

NIYATI

CHAPTER ONE: ROUTINE

BY JESSICA ASTLE

Dilamos closed his eyes and took in several deep breaths, steadying his beating heart in preparation for the night ahead. As always, his hands were shaky and moist with sweat, but he was determined to make it through a single day without proving himself the inept, slow-witted boy everyone thought he was. He focused on the cool stone beneath his bare feet and the pungent smell of burning torches on the other side of the door, calming his nerves with the comfortable surroundings. With one last inhalation, he opened his eyes and quickly pushed open the warped wooden door, stepping out into the expansive corridor.

"Watch where you're going!" Lodest snapped as Dilamos collided with his heavily muscled form and fell back onto the hard floor of his quarters. The big man glowered down at him, his small, mean eyes nearly lost in the mass of dark hair enveloping his face. Fearing another beating, Dilamos cringed, trying to make himself as small as possible, but Lodest merely snorted in disgust and grabbed him by the nape of the neck.

"Stop laying around and get to work!" he yelled right in the boy's face before throwing Dilamos down the hall toward the dimly lit tavern.

The boy cursed his limbs and tucked his head close to his chest, rolling with the momentum when he collided with the ground. By the time he came to a stop, he was able to climb to his feet with only a few new scrapes and bruises along his arms and back. He bore many deep scars from such clumsiness in the past and counted himself lucky he'd suffered nothing worse.

"Slave scum," Lodest snarled, spitting on the floor. With a last glare, he lumbered out to fight around the corner. His heavy footsteps rumbled down the staircase leading to the cellar where kegs of beer and bottles of alcohol were stored.

Cringing at a long scratch down his forearm, Dilamos stepped through the doorless arch into the tavern. He had to squint to make out the wooden bar and tables, both from the poor lighting and the perpetual cloud of rank smoke hanging in the air. Lodest kept the torches low in order to create as many dark areas as possible, places where patrons would feel comfortable when making their shady deals with one another. More than once, Dilamos overheard thieves discussing their next target or men enlisting assassins to kill their neighbors.

On the outer edge of Harrelcien city, the building attracted mostly criminal types, so there also tended to be a number of fights commencing at any given time. The boy could make out at least three in progress as he snaked through the narrow pathways between tables and people, dodging as a man was thrown from one of the brawls.

There were a large number of customers eating, drinking, and arguing that night, but with the exceptionally cool weather lately, it didn't surprise Dilamos. The Wyvern Claw Tavern was the last before travelers entered the desert, drawing in both those returning and those planning to set out the next day. Often, he heard the tavern was unusually big for an establish ment of its nature, but he had nothing to compare it to, having never set foot outside the ran stone building. This prolonged imprisonment compounded with his hatred of everything else about it, the grime-smeared floors, the constant noise, and the crude drunkards who frequented it. But no matter how much he wished he could leave, it would never happen. With a sigh, Dilamos made his way behind the bar and ducked one of the waiting rags into a bucket of gray water. It was his responsibility to keep the tables moderately clean and to take the used dishes to the back, scrubbing them with sand. This gave the barmaids more time to serve and flirt, giving the men a strong incentive to return the next night.

Not wanting to encounter Lodest when the bartender made his way back, Dilamos quickly wrung out the worn piece of cloth and slipped into the main walkway. As he wove through the crowded room to the nearest empty table, he came face to face with Selia, the youngest barmaid. She gave him a small smile, nearly hidden behind her long Auburn hair, before brushing past him carrying a tray of glasses filled with alcoholic drinks in a myriad of bright colors. Dilamos looked after her for a moment, then wiped his nose on a dirt-stained sleeve, pushed his brown hair out of his eyes, and set to work on the splintered surface of the table. Selia, at fourteen, was three years older than he, but despite their age difference, they became close friends. Some days she would visit him through the window hole of the tiny room, he shared with the resident wyvern, Vor, even though they both knew the consequences if Lodest found out.

Dilamos ducked the flailing arms of several brawling

men and threw the rag onto the dark wood of the next table over, making a show of wiping it off. He knew far too well the dirty cloths he used did more to add to his than remove it, but when he pointed this out to Lodest, he'd received such a severe whipping for his impudence he could hardly move for five days. Before he could complete his cleaning, the fighting gunch tumbled onto the table, yelling threats and curses as they continued beating on each other. He stepped back and waited patiently until they crashed onto the floor, then jumped over the tangle of limbs and torso to reach the other half of the table top.

Having finished with the rag, wrinkling his nose at the grimy layer left behind, Dilamos piled up the numerous plates and glasses from the two tables and started toward the broad hallway, steadying the unwieldy stack with each careful step. Most of the earthenware dishes still had a good amount of bread on them, and the smell of leftover brauu meat made his empty stomach growl. These table scraps were the only sustenance he got each day, and it would be a welcome change to feel a full belly. He made a mental note to save some of the remains for Vor. The runty wyvern was set free in the tavern after it closed to catch the small lizards and rodents that plagued the city, but it hadn't eaten much the past few days, acting sluggish and disoriented. He worried it was getting sick.

Distractions by his thoughts, Dilamos was caught on the rough stone floor when he was almost beneath the open archway. He lost his balance, falling forward. The dishes flew from his arms and tumbled through the air before shattering to pieces on the ground.

The boy stared in horror at the shards of glass and pottery as the entire room went still. One of the men behind him gave an evil chuckle and a few more joined in. Regulars at the tavern liked nothing more than to watch Dilamos get disciplined for his blunders, and the boy knew it would be his time. Very bad. Dread gripped his insides at the distinctive sound of Lodest's heavy footsteps, then he was roughly jerked from the floor by the back of his thin, tattered shirt.

Lodest only had two emotions, angry and furious, and judging by the flames burning in the bartender's black eyes, Dilamos knew he faced the latter.

"You stupid boy!" the big man bellowed, shaking him so

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hard his teeth rattled in his head. Squeezing his eyes shut, Dilamos braced himself for the pain that would soon come, but as the crowd took bets on how many blows it would take before he lost consciousness, he heard someone walk into the tavern and stop in the doorway.

When no fist connected with his face, Dilamos risked lifting an eyelid to peer at his punisher. Lodest's arm was raised to strike, but his eyes focused on the newcomer, as were those of everyone else. Alarmed by their awed, frightened expressions, Dilamos swiveled his head around to see the new arrival for himself. At all, broad-shouldered figure with an overwhelming air of authority stood blocking the entrance. Though the torchlight was too dim for Dilamos to distinguish the face, an icy chill froze every muscle in his body and his lungs seized up. He would recognize his father's silhouette anywhere.

Zeram Metcalas took several steps forward, booted feet soundless as they made contact with the ground. Dressed entirely in black, he cut an imposing figure among the sea of more practical browns and tans. With possession of almost half the city's establishments, he held a widespread reputation both for his keen business sense, as well as his ruthless nature. None dared oppose him, especially Dilamos. He knew the moment he tried to escape the life chiseled out for him by Zeram, he would be brutally killed to prove to the entire populace that even Zeram's own flesh and blood wasn't safe from swift retribution at any hint of defiance. Merciless, bloodred eyes bored into the boy's, and he covered in Lodest's grip.

"Leave him to me," Zeram directed, hiss of voice audible to all in the utter silence. Shrugging, Lodest dropped Dilamos on top of the broken remains of the dishes and backed away. Despite the fact several small, jagged pieces sailed into his arms and chest, the boy shakily pushed himself to a standing position, head bowed in submission. He didn't even attempt to escape his fate, focusing instead on throwing up mental barriers against the intense agony he was about to endure. With his father dealing the blows, he would be left able to work, but not without considerable pain that would last for weeks. Grabbing Dilamos by the throat, Zeram attacked.

The first blow connected solidly with the boy's ribs, followed by a sharp jab to the kidneys. He hissed in a breath, but managed to keep quiet, having trained himself years ago

to keep from crying out from something as common as pain. Zeram threw a punch to his shoulder, then one to the thigh, cheek, side, stomach, an endless barrage of attacks he lost track of, all blurring together into one continuous stream of torture. Each strike was met with a cheer from the audience, followed by jeering and laughter. With a final box to the ear, Zeram let the boy collapse, no longer able to support himself with muscles already weak from hunger. Dilamos lay there limply, wishing with every fiber of his soul he could escape into the blackness hovering around the edges of his mind and never return.

Through the buzzing in his head, Dilamos made out Zeram giving instructions for him to be locked in his sleeping area for the next three days without food. A meaty hand latched onto his ankle, and dragged him through the sharp fragments still on the floor, adding several more cuffs to his collection. While Lodeset hauled him away, the crowd called out insults and threw bones and gobs of fat after him as he was pulled down the corridor. The bartender pulled open the cracked wooden door to his room and chucked him inside, locking it with a laugh that resonated down the hall as the man ambled back to tend to the tavern's customers.

Dilamos stayed where he'd been thrown for a long time, unable to summon the strength to shove himself upright. He heard the clank of Vor's chain as the wyvern tried to draw closer to him, but after a while, it settled down and all was quiet save for his ragged breath echoing around the stone room. After what felt like hours, he managed to claw his way to the nearest wall and prop his tender back against it. His entire body felt like it was on fire, and just moving the short distance made him dizzy.

Pushing it self with its wing arms, the small green wyvern crept the extent of its reach to rub its scaly head against the boy's fingers, looking up at him with sad, sky blue eyes. With a faint smile, Dilamos ran a hand over the creature's rough back. It suffered as much as he did, if not more. The majestic maroon wings were tattered and full of jagged holes, its pelt was pockmarked with missing scales, and much of the gold ridge along its spine had broken off. During the day, Lodeset kept it chained to a metal spike driven deep into the floor, only releasing it for those few hours each night to drive away vermin. The boy and wyvern kept each other company, finding comfort in the other's presence.

Dilamos sat stroking the dragon-like creature's side, tracing each prominent rib as he let himself envision a life without

his father or Lodeset, a life outside the tavern, a life of freedom. He didn't realize he'd drifted off until Vor startled him awake by nipping his pinky. His sudden movement made every muscle spasm, and he gasped, closing his eyes against the flashes of red streaking through his mind.

"Dilamos!" someone whispered in alarm.

When he could think clearly, Dilamos turned his head toward the barred window from where the familiar voice had come. "Selia!" he called back, surprised at how raspy he sounded. In the faint moonlight, he noticed a shocking amount of dried blood coating the rough material of his clothes, enough to cover his entire chest, with some smeared on the ground beside him from the cuffs on his arms. He felt a faint twinge of regret that it hadn't been enough to carry him out of his nightmarish existence forever.

A list reached through the metal bars and waved at him in acknowledgement. "I have something to help with your injuries," the barmaid answered softly.

Gritting his teeth, Dilamos positioned himself beneath her closed hand, supporting himself against the wall. "You can drop it."

Selia unclenched her fingers and several fresh flowers fluted onto Dilamos's lap. He recognized the miniature white sandeaters right away, named for their cone-like shape that filled with sand during storms. They were well known for their medicinal qualities, one being the reduction of pain for about half a day. Without hesitation, he put the largest flower in his mouth and thoroughly crushed it between his teeth, extracting every drop of liquid from its petals before swallowing the remaining pulp. It might have been his imagination, but he felt better almost immediately.

"Thanks," Dilamos said, putting as much gratitude into the single word as possible while keeping his tone low to avoid attracting attention. "But aren't you supposed to be working tonight now?"

The barmaid's fingertips bunched together, her signed version of a smile when they communicated through the wall of his room. "I finished a little while ago and came back to give you the sandeaters. A few what Zeram did, I was worried about you."

Dilamos frowned. If she was finished for the night, that meant he'd been asleep for nearly four hours. Lodeset would come for the wyvern soon, and if he barkeeper caught Selia helping him, she would be punished with a whipping, if not things worse. Before he could point that out to her, she dropped

a cloth-wrapped bundle down and withdrew her hand. He stared at the package in confusion.

"A little bread and meat to keep up your strength," Selia explained, anticipating his question. "I'll come back tomorrow with some water."

"No, Selia, wait," Dilamos hissed, gathering his energy to throw back the valuable food. By the time he was ready to make the attempt, she had already tapped the wall in farewell and run off. With no other options, he quickly stuffed the bundle under his ragged shirt and positioned himself on his side, curling his knees up to hide the bulge.

Not a minute later, the heavy bolt of the door yanked back. Dilamos shut his eyes as Lodeset stumbled in, the strong odor of smoke and alcohol entering with him. Muttering under his breath, the bartender freed the wyvern from its thick chain and dragged it away by the collar, slamming the door shut behind him. Dilamos heard the scrape of the key in the lock, followed by Vor's whimpering as it was hauled down the corridor.

When it seemed safe to do so, Dilamos sat up again and retrieved the food package, carefully removing the string holding the coarse fabric together and tying it to his rope belt for possible use later. He evaluated the half loaf of stale bread and sheet of dried branu meat, mentally rationing it to last the length of his imprisonment before ripping off a piece of jerky and stuffing it into his mouth. Although it made his bruised face hurt, he chewed the bite slowly, forcing himself to savor every morsel of the nourishing sustenance. Even so, it didn't take long for him to finish the small portion since there had been very few leftover scraps for him to eat over the last week. He needed all his willpower to wrap up the remaining food to save for when he really needed it.

Holding the precious bundle close to his chest, Dilamos crawled to the far end of the tiny room and jammed his fingers into a long crack separating the corner from the rest of the stone floor. Steeling himself, he strained his arm and lifted the triangular section up, revealing the hollow pocket sheltering his few belongings, mostly things brought to him by Selia over the last few weeks. The collection included a sheet of

parchment he'd used to learn his letters and figures, a leather pouch that usually held a store of white sandeaters, and a dry water skin he hadn't refilled in weeks. He put the remaining flowers in the empty pouch and set the food on top of everything else, then lowered the piece of floor back down, hiding the treasures from sight.

Dilamos brushed sand into the gap to conceal the loose corner before tightening his belt around his mostly empty stomach to keep the hunger pangs at bay. He lay back, staring at the bars of moonlight illuminated on the wall beside him, and wondered if he would ever get to see the black desert sands bathed in the pale light like Selia described. His body ached from his beating, but it was the inner sting of longing that made him take in a shallow, agonizing breath, letting it out in a frustrated huff. The action sent a sharp spear of pain jolting through his side and he closed his eyes against it. He knew once he might have cried from the pain, anger, and yearning that burned within him, but he could no longer bring himself to weep, having shed all his tears years ago when he still carried a measure of hope within him. Instead, the boy just sighed, feeling his heart's shudder with a crippling despair. 🐉



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