

**[UNTITLED]**

*Riya Parashar*

Mortuus' earliest encounter with evil beheld a story never repeated nor forgotten.

A feeling of unbridled joy courses through his veins as he races through the palace, sword thuds against his leg as he runs.

He slides to a halt outside a door decorated by ominous carvings, intrigued not by the legend of illustrations, only for the man behind the door.

The guard's posted outside the king's chambers bow at his arrival, and Mortuus beams at them as he always had.

*He is too kind*, members of the royal court whisper.

But his mother taught him kindness was to be rewarded with respect, so he smiles nonetheless.

It was unsettling; the way the guards remained stiff and unmoving that day.

Gone were their grins, replaced by something far sinister.

"May I speak to his Grace?" Mortuus' voice is high and scratchy; a tale of his youth.

"Apologies, your royal highness, but the king is.. receiving counsel." Sir Berren offers unconvincingly, a pleased smirk drawing at his puffy lips.

Lies.

Mortuus easily makes out the sound of raised voices echoing beyond the wall, his mother's the softer of the two.

He shifts uncomfortably, their muffled shouts growing louder. With dull grey eyes gifted to him by the king, Mortuus urges the guards to let him pass.

A sharp crack sounds, and before the guards can react, Mortuus slips nimbly between them, shouldering past the heavy oak doors.

The first thing Mortuus sets his eyes upon is the king towering over his mother, glare threatening.

Her fearful eyes flit to the ajar door, hand pressed to her cheek.

“Mother?” Mortuus calls. One hesitant step forwards.

The king barely dignifies him with a glance, dropping ungracefully to a cushioned seat.

“Mortuus!” His mother beams, hand dropping to usher him closer, revealing the raw, reddening skin of her cheek.

The prince’s brows crease, reaching for his sword, gaze flickering between the king and his mother.

King Orchomenus stares back, irises alight, daring him to challenge.

A gentle grip on the boy's shoulder stops him.

Looking up, Mortuus finds his mother’s blue eyes, bright as the sky, brimming with unshed tears. She shakes her head softly.

And it is only because it is she who asks that he does not raise his sword.

“I have no son.”

Mortuus catches the king’s scorn upon retreating.

“You raised a girl.”

~

His mother —Queen Aethereus— is declared dead the following year.

The palace is riddled with rumours of a god's wrath, but Mortuus knows better.

This was no gods doing, rather the work of a mortal, a vile one indeed.

She was found with crimson spilling from her lips, the family crest stamped into her skin like an ugly bruise.

Only one man possessed a ring of their sigil.

Bound by the king's cruelty even in death.

Some say she was blessed to bear the mark of a great king.

Mortuus believes it a curse.

~

Another year passes; Mortuus grows taller, shoulders broader and eyes sharper.

Each day his likeness to the king grows stronger.

He loathes it.

The way he looks to mirror and finds a shadow of his abhorrence glaring back at him.

Even now as he stares at the king, he is unsure which is worse.

“You have brooded long enough.” The king bellows.

Mortuus rolls his eyes; he needn't speak so loudly.

They stand so close, a flick of the wrist and his dagger would find its place in King Orchomenus' heart.

“The Lord Mercurius will make a man of you.”

Revenge can wait.

~

Strangely, Mortuus finds the company enjoyable.

Mercurius is determined, kind and resembles everything Mortuus lost the day his mother died.

His grey eyes brighten in the presence of his lordship.

“Widen your stance,” Mercurius orders, parrying his strike as they dance around one another. Mortuus barely blinks before he is lain on his back, air knocked from his lungs.

“I warned you,” Mercurius offers his hand.

The prince wishes to scowl, but instead smiles. Mercurius has a way of breaching one’s walls with a simple grin.

Mortuus accepts the hand, heaved to his feet.

His attention quickly drawn to a curious glimmer of gold in the gardens.

“One moment.” The prince claps Mercurius’ shoulder, taking off in long strides down the narrow path, plucking a rose of crimson from its shrub.

A young lady stands a pace away, blue eyes bright as the sky.

Golden hair falling in delicate swoops, framing her soft features. And her smile; she had the prettiest smile.

Decidedly, Mortuus dips his head, teeth flashing as he presents her with the rose.

His voice is low and smooth; a tale of his charm.

“For you, my lady.”

~

Mortuus lies awake, admiring the golden gleam of the morning sun seeping past drawn curtains.

The light is particularly kind to the lady sleeping peacefully beside him.

Thoughtlessly lifting a hand to caress her delicate features, the silver band on Mortuus’ fourth finger glints in the sunlight.

Princess Elara; she really was the prettiest *thing*.

A sharp knock interrupts his reverie, Mercurius stumbling inside, chestnut eyes wide and alert.

“What is it?” Mortuus growls, uncaring if his volume rouses the princess.

Mercurius hesitates.

“Speak.” The prince commands, rising from strewn sheets.

“My prince,” he begins, a careful hand landing on Mortuus’ shoulder, “’tis your father.”

Mortuus feels his heart seize in his chest. “What of him?”

“The king—” Mercurius pauses, tongue caught between his teeth.

“The king has fallen.”

A heavy silence looms over them, and for a moment, the world ceases to spin, Mortuus staggering backward.

“No,” he shakes his head, bile rising to his throat.

It is not true, it cannot be. *A fabrication*, it must be—

“I am sorry, Mortuus, I am so sorry.”

*No, no, no.*

His hands form tight fists, jaw clenched painfully.

“He went peacefully.”

Mortuus’ sharp grey eyes burn; eyes the king had given him.

“*NO!*” He shouts, voice raw, tainted by agony.

The palace is shaken by his wails that day. Only, Mortuus does not cry for the loss of a great king as they believe.

He cries because the king’s death is not by his hand.

He cries because the king does not suffer.

He certainly does not cry because the king is dead.

~

Despite the untimely demise of his predecessor, Mortuus settles into the role with ease, subjects utterly complicit.

The moon following his coronation, paintings of him are strung on every wall.

Lord Mercurius is named hand to the king. The only person he truly trusts.

Princess Elara —*now queen*— still pretty as the day they met, his desire yet to cease, even now, as he scours the grounds in search of her.

“Darling,” he drawls, head ducking into yet another empty room. It will not be long before he tires of this game, *of her*.

His ears perk at the sound of muted footsteps echoing from the only unchecked wing. Mortuus grins, “got you.”

What he does not expect to see is his queen’s lips locked with that of another.

He has half a mind to laugh, the burn of betrayal emerges victorious.

“Guards!” Mortuus bellows, startling the lovers —*fools*— apart.

They stare at him aghast, heavy footfall rattling down the corridor.

“Mortuus—” Elara begins, and the king can only smile a cruel smile as guards flock him, his eyes wild; predatory.

“Please escort Lord Mercurius to the dungeons.” The calm command fills the tense silence.

“Mortuus please,” his companion begs for mercy, but the king turns his gaze away indifferently.

Revenge will not wait today.

~

Darkness befalls the morning sky, a thick fog rolling through the palace courtyard.

Mercurius stands at the square’s centre, isolated from the unusually quiet crowd.

Even the executioner appears particularly melancholic today.

Much to King Mortuus' displeasure, a meagre grip on his bicep forces his gaze away from the festivities.

"Mortuus, please." The words fall softly from Queen Elara's perfect lips, she dare not speak above a whisper.

He regards her with disinterest.

"Mortuus you can still stop this," she cries now, tears spilling from her bright blue eyes.

Growing irritated, the king shakes her off. She was fortunate to have her head.

There would be use for her yet.

"Please," she wails.

"Quiet," the king hisses, a scowl painted on his face.

"Mortuus please, you must stop this!"

The back of his hand strikes her soft skin hard.

His father's ring weighs heavy on his hand as she stumbles backwards.

It is the first time he hits her. It will not be the last.

He turns just in time to meet Mercurius' gaze, the lord's head is raised high.

Mortuus thinks it despicable.

He does not flinch when the executioner strikes.

Instead, he watches with fascination as Mercurius' warm brown irises turn cold.

A satisfied breath passes the king's lips.

Now only his own dull grey eyes stare back at him in a pool of red and Mortuus cannot help but smile at himself.

It was a day no one would forget.