

1.

It's as beautiful as it had looked the first time Briar had stepped foot inside it, high ceilings arched overhead dancing with light from the stunning stained-glass windows at the back. In fact, it might be even more opulent than before. No expense has been spared for their visitors, it seems, a long red carpet leading from the main entrance right to the steps that cascade up to the thrones. *Thrones*. There are two of them today, almost identical save for the array of jewels crowning the head of them, stones chosen in the same heraldry tones for the royalty that will sit beneath. Briar can't help but stare when he notices, surprised at the respect Yarrow has doled out, and for the ruler of another kingdom, no less.

Because there he is, already seated with an unreadable, empty expression on his face, a hand under his chin and his legs spread arrogantly wide. *Hamaria Kestrel*. At first impression he's everything Briar expected a king to be. Or, well, everything he'd initially expected King Yarrow to be. Kestrel barely spares Briar a glance as he passes, indifference in every line of his posture before his gaze flickers away again. As it is, the brief moment of eye contact is as cold as the rumors claimed it would be, the air of it declaring quite plainly that Briar is not only beneath him, but unworthy of the effort of his attention.

He stays at the bottom of the steps as Yarrow ascends the dais, his bag still clasped too tightly in his hands while he waits to be dismissed with the other servants. Out of the corner of his eyes he can see Sparrow standing off to the side, bracketed in by a pair of guards rather than Briar's gaggle of handmaidens, an odd sense of relief washing through him when Sparrow smiles in his direction. At the head of the room, Yarrow flops dramatically down onto his throne, a sigh breathed out before he waves a hand. "Go," he tuts at his gathered attendants. "Make yourselves scarce. We have guests to attend to, and they don't need the rabble underfoot."

The tittering of the handmaidens as they shuffle Briar away speaks volumes, as does the sobering manner with which they grow quiet as the main double doors to the hall creek open just as Briar finds himself sequestered off in the same corner as Sparrow. A palm lands on his back, firm, the two guards making room for him in time for Sparrow to lean in and murmur beside his ear, "Do *not* bow to anyone save your king. Stand up straight, no eye contact, hands behind your back."

Briar does as he's told without a second thought, his next inhale hitching harshly in his lungs as the convoy from Hiems Mordere begins to file into the throne room.

There must be over a score of people, an absurd amount even if Briar is meant to assume some of them are servants, although they're clearly not. Every member of the party is armored, even if it's only in light, scaled leather. He can't see a hint of weaponry, though, any effects likely confiscated before they'd even reached the city gates. But he's also not naive enough to delude himself into thinking every man and woman beneath the mauve and black banner isn't still somehow armed. Regardless, he holds his head up, the press of Sparrow's hand against his back keeping his spine straight. He does not bow, does not meet any curious gazes. These guests are not worthy of such respect, not even from a jester.

And just like that, it begins.

People joke about the unnecessary formalities of the royal court, the overdramatic pomp and circumstance of the affair readymade for puns traded in low-lit taverns. Briar has probably heard them all by now, the claims of frilly titles that have to be stated in their entirety, unpronounceable names, and people with egos so large they barely fit into their clothes. He'd always brushed them off before, assuming merely that politics were dull enough to lend to tall tales. It turns out, though, that everything he'd heard *and* thought was true. The proceedings of the court are both stupid as well as utterly boring, which is quite frankly an impressive feat.

After two full hours, introductions finally wrap up, the throng of assembled ambassadors falling back into their original messy order before the thrones as one of them emerges to unroll a comically long scroll. Briar has to bite back a laugh when it unfurls all the way down to the carpet to roll to a stop just below the first step leading up the dais. It's not even all that funny, but after listening to everyone drone on for so long, it's a little too hilarious for him to keep a straight face, especially as it makes Kestrel, who had looked to be half asleep, sit up a little, one of his eyebrows arching.

"A list," the Hiems Mordere ambassador holding the scroll aloft declares, "of what our lord desires from the reworking of the treaty."

Horrifically, the list takes longer than the introductions do, each point on it having to be neutrally acknowledged as having been heard by both Yarrow and Kestrel, neither of whom are attempting to even feign their interest. From what Briar can tell, this isn't even really part of the upcoming negotiations, it's just a statement of demands that both allied kingdoms can either affirm or decline at an unspecified later time set aside for exactly that purpose.

Most of the things being asked for are absurd, if not outright tyrannical and greedy. They want more land, the border that Briar's own hometown was built beside moved from the river between the countries to the next tributary over, more than twenty leagues south. They want a gift of livestock, a number in heads of cattle so high they wouldn't even fit into a castle. They want *people*, the villages caught within the potential shift of borders to become citizens of Hiems Mordere instead. They want gold, access to the finances of Gravis Amare and Aestas Clara both. And then, most alarming of all . . .

"We would like to broker favor with The Wizard of the Woods Between."

Yarrow stiffens on his throne, his glazed over gaze sharpening parallel to the thin line of his mouth. Beside him, Kestrel shifts, an elbow resting on the arm of his seat as he once more props his chin along the back of a hand. A chill settles in the room.

This is not the place for debate, but Briar can see Yarrow's anger starting to simmer beneath the surface, his nostrils flaring as he looks down at the brazen ambassadors below the dais. "The Wizard of the Woods Between does not belong to us," he states, every syllable measured.

The ambassador at the head of the throng looks up from his list. "Well, yes," he concedes, unflinching. "But you have a rapport with them. We are not asking for them to be handed over, we would merely like equal treatment. If you could foster some amicability--"

"The Wizard," Yarrow says again, slower, as though he's annunciating for a toddler to comprehend, "*does not belong to us.*"

The ambassador's shoulders tense, "I am not *asking* if they belong to you, I am--"

Briar plucks one of his lute strings.

The throne room falls deathly silent in a rush, a collective exhale breathed out through stained glass and hidden behind tapestries.

Lazily, Briar picks at a second string, then a third, ignoring Sparrow's frantic eyes on him and the hand that's risen to tug urgently at the back of his jester attire. He gets all the way through the opening notes of a bawdy tavern song before anyone interrupts.

"Jester," Yarrow utters coolly. "What are you doing?"

Briar lifts his gaze to him slowly, searching Yarrow's face for emotion. There's none, his expression professionally blank. The corner of his mouth twitches incrementally. Briar steels himself, and speaks. "Nothing, sire. I just thought our guests must be bored."

Kestrel's brow, which was already raised, impressively arcs higher. To his left, Yarrow blinks. "Bored?" he echoes. "Do tell. Why would you assume our guests are bored?"

He continues idly playing through the half-recalled measures of the tavern ditty. "Forgive me," Briar says as light as he can, "but I couldn't help but think so, given that their list of demands had descended into madness." His fingers pause on the strings so he can place a hand to his heart instead. "I, too, often babble nonsensically when my head is empty."

Someone snorts. Briar can't tell who, especially after another person coughs to poorly cover a laugh. He casts a swift glance about the room, noting hunched shoulders amidst the servants in the corner, as well as Kestrel's head turning away before their eyes can meet. The ambassador at the front of the rest of the Hiems Mordere party is shaking, his face red and puffed with fury. "How *dare* you insinuate--"

"I know *I'm* bored," Yarrow sighs loudly.

Again, the sudden interruption cuts the ambassador off. His hand not clutching the scroll clenches into a fist at his side.

Yarrow doesn't so much as look his way. "All of these requests are terribly stale," he goes on. "I was starting to worry I'd fall asleep. In fact," his arm raises, motioning in the same beckoning way he'd drawn Briar forward with when they'd met, "I'd nearly forgotten you were here."

Briar follows the gesture, climbing the steps to dutifully stand before the king. With his back to the gathered retinue, he briefly eclipses Yarrow from their view as the tiniest nod is directed up at him. Yarrow straightens his posture once Briar returns a minute one of his own. "Have you seen my new jester, ambassador?" Yarrow asks, a finger twirled in the air for Briar to turn. "He's quite the prize, isn't he?"

The bristling ambassador glares up at them, and says nothing. Yarrow smirks, coy and calculating.

2.

"Been wondering where you little birdies ran off to."

Briar freezes. In the silence of the library, the strange voice practically echoes, too loud. His eyes dart to the end of the row they're tucked away in and his stomach churns.

There's a man striding towards them, long steps on equally long legs, his arms swinging at his sides every time a boot meets the floor. The gait alone has Briar on edge, the lack of elegance behind it sticking out like a sore thumb in the castle's walls, and he bristles further once he sees that the man is clad in the leather armor of the party from Hiems Mordere. Beside him, Sparrow tenses, too.

"You're not allowed in here," Sparrow stiffly states. The man walks closer, heedless. "Seriously, you can't-"

The noise Sparrow chokes on as the man backhands him across the face is awful, as is the subsequent one of his head harshly hitting the bookshelf behind him. He slumps to the floor with a disoriented little gasp, clutching at the back of his skull.

Were he not sitting, Briar thinks he might have been able to get away. In hindsight he should have stood up the second he saw the man approaching. But it's too late for that now, too little space and the wrong angle between them for him to fight back as the stranger whirls around from striking Sparrow and grabs Briar by the throat.

He flails anyways, shouting at the top of his lungs. The thermos drops in the small space between them where it shatters, glass and hot tea splattered all over the rich stone tiles and the assailant's legs, but he pays it no mind. The fingers around Briar's neck tighten and Briar desperately claws at the arm holding him, to no avail. His attacker is armored, the scales of leather and thick wool extending all the way to his wrist. So he digs his nails into the flesh of the man's hand instead even as his frantic holler starts to peter out, cut off by his increasing lack of air.

The last of his breath leaves him in a rush as he's slammed back against the shelf as well. Winded, Briar utters a furious, final yelp, his kicking legs and

panicked hands falling limp. The man holding him grins, his other arm lifting as he grips the sides of Briar's face with a thumb and forefinger. His hold is tight there, too, pressing until Briar's teeth cut against the inside of his cheeks. There's not enough air in his lungs for him to do more than squeak, trapped like caught prey as the taste of his own blood trickles onto his tongue.

"Such a lovely show you put on earlier," the stranger coos at him, every note of the words so vicious Briar wants to gag. "It's disgusting, isn't it, that Gravis Amare calls *us* the barbarians of the north when their royals are the ones that fuck their consorts like animals with no restraint." The hand on Briar's throat releases and Briar chokes in a gasp as his vision loses its blackening edges. He gulps down another breath while he has the chance, then a third, ignoring the disgusting feel of the stranger's hand stroking down his chest. A shudder wracks through him. "Still, it seems unfair that only the wealthy and powerful get to use such pretty playthings, don't you think?"

He's still keeping Briar at arm's length as he touches him, his superior height and size an effective natural deterrent when Briar tries to kick at him again and falls short, unable to reach. His fingers squeeze in the fabric on the left side of Briar's chest, and he frowns as they grasp at nothing but cloth. The man exhales in a huff. "Huh," he mutters. "I could have sworn . . ."

His dark eyes search Briar's face, scowl deepening. The thumb on his cheek presses harder. "You wouldn't happen to have a sister, would you, whore?" His lips part in another grin, vile and vicious. "One who's feisty and likes to bite?"

The hand groping Briar's chest rises back to his throat again, and Briar gurgles as he notices that the grip is only warm at three points. A thumb, a pointer, and a middle finger squeeze tight, the ring and pinky cold and immobile, metal.

Oh no.

Briar attempts to shake his head, deny it, but he can't move under the relentless hold. Saliva and blood pool in his mouth when he tries to speak instead. Nothing save for another terrified squeak comes out.

"She had the same ass as you," the man says through his teeth. "I'd recognize that ass anywhere, since it was almost *mine*. And she couldn't stop *squirming*, just like you are now, sobbing as she begged me to save her village I'd only just burned."

His breath is foul when he leans in close, the hand on Briar's face shifting to cover his mouth and muffle the weak little cries he's hiccupping around. "But she hadn't been tamed right, filthy wench that she was. She didn't know any better. You, though," he sneers, "already take cock so well, don't you."

Briar leans back, an inhale heaved through his nose, opens his mouth as wide as he can, and *bites*.

He doesn't manage to get a good chomp in at first, the hand muffling him at the wrong angle as he sinks his teeth into the flesh of the man's palm. His assailant howls regardless though, the hand snatched back too slow as Briar lurches all his weight forward to catch it again, right on the sensitive, thin flesh between forefinger and thumb.

The stranger screams, but Briar doesn't let go despite the sour iron tang flooding his mouth. They stumble in the other direction as a mass, the hand around Briar's throat releasing to try and tug him off by his hair instead. It's a mistake. Briar sucks in a good, full breath through his nose and windmills all his limbs to send them both tumbling to the floor.

There's not enough practice behind his movements to keep it up for long, not enough weight for his body to pin the man down, either. But when he's shoved off, he makes sure to take a chunk of the stranger's hand with him.

Briar's already scrabbling to his feet again as soon as he crashes into the bookshelf a second time, wincing as some of the tomes tumble free of their places and hit him on the way. He lunges towards where Sparrow is still crumpled where he fell, spitting out the severed hunk of flesh as he wraps shaking hands around the other's wrists. "Up! Get up, Sparrow! We have to-

"

A boot hits him dead center in the back, once more knocking the wind from him, and Briar yelps when he hits the floor face-first. There's a sickening crunch that meets his ears before he feels the excruciating burst of pain. Instinctively his hands rise to try and staunch the flow of blood that spills from his nose, his delayed gasp echoing through the library's dusty shelves.

One of his legs is still splayed over one of Sparrow's, but it's kicked aside when he sits up. The man looms over them, fury quivering in every hulking centimeter of his frame. Briar tries to scramble back as their attacker's three-fingered hand reaches for him to no avail. The bells in his hair jingle like a sick funeral rite, and he kicks helplessly as he's smashed bodily into the floor again, headfirst. There's no crack, no snap, but stars explode

somewhere in his skull anyways, a gurgling cry pulled from his lungs as the hand leaves him to be replaced by the full weight of a boot.

His eyes are shut when Sparrow starts wailing. Briar lifts trembling hands to try and claw at whatever bit of the man's leg he can reach, his nails biting at nothing but leather plating.

"No, no, *no*," Sparrow pleads, breathing in wet, awful hiccups. Briar thrashes. "Please! Don't, d-don't! *Please!*"

Briar snarls like a wild thing. He claws at the leg, the boot, twisting and flailing every which way. His palms slap against the floor and he pushes up with all his might.

The man trips backwards, unbalanced as Briar rolls out from under his foot. Blindly, he reaches for where Sparrow is choking and sobbing, his eyes finally blinking open through the pounding pain in his head.

Sparrow is on his back, pushing and pushing against the man's other foot on his chest, his hands shaking too much to get a good enough grip to force him off. There's scarlet on his lips, blood bubbling up from his mouth as he cries out his desperate mantra of "*no, no, no!*" that goes unheard. Something's been broken, Briar's sure, a rib or more, to have Sparrow cough up so much blood like that. He throws his whole weight into his next lurch forward, brief pride welling in his chest when the man falls over onto his ass as Briar knocks his legs out from under him entirely.

This time, he doesn't dare give the stranger a chance to catch them both again. He howls in fury as he tackles the man down when he tries to rise, clawing at whatever bits of skin he can find, fingers, hands, throat, face. "*Run!*" he shouts without turning. "Sparrow, run! *Run!*"

He can hear Sparrow choking, can hear him heaving in too-wet breaths as he tries to drag himself away. But he can't pay them any mind right now. If he lets up for even a moment, the man will overpower him again, and Briar can not let that happen. He jabs a finger into an eye, then a thumb, reveling in the scream of pain and the burst of blood that blooms beneath the assault. His knee comes down in the center of the man's chest, and he grabs a fistful of hair and pulls until it tears free in his hand. He drags a breath into his lungs, partially to keep fighting, partially to shout at Sparrow. "*Run!*" he repeats. "Sparrow! *Fucking run!*"

Somewhere behind him Sparrow retches, groans. "Can't. *I can't.*"

They're going to die here, Briar thinks through the haze of his own fear and fury. The idea hadn't crossed his mind before that exact instant, but it snares in his brain now, only spurring his feral desperation further with a terrified burst of adrenaline. No. *No*, he won't *let them*. He has to-

Sparrow chokes on a sound that's just as scared as Briar feels, gasping through shallow breaths. "Help," he weeps, too quiet for anyone beyond the library's walls to ever hope to hear them. Briar's heart sinks at the weakness of the cry. "H- *help*," Sparrow sobs. "*Kestrel*."

No one is coming, Briar panics. No one will hear that. He hisses in another breath through his teeth, watching his own blood drips from his shattered nose down onto the man as he snatches another handful of greasy hair from his skull and rips. They either save themselves, or they'll die. No one-

"*T-Tarren*."

Every bit of air feels like it gets sucked out of the room at once. Sparrow's frail, shuddering sounds fall silent. For a broken heartbeat Briar fears the worst, the fight in his body seeping out in a rush. It's all the opportunity the stranger needs, unfortunately, and before he can blink Briar finds himself thrown to the floor again, skidding across the stone. He coughs as he twists to try and push himself up, only to be crushed back down, a foot solidly on his back.

There's not enough of *anything* left in him to get free, the hands he presses to the floor shaking too much to hold his weight, his head swimming as more and more air is forced from his chest the longer he struggles. His own frantic noises are ringing through the shelves, like an animal in the throes of death, involuntary. One of his hands fumbles to his side, searching for something to aid him and finding nothing but the shuddering frame of Sparrow he can't see.

"Killing you," the man spits above them, "will be a *mercy*."

The castle quakes.

For a moment Briar's sure he's imagined it, his delirious brain conjuring up the impossible. But then it happens again. The books on either side of them tremble, and the man's foot lifts from Briar's back as he utters a startled, "Wha-"

Something crashes in the library. It's loud, a cacophony of things falling, breaking, but Briar pays it no heed. Free of his assailant's weight, he heaves

himself onto his elbows and starts to drag his body towards Sparrow one aching centimeter at a time. A yowl splits the air, inhuman, and Briar doesn't grant that his attention either. He closes the space between them to where Sparrow is curled in on himself, arms clutching his stomach and knees pulled to his chest, wide-eyed. Briar crawls as much over top of him as he can, head on Sparrow's shoulder, torso covering his hitching sides as he weakly breathes, a hand on his back.

One of the shelves, just a single row over, teeters as something bumps against it while it stalks in the thin space. Blinking through the haze of his throbbing head, Briar watches it go, black fur and gleaming claws, the glow of mismatched eyes towering almost to the top row of books. He presses closer to Sparrow and ignores the jagged agony of his own inhaled and exhaled.

When it reaches the end of the row and peers into theirs, the only thing Briar has enough mind to think is that it looks like a cat. A really *fucked up* cat. One clear blue eye and one green with a five-pointed, uneven pupil glaring down at them, surrounded by a shifting, dark mass, the shape of a cat that *isn't*. Its jaws draw apart almost like a smile, pointed and wild but deliberately human, and the eyes curve into crescents. The thing's single, barbed pupil flashes.

It's over so fast. The man stumbles back, tripping over his own shaking legs and falling to the floor. He says something, high and shrill, a coward's prayer for an undeserved life, Briar is sure, and then he's gone.

The cat pounces, maw gaping, dark teeth closing around the stranger whole. His futile screech cuts shorts with an odd, almost anticlimactic *pop!* as though his body was nothing more than a bloated waterskin, and a single three-fingered hand thumps to the floor in a gush of blood.

Briar turns his head away from the sight, a shudder rippling all the way up his spine.

He drags in a breath as silence once more descends on the library, then another, his fingers clutching at Sparrow shivering beneath him wherever he can. "Okay," he gasps, though he doesn't quite yet believe it, "we're okay."

When the touch comes he can't help but flinch back from it, every overwrought muscle in him tensing even though he knows those hands. The second attempt doesn't fare much better, and Briar shakes his head even before he hears, "Briar, *let go.*"

He struggles when the same hands start to pry him off of Sparrow, the fear that's pounding through his veins too heavy still to shake. "Briar," the voice urges again, softer now. "Please. It's alright. I promise."

Briar lets go.

He slumps over backwards in a heap, heaving in breaths that don't seem to do him any good. His hands don't stop trembling when he threads them into his own hair, and his whole body aches as he draws his knees up towards it. A cough wracks him, blood clogging his throat and dripping from the remains of his nose into his mouth. "Tarren," he chokes.

Tarren shushes him, one hand settling on Briar's shoulder. They're immaculate as usual despite the fact that Briar literally just saw them eat someone, their wide-brimmed, pointed hat only slightly askew and their deep purple robes clean and blood-free. Even all the stupid baubles and shiny thingamabobs hanging off their clothes are untouched, glistening with the same starlight that sparks in five-points within their left eye. "Deep breath," Tarren murmurs, and Briar hiccups as he feels cool relief starting to spread outward from the wizard's palm and through his own skin. "Give it a minute, you're alright."

Briar breathes.

Sparrow is still curled in on himself, chest heaving too hard, too fast, his wide eyes unseeing when Tarren calmly rolls him over onto his back. Somehow, despite going down so early in the scuffle, he's clearly much worse off. Fuck, he looks as though he's not even there, barely uttering more than the tiniest gurgle of protest as Tarren gently unwinds his arms from their odd, desperate clutch around his middle. "Sparrow," Tarren whispers. "You have to breathe too, or this isn't going to work." They squeeze the other's fingers in their own, a palm laid feather light at the base of Sparrow's hitching rib cage. "Come on," they soothe. "Two breaths for me, one for each of you. Ready?"

Sparrow sucks in a mouthful of air, his eyes closing as he winces so hard his whole body jolts with it. He gasps on the exhale, back twisting, a bubble of blood bursting on his lips. Tarren holds him down and squeezes their fingers together again. "One more. In." Sparrow sobs. "Good. And out."

Briar sees the second the magic really starts working, the way Sparrow goes limp from the bottom up in one long, slow wave. Tarren's hands don't leave him, instead merely holding on that much harder as they puff out a sigh. "Why," they grumble, "the *fuck* didn't you call me sooner?"

If Sparrow has a response to that, he doesn't have the energy to give it. One of his hands clutches at the trailing end of Tarren's robes.

"Is he going to be alright?" Briar asks hoarsely.

Tarren glances at him over their shoulder. "Uh, yeah? Who do you think I am?"

. . . Fair.

The wizard turns away from him, shaking Sparrow's hands off them to splay their own carefully on the man's lower abdomen. Immediately Sparrow snags ahold of them again, his eyes flying open with fresh, panicked tears clinging to his lashes. "Don't-"

"Hush," Tarren snaps. "Idiot. I'm just checking. Everything's fine."

Sparrow's ragged breathing stalls. "It . . . It is?"

Tarren's mouth quirks into a wry smile. "Even if it wasn't, it wouldn't be anything I can't fix. You made a *wish*, remember? I'm not going to let it not come to fruition."

And then, to Briar's horror, they reach out and flick Sparrow right in the center of his forehead. Sparrow makes a startled noise, staring in surprise, and then his eyes roll back into his head. "Forget," Tarren declares, deadpan.

Briar is lunging at them before he realizes he's moved at all, ready to attack the wizard with every last ounce of strength left in him, which admittedly isn't much. But Tarren seems to have anticipated that, and they deftly turn to catch Briar by the wrists before he can even make the briefest bit of contact. "Stop," they order, "I told you everything's fine."

"You just-!" Briar snarls, his heels digging into the floor as he tries to break the wizard's firm grip. "You-"

"He was in shock," Tarren states lowly. "I made him forget. He'll sleep for awhile, then he'll wake up without remembering any of this." His fingers clench around Briar's wrists, and Briar yelps as the pressure of the hold actually starts to hurt. "Stop being stupid," Tarren hisses. "He almost *died*, Briar. There's no reason he needs to recall any of this!"

Briar falls to his knees, scowling until Tarren snorts and releases his wrists. "You could have asked him first," he mutters.

Tarren levels him with a truly incredulous stare. "And let him be haunted by nightmares for the rest of his life? I think not. If I don't do it as soon as I can, the memory will stick. He's better off not knowing."

Maybe. Briar crosses his arms over his chest and sits back down. There's still blood all over his front, his own mixed with, well, everyone else's. His nose feels funny, chilled on the tip as the last tingling bits of healing magic begin to fade. "I assume, then, that you're not erasing mine?" he accuses.

"There's no reason why I should," Tarren sniffs dismissively. "You fought well, Briar. When you walk away from this, the only thing you should feel is *pride*."

The praise settles around Briar's shoulders, heavy in all the best and worst ways. "I was terrified," he whispers, ashamed of the way his voice trembles.

"You were *brave*," Tarren corrects evenly. "And you should carry that feeling, the fear and the courage that overwhelmed it, for as long as you can."

Briar lifts uncertain eyes to them. "I don't see what the point of that would be."

"Don't you?" Tarren asks like the awful, cryptic wizard they are. Briar frowns. "You're taking your first steps into an unknown life. I should think a moment such as this would lend itself to the decisions you still have left to make."

What the hell is that supposed to mean? Briar glowers at them, ready to retort that he doesn't need weird, potentially unhinged, meddling fae giving him terrible advice when the broad double doors of the library bang open in the distance. There's a clatter of footsteps, shouting, and then the both of them straighten up as Huening Kestrel, still clad in all his royal finery, comes hurtling around the corner and into their row of shelves.

There's a cluster of guards on his heels, but Kestrel doesn't pay them any mind, arms outstretched in front of him as he races their way and all but tumbles down over Sparrow. He's a flurry of hands, trembling touches as he sets fingers and palms to Sparrow's face, shoulders, chest, and then with a strange hesitance, abdomen. "Sparrow," he gasps, and Briar reels at how

small he sounds, the stricken anguish shattering the image of The Frost King irreparably. "*Sparrow.*"

"He's fine," Tarren says, tone suddenly stiff and formal. "They're *both* fine. I swore to you I'd make sure of that, didn't I?" they add, softer. One of their hands reaches out to brush over Kestrel's neck, a thumb tracing a heart-shaped mark tucked innocently beside a mole.

Kestrel stares at them, his gaze open and empty, lost, and then he bursts into tears.

It's relief, Briar knows, that draws that reaction from the king, pure and unrestrained relief. His shaking fingers grasp at the front of Sparrow's clothes, his back bowing as he slumps over the other man, sob after sob wrenched from his lungs. He hiccups, every heaving breath that leaves him shuddering in the air, and Briar has to look away as he pushes himself to his feet. He shouldn't be seeing this, every broken little sound Kestrel chokes on feeling intimate, raw. Even the guards that had trailed behind him into the library look aghast.

Briar tilts a glance at Tarren, gesturing in their direction, and after a heartbeat Tarren nods.

Right. "Hey, uh," Briar starts, his tone laced with as much bemused innocence as he can muster, "can you take me out of here? Like, now?"

One of the guards peers at him, then over his shoulder at the still unfolding scene of a distraught king who nearly had his heart torn asunder. "But—"

Briar waves a hand dismissively. "Don't worry about that. You're going to forget all about it in a few seconds. Now, I'm a jester in need of an escort. Let's go."

3.

He finds Yarrow exactly where he left him, in the throne room surrounded by the Hiems Mordere ambassadors, as well as his own servants and guards.

Although he doesn't think Yarrow had a sword in his hands when he departed. Nor had he been standing with his foot planted on the lead ambassador's chest pointing said blade at his throat.

Huh.

Briar leans against the ajar door to the servants' entrance.

"Give me *one* good reason why I shouldn't bleed you out right here on the floor like a hog for slaughter," Yarrow bites out through his teeth.

Hmm. Hot.

The ambassador at least has enough sense not to struggle, though his bugged-out eyes and rapid breathing don't lend him any favors. Briar lifts an eyebrow as he spots a spreading stain in the man's trousers. Actually, maybe it would be better if Yarrow just killed him. That's an embarrassment that can't be recovered from, *especially* in Hiems Mordere. "Your majesty," the ambassador croaks, "I swear, we had no idea—"

"Oh *shut up*," Yarrow snaps. "You really think I'll believe that you didn't *know* you had a snake in your midst? You're *all* snakes." He leans forward, the blade of his sword pressing further against the ambassador's neck. A thin line of blood appears on the man's skin, and he squeals very much like the hog he's been accused of being. "I do not take kindly to people coveting what belongs to me," the king hisses. His expression is dark, furious, his shoulders shaking. "Death will be the *kindest* punishment I can offer."

The ambassador gulps, gasps, his hands reaching for the blade at his throat and slipping when he foolishly tries to grasp it, slicing his palms open. A putrid smell starts to permeate the room. Briar's nose wrinkles. God, even when he'd been sure of his own demise, he hadn't been so pathetic as to shit himself, and neither had Sparrow, for that matter.

"Thought you said you could just buy a new one," someone mutters.

In a second the sword plunges down all the way through the ambassador's throat. It's an instant death, no chance for a last word or, Briar suspects, final scream. Blood spouts from the wound like a spring, one with the red rug it seeps into. Yarrow whirls as soon as the deed is done, sword spraying crimson droplets as it whirls over his head. The rest of the gathered ambassadors start to scatter. "This land?" Yarrow snarls. "Mine! This castle?" The blade dances in his hold, bathed in iridescent light from the stained glass panes casting down upon it. "Mine! My fucking *jester*?" He brings it down, and Briar turns his gaze to the ceiling as a head is severed from its body, tumbling to the floor with a sickening thwump. "*Mine!* They are for *me* to do with as *I* please, no one else!"

When Briar looks again, the king has run a third man through, impaled on his sword and well on his way to the afterlife as he vomits blood and bile. Yarrow draws the blade free and faces the panicked rest of the Hiems Mordere retinue, his teeth bared as his final victim slumps to the ground. "Does anyone else want to say something stupid!?"

The mass of terrified ambassadors shake their heads as one, a few of them stuttering out hasty denials. Yarrow stares them all down.

Briar figures this is as good a time as any to make himself known. He coughs, unsubtle, his face neutral as Yarrow's head immediately jerks around towards him. The king blinks once, twice, and Briar's stomach twists as he sees the rage briefly melt into something much worse before Yarrow's face shuts.

Guilt. Just for a second, he saw it. Unbridled *guilt*.

Yarrow's sword clatters to the stone, his fingers too limp to hold it as he stalks forwards, up the dais, to grasp Briar by the collar of his tunic. "Where have you been!?"

Up close, the remorse is even more obvious, as is the frantic way Yarrow's eyes search his face. A thumb traces over his neck, gentler than the trembling fingers gripping his clothes. "You sent me away," Briar reminds steadily.