Eyes pierced into Melial from every direction, clawing at his soul. The silence was even worse. Each empty second took a piece of his heart and left the rest bare and shivering like a wounded beast. Two wings as black as night sprouted behind Melial’s back, reaching into the pinkish sky above, unfurling into a cloak of shadow. It rose out of his back along with an agony that was slicing his mind apart, a billion new senses hammering into his head in a terrifying rhythm. A long black feather drifted onto the yellow grass at Melial’s feet. As soon as it hit the ground, he knew things would never be the same.

Captain Larlo stepped towards Melial, blonde hair reflecting the blood-red sunset. The captain who had taken a weak Melial under his wing and protected him since the age of 7. The Larlo who had been a friend. That Captain Larlo marched towards Melial, hand on the blade at his side that had taken the blood of many before. Larlo’s cold gaze didn’t waver, blue eyes piercing. He never did.

Melial looked towards the rest of the company, pleading for any understanding. Just returning his gaze would mean something. Not one of them looked back. Vira didn’t. Melial stumbled. “Get away!” His voice came out raw and primal. Unhuman. Larlo and death marched towards him. The cadets screeched, voices rising like a tidal wave. A hand fell on Melial’s shoulder. He slapped it off with a flash of his dark wing. They shouted his name, but their voices drowned out as his senses adapted. His wings drummed a deep, heavy sound as if they had always been there, and Melial rose into the setting sky.

But a voice rang clearly.

“Melial!” Vira shouted, singing true. He could always hear her. Vira stood among the company like a lone island in the ocean, a golden paradise against a burning hell. Yet, she didn’t get any words out. Her mouth stayed open, and her brown eyes said the same message as the others. Melial would never be welcome. That was all he needed. With tears dropping from his eyes, he turned and flew away, bursting towards Kalagor Peaks, home of beasts and demons – now the home of Melial.

Under night’s blanket, Melial hid. He couldn’t sleep. His heart bore the weight of a thousand. Yet, instead of feeling slow, he felt electric. New blood pumped through him, and his body wished him to try it, to prowl in the night. He didn’t. His friends had been his meaning. Vira had been his purpose. Without them, the world was black and dark. An unforgiving abyss and a meaningless existence.

Melial had always been proud of his survival skills; however, grotesque beasts fused with demonic influence challenged him day-by-day. He was an intruder in two worlds. And the food, the meat of those beasts, sent savory rushes down his spine even when he knew it shouldn’t. To live was to reject all he knew, but he didn’t care anymore. No one did. No one ever had. Not enough. Not one person had searched for him, wanted him. Melial let the small things take hold of him, let the thrill of the hunt contaminate his mind. He let order out the window for a cutthroat savagery even though he wished to keep it. To feel anything, to know he was not dreaming, he had to.

And then Melial met a real demon, someone like him. Two blood-red eyes bulged out of his head. Jagged purple wings stretched to the sides as wide as a tree. He donned a magnificent suit as black as night. Coarse green hair filtered down his face.

“Are you going to keep staring, hatchling?” The demon snorted, gliding down from a branch. “I’m surprised you have made it this deep into Kalagor. Some demons would have killed you for your disrespect. And do not just stand there without speaking. I know you are capable.” He stopped a few feet from Melial, who stood, eyes wide. “Name?”

“Melial,” Melial coughed, voice cracking.

“And how long have you been a demon?” The demon asked.

“I... don’t know.”

“Of course, you do not.” The demon clicked his tongue and studied Melial’s torn clothes, leaning closer. “A man of Sparta,” he laughed, “*Former* man. And the conditions of those clothes... you know that a demon does not have to be uncivilized, right?”

Melial grunted. Something seemed off about the demon. He was too -

"Well, friend, you undoubtedly believe that being a demon is a curse.” The demon placed a hand on Melial’s shoulder, and a sweet sensation ran down it. He began to ask why but felt he should stop as the demon continued. “I was the same once, and I failed and failed. You do not have to go through what I did. I can teach you how we are better in every single way.” The demon rose to the trees. He was magnificent, Melial felt he should think. “Better than humans and better than life itself. For we are not temporary. We are immortal. We are the truest creation of the gods. The most perfect. We are what humans wish they could be.” The demon closed his eyes. When he opened them again, they were pitch black. “My true name is Zethrius Vin Lazadel, leader of the Bloodhounds.” Zethrius stretched a claw out. “Will you join me on my journey?”

Melial shook the claw back, though a small part in the back of his head screamed against it. Melial’s shoulder was still sweet.

Time passes faster for a demon, for time is of no consequence to one. Melial strut down Bloodhounds’ halls. Red carpets drew down the middle of a grand hall of gold and silver. Banners of demonic houses hung from the ceiling.

“Melial!” Nera shouted, getting his attention. Ravenlike, she stood next to Zethrius and Piche, wearing a black dress that draped down to the floor and on top of it. She waved enthusiastically, black hair contrasting her pale skin.

“Our favorite man!” Zethrius grinned, teeth baring. He donned that midnight suit of his like always, and his green hair was slicked back. He rested against a luxurious column, which had gold running up and down in lines.

“What were you guys talking about?” Melial asked, waving back to Nera.

Zethrius glanced back and forth between Piche, who was as quiet as ever, and Nera.

Nera leaned closer to Melial. “Sparta,” she whispered, breath chilling Melial’s ear.

Melial’s eyes widened. “Are the Bloodhounds attacking Sparta? When? Soon? I must know,” Melial quizzed.

Nera giggled.

“Yes,” Zethrius replied, narrowing his red eyes at Nera, “We are invading Sparta. A formality, really, for we will obtain it no matter what happens. As for your other questions, does it matter? Does Sparta matter to you, Melial?”

Melial paused. An answer was on the tip of his tongue, but it refused to come out. What was it again? What was it? What had he wanted to say?

Melial smiled as he found what he assumed to be it. “No. It does not matter at all.”

“Good,” Zethrius smiled.

Melial was sent out on the second day of the invasion. Ribbons of blood danced in the air, twirling from human to demon to human. Blood pooled on the coarse dirt of Melial’s home. Blood turned Sparta’s once great walls into beautiful artwork.

Images of humans flashed before him. Each time, before he knew it, their body slumped, and Melial’s black wings would rumple, bloodied. But the walls were still beautiful, turning redder with each passing day.

However, on the fifteenth day, he asked himself if the walls were still beautiful. This time, he did not have an answer, and he did not know why he did not.

“Melial!” Someone shouted, piercing through the noise. A human girl, it sounded like.

“Melial, you have to wake up!”

It was so familiar. But why could he only pick out this voice among the endless clattering of his mind?

“Please, come back!”

It had to be a daydream, but which was real and which was not?

“ - never stopped looking. I never stopped. I’ll come back for you. I will.”

“Melial, are you okay?” Zethrius asked. They stood on the ruins of a Spartan outpost, the remains of toppled houses. Bodies lay strewn like the victims of a hurricane.

“I am... a demon of the Bloodhounds,” Melial answered, but he felt sick to his stomach.

“Yes, you are,” Zethrius laughed. He patted Melial’s shoulder twice, power shooting into it. “Yes, you are.”

Melial felt like he was in Sparta’s heart, a large plaza with, eventually, steps leading to a pantheon. But how did he know that? How? Two slim black swords pulsed in his hands.

A woman with no face stood in the center of the plaza, a bronze sword held in her hands. On her right, a muscular man brandished a longsword. He too was faceless. Faded. Wispy. Melial tried to peer into the two, but he was locked out at the doorsteps. They must be the dream, he thought.

Melial moved in a second, his body and mind two separate beings. His midnight wings swooped in wide arcs aimed for the man’s head, jagged edges reaching for the taste of blood. But in one fluid motion, the man parried the wings. Was that possible? Two wings the size of men themselves stopped in their tracks. The man roared and pushed Melial back.

Melial grinned. He launched into the air, wings rumbling, and spiraled towards the man with meteoric speed, his twin swords aiming for the man’s heart with an unstoppable force. Just before blood spilled, the man rolled, easily gaining a distance far from Melial’s strike. Melial laughed, sliding onto the ground, and shot up again and again from every single angle, but the man was always ready. Had there been a human this formidable?

Melial’s eyes widened. His grip on the swords loosened. “I’ve fought you before, haven’t I?”

The woman began to move closer to Melial, calling out words that, for some reason, Melial couldn’t hear, but the man stopped her, putting an arm out in front of her as if to protect. He nodded to Melial.

Melial clenched his fists. He trembled. Why did his gut tell him that something was so seriously wrong? “Do not play with me! Leave my mind untouched!” Melial yelled, throwing a sword at the woman. The man easily deflected it to the side, but Melial was already in the sky by then. The sun was setting, pinkish dots melting into a blue canvas. Such a sunset had happened before. Beneath him, Sparta was ruined. Had he done it? The walls had tumbled. The homes had been demolished. Was it him?

Melial screamed and barreled towards the plaza, wind scraping his skin. The man and woman watched him come, unfazed by him even if he was a demon. His heart sank, and he didn’t know why. He grasped his remaining sword with both hands. The man’s cut blonde hair matched the sun itself. His posture was proud and full like a man of position, like a captain. The woman studied him, bronze skin glittering, brown hair tied behind her head. Her eyes were the stars themselves – blacks as deep as space and browns as soft as the twilight. She was impenetrable and formidable, a castle against a raging sea. A golden paradise against a burning hell.

Melial crashed into the ground beside them, knocking a cloud of dust and debris into the air.

“I see you.”

“We were always here.” Vira softened. “Always and forever.”

“I know,” Melial laughed, wiping a tear from his eyes. Finally, he knew what truly was beautiful.