

## Corinthians

*"... AND THE SILVER CITADEL was so blessed with wealth that it housed more than a thousand slaves and courtesans—men and women whose lives had been offered as tribute to Selene, goddess of the Few. And it was said on account of these courtesans that the city was crowded with denizens seeking the pleasures of this world so that the land grew even more prosperous. [...]*

*But rare is the common man fit for the life of the Few. To sit at the Citadel's opulent tables, bask in its lavish halls—most will never abide. Their blood won't allow it. For it is written: 'Not for every man is the voyage to Corinthia.'"*

— A Modern Geography (8.6.20); revised from the Grecian work of Strabo by Cardinal Loukas Eirenaios, Council on New Histories, January 24, 2173

### FIRST

The air is thick with morning mist, the path diffused in gray, but Noel reminds himself that this is often how things go.

*We move when we have to, even if blind, and trust that we know the way.*

Noel winces, a sudden stitch in his side that causes him to pull up quickly, reaching for the cramp beneath his ribs.

Ahead of him, Jesse grunts, caught by the tightening iron chain. He barks in frustration, his steel harness tugging at his skin.

"How many times do I have to tell you?" growls Jesse, turning to Noel. "You can't just stop without warning. We are meant to move as one." And he rattles in emphasis the length of rusted chain between them.

Noel says nothing, too short of breath to reply. He and Jesse had kept at a breakneck pace since the small hours of the morning when, in the dark, their makeshift camp had been run amok by a small horde of Feral. Only Noel and Jesse

were able to make a disorderly escape; their lone comrades, Darius and Andor, were not so fortunate.

Jesse leans over, hands on his knees, catching his breath.

"Come," he says after a few deep inhales. "We must be moving."

Noel shakes his head, gulping shallow breaths. "One more moment."

"We don't have another moment, Noel. The Feral may be right behind us."

"I just need some water," replies Noel, holding out a palm to his companion. Jesse notes the outstretched hand, and while he'd rather remain cold, focused, and appear in control, his expression softens.

"Very well," he says, crossing back to Noel. He pulls an old wineskin from his pack and hands it to his friend.

Jesse's eyes, forever moving, observe their surroundings. He spies one of the massive metal structures again through the fog like the legs of steel giants cemented in the clay of creation. They'd been following these structures north for the past day, just as the map had instructed, though Jesse remained confused as to why such metalwork existed in the first place. Did they hold a purpose once? Do they still?

Noel had heard that they used to carry something called power lines, which safely moved electrical energy across the whole of the world. This was in the Old Age when almost every family had access to electricity.

Jesse thought it was a nice story, but he couldn't imagine a time when a precious commodity such as energy was shared willingly among the people. Lessers, laborers like them, could only dream of such things, and of the two of them, it was Noel who took well to such dreaming. Jesse rarely played the optimist, even under the best of circumstances.

Noel hands the wineskin back to Jesse, who takes a swig of his own.

"Since we've stopped, may I look at the map again?" Jesse asks, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

Noel chuckles.

"Haven't you seen enough of it by now?" he says, unfastening the top string of his coarse leather tunic. "It's been a decade. What's left to discover?"

Strings loose, Noel pulls his arms out from the collar of the garment and lets it fall to his waist—not how he'd typically undress, but it worked when in a hurry. He turns and kneels, his back facing Jesse.

Returning the water to his satchel, Jesse pulls a pair of cracked spectacles from a pocket in his linen mantle. Donning the eyewear, he inspects the rich black markings on Noel's copper skin, tattoos that slither and snake in intricate patterns across the whole of the man's back. The swirls and symbols, these ancient runes, unreadable to all but Jesse, make up the map they've entrusted their lives with, the North Star of their journey.

Noel was born with these markings and has dealt with the whispers since the beginning.

*Is he the one the legends speak of? The one who will rouse the Sleeper, topple the Silver Citadel, and bring about the fall of the Chosen and the Few?*

And sometimes:

*Who is this Lesser who thinks himself so much better than the rest of us?*

But Noel pictured himself as nothing so grand—just a lowly Lesser, like his parents before him and theirs before that. So, he mostly ignored the folktales of his people and kept his back hidden in hopes of avoiding rumors.

That was until his sixteenth birthday, when he lived with his aunt at the work camp in Weathervane. As is the custom when a Lesser male comes of age, Noel was to be fitted for a harness and given his customary first lashes from the headmaster. But when the grizzled old man, pale-skinned and grey-haired, took

one look at Noel's back, he refused to whip the boy and whisked him off instead to his foreman's quarters, away from the prying eyes of the Watchers.

Once safe, Noel was formally introduced to the camp's foreman, a level-headed man by the name of Nathaniel Calloway, as well as the tribe's elder priestess, a withered old woman called Griselda.

Lastly, he was introduced to the headmaster's son, a boy a handful of years older than Noel, whose name was Jesse. Jesse had shown the ability to read and decipher the most ancient of written relics since birth.

And as his father had hoped upon seeing the markings on Noel's back, Jesse could read this fabled map, could understand its key, and decipher its strange language. And so began a friendship that has lasted over a decade.

Noel and Jesse were inseparable—quite literally—chained and sold together from camp to camp as Jesse's father had wished, always on the move so as not to draw attention to themselves, clandestine until the day they would be called on by the Fates.

Over time, Noel learned to embrace their destinies. He studied the old stories, the ancient histories the elder priests and priestesses kept hidden in their chambers, those accurate histories yet unaltered by the "New Histories" passed down by the Few. He learned of Corinth as it was in the Old Age, when it went by other names, learned of the regions beyond its borders and of the ocean that lines its eastern shores. He read of the Silver Citadel, how its original location now lay shrouded to all except the Few, took in the tales of the First Corinthians and the Cult of Selene and their notorious leader, Endymion, the Sleeper.

But most importantly, Noel learned of the fabled Sons of Lesser—one who held the map and one who read the key.

But acting on these tales, these traveled prophecies born in the shadows, proved almost impossible. A slave was rarely given their freedom for good behavior, and chances to escape were few, try as Noel might.

That is until three days ago when the four of them—Noel and Jesse, Darius and

Andor—managed against all odds to finally free themselves from the work camp at Easter Ridge.

The escape plot had been forming for a time, ever since Darius and Andor came chained together to the reservation—two by two, as was the custom. They were what one might call "true believers," and upon catching a glimpse of Noel's surreptitious markings, they insisted on aiding both he and Jesse in their inevitable exodus. Now, the intrepid and loyal pair lay behind them, no doubt eviscerated by the jaws of the Feral, and Noel's heart was heavy with their sacrifice.

*How has it happened now? He thought. Why with Darius and Andor? Why from the camp in Easter Ridge?*

Noel couldn't say, but the path lay ahead of them in earnest now, no matter the reasons. Come success or defeat, there'd be no going back.

While he pondered these things and Jesse read the map, something in the dirt caught Noel's eye. A shard of glass, thick and lime-colored. Noel reaches forward and picks it up, rolling it around his rough palm. It's about a four-inch hunk, pointed on one end, sharp on the edges. Noel hasn't seen glass like this since he was a child. His mother had kept a collection of antique glassware she called "pop bottles," and Noel would spend hours interrogating them, holding them up to the sun to watch how the light refracted through the different colors, clear and green and brown and blue.

"Curse the Author," mutters Jesse then, removing his glasses. He takes a few steps away as Noel stands, pocketing the glass shard and returning his tunic to its rightful place.

"What is it?"

Jesse waves an impatient hand in front of them, around them, at the whole of the opaque universe.

"This fog, this day. And these forsaken metal things we follow; they cut a path through the forest for a hundred miles still at least and always down this clearing, leaving us in the open."

"Could we stick to the edge of the woods, follow the path with a bit more coverage?"

"We could," says Jesse, eyeing the trees. "But we'd face other obstacles in there. In the clearing, at least we can see someone coming, even if they, too, can see us. I don't like either option, frankly—"

He sniffs the air then, his body suddenly taut. Noel's attention piques as well, a shift in the natural ambiance around them.

"Do you hear that?" He says as Jesse scans the landscape through the thinning haze.

"Nothing," replies Jesse. "There's nothing." The forest had grown silent. No birds sang, no insects chirred, no foliage stirred under the weight of unseen animals.

"The Feral are here," Noel states. "How close?"

Jesse sniffs the air again.

"Closer than I'd like."

"We'll go slowly, then," says Noel in a hushed tone. "Perhaps they've only chanced upon our scent and have yet to spot us in the fog."

"Right," says Jesse. "That could be." But his face betrays the confidence he's hoping to portray. He tightens the strap to his pack, turns, takes a step to the north—

—and promptly vanishes into the earth.

Noel, yanked [rusty chain pulled] forward by their shared chain as his compatriot falls, lands hard in the brittle grass and skids unwittingly ahead until he comes to a stop when Jesse stops as well. Then, the chain still between them, Noel scurries hurriedly to the edge of the once-hidden pitfall, afraid of what he might see.

"Jesse!" Shouts Noel into the earth, unconcerned by the volume of his voice. He

can see his friend lying on the grey clay below, motionless. Jutting out around him like needles in a pincushion are spikes—carved wood the thickness of saplings, at least four feet tall. There must be a dozen or more, at least! But amazingly, from what Noel can see, Jesse hasn't landed on a single one.

"Jesse!" he calls again, this time in a screaming whisper, cognizant again that their pursuers could be on them in a heartbeat. "Can you hear me?"

Below him, Jesse stirs.

"Noel?" he asks, slowly sitting up, one hand gripping his discombobulated head. From his right ear, a thin river of blood trickles down his neck. "Noel, are you there?"

"Up here," answers Noel, and it's only then that Jesse's vision begins to focus. He looks around first, then up into the sky and toward Noel, realizing at once his unfortunate predicament.

"By the Author," gasps Jesse, standing quickly to his feet, pressing away from the spikes like they were snakes about to strike. "How is it possible?"

"We can thank our angels later, dear friend. But, right now, we must get you out of there."

"The Feral," he remarks, remembering their first danger. "Right you are."

Noel looks up, surveying the area. No sign of attackers, but no sign of help, either—not that he expected any. The ground beneath him is cold and damp, his warm knees heating up the icy grass. He would never gain purchase enough to pull Jesse up, not with the frost and the mud.

Then, across the maw from him, Noel spots a small boulder serendipitously stuck in the earth at the edge of the pit.

"Jesse, can you get to the other side?" Says Noel, pointing in the stone's direction. "I think I can get a firmer grip on the other side."

"Indeed," replies Jesse. "Bring your end of the chain, and I'll manage mine."

So together they walk, the chain held aloft or outstretched, Noel around the rim of the trap, Jesse weaving between its spikes. In a moment, they are on the other side.

Noel looks around again, fearing any moment to see emerald eyes in the shadows of the trees, to taste the putrid scent of the Feral on his tongue. But the forest stands serene.

"All right, Jesse, take hold. We'll work together now."

Noel loops his end of the chain around his wrists and palms, forming the tightest grip he can muster against the cold of the iron, then moves around to the backside of the boulder. He plants his feet against it, gaining leverage he didn't have before and braces himself.

"Ready?" He calls out.

"Ready," comes Jesse's muffled reply.

"Then I'll pull, and you climb."

So Jesse, his hands on the chain, his booted feet on the earthen wall, begins to inch his way up and out of the trap.

But it's slow going, Noel's muscles straining against the weight of his stockier companion. Meanwhile, Jesse's having struggles of his own to keep his footing. The clay earth, once sturdy, had become soft under his feet as every step served more and more to knead the ground into a slippery muck. Sweat draining down his back, Jesse is about halfway up the side of his would-be demise when he hears the wail of the hunting horn.

Noel hears it, too, cocks an ear instinctively in the direction of the sound. The chain digs into his skin, Jesse's weight shifting erratically.

"Don't panic!" Cries Noel, gritting his teeth against the pull of the iron.



"I'm almost there!" Screams Jesse, his voice pitched higher than its usual timbre. "Just a few feet more!"

A crude and hand-wrought spear flies angrily into view, black-stone-tipped and sharper than a winter's chill. Noel feels the weapon's presence even before he catches it in the corner of his sight. Mere seconds from death, trained reflexes and steady muscles take over on their own. Noel dips backward and down, skillfully avoiding the projectile.

But in the process, he loses his grip on the chain.

It tears viciously from his grasp in a wake of blood and heat, and Jesse yells, slipping back down into the trap. He manages to land on his feet, again avoiding impalement, but his ankle gives way with a crack. He cries out in pain as he hits the dirt, gripping his hobbled leg.

Caring not for the horde of Feral closing in, Noel scrambles again to the edge of the pit and looks down at his one and only friend.

"Jesse!" he shouts, reaching a hand out to the man in the earth, an ineffectual gesture.

The horn sounds again, closer, and now the hunting cries are heard, guttural barks, barely human.

The dinner bell's been rung.

A typical Feral hunting party consisted of twelve to fifteen members. Although these reapers had, by all accounts, once been human, that was no longer the case. They stood upright and could speak when needed. But their teeth had grown sharp, their muzzles beastly, their animal eyes untamed. Wolf and man mashed together, the ultimate predator with a hunger for human flesh.

From his place near the trap, Noel can see the green of their eyes, more frightening than he remembers. His body tightens like a lynx about to leap. Noel is no warrior, he might say. But those who have trained in the lodges with him would tell otherwise. Noel is a fierce and formidable opponent. He wouldn't have made it

this far if he weren't.

The Feral move in, circling slowly, their stares locked on their prey. Noel turns, crouches, watches them, waiting for the first to charge out of the mist. He calls down to his friend.

"Jesse, can you stand?"

"I'm afraid not," comes the answer. "But you need to go if you can."

"What?"

"My time is up, brother. No doubt the horde has surrounded us by now."

"Don't be ridiculous," Noel lies, forcing a smile even though Jesse can't see him. "We've only just heard their call. We can still do this."

All around him, Noel can hear the prowling footsteps, bare feet on the thawing earth. He does his best not to look in the Feral's direction and keeps his eyes toward Jesse.

"You're a terrible liar."

Noel laughs, an awkward sound that's almost a sob.

"Come on, old man. Don't give up on me now."

"Old man" had long been a private joke between them. In reality, even with the small age gap between them, both Jesse and Noel would still be considered young. But Jesse always had been the more serious of the two, the more seasoned soul.

Jesse smiles wistfully at the friendly ribbing, tears already in his eyes.

"You know the way now," Jesse says, his eyes to the heavens. "Just keep following the power lines. The Silver Citadel awaits you if you can break the chain. But, do it quickly, against the rock!"

"I can't do this alone!" Cries Noel. The Feral are almost upon him, savoring their meal.

"Then I'll do it!" Jesse wails, pulling a hunting blade from his waistband. "I'll cut myself in half if it means your freedom, dammit! The least you can do is try!"

A measured, erudite voice calls from behind Noel.

"Might I be of some assistance?"

Noel and Jesse freeze and lock eyes for a moment.

"Is someone here?" Jesse whispers, disbelief etching his gaze. Without answering, Noel slowly turns. As he does, he sees the faces of the Feral all around him, not so removed from his own, staring at the new arrival with their neon eyes.

The newcomer is tall and thin, with bony legs and arms, his pose one of a practiced oddity, broken at the hip so that he's bent in an off-putting yet statuesque manner, casting at first glance the shadow of a gnarled, leafless tree. He is dressed all in black—black gloves, black boots, a black overcoat that falls all the way to his feet, its wide, wool collar popped and cinched tight against his neck. Even his face and head are covered in a skin-tight fabric the shade of midnight, and his eyes lay hidden behind dark, reflective goggles.

There is no mistaking it: This is one of the Chosen, a member of the regional authority.

A Corinthian.

The Corinthian, fluid, graceful, steps forward and gestures with a serpentine hand.

"Did you not hear me, boy? I asked if you are in need of our help."

Behind the Corinthian sits a windowless black carriage no larger than a chariot. In its harness are a pair of jet-black rams, their massive grey horns impressive.

Whether by nature, design, or some wicked combination of both, the man in the

driver's box is also horned. Shirtless and chiseled, his red tapered harem pants billowing in the early morning breeze, he dips his strange head to Noel. His face, like the Corinthians, is covered. However, unlike his master, the driver wears no goggles. In fact, his mask has no eyeholes at all, and it comes down just far enough to cover the man's nose, leaving bare his stubbled chin.

A slave, Noel thinks. A Lesser like me. The Chosen, when they traveled during daylight at all, could leave no centimeter of skin exposed to the sun, lest their bodies be turned to ashes.

That was the rumor, anyway.

"We could use a hand, yes," says Noel cautiously, suspicion keeping his body tense. This could all sour quickly in a moment, stuck between a hungry horde of Feral and a beckoning Corinthian. "It's my friend; he's fallen into this trap."

The Corinthian presses forward with long, elegant strides. The confused Feral, eyes darting about the scene, take a few hesitant steps backward. The Corinthian joins Noel at the hole's edge and peers into it.

"Hello there, Jesse," he says with a too-friendly wave.

At once very afraid, Noel gives the Corinthian a troubled look. "How do you—"

"You don't think a loyalist such as myself, an ambassador in high standing with the Crimson Citadel, would happen upon you by chance, do you?"

Noel's blood chills. The Corinthian's voice is like that of a viper. He can almost imagine the man's forked tongue.

Noel looks down at Jesse, whose pale expression no doubt mirrors his own. The Corinthian takes Noel by the forearm then, pulling him closer and whispering just for him.

"Cardinal Loukas has had his eye on you for some time, Noel of Contreras. Even before your daring escape from Easter Ridge. He wishes now to make your acquaintance."

Noel looks at the Corinthian, trying to keep his expression as unreadable as his opponent's. It's not easy to tell when someone's lying when all you can see in their eyes is your own reflection, and Noel doesn't want to be the only one showing all his cards.

"Jesse, as well?" Noel asks at last.

"Of course," replies the Corinthian, lifting a gloved hand. Out from it drops a red skeleton key dangling by a silver chain. Noel eyes the key, the Corinthian, and the still-bewildered Feral surrounding him in the mist, weighing his miserable options.

"It seems quite simple to me, Noel," says the Corinthian. His voice is warm now, viscous, sweet like the sap that incases an insect. "Come with me, or stay here and die." And he jingles the key enticingly.

"The choice is yours."

Noel looks down at Jesse, sitting up now but clearly still in pain.

"Very well," says Noel, bowing his head respectfully. "We would be honored to meet the Cardinal."

The Corinthian smiles—or at least Noel perceives a smile. The fabric covering the man's jaw tightens slightly, stretching upward. He takes the key in his hand and reaches around Noel for the lock that keeps the heavy chain fastened to his harness. Noel looks over his shoulder, notices the shimmering, seamless bangle tight around the Corinthian's wrist, and notes that the key's silver chain is fused to it.

*A key to every lock in the land, thinks Noel, permanently a part of you.*

So, this Corinthian did indeed have some serious standing. But he still took orders from the Few—not a slave, but not entirely free, either.

*Is anyone free in this land?*

The lock now removed, the Corinthian slips the chain from its harness. Then, holding it, he looks at Noel, and that unseen smile there beneath the mask widens, and now Noel is confident he should not have trusted this being.

Instead of pulling Jesse up, the Corinthian tosses the chain away from him and into the pit.

"No!" Shouts Noel, reaching out to grab the flailing end of the chainlink. But even with quick reflexes, he is no match for falling iron. Whether sensing this opportunity or simply reacting to Noel's distress, the Feral begin beating their chests and growling.

"Let us part," says the Corinthian, taking Noel firmly by the shoulder and turning him away from the pit. "Before these animals grow too hungry to obey."

Noel can hear Jesse pleading from the pit, and he pushes against his escort. "Wait!" Shouts Noel, pulling away. "We can't just leave him!"

With confounding speed, the Corinthian slips Noel back into his grip, this time by the collar of his tunic, and brings a long, silver blade up under Noel's chin. As far as Noel could tell, the man wore no sheath, no accessory to hold such a weapon. But here was steel nonetheless.

"Do not test me, little bird," growls the Corinthian, all sense of congeniality gone. "Loukas wants you alive, but he never stipulated that you must arrive intact, and there are many tricks to keep you breathing long after I've clipped your wings."

Noel holds his breath, jaw clenched. He spares a glance over to the pit, to Jesse unseen below. Noel's muscles ache to strike, to take on this smug bastard and grind his silk-covered face into pulp. But instead, he lifts a silent request to the Author and bites his tongue. It's all he can do.

*Bring my friend safely into the next life,* Noel prays. He opens his eyes, stares hard at the Corinthian, and breathes again.

"That's better," compliments the Corinthian. "It's a bit of a ride to Coldaire, so we

might as well learn to get along.”

The carriage traveled through the day and into the night, and by the time the moon had lifted her ivory head, Noel had fallen into a fitful and feverish sleep.

In this slumber, dreams assaulted him. One by one, he saw images he'd thought he'd forgotten: nights in the fields when sleep was never offered; hours in the hot sun digging ditches—aqueducts to feed crops whose bounty his people would never know; days in the mines, rodentine and half-blind, scouring for precious metals to line the Chosen's coffers. He saw his mother's face colored by the light through her glass bottle collection, felt his own shard of glass in his dream-pocket, emerald, like the eyes of the Feral.

And he saw other things. Things he hadn't witnessed but assumed to be true. Like when the Feral slipped into their snare like an oil slick, moving as a single spill, to rescue Jesse from the jaws of the earth only to tear him apart with their own.

By sunrise, the visions wilted, but the memory of them remained a vibrant red, blooming and alive.

A few hours into the morning, the carriage arrives at Coldiare. Leaving it with the driver at the city's main gates, Noel and his chaperone make their way through the streets, past shops and taverns, to the outset gardens that adorn the grounds of the Crimson Citadel.

Noel can't help but stare in awe. The towering obelisk, mirrored in the reflecting pool perpendicular to the main entrance, is a horrid yet splendid sight. Its thousands of blood-red bricks, pointed windows laced in intricate mullions, and baroque entrance doors as thick as ancient tombstones.

But its most captivating feature lay at its pinnacle. Atop the Citadel, perched like a saucer-shaped crown, broader than the base of the building itself, sat the observation decks, the high dungeons, and the many-roomed quarters of Cardinal Loukas Eirenaios and his servants and staff.

Noel cranes his neck, peering into the heavens at the marvelous structure above before the sky disappears as he follows the Corinthian through the Citadel's doors.

Once within its wall, the Crimson Citadel's opulence only increases. Noel takes in the vaulted ceilings, arched and lined with lierne like the ribcage of some hollowed-out dragon, and appraises the grand chandelier in the center, the Citadel's crystal heart. He watches Chosen and Lesser alike—servants and officers, courtesans and elites—mingle about, congregating in small groups to spread gossip or share in an intimate moment. He spots soldiers near the exits as well, red-armored and mountainous men, their heads horned like sheep, just as his driver's had been. Noel wonders if this is a regional ornament or if the direct subjects of every Citadel were fashioned in this bestial way.

"You've never stepped foot inside a Citadel," states the Corinthian. Noel doesn't reply. The Corinthian takes him by the shoulder then, almost as if they are friends.

"You will learn to like it here," he says, leading Noel to a hallway on the northern edge of the building. There, he finds a lift, a steel platform with three sides, and no door. A system of intricate gears abuts either side of the incomplete cube; pulleys disappear into the open shaft above. Noel swallows hard. The contraption looks rickety despite its bulk, and he hesitates.

"You'll be quite all right," says the Corinthian, stepping onto the platform. "She's carried more than you and I."

Noel looks at the man, this ambassador, and wonders if all ambassadors are forced to be this way: threatening one moment, cajoling and comforting the next. Noel wants to hate him—and he does, for his betrayal and what he's done to Jesse. But a part of him feels pity for the man, too. Did he have a say in his lot? Or was he thrust into all of this, as Noel had been, born into shackles of a different kind?

Noel steps onto the platform and stands beside the Corinthian.

The shrouded man looks down at him.

"Are you ready, Noel?"



And Noel is caught off guard by the tone in the Corinthian's voice. For the first time, there's a hint of something human there, considerate and sincere. Noel nods, and his chaperone engages the lift.

Slowly, inch by crepitating inch, they rise into the Citadel.

## SECOND

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Flanked by the Corinthian, Noel is brought before the Cardinal. They meet in his main quarters, a spire-ceilinged sanctuary at the center of the Citadel's uppermost floor. The cavernous room gives off every indication of being a hallowed place. Candles in gold candelabras festoon the walls, their wax dripping languidly to the floor, and from the steeple's high ceiling, thick drapes of crimson hang like curtains, blocking perhaps some unseen skylight. Even the Cardinal's desk looks more like an altar than a writing surface, six feet wide at least and fashioned out of marble.

And seated there behind that desk is Cardinal Loukas Eirenaios, overseer of the Crimson Citadel at Coldiare and chief magistrate to the greater region of Alpinion. Skeletal, ghastly, and pale, Loukas lifts his orange eyes as Noel enters. He stands, his frame at once monumental, and stretches a blackened smile and open arms.

"Noel," the Cardinal says as he crosses the room with long strides, traversing the distance between them as if it were never there, like a ghost floating through a wall. Towering over even the Corinthian, he strikes a formidable presence; ancient strength reveals itself in his gate, his haunting eyes, his sharp chin.

"It is an honor to meet you at last," Loukas says, reaching Noel. In stark contrast to his appearance, his voice is a warm baritone, measured and kind.

Loukas takes Noel's hand in both of his. The Corinthian squeezes Noel's shoulder and presses down on it firmly, indicating that Noel should kneel. He does so, too awestruck to question such groveling.

Noel feels his stomach seethe, down on one knee, his hand held above him in the Cardinal's grip. All this pomp, all this posturing, all this air of nobility—it made him sick. Noel had seen what the ranks of the Chosen and the Few were capable of out there in the fields, in the world beyond these blood-colored walls. It was anything but noble.

Loukas bends at the waist, placing his forehead on the back of Noel's hand, a ceremonial greeting Noel has only read about. He presses it there momentarily, his skin rippled and hard like ice on a frozen river, before releasing his grasp.

"Thank you, Croenen."

Croenen—the Corinthian—nods his head and exits the sanctuary without a word. Noel turns and watches him go, a shiver running through him. The Corinthian certainly was no friend, but Croenen's presence somehow made things more palatable. Now alone with the Cardinal, Noel's mind is awash with bleak concern, the wonder of the journey and the spectacle of the Citadel giving way to the reality of his plight.

"You may stand, boy," Loukas says patiently as he returns to his desk. Noel does as told, and the Cardinal waves him further into the room. Noel now sees that his workspace is littered with parchment, leather-bound journals, bottles filled with blackened ink. Loukas appears to be pouring over some works of great importance.

From behind his stacks of literature, Loukas smiles. "Have you kept up with your histories, Noel?"

Noel clears his throat.

"I read everything I come across."

The Cardinal beams.

"Brilliant," he says with a fatherly air. "It's so important to know where we come from, what we've been. The past cuts deep rivulets into the present. Even now, we can feel the blade."

Loukas snatches something from the desk, striding back to Noel, who notices that the Cardinal now carries a broad, triangular dagger, black-hilted and sheathed in silver and bronze.

"I'm a historian myself," continues Loukas. "The Scribe of Salene. It's my duty to chronicle everything I've witnessed in my long and illustrious life so that my goddess may read of our works when she returns. My catalog of records, both Old and New, is the most extensive library ever assembled.

"However, not every truth worth knowing is written down. Some things are too dangerous for parchment. For example—" and Loukas pulls his weapon from its ornate scabbard, the blade ringing out a melody only the sharpest steel can sing. Feet away, Noel can't help but take a step back, his eyes on the dagger in the withered creature's grip.

"Did you know that there were others before you, Noel? Other 'chosen ones?'"

Noel blinks, his startled eyes shifting from the weapon in the Cardinal's hand to his expression. Was Loukas lying? Noel searches his eyes, his mind revolving.

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying," replies the Cardinal, "that you are not the first. They came in pairs as you did, brought together early in life by some fortuitous event, seeking the Silver

Citadel. The one who holds the map—"

Loukas points the dagger at Noel, referencing him before gesturing it directionlessly, toward someplace else, to someone not present. Jesse, far away in a hole.

Jesse, his bones drying beneath the power lines.

"—And the one who holds the key."

Loukas smirks, his cheek twitching.

"Such a charming tale. And one not written down. Why do you think that is, Noel?"

Noel looks away, a pernicious pang in his chest.

"Because it's dangerous," he whispers, his voice somber.

"Right you are," says Loukas with a pleased of his hands.

"And do you know why it's dangerous?"

Noel says nothing, biting back tears at these revelations.

"Hope, Noel. Hope is the most dangerous thing in all the world. So we hide it."

The Cardinal begins to pace around Noel then, circling him like a panther.

"And yet, the prophecy repeats, cycles on unfulfilled, starts again like a game of rabbits, a game of Chosen Ones. Every hundred years or so, we see another pair appear. And every hundred years or so, a certain comrade of mine is called upon to deal with things. You might consider him a tailor skilled at sewing up loose ends."

Loukas stops, and Noel turns to face him. The Cardinal stands between Noel and the door Croenen had exited a lifetime ago. Loukas looks down at the blade, turning it to catch the light.

"Sadly, it always ends the same."

Noel's muscles tighten, bracing for the charge and the dagger's flight, but Loukas doesn't start. Instead, he considers Noel with a studious squint. There's a grave tension here, standing on the serrated edge between what has come before and what will happen next.

Finally, the Cardinal speaks.

"But then one day I asked myself, 'does it always have to? Could there be another way—something that ends not just this loop but the loop altogether? What could stop a prophecy if death does not?'"

Loukas snaps his brittle fingers then, a pop that pulls Noel away from his swimming head and into the moment.

Two burly guards armed with pikes enter from a door to Noel's left and usher in four scantily-clad Lessers—three women and one man, who carries with him a wooden chair. Noel is at once struck by their beauty, their poise, the softness of their features and skin. These were slaves, no doubt, but not like him; these fair mortals had never seen a day of fieldwork.

"Life," explains the Cardinal. "Life will stop the cycle; eternal life and all its splendid trappings."

The servants come forward, and the Lesser man places the chair in the center of the room. It's a regal piece of furniture with a high, velvet-upholstered back and carved wooden armrests. The man then turns the chair so that it faces the direction of the desk. Loukas points with the dagger.

"Sit."

Hesitant to take his eyes off Loukas, fearful of turning his back to the door, Noel crosses to the chair and sits down. In moments, the four slaves—courtesans, he surmises—are on him, framing him with curvaceous and chiseled bodies, wandering hands across his chest, fingers through his hair. He squirms nervously

under their touch and gives the blonde woman kneeling before him a puncturing stare. She slinks back, and the others cease their more blatant caressing, though they make no effort to lean away from him.

One thing useful comes from the advances, though. When the blonde woman he shooed off had run her hand up Noel's thigh, he was reminded with a jab of the shard of glass hidden in his pocket.

From behind Noel, Loukas speaks.

"Comfortable, are we?"

"Not particularly," Noel says under his breath. The Cardinal chuckles.

"Well, as we say, not for every man is the voyage to Corinthia."

The Cardinal appears now, walking from near the door to stand before Noel.

"So," he begins, gesticulating toward the would-be paramours at Noel's side. "If not these earthly pleasures, then what?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Is it prestige? Power? Wealth? Every man has his price."

And Loukas closes in now, leaning forward so that his nose almost touches Noel's.

"What is your price?" He whispers, and the ice in the word hisses like a snake. Noel freezes under the weight of the Cardinal's gaze, unable to breathe.

"My price for what?" He manages, his mouth dry.

"For your cooperation, of course. For your help in ending the prophecy. What will it take for you to give up this pointless crusade of yours?"

"I have no crusade."



The Cardinal clucks his tongue, standing upright. "Come now, Noel. We both know why you're here."

Noel exhales.

"Your ambassador lied to me and left my friend to die at the hands of the Feral. He brought me to you at your request. I am only here because of you. So, no, Cardinal Loukas, I have no idea why I'm here."

Loukas sheds a thin, mealy smile.

"I see," he says, bringing the point of the dagger to his temple like a finger to a thought. "Your heart still lies with Jesse."

The Cardinal begins to pace toward the back wall in the direction of his desk. Over his shoulder, he gestures to the guards to follow him.

"That's what you desire most," continues Loukas. "Your friend's well-being. I could dangle earthly delights in front of you all night, but your riches are intangible, things one cannot hold: love for your fellow man."

Reaching the wall, Loukas reveals some mechanism built into the brick, hidden behind a panel. There appear to be lights within it, small circles glowing red. His guards now at his side, Loukas pushes one of the circles.

The metallic groan of gears engaging—not unlike the sound the lift had made on his journey skyward—startles Noel. He watches with fascination and horror as the wall next to the Cardinal begins to rise, peeling away from the floor and creeping upward.

Revealed behind this moving mass of brick is a dungeon of sorts, though its bars aren't made of iron. Instead, beams of radiant cerulean light keep the cohort of slaves beyond—two dozen in number, maybe more—trapped there in the cell.. Noel is in awe of the magic he is witnessing, but his stomach lurches when he sees the faces of his fellow Lessers. Gripping the armrests to restrain himself, Noel's knuckles whiten.

Swiftly, the guards lower their pikes to aim at the prisoners, and Loukas pushes another button on the control panel. With a sucking sound, the light-bars disappeared into the floor. The guards step into the cell, one prodding any surging slave backward while the other lunges into the crowd, reaching for one of its members, anyone at all.

Backing away, the guards drag a man from the cell. He is older than Noel, but not by much. His clothes are barely more than rags, disheveled and dirty, and his straw-colored hair sits atop his head like a used mop. The Cardinal replaces the bars with a push of his finger as the trio leaves the cell, and those still captive cry out, shouting and pressing forward, though not enough to touch the bars. Certainly, they are deadly, Noel thinks. As harmful as a flame.

The guard holding the man shoves him toward the center of the room, where he staggers over unsteady legs and collapses in a heap at Noel's feet. The Lesser looks up at Noel, seated there in that regal chair, lustful slaves at his side, and his eyes well with tears. Noel's heart breaks, for this man does not realize they are the same. He thinks he is beneath Noel.

Then the Cardinal is on the man with startling speed, gathering him up, standing him straight, his arm around the slave's shoulder like an old friend.

"Good day to you, sir, good day," says Loukas in exaggerated pleasantry. "It's so kind of you to stop by."

The man's bewildered eyes dart around.

"Y-you're welcome," he stutters, unsure what to say.

"And what is your name, my dear lad?" Asks the Cardinal.

The man looks at Noel, his eyes a wordless question: *what is going on?*

"My name is Mathis."

"And do you have any family, Mathis?"

The man glances at Loukas, hurt by the question, but he just as quickly looks away,

remembering his place.

"I did once," Mathis says soberly, his gaze on the floor. "Though I'm not sure who's alive anymore."

Mathis pauses, but the Cardinal wants more.

"Go on," he coaxes.

"M-my wife is dead, that I know. I saw her die. And I last saw my daughter over three calendars ago before they moved us to separate camps. I had two sons, too, but of them, I know nothing."

"Such a tragic story," says Loukas, gazing at Noel now. His eyes betray the empathy in his voice, amber orbs of malice and disgust. "And how did you end up here in my realignment program?"

Noel nearly spits.

*Realignment program?* He thinks, and a lump rises in his throat. What a way to name a dungeon. Noel's muscles burn with anger, with the desire to lash out, to tear the Cardinal's smug face right from his skull.

"I s-stole something," Mathis says, his dirty face reddening. "Food, for my chain-mate and I."

"That's right," Loukas says. "You're a thief. A vermin. You take what isn't yours, just like the rest of your kind." And in a burst of aggression, all pretense vanishing, Loukas shoves Mathis violently to the floor. He lands just feet from Noel.

Noel looks at this man named Mathis, huddled before him on all fours, his face buried in his hands. He is murmuring something. At first, Noel thinks the Lesser is groveling, begging to be spared. But that's not it.

The man is praying.

Fury swells greater in Noel, a tide pulled forth by a blood-red moon.

Loukas grits his blackened teeth.

"This is your treasure, then?" He asks, gesturing to Mathis. "Your precious humanity? You want to save Jesse, to steal him from me the way this man has stolen what he desired. But when you cross the Chosen, only death remains."

With a flick of his wrist, Loukas sends one of his guards back to the desk. Behind that, Noel sees the imprisoned, their forlorn faces visible through the glowing bars.

"You waste your potential on others, Noel. On their expectations. On their dreams for what you'll become. But you have no idea what eternity looks like, how small and meaningless your lives really are. Your people are a sliver of history. A breath. A barely whispered thought.

"My people are eternal; we are history. We have seen centuries come and go, have shaped civilizations from the shadows and bent rulers to our will. We are the Chosen and the Few. And you, Noel, act like rodents when you could be so much more."

Having returned to the center of the room, the Cardinal's guard hands his master the object he's retrieved.

Loukas raises a wide crystal chalice, displaying it to Noel as if offering a toast. Opulent and splendid, Noel can't help but admire the goblet, watch the way the candlelight dances off its many facets, shimmering like a spider's eyes.

"What if I told you," Loukas says, pulling Noel's attention away from the chalice, "That there is another way? A way to save Jesse. A way to save yourself."

Noel sees now that both guards have Mathis upright on his knees, their arms hooked under his shoulders, holding him in place. Mathis' face has gone pale. Noel sees the fear in the man's eyes, takes in the guards and their expressionless faces, and recognizes the Cardinal's ceremonial stance, the dagger in one hand and the cup in the other.

"What if I told you that you could live forever?"

And just like that, Noel sees it all, aware in an instant of what is to come next, of what this has all been leading to.

A sacrifice.

"No!" Cries Noel. Raising a hand, he tries to push himself from the chair, but the grip of the ready resistance of the concubines keeps him rooted.

With a lightning-quick slash of his blade, Cardinal Loukas opens wide Mathis' throat. The hapless man's eyes roll back, spinning wildly, and his mouth works a soundless scream as life rushes from his body, his limbs going slack at once.

With a rapturous glow on his face, Loukas places the crystal chalice beneath the wound, letting the river of blood fill his cup until it overflows. The guards take a step back, letting go of Mathis so that the man falls dead to the cold marble floor. The Cardinal raises his glass to his lips and takes a greedy drink, blood dripping carelessly down his neck and chin.

Noel looks on, aghast, shocked by the coarse display of savagery he has just witnessed. Noel had never seen darkness like this, even in the most brutal of work camps, the most dangerous of caverns, at the bitter end of the most vicious beatings.

Noel stares down his adversary, his vision tunneling, turning redder than the walls around him. He realizes the room has quieted, save for the muffled sobs of the imprisoned, who have also just witnessed the execution. The prayers of Mathis lie silent beside him, drowning in a pool of blood.

Noel feels his fingers instinctively, stealthily creep toward his pocket.

The Cardinal finishes swallowing and lets out a satisfied exhale. His eyes seem to glow a brighter orange than before, rivaling the candlelight around him.

He brings those eyes to Noel.

"All death is regrettable," Loukas says, his words like liquid, soaked in blood. "But

this was just a little death. No need to make it more than that." And to Noel's horror, Loukas steps forward and bends, offering him the chalice.

"To Jesse," says the Cardinal. "And to your future and your health, Noel."

Noel just stares at the cup, dumbfounded.

"Best to put aside this silly prophecy once and for all and to embrace life while there's still a chance. Wouldn't you agree?"

Noel glares at the ghoul before him, this inhuman husk, and knows it's now or never.

"What must I do?" He asks through gritted teeth. He measures his breathing, trying to stay calm before the storm. Finally, the Cardinal smiles, crimson in his teeth.

"Drink," Loukas replies. "Become one of us. Take this man's life and spare your own, and together, we will go to Jesse."

"A life for a life," Noel whispers, closing his eyes. "That's all it takes?"

"Precisely."

Noel hitches his breath, ready.

"Then I'll have yours."

With a speed he'd never known, Noel releases his muscles like a taut spring, yanking the shard of emerald glass from his pocket as he thrusts forward. He rips the pointed end of the glass up the front of the Cardinal, tearing through the meat of his chest and his ribs, clacking off his clavicle, shredding at his neck.

Startled and caught off guard, the sentries and concubines alike leap backward. Loukas, dropping both dagger and chalice [knife and cup clatter to the cement floor], spins away from Noel, flailing and falling back, grasping at the gash across the whole of him, from ear to stomach. Ichor—blood as black as oil—leaps from

the wailing Cardinal like rats from a collapsing mine.

Noel is on his feet and ready, all the adrenaline and emotion of the last few days coursing through his veins like liquid fire. Furiously, he grips his chair and hurls it at the two guards before him, knocking them backward and to the ground. He slips forward, kneeling to grab the Cardinal's discarded dagger in stride, and pounces on the closest guard, dispatching him quickly.

Gathering himself, the other sentry cries out, and Noel is reminded by the tenor of his voice that this soldier was once a slave, a Lesser like him. Still, this must be done.

Noel kicks out a leg, striking the chair and sending it splintering into the soldier's kneecaps, pitching him forward. Noel dodges the man's pike, tossed in a feeble attempt to land a blow, before grabbing the howling man as he falls and driving his face to the marble floor.

With a skillful motion of the dagger to the base of the man's skull, Noel regretfully ends him. He then stands, blade in one hand and one of the sentries' pikes in the other. He gives the four would-be seducers a stern glare. They crumple beneath the weight of it. Clearly, none of them has a taste for blood. Noel is thankful for this, for he hates the idea of killing any more of his people.

Steeling himself, Noel turns his attention to the Cardinal, who is staggering away, edging toward his desk, weakened but far from dead. Noel rushes forward with a cry, pike at the ready. As Loukas turns in surprise to face him, he catches the charging weapon in the diaphragm. Somewhere within, ancient lungs deflate, and the force of Noel's surge drives the decrepit demon backward, pinning him to the wall.

Noel lets fly a rattling, victorious roar, the heat of the battle boiling over. His heart races as he stares at the creature he's caught, mounted to the wall like a trophy buck.

"On second thought," says Noel, his chest heaving to catch air. "I don't want your life. Yours is an empty, carnivorous thing, and I'm already so much more than you."

The Cardinal, his strength waning, can only chuckle ruefully.

"Oh, you stupid, silly boy."

A subtle sound behind him now, the dropping of a needle, a barely audible ting, sends Noel spinning around, ready to attack.

But he freezes, held in place, the thin blade of the Corinthian at his throat.

Croenen is there poised like a fencer. Black and lean and striking, his goggles echo the kaleidoscopic colors that dance around the room—various reds and candle yellows, glowing cerulean, Noel's silver-blue eyes. Noel can't bring himself to breathe, the point of Croenen's sword resting near his Adam's apple.

Behind him, Loukas is laughing.

"Hello, Noel," croaks the Corinthian, his throat dry. "I see you've been busy."

"Finish him, my friend," instructs the Cardinal, sputtering blood. "Avenge me, and the riches of this Citadel will be yours."

"He is not your friend," Noel finds himself saying, his voice low and calm, his ears ringing. "The Chosen Few—they're only using you. Like they use up the rest of us, turning the world to ash."

The Corinthian is silent, and once again, Noel longs to know the man's expression, to see what thoughts ricochet behind his reflective eyes. He swallows hard.

*There's no way I'll get out of this.* Loukas is powerful yet old, and Noel had the element of surprise. Croenen has the upper hand now, and Noel has seen him move. He is agile and much younger, at least physically, than the Cardinal.

"We can end this," Noel pleads, a final attempt at diplomacy before all the blood in the room is shed.

The Corinthian stares back at him, immobile. Unreadable. An unwavering force.



"Kill him, you wretch!" Screams the Cardinal, all sense of decorum lost. "Kill him now!"

Noel waits, his muscles tense.

"Choose your path, Corinthian," he says, steeling his eyes, his heart, his mortal soul for whatever might come next.

For three days, Jesse lived in the ground.

It was night now, the third night, and he was tired beyond all words.

He stirs with what strength he has left and drags his weary body along the mucky clay floor of his eventual final resting place, a grave dug ages ago not for him but for whoever was unlucky enough to fall in. A nameless, faceless soul. A meal for something else. He reaches the small puddle near the wall, rainwater collected from yesterday's storm, and cups his hands to drink. Swallowing what he can, Jesse rolls over, exhausted, to gaze at the stars one last time.

Above him, the celestial bodies promenade, the moon and her stars. He thinks of the stories Noel once told him, how The Chosen and The Few were said to worship the moon as their source of strength and immortality, how the jealous sun had turned its back on them and left them to rule the night, and he wondered how anything so bright and so lovely could allow such a thing to happen. Perhaps she didn't want this. Maybe her followers took their powers and did what they liked with them despite their god.

Whatever the case, Jesse was headed for the heavens soon. He could feel it, his hunger now a part of him, his weariness his only companion.

Around the rim of the pitfall, closer than the stars, other lights shine, too. Green eyes reflected the silver moon, flickering like so many fireflies. The Feral look in on Jesse, studying him from time to time, especially at night. From what Jesse can tell, they've made camp above but have made no attempts to either rescue or destroy him. He can't fathom why they would stay here and yet not take him. Was

the Great Author protecting him? Sparing him for some wondrous deed yet to come? Jesse couldn't believe it. Not down here in the earth with the sky so far away, not here nestled in the grave.

Jesse shuts his eyes and pictures his friends and family one last time. Noel, more than a brother to him. Darius and Andor, spirited allies. His father, headmaster at the camp in Weathervane, where it all began. He had died over a decade ago, but Jesse still felt him here, watching over him. Tears spill over closed eyelids and run tiny rivers through the grime on Jesse's face. He takes a long, luscious breath, savoring this world for one moment more.

Above him, the Feral stir.

Jesse opens his eyes in time to see those near him scamper off. He can hear their murmuring begin, their bewildered growls and confusion. The sound of clanging, things tipped over in the night, the steady beat of hooves. A lantern, misplaced yet still lit, topples into the pit. It crashes a few inches from Jesse's feet, shattering, fire and fuel kicking up.

Moving by instinct alone, Jesse pulls his legs away from the flames and struggles to his knees. There's more commotion above now, shouting. Human voices. He hears the spring of a bow, an arrow let loose. The Feral are howling now, their angry shrieks echoing through the night.

But the scuffle is brief. Those Feral not killed, from what Jesse can surmise, flee into the woods, their wounded bellows fading into the night. The earth above grows still again.

"Hello?" Jesse means to say, but his voice gives way like stale bread, crumbling under neglect, and all that comes out is a wicked kind of breath.

He swallows, his throat on fire.

Suddenly, a familiar voice calls out from above.

"Have you been keeping up with your histories, Jesse of Anberlin?"

Jesse falls over, his blood racing.

"I'm certain that you have. But did you know that some stories are too dangerous to write down?"

Above him and across the way, Noel appears at the circle's edge. Nearly silhouetted against the moon, he radiates a mythic air, decked in the black and silver armor of a warrior or an angel of heaven. He sits casually, dangling his legs into the pit, an unflappable smile on his face.

"For example," Noel says, hope in his eyes. Jesse has forgotten what hope even looked like. "Have you heard the story of the revolution, the prophetic Sons of Lesser who will rouse the Sleeper, topple the Silver Citadel, and bring about the fall of the Chosen and the Few?"

Jesse, his eyes swimming with tears, clutches his heart and slips to the earth, overjoyed at the sight of his friend, his brother. He smiles, finding his voice, horse though it may be.

"I believe I have," he says, chuckling. "There were two of them, yeah? These Sons of Lesser? One who holds the map—"

"And one who holds the key."

But it isn't Noel who finishes the quote. Instead, it's a voice that sends Jesse's mind into a panic.

A tall, shrouded man steps up beside Noel. Jesse's breath quickens. He has seen this figure look down on him once before, and it didn't end well then.

The Corinthian speaks.

"Perhaps there's room yet in this story for a key of a different kind." And he extends a closed fist. From it hangs a silver chain. On the end of it, a crimson key. Both glisten like jewels in the moonlight.

Beside Jesse's head, a noise. He turns and is startled to find a rope lowered from

above next to him. He looks up and sees more people looking in on him. Unfamiliar faces, but faces like his own. Faces of other Lessers, muddy and worn. But they're wearing smiles and offering their hands.

"What is going on?" Jesse laughs, taking the rope. Then, gingerly, he pulls himself to his feet, groaning in pain.

"A dangerous tale, old man," says Noel with a crooked grin. "One for the ages. But you needn't worry about all that.

"Just hold on tight for now, and soon I will tell you everything."

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