

Mantles

By kwyx&

Prologue

The first streaks of morning light crested over the horizon and the rough waves, revealing the small island as a lush shimmering emerald in a sapphire sea. Trees rustled in the wind; they set a rhythmic and mellow backing track for the merry morning melodies of the awakening birds. For over a hundred years, Tumhai had been untouched by man, and the lush flora and fauna of the island had experienced no rude interruptions in their day-to-day happenings as they spun about the circle of life.

This morning, however, was different.

The crater that had formed near the center of Tumhai, though littered with the splintered bodies of trees, felt more alive than ever as frightened critters scurried out of the hole and into the morning sun. Nearly forty feet deep, the impact had struck water, which had just begun to line the bottom and cool the broken body of the beast that had crashed into the homes of so many creatures, unannounced, and evicted them with a great deal of force.

As the water pooled about his ears, the beast began to stir and gently sat up, propping his aching back up against the dirt wall of the crater. Nearly ten feet tall, he had little room in the tight space near the bottom of the hole to stretch out as he so often liked to do. Still clutching his empty cup in his left hand, his right traced up the wall gingerly, pausing when his enormous arm was fully extended to sink its claws into the soft soil and pull himself up to a standing position. As he came to his feet, his healing bones crackled and snapped, slowly bearing his full weight.

The crater wasn't wide enough for Wyre to spread his wings, but his claws were more than strong enough for him to clamber out of the pit his impact had formed. He stood tall and stretched, feeling a slight itch as the final fractures in his body stitched themselves together with a quiet crackle. Sauntering over to one of the trees he'd broken with his crash, Wyre filled his cup with the viscous sap that was flowing from the broken stump, eagerly bringing the dar to his lips. Almost immediately, its tangy aroma brought to mind his father's harsh opinions of the drug; he'd often liked to quote ancient Sury priests in his support of Wyre's sobriety.

The arms of poison take away our fears with their strength, our minds with their touch, and our breath with their crushing embrace.

Wyre scoffed at the thought. Dar had never hurt Wyre the way Garbov, his father, had been punished by his responsibilities. They'd taken his wife. His family. His friends. Even his once-unwavering belief in the triumph of good over evil, driving him to live as an outcast and to raise Wyre in obscurity.

And now they'd taken his life.

Tears welled up in Wyre's eyes once more, though he'd thought he had none left to give. He downed the cup in a single gulp, filling it up once more before flapping his wings and perching himself atop one of the few trees left standing near the crater.

As he began to feel a buzz from the potent liquid, images of the night before flashed in his mind. Wyre had never been so drunk, nor flown so high, as he had the night before. He remembered fire: the town to the east that he'd turned into a bright orange flower, a target on which to land after his avian excursion. From his stoop, he glanced at the crater and then two miles east at the still-smoldering towers and blackened abandoned homes. He gave a wry smile at his poor marksmanship, and took another swig.

Wyre lay back into the crook of the branch, basking in the sunlight as he grew more and more drunk. Words fluttered about his head, the drink loosening his grip over his thoughts. *Father. Dead. Alone. Unknown. Betrayal. Extinction. Vengeance.*

Suicide.

How high had he flown? The air had grown thin, he recalled. He'd seen the curve of the world and the void of the cosmos before his drunken stupor had overtaken him and he'd fallen to the ground. The Gems of Thieves, once his favorite constellation, had seemed within his grasp, bright and colorful against the black canvas of space.

He'd thought the fall would kill him. An impossible height for any Sur, even a Havasur, but it was nothing a few hours sleep hadn't repaired. Legends told of Sury who'd drank themselves to death with unholy amounts of Dar, but even children knew those were just stories. The Sury had evolved physically into near-perfect beings; aside from an extremely old age, the death of a Sur could only be brought by one thing.

And Aastar Wyre had none of it.

Landing clumsily in the charred remains of what was once his home, Wyre traced a finger along the wall of the market he'd loved so much, watching it crumble into a pile of black rubble. Tumhai was once a center of activity for his people. To see the charred remains would have brought tears to the eyes of every Havasur who'd even heard of the city, let alone set foot there. How fortunate it was, that Wyre was the only one forced to see it.

He grimaced, holding back tears once again.

Cremation was the custom for funeral proceedings in Havasury culture, but no Havasur had had a pyre as grand as Aastar Garbov, taking an entire city with him in his ascension. Wyre walked into the remains of the hut that had been his home his whole life. Most of the furniture had been destroyed, but his father's old bedframe had survived mostly intact. He sat at its edge, head in his hands as he wept. Thoroughly drunk now, his sobs grew quieter and quieter as he sank to his knees, slowly laying down to rest in the ashes of his childhood.

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It was hours later when Wyre lazily blinked open his eyes. The evening sun had cast long shadows through the small home, but a single ray of light across Wyre's face had gently ended his slumber. Laying on his side, he was looking directly beneath his father's bed, at the remains of old books and keepsakes the elder Aastar liked to keep there. Through the piles of grey ash, the edge of a relatively unscathed notebook caught Wyre's eye.

It took a bit of work for Wyre to grab at the notebook; built with a boulder-like musculature, his wide frame and large arms couldn't quite fit beneath the bed far enough. Frustrated from repeatedly grabbing at piles of ash, he overturned the bed itself, leaning it against the wall and trudging through the blackened books till he arrived at a single bright orange one.

He was surprised that he recognized it at second glance. A gift for his father from his Uncle Nelson, the journal was one that Aastar Garbov had used mainly for professional matters. Wyre took a seat against the wall, the fading sunlight illuminating the pages of his father's work.

Wyre had always found his father's work boring; tedious and repetitive, he'd always felt that his father's intensely diplomatic career held him back from reaching his full potential. Though he'd had no intention of following in his father's footsteps, the pages before him now drew his attention as would an oasis in a desert. He struggled

to understand many of the intricacies of the notes, but they delighted him and brought him closer to his father all the same.

For the first time in weeks, Wyre had a smile on his face as the sun began to set. He'd reached the last written page and thumbed through the final blank pages nonchalantly as he looked up to admire the hues of the twilight sky. Wyre loved the way the slowly setting sun seemed to sink like a rock in water as it touched the horizon, as if being pulled down by the weight of the world itself. Glancing down, he realized he'd reached the back cover of the notebook.

Wyre froze.

A small inscription inside the back cover had caught his eye, unmistakably his father's handwriting once again. But was it possible? He read and re-read it repeatedly, burning the words into his mind.

Shak Rasan lives. Nidai Mand.

The words were askew, as if written hurriedly, perhaps whilst standing. Wyre's mind raced as he furiously flipped back to his father's hand-drawn map of the nearby islands. He saw Nidai at the edge of the map, the largest island—and smallest continent—in the world. It was West of Tumhai, but he could not be sure of the distance. It was certainly hard to miss, however. He chuckled quietly at the absurd thought of flying past it without noticing. Even so, the journey was not going to be easy. He'd been there as a child, but that was so long ago; riding on his father's back as he flew had given him the leisure of sleep and relaxation. And the elder Aastar was certainly superior in flight.

Wyre made some quick calculations: flying there would take the better part of a day, but he had a renewed energy and swiftly packed a small bag. Tucking the notebook carefully into the pouch and slinging it across his chest, Wyre walked out of the hut, his shadow stretching long behind him. He turned to take a final look at his hometown; though blackened and charred, he still felt at peace here. His heart felt heavy, not knowing when—if—he would return, or if Tumhai would ever be rebuilt to its former glory.

Wyre spoke a silent prayer to the Trikon, and spread his wings, catching the evening breeze and jetting off westward. From the shores of Tumhai, the sun dipped below the horizon, and Aastar Wyre soon followed.

Chapter 1

Though the early morning was black as pitch, Rayan Henley's feet moved quickly through the narrow path up the hill, deftly avoiding the punctured soles and twisted ankles of hundreds before him. The trail was no newer to Rayan than was his own name; a grin stretched across his face as he recalled the scars he'd gotten tumbling into the rocks and brambles, each one telling a story of foolish decisions, pretty girls, or, as was most often the case, both.

As he crested the hill, he ran a hand along Nantri, the spirit who had looked over and protected the colony since the dawn of his people, feeling the inscriptions of the Reges and Reines over the years. That the strongest of his people sought its guidance was a calming sentiment, as were the veins of light that traveled slowly along the mother tree, pulsing softly up the trunk and into each leaf. The brown wood was strong alone, but was certainly made more resilient by the silver streaks that traveled in short bursts from roots to treetops. Glowing purple in beautiful synchrony, they seemed to carry the strength of the island up into the heavens, illuminating the darkened sky before the sun rose.

The tree, though surrounded by many others, could just as easily have been standing alone; its sheer size made it outstanding, a strong, wide-armed angel reaching for the clouds from the treetops of the island. Though much younger than the village protector, Rayan carried a strength and grandeur among the people of the Muertan colony as Nantri did among the trees of Muertos. The twenty-year-old displayed a tall, lean, and athletic frame as he stretched to retrieve a couple low-hanging fruit, seating himself comfortably among the roots to eat one as he overlooked his home and the rough sea beyond. He set the other aside as he swept a few curly black locks away from his face; matted from the seawater of his morning swim, they looked like a dark mop head, resting atop his deeply tanned body.

As Rayan gazed out to the horizon, he heard the distant thunderclap of Typhoon, roaring just a few miles from the shore. The storm had encircled the island for many ages, forming its barricade around Muertos long before Rayan had been born. The wall of clouds stretched from sea to sky; Rayan just barely caught a glimpse of the

rising sun between the two before it hid its face behind Typhoon, only to return in an hour for the second sunrise over the clouds. Rayan sighed and ran a hand through his knotted hair, calming himself before he grew anxious and angry at the will of the gods.

For a skilled seafaring people, the Muertans were confined to the land a great deal. Many had tried and failed to venture beyond Typhoon's grasp, their bodies to wash up on the shore days, weeks, or even months later. It had been 40 years since travel beyond the buoy line was deemed punishable by law, ensuring at least a year's indentured servitude or more, depending on which precious resources had been risked or lost in the endeavor. All knew the law, but the allure of a world, a new life unencumbered by Typhoon proved too great for many. Even the reigning Rex had spent 2 years in his youth cleaning Nantri's altar and chopping firewood after losing a boat and an eye to the Muertan sea.

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Rayan felt at peace as he finished the motherfruit and threw the pit into the nearby bushes. Faintly, he heard a pair of footsteps behind him; they stepped softly as if making an attempt to hide their sound, but the slight crunch of the leaves and twigs around Nantri was unmistakable in the relative silence of the early morning. Rayan smiled as he restrained himself from turning around to look, sure he already knew the crunching culprit.

"Hey *Reine*, you're up early for once," Rayan couldn't help but chuckle until he felt the sting of a projectile on the back of his head. He looked back to see Mikti standing in just one sandal, the other having ricocheted off his head and onto the gnarled roots.

"Don't call me that! How many times do I have to tell you?!" She paused to look up at a particularly plump purple fruit, just out of her grasp. "I'll forgive you if you get me that though," she said with a smirk.

Rayan stood up and tossed her the motherfruit he'd set aside. "Think fast!" He grinned as she scrambled to catch it, hoping he'd be able to suppress a laugh if she didn't succeed.

But she did, and she slipped off her other sandal as she stepped onto the roots lining the top of the hill. She took a bite of the motherfruit and a seat on a knot slightly higher than the one Rayan had chosen; he glanced up and smiled at his tired friend, the dark circles under her eyes betraying her lack of sleep.

"Quit it," Mikti snapped at first, but quickly softened her tone. "Sorry, I'm really out of it. But you know I don't like it when you stare."

"I wasn't staring, I zoned out. You're not *Reine* just yet, don't flatter yourself." Rayan smirked as he turned to face the sea once more.

"Please stop calling me that." Mikti knew he meant it jokingly but it stung a bit more on this day. She forced a smile, "It's not gonna happen anytime soon, you're closer to the title than I am, *Rayan*." She'd been thinking about the pun for a few days, waiting for an opportunity to use it. Rayan scoffed, clearly unimpressed, but Mikti was pleased.

Rayan stood and climbed up a few roots, sitting next to Mikti so he could face her while they talked. The wind was picking up as she watched the water and continued to eat; Rayan watched a few blonde curls set themselves free of the messy bun on her head. She'd worn royal clothing this morning; they fit her beautifully, the material much stronger and more resilient than the clothes sold at the market to families like Rayan's. As was custom for Muertan royalty, her sleeves reached just past the elbow, still revealing the dark birthmark on the light olive skin of her right forearm. The shape of a skull, the sigil of Muertos, identified members of the Muertan royal family, alongside military personnel with a rank of Admiral or Commander General. Subconsciously, Rayan let a finger drift to his own collarbone, feeling the twisted skin of the brand beneath it.

"Hey, don't play with that." Mikti knew her friend – and his nervous tics – all too well. "Are you excited to graduate?" She asked with a smile, taking his mind away from his demons.

"Hm. I don't know. I mean I'm not sad about it, but it's gonna be weird right? All we've ever done is school I don't know if I'm ready to start *doing*, ya know?"

"You're ready! Don't be a dork." Mikti punched his arm playfully. "You're like the best student this year what are you worried about?!"

"I mean there's only 8 of us."

"Yeah well shut up. I'm still in 8th place so..." Mikti's voice trailed off, catching slightly as she sniffled.

"Mik I'm sorry hey, I..." he scooted closer to her, "I didn't mean it like that."

"I know, I know. I'm not upset, it's just scary. I'm still just a kid, I don't even know if I want to be Reine, but this stupid skull says I have to be." She picked at the birthmark as if to scratch it off. "And I don't want to make mistakes. The gods know, Reges and Reines haven't made the best decisions; I don't know if it's prejudice or pressure but I don't want to turn out that way." She reached out gently to feel the brand on Rayan's chest. "I don't want anyone else to get hurt."

Rayan turned toward the sea once again, lost in thought. For decades, his people had been shunned on the island; between demeaning jobs and teetering on the edge of famine, many of the islanders who had attempted escape from Typhoon were of his kind, looking beyond the storm for a better life. Their population had dwindled rapidly as resources became scarcer, and it had seemed like the Kur people would soon be extinct on Muertos.

But that had changed with Alonzo Rex.

Affectionately referred to as Zo Rex, Mikti's father had single handedly fought against the oppression of the Kurs, welcoming them as Muertans in their own right. Many on the island still saw – and supported – a divide; Rayan could feel their glares when he spoke to the Rex's daughter, but legal equality had been achieved. As the first Kur Muertan to graduate, Rayan would be the only Kur with a Muertan Assignment for at least a year. No longer would all Kurs be resigned to the tasks of servants and criminals, cleaning beaches and digging sewers. Though his profession would be assigned, it was nearly guaranteed to be a noble one. A teacher perhaps, or a fisherman. He dreamed of a role as a lifeguard; it was unlikely for the first Kur to be formally educated, but he longed to spend his days on the beach and in the water, his favorite place in the village he'd come to know every inch of. He was determined to prove himself, but the task proved daunting at times, solely shouldering the dignity of his people.

"Rayan look!" Mikti grabbed his arm jarringly and pulled them both to their feet. Pointing out into the water, she screamed. "Leviathans! By the buoys!"

Rayan followed her gaze to the rough waves, catching a glimpse of the monstrous webbed feet of the hellish creatures. Though it was rare for them to venture too close to shore, many a Muertan sailor had the scars and stories of the Leviathans. They'd taken the lives of Muertans and Kurs alike; the stone arrows, axes, and spears used by the hunters and fishermen were useless against their hides. Only the Muertan military could fight them, though no confirmed kills had ever been reported.

"That's the fifth sighting this week, right?" Mikti's voice quivered slightly as she turned to Rayan, quickly regaining her composure as she remembered her place as Reine-apparent. "It seems like they've swarmed this cove recently, where are they coming from?"

"I'm not sure." Rayan's voice trailed off as he thought deeply, looking around the beach for markers. "I don't know how many have been seen, but I think they've all been between those two bouys." Rayan gestured at a stretch marked on the beach: about 80 feet apart, the beach markers corresponded with the buoys bobbing in the waves about a mile from the shore. He scratched his chin, "They haven't congregated like that before, have they? Like they're looking for something, maybe to eat or a place to rest."

"I haven't ever seen them work together. I don't think they're very smart, just really strong." Her heartbeat slowing again, Mikti sat beneath the tree once more. "I guess I'll report it when I get home. Whatever it is, it can't be a good sign to have Leviathans coming to our village in hordes."

"Yeah that's true." Rayan took a seat next to her, and focused on the pulsing veins of Nantri once more, putting the pressures of Assignment Day and Leviathans out of his mind. He smiled softly as she rested her head on his shoulder, not sure if they'd ever get to spend time together like this anytime soon. He reminisced on the times they'd spent here; their friendships with other Muertan youths had come and gone, but Rayan had had Mikti by his side since they were five years old. He'd always known the day would come when she'd move on to more royal duties as a Disciple Reine, eventually becoming the sole regent of the island and its people. Kur people may have achieved legal recognition, but it would be a long time before they were part of the elite or military classes.

He sighed, feeling the morning breeze sigh back, as if recognizing his strife.

Rayan turned to Mikti, as if to ask a question, quickly realizing she'd fallen asleep on his shoulder. As he moved slightly to awaken her, the first rays of sunlight peered over top of the stormwall. Mikti stirred, and soon the pair were treading down the hill once more, bathed in the glow of the second sunrise.

Chapter 2

The water slowly dripped to a halt as Mikti turned off the steady shower stream, feeling the stone floor beneath her feet quickly cool as its heat source drained away. As future Reine, she had to look her best for her Assignment Day; she'd been instructed from a young age on the importance of a ruler's looks, how a disheveled appearance drew credence away from their status.

She found it cumbersome. Everyone in the village looked disheveled all the time, with the sea air and sand making it all the more difficult. Why couldn't she?

Nobility. Royalty. She rolled her eyes as she reached for a thick towel, wrapping herself in its warmth as she stepped onto the bathroom floor. Reges and Reines had been regarded as godlike figures for generations on Muertos; to dismiss that custom would be to throw away over a century of beliefs and ideals, though Mikti often wondered if those traditions were worthy of being upheld.

She had just been a child when her father had brought Muertans and Kurs together, a radical proposition with great pushback in execution. To remove the opulence and mystery surrounding the throne would be just as revolutionary.

But maybe it would be for the best.

As Mikti walked into her room, she took a moment to look through the small window onto the village below. Muertans and Kurs alike lived in huts, built with the wood from the island or bricks baked from the sand. Though sturdy in construction, many had been destroyed by unpredictable tides or storms that came with no warning. The effects of Typhoon had ravaged Muertos year after year and it was soon to be Mikti's responsibility to prevent it.

She looked around her own home with guilt. Nantec, the palace of the Rex, was built into the hill of Nantri herself. The tree stood atop the home of the regent, a symbol of the royal house, its strength, and its protection of the community. Mikti and her family lived a lush life in their home; they were well-guarded from the elements and were

waited on hand and foot. But try as she might, she could not justify her home simply for her family. The royal family was no better than the fishermen nor the masons. The woodcutters worked just as hard in the forest as her father did in the palace, and the firemen saved lives with their arms as the regent did with decrees. How could she feel it was her right to a lavish lifestyle when the subjects lived in poverty?

As she sat before her mirror and brushed the messy blonde locks atop her head, she thought about when she'd first shown Rayan the mirror. She laughed. Having only seen his face in pools of water, he'd spent nearly an hour looking at himself with clarity, memorizing his own face. The joy in his eyes was so pure, almost childlike. She'd let him keep her pocket mirror as a gift, a secret she'd kept from her family.

But a mirror did not have to be a royal luxury.

She'd brought it up with her father before, only to receive sharp rebuke and anger at the idea of bringing in the *proletariat*, of including them in the rights of the Reges and Reines. Mikti hated when her father used big words to confuse her argument, but she'd made sure to learn it for the future. Of course, that rage didn't hold a candle to Mikti's anger at her mother's use of another word.

Designed.

The slur had enraged Mikti since she'd learned its meaning. Even now, she seethed with fury.

"If we let the common folk into Nantec who's next? Criminals? Leviathans? The Designed?" her mother had asked pointedly.

Ouch. She'd pulled her own hair in her anger. She brushed a bit more gently, removing the last few knots and retrieving the dress she'd laid out on a chair for this day. She muttered under her breath, trying to calm herself as she slid it on. To place Kurs lower on a list than the monsters that had killed so many of their people was despicable. She didn't understand the hatred, born ages before her mother had been.

Once, the Kurs had been equal to Muertans in standing. Some had even held honorable positions, bearing sigils as Mikti bore on her forearm, but when the clans had split, the Muertans overthrew their ruling-class Kur brethren. A hot iron rod was applied to their sigils, once displayed proudly beneath their left collarbones. From that day forward every Kur man, woman, and child was branded, their "signs" removed, whether they bore the symbol of leadership or not.

De-signed.

She shuddered. So many Kur children, mutilated at birth. She thanked the Stars that her father didn't share the sentiment. Anymore, that is. People spoke of Zo Rex's youth, his hatred for the Kurs making him popular. But he'd changed one day: Mikti had been about five at the ceremony which outlawed the hellish practice and welcomed the Kurs back into the good graces of the throne.

It hadn't made him popular with many Muertans, but to Mikti, her father had become a hero.

As she straightened out the slight creases in her dress, she smiled. The dress was a rose gold color, hugging her youthful curves elegantly. The slight waves in her hair had turned out nicely, and she felt ready for any momentous occasion ahead, like a queen.

Like a Reine.

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As Mikti came into the dining room, she found a single glass of coconut milk and a sliced motherfruit waiting on the table. She smiled a tacit thank you at Lina, her attendant, who simply nodded and smiled back. Lina had served the royal family since before even Zo Rex had been born; she was one of the family, just as proud of Mikti as her parents were. Though her hands were frail, her mind was as sharp as ever, and she would not easily forget to make Mikti's favorite breakfast, especially on such an important day.

Mikti took her food to the balcony, overlooking the royal garden and the village. Placing the glass and plate on the ledge, she craned her neck to see her mother and younger brother enjoying the garden below. The Reine-consort wore a dress more voluminous than Mikti's, but complementing the color with a slightly rosier gold pattern. It was her brother's outfit that Mikti found quite amusing, however; Haddy wore a traditional Muertan tunic, the same as those given to military members for ceremonial occasions. Patterned a light gold interlaced with a deep indigo threading, the tunics matched the beauty of the beaches of Muertos, though they were usually worn by the strongest and most intimidating of the village; her ten-year-old brother in the garb was a sight Mikti found adorable.

Taking a sip of the coconut milk, she cut a slice of the motherfruit from its rind and nibbled at it timidly. She knew she wouldn't have a chance to eat until the festival in

the evening, but her nerves had whittled away her appetite. The sundial in the courtyard below showed that the ceremony was but an hour away; Mikti fidgeted a bit more, dropping her fork before she could take a complete bite.

"Relax darling. You will be fine; the most intelligent, poised, and beautiful Reine this island has ever seen." The voice came from the doorway behind her, as deep as the sea before them and as rough as a gravel path. There were those that would find it hard on the ears, but to Mikti the sound had always been calming and comforting.

She spun around to look at her father. Zo Rex stood just behind the doorway, his arms folded and a grin spreading across his face. He took a step forward to pick up the fork that had clattered along the balcony's tile, his immense bulk barely fitting through the frame. The Rex sported a thick red beard, a stark contrast to the desert of hair atop his head. As he bent down, Mikti could nearly see her own reflection in his scalp, and she covered her mouth to hide her irreverent grin.

Zo wore the same tunic as his son, though it suited his frame far better. His strong arms stretched the short sleeves, making him a fitting Commander General for the Muertan Military. A band bearing the same indigo and gold as the tunic adorned his head, wrapped around his right eye and beneath his ear, fastening around his head. Though he'd lost one, the reigning Rex's remaining eye easily conveyed more emotion at this moment than most could ever show with two. As he stepped forward, he placed the fork on the ledge and wrapped those very same arms around his daughter tightly. Mikti could hear his strong heartbeat as her head pressed into his chest, and for a moment she felt small again, a girl of no more than four, carried home after a long day at the beach.

The Rex pulled away, smiling down at his daughter. "I have dreamed of today for 20 years. Today I get to welcome my daughter, my strong, hardworking, capable daughter, to lead the next generation of Muertos forward into the future."

Mikti had never seen her father cry, but today he looked as though he just might shed a few tears, smiling proudly with a slight melancholy about him. She felt them in her own eyes a moment later, and embraced her father tightly once more before he saw.

"Papa I..." Mikti paused to as her voice caught in her throat. "I hope I can make you proud." A few tears fell from her face into the fabric of his tunic, and she sniffled softly.

Zo Rex released his embrace gently, using his enormous hand to softly wipe the tears from her eyes. He smiled warmly once more. "You have already brought me more pride and joy than I ever could have imagined dear." He took a step back into their home, gesturing for Mikti to follow. "Come quickly, I have something for you before your Assignment."

Mikti went after him, stepping hurriedly to keep up with her father's long strides. She glanced at Lina as they walked by; the attendant gave a humble nod to the Rex and a knowing smile to Mikti. Lina remembered fondly the day when a young Zo Rex himself had been led into the Regent Chambers for the first time by his mother, Jillian Reine. Though she'd passed just two years ago, Zo kept her memory alive in the home, and Lina felt the late Reine's loving, charitable presence in Mikti. Lina sighed contentedly, as she gathered the dishes from the balcony, pleased that the future of Muertos was in good hands.

As Mikti and the Rex neared the royal chambers, she marveled at the grandeur of the great hall. The largest room in the palace, the great hall housed the throne of the reigning regent, a seat carved into the roots of Nantri herself. The roots stretched along the walls and ceiling of the hall, illuminating the room in a beautiful and vibrant purple hue even though they were deep within the hill, guarded from the light of day.

Adjacent to the throne room were her father's private chambers; they'd be Mikti's the day of her coronation, but that was to be years from now. She'd only entered a few times before; the Rex or Reine in command was the only person on the island who could enter. As they neared the enormous entryway, her father waved his right hand in front of the door handle – also carved of Nantri's roots – and it glowed in acknowledgment, unlocking the door and creating an opening for the two of them.

Not many on the island knew the secret to the Rex's chambers, but Mikti had learned much in her twenty years as his daughter. Her father wore a ring on the center finger of his right hand. A bright white color, it glowed softly in Nantri's presence, as if warmed by the presence of the mother tree. It was with this ring that Nantri recognized the Rex, forming a stronghold around his chambers against all those who did not possess it.

Mikti walked before her father's desk, awaiting his instruction for her to be seated. It surprised her, however, when her father did not take his own seat, instead walking to the back of the room, far behind his stone desk in the center.

"Papa? May I take..."

"Mikti." He interrupted her sternly but gently, holding up a palm to face her as he took the final few steps to reach the stone wall, black as pitch, at the far end of the room. As Mikti stood, watching, he placed a ring-bearing hand on the smooth surface, whispering quietly before stepping back to see. Before the Rex, a strong pulse of energy rippled through the wall, shaking the very floor beneath Mikti's feet. She saw another doorway appear in the stone, slowly parting into itself until there was just enough room for the two of them to pass through.

"Join me." As Rex, Zo always spoke in a calm, nearly emotionless manner, but Mikti could sense the mirth in his voice even as he spoke just two words. As he entered the dark room, Mikti could see his hand glowing; not only from the ring on his finger, but also from the birthmark on his forearm that, matching the skull on hers. The light faded soon, but it was unmistakably the same as the glowing pulses of Nantri. Mikti had never seen her own sigil glow, let alone her father's. Concerned, she stopped to inspect the mark on her arm for an instant before returning to the present moment, quickly moving around the large desk before her and following Zo Rex into the once-secret chamber.

As she stepped through the black stone wall, Mikti realized that it was merely a partition. The room she had entered seemed to connect seamlessly with the one she'd just left; perhaps a Rex or Reine of the past had had the divider installed? She stepped toward the corner where the partition met the walls of the room, confirming her suspicions: though much work had been done to blend the two effortlessly, Mikti could see traces of craftsmanship, the same as she'd seen on stone huts in the village. The masons of Muertos had certainly played a part in this dissemblance.

"Daughter, come quickly. The ceremony will begin soon, we haven't much time." Zo gestured for her to make haste, and soon Mikti was standing beside him before a small podium. Though the room was dimly lit at the moment, Mikti could see the writing and relics around the room: depictions of Muertan struggles and retired military equipment surrounded her, a testament to the history of their people. Before her, the podium of stone was similar in color and texture to that which comprised her father's desk and the false wall through which they'd entered. A small wooden box sat atop it, and Mikti's father drummed his fingers along it as he spoke.

"As you know, Mikti, each of you will receive your Assignments today, the service you will provide our community and all future generations of Muertos. Traditionally, I'm

supposed to meet with each student after assignment, to welcome them to the ranks of adulthood." Zo chuckled heartily as he spoke the last words. "You're hardly adults, I remember when you and the Kur boy were just toddling around." He gave his daughter a cheeky grin before bursting into a chortle, enjoying his daughter's embarrassment.

Mikti rolled her eyes at her father, but that didn't stop her from blushing. Her chagrin was clear to Zo, even with his single eye in the dim lights of the chamber. Zo Rex had always teased her about Rayan; why couldn't she help herself from reacting this way?

The Rex took a moment to compose himself once more. "Nonetheless, you *are* adults now. I figured there would be no surprises as to your assignment, so I might as well meet with you sooner rather than later. We'll be working closely enough during your training as Reine, but today, you are formally welcomed into the fold." Zo picked up the box from the podium and unhinged the lid, passing the container to Mikti's hands.

In the box sat a ring, a beautiful black color, gently reflecting back the pulses of light that surrounded them. In shape and quality, it matched the ring her father wore, but she got the feeling this ring was far more familiar.

"Is this Nana's ring?" she asked softly. The former Reine had worn it proudly when Mikti was young. She hadn't understood its significance as a child, but felt foolish now for not having made the connection. Though her heart was racing as she received the gift, the memory of her grandmother brought a peace and calmness to the chamber.

Zo Rex nodded somberly, but smiled down at his daughter as she removed the ring from the box.

"I know she would have been ecstatic, immensely proud to see you succeed her as Reine. In a few years time, when your training is complete, I will bring you here to the Dominion Chamber once again, and will pass on the ruling rights and responsibilities from Rex to Reine, as she had passed them to me." He took a deep breath, calming himself, hoping not to betray his sorrow before his daughter. "Our rings connect us not only with Nantri, but also with one another, a simple bond between. Not many can know the difficulties, and at times the elation, of ruling Muertos. In times of great strife or joy, we always have the choice to share the emotion, from Rex to Reine to Rex again, in perpetuity."

Zo Rex stood silent for a moment, a solemn look crossing his face. "When Mama was on her deathbed, she was in a great deal of pain, suffering from her ailments in old age. I'm grateful that I was able to convince her to share that with me, to alleviate her distress so that she might pass in peace." The tears were flowing freely now, and neither the Rex nor his daughter sought to stop them. Mikti hugged her father tightly and they stood in the Dominion Chamber, not a sound to be heard save for the low hum of the mother tree around them.

To think that his young daughter would shoulder the pain and criticism of the Muertan people, the immense weight he bore now, was almost too much for the Rex to fathom. As a royal son, he'd lived a life of luxury; he did not want for food nor water, clothing, or shelter. Waited on hand and foot, the Rex had rarely sneezed without a "bless you" from one attendant and a thorough health checkup from another.

But at what cost?

It was he who was to blame, who was expected to deliver a solution when an outburst from Typhoon ravaged a quarter of the village. It was he who was to answer the calls of grieving mothers when an affliction, an invisible enemy, stole from them the lives of their young children. And it was he who was responsible for the deaths of friends and colleagues, servicemen and civilians, at the hands of Leviathans. As the enormous, undying fiends rose from the deep, fingers grasping at Muertan lives, so did the Muertan fingers cast the blame squarely on the shoulders of Zo Rex. He lamented the price of nobility, that these trials and tribulations he'd faced, Mikti, too, would have to endure, accept, and overcome.

But he did not doubt that she could.

Mikti took a step back from her father, taking a long look at the smooth black ring in her hand. She felt its weight in her palm; the weight of the throne and the struggles that came with it, symbolized in a small black circle. Slowly she slid the ring onto the center finger of her right hand. Though it was black, an unmistakable glow emanated from the ring as it settled itself on her hand.

Slowly but surely, the chamber around them recognized the now Disciple Reine, and the warming pulse of Nantri bounded around the room, as a vibrant, glowing rabbit might prance about a field. Smiling, the Rex and his daughter knew that the mother tree, and all those regents who had come before them, welcomed the new ruler into the royal line.