

“Five hundred talents. As we agreed.”

The merchant’s hands shake as he places the box of coin on Dimas’ desk. Even in the candlelight, the man’s face shines with sweat, and Dimas cannot hide his smile.

“Acceptable.” He stands, crossing the room. “I can see that you are devout, Brother Costa. It is virtuous, for you to worry so for little... Valente, yes?”

Costa nods. “You said he’d be cared for. If—”

“Don’t worry.” He places a hand on the man’s shoulder. “Education is tricky; it cannot always be done. But your gift—” he gestures to the box of talents “—will help ensure that your nephew learns well. He’ll be brought up in the faith, just as you wish.”

“His sins,” Costa whispers. “They... they are not too grave?”

“Never. He’s still a child, isn’t he? They can learn.”

Costa nods, dragging his hands down his face. He can’t be more than forty, forty-five at the most. Harsh lines carve round his eyes and mouth anyway.

“You won’t see him again,” Dimas says. He squeezes Costa’s shoulder. “You understand. The ones who are educated... they must be brought up among us, to avoid temptation. But I guarantee that he’ll be looked after. You needn’t worry.”

“I understand,” Costa whispers, and his voice cracks. Dimas gives him a pitying look.

Poor Costa. The man wears prayer beads at his throat, even now, and it’s known that he attends worship near daily. How devout. And in return, he’s been given one of the devil-marked for a nephew.

Dimas releases him. “Go home. You have a niece, I think—keep her close to you. Make sure she doesn’t follow her brother’s ways. We will keep Valente in the faith for you.”

The merchant nods slowly, eyes distant. "Thank you. I... thank you."

"I am only doing what is right."

He waits until the merchant has left, and then orders a young man of the order to ensure that the man reaches home. When the boy returns, confirming that Julián Costa is safe in bed, Dimas lights a lantern and makes his way to the underground.

The cells are a miserable place. The only light comes from torches, but the things barely illuminate the dank hallway, let alone the cells beyond. Most prisoners find themselves deep in darkness. The air smells of mildew. The hunters down here are stone-faced, but Dimas knows that they're assigned to guard duty because they are either particularly weak or particularly cruel. Ill-suited to the streets. Here in the dark, their word is law, and even Dimas prefers not to think of what those interred here suffer at the men's hands.

Muffled sobs echo from one cell, or perhaps two. Dimas ignores them and continues onward.

He finds the boy curled against the wall, hugging himself tightly. How long has he been down here? A week at the least, possibly two. God knows how long he'd have stayed here if Costa hadn't managed to pay.

Dimas waves his hand in a *come hither* motion. "Come here, child."

The boy's head jerks up, eyes wild. He searches Dimas' face, the darkness beyond. In the end, he pushes himself shakily to his feet and stumbles over to the bars.

"Your uncle said your name was Valente," Dimas says softly. "Is that right?"

The child nods rapidly. Dimas smiles.

"Good. I wouldn't want him to lie to me."

Valente nods again, pale hands curling round the bars. He's only fourteen, and he'd been a bit heavysset when the hunters first dragged him down here, but he's shed an alarming amount of weight in the time he's been down here. He's practically bony by now.

"Are you here to free me?"

His voice is raspy. Dimas wonders how long it's been since the boy's had any water.

"In a way," he replies, and Valente's shoulders slump.

Dimas dips a hand through the bars, brushing a few locks from Valente's eyes. "Valente, can you show me your hands?"

The child hesitates, shaking slightly. But Dimas refuses to break eye contact, and after a brief moment, Valente pushes his dirty sleeves back, offering his wrists up. Dimas raises his torch to examine them.

A band of deep red encircles each wrist, the color of a half-healed scar. Dimas, of course, knows far better than to think them scars.

He grabs Valente's wrists in one hand, making the boy gasp. "These are witchmarks. Do you know *who* carries witchmarks?"

"Witches," Valente whispers.

"Very good." Dimas releases him. "And what does that make you?"

"A-a witch."

"It does. Valente, why do men like me hunt witches?"

The boy's eyes are shimmering with tears. "Because—because you are devout. Witches are devil-marked. Unholy. You need to cleanse them from the earth."

“I see your uncle’s taught you well,” Dimas says. “You’re very right, the cleansing is a hunter’s duty. But sometimes, if a witch is young... they might be saved. There is still time to save their soul.”

He crouches down, looking Valente in the eye. The boy trembles.

“You are a very lucky boy,” Dimas whispers. “I can tell you are devout. Look at me, Valente. Do you want to be saved?”

“Yes.”

He smiles. “Then you shall be. You will train with the witch-hunters, and you will help cleanse this world of the witches. It is the only way to scrub the devil’s mark off of you.”

Dimas sets his lantern down and unlocks the cell door, then extends a hand to the boy beyond. Valente stares at it uncertainly.

“You are a sinner, Valente.” Dimas tilts his head. “But your faith saves you. I see you’re devout. So come with me, and show our god how much you love him.”