

Shadows Over Innocence

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Sicarius slipped into an expansive room in the Imperial Barracks, the rambling old building that held offices and residences for the emperor and those who assisted him in his rule. As the throne's assassin, Sicarius counted as one of those men. He set down a large, bloodstained sack and leaned against a pillar in the shadows.

On the far end of the rectangular space, sunlight streamed through the spotless panes of tall windows, warming the marble floor and the back of the room's single occupant. The small boy pushed a tangled thatch of pale brown hair out of his eyes and hunkered over a gleaming, white floor tile, a charcoal stick grasped between his fingers. Heedless of the sanctity of the palatial décor, he squiggled lines onto the floor with precise squeaks. Sicarius cocked his head, surprised at the intricacy of the pattern forming.

Footsteps echoed from the corridor. Two men, one grayer than the other but both past middle age, strode into the bright chamber. The child bolted upright. He clutched the charcoal stick behind his back and shrank into himself.

"Sespian!" Raumesys Savarsin, the younger of the two men and the twenty-seventh emperor of Turgonia, curled his fingers into a fist and glared at the boy. "What are you doing?"

Eyes downcast, Sespian whispered, "Drawing, Father."

Unnoticed by anyone, Sicarius clenched his jaw as he watched from the shadows.

"Drawing." Raumesys turned to the willowy, gray-haired man next to him, Commander of the Armies Hollowcrest. "My son, the future emperor and leader of our armies, is drawing on the floor of the solarium." He turned back to the boy. "Come here!"

For a moment, Sespian hesitated, eyes darting, as if he might flee into the shadows, but Raumesys growled, and the boy plodded forward. Chin drooped to his chest, he halted before the men. The emperor bent and grabbed his arm, knuckles whitening. The boy flinched, but he did not cry out when the charcoal stick was ripped from his grasp. Raumesys snapped it in half, the crack echoing through the silent room like a bone breaking.

"Father!" Anguish flashed across the boy's face as the splintered halves clacked to the floor and rolled across the marble. "That was my only—"

"And you'll get no more." The emperor dropped to one knee and grabbed Sespian by the front of his shirt. "You're five years old now. It's time you stopped playing and started learning how to lead a nation. No more foolish scribbling on the floor, do you understand?"

"Mother always lets me..."

"Your mother's too soft with you. You will rule a nation of warriors one day. You must be strong."

Knowing the shadows hid him, Sicarius let his fingers curl into fists. Not for the first time, he was tempted to intervene, to protect the boy from such abuse, but he did not move. Speaking against the emperor—thinking against the emperor—was not permitted. He had learned that lesson well as a boy.

"No more drawing," Raumesys repeated. He pulled Sespian close, twisting his arm. "Do you understand?"

The boy winced. "Yes, Father."

Cold and distant, Commander of the Armies Hollowcrest watched impassively. A familiar sight, Sicarius thought, as he remembered Hollowcrest's presence during his

childhood training sessions. Steal sixteen years, and this moment might have been with him. No, he reminded himself; this cruelty was mild compared to what he'd endured. Sespian was Raumesys's heir, not some future assassin they were training. The boy would learn resilience and survive. Despite the thoughts, it took some effort to force his fists to unclench.

"Such frivolity should be punished, Sire," Hollowcrest said.

To deter that punishment, Sicarius picked up the sack and strode into the center of the chamber. The emperor, reminded of work matters, ought to send the boy away.

Sespian's eyes bulged at Sicarius's approach. He tried to squirm away from his father's grip.

Sicarius knew that, dressed all in black accented with throwing knives and daggers, he wasn't the friendliest looking man. He wished he could soften his face for the boy's sake, but that wasn't permitted either. As they'd long ago drilled into his head, the face must be kept devoid of thought and emotion, lest an enemy gather information from one's eyes. He'd been punished relentlessly until he'd mastered a façade that they deemed acceptable.

Raumesys noticed Sicarius's approach first and twitched in surprise before recovering a more regal bearing.

Hollowcrest did not twitch. He said, "Sicarius," by way of greeting and eyed the sack. "Were you successful? Did you get them all?"

"Yes," Sicarius said.

"Let's see," Raumesys said.

Sicarius glanced at Sespian.

Hollowcrest raised an eyebrow. Though thin, wire-framed spectacles perched upon his hawkish nose, his dark brown eyes remained sharp, and he missed little. "Concerned for the boy?"

Sicarius knew the words were a test. Everything was always a test. "No," he said, giving the expected response. "Concern is a feeling, and feelings interfere with duty."

Hollowcrest nodded his approval.

"Sespian will stay," Raumesys said. "Time he learns what comes with the position."

Anger simmered behind Sicarius's carefully constructed mask. The boy was too young; he shouldn't have to witness such atrocities. "Understood, Sire," was all he said.

Hollowcrest twitched his fingers in a get-on-with-it motion.

Sicarius untied the bag and upended it. Four severed heads rolled out and bounced on the white marble. Though desiccated and distorted after weeks of travel, they were still identifiable: man, woman, and children.

Sespian screamed and jerked away from his father. He stumbled, recovered, and fled the room. Sicarius was the only one to watch him go.

Raumesys slapped a palm on his thigh. "Excellent."

"Yes," Hollowcrest said. "There'll be no more talk of uniting the tribes in Mangdoria, with their most prominent chief dead, along with any hope of worthy scions." He nodded to Sicarius. "Go relax. We'll have something new for you in a day or two."

"Yes, sir."

Sicarius padded toward the exit, his soft black boots silent on the tile floor. He paused in the doorway and glanced at the backs of the two older men.

The emperor emitted a nervous chuckle. "You trained him too well, Hollow. The man

bothers me."

"He is loyal."

"I know. You did a good job. I ought to give you Sespian to work with. The boy is disappointing."

"He does seem soft," Hollowcrest said.

"Did you hear that scream? I would've been fascinated by severed heads at that age."

"You're fascinated with them now, Sire."

"True enough."

They shared a laugh and headed for the door. Sicarius slipped away before they noticed him.

* * *

Darkness pressed against the windows overlooking the large gymnasium in the rear of the Imperial Barracks. Sicarius grabbed a towel and wiped sweat from his face and bare torso. He'd warmed up with a couple of hours running sprints, scaling the climbing wall, and strengthening his muscles with sand-filled bags of various weights. Then he'd talked quasi-worthy, off-duty soldiers into wrestling and boxing with him. More precisely, he'd stared at them and pointed to the rings painted on the wooden floor until they'd joined him. Some of them knew who he was, and others did not, but nobody had disobeyed.

The bouts had been short and not particularly satisfying. For years, Hollowcrest had brought in tutors from all over the world to instruct Sicarius on different combat styles, and, even though the best soldiers in the army were chosen to work at the Barracks, it'd been some time since any had challenged him. Honing a blade on a dull stone was difficult, but better than letting it rust. Hollowcrest, Sicarius reminded himself, would send him to the Global Grappling Tournament in the summer, an event where the best warriors in the world competed for honor and, more important for Sicarius, could learn from those better than themselves.

"Men, attention!" someone called from a ring near the doorway.

Everyone stopped in place and stood straight, heels smacking together as Commander of the Armies Hollowcrest strode into the gymnasium.

"At ease," he said.

As soon as Hollowcrest wasn't looking in their direction, the soldiers snatched their gear and disappeared. Sicarius, doubting the Commander of the Armies had come to throw sandbags around, folded his towel, set it on a bench beside his shirt, which was also folded, and clasped his hands behind his back to wait.

Hollowcrest stopped before Sicarius. "I told you to relax."

"Yes, sir."

A tight smile of approval creased Hollowcrest's face. They both knew this was what he'd meant by the order. He would not have been pleased if he'd found Sicarius anywhere else.

"There's a new adjudicator in the northeastern city-state," Hollowcrest said. "He's trying to start a desert-wide trade embargo against us. The emperor wants him eliminated. You'll leave in the morning."

"Yes, sir." Sicarius picked up his shirt. "And this evening?"

"Do a round of the Barracks. Colonel Bratnuvic took over security last month. His work seems adequate." Hollowcrest lifted a shoulder. "But I suspect your experience has given you expertise in such matters. Let me know if you find any weaknesses."

"Yes, sir."

Sicarius ghosted through the corridors of the Barracks, questioning guards and noting the state of each entrance. He entered the extensive dungeons, and memories of childhood training sessions flitted through his mind as he passed walls full of torture implements. Prisoners strung from shackles cringed when they noticed him, but he did nothing more than register their presence as he checked hidden exits, ensuring they were not accessible from the outside.

Before going outdoors to continue his inspection, Sicarius stopped in the kitchen. Spoons scraped and pans clattered as two-dozen men and women prepared the evening meal. A few noticed him as he entered, and they quickly looked away. Scents of complex, spiced dishes brushed his nose, but he chose unseasoned fish and roasted vegetables, then retreated to a remote table. He put his back to the corner and watched the busy area while he ate.

Halfway through his meal, a familiar figure scampered into the kitchen. The boy darted behind the apron of a heavyset woman and peered back the way he had come.

"Prince Sespian." The woman put down a spoon and planted her hands on her hips. "What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be with your tutor?"

The boy offered her a shy smile. "I'm hiding from him."

"But why?"

He looked up at her with imploring brown eyes. "He's boring. I don't care about armies and history and war and all that stuff."

The woman's eyebrows drew down, but the corners of her mouth twitched.

"Can I stay here?" Sespian asked. "Please?"

She picked him up and plopped him onto a nearby table. "Do you want old Dana to get in trouble for hiding a fugitive?"

The boy's gentle eyes widened, and he shook his head.

She clucked her tongue. "You can sit there while we work, but when your tutor finds you in here, no more running, yes?"

After a pause, Sespian nodded. As soon as the cook turned her back, he plucked two spoons out of a ceramic utensil holder, flipped them around, and began tapping out a rhythm on the tabletop. The boy had dexterous fingers. He'd do well at blade lessons when he grew older. Or perhaps not. His list of "boring" suggested he had little interest in martial matters. Sicarius sometimes wondered what he might have found interesting as a boy, if he'd been allowed the freedom to choose his areas of study.

"Where'd you learn that?" Dana asked him, gesturing toward the tapping spoons.

Sespian shrugged. "Just did."

"Ah? You should have a tutor who can give you some music lessons."

A smile started to form on the boy's lips, but it quickly faded. "Father wouldn't let me. Father says things like that are worthless." He set down the spoons and dropped his gaze. "He took away my pens and paper. He says I can't draw any more."

"Well, you must do as he says."

"He hates me," Sespian whispered too softly for Sicarius to hear, but he read the words on the boy's lips.

The cook frowned and patted him on the shoulder. A reedy gray-haired man came in, eyes narrowing as he focused on Sespian. He stalked across the room and grabbed his wayward student by the arm.

"You've wasted our time tonight, Prince Sespian." He pulled the boy off the table. "Now it's bedtime, and you've learned nothing. Surely, the citizens of Turgonia would tremble if they knew a boy such as you was being raised to lead them."

Without thinking, Sicarius left his meal and set a path to intersect boy and tutor. He stopped in front of them, blocking their route. The tutor's mouth dropped, and he fell back a step. Sicarius stared at him, but realized he had nothing to say. The boy had nothing to do with his duty—what was he doing?

Sespian's head lolled back, and his eyes widened. When Sicarius looked down at him, the boy pulled his arm out of his tutor's grasp. He stumbled back a few steps, then turned and sprinted toward the nearest exit.

"Pardon me," the tutor mumbled and darted after Sespian.

Sicarius sighed softly. Meal forgotten, he resumed his inspection. He left the kitchen, then the Barracks. Dusk had fallen. He ignored the caress of crisp air on his cheeks, noting instead tactical strengths and weaknesses in the structures and walls. By habit, he studied each guard, servant, and hired hand he passed, marking walk, build, and weapons carried.

A corporal and a private were stationed at the front gate. When he approached, the corporal straightened and clicked his heels together. The private, a younger man, eyed Sicarius's plain black clothes with furrowed brow. Sicarius wasn't in the Barracks much, so there were many people who didn't recognize him, but something about this private made him pause. Like his comrade, he wore a gold-piped blue uniform, but unlike his comrade, he had Turgonia's insignia, crossed swords over a craggy mountain, pinned to his right breast instead of his left. Sicarius stared him in the eye. The private cleared his throat and glanced at his superior.

"Help you, sir?" the corporal asked.

Sicarius kept his gaze on the younger man. "For a soldier, there is supposed to be no greater honor than serving on the emperor's estate."

"Yes, sir," the private whispered, eyes darting.

"Such an honor that you didn't bother to dress correctly?"

"I..." The private looked down, studying his uniform. After a furtive glance at the corporal, realization came, and he touched his chest. "Yes, sir. I mean no, sir. It was an accident."

Sicarius listened, placing the man's accent as northeastern Turgonia, the area closest to Mangdorian borders. That in itself was not suspect—soldiers were moved around the empire often during the course of their careers—but coupled with the misplaced insignia...

"New man, corporal?" Sicarius asked.

"Yes, sir. Came up from the garrison just today."

The private shifted his weight.

"Anyone come through the gates while you've been on shift?" Sicarius asked.

"Some folks left," the corporal said, "but none have come in since I got on. Except... I got sick for a bit and the private was alone."

"Sick?"

"Had to run to the latrine. Something I ate..." The corporal squinted at his younger comrade. "He brought pastries at the start of—"

The private shoved the corporal into Sicarius and bolted. He fled out the gate, skidded

on the flagstones, and disappeared around the corner. Sicarius pushed the soldier aside and raced after the man. His prey sprinted down the street, running in and out of the influence of gas lanterns burning on the Imperial Barracks' outer wall, and toward the trolley tracks and roadways of the city. He must have hoped to evade pursuit amongst the buildings and dark alleys. On the parapet above, guards patrolled—guards with access to muskets and cannons—but no one fired at the fleeing man. Of course not. He wore an army uniform. Sicarius might have yelled up and explained the situation, but it'd be more efficient to simply handle the spy himself.

He increased his speed, arms pumping as hard as his legs. The spy's boots thudded on roads slick with frost, and crystallized puffs of air drifted behind as he ran, his ragged breaths audible in the still evening. As he'd been so trained, Sicarius made not a sound. He closed the distance. Ten meters. Five.

The man sprinted through a square at the base of the hill and glanced back, perhaps believing he'd outrun his pursuer. His eyes bulged when he spotted Sicarius just behind. The spy's jaw firmed, and he whipped his sword from its sheath, turning around as he did so, holding it out, perhaps hoping Sicarius might impale himself.

Sicarius shifted his weight and, between one step and the next, halted out of blade reach. A few passersby paused, heads cocked.

"Criminal!" the soldier shouted, pointing at Sicarius with his sword.

At the private's proclamation, citizens opened their doors and came outside. Pedestrians murmured to each other. More than one person touched a sword or dagger. Without rank or uniform, Sicarius did not bother arguing. He kept the encroaching citizens in mind, but focused on his opponent.

Falling into a ready crouch, the spy brandished his blade. A smug smile creased his face. Sicarius had no sword with him, and he had not drawn a knife.

Certainly believing his opponent helpless, the spy lifted an arm to strike. Sicarius stepped aside, dodging the blow easily, then lunged in behind the attack. He grasped the man's wrist and twisted it against the joint, catching the sword when it dropped. The man squawked in pain and tried to pull away. Sicarius snaked his leg behind his opponent's knee, sweeping him off balance. Only the arm Sicarius wrapped around the man's neck kept him from pitching to the street. The spy clawed at the grip, but Sicarius merely squeezed harder. Soon his opponent's breaths came in wheezes.

The approaching citizens hesitated. Without releasing his man, Sicarius lifted the soldier's blade and eyed them with a cool stare. Their hands dropped from their weapons, and they backed away.

"Who did you let through the gate?" Sicarius asked his prisoner.

The soldier squirmed, but did not answer. Sicarius dropped the sword and gouged his thumb into the depression at the back of the man's jaw. He dug at the point until the man whimpered.

"Mangdorians... hired assassin... emperor."

Bone cracked as Sicarius broke the man's neck. He dropped the body and raced back to the Imperial Barracks. He'd made a mistake. Someone had seen him on his mission; that was the only explanation. The Mangdorians were reputed to prefer peace and negotiation to conflict and war, but Sicarius had encountered more than one warrior from that nation; not everyone believed in their god's tenets. If someone had hired an assassin, and if the man were successful... it would be Sicarius's fault.

The corporal at the gate had gathered more soldiers. His eyebrows rose at Sicarius's approach.

"There's an assassin inside," Sicarius said. "Sweep the grounds. Tell Hollowcrest."

Before the corporal could respond, Sicarius sped across the courtyard toward the entrance to the Barracks. He took the steps three at a time, tore open the massive doors, and ran down the gleaming marble corridors. On the third floor, he reached the emperor's suite. Two armored men wearing the black uniforms of the emperor's personal bodyguard stood to either side of the door.

"Sir, you can't—"

"The emperor's not to be—"

Sicarius ignored them and pushed through the door. Raumesys was sprawled naked on his divan with three equally naked young women draped over him. His head jerked up, face twisting with rage. When he identified Sicarius, his features grew more hesitant, but his eyes remained cold.

Schooled features neutral, Sicarius eyed the women with professional detachment. All three were familiar, which did not discount them, but made them unlikely assassins. He ignored the emperor's sputtering protests and stalked through the suite, searching the shadows. He found nothing.

Hollowcrest burst through the door. Six armed and armored men clanked in after him.

"Yes," Raumesys said, throwing a bare arm toward the ceiling. "Everyone come in. I'm obviously not busy!"

"There's an assassin on the premises," Hollowcrest said.

Instead of grabbing a weapon—or clothing—Raumesys tugged one of the girls over his chest. The guards placed themselves at strategic points around the room.

Satisfied that the emperor had enough men—and women—protecting him, Sicarius slipped into the hallway. He considered the layout of the Barracks, selecting likely hiding places and identifying other possible targets. Raumesys's wife? Or—a sickening thought flashed through Sicarius's mind, and his stomach lurched.

He took off again, candles blurring past. He turned a corner and stopped before an unguarded door—a door that should have been guarded. A dark smudge stained the floor. He bent and touched it. Fresh blood.

Sicarius eased the door open, afraid of what he would find inside. He pushed the thoughts aside and reached for his usual calm detachment. He had seen death in all its cruelties, delivered it in more cases than he could remember. Living or dead, one boy should not bother him.

Inside, shadows lurked. Sicarius moved away from the door, so that he wouldn't be silhouetted against the light of the hall.

A low-burning lantern glowed on a table beside a canopied bed that dwarfed the five year old curled in the sheets. Against his instincts, Sicarius let his eyes rest on the boy for a moment. He caught the rise and fall of rhythmic breathing, and an iota of relief trickled through his mind.

A faint rustle sounded. Sicarius crouched, muscles tense. He had not moved, and neither had the boy. Anyone who had watched him come in would know precisely where he was.

Willing calm into his mind and relaxation into his muscles, he scanned the room. Curtains and furniture cast thick, irregular shadows. As his eyes drifted away from one

corner, movement drew them back. Reflexively, he dropped into a roll.

Something whisked over his head, pinging off the wall.

Sicarius came up running, his soft boots soundless on the thick carpet as he cut toward the source. The intruder stepped out to meet him. With a soft rasp, a small blade appeared, light from the hall revealing a gooey dark substance on the edge.

As Sicarius closed, the dagger slashed toward him. He melted away from the strike, then darted in, catching the man's forearm. He glided in closer, turned his hip, and hurled the would-be assassin over his shoulder. The man proved agile, though, and wriggled out of the throw before he hit the ground. Like a cat, he landed on his feet. But for a split second, he was off balance, and Sicarius struck. Lightning-quick, he slammed a punch into his foe's kidney. The force of the blow sent the man stumbling forward. Sicarius leaped after him, but, before he reached his target, the assassin whirled, slashing with the dagger. It was a desperate attack from a wounded opponent, but that didn't make the poison on the blade any less dangerous. Forcing himself to defend with careful, mindful precision, Sicarius knocked the arm wide and stepped close, launching a punch. The man blocked it, but the attack had been meant as a distraction, and Sicarius slammed his heel into his foe's knee at the same time.

The intruder went down, but he took another wild swipe with the dagger. Sicarius leaped backward and would have evaded the attack easily, but he'd forgotten his surroundings; he came up short, bumping into the bed's footboard.

Sicarius chastised himself—men died from such mistakes—even as he anticipated the coming attack and twisted to the side. The poisoned blade cut through his shirt, missing flesh by a hair. Momentum carried the dagger into the footboard, the tip sinking into the wood. The assassin wasted a split second trying to free it. Recognizing the advantage, Sicarius pounced. He spun his foe around, pinning him against the footboard, and found his neck. Perhaps trained as Sicarius had been, the man died in silence.

On the bed, Sespian mumbled something and stirred. Sicarius let out a slow breath and lifted his head. The boy did not open his eyes.

After a moment, Sicarius rose. He sheathed the man's dagger, found and pocketed a miniature crossbow, and slung the body over his shoulder. He trod across the carpet toward the door and stopped to pick up the tiny quarrel that had started the confrontation. The tip glistened with freshly applied poison. He left the room, shifting the weight of the body so that he could softly close the door.

"Sicarius!" came Hollowcrest's surprised voice as he rounded the corner. "I came to check on the heir..." He noticed the corpse. "I realized the boy might be a target."

"Astute," Sicarius murmured. "Sir."

Hollowcrest gave him a sharp look, then nodded toward the body. "Get rid of that."

"Yes, sir."

* * *

Sicarius found the bodies of Sespian's missing guards stuffed in a nearby room with the assassin's gear. The man had traveled light: a change of clothes, trail rations, sharpening stone, and a flat wooden box.

Before opening the box, Sicarius brushed sensitive fingers along the surface. He found a slight depression disguised as part of the grain. Pressing it produced a soft click. With wary hands, he opened the box. The tiny dart poised underneath the lid did not shoot out. Mindful of the tip, he removed it and fingered the contents.

Tucked inside lay a book, a pen, a charcoal stick, two brushes, and three tiny jars of paint. When he flipped through the book, he discovered the reason for the other items. The first few pages were filled with notes and detailed maps of the Imperial Barracks, the capital, and the nearby army fort. Perhaps the assassin intended to be paid twice, once by the vengeful Mangdorians and once by someone who craved information on imperial defenses.

Suspecting Hollowcrest would want to know about the work, Sicarius tore out the pages to give to him. Then he considered the box for a moment.

He tucked it under his arm and strode into the hall. For the second time that night, he stopped before Sespian's door. The guard had not yet been replaced. Sicarius noted the inefficiency and slipped into the room.

Little had changed; the boy lay on his side, fingers curled on the pillow, pale locks caressing his cheek. Sicarius wondered what it would be like to work for Sespian when he became emperor. Would he retain any of his innocence or would Raumesys and Hollowcrest steal it from him?

For Sicarius, duty was all he knew, all he had ever known, and he would not shirk it, but perhaps it was possible to shape the future of it? Or did his reasons for returning have nothing to do with duty at all?

He pushed aside the confusing thoughts and set the box on the bedside table. His lip twitched as an image flickered through his mind, and he hoped Sespian would be wise enough not to apply the paints to the solarium floor, at least not when Raumesys was around.

Sicarius returned to the hall and took up position by the door until the new guard came.

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