

Heauie

He is only a boy the first time he is caught staring. His father has retired for the night, in preparation for the ceremony to be held tomorrow, and it lays delicately on the plush velvet cushion, patiently awaiting the dawn. Some squire has painstakingly polished the ornate crown until it glows flame-bright, and the boy can almost discern his own reflection in the square-cut gems.

Outstretched fingers creep up the purple fabric, hovering just above the metal, long before he can blink, let alone quell the urge. Bony fingers choose that moment to cover his own. They wrap around his wrist like a vice, and tug his grasping hands away firmly, though not unkindly.

The old man's eyes are astonishingly piercing, and the sharp pinpricks are easy to distinguish from the folds of surrounding grey skin.

“It is a dangerous thing to wear a crown, my prince. Lovely as they may be, they weigh something terrible.”

The child is contrite, “Yes Alastor, I'm sorry.”

The old man softens. He offers the youngster a teasing hair ruffle before leading them both away from the chamber, taking care the door at their backs is fastened.

Many years pass before the prince next allows his thoughts to wander. The banners have all descended upon the keep, and the air is heavy with music, ale, and the unabashed revelry that can only be born of the uncertainty of battle the next morning.

His father sits at the head of the dais, conferring often with his lords, and taking care to listen to each of them. While talking with the castle's Master-at-Arms, his expression gradually stiffens until Medusa herself could be whispering in his ear. He excuses himself early. The prince follows.

When he finds his father, the king's knees are bent in prayer before the altar.

“Father,” the prince begins, “whatever Sir Rowan may have said-”

There are dark circles under his eyes when the king turns his head. “My son, Sir Rowan has said nothing I did not already know.” His lips turn at the corners in the ghost of a smile. “Rest now, child.”

The prince’s nails dig into the skin of his palms. “Father, respectfully, I- where is your crown?”

A solitary candle illuminates the room, and the prince follows the king’s eyes to the delicately wrought gold lying near the base of the alter. Weariness is written into the tired gaze and silvered strands of his father’s hair. “Even a king remains a mere man before God,” the kneeling figure whispers. The candlelight does not reach his face. “Go.”

That night, the prince’s dreams are filled to bursting with flashes of green lightning and prowling lionesses roaming the castle’s stone battlements. When his father clasps his shoulder before riding out to lead the vanguard in the morning, the prince’s apprehension must still linger on his face.

The king’s eyes crinkle when they meet his. “Worry not my son, we shall return soon.”

Swallowing the growing lump in his throat, the prince nods, “Yes sire.” A raised hand signals the column to begin advancing. His father smiles once more before racing to their head.

The thin circlet perched on the prince’s brow weighs heavier with each step.

He is unable to stop pacing. The death toll rises day by day, and without a leader, it is sure to climb higher. He crosses the room and back at a frenetic pace, his feet rising and falling unceasingly. Knowing the crown would pass to him some day does nothing to soothe his nerves. *It wasn’t supposed to be like this.* A thunderous rush of blood roars past his ears, heightening the twitching of his hands and hitching his breath. The mixture of panic and bile steadily clawing its way up his throat only catches when the knock rings out on the door of his father’s, *no, it’s his now*, chamber.

A pimply-faced squire’s head appears. “If Y’Majesty be so kind, they’re waiting for you. Sire. The coronation is ‘bout to begin.”

He closes his eyes. He won't be afforded the luxury in the coming days. "Very well," he nods, "lead on, Ned."

Kneeling with his back to the press, his clenched fists shake ever so slightly as the spun gold monstrosity is placed upon his head. Despite having held the damned thing earlier, his neck strains under the burden, and drops a fraction of an inch. If the clergyman notices, he gives no outward indication. Without missing a beat, the freshly-crowned monarch rises and turns to address the crowd; his voice is strong and clear.

He gauges the reactions around the room with a carefully practiced eye. They will need his strength, he knows. His youth too. He nods to the Lord Brut, considered by many the kingdom's most honorable warrior, and a promising army tactician to boot. Soon enough, they will need men like Brut too. After all...

War waits for no one.

The fire is of middling height. It casts a glow the same shade as the sunset, only the flames no longer voraciously consume the logs sent to test them, instead choosing to comfortably burn through the wood piece by careful piece. Golden hour, he likes to call it. These precious few minutes where he is lost entirely in his own mind, without a thought for the onus that rests near his elbow.

Somehow, despite the long years, its density remains immeasurable. Though not as often, he still feels an aching in his neck after wearing it some days. He smiles. A terrible weight indeed.

These golden hours are few and far between as is, and he dreads that they are soon to become all the rarer. A foul breeze is stirring in the court. He hears the poisonous whispers and can see the furtive glances, but there is naught that he may do at present without prompting the fearful cowards lurking in the shadows from seizing the crown and putting the entire kingdom to the sword. Men like that care for nothing but themselves.

Perhaps he was wrong. The fire doesn't share the muted orange glow of a sunset, it is more akin to the gold of leaves drifting from autumn branches. He doesn't dare to glance next to his elbow,

nor acknowledge the growing tension on the top of his head. Autumn it seems, has come for him too.

It rests on a purple velvet pillow, just as it did when he first saw it. The bouncing light creates ripples in the smooth gold, and each gemstone shines with an age-defying brilliance. He is almost sad to hand the burden over, it looks such a small thing lying on its own, betraying none of the neck-breaking strain he is all-too-aware it carries.

It is also, it seems, still a magnet for headstrong young princes.

His young grandson, Ben, is staring with intensity at the curves and spires wrought from precious metals. Only when he places a hand on the boy's shoulder does the youngster realize he is not alone.

“My apologies Grandfather, I did not know you were here.”

The old king shakes his head, “What do you mean to apologize for?” The prince reddens, and shrugs his shoulders a moment later. Young and old alike are drawn once more to the magnetic pull of the headpiece.

A beat passes. “Promise me you will take care of your father,” the king murmurs.

Ben looks up at him, wide-eyed, “Of course.” The king purses his lips and kneels to look the child in the eye.

“Listen closely my boy, it is a difficult thing to wear a crown. No man should do so with ease. Do I make myself clear?”

The child gives a solemn nod. The old man lingers a moment, cupping Ben's cheek before raising himself to stand once more. “I thought you would,” he says with an affectionate ruffle of the boy's hair. He leads them both out the chambers, taking care the door is fastened behind them.