

Hogarth Gale, third son of a Vittorian Wild Count.

Third *son*, mind you. That's not counting my two older sisters and the dowries that had to be paid. I mean, it was a nice change of pace, being the baby of the family. Last time around, I'm pretty sure I was the eldest son... or something. Things get kind of fuzzy, which is probably for the best. Even with what I remember there's still this... melancholic ache whenever I let my mind linger too long on what I've lost. Between... well, *dying*, and another fourteen years... I think it's kind of understandable.

"Where was I?" I asked aloud, quirking a brow as I chewed on the long leaf of grass.

"I'm sure I haven't the slightest idea."

I tilted my head to look downward, brushing sun-bleached hair out of my eyes and blinking in mild surprise. "Hey Alyce, what's up?"

The brunette sighed and closed her plum-shaded eyes as her short braid shifted slightly. "As with the last umpteen times you have asked that bizarre question, many things are 'up.' Amongst them, today, is *you* in case you haven't noticed."

I snorted, stretching out on the branch I'd claimed as my own. "So I am, so I am. More importantly, though, last I'd heard from you was a letter saying you'd been accepted to one of the academies. That begs the question, of course..."

She smirked. "Why am I here? Principally, my father had some important documents he wished ferried to your father. I merely happened to be on my way to formally enroll and thought I might drop in on an old friend."

This time I raised *both* eyebrows. "...so you decided you'd hunt me down out here in the fields? Exactly how long did that take you, Alyce?"

She colored slightly and scowled at me. "Not nearly so long as it would have if you'd been at Galehouse for the mid-day meal as a good son ought to be!"

I snorted and began to limber myself up. "What slander is this? What varlet has claimed me to be this most ignoble of beasts? A 'good son' indeed! I'll have them hanged! From the neck even!"

Alyce rolled her eyes and paced back to where her steed, Sda, was grazing. The young warhorse gave a plaintive whinny at being pulled from a patch of clover, but acceded to being mounted with good grace.

"Leaving so soon?" I asked, propping my elbow up on my knee as the other leg dangled.

"It was your father who bade me find you," Alyce smirked from where she sat astride Sda, taking pleasure in the slight alarm passing over my face. "I still have business with him before my father's ship departs tomorrow and if you know what's good for you, you do too."

I opened my mouth to respond, but she had already snapped the reins with a sharp cry, riding off at a brisk pace.

Frowning, I cracked my neck as I traced her path with my gaze.

She wanted to play that game, then?

Kneeling, I tensed my body and leapt, not onto the field-trail she'd taken back to my family's manse, but further into the forest.

My forest.

The edge of the wildwood which bordered my family's small holdings was unlike anything but the most fleeting glimpses I could remember from *before*. It was a place untouched by human hands save in the most transient of ways. This was a place where only infrequent shafts of sunlight occasionally pierced the thick canopy of greenery above and around me, leaving the land struck in eternal twilight during the day and a deep, abiding darkness during the night.

There were no roads through it, for there was nothing of civilization on the other side save in the far distance, beyond the Etwin mountains barely visible on the horizon during the few clearest days of the year. Between here and there, though, there was nothing of human lands. Anything past our hold was given over to monsters, elves, and things far stranger.

My eyes ghosted over the faint scar of ash and blackened wood as I crested a hill and I sighed before jumping off again, consoling myself with the offerings I'd made to the spirits I'd offended in those matters.

Ultimately, there was nothing to be done save avoid the valley in question unless there were no other options.

Turning my mind to happier things, I spied Alyce riding hard down the fieldroads, pushing Sda with the urgency born of a rivalry instead of threatening danger.

I snorted and pushed myself *harder* down my own road as I leapt from branch to branch before giving a pair of sharp whistles as I neared the guardhouse. "Coming through gents!"

"Hail, Galeson!" A watcher called, saluting me with a spear as I gave a mangled combination of wave and salute even as I sprung to land on the watchtower itself, then launched my body even further, clearing the lowest, outermost walls to crouch on the guardhouse's roof.

"Blaggard!" I heard Alyce cry as Sda slowed to a trot outside the checkpoint, though I noticed no real anger colored her tone.

"Sorry, can't stop to chat! Too busy winning!" I laughed as I jumped again, a truly crazy maneuver which left me standing on a stone building some several dozen feet away after bouncing off the tip of a flag pole along the way.

Now to see what all the fuss was about...

~~*~*~*~*~*

I admit, my first hint that something was off should have been the fact that there were *two* airships tied down on the landing field. As I didn't quite notice that, my *real* first indication

was the sight of Duke Jeremiah Westhold speaking with my father, Count Berchand Gale. The two standing together, obviously in deep discussion by one of the great open windows of Galehouse, brought me up short as I was *not quite running* to beat Alyce to the punch.

"Lord Westhold! Your Grace!" I gasped, coming to an abrupt stop and bowing sharply.

"It's rare to see you in such a hurry, Hogarth," my father smirked, looking over my lightly-sweating form with the amusement every elder seems to have for the young. "Are you late for something?"

"His Grace's daughter mentioned that you and mother had need to see me," I replied with another bow to the superior noble in the room. "I had thought to make haste and apologize for my absence."

"Quite alright," the older, salt-and-russet haired man nodded, his blue eyes sliding over me in appraisal. "It's been quite some time since I was able to converse with your father casually, young Gale. His understanding of the borderlands are vital to the state of the Kingdom, after all. Though I believe I have *you* to thank for a great many things as well."

I grimaced slightly, but hid it with another duck of my head. "Your Grace is too kind, but I was merely doing my duty as a subject of the crown and my father's son. If any praise is to be given, it is to him for the upbringing which he has given me."

My father puffed his chest up a little at the compliment-cum-deflection, and the Duke smiled openly at the reply.

"Be that as it may," Duke Westhold stated, "your deeds still bring honor to your own name as well as that of your father's. Now, I believe we should retire to a more suitable venue for the rest of our discussion... though, given you mentioned my daughter, I don't suppose you know where she has-"

"Father!" The huffing and slightly-disheveled Alyce Westhold called, making obvious effort to soothe her breathing as she turned the corner into the hall. "My apologies for my tardiness, there was a trade wagon undergoing inspection at the castle gate and I was loathe to entrust Sda to any hand save mine."

"It's all well and good of you to hurry back to the manor, Alyce, but have a care about yourself," Duke Westhold chastised lightly, then held up a hand and made a complex motion as he whispered a word or two. Instantly, his daughter's clothing righted itself, errant dirt flying from it and creases flattening out into perfection. Even her hair shone slightly brighter.

Magic.

"Of course, father," Alyce nodded deeply, then shot me an irritated look out of the corner of her downturned gaze when the older man turned away.

"Well then, if we're all here, I think it's time to make our way to the parlor. My wife should have a proper reception set up there for you, Your Grace." Berchand, my own father, stated with a slighter bow that swept his shoulder-length blonde hair into a curtain as he extended an arm leadingly.

"That sounds excellent," the Duke acceded, allowing himself to be led towards the room in question.

The walk was a short one, as even though Galehouse was a noble's residence, my family bore one of the lowest court ranks which was still heritable. I, myself, probably wouldn't inherit much of anything besides the pretense of noble blood... which was something I both rejoiced at and mourned for. I could do without the pressures of a landed estate and the administrative burdens of the aristocracy, but at the same time it would have been nice to have a dependable income I could look forward to.

"Mother," I greeted with a shallow nod, the woman in question sparing me an affectionate smile while directing a trio of servants to set down trays and mix our drinks for us. I hid the shudder I reflexively felt as a glass of the expensive, bitter, and thin tea common to the higher nobility was placed in front of me, but did not complain.

It would, after all, be *gauche* to request a strong and sweet tankard of mead in the presence of the duke.

Particularly since it would give the impression of commoner affectations.