

[1] Diminished Inheritance

Fawn's Courtyard - Imperial Harbor

As the sun set on their adventure, they embraced whispering promises of forever. Their love bonded by an oath stronger than any enchantment.

Noelle's fingers traced the last two sentences inked on the matted parchment of the final page. She chose not to close the book and she dared not to look up from the page yet. Instead, she kept her head steady and locked. Her eyes dared to glance over the top brim of the leather bound book she had finished.

Across from her, sitting on the ground lounged against another tree, was Honor. He held his copy of the same book in one of his hands while his other arm was crossed behind his head as a makeshift pillow. His forearm gently brushed up his brown hair that nearly blended in with the dark oak of the tree at his back.

Noelle's eyes flicked back to the page stealthily. Anticipation for Honor to finish built as she began to read the same sentences twice. Once the page had been read three

times through, she glanced back up to see Honor's progress. Instead she met his eyes looking back at her.

"Finished already?" he grumbled, a mix of admiration and irritation lined his words.

As prince of Elyndria, Honor and his siblings had access to some of the best tutors and scholars in the capital. For eighteen years, his life was a strictly scheduled routine of proper education and training. Groomed for leadership, Honor was no stranger to towering standards set by his father, the King of Elyndria. Yet, despite the best education money could buy, Honor couldn't shake the nagging feeling of falling behind.

Noelle didn't start to learn how to read or write until she was ten years old, when Honor's mother began to teach her. Seeing his younger siblings and his best friends excel in their studies only deepened Honor's own feelings of inadequacy.

"What? No, I still have this last page to read." Noelle couldn't hide a small smirk as it pulled at the corner of her mouth.

"Oh, please. You've been staring at that page for at least three minutes now," Honor chuckled as he diverted his attention back to the final few pages of his book.

Closing her own book, Noelle took this moment to center her breath and attempt to see Honor's aura. Seeing

aura was not an easy task, requiring a great amount of focus. According to Honor's Mother, Victoria; only people that have experienced extreme emotional distress or those who are severely empathetic can see another person's aura.

As Noelle's breath settled into a steady rhythm, Honor's aura began to shape. Flicks of playful energy danced. His aura was thick to match his strong will, but Noelle always felt a rush of delight seeing the familiar patterns of whirling energy when the two of them spent time together. Honor would never say it out loud, but Noelle found pleasure knowing how he felt about her.

Noelle sat patiently, enjoying the warmth of the sunlight and the fresh smell of the flowers and oak littering the courtyard. Each moment she claimed with Honor these days she began to cherish more and more. Looking back at the past few years, it all seemed to blur together. Joyful moments in her memory were only bits and pieces when she recalled them now.

The pages of Honor's book clapped together as he finally finished. "Well, what did you think?" Noelle asked him, eager for his response.

"It's a bit predictable," Honor resigned. His aura steadied from the flickering energy he expressed earlier.

Squinting back at him, Noelle snorted "You just can't appreciate a happy ending."

“Well of course; he slays the monster, he has his kingdom, and he gets the girl. What other way would this story end?” Honor’s voice had hints of a familiar frustration.

After long sessions with Honor’s Mother, learning to read and write, Noelle would spend even more time with Honor as he shared his favorite stories and books with her. Back then, Honor’s favorite stories always followed heroic knights who had slain monsters and defeated evil.

Without being able to read the scribbles on a single page, Noelle was still in awe of Honor’s passion and excitement for sharing stories. Things were better between the pages of a book. It was an escape for Noelle. It was hope. It was the possibility of a happy ending on the horizon. But, at some point, Honor’s excitement for those same stories started to fade.

“Well, how would you change it?”

Honor furrowed his brow. “Sure, he had to fight for what he wanted.” He paused as he contemplated his next words carefully. “But, he never had to sacrifice anything... and he still got everything he wanted in the end.”

This realization caused Honor’s aura to thin. Seeing this, Noelle felt something catch in her throat. She lost focus on her breath and Honor’s aura faded away from her vision.

“What do you think should have been sacrificed?” Noelle nervously posed the question, barely getting the words out.

Honor sat and pondered the question for a moment. Eventually he came to an answer, “It would be a more interesting story if he had to sacrifice his kingdom.”

He was lying. Noelle didn’t need to see his aura to know.

Her stomach dropped and her heart began to skip a beat as it raced faster. Breathing became more shallow as she stood up from her seat. The dark gray wool of her dress cascaded around her lower body. It took only three paces to reach Honor as he lounged against the tree. Pressing her back against the rough bark, she slid down to the ground to sit by his side. Noelle rested her head on Honor. Her thick brown curls acted as a cushion against the lean exterior of the prince’s shoulder.

Letting out a small sigh, “Things are going to change soon, I suppose.”

Honor remained silent, fiddling with the corners of the closed book.

“Have you seen your father?” Noelle probed, desperately trying to hold onto their moment together.

“Not for a few days. It was a fleeting moment,” Honor sighed.

Justice Carwyn, Honor's father and King of Elyndria, had fallen grievously ill over the past months. His plague was known as the *Ebonscourage*. Thankfully, the illness was not contagious. However, the best healers in the capital couldn't cure it. Those struck would gasp for air for months as their skin withered like flowers as the cold sets. Soon enough, Justice would fall to the disease and Honor would be required to step into his father's place.

Noelle's hand slid gently onto Honor's forearm and offered a reassuring squeeze, "I couldn't think of a more perfect person to -"

"I doubt any amount of training or studying could prepare me for this," Honor scoffed, trying to laugh off the fear in his voice.

Her thumb traced comforting circles over his. Becoming King meant that Honor would shoulder the weight of an entire kingdom. A daunting task for an eighteen year old boy. He'd sit in on important meetings everyday. He'd become the face of the people. Worst of all, to Noelle, he'd be required to marry into nobility and continue the Carwyn family lineage. It didn't matter how Noelle felt about him. Nor did it matter how he felt for her. Their time together was limited. When the time comes, there would be no place for an orphan girl in gray wool clothes.

Intrusive thoughts and selfish fantasies invaded Noelle's mind. "You know, it's not too late to run away. A place where no one knows our names." She gave her best effort to play the words as a joke. But, she cringed as she felt the desperation leave her lips.

"Yeah? Where would we go?"

"We could find a small stead. North. In the mountains?"

"You wouldn't prefer a quiet life on a farm with rolling fields?" Honor amused her.

"Please. I don't think either of us would fare well at farming," she chuckled weakly. "Besides, I don't need much."

Noelle had nothing as a child. There was no family and there was barely a scrap of food. Coming to live with the Carwyn family changed her life. Often, she is kept awake at night by the nightmares of what kind of person Noelle would be if it weren't for the kindness and generosity of Honor's parents.

Victoria passed away six years ago. Justice's time was short. And now, Honor's future didn't seem to have room for an orphan girl. The impending departure nagged at Noelle's mind. *What would happen to her once the Carwyns were gone?*

Feeling helpless, Noelle offered a whisper, “We can go wherever you prefer.”

Honor gently squeezed her hand. They both closed their eyes in silent gratitude as their bodies propped against the dark oak tree.

The moment was interrupted by the sound of two stones grinding. A grizzled knight stood at the opposite side of Fawn’s Courtyard clearing his throat. Doing his best to insert himself into the situation politely, Sir John Reinhardt stepped forward towards the two.

“Lord Carwyn,” the older knight stopped a jaunt away from the two. He stood attentively. “Your sparring session will begin shortly. We’ll have a guest overseeing the training today, as well.”

Honor shifted and began to stand, swiftly stowing his book into a small pack. From it, he pulled a pair of leather gloves, preparing for the grueling match. With the pack slung over his shoulder, he began to follow the older man.

“Miss Gray,” the knight gave a polite half bow to Noelle.

“Sir Reinhardt,” she acknowledged him. She hid a solemn sigh as she began to center her breath again.

Noelle tried to capture a mental memory of their auras as they began to walk away. Sir Reinhardt’s aura was a

brilliant yellow color. It was steady and unmoving. There were no sparks or flicks of energy that were any sign of his emotional state or his true will. This was a man who had spent years constantly perfecting the control of his aura. Countless battles and hours of training refine a person's aura. Those with a masterful control can disguise their auras to people like Noelle who take a peek.

As Honor walked away, she saw his aura droop and thin with each step as if he was burdened with a heavy pack. The wavering hues of his aura revealed his frustrating reminders of the sacrifices he makes for his duty.

Noelle sat alone on the grass watching the two of them leave her. A bitter taste formed in her mouth as she realized her love for Honor only deepened with each step he took away from her. It was painful.

Liberty Hall - Imperial Harbor

The two men strode through the carved stone hallways of the castle, their footsteps echoing off the walls.

Sir John Reinhardt, the taller and more weathered of the two men, led with a heavy foot. His armor was trimmed with the colors of the Carwyn family - purple and gold.

The younger and leaner of the two wore leather gloves that braced down the length of his forearm. Honor Carwyn, the first son of the Carwyn family, was following swiftly behind, much lighter on his feet.

Years of training and battle experience allowed Sir Reinhardt to perceive aura and control his own with little effort. He could recall how difficult it was at first to even glimpse another person's aura. Now, after four decades of practice, it was as effortless as breathing.

Honor's aura was wavering and thinned after Reinhardt had retrieved him from Fawn's Courtyard, where he spent time with Noelle Gray. A mix of fear, frustration, and depression permeated off of the prince almost tangible enough for Reinhardt to feel it himself.

Every person has aura. Aura is the manifestation of an individual's energy. Heightened emotions can be a powerful stimulant, yet hard to control. A younger person would likely have a more potent aura than an elderly man. But, just like a muscle, aura can be strengthened and refined. Mastery of aura can make the difference in a decisive battle.

"Sir Thaddeus Ludovick will be overseeing your training today," Sir Reinhardt tried to make conversation

during their walk to Liberty Hall, where their combat training always took place.

Honor nodded, but didn't say anything. Reinhardt had been a loyal agent to the Carwyn Family for most of his life. His apprenticeship was done while Honor's grandmother served as Queen of Elyndria. When Justice Carwyn came of age, Reinhardt had already worked his way into a high status position among other knights. He personally oversaw Justice's training. Eventually, he fought next to Justice during the Nether War. Now, Reinhardt currently serves as Vice Regent to the King, chosen by Justice himself, when he took the throne.

Now, Sir Reinhardt had the privilege of training Honor. "Sir Ludovick is a tough critic. Understand that whatever he says, he only wants the best for you and the kingdom." They approached the door to the hall.

Honor didn't regard the comment. Instead, he pulled the straps of his leather gloves tight. The training swords, even though they were dulled, could still pack a sharp bruise without the proper protections.

"Have you made any progress with your aura training?" Reinhardt interrogated the prince even further.

Honor shook his head. His aura began to flare, turning his depression into anger. Reinhardt knew the answer. Honor's aura wouldn't flare and oscillate as much as

it did, if he had achieved any control over it. However, as a leader, Honor would need to operate with a heightened emotional state.

The white haired knight grunted, “Well, perhaps today will be the day you finally best Jasper.” Reinhardt moved to open the large wooden door.

Behind the door revealed a circular stone room. The walls were masterfully crafted stone bricks, each laid with precision. Some glass pane windows allowed for natural light to flood the room. In the center of the room was a wide wooden platform just a few inches off of the stone floor. The planks of the platform were softened and polished. When sparring, it’s best not to risk anyone rebounding their head off of the stone ground.

A tall thin framed man stood just off the platform. He had wavy blonde hair that framed his sharp facial features. His faded green eyes pierced like daggers. The mental preparation flooded the room as he stood waiting for Honor. His leather armor and bracers clung to his charcoal gray clothing beneath. A royal purple scarf was wrapped around his neck, signifying his loyalty to the Carwyn family.

“Mister Gray,” Reinhardt stepped through the doors and acknowledged the thin framed man. “In the hallway, Honor claimed that you were destined to lose

today.” Reinhardt instigated the two boys’ competitiveness as he moved to the edge of the circular room.

A playful smirk edged onto the blonde man’s face. Honor moved to the center of the room to greet his opponent. Honor’s training sword was heavy and meant to be used with two hands. His rival’s sword was thinner, lighter and made for swift thrusts.

Both of the trainees began to warm up by moving through various fundamental drills. They found their own space at separate edges of the room. Anticipation for their spar began to fill the air, heightening the tension.

A new man entered the room while the boys prepared. The metal of his plated armor clinked together as he strode into the room. Assessing the room, he moved to stand beside Sir Reinhardt against the outer wall.

“John!” the man exclaimed informally. “It’s good to see you. You’re much more gray than the last time I saw you. I’m surprised you’ve yet to retire.”

“Sir Ludovick,” Reinhardt regarded the man. “Good to see you as well. There is nothing I’d like more than to lay down my sword. Though, my work is not yet done.” Reinhardt continued to observe every move that both Jasper and Honor made while moving through their drills.

“Fighting a war. Bringing a time of peace. Now, shaping a new generation,” Ludovick gave a hearty chuckle

as he pat the old knight on the shoulder. “It seems as though your work may never end.”

Reinhardt weakly chuckled in response. “Well, with our King’s untimely illness, responsibility for Honor’s training falls to me.”

Ludovick began to straighten up at the mention of his Prince’s name. “Yes, Lord Carwyn is looking strong. Why aren’t you down there giving him the lesson, hands on? Not many could ever match your blade.”

Reinhardt let out a genuine chuckle this time, “These two outpaced me years ago. I’m afraid I lack the stamina to challenge them now.”

“Hard to believe. Even at your age, I wouldn’t dare cross you.” Ludovick was a shorter man. Half a foot shorter than Reinhardt, he had an intense jawline and an even more intense brow that was furrowed at all times. “Who is the other boy? I’ve never seen him with the other squires.”

“That is Jasper Gray. I’m sure you remember the two orphans that Justice took pity on?”

“Gray?” Ludovick’s interest peaked at the name, his brow furrowing even further.

Honor and Jasper moved to the wooden platform to begin their spar. Honor’s flaring and intense aura settled from his routine warm up. But, in comparison, Jasper’s aura was much more controlled and refined. Reinhardt knew

that Jasper had also struggled greatly with his own aura training. Jasper, while not being able to directly control his aura, had full control of his emotions.

Jasper held up his blade in one hand, side facing his opponent. Honor held his sword firmly with both hands, a wider stance. Reinhardt observed the two. Honor's intensity was like a thunderous strike waiting to be unleashed. Jasper's composed demeanor and ghostly green eyes hinted to his deadliness.

Reinhardt signaled for the battle to begin. Keeping his stance wide and strong, Honor made the first move slashing his sword downward. A great deal of force carried behind his attack. Normal men would crumble with just a single strike of Honor's assault.

Jasper turned his shoulder, narrowly evading the blade, but keeping close enough for a counter-attack of his own. Swiftly, he thrust the tip of his blade for Honor's ribs.

Honor had seen this counter hundreds of times before, and managed to retreat from his strike just in time. His aura burst outwards as he swept the blade through in a single motion.

Jasper spun away from the swing and used his blade to parry Honor's, locking at the hilt. Despite Honor's strength advantage, Jasper always emerged successful from these battles. Using the leverage, Jasper disarmed Honor,

stepped forward, and quickly brought his training sword across the prince's thigh for a decisive blow.

Disappointment painted Ludovick's brow. "This boy is supposed to bear the Purple Flame? He'll be our next king in just a few months?" A slight twinge of disgust tainted his voice.

Reinhardt elected to remain silent at the remark, his face remaining stoic.

Honor picked himself up from the spar. A bruise on his thigh was sure to form. Ludovick paced toward the two boys at the end of their spar. Jasper quickly set down his blade and took a knee as the knight approached. Honor acknowledged the knight as well, giving a courteous nod. "Sir Ludovick, it's good to have you here. I trust your travels were well?" He took a gasp of breath between his words.

"Let's dispense the formalities," Ludovick raised his hand in disregard. "I must admit that I expected more from the son of Justice Carwyn. Sir Reinhardt has been training you tirelessly, and yet you fall short to a Gray? As talented and fierce Reinhardt was during his tenure, either he has been sloppy as a teacher, or you can't comprehend the gravity of your situation."

Jasper quickly rose from his knee. "With all due respect, Sir Ludovick, this is your Prince. And heir to the throne."

“Exactly right. He is heir to the throne. He will be King within a year when Justice draws his final breath. He will bear one of the Seven Torches. Yet, all I’ve seen today is a boy who can’t control his aura, letting his emotions cloud his judgment in battle.”

Continuing to remain silent, Reinhardt observed the conflict. How the two boys reacted to Ludovick’s criticisms would shape the Kingdom’s future. Fear began to itch at the old knight as Honor’s aura began to blaze with frustration.

Biting his lip, Honor’s breathing became more shallow. His face burned with heat. The bruise forming on his thigh began to throb.

Jasper took a step forward, “A King is only as good as his council,” beginning to overstep his place. “You would know that better than anyone, as Minister of Defense. Honor will have a burden on his shoulders greater than any man on the continent.”

Ludovick’s jaw clenched and his eyes narrowed as he tried to put down Jasper’s defiance with his own will. Outwardly calm and collected, Jasper’s aura was indomitable.

“If Honor isn’t strong enough, I will be strong enough for the both of us as his Vice Regent,” Jasper’s tenacious will made the hairs on everyone’s skin stand at

attention. “If he needs counsel, he will have advisors like you. It’s not a question of work ethic or education; it’s about how quickly our generation can assert itself.”

“Vice Regent? You’re an orphan. Only the Altus Domini have ever held such esteemed positions on the King’s Council,” Ludovick burst out at the boy.

“I will be the first. I will take place next to Honor as his Vice Regent once Sir Reinhardt retires,” Jasper responded without hesitation.

“That’s quite the task. Where does this fervor come from?” Ludovick’s interest in the blonde boy increasingly grew.

Jasper met Ludovick’s gaze head on. His resolve was unshakeable. “It’s my belief that no mountain is too tall to climb. Honor may face challenges greater than either of us will ever have to. I intend to make sure he ascends to heights greater than any King before him.”

Ludovick took a small step back as he eyed both boys. “I’m impressed with your resolve.” He took a moment to scan the boys’ faces and clear his throat. “Forgive me, my Lord. As Minister of Defense, it’s my responsibility to ensure the strength of our country does not waver. With your father’s condition, we need to be just as strong as ever.”

Taken aback by Jasper's determined outburst, Honor weakly responded "There is no need to apologize, Sir Ludovick."

"Gray, when do you turn eighteen?" Ludovick converted his attention solely to Jasper.

"The new year, sir."

"Where will you complete your apprenticeship?"

"I aim to join the squires, become a knight, work my way up through the ranks, and eventually serve as Vice Regent." Hesitation was a complete stranger to Jasper.

"I wish my men had an ounce of the conviction you do, boy. Consider completing your apprenticeship with me. After Honor's coronation I'll be making another expedition east, across the country to the Hikari Clan. You'll become a knight, see the country, and become familiar with our kingdom's military standards. You might even benefit from witnessing the ferocity of the Hikari," Ludovick offered the opportunity of a lifetime for the orphan.

Honor and Jasper's eyes both grew wide in shock. "I'm honored, sir," for the first time in years, Honor heard a flash of hesitancy in Jasper's voice. "If you would, please allow me some time to think about it."

Ludovick nodded, shaking hands with both boys before departing.

Breaking his silence, Reinhardt stepped forward. “Let’s take the rest of the evening off. Spend your free time trying to center your breath and feel your aura.”

Jasper’s resolute aura was unnerved. Honor’s roaring aura suddenly became weak and hung over him like a wet linen. The two boys departed and left Reinhardt alone wondering what the new generation would shape their country into.

Honor Carwyn’s Quarters - Imperial Harbor

The sun broke through the thinned pane glass lining the balcony of Honor’s room. The rays of light pierced through his eyelids like daggers.

Honor’s hand instinctively reached down to his thigh. He began kneading the skin trying to suppress the throbbing. The bruise that Jasper gave him pounded as if it was a volcano waiting to break the surface of his skin.

Pulling himself to the edge of his bed, Honor propped his elbows on his knees. His face fell into the palms of his hand as he ruffled his hair and rubbed his eyes.

Sleep was foreign to him lately. The night before, he tossed and turned more than usual. Staring outside, the stars twinkled mockingly, reminding him of Noelle. Memories of the times spent together staring at the sky, enjoying their company, and discussing stories flooded him. The prominent moon served as an unforgiving reminder of their situation and the hopelessness of a relationship ever blooming.

He turned over again, trying to forget about it. Desperately, he was grasping for the elusive idea of actually drifting off to sleep. Instead, the throbbing of his bruise reminded him of Jasper's imminent departure. His best friend and steadfast companion was offered an incredible opportunity to complete his apprenticeship, one that orphans never received. With how hard he worked, Jasper was an appropriate choice. Despite Honor's pride in his friend, the loss was weighing heavily on his heart.

Honor's father was soon to pass. Mountains of responsibility and irrevocable change would be pressing upon him. Soon, he would bid farewell to his father and his closest friends.

Adrift in a sea of uncertainty.

As he brooded at the edge of his bed, the sharp rapping of knuckles interrupted the silence. The gravelly voice of Sir Reinhardt, his trusted mentor, cut through. “Lord Carwyn,” came the familiar call and reminder of his duties. “The King’s Council will be convening soon. It would be prudent for you to attend. We shall be discussing the steps to be taken after your father passes.”

Honor grunted back, acknowledging the Knight’s summons. He washed his face, fixed his hair, and dressed for the meeting.

Scanning his reflection in the imperfect glass mirror, Honor couldn’t help but linger on the purple and gold robes he wore. They were magnificently tailored and fitted perfectly to his frame.

He turned and began to stride towards the entry door to his chambers. Too many steps were required to move across a single room. There was much more space than any single person needed. His belongings and furniture barely filled the space. The designers and architects did their best to fill it.

I have everything I could ever ask for. What right do I have to feel so sorry for myself? Why do I feel so empty? Honor asked himself as he opened the door to greet his mentor, bearing a weak smile and disguising his turmoil.