

## Chapter 17

Ealyn wakes with a wince and a cough, the cold air scratching indelicately against the ripped flesh of her worn throat. She sits up and continues coughing, Ealyn's coughing settles and she starts to wheeze. She reaches to her side and finds the herbal mixture. She swallows it, the relief is slight, but she breathes clear. The pain still sits lightly on the flesh of her throat. She peeks out of the tent, Salum is nowhere to be seen. There is no moon in the sky so the only light comes from the crackling fire and the stars. The fire only illuminates the closest faces of the surrounding trees. The shadows casted into the forest beyond are erratic and energetic moving along with the sputtering fire. Ealyn turns to face the water. The stars are reflected perfectly in the water as if the sky did not end as it approached the horizon and simply continued pouring itself in the water. Ealyn feels that if she pulled herself into the water she would simply fall into the ether of space.

Ealyn stares at the water watching the slight ripples causing the stars to move. She inches towards the lake pulling herself by her arms. Once she makes it to the bank her dress is covered in fluffy snow. She stars into the water. He face is surrounded by stars but her visage is obscured in darkness. She presses a finger into the water and her face distorts again. Salum walks out of the forest back to the campsite. He walks to Ealyn and looks into the water with her. His face is lit by his glowing eyes, but it is still distorted by the rippling water. He taps Ealyn on the shoulder and she rolls around.

“We should go.” Salum says.

Ealyn nods, and Salum picks her up in a bridal hold. He slides her onto the horse and walks back to the sight. Ealyn watches him pack up the camp. He lacks the grace he once possessed, before all his movements were so calculated like his life was a dance and he was performing with every step, but now his moves are crude and lacking coordination. Ealyn cringes realizing this might be a result of the nebulous scar on his neck, or the many other no doubt hidden traumas that he endured during the time between now and when she abandoned him. This leads her to think about Gerard.

She fills with rage at being lied to, but then she takes a second to look at Salum. He killed his wife for doing what she did, what could he have expected Salum to do to her, but killing him was wrong. He just used the potential threat on her life to justify what he did. He is not a knight in shining armor. He is a mercenary first, someone who only thinks of himself. Ealyn is pulled from her inner mind when Salum mounts the horse behind her, and nudges it forwards.

The horse gallops at a steady pace along the darkened path. Salum follows the path with ease, where Ealyn can barely see more than a hands length in front of her. The night ebbs away bringing the sunrise. The sunrise was always a close second to the sunset in Ealyn's mind. Yet tonight the relief of dawn taking away the cold dark night is a feeling that brings contention to the competition between sunrise and sunset. The sun is high in the sky by the time they make it to a small village on the outskirts of castle Talltree.

The village is in good condition, but it is too small to have a name. Just three buildings with a few peasants milling about the place. Salum stops the horse and walks into what can be approximated a tavern. Ealyn stays straddling the horse looking at the villagers looking at her askance. Salum emerges from the tavern and a person comes out

from behind him. The person walks to the stable next to the tavern and gets on his horse and races north.

“Where is he going?” Ealyn asks.

“I told him to tell lord Talltree to expect us, so that he can receive you.” Salum says.

“Oh.” Ealyn says.

Salum mounts the horse and Ealyn plunges back into thought. What should she say to him, not many people except marriage proposals from cripples, let alone cripples being chased by powerful men. He is known to be a kind and honorable man, even though he is an enemy with my father he will receive me. I can at least come back to health, then I can propose my plan. Ealyn's thoughts stop immediately as she catches the first glimpse of castle Talltree.

The castle is carved into one of the tallest askr trees she has ever seen. The top seems to scratch the clouds above, it's canopy far above them, making it look like one log column sticking straight into the sky. The only thing that could compare in height is the fallen white tower. The castle itself is a marvel, one smooth wooden face with balconies, windows and landings all carved with expert precision into the wood of the tree. This castle might be one of the most defensible places in all of Aurica if not the world.

Ealyn is still lost in awe when they pass through the outer stone wall of the castle. A delegation of fifteen men in noble clothes are out to meet them. Salum pulls her down from the horse. He carries her through the courtyard. People whisper between themselves looking at the sight of an inquisitor carrying a wounded lady in his arms. Ealyn is still lost in the architecture. Many of the outer buildings are stone or planked wood, but the closer they move in the more of the buildings are grown out of the ground,

with insides carved. Each carving either in the castle or surrounding buildings is carved with beautiful symbols in a long lost language. Ealyn passes the innermost wall into the castle grounds proper. In front of them are the large wooden doors leading into the great hall. Carved into the doors is a scene of a great battle between people in the shadow of the asmr trees on the other side. Fleshy monstrosities rise from the ground. They meet in the center with one man holding a sword with carvings on it fighting a fleshy monstrosity of a man holding something smooth and clawlike in his hand as if it was a sword. The doors part leading into the hall.

The columns are contiguous with the rest of the wood. Their tops and bottoms carved to look like mock roots growing into the ceilings and floors respectively. There are no carpets. Ealyn looks to the other end of the court. Ealyn frowns, there is only one person sitting on the dais. There are seats for five. The largest assumedly for the lord Talltree, one for his lady wife, and three others for sons and or advisors, but only one is occupied.

As Salum approaches the man's figure reveals itself. He is lithe, like a dancer, but he carries himself like a king. He has blonde hair that comes down in a flop on one side of his face. Half of his face is covered by a white mask. Ealyn looks closer. His face is in shadow obscured by the lighting overhead. Salum lays Ealyn down in front of the man.

"My lord." Salum says.

Ealyn's head darts to Salum then back to the figure.

"You are dismissed." The man says.

Salum walks to the leftmost door of the hall. The man steps down at the dais, and walks in front of Ealyn. As he approaches the color drains from Ealyn's face.

"Prince Alyks." Ealyn whispers shakily.

“Of course my sweetling.” Alyks says.