

# Attention Reader:

Please, note that this is not a finished book

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This advance reading copy has not been fully corrected by the author. Any typographical errors will be corrected during the course of production.

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**In case you have already read these three chapters:**

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# Praise for

## **WORTHY OF THE RAVEN**



Interesting! You have the world building spread out, the pace is perfect, and I liked how I got the plot quickly. Lara is a wonderful, strong lead. The tension between the three is amazing! Plot is great and the mini arcs of each! I very much love this story. You did an awesome job and the next books are going to be amazing. The first half was good, of course more about building, middle was very good and ending... perfect build up and climax! More than fine to beta reading again.

### *Comments from one of my lovely Beta Readers*

I'm hooked, It's so good. You did a great job. Lara is badass and I can't believe she stepped up and /redacted/. So inspiring. I cried a lot during the scenes with /redacted/. Everything has been amazing so far. The beginning was hard but not because of your writing. It was just heavy and touched on some very hard topics. I couldn't stop laughing during the last chapter! I found it so funny that both Alessandro and Nicola freaked out when they figured out what Lara was doing, The way you wrote their point of view of her chapter was perfect.

I'm obsessed with it. Seriously. You did an amazing job and I'm only half way done! The world building is perfect and the characters! Love them! It literally plays out like a movie in my head.

I feel like a lot of books rush through the growth of their characters and you took the time to go into detail to make us fall in love with them (at least I did lol)

/redacted/ I straight up closed the app and ran over here to message you. I'm afraid to continue reading lol I know I'm close to the end but 😞😞😞

I'm crying all over again 🥹🥹🥹/redacted/

You should be proud.

OMG! They're in the balcony!! 😞😞😞WHAT IS HAPPENING 🥹🥹

I kept scrolling even though I saw "The End" lol I'm already dying to know what happens next.

Phenomenal!! Extraordinary!! Remarkable!!

I loved everything!

### *Comments from another one of my lovely Beta Readers*

Worthy of the Raven is the book for you, and I will tell you why. It might be hard for me to remain neutral here since I'm the author's husband, yes! I am, and even when I'm not a reader, I'm still her husband. I had the honor of reading the book while it was being written. It's a trap. The book is a trap. Once you start reading, it becomes addictive, you can't stop, and you want the next chapter, the next one, and the one after. When you get to THE END, you get depressed because you want to know what comes after .... Then you go like... my love, don't eat, don't sleep, don't even breathe, just write, please!

Again not because I'm close but Worthy of the Raven is a piece of art. There are no simple characters in this book, you get to know all of them while reading. You also learn to love ones and hate others as well. The complexity of the different cultures fighting, some for conquering, others to keep their freedom. Their identity, the clothing, the cities with their streets, buildings, and roads, everything is so well described but in a relaxed way, so you can let your imagination fly and have your world within the author's world. The book is a tribute to friendship, loyalty, freedom, diversity, love, resilience, honor, respect, and so much more.

I've witnessed how much work she's put into it, from spending several hours watching Kali videos, which is a Filipino martial art with knives, and Capoeira, an acrobatic Brazilian martial art, studying the body movements, the flexing, the blades, so she could create incredibly amazing yet realistic fighting scenes, or the days and weeks of research to put together a selection of words from our almost completely lost Taino, which was the language of our ancestors, the indigenous people of the Caribbean.

Nothing happens by coincidence in this book. There are no loose ends. All characters have a meaningful role, every conversation is a clue for something else, you feel alive while reading, you are there with them, sharing good and bad, they become your people, your family, you want to be there for them, you want to help, you can breathe their same air, you can feel their pain...

I'm not a reader and don't have vast book knowledge, but I can say this is a great book, and I'm entirely sure this book is for you...

I can't finish without saying how proud I am of you. Love you.

*Review from my not-at-all-biased and loving husband 🥰*



# **Worthy of the Raven**

**Stalked by Darkness**

**BOOK ONE OF  
THE RAVEN'S CHOSEN ONE SERIES**

**Y.L. Zamora**



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WORTHY OF THE RAVEN: STALKED BY DARKNESS

Book 1 of The Raven's Chosen One Series

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First Edition

# **Worthy of the Raven**

**Stalked by Darkness**

# PROLOGUE

Lara

**I**t was the first snowy morning after her sixth birthday when Lara met the Raven and witnessed, for the first time, a *Skin* sacrifice.

After slowly counting to ten, she opened her eyes and stepped away from the tree. “Ready or not, here I come, “ she shouted, looking at the snow-covered woods in all directions, as she tried to find any clues left by her playing partners on their way to hide.

*There should be a path*, she thought, focused on the sea of white, trying to make up a trail. There were prints everywhere from their previous game, but she didn’t get discouraged. Gathering her skirt, she wobbled to the closest trees around the playground.

*All the snow fell from this one*, she observed, slowly advancing through the icy forest.

She stopped when she heard a creaking noise. “Ale, is that you?” She listened attentively, but there was no answer.

She didn’t get farther than a few steps before hearing it again. She looked up. The raven hopping on a frozen olive branch stopped moving.

“Hello, birdie! Want to help me find my friends?” Her face lit up with wonder. The raven twitched its head to one side, then the other. Lara noted, fascinated, how it pushed a pile of snow with its head. She smiled as it landed before her feet. “I’d love to stay and play with you, but I need to find the boys. See you later.” She waved her little hand and continued walking.

After three steps, she heard its caw, followed by wings beating.

When she turned around, the raven flew in her direction. She tried to duck in a panic, but the sneaky bird snatched away her hat while she hid her face in her hands. She opened her eyes again on her knees as the bird landed in front of her.

“Hey! Why did you do that? Give back my hat,” she pleaded with it, heart beating vigorously. The bird twitched its head, looking at her with its little black eyes, then hopped away through the trees, still holding her hat on its beak. “If you help me find them, I can stay and play with you for a little.” Lara got up and hobbled slowly behind it. The raven leaped a bit further, pausing from time to time.

*Do you want to show me something?*

The bird disappeared through the opening under a frosty cluster of bushes.

Her eyes lit up at the thought of adventure waiting for her. She got on all fours and crawled under. When she emerged on the other side, her hat lay in the middle of a clearing, the raven beside it.

She tried to dust the snow covering her white coat, but it had already melted. Her hair had gotten wet, which her mother wouldn't like. She wore it loose and adorned with a single braid, as customary for a *Longbraid* girl of her class.

Shivering, she put her hat back on.

“Show me, birdie.” She followed to the center of the clearing. “Oh, no! What happened to you?” Lara kneeled by the bird. “Is this your friend?”

The bird twitched its head rapidly. She gently picked up the fox cub and brought it close to her ear to hear a low, weak hissing.

Lara smiled, looking at the raven while taking her scarf off to carefully wrap the fox in it. Then she hid the ball of cloth inside her overcoat, where she could easily see the cub's little head. “You did well, birdie. Your friend is going to be fine now.” Lara took her glove off and put her hand out.

The raven hopped under it, and when she softly petted its head...

*Darkness.*

The raven flew over her and landed on a tree as she followed with her eyes, confused.

It all happened as if she were watching from afar. She saw herself kneeling *in* the darkness, hugging the tiny ball of light that was the fox while brushing the black bird's head with her fingers. Even though they were perfectly visible, as if the image emitted a gentle glow, blackness consumed everything else.

When she touched the raven, it felt like time had stopped. Random snowflakes floated mid-fall around her, stark white against the black hole surrounding the picture before her.

The silence was such, she could hear her own breathing and heartbeat. Nothing else moved, only she and the second raven perched on the tree. The *other* her, the one petting the bird, had also frozen.

Lara rubbed her eyes, then opened them wide, shaking her little head. She slowly walked towards the image of herself, amazed. She extended her arm, shivering, and stood right before the other girl.

The raven on the branch cawed noisily. She glanced at it and took a deep breath, bracing herself. When she touched her other self's hand, her real body got zapped, a painful pulse hurting her temples.

She was again in her own body, kneeling on the snow, watching the bird. Snowflakes fell around her, and the little fox moved against her chest.

Lara's eyes hurt by the quick change from dark to bright white snow. She felt dizzy and dropped forward. Her hands on the freezing snow stopped her from falling on her face. Her stomach turned as her mouth filled with bitterness, and she coughed.

The raven cawed again, and something caught her eye as she wiped her lips with her glove.

*Blood.*

It dripped down the olive trunk where the raven watched her from. It came from a crack on the birch and tinted the snow below in deep red. Lara gasped, covering her mouth.

"Don't be afraid," a soft and deep voice said, coming from behind the tree.

Lara stood up, not without some struggle, still lightheaded. "Who is there?" She pulled a small knife and pointed it at the sound while hugging the cub inside her jacket.

"I'm going to come out now."

Lara saw a set of bloody fingers moving, slowly discovering an arm, a shoulder, and finally, a hooded figure. She didn't move and kept her guard up as the stranger gradually walked around the olive. "I have no need for this anymore. I'm going to put it back now," the stranger said, showing their own knife to Lara, whose little body tensed in fear. The outsider quietly tucked the blade on their back sheath and raised both hands.

"You're a *Skin*," Lara said, pointing her knife at them.

"That is what *your* people call us," the woman said with a cold expression as she lowered her hood. "My name is Mucaro."

She wore her hair completely shaved and had many scars on the scalp, with some smaller ones on the face. Metal rings dangled from her ears, and golden-brown feathers covered the shoulders of her white fur cloak. She looked so different from Lara's people, the Longbraid, and the most fascinating part of her appearance, Lara thought, was the drawing on her face.

The woman's skin was brown like hers, but a deep tone, while Lara's was lighter. Both eyes around the temples seemed covered in golden-brown paint. It almost looked like feathers, *like the ones she has on her shoulders*, Lara thought.

The mysterious woman resembled a bird, not a demon like her father had said.

"Did you hurt someone?"

"Why would you think I did?"

"Because that's what *Skin* do, don't you?" Lara frowned, staring into the woman's eyes.

She had heard her father talk about the devils in the woods that hurt people and took them away to eat them or something. Lara didn't want to be taken away, so she kept her knife pointed at the woman, just in case.

Mucaro closed her fist and pointed at the small pool of red on the tree; before showing it to Lara. Blood dripped from her palm, staining the snow below as she squeezed. "That is my blood. *This* blood." She clenched her fist, making her wound bleed heavier.

Lara didn't move, but her stomach revolted; maybe her father was right about these *Skin* people. *Why would she hurt herself like that?*

Mucaro shook her head. "I made a sacrifice." Lara didn't understand that word and narrowed her eyes, confused. "A creature got hurt. I paid with my blood, and you came. It *chose* you." Mucaro glanced at the Raven, perched on a branch above her.

"The cub?" Lara looked inside her jacket where the small fox slept. "You're not making sense."

"I have said enough. Just take care of it." Mucaro turned around to leave.

"Wait! Let me help..." Lara offered, sheathing her knife.

She walked forward, tearing a piece of her dress. When she tried to touch the woman's hand, Mucaro stopped her. Lara offered her the piece of cloth instead. Mucaro looked around, hesitant, but Lara put the rag on her hand and stepped back. "For the bleeding."

"I have to go," Mucaro said, wrapping her palm. "Thank you."

As she disappeared into the frozen woods, Lara stood in the middle of the snow, trying to

make sense of what had just happened. The bird flew to her shoulder.

“You set me up, Raven,” she said, puckering her lips, and the bird cawed.

“Lara! Where are you?” A boy shouted.

She had completely forgotten about her friends. She lifted her skirt and ran towards the voice, trying to get away from the bloody tree before they saw it.

“Are you alright, Lara?” A second boy called.

“I’m here!” She shouted as two kids came walking through the trees. They were taller than her, a couple of years older. They were brothers, even though one had brown hair and the other dark blonde, also braided like hers.

Longbraid children wore their hair at shoulder length always. Boys could wear several braids from their forehead down while girls wore one single plait from the temple, like a half-crown, leaving the rest of their manes loose and free unless they were poor.

Poor people had to keep their braids tight, so their hair didn’t get in their way while working. Loose, lustrous hair meant less work and higher class. At least, that was what Lara’s mother said to her every day to make her brush her curls, although she preferred to spend that time reading, which her mother didn’t appreciate.

“Alessandro, you must take care of her!” She said with puppy eyes, showing them the wounded cub, skipping everything about Mucaro.

“A fox? Why would we take a fox home, Lara?” Nicola, the older brother, argued. He teased her every time he could.

“Because it’s hurt and needs someone to take care of her, and I can’t take her home. I would get in trouble.” Her brows joined. “Ale, please...” she begged, grabbing the boy’s hands. He had the kindest, warmest eyes and was always happy.

Alessandro looked at her for a moment, his thumb brushing her bruised cheek as he frowned. She looked away, but he smiled. “I’ll take care of her,” he said while Nicola rolled his eyes.

Lara hugged Alessandro, giggling. “Thank you!” She pecked his cheek, which quickly reddened.

“Ha! A girl kissed Ale, eww!” Nicola yelled, teasing his brother.

“Shut up!” Alessandro snatched a pile of snow and shot. It hit his brother right in the face. Lara chuckled, but Nicola was already making a snowball to attack Alessandro, who ducked,

and the ball hit Lara in the leg.

“Hey, you’re going to hit our pup,” she yelled, peeking through her coat to check on the cub. “Let’s go home so we can feed her.” The boys agreed. “I know she’s going to be fine. You’re so good with animals,” Lara whispered to Alessandro on their way home. He smiled, nodding.

“Don’t ask me to take care of that rat. I’m a Erus, and men of my stature don’t have time to take care of animals,” Nicola said dramatically, pulling on his jacket. “If Ale does not want to be a Erus like me, he can be a farmer.” He mocked his brother.

Alessandro scoffed, messing up Nicola’s blonde hair. Lara giggled at their bickering. “What will you be when you grow up, Lara?” He asked, walking by her side.

“What kind of question is that, little brother? Lara is going to be my wife!” Nicola declared, running his fingers through her hair, playfully waving it in the air.

“Eww, no! I’ll never marry!” She pushed Nicola away from her. Both burst into laughter as he fell on the snow.

“What then, Lara?” Alessandro asked again, looking straight into her eyes. Her face lit up.

She snapped a thin branch from a bush and waved it like a sword. “I’m going to be a great warrior!” She proclaimed, awkwardly practicing her footwork on the snow. “I’m going to get better than both of you at sword fighting, and I’ll go away and explore the world. I shall find somewhere else to live by myself,” she added, pointing the stick at Nicola as he tried to get up.

“Ha! Don’t be silly.” He brushed it away with a smile.

“I am! Believe me! And if you keep doubting me, I’ll only let Ale visit, not you.”

She waved the twig again, stopping so close to Nicola’s face it almost touched him. Both laughed, and Alessandro flushed again. He helped his brother off the snow, and Nicola hurried to the front, playing around as he made funny faces and glanced at them.

Lara’s favorite thing in the world was spending time with these two.

She checked on the cub again. It slept peacefully. Alessandro held her hand and looked into her eyes again as he offered her a big, bright smile.

“I believe you.”

# CHAPTER 1

*Nine years later*

Lara

Lara could feel her lip swelling, curled up on the floor with her back against the wall. She had run to her bedroom in a desperate attempt to protect herself, but like so many times before, it had been pointless. Her mother stood by the door, breathing heavily, a belt tightly gripped in her fist.

Perched outside the open window, the Raven twitched its head while Lara endured her penance. It was always there since that wintery morning they first met, especially when awful things happened.

*You're trying to protect me, aren't you?* She thought, staring at its black eyes.

Getting beaten by her mother was a regular occurrence for Lara. The woman expected everything to be done in her particular way, and corporal punishment was the consequence when her Lara didn't meet her expectations.

She was always bruised, always in pain at her mother's hands, although she concealed it.

"This is all your fault. You shouldn't question your mother," the woman said, jaw clenched. Lara didn't dare to look up. She squeezed her knees tightly against her chest. She didn't want to get hit again. Her mother frowned at the belt with horrified eyes. "No, no, no!" She paced around anxiously.

Lara shuddered when her mother got agitated once more.

Signora Morini glanced at the strap one last time and threw it to the side. She rushed towards Lara and kneeled on the floor before her, scrunching her face with her hands. Her mother's eyes

squinted; lips twisted in a grin of contempt. Lara didn't move a muscle. She even stopped breathing.

"Let me see." The woman inspected her for visible bruises and cuts. "He can't find you like this," she muttered, noticing the swollen lip. She then hurried two doors down the corridor into the bathing room.

Lara hid her face in her palms. Tears crowded her eyes. Her chest tightened; her throat jammed with the screams she couldn't ever let out while her pained body caged her agony. Her cheeks ached when she cried over the red welts on her arms.

When she heard the steps, she quickly wiped her eyes with her dress, right before her mother returned with a rag and a wooden bowl full of water.

"Here." Her mother dipped the cloth and squeezed it to place it in Lara's hands. "Put that on your face, and don't take it off until your lip is fine again. If your father sees you, you better tell him you tripped and fell, or I swear..." she didn't have to end the sentence.

Lara understood.

Her tone was menacing, but her eyes... those eyes terrorized Lara to her bones. Her mother had crazy, empty eyes like a dead fish and always seemed to be hurting.

She knew her mother was miserable and took it out on her. The stare from those wide-open, insane-looking eyes meant she would hurt her badly.

Lara nodded, patting the rag on her lip, her entire body shaking. She groaned quietly at the freezing contact with her broken skin.

Her mother's eyes wetted as she grabbed Lara's arms firmly, hurting her flesh with her fingers. She tightened her eyes, frightened by the woman's reaction, but she only hugged her this time.

Lara endured the hug like she had endured the beating. She didn't open her eyes. Instead, went far away in her thoughts, to a place where nobody could hurt her, where she wasn't a defenseless little girl anymore. She didn't move and only stayed there while her mother sobbed.

The crying after punishing her was also a regular occurrence, and somehow, the outpourings of affection hurt Lara even deeper than the beatings. Her whole body strained; the pit of her stomach revolted as her mother kissed her head. Lara wanted to run, get away from her, from this life, from this pain.

"Why do you make me do this, Lara? If only you behaved as I tell you to..." The woman pressed Lara's head against her chest. Even her mother's smell repelled her, triggering many more

awful memories she tried desperately to suppress. “You know I do this for your own good, to make you a proper dama. It’s my duty to teach you this before I send you off to your husband.”

According to her parents, Lara's duties were to get married and be a good wife, like her mother. She was expected to run a house, bear children, and please her husband. Anything else wasn’t acceptable or appropriate for her to even dream about.

It was the Longbraid women’s destiny, regardless of class.

She couldn’t help it, though; Lara was a dreamer. She wanted to be a warrior and fight spectacular battles. She fantasized of seeing the world outside her country’s walls. Lara wanted to break from her shackles, from her family, and she hid in books to escape her reality and the constrictions of her gender, to be a free person, at least in her mind.

She read a lot and daydreamed constantly. She was inquisitive and couldn’t help to question everything. She wouldn’t stop until wholly satiating her curiosity, by any means necessary.

That’s why, earlier, when she asked about the gentleman leaving the house that afternoon, her mother’s response was to strike her across the face and hit her with a belt until both ran out of breath. Lara didn’t know him, and he wasn’t visiting her father.

Signore Morini had been out since the morning when he left in a hurry after receiving an urgent message from Erus Scarfo.

“You won’t eat dinner. Go to sleep.”

“Yes, mother.”

Lara got into bed and read while the moonlight allowed her. The Raven stayed outside her window, watching over her as she lost herself in the exhilarating stories until she fell asleep.

The following morning while still dark, she dusted the marble statues around the atrium room and her mother’s many vases. They adorned the long, airy corridors of tile mosaics as tall as her face, where deep red plaster walls rose to meet vaulted ceilings.

She swept the entire house, from the two shops by the front entrance to the back garden. She also polished the tile murals —one room a day. Today the dining room.

Her fingers hurt when she finished, right before her mother came down at sunrise. Lara ran to the outdoor oven room to check on her baking. The last thing she needed this morning was burnt bread.

As they prepared breakfast, she glanced into the back garden through the iron banisters embellishing some sections of the light stone wall. She could see the street beyond the cypresses

and thought the morning was beautiful, but her mother's complaints brought her back to her duties.

Her lip stung from time to time, still swollen, and she kept her head down as her mother had instructed. She was setting the smaller table where they had breakfast outside when her father joined them, holding a book in his hand. He walked through the bronze double-door dividing both kitchens, chin up, chest puffed.

He kept a manicured beard, salt-pepper like his shoulder-length hair, and the two braids above his ears, tied at the back of his head in a ponytail, as his class of nobleman decreed. He greeted them as he admired his light-colored, pristine clothes, lifting a random lint from his sleeve. His work wasn't dirty or demanding like those of lower-class people.

Lara scrutinized her own dress, making sure she hadn't stained it, or her mother would be furious. She sighed, confirming it was fine, brushing a few flour speckles off her white apron. She had tucked her flowy, ivory linen dress on her belt, so the hems didn't get soiled as she walked. *She won't have a reason to nag at me.*

"Good morning, papa." Lara's eyes shone as he handed her the book, although she avoided meeting his, hooded. Her mother had warned her, and she knew an even worse beating waited for her today if she didn't hide the cut lip from him.

"You're going to like this one, princess," he said, patting her head as she brought it to her face and took a deep breath. The smell of books soothed her.

"Why is the shop not open?" Her mother inquired as he sat.

He was a shoemaker way before marrying into her mother's noble family. From the marriage he gained her name and a house in the middle of Antiquus Town, a prime location to run any shop.

He worked it when he was younger, and that's how Lara met the boys one time when they came by to get new boots. Two workers ran it currently while Lara spied on them, learning the craft in hiding.

Noblegirls couldn't meddle in such improper behavior.

"Will you allow me today, papa?" Lara took the shot since he was in such a good mood. "I want to learn..." she pleaded, but he frowned with disgust, discarding her petition with a waving of his hand.

She lowered her eyes to the book, accepting the grace of at least being allowed to read.

Her father wasn't as relentless as her mother but was still strict and demanding. She was to behave like a proper dama at all times, although he left the enforcement to Signora Morini. Meanwhile, he dedicated his time to socializing with more influential noblemen among whom he wished to find a husband for Lara, to propel their family into higher status.

Lara shook her head, forgetting about making shoes for now, to rejoice in her new prized possession.

"Serve your father," her mother told her while she skimmed the pages with joy. "Why is everyone so happy this morning?" Her tone was sour. Her mother didn't like happy people.

"We're going to war!" Her father's tone was too enthusiastic. Lara's smile vanished as she gripped the book firmly with her fingers, her chest tightening.

Her hopes of becoming a great warrior didn't come just from books and dreams. Her people, the Longbraids, were known as formidable fighters. Their lengthy plaits —the staple of their culture— symbolized their prowess in battle.

*The longer his braids, the more skilled and capable the man.*

The vast history of wars fought as they guarded their newly founded country against those who tried to usurp it —after forsaking the Gods of Ewhan to settle in The Land of Plectos— wasn't taught to girls. Lara had only read about it because of the many books she got from Nicola, and her father, who didn't know what she read when he left her alone in the bookstore.

The latest war had been won when she was very young, and she only knew what she heard from him, but Signore Morini had a habit of aggrandizing everything, especially himself. At best, he was a mediocre fighter, although he told tales of great self-heroism, which Lara had the better judgment to remain silently skeptical about.

Longbraid men were expected to train hard every day for hours, regardless of class or job. Every man had to be at least proficient in sword fighting, and she knew too well he hadn't touched a weapon in years. His armor was tucked away in some dark corner of the house where she wasn't allowed.

Longbraids had enjoyed many years of peace after crushing the last challengers and securing an alliance with Costos, the country to the northwest, with whom they shared a border. The thought of seeing war hadn't crossed her mind before. Her land was boring and peaceful.

"Again? We need to find a fitting husband for your daughter before you go," her mother grumbled. Lara put the book down; her jaw clasped in disgust.

“There’s no time for that now. Every suitable young man will also go to war.” He grinned morbidly. “We can talk about it when I get back, and we see who survived,” he added, bursting into laughter.

Her mother muttered a complaint.

“Every young man...” Lara murmured to herself, concerned. She tucked the book into her apron pocket, frowning as she placed bread and cheese on her father’s plate. Her mother sat and signaled her to join.

“Eat quickly, princess. We can stop by the bookstore on my way out. There were a few more I thought you’d like, but I prefer you choose yourself.”

He took a bite while Lara put a single boiled egg on her wooden plate and peeled it with a somber face. She wasn’t that hungry anymore, but her mother would be furious if she didn’t eat.

“She needs to go to the market. She can’t waste any time,” her mother argued, tearing a piece of bread from the warm loaf Lara had baked, then she bit a chunk previously slathered in honey.

“It’s not going to take that long. She will go back to her chores straight after. We promise, right Lara?” Her father smirked at her, and she sighed, expecting what was coming.

Every morning was the same in the Morini house.

“Yes, father.” She ate half of her egg.

“I need her help around the house. I’m always in pain and can’t take care of everything alone”. Her mother doubled down; eyes filled with ire.

Lara stared at her plate, worried. She didn’t want to be there, but she knew her mother wouldn’t stop bickering until she got her way. She tried to soften things up. “I’ll stay—”

Her father’s fist pounded the table with force, scaring her as he made a mess. “I said it’ll only take a moment!” He shouted, his brown eyes piercing her mother’s.

Signora Morini was scary when angry, but her husband was worse. Now he stared at his wife with scorned, reddish eyes, and Lara wanted to run away and never look back.

“It’s your fault she’s like that! You’ve spoiled her rotten!” Her mother shouted back, getting up. She snatched her terracotta plate and threw it on the cleaning bucket. Lara closed her eyes, trying to flee the table, at least in thought.

“Let the girl breathe! You’re suffocating, woman!”

“I’m suffocating? What about you, drunk?”

“You shouldn’t have married me!”

“Given a choice, I wouldn’t have.”

Lara moved from the table to lean against the bronze doors while her parents yelled at each other. She pulled the book out and held it tight against her chest. The comforting aroma filled her lungs.

The screaming only worsened as she closed her eyes and ground her teeth. It was always like this. They would argue for a while until none had the energy to keep going, and everything went back to... normal.

*Run.*

A loud flutter brought her back from her introspection. The Raven had perched on the stone backyard wall. She sighed, crossing the wooden gate to the back garden as her parents fought. She quietly walked under the single peach tree in the garden and sat on a swing tied to one of its thick branches.

Breathing deeply, she extended her hand to invite the bird. It flew to her arm.

“Hi, Raven. Good timing.” With a finger, she petted its head. “Sometimes I want to run and never look back,” she said to the bird with a sour smile. “I wish I could,” she murmured, looking away in the distance, beyond the rose bushes, the cypresses, and into the long streets of cream stone and jagged little houses.

After a while, she heard a loud thump and her mother shrieked for the last time before the noise subsided. The Raven flew away when her father stormed out the back gate, sleeking his braided hair.

“Let’s go,” he ordered, looking at his reflection in the fountain in the middle of the garden. He stared at the water clock marks on the marble and shook his head. “It’s the seventh hour, and I have little time.”

She walked to him. “I need to help clean up.”

“Not today, dear,” he said, giving her a few coins for the market.

Lara looked at her mother through the iron banister. She was cleaning the table, crying, holding her cheek with her hand. Lara ground her teeth, clenching her apron with her fists as she noticed the redness creeping up her mother’s brown skin under her fingers, but she followed her father when he walked away.

He marched in long strides, and Lara almost had to run to keep up with his pace. She didn’t have time to enjoy anything around her. All the wonders, shops, and people passed her, but she

couldn't experience them.

She loved to come to the Grand Plaza, where the shops and the market were. Sitting down by the fountain to watch people go about their days was something she appreciated. Trying to decipher their personalities, interests, and even their secrets just by observing them wasn't only entertaining but addicting.

Lara could tell a lot about someone just by looking at them. She not only read books; she was constantly reading people. Seemingly quiet and introspective, she spent most of her time inside her head, studying the world and those around her.

But today she couldn't indulge because her father didn't let her. Even though he took her out of the house, he didn't genuinely want to spend time with her. His only interest was the war. He only cared about gaining something from it and using it to ascend to power.

Lara walked behind him, missing out on life itself. Her desires didn't matter to anyone.

The smells vanished before she could determine what that pub served today as she walked by the turquoise-stained, rusty bronze door. She couldn't delight in the beautiful melody the street musician played on his lyre, braids bouncing as he danced on a busy corner. The playful children vanished quickly as she diligently strolled behind her father, as she got away from all the fun things Antiquus Town had to offer that warm summer morning.

A man had taken that poor dama's purse and even though Lara had witnessed it happen, she couldn't stop to tell her father. He shut her down when she tried to warn him, pushing her to hurry as he marched without patience among the many Longbraids going about their day.

Her life ran before her eyes at the specific speed her parents set for her, and she couldn't do anything but adapt. Her father was in a hurry to get to the bookstore, and she passively followed.

Although her family wasn't wealthy, Lara had been born a noblewoman. Her father came from a lower class but married up. Her mother's family name, Morini, was influential in itself. Although they lost their fortune when her grandfather involved himself in bad business, they kept the status that came with it.

Her father had taken care of some of the family's debt as he married her mother and gave her and Lara a comfortable life with his thriving shoe-making business. But nothing was enough for him, and he often complained about the little lands the family had left, inherited by her mother's sister.

He was determined to climb the social ladder, and Lara was his ticket to get there. Her life

was reduced to her chores and learning how to be a proper wife, like her mother. That was the life of every young girl from noble blood, and there was nothing she could do about it; it was her destiny.

Lara's eyes landed on a girl who walked past her. She wore a simple side braid, a hairstyle for men or women promised to be married. She looked so young, probably around Lara's age.

In a way, class didn't even matter. Being a girl in Plectos meant she would be married off to the man her family chose. Poor girls didn't have a choice either. Women didn't have many options in her country, and that side braid would be Lara's fate one day.

She closed her eyes, swallowing as she tried to escape reality by running into her thoughts.

"Good morning. I brought my daughter, as promised." Her father walked through the bookstore's open doors, waving at the vendor, who frowned, lowering his eyes. "I can't stay, dear," he told her, rapidly walking to the back. "I got your book around here." His eyes scanned the bookshelves. "There. I thought you might like these as well." He pointed at a pile. "Look around and pick two more. I've paid for them." Lara nodded. "Take your time," he suggested, patting her shoulder.

Her jaw clenched; neck tensed under his fingers. Her father turned around and walked to the front, stopping on the way out to fix his hair and clothes on the wall mirror. He smiled at himself and vanished into the busy street.

"You like History." The vendor looked at her with skeptical eyes. "It's not commonplace to find a... young dama sporting such taste."

"It's better than reality," Lara muttered to herself and walked behind a bookshelf. Her face lit when she was finally alone with the books.

## CHAPTER 2

### Alessandro

“Aless...” He woke up to his sister’s voice. “You overslept.” She gently pushed his arm, sitting by his side. She was blonde and blue-eyed like his older brother but bubbly like himself.

He rubbed his eyes, still disoriented. “What... what time is it?”

“The seventh hour,” she said. He scratched his head, sleepy. “Today is Wednesday,” she added with a sassy smirk.

“Shit!” Alessandro jumped off the bed, immediately awakening. “You shouldn’t have let me sleep this much, Camile!” He messed up his sister’s long, loose hair, adorned with thin braids interlocked at her crown.

He frantically paced around the room, picking up pieces of clothing. After throwing a rag over his shoulder, he quickly brushed his teeth with the cleansing powder from a small box in his armoire before washing it with water.

“I won’t have time to get breakfast,” he grunted, putting on a sand-colored tunic he tucked tied his waist. He frowned, hurrying nervously. He snapped a few mint leaves from a bundle he kept in water, but Camile stopped him before he could chew them.

“I got you.” She smiled, amused by his meltdown, dangling her feet while she leaned back on his bed.

“What would I do without you?” He caught the muffin she threw and bit half of it. “Fig, nice.” He put on one boot. “Where’s the other one?” He looked around anxiously.

“You’re a madman. Relax!” Camile started chuckling.

“Don’t laugh and help!” He said with desperation, standing in front of her. She got up, kissed

his nose, and gave him the missing shoe. “You’re evil, little sister.” He smiled, gulping the rest of the bun before running out of his bedroom. She followed, playfully humming behind him.

“Son, come have breakfast with us,” his father invited from the kitchen.

“Can’t, father, I have... somewhere to be,” he yelled, flying through the door as he shoved the mint leaves in his mouth.

The beautiful summer morning welcomed him as he ran down the front veranda steps of the creamy hardstone villa. He cut through the gardens, zigzagging between the cypresses, jumping over the rows of lavender bushes adorning the carefully manicured entrance. He couldn’t waste any more time.

He sprinted through the black-dirt countryside, breezing past the green fields he’d planted with his own two hands. The familiar dry-wood aroma of the olives filled his lungs as he ran through the trees, bringing back memories from when he was a kid, playing among them.

The smell of the olives always made him think of *her*... but what didn’t?

She was always in his mind, always with him. Even when life stole her from him, she lived in his heart; she had resided there since he was a little kid. The olive fields were his happy place because there, he could have her all for himself.

In the woods, he could look into her dark eyes for longer than otherwise appropriate while he explained the secrets of the earth to her. He could inadvertently brush her skin with his fingers as he taught her to care for the land. Kneeling on the ground, he could take her small hands in his and hold her there all he wanted as he took forever to explain the planting process.

They had spent their childhoods playing among the trees, planting the seeds, sharing the fruits. They played hide and seek in the forest, and he could hold her against his chest when he found her. There, they ran together and rolled in the grass and hugged.

He could tickle her relentlessly among the trees and play with her beautiful long hair, where he could tease her all he wanted, hidden under the subtle veil of familiarity childhood friends shared.

Every time he ran through these fields to meet her, his heart raced, trying to leave his chest. The olives were the only witnesses of his desperation as he hurried to her side, where he wanted to be, always.

Even though he loved his family, animals, and land, Alessandro’s only home was her hand, which he held every time he could. *Home* was embracing her when she cried. *She* was home for

him, and he lived to deserve her one day. He lived to protect her, to save her from everything and everyone.

After racing through the forest, which shortened the course significantly, he joined the Main Road. He crossed the bridge over the Vasto River —the primary water source the country had been founded around, which also separated the Condé lands from Antiquus Town.

He stopped running as he entered the village to catch his breath and saw his red face in a puddle. *I need to compose myself*, he thought, walking up the steps of the Fountain of Wishes.

His state of mind was turbulent, his body trembling with anticipation. He couldn't think straight when he knew he was going to see her.

Children played around the three white-stone steps of a round pool adorned with beautiful statues at the center of the massive Grand Plaza. The heart of the town beat with the noise from hundreds of busy Longbraids.

The quick pace of the city was more to his brother's taste, and even when Nicola made him join him at night to dance with pretty girls, Alessandro preferred the peace of the countryside. But coming to see her was different. He didn't mind the stink and noise as long as he could spend time with her.

Laughter and childish voices infected the air with joy. He got caught in the middle of the children's splashing as he bent over to collect water on his hands. He smiled at them, still unable to speak as he gathered his breathing.

He drank, unbothered by the drips down his forearms and neck. He welcomed the coolness on his hot skin. He threw a silver coin into the water. "Let me make her laugh today," he wished and gave a last glance at the kids.

With an index on his mouth, he winked at a little girl and splashed the boy playing with her as she giggled. They burst into laughter as Alessandro jumped back, avoiding their playful vengeance, and ran away, waving at them.

After drying his face with his sleeve, he combed his messy hair with his fingers and smelled his shirt. "It's fine."

He walked towards the light-stone buildings of terracotta tile roofs and open shutter windows. The market was a few streets away, and he was barely on time to meet her. He was about to cross the street when his body froze as he caught a glimpse of *her*.

His eyes devised her silhouette for only a moment, among the many people who crowded the

streets, but an instant was enough for him to recognize her. He knew all too well the way her body moved, the color of her long, beautiful hair shining in the morning sun, her absentminded gaze.

Even if she walked among thousands, Alessandro could always see Lara.

His heart stopped for a moment when he lost sight of her, but his eyes lit up, and his cheeks dimpled when he spotted her again in the distance. Knowing she existed in the world made him happy.

A scream brought him back from his daydreaming. “Thief! Stop the thief!” A woman yelled with all her might as a man raced in his direction. Without even thinking, he tackled the mugger with force. The crook fell under Alessandro’s weight, dropping two purses and a dagger.

“Did you steal this?” He asked, furious, his eyes going from the man’s to the distance, trying not to lose sight of Lara in the crowd. The thief tried to get rid of him, but Alessandro grabbed his collar, violently shaking him. “I don’t have time for this!” He hissed a warning in the man's face. The robber's eyes trembled as he nodded. “Over here!” Alessandro shouted, lifting him by the shirt.

Three other men joined and grabbed him as the victim approached with open arms.

“Thank you! That pig took everything I own,” she cried, hugging him.

He patted her back awkwardly while the mob clapped. His eyes impatiently scanned the crowd looking for Lara.

She was gone.

“It was nothing,” he said to the dama as soon as she let go of him. She thanked him a few more times while he struggled to excuse himself. When she finally directed her attention to the delinquent, Alessandro took the chance and slipped away among the bystanders.

*Dammit!*

He ran towards the building Lara had disappeared into, hoping she hadn’t left while he got caught up, *saving the world*, he mustered with annoyance. He was impatient, eager to see her. He rushed to the shops, avoiding the many people crowding the sidewalk, when he saw Signore Morini exit the bookstore.

Alessandro paused and waited for her, but she didn’t come out, and Morini never looked back. *She must be inside*, he thought, and his heart rumbled again. He exhaled and continued walking hesitantly. Now that he was so close to her, his resolve wasn’t as firm, and the fluttering

in the pit of his stomach made him want to giggle.

“Stupid!” He mocked himself.

He shook his head, and his cheeks burned when he reached the first window. He glanced inside, but he didn’t see her. His eyes squinted with the pain of disappointment as he held his breath, trying to ease himself. *Just breathe.*

He kept advancing, gazing among the bookshelves, trying to get a glimpse of her hair, her fluffy dress. Moments later, he found himself standing at the door, eyes wandering all over.

The vendor brought him to reality. “Are you coming in, son?” The old man raised his sight.

“At once!” He assertively crossed the threshold. “Your History section, please?”

The seller pointed to the back without looking at him, already immersed in his reading. Alessandro sighed and swaggered forward. He moved among the stands, enjoying the familiar smell she loved so much, allowing himself to enjoy the expectation build-up as he took each step, getting closer to her.

He knew she was there; he could feel her presence in his skin when all his hair spiked. He could hear her chuckles. He could almost see her if he closed his eyes, imagining her gently rustling around thousands of yellow pages.

He turned around the last corner of the narrow hall. Then, he saw her kneeling on the floor; at least ten books stacked by her side. Her off-white airy skirt resembled the petals of a white poppy. Her delicate fingers skimmed through the paper, and her reddish lips silently mouthed the words, breathing mild waves into her chest. All of her looked like a flower blossoming.

“Where are you?” He rasped in a whisper. Lara closed the book and glanced at him, brightening the room and his world.

“The faraway kingdom of bliss.” She extended her arm to him. Alessandro held her hand and helped her stand. The touch of her soft skin stabbed him like an arrow to the chest. *Bliss.*

“I figured.” He hugged her waist with his arms while she threw hers around his neck. His face heated when she pecked his cheek. He couldn’t stop thinking she would hear the roaring of his heart, pounding like a drum.

“I’m sorry I was late. Father wanted me to see some books.” She pointed at her treasures with puckered lips. Alessandro’s smile vanished. He grabbed her face, gently turning her to the side, his eyes squinting as he examined her bruise. “I’m fine.” She took his hands and walked out of the store. “Let’s go fight!”

He could listen to her sweet, pitchy voice for hours as she described ideas and dreams. His favorite thing in the world was spending time with her. It didn't matter if they were sparring, riding horses, picking produce on the fields, or simply chatting.

Lara made him happy.

Seeing the bruise on the corner of her mouth every time she spoke reminded him that she wasn't. Sometimes, like now, he felt there was nothing he could ever do to erase all the pain, the sadness she carried inside her beautiful soul.

Since they were little kids, he didn't remember a day she came to play and didn't have bruises, scrapes, or cuts all over her little body. At first, he didn't pay much attention, and most times didn't even realize it, until he did one day. After noticing, he remembered all the previous times, and it was, sadly, *all the time*.

She wasn't a little girl anymore. Lara was fifteen years old but still as defenseless as when she was six. She didn't talk about it and constantly changed the subject or avoided it, like today. Lara never complained. She endured her mother's abuse and didn't even acknowledge it happened.

Alessandro felt her pain. In her eyes he could see the agony she lived, but he couldn't do anything about it. He didn't know how to help her. He was a boy who didn't have anything to give her. He couldn't take care of her, not like he wanted or like she deserved.

He had tried many times to convince her not to sneak out to avoid getting punished. But exploring the woods, learning to fight, running around barefoot, and bantering with him and his brother made Lara happy.

Those were the only real moments of happiness she got to experience, and they were also her escape from real life. Alessandro knew it better than anybody, so he didn't ask her to stop anymore. He let her enjoy it, although it meant she would pay for it later.

He kept her hand in his as they walked, memorizing her soft skin while she floated like a butterfly around him. She made everything she touched with her little fingers special, and he had to fight the urge to buy everything she put down and hide in his pockets, to keep forever, just because she had cherished it.

She inspected everything. She cared about every single thing around her. She wanted to know how everything worked and why things were the way they were. She was insatiable in her hunger for knowledge, and he treasured watching her as she soared around freely when her parents weren't suffocating her.

“I have something for you.” He pulled her closer to him and stood at her back. She smiled with curiosity, looking over her shoulder to meet his eyes. “To remember me by... when I’m gone,” he whispered. Such a vulnerable moment made him shier than usual around her.

“I just learned this morning.” She looked away, although he noticed her frown. “I didn’t have time to get you anything,” she added, her fingers rubbing his hand as he placed a thin silver chain around her delicate neck.

“It’s fine. I wanted to surprise you.” He made her turn and looked at her. “I found it the last time I went fishing on the west coast and I thought it was perfect like...” he coughed, “perfect for you.” He held the small pearl between his fingers, before removing his hand, blushing.

“It’s beautiful.” She smiled, also flushed. Her little eyes shivered as she looked at him. “Here!” She grinned, patting her hair, as she chose one of the thin braids from the rest of her silky mane, then pulled the leather string tying it. “I can make you a bracelet with it.” She giggled, grabbing his wrist to wrap the brown cord around. It had two metal beads at the ends that fell on Alessandro’s palm when she finished tying a knot. “Do you like it? It’s not as fancy, but...” She asked with a chuckle, holding the black pearl now, inspecting it with her curious eyes.

Alessandro ran his fingers over the soft piece of leather. Even when she joked about it, he would cherish it forever. “I’d never take it off,” he promised, his heart aching at the thought of leaving her.

“Me either,” she said, hugging his arm.

During the walk back to his house, Lara told him about the latest book she had read. Her father had given it to her, as usual, and she was in love with the story. Watching her face lit up, telling him all about her new favorite world, was a joy for him.

“That’s a life I would enjoy.” She tightened her fingers around his arm. He nodded, still lost in his thoughts. “You’re not listening to a word I’m saying!” She chuckled.

“I am!” He lied. She paused and stared into his eyes. “I’m sorry.” He lowered his head.

“Don’t worry. I know you have worse things to worry about right now,” she said. “Aren’t you afraid?”

“Uh-huh.” He wasn’t lying this time. He feared leaving her alone with her mother for months or even years.

Lara wrapped herself around his arm, and he welcomed her warmth with a smile. “Do you want me to come with you and protect you?” Alessandro scoffed before chuckling as she

intertwined her fingers with his and dragged him behind her. “I promise I’ll write to you,” she said, and his heart ached.

They were close to the end of the olive fields as they approached the villa’s entrance when a raspy bark welcomed them. Lara’s face brightened with joy, and she kneeled on the dirt.

“Who’s a good girl? Red is.”

The fox she had entrusted to him nine years earlier had stayed with him and mated on his land for years. Red was the fourth generation. The beautiful creature was his loyal companion.

“Red is, indeed, right girl?” He petted the fox before walking towards the shed. Lara followed him, excited.

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“Don’t lower your guard, Lara,” he shouted, clashing his sword against hers before pushing her back. She gasped for air as her back hit the wall. He could notice her struggling, pinned against the stone and his body. “Are you ready to give up?” He tried his best to give her a good fight, but he always held back a lot, being incredibly careful not to hurt her.

“You wish!”

She kneeled him in the crotch. His senses shut down for a moment as he tried to survive the pain, panting. She had a mean jab, and even when he was strong like a horse, Alessandro had to kneel to keep his balance when she connected her left fist with his jaw.

“That’s a dirty move, Lara,” he complained, getting up and charging at her again. This time she was ready and aware of her surroundings. She took two quick steps back and missed his sword by an inch. He swiped again. She ducked.

He smiled, nodding. She fought back, and this time he stopped her blade with his, pulling a knife from his belt to attack her while their swords were still bound. She blocked his forearm with the back of hers.

“Good girl,” he whispered, pleased.

She lifted her eyebrows, proud of herself, her face and neck reddish.

Lara wasn’t a tiny girl, but he was so tall she had to tilt her head back to meet his eyes and still only reached his ribs. She had long, thick black hair to her waist, embellished with long braids, tied with leather knots at the end, like the one she strapped around his left wrist.

Her eyes were also dark, big, and shaped like almonds. She was strong under her feminine

shape from secretly training with him since she was a little girl, but he was way stronger. He couldn't go all out against her.

He kept pushing until the blade reached so close to her skin, it almost cut her. In the heat of the moment, he looked her dead in the eyes as she struggled. He decreased the force slightly, although still trying to subdue her.

She got mad; he could see the rage in her eyes. She got so furious; she stopped blocking his arm. The momentum made him slash through her skirt as she jumped back.

"Are you crazy? I could have cut you!" He yelled at her; his eyes locked on the huge tear on her dress. She ignored his reprimand entirely and pulled her sword to his neck.

"You don't have to let me," she said, "I can win fair and square," she sanctioned, and her eyes burned with fire.

"I know that..." Alessandro pushed the blade of her sword away with his fingers, tensing his jaw. She was fearless, and he struggled to tame her sometimes.

"No, I don't think you do. You treat me like I need extra help and always go soft on me. I'll never get better if you don't take me seriously, Alessandro." She breathed rapidly, face flushed, and he was sure it was anger, not the fight.

"I'm not trying to protect you. We're just training," he said with a deeper voice than usual. "There's no need for me to try and hurt you for real. You're too reckless sometimes, Lara."

He could also feel the blood burning his face. He wanted her to be strong, but the idea of her getting hurt in any way terrified him.

"I'm not weak—"

"I know you're not!" He cut her off, raising his voice. "But you don't need to put yourself in danger to prove that, especially not to me."

She tried to start arguing again, but he gave her his most severe stare, and she stopped talking, mouth puckered, her little fists clenched by her sides. He grabbed her sword from her hands and placed it against the wall along with his as she mouthed her protest.

He took a deep breath and put his hands on her shoulders, inspecting her skin closely. "Did I hurt you anywhere? I'm sure that knife cut something." He held her arms, anxiously looking for a wound, wishing there were none.

"You only slashed my skirt. I dodged the knife with ease," she muttered between her teeth.

"Not completely, no. I wouldn't have torn your dress like this if you had." He grabbed the

ripped fabric in his fingers, showing it to her. "You will get in trouble if your mother sees this." He couldn't hide the fear, the rage in his voice. "We need to fix it."

He signaled a servant and gave instructions before sending him away. He stood by the training shed door while Lara picked the swords, shaking her head. She went to place them on the wall mounts as he stared out to the gardens, impatient.

"Sometimes it seems you have a death wish, little Lara."

"Nicola." She greeted his brother with a big smile, as she organized the weapons.

The studio where he spent most of his time working was across the courtyard and he would usually come to watch them spar. Nicola had been looking at her from the loggia, sitting on the stone railing, but he jumped and came into the room, walking barefoot on the tile floors.

"Your mother is sure to give you a good beating when she sees the state you find yourself in," he said and grabbed one of her long braids to examine it with disdain. Alessandro leaned against the wall, watching them closely. "I pity the man tasked with wedding you, little rascal."

His brother stood nearly as tall as him, graceful, elegant, wearing all white. Immaculate breeches folded over his ankles, and a wide-sleeved, flowy tunic rested over his shoulders, baring his chest. He wore a couple of rings on his long fingers and a small stud shaped like a C for Condé on his left ear.

A braid adorned each temple, joined by a third plait at the crown of his head, while the rest of his dark blonde hair cascaded over his broad shoulders in soft curls.

He had the bluest eyes and sometimes offered a rare smile of rosy dimples, warm and honest, like their father's. He resembled Erus Condé the most, while Alessandro had his late mother's olive skin and darker features.

Lara seized her braid from him and stuck her tongue out. "I'm never getting married!"

They bickered a lot but also loved each other. Nicola smiled and added: "I prefer my women docile and quiet. I wouldn't have the patience to deal with your... inappropriateness." He raised a thick eyebrow at her, eyes going from hers to the thigh, peeking through the rip on her dress.

Nicola pulled a long dagger from his side and grabbed an apple from a crater, slicing it into wedges. She stretched her body, unbothered by his sassy comments.

Alessandro enjoyed their back and forth a little too much and couldn't hide the smile forming on his lips as he observed them dance with their words.

She poked back at his brother with a sardonic smile. "Who would want to marry such a wuss

like you who can't even pick his own food?"

"Any educated maiden knows rich men don't have to. We have servants for that." Nicola looked her up and down, then landed his squinted eyes on Alessandro. "I don't know why my brother insists on working the fields, breaking his back when he should be doing what I do."

Alessandro shook his head, crossing his arms over his chest. This was one of the subjects he and his brother didn't see eye to eye on.

"If you worked more, you could have a back like your brother," Lara whispered to herself with a cheeky smile, standing close to him by the door. Alessandro smiled at her comeback, biting the inside of his lip. She was witty and sharp, but Nicola didn't hear her, although his older brother was as tall and broad as all the men in the family.

"I bet he would be happy to have you, that idiot," Nicola said, throwing a slice of apple at Lara. She grabbed it and shoved it in her mouth, chuckling as she made faces at him.

"Ale?" She shook her head. "He could marry anyone he wanted. I can't tell you how many letters I have delivered to him from the girls in town," she said casually. Alessandro covered his blush with his hands, avoiding their gazes as they talked about him as if he wasn't listening. "And I already told you, I won't marry anybody. Ever," Lara sentenced.

Alessandro rubbed his temples with his fingers, trying to massage away the pain of her words.

"It would be a shame. You're too adorable to go to waste." Nicola's eyes darkened as he stared at her. She rolled hers in response, and Alessandro sighed, listening to his two favorite people in the world stabbed back at each other in their vicious little game of words.

"Lara, let's fix that skirt before you go home," he said after receiving a pouch from the servant that finally came back. He walked her towards an apple crate by the wall, pulling thread and needle from the purse.

"Thank you!" She sighed with relief. "Give it here." She took it from his hands and sat on the wooden box.

Gathering the skirt over her knees, she looked for the pieces that needed sewing. She was barefoot. Her beautifully carved leather sandals lay by the door, and her legs were naked under the abundant fabric.

Alessandro swallowed and cleared his throat before looking away, but not before catching a glance of her firm thighs. His face burned with more intensity than before.

When he turned around, his brother didn't show the same level of discretion. Nicola bit the

last piece of apple, licked his fingers, and put his dagger back without taking his eyes away from her. Alessandro walked towards him, blocking his view completely, shaking his head with a frown.

Nicola shrugged and smirked at him nonchalantly. “So, little brother, tell me about those love letters from every pretty maiden in town.” A cheeky smile crossed his lips.

Alessandro was getting irritated. He didn’t want to talk about it, especially not in front of her. “There’s nothing to tell.”

“How come? Are they all tasteless and romantic, or is there any naughty one I should know about?”

“I said there’s nothing to tell. I don’t even open them,” Alessandro whispered the last part, looking over his shoulder at Lara, still busy sewing.

“Such a bore.” Nicola rolled his eyes, walking towards the door. “Anyways, tonight will be fun. I bet we’ll hear our little Lara’s screams when her mother beats her for being such a romp. I hope you don’t feel too guilty about it since it was your fault...”

“Get out, Nicola!” Alessandro growled, and his brother left with a cynical smile. *You’re so cruel sometimes*, he thought.

He loved his brother, but he hated how crass he was most of the time, without consideration for other people’s feelings. Although right now, he hated him because he was right.

Of course, he felt guilty...

“It shouldn’t be so obvious now.” Lara fluffed her skirt, hiding the patch within the ruffles. “How is your...?” She asked, covering her mouth with her hand, and both flushed.

His crotch still hurt. She was such a savage sometimes.

“It’s fine now, but I’d prefer you save those moves for a real enemy, not me. I want to have babies.” Alessandro shook his head, and they both laughed.

## CHAPTER 3

### Nicola

**M**idmorning, the men arrived for the Assembly. His father, Erus Condé, would preside over the meeting, which would take place in the same shed Lara and his brother had trained in.

Nicola stood by the open doors, looking at them in the distance. “It’s time to hide, little one. They’re coming,” he said, watching the flocks of men approaching.

She took cover behind the oil barrels stored at the back of the shed that accessed the kitchen. The dark corner gave her the best vantage point to watch without disturbance. Nicola stayed a few feet away with his back to her, in the way of anyone trying to get close.

Men of different stature crowded the warehouse. Most upper-class or Noblemen, like Morini served the High Families. All sported mid to long manes, braided in different styles, according to their status.

Although married women had to wear discrete updos that didn’t call attention to themselves, wedded men still wore loose hair to the shoulders: two braids born at the temples, knotted at the back of their heads.

Younger, unmarried Longbraids enjoyed the longest hair, often to their waists, like Alessandro but usually just mid-back like his. Men wore it down, with any number of loose braids beginning in their foreheads, running back like he was wearing his today. On the other hand, his brother styled his in several relaxed, thin plaits lost in his abundant mane, spilling down his back, similar to Lara’s.

Young people of age to marry were allowed more lenient styles, regardless of gender or wealth. They were expected to display their lustrous tresses.

No other young man in the land had longer, more beautiful hair than Alessandro. Nicola almost envied him a little because he would cut his brother's golden-brown, thick curls himself every other month when it grew so much it would bother him on his farm work.

Lara had the prettiest hair of any woman he'd ever seen. He wouldn't admit it to her, but it was a thing of beauty; black like a starless night, curls for days, all the way past her small waist. What he'd give to brush and braid it for hours, to play with the soft locks in his fingers...

She was only fifteen —the age Plectian women were first given in marriage. Her exquisite hair down to her ass, adorned with delicate braids, was a sign to court her, to approach her and Nicola's fists clenched every time he saw a young nobleman notice her, talk about her, admit to wanting her.

His fists clenched now as he guarded her, knowing all too well the trouble she would be in if somebody discovered she was there.

Nicola located the Eruss, the only people allowed to wear gathered plaits at the top or sides of the head, stylized at the crown to add volume, which gave them a more dignified look.

Tadius dressed in tanned clothes. His straight black hair sleeked back into an elaborate fishtail at the top of his head. His narrow, hooded eyes moved around anxiously; his chubby cheeks flushed as he braved the heat of the overcrowded room. He was a very short, delicate, slightly plump man.

Erus Pictor's mid-height posed a stark contrast. Textured twisted locks fell down his high cheeks, framing his strong jaw. He dressed in cream colors, accentuating his deep brown skin and dark, intense eyes.

After a few minutes, the last batch of men entered the shed, followed by Erus Condé, leaning on a cane while Alessandro held his arm, aiding him. His father had been crippled for life many years before when he lost a leg in the Great Longbraid War. Although Alessandro and Nicola were still children when it happened, they had to take over the farm to help him.

When their mother died during the birth of his younger brother Sebastian, Nicola was six years old, Alessandro five, and Camile three. Their father was devastated, but his children, and his villa kept him busy enough to survive the grief.

When he lost the leg, his past vitality went with it, and he withered away quickly. Erus Condé was sixty years old but looked seventy. His hair was stark white, his body frail, although his mind was still sharp and his heart kind.

Nicola's eyes followed his brother as he helped his father sit on the only chair in the shed and kissed his old hand. Then Alessandro approached him, inquiring about Lara with a slight motion of his head. They were so tight; they didn't need words to communicate most of the time. As his brother stood by him, Nicola looked over his shoulder, pointing at the spot where he had concealed her before winking at her.

Her mischievous smile flickered in the darkness.

Alessandro nodded and both stared forward.

"We are all here," his father said with a hoarse voice, and the men quieted down. "Erus Scarfo, you have the floor."

Scarfo was taller than the other Eruss and wide, had dark wavy hair past his shoulders, loosely tied midway at the end of a gathered plait from his forehead. A short, well-kept beard framed the rest of his face. His sharp silver eyes shone when he took center stage.

"We haven't succeeded in finding Magic, even though we know for a fact, Skin have it. Discovering those scarred demons has proven very difficult with our current strategy," he said with a honeyed voice. An exceptional speaker, the Erus could always convince the men to do his will by sweet talking them.

"Every time we send out Scouts, we find them after days or weeks, hanging from our own trees, disemboweled, dismembered, sometimes beheaded." Nicola's father raised his upper lip. "How many more men do we need to sacrifice for this impossible conquest?"

He perceived the pain in his father's eyes as he talked about the lost men. Many in attendance wrinkled their noses, muttering inaudible complaints as they heard the old man give the gruesome deaths' details.

His father was a very affable man—a trait Alessandro had inherited... for the most part—and always opposed the Longbraids' conquering ideals. His name and wealth granted him enough leverage to voice his opposition in a public forum like this without explicitly going against his own people's desires. After all, he was a Longbraid, and *Longbraids stuck together*, but Nicola knew the sacrifices that motto entailed.

"As many as necessary," Scarfo brushed off the argument with a hand movement. Nicola clenched his fists by his side. "Getting our hands on this Magic would put us in a position to rival *Oubao-moin*, the Blood Island's Magic Kingdom."

A few men nodded, and some agreed out loud.

There was no Longbraid King. They had renegaded their old sovereigns centuries ago and founded their free country, but Scarfo was the most powerful man in the land and believed acquiring Magic was his ticket to becoming ruler of The Land of Plectos.

Nicola grunted, well aware of Scarfo's influence on the men. He convinced more and more every day, going against everything Longbraids had stood for, worked for, and fought against for centuries.

Their government system, created four hundred years ago, was led, and managed by four Eruss: Scarfo, Pictor, Tadius, and their father. They owned most of the land in Plectos, worked by lower-class people who produced goods while the High Families paid their salaries and taxes used to build roads, aqueducts, fountains, and also maintain their army.

The greedy, power-hungry Erus was doing everything in his hands to change that system. He was sly and hadn't proclaimed it openly, but the Condé had figured out his goal.

"We are farmers," Alessandro interceded with a silvery voice. "We have always been farmers. The land you're standing on has belonged to my family for centuries. We don't have the military force needed for such a quest." Alessandro, like his father, opposed the war.

"We have a better trained army than Costos. Our military strength pushed them to negotiate peace with us. Even when their population is five times ours, they are not natural warriors like us," the Erus argued, and Nicola scuffed.

His brother was a great warrior, a trait also gotten from their father, who had been one of the greatest fighters in the history of Plectos. Scarfo? The man was... a wuss.

"We already have the bones to achieve greatness. We only need the power we'll strip from Skin when we take their Magic!" Morini cut in. "If leveraged strategically, we could afford the biggest army in the world." He walked to the front of the room, smoothing his hair back, holding his tunic, and raising his jaw. "As Erus Scarfo said, the sacrifice of a few good men is necessary to achieve greatness. We must go to war." He lifted his fist dramatically.

"Signore Morini, it's easy for you to agree with Erus Scarfo. Neither of you would be sacrificed in this quest." Nicola didn't move from his spot. His chin lifted, eyes piercing those of Lara's father. "Eruss and Noblemen are never the ones to die in battle," he added with scorn.

Nicola knew every man's level of strength and skill in his country. As treasurer of Plectos—a position always held by his family, granted because of their long history of honesty and honor—he managed the funds to pay for every man's time training.

The Condé also produced the best warriors in the land, trained by Alessandro currently, by their old man before, and by their grandfather previously. His father's father had been a loyal vassal to their mother's family. She was the Condé heir, who married their father, a lower-class farmer who became General of the greatest Army in the Ucrian Peninsula.

Alessandro had inherited the men of their family's legacy and was considered the best fighter in the land at the tender age of seventeen. Nicola oversaw his brother's regular testing to measure the Longbraids' abilities. Both of them knew Noblemen were the worst warriors in Plectos. They slacked, barely maintaining an ordinary skill, especially after so many years of peace. Morini was completely useless, but Scarfo protected him.

Eruss were exempt from participating in battle, shielded by their Family names, to ensure the survival of their lineage. Their father was a great exception. Him and his brother were as well, as they were raised under the expectations of the most formidable man in the country.

"Boy, do you expect us to lead the way into battle?" Morini puffed his chest out, smirking. Some men in the crowd chuckled along.

"Do you expect my brother and me to carry the Longbraids' name while you and the other Eruss debate our fates?" Nicola asked with a clear voice, giving Morini a cheeky grin. "If you want this... Magic," Nicola said with skepticism, "you should be ready to grow your braid out on the battlefield." He challenged the man.

In times of war, Longbraids didn't cut their hair, unless defeated; in which case, their long manes would get chopped to their ears, as a memory of their dishonor. The longer their braids as soldiers, the more honor and victories under their belt.

They had been told tales about their father's braids to his thighs when they were children, although they never saw them. He cut his hair himself when he lost his leg.

Chopping their long braids was a sign of shame or mourning for the men, even punishment for some crimes. The worst criminals in Longbraid history had been banished from the land and forbidden from ever growing or braiding their hair.

Nicola had planted the seed of doubt in the crowd. They soon got agitated, whispering to one another. Lara's father clenched his jaw, face flushed. The nobleman arranged his tunic and smoothed his hair back before speaking. "I'm a strategist, not a foot soldier."

"How far have your strategies taken us, Signore Morini?" Nicola countered again, and his interlocutor raised his fist. His brother, who had been by his side the whole time, took two quick

steps forward, standing between them.

“Signore Morini...” His brother’s clear voice turned deeper, lower. The man froze, looking up at Alessandro’s severe grin.

His brother was slender, yet strong like a horse, with a wider back than him, naturally built bulkier. Although still an adolescent, he was taller than Nicola by more than a couple of inches. His younger brother was taller than anybody he knew.

Imposing as he seemed, Alessandro led with his agreeable, kindhearted spirit. He was the embodiment of sunshine unless someone got on his bad side. Nicola knew when those amber eyes turned dark, he became dangerous. Only his formidable presence was enough to intimidate anyone like Morini was now.

Lara’s father opened his eyes wide at the sight of Alessandro, an entire head taller than him, thick brows squinted, C-shaped studs —like the one he was wearing— piercing his ears. The shiny peak of a fang showed as he bared his teeth at the weak man.

His brother wore all tan trousers and a long-sleeved tunic, his face framed by the shorter strands of wild golden-brown hair gathered at the crown of his head in a loose ponytail, rogue braids cascading his shoulders.

Morini turned around and snorted, looking at them over his shoulder before joining the crowd. The man longed for this war. His ambition was to gain a High Family status. Although they weren’t poor, he didn’t own any land or much influence to gain the position, aside from having Scarfo’s ear.

Nicola, on the contrary, wasn’t interested in the war. His mindset was that of a businessman, and a battle wasn’t a good business for farmers.

Only a year older than Alessandro, they couldn’t be more different. While his brother loved to get his hands dirty, Nicola plainly refused. He focused his efforts on learning the business side of overseeing their land. As heir, he wanted to honor his father and bring some joy back to his life by making their villa flourish.

“Quite the boys you got here, Erus Condé.” Scarfo eased in, taking advantage of the tension. “I bet they will be great assets in the war.” He gave Lara’s father a stern look as he took over.

“I sure hope so.” His father’s voice tinted with resignation.

Longbraids had already decided on the war a month earlier. Their father had convened this Assembly for a last chance at convincing them against it, but the men had already prepared for it.

If their family failed to convince them to give up, they would leave the next morning.

“We’re all going to this war. It’s the only way to cover more land in our search for the elusive Skin,” Scarfo said. A few men complained again. “And, yes, we’ll lead the battle,” he promised to appease them, but Nicola knew it was a lie. Morini crossed his arms over his chest, frowning. “Like all of you standing here today, I’m a Longbraid. My father and grandfather were Longbraids. My entire lineage, for hundreds of years, were Longbraids. All of us share our history, and Longbraids don’t give up. Longbraids stick together.” The Erus never failed to impress when it was time to manipulate the masses. “When our ancestors came to this land, it was barren, desolated, but they planted it, bore children, and made it their home. *Our* home.”

“He’s good,” Nicola whispered, and Alessandro nodded, clenching his jaw.

Scarfo walked among the men, grinning, looking them in the eyes as he monologued. “We inherited a great country from our forefathers. They left us the most amazing legacy. And we shall honor them,” he said slowly. A few men nodded, struck by patriotism as the Erus delivered each word assertively, deeply. “What better way to honor them than to leave an even better country, a rich and powerful country, to *you*, our children?” He stood before him and Alessandro, placing his hands on their shoulders. Nicola smirked when the man squeezed his flesh, accepting defeat for the moment. His brother looked at his father and lowered his head when the old man smiled sadly. “We are Longbraids!” Scarfo shouted, raising his fist.

“Yes!” A man shouted.

“We are!” Another one joined in.

“Longbraids!” The crowd answered.

“*We are Longbraids!*” Scarfo repeated, louder this time, confidently.

“WE ARE LONGBRAIDS!” The entire crowd roared.

Scarfo looked around, beaming, arms wide open, absorbing the hollers of the man he had just persuaded, without a shadow of a doubt, to follow him into war.

“We did what we could.” Nicola patted his brother’s back, shaking his head.

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The noblemen of Plectos left the Assembly with an air of security and victory, although they hadn’t fought the Skin or really knew what kind of Magic they possessed, if any. Scarfo had riled them up so greatly they would blindly follow his lead to what would most likely end up being a stupid

massacre, Nicola thought as he finished sending everybody away.

Alessandro had accompanied his father back into the house through the loggia and Lara hid behind the oil barrels. Nicola walked back into the shed, exhausted. The Assembly had been insufferably long.

“I almost forgot about you, little Lara,” he lied when she emerged from behind the barrels. “Your father might need a drink or two after that.” He smiled dryly.

She looked down, shaking her head. “I know it’s dangerous but... you get to go on an adventure.” She played with her hands.

“I’m not particularly fond of adventures. You know me. This war will be a waste of time and resources, not to mention how many men will die and how our land will suffer without anyone to work the fields. We will lose several harvests, and you and the other women will be alone for years, unprotected... in charge of everything. It’s going to be chaos.” He rubbed his temples.

“What is so wrong with us being in charge in the meantime?” She inquired, squinting her fiery eyes.

“Everything!” Her indignation amused him. He loved to taunt her, and he did every opportunity he had.

“Women bear your children and make your homes. We can work the fields; also fight if need be.” Her plump lips pouted. She looked adorable when mad.

“You certainly would be able to, with that strong body.” He glanced at her thighs, still bare under her gathered dress, before returning to her eyes, “but do you think your sick mother could? Do you even think she would allow it? I bet you’d all die of hunger during the first winter if not for incompetence, surely out of stubbornness.” Nicola knew he had struck a nerve when her knuckles turned white as she clenched her small fists around her apron. “Anyways, I know you’ll manage.” He tried to appease the beast. She walked by him and stood by the shed door, turning her back to him.

Nicola sighed. Another conversation with her ended up in discord. It was like he couldn’t dial back the contempt, not even when talking with her, although he tried really hard. There wasn’t a time he didn’t end up irritating Lara, but he couldn’t help himself.

Teasing her was too pleasurable for him. She had a strong temper and a passionate will she let out only when alone with him and Alessandro. Even when Nicola fought himself every time, provoking her was just... intoxicating. He couldn’t stop.

While he called her a rascal and acted aloof in her presence, he enjoyed teaching her about the farm. Watching her gather her skirt in her belt to pick up vegetables barefoot in the fields had always been a welcomed treat. She wasn't particularly pretty. At least not to his standards, he would tell himself repeatedly, but he still appreciated her raw simplicity.

He would tell himself and anybody who asked that he liked his women slim, refined, with long necks and delicate features. He enjoyed his women stunning and quiet. Lara was neither. He would tell his brother how very pedestrian she was, not refined at all. He believed no amount of beatings was ever going to change that.

Nicola liked her nonetheless, because she had spirit, and her eyes would sparkle with a hunger for learning and discovering he had never been able to satisfy. She would ask questions, *oh, so many questions.*

He'd find himself in a bind whenever he tried to debate her and her resounding logic. He hadn't met a single grown man able to stimulate his brain like she could when she doubted and challenged everything. Nothing was absolute. Everything was dissectible to Signorina Morini.

He found her the most delicious when she was taking a subject and breaking it apart, tearing its walls, ripping away all its mysteries, digging deep into it until she started understanding it. And it was magical for him to witness it and even take part when she let him since getting excited about something meant she wouldn't shut up.

She behaved shy and distant for the most part, always inside her own head unless something piqued her curiosity. When that happened, Nicola always wanted to be there, listening to her philosophy, speculate about the hows and whys of things.

In those moments, he wondered if telling her he was going to marry her was just a way to tease her because she always said no, or if maybe... he would enjoy having a wife who couldn't only fill his flesh and heart needs but his mind's as well.

But then she looked at him with those feisty eyes, and he returned to reality. Lara wasn't wife material. She was too rough and callous for his taste. He would never be able to tame her, although he knew it would be fun trying.

"I have something for you, little rascal," he said, and she shot him a scornful look. "It's good. I promise you're going to love it." He walked to her as she crossed her arms. "Don't be mad at me."

He reached for her neckline with his hand, tapping the black pearl against the soft fabric of

her tall collar dress. He remembered the shine in his brother's eyes when he showed it to him after he had it made into a pendant for the delicate chain adorning her lovely neck.

He closed his eyes, recalling how he didn't share with Alessandro he had his own gift for her.

She blushed when his thumb brushed her cheek. He sighed, stopping the rogue caress. Instead, he grabbed a curl resting on her shoulder and pulled it gently, enjoying the soft texture of her magnificent hair. He smiled, letting the lock fall on her back, and untucked the present from his waistband.

"Here." He handed a carefully wrapped small package to her.

The hint of a smile peaked through her lips, and his heart rumbled, excited for her reaction. "What is it?"

"It's your favorite thing in the world," Nicola said, his finger trailing the cloth covering.

"You're here," she said, cheeky, and his chest tightened. "And Ale will be soon." She glanced at the main house across the courtyard.

"It's a book, silly." He couldn't stop the side smile as she grabbed it and began untying the silk ribbon.

"A book?" Her eyes shimmered, and she hurried to discover her treasure. "It's magnificent!" She brought it to her lips, smelling it. Nicola couldn't contain another smile, although he did his best to conceal it. He couldn't stop grinning around her. "How old is it?" She asked, examining the leather cover, then the thick yellowish pages.

"Very, probably hundreds of years," he confirmed.

Her eyes widened, and she jumped into his arms without notice, hugging him with clumsy strength, and such warmth Nicola didn't know how to react. Lara would hug his brother a lot, which filled him with good envy, but never him. He wasn't used to her this close, to her unbearable softness against his chest.

*Damn you, Lara!*

He stood there, eyes on her crown as her face hid in his chest, with his arms in the air, a little afraid of wrapping them around her. He feared if he let himself do it, he would never want to let go...

Holding his breath so she wouldn't notice the state of chaos her inappropriate outburst of familiarity had left him in, he awkwardly patted her back. "It's—" he cleared his throat, the words stuck momentarily. "It tells the tale of God Vinas and his long, tiring pursuit of this woman who

didn't want to marry him," Nicola said, feeling the heat in his cheeks.

He shook his head, grabbing her shoulders, and pushing her back gently but firmly. Her hug wasn't something he could permit himself anymore.

"You're teasing me again." She wrapped the white ribbon around a lock of hair over her shoulder. Nicola didn't answer. "I didn't bring anything." She patted the skirt of her dress. "I never expected a gift from you." Her eyes squinted, inquiring, curious, dangerously discerning.

"It's only a parting gift. Don't make it weird." His voice deepened, frayed as he avoided her eyes. He leaned against the shed doorframe, looking at the hill of cypresses going away into town.

"Well, you surprised me. I don't expect these niceties from you, Nic," she said, pacing around him, playfully teasing him now. He didn't enjoy being on this side of it. "Would you accept my handkerchief in return?" She pulled a graceful piece of fabric from her cleavage and dangled it before his eyes, and he immediately caught a whiff of her subtle, lovely scent.

He gulped, back pushing against the wooden beam like he was trying to run from the plague. "I don't think I should," he said, his burning face turning away from the napkin.

"It's the only thing I have." Her eyes took the place of the handkerchief, and she stabbed him with them, dark and... so bewitching, as she leaned closer to look up at him.

"It'll be my pleasure." He grabbed the napkin, squeezing it inside his fist as he endured her closeness. *I can't have you this close, dammit!* "I'll treasure it," he confessed with more honesty than he should have, walking away from her to stumble against his brother.

Alessandro's question rescued him from her. "Are you worried about the war?" Nicola sighed, shaking his head.

"Promise me you'll write every time you can. I want to know everything, even the ugliest details." There she was. Her sparkly eyes trembled with wonder when she shifted her attention to his brother. "I'll write to you," she said, walking away from the shed, hugging Alessandro's arm.

"I doubt she's going to write to me," Nicola murmured, squinting for a brief moment. He brought his fist to his lips, breathing her in before shaking away the feelings threatening to creep into his ever-pragmatic heart.

## End of First Three Chapters

Thanks so much for reading. If you want to continue, you can sign up for a chance to get a FREE Advance Reader Copy (ARC) in exchanged for an honest Review here: <https://forms.gle/MqXUbmSRbJeMd9R56>