

Chapter 16

Salum's face is the same but his mouth is no longer a grate of skin only letting air pass through. There is still evidence of the mock surgery in the rings of baby pink skin where the ribbons were cut, but his mouth is open and can close. He is wearing leather armor over a loose white shirt, tucked into black leather pants. A lance of pain knocks Ealyn out. Ealyn wakes starting at the smooth ceiling of a white church. She winces against the light, she pushes herself out of bed and looks down. Her legs are wrapped totally in bandages. She tries to move them, but they do not cooperate. Tears leak from her eyes, then she panics. She reaches around the small thatched bed panning for her satchel. It is not in sight nor within reach. With the commotion Salum walks into the room. Ealyn opens her mouth, but only a croak comes out. Her vision starts to blur and the panic increases. She points to her throat as her wheezing grows. Salum's rummages around the room looking for what she is trying to grab for, but before he can finish she passes out again.

She awakes anew now midday with a terrible taste in her mouth. A Man wearing the white vestments of a white order priest is standing over her with a bowl of herbs in one hand, and another with a smooth wooden rod. Ealyn turns to the priest. The priest sees her open eyes then turns to Salum.

"She has a malady of the lungs. I am not able to cure it, I have created a mixture of herbs that will prevent the closing of the main airway, but the lungs will fill with too much fluid and she will drown." The priest says.

"Okay." Salum responds.

Ealyn gasps, or more accurately wheezes. Salum's voice is soft and a little high pitched. Something that contradicted vastly from the voice she crafted in her head, from the time they were speaking in signs, but this voice is fitting somehow. He has only said one word, but there is a subtle tenderness with the intonation of the single syllable. Ealyn tries to reconcile the two voices as Salum walks to her side. He clasps a copy of the white hymns and looks down at her face.

"I am so sorry." Salum says.

"When we make it to castle Talltree I can craft my medication." Ealyn croaks.

"Then we shall make haste." Salum responds.

Salum turns to the priest.

"Can she be moved?" Salum asks.

"Yes, but I would not advise it." The priest responds.

"Well if we leave now we can be at castle Talltree within the sky's turn." Salum says.

Ealyn nods, then Salum walks out of the room leaving the priest alone with Ealyn. The priest turns to Ealyn clutching his shackle necklace in a tight fist.

"I did not inform him of the metal that I removed from your legs." The priest says.

"Thank you," Ealyn says.

"Broun will judge us all after we leave this plane. Why force his hand before that." The priest says.

Ealyn nods, then Salum arrives back in the room.

"I have a horse stabled outside." Salum says.

Ealyn tries to push off the bed, but she just slumps back into the sheets. Salum walks to her side and picks her up in a bridal hold and carries her outside. Autumn has disappeared leaving the ground like a maple cake dusted with powdered sugar. The trees stand in opposite to the rich brown of the dirt, and stand like jagged black metal fragments bare of any leaves that remind one they are alive. Salum mounts the horse slinging Ealyn in front of him, then he kicks the reins and takes off out of town into the forest beyond.

Salum rides the horse hard day and night, the horse starts wheezing out its breathes and its sweat creates a white sheen under the harness.

“We need to stop.” Ealyn says.

“We can’t” Salum says.

“If we don’t stop this horse will die.” Ealyn says.

Salum frowns, then slows down to a stop. He gets off the horse and looks around. The wintery forest leaves the horizon unobscured by foliage, so it is easy to spot the small lake a short distance away. With Ealyn still straddling the horse Salum leads it to the small lake and pulls Ealyn off the horse. He lays her down against a tree stump, then starts grabbing gear from the saddle bag.

Ealyn's eyes wander over Salum, but they always come back to the thin scar around his neck. It is the only obvious new scar that is on his person. A pang of guilt drops like a stone in her stomach. What other horrid scars could he have gained since she and Gerard left him in that cave alone. Maybe she should ask, she opens her mouth, but the words do not come. Salum stops unloading the bags, then uses their contents to construct a sparse campsite. He walks into the forest with a bundle strap for firewood.

Ealyn sits alone at the foot of the stump and attempts to let her mind wander, but the heavy stone of guilt in her stomach weighs her down keeping her tethered to the thoughts of Salum's new scar. A single snowflake lands on the tip of her nose and melts. She looks up at the sky. A flurry is incoming about to cover the land in a sheet of snow. She hikes her frock up to her ears. Salum returns with a bundle of firewood. He lights the fire, with the newfound warmth Ealyn finally gathers the courage to ask.

"I don't remember that scar on your neck." Ealyn says.

Salum lifts his left hand to his neck and touches the scar, and pulls away quicker than if it were as hot as a cooking pan.

"It is recent, or at least as I remember." Salum says.

"As you remember?" Ealyn asks.

Salum sits down next to Ealyn in front of the fire. The fire lights the front of both of their faces, Ealyn's is pallid and sallow, Salum's face is so covered in scars that shadows dance across his features, keeping his expression enigmatic.

"Ever since we parted ways my memory has been spotty at best." Salum says.

"Do you remember how you got the scar?" Ealyn asks.

"Yes." Salum says.

Salum's expression goes from enigmatic to grim.

"Do you remember?" Salum asks.

"I don't know what you speak of." Ealyn says.

"I figured that." Salum says.

"Figured what?" Ealyn asks.

"I know Gerard, he is a vengeful bastard. Your head is straight enough that you would not have let him do what he did." Salum says.

Ealyn frowns, Salum never curses.

“Do what?” Ealyn asks.

“It was the night you two left. I sat at the edge of the cave watching the moon move across the sky. When the moon reached its zenith I felt sleep creep up on me. So I took my rest, but Gerard was not resting. He was lying in wait. He slunk to my side, and in one last moment I saw him with his white sword raised. Then, he brought it down on my head.” Salum says.

Ealyn gasps.

“How are you alive?” Ealyn asks.

“Thankfully I was found by a kind stranger. He put me together for lack of a better term, and brought me back to health. When I could move I took off looking for you. I tracked you all the way to the ruined Greywind castle. I could not find a way in so I stayed outside. When you left that night I followed you to the stone formation in the woods, then I heard you scream and I ran down the way to came.” Salum says.

“Thank you.” Ealyn says.

“Of course.” Salum says.

He took the thanks instead of giving it to Broun.

“So, the plan when we get to castle Talltree.” Ealyn says.

Ealyn opens her mouth to continue, but then she is taken on by a fit of coughing. Salum holds her steady while she writhes back and forth wracking her entire body with coughs.

“When we get to castle Talltree we get the alchemist, then we make parley with lord Talltree.” Salum says.

Ealyn nods, not willing to open her mouth again. Salum gets up and grabs a piece of canvas out of the saddle bag, and mounts it against the tree above Ealyn, leaving an opening at the front where the fire is. The snow has come to foot height, but a circle of dead grass is still visible around the fire. Salum finish securing the tent, then slips into the tent next to Ealyn.

Ealyn tries to let sleep take her, but that rock weighs enough to keep sleep from coming on. Salum snuggles next to her, and takes in a deep breath. Ealyn stiffens against his shuffling. Salum feels the stiffness then scoots back a little. Ealyn sits occasionally darting a glance at Salum. He walks out of the tent and starts prodding at the fire. Without the burden, thinking of sleep finally creeps up on her and pulls her into the inky blackness.