

Chapter 4

Brena

Brena stands in front of her closet pursuing her dresses. They represent a large portion of the rainbow excluding brown, or black. She finally lands on a slimmer dress than the rest. It is a deep forest green inlaid with silver trim. She slips the dress on and looks in the mirror and frowns. She goes to the other side of the room and reaches under her bed. Under her bed are ten different canvas bags stuffed to bursting with clothes and accessories, she grabs a nearly empty one and slings it over her shoulder. She walks to the window and climbs up.

With her feet dangling over the edge she breathes in the autumn air. The scent of dead leaves is not on her favorite list of smells. She often thought the smell of the outdoors is something that should be covered instead of embraced. Although now that she was escaping the castle from her window like a princess from the songs she felt a new appreciation for the smell of nature. This thought is soured as the smell brings back memories of Ealyn returning from her sometimes weeks long forest romps with Rycard. *'They always smelled like horses and shit, yet they always came back laughing carrying bunches of leaves and grasses. God knows what she did with them. Maybe she ate them, she spends so much time outside I bet that grass tastes better then steak to her.'* Brena chuckles to herself, then looks down and swallows.

The drop is two stories, but there is a hedge to catch her. The fantasy of adventure often leaves out the sinking feeling one gets just as they are on the edge of home. She closes her eyes and pushes off. She lands in the bramble and her immaculate green dress is ripped in three places. She pulls herself out of the bush with ease. She

steadies herself and appraises herself. Not cuts or bruises, then she looks down at her dress and screams in pain. She stops her cries as she holds the large tatters of her dress. She swallows her tears then continues into the forest. She curses herself. *'I forgot the princesses in the songs always put a drab brown cloak on to escape. I didn't even think of that.'* Brena continues out into the forest surrounding the castle then disappears into the trees.

The land around the castle is steep, covered in rock and deep forest. There is true flat land outside the curtain walls of the castle that could be conducive to an outer village. So unlike many other castles, castle light feather does not have a village outside its walls. The closest village is Jack's Wend, although due to the castle's self-sufficiency many of the castle denizens and staff rarely leave the walls.

Brena turns away from the castle and stares deep into the forest. She pushes herself forward and walks deeper into the forest. Brena stumbles on a tree root, but catches herself before she can do any more damage to her dress. She pushes past a couple trees revealing their deep hue. She has never appreciated the forest before, but its beauty is undeniable. Brena passes a small stream, then furrows her brow. *'I should have hit the road by now'*. She makes her way to the stream and looks at the crystalline water.

Its bluer than sapphire, and clearer too. She can see the fish in a great dance as they go about their lives unaware of the entire world outside their little stream. She looks back in the direction of the castle and sighs, then continues into the forest. The sun that she could swear was just above her disappears amongst the thick brush. Now in complete shadow she loses her sense of time and direction.

Suddenly the beauty of the forest is twisted around her. The clean air smells foul with decay and death. The naked trees reach out to grab her with their skeletal branches. She runs as fast as she can, desperate to find a way out of the brush. She trips and falls headfirst into clearing. Splayed on the ground she lets a few tears escape.

“Why did I even try this? Ealyn wouldn’t be headfirst in the mud right now. I can’t even leave the castle for half a day without covering myself in mud, and now I’m gonna die alone in the forest. At least Ealyn won’t see me like this.” Brena cries.

“Excuse me miss?” A woman says.

Brena blanches then wrenches herself out of the mud. In front of her is a serving girl a little older than her. She has a small round face with dark brown hair that stops at the shoulders. Her large dark eyes stare at Brena with deep concern.

“Are you okay milady?” The woman asks.

“Yes, of course.” Brena stammers.

Brena brushes off the mud on her face and stands tall.

“What are you doing in the middle of the forest?” Brena asks.

“I come out here to pick rosemary.” The woman says.

“Wait, how far are we from the castle?” Brena asks.

“Oh, don’t worry milady, no more than a hour out.” The woman says.

Brena falls to her knees.

“An hour.” Brena whines.

“What’s wrong milady?” The woman asks.

Brena swallows her tears, but stays on the ground.

“I thought I was going on a great adventure, but it seems that I can only manage a midday walk.” Brena says.

The woman furrows her brow.

“A great adventure, in that dress?” The woman says.

Brena scowls.

“It’s the only outdoor dress I have.” Brena whines.

The woman laughs, Brena is slow to come to it, but she starts to laugh along with her. When they stop laughing the woman approaches Brena.

“Do you want an escort back to the castle milady?” The woman asks.

Brena sags.

“Yes please.” Brena sighs.

The woman wraps her arm around Brena’s shoulder. Brena did not realize just how much taller the woman was than her until that gesture. They walk in the forest along a very slim trodden path. Brena looks down at her feet studying the laces of her boots, then she gasps.

“Oh, Broun! I didn’t ask your name, please forgive me.” Brena says.

“The name is Aleiri.” Aleiri states.

“That name is very novel, where does that hail from?” Brena asks.

“I will only answer if you tell me of this adventure you spoke of.” Aleiri says.

“I wanted to sneak into prince Alyks’ war party. I figured that I could slip in while they were encamped outside of Jack’s wend.” Brena says.

“Why would you want to do such a thing?” Aleiri says.

“I owe you no answer.” Brena states.

“Love then.” Aleiri responds.

Brena sags lower than before, then nods.

“Ah, I see, in love with a soldier. That’s a messy one.” Aleiri says.

Brena scowls.

“Okay, okay fine, I am not one to pry.” Aleiri says.

They continue walking Aleiri holding her shoulder keeping her mouth shut, but unable to control her desperate eyes, as they stare at Brena. Brena tries to avoid the expectant gaze, but collapses under its weight.

“Yes, I’m in love with a soldier.” Brena says.

“Ha! I knew it!” Aleiri exclaims.

“Well, actually he is a commander.” Brena sighs.

“I should expect as much judging from that dress.” Aleiri says.

Brena scowls.

“Ok, I’ll stop, but you should know; men and soldiers are different beasts. I am not one to give free advice, but maybe you should stop this before you get your heart broken.” Aleiri says.

“I won’t, I know he loves me. That’s why we can’t be apart.” Ealyn states.

Aleiri cringes.

“Fine, but whatever plan you had clearly backfired.” Aleiri says.

She looks at Brena’s torn dress, and dirt mottled face. Brena looks down in turn, and stifles tears. Aleiri looks at Brena’s pouting face on the edge of tears and her expression softens. She pulls Brena into a hug.

“I am so stupid. Only a fool would expect this to work.” Brena cries into Aleiri’s shoulder.

Aleiri pulls Brena close and puts her face in the hollow between her neck and shoulder and lets Brena cry. Aleiri lets Brena free her tears, then pulls her out to face her.

“Don’t worry about him, if he loves you, then his love should not diminish because of distance.” Aleiri says.

Brena looks into Aleiri’s eyes, then starts to pout again.

“What if I was lying, what if I don’t know that he truly loves me.” Brena says.

Aleiri sighs.

“There is nothing for it, sweet one.” Aleiri says.

Brena’s pout threatens to edge back into a cry, but something enters her mind.

“You can help me!” Brena exclaims.

“How?” Aleiri says.

“The camp has many maid servants, enough so that if a couple slipped in they would go unnoticed. You and I could slip in and serve a captain or other commissioned officer and no one would notice or maybe even care.” Brena says.

“Why would I do that?” Aleiri says.

“Because we are new friends, and you want to help me find love?” Brena questions.

Aleiri scoffs.

“Fine, I can give you this dress, and once we make it back to the castle I can give you twenty five gold feathers, and twenty five when we make it back.” Brena says.

“Make it the same in white coins and you have a deal.” Aleiri says.

Brena frowns.

“Fine.” Brena says.

They both walk back to light feather castle with determination on Brena’s face, and amusement on Aleiri’s.