

Chapter 2

Brena

Brena sits up awake, the sun barely inching above the horizon staring at the door prince Alyks slammed shut hours ago. Brena did not cry when Alyks left, she kept her cold hollow expression on until she was sure that Alyks could not hear her tears. So when she was sure all the built up emotion let out in one torrent. Now she sits with puffy red eyes staring at the sunrise, the tears drained from her body now stained onto the heavy white blanket on her lap. Alyks has never said as much but before today she was sure that he loved her.

This must be Ealyn's doing, that conniving wench. She has ruined everything up to this point, why not this one. Everyone loves Ealyn, and her delicate features, her intelligent manor, even her sickness is endearing. She always milked that to the extreme.

All father and mother ever did was fret over her, until when she was of marrying age she made a miraculous recovery. Oh how awfully convenient the timing of that was. Now, Ealyn has taken away the one thing she ever wanted, then run off with some stable boy just to show off how little she cares. She took Alyks' heart stamped on it and ran away laughing. Oh, Alyks I hope he is okay. For every tear I have shed the tender heart of such a gentle soul must have cried at least double. If only he would let me in. Ealyn was always keeping us apart. Everyday when I would organise a private picnic or a walk about the grounds, Ealyn would find some excuse

to pull me away. Now I know that it was all so she could have him all to herself, to play with like she does everyone in her life.

This all makes sense now, the plan to send me off to some middle of nowhere church to become a white priestess. She just wanted to ruin my life further. She wanted to make sure that I could never love again. That I would be cloistered somewhere while she could galavant across Aurica stealing the heart of any noble knight or gentle lord that crossed her path. She is such a conceited slut. I understand why her door is always locked. Those moans of pleasure leaking through the cracks in the door. I wonder how many bastards she has had to use sorcery to abort. I wouldn't doubt that she has practiced sorcery herself. All that time spent at the alchemy table, maybe she charmed Alyks with some sort of tonic or spell.

I can't let her win not this time. She is gone, and she has underestimated me. I will have Alyks to myself, he will be mine, and I will find her in the slum she is curling over to die in and I will spit on her dying corpse and force her to look at my new perfect life.

Brena wipes away any dried tears from her face and overturns her sorrowful demeanor into a determined one. *If I become inconsolable, Alyks will come to my side to bring me back to myself, then together I believe we can convince father to break the deal with the white order. Alyks is so intelligent and charming, he can do it.*

Brena stands up in front of her canopied bed surrounded by the failed attempts at making the perfect favor and walks to her dresser. She stands determined in front of a silvered mirror and undoes her night dress. She looks in the mirror at her naked form; she frowns. Her flesh is stretched across her bones, causing her rib cage to jut out. Her

face stands in stark contrast to the rest of her remaining cherubic. Her hair is long and golden in natural ringlets. She pushes the little flesh she has around with her hands. She sucks in her stomach for a second, then stops. She raises her hands to her face and pushes in the cheeks until she presses bone. Once finished with her daily ritual she sighs as the light leaves her eyes. She dawns her robe then goes back to laying on the bed. A maid with a black frock walks in with a tea and an over hard egg. She lays the tray on the bed side and sits down next to her. Brena turns to look at the tray.

“You can leave now.” Brena says

The servant sighs, then nods and walks out of the room. Brena scoots over until she is next to the tray. She makes a perfunctory effort to break apart the egg. She takes a few miniscule bites then stands up and walks to tray to the window. She dumps the egg over until it lands on a tall pile of compost composed of earlier meals. She walks back to her mirror, gives a quick glance, then moves to the chair in front of an ornate vanity. She sits creasing her robe.

“Missy, I need help dressing.” Brena says.

Missy walks back into the room instantly. She looks at the empty plate, then out the open window. She sighs, then walks to Brena’s side. She starts by brushing her hair. Brena has always fussed over her hair. It is one of the traits Alyks complimented on the most. So she always made sure it was in perfect condition for him. Then it came time for Brena to get dressed. She undid her robe, and Missy pulled it off. She hangs it back up then looks back at Brena. She appraises Brena’s waifish body, her expression sours as they lock eyes. Missy opens her mouth and Brena scowls. She closes it then gets Brena dressed the rest of the way without uttering a single word.

Brena pulls on the last layer of a frilly white long skirt. Her white skirt trails behind her slightly like the tail of a tadpole. The filigree is grey causing her dress to match the colors of her family's crest. She refuses to wear her family crest. In many harsh hushed conversations after dinner with her red faced father he would demand she wear his crest. She would refuse. He was always able to make her do anything but this. This enraged him, but not wanting to leave bruises on his prized mare he would not push the issue. He thought it as some form of childish rebellion. She only did it because she only wanted to wear the crest of her true love. That being Alyks' white feather.

She looks at her dress in the mirror checking every curve and flat. Waves Missy out of the room and turns back to look into her reflection. She puts on her most beautiful smile, and when she fixes it so it looks perfectly natural she walks out of her room into the hallway. Missy is walking head down towards the servants quarters. Brena scoffs, then turns around and walks towards the other end of the castle. She walks forwards, eyes glazed. *Alyks is probably in his war room with his top generals. I need to catch him at a place where he can run across me, but it not seem like I put myself in his way. Maybe the garden.* Brena looks out the window. The day is perfect, but there is a large grey cloud looming in the distance, she frowns. *No garden, maybe I can meet him in the stables before his morning ride. No he will be suspicious, I can't bear the scent of those disgusting beasts. Okay no stables, Oh the church. He is going to need to use the white line to send word to his vassals. That means he will be in the northwest corner of the church. I can sit on the foremost bench next to the priest's contact station.*

Brena smiles then walks across the castle grounds until she reaches a large pair of double doors. She pushes them open just enough for her to slip through. On the other

side is a pure white church made of smooth stone. There are large bleached windows on every wall of the six sided church. Surrounding the church is a small green area with various plants of varying color and shape. The area is large enough that the curtain walls surrounding the church do not block out the sun.

Brena takes a second to breathe in the fresh air, then walks to a small pond and looks into it. She studies her features then frowns. She breathes in and out rapidly, until her eyes go red and tears start leaking. She smiles when the tears come in full strength, then she buries her head in her hands and runs into the church.

The inside of the church is almost purely white, everything made of the same smooth stone as the outside. The benches are almost apart of the floor, for there is no visible seam that separates them. At one end of the large atrium is a dias with a white book open to the center page. An old man in white vestments studies the pages. Other lower order priests putter about the place, mostly cleaning. In the northwest corner of the room is a small white room with walls made of a visibly different material of a slightly different shade of white.

The priests shoot silent prayers as she passes them making her way to the northwest corner of the room. Brena crumples into a bench right next to the small room heaving into the chair in front of her. Occasionally for less than a second her head pops up to look at the door. She continues this ritual for an hour until she finally settles back into her chair and gets up to stretch. She sits back down and resumes her balling. Another half hour passes and the doors fling open. Brena consciously avoids looking at the door. She picks up her crying the closer Alyks comes.

She hears Alyks' footsteps approach. He puts his hand on her shoulder and she brings her head to look up at him. She blinks through her tears to see Alyks visibly shaken. She internally cringes at causing Alyks such pain, but *Seeing him so distraught over me fills me with more joy than I can measure. How could he possibly care about Ealyn when he looks at me like this.*

"Are you okay?" Alyks asks shakily.

Brena snuffles and wipes away her perfectly rehearsed tears.

"Yes my prince, I am sorry for making such a sorry display, I am just so distraught over Ealyn leaving me like she did. She was my sister after all." Brena says.

"Of course." Alyks says.

He wipes away an errant tear on Brena's cheek. She keeps herself from reddening, before he pulls his hand away, she grabs onto it.

"I am also so distraught by something else." Brena says.

"What is it?" Alyks asks.

Brena leans in, and Alyks bends down until his ear is next to her mouth. She breathes in his ear causing him to shiver.

"I also feel guilty, because I don't feel totally awful about Ealyn's sudden departure. Is that bad?" Brena asks.

Alyks swallows then stands back up straight and stiff. He pulls his hand out of her grip.

“I’m sorry about Ealyn Brena, I know you will be fine. I need to attend to other matters now.” Alyks says stiffly.

Alyks walks at a quick pace to the room in the corner. Brena crumples back down to her chair and rests her head on the pew in front of her. This time she does not have to pretend when the tears come. She cries for a second, then regains her composure. She shoots up from her chair ready to leave, but then she catches something.

“I will meet you there, stop.” Alyks says.

Brena walks back to her seat, then looks into the box. It seems that the priest managing the white line has left the door ajar. Brena can’t make out much except for Alyks and the priest standing over some sort of white box covered in filigree.

“The position will be at the breakpoint, stop.” Alyks says.

“Bring extra men, stop. That’s it” Alyks finishes.

The priest nods, then walks to another part of the room. There is a slight clicking noise, then he gets back up. Brena stands back up and walks out of the church. *What does any of that mean.* Brena contemplates the words Alyks said, letting it pull her out of her malaise. She thinks back on the strategy meetings she and Ealyn would spy on in her youth. Something about the word breakpoint strikes a chord. *Breakpoint, Breakpoint, Oh Broun that’s a code name for a camp outside a sieging town. Is Alyks prepping to go to war, just for Ealyn. No that can’t be it, the timing is just unfortunate.* Brena makes it back to her room and sees a steaming pot of tomato and onion stew sitting on her desk. She sits on her desk and stares at the soup, then her face falls when she comes to a sudden realization. *Alyks is going to war, he is going to be gone for*

months on end, and he is leaving without me. Who knows what wench will seduce him when he has just faced death on the field. When he is vulnerable and desperate for company. Brena makes up her mind, she is determined to go.

Brena starts packing her bags, stuffing every dress she can into rucksacks and coat bags. By the time she has finished the sun is low in the sky and she has ten bags stuffed to bursting with clothes. She barely lifts all the bags onto her bags. She smiles widely at the hillock of bags dangling dangerously close to the edge of the bed. She jumps onto her bed knocking a couple bags onto the floor. She lays down surrounded by the floofy bags and stares at the sun letting it sink below the horizon. She has never been a sound sleeper, before she was here at castle her nanny had to sing her to sleep. She made a nightly ritual of this. She actually came with her to castle light feather, but after a moon's turn she suddenly disappeared.

She cried herself to sleep on the nights she could. Other nights she simply laid awake staring at the ceiling. This continued until during a vassal assize she collapsed in front of all the light feather vassals and Alyks' father. She woke up mortified in Alyks' arms. He carried her to her room. Later the surgeon entered, then prescribed a terrible syrupy draught that left a bitter taste in the mouth, and only let her sleep dreamlessly. For many moons she walked about the court like a corpse puppeted by a lame dullard. That was until one day Alyks visited her in her quarters.

This was the first time he ever visited her quarters. She panicked and attempted to clean the room and bring it out of its sorry refuse filled state.

"You can stop that." Alyks said.

“Sorry,” Brena slurs.

Brena stumbled back to her bed, and collapsed into it, her dress billowed around her. It slowly deflated around her as Alyks approached. He sat next to her, displacing air to the other side causing it to inflate slightly.

“What has come up you?” Alyks asked.

“The tonic I assume. Something in it has left me in a stupor.” Brena said.

Alyks grabs for the tonic sitting at her bedside, and inspects it. Alyks scowled as he looked down at the contents of the bottle.

“Did Ealyn give this to you?” Alyks asked.

“No, Why do you ask?” Brena asked.

“Just forget it.” Alyks said.

“She is my sister I should know?” Brena asked.

Alyks sighed, and started pacing.

“She has a talent for alchemy, your sister. You know this?” Alyks said.

“I know.” Brena hissed.

“Yes, well I found something in my cups last night.” Alyks said.

“Really?” Brena gasped.

“Yes.” Alyks said.

“What was it?” Brena asked.

“I don’t know but my taster fell into a stupor after drinking it.” Alyks said.

“She tries to poison you!” Brena yells.

Alyks grabs her by the shoulders.

“Be quiet, she could be listening.” Alyks said.

“Could she have given me this tonic?” Brena whispers.

“I don’t know, but she is very cunning, I would not doubt it.” Alyks said.

“She is just jealous.” Brena said, then blanched.

“Jealous of what?” Alyks asked.

Brena flushes.

“Nothing.” Brena said.

Brena buries herself in her skirts, then lays down on the bed.

“Well, even if it isn’t Ealyn this tonic is draining you.” Alyks said.

He pitched the tonic out the open window, then sits back down next to her.

“I have always had trouble sleeping.” Alyks said.

“Really?” Brena asked.

Alyks nods.

“My mother had the same problem. She taught me this method that never failed to carry me to sleep.” Alyks said.

Brena gazes at Alyks wide eyed.

“She would hold my hand just like this.” Alyks said.

He slips his hand into hers. She is able to hide her blush under the covers.

“Then she would say to look out the window.” Alyks said.

Brena turns to face the setting sun.

“She said to wait and watch the orange seep out of the sky.” Alyks said.

They sit their hands held staring at the sky waiting for the sun to let go of its jealous grip of the sky and let the stars out. It is a slow process, but the sky looses its deep orange and red hue leaving a deep indigo ocean with tiny flecks of light streaking across its surface.

“Now, that the stars are out she would tell me to count them.” Alyks said.

“Did she say why?” Brena asks.

“She said that from where she came from there are no stars. So when she came here at a young age she feared that the stars would disappear, so she counted them every night to make sure they were still all there.” Alyks said.

Tears start to fill Alyks’ eyes.

“Are you okay?” Brena asked.

“Oh yes, sorry.” Alyks said.

He quickly wipes away his tears. Brena sits up and wraps him in a hug.

“Don’t apologize to me.” Brena whispers in his ear.

Brena leans back taking Alyks down onto the bed. They lay together counting the stars as they both slip into sleep. Brena woke up the next day without Alyks at her side, but she never had trouble sleeping again.