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## Chapter 11

### Anton

Anton stood in a wasteland. His hands were still clasped over his ears, and the arena still stood before him, but there was complete silence. He shivered, spinning in circles. A moment ago, he was surrounded by their people, while that girl acted like some sort of insane beast. Then, everyone disappeared.

“Hello?” he shouted. His voice echoed louder than it should have. He could still see the forest in the distance, but everything was shrouded in shades of brown and gray. There wasn’t even the slightest breeze. And he felt... hollow. An overwhelming sense of loneliness began to set in, as though something was begging him to stay—to keep it company. It had been alone for so long.

Anton reached out a hand to it, but whatever it was, it wasn’t a person. His hand glowed purple, and he jumped back, checking himself. *He* was purple. And see-through. Like he wasn’t even there. What in the name of dragons was going on?

He stumbled, falling back onto the ground.

The crowd was suddenly back, rushing past him and tripping over him. Anton covered his head instinctively, curling up into a ball to protect himself from the stampede. The roaring had stopped, and the last of the people had run past him. He shuddered, putting his hands on the ground. It was solid—he was solid. Had he been hallucinating again? He got up, dusting himself off. It had felt too real. Then again, they all did.

Anton glanced around. He was mostly alone in the arena again, but he was definitely in Anadrieth. Everyone had run off in fear of that girl. He followed the direction in which everyone had left. It was a complete mess—the councilors were frazzled, General Barrett was injured and even the soldiers seemed frightened. Where was Alexander? He should be controlling this situation.

The longer he looked around the castle, the more suspicious he became. No one had seen their leader after the girl had run off into the forest. His stupid brother must have gone after her instead of helping the rest of them. Someone grabbed his shoulder, and he whirled around.

“Have you seen Lord Alexander?” asked Ban. He seemed just as frazzled as the rest of them.

“He’s probably trying to find the girl,” said Anton. “I’m sure he’ll be back with some sort of excuse.”

Ban grabbed his arm and pulled him along. “Come on, we have to look for him.”

“He can take care of himself.”

“With the Lanadese about? If there were any spies amongst us who saw him go off alone, it would be the perfect opportunity.”

He wasn't taking no for an answer.

“Did you find him?” called Councilor Dallan.

“We've got a lead,” said Ban.

Anton let himself be dragged along with them as they gathered a few soldiers on their way to the stables. With a sigh, he mounted one of the horses and held his breath. The small group rode into the forest, following Alexander's trail. Ban wasn't wrong to be worried, but the likelihood of his brother being defeated was slim. They would probably end up going through all of this effort, only to return to see him contentedly having supper. But Anton figured that he'd better make sure that that was the case.

It was dark by the time they reached the end of the trail and were forced to slow down. No one had thought to bring any lanterns with them, and the forest was even more dangerous at night.

“There!” Councilor Dallan pointed in the distance.

There were dark shapes littered across the clearing—bodies. Anton's heart picked up. Maybe Ban had been right. He threw himself off of his horse, scanning the ground. There was blood everywhere, far more than there should have been with this number of bodies. He touched the puddles with his fingers, just to make sure that it wasn't the shadows playing tricks on him. It wasn't. There was evidence of a small army, yet there were only a dozen or so bodies. He took a closer look at one of them. A cleanly slaughtered man, wearing imperial white and gold.

*Oh, no.*

This wasn't a battle of the Lanadese. This was treason against the empire itself.

“I found them! They're still breathing,” called Ban.

Anton jogged over with the rest of them, but a silver glint in the snow caught his eye. He crouched, peering at the sword. It pulsed with a slight violet glow, the same glow that he'd seen throughout his body earlier. He realized that there were two swords—one stuck in a body, the other laying by his feet. He narrowed his eyes. They each had that script on them. The same scribbles his little sister was always going on about. And the imperial crest.

She must have stolen them; these swords were clearly property of the imperial family. That's why the empire had come. And his brother had gotten caught in the crossfire. He shook his head. The girl must have been hiding them in Anadrieth this entire time. Coward. But that would mean that the empire believed that they had been concealing a thief. Anton swallowed. Depending on how important these artifacts were, the entire region could be condemned for high treason.

He was about to get up when the sword glowed a little bit brighter. It had that same presence about it, the same as he had felt when the girl was in the arena, the same as his hallucination. Anton reached out a hand, and his palm connected with the blade.

A scream tore at his throat, but no sound came out. Searing pain coursed through his arm. He couldn't pull back, couldn't pull away. His vision blurred, his senses both muted and incredibly sharp.

*A foreign land, yet intimately familiar. Titanic creatures soared above, tails as large as rivers. A silent song tugged on his spirit.*

Anton felt his face hit the snow. There was an overwhelming presence commanding his attention, his sacrifice—the circle of three.

*Mysoviere, mysoviere.*

Then, nothing.

Anton shot up, his fingers gripping blankets. He swung his head around wildly, blinking through the darkness. Had he had another episode? He took a few deep breaths to calm his heart. No, this was different. It was far from his usual episode but no less confusing.

There was a bandage wrapped around his left hand. He attempted to unravel it, but he was unable to get past the last layer where his raw flesh stuck to the cloth. He grimaced, squeezing his eyes shut. Better not touch it.

His eyes adjusted to the darkness, and he saw his brother and the girl lying in the infirmary next to him, still passed out. He could hear Elaine snoring in her room next door. She must not have had enough energy left to heal his wound.

Anton's feet hit the cold floor, and he leaned close to see the gentle rise and fall of his brother's chest. He looked worse for wear, but at least it seemed like he'd make it through the night. He wandered over to the girl, gritting his teeth. That stupid servant girl. He should end her now while she was weak. It would save everyone else the trouble. He'd been right all along, but she was more dangerous than he'd ever imagined. Anton looked around for a weapon.

The woman laid her head against his shoulder, muttering in his ear, detailing the many ways he could go about it. There were plenty of weapons right in front of him; he just had to get creative. Then, there were the twin swords laying on the bedside table, suffocating in layers of cloth. Alexander might hate him for it, but he would get over it eventually. This was the moment.

A sudden pang hit him in the chest, and he sunk to his knees. The woman's presence left him with a bad taste in his mouth. He couldn't do it. He couldn't kill someone. Not again. Besides, there was also no way he was going near those swords again.

Anton banged his head against the bed. Something was wrong with him. His mind drifted, the smell of the barbarian's foul breath wafting across the room. He squeezed his eyes shut.

*Go away.*

It wasn't real—the weight of the dead body crushing his own, threatening to take him down.

*It's not real.*

There was an awful feeling in the pit of his stomach. None of it was ever real. Was he fated to slowly lose his mind? Anton punched the stone floor, then bit his tongue, cradling his wrist. Wrong hand.

The room suddenly became brighter, and he leaped up with a start. His brother and the girl were glowing, an ethereal violet surrounding their entire bodies, concentrated at their hearts. Her light was unbearably bright. The swords were glowing, too. They both held an indescribable warmth, a fluttering innocence.

Anton rubbed his eyes, blinking furiously. Tiny colored lights danced through the air, everywhere he looked, and he backed away, bumping into the wall. This was far more intense than it had ever been. When he looked up again, everything was back to normal. It wasn't just his eye acting up this time—it was his whole mind. A laugh escaped his throat. He was truly going insane. Maybe it was time he just embraced it.

Anton ran down the hall toward his room, a little bubble of air under each step. He jumped into his bed, grinning into his pillow. Perhaps there was peace in being insane. That would be nice.

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Two days had passed since the *incident*, and the whole of Anadrieth was gossiping about who this servant girl really was. Anton stalked down the hall with dark circles under his eyes. Yet another night without sleep.

He'd heard nothing but talk of that girl and whether his brother was going to be fit enough to lead them into war. Alexander this, Alexander that. No one really cared about his brother's wellbeing; they were just interested in self-preservation. And gossip; can't forget how fascinating the gossip was. Neither Alexander nor the girl had woken up yet, and the rumors were growing out of control, becoming more outlandish every day.

Anton shook his head, willing the little lights to go away. He'd seen Elaine about his eye, but the lights didn't seem to have anything to do with his vision, and she'd avoided his questions. Maybe he could tire himself out in the training grounds instead by hitting some things. That seemed like a manly thing to do, and though it wasn't the ideal nighttime activity, it might send him to sleep at last.

As he neared the training grounds, he paused, spying one shape hiding behind a pillar and another lurking on the grounds. Anton stuck to the shadows. Was it an intruder? Maybe he should call the guards.

Moonlight illuminated the area briefly as the dark cloud drifted away. The figure behind the pillar was his brother, watching the figure on the grounds—the girl.

Anton frowned. He hadn't been informed that they were conscious. What in dragon's name were they doing?

The girl swung her swords around with frantic grace, her bandages discarded in a heap. Her chest heaved, and her exhaustion was evident. Droplets of rain started to fall, and Anton edged back as far into the shadows as he could. Slowly, the rain grew heavier.

Blood seeped through the girl's shoulder, the water enlarging the stain. She faltered, clutching her wound. It seemed to spur her on, and her strikes grew more fervent. Although she fought only air, she swung with a force that looked like it could smash iron walls. It was nothing like her duel. This was carnal.

The girl let out a roar, and Anton held his breath, gripping his arms around himself. He couldn't help but shudder.

Alexander ran out to her, and suddenly her blade was at his throat.

Anton's hand went for his sword, but it wasn't there. Of course, it wasn't; he didn't sleep with it, unlike his brother. It was stupid of him to wander the grounds without it, though.

After a moment, his brother drew his sword, and she came at him with incredible speed. Anton watched with his mouth agape. Now they were fighting? His brother was the best fighter he knew, but he was barely surviving on the defensive. Alexander was quickly disarmed, and his sword flung several paces away. It wasn't surprising, considering her show against General Barrett. Not only was she some sort of terrifying beast, but she was also a trained fighter, just like he'd always said.

The girl fell to her knees, grasping her arms.

"Two years... two years!" she cried.

Anton hugged the wall as she pounded her fist into the ground, sending out a minor shock wave with each blow. That same feeling surrounded her, but it was not nearly as intense. She'd better not do what she did in the arena, or they'd all be in trouble.

His brother didn't seem frightened as he knelt in front of her.

"And this! I've never made a mistake like this," the girl exclaimed, gesturing at her wound. "Two years out of practice."

Alexander pulled her into an embrace, and they stared at each other. Then, he pressed his lips against hers.

Anton retched silently. That had to be the worst method of courting he'd ever seen. Thank dragons no one else was here to see that.

"Are you serious?" Anton blurted out.

Alexander turned toward him in shock, grabbing his sword. Anton emerged from behind the wall, and his brother sighed.

Alexander stood, helping the girl to her feet and reaching for her swords.

"Don't," she said, retrieving them herself.

Anton narrowed his eyes. She was holding them with her bare hands, but she wouldn't let Alexander touch them. That temptress must have enchanted them somehow; that's why they glowed. He had just found out the hard way. He clenched his bandaged fist. It still hurt.

They walked past him without a word. His brother didn't even look at him.

Anton pursed his lips, spinning in the opposite direction, running into a wall before stomping back to his room. He could have lived his entire life without having witnessed that.

*Utterly disgusting.*

So much for training himself to sleep. It seemed like it was going to be yet another sleepless night. Anton threw himself into bed, crossing his arms. His gaze was drawn to the window, where the subsiding rain was a glowing shower of deep blue. As strange as everything in his life was, the rain had never looked more beautiful.