

Chapter 3

Alyks

I look at the door of my father's chamber. The wood grain is undisturbed by a single imperfect, making it look like one perfect section of the tree. The expense for a single cut piece of log like this would be astronomical. For something that one hopes to only see for a few moments at a time it seems extravagant. Maybe he knew that I would spend much time staring at this door. Although if he knew that he would have made this door the most wretched he could. He may have even had a carved face of the black wizard himself; just to torment me. I doubt that though, Actually I don't think he would have spared the thought. This door is probably just symptomatic of his attempt to fill the bottomless pit in his soul with lavish luxury.

Alyks palms the vial of green liquid in his pocket. *Two drops to keep him sick. Another drop to kill him. That would be too good for him. I should feed him his own guts.*

It's back that session yesterday was not enough. I swallow and gather my composure, composure is key. I walk in and the first thing I see are the fabrics; The deepest of royal purple. He would have had to import the dye for these carpets. Although looking at it I understand. The light passing through the curtains is tinged purple. The light makes them look made of amethyst. The beautiful colors make a perfect covering for my father. I can make out his silhouette through the sheer fabric of the canopy. The purple light surrounds the shadow of his waifish figure. I can hear his rasping from here. Every breath is labored, but he still breathes.

When I make it to his bedside I can see his face. His face is covered in shadow, but the little light that makes it to him breaks into shadow on the many ridges of his weathered face. I put his lunch down in front of him and shake him awake. He starts coughing, he continues his body wrenching back and forth violently, then before the last cough he gasps in a lungful of air.

“Eat.”

He turns to face me, then shakes his head.

I ought to feed your guts to you for what you did to me.

“Eat it!”

“Please.”

“Broun damn you eat it or I will force it down your throat!”

The king holds out a shaky hand and grasps the wooden spoon. He methodically scoops the soup then swallows, he stops about halfway.

“Finish it.”

The king looks at his half finished bowl of soup then whimpers and continues eating it. With every bite he cringes with pain. Eventually he finishes the soup. Something in me burns when I hear him whimper. All I have to do is focus on the pain that still lingers between my legs and that clears it up. I walk out of the room, then step into the hallway. I take a deep breath, then walk to my room. My room is sparse, just a large bed and a small table with two chairs. The maids don't come to my room anymore, so before the council I'll need to head to the kitchens for breakfast.

I don't blame them. I head down the stairs to the kitchens. There is a small tray with a biscuit and an apple sitting on a small table right outside the hallway to the kitchens. I grab the biscuit, then take a sniff. I recognise that scent. She is the only one

who uses the essence of vanilla in the biscuits. I eat the biscuit whole in two bites, then stuff the apple in my pocket. I'll meet her after the council to thank her. The maids should be seeing to my father's preparation. I'll be there to escort him, but first I need to meet with the Whitefall representative.

That man is a fool in lord's dress, but discussions with him need to be productive. There are people walking down the hall. They are in lords' dress, they are making their way to the great hall. The council should not be for more than an hour. I can't take the risk, follow the crowd.

Every time I step foot into the great hall I am dumbfounded. The floor is unbroken stone with four large pillars holding up the domed ceiling, the other end of the room from the entrance is stone directly from the mountain. Carved into that stone is a large dias and a chair with feathers inlaid like they are falling from above. Next to the largest chair are four others. The one on the right is mine as my father's seneschal. The lords are filling into their seats at the other wooden tables arrayed in a half circle in front of the dias, leaving an area between the dias and them. There are twenty men at arms dotted around the hall, with six in front of the dias. One lord is standing in the center of this area. I can't recognize him from this distance.

Everyone files into their seats, I sit next to my father's chair and I wait. The maids should bring him in shortly. While everyone's waiting the stranger is talking and laughing amongst the other lords. They must know him, who could he be to call a meeting like this. All conversation stops when the doors of the great hall swing open. My father walking with his cane makes his way to the dias slowly. I try my best not to revel in seeing the pained look on his face as he takes every step. When he sits all the other lords take their seats.

“For what reason do you call this emergency meeting?” My father rasps.

“It has come to my attention that the Whitefall daughter has disappeared.” The man says.

“Why is that a reason to call this meeting?” My father asks.

“The Whitefalls are not yet our allies, and noticing that their daughter has been lost in our care, they are assuredly going to turn against us.” He responds.

“They cannot afford a war on two fronts.” My father says.

“Do not be so confident, cousin.” Albert says.

Broun curse me.

“They have the backing of the white order, all the white order needs to do is stop exchanging feathered coins for white coins, and our international markets would collapse. We should not be so confident in our ability to stand up to the white order.” Albert says.

“So what do you propose?” My father asks.

“She was supposed to marry your son, am I not wrong.” He says.

“Yes.” My father responds.

“Well, Alyks was the one who she was in the care of. Is it not his fault for her loss then?”

The whole room goes silent. Albert laughs as he points at me.

“I mean the kid is a freak. I may have been gone for many seasons, but seeing him at your side is truly a sight. I mean don’t you want to pawn him off to the white order? They should set him straight, and he will be back in no time.” Albert says.

The faces in the room go white including my father. The room sits in silence, few daring to turn their gaze to me. Albert's laugh slowly dies as he turns to face the other lords in the room. I smile, teeth bared, then stand.

"I was actually going to meet with the Whitefall representatives today. I was not sure of something until Ealyn was captured. There have been many odd occurrences in the kingdom of late. Missing caravans, dead captains, towns burned by supposed bandits. All of these disparate occurrences taken separately could be seen as the norm, but taken together there is an organised force behind these maneuvers. These hits have been strategic and targeted almost like a focused attack. These attacks have all shown signs of a large use of beast kin and arrows. The only people that possess these sorts of tactics are in fact the Talltrees. Until yesterday I thought this was a slow campaign of sabotage done by the Talltrees to damage us before we formally declare for the Whitefalls, but after today I know that there is a traitor in our midst."

I pause and the crowd stays silent, Albert's smile slowly falls.

"These accusations you throw at me are suspicious in the light of these new findings."

Albert turns to face the king.

"Cousin you can't believe this nonsense, the kid is delusional." Albert says.

The king turns to face away from him.

"In the light of this new discovery your accusations seem awfully suspicious. It seems like you want to weaken our alliance with the Whitefalls."

"Cousin please, you can't believe him." Albert begs.

The king keeps his head turn.

“I speak to my fellow lords and vassals to the head of house Talltree. I put forward that we take Albert in for questioning.” I propose.

All the lords raise their hands, Albert blanches.

“You are going to trust the words of a freak who killed his mother over a war hero!” He yells.

My vision goes black. I wake up with a puddle of blood beneath me. Albert's skull is not intact, it is broken into twenty odd pieces jabbed into the flesh that used to be his face. My hands are bloodied and the lords around me are shaking. I stand up and they all flinch. I turn to my father.

“The council is adjourned, the traitor has been found and dealt with.” My father says.

The lords all rush to leave including my father who is desperately shuffling across the floor. The Whitefall representative stays behind. I know what he is going to ask, but I need to keep impassive.

“So interesting proposition.” The squat man says.

“I assume that it's in your interest.” I say.

“Oh, of course, my lord will be happy to hear.” He responds.

“Well, I guess our meeting no longer has a purpose. I will convene the generals and meet your lord on the field.” I say.

The man nods, then walks out the room. I walk behind him until we part at a split in the hall. I feel it in the back of my mind, I just need to keep it together for long enough to make it to my room. Just one more step, tears are threatening to escape, but I can't let them see me. Once I cross the threshold I let go.

A scream and a decent cry will be enough for now. I just need to vent enough to regain control. I can't keep doing this. I need another vent. Ealyn is not hear, and I can't subsist, I can't let myself lose control. I can't not again, that blackout was just the beginning. What happens when I wake up in front of a pile of meat that is unrecognizable from human? What if it's Brena.

I should kill myself. I grab the dagger from my side pocket and hold it to my throat. Just push do it, go just do it, I can't hurt her, I can't do this anymore. I can't let it happen again. *Drop the knife.* I drop the knife, it clangs on the floor.

I stare at it as the sunlight reflects off the perfectly clear blade. The filigree breaks the light into interesting patterns that dance across the walls as the blade lists from side to side. I pick the dagger back up and stuff it back in its holster. I can't let it gain control not again.

"Broun, please forgive me for what I am about to do." I whisper.

I walk out the room, and I prepare myself for what I am about to do. I take the knife out and study the blade carefully, and do the ritual that I have not had to do in a long time, then I make my way out of the castle into town. She is worth it.