

“You’re a soul of intrigue, dear Sidero,” said Asael, shooing his attendants out of the study, which was lushly draped with Broniec heraldry and warmed by a generous fireplace. Books neatly adorned the walls, and a massive oak table sat along the tall windows, frosted over from the cold outside.

Sidero circled his foot over the extravagant carpet, tracing the outlines of a tree branch.

“You’ve caught many an eye and word after your arrival,” the king added, leaning his backside against the table. He crossed his arms and appeared more lad than monarch.

“Ah yes.” Sidero bowed, deeply, too deeply, his cap’s bells jingled. “But have I caught the interest of a king?”

“You have.”

The jester stiffened, pausing mid-bow, but he recovered, snapping out a hidden fan and furiously buffeting himself with it. “You’re making me blush,” he said, girlish.

The king tilted his head, lips parting with an amused smile. “You make my court uncomfortable, though I find you a delight.”

He snapped the fan shut and tucked it back up his arm sleeve. “A relief, that.”

“But your clothing... I’d like to see you in my colors.”

Sidero acted deep in thought, hand on his hip, a finger on his chin. “Hmn...” He suddenly turned and snatched a banner from its post, pulling it down with a dreadful sound of tearing fabric. “These colors?”

The king laughed. “Yes.” He pushed himself away from the desk and walked over. Their differences in height apparent as he towered over Sidero. “A lesser king would find offense in what you’ve just done.”

The jester wrapped himself in the dusty tricolored fabric. “And you?”

“The colors clash with what you have on, the only offense really. Remediable.”

“Ohoh say less Your Excellency. What would you have me do? Strip?”

He smiled and deftly slipped a finger between Sidero’s shirt lacings, hooking and tugging slightly. “I don’t know how you survived the tundra or why you came here, but I’m...”

Sidero playfully batted his lashes. “Hesitation? You’ve my tongue.”

He hummed, pleased by the twofold meaning. “Your loyalty?”

“That too.”

“I admit, I’m not fond of our skewed standings—”

“I’m afraid I’ve stopped growing.”

The king barked out a laugh. “Well, we’re equals here, between these walls. Know that.”

Sidero giggled. “But I rather enjoy the imbalance, keeps me spry, hard to knock me down after all, strong core.”

“Nimble.”

“Nimble indeed.”

The king huffed out a laugh and pulled his hand away. “I’ll send the tailor to you, sunrise tomorrow, Sid—”

“Cyprian, my liege.”

He smiled. “Asael then, my fool.” He turned away to leave but paused by the door. “You have admittance to the entire castle, do as you please, but come to me when I call.”