

Chapter Fourteen

“Who am I to make demands of gods?”

There were few things more likely to distress Albus than a loss of intellect. Specifically losing comprehension in one of the sixteen languages he spoke.

Certainly recent events had seen the addition of vengeful pirates and warriors immune to pain to that list of nightmare scenarios, but for a man whose very identity and understanding of self stemmed from the grey matter in his skull, the prospect of a diminishing of that grey matter’s capabilities was truly horrifying.

As such, when Albus swam back into consciousness and heard a voice speaking words that were somehow familiar and yet wholly unintelligible to him, his first thought was that his foolish scheme had rendered his mind useless. His second thought was the realization that he had not ended up dead, which suggested a certain degree of success—the bare minimum, really. His third thought was that his tongue weighed as much as a cobblestone.

Albus opened his eyes—and immediately wished he hadn’t.

Keleut stood over him.

And he was in his bed in the Macedonos house. Which meant there was likely still a trident-wielding guard outside the door.

To be sure, the second phase of his plan—which did not deserve the term—had always been nebulous. Albus had hoped to awaken, well, elsewhere. Perhaps in a healer’s place of business, or in a ward in the infirmary on the fourth level of the city. Another room in another wing of the Macedonos house—provided there was an absence of guards—would even be preferable to waking up approximately fifteen steps from where he had last been conscious.

There was some relief, he supposed, in the fact that Keleut’s face bore traces of concern. If the pirate truly thought him to be gravely ill, perhaps not all was lost.

“Albus?” Keleut rattled off a string of words in Seycherran, which, Albus realized, he understood, though his mind was slow in processing them.

He blinked.

She switched to Bellaran. “Can you hear me?”

Albus moved his cobblestone tongue within his mouth and managed to utter something resembling affirmation.

“How do you feel?”

There was no need for a lie here. He felt awful. His body was stiff and achy, his mind fuzzy, his lungs weak. And his skin was on fire, as though stinging ants marched just under the surface. Still, he opted for more drama than was strictly necessary.

“Dead,” Albus croaked. He was pleased to see Keleut’s brows knit together.

“You nearly were,” she said. “Your pulse was all but gone when they found you. At least so I am told. What happened, Albus?”

Albus tried to lift his head, failed. Keleut slid one arm under his shoulders and lifted, giving Albus his first look at his body.

He had been determined to act surprised. This was, it turned out, not needed.

His arms were swollen, lumpy things, the skin a hideous mottled purple and red, his elbow joints so stiff as to be incapacitated. His torso was little better off, despite the fact that Albus had jabbed all but two of the fish bones into his arms. Only his legs, spindly and white in comparison as they poked out from his undergarment, seemed unaffected. Albus stared, suddenly aware that he had come much closer to death than he had anticipated. The weakness in his lungs, the thickness in his throat as he worked to swallow—all told of severe trauma to his vital systems. He felt his heart begin to patter with incessant speed, heard himself struggle to draw in breath.

Keleut lowered him back down to the pillow, her hands firm but gentle. “You’re all right,” she murmured. “Just breathe.” She continued on this way until Albus settled.

“It hurts,” Albus whispered, his eyes shut tight. “My skin. A physician, please.”

“Soon,” Keleut said, her voice tight. “She was here, but returned to her shop for supplies. She’ll be back. Soon.”

“I’m afraid I won’t be ready for negotiations in the morning,” Albus said, not because he wanted to make a joke, but because he desperately needed to think

about something other than death. Keleut did not laugh, but he felt her hand squeeze his shoulder.

“It can wait,” she said.

Delay, yes. Albus should have been glad. Any delay to Keleut’s plans, any delay before the Second Spears of Naxos were unleashed on Arconia, was to be welcomed. But there was something in her voice that tugged at him.

“You don’t need me, Keleut,” Albus said, each word requiring effort. “You have your alliance. The twins will listen to your demands. You don’t need my voice.”

Silence. And then Keleut’s hand lifted from his shoulder.

“You’re wrong. I am no one.” Albus heard Keleut stand, heard her voice grow softer she turned away from the bed. “They are like gods to their people and they know it. I am but a pirate. I own nothing but a ship, and even that is not truly mine. I have a crew that will not hesitate to abandon me if they see me fail. Who am I to make demands of gods?”

Children, Albus wanted to say. For all their poise and intelligence, the Macedonos twins were but children. And yet, he understood Keleut’s awe, had felt it himself.

Albus opened his eyes again, this time seeing Keleut’s back. She appeared small, smaller than she ought, her shoulders caved in under the weight of an invisible burden. Albus searched for the right words—but before he could utter any, the door to his room opened.

A woman in grey and dark green entered, a large leather bag slung on one arm, a small metal chest in her hands. A young man followed, eyes downcast, a diligent shadow.

“The physician,” Keleut said, not quite looking Albus in the eye.

The woman strode to the bed and deposited her things next to Albus’s feet. She looked expectantly at the young man, who mumbled in Bellaran that this was Livia nox Ionos, the finest physician in Onaxos. Some accolades followed, which the translator delivered with little enthusiasm, but Albus wasn’t paying attention, nor did he manage to muster any curiosity about the salve the physician began to apply to his skin after poking at his armpits and abdomen. No, Albus was aware of little

other than the last expression he saw on Keleut's face before she slipped from his chamber. Doubt.

And, through the pain in his body and the haze in his mind, Albus understood that Keleut, daughter of Nestor, was less sure of herself than she wanted the world to know.