

## coliseum

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## coliseum

by [artanogon](#)

### Summary

Grian is on a mission: kill the Red King of the Third Precinct. Unfortunately, when he travels to the capital where the king resides, he lands in a spot of trouble with a local merchant when he accidentally destroys the merchant's shop. After he enters into a contract to help pay off the damages, he discovers that there might be another side to Scar under the silver-tongued salesman— and that he's not the only one who wants the Red King dead.

### Notes

when desert duo. hope this helps

a lot of this concept and some of the worldbuilding was inspired by relaxxattack's bishop's knife trick! send some love to them please :)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

every end of a time is another begun



Grian has no illusions about being a good person, but he does have some sense of firmness in his understanding of justice. His methods are questionable at best and bloody when needed, but even he can see the line in the sand. Even he can disapprove of tyrants.

As can those who sent him.

The enchanted gold knife almost burns a hole in his sleeve as he bypasses the guards at the entrance of Cithref, the capital of the Third Precinct. The rings of the city tower above him in great white-and-grey spirals, layers of houses and shops, busy streets.

But most importantly, the castle at the highest tier with red banners flying. That's his object of his... visit. An entirely innocuous one, a traveller who wants to see more of the world and thinks that Cithref is the perfect place to do it as the hub of everything in this precinct. Who may happen to steal close to the castle and become fascinated with that world. Who becomes welcome there.

And then?

Well, his knife finds its mark in the back of the Red King. And Grian leaves a happy man with the Watchers sated and no more eyes burning into his shoulder blades where his wings used to be.

The streets of Cithref are absolute chaos. Grian dodges and weaves between the thick flow of the crowd, humans and hybrids and things that smell of divinity alike. The calls of merchants fly from either side of him, carts rattle past. There's shouting somewhere in the distance. Probably a bar fight, judging by the sound of shattering glass that comes with it.

It's wild and loud and overwhelming, and Grian *loves* it.

The Watcher palaces and meeting rooms back in the endless void are cold and stifling. There is no

laughter, no noise. Watchers glide or fly silently from room to room, communicating only through mental whispers or notes scrawled into the sandstone walls. There's no life, nor mess.

This place is exactly the opposite. Grian's here on business but he finds himself distracted immediately by the bright world around him. He escapes the clog of the crowd and slips among the stalls surrounding him, brightly colored silk cloth and canopies brushing his skin. Light glints on the packed earth from the crystals that dangle from most of the booths and merchants call after him. He doesn't bother to pause for any of them, just taking in all the sensations of noise and trinkets and the smell of frying street food. He had forgotten how good it feels to be human.

He stops by one of the food stalls, buying a strangely shaped pastry covered in a bright green sauce that smells of spicy meat. The woman at the counter gives him a grin when he tosses her one of the more expensive coins the Watchers gave him, slipping another pastry towards him. Her skin is rough and cold, tinged with the characteristic rot of zombie flesh, and her eyes flash red in the sunlight when she waves him goodbye.

Fascinating.

The pastries are good too.

He continues to race through the streets, taking in all the sights he can and learning all the little nooks and crannies. He'll need a place to stay, but that won't be hard to find with some good coin on him. The mountain summer air beats down on him and sinks through his thick red shirt. He's overheating quickly but doesn't care much.

He ducks into another area of shady stalls, wiping his forehead. Redstone torches flicker red-gold around him, the shades of red, white, and green fabric of the stall above him sheltering him from the intense sun. He hears a spitting noise and turns to see a white llama looking at him.

That's interesting too. He takes a peek at the wares in front of the stall, seeing an assortment of gems and crystals and books and paper. There's no merchant in sight, though.

There's a crash and a scream. Grian ducks out from the shady stall to find two people locked in a fight. One, a familiar-looking blond man in a green coat, ducks out of the way of his silver-haired enemy's knife. Grian could swear he knows them both, but isn't sure where from. Then the man with the knife goes for his opponent's stomach. Grian's cover is destroyed if he's found near a dead body, so he runs forward, slamming the armed man away from his downed opponent. The knife sinks into the ground and the attacker crashes back into the stall Grian was just sheltered under.

Grian has enough time to blink before the stall collapses in on itself—

And then catches on fire.

The redstone torches made great lighting, but they're an open hazard in a flammable wool booth.

*Shit.*

The limber man darts out from the flaming stall with a muttered curse, taking off into the streets at top speed away from the rapidly spreading fire. The blond man next to Grian gets to his feet, tosses a quick "thanks" over his shoulder, and races after his opponent. Grian's left to deal with the rest of the mess.

Then he remembers there was a llama in the stall, likely a prized possession of the merchant. Before the fire can spread any further, he runs towards the collapsed tent and ducks into the ruined

fabric. He finds the llama struggling on its lead where it's tethered down.

He quickly pulls his knife from his sleeve, slices the rope and leads the llama out of the back of the stall. It bolts out after him.

Grian ends up back in the middle of the street, watching the stall go up in a gust of red fire. He winces. The wares in it looked expensive and well-made. It'd probably be best to leave before trouble comes in the form of the guards—it wouldn't do him well to be established as a threat or an issue when he needs to be unnoticeable—but he doesn't want someone stealing the llama. Particularly if that's all the merchant has left.

He doesn't have a water bucket on him, but thankfully there's no wind and the flames die out by themselves.

Then he hears the sound of wheels skidding on pavement, and then a soft, "Oh, *no*."

Grian turns slowly. Behind him, there's a man probably a few years older than him staring at the blackened remains of the stall with grief across his face. He's in a golden industrial-looking wheelchair. A large brown hat shields his scarred face. He's clad in brown pants and a deep red patterned shawl that wraps across his shoulders and torso. He has a lot of jewelry on him too, a clear sign of wealth.

Definitely the merchant who owns the stall.

Grian's shoulders droop. He walks softly over to the man, pulling the now-calm llama behind him. "I'm really sorry about your stall. I—I managed to rescue your llama, though."

The merchant gives a heavy sigh, some of the pain seeming to drop from his face. He reaches out one hand. "Oh, good, you got Pizza. That's something. What happened to the..." He waves his other hand towards the stall as he grabs the llama's lead. "Everything else?"

Grian settles down on the burning hot pavement. It stings his hands and burns his dark trousers. A cool wind starts to blow through the air, taking the remains of the stall to the sky. "There was a knife fight nearby. I don't know who it was, but one of them was about to kill the other, and I ran in to stop it. One of them got knocked back into the stall, and then it collapsed on him. I think because there were torches, it all went up in flames."

"Ah." The merchant scrubs his fingertips over his forehead. "*Dangit*. I don't know what I'm gonna do now. That's gonna be a pain to replace and put up again."

Grian swallows. Guilt clogs his throat, but more importantly there's the worry that the merchant will go and tell the authorities or sue him and make a scandal. It would entirely blow his cover. So he stands, slowly, walking towards the merchant and dropping to one knee in front of him. He watches the merchant's eyes widen.

"It was my fault," he says, quietly. "I was the one who knocked the man into the stall. I will pay you back for it all and help you rebuild. I just—I'm new here, and I don't want to get in trouble with the guard. They're terrifying." It's a sort of white lie. Grian isn't scared of the guard at all. He's only scared of what will happen if he's found out. "I'll do anything to repair the damage, just please don't turn me in."

The merchant blinks, then smiles at him. His smile is soft and crinkles the edges of his eyes. "Well, I've never been bowed to like King Arthur before." He motions for Grian to stand and Grian blinks as he watches the merchant's demeanor change. "I won't tell. I get it, being new in town and in

over your head. Been there, did that, it sucked. If you want to stick around and help me rebuild, though, that'd be great."

Grian gives a subtle sigh of relief, his shoulders relaxing just the slightest bit. "Thank you."

The man across from him claps his hands. "Of course! I'll be in considerably better shape if I have another pair of hands to help me get everything together. Mistakes happen and it sounds like you were doing a good thing, so... no biggie." He shrugs a shoulder.

Grian blinks at him for a minute. Were humans always this damn *cheery*?

He forces a relieved smile onto his own face. "Thank you. I was really scared there."

The merchant extends a hand to him. Grian shakes it and makes sure he can't feel the knife up Grian's sleeve. His grip is firm, his hands rough and warped with what seems like explosion scars. Grian can't help but wonder where those came from. "No problem. Welcome to Monopoly Mountain, um..."

"Grian," he supplies. It's a bit of an unusual name, but that doesn't matter. It's only if he shared his true name that he'd be in danger. As is, he just sounds like a far-off foreigner.

"Grian. Got it. I'm Scar, your official new temporary employer." Scar shoots him a bright grin, winding the llama's broken lead around his arm. "Do you have a place to stay?"

"Not currently," Grian replies, burying his hands in his pockets. "Are you offering?"

"Indeed." Scar turns his wheelchair around, back towards the slowly winding streets that spiral upwards to a collection of warmly coloured houses on the next tier. He looks back over at Grian, lifting one hand off his wheels to beckon Grian after him before rolling off. "I have a spare floor of my house that I can't really reach, so... it's open if you want."

"That sounds great." Grian quickly follows after him, wishing more than ever that he still had his wings.

Scar pauses for a minute. "You can hop on Pizza if you want. He's well trained and used to giving people rides so they can keep up with me."

Grian obliges the offer, clambering atop the soft white llama and swinging himself over the saddlebags. Scar ties the leash around a handle-like shape on one side of his chair, and then starts wheeling off. Grian clings to the llama's slightly charred harness as Scar wheels faster and faster, then flicks a lever on his chair which releases a blast of hot steam into Grian's face. Grian coughs and the chair makes a revving noise, and then it's taking off at a clip that Pizza runs to keep up with.

He clings tighter to the llama as Scar gives a whoop of laughter. The buildings seem to almost fly by them, the wind ruffles Grian's hair, and as they coast up the streets towards the tall buildings ahead he wonders if that mistake might have been for the best. Now he has his own place, his cover story, a new job, and no one to ask questions.

He can work with this.

The Red King won't last two weeks.

## these coins sit upon our eyes

### Chapter Summary

Manual labour isn't what Grian usually spends his Saturday doing, but things get better when a new opportunity to infiltrate the royal palace opens up.

### Chapter Notes

oh my GOSH thank you guys so much for all the support thus far. it's so motivating, tysm :>

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Grian has made a few mistakes in his life, to varying degrees with varying consequences. Some of them cost him a lot— the scars on his back can attest to that. Some of them just make him wish he could melt into the ground and die.

This is one of the latter.

In the least severe way possible, entering Scar's service was a colossal mistake. The man is a cheerful, bumbling, *utter idiot*. He's mental. A lunatic. Nuts. Insane. The list of synonyms goes on and on, until Grian's fading into colloquial phrases that easily haven't been said over the past seventy years. The heavy planks over his shoulders are making them ache, Scar's cat basks lazily on top of the planks, and through the muggy heat and strain he can hear Scar prattling away ahead of him.

“And then I told him, ‘well, if the dark oak tree is so valuable, then I'll just get rid of it so you can't hoard it anymore’, and you would not *believe* how mad that guy was—”

Grian gives a low grumble, re-adjusting the planks on his shoulders again and trying desperately not to knock Jellie off.

See, the thing is Grian's services currently mostly amount to manual labour. Scar is strong and has been able to set up most of the materials for his stall himself, but he can't exactly steer his wheelchair and carry a bunch of heavy planks at the same time. So, thus, Grian's left to move the wares that they've bought from the fiery-tempered merchant not far from Scar's house.

Scar looks back over his shoulder at him again and seems to finally notice the struggle Grian is facing. “This is the last one. All I need are some other parts from the higher tiers, but those shouldn't be much to carry.”

“Oh, good,” Grian mumbles. The sun beats down on his head and sticks his hair to his head with sweat. Everything hurts.

When the two of them finally cross the threshold to Scar's wide-open, cooled house, Grian gives a heavy sigh of relief and cautiously lets the planks down on the sofa. Jellie hops off of them and

gives a big stretch before disappearing down the hall, presumably going to sleep on Scar's bed. He dusts himself off and resists the urge to collapse on the soft cushions in front of him.

It seems like he's not the only one who's exhausted, though. Scar's slumped in his wheelchair, his hat in his lap, running his hands through his hair with his eyes closed. He looks as good as ever, but messier and more off-balance than usual. From what Grian's gathered, Scar hates the heat.

But the merchant opens his eyes and gives him a smile. The way it trembles at the edge is barely noticeable. "Well. One last trip up to the high rings, then?"

"I can go alone," Grian says quickly. Not only does it make the trip easier and less ear-hurting for him, but it gives him a chance to get up to the castle and start gathering intel on the Red King. Scar won't question if he's gone a bit longer. In the week they've lived together, he's never questioned where Grian disappears off to on moonlit nights.

Scar raises an eyebrow. "You sure? It's a long trip."

"I'm sure." He dusts off his shoulders and trousers, then gives Scar a small smile. No indication of the joy bubbling up at a perfect, uninterrupted opportunity. He's been trying to get away from Scar in daylight for days. "I want to see more of the area anyways."

"Well, thank you." Scar's tired smile turns to his classic grin with the lit-up eyes, and he pulls a crumpled list from his pocket and passes it into Grian's hands. "That's all the supplies you'll need to get, enough to store in one bag. I'll see you soon."

"See you then," Grian replies, and as soon as Scar's waved goodbye and wheeled away down the hall, he's bolting out of the door and into the dusty streets beyond.

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The two upper rings of Cithref are the pretentious, rich, almost disgustingly beautiful sections of the whole city. Quartz and stone and brick and expensive woods from far away decorate it all. It's eerily clean, with no evidence of beggars or street food or chaos like there is in the lower rings. It's gorgeous, to be sure, with full gardens and lush sections of nature. But there's no *life*.

Far too much like the home of the Watchers.

Grian shudders and walks on faster.

The shops here aren't booths on the side of the road, but polished buildings cut into the sides of the city with wooden signs proclaiming their wares blowing in the wind. All with similar colours, quiet entrances with bells that jangle, and well-dressed people popping in and out of them.

Grian walks right past them. He can go back later. Right now his object of focus is settled one tier up, in massive green courtyards, a palace surrounded by cobblestone walls and built with warm spruce and fine stone. Or, more specifically, inside the palace.

Breaking in seems like a pretty good first step to murder.

But to do that, he has to figure out a way in. And while pickaxes exist, they're only good for tunnels that are too easily discovered or for a one time break in. It's obvious. It's evidence. He needs something subtler: human connection. People who invite him in, who trust him, and then never suspect it when he frames them and commits treachery right under their noses. He knows the drill by now.

In the time it takes him to think, he's on the final, highest tier of the city and the grand gates of the

castle stretch out before him. He's heard it's called the Enchanter, supposed to mesmerize everyone who steps through the halls and marvels at all the magical whimsy that surrounds them.

What an *utter* load of garbage. Grian hikes his bag over his shoulder and walks towards the guarded gates, trying to brainstorm a way to get in.

He could feign an excuse of a delivery, but then he'd have to provide proof of it. He could say he's here on business, but that means coming up with a reason, and he doesn't quite look the part of it right now. There's no way to sneak his way past. He can't think of anything else off the top of his head, and he's considering how to play off the second option, when he hears a voice call out from behind him.

"Ho, there! I know you."

Grian flinches, fight or flight rising in his stomach. He has one knife up his sleeve, another in his bag, and a sword at the side of his leg. He can draw them all fairly easily, but there's the guards in front of him. That's an issue.

He turns, slowly, and then stands dead still where he is. It's the same blond-haired, green-coated chap from yesterday who was in the knife fight. The man waves at him with a bright smile, racing up to his side and then pausing to catch his breath. He extends a hand forward to Grian. "I never got to properly thank you yesterday for your help. That would have been an unfortunate and untimely end for me if you hadn't come along."

Grian blinks, but shakes his hand. "It was just the right thing to do."

The man laughs. "A small thing for you, maybe. It made a lot of difference to me. I'm Martyn. Yourself?"

That's what gets Grian to stand there dumbstruck. *Martyn Littlewood.*

Also known as the Red Hand. Closest advisor and guard of the Red King, famous for being fearsome in combat and a clever strategist, with more prestige to his name than most people could ever dream of. Closest friend of the king, and many speculate he's the king's consort as well.

This is the biggest stroke of luck Grian could have asked for.

He shakes himself out of his own shock and joy, stuttering over his words when he speaks again. "I — I'm Grian."

"Are you alright?"

He can use this. This is *perfect*. "Forgive me, I was just shocked. I had never hoped to meet any of the royalty in Cithref. I visited this city because I was so fascinated with the history and culture here, and this is... well, it hardly feels real to meet someone so involved in that world."

The key to a believable lie is to include as much truth as possible. And it works, because Martyn's smile widens and he seems to puff up slightly. He claps his hand on Grian's shoulder. "Well, that *is* good luck for you. And to meet again at the palace, no less."

It's a risky move, but Grian dares to try. "Could I possibly see it? I know it's not usually allowed, but it's been my dream since I first heard of what the Enchanter was like to see all the magic and history inside it. I won't share anything or tell anyone, I just... it's such a wish of mine, you know? This city's life is contained in that place."



That's the other thing. Gush love, gush praise. Everyone's a sucker for it if you hit on the right spot.

Martyn hesitates, seemingly deliberating over it. But he arrives at his conclusion fairly quickly and gives a relaxed shrug. "Sure! Who am I to deny you? It's not like we have a bunch of royal secrets in there or anything." He gives Grian a sly grin. "At least not where it's visible."

Grian laughs and then follows in Martyn's footsteps to the gates. The guards don't question them or stop them, just salute Martyn and crank open the heavy wood gates for them. The grand castle stretches out in front of them and Grian's just gotten a free pass inside.

Today is a good, *good* day.

## Chapter End Notes

this now has an amazing fanart by its-amphicyon, which you can find in the chapter 2 link on tumblr :D

# we both say the things we both really feel

## Chapter Summary

The Enchanter is a lot more than Grian was expecting... and so is Scar.

## Chapter Notes

this is probably gonna be the same message at the start of each chapter LOL but thank u all so much for the support!! it's truly incredible to get such positive reception on such a self indulgent thing

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The inside of the castle, in terms of the architecture, is surprisingly home-y and simple. It's all spruce and oak, high arches and beams lit by warm torches and lanterns. But more interesting than the build of it all is the pure raw magic and energy Grian can feel emanating out of the walls. The shelves are covered by glass and filled with trinkets and jewelry and statues that thrum with raw power. He's never seen this many magical items in one place.

The wooden halls stretch on ahead for a surprisingly short distance, then two grand iron doors guard what is presumably the entrance to the throne room. Grian's fingers itch to go for the knife in his sleeve.

He tempers the urge. There's no guarantee the Red King is in there, it's highly doubtful Martyn will let him in, and there are guards here and probably more inside the throne room. There's no use getting killed when he's just taken the first few steps towards reaching his goal.

Instead he makes his expression one of wonder. It isn't hard. "This is gorgeous."

Martyn gives a proud grin. "Isn't it?"

He carefully trails his fingertips over the smooth wooden walls, looking at hovering end crystals behind layers of thick glass and the gorgeous enchanted books that shimmer on the bookcases. Small golden statues, little totems of undying. Treasures far and wide, some that even Grian has never seen.

It's incredible. The magic would draw even an ordinary passerby in, but it makes something roar in Grian's chest. The hungry desire for life, magical energy, that is typical of all his kind. He wants to tear the feeling from the air, pump it into his veins and blood and grow back the wings and abilities he misses so desperately.

No wonder people are so absorbed by the castle. It's dangerous in how tempting it is.

Too dangerous.

He takes one last glance around the halls, at the entrances and exits and windows and locations of

dangerous objects. The amount of guards, the location of the door and the locks on it. All of it's useful notes— and if he has his way, he'll be back soon.

Then he turns to Martyn, making his smile tremble a little and then start to fall. "I— I'm not feeling so good, I think I have a headache."

He has to get out of here before the sheer power surrounding him drives him insane.

Martyn jumps a little from whatever trance he's been in. Concern crosses his brow and he places a hand on Grian's shoulder blades. "There's a lot of powerful items in here. It can get a bit overwhelming— I mean, we even have to change out the guard regularly because of the migraines they get from being here for too long. Come on, let's step outside and get some fresh air."

Martyn, evidently, is an absolute chatterbox. Grian walks with him back outside, giving a sigh of relief when the thing in his lungs and heart stops screaming for divine power. He quickly makes a mental note of the guard changing and has to stop himself from laughing. The king's hand hands out secrets like they're candy. If Grian can keep on his good side and, heaven forbid, maybe even become friends with him, this job will be too easy.

"You alright?" His companion's green eyes are knit in concern. Grian notices for the first time that his coat has thin leather armour under it, reinforced with thick iron in some places. Of course he wouldn't be walking around defenceless. "You got really pale there for a bit."

"I'm feeling better," Grian replies, trying to sound sweet and exhausted. "Just— very dizzy, I think it might be best to go home and lay down for a while."

"Definitely. Look after yourself, alright? The Enchanter can be a bit overwhelming the first few times." Martyn claps him on the shoulder one more time. "And hey, if you see me around, don't be afraid to come and chat. You're a nice fellow and I respect people who like studying culture. It'd be a crying shame to never see you again."

*Bingo.*

Grian grins at him, all dimples and scrunched eyes and overjoyed voice. "Thank you. I'll make sure that I see you again. It would be a shame to never see you as well. And thank you so much for the small tour again."

"Any time."

He walks back through the gates, turning to call over his shoulder at Martyn. "I might take you up on that!"

"Please do. Take care, Grian!"

He waits until he's descended from the castle ring, far out of the sight of any royal guards or staff. Then he runs and skips his way back down to the shops, grinning from ear to ear. This is everything he could have hoped for and more. He's welcome back again. He's in confidence with the man closest to the king.

*I'll be back, Martyn. Not for the history lessons you're expecting.*

He giggles to himself and then forces himself to look neutral and like a respectable customer. He has parts to get.

Boy, what bumbling Scar would say about this.

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“Of *course* it would be one of the royal jerks,” Scar says with emphasis, waving his fork around in the air. The piece of chicken on the end of it goes flying and Grian watches out of the corner of his eye as Jellie bolts towards it. She snaps the morsel up, climbs back on the couch to go to sleep again, and Scar is stabbing his chicken with viciousness.

Grian had come back with all the intricate brazier and lantern parts as well as the screws and supports for Scar’s display cases, dropping the bag off at the doorstep and finding Scar cooking in the kitchen.

He’d waved to Grian, gold-and-redstone leg braces glinting all up his legs and back and his cane leaning against the counter. Jellie was sitting on the counter just out of range of the gas stove grease, flicking her tail lazily in the air. Everything had seemed so easy, very content and domestic. It was kind of a nice feeling.

Grian had sat down at the dining table while Scar fished the chicken and potatoes out of the pans and furnace. The air was warm and heavy with the smell of spices and buttered potatoes, muggy in the summer heat but oddly pleasant all the same. Still far too hot. Grian was going to have to swap out his tunic soon for something lighter.

Scar had set down the meal for both of them, then unlocked his braces and cautiously sat down in the chair across from Grian. “How was the trip?”

He had shrugged, absentmindedly taking a bite of food. It was good food, but that hadn’t been first and foremost on his mind. “Pretty alright. Found all the parts I needed within a few minutes.”

“Spent the rest of the time exploring, then?” Scar asked with an easy smile and cocked eyebrow. Grian nearly choked on his food as he remembered he’d likely been gone for a couple of hours. He couldn’t be making careless mistakes like that and possibly blowing his cover.

He cleared his throat, setting his knife and fork down. “I ran into one of the men from the knife fight last week.”

Scar had set his utensils down as well. His keen eyes had focused on Grian, amber-yellow in the bright evening light. “Oh, really?”

His voice was as friendly and amiable as ever. Yet somehow, Grian found himself shivering when he looked back across at Scar’s perfectly neutral face. He couldn’t place why, but— something nearly deadly seemed to lurk in the back of the words. Something oddly terrifying. And Grian’s instincts were very rarely wrong.

Now he sits here, mid-discussion with Scar. Or rather, mid-listening-to-angry-rant from Scar about how rude the royal guards are. The vehemence of Scar’s words leaves him blinking and staring at his housemate. As far as he’s read and heard, most people don’t dare speak a bad word about the Red King or his rule. Whether it’s from respect or fear varies.

Scar, though, seems to have a lot to say.

“Those stupid... numbskulls.” Scar mutters, shaking his head.

“You can swear around me. I’m an adult, Scar, I don’t mind. I’ve said a fair few in my time.”

“Thank you.” Scar snaps his fingers and Jellie hops up from the couch, leaping onto his lap instead and giving a low rumbling purr. Grian’s never seen such a well-behaved cat before. “Those *fuckers*.”

That, admittedly, makes him laugh. He stifles it with his napkin but some of Scar's dark mood seems to break anyways and a smile peaks through the corners of the thundercloud over his face. It's just a *little* jarring to hear it from Scar's normally very friendly, restrained self.

He probably shouldn't say a lot more. But if Scar's feelings are so hostile towards the Red Army and Crimson Rule, then Grian may have a potential ally on his hands. That opportunity is far too good to pass up. Especially with Scar's likeability and silver tongue. The risk is probably worth it.

And if it isn't? Well, Grian owns a lot of weapons. "It wasn't just one of the guards. It was the King's Hand himself."

Scar pauses and stares dead at him. "Martyn Littlewood?"

"The one and only."

"*Dude.*"

Grian chuckles a bit, biting into another piece of chicken. "I know. What on earth are the odds of that?"

"No, well— that too. What I mean is that if word got out he was getting in brawls, he'd be kicked down from his position. The monarchy's always said they won't have a needlessly violent rule."

"Needlessly," Grian scoffs. "They'd know, wouldn't they?"

Scar shrugs one shoulder. "See, then they'd have to be self aware. We all know that's only happening when hels freezes over."

He goes back to cutting at his chicken, picking a scrap from his plate and holding it up to Jellie. She raises her head and then nips it out of his fingers, giving a yawn afterwards and snuggling further into Scar's shawl. The sun has finally started to set, painting the room in strokes of red-orange and lengthy shadows. There's no sound except distant chatter and Jellie's soft purring.

Finally, Grian clears his throat. "Seems you don't like them much either."

The man across from him scoffs. "Do workers care for the wealthy men who come and steal all their money? Do you think rabbits love jackals? I sure don't think so."

"Good point," Grian agrees, standing from the table. "I can wash the dishes."

"Sounds good." Scar passes him his plate, the brush of his skin cool and scarred against Grian's. Scar never seems to be warm. The slight touch is jarring, more so when Grian walks away to the sink and can feel eyes on the back of his head. Not the same ones as normal.

No, definitely not. Scar's watching him now.

Well, two can play at that game. Grian was already stacking the cards his way anyways.

Tepid water pours over his hand, then with a splutter of steam and groan of piping, grows abruptly hotter. Grian winces but sets about scrubbing the dishes, heavy soap chafing at his hands and hot water sinking into his skin.

As he works, small bits of information begin to piece themselves together. Scar's got quick reflexes, that's one of the first things Grian's noticed. He never drops anything, immediately catches his balance if he ever slips while wearing his braces. He watches intensely as if his eyes

could burn into someone's body and see through their soul. Grian's familiar with that kind of sight. He doesn't enjoy it.

The scars. The bitter comments and specific analogies about the Crimson Rule. The amount of money he must have to be able to afford a nice two story place like this in such an expensive city. The wealth of knowledge, the small magical items and crystals Grian has seen and felt stowed around his house. Scar's not as observant as Grian, but he's a near thing.

Grian shuts off the sink with another great groan of pipes. Behind him, he can hear the sound of Scar locking his braces into place and then the tap of a cane on the ground. He turns and waves goodnight to Scar. Scar waves back, and then disappears down the hall beyond. The shadows seem to almost swallow him.

He sets about putting away the dishes.

There's definitely something more to Scar than meets the eye. And for as long as Grian's staying here, he may as well take on a side project. Focus on the assassination, but also figure out who or what it is he's living with.

He wonders if he might regret finding the answer.

## Chapter End Notes

ceci n'est pas un plot point

# think of all the horrors that i promised you i'd bring

## Chapter Summary

The Watchers are displeased with Grian's lack of progress. It's high time he starts his mission again— if he can get away with it.

## Chapter Notes

sorry for the disappearance! this chapter did not want to cooperate

update: the cover art has been added to the fic :>

warning for some slightly graphic nightmares ahead!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It's just his luck that one of the first few nights of decent sleep Grian's managed to get in a long time is interrupted by the threats of vengeful gods.

Not quite gods, really, beyond the idea of false idols that many humans worship. The omniscient needs no worship nor sacrifice, only their will done and their power feared. The Watchers are quite good at that— always have been, really. Dreams and portals are their domain. Grian can't remember the last time he's gone to sleep without wondering if he'll ever wake up again.

Tonight's just rather worse than usual.

Grian wakes from deep sleep to a strange sort of trance, the veil between dreams and reality that the Watchers like to dwell in.

The first thing he registers is the feeling of a million eyes snapping towards him. The second is that his skin is stinging and raw, and when he looks down at his own hands the skin has been flayed off them and left only pale pink and the stretch of tendons and bones. His stomach turns and it takes everything he has not to gag.

He forces himself to look back up.

The endless void stretches out before him, pale stars that slowly coalesce into a grin that seeps pure droplets of starlight, falling to the earth in great white comets that grow wings and mouths and far too many eyes. The great smile opens in laughter and thousands of eyes grow from the space between its celestial teeth.

Grian dares to blink, and when he opens his eyes again, the council of Watchers stands in front of him. They are taller than him by far, stretching up into the sky with great billowing cloaks of black and purple flowing down from the void like ocean waves. Halos of billions of eyes—all types, magical and real—snap down to look directly at him.

He flinches away before he can help it.

The first Watcher in front of him, Etoile, stretches their wide many-toothed mouth in some strange approximation of a smile. Their voice echoes deep in his ears with the weight of the Universe.

*“Greetings, Xelqua.”*

He inclines his own head. *“Greetings.”*

More eyes seem to settle on him. Grian’s shoulders threaten to crumple under the pressure that beats down on him. There is complete and utter silence across every level of the Universe, seeping black venom that eats Grian’s voice and self confidence. Then, slowly, the Watchers speak as one.

*“You have not delivered on your promise. You know the consequences.”*

His heartbeat echoes in his ears. *“I have not had enough time. I have— ended up in the service of a merchant due to the careless mistakes of those around me. I have information. I have a way to get to the king. It will be over soon. All I ask is more time.”*

*“You know the consequences.”*

The scars on Grian’s shoulders burn red-hot. His neck spasms, and then his lungs won’t let him breathe, and there is no air or gravity in the world around him. He floats to the sky, clutching his throat and struggling for air. The Watchers rise with him, shadowy hands ghosting over his fragile dying form and eyes relentlessly searching his memories and soul.

*“Please,”* Grian chokes out, his lungs twisting in on themselves. *“I will do it. I promise. Please, I cannot die here. It will be done within the next fortnight, I promise, but I cannot die here— only time, please—”*

The terrible clamping feeling in his chest releases. Grian takes his first breath of free air and feels tears well up. His chest spasms with coughs and he’s near sobbing as he doubles over in mid-air, torso burning and millions of stars and presences and expectations boring into his skull. Humans are so small and fragile, really.

He feels like a mouse.

Ice-cold shadow hands settle on his head, his shoulders and back and chest and legs. His skin crawls and he only cries harder.

One Watcher lifts his head up by the chin. He looks head-on at his saviors and tormentors. There is no pity or kindness looking back at him from the smooth, empty faces and cold divinity. There is only the expectation: his task or his soul.

He’d much rather deal with the first than lose the second.

*“I promise,”* Grian murmurs, forcing his tears to still and his own manner to appear neutral and strong. The Void is so cold. *“It will be done.”*

*“And so it shall,”* the Watchers echo, and gravity comes back.

He plummets to the pale end stone below. A shriek tears itself loose from his throat as the wind whips at his skin, ripping his shirt and pants and pulling the raw flesh loose from his bones. He doesn’t know how many blocks he’s falling, but the ground rushes up to meet him and he prepares himself for the feeling of his body shattering to pieces.

In that moment between the fear and the crushing impact, he wakes up choking on his own screams.



He hugs his thin blankets close to his chest for a few minutes, hunching over and trying desperately to catch his breath. He holds the blanket close to his face, not caring when it gets wet and sticky with tears. Scar sleeps like a log, so at least Grian doesn't have to worry about that. He doesn't dare scream again but lets himself cry. No one other than the usual is around to see. It's fine to be weak for a minute.

He staggers from the bedcovers, sitting down at the rickety chair in front of his borrowed desk. There's a mirror built into it and he gets a good look at himself. The sight makes him recoil.

Under his thin vest, his chest is flushed bright red and criss-crossed with angry red veins and warped skin. His throat has rings of patterns around it like a thousand hands had tried to choke him to death. He loses track of his own breath, hyperventilating as he twists around in his chair. Just as he predicted, the scars on his shoulder blades are angry and swollen, like great inflamed blisters.

He chokes out a curse and lays his head down on the desk, his arms functioning as a makeshift pillow. Everything hurts and it's really his own fault.

As much as he hates to admit it, he's been distracted living with Scar. He does his own independent research and talks to guards and people around town, but most of his time is spent helping Scar set things up or search for this and that. And when he comes home, he's always exhausted and Scar's just so willing to sit down and eat and chat. Time passes quickly between the two of them, little chats or debates or witty insults. Some nights he sits with Jellie on his lap and listens to Scar softly sing as he tinkers with some kind of new idea. It's nice, it's peaceful. It's something to come back to while Grian works on the not-easy task of a royal assassination.

But obviously, that's far too complacent for the Watchers.

He gives a sigh of frustration that turns into a quiet sob. He'll just have to be faster, do better. He's been here a week and a day, he has a fortnight at least to finish the job. He can do this.

He's just in a lot of pain, and very tired.

With another sigh, he buries his face in his arms and falls back to sleep.

---

He wanders his way downstairs several hours later, shoulders aching and eyes drooping like they're made of sand. He has no doubt that if he looked in a mirror he'd find a nightmarishly tired face staring back at him. Dark bags, pale skin, wan face, the whole package. How's he explaining this one to Scar?

You know what? It doesn't matter. He's sure he can come up with some kind of excuse for it.

Unfortunately, Scar sits at the table, chewing idly on a piece of toast while reading over what appears to be a newspaper.

Grian sets about trying to slip past as quietly as possible, feet drifting soundlessly on the floor as he avoids the familiar creaky boards with ease. The ground is warm beneath his feet and Jellie's soft fur brushes against his ankles as she slips past him, and he's nearly to the door when Scar speaks, not looking up from his toast. "Morning, rascal."

"I'm a *what?*" Grian asks, giving up on his stealth and resigning himself to trying to appear as normal as possible. He can say it was a nightmare. It's fine.

"Rascal. Rapsallion. Troublemaker. Bother, et cetera."

He walks over to the counter, taking one of the well-polished knives in hand and deftly slicing himself a piece of bread. He takes a bite out of it, settling down at the table across from Scar. “Have I done something to deserve the sudden amount of verbal abuse this morning?”

“It’s affectionate!” Scar protests, his amber eyes lit up with morning light and whatever scheming is going on in that brain of his today. “I needed a good nickname to call you, like I always do for my friends. Those ones will work perfectly. You have a knack for getting into sticky situations, from what I’ve seen.”

Scar considers Grian to be one of his friends now. How odd.

Grian’s not had many friends before. Or, maybe he did at some point, but from what little he remembers, they’re likely all dead now. And what, he’s known this Scar fellow for little more than a week, and they’re already friends in Scar’s mind? The man must be lonely indeed.

He drops his head onto his folded hands, letting out a resigned sigh. “I could refute all of that, but I’m too tired to.”

“Seems like it,” Scar replies. The way he says it is just slightly odd— too tentative, a little stressed and stretched in ways it shouldn’t be. Grian continues to act exhausted with very little effort (all his limbs *ache* ) but the strange response has him paying much closer attention than he was before. “Rough night?”

Tripwire traps always have strings on the ground that give away their presence. Grian thinks he can feel the slide of taunt silk in Scar’s too-casual tone.

“Nightmare,” is all he says in return, pushing himself back up from the kitchen table. He should get out of here. His skin is pricked with goosebumps, some strange fight-or-flight rushing down his spine like every time he’s been in a fight before. Maybe it’s the fact that Scar’s eyes are far too keen.

“Must have been a hell of one. Lovingly, G, you look terrible.”

“Yeah, I feel like it too.” He breezes past the new nickname. He’ll be out of here in two weeks. No sense indulging this strange man.

“I can imagine.”

Silence hangs between them, stilted and awkward. Grian grabs his boots from beside the door, gently nudging Jellie away from the pile of shoes and coats. He hears Scar set down the paper and the clunk of a mug on the table, then the slight squeak of Scar’s wheelchair.

He turns around, testing the waters. “Have I done something wrong?”

Scar jumps slightly. He blinks rapidly, and his smile wavers before coming back, and Grian wants to bolt out the door and never come back before his secrets can be found out. “No! Not at all, I was just worried.”

That, well... that can mean a lot of things. Grian isn’t sure any of those are good ones.

He should leave. Now.

But Scar claps his hands, perfect enthusiasm lighting up his face. “But, now that I’m slightly more reassured that you aren’t going to die face-down in your coffee, I have a few final preparations left for the booth. I just need more of the materials to make what I’ll actually sell. But once that’s done

— you're free to go. You can stay here if you want, but the contract will officially be paid off."

Grian freezes, blinking. "Really?"

"Yep! Couldn't have done it without you." Scar reaches up, offering him a handshake. Grian takes it. "Thanks so much for everything. And hey, I'm sure we'll see each other again."

"It was nothing." He smiles at Scar in return. "I'll make sure to stop by and see you."

That's all a blatant lie, but it doesn't matter. Scar hands him a list— this one filled with slightly unorthodox items. Rabbit's feet, shroomlights, amethyst shards, lapis, mob heads, and stranger things besides. Grian can't puzzle out what on earth it might be for.

He ties his boots, running back upstairs to grab one of his bags. To his surprise, there's a black book on his desk with the Watcher symbol emblazoned on it. Neat and precise handwriting spells out terms for him— a month-long timeframe for him to kill the Red King, a precise contract with steps and details. There's new information in it, provided from a contact simply labelled "J", and nothing else. It's useful anyways and Grian commits it to memory.

He tucks the small book into his pocket, hoisting his bag over his shoulder and clipping a small wired camera to his wrist. The gears dig into his skin, but the small device will hopefully let him accurately record the Enchanter and give him additional knowledge for the map he's creating.

He doesn't only have plans to go shopping today.

No, he has plans to be out and fishing for secrets. What better way to do that than to track down friendly, clueless Martyn again?

With that goal in mind, he hops down the stairs and bends down to pet Jellie goodbye before racing out of the door and not looking back. Just a couple of days and then he has his freedom. His plans can go forward with no further time wasted and no interruptions.

(Maybe he'll miss laughing over dinner a bit, but that's nothing in the grand scheme of things.)

Now, onwards. He has jobs to do.

---

The sun has set by the time he returns home, the well-lit streets thankfully preventing any mobs from spawning. His shoulders ache from how long he's been up and how much he's been walking, but all in all it's been a successful day.

He traces his hand idly over the camera on his other wrist, making sure the film is all held securely so it'll stay intact. It's packed with photos of the Enchanter, all the corridors and pathways and guard stations. His head swims with a headache.

The magical energy had been so intense, so all-consuming. It tore at his skin and his mind until he had wanted to go insane, to tear Martyn's head from his shoulders and eat all the magic that surrounded him whole. He had forced himself through it with gritted teeth, listening to Martyn's in-depth tour of the castle and nodding complacently along. He and Martyn were becoming quite good friends, really.

He slid his hand back up from the camera, tracing along his index finger where Martyn had slipped him a lapis ring. A tiny trinket, just the faintest trace of power.

"A secret between us," Martyn had whispered with a comical hush motion. "Don't tell the king,

he'd never forgive me for giving out artifacts like that. It's fine with friends, though."

It's funny. Everyone seems to consider Grian a friend so quickly when he's done nothing to deserve it and has no good plans for any of them.

He has all the items Scar wanted, more knowledge to show for it, and a way to record it. As a matter of fact, he ought to do that. He reaches for the black book he stowed in his pocket and his hand settles on empty air.

His heart leaps into his throat.

The book has fallen out of his pocket. It might have fallen out in the Enchanter. Or on the street. It's the single most incriminating piece of evidence on him— he shouldn't have just left it hanging out, that's the *stupidest* thing he could have possibly done. He has to return these items before Scar gets too suspicious and then immediately head out and find the notebook again. He can't risk losing that. It blows his cover. The Watchers will be completely and utterly furious with him.

He swallows down the lump of anxiety threatening to choke him, pushing the (strangely unlocked) door to Scar's house open.

The first thing he notices is that the lights are on, even though it's far past when Scar is usually asleep. The second is that some of the drapes are still open, letting the streetlights from outside flood into the space. Scar always closes up everything before he goes to bed.

The third is that he hears the faint sound of a wheelchair creaking.

He has no more need for observations when he cautiously steps in through the door, shutting it quietly behind him, and finds Scar sitting awake in the kitchen. He draws to an abrupt halt. Scar looks up slowly, meeting eyes with him, and the intense scrutiny in them seems to bore straight through Grian's calm exterior and expose the raw panic at his core.

He swallows again. He could swear the sound echoes in the dead silent house. "Sorry about that, I've been distracted all day. The time got far away from me." He forces himself to smile through the way his limbs are locking up on him, the panic streaking down his spine, the racing of his heart. He holds up the bag. "I got all the items you wanted and a discount on most of them."

"Sounds great," Scar replies, tone flat. Grian's hand falls back down.

"Is—" He stumbles. He *never* normally stumbles. "Is everything alright?"

He can hear his own heartbeat. He wonders if Scar can too.

The man across from him moves, almost idly, taking a small black book out from under his shawl. Grian's stomach drops all the way back down from his throat. He stands witness in dead silence as Scar raises it up to the light. The silver Watcher symbol glints plainly on the front.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Scar raises his eyebrows. "Care to explain this, Grian?"

## Chapter End Notes

those cliffs sure are hanging :>



## sinners come down, come gather 'round

### Chapter Summary

The confrontation with Scar doesn't go the way Grian is expecting.

### Chapter Notes

hey guys! sorry it's been a bit, the holidays were Rough but coliseum is back!! the plot's picking up pace now :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The two most common instincts when faced with danger, in the human and animal experience, are fight or flight. The lesser known yet considerably more deadly third one is freeze.

Currently, Grian finds himself locked to the ground and staring his fate dead in the eyes.

Scar's amber-yellow eyes bore into his. Grian can't remember how to swallow, or walk, or move, or breathe, or—

He dimly registers the feel of his bag leaving his hand and clattering to the floor. The metal parts crash from the open bag and ring in circles, turning over and over and boring into his brain just like Scar's eyes. He can't find it in himself to flinch. Scar doesn't even seem fazed.

His tongue lies heavy and silent in his mouth.

He stands there and watches as Scar turns through the pages of the small book. The first few pages contain the contract— Grian's month of time, the name and conditions of the Watchers, how Grian *got* himself into this situation. What he lost and what he stands to regain. The next few contain possible ideas for Grian to follow through on. The last contains all the information gathered by "J".

It's treason personified on parchment pages. Grian knows that Scar isn't friendly towards the crown, but this is enough to make him a hero in the entire city, and evidence of gods among them besides. Dabbling in magic is quite a different thing than having the secrets of the Universe crash down on you. Grian would know.

When he still doesn't respond, Scar speaks. Slowly, deliberately, with all the honey of a hunter taunting caught prey. "It seems like the little rascal staying in my house has a side job."

Still no words come.

"I had some questions after what I heard last night," Scar continues, idly tossing the book from hand to hand. Grian would move to snatch it if he could get his limbs to unstiffen. But with the additional deadweight knowledge that his dream was *audible*— "And it wasn't hard to figure out you were talking about the Red King with the animosity we both had at the dinner table. I did

wonder who the Watchers were, but then Jellie brought me this little book, and I had all the answers at my fingertips.”

He ruffles through it once more and then slams it shut. Slowly, his eyes skim Grian’s frozen form. “Not only did I end up in the company of an assassin, it seems like I’ve got an ex-god on my hands. One with a mission no less.”

The Watchers aren’t gods. Scar ought to know that. Grian manages to move his mouth, but still no words. He fumbles uselessly at empty air.

Scar wheels closer to him. “I thought something was wrong. You’re too quiet, too fast, always seem like you’re scheming. Those disappearances for hours make a lot more sense now. I’d have questioned my stall burning, too, but at least I know that one’s the truth. Other than that, I do believe this has all been a lie.”

He thinks he wants to scream something at Scar’s insufferably calm face. Something along the lines of *how dare you* or *I’ll kill you*, something with the same violence that beats and burns under his skin and demands for him to claw out the throat of everyone who dares annoy him. He’s quite good at repressing the urges, but—

If he weren’t frozen right here, he’s quite sure the knife up his sleeve would be stuck four inches deep in Scar’s neck.

“This is treason, you know,” Scar says pointedly, waving the book.

Grian is well fucking aware of that.

Then, slowly, his companion wheels back around to face him, laying the book back down in his lap in favour of locking eyes with Grian. The serious, calm expression morphs into a smirk that seeps cocky arrogance. It sucks him in like quicksand and calls to him like a magnet. It makes his chest and fingertips burn, but more than anything it makes him *confused*.

Slowly, slowly, Scar’s hand reaches up and tilts Grian’s chin up slightly. Grian isn’t sure if fear is what makes his heart leap. “But, fortunately, I’m quite the treasonous man myself.” He lets Grian’s chin go and shrugs. “I think my friends and I would throw a celebration if this—” He holds the book up for emphasis. “Went through. So, may I perhaps offer you some help in this trying endeavor of beheading the king again?”

Grian would have been less surprised if a comet had crashed into the side of Scar’s house.

As it is, he finds it in himself to say words again. Only three, but ones that get his feelings across easily enough:

“What the *fuck*?”

Scar tilts his head back and gives a roaring, full-chested laugh.

---

The least bit of comfort Grian has right now is that he’s not going to die to the king’s hands, nor is he going to be turned in. Scar had made that quite clear immediately, in his vague, ominous way. The rest of his situation, however, isn’t very comforting.

Why? Well, he’s currently following Scar down a long sandstone tunnel with only a torch to light their way and Scar’s rough hand in his to cling onto. Going to meet people who he’s never heard of nor met, late in the night. Nothing to trust but Scar’s word that they all hate the monarchy as much

as he does. Apparently he had meant to meet with them tonight anyways.

Awfully convenient timing. Grian isn't sure if he believes it.

Well, if he dies here after all, at least he'll be free from the Watchers.

"Here we are," Scar says cheerfully as they come upon iron double doors, stowing the torch in his inventory. It plunges them both into pitch blackness, but Scar lifts some sort of small glowing crystal from his pocket and presses it to the left door. With a slow creak, the doors creak open. "Welcome, Grian, to the Red Desert Alliance."

The first thing Grian hears when he steps through the doors is cheering. That's a novelty.

A good handful of people waits for them. A tall blonde man and a shorter one with flowers wound in his hair standing arm in arm, the merchant woman with zombie-stitched skin, the fiery-tempered man they bought the wood for the new stall from, a stocky man with a red bandanna. In the corner, alone, slouches a man with several white dogs—no, wolves—draped across his legs and feet.

He doesn't acknowledge them at first, taking in the room. It's lined with maps—*detailed* maps of the city and castle clearly made by hand. The walls are birch and sandstone, hung with tapestries and a central fire making the already warm night air muggy. It's the only light in the room, casting everyone's faces into shadow. Somewhere in the background he hears the crackling of a jukebox.

The blonde man bounds up to him, his face lit up. "Well, here he is! The fabled man himself."

Oh gods, another *cheery* one. Between this one's golden hair and bright smile he's a walking golden retriever. Grian gives him a cold stare in return but deigns to extend his hand in greeting. The man shakes it enthusiastically. "I don't know what exactly I'm fabled for, but... nice to meet you, I suppose."

Scar's voice chips in from next to him and Grian jumps. Somehow Scar managed to wheel up to him without him noticing. That doesn't normally happen. "Oh, this group has heard a lot of my ideas about the new, strange and handsome anti-monarchy man who's started crashing at my house."

His heart skips a beat for a second, definitely from hearing Scar's been telling strangers about his presence. That's the only conceivable explanation for it.

"You've been quite the legend around here," the blue-haired and flower-decorated man calls from where he's sat on one of the benches. His voice has a pleasant lilt to it that Grian's not heard before — and he could swear if he blinks fast enough that there's lights floating around the stranger's head. How odd.

He pushes all those thoughts aside, forcing an intrigued smile to his face. "Have I? That secret's news to me."

"Well, secrets are a cornerstone of a *secret society*." This time it's the merchant woman, shooting him a sharp-toothed grin.

He grins right back. "No, really?"

"Believe it or not, though I know it's hard to imagine—"

"Please, ladies and gents," Scar cuts in, shaking his head and miming a separating motion, "allow me to make some introductions before we descend down the spiral of incomprehensible midnight



babbling. Grian, this is Cleo, and next to her is Bdubs. These two are Scott and Jimmy, and I believe you already know Tango. Over in the corner with his many lovely puppies is Joel.”

Grian gives them all a distracted wave. Despite the banter, exhaustion tugs at his eyelids— Scar’s drained him completely dry of secrets, prying into details of his life before cheerily announcing that Grian was no longer alone in his efforts. He can’t even keep track of how long he’s been awake. It’s definitely not midnight like Scar thinks.

He vaguely registers that the room has descended into chatter between the group. He can’t make out the words very well, but he catches enough to figure out there’s some new plan brewing. Scar seems to be the one who proposed it.

He stands there, unmoving, until Cleo clears her throat and claps her hands. The room lapses into silence.

Cleo approaches him. She easily towers over him—Grian isn’t the tallest even around the average human, but she’s far from an average human—fiery hair and intense red eyes glowing in the dim light. She extends a hand to him. He takes it and she leads him over to one of the tables covered in exterior maps of the castle. “Sounds like from what Scar told us, you’ve got some inside information we don’t. The rest of us have been planning a takeover for— how long now, Scar?”

“A few months,” Scar calls from the far side of the room.

“That. A few of us have come and gone to varying degrees, but the goal’s been the same. The Red King and his rule has screwed all of us over in varying ways and it’ll be a better day when he’s done for.” She shakes her head. “I’m getting distracted. The main thing is you’ve seen the inside of the castle with your own eyes. That’s the information we’ve been missing.”

Grian turns around to glare at Scar. “You told them all about that?”

Scar gives him a shameless grin, holding up a small bronze and black watch-like device. It takes Grian a moment to recognize it. “Got your camera, too.”

He remembers Scar’s hand clasped around his own in the tunnels, the way his fingers had brushed against Grian’s wrist a few times as he led the way. He hadn’t even noticed the device had gone with how distracted he’d been. “You fu—”

And he just stands there as Scar bursts into laughter again. His hands twitch at his sides and he reminds himself he can’t maul someone in public. Scar does make it tempting sometimes.

“Ooh!” Joel sits up, snatching it out of Scar’s hands. “You got photos?”

“Yes,” Grian grumbles, folding his arms over his chest. It probably makes him look like a petulant child, but his limit was reached a few hours ago and the line in the sand is so far back it may not as well exist. He makes one mistake and all his hard work gets stolen or trampled.

Someone taps his shoulder and he whirls around to see Jimmy smiling at him. “Hey, don’t be so grumpy! This is really, really good news. If you describe the place to Joel, he can make us a map of the whole area. It’s his speciality.” He swears that out of the corner of his eye Joel makes finger guns. “This with the inside information that... you got about the king’s life is the key to all of this.”

“What’s ‘all of this’?” He asks, blatantly taking a step away from Jimmy’s too-cheery everything. He does note the stutter in Jimmy’s voice, though. That’s something to look into.

Scar wheels up to the three of them as Joel excitedly fiddles with the film on the camera, arching

one eyebrow at Grian. There's excitement in the sharp slant of his smile and the crinkle of his eyes.  
"How do you feel about hostile takeovers?"

## Chapter End Notes

this chapter doesn't quite feel up to snuff, but oh well :< you guys have met the main gang!! keep in mind this is a retelling of the canon third life events

got any theories about the new characters or what'll happen next :)?

## where no one's been before, but it feels like home

### Chapter Summary

The stall is finally rebuilt, but Grian's journey with Scar is far from over.

### Chapter Notes

welcome BACK baby!! this is a bit of a softer, downtime-like chapter :) with a little bit :) of lore :)

also i make joel sound like kind of an asshole here LOL but it's just him causing problems on purpose! i'm a long-time fan of his+love him a lot and the thing i associate most with him is being very stubborn and chaotic. grian's just in the right space at the right time to become the prime target of joel's antics :->

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Life has, oddly enough, gotten better.

Grian props up the last of the thick logs that'll hold up the canopies of Scar's booth, making sure it's secured in the ground before beginning to tie the ropes around it. He passes the ropes to Scar, who stakes them into the earth, and in the background he can hear Tango and Cleo chattering over her pastries. The sun sinks deep into his skin and some of the weight is finally off his shoulders.

With all the ropes firmly held down, he dusts his hands off and turns to Scar. His housemate (they're sticking together now, Scar's made that quite clear) has forgone his shawl in the burning summer heat. In fact, he's forgone his shirt as well.

Grian blinks at him. "Where are your clothes?"

Scar grins. "It's too hot. You're in a t-shirt and you're normally swamped in that button down of yours. We're all feeling it."

"Yes, but— why can't you put something lightweight on like I did?"

"Didn't feel like it. Are you complaining about the view?"

It, well... isn't a bad one. He's got quite strong arms, actually, well-built with patches of scar tissue all across his chest and shoulders as well as parts of his forearms. Scar's actually quite good looking, really, especially in the summer heat when—

He turns away and turns up his nose, crossing his arms. His cheeks burn like the sun has scorched them. "Just put some clothes on."

He hears a soft chuckle as Scar wheels to the other side of the booth and resists the urge to throw something. Scar drives him mental sometimes, and this is no exception. He's going to get a fever from the heat and the stress at this rate. Scar runs his mouth off and talks big and gives Grian piles

of tasks and acts flirty and—

He bangs his head against the post he's just put up. He has bigger problems than this.

There's a crunch of footsteps on sand from somewhere behind him and a whoop of excited laughter. Someone else to talk to, great. Grian wipes his mouth with his hand and grimaces when he feels the grate of sand grains on his chapped lips. His hand comes away smeared with blood from splits like he thought it would, but he licks the rest of his blood off his lips and tries to make himself look vaguely presentable and not homicidal.

“You got it!” he hears Scar cheer.

Joel stands in the street, holding what's presumably a map in his hands and grinning. One of his dogs winds around his feet, her tail thumping against his legs. As Grian turns, Joel holds the map out to him. “Sure did. Thanks for your help.”

Grian steps over to him, taking the map from his hand. It's... *highly* detailed and extraordinarily impressive considering he couldn't recount much from his memory when he talked to Joel last night.

It's almost as if Joel reads his mind, giving him a proud smile. “I cross-referenced for hours with the photos and what you told me, and there's probably a few things that I didn't get right, like the throne room and the corridors. There's probably bedrooms and quarters too, but it's a lot more than what we had. I did my best with it.”

“This is very impressive,” Grian murmurs. He means it. “You noted down the magical items too.”

“Of course I did.” Joel makes a face at him. “Those might be the most useful things in the whole castle. I'd be an idiot if I didn't.”

Grian laughs, rolling the map up carefully and handing it back to Joel. “It looks pretty much exactly accurate to what I saw while I was there. That's really quite amazing, Joel.”

The man practically preens. “Why thank you!”

Scar joins them. Much to Grian's dismay and nothing else, he still hasn't put on a shirt. “May I see?”

Joel passes it to him as well and Scar skims over it fairly quickly, almost quickly enough that Grian can't help but wonder if he knows how to decipher a map at all or if he's faking it. “Looks really good. Now that we have a better floor plan, I think we're well on the way to paying our high-up neighbours a visit.”

“With a little TNT present.” Joel's teeth have sharp incisors, just like a wolf's. A chill goes down Grian's back.

“We're going through with *that* plan, then?” Grian asks, cracking his knuckles. He's been waiting still for far too long and he's starting to tire of the idle life, knowing the hours are slipping by like sands in an hourglass, ticking down towards his death by the Watchers. He's never liked the plan his temporary allies invented from the start and made that very clear.

Joel shrugs, his carefree manner dipping into something else. Eyes narrowed, stance changing, head tilting. “Unless you have a better one.”

Grian bristles. He doesn't take the bait usually, but it's too hot and he's itchy and uncomfortable,

plus Scar's already annoyed him. "I could make more than the bare bones of a plan. I can't imagine that ten people storming a castle would go unnoticed, exactly. I didn't spend all that time making 'friends' for nothing."

"They won't have time to notice." Joel levels a sharp look at him. If Grian were any less annoyed, he'd have backed off by now. "You did a great job getting information, sure, but a one man effort isn't going to sort out shit."

"There might only be one man left at the end. A bit cavalier, aren't you?"

"Listen, Grian, you did your part." The condescending tone Joel's voice takes on makes Grian grit his teeth, hands twitching at his sides, wondering how quickly he can strangle someone and run. "But maybe you should let the people who actually know what they're doing and have been doing this for a while step in for a bit, huh?"

"If you're going to talk down to me like this—" Grian starts, stepping towards him.

The more this goes on, the more Joel seems amused, glee in his sharp grin and a challenge behind his eyes. He's looking for a fight. Normally, Grian wouldn't bother giving it to him, but he's really asking for it and all Grian's frustration at his powerlessness is hitting the boiling point. Now mortals dare to condescend to him—they never would have before.

"All five feet of you's going to pick a fight with me?" Joel asks. His dark eyes flash with amusement.

Grian's hands twitch again and one swings without conscious thought, quicker than the wind toward Joel's temple. He's about to make satisfying contact and knock Joel unconscious when his hand is stopped in mid-air.

He blinks at the sight of tan fingers curled around his wrist, holding him firmly in place. He follows them down to see Scar somehow right next to him, keeping him still with much more effort than he shows. He tries to jerk away but Scar holds firm and then pulls him away from his opponent. When he speaks, his voice is jovial as ever. "Hey now, folks, let's not get off on the wrong foot."

Grian growls and tugs his arm away again. This time, Scar lets him go.

That shouldn't be possible. Scar shouldn't be that fast.

Joel, looking somewhat disappointed, nods.

"Grian, you've been a big help to everything and I understand you have your own reasons for being part of this. Your input is as valued as everyone else. Joel, our plan does need more improvements and if you want to get anywhere in the vein of teamwork you need to pick fights a little less. Having one man added to our efforts doesn't dull down what we've already done. Grian, also, have a little less pride if you can."

Well that's even *more* bloody condescending, but even now Grian knows to pick and choose his battles. This isn't one that's worth it.

He nods and steps back.

Joel huffs and walks away. Scar follows after him, then pulls him aside into the sun. The two of them exchange words Grian can't catch and he watches as Scar pats Joel on the arm and takes the map from him. He can just barely make out Joel's face and the way the mischievous fight seems to

slowly drain out of his expression.

Scar pats Joel again and he nods before running off, boots kicking up a trail of dust in his wake.

Grian turns back to the stall, where Tango and Cleo have stretched the striped cloth canopy between the logs. Scar's assembled all the display cases that are once again full of items that hum just faintly with magic, Pizza is back lounging on his new pillow nest within the stall. It's almost exactly like it was when Grian first saw it.

There's just a few last touches.

He takes an unlit lantern from the pile of materials, pulling out a flint and steel and lighting the candle inside. A much less hazardous form of lighting.

He winds a chain through the handle at the top and strings it from one of the supporting beams of the stall. The stall is lit with a dusky, warm light that casts the ground and the objects around him in soft orange. Some of the tension drops from his shoulders. It looks oddly beautiful here.

The cloth forms a strange sort of tent that lights the stall in different shades, copper and acacia support beams matching perfectly with the lantern light where the natural light of the day is starting to fade. He hears the cloth shift slightly and the creak of Scar's wheelchair and turns to find Scar looking around with awed eyes.

"It looks amazing, G," he murmurs, offering him a gentle smile. "Couldn't have done it without you."

"It's fairly simple," Grian replies, rubbing the back of his neck. He doesn't know when he became bashful. "I didn't do that much." That's a lie. Why's he lying?

Scar grins at him and his hands splay out in the air. The jewelry and charms on his hands and wrists seem to flash with light and Grian feels a soft gust of wind against his face. When he blinks he finds that the lantern's casing's changed to have beautiful patterns like stars that create orange-gold shapes all around the room where the light lands. The stall flutters with just the edge of a cool breeze, the display case glints alluringly, everything is tinged with just the slightest haze and the scent of spices.

Glamour magic.

Grian blinks at him. "You actually know magic." Keeping magic items is one thing, but being able to use that power is another.

"I dabble in it."

He raises an eyebrow at the subtle transformation that's taken over the stall, the welcoming aura that seems to draw him in as it did the first time he ever entered the city. "This is a little more than dabbling."

"It's just a hobby!" Scar protests, hand drifting over the display case. "I know enough magic to make things look pretty and help with a thing or two. I'm no magic scholar."

"Enough to make magic items," Grian volleys back, remembering the useless bits and bobs he brought home. Scar gives a sheepish chuckle and shrugs, pulling a small crystal from a display case. The magic is stronger than Grian would have expected without the glass, tugging at the divine essence that still lingers in his gut and heart, pulling him forwards. It's charisma poured into an object— very familiar. He levels a judging look at Scar. "And also to charm some people, I

think.”

Scar laughs but neither confirms nor denies it. Interesting.

The sound of a bustling city outside has slowly faded, Grian realises as he looks back through the stall entrance. The sun is starting to set over Cithref. The lantern is the only light in the stall now, casting intricate designs over Scar’s tan skin and Pizza’s coat.

Scar reaches up, snaps his fingers. The breeze becomes wind and spins the lantern, creating a whirling cyclone of stars and runes, merging with the light outside. Grian finds himself reaching out for the shapes and then lowers his hand, reminding himself he looks childish. It’s just oddly beautiful.

Scar’s eyes close, his face outlined in gold and nearly blissful. He gives a gentle sigh, leaning back in his chair. “Feels like coming home. Man, you have no idea how happy I am to have this place back.”

“I’m glad,” Grian replies. He finds he means it.

Scar looks up at him, amber eyes alight in their little artificial dusk. “I mean it, though. Couldn’t have done it without you. If you need any payment, rest assured I can spare it for you.”

“Your help with all of—” Grian mimes slitting someone’s throat, “all of this is plenty. I couldn’t ask any more.”

*And I don’t need to*, he almost says.

His... not quite friend shrugs. “If you say so. I have to see that through now, at least.”

“Is it that big of a deal?”

“You got me my livelihood back, so I would say so at least.” Scar wheels up to him, nudging his side with one elbow. “This isn’t my first rodeo with your kind of work, anyways.”

Grian stares at him. “What?”

“That’s a conversation for another day. For now, I think we really ought to go home before zombies start crawling out of the sewers again. There was a cave system underground and someone breached it mining, and then all the zombies got into the sewer system and turned into drowned. *Then* that breach started spawning creepers and it was total chaos. You have no idea how un-spawnproof this city is. The sewers in particular. There was a creeper in my shower once. I didn’t know those things could fit through the grates.”

He almost chases the previous subject, but the opportunity to put Scar on blast for his mistakes is too good to miss. “I think your house is just badly lit up.”

“Excuse you! My house is *aesthetically* lit.”

“There was a spider in my closet, Scar.”

“I don’t control the wildlife upstairs! If there’s a creeper in my attic then it can stay in my attic. Unless it falls on my head. Then that’s a problem. Not sure I could *do* anything about it but I will shake my fist at the upstairs and yell at them.”

“Well, if a creeper falls on my head, then I’m luring one into your bedroom.”

Scar grins, wheeling over to where Jellie's fallen asleep on top of Pizza and lifting her sleepy form onto his lap. He wheels back over to Grian and slaps him lightly on the arm. "Ah, property damage, your speciality. Your talent, even."

"Hey!" Grian finds himself laughing, but winces when one of the splits in his lip tears open from the movement and the taste of blood floods his mouth. His companion stops laughing as well, his demeanor abruptly turning sober and gentler.

"You're bleeding," he says softly, and his thumb skims the edge of Grian's lower lip. It's tinged scarlet when he lifts it away. "Not used to the way the desert dries everything out, huh? Let's go home and get some water and salve for that."

Grian follows him wordlessly and ignores the way his lip burns like Scar traced a match across it.

## Chapter End Notes

denial isn't just a river in egypt or however the saying goes



# swallow all your morals, they're a poor man's quality

## Chapter Summary

Things take a turn for the worse.

## Chapter Notes

hey guys!! sorry this took a while ^^ this chapter got far out of control and reached 4K

also, for this chapter i ask you to PLEASE heed the archive warnings. there's a pretty intense scene ahead

other than that, enjoy :>

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

In all honesty, Grian should have realised something was off when a rusty smell had reached his nose as he followed Scar down to the meeting room.

But here he stands now at the mouth of another passage to the stuffy chamber, this one hidden by a beautiful red and pearl-white tapestry that stretches into dark nothing. There's the faint groan of a zombie somewhere far off down the hall, but it doesn't explain the strange reek that coats the roof of his mouth— he's not sure what could do that.

But, of course: he doesn't have the senses of a mortal, at least not fully. There's certain smells that burn at the remaining divinity in his body: the unholy or the sacreligious, the characteristic taste of a sacrifice, tangy and bitter.

He's most familiar with the smell of death.

This is that smell.

His heart thunders in his chest. No one beyond him and Scar has arrived yet. They'd gathered in advance to make sure they had all the maps and the notebooks and the pages of ideas for the plan ahead. Grian still hadn't shared the deadline over his head, but had told Scar he wanted it done as soon as possible, and Scar in all his optimism had promised it would be done in two weeks. As such, he'd said, more meetings would become a necessity.

But if no one else is here— then what's the stench of death in the air?

The door to the room creaks open and Scar walks back in behind him, his cane clicking on the floor. "Well, G, I think we might just have made a breakthrough—"

"Scar, come here."

His chattering fades away and Grian turns to face him, finding Scar's brows furrowed and a look of apprehension on his face. He sets down his armful of papers that he's pulled from gods know

where and crosses over to Grian's side. His hand strays towards his belt as if looking for some sort of weapon. Grian notes the gesture with interest. That's not pacifist behavior, nor the behavior of a merchant.

Scar's hand settles on his shoulder, peering past him into the pitch-black corridor. "What is it?"

"Quiet," Grian replies, dropping his voice down to a hushed whisper. Scar winces and then repeats the question, soft as wind. "Someone's dead down there. Do you smell the blood?"

"I didn't, and—" Scar sniffs. "Still don't. Show me."

"I haven't gone down there yet. Something caused the death, even if it's just a mob, and I'd rather not walk in alone and blind."

Scar's hand drops from his shoulder to lock fingers with his. Oddly enough, Grian finds that the touch is comforting for once. "Well, you won't be going in alone."

Grian gives him a nod in return and pulls out his flint and steel, striking up a torch on the wall that sheds dim light only a couple of feet in front of him. The flames lick just a little too low, almost catching the edge of the oversized shirt he'd stolen from Scar's closet while his own shirt soaked away all the ingrained sand. He raises the stick of the torch a little higher as they step into the gaping void, nearly dropping it in the process. The light from the flames lurch forward as the torch tips— and for a split second illuminates a severed hand soaked in a pool of blood.

His stomach flips. "Scar. Wait."

The rhythmic click of Scar's cane on the ground fades. "What's going on?"

"There's a body somewhere nearby— likely right ahead of us. There's a hand here. Just... a hand."

A sharp breath in. "Oh." Scar's hand tightens just a fraction more around his. "Probably not a mob, then."

Grian takes another inhale in. Now the tangy scent of blood coats his mouth and lungs, laced with a distinctive quality to it that Grian can't quite name. Whatever that feeling might be called, it means the dead person was killed by a human hand. Humans have a distinctive feel to them. Their murders are no exceptions. "No, definitely not."

"You can hand me the torch if you want. I have a longer reach than you."

He shakes his head, swallowing around the iron-flavored lump in his throat. "I don't want to let go of you." It sounds child-like and pathetic as soon as he says it, but there's a reason behind it. No sense in Scar moving out of his sight. Plus, if Scar was seized by whatever might be down here, Grian wouldn't be able to grab onto him. It just makes the most sense for them to stay together.

"Okay," Scar murmurs, and they continue down the hallway. It only takes another few steps for Grian to realise that his boots are sticking in a thick patch of blood— fresh blood, coating the bottoms of his soles. A breeze ghosts down the corridor and brings a foul stench with it. He grips Scar's hand so hard it's almost painful.

They pass by the hand that's drained pale white. It seems to have been cleanly severed off with a knife. Grian feels Scar shudder next to him.

The air of the tunnel is frigid cold, despite the heat of the desert. The groaning zombie Grian first heard seems to have disappeared into the pure blackness of the shadowed sandstone. Even in the

enclosed midnight space, Grian swears the walls are darker here than they should be.

He brings his torch closer to the walls and then recoils as he realises it's not natural sandstone at all, but massive splatters of dripping dark red.

Scar curses softly next to him, steadying Grian's off-kilter balance. Grian swallows, the faint wind blowing down the tunnel sinking under his collar, like a warning of what's ahead. He shakes his head to futilely try and dispel the chill. "I hate this. We find out who or— what's down here, and then we leave." He takes a deep breath in. "Let's just get this over with."

It only takes a few steps until his boots are slick with the red that covers the floor, the torch illuminating stain upon stain until—

"*Shit*," Scar breathes. Grian feels the ground spin faintly around him.

At some point, a body has to be so mutilated it can't be called a body anymore, more blood and wounds than human form. Grian would barely recognise what lies in front of him if he didn't have vivid memories of just two days earlier: the sun beating down on his neck and the fury of a fight beating in his heart.

What lies in front of them is barely even Joel.

Three gaping slashes across his throat like a grotesque smile, two that cut deep into his chest to where the bone of his ribcage is exposed, bruises across his mishapen face and a waterfall of blood drying on his chin. Multiple broken bones in his misshapen legs and arms, one hand missing. Clothes dirty, hair matted red from a crusted wound in his skull, green leather armour torn. The fingers on his remaining hand are oddly bent and his golden sword is embedded in the wall. The ground around him is soaked with blood and water.

"I think I'm gonna be sick." Scar stumbles forward and Grian catches him, letting the torch drop to the ground with a loud *thunk*.

The flames scatter across the ground, illuminating one last thing: an unfamiliar silver knife, staked through the map of the castle that Joel had made.

Grian digs his fingers into Scar's hand so hard that he feels Scar's knuckles give way under the touch, digging his nails just slightly into the rough skin. "How do you get into this tunnel?"

"Through the sewer system. It starts in a grate between a couple of houses and you have to unlatch that, and then the sewer goes off in all different directions so it's stupidly hard to even find this path. I watched Cleo and Tango dig it out and I still get lost down here. No one should have any idea how to find him down here unless he was tailed."

From what Scar describes, tailing seems unlikely at best. That does leave one other option, though. "Or he was killed by someone who knew the route already."

For a second there's only the faint whoosh of wind, then Grian feels someone's gaze land on him and looks up to find Scar's eyes locked on his. They're dark as night, wide and dark as pitch. "An inside job?"

"I don't think tailing is what happened here."

A heavy sigh falls from Scar's lips. "I don't want to believe one of them would do this."

He thinks of the circle of people who had welcomed him so warmly. Somehow Joel, the most

isolated one, had ended up being the victim. He otherwise probably would have assumed Joel guilty. He's finding more and more over the course of his lifetime that nothing's ever as it seems.

"We should head back," Grian says, tugging Scar back by the hand. "We can come back for him later but we need to tell the others what's going on, see if we can find any answers." Scar nods and reluctantly follows him. Grian doesn't bother reaching for the bloodied torch and just clings to Scar's hand instead. "Who uses this tunnel?"

"Usually only Joel." His companion pauses, his steps slightly more erratic than usual. "Sometimes Jimmy and Scott, sometimes Bdubs, Cleo occasionally. Most of them use other entrances, though."

"Hmm."

By the time the two of them lift away the tapestry and leave the gruesome night behind for the warmth of the Red Desert Alliance's base, everyone else has assembled.

Jimmy seems to be the first one that notices something is wrong. He steps towards the two of them with his brow wrinkled, then his eyes drift down the two of them and widen. Grian realises they've tracked bloody footsteps into the room.

He speaks before anyone else has a chance to, watching carefully for their reactions. "Joel's been murdered."

Scott curses softly, stepping up to Jimmy's side. His fingers lace with Jimmy's as naturally as Grian's are still locked with Scar's. "Where?"

"Down the tunnel, close to here. Seems like he was running to get here. I wouldn't even know he was down there if Grian hadn't smelled the blood." Scar drops his hand, nearly limping his way over to one of the chairs and sitting down with a hiss and click of his redstone braces. He leans heavily back in the chair, his gaze drifting down to his knees and his brow knitting. "He was torn up like butcher's bacon."

Someone inhales sharply. Grian pushes away the memory of Joel's mutilated body.

"None of us took that tunnel, as far as I know," Cleo chips in, sitting down on the table and crossing her legs. Her hands tear at the edge of her skirt. "Though I haven't been with everyone the whole way, so... I can't say. Do you have any idea who killed him?"

Scar gives another sigh, settling his cane across his lap with an expression of resignation. "It had to have been one of you."

Silence descends on the room like a swooping vulture. The jukebox crackles its tune in the far distance, the lamps flicker, and everyone exchanges slow glances with each other. Grian catches gleams of suspicion, bits of fear, mostly confusion.

Cleo's hands are twitching. Jimmy has shrunk back from the group, hand tight around Scott's. Tango looks enraged, Scott's face is perfectly neutral. Bdubs's eyes flick around to each of them in turn.

He bites at his lip, running over what he remembers about each of them. Not much, really, he's only just met them. But there's a few things. Bdubs watches everyone around him like a hawk and he's always twitchy and abrupt, though that might just be his manner. Scott reveals nothing and says nothing, never rising to a challenge or doing anything that might be suspicious or out of line. Jimmy notices things too quickly, knows just a bit too much, and he's not too good at hiding it. It's also possible that people in the group could be working together.

Jimmy and Scott know the tunnel. So do Bdubs and Cleo. Those two duos are always sticking together, side by side or close enough to touch.

He scans both of them again. There's no blood on anyone, but there was plenty of time between when Joel was killed and when the others arrived to change and wash. Jimmy's twisting his hands together, a golden band glinting on one of them. Grian notes a band around Scott's finger too.

Husbands, then. Even more motivation to protect each other.

Finally, Cleo breaks the silence. "What do we do, then?"

Scar laces his hands together, shaking his head slightly. "The plan's on hold. I won't go forward with this until we know who here is at least partially responsible for Joel's death."

Grian's shoulders tense immediately, a sudden cold feeling down his stomach and spine. It's like a heavy weight lands on him, crushing him harder than the discovery of Joel's body. A delay. He has three weeks. This plan could take up to two at the earliest. A delay might be the end of him.

Before he dares to speak up, dares to try and shape the desperate words forming on his tongue, Scar rubs his fingers over his temples and looks back up at everyone. "Consider the meeting over and don't leave alone. We'll get to the bottom of this."

Slowly, everyone nods, and the room shifts with people beginning to pack up and get ready to go. Cleo says she'll take care of Joel's body and Jimmy offers to help. Grian's in the middle of giving them both his thanks when Tango stands up smoothly and walks over to Scar, touching him on the shoulder. "Can I speak with you in private?"

Scar nods and rises from his chair slowly, planting his cane firmly on the ground and taking a minute to find his balance before following Tango. Grian finds an unusual sense of panic rising in his throat, spurring him to chase after Scar and *protect* because this could be a trap. Tango could be taking him away to kill him now that most of the others have cleared out, or—

"Will you be alright, Scar?" He asks instead. The words come out awkward and stilted.

Scar turns to him briefly, giving him a smile. It's warm and gentle and perfectly bland. No indication of whatever thoughts, emotions, or fears he might be having. "Don't you worry, G. You can head out when you want, I'll catch up with you."

Reluctantly, he nods. His dagger burns in his sleeve.

It only takes him two minutes (he counts the seconds exactly, glancing cautiously towards the side tunnel Tango and Scar disappeared through) to pack up the rest of the unused papers and stow them in his bag.

He waits another minute and thirty seconds before giving up on the prospect of Scar returning soon. He doesn't know if Scar's okay, but he does know that Scar is more than he seems. Possibly much stronger too. Tango has some advantages over him, but he might still have a good chance.

He resolves to end his worry by starting his way back home and if Scar's not caught up to him in five minutes, he'll go back.

(It might be too late by then. He doesn't think about it.)

He steps into the torchlit sandstone tunnel slowly. Wind whistles down the vast expanse and makes the torches flicker almost to the point of going out. Icy fingers crawl down his back.

His first footfall echoes around him. He's never noticed how quiet this hollow place is before without Scar to accompany him.

One step after the other, slowly down the tunnel. An even gait that turns irregular and echoes far around him as he tries to escape faster. One step, an echoing step, another step and it's follower—

Two steps. He pauses, standing still, and swears he hears the faint echo of his last movement continue for a second.

The wind blows harder. A few torches behind him go out. The ice creeps up his ribs and spine, centreing on the back of his head. Two cold spots.

Eyes following him.

Then an echoing *thump-thump-thump* and he whirls around, bringing up his knife just in time to see a shadowy figure lunge at him. His golden blade clashes with a deathly sharp iron one with a great clang and he's scrambling backwards down the golden sandstone, wind tugging at his hair and shirt.

His attacker's dressed in all black, a wolf-like mask over their face. They swing at him again. He ducks. The knife slashes across his face, leaving a stinging path that drips salty blood into his mouth.

Another blow aimed to his heart. He brings his knife up against the longer blade of the iron sword, holding it still with all the strength he can muster in one arm.

The attacker presses forward, driving him slowly backwards through sheer concentrated weight. Too heavy, too much pressure. His arm's going to give.

Just as he predicted, it does. He jumps away, ducking to the ground and rolling up behind his opponent, swinging his knife at their shoulder blades. They snap around, smacking his wrist away and slamming their shoulder into his side. Pain flares up, white-hot and drawing an involuntary grunt from his chest.

The sword swings again. He deflects it, trying to duck away again, but they kick his legs out from under him.

He crashes to the ground, barely managing to turn his knife so it doesn't stab through his wrist. The sword swings for him again and he scrambles back into the darkness. Blade's coming down. Twist and roll, duck out of its path. The sword digs deep into the sandstone and lodges.

Now.

He lunges back up, crashing bodily into them and slashing his knife over their forehead. It skates off the mask but leaves the start of a crack in it. His opponent runs back into the dark corridor. Not fast enough.

He pursues after them. He catches up fairly quickly, draws his knife back for another strike, but they're flicking a knife out of their own sleeve and it's going directly for the exposed flesh of his ribs—

And just as he's preparing for the slide of a knife right into his too-fragile, too-useless mortal body that'll end him right here, his opponent is pulled off their feet. They crash to the ground and Grian catches sight of a dark black cord wrapped around their legs.

He looks up and Scar's smiling at him, gold braces glinting in the dim light and the handle of a whip held tight in his clever fingers.

"Need some help?"

He forces his bones to unlock, to unfreeze, and pushes the surprise back for a time when his life isn't actively in danger. Snark rises to his tongue unbidden, as it always does around Scar. "It might be useful—"

A knife sings past his face from the downed stranger and he ducks. He feels the ghost of it brush his face, cold and sobering. They've managed to get to their feet and shake off the whip, lunging for him and ignoring Scar altogether in favour of launching another knife in his direction.

He hears, faintly, a "well now, *that* won't do" and then there's some strange glowing light and a crackle of electricity. The person in front of him lurches forward and he catches sight of a bright golden-yellow snake-like thing wound around their arm.

They give a low snarl, yanking off the rope-like thing which creates another massive crackle of electricity. He actually sees the shock jump across their skin this time.

They push past him and slam into Scar, knocking his cane out from under him and darting past when Scar stumbles, down the darkened tunnel towards the meeting room and then through it.

In their absence, silence rings down the corridor.

Scar just barely manages to regain his balance, leaning heavily on the wall and wincing before slowly pushing himself up with his cane. "Wearing the braces today was a mistake. Damn it." He shakes his head, limping towards Grian. "Are you okay?"

Grian blinks. "I... don't know."

His companion slings the cord, fading back to black, over his shoulder. He reaches out with his free hand and those scarred fingers drift across the slash on his cheek. Grian shivers and finds himself leaning into the touch. His own hands are shaking.

"Doesn't seem like it. You look shaken. Don't blame you, though, I almost had a heart attack myself when I found you like that."

Slowly, Grian's shoulders drop and he lowers to his knees on the cold ground. Exhaustion and worry both hit him at once. Joel is dead, Grian was almost just killed too. The timer is ticking, his inevitable fate is staring him down, and the revolution is torn in two.

It's sort of similar to how it felt when he realised Scar's stall was burning all that time ago. The silence and stillness for a moment, and then the flames that burnt it all up, and the knowledge that nothing would be safe or the same again.

Then Scar's hand settles atop his head, combing softly through tangled locks of hair. If this were ordinary circumstances, Grian would shove the touch away and snap at him for daring to even try such a thing.

As it is, though, well... he can't find it in himself to complain.

"Where were you?" His voice comes out hoarse and shaky.

"Talking with Tango. He was worried that Bdubs and Cleo were hiding something. Said that Cleo

had been acting off lately and he barely even saw Bdubs anymore. It seemed legitimate.”

*Unless he was shifting the blame away from himself. Coincidentally, I was the one who found Joel dead and now Tango pulls Scar away and leaves me alone. Coincidentally, I got attacked immediately. But— he'd have to not be working alone.*

This is something he needs to figure out in his own time. Scar is too trusting.

Instead, he searches for something to change the subject to. He looks up at Scar's face and is surprised to find concern, perhaps even something caring in the lines of his face. He doesn't want to deal with that right now either.

His eyes drop to the dark whip coiled over Scar's shoulder. Right. That. Now that he has time to think about it, it's a confirmation of a lot of things. Scar is just a bit too fast, a bit too skilled. Too familiar with combat.

“How did you...” Grian trails off, unsure how even to confront this. “You know how to fight. You have weapons.”

“I did say this wasn't my first rodeo, didn't I?” Scar asks, raising his eyebrows. He lifts his hand from Grian's hair and fiddles with his dark whip idly, all the golden electricity seemingly gone.

“You— what?” He swallows, standing slowly, never taking his eyes off of the man across from him. “What are you, Scar?”

“Finally! A real question!” Scar stows the whip somewhere underneath his baggy cloak and gives Grian a sharp, brilliant grin. Grian's heart thunders in his chest for some odd reason. “Though it would have been better to ask me what I *was* rather than what I am. Right now, I'm just a humble merchant trying to sell his wares. As for what I once was, well...”

Grian glares at him. “You're enjoying this.”

His companion chuckles. “Maybe. But to give you a real answer, I was a mercenary just like you, dear G. This isn't my first time dealing with killing kings.”

## Chapter End Notes

so, which person (or people...) do you think did it? sound off your theories :)



# you're crooked too, boy, and it shows

## Chapter Summary

A quiet interlude—the calm before the storm.

## Chapter Notes

happy valentine's day!! this is a bit of a shorter chapter to celebrate the day and also to continue progress since the next big plot oriented chapter has decided to be slower than a slug

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

How odd to feel safe in the presence of a killer. Shocked, definitely, but strangely enough Grian doesn't find himself reaching for his knife. Scar doesn't move either.

Slowly, he swallows. His throat is dry and coated with both dread and sandpaper. Across from him, Scar's eyes are steady, dark as pitch in the lack of torchlight. His hands still shake with the memory of a knife swinging towards them. Pitch black wind blows the scent of blood around them, the world is shaken to its core, and yet he can't find it in him to run. Not to speak, nor leave, or do, well... anything except stare at Scar.

The silence stretches on for far too long before Scar's the one to break it. "Sorry if that was a bit... startling on top of everything else."

He does the best he can to speak around the sandpaper. "I... it's hard to say." His shoulders drop a bit. "I think I already knew. The pieces just weren't all there."

Scar nods. The world waits with bated breath.

He becomes aware, then, that Scar is very close to him. Close enough to feel the soft exhale from Scar's lips ghost across his forehead. Close enough where he can pick out the bumps and ridges of the scars across his face and the precise spot where brown blends with black in his eyes. Close enough to read perhaps just the faintest trace of fear on his face.

His eyes flick down to the bob of Scar's throat. Why isn't Scar saying anything?

The silence stretches heavier and heavier, unbearable in its weight across his shoulders. He thinks, dimly, that Scar is both a murderer and a magnet. Violence is always intriguing.

He wonders what brought Scar to this point. Why he's here, why he's so injured, what his history is. If Grian's been more similar to him this whole time than he's realised. Maybe his own blindness has clouded his vision of Scar, too. Not so bumbling or incompetent as Grian had thought. Far more dangerous than he had seemed.

His feet move without his own consent, closer to Scar. In all honesty, he should be moving away.

He really should. Or speak, or address the glaring issue in the room of whoever just attacked him—anything but this. Maybe he should be moving closer.

Scar's next exhale brushes his mouth. There's barely any space between them as Grian looks up. He's met with eyes that are multi-layered brown this close up, with dilated pupils, locked on him like a predator staring another one down. Scar's body is tense. The whip is dark over his shoulder.

He wants to do *something*. He's not sure what that something is anymore. His hands rise, though he's unsure of where they're going. Scar doesn't move, but Grian notices that there's just the slightest tremor to his muscles. Strong under the shawl. He could probably kill Grian. Grian could probably kill him.

(He hates that the deep, dark, hungry god within him loves the idea.)

In this moment, there's nothing, but there's everything.

Scar's hand settles against his collarbone, just the slightest brush of fingers. The shirt Grian borrowed from him sags at the neck and exposes bare skin. The scrape of rough scar tissue across it may as well be a blow from Scar's electric whip. "Grian?"

The silence shatters. Grian stumbles back, blinking in the dark, his eyes locked on Scar's. The pull deep in his core fades, whatever strange emotion that rose settling under the surface.

There is fear again. There is clarity again.

"We should..." He takes a deep breath in. His heartbeat hammers in the back of his ears. "We should go see where that person went. They might have left some evidence behind besides the knives."

The world returns to equilibrium. Scar steps back too and nods. Grian tries to shake away the strange shivers that go down his spine and limps his way back towards the meeting room. It was so warm the first time he entered here.

Now, as he returns, with Scar's uneven footsteps behind him, it feels so very cold.

He finds nothing when he walks in except a trail of blood. He peeks behind every entrance, seeing nothing but dark beyond. Scar examines nooks and crannies around the room while Grian slips down the tunnel where they first found Joel's body. There's nothing except the cold whistle of the wind and faint traces of mostly scrubbed away blood. Cleo and Jimmy did their job well.

Eventually, he meets back up with Scar. "Nothing?"

Scar shakes his head, settled back in the soft chair he'd been sitting in earlier. "Nothing at all. Just the knives— but the map from earlier is gone. The one that was staked through."

Grian swears softly. The Red King could have gotten his hands on that. This is bad— all of this is bad. They have to get that map back, and get information, or rather Grian will because this whole operation has ground to a halt and it's down to just him. All he has left is his own two hands at this point, and—

Rough hands settle around his own. Scar's voice echoes in his ears. "Breathe."

Right. Breathing is important. He should probably do that before he starts spiraling or causes himself pain from lack of oxygen. He clenches those hands tightly and stables himself.

“I have three weeks,” he admits, the words shaking with his own breath. The words are hasty and trip off his tongue, made careless by the fear that beats in his ribs. His mouth tastes of iron and copper. The air smells like candle smoke and burnt beeswax. “If I can’t finish this contract by then, I’m dead.” Scar’s fingers tighten against his skin. “I’m out of time, Scar.”

“You’re supposed to ruin an empire in three weeks,” Scar says softly. When he looks up, his face is eerily smooth and neutral. “With everything that’s happened?”

“I don’t think I have a choice. It has to be done.”

Flames crackle in the pause that follows. Then Scar’s hands drop away from his. “Then we have to go forward, don’t we?”

“What?”

“No man left behind, isn’t that the saying? It wouldn’t be right after all of this to let you just kick the bucket and abandon the effort. We just have to be more careful. Not leave as much out in the open.” He gets the edge of a grin. “It’s like any good old murder mystery. Life goes on and the detectives look behind the scenes. The murderer doesn’t suspect it.”

He finds himself breathing a bit easier, his brain returning to some semblance of stability. He raises one eyebrow at Scar. “Am I talking to the detective or the murderer?”

“Well, G, would the man who did it turn himself in?” Scar sets his cane firmly against the floor, slowly standing with a soft groan of pain. “I have a feeling it’s time to return home. Walls have ears and all.”

Grian nods and follows silently in Scar’s shadow.

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By the time they reach home, Grian’s shoulders ache from exhaustion and Scar looks just as worse for wear.

He lets the door fall shut behind him with a dull thump, echoing down behind them into the sandstone hallway. He makes sure the door is tightly locked, latched, and deadbolted. He double checks too.

Scar’s waiting for him in the kitchen with slumped shoulders. His eyes are flicking back and forth, unusually bright. His hands twitch in his lap. His cane leans against the wall and he’s settled heavily in a chair, his twitching fingers rising up to card through his hair. Shadows smudge the skin under his eyes.

Haunted. That’s how he looks.

Grian bridges the distance between them, pressing his lips tightly together to keep back whatever nervous question is hovering behind them. Instead, he settles his hand on Scar’s shoulder. It’s the first time in his memory that he’s been the one to simply touch Scar.

His shoulder is tough and hard beneath Grian’s light grip. How hasn’t he noticed the strength there?

The questions bubble in a fountain behind his lips, weighing down his tongue and choking up his throat. He closes his mouth tighter against them. Still they push on and on as he scans Scar’s figure once more, really *looking* this time. There’s a faint mark of a blade handle under his heavy cloak. Well concealed.

He has so much he wants to say.

All he says is, “We should go to bed.”

Scar gives a hollow laugh. “If there’s any hope of falling asleep.” The brief vein of mischievous triumph that had appeared at the end of the fight has faded under his skin. He must be grieving now.

“It’s worth a try, at least.” Grian steps away from him, finding for the first time in a while that he longs to go to sleep. “Same goes for you.”

His friend shakes his head. He slumps back in his chair. “Pushed myself too hard. I doubt I’ll be able to walk back to my room.” Grian and blinks and looks a bit closer. His jaw is clenched tight, the brightness in his eyes almost something like pain. “I can’t stand up right now, I think.”

Grian swallows. Again he feels the urge to *do* something. To help Scar in turn. “Do you want help? Walking back, I mean?”

Those bright amber eyes flick towards him, studying him for a long moment. Then, slowly, Scar nods. “That would be appreciated.”

Grian moves to help him up, an arm around his waist and Scar’s other arm around his shoulder. Scar stumbles when they stand and sucks in a quick hiss of breath, but Grian steadies him. The majority of his weight falls on Grian, but his braces lock with a hiss and he grabs his cane to lean on as well. They move in slow steps down the hall, easy and quiet against the horror of the night.

“Thanks, G,” his companion murmurs as they move down the hall.

“Of course.”

He finds that once again, strangely enough, he means it.

## Chapter End Notes

and to your left you can see grian, having entirely platonic feelings,

# the tricks and tales that traitors tell

## Chapter Summary

Grian learns a little more about his allies and lands himself in a sticky situation.

## Chapter Notes

thanks for your patience with this one yall!! it was a stubborn bugger but it's here :>  
we're into full throttle action mode now

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The next morning dawns bright and cruel as a knife.

Grian wakes from an oddly dreamless sleep (he would expect the Watchers to haunt him in sleep as they do in waking, eyes burning into his flesh) with a headache stabbing at his temples. His index finger, still trapped in Martyn's lapis ring, itches. He wrestles the ring off and leaves it on his bedside table. He doesn't need more discomfort with a burning headache already.

He stumbles his way down the stairs, wincing at the bright light of the living room. He can hear soft humming in the kitchen. It sounds like some sort of folk song, with notes that skip up and down in an even rhythm. There's a clatter and then Jellie's familiar yowl. He follows the sound.

"Sorry, sorry," Scar's mumbling to Jellie as he lifts her off the floor. She's freshly drenched in water and looks about as miserable as Grian feels. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart, let's get you toweled off— oh, you poor sad thing—"

"Morning, Scar." The words come out as more of an exhausted groan as he drops into a chair, banging his head down on his arms. It doesn't help the throbbing in his temples much.

His friend pauses where he's mid toweling off his grumpy cat, looking over at him. Concern knits his brow. "You alright there, G?"

He's not sure the sound he makes in return is entirely human and it's definitely not comprehensible. Scar slowly sets Jellie down and wheels over to him, letting her angrily shake herself off on the counter before jumping onto the floor and stalking away.

His hand settles on Grian's head. Grian doesn't bother shoving him away. "Tired. My head hurts."

A heavy sigh. "Yeah. Me too."

He waits for a few moments, the sun trickling through the closed brown kitchen curtains, heating the room pleasantly. It'll be unbearable come the afternoon when it's burning hot and muggy, but the warmth isn't bad now. Scar's nails scratch at his scalp. His eyes fall shut.

He tilts his head to the side, opening his eyes and squinting at Scar. He's lit up well by the angle of the sun, tan skin glowing and the golden patterning on his shawl glinting. He can see the outline of

a bullet bandolier under the thick material.

A good reminder of the questions on his mind. Now he dares to give voice to them. The words come out rough. “When did you become a mercenary?”

The scratching at his hair stills. “About four years back. I left the job ten months ago— against my will.”

Grian swallows. His throat is pressed to the sharp edge of the table. “Because of the injury?”

“If you mean the legs, then yeah. The other scars come from my first year on the job. After that I got too good at it to end up hurt.” He huffs a laugh, resuming playing with Grian’s hair. His rings catch on the strands. “Until I didn’t.”

“I... what happened? If you want to answer.”

Scar’s nails skim the tip of his ear. Grian forcibly stops himself from jumping at the touch. “A mistake. I misjudged a jump on the job— thought it wasn’t as high as it was. Broke both my legs and couldn’t get the help I needed. They healed all wrong and now here I am.”

He sucks in a sharp breath, feeling his shoulders tense back. The thought of it is enough to make him wince.

“I’m sorry,” he says softly, sickening horror eating at his gut at the memory of falling in his dreams and hitting the ground, feeling every bone break on impact. “That’s awful.”

Scar’s hand withdraws from his hair. “Eh. It was rough as hell. Still is with the pain I get. You learn to live with it, though.” He wheels his way into the kitchen, turning back to look over his shoulder at Grian. “Want some coffee? It might help with the headache.”

Grian nods and grimaces immediately after the motion. “That would be good.”

“You got it. One genuine Scar coffee, coming right up.” His friend busies himself with clattering around at the counter. Grian notes with interest that there’s an overturned bucket. Probably the source of the soaked Jellie earlier. “Anyways. In the line of merc stuff, it wasn’t too bad of a loss. I had to step back and get my life in order. Get other priorities besides killing for coins. Sure, it sucked in most ways, but it was good for some. Plus, I haven’t lost my skills.”

He remembers the way that Scar swept his attacker off their feet, neatly placed cracks of a heavy whip that took obvious skill and practise. “Evidently. How good were— are you?”

The clattering noises still. Scar shrugs one shoulder, giving a low hum, reaching for something on the counter. He has a split second to see what it is—a butter knife—and then it’s lodged perfectly into the wood of the table in front of him with a dull *thunk*. Stuck in about a half in inch deep, barely a finger’s length away from his face.

If he’d been more awake this morning, he’d perhaps have jumped back or fallen out of his chair.

As it is, he just stares at it with wide eyes.

He flicks his gaze back up to Scar. He’s met with a brilliant smile and crinkled eyes, touched with just a bit of self-satisfaction. “I’d say I’m pretty good.”

He reaches out, touching the still-vibrating knife with one finger. “Bastard.”

“It was funny,” Scar replies cheerfully and goes back to making him coffee.

Grian drops his head back down with a groan, his eyes fluttering shut. A rich scent fills the air. Scar’s movement stills and eventually he hears the creak of Scar’s wheelchair again, followed by the soft clink of a warm mug near his head. He forces himself to sit up, wrapping his hands around the white clay and inhaling the steam. The first sip scalds his mouth but he takes a second big drink anyways.

Eventually, Scar wheels across from him. “I hate to make you get up and function today, but I think it’s time we got back together with the alliance.”

“If I must,” he mumbles, slowly standing from his chair and continuing to sip the coffee. “There’s no time to waste and all that.”

“Exactly. There’s even less time to waste than usual.” Scar cracks his knuckles, the sound echoing around the quiet kitchen. “I’ll send out a message to the lot, see if we can meet around noon. Any excuse to get out of the sun and into a safer place.”

Grian’s not sure if the word *safe* really applies to the meeting room anymore. He bites his tongue, though, and nods to Scar instead. “I’m going to step outside for a little bit. Just get some fresh air and see if it helps.”

“Have fun,” Scar replies, wheeling away and calling out to Jellie. Grian nods to him, setting his half-empty coffee cup on the counter and slinging his leather bag over his shoulder. The scars on his shoulder blades hurt worse than usual today.

He opens the door to a startling blast of wind that nearly blows his goggles off his head, whipping at the edges of his shirt and his bag. He wobbles for a second, but then rights himself and almost laughs. He used to love the wind. Used to love coasting far up in the sky and watching the world blur into vague colours far under him.

His limbs move before his mind does, his hands wrapping around the iron bars that hold up the porch lanterns and heaving himself up onto the mini roof over the door. There’s plenty of places where the uneven sandstone of the house walls jut out. A path to the roof.

He darts from ledge to ledge, one hand over the other with the wind tearing at his hair and blowing sand around him. He never slips, never falters. He was always good at climbing.

Before long he’s clambering onto the burning terracotta tiles of the roof, where the wind is strongest and the sun beats down on his head and shoulders. He pulls his goggles down over his eyes to protect from the swirls of dust that fly through the air and grins at the layers and rings of buildings below him. So small, so alive.

Just like this mortal body. Just like him.

The roof is steep and slanted, unsteady as a tightrope underneath his boots. The wind tears his shirt loose, the edges of it flapping in the wind. His hair is in his face and there’s dust in his mouth and the heat burns already.

He stretches his hands wide to the world beyond, a conductor at the climax of an intangible symphony. Spreads his arms open, like he could fly with them if he tried hard enough just like he used to with his wings. The sun hurts his eyes so he closes them. He doesn’t need to see when he has faith in his tried and tested instincts.

He tilts his head back, leaning back just enough where he flirts with the edge of danger, the

possibility of falling.

He aches for his wings. He loves that he doesn't need them.

Is this what humans mean by freedom?

In the sun and sand, in the eye of a desert's hurricane, Grian gives himself to the whims of nature and *laughs*. The laugh tastes like defiance. The laugh feels so mortal in his mouth— in the best way possible. His headache may as well be nothing more than a light buzz.

He'd give all the money in the bloody world to live like this forever.

“Grian!”

The voice snaps him from his joyful reverie. His eyes open to the harsh wind and sun beyond. Far below him, on the ground, Scar is waiting for him. Grian can just barely make out that his eyes are wide and fearful.

“Hi Scar!” he calls back, hands around his mouth. His own voice is unusually cheerful.

“Are you insane?”

He laughs again. “Maybe!”

Scar stares at him for a moment, then shakes his head and gives a laugh laced with incredulity.

“Get down from there, you might break your neck!”

“I'd never,” he shouts over the wind, but grabs onto the protruding beam of the roof and swings himself off of it, steadying himself on the sandstone bricks. Hand over hand, downwards until he's close enough to the ground to drop. The landing stings his ankles but it's barely noticeable over the rush of exhilaration in his chest.

His friend shakes his head again. “You're going to give me a heart attack, G.”

“Now you know how I feel,” he tosses back, no bite behind the words at all. “When are we meeting the others?”

“Around noon, still. We're gonna be meeting outside the city. I think it's time we got some proper training in order.”

Grian raises an eyebrow and follows after Scar, excitement picking back up in his chest. It's been too long since he's gone outside the city walls, seen where the desert land transitions into temperate forest.

“What sort of training?”

He can hear the smile in Scar's voice when he replies, “Combat.”

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The heat is so much more bearable outside the desert, cut into soft light by the canopy of leaves above his head. Grian's pushed his hair out of his face with a soft bandana he stole from Scar's coat stand and has some of his combat armour on, leather bracers and shoulder pads with a light chestplate. His sword swings at his hip and his dagger is out in the open for once.

Deep in the thick army of trees, there's a clearing. This is where Scar leads him, braces hissing



slightly with every step across the grass. Slowly the grass fades to packed earth, and Grian finds himself in the center of a massive training ground. Shooting ranges, target ranges, wooden posts and lines of weaponry. The posts lead into what seems to be a bit of an obstacle course, long jumps and steep climbs. It's coated with dust and all the signs and cloth seem run down— it carries the feel of a place that was abandoned long ago.

The clearing is empty, save for Cleo who seems to be training with a sword, whirling through move after move towards an invisible opponent. Her swings are fast and brutal.

He moves towards Cleo without a thought as to why, making sure to stay out of the weaving silver arc. It's not until he's close by that she seems to notice him, lowering her weapon and giving him a grin. Sweat gleams on her brow.

“What is this place?” He asks quietly, glancing at the strange haven around them.

Cleo cracks her knuckles, stowing her sword in her belt. “The old red army training grounds.”

“It hasn't been used in a long time,” he notes, perching on one of the wooden posts.

She nods, sitting on a post across from him and tucking her legs under her. She has excellent balance, not so much as wobbling even with her difficult position. Cicadas hum in the trees somewhere behind them. The sun beats down heavier here, sinking into his armour and beading sweat on his neck. There's nothing else but the sound of the distant wind.

They hang in that limbo for a few seconds before Cleo speaks again. She pulls her hair out of its ponytail and starts braiding it into individual strands, bright red against her greyish fingers. “I used to train here with the rest of the army. Until the last war. Then this place was abandoned and the warwood was grown around it. Some kind of commemoration for what once was.”

He raises his eyebrows at her. “You were in the red army?”

Cleo tosses her head back, abandoning her braid work. “I was one of the best generals they had. *Was*. They lost me for good one day and never got me back.”

He finds himself leaning closer to her, hands stilling and settling on the wood. More insight into these strange people that hold a murder among them is a luxury. “What happened?”

She spreads her fingers wide. “I died for them.” A quiet chuckle, a shake of her head. “Well, I took a sword for my commander Martyn that would have been his end. I fell on the battlefield with that in my stomach and he left me to die. I was lucky to be found and healed by someone who could have taken my head.” She pauses, her hands settling back at her sides. The easy smile drops away. “I was seventeen. I gave up my life in the city to save it and got nothing for my trouble.”

*I'm sorry* almost floats to his tongue. He bites down on it. “No wonder you're here.”

The fragility in her face fades, replaced by bitterness. Her eyes are shadowed and her skin is cracked. It sounds as if she might once have been human. She would have been beautiful then.

She's not as much now, but there's a different sort of spark to her.

“‘No wonder’ is right. I was half dead by the time *he* found me. Even when he healed me, I couldn't fully be brought back. Now I'm just... this.” Her eyes lower and then snap back up to him, glinting in the daylight. “The people I would die for let me become this.”

“And you hate them for it,” he says quietly. He remembers reading about the last war, the carnage

between the Third Precinct and the Seventh. The most brutal battle in recent history, and the battle where the Red King got his name. He stares now at one of the reluctant survivors.

The last of the gentleness disappears and she grins at him, the sun lighting her from behind. She shines like silver and red fire. "I'll burn them to ashes for it."

Somehow, Grian doesn't doubt it.

There's a crunch of footsteps on rocks behind him and Grian turns around, trying not to fall off the unstable post in the process. Bdubs waits there, shifting from foot to foot. The rest of the group seems to have filtered in. Scott's perched by the shooting ranges and fiddling with the trigger of a rifle. Jimmy's wandered away from him to chat with Scar nearby. Tango's a few feet away too, twirling an axe between his fingers. He hadn't heard them arrive. Perhaps too drawn towards Cleo.

"Sorry to interrupt and all," Bdubs says quietly, eyes flicking between the two of them. "I was wondering if you'd want to spar, Cleo."

She grins at him as well, drawing her axe from its belt and slamming it into the wood of the post below her. It nearly splits in half. "Oh, you bet."

"Have fun," Grian says to them, hopping off of his own post and sending a nod Cleo's way. "I hope you get what you're looking for. You've earned it."

The sharpness at her edges softens and she nods her head to him. "I hope so too."

He's left on his own on the post and decides very quickly that sitting and doing nothing is the worst way for him to spend this valuable chunk of time. Scott has started shooting his rifle, bullets streaking through the center of the target reliably. Grian could use a piece of guidance on that.

So he stands, his sword clanking against his leg.

Scott looks up from the target when he approaches, his tied-back hair falling into his face. He seems slightly different every time Grian looks at him, whether it's a point to his ears or a change in his eyes—or the dancing lights that appear when he looks at Scott in the corner of his vision. He wonders at the reason but doesn't dare ask for fear of ruining both their covers.

Instead, he smiles. "Can you offer me a lesson or two on those things?"

Scott gives him an odd look and then nods. "Sit down with me." He loads the gun with a fresh round of bullets and Grian sits cross-legged beside him. Scott's propped up on one knee, his posture surprisingly relaxed despite the weapon in his hands. "These guns have a recoil. They'll jump back every time you fire, so you have to make sure to keep your balance. Sometimes people sit like you're sitting now when firing to minimize the backlash."

"You know a lot about rifles, then?" Grian asks as Scott passes him the metal weapon, still warm from the rounds of gunfire.

Scott cracks his knuckles. "I build them, so yes."

"That's what you make a living on?" He raises an eyebrow, equal parts impressed and newly surprised.

The man grins at him. The faint lights dance around him again. "The weapons manufacturing and the flower shop, yes. I give the Red Army duds when they ask me to make them rifles and flintlocks. They haven't caught on yet."

He laughs despite himself. He's newly impressed with Scott, and surprised at how connected everyone around him is to the Red Army. They have far more personal vengeance than him.

(He's not sure about Scar. He knows so little about him for a man he sees so often.)

"Can you show me how to fire it?"

Scott nods, and his gentle and soft hands settle over Grian's own. They don't feel like the hands of a fighter. Grian's learning far too quickly, though, that no one's appearance is who they truly are.

The sun slides overhead and Scott teaches him slowly, with many mistakes, how to fire a rifle well. Grian somehow manages to shoot the branch off the tree instead of hitting anywhere close to the target and Scott collapses in a fit of laughter. The air around them echoes with the sound of metal clanging, of crossbows loading and guns firing. For once, he finds himself not observing everyone around him, instead focused on the singular task of learning how to fire the damn gun in the correct direction. Scott wasn't lying about the backlash.

Sun and sweat sticks heavy to his neck. His hands and shoulders ache. It's the familiar ritual of training himself to be better— but this time with the sort of gentle, mortal connection that he's missed for years.

Eventually he manages to hit the centre of the target with a stunning crack. Scott cheers and slaps him on the shoulder. "Not bad, it only took you a few dozen tries and a broken tree!"

"We do not speak of the broken tree," he tosses back, shoving Scott's hand away with a smile of his own. He's about to add something else onto it, but he feels a strange prickling down his spine and the back of his head. Old instincts— danger, eyes on him.

He turns around, shoulders tensing up.

Jimmy is watching him, brown eyes focused directly on his head and unblinking. They're eerily sharp and clear, almost as if they see right past the surface he covers himself with. The sensation is unsettling and sets his skin crawling.

He notices, then, that Jimmy twirls a silver knife between his fingers with unusual dexterity. His hands twitch at his sides.

Scott tracks his gaze, looking back at Jimmy as well. "He's been watching for a while. He probably wants to talk, he's just too polite to interrupt." His smile is still easy, his face guileless and touched with affection. He waves Jimmy over and the eerie focus on Jimmy's face drops, replaced with an affectionate crinkle of his eyes and his normally ever-present smile.

*He's been watching for a while.* The phrase sounds strangely familiar.

He sets his suspicions away to the back of his mind for when he has time to reflect on them, making sure his face is still carefully neutral and vaguely cheerful. "What do you need, Jimmy?"

Jimmy laces his hands behind his back. His tunic is sleeveless, showing arms covered in scars and scratches. He's surprisingly well built, strong and fit. It wouldn't be obvious under his normal baggy and comfortable clothes. "Well, Scar and I were hoping to talk to you."

Grian levels a questioning stare at him. "About?"

He shrugs his shoulders, unlacing his hands again. "He wants us to do something that's either a really good or terrible idea. Needs your opinion on it, though. Fine with ordering the rest of us

around but he wants to consult with you first.” The words are light, without any detectable bite behind them, accompanied with a laugh.

Grian lets his shoulders relax a little. “Well, lead the way. I’ll see you later, Scott.”

“See you,” Scott chirps and picks up his rifle again.

He follows in Jimmy’s footsteps. Scar leans against a tree, arms folded over his chest. His shirt is undone, as per unfortunate usual, sweat on his brow. All his weaponry is fully exposed— knives at his hip, a bandolier around his chest and rifle over his back, dual flintlocks belted around his waist. His whip hangs from his belt loop.

Mercenary indeed. Grian’s almost impressed. If he would allow himself to be impressed by Scar.

“You called for me?” he asks instead, adding just the touch of a jab to it (not to compensate for anything, of course). Scar’s eyebrows raise and he sticks his cane firmly in the ground, leaning forwards with a hiss of his bracers. “Jimmy said you wanted my opinion on doing something stupid.”

“Not my wording!” Jimmy protests, backing away, raising his hands slightly.

Scar flicks his gaze over to Jimmy and then back to Grian, stepping a couple of paces closer. Maybe it’s the violence that’s been at Grian’s fingertips for a few hours but he’s more than willing to have a bit of a challenge with Scar. He smiles back.

“Well, my ‘stupid idea’, as you worded it, was a bit of infiltration work.” Scar grins at him, nodding to their companion. “You see, Jimmy’s known Martyn for quite a while and Martyn’s more than fond of you. Having a bit of inside intel would be a good advantage. So, if you both took a visit, and say a storm happened to come by...” He trails off, waving one hand idly in the air. “You’d have to stay the night.”

Grian blinks at him. “You’re proposing we go and trap ourselves in the castle of the enemy on our own.”

“And gain valuable information! Plus, I’ve heard they have a very nice setup there. Probably hotel-level beds.”

He can’t help but stare at the man across from him. “I was right. This idea is exceptionally stupid.”

## Chapter End Notes

any theories?

also obligatory tumblr plug! same user and everything :> come get access to exclusive tumblr only coliseum content and personal interaction

# there's something changed, there's something weaved

## Chapter Summary

Grian goes to the Enchanter once again and gets far more than he bargained for.

## Chapter Notes

hi folks!! sorry for the delay between updates this chapter kicked my ASS and ive been in the middle of moving. its finally done though :>

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

By some damn miracle (and Grian suspects partly to do with the touch of magic he felt in the air), Scar manages to get the rest of the team on board with the batshit insane plan he and Jimmy have concocted.

It consists of the two of them somehow approaching the castle and requesting a full tour for Grian. Jimmy says he can cover for it and be convincing, but he's really not too sure about that. He's not too sure about any of this. Jimmy says it'll rain tonight, even though the sun hangs warm and heavy over them. They'll be trapped all night and have time to investigate everything.

Grian is firmly out-voted and nowhere near as good as convincing.

So, now he follows in Scar's footsteps back through the door of the house. Scar is mumbling to himself, fiddling with something in his pocket, the cat winding around his ankles as Grian shuts the door.

"I'll go get my bag and change," Grian mumbles, shrugging off his armour and straggling up the stairs. Scar doesn't respond.

He changes quickly while in his room, grabbing his camera to take photos and a journal to take notes. He pauses, looking at the weapons strewn on his bed, and shakes his head. It makes his spine crawl to go unarmed but Jimmy's warned him that the guards will likely search them if they go further into the castle.

This is all a terrible idea.

He pauses, giving one more glance around the sparsely furnished room. There's little here except weaponry, Scar's bedding, and old trinkets from a time before Grian got here.

He's fairly certain someone lived here before. He's never asked who.

He shrugs on a fresh shirt that isn't stained from sweat, tying his hair back from his face and settling his goggles back atop his head. He changes into his normal heavyweight boots instead of light combat ones.

It feels like saying goodbye. He's not sure he'll come back.

He can afford to leave the rest.

His grip is firm around the door handle as he pulls it closed with a resounding thunk. The window is left open in his wake, drifting sand and sunlight atop the furniture. The stairs creak under his footsteps. He doesn't bother to creep around anymore.

Down in the living room, Scar waits for him. He pauses when he sees the other man settled on the couch, brow knitted and cane at his side. He twirls something between his rough hands. When he looks up, his eyes are dark and distant.

He swallows, his mouth strangely sandpaper-rough. "Scar?"

"Jimmy will be here soon. He's got everything you guys might need." The words are abrupt, seeming to stumble out of Scar's mouth. He unclasps his hand and something red glints in them. "I wanted— I wanted to give you this." His shoulders slump forwards a little.

Grian steps forward, to where there's little space between them, enough to see the object properly. It's a little red crystal earring, wrapped in copper and carved in the shape of a multi-layered star. He reaches forward, brushing his fingertips against it. It sends a spark up his skin. "That's for me?"

Scar nods. "I made it. Can I—?" Words seem to fail him. Grian wonders if he's ever seen that happen before.

The gesture touches some strange part of him. It sends tenderness flaring through his ribs, calls up that same pull he always feels towards the strange merchant. He nods, stepping closer and sinking to his knees in front of Scar.

A gentle touch to his jaw, one hand tilting his head to the side and steadying it there, before the feeling of one of his black stud earrings being unclasped and pulled out. Scar's fingertips drift against his ear. He shivers.

Scar presses the earring into his hand and then unclasps his red one. It glints in the late afternoon sunlight.

The hands pull him a little closer. He leans the side of his head against Scar's knee. He can feel raised scar tissue through the fabric. Scar's hands slide through his hair, then settle next to his ears and softly settle the earring into place and secure it. The dangling weight is an odd feeling after so long of him forgetting about his piercings.

One finger tilts his chin up. He meets eyes with Scar. The touch settles heavy against his skin.

Scar swallows. His eyes have a strange shine to them. "You be safe, okay, little rascal?"

He has so much he could say. He's not even sure what it is he wants to say.

Instead, he nods his head hesitantly. "Okay."

"Good. Good." Scar takes a deep breath in, pulling his hands away. Silence lingers over them and stillness reigns. Grian clenches the spare earring in his hand, his arm settling over Scar's knee. He pushes himself up, never breaking their strange eye contact. The strange feeling still pulls in his chest. He opens his mouth, as if to speak.

The knock on the door echos like a gunshot. Grian jumps.

The trance ends. Scar clears his throat, moving away slightly. “That’s Jimmy. You should go.”

“Are you—” he gestures vaguely to Scar. His tongue sticks to the back of his throat and the words don’t come.

“Go,” Scar murmurs in reply, motioning for him to stand, face smooth and impartial. “He’s waiting for you and night will be here before long.”

He has nothing left to do but nod and head for the door.

---

The sunlight hangs warm and muggy overhead as he and Jimmy approach the Enchanter. Jimmy’s chatting away about Scott’s flower shop, which Grian’s vaguely sure they passed some time ago, starting Jimmy on this extensive ramble. He nods along every so often. He’s not listened to much of any of it, but he can bother to at least act like he’s listening.

He grabs Jimmy’s arm as he nears the castle, startling the cheerful man from his monologue. Two guards stand by the gate, clothed in proper shining iron armour even in the burning heat. Clunky and likely to overheat. Those guards are there for show.

They’re still an obstacle to get past. “What do we do about the whole— them?”

Jimmy smiles at him. “Don’t worry about that.”

He eyes Jimmy. He’s a fairly unassuming man when clad in his normal baggy shawl and tunic, industrial pants and toolbelt, all shades of faded brown, blue and red. They mask the strength that Grian saw during training. His shoulders slouch and he doesn’t look so tall. Between all that, the goofy aviator helmet he wears that makes his hair frizz out under the bottom, and the ash-grease machinery marks on his face, he’s almost laughable.

But as he watches, Jimmy’s demeanor changes altogether.

His shoulders rise, his chin juts out, his eyes gain that same eerie sharpness to them that Grian had felt prick along the back of his neck. He walks with authority. He seems taller, harder to ignore, as if staying with him is being shielded by a soldier.

(He looks eerily familiar in that moment— not for the first time. Grian can’t help but wonder why.)

He approaches the guards with ease and purpose. “Hello, Skizz. I was wondering if Martyn was available. My friend and I had wanted to conference with him about a few… private matters.”

The guard nods, opening one side of the gate and slipping through the gap. He gives Jimmy a loose salute. “I’ll go check.”

“Thank you kindly,” Jimmy responds, his voice sunny as it was the first time he met Grian.

Grian only has enough time to shoot Jimmy a subtle, questioning look, and get a wag of eyebrows in response, before the tromp of iron boots on carved sandstone returns. A second pair of footsteps accompanies it, these ones lighter. The wooden gate creaks back open and Skizz emerges again. Martyn follows after him. He waves at Jimmy.

Then he turns to Grian, and for a split second his brows furrow, something dark and disbelieving

flashing across his face. Grian barely catches it in the space between blinks and resists the urge to flinch back. He's never seen an expression like that on Martyn before.

But then he's smiling, offering Grian a handshake and commenting on "what a pleasant surprise this is," and Grian would wonder if he'd imagined it. He knows himself better than that, though.

He has a creeping feeling that somehow Martyn's been waiting for him every other time.

"We were wondering," Grian's companion says, seemingly oblivious to the whole encounter, "if we might be able to speak with you."

Martyn's shoulders rise slightly, the smallest tensing of his muscles, like a wounded animal on guard. He nods, slowly, and motions for them to follow him. The guard's eyes skim over them all and he nods to his partner. They stand aside and the gates drift open.

The second the gates slam close, Martyn turns back to face Jimmy. Grian's not quite sure what expression is on his face. "What is it?"

"I wanted Grian to see more of the Enchanter," Jimmy replies, gesturing to the castle, "than just a trivial tour." He leans a little closer to Martyn, his voice turning softer. "I think it's time."

Grian tenses. Neither of them expect him to have good enough hearing to catch them, obviously.

He makes himself look distracted, glancing around at the castle and the flying banners high above him. He watches out of the corner of his eye as Martyn's eyes widen slightly and he gives a faint nod, clapping Jimmy on the shoulder. He turns outwards, puts back on the cheery grin. "Well, who am I to deny an old friend?"

Grian follows in their footsteps up to the castle drawbridge. The wind tears at his hair and clothes this high up.

As Martyn pulls open the doors to the castle, Jimmy looks out at the cloudless sky, biting down on his lower lip. "Wind's in the east."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Grian asks as he steps closer.

Jimmy waves one hand in the air, almost theatrical. His voice is barely over a whisper. "A storm's coming in from the mountains."

Then he motions for Grian to follow him through the doors, and they disappear into the magic-tinged belly of the beast, with the intention of staying for a while.

---

True to Jimmy's words, a storm blows in viciously within the hour. Jimmy steps outside at one point as Martyn, accompanied by the guard from earlier, shows them photos and paintings of the many political rulers over the Third Precinct throughout the years. He comes back in with his clothes soaked and his hair ruffled, warning them of a heavy rainstorm outside.

When thunder echoes so loudly that even the sturdy stone walls of the castle shake, Martyn invites them to stay. Grian catches the way his voice trips over the words.

Regardless, it's not like Martyn has much choice. Mobs spawn freely in the pouring rain and dusk has settled heavily over the city. Most people will be headed to bed. Even kings and their servants have to sleep eventually.



As much as Grian hates to admit it, it's a good plan.

He paces the hallways of the guest bedrooms, fiddling with a map and compass in his hands. Joel may be dead but he may as well finish the maps Joel tried to start.

(It's the least he can do to get the image of Joel's mutilated body out of his head when he tries to sleep.)

The castle has become silent. He may as well take the opportunity.

He walks down the hallway and heaves open the heavy spruce door that separates the rooms from the rest of the castle. Beyond him are open stone halls with vast columns and balconies that let in the smell of pouring rain from outside. The air is frigid. Goosebumps rise on his arms as the wind cuts through the thin shirt he put on earlier.

The wind also carries voices. Familiar ones.

He steps into the towering hall and sees one of the balconies on the far end lets in pale blue light from the outside. Some sort of sea lantern.

Jimmy and Martyn's voices echo from the lit balcony.

He creeps his way towards it, making sure that his footsteps are carefully placed and light enough to not reverb throughout the archways. Halls like this are designed for grandeur, not stealth.

Either way, as he gets closer, it seems Jimmy and Martyn are too entrenched in their conversation to notice. He ducks behind one of the pillars, just barely leaning out from behind it to catch a glimpse of the two of them.

Jimmy sits in the rain, the downpour soaking into his tunic and plastering it to his skin. There's no lantern after all— there's only an odd glow from Jimmy himself, concentrated around his head like a halo. It illuminates the individual drops of rain as they hit his skin. His eyes are sharp and clear, his expression serene.

Martyn's back is to Grian, but his shoulders are relaxed in a way Grian's never seen on him. He leans close to Jimmy and there's a no tension in his voice. He's dressed in simple clothes with no armour to be found.

Martyn speaks, about as quiet as the rain. "What do you think it means?"

Jimmy leans back on the edge of the balcony, barely a few centimeters from tipping over and falling. "It means they'll bring you ruin."

A sharp inhale of breath. "When?"

"Soon."

Martyn curses, his shoulders slumping. His head falls into his hands. "I didn't build this life for it all to fall into rubble."

"I know."

"It's— I knew it would happen all along. All the signs were there. I've spent so long running, I didn't think... I didn't think it would happen like this." He speaks faster. "I can still try and defend us. I can pack up and run again. But I can't leave Ren, you understand?"

“I understand.”

Martyn makes a sound like a wounded animal. Grian thinks, vaguely, it might be a sob. “What can I do, Jimmy?”

Jimmy’s brows wrinkle and he slips down from the railing, kneeling by Martyn’s side. The rain on his hands soaks into Martyn’s nightshirt. “I don’t know, Martyn. I think things were always meant to be this way.”

“Surely not. I’ve defied fate before. I can do it again.” Martyn grabs Jimmy’s hands, clings to them. His scarred skin is white as snow compared to the golden tan Jimmy has. “Can’t you help me? Can’t you stop them?”

Jimmy breathes in sharply, then leans in and pulls Martyn into a hug. Martyn slumps against his shoulder and Grian’s certain that there’s the sound of crying hidden under the pounding of the rain. “I’m sorry.”

It’s no real answer, but by Martyn’s silence, Grian can guess it’s enough of one.

He ducks back behind the pillar as silence reigns, heart thundering in his ears. Martyn knows. Martyn knows that a siege is going to be laid on the castle. Martyn knows and so does Jimmy, and they’re *friends*, and too many things are clicking into place too quickly. Jimmy could have killed Cleo. Jimmy could be an informant.

Jimmy could be a traitor.

He might have walked right into a trap.

He walks away as fast as he can, panic blindly guiding his footsteps. He needs some way to warn Scar. He needs to make a new plan. He can’t dare sleep tonight, for fear he wakes in the dungeons or never wakes up at all. This was all far too convenient.

He wanders into another dark hall with glowing display cases surrounding him and a door at the far end. He doesn’t speak out loud for fear of it echoing, but questions swirl around his head like a tempest tears up a city.

There’s so much to be done. There’s so much to be changed. There’s so little time to do it. If he—

“Are y’ our guest for the night?” a surprisingly soft voice murmurs from behind him. Grian jumps, tensing up and nearly reaching for a weapon that isn’t there. He turns slowly, shoulders high, and freezes when he realizes who he’s happened to run into.

The Red King stands across from him, in all his scarred and crimson glory.

The first thing that hits him is he didn’t expect the tyrant to be, well... normal looking. Of course, there’s the scars that cross across his entire body, jagged white across his neck and face.

But other than that, he’s not hard on the eyes. Tall, broad with a heavy cape strewn across his shoulders, a river of smooth dark hair that streams down to his lower back and slides across his shoulders like water as he steps forward. His eyes are deep brown, his clothes fine but practical. His crown is old and stained with what might be either rust or blood.

He shares Scott’s accent. Interesting.

The object of his deadly obsession stands directly in front of him and Grian is powerless to kill

him.

He swallows, dipping his head downwards slightly. "I am. It's an honor to meet you, your Majesty."

"Oh, stuff the formalities," the king replies, unclasping his cape at the throat and pulling it off his shoulders, folding it over one arm. "I care not a whit for stiff politeness, and I've heard about you from my Hand besides. Grian, yes?"

Grian blinks at him. "Yes, that's me." He begins to see now where the other staff get their casual manner from.

"Well met." The king is wearing simple clothes under the cape: a white shirt that's rumpled and slightly dirty as if he was wrestling in it, a loose vest, simple pants and heavy boots that have seen their fair share of rough days. If it weren't for the crown on his head and the coldness in his expressionless face, he would look almost like a common man.

*The wolf king. The tyrant. The bloody hand. The crimson rule.*

Perhaps one of the most unordinary men Grian has ever laid his eyes on.

He clears his throat. He has to appear normal, unruffled. Give no clue to the dark through weeding their way through his brain. "This place is beautiful."

The king nods, stepping forwards with utterly silent footsteps even to Grian's heightened senses. He stops by the door that radiates power, drawing Grian ever closer, even though he tries to hide it. "It is my pride and joy. My life's work."

"I can see why," he murmurs, stepping closer to the king. His hand itches for his knife.

"Oh, this?" The king gestures at the glowing items that surround them, at the broad and cold expanses of the palace. "This is only part of what there is to see."

Grian forces himself to act casual, stretching his shoulders and discreetly stuffing his map into his pockets. He longs to feel the sink of a knife into flesh or to hear the sound of a key unlocking a door, his feet itching to run forward, his hands searching for a lock pick or a knife. Ants crawl every inch of his skin. "Is that an offering?"

"If you'd like me to make it one."

"I do have an interest in historical artifacts," he replies, grinning at the king. He always feels more in control when he can be arrogant, proud, and angry. The Watchers wear more than one kind of mask.

As he'd hoped, the king's eyes glint with the same amusement. He gives Grian a slight bow (how ironic, really) and turns back to the door. He pulls an ornate key from his left pocket. It's not chained down and would be easy to swipe if he were distracted. "Allow me, then."

With a click, it slides into the lock.

He thinks he feels wind when the door opens, a gust of powdery breeze with the scent of ancient power. It never touches his skin, but something much deeper instead.

Then he sees the room itself.

The first thing that draws his eye is the massive golden and copper clock inlaid into the wall across from him. Massive gears and tiny cogs turn in unison, moving hands the size of his body around in a circle. The ticking, completely muffled by the door, echoes through the room like a heartbeat. The hour strikes two.

The clock chimes, loud enough to echo in his bones and shake the copper-coloured floor. It calls to the monster lurking under his skin, a spark dancing across his skin, calling forth the raw magic beneath this fragile human form.

He steps forward before he can help it. It calls to him.

“You alright, laddie?”

Grian jumps, turning back around. The chime ends. The spell breaks.

He takes a proper look at the room then. Ancient things surround him, statues and shards of portals, totems, diadems and crowns. Old shields and banners. Carvings of rock. Each of them seems to feed energy to the clock behind him, yanking at the fragile coverings of his skin, singing at him to come home. This place is more than magical. It's *alive*.

“What is this?” he asks, hushed against the ticking of the clock.

The king smiles at him. His teeth are sharp and fanged. Grian shivers. “I named this place the Enchanter for more than one reason.”

“Because of this room,” he murmurs back, pivoting around unconsciously towards the clock again. It's massive, mesmerizing. Behind it—he remembers the map now—is the throne room. A massive source of magical power, feeding into the king's domain. His sanctuary.

How mesmerizing. How terrifying.

He steps towards the clock. The hands look more like blades the closer he gets. The edges are sharp.

He thinks the king says something. It doesn't quite register over the way the ticking of the clock echoes down his ear and soul. This is the real deal. A source of power that keeps the king stable. One that can be misused.

One that is so familiar. If only he could *touch* it, feel the magic settle under his skin, feel like he was *home*.

Before he can quite think about it, his fingers touch the bottom of the clock, resting atop the second hand. There's a loud whine in his ears, getting higher and higher pitched. The magic bubbles under his fingers, it sings to him, it calls him—

There's a sound like shattering glass, and he reels back as the world swoops under him—

The strange noise swallows his vision and turns to empty darkness.

## Chapter End Notes

ehehehehehehehehehehe



# hang up my heart, let it air out

## Chapter Summary

Grian wakes to a changed world, one that only seems to shift more and more with every step he takes.

## Chapter Notes

BUCKLE UP FOLKS. this is one of the most beefy chapters in terms of storytelling and a LOT gets revealed/happens in this chapter. enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Grian wakes to a headache that threatens to slip his skull open and the brush of cool, rough fingers across his forehead.

He leans blindly into the touch, turning his head to the side and mumbling something. The touch is so familiar, cold skin even in the desert, rough hands. *Scar*. The thought makes him feel safer, makes the headache a little more bearable.

“Can you hear me, laddie?”

With the softly accented voice, the comforting illusion shatters.

Grian forces his eyes open and flinches. The Red King kneels over him, fingertips pressed to his brow, his forehead knitted with concern. He finds himself tensing in preparation to grab a knife that isn't there. The tension only makes his head scream at him in pain and he winces.

The light pressure of the king's fingers disappears and Grian's left aware that he's sprawled over the icily cold floor, his head resting against the king's knee. His limbs feel fuzzy and every blink sends a wave of nausea through him.

Right. A question. He was asked a question.

“What?” he manages. The words come out cracked and faint.

The king's shoulders slump in what might be relief. “Oh, good. I was worried we'd lost ya.”

Grian clears his throat. He attempts to sit up and the world turns upside down, throwing him sideways and sending a lance of pain through his skull. He doubles over on his side, feeling vaguely as if he's about to vomit. The king catches him, steadies his shaking and helps him slowly sit upright. “Easy. Easy. Careful now.”

He heaves in gasping breaths, clenching his fingers in the fabric of his pants. The floor twists and bends. “What happened?”

The king's hand is steady against his shoulder blades. His cloak smells like pine wood. “You

touched the en.. the clock. There's too much power in that thing for our mere mortal forms." Grian, loopy as he is, almost argues the contrary. He barely manages to snap his jaw back down before the words escape him. "That could have killed you if I hadn't pulled you away."

"Ah." Grian inhales another breath. His chest feels a little tighter. "That's not good."

"Not really, laddie, no," the king agrees. "Can you stand?"

Grian tries to push himself up on his elbows and the world starts to tilt again rather alarmingly. He attempts to shake his head, decides that isn't a good idea either, and slumps back down. "I don't think so."

The king nods. "Allow me to help you, then?"

Grian gives him a questioning look and says nothing. The king hesitates for a moment, then kneels back down by his side and wraps one hand under his knees. "Y' don't seem to like being touched, laddie, so I'm sorry about this."

True to the king's... rather startling observancy, Grian flinches when the king lifts him from the floor. If he had his knife, if he could think clearly, if—

But instead he stays still, mutely, as his enemy carries him with all the gentleness of a friend.

They reach his quarters fairly quickly. Grian dimly notices that Jimmy and Martyn have left the balcony and the light has disappeared. The hallways are now eerily silent except for the echo of the wind. The king carries him with next to no effort and the archways tower high above them.

The king opens the door to Grian's borrowed room, shouldering it wide and setting Grian down on the ridiculously soft bed covers. Grian isn't sure how to react to the kindness of it all.

"Is there anything you need for your head?" His dark eyes seem to have something like regret in them.

Grian does his best to shake his head. He gives the king the strongest smile he can between the confusion, the lingering fear, and the pounding of his head. "I've had worse headaches. I'll be alright. Thank you for everything, your majesty."

"Ren," the king replies, straightening up from his side. He looks distant and unknowable again. Still, his voice is gentle, not disdainful. "I care not a whit for formalities."

Grian thinks he sees the touch of a smile at the edge of the king's mouth as he steps out the door and quietly shuts it.

He collapses back on the too-fine bedding, ignoring the way his headache screams at the motion. The bed has a canopy in deep red, deeper than the king— than *Ren's* cloak, shrouding him from the ceiling above. Breathing feels like suffocating. He could have died. He could have lost it all. The Watchers would be furious with him.

Scar would be upset without him.

The thought strikes him as he reaches up to his ear, finding no earring looped into it. It must have fallen out or been stolen, or broken somehow. Scar's going to be upset about that too.

Grian's oddly sad about it as well. His ear still tingles with the memory of Scar's touch.

He shouldn't sleep. He has more to do. The Watchers might visit him in the night, whispering threats in his ears, torturing him with more visions. He should see more of the castle. Jimmy might be a traitor. He has so much to think about.

But oh *gods*, his head hurts and his shoulders are so heavy.

As the covers seem to swallow him, one last realization lights in some corner of his brain.

The door was meticulously locked and hidden, kept safe. Yet as Ren had carried him back, he'd left the door ajar with the key in it. Anyone in the castle could have gotten in.

How strange.

---

The next morning is bright and clear, the carefully tended and protected gardens surrounding the castle smelling of petrichor. There's not a cloud in the sky and in the aftermath of rain, the air is cooler, almost pleasant. It's a beautiful sight.

Grian can hardly bring himself to look at it, his eyes instead locked on Jimmy as he waves goodbye to Martyn and Ren. The king and his hand stand side by side, Martyn with his usual careless grin, the king distant as he was when Grian first met him.

He's expected to say goodbye as well, of course. So he waves one hand in farewell to the royal duo and follows Jimmy down to the gate. His head still throbs with the remains of a headache.

Jimmy is cheerful and oblivious as ever. If Grian hadn't seen what happened last night, he would assume nothing had changed at all. That Jimmy was dull and helpful and perhaps a bit strange, and that was it. Now, though, he finds himself waiting for a knife in his side or an arrow in his back.

"Well, that was productive," Jimmy says, stretching idly. Grian can't tell if the words are sarcastic or not.

He blinks slowly at his companion. The urge to run tugs at him. "How so?"

Jimmy shrugs, cracks his knuckles, and stifles a yawn. "Learned a lot of valuable stuff. I think Scar'll be happy to hear it."

*Before you lead them all to their doom with the information you told the army?*

He almost voices the words but bites down on it. He's a good fighter, but he doesn't know enough about Jimmy. Who he is or what he's capable of. Giving away his hand might very well be the end of him.

So instead, he nods, and they are both silent. He doesn't look at Jimmy's face. He wants to see Scar, go back to that house. He wants to go *home*.

Fortunately, it doesn't take long to reach that circle of the city. Jimmy says nothing more, the only sound being the echo of the town setting up for the day and the rush of desert wind carrying hot air back into the refreshed city. His skin itches the more time he spends alone in Jimmy's company.

When he finally sees the sandstone bricks and terracotta slats of Scar's house, colourful kites and banners on strings flying in the wind and the silhouette of Jellie in the upper window, the fear gripping his chest releases.

He manages to muster a weak smile, giving Jimmy a small wave. "Thank you for everything,



Jimmy. I'll see you later."

Jimmy nods, an unreadable look in his eyes. "See you then."

Grian waits until Jimmy has disappeared down the street, dissolving into the crowd that streams towards the markets to get the early morning deals. Then his feet move without his consent, faster and faster until he's running to Scar's door, pulling the key Scar gave him from his pocket. His hands shake a little when he unlocks the door.

But *finally* the door gives way, and he is stepping across the familiar threshold.

He raises his voice. "Scar?"

Somewhere from the back of the house, there's a thump. Grian swallows, sitting down on the couch and waiting in silence. Scar doesn't emerge, but there's a soft meow and Jellie hops down the stairs. She trots over to him, winds around his ankles and nudges his shin with her head. He reaches down to pet her, finding comfort in the softness of her fur.

He hears the sound of a wheelchair creaking before he sees Scar.

When he does look up, his friend is staring at him with wide eyes. There's some strange mix of emotions on his face, some mix of fear and shock, and something relieved.

He starts to say Scar's name, but Scar cuts him off. "You're okay."

Grian nods, lifting Jellie into his lap. She squeaks and twists in his grasp. "Yes, I survived, remarkably intact." He smiles at his friend, scratching behind Jellie's ears as he does. "Were you worried?"

The words are meant to be a joke, but Scar nods. His brow wrinkles and Grian realises with some alarm that he looks like he might be about to cry. "I was."

He blinks, opening his mouth. Before he says anything, Scar wheels over to face him and reaches out both his hands, cupping them around Grian's jaw. He closes his mouth again, finding no words to say. Scar's touch is gentle and his eyes have a sheen over them. He looks as if he's barely slept.

The hands tilt his head slightly to the left. Scar's brow knits further. "The earring."

Grian reaches one of his own hands up. There's only a copper hook in his ear. The star is gone.

He swallows. It must have fallen off in the night, or gotten lost, or been stolen. He hadn't noticed amid all the other chaos of the day. "I must have lost it. I'm terribly sorry."

"Don't be," Scar breathes, his hands settling on Grian's shoulders. Grian finds he can barely breathe. "You're alive. You're alright. That's all that matters."

"Are *you* alright?" Grian returns, finding himself leaning forwards, towards Scar's kindness, towards something he didn't even realise he missed.

Scar is silent for a long minute, some of the tension releasing from his brow. His hands drop further down, gripping Grian's own where they rest atop Jellie's back. He clenches them for a brief second and then relaxes. "I thought you were dead."

Grian gives him a confused look, almost pulling back his hands. "Why?"

"The earring. It was— meant to protect you. Keep you safe. It was only supposed to break if

something terrible happened to you, and I— I thought the worst.”

Dimly, he remembers the sound of shattering glass when he touched the clock. Ren’s warning that the magic of the clock could have killed him.

His chest grows cold.

“I have a lot to tell you about,” he murmurs.

Scar nods and doesn’t let his hands go. As the morning creeps by and Jellie falls asleep in his lap, he tells Scar in hushed tones about everything he saw. It feels wrong to say the words too loudly, for fear some unknown presence could hear them. Even here, he doesn’t quite feel safe.

He watches for Scar’s little tics, the furrow of his brows and tightening of his hands as he describes Martyn’s reaction. The slight widening of his eyes and the way he bites at his lip when Grian describes the king. The further tightening of his hands when Grian talks about the clock and the way he woke up stunned.

Perhaps, most notably, the confusion in his eyes when Grian describes how the king carried him back when he couldn’t stand. How the king was gentle.

(It seems like Scar struggles to reconcile the images. Grian does too.)

Then it’s time for the thing that makes his stomach settle heavy with dread. The coldness even amid the warmth of Scar’s body and Jellie’s thick fur. Sort of like being haunted.

He breathes in deep. The air smells faintly of spice and incense, the familiar scent of whatever oil or perfume Scar uses. His skin and clothes and room all carry the smell. Often Jellie does too. It’s familiar. It’s, by all means, safe. Through all of this, even if he wonders he shouldn’t, he still trusts Scar.

With sumac and cinnamon surrounding him, he leans closer to Scar, resting his hands on Scar’s lap. “I think Jimmy might be a traitor.”

Scar’s eyebrows shoot up. True, undisguised shock— a rare thing for Scar. “Why?”

One more breath in, one more breath out. He’s safe here. “I overheard him speaking with Martyn, late that night in the storm. Martyn knew that something was about to attack him and was making plans for what to do. He was... warning Martyn. I’m almost certain of it.”

“Ah.” Scar’s expression closes off, unreadable even to Grian’s eyes. “Well.”

The hands grasped around his release. Grian feels suddenly colder, more withdrawn, as if the winter wind has blown between them.

“What do you plan to—“

“I don’t know yet,” Scar says, cutting him off. His voice is distant. Far too empty for Grian’s liking. Grian takes his hands away, folding them back over Jellie’s coat. Scar keeps speaking, the words hollow and empty. “I really don’t know, Grian. More things keep going wrong and I feel like it’s only going to get worse.”

“You can’t know that,” he murmurs, scratching behind Jellie’s ears. She wakes under the touch, stretching her paws out and yawning, rolling over into the feeling with a purr.

Scar gives him a bitter smile and nothing more. “Get some rest, G. I’ll see what I can do about Jimmy.”

He wheels away and Grian is left in silence.

---

The day passes without further incident, made blurry by Grian’s headache and exhaustion. Scar leaves some time around noon and doesn’t return until the sun has almost set. Grian wanders into the kitchen and looks around for ingredients, finding a suitable amount of meat and seasonings, as well as a few vegetables that are always more expensive in the desert climate. He cooks the meat in a savory sauce, prepares some rice, cooks the vegetables in the leftover grease from the meat and makes what turns out to be a half-decent dish. He’s had less than stellar attempts in the past.

*She* always used to laugh at him for that.

He doesn’t think about her, instead setting aside a covered bowl of food for Scar whenever he gets home. Scar usually does the cooking, so Grian may as well repay him.

He’s upstairs in his room when he hears Scar return. There’s little noise except for the sound of the door creaking, the soft sound of the steam lever on Scar’s wheelchair powering down, and Jellie’s meow of greeting.

He doesn’t go down and ask where Scar’s been. It’s not something either of them do. Scar’s back, and he’s fine, and whatever else he does is none of Grian’s concern. Mutual trust and mutual secrets pretty much defines their relationship.

He lays on his bed as day slips into night and he has to turn on the gas lamp near his bed, wincing at the light. He grabs a blank journal he purchased during one of the shopping trips, thumbing the pages open. He stares at the blank paper. He feels an urge to write twitch at his fingertips, yet no ideas come.

He grabs a pen. Lays it to the paper. Lets his mind run unfettered.

Strangely, he writes about Scar. How his wheelchair is designed, how his house is open and set up for Scar to reach everything without help. How he has no guests over, how he’s fiercely independent, how his only companion most days is Jellie. How he fights, where his weapons are stored. He writes pages of observation about his roommate in a vague attempt to puzzle together a narrative about Scar.

His past as a hitman, his hatred for the Red King. His accident. His bitterness. The snippets of conversations about disloyalty over dinner. The fear behind his charismatic front.

The narrative starts to piece itself together.

The clock on the wall has slid to one in the morning by the time he sets the notebook back down. His handwriting has turned to messy scribbles and theories. In front of him is the narrative of a man scorned and abandoned. It seems to match up far too well. It might still be wrong. It could very well be.

But Grian suspects, somehow, that he might know Scar better than anyone else in his life.

He stands up from the bed, wincing at how stiff his legs have gone. He grabs his gas lamp, walks down the stairs, the wind whispering in the staircase and catching the edge of his shirt. It’s completely dark downstairs and dark in the hallway to Scar’s room.

Scar leaves the door to his room open every night, though Grian's not sure why.

He steps into the doorway. Scar is asleep, one arm tossed carelessly on the pillows and the other cradling Jellie. The tension has drained from his brow in slumber. His hair is a mess, the covers wrapped tight around him, and he looks peaceful.

Grian finds, looking at him, that he feels a little more peaceful too.

Scar is a mystery. That mystery is far too intriguing, drawing Grian in like a fish caught on a hook, knowing he's getting in over his head. This job was supposed to be one and done. He would come here, finish his mission, and leave in glory.

Now he wonders if he wants to leave at all.

His footsteps are utterly silent as he approaches Scar's bed. He's never seen Scar asleep until now, and the sight is disarming.

He reaches out, touches the tips of his fingers to Scar's messy hair, then brushes them along Scar's forehead. Inexplicably, some of the tension in his chest unclenches. His breath comes a little easier.

"Goodnight, Scar," he whispers over his shoulder, turning and leaving the room.

He slips back upstairs, setting the lamp down and stripping off his shirt, crawling under the thick bedcovers. The desert can get freezing cold at night, especially after rain, and Grian appreciates the warmth. His shoulders are relaxed for once, his limbs less heavy.

He turns off the lamp, flopping back into the bedcovers. The dark ceiling shadows him, the faint patterns in the wood grain making themselves into nonsensical images the more he stares at them. He feels like his mind should be racing. Yet, he's not thinking at all.

He's just thought so much anyway about Scar.

Scar, who's kind and caring, who saved his life more than once. Who waited for him, most nights, making sure he was safe. Who helped him build his scheme from the ground up. Scar, who scams people in his shops, unreasonable prices for goods surely not worth that much. Who is a criminal and a con and dangerous. Who cooks both of them dinner every night and laughs when Jellie lunges over the table for his food.

Scar, who is handsome and reckless and not perfect but something so close to it.

Grian takes a deep breath in and smells the incense in the air again. It's the scent of home now. When did this become home?

When did *Scar* become home?

The answer dawns on him, clear and life-shattering as a lightning strike, yet somehow exactly what he expected. As if someone from long ago had stepped back into his life, and there was the pleasant feeling of *oh, welcome back. I missed you. I love you.*

"I love you," he murmurs, out loud, and the words may as well be a prayer or a cry for help. "I want you."

Amid all the lies, there's that one certain truth. Perhaps Grian should be afraid of it.

But amid the hurricane that rends him from limb to limb, makes every shadow in every corner seem like an enemy, makes all truths false, it gives him something to hold on to. Something that beats between his ribs like a heart, stronger every time he looks at Scar.

He ought to fear loving a mortal.

Now, he clings to it.

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Grian wakes, late in the morning, to someone yelling his name from downstairs. He blinks, groggy in the unusually bright light. He must have slept in by accident.

His name is called again. That's Scar's voice. Something's happened.

He lurches out of bed, almost banging his head on the wall. He bites down on a yawn and grabs his dagger out of instinct, leaning out from his door frame to where he can just barely see the bottom of the stairs. Scar sits there in his wheelchair, alarm written across his ashen face.

“What's going on?” he calls down, stowing his dagger in his pocket.

Scar's voice shakes when he responds. “Cleo's dead.”

## Chapter End Notes

so, what did we make of all of that? :)

# devil with an evil plan

## Chapter Summary

Unearthing secrets is never pretty.

## Chapter Notes

hi folks!!! it's been a while, but here we are ^^ you may have noticed that the chapter amount has been (tentatively) laid out, and that this work is now part of a series. this is because coliseum isn't the end of the story, shall we say :)

before you get started, PLEASE be warned: this chapter contains a graphic description of a burned body. skip over the few paragraphs immediately after scott invites grian in if that's a trigger for you

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The dagger falls from his hand, clattering loudly against the wood of the stairs. It tumbles down each step, then comes to a stop at Scar's feet.

He breathes in deeply. It shakes on the way in, then vanishes to silence. The house is silent. He thinks there might be the whistle of wind somewhere outside. Wind blows sand in the house—that's always a pain to clean up. Another menial task to add to the list, small amid everything else.

Cleo's dead.

Grian will need to sweep the floor later.

He forces himself to speak. "How did she die?" His voice comes out scratchy, cracked, all the haziness of sleep vanished into whatever cold paralysis grips him now. "When?"

"Last night," Scar replies, gripping his hands together tightly in his lap. "As for... that. From what Jimmy told me, I think you'd better... see instead."

Grian swallows. The sound echoes in his ears. "I'll be down in a minute."

He dresses without particular care for what he's wearing: a white shirt that's far too large for him, his hair still messy from sleep with his goggles awkwardly settled on top of it, and heavy boots. Two knives at his side. He reaches for his other one to put up his sleeve, before remembering he dropped it down the stairs. He can pick it up but— he has to go.

He stumbles his way down the stairs, barely remembering to grab his knife from the floor. He picks it up with trembling fingers and it falls from his grasp, the enchanted gold slitting his palm open and pouring blood onto Scar's floor.

He grabs the knife again. Stows it up his sleeve. He can't even feel the cut.

Scar is waiting for him by the door. His brow is knitted as he looks up at Grian, shadowed eyes tracing his undoubtedly disheveled form. “You alright?”

“Let’s just go see her,” Grian says, suppressing a wince at his own abruptness, and opens the door. Scar makes a vague sort of noise next to him, like the cut-off start of a sentence, but when Grian looks over at him his face is blank. It doesn’t matter. Conversations can wait. He just needs to know what happened to Cleo. Who’s killing them off one by one. Who they’ll come for next.

He follows in Scar’s tracks through the bustling streets, surrounded by people heading to the market or chatting amongst themselves in groups. Children run under his feet, shoving and poking each other, a couple of them stopping to ask Scar about his fancy wheelchair. He indulges them with an unbothered smile, showing them the intricate redstone system that powers it and reminding them not to touch it. He seems casual, cheerful. Grian, meanwhile, can’t quite seem to find enough air.

He steps up to Scar’s side, his voice tight and small. “Can we please go faster? I don’t feel well.”

Scar frowns, reaching up and squeezing Grian’s hand with one of his own. “Sure. She’s... not far from here.”

The trip passes in a blur of faces and voices. They don’t leave the ring, but they disappear into a crooked and chaotic alleyway of houses. The weathered sandstone seems to loom over him, crushing down on him, trapping him under unforgiving and precarious rock. His hands are unsteady as he tries to hold on to one of his knives.

Scar stops in front of a tall granite and sandstone building, built almost in the style of a castle tower. His casual expression becomes something more resigned, and he rests his head on one of his hands. His eyes are dark and distant. “Do you mind knocking, G?”

He nods, grasping the copper door knocker and slamming it down. Three knocks, echoing around the empty alleyway. The knocker trembles in his grasp.

Slowly, the door opens. Scott is on the other side, his eyes red-rimmed and his overalls covered in dark rusty stains. He blinks when he sees Grian, then his eyes shift to Scar, and he nods. The lights around his head flicker between gold and angry crimson.

Silence hovers over them for a minute.

“How bad is it?” Scar asks.

“Bad,” Scott says flatly, stepping back from the door. “Come in.”

The first thing Grian registers when he steps through the door, much like the time he found Joel’s body, is the smell. Charred flesh, strong and vile. Smoke and cinders. Blood.

He resists the urge to turn on his heel, flee through the door. He’s seen worse than this. He has a stronger will than that.

Then, as he enters the well-furnished and clearly loved living room, he sees Cleo—

Or what he can only assume is Cleo.

Her skin is a mass of blisters and split skin, pure white bone poking through what little is left of blackened flesh. Her charred hand is clasped tight around a sword—the metal of it seems to have melted into her skin—and her hair is almost burned off. Her face is locked in a silent scream,

unseeing sockets and drying blood. No wonder Scott's covered in it.

He shudders, keels forward, and resists the urge to vomit.

A steady hand settles on his shoulder and another person sits down beside him, one strong arm wrapping around his shoulders and the other hand rubbing circles on his back.

"Breathe," the voice murmurs, low and gentle. Jimmy.

He wants to flinch away. Jimmy's a traitor, he might be responsible for this, and if there's any time to reveal treachery it should be now.

He can't get his limbs to move.

"Oh, *god*," Scar murmurs. His voice cracks, choked up and strained. "What *happened* to her?"

"Someone burned her alive," Scott says, the words laden with fury.

He remembers that day at the training grounds, Cleo alive and grinning at him, proud and tall as anything. The toss of her hair, the shine of her axe as she slammed it into a fencepost. *I'll burn them to ashes for it.*

That's too coincidental to be a random chance.

Someone who was at the training grounds did it. Someone in this room, someone who was close enough to hear her.

Who does that leave?

His head is buzzing, his hearing distorted as if from the bottom of a lake. He can't think. The air smells so strongly of rotten, ruined flesh. Everything is so much, everyone is so loud. He can't *think*.

The voice of reason, of grounding, that comes to him sounds remarkably like Scar. *Think, G. Who was there? Remember it.*

Bdubs. Tango. Scar. Scott was too far away, over by the shooting ranges. He couldn't have heard unless the words were carried by the wind. Jimmy might have been able to.

That's all of them that's left.

Another thought strikes him, ice-cold and devastating. Scar was gone for hours last night. He came back so late, Grian had never asked where he'd gone, he could have been anywhere. Scar could be acting. This could have all been a lie.

Tango could have done it. Grian doesn't know enough about him to know if there's any tells. Stupid, stupid, stupid. He should have kept a closer watch on all of them.

Or Bdubs. Who's nowhere in sight. This is his house, he lives with Cleo, Grian vaguely remembers hearing that in one of the meetings. They were planning to get married, or something like that, so it couldn't be him— but *who*—

The hand around his shoulders squeezes tighter, jolting him back to some semblance of reality. Jimmy speaks again, firmer. "Grian, *breathe*."

Another voice joins him, this one silky-smooth and familiar. "It's alright, Jimmy. I've got him.



Just... get Bdubs and we'll start planning how to hold a service for her. I'll look after G."

There's another shift of fabric and the arm around him releases, leaving him untethered and spinning. Everything smells like ash. He thinks, distantly, that the grilling stalls in the market will never hold any appeal for him again.

A light, rough-skinned hand settles on his head, combing softly through his hair. The gesture is warm and familiar. He leans into it, shifting slightly to the side and pressing against the metal frame of a wheelchair. Scar's wheelchair. He makes a soft, wounded noise, reaching up blindly and holding onto Scar's knee with one hand. In the background, he can hear footsteps up and down the stairs, some shouting, and the sound of someone bursting into tears. He doesn't look up, instead just staring at the wood grains that form a pattern in the floor.

"I know, rapsollion, I know," the voice—Scar—murmurs, toying with his hair. "I don't feel so good either."

He swallows around the tightness of his throat. There's the tramp of heavy boots on creaking wood, then soft murmuring. Bdubs and Jimmy, he thinks. "What happens now?"

A pause, then a deep sigh. "I'm not so sure anymore."

He lifts his head. Scar's face is constricted with grief, his eyes fixed on some unknown point, his mouth a hard line. Either Scar is a *very* good actor, or his grief is genuine. He studies the lines of his eyes, the movement of his hands, every little tendency he's memorized. It seems whatever the case is, Scar's in real pain.

He's jolted out of it by the sound of glass shattering, sharp and grating. He jumps, twists to look over his shoulder. Scott stands by a broken vase, tears flowing down his cheeks, fury written in every line of his body. He faces Bdubs. The man seems to have just as much aggression about him, his shoulders tense and his eyes shadowed.

"*Damn you, Bdubs, she's dead— you don't get to run away from this!*" Scott strides forward. The lights around his head glow bright as the burning sun, his hands locked in tight fists at his side. Jimmy steps forward, reaching out a hand in Scott's direction, but Scott shoves him aside. "You cannot hole up in your room like a coward while the rest of us sit here over her bleeding body, trying to decide what to do with a person who was murdered behind our backs—"

The hand in Grian's hair withdraws and pats him gently once. Then Scar is wheeling away, towards the both of them. He stops, raises his hands. "Whoa there, gentlemen. Order in the court."

"Shut up, Scar," Bdubs barks, his eyes glittering angrily. Grian winces instinctively.

It's as if the wind shifts, as if the room drops in temperature. Silence hangs in the wake of Bdubs's words, heavy and stifling. Scott steps back slightly.

Scar tilts his head slowly. Grian can hear the frown, the very edge of a threat, in his voice. "Now, Bdubs, let's be reasonable. I'd hate for any *serious* fights to start. We're all grieving. But arguing isn't going to bring your dear Cleo back. So let's just stay all nice and calm, alright?"

Bdubs twitches, seeming to wrestle with something. Several emotions flash across his face, but eventually he nods, slowly shrinking away. He walks with a limp, his eyes locked on Scar's.

"Scott, the same goes for you." Scott nods as well, straying to Jimmy's side and linking his arm with Jimmy's. His hands shake where they're grasped onto Jimmy's tunic. "That aside, can someone tell me if we have *any* clue what happened to her? When she died? Where? Who might

have killed her, why they did..." he trails off, then gestures to Cleo's body. "This?"

Jimmy's the first to speak, wrapping his arm around Scott's waist and leaning their heads together. "She died sometime last night. Tango—he found her body this morning. It was... a few streets away from the house. She was surrounded by blood and— there were weapons nearby, right?"

From the corner, Tango nods, standing to his feet and linking his hands behind his back. His shoulders are slumped, his eyes red-rimmed like Scott's. "Yeah. Two daggers in the dirt. One of them had the sigil of the Red Army."

Grian sucks in a breath. He hears Scar curse softly and staggers to a standing position. His steps are rocky, but he makes it to where he can stand beside Scar.

His friend nods, his hands tight on the arms of his wheelchair. "Anything else?"

"Couple of things, yeah." Tango mutters, reaching up one hand to scrub through his hair. "There'd been a struggle. Fences and posts were bashed in nearby. There was blood leading from a couple of streets over. She'd died fighting, must have been more than one person. Then someone used a flint and steel or something, and lit her up. Zombies go up like tinder."

Scar swears again, this time with more vehemence, reaching up and holding onto one of Grian's hands. "Was she already dead?"

Tango swallows. His shoulders shrink further inwards. "Not... quite."

Scott speaks, then, his voice hoarse. More tears glitter at the corner of his eyes. "I tried to save her, Scar. I really fucking tried."

"There's not much you could have done, Scott," Scar says. "Not if she was in a state like that." He gives another heavy sigh, then shakes his head. "Who was she last with? Who saw her?"

"I," Scott starts, then halts when the room turns towards him. He presses further into Jimmy's side. He's started to visibly shake, twisting his bloodstained shirtsleeves between his hands. "I did. Last night. It must have been— right before she died."

Grian notices, vaguely, that Bdubs flinches away.

The room is quiet enough for Scott's uneven breathing to be audible. Slowly, he pulls away from Jimmy's grip, walking over to Cleo's burnt body. "We went out drinking. Had a few laughs, caught up on life. Jimmy was doing a supply run out of the city, getting some materials for both our shops." He looks to Scar, who nods. "She... it got late, and she said she was going to head home. I wasn't thinking clearly, I was drunk, and she's always been able to handle herself. She left and that was the last I saw of her."

"Ah," Scar murmurs. His hand grasps tighter around Grian's.

Scott scrubs at his eyes furiously. "I should've gone with her. I didn't even know until this morning and even with a medic's training it was too late. It was my fault."

"Did you kill her?" Scar asks. Grian sends him a confused look—why on earth would he ask that question in front of *everyone*— but Scar resolutely ignores it.

"No!" Scott's brows furrow, outrage flashing across his face. He clasps Cleo's burnt arm, shuddering slightly. "She was my friend. We had a life pact. I'd rather kill myself than ever touch her."

Scar nods. “Then it’s not your fault. I bet if you’d gone with her, the only difference would be that there would be two bodies in this room instead of one.”

“I guess,” he replies, looking blankly at Cleo’s body and saying nothing further.

Silence reigns again. Bdubs has leaned against the wall, arms crossed over his chest and an unwavering glare fixed on Scott. Grian’s spine prickles. Tango sits on the armchair nearby, his head in his hands. Jimmy has joined his husband near the sofa. Scar is unmoving next to him.

Abruptly, Scar shifts, letting go of his hand. “Bdubs, did she come home last night?”

Bdubs turns towards him, some strange and haunted look about his face, and says nothing. Grian feels some strange sense of foreboding start to tug at him with icy fingers, little whispers that trail their shadows across his skin and tell him to run. Slowly, slowly, a picture forms in his mind.

He speaks before he can think too much about it. “Scar, I’m sorry to interrupt you, but I just remembered something. When we had the group practise at the grove recently, Cleo mentioned she was... planning to burn the Red Army to ashes. Given the manner of her death, I’m not sure that was a coincidence.”

He looks to Tango, to Bdubs. “It was entirely possible someone heard it.”

Tango raises his head from his hands.

Grian swallows. His heartbeat seems to grow stronger, echoing through his body. “It would be easy enough to ambush her and to enact what they might have thought was poetic justice.” He lets go of Scar’s hand. “And if she was coming home, but never made it back... then why are the blood trails leading *away* from the house?”

He watches as Scar’s eyes widen. Bdubs has frozen, gone still as a statue. It spurs him onwards.

“There were signs of a struggle. Presumably, whoever was responsible didn’t make it out unscathed,” he continues, readying his knife in his sleeve. He waits, for a moment, gaging the reactions of everyone around him.

“Your point, G?” Scar prompts.

One heartbeat. Two. The knife handle settles comfortably in his fist. He looks at the man across from him, voice as cold as ice.

“Bdubs, why are you limping?”

Three heartbeats. Four. Five.

His reflexes are just barely fast enough to block the knife that swings towards his face.

## Chapter End Notes

so... what do we think? :>

# all i ever wanted was a little bit of everything

## Chapter Summary

Grian's life spirals out of control.

## Chapter Notes

oh my god this BEAST of a chapter KICKED my ass. however!!! this is where the certified Most developments in the coliseum plot happen so buckle in!!!!

it is 9 pm june 21. i am exhausted. the things i did to get this published on my birthday and to celebrate double life. gonna go pass out now thumbs up

ALSO warning this is where the blood and violence AND the implied sexual content tags really come in so be forewarned. there are also discussions of suicidal mentality

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The split-second reaction time that comes from a lifetime of being on the run is the only thing that saves him.

He stops the knife centimetres from his face with the blade of his own, forcing Bdubs' arm back and shoving him away. It's the same fighting style as the person who attacked him in the tunnels. *Bdubs* is the same person who attacked him in the tunnels.

The information takes a second to register— only a second, but it's enough. Bdubs closes the distance between them and there's a sudden burst of *pain*, powerful enough to knock him to the floor as the left side of his head burns. He stumbles, falling with one hand over the side of his face, and registers vaguely that people are yelling. Someone's next to him, holding him in sturdy arms, and there's the sound of a door slamming, an incoherent scream of rage.

He can make out, muffled as if underwater, a voice that sounds vaguely like Scar's. Something about *go after him, now*.

"You're okay," someone murmurs on his right side, clear and gentle. "You're okay, you're alright. We'll fix you up."

"Bdubs," he gasps out. His hand is soaked with something warm and damp. He doesn't dare take it away from his face to see what it is.

"Scar and the others are giving him chase. He won't get away." The arms around him shift, one careful hand pressing gently to the burning injury. It feels like having a hot poker laid to raw skin, shocking and mind-numbing in its suddenness. He yelps, blindly slapping the hand away.

Somewhere, amid the fresh rush of pain, he registers the words his companion says.

He pushes himself up on unsteady hands, ignoring the concerned noise the person next to him

gives, forcing himself to balance even as the ground tilts a bit beneath him. He shrugs off the hands, focuses his vision enough to see the front door swinging and open in front of him. The person in his peripheral shifts, and he realizes it's Jimmy.

He really ought to apologize, even if the suspicion was logical. It wasn't him, after all, it was Bdubs, who—

"I'm going after him too," Grian says, resolute.

Jimmy steps next to him again, one hand resting almost protectively on his shoulder. "Grian, your ear and face got wrecked. I don't want you to bleed out."

"I won't." He clenches his fists tightly until his knuckles burn, until he can feel the prick of nails in his skin. It helps balance out the dizziness, the strange disorientation, and the creeping dread as the dead silence in his left ear doesn't change. "Jimmy, I have to— I have to help find him. I have to." He's not sure how to name why. He just knows it's the truth.

Slowly, Jimmy breathes in. Slowly, he takes his hand away, and nods. He looks pale and haunted, just like the rest of them, but there's some understanding in his eyes when he steps back. "Promise me you'll get help for the wound afterwards."

Grian nods back to him, then promptly wishes he hadn't. "I promise. I'm not that stupid."

Silence, for a moment.

Then Jimmy draws his sword, his mouth setting into a firm line. "Best of luck on the hunt."

Grian takes off, the pounding of his feet against the earth a familiar drum. Whether he's flying or running, injured or not, the feeling of fleeing somewhere is a song as old as time to him. Thump, thump, thump. Steady as his own heartbeat, steady as the blood pouring down his face.

He wonders, vaguely, why Jimmy's words sent such a chill down his spine.

He's used to tracking people. Even in his distant time before the Watchers and their kind, he was an expert hunter and prankster who learned how to track down his victims with ease. Bdubs wears heavy boots with a distinct print that sink into the bloodstains and the scattered sand, leading off into another system of closed-in alleyways.

Interestingly enough, they're soon joined by the tracks of wheels. Scar is on his tail too.

He stumbles into the first dark alleyway, leaning briefly against the gritty sandstone of a nearby building and catching his breath. He chokes when he tries to breathe in, breaking into a coughing fit and wincing when it makes the pain in his face so much worse. He's probably going to black out.

It doesn't matter. He has to find Scar and Bdubs, so he keeps running.

And find them he does.

Or, rather, he hears the murmur of voices in the third turn of the alleyway, deep and dark where the sun above is blotted out by canopies stretched between the tall buildings. He creeps up behind a group of barrels, knife in hand and at the ready, and then stops.

Because Bdubs is standing still, his empty hands at his side and his back turned to where Grian is.

Because Scar is behind him, a loaded rifle pointed at his back, and his voice is eerily calm even though Grian can see Bdubs shaking.

Because Scar speaks.

“Why did you do it?”

Bdubs raises one hand, swiping it across his face. His voice is thick with tears and anger. “What do you want from me, some kind of deathbed confession? Just fire the stupid gun.”

“Tell me what happened to her,” Scar repeats and the words are almost *gentle*. “You and Cleo were my friends, Bdubs. I know you loved her and I know there’s more to this. I won’t...” A deep breath out. “I won’t hurt you. Just tell me why you have her blood on your hands.”

Bdubs gives a groan of pain, his shoulders folding inwards as he sinks to the ground. “Can’t you just kill me and end it?”

“Listen, Bdubs, you can be suicidal all you want. But I owe it to me and to you and to *her* to find out the truth here. You can go and kill yourself after this, but this can’t be your legacy. You have reasons. Just *tell* me. Please.”

Silence reigns over the dark alleyway. Grian doesn’t dare make a sound.

The words are slightly muffled, so he leans closer, turning his uninjured ear towards the conversation. Even then, it’s barely enough to catch how softly Bdubs speaks.

“She did something stupid.”

Slowly, Scar lowers his gun. “And what was that?”

“She wasn’t... she told me she was going to be out late that night and then stay over with Scott. Always was true to her word, when she said she was gonna be gone she always was, and I...” He gives a heavy sigh, scrubbing both his hands over his face. “Look, I know you’re gonna hate me regardless but I don’t know how to say any of this without making it worse.”

“Hate is such a strong word, Bdubs. I don’t truly hate anything or anyone. I can have my likes, have my dislikes, but I prefer to keep myself as a more objective person. Some sort of omniscient narrator willing to hear everyone's story.”

Bdubs gives a weak laugh. “You’re a madman with a god complex.”

“A very smart madman. I’m here to know what happened, not to hold grudges.”

“Alright, alright. Well, point is, the Red Army found me out. They didn’t know about all of you until recently, but you know I have a bit of a loose tongue, and I mentioned that I was part of a revolution to a buddy. He turned me in. Then the Army came after me. Told me I could spy for them and get away with my life, or they’d torch my home to the ground and hunt me and Cleo down.”

He gives another trembling laugh, sniffing afterwards. “Fat lot of good that deal did me. Anyways, I... started giving them stuff on you. Then Joel found me out and I had to kill him. Hated it, couldn’t stand the guilt. Cleo didn’t have a clue it was all going on, I only ever visited or met with the Army when she was out. I didn’t want to drag her into it.”

“But then she came home.”

Bdubs nods. “Martyn and Skizzleman and Etho came over. Something about an emergency gathering, something had really freaked them out. I... I told them that you were all planning to meet tomorrow. They wanted to ambush you. Then Cleo walked in on it.”

Grian shudders, feeling cold run its way up and down his spine. He curls further down into the shelter of the barrels. The image is far too clear in his mind, but more chillingly— Martyn knows about their group. About their efforts. Martyn’s known about *him* all along.

He’s been played for an utter fool.

“She ran to tell you immediately. Always was a loyal person,” Bdubs continues. His voice has gotten flatter, heavier. “Martyn and the others chased her down. It was three to one, and she was drunk already. That’s not to say she didn’t give them hell, and she did get away from them. I was... that’s when I ran after her. I’ve always been faster than her, I caught up easily.”

A beat of silence. If Grian leans closer and strains hard enough, he thinks he can hear Scar breathing heavily. “And?”

“We started fighting. She beat the crap out of me, even a healing potion couldn’t fix it all. I didn’t want to fight her. I wanted her to stop. I knew she was gonna die no matter what and if the Red Army had a struggle getting her it was gonna be slow. They aren’t exactly merciful.”

Scar makes a noise of agreement. “No, they aren’t.”

“Yeah. Then the... the rest of the Army caught up. We were on a roof, far up where she thought I couldn’t climb. She underestimated me sometimes. That doesn’t matter, though, because Martyn shot her down. She fell far enough to break her skull.”

Grian winces, curling in tighter. He hears Scar hiss slightly. He remembers feeling his body plummeting towards solid ground far below, the shakiness of Scar’s voice as he described breaking both his legs.

“Why was she burnt, then?” Scar asks, and there’s not as much smooth confidence in his words anymore.

There’s a long pause, broken only by the shifting of fabric and the creak of the buildings around them.

“It was a kindness,” Bdubs croaks out. “She was already dying but she wouldn’t go for a while, and I couldn’t give her over to the Army. I couldn’t put her through their questioning and torture and executions. So I burnt her before they could get her body. I hope she... I hope she understood that.” He gives an awful, grating laugh, mixed with the wetness of suppressed tears. “It was the only thing I could do to save her.”

Grian’s pretty sure Scar says something in response, but whatever it is, it’s too quiet for him to catch.

“Are you gonna kill me now?” Bdubs asks. He sounds almost hopeful.

A beat. Grian’s heartbeat echoes in his ears, his hand clenched so tight around his knife that his knuckles burn.

Then—

“No.”

Grian jerks his head up, craning it slightly to see Scar. Scar's lowered his rifle into his lap, his hands resting over it. Bdubs stands up, turning back around, and his tear-stained face has shock written all over it. "What do you mean, no?"

"How much have you told the Army?"

"The plans you guys made. The meeting room area. Some of the past attempts. But no names. No dates. I lied and said I didn't know, you all used pseudonyms and stuff."

Scar breathes in, deeply, and laces his hands in his lap. "What will you do now?"

Bdubs shrugs, shifting his gaze to his shoes. "Die, probably. Either one of you lot will kill me or I won't be able to go on without her."

"Will you go back to the Army?"

"Not unless they force me."

Grian finds he can't move. Scar twists his hands together, a sign of deliberation that he always does when mulling a plan over. There's some mix of fear and hope across Bdubs' face, grief and anger seeming to war with each other. He knows, somehow, what Scar's going to do.

And Scar does exactly that.

"Go. Leave. If anyone asks me, you got away. Leave the city. Don't come back. It's none of my business what happens to you from there, but just get out of here."

Even though he's on some level been expecting it, the words still send a cold shock through Grian. His hands clench tighter around his knife, the blade of it digging into his other palm. He doesn't dare make a sound, sinking back behind the barrels until he can't see the two of them anymore.

Then, there's the sound of feet scuffing against pavement, and a long sigh.

Scar wheels past him, doesn't seem to notice him at all. Grian's not sure whether he's grateful for the fact.

He looks down at his hand. Red blood seeps over it, red like Joel and Cleo's was. His left side is still dead silent but his right ear fills with almost maddening high-pitched ringing. He tilts his hand, watches the blood drip down onto the wood of the barrels and sink into the grains.

The coldness in his chest hardens into ice, stopping up his throat and lungs and freezing his mind into one singular thought.

He's going to *kill* Scar for this.

---

The floorboards give way under his feet as he creeps down the hallway, but his tread is light enough to not make them creak. He picks his way through the dark blindly, clinging tightly to the faintly glimmering knife clenched tightly in his right hand. The house is still, silent. His own movements are no louder than a whisper, only the soft rustling of clothes— or he's pretty sure they are. Jimmy helped clean and bandage his face when he got back, but he still can't hear on his left. He's starting to suspect that it's going to be permanent.

He shoves the thoughts away and focuses on the task at hand. He has a goal here.

Scar's door is ajar, as it is every night.



He's trembling, he realizes.

None of this is right. Scar shouldn't have let Bdubs go. Grian shouldn't be here, waiting to make sure Scar is asleep before cutting his throat. It tears him up somewhere deep in his chest, ripping apart his heart and lungs, the conflict between what he wants and what needs to be done. Scar may be their leader, but he's a liability. He let a *traitor* go. He's one too.

So why can't Grian bring himself to just go into the damn room?

Scar's always asleep by this hour—it's nearly one in the morning. As Grian skulks closer, he can see Scar's muscled back turned to him, the covers kicked down by his feet. His chest rises and falls evenly.

Maybe killing Scar isn't the solution. Maybe it is.

He grips the knife tighter. The room smells like incense, just like Scar's hands. It'll be so quiet in the house after this, no bursting laughter or soft songs, no sound of Scar and Jellie racing around the living room with a cat toy. It'll be empty.

He remembers the tension in Scar's jaw when he'd returned to the rest of the group, saying *Bdubs got away from me. I almost had him.*

Scar had *lied*. None of the alliance knew about it, no one had a clue he had let Bdubs go on nothing more than a hollow promise. Scar was *weak* for the things he loved.

But, as he stares at Scar's sleeping form, he finds a hysterical giggle bubble up in his throat. He's no different, is he? He can't even bring himself to finish a job because he's too busy being in love and staring at Scar's stupid shoulders and becoming *mortal*.

He can't do it. He should do it. He shouldn't.

Thinking things through is so complicated. It seems like he never makes the right decision.

He slips past the threshold, cautiously stepping into Scar's room and avoiding the loose floorboards. He can't see Jellie anywhere. Maybe that's for the best.

It only takes one stab. One stab, and he's free of all of this, and he can defeat the king on his own. He can leave everything behind. He can right whatever this mess of feelings within him is by getting rid of all of it and never thinking of it again. He can end it.

He walks up right behind Scar, readies the knife, and then freezes.

Because one amber eye opens, looking directly at him.

"Hello, G," Scar says, his voice rough with sleep. Grian shivers despite himself. "Come to finish what Bdubs started?"

He swallows, unable to move as Scar rolls over, eyeing him like one predator facing off another. His hands are shaking as hard as anything, but he can't make them stop. "You let him go."

"I did," Scar replies, leaning back against the pillows. "I take it you're mad?"

"You *think*?" Grian hisses. He forces his limbs to move, clenching his hands tighter around the knife until his knuckles burn. "You're a bloody *traitor*!"

"You can believe that if you want."

He breathes in, deeply, and looks Scar right in his impossibly beautiful eyes. “I do.”

His knife comes down in a shining arc, aimed directly at Scar’s heart where lines of explosion scars and thin slits under his pecs cross. One stab and it’s done. He can—

The knife stops.

Scar smiles at him, his hand tightening around Grian’s wrist. He’s pushed himself up to a half-sitting position with his other arm. “We can talk this out, Grian.”

“The last thing I want is to talk this out with you. You— you’re a liability to our team, letting people go who could lie to you and run *right back* to the enemy. I watched you drop him and then make up some *false* excuse to the team you claim to be loyal to. You’re a danger.”

His companion arches an eyebrow. “And the rest of them aren’t? *You* aren’t?”

“It’s— that’s different. You know it’s different.”

Scar clicks his tongue, shakes his head. He pulls Grian a little closer to where his knees knock into the bed and he almost falls over, lifting his other hand from the covers and tracing one finger over the curved edge of his knife. “By how much? You get mad at me for letting a murderer go, but you were about to off me and leave the alliance even weaker. Give the Red King an advantage. The difference between you and me is very small, G.”

“That’s not—” He fumbles, and words fail him.

Scar slowly tilts his head. Something in his gaze shifts. His free hand traces the curve of Grian’s wrist, gentle as a breeze.

“What?”

Grian grits his teeth. His face burns. “I should kill you. I should have done it sooner.”

He tries to drive the knife down again, but his wrist is still caught firmly in Scar’s grip.

Scar settles back on the pillows, an easy smile spread across his face. Shivers and shudders crawl down Grian’s spine. “Hey, now. I get it. You could kill me, I could kill you. We’re both bad people. But I’ll be entirely honest,” he looks up, then, dark eyes meeting Grian’s, “I don’t think this team can stand to lose anyone else right now, no matter our own feelings. Truce?”

Grian grimaces slightly, going to wrench away from Scar. “This is *your* fault.” He breathes in, his hands shaking. “I don’t want—” *To talk with you. To be around you. Not when you do stupid things like this and put everything I’ve trusted you with on the line.* He’s severed ties and severed heads for less.

“Blood?” Scar asks. “I don’t. I can tell you, G, I’m not feeling whatever bloodlust you are.” His eyes slowly fall from Grian’s face, tracing slowly down his neck and body, hooded and warm. Grian swears he can feel every one of his nerves standing on edge. He wants so many things, and exactly none of them are allowed. “Well, not the first part. Maybe the second.”

His own damn body betrays him and shudders again at the words. “Don’t say things like that.”

“I won’t if you don’t want me to. Only if you don’t want me to.” His infuriating partner gives him one more heat-filled look, striking a match and setting tinder to smolder. Grian resists his own impulses with all the remaining will he has. It’s hard when Scar’s mouth curls in that tantalizing

half-smile. “But unless I’ve misread this whole situation over the last few weeks—and I don’t think I have—you wanted me in the bed for a reason. Don’t tell me it was just because I’d be helpless here.”

He braces himself up with one elbow, his face close enough for his lips to brush Grian’s neck. Grian nearly groans at the ghost of hot air on his skin. “Or *is* that why? You want something from me, Grian. Show me what.”

Matches and tinder be damned, and every single one of Grian’s grievances with them. Scar has doused the world in oil and tossed a torch in it, just to watch it all go up in flames.

If he wants an inferno, Grian can give him one.

“I will,” he breathes, and swings his legs over Scar’s lap, and then he’s kissing him with the full force of the fire Scar has made rage in his chest. The knife clunks when it hits the floor.

His partner only pauses for a brief moment before his hands are sliding up Grian’s sides, settling on his lower back and pulling him close until Grian is collapsed fully over him, hips to hips and chest to chest. He’s *strong*, stronger than Grian expected even now. He bites softly at Grian’s lip and Grian acquiesces, and then Scar’s clever tongue is in his mouth and his scarred hands are on bare skin, and *gods* this is how Grian is going to die.

Grian pulls himself away, chest heaving for breath. When he speaks his voice is rough. “I want you dead. I want you to kiss me.” He breathes in, fear and venom curdling in his throat. “I hate that it’s both. That’s what this is.”

“I figured as much,” Scar chuckles, his mouth pressing to Grian’s neck and worrying at the skin there. Grian swears under his breath and can feel his partner’s laughter. “You can have me. I think you know I want you too.”

“Then *do* something about it,” Grian hisses.

One sharp bite to his neck, something that will definitely leave a mark later, and then Scar is looking up through dark lashes with a scheming grin. “Oh trust me, I’m working on it.” His hands undo Grian’s shirt, his mouth presses to Grian’s jaw and then the side of his mouth and then the centre of his lips. “I plan to do something just like this.”

Then his mouth covers Grian’s once more, Grian is drowning in his own hunger as the kisses grow deeper and layers between them grow inconsequential, and the rest after that is a hazy blend of skin and need. He doesn’t think, doesn’t plan. Doesn’t so much as look at the knife. He gives up the fire of a hunt for the fire of feeling Scar’s mouth and hands on him.

It’s been a long time, really, since Grian’s screams weren’t screams of fear.

## Chapter End Notes

i’m sure that seducing your would-be killer who you have a big fat crush on is a great solution, scar.

also obligatory plug there is now a fun scarian discord called maniacal mountain run by yours truly! stop on by the tumblr (same user as here) and grab the link :>



# run to show that love's worth running to

## Chapter Summary

The aftermath.

## Chapter Notes

GDAY EVERYONE!! first and foremost, coliseum has some INCREDIBLE new fanart by the INCREDIBLE kkoct-ik.

<https://artanogon.tumblr.com/post/688710457849184256>

he also did the chapter cover for this chapter on tumblr!!! go check that out too!!!

also! we have passed 12k hits on the fic and i just wanted to say thank you so much for staying on this journey :> <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Why did you let him go?” Grian asks, the words muffled by the fact that his face is buried in the fabric of Scar’s pillows. Morning sunlight streams in through the partially-drawn curtains, soaking the room in beams of gold. It makes his own skin glow like candle wax, pale against Scar’s tan obtained over years of desert sunlight, a pretty contrast where his arm rests on Scar’s bare hips.

Scar turns over slightly to look at him, combing his fingers through Grian’s hair and smoothing it back from his face in soothing motions. Grian gives a soft sigh, letting his uncovered eye flutter shut at the touch. “I understood him.”

He curls a little deeper into the covers. “I don’t get it.”

There’s a pause. Then the sound of Scar drawing in a deep breath. “It’s a dangerous game when you start getting involved in politics and war. You can... you can love someone a lot, be closer to them than anything. But you never know when you might lose them. Whether your enemy takes them out or you have to leave them behind.”

“You’ve been in his place?”

The covers shift. Scar’s hand leaves his hair, settling over his waist instead. He feels the heat of Scar’s body envelop him as his partner curls closer. “Yeah. More than once. It... it tears you up, even if it was the right thing to do or you have no other choice. You can have all the right intentions. It never makes it easier. Never makes you earn anyone’s forgiveness.”

Grian nods slightly, his mind trailing back to the hazy memories of whatever world came before the Watchers stole him away. He remembers hazy faces, yells and sobs of grief, collapsing buildings and slaughter and guilt that choked him like a noose he could never untighten.

Maybe he does get it, more than he’d like to.

“It feels like it’s all your fault,” Scar continues, tracing idle patterns on Grian’s lower back where it’s covered by the blanket. “You think of everything you could have done to prevent it. It sure doesn’t help if more people cut you out for it, kick you when you’re down. I couldn’t do that to Bdubs.”

“You saw yourself in him,” Grian murmurs, shuddering slightly.

Scar gives a hollow chuckle. “Sure did.”

“I... I think I understand that after all.”

Scar’s hand stills, both his arms wrapping around Grian’s lower back. Grian had asked him not to touch or look at his shoulder blades last night, somewhere in between the desperate kisses and the feeling of Scar’s mouth between his legs. Scar had respected it. He still is. He never even asked any questions.

It touches Grian’s heart more than he’d like to admit.

He feels the weight of Scar’s chin settle on his head. When he speaks, Grian can feel the rumble of his voice. “Wanna talk about it?”

That’s... a good question.

He grasps the jut of Scar’s hip, skimming his fingertips over the curve of his hipbone. He can see the light of the sun even through his closed eyelids, warmth enveloping him. He knows that his knife is carefully set on a drawer on the other side of the room. Never to be wielded in Scar’s direction again if he can help it. He’s not sure what he was thinking.

Maybe he’s lured in too much by Scar’s strange charm. Maybe it’s foolish to trust him at all.

Maybe, for once, he’s willing to be a fool.

“I came from a little village,” he says, softly, the words catching in his throat and coming out raspy. “Out in the middle of nowhere. There weren’t many of us. It was... very religious. We prayed to these deities, the Watchers, and they blessed our town of strange people by keeping us secret and helping our crops grow.”

Scar makes a noise of acknowledgement, his lips pressing to Grian’s forehead.

“But they weren’t really a blessing. They tormented all of us. This boy... I can’t remember his name. I don’t remember any of them. But they gave him visions of things he couldn’t control. Showed him bits of the future. Enough to help sometimes, but it just... drove him mad. He ran away and I never saw him again.”

“Dicks,” Scar mutters. Grian can’t help the startled laugh he gives, slapping Scar’s hip in something like admonishment.

He takes a deep breath in, pressing just the slightest bit closer to Scar. “That wasn’t the half of it. They gave us random puzzles, challenge towers that you either... completed or you died. I think it made them laugh to watch us fight and struggle. No, it *definitely* did. Gods are cruel.”

“And yet you joined them.”

“I’m getting to that.” He reigns in his snappish tone. “Sorry. It just always pissed me off when they would come around and I got tired of it. I started defying their puzzles, insulting their names, and

refusing to pray to them. I started playing pranks on them. Turning *them* into a joke.”

“I’m guessing they didn’t take too kindly to that,” Scar says. Grian can feel the way his lips turn up slightly in a smile.

“They certainly didn’t. Well, sort of. I think they were annoyed by me and they also respected me for being able to stand up to them. I can’t claim to understand it. They always said I had a mortal mind in an immortal body. I think it was supposed to be an insult.”

“I’d rather you be like me than like them.”

“I’d rather not be like *you*, thank you very much,” Grian retorts, finally opening his eye to send a disapproving squint in Scar’s direction. He feels Scar shake with a laugh. “I prefer to have some common sense.”

“I have common sense! I’m a perfectly sensible gentleman.”

“And money grows on trees.”

“Well, fruit grows on trees which *makes* money when you sell it— sorry, I’m derailing things. Please do continue.”

“Pfft— well, there’s not much more to say. They gave me an offer to join them. I told them to shove off. Then they…” He shudders, remembering standing over hollow emptiness and feeling the same pit in his stomach. Turning away with a blank expression, as if the village had never mattered to him at all. “They destroyed the village. They knocked it all down to trap the people, and then just… made it vanish into nothing. As if it had never existed at all. Then they took me with them.”

“Oh,” Scar murmurs.

Grian gives a dull laugh that he doesn’t feel. “There’s my sob story.”

Scar shifts, pulling back a little bit to look at him. Grian notes with surprise that grief is written over his face, a mix of obvious pity that stings like a nettle and soft kindness. He’s never seen Scar make a face like that.

“I don’t need your pity,” he says abruptly, before Scar can get a word out. “I know it was bad. I barely remember it. I just… you know. I think I might’ve needed to tell someone.”

His partner nods, brushing a kiss to his forehead. “Well, just know that I’m glad you trusted me enough to tell me.”

The words give him pause.

Does he trust Scar?

He sinks deeper into the covers, turning the thought over in his mind. Scar knows more about him than anyone else in the Alliance, anyone in his life since perhaps the early days of his old village. He can’t even remember who his friends *were* back then, so that’s not exactly a stunning vouch, but it’s something. He knows a lot about Scar too. Not enough, definitely, but he has a suspicion not many are privy to nearly as much information. He’s here, in Scar’s bed, despite what happened last night. He’s in command of himself. No one else’s blood is spilled.

And he plans to get up like usual, eat a slice of toast and discuss plans with Scar, trust that those

plans Scar promised in a dusky underground room will be followed through on. He'll sit in the living room and pet Jellie. Laugh more than he's laughed in eternity.

He's not sure about *trust*. He is reasonably sure, however, that he's home.

"I hate to disturb you," Scar murmurs, drumming a rhythm against his spine, "but we really do have to get up. It's already late."

He makes some vague noise of disagreement, turning to bury his face fully in the pillows and grumbling louder when Scar half-heartedly tugs at him. Scar pulls harder, then seems to give up.

At least until he bundles Grian in his arms and flips him over, rolling them both around on the bed until Grian's trapped under his *extremely* heavy weight. Grian shrieks, slapping at his shoulders and squirming under him. "Scar, let me *up*—"

Scar grins at him, bracing himself up on one elbow and leaning smugly into Grian's face. "Why should I?"

"You're heavy and also because I hate you," Grian grumbles, giving the best offended pout that he can.

"I think I'm going to trap you here forever and ever and *ever*. Gonna trap you in bed and kiss you for the rest of time and nothing will ever happen ever. You'll never have to complain about getting out of bed."

Grian shoves his face into Scar's collarbone. "I think this is a bit too extreme even for calling someone's bluff."

"Oh, come on. Like you wouldn't want to lay here under the covers for the rest of time, spending day after day *relaxing* and letting good ol' Scar dive beneath those blankets and—"

He slaps his partner's shoulder hard enough to echo through the room. "*Scar!*"

---

He does, eventually, get up. It takes a lot of arguing and protesting, and maybe *also* a few minutes delay as Scar's hands wander too low, but Scar manages to wrangle him out of bed and to the kitchen table. If Grian walks with a slight limp, that's between him and the knowing look he *swears* that Jellie sends him.

He stumbles his way into his seat, wincing at the way that the wood squeaks against the floor. Scar makes his way to the counter, preparing himself a cup of the heavily spiced tea he normally makes for himself on lazy mornings.

How odd. Grian knows his routine by now.

Scar's braces are squeaking slightly, he realizes as he watches Scar maneuver around the kitchen and grab some coffee beans to make coffee for Grian as well. They don't ordinarily make that much sound.

"Your braces are squeaky," he says, leaning his head on the kitchen table. He watches Scar pause through half-closed eyes, still heavy with contentment and the shivery aftershocks that run down his spine.

Scar blinks at him a couple of times. "Are they? I didn't notice." He moves around for a moment, then nods. "So they are."



“You’re very observant today.”

“I’ve been very distracted by a pretty rapsallion for the last few hours, G.”

“Oh, lay the nicknames to rest, would you?”

His partner grins viciously at him. “You’d love that, huh, sweetheart? Sugar? Honey bunny? Darling dearest? Cutie pie?”

“I *should* have killed you last night,” he grumbles, slamming his forehead down against the table and then promptly regretting it. “I wouldn’t have had to hear this.”

He hears Scar give a soft laugh from somewhere to his left, then the clink of a cup next to his head. Gentle fingers comb through his hair again. He makes a noise of contentment, blindly leaning into Scar’s touch.

“I really thought you were going to,” Scar says, rather abruptly.

Grian forces himself to look up. “Huh?”

“Kill me. Last night.” His partner sighs, his brow wrinkled with tension and some strangely lost look about him. “I thought that would be the end of me. After all this time. All the times everyone else tried to get rid of me.”

Slowly, he reaches up, tangling his fingers with Scar’s. He focuses his gaze down on the patterns of grain in the wooden table. Something new and forlorn hangs heavily over the both of them. “I don’t think I could have done it. I don’t even know if I wanted to.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that.”

“Though if... *that* was meant to be a distraction, it worked.”

Finally, thankfully, Scar laughs. It’s airy and a little bit shaky, but still a laugh. Some of the tension drops from the room, banishing the shadows in the corners and welcoming in a bit of the sunlight.

He hears the screech of a chair against the floor, then the hiss of Scar’s braces adjusting. “I’m good at charming myself out of things.”

He snorts. “Believe me, I’ve noticed.”

“I— yeah, I would imagine. It was real, though, G. You mean more than that to me. Well, that too. But...” He gives another sigh, his hand unclenching around Grian’s. When Grian looks up, Scar’s buried his face in his forearms. “I love you, Grian. I hope you know that.”

Stillness settles around him. In the distance, he hears a bird call out. His limbs won’t move.

Scar raises his head, giving him a crooked grin that doesn’t quite match with the odd shine to his eyes. “Sorry to keep loading surprises on you.”

He forces words to his throat. They come out in a hoarse croak. “Don’t be sorry.”

One of his hands reaches out. It wraps around Scar’s again, then both their arms and hands are folded together, rings and scars gleaming in the light. The jukebox crackles some idle tunes in the living room. Nothing dares disturb them.

He knows the three words he really ought to say. They stick in his throat, though, building up and

choking him like coal dust.

So, instead, he squeezes Scar's palms tightly. He hopes it gets the message across.

"Can I kiss you?" Scar asks.

"Always."

*Love me. Love me. You can have me. I love you too.*

The words bubble up in his throat like a fountain, spewing out from the weight in his chest that sinks into his heart and lungs, drowning him in their desperate fury. He can't leave, he can't walk away. He can't dare to move. The words claw at him and howl to be let out, to be let past the wall he can't even put a name to that keeps blocking them.

Still, he can't force them to his tongue.

So he pulls Scar as close as he can, climbs up onto the table and sits so that Scar can lean up to him between his legs. He kisses Scar with a fury and hopes that it's enough to get across what he can't make himself say.

*I love you*, he pours into every kiss that feels like drowning in dry land.

He has so much to do. There's so little time. He has so much he needs to plan for and know and the end is coming for him. If he messes up, there will be no life and home to come back to. He dances on the knife's edge of losing everything.

But as he slides his way into Scar's lap and stays there until his coffee goes cold, he finds he doesn't mind. The knife may be dangerous, but it's so beautiful too. Just like Scar. Just like this pretty, sunlit and magic-touched life he lives within the walls of Scar's house.

Let the world wait another hour. His time is far too precious to waste what little he has left. He'll take every second he can get, for all the seconds he's wasted.

He holds Scar like the world is ending, because it is, and yet he can't find it in himself to be afraid.

## Chapter End Notes

this chapter was MEANT to have plot in it. however. scarian took over the entirety of this. the chapter count might need updating LOL

# you rely on wit and people die on it

## Chapter Summary

The beginning of the end.

## Chapter Notes

hi there folks!!!! sorry this chapter took... checks hand. over a month. my mother has been in hospital recently and is currently in recovery, family issues, preparing for a new semester, etc etc. i hope the nearly 7.5k chapter makes up for it ^^

this fic has passed 1000 kudos and is almost at 16k hits, and the support for it has just been baffling. thank you all so much for your patience and for joining me on this journey. i can't believe we're almost at the end (of the first book, mind you!)

love you all <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

This meeting feels like farewell.

Grian sits on a table near the central fireplace of the meeting room, one knee hiked up and his arms wrapped around it. Jellie sits next to him. Scar allowed her to accompany them for once and she'd been greeted with noises of delight and general cooing that wasted about five minutes of their meeting.

He would have bristled at the lost time once. Now, he finds he doesn't really care. Instead, he rhythmically pets Jellie as she settles down for a nap, and listens to Scar talk with a fervor in his eyes. Jimmy stands next to him as they go over a map together. Scott sits on a chair nearby. Tango is cross-legged on the floor, watching them both with a dead-set intensity on his face.

They're all that's left of the alliance. It's a sobering thought.

Scar lets the map flutter to the floor. It almost falls into the flames instead and Grian winces as Jimmy fumbles to catch it before it can go up. That's Joel's legacy— what a waste.

However, Scar recovers from his blunder with remarkable smoothness. He rolls his sleeves up, adjusting a little in his chair before addressing the room once more. "I guess the last pieces of business are in order. What weapons do you all have?"

"Plenty," Scott chimes in, standing up and drawing a knife from the holster at his side. "If anyone needs some, I have more than enough in my shop. I've... also got Cleo's. I know she had some specialty stuff."

"Anything of use?" Scar asks.

Scott pauses, his fingers wrapping a little tighter around the knife handle. His mouth flattens a

little. “I don’t know. It’s not all that good unless you know how to properly wield it.”

“Then let it be,” Scar says, pushing himself to his feet with a soft grunt and walking to place his free hand on Scott’s shoulder. “Let her rest.”

Scott nods, his grimace deepening, and leans slightly towards Scar. He looks unsteady on his feet as the lights around his face flicker and dim. Some odd dark and sticky feeling hovers around him, Grian realizes as he looks a bit closer, like melted tar. He presses into it and gets met with a bolt of grief so sharp it almost chokes him.

Scott’s eyes flick towards him, then narrow. Grian schools his face into something calm and kind. He does feel a bit of sympathy rising in his chest— he can’t help it, he’s got a generally fond impression of Scott, and Cleo’s death has been hard on all of them.

He scratches behind Jellie’s ears and nods. His voice comes out a bit hoarse. He’s not been speaking much today. The end feels too imminent to chat idly. “I think between all of us we’ll be fine on weaponry. You and I have plenty, Scar, and Tango and Jimmy will be fine as well. We’ve all got diamond gear, right?”

Diamond armor’s rarely worn in everyday life and hard to acquire. Only for dangerous mining expeditions where mobs lurk in every corner or for the most dangerous of fights. Commonly, unless you’re rich or lucky enough to know someone who makes it, you have iron and leather at the best. That’s what Grian’s always had.

But between Scott’s forging skill and Scar’s money, he’s got full diamond gear for the first time in his life. It feels foreign.

The others nod. Grian stands up from the table as well, gathering the sleepy Jellie in his arms and walking towards Scar and Scott. He passes Jellie into Scott’s arms and Scott startles a bit, readjusting his grip before starting to scratch at her belly. She purrs and curls further into his embrace, and Grian watches as Scott’s shoulders relax just the tiniest amount.

“Thanks,” Scott murmurs softly. Grian gives him a nod.

Slowly, the rest join them. They end up in one huddled circle around the fire, close enough to brush shoulders and hands. Grian can feel the heat Tango gives off even from a couple of feet away, and as Jimmy walks up next to him, he swears he can feel the brush of phantom wings. He discards it for now but files the thought away for later. He’s been around Jimmy many times before and felt nothing of the sort.

Someone’s hand settles on his shoulder blades. He doesn’t look at who, but he guesses it’s Scar. None of the others usually try to touch him.

“I’ll contact the network to help contain the guards,” Tango says. He speaks much quieter than usual. There’s no need to be loud when it’s just all of them so close in the dimly lit room. “They can secure the upper shopping ring at least.”

“Buys us time,” Jimmy replies with a shrug. “Better than nothing.”

Scar’s eyes flick over to him, amber-gold and reflecting the flames. “You’ll get us in.”

Jimmy nods.

“I’ve got weapons and traps,” Scott adds. The words are empty and emotionless, but his hands are gentle as he keeps petting Jellie.

Scar fiddles with one of his bracelets. His expression is drawn and alive with intensity. Grian finds he can't quite look away. "No one else in the city gets in until the king's head rolls."

Grian knows his time to speak, his place in the plan. Even with three of their number lost, they still fit together like one of the well-oiled machines that run the city deep underground. Out of sight and perfectly smooth, one single purpose.

He's one gear, one piece in the puzzle, but he has a debt to pay and a crucial role to fill. Scar knows this.

He takes a deep breath in.

"And I'll be the one to make sure it does."

They exchange one more glance, one solemn nod.

Scar lets out a breath at the same time Grian does, his hand untensing on Grian's shoulder. He pulls his scarf over his head, his face shadowed by the folds of deep red fabric. "Well, my friends, it seems we're done and the time of our little meetings is at an end. Anything else, we communicate it door-to-door or through messages."

They've all figured the place isn't safe anymore. Not with a murderer still on the loose who knows the path of the tunnels that would lead the army directly here. Scar may be soft-hearted, but he's not an idiot. Grian does have to keep reminding himself of that.

"See you all in two weeks, gentlemen," Scar says, tipping his head in farewell. With a hiss of his braces and a click of his cane, he turns his back, and their sheltered circle breaks. Cold and stark reality resumes.

Grian takes Jellie back from Scott's arms, exchanges goodbyes with all of them. Two weeks exactly. The day of the attack is his last day. Their only chance.

He just has to trust Scar.

And, he thinks as he follows Scar down the tunnel to their home, he does.

---

Time passes in a blur.

He's not sure how many days or nights it is after the alliance meeting, but the next incident that burns itself clearly into his brain is when he and Scar are sitting on Scar's bed late one night, nibbling on miniature pies they bought on a shopping trip earlier. His is filled with lamb and saffron and sweet onions, almost as good as the pastries Cleo used to make.

(He misses that first day when he arrived in the city and she was there to greet him, no idea what would become of either of them in the future. He knows there would be no value in going back, but sometimes he wishes he could.)

Scar stands up to put away their plates, his cane clicking against the floor as he leaves, and Grian lets his eyes drift shut in the dusky lamplight.

He doesn't even realize he's fallen asleep until someone's hand lays on his shoulder. He jolts up blindly, swinging one fist out at whoever managed to sneak up on him, and pauses when he realizes it's just Scar. Or, rather, he tries to pause a bit too late. His fist still smacks into the side of Scar's face.

Scar winces. “Hey, G. Sorry. You weren’t waking up when I called you.”

The words sound oddly muffled and distorted. Then he realizes Scar is on his left side and the thought is a bucket of ice water doused over his jumpy nerves.

“I didn’t hear you,” he says slowly as he takes his hand away.

He watches as Scar’s brow furrows, then goes up, and his eyes widen slightly in realization. Scar reaches out, cautiously, hesitating before gently touching his fingers to Grian’s left ear. Grian breathes in determinedly and doesn’t flinch at the way he can’t hear the touch land.

Scar tilts his head slightly, leaning a bit closer and examining the wound that runs across the left side of his face. Grian takes the opportunity to map out the sunspots that dot Scar’s own.

Then Scar shifts, taking his hand away and standing up one more time with a slight groan of pain. He plonks himself back down on Grian’s right, then gives him a small, uncertain smile. Grian finds himself frozen a bit at the little gesture.

“I think you’re permanently deaf,” he says, regret shining in his dark eyes. Some kind of familiar grief—Grian supposes he’s familiar with how it feels to have news like that delivered. “It looks like your eardrum got torn.”

Grian’s already figured his hearing isn’t coming back, after days of stony silence with no shift no matter how much he tries to pop his ears or fiddle with the scar. For some reason, though, the absoluteness of Scar’s statement makes a heavy weight crash down on him.

He’s never been without all his senses before. He needs to be able to hear what people are seeing and hear if someone is tracking him, he needs to be able to fight and hunt and feel *safe*.

Scar shakes his shoulder. “Hey, rascal, come back to me. You’re staring at nothing.”

Grian turns to look at him blankly and says nothing.

Scar watches him for a long minute, then sighs, moving away and instead starting to fiddle with his braces, unlocking them and undoing the buckles. It’s an intricate routine that Grian’s seen a few times now, and he always wonders how Scar makes sense of where everything goes. It seems so much to keep track of. So much to adjust to and figure out how to live with.

He can’t even hear it when Jellie jumps up on the bed next to him.

Eventually, Scar lays back against the blankets, scooting himself up to rest his head on the pillows. Jellie pads onto his chest, settling down under his chin and curling into a ball. He motions with one hand for Grian to join him and Grian moves without thinking, wrapping a blanket around his shoulders and crawling over to Scar’s side.

He fists his hand in the blankets over Scar’s chest, trying to quell the rising emotion forcing its way up his throat, strangling him like weeds. It feels like being choked, being slammed from all angles, like too many weights stacking up on him until his spine finally cracks.

He shoves his face into Scar’s shoulder and speaks into his skin. “I’m scared.”

Well. He didn’t mean to say that.

“I know,” Scar replies softly, leaning down and pulling him closer. “Believe me, I understand.”

He shudders, clinging to Scar a little tighter. It's all too much, and if he doesn't figure out some way to shove all the fear back, he's going to be torn apart into a thousand unfixable pieces. Guilt and hatred and worry slam him from all sides, and the ground shakes under him, and he hates it. It hurts too much to be mortal. It hurts too much to feel.

The jukebox in the living room doesn't sound the same anymore. He could be chased down so easily, ambushed, and not have any idea. His left side feels all *wrong* all the time and it's even harder to be comfortable in this mortal skin.

He wants so badly to be whole and perfect again, and yet somehow he still hates the idea of it. That would be another victory to the Watchers.

(But it hurts, it *hurts*.)

"I don't want to think about it," he pleads, wincing at how badly his voice cracks. "Let's just— let's talk about anything else."

Scar kisses his forehead, then nods and leans down to kiss Grian's jaw as well. "Okay." He nuzzles his face against Grian's neck. "One thing, though, before we move on. I'll be your ears, alright? You've done plenty of stuff for me that I can't, so I'll do the same for you."

He breathes in sharply, feeling something in his chest crack open a little more. "Thank you."

"Always, rascal. I've got you," Scar says, with all the determination of the sweet-talker that rallied an army of traitors. Grian feels Jellie shift, curling up between and nosing at Grian's hand. He feels so warm. "Now, do you want to hear a secret?"

He unclenches his hand from Scar's shirt, winding it in his hair instead. "Sure."

"Okay." Scar pauses, as if searching for a topic. "I think... I fell in love with you when I saw you walk on the roof. I was really scared you were gonna slip and fall and I'd watch you die. You didn't even have armour on."

Grian remembers that day clearly, the sun beating down on his neck and shoulders and the terracotta tiles below his feet burning in the summer heat. His borrowed shirt flapping in the wind, the gusts through his hair and between his hands, reminding him of how he used to be able to *fly*.

When Scar speaks again, his voice is soft with something like reverence. "But then you walked out on that sloped part of the roof, and you kept your balance so easily, and I... I was watching as you tilted your head back and *laughed*. You looked so happy, so carefree, and the sun lit you up just right for a minute, and I... it sounds so ridiculous, but for a minute I swear it looked like you were glowing and there was a halo around your head."

He takes a deep breath in, burying his face in Scar's shoulder and running his fingers through Scar's coarse hair. His heart thunders deep in his chest. His ribs *ache*. How strange to be human again. To feel this much.

"I swear, my exact thoughts at that moment were 'I've had an angel walk into my life'. And I just watched, and watched, and you looked down at me and gave me that beautiful smile..." A kiss to his forehead, his cheek, his neck, the edge of his mouth. "That was when I knew I was done for."

"Scar." As much as he hates to admit it, he tears up a little.

In the pitch darkness, he feels cool fingers lace with his and then a smiling mouth press against the back of his hand, a soft kiss followed by another pressed to his wrist. He gives a soft, slightly wet

giggle and rolls over on his back, smiling up at Scar's dimly visible face. The nothingness on his left may as well not exist.

He's beyond gone by now. He used to dance far above these mortal planes, with the void as his territory and the human world somewhere far below him he could never reach. Even when the veil wore thin, his mind was always still up there, his head lost among the stars.

Now, Scar's reached through that illusory veil and yanked him down head-over-heels, from cold sky to an endless ocean he's forgotten how to swim in. He's a mortal again, and he's drowning, sinking in beyond saving, but the stars look so much emptier down here.

Plus, he thinks as he kisses Scar's rough cheek, he has a lifeline to cling to.

If he lets his eyes fall shut, it's like he can see the inky blue-black expanse where those two worlds overlap. Endless and unknowable and so easy to get lost in.

Scar's laugh against his throat brings him right back down to earth.

---

Things take a strange turn the next day. The morning starts simply enough, Grian dragging himself out of bed and into the shower and standing under the hot water until his skin turns a bright red, scrubbing at it until the rawness helps him feel something. Then he wanders back downstairs to find Scar—shirtless *again*— wheeling around the room and gathering up bags of stuff that's been strewn all over the floor. He looks up when Grian walks in, shooting him a bright grin.

“Morning, sunshine. Sorry about the mess.”

He raises one eyebrow, stumbling to the kitchen and starting to brew a pot of coffee. “Did the living room get hit by a sandstorm?”

“Nope!” Scar rummages around a little more and makes a triumphant sound. “I have been looking for all my secret hidey holes of magic and weapons supplies that I *definitely* didn't lose track of. Just had to... dig around a bit.”

Grian chuckles, watching the coffee drip slowly into the pot. “I'm sure.”

“As you should be,” Scar replies, wheeling into the kitchen and taking his hand to press a kiss to his palm. Two pistols and a bag full of various strange objects sit on his lap, which he sets on the kitchen table. “I was wondering if you'd like to accompany me to the shop today and maybe go experiment with a few things afterwards.”

“What kind of things?”

“Oh, you know. Spells, guns, enchantments and such. Just final preparations for what's to come.”

He shrugs, pouring himself a cup and adding a generous amount of honey to it. “Sounds good to me.”

“Wonderful! Then I'll—” A knock sounds at the door and Scar pauses. “Hang on one minute.”

He watches curiously as Scar moves away, grasping his cup between his hands and leaning against the wall between the kitchen and living room. He doesn't have a knife on him, thinking he wouldn't need one this morning. Stupid of him. He can grab one from the kitchen, if needs be, but he hopes Scar will be quick on the draw and take care of any attackers with the gun on his lap. Maybe Grian could get a decent shot if he threw the kitchen knives.



But, when the door opens, it's just Jimmy on the other side.

"Hey Scar," Jimmy says, softer than usual. He looks troubled. "I was wondering if I could talk to you."

Scar tilts his head, confusion evident in his voice, but nods. "Sure. Come on in."

Jimmy steps over the threshold, his shoulders bowed slightly as Scar moves aside. Grian's rarely seen Jimmy this somber, save for Cleo's death and that strange talk with Martyn at the castle. A funny, unnameable feeling tugs in his chest, like a warning.

Jimmy's eyes flick over towards him, dark as chips of obsidian. "Privately, if you don't mind?"

The lack of even a greeting surprises him, but he nods. "I'll be upstairs."

And, well, it's not technically a lie. He waves goodbye to Scar, then makes his way up the stairs. Then he sits at the top of the stairwell with his cup of coffee, turning his good ear towards downstairs as he sips the burning hot drink.

He hears the creak of Scar's wheelchair, then a long sigh and the shifting of fabric.

"What do you want, Jimmy?"

"I..." Another sigh. "I want to give you a warning."

A beat of quiet. Scar's voice sounds darker, testier, when he speaks again. "A warning about *what*, exactly?"

"All of this. The plans, the way things are turning out. The little bit of things that I've heard. Grian."

"What does he have to do with this?"

"Everything. You're being a fool, Scar."

"Really? I'm not blind. Do you really think I would have fallen for him if I didn't consider the danger first? I know what he is, Jimmy. I know fate's involved in all of this. I'm just... choosing him anyways. I've outrun everything else. I got this far. It would be weird for me to stop doing stupid things *now*. Either I'll be fine or I'll die. I know that."

Another long pause. Then there's the slight squeal of the couch as someone moves, soft footsteps, and the brush of fabric. "How much longer until your luck runs out?"

Scar scoffs. "What, you think all of this is luck? Have faith in some of my own skills."

"More of it is luck than you know."

A vaguely exasperated noise. "Even if that's true, which it's not, I'm okay if this is the end. I'm okay if the revolution fails as long as something comes out of it."

"You just want Ren dead."

"Is that so wrong?"

"It's selfish, Scar. You're doing so much of this for you. For the things you want, and the things you're set on, and everyone else dies for what you believe in. You'll follow them if you're not

careful.”

The air’s split by the sound of metal sliding against a leather sheath. “Did you have anything of value, or did you just come here to lecture me?”

“I’m *trying* to warn you. You’re my friend and I don’t want to see you get hurt again.” More footsteps, this time fading away. The front door squeaks as it opens. “I care about Grian too. He’s a good man. But none of this is going to end well for either of you.”

The door slams shut.

Silence reigns.

Grian waits for quite a while before he dares come downstairs again.

When he does, he finds Scar sitting alone in the living room, his face in his hands. Jellie winds around the wheels of his chair and rubs her head against his feet, mewling in concern when he doesn’t even look up. His shoulders shake slightly.

In that moment, he looks very fragile.

“Are you alright?” he asks, walking up to Scar very slowly to not startle him.

Scar jumps a bit, taking his hands away from his face and scrubbing at what look like a couple of stray tears at the corner of his eyes. He grins, but it’s weak and shaky. “Hello, rascal. Don’t you worry, I’m fine. Just wasn’t an easy talk.”

“Okay,” he replies, even though he knows Scar’s lying, and puts one hand on his shoulder. “Let’s get back to work.”

He nods. They move on with the day as normal, banter and the trip down to the market stall with Pizza, selling wares and then heading outside the city to practise sharpshooting and magical tricks. They laugh and chat and act the same as ever.

All of it feels hollow, but Grian tries to ignore it.

Despite his attempts, the feeling nags him all day and into the late night. It leaves him antsy and restless. He needs to do *something* with himself, quell the itching in his hands and the itching of the scars on his back. Talk to Scar or confront Jimmy. Face something within himself that’s only growing and growing.

He wanders his way to Scar’s room, clad only in one of his stolen button ups from Scar’s closet that hangs off him like a short dress. His scars hurt something fierce under it.

Scar’s waiting for him, sitting up in bed. His eyes widen when he sees Grian’s clothes, his face settling into a mischevious and slightly hungry smile.

“You look very nice.”

“Thank you,” he replies with a faint smile of his own, climbing onto the bed and crawling onto Scar’s lap. He presses a kiss to the corner of Scar’s mouth, then one to his jaw. Scar’s hands settle on his thighs, squeezing slightly and then sliding up to feel his hips and waist.

“Mind if I take this off?”

*Now or never*, some corner of his mind whispers. He swallows thickly.

“About that...” he trails off when Scar looks up, keen curiosity written on his face. “I want to show you something.”

Scar nods and Grian takes a deep breath in. He moves back just enough where he can turn around in Scar’s lap, then settles his shaking fingers over the buttons of his shirt. Scar will understand. He has to.

“I used to have wings,” he murmurs, undoing the first few buttons. “The Watchers stole them when they made me mortal again.”

He lets the shirt fall, baring his marred shoulders for Scar to see. They’re a mass of twisted reddish flesh, as if the wings he once had were torn bloodily out of his back instead of just being removed. It was his greatest fear to let Scar catch sight of them.

But there’s only a soft inhale, and then rough hands that gently touch the irritated tissue, sliding down his back and hips and settling there. He shivers.

He feels Scar’s lips settle against his neck, a brief kiss. His mouth moves against the flushed skin. “They’ve been cruel to you, angel.”

Grian lets his head fall back against Scar’s shoulder and wonders if he might be about to cry.

Even if they’re doomed, they find the space to be kind to each other and love each other. To understand and talk. Grian can’t remember the last time he had that either.

(Gods, he hopes, he *prays* they aren’t doomed.)

---

He needs answers, though.

He decides that when he wakes the next morning, sprawled over Scar with aching hips and heavy eyelids, thrown out of his sleepy haze by an ungodly amount of thunder. Scar remains deep in sleep, his arms wrapping tighter around Grian’s waist like he’s hugging a teddy bear.

He stares out the window across from them, watching flashes of lightning through the thin curtains. Storms are rare in the desert, especially heavy ones like this. It’s kind of soothing. It’s chillier than he’s become used to, though, and he’s grateful for Scar’s body heat.

He has no idea who Jimmy is, really. More than he seems, that’s for sure.

Otherworldly. With the things he says, the keenness in his eyes, that strange aura around him when he was talking with Martyn. The fact that he’s married to Scott, another nonhuman. It’s hard, if not impossible, to keep that secret for an entire marriage.

Most importantly, he might have answers. From what Grian overheard, they’re not good ones. But any knowledge is better than none. He’d like to at least know if he’s doomed.

That’s that, then. He’ll track down Jimmy later today and learn anything he can.

An hour later, while he and Scar are washing up the dishes from breakfast, he mentions that he’s going to go visit Tango and spend some time in the upper shops. Scar nods, presses a kiss to his temple and then drops off a list of things he needs Tango’s aid with for Grian to deliver. They say their goodbyes and Scar heads off to fix up his stall for the bad weather.

Grian spends a little longer sitting on the couch by an open window, Jellie curled on his lap as the

rain mists his face. He sips his second cup of coffee of the day and watches water flood through the street. He wonders how long the storm's going to last.

Eventually, he decides that's enough procrastination. He lifts Jellie off his lap with a muttered apology as she meows in protest and nestles her among the couch pillows. He closes the window, sweeps the floors before he leaves. Wraps himself in one of Scar's ponchos and grabs an umbrella.

Then he walks out the door, locks it behind him, and heads towards the upper rings.

It's cold, oddly so. Grian swears he can see his breath mist in the air as the rain pours down. It batters against his umbrella in a constant drum as he walks towards the distant outline of the flower shop, the red-and-gold sign with faded paint creaking as it waves back and forth in the wind. It's an old and well loved place, evidently. Even looking at it crowds his mind with questions, none of which he knows how to get an answer for.

He reaches it just as the rumbles of thunder start to shake the ground. He winces at a particularly bright bolt of lightning and pushes the door open, stepping past the threshold to a rush of warmth and a burst of flowery scent.

The shop's currently empty, save for Jimmy, standing behind the counter and organizing the shelves with his back to Grian. Perfect.

He takes a moment to glance around the shop itself. The walls are covered in art and well-decorated, lots of detailing and trinkets and just the right balance of chaotic and artful. Pots and bouquets of flowers crowd the walls and stands, in full bloom despite the desert heat. Ivy hangs from the ceiling and almost brushes his head. It feels like stepping into something otherworldly.

The bell over the door jangles as he shuts it behind him.

Jimmy turns around, a question on his lips, but it turns to a smile as he catches sight of Grian. "Hi there, Grian. What can I do for you?"

Grian lets out a long breath, collapsing his umbrella. It's bad luck to have those open indoors. "It's the end, isn't it?"

Jimmy pauses, setting down the small succulent in his hands. The smile drops from his face as he leans over the counter a bit, resting on his elbows. That eerie expression Grian can't quite place returns, seeming to war with something like concern or regret. He doesn't say anything, though, as if he's waiting.

So Grian keeps talking.

"I saw you and Martyn that night," he says in a rush. Jimmy's eyes widen, but Grian cuts him off before he can say anything else. "I thought you were the traitor and told him our plans. But you were warning him because you saw something else, didn't you? You saw... the future."

Slowly, Jimmy's shoulders deflate, sinking downwards as his gaze settles on the countertop. "Not enough to help you, if that's what you're looking for."

That is a *little* disappointing, to be honest. Having a true prophet to help them (to give him some sense of *security* in the future, but he's not looking at that) would make a difference. But Grian just needs something, anything, any idea of how to handle what's to come.

It almost shocks him when Jimmy speaks again out of nowhere. "I don't really... *see* the future. I hear it. In the things people say. Words have weight to them, and if you can listen right, you get a

sense of things.”

Grian steps closer, clipping his umbrella on his belt and setting his own hands on the counter as well. They almost touch Jimmy’s. “You’re like me.”

Jimmy’s eyes flick up and meet his own. “Sort of. I used to be, before, well, a lot happened. But yeah.” He chuckles slightly, reaching out to settle his fingers over Grian’s. His hands are calloused and warm. “I know you.”

He hesitates after he says the words, as if he wants to add something more. But nothing comes out, so Grian takes the opportunity instead.

“What do you hear about us?” he asks, holding Jimmy’s gaze. “Our plans and our future?”

Silence drags on for a long minute, punctured only by the sound of rain on the windows outside. No one reasonable is out shopping for flowers in weather like this anyways, so it’s just them and the storm.

“Ruin,” Jimmy murmurs, quiet enough that Grian almost doesn’t catch it with his deafness in one ear. “All I hear is ruin.”

“Oh.” He pauses, a sinking feeling settling deep in his chest, and pulls away. His ribs suddenly feel much hollower. He unclips his umbrella, turning away before Jimmy can catch sight of whatever must be playing across his face. “Thank you, Jimmy. That’s good to know.”

He heads towards the door, but Jimmy calls out to him. “Grian, wait.”

He turns, slowly. “Yes?”

“No matter what... no matter what happens, I can promise you one thing, okay?” Jimmy fiddles with the succulent, rolling the pot between his hands and not looking at him. “I swear that things will turn out alright.” He sets the succulent down, bowing his head over laced fingers. “I swear it.”

He feels a sudden shudder go down his spine, as if a cold wind has blown across his back. He looks over his shoulder to check the door, but it’s firmly closed and no draft is coming in.

As quickly as the feeling comes, it fades.

He breathes in, clenching his umbrella handle tightly, and swears the world around him has shifted. Not enough to be truly noticeable, but just enough to be there. Jimmy still hasn’t raised his head.

“I believe you,” he says.

He finds he means it. Something just feels... right.

Jimmy nods. “Be well, Grian.”

“You too.”

He pushes the door open, unfurling his umbrella and stepping back into the relentlessly pouring rain. The bell jingles again as the door closes behind him. He walks away quickly, far quicker than he came, and doesn’t look back.

---

His last stop for the day is Tango’s shop. He sells logs and enchanted books— his prices are high, but Grian suspects it’s half because everyone haggles it down and Tango likes to argue.

It doesn't matter right now anyways. He's not looking to buy today.

The shop seems empty as well, but Tango sprawls on top of the counter, reading a book of some kind as a jukebox plays next to him.

Grian clears his throat and Tango startles, setting down his book and sitting up properly. "Hey, man! What's up?"

He passes Tango the list and watches his eyebrows raise. He only got a cursory look at it, but he knows it's packed with names and coordinates and places where Tango is supposed to plant TNT around the castle and upper ring to destroy the roads and prevent help from arriving. Grian can't help but wonder if it will injure citizens in the process.

(It's war, though, isn't it? Aren't casualties meant to happen?)

(Still, the thought doesn't feel right.)

Tango slides off the counter in one smooth motion, leaning against it and folding the list up before sticking it inside his glove. He folds his arms over his chest and kicks one leg up, sending Grian an inquisitive look. "When does he think the attack's happening, then?"

Grian squints in thought. He's starting to lose track of time, even though he knows he ought to be counting his days by now. Has it been three days, five since the last meeting? Gods only know.

"In four days," he says finally, pretty sure that he's right.

Tango sighs in aggravation, scrubbing his hand through his hair. "Yeah, okay, great. Coordinate a fourth of the damn revolution in that time period. That's reasonable."

"To be fair, we're on a tight schedule," he replies, giving Tango a stern look. He knows it's not as piercing as one of Scar's, but he hopes it gets close. It seems to still get the point across by the way Tango flushes sheepishly and ducks his head. "We didn't plan for three losses."

"Mmm." Tango nods, cracking his knuckles. "Well, thanks for the message, boss. Anything else?"

He shakes his head. "Not really. I just came to check in and ask if you needed any help with the traps or talking to any contacts."

"Oh, sure thing. Weather's looking nasty, though, so it won't be happening today. I'm probably gonna head home, actually, doubt I'll be getting any business while this is going on." He gives Grian a smile, gesturing towards the door with one shoulder. "Why don't you walk back with me? We can talk a few things over."

Well, it's not like he really has anything else to do.

Plus, he hears the unspoken fear of being caught alone. Too many of the others have died that way.

"Sure."

The walk takes a little longer than usual with the slippery cobblestones and flooded streets, but it gives them plenty of time to discuss some of Tango's ideas for cutting off aid to the castle. Grian deems most of them improbable at best, but a few of them sound quite promising. It's a nice discussion. Tango's sharp and easy to keep conversation with and the weather has left the streets relatively deserted.

Still, for some unknown reason, Grian finds himself becoming uneasy as they walk down to the ring full of houses. Tango's acting no differently, the atmosphere hasn't changed. Yet his spine prickles and he feels like he's missing something.

The thunder pauses as he and Tango pass through the gateway between the rings, leaving them with just the pouring rain and the occasional flash of lightning. It's nice to not have the ground shaking every few seconds.

In that moment, he realizes what's wrong.

He hadn't before, with his imperfect hearing, and he curses himself for it. Footsteps. They're being followed.

He catches Tango's wrist, pulls him back slightly and leans on his shoulder, giving him a sappy smile. Tango's face contorts with confusion, an inevitably loud question on his lips, and Grian just barely nudges his head in the direction he heard the footsteps come from.

Thank all the gods, Tango seems to catch on, leaning his head down against Grian's. He laces their fingers together, guiding them both in the directions of his house. He has explosive traps hidden in his basement that he can detonate if needed, a last-ditch effort if he was to ever be caught. It would likely be a suicide plan, but he'd been willing to do it, he'd said in a hushed voice next to the light of the fire.

There's a lot of footsteps.

Grian hopes, despite all sensibility, that the explosives won't be necessary.

"Oh, that's what you're thinking. Well, right this way, baby," Tango says, his voice just a bit exaggerated over his normal speaking level. Grian suppresses a wince. Tango's acting skills evidently aren't the best, but maybe they'll do. Maybe it'll be enough.

He giggles, flirty and utterly ditzy. Oh, let the Watchers strike him down right now. This is the *worst*.

He follows Tango through the threshold, down into the basement, and holds back a sigh of relief when the footsteps keep following them. They'll be stuck inside the house now. Tango can find a way to detonate things if needs be. It'll bring the guards running, sure, but Scar and the others will know. It'll give them a chance.

"What's the surprise down here?" he asks, keeping his voice light and oblivious. Let their pursuers think they've got the edge. It's bait for the trap.

One set of footsteps becomes louder than the others, no longer subtle.

Someone clears their throat, a deep and even voice ringing out from behind them. "This is."

The trap snaps down.

He turns, slowly, keeping his hand laced with Tango's.

Oddly enough, he recognizes the one who must have addressed them. His hair is familiar, spiky silver-grey, so distinctive that Grian could hardly miss it, even if he barely remembers where from. He allows himself a moment to stare, to try and collect the dots. It'll help him feign surprise if he hesitates.

Then, in the back of his mind, it clicks. This is the man he saw Martyn fighting the first day, back at the beginning of everything.

Evidently, that conflict must have been solved, because behind him stands two members of the Red Army. Skizz, the knight at the gate who had been there to greet him every time before. And, more pressingly and slightly more worrying, Martyn himself. He steps up to Etho's shoulder, his eyes narrowing.

The two men who unintentionally led Grian to where he is now stand in front of him. Everything comes full circle.

Maybe Grian should thank them.

The thought is almost enough to make him laugh.

He looks up at Tango, stuttering out a laugh and giving him an uncertain smile. "If I'd known you were going to bring guests, I would have made different plans for the night."

"Cut it out, Grian," Martyn snaps, and Grian flicks his gaze back down to lock eyes with him. They're cold and unreadable, nothing in the sea of green. His heart stutters a nervous beat despite himself. He's not used to not being able to read people. "I don't know what you and your boyfriend are up to, but you're both complicit in treason."

He blinks at Martyn innocently, less because he believes the act will work and more because he knows it will nettle Martyn. Never let it be said he can't be petty. "Pardon?"

Martyn pinches the bridge of his nose between his fingers, giving a long sigh. "Both of you are under arrest for aiding in a conspiracy to kill the Red King. You will be charged with treason accordingly, with witness testimony." Some of the exasperation fades, replaced by a vicious and almost maniacal glint in his eyes. "You shouldn't discuss things like that in public, you know. Etho, Skizz, bind them."

He swallows, glancing around at the room and taking another good look at the people in front of them. Martyn draws his sword. Etho has chains in his arms, Skizz has cuffs. He flinches back as they advance a bit and looks up to Tango, a silent *what do we do?*

Tango gestures one shoulder to his workbenches behind him, where Grian knows a lever is hidden under one of the benches. His eyes flick towards the door and he squeezes Grian's hand, tight enough to hurt.

Grian nods slightly. The message is clear enough.

His eyes flick around the room one more time. Martyn, Skizz, and Etho, in a semi-circle in front of them. Etho's got the wiriest build, probably the easiest one to bowl into and slip past. He has no way of knowing if anyone else is guarding the door. He'll just have to hope not.

Skizz draws his sword too. It's now or never.

*I'm sorry, Tango*, Grian thinks, and tears himself loose from the man's grip. He takes off at a run, twisting so he can slam his shoulder into Etho's chest and shove his way past. Etho grunts in pain and Martyn cries out, making a grab for him. He ducks under Martyn's hand, barreling up the stairs in a reckless sprint. He hears the thud of footsteps behind him—probably Martyn—and pushes himself to run faster.

*Come on*, he pleads to empty air, risking a glance over his shoulder and seeing Martyn only a few



paces behind him. *Tango, come on—*

In the nick of time, Tango's voice echoes out from behind him, a gleeful cry. "So long, boys!"

Skizz and Etho's voices overlap, cries of *stop* and *Skizz, hold him back*, and then *run—*

Martyn freezes as the sound of TNT being lit echoes around them and Grian makes a noise of triumph, using every last ounce of adrenaline in his body to fling himself through the door and run down the street. His feet pound on the ground, a hard and steady rhythm that makes his head ache. No one follows him, but he can still hear shouting.

He ducks into the shelter of one of the alleyways, curling behind a defunct and rusted machine someone's carelessly tossed to the side.

And, just as he pokes his head back up, the house explodes.

## Chapter End Notes

don't worry, they're probably not dead!

feel free to drop a kudos or a comment, and as always, come hang out on tumblr or on the scarian discord i moderate ^^

<https://href.li/?https://discord.gg/ZYwgZRKAUX>

# come with me now, i'm gonna take you down

## Chapter Summary

Tango's last-ditch effort spirals into something greater than Grian could have ever imagined, and the end finally, truly begins.

## Chapter Notes

oh my god, guys. i don't even know what to say. first and foremost: i'm so sorry it's been months. my mom had further health challenges, i caught covid, my hands have been full of university stuff, and my parents' divorce just got finalized. this chapter was also just another beast that didn't want to come out until it was well and ready. thank you all so much for your patience, and rest assured coliseum and the equinox will be continuing!

second: holy SHIT thank you so much for all the love. we're at over 21k hits now and almost 1300 kudos, making this one of the most read fics in the fandom. i read all your comments and even if i'm very bad at replying please know each and every one of them makes my day and motivates me to keep writing. thank you all for your support. it means the world to me <3

third: this chapter is a wild ride. buckle up, and i hope you're a fan of repressed characters getting to have a mental breakdown

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He doesn't stay to watch the dust settle.

In fact, he's gone before the first neighbours can so much as step out of their front doors. If he gets caught watching this or one of the knights survived and manages to grab him, he's dead meat. It's possible the explosion wasn't fatal and they could all still be alive.

Tango might be too. However, Grian thinks he'll understand, if he ever does make it out. Why Grian couldn't go back to him.

He feels nothing at the thought and keeps running blind. His non-deaf ear is ringing from the aftermath of the explosion and his eyes are stinging from ashes being blown into them, but he knows the path back to home by heart. He'd remember it even if every one of his senses was stolen from him.

He's abandoned his umbrella in the remains of Tango's house and the rain soaks him to the bone within seconds, but he doesn't care.

He has to tell Scar. Things have got to end. He's just got to get away before anyone can see him, before any more disasters can happen—

He crashes into someone head-first with a loud *thump* and an *oof* of breath, so fast that they both tumble to the street below. He hacks up a small cloud of ashes and struggles away from whoever it is, blinking his eyes clear. Through the tears, a face takes shape, and he slowly recognizes the man sprawled under him.

He blinks. “Jimmy?”

Jimmy, his umbrella now blown into a gutter and the rain soaking into his poncho, blinks right back at him. “Hi there. You alright?”

His hands are trembling and give out on him when he tries to prop himself up. Jimmy catches him, sitting up on the drenched pavement and keeping Grian upright with a steady hand on his shoulder. His helmet is lopsided, half hanging off his head. Grian reaches out and fixes it without thinking, adjusting the goggles as well. He can barely clench his fingers around them.

That looks better now. There’s some order.

“Grian?” Jimmy prompts, squinting at him.

The words trip out of his mouth, breaking the silence in one clumsy flow. “Tango blew up his house. We got followed. So Tango had to stop them. Now it's all gone.”

It takes Jimmy a minute to register his hasty words, but then his eyes widen. He takes his hand away from Grian’s shoulder and scrubs it through his rain-soaked hair instead. “Son of a bitch.”

A hysterical giggle bubbles out of his throat. He’s never heard Jimmy swear before.

The laugh devolves into cackling, until he’s doubled over with his head pressed to his knees, floodwater rushing past only a couple of inches from his nose. His body shakes with equal parts fear and nonsensical glee. It’s all so much. It’s all too bloody much, everyone is dying and everything is destroyed, and Jimmy is swearing, and nothing in his life makes any goddamn sense anymore.

He’s not sure if he’s laughing or crying now.

Somewhere between fits of mania, he registers a strange buzzing ringtone. Then a crackling and a fragmented voice that sounds vaguely like Scott asking *is everything okay?*

“I’m a few quarters down,” Jimmy murmurs as Grian feels a hand rub soothing circles on his back. “Something’s wrong with Grian. Come here?”

*Give me five minutes. I’ll be there.*

Then the crackling ends.

He kneels there until more footsteps pound against the path, splashing water on his already ruined clothes. His chest hurts and his vision flickers between dark and light. He can’t stop shaking— he can’t even look up to see who it is.

Cold fingers brush his forehead. He’d flinch away if he could get his body to move.

“*Breathe,*” Scott whispers, and the tightness in his chest drains away in one abrupt rush. He sucks in greedy lungfuls of air, coughing and whooping when it’s too much for his lungs to handle. His elbows land against the hard stone below and promptly give out on him. The floodwater is lukewarm and muddy when it hits his face.

Two sets of hands lift him back up. He can't see who, and he's not sure why, but there's just darkness—

He remembers, then, that he needs to open his eyes.

He finds that he can't, though. Instead, he buries his face in the shoulder close to him, rough fabric scratching his cheeks. His chest heaves with broken sobs as he sinks deeper into whoever's holding him. He's going crazy, but he feels nothing, and it doesn't make sense. Maybe he's dreaming. Maybe he's dead too. Maybe this is his last moments and he's buried under the rubble with Tango. It doesn't matter— he's going crazy anyways. Dead or not.

“Should I get Scar?” The voice is familiar. He knows it. He heard it earlier, but for some reason, his brain refuses to connect anything. Broken wires torn from a control board, sparking and melting and doing absolutely nothing. He's breaking apart. A useless machine. “He looks bad.”

“Probably,” the person he's leaning on murmurs. “I think Tango's dead, too. May as well all go, then, and make a new plan. I can carry him if I need to.”

A soft hiss of breath. “Okay.”

“Grian?” He's pulled away from the shoulder he's hid himself in, Jimmy's blurry face filling his vision. “Let's go talk to Scar, alright?”

He nods vaguely. Jimmy takes both his hands, standing up slowly as Grian follows. His legs tremble under him and he stumbles as soon as he puts his full weight on them, lurching forwards. Jimmy catches him easily, wrapping one arm around his waist as Scott steps up to his other side. The three of them walk away together as Jimmy's umbrella lies abandoned in the streets, dripping muddy water onto the ash marks that Grian's left behind.

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It feels like Grian only blinks a few times, takes a few steps, and then finds himself curled into Scar's side down in their little underground bunker. Scott and Jimmy sit on chairs across from them, Jimmy's hand resting on Scott's knee and Scott's fingers tapping idly on his palm.

He swears he was just on the streets— but it feels like forever, too, a century since he walked away from the ashes. They'd seen the city guards running up the streets as they left. Scott and Jimmy had stepped shoulder to shoulder in front of him, shielding him from view.

The gesture had felt so oddly familiar. He really isn't sure, though, because his mind is the furthest thing from stable right now. He's pretty sure the only reason he isn't a sobbing mess is because his mind has gone numb. He watches the scene from a thousand miles away, like the narrator of an ill-fated tragedy telling the story with pure apathy.

He flexes one hand and watches the split skin on his palms tear further. He doesn't feel it.

Scar sighs, long and heavy. He takes Grian's hand in his, stilling Grian's idle movements. “Tomorrow it is, then. No sense delaying the inevitable anymore while we get picked off like sheep in a field.”

Jimmy nods. The fire casts his face into sharp shadows.

Scar lets Grian go again, heaving himself to the feet with a groan as he leans heavier on his cane than usual. “Jimmy, I need you to tell me everything. Meet me in the hall.”

Grian watches, numbly, as Jimmy rises too, pressing a kiss to Scott's knuckles. Scott watches him

go with furrowed brows, then folds both his hands together in his lap and looks down at them. Grian curls his knees up to his chest and settles his chin on top of them.

Silence sits heavy between the two of them. The door to the hall bangs shut and muffles Scar and Jimmy's voices. Scott looks far away from everything too.

Grian, eventually, finds that he can't stand the silence.

"What do you think will happen when the king dies?" he says. Scott's head jerks up and he blinks for a few seconds, before his shoulders relax and he leans back in his chair. Golden tattoos glow on his wrists as his sleeves ride up slightly.

"Well..." Scott pauses for a long moment, his gaze scanning the beams above them. "I suppose things won't change much, really. I mean, it'll be a big adjustment for the city, but most places function just fine without any royalty. This is the only precinct with a king anyways."

Grian sits up, letting go of his knees and leaning forwards slightly. "What?"

Scott raises his eyebrows. "Ever take a history class?"

He fumbles for a moment, trying to figure out an appropriate excuse to give here. He settles eventually on simply saying, "I'm from a small village a ways from here. I never really learned anything about this."

"Ah." Scott's eyes scan him for a moment, a curious light in them, but he says nothing else on the matter. "Yeah, this place has a history of war. Whoever it was on the precinct council and the citizens really didn't want to be part of a governing body, I guess. Started fighting with the other precincts about it. It never really went anywhere."

"Then how...?"

"Ren came along when we went to war with the seventh precinct that wanted to annex this place to get the infighting to stop. I don't... know exactly what happened, Jimmy or Scar could tell you more about that."

He blinks for a minute. Scar?

Scott continues, as if he hasn't noticed Grian's confusion. "But that time, they won. The other precincts let them withdraw and Ren became the first king. It wasn't so long ago, honestly, and this place is still getting established. It won't do them too much damage to be without a king. All the old souls are used to turmoil anyways."

He furrows his brows even more, leaning forward and bracing his elbows on his knees. The fire crackles a few feet away and fills the room with its dull noise. "I thought Ren was from a lineage. That there were more kings before him."

Scott snorts derisively, crossing his arms over his chest. "Right. Sure there were. All we had was incompetent battle commanders."

"You say it like you were there."

There's a pause for a beat. Then Scott nods. "I was."

"But the precinct..."

“Is very old, yes.”

“And you—”

“So am I.”

Grian breathes in slowly, then lets it back out with a long huff. He clenches his fingers together.

“Me too.”

“I know,” Scott says, almost lost amid the crackling of the fire. Grian meets his eyes that flick between pitch-black and emerald green, a silent moment of connection. He sees something like stars glint in Scott’s pupils.

*You and I are the same*, he thinks, but no words come to his tongue. *All of us are the same.*

*Othered for a reason.*

Then what Scott said properly registers. “But when Jimmy and I visited, he had paintings of forefathers and previous leaders on the walls.”

Scott gives him a puzzled look.

“Why would he lie?” Grian asks no one in particular, folding his hands under his chin and staring at the table. “And why do Martyn and the others believe him?”

There’s a beat of silence. Scott shifts slightly in the chair across from him. Outside the door, he can faintly hear raised voices— Jimmy and Scar are arguing. He doesn’t know why and doesn’t bother to try and listen in.

“I don’t know,” Scott says, producing a small knife from his pocket and tapping it repetitively on the table. When Grian looks up at him, his face is drawn in thought.

They sit there for quite a while, until the sound of arguing fades back into dull chatter and they hear footsteps closer to the door. Before it can open, Scott stands up and leans in close to Grian, to where his mouth touches Grian’s ear. His long hair brushes the side of Grian’s face and he smells like flowers. His voice is so hushed Grian can barely hear it.

“Jimmy’s already told the other precincts about the coup that’s going to happen. Ren’s not got any allies coming to help him and the city will be in good hands no matter what happens. If we fail, the army will be weak when the precinct gets annexed again.”

Grian’s eyes widen and dart over to him. “You’ve already involved them?”

“Scar’s only thinking of his ideals,” Scott replies and Grian feels his lips turn upwards in a grim smile. “Jimmy and I are prepared for the worst. We know what people like him don’t.”

“Which is?”

Scott pulls back. His eyes are as black as the void. “Death takes whoever she wants.”

He goes to speak in response, fumbling for something to say, but Scott reaches out one finger and places it over Grian’s lips as the door handle twists. “Don’t tell Scar. It’s better if he doesn’t know until this is over.”

Grian can do nothing, really, except nod.

The door opens right as Scott settles back down in his seat.

Jimmy's shoulders are tense, but he manages to smile at both of them as he extends one hand to Scott and helps him up. "Well. I think that we've done everything we can. Let's all just... head home."

Grian nods, rising as well and standing by Scar's side. He presses just a bit closer than is entirely necessary, the best show of silent support he can give at the moment. Scar tilts his head slightly to look at him and the corners of his mouth twitch up, fondness sparking in his amber eyes.

"Rest well, you two," he says, blinking in surprise at how weary his own voice is. "We'll see you tomorrow."

*We* comes more naturally to his tongue now than *I*. Him and Scar, one inseparable unit. For however long they have left.

Exhaustion weighs his shoulders down as he follows Scar out the door, leaning a bit heavily on the doorframe before stumbling after Scar's form. The torchlight gleams on his shawl and casts sharp shadows over his hat and his tanned skin. Grian traces the pattern silently, watching the way they dapple his form.

Then a section of the shadows on Scar's shoulders *moves up*.

Like a *person*.

Every one of Grian's instincts screams *danger*, years of hypervigilant survival forcing their way through his tired haze.

One breath, two.

A third set of footsteps are matching theirs.

One, two.

*Click*. The sound of a pressure plate or button being laid.

One, two.

They're going to die here.

One—

Grian turns around.

Etho's waiting for him. Etho, who was supposed to have *died* in that house alongside Tango, Skizz, and Martyn.

"Scar," Grian says, a shaky warning. Etho has no gun in his hand, but Grian can see the shine of knives at his side and knows he just heard something being loaded.

(Or a trap being sprung. Explosives being laid. This whole damn tunnel could crumble around them and no one would know.)

Etho still doesn't move, even as Grian feels Scar turn around as well.

"Hello, Etho," Scar says calmly, casually. "Fancy seeing you here."

The man blinks at them both slowly, crossing his arms over his chest. They're covered in bandages and as Grian looks closer, he can see red and inflamed skin peeking out under Etho's black mask. It looks like no matter what happened in the end, the army didn't get out entirely unscathed.

When Etho does speak, his voice is flat and emotionless. "You pulled a nice stunt, Grian. Could've been less obvious about coming back here."

Grian ignores him, moving scanning the walls and floor for where a trap could lie. He doesn't see any redstone or buttons or levers, but those are too subtle. Too obvious. No one could follow them all the way here and then be stupid enough to do such a crude murder attempt.

Etho must be talking, because Grian hears voices, and then the sound of a blade being drawn. The sound doesn't fully register and he keeps scanning the area. It has to be somewhere near here. Otherwise he wouldn't have heard it. Is it *on* Etho?

"Grian—"

He sees it then. A pressure plate next to the doors. The exact same colour as the sandstone. Easy to miss. It would be triggered the second someone stepped out of the doors.

Scott and Jimmy are still in the meeting room.

"*Grian!*"

Someone shoves him to the ground and his face collides with the rough sandstone, scraping his cheek open. Pain ricochets through him and throws him right back into the present moment as he feels blood start to pour down his face.

There's the *shunk* of a knife and the sound of a gunshot, followed by a hoarse scream.

He looks up and Scar is standing over him with a blade buried in the handle of his cane.

Etho, meanwhile, appears to have just gotten a bullet shot through his leg. He's forcing himself to his feet, his shoulders tensed and his eyes burning like hellfire as they glare up at Scar. Red blood soaks into the sandstone around him.

Something cold freezes Grian dead in his tracks. The noises are going to make Scott and Jimmy come running if they haven't already left through a side door. They're going to die instantly if someone doesn't do something.

His body moves before his mind can think any more.

Time seems to slow itself down and the facts stretch before him like the unfurling pages of a book.

Etho's slow. He's already badly injured. He cradles his left arm a little closer to him even though he seems fine on his right. Likely, under the sleeve, that one's been badly hurt by the earlier explosion.

Grian takes the opportunity.

He throws himself forward, grabbing Etho's left forearm and twisting. Etho gives another shout through gritted teeth, stumbling and pushing blindly at Grian, drawing a knife. It gets close enough to his head to make a few strands of freshly cut hair fall in his eyes.

He grips Etho's arm tighter and *shoves*, throwing him back onto the pressure plate a few paces



back.

Etho falls. Grian turns on his heel, pushing himself off the ground and sprinting away as fast as possible. He hears the *click-hiss* from Tango's house and pushes himself until his legs scream in protest.

The explosion is deafening, knocking him to the ground even from a few feet away. He throws his hands over his head to protect his skull from flying shrapnel. Something warm and wet hits his back and he tries not to vomit as he realizes what it is. More explosions follow, an endless echo chamber as the entire bunker collapses into smithereens. Sand and debris trickles down from the roof and he braces himself for the rock to crack, for him to be buried under tons of sand until he suffocates.

The roof doesn't cave. Slowly, the explosions die down.

His good ear is full of high-pitched ringing again.

He pushes himself up on shaking arms, gagging when he sees the blood and pieces of reddish flesh on the floor surrounding him. The air smells like smoke and he hangs his head low, panting heavily as his stomach churns.

Where are the others?

Are they alive?

Why does death follow him everywhere he goes now?

Where's *Scar*?

"Grian?" someone calls.

Out of the smoke comes Scar. He's limping, pale dust coating his hair and clothes like a walking statue. His brow is knit with concern and his eyes widen when he sees Grian. He rushes forward as best he can while Grian pushes himself up on shaking arms.

"Etho's gone," Grian rasps, trying to struggle to his feet. He coughs and chokes and watches a cloud of dust fly out of his lungs.

Scar takes a minute to glance around them, no doubt seeing the shredded flesh and pieces of clothes amid all the blood splattering the walls. He takes a deep breath in, winces slightly, and helps Grian the rest of the way up.

They stand there for a minute, both shaky and unstable. Grian doesn't dare look behind him for fear of what he'll see amid Etho's remains. Scar's face has already drained of colour and he refuses to look over Grian's shoulder, and Grian's stomach is already sick enough as it is. Etho's dead now. But the meeting room—

The tunnel collapsed. The meeting room probably did too.

Oh, gods— Jimmy and Scott. Did they make it out?

He didn't hear them scream the way Etho did. But with all the blood, all the wreckage, all the dust, it's impossible to tell. They could be dead too. It could just be him and Scar left. They could be— could be—

Scott held his face earlier today while he cried. Jimmy called for help and was there for him to lean on. They were the ones trying to have some form of insurance for when the king fell. Protecting him, protecting the city, trying to do some right by this horrible and rotten mess that they've all fallen into—

He hears someone else yell his name.

Slowly, painfully, he makes himself turn.

He determinedly *doesn't* focus on the reddened, tattered lump in his peripheral vision, instead looking to the wreckage beyond. Two forms crawl their way out from the chunks of jagged rock, covered in sandstone dust as well like moonlit wraiths. He knows their builds, their clothes, and he lets out a breath he didn't know he was holding.

They're all alive.

Scar says something to that effect next to him and the other two run forwards, clasping hands and there's people next to him and arms around his shoulders and murmured voices. Little check-ins of *are you alright* and *where are you wounded* and *what now*.

“You two can crash at my place,” Scar says at a distance, as if he's underwater. Grian's pretty sure his hearing is just getting worse and nothing's wrong. After all, you can't *really* drown on dry land. You can choke, you can die, you can be buried under ten tons of sand and dust, but you can't *drown*.

What's he supposed to be doing? What was he thinking about?

Someone on his left grasps his waist and he follows them blindly.

He feels a strange sort of aura grow next to him, something unearthly that sends a deep feeling of *safe* and *protected* through him. A hand laces with his on his right.

Scott's voice is rough and exhausted. “Let's go home.”

---

About an hour later finds Grian standing alone in his room, watching milky white puddles of water drip off his clothes and onto the floor. Scott and Jimmy have gone to collect a few last possessions from their store and home and then rig both places with traps.

Scar's doing... something downstairs. Grian doesn't know what.

He should get changed. He's going to catch a cold at this rate.

So slowly, mechanically, he does.

As he strips off his soaked shirt, something falls to the floor out of his sleeve.

He bends down and picks it up, unfolding the ruined paper. The ink has bled badly from all the rain, but it's still pretty legible. It's the instructions of where to plant explosives, who to talk to—the list he'd passed to Tango earlier.

He remembers something scratching his arm when Tango had grabbed his hand.

Tango had planned to die from the moment he found out they were being followed.

He lets out a long, shaky breath, grasping the thin paper so tightly it starts to tear. There's still a

couple of hours left before it goes dark. This information has to go out, still. The people have to be talked to. The TNT has to be planted. Their resistance is hinging on it, more so now that they're down on people and out of time.

He searches his clothes for a dry shirt and pants, shrugging them on and then putting on a hooded coat over it. He grabs his personal journal, meticulously copying down all the notes on the waterlogged sheet. When he's sure they're correct, he shoves the notebook in his bag and walks downstairs.

Scar's sitting on the couch with Jellie and looks up, a question on his open lips.

"I'm doing what Tango couldn't," Grian says, opening the door and being blasted by a wave of wind and rain. "You don't have to wait up for me."

Then he shuts it behind him, opens Jimmy's retrieved umbrella, and strides out into the freezing streets.

---

When he gets back, he finds out Scar *has* stayed up to greet him.

He's still sitting on the couch. He has a glass container in his lap, the sides fogged up with steam and the vivid colour of a curry faintly visible through it. He nods when Grian walks in and hangs up his coat, motioning for Grian to sit down beside him.

Grian does.

Scar passes him the curry and a spoon. He opens it and the smell of spices floods the room, making his stomach rumble as he digs into it. It's fish in a yellow sauce, so spicy it hurts his tongue and the back of his throat, but he doesn't mind. He'd not even realized how hungry he was.

He eats in silence. Scar keeps silent too, one warm hand resting on his knee.

Eventually, he sets the container down on a side table. The clink echoes in the large living room.

Scar's hand moves from his knee to instead lace his fingers with Grian's. Grian lets out a long breath, leaning his head against Scar's shoulder. If he listens hard enough, he can hear the very faint ticking of the clock on the far wall. He remembers the massive hands of the Enchanter's clock, rotating slowly around and around. Pulling him in, deeper and deeper. An irresistible song.

*Tick, tock.*

*Tick, tock.*

*Tick—*

"Tell me how I can help you," Scar says, so sudden and close to his ear that it makes Grian jump.

He stares blankly at the ceiling for a minute. Scar's hand is so warm. "I'm tired, Scar."

He can hear every single even, measured breath that Scar lets out.

"Jimmy told me about what happened today when he found you. It... scared me, angel. I don't want you hurting like that."

Somewhere upstairs, he can hear the jingle of Jellie playing with a bell toy.

“I watched Tango die.”

The TNT felt so wrong in his hands when he was helping the others place it. The sticks were slightly rough and smelled like gunpowder. He tasted blood in his mouth and heard the sound of buildings crumbling.

Even now, the taste of blood hasn't left. He might have bit through his tongue.

Scar says nothing, so he keeps talking. “I was the one that killed Etho. He blew up into pieces.” His breath shakes almost as badly as his hands. “Everyone's going to die and we— we—”

*We'll be next*, he doesn't say.

Between one breath and the next, Scar pulls him into a hug. Grian rests his head on his broad shoulder, looking empty-eyed over the living room, still slightly in disarray from the mess Scar made earlier. It doesn't feel like everything's happened in one day. Time feels as false as the fronts he put up.

“We'll be alright,” Scar says.

Grian knows a lie when he hears it.

Slowly, Scar turns and lays down so he's sprawled across the couch. He pulls Grian down with him, pulling a knitted throw blanket over the both of them and rubbing his hands down Grian's sides. Grian snuffles softly, burying his head under Scar's chin.

Rain still hasn't stopped pouring outside. He's not exactly lived in a desert before this, but he *knows* this isn't normal.

A long moment passes before Grian speaks again. “What makes us luckier than anyone else? We're not... we're not gods, Scar. You can promise me a lot of things, Scar. But don't... don't lie to me anymore.”

Scar lets out a long breath above him. The pounding on the roof grows louder, like hail. “Okay. No more lies.”

“No more lies,” Grian agrees.

They lay there like that for a few minutes, Scar's hands rubbing soothingly along his back and his chest a steady rise-and-fall under Grian. It's definitely hailing now and the incongruity makes him feel oddly on edge. It doesn't seem like a good omen for what's ahead.

He feels the vibration of Scar's throat when he speaks. It surrounds him like a melody. “We might die. We might not. But we're going up there with a purpose. It's something that's bigger than us, something that will make a difference in everyone's lives and lead to unity. Something that will make people's lives better.”

There it is. Scar's such a sweet talker. He can make even the worst news sound like something you should be honoured to hear.

But something ugly and weeping claws its way out of his chest and through his lungs, right up into his throat. It's been growing and mutating since the first of the explosions, since he collapsed in the street and cried like an animal for reasons he still can't understand. He feels raw, scrubbed clean and wrung out to dry, bare and defenceless against the war ahead of them.

He's mortal. He's fragile. He's damaged.

"I don't want to die," he admits quietly, the words coming out a rusty squeak. "Oh, Scar, I don't want to die. I don't want to leave you, and I... I'm scared I'll have to."

That's the truth of it. He has faith in his abilities and Scar's too, but neither the Watchers nor the King's Army are particularly friendly to them, and no matter how many people they have on their side it won't be enough. The Watchers have their will, and it will be the two of them versus the king and his hand. He can't change that.

He's tried. It's impossible to run away from fate.

Scar presses a kiss to the corner of his mouth, one hand settling against Grian's face as his thumb rubs in slow circles over the now-healed injury that Bdubs left. He can't hear the sound of it.

He shudders, leaning into the touch and settling his head against Scar's shoulder. This is how the nights go for them now. Intimate words and confessions that neither of them can figure out how to say during the day, soft touches or holding each other through the night, long talks or sex shrouded in the shadows.

Scar says nothing.

"I can't think anymore," Grian mumbles, the weight of the days to come settling heavy on his shoulders.

Cool fingers brush against the skin of his hip as Scar's fingers settle under his waistband. Scar's warm mouth presses to his neck. "You don't have to. Just relax."

Scar's voice pours over his nerves like thick honey, settling some of the anxiety and stirring the deep and heady lust that Grian thought he had forgotten how to feel. His stomach still rolls, but it's easier to forget with him straddling Scar's thighs and intimacy to distract him from his life crumbling to pieces.

"I don't remember how at this point." He leans into Scar, pulling the shawl from his shoulders and whimpering when a burning kiss is pressed to his collarbone. "I can't remember the last time I did."

Scar kisses his neck again, then again, and down his collarbone and his chest as those clever hands move to unbutton his shirt. Grian's head falls back almost beyond his control. He arches into the touch, making a pleading noise when Scar's hands fall back down to his waist and hips and lower.

His partner traces a damning constellation out of the marks he left on Grian's bare hip the last time, rough calluses scraping the skin on his thigh. The air is humid, muggy, sticking Grian's hair to the back of his neck. He wonders if he might be burning up a fever.

He realizes Scar's plans when those hands settle under his legs, when Scar finally discontinues the assault on his neck in favor of laying back on the couch and giving him that nearly worshipful smile. "Well, please allow me to remind you."

He lets Scar move him without protest, forcibly shutting the fear away and challenging whatever beings try to follow him around to put up with him *daring* to love and sleep with a mortal. Let them watch. Damn it all to hell and back, it's *his* life. It's his wants.

And he wants this.

“I think I might,” he murmurs in reply.

Scar’s hands pause for a moment when they settle under the waist of his pants. Grian tilts his own head at an awkward angle to try and send Scar a confused look, and is surprised to find Scar’s eyes look a little misty. He pushes himself up, touching Scar’s face gently, a question on his lips.

Scar beats him to it.

“For what it’s worth, Grian...” He trails off for a minute, as if his mind is wandering somewhere far away. “I love you. I love you so much more than I’ll ever be able to say. And I’ll keep you as safe as I can. I promise.”

## Chapter End Notes

hope you all enjoyed! are you ready for the attack on the castle?

## here comes the debt collector

### Chapter Summary

The final battle begins.

### Chapter Notes

hi guys!! sorry this one is so late again :( i won't bother you with a laundry list of excuses and instead say again that the support for this fic means the world to me. it's hard to believe coliseum is finally drawing to a close. however, the story doesn't end here— there's an equinox series, after all! the sequel to this fic, eons, will be treebark-centric and show us the crimson reign's side of the story. i hope you come and join me on that journey :)

sentiments aside: huge, HUGE, HUGE warning this chapter for the graphic descriptions of violence tag. i know you hopefully read the violence and character death tags on this before you clicked on it but i really can't reiterate enough. violence. that aside, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It's snowing.

Grian knows, logically, that there's no way it snows in the desert.

A lot of people have gathered in the streets, staring up at the sky in wonder and reaching out their hands to watch the snowflakes melt on them. Children are shrieking in delight, running out into the flurry in their light desert clothing, their breaths misting in the frigid air.

He hears a shuffle from behind him and looks behind to see Scar blinking at the scene before him.

"I think it might be a better idea to use the cane today, actually," he says, his eyebrow raised tall. "Those roads are covered in ice. Not keen on breaking my neck that way."

"Will you be alright?" Grian asks, leaning on the doorframe as he properly turns to face Scar.

Scar waves one hand. "I'll manage. The pain isn't the worst. Now pardon me while I go spend another ten minutes wrangling my braces."

He watches Scar leave, before turning back towards the street and exhaling a long cloud of frosty air. He hasn't seen snow in decades— maybe centuries. It would be nice if it wasn't so unnerving, and if he wasn't preparing to storm a castle in these conditions. It doesn't seem like a good omen.

Maybe he should wear a heavier coat after all.

He deliberates over the decision for a moment before shutting the door and heading inside.

Jimmy's sitting on the couch, pulling another layer of regular clothes on over gleaming diamond armour. His helmet has been abandoned and his blond hair hangs shaggily around his face, brushing against his narrowed eyebrows. He can see the clench of Jimmy's jaw and the slight tremor of his hands, and feels the same anxiety resonate in his stomach.

"It's cold," he says awkwardly.

Jimmy looks up, then gives him a blank look. "I felt it."

He nods. Silence hangs awkwardly between them.

Eventually, he can't stand it, and steps away from the door. "I'm going to go get a proper coat, I think."

"Okay."

He flees upstairs without another word, slipping into his room. Jellie sits on his bed amid the scattered papers he's flung all over it with defunct plans and rambles about Scar and the history of the Watchers. His spare pair of boots are strewn in opposite corners of his room and a mix of his and Scar's clothes litter the floor. It's a mess. He'll clean it up later if he survives the whole thing and manages to come home.

He picks out his spare jacket from his travel bag that's hanging behind the door. The leather of the bag has taken on a strong scent of the incense that Scar's always burning.

He hears clattering downstairs and Scott's voice, followed by the *click* of a shotgun being loaded. Someone else laughs, and then there's some muffled dialogue he can't make out, and then it falls silent again. Time to go, then.

The thin jacket scratches his chapped hands when he pulls it on. He looks in the mirror at his baggy clothes that mask the diamond armour under them, the faint outline of a chestplate under his shirt before he buttons the jacket up. He buckles his sword over his hip, slips his knife up his sleeve, and lets out a long breath.

No sense delaying the inevitable any longer.

He stops to pet Jellie a last few times on the way out. She purrs, arching her back and rubbing her face against the back of his hand before giving it one gentle lick.

Grian finds himself, for some odd reason, choking back tears as he lets her go and steps out the door.

He walks down the stairs and finds Scar standing by one of the open windows. Cold wind and snowflakes drift into the kitchen, but Scar doesn't seem to notice. He barely reacts when Grian walks behind him except for a slight lowering of his shoulders.

They stand there for a minute together and watch the world drift by.

"I'd die for you," Scar says, unprompted. He's staring foggily up at the distant outline of the castle. His eyes flick over to Grian, amber-brown and oddly somber. "I thought you should know that."

Grian swallows, stepping up beside him and resting his hand on Scar's broad shoulder. "I'd rather you didn't."

Scar sighs, his eyes falling closed. "If it were to ever come to that, though. I love you enough."



“I love you too,” Grian murmurs, standing on his tiptoes to press a kiss to the corner of Scar’s mouth. The merchant’s free hand settles on his waist, delicate as a jeweler touching a fragile masterpiece. The wind tugs his hair, the clouds over the city hanging dark and heavy. He’s almost cold.

He doesn’t think about the resignation in Scar’s words.

Someone clears their throat behind him. Grian turns around, finding Jimmy leaning against the doorway with his arms crossed over his chest. Scott stands a bit behind him, a heavy cloak masking the rifle Grian knows he has over his back.

“It’s time,” Jimmy says simply, pulling his goggles down over his eyes. Grian knows there’s gas bombs strapped to his hip— both ones that blind and ones that kill. Grian has flares waiting on the counter and he’ll send them up when they get through the gates, a signal for the agents in the streets to bar the entrances and break the roads and light the TNT at the guard’s garrisons.

It’s a brutal, efficient, and most likely suicidal plan.

It’s for a reason, Grian reminds himself. And it’s not like he’s going to gain anything if he doesn’t go. He’ll die anyways. At least this way he has a chance of surviving.

(His internal voice is starting to sound suspiciously like Scar’s method of rationalizing things. He’s not sure if that’s necessarily a good thing.)

There’s a moment for him to let out a breath, then slip his eyes shut and reopen them. He gets one last look at the house: warm woods, sandstone, patterned terracotta, copper. The walls that have kept him safe and borne witness to the strangest life he could have possibly lived.

Then the moment passes and their purpose can’t be avoided any longer.

“Let’s go,” Scar says resolutely, clasping Grian’s hand in his. Jimmy and Scott nod.

Together, they turn towards the door, and the end of their world.

---

The streets are flooded with people and the four of them disappear easily into the throng, hats and hoods over their heads. There’s barely any guards around at all—likely having been taken out in advance, if Grian had to guess—and life continues as normal as they trudge their way up the rings. The air is bitterly cold and Scar’s breath fogs the air next to him. Grian buries his own mouth deeper in his scarf and tries to suppress another shiver at a gust of frigid wind.

This is bloody well miserable. He couldn’t ask for worse conditions for a fight.

He notices, slowly, that Scar’s breathing is laboured. He’d almost missed it, but Scar always stands on his good side nowadays, and if he strains hard enough he can faintly hear it over the buzzing of the crowds around them.

He doesn’t say anything for fear someone else will overhear them, but reaches down to wrap his hand around Scar’s waist and silently hold him steady.

Scar doesn’t say anything either, but he moves just a little closer, and they stay like that until the castle looms up over them.

Jimmy steps ahead of the rest of them, his brow knitted. His eyes are dark with something Grian can’t name and his shoulders are tensed in one hard line. “Alright. I’ll get us in. Don’t move until I

signal you can come in. Wait out here.”

They nod in near-unison, ducking down behind the outer wall. Jimmy strides up to the gates with no pretense, knocking twice and waiting. Grian holds himself still as a statue with bated breath.

He hears the click of the gate unlocking and then a voice that’s faintly familiar—not one he recognizes, but one that strikes a chord deep within him that he can’t name. “Is this it?”

Jimmy nods, stiffly. “Yes.”

There’s a heavy sigh, then the creak of the gate doors. “Alright. He’s inside and there’s a patrol near the interior doors. You have maybe five minutes before the guards flood in. Steer clear of Martyn, he’ll rip your head off your shoulders.” There’s another pause and then the voice speaks again, this time more resigned. “Please just... try and have mercy.”

“I can’t promise anything, B,” Jimmy replies.

A low hum of something like disappointment. “I know.”

There’s a clank of armoured footsteps and then silence. Jimmy stands there like a statue for another minute, then glances over at Grian and motions him forward. The two of them are most familiar with the castle, so they’ll break their way in first at the weak points and then open the doors for Scar and Scott. It should hopefully be enough time for Scott to plant his weapons and for the bombs to go off in the city itself.

Grian nods, slipping to his feet and following Jimmy through the gate door. He doesn’t look back at the others.

The first guards waiting by the castle door are too taken by surprise to even raise the alarm, let alone draw their weapons. Grian brings his knife up under the helmet of the first and slits their neck wide open, while Jimmy takes out the other one with a swift blow over the head. The two of them catch the bodies before they can fall and clang against the cobblestones, tossing them off to the side in the grass before stepping up to the door.

They stand there for a moment, one hand on each of the iron rings, and lock eyes.

Jimmy nods to him, and they heave open the heavy castle doors with weapons in hand, ready for whoever waits on the other side—

And then all hell breaks loose.

They find a whole company of guards waiting for them on the other side. Easily ten, perhaps a dozen or more— Grian doesn’t exactly have time to count.

He doesn’t have time because the second the doors slam open, a volley of bullets and arrows spray their way. Grian drops down to the ground, holding his shield up over his head and wincing at the slam-thunk of projectiles against his shield. One just grazes over the rim of his shield and flies close enough to his head to ruffle his hair, making his heart jump into his throat as he cringes inwards.

He swallows down the sudden nausea and forces himself back up with a yell, raising his sword and plunging it into the gap between someone’s neck armour and the underside of their helmet. Blood sprays his face.

Two people go down like ninepins next to him, topping into each other and spreading a pool of red

across the floor. Next to him, Scott grins with a rifle in hand.

What seems like the first wave passes by in a flurry, everything blurring together in a mix of sweaty armour-covered bodies and the smell of gunpowder and the clang of weapons against each other. He barely manages to keep in mind the difference between friend and foe, barely manages to watch who's behind or in front of him.

He whirls around when someone grabs his shoulder, sword at the ready to slash another person's neck, bloody and awful, but finds Scar instead.

"The flare!" Scar calls over the clanging of battle, even then barely loud enough to be heard. "G, now!"

He nods. Then he turns and shoves aside the opponent charging him, letting Jimmy spear them, drawing the gun at his side and firing the red flare into the air. It goes off with a deafening bang, showering them in red sparks, and in the moment's silence following it, he imagines he can hear the fuses down in the streets being lit.

And, as he expected, the ground shakes under him seconds later, accompanied by a cacophony of explosions all around them. People scream in the distance, the city *sways* as half its supports collapse, and dust and smoke fly in the air like confetti.

Amid the chaos, the explosions, the disoriented guards and the noise so overwhelming Grian's poor remaining ear can barely discern anything—

He still hears Scar.

"Come on!" Scar yells to them over his shoulder, brandishing his gun before plunging into the chaos with a spray of gunfire and crumpling bodies. They all follow, like cavalry riders of old charging into war against dark, evil forces, fantastical and unreal, unstoppable even in their small numbers.

Grian is the first, without any hesitation, drawing a sword in his right hand and crouching back-to-back with Scar as they cut down the soldiers like livestock.

He hears someone wailing in pain to his right and with his next turn to stab a nearby guard, he sees someone writhe on the ground, on fire, their armour melting into their skin as Jimmy stands over them with a pitch-torch. He watches as Jimmy swings it again into another soldier's face, filling the air with the smell of burning flesh and melting metal.

An explosion topples part of the castle wall and Scott runs out of the rubble as it falls, tossing another live grenade at a cluster of soldiers running down a side hallway towards the fight.

He loses track of blood and bone and body, charging forward as a new wave of reinforcements rushes them. It seems to no longer become real, like toppling pieces on a chessboard instead of cutting down people in front of him. If he doesn't think too hard about it, he can almost imagine he's simply cutting his way through another dream, simulating a fight he'll one day have to live through. Screams become background noise, bones breaking under his touch become the snap of twigs on the ground. He watches Scar blow someone's face off with a rifle and simply turns the other way, cutting the next man down.

Carnage covers him up to his elbows and sprays his jacket deep red. He doesn't feel unclean at all.

Slowly, the soldiers wear down and disappear. Slowly, the waves trickle into a stream of guards. Still plenty to fight— but far less than the initial awful battle. They must be busy trying to hold the

city together.

The thought gives him a grim sort of satisfaction. So much for all Martyn's planning.

The guards blur together as they emerge, silver armour and rusted swords and bloody ground, one after another—

And then one more rushes into the room, with a cry of *stop* as Jimmy turns a gun on him, and it's not a soldier who stands by his side.

It's Tango.

Battered, bruised, bloodied, and clearly exhausted, but Tango. The guard who stands next to him is big-built and broad-shouldered, his helmet abandoned to reveal close-cropped light brown hair and eyes that glow gold in the faint light streaming through the castle windows. Tango's not quite leaning on him but sticks close to him regardless, and they bash their way through the people that turn towards them like a battering ram through a barricade.

Amid the carnage, Grian just barely hears the inhale of breath Jimmy lets out next to him.

He opens his mouth as if to ask *what are you doing*, but Tango gets there first, drawing a gun at his side and firing it into another soldier's neck.

"We're here to fight with you," the helmless guard calls out and Tango nods along with him, his eyebrows set with that familiar determined glare. "I mean no harm."

Tango shoves his way up to Scar's side, grinning at him. "Impulse saved my life."

Funnily enough, Scar isn't the one to respond— Jimmy is. His voice is loud, jubilant, almost relieved, and alive with some kind of fire that sounds halfway to bloodlust. "Alright, well, get over here and join us!"

Impulse does. Scar says no word in protest and so neither does Grian.

They forge onwards.

And then, of course, more goes awry. Scar spots a group of guards setting up a long-distance archery attack in a nearby tower of the castle that will shoot them down like so much cattle through the glassless windows in this corridor.

Jimmy is the one who decides to go and stop them.

As Grian watches him volunteer in the lull between the last few guards, he catches a glimpse of the horror in Scott's eyes. The way Scott reaches out for a split second, as if to stop him, and closes his hand back in on itself.

Scott knows better. He knows as well as the rest of them what war takes.

So, they let him go. Grian finds enough energy in himself to raise one arm, to clap his hand on the back of Jimmy's shoulder and murmur a little *be safe*. It feels like saying farewell, and Grian finds he dreads the thought much more than he thought he would. Their little group has dwindled so much that the idea of anyone else leaving it sends an odd sort of ache through his chest. Preemptive mourning, he supposes.

(*Jimmy shouldn't be trying to face them alone*, some part of Grian's mind whispers. *He can't*

*possibly face them one on one. He'll die if he does and if he takes them out some other way, he'll die regardless.)*

*( He's saying goodbye , Grian thinks.)*

It happens in a couple of seconds, but it feels like forever. Jimmy steps away from him and takes off his helmet to plant one last kiss on Scott's lips. Blood smears both their faces as he steps away, then gives a solemn nod to Scar. He claps one hand on Tango's shoulder, takes a long look at all of them, and then shoves his helmet back on and turns away from them.

His footsteps echo as he takes a running leap out of one of the windows, landing in the courtyard below and rushing the nearby tower. Arrows shoot down at them but he dodges them in a way that's almost uncannily fast.

*(Inhumanly so. Grian has his suspicions, after all.)*

Then—right as another few guards round the corner with proper weapons obviously taken from the armoury—he sees what Jimmy draws from a pouch at his side.

A string of explosives. A large string of explosives.

He realizes, then, that no matter what, this was a suicide plan on Jimmy's part.

If he takes the castle down, it takes the enemy down too, of course.

Everyone else is absorbed in the battle. Grian is the only one to see the moment he breaks through the door, the moment the flint and steel lights a flame in his hand, the moment he disappears from sight and into the bellows of the tower.

Everyone hears it, though, when the great *boom-crack* happens. For a second, the world holds its breath, and Grian bears witness to catastrophe. For once, the haze lifts, and the sight in front of him is visceral as a nightmare.

Everyone knows when Jimmy gives up his life for their cause, just like so many before them.

Everyone sees the moment the tower breaks apart from the bottom and ever so slowly starts to tumble. Stones crash into the ground, shaking the earth below them, and Grian finds himself thrown into a few days before, watching from behind safe cover as Tango's house is consumed by ash and fire.

Too late to notice, once again. Witness to death, curse of the end, harbinger of tragedy, once again.

He really ought to stop loving mortals so much. It will be the end of— well, not the end of him. But the end of everyone else surrounding him.

*"Jimmy!"* Scott shrieks next to him. Grian turns, broken out of his own thoughts, watching as Scott falls to his knees, staring with horror at the exploded castle tower crumbling before their eyes. A soldier charges at Scott while his back is turned, sword high over their head, and Grian lunges to stop them—

Scott moves first with an incoherent yell of rage, pushing himself up with inhuman speed and *yanking* the sword out of their hand, driving it back into the space between their helmet and chestplate with a sickening *shunk*.

He moves faster than wind, almost impossible to track, knocking guards down like toppling a

house of cards. Grian has no time to call out to him or stop him as he plunges deep into the fray and becomes lost from Grian's sight.

He feels, somehow, he's never going to see Scott come back.

Something breaks the haze, a movement in the corner of his vision.

He whirls back around, finding a guard charging for him while swinging a mace directly over his head, spiked and heavy and he can't *move*—

*Run—*

*Run—*

*Run!*

Grian screams as his body unparalyses, lurching back blindly and clumsily bringing his dagger up while trying to dart away. The guard looms tall over him, the strike of his mace promising to land true, and oh *gods* Grian is going to die—

Blood spatters across his face. Grian registers, dimly, that a severed helmeted head is bouncing across the ground. He wipes the gore from his eyes and blinks at the blurry figure in front of him. Scar grins at him over a gleaming iron blade.

“Looked like you were in a spot of trouble,” his partner says, twirling the blade deftly between his fingers before launching it at the second guard running up to them. It lodged in the guard's throat and they topple without a word. “Figured I would use my amazing talents to back you up.”

Grian stares at him, silence descending in the absence of chaos.

“Come on, G, we've got a ways to go yet.” Scar turns back towards him from where he's yanking his blade back out of the guard's throat, raising an eyebrow. “You good there?”

Grian snaps himself out of his staring and stows his dagger in his belt. “I've never been more attracted to you in my life.”

Scar laughs, long and hearty, and they storm their way down the corridor together, their team in tow.

Slowly, they split from each other. Tango breaks his way down the wider passages, spilling tar over the floor and lighting it as it streams down into the nooks, crannies, and corridors of the castle. Impulse turns back to delay some of the guards with false information and takes them out when they fall into traps. Scott never returns and neither does Jimmy. Eventually, they get further and further from each other until Grian and Scar are left alone, deep in the belly of the castle, and Grian can't hear any more sounds of the fight outside.

Nothing waits for them in the throne room except for dead guards and scorch marks along the walls. If Grian had to guess, it's from Impulse breaking out Tango.

Still, it begs the question: where *is* the king and his hand?

Then it strikes him.

The enchanter. The *real* enchanter.

“Follow me,” he says, tugging on Scar's hand, and they disappear back into the shadowed and

bloodstained halls.

---

Grian's intuition turns out to be right.

They round the last corner down the halls Grian crept his way through once before, their footsteps echoing around them in an endless loop. The door to the Enchanter is open and Martyn leans against it, one hand on his sheathed sword at his hip. He's clad in a deep, blood-red coat and shining armour, covered in fresh burn scars and bandages, with a glare that could kill.

Grian comes to a halt, Scar stopping shortly after him. He grits his teeth, giving a sardonic little bow. "Martyn."

"Grian," Martyn replies coldly. His eyes flick up to Scar, some unreadable emotion crossing his face for a second, and then he looks back at Grian. "I take it Etho's dead."

"Most of your men are dead," Scar says, casually, moving a little closer to Grian. "I'd say it's payback."

Martyn's expression twists into bitter anger, his lips baring in a snarl as he pushes off the wall. He stalks closer, his shoulders raised, his smooth gait reminding Grian far too much of a wolf. "Is that so—"

Then a new voice chimes in, smoothly accented and... almost shocked. "Scar?"

Grian looks up, past Martyn.

The Red King stands in the doorway of the Enchanter, dark netherite armour gleaming in the sunlight streaming through the windows, his spiked crown sitting tall on his head. Now, he looks like a true king, and barely anything like the man that carried Grian back to sleep a few weeks ago.

Scar goes still next to him.

A slow, creeping sort of uncertainty starts to curdle in Grian's gut.

"It's you," the king breathes. His goggles are pushed up onto his forehead and his dark eyes look haunted. "I didn't want to believe it."

Scar's responding look is nothing short of freezing. "I'm good at defying expectations." Grian nearly winces at how flat his voice is.

Martyn, from his place by the king's side, says nothing. Still, he steps a little closer and one hand rests atop his sword hilt. The burn scars on his face shine ugly and bright red in the sunlight.

The silence drags on for a moment longer.

Then Ren speaks, soft enough that Grian can barely hear it. "Why would you do this?"

Scar levels another scathing glare his way. "Why wouldn't I? Come on, Ren, you know me."

Grian gives them both a confused look, his gaze flicking back and forth between them. To Ren's right, Martyn's face has settled into a mask of defensive anger. He steps a little closer to his king's side, levelling a glare of his own back at Scar.

"I do," Ren says, almost softly. "Or— I knew you better than anyone, maybe. A long time ago. You... I don't recognize you anymore, man. Who are you?"

Scar's jaw works relentlessly, grinding his teeth so hard Grian can almost hear it. None of them move, as if frozen in time. Grian can't find the words to process what's in front of him.

"Your enemy," Scar replies simply.

Time hangs on a still thread between them, seconds away from snapping at the slightest disturbance. The tick of the clock echoes like a heartbeat inside Grian's skull. He doesn't... doesn't know what to make of any of this.

Ren is the one to break it, with a single step back and one hand rising to the sword at his side. Grian goes on the defence on instinct, slipping his knife out of his sleeve and dropping into a defensive decision. Martyn draws his sword. Scar cocks his pistol.

None of them dares move anymore, with shaky hands and darting eyes. It seems like they break in and out of a continuous, hypnotizing spell.

Once again, Ren shatters it. "I loved you."

Scar takes a deep breath in, and then lets another one out. The glance he sends Grian almost looks like an apology. "And I served you for years. I walked these halls, stayed at your side, and you cast me out like trash for—" He jerks his head at Martyn. "—that bitch."

Martyn makes a low snarling noise, stepping a little closer to Scar in threat. Scar just looks at him blankly.

"So," Scar continues, blandly, "we all make mistakes. Sometimes those mistakes, those *failures*, come back to bite us."

And then, slowly, the words register in Grian's mind. The *meaning* of them. The *history*.

Scar knew this place all along.

His heart drops into his stomach.

*No more lies*, Scar's voice whispers in his ear.

No more lies.

And yet that was one of them.

"What do you want from me?" Ren growls, something like pain flashing across his face.

Scar's mask of indifference finally cracks and he starts to laugh, long and hard and slightly high-pitched. He laughs like he's found the funniest joke in the world, like his mind is fracturing, like an almost comedic villain, and Grian can do nothing but stare at the man in front of him. He's not sure he sees his lover in this bitter, secretive, vindictive mercenary who holds a gun like a toy.

Scar sticks the gun back in his belt, reaching up that hand to wipe the amused tears from his eyes. The smile drops from his face, replaced with a cold scowl. "I want your head on a fucking *spike*."

Some horror seems to cross Ren's face. He reaches up to the collar of his tunic. "It was you."

"Yeah," Scar chuckles, wobbling on his feet and leaning heavily on his cane. "Now I'm back to finish the job."

There's time for Grian to draw in one more breath, and then everything goes wrong, very quickly.



Because Ren starts to shake and the temperature of the room *plunges*, frost creeping across the windows and ice solidifying on the floor, and Martyn backs away from him. Because the clock ticking grows louder and louder, drowning Grian in the noise and sending a crawling feeling of blackened *wrongness* over his skin, and Ren folds over onto the ground.

Because the clock *strikes*, a deafening gong that Grian can feel reverberating right down into his bones.

Because Scar's face has pure, shocked horror written all over it.

And then Ren looks back *up*, and the eyes that meet Grian's are not human.

He feels Scar grab his hand, desperate fingers lacing with his and squeezing tight enough to hurt. "Run."

"What?" Grian demands, tearing his hand away and drawing his dagger, his eyes flicking desperately between the grim fear in Scar's expression, the terror on Martyn's, and the... wolf-like *thing* that only vaguely resembles the king.

Scar bodily shoves him away, stumbling with the movement and nearly falling before he catches himself on his cane. His breaths are laboured, but he still manages to give Grian a scathing glare before he whirls back around, a sudden wind picking up around him as his eyes glow brilliant gold. "I said *run!*"

Scar's plea is so aggressive, so desperate, that Grian can't help but obey, and leave someone he loves behind again.

Before he goes, he presses his dagger into Scar's free hand. He hopes Scar will know what to do with it.

Over his shoulder, he sees Scar raise one hand, a ball of fiery light coalescing in his palm before he flings it at Ren's face. Ren ducks out of its way, snarling in an echoing, animalistic voice before lunging at him, snow swirling around him, thick enough to be a fog.

There's a *crash* when they fall into each other, one that resonates in Grian's bones, and a snowstorm starts to batter at the windows hard enough to crack the glass.

And Grian— Grian, after everything, is a coward.

He runs.

His footsteps echo in the massive hallway, ringing around him along with his panting breaths as he races from the otherworldly fight going on behind him. He moves faster and faster, unsure where he's even fleeing to, just knowing he has to get *away*—

Sudden and shocking as lightning, wind *howls* outside and the glass windows and doors to the balconies all shatter with one horrible crash.

He falls to his knees, rolling over and away from the windows behind a pillar and throwing his arms over his face to protect it from the flying glass. He feels shards cut into the skin of his arms, his legs, embedding deep in flesh, blood welling up in their wake.

He curls there, knees to his chest and forearms over his head, shivering as snow blasts into the hallway and buries the ice under great white drifts. Oh, gods, he's so cold. It's so cold. It's so wrong he can barely fight the urge to tear his own skin off.

Then he hears another set of footsteps down the stone hallway and forces himself up, rolling back onto his feet and sagging against the pillar when the ground spins under him. There's so much blood on the floor. That's his blood. His blood is all over the floor.

He turns as if in a dream, his weapons abandoned on the floor, and sways out of the way of Martyn's sword. He's so distant, floating, close to falling any second.

He doesn't hear the words Martyn says, his good ear full of ringing that makes everything else sound distant. His head hurts so badly— he must have a concussion. Must have hit his head on the floor. Did he hit his head? He doesn't remember it. He barely remembers anything.

His hands move on their own, seizing Martyn's sword arm and forcing it back with a brutal strength he didn't know he had. He feels something *crack* and watches as Martyn's mouth moves like he's screaming.

Martyn reels back and Grian follows, shoving at him unarmed. He crashes to the ground in front of Grian and Grian can't even hear the impact. He just moves, lost in a single purpose.

To end it all. To stop all of this from happening any longer. To end violence with more violence by using this body that doesn't feel like his own.

He's too strong. Something is wrong.

He can't find the way to make his body stop, though, watching behind a sheet of glass as he kicks Martyn's ribs hard enough to break them. Martyn curls up like a dying animal, drawing in wheezing breaths that blend with the white noise in his good ear.

One kick.

Another.

More bones break.

Another—

Distantly, in another world, a sword plunges into his side.

He looks down. Gleaming diamond is embedded in his stomach between the gaps in his armour, not deep enough to kill quite yet but deep enough to spill what feels like a fountain of blood over his abdomen. It's wedged between the small gap of his chestplate and leggings, a thin opening he was sure no one would be able to reach.

*Lucky hit*, he thinks, as his body reels away without his consent.

He doesn't feel it when Martyn yanks the sword back out with a vicious growl. He sees the blade leave him, sees blood spray over the floor, sees the way Martyn collapses on the ground with a vicious snarl— but watches it all from behind a window.

Is he going to die?

He turns away, staggering off blindly, unsure where he's going.

Then he remembers. *Scar*. He has to find Scar.

Scar. Martyn. Martyn first? Martyn is a danger.

Better to get rid of the danger now.

He can barely think. The haze is so overwhelming, so consuming, covering his body and mind in a layer of unshatterable ice. Martyn's still collapsed on the floor behind him. He has one hand over his stomach, compressing it and watching red spill sluggishly over his fingers. It's time to kill Martyn. It's time to end this. To destroy the enemy and find Scar. Then it doesn't matter if he bleeds out or not. He'll have at least done part of what he came to do.

He feels nothing as he turns around, raising his boot over Martyn's head, distantly preparing himself for the crack of Martyn's neck under his heel. The buzzing in his ears grows, and grows, and grows, and then—

There's another ear-splitting sound of glass breaking and the world *screams*, an electric feeling frying the air and singeing the hairs on Grian's arms, tearing through his body like a knife through his soul. It drowns him in fire and noise, tearing him further and further apart and ripping him to pieces, stripping him down to bones and ashes. Somewhere amid the chaos, he thinks he hears the faint sound of a gunshot.

And then, abruptly, it all—

just—

goes—

silent.

The eerie stillness hangs heavy in the wake of everything ending and Grian finds himself unable to quite come back down to earth. Something raw aches in his chest now, a gaping feeling of something *missing*, a piece of the world around him torn out with only a void in its wake.

He stumbles towards the epicentre of the sickly, draining feeling, leaving Martyn behind. His feet carry him like pallbearers carry an unfeeling, cold, heavy coffin. His eyes stay on the floor.

Only when the tug of nothingness threatens to suck him in does he look up.

Then, as he stands in front of the Enchanter and takes in the sight in front of him, he's thrown so starkly back into the real world that it's like he's staring at Cleo's burnt corpse again. So devastatingly real that it paralyzes him right in place.

The clock is shattered and the ticking is mercifully silent.

Among the shards, red cloak fanning around him like a pool of blood, lies the king.

Scar stands over his body.

The world stops.

## Chapter End Notes

so... where do you think it goes from here? did you enjoy the fight? what exactly is ren?

please drop your thoughts and theories below. i really hope you had fun :)

# **i will bring you ruin in everything i do**

## Chapter Summary

"For the Quest is achieved, and now all is over. I am glad you are here with me. Here at the end of all things."

- J.R.R Tolkien, The Return of the King.

## Chapter Notes

hey guys. sorry for the long wait between uploads, i wanted to get both this chapter and the epilogue finished before i posted anything so you all wouldn't have to wait for weeks to months between a cliffhanger. this is... really the last chapter. which is absolutely insane to me. after everything, this is the end... almost. i don't plan for the equinox story to stop here. with any luck, a sequel telling martyn's story ought to follow soon.

now, i'm going to get grossly sentimental and mushy. if you want to bypass that, i simply say this: check the tags before you read on. remember there is an epilogue. don't give up hope just yet. and know that i am so thankful you stayed with me for this, and that i love you.

okay. mushy mode.

this is something not many of you know, but when i first published coliseum, i was homeless. i was on the run from an abuser, with no money and nowhere to go. for six months, my life was utter chaos. this fic was a scrap of inspiration for me that i tested out, just to see if the story would hook me. i liked it, so i decided to publish it and see if it got any response.

it got over a thousand hits in a couple of weeks. i was stunned.

since then, my life has remained chaos, constant up-and-downs, but through it all, i have always found some way to come back to this fic. all the paragraph-long reviews and fanart and asks and love gave me an experience i had never felt before: for my writing to become popular, for it to change people's lives. i clung to this fic, to this hope of finishing it, like a lifeline. through getting housed and starting over and staying in my classes, i always came home to working on this story again. it is part of the reason i survived.

you all, and your love, are part of the reason i survived.

i don't love myct as much as i used to (the inevitable changing of fandoms) but coliseumverse is something special in my heart and something i want to continue. i hope, no matter what new challenges come, i can.

thank you all for staying with me. thank you. i love you.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The first thing Grian realizes when he manages to tear his eyes away from Ren's body is that Scar is barely standing. He leans on his cane with both hands like a lifeline, Grian's dagger stuck in Ren's gut instead of clutched in his hand. His brow is knit in something that's either grief or pain—Grian can't tell, but he can make out the tears on Scar's face.

“Serves you right,” Scar mutters quietly, the words half-spit and horribly bitter, but he doesn't move away from Ren's body. Grian's not sure if he doesn't want to or if he *can't*.

He chokes on blood of his own when he tries to speak. “Scar—” His voice falters halfway through, too weak to be heard. He coughs up a mouthful of blood, and tries again. “Scar, it's me.”

Scar turns his head to the side, one amber eye slowly fixing on him. His shoulders slump a little and some of the grief disappears from his face, replaced with something like resignation. His voice is strained and shaky. “Hey, G. You're...” He pauses, his eye widening. “You're bleeding. Grian, that's a stab wound.”

Grian looks down at the blood coating his hand, raising his eyebrows. He'd almost forgotten. “So it is.”

Scar turns fully towards him this time and stumbles halfway through, sucking a sharp breath in between his teeth and barely catching himself on his cane. His brow knits further and he folds a bit forwards, but just manages to force himself back up. Worry leaps its way to the forefront of Grian's distant mind and he staggers towards Scar, keeping the pressure on his wound and catching Scar's shoulder with his free hand before Scar can move another step. Scar's in pain. He can't walk. This is bad.

Part of the throne room wall has caved in, opening half the room to the outside elements. The snow outside has turned to pouring rain, flooding through the castle and puddling on the floor near them.

“I'm so sorry,” Scar breathes against his hair. “It's over. You've... you've done what you needed to. Let's get home, fix you up, and I have... I have so many apologies owed to you, G. So much to explain. But let's just— let's go home, alright? It's done.”

He goes to agree, to comment on *yes, you need to explain some things*, but he can't, because it's *not* done yet.

Because the air splits with the sound of a hoarse cry of *no*, broken by the thudding of footsteps and the sound of a pistol cocking.

Grian turns around, slowly, and finds Martyn pointing a gun at him with shaking hands. His eyes are wide and horrified, flicking between Grian's face and Ren's bleeding body collapsed in front of Scar. He can't even seem to fit his finger on the trigger.

“How *dare* you,” he hisses, tears starting to slip from his eyes as the gun nearly clatters from his hands. “My king—you bastards, you *murderers*—”

“Your king?” Scar snaps, and there's a dull *thud* of something hitting fabric. Martyn's face contorts with sharp pain, tears flowing faster down his face as he glares at Scar over Grian's shoulder. “You mean your *lover*?”

Martyn's shoulders are shaking now too. He clenches the gun tighter in his hands, raising it from Grian's head. He looks broken with grief, his clothes torn and armour in disarray, blood pouring

down his face and cut through with lines of tear trails. Grian wonders if he can even aim.

(He remembers Martyn grinning at him at the castle gate, friendly as anything and with no ill intent.)

Success has never felt so *wrong*.

There has to be a way to stop this carnage. It's too much, now, the three of them all that remain in a castle of corpses, all of them damaged beyond repair. Everything's gone too far. There has to be a way to fix it. There's always a way.

There's just never *time*.

Because Martyn shoots blindly, his knees giving out on him as he hits the floor with a clank of metal. Grian whips around, watching as Scar easily ducks the bullet and it rockets through a pillar behind them instead.

He has space to take in one breath.

Then Scar draws his own rifle and fires it directly into Martyn's face.

And just like that, it's over.

He stands there, unmoving, and stares at the new mess of gore that sprays the floor. There's barely even a head on Martyn's body anymore, just a caved-in and mangled mess. He thinks he would throw up if it wasn't too much effort.

Silence reigns like a cruel lord over the scene.

Then a soft, whispering wind picks up in the courtyard. A twitch begins at the base of his spine that turns into a shiver up his back, climbing up every nerve and shuddering down his shoulders, his hands, his legs and up to the base of his skull. It leaves a low buzzing behind it, a building pressure in his ears that burns and pushes and presses and aches—

Then pops, and the whispers breathe their last breath, and he's met with the familiar feeling of far too many eyes on his back.

He knows what will wait for him when he looks up again, but he flinches anyways.

The glass from the windows picks back up from the floor, and slowly, clinks together, piece after tiny piece, back into glowing white panes. He can't see the courtyard below anymore, as if the lanes have been frosted over by thick, iridescent frost. They light up like lamps, illuminating the—

Dark room?

He swallows, turning slowly in a circle, and finds that all the non-destroyed sconces have flickered out. The holes in the ceiling and walls have gone pure black as if it's a new-moon night outside, and the shadows overlay with the glow of the window panes on the floor, black on white.

It looks like eyes.

Then the shadows—the *pupils*— move, and multiply, all at once—

And there are a thousand eyes on him and Scar.

“No,” he breathes, and more blood spills over his lips.

*Hello, Xelqua*, a thousand voices say around them, everything and nothing at once. They boom, they shake, and they're no more than a whisper— nothing that disturbs the air around them at all. Grian finds himself, despite everything else, terrified.

Scar speaks behind him, his voice cracking. “G, what is this?”

He looks over his shoulder, and for once, sees his own fear mirrored on Scar's face.

“The Watchers,” he whispers, squeezing his eyes shut. No. No, Void, no, not like this. He wanted it to be over. He wanted more *time*. Not this.

He hears laboured, limping footsteps, and then Scar's hand settles on his shoulder, gripping so tight it feels more like Scar is trying to steady himself than reassure Grian. “Easy. We'll be okay.”

He hears it when they start to laugh and flinches away. Still, the sound echoes, grating like nails down a chalkboard and the distortion of rusted machinery and the wrongness of broken reality itself. His skin crawls. He has never liked their laughter.

*You succeeded*, Etoile says, and if he didn't know better he'd dared to say they almost sounded proud.

“I know,” he spits, glaring down at the eyes. “So, what now? What else could you possibly want from me?”

*Rejoin us*, one says.

*You've undone your shame at last*, another adds.

There's a pause after that and a growing feeling in the air of disapproval and discontent. After it stretches on long enough to be uncomfortable, Etoile responds. *Mostly*.

“Mostly?” Scar asks, quiet as a whisper. A warning starts to pound at the base of Grian's skull.

Still, he steadies himself up, pressing harder on the stab wound in his stomach when it screams in protest at the motion. He lurches forward, baring his teeth at the shifting eyes. “I *said*, what else could you possibly want from me?”

Etoile answers him. They were always the most forthcoming of the Watchers who even ever bothered to speak to him. The only one whose name he ever learned besides *hers* – but she had been dead and gone a long time ago.

*Your human*.

He swears he can feel Scar straighten up in offence. Grian beats him to it. “My human?”

*Him. You know who I speak of*.

“His name is Scar.”

Etoile speaks anyways, brushing past his words like brushing off an annoying fly. He can feel their disdain right down to his bones.

*You are weak, with him. The power to create this new world is in your hands, to shape the lives of these mortals in a way that will not let this happen again, but... you tie yourself too closely to the mortal world. You are weak as one of them. You fix nothing as one of them.*



...*You fix nothing, so long as you stay with him.*

“I won’t leave Scar,” he hisses, coughing up another waterfall of blood. This sounds awfully like a personal vendetta instead of some prophecy of doom.

*You are dying, Xelqua, and the fate that waits for you if you die now is not kind. You are better than this.*

“So what happens if I choose to stay?”

One of the eyes turns sharply, locking directly onto him, and he can see another shadow moving within the pupil. *He dies for upsetting the order of fate and killing the king with his own hands. It will not be a merciful one. Then you will pass too, and take your chances with the unfeeling universe beyond, where there is no one to love or protect you. Our domain can only stretch so far. We cannot save you there.*

It takes a minute for the words to register and then he stumbles back, wincing and doubling over at the renewed pain. He’s not got much time left. Still—

“He *dies*?” The words come out horrified, furious. “I will not let him *die*.”

...*A shame.*

“What?”

*You have no choice, Etoile says, and there’s a whisper of wind, and when he looks down a golden dagger sits in his palm. The golden dagger. It’s still stained with blood and gore, scraps of torn red-and-brown fabric clinging to it, enchantments shining like a lamp in the dark room. Fate is quite angry... and so are we. There is an order to the Universe. There is not much love left for those who upset it... or who should have died long ago.*

He finds he has no words to say.

Scar is the one who speaks instead. “Well, they’re not wrong.”

Grian whirls around, and regrets it immediately, stifling a cry of pain. “*What?*”

“Tell you some other time,” Scar says, and the *which won’t happen* goes unsaid. “These guys are assholes. Worse than I thought.”

A hysterical laugh forces its way past his lips. Only Scar. Only ever Scar.

He turns slightly over his shoulder, back towards the eye still locked on him. He gestures with the knife. “What exactly do you want me to do with this?”

*You know.*

It takes a fraction of a second for him to make the connection, but it feels like eternity. One blink to the next, and he sees Scar again—broad, red-cloaked, tan-skinned, strong as stone—and he looks at the knife in his hand, and dread settles like lead heavy in his stomach. The knife seems to turn into a poisonous snake in his hand and he flinches back in slow motion, trying to cast it away but finding he can’t quite take his fingers off.

No.

No.

No.

“Scar,” he says, the words broken, like he’s pleading for a lifeline. His voice sounds thick with tears.

He sees it when Scar realizes too. Those amber eyes widen, his lips parting slightly, and there’s pure outrage on his face—

And then Scar bows his shoulders in resignation.

This time, Scar’s the one to laugh. “I should have known.”

He can’t force the question to his lips—can’t force his body to move at all—but Scar continues anyways.

“Martyn always told me we were all cursed. That we were doomed for tragedy. Jimmy said it too—you’d really think I’d have noticed, at some point, that all the ominous folks were telling me about my impending demise. You know me, G. Not the brightest.” His words don’t seem to really be directed at Grian, more at the empty air, but Grian listens anyways. He finds he doesn’t really have any other choice. “At least it’s you. At least you get to be... you get to be happy again. You can be a god. It works out better for you, doesn’t it?”

The way Scar’s looking at him is almost hopeful. Grian thinks he really is going to be sick.

“At least it’s with you, G.”

That’s what finally gets him to move, as if he’s fallen out of ice still expecting to be drowning. He stumbles towards Scar, reaching out with his free hand, close to him to where they can share breath and he can put his hand on Scar’s shoulders, anything, *anything*. He sucks in a deep breath of air, gripping the dagger so tightly his knuckles burn, and stares wide-eyed at Scar. Scar can’t possibly be serious. He can’t.

“I won’t kill you,” he protests, the words hollow with shock.

Scar’s eyes are hollow too. “Rascal, I’m already dying.” He grins, and it’s all gritted teeth, and no joy at all. He moves Grian’s hand up, over his sternum, and warm-sticky-wet seeps into his palm. Grian’s fingers turn scarlet. “See?”

Something freezing grips his chest. “No.” He pushes harder and hears Scar suck in a hiss of breath, torn flesh giving under his fingers. “How? When?”

“I shouldn’t have worn my braces,” Scar says quietly. “Today was a bad day. My legs... I could barely move them by the time I fought Ren. My reaction time was... gone. He got a hit on me. I took the chance to stab him back. I just happened to hit him where it counts.”

He looks down at Grian, and now his smile is crooked and tears bead in his eyes.

“Looks like we’ve both had an unlucky day. I don’t have any gods waiting to save me, though. Everything hurts a lot, actually, and it’s all taking forever. If you could speed up the process I’d appreciate it.”

Grian steps back in horror, taking his hand away, and Scar catches it before he can fully withdraw. His breathing comes fast, too fast, and the world is starting to spin. This can’t be real. None of it feels real, so it can’t possibly be, right? It can’t end like this.

“Not like this,” he whispers, the tears finally spilling over. He can almost feel the gaze of the Watchers heavy on his shoulders, choking him with their sickening fascination. None of this even matters to them. It’s inevitable; it has to be. They see it all and do *nothing*.

“Do it,” Scar says—no, *pleads*—as he grasps Grian’s wrist. “Come on, G, if anyone has to take the fall for this, it’s me. I’m not letting you die too.”

“But...” He fumbles for words he can’t find, struggling to drop the knife as Scar holds his hand in place. It feels like a sickening parody of their first night together. “You can’t. I can’t live with this. I can’t accept— I just can’t do this, Scar, you know I can’t do this. You don’t deserve it.”

Scar’s laughter is wild this time. Tears have started to fall from his eyes, leaving dark spots on his shawl where they land. “Are you kidding me? Of course I do.”

“You don’t—”

“I’m a monster. Take my life, and end this whole cycle, and be something better than I was. *Please*, angel.”

He grits his teeth, wrenching his arm away from Scar’s grip so hard it pulls something loose in his shoulder. This time, Scar lets him go. “*I can’t!*”

“You have to. It’s the only way to end all of this. I said I’d die for you and I meant it.”

“I won’t do this. *I won’t.*”

Scar’s hand settles on the side of his face. The touch is gentle and Grian shudders, unsure if he wants to say *forget all of this* and collapse into Scar’s arms, or if he wants to run far away and never look back. Wind whistles around them as the rain starts to pour again. He can’t move.

“You deserve the better ending,” Scar whispers, pressing a soft kiss to his lips. “I’m so sorry it had to happen like this.”

“But—”

“It’s okay. I never expected to make it out anyways. I’m gone no matter what.”

A migraine beats behind his temples. His hands tremble like a dying man’s as he raises them and settles them around the hilt of his knife. Scar doesn’t move away, leaning his forehead against Grian’s. Rough fingers wrap around his.

Violence, it seems, is a kindness sometimes.

“I love you,” he whispers, steadying his grip. “I’ll find you again. I promise.”

He stabs upwards.

Warm and salty blood splatters on his lips.

He feels it when Scar falls.

For a long minute, the world is still. Scar tumbles away from him, a dull thump echoing as his body hits the floor. Blood seeps into the floor like spilt wine, filling up every crack and making miniature red rivers. Beads start to roll in the red, bumping into each other and bouncing down onto the cobblestones far below. One of Scar’s necklaces broke when he collapsed.

Grian kneels down to pick up a bead, his head numb and full of buzzing, and feels the tear in his abdomen close in one smooth pull. It doesn't even hurt.

The bead he picks up is small, perfectly round, made of red glass with a tiny golden flower painted on it. Blood coats it in an additional layer of crimson, soiling the flower design. Grian wipes it off on his sleeve.

He stares at it for a minute longer and something bitter, furious, and ashen-tasting begins to crawl out of his ribs and up his throat. The numbness burns up into a fast, heavy heartbeat through his entire body, shaking all down his spine. Poison ivy seems to wrap itself around his tongue like a weapon.

The air shifts once more behind him.

He turns, slowly, silently.

The Watchers tower over him once more in their true forms. Tall beyond measure, shadow and light and everything and nothing all at once, impossible to look at, impossible to avoid. Endless spectres of death. *Spectators* of death.

The weeds strangling his tongue melt into pure, acrid, white-hot *rage*.

*You are the victor, little champion*, the Watchers hum.

His heartbeat pounds inside his head. He watches through distant and uncaring eyes as his hands clench tighter, curling in on themselves, whitening knuckles and biting nails as if he can tear himself apart if he tries hard enough. Everything buzzes around him, static that threatens to suffocate him alive.

He sucks in desperate, heaving breaths. The sound of his own voice is foreign to him with how much fury drips from it.

"I don't feel like I've *won*," he spits out. He feels numb and as if his ribs are being carved out from the inside at the same time. He pushes himself to his feet on useless and blood-coated hands to snarl at the figures that hover in the dark, distant sky. "You *never* would have let me *win!*"

He keeps speaking, so fast that the words seem to force themselves from his throat, a tidal wave of bile and hatred. "I was your toy. That's what Jimmy meant, wasn't it? That I was doomed all along, and you knew it, and you hated me because I chose to live despite it. You hate me. You hate me because even though I've made a fool of myself, I've made bigger fools of *you*. I've defied you again. It was all rigged."

He's panting, now, pacing back and forth, unable to tear his eyes from the ones that stare back at him. "I played your stupid game. *Oh*, I played it, and maybe it didn't matter. Of course, it was going to come back to this. But you never planned for *him*. You never planned for me to love him or choose him. You thought I couldn't. And now look where we are. He might be gone but..." He fumbles for the right words, a way to speak whatever unbreakable truth has hardened around his heart in the wake of Scar's death. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I did win. I won because I loved him and it made me *strong*. I can defy you all."

*Xelqua, be reasonable*, Etoile hisses.

He takes one more breath in. His feet move without his consent, towards the edge of the caved-in room. He steps past Scar's body. The braces on Scar's legs are still locked, his legs perfectly straight, collapsed on the ground in a grotesque preservation of exactly how he stood when he was

alive. Rain washes the blood away from his body.

Grian tears his eyes away and part of his heart with them.

He looks up, instead, at what surrounds him with the castle exposed, freed from endless Void-night. It all looks like a dream.

This part of the castle is round, supported by arches and pillars, rising up in tiers like the city.

All of it, built like a coliseum. A place for all these stupid and self-absorbed humans to live in decadence and fight each other and struggle for their lives. He walked into the ring, another unwitting gladiator in their midst.

Maybe it's fitting for him to not walk out.

He steps onto the ledge.

More of the Watcher's voices chip in. He knows they're scared, even if there's no emotion in how they speak. If one of them defects, all of them are weak. No order holds them together anymore. A new era begins.

*Xelqua, stop.*

He turns around to glare at them one final time. "Fuck you. Fuck you and *everything* you stand for."

One breath in, another. He takes his hand away from his stomach, letting the blood flow unfettered. His head is starting to swim.

An act of defiance, a rejection of divinity, casting them away and cursing himself as unsaveable in the process. A ruination of their great assassin and stain on their perfect judgement.

A fitting end.

"I'd rather die as a mortal than live as one of you."

Something in his mind *screams* as he feels otherworldly hands reach out towards him, trying to yank him back with a flood of *no, no, no*—

But it's far too late for them.

He tips back, the way he once stood on Scar's roof with the wind tearing at his clothes and limbs, and he isn't afraid this time either. He performs a song and dance of defiance, his hands stained with blood on blood on blood, all covered with the fresh red sheen of Scar's. He hopes, *prays* to whatever else is out there that Scar will be waiting for him somehow.

This time, on this ledge, he falls.

He *falls*—

Falls the way he fell in love, sharp and far and brutal.

Falls the way he fell for the lies, eyes closed and unwilling to see.

Falls the way he fell from grace, life-shattering and new—

The way Scar lost the use of his legs—

The way Cleo died—

He falls, and he *lands*.

The impact comes with a crunch of bones and a burst of pain so sharp he screams, the agony of something puncturing his lungs and of his legs shattering, something warm and wet along the back of his head. It is so awful, for an instant, and then it is so numb.

He never opens his eyes. He refuses to look back at the Watchers.

He musters one last smile, shaking and strained. The blackness of his closed eyes becomes darker, heavier, tugging at him like the Void pulling him under. He doesn't resist the pull, what's the point? He's dying. He knows this.

The Void swallows him, and he gives a bloodied laugh, feeling it bubble on his lips.

He thinks of Scar, at the End. Maybe Scar will be there, waiting for him. Maybe the Universe is kind when the Watchers are not.

He falls one final time, deep into the night-darkness of death.

And then he *wakes*.

#### Chapter End Notes

see you in the epilogue. keep hope alive for now, my friends. it's not over yet.

# i am above you, and i love you, don't you know?

## Chapter Summary

We say goodbye, at last.

## Chapter Notes

hey all! i hoped to get the epilogue out the day after i published the last chapter, but life got in the way, as it often does. i hope you were alright living with the cliffhanger for a few days and thank you for your patience. i know this ending wasn't what all of you wanted, but i appreciate you sticking with me enough to hear the epilogue out.

i hope you can find some happiness in knowing that even the worst of luck doesn't always end in disaster. i learned that from rough experience, so i hope this fic is, in comparison, a gentler way to receive that message.

thank you all once again for everything. i love you.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*“You are not separate from every other thing,”* a voice murmurs above him, like the beginning notes of a chorus. Grian’s head aches something fierce and the blackness behind his eyelids is dotted with stars, a thousand shifting colours and pinpricks of life vaster than anything he’s ever seen.

Then he blinks and realizes the stars are above him.

Slowly, awareness returns. His entire body carries a residual ache, though nothing looks broken when he manages to crane his stiff neck to look at himself. He feels... weightless.

The voice picks up again. *“And the universe said you are the universe tasting itself— oh. Hello, Grian. Welcome back.”*

He blinks sluggishly, squinting up at the endless stars above him and seeing nothing waiting for him. “Who are you? Where am I?”

“You’re at the end,” a now-familiar voice replies, absent from its distorted echoing earlier. This one is bright and rolls the words almost awkwardly off his tongue, matching the hesitant steps that Grian hears to his left.

He *hears*.

He tries to force himself up, wincing as his elbows nearly give out on him, and ends up in a half-curved position reminiscent of a dying bug. It’s enough, though, for him to catch a glimpse of who waits next to him.

The sight makes him fall back again.

It's—

“Jimmy?”

He barely looks the same. His hair is loose and not tucked under an aviator helmet, falling to his shoulders in messy light blond strands. No grease stains his skin and his stubble is gone, his face eerily smooth like a carved marble statue. His clothes are that of a temple priest's, white robes and embroidered overlayers and draped cloth. His face is impassive, and his eyes—

His eyes are sewn shut.

Grian finally finds it in himself to throw up.

Jimmy kneels down, touching his shoulder. Some nausea clears. “Hey, Grian. Sorry for the weird welcome.”

“Your eyes,” Grian chokes out.

“Oh.” The hand withdraws. Jimmy stands up. “My curse. It's not painful. It won't last beyond when I'm not here. Don't worry about it.”

He coughs up more bile, wiping his mouth and staring down at the obsidian-black solid floor below. He can see Jimmy's disturbing reflection in it. “What curse? Who are you?”

Jimmy is quiet for a long minute.

“That would take too much time to explain. You don't have enough of it. I managed to keep the Void from grabbing you after you died, but it won't last for long. You're supposed to be dead, just like Scar was. It'll upset things again if you stay. The Watchers hate my gods enough. No sense making it worse.”

“Your gods?”

“The Listeners. Don't you remember them?”

He shakes his head. Jimmy lets out a quiet sigh and a halo of blinding blue-white light encircles his head— just like the one Grian had seen before, that night on the balcony with Martyn. This time, it stirs something in his veins, a deep tug-and-pull under his skin. Like the Enchanter called to him. Like the Watchers did. Pure, raw magic. Something stirs to life inside him.

Bits and pieces of knowledge start to fit themselves together in his mind. He's heard about this from Etoile before, hasn't he?

Gradually, he manages to sit up, some semblance of memory returning to him. Not just from his time with the Watchers, but before, too. His village. He'd forgotten almost everything from that time. He's not sure why. But he—

He knows the Watchers aren't fond of their counterparts. The Listeners have always been more distant than the Watchers, emissaries of the future and of hope, whereas the Watchers are justice and unflinching witnesses to cruelty, absolute truth. They both function as unseen forces not quite worshipped in the world, hidden behind false faces of “deities”, building the fabric of the world from their dark and light.

The Watchers shape the earth, though. The Listeners only ever stand by, hardly relevant at all.



Then how...?

“You’re not human,” he says quietly.

Jimmy turns his head down towards him. “I told you that a while ago. I’ve been trying to keep us all safe from what those Watchers wanted, you know. They care about ‘fate’. Not about what happens when they try to get what they want. Not who suffers for it.”

“You’re a Listener, then?”

“Not really. Our gods have their hands in everything. Your life, Martyn’s, mine, all those we’ve met. I just knew enough and heard enough to realize I was a pawn in their games.”

Grian lets out a long sigh, scrubbing his hands over his eyes. This might as well be happening. It’s not as if things can get stranger or worse. “You and I both.”

“Martyn, too. The Watchers... they weren’t really after the king, Grian. They were after the people that had escaped them before, that had defied fate and upset the natural order of how things were supposed to go. You were just the instrument to bring justice upon them. Scar, Martyn... me as well. I tried to warn them all. Even you. But there wasn’t much use in it.”

He blinks once, twice. “I heard you talking to Martyn on the balcony that night. I thought you were telling him about the attack.”

Jimmy huffs out a bitter laugh. “No. I was warning him about the Watchers hunting him down. Give him a chance to escape again. Fat lot of good that did him or me.”

He thinks his head is spinning. Everything feels like too much.

“The thing about the Red King being a danger... about Ren was a lie, then?”

Jimmy shrugs one shoulder, reaching down to help him stand. Grian manages to force himself to look at Jimmy’s face, despite the new shudder that goes through him. “Well. He was a tyrant. But he became the way he did thanks to Martyn, and the curse Martyn brought with him. It ruined who he was. Summoned dark forces to them, drove both of them mad. You, me, Martyn; we’ve all been walking around with targets on our backs, and ruined everyone around us in the process. Being hated by the gods isn’t exactly a good omen.”

Grian’s stomach turns again. “I brought this on everyone?”

“All three of us did. We ended up in the same place, in the same war, with all the forces surrounding us at odds with each other. That couldn’t have brought anything but disaster.”

Grian curses quietly. Silence follows the words, making the blackness hang heavier over them. He knew he meant nothing good. He knew he was a harbinger of disaster, the feeling had lingered in the back of his mind since the day this conflict began. But the knowledge that destiny made him this way somehow makes it worse.

“Where are we?” he asks, just to change the subject to anything else.

“The end of all things,” Jimmy replies, gesturing at the stars. “Not our world, but not the Void either. It’s what waits beyond the long dream.”

“The long dream?”

“Life.”

He breathes heavily, in and out, tasting and smelling nothing. No air fills his lungs. “So this is really the end of it for me. I’m done.”

“I’m sorry,” Jimmy offers, a quiet and weak statement.

“It’s not... I don’t really mind. I knew what I was doing when I jumped. I’m not scared to die.” He pauses, swallowing and cracking his knuckles, anything idle he can possibly do. In this strange dimension that he can’t quite comprehend, the hazy feeling that descended over his mind in life is gone. Whether it’s the absence of stress or of the Watchers, he isn’t sure. Either way, it’s uncomfortable. Everything feels far too real.

“I just wish it hadn’t ended like this,” he finishes lamely.

“I know.”

He turns to Jimmy again. “You knew this was going to happen, didn’t you? That things were going to end this way. Because you can hear the future. You knew we were destined for ruin.”

“I did.” One of Jimmy’s hands settles against his shoulder blades. The touch makes Grian grimace. “The Universe has a way of getting what it wants.”

An indeterminate amount of time passes as they stand there. A weird tingling feeling begins on Grian’s shoulders, underneath Jimmy’s hand, starting to spread down his back. He can’t name what it is. Regret begins to gnaw at his ribs. This is it. This is really it.

“You know, I think I’ve changed my mind. I wish I had lived,” he says finally. “I had a lot left I could have done. Even if I had to rejoin the Watchers to do it. At least I could have shaped the world into something better for all the damage I did.”

Jimmy seems to consider him for a long moment. “Better in your case, I think, to die mortal. You’d have lost yourself if you went back to them, and that would have been a shame. You became a good man.”

He laughs, hollow and shaky. “But the rest of the world goes on without me.”

“Not all of it. Most of them are gone.”

“You aren’t, are you?”

“No. It’s not my time yet. I don’t have a choice in the matter, even if I’d rather be gone too. I won’t have *him* anymore. I’d go the same way everyone else did just for that chance.”

He remembers amber eyes, extravagant clothes and jewellery, white and slightly crooked teeth bared in a wild grin. The thought makes his heart ache like it’s being pulled out of his chest, bloody and raw. It feels like something’s gone missing. Something *is* missing.

“They’re all dead, then?”

“They are. I’m sorry.”

Grian shakes his head. “No, *I’m* sorry. He was your husband.”

Jimmy sighs. “I gave him an afterlife. That was the best I could do for him and I still get to see him sometimes. The Listeners are good to me. That was the kindest thing I could have asked for.”

There's not much to say in the aftermath of that statement, except a simple, "This is all awful."

"It could be worse."

"Everyone died. And for *what?*"

"It meant something, still," Jimmy replies, pulling the hood of his robes up. It shadows his face in whitened fabric. "Maybe we weren't lucky enough to win, you know? Maybe the victory was all hollow. But the hope was there. The love was there. It changed things, it meant something. That's what matters."

Something bitter seems to eat him from the inside out, gnawing through his organs and ribs and skin, collapsing him in on himself like a dying star. There's no fucking justice in any of this. There's only grief.

"I wish I'd done things different," he says finally.

Jimmy takes his hand away. "Don't we all. But... even in death, at the end of the long dream, it's not all over. Some people move on and start over, go back into the world. Some people don't and stay ghosts. Some people land in between. No matter what, there's always a new dream waiting."

"Is this supposed to comfort me?"

"Maybe. I think you'll find what waits out there is more comforting, though."

"Out where?"

Jimmy gestures, and out of the darkness, a doorway appears. It glows golden, brighter than the surrounding stars. "This is just a waystation on your way to better things, you know. The Universe is kind sometimes. *The Universe said I love you*, and all that."

Grian blinks at him. He's never heard that phrase before. "What?"

"Just poetry. Idle stuff, religious stuff. Nevermind it. I can't keep that door open for long, but I managed to make a deal with the gods, a good ending for a few last good deeds. You earned it."

He swallows, staring at the bright light beyond. The door flickers at the edges. He thinks, if he squints hard enough and makes sure he isn't imagining it, he can see a street-lined house somewhere in the blinding gold. The sight makes his heartbeat start to thunder in the hollow of his throat.

"I got you the best thing I could." Jimmy pauses, and a smile turns up the corner of his mouth. "Go on. You know who's waiting for you."

The scent of spices reaches his nose. He thinks he feels tears spill down his cheeks.

"Thank you," he breathes, turning to Jimmy one last time.

Jimmy's smile grows wider and brighter, and this time, Grian feels he recognizes it. "Don't mention it. Now go."

He does.

He runs, then, towards that distant door that's started to already collapse in on itself. His footsteps become faster, lighter, half lifting off the ground, and the buzzing feeling in his back blooms outwards into a heavy weight dragging in the wind. Dark feathers drift into his vision, flying

towards the golden door, and a familiar sensation of two great, feathered limbs flapping behind him returns.

That strange, echoing voice resumes its recital. This time, he can hear Jimmy, just faintly, within the words.

*You are the Universe tasting itself, talking to itself, reading its own code.*

He flies the last steps into the door, tumbling headfirst through it, and it's all so blindingly bright—

*And the Universe said I love you because you are love.*

Then suddenly dark and silent.

Someone's hands caress gently over his cheekbones, rough and scarred skin that's so achingly familiar. Grian forces his eyes open, blinking at the brilliant sunlight flooding his vision and the vibrant blue sky up above him. His eyesight blurs for a few minutes, a blob of tan-and-red colour fading in and out of it, a stark contrast against the sky.

Slowly, his vision clears.

Slowly, he recognizes the face in front of him. Faded scar tissue, a sharp jaw and cheekbones, beautiful and warm amber eyes.

His breath catches on its way in. The one he lets out shakes with tears springing to his eyes and spilling down his cheeks.

He sits up with unbroken bones, unmarred skin and great *wings* weighing down his back, and yanks his *friend-lover-partner* into a desperate embrace. He's met with a warm body, thick and strong muscle, heavy embroidered fabric and beaded jewellery that smells of incense.

One hand strokes down his back. Two arms wrap around him tight enough that he can't move, holding him steady and secure, keeping him *here*. This is real. Oh, gods, blessed *Listeners*, this is real.

"*Scar*," he breathes, burying his face in that soft, sumac-and-cinnamon-scented shawl. Tears soak into the fabric like rainfall.

That steady, familiar hand settles on his head and combs through his hair. "Hey, rascal. You came back to me after all."

He laughs, an equally joyful and broken thing.

"I said I was going to find my way to you. I don't break my vows anymore."

The sun pours over them like melted honey, melding their skin and bodies into one single thing that's beautiful and endlessly golden. Two pairs of battered hands find each other and lace together, glowing in the sunlight; lovers inseparable from one another at last.

## Chapter End Notes

despite it all, we made it. both of us. you and me, and here we are at the end together.

i hope you have as much love for this work as i put into it. even if you don't, thank you for being here.

see you in eons, the treebark perspective of this story, whenever it rolls around at last. i'll be back one day, just like every time before. keep waiting for me like you always have. we can keep each other going that way :)

in the meantime, i'll be waiting on tumblr and in my discord server if you want to chat. be well, friends.

## End Notes

this has been in the works as a concept since october, so! hopefully it should be fun going forward. there's a lot of plans for this little fic :>

feel free to drop a comment or come chat on tumblr

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!