

## Chapter 19

Brena

The siege was over quicker than Brena initially imagined. The day before Alyks organized his troops along with the siege engines, and ladders and walked off. Now he returns to camp evidently triumphant surrounded by cheering men at arms and knights. He father stands by his side wearing his full engraved plate keeping silent, but giving a very foreign approving look at Alyks. So, he walks into camp and first thing he does is point out a man at arms in the center of the contingent of people that followed him. The man walks up to him limply. His left leg is missing and he has a bandage wrapped around his right eye. The man does his best to kneel, on the way down he almost trips but Alyks grabs his hand. The soldiers look into up, and Alyks raises his hand up high and yells.

“This was the first man to climb the walls.”

The rest of the army cheers. Once the cheering recedes Alyks speaks again.

“The one who displays such a feat of bravery deserves a boon of equal substance.”

Alyks nods his head at one of his servants. They rush into his tent and after a moment they return with a oaken case fastened with an iron latch. Alyks opens the case holding his arm for the man to balance himself on. Alyks reaches inside and grabs a golden crown made of two interlocking feathers. He holds up the crown to the rest of the soldiers and they holler with cheers. The wounded man starts to tear up as Alyks places the crown on his head.

“You have joined the ranks of the people closest to Broun.” He whispers into his ears.

“Tonight, we will celebrate not only the taking of this town! We will also celebrate this man, and his display of valor and honor worthy of song!”

The rest of the men cheer as Alyks leads the man into a tent right beside his own. Alyks gets back on the stand and for a while he hands out honors and medals. Her father approaches the stand and starts situating himself to make a grand speech. While focused on her father Alyks walks towards the carriage. When her father is fully situated to present Alyks knocks on the door. Brena stumbles back, and then scrambles to open it. Alyks looks down at her with a neutral expression on his face.

“Can I come in?” He asks.

“Oh, yes of course.”

Brena stands up straight, and glides across the floor, until she slips onto the bed. Alyks walks in behind her keeping his expression neutral. Brena looks up at him with a similarly schooled expression.

“I’m sorry about the other day.” Alyks says.

Brena keeps down a wince.

“I am the one who should apologize. It is not befitting for a lady to be so forward.” Brena says.

Alyks stares into her, she can see many thoughts and feelings pass over his eyes, until he finally lands on one.

“Would you like to accompany me to tonight’s festivities?”

“It would be a pleasure.”

Alyks nods, then steps out of the carriage. Brena sinks back onto her bed and stares at the roof of the carriage. She has replayed the events of that night in her head every day since, and every time the shame builds and compounds on itself. To keep her mind off the cold tone and demeanor that Alyks displayed so casually the moment before, Brena starts raking through her dresses.

The only dress fit for an occasion so grand is the one she wore to see her father. Her father would not mind as none of the nobles saw her in it before. Besides, her father would make sure she left with at least two new ball gowns before she was set back on the road. So, she donned the gown and waited, for a time she sat and stared at the carriage wall. She let the wood grain slowly distort and reform in rough patterns and shapes. She let her mind wander, thinking about how the dance was going to pass, or how she felt about Alyks, yet when these feelings came up, she practiced what she wanted to feel. Any negative emotion associated with either event she squashed and trained herself to feel something positive. This strategy was taught to her by her mother. So, she sat and she convinced herself about Alyks, and the dance.

So the dreaded celebration comes, Brena sits and waits in her carriage waiting for her prince charming to whisk her away to an enchanted land full of song and joy. Yet as much as she tries to perpetuate this fantasy, the rot creeps in at the edges, slowly eating away the tapestry until she is left empty. Someone knocks at the door.

“Are you ready?” Alyks asks.

Brena forces herself out of bed, and starts trudging to the door. She pulls her legs through invisible muck, growing thicker the farther she walks from the bed. Once at the door, she exerts the final bit of her energy pushing it open, revealing Alyks. Many men are handsome, very few are beautiful, and Alyks is truly beautiful. He reaches out his

hand and grabs hers. As they walk together a little thought that was once a friend, and had become a stranger, makes its introduction as if it never left her side. She likes the looks that the servant women are giving her, she likes the looks of the knights with their war wives in tow. They are jealous, deeply envious, the venom in their glares feeds stokes a fire long extinguished in Brena's chest. So, she cuddles closer to Alyks; He does not push away.

They arrive at the gates of town. There are no gates standing, although they have been so expertly removed that one can barely tell there ever were. Brena walks beyond the hollowed out gate and takes a curious glance around the once great city. The men sent to clean up the city for the party did an amazing job in such a short period of time. There is no hiding the destroyed buildings or scorch marks, but the streets look mostly clean, and there are no errant weapons or suspicious stains blotting the cracked streets. In the air is the strong smell of honeyed wines and incense. The scent is strong, but not so strong as to cause any adverse reactions.

Brena and Alyks continue down the street following a central beacon of light emanating from the center of town. Along with many knights, and clergy they make their way past the ruined buildings hidden behind the veil of darkness, to the center of town. Soon the light is bright enough to see the buildings, but they are far enough in that the rocks from the engines of war have not destroyed any of the buildings. They turn a corner and there it is in the center of town. A pavilion surrounded by hundreds of candles and bonfires, huge piles of incense burning trailing thin tall columns of blue smoke into the dark sky above. All sitting under the large cracked obelisk in the center of town.

The attendees all rush to the banquet tables flanking all sides of the central column and various pavilions. The clergy are well bred enough to avoid stuffing their mouths with the fresh food brought in by Brena's father, but the knights after a day of battle are not. They stuff their faces with honeyed pork, and garlic roasted chickens. The grease pouring down their faces and pooling at their feet. They rip the meat from the bones and toss the bones into the darkness beyond the light of the torches. They gulp down wine drinking it too fast to swallow, so it also pours down their faces. Brena turns to one knight who pulls his drink away from his face to laugh at a companion's joke, and running down his face is dark red liquid. He laughs as wine sputters out of his mouth, like blood. The smell once inviting starts to grow cloying. She gags on the stench, so bad that it becomes material, it fills her throat choking her. Alyks grabs her shoulder and turns her to face him.

"Are you okay?" Alyks asks.

Brena looks into deep silver eyes. He looks so concerned for her. She has only once ever seen that look, her mother and father did not have those eyes, the only time she can remember seeing something like that was her sister. After hearing about Ealyn's departure Brena realizes something. Those eyes are beautiful, so beautiful, beautiful because they care.

"I'm okay." Brena says.

"Do you want to sit down?" Alyks asks.

"No, I want to dance."

Alyks grabs his hand, and he looks at the empty square in the center of the pavilion with deep confusion. Once they cross over the halfway point Alyks yells at the top of his lungs.

“Bards, my guest says it's time to dance!”

Quickly darting from a banquet table, four bards with various musical instruments run to the side of the side of the dance floor. Brena pulls Alyks to the center and grabs his waist and hand. The bards look at each other and they play a jaunty toon. Alyks takes the lead and whisks Brena across the dance floor. Brena gives into the feeling of joy, the feeling of connection. The colors blur around them as they spin across. She does not notice knights dropping their cups to the floor, and grabbing serving women to take to the dance floor. Soon the dance floor is fully populated, but Brena does not notice. She only sees Alyks, someone who truly cares about her. He pulls her in close for a turn, and she presses into his waist. Her faces flushes red, and her chest fills with warmth. Once out of the turn she looks up at him. His face is flushed too. His face is flushed too! Alyks lets her out for another spin, but at the last moment Brena lets go. Alyks brow scrunches, but Brena returns and grabs his hand and puts her hand on his waist. She leads him across the floor, pulling him closer and closer with the more people that flood in. Even though she is a foot or more shorter than him, she leads him across the floor. Pulling him in and out of spins, she turns him, he is putty in her hands. The music comes to crescendo, and she drops him into a dip, and the music stops for a second, as Brena looks up to see everyone staring at them with their mouths lulled open.

Brena looks around at the stunned audience, and he heart is filled full. For once she does not feel so empty, then she turns to Alyks, and she is floored. It's subtle but he is looking at her differently than he has looked at her before. He is undressing her with his eyes, he only does it for a second, but that perfect facade is fractured, and Brena is deeply sated by this. So, she preens with the attention, turning and bowing to the crowd, they all erupt in applause. When the applause cools, she turns to the banquet table to

sate her thirst. As she walks the high subsides, and the reality of her body returns to her. Her large frilly dress is soaked with sweat, and her knees ache. The pain however does not hurt, it is a reminder, a lingering physical feeling to match the emotional one. Something that says that she did something amazing. Nothing brings down her mood, as she grabs a cup of wine and brings it to her lips.

She brings the wine to her lips and drinks it down. She puts down the cup and a breeze blows over the party. The flames of the braziers list with the wind, the candles flicker, yet something else travels on the wind. Brena smells it first, with the wind the scent of the incense has cleared, and with the parting scent in its place an acrid, putrid, and sickening smell takes its place. It's enough to cause her to gag, she swallows her wine, but in an instant it's gone. She turns to her fellow attendees and it seems she was the only one who noticed it. Her curiosity gets the better of her so she follows the source of the smell.

The farther she travels from the light of the party the more the moon lights her surroundings. The light of the moon washes away the veneer of the victory party, crumbling buildings leak thin wisps of curling smoke into the air, the embers still alighting with the wind. Toppled carts, broken windows, rubble covering the street. She gazes at the destruction growing more and more apprehensive as she stands witness to the destruction, then she turns a corner and she goes white.

A pile of bodies, a mass of flesh, she can't even distinguish horse, from farm animal, from human. It all lies in a mass together slowly leaking blood forming a puddle below it. She tries to scream but nothing comes out, yet she hears a scream. Its not hers. She turns to the source. It seems to be coming from the party. She runs away from the mass of flesh, she fears that maybe it will lurch to life like some lumbering beast and

chase her. Pouring through the streets like tar, covering every building in red slime, until it engulfs her. Yet when she turns, she does not see it. Just the destruction of a once great city. A little while after she arrives at the party, and a serving girl is crying on the arm of a knight.

In front of the serving girl is the battered and bloodied form of a knight wearing black armor with. His hair is medium length, and as black as crow's feathers. His shoulders have epaulets made to look like they are also composed of feathers. Brena notices that a piece of Ealyn's skirt is tied around his leg. Brena grabs onto Alyks' shoulder.

"What's going on?" Brena asks.

Alyks turns to her, he has a grave look on his face. Brena puts together the bloodied rag on his leg, and the look on Alyks' face. Ealyn.

"I think we should go somewhere." Alyks says.

Brena pulls away stopping Alyks in his tracks. Tears start to fill Brena's eyes.

"No! I don't want to go just tell me." Brena says.

"Please." Alyks begs.

"Tell me!" Brena yells.

Alyks winces, then swallows.

"This man said Ealyn is dead." Alyks says.

Brena's face loses all expression and her mouth falls open. The noises of her environment turn muffled. She doesn't even notice when she collapses to the ground. Alyks grabs ahold of her, and looking into Alyks' teary eyes, Brena comes back to reality. She screams in his arms.

"He's lying!" She screams.



She tries to wrench herself free from Alyks' arms and flails her arms out at the bloodied knight.

"You're lying!" Brena screams.

Alyks pulls her into him, and presses her head into his shoulder. She tries to fight, but the energy drains out of her, until the only movement is from her shuddering and shaking. He picks her up into a bridal carry, and walks out of the party. As they walk away Brena lifts her head, and in the blur, she sees a trail of blood streaking down the street leading into a drain. She follows it to its source, she keeps following it until she sees it again. Hiding between two buildings obscured by shadow, but its silhouette is perfectly recognizable. The mass of flesh towers over her, sucking all the life out of her. Yet in the last moment before she leaves the city, she swears in the piles of bodies she sees Ealyn's face.