

Chapter Six

•

The courtyard of the palace was one of the most beautiful sights Gerardo had ever laid eyes on. Pink and lavender trees had been planted adjacent to the surrounding wall, along with flowerbeds and rose bushes which were tended to frequently. Their fragrances mixed in the air and followed Gerardo as the guard led him around the rectangular pool located in the middle of the courtyard. Two fairies sculpted from white marble had been placed in the center of the pool, posing back to back. They appeared to be blowing kisses with streams of water pouring from their mouths, which created a pleasurable rippling sound that helped Gerardo to relax slightly.

Grass lined the perimeter and the guard strictly warned Gerardo not to step on it. Under no circumstances were they to stray from their lavender path. Gerardo didn't recognize the glistening stones on which they walked. As he and the guard strolled across them, it sounded as though they were marching on glass. This path placidly guided them all the way to the steps leading to the entrance of the palace.

During this era on Xyntriav, the exterior of a palace wasn't much to look at. All that caught the eye were the statues of past family members placed between the pillars, the various designs etched into these pillars, and the pictures carved into the frieze above the entrance. Emperor Mentir's palace in particular appeared similar to an ancient white temple and the front entrance was merely a large doorframe. However, inside was a separate matter entirely. Gerardo dodged the hot pink linen curtains hanging in the entryway so not to brush any dirt onto them. He felt somewhat guilty for trampling all over the marble floor in his muddy boots. The flawless silver floral and leaf designs which adorned the floor must have taken years to paint by hand as it stretched to the end of every corridor and walkway. They even continued halfway up the pale blue columns and cream-colored walls.

Gerardo studied every delicate detail of his surroundings, but quickly found himself in the throne room struggling to devise a plan to reach the jail. How could he have allowed himself to become so easily entranced by the luxury of the palace? Then still, the exquisite architecture which continued into the throne room did little to help him divert his attention back to the situation at hand. He observed the area as he and the guard passed six small pools of water where tiny rainbow-colored birds bathed, played, and chirped.

Finally, they reached the emperor and his silver and white throne. Gerardo stood next to the guard, fidgeting

at first. Then he got down on one knee before the emperor, who appeared to be momentarily detained and completely uninterested in who had just entered his throne room. Gerardo held his breath as the emperor spoke in an assertive tone to a man whom he could only assume was the imperial advisor. Finally, this colorfully dressed advisor gestured to Gerardo and the guard so that the reluctant ruler was forced to acknowledge their presence.

“What *is* this?” Emperor Mentir demanded.

The emperor 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, Gerardo had to avoid eye-contact completely in order to keep some fraction of hope that his fate was not sealed in those leering eyes.

“This soldier here says that he was separated from his battalion after a battle, Sire,” the guard explained. “And his commander told him that he was to come here to be relocated.”

Gerardo felt positive that things could only go downhill from there as no such policy existed anywhere. It had been a feeble last-minute excuse to enter the palace. It never occurred to him that he would actually be taken to see the emperor himself.

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 jolted at the sudden change in Mentir's pitch. Then he silently prayed a desperate prayer as he watched a servant approach and kneel before his emperor. When the prayer was finished, his sheer terror somehow seemed silly to him. After all, if this was indeed God's will like Mira had claimed it to be, 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 more distractions! If any soldiers wander over here, just relocate them for God's sake. *Imbeciles.*”

“Where should I send him, Sire?” Nareed asked.

“Does it matter? He's but one soldier.”

“Send him to the Airies,” the imperial advisor cut 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 and followed the servant away from the direction in which he had entered. It was difficult for him to suppress his irking desire to bolt out of the throne room, but he knew he shouldn't draw any more attention to himself. The fact that every soul present detested his very existence brought too much attention to him even now. He breathed a deep but silent breath to compose himself and glanced at his trembling hands. No matter how hard he tried he couldn't steady them. Hopefully no one was watching. He casually scanned his surroundings in a hope to spot any sign of a prison, but he hadn't the faintest idea how he would find it if nothing stood out to him.

Gerardo and Nareed paced near to the end of an especially long corridor where the servant instructed him to sit on a bench while he entered another room. Gerardo obeyed one last time and fought hard to think. How would he find his way to the jail from here? If he wasn't magically shown there somehow, he would be relocated to a battle where he was expected to fight for what the advisor presumed was the losing side.

Gerardo turned his head to the end of the corridor where a set of stairs descended to a lower level of the palace. Now that he was aware of the unlikely possibility this could lead to the jail, he found himself hoping that it didn't. Even though he was so close to completing this mission, the desire to break Jorge out of prison remained non-existent. Come to think of it, he preferred to be relocated to the Airies. If he remembered correctly, it was an area on the outskirts of the Bonn Empire where a large mass of Bonn soldiers had been camping for some time to protect their homeland. He didn't remember them being at all secretive about this as their numbers were something to boast about. So if the People decided to attack that camp he felt only amused by their idiocy. It was highly unlikely they attacked with the appropriate amount of soldiers and necessary resources to win the resulting battle.

During this moment of recollection, an armed palace-worker ascended from the stairs and continued to hurry past Gerardo. Gerardo assumed by the fact that this man was dressed in armor that he was a prison guard. This only increased his worry; it was now or never.

"Excuse me, Sir," Gerardo said. "I ask only to quell my curiosity: what might be down there?"

The guard narrowed his eyes 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 just answered the question? But now Gerardo had little doubt that the dreaded prison lay directly at the bottom of those stairs, just waiting in anticipation for him to come and try to steal Jorge back. This was it. He felt the

confirmation weigh his body down as if he had just swallowed a boulder. He stood up with a tragic sigh of dread and made his way down the stairs to where he found exactly fifteen guards in a jail. Even still Gerardo felt a minute amount of surprise. There were two guards assigned to each cell, excluding of course the sixteenth guard who Gerardo had just seen leave. 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 equipment. So I decided to take a look around. This was the first place I thought to explore.”

As he spoke he studied the area, contemplating how he would fight these guards when necessary. Every cell was located on the right side of the jail and a shelf was mounted on the wall to the left. The layout was clearly a disadvantage to a number of people teaming up against a lone soldier as well-trained as Gerardo had been. Due to the animosity of his commanders during training, Gerardo had received the harshest of lessons. This in turn only benefited him in the end, of course. He knew exactly how to use the layout of the jail against the guards should they attack him. 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 was separated from my battalion during battle, so I’m to be relocated to the Airies.”

Locked up in the second cell from Gerardo was Jorge and his two prison-mates. All three of them recognized Gerardo immediately. Jorge squinted his eyes at him as if trying to discern what exactly was going on, while his prison-mates only gaped at Gerardo like they were staring at an evil spirit. He could only imagine what they were thinking.

“I’ve never heard of such a policy,” the guard continued.

“Well thankfully His Majesty has,” Gerardo responded. He eyed a ring of keys hanging on the wall above the shelf.

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

The other guards followed suit. One added, “Nor 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.”

All of the guards moved in closer to Gerardo, who wasted no time. He leapt onto the shelf and tossed the key-ring into Jorge’s cell while the guards viciously thrust their swords at him. Gerardo managed to dodge the blades and knocked some of them out of his path as he ran to the end of the shelf. Eventually he felt it was time to draw his own sword and swung back. Once he had killed one guard and severely wounded another, he took the opportunity to kick one of their swords to the end of the jail.

Being hopelessly outnumbered, there was no room for error and little time to think. Gerardo propelled himself from the shelf and leapt off the head of one of the guards, snapping that guard’s neck in the process. He landed right next to the spare sword that he had just kicked away and didn’t hesitate to snatch it up. Now armed with two weapons, Gerardo proceeded to use the pillars as shields against the remaining twelve guards. They seemed to have slightly more experience than most of the Xers he was used to fighting in battle; or perhaps it was their aggravated disposition that fueled their motivation to do away with him, making it that much more difficult to counter their attacks. No matter the reason, this was a new challenge for Gerardo and he had to call upon his creative side if he was to survive this conflict. He used everything he could to his advantage including the tables, barrels, the stairs, and even the walls, mixing parkour with swordplay. This methodology helped him to combat no more than two opponents simultaneously. At every chance he grasped he remained on higher ground, which in the end proved to be his most useful technique. 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. As one can imagine, this only added more complications to his dilemma. Gerardo had to quickly pluck another sword out of 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 that 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. Gerardo was familiar with this desire in their eyes and it rarely affected him anymore, only because he saw it often in others.

At long last, after the three prisoners were equipped with swords of their own, Jorge and his prison-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 exit besides the way I entered?” Gerardo asked over the voices of the rest of the prisoners

pleading to be freed as well.

“Perhaps,” Jorge replied. “We’ve witnessed the guards coming in and out of a door hidden in the wall over there. We’re unsure where it leads.”

“Good enough for me,” Gerardo said. “You three first.”

Jorge and his prison-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 in here, you coward!”

It wasn’t long before Gerardo felt the surviving guards violently tear him from the door. He struggled against all five of them, shouting curses at Jorge for leaving him behind like this. Of course it shouldn’t have been a surprise. A dizzying strike to his temple ended Gerardo’s fight and he was savagely thrown to the stony ground. After forcing 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,” said the fifth guard after catching his breath.

“No need,” came a voice from the top of the stairs. “I’m right here.”

It was Emperor Mentir himself.

An ogre guard snagged Gerardo’s wrists with one hand and yanked him up to his knees. He then used his free hand to force Gerardo’s head up, leaving his neck fully exposed. Emperor Mentir slowly approached his prized prisoner, making sure to bask in 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 revealed an embellished dagger from beneath his white robe and pressed the end of the blade into Gerardo’s neck. Gerardo flinched and emitted a small grunt as the emperor deepened the wound he had received the night before. He hissed through his nose in an attempt to bear the stinging pain quietly. If this was the way he was meant to die, he prayed for it to happen a bit faster. The emperor leaned in closer so that he was nose to nose with Gerardo, keeping his blade where it was in his prisoner’s throat. He even twisted it slightly, just for a little more blood.

“You’re going to suffer through much more than this, Traitor,” he spat. “You’ll wish you were dead by the

time I'm through with you. No one ever got away with what you've done and no one ever *will*."

Emperor Mentir snatched his knife back and Gerardo successfully managed to stifle another cry.

The emperor stood and turned to the guard closest to him. "Lock him in the same cell his friends were in. And we're going need some new guards down here since all my other guards have been brutally *slaughtered!*"

Gerardo's hands were secured behind his back so that the ropes burned his wrists. Then he was quite literally tossed into the cell Jorge had been held captive in. 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 then an overwhelming fear 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. He was quick to look away. There was no escape from negativity in here.

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 vicious feud and new guards stood shift, someone entered who had to be somehow related to a giant judging by his size. Strapped to the giant-hybrid's belt, Gerardo noticed a whip on his right and an axe on his left. This creature was dressed in bloodstains and wore a barbaric expression on his grim face. He hadn't finished descending the stairs before he tossed a set of shackles to a guard in front of Gerardo's cell.

"Let's begin, shall we?"

His gaze moved to Gerardo and a rotting grin stretched across his face. It was evident to Gerardo that whatever was making this giant appear so elated would only bring unrelenting misery to him. He began to scoot away from the giant but quickly realized it was useless. So he swallowed his panic and searched deep inside his being to access whatever courage he had left.