



ASTERIA

A World Unbound

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ASTERIA: A WORLD UNBOUND

BOOK ONE OF THE ASTERIA CHRONICLES



BY VI MAI & ADAM JASKULOSKI

ASTERIA: A WORLD UNBOUND - Preview Edition

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Written by Vi Mai and Adam Jaskuloski

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For more information, or to learn more about the large, interactive World Map, visit:
www.worldasteria.com



For those who wander in the wake of
echoes. May they guide you across worlds.

PROLOGUE

The world was born when the sky fell. It created a pulse as it crashed into the earth, and it continued to pulse with life, even to this day.

— Si'ila, The Speckled Witness

Small puffs of cold air escaped the Redwind rogue's mouth as he stood on top of a stone pillar. The blizzarding frost and constant snowfall always blanketed the winding mountain paths this far up the barely carved trail. Still, he had grown accustomed to the harsh cold. Vendin, Raven of Trost, kept a watchful eye on his target—a lone wanderer navigating the slippery crevices and crumbling roads, inching steadily forward.

To where? He didn't know.

The wanderer took a few more steps, and then he stopped. Light armor, a small bag, a leather-bound book, and an intricate sword etched with fiery designs adorned his figure. His stallion neighed in the cold air, though horses rarely thrived in this frigid height.

Magic, perhaps?

Vendin swiftly double-checked his gear. The man had been out here searching for something, and someone with the mettle to brave these colds wouldn't be caught off-guard so easily. Whatever the case, the traveler had what he needed—and he had a price to pay.

There was no room for mistakes.

Three Windstreak Hawks perched by Vendin's side, their sharp eyes locked on the lone traveler. One rested on his shoulder, another balanced on his fingertips, and the third stood watch atop a nearby tree. With their dark bodies and bright maroon-tipped feathers, the native birds of Dventos were not only his eyes, scanning the man for any weaknesses, but they were also his constant companions.

Vendin looked down, and as the traveler's body shifted ever so slightly, they both knew.

He'd already sensed him—there was no need for deception. No trick or clever scheme would tip the scales now.

Not against this person.

The wanderer held steady, but his hands stayed ready, prepared for any move Vendin might make. Drawing his Dual Ravens, twin magesteel daggers that thrummed in the cold air, Vendin landed smoothly on the rugged terrain below. Sensing the threat, the traveler unsheathed his longsword, its edge gleaming as he braced for the coming clash. Vendin recognized the sword, the Dragon's Tooth.

Meeting Vendin's gaze, the man steadied his breath, and their eyes stayed locked, each measuring the other, reading the terrain. The wind whistled through the silence, the only sound between them. Vendin knew no words would be exchanged—only action.

Then, the traveler struck first, lunging with lightning speed. But Vendin was faster. He moved with ease, outpacing his opponent effortlessly.

Soon, their blades met with a sharp ring, but Vendin remained unnervingly composed. His Third Vision hummed—an ability that unraveled every shift in balance, every subtle hitch in his opponent's stance. Through his own eyes and the keen sight of his hawks, he saw everything: the snow-blind terrain, the traveler's tensed shoulders, his firm grip on the Dragon's Tooth. No weakness went unnoticed.

"Who sent you?" The traveler's voice was low, edged with the weariness of too many battles in too many places. "Another bounty hunter? Or just a fool with a death wish?"

"You should know," Vendin didn't blink. "Debts don't settle themselves."

The traveler's lips curled into a humorless smile. "And you're the mongrel they sent to collect? Really?"

"Mongrels bite," Vendin said, his tone flat.

The traveler's smile faded, his voice hardening. "Don't think you'll walk away unscathed. I've dealt with people like you before. You're just another footnote. Nothing more."

"Right." A muscle twitched in Vendin's jaw. "That's what they all say."

His dagger moved as the word finished—a whip-crack motion, steel aimed not at flesh but at the nearby stallion's tendon. Vendin knew the first move was to ground the beast that accompanied him. If he couldn't win this battle, then he'd at least slow him down.

But the traveler reacted quickly, snatching the dagger from the air before it could reach the horse. Seizing that moment, Vendin activated his ability, and both of his blades ignited. Crackling arcs of blue energy snaked up the traveler's arms, hissing like storm-winds through wire.

Lightning Strikes Twice.



The ability paralyzed the traveler as the daggers, crackling with a lightning aura, pulsed a bluish glow, transmuting the air. The traveler, caught off guard, dropped the dagger—another costly mistake.

The charge bled into the snow, and the horse staggered, its legs locking mid-step, as the current rooted both man and beast in place. Vendin's grin curled into something feral as he lunged, closing the distance in an instant.

With a blade angled for his chest, victory was his.

... At least, that's how he'd imagined it.

Instead, the traveler's roar shattered the air. Fire erupted around him in a scorching corona that melted snow to steam instantly. His skin flushed crimson, his eyes burning with raw heat and his veins alight like molten fissures.

The man took a breath, pausing, and then the inferno poured from his lips, devouring the space between them.

Vendin's reflexes snapped taut, narrowly avoiding the flames and snatching up the other of his Dual Ravens, the blade nearly slipping out of his palms slicked with sweat. He didn't hesitate, defaulting to instinct: retreat, not attack. A backward leap carried him away, his boots skidding across stone that became scorched black moments after. He pivoted into a defensive stance, every step precise, his muscles coiled like springs from a thousand drills.

A hook line shot out from his wrist, its claw sinking into a nearby rock pillar, and he hauled himself up, his boots scrambling for purchase. Crouched on the ledge, breath sawed in his throat, heart hammering against his ribs.

"It has been a long time since I've been pushed to use this ability," the traveler said, his breath ragged from the exchange. "Most rogues lack the intellect to devise a plan as even half as complex as yours. I commend you."

He raised his sword to his chest, and the blade ignited, a molten glow spreading across its surface. Vendin didn't understand what it meant, but instinct told him that a direct strike from that blade would sear his flesh, burning him to the bone.

It would kill him.

"This is a Circle Three, fire-aligned ability," the traveler said, his voice clear and authoritative as he stretched his arms outward. "It allows me to shroud myself in a blazing aura of mana, both within and around my body. Anything that touches me within this aura will be burned or singed, and my weapons grow stronger and more durable."

Vendin widened his eyes.

He's revealing his technique?

It must've been one of his conditions for using the ability, and for the ferocity it granted him, it was likely a worthwhile trade. Vendin processed his words, trying to devise a strategy, but the traveler gave him no time. In a flash, he closed the distance. Vendin leaped back, startled by the sudden speed, and the sword



missed him by inches, its aura of heat leaving minor burns on his skin. He gritted his teeth, the sting sharp against his resolve.

His speed nearly tripled.

Vendin grimaced, realizing that taking the traveler head-on was futile. He had to change tactics, and fast. Pressing his hands together, he activated his trump card: Lightning Step. Though he'd hoped to save it for later, he had no choice but to use it now.

The air around him crackled, charged with electricity. His speed surged, reflexes sharpening as the ability coursed through him, igniting every muscle in his legs.

Vendin darted toward the traveler, sidestepping a deadly sword swing at the last possible moment. Blows came fast, each strike more precise than the last. Now, the tide had turned. Vendin weaved through the traveler's attacks, dodging and countering with ease, landing quick, damning cuts across his body.

The wounds were minor, but they piled up. Each time a cut seared shut—cauterized by the traveler's own technique—he winced, the pain slowing him down ever so slightly. But after a while, he couldn't endure the assault much longer. Finally, with a mighty sweep of his sword, the traveler released a circular wheel of flames that radiated outward.

It seemed he wasn't taking this lightly anymore.

The pressure slammed into Vendin like a battering ram, hurling him backward into the snow. His body skidded across the icy ground, struggling for traction, but the traveler was relentless. He surged forward with raw, animalistic force, leaving Vendin no room to recover. A brutal kick to his abdomen sent him crashing down, pain exploding through him.

Blood spilled from Vendin's mouth as he lay writhing in agony, gasping for air. The traveler stepped closer, and a cold, sharp fear washed over him. Vendin cursed under his breath. Why had the Aevum sent him after someone like this? This was far beyond his paygrade.

But even through the terror, his connection with his Windstreak Hawks kicked in. He sensed it—the traveler wasn't planning to kill him just yet.

"Tell me," the traveler said, his voice low. "Why have you come to assassinate me?"

"Assassinate?" Vendin's eyes flicked up, surprised. The traveler was far too dangerous for that. If that had been his goal, he'd never have come alone.

"My goal isn't your assassination," Vendin coughed, blood staining his lips. "You owe debts to my employer. I'm merely here to collect—nothing more."

"I owe many people a great deal of things," the traveler said, his tone flat. "You'll have to be more specific."

Vendin paused. "The House of Aevum."

Those words landed like a hammer, and the traveler froze, his face unreadable for a moment before he nodded slowly.



"You're sure?" the traveler asked.

Vendin nodded.

"Then, my apologies," he said, extending a hand to help Vendin up. "If the Aevum truly wanted me dead, I wouldn't still be standing."

"I see we're both in agreement," Vendin nodded.

He knew better than anyone the might of the Aevum. They were no ordinary house, and their operatives, the Aevum Imperia, were monsters themselves, feared and respected as the Duke of Trost's most lethal enforcers. Pride aside, Vendin knew he didn't even compare. The Aevum had crushed rebellions and silenced threats to thrones for generations. Their reputation was earned, not given.

"As per your contract," Vendin said, his tone firm, "you owe one thousand gold Vinar coins for their services." He retrieved a leather-bound book from his bag before adding, "If you cannot pay, negotiations can be arranged. If you refuse to pay, next time, it will not just be me. They'll cut you where you stand."

The traveler scratched his head, looking sheepish. "I'm on a mission for King Bel of Tenebris," he revealed. "I don't have the funds on hand, but perhaps this will work as a down-payment."

He handed Vendin a heavy object. Closer inspection revealed a sizable crystalline mana shard, shaped like a great, curved horn. Vendin recognized it at once—a horn from the Bluefrost Yeti, one of the fearsome mountain beasts that prowled the Vasir Mountains.

"Very well, this will suffice," Vendin said, taking the shard with a nod, his fingers brushing its edge. He knew its value. "Next time, think twice before attacking without explanation."

"Don't play coy," the traveler shot back. "You were stalking me like a vulture."

"I was simply monitoring you," Vendin replied, his voice cutting through the air. "Don't twist my actions."

The man chuckled. "Seems we both share some blame, then."

"Perhaps so. But be careful. If anyone comes for you soon, know it won't be from the Aevum," Vendin said, his gaze hardening. "Well, I must be on my way. Good luck with the rest of your mission."

"Likewise," the traveler replied, his nod curt but not unkind. "And tell the Aevum I'm grateful for their... continued patience."

Vendin let out a sharp whistle, and his hawks dove down in unison. Two of them seized the massive horn from his hands, their talons digging deep into its surface. The third hawk began to grow, its body swelling until it was large enough to bear his weight. Vendin swung onto its back, and with a rush of wind, they shot into the sky, leaving the traveler alone on the mountain path. His gaze remained fixed on the shimmering blue gem.

The mission was complete. The horn was his.

Now, Trost awaited.



PART ONE

A Land of Magic



House Aevum

House Aevum first emerged with the founding of the Second Kingdom, Gatam, as guardians to the throne of Scezitar. However, it wasn't until their expansion into the unknown lands of Asteria that they truly flourished under the embrace of magic.

CHAPTER ONE

No greater suffering exists than loss. To know the feeling of having something, only to be reminded that you no longer do. To imagine a reality where things went differently. Endure an eternity of sorrow, or embrace the mercy of death: the choice is yours.

— Nvthgkv, Hbi Jouaa

Aaron opened his eyes.

His irises were glistening with a tone of vivid golden—bright with an auburn hue that gave a shining glint in the air, reminiscent of the autumn leaves. He blinked a few times and looked around, slightly disoriented but aware of his surroundings. As they adjusted to the warm light, his mind reeled in. Initially, Aaron thought he was in chains or being held captive—the usual assumption when he couldn't immediately recall his surroundings. However, to his surprise, he found himself lying on a plush seat, his aching muscles bearing witness to the exertions of days gone by.

But where exactly was he?

Aaron knew he was clearly in motion, evident by the subtle rocking back and forth, and he listened intently to the noises around him to learn more. Initially the sound was barely audible, a faint murmur in his ears, but as he concentrated, it intensified, transforming into a distinct and growing resonance that resembled the gentle patter of rocks cascading over a water wheel.

... Horses?

He supposed it wouldn't be the strangest thing to find in Chicago, but what confused him more than the sound of their clattering hooves was the absence of other noise. The bustle of the streets, the din of urbanity—if he was still in the city, why didn't he hear it?

Was he still in the city?

Scanning his surroundings, Aaron determined that he was within a large and opulent carriage. Rising to his feet, he beheld the intricate details adorning the carriage's walls. Golden designs and ivory engravings sparkled with a touch of what seemed to be Renaissance Europe, all delicately laced with faithful ornamentations.

"Stop," He cleared his throat with a forceful cough.

He swallowed hard. The words that erupted from his lips were as dry as a desert breeze, but his voice was still evident. Upon his command, the carriage screeched to a halt, its wheels grinding against the rough gravel. Despite the harsh rasp of his parched throat, his voice was different. It was unfamiliar... almost alien.

Was it just a trick of his mind?

"What troubles you, Master Aaron?" a rough voice came from the front of the carriage.

Aaron tilted his head. "How do you know my name?"

And Master? Who on earth would call him that?

There was a pause. Then a slow shake of the head. "Has it really gotten that bad?"

"Has what?"

The voice chuckled. "What exactly have you been drinking, my boy?"

Aaron fell silent, confused.

What did he mean by that?

"Still feeling under the weather, I presume?" the voice chuckled, giving a light nod. "Don't worry too much. Just sit back and relax. It's been my task to escort you for quite some time now."

Aaron frowned, confusion settling deeper. "I don't understand," he muttered, glancing around, trying to make sense of this unexpected turn. "Where are you escorting me to?"

"To your residence, of course," the servant replied, his tone completely unreadable.

Aaron's scowl deepened. "My... residence?" He was about to ask more, but something about the way the servant said it—so casually, like this was normal—made him hesitate. "I don't remember arranging for an escort, much less a... mysterious one."

The servant's voice softened, carrying a touch of amusement. "Ah, well, I suppose that comes with the territory, considering how much you've been celebrating." He gave a slight chuckle before continuing, "But worry not. I'm quite reliable when it comes to these things."

Aaron blinked, trying to piece together the situation. How had he ended up in this carriage? And why was it heading toward his 'residence'? There was one place he could've thought of that fit the bill, but he would've never called it home.

He pressed his fingers to his temples, hoping to clear the fog clouding his thoughts. A strange sensation inundated him, the feeling of distant memories

being dredged up like fragments of a forgotten dream. Faces and voices swirled around him, tantalizingly close but just out of reach. It felt like trying to catch a butterfly in a storm—he could tell they were there, but they slipped away every time he tried to grab them, like sand through his fingers.

Aaron was silent for too long, but he snapped back to his senses soon enough, “Continue on our journey,” he replied softly, his voice decisive. “And please tell me everything you know.”

The chauffeur, donned in leather attire, which happened to be a person he soon discovered bore the name of William, lightly flicked the reins and surged the carriage forward.

Bouncing along the uneven road, William spoke with a voice that held a mysterious charm. “What is there to know? I’ve been a loyal servant to your father, tasked with bringing you home. This isn’t the first time you’ve found yourself in a state like this, I’m sure.”

“I... don’t have a father,” Aaron interjected, his voice flat.

“Ah, yes... family matters. Complicated things,” William replied, waving a hand dismissively. “If that’s your view, I won’t press the issue. For now, let’s just say I’ve been retained as your butler for this particular occasion.”

Aaron sat silently for several more minutes, his mind racing as he tried to piece together his tangled memories. But like a shattered mirror, his thoughts were fractured and incomplete. With a frustrated sigh, he sat upright and leaned against the coach seat, crossing his arms. “Can I ask where we’re coming from, then?”

The driver’s unexpected behavior disrupted the carriage’s atmosphere. A hearty chuckle burst from him, echoing throughout the enclosed space. “Why, your very own birthday celebration!” he exclaimed. “Although, given the extent of your indulgence, I’m not surprised to hear you may have forgotten much of what the night had to offer.”

“How severe was it?”

“If I recall, there were at least three escorts involved.”

“That’s...” Aaron paused. “That’s not that bad.”

“Unfortunately, they died.”

“Oh.” Aaron shook his head. “On second thought, I am actually having trouble remembering many things at the moment,” he admitted.

“That much is understandable,” the driver nodded thoughtfully. “You’re fortunate to have a family that’s... lenient with these things. Though, I suppose, what family wouldn’t do favors for their own kin?” He gave a small, knowing smile. “I’m confident your memory will return in due time. However, may I suggest summoning our alchemist to assist with your recovery once we reach your residence?”



"An alchemist?" Aaron raised an eyebrow, his voice edged with skepticism. "No, there's no need for that. I've had my fair share of unpleasant experiences with vials, no matter what's inside them."

"As you wish," the driver shrugged, turning his focus back to the road. "But should you have any further inquiries, feel free to ask. That said, I would recommend sticking to sanctioned brews at future parties. Or at least bringing a guard to test them first."

Aaron gave a small, appreciative smile. "Thank you for the advice, William."

As the carriage rumbled forward, Aaron leaned back, his gaze fixed on his feet. He briefly entertained the thought that he might've been trapped in a dream—a carefully woven illusion probing the depths of his mind to uncover its secrets. He'd heard rumors of advanced contraptions capable of such feats, machines so precise they could navigate the human mind's twists and turns, revealing truths even the harshest torture could not.

But that didn't make much sense, either.

Aaron furrowed his brow, delving deeper into his thoughts. Closing his eyes, he reached into the past, searching for any clue to decipher his current predicament. If this was a dream, it was the most vivid he'd ever known. The world around him felt too real—he could sense the soft leather beneath him, feel the breeze brushing his face, and bask in the sun's warmth filtering through the carriage window.

And then, a thought struck Aaron.

He ran his tongue over his teeth and felt the back of his throat, but he struggled to find what he was looking for.

"Not there," he whispered under his breath, frowning.

But why?

He tried using his hands instead, but the result was the same, and a slight panic grew as Aaron prodded around his mouth, his heart skipping a beat. Had he lost it? Had he misplaced the one thing that could keep him safe from torture?

Aaron shut his eyes, straining to remember. But remember what, exactly?

Ah... right.

It came crashing back, sharp and almost painful in its clarity. He had died, that much was certain. The feeling of the cold seeping through his body and the crushing weight of exhaustion as his life slipped away lingered in his mind. Yet here he was, inexplicably alive. If this wasn't a dream, then how was it possible?

He closed his eyes again, inhaling deeply as his palms pressed against his chest, searching for the reassuring rhythm of his heartbeat. Despite the strong pulse beneath his fingertips, a nagging unease lingered. His eyes snapped open, his hands dropping to the spot where his necklace—a cherished keepsake—should have rested.

But to his shock, it was no longer there.

"Hey, when will we arrive again?" Aaron looked up abruptly.



"In a few hours, I presume," William replied coolly.

"Hm," Aaron leaned forward. "And what about my father?"

"Pardon?" William asked.

"I'm asking why did he send you, a butler, instead of coming himself?" Aaron persisted. "Is he too important to bother with his own son?"

William scoffed. "He is much too busy managing Trost. His work as its duke allows you to live the lavish... *lifestyle* you desire, so I'm sure you can understand."

"Duke, hm?" Aaron mused, his gaze fixed on the horizon. "And what of my role?" The carriage rumbled forward, the driver's horse snorting.

"What do you mean by that?" William asked, lightly whipping the reins.

Aaron's gaze never wavered. "Well, you say my father is the Duke of Trost, right? Surely, he has plans for his lands and people—plans that might require my involvement."

The driver chuckled, "Worry not. Your father has already delegated those responsibilities, some to your siblings. As for you, your plans are rather vague, wouldn't you say?"

"I see..." Aaron contemplated.

"Are you sure you're alright?" William asked, his tone laced with concern. "Forgetting simple things like that isn't good for you, even in your state."

Aaron glanced up, his thoughts drifting. "It's not that," he said, shrugging lightly. "There's just been a lot on my plate lately, you know? Sometimes a little reminder is all it takes to clear things up." He tried to offer a casual smile, though it didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Getting suddenly interested in your birthright?" William raised an eyebrow, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Does your exile finally stir something inside you?"

Exile?

"Perhaps. Can you remind me of my exile?" Aaron asked.

"I know you don't give your father's words much concern," he sighed, "but with matters like these, don't you think it would be pertinent to stay informed?"

"Sorry. I just forgot the exact date."

William's smirk faded, replaced by a look that was harder to read. "Understandable," he said, his voice even. "Your exile is just a year away. Soon after the Asterian Calendar marks its 100th year, you'll turn twenty and be required to leave the family estate."

Aaron's curiosity sparked, but he kept it to himself. His mind still swirled in a fog, but he already had a lot to think about, and pushing William for more now might only raise unwanted suspicion.

"If that's the case," Aaron sighed, "Then slow down a bit. Let me take in the sights."

"Are you certain?" William asked. "Staying idle will only increase your risk."

"I'm sure," Aaron assured him.



The butler nodded without a word and gently pulled the reins, slowing the carriage to a more leisurely pace. Aaron leaned back, gazing out the window as the vehicle glided forward.

The clouds were sparse, drifting lazily across the azure sky. The scenery was pleasant, yet a sense of unease gnawed at him—the feeling of being a stranger in a foreign land. Looking around, he realized he was surrounded by fifteen guards, each in gleaming armor adorned with intricate patterns and sashes. He assumed they were there to protect him, but still—

A bit overkill, wasn't it?

Aaron slumped in the seat, stopping just short of a sigh. A few thoughts passed through his mind, but the one that made the most sense was the least likely.

Reincarnation.

The word lingered, heavy in his mind like a pall.

“Exile too... What’s my next move supposed to be?” he muttered, his voice barely audible. Countless questions clamored for answers, but an overwhelming sense of doubt washed over him. Was there some greater force guiding him here, or was he simply... lost?

Aaron lingered in the sunlight of the open window a moment longer, taking in the scenery before finally shutting it and resting his head against the carriage wall. He closed his eyes, letting his mind slip into a deep slumber. The gentle rhythm of the carriage ambling along soothed him into sleep. For now, there were no answers, no truths to seek. He could only wait, hoping that clarity would eventually come.



Aaron’s eyes fluttered open, disoriented. It wasn’t just the lingering effects of his illness clouding his mind, but there was something else too—an unfamiliar sensation. Memories surged, intricate and vivid yet foreign and jumbled together.

But where had they come from?

Despite their presence, they were difficult to grasp, crashing over him like waves, at one moment overwhelming him and at another receding into the distance.

A woman’s face appeared, her soothing voice weaving tales, though he couldn’t recall what of. Then came another memory—a man instructing him—and several faces more flashed through his mind. But as his awareness increasingly grew, the information started to slip away like a dream, and eventually, he fully woke up, his mind a mess.

Glancing outside the carriage, he saw the sun hanging lower in the sky. He must have been asleep longer than he realized.



“William,” Aaron’s voice was rough, betraying the nausea that clung to him. The hangover was really hitting him now.

Just how much had he drunk?

“Ugh... how much longer until we arrive?”

“Only a few more minutes,” William replied, his tone as crisp as ever. “Did you have a restful nap?”

“As restful as one could have in this situation.”

A flicker of sympathy crossed William’s face before he continued, “The sun will set soon, and dinner will be ready once we arrive. They’ve prepared your favorite—steak, medium-rare, with warm bread on the side.

“Who prepared it?” Aaron asked, his curiosity piqued.

“The maids,” William replied. “Would you like to speak with them?”

Without waiting for Aaron’s response, William handed him a small, shiny tablet with an intricate hourglass insignia etched on it. A diamond-like crystal protruded from its center.

“What is this?” Aaron turned the tablet over in his hand, but there were no buttons, no apparent way to interact with it.

“It’s a communication device,” William explained. “Just touch the crystal, speak, and it will handle the rest.”

Aaron raised an eyebrow, intrigued. Magical phones? Now that was something new. But he didn’t linger on it. “Interesting,” he muttered, tapping the crystal to activate the device.

“Is anyone there?” he asked quickly. The moment stretched, the only sound the rustling of trees outside the carriage window. Had he not spoken loud enough? Should he try again? Before he could, a clear voice broke the silence.

“Hello, Master Aaron. My name is Emma. How can I assist you?”

The voice, unmistakably feminine, came through with surprising clarity. There was no static nor background noise. It felt almost as though she was sitting there with him.

“I heard you’re preparing my dinner today,” he replied.

“We’ll have it ready soon.”

“Please pass my thanks to the chef. I’m sure it will be superb.”

“Y-yes,” she replied. “I’ll be sure to do that.”

“Can I ask what’s on the menu?” Aaron asked eagerly. “William mentioned steak, but are there more options?”

“We’ve prepared the usual for you,” Emma replied. “A medium-rare steak with sourdough bread, accompanied by wine.”

“Wine?” Aaron scratched his head, caught off guard by the unexpected addition. “Is that normal? Do I always drink wine with dinner?”

“If you’d prefer something else, I can prepare it,” Emma said, her tone polite. “We’re also happy to adjust the food if you’d like.”



Aaron considered for a moment before shrugging. “Keep the steak and bread. The wine will be fine. Thank you, Emma.”

“The pleasure is mine,” Emma said.

With a flick of his wrist, Aaron tossed the tablet to William, who caught it effortlessly without a glance. The butler tucked it away, his gaze never straying from the road ahead. Aaron was surprised by the older man’s dexterity, especially considering his age, but his attention soon shifted to the grand mansion looming in the distance. As the carriage crept forward, the towering structure exuded an air of majesty, its castle-like walls and commanding height perched atop a hill that overlooked the rest of the town of Trost.

Aaron was thoroughly impressed as the metal gates swung open and the sight of the lush field of flowers stretched before him. The maid who accompanied him into the manor seemed to sense his surprise and only smiled in response.

She guided him through the winding halls of the grand estate, his belongings trailing behind him without so much as a jostle. Upon reaching the dining room, a younger butler, taller than William, greeted him with a respectful bow.

“Allow me to escort you to your seat,” the butler announced.

Aaron nodded quietly, his thoughts drifting to the strange emptiness of the room. It was large—too large for just a few people. Where was everyone? The silence felt jarring compared to the bustling, noisy atmosphere he was used to. Yet, he settled into the stillness, observing the maids moving gracefully through their duties.

Plates shifted as Aaron settled at the large rectangular table. He ate quietly, savoring the steak and bread, absentmindedly aligning his utensils—a comforting habit he had picked up years ago.

Once he finished, the maids cleared the plates, and Aaron leaned back in his chair, a satisfied smile crossing his face. The steak had been cooked to perfection, the bread toasted to a golden brown. He gave thanks for the meal and the attentive maids who had seen to his every need, eating until only clean bones and a few scraps of bread remained, savoring each bite.

As the maids in attendance bowed deferentially, their bright emblem patches marked one of them as the head maid and the rest as her assistants. Aaron turned to the head maid, who’d introduced herself as Malia, and posed a question lingering on his mind.

“May I ask you something?”

“You may ask whatever you wish,” she replied with a slight bow.

Aaron sat, his gaze steady, fingers curling around the knife at his place setting. He lifted it slowly, presenting it almost ceremoniously as he asked his question, clearly unsettling the maid.

“Tell me, what are your goals?”



The head maid hesitated, unsure of how her answer might reflect on her position in the household. "I want to pay off my family's debts," she said, her voice steadying.

"Is that all?" Aaron followed-up.

The room fell into an uneasy silence. The maid recoiled, tensely interpreting his words. She bowed deeper, panic creeping into her movements.

But Aaron's next words were softer, more probing. "My apologies. What I meant was, do you have any dreams?" he sighed, watching her carefully.

"Well... yes," she coyly admitted. "I've always loved making clothes... Someday, I'd like to start a shop in Tenebris."

Aaron's interest piqued, he probed further. "What would you do if I gave you enough funds to start your own shop? Do you think you would do a good job?"

Malia hesitated. "I would try my best."

Aaron's gaze sharpened. "And what if you fail? Not everything works out as planned."

Her answer came quickly. "Then I'll try again. Until it works."

Aaron's lips twitched slightly, intrigued. "And once it does, what then?"

"I'll keep going," she said, her eyes steady. "There's always room to improve."

Aaron studied her for a moment, then exhaled a quiet chuckle. "A tireless student. I can respect that." He lifted the knife, turning it in his hand like a rare gem catching the light. "I once had that same hunger. But lately, I wonder if I've dulled. Perhaps I've grown complacent."

His fingers brushed the hilt, tracing the edge with care, but there was a tension in his grip, a subtle nervousness that contradicted the familiarity he had with the tool.

"It's curious, isn't it?" he said, his eyes fixed on the blade. "Such a simple tool, yet it holds the power to end a life. I've held one countless times, and yet now my hand shakes as though it's the first. The knowledge is there... but my body resists. So I ask you, do you understand why that is?"

With a practiced flick of his wrist, Aaron slammed the knife onto the table, its sharp edge plunging deep into the laminated wood. The head maid recoiled, discomfort etched on her face as she bore witness to the sheer speed and precision with which he moved.

Her answer came forth with a quiet voice as she mustered the courage to speak. "You... have not been trained in the ways of the family household. Perhaps that is why you face this difficulty."

Really?

Had his family neglected him?

He pondered her words carefully, but what she said next clarified everything. "But it was upon your request. You did not want to participate. You were occupied with drinking and clowning and... other things."



The truth struck Aaron with the force of a slap, and he realized just how dismal this life was. Irritation simmered beneath the surface, threatening to spill over. But, to his own surprise, he burst into laughter instead.

"Alright, alright," he said, standing up and returning his chair to its place. "I'll be taking my leave now, but this talk has been... enlightening..."

As he turned to go, a thought struck him, and he called over his shoulder, "Come, Malia, show me to my quarters. I'll see you're properly rewarded for your honesty."

Malia looked hesitantly to the other maids behind her before complying, "If you insist, Master Aaron."

As she led him through the labyrinth of corridors, Aaron observed the blend of architectural styles that defined the mansion. A fusion of Asian and European influences appeared to define them, every corner unveiling a new visual delight reminiscent of a modern architectural exhibit. It was a collaboration between Shanghai and Italy on an extravagant scale.

After a few minutes, she stopped in front of a door and opened it for him. Inside, Aaron found a spacious bedroom, its shelves lined with liquor bottles but little else. Despite the abundance of alcohol, the room had a minimalist feel, tidy yet sparse. A bed sat in the center, but Aaron couldn't shake the sense that it wasn't a place anyone actually spent much time.

"Is this really my—" Aaron returned his gaze to the maid who had guided him here, only to find her undressing right in front of him.

"Woah, woah, what are you doing?"

"Oh, I apologize!" she squirmed as she worked to put back on her dress. "Of course you would want to do it yourself..."

"That's not—" Aaron looked away, embarrassed by the situation. "I think you've misunderstood why I asked you here."

"Is this not usually what you summon my younger maids to your quarters for?" she spoke, a light relief lacing her words.

"God damn it..." he muttered under his breath, putting his hand to his face as he realized the weight of her earlier statements.

Is this really what he spent all his time doing?

"I just want to ask you a few more questions," Aaron said. "But this stays between us. My memory hasn't been the best lately, and I need to be sure of a few things."

"Of course," she replied, "Whatever you wish to know."

As Malia redressed herself, Aaron looked for a nearby chair to pull over and sat down.

"So, Malia," Aaron started over. "What do you know about this world?"

"Hm?" she tilted her head, unsure of how to answer the question. "Not to misunderstand again, but what exactly do you mean by that?"



Aaron rethought his approach, understanding the sudden strangeness of the inquiry.

“Tell me, to whom does your family owe money?”

“A lord who runs one of the trading businesses here in Trost,” she explained.

Aaron noticed her eyes flicker away as she paused to continue.

“When we had to flee the Second Kingdom, he helped safeguard our journey across the desert,” she elaborated. “We would not have survived without him.”

“Any reason you had to leave?” Aaron inquired, her hesitance piquing his interest.

“I’d... rather not discuss that, if I may.”

“Touchy subject?”

She nodded lightly.

“That’s fine,” he refrained away from the topic. “Then, how many kingdoms are there?”

“I’m not sure I understand the meaning behind this question...” she faltered, somewhat confounded.

“It’s as straightforward as it sounds,” he encouraged. “I just want to make sure we’re on the same page here.”

“Well, if that’s the case...” she began, “there are three. The Third Kingdom is where we are now, and two more lie to the east of the Mirage Desert.”

“Do you have a map I could look at?”

“I don’t mean to question your intent,” she said, “but if your interests lie in such things, the library might better suit your needs.”

A library?

Surprised, he thought to ask further, but he paused, reconsidering. “I see. Fair enough, then. Would you show me to the library in the morning?”

“Of course.” She nodded. “That can be arranged.”

“Then leave me for now,” Aaron said.

“I’ll make sure to come at an appropriate time tomorrow.”



CHAPTER TWO

Beyond the towering clouds, deep within the verdant woods, and atop the majestic peaks, there lie kingdoms of wonder, waiting to be uncovered and explored by the daring and the curious.

— The Adventurers Guild, *A Call to Adventure*

Malia departed as they arrived before a set of wide open doors inside the Aevum Estate, leaving Aaron standing before the grand entrance of the Aevum Library.

The name glinted like a beacon above the arched doors as the first rays of dawn peeked through the windows, daring him to enter a new world. Since his arrival, he'd been thinking about what steps to take next, and like any smart planner, he knew that gathering information was always the crucial first move. What was a good plan without information, after all? For an assassin, information was like pure gold.

From beyond the gates, a faint murmur echoed as if the very walls of the library whispered of the wonders within.

Aaron stepped over the threshold; his cautious footsteps echoed against the gleaming marble floors. Despite the trepidation pulsating in his heart, a hunger for knowledge propelled him forward.

The room sprawled magnificently, breathtaking in its sheer grandeur. This library rivaled some of the ones he'd seen back on Earth. He recalled a mission in America he had partaken involving a particularly large library. Unluckily, he'd damaged some of the books there. He would try to avoid repeating that mistake here.

Looking around, golden accents caught the morning light, casting a warm glow across the opulent oak surroundings. Towering shelves reached toward the sky, their immense structure reflecting the space's majesty. The rich crimson decor exuded warmth, perfectly complementing the golden hues of the early sun.

“Oh? Fancy seeing you here,” a voice, soft and graceful, filled the air, prompting Aaron to turn toward its source. “Welcome to my library.”

Before him stood a tall female figure, radiating a gentle peaches-and-cream essence. Her soft-gold eyes held a tranquil, observant gaze. But her hair was what drew his attention most—luminous and metallic, akin to refined quicksilver, flowing down her back in long, sleek strands. Her complexion contributed to her general elegance and allure, amplifying her already refined presence. The sharp features only added to the overall impression.

Yet Aaron couldn’t shake the feeling that her serene exterior might be hiding something more beneath.

“Why do you look at me like that?” Aaron asked suddenly, sensing a faint undercurrent of disdain from her eyes. He was particularly good at reading people, and while she was a bit harder to decipher, he could tell something was off.

They didn’t seem to see eye to eye. He wasn’t sure on what, but he could feel it.

“What do you mean?” she replied innocently, but a slight crease on her forehead betrayed her genuine emotions.

“I can see it in your eyes,” Aaron stated with certainty, narrowing his eyesight as he scrutinized her expression. “I’ve seen that look before.”

“You’re overthinking it,” she replied with a soft chuckle, her tone light. “It’s just that you look a bit... disheveled,” she added, gesturing to his worn, stained clothes. “But what brings you to my library? You’re not exactly the type to frequent here.”

Her voice was mesmerizing, a gentle melody that caught Aaron’s attention and held it.

“Beautiful,” he muttered, almost to himself.

“Sorry?” she asked, her brow furrowed in confusion.

“This place,” he quickly corrected, trying to cover up his slip of the tongue. “It’s only gotten better since the last time I visited.” He paused, unsure if he’d been convincing. “Anyway, I’ve come to read from your collection. Hope you don’t mind if I spend some time here today.”

Her reaction caught him off guard. Though she tried to conceal it, he sensed the confusion beneath her composed exterior. For a brief moment, her lips remained pressed together, perhaps weighing whether to admit him or show him the door. It was clear this wasn’t something the old Aaron did often.

“Well, may I enter?” Aaron pressed, giving into a slight inclination to bow.

After a brief pause, the woman before him relented, her expression softening as she gestured gracefully with a sweep of her arm. “I won’t stop you, but try your best not to make a mess, if you can help it. Clean up after you’re finished.”

“Of course.”

Stepping farther inside, the room seemed to come alive. Sunbeams filtered through the numerous windows, casting an ethereal glow over the woman’s hair. She moved toward a nearby couch and shielded her face from the light with a



book, her attention quickly consumed by its pages. Fully engrossed, she dismissed him once more, returning to her reading.

Aaron navigated the opulent library, admiring the plush crimson carpets and intricate bookshelves. Scholars, engrossed in their studies, gave only fleeting glances, acknowledging him with polite nods or brief salutations. Some lounged on luxurious sofas while others whispered quietly among themselves.

Most strikingly, however, in the center of the space, whirled an enormous magical sphere.

Suspended in midair, the sphere was encircled by whirling rings and surrounded by floating shards of molded iron. It seemed to bend the very fabric of space and gravity around it. Its brilliance was nearly blinding, causing the room to shift in response—walls and floors projected outward like a mesmerizing kaleidoscope.

Despite the diversion of gravity, floating chandeliers still hung defiantly from the ceiling. The bookshelves, tables, and chairs on the upper roof turned in adamant denial of physics, and scholars paced around on the second floor as if it were nothing out of the ordinary.

A part of him wanted to stay around and admire the structure, but another part of him knew that he needed to see beyond the first floor.

When Aaron ascended the spiral staircase to the second floor, his stomach churned. It wasn't him that was inverted, but rather it was the world around him that had turned upside down. He couldn't quite place the feeling, but the very force of gravity seemed transposed. Below him, scholars on the first floor hung suspended, their postures turned upside-down. Aaron took a few careful steps, unease settling in as he adjusted to his shifting balance.

"Well, that's interesting," Aaron clutched his stomach, leaning on the balcony. He tapped his foot, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Though he tensed, expecting to fall, his balance remained unnervingly steady.

As Aaron navigated the inverted library, his eyes darted from shelf to shelf, seeking something useful. The rows of books offered a mix of familiar and foreign subjects. He found it interesting that the books on religion, although detailed and organized, occupied a small, tucked-away corner, as though deliberately removed from the rest of the collection.

Aaron shrugged off the thought, his attention drawn instead to the volumes on history and geography. As he perused their titles and picked some out from the bookshelves, scholars in white tunics bustled around him carrying scrolls and books, their robes marked with the emblem of an hourglass.

One scholar approached Aaron and inquired, "Would you like any assistance?"

Aaron noticed the colorful vials fastened to the scholar's waist.

"I could use some help carrying these books to the first floor," he accepted.



"We can attend to that matter," the scholar replied with a whistle, summoning a glowing orb of light that floated above him. The other scholars, noticing, wordlessly began sorting the books he requested into piles, preparing to carry them down the spiral staircase. But a few of them opted instead to defy the defiance of gravity, levitating several feet off the ground before gently turning around in mid-air and descending to the first floor. Aaron raised an eyebrow.

Levitation?

"It's been a while since you last visited us," the scholar remarked.

"Better late than never," Aaron replied.

"I'm glad to see you showing an interest in intellectual pursuits. The Aevum Astrala takes pride in serving the noble son of the House of Aevum."

"Well, you certainly have a way with words," Aaron said.

The scholar bowed humbly. "Words are the bridge between worlds. Here, the books hold a wealth of knowledge, gathered from every corner of Ralador."

"And what of our own history? Can you tell me about that?" Aaron inquired.

"Hmm..." The scholar's expression shifted, his tone becoming more guarded. "Your sister, Sylvia, could offer far more insight than I. Much of your family's legacy is kept private."

"You can't tell me anything at all?" Aaron pressed.

The scholar shook his head. "As a precaution, you should know the most."

"Right," Aaron replied, his tone curt.



Aaron reclined on the plush davenport, a towering stack of books surrounding him. He'd amassed quite a collection. The spines ranged from well-worn classics to obscure texts, a good mix of entertainment and knowledge. He intended to devour them all that day, and with his eidetic memory, honed over years of training, it wouldn't be hard. The real question, though, was whether he wanted to spend the whole day reading or not. It wasn't his choice of activity, but with no better plan, why not?

Diving in, the first book that caught his attention, *The Founding of the Four Great Houses*, proved to be a good introduction to his understanding of this world's politics.

The four Great Houses: Torelli, Exoren, Dahnari, and Aevum.

Understanding the dynamics of a situation was the first step toward mastering it, and upon further reading, he learned that his family held considerable power, an interesting position for him to be in. He was used to being at the bottom of the chain, scrabbling for scraps and fighting to survive, but perhaps this new life wouldn't be so bad after all.



Continuing to read, it became clear that the four Great Houses each had their own roles to play in the Human Empire, which itself consisted of the three kingdoms. “Human,” he mused. Did that imply the existence of other races, or was it simply a term to unite all of humanity?

He quickly pieced together a rough history of each kingdom.

‘The First Kingdom,’ his finger traced across the page. King Mirakhil Torelli was credited with founding Yakiri, the Kingdom of Science, which became renowned for its innovations in the practical sciences. Aaron found it reminiscent of Germany in a way.

The Second Kingdom’s rise was spurred by conflict with other species, a fact that surprised Aaron more than the kingdom’s very founding. Named Gatam, the Kingdom of War, a significant battle ending the war seemed to have truly started the kingdom, though the specifics remained vague. This war led to the emergence of several noble houses, with House Dahnari initially standing out as the chief supplier of weapons vital for the empire’s defense and House Exoren’s using slaves to construct the kingdom’s walls.

Slavery here wasn’t surprising to Aaron, but it was still a little bit disappointing.

The Third Kingdom, Asteria, the Kingdom of Magic, struck Aaron as the most substantial of the three. Just a century ago, the empire fully embraced magic as more and more people pushed past the vast Mirage Desert and beyond the empire’s former reach. Aaron’s family, House Aevum, had been at the forefront of this movement, adapting quickly and establishing themselves as one of the first and most successful families to thrive in this new, magical era.

“The Aevum paved the foundation for the empire’s future,” the book read.

Aaron paused, reflecting. “I see...”

He let the words settle. Things were starting to fall into place. Honestly, for how prestigious they were, Aaron couldn’t fault his family for considering exile. If he were in their shoes, a son like him would hardly be an asset, short-term or long. The lingering question, though, was whether there was any way for him to change his course—to shift the direction he was heading.

He had several questions, but his primary interest was the subject of magic itself. It appeared to be the prevailing force now shaping the world, and the idea of mastering it occupied his thoughts more than he was willing to acknowledge.

However, as he dove into his next book, *Mastrov’s Primer on Magical Anatomy*, he sensed someone watching him from the corner of his eye.

“You seem different today,” Sylvia observed, her silken robes rustling as she drew near. Her piercing gaze bore into him, and Aaron shifted uncomfortably.

“How so?” he asked, trying to hide his unease.

“Your eyes are clear,” she replied jokingly, her voice low and measured. Aaron met her gaze for a moment. The intensity behind them was imposing, but it was nothing he wasn’t familiar with.

“Well, I’d hope so,” Aaron replied, “It helps to see what I’m reading.”



“Very funny,” Sylvia said, rolling her eyes. “Nevertheless, I’m relieved to see you’re not under the influence of any... questionable substances today.” She exhaled, her tone softening. “I miss having my younger brother around, you know. Especially when everyone else is tangled up in their own affairs.”

Aaron smirked. “Do you, now?”

“Well, I kid, but there’s some truth to it,” she said with a coy tilt of her head. “Excessive as your prattling is, I still can’t help but enjoy your company.”

“How generous of you.” He turned a page in his book, his expression unreadable. “In that case, I’ll make it an effort to prattle less.”

Sylvia folded her arms. “Oh?” Her voice carried a note of amusement. “No sharp retort this time? No exaggerated sigh of defiance?”

Aaron glanced up. “Hm?”

She leaned in slightly, studying him. “Typically, you’re quite vocal when given criticism.”

He hummed in thought before closing the book. “Perhaps I’m learning restraint.”

Sylvia scoffed. “Now that would be a first.”

“Well, to be honest... my memories have been a bit hazy lately,” Aaron admitted, rubbing his temple. “I forget things I shouldn’t, and though the details are unclear, I feel as if I recall things that don’t seem tied to my past.”

Sylvia raised an eyebrow. “Is that the excuse this time? How hazy are we talking?”

Aaron hesitated, exhaling slowly. “Pretty much everything. I think I might have a case of amnesia.”

She blinked. “Amnesia?” Her head tilted. “Your jokes don’t usually go that far.”

“I’m serious this time.”

“You don’t remember anything at all?”

“Some bits and pieces,” he said, waving a hand vaguely. “The important things, I guess. I can still remember a bit about you, just... not really.”

Sylvia scoffed. “Comforting. Are you sure this isn’t one of your pranks again?”

“I wish.” Aaron smirked.

“Fascinating.” She skeptically studied him for a moment, her eyes narrowing. “And yet you’re inclined to share this with me?”

He shrugged. “I’m not too sure. It just feels... instinctive, somehow.”

Sylvia leaned back, crossing her arms. “Instinct, huh? That’s either very touching or deeply concerning.”

Aaron chuckled. “I suppose that depends on how much you trust me.”

“Not nearly enough to take that as reassurance.” She nodded, the fabric of her robes shifting with the movement. Then, after a beat, her expression softened. “But... it’ll clear up. I’m sure of it.”

Aaron frowned. “And how can you be so sure?”



Sylvia let out a short breath, crossing her arms. "Experience," she admitted. "I've had my fair share of reckless nights. Give it a few days. You'll feel normal again."

He hesitated, then decided to speak. "That's not what I meant." His fingers drummed against his sleeve. "I've been having these dreams. They feel so vivid in the moment, so real that they mess with my sense of perception of memory, but when I try to focus on them, I find that their details escape me."

Sylvia's brows lifted slightly. "That does sound unsettling." She tilted her head, a glint of curiosity in her eyes. "Are you asking for my expertise, then?"

"Maybe." Aaron gave a small nod.

She began pacing, her robe trailing behind her as she mulled it over. "Dreams tangling with memories..." she murmured. "I can't say I've ever come across that before."

Then, with a decisive shake of her head, she added, "But I still say it's the drinking. Give it time, and it'll pass."

Aaron huffed a quiet laugh. "You really do blame everything on drinking, don't you?"

"I simply follow the most likely explanation," Sylvia countered smoothly. "And considering how much you've been drinking lately, I'd say your brain is finally protesting."

Aaron looked up. "And if it doesn't subside in a few days?"

Sylvia tapped a finger against her arm, considering. "Then we'll cross that bridge when we get there. Who knows? It might even turn out to be a good thing." She gave him a pointed look. "Until then, patience and observation."

Aaron fell quiet for a moment, as if debating something. Then, with a casual air that didn't quite match the weight of his words, he said, "One of the librarians mentioned you were the one to ask about our family history. I was wondering if you could enlighten me."

Sylvia's expression shifted, her eyes narrowing just slightly at the sudden request. Aaron caught the change but said nothing, waiting. "Why the sudden interest?" she asked.

He shrugged, feigning nonchalance. "Exile gives a man time to think. Lately, I find myself wanting to know more about... a lot of things."

Sylvia studied him for a moment longer before exhaling. "I see." She scoffed but eventually relented. "I suppose that makes sense. It's not every day a trickster like you shows a genuine desire for knowledge." A wry smile tugged at her lips. "Just don't get your hopes up too high. The rest of the family still finds you rather... unsettling."

Aaron smirked. "It is what it is. Can't change the past." He tilted his head slightly. "But who knows? Maybe I'll surprise you one day."

Sylvia arched a skeptical brow. "Oh? And how exactly do you plan to do that?"



He grinned. "That would ruin the surprise, wouldn't it?"

She hummed, unconvinced. "I'll believe it when I see it."

Aaron shrugged. "Fair enough." Then, after a beat, his tone shifted. "First, though, I genuinely am curious about our family's history."

Without warning, Sylvia leaned in and flicked him on the forehead. Aaron flinched, more surprised by her sudden proximity than the flick itself. "There's something different about you," she mused, her voice filled with a bit of curiosity.

"I searched around and couldn't find anything substantial on the subject," he said, eager to steer the conversation back on course. "Any reason for that?"

Sylvia nodded. "Come sit with me."

She led him to a spacious table where he settled onto one of the couches without a sound. Sylvia took the opposite seat, lounging back with the ease of someone who had all the time in the world, though her sharp gaze never left him.

"You've never been interested in this sort of thing before," Sylvia said, studying him. "I could get you a book on our history in a few days, but not right now."

Aaron leaned in slightly. "Do we not have books on it?"

"Not ones available to the public, no." She crossed one leg over the other. "There are certain... secrets tied to them. Not hidden from you, of course, but Father would have to be consulted before we dig too deep." She tilted her head. "Still, it's good to see you taking an interest again."

Aaron exhaled, resting his arms on the table. "Figured it wouldn't hurt to learn a little before I lose the opportunity." If he was going to be stuck in this world, he might as well understand his place in it.

Sylvia's expression turned unreadable. "Are you hoping to escape your exile?"

He met her gaze evenly. "Do you think it's possible?"

Sylvia hummed, tapping a finger idly against the armrest. "I'm not the person to ask about that. You'd have to consult Father."

"Guess it wouldn't hurt to know more about him before that time comes," Aaron said. "Is there any way I can learn about our history now?"

Sylvia tapped a finger against her chin, considering. "I could show you. But don't expect anything beyond the basics—just what's available to the public."

Aaron raised a brow. "Didn't you say there wasn't anything the public had access to?"

She smirked. "We can't hide *everything* from the world." Leaning back, she gestured toward the open space around them. "So, let's start with what's already known."

With a sharp snap of her fingers, the room ignited with golden light. Aaron instinctively tensed, his eyes darting around for the source and finally landing on the massive orb behind him. Its metallic rings whirled to life, spinning faster and faster, the glow intensifying with each rotation.

"The Aeviternum," Sylvia said, her voice steady and thoughtful. "Before you ask, yes, there are only a few of these in the world, and we're fortunate enough



to have them all. It's hard to believe Mother doesn't acknowledge it as her finest creation."

Aaron's confusion deepened as her words seemed to echo throughout the space. Suddenly, the room around them began to vanish—walls and furniture melted away, leaving only an empty void. Metallic lines appeared, glowing faintly with a strange, almost haunting light that sent a shiver down Aaron's spine. Despite the brightness, there was something unnerving in the air.

"You wanted to learn about our history?" Sylvia's voice rang clear in the silence. "Then let's watch the memories of our ancestors."

With a clap of her hands, the air ignited with arcane runes, intricate circles of magic pulsing with otherworldly energy. The glowing sigils wove themselves into the walls and floor, etching patterns that seemed to shimmer between reality and something beyond.

The space around Aaron twisted, folding in on itself like ripples in a pond. In an instant, the chamber was gone, replaced by a vast, sunlit plain. Rolling grasslands stretched endlessly before him, and winding rivers glistened under the sun's golden light. The scent of earth and wildflowers filled the air.

Aaron hesitated before stepping forward, half-expecting the illusion to break underfoot. But the ground was solid. The breeze was real, cool against his skin. The warmth of the sun felt no different than it had moments ago.

Sylvia spread her arms, her expression unreadable. "The Eredal Plains," she said, her voice tinged with something between reverence and nostalgia. "As they were nearly a century ago."

Aaron's mind raced. Was this an illusion? No—his senses told him otherwise. If this was mere trickery, it was flawless. Sylvia glanced at him, as if reading his thoughts. "This is a projection of our ancestors' memories," she explained, "Through the Aeviternum, we aren't just watching history—we're experiencing it."

"Fascinating," Aaron exhaled slowly, taking in the endless stretch of grasslands. "Hard to believe this is what they saw, the land they walked."

Sylvia studied the horizon, her expression unreadable. "Some tales of history paint them as brigands. Convenient, isn't it?" She let the words hang before shaking her head. "But they weren't thieves, not really in that sense. They were explorers, mercenaries—people who didn't wait for permission to claim what the world refused to give them."

Aaron's gaze flicked toward her. "And they built all this," he murmured. She nodded. "Not without effort."

"Figured as much," Aaron muttered. The weight of the estate, the city, their name, it all carried the echoes of struggle. Nothing that lasted was ever won cleanly.

Sylvia smirked, folding her arms. "The other houses weren't exactly welcoming. Power unsettles people." Her eyes glinted. "But here, we stopped



asking for permission,” she tapped a finger against her arm. “In Asteria, although the king may wear the crown, he isn’t the only one holding the reins.”

With a snap of Sylvia’s fingers, the world shifted. Stone walls rose from nothing, stretching high into the sky. Buildings took form, brick by brick, as if the past were unfolding before their eyes. “Look,” Sylvia gestured outward. “The earliest days of Trost.”

Aaron turned, his senses assaulted by the sheer vibrancy of the scene. Farmers hunched over rows of crops, their hands caked in soil. Blacksmiths hammered away at glowing metal, sparks flying as they shaped tools and weapons. Wagons groaned under the weight of goods, their drivers barking orders to clear the way.

The air was thick with the mingling scents of fresh earth, sweat, and roasting meat. The hum of voices layered over the rhythmic clang of steel, the distant crackle of open fires, the rush of footsteps on uneven streets. His gaze swept across it all.

“Trost wasn’t always the city you know. It started like this—raw, uncertain. Our ancestors carved it from dust and ambition, brick by brick, deal by deal.” She folded her arms. “And we’re still building on what they left behind.”

Aaron folded his arms, watching the city unfold around him. “So how did we go so long unopposed?”

Sylvia’s gaze lingered on the streets, where spectral figures bustled about, carrying bricks, tending to market stalls, weaving the fabric of early civilization. “Opportunity,” she simply said. “We were among the first to leave the old kingdoms and develop magical techniques—despite the empire’s ban on magic. That gave us an edge. We built, we defended, we thrived. People feared us, and they respected us.”

Aaron’s brow furrowed. “And yet, we never claimed the throne.”

Sylvia smirked. “You think we should have?”

“Seems like the logical step. If we had that much power, why settle for anything less?”

She let the question hang for a moment before gesturing with a flick of her wrist. The city shifted again—great banners unfurled from rooftops, bearing a symbol of wispy wings. A lone figure appeared in the distance, his stance unwavering, his silhouette towering over a gathered crowd. “The throne already had its ruler,” Sylvia said. “Tenik Fiari. A man who clawed his way from nothing to become the first King of Asteria. He wielded magic when it was still forbidden, he built a kingdom of his own strong enough to challenge the empire itself, and when he forced their hand, when he made them bend, we stood beside him.”

Aaron exhaled slowly, watching the ghostly image of the king address his people. “So we traded the crown for influence.”

“You don’t understand,” Sylvia said, her tone was certain. “Some figures are simply too strong to be swayed. He united those who the empire previously abandoned, and that kind of influence is stronger than any.” A ghost of a smile



flickered across her lips. “Not that we ever needed the throne. We helped shape it from the shadows.”

Aaron watched her, his thoughts drifting. The way she spoke of Tenik Fiairi—his unshakable will, his relentless pursuit of something greater—struck a chord. It felt familiar, though not in a way he cared to remember. He had never been one that shaped the world, only ever the blade in another’s hand. He hadn’t sought power or purpose; they had been decided for him. In the end, he simply followed the path laid before him, whether he wanted to or not.

“That’s enough for today,” Sylvia said, snapping her fingers. The illusion unraveled in an instant, Trost’s towering walls and bustling streets dissolving into the void-like emptiness of the chamber. “I’ll have those books for you in a few days, if you’re still interested.”

Aaron exhaled, still adjusting to the sudden shift. “And if I want to see more before then?”

Sylvia smirked. “I won’t stop you. But unlike you, I have other responsibilities.”

He huffed a quiet laugh. “Fair enough. I’ve got things to handle too.”

“Good.” She turned to leave but hesitated. “Just make sure you’re at the family dinner tonight.”

Aaron arched a brow. “Family dinner?”

“Father doesn’t want you showing up late again,” she said, folding her arms. “You know how he was last year.”

Aaron rolled his shoulders, suppressing a sigh. “Right. I’ll be there.”

Sylvia’s fingers shimmered with lingering magic as the illusion unraveled, fading like mist in the morning sun. The library settled around them once more—the scent of aged parchment, the quiet murmur of scholars, and the steady hum of the floating orb, its glow dimming as it spun to a slow, rhythmic turn.

“What will you do until then?” she asked.

Aaron leaned against a nearby desk, considering. “Probably finish reading.”

Sylvia smiled. “You’re welcome to stay as long as you like. It’d be a good time to catch up on those family lessons you’ve conveniently ignored.”

He raised a brow. “How many am I behind on?”

She tilted her head, feigning thought. “Let’s see... nearly all of them.”

Aaron exhaled, rubbing his temples. “Of course. Why did I even ask?”



CHAPTER THREE

Everyone casts a shadow. My shadow looms over the entire city.

— The Unseen Moon

The table buzzed with an unusual liveliness as Sylvia idly picked at her half-eaten plate, her gaze drifting over the steak, eggs, wheat bread, and soup before her. It was an unremarkable meal at a glance, but the meat caught her attention. She speared a piece with her fork, lifting it to the light and scrutinizing the marbling. With a turn of her wrist, she rotated the steak. It was clearly a cut above the usual fare.

“Did we change suppliers?” Sylvia asked, her gaze shifting around the room. Her family, gathered at the grand dining table, fell into a brief hush at her words. Her father, as always, commanded the bulk of the attention at one end, while her mother held court at the other. Between them, her siblings spoke in quieter tones, their conversations filling the gaps.

Eric, the brawniest and most boisterous of her brothers, was the first to break the silence. “Yeah, we did,” he grunted, his voice deep and rugged as he swiped another hearty bite of his meal. “You like it?”

Sylvia scrutinized the meat on her plate, still turning it thoughtfully. “The quality’s nice,” she said, pausing, her brow furrowing slightly. “But why the switch? Anyone care to explain?”

Eric, still chewing, shrugged with casual confidence. “Well, we secured a promising trade deal. Figured we deserved a little treat.” His grin grew wider, though Sylvia could tell it was more pride than mischief.

Sylvia’s gaze shifted to their father, who sat quiet and distant, his thoughts unreadable as always. His single nod, silent and unyielding, carried more weight than any words could. Sylvia knew better than to press further. His very presence demanded respect, and caution often followed in its wake. With a resigned sigh, she turned back to her plate.

Some decisions were simply beyond her reach.

"Very well, I will note that down in our records," she lamented, returning to her food.

Her disappointment lingered in the air as she absentmindedly twirled her utensils. To her, the funds spent on enhancing their meals could've been better used elsewhere, such as expanding their influence or strengthening their alliances. Those kinds of operations seemed more vital to her.

"Did we get any new cooks?" a soft voice asked from beside her. Sylvia's younger sister, her cheeks round and silver hair neatly pulled into an updo, leaned in to examine her steak with curiosity.

"A keen eye you've got there," Eric smiled.

"It's really good!" the girl chirped, practically bouncing in her seat.

"Glad to hear that," Eric grinned, clearly pleased with the praise.

But as they savored the succulent meal, another female voice chimed in, much bolder, "If we're making improvements, the training grounds could use a repair."

Irene slouched in her chair, clearly unenthused by the present conversation. She was the most formidable of the sisters, with visible scars adorning her arms and her black, messy lob complimenting her sharp facial features.

"Point taken," Eric said, gesturing with his fork. "They have been getting a little battered."

"Hmm," Sylvia mused. "It's mostly just you two who make use of them though."

"As far as I'm concerned, two is enough to justify it," Eric replied.

Sylvia nodded. "I don't disagree, but I believe we have higher priorities on the horizon."

"Then I have a proposition," Eric began with a knowing smile. "Let's get Aaron involved more in training." With a flourish, he extended his hand in Aaron's direction, capturing everyone's attention.

Aaron, taken off guard, looked up from his plate. His fork hovered in mid-air as he suddenly found himself the center of attention. Sylvia was slightly surprised he'd actually shown up, and she'd been even more surprised with how quietly he'd been enjoying his meal. But now, with everyone's eyes on him, it seemed he couldn't remain in the background anymore.

"I'm not going to start cleaning up after you guys," he replied.

Eric chuckled, waving him off. "No, not that. Just use the grounds more often. That way Sylvia won't get all worked up every time we ask to repair it."

"I can hear you, Eric," Sylvia shot him a sharp look.

It wasn't that she ignored the state of the training grounds, it was just that their loud, chaotic sparring sessions almost always left it destroyed. They'd patched it up here and there at least a dozen times over the last few months, but Sylvia didn't see much point in a complete restoration knowing that it would be ruined again after just one fight.



Eric smiled playfully. "Lighten up, Sylvia."

"Sylvia *loves* to harp at us for ruining the training grounds, yet she holds the purse strings," Irene grumbled. "Shouldn't you be funding our family's training better?"

"Shouldn't *you* be off sailing the Archipelago or something?" Sylvia remarked. "Until a few months ago, those training grounds were pristine."

"That doesn't mean things shouldn't be prepared for when I return."

Sylvia cleared her throat, her eyes narrowing slightly. "There are more important areas to focus on than just the training grounds."

Irene raised an eyebrow, her expression skeptical. "Like what? Are you saying our training doesn't matter?"

"That's not what I'm saying," Sylvia replied evenly, "I'm suggesting we allocate our resources more wisely. Perhaps strengthening our information network or improving our intel-gathering capabilities."

Irene's lip curled. "You mean sneaking around like vermin?"

Sylvia's gaze sharpened, her voice cold but controlled. "No. I mean controlling the flow of information—that's what we've always done."

Irene's brow arched, amusement flickering in her eyes. "In my opinion, there are much easier ways of extracting information."

Sylvia's tone turned cold, "Is that all you're capable of? Resorting to violence?"

"Whatever it takes to get results," she shrugged. "Do you think that we're better off playing nice and pretending that diplomacy will solve everything?"

Sylvia met her gaze head-on, unflinching. "Diplomacy cultivates civilization." Her voice lowered, growing more measured, yet still sharp. "We control more than just fear."

"Oh, spare me your ideals," Irene scoffed, crossing her arms. "How do you think the empire was born? Even the Torellis knew that if you want results, sometimes you have to get your hands bloodied."

Sylvia's jaw clenched, the slightest twitch in her fingers betraying the simmering frustration beneath her calm exterior. "Yes, an empire that's fractured more than once," she said slowly. "What happens when the blood you spilled causes more bloodshed in the future? What will you do then?"

Irene's golden stare dangerously narrowed, her voice lowering as the challenge hung in the air. "You always speak like there's a perfect answer, like every move can be calculated, but sometimes it just comes down to who's got the bigger sword."

"Typical." Sylvia's gaze sharpened.

Irene leaned forward, her posture brimming with defiance. "What was that?"

The two locked eyes, the tension between them thickening with every passing moment. Sylvia's expression was taut, but she refused to break. Irene's hands clenched into fists, but she held them still, her anger palpable through her countenance.



The quiet at the table grew heavier, as if the very air hummed with the threat of something worse. Sylvia rolled her eyes, a gesture so dismissive it sent a jolt through Irene who shot up from her seat, her chair scraping sharply against the floor.

Just as the tension seemed like it was about to reach a breaking point, a voice rang out—sharp and composed, cutting through the building tension like a blade. Their mother’s voice, calm yet carrying the weight of authority, filled the room.

“Enough,” she said. The air shifted, an icy apprehension settling over them all. “There will be no more bickering at the table. It’s been far too long since we’ve all gathered like this.”

Both sisters froze, their eyes wide with a touch of unease.

“Sylvia, you will apologize to your older sister,” their mother’s voice, calm yet commanding, continued. “And Irene, you will show respect.”

With that, the room grew deathly still. They all knew that while Mother was generally kind, she was equally capable of being merciless when pushed too far.

Irene clicked her tongue, her frustration barely contained.

Sylvia, her gaze silent, caught Irene’s eye, understanding flashing between them in that brief moment. A clear agreement passed between the two, no words necessary.

“Now,” Mother continued, her tone unwavering, “we are gathered here for a reason.”

“Indeed.” Their father’s deep voice cut through the air as he pushed back his chair and rose to his feet. The room stilled, every pair of eyes drawn to him. “Tonight, we mark an occasion our family has honored since the kingdom’s founding. As such, I’m grateful to have all my children here to share in it.”

He rarely spoke at length during meals, but once a year, he always had words to say. The kingdom’s anniversary held a weight of tradition that he dutifully passed down to them, much as it had been passed to him. Though the true date had come and gone days ago, they had delayed their observance of it—waiting until every seat at the table was filled.

When Aaron so blatantly showed disdain for it last year, it came as barely a surprise when his exile was announced for everyone to witness.

“Ninety-nine years ago, the efforts of our ancestors were recognized in the birth of the greatest kingdom that this empire has ever known,” he proclaimed, his voice resonating with pride. “We carry their legacy forward, ensuring that a century from now, our descendants may proudly follow in their footsteps.”

As he sat back down, all eyes remained fixed on him, awaiting his final words.

“Now,” he said as he clasped the glass in front of him and raised it. “Let us pay tribute to them.” On his command, each member of the family took a drink in their hands and similarly raised them to the center of the table.

“From the eyes that see the world,” he spoke, and each person nodded in response.



Then, following his motion, everybody took a drink. Sylvia expected that to be the end of it, but he continued to speak.

"Aaron, I'm glad to see you here," Father proclaimed. "How were your birthday festivities?"

"You know, the usual," he simply answered.

"William has informed me of the... circumstances following it. Are you feeling better?"

Aaron nodded. "Quite. Thank you for your concern."

Sylvia raised an eyebrow at the unexpected exchange. Aaron was infamous for his long-winded, often absurdly detailed stories—particularly the ones laced with his questionable exploits. More often than not, they ended with everyone nursing a headache.

But this time, he was different. His tone was quieter, more measured—nothing like his usual ramblings, the ones he always labored over. Perhaps something really *had* happened to him.

"Long time no see!" Nina exclaimed suddenly, her voice bubbly and full of energy. "Whatcha been up to?"

"I started learning about magic," he said, giving a slight smile.

Nina's face widened immensely at the mention of magic. "Teach me!" she exclaimed, excitement in her voice.

"Want to see something?" Aaron asked.

Nina shook her head fervently.

Aaron flicked his wrist, and a gleaming silver Vinar coin materialized between his fingers. Freshly minted, its polished surface caught the light as he rolled it smoothly across his knuckles. Then, with a subtle twist of his hand, it vanished—only to reappear in his other palm a heartbeat later.

"Whoa!" Nina's eyes went wide with excitement. "That's so cool! Show me how!"

Aaron chuckled. "Watch carefully."

He laid the coin flat on his open palm. With the slightest motion of his fingers, it lifted off his skin, hovering a few centimeters in the air. It spun lazily for a moment before dropping back into his grasp. Then, with a smooth motion, he closed his hand over it. When he opened it again, the coin was gone.

Nina gasped. "No way! Where'd it go?!"

Sylvia observed with mild intrigue as Aaron demonstrated his skill. It wasn't actual magic, but it'd been an impressive blend of sleight of hand and misdirection.

Eric dabbed his mouth with a handkerchief before leaning forward. "What made you finally interested in magic?" he asked. "Didn't seem to matter much to you before."

Aaron took a bite, chewing thoughtfully before replying, "Well, I'm sure you already know the answer."



Eric nodded knowingly. “Ah, yes. I understand,” he said, his eyes scanning the table for a change in topic. But Aaron wasn’t finished.

“But that’s not the only reason,” Aaron said. “I wanted to expand my studies in general. Magic just happens to be my current focus.”

Across the table, Irene smirked. “How’s that going? If you need a hand, I wouldn’t mind giving you a few training sessions before I leave. And if Sylvia finally gets around to fixing the training grounds before then, we could even give it a spar.”

Sylvia shot her a sharp look, but Irene only knowingly smirked.

Adam smoothly cut in, his clear, sharp tone giving a slight air of authority. “You’re welcome to use any family resources,” he told Aaron. “Just run it by Father or me first—not that he’d have any objections.”

“I’ll be sure to keep that in mind,” Aaron replied with a nod.

The conversation died quickly, leaving a bitter taste in the air, and the once lively atmosphere had now turned into one of silence. Aaron’s exile was a matter that hung over the room like a thick fog. Father had always been firm with his punishments, but this one had inarguably been his most severe. It was still a year away, but each day that it ticked closer only made it all the more real—perhaps Aaron was finally coming to realize that.

As Aaron polished off the last morsel on his plate, his eyes drifted to the heavy book resting beside him. He dabbed his mouth with a napkin and stood up, offering a respectful bow. “If you’ll excuse me,” he said, his voice polite.

He picked up the book and left the table, his footsteps echoing softly against the polished stone floor as he stepped into the hallway. The sound of his steps gradually faded into the distance, swallowed by the vast expanse of the estate.

With a gentle gesture, Adam pushed his glasses up and cleared his throat. Instantly, the rest of the family fell silent, each member looking expectantly towards him. Adam scanned the room, his eyes meeting each gaze before he tapped his fingertips lightly against the table’s polished surface.

As he did, a magical circle sprang to life under his hands, glowing with an otherworldly energy. The circle expanded, sending out ripples of mana that spread throughout the dining room, encapsulating it in a transparent barrier. The family members watched, unsurprised, as if they had been expecting Adam to do something like this.

“Well, that was quite the set of events,” Adam exclaimed, his eyes alight with intrigue.

Irene smirked, her curiosity piqued. “You may have a point for once,” she admitted.

Adam gestured towards Sylvia, beckoning her to share her insight. “So, what do you think? Is he compromised?” he inquired.



Sylvia shrugged nonchalantly, her attention focused on her meal. “Not exactly,” she replied, her tone matter-of-fact. “There’s no evidence of tampering with his mind or physical composition.”

Eric interjected, his skepticism evident. “But everyone’s noticed his odd behavior,” he countered. “Even the servants have whispered about it. He hasn’t raised his voice once since returning from his birthday.”

“Could he have been taken over during the celebration?” Adam probed, raising an eyebrow.

“It wouldn’t be the first time someone tried,” Sylvia mused, her expression guarded. “But the Redwind watching over him assured us that he went unharmed.”

Adam’s skepticism remained. “How can you be so certain?” he pressed.

“I trust in our allegiance with them,” Sylvia replied evenly. “And I would know if anything had transpired.”

“A perplexing situation,” Adam murmured.

“Maybe he’s genuinely changed,” Eric proposed. “With his exile and all, he could have seen the error of his ways and turned over a new leaf.”

Irene let out a sharp laugh. “Be serious, Eric. This is the person who’s been creeping on the maids since he could form coherent thoughts. Every time we hire someone new, he’s on them like a parasite. I’ve told Sylvia for years now to hire only male staff, but she insists it’s ‘impractical’. Though, frankly, I’m not convinced even that would stop him.”

Eric bristled, his eyes flashing with annoyance. “Then tell me again why we put up with his antics?”

Irene’s voice flared with frustration. “That’s precisely why he’s being exiled! He can’t keep his mouth shut, and our family’s secrets are slipping out with every new maid. I still don’t understand why Sylvia and Father insist on waiting another year.”

Sylvia’s eyes narrowed, her tone cold as steel. “Blood runs thicker than water, Irene. You must know that.”

Irene exhaled sharply. “I do, but even he’s testing the limits.”

Adam rapped his knuckles on the table, drawing everyone’s attention. “Let’s not forget our primary objective here,” he reminded them. “Could it be that he’s already dead? Perhaps he’s been reanimated as a puppet, or worse, a homunculus bearing his likeness.”

Sylvia’s face tightened in suspicion. “I highly doubt that. Even with a perfect physical specimen, nobody could replicate his aura. And that’s assuming they could even capture him without our assassins catching wind of it.”

“Hmm...” Adam mused, drumming the table with his fingers. “Well, regardless,” he casually dismissed, raising a hand. “All those in favor of taking him out, say aye.”

Sylvia’s frown deepened. “Did you not hear a word I said?”

Adam shrugged nonchalantly. “Personally, I wouldn’t take any chances.”



"You're seriously an idiot." Sylvia deeply sighed.

Eric's brow furrowed. "You want to kill, Adam?"

Adam remained silent, but the message was clear.

"*Tch*." Eric scoffed. "Forget that I even asked."

"Are you disappointed because it's the correct choice?" Adam shot back.

Eric shook his head, his frustration clear. "You may have our best interests in mind, but this isn't the way to handle it."

Irene, finally choosing to speak, surprised Sylvia by offering a voice of reason. "Why not just keep tabs on him for now? We don't even know what he's up to. Let's observe and wait."

Sylvia nodded in agreement, a slight smile forming. "Thank you, Irene," she said, her voice sincere. "It's good to know there's still someone in this family who can think critically."

Irene raised an eyebrow, a hint of skepticism in her expression. "That sounded more like a pointed jab than a sincere compliment."

"We're both on the same side here," Sylvia responded.

"Is that how you sound like when we're on the same side?" Irene dryly questioned.

Adam shook his head, his conviction evident as he gestured towards the corridors, "Look, with each passing moment that he is free to wander here, he accrues a greater advantage over us. Simply possessing knowledge of our home's layout grants him an increasingly favorable hand."

"As I said before," Sylvia spoke firmly. "I don't believe he's been compromised. And who would dare devise such a bold plan against us?"

Adam's eyes blazed, "We have many enemies, Sylvia. It could be any one of them."

Sylvia's glare intensified. "Do you not think I realize that?"

"Well, then what do you suggest?"

"I will handle it," she declared. "Just leave him to me."

Adam took a second look, his aureate, discerning gaze locking onto Sylvia's own.

"You've thought this through, haven't you?" Adam asked, an intrigued smile barely twisting his lips.

She nodded.

"Very well," Adam said, his voice yielding. "I won't question your motives."

Sylvia swept her eyes over the rest of the room, looking for any lingering doubt.

"Is that settled, then?" she asked.

"Fine with me," Eric simply replied.

Irene grunted in resignation but gave a reluctant nod.

She didn't expect a response from Father or Mother, and Nina knew to stay silent. So, with a unanimous agreement reached, Adam snapped his fingers to

dispelling the protective barrier around them, and they returned their focus to their meals.

One by one, they cleared their plates. Adam was the first to finish, tucking a handkerchief into his pocket as he stood from the table and headed for the door. Eric followed soon after, and Irene and Nina weren't far behind after him. Meanwhile, Sylvia remained behind, summoning a maid to clear the table.

"What's on your mind, my daughter?" Father addressed Sylvia, motioning for her to express her thoughts.

A smile crept onto Sylvia's face. He knew her too well. "I wish to access your private collection," she said, her voice low and even.

Father's eyebrow arched in mild curiosity. "Do you plan to show them to Aaron?"

"He's expressed a desire to learn more about our family," Sylvia replied, her voice unwavering.

There was a brief silence before Father finally nodded. "Very well. You may use them."

Sylvia bowed deeply, her gesture one of both respect and gratitude. "Much gratitude," she thanked, her hands clasped behind her as she turned and glided silently from the room. Her footsteps were almost inaudible as she disappeared down the hall.



CHAPTER FOUR

Date: January 17th, 2050

Location: Train in Russia

If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the thing itself, but to your estimate of it; and this you have the power to revoke at any moment.

— Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*

The train rattled through the countryside, snow streaking past the windows in pale blurs. Inside, the air was thick with the scent of damp wool and cigarette smoke. Passengers huddled in their coats speaking in low murmurs, their faces pale under the flickering lights.

A little girl, bundled in furs, weaved between the rows of seats, entering into the car from another.

She moved slowly, her small boots tapping lightly against the floorboards until she stopped in front of a man sitting by the window. His black coat with the collar was turned up, his posture deliberate. The seat beside him was empty—an intentional choice, a quiet corner away from the others.

His hands were motionless on his lap as he looked out the window, barely aware of her presence. He wasn't reading nor shifting in his seat; he simply observed as the snow streaked past in a silent blur.

Other passengers dozed, fidgeted, checked their watches.

But he did none of that. He was aware—watching.

"Hello," the girl took a step closer. "Mister... are you a soldier?"

Aaron glanced at her, his expression calm but watchful. "No."

"Oh..." she said, unconvinced. "You look like one."

He exhaled. "Do I? What makes you say that?"

"You're too still," she said, tilting her head. "Everyone else fidgets or talks, but you just sit there like you're waiting for something. The soldiers are like that sometimes, too..."

"No harm done in being wary," he said with a faint smile. "Maybe you're right. I should work on blending in better."

She frowned. "Why?"

"Bad time to be a soldier," he murmured. "Hard job. High expectations. No rewards." He tapped the armrest once. "Better to be a traveler. Easier to disappear."

She glanced around, "There's more of them lately. They don't smile much anymore."

"Mm," Aaron murmured. "Understandable."

The girl considered his words a bit before replying. "Where are you traveling?"

"The same place as you." He nodded toward the window. "Moscow."

She huffed. "That's not what I meant. Where in Moscow?"

Aaron smirked and shook his head. "Not wise to ask a stranger too many questions." He gave her a look—measured, not unkind. "But you've got a sharp eye, kid. I'll give you that."

She crossed her arms. "I'm not a kid."

"Are you here alone?"

She shook her head. "No. I'm with my mother."

He raised an eyebrow, glancing past her toward the aisle. "Then all the more reason to head back. Storm's picking up. Don't keep her waiting."

"She's not," the girl confidently assured. "She thinks I wander too much."

Aaron leaned in, just slightly—enough to command her full attention. His voice was low, but firm.

"The storm's getting worse. Go check on her anyway. And listen carefully—if anything feels off, anything at all, take her to the back of the train. No questions. Understand?"

She hesitated before giving a slow nod.

"Alright. Good." Aaron leaned back, his posture easy but his awareness never faltering. His attention remained on the girl, though his senses stretched outward, listening. The train hummed beneath them, the steady rhythm of rattling metal and glass merging with the distant murmur of conversation.

The girl lingered a bit, her fingers idly tracing the worn fabric of her sleeve as she weighed his words. But soon, without another word, she drifted away. She didn't leave, however, settling instead into a seat a few rows down as she watched the blurred landscape rush past.

Hah. Aaron exhaled, shifting slightly.

Just then, her gaze shifted—past him, toward the aisle.

Aaron didn't move, didn't turn his head, but his eyes followed.

A tall man was making his way down the train car.



His coat hung stiff on his frame, his movements controlled. Too controlled. They weren't the absentminded sway of a traveler but instead something measured, deliberate.

The girl, restless now, had started shifting from seat to seat. First by the window, then across the aisle. A quick glance out. A fidget. A sigh.

Eventually, just as the man drew closer, she wandered back toward Aaron.

She stepped aside to let him pass, but he wasn't just walking around.

He was searching. Slowly.

Something was off.

Aaron remained still, his posture easy, unbothered. But beneath the surface, his muscles coiled, his hand drifting toward his coat. The girl turned back to him, bumping into his knee before catching herself. "Are you—"

Aaron moved.

Smooth, practiced like he had done this a thousand times before, Aaron drew his pistol, leveled it, and fired.

Two shots, center mass. A third, just to be sure.

The girl gasped, stumbling back, her eyes wide.

"Alright," Aaron gave her a sharp nod. "Remember what I told you."

For half a second, she froze. Then she turned and bolted down the aisle, vanishing into the cars behind. He exhaled, steadying himself. Slipping the silencer onto his barrel, he ejected the spent mag, slid in a fresh one, and racked the slide with a quiet click. Then, without breaking stride, he moved forward toward the front of the train.



The metallic clank of the wheels reverberated, the low rumble of the train swaying like a pendulum. The sky outside was pitch dark, save for the train's headlights cutting through the wintry fog.

Clack. Clack. Clack. Clack.

The steady rhythm of the tracks.

Then, the hum. Clear. Distinct. A subtle vibration underfoot as Aaron sank deeper into his seat. It seemed louder now. It always did after a fight. After the chaos of the last few minutes, he could finally take a breath.

The floor was marked by the aftermath—dark stains smeared across the once-pristine blue leather. But in the quiet, there was an unexpected stillness. The train's motion, steady and uninterrupted, allowed his mind to settle, drifting into its own thoughts.

In moments like this, when his mind was sharpest, Aaron often wondered how he had ended up here. The cold bit deep, seeping through his layers, the bitter



night wrapping itself around him. He'd cleared the middle of the train. They'd sent thirty—no, forty—people to guard the front of the train.

At one time, perhaps, he had longed for a simpler life—a life with a loving family, maybe a garden, hobbies that brought peace.

But then he remembered his mentor's words: "Life is the reason for our existence. Everything else is a privilege."

Aaron hadn't understood it then, so he asked what it meant.

His master's answer had been simple: *"Whatever life gives you, acknowledge it as a privilege. Breathing, living—these are gifts. When you understand that, the world is yours."*

Was it true? Maybe. Maybe not.

But Aaron believed it. That belief had guided him for years now.

While other kids played in the park, enjoying their youth, Aaron was entrenched in war. Perhaps he'd been robbed of a childhood he could never reclaim, but he wouldn't have it any other way. To Aaron, this path was better than a life of mediocrity.

The world was cruel. He knew that from the start. Orphaned, born in a place with little infrastructure, he saw the same struggles everywhere. People starved in the streets, parents lined up at the market for rations, and the cold, barren landscape remained ruthless to those unprepared to handle it. He at least had the benefit of knowing he had a place to sleep and a meal when he was younger, but even that was a precarious luxury.

It was moments like these that defined his world, when he gave thought to the meaning behind it all. Some thoughts were filled with anger, others with resentment, but most led him to the same questions and the same conclusion.

Why did people endure this? What was the point?

He'd determined that to exist meant to confront hardship. Those who overcame adversity would rise, gain power, and command respect. That was the path to meaning, a path of reason. After all, why choose mediocrity? A life like that felt hollow, uninspired.

Maybe he was simply naive, but how could he think any differently? From the start, he had been a pawn. He'd been dragged into this profession, and yet he chose not to leave it. There hadn't been the time or the opportunity for anything else.

"Hey, wake up," a sharp voice jolted Aaron back to the present. His head pulsed with exhaustion; three days without sleep had taken its toll. Just as he hoped for a moment to catch his breath, reality yanked him back. Despite his rigorous training, he found himself drifting in and out of consciousness.

Rubbing his eyes, Aaron met the gaze of the Russian figure before him—Asimov, his contact for the mission. Asimov studied him with a sharp, assessing look. The mission was simple: protect and rescue one man. For so many to die in



pursuit of that goal, it made Aaron wonder: what earned a person that level of respect?

"They said you were good," Asimov said, skeptical. "But you look like just a child."

Aaron stifled a yawn, his voice dry. "Yeah, well—I did take out half the train," he muttered, eyes half-lidded. "Cut me some slack. You got your director, didn't you? That mess gave your guys plenty of time to get into position up top. You should be thanking me."

"Yes," he said, pausing for a moment, "But now you've involved civilians. Children, even. I didn't think your organization would go as far as putting them at risk."

Aaron gave a small shrug. "We follow the parameters we're given. If avoiding civilian casualties was a priority, it should've been stated clearly in the contract. That kind of ask comes at a higher cost." He leaned back, his tone steady. "At the end of the day, I'm a contracted asset. Your boss knew exactly what he was signing up for." He paused. "Do you blame the knife for its sharp blade?"

"A tool with no regard for caution is dangerous. But what happens when it starts to rust?" Asimov said, his tone more contemplative now. "Worse still—what happens when the tool begins to think it's something more? When it starts to grow a bad conscience?"

Aaron's lips barely moved, his voice low but steady. "Listen, I do the job. That's what matters. Isn't that the same with you? You know how this profession works."

The man's eyes darkened slightly, "The work I do, I do for my people. The director will lead us to a better Moscow. That means a better future for my family." He leaned in, his gaze unwavering. "You may have your use now, but I've seen where people like you end up. Get too big for the leash, and they put you down."

Aaron's gaze never wavered. After a beat, his voice lowered, almost to himself. "I know where this road leads." His eyes shifted slightly, "But that's a conversation for another time." He narrowed his eyes to make a point. "I live my life the way I want to. Unless you want to challenge that... I'd suggest you keep quiet."

Asimov said nothing, but he gave him a long, unreadable look before turning away.

Meanwhile, Asimov's henchmen moved quickly, cleaning up the mess left behind. The train car was filled with lifeless bodies, each one being propped up in their seats with methodical precision. It was a tactic, simple but effective. If they needed a fast getaway, the police would likely check for the living first, giving them a crucial moment to vanish before anyone thought to examine the passengers.

"How long until extraction?" Aaron asked.

"Ten minutes," the man replied. "Once we reach the station, securing the area is on you."



"Got it." Aaron said, but inside, he couldn't believe it. He knew this mission would be tough, but he hadn't expected them to be so unprepared.

He'd stationed a few colleagues at the arrival point—standard procedure. As the youngest, he played the novice, gathering intel and eliminating threats before they knew what hit them. It had worked so far. His superiors, though, rarely appreciated when he strayed from protocol. He'd probably get chewed out for the body count, but they couldn't complain. That was simply part of the job.

Ring ring.

"*Speaking of superiors,*" he muttered with a sigh.

His phone vibrated in his jacket pocket. Aaron pulled it out and answered.

"You awake?" The voice cut through the silence, sharp and direct.

"As awake as I can be," Aaron replied, his tone even, betraying no hint of fatigue.

"They're reporting over half the convoy to New Moscow was wiped out. Is the target intact?" the voice asked, tone clipped.

"Yeah, that was me," Aaron responded flatly.

"Explosives again?" came the incredulous reply.

"No need to get into the details," Aaron muttered. "Most of them were expecting us anyway. I only took out the ones I knew were clearly armed."

"But the target?"

"Unharmed," he confirmed.

A brief pause followed. Then, a quiet click of disapproval. "ETA?"

"On schedule. No delays."

"Understood. I'll keep you posted. Our team is standing by."

"Copy." He slipped the phone back into his coat.

The Russian had been watching him closely. "Is that your contact?"

"Yeah," Aaron simply said. "Why, you interested?"

"*Tch*," he scoffed. "You know, you're not what I expected."

Aaron's lips curved into a faint smile. "And what did you expect?"

"I guess I can't say," he admitted. "I know you've got a reputation for getting the job done, no matter the odds, but the details about you? Scarce. Some say you're a prodigy. Others think you're just a myth. You've kept your identity well-guarded."

"Then perfect," Aaron said, clapping his hands together. "That's exactly how it's supposed to be."

Asimov studied Aaron for a moment before nodding slowly. "Well, the director trusted you, and he's a good judge of character. For all our sakes, and for Moscow, I hope your plan works."



Three minutes left.

Aaron checked his watch, the faint tap of his glove against the glass barely registering beneath the grind of the train. The steel beneath them groaned, the lights above swaying in rhythm with the storm outside.

No words were exchanged. Across from him, Asimov stood silent, arms crossed, boots planted like he was expecting a war.

Aaron's gaze lifted, steady and unblinking. "How much do you think a life's worth?"

Asimov gave him a slow look, uncertain if it was a joke. "That depends," he said cautiously. "Why ask now?"

"To me..." Aaron gave his own answer. "Not much. People live, people die. I've killed many before, and I'll probably die the same way."

Aaron reached into his coat and pulled out a sleek phone. A small red dot pulsed on the screen. He pressed it.

Boom.

The train rocked beneath them. A low, distant roar rolled down the cars—muted, contained, but powerful. Lights flickered once. The air shifted. Then came the sound of chaos—muffled shouts, screams, people scrambling at the far end.

Aaron slid the phone back into his pocket like it was nothing more than a receipt.

"Middle car's gone. Gives us six minutes before the search spreads forward," he said calmly. "Use it or don't. Up to you."

Asimov's hand hovered near his coat. "You set a charge on the train?"

Aaron didn't blink. "A little diversion."

"You're insane."

Aaron tilted his head slightly. "Wow. Never heard that one before."

A beat passed.

Asimov scowled but didn't argue. He gave a low whistle, and at once his men began moving—communicating through glances and brief gestures, already sweeping the car for exit strategy.

Aaron moved past them like a ghost, unhurried, each step placed with practiced precision. A black duffel waited two cars down—right where he'd stashed it.

He unzipped it on one knee. Inside: clean clothes, scarf, gloves, neutral colors that didn't stand out. He changed quickly, silently. The blood on his arms was nearly dry. The new coat covered it. The gloves masked the rest.

Behind him, Asimov followed, slower now. Warier.

Aaron spoke without turning. "The contract's fulfilled. Your director's alive, as promised. Moscow will welcome him. Whatever comes next is your burden."

He paused, just long enough for the words to settle.

"When the dust clears," he added, "tell him I'll be cashing in a favor. Sooner or later."



Asimov hesitated. His voice was quieter now. "You're just going to walk out?" "Very observant of you," Aaron pulled his scarf up around his face.

Outside the window, flashing lights began to bloom against the snow. Sirens wailed in the distance, approaching fast.

"You'll be on their camera surveillance," Asimov warned.

"Trust me, I won't."

Aaron pulled the beanie low over his brow and opened the final door. Cold air rushed in, biting at the edges of his sleeves.

"I'll handle the rest from here."

He stepped out into the storm.



Aaron perched on a rooftop, gazing at the aftermath of the explosion in the distance. Watching with Delta had become their post-mission ritual, a usual occurrence. She was the closest in age to him, about seventeen.

Delta sat down beside him without asking. They watched the smoke curl into the sky.

After a while, she said, "That was a public station, you know."

Aaron didn't respond right away. "... I know."

She didn't press—just sat with it—then said, "You timed it well."

She paused a moment longer.

Then, quietly, she added. "There was still a lot of movement down there. Civilians. Elderly. Medics. Off-duty workers just trying to get home."

He shifted his weight. "It happens."

"You ever think it's too much?" she asked, not looking at him.

His eyes stayed on the firelight flickering in the windows below. "Sometimes."

She glanced at him, just briefly. "But not this time?"

"No," he said. "Not this time."

She leaned back on her elbows. "Clean enough, I suppose."

"That's something." He looked over at her. "You're not going soft on me, are you?"

"No," she replied. "Just wondering."

He let the quiet stretch a moment. "If it matters, I'll try to be more subtle next time."

Another pause. A breath of wind. Somewhere below, a dog barked, then stopped.

"You remember that outpost job last winter?" she asked.

"I do."

"... It felt quieter than this."

"It was colder," he said. "But yeah. I know what you mean."



She gave a faint smirk, then let it fade. After a moment, she shook her head. "Some lives matter more to some than others. Even if we don't care, someone does."

"Is that so?"

"I think so."

Aaron nodded slowly. "If someone wants revenge, they'll know where to find me."

She sighed, amused. "You're so dramatic." Glancing over, she gave him a light tap on the chest. "Maybe one day you'll pull a Grinch and grow a heart three sizes bigger."

"Wouldn't that be a sight," Aaron murmured, leaning back.

She shifted gears without missing a beat. "Anyway—hungry? There's a new Mexican place nearby. Supposedly worth the trek through this frozen wasteland."

"In Russia?" Aaron raised an eyebrow.

She shrugged. "Maybe there's a silver lining. World's getting smaller. More connected. Especially with those peace deals we helped push through."

"Well, Mexican doesn't sound like a bad idea," Aaron conceded.



Date: January 24th, 2050

Location: Hotel in Russia

Aaron had been taught to memorize a lot of things: names, dates, places, times, languages. Even the smallest tidbits, like the color of a sign or the orientation of specific board posts, could be vital in identifying where he was.

Initially, he dismissed it as somewhat pointless. However, his perspective shifted when he successfully pinpointed a location by examining a series of pictures provided by intelligence. It didn't take long for him to identify the general area. And then, of course, bombing the living daylights out of it until the target was neutralized.

The knowledge he sought out was pretty varied as well. Sometimes he would dive into books about fantasy and science fiction, and other times he'd investigate literature about history. He even read a book about economics and business once. But despite his varied interests, at the end of the day, what he excelled at was being an assassin.

Unsurprisingly, he hadn't been taught the shelf life of such a profession—maybe they never wanted him to retire.

He was still young. But was he meant to do this forever?

There were older assassins still in the field—men and women three, even four times his age. Maybe that was just how it went. The longer you lasted, the harder it became to stop. The accomplishments piled up. So did the reputation.



Eventually, governments either wanted you dead, or worse, kept you alive to serve their interests.

Either way, going back to ‘normal’ stopped being an option.

“What are you doing?” Delta asked suddenly.

She glanced over at Aaron, who was casually reclining in his chair. After wrapping up their mission, they chose a nice hotel to keep a low profile. The room was spacious, just enough for them to play the part of well-to-do teenagers enjoying a stay during winter.

“Just playing a web game,” he replied.

“This late into the night?”

“Gotta do something.” Aaron shrugged, clicking his mouse.

Her eyes watched his screen for a bit before asking, “What’s the point of this game?”

“You’ve never played?” he turned to her, surprised.

She shook her head, moving in a little closer.

“Oh, well it just drops you somewhere on Google Maps, and you have to guess where you are,” Aaron replied. “You get more points if you guess faster or closer to the original location.”

“They really made a game for that?” she cocked her head.

“They have a game for anything nowadays,” Aaron returned. “Anyways. The point is, it’s pretty effective at improving memory and recall. It comes in handy on the job.”

“I see...” she murmured, nodding faintly. A longer pause followed before she added, almost offhand, “The news said a few kids were caught in the blast.”

“Unfortunate.”

“Explosives are messy, Aaron,” she said quietly. “Will you be more careful next time?”

“I did my best to avoid casualties,” he replied, voice flat. “But if we’re thinking like the opposition, some consequences are inevitable.”

“I see,” she said.

He glanced at her. “Didn’t think you were the type to flinch at these things.”

“You know kids are different, Aaron.” Her voice stayed measured, but her gaze sharpened. “Some of the people who died—sure. Maybe they were part of it, maybe they weren’t. But dragging children into it when it wasn’t necessary... that’s something else.”

Aaron was silent for a moment. “Maybe. But if it’s between risking a hostage situation or ending it early, I’d still make the same call.”

She didn’t look away. “The kids on that train were innocent. You know that.”

“I know.” He exhaled, his voice lower now. “And yeah—they didn’t deserve that. But neither do the ones growing up in bombed-out cities or being used as bargaining chips by people worse than me.”

Delta shook her head. “You always find a way to justify it.”



"I don't justify it," he said. "I just live with it."

She hesitated, then gave a small nod, not quite satisfied but willing to let it rest. "Just... try to be safer next time, please."

Aaron let out a breath. "I'll try."

With a pause in the moment's resolution and a faint sigh, Delta turned to look at his screen. "What's the name of that website?"

"You wanna play?" Aaron glanced over to see she had gotten her laptop out too.

Delta wasn't one act 'casual' during their missions. Typically, she leaned towards the paranoid side, monitoring their surroundings for any potential intruders, but after a week without a hiccup, perhaps she was finally starting to relax. Though, that implied that Aaron would need to keep a watchful eye in her stead.

"Yeah, why not?" Delta replied. "Best score gets a favor from the other."

"A favor? How big are we talking?"

"We'll figure that out when it's time to cash in."

"Ah," Aaron raised an eyebrow. "One of *those* favors."

Last time he lost a bet like that, she made him dive into an ice-cold river in northern Russia—completely naked. No amount of training could make that pleasant.

After a few rounds, Delta picked up the game quickly.

The mechanics weren't complicated, but it still took her a few minutes to find her rhythm. Her guess time dropped—from ten seconds to nine, then five, then three—until she was regularly locking in answers within two seconds. Over the next fifteen minutes, she sharpened her instincts, her guesses becoming faster and more accurate with each attempt.

For Aaron, he kept busy maintaining watch, but he couldn't help but observe her progress from the corner of his eye. She was pretty good for a beginner, but then again, she'd had the same training he did, and she'd been at it for longer.

In a way, she came as close as anyone possibly could to understanding him.

To him, she was an even rarer person than he was.

Few women became assassins. Fewer still chose the kind of path she did. She preferred the field—direct action, clean kills—but there were lines she wouldn't cross. Seduction, manipulation, the shortcuts their mentors endorsed—she avoided them not out of naivety, but principle.

Aaron had always respected that. Maybe more than he let on.

Once, he'd asked her, "Why take the harder path?"

She'd looked at him and smiled with a peculiar expression that he couldn't quite decipher. Nonetheless, the words she spoke resonated with him more than he cared to admit. "What's worth more than your own peace?"

Aaron didn't argue. There wasn't much to say.



Their line of work was already steeped in compromise—the rotten systems, shifting loyalties, cruelty passed off as order. He'd come to see it as the natural order of things: the strong wrote the rules, and everyone else learned to survive beneath them.

"Alright, I'm ready for the challenge now," she finally said. "Do I just click the Party button?"

"Yep," Aaron replied.

After a minute or two of configuring the lobby, they found themselves pitted against each other in identical scenarios. Naturally, it was both a timed race and a test of accuracy, yet the times between their guesses were narrow—consistently within a one-second difference. The determining factor for victory would be proximity to the actual location.

...

"Damn," she frowned.

After about ten minutes of going back and forth, the gap between their scores started to get larger, and in the end, Aaron managed to secure the victory.

"To be fair, you only started recently," Aaron reassured. "Like... twenty minutes ago. With some more practice, you'd probably be able to beat me."

She waved him off. "You're just being nice."

"Maybe," he said, half-smiling.

She stood, brushing off her pants. "Anyway. Let's pick it up another day."

Aaron nodded and returned his focus to keeping watch.

A few minutes passed in silent contemplation. They were likely fine after this long—he usually only kept his head down for a few days before moving on—but with how significant this mission had been, they'd opted to keep low for a while longer.

For Aaron, it was crucial to ensure that everything left no trace, and he was constantly aware to eliminate anything that could lead back to them. As for her, she was occupied with her weapons, always meticulous about their order. Whether the simple cache she carried with her or the collection she had back at the base, it was a priority for her.

Then, out of the blue, Delta asked something.

"Hey... do you actually see yourself doing this forever?"

Aaron glanced up. "What do you mean?"

"Ever thought of settling down?" she clarified. "You know, retiring and moving somewhere safe to start a new life?"

He raised a brow. "Are you dying or something?"

"No!" she laughed. "I'm not *that* much older than you, you know."

"Sorry," he said with a small smile. "Just... people usually ask that when they don't have much time left."

She leaned back slightly, gaze distant. "It's just been on my mind lately."



Aaron studied her for a moment, then nodded. "It's not really for me," he said at last. "I don't think I'm built for that kind of life."

"Why not?" she asked.

Aaron shrugged. "What would I even retire for?"

"So you could enjoy life," she said. "Pick up a hobby. Learn something new. Maybe start a family?"

He shook his head. "Not a fan of kids. And I don't like the idea of someone using them against me."

"Then raise them to be strong," she offered.

"Still doesn't mean I want that," he said. "Not now."

She tilted her head, watching him. "But maybe someday?"

Aaron gave her a look. "Why the sudden interest?"

Delta let out a quiet sigh. "Just saying... this can't be it forever. There has to be something after."

"What we do changes the world. Maybe for the better," Aaron replied.

"You believe that?" she asked, her tone soft but uncertain.

"I do," he replied. "And right now, I think it's more important for me to find out what I'm really capable of."

She didn't push further. Just offered a quiet smile, more thoughtful than cheerful. "Maybe. But I think you'll come around. This life... it isn't meant to last."

"So," Aaron asked, "what else do you want out of it?"

Delta leaned her head back, eyes on the ceiling. "Maybe kids. Someday."

"Really?" Aaron asked.

"Not now," she clarified. "But maybe later. I don't know, I guess I like the idea of passing something onto someone. We spend so much time figuring things out... maybe the point is to leave those lessons behind. Even if our life was messy, maybe theirs doesn't have to be as much."

Aaron took a deep breath, thinking about her words.

Maybe she was right, but he didn't know what a family was like, and it wasn't something that really interested him.

"I guess I'll see when I get older," he thoughtfully responded. "Are you asking because you'd like to settle down with me?" he lightly teased.

She gave him a sidelong glance. "Was that a proposal?"

He blinked, caught off guard, then laughed it off. "I'm a bit young for that."

"Just a joke, of course." She smiled. "Still... it's something to think about."

"Eh~" Aaron narrowed his eyes in thought, "I still don't really see myself retiring."

"I often find that the world doesn't ask what you see," she said. "It just keeps moving. People change with it—whether they want to or not."

"Hmm... then perhaps I'll retire when I've achieved a certain goal."

"And what goal would that be?" she questioned.



He thought about it for a bit before finally stating, “I’ll become one of the best assassins.”

“You’re not one right now?”

Aaron shook his head. “I don’t think this is the peak of my abilities. Not yet.”

She let out a soft laugh—not mocking, just a bit amused. “Alright. Then I’ll wait for that day to come.”



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