

PURPUREA NOXA

Seymour's pack, part of the sabbat sect, finally starts to help Javier in his searching mission. Visiting the Priscus House, however, leaves them with more questions than answers. The man has disappeared and his ghoul is totally gone. The traces seems to lead to only one culprit: the werewolves. But are their hypotheses right?

Dylan, by searching for Falko, finally meets Jacopo, the famous cousins of our cute albino. But it seems that he doesn't know where falko could be either. Furthermore, to have some answers Jacopo orders Valentina, his ghost, to follow Dylan everywhere. When the Gangrel finally found Falko at the entrance of the Bottini Mansion, he noticed that there was something strange in his chilly behaviour. Well, Falko has never been so expansive, but his reaction was really exaggerated when Dylan just touched the folder of documents he carried with him.

And hey, how can we forgot Connor? He's facing a really big issue: keep Izaak away. The scarman seems to have fun tormenting him. Could there be something more behind all of this interest?

For our cop, things seems to go better, since he was able to recover the drugs stolen by Jason and Trevor. The two guys, not particularly happy about getting played, tried to recover the stolen goods. Trevor attacks Javier that, unexpectedly, is defended by Jason.

The boy tries to explain to his friend Trevor that the policeman is a vampire from Pisa, the gang which they should stay away, but Trevor does not think the same way and angrily walks away, leaving Javier the opportunity to steal a kiss from the thug with the red lock.

Something is moving through the shadow of Lucca and Pisa, and soon, it will come out.



JAVIER



JASON



TREVOR



LYUBEN



NAVDEN



SEYMOUR



HAYNER



ZHIVKO



CAIDAN



JAGER



JACOPO



FALKO



DYLAN



CONNOR



IZAAK



VALENTINA



LEONARDO



SUTEKH



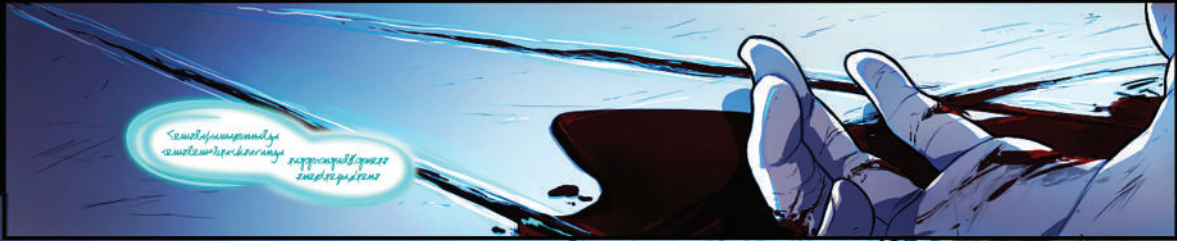
RASHIDI



KAREEM

LUCCA, RAILWAY STATION



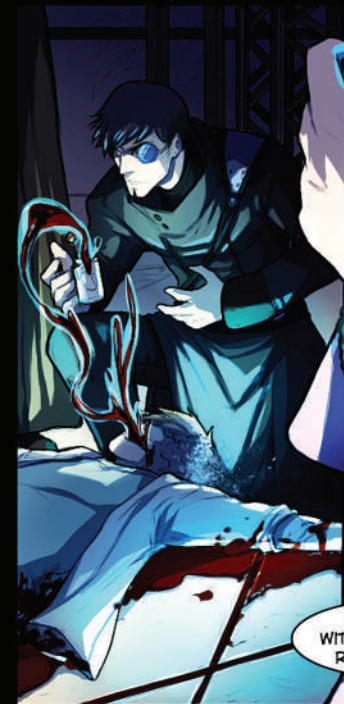


Самое главное
сделать так, чтобы
никто не узнал
о наших планах

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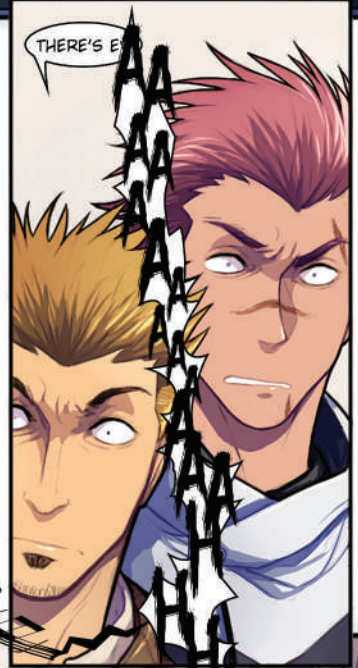


IT WAS EASIER THAN EXPECTED.



EXCELLENT, WITH THIS ONE WE REACHED FIVE.





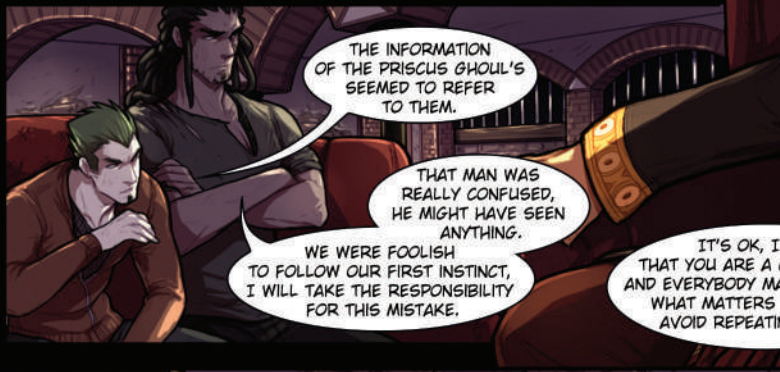


THIS IS WHAT HAPPENED. WE THOUGHT THAT THE LUPINES WERE RESPONSIBLE BUT WE WERE WRONG.



SEY, YOU SHOULD NOT HAVE INVADED THE WEREWOLVES TERRITORY AS YOU DID.

YOU SHOULD HAVE WARNED ME BEFORE TAKING THIS RISK.



THE INFORMATION OF THE PRISCUS GHOUL'S SEEMED TO REFER TO THEM.

THAT MAN WAS REALLY CONFUSED, HE MIGHT HAVE SEEN ANYTHING.

WE WERE FOOLISH TO FOLLOW OUR FIRST INSTINCT, I WILL TAKE THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THIS MISTAKE.

IT'S OK, I KNOW THAT YOU ARE A GOOD DUCTUS AND EVERYBODY MAKES MISTAKES, WHAT MATTERS IS THAT YOU AVOID REPEATING IT AGAIN.

SO, IF THE WEREWOLVES DID NOT KIDNAPPED THE PRISCUS, I THINK IT IS APPROPRIATE TO INVESTIGATE ABOUT THE CAMARILLA.



HEY, I SEE THAT THEY KICKED YOUR ASS SO HARD!

WHAT THE FUCK! EVERY TIME YOU GO TO HAVE FUN, I'M NOT THERE!



LOOK WHAT THEY DID TO YOU.

YOU ARE A WANKER CAIDAN!

LEAVE HIM ALONE! THESE ARE NOT SLIGHT INJURIES, I CAN'T HEAL THEM.

ughhhh... fuck you!



WE HAVEN'T HAD ANY LUCK, THE WEREWOLVES WE SAW WERE JUST TRAVELLERS.

THOSE PUSSIES RAN AWAY WITHOUT FIGHTING!

THIS CONFIRMS THAT THEY HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH THAT.

SEYMOUR, YOU HAVE TO ORGANIZE A TEAM OF NO MORE THAN TWO ELEMENTS.

THEY MUST INFILTRATE IN LUCCA FOR A QUICK INSPECTION.



I THINK THAT YOU, JAGER OR CAIDAN, WILL BE THE RIGHT PEOPLE FOR THIS TASK.



I'LL GO TOO!

NO HAYNER, THE ARCHBISHOP SAID "INFILTRATION" NOT BRAWL.



WELL, YOU ARE FREE, GO TO GET SOME REST. WHEN YOU ARE FULLY RECOVERED, CALL ME AND DON'T DO ANYTHING RECKLESS.

THE NEXT MISTAKE, I WILL NOT BE SO MAGNANIMOUS.

DON'T BE WORRIED ARCHBISHOP SUITEKH, I DON'T WANT DECIMATE MY PACK EVEN MORE. WE'LL BE CAREFUL.




ZHIVKO, LEAVE CAIDAN HERE.

YOU'VE DONE ENOUGH FOR HIM. GO GET SOME REST AND PUT ON SOME CLOTHES.



I WILL TAKE CARE OF HIM.




YOU HAVE BEEN TOO SOFT FATHER! YOU SHOULD HAVE PUNISHED THEM, THEY ACTED WITHOUT ORDERS. TELL HIM KAH!

RAH, OUR FATHER KNOWS WHAT HE'S DOING. HE MUST HAVE A REASON NOT TO PUNISH THEM, DON'T YOU THINK?



T-THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP ARCHBISHOP, BUT I DON'T NEED ALL THIS THOUGHTFULNESS.



HOW DARE YOU REFUSE THE HELP OF OUR FATHER? BE THANKFUL FOR THE ATTENTION HE'S GIVING TO A PIPSQUEAK LIKE YOU.

NO, HE WERE TOO SOFT!

FATHER, YOU SHOULD BE MORE STRICT WITH THEM!

THEY ARE A GOOD PACK, THEY WON'T LET ME DOWN ANYMORE.


AND THEN, WHAT IS HE DOING HERE?!

LET ME FOLLOW THE OTHERS, I CAN RECOVER AT THE SHELTER.

I DIDN'T ASK FOR IT.

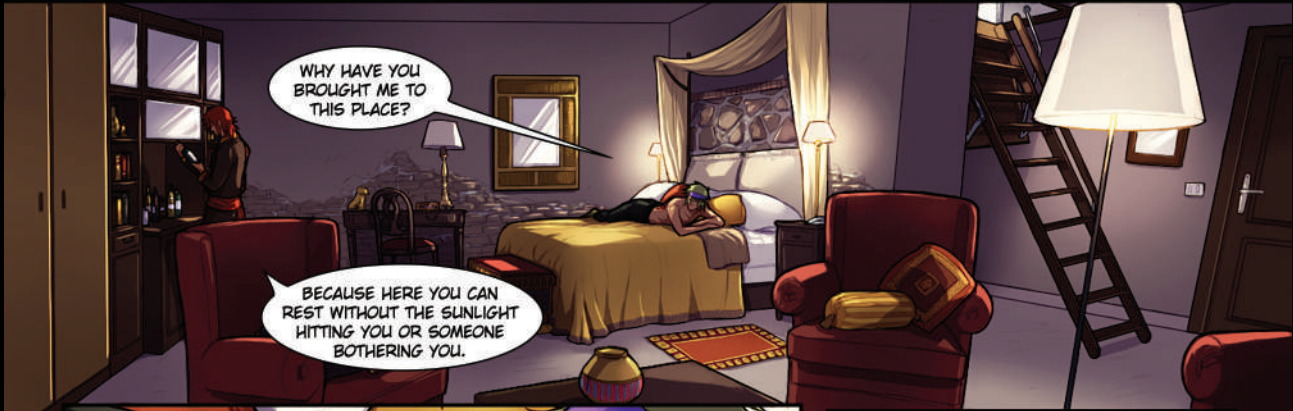


YOU GUYS BE GOOD AND DON'T BICKER.



RASHIDI, KAREEM, I DON'T NEED YOU ANYMORE FOR TONIGHT. GO HOME, I'LL STAY HERE AT THE BABYLON FOR THE DAY.

grab-



WHY HAVE YOU BROUGHT ME TO THIS PLACE?

BECAUSE HERE YOU CAN REST WITHOUT THE SUNLIGHT HITTING YOU OR SOMEONE BOTHERING YOU.



AT THE SHELTER WOULD BE THE SAME, ZHIVKO AND THE BOYS WOULD TAKE CARE OF ME



VITAE?
AT THE SHELTER WE HAVE ENOUGH BLOOD, THERE WOULD BE NOTHING DIFFERENT.

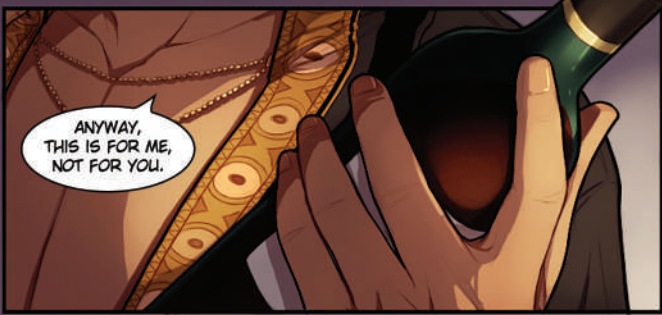
YOU COULD HAVE LET ME GO WITH THEM.

AT THE SHELTER THIS, AT THE SHELTER THAT, ARE YOU AFRAID TO STAY HERE, CAIDAN?



ZHIVKO DID EVERYTHING HE COULD,

AND THE OTHERS MUST TAKE CARE OF THEMSELVES.



ANYWAY, THIS IS FOR ME, NOT FOR YOU.



FOR YOU I HAVE SOMETHING MUCH...
... MUCH BETTER.



TONIGHT I'M NOT IN THE MOOD TO ENDURE YOUR STUPID AVANCES.



I KNOW, I KNOW I'LL TRY AGAIN TOMORROW.

NO! YOU SHOULD STOP DOING THIS!

HOW MANY MORE TIMES WILL I HAVE TO REPEAT THAT I WILL NOT HAVE SEX WITH YOU!?

PLEASE, YOU'RE HURTING ME! I WAS TRYING SO HARD.



BUT, I WASN'T TALKING ABOUT THAT...



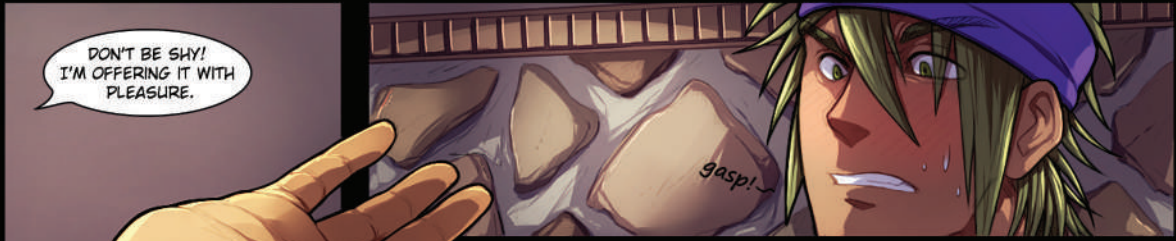
I WANT TO GIVE YOU SOMETHING THAT WILL MAKE YOU HEAL FASTER.



bite



DRINK IT.



DON'T BE SHY!
I'M OFFERING IT WITH
PLEASURE.

gasp!



I... D-DON'T WANT
YOUR BLOOD.



YOU NEED IT,
IT WILL HELP YOU TO HEAL
FASTER THAN THE COMMON
HUMAN BLOOD, AND
YOU KNOW IT.

I NEED ALL OF YOU FIT
AND HEALTHY AND YOU, CAIDAN,
ARE MEDIOCRE COMPARED TO THE
REST OF THE PACK, AND NOW YOU
ARE ALSO IN BAD SHAPE.



MEDIOCRE!?



ARE YOU
LIPSET NOW?
YOU KNOW THAT
I CAN SIMPLY COMMAND
YOU TO DRINK IT,
RIGHT?



I KNOW I'M
MEDIocre!
BUT EVEN IF YOU
ARE THE ARCHBISHOP
YOU HAVE NO
RIGHT TO...



T-TO...



YOU ARE YOUNG
CAIDAN, YOU NEED TO
GROW UP, BUT YOU HAVE A
GOOD POTENTIAL AND I'M
SURE YOU WILL GET
BETTER. I'M JUST
OFFERING YOU
A SHORTCUT.



I DON'T WANT
BLOOD BONDS WITH
ANYONE.

EVEN WITH
YOU, BUT...



IT WOULD BE
SUCH A WASTE...



EHI, EHI!
KEEP CALM!
DO NOT WORRY,
IT DOES NOT RUN
AWAY.

YOU SEEM TO
ENJOY IT.



YOU ARE A
GOOD BOY.
I'M GLAD
YOU CHANGED
YOUR MIND.



IT'S GOOD,
RIGHT?



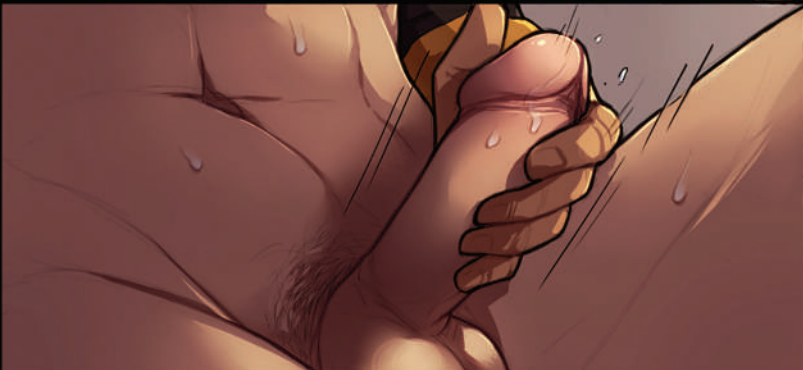
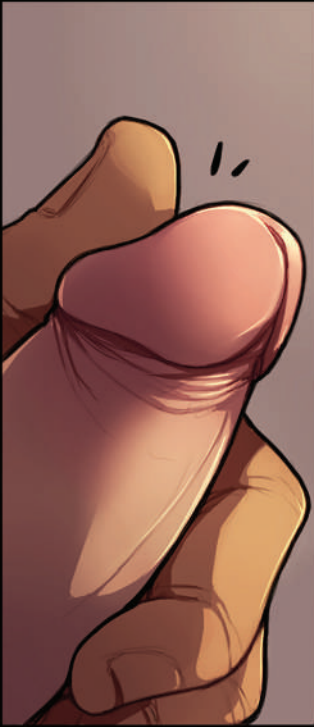
LOOKS LIKE YOUR BACK IS RECOVERING.

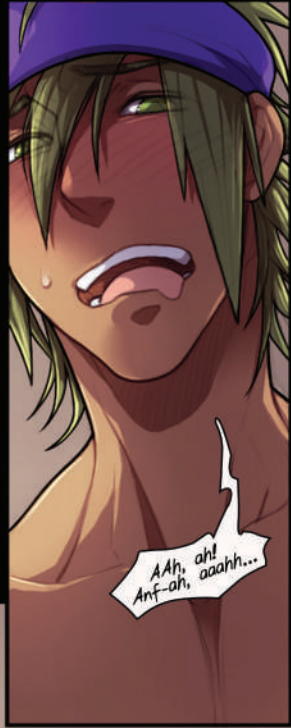
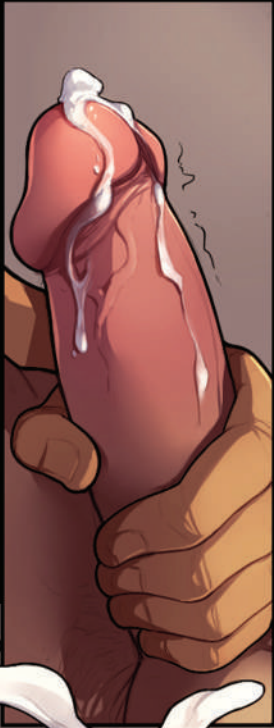
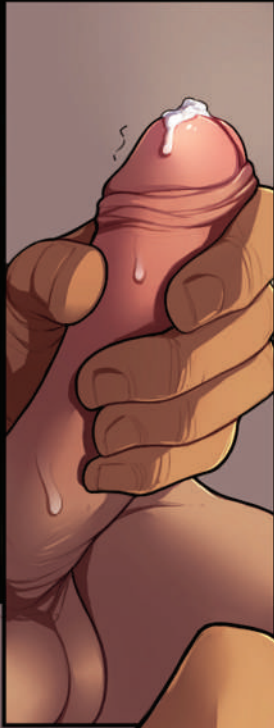
THE SCARS WILL DISAPPEAR IN A FEW NIGHTS.



OH, WHAT WE HAVE HERE?

IS IT A GIFT FOR ME?

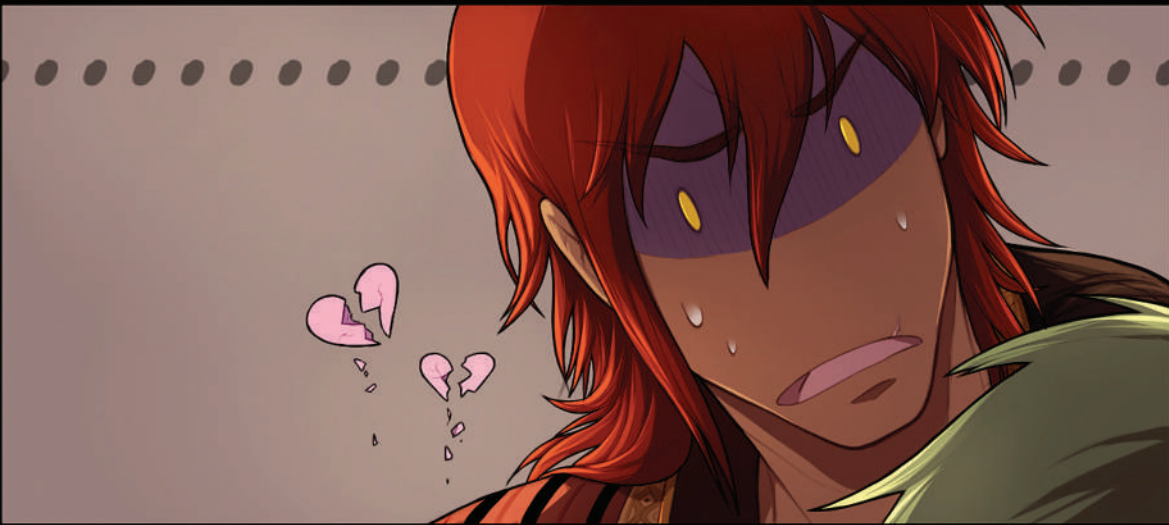




NOW IT'S MY TURN-



DO NOT WORRY, I WILL NOT GO ALL THE WAY, BUT IT SEEMS RIGHT THAT YOU REC-... CAIDAN?



THIS IS NOT FAIR!



I'M NOT GOING TO ACCEPT THE JOB IF YOU, FIRST OF ALL, DO NOT EXPLAIN WHAT IT IS.

ARE YOU IN A SAFE PLACE? I HEAR A LOT OF NOISE.

YES, OF COURSE, IT IS TELEVISION.

HM... HM...



SO WHAT?

I DO NOT WANT TO SPEND ALL NIGHT ON THE PHONE.

OKAY... THE JOB IS TO KEEP AN OBJECT IN A SAFE PLACE.

HM... JUST THIS?



YES BUT IT IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT THAT NO ONE WILL BE ABLE TO FIND IT.

YOU HAVE TO KEEP IT FOR A FEW MONTHS, I WILL COME PERSONALLY TO TAKE IT BACK.

DON'T OPEN THE PACK. IF YOU OPEN IT, I WILL NOT PAY YOU.



WHAT?!

AND HOW DO I KNOW THAT YOU'RE NOT GIVING ME SOMETHING DANGEROUS?

I WILL PAY YOU DOUBLE NOW, AND THEN TRIPLE UPON DELIVERY IF THE BOX AND CONTENT ARE INTACT.

IF YOU TRY TO FOOL ME YOU WILL HAVE NOTHING.



I DO NOT LIKE TO WORK THAT WAY, BUT YOU WERE VERY PERSUASIVE, JUNK DEALER. WE ACCEPT IT.

I WILL NOT OPEN YOUR FUCKING PACK AND I WILL KEEP IT SO WELL HIDDEN THAT NOT EVEN I WILL REMEMBER WHERE IT IS.

WHEN DO YOU WANT ME TO COME TO YOUR STORE?

TOMORROW NIGHT.

YOU ARE TOO MUCH HASTY FOR MY TASTE.

SEE YOU TOMORROW.

clic-



LOOK WHO IS HERE.

WHAT HAPPENED LAST TIME WASN'T ENOUGH FOR YOU?



NO, APPARENTLY IT WASN'T ENOUGH.

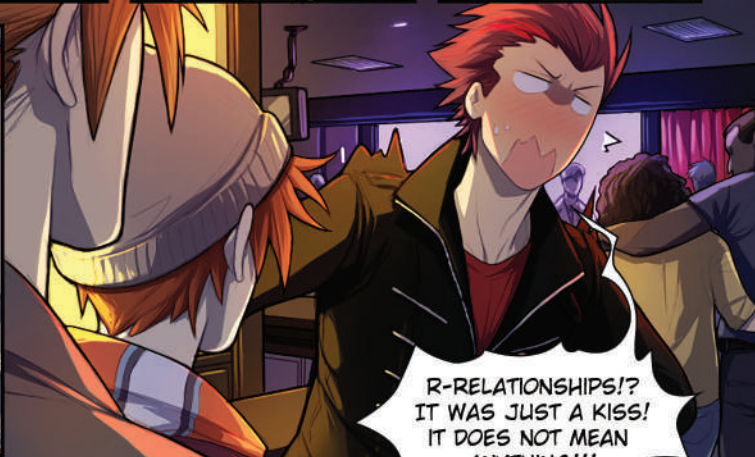


YOU ARE NOT WELCOME HERE, COP. SCRAM!



EVEN A COP JAS?

YOU LIKE DANGEROUS RELATIONSHIPS!



R-RELATIONSHIPS!?! IT WAS JUST A KISS! IT DOES NOT MEAN ANYTHING!!!





THAT'S THE BEST YOU'VE GOT?
YOU ARE WEAK WITHOUT YOUR TRICKS.

SHUT UP!



JASON, DON'T YOU THINK THAT TREVOR ARE TAKING THIS TOO FAR?



LOOKS LIKE HE DOES NOT LIKE YOUR COP TOO MUCH.

HE IS NOT MY COP!

SO, YOU WON'T DO ANYTHING?

WHAT SHOULD I DO!?

THEY ARE ACTING LIKE TWO IDIOTS!



STOP NOW!
YOU ARE GOING
TOO FAR!



STOP ACTING LIKE
FUCKING IDIOTS

POW



JAS I'M SORRY,
IT WAS NOT MY
INTENTION...



WHAT THE FUCK HAS
GOTTEN INTO YOU!?

COMING
TO BLOWS WAS
NECESSARY!?

WHY DID YOU
START THIS STUPID
SCENE?!



BECAUSE THAT
DUDE HAS TO STAY
AWAY FROM YOU!

HE MUST
NOT GET CLOSE
TO YOU!



STAYING AWAY FROM ME!?
STOP IT TREVOR! YOU CAN'T
DECIDE FOR ME!

THIS ISN'T YOUR
BUSINESS!

STOP
PROTECTING ME,
I DON'T NEED IT!



ALL BECAUSE OF
THIS PIECE OF SHIT!



HEY, HEY!
HERE THINGS ARE
GETTING PRETTY
BAD!

CALM DOWN TREVOR!
THERE IS NO NEED
TO FIGHT!



LET'S GO TO THE
HIDEOUT TO TALK ABOUT
THE NEW JOB! I'M VERY
CURIOUS!



WE WILL DRINK
A BEER AND COME UP
WITH A PLAN!



T-THEY LEFT ME HERE...



DO YOU NEED A RIDE?

LEAVE ME ALONE!



YOU'RE NOT THINKING THAT I REALLY LIKE YOU, ARE YOU!?

I JUST WANT TO AVOID THAT MY FRIENDS WOULD BE INVOLVED IN YOUR BUSINESS!

I KNOW YOUR SABBAT PACK IN PISA, AND YOU ARE ASSHOLES!



I'M NOT MY GROUP AND YOU KNOW IT WELL.

IF I WANTED TO DO SOMETHING TO YOU OR YOUR FRIENDS, I WOULD HAVE DONE SO, DO NOT YOU THINK?



HELLO?



W-WHAT IF I WANTED TO TAKE THAT RIDE?

FINALLY YOU SUCCUMB TO MY CHARMS!

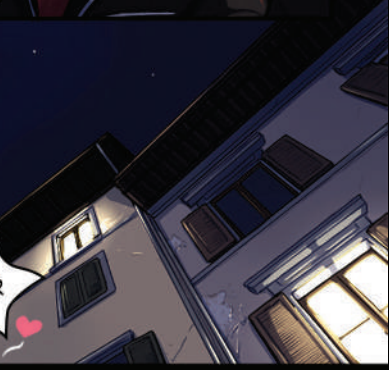
IT'S A LAME EXCUSE TO HAVE A NIGHT OF SEX WITH NO THOUGHTS, BUT OK I'LL PUT UP WITH IT.

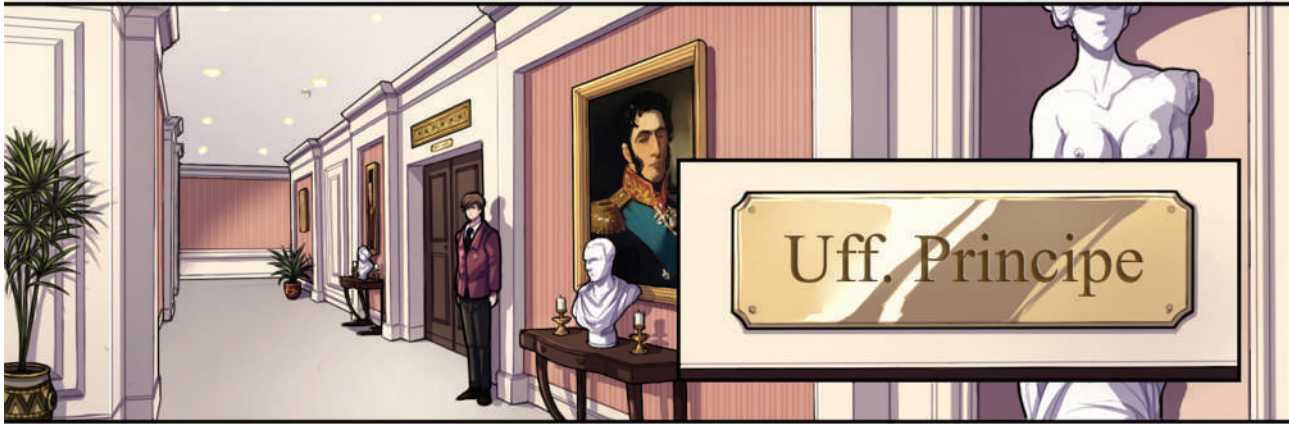
W-WHAT ARE YOU SAYING!? I'M JUST WITHOUT TRANSPORT!

-die

SEX!? WHO IS TALKING ABOUT S-

WHERE ARE YOU PUTTING YOUR HANDS !?





Uff. Principe



Y-YES PRINCE, THE DEATH OF MALKAVIAN PRIMOGEN IS CONFIRMED.

IT WAS SUBJECTED TO A MAGICAL RITUAL, BEHIND THE TRAIN STATION.

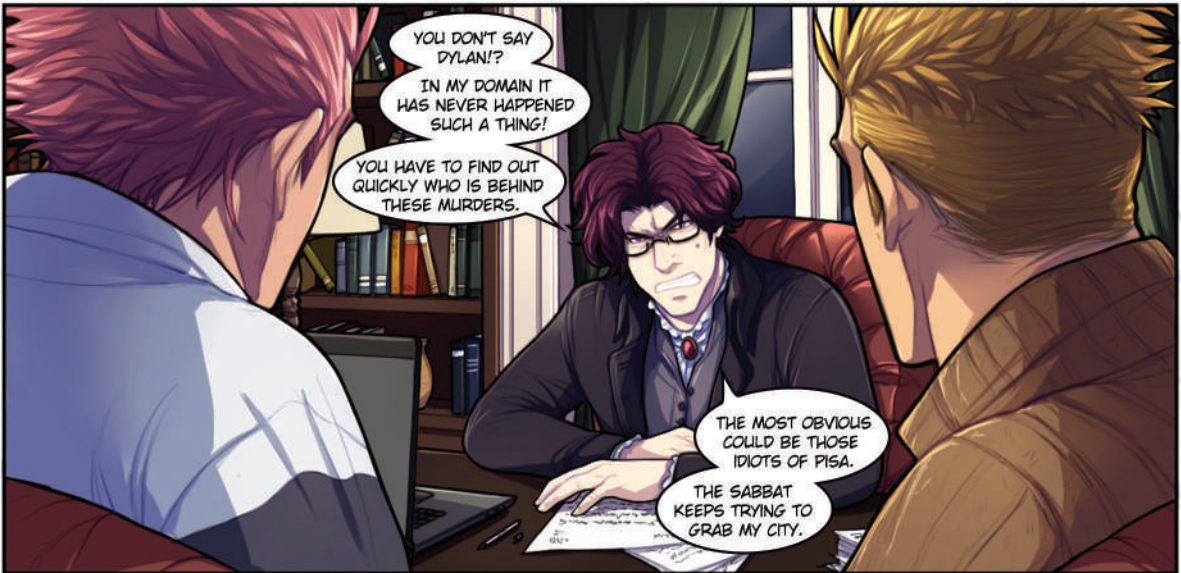
THERE WERE THE SAME SIGNS FOUND AT TOREADOR'S HOME AND AT THE TREMERE'S MERCHANT STORE.



WE DON'T KNOW YET WHO IS THE CULPRIT, BUT I SMELLED KINDRED.

NOT OF HUMANS NEITHER OF SOME OTHER CREATURE.

THREE MURDERS IN SUCH A SHORT TIME ARE TROUBLING.



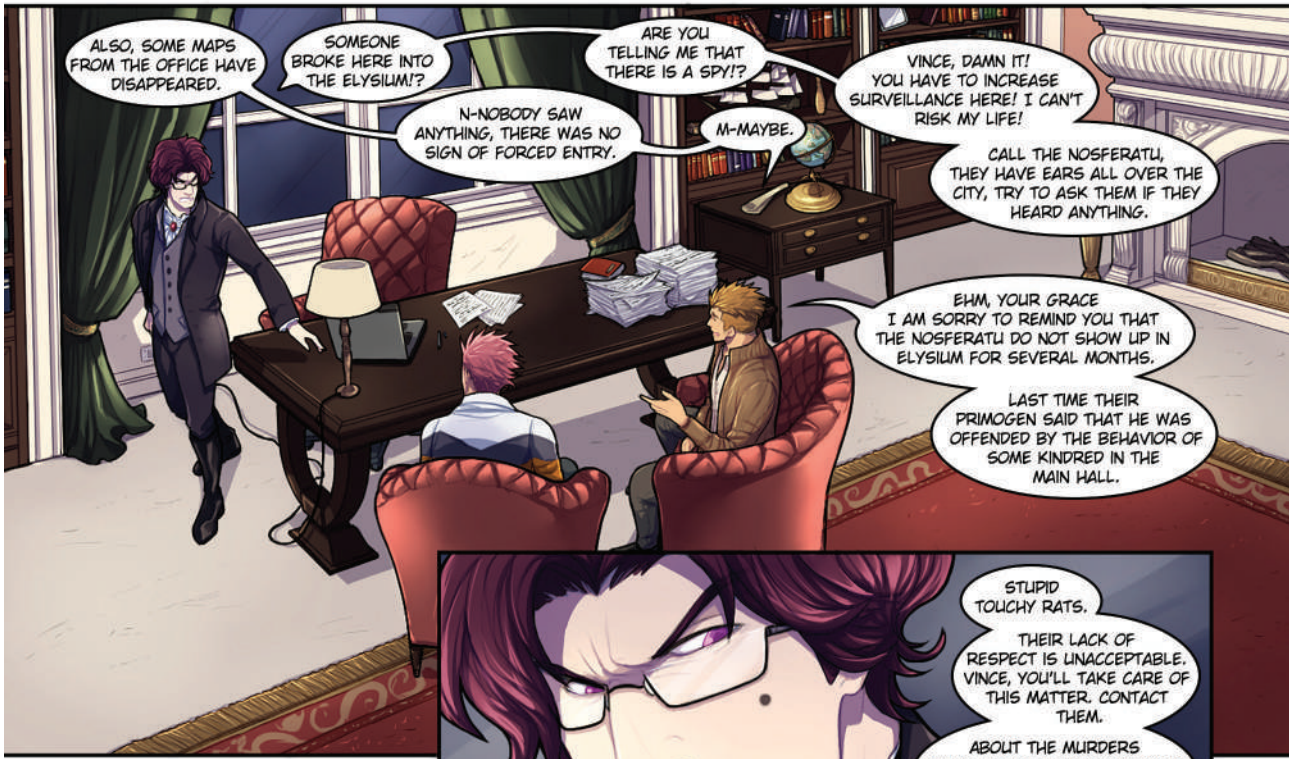
YOU DON'T SAY DYLAN!?

IN MY DOMAIN IT HAS NEVER HAPPENED SUCH A THING!

YOU HAVE TO FIND OUT QUICKLY WHO IS BEHIND THESE MURDERS.

THE MOST OBVIOUS COULD BE THOSE IDIOTS OF PISA.

THE SABBAT KEEPS TRYING TO GRAB MY CITY.



ALSO, SOME MAPS FROM THE OFFICE HAVE DISAPPEARED.

SOMEONE BROKE HERE INTO THE ELYSIUM!?

ARE YOU TELLING ME THAT THERE IS A SPY!?

N-NOBODY SAW ANYTHING, THERE WAS NO SIGN OF FORCED ENTRY.

M-MAYBE.

VINCE, DAMN IT! YOU HAVE TO INCREASE SURVEILLANCE HERE! I CAN'T RISK MY LIFE!

CALL THE NOSFERATU, THEY HAVE EARS ALL OVER THE CITY, TRY TO ASK THEM IF THEY HEARD ANYTHING.

EHM, YOUR GRACE I AM SORRY TO REMIND YOU THAT THE NOSFERATU DO NOT SHOW UP IN ELYSIUM FOR SEVERAL MONTHS.

LAST TIME THEIR PRIMOGEN SAID THAT HE WAS OFFENDED BY THE BEHAVIOR OF SOME KINDRED IN THE MAIN HALL.



STUPID TOUCHY RATS.

THEIR LACK OF RESPECT IS UNACCEPTABLE. VINCE, YOU'LL TAKE CARE OF THIS MATTER. CONTACT THEM.

ABOUT THE MURDERS ISSUE, WE NEED TO INVESTIGATE IN PISA AND CHECK IF THERE IS THE SABBAT BEHIND THIS.



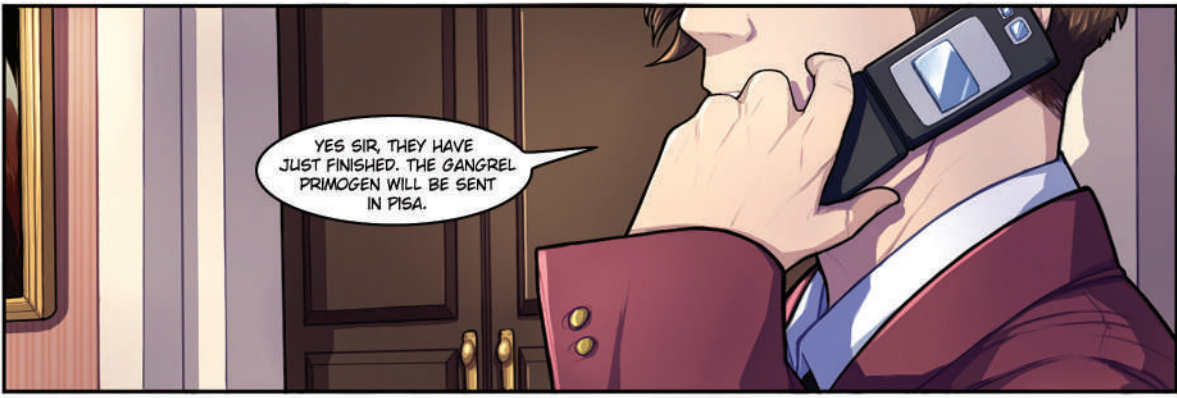
PRINCE, IF YOU GRANT ME PERMISSION, I COULD GO MYSELF TO CHECK IT OUT.



OBVIOUSLY.

BRINGS SOME OF YOUR CLAN WITH YOU AND TRY TO NOT GET DISCOVERED OR GET CAUGHT.

WE DON'T NEED OTHER PROBLEMS.



YES SIR, THEY HAVE JUST FINISHED. THE GANGREL PRIMOGEN WILL BE SENT IN PISA.



SO AT LAST THAT IDIOT HAS FINALLY REALIZED THAT SOMETHING IS GOING ON HERE.

WILL THE PRIMOGEN GO ALONE?

NO SIR, THE PRINCE ASKED TO BRING SOMEONE OF HIS CLAN WITH HIM.

I SEE, I CAN ALREADY IMAGINE WHO IT IS.

ANYTHING ELSE?

NO SIR.

KEEP ME INFORMED. FLORENCE HAS TO KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON HERE.

AS YOU WISH SIR.

WHEN LOOSENING TOO MUCH THE LEASH TO THE DOG YOU RISK OF LOSING IT.



WRDCA

-die-



HOW FOOLISH I AM, I HAVEN'T LOCKED THE DOOR.



WELCOME BACK YOUNG MASTER MACALISTER, HIS BELONGINGS HAVE ALREADY BEEN NEATLY PACKED AND LOADED ONTO THE CAR.

EVEN THE RENT FOR THE APARTMENT WAS PAID AND I GAVE ALSO THE LEASE TERMINATION NOTICE.

YOU SHOULDN'T WORRY ABOUT ANYTHING.



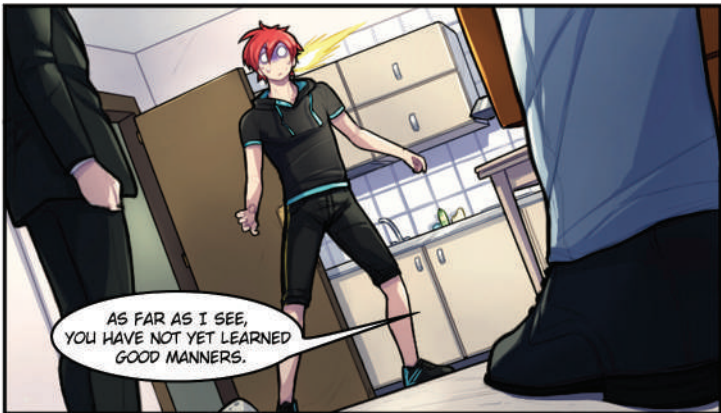
MY NAME IS ALFRED, I'M THE BUTLER. IT'S A PLEASURE TO MEET YOU.



ALFRED!? WHO ARE YOU?!

HOW THE HELL DID YOU GET IN MY HOUSE?!

WHO THE FUCK GAVE YOU PERMISSION TO TAKE MY STUFF!?



AS FAR AS I SEE, YOU HAVE NOT YET LEARNED GOOD MANNERS.



W-WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE!?



I'M HERE TO PICK YOU UP, BECAUSE FROM TODAY ON YOU'LL WORK FOR ME.

YOU'LL STAY AT MY HOUSE SO YOU'LL BE ALWAYS AVAILABLE.



A-AVAILABLE!? WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU?!

DON'T YOU DARE COME NEAR ME AGAIN OR I'LL BITE YOUR HANDS OFF!!

I WILL WAIT IN THE CAR SIR.



WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU GOING?! BRING ME BACK MY THINGS!



LISTEN TO ME, THIS IS NO LONGER A GAME.

FLORENCE SENT ME TO LUCCA TO MONITOR THE PRINCE'S WORK.

THIS CITY DOESN'T HAVE A GOOD LEADER AND TOO MANY STRANGE THINGS ARE HAPPENING.

YOU ARE NOT GOING TO OPPOSE TO CAMARILLA'S ORDERS, ARE YOU?

EH?



WHY SHOULD I TRUST YOU?!

WHAT IS THIS? ANOTHER EXCUSE TO TRY TO MAKE ME T-THAT D-DIRTY THINGS?!



...



YOU DISGUST ME!

I DON'T WANT TO COME TO YOUR HOME!!

YOU CAN'T TAKE ME AWAY!

I HAVE A LIFE!

A JOB!

LET ME GO!



WHY IS THIS HAPPENING TO ME!?



DO YOU KNOW THAT YOUR HOUSE IS VERY NICE? THESE ARE ALL STOLEN ITEMS, I GUESS.

WHAT ARE YOU SAYING!? I EARNED EVERYTHING WITH SWEAT AND TEARS!

I'M SURE THAT THE OWNERS ARE NOT OF THE SAME OPINION.

KEEP YOUR HANDS OFF! I DIDN'T GIVE YOU PERMISSION TO TOUCH MY STUFF!

SO WHY DID YOU INVITE ME IF I CAN'T TOUCH YOUR "STUFF"?

DON'T TALK DIRTY TO ME!

IF I CAN'T TOUCH YOU AND I CAN'T TALK DIRTY TO YOU, WHY AM I HERE?

YOU ARE AN IDIOT!

HEY, WHAT ARE YOU SEARCHING FOR?

N-NOTHING!

I'M SURE THAT IT WAS HERE...

WHAT'S UP? ARE YOU PLAYING FOR TIME?

W-WHO DO YOU THINK I AM?! I'M NOT A PUSSY!



HERE IT IS!



I KNEW THAT THERE WAS EN...



WE DON'T NEED IT, I CAN TAKE CARE OF THAT. I'M VERY GOOD WITH MY TONGUE!

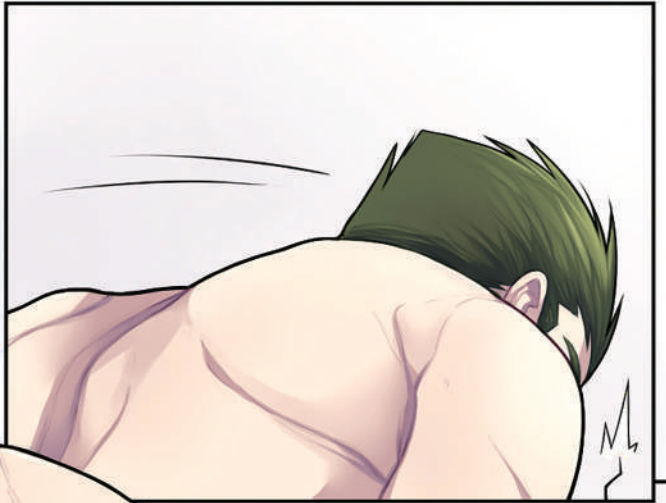
I TOLD YOU TO STOP TALKING DIRTY.



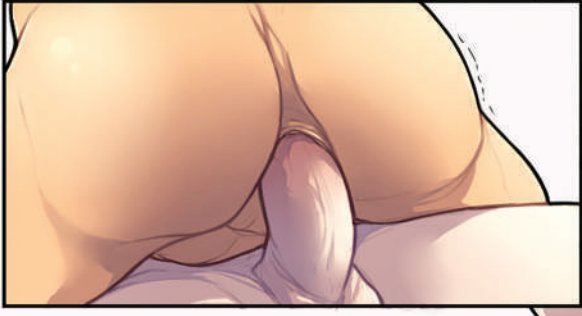
LET ME MAKE ONE THING CLEAR TO YOU! IT'S JUST SEX, OK?! DON'T GO GETTING ANY WEIRD IDEAS!

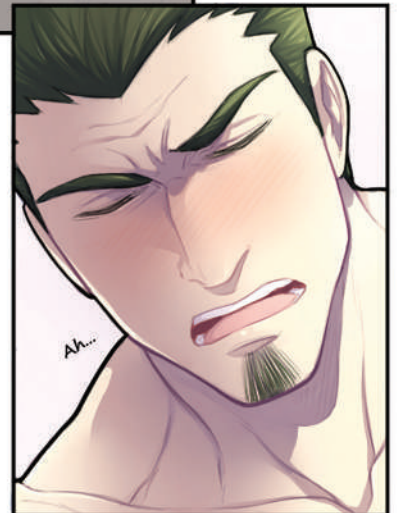
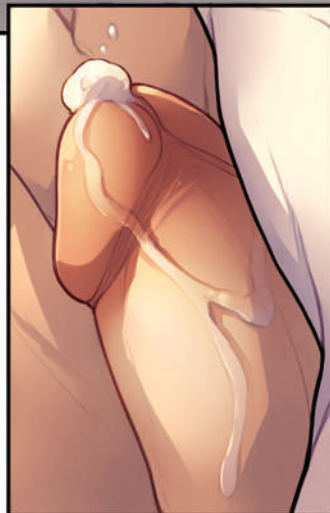
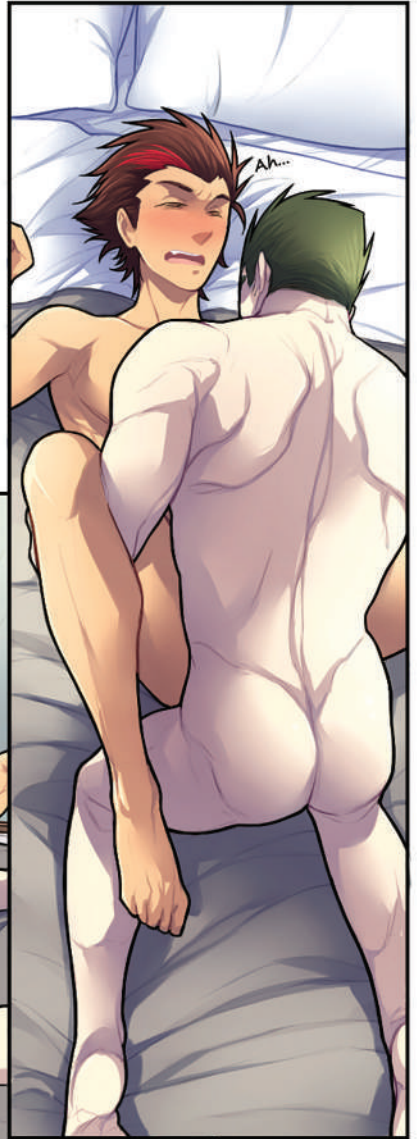
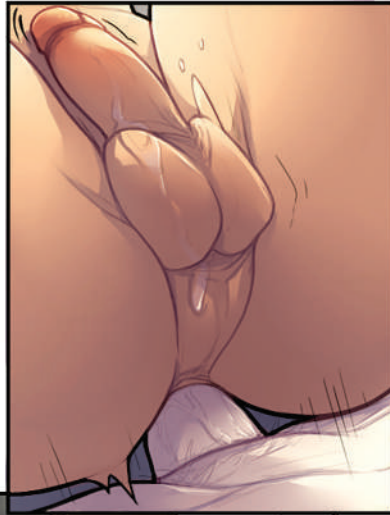
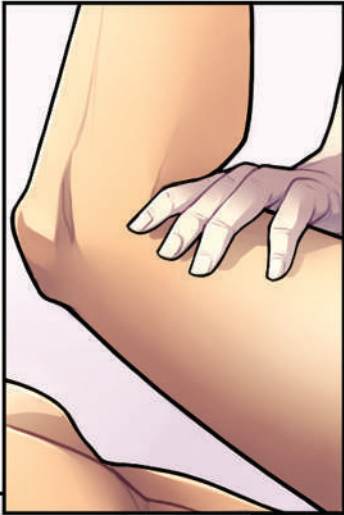
I'M NOT INTERESTED IN A DUMB COP WHO GETS FOOLED BY A "THUG" AND THAT DOESN'T KNOW HOW TO FIG-

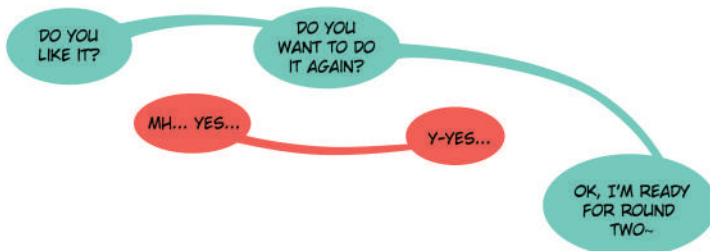




DO YOU STILL WANT TO INSULT ME OR CAN I SHOW YOU THAT I CAN DO SOMETHING BETTER?











FALKO, WE NEED
TO TALK.

EXTRA CONTENTS







“The land of Kemet, Egypt, was a victim of chaos and confusion for many years. Everyone did as they pleased, and no one could rise above the masses as an authoritative figure. The land had been governed by many leaders that came to power by overthrowing each other, motivated by a thirst for power.

After some years, A-ar-su, a Syrian, rose to power, subjecting the lands to his dominion. He and his companions brought destruction and despair, degrading the Deities in their treatment, refusing to leave offers and sacrifices in their temples.

All the Gods had wished for was peace and to see their land ruled fairly and with respect for traditions.

For this reason, they chose their son, born of their own flesh, to rule the land of Egypt: Serkhaure Setepenre Meryamun, the chosen son of Ra, loved by Amon, Sethnakht Merire Mweryamun, Seth is victorious, loved by Amon-Ra.

Ankh, wedja, seneb.

It is he who was known as Khepri-Set when angered; he who brought order back into the turmoiled lands, who killed the rebels terrorizing the country, who purified the great throne of Egypt and became ruler of the Two Lands on the throne of Atum.

Ankh, wedja, seneb.

He brought the land back to its origins, and those that were hiding in fear came out, accepting him as their ruler.

Every man that had been hiding between his house’s walls came out and met his brothers.

He reinstated the temples, giving back to the Gods what was traditionally owed.

He chose me to inherit the throne on the lands of Keb, and now, thanks to my father

Sethnakht, I am the great ruler of Egypt, reunited under a single domain, in peace.

Now the time has come for him to rest in the peace of the Horizon, in the company of the Gods. For him it has been done what has been for Osiris; his royal boat has sailed over the river to the ovest of Tebe, letting him rest for eternity.”

- Ramses III, Papyrus of Harris -





3rd year of the kingdom, Pharmouti, the 5th month of Peret the sowing season, 20th day
[April 15, 1186 b.C.]

The heat was sweltering, the sun a burning sphere high in the bright blue sky. The light breeze could've helped, had the air not have been as hot as the last breath of a dying man.

Along the crests of the dunes, whirlwinds of sand rose, the small grains slipping under clothes, scratching at covered skin.

The desert landscape, with its gold, scalding sand going as far as the horizon, would've looked quiet, placid, had it not been for the corpses strewn everywhere; small islands on the sea of land.

The battlefield was calm, the Egyptians walking amongst the corpses to lay final blows on the dying soldiers and capture those who made it out the battle alive. Those retrieved were destined to serve, to build the pyramids and monuments for the glory of the Pharaoh and Egypt.

The Pharaoh, walking amongst them, was inspecting the state of his army and counting the losses.

Escorted by his personal guards, an empty space opened around him as the men made way, not daring to approach him unless it was required of them.

His steps guided him to where the soldiers had grouped up the prisoners to count them. The Egyptians' losses had been minimal compared to those of their enemies, and the fallen soldiers were going to be brought back home to be buried with all the honors a warrior deserved. Their enemies' corpses would not get the same kindness, abandoned on the battlefield and left to become one with the desert.

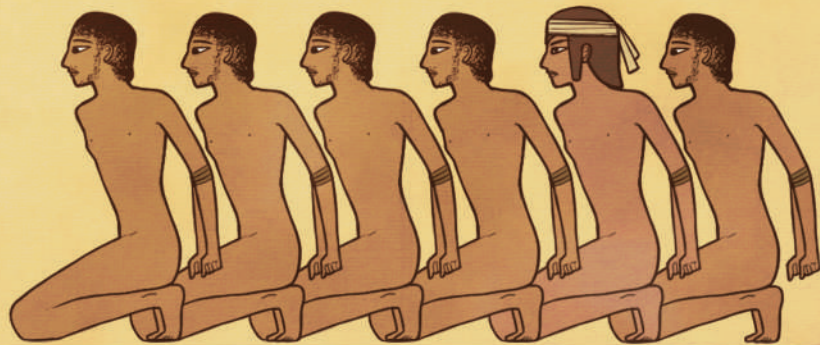
The enemy survivors amounted to about twenty men, shackled to one another. Stripped of their armor and possessions, they were left naked under the burning sun and whipping sand. Their muscled bodies were in pitiful condition, carrying the wounds of that battle and the scars of the previous ones on their tanned skin.

Some showed no fear, their gazes proud. Others seemed tired, bowing down to exhaustion after the battle that just occurred.

What was left of the army of the People of the Sea was there, standing in front of the Egyptian ruler, inspected one man at a time.

The Pharaoh, Khopesh, stopped in front of one of them, putting his weapon under the prisoner's chin to lift his head.

The man looked up, submitting under the Pharaoh's golden eyes despite his initial intention of showing no fear.





“Shardana,” murmured the Pharaoh, his eyes gazing into the prisoner’s then slowly sliding down to evaluate the man’s body. He had recognized the invader, one of the people coming from the Great Sea; from a very distant land which Egypt didn’t know much about.

“You’ve been trying to invade my lands. For a long time, you’ve been trying to get Egypt. Shardana, Sekeles, Peleset, Libu. You’ve been trying to bend us, conquer us, but all you are is a bunch of barbarians, and all you can hope for now is a dignified loss.”

The Pharaoh spoke these words loud and proud so all the prisoners would hear him as he started to walk in front of the line. He looked at them, one by one, and the prisoners knew their lives were in his hands; in the hands of the man that was considered a God in the land of Egypt.

In their eyes, he could see their disdain, fear, regrets, and the realization no one would come for them; that their destiny was sealed. No one dared move even with the scalding sand burning under their feet.

The Pharaoh stopped at the center, his eyes sliding down the entire group of prisoners. Every single one of these men had a future purpose for him; nothing was to go to waste in Egypt.

“I will spare your lives, as a reward for your bravery.” The slight relief showing on the prisoners’ faces did not go unnoticed to the Pharaoh. “But from now on, your lives belong to me, and they will be used for the glory of Egypt.” The tension was back as the Shardana trembled,

holding their breaths.

“You will work on the construction of our temples and pyramids. For my pyramid,” he added, observing the rage and humiliation on the men’s faces. He did not dignify them with another word, turning to walk back to his horse with his personal guard trailing right behind him. He was going back to the city, in triumph, prisoners following them on foot.

Warriors degraded to prisoners and laborers, their dignity like dust between the desert sand. Most of them were already giving up, their pride in shambles, but some were already contemplating revenge on Egypt and the Pharaoh.

Eyes like embers followed every single movement of the Pharaoh, causing a chill to run down his spine.

The ruler of high and low Egypt stopped and, for a second, looked behind him at each and every one of the new slaves. He did not notice anything out of the ordinary; they were just men, already bowing down to the power of his land, with no future ahead of them but to die in his quarries.

As he looked away, a slave, just one of the many, with nothing to really distinguish him from his companions, looked right back up at the Pharaoh mounting on his chariot. This slave knew he was going to run away at his first opportunity. He was going to do everything necessary to gain his freedom back. He did not belong to Egypt and, more importantly, he did not belong to the Pharaoh.

**3rd year of the kingdom, Payni, the 2nd month of the sowing season Shemet, 20th day
[June 15, 1186 b.C.]**

Ta-sekhet-a’at, The Valley of the Kings; a timeless land surrounded by high mountains, burning sand, and a sky so blue it could hurt the eyes. Despite the unmoving air, one could feel something; a vibration, the feeling of something existing beyond reality.

Despite being a place dedicated to the past, it was not silent. It was filled with the sound of chisels on stones, the chatting of the guards mixed with the heavy breaths of the slaves, and the yells of the jailers and their whips snapping every now and then.

The work was going slow, slower than the great architect had envisioned. The work on Queen Tausert’s tomb decorations was more complex than anticipated, but despite that, there was hope the work would be completed in time, with the slaves working as fast as possible and with no pause.

The Valley of the Kings never slept, an endless construction site, and a new tomb, superb and imposing, would rise there, another testimony of the Pharaohs’ immortality in that unmoving, unchanging desert landscape.





Yet, many did not feel part of this glorious place that was going to be part of history. For the war prisoners, now slaves, this forsaken land was only full of sand, hot as the flames of hell and dry as an old woman's vulva, and not for a moment would they stop silently cursing Egypt and its people.

Many there were free men, rightfully paid for their work. But not the prisoners, the criminals, the outcasts, forced to work as a punishment because nothing went to waste in the lands of Egypt.

The free men went back to Set-Maat, their village, at the end of the work day. But for the war prisoners nothing of the sort was granted. There was no rest, no mercy, no freedom. The slaves were brought back to their cells at night, only to start work back up in the morning. Every day was the same as the last, until death by exhaustion or the hand of a jailer finally freed them.

It was their punishment for daring to try to invade Egypt, for trying to attack the land of the Pharaohs.

But it was going to end soon for him, for one slave who stumbled up the hill, transporting yet another crate of stones. It was going to end.

He was just waiting for the right moment; he had been patiently waiting for days.

He had studied the guards and every single one of their movements, every round, every step. He even knew how long each and every one of them would need before whipping any slave that showed any hint of insubordination or who was working too slowly.

And now, yes; he was ready to take the leap.

He knew he only had once chance, as anyone who was caught daring to try to escape was immediately killed, but he could not wait anymore.

He was losing his strength, weakened by the scarcity of food and water and the very little rest granted to them. If he waited any more he would've ended up like so many of them, empty souls walking and dragging stones with no will left. He preferred death to a life like that.

And there it was: his small opening, his only hope, precisely on time. The head of the guards was here.

He wondered how it was possible that such an idiot was the captain of the guards of the great architect.

Yes, he was tall, big, and strong, but that was all he was. Intelligence and swiftness, though...

Well, the slave knew he was faster and, even if weakened by hunger, he knew he could do it.

He emptied his basket of stones and turned to walk back with it hanging from his shoulders, slowing his steps when walking by the big Egyptian. He usually could not waste any time, had to walk faster in order to go fill the basket yet again, and he knew very well what was about to happen. Senses heightening, he felt the guard's muscles shift as if they were his own. He could see out the corner of his eye the arm raising as if time had slowed, and in that second he sprung to action.

He slid down the guard's arm, dodging the whip with a backstep, and launched the basket against him. The whip hit down on it, breaking the fibers and snapping on the dry ground with a small cloud of dust. The guard stumbled forward in surprise at the unexpected gesture, and the slave took his chance.

He was behind the guard, a sword hanging on the man's hip, and with great agility the slave grabbed the hilt, unsheathing the blade and cutting deep down the man's left arm.

He looked around, knowing he had but a few seconds to act, as the other guards were already alerted by their captain's yell, already converging on him.

He ran through the quarry, dodging other slaves and hitting all the men that stumbled in his path, without ever stopping. He had to make it out to the desert, hide between the tombs, stay there until night, and then find a way to escape from the country.

It was not the best plan, but it was all he had.

The commotion was getting louder as he made his way through the center of the working camp, more and more guards alerted and on his tail. He cursed, running as fast as he could, until his road was blocked by four of them, one of whom seemed to be a new face. Bigger than the others, his skin was a shade of ebony hinting the man's origins were of the people of the deep south.

Squinting at the guard, the slave took in a deep breath to calm himself down. He knew he could not take this man one on one, so he focused on him as the guard ran toward him, waiting until the last instant; waiting until the man was close





enough for him to feel his breath and see his arm descending towards him, blade in hand. He waited until that moment to slide down on the ground, legs against his chest, before swiftly kicking up in the Nubian guard's belly. He was heavy, but the slave pushed hard, teeth clenched, and the guard stumbled back, falling.

The slave was short on breath, but adrenaline did its job as he sprung right back on his feet. He could not wait a minute more, or he would end up in pieces.

He looked around to assess the situation, just a second more. That ended up being his fatal mistake.

A whip curled on his ankle like a snake and yanked back, and he tumbled down in the sand.

More guards were running toward him, surrounding him, ready to take his life.

He was dead; he knew it. This was it.

His hand clawed in the sand as frustration and fear coiled in his gut.

He didn't want to die, but if that was to be his end, then he was not going down easily.

With a slash of the blade he still had in hand, he cut the whip trapping his ankle, turning to look at the Nubian guard. Rage and resolve burned in the slave's eyes. He was certainly going to die, but he was going to make sure to drag some of the Egyptians with him too so they could meet their beloved deities.

He stood, facing the guard as a small circle formed around them; all armed men, spears pointing right at him, ready to strike. But the head of the guards stopped them with a swift gesture, turning to taunt the slave. He was going to fight him.

"Come forward, slave." He said, secure, blade in hand.

It suited the slave fine. His odds were better in a direct confrontation. He was going to die either way, but what better way for a Shardana warrior to go than fighting honorably? Surely he could not ask for more.

He took position, guard up, ready to fight through his last living moments. They both started to circle each other, as the slave evaluated the situation. He could not win with sheer brute force; it was obvious by their size difference. Just looking at his enemy's muscles, he knew that, was he to be hit even once, it could be his end.

He could try to play on his agility and his cunning, and, deciding to take his chances on that, he sprung into action as the guard tried to hit his side.

He managed to dodge with a sidestep, aiming at the guard's leg, and both the attacks hit. The Shardana felt his enemy's blade sinking in his shoulder, his skin opening as he bit his lip in pain. At the same time, he felt his own attack hitting the mark, the blade driving deep down the guard's thigh.

He did not wait for his enemy to catch his breath, trying to hit the guard in the back, but the guard turned around just in time to parry the slave's hit with his own blade. The slave only scratched his enemy's arm, but it was still better than nothing. He stepped back, observing. Around them stood a large group of guards. Even the workers had stopped.

The Nubian tried to attack, aiming for his uncovered belly for a quick end, but the slave was faster. He dodged just in time for the blade to





nick his hip, and with a kick, he managed to send the man tumbling down. In an instant he was on the guard, sitting on his back to keep him down and pointing the blade at his neck.

He won.

His satisfaction was short lived as a dozen of spears closed in on him, ready to strike if he dared try to move another finger.

He had lost.

For a moment, he was unmoving, the only sound in the eerie silence being his own panting. The shocked look of the guard under him was his prize; it was clear the man was not expecting to be beaten so quickly.

The slave leaned down toward the guard's ear, keeping him still with a hand on his head as he already felt a spear pressing at his side.

"I'm done for, but you are coming with me," he murmured, opening a cut on the man's throat. He was about to sink down fully and put an end on both of them when a booming voice rumbled in the quarry.

"Enough!"

The simple word stopped everything; even the dust seemed to stand still in the scorching heat. The sound of the hammers stopped, the guards fell in silence, and even the slave's hand froze.

The crowd moved aside and the slave stared, eyes wide, as the Pharaoh himself walked toward them.

With dark skin burnt by the sun and a lean body, he was wearing a pristine white tunic, jewelry tied to his rank decorating his form. He was holding the scepter symbol of Set, and the link with the Deities in his right hand. Hanging at his left side was the Khopesh, a decorative sickle-sword; a symbol of power and regality. On his head sat the Uraeus diadem; the Egyptian cobra that protected the Pharaoh himself with its breath of fire. But he did not wear a customary wig now, letting his hair, red as the desert sunset, show freely. It was a stark contrast to the dark hair of all the people surrounding them and the fake beard on his chin.

Yet it was his golden eyes that made him look more a God than any object he could possibly wear; so bright and intense, so different from anyone else's.

He was a man that commanded respect with his presence alone, and everyone around them had

already kneeled down at his arrival, except for the guards that were still pointing their spears at the slave.

The Pharaoh's group advanced, his valets taking care to keep him protected from the sun rays and fanning him with the flabellum made of entwined lotus leaves.

He reached the small circle of guards that made way for him, letting him take in the scene.

The slave's grip around the hilt tightened, but when he turned to look up at the Pharaoh he froze under that gaze.

He felt trapped, like a mouse cornered by a cat... Except that man wasn't a cat so much as he was a vicious snake.

He had seen him more than once at the quarry and, of course, when he had been captured in the desert. He had hoped to never see him again, especially when he had finally tried to make his escape.

Their eyes met, and the slave was unable to look away.

The Pharaoh could see the determination in those eyes; it was quite impressive, and he found himself surprised in when he looked down and noticed that the trapped guard was none other than the head of his personal guards, Òshii.

He lifted an eyebrow in disappointment, before turning to look back up at the slave. He could not recall who he was, but the lines of his face indicated his ethnicity.

"Shardana," he murmured, as if calling the slave by name. "Your tenacity is admirable, but you know very well that once you cut this man's throat, your life will come to an end, right?"

The slave frowned. He had expected everything but that he'd end up chatting with the Pharaoh. He needed a few moments to properly understand the words, as he had only learned a very limited amount of their language while working in the quarry.

"My life ended when I was captured," he replied in stunted and probably incorrect Egyptian.

A spear poked at his throat, drawing a single drop of blood that ran down his neck. He did not move nor relax his grip on the blade, pressing it down more firmly on the Nubian's neck instead.

The Pharaoh raised a hand, stopping the soldier pressing his spear against the slave's throat, and the man complied, stepping back without





lowering his guard.

“Let him go, and I will give you a new life,” the Pharaoh replied, gaze firmly set on the slave. What?! The slave stared, eyes wide in surprise. What was the ruler of Egypt saying? A new life? For him?

No, he could not believe him. Surely, as soon as he would drag the blade away from the guard’s throat, the others would instantly spear him with their weapons. He frowned, pushing down on his prisoner’s head more firmly as he searched for the right words to reply.

“No, that’s not true,” he gritted out through his teeth.

The Pharaoh’s eyebrow shot up, perplexed.

“You doubt the words of the ruler of Egypt?”

Taken aback by this question, the slave blinked. Whatever his answer might be, he thought, he would be killed; he had no chances.

And yet the man seemed honest, leaving him feeling that maybe he still had some hope to be saved. He felt as if trusting him could still give him a chance at life.

And yet, what life could it be? Frowning, he looked down at the guard trapped under him. Slowly, he took the blade away from his throat.

The Pharaoh smiled, satisfied.

“You value your life. It’s a good thing. I have no use for men wasting it.”

A nod to the guards was all he needed for them to spring in action and tear the sword away from the slave’s hand. The slave let them, knowing that resisting would only worsen his precarious position. His life was in the Pharaoh’s hands, now, and that scared him more than enough.

Another guard grabbed his arm, forcing him up on his feet and finally freeing the Nubian guard under him. The man immediately rose to bow before his ruler, head hanging low in penitence.

“Forgive me, my king,” he simply said.

“Òshii, I am very disappointed. Do I have to question if any slave here at the quarry could have a chance to take my life?” asked the Pharaoh, arms open as if indicating everyone surrounding them.

The Nubian guard said nothing, knowing that offering any kind of excuse would only further enrage his Pharaoh.

“I will deal with you later. Now, give me the whip,” the Pharaoh said, hand extended in front of him,

immediately receiving it. He turned to look at the slave, held by his arms by two guards and apparently tired after his attempted escape. They dragged him in front of the Pharaoh, pushing him down to kneel, ready to tie his wrists, but the Pharaoh stopped them.

“The Shardana will receive his punishment without moving. Should he move, you will kill him.” He stared straight at the slave, who felt his blood run cold, understanding this was only a test. He turned, giving the Pharaoh his exposed back. He resolved not to make a single sound, nor to move even a finger. His warrior’s pride wouldn’t let him.

The Pharaoh seemed satisfied by this, but before starting, he turned around, talking to every single man in the quarry, be they slaves, workers or jailers.

“Those of you who are here in slavery know why they are. They tried to conquer the land of my people, and they know that the loss of their battle also meant the loss of their freedom. Their lives are mine, and only I can decide what to do with them. Trying to escape will not save you; instead, it will make the rest of your lives here harder.”

Those words seemed like a death sentence for the men forced into slavery, but the ruler of Egypt knew he needed to keep order and keep them in line to avoid possible riots. He looked down at the slave’s back, noticing the scars of past punishments. He frowned, but would not let the sight stagger him.

He knew what happened in his quarries, and how often the slaves would try to fight back. A few scars certainly wouldn’t shake his convictions.

Yet, he was not going to kill this slave, nor he would overdo the punishment. He had different plans for him.

The whip rose. The slave could see the shadow cast by the Pharaoh’s arm hanging over him, and he took in a deep breath, steeling himself for the imminent hit.

The shadow slid down and with it, the whip, snapping on his back in a first, painful hit. He felt his skin tear, as he had felt many times before, along with the burning pain, but he knew it was just the beginning. He grits his teeth, waiting.

A second hit, then a third, and then, many more. The Pharaoh’s hand was not gentle, but had it





been one of the other guards whipping him, he would not have made it out alive.

Ten, fifteen, twenty hits. He counted them, one by one, until they stopped.

He was exhausted, pain throbbing in his back; he thought he would have died, but he had still made no sound during the entirety of the punishment. His back felt as if it were on fire, and he could feel his senses slipping away from him as he heard the Pharaoh's voice.

"Bring him into my tent." The order was terse.

The slave was grabbed by the arms and lifted roughly, and as he tried to look up to the Pharaoh, he was blinded by the shining sun, his last glimmer of consciousness leaving him.

It was just a small annoyance, at the start. He was tired; he just wanted rest, and after everything, he was dead, which was fine with him. And yet, why won't that irritating feeling go away?

Even in the afterlife he couldn't be left alone...

He opened his eyes suddenly, trying to sit up, when a sensation like freezing air engulfed his head.

He knew that had been a mistake, as a jolt of pain rolled down his back, forcing him back down.

He was awake. Alive. And he had no idea where he was.

Blinking, he tried to focus on his surroundings, until a voice broke the silence.

"You've finally awoken; I was starting to wonder if you were going to sleep for the rest of the day." His attention snapped to the figure at his side, and he immediately recognized the Pharaoh of Egypt. The slave frowned, looking around without answering.

He was in a tent, safe from the sun and the sand of the quarry. It must not have been too long since he lost consciousness outside.

He tried to sit again, but the Pharaoh stopped him and forced him down, a hand on his arm.

"Don't move, let the medication work," he ordered tersely, and the slave could only obey, noticing the bandages on his back that smelled lightly of medical herbs.

It was so strange to be there... resting in the cooling shadows, with the sounds of the other slaves still at work in the quarry outside.

He looked at the man who had saved him from a certain death, watching his own reflection

in those intensely golden eyes. He could only maintain eye contact for a few seconds before looking down.

"Why?" he asked. A single word, all he needed to try to understand why the Pharaoh would spare his life.

"It is not every day that a tired, hungry slave will come so close to killing one of the Pharaoh's personal guards," the Pharaoh replied as he took a soft fig out from a basket of fruit and took a bite.

The slave felt his stomach rumble and his mouth water at that nearly sensual sight.

"I'm not a man who wastes something that could become useful," the Pharaoh continued, noticing the expression on the slave's face and taking a second fruit from the basket, handing it over. "And I think you will be more useful at my palace than in a quarry. Your combat prowess is clear."





The slave stared wide-eyed at the offered fig, and he wasted no time grabbing it in fear the Pharaoh might change his mind. He wolfed it down, sweet release for his dry throat and empty stomach, and when the Pharaoh wordlessly offered him the entire basket, he did not protest, emptying it quickly.

The ruler of Egypt observed as if he was watching a wild animal. The slave did not care. He was hungry and he needed all his strength if he wanted to complete his escape.

He could maybe understand the Pharaoh's intentions, but all he wanted was his freedom; to leave this forsaken land. He was sure the story was all a ruse and that the Pharaoh just wanted to keep him as a slave. That certainly wasn't what he wanted.

As the slave finished off a peach, the Pharaoh poured himself a glass of wine, observing with a hint of amusement as the slave's eyes followed the movement of the pitcher. The Pharaoh nearly laughed at this shameless display of want; an animal would have been more subtle.

As he had done with the basket of fruits before, he slid the pitcher to the slave, expressing without words that the slave was free to drink it all if he so desired. And so he did, judging by the way he took the pitcher and started to drink from it greedily.

The slave emptied the pitcher as a thought flashed in his mind. That was his moment.

Closing both hands on the pitcher, he sprung, trying to hit the Pharaoh's head with it despite

the pain in his back.

The Pharaoh, surprised, could only try to block the hit with a hand, but it was not enough to completely stop the attack. The Shardana wasted no time checking if the Pharaoh was unconscious as he dropped the pitcher, making a desperate run for freedom. Surely, now that he had hit the emperor of all Egypt he would not get any more second chances. With what little energy was left in him, he opened the drapes in the back of the tent, blinking as he was momentarily blinded from the setting sun right in the horizon. Shielding his eyes with a hand, he started to run... or so he thought, as his run was nothing more than a fast walk.

His back hurt; the wine, drunk too fast, was making his head spin. He could only force a few more steps out of himself, just a few meters away from the tent, before falling down in the sand unconscious, certain in his mind that that was it... he was dead.

"Maybe I should kill you right here and now, Shardana. You seem to be a troublemaker," the Pharaoh murmured absentmindedly to himself from the entrance of the tent as he squeezed the wine out of his hair. There was a small cut on his temple from the pitcher that the slave had hit him with.

And yet, despite his words, he could only admire the tenacity of this slave. He ordered the guards that had been alerted by the noise to put him on a carriage directly for his palace.

3rd year of the kingdom, Epiphi, the 3rd month of Shemu the sowing season, 1st day [June 25, 1186 b.C.]

"It has been ten days, Shardana; surely your body and health must have recovered."

The Pharaoh was observing him from his high throne in this enormous room decorated with paintings and statues. He was dressed in full regalia; on his head was the crown of Sekhemty, a fusion of the red Deshret, the symbol of the lower Egypt, and of the white Hedjet, the symbol of the upper Egypt. Both showed the Uraeus; the rearing cobra.

The slave was kneeling in front of the Pharaoh, surrounded by the decorated columns and paintings, a celebration of the power of Egypt.

At the Pharaoh's side stood two guards, ready to intervene if necessary; the slave could only feel out of place and uncomfortable.

In the past week, he had received food and care, new clothes, and even a room for himself. He had managed to practice his Egyptian, learning some new words from the slaves working in the palace. At first, he had been anxious, expecting to be killed at any second or, even worse, to be dragged away in chains yet again.

Once fully recovered, he had been summoned in front of the Pharaoh.

He hadn't seen him ever since he had hit him with





the pitcher, trying his last desperate escape, and he could only imagine the Pharaoh wanting to take his revenge.

And yet, why would he waste time healing him, just to kill him right after?

He could not imagine what the most powerful man of all Egypt would ever want from him.

The Pharaoh stood, walking down the steps in front of his throne to inspect the slave's condition. His back was mostly healed, despite still bearing the signs of the whipping, and under his much less sickly-looking skin, his muscles were already looking more toned.

"I am not going to waste time," the Pharaoh said, stopping in front of the slave and forcing him to look up just slightly. "I want you to become the head of my personal guard."

The slave was frozen by the directness; it took him a long while for the words to properly sink in. What?!

"What?" he said out loud, fully looking up.

"Are you still having difficulty speaking my tongue? I will make sure you will learn properly," the Pharaoh replied, unfazed, crossing his fingers behind his back.

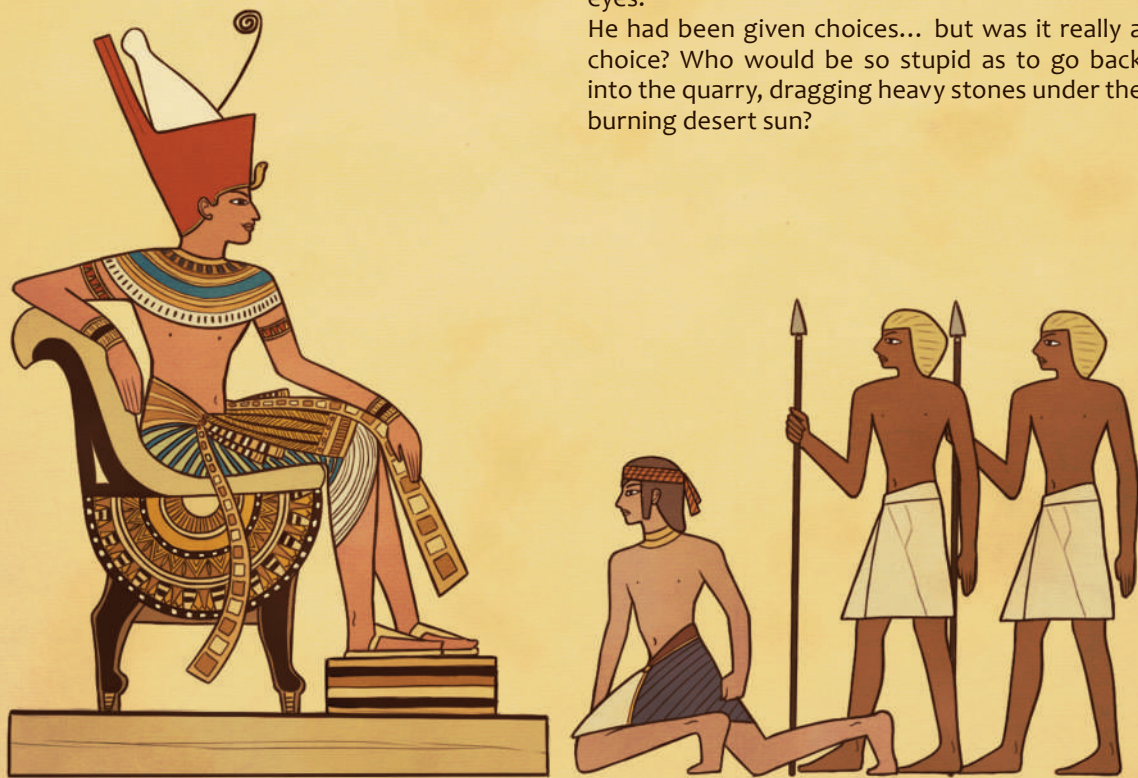
"No, I... understood," the slave said, not looking directly into the Pharaoh's eyes. He felt like the man had a strange effect on him, he felt like once locked into those deeply golden eyes he won't be able to look away. He did not want to risk getting lost in them.

"Why me? I hate Egypt and all I want is to go back to my land," he forced himself to say, searching for the right words, even if he knew saying he hated the Pharaoh's land would only cast him in an even worse light.

The Pharaoh stared at him, silent, calculating. "You've beaten the man responsible for my safety nearly weapon-less, weak and hungry. It would be stupid of me to let a warrior like you slip away, and a waste to send you back there, breaking rocks." He then said, slowly and simply, to make sure the slave would understand.

"I'm offering you the position of head of my personal guard, and this is the only offer you will receive from me. If not, you can always go back into the quarry, and work on my pyramid. Which one would you prefer?" the Pharaoh asked, straight to the point, unmoving in front of the slave who looked down at the floor with wide eyes.

He had been given choices... but was it really a choice? Who would be so stupid as to go back into the quarry, dragging heavy stones under the burning desert sun?





“...I accept,” he murmured after a few seconds, looking back up. He was still considering the idea of running away, but he would not be able to do so from the quarry; not a second time. Maybe, from the palace, it could be easier-

His running thoughts came to a stop when the Pharaoh spoke again, as if reading his mind.

“If you try to escape again, I will end your life myself,” he said, simple, and yet his voice heavy as stone, freezing the slave in his place. He did not give him time to reply, walking back to his throne.

“I do not care of who you once were. From today, your new life begins in the service of Sethnakht, your Pharaoh; your owner and king. Your job will be to protect my life and obey my orders with no reservations. I do not care to know who you were before this; from now on you are a new person, and you will answer to the name I choose for you.”

3rd year of the kingdom, Epiphi, the 3rd month of Shemu the sowing season, 27th day [July 20, 1186 b.C.]

«“Khait, if you keep holding back, I will be the winner!”

Holding back? He had been trying to kill him since the very start of this stupid fight!

Also, he was calling him with that name he hated so much as he tried to stab him. There was nothing he could do! The Pharaoh would quickly dodge each and every one of his attacks, showing a strength the Shardana did not realize he possessed.

He attacked again, and again the Pharaoh dodged easily and attacked back, the Shardana moving away quickly to avoid the hit.

It seemed as if the Pharaoh was playing with him; as if it was not a serious fight for him, which irritated the Shardana to no end. The Pharaoh himself had asked for a show of strength from him, wanting to witness firsthand his prowess in combat, and as an incentive, he had offered his freedom. If he won, he could have walked away a free man, but if he lost, the Pharaoh would ask something in return. The Shardana had accepted eagerly, having no doubt that the man, spoiled as he looked, would not be able to even hold a sword properly.

But he quickly realized how wrong he had been. The Pharaoh knew how to fight and how to move.

Everything was happening so fast... the slave looked up, apprehension showing on his face. This man, the Pharaoh, was snuffing out who he once was and shaping him into something new. What was happening now seemed to further diminish his chances at freedom.

“Your name will be Khait,” the Pharaoh continues, his voice definitive, not giving the slave any chance to reply. “It is the right name for a warrior like you,” he explained, with the slightest hint of a smile.

The slave was shocked, his mind an empty chamber.

“Khait...” he murmured. He disliked the name; it tasted like slavery, chains, and constraints. And yet, what could he do?

He looked down, biting at his lower lip and gulping down the knot in his throat.

“Khait.”

He was strong and agile. Damn, he had no need of a personal guard!

They circled each other in the garden the Pharaoh had brought them to, having sent away all the servants. And now, under the bright sun, the slave seemed to be the most tired of the two.

“Enough with games,” the Shardana murmured in his mother tongue, darting forward for a new attack; fast, faster than he had been so far. He wanted to end it quickly and get his freedom back.

He feigned an attack from the right, then quickly sidestepped to the left, trying to attack from a lower point, his attack directed at the Pharaoh’s belly.

He was so sure the hit connected, he even thought he saw the blade cutting through cloth and flesh. He even was about to declare victory when the Pharaoh, with a nearly inhuman agility, managed to avoid the blade nearly completely. Khait had felt his weapon nick the skin and he saw blood, but a second after that, the Pharaoh’s blade was at his neck.

“You wounded me...” he said, a mocking smile on his lips.

He hated this man, he truly did.

“So, do you give u-” The Pharaoh could not finish





the phrase, as Khait, with his quick reflexes, head-butted him, forcing him to step back.

“No rules, right?” the slave replied, putting some distance between them.

“Right...” the Pharaoh replied, voice low as he dried away the fresh blood running from his nose. He had to admit that the fight was starting to get exciting. He had noticed Khait’s ability in the past few days, both in keeping the other guards in check and in combat. He had never seen a warrior quite as skilled as him.

If the Pharaoh hadn’t been what he was... had he been a normal human being, he would certainly lose to him.

It was exciting indeed!

With a smile he licked away a drop of blood running down his lips, then darted forward for a new attack without giving the slave any time to react. Up until that moment he had only defended himself, passively, but now he felt a burning resolve. He wanted to win.

It was a direct attack, no tricks or feints, with a blade striking down at his side. If Khait would try to dodge, the long blade would connect with him, but if he’d try to parry the blow with his own weapon-

KLANG!

Steel against steel. The sound the Pharaoh wanted to hear.

He stepped forward, his blade sliding against Khait’s until the hilt came to contact with it, and the Pharaoh had fully forced himself over Khait’s guard, bodies touching as he loomed over him with his greater height.

“No rules, right?” he repeated with a smile, before using his free hand to slide down and squeeze between Khait’s legs.

The expression on the Shardana’s face muted quickly, from surprise at the strength of the attack, to shame for falling for such a dirty trick.

“So, will you give up?” the Pharaoh asked, stepping forward, forcing him back.

“Never,” Khait replied, grinding his teeth together. His tight grip was painful and embarrassing, but he would not give up so easily when his freedom was on the line.

Baring his teeth like an animal, he darted forward with all the intentions to bite down and rip that smug smile off the Pharaoh’s face. The Pharaoh was fast enough to avoid the bite only partially, a

cut opening on his upper lip.

That was enough to make him lighten his hold, enough for Khait to step back from him. He expected the Pharaoh to inspect the wound first, but the quickness of his reaction was beyond human abilities.

In an instant he was over him again, ready to strike one handed from his side as he had done before, but this time the Shardana was ready. Instead of letting himself step down from the attack he tightened his hold on the weapon, right foot planted firmly on the ground, ready to parry back the strong attack.

“I won’t be fooled a second time,” he muttered to himself, stepping back just enough to avoid a possible second hold.

He was so concentrated on the possibility of parrying that attack that he did not notice the kick directed at his knee. The Pharaoh’s blade stopped mid-air as he shifted his weight on his left foot to kick Khait’s leg so hard, he was sure the bones would break.

That was enough to shift his body weight, as he was leaning forward ready to bear the attack, and Khait tumbled down, his back hitting the dirt as the weapon slipped away from his grasp.

He was fumbling to get back, get his weapon, desperate and angry over having made such a mistake, but the Pharaoh was on him. He held him down with his body, the blade firm against Khait’s throat.

A drop of fresh blood fell onto his cheek from the Pharaoh’s lip. The Pharaoh was panting slightly, with intense, excited eyes pinning him down.

“Do you give up?” he asked again.

Khait bit his lip nervously, eyeing the weapon lying out of his reach

“No,” he found himself saying, too proud of a warrior to recognize the loss, staring right back at the Pharaoh. He knew he had lost, but he would never admit it.

The blade on his neck moved just slightly, enough for a cut to open on the soft flesh of his throat.

“I have no intention to kill you, Khait,” The Pharaoh replied, “but you have lost.” He added that, not moving from the sitting position on Khait’s stomach.

Still worrying at his lip, Khait looked away from those golden eyes.

“I lost,” he admitted, voice low. “Ask what you





want of me.”

The blade slid away from his neck, as the Pharaoh took his face between his fingers firmly and turned it to look up at him. In a second, his lips were on Khait’s.

He felt the blood from the cut he had opened on the Pharaoh’s lips, a salty taste, and the Pharaoh’s tongue breached into his mouth. His breath hitched in his throat. What the hell was going on?! The Pharaoh’s hands roamed on him, caressing and searching for the belts keeping the clothes on the slave’s body. Shocked, Khait did not move, nor did he return the kiss, to the point that Sethnakht, tired of his lack of response, stopped and looked down at him.

“A bit of enthusiasm would be appreciated,” he said, his voice a bit dry as he watched the baffled expression on Khait’s face.

“I don’t want to,” replied the slave, painfully honest. He would have never expected something like this from the Pharaoh, since he could have anyone he desired, be they male or female. He knew he had no power and that he should bow down to each and every one of the Pharaoh’s whims, but his pride would not allow him to give up so easily.

He looked around, finally noticing the emptiness around them. The sun was high, hidden behind the tree branches. They were the only ones in the silent garden, no servants or guards around

them. There was no one but them. Could it be that those were the Pharaoh’s intentions from the very beginning?

“You promised you would give me whatever I asked, if you were to lose,” the Pharaoh’s murmured, his finger on Khait’s lips.

Yes. It’s clear this had been his intention from the beginning.

He knew he had promised, and despite how irritated he was, he could not get his words back. And this man...

He looked up, determined.

“You want my body?” he asked with his unsure Egyptian. “You can take it, but do not expect me to like it.”

Strangely, the Pharaoh smiled, as if these words were a gift. He leaned down, murmuring against his lips.

“If you like it, I will give you permission to ask me for it next time.”

He kissed him again and they did it there, under the fading sun of that summer afternoon.

Their bodies became one, and if Khait had hesitated at first, as the Pharaoh took care of him, he found himself melting under his attention, murmuring his name. His voice was lost to the wind, and despite his intentions not to enjoy the act, the seed of doubt had been planted in his mind.

3rd year of the kingdom, Mesori, the 5th month of Shemu the sowing season, 21st day [August 15, 1186 b.C.]

The Pharaoh had summoned him yet again. In the hot days of the sowing season, it appeared that the Pharaoh needed him for every little thing. Khait was starting to think he was unable to even tie his own sandals.

He was constantly surrounded by servants ready to answer to his every whim, and yet the Pharaoh kept calling him.

“Khait, come, I have to show you something.”
“Khait, you will practice with me tonight.” “Khait this, Khait that.”

He was even growing used to that forsaken name because the Pharaoh kept repeating it!

And he would sleep with him every night.

After that first time in the garden, it had happened again, though it never been Khait to ask for it,

despite what Sethnakht had said the first time.

He kept telling himself it was wrong and putting up some resistance each time it happened, but his attitude seemed only to amuse the emperor of Egypt.

Khait had to admit to himself that the Pharaoh knew what to do, though. He was certainly charming, and beautiful, and quite handsome and... and...

What the hell was he thinking?!

He could not start to praise the Pharaoh’s prowess; that act only damaged his virility!

And yet... he liked it, and it was harder and harder to deny the fact to himself.

As he walked down the corridor he mulled over how his life had changed. He lived in the palace





now and he had his own room, if barren and modest compared to the Pharaoh's quarters, but it was enough for him. Even more than enough, really, for someone like him.

He had been given new, clean clothes, weapons, and armors fit for his new role. He had been introduced to the other members of the Pharaoh's personal guard, who had been vocally disapproving of him at first. Only after he fought and won yet again against Ōshii, the former head of the guard, under the Pharaoh's approving, focused gaze, had he gained the silence and respect as their new captain.

He dragged a hand over his forehead, moist with sweat under his brown hair, and sighed in the dry heat. The palace was rather cool compared to the temperature outside, but he had yet to get used to the extreme summer. Once in front of the room's doors, he greeted the guard standing by them with a nod and knocked, waiting for permission to step inside.

A long moment went by with no answer, and he frowned, raising his hand to knock again, when the door suddenly banged open and the Pharaoh himself ushered him inside.

"Khait, finally!" he welcomed him as he entered. Khait wondered where the page who would usually assist the Pharaoh at every hour of the day was. Looking around, he did not see him, so he looked back at the Pharaoh, walking into the hall. The man was very strange, even looking past all the times they had slept together. Sometimes he would act like a spoiled brat, which would irritate Khait to the point he would have no qualms about ending his life right then and there. Other times, he showed a wise, calm side that made him seem worthy of respect and admiration on a deep level Khait had never felt even with the Shardana leaders.

The Pharaoh was fascinating and charismatic; he could not lie to himself.

"I've been thinking about this for a while, and I could not wait anymore!"

And here it was, that immature attitude that made him look like a child...

"I'm here for whatever you need of me, my king," Khait said, kneeling down, his head bowed in a sign of respect. For how much he disliked having to submit to a ruler he did not recognize, he was still bound by gratitude for having his life spared.

His own morality stopped him from acting otherwise. He knew he was indebted to this man, despite being his prisoner and slave.

"Your Egyptian has greatly improved, you know?" The Pharaoh smiled at him, brightly. Khait felt his stomach knot as a wave of pride washed over him. ...what was wrong with him?!

"Anyway, stand and come; I've not summoned you here to get bowed down at," the Pharaoh said, nodding in an invitation to be followed. Khait silently obeyed, trailing down the man as he stopped in front of a chest. He opened it, showing the contents to him.

"Here!"

Khait looked inside, tilting an eyebrow.

"...old clothes?" he asked, confused.

Now that he looked, he noticed the Pharaoh lacked his usual regalia. He was dressed in a simple white tunic, modest bracelets and sandals, and nothing on his head to show his role and rank.

"Exactly!" the Pharaoh replied cheerfully, bending toward the chest to take the modest tunics and capes out of it. "I want to go out, and you will come with me," he added, knowing the head of his guard could simply not refuse.

"Do you want me to summon your servants and ready the carriage?" Khait asked, confused by the fact he had been summoned for that. If the Pharaoh wanted to go out he'd usually ask the servants, while he organized the proper escorts. "No, no! No need, it will be just you and me," the Pharaoh said, undressing from the white tunic and putting on the older, more common one he took out the chest. He tied a simple rope around his hips, got rid of the golden bracelets, and then stood in front of him as if showing off.

Khait had been staring, speechless. Did he really want to go out without his escort? Why would he risk his life like that?! He didn't understand at all.

"I don't think it's safe to go out without your guard, my king," he said, trying to convey how stupid he thought the idea was.

"That is why I have summoned you. You will watch over me," the Pharaoh replied easily, handing him his own modest tunic.

Khait hesitated, looking first at the Pharaoh, then at the clothes. He was convinced that this idea was not wise at all.

"My king, I doubt we should go out in secret. If the Vizier was to discover this--"





“Oh, Hori will not know. He never did,” the Pharaoh interrupted, putting the clothes in his hands and pushing him away so he could change. Was this not the first time the Pharaoh had done this?

“You went out alone already?!” Khait asked, as he gave up to the fact he did not have any chance to change his mind. He undressed and tucked a small knife in his underwear. At least he should bring some kind of weaponry with him.

“I do not think this is wise,” he reiterated, finally having put on the modest tunic under the cheerful gaze of the Pharaoh.

“Duly noted,” the Pharaoh replied, unfazed. Had he been another king, he probably would’ve punished him for his insolence, but Sethnakht seemed amused by his attitude most of the time. Once dressed, he waited for orders.

“Perfect, let us go!” the Pharaoh said, walking at his side, and Khait stopped him, grabbing his arm. “Where do you think you are going, looking like this?!” he demanded, and when he met the golden, perplexed gaze of the Pharaoh he realized his impudence, letting his arm go and kneeling down.

“F-forgive me, my king,” he said, berating himself mentally. “I would not dare challenge you, it’s just... you will be too recognizable, like this; you should wear a wig.” he continued, looking up as he was interrupted by the Pharaoh.

“No,” he said, terse. “Every time I wear a wig, it gets itchy.”

Khait could not believe his own ears, but he held back his own doubt at his childish attitude. With a sigh, he stood, rummaging in the chest full of cloth to find one that could do the job, along with some thin rope. He went back to the Pharaoh, who, understanding his intention, nodded at him, letting him settle the cloth on his head. Khait made sure none of his bright red hair would be visible under it, wrapping the rest of the cloth around the lower part of the Pharaoh’s face in a makeshift scarf. He secured the disguise with the rope on the Pharaoh’s forehead, and observed him critically.

Those damn golden eyes were still way too obvious.

The Pharaoh walked toward a copper-framed mirror to inspect himself, smiling under the cloth. “Good work, Khait! I couldn’t have done any

better. Let us go, now!” he exclaimed, walking toward the side of the room instead of the exit and grabbing a knapsack on his way there. Khait frowned, waiting, expecting the Pharaoh to be taking something else before walking out, but instead he watched as he approached a chest, pushing it aside. The Shardana’s eyes widened in surprise, when he saw the hole in the floor hidden under it.

“Come, Khait, don’t just stand there!” Sethnakht said as he lit a candle to be used in the dark secret passage. Khait approached him, seeing a small ramp of stairs leading down. His mind was running with the ideas of freedom that came to him at that sight. Silently, he walked near the entrance, missing the little squint the Pharaoh aimed at him.

He gave him the lit candle, pointing down the stairs.

“There’s a corridor down there. You go first.” Khait nodded, taking the candle and walking down. Once he touched the last step he heard the sound of the chest being slid back into place, and the light coming from the room above disappeared.

The Pharaoh reached him a few seconds later. In front of them was darkness, and the feeble light from the candle was just enough to make out the passage dug directly into rock.

“This secret passage has always existed,” the Pharaoh explained. “It goes under the palace walls, directly out to Tebe.”

Khait kept walking in front of him, silent as his mind worked.

“When I discovered it, it was sealed, so I opened it again. No one else knows of it,” the Pharaoh added, observing his back.

They walked for a few meters more, before what the Pharaoh was waiting for happened.

Khait turned, letting the still-lit candle fall to the floor, his hand tight around his knife’s handle. He pushed Sethnakht against the wall, the blade drawn against his throat, looking him directly in those golden eyes that seemed even brighter than the small flame of the candle casting their shadows high on the walls.

“There he is, my Khait,” the Pharaoh said with a smile.

“What would stop me from taking your life and leaving you here so I can reclaim my freedom?”





Khait asked, his eyes wide with surprise. He felt anxious but euphoric all at once.

“Nothing. No one would find me here for days; you could run away without trouble.”

Certainly it was not the answer Khait was expecting. He could not see any trace of fear in the Pharaoh’s eyes, but no mockery either, nor a challenge. He was calm, his expression impossible to read.

Khait bit down on his lip, the blade pushing more insistently on the Pharaoh’s skin.

“Then what reason would you have to show me this passage?” he asked, angry. “Why would you bring me here, knowing freedom is all I want?!”

His confusion fed the anger he felt. Was the Pharaoh really this stupid? Did he wish to die? Or was he just making fun of him?

“Because I wanted to take a walk in Thebes without being the Pharaoh. Because I know you will not kill me, and run away,” the Pharaoh replied, unperturbed.

“W-what makes you believe that?! How can you be so sure?!” the slave stammered, shocked.

“You are still here, aren’t you? You haven’t killed me yet. You have your own ethics and morals, as a warrior, and you know you are indebted to me. You like your life in the palace, and you love your Pharaoh.” That was the answer, said with such unwavering conviction as to leave the Shardana absolutely speechless.

But he had to admit... the Pharaoh was right. For the most part. He was hesitating, his knife still against his throat, but not even a small cut had come of it. He could not deny most of what the Pharaoh had said, except for the last thing. He did not love him. He respected him, surely, but love? Not a chance.

He scanned the Pharaoh’s face, his eyes following the thin line of a scar on his lips, the sign of their first fight.

He did not.

“I do not love you,” was the only objection he could muster up before all the reasons given.

The Pharaoh lifted an eyebrow, then let out a laugh that echoed into the dark corridor.

“It’s quite strange that the only objection you have is that.” With a finger, he pushed the knife away, finding very little resistance. Khait was willingly removing the blade from his throat, his arm going limp at his side as the blade fell,

clashing against the stone floor. Khait looked down, feeling small; crushed, and the Pharaoh didn’t move from the wall, simply observing him. He could almost hear the negative thoughts in the Shardana’s mind, like dark clouds bringing a storm with them.

He took Khait’s face between his fingers, forcing his face up, looking directly into his eyes.

“I trust you, Khait. Ever since you’ve come to live into the palace, you’ve changed so much, so brightly. At first I had thought you would not withstand more than a few days, that I would have been forced to send you back to your chains... but your temperament, your integrity, have made you an excellent guard, and an integral part of my court and my life.” As the Pharaoh spoke, a gentle smile softened his whole expression. “I do not know what you have left, on the other side of the sea... I do not know who you were, nor have I any need to. Who you are now is more than enough. You are no longer a slave, to me.”

He slid that hand away from Khait’s face, kneeling to pick the nearly-out candle up from the floor.

“We’d better go, before we lose our light source. The path is fairly complicated.”

Khait did not move, his eyes unfocused. He could not stop thinking about those words.

Trust you. You are no longer a slave, to me. His hand tightening into a fist, he knelt with a small knot in his chest. He picked up the knife, repeating to himself that it was not possible; he did not love him. He was the Pharaoh of Egypt, a God... and he... he was just his guard. His shield. He did not rise back up, keeping his head down.

“I know I have been an insolent, my King. Whatever punishment you deem right for me, I will accept it,” he said, as Sethnakht turned to look at him with a serious frown.

“You do deserve punishment, that is true,” he conceded. “I will be lenient, this time. Still...” A smile formed on his face as he winked. “Tonight we will sleep together, and you will give yourself to me!” He said this cheerfully, his arms widening in a broad gesture, suddenly very childish and not serious at all in a matter of seconds. Khait could not believe this, frowning up at him and asking himself yet again how it was possible that such a man had become the ruler of an entire kingdom. He shook his head with a sigh and a hand on his face. Such a declaration did not deserve a





response, and honestly the Pharaoh did not need one.

“You will see; it will be beautiful! On the shores of the Nile, under the stars... I will make you scream my name so loud your voice will reach the palace!” Sethnakht continued to speak as he started to walk back down the corridor, hastily followed by Khait.

“I-I do not scream...” he muttered, a blush rising on his cheeks.

“Oh, you do scream! And each and every one is like music. Every sound you make excites me, and every little thing you do leaves me ecstatic!” The dreamy expression on the Pharaoh’s face left little to the imagination. He was surely remembering the past night they’ve spent together.

“And you know another thing you do?” he asked, as if they were talking about the weather. “When you are close to climax, you bite your lip and squeeze your eyes--the right one a little more than the left--as if you want to hold back, but you always fail!” He then gave an imitation of that

expression for good measure, looking absolutely comical.

The blush seemed to have taken permanent residence on the Shardana’s face, as he fumbled for a way to stop the Pharaoh from saying such embarrassing things. His attempts were ignored, add the Pharaoh kept walking and talking, dutifully followed by Khait.

Their voices grew weaker and weaker, deep into the darkness alongside the tiny flame.

It was going to be a good day. They were going to stay out until the sun rose the next day, roaming like common people into the streets of Thebes, unrecognized by the population. They would sleep under a sea of stars, lulled by the flowing water of the Nile, and, protected by the river itself, they would wake at the first voices of the fishermen going out for their daily work at first daylight.

For a day like this, all you could do was thank the deities.

3rd year of the kingdom, Mykoydji uabot, 3rd day [August 26, 1186 b.C.]

“Have you summoned me?” Khait asked, as he walked into the Pharaoh’s personal quarters. Sethnakht had called him just as he was giving the last orders to his team of guards, making sure security would be completely efficient. He had been told this was going to be an extremely important day for Egypt and, most importantly, for the Pharaoh. He had to make sure everything went smoothly, and that nothing would disrupt the celebrations.

The Pharaoh was right in the middle of the room, surrounded by three servants who were dressing him up for the occasion.

Khait stopped, staring with his mouth slightly open. It was the first time he had witnessed the Pharaoh dressed in ceremonial garbs, and he could not stop himself from thinking that his natural charm seemed to increase tenfold with the elegant attire and the smell of the incense oils that were spread over his skin.

The kalasaris he was wearing was finely folded, the linen cloth so light it seemed nearly transparent, masterfully arranged on him by the servants. On his hip sat a belt of colorful cloth

and leathers in gold, red, and blue, going all the way down to his knees. It was decorated with precious gemstones and jewelry. In a similar style to the belt, the Pharaoh was wearing golden ornaments on his neck and shoulders, holding in place a light mantle sliding down his back and arms and creating large sleeves.

He was wearing make-up, something Khait knew the Pharaoh did not like to do, but this time he could not refuse and the dark lines complemented his bright eyes, making them even more striking than usual.

Instead of a wig, something the Pharaoh could not stand, he was wearing a Nemes, the striped head cloth in blue and gold that reached all the way down to his shoulders, covering the bright red hair. The diadem with the Uraeus kept the thing in place.

He was beautiful, enough to leave anyone speechless.

“Khait!” The Pharaoh turned, stepping down from the stool he was on, shooing the servants with a hand. The women left the room, bowing profusely. “Do you know what day it is?” he asked





with a smile.

Khait nodded. He had been told so many times it was impossible to forget.

"Today is the day we celebrate your birth," he replied, evenly.

Sethnakht stared at him before letting out a laugh. The Shardana blinked, perplexed.

"That's all you've been told?"

Khait nodded again, confused. Had he been lied to?

"Today is not only my birthday," the Pharaoh spoke, and grabbed him by an arm, dragging Khait towards a couch and forcing him to sit down with him. The Shardana squirmed, uncomfortable.

"I will tell you a tale, Khait. The tale of this day."

The Shardana stared, curious. The Pharaoh wanted to tell him of his birth? He did not mind him when he spoke seriously; it was just his childish side he could not stand.

"In the early days of this world, where nothing was living yet, Nut, the Goddess of Skies, was observing Geb, the God of Earth. From the mountains to his plains, and through the green fields and flowing waters, Geb admired Nut. Her womb, her skin bright as lapis lazuli, how she extended into the horizon, silent and mysterious... Geb fell in love with her, and she loved him back with passion. They fit together perfectly, their love so strong nothing else could come between them."

Khait was silent, enraptured by the tale. The deities of this land were fascinating, capturing him more and more ever since he had given up and decided to just live his life in Egypt, learning more about them as his life went on. He was holding his breath, waiting for more.

"But the God Ra did not approve this union. He hadn't created the earth and the sky so they could hold onto each other. Space was needed, if life was to be born. He called upon Shu, the God of Wind and the father of Nut, that with his strong winds tear the two lovers apart. This wind carried Nut, who, in a desperate attempt to hold onto her beloved Geb, stretched out her fingers and toes, assuming the dome shape of our skies. This way, the wind was able to offer space to the life that was to be born on Earth. However, Nut was pregnant with five children already, and Ra, enraged by this, cursed her. "You will not give birth at any day or hour of the year!"' The

Pharaoh imitated to pompous tone, making a small smile slip on Khait's lips.

"And since the divine words of Ra could not be refused, Nut suffered, unable to give birth. Her suffering was so strong that it unsettled Maat, the Goddess of Balance. At that point, Thoth, the God of Wisdom and a friend of Nut, Maat, and even the great Ra, decided to intervene and find a solution to relieve Nut's pain, while keeping Maat's order and maintaining Ra's honor. He had a brilliant idea he went to Khonsu, God of the Moon, and challenged him to a game; the Senet. Khonsu could not deny a challenge, so he accepted. He had always been jealous of Thot and his Wisdom, so beating him in a game of Senet would have been a pleasure. Thot, in the case of victory, would ask for a bit of his time, and Khonsu accepted eagerly, faithful in his abilities. Thot won easily, and kept winning until he had enough time--five whole days, enough for Nut to give birth. And since those days had been created after Ra's curse and thus were not subjected to it, those days were added at the end of the year. This way, the God of Wisdom had found a solution for everyone's problems. Nut could give birth to one of her children each day; the first was Osiris, God of the Afterlife, and then came Horus, the old God of War. The third was Set, God of Chaos. Then fourth, Isis, Goddess of Fertility, and then, Nephthys, protector of the temple. Thot was satisfied; this way, the will of Ra had not been contradicted, Maat's order was back in place, and Nut was not suffering anymore, having given the world five new powerful deities."

The Pharaoh finally ended his tale, but the curious expression on Khait's face forced him to explain further.

"Today is the third of those five days Thot had won. Today is the birthday of Set, the God of Chaos, the red God, dry as the deserts he looks over. A wrathful God, jealous of his brother Osiris, who he ended up killing. And a God standing on the prow of the great Ra's boat, ready to protect him from Apep." He smiled as he spoke his words, and Khait stared, his eyes wide.

"...are you Set?" he asked, naively, and Sethnakht stared, silent, for a few seconds, before letting out a loud laugh, his hands on his belly as he tried to stifle it. Khait looked away, blushing, realizing his misstep.





“Don’t laugh at me,” he muttered, feeling shame for having asked such a question. “Everyone here says the Pharaoh is the reincarnation of God.” He added this, trying to justify himself. He waited for the Pharaoh to stop laughing, grumpy, and looked at him only when he finally stopped with a deep sigh, smiling down at the head of his guard. “I’m not Set, Khait, but my name has been given in his honor. I have told you this tale so you could understand that today is an important day not only for me, but for Egypt itself.”

The Shardana nodded, still slightly irritated over being laughed at.

“However, I hadn’t summoned you here to tell you this tale,” the Pharaoh said, rising from the couch and going to retrieve a small, finely decorated wooden box. He returned soon after, sitting at Khait’s side.

“This is for you,” he said, still smiling with an unreadable expression that left the Shardana with a strange knot in his stomach.

“Today is your day, not mine,” Khait replied. Ever since he had started living in the palace, he had been receiving a constant stream of gifts; whatever he wished for. And yet, every time it happened, he felt more indebted to this land and its ruler.

“That does not forbid me from giving you a present, Khait,” the Pharaoh said, pushing the box in his hands. Khait gave up with a sigh, opening it. Inside the wooden box, on a silky black cloth, sat a golden bracelet. Khait did not inspect it, just closed the box and tried to give it back.

“I can’t accept-”

“If you don’t accept this, I will consider it a personal insult,” the Pharaoh interrupted, serious. He removed the lid from the box, pointing at the bracelet. With a sigh, Khait gave up, fishing the object from the box. It was heavy for a bracelet, maybe not a bracelet at all. It was too loose. It was golden, finely decorated, and a cobra was twisting in a spiral, its head protruding forward aggressively. There were no gemstones or bright paint decorating it, but the scales and expression of the animal were finely sculpted, making it look almost real. It was clearly the work of a master, he thought; it was beautiful and priceless. It was something too generous for him, a modest guard. But he could not refuse it.

“Thank you, my lord. It is beautiful. I will keep it dear.” Sethnakht interrupted him, taking the object from him and holding out his arm.

“This is not to be kept, but worn.” He said, as he slid the bracelets over Khait’s hand, up to his forearm. “As the cobra protects the Pharaoh, so will it protect you.” Once he had put the jewelry in place, he observed it, satisfied. Khait realized it was a perfect fit; neither too loose nor too tight. He could not deny the mastery of Egyptian goldsmiths.

“Do not take it off, ever,” Sethnakht added, a strange tone in his voice. “It will show who you belong to, and it will protect you from my enemies.”

Enemies?

Khait frowned at the strange tone. He ignored the fact that the Pharaoh had declared ownership over him, as he was used to that, but... which enemies was he talking about?

Yes, outside these lands many could be considered enemies, but in Egypt, who would want to harm him?

He noticed a fleeting shadow, a dark thought, in the Pharaoh’s eyes, just an instant, enough to let Khait realize his words had a very real meaning.

Worry grew in his stomach. He was the personal





guard of the Pharaoh; that was his place and his role now and he could not let anything bad happen to him.

The smile came back on Sethnakht's face, as if nothing had happened, and he rose from the couch, adjusting his clothes.

"It is time to go. If I let my royal consort and Hori wait a minute more I will surely have to listen to their complaints through the whole ceremony."

Khait rose after him, still staring.

"Please check if the cortege is ready, Khait," the Pharaoh ordered, and the Shardana could only bow and walk out. But just before he left, he stopped in the doorway and looked back at the Pharaoh who was pouring himself a cup of wine.

"I will protect you. Nothing will happen to you as long as I live," he said, walking out to fulfill his duties without waiting for an answer.

4th year of the kingdom, Thot, the 1st month of the flood season Akhet, 22nd day [September 20, 1186 B.C.]

"Where the hell is he hiding? He just went and disappeared in the middle of the ceremony—" Khait muttered, walking down the many corridors in the palace. "Vizier Hori hasn't noticed yet, but when he does, he'll surely blame me," he added, his voice low in fear someone could hear him.

It was the day of Osiris' birth and Nile's high tide, and the Pharaoh had disappeared before the celebration had even begun!

The cortege was almost ready, so why had Sethnakht not shown up yet?

"Maybe he's having some issues...?" he wondered to himself as he reached the Pharaoh's personal room. There were no guards outside the door, which was strange. It was his own duty to appoint guards to the Pharaoh's room each day, and none of his men would even dream of disobeying him.

A bad feeling rose in his gut as he slowly pushed the door open, a hand flying to his sword hilt. He peered in through the sliver of space he had opened.

The room was covered in shadow, almost completely dark with the curtains on the window completely shut. Despite the bright sun outside, not a single ray of light made it into the room.

Something was wrong; he could tell. A shiver ran down his spine, goosebumps rising on his skin as if a sudden night breeze had run over him.

He slid into the room fast, hoping whoever it was did not notice the small amount of light as he hastily closed the door on his back. He took some silent steps before hearing a voice he'd never heard before.

"It is time. It looks like you are ready, to me."

The voice felt wrong, Khait sensed something deeply evil about it.

"I can only trust your judgment, my liege. If you think so then I can only be happy."

The Pharaoh? It was his voice, but such a submissive tone... could it really be him?

"We have visitors..." the voice hissed.

Curiosity won him over as Khait made his way into the room, unsheathing his sword. He could just barely make out two figures on the bed, their backs to the door. He could barely recognize the fiery red of the Pharaoh's hair, and the other figure was clad in a dark cloak, towering over the Pharaoh, head close to his neck.

It was just a short instant, and then the dark figure disappeared into thin air.

Khait ran to a window, dragging the curtains open and letting the sunlight in. He frantically looked around, but the only other person in the room was the Pharaoh, placid on his bed.

"Khait. Forgive me, I am late for the ceremony, surely." He got up, adjusting his clothes. He was acting as if nothing happened. "I just felt a little lightheaded, I hope Hori and Tiy-mereneset haven't blamed you for my lateness."

Khait was still looking around, walking towards the chest that covered the hidden passage and sliding it on its side. He looked inside, but the space was empty, so that person he'd seen had to still be somewhere in the room. They could not just disappear like that.

"Where are they?" he asked, turning towards the Pharaoh. "Who were you talking to?"

Sethnakht approached the table by his bedside, pouring himself a glass of water. He did not seem as if he had just been ill; obviously the Shardana did not believe his excuse.

"Who? It is just you and me here, Khait. You can check all the chests, if you wish to."





Khait did not waste any time, doing what the Pharaoh had just suggested. He checked every single corner of the room, but no one was there. Just them.

The Pharaoh approached him, a hand on his arm as a silent invite to put the sword away.

“I told you, it is just you and me. Do you not believe your Pharaoh’s words?” he asked, a small sarcastic smile on his lips.

Khait put his weapon away, staring straight into the Pharaoh’s eyes.

“I heard a voice; saw someone with you,” he replied firmly. He had no intention of letting the Pharaoh make fun of him, and Sethnakht could see it in his eyes.

And yet, the Pharaoh could say nothing. It was not the time for this, nor such a simple thing to explain... not to mention, if he did he say anything, his master would surely not forgive him. The master said that he looked ready to receive his gift... and he had to show that he was not wrong.

Also, he did not want to involve Khait. Not until he’d be ready to protect him.

Sethnakht clasped Khait’s face in both hands, staring firmly down at him. He had to convince him nothing was wrong.

“Khait, there’s nothing to worry about. I am fine; what you have seen must’ve been just a shadow, and no one here has ill intentions toward me. You trust me, do you not?”

How could Khait say no? How could he deny while

looking into those golden eyes? He trusted him fully now, and with that thought he could only nod slowly.

“Good. I don’t want to see you worry like that ever again.” The Pharaoh smiled, tilting his head and brushing his lips against Khait’s in a gentle kiss.

Those reassuring words and the sweet gesture managed to placate Khait’s anxiety, and he let himself enjoy the contact, his eyes fluttering closed, relaxed. It was unlike the first times the Pharaoh had approached him in such an affectionate manner.

When he re-opened his eyes, the Pharaoh was smiling, cheerful.

“Do we really have to go to the celebrations?” He asked, childish, making Khait frown.

“Get ready, I have no intention to be lectured by Hori and your consort because of you,” he replied as he slid out of his embrace, ready to walk toward the door. But when he turned toward Sethnakht, he noticed a red stain on his neck. He reached over without thinking too much about it, his fingertips brushing against it. Blood.

Their eyes met again, as one thousand questions rose into Khait’s mind. But the light in his Pharaoh’s eyes stopped him from voicing them.

He had to trust him. Sethnakht had asked him to, not ordered him. He turned toward the door again, silent.

He was going to have to keep his eyes open.

4th year of the kingdom, Athyr, the 3rd month of the flood season Akhet, 2nd day [October 29, 1186 b.C.]

Where was he going? Where the hell would the Pharaoh go at such a late hour?!

The sun had disappeared on the horizon, as the moon and stars rose in the sky between light clouds, and Khait had been following Sethnakht for too long now. He had knocked at the Pharaoh’s door to give his daily report but had received no response. Ever since he saw that shadow in the room, he had kept a closer eye to the Pharaoh, but could not find anything wrong, until now. Upon entering, he had found the room completely empty. Immediately he had looked toward the secret passage and found the chest askew, and without hesitation Khait had entered

the corridor, even if he had no idea for how long Sethnakht had been out. Why would he even go out alone?

Surely, he would’ve summoned Khait if he just wanted to take a stroll out. They’ve been out in secret multiple times, so if the Pharaoh had decided to go alone then he must have been hiding something.

The cloud covering the moon shifted, and the silver light falling on the streets of Thebes finally let Khait lay eyes on a lone figure.

He was clad in a cloak covering him from head to toe, but he would have recognized that way of walking and moving everywhere.





Khait had a terrible feeling about it, but he dared not call out to the Pharaoh. He needed to follow him and discover what he was doing.

They left the city, walking towards the Nile's shores, where the fishermen boats were anchored.

He remained hidden in some bushes as the Pharaoh untied one of the boats, boarding it and starting to paddle towards the other shore, disappearing at the dark point where the deep water and the sky met. After a short moment, Khait followed his example. On the other side of the river there were temples, the necropolis, the Valley of Kings and the village home to the workers of the temples. Whatever reason the Pharaoh had for going there at night, alone, was something mysterious and deeply worrying to him.

He reached the other shore just in time to see the Pharaoh traverse the bridge leading into the small village and disappearing between the small homes.

He hastily anchored the boat before following him, as far away and silently as he possibly could. Sethnakht seemed so sure he was alone that he never looked back.

They left the village and some crop fields behind, as the sand of the dunes finally came into view, hiding between them the acropolis of the lords of Egypt.

They walked for a long time, helped by the cool breeze of the night. It was hard to hide in such plain view, but at the same time it was easier for Khait to keep sight of the Pharaoh. He was undoubtedly walking towards the acropolis, and Khait wondered how he was going to just walk over the giant dunes surrounding the tombs and over the guards stationed there, in protection of all the treasures hidden inside.

And yet, the Pharaoh didn't seem worried. He just walked in between the hills, not looking up even once. This way, he'd surely end with an arrow right through him; what was he even thinking?!

But nothing came as Khait looked up, noticing that there were no fires lit where guards would usually stand watch. Frowning, he pushed the thought aside. Now was no time to wonder why no one seemed to be there; he had to follow the Pharaoh. And so he did, quickening his steps as his breath grew more uneven, a feeling of dread

growing in his stomach.

He had been back to the quarry multiple times, and the Pharaoh's personal guard, but he still felt anxious every time he did, as if he expected to be put back in chains at any time.

But that night, everything was unusually silent. There was something in the air, something oppressive.

He slowly advanced, his eyes glued to the figure of the Pharaoh as he was walking toward a more isolated part of the valley; where his own tomb was being built.

It was not done yet; there was still a lot of work to do, but the works were going smoothly. The base of the tomb was done, even if some chambers had yet to be completed and those already built weren't decorated.

The Pharaoh disappeared through the entrance of the pyramid, and Khait followed. The corridor was dark, but he could hear the other's steps going towards the inner chamber. He waited for them to disappear before following; this that was the only direction he could go if he wanted to reach the chamber itself.

This path was more of a slope, completely clad in darkness. Khait had to walk with a hand on the rough wall at all times, and when the weak light of the entrance disappeared completely, he had to fight the urge to just run back out, feeling like he was being buried alive in here.

He breathed deeply, calming himself. He had to know what was going on.

He could finally see a light at the end of the corridor, as torches had been lit down there. He kept his body as close to the wall as he could, sneaking silently into the chamber and hiding behind one of the columns as he searched for the familiar shape of the Pharaoh.

The lights were weak, but the Shardana could still see two dark shadows between the columns. He leaned out just enough to see what was going on, and he immediately recognized Sethnakht, his bright red hair standing out in the rather bleak room. He moved his gaze onto the shadowy figure right in front of him, immediately recognizing him despite having only seen a fleeting glance of him on the day of Osiris. The figure was wearing a mask, and even if Khait was still not entirely familiar with all of the Egyptian deities, he still recognized the beast symbol of Set.





“It is time, my servant. You are ready to receive your gift.”

The voice was as slithery as Khait remembered it being... and did he just call the Pharaoh “servant”?!

“My liege,” the Pharaoh replied, kneeling in front of the man with the mask, leaving Khait surprised. “I will be happy to receive it; I will honor you and the followers of Set.”

Khait could not understand what was happening, but he knew something bad would, and that he was unable to stop it. Anxiety grew in him, alongside a sense of powerlessness.

Sethnakht removed his cloak, tilting his head to the side, exposing his neck to the man with the mask.

That mask was finally removed, and the Shardana could finally see who was behind it. He had to gulp down a gasp of shock; the stranger had sickly-looking gray skin, as if the man was extremely old, even though his body was toned and well-muscled. He had no hair and bore a strong profile, clearly Egyptian. His eyes were two small slits as dark as a moonless night, and Khait had to look away, afraid of meeting his gaze.

His eyes slid down on the stranger’s mouth as he was opening it, and the sight froze the blood in his veins. His teeth, his canines were transforming, elongating, becoming like two white, sharp knives protruding from the stranger’s thin, dry lips.

A hand stuck out from the stranger’s cloak, squeezing Sethnakht’s chin as the stranger leaned down on his neck. The Pharaoh was kneeling in front of him, passive, letting him do as he pleased. Khait held his breath.

That... monster opened his jaw wide, ready to plunge into the Pharaoh’s neck like a wild animal. Instinct kicked in for the Shardana, his eyes wide in shock as he unsheathed his blade before those fangs could even brush the Pharaoh’s skin. Khait lunged at the creature, ready to attack.

He had promised to protect the Pharaoh at every costs, even with his own life. He would’ve never let that creature hurt the Pharaoh, he wouldn’t let it kill him.

However, he could not even close half the distance between him in the creature before something slammed against his chest, sending him flying against one of the columns. Teeth

clenched in pain, Khait squeezed his eyes open, trying to understand what attacked him, before he realized something was wrapping around him in a vicelike grip. Surprised, he realized the enormous body of a snake was trapping him, and there was not a snake head waiting for him at the end of it, but rather, the snake body tapered into a human one. The body of the stranger.

At the stranger’s hip, the green snake body turned into a human chest, small green scales peppering the skin.

Khait fell silent. This creature was not of this world; he had never seen something like it, and he had no words for the horror he felt clawing at his stomach.

“Khait...”

The voice shook him out of his stupor. Khait looked away from the monster, moving his gaze on the pale looking Pharaoh.

“My k-king, what...?” he managed to stutter, feeling that both their lives were in danger, and yet he powerless to do anything.

“You shouldn’t have followed me, Khait,” the Pharaoh replied, not moving. He looked angry, but Khait could not see past the worries agitating his thoughts.

The Shardana looked down, conflicted. Why shouldn’t he have followed him? It was his duty, to protect the Pharaoh’s life, and... he loved him. He had long admitted that to himself, even if he had never said it out loud. His heart was beating fast, and he could not voice his thoughts, those feelings making him feel even weaker and more exposed.

“Master.” Sethnakht turned back to the creature, that had been silently observing. “I apologize for this,” he added, his head low in a sign of respect. Khait was shocked. He did not know what to do or say. His confusion had long taken over, preventing him from thinking clearly, and he felt emptied, observing the scene like a doll, still trapped.

“We will think about him later.” The slithery tone seemed to match the stranger’s looks, and Khait noticed a small, bifurcated tongue flashing through the stranger’s lips.

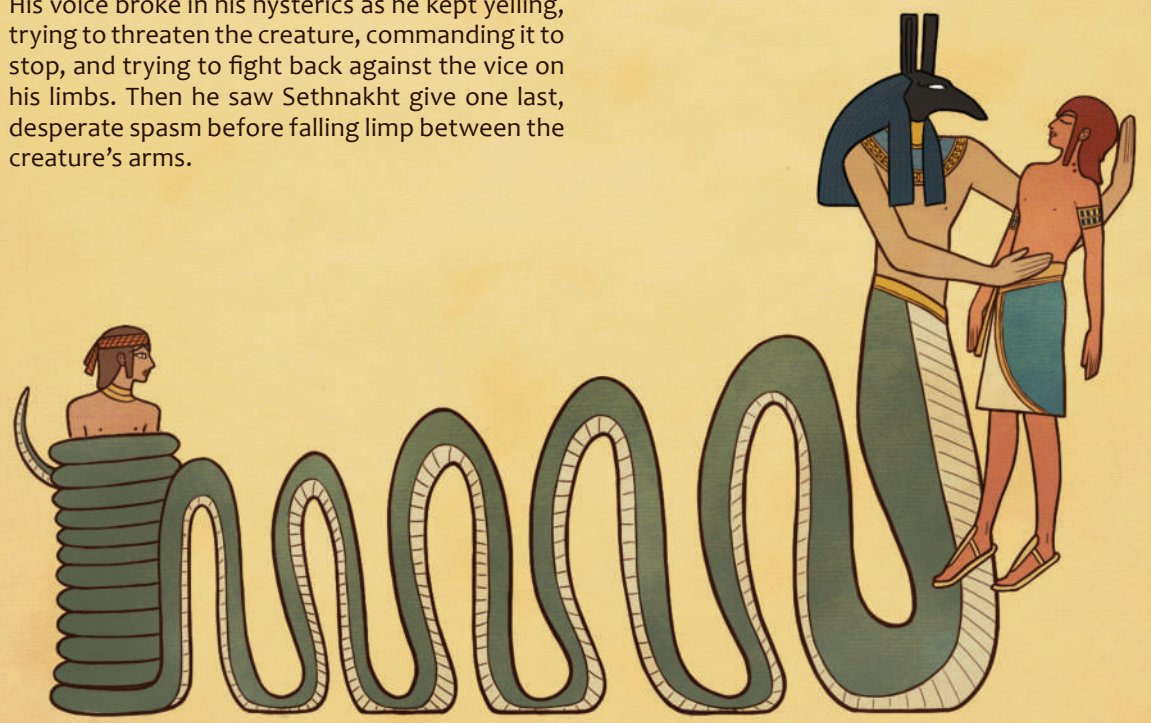
Those words sent a shiver down his spine, as Khait tried to meet the Pharaoh’s gaze. But he wasn’t looking at him; his head was still hanging low, and Khait felt abandoned, lost, as the creature turned





back to his king. He could only watch. The “master” did not waste any more time, grabbing Sethnakht’s chin and lunging down, biting through the skin of his neck. Khait remembered the stain on the Pharaoh’s neck all those days ago, and realized that this must not be the first time something like this happened. The creature started to suck greedily, like a leech, and even more hungry than one. The Shardana could hear him gulping down the fresh blood. He kept sucking, even as Sethnakht’s body started to show the signs of blood loss. His skin went pale and then filled with wrinkles, like a sheet of papyrus, as the stranger’s skin, conversely, seemed to become brighter and more vibrant by the second. It seemed that instinct had kicked in for the Pharaoh, as he weakly tried to break free of the hold, fumbling with his hands against the creature’s chest and shoulders. It was all for nothing. The monster grabbed him in a deadly hug, raising him tight against his own chest, almost as if he was trying to crush the Pharaoh. Then came the scream. That shook Khait out of his shocked stupor. “Stop! You will kill him!” he yelled, trying to break free. “Let him go, or I will kill you, I swear!!!” Tears pooled in his eyes and rolled down his cheeks. His voice broke in his hysterics as he kept yelling, trying to threaten the creature, commanding it to stop, and trying to fight back against the vice on his limbs. Then he saw Sethnakht give one last, desperate spasm before falling limp between the creature’s arms.

Khait’s mouth opened wide in a desperate scream, screaming for the emptiness in his heart, for the love he lost in front of his eyes. Now it had to be his turn; he wanted it to be, he wanted to die, knowing he would not be able to keep living without Sethnakht and without any real purpose. He waited, sure it was about to happen, but nothing did. Instead, the monster ignored him, eyes on the unmoving body of Sethnakht. The creature brought a wrist at his mouth and bit down, a generous flow of dark red blood coming out of it. He put the wrist against the Pharaoh’s mouth, letting the blood slide down his throat. For long seconds, nothing seemed to happen, the silence broken only by Khait’s sobbing. But suddenly, Sethnakht’s body shivered, a hand springing up to grab the creature’s wrist. The Pharaoh started to greedily suck on the creature’s blood. Khait’s eyes went wide, as his sobbing hitched in his throat. The Pharaoh was alive... how was that possible? Sethnakht kept drinking until the creature put a hand on his hair, gently pushing him away in an almost father-like way.





“There’s a meal ready for you, my son, so you will be able to regain your strength,” the monster said, turning to look at Khait.

The Shardana trembled, meeting the monster’s eyes. But his gaze immediately moved to the Pharaoh who had just died and came back to life before his eyes. Surprise and shock mixed with pure fear as he saw that two fangs similar to the monster’s own poked from the Pharaoh’s bloodstained lips.

But what filled him with real terror was seeing the cheerful light in those bright golden eyes was gone, looking more dull; a sickly yellow. Empty.

The Pharaoh snarled like a beast, letting out a hiss, and Khait felt the snake body finally letting him go as the creature became fully human again. He was free, and as he looked at Sethnakht, his first instinct was to run to him, squeeze him in an embrace, and run away from this horrible place with him. Yet he felt frozen in place.

“M-My king...?” he murmured, hesitating. Slowly, he stretched a hand towards him. But he could add nothing else, as the Pharaoh plunged on him like a hungry beast, pushing him against the column and sinking in his teeth into the delicate flesh of his neck. Khait screamed in pain, trying to push him away and punching at his chest and shoulders, but the Pharaoh seemed not to notice at all. Strength started to seep out of him along with the blood escaping the two holes on his neck. His beloved was killing him, and Khait felt fresh tears on his cheek, a pain in his chest that had nothing to do with the blood that was being stolen from him.

“Sethnakht... P-Please... Please...”

Something happened. The Pharaoh had stopped at those words, and the dread seemed to lift from Khait’s head like a cloak.

Sethnakht slid the fangs out of his neck, tongue darting on the skin. Khait tried to meet his eyes again, despite being scared of facing the monster he had seen just seconds before again, but what he saw were the same bright golden eyes of the man he loved, looking definitely less scary despite the blood still staining his face.

Sethnakht was back. The eyes he loved so much were back, and he could see the worry in them; the fear and regrets and love for him.

“Khait... You shouldn’t have come here,” the Pharaoh murmured, voice barely above a whisper.

“I have to protect you...” the Shardana replied, voice wavering.

The Pharaoh smiled, gently letting him go and pushing him against the column. He turned, looking back at their silent spectator.

“Trust me,” he had murmured before doing so, then he’d walked towards his master, fully knowing he would not approve of what he was doing.

The master would surely be interested by the fact that he had spared Khait, a useless foreign slave. Something that, to him, meant less than nothing. Sethnakht had to make things right; after all, it was his fault if Khait was now in danger. He had been reckless, and had risked losing him forever.

“Master, I will need this slave now that my life has changed,” the Pharaoh said, not liking to have to use the word ‘slave’ yet again but knowing it was the only way to make his sire think Khait was not particularly important. That would have put him in serious danger.

Khait silently observed, knowing he had no place to talk, letting Sethnakht do whatever he needed to and just hoping for an explanation later on.

The creature took a step forward, towering over the Pharaoh like a dark presence. His eyes slid past him, towards the slave. He hated anyone that wasn’t a pure Egyptian; they were impure and unworthy, and the slave made no exception. The creature noticed the cobra shaped jewelry on Khait’s arm, and his lower lip trembled in rage at that sight, knowing it had to be a gift from Sethnakht, whom he turned back to.

“Sethnakht, I put my trust in you, giving you eternal life. Do not disappoint me, do not make me regret this,” the creature murmured menacingly.

The Pharaoh nodded, silent, and the creature took a step back, disappearing into the dark.

Sethnakht waited, making sure his master was well and truly gone, before turning toward Khait. He immediately felt the hunger, the thirst, and he knew from that day on he would only feel hunger for that. But he could not feed, not tonight.

Khait tried to rise from the column, but he was so weak he had to lean back on it. He thought about what he had just witnessed, unable to put his thoughts in order.

He could not understand what had happened. He did not know who that creature was, nor was he





sure the person in front of him was his Pharaoh anymore.

However, Sethnakht approached him with a smile, gently helping him walk out the tomb, and

the Shardana felt a bit of warmth and strength settle in his chest as he responded with a weak smile.

It was going to be fine, he believed in Sethnakht.

4th year of the kingdom, Athyr, the 3rd month of the flood season Akhet, 5th day [November 1, 1186 b.C.]

Three days had passed since the Pharaoh had “changed”. Although that wasn’t the right word to define what has happened, Khait could not give a name to what he had seen, just as he could not give a name to the creature Sethnakht had turned into. He would sleep all day in a completely darkened room, and had changed the usually light curtains for deep dark, heavy drapes. He excused himself often, saying he was feeling ill. It worked well enough, for now, but they knew it would not work forever.

The Shardana kept thinking it over as he walked down the familiar corridor, searching for answers he had not received yet, not even from the Pharaoh. Once he was in front of his room, where four guards now would stand, he nodded at them and knocked on the door.

Once the night would come, everyone was forbidden from visiting except for Khait, the Vizier Hori, and the Pharaoh’s closest family members. In front of them, Sethnakht had to act as if ill, and the court priests and healers were starting to think a curse had been casted on their Pharaoh. They had filled the room with incense, spells, and deity idols.

From the inside, permission to enter was given; it was the Vizier. Khait walked in, noticing that the heavy curtains had been dragged aside, letting the bright light of the moon in, more powerful than any torch could be. Sethnakht was standing just outside, in the garden, Hori at his side as they observed the moon.

Khait reached them, silently kneeling while waiting for his Pharaoh’s words.

“Are you sure, my lord?” Hori asked, just glancing at Khait. The Vizier was a man of common features, tall and thin like a flower and extremely austere. His stern attitude was a total contrast to the Pharaoh’s usual joyful demeanor. Between him and Khait there had never been much approval, as if the Vizier had realized that Khait was more than just the head of the Pharaoh’s

guar. But he had never acted on that; he never gave them any grief, and always bowed to the Pharaoh’s will.

“Yes, Hori. I cannot rule my land in these conditions, not firsthand. I will still be the Pharaoh, but my son, Ramses, will guide our people during the day, when I cannot be there,” the Pharaoh said, not turning toward Khait whose eyes were wide with surprise.

“Are you sure he’s ready for this? He is quite young,” the Vizier replied.

“With my guidance, and yours, I have no doubt he will be a good Pharaoh; even better than me.”

The Pharaoh finally turned, smiling at Hori and finally casting a glance at Khait.

“As you wish, my lord. I will start the preparation for the crowning ceremony, then.” Hori bowed, before turning to make his way out of the room. Upon looking at Khait, he gave a little nod which was answered in kind. They might not like each other much, but there was mutual respect between them.

Khait and the Pharaoh were alone, at last, but Khait did not rise from his kneeling position, waiting for a word from his king.

“Do you know what I have become, Khait?” the Pharaoh asked, watching the stars up in the sky.

“No, my lord, I do not,” Khait replied, earnest. Surely that creature had turned Sethnakht into something similar to it, but what were they called? He had no idea.

The Pharaoh sat down in front of him, gesturing for him to do the same, which wasn’t surprising. Not anymore, at least. Khait sat, waiting to hear more.

“We are the followers of Set. We celebrate the great God, and we dedicate our entire existences to him. The God chooses from his men someone worthy, and turns them, changing them for the better, giving them great gifts,” the Pharaoh calmly stated, trying to be as clear as possible.

“The great Set gifts us immortality.”





The Pharaoh could see the surprise in Khait's eyes at that declaration, his lips letting out an almost fearful question.

"You have become... immortal?"

Sethnakht nodded as Khait kept staring at him.

"But... you've been ill, these past days," Khait asked, his voice still low, while he looked over him for signs of such a big change. It was hard to believe what he had just been told; the Pharaoh seemed to be the exact same.

"Set's gifts are great, but we must give something in return," Sethnakht grabbed Khait's hand, guiding it on his chest. The Shardana frowned, staring at the hand, then at the Pharaoh, waiting for some kind of reaction, before realizing what the Pharaoh was really showing him, his eyes going wide.

"Y-your heart!" he exclaimed, getting closer without realizing. He opened the Pharaoh's clothes, putting his head in direct contact with the skin, hoping the lack of a heartbeat was just because of the clothing, but nothing changed. There was nothing beating in the Pharaoh's chest.

The heart was home to the soul, it was the only body part that would not be removed before the mummification process, and now it was as if the Pharaoh's heart had disappeared, or died already. "You soul, aren't you-" Khait's question got interrupted as two fingers gently pressed on his lips.

"I am still me, Khait, nothing has changed. Let me explain."

Khait nodded, silent, even if one thousand questions were struggling to escape his lips as his anxiety and need to know more grew stronger.

"Set gives us many gifts." The Pharaoh grabbed a heavy golden goblet and squeezed. It crumpled, as easily as a sheet of papyrus. "But for every gift offered, something must be given back. A weakness is acquired."

"I do not need food anymore, but I need sustenance from something else. Blood. That is what I need to keep living and existing."

Khait did not know what to say. He had seen him die and get back, had his own blood used as food, despite not knowing the reason. He let the Pharaoh go on.

"I cannot go out in daylight anymore, if I would be hit by a ray of sun it could kill me, turn me into

dust. This is why I am giving up on my throne and giving it to my son, helping him from the shadows. This way it will be easier, and I will be able to do what my God asks of me."

Khait gazed into his eyes before looking down, thinking all this information over. Now things were a little bit clearer, even if he still had many questions, and he took his time musing about it all before looking back up into the Pharaoh's golden eyes.

"Do you need my blood?" he asked, direct to the point. "If you need it, just take it."

He did not care about what the Pharaoh was; he loved him and would do anything for him. It was a truth he could not escape from. Sethnakht was about to reply, but Khait stopped him in a similar fashion as the Pharaoh had done a few minutes ago, before realizing how bold he was being without feeling the need to apologize to him.

"If you cannot go out in the day anymore, I will be your eyes and ears until the sun will set. I will be with you every night," Khait said, putting his hands on the Pharaoh's shoulder firmly, pushing him down. "And even if you do not need my protection anymore, I will still serve you in whatever way you need." The conviction in his voice was a surprise to the Pharaoh who gave no resistance, taking pleasure in seeing Khait's attitude, and feeling joy at his words.

"Will you be my sustenance? My sun, my support?" he asked, despite not really needing any confirmation. He just wanted to hear those words again.

"I will be anything I can be, for you," Khait said, hovering on him, just a breath away from his lips. Khait was happy, even knowing he would surely perish before his Pharaoh, now that he had become immortal. He did not care; he wanted to serve him until his life came to an end.

"Then I will never let you get away from me." Sethnakht murmured, before leaning up to press their lips together.

Their bodies became one, that night. The Pharaoh's cold one ignited with passion under Khait's warm fingers, passion that was answered in kind. The Shardana was ready to receive whatever the Pharaoh wanted to give him. That night, they sealed the promises they gave to each other.





**4th year of the kingdom, Tybi, the 1st month of Peret the sowing season, 15th day
[December 10, 1186 b.C.]**

“My lord Nakhthorheb, I have only acted with the clan’s interests in mind.”

Sitting on his throne in the temple dedicated to Set, the old sire was looking down upon kneeling son with obvious irritation.

“Do not try to justify yourself, Sethnakht. You weren’t supposed to give your throne to your son. You were supposed to keep ruling,” the sire replied, waiting for justifications that did not come.

“How was I supposed to run the constructions of Tanis if I cannot go out during the day?” Sethnakht asked.

This newborn was already becoming unmanageable after just a few nights. He had always been prideful, but now that he had

received the gifts of Set, he had become even more arrogant.

“Ramses listens to me, and follow my orders. There is no need to worry; what the great Set orders will be completed.”

Nakhthorheb stared him down for a few long, silent seconds before giving a curt nod.

“The will of the God will be done. Show me that my progeny is worthy of the gifts it has been given,” he then said, gesturing to indicate that the discussion was done.

Observing the newborn turning and leaving the temple, he noticed the guard waiting for him over the colonnade. His eyes squinted, darkening over. Sethnakht still had much to learn, but his first lesson would come soon.

**4th year of the kingdom, Tybi, the 1st month of the sowing season Peret, 22nd day
[December 17, 1186 b.C.]**

Ever since the Pharaoh had given up his throne to his son, many of his duties had disappeared, and Khait appreciated that. His personal guard had slimmed down in favor of protecting his son with a new captain in charge of that, and Khait had kept his role as the protector of Sethnakht, which made him joyful.

Now that his duties were significantly less demanding, he could handle his time in a way that made possible for him to adjust to the Pharaoh’s new life. He could leave two guards at the door during the day, sleeping most of it off. No one dared to go into Sethnakht’s room due to his illness, or curse, and he had no worries. He could wake up in the afternoon, taking care of the few obligations he had, and then go to Sethnakht once the sun had set, ready to comply with his orders.

It was a strange life, but he would not complain about it. He only wished to serve Sethnakht, and he was giving every ounce of himself for him.

As usual he nodded to the stationary guard outside the door before trying to open without knocking as they were now used to doing, but the door opened right in front of him, showing an already awake Sethnakht.

“My lord, you are already—”

His words were cut off as Sethnakht grabbed his wrist and dragged him inside, near the chest hiding the secret passage. He was ready to go out.

“My lord, Nakhthorheb, has summoned me again. I need to be at the tombs yet again; a lot of old sires will be there and apparently Set himself will show up!”

Khait finally noticed how excited and jittery Sethnakht was, like a kid.

“Do you think my presence is needed?” he asked, not quite sure he should be there for such an important meeting of what he believed were half deities, let alone a true God in the flesh!

Sethnakht stopped at the first step of the stair leading down, turning to look at him.

“You need to escort me,” he said, with a nod; an invitation to be followed. “Who will protect me otherwise?”

He gave a smile that made Khait’s heart go faster, despite the knowledge the Pharaoh did not need an escort, not now that he was so powerful. But those words still made him feel important.

They walked the path that they had taken many times already, reaching the Valley of Kings, and as they made their way through the dunes, Khait looked up, noticing yet again the lack of





guards. Sethnakht had explained that those were followers of Set, too.

They made their way over the tombs of past Pharaohs until they reached an open space where Nakhthorheb, cloaked in dark clothing, was waiting. Khait stopped, taking some steps back, trying not to get noticed too much. He had not met any other follower of Set, and that creature that had turned Sethnakht still gave him a feeling of danger and fear.

Sethnakht approached him, bowing down respectfully.

"I have come forth, my lord." The Pharaoh looked around, trying to spot more followers, but no one was in sight. He looked at his master, silent.

"You did right, Sethnakht. Today I will teach you something important." Nakhthorheb raised his cane, and the shadows of the valley moved. Sethnakht wasn't quite sure what he meant with those words, thinking he was alluding to the fact that, in meeting Set, he would gain new powers and new knowledge. The shadows must have been blood brothers.

Khait could not hear them from his position, but he saw the movements and noticed more cloaked figures emerging from the shadows. Instinctively, he put his hand on the hilt of his sword.

"I have invited our brothers, today." Nakhthorheb kept talking, raising his voice to the point even Khait could hear him. "So they could see the important lesson I am about to bestow upon you. Unfortunately, our lord Set had more important matters to attend to, tonight."

Sethnakht took another glance around, starting to feel as if something was not right, but he let his master go on.

The sire took a step forward, giving a small wave with his right hand.

From behind Khait three shadows emerged and surprised him, and even if Khait was a good fighter, he could simply not best three people at once. They pinned him down, tying his wrists and gagging him.

"Khait!"

Sethnakht turned, as if running toward his guard, but a firm hand on his shoulder stopped him in his tracks. Nakhthorheb was at his side.

"Tell me, Sethnakht. You care about this slave, do you not?" His slithery voice did not try to hide anything. Sethnakht and Khait were in danger.

"You care for him so much my words and my teachings have become less important." It was not a question, but a statement. Sethnakht felt a shiver run down his spine as he stared at the men dragging Khait forward, keeping him in front of him and his master.

It was clear what Nakhthorheb wanted from him, and Sethnakht could only blame himself for that. He had been foolish. They let himself relax and enjoy their new life as if it was normal, not thinking they might be observed and spied on, even in the palace. He loved Khait, even more than his wife and son, and he knew how much Khait loved him back. They needed no words, both knowing that as clear as day.

Khait was pushed down to kneel in front of him, his scared gaze pointing right at Sethnakht. The sire approached him to remove the cloth gagging him.

As soon as Khait was free to talk he turned to the Pharaoh, ignoring the creature in front of him. He knew he was about to die. Sethnakht had managed to save him the first time, but he could not be as lucky a second. He was scared, but there was something more important to do.

"Do not worry for me. I'm not as important as you are," he said, provoking clear disappointment on Nakhthorheb's face, who slapped him hard enough to slam him into the sand. Khait's head hurt acutely; the strength of the hit had been something else.

In a second, Sethnakht was kneeling at his side, scrolling his master's hands off and taking Khait between his arms.

"I'll get you out of here, do not worry."

Nakhthorheb's fingers closed on his hair, dragging him away from Khait and slamming him forcefully against one of the tombs, his eyes squeezing shut from pain. He knew his sire had to be stronger than him, but he had never suspected the difference would be so big, not after he had also received his gifts.

When he looked up again, Khait was kneeling, Nakhthorheb keeping him strained up by his hair.

"Tell me, Sethnakht, have you turned him into a ghoul?" the creature asked, leaning his face down close to sniff at Khait. The Shardana shivered, not fully grasping the meaning of his words. All he knew was that he had drank the Pharaoh's blood, which made him stronger and more resistant,





even if it didn't seem to be enough for him to fight back against these creatures.

Sethnakht stood, trying to approach them again, a hand on his throbbing shoulder.

"Answer me!" Nakhthorheb yelled, enraged. The Pharaoh flinched.

"... yes," he admitted in a small voice, his eyes fixed on Khait. He did not want him to die; he did not want to lose him in any way.

"No one has given you permission to turn him." Nakhthorheb replied, glacial. "No one has given you permission to gift the sacred blood of Set to a non-Egyptian." His hand closed on Khait's throat, and Sethnakht knew he could not just stand there and watch.

He had his own sword, and knew how to use it. Without giving his sire the chance to add a single word he unsheathed it, plunging in for an attack, ready to hit the arm keeping Khait prisoner.

The attack was surprising enough that the hit managed to make contact, a deep cut opening on Nakhthorheb's arm, which let the Shardana go.

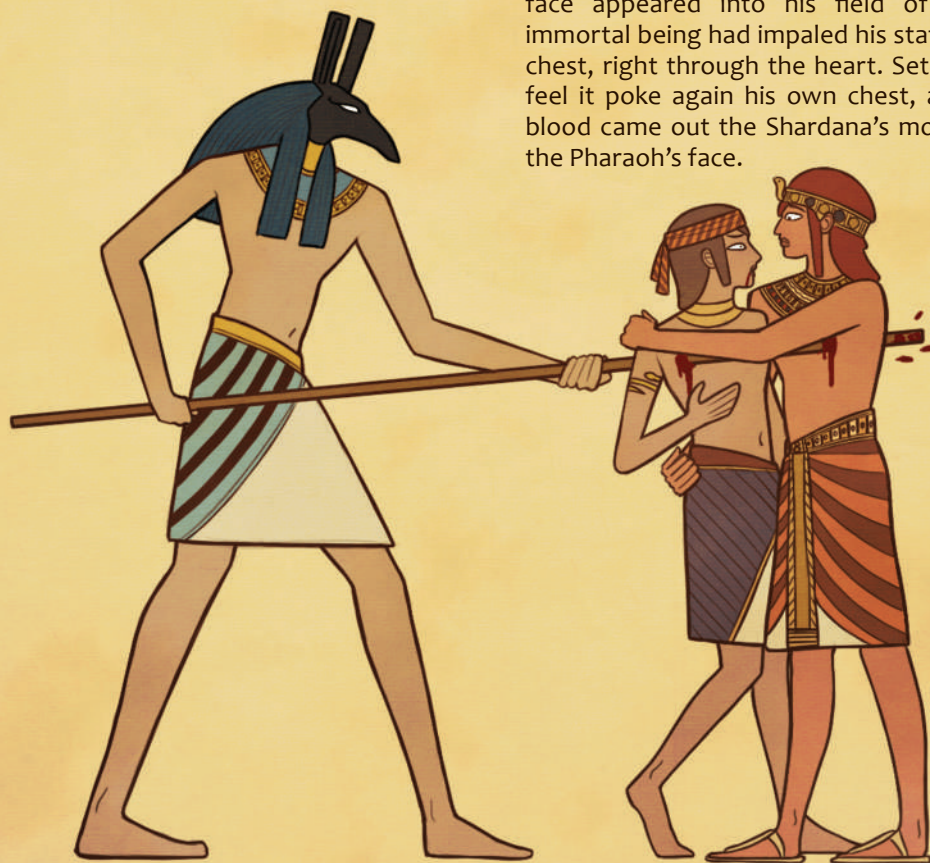
Sethnakht wasted no time, grabbing Khait by the hip and keeping him close. Khait still was tied and trapped; he could not move this way, unless Sethnakht was able to cut the ropes.

"Sethnakht." Khait never used his name, just that one time in the tomb, and it had slipped out some other times as they made love, but he would never dare to refer to him in any way that did not show the utmost respect. "Please, save yourself," Khait murmured, leaning onto him. He was scared, but not of dying. All he wanted was to make sure the Pharaoh was safe, even if that meant losing his own life.

"I have no intention to leave you here! I love you, Khait, I don't want to lose you here!"

Khait's eyes went wide at those words, never expecting to hear them. And despite the dire situation, he could only smile up at him.

"I love you too—" his words ended in a choke, as his smile slid off his face. Khait's face turned into a mask of pure pain, before relaxing in death under Sethnakht's disbelieving stare. Nakhthorheb's face appeared into his field of vision. The immortal being had impaled his staff into Khait's chest, right through the heart. Sethnakht could feel it poke again his own chest, as a spurt of blood came out the Shardana's mouth, staining the Pharaoh's face.





Terror, fear, rage and despair went through Sethnakht's expression, leaving him frozen and unable to react. Warm tears formed in his eyes and slipped down, mixing with his lover's blood. He had lost him forever.

He had lost his sun; bright, warm and pure. He had been extinguished that night, between his arms, and he had done nothing to stop it. His soul was in shambles. Half of it was gone, and no light would be with him into the eternal night of his future. As he felt the pieces of his being shattering like a delicate vase, Nakhthorheb's voice made space in his mind, numbed by the loss.

"I gave you the blood of Set, hoping it would change you, but I now see that I have overestimated you."

Sethnakht slowly turned to look at his sire, looking into his deep dark eyes in which only hatred showed. The Pharaoh realized what his sire wanted to do, disbelief on rising on his face. Nakhthorheb did not want to kill him; he wanted to punish him, in the worst possible way. The wooden staff, planted into his heart, would leave him frozen, suspended in a deep slumber he would only escape if someone was to take the staff out of his chest. They called it "torpor".

"You do not deserve the power of God," Nakhthorheb continued, giving one last push, the staff sinking into the Pharaoh's chest.

Despite knowing what would happen, the pain was unbearable. Sethnakht could not stop himself from screaming with all his strength, screams that were lost to the Valley of Kings, where only his murderers, the sand, and the mummies of those who came before him could hear them.

"Come back to me once you will be less human."

These were the last words Sethnakht could hear. For the Pharaoh, time stopped. As if looking at a painting, in front of his eyes he could only see the hatred on his sire's face, and near him Khait, staring with his empty, lifeless eyes.

Then the void came.

That night, two hearts stopped beating: Khait's, and despite the fact that it was already not working anymore, Sethnakht's heart had stopped a second time, as if killing him again.



March 6, 20xx

The club was half empty, as usual. The Lasombra was almost used to it; the place had never been particularly crowded and, despite being Sabbath territory, Pisa was a fairly peaceful city.

Of course, had his pack been there, things would've been very different. His face darkened at the thought and, trying to chase it away, he gulped down some more of his beer.

He had been waiting at the counter for half an hour, had already drunk two beers as he waited for the barista to give him permission to go meet the new Archbishop.

He hadn't been able to find much information on him. He only knew he was a follower of Set who had been sent there to restore some order to the city after the chaos had fallen following the deaths of a large part of the pack that had been ruling up to that moment.

He glanced around yet again, at the folding screen behind which the Archbishop was receiving his visitors. He finally saw the man who had entered before leaving.

"The Archbishop can meet you, now," the barista confirmed. The Lasombra left a bill on the counter, not bothering to collect the change, and walked behind the folding screen.

He poked his head in, noticing the man sitting down on the armchair, his head low on some documents and a mop of long, bright red hair falling down his shoulders, partially hiding his features.

Even if he was sitting, he seemed to be taller than him, and pretty well-muscled too. He was wearing clothes very reminiscent of a middle-eastern style in bright colors, a sharp contrast to the decaying pub they were in.

"Can I come in?" the Lasombra asked, making his presence known.

The Archbishop gave him a vague gesture, letting him in without even looking up from the document he was reading. The Lasombra sat down, pursing his lips and staring until the other finally looked up, giving him attention.

"You must be Cai."

The question died on the Archbishop's lips as their eyes met, a surprised expression showing on his face.

"Khait...?" he murmured, almost unconsciously.

It couldn't be true; he couldn't be there. A knot formed in his chest, despite his still, dead heart, and a feeling of emptiness threatened to swallow him whole.

He felt as if he was going back. To when? Three thousand years earlier? He could not even remember.

And yet, the man in front of him had to be Khait. He was so similar. Same features, same eyes, same lips. He seemed like a literal carbon copy of Khait.

Who was he? A ghost from a far past? A vision?

He realized he had leaned forward, his arm stretching as if touching the other man, before he stopped himself.

Was faith playing with him?

He couldn't possibly be Khait. He had seen him die, pierced by Nakhthorheb's staff.

Khait's lifeless face was the last thing he saw upon falling into torpor, and the first when he finally woke up, as Nakhthorheb cruelly gave him one last punishment by burying him still embraced to his lover, so he could wake up with a corpse in his arms.

And so it had happened, Khait's skull becoming ashes between his hands, leaving a permanent scar on his soul. The only memento he had left was Khait's golden bracelet, the spiraling cobra that he had devotedly preserved.

The Archbishop's eyes fell on Caidan's arm, as if expecting to see the bracelet there, but what he saw was even more shocking. A black snake, the head on his hand, spiraled up all the way to Caidan's shoulder. Sutekh could not believe what he was seeing; it couldn't be a mere coincidence. The similarities were too great.

Even knowing he must look very dumb at the moment, he could not stop staring, nor could he say anything. Too many questions stormed into his mind, as an uncomfortable silence stretched between them.

"That's not my name, but it's close," Caidan said, when the Archbishop kept staring silently. "I'm Caidan," he added, offering a hand. He had no idea what was wrong with the Archbishop and why he was staring at him as if he had seen something terrible. To be fair, he hadn't exactly dressed elegantly for the occasion, but he was pretty sure he wasn't supposed to show up in a suit or anything.

“Caidan. Of course,” the Archbishop repeated, as if trying to commit the name to memory.

He hesitated, before finally shaking Caidan’s hand. He felt confused, conflicted, panic rising in him as he forced himself to close his eyes and relax. For a fleeting moment he hoped that, upon opening them again, the man in front of him would be gone, as if only a dream; an illusion. Of course, that did not happen, the Lasombra still very real and solid in front of him.

Real and solid, as much as his hand once their skin came into contact, and Sutekh lingered a little more than he should have before letting the other go.

“I am Sutekh, it is a pleasure to meet you, Caidan,” he said, unable to look away despite the perplexed expression on the Lasombra’s face.

Caidan pursed his lips as he took his hand away, hearing the name. He knew that Sutekh was another name of Set, the Archbishop that the followers of Set considered their God, and he doubted that could be the real name of this Archbishop.

“A bit of a pretentious name, isn’t it?” he muttered to himself, not really thinking about how disrespectful it could sound.

Hearing that, Sutekh could not stop an amused smile from rising on his lips. This guy was as bold as Khait had been thousands of years ago, and Sutekh could not believe it was really happening. The man had to be Khait; it was the only explanation. Surely now that the initial shock had passed he could see the little differences, like the color of his hair and the shape of his nose, but everything else was absolutely the same.

Caidan, on his part, kept wondering if the new Archbishop had some kind of problem. Why was he still staring with that dumb expression?

“You are one of the few that survived the fight against the Camarilla, are you not?”

Caidan nodded, hoping this farce would soon be over. He felt very anxious, being stared at like an animal at the zoo by this lunatic.

“I wanted to get away from the city for a while, unless you have a job for me,” he said, hoping there wouldn’t be one. He just wanted to get out of Pisa.

Now that he had no pack anymore, there was no reason to stay. But if he wanted to avoid problems, he had to receive the Archbishop’s

permission first.

Sutekh blinked at that question, the instinctual answer escaping from his lips.

“No,” he said, firm, freezing the Lasombra in place. Caidan had been absolutely convinced that, after what has happened, any Archbishop would rather put his own men in place, instead of the one who had already failed once.

“I want to regroup with all the people that, like you, had survived the fight and unify in a single pack,” the Archbishop continued, his face finally becoming serious. “You are all essential to this city, if we want to keep it as an outpost in the Camarilla’s territory.”

He leaned over, elbows on his knees.

“You know the city, the territory. The enemy,” he added, counting on his fingers.

Caidan looked at him, finding himself agreeing with his points despite the Archbishop’s weird attitude. Maybe he wasn’t just an idiot.

“If I had to start from scratch, I would be surely be overwhelmed by Lucca and Firenze in record time. With your survivors, I will be able to predict possible threats. Does this sound right to you?” Sutekh asked, surprising Caidan. He hadn’t thought the Archbishop would even want his opinion.

“Y-yes, I agree. I think it’d be a good strategy,” he admitted, after hesitating for a second.

The Archbishop nodded, relaxing back against the armchair. “A new Ductus will come, assisting me in putting together a good pack that will help me control the city. If you want to be part of it, I will gladly keep you in consideration.”

Caiden thought it over, silent. Was Sutekh really giving him a choice? It didn’t seem likely, more like a trap, if he was to refuse the Archbishop would surely punish him. A new Ductus meant new pack, and companions. The idea wasn’t bad at all, and after all he really didn’t know what he would do if he was to leave Pisa.

“I will be happy to keep serving the Sabbat,” he said, sure that was the answer the Archbishop was expecting.

“That’s the spirit.” Sutekh smiled, handing over a piece of paper with a pen. “Give me your phone number, I will contact you as soon as I have news.” A shiver ran down his spine as Caidan took the paper, looking at him still a bit perplexed. Yet, he complied, noticing some numbers were

already written on the paper. Surely Sutekh had met more people, so Caidan doubted he would really call him to be part of the new pack. There was not much to worry about.

“Thank you for the chance, Archbishop,” he said as he stood, sure that the useless meeting was finally over. The Archbishop took the paper back, looking at it for a second before turning back up to him, stretching a hand forward.

“You have been through a terrible time, but now it’s time to start rebuilding,” Sutekh said, the same words he had offered to many people that night,

Caidan shook his hand, and he tried to ignore the sense of familiarity the gesture caused in him. This time, he managed not to linger, though.

“Have a good night, Caidan.”

“It has been a pleasure to meet you, Archbishop. Have a good night,” Caidan replied, forcing himself to be polite, before turning away from him to exit the pub.

Sutekh looked at him; his was posture sloppy and lazy, so very different from Khait’s military attitude. Yet, he could still not accept just how similar the two looked. When he heard Caidan say that he wanted to get out of the city, a thought had flashed through his mind.

“I have just found you again, how can I let you go?” he voiced it without realizing and, despite his low tone, Caidan turned around. Sutekh flinched, feeling even more strongly that this man had to have some kind of connection to Khait. He could almost feel a hand on his chest, gently checking his unmoving heart-

The feeling stopped when Caidan turned back, kept walking.

He had to know more about the Lasombra, to shut down the doubts that were now plaguing his mind.

Was the resemblance just a coincidence? Could he be a descendant of Khait? Or even a reincarnation? Sutekh let himself fall back down on the armchair, his head falling back as an arm went up, shielding his eyes, trying to calm his racing thoughts.

“I thought faith had forgotten about me...” he murmured to himself, sarcastic.

Sutekh knew he would never be able to let this go; he could not just act as if it was nothing. His feelings, lying dormant in him for thousands of years, were back in full force. His mind, body, and his very soul told him he could not let Caidan go and, despite how feeble his hopes were, he would listen to them.

Death is but the threshold of a new life,
Today we live, and so will still,
Under many forms we will be back.

- Ancient Egyptian Prayer (XXV cent. b.C.) -







If you have reached the end without hating us too much, then you are really great <3
We are really happy to be able to finish this fourth volume as well. This year, we really have made a lot of effort to make it happens, and we hope you enjoyed what we've been able to do.
As always, we can only thank you from the depths of our hearts for the confidence and the support that you continue to give us, your love is the fuel of our project and without you Purpurea Noxa would not exist.
Hoping that we don't disappoint your future expectations, this is just a goodbye until the fifth volume!

Thanks,
Veronica & Valentina

A very big thanks to Valeria for the english translation! We seriously don't know what we would've done if she hadn't helped us!
She's also an amazing artist. This is her tumblr: nohaijiachi.tumblr.com
Visit it now and give to her a lot of love!