

The Exiled Son by Mattius C. S. White

Prologue: The Passing of Bravery

"The shadows that friends and enemies cast are just as dark – so goes their unfound treachery." Lasech Egasesew remembered his father's words as he walked down the torch lit corridor toward his brother's chamber, deep within the SangreLin Fortress. His leather boots clacked in hollow echoes with every step he took through the pale golden light. The torches were mounted high on the stone walls, but his head rose above them as he passed. His long black hair poured over his broad shoulders and down his back like crude oil over a cliff. It trailed behind him, undulating off his back like a shining cape.

Lasech expected his visit to include another trivial discussion about the mission from which he had returned; but a doubt lingered in his mind that he had not been careful enough. Perhaps his actions were a mistake, he often thought, but he knew the SangreLin dynasty had turned sour even before he was born. The bloodline had burned to a black river of tyranny and greed, and stopped at his younger brother, Yaernich Egasesew. Yaernich ruled as All High Glava while Lasech remained his assistant and servant, advising him in most matters, although Lasech was rarely paid heed. His less ambitious and merciful demeanor had been viewed as a weakness by both Yaernich and their father. Only he saw a need for change regarding the safety of the neighboring nations, upon which the SangreLin was encroaching.

Lasech emerged from the dark corridor into a large hall called the Well of the Glavas, which was filled with a dim aquatic sunlight. The shadowed rays of the sun shone through a large dome of pale blue stained glass high above him, faintly streaming in from the early traces of sunset, and resting halfway down the stone walls. The dome had been crafted while his grandfather Blairtonis Egasesew was in power. In the center, which emanated many rays of lightning and blue fire, a faceless Glava knelt, his head bowed, praying in the palms of the mighty outstretched hands of Repediala, the saint of the SangreLin. Beneath it, covering a vast circular hole in the middle of the stone floor, a similar stained glass window rested, barring sight from the abyss beneath it with a historic image of the flaming spirit of Decay casting down the Emerald Angel, guardian of the Earth. Around it a small rail had been constructed to prevent anyone's falling through, as Lasech had nearly done many times when he was young.

Statues of the previous Glavas of the SangreLin lined the opposite wall of the hall. At the far end stood Blairtonis Egasesew and Lasech's deceased father Rodrinlos Egasesew; and beside him in the dark corner stood the statue of Yaernich.

It did not matter what month it was; the sun never reached the far end of the line of rulers. A shadow always loomed over them. Lasech had long wondered if it was an overlooked omen, unnoticed by the scribes and sages, which had come true.

He slowly approached his brother's towering door. Swirling streams of knotted gold and silver swam across the wood like precious rivers. The svelte serpentine knots sprouted into heads of birds and dragons. Lasech once thought these smelted creatures looked friendly, but now their open-mouth smiles mocked him with fanged sneers. The fortress seemed much darker now than when he was a child.

He heard footsteps across the wide hall and turned. In the distance, a robed man walked with hurried steps. His face was half-hidden under a hood, but he was still familiar in some remote way. Lasech squinted, trying to make out who it was in the dim light, but his face was out of view. Lasech turned and followed the shrouded man, who began to quicken his stride. On his back, a hump moved from side to side with each step, like a large sack slung over his shoulder, but the man did not strain or hunch in carrying it.

"Sir, can I help you with that load?" Lasech asked.

The stranger did not respond. He passed by the statues of Rodrinlos and Yaernich and rounded the corner, disappearing down one of three winding staircases. Lasech stood for a moment listening, but heard nothing, aside from a whistling breeze of stale air escaping from the dungeon's caverns.

Yaernich's statue loomed behind him in the perpetual shadow that lived in the corner of the hall. Lasech caught a sudden shiver as he felt his brother's gaze, captured in stone. He tried to forget about the familiar stranger and crossed the main hall, looking back for the man to reappear, but no one did. He approached the immense door and stopped with his eyes to the floor. He stared at the flat stones and breathed a deep sigh. His whole body had grown chilled and nervous in the past months, and he had sunk into paranoia of always looking over his shoulder for loose-lipped witnesses to his rebellion—anyone who may leak the information back here. He knew he was going to visit a potential enemy in his brother.

The young SangreLin prince grunted as he pulled open the monstrous doors, his eyes still facing the cold floor. The orange sunlight from Yaernich's chamber stung Lasech's eyes as he looked up to meet his brother and ruler.

"Lasech!" Yaernich said as he turned away from the three large, oval windows behind his meditation platform in the center of the room. "I've been expecting you!"

"I'm sorry for the delay," Lasech said. He was always cautious of this eagerness he saw in his brother, who seemed to become hungrier for power with every sun that set. He entered the room and closed the huge doors only after seeing that they were alone, aside from some antique suits of armor that stood lining the walls on either side of him. He had never seen them before in the room, but Yaernich had a taste for the rare and old. They stood watching over the room like the ghosts of some ancient soldiers, the only remaining earthly husks of a people long dead.

"So, what has become of your search?" Yaernich asked, grinning. His skin had grown oddly pale over the last few months, and his cheekbones and chin, which had always been chiseled and bony, were more ridged than before, almost appearing sharp to the

touch. His angular features jutted beneath his skin like a series of uneven spears beneath a draping of damp paper.

"I have run into a wall. I can find nothing to tell me this sword is anything more than what it appears to be – a rumor." Lasech met his brother's grin with a firm gaze, though he strained to keep his hands from shaking. He wiped the sweat from his brow and hid his two quivering pantomimes behind his back, hoping his brother had not noticed.

"Strange, I was hoping you would return with some sort of news, so I may have something more interesting to attend to, aside from all the tedious duties of ruling this empire." Yaernich laughed, turning his gaze to the wall, agitation and impatience painting his face red. The sun hit Yaernich's long black hair, a feature he shared with his brother. Streaks of silver gleamed that Lasech had never before seen.

"I'm sorry, brother. I thought no news of this supposed 'prophecy' would be good news. If you would like to accompany me on my next. . ."

"Now," Yaernich said with a snap of his long fingers and an irritated shake of his head, bringing to life the statuesque suits of armor. The concealed guards clattered around Lasech and swarmed him like a pack of wolves, jabbing their spears against his bottom jaw. They froze like marionettes, awaiting further orders from their puppet master.

"You thought your treachery would go unnoticed by me, your brother, your emperor? You thought I wouldn't find out that my own flesh and blood was conspiring against me? Am I a moron?" Yaernich shouted, walking toward him. His long black and purple robe, hemmed with golden netting, followed him along the floor like a shadow.

Lasech tried to hide his fear, raising his head in an attempt to distance the razor-sharp blades from his throat. "Yaernich, that is impossible. I found nothing while I was away. I would never. . ."

"Silence! This is why Father appointed me over you. Your carelessness for the welfare of this empire is spoken by your actions and your weakness!" He turned his back on his brother, walking away with a grimace of utter disgust; though when he turned, he grinned smugly. "You always were a mother's boy – always accepting encouragement from the weak."

"Do not speak of our mother like that!" Lasech said.

Yaernich smiled. "I see so much of her in you, but now I see that you no longer wear her ring."

Lasech felt his naked finger with his other hand. It still felt foreign to him to not be wearing it.

Yaernich continued to speak. "Did you rid yourself of that piece of metal to forget the weakness you both share, or did you offer it to a whore in your travels?"

Lasech bit his tongue and remained silent.

"Neither of you ever understood the meaning of power," Yaernich said pacing back and forth. "Its value in life or death."

"Perhaps I never acquired the thirst for it as you and Father did. Did the two of you ever find contentment with your power?" Lasech asked.

"This empire makes me content, so long as it is rid of traitors," Yaernich said, the smile vanishing from his face.

"Then a very empty existence you must have. I have always been a friend to you," Lasech said, his eyes pleading for understanding from his younger brother.

"Friends can sometimes be your greatest enemies," Yaernich said as he turned away, hurt clouding his face. "I see that now more than ever." Suddenly grinning, with a fire burning behind his dark eyes, he turned back to his brother. "I sent a spy to monitor your behavior and join your pathetic mutiny. He informed me of your every move while you mounted this rebellion and even unknowingly befriended him." Yaernich laughed as if he had just caught a complete stranger picking his pocket. His pompous chortles echoed off the stone walls of the chamber, each reverberation drilling into Lasech's head. Yaernich went silent and stood before him.

Lasech stood silently, wondering who had betrayed him and relayed his plan back to his brother. The names and faces of his disciples flashed through his head as he tried to rationalize who had done this, but his head sank in despair. None fit the bill of the traitor, even in his darkest dreams. The jagged blades beneath his jaw pierced the skin, but he did not flinch. He could not imagine any of it to be true. The pain within him ached far more than the steel that split his flesh.

Yaernich sauntered over to the dejected Lasech and placed two fingers under his brother's chin, raising his head to meet his own dark eyes.

"Now you know the weakness of friendship. Now you know the pain you have caused me. Remember the words Father always taught us?" he baited. "Of course you do, Scholar. You remember everything. 'Prey on the weaknesses of those who oppose you. Inevitably, those will be the very means by which they are ensnared.' Betrayal, brother, of the lowest form can only be made right by swift justice." Yaernich paused, his eyes splitting through Lasech as he stared. "You were my brother; now you are a common traitor. I shall purge you for your crime, but enjoy it no more and no less than I would anyone else. I am merely the hand appointed to wield the knife against the criminals of this empire." He grinned coldly, running his finger through the blood on his brother's chin. "Detain him below. His punishment shall commence at Dusk tomorrow, when the sky runs red with the blood of those passing from this world." Yaernich turned from his brother to face the window and smeared the blood upon the glass with his bony finger. "One more, My Lord," he muttered.

Lasech went without a word.

The guards led Lasech into a stench-filled cell in the dank, musty caverns beneath the fortress. The air ebbed and flowed with rancid life upon a slow breeze, as if the very dungeon were inhaling and exhaling the stench of the living and the dead within its entombing walls. Cries and weeping from prisoners and slaves alike echoed in the dark halls, but worse still, down some corridors there loomed utter silence, a void where sounds of torment had lingered only moments before.

The guards heaved Lasech through the barred door without care for the brother of the Glava. The traitors of the empire were scum, and treated as such.

He landed hard upon the stone floor in a tepid puddle of urine from the cell's last tenant. His head cracked hard against an iron ball and chain that lay buried in the strewn and rotting straw upon the floor. His head reeled, and he faded from consciousness as the guards slammed the barred door closed with a loud clang.

Lasech's mind wandered from waking thought, aimlessly through scattered dreams and random recollections, flying past his eyes like ripples in the wavering pool of his psyche.

All went dark except for the blue light of a cold moon. He found himself in the air above thick trees and rolling hills. Golden fields sprawled grey in the darkness, and glimmering lakes blotted the fertile country. To the East, the vast jagged humps of the Lazy Mountains marched southward. This was the land Vanon, destination of his latest voyage, where he had searched for the sword that was to be wielded against the SangreLin Empire and where he had met the only woman he had ever loved.

He flew over the sea with nothing but air between him and the water. The wind blew through his long black hair as he soared above the green land he held dear. The Earth's color reflected a faint blue beneath the pale gaze of the watchful moon, like the belly of a vast sea turtle coming to the surface of the ocean. He breathed deeply, knowing these would be his last breaths of sweet evening air, whether real or in a dream. Closing his eyes, he hoped somehow that this was really happening, somehow he had left the cell, or perhaps that he would never wake.

The cool air warmed, and the scent of the cool evening changed from the salty ocean to the cooking of stew over a crackling fire. He opened his eyes to see the dream had revealed what he expected.

Lasech looked around the small, dark cabin. The glow of firelight flickered off the shiny pitch that covered the logs supporting the home. The paneled walls cast forth a warm yellow glow about the room as the fire flickered in the hearth. Lasech was once again surrounded by a tranquility he never experienced in the SangreLin Fortress.

He immediately recognized the place as the house of his love, Kiene. He walked over to her bed, where they had shared a single night with each other, never to be forgotten. There she lay beneath her blankets asleep, facing toward Lasech. Her sweet, pure face bore a slight smile of contentment as she rested, lost in a world of limitless possibilities. Her left arm lay across the bed, wrapped around the empty air where Lasech had lain only nights before. Here he was, a phantom in his own dream, yet he hoped

somehow that Kiene shared his sleepy vision, and that perhaps they were really meeting, if not for the last time.

"Lasech," her sad voice whispered, though she still slept, lips unmoving.

He turned around, looking for the source of the voice, which filled the air all around him. "Is that you, Kiene?"

"Yes, I am here," the voice answered. Kiene rolled over onto her back, still asleep in her bed. "I am carrying our child, my love."

Lasech turned back to her and saw her pregnant belly, swollen beneath the blankets. "My child? But I was only just with you," he said.

"This is only a dream, but heed what I have to say. Some dreams bring fantasy, while others may reveal unknown truths."

Lasech stood in silence. The fire burned in the fireplace, sparking and popping as it feasted upon the dry wood.

"Listen to me. Your spirit will live on in your son. He will rise up and continue where you leave off in this life."

"My son," Lasech muttered, his eyes wide.

"Be brave. I know you will. And always know that your life was not in vain. I will always love you," Kiene said, and was silent.

The dream faded into an enveloping darkness.

"Wait! Please don't leave me!" Lasech cried out. He sank to his knees, and his head fell in despair.

"Lasech!" a rumbling voice boomed throughout the darkness. It was as deep as the Earth, and its tone seemed nearly as old. The air grew chill, and the ground's bland texture grew smooth ridges in its surface.

"Who's there?" Lasech looked around, jumping to his feet.

"I am the voice of your ancestors. We are the rulers of the old SangreLin Empire. We ruled before it turned bitter and cruel, years before your father or even your grandfather walked this earth." The baritone vibrated through the cold ground on which Lasech stood; and though it was a unified voice, it contained many men's as one booming choir. "Since our deaths we have been free, but that will not always be so for the souls of this earth."

"What do you mean that you are free?"

"You will know when the time comes," the voice said.

A faint light from an unseen source lit the room ever so slightly. The glimmers reflected off the walls like a frozen sea, splitting apart on either side as its black waters retreated up the walls. He could see only vague shadows of any semblance of structure.

Lasech then realized the shining walls were carved in obsidian, the petrified remnants of a molten tunnel. He now realized he was standing inside the Tomb of the Fallen, where all the past rulers of the SangreLin were laid to rest. It was only a fair-sized chamber, but the ceiling towered into the darkness and peaked at the ancient stained glass floor that depicted the battling guardians of Earth and Decay, at the center of the Well of the Glavas of the SangreLin Palace. The pillars lining the walls from floor to ceiling were sculpted with ancient images portraying royalty figures of the past, as well as several artists' renditions of the afterlife. The illustrations were vastly different from what the SangreLin had become, and from the common conceptions of life after death, but nevertheless, all were carved in molten black. Along the walls spiraled small shelves, which were hewn into the stone to house the remains of the deceased.

"What do you want?" Lasech asked.

"We have all experienced death. None of ours have been for naught, and neither shall be yours. Your death will be the one that will lead to the downfall of this empire and the restoration of the old one – the Empire we once ruled," the voice answered.

"Why did you come to me? Why not Kiene?" Lasech asked.

"All need a reason to leave this world without resistance, cloven from mortal attachment. We admire your courage, Lasech, and that is why we have come to you. Your son will remain unknown. His fate will draw its own course, so he may choose the path that you began, but he will do it on his own. His destiny is his to control."

"Will you show him the way?" Lasech said. "These wrongs must be dealt with."

"We cannot. Now, even our time may be short. Your brother's actions may affect more than just the living. Be brave as the end comes for you, for it will be the beginning for many others. Farewell."

As the ground ceased in its quaking, all went silent. The black reflections of the tomb disappeared, and before Lasech could ask anything else, he awoke to the thick odors of the dungeon cell.

He sat in silence in the filth of other men with his back against the rear wall, reflecting upon his dream, hoping it was more than just that. He imagined his son one day walking the earth in a distant land, attaining the opportunity to enjoy a life free of the hold of the empire that his father had once been a part. He almost smiled, but knew that the task of overthrowing the SangreLin was for no single man.

Perhaps his son would go into hiding and live his days out in peace, free of war and betrayal.

Betrayal – Lasech then remembered his. The traitor would soon lead the SangreLin close to Kiene and their son. He closed his eyes and gathered his wits and courage, putting the unstoppable out of his mind, hoping his disciples would not let him down. He knew they would fight to the end for his cause, but worried they would not be able to weed out the traitor before it was too late. Only the years following would tell.

Lasech dwelled within the scope of his vision, counting it as more than just a hopeful dream, for it was all he had in the waning moments of his life.

When Lasech's time had arrived and the bars creaked open, he turned a distant gaze to the two hulking guards who had been sent to escort him. He looked at their masked faces with tired eyes and neither a smile nor a frown. He didn't struggle or swear, or even glare at the men. He was a man who had been spent by betrayal and secrecy and was finally at peace with his inevitable coming end.

The two men led Lasech out of his cell and down a long hall that opened to the vast courtyard outside of the citadel. It served as the city of the SangreLin's town square and the primary meeting place for all public addresses and executions. The city's tall stone buildings towered around the courtyard into the distance, and grew up around the fortress like wild grass around an oak. The fortress' mighty battlements still dwarfed the city's towers, rising into the sky just beneath the edges of the surrounding cliffs. Atop the towers, banners licked the edges of the dissipating ocean air that found its way over the tops of the twisted maze of stone. The flags displayed the new emblem of the SangreLin – a red outstretched hand with splayed fingers reaching out from a diamond of black, atop a red field. The emblem was foreign to Lasech. As he entered the courtyard, he realized this was the first time he had ever seen it.

The fleeting sun stung at the back of Lasech's eyes as the light of a bloody dusk hit his face. It was the reddest sky he had ever seen. It seemed unnatural to him, as the red broke free of the sky and painted the objects on the ground a pale crimson. It was as if a sheen of scarlet silk had been drawn in front of his eyes. The sounds of a storm perched upon the air, though there was little wind. The skies buzzed and blustered with activity, but neither his hair nor his cloak rose off his shoulders.

In the distance, the brown cliffs of the Canyons of Garesa-Tirrel rose into the sky and were painted a dull burgundy by the crimson star that was setting in the east. The surrounding cliffs always commanded early sunsets for the SangreLin and fortified a natural wall around the sides of the city. Lasech thought he remembered the surrounding lands being more green and lush with life when he was younger. A strange, humming of deep voices from above filled the courtyard, possibly from his brother's meditation chamber. As they grew in volume, the red of the sunset somehow deepened, making the light itself seem thicker.

Several thousand SangreLin followers, intent on seeing the blood of a traitor, met Lasech as he passed beneath the rounded stone archway from the dungeon. They taunted him, threw rotten fruit, spat on him, and even rushed at him, punching and kicking. They

did not care if Yaernich was killing his own brother or a distant enemy. The only thing the zealous followers knew was that he was killing a man who tried to hamper the progress of the empire, whether for his own gain or not. People of all ages, including elderly women and children, lowered themselves to a class of animals in their aggression; and from Lasech's squinting eyes, they looked like little more than scavenging vultures. They, too, had grown jagged in appearance, some even taking on strange hues in their flesh.

The guards did little to stop the mob, only pushing aside a few to make room for them to walk. Lasech took the barrage and held his head high, despite the many pieces of fruit and fists that hit him and would leave him bruised. The guards pushed Lasech in front of them, through the rest of the crowd, and up onto a wooden stage erected in the center of the courtyard. They shoved him, shackled, near a wooden door and backed away, remaining at the edge of the stage should anything go awry.

Out of the wooden door emerged his brother, in the black cloak that was traditionally worn by the executioner at such family outings. His black hair melted away in the colorless fabric, leaving only his streaks of silver to be seen. Yaernich, whose face was void of any sorrow or conflict, approached the prisoner at the center of the stage. He gestured to the crowd for silence while he spoke.

An ill-timed piece of fruit hurtled through the air toward Lasech and broke apart across his chest. It was particularly soft and didn't affect him, but some of its putrid juices splashed onto Yaernich's face. Yaernich paused, refusing to wipe the mush from his face, and scanned the crowd. He spotted the culprit with ease. The young man stopped with wide eyes as if he had been hit by a flash freeze and seen death an instant before the scythe hewed him.

Yaernich stared through him with a rage that waited to erupt, then took a shallow breath. His red face returned to its pale tone. With one fluid movement, he raised his left hand, levitating the horrified man out of the crowd and toward the stage, using the natural powers of the SangreLin that he had been honing and perfecting since he was a small boy. As the man kicked and screamed, lashing out at the invisible hands that carried him to certain doom, Yaernich sauntered over to a guard and took a long curved blade from him. Spinning fast as a striking cobra, he lopped the head off his terrified kin in mid air. Yaernich then dropped the sword to the wooden platform, and the body and severed head fell to the ground, splitting the shocked crowd like a large stone in a shallow pond. Yaernich gave no time for any reactions and turned to stare coldly at the mob, seemingly flipping through the pages of all their souls.

The rest of them knew when to pay reverence, despite one man's lapse of judgement. Similar incidences of disobedience and obliviousness were not common, for the very reason of the punishment's severity.

"This man is my brother. My own flesh and blood has been brought before you this evening for a reason even I cannot grasp," Yaernich began, though upon his jagged face there was no sign of surprise. "He is a traitor. A traitor to me, a traitor to you, and a traitor to all who have sacrificed themselves to make this the most powerful empire this world has ever seen!"

The crowd erupted into an uproar of boos for Lasech and cheers for their own great nation, but quickly returned to silence as Yaernich opened his mouth to continue. He turned to his brother, who stood silently in chains, meeting Yaernich's eyes as his equal.

"For this atrocity, I denounce him as my brother publicly, and shall treat him as any other common enemy of the SangreLin!" He flashed a quick glare at his brother as the crowd roared. "Commence!" Yaernich ordered amid the booming din.

The guards grabbed Lasech by the arms, dragged him to a pole in the center rear of the stage, and lashed him to it with thick leather. Lasech had no idea how death would find him. Every execution was done differently, giving the Glava the ability to be creative in producing an evening of memorable entertainment. Some involved wild beasts and a terrified meal, while others were a simple beheading.

Lasech closed his eyes and searched deep within himself for strength in his final hour, hoping at the very least that it would touch someone's heart in the crowd. He was still and opened his eyes as the guards returned.

The first torture technique of the night was made apparent when a smoldering kiln was brought out and placed before him. A guard pulled a glowing branding iron from the inferno and waved it in front of the prisoner, making sure he could feel the heat.

Lasech cringed at the sight of it, reading "DAMNED" in bold letters. As the guard approached, another stripped off Lasech's shirt, baring his chest as the target for the first site of true pain.

"Make his destiny known to all," Yaernich ordered from beside the prisoner, and watched the expression upon his brother's face as the luminous iron scorched his skin.

Lasech writhed within the restraining straps. The pain was the most intense he had ever felt, and he coughed as the smoke of his cooking flesh rose past his face. His chest went numb in seconds, and with great effort he ceased in his squirming in an attempt to rebuke the mutilation his body was enduring.

The guard pulled the iron from his flesh and tossed it into a bucket of water.

Lasech panted heavily, but his gaze was focused. He turned to Yaernich and forced a grimacing, toothy smile in defiance, hoping to enrage his brother into killing him quickly.

Yaernich glared back at him. "I enjoyed that as much as you did," he said as he leaned over to Lasech. He placed his hands upon his brother's shoulders. "You made me do this," he said and lashed out, striking the prisoner in his groin.

Laughter and cheers from the onlookers filled the air. Lasech lowered his head in pain, the straps providing the only support that held him to his feet.

"Arrows! I think he is having trouble staying on his feet!" Yaernich mocked, eliciting the same response from the vicious mob, though his eyes were heavy with duty.

A guard quickly fetched a longbow and a quiver of arrows and handed them to his Glava.

Yaernich took aim and fired. The arrow flew, piercing Lasech's shoulder and stopping at the wooden pole.

Lasech opened his mouth to cry out in anguish but held his voice inside him. He would not be weak.

Yaernich fired another, pinning his other shoulder. Lasech looked up at his brother with woozy eyes and managed to spit on the ground at his brother's feet.

Yaernich's cheeks sank as he wrinkled his nose and glared at Lasech. "The Glava will not cope with this any longer," he muttered. "Let us finish this!" he shouted to his guards, who scrambled to retrieve the next devices of punishment. They returned shortly with a horse and a long chain, covered with inch-long spikes and razors. Lasech saw it, but made no reaction. Yaernich had mentioned finishing what he had begun, and Lasech was prepared for the same.

The guards led the horse behind Lasech and faced it away from him, while fastening one end of the chain to the animal. They wrapped the other end around the opposite side of the pole in front of Lasech, and lashed it to the other side of the horse. One of them lifted the chain from the ground and placed it across the two arrows in the prisoner's shoulders. The other guard guided the horse forward, but only until all the slack was pulled tight. The chain could then rest its sharp edges against the prisoner's neck without hurting him.

"Is there anything you would like to say before you are purged?" Yaernich asked, and though his words were snide, beneath the arrogant façade his true demeanor showed the heavy burden he bore.

Lasech gathered all the strength he had to speak and leaned his head toward his brother. "You may be rid of me, but I assure you, my disciples will never surrender. If they are to die, they will take you with them. I swear on our departed father Rodrinlos Egasesew's soul and name," he said, struggling just to whisper. Though the pain was dizzying, causing his senses to fade behind a disorienting haze, Lasech tried to meet his brother's eyes.

Yaernich's visage grew harsh once more, as it had the previous day. He smiled at his brother, and his eyes gleamed with knowledge. "You have no business speaking our father's name, Traitor. You relinquished that right when you betrayed him, as well," Yaernich paused. "And regarding your disciple friends, I essentially have already obtained the sword from you. I need now only claim my prize – and not without a little help from. . ." Yaernich stepped aside and raised his arm to a cloaked stranger.

Lasech recognized the man as the burdened stranger who had avoided him in the Well of the Glavas the day before. The figure stopped before him and slowly pulled back his hood to reveal a familiar face.

Lasech did not blink. His mouth opened into a voiceless yawn of anguish as he stood horrified, facing one of his most beloved students.

The man stood there grinning at him, but said nothing.

Lasech could not speak. He lowered his head, allowing the razor chain to draw blood. He closed his eyes, and let the events that transpired in his dream the night before permeate his mind, comforting him. The sound of Kiene's voice, the inspiring words of his ancestors, the thought of his son who would avenge his death, and the knowing that not even his disciples knew about the family with whom he should have been – all these things put him at ease as he raised his head to face the end bravely.

He then remembered his mother, Tegan Egasesew's last words to him before she passed. "In life or death, Lasech, you will accomplish great things. Fear not by which, or you will find the end of your days too early."

He opened his eyes, but stayed in the realm of his mind, remaining at peace as Yaernich dropped his hand, as the guard cracked the whip, as the horse took off at a gallop.

It was over.

Lasech's life left his limp body to roaring applause.

"Into the hands of Repediala you go, Brother. With any luck, I will see you in the coming Dusk. Welcome to my world," Yaernich muttered from the rear of the stage, and his voice both mourned and scorned the dead. He did not look upon the duty he had just commanded, but instead sighed deeply with his eyes downcast.

Yaernich then turned to face the crowd and flashed a victorious grin. For the sake of his subjects and the image they expected from their ruling figurehead, he had all but conquered the world with this act of heroism. He raised his arms in the air, then left the stage through the wooden door and descended into the darkness within the fortress.

The traitor was dead. Justice had been served, and the citizens of the SangreLin had seen it firsthand.

Yaernich's only brother was dead too, and he would let no one witness his reaction.

Duty with the living had commenced. The SangreLin focus now shifted to the dead, and the red skies darkened further with otherworldly maelstrom.