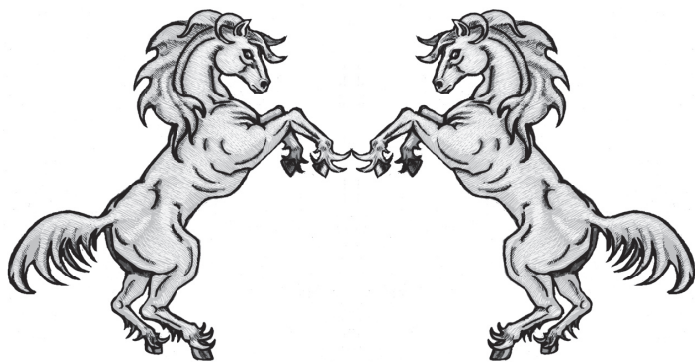


Lord
of the
White Hell
Book One



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Ginn Hale



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by Ginn Hale

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This book is dedicated to Angus, who was a better friend than he could have ever known.

Cadeleon & Neighboring Kingdoms



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Chapter One

Kiram woke as the carriage jolted against the rough cobblestones of the country road.

After six days of sleepless travel he couldn't believe that he had dozed off today of all days. He frowned at the creased front of his white linen shirt and tucked a loose edge back into his dark pants. His curly blonde hair was always a wild mess after he had slept on it. He tried to smooth it with his hand, feeling the tight spirals spring back as his fingers brushed over them.

His book, *Modern Mechanism*, lay on the carriage floor. Dozens of strips of paper protruded from between the pages, displaying Kiram's notes and diagrams. He retrieved the book, straightened his notes, and carefully wrapped the book in the remains of his parchment and tucked it into the wide pocket of his new Cadeleonian wool coat.

Kiram had packed very little clothing and only a few of his favorite books. Tools and crated machine parts filled most of the space in the carriage. Many heavier crates groaned against the ropes securing them to the roof of the carriage. The driver had charged Kiram's mother twice the normal fare because of the weight, but she had been proud to pay it. Those heavy, oily pieces of metal had won Kiram the right to attend Academy Sagrada.

No full-blooded Haldiim had ever before been accepted into the school, and a century had passed since the half-blood Yassin Lif-Harun studied there.

Lif-Harun's formulas had altered the very heavens. A statue of the man stood in the Royal Park. Kiram's father had already pointed out the spot where he thought Kiram's own statue would one day stand. If his parents had been allowed to, they would have

sent another half-dozen carriages filled with praise dancers and red-dyed doves to announce their youngest son's arrival. Fortunately the school permitted only one carriage per student.

The carriage struck another bump and Kiram shoved the stack of rocking crates back against the carriage wall. Sunlight streamed in through the red carriage curtains, filling the space with a warm glow. The dark wood radiated a late afternoon heat. The brown coat he'd worn for the trip over the mountains felt sweltering hot now, and smelled of his sweat. Kiram stripped it off, and stretched his long legs as best he could in the cramped confines.

He couldn't be far from the Academy Sagrada now. Maybe an hour, possibly less.

He pulled the curtains aside and gazed out at the walls of wild, green forest that arched over the road. There was a flash of brilliant blue wings as a flock of jaybirds took flight from the overhanging branches. He thought he caught a glimpse of something white moving fast between the trunks of trees but he lost sight of it as the road turned away.

As he rode further, the dense brambles and towering oak trees gave way to groomed hedges and open fields divided by low stone walls. A flock of white ducks waddled along the roadside, tended by a young, bored-looking boy.

Far across a fallow field, Kiram spied a horse and rider. The horse was brilliant white in the bright sun and rider's skin seemed almost as pale as the horse's hide. His black hair stood out in sharp contrast, as did his deep blue Academy Sagrada uniform.

Kiram doubted that his own uniform, well made as it was, would look so good on him. He wondered if the rider was an upperclassman or even an instructor. Kiram stared in amazement as the lean man urged his horse ahead and the two of them seemed to fly over the stone wall and raced across the road and through the opposite field.

He didn't spare a glance for Kiram's carriage, the herder boy, or even the flock of now startled ducks. A few moments later both the horse and rider were little more than a distant haze. Kiram tried

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to keep track of the rider's blue jacket, but eventually he lost sight of it amongst the fields of blooming sunflowers.

Kiram felt his pulse surging through his body. This was exactly what the academy promised for his future, such fearless prowess, such determination and beauty. Perhaps even adventure.

Kiram had been patient for days but suddenly he felt as though this slow, creaking carriage would never reach its destination and he needed to be at the Academy now. Desire and excitement coursed through him like a physical pang.

As the carriage rolled up to the heavy stone walls that surrounded the academy, Kiram gripped the latch of the carriage door. He hardly took in the fortress-like towers of the main building or the chapel's brilliant blue spire. He stared at cobblestone paths and green lawn of the grounds, searching for his fellow classmates. Several boys dressed in academy blue strolled toward the chapel, but none of them captured Kiram's attention the way that single rider had.

The carriage jerked to a halt, and Kiram slipped slightly forward, his hand pulling the door latch. Instantly the carriage door sprang open and he spilled out onto the muddy ground in front of the stable. He struggled up to his feet to see two older men in gray scholars' robes gaping at him. Just behind them, leading his brilliant white horse by its reins, stood the rider.

"I'm fine!" Kiram announced, though no one had asked. "I just... the door opened and I wasn't looking..."

Kiram could feel his face flushing bright red. Not even his dark skin could hide such an intense blush. He regained his feet quickly but to his horror the rider's expression shifted from slight concern to amusement. His handsome smile somehow made Kiram's humiliation far worse. He glared at the rider and then dove back into the cover of the carriage to retrieve his coat.

When he turned back the rider had disappeared into the stables. The two scholars hurried to Kiram's side. They were both typical Cadeleonians, pale skinned and thickly built with brown hair and eyes.

One of them was older, probably in his late forties with shots of gray scattered through his close-cropped hair. The other scholar wasn't more than a decade past Kiram's own age, perhaps twenty-seven. He wore his hair a little long and his cheeks were dappled with freckles.

"I'm Blasio Urracon," the younger scholar introduced himself, "and this is my honored brother, Scholar Donamillo Urracon."

Kiram bowed to both men. Cadeleonian names often sounded odd to him, so he made special note of their pronunciation. Many Cadeleonians found Haldiim informality rude and so Kiram was careful to use proper titles as he addressed his new teachers.

"Scholar Blasio and Scholar Donamillo, it is an honor to meet you. I'm Kiram Kir-Zaki, your humble student."

Scholar Blasio smiled at Kiram's politeness. "It's a pleasure to meet you at last. Javier was just saying that he'd seen your carriage so we came to greet you." Scholar Blasio gestured back towards the stable where the rider had been standing. He frowned at the empty spot. "I suppose he's brushing down his horse. We're short a stable hand at the moment—"

"It's no matter," the older brother, Scholar Donamillo cut in. "Kiram will be formally introduced to staff and students at dinner tonight."

Scholar Donamillo's tone was much more reserved than Scholar Blasio's, and his expression stern. Kiram couldn't help but think that the older man had taken a quick dislike to him. Probably because he was supposed to be a gifted thinker and he'd just fallen out of a carriage onto his face.

Scholar Donamillo looked a little past Kiram to the crates stacked atop and inside the carriage. "Are all of these yours?"

"Yes, sir. They're the components I've fabricated for the Crown Challenge."

Scholar Blasio grinned. "You brought them all the way from Anacleto? What dedication. That's fabulous!"

Kiram warmed to Scholar Blasio for his enthusiasm but he also noted Scholar Donamillo's expression of disapproval.

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"I'll have the groundsman unpack these," Scholar Donamillo stated. "I suppose that one of the tack sheds can be spared to provide a workshop for the project. No doubt it will take a great deal of space."

"Thank you, sir." Kiram bowed again to the older man. "I'm sorry for the inconvenience."

"Yes, it's good that you realize that this does inconvenience us. It is not common to accept a new student directly into the second-year courses, much less accommodate his individual studies." Strangely, Scholar Donamillo's stern expression seemed to soften as he looked over the wooden crates. "I can only hope that you will prove to be the mechanist genius your teachers claim you are."

The label "genius" brought a second flush to Kiram's cheeks and also a gnawing anxiety to the pit of his stomach. At seventeen, most of his achievements were still built upon his father's innovations. This would be the first time he would have to rise to a challenge alone.

"I will do my utmost to win the Crown Challenge in the Academy's name," Kiram assured Scholar Donamillo. The older man offered him a slight smile in return. He reached out and brushed a clump of mud off of Kiram's shirt.

"No doubt you will want a bath after your long journey. Scholar Blasio will take you up to your room."

"Yes, sir." Kiram snatched up his coat and his gray trunk and followed Scholar Blasio across the lush, green lawn to the three-story stone building that dominated the grounds.

"This is the dormitory. First-year students are all housed on the first floor of the west wing, in the old armory room." Scholar Blasio pointed to where the west wing jutted out from the main building. The windows were barred. "With everyone in a single room the night wardens can keep them out of trouble more easily."

Kiram was glad that he hadn't been forced to come as a first-year student. He couldn't imagine sleeping while crammed in a

single room with a hundred noisy Cadeleonian boys. The smell alone would have driven him mad.

“Second and third years are housed together on the second floor. Those young men who stand to inherit titles, of course, stay on for a fourth year of Lord’s Law. They each have private rooms on the third floor.”

“What about the watchtowers?” Kiram gazed up at the two jutting towers that rose up from the third floor.

“The west tower is used for storage and the east one is for special cases.” Scholar Blasio looked a little uncomfortable. “Let’s go in, shall we?”

Inside, the building was dim and cool. Crests of Cadeleonian noble families, all woven in academy blue, decorated the walls. The royal crest of the Sagrada family was inlaid in gold over all the doors. Scholar Blasio led him past a statue of a rearing stallion, through a huge dining hall, and then up a massive staircase.

“Four of the lecture halls are located on the first floor, the rest are in the east wing,” Scholar Blasio told Kiram as they walked up the stairs. “The dining hall and common library are directly below us.”

“Everything seems so heavy and huge,” Kiram commented. “It looks a little like a fortress.”

“It used to be one. Three hundred years ago, during the first Sagrada dynasty, this was one of their great strongholds. After the Restoration the reinstated Sagrada king turned the fortress over to one of his favored vassals to train young lords in the arts of war and law. Of course, things have changed since then but we have not forgotten our history. In fact, it’s right under our feet.” Scholar Blasio paused on the stairs and pointed back down to a radiant, black design that spread across the stones of the floor below them.

“That is exactly the spot where one hundred years ago, Calixto Tornosal opened the mouth of the white hell and defeated the Mirogoth invaders.”

Kiram studied the fine web of black cracks. He didn’t believe in the white hell or any of the other Cadeleonian hells but the

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sight of the burnt, pitted stones still gave him pause. Standing in an ancient fortress, with a scholar relating the story and pointing out its exact site, it seemed almost plausible that a Cadeleonian nobleman had traded his soul for the power to drive back an invading army.

Even so, Kiram couldn't credit it. A soul could not be given up any more than joy or kindness could be bottled and sold at market. Only in death could the soul leave the flesh.

Kiram glanced to Scholar Blasio, searching his face for some sign that he was joking, but his expression was serious.

"Calixto's descendants still hold the pact of the white hell." Scholar Blasio looked meaningfully at Kiram.

Kiram wasn't sure if he should respond with reverence or revulsion. At last he decided to simply be honest. "In Haldiim tradition we don't believe that people are condemned to hells. We believe that in death all creatures pass through a shajdi and then are reborn in a new form."

Seeing Scholar Blasio's furrowed brow, Kiram continued, "Most modern Haldiim, like my family, don't give much credence to the tales of shajdis hidden in sacred forests or the Bahiim who opened them and claimed power over life and death. If shajdi ever did exist, it was in the ancient past, and they have gone now. But really, most of us understand such stories as metaphors for the balance of birth and death."

Only the very religious Bahiim took shajdis as literal gates between life and death, and the last thing Kiram wanted was to be taken for a superstitious ascetic who'd spend hours talking to trees.

"Really?" Scholar Blasio cocked his head slightly. "So, you aren't afraid of the hells?"

"No, as I said, we don't believe in hells. Shajdi make for amusing stories, though."

Scholar Blasio gazed intently at Kiram, studying his face. "So you wouldn't be afraid of a man who had been hell-branded? Who had the gate to a hell burning within him?"

Kiram simply shrugged. “I suppose not.”

“It wouldn’t worry you at all to, say, sleep in a room with him?” Scholar Blasio sounded almost incredulous.

“So long as he wasn’t insane or sick with black pox I wouldn’t be afraid to sleep in a room with any man,” Kiram replied. It wasn’t entirely true—certainly he wouldn’t want to sleep in a room with a thief or murder or, honestly, a man who stank terribly...

“Well, that’s good to know. Your room is on the third floor, in the east tower.” Scholar Blasio continued up the stairs. Kiram followed him in quick strides. “It’s away from the other rooms so it will be quiet enough for you to study, and unlike the other rooms, it’s very spacious.”

Kiram thought he knew where all of this was leading and decided to just get to the point, instead of having Scholar Blasio nervously list the amenities of his living arrangements when he’d already stated the east tower was reserved for special cases.

“You want me to room with one of these hell-branded men? A descendant of the Tornesal line?”

“You don’t have much choice,” Scholar Blasio admitted at last. “The other upperclassmen have refused to room with a Haldiim. They have no objection to you schooling here, but sleeping in the same room, when their souls are unprotected, is out of the question. However, since Javier’s spiritual state is already... compromised, he risks nothing in sharing a room with you.”

Kiram wanted to demand what exactly it was that these people imagined he was going to do to them in their sleep but then his thoughts stopped short as he registered the name Javier and remembered the dark, sardonic eyes of the rider.

“Javier? The man with the white stallion?”

“Yes, Javier Tornesal, duke of Rauma. He will be your upperclassman.”

Chapter Two

More than spacious, the room was vast and nearly empty. Two beds stood against opposite walls, one of them little more than a wood frame and mattress while the other seemed well used and only half made. A dresser and writing table stood beside it and several black, leather-bound books lay on the table along with an inkwell and a penknife.

Normally, Kiram would have found some excuse to look through the books. This once he wasn't paying so much attention to them.

Instead he stared at the maze of thin red-brown lines that curved and spiraled across the floor like a gigantic map of the heavens.

For a brief moment Kiram thought of Yassin Lif-Harun. He wondered if it was possible that the academy had left one of the famous astronomer's early drawings intact out of reverence. Almost at once Kiram noted that the lines on the floor didn't match any particular constellation and that the ink was far too fresh to have been spread across this floor a century ago.

Long shafts of light poured in from the slit windows, illuminating a series of ellipses and the scrawling, strange letters that they enclosed. The ink seemed to shift in color, rusty brown in some areas, deep red in others.

Kiram glanced to Scholar Blasio, hoping for an explanation, but the man didn't seem to take any note of the floor. He pointed the barren bed pushed up against the west wall.

"The housekeepers should have your bedding brought up before dinner, but if they don't all you need to do is pull the bell cord just outside the door and someone will come up directly." Scholar Blasio pulled the heavy, oak door back open. "You saw the bell chord, didn't you?"

“Yes.” Kiram didn’t bother to look at the dark blue braided cord a second time. He frowned at the arc of letters surrounding a dark red line at the foot of his new bed. The writing was Cadeleonian but Kiram didn’t recognize a single word.

“The bath is through there.” Scholar Blasio pointed to a narrow door just past the writing desk. “In the summer, though, many of the students prefer to wash in the orchard lake. The water is quite shallow and warm. I used go there myself when I was a student but now that I’m an instructor I don’t go so often. It’s best that instructors and students don’t mix.” Scholar Blasio kept his gaze away from the floor, and even the bed and desk against the east wall. He gripped the iron doorknob in one hand.

Kiram realized that just standing in this room disturbed the scholar.

“Fifth bell will sound for dinner. It’s best to come dressed formally. You have your uniform, I assume?”

Kiram nodded.

“Good, good...” Scholar Blasio faded off, staring out one of the dozen tall, narrow windows. The knuckles of his hand went white as he continued to grip the doorknob.

“You could sleep in the stables, you know,” Scholar Blasio said at last.

“With the animals?” Kiram couldn’t hide his offense at the suggestion. He wasn’t some stray dog that a student had taken pity on. He had been invited by the headmaster to study at the academy. His mother had already paid a full year’s tuition.

“No, of course not.” Scholar Blasio blanched, and the freckles on his face looked suddenly very dark. “It’s a lovely room really. Lots of light and Javier says that it’s quite warm in the winter. The fireplace is huge. I’m sure you’ll be comfortable here.”

Kiram pointed to the floor but Scholar Blasio spoke before he could get his question out.

“You probably want to unpack and wash up. I’ll just go down and see about your bedding.” With that he slipped out of the room and pulled the door shut behind him.

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Kiram would have laughed at the scholar's awkward exit if it hadn't been so disconcerting.

For a few moments he stood in the doorway, studying the floor. He had never believed in Cadeleonian superstitions and didn't think now was a good time to start. He boldly walked across the floor and when he caught himself picking a careful path between the flowing lines of ink, he forced himself to step directly on the strange words, just to prove that they were meaningless.

He reached his bed without incident and laid his trunk on the floor. The big, white mattress looked inviting. Kiram ached to lie down and sink into it, but he and his clothes were both too filthy.

He opened his trunk and found his soap tin as well as the thin white prayer clothes that his uncle had insisted he pack. Hidden beneath them, Kiram discovered a small satchel stuffed with dried mint leaves and pieces of his favorite rosewater taffy. A gift from his mother. Doubtless she'd hidden several in his things, as was her habit.

A wave of homesickness overwhelmed him. He had only just arrived at the academy and already he felt completely out of his depth.

"To fear what you do not understand is to mistake ignorance for safety."

Traveling Haldiim scholars were constantly repeating that proverb. For the first time, Kiram thought he might understand why they would need to.

The bathroom was little more than a closet with a large iron tub and several porcelain jars of cool water. Kiram washed quickly. When he was done he pulled the stopper out of the base of the iron tub and listened as the water drained away. A moment later he heard the faint sound of the water pouring out of some rainspout just outside the building. That was a clever design, Kiram decided, and he felt a little of his delight with the academy returning.

He dressed in his prayer clothes. The thin cotton clung to his damp skin, but it was better than putting his dirty travel clothes back on.

He left the bathroom and started for his own bed. Then one of the books on the nearby writing table caught his attention. A circle of gilded script shone from the black leather cover. Like the words scrawled across the floor, each of the curling letters looked so close to common Cadeleonian writing that Kiram thought that he ought to be able to read them. If he just glanced at the words' lengths and shapes, they seemed recognizable. Only when he looked closer did they melt into gibberish.

He picked the book up and leafed through it. A deep, woody scent drifted up from the thick parchment.

The last third of the book was empty. But the pages that did contain text were crammed with blocks of tightly packed, handwritten script. Every few pages there were drawings of circles and curling lines. Some looked like ornate knives, others like tangled briars or strangely skewed constellations. The very same designs that decorated the floor.

Three that resembled blades were almost under Kiram's feet. They seemed to be pointing at the other bed in the room. Javier's bed, Kiram assumed. The dark blue blankets were slightly rumpled, revealing an expanse of clean, white sheet.

Kiram laid the book back on the table and turned to his own bed. As he did, he realized that the door to the room stood open. Javier Tornesal leaned against the doorframe, silently watching him.

He was tall even for a Cadeleonian and very well dressed. The black silk suns of the Tornesal crest adorned the sleeves of his dark blue jacket. The same silk stitching ran down the length of his fitted riding pants and the seams of his leather boots and gloves. He wore a large gold signet ring on his right hand.

And yet, for all his refined dress, there was still something about Javier's lean build, unkempt black hair and hard dark gaze that reminded Kiram of those rangy youths who haunted the smoke alleys of Anacleto and made their money with their knives. Kiram's father called them "street snakes" and no Hal diim from any good family ever spoke to one of them.

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“I would have announced myself but I didn’t want to disturb your reading.” Javier’s voice was softer than Kiram had expected and much lower.

“I wasn’t—” Kiram cut himself off. It was bad enough that he’d been caught going through Javier’s book; he shouldn’t also try to lie to the man about it. “I know that I shouldn’t have been reading your book but I recognized the writing on the cover of the book as the same that was on the floor and I wondered what it all meant. I’m sorry.”

Javier regarded him for a moment, a slight curve spread across his sharply bowed lips. “Did you figure it out?”

“No,” Kiram admitted. “I couldn’t read any of it.”

“Don’t sound so disappointed.” Javier crossed the room to the bedside. As he passed, Kiram caught the scents of leather and sweat. He noticed tiny spears of golden straw caught in the laces of Javier’s black boots. Javier picked up the book and for an instant his amused expression seemed to falter; then the hard arrogance returned and he tossed the book to Kiram.

“Look through it all you like.” Javier sat down on the edge of his bed and began pulling off one of his boots. “Only the eyes of the damned can read it.”

The soft leather cover felt hot against Kiram’s palm. “That’s not possible. Any script written can be learned and read.”

“Of course it can be learned, but only for a price.” Javier’s tone was unconcerned, but when he looked up at Kiram his expression seemed so serious that Kiram found it difficult to meet his intense, dark gaze. “Relinquish your soul to me and I will reveal every mystery of the white hell to you.”

Kiram didn’t believe in the white hell but there was a strange appeal to the way Javier offered him the knowledge, like some exotic, dangerous proposition right out of the storybooks of his childhood. Such proposals always led the young heroes to adventure and romance.

Javier suddenly laughed and tossed his boot down on the floor.

“Are you actually considering the offer?” Javier shook his head. A lock of his black hair fell across his face and he shoved it back brusquely. “You’d sell your soul to me in exchange for a reading from my insane great-grandfather’s diary? And they say all you Haldiim are clever conmen.”

“I didn’t agree,” Kiram objected though he could feel a guilty heat flush his face. “I didn’t even believe you.”

“You did,” Javier replied with a smile. “I could see it in your face.”

“No, I didn’t.” Kiram sat down on his own bed. “I just didn’t know what to say to you. You haven’t even introduced yourself and here you are offering to buy my soul. How am I supposed to know that you aren’t a madman?”

“Indeed.” Javier relented so easily that it surprised Kiram. “Who’s to say I’m not a madman?”

For a few moments there was silence. Kiram couldn’t think of anything to say and Javier seemed intent on removing his remaining boot. At last, he placed the second boot beside the first and pushed them both to the foot of his bed and began to unbutton his jacket. “I assumed that Scholar Blasio told you who and what I am.”

“He said that you were the only student here that had nothing to lose by having me in his room.”

“Well, nothing except my privacy, it would appear.” Javier’s gaze flicked to the book in Kiram’s hand.

“I explained that already.” Again that intense heat flushed across Kiram’s face. He prayed that the natural darkness of his skin would hide his guilty blush. “I apologized and I swear I won’t do it again.”

For some reason Javier laughed at this. “Do it all you like. Just remember that I may require payment of you in return.”

Kiram thought Javier was joking again but he couldn’t be absolutely certain.

Javier tossed his jacket onto his bed and then slid his long white fingers through the laces that held his shirt closed. He wore

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a gold medallion of some kind around his neck. Kiram wondered if it was another crest but his attention quickly slipped from the medallion as Javier pulled his shirt entirely off. Kiram couldn't help but notice how black the hair of Javier's chest looked against his pale skin. The sharp pattern of it was nothing like the blonde down of Kiram's own body.

Javier glanced to him and Kiram looked quickly away.

"To be honest, there's nothing of much interest in the book. Those marks around your bed are blessings to protect you in your sleep when your soul is vulnerable. This here," Javier pointed to one of the designs beside his stocking feet, "is a ward to keep the white hell that lives in me from hunting while I sleep. You should be safe."

"You really believe that there's a hell within you?" Kiram asked.

"I know there is," Javier replied and this time there was no trace of humor in his voice.

Javier loosed his belt buckle and pulled the leather belt out from the loops in his pants. Then he started working the tiny gold buttons of his pants apart. A surge of shock rushed through Kiram, though he could not quite bring himself to avert his gaze.

"Are you taking off all your clothes?"

Javier cocked his head slightly and regarded Kiram. "Why else would I be unbuttoning my pants?"

"Why are you taking them off?" Kiram ignored Javier's question.

"Well, while you might bathe fully dressed," Javier said with a smile, "I prefer to wash naked."

Kiram didn't have a reply for Javier's sarcasm. He busied himself with unpacking the belongings in his trunk. He heard Javier's pants fall to the floor.

"Did you leave any water?"

"What?" Kiram glanced back at Javier. Only the gold medallion remained on his body; otherwise he was a perfect expanse of white and black, like a figure seen at night when all the color had drained from the world. Only the faintest hint of

red colored his nipples and genitals. As Kiram took in the sight he felt his face flushing once again.

“Water.” Kiram belatedly remembered Javier’s question. “There’s enough water left for another bath.”

“Excellent,” Javier replied. “Saves you the work of hauling a bucket up for me.”

He strode to the bathroom but didn’t close the door behind him. Was that a normal Cadeleonian behavior or more hell-branded eccentricity? Almost unwillingly Kiram stole a glance at Javier’s naked back.

Javier slid a ceramic tile aside to expose a cupboard in the bathroom wall. A shaving razor as well as towels, soap, and scrub brushes filled the space. Another clever design.

“Hey.” Javier glanced back over his shoulder at Kiram. “Come over here and give me a hand.”

“With what?” Kiram demanded. He hoped this wasn’t more of Javier’s strange humor.

Javier simply waved a scrub brush at him. Kiram rose and joined him in the bathroom.

There were dozens of common bathhouses back home in Anacleto but most were in the Cadeleonian section of the city. Kiram’s family had two private baths, and certainly would never have expected Kiram to have to scrub the back of some strange man. The idea of it both excited and unnerved him.

“What should I call you?” Javier asked as he soaped himself. Kiram watched the thick white bubbles slide along the curves of Javier’s muscular shoulders and thighs. He wondered if all Cadeleonian men were so at ease in front of one another. Was it so common that the scents and sights of their naked bodies no longer affected them?

“Kiram is fine, unless students at the academy go by their family names.”

“Given names, otherwise half the school would be answering to the name Grunito. There are two enrolled right now and more on the way.”

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“What about you,” Kiram asked. “Just Javier?”

“Upperclassman Javier, if we’re in public.”

Kiram ran his hand over the bristles of the scrub-brush. They felt too stiff to use on skin as fine as Javier’s. Though now that he was standing so close, Kiram could see that there were imperfections in Javier’s body. The most noticeable was the raw, half-healed scar that ran up his left wrist.

Kiram placed the scrub brush against Javier’s back and drew it gently up along the line of his spine and then over his jutting shoulder blades. Javier leaned back into Kiram’s ministrations just slightly.

Other scars nicked and cut across Javier’s lean body but most of those were much older and had faded to white. On Javier’s right shoulder there was a circular scar that looked almost like a written word. Kiram didn’t recognize it, but the shape was familiar. Kiram had no doubt that this, too, was written in that same hellscript. Scholar Blasio had called Javier hell-branded. Kiram wondered if this was the actual brand.

“Put some force into it,” Javier instructed. “You’re not brushing a kitten, you know.”

Kiram scowled at Javier’s back. He had wanted Javier to like his touch, not mock his ignorance. Kiram shoved the bristles of the scrub-brush hard against Javier’s skin leaving a red track. Javier pulled back from him.

“Touchy, aren’t you?”

“I’m just ensuring that you will be clean.” Kiram could hear the petulance in his own voice.

“Ensuring that I won’t have skin is more like it. Haven’t you ever done this before?”

“No,” Kiram admitted.

“Let me show you, then.” Javier’s voice never lost hint of mockery but it did seem to soften a little.

He turned and caught Kiram’s hand in his own. Facing Javier, Kiram felt suddenly awkward and shy. His grip on the scrub brush seemed unsteady as if the heat of Javier’s fingers were drawing all the strength from him.

Javier pulled Kiram's hand to his chest, guiding the scrub brush over his sharp ribs and down along his flat stomach.

"Like that, you see? Firm but gentle."

Kiram couldn't reply. He could hardly think. Javier's closeness, the heat and scent of him, the sensation of his skin against Kiram's own, it all overwhelmed his senses. Anticipation and confusion rolled through him.

If he had been standing like this with Musni, or any other Haldiim youth, he would have known what to think and what to do. He would have known that this was a seduction.

But the Cadeleonians were not like the Haldiim, and Kiram knew that their laws forbade even the thoughts that raced through Kiram's head.

Kiram's breath felt ragged. He couldn't pull his gaze away from Javier's face, his dark eyes, his sharply curved lips. Kiram almost leaned into Javier, almost laid his lips against the graceful curve of Javier's neck. But then he saw the slight quirk of Javier's mouth.

It was that terrible smile of his. He was simply toying with Kiram, making a joke of his confusion and desire.

Angry humiliation surged through him. He jerked back from Javier's grip and hurled the scrub brush. It struck Javier hard across the cheek.

"You can do it well enough yourself," Kiram growled. "Don't think that because I'm Haldiim I'll play the part of your bathhouse whore." Then he turned and left the bathing room, slamming the door closed behind him.

Kiram strode to his bed and briefly he considered just taking his trunk and returning to the carriage to be driven back home.

But his pride as both a Haldiim and a scholar rebelled at the thought. That was just what Javier and the other students at the academy wanted, wasn't it? That was most likely what all this arcane gibberish on the floor and the taunting exchange in the bathroom had been about. They didn't want a Haldiim outshining them in their own precious academy.

Lord of the White Hell

They could all burn in their stupid hells. He was going to stay. More than that, he was going to rub their faces in his accomplishments.

The rant running through Kiram's mind was so engaging that he almost missed the polite knock at the door. Kiram forced himself to swallow back a filthy Haldiim insult. Instead he pulled the door open.

Several serving men in gray uniforms stood in the hall. One was loaded with the bedding that Scholar Blasio had promised. The others had brought up furniture. None of them met Kiram's gaze or spoke to him. He didn't bother to greet them either.

They scurried into the room like skittish mice, awkwardly side stepping the symbols on the floor. More than one of them made Cadeleonian prayer signs as they moved through the room. Kiram purposely stepped on several of the symbols, making his disdain as clear as he could.

In moments Kiram's bed was made with fresh sheets and blue blankets as well as two pillows. A tall dresser stood at the foot of his bed. A writing table and a chair were deposited near the dresser.

Amidst all the moving in, Javier appeared from the bathroom. He wore a towel wrapped tightly around his narrow waist. A bright red mark stood out on his left cheek. His mere presence seemed to panic the servants. One man drew back so quickly that he tripped over Kiram's trunk. He scrambled to his feet and made a quick blessing sign over his own chest. The servants fled from the room, more than taking their leave.

Kiram found it pleasing to slam the door closed behind them with unnecessary force.

Out of the corner of his eye, he glimpsed Javier taking a fresh pair of pants from his dresser. Then Kiram turned purposefully to his trunk. While Javier dressed, Kiram finished unpacking. He hid the satchel of taffy among his clothes and tucked it away in his dresser.

His books went on his table, as did his Silver Leaf medal.

“Dinner bell will be soon,” Javier said from behind him. “You should get into your uniform.”

Kiram gave no response. He placed his inkwells and sheaves of parchment on his writing table and then needlessly straightened them.

“Look,” Javier began quietly, “you can’t just—”

Kiram rounded on him.

“I have nothing to say to you and no desire to hear anything you might say to me.” It pleased him to see the surprise in Javier’s expression. No doubt he was used to scaring everyone around him and having his own way in everything. Well, Kiram had no intention of being bullied or toyed with. “I have to live here, but that does not mean that I want anything to do with you, do you understand me?”

Kiram had the momentary gratification of seeing something like hurt break through Javier’s smug countenance. The expression instantly twisted into that smirk that Kiram already hated.

“As you please, Underclassman Kiram.” Javier offered him a sarcastic bow, then departed.

As the door fell closed the dinner bell rang out, but Kiram found that he had lost his appetite for Cadeleonian food.