

Chapter 18

Brena

Brena sits in her carriage wearing a resplendent silver and black gown with the Whitefall sigil prominently emblazoned on it. She bits the nail off her middle finger, and winces. She looks down at her hands, all of her finger nails have been bitten down to the quick; her middle finger has a blob of blood growing lazily until it grows too heavy and plops onto the floor below. Brena reaches into her pocket with her other hand and ties a handkerchief around the finger, and sits back down. Someone knocks on the door of the carriage.

“It’s time.” Alyks says

Brena inhales deeply and stands walking over to the door. She steps down the carriage and starts making it to the bottom without issue, but on the last step slips on an exposed piece of fabric. For a second her mind fills with panic, but Alyks grabs her hand and brings her back to her feet. Brena looks in Alyks eyes and sees her feelings reflected back at her. They both stand straight and walk into the new encampment.

As they walk, Brena notices a group of soldiers setting up a small pavilion. Brena looks closely and sees a sigil of a dead blackened tree standing alone in a field of gold. Brena wracks her brain thinking of the family's name. She goes back to her lessons with bishop Olwund, and her short time in the halls of white, but nothing comes to her mind. She even delves farther back to her father’s brief stint deigning to teach her his vassal houses, but that again turns up short.

“It’s Black Tree.” Alyks says.

“How did you?”

“I saw you looking, and your face was scrunched.” Alyks says.

Brena turns away from the camp and looks down at the ground, hoping to hide her embarrassed blush from Alyks; she fails.

“Don’t worry, they are a recent addition. When sir Alfonze was given land for his service in the first Dennish crusade he took the black tree as his sigil.” Alyks says.

“Why is it surrounded by a field of gold?” Brena asks.

“They are the main suppliers of wheat to Whitefall.” Alyks says.

Brena stays flushed.

“I only know them because Alfonze's son emptied his stomach on my boots outside a tavern in Kreation.” Alyks says.

Brena chuckles and Alyks joins her, but as they turn a corner they spot the central tent and both go silent and stiff. The central tent larger than any tent Brena has seen in her life, another thing making it stand out is its complete whiteness, and if it did not already stand out enough ten Inquisitors stand guard in a circle around it. The tent has two large points with metal spikes protruding from the top.

Brena and Alyks look at each other gathering what little strength they can from the other’s presence, then they turn and walk into the tent. The tent is so large that it has a capacity for a receiving area. Although small at least by Brena’s father standards, it is still enough room to fit three small chairs and a short wide table. On top of the table is an ornate candelabra with the broken tower etched into the base. Brena looks longingly at the chair suddenly feeling the cramp in her feet caused by wearing shoes she has not worn since she left the castle, but she does not dare. Suffering the pain in her feet pales

in comparison to what her father would bring down on her if she broke any form of decorum.

So, she stands alongside Alyks both waiting in the small receiving area. Time passes, the pain in her feet extends the time by many factors, she hopes that maybe if she where in more pain the time would grow by even more factors, but her hopes are in vain when a slick black boot parts the curtain to her left.

Her father steps through the parted curtain into full view of the two of them. He is older on the other end of life, but one can only tell from his salt and pepper hair, long on his head, and short on his face. His face is gaunt with sharp edges, but not so much that it looks emaciated. It looks much more like he was hewn from stone with a large chisel and few cuts. Although one doubts the large chisel could do such fine work as to recreate his deep intricate crease filled scowl etched deep into his stone visage.

So he stands in front of them not uttering a single word as he looks Brena up and down. Once finished with his appraisal he leaves looking less than pleased, at least that is what Brena picks up. He does not make it so obvious, but Brena has been trained over the course of her entire life to pick up on the subtle cues to indicate her father's moods. He turns to look at Alyks, and Alyks stands firm. His appraisal is shorter, and he leaves non plussed.

"Prince light feather." Brena's father says.

"Lord white fall."

Alyks bows after giving his quick introduction, Brena sees that he is pleased by this. Her father sits in silence for long enough to make Alyks uneasy, then lifts his arm to point to the curtain he just walked through.

"There is much to discuss." Brena's father says.

“Yes of course.” Alyks responds.

They both make to follow him. He turns to face Brena.

“You will not join us.” He orders.

Brena shrinks back. Alyks gives her a nod of sympathy, then walks in behind her father. Brena finally allows herself to plop down on the chair and commits herself entirely to the action of avoiding tears. For a time, she can sit in silence letting her worst thoughts charter the course of her premonitions for the inevitable conversation with her father. Brena knows what they are speaking of right now dictates the course of her future. Dictates the course of Aurica’s future. She figures that many a future historian will give their souls and that of their children to be in that room right now. Then it comes to her all at once. What would Alleiri do? Alleiri would not just sit and wallow in such dark thoughts. She can't even recall a moment where Alleiri had a thought. Brena chuckles silently to herself, but then as with any thought of Alleiri is tainted with sadness so is this one, but instead of letting despair consume her she instead decides to pay homage to Alleiri and do something very stupid.

Brena does her best to slink across the tent. She passes through the curtains into another hallway of sorts. Different partitions in the tent are covered by their own curtains. Brena lets the faint sound of conversation guide her across the vast tent. She slinks staying close to the ground thanking everything that the floor is dirt and soaks up her footsteps. She arrives at another curtain this one with the Whitefall sigil embroidered into the fabric, and beside the curtain she hears conversation.

“Enough with battle strategy. I know why you are truly here.” Her father says.

“Why is that?” Alyks responds.

“I know what happened with Ealyn.”

Brena freezes in place her face draining of color. Desperation to see Alyks' face now fills her from tip to toes. She must see his face. Maybe if she can see his eyes she can find if he still loves her. So, she inches closer to the opening until she sees inside. Only a sliver is present, but it's enough to see Alyks and her father sitting across from each other separated by a large black oaken desk.

"She was taken by the Talltrees." Alyks says.

"Of course, and when you find her?"

"We are to be married, as per the agreement."

"Good, that is good to hear, but being a prisoner of war is something even the greatest of men shiver thinking about. If she comes back spoilt?"

"I will keep to our agreement."

"Good, good, that is good to hear, but the terms of our agreement say only that our families are to be joined."

"What are you proposing?"

"Nothing yet but keep this in mind. This agreement was forged in good conscious, and common purpose. I would never force you to bend to every letter. Letters are finicky things that are easily reinterpreted."

"Thank you, that is a kindness."

"Good, that we seem to understand one another. Do you have anything else you wish to speak of?"

"No, nothing."

"Well then take your leave at your leisure, but before you do, I would be a terrible host if I left you empty handed."

Brena's father gets up from his chair and reaches under the desk. He emerges holding a bright silver object in hand. Brena has no clue what it could be, it seems to be a silver rod with a leather grip attached to the other end. The metal work is exquisite, there is no seam, and the etchings are beautiful. The chains of Broun loop around the barrel in dueling spirals coming together at the end with two interlocked hand cuffs shattered at the center. Alyks looks at the object in awe.

"Very much useless by now, but it holds much value to my family as it will to yours, I hope." Her father says.

He hands the object to Alyks, he holds onto to it gingerly, holding it as carefully as he would a newborn.

"This is a very fine gift." Alyks says.

"Good, that's good, well we are to be family, so consider this an early addition to the dowery."

Alyks continues to stare down at the object, then he shakes himself from his mesmerized stupor and looks up at Brena's father.

"I ask to take my leave, I think I must meet with my marshals, before the siege tomorrow."

"You may take you leave."

Alyks gets up from his seat, and Brena scrambles back darting her head around looking desperately for a hiding place. She finds it in a hole in the tent. The opening is no larger then one that could fit a cat, but with expert finesses she is able to scramble through. She makes it to the other side and takes a breath, but suddenly the breathe catches in her throat when she hears her father through the tent.

"Brena come in."

She pales, and slowly slips through the opening and walks in. Her dress now covered in a layer of dirt, making the beautiful silk seem more like rough brown cloth. Her father looks down at his desk gripping at the sides of his chairs with his knuckles going white. Brena starts shaking but gets control of herself.

“Did you know?”

“Know what.”

He shoots up from his chair and grabs Brena by the neck.

“Don’t play with me girl!”

“I don’t know what you speak of.” Brena cries.

He drops her to the floor.

“Your sister could have cost us everything. Do you understand? We could be ruined right now if Alyks was not so gracious.”

“What about Ealyn.”

“She ran, she was not captured, that castle is one of the most secure in the land. No spy could have penetrated its walls.”

This causes Brena’s head to spin. She has been operating on the assumption that Ealyn and Alyks were perfect. That Ealyn was trying to steal Alyks from her. So why would she run.

“I had nothing to do with it father.”

He turns to look in her eyes. He does not remove his gaze for some time before he looks away.

“It seems that you are not lying. That is good, but that still leaves us in a very precarious position.”

He walks back to his desk and sits down. He grabs a piece of parchment from inside the desk and starts writing. Brena looks at the page and pieces together that its a writ to be sent to the white order.

“What are you writing?”

“This will clear you of your white order promise.”

Brena is knocked back with a wall of emotion, unable to keep her composure she stumbles o the chair Alyks was sitting in and collapses down. Sinking into the soft leather.

“Why?”

“You are going to do something that will save this family.”

“What?”

“You are young, and beautiful, not as much as your sister, but you will do. You are going to attract the prince Ligthfeather, and you will do so before he makes it to your sister.”

“I don’t know if...”

“You will! If you don’t we are ruined. Without the backing of the Lightfeathers the Talltrees will spill into our borders and massacre everyone who believes in Broun; until they spill over the walls of Whitefall and flood everything. They will kill us all do you understand!”

“Yes.”

“Good, good, so you understand the steaks here.”

“Yes I do.”

“Well be off.”

“Yes.”

Brena curtsies then leaves the room. She walks back to the stationary carriage in a trance. The stupor breaks, when she stumbles on the last step leading into the carriage. Her arms flail outwards desperately reaching for something to catch her before she falls. She grabs a hold of something, and she recovers quickly. Turning to her savoir to give internal thanks, she finds herself stunned. It's her father's sword. She feels the cold metal grip and remembers the title that Alleiri gave her. She was a sir to her. Someone opens the carriage door behind her, and Brena instinctually grabs the sword and holds it to the person walking in. Alyks stands frozen in the doorway looking down at the point of her father's sword. Alyks reaches out his hand and presses down on the end of the sword until Brena lets it go and it falls to the floor. A moment of tense silence passes, then Alyks crosses the gap of the room in seconds and embraces Brena.

Brena feels his warmth and his heartbeat through a thin layer of silk. Alyks grips tighter and only then does Brena let go and tears fall freely from her eyes. Ealyn used to do this, the onetime Brena let her sister hold her was after they met with their father before they were sent off to castle Lightfeather. She remembers her sister's ginger touch and assurances that she was going to be there. Comparing the embrace of Alyks to Ealyn is comparing a sunrise to sunset. Alyks is strong and warm, her sister's was light and cold. Her sister's illness always made her so frigid. Ealyn would sit by the fire shaking in winter desperately hefting on blanket after blanket in a desperate bid to get warm. Of course Brena's parents would be fretting all winter long. Calling in surgeons, scholars, and priests. They spent so much time around her, that once she fell off a tree climbing. She crashed to the ground, but the pain was not what she remembered. She remembered the sickening crunch her back made when she tried to sit up.

For hours she sat in the snow drowning in pain. She had to wrench herself up and limp back to the castle. It took her hours, and when she walks through the doors she was initially hopeful. Her parents were in a full blown panic the castle staff darting from place to place. She greeted her parents hoping that they would for once have organized this small army to find her, but no. Ealyn was in a high fever and it had not broken for two days. Brena limped back to her room fuming, but when she passed Ealyn's room she peaked in. Until now she hadn't revisited the memory, but suddenly she remembers Ealyn's face. Closer to death than to life. Suddenly a pang of guilt lances through her stomach. She backs out of the hug and looks into Alyks' eyes.

He is beautiful for lack of a better word. Handsome does not do him justice. He is gallant, and noble. Yet now so close to him like she has always dreamed to be something does not feel right anymore. She goes to pull away, but her father's word ring in her head louder than church bells. So, she tries to recall the feeling of longing she once had and musters enough courage to lean in and close her eyes. She moves quickly, but Alyks is quicker. She opens her eyes to see that Alyks is on the other side of the carriage, his face panicked. He quickly darts out of the door and Brena is left alone.

The feeling comes in waves. Initially Brena is confused, but then a wave of sorrow washes over her, and takes her out to a sea of despair. So again she cries, but instead of catharsis all she revels in is self-pity. This is not the first rejection, but this one stings the worst. Alyks has been laid in front of her on a silver platter and ate too quickly and expelled everything. The final wave is not tidal, it is barely even noticeable, maybe only comparable to a ripple. So relief laps over Brena and the tears dry. So she does not go to sleep in tears instead, just lulls off to bed with Aleiri's face smiling down at her.

