

Chapter 17

Brena

Brena's eyes flutter open, but the light burns, so she closes them again. Once she regains her bearings she reopens her eyes. Now accustomed to the light she looks around the room. Everything is out of focus, Something moves from across the room, a blob of color and shape undulating as it grows bigger, no moves closer. The blob covers the light, her eyes no longer burn but everything is blurry. The figure presses something cold against her forehead. She feels droplets slip down her face, and she realizes that it must be a compress. She tries to reach for the thing but her muscles refuse to cooperate and stay in their place. Suddenly darkness pools again and she slips back into its gentle embrace.

A bump in the road knocks her against the pillow causing her eyes to shoot open. The world is no longer so impressionistic as the forms and figures regain their sharpness and contrast. She looks around, she is in the same carriage from before, but one of the seats has been reconfigured into a bed of sorts. She is currently tucked between fluffy padded sheets, with a pile of pillows beneath her. She tries to muscle out of the sheets, and after a time they relent and let her go. She slowly sits up, then stops suddenly when a sharp pain streaks across her head. The pain is deep under the skull in one long trail from eye to the tip of her spine. She winces and holds her hand to the source, the pain causes a nausea, but she pushes through and sits up in the bed. She turns to the window and looks into the field outside.

The field is lit by the dim silver light of the stars. The moon is barely large enough to be more than a sliver of marble dangling in the sky. When the light is like this it is enough to see the true beauty of the stars. A cold breeze passes through the window and fills the cabin with a deep chill. Brena initially shivers, but the chill saps away the pain in her head. She sags with relief and turns back to the sky. She scans the sky looking for Alyks' constellation. She finds it sitting right above her, with the stars so clear in the night she sees the colors of the sky. Beyond the blue and silver of the usual night when true darkness is upon the world below the sky reveals its true form. Full of color and beauty, not just points of light but large clouds of color, and bands of hazy form. They all mix to create a beautiful tapestry of life. Many look at the sky and only see darkness, but these nights remind Brena of life and light not darkness. So far away they seem, and so full of light and life they are, but through the haze of colors Brena looks at what she usually avoids at all costs. Small patches of darkness, true darkness. Usually they don't bother her, she is usually so mesmerized by the beauty of the sky that she barely notices them. But tonight she sees them, and she sees them true. The pockets of true nothing marring the tapestry of light above her.

Today she looks into their depths so focused on them that no light appears to her, and she swears that she sees something. A form, a figure, a face, something stares back at her, and she shutters the blinds. She crawls her legs close to her until she is curled in a tight ball, and she forces her eyes closed, but there is no sanctuary behind her eyes. Only a new place for darkness to find refuge. The forms and figures dance across her vision laughing, then they all go silent when the specter returns. She tries to open her eyes, but they refuse her control. She is forced to stare at the face of the woman she

failed. At the woman she forced to be here, at the woman she killed. The specter stares at her for a time, then it walks away, and the rest of the apparitions with her sink into blackness. Brena is now just alone in the darkness, which might be worse. So she cries.

Brena's eyes shoot open when someone grabs her shoulder.

“Brena, are you well?” Alyks asks.

Brena leaps onto him and hugs him close. Brena pulls him down to the bed, and Alyks opens his mouth, but then closes it and places his head on top of hers and hugs her back. While the moon sinks in the sky and gives way to the sun, Brena and Alyks stay wrapped in each other's arms. Once Brena's tears are spent she slowly lets go of Alyks. Brena stares into his clear grey eyes. Brena sits up and schools her features.

“I'm sorry that was not proper of me.” Brena says.

Alyks sits up alongside her. For a second Alyks contemplates his words, then says.

“No, it wasn't.” Alyks says.

Brena keeps herself together with all her strength, then Alyks wraps her in another hug. He breathes in her scent and Brena looks down at him dumbfounded. Alyks does his best but a couple tears escape.

“I thought I lost you.” Alyks says.

Brena tears up with him. Neither of them cry but they stay interlocked until someone knocks on the carriage door. Alyks quickly separates himself as one of the lightfeather men at arms walks in.

“Prince, you told me to inform you when we got within forty furlongs of the split river meeting place.”

Alyks nods, then the man at arms leaves. Brena realizes that she is to leave soon. Suddenly everything evaporates, and she is left hollow. She steals her resolve and starts to get up.

“I will make ready to leave.” Brena says.

Brena movement is arrested when Alyks grabs onto her wrist.

“You are not leaving my side ever again.” Alyks says.

Brena's eyes go wide, then quickly tears fill them, and she collapses into Alyks. She looks up at him and his lips, but refrains from pushing her luck, and basks in the pure bliss of the revelation, but something feels hollow about it. The victory she sought, the point of her long excursion. Then in the back of her mind she sees the specter again. It looks on without any emotion, but it stays watching. Brena is uneasy, but quickly fills her mind with thoughts of Alyks enough to distract her from the specter that stays. It may be obscured but it is still there watching. But she no longer thinks about it, and instead forces herself to bask in glory and happiness.