

Kelyssa had never ridden a horse, yet now, she found herself hoisted up onto the back of one, dangling her legs in fright as the large sentinel lifted her. The belts and metal clips on the saddle rattled and jingled like keys on a chain as she straightened herself and grasped the hair of the animal's mane for fear of falling.

"Use the reins, Your Majesty," a burly stablemaster said, his eyes cold and his face grim, "You don't want to hurt 'im, do you?"

The young queen found the leather rein buried in the forest of hair she had been holding and clenched it tightly in her fists, praying that she did not slip and plummet to the hard dirt below. Around her, the men of her council were either mounting, or waiting with looks of impatience on their faces and boredom in their eyes. Their feelings seemed to transfer to the beasts they rode, for the animals began kicking the ground and snorting, creating quite a noise.

"Hurry, stablemaster," one of them said, a young man with dark hair and a smirk on his lips, "We do not have all spring."

He wore a purple silk doublet embroidered with white stars that shimmered like crystal, and dark black riding gloves that covered the lower half of his arms in hard leather. A cape of velvet hung from his shoulders, also purple, and gold clasps held it in place around his neck. His eyes shone bright hazel and his face was angular and defined, almost like a Vendyros, though the bronze sheen of his skin marked him as a southern man.

"Move your horses to the gates," he said, the accent in his voice muddled and almost indistinguishable, though strong enough to betray his country of birth, "They grow restless."

Kelyssa watched him for a time, then felt the movement of her mount beneath her as it indicated its impatience. She found that the control of the horse was in the hands of the leading noblemen, and not her, which made the sudden spur of movement quite jarring as the beast lumbered towards the gates to join its fellows. A man in a white riding coat moved just ahead of her, seemingly guiding her horse as well as his own, and giving her a sly glance whenever he heard a stumble or a noise he found suspicious.

A blaring trumpet made the queen flinch as it rang out through the yard, splitting the air like a blade and deafening the ears with its volume. Karyen Chandler was standing by the gate to the wall of the keep and watching as the retinue made their way past. When Kelyssa noticed him,

he nodded reassuringly at her, though his expression was one of worry. The man in the riding coat scowled at him when he thought the queen had turned away. His eyes were like daggers, each with a flaming blade.

Farther down the cliffside, the queen could see the full vastness of her city without the obstruction of the wall. It covered the landscape like a sea of rooftops and towers with sparkling silver smokestacks, disappearing gradually into the distance in a blur of color. To make it to the outer gate, the retinue would have to travel for half the day, then use the remainder to complete the ceremony. Kelyssa surmised that they would not be foolish enough to start back at nightfall, for they would very likely be attacked in the streets by brigands or sellswords. A camp would be set up, which explained the tents and poles carried by the pack mules and their riders who trailed behind like loose baggage. Once the sun peeked out from over the hills, they would make their way back to the castle to receive their congratulations.

*If all goes well.*

She prayed that it would.

“Your Majesty,” a voice said, stopping the queen’s thoughts and turning them to wisps of fleeting cloud that vanished into the mists, “We have not met.”

The nobleman in the purple doublet approached on his horse, falling into step beside Kelyssa and shifting the reins in his hands to find a better grip.

“My name is Sever Triado,” he said, smiling and bowing his head, “I am... a keeper of secrets, among other things.”

Kelyssa watched him, examining his face for signs of sarcasm. She wondered why her council needed a man to keep their secrets for them if they spoke so little to anyone anyway. Surely a tongue that does not slip needs no second tongue that may.

“It is a pleasure to meet you,” Sever continued.

“Thank you,” the queen said, “The pleasure is mine.”

He smiled and fixed one of the silver buttons on his front before correcting his horse with a slight pull.

“I trust you are anxious about this endeavor,” he said, “In my country, there is no foolish ceremony for a king. Once you are coronated, the citizens love you without needing an incentive to follow you.”

“Where is your country?” Kelyssa asked.

The small cart at the head of the party rattled as its wheel hit a rock and almost bent out of shape. A chorus of startled mumbling grew loud, then quiet as the men on their horses dismissed the occurrence and continued.

“I come from Villamaje, Your Majesty,” he said, “There, the world is different than it is in the north.”

He paused, turning to look at the man in the white riding coat. When he received a glare, his lips spread into a mocking smile and his eyes flickered like candlelight.

“They do not glare at you there as if you have killed one of their family,” he said, “If you did, they would return the favor and move on, you see.”

Kelyssa looked at him, slightly confused.

“But do not listen to me, Your Majesty,” he said, “Your councilmen would find it unwise.”

He leaned closer to her and ignored the cautionary scowls that the guards gave him.

“If a man dares smile in their presence, they fear that they might turn to dust, you see,” he said, smirking.

“Leave Her Majesty alone, Triado, or I will send you back to your king for a beating,” one of the noblemen said, finding satisfaction in the laughter from his companions.

Sever smiled and rode up closer to the man.

“I would be careful with Cantarell, my friend,” he said, “The last northern idiot who pestered him returned to his country a little shorter.”

The other noblemen snickered as Sever slowed his mount to rejoin the back of the line, smiling and winking his eye at the queen as he passed her. She watched him as he vanished from her view, then turned her attention to the massive wall of the city that was slowly growing like a dark fog in the distance.

A pack of small rabbits darted away, disappearing into the underbrush before the man at the head found his grip on his spear and sent it hurtling into the hard dirt with a great thud.

“Damn.”

He leaned off of his mount and retrieved his weapon before peering into the tall grasses in search of his quarry. At his back, the caravan of carts and horsemen, guards and nobles, was slowing to a trot in an attempt to find a place to set their camp. The sound of hooves permeated the air and was carried on the winds, unabated, over the great expanse between the edge of the woods and the wall of Velerin that rose monolithic into the afternoon sky. A cloud of dust followed in the party’s wake and obscured the road almost completely underneath, leaving the baggage carts and the lone travellers that followed choking on smoke and the smell of horse.

A thundering of hooves woke Kelyssa from her daydream and the sudden rush of air beside her made her flinch as a nobleman rode up to the head of the retinue. His half-cape fluttered in the winds and made him look very much to the queen like an injured bird, struggling to fly with only one wing. As he reached the man who was leading, he leaned close and began to speak with him in a lowered voice that was trampled underneath the sound of the caravan’s movement like a stray rock or a dead animal on the road. Once finished, he slowed his mount to rejoin his companions at the back, glancing at the queen with a suspicious look in his eyes as she passed him.

“We make camp here,” the man at the head of the column bellowed, “Set the tents and find wood for the fires.”

He was dressed in armor plating that glimmered and danced as the rays of sunlight were reflected in its surface. A curious helmet forged in the shape of a wolf covered his head almost completely, leaving only his face exposed through the metal jaws at the front.

Kelyssa wondered if he had served the Sharpe family long ago, and had kept his armor with him. She also wondered if he had taken part in murdering them when Dymon the Black had ordered their removal, and if he would want to finish his job.

The look he gave her as he dismounted made her worry.

“My queen,” Sever said, standing beside Kelyssa’s horse and looking up at her from the ground as if he were a small child peering up at his parent, “May I help you?”

She remained silent for a moment as she regained her senses, for her daydreaming had taken her out of the world and out of reality.

“Of course,” she said, “Thank you.”

He took her hands and helped her down onto the ground, smiling kindly once she had successfully dismounted. The man in the white riding coat approached on his horse and glowered like a man ready to murder, his eyes like notched arrows waiting to fire.

“You are to leave Her Majesty and help with the setting of the camp,” he said, his voice ragged and his tone impatient, “By order of the commander.”

Sever looked up at him, and he had to crane his neck far, for the man sat almost ten feet on his horse. Kelyssa wondered how tall he was when he stood, then decided that she would rather not find out.

“I take no orders from the commander, my friend,” the nobleman said, placing his hand on his belt, and very close to the sword that hung from it, “Her Majesty will decide what I am to do on this outing, not the head peacock.”

The man in the white coat glowered, more so now than he had before. There was a light in his eyes that made Kelyssa feel very uncomfortable, though that feeling turned to dread as he turned slowly to her, never changing his expression.

“Then she will decide now,” he said.

Sever turned and glanced at the queen, smirking like a troublesome child.

“He stays with me,” Kelyssa said, though the fire that erupted in the rider’s eyes made her wonder if she had chosen rightly.

“Of course,” the man said, wheeling his horse around and moving off into the tumult of people setting the tents and fires.

Sever lowered his hand from his belt and turned to the queen, producing a metal trinket from a small bag at his waist and looking at it with a frown. Once he had finished, he replaced it and looked down at her.

“The time has almost come, Your Majesty,” he said, “Shall I find your bow?”

The Commander of the Steel Garrison led the retinue into the trees like an ant taking his fellows back to their hill. He wore the blue, avian armor of the city guard, with two golden wings protruding from his helmet, and a cape of black silk billowing behind him like the wings of a great bird. All plates of his armor were edged in shining gold, the same as the wings on his head and the shining sword that sat in its scabbard at his belt, and all sparkled and shimmered like crystal and diamond.

Kelyssa followed him warily, a longbow clutched tightly in her hands and a quiver filled with arrows strapped to her back. She had been instructed to wear a tight doublet made of green velvet and to tie her hair back to prevent it from distracting her, much to her contempt. Everywhere she stepped, it seemed as though a root wanted to grasp at her, or the insects wanted to consume her like the carcass of a deer, and the air stunk of dirt and mud from the rainfall. She longed to return to her warm castle and to wear her lovely dresses and to brush her long, flowing hair before she decorated it with her jewels and ornaments of crystal.

The commander suddenly raised his hand to call a halt, and the line behind him froze as if turned to stone. He carried a longbow as well, though his was larger and heavier to draw. The arrows that protruded like tall rushes from the quiver dangling at his belt made Kelyssa shiver at the thought of their force. Surely, the heads were near two inches long and barbed with sharp spikes and edges that would rip and tear through flesh. Cyran Sharpe had designed them long ago when he had created the Steel Garrison, and Kelyssa wondered how cruel her uncle could have been to create such a wicked thing.

A shifting in the bushes drew the commander's attention, and his head snapped over to search for it like a bird looking for mice. His hand hovered very close to the quiver, and the feathered heads of the arrows all seemed to reach out towards his fingers, desperate to fly and to pierce the object in the trees.

"There!" someone called, and the arrow was already flying.

It whipped through the air, sending waves and ripples of deep vibration through the quiet of the woods, cutting through the breeze that ceased its blowing and silencing the birds that sang in the branches above. The guttural smack of the bowstring resonated like the beat of a great drum and the queen could feel its noise deep in her chest.

“You hit it!” someone yelled, and the party moved closer to examine the scene that lay waiting for them through the wall of trunks and bushes.

On the ground, bleeding profusely from the wound inflicted by the commander’s arrow, was a large stag. The wooden shaft protruded from its side, and the fletching at the end moved and shifted in the breeze that found its way through the walls of trees that surrounded the clearing. When the commander approached, the animal let out a grunting noise that made Kelyssa flinch, and then it buried its antlers into the dirt, cutting deep gouges into the mud beneath.

“Now, Your Majesty,” the faceless sentinel said, turning to her with unseen eyes hidden underneath the blue beak, “You have your chance.”

Kelyssa looked at him, her face drained of color and her mouth agape. A sick feeling was growing in her stomach and her vision was growing dim and blurred so that all around her melded into an uncertain mass of green and shining blue.

“Do it quickly,” one of the noblemen said.

The queen found herself stepping forward, her bow barely grasped in her hand and her palms cold. She watched the animal on the ground as it stared up at her with one large, black eye, and she felt the sickness in her stomach worsen. All sound faded from the world until all she saw was the stag and the ground beneath it turning dark red.

“Before it dies,” the nobleman continued, though his voice was an echo in the abyss, a whisper in the darkness.

Kelyssa raised her bow and clumsily nocked an arrow on the string. She raised her arms and pulled back, feeling as if she were dragging a cart of heavy stone in her hand instead of sinew. The fletching felt like fire in her fingers and the wood burned her skin until the pain was almost unbearable.

There was a loud clamour that grew muffled in her mind, and she ignored it. She heard voices blending together and yelling that turned to a heavy drone in the blur and the mist that shrouded her thoughts. All moved slowly, and the string was all that she focused on. It gouged deep marks into her fingers and froze the nerves in her arm like ice as it became heavier and heavier.

“Move!” someone yelled, cutting through the mist, though the queen was too late.

She felt razor blades in her arm, as if someone were burying hundreds of sharp knives into her flesh. The string was released and the arrow rocketed off into the trees before the bow was thrown from her hands and the pain engulfed her mind like fire taking dry wood. She screamed as she felt her body hit the hard forest ground, then the sky began to shake back and forth as if caught in a whirlwind.

“Kill it! Shoot it now!”

There was a burst of pain, and then a sudden feeling of relief in her wrist as the sky ceased to spin and shake. She turned to see what had happened and fainted as she saw blood leaking from the stump of her hand, spilling onto the dark brown dirt and soaking it in red.

The thrum of a bowstring split the air and the wolf was thrown back against a tree by the impact. Leaves fell in a shower from the branches above and dust was kicked up in a great cloud that filled the clearing like rushing water.

“Kill it!”

An arrow zipped through the cloud and buried itself between the animal’s eyes, killing it instantly. The body fell to the ground and twitched before growing still.

“Bring the doctors!” Sever said, sheathing his blade and kneeling down beside Kelyssa.

“Take her back to the camp,” one of the noblemen said, “The doctors will not make it here in time.”

Sever lifted her and started the walk back to the camp with the guards and noblemen, watching the trees around them as they went. As they passed, a kingfisher took flight from the branches above and disappeared into the starlit sky, turning to shadow in the blackness.