

Mather lingered until the barn emptied, and only then did he let himself fly out the door. So distracted was he that he didn't notice the figure standing just outside until he slammed into it, shoulder stinging from where it connected with armor.

“Watch your—” he started, a mouthful of curses ready. Careless Cordellan scum—

But it wasn't just any Cordellan. It was Captain Brennan Crewe, the man Noam had put in charge of the soldiers stationed in Januari. Number two on the list of Cordellans Mather hated, behind both Theron and Noam, who tied for first.

Mather spun away, stomping off before he could register any reaction on Brennan's face. He'd only gotten a few paces when he heard snow crunch, footsteps that trotted after him.

“Hold a moment!” Brennan called. “How goes the training? By your scowl, I can tell it's going as well as I'd expected. My king still wonders why you bother training an army, when you have all the protection you would ever need from Cordell.”

Mather stopped, boots shredding holes in the snow. The training barn stood to the east of the palace, connected by an expanse of snow and a disheveled path that covered with flakes faster than anyone could clean it. But they were alone, no soldiers pacing by in their patrol. And after his interaction with William, Mather didn't have the strength to keep his mouth shut.

“It's going well enough that you should tell your king not to get too comfortable here,” he spit as he pivoted around.

Brennan's eyebrows rose. “You forget your place, *Lord* Mather.”

Mather bristled but ground his jaw to steady himself. Being dropped from king to lord didn't bother him, not really—what bothered him was who had all his responsibilities on her shoulders now.

“My apologies, Captain. I did forget my place in relation to your own. I have such a hard time remembering that you aren’t an actual soldier—you’re a gift meant to protect an investment. It would make things so much easier if every Cordellan soldier walked around wearing bows on their helmets.”

Brennan lurched closer. Mather rose up as he neared, but before he felt the sweet vacancy of instinct take over his movements, Brennan smiled.

“Gifts we may be,” he said, “but at least we are wanted. Your queen is back, didn’t you hear? But has she summoned you? No, I’d take it. You’re probably on your way to continue the task of counting out *Cordell’s* wealth. You act so sure of your importance to Winter, though we both know your role in this kingdom is little more than that of a peasant.”

By the time Brennan finished talking, Mather couldn’t see anything but the stars swimming across his vision, his body so hot with rage that he expected the falling snowflakes to sizzle on his skin. He moved, but he didn’t remember doing so—all he knew was a sudden fistful of Brennan’s collar, the fabric pulling taut out of his breastplate as he yanked the man forward.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” Mather growled.

Brennan’s attention flicked over Mather’s shoulder. His eyes enlarged. “Queen Meira.”

Mather swelled with panic. She was here, now?

He couldn’t see her without any buffers. He could only handle her in neatly arranged settings, where he knew his place—a lord of Winter, a servant of the queen. Because here, with no formalities to give him purpose, he’d be reminded so strongly of how she didn’t need him that he wouldn’t be able to function.

Mather released Brennan and spun, his boots twisting on the ice-slickened stones. He plummeted into the snow, his panic fading as quickly as it had come.

The path behind him stood empty.

Brennan laughed. “But you’re right, Lord Mather. I have no idea what I’m talking about.”

Mather leapt to his feet, tearing down the path as though he could outrun his humiliation.

Did everyone know of his failures, how he was not only no longer the king, but no longer someone Winter’s true ruler turned to at all? Did everyone recognize how far he had fallen?

Did no one else see how much stress and hardship were on Meira now?

And tonight Mather would have to see Meira float around the ballroom on Theron’s arm, and pretend that watching her was enough for him. Though every part of him screamed to fight for her . . . he couldn’t. She hadn’t sought him out in the three months since their return. He’d seen her in passing, in meetings—but that was it.

He didn’t want to have to fight for her. He wanted her to *want* him, and she didn’t.

She wanted Theron.

As much as it pained Mather to admit, Theron deserved her. It was Theron who had saved her from Spring; Theron who had risked his life to draw Cordell’s army to fight Angra.

And it was Mather who had done *nothing* while Meira had fallen unconscious at Herod’s feet during the battle. Mather who had paced the halls of Noam’s palace until the floors were nearly worn through while she spent months in Angra’s prison camp. Mather who did nothing now, again, because he didn’t know what he could do for her, and he couldn’t stand being around her when she had . . . Theron.

He wasn’t king anymore. He wasn’t an orphan anymore. He wasn’t in Meira’s life anymore.

None of this was the freedom he thought he’d wanted.