anastasha smiled coldly at Rasmus.

Rasmus remembered what Anastasha said that the only way to gain influence in this continent was to play on the board instead of controlling the board. He then told Erdinand, who had become his coachman to stop the carriage.

When Rasmus walked down the carriage, all the Blackhands immediately formed a formation around his carriage. They were aware of what was waiting for them when they entered the desert crevasse. It didn't take a while until a shadow appeared, and everyone looked up at the man wearing a black turban and scarf that covered his face, leaving on his eyes. One by one, more and more of them stood on the edges of the cliffs, looking down at them while they were holding scimitars and sabers.

"Get under the cliff!" Javi shouted, warning everyone.

As soon as Javi said that, big boulders of rocks were being pushed off the cliffs. Everyone ran to take cover, but Rasmus stayed still and watched the boulders fall right above him. He flicked his hand and immediately the boulders turned into tiny debris, dirtying his suit. He flicked the dust and debris off his shoulders as he looked up at the bandits' shocked expressions.

"He's a mage! Don't let him use another magic!" The bandit leader shouted as he pointed his saber at Rasmus.

All the bandits jumped down the cliffs, finding platforms for them to land on before they jumped to the lower platforms. However, they noticed how the sky suddenly turned dark, and when they looked up, they saw a black smoke that looked like a black semi-transparent cloth floating in the sky. They didn't know what it was until they saw balls of smoke descended and hit them.

The bandits tried to get rid of the smoke, and when they started to panic, the smoke entered through the gap of their masks and entered their noses and mouths. All the bandits suffocated and slipped, falling down to the ground that was at fifty meters away. They all fell on their heads, making loud cracking and snapping sounds, and died instantly without them knowing since their minds and bodies were being consumed by Rullein.

Anastasha watched the gruesome power of Rullein, sucking the soul, flesh, and organs of the bandits until they turned so skinny that they looked like skeletons with skins. She decided to get out of the carriage to look at the corpses from up close. She slowly pulled the scarf down and was terrified by the expression on the bandit's face, it looked like someone who had died from fear.

"Don't you find it weird?" Rasmus asked as he approached Rullein.

Anastasha flinched, startled by Rasmus' voice and immediately cleared her throat and stood up. She walked away from the bandit, her eyes couldn't look away from the bandit's face until she forced herself to look away and looked at Rasmus.

"Weird? What's weird?" Anastasha asked under her breath.

"These bandits," Rasmus pointed at the corpses. "They should know that you're with us. Shouldn't they let us pass here and not block us and tried to do whatever they tried to do," he pointed out.

"Hmm, that's possible, but it's also possible they're here because they have planned to plunder anyone that uses this route," Anastasha nodded in agreement. "But you're right, they should have someone in the port to inform them, and they still chose to ambush us, which is weird," she crossed her arms, thinking of the possibility that her family had something to do with this.

"Well, I don't think it matters anymore. It's not like I'm unaware that I'm being hunted, so what's the difference?" Anastasha smiled at Rasmus. "Shall we keep moving? Our journey is long, and I don't like desert in general," she unfolded her fan and fanned her neck.

Rasmus looked at the others and signaled them to get on their horses and continue the journey.

Chapter 576 - 576: Araknum City.

"Araknum city, the city of opportunity where the rich could get richer and the poor to be rich. But that also can go the other way around in just a snap of a finger," Anastasha smiled coldly as she stared at the city in the middle of the desert, a city that was built around the big oasis called The and a natural spring of cold water that never dried out for centuries.

Rasmus looked out the window and saw the city with heavily reinforced two layer walls, making it look like a fortress. He knew a leader's personality based on the city they built, and the fact that Araknum city was built like a fortress, meaning the Ashenvale was aware of the threat they produced to the whole continent.

"Have you visited this city before?" Rasmus looked at Anastasha, who was fixing her attire.

"I have, once. And the patriarch of the Ashenvale family wasn't someone that I could persuade or even have any shred of interest toward me. I was politely being kicked out of the city by him," Anastasha chuckled softly as she crossed her arms. "You need to keep this in mind. Malik is bestowed a title of Agha, meaning it only bestowed a title for someone who hold enough power to rule a nation. You should understand his status," she warned.

"I'll keep that in mind," Rasmus hummed as his carriage waited in line to enter the city.

After half an hour of waiting, the gatekeepers approached Rasmus' carriage. When the gatekeeper opened the door into the carriage, they were surprised to see four women in inside, three of them wore something alluring and they were captivated by Aris', Rullein's, and Serena's eyes, the only thing that was exposed on their faces. However, when they looked at Anastasia, their expression hardened and turned almost cold.

"What's your purpose of entering the city, Princess Asghar?" The gatekeeper asked, thinking that it was Anastasha's carriage and that she was the one in charge.

"Oh, I'm only tagging along," Anastasha pointed her folded fan at Rasmus.

The gatekeepers turned their heads to look at the man with light gray hair and heterochromatic eyes. They furrowed their brows, not realizing who it was, but they recognized the heterochromatic eyes, something that only the Urion family possessed, at least in East Neva. They didn't hesitate to show hostility toward Rasmus because they thought he was from the Urion family.

"And who are you, sir?" The gatekeeper asked, staring with a cold gaze.

"Rasmus Blackheart," Rasmus answered and stared back at the gatekeeper. "Those four carriages behind me and those people on the horses, they're with me as well," he pointed at the carriages behind his.

The gatekeepers' eyes widened and glanced at each other before they both nodded with understanding.

"You may enter, Count Blackheart," The gatekeeper said and pointed at the gate.

"Thank you," Rasmus nodded and watched the gatekeeper close the door, then instructed Erdinand and the other four carriages to enter the city.

One of the gatekeepers hurriedly informed the city guard about Rasmus' arrival.

Rasmus looked at the city and it was the first time he had seen a street that was crowded with people on a normal day. It was impossible for anyone to detect or to find a thief because everyone would brush their shoulders against each other when they walked. Based on what Anastasha said, those who went to Araknum were mostly small merchants and trading house owners, making deals, contracts, buying and selling supplies, and partnerships with each other. On the other hand, the deeper the city to its heart, those were exclusively for companies and merchant guilds, they were the one who set prices of goods in the whole continent.

When Rasmus reached the first city wall, it was no longer crowded and the gatekeepers were fully armed with high skills. Based on what Anastasha said, the guards that guarded the central district were similar to elite knights in terms of skill and strength while the palace guards were on par with Swordmasters. The Araknum city had never been breached, not a single assassination attempt had happened within the central district.

"Not even a single incident?" Rasmus looked at Anastasha with his brows raised.

"No, and do you know why?" Anastasha shook her head with a smile on her face. "That..." She pointed at Javi, who was riding his horse next to Rasmus' carriage, wearing a cloak and a hood to cover his face. "The Sand Tower and the Ashenvale family are tightly bonded, inseparable."

"Inseparable? That's a strong word to use," Rasmus was intrigued by the fact that Anastasha could say that with such confidence, knowing that should be something she should be worried about.

"Yes, they have a very long history, from the era of the Great Yunas Empire," Anastasha muttered as she looked at the empty roads that were almost jarring to see after the crowded space outside the first wall. She was also admired by the small rivers in between the buildings and the small bridges that decorated the central district.

"Speaking of the Sand Tower, do you know who owns that place?" Rasmus asked, remembering that the Poor Man's Hand didn't know or perhaps too afraid to find out the owner behind the most secretive place in the whole desert and perhaps one of the most dangerous places in East Neva.

Anastasha glanced at Rasmus, her expression was impassive, her gaze was almost blank. She slowly shook her head, no words, only a simple gesture. Knowing that even Anastasha didn't have any idea who the one who ran and owned the Sand Tower was, it made Rasmus realize that even in the most chaotic and full of noises continent, silence still existed. He then nodded with understanding and decided not to pry on it, at least not yet.

When they finally arrived at the palace's gate, Rasmus never thought that the palace was in the middle of a big oasis with one way in and out, which was through a bridge. The guards wore all-black attire with a black helmet that covered their whole face, not even a glimpse of their eyes. The guards held a shield and a spear in each hand, and they looked menacing from the way they stood at the gate.

"I'll stay out of this, Count," Anastasha said with a smile on her face. "I don't want to ruin your reputation and the mood because my face is an eyesore for the Ashenvale," she added.

Rasmus nodded with understanding, and then he looked at Aris, Rullein, and Serena. The three of them wanted to follow him because Aris and Rullein were curious about the food and the drink while Serena wanted to see the culture. With that being said, those three walked out of the carriage and followed Rasmus from behind. Erdinand then turned the carriage over and let Anastasha decide where she wanted to go.

The guards stared at them, and they didn't move a muscle because Rasmus wasn't close enough to be seen as a threat. Before Rasmus could even open his mouth, he saw the steel gate slowly raised and then a figure appeared from the corner, a young man with light dark skin, a silk attire, and dark brown hair. It was Valari, he was surprised and happy to see his former instructor, the man that made his time in the academy memorable for the rest of his life.

"Count," Valari said as he lowered his head.

"Long time no see," Rasmus lowered his head, not knowing what to address Valari.

"It is, and please, just call me by my name, Count," Valari answered with a smile on his face. "Please, come in. I want you to meet with my father and mothers," he pointed his hand at the palace while he looked at the guards, giving them a nod.

The guards slowly moved aside and their gazes focused on the front instead on Rasmus.

Chapter 577 - 577: Emotional Paralysis.

Rasmus' eyes scanned the room from left to right, and he couldn't believe that Malik, the patriarch of the Ashenvale family had a dozen children and five wives. He looked at the wives and they were all the same figures as if Malik wanted everyone to know his preference for women. But what surprised him the most was the fact Malik was still young, perhaps in his mid or late 30s and Valari was the eldest child of his, meaning that Malik got married when he was at Valari's age.

"I have heard a lot of things about you, Count Blackheart," Malik said, his voice gentle and yet cold. His piercing yellow eyes stared right into Rasmus' with a few strands of hair covering his eyes. "But I didn't know that you captured those ladies' hearts. If I have to be honest, I'm quite envious with the women you have there, they're quite... exquisite," his lazy gaze moved from Aris' legs to her head and then moved to Rullein's and Serena's. He then glanced at Rullein's hand and Serena's hand resting on Rasmus' inner thighs.

Rasmus glanced at Valari and noticed the discomfort written on his face as if Valari wanted to tell his father to be careful in front of Rasmus.

"I wish I could say the same thing, Lord Ashenvale," Rasmus responded, his voice matched with Malik's, calm and relaxed. "I believe you already have enough," he added.

"There's no such a thing as enough in my world, Count," Malik said as he glanced at the long couch at all his children. "I could say the same thing to you, Count Blackheart. Don't you think it's enough turning three continents upside-down? But here you are, in the land of sand and mythical beasts," He asked as a smirk appeared on the corner of his lips. "Compared to you, my desire for more doesn't harm anyone, you do."

"Yes, you're correct. But I'm talking about partners, not politics or something within such scale," Rasmus nodded, his expression impassive.

"Oh, I'm fully aware of that. However, you came to my place and judge me, why can't I do the same?" Malik tilted his head to the side, still with a smirk on his face. "I could easily send you off the moment you judged me, but I'm not petty."

Rasmus tried to understand what kind of person Malik was, but so far, he still couldn't grasp it. One thing that he knew was that Malik was a playful person but every word held truth in it.

"As you said, I had turned three continents upside-down, turning this city of yours upside-down from the idea of taking what's mine and it wouldn't be that hard to do so. Or perhaps just one family is enough, but like you, I'm not that petty," Rasmus stared at Malik with a cold gaze.

The tension in the room was unbearable for Malik's wives and children, especially Valari. Malik was the only person under the roof where his words were absolute and they had learned to respect and accept that. Everyone in East Neva who had visited the palace knew how to behave in front of Malik, and none of them dared to challenge him or even threaten him.

Malik and Rasmus stared at each other in silence for a moment before Malik's smirk turned into a grin. He slowly sat straight before he leaned forward with his elbows rested on his knees.

"Someone with a spine, that's so great..." Malik chuckled. "Do it," he narrowed his eyes, still with a grin on his face.

Rasmus stood up and instead of approaching Malik, he walked toward the couch where Malik's children were. He pulled out a dagger from his spatial ring when he stood in front of the children. Malik's wives and his children panicked, and they all looked at him with pleading eyes, begging him to stop Rasmus.

"Which one you want to see them off first?" Rasmus looked over his shoulder at Malik. Even with the situation they were in, Malik still had that grin on his face, and he didn't avert his gaze until he looked at one of his children.

"The youngest one, since he still don't understand anything," Malik pointed at his youngest son who was still four years old. He said it calmly and his expression unbothered.

Rasmus looked at the boy, who was sitting in the middle beside Valari and the second eldest son. His expression was stoic and slowly he moved his dagger toward the boy's neck. He noticed from the corner of his eyes that both Valari and the second eldest brother didn't move a muscle, he realized how absolute Malik's authority was that nobody tried to make a move.

The moment the dagger was placed on the boy's neck, Rasmus didn't hesitate to cut the boy's neck. However, the moment a drop of blood came out of the boy's neck, the windows shattered into pieces as a strong gush of wind entered the room. Rasmus felt a powerful presence coming toward him at extreme speed and he immediately swung his dagger to his left. The sound of metal hitting something sturdy echoed throughout the room, and that was when Rasmus saw claws gripping the blade of his dagger.

Rasmus narrowed his eyes when he saw a creature with a muscular humanoid torso and arms while the waist and legs were that of a bird. He stared at the head of the creature, and it looked like an eagle's head then looked at the creature's wide feathered wings. He then glanced to his surroundings and saw more than a dozen of them enter the room without making a sound or even seeing of their entrance.

"(Mythical beasts...)" Rasmus thought, remembering about their existence in East Neva. Great Spirits that became mythological creatures that people believed in and even worshiped.

"If you think you could harm my family, you should think twice, Count," Malik's gaze turned cold when he saw the blood of his youngest son and listened to his cry from the pain. "But I have to admit, the fact that you can react and stop his attack like that, it's unheard of," he pointed out.

Rasmus glanced at Malik for a moment, his expression impassive before he turned to look at the creature in front of him. The moment he turned his eyes into draconic eyes and revealed the Overlord's power along with the gray mist that appeared around him, all the creatures began to tremble when they felt it. The creatures slowly bent down to their knees willingly, and it shocked everyone in the room, including Malik.

"You should expect this from someone who had gone through countless wars and turned the three continents upside-down," Rasmus snapped his fingers and in an instant the whole room covered in ice and all the creatures were frozen while Malik, his wives, and his children's legs were bound by ice. "Now, where were we?" He asked as he slowly turned to look at the boy again, who was still crying and being comforted by Valari and his siblings.

Rasmus walked toward the boy and that was when Valari grabbed Rasmus' hand. He looked at the fear and the panic in Valari's eyes, pleading silently because his mouth couldn't form any words when he stared at Rasmus' draconic eyes.

"Don't blame me, blame your father," Rasmus said as he used his left hand to cover the boy's eyes while his right hand moved the dagger to the boy's neck once again. "You should say goodbye to your little brother," he muttered and finished what Malik asked for.

No words came out of everyone's words, only guttural noises when they stared at the body. He looked at the blood on his dagger for a moment before he turned around and stared into Malik's eyes. Malik was speechless, his gaze was fixated on the body of his son. Rasmus then glanced at Serena as he moved aside from his deed, and immediately Serena stood up and walked toward the boy.

Serena used her divine power and healed the wound on the boy's neck. It only took a few seconds before the boy suddenly awoke as if he was waking up from a sleep. There was no scar, no pain, nothing. Serena smiled at the boy and caressed his head with a soft smile that was hidden on the thin fabric of the mask she wore. Emotions were mixed together, and nobody knew what to feel from what had just happened.

Rasmus and Serena went back to the couch where Aris and Rullein were. He threw the dagger that was still covered in the boy's blood into Malik's lap. He then let the ice evaporate, everyone and including the creatures could finally move again.

"I can make it real or you can stop pretending. Which one do you prefer?" Rasmus stared into Malik's eyes coldly.

Chapter 578 - 578: Pretense.

"Everyone leave..." Malik said while suppressing his anger, clenching his jaw as he glared at Rasmus. "That also applies to those women of yours, Count."

Rasmus didn't need to tell Aris and the others to leave since they already stood up and were ready to leave. Malik's wives and children also made their way out of the room, and they were checking their youngest, checking if he was really fine after what had happened to him.

Once the room was empty, leaving only Malik and Rasmus alone in the room, Malik took a deep breath and exhaled deeply. He was furious, but for the first time in his life, he felt powerless that nothing would matter, that nothing could change anything, that he couldn't do what he wanted to do to Rasmus.

"That was your fault, not mine. Blaming me for it is foolish," Rasmus said before Malik could find anything to say. "You were the one who led to this, not me."

"You just made yourself an enemy of Ashenvale, Count Blackheart. Nothing will change that," Malik said with a cold gaze, his desire to slit Rasmus' throat was unbearable.

"Is that what you want? Fine, I'll kill your whole family then," Rasmus responded with a serious expression. "You were powerless once, you want to be powerless for the second time? For someone like you to be swayed by emotion, it seems the empire you have built will soon to crumble," he asked as he looked at his hand, the hand that was covered in the blood of an innocent child.

Malik clenched his fist until his knuckles turned white, he then slammed against the golden table. He wasn't built like a warrior, but his anger and his desire to shred the man in front of him into pieces was so strong that his fist made a dent on the gold table and broke his whole hand. However, he didn't feel pain, he felt anything but pain. When he glanced at Rasmus, he saw something worse than he had expected. He didn't see arrogance, didn't see satisfaction, or even any emotion coming out of Ramsus' eyes, utterly nothing.

"So I just brought a lion into my den," Malik scoffed as he held his wrist, slowly registering the pain.

"No, you made me become one," Rasmus responded with a calm expression.

"Fine, what do you want?" Malik knew that nothing would change anything if he kept wasting his time dwelling with his emotions against someone who didn't indulge in one.

"Nothing, I want nothing but to meet with my former student, Valari. I had no intention of doing anything," Rasmus answered as he crossed his legs and leaned back to make himself comfortable. "But now that you asked, I guess I want to know about the situation here, especially about a woman called Anastasha Asghar and her situation. You must have heard that I came here with her, so might as well ask the obvious," he added.

Malik narrowed his eyes, and it was jarring to see someone who could be so impassive yet so threatening and dangerous.

"I don't know anything about her, not like I care about her and her family. I never tried to make any connection with them," Malik answered as he felt the stinging pain that had slowly overwhelmed his mind. "If you're asking about the situation here in East Neva, you already know a lot from her in the first place. I don't think you need to hear anything else from me," he pointed out.

"Then what about the rest of the south of East Neva? Your position is threatened by the Urion family, at least that's what I heard. The shift in power, what do you see?" Rasmus raised his brows.

Malik scoffed as he shook his head, and then suddenly the same creature appeared behind his couch. A creature that looked like a garuda, something that Rasmus had finally registered after what had just happened earlier. Malik showed his broken hand to the garuda and the creature suddenly brushed his hand with its feathered wing. The hand had healed, and the garuda stayed behind him as if it was his request to have someone or something by his side while facing Rasmus.

"The Urion family? They're nothing. This wasn't the first time they tried, they have tried this for generations, but they failed miserably. I'm not being arrogant here, Count. The Urion family, they're nothing like my family, they're divided. Do you think a divided family can achieve something when their desire never aligned?" Malik crossed his arms and stared into Rasmus' eyes.

"Divided? And your family isn't? Seeing as you have so many children, meaning you also have a lot of siblings. What makes yours different than theirs?" Rasmus furrowed his brows.

"Because a desire for revenge isn't for anyone. The Ashenvale family doesn't have any desire for revenge. We all have a desire for power, yes, but here, you saw it, didn't you? The submission, the absolute power I possess over my own family. I made sure I understand their characters from the early age, give them what they need and prevent them from wanting more," Malik revealed, his expression still cold, still harboring a desire to rip out the eyes of the man in front of him.

Rasmus narrowed his eyes, finding it applaudable and fascinating. He then remembered the connection between Ashenvale and the Sand Tower, the place where the most skilled and deadliest assassins were raised. He remembered his time when he was there, the fact the Sand Tower raised the children, turning them into cold killing machines.

"So you raised your children just like the masters of the Sand Tower but with a more subtle and acceptable method?" Rasmus' brows arched.

Malik wasn't surprised that Rasmus suddenly mentioned the Sand Tower when he found out Rasmus had been with Anastasha. He didn't need to deny Rasmus' question, but he didn't need to answer it either. He chose to be silent and didn't give any response to Rasmus' question.

"That doesn't change the fact that the Urion family got supports from two of the Sultans. There's always first in everything," Rasmus continued, knowing that Malik chose silence from the question.

"And why is that matter to you, Count? What's your purpose here?" Malik arched his brows. "You have been asking me a lot of questions, I believe it's my turn to ask," he pointed out.

"I believe you already have some ideas as to why I'm here, especially when I came here with Anastasha Asghar. I came to give my support," Rasmus answered. "Her plan aligns with mine, or to be exact, it helps with mine in the future," he added.

Malik narrowed his eyes this time, not expecting Rasmus to answer with the truth.

"And what exactly is her plan?" Malik tilted his head, staring at Rasmus with a serious expression.

"She wanted to take over the Asghar family and rule over the whole continent," Rasmus answered without hesitation.

Malik was surprised that Rasmus once again answered without even thinking, without hiding anything. He had never seen anyone without hiding their agenda, but then he realized that Rasmus might be revealing it on purpose, that his agenda was somewhere beyond that.

"And what about your plan?" Malik asked, his gaze fixated on Rasmus' eyes.

"If you want to know, you have to join the ride. If I'm allowed to say, it would benefit you and your family," Rasmus said with a serious expression. "Or even better, your family wouldn't be a threat to us," he smiled coldly.

Chapter 579 - 579: Categorized.

Valari walked the long hallway, his gaze fixated on the carpet under his feet that felt soft under his shoes. He didn't know why his father wanted to meet him, especially after a full hour of being alone with Rasmus. He couldn't erase the image of his youngest brother from his mind, the way Rasmus did it without hesitation, without emotion, it was terrifying.

"What should I do..." Valari muttered to himself, scared to meet Rasmus, someone he admired back in the academy, the instructor who taught him everything. At the same time, he was furious, hatred grew deep inside him for what Rasmus had done to his youngest brother. "Get a hold of yourself, Valari..." He smacked his cheeks to snap back to reality.

Valari stood in front of the double door made of blackwood with gold engravings and decorations made of gems. The doors were so expensive that they could feed an entire family for generations. He took a deep breath before he knocked on the door, but there was only silence afterward.

"Father? It's Valari," Valari called as he stared at the gems on the door.

"Come in," Malik's voice was muffled by the door.

Valari pushed the handle and saw his father sitting at his desk. The room was painted black, everything was made from the rarest and most expensive materials. A room that was worth a small kingdom, and anyone who had entered that room, they all felt insignificant, that their wealth meant nothing to the Ashenvale.

Valari looked at Malik's face, and it was always the same expression he had seen for as long as he could remember. He walked toward the desk and watched his father calmly read a letter as if nothing had happened before. He then stood beside the chair, waiting for his father to give permission to sit or to remind him to stand still.

There was only silence, Valari didn't dare to speak or even make a single noise. He stood still like a statue until his father decided to speak to him.

"You didn't tell me everything about Count Blackheart," Malik's voice was gentle but undeniably cold like someone who was utterly disappointed. "Or perhaps he never showed his true nature to you in the first place," he glanced at Valari, who looked panicked and conflicted.

"I am ashamed..." Valari said, the only thing he could say at that moment.

"You should be ashamed, but everything that happened, it was your father's fault," Malik answered as he stood up and shredded the letter. "I never brought someone here into my palace with such resolve like an assassin. Challenged him was my biggest mistake, and it was my fault that your youngest brother had to experience something like that," he muttered as he stood behind the window, looking out at the city.

"He's the worst thing that everyone will face, father. He breaks everyone's beliefs until they realize their beliefs are... flawed..." Valari muttered as he lowered his head.

"Yes, you mentioned that before," Malik nodded. "He's not a politician, not a strategist, not a warrior. He's exactly the blade that everyone crafted that has turned against them," he scoffed as he turned around to look at Valari.

Malik walked toward his desk, his fingers brushed against the fine surface of his table. His expression was impassive, but his eyes were deep in thought.

"What do you think of him now?" Malik glanced at Valari.

"I... I don't know..." Valari lowered his head, unable to meet his father's gaze.

Good, keep it that way," Malik said as he sat down as his expression turned serious. "Everyone who has encountered him, they have the same thought as yours. All of the powerful figures who had encountered him, they kept their distance. He's dangerous but can be compromised," he muttered, his hands clasped together while his gaze focused on the spot on the wall.

Valari received letters from Aurelia and Alexander in the past few months. He understood the situation in South Neva, North Neva, and Central Neva. He knew Rasmus' role in South Neva and Central Neva, he was shocked by how easy it was for Rasmus to turn the tides back and forth so effortlessly.

He found out the relationship between Rasmus with the South Neva Union, the Gratlan Island, the Magic Tower, and Centriva from Aurelia. His father never spoke for the sake of spouting words, he spoke with hidden meanings. Valari was raised and taught to understand his father's words and intents.

"Compromised..." Valari repeated the words with the hidden meanings behind it. "Father, does that mean our family will be involved in whatever Count Blackheart will do here?" He asked, his face turned pale, knowing what kind of future awaited East Neva.

"He gave me a choice, to join him and assured me of the benefits or to be erased," Malik nodded and tapped his fingers on the desk. "Guess what I chose," he glanced at Valari.

As the future patriarch of Ashenvale, Valari knew he needed to be careful whenever his father asked a question. He took a moment to think, not for himself, but for the family, the power they possessed, and the causality of the decision. However, he knew neither of the options would keep Ashenvale position to stay neutral. He then remembered what his father had said about Rasmus that he could be compromised.

"Neither. Stalling would be pointless. Father would give what he needed, but that wouldn't be enough to convince him that we wouldn't betray him later on..." Valari crossed his arms before his hand was placed on his chin. "To stay neutral but also support him..." He muttered, his brows furrowed and eyes narrowed. No matter how hard he thought, he couldn't find the right answer. "I don't know..." He lowered his arms to his sides and slowly lowered his head, feeling ashamed for not knowing the answer.

"Conditions..." Malik hinted as he slowly stood up from his chair. "What kind of a person he is..." He added another hint as he walked toward Valari. "What he has done, what he has achieved. Patterns..." He crossed his arms, standing in front of Valari.

Valari lifted his head and looked at his father's eyes, trying to process what he had just heard. His mind was blank, not knowing what to do with those hints.

"You accepted his offer?" Valari answered, but with hesitation.

"I did," Malik nodded. "And so the Magic Tower, the South Neva Union, and Centriva. He has no desire for power and control. With no desire for power and control, there's no reason for me to decline his offer," he pointed out and walked past Valari to look at the big painting on the wall.

"But, what are the consequences? The risks?" Valari turned around to look at his father.

"They're not worth mentioning when the other option is our family being erased," Malik answered without hesitation.

Valari averted his gaze and glanced around the room, remembering what Rasmus had done to his youngest brother. He knew that Rasmus wasn't someone who lied and who used empty threats since that moment.

"Don't think about it too much. If you think someone like him is rare, you would be surprised the moment you sit on that chair," Malik pointed at his chair while he kept staring at the painting. "There are people you should avoid, people you should face and defeat, people you should keep close as an ally, and then people like him."

Malik glanced at the statuette of a man wearing a robe and a turban with his beard that reached his chest.

"People that you know they're dangerously powerful. Avoiding them and you'll be insignificant that they will erase your existence as they move. Approaching them too close and you'll be lost and devoured. Close enough that you benefit from them but far enough to keep yourself safe," Malik turned around and stared Valari in the eyes. "Let me put it simply, Valari. Those people? They're the reason this continent hasn't been covered in blood," he said with a serious expression.

Valari nodded with understanding.

"I'll keep that in mind, father," Valari said with his head lowered.

"You may leave now..." Malik said under his breath as he walked back to his desk. "Ah, one more thing. He's looking for you. Said that he has something to say, privately," he sat down and pulled a piece of paper as he began to write a letter. He didn't seem to be worried or cared.

Valari's face turned pale and it felt like what he had just learned was about to be tested immediately.

"I'll see him now. Thank you for the lessons, father," Valari bowed his head and then left the room.

Chapter 580 - 580: A glimpse of it.

Valari sat on the couch across from Rasmus, in a room where he was alone and facing a man that he admired and despised at the same time. He sat there trying to not show any emotion and behaved like the heir of Ashenvale.

The room was quiet, and Rasmus kept his eyes staring into Valari's eyes. The two of them stared at each other's eyes and Valari thought that they were trying to see who would look away first.

"Are we in some kind of staring contest, Valari?" Rasmus shook his head as he chuckled. "The reason I want to talk to you privately is because I want to know what you know. The current state of East Neva," he crossed his legs and clasped his hands, resting them on his thigh.

"What?" Valari was taken aback by the question because he thought Rasmus would test him or would say anything to challenge him about what had happened. "The current state of East Neva?" He repeated the question.

"Yes," Rasmus nodded.

Valari felt a chill down his spine from seeing how casual Rasmus looked. He had just seen Rasmus holding a dagger and slit his youngest brother's throat like it was nothing. Although his brother was alive and healthy for some reason, he still couldn't believe the audacity of Rasmus to sit there like nothing had happened.

"I don't know much about the current situation. I have been busy studying and learning about business that my father entrusted me with," Valari answered with a cold expression. He didn't want to give Rasmus the satisfaction of trampling on the dignity of Ashenvale.

"As I said, tell me what you know," Rasmus responded, knowing exactly what was inside Valari's head. "I'm not asking some fancy information, I'm asking you an information."

Valari closed his eyes for a moment, his hands tightened on his lap. He knew he had to address the elephant in the room and grew some spine for himself, for his family.

"No," Valari rejected. "If you think you can do as you please after what you did, you're wrong, Count Blackheart. You could convince my father it was his fault that it happened, but in reality, you were the one who did it, and that didn't change the fact you dared to use that dagger to hurt my brother and that's enough. You can't just sit there and ask for something like nothing happened!" He said as he clenched his fists until veins popped on the back of his hands.

"And yet here I am. Which reality are you referring to?" Rasmus asked as he pointed his hand at the couch he was sitting on. "Didn't I teach you to not speak with emotions? Think before you think of answering. Emotions don't give you an advantage, it wears you down. Not only that, but you're also not the man in power in this place, which is make it worse for you because your threat means nothing to me," he added.

Valari scoffed, trying to dismiss Rasmus' words so he could keep his dignity. Unfortunately, Rasmus' words had pierced through him, and he would never be able to ignore it.

"I'm not here to lecture you or waste your time," Rasmus said under his breath as he made himself comfortable on the couch. "The others have seen who I am. Aurelia, Alexander, Monica, Maximilian, Isador, they have seen it, and they were as shocked as you are. But they pushed that aside and focused on the real problems," he revealed, tapping his finger on his thigh.

"Problems? The only problem I see is the one who's sitting in front of me," Valari answered with a cold expression, his gaze never leaving Rasmus' eyes.

"Exactly," Rasmus smiled.

Valari narrowed his eyes, surprised that Rasmus didn't deny his accusation.

"I'm going to be the problem that will lead this continent into chaos, Valari. But as I said earlier. You have to deal with the problems without using your emotions. I'm giving you a heads-up, a glimpse of the damage that I'll cause into this land," Rasmus explained with a serious expression.

"What are you talking about, Count?" Valari asked with his brows furrowed.

"I'm talking about what kind of action you'll take once the problem arise," Rasmus answered as he stood up and buttoned his suit. "I want to see if you're worthy to be standing among your peers," he stared down at Valari before he lowered his head to him before he walked away and left the room.

Valari looked over his shoulders and watched Rasmus abruptly leave the room. He took a moment to think of what had just happened. He wondered if it was a warning, a test, or something else, but when Rasmus mentioned Aurelia and the others, he knew that they were all working together to create a better world. It reminded him of the assignment that Rasmus gave him back then in the academy.

"What was that all about..." Valari sighed as he leaned back and stared blankly at the ceiling.

Rasmus went to meet with Aris and the others, they were in the dining hall where Malik's wives and children were. His presence was enough to bring fear into the room, and they all stood up from their chairs, seeking comfort from their mothers while the mothers tried to protect their children. On the other hand, Aris, Rullein, and Serena realized that it was time to leave. Suddenly, Rasmus, Aris, and Rullein turned their heads facing the window for a moment before they finally saw a shadow that blocked the sunlight.

"Is that what I think that is?" Rasmus asked, his gaze fixated on the window.

"That one is nothing like Yur," Rullein furrowed her brows.

"You're right. Yur feels like a child compared to that," Aris nodded as she stood up. "And I think we know why it came," she glanced at Rasmus.

Rasmus left the dining hall with Aris, Rullein, and Serena. The four of them walked the long hallway while the guards were lowering their heads, not toward them, but toward the presence outside the palace. The palace was completely dark because there wasn't a single light that came into the palace.

When the four of them walked out of the palace, they slowly turned around and looked up. That was when they saw the mythical beast, the one that protected the Ashenvale family. A large garuda that stood tall on top of the palace with its wings covered the whole palace. The garuda could easily flatten the palace, but somehow it wasn't as if the garuda's weight was that of a feather.

It was nothing like the ones that Rasmus saw earlier, the garuda wore a golden helmet with its fiery mane and ashen skin that looked like a rock. Its gold wings shone brightly, reflecting the sunlight. The wings weren't made of feathers, they looked like made of steel, tough and solid. Everyone in the city trembled because it was the first time they had seen the mythical beast that belonged to the Ashenvale, the beast that had protected the Ashenvale for centuries.

"You..." The Garuda spoke, its voice like a rumbling thunder that shook the whole city. Its glowing golden eyes stared at Aris, Rullein, Serena, and Rasmus. "Who are you..." The Garuda leaned its head down until its massive beak almost touched the ground, its eyes stared at Rullein and Rasmus.