

Chapter Twenty-Two

"Which way will the wind blow when the moon meets death?"

"Did you see what lies beyond life, Master Tarvonos?"

Aurelia nox Macedonos addressed Albus with an eagerness, for a child her age, more suited to questions of ponies or performers or, well, Albus wasn't really sure. When he was that age, a similar look of curious delight occupied his face when confronted with a particularly fascinating book. But he was well acquainted with the fact that this was not typical. His stomach squirmed at the thought of having this in common with her. Or perhaps at the sight and smell of the small prawns Aurelia was consuming. He was quite sure she had chosen her meal with some purpose, though her radiant face gave away no such deviousness.

"I saw a strange sea, princess," Albus said.

He had seen no such thing. Indeed, despite the serious nature of his self-inflicted brush with death, he had no recollection of anything beyond the itchiness and irritation he had felt inflaming his skin in the moments before he lost consciousness. But he sensed Aurelia nox Macedonos would not be enthralled by such meager truths.

He tucked the blanket—conveniently provided by the girl—around his legs, though he had no need of the warmth. The role of invalid had been offered to him in the form of tea, a cushioned swing under a canopy of gently fluttering leaves, and said blanket—a wooly sort, finely milled. And Albus had decided it was safer to accept that role than appear too vivacious and arouse suspicion.

The physician had pronounced him cured three days earlier. Her diagnoses had run a gamut, over the course of his recovery, between inflammation of the lungs, an excess of sea air, and an invisible spider bite, at least so Albus had ascertained between covert questions to the translator and Keleut's observations, when the pirate was present. The physician had fussed over him with a variety of treatments—perhaps for all three ailments, he wasn't quite certain—and then declared him capable of taking fresh air (seemingly in direct conflict with one of her diagnoses, but who was Albus to say) and sunshine in small doses. And so in

those three days, Albus had sojourned each afternoon in one of the private gardens in the Macedonos compound, and each day he had been visited by Aurelia. There was no sign that the twins or Keleut was particularly suspicious of his illness. But Albus had learned enough to know that if Aurelia wished him to think otherwise, she would do so exceedingly convincingly.

They had talked of many things in those three days. Small things, mostly. A few stories from her earliest memories. A conversation on dialects. But this was the first she had spoken of the incident that had almost killed him.

“A sea? Tell me more.”

“Yes, a strange sea, and even stranger blue lights.” Perhaps Albus was acquiring a taste for subterfuge. Or uncovering a hidden talent for the dramatic. Eska would hardly know him when they saw each other again.

If. He supposed that was an if.

The thought must have cast a shadow over his face, because Aurelia leaned closer from her perch on a folding chair opposite his swing.

“What is it, Master Tarvonos?”

Albus shook his head slightly and crinkled his forehead in a frown. “I’m not sure. It is difficult to put into words. At first, I simply lay on the surface of the sea. I expended no effort to stay afloat. There were no waves. The water was grey, but not in the dreary way of clouds.” He looked up from his hands and met Aurelia’s gaze. “It was peaceful.”

He waited, trying to gauge if he had overstepped the bounds of a story he was making up as he went.

“And the lights? How many? Were they far or close?”

“One at first. And then more, though now I cannot say whether they were great in number or few. They flickered, a little, but never went out.” Albus paused, to give his next words more gravity. “I think I could have floated there forever and been content.”

Preposterous. Albus’s notion of an afterlife—if he were to believe in such things—to be content with would involve an endless supply of knowledge, nothing more, nothing less. Certainly not a mindless existence. But most people wanted

happy thoughts of eternity and promises of reunion with deceased loved ones. Not books.

Aurelia was quiet for a moment, her face pensive. “I suppose,” she said at last, “that the Twins would not have revealed themselves to you.” She smiled at Albus. “But I wish they had, if you only so you could tell me of them.”

“Perhaps they did, princess, but my mind was too small to comprehend them.”

Oh, that was very good. Aurelia’s smile grew, but it was no longer for Albus. Still, he sensed he ought not to lay it on too thick. She had a sharp mind, and would smell out deceit if he gave her the chance.

“I should like to know more about what you saw, Master Tarvonos. Perhaps even beyond what you can remember, if possible.”

“I don’t understand,” Albus said. His stomach gave a neat little twist, though not, he thought, due to the prawns this time.

“I would like to ask you to attempt dissolution.”

The words made no sense.

“I still don’t understand, princess.”

“That’s to be expected,” she said, smiling again. Sunlight streamed through the leaves above their heads. It made for a pretty picture—but Albus felt only a cold fear creep through his gut as she spoke. “Dissolution is a ritual, not unlike the cleanse you witnessed part of when you first arrived in Onaxos. It is an ancient thing and has been known by many names and has been completed to achieve many purposes. But for our purposes, you may think of it as a process by which you may achieve a new enlightenment, new understanding.”

“Understanding of what, exactly?” Albus tried to ask this with mild intellectual curiosity. He was rather afraid he sounded uncouth. It could be argued, he decided, that uncouth was better than terrified.

Aurelia gave a delicate shrug. The folds of her white robe shivered with the movement. “I am given to understand that this question could be answered in infinite ways. But in the most primitive sense, if we must condense it into such useless terms, life and death, Master Tarvonos.”

“And how does one achieve,” Albus hesitated over the word, “dissolution?”

Aurelia smiled. "I believe I'll let those who know best show you."

Show, as though Albus had already agreed to submit.

"Very well, princess, I will do this for you. But I will ask something of you in return." Albus tried to keep his voice even, but he did not wait for her to accept his terms. He charged onward. "You will allow me to write a letter and see it dispatched."

One corner of Aurelia's mouth turned up, but then she demurred, giving a great sigh. "Dear Master Tarvonos, I should like to help you, but I do not think our friend Keleut would allow it. Surely you won't ask me to assist you in circumventing her wishes. This is not the way to begin an alliance."

Before that fateful day on the Anerrean Sea, before he had met a pirate named Keleut and played a game of lives and swords and riddles, Albus would have let the matter drop. But he was no longer that Albus Courtenay. That man might as well have died when he tried to bludgeon a pirate with a book.

"Do you want to know a secret?"

Aurelia cocked her head to one side. "I am very good with secrets, Master Tarvonos."

Albus nodded. "I know. Which is why I will trust you with this." He hesitated, looking across at her through his eyebrows. Her hands were clasped tight in her lap. Albus thought of the sea wall, of looking down at the sharks and chum in the water. Perhaps it was time he jumped. "My name is not Tristan Tarvonos."

As he was not particularly well acquainted with blindsiding unsuspecting prey, Albus had no way of knowing whether the expression on Aurelia nox Macedonos's face should be considered a triumph or a mediocre result.

It wasn't just her face, which had gone still, or her mouth, which had opened slightly, or even the crease in between her eyes—a thing Albus had not before seen on her young face.

It was the way her hands froze in her lap, the fingers of the right extended as though mid-gesture.

All in all, Albus supposed, it was a rather tame reaction, but given that Aurelia was typically as poised as a blind and deaf marble statue, he supposed he had

achieved the desired effect. The question remained as to whether it had been the right decision.

“You had better explain yourself.”

There was something childish in her voice, and hurt in her eyes. The words, though, were insistent.

“Of course, princess,” Albus murmured, if only to give himself a moment to think. Her eyes told him he didn’t have long. “I am no translator, though I have skill enough to convince the pirate.” Albus kept his eyes on Aurelia as he spoke, though not without some difficulty. They were very intent on burrowing somewhere under the pebbled surface of the stone garden where they sat. This was, to say the least, inconvenient. “When she set upon me at sea, she interrupted a journey of some,” Albus hesitated, “delicacy, and one which I could not, under any circumstances, disclose to her.” He waited, trying to read the girl’s face. The marble veneer had returned. “And so Master Tristan Tarvonos was born.”

As the lies passed from his lips, Albus did at last consider that there was little chance of him successfully juggling these stories between Keleut and Aurelia. Keleut, after all, knew exactly who he was. Tristan Tarvonos was a fiction of which she was laughably aware. But he had jumped in with the sharks. Swim or die.

“Tell me of this delicate journey.”

Ah. Right to it, then. Albus took a breath.

“I am a representative of the Varadome. I answer to those at the highest echelons of Arconian government.”

Really, these were quite thrilling lies he was weaving.

“I was traveling to Sandalese.” This, at least, was true. “On a diplomatic mission.” Decidedly not true. Albus waited again, desperately hoping she would respect diplomatic conventions and not press too deeply for more information. Not yet, at least.

Aurelia was quiet. Albus worked to wet his mouth without revealing that his tongue was as dry as a sack of flour. “And what am I to call you?”

“You may call me Arkadio de Ulysey.”

There. It was done. Albus could feel the sharks circling. His stomach heaved. After all, one did not assume the identity of the eldest son of Sylvain de Ulysey, closest confidant of the Archduke of Arconia and second-most powerful man in the city, without anticipating certain consequences.

But it was de Ulysey's fault that Albus had ever left home, so there was some, surely misplaced, satisfaction in that.

He attained further satisfaction from Aurelia's latest expression. Thoughtful, composed, alert. And exhibiting no signs that the name of de Ulysey was meaningless to her. He had been counting on that. Appearing important enough to remain among the living was rather near and dear to Albus's heart in that moment.

"I can see why you might wish to hide your identity from the Seycherran," Aurelia said. She smiled slightly, but it was a lesser copy of her usual knowing expression. She was, Albus reasoned, perhaps more unsettled than he had thought. "She is intent on the destruction of your city and would no doubt not hesitate to announce her vendetta with a timely execution."

Albus swallowed, his tongue seemingly too large for his mouth. "The question is," he managed, "what you will do with this secret, princess?"

It was a two-layered question. There was the immediate to consider—would Aurelia cement her new alliance by offering up what she thought was a tasty prize to Keleut—but also the long view. Namely, could Albus save Arconia by giving the Macedonos twins a reason to reconsider their plans for renewing Onaxian domination of the Anerrean Sea.

A great number of adjectives crowded into Albus's head at such a notion, each clamoring for attention. Farfetched. Outrageous. Preposterous. Harebrained. Yes, that's the one Eska would have used. Albus wasn't sure whether he wanted to laugh or cry. He was saved—barely—from either by Aurelia.

"You are my ally's enemy. While the revenge that drives Keleut does not occupy my or my brother's heart, I must respect my alliance."

This was not a promising start.

"But my mother taught me the value of information. And you have just offered me a great deal of information. Not just the secret of your identity, my lord, but the

secret of your diplomatic mission to Sandalese.” Aurelia leaned forward and put a hand on Albus’s. It was not a sensation he enjoyed, and he bit the inside of his cheek to keep from drawing away from her. “So I will keep your secrets, Arkadio de Ulysey. For now.”

“And the letter?” Even he was quite impressed with the cool nonchalance with which he managed that question. It was, after all, the very reason he had taken this particular leap. Perhaps the real Arkadio de Ulysey would be proud. After stabbing into Albus’s belly, no doubt.

Aurelia smiled her brilliant, winning smile, once more the benevolent, generous ruler. “It will be as you wish.” She squeezed his hand and then released it, settling back into her chair once more. “But I will tell my brother. You must understand, my lord. There are no secrets between us.”

“Of course, princess.”

“And you will first undergo the dissolution ceremony.”

Inconvenient, but not altogether unexpected. Albus offered his own smile. “I await it with an eager mind. The guise of Tristan Tarvonos was not all deceit. I trained as a scholar before turning to pursue my civic responsibilities.” Arkadio de Ulysey was turning out to be quite fascinating.

Aurelia stood and leaned close. Albus held his breath. She touched two fingertips to the place where his heart beat—raced—in his chest. “Ah, but it is not your scholarly mind I want, my lord. It is what lies in here. Only in our hearts can we find true understanding.”

The words seeped into Albus—as though through her fingers like a chill. And then a small voice in his head, smaller than he would have liked, proclaimed the words nonsense.

“Very astute, princess,” he heard himself say. Or perhaps that was Arkadio’s smooth answer. Aurelia smiled. But Albus, though his eyes saw her face, was hardly aware. From a young age, Albus had possessed an understanding of himself—reader, thinker, not much for outdoor pastimes, quiet, observant, the opposite of mischievous. And then later, scholar, and all that word entailed, which was, in Albus’s mind, a great many things. But there in that moment, for the first time in his

memory, as he pretended to be a man pretending to be another man, Albus Courtenay was suddenly gripped with the sort of uncertainty of self he had yet avoided in his life—that and the fear that he was changing, perhaps into something unrecognizable. The thought coiled his stomach into its most fiendish knot yet.

As such, in this rather preoccupied state, when Aurelia took him to a dome-shaped building, led him down a set of poorly lit stairs (down and down again), and then presented him to a pair of grey-robed women who proceeded to tell him to strip down and smear a questionable red paste over his body, Albus uttered not a word of protest—externally or internally.

Which resulted in him, within a matter of moments, red and pasty and slightly chilled, finding himself submerged in a vat of, well, he wasn't really sure. Thick and viscous, slightly sticky, perhaps the texture of cooling fat that had not quite gone solid but was well on its way. It was odorless, as far as Albus could tell, but decidedly tinged with yellow.

The sensation was not unpleasant.

Around Albus, the substance extended as far as the dark granite walls that sloped upward, mimicking the dome of the exterior far above at the surface. There was no telling how far it descended beneath him, though the primary source of light, curiously, seemed to be below, suffusing the chamber with a glow Albus found soothing. His body was settling into the substance at an angle, neither horizontal nor vertical, but somewhere in between that would not have been sustainable were it not for the matter's ability to hold him there. Conveniently located such that he did not have to crane his neck to see it, was a platform upon which the two women stood. Albus blinked at them.

"What is this place?"

He could not remember if he had been instructed to keep silent. Nor could he remember Aurelia leaving or where, precisely, his clothes had been discarded.

"You are in the House of Stone and Water," one of the women intoned.

Which was not helpful, as answers went.

"And you are?"

"I am Stone."

“And I am Water.”

“Oh.” Albus hesitated. “Am I meant to be doing something?” He addressed the one called Stone, who had spoken first.

“Do whatever feels natural.” That from Water.

Seeing as how none of what he was doing felt natural, this left Albus rather perplexed. He decided, after a brief assessment of the reasons for and against, to close his eyes. Yes. Natural. Surely.

He was about to open them again—just ever so slightly, what could be the harm in peeking—when the substance holding his body began to hum.

Were it water, he would have done his best to leap free. Alas, such a maneuver was not possible, though he did squirm about a bit.

“Be still.”

“What’s happening?” he asked, unsure which woman had spoken.

“What do you feel happening?”

He felt uncomfortable, that’s what. But no sooner had this thought harrumphed its way through his mind than he realized this was not exactly accurate.

The substance’s hum was, he began to understand, both a sound his ears could measure and a vibration felt against his skin. Which was, upon reflection, growing warmer.

“I feel this substance vibrating. Warming. What is it?”

“But what do you feel inside?” Stone answered, ignoring his question.

Albus frowned and began to say that he felt nothing, only this would have been a lie.

“I feel I am a child again,” he said quietly. The chamber seemed to swallow this answer. “Warm and dry after a rain storm. The hearth crackling.” He closed his eyes. “A woman singing.”

Ilana.

He had not thought of Ilana in a long time. But her voice came back to him clearly—not a particular song, no, but her voice, as strong and sweet as though she were there with him once more. Comforting a small boy. Giving him pieces of herself she could not afford to give.

She wasn't there. Albus was under no delusions of that. And while the dissolution ceremony might be intended to reveal something of life and death, this was no vision of the afterlife, no glimpse of a dead woman's spirit. This was memory. Searing, unshakeable, agonizing memory.

If not for the warmth of the substance in which he was suspended, Albus would have shivered, trembled, with the force of that memory. As it was, he pressed his eyelids tight together, but whether to ward off Ilena's voice or clasp it close and preserve it within himself, he could not have said.

The vibration increased, the humming growing louder, and Albus was aware of a darkening outside his lids. He opened his eyes to see the chamber vanish—more so than it ought to at a simple dimming of a lantern or guttering of a flame. Panic leaped through his chest, but no sooner did he gasp in a shaky breath than it fled, as though from an invisible force, a surging presence that Albus would have named light and fury though the darkness did nothing more than settle about him—darkness and a calm born of something outside Albus.

The scholarly mind within Albus was fairly sure such a thing was impossible. Indeed, it protested strongly in this manner. And yet the protest was somehow muted, as though offered from a great distance. Albus listened to it, heard it, understood it, even, but found he was rather more fascinated by what it argued against than the sense it spoke. Eska would understand. Long had she tried to convince him that even the most orderly mind, even the scholar fortified in fact and evidence and logic, should cherish wonder. Perhaps he ought to have given her notion more credence.

It was in that moment—a pleasant moment in which thoughts of Eska mingled with the sensations around him—that Albus, with the sort of mildness one might reserve for an observation about the weather, noticed he could no longer feel his toes. Or fingers. Or the viscous substance encasing any of those appendages.

Odd. Decidedly odd.

"Perhaps I've died," he mused. It seemed possible, certainly, though Albus was not one to believe one could be cognizant of one's own death, much less wondering out loud about it.

“Do you wish to die?”

The voice that rang out in response did so with quiet authority. Neither male nor female, by any measure Albus possessed, and not belonging to Stone or Water, it seemed to emanate from somewhere below. Instinctually, Albus looked down—or he supposed he did, but once again his body seemed, well, elsewhere, and he really could not have said if his neck moved at all.

“No,” Albus said. “Not yet, at least.”

“If you wish it,” the voice said, “I can grant you death.”

“That would be unnecessary. I make no claim to immortality and accept that death will find me in time.”

A moment of silence. Then: “You are wise. Most who appear before me fear death.”

“Before you? Am I? I confess I can’t see you.”

The voice laughed, an enormously pleasant sound. “I should hope not. It wouldn’t go well for you.”

“May I ask your name?” As he ventured the question, Albus was aware for the first time that he probably ought to be very frightened. Again, this thought passed as though a bird flying at a far height—observable, noticeable, but altogether unremarkable and without impact.

“You don’t know it already?”

“I’m afraid I don’t.”

The silence was longer this time, though this was not discomfiting.

At last, the voice said, “Then I think I won’t burden you with it.”

How delightfully curious. Albus said as much.

The laugh again, followed by, “I’m glad you think so.”

“I’m a scholar,” Albus said. “It is my nature to be curious. I shall be pondering these moments for a very long time, I think. But, if we’re being honest, I’m not entirely sure why I’m here. Well, I know why I’m here, but not what I’m meant to be doing or what this is meant to achieve.”

“Why are you here, then?”

“Ah, see,” Albus said, suddenly and thoroughly aware, for reasons he could not name, that he would not be able to lie, “I need to write a letter. And this was the price.”

“I don’t remember the last time I was used in a bargain.” The tone behind this was undeniably one of amusement. “Tell me more about this letter.” A pause, and then, as though the voice could understand something of Albus’s mind, “It’s quite safe, I can promise that.”

Albus took a breath, though he had no sensation of doing so. “The letter is to a friend.”

“Aren’t most?” The laugh was hidden away, like a smile behind a veil.

“I suppose, but most friends aren’t like this friend.” Albus said. “Which makes all the difference in the world.”

“Go on.”

“It could save very many lives.”

“Are these lives worth saving?”

“Aren’t most?”

Though no sound came, Albus would have sworn he felt the smile.

“Please don’t take this as disappointment, this has been a fascinating experience, but am I not meant to be finding enlightenment?”

“Enlightenment? Is that what they told you? Well,” a pause, “I suppose that does happen for those who are desperate for such things. But enlightenment is different for every man and woman. Those who ask such meaningless questions are easily appeased.”

“What question, then, should I ask of you?”

The silence that followed could have stretched on for a lifetime. Or it could have been no longer than a heartbeat pattering through Albus’s chest.

“You should ask me which way the wind will blow when the moon meets death.”

There was something new in the voice then, something stark and solemn.

“That’s...very specific,” Albus said. “And, frankly, impractical, as far as questions go.”

No answer. No smile.

And Albus knew what was expected of him. Knew it as surely as he knew the number of grey hairs growing just over his left ear (four).

So he asked.

“Which way will the wind blow when the moon meets death?”

The smile returned.

“South.”

Curious, indeed.