

Chapter Six



The palace itself, from the outside, wasn't ostentatious. Its beauty lay in subtlety: weathered statues of elven heroes and fairy saints stood between carved columns. Intricate patterns coiled up the stonework, and the frieze above the doorway depicted scenes from long-forgotten myths. It resembled an ancient temple more than an imperial stronghold; humble, silent, reverent.

The courtyard, however, looked as though it had been pulled from a dream Gerardo never imagined he'd step into. Pink and lavender trees bloomed in careful rows along the perimeter walls, their petals catching the breeze and perfuming the air with a delicate sweetness. Flowerbeds, dense with color, overflowed with meticulously groomed roses and wild blossoms, every stem touched by some unseen gardener's devotion.

A rectangular pool mirrored the soft blue of the sky, perfectly still except where two marble fairies stood at its center, posed back-to-back. Water spilled gently from their pursed lips, sending soft gurgles echoing across the courtyard. The sound pulled tension from Gerardo's chest, little by little, like a lullaby fashioned from architecture.

As they walked, the guard warned Gerardo not to step on the grass. He glanced down. The pathway shimmered beneath his feet with a mosaic of unfamiliar, polished stones that glittered like lavender glass. Each step

sounded like the clink of crystal underfoot, and it almost felt disrespectful to tread on something so fine. They followed the path around the pool, curving gently until it guided them straight to the palace steps.

Gerardo ducked under a curtain of hot pink linen at the entrance, careful not to let mud from his boots stain the fabric. Guilt pricked his chest the moment his soles touched the sea of gleaming marble flooring inlaid with silver floral designs, so precise and intricate they looked too delicate to step on. The patterns stretched across every corridor, crept up the pale blue pillars, and wrapped along the crème-colored walls like vines frozen in time. Whatever expectations he'd carried with him into this palace, they fell away here. This was no ordinary hall of power. This was a place of rituals. Of unspoken rules. And he was a trespasser, muddy boots and all. He tried to focus, to keep his thoughts tethered to the mission, but the palace was a maze of distractions.

Somehow, without realizing how quickly it had all blurred together, Gerardo found himself entering the throne room—and utterly without a plan. Six narrow pools flanked their path, one on each side of three long pathways. Gerardo's breath grew tight in his chest as they approached the throne. He forced his gaze upward and found the emperor seated high above, a figure wrapped in indifference. Emperor Mentir didn't spare them a glance. He was turned slightly toward another man, speaking in a low, commanding voice; possibly the imperial advisor, judging by the ornate silks and elaborate rings that glittered with every small gesture. Gerardo shifted nervously beside the guard, hands twitching at his sides. Then, remembering himself, he dropped to one knee.

At last, the richly adorned advisor tilted his head in their direction and murmured something to the emperor. Only then did Mentir's gaze slide over to them. Gerardo held his breath.

"What *is* this?"

Emperor Mentir eyed his visitor with a piercing look of malevolence which Gerardo was not surprised to receive, but still he couldn't help the shudder that claimed his nerves. A sense of despondency formed as a lump in his throat and grew with every following glance. Soon, he was forced to avoid eye-contact in order to keep some fraction of hope that his fate was not sealed in those leering eyes.

"This soldier here says he was separated from his battalion after a battle, sire," the guard explained. "And his commander instructed him to come here to be relocated should the palace be closer than a base."

Gerardo felt positive things could only go downhill from there as no such policy existed anywhere to his knowledge. It had been a feeble last-minute excuse to enter the palace.

Emperor Mentir furrowed his eyebrows at the guard. "I beg your pardon?" Before anything else could be said, the advisor whispered something into the emperor's ear, but the statement was quickly dismissed. "I'm well aware, thank you!" He peered over the advisor's shoulder. "Nareed!"

Gerardo silently prayed a desperate prayer as he watched a servant approach and kneel before his emperor. When the prayer was finished, his utter fear somehow seemed silly to him. After all, if this was meant to be as Mira had claimed, shouldn't everything conveniently fall into place for him?

"This soldier needs to be relocated immediately," Emperor Mentir informed the servant. "Just get him out of my sight. And I don't want any

further distractions! If anymore soldiers wander over here, just relocate them for God's sake. *Fools.*"

"Where should I send him, sire?" Nareed asked.

"Does it matter? He's but one soldier!"

"Send him to The Airies," the imperial advisor butted in. "They can use all the help they can get."

"Oh, for the love of—" The emperor thrust his hands through his light blonde hair. This disturbance was ever testing his nerves. "Fine, send him to The Airies, Nareed. Just get him out of my palace already!"

"Yes, Your Majesty." Nareed stood and addressed Gerardo. "Follow me, please."

Gerardo obeyed without a word, trailing behind the servant in the opposite direction from where he'd entered. Every step away from the throne room made it harder to resist the primal urge to run. But fleeing would only draw suspicion. He was already under enough scrutiny. Every glance, every sideways look from the palace staff or the guards screamed disdain. He breathed a furtive sigh through his lips and glanced at his trembling hands. He curled his fingers into tight fists in an effort to steady them.

As they walked on, Gerardo casually surveyed his surroundings. Columns, archways, endless doors, but nothing that hinted at a prison. He wouldn't even know what to look for in a palace like this. Nothing stood out. It was all too pristine, too curated.

The corridor narrowed and stretched endlessly before them until at last, they reached its far end. Nareed gestured toward a bench and disappeared into a side room without a word. Gerardo sat stiffly, shoulders tense, mind racing. If no one intervened, no hidden opportunity emerged, he would be sent to a battlefield and forced to fight for a side he neither believed in nor trusted.

Gerardo turned his gaze toward the end of the corridor, where a narrow staircase descended to a lower level of the palace. The moment he considered the possibility that it might lead to the jail, a knot of unease twisted in his gut. He found himself hoping—*almost praying*—that it didn't. Despite being so close to fulfilling his mission, the desire to actually rescue Jorge remained disturbingly absent. In truth, the idea of being reassigned to The Airies seemed far more appealing. If he remembered right, The Airies was situated deep within the heart of the Noelle Empire, a makeshift base used to regroup and reinforce. The place had never exactly been shrouded in secrecy. On the contrary, their strength had been paraded like a badge of pride. If the People truly intended to attack such a fortified position, Gerardo could only smirk at the thought.

Lost in this moment of recollection, he didn't immediately notice the armored figure emerging from the stairwell. The man moved quickly, his gear clinking faintly with each step. As he passed, Gerardo took in the armor, the posture, the purpose in the man's stride. He imagined with a sinking certainty this had to be a prison guard. His pulse quickened; it was now or never.

"What's down there?" Gerardo asked.

The guard glared spitefully at him. "Why don't you go find out for yourself?"

Then he stormed away shaking his head, and Gerardo watched him disappear around a corner. Why couldn't he have simply answered the question? But now, Gerardo had little doubt: the dreaded prison waited directly at the bottom of those stairs, eager for him to come and try to steal Jorge back. This was it. He felt the certainty of this truth settle into his chest like a boulder, dragging his breath down with it. He stood with a tragic sigh of regret, and forced his legs to carry him forward.

As he descended into the dim underbelly of the palace, his unease sharpened. The room at the bottom confirmed everything: a fortified jail, rigid and orderly, where exactly fifteen guards stood posted. Even still Gerardo felt some smidgen of surprise. There were two guards assigned to each cell, save for one. The missing sixteenth, no doubt, was the man he had just seen leave moments ago. That weight he felt earlier nearly brought him to the ground now. Why couldn't he have simply died at the Valley of Hills like everyone else had?

"What do you want, Soldier?" spat the closest guard to him.

Gerardo shrugged. "I'm supposed to be relocating soon, but Nareed is taking ages to prepare my gear. So I decided to take a look around. This was the first place I thought to check out."

As he spoke, Gerardo's eyes swept the jail, quietly calculating. He studied every angle, every blind spot, every flaw in the layout that might work to his advantage when the inevitable fight began. The cells—all lined along the right side—faced a bare wall with a single mounted shelf to the left. To a group defending from the inside, it offered a tactical edge. But for a lone infiltrator like Gerardo, it also offered opportunity. He could use that tight configuration against them. He had done more with less. If the emperor trained his guards the way he trained his soldiers, Gerardo shouldn't have *too* much of a problem fighting them off, but he was careful not to underestimate his enemy.

"What do you mean by being relocated?" another guard asked.

"Exactly what I said," Gerardo answered. "I'm going to be sent to a different base because I was separated from my unit during battle."

His eyes fell on the second cell where he spotted Jorge and his two prison-mates. The three men registered his presence at once. Jorge narrowed his eyes, as if struggling to make sense of what he was seeing. The other two simply

stared, expressions fixed with disbelief, as though they were seeing a ghost. Gerardo could only imagine what ran through their minds.

“I’ve never heard such a thing,” the guard responded.

Gerardo spotted a key ring hanging on the wall above the shelf. “Well thankfully His Majesty has.”

The first guard drew his sword. “I don’t believe you.”

The other guards followed suit. One added, “Neither do I.”

“I see,” Gerardo replied. “So you’re going to kill me because you don’t believe I’m being relocated?”

“You also make my stomach turn.”

The guards closed in on Gerardo, who wasted no time. He vaulted onto the shelf and hurled the key ring into Jorge’s cell. Instantly, blades lunged at him from below. He dodged and ran the length of the shelf, using the height to his advantage. He kicked one guard squarely in the face, then drew his own sword and swung back. Within seconds he killed one guard, severely wounded another, and disarmed a third.

He was hopelessly outnumbered, but he was bringing the number down quickly. Still, there was no room for error and little time to think. Gerardo pounced onto one of his enemies’ heads, propelling himself from the shelf toward the spare sword he’d just kicked away, and he snatched the weapon into his hand. Now armed with two swords, Gerardo proceeded to use the columns as shields against the remaining eleven guards. These guards were sharper and more coordinated than the average Xer he’d faced on the battlefield. Maybe it was their training. Or maybe it was their fury, sharpened by the sheer audacity of his intrusion. Whatever the reason, Gerardo found himself in the midst of a far more formidable fight. He had no choice but to adapt.

Drawing on instinct and ingenuity, he used every object in reach to shift the odds in his favor—vaulting over tables, ricocheting off barrels, darting up stairs, and springing from walls. He blended parkour with swordplay in a way that was as unorthodox as it was effective. The strategy allowed him to limit combat to no more than two opponents at once. Whenever possible, he kept the high ground. From there, he struck harder, moved quicker, and saw more. It became his greatest advantage. He made an impressive spectacle of himself. All the while, the guards cried out for back-up as he slowly killed them off one by one. However, no one came to their aid.

Whenever Gerardo passed close to Jorge's cell, he tossed in a sword to arm him and his two prison-mates. Then he would quickly pluck another sword out from the grip of a dead guard to keep himself armed with two weapons. Without two swords, Gerardo was as good as defenseless against his savage adversaries. It was apparent the only thing on their minds was his blood on their blades ... maybe on their hands and coating the ground if they could help it. He recognized this desire in their eyes only because he saw it often in others.

At long last, after the three prisoners were armed with swords of their own, Jorge and his cell-mates freed themselves and helped rid Gerardo of the rest of the guards. The final five surrendered and Jorge ordered them to sit on the stairs and remain silent.

"Is there another way out besides the way I came?" Gerardo asked over the voices of the rest of the prisoners who pleaded to be freed as well.

"Yes," Jorge replied. "We've witnessed the guards coming in and out of a door hidden in the wall over there."

"All right, you three out first," said Gerardo.

Jorge and his cell-mates didn't hesitate to leave out the door mentioned, and Gerardo bolted for it after Jorge exited. However, Jorge closed the door and held it shut, causing Gerardo to stall as he fought to get it open again.

"What are you doing?" Gerardo panicked. "Open the door, Jorge! Don't leave me here!"

Then the surviving guards violently tore Gerardo from the door. He kicked and writhed against all five of them, spitting curses at Jorge for leaving him behind like this. Although, it shouldn't have come as a surprise. A dizzying strike to his temple ended his fight, and he was wildly thrown to the stony ground. After binding his hands behind his back, four of the guards practically sat on him while they took a moment to regain their composure.

"Tell the emperor we have him in custody," one said to another.

"No need," came a voice from the top of the stairs. "I'm right here."

It was Emperor Mentir himself.

An ogre guard yanked Gerardo to his knees, then wrenched his head back by his hair, baring his throat. Emperor Mentir slowly approached his prized prisoner, making sure to relish every precious moment. This was the end, Gerardo had never felt so certain of anything before. What had he done wrong?

"I watched everything," the emperor growled. "I saw the way you massacred my guards and I watched as my prisoners escaped from my palace."

He removed an embellished dagger from beneath his white robe, and pressed the end of the blade into Gerardo's neck. Gerardo flinched and bit his tongue against a cry as the emperor deepened the wound he'd received the night before. He hissed through his nose, forcing himself to endure. Finally, the emperor took back the blade and leaned in closer so that he was nose to nose with Gerardo.

“You’re going to suffer through much more than this, Soldier,” he cooed. “You made me lose some *very* valuable information by letting those men escape. You’ll wish you were dead by the time I’m through with you, and then your suffering still won’t end.”

Emperor Mentir stood and landed his fist against Gerardo’s eye before turning to leave.

“Lock him in the same cell his friends were in. And we’re going to need some new guards down here since all my other guards have been brutally *slaughtered!*”

Gerardo was lifted by his shoulders and thrown into the cell which was once Jorge’s. He sat up and watched as the surviving guards began to clean up the mess of bodies left over from the prison break, some of them even weeping over their deceased comrades. It almost made Gerardo feel remorseful, but a sheer terror of all the possible torments his future could have in store claimed his mind. In an attempt to distract himself, he glanced over into the cell next to him where he was met with the vindictive glares of prisoners he might have been able to rescue along with Jorge. Perhaps that was the sin which got him captured. He was quick to look away. No matter what he did, something negative would captivate his mind.

Blood slowly trickled down his neck and he wished he could wipe it away, but his hands remained mercilessly restrained. It tickled and taunted his skin until he finally used his knee as a form of relief. It didn’t remove all the blood, but at least it stopped the itch.

Once the floor of the prison was cleared of all evidence of a violent feud, and new guards were posted, footsteps breached the heavy silence. Slow and steady, they marched down the stairs. A man Gerardo judged to be part orc and part oroad emerged into the torchlight. Strapped to his belt was a whip on his

right, and an axe on his left. This creature was dressed in bloodstains and wore a barbaric expression on his menacing face. He reached the stone floor before he tossed a set of shackles to the guard in front of Gerardo's cell.

“Let's begin, shall we?”

His gaze moved to Gerardo, and a hungry grin revealed rotten teeth. Whatever had filled the creature with such glee, Gerardo knew it spelled unrelenting misery for him. He instinctively tried to back away, but the effort was hopeless as the guards opened his cell door and snatched him up. Swallowing his fear, he reached deep within himself, grasping for whatever scraps of courage remained.