

CHAPTER 1 — THE MIRROR IN THE SNOW

This is an alternate universe where Itha Thornwell, the Night Stalker, was discovered wounded and unconscious by Alaric Branwood. Unaware of her true identity, he carried her to his secluded home and nursed her back to health. As weeks passed, care turned into closeness—and closeness into love, changing them both. In the two months they've lived together, Itha has stepped away from her life as the Night Stalker as the warmth of what they share has grown stronger. But beyond the safety of Alaric's home, the hunt for the Night Stalker never stopped.

Deep in the southern reaches of Velldenaar, where the land begins to slope toward the trade roads that feed Hillbranton, the Dark Forest closes in like a living thing. The trees here grow older and denser, their trunks thick and shadow-stained, their upper branches knitting together so tightly that even daylight feels filtered and watchful. Still, at this hour, the sun manages to pierce through in thin, pale beams, glinting off the snow in harsh, cold sparks. Small flakes fall only now and then, drifting lazily as if the sky can't decide whether to keep winter moving.

It should feel peaceful.

But the forest is unnaturally quiet, no chatter of birds, no darting shapes in the branches, no small life stirring beneath the underbrush. Even the usual creak of pine and the whisper of needles seems subdued, as though the woods are listening.

Blood breaks the spell.

It's splashed across the snow in scattered patches at first, then in longer smears where someone staggered, slipped, or was dragged. There are prints everywhere, boots punching through crusted white, steps overlapping in frantic spirals, deep trenches where bodies were hauled or thrown. In places, fresh crimson has softened the snow into dark slush before the cold seized it again, freezing the stains mid-spread so they look like wounds that never finish bleeding.

And then the hut comes into view.

A rough timber shelter crouched close to the riverbank, half-hidden by pines and shadow, the kind of place travelers whisper about but never expect to find. The roof sags under winter's weight. The chimney is cold, no smoke, no warmth, only the low, steady murmur of the river slipping beneath broken ice.

But the ground in front of the hut tells the truth.

A battle didn't just happen here—it detonated.

The clearing has been pulverized into chaos: drifts torn open, snow churned to slush, frozen clumps thrown like scattered ash. Bark is ripped from nearby trunks and snapped branches jut from the ground like broken spears. A nearby wood pile has been scattered, and a fence post lies cracked in the snow as if something slammed into it and was thrown back. Deep gouges score the clearing where boots skidded and bodies dragged, and the trampled snow is stained so dark it looks almost black where it already started to freeze.

Bodies lie scattered around the hut in the most unnatural positions—thrown, not fallen. Some are crumpled face-down as if they were dropped mid-stride. Others are twisted as though their bones gave way before the rest of them did. One has been smashed into a tree with such force the trunk behind him is stained, the snow beneath his boots churned into a red slurry that's crusting over with ice. Another lies farther out, torn apart in a way that doesn't feel like swordwork—cloth shredded, limbs wrenched, the ruin of a man left as if whatever struck him didn't care about precision, only outcome.

And the stench—

Not just blood and iron, but sweat locked into fabric, disturbed earth, torn pine... and something else layered beneath it all: the thick, lingering sourness of fear, clinging to the clearing as if the air itself remembers the screaming.

Yet the strangest part isn't the brutality.

It's the control.

For all the carnage, the hut stands almost untouched, as if the violence was forced to orbit it. No wide splatter across the timber. No smeared handprints on the planks. Even the threshold, where the worst of it should have gathered, looks spared. The fight didn't happen at the door. It happened in front of it, always pushed outward, always redirected, as though an invisible line had been drawn in the snow and enforced with death.

Like whatever the soldiers attacked wasn't simply fighting to survive.

It was protecting the hut by any means necessary, ensuring not even a single drop would reach the door.

And at the center of it all, the final struggle is silent, so silent it feels like the forest itself is leaning in to listen.

One man stands behind the masked figure, crushed close to its back, holding it so tight there's nowhere to slip—not left, not right, not down.

The Nightstalker wears a long dark blue cloak, heavy with snowmelt, its back lined with thick white fur that looks almost too soft for what stands beneath it.

Long blonde hair falls entirely over the front of the body, spilling down both sides in pale lengths that reach nearly to the legs. It is the only warmth in that appearance, a muted gold standing in eerie contrast to the cold darkness of the attire. Beneath the cloak, the sleeves and pants are black, and the chest of the garment is a deep, muted blue, bound by a belt drawn across it. Long black boots disappear into the snow below, while both hands are encased in clawed metal gloves, more like the talons of a hunting beast than something made for a human hand.

Over the face rests a bone-white mask shaped like some strange owl-like creature, its features hollow and unsettling. From the empty sockets, a cold blue glow shines out, bright and unnatural, like pupils lit by frostbound flame.

At the back of the cloak, beneath the white fur lining, something else moves.

Bandages.

Pale wrappings spill from the Nightstalker's back in ragged lengths, floating in the air like snakes that forgot they were cloth. They coil and uncoil with a restless, hungry intelligence—hovering, searching for space, for purchase, for a throat. Every so often they twitch forward in sharp, eager feints, as if testing the world for weakness.

But Raphael gives them none.

He keeps the Nightstalker folded into him like a shield, his forearm locked across the upper chest while his other hand clamps both wrists and wrenches the arms down and back. The clawed fingers scrape at empty air, flexing, twitching, dangerous even in panic, but he angles the joints so there's no reach, no swing, no way to rake at him or break free without tearing the body apart.

His body weight is a cage, his stance wide and immovable in the churned snow.

And because he has the Nightstalker crushed so tightly against him, the bandages struggle too—pressed between the body and his armor, pinned at awkward angles, robbed of the space they need to strike cleanly. They writhe over his shoulder and along his side, whipping in short, frustrated arcs, scraping against metal with a dry, rasping sound—alive, furious, and contained only by the brutal closeness of his hold.

Tan skin shows at his throat where the metal armor doesn't fully cover. Brown hair, damp with snowmelt. Red eyes, wine-dark and unblinking, staring past the mask as if he's already decided this ends here. A red cloak hangs from his shoulders like the mantle of a hero, heavy and vivid against the winter-white, fastened at his front right side with a golden medal that pins the fabric in place. When the wind shifts, the cloak tugs and flares, and his steel catches a sudden slice of sunlight—flashing coldly—before the shadows swallow it again.

And he doesn't release the Nightstalker when the Inquisitor steps in.

He holds tighter.

In front of them, Prince Nathanos Thornwell—commander of the squad and Inquisitor assigned to the hunt—moves with the calm certainty of someone who has ended battles before. Long blond hair falls to his shoulders in loose, wind-tugged strands, framing a face that looks almost too composed for a place like this: smooth, pale skin spared by a quiet inner flame that radiates from him, keeping the cold from settling too deep.

His blue eyes stay locked on the mask—unwavering, sharp with focus.

He wears an inquisitor's long coat, dark grey with a faint purple cast in the winter light, cut for authority as much as combat. Across his chest lies a tabard bearing the Searing Flame insignia, stark against the gloom. A red scarf—threaded with gold—wraps his neck and shoulders, heavy against the wind. And at his shoulders, thorned guards rise like a crown of menace: dark metal shaped into brambles, laced with gold thorns that catch the light in brief, cold glints whenever the wind shifts.

His presence is royal even here, in blood and frost—posture straight, shoulders squared, no tremor in his hands. And even though fear claws at his heart, surrounded by the dead left scattered through the snow, he does not hesitate.

Instead, he steps through the wreckage and reaches down into the churned snow.

A blade lies half-buried at his feet, dropped, discarded, iced along the edge where blood met winter. His gloved fingers close around the hilt with controlled firmness, and he pulls it free in one smooth motion. Frozen slush cracks as the steel breaks loose, shedding snow in thin sheets. For a heartbeat he simply holds it.

Not to admire it—never that—but to claim it. His grip tightens, and beneath the leather something shifts: a quiet heat, an inner flame he keeps leashed behind his ribs. He doesn't ignite the weapon. There's no blaze, no spectacle to warn the forest.

Just warmth.

It travels down his arm like a restrained breath and seeps into the metal. The frost along the blade sweats, beads forming, then vanishing as the edge is tempered to his will. The steel darkens from icy bite to living warmth, subtle, controlled, so it won't catch, won't slow, won't be dulled by winter when it needs to pierce.

For one last, desperate instant, the Nightstalker fights the grip.

The body twists hard against Raphael's hold, bandages snapping upward as if to tear him away, to wrench free, to survive by sheer refusal alone.

But it is too late.

Then the weapon drives forward, Nathanos's blue eyes never leaving the mask.

It plunges into the Nightstalker's chest with lethal precision—and a scream tears out.

For a heartbeat, it isn't one voice.

Two sounds break from beneath the mask at once: the first is unmistakably human—a woman’s voice, ragged, shocked, full of pain—and the second rises beneath it like something ancient and starving forcing its way through the same throat. A shrieking beast-note claws into the air, too sharp, too vast, too wrong to belong to anything living. It drowns the human cry almost at once, twisting through the trees with such terror that the forest itself seems to recoil.

Nathanos freezes at the first sound.

Not because it is human.

Because it is familiar.

But then the second voice tears through it, and whatever recognition had begun to form in him is crushed beneath the horror of it.

For that same heartbeat, all three of them forget how to breathe.

The Nightstalker’s body bucks, then locks, lungs fighting for air that will not come. Behind it, Raphael jerks as heat bites through his armor. His eyes squeeze shut from the pain, and he swallows the sound it tears from him, breath catching hard in his throat.

In front of them, Nathanos stills, his chest lifting once, shallow and tight, as if the scream had struck him too. Fear pins them together more firmly than any grip. Eyes widen—the eyes behind the mask, Nathanos’s blue flaring bright as he stares at what he has done—while Raphael keeps his eyes shut, face twisted against the pain.

And then, before the Nightstalker dies, a smaller sound slips from beneath the mask.

Not a scream this time. Not the terrible, layered sound that had torn through the clearing before. This is softer. Broken. A voice stripped of the beast beneath it, trembling with pain before it can be swallowed.

For one terrible second, Nathanos hears nothing monstrous in it.

Only a woman.

Only someone hurt.

The realization shakes him so sharply that his grip tightens around the sword. No. His jaw clenches. No. Familiar or not, it changed nothing.

Nathanos had seen the creature before, but always from afar. A shape at the edge of the trees. A shadow watching while its minions, the Nightmares, fought in its place. Every time his men pushed close, it vanished into the forest before they could reach it. He had never stood this near. Never imagined that a woman's voice could be hiding beneath all that dread.

But this was the Nightstalker of Velldengar. Confirmed. Witnessed. Named in reports, in survivor accounts, in the fear left behind across the southern region. The signs, the witnesses, the corruption left in its wake, all of it had tied the creature to the Lord of Dread. A spawn. A thing born from him, or made by him, or bound to his will.

This was why people vanished from roads and villages. Why families locked their doors before dusk. Why no one in the south could truly rest while that thing still moved beneath the trees.

It had to be done.

He had to.

Nathanos forces the pity down before it can take root.

And then the mask loosens.

The straps give, slackened by the violent convulsion of her body, and the mask slips, tilting, dragging across her cheek before it falls into the snow with a soft, final sound.

For the first time, Nathanos sees her face.

The world freezes.

For one impossible moment, even the wind seems to stop moving through the trees. Nathanos's eyes widen, fear breaking through his focus as he stares at what the mask had hidden.

It is his.

Not similar. Identical. The same line of jaw, the same mouth, the same bone and brow, as if the Dark Forest has lifted a mirror in front of him and demanded he witness it. His breath catches shallow, and his blue eyes lock on hers, wide and unblinking, as though blinking might make it true.

Tears gather on her lashes and spill down her cheeks, cutting clean tracks through frost and blood. Her lips tremble. Her gaze flickers, past him, past the trees, past the horror, as if she's already leaving this place.

And with her last breath, she whispers, slow and breaking apart:

“I am sorry, Ala... I... I... lov...”

She never finishes.

The light drains from her eyes. Her body goes heavy, utterly still, the blade still sunk through her and into Raphael, who holds her tight.

From her back, the pale grey bandages that had fought like extra limbs shudder once, as if searching for one last command. For an instant they twitch in the air, suspended and trembling. Then the force simply leaves them. They slacken mid-curl and drop into the snow in long, lifeless ribbons.

Whatever animated them is gone with her.

Nathanos’s hand moves before thought can stop it.

He pulls the sword free.

There is no decision in it. No triumph. No relief. Only the numb, automatic motion of a body that knows what comes after a killing, even when the mind refuses to follow.

The heated metal leaves Raphael first, then hers, with a wet, steaming hiss. The moment it is gone, her body drops into the snow as if the strings were cut, limbs slack, hair spilling like pale gold against the white. Her face turns downward as she falls, pressed into the drift, hidden from everyone but him. Nearby, her wooden mask lies half-buried. Around her, the fallen bandages lie still, half-frozen where they landed, no longer reaching for anything.

For a second, Nathanos doesn't move.

His gaze sticks to the place she fell, to the body and those motionless bandages, and his mind keeps insisting it saw what it saw. Even when he looks away, he still sees her face.

A rough, involuntary sound behind him yanks him back to the living.

“Raphael—”

The soldier's knees buckle.

Nathanos turns, the sword slipping from his hand before he even thinks to hold on to it. It hits the snow beside him with a muted hiss, heated metal sinking into white.

He catches Raphael just before he can crash down, one arm bracing him, hauling him close.

Blood pours from the scorched breach in Raphael's armor, dark and fast against the snow.

Nathanos's voice comes out too sharp.

"Stay with me. Raphael, stay with me."

Raphael drags in a breath through clenched teeth, then forces a crooked smirk, pride refusing to let him be weak. "I've had worse."

"I—" Nathanos's voice catches. He looks at the blood spilling from Raphael's armor, then back at his face, as if the sight refuses to settle into reality. His hands hover for a second, trembling.

"Are you out of your mind?" he snaps, the words sharper than he means them to be. Fear bleeds through the command in his tone. "I could have killed you, Raphael. Was there no other way?"

Raphael's mouth twists with pain, something almost like a smirk trying and failing to form.

"There wasn't," he says, voice rough but steady. "You saw how she fought." His red eyes flick toward the face-down body in the snow, the limp bandages sprawled around her like shed skin.

"If I hadn't taken her from behind, if I hadn't caught her by surprise, she would've killed us all."

He draws a tight breath, then looks back at Nathanos. “She didn’t see me coming because she was fixated on you.” A beat. “That was our only opening.”

Nathanos stares at him, the words landing too slowly.

Our only opening.

For a moment, he sees it again: Raphael behind her, the blade driving forward, the same strike that killed the Nightstalker tearing through him too. His throat tightens, confusion and fear tangling so sharply he almost cannot breathe.

Then Raphael shifts, just slightly, and fresh blood wells dark through the breach in his armor.

The sight snaps Nathanos back.

Nathanos’s hand hovers for one more breath, fingers spread, as if he’s afraid to touch what he’s done, then he presses his palm to the scorched breach in Raphael’s armor.

Heat answers at once. Not a blaze, not a show of power, just his inner flame, leashed and forced into purpose. It threads through metal and flesh, sealing what it can, slowing the spill to a dark ooze that won’t steal Raphael’s life in the snow. Nathanos keeps his jaw locked, eyes fixed on the wound, but his voice comes out strained.

“This will stop the bleeding,” he says. “But I don’t know if the blade tore something deeper. An organ—” He cuts himself off and shakes his head once, sharp. “We’re leaving. Now. To Kalluth. You’ll get proper treatment.”

His gaze flicks to the clearing, to the bodies scattered in the drifts, and his breathing turns uneven. One body after another lies half-buried in the snow, men who had followed him here and would never rise again. Then Raphael shifts against him, too heavy, too warm, too alive to lose, and Nathanos’s hand presses harder to the wound as if pressure alone could keep him there.

“We can come back,” he says, quieter, the words rushing out like he needs them to be true.

“Later. We’ll bury them. We won’t leave them like this. But not now. Not while you’re—”

He stops before the word can take shape.

Dying.

Raphael watches him while the heat works, feeling the tremor in his hands, the way his breath won’t settle, the way his composure keeps slipping. Nathanos has never been the shining hero sung about in taverns, but he isn’t a coward either. This isn’t fear of battle.

It’s something deeper.

Raphael shifts closer despite the pain and grips Nathanos's forearm, firm, grounding, soldier to commander, a friend to another.

"My prince," he says, low. "Breathe."

Nathanos drags in air, shaky, and nods once without looking up.

Raphael's voice hardens into certainty, the kind soldiers cling to when the world is blood and winter. "Listen to me. Today we became true heroes."

Nathanos's eyes flick to him at that.

Raphael jerks his chin toward the fallen in the snow, toward the torn bodies half-buried in drifts, the frozen ruin she left behind.

"She wasn't just an enemy," he says, voice low and rough. "She was a fiend, a monster given flesh. An incarnation of dread." His red eyes sweep the clearing, unblinking. "You saw what she did, how she didn't only kill. She broke them. Drove men into madness with the horror. Made them beg for death before it came."

His mouth tightens as his gaze catches on their own squad, faces gone slack, blood crusting black in the snow. For a heartbeat, something raw cuts through his pride.

“Even if it cost the lives of our remaining men,” he finishes, quiet as a burial prayer. “They didn’t die for nothing.”

Nathanos swallows, throat working.

Fiend. Dread. Monster.

The words land wrong, too close. Too sharp. And for a heartbeat his mind twists them, turns them inward. He sees her face again—his face—superimposed where Raphael stands, as if the Dark Forest is mocking him with the same mirror over and over. His breath locks. His eyes widen in sudden, silent terror, not at the bodies, not at the blood, but at the thought that the hatred meant for her could just as easily be meant for him.

Raphael notices.

He feels the shift in Nathanos’s body—the way his spine goes rigid, the way his gaze goes distant, trapped somewhere Raphael can’t follow. He doesn’t understand the shape of it, only the danger of it.

Raphael pulls him even closer with his good arm, trying to brace him in the churned snow.

Pain tears through him at once.

A low grunt slips from his throat before he can stop it, and fresh blood wells dark from the wound Nathanos had only just sealed. His balance falters. Nathanos feels it immediately and tightens his hold around him, refusing to let him drop.

They go down together, slowly, Nathanos guiding the fall as best he can until they sink into the snow. Raphael ends half-braced against him, breath uneven, while Nathanos keeps one arm locked around him and his other hand pressed hard to the wound.

Still, Raphael holds on.

“Nathanos,” he murmurs, firm despite the strain. “She can’t hurt us anymore. Do you hear me? The madness is over.”

Nathanos’s breathing stutters.

Raphael tightens his grip, grounding him with warmth through armor and cloth. His voice drops, quieter now—less battlefield certainty, more something like truth.

“Do not let her feeble madness corrupt your mind,” Raphael breathes, forcing strength into every word. “We did it. The hunt for the Nightstalker is finally over.” His fingers tighten around Nathanos’s arm. “I need you here, Nathanos. Focused. More than ever.”

Nathanos blinks once, hard, and the world swims back into focus in pieces: the snow, her lifeless body, the river, the bodies of his squad, Raphael's red cloak.

And then the wound.

Fresh blood seeps through the scorched breach in Raphael's armor, slower than before but still too much, darkening beneath Nathanos's hand and threatening to undo what he had only just forced closed.

Nathanos does not waste a word. His hand presses back over the wound, fingers spreading against broken metal and torn flesh. Heat answers beneath his palm, sharper this time, not wild but urgent, forced into purpose before panic can take hold. He lowers his gaze and focuses on it completely, on the warmth, on the blood, on keeping Raphael alive.

Raphael sucks in a breath through clenched teeth as Nathanos presses harder against the wound. His eyes squeeze shut, and a rough sound of pain slips from him before he can bury it.

For a moment, there is only silence between them.

Only the wind. The snow. The quiet hiss of Nathanos's flame working beneath his palm.

Then Raphael opens his eyes again.

His gaze drifts past Nathanos, across the battlefield, across the bodies half-buried in white. For a heartbeat, he can almost hear it again: the screams of men driven past the edge of themselves, men who had turned their blades on the air, on each other, on their own throats while the Nightstalker's madness crawled through their minds. He remembers the terror in their faces. The confusion. The way some of them had died not knowing whose hand held the weapon.

And Nathanos had seen it all.

His own men. His own command. Torn apart before him while he fought the thing that had caused it.

Raphael understands the shock then. Not fully, perhaps. Not the shape of whatever had trapped Nathanos behind those haunted eyes. But enough.

“Kenneth,” Raphael says suddenly, voice rough.

Nathanos does not look up. His hand stays pressed to the wound, the heat beneath his palm narrowing into careful, controlled purpose.

“Marren,” Raphael continues. “Joric. Halven.” His gaze remains on the fallen, grief cutting through the pain. “They fought bravely. Every one of them. Kenneth especially. Young as he was, he stood fiercer than men twice his age.”

Nathanos's jaw tightens, but he remains silent.

Raphael draws another breath, shallow and strained. "They were part of this victory. All of them. Their names will be carried back to Kalluth with ours. The people will remember what they gave here. Kalluth will remember. The southern region of Velldonar will remember." His voice roughens, but it does not break. "They will know peace because of their sacrifice."

Nathanos says nothing. He only focuses on the wound, on the blood, on forcing the torn flesh to close beneath his hand.

Raphael watches him through the pain.

"And your father will know it too."

At that, Nathanos stills.

Raphael's eyes return to him, steady despite the color draining from his face. "King Aren Thornwell will hear that the Nightstalker is dead. He will hear that the south can be held again, that the tide of this war has shifted because of what you did here." His grip tightens weakly around Nathanos's arm. "He will see it, Nathanos. He will see you."

Nathanos slowly lifts his gaze.

The horror is still there. The guilt. The shadow of everything he has just witnessed. But beneath it, something catches.

That wordless hunger he had carried for years.

Approval. Recognition. Family.

The thing all his training, all his discipline, all his pain had been reaching for.

Raphael sees the moment it reaches him.

Nathanos draws in a shaky breath, then looks down at the wound again. His voice comes out low and rough.

“If you keep talking like that, you won’t live long enough to hear what he says.”

Raphael’s mouth twitches despite the pain, a faint smirk pulling at the edge of his lips.

“There you are,” he murmurs. “Welcome back, Nathanos.”

The flame beneath Nathanos's palm steadies one final time, sealing the worst of the wound until the blood slows to a dark, stubborn seep. Not healed. Not safe. But held together enough to move.

Nathanos exhales and pulls his hand back only slightly, keeping close in case the bleeding starts again.

“Are you ready to move?” he asks.

Raphael gives him a small, strained nod.

“As ready as I'll ever be.”

Nathanos forces himself upright, legs stiff from cold and shock. He hooks an arm beneath Raphael's and lifts him carefully, taking most of his weight as the soldier rises with a sharp, uneven breath. Raphael's arm slides over Nathanos's shoulder, heavy and unsteady, his footing barely holding beneath him.

Nathanos tightens his grip around him.

Together, they take the first slow steps away from the ruin, away from the hut, away from the face-down body in the snow, away from the silence that feels like it is watching.

They can't do anything for the dead now. Not in this cold, not with Raphael bleeding and their strength running thin. They'll return. They have to. To bury the men who fell here. To give them something better than blood and snow.

Raphael swallows a breath and glances back over his shoulder. "Don't leave it," he mutters, voice rough. "The mask."

Nathanos hesitates, just a fraction, like his body refuses to turn back even if his duty demands it. "We'll need proof," Raphael adds. "Kalluth won't take stories. Not without something to show."

That breaks through the fog.

Nathanos nods once, tight and controlled. He shifts Raphael's weight carefully against his shoulder, keeping one arm locked around him as he steps back just far enough to reach down.

He keeps his eyes averted from the corpse.

His fingers close around the mask in the snow—cold, damp, its carved grooves darkened by melting flakes. He does not linger. He does not look at it longer than he has to.

Then he threads it onto his belt.

It hangs there at his side as they start moving again, proof for Kalluth, and a reminder that will not let either of them pretend this was only a nightmare.

Together, they leave the clearing behind.

Slowly.

Raphael leans heavily against him, each step uneven, each breath dragged through pain.

Nathanos bears most of his weight, his grip firm around the soldier's side as they make their way toward the place where the horses wait beyond the trees.

Before the forest takes the ruin from sight, Nathanos lets the clearing sink in one last time.

How peaceful it looks from a distance. Snow drifting in lazy spirals. Pale sunlight caught in the branches. The river murmuring as if nothing has happened. It is almost obscene, that calm, this serene pocket of wilderness that held a creature like the Nightstalker and swallowed the screams without a single bird calling witness.

The snow begins to fall harder.

It settles on Nathanos's shoulders and in Raphael's red cloak. It gathers over broken armor, over still hands, over the bodies of men who had followed their prince into the Dark Forest and would not follow him home.

And it falls on her too.

On the face-down body in the snow. On the pale hair spread against the white. On the creature Velldenaar had known only as the Nightstalker.

Nathanos keeps his eyes away from her. He cannot make himself look. He turns his gaze toward the trees, toward the waiting horses, toward anything that is not her face, and clings instead to Raphael's words.

Hero. Justice. Victory.

With a heavy heart, they move on, snowflakes drifting down in soft, silent spirals, settling on the living and the dead alike, gentle as a blessing and cold as a shroud.

At Nathanos's side, the bone-white mask hangs from his belt, proof for Kalluth and a weight he will never truly leave behind.