



CHILDREN

OF

RIMA

MIRIAM YVETTE



SEEDS OF THE FALLEN





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## Name Pronunciation

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**Fior** (Fee-or)

**Gittle** (Gih-til)

**Matias** (Mah-tee-ahs)

**Oscern** (O-surn)

**Rima** (Ree-mah)

**Vinol** (Vih-nul)

**Villena** (Vee-yena)

**Wein** (Way-n)

**Zorn** (Zoh-rn)

The line between light and darkness is finer than a thread of silk. You are either light or darkness.

So take good care of your light.

Lucan.

# CHAPTER 1 LUCAN

Dawn's light had yet to unveil the darkened road. In the icy and bleak winter, the valley was bathed in blue, covered with brown, slushy snow. The horses' labored breaths streamed from their nostrils, steering through by the coachman's command. The wagon they pulled bore no shelter for Lucan or his companions, but it was better than walking through the aftermaths of a blizzard.

Any seasoned traveler would have thought twice before thinking about making the journey north. It was the watchful eye of Skiar or sheer luck they ran into Fredrick, a wealthy merchant en route to their destination, Vinol.

Fredrick wore a green flat-top hat with a large red feather sticking at the back. The hat was a symbol of the Red Guild, a union of traders who toured Vine Road to sell their wares.

For the entire night, Lucan hadn't talked to him much, but he looked the part of a wealthy merchant, although his gold rings could use some polishing. The wind's chill took the moisture from his eyes. He had rubbed them a few times because they stung whenever he blinked. His hands were still crusty, mostly from the blood he tried to wipe off over and over.

"I'm tired of going in circles with you, Fredrick." The coachman sat with his back slouched, either from his poor posture or bad habit. "You stay an entire month in Villena, and you suddenly believe those country folk?"

"Then answer me this," Fredrick said. He didn't seem to get the signal cues that his hired hand wasn't interested in conversing, but they carried on the debate, nonetheless. "Are we inherently evil?"

"I don't care if humans were inherently shitted out of a pig's ass." The coachman cupped his hands over the tip of his cold nose and blew hot air before he spewed more words out. "Vinol got into these shithole wars because of religious beliefs—now you're trapped by those Rimans."

While they went on and on, Lucan looked at the pale moons, endlessly shining their steel lights over them, offering no warmth or comfort to his two companions. The blanket they shared was thin

and itchy. Lucan didn't need it, as it only impeded his movements. Wedged in the back of the cart, Oscern could barely shift a leg. Taking up most of the space was Fredrick's trunks of wares, blanketed by tarps to keep the snow from damaging the wood. The iron clamp was painted gold, and the straps still smelled like polish. Each latch was locked, but it wouldn't stop Zorn from trying his luck to lock pick them.

"How can you not believe? Those Villenan Maidens made compelling arguments." Fredrick was back at it, looping the conversation as if he didn't know how to keep his mouth shut.

"Well, women will say anything to tie your balls around their fingers. They'll fill your mind to weaken your will so you can follow their cause."

Lucan winced at those mere words. His broken heart was still bruised from the aftermath of his lover. Restless, he decided to listen, just to see what they thought, as Fredrick seemed unwilling to back down.

"You can curse Skiar for doing nothing all you want. But we are evil, and this world was created by the Demon of the Deep."

"And that's how they get you. They instill fear in your weak-minded noggin." The coachman coughed up some phlegm and spat it into the snow. "Hell, there were no women who would raise their skirts for us. I'd seen livelier flies hump one another in a pile of dung than in that village they protect."

"If you'd gone to their temple, you'd have known the truth!" Fredrick raised his hands to the sky like he was some priest. "Listen very closely, for I will now unveil the truth. Our bountiful world, Pleada, was born in darkness. Its very nature embraced the ravaging quakes, typhoons, and tsunamis. There was no haven in any corner of the world, not even under any dwelling created by man. Horn-bearing creatures terrorized the continent and stripped humanity's hope. Victims of the malicious lost their sanity and choked their loved ones with their own hands."

The long speech woke Zorn from his sleep. He opened one eye, eyebrows furrowed at Fredrick, who continued. "Ultimately, Skiar took pity on our world and sent down his celestial maiden, Rima. Her arrival brought upon a light we had never beheld. Her presence parted the clouds, where she stood among the mountains in her might."

“You’re going to keep going at it, ain’t ya?” the coachman groaned.

“Seems like it,” Zorn mumbled, rubbing his eyes.

“As I was saying,” Fredrick declared, slightly turning to them. “To combat her greatness, the Demon of the Deep summoned his loyal servant, Murella. But Rima swept over the darkness, bringing down the treacherous woman and forcing the Demon of the Deep to burrow back into his hell. So much blood was spilled that it split the Rufen continent in half, creating Blood River, and thus creating the Northern and Southern lands.”

“I thought it was called Blood River because the water looks red in the fall?” the coachman asked, his voice slightly changing to interest.

“A phenomenon just the same,” Fredrick answered, pleased by his question. “Pleada had suffered enough by the Demon of the Deep, so Rima didn’t return to the heavens. She took the form of a woman and traveled to all the corners of the world, planting her Oak trees to calm the shaking core that dwelled within Pleada, bringing balance and peace to our lands.”

The coachman smacked his lips, peering at Fredrick, then at the road. “You know, if some giantess roamed these lands, don’t you think we’d have seen her footprints or what became of her?”

“You want proof? Rima has Maidens, women of light who tend and protect her oak trees and draw out the darkness. And the men who protect the village, their prowess keeps any ill-doer from their holy White Oak.”

“And what became of her?”

“Who?”

“Rima.”

“Rumor has it she met a man worthy of her attention and birthed his children. She succumbed to her human body and was put to rest in Aelith. To this very day, the Maidens say Rima’s lineage lives.”

“What a crock of hornshit!” The coachman’s raised voice shook Oscern awake. “It’s been over a decade since that holy city fell, and you wanna know why? It’s because belief in fables led to their own demise. Now, shut those flaps, or I’ll have you go searching for firewood at our next stop.” He yanked on his blanket and tucked the corners under his armpits.

Fredrick stomped his foot. “Well, it’s your loss. I’ll just give my focus to our new companions.” He turned and looked directly at



Lucan. “A good deed is sure to lead to a suitable reward. You lads would’ve been goners if we hadn’t saved you from those bandits—not like me to stop for strangers, but I do recall seeing you boys in Villena.”

“Uh...yeah,” Lucan answered. They could have taken care of those criminals, but it was he who messed up in the end.

“Did your parents approve of you three leaving the nest?”

“We got no parents.” He looked at his friends, awake and listening. “And we’re not from Villena.”

Fredrick’s face contorted and molded before it scrunched over his flared nose. “Oh, I thought you three were Rimans.”

“We *are*.” The soothing voice on his right came from one of his companions, Zorn. He stretched his arms and released a long yawn, crinkling his narrow nose. “But that’s not our home.”

“Where did you strangers come from then?” It was hard to tell at night, but the merchant appeared to have formed an ugly frown.

“We came from Truterson.” Oscern’s deep voice could pull at the ears for being loud and clear. When they were still boys, folks would mistake him for an adult.

“My, my.” The coachman had lent an ear to their conversation. “You’re a far cry from home. Why the eagerness to hitch a ride to Vinol?”

Lucan didn’t need to look to feel Zorn and Oscern’s stare at him. They already assumed by Oscern’s answer that they were from Truterson. Now it was up to him to answer this one. He looked at the cold coachman, beard neatly tucked under his tunic. “We were bored off our asses.”

Zorn snickered, pulling Fredrick’s eyebrows to deepen over his lashes. “Hey!” he snapped. “There’ll be no foul language on this respectable wagon.”

“Leave ’em alone,” said the coachman. “They’re just boys.”

Fredrick grumbled. “Listen here. I agreed to take you three out of Rima’s goodwill. But if you’re troublemakers, and we run into each other in Vinol, we’ve never met, got it?”

“Why do you care about us?” Zorn delicately leaned his sharp chin on the back of his pale hand. “I thought Vinol was the city of opportunity, where all the merchants, such as yourself, fill your pockets with coins without regard for morality?”

Fredrick puffed his chest. "I'll have you know, pretty boy, that I'm a Vinolian and a respectable master of my trade. My coin isn't tarnished by gambling or blood."

"That doesn't mean the claims aren't true," Lucan said in support of his friend. "I heard of the taxing, gambling rooms, masses of sex workers, and the hiring of mercenaries have helped keep the economy going and support the war."

"And who are you to question King Pann's decisions?"

"Leave 'em alone, Fredrick. Cheap women and coin are why the boys are here." The coachman's viewpoint shed some light on their motives. "Money has been calling these grunts from all the corners of Pleada like a flock of seagulls to a fisherman's catch."

Fredrick harrumphed. "That's on account that they have some skill."

"You can rest easy with that one," Zorn said. "This isn't the first time we've taken a job that requires sticking steel to the gut."

Fredrick clasped his hands as if he was about to mutter a prayer, but instead, his face wrinkled with that same revulsion no form of religion could cleanse. "*You* boys kill?"

Lucan leaned his back against the wagon. These newly founded believers, they always have a way of annoying him. "Rima killed Murella to save the world. Why can't we do the same bidding?"

Somehow, that seemed to piss off Fredrick even more. "You are wolves disguised as believers."

Lucan scoffed. At that moment, he felt Oscern tap his leg, but he didn't hold his words. "You've only been to *one* Rima village, and you think you know everything."

"What would a little life-stealer like you know?"

"I know every village will hark the same tale about Rima conquering darkness and destroying Murella, but they have their own rules to what merits a Riman. Villenans don't value killing of any kind, even for defense. Now go to another Rima village and open your eyes again."

"Stop the wagon!" Fredrick hollered. Lucan nearly hit his head against the wood. "Get these delinquents off—I want nothing to do with them."

"You sure?" The coachman examined them again. "We haven't reached Lotter's Mountain, and the blizzard may come back."

"I'm sure they can make it to their destination well on their own if Rima allows."

The coachman shrugged. “Sorry, boys, but he paid me for the road. Best get used to that sort of treatment in Vinol. Now get off my wagon.”

Lucan made no qualms about it. At least he was kind enough to slow down. He hopped off and watched Oscern go next, stumbling on his last step. When the wagon picked up, there was a struggle. Fredrick was yelling at Zorn because he didn’t want to leave without that itchy blanket. The drop of his back against the ground got him cursing, dusting the snow off his back.

“Nice going, Lucan!” Zorn shouted. “First, your stupid woman led us to an ambush. Now we got kicked off our only ride!”

Lucan picked up his leather travel bag and wiped it off. There was no point in addressing the matter. He didn’t know his girl of two years would turn against him, not after they spent that night sharing their dreams.

Oscern, who was often the quiet, deep thinker, had sowed his eyes on him.

“What is it, O?” From afar, he felt Zorn’s jabbing stare.

“If you’re not careful, that mouth of yours is going to sink you.”

“Ha!” Lucan went to tie his leather scabbard around his belt. “My mouth? What about Villena? The Maidens can evangelize all they want, but if they skew Rima into making her appear like some goddess who never killed, we’ll keep getting more fools like him.”

“They revere her. And it’s as you said, every village takes Rima’s teachings differently.”

Lucan looked at the mark above Oscern’s middle finger. Etched on his skin was an oval black shape, much like an obsidian ring. When their powers were in use, the mark would turn a golden light. Like Zorn and every boy, they bore the obvious sign that Fredrick overlooked.

“Maybe we can tell Villena about the consequences of such a thought-provoking lifestyle?” Oscern added.

“We don’t *need* to teach anyone how to govern. We don’t have that sort of authority anymore. Aelith is destroyed, and we’re supposed to be dead.”

Oscern’s light eyes narrowed. The color always burned gold despite the pale night. “We were kids when Aelith fell, Lucan. Others survived—*we* survived.”

“And look where that left us? We live like vagrants, using our powers to fight another man’s holy war just so we don’t starve.”

Lucan flung his bag over his shoulder and followed the tracks of the wagon that left them.

Dawn had not yet arrived to clear the damn way, and his boots were sinking into slushy mud. It was moments like these that reminded him that no power of his could influence the sun to rise faster, for the spring to melt the snow away.

Fredrick was right about one thing. Rima's lineage did exist. Her blood coursed through his veins, pumping through the chambers of his heart. He couldn't even know what the cold felt like.

But being her descendant changed nothing. The world was bigger than him and stronger. That's what Aelith's downfall taught him.

As far as anyone knew, he was a regular man with two friends who harnessed powers beyond compare. His celestial name, true form, and powers—all of it buried, to be lost and forgotten as if he didn't exist.

"Just live," he said under his breath, echoing what his mother told him. "Just live."

# CHAPTER 2 LUCAN

Spring  
Three years later  
Dalen Hills

“Just live,” Lucan said, his voice muffled by having pressed his arm against his nose and mouth. Smoke clouded the air, rising from the burning logs that burned the same chemical Vinol used against the enemy. His lungs wouldn’t expand to draw in more air, and his throat was itching.

Even so, he strode through the uneven ground, dirt clods crushed under the weight of his boots. The clanking steel and screams of the wounded were in a constant loop.

The gaping eyes of the dead stared as he passed them, and for a moment, he had to hold it together. The battlefield created the precise instruments to orchestrate death’s wide-ranging melody, a composition that hearkened at his soul. The sword and spear were the brass, the arrows were the strings, and the painful cries of the wounded were the choir. The sounds were so dissonant they bled an uneasy feeling, a type of disquiet in his mind.

Severed arms marked a little trail uphill. The cut on the wound and steel was clean and likely done by Oscern’s battleax.

The cough of another alerted his senses to the clumsy pacing of feet coming his way. It certainly wasn’t Oscern. This person wanted his back to cleave into.

A kill was a kill, but inexperienced cowards went for the back, and the sloppy pacing proved it.

Rather than meet him, Lucan remained still. It was best if he allowed the enemy to think he was defenseless. When he stepped within his sword’s reach, Lucan turned and severed the head. It was fairly too easy for an Averyan soldier of short stature. The enemy’s

sword was too high in the air, and without a second to spare, his blade met his neck.

Tired and shoulders slouched from swinging, Lucan sauntered towards the rolling head caught under the arm of a gone soldier.

He moved the head with his blade, finding tears and terror frozen in the eyes. The stare froze Lucan over, a stare he couldn't pry away until he upchucked his breakfast.

He heaved, plopping half-digested food and gagging at the stench in the air. How could someone so young be permitted to step into this hell and raise a blade?

Did he come because his gut was empty or because King Galrug tore him from his family to serve in the name of honor? Lucan kneeled before him for a closer look. Soot smeared the boy's cheek and hands from the powder of the cannons. He was probably just a hired hand of the army, but then, what was he doing here?

Lucan wiped the moisture from his cheek and gently closed his eyes. He bit his bottom lip as he got up and paced from the bow, using a dead Averyan soldier's back to clean the red stains from his sword.

The boy did not belong here. Was he saying that to ease his guilt?

He was no better. To stave his hunger in a prominent city, he worked as a mercenary. Profiting from the deaths of those he had no personal quarry with.

*Damn Avery!*

*Damn me.*

Fumbling down one of Meadow Valley's hills was another poor sod. He was an inch taller than the boy. He looked at his headless companion with gritting teeth. The boy raised his blade while Lucan kept his blade down. The stance was too wide. Already he could see how many times he could cut him down.

The boy suddenly halted. Those rage-filled eyes moved their focus to the person standing behind him. He shouted like a warrior and ran down, passing Lucan.

There was a struggle, some clanking of blades resounding from behind until it ended with a groan.

When Lucan turned, the boy was on the floor. Standing over him was an insufferable face with a copper-colored beard, Major Rudra or Major Dickhead among the lower ranks who detest him.

"Lucan!" The confident fool wore no helmet, allowing his small eyes to squint at him. "Why didn't you take the boy down?"

Lucan spat at the ground and ignored him. A proper soldier of his stature was coming from his left, pointing his spear at him. Reach was a problem when it came to the sword, and Colonel Finsley reprimanded him for not picking up a spear, but his choice for a sword had nothing to do with pride. He just knew how blades worked.

The Averyan soldier parted his legs and thrust the spear. Lucan shifted back, aware of the feint of his point, moving up before trying to attack the abdomen.

“Thought you were clever, didn’t ya?” Major Rudra was watching, amused that he almost fell for it.

Lucan kept the blade against the spearman, moving clock ward so their faces were still facing each other. When the soldier’s right knee bent into a posture, he moved in. As the spear came at him again, he moved the left side and glided the spearhead against his sword until it reached his crossguard. He deflected it to the side and struck the soldier’s chest. He crashed on the ground, holding where the blade cut his collar bone.

As Lucan readied his blade to end his pain, Major Dickhead stepped in. He pressed his boot over the groaning man to keep him pinned. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“Give him a few moments to breathe.” The tinted white part of the Major’s eyes was yellow, like the abscess of an infected wound. He wasn’t a drinker, but he must be suffering an illness—only a sick man would marvel at an agonizing man. “You easily killed this one, but why did you spare the other?” His flirtatious tone made his stomach churn. “Let me guess, young boys are your weakness?”

Lucan parted his legs and prepared for the next soldier to come up the hill. That boy didn’t deserve his blade, but, of course, Rudra would be a tightwad about it. “The enemy is the enemy,” he assured, giving him the attention he was craving.

“Good. Just making sure we are getting our money’s worth, you damned Rimans seem to enjoy idling around.”

“I’m doing my job.”

Major Rudra’s eyes widened at the incoming soldier. Lucan bent his knees and swung his sword upward, taking his ax, turning it, and penetrating the enemy’s back with his own blade.

“Puh.” Major Rudra spat at the ground. “*Your* job is to look for Avery’s Riman bastards who may degrade our advancement. So stop showing off and leave the war to us.”

“That’s why I gave you the boy,” Lucan said. “He needed someone at his skill level to fight him.”

Major Rudra plodded towards him, and his sword slightly went up. “I’ll show you some respect, you little shit.”

A hand gripped Lucan’s shoulder and gently shook him. “Sir Rudra, don’t ruin your mood on my good friend here. He’s merely pulling your leg.” Zorn. Already kissing ass. “*Clearly*, he’s afraid of hurting boys. He’s traumatized, you know, with us losing our village at a tender age.”

The grip on Major Rudra’s sword loosened. If there was one person who had more leverage over the Major, it was Zorn. The Major had a soft spot for him and watched him like a sick man. “Yes, that’s what I thought.” He gave the young soldier he dropped a sneering look and left.

“Lucan,” Zorn said, watching Rudra holler at the soldiers nearby, fist clenching as he left. “What the hell are you doing? The enemy is retreating, and here you are picking fights with Major Dickhead.”

Lucan moved Zorn’s hand off and went up the hill. “I checked the east region. It’s fruitless. There are no Riman children to fight.” He didn’t need to see if his friend followed him. His boots barely touched the ground. Zorn’s ability to levitate over any surface won many surprises from the enemy, as the last thing they wanted to see was his friend floating like some ghost with a spear in hand and a dagger on his belt.

“Care to explain what happened?” Zorn still carried the same sharp, energetic voice he always had. The sharp tongue he hated. “You trying to get us out of a job?”

“Major *Dickhead* was picking a fight,” he defended. “Saw a boy who looked at him like he had done something personal to him, so I let him try his luck.” The young soldier he took down flashed back into his mind. “I don’t think they were from Avery. They were too young and poorly dressed. Something tells me they worked in the cannon department.”

“And now he’s dead, but we’re the ones who need to deal with this shit, slaving away for coins.” Zorn’s hands firmly rested on his waist.

“Hey, I don’t spend coin on company half as much as you do.”

“Precisely why I need this job. Sex workers are expensive—” His voice fell short.



Mounted on horseback was a cavalry. He had to be the last poor fool who didn't hear the call to retreat or saw it was too late.

"You surrendering?" Lucan called.

The rider charged at them. "You mercenaries picked the wrong side."

Zorn sped towards him, gliding in the air, hand neatly on his dagger, with his spear in the other. The rider raised his halberd. The weapons alone would have decided the fight, except the foolish rider thought Zorn was going to meet him head-on.

Zorn swept under this horse's legs and struck at the belly. That talent of his was deadly. He could be unseen by how craftily he moved. The rider attempted to recover, but Zorn had already finished him with his spear.

Nothing but the dead and cloud on the battlefield decorated the trenches. They had been at it for three hours, and yet it felt like days. The screaming hadn't stopped. It had been staying in his mind as of late. Sometimes he would wake up drenched in sweat. Even as he counted the dead corpses across Meadow's Valley, he could still hear clattering steel and men yelling.

"Lucan." He recognized that deep voice from the sea of stares. Since they were enlisted, Oscern's broad shoulders grew more muscle than Zorn and his combined. His tight black curls were braided and wrapped into four sections, where gold trinkets and clips moved his braids into abstract shapes. "You said you were going south. That must be why Major Rudra went looking for you."

Lucan passed him. "Anything else you want to point out?"

Oscern covered his nose. "Worry instead about the stink you have. When was the last time you washed your ass?"

Lucan shrugged and flicked bits of dirt off his shoulder. He stepped on horse dung and didn't care to wipe it off.

Oscern's concerned stare softened. "Having those nightmares again?"

"No, just something that happened on the battlefield."

Oscern patted his back. "You're so crude. Bottling up like that is what may be causing those dreams."

"Doubt it." Lucan looked to his right. "Where did that dimwit go?"

"Zorn? Probably digging the dead's pocket to clear his gambling debt." Oscern nudged him to keep walking. "Come, let's report to our commander and get our pay."

The encampment was just outside the Gypsy Forest. Where the nomadic travelers were so weary of outsiders entering their forests, they fenced the place up. Among their forests were Grandi trees, conifer trees that contested the height of castles, swaying in the distance.

From afar was a tiny foretaste of the kingdom the Gypsians had the rotten luck to have as neighbors, Vinol. High city walls with its back against the body of water. The only reason Vinol never bothered the Gypsians was that they needed their medicine, so it would be a risky business to enrage them.

Lucan dusted what he could off his trousers, picking at any lint the naked eye could see. Colonel Finsley was adamant about his soldiers looking presentable. The Vinolian soldiers came and went, picking up their pay before them and retreating to get washed, perhaps cool their throats with some beer, while they had to wait. Some didn't pass him without giving him a threatening look which Lucan returned with the same steel gaze. They were on the same side of the war, but Skiar, three years of service and they still distrust him?

When it came to those xenophobic soldiers, Zorn ate any good or negative attention. His friend always lacked common decency and thus invited many fights—depending on how much he had to drink—he could handle his own.

Colonel Finsley left his tent and caught them standing by. He approached them, hand always on his scabbard. He was an old fellow who was a veteran of war and one he often looked up to. He had seen every twist and turn the enemy could make. The only problem was his blind loyalty to Vinol.

Coming behind him was that damned copper-haired asshole. His stare scooped over Oscern and met him. His frown deepened, his focus switching from him and Oscern as if Zorn would appear behind them.

“You men have been under Vinol's banner for how long?” Colonel Finsley asked.

Oscern let his hands rest on his hips. “About three years, sir.” He was so tall his back drooped because of how often he hunched to stay at everyone's eye level.

“And have we not been hospitable? Bringing three young men into our country and joining our ranks?”

“You’ve been more than hospitable,” Oscern continued, this time with a curt bow. That or he was hunching again. He couldn’t tell sometimes.

“Then please explain why Rudra saw you, Lucan Greystone, permitting an enemy to get through you?”

So, that flat-lipped pucker fish opened his mouth. “I didn’t see him, Colonel.”

Colonel Finsley didn’t look convinced. It was his attention to detail that must’ve made it easy for him to read a bullshitter. “I know you’re not a Child of Rima, Lucan, and you’ve kept up with your friends for this long. Ace was right when he vouched for you and your companions, but you know better than to let the enemy pass you after a call to retreat.”

If he made it this far, it was because his swordsmanship had gotten better. With all the noise, he couldn’t fully use the ability that made him see beyond normal eyesight—not that it would be useful. “We’ve been here for a week. Sometimes, I can’t tell who among the battleground is dead or standing.”

It seemed to be enough because Colonel Finsley turned to Rudra. “See? The lad did not see him.”

Major Rudra grumbled and barked. “My eyes did not betray me. He knew the enemy was coming at me!”

“Boy,” Lucan corrected. “King Galrug’s army may have retreated, but they didn’t make it far by the backs of thirteen-year-olds. They were Vinolean, your people, Colonel.”

“What are you saying?” said Colonel Finsley.

# CHAPTER 3 LUCAN

Major Rudra's jaw hung, and after coming out of battle, those crusty lips could catch flies. What made him think he didn't have the audacity to rat him out? Because of him, his hands were forever stained by young blood.

"Lucan." Colonel Finsley's patience was wearing thin. "I don't like the repeat myself.

"Right." Lucan straightened his posture. "The first boy I took down was covered in soot, similar to the boys who help transport powder to the cannons. My guess is they took some armor and weapons amidst the battlefield. The second boy swept past me and gave me the suspicion that perhaps there were ulterior motives, and that person was Major Rudra."

"You're lying..." Spit hung from Major Rudra's bottom lip. His face had gone beyond the color of a chili pepper, and the corners of his lips were foaming. "Those little rats had no business coming into a man's war!"

Colonel Finsley raised an eyebrow. His glare then shifted to Major Rudra. "So you knew they were underage?"

"Colonel."

"And if they were as young as Lucan claimed, you could have taken that boy down easily." The Colonel rubbed his temple. He didn't seem surprised but rather annoyed. Major Rudra's face went red, hands balled into a fist. That enough confirmed his suspicions. "Those boys will be inspected, and if they're Vinolean, you'll have a talking to straight to my superior, your father. Now leave my sight at once, Rudra."

In one huff, the Major left.

"What a careless fool." Colonel Finsley stared at the charred battlefield. He composed himself by straightening his posture. "Avery has tested His Majesty's patience by bringing the battle close to the city, and for that, we will pay them twice fold."

"How do we go about it?" Oscern asked.

"Their call to retreat is the start of a successful campaign, and if we continue to win, they'll be forced over Lotter's Mountain."

Colonel Finsley tiredly gave them the same pay, each bag of coin weighing the same. “Go and get some rest, but do not leave the city.”

Lucan jumped when another hand came up behind him to pick up his share.

“A pleasure as always, Colonel Finsley.” Zorn sang.  
That sneaky mud runner!

\*\*\*

The Dustbowl was a cabaret located in Vinol’s lower and oldest district. Being every soldier’s payday, every inn or tavern in the city was at full capacity. For entertainment, there were gambling rooms, succulent food of every imaginable dish in the region, and most importantly, cheap booze and cheap rooms to rent on the second floor. Patrons from the upper class mostly came to taste the exquisite meals or the women of the night who were eager to give attention.

“I say we stay.” Oscern’s thumb was fumbling over the other, eyes searching at the crowd. “Colonel Finsley sounded serious about our next campaign.”

Lucan dropped his tankard down. Foaming beer glided off the rim. “We agreed to hit Mudburrow after we were done with this battle, not *another*.” It was when he was out of Vinol that his mind could feel still and not spin like it had on the battlefield.

“We’re better off waiting a few more days to see when Colonel Finsley needs us.” Oscern gave him a steady look. “But, of course, you have the final call.”

Lucan lowered his gaze. There was no point in looking at him like that or talk like he didn’t have a choice. When was he going to realize that? The old ways died when Aelith fell.

On rare occurrences, the other survivors they ran into had no better life than theirs. If the fever didn’t take them, it was their addictions or the trauma of what they witnessed. But now that home was a ruined blotch on the map, his pride succumbed to his drinks and, when he felt empty, the company of women.

“We will stay.” Zorn snatched a turkey leg from one of the passing servers and plopped onto the chair next to Lucan. “Colonel Finsley can’t call on us for all of Vinol’s battles, and the more time we don’t work, the more coins we spend. It’s stupid, really.”

“Don’t count on it,” Lucan said. “King Pann wants Vinolians to win the war by their merits.”

Zorn chomped on the meat and grinned, showing bits of the white turkey between his teeth. “But if he didn’t, we’d have enough money to buy some land—maybe start our own pub?”

Oscern grumbled. “I highly doubt it when you two don’t know how to save money.”

“I have enough,” Lucan refuted. “More than Zorn.”

“That’s because you don’t have a life, and I’m an expensive man.” Zorn grazed his hand over his fine vest. “What’s wrong with playing a few games and looking good?”

“Getting into gambling debt.”

“I don’t owe *that* much!”

Just as Lucan was about to snap back, a hand started to massage his shoulders.

“There’s my wavy-haired stud.” That singing voice was Tabetha. She covered her nose and scrunched her face. “Uck. You stink like shit.”

Lucan looked at his boots. “Oh right.”

Tabetha then fluttered her long lashes and sang. “But how I missed you.”

Lucan raised a single silver coin between his index and middle fingers. “You mean you miss this?”

Tabetha reached for it, fingers spread out like spider legs. Lucan threw it at Zorn, who caught it. Tabetha blew air out loudly and smacked his shoulder. She left his side, attracted by the coin like a bee to pollen.

“Oh, Zorn.” She gently brushed what little she could of his short blond hair. “Did I ever tell you how lovely those blue eyes look on your pretty little pale face?”

Zorn raised his eyebrows and went for his drink. “Oh, that’s a new one.”

“And did you know *you’re* the most gorgeous-looking man when it comes to these two brutes? Oscern is a stiff looker, and Lucan is a little ugly.”

Zorn almost spilled his drink and laughed. “Yeah, I know, now move aside.” He had already embarked on a staring match with his usual pick, a man similar in his age and build.

Tabetha gave Oscern a curt nod but never gave him that sort of attention.

In terms of nightly company, Lucan and Zorn did what any single man would do, but not Oscern. It had to be his faith and or the fact that he's been ensnared by Delilah.

"Speak of the devil," Lucan whispered.

Delilah was a short little thing with frost-blond curly hair and child-rearing hips. Every time she stepped into the room, the men would stand and bow. Forget King Pann and his royal family. She was the only regal queen who kept another woman's husband happy, but no man ever remained committed to her because she had three mouths to feed. With a body like hers, she probably made enough coin, but Vinol wasn't a paradise for cheap. Everyone needed a place to stay, and according to Oscern, her oldest, Rohm, was attending a respected school.

Oscern tucked his fists under the table after the first man won her favor with a bouquet. It was dreadful to watch his friend go through this again. Oscern's powers prevented him from feeling any physical pain, but whenever Delilah left with a customer, Lucan could see his friend die a little.

Zorn flung the coin back. Lucan caught it and put it back in his pocket. He chugged his tankard empty, noticing the grime under his nails. "I do need a bath."

Tabetha clapped her hands and skipped toward him. "Then I'll happily join you and get you nice and squeaky clean."

"Not tonight," he said, rising from his chair. "I'm tired, my feet are sore, and I just want to sleep."

Tabetha locked her arms around his. She wasn't taking no for an answer. From the way she looked at the other women, she didn't want to risk losing a customer, her meal for the day.

*Oh well. Business is business.* Before he left, Delilah was sneaking behind his friend.

"Hello, Oscern." Her chirpy voice must have trickled down his back because he straightened it. "You having the usual tonight?"

"Yes," he said, clearing his throat.

Her lashes flickered when he caught her gaze, and her glossy pink lips smirked. Oscern kept his head straight, but the slight bite under him pressing his lip together showed he was nervous.

Delilah did nothing to seduce him. She would sit with him and talk, Skiar knew what the hell came out of Oscern's mouth, but he knew how to make her laugh.

A man grabbed her waist and swung Delilah back. Her little boots kicked as she giggled. It seemed an arrangement had already been made, as only a paying customer would take her in that matter.

“Pick up your feet,” Tabetha said, guiding him up the stairs.

Lucan followed so he wouldn’t see his friend’s reaction. Perhaps Zorn was right. Oscern needed to get hammered and just sleep with someone, anything to get over that siren. At this point, he was open to just knocking him unconscious and having Tabetha lay next to him so he could think something had happened.

“Ease up, Lucan.” Tabetha squeezed his arm. “No matter who she sees, Delilah has a soft spot for that hunk of muscle.”

“Hard to tell after she just left with a customer.”

“She has little mouths to feed and tries her best to give them the life she couldn’t have, and that costs money.”

“Oscern *has* money. He could give her a steady lifestyle for her and her children.”

“And no woman is going to wait for an indecisive man.”

“How admirable.”

“Yeah?” Tabetha mocked, not sounding convinced. “And why won’t he take her—oh wait, I know, she’s not a Riman.”

“It’s more complicated than that.” It didn’t mean Oscern didn’t try to convert her or least, consider a giant celestial walked the land.

“Complicated how?” Tabetha waved at the clerk who managed the upstairs rooms. “By taking him to that fortune teller so he can get over Delilah?”

Lucan shrugged. “I still don’t like that she befriends him and hurts him just the same.”

Tabetha rolled her eyes. “Lucan, you’re just as bad. You don’t know when a good woman is standing in front of you, and you can’t blame it all on Marca.”

He stopped before reaching the first step of the stairs. “Who told you about Marca?”

“Zorn.”

“That weasel.”

The conversation ended there, and he couldn’t be more than relieved. Tabetha meant well, and sure, maybe Delilah felt something for his friend, but this was beyond Marca or Delilah not being Riman. The normalcy of life wasn’t something he or his friends saw in the future. That’s why Zorn liked to talk about buying land but never saved a coin for it, why Oscern and Delilah had a strange



relationship. After witnessing everything they love engulfed in flames, why would anyone want to return to such a life? Settling down was just disguising what was always plain in sight.

Destruction could take them at any time.

## CHAPTER 4 ELENE

It took two days of rumbling winds and rain before the sky cleared. The afternoon sun was high, but not a chirp of any bird could be heard on Vine Road. The working anvil of several blacksmiths chipping at hot metal hushed their songs. The rough-looking men who rested under the shade of the trees were not traders, nor were they passing by. More Averyans have made it to the North, conscripted by their king to siege the regions that hardly saw battle.

To keep the blacksmith's stare from lingering, Elene stayed near Fior and his mighty legs. He was a black draft horse that did not second guess when to steer the wagon even after heavy rain. Helping him push the load was Ivory, their gray horse with white pigments. With difficult paths or sudden noises, he needed blinders and encouragement, and because of the sinking mud, they almost got her father's four-wheeled wagon stuck in a ditch, but with encouragement and Fior pulling the weight, they could continue.

Elene hummed to fight their droning efforts of clanking metal. One of the Averyans lingering by opened his flask and gave it a drink. The thought of drinking spirits didn't help her pulsing headache.

"You alright?" Her brother, Wein, walked near her when the next blacksmith passed by.

Elene grazed her hand up the back of her neck. Since they left Lyrin Town, she grew a habit of measuring the shape of her head.

"Elene?"

"I'm fine."

"Good because we're resting once we're halfway through Grazen Fields."

"Really?" She gave him a look. Wein was of average height, but the green hat with the red feather made him look a few inches taller, as it would to any respectable trader of the Red Guild. "I think you're just trying to avoid the inevitable."

"Maybe," he said, half smiling. "But I hope you came up with a reasonable excuse because gambling and alcohol will not help your case."

"It's the truth, ain't it?"

Wein shook his head but said nothing.

That night, they sat around the campfire. Finally, some silence, no blacksmith, no talk of the war, and no Lyrin Town to worry about. Wein went to feed the horses, a job Elene often did if it wasn't for her headache. Gourd joined him, just in case anything happened.

Father wouldn't let Wein leave Melodia without hiring protection, and because Rufus, Pete, and Gourd were his childhood friends, they often tagged along. Mother thought three guards were too much to pay, but Gourd and Pete charged less than Rufus, but only because they wanted an excuse to leave Melodia.

Elene massaged her temple, barely standing the fire's light.

Rufus left his spot and passed his bottle of mead for her to take. "It will help with the hangover." He gave her a wink. "Just don't go overboard like you did last night."

After giving it a swig, she returned the bottle and wrapped herself in her cloak even more. "Damn me for not bringing any pain relievers."

"Hope you learned your lesson," Wein said, returning from his task. When he sat next to her, she looked at his hair with envy. He was six years her senior, but he was more like a twin. They thought alike, said little, and enjoyed being on the road. Wherever he went, she was there to go.

The sound of hooves was plodding on the soil.

Rufus dropped his bottle and swiftly took his sword from his belt. Pete and Gourd did the same, leaving the campfire and asking whoever was approaching not to come near.

Elene went to her feet and peered at who it could be, but Wein had his arm out, keeping her behind him.

The shadow became a man on horseback. Behind, they could hear the group who followed him. He stared down at them, visor open for them to look at his eyes.

"Gentlemen." His eyes squinted at her but moved over to her brother. "Quite a lovely night to have after so much rain, isn't it?"

The pressured look in Wein's eyes. Unlike their friends, they had only their dagger to defend themselves. For years her brother wanted a guard's job that came with the spear, but as the only Harrow son, he had to choose the family occupation.

The armored man's stare narrowed. Their silence must have pinched at his nerves. "Where are you heading? Clearly someplace secured, but you don't look like Appleton folks."

Pete turned slightly to Wein, who nodded. "We're from Melodia."

"Ah... Rimans." The dark, brooded man turned to look at his men. "Sorry to startle you, good folk. Didn't know you were locals."

"We're resting until dawn's first light, but we can leave sooner if you wish." Wein still kept his arm over her, still in a protective posture.

"Take your time by all means, gentlemen. Seeing your destination is through those Grandi trees, you will be of more aid to me. King Galrug will launch his army in these lovely Grazen Fields, and they will be very thirsty. The Beaven River, as you know, travels richly in Appleton and breaks closely through your mountains. But water cannot fetch itself. Seeing your Rima's trees can be violent against ill-willed trespassers, may I speak to your Head Maiden, so I can establish an agreement? You'll be paid on account that you support our cause."

"Melodia has no Head Maiden," Gourd answered. "It's managed by a cleric." Gourd was a redhead with cloudy tight curls. He was a petite man and the youngest Melodian guard, as they celebrated his nineteenth birthday yesterday.

"But we can pass on the message just the same," Wein added. "Who do we get in contact with?"

"You won't have trouble there. Expect a flourish of tents upon these very lands this week." He waved his hand, and the horses that were hard to see started to move. "Ah, and before I go, gentlemen. We do not take lightly to Vinolean sympathizers. Consider that my one and final warning. Goodnight." The man and his horse left, following the noise of his group.

Amidst the silence, Rufus was the first to lower his sword. "The entitlement of Southerners coming into our lands and ordering us around."

"We got the Vinoleans to blame for that," said Pete. "Imarus is a small kingdom, and they closed their gates, so there's no one to safeguard these parts."

"Alright, let's all get some shut-eye," said Wein. "We got a vital message to deliver."

"You can't possibly think I will get some sleep after that," Gourd said. "It's as my father feared. King Galrug will soon want to make us all Averyan."

"Over my dead body," grumbled Rufus.

Wein sighed. He shared their concern, but he hardly let emotions run him. “It won’t be the last time we see another Averyan soldier, so start keeping those thoughts to yourself.”

Elene spent the remainder of the night staring at the way home. Folklore often surrounded forests that effectively kept most city folk from visiting. Some say the forest was the portal to another world, others that it was the gateway to hell. That creepy, crawling things linger in the dark to take travelers or the firstborn child of neglectful mothers. But any person who spent their life surrounded by a forest as she has would find quite the opposite. Hidden in the lushness of plants were little stories, voices of a forgotten world. On hard times, it was the home to wandering bears and packs of wolves that claimed the continental drift of the mountains. In the spring, the foxes and beavers borrowed its beauty. No matter its tales and life-giving atmosphere, it was not the world Elene imagined herself to be in.

Her world was a land of the sunflowers she grew, where she would push back her green prison with their crispy gold leaves honorably facing the sun and in the late summer seeds to harvest.

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The way through Iven Forest was a more dirt than the cobblestone road it once was. Droplets of water covered the ferns, which were rightfully taking the moisture for themselves. Many who wandered off the road could easily get lost in the Grandi trees. To prevent this, they hung various lanterns of different shapes above them. Star-shaped ornaments, gold mushrooms crafted out of wires, to glass orbs flowed with the breeze. The Maidens bathed them in light so that even in the day, their light would guide the lost.

Wein was carrying a long face, back almost hunched as he rode the wagon forward. From the concerned look on his face, he was probably thinking of that Averyan soldier, or he was still burned out from having to travel to Lyrin Town for the fourth time. Leaving Melodia for weeks and trading his wool was a demanding job. Though she never stepped into the town, she had seen buyers on Vine Road badger him with questions and test the fibers from length to length. No matter how well they appeared, someone was always uptight or unhappy.

“Did you notice?” she said, nudging Wien’s arm. Anything to turn that frown into a smile. “That Averyan thought I was a man.”

Wein looked at her and groaned at the state of her hair. Like Father, Wein’s hair was as dark as hers, but like their sister Terra, he got Mother’s beautiful blue eyes while she got Father’s dark brown eyes, no different from Fior’s. Although anything her black steed had, she naturally admired.

Rather than some gate to enter, two white pillars marked the entrance to Melodia. The major roads were made of brick from every shade of red. The central market was busy, lined with vendors who sold their farm tools, produce, and handmade goods. The roundabout road and crowded buildings. Their only tavern, Sundale, was the perfect place to play some dice and drink their cool beer.

The two available inns were made with dark grey bricks, with white window panels and red shutters. Pansies grew from their window box, nodding in the breeze.

Elene only ever stepped inside an inn once, and that was to help her father deliver the innkeeper’s order of wool blankets. The wallpaper, the smell of a home-cooked meal, the dark cherry tree stairs that led to the rooms. If only she could see what each room looked like, what it was like to be serviced for a night’s stay.

“Come on, men, the sooner we talk to him, the better we can prepare,” said Pete, turning to the Avenue. “Cleric Aaron is going to tighten security after this.”

“Until our next trip.” Rufus winked at her again, and she only smiled.

“Hopefully, your Pa will change his mind about you being a guard,” Gourd said to Wein, offering him hope.

“Say hello to Corie for me,” Elene said, waving as he left.

Wein clicked his tongue, leading the horses up the hill. “Father will never change his mind. Something is always happening back home. Mother buying things out of impulse, or another hired hand leaving Melodia to work in Lyrin Town.”

“That’s why we’re lucky to have you,” Elene said, patting his shoulder. “He knows that.”

As Fior and Ivory continued up the road, a group of women walked on the sidewalk, carrying an arrangement of flowers. Joining them in the middle was Melodia’s flower and tea shop owner, Mrs. Brel. The moment she stopped, her friends did the same.

Wein stopped the horses so they could safely cross. Mrs. Brel grabbed her shawl and covered her face, eyes unwilling to lock on her as she hurriedly crossed the street. The other women did the same, catching up to her before but not before giving her one last glance.

“She acts like I’m Murella herself,” Elene muttered.

“You don’t make it easy for them.” Terrific. Wein had to be in a bad mood to be giving her his peace of mind.

“Why ask a stinkbug to have a change of heart when it’s going to spray the moment it gets angry?”

Wein didn’t respond, but at least she got a smile out of him.

Not far were two guards, hands resting neatly on the hilt of the sword. They were speaking to a tiny old woman in long robes with a blue sash. The trotting horses must have caught her attention as they passed them because she glimpsed at them.

“Elene Harrow!” she called, waving at them. “Just the doll I wanted to see.”

Wein stopped the horses and released a long, sorrowful sigh.

“I’m sure she just wants to talk about Terra,” Elene encouraged.

As she got closer, the old woman’s eyes widened from the same shock Mrs. Brel had. “Skiar, what has happened to your hair!”

“Good afternoon, Maiden Derli.” Elene grazed her nails over her short hair. “I trimmed it.”

“Blessed Rima, that is no trim, and you have chosen the wrong time to do such a terrible thing.”

“It was out of my control. Lyrin Town has some crafty dice players—ouch!” Wein had pinched her arm. “Sorry, I grew a fever and was a bit delirious. This was the only way I could cool down.”

Maiden Derli’s eyes narrowed. “Of course, I’ll pretend I didn’t hear what you previously said. Anyhow, I was on my way to visit your parents.”

“Please, join us,” Elene said, stepping down to give her seat away.

Wein stared ahead. Turns out it wouldn’t be a brief chat after all.

Maiden Derli nervously took her seat while Elene shuffled to the back.

As they continued, more stares followed, eyes gaping at her hair. The town was behind, and the country road opened. The closer they got to their father’s property, the more nervous she was getting.

“A wrap will have to do,” Maiden Derli had been staring at her, smiling. Her hair was braided at the ends and held up tied by cerulean

seashells. “A nice head wrap with my essential oils will help grow your hair back and full.”

“Oh, I wasn’t—”

“It will also keep those eyes from staring at what you’ve done to your hair.”

Wein cleared his throat. He was telling her to go with it. After all, who says no to Melodia’s matchmaker and oldest Maiden?

“Thank you,” she said. “I’ll think about it.”

Maiden Derli chuckled.

When they made it to the farm, Wein stopped the wagon close enough by the house. A farmhand who had been carrying stacks of hay went to meet him. He was unstrapping the horses so he could bring them to the barn.

Elene hurried up the porch. In finding the door locked, she knocked. While Maiden Derli caught up, she started to wipe her hands on her dress. Wein was passing the peach tree, hands deep in his pockets.

The sound of boots followed. Upon opening the door, her mother smiled at her until a few blinks revealed her surprise. Her stare then moved to Maiden Derli, and the door widened. “Maiden Derli, you’ve come at last.” She turned and shouted from the stairs for Terra to come down. “Elene, go get your father.”

Seeing her mother was thrilled, Elene hurried to the stables. Wein was heading to the country road. “You’re not staying?” she asked, loud enough for him to hear.

He turned and shook his head. “I want to see what Cleric Aaron is going to do. Keep me posted.”

In the barn, Fior and Ivory were back in their stalls. At the working table was a tall man with broad shoulders, nailing what looked like new wiring for their fence. Her steps didn’t waver him, so she got closer. His full beard was groomed neatly with no stray ends. Most of his peppered hair was coming from his widow’s peak and combed back where he tied it with a simple knot. His loyal dog, Pepe, was resting by his feet.

“Excuse me, master.” Elene deepened her voice to sound husky and stomped her boots as if to mimic a heavy man. “I’m looking for some work.”

“You found the right place,” he said. “I lost all my hired hands and...” His eyes moved to her, and his lips hung.



Elene meant for him to take her joke and for them to laugh, but his words sunk into her chest. “Father—what happened with the workers?”

“What in Pleada have you done to your hair!”

“Ah, you see, I lost a bet,” Elene smiled. “So, I gave them my hair as payment.” She was near blaming the strong spirits that made the room spin, but she tucked those words under her teeth. “Ah, and before you say anything, Maiden Derli is here!”

Father took a deep breath. He took her arm like he often did when she was away and gave her a tight embrace. Elene breathed hay and spices on his vest.

When he released her, he frowned at her hair. “I thought you liked your hair long.”

“And I cried all the tears I could when I chopped it off.”

Father’s stare fell. “Thought you don’t like Lyrin Town....”

“It happened in the campsites,” she corrected.

He sighed and flicked her forehead. “Let’s go see what the matchmaker has for us.”

“And the hired help?” she asked. “What’s become of John and Nader?”

“Moved to Lyrin Town. Just like the last guy who’s here.”

“Do you need me to help?”

“You already herd the sheep and prep the wool. You’ve helped enough.”

Mother served tea in the living room. Everyone sat appropriately with father and mother, taking the main seat by the fireplace. Across was Maiden Derli, seer of the soul, or so people said, who managed sacred Vows of Marriage.

Mother held Father’s arms while her younger sister, Terra, stared at her bald head with flat lips and wide eyes.

Maiden Derli laid her blue cloth over the table. It wasn’t silk, but the fabric had a type of sheer against the light. Sewn into the center was a sun, with its rays of light stretching to the end of the cloth. The bag she placed on top was made of brown leather, with the outline of Rima’s White Oak burned in the center. From the shape, it looked like she was keeping marbles but instead laid across her collection of pyrites or fool’s gold to the untrained eye. The rest were grey and blue stones, polished enough to reflect their faces.

Maiden Derli was an expert in reading stones, a divine intervention she says was gifted to her by Skiar. It was just

lithomancy to Elene, something the women she befriended at Lyrin Town would do to make a quick coin, but here, it decided the fate of anyone who made a Vow of Marriage.

“The stones have spoken to me, and they have called out the Harrow family.” Maiden Derli said.

“Not to intrude on your announcement.” In Father asking, Mother went to squeeze his hand. He shut his eyes and continued. “But you haven’t told us which of our daughters the rocks called upon.”

“That’s why I’m here.” Maiden Derli picked up the stones and held them with both of her hands. She hummed to them and rocked forward and back.

Elene wanted to laugh. She looked at Terra, who responded by silently saying the words, ‘focus.’

Maiden Derli dropped the stones, and everyone jumped.

Two stones tumbled and rolled off the table, but the rest were touching the thread of the sun rays while most were in the gaps. Maiden Derli nodded, seemingly aware that she understood.

By that stare alone, it looked like Mother’s eyeballs were going to pop off and roll on the table. Meanwhile, Father listened soberly.

Elene’s heart skipped a bit when Maiden Derli focused on her. “Your eldest daughter, Elene Harrow.”

Mother’s glowing skin went pale. “Pardon?”

“What about our youngest, Terra?” Father said calmly. “Have they said her name?”

“The stones have chosen only Elene.” Maiden Derli said with a smile, contrasting the tension in the room. It had gotten so quiet a sheep was heard bleating in the distance. Suddenly, the Maiden seemed to have read the room. “Are you Harrows displeased by the stone’s prediction?”

Father glanced at Mother, then at Maiden Derli. “This is the second time for Elene, so I want things to go right to be certain her years of waiting are not for naught.”

Maiden Derli’s chuckled, her shoulders relaxed, and she picked up the stones. “You’re a good father, Matias. If Skiar wills it, everything will go accordingly.”

“But she’s well seasoned in her age,” Mother said matter-of-factly. “Terra is twenty-one and has given her Vow of Marriage the moment she turned eighteen.”

“Not all is lost, Mrs. Harrow.” Maiden Derli picked up the two stones that rolled under the chair. It was rude not to help her, but they couldn’t. Only she could touch them. “Your young Terra will have her time, I will see it through, but we must press our focus on Elene as she will take the stage at the Engagement Ceremony.”

“And what are we to do with Elene’s...” Mother looked at her hair again before looking back.

“I have an oil with my own special ingredients that will help her hair growth.” Maiden Derli slowly got up. “Now, if there isn’t anything else, I will take my leave.”

With a brief intake of air, Mother went to the kitchen, heels hammering the hardwood floor.

“You really think that will help her condition?” Terra said, interest piqued by the oil. “Because I would like my hair a tad bit longer.”

Maiden Derli smiled. “The oils were taken from Rima’s White Oak. It is not something I can give for vanity’s sake.”

Father turned to Terra, who avoided eye contact by fluffing out her dress.

Mother returned with the canned peaches they picked last summer. It seemed the walk did her good, there was no protest in her eyes, or perhaps it was buried underneath, kept tight like her canned jars.

While she and Father escorted her out of the house, Elene groaned and sat on the seat. “Sorry, Terra.”

Her sister sat on the sofa’s arm panel, arms crossed. “Forget that. I want to know why, in all that is good, you cut your hair like a boy?”

“I got a fever.”

Terra rolled her eyes. “A fever...*really?*”

“*Really.*”

A pair of stomping feet returned. By the sound alone, they passed Terra and came toward her. Just as Elene turned, a sting crossed her cheek. Pain shot through her right eye socket. The hand didn’t hit her there, but her eyelid shut like it had.

Father, who stood at the entrance, escalated his voice that very moment.

“No, Matias, don’t barge in.” Mother’s glaring eyes never moved from her hair. “You will apply the oil Maiden Derli will give you.”

"I never said I wasn't." Elene's voice cracked. Her throat had pinched all the way through, and her body was burning, hand still pressed against her sizzling cheek.

"And you'll wear a turban to cover that awful look."

"I'll think about it."

"No, you *will* wear it."

She could only stand still and listen to her heartbeat in her breathing. She was beyond Terra's age, and yet Mother treated her like she was nine.

"Norma, leave it." Father's deep voice came like a breeze. "Elene is free to decide how she wishes to look."

"And look what your coddling has done, Matias. She repaid us by tainting this family with her transgression. Your youngest daughter will never find happiness. She'll be old before Maiden Derli finds a proper suitor."

"I'm not short of suitors," Terra corrected softly as if not to agitate Mother. "I can annul my Vow of Marriage and find my own husband."

"That's not the point of this discussion." Out of frustration, Mother brushed her brown locks back. "Skiar is punishing us because Elene broke her first Vow of Marriage."

"Mother," Elene said calmly. That name. Always with that name.

"Rima's White Oak is suffering because you wanted to take matters into your own hand, because you thought you could decide when—"

"Enough!" Elene exclaimed. "I'm tired of hearing of Rima, of Skiar. You can't appease what doesn't exist!"

Another slap crossed the same cheek. This time Elene's upper teeth dug into her bottom lip so she wouldn't whimper. Terra was covering her face, heaving. Before Mother could give her another, Father went in between.

"No more Norma."

"Matias."

"I said no more!" Father took Elene's arms and walked her out of the house. The place she would still call home if she didn't ruin things.

Down the porch, he encouraged her towards the stables. "Take Fior with you. You'll be wise to wear a head wrap from here on, or your mother will be beside herself."

"Father... I'm a grown woman—I don't need to be treated—"

“Not a word. No more excuses. Go!”

Elene fled to the stables. She grabbed the halter from the wall and rushed to the stall belonging to Fior. As soon as she got inside, he moved from the hay feeder and in her direction, allowing her to place the halter. After securing it, he reached in and nuzzled the side of her cheek. No matter how much she pretended she was fine, her shoulders were still shaking.

Placing the pad first, Elene aligned the wool blanket over it. The saddle had the girth and cinch ready, leaving her to just lay the saddle down. Tears streamed down her cheeks when she reached to bring the cinches under. Fior gave her back a little nudge. She hiccuped from his touch. His left ear bent as she gently slid her hand down the bridge of his nose.

After securing the saddle was aligned with the back of his shoulder, Elene mounted him.

Terra sat on the wooden bench under the peach tree, her focus centered on the direction of the noise coming from the house. There was nothing her younger sister could say, nothing she could do to stop their parents from arguing.

This was on her.

Elene left the family property. Fior’s powerful legs steered through the country road, her skirt blowing with the wind as he picked up speed. His ears bounced while his pitch-black hair swayed in every direction, its darkness glistening in the sun.

Vance, a cleric, and Child of Rima, was up ahead, keeping an old couple company. His haughty gaze only worsened the acid she felt in her stomach. Because of what she did, Father lived his days looking over her shoulder, and Mother was no longer proud of her. Wein wouldn’t need to find some excuse to camp for another day like they did in the Grazen Fields. Then there was Terra, her poor sister. She always talked about her wedding day, but Elene had become the obstacle to her happiness.

Tears clogging her view, she looked toward Melodia, where Rima’s temple stood above all the other buildings. The stone tower bearing its white bell rang. By now, Camilla and the other Maidens were inside, singing for Rima like they did every afternoon.

Anything she did was never good enough for them. Everyone who knew of her transgression made her feel unusual, like a creature, caged and repulsed by its captor, and if they let her see the light of

day again, it was to remind her that even the foulest things can breathe.

“No,” she uttered under her breath, focusing on the road home. “They’re the animals here, not me.”

# CHAPTER 5 LUCAN

**Summer  
Three months later  
Lotter's Mountain**

Colonel Finsley called for the rest of his army through the vicious cliffs of Lotter's Mountain. It was the most dangerous path on Vine Road, and their only rest was at the top. But overconfident travelers and traders erected dozens of graves with their wagons and scattered bones becoming their headstones.

The mountain was a treacherous seven-mile hike up and a seven-mile hike down. Like any chunk of rock with steep sides, there were always the risks of climbing and exhaustion for those who didn't have the lungs for it.

Lucan made it to the rest stop with the rest of Vinol's soldiers, but he was alone. Because Oscern and Zorn were the useful ones, they were deployed a week before him. Stuck with Major Rudra, he followed along in silence. The people at the rest stop were tense and forced to camp another day because Rudra wanted a clear path down the mountain. He still spat some ridiculous comment at him or a soldier.

As they descended, the surrounding mountain peaks around them howled from the wind, swimming through the crevasses. The high altitude nearly led a few soldiers to faint, and with the constant fog roaming throughout, the lack of visibility was a misstep from leading them to their doom.

Some were met with a not-so-lucky fate. Major Dickhead got into an argument with a family who made it halfway up, three hours from the rest area. After Major Rudra told them to turn back and go down. The husband implored otherwise, asking his soldiers to make room as the way back was already a death sentence. While he stood his ground, his wife and children waited with anxious eyes in the cart.

Lucan rubbed his stomach. He could still hear the cries of the family when Major Rudra commanded that they be tossed over, leaving the husband to watch. The look of every soldier, even the

ones who followed his command, carried the same exhausting look as his. Nobody tried to reason with the major—the bastard had no value for life. And even if Lucan had tried, he would have done it sooner out of spite for him.

When the mountain was behind them, and feet were back on the grounded road, there was still enough daylight to spare.

Colonel Finsley's encampment had moved up north towards a Riman town called Havekin. From what Lucan could pick up from passing soldiers, the battle seemed to have shifted because the campsite moved north.

"You bastards set camp and rest," Major Rudra announced, giving Lucan the stink eye. "But no wandering off where you don't belong."

While traversing through the camps, Lucan stopped two of Colonel Finsley's foot soldiers. "Have you men seen the Riman children?"

"Saw one of em' with the Colonel's scouts. They should'a been back 'round this time."

"Maybe bandits took 'em," his friend mused.

That damn blizzard from three years ago returned, Marca faking her being kidnapped, him fighting through bandits to reclaim her only to end up surrounded by her people. The months of heartache and the suspicion of women he grew over the years all started in this region.

"Spacing out again?" That high-and-mighty voice. Zorn snuck behind him again. His armor had wear and tear, but he looked unscathed. "We pushed back the enemy some." Zorn must have noticed sense his worry and led him down the tents. "Avery moved their forces to a bustling place called Lyrin Town. I started to help weaken their defenses, only..."

"Only?"

"I ran into a Child of Rima. He had some strange ability because he vanished right before my eyes."

"You sure you weren't just seeing things?" Avery had hired plenty of Children of Rima before. Most were unbelievers, skeptics who lost their way but found a way to make money just like them. Unless Zorn had the upper hand, they wouldn't have retreated so suddenly, not when they were meant to strike each other down.

Zorn gave a long yawn. "Eh, maybe it was in my head—I did drink a few before we set out."



“A bit careless, don’t you think?”

“Hey, you’re not the only one who’s tired of this three-year gig. Anyway, the sooner we get this over with, the sooner I get paid.”

“You act like you’re not putting your life on the line every time we come to battle. And what if that flicker you saw wasn’t a Child of Rima but a bystander? Then how would you have taken care of it?”

“Balls, you’re worse than I thought. You seriously need a vacation.”

“Yeah? And we should’ve left when we got the chance, but you wanted to make more blood coins.”

Zorn released a high-pitched laugh. “Stop acting like some old war veteran. Your average soldier has seen trifold than us.”

“Forget it.” Lucan bumped his arms with his to get him out of the way and went to search for the big guy.

That damn Zorn, even if he explained, he still wouldn’t understand. Death was an omniscient presence that left lasting effects on those who were hypersensitive. The first time he felt its touch was when Aelith fell. At first, he grew numb to the tug of every departed soul. But not when it happened before his eyes, like that boy he killed or the family Major Rudra tossed over Lotter’s mountain. The energy ripped from countless bodies, tattered his own, and left him with a cold sweat.

Oscern stood among a group of scouts. His armor needed some repairing. It seemed whoever he came in contact with was trying to strike at his helmet or side. Layers of steel covered him, and for good reason. Strength and not being able to feel pain was an impressive ability but a dangerous trait if overlooked.

Seeing his approach, Oscern left the scouts and gestured him to follow away from the ears of others. “Avery’s men have camped out not just in Lyrin Town but across Vine Road, all the way to Silk Bridge.”

“Really?” Lucan crossed his arms and chuckled. “Major Dickhead said we should’ve won by the time we came down the mountain.”

“Not by a long shot. Those Southern snobs prepared themselves far better than Vinol’s men. We’re heading west tonight to some expansive field called Grazen Fields.” Oscern came to a full stop and observed the expanding lands ahead. “The forest nearby has giantess trees.”

Lucan's stare narrowed. "Is there a Rima tree standing among them?"

"No, it's probably just another settlement, but it's good that Rimans won't get caught in another religious war."

The cooks rang their bells, calling for tonight's rationed food. Oscern went to get his share before Lucan stopped him. "Let's go to the tent. You could be suffering a wound you're not aware of."

Oscern grumbled. "I'm fine. I don't feel any leak."

"Oh, you mean like that time you forgot to mention that a carpet viper bit your pinky? You endured it for hours before we noticed your hand turning purple?"

Oscern rubbed the back of his neck. "I told you I'm fine."

"Tent. Now."

"Skiar," he said. "Zorn was right. You need a vacation."

"Don't mention that cheeky bastard."

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What remained of the sun sank on the other side of Pleada. More units of soldiers went to meet the heat of the battle, the ground thundering with their steps. It was still unclear who prompted the attack. They were a fair distance from the Grazen fields before Colonel Finsley started sending more units forward.

"Riman," a soldier said. "The Colonel wants you."

Sweat dripped down his neck temple, and his feet were still sore from the climb. The summer night burned like midday, and the torches lighting the way didn't help. With what little light showed on the ground were flowers that had not yet been battered and stomped. By morning, not a single petal would survive.

Zorn and Oscern had already met with the Colonel. He was holding his side, assisted by medical aid. "Those bastards want to strike in the night, then so be it." His stare moved to them. "We wouldn't have been successful undetected, not without the use of those powers to hold over us. You know your jobs. Kill any Riman bastard who dares use his powers against my men." With the help of his aide, he mounted his horse and left.

Avery must be adamant about claiming the West if they got another Child of Rima under their belt.

Zorn covered his mouth as he released a long yawn. "Say, think I can sneak back in the tent and get some shut-eye?"

Lucan elbowed his stomach, leaving him with little room to breathe. “This is serious. We got Children of Rima to confront.”

“And this region has uneven terrains,” said Oscern. “Bigger than we’ve ever seen—we could easily be separated and run into another enemy unit.”

Zorn took Oscern’s arm to hold his composure. “You scared?”

“I’m cautious.”

“Alright, let’s spread out.” Lucan tugged at his steel-plated armor. Underneath was his mail and simple tunic. “We can’t lose any more time.”

Zorn started levitating from the ground, giving his two cavalry sabre blades a few turns. It was forty-four inches long, and each weighed over two pounds. They used to belong to Ace, but seeing they traveled this far west, he must have decided to bring them. “See you two in the morning.”

“Wait,” Lucan said, halting him and Oscern. “Take care. Both of you.”

“You always say that,” groaned Zorn. He reached over to scratch his short blond hair. “We’re not kids anymore. We can defend ourselves, ya know?”

Lucan smiled and nodded. Assholes they sometimes were, but they were all he had. Oscern joined the north party, Zorn took the south, and Lucan stayed in the center.

He met the battle, joining the foot soldiers and clashing with the enemy. Any spare moment he had, he searched the crowd for a glowing mark on the middle finger. Even with the gloves on, the night the glow could sometimes pierce through leather and gauntlets. It was a shame there were no rogue Maidens who participated in these campaigns. They could detect the powers of a Child of Rima in half the time. They either thought the occupation was beneath them or were too noble to take jobs like these.

A Vinolian soldier stumbled toward him. “Sorry!” he stammered. “I’m nervous as hell.”

“It’s alright,” Lucan said.

“I’m Rex.” He looked like a typical foot soldier, a shaken one in this case.

“Lucan.”

“Saw your gifted friend go up that hill. The big fellow? Think he found those Children of Rima?”

“Maybe.” Six months ago, they ran into one who could bend metal at his will. He tried to do this with their blades and squeeze them with their armor. Luckily Oscern was the first guy he locked onto. Seeing him not flinch because he felt no pain was the shock they needed to get to him.

A blast started to break into the unit. Cries echoed, and bodies flew from the impact of canons. Rex and the others ducked for cover while Lucan moved from the direct line of fire. At that moment, an Averyan soldier swooped his blade at him. He barely had enough time to block it before he created a distance. Another clash, and he moved further back. Each time, the soldier would raise his sword a little higher. When he saw more than he needed to. He thrust his steel under his armpit. The enemy dropped against the mud and muffled a painful cry. These Averyan soldiers, if they had been under Colonel Finsley, they would have been discharged for not putting on mail. Not that it mattered. His sword had a thin enough point to sink through.

The smoke from the cannons came down, fogging the battlefield. It lacked the metallic sulfuric scent, nor did it give off that peppery chemicals Vinol liked to use. The battle was still in motion, but it felt like he was far away. He brushed through the smoke until he realized there was nothing to see.

Everything was pitch black.

A force knocked him to the ground, and at that moment, he was able to make out patterns. He took out his helmet and peered at the night. It would've been pitch black if the moon hadn't shone its light. The air was clear, the heat slightly cooler. They looked like orbs piled into one another.

As he attempted to rise to his feet, a steel boot kicked his stomach. His lungs quickly fought for air. There were shuffling of feet and whispers until one mumbled, 'Let him see.'

Rex. The nervous Vinolean soldier he spoke to was there, standing upright, with a cold pair of eyes. The other wore an orange tunic over his armor. By the face alone, he had never seen him before, but the look about him made him uneasy.

Coming from the shadows was a very familiar face, sword in his grasp.

Major Rudra.

Lucan chuckled to himself and picked himself up. “What is this... some kind of assassination attempt?” Oscern was right. Open the mouth, get a bite.

Major Rudra smiled. “Oh, Lucan...you’re not worth the coin, but after some consideration, I’ve taken it upon myself to replace you with better talented fools.”

Lucan patted his side. His scabbard was missing. “Very smart, Major Dickhead. You hired Children of Rima to fight Children of Rima.” He rubbed his neck and turned, searching for his blade. “But I think you should’ve just killed me—”

Rex and the other took his arms and forced him back to his knees. Seeing this made Major Rudra approach him. “Sure, I could’ve spared you, but I want to enjoy seeing that stupid smile of yours beg for my mercy.” His steel boot lodged his face.

Upon impact, his jaw shifted, nearly dislocating from the force. The men who held him down let him go. Lucan wiped the blood from his lips. “Did Colonel Finsley agree to this?”

“The Colonel will think his good little boys died fighting for King Pann.”

“You two are going to fight a fellow brother in the faith?” A sting pained his eyes again. Lucan rubbed them and stepped back. His powers were affecting his eyesight, that much he understood.

A whistle sounded off, and the ground was getting shaky. Before his feet sank into the soil, he rolled back. The man in the orange tunic stared at him silently. He had some influence over the terrain.

The pacing of feet was coming at him. He raised his gauntlets as the sword fell and gripped Rex’s blade. The man in the orange tunic came from his blindside and kicked him to the ground.

Major Rudra’s laughter echoed. He must be watching from a safe distance, marveling at his wretched state. “How will the blind child of Rima see? How will he move when he gets buried alive?”

That was a good enough tip. Orange tunic could open the ground with a whistle, and Rex could blind him at will.

Lucan fled in the opposite direction, stumbling over the uneven ground and rubbing his eyes from the blur. The Grandi trees towering over them like mountains helped his focus. He could flee there, but his steps were getting sloppy.

The rumbling of a wagon forestalled his attention. A man in robes who was no soldier halted his donkey. He stood from his seat, raising his lantern outward, eyes widening at the surrounding

sinkhole. Suddenly Lucan couldn't look away. That attire, the oak leaves sewn into his coat. He was a cleric! He had forgotten there was a Riman village nestled within.

A whistle startled to come in waves, spreading the ground underneath, leaving little for the cleric and him to move. The entire floor opened with dozens of sinkholes.

The stunned cleric tried to move his donkey, but the ass was frozen from the shock. Whatever he hauled on his carriage was in many barrels that rolled and fell into the gaping holes.

Each leap took him closer to the man. Before the next whistle, Lucan pushed him from the carriage. His donkey and carriage were immediately swallowed. The cleric screamed, shaken from what he had witnessed.

"You need to get out of here," Lucan said, tugging him back to his feet. "Hurry!"

The cleric nodded and fled, turning from where he came from.

A sharp pain crossed his back. It stung like hell, but he turned that moment to meet Rex and tackled him to the ground. His eyes were burning again, but Lucan only worried about the sword. He plucked the blade from him and dove it into his chest.

Rex didn't cry. He gurgled blood, fingers digging into the soil than the blade Lucan stole. "You..." His eyes widened, and tears started to come out. Lucan tried to wedge the sword off, but the soldier took his arm—stopping him. "I know who you are... burn me, please... don't leave me like this."

Something opened inside Lucan and carved out of his right torso. He stared at the blade, smeared with his blood. The sword peeled back, and he wailed. His blood dripped on the dead soldier as he heaved for air, hand gripping where the hot liquid poured out from.

Another whistle. The ground underneath rose like a tide and trembled. Lucan steadied his shaky knees. Little by little, his eyesight was coming back.

Major Rudra held a red-stained blade. He made a fair distance after he stabbed him. The blood loss slackened his movements. Any chance at fleeing was gone now, he had to confront this head-on.

He collapsed to the ground again. The man in the orange tunic was staring, content, and no longer intimidated by him. Had he lost too much blood? Was it over for him?

Major Rudra stepped around the sinkholes. When he got close, he gripped his hair and raised him to his knees. A flat tongue ran up his ear, leaving a pungent odor. “Not going to put up a fight?” Major Rudra snickered. “Don’t worry, once I tear your insides out, your friends will join you—and that Zorn, I’ll play with him a little, and if he begs just right, I might just keep him.”

Something woke inside Lucan. He turned and shoved his thumbs into Rudra’s eyes. “What did you say!” He arched his back and screamed, nails digging into his arms while fluid ran down his cheeks. “Say those words again!” he growled. “Say it!” His thumb wedged through, forcing his eyeballs to pop out.

The whistle came, and for a moment, time stood still.

No master, no payment, no orders to kill Oscern and Zorn.

Lucan gripped Rudra and took him into the mouth of the dark vortex.



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