

Of Swords and Souls (Inglés)

Alex Martin



Capítulo 1

Ø

He walks by me, with unblinking eyes that keep a fiery and remorseful wish, scrutinizing every unfamiliar detail.

He sees me. He recognizes me, and the questions pour like cascades from his confused stare. I reply with the first spontaneous —yet painful— smile in a lifetime.

His lips smile back, just enough to be noticed, and yet, his eyes become flooded with sorrow.

I choose him.

It's wrong, but, they left me no choice. Desperation overpowers my fear of consequences.

His wish is no greater than so many others I've seen; yet, the will in it surpasses all I've experienced before.

A wish only matched by my own will for freedom and redemption.

He'll be right for me —for my purpose. That fire in his eyes is the power of his soul.

Fitting.

I know he won't resist.

Even if he forgets me as soon as we break stares...

He'll follow me, driven by the promise of his wish being granted, feeding his will, and with the help of his will, I'll have my revenge and our freedom.

I'll end it —we'll end it.

After all, I owe it to him.

We'll kill the Ruling Granters.

I'll grant our wishes without them by doing so.

After all...

Capítulo 2

1

What does life mean in this world, now that death is my ultimate currency? Rules and laws of common men no longer hold power over me or my kind. We deliver death to other like us under the shade of our abilities, some so strong they could cut the thin, synthetic thread keeping this world from plunging into chaos.

I wonder if that's why we must remain in the shadows, never to reveal ourselves to mere mortals.

We who became separated from that I used to believe to be our connection with life —our souls— now walk this city looking for other with the same peculiar feat, attempting to sever the connection with our swords. We're the emissaries of death, Wielders whose price for our wish is to bring death to other Wielders...

And I'd like to believe I'm the strongest of them all.

Today, another unfamiliar face lies in front of me, fear-riddled by the unavoidable fate my sword will land upon him. Like me, he knew the risks of the way of life we took. We knew there were others like me, ready to cut clean the dream wish out of us, just to fulfill their own. We all hope never to face someone stronger, whose wishes came at the price of other Wielders' lives.

This man's luck ran out.

The room goes dark at my command, as if the forced blackness in my mind had escaped and swallowed us both. My eyes adjust to the few drops of streetlight seeping through the closed curtains, allowing me a glimpse of the other Wielder —the one I'm here to kill.

He's not moving. He already has an idea of who I am and why I'm revealing myself to him. He doesn't know my name —not my birth one— but I know he already recognized my sword and its name: Black Reaper. I'm not the only guy hunting other Wielders, but somehow I've become thing pulled out from their darkest nightmares.

"I— they said I'd be safe if I paid." The fat man cries, scanning the room for a sign of his sword. "What sort of wish—?"

"I'm not here to chat." I snap. "It has nothing to do with you or what you did or what you wished for. You can find solace —as I do— knowing we had no choice but to do their bidding."

"But... why me?" He trembles as I extended my arm, pointing the massive black sword at him, infecting me with its aching need to taste blood.

"No reason. I just need your soul, and your sloppiness gave you away." I reply, voice artificially devoid of feelings.

An extra dose of light allowed in by a soft breeze fighting the window curtains bounces over the Wielder's sword golden blade. He tries to pretend he didn't see it, but, as his sword, he's everything but conspicuous. Out of desperation, his body leans towards his weapon, but I push the tip of my sword against his cheek, drawing a thick, dark drop of blood, freezing his body and thoughts from going any further.

Such a flashy sword can only come with a wish that matches it; this mansion, the expensive car collection on the hangar-like hall next to it and the gold linings on every doorway —he's one of those who wished for money, the main "meat" of soul-seeking Wielders. Every Wielder who wished for material stuff is an easy target, and the reason I now possess more than twenty souls. They're the most stupid at concealing their identities, making it easy to differentiate from common mortals.

"Where's the stash?" I ask, stealing a perplexed stare from him. I'm not a thief —strictly speaking—, but, since I'm taking his soul and losing a shard of mine in the process, I might as well make a small profit.

"What?" His attempt for dementia comes shallower than his breathing, as his eyes fix on an empty wall behind me a full second before noticing his own reaction.

I wave my hand, focusing on turning all the lights back on. The man's glassy eyes shine like marbles dug in pale white skin. His thick body is able to cast a shadow even with light pouring from every angle in the room. Trading a soul for fortune and wealth is one of the most stupid things I can think of. Such individuals should not deserve to live as Wielders. And still... That's not enough to reconcile the idea of killing him. I'm not a murderer —I refuse to accept that. I was turned into a soul taker —there's a difference. I made a wish and the condition was clear. If I wanted that wish granted, I had to take souls —a hundred of them.

It's not murder if the target's already dead. After all, aren't we all dead when the soul is apart from our bodies?

Reaper, my sword, whispers encouraging words into my mind, along with a cold thirst for blood and compelling me to look at the Gem on the

Golden Sword. Ambivalence swarms my thoughts and I have to shut my eyelids hard to push the confusion back into its cage.

I hear the man crawling away on the fancy wooden floor. Hot waves of energy pour from Reaper into my body, taking control of just to make me open my eyes and see the man awkwardly drawing his sword. He's twice my size, but his blade is too thin—he's not strong at all. My blade is three times wider and doubles the Golden one's length. He should know there's no point in fighting me.

I turn the lights off again, stride towards him and snatch the golden, medieval sword from his weak grasp. Panic takes over him and uses a piece of wooden chair as bat to attack. I didn't think I was endangered by that sort of weapon and the clumsy way he wielded it, and yet, the man's arm flies across the room, cut clean at the shoulder by Reaper, spraying blood over the walls and bed.

Not again. Don't... please...

Thrill and satisfaction pours from my sword and floods my body. I want to stop it, I want to regain control of my own body, but I become blinded by Reaper's overwhelming desire to keep the barrage going. I hear the man's cries, trying to use them to pull me back into myself, but only manage to pour more gas into the fire.

I take his legs next and impale him against the marble floors, feeling the widest smile in my lips.

Stop! Stop! Stop!

My arms burn and shake, ambivalent between my mind's plea and Reaper's own will. I feel darkness swallowing my sight, knowing I'm about to lose every bit of control if I don't give in. Every time I try to stop my sword's will—it's like a challenge for it, pushing harder and harder until numbness and blindness kicks in, leaving me trapped inside my own skin.

Every time, I lose this battle.

I fight it harder.

I fight it louder.

Pointless.

I let go, hoping to keep enough of myself awake to witness one more time my actions, waiting for another chance—

Reaper's sinks into his body, blade wide enough to cut through the man's stomach and chest, twisting, allowing me feel in my hands the crunching and scraping of bone. Hot blood sprays my face and I can't even blink at that. I see it all. I see his contorted face and the watery, red liquid bubbling out of his mouth, drowning his begs for mercy.

Stop.

It hates him. It wants to tear the man down to shreds. It wants me to join the bloodbath, but I can't stand it. I'm not doing this. I won't be part of this extreme. It's my sword and I should be its master. It's like a rabid, scared animal, ready to attack me if I dare to get between him and it frenzy. But I can't allow this anymore.

I'll lose it.

Stop.

It's done enough through me. My heart races and skips beats every time I force the thought through the hilt, crashing against a barrier around the gem that holds my soul. I need to connect. I need to—

STOP!

The black Gem glows for a moment and my body tenses at last.

But the damage is done. The man's body is torn and he stumbles back and forth between near death and excruciating, white-eyed agony —and it'll keep that way until I reclaim his soul. I must do it, now that I have the slightest control over myself and my sword.

I look at the golden sword on my left hand and command myself to drop it. Reaper doesn't like that, it wants to take over again, but I thrust the tip Reaper's blade against the blue, circular gem on the golden sword's pommel, unleashing bolts of lightning reaching every corner of the room. Blue smoke comes out of the gem, hovering over Reaper's blade and traveling towards the black jewel on the handle. The gem shines blue until the last of the smoke disappears; his soul —now part of my sword, strengthening it.

Murderer. I hear, as a whisper into my ears. It's the man's voice.

Reaper rests, satisfied by his late dinner, becoming a ton heavier in a fraction of a second.

I'm a dry leaf struck by a cold autumn breeze. Every fiber on muscle shakes and I can no longer hold my sword. I let go, and it splinters the wood at my feet. Thick tears flow over my cheeks and fall hard with my

knees against the floor.

The man lies there —lifeless at last— over a puddle of blood that flows in cascades down the whole carved by Reaper. His face remains contorted in agony and his one good arm extended, defending himself from the sword that was destroying his body. I never noticed he was still trying to fight me. I was just—

“It was worse this time.” I mutter, looking down at Reaper. “What do you want from me?”

I hold my head with both hands and press it hard, swallowing the bitter, poisonous angst before I lose my reason again. I remember Lyla’s face as she was taken by the Granters. I see their elegant white clothes and hear the piercing voices.

And the dizziness returns.

The full reality of the kill hits me and I want to throw up. I must use all my will power to keep the little dinner I had in me —to hold my head in place and stop the room from spinning. It’s the truth I deny. It’s the reality of the word I heard as the man’s soul was sucked into my gem.

But most of all, It’s the fear of getting caught. Of people knowing of me, what I have done and what I can do.

That won’t happen. Resolve is my armor against insanity —against me losing my mind.

It can’t. I won’t allow it to happen.

I take my sword and stand up. I hold in front of my chest and summon the fire. It spring alive from the guard, blazing over Reaper’s every millimeter, dancing around my hands. It doesn’t burn —not me. It’s my fire and it’s one with me. I wave the sword in the air twice before digging it deep into the wooden floor. The fire spreads over the room instantly, finding its way out of the room’s broken door to the rest of the mansion.

The fat man’s body burns along with every evidence of my presence.

I take the golden sword and caress the place where the blue jewel was, now replaced by a black one, marking it as mine, now. I close my eyes, commanding the sword to disappear, leaving only the black jewel in my hand. I make a fist around it and let it be fused with my body. A small gold circle with a blue “X” inside appears in my forearm: the tenth Sword Tattoo. I don’t know what this sword does, but, it’s the first golden sword I run into. Whatever it does, must be useful.

I turn to look at Reaper, letting out a loud, defeated sigh. I caress the black hexagonal gem on my sword's hilt and it becomes a cloud of black smoke, then, it travels to the back of my hand, becoming a tattoo of a black pentagram, with a red circle in the middle.

I step out of the room, taking the stairs from the fifth floor down to the entrance, always greeted by the flames that consume the construction. To me, they're like warm, silky clouds of amber light. I miss them at the moment I leave the mansion and walk away, back into the more crowded city's skirts, listening to the wailing of firetrucks closing on me.

I try not to look back as I walk away from the burning house, though I can't stop thinking about the man I just killed. I see his torn body and feel a momentary wave of guilt, with a cool, after-storm wind.

I pull my black shirt's long sleeves all the way down my wrists and hasten my pace. It's earlier than I expected, so I walk to a nearby open mall while I wait for my parents and brother to sleep. I don't want them seeing me like this. My face tells too much of what goes on inside me. And I've had enough pain and stress for one night —or for a whole lifetime, is you ask me.

There's a movie starting in a few minutes —a midnight premiere of an epic—, and by the time it ends, it'll be late enough. I buy one of the five remaining tickets —placed far up the last row. I can't care less about the movie or how long it is, but, apart from waiting for my family to fall sleep, I also need to be hidden long enough to calm my nerves and to let the turmoil caused by a burning mansion to settle.

"Cool tattoo." The girl says as I take the ticket, referring to the one in my hand —my sword.

"Thanks." I reply, not making eye contact.

I walk into the crowded hall, straight to my seat. There's only one empty space between me and a horny couple, which stops making out as soon as the spot me. They giggle and whisper things between them. If this was a movie I wanted to see I'd hate them right now. But as soon as the lights die and the movie trailers kick in, I won't be seeing or hearing nothing but my own thoughts.

I rub my temples and I see his face —the fat man's—, contorted and pleading for mercy as I twisted my blade over and over.

Why?

It's the price I have to pay to see Lyla again. Extinguish hundred lives to respawn hers is a good deal for me. I don't care if that means to lose

myself and who I was.

Who I was—

“Excuse me?”

I open my eyes and see the outline of a short, slightly curvy girl standing right next to my seat.

“Is that seat taken?” She asks, sounding both joyful and embarrassed.

Judging by her voice, she may be about my age or younger. The movie screen goes bright, allowing me to see her curly, chocolate hair, falling in all but perfect locks to her chest.

I shake my head and move my legs so she can take the seat between me and the Hornysons.

“Thanks. I hope no one takes this place. I just didn’t want to be seating with my friends. They’ve got their tongues in each other’s throats since we got here.”

Sorry to say this, but you didn’t trade for better. I think.

“Did you like the first movie? I’ve been waiting for this sequel like crazy and...”

Great! I’ve got a talker —and a hyperactive one.

After a couple minutes of non-stop chatting I decide to hammer-crush her spirit.

“I’m sorry, Miss—” I whisper.

“Haley.” She snaps, with a huge smile.

“Don’t care.” That erases the smile. “I’m here to hide for a while, you know? I don’t even know what the movie’s about or if there was one before. I just need to disconnect from everything and everyone. So, no offence, but I’d appreciate if you could stop talking.”

The horny couple glares at me from over the girl’s shoulder, but they look away as soon as I make eye contact with them. I’ve developed a killer look over the last couple months —almost literally killer.

“I—I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—” The girl’s voice gets chocked.

Great. I sliver of guilt manages to get through my jerkiness.

"I know. This is all me. If you feel like returning to your friends I won't be offended."

"Nah. Awkward silence is better than being close to them."

"Suit yourself."

The cinema goes dark again, ready to transition from trailers to the actual movie, and I travel to a different dimension, ignoring the screen and noises.

Every now and then I see some of the movie, when I'm tired of replaying the murder scene in my head, feeling every second of uncontrolled rage and thirst for blood. It's not a bad movie, but I don't understand half of what's happening, and every time there's a sword fight, I remember all my own fights, searching for a moment of weakness where I could regain control of myself and dominate my sword's urge to kill.

The movie ends and I feel like only an hour had passed. The short girl left before the movie ended, but I didn't even notice. And she must've left in hurry, because her pink wallet is right over her seat. The horny couple—and most of the people—already left, so I'm stuck between my desire to leave it to the movie theater personnel and never get back to her, or take it myself and return it.

"Shit." I mutter.

I pick it up and leave the mall.

On my way back home I open the wallet to see if there's an ID that can tell me where she live so I can give it back as soon as possible. She might even live nearby.

A piece of paper falls from the wallet and I pick it up before it hits the wet floor. It looks blank at first, but the longer I stare at it, the clearer some words become.

"What the—?"

I re-read it three times, making sure I'm reading it right:

Nice job, Wielder.

But there are things that magic fire can't erase.

Capítulo 3

2

The only thing in the wallet is the cinema ticket, also carrying a message in magic ink. I memorize the address written before it vanishes; it's an empty, dead-ended alley just a few blocks from here, opposite to the way home, which calms my nerves. This Wielder girl knows me somehow, maybe has been following me since before the burning mansion. And I'm kinda compelled to know why.

I look down the empty, wide street. My home is twelve long blocks ahead. Potential safety awaits me there —or I'd be leading her to my home, endangering my family. Patches of yellow, dim streetlights fade into darkness a couple of blocks into the street, in the invitation's direction. She's smart. And I'd have to be too dumb to accept that invitation —that or...

There are things that magic fire doesn't erase. I'm tensing my jaw, knowing I'm not gonna get home just yet. It's not the wisest choice, but I believe this girl knows something I don't. If she were strong enough to kill me, she'd have done it already. Problem is that one of us will have to die at the moment we meet, either by our hands or the Granter's spies.

If it comes to it, I'd have to kill her first.

My heart jumps and my insides twist hard. I feel like throwing up as I remember the faces of the men, women and youngsters I've killed, shrinking and expanding the street and buildings around me.

"I had no choice, I had no choice, I had no choice, I—" Words pile against each other into a lump in my throat. I swallow them, along with the upcoming sobs. I promised myself I wouldn't break again. A hundred souls are worth the one wish I made.

I look around, making sure I'm not being watched, then, circle my sword's tattoo twice with the tip of my index finger and the black gem materializes out of a black cloud. I hide it in my fist, ready to release Reaper if I feel threatened. Ready to defend in case this is a trap.

That's when I freeze.

This is that indeed. If I go, I'd be walking blind into this Wielder's bear

trap —weak or not, she must have a plan.

I look down the street once more. I can almost see the alley in the dark ahead, right before where the traffic lights tell a lonely car to stop —a lonely witness.

This is risking too much. I let out a long sigh and turn back to head home, but I don't get far —I stop dead as the tip of a sword is pointed at my chest. I follow the blade one centimeter at a time, recognizing a katana's pattern on its edge. It has no guard, so either the Wielder is highly skilled... no, not just highly skilled, if I didn't hear her sneaking upon me she's beyond that, specially wearing that leather jacket and loose jeans. I should've heard her coming at me from a block away.

"It's not polite to reject an invitation, Wielder."

My eyes shift to see the short girl in front of me. It's the same one from the movie, just her voice is different —deeper.

"You kinda see why." I say. "Though, I'm kinda hopeful you're not here to kill me, are you?"

She shakes her head, keeping her piercing black eyes on mine. Never blinking. "I am not, Ares." My eyes go wide open —she knows my real name.

She retracts her sword to her side —a red katana, as long as her height.

"How do you know my name?"

"I know more than that." Her eyes go to my right hand. Does she also know I have my gem there? "I'm here to make you an offer." She says as she fuses her katana into her left hand, becoming a red dragon tattoo in its palm.

"That's not an answer." I hold my gem harder, ready to release Reaper.

"That won't matter when I make you this offer, Ares. And if you still don't like it, I'll search for another Wielder brave enough to accept."

There's not a single drop of doubt on her menacing face. She's small and, judging by her width, not in shape to be a powerful Wielder, but, just her stare has enough power to intimidate. It all could be an act. I'll have to find out the hard way.

"If you answer one of my questions I'll—"

"Nice knowing you, Ares." She says and turns to walk away, just like that.

Now. I summon Reaper into its full form and stride to catch up with her.

She stops. I know she's ready to attack me, so I swing my sword right at her neck. But she's not moving. I don't see her wielding her sword at all. I can take her soul, here and now. One more—

Lyla. I hear in my head.

I force-stop my swing an instant too late —my sword is way too heavy to just stop it that fast. There's a small cut, too close to her jugular. My sword doesn't even shake at the sight of the warm, crimson river flowing into her shoulder. Reaper should be screaming for the kill. It's not taking control, asking me to kill her like with the others. For the first time, I'm in full control of my sword.

"How do you know that name?" I demand.

She claps her hands together and pulls her katana out of her left palm. I just have a fraction of a second to react and block her first swing at my arms. Before I can take a step back she's already attacking again, thrusting her sword at my neck, stopping just on the same spot as my Black Reaper did on neck.

"Now we're even."

I feel the cold steel against my skin, and the hot drop of blood running down my neck. This girl is no joke. She could have killed me twice already, and not by luck. She's fast, and determined. Plus, her magic skills must be just as good as mine —or better.

Shit.

"Are you ready to hear what I have to say this time? Or can I walk peacefully away?"

"Guess I'm out of choices."

She nods.

"I'm all ears."

"I'll kill the Granters, but to get to them I need the help of a powerful Wielder like you."

I narrow my eyes on her, shooting piercing beams of disbelief. "That's impossible."

"To you alone, yes."

This arrogance is driving to the edge. I want to kill her as much as I need to understand who the hell she is. "Prove it."

"No need. Proof will come when I'm stepping on their severed heads."

Not a single twitch. Nothing that could tell me she's bluffing or conning me. Who the fuck is she? Besides, if she kills the Granters, then Lyla—

"She's not dead. They lied to you, Ares."

My jaw drops.

"Your wish was granted as you asked, but, they need you to gather the hundred souls for a greater reason —and they found one of their most faithful servants in you. They saw the despair burning in you and knew you'd do anything they asked for the sake of your wish. But if they gave you Lyla back, you could become more preoccupied defending her than doing their bidding."

I'm petrified. This girl knows my name, my wish and the name of whom I made the wish for. Plus, her power and ability is great enough to slice me in two moves had she wanted to. Hell knows how long she's been stalking me to know so much.

"Who are you?" The question escapes my mind.

"I need shelter until I find a safe place for us to stay and begin our way towards the Granters' Lair. We'll stick and fight together and you'll keep the souls of the fallen. In exchange, I'll make sure you get Lyla back to you, safe and sound."

"It sounds too easy."

"It's simple, Ares. Not easy."

"What if you fail?"

"I won't. But, if you do help me get to the Granters' Lair —and don't want to follow me inside— I'll give you all the swords I've gathered; they have their owner's souls intact inside the gems, and are more than enough to pay your debt."

It's all too good to be true, and yet, her arctic-cold stare make me believe it's possible, and that scares me down to the marrow. If she's serious about being able to kill the Granters, what stops her from killing me when we get there? All the sword she claims she owns... could they be other Wielders who helped her and then were betrayed?

"I need to know," I say. "I need to understand who are you or why you want to kill the Granters."

My question manages to make her narrow her eyes on me.

"I find interesting that getting Lyla back isn't reason enough to stop asking questions, Ares. Could it mean that she's not the real reason you became a Wielder?" That pierces a whole in my chest as much as boils my blood. "My real name is Shannon —that's all the answer you'll get. If that's not enough, I'll walk away and find another Wielder. And who knows? May be your replacement and I get there in less of the time it'll take you to collect the hundred souls alone, then, there'll be no one to grant your wish."

Nothing but the hundred souls will grant your wish, Wielder. That's what they told me three months ago. Getting Lyla back it's my priority, so, if she's true to her word... I'll use her abilities to get close to them, and as we fight, I'll get stronger, so, if she thinks about betraying me at least I can grow a chance fight back.

I offer my hand and she shakes it without a second thought.

It's done. Her sword returns to her hand and I follow suit.

"Lead on." The order set off a million alarms in my head.

It's not only me giving her refuge at my own house, but, it means bringing her close to my family. My brother and my parents, they all might be endangered by this deal. She could be planning on using them as hostages to force me do her will. I can't allow that to happen.

"What's wrong now?" Irritation pushes her words hard off her mouth.

"It can't be in my home" I say, firmly.

She rolls her eyes and turns to face me. "You have a brother and a mother and a father. Caleb's your brother name. I've seen them." My face contorts with fear and anger. "I am not —and listen well— NOT interested in them. The last thing I need from you is to be distracted by their wellbeing, so, I'll help you keep them safe —if that helps you stay

focused.”

Why?

“Because you’re more important than you know.” I’m about to ask another question when... “And I don’t want to hear another word from you. We’re no longer safe here. Let’s go.”

I stay froze in place, taking in her last statement, searching for the tiniest hint of mislead or malice. What I get is a far unexpected glimpse of despair, lurking deep in the void of her eyes. I know that can’t be fake ‘cause I’ve seen that same cold, somber glint on my own reflection.

I lead on, as she asked, despite the fact that she must already know the way.

After leaving the big, fancy buildings, the city gives way to unending blocks of similarly shaped homes. Most houses have only one story, but mine is one of the few lucky ones with two —three if I count my room/attic.

Shannon walks in silence the whole way, keeping her determined stare, with her hands ready to draw her sword, as if she was something of a bodyguard. It makes me feel safe, in a way. After seeing what she’s capable of, having her near helps me forget about the potential threat of another Wielder.

But, if she’s so powerful, why needing shelter? Why—?

“Can we walk faster?” Sudden anxiety sharpens her voice.

“Reason?”

She shoots her “No more questions” look at me again. I just groan and quicken the pace and she just follows. Her light footsteps are light and quiet, like rhythmic water drops falling from a faucet, impossible to hear at any other time of day but the dead of night. Three houses away from mine, the steady flow stops. I look back and she’s has a blank stare, her body tensed from toes to the very tip of every single curly hair.

Something’s wrong.

“What?”

She puts a finger over her lips. Her eyes glow faintly red before she shuts them and concentrate on something. A few seconds later she opens them again, slightly tilted towards her left, glowing brighter. The inner light dims like it was being sucked back into her skull. Then, she looks at me.

"False alarm." The dismissal of her recent reaction is nothing less than disturbing. "That's your house, right?" Shannon nods directly at my home.

I don't even bother to ask how she knows that, anymore. I just hope I get one or two answers in the near future.

I guide her to the backdoor, 'cause opening the front one would make enough noise to wake up the entire block —I think we've never greased the hinges once since we moved in. Shannon follows, not asking about the alternate route taken. This lock is a week old at most, and the key enters and turns like a hot knife in warm butter. The hinges purr as I open and close the door, waking only a shy cricket to jump back into the overgrown yard grass. Inside, the kitchen is pristine clean and the dining table has a single plate covered with a napkin and a cold, hardened sandwich under it. I smile as I imagine Caleb, my younger brother, making it.

"You hungry?" I keep the lowest voice volume I can muster, then, take a pause to reconsider my question. "Do you even eat?"

"I do. I'm not a robot." There's a hint of annoyance in her words. Good, because I was actually beginning to believe she wasn't even human. "But thanks, I ate fine earlier."

"Got it." I reply and grab the meal for myself.

I take off my sneakers and she does the same with hers. We walk the distance from the table to the stairs leading to the second floor, tiptoeing as we go. We climb the stairs one step at a time, ears sharply fixed on any sudden noise. We go across the bedrooms' hallway like weightless shadows. My parents' door is open and I can hear the fan on, which helps to silence our footsteps. It's not a hot night, but, the day was hot enough and something about the way this house was constructed keeps that warmth inside for the entire night.

Climbing the improvised stairs quietly to the attic turns to be an impossible task, wood creaks under our weight so loud I fear the sound is reaching all the way to the street. Yet, not a soul comes out to the hallway behind us. I pull the stairs back up and lock the floor door. We've been out in the dark for so long the street light seeping into the room through the round window facing the street it's more than enough to see in here. It's open, letting cool, moist air in. I'm about to close it when Shannon's hand stops me.

"Keep it that way." She whispers.

“Why?”

“I’ll take the first watch until you wake up. I need every sense on what’s outside the whole time.”

This is the first question she actually answered. Should I consider this a progress? Whatever the reason, I won’t spoil the moment with a sarcastic comment, I’ll just go along. Maybe I’ll be getting more answers if I let them flow naturally out of her.

“Fine.” I say.

I’m about to take off my shirt when I become conscious of the girl in my room. I look at her and she’s already dropping her leather jacket off, revealing a white, tight tank top underneath. Her arms and chest are full of tattoos —apparently she wasn’t kidding about the swords. As she flexes her arms I can see her complexion has more to do with muscles than body fat. It’s a gorgeous combination, hard not to look at. She sits on the floor, near the window, with her black eyes glowing just lightly red.

I wonder what will she think if I undress here and now —I mean, it’s not like anything’s gonna happen, but, we barely know each other and...

Grow up, Ares, you’re not twelve.

I sigh and take off my long sleeve shirt and pants. I take a quick look at her, feeling my cheeks burning against my desperate commands to stop; she’s not at all interested in what I’m doing. Her attention is devoted to the window.

Good. I jump in bed and check my phone; it has enough battery and the alarm is set at nine o’clock tomorrow. It’ll be Saturday, so I can’t arrive late at work. Weekends are busier days.

I look at Shannon one last time before closing my eyes.

“Don’t worry. I’ll protect you.” Her voice reaches me like she was whispering directly into both my ears, gently shoving me into dreamland.