

The square is still thick with smoke, air clogged with the smell of burned gladioli. The burning ended hours ago, just as dawn lit the horizon. Yet Valente still kneels before the pyre, prayer beads clutched tightly as his lips move in silent psalm.

Dimas León died fourteen days ago, his ashes long since scattered to the sea. The burning of flowers is the final funerary rite; when it is finished León will finally be gone, soul released to the three-faced god, and Valente still cannot accept it.

His knees went numb long ago, and his nose stings from smoke. How strange, he reflects, that they burn flowers to send righteous souls to the afterlife, yet execute witches through flame.

He leans forward, pressing his forehead to the pyre's stone casing. On any other day it would be cool to the touch. Now, it burns him.

"May our god preserve you," Valente whispers, and hopes the words reach his teacher's soul.

The distant clocktower strikes the hour, counting out nine long strokes, and he pushes himself shakily to his feet. León's will is read today. Valente is required to attend.

He makes his way inside in a daze. Salvador Ortiz, Head of the Hunt in Marzial, traveled to Constanza following León's death to manage the man's duty until his successor assumes the position. Ortiz has requested they assemble in the Head's office for the reading of the will.

*León's office*, Valente corrects. It's always been León's.

When he arrives, the office is far too full, though it hosts less than a dozen men. Favero, Vargas, Durante. Russo. Moreno and Bellini. Valente knows them all by face and name, each an exceptional witch-hunter León favored. He himself is the youngest, though with the exception of Ortiz—somewhere in his sixties—no man is older than forty.

“You’re late.”

Valente suppresses a cringe. When he turns, it’s to see Ganza in the corner of the room, sitting straight-backed with disapproval clear on his face. Valente looks away, turning his eyes to Ortiz, and hopes he appears unaffected rather than ashamed.

“I was praying at the pyre,” he says, lowering himself into the last chair. “Forgive me.”

Ganza snorts. Ortiz casts him a look of warning.

“Prayer is a noble activity, Brother Ganza,” he chides. “Especially in the name of the dead.” He glances back at Valente. “Though punctuality is also admirable.”

Valente nods wordlessly. Ortiz, apparently satisfied, leans back in his—*León’s*—seat and opens the papers of the will.

“Now that we are all in attendance,” he says, “may we commence the reading.”

Witch-hunters are meant to be frugal men, sacrificing life’s greater pleasures in search of purity. But as Head of the Hunt, León managed to amass quite a fortune to leave behind. His heirs, his favorite pupils and lieutenants.

Valente’s been willed a collection of magic artifacts seized from witches through the decades, as well as León’s prayer beads. The monetary assets are divided between Bellini, Russo, and Vargas, each of them willed hundreds of thousands of talents. León left his wine stock to Ortiz, which earns a laugh from the old man.

Favero receives properties, Durante a collection of antiques and weaponry. Ganza, much like Valente, inherits items of witchcraft, along with a collection of holy objects that include León’s prayer book and formal witch-hunter’s coat. The prayer beads seem almost paltry in comparison.

Valente will cherish them anyway.

León's stock holdings are left to Moreno. Ortiz reads them out, then pauses before the next and final item of inheritance.

"I bestow my position as Head of the Hunt," he says quietly, "upon Valente Costa, so long as he is deemed fit."

The room goes very, very quiet.

Durante breaks the silence. "Could you read it again, sir?"

Ortiz does. The words remain the same: *I bestow my position as Head of the Hunt upon Valente Costa.*

Traditionally, each Head chooses his successor, denoting his choice in his will if his death comes to pass before retirement. León was appointed in such a way, as was Ortiz. But usually, their successors are highly ranked witch-hunters, with countless arrests and executions to their name. They are not men like Valente.

No, never like Valente.

He can feel every eye in the room turned to him. Ortiz's head is tilted with curiosity, unaware of Valente's history and, thus, harmless. But every other man stares at him with shock, anger, and open, unmasked jealousy.

Valente swallows.

"A joke," Ganza says suddenly. "This—it must be a joke."

Ortiz lifts an eyebrow. "It's written here plain, Brother Ganza, if you wish to examine it."

"A mistake, then." Ganza sniffs haughtily. "You're from Marzial, dear sir; you've not witnessed how this *child* fails at every task given to him. His term as Head would be a disgrace."

“Brother Ganza—”

“When have I failed?” Valente asks. “The Alber affair—that was years ago, I’ve succeeded in my work since. I’m an officer, same as you. If León wanted—”

“You’re a pageboy.”

He shoves himself to his feet. “I keep accounts. I manage the coin that pays for your boots and your sword; I keep track of every witch, every execution, and not once have I faltered in the record-keeping. Just because I work with pen and ink instead of cuffs like you, Ganza, does *not* mean I can’t handle office, and if León trusted me enough to name me, then—”

“Sirs, please,” Ortiz interrupts, but Ganza cuts him off with a harsh laugh.

“What is pen and ink? You were trained to fight, to be a *hunter*, and you’re still boasting of *record-keeping*?”

“I was trained to aid our faith. I will do so in any way possible.”

“*Hunters!*”

Ortiz, in the twelve days Valente has known him, has proven a quiet man, strangely affable for an officer of his station. So at the sound of his shout, the room goes terribly, terribly silent, and neither Valente nor Ganza move in the slightest.

Ortiz is neither red-faced nor panting, as León was wont to become. The only sign of his disapproval is the set of his mouth, a grim, flat line, and somehow it’s worse than any of León’s fits or tirades.

“This behavior,” Ortiz says slowly, “is most unbecoming of any gentleman, let alone two noble witch-hunters.”

Valente digs his nails into his palms, then bows low. “My apologies, sir. I’m afraid I let my emotions overwhelm my good sense. I will strive to avoid such outbursts in the future.”

All eyes turn to Ganza. The man blinks, then bows briefly.

“My apologies, Sir Ortiz.”

Ortiz nods. “Thank you. Now, as for the inheritance of office, I feel it is a matter best discussed in private. Valente, remain. The rest of you are dismissed.”

Chairs scrape and clothes rustle, the sounds of a half-dozen men rising from their seats. Most mutter solemn farewells to Ortiz. Not one bids goodbye to Valente.

When the door has shut behind the final man, Ortiz gestures to the seat directly before the desk, last occupied by Bellini. “If you’d sit here, please.”

Valente goes and sits.

Ortiz offers him a tired smile. “I find myself eager to meet you, Brother Costa. Dimas and I were great friends, as you may know, and corresponded regularly. He spoke of you often.”

“I am eager to meet you as well, sir,” Valente replies, and folds his hands in his lap.

He finds himself eying Ortiz. The man’s served as Head of the Hunt in Marzial for twenty-odd years, and cut quite a reputation in those years. By no means is he young any longer—he’s nearly forty years Valente’s senior, his dark hair shot with white and his face deeply lined, but he remains formidable. The acts of witch-hunting Ortiz has sanctioned, ordered, and performed in his term are usually spoken of in whispers, reverently by hunters and fearfully by their prey. It is said he’d hang his own mother if she bore a witch-mark.

Valente's wrists itch, and he wonders just how much León told Ortiz of him.

He'll have to tread carefully.

"So," Valente says, studying Ortiz's expression. "The inheritance."

"Direct, aren't you?"

He shrugs, tries to make it seem casual. "León valued promptness."

"Of course he did," Ortiz sighs. He leans back. "Brother Costa, I value Dimas' opinion very much. We were quite close, as I said before. If he names you his successor, I would happily carry out his wishes. But he did not expect to... leave his office behind as early as he did."

"Could you elaborate, sir?"

Ortiz spreads his hands. "I'll be frank. He didn't expect he'd die when he did—he believed he had *years* left, decades even."

And why shouldn't he have? León died at one of the youngest ages of any Head of the Hunt. Most live into their seventies, even eighties. Illness and old age are far deadlier to them than any witch.

"He thought he'd have more time with you. Expected that when he finally passed, you'd be ready to follow his footsteps. He said as much."

Valente blinks. "He told you he'd name me?"

"Not exactly. He never named his heir outright, simply alluded, saying that the man he'd chosen was young, not quite ready for the rank, but of righteous heart. With time, he believed you'd become fit for it." Ortiz shrugs. "It's not difficult to connect you to the heir he described, knowing what I do of you, though I'm afraid I never pieced it together before this morning."

"And what exactly do you know of me?"

Ortiz studies him, just as, Valente supposes, he himself studied Ortiz when the meeting began. Assessing the man across the desk, and exactly what he can be told.

“I know that you’ve had trouble with the more difficult aspects of hunting,” Ortiz says at last. “You were older than most when you first pledged, weren’t you?”

Valente nods. “Fourteen.” Most witch-hunters-to-be are deeply involved in faith, whether raised by the church or by a particularly devout family, and pledge themselves around ten, though training may only begin at age thirteen. For boys that young, there’s little else they know, and adjusting to the more brutal aspects of the witch-hunters is much easier.

“You mentioned something about the Alber affair,” Ortiz says. “Tell me about it.”

“How much do you know? León wrote to you often; he must’ve spoken of it.”

“Only that the first witch you arrested was called Alber, and you never formally executed, but killed in accident.” Ortiz tilts his head. “Dimas said it affected you greatly. You were removed from street work, and haven’t been assigned to it since.”

“Ah,” Valente says, and then again. “Ah.”

His prayer beads are hanging from his waist, and he touches them for comfort.

“I didn’t arrest her,” he says. “She was just the first arrest I played a role in. I was eighteen, you see, newly an officer. I was looking into a woman called Rebecca Alber. Witch. It was rumored that she was healing, so I cut my hand open and visited her. She healed it, and I took the information to my superior. She was arrested within hours.

“I wasn’t there when they arrested her, but I was here, in the halls, and she saw me when they brought her here to jail her. I suppose she knew she had nothing else to lose. So she broke

her chains and lunged at me, tried to strangle me. I stabbed her, though, and killed her before she could kill me. But when I did—when she went still, and I realized what I'd done—“

He cannot bear to look at Ortiz anymore. Ortiz is righteous, a paragon of holiness, responsible for the execution of dozens, perhaps hundreds, of witches. Valente couldn't kill even one without losing his mind.

“They say I went mad,” he whispers. “That I screamed, started weeping. I can't remember it. León said I could not speak for five days, only weep, and by the end...”

He gestures to his brow. “My hair had turned like this from the anguish of it all.”

“I did wonder what had happened,” Ortiz muses. “You seemed rather young to go white as a hare.”

Valente's cheeks burn. “Yes, well. I used to dye it, but the process was tedious, and everyone knew anyways. It wasn't worth the trouble.” He reaches for his beads again, fitting one against the pad of his thumb. “That's all there is to it, really. Alber's body was burned, and I wasn't allowed on the streets anymore.”

He turns his head, glancing out the window. If he squints, he swears he can still see smoke smudging the sky.

“Artemio Ganza says I'm weak,” Valente says quietly. “Most do.”

*Because I am. I am weak.*

If he has learned anything in his time as a member of the order, it's that there's certain irrefutable truths of the world, and one of them is that Valente Costa, for all his righteousness and religious zeal, is still a weak, wretched man. The white of his hair and the marks on his wrists say as much.

Ortiz is quiet for a long time, hand on his chin. Finally, he leans forward, folding his hands on the desk, and Valente straightens automatically.

“I do not believe you are weak,” his superior says. “I believe you have had misfortune, and you are the victim of a very caring heart. Among most men, it’s quite a good thing, but witch-hunters are not most men. We cannot afford to slip in our duty.

“I wish to see you succeed, Brother Costa. Dimas believed in you, and so shall I. At the moment, you're hardly ready for the position willed to you, but that could change with time.”

Ortiz reaches for pen and ink with one hand, paper with the other, and scratches out a few quick sentences. It is strange to see León's quills, his inkwells, in hands so clearly not his own.

“As of now, you are restored to your former position.” Ortiz hands Valente the paper. “You will hunt upon the street with others. If you can prove to me within a month's time that you can endure the demands of our order, then I shall establish you as Constanza's Head of the Hunt, as Dimas wished. If not, the council and I shall confer, and select another more suited to the work. Do you understand?”

Valente nods, pulse hammering. “I understand, sir.”

“You are dismissed, then. Go, and carry out your duty.”

He rises, bows deeply. The paper twists in his hand.

“I shall carry out my duty, Sir Ortiz,” Valente whispers. “I will carry it out to the holiest degree.”

León would want nothing else.