

Lisander Dust hasn't always had the surname reserved for the orphans and bastard children of the Mud District. Of all the last names in Spirea, *Dust* is the one most commonly spat out in disgust. With a name like that, he'd be lucky to get a job in the drainage trenches, trying to extract enough water from the ground to keep the Mud District from sinking into it. It's pitched as a noble profession—as noble as a muddie can be—and the pay is good enough to put food on the table at least three nights a week, but with the constant trickle-down of used water from higher districts, it's ultimately a futile one. When Muddies die on the street, their bodies often simply sink into the mud before anyone can be bothered to pull them out and identify them, but Dusts often seem to simply disappear, as if they never were to begin with. Dust to dust.

Lisander was born Lisander Alabaster; a mouthful of a name for a child still learning to spell. His mothers were determined that he grow up wanting for nothing, and as a result he had to live up to their expectations early. He learned how to act and sing, paint with watercolours and toil away for hours at needlework. He would fence and ride horseback during the daylight hours and then the three of them would read literature in the evenings before retiring. He lived a charmed life, but it was a life built over a shadow. Over the mud that was slowly sinking its foundations and eating at the floors.

His mothers insisted that he learn these skills to better navigate the Marble District, a world of glistening silk and plush carpets beneath the feet of guests, but when he left them, these skills proved even more useful in the life he built from himself in the muck he was left to.

Lisander didn't escape under cover of darkness. He didn't even leave at dawn, or on a rainy day. On a day made bright and rich with sunshine, Lisander packed up what coin he could easily carry, a dagger and shortsword given to him for his birthday and layered a crisp blouse over a pair of blue silk pants. Beneath that, he wore all black. He told his mothers that he would be going out to see some friends, and that he wouldn't be back until the evening. Perhaps he'd stay over, but he'd be back. Then he pulled on a pair of boots, slung a cloak nonchalantly over his shoulder, and strode out into the bright daylight. The boots were far closer to work boots than anything that would be appropriate for visiting in, and the cloak leaned towards rainy days rather than sunny ones, but those were the only clues his mothers had as to what he was planning, or where he was doing. They were not enough. When the sun began to set, Lisander was in the gravel district, selling his nice shirt and pants for a price that would make his mothers

weep, and by the time the sun sank behind the buildings, his boots were squelching uncomfortably beneath him and his pockets were more loaded with coin than he would have liked. The sound and feel of that thick mud was unfamiliar, unpleasant at the time, but he would grow used to it in the months and years to come.

He should have brought some damn gloves. That was the thought that kept him warm for those first nights as the dampness crept into his bones, more than he had ever known, and chilled him more than he would have ever imagined in a house with a fireplace for each room. The mud caked itself onto him, thicker each day. His black clothes turned brown, and though he initially tried to wash them in the washing pools provided, the hours of standing, shivering and sodden, waiting for his clothes to dry after were ultimately not worth it when he would immediately sink up to his calves in mud afterwards.

So Lisander adapted. In fact, he would say he adapted rather well. He learned when the guards would pass by, when the workers from other districts would come through on their way to other projects. He learned what aroused their suspicion and what would make them curious, even come closer. Lisander watched other muddies make mistakes, get shoved back into the muck by guards who would rather walk past a face lined with dirt and sickness than consider for even a moment that it was a human beneath all that. Lisander watched and understood that desire not to see what makes them uncomfortable, and he hated himself for that understanding. He pickpocketed guards every chance he got. When they were kicking awake a muddie who had fallen asleep, too exhausted to get home or perhaps with no home to return to, he would lift their wallets, only allowing his feet to squelch when he was far enough away to ensure his escape. The guards were armed and well trained, but he was quick, slippery, and knew his way through the narrow alleyways in ways they couldn't fathom. By the time they finally lost him they were out of breath, utterly lost, and much poorer than before. Lisander survived by gritting his teeth and fighting against the people who had coddled him his whole life. He fought, and he survived. And he survived. And he survived.

Lisander was lucky that his mothers had taught him so well. He could improvise and lie, and could recall his posh accent to get him a free pass in most situations. He had enough practical know-how to get enough odd jobs throughout the Mud District to keep him from starving like so many kids his age. But there were so many kids like him that were less lucky. There were kids who were abandoned because they were one more mouth to

feed, or whose parents had died with nothing to leave them. Of all the injustices, that was the most intolerable of all.

The first true friend he made in the Mud District was a girl named Wallis. She had been given a name that sounded like something that would belong in a higher district, but her accent and the mud caked beneath her fingernails gave her away before she could ever get around to introducing herself. Still, she was bright and inventive, and had a number of devices designed to distract guards so that she would have a better chance of earning herself a free meal from their pockets. Her and Lisander became fast friends and ate well when they worked together. Before long, they were joined by Breneth, another young girl with a mean streak who taught Lisander more about what he could do with his knives in a week than he'd learned in his whole life in the Marble District, and Olivyr, a boy who seemed to have got through life simply by being the kindest person in the room. As their company grew, so did their need for resources. They offered lessons to orphans in exchange for a small cut of their profits if they were successful. Before long, Lisander had a small empire of his own, children of the Mud District and occasionally somewhere else, as high as the Gravel District.

Lisander had struggled to keep himself fed. Providing for all the Dust children was infinitely more challenging. But now Lisander had eyes everywhere. He learned the guards schedules, the movements of key district residents, and he was the first to know when anything changed. The soldiers, the other residents of the Mud District, the rest of Spirea referred to the Mud District orphans as *motes*, small and inconsequential, only a problem if they found a place to settle, easily swept away. But under Lisander they were organized, unified. And Lisander had a plan.

Change was coming, and his eyes were trained on the gleaming Marble District. On the ones in control.