

Murky black eyes shining with reflected fire searched the mural for anything he could have missed. In the half-light of bracketed torches, the ruby on King Damien's finger looked as black as his hair.

As he studied the images all around him, a dozen stealthy and agile guards stood at attention in the glittering throne room on the other side of the stone wall. Each guard wore a simple black bodysuit with attached gloves and held two long swords, one in each hand. There were sheathes crisscrossing their backs, but they would only stow the swords when the king was no longer in their presence.

Warm light from the domed glass ceiling made everything in the enormous outer chamber appear golden. The chains of chandeliers reached up into the heights, and a brightly painted mural covered every inch of the walls. It was this same mural that the king pondered, but his eyes fell on the darker portions, the hidden stories on the other side of the wall that were kept in deepest secret.

There were terrible mysteries waiting here, prophecies recorded with paint and brushes on upright stone slabs. King Damien had tortured and killed his own people in efforts to understand, and he felt growing frustration that he still had no answers. He could not let this forecasted future come to pass.

The king was alone, hidden within a protected corridor in the center of his vast palace. He wore the customary clothing for the mountain kingdom's royal men: black trousers, shiny black shoes, black leather gloves, and a crisp white shirt. The back of his shirt had a large circle cut out of the fabric, exposing intricate black designs that covered his skin. Most of the markings were the size of a fist, and there were seven of them forming a large ring from his shoulders to his waist. Hissing snake. Pointed crown. Unbalanced scales. Heavy chains. Thorny rose. Sharp diamond. Twisted flames. Taking up the center of this wreath was a much larger image — a highly-detailed heart, strangled by ragged veins.

His palatial estate sat on top of a low, squat mountain in the very center of the known world. Mount Damien — named for him — was encircled by a thick layer of cloud separating the civilized peak from the wild frontiers on the slopes below. When looking out from the palace's highest tower, the city looked as if it floated in a sea of white cotton with brief glimpses of greener lands beneath. Most of the mountain's inhabitants had never ventured below the clouds.

King Damien looked closely at a troubling span of the mural. It was the same spot he had obsessed over a million times before. It portrayed four warriors atop his mountain with victory in their expressions and armies coming behind them. The next scene was a barren landscape, with nothing but a small mound of rocks where Mount Damien used to be. Then, the mural stopped.

With each year of his reign, more of the painted prophecies came to pass. All that was left was this last corridor behind the curtain. Would these final scenes come to be, too? Had he done enough to stop these conquerors? What if he had been wrong about their identities? How exact were these paintings, and did he have the power to change them?

He had a nagging suspicion that he had missed something. He daily paced along this wall looking for any hint that would lead him to answers. His middle-aged son and heir, Prince Ajax, sometimes joined him, but he didn't share his father's enthusiasm for deciphering the future.

The future. Damien hated the thought of the future. He hated how little he could control without knowing for certain the identities of those four conquerors and if he had really put an end to them. But how could he ever learn these things when the artist who painted the scenes left the mountain nearly fifty years ago? It was enough to drive him mad.

It was in this madness that he had created a bit of a game. Six months had passed since he gathered seven of his most powerful up-and-coming leaders, named them the Council of Masters, and sent them below the cloud to the land of Adia, where the painting prophet had fled. The rules were simple. They must brand an Adian with the symbol of their specific expertise and bring the victim back to the mountain. The first to do so would earn a large chest filled with gold, a fortune that could fund the most lavish lifestyle for several years.

They didn't need to know that there were many deeper reasons for bringing an Adian above the clouds. He longed to interrogate one and find out if there were more prophecies, to find out if there were more murals, to find out if Adwin was still in Adia. Even more so, he salivated over the thought of Adwin himself coming to the mountain to retrieve the victim. Could he finally have Adwin in his grasp after all these years?

The click of heels against tile made his ears perk, and the king quickly passed through the thick red curtain that separated the dark corridor from the glittering throne room. He squinted at the sudden onslaught of light. The guards let him pass before reclaiming their positions.

He moved toward the center of the room and pondered the seven young people as they entered. They were his kingdom's finest weapons. Formidable. Hardened. Lethally clever.

The three men wore the same white shirt as the king, but their trousers and gloves were gray instead of black. The four women wore loosely draped gowns of varying gray hues with gloves to match. All seven looked beautiful, uneasy, and dangerous.

Damien addressed them quietly, each syllable articulated and precise. "I must admit I'm disappointed. Six months and you bring me nothing from Adia. Is the task too difficult?"

They remained silent, staring back.

"I asked you a question," he declared, his vision going dark for a split second as the veins in his eyes pulsed. "Do you think the task is too difficult? Too much for you?"

"No, Your Majesty," they responded in unison.

"Maybe the reward has been too small?"

"No, Your Majesty."

"Well, I am a gracious king. You do not ask for more incentive, yet I am prepared to offer it. If mere gold does not entice you, would an entire kingdom suffice?" He allowed the words to sink in before going on, enjoying the play of emotions as these young weapons tried to understand. He ascended three marble steps and sat on his emerald-encrusted golden throne. His son, Prince Ajax, sat just below him to the left. Ajax's son was not present, so the seat on the king's right remained empty.

"If you are the first to mark an Adian and bring the fool to this mountain," Damien continued, shifting forward for a better view of their faces, "You will be the rightful king or queen of Adia. I will send my armies to defeat that rebellious land, and I will place you as the crowned ruler. It would all be yours."

That would get their attention. None of their demeanors had changed a bit, but he had always been good at reading stony faces. Hunger and greed glowed in many of their eyes, terrified panic in a few. Some of them were growing soft.

He stood from his throne and approached them once more, starting with the far end of the line. Xanthe had long lemon-yellow hair with one thick aqua stripe that reached from scalp to tip. She was tall and slender, with excellent posture that betrayed the hours and hours her mother spent turning her into a perfect young woman. Xanthe's eyes were intensely purple, and they were dull and cold as they stared at the far wall. She was betrothed to the king's grandson, Prince Jairus, who was not in the room. As Damien drew near, Xanthe took a sharp breath and lifted her chin, but her gaze remained unfocused and distant.

"What's wrong, Xanthe?" the king asked with over-exaggerated concern, stroking her smooth cheek with his wrinkled finger. "Don't you want to rule your own kingdom one day?"

"Of course, Your Majesty," she replied with no sign of emotion. "But not Adia."

"Not Adia?" Damien prodded, poison creeping into his voice. "Why not Adia?"

"I will be this mountain's queen one day when Jairus is king. I have no need for another kingdom."

"If you were truly invested you would want both. So, you will not continue in this quest. You may leave."

"Your Majesty, I didn't say —"

"You will not go back," he ordered forcefully. "Leave us."

Xanthe's eyes locked on the king and flashed with hatred as she turned to leave.

"Is there anyone else who would like to leave these ranks? This Council of Masters?"

No one moved.

"That's what I thought." Damien sauntered along the line, eyeing each weapon and looking for signs of cowardice. He took an especially long time examining Eryx. He was huge — an excellent athlete and fighter. He had recently shaved his head, which added to his menacing aura. He towered at least six inches over the next tallest Master, and his highly-defined and powerful body was crisscrossed with white scars, trophies of his time in the fighting ring. "What about you, Eryx? Enjoying this game?"

With great articulation but no fervor, he answered, "It's not a game, Your Majesty."

"Oh? Isn't it?" Damien asked with feigned innocence.

"'Game' is too trivial for this assignment, Your Majesty. Your orders are law."

Damien loved the words, but he hated the monotonous delivery. "Hmm. Thank you for this passionate speech, Eryx. You will do well to use this spirit and zeal in the next fight."

"You haven't put me in a fight for years!" Eryx bellowed, a sudden fire lit in his tone. "It is below my status as Master."

"You argue with me?" Damien asked softly and dangerously, standing toe to toe and looking up into Eryx's face. "You will fight when I tell you to. You will prove you are still able to harness your power. Now, off with all of you. You have much work to do."

His eyes bounced to each of them in turn as they filed through the door. Without looking at his son, he asked, "Ajax, what are your thoughts? Who is leading this race?"

“You already know I don’t care for your stunts, Father. You should just send the armies now if defeating Adia is what you’re after.”

“That’s just it,” he said softly, dreamily, as he imagined a better world. “Defeating Adia is only a small part of what I’m after. Yes, I want their land. Yes, I want its rich resources and fertile soil and clean waters. But I want so much more. I want Adwin to quake in fear at the mere mention of my name. I want him to hurt. I want him to *break*.”

“Adwin? This is about Adwin? Wouldn’t defeating Adia make him ‘quake’ as you call it?”

This snapped the king back to attention. Sternly he asked, “How old are you, Ajax?”

“Forty-nine.”

“In forty-nine years, you still have not learned. We could burn every tree and building in his village to the ground, and it would not shake him nearly as much as marking one of his beloved Adians with my symbols.”

“I doubt that very much. But you didn’t answer my question. Why have you never mentioned to me that this silly game is about Adwin?”

“My son, when will you discover that *everything* is about Adwin?”

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