

They first saw them off the port side, protruding from the mist like spirits afloat over the water. Legs dangled, arms hung lifeless, and heads turned upwards to the sky, lips forever parted in silent screams. Great spikes of rusted iron lined the rocky inlets and outcrops, thrust out towards the sea, as if to threaten passing ships, each one adorned in gruesome warning with a corpse; man, woman and child alike were skewered there, some with their flesh rotting, others yet to decompose. Beneath this display, a large signboard of wooden planks nailed together with bent, rotted nails bore a message in a tongue that Elden Killian could not read.

“*Theviases ei bosterdes no specia lo hevia,*” he read aloud, though his pronunciation was mangled, “What does that mean? Myrrin?”

Elden turned to search the deck for the elf and found him perched atop a crate, his back up against the tall railing of the ship. His blue eyes, even through the thick fog, were aglow, piercing through the grey.

“I do not know,” he said, his voice lowered, as if he was wary to disturb the placid air, “I know these people not.”

Elden turned back around to gaze at the sign, as if it might reveal itself if he stared. He heard thumping footsteps on the deck behind, then felt a presence to his left, breath leaving its nose in chilled puffs. It was the captain, his long, dark hair braided at the back, and left mussed and tumbled at the front. He wore concern in his expression, and his fingers clutched his belt tightly, fidgeting with the leather and the metal buckle. The wind tugged at his long, sea-blue overcoat, as if urging him to turn the ship away.

“That’s a warning, My Lord,” he said, a darkness in his gruff snarl, “Villalon doesn’t like no visitors, I see.”

Elden turned to face him fully.

“What does it say?” he asked, almost desperately, “Can you read it?”

“I can,” the captain said, then he paused before continuing, “Thieves and bastards can not speak to heaven.”

The wind ruffled Elden’s golden hair as he stared in trepidation at the captain, then at the corpses. They were growing nearer, and the tips of the spits that held them could be seen now, protruding from their mouths, covered in blood long dried from the sun’s constant rays.

“What were the crimes of these people?” Elden asked, “What bought them this fate?”

With a rough, throaty sigh, the captain leaned on the railing with his hands, the innumerable golden rings on his fingers clicking and snapping against the wood. He shifted his boots, heels striking the planking with a thrum.

“Thieves, most likely, as the warning says,” he began, “But some... if they have their eyes still — if the crows haven’t got to them — then those are the Children of Ash. Eyes are glass in their heads, and birds don’t eat glass.”

Elden peered up at the dead, yet he could not see their faces from so far away. He heard the captain’s retreating footsteps, then turned to see him crossing the deck, shuffling through the crowds of crewmen. Like a spirit, he vanished, and Elden was alone once more.

“Where is that boy?” he asked, and turned to see that Myrrin had been staring at him; he frowned.

“Sleeping,” the elf said; he reached up to fix his silver hair, then his scabbard clicked against the rail as he sat up, “When will we dock?”

“Soon, I imagine,” Elden answered, leaning against the rail just as the captain did, yet his fingers made no golden clicks, “Cantarell seems horrid. There are children up there, Myrrin, smaller than Adrian.”

The elf said nothing; he slid on a glove of pale velvet, examining the shimmering silver stitching. Elden turned to see if he would answer, then saw that he would not, and so he continued to stare off into the mist.

After a time, the mists began to clear, and two great walls of rock reaching up into the sky could be seen on either side of the ship; they formed a gateway, and Elden gaped up at them in veneration. They were thick and broad, jagged and dotted with trees drooping down over the water, as if reaching for the ship as it passed through. Their pinnacles remained hidden beneath the last wisps of fog, though their height was evident even still; they seemed ethereal, as if the entrance to some divine plan, able to make the most stolid of men feel trifled.

“The gateway to the South,” the captain bellowed from atop the quarterdeck, “May the Lion give you all strength.”

His eyes were flickering, but with fear or some other thing, Elden could not tell. He turned away from the captain to watch as the great walls faded away into the mists behind them, abandoning them in a sea of paleness. They were alone again, afloat in a void of white, and Elden began to worry whether their heading was clear.

“You told me there would be sun here,” Myrrin began, still staring with his crystal blue eyes, “I see no sun.”

Elden smiled morosely, then drummed his fingers against the rail.

“Perhaps it is just as lost as we,” he said, “Or perhaps...”

The elf frowned.

“Perhaps?”

Elden blinked.

“Perhaps... no,” he said, “It is nothing.”

Myrrin continued to stare, his body drifting back and forth with the rock of the ship. His scabbard clicked against the rail once more.

“You worry for Adrian,” he said, “You need not.”

Elden’s gaze did not meet the elf’s. He was fixated on the endless wall of fog. It had weakened, yet still, it shrouded all beneath it; it would take many hours for it to vanish fully.

“And why is that?” Elden asked.

“As of yet, I can not say,” the elf began, “The Faynin are bound by the honor of Shyrrik, and we can not break his bond, but I will tell you this: Adrian will return, yet he will return a different boy.”

The elf expected the adviser to turn, yet he did not. He only stared out at the sea, as if the words had gone unheard. Above him, the masts groaned heavily, sending sonorous vibrations through the deck and the air. Lines, ropes, and nets whipped and beat against the wood, snapping whenever the wind would blow too strongly, fluttering gently when it did not. Water lapped the hull, and though Elden could not see it, he could hear it gently licking the planking, coating it in wetness.

The ship was a trader, not a war vessel, and so it was smaller than Elden would have liked, especially in such a place. Two masts held aloft great sails of pale fabric emblazoned with

the gilded lion of House Starmane, yet these were furled now; the captain thought it unsavoury to travel at such a speed in a mist. Even still, the ship kept a brisk pace, urged forward by the rowers, who hid beneath the decks, pushing and pulling unceasingly on their great oars. An ornament — a golden figurehead on the bowsprit — was wrought into the form of a lion, its claws outstretched in stillness. A trading vessel needed no such thing, it certainly would not discourage pirates, yet it was there all the same. Elden peered across the deck, examining the top of the lion's mane — it was coated in condensation, and little droplets beaded on its surface, sparkling even in the grey.

“Do you have a mate, Elden Killian?” Myrrin asked.

Elden frowned as his gaze snapped around to meet the blue eyes of the elf. There was inquisitiveness in them, the same a child might bear.

“I do not,” Elden said, “I never found a woman.”

“I have none either,” the elf explained, “The Faynin take partners only if the stars allow it. If they do not, then you must continue to search. Sometimes, the stars never allow it, but that depends.”

His scabbard clicked the rail again.

“Then how do you... continue to reproduce — to sustain your family line — if the stars do not allow it?” Elden asked.

The elf tilted his head, yet his gaze remained unchanging.

“You do not,” he said, “The stars have forbidden it.”

Elden held the elf's gaze for a moment in confusion, then turned away again. The mist had not changed since last he looked. He drummed his fingers again, then listened to an argument erupt from atop the quarterdeck before turning back to the elf; he was staring still.

“Then your family will die with you?” he asked.

The elf nodded his head. There was no sadness in his expression, no emotion. Elden looked away, and heard the scabbard click against the wood once again; it was beginning to vex him.

“Lord Killian!”

The captain stood at the ship's wheel, gazing off across the sea ahead. Elden turned to follow his gaze, then straightened, taking his hands off of the rail. He crossed the deck to the forward, just above the bowsprit, and stared, a grim expression touching his face.

The island of Villamaje — its great mass filling the horizon — lay ahead of them, blotting out the sun where it rose uncertainly, framing the island in its orange glow. Ship masts rose like trees in a forest along its shores, filling every port and harbor in sight, and tall statues wrought from gold and bronze stood like gods atop pedestals, visible even from such a distance, in the upper city and along the harbor walls. The mists had cleared now, as if afraid to approach the island, and the blue waters of the Eastern Seas were now clear to see, spraying the hull of the ship with every lurch.

“Lord Killian, you had best begin to pray,” the captain shouted, “I’ve been since we left port; the Gods need added entreatment here.”

Elden felt a pain in his stomach. He turned to look at the elf, and saw only the blank, placid stare that seemed unchangeable, though his blue eyes seemed set alight, like two stars in his face of burnished silver.



The port was crowded, just as much with ships as with their sailors and crewmen. Like ants, people passed back and forth, stamping along the jutties, some bearing large crates and handfuls of supplies, others nothing, their hands empty but their eyes watchful. These ones were garbed in long overcoats of silk and velvet, the inner linings pale fur and dyed animal pelts; around their necks, their upturned collars shielded them from the sun's rays with ermine and mink. Most wore their hair long, yet cropped around their shoulders, some with braids and flashing ornaments of gold that caught the sunlight like stars. Each face was angular, with skin the color of lightly tanned leather, and every pair of eyes was alight in brilliant hazel, bright even in their darkness. A wall of beige stone stood along the perimeter of the harbor, barring entrance to the island but for a large gateway, which now admitted a long stream of merchants and their carts; their horses stamped and snuffed, uncomfortable in the unabated heat. A small party of

four gatekeepers stood guard, watching as the visitors passed through, checking them before allowing them entry. Each carried a long staff tipped on one end with a barb longer than their forearms, and the other fixed with a scythe blade that glinted as they moved. They were arrayed in the same long coats of silk, yet there was armor beneath, every piece decorated with filigree of silver and gold.

Elden watched them as he stood atop the quarterdeck, waiting for the ship to be secured to the dock. The captain stood beside him, his face grim and his eyes darting about, and Myrrin leaned against the rail, his small stature preventing him from peering over the top; he resolved to finger his gloves instead. Zander hovered close to the elf, glancing at every passing body with a suspicious frown on his lips. His scarf hung from his neck, stirred every so often by the sparse breeze, but hanging limp when it was not. The captain shifted on his feet.

“These Southern men are prideful,” he began, and Elden turned to listen, “You would do well not to cross them, least of all their king; if you do, you may lose a finger... perhaps even all of them.”

Zander’s eyes widened and his skin began to grow slightly pale.

“Catpurses wander the streets like stray dogs — always children, mind you — and they’ll run their little fingers through your pockets ‘til there’s nothing left,” the captain continued, “Keep your gold secure, My Lord.”

“I will,” Elden said, “You seem awfully concerned, captain, for our safety.”

The captain shifted again.

“His Majesty chose you as regent ‘fore he left,” he explained, “You are his adviser; you have my respect just as much as he.”

Elden fixed the captain with a stare, then a smile touched his lips. Before he could speak again, there was a bellow from the dock below that drew his attention. He crossed the quarterdeck, boots thumping the planking, to peer over the side of the ship, and found himself peering down at a group of men garbed in the same regalia as the guardsmen at the gate. Leading them was a man taller than his fellows, with long hair pulled back and cut just below his shoulders. He was comely, with a rough grace in his stance and a noble light in his hazel eyes; he seemed as if he might *be* noble, as his armor was gilded beyond his companions’, and a short

half-cape of purple silk hung limp from his right shoulder, secured over his long coat, which was dyed the same color. Secured to his belt was a long, curved scabbard, a sabre with a gilded handle sheathed within; he rested his left hand on the jeweled pommel.

“Elden Killian, yes?” he called up, his bright eyes having spotted the adviser atop his perch, “Come down, my friend.”

He gestured with his hand, tilting his head to stare up at the councilman. Elden frowned, then turned back to face the captain, who wore a weary expression on his face. Motioning for the elf and Zander to follow, he descended the staircase to the quarterdeck, then crossed the main deck to the boarding ramp, dodging crewmen who bore boxes and crates for trading. He stepped onto it, hesitantly making his way down, clenching his teeth as the platform bowed slightly beneath his weight, then leapt down onto the pier, approaching the party of gilded men with his two companions in tow. As he reached them, the man with the blade stopped him, then placed his hands on his shoulders, staring into his eyes as if searching for something within them. Zander and Myrrin waited, watching in confusion the man and his retinue. After a moment, a smirk touched the man’s lips.

“Elden Killian,” he said, his staring done, “My name is Salazar Alvarez. Do you know me?”

When he received a shake of the head, he continued.

“I am the *Gourdredora* of Cantarell Villalon,” he explained, “His personal guard, you might call it. It is my duty to answer to him, and I bring a message especially for you.”

His retinue began to stir, moving past Elden, then past Myrrin and Zander to form a barrier behind them. They clutched their staffs tightly with one hand, leaning on them as they awaited instructions; Myrrin watched them, his blue eyes sparkling. Salazar continued, releasing Elden’s shoulders and standing back, his hand moving to rest once more on the pommel of his weapon. The smile did not leave his lips.

“I am to take you to *Casteloro*, my friend,” he said, “And put you in prison. Cantarell wants Adrian to come, and he will not if he has no motivation to... you will be that motivation.”

Elden's eyes widened and he turned to glance at his companions. They bore expressions of worry on their faces, and Zander seemed as if he might retch. The *Gourdredora*'s snapping drew Elden's attention, and he turned back around to see the man's fingers raised.

"I am speaking to you," he said, "It is disrespectful to look away."

Elden said nothing to that.

"Come along," Salazar continued, "Cantarell is an impatient man."