

Blow it Down

By Chloe B. Young

Vivian heard the first echoing cry from her room in the west tower. She lifted her head from her book and listened, her eyes drawn to the narrow, uncovered window that showed only the colourless sky. The light that leaked through was bright, though no sun was visible, and it diffused even as she looked at it, giving the portal a blurred halo.

The sound came again, and the crows--whose harsh calling had been rising from the barren acres of snow-covered field surrounding the keep--doubled in volume. Certain, now, that she hadn't imagined it, she leapt from her chair. She held the ragged and stained hem of her dress as she ran down the spiralling steps that led to the entrance, her breath rasping and her heartbeat pounding in her ears.

She'd heard the rumours in the tiny village nearby that a great castle had fallen. They told of an army who'd come in the dead of night, and the spineless lord who had fled for his older brother's fortress while his men kept fighting, unaware that they defended an empty room. Then, she'd heard the mutterings of the warlord who'd knocked at the second brother's door under the midday sun. If the tales were to be believed, the warlord stood at the gates, his army gnashing their bloodthirsty teeth behind him, and offered them a choice. Let him in, he'd asked, and they'd sort out their grievances like men, face to face.

There was some disagreement between the sources of these rumours over the specifics of their story, but on one thing, they could all agree. The brothers refused and the warlord's answer was swift and bloody.

And now, he was at her door, or soon would be. Vivian paused in her journey to look out a south-facing window, and sure enough, she could see the dark, spreading stain of horses and men in the distance, their war cries crashing and reverberating like waves.

She clenched her fists on the window sill and her knuckles scraped against the cold stone. The keep was sturdy, still standing after decades of the wind's battering, but it was small and wind crept through the cracks in the walls at night. It had been abandoned by her father's father for its location in the middle of a wide, flat plain, with little cover or sight advantage. She didn't consider running, because there would be no point. They were vulnerable, no matter what they did.

Vivian tore her eyes away from the window and hurried away, calling out to the rest of the people in the keep to prepare.

The Black Wolf was coming for her.

Music from whittled pipes and skin drums floated up the hill to Vivian as she reached the bottom of the long path to the castle. It was jolly music, which didn't match the atmosphere or the weather, despite the bright festoons of garlands made of green grass, in the absence of flowers. During harvest festivals of years past, the yellow and purple flowers of fall would adorn every door, and everyone who came to hear the music would be given a ribbon to wear in their hair. This year the flowers hadn't grown, nor the crops they needed to store for the winter. Coloured fabric was too dear to be cut into strips for decoration.

Vivian ducked in between the revellers to skirt the edge of the dirt floor reserved for dancing. Her feet already ached a bit from the long trek from home, but in a moment, she would join the villagers who wove and dipped through the pattern of the jig.

The village was nestled in a deep valley, in the shadow of two castles that had overlooked it for centuries. Vivian often walked here from the larger of the two when her books didn't fill her time, but the contrast between the lavish castle with its over-stocked kitchen and the tiny houses where families made watery stew last for days made her head spin.

The villagers regarded her with suspicion, as usual. She didn't mind, nor did she expect them to welcome her with open arms when she was related--by marriage, at least--to the rulers they resented. They tolerated her presence, but kept their distance, their forced smiles nothing like the genuine happiness they used to show when her father came to visit, not so long ago. She joined the dancing when the music picked up speed, bowing and spinning with strangers who wouldn't meet her eyes.

She was dizzy and breathing hard with the speed of a reel when she noticed a man at the edge of the group. A black cloak covered anything he might have worn to place where he had come from, but the villagers gave him an even wider berth than they gave Vivian. An outsider, then, like her.

The hood of the voluminous cloak was pulled up, but it didn't quite cover his eyes, which followed her through the steps of the dance, or his mouth which tilted up in a smirk as he watched. She stumbled, watching him instead of her feet, and irritation flared. She let go of her partner's hand--ignoring his relief--and worked her way, slowly, toward the man, whose smirk grew into a full-blown smile at her approach.

"Why do you stare so?" Vivian demanded.

“Is it wrong to stare at a beautiful thing?” His voice was low, and he sounded deeply amused by her ire.

“When you refer to this supposed beauty as a *thing*, then yes.” He opened his mouth to soothe and protest, but she cut him off with a sharp, staying hand. “Cease your slavering, beast, and turn your eye to a bauble that appreciates it.”

She turned to leave, her skirt tangling in her legs with her haste, but he grabbed her wrist, quick as lightning. He didn’t pull her closer, but his grip was tight, and she didn’t think she could escape, should she try, and her heart beat louder for it.

“I am truly sorry,” he said, his hand loosening on her wrist even as he spoke. “I did not mean offence. If my gaze angers you, I will gladly turn it away. But say you’ll forgive me.”

She let out a disbelieving laugh, and his eyes sparkled with merriment. “Why should I forgive you? I don’t know you, or if you’re sincere.”

“So distrustful. That’s a terribly bleak way to go through life, don’t you think?”

“I trust people when they deserve it.”

“What can I do, then? To deserve your trust.” His grip on her wrist changed, twisting to meet her palm to palm, and his thumb brushed the back of her hand.

“Well,” she purred, sliding her hand up his forearm, then walking her fingers up the folds of thick fabric about his shoulders. “You can start by not lurking at the corners of village dances in dark cloaks, staring at unsuspecting women.”

His startled laugh followed her as she walked away, beginning the long journey back up the hill to the castle. She’d had her fill of dancing, and her step-brother would want her there to help greet the visitors for that evening’s celebrations. The man and the bright slash of his smile were both forgotten by the time she reached the top.

The celebrations went long into the night, on the flimsy excuse of a successful harvest, though it was far from bountiful. Her step-brothers held court in the main hall, toasting their dubious accomplishments with overflowing cups.

Vivian had no stomach for it. She hadn't when her father had been alive, and now, months after his death, even less so. She went outside to the bailey to escape the raucous laughter and leering glances.

It was cold. The vestiges of late summer sun that warmed the air during the day disappeared completely when the moon was high. She walked the edges of the courtyard, arms crossed under her cloak to ward off the chill. Her breath wasn't quite visible, but it would be very soon. Less than a month.

A wolf howled, and the way it floated back on the fog made it sound like it was right outside the walls, though she knew it had to be coming from the forest, which was leagues away. The lonely call made her colder and she hunched into herself, wondering if she was better off out here, chilled and unnerved, than she was inside, overheated and uncomfortable.

"Does it scare you?"

She turned quickly at the sound of the voice, her heartbeat stuttering. It was the man from earlier, still draped in his black cloak. He stood a few feet away, between her and the door back inside.

She huffed, her breath still settling from the shock. "Oh. It's you."

"Yes, me."

"What are you doing out here?"

“Same as you, I suppose.” He looked casually around the empty courtyard, then back at her, with a raised brow that was almost indiscernible in the dark. “Some late night lurking. You never answered my question.”

“What question?”

“The wolf,” he said, jerking his chin toward the wide doors that led outside. “Does it scare you?”

“Not as long as it’s out there and I’m in here.”

His teeth bared in a sharp grin that seemed to white in the moonlit dark. “Logical. And if you were out there? Or, better yet, he were in here? Would you be scared he would gobble you up?”

“That would depend.”

“On what, exactly?” He took a few steps forward, slowly and deliberately, his head tilted in intense focus. She held her ground, though her muscles urged her to step back and away.

“On his eyes. You can always tell a killer from their eyes.”

Their own eyes locked, his shining in the moonlight that seemed to grow brighter with every passing minute.

“And if he meant to kill, but it wasn’t you he was after?”

She swallowed, unsure, now, if they still spoke of the wolf who was locked outside the gates, or another, much closer, predator. “Then I’d count myself lucky and stand aside.”

He studied her for a long time, the insulting heat from earlier replaced by curious amusement. “You’re a smart girl. What’s your name?”

“Why?”

“Must there be a reason? I like you. I wish to know more of you. If it makes you feel better, you may know that I’m called Cole, by those who call me by name.”

“What would they call you, if not your name?”

His laugh was rich and low, and it had the corner of her lip tugging upward in its infectiousness. “Far less flattering things. Nothing for a lady’s ear.”

A frisson of unease went through her. “What makes you think I’m a lady?”

“A few things. The way you walk. Your voice. And I hear that the men who rule in these parts only have one beautiful, golden-haired sister.”

“Step-sister.” Cole smirked like he’d won some dark secret from her, as if he hadn’t known all the time who she was. “I’m Vivian.”

There was a commotion inside, shouting and the sound of a door slamming against the wall with the force of its opening. Light from inside the main hall cut a swath into the bailey, and Cole disappeared into the shadows before it touched the edge of his cloak.

“Vivian!” Bran, her older step-brother, marched across the courtyard, hand on the hilt of his broadsword. She opened her mouth to respond, but the moment he reached her side, he had her arm in a firm grip and started tugging her back to the hall. “What are you doing out here? You should stay inside where it’s safe.”

She dug in her heels and pried Bran’s hand from her upper arm. “Safe from what? This is our home and I’m inside the gates. What could harm me here?”

Bran heaved an exasperated sigh and put his hands on his hips, like he was scolding an errant child. “I heard a rumour that someone who wishes me ill was seen in the village today.”

“Who?” Vivian asked, though she would guess that it was a man who wore black and stared at women at harvest festivals.

“You wouldn’t know of him.”

“Why not? I go to the village more often than you do. Why shouldn’t I know who you speak of?”

Bran fidgeted, palming the end of his weapon again and squeezing. “They call him the Black Wolf. He comes in the dead of night, and leaves destruction in his wake. He’s a mercenary, with no morals or graces to speak of, just a motley group of barbarians and a reputation for thoroughness.”

Vivian felt ill, but she kept her voice steady, and hoped her face was blank. “Why does he wish you ill?”

His mouth tightened, and he took her arm again, none too gently, “Go inside with Rory, I have not time for this.”

She didn’t protest because he was already gone, shouting across the bailey to his men to search the property and the village. She let her younger step-brother escort her to her room, even as she knew sleep would be a long time coming, and her dreams too busy with visions of too-sharp teeth and a cloak as black as night.

Vivian entered Bran’s study, tense and prepared to walk on eggshells. He’d been nervous for the last few weeks, and snapped at anyone who tried to put him at ease. Since the rumoured sightings of the Black Wolf, Rory had retreated to his own home, for once, which was why she was surprised to see him in Bran’s chambers. He tipped his head in greeting, but kept silent, standing at the edge of the room, like he could leave at any moment.

“You wished to see me?”

“Yes,” Bran said, distractedly, not turning around from the map spread on his table. “I have some bad news.”

Her first thought was that they’d found the Black Wolf, and that he was dead, then she shook herself, and remembered that it was bad news she was supposed to be hearing. Her stomach swooped at her own odd reaction. “And? What is it?” Vivian prompted, since Bran had gone quiet.

“Hmm? Oh, right. I’m afraid you’ll have to leave.”

She frowned, annoyed that she’d responded to Bran’s high-handed summons, only to be sent away again. “I can come back later, if you wish--”

“No, I mean, you’ll have to leave this castle. Permanently.”

Vivian was shocked speechless. When he finally turned to face her, she searched Bran’s face for any hint of jest or exaggeration, but his smile was pleasant and genuine.

“You’ll be moving to the old keep,” he continued, gesturing with the sharp tool he’d been using on his work.

When her voice came back, she sputtered, “What? That place was abandoned for a reason.”

“It’s perfectly sound, I’ve seen it myself.”

“I’ll be undefended.”

“Nonsense, you’ll have your personal guard.”

“Oh, please,” she scoffed. “Four soldiers, retired a decade ago? Those men could be blown down by a strong wind.”

“I have every faith in their ability to keep you safe.”

Shock gave way to anger, and her hands fisted at her sides in rage. She tilted her chin up in defiance and said, "I won't go. You will not toss me out of my home so that your greed can tear it apart--"

Bran slammed the metal instrument on the table, hard enough to make both her and Rory jump, then he stalked toward her, his face still inscrutably benign. He grabbed her by the throat and she stumbled backward, hitting the wall hard under the force of his relentless grip. His large hand didn't quite cut off her air, but the strength he showed promised that it could, and would, in the blink of an eye.

"You'll leave here with an armed guard for a perfectly adequate keep, or you'll leave here with nothing. Not a penny or a friend in the world. It's your choice."

Vivian dug her nails into his wrist and gritted her teeth against the pain of his hold on her windpipe. "Why? You've lived here with me since we were children. Why make me go now?"

"These times are hard. You're another mouth to feed, a bed to keep warm. A body to clothe." Bran looked past his outstretched arm and raked his gaze down then back up her body. The obvious heat, and the way his eyes lingered on her breasts and hips made her sick to her stomach. Bran was her step-brother, had been raised alongside her since the age of nine. How could she have missed that leering, possessive want in him that she saw now?

"You're a burden, Vivian," he continued, then let out a gentle, put-upon sigh. "But, I promised your father that I'd keep you fed, clothed and alive. I'll not be called an oathbreaker."

He released her throat, but didn't step back and she slid down the wall on weak knees, her legs twisting awkwardly under her. He looked down at her with that same

bland smile, trapping her between his legs and the hard wall. She looked around his body to Rory, who had always been the gentler of the two, who had followed her around as a child, desperate to please and be noticed as a younger son. His face remained blank for a moment, and she thought she might have an ally, then a mischievous, damning smile bloomed on his lips. He wasn't her saviour. He was just as happy to see her go as Bran was.

Vivian craned her sore neck to spit at Bran, "Your mother always said how grateful she was that Father took you in. And this is how you honour her memory?"

Bran crouched in front of her, the joints in his knees snapping as he sank to her level. "My mother always told me that I must make my own fortune. That I couldn't wait for a kingdom to fall in my lap. So, I didn't." He leaned forward, his breath tickling her ear. "I made the kingdom fall."

From his corner, Rory laughed, the same high-pitched giggle he'd had as a child. "Or the king."

Time stopped, and the cold stone at her knees disappeared from underneath her. Her father had died while out hunting. An accident, a tragic one, they'd said. Bran and Rory had....

"Be ready to leave by tomorrow morning," Bran said, and sauntered back to his map, dismissing her. Vivian stumbled to her feet, her throat burning and her stomach in knots.

"Oh, and Vivian?" She stopped, but didn't turn to face him. His sickly smile would have made her vomit. "I hear they value silence where you're going. Remember that, would you?"

She swallowed down her caustic reply and left the room, her hands clumsy on the heavy latch. If she were more reckless, she would have had the last word, but she knew that would be pressing her luck. Bran had killed her father, and only a tenuous thread of chivalry kept him from killing her too.

Rory would stand behind his brother, and the two of them would make her sound like a little girl gone mad with grief over her father, or perhaps jealous of her siblings' success. No one would believe her, should she accuse them. She had no choice but to slink off like a kicked dog to a crumbling keep in the middle of nowhere.

Anger simmered in her belly, but she started packing her things.

The wind whipped her cheeks raw and tugged small strands from her tight braid to tickle her forehead and neck. She was warm where her body touched the horse she rode, but everywhere else was alive with shivers from the bitter cold.

The snow had yet to fall here, but it would come soon enough, and if it came before she and the four men she travelled with arrived at their destination, she wasn't sure they would last long. The cart that toted their supplies held no extra furs or blankets, only food that they rationed for when game was scarce.

(Game was always scarce, here, in these long stretches of rocky hills between battered, thin forests.)

The horse at the head of their small group nickered and stumbled to a halt at the crest of the largest hill they'd come to yet, and the rest of them reined in behind. Bertram, the head of her motley guard, reached out a hand to Donald for the buckskin bag that she knew carried a sturdy crossbow.

“What’s the problem, Bertram?” Vivian called, but he held up a hand to silence her, the tension in his posture obvious, even from that far behind. A bolt of fear straightened her spine and she spurred her horse closer to the top of the hill, just far enough that she could see what lay beyond it.

It was an army. A small and rough one, to be sure, but large enough still to crush their pitiful troupe in minutes. They stood at attention, some on horses, some on foot, starting with greed and anticipation shining in their eyes. One man broke away from the rest, guiding his horse up the slope, then turning it to stand sideways across the faint path, as if Vivian and her group didn’t already know they could go no farther without their say. The man’s face was obscured, his black cloak falling in familiar folds that had her pulse picking up.

“We wish to pass,” Bertram said, his voice clear and unwavering.

“I’m not concerned with where you go, sir. I only care about where you came from,” Cole’s voice cut through the wind, his smile, mocking and predatory, evident though his face remained unseen. “There’s little between here and the nearest village, and you don’t appear to be travelling with enough men or supplies to have come from farther away, so I must conclude that the village is where you recently left. Am I correct?”

Bertram tightened his hand on the useless crossbow in its bag and looked back at group, helplessly. The army must have known they were coming, to lie in wait like this, and to know so much about them. Their scout must have walked like a shadow, to spy when so little cover existed.

“You are,” Bertram said, at length, since lying would gain them nothing.

Cole spread his arms wide, chest puffed like colourful bird as he addressed his restless camp. “You see, boys? Did I not tell you?”

They roared their agreement and Vivian grew tired of his taunting. She spurred her horse past Bertram, ignoring their warning cries and headed straight for Cole, pulling up sideways, as a reflection of his obstinate stance.

“Say what you wish from us, sir,” she demanded, “or let us pass. Enough of your games.”

Cole pulled the cloak from his face and the surprise she saw there was real.

“Vivian,” he breathed, drinking in her appearance, travel-worn as it was. “Forgive me. We’ll let you pass. I didn’t know.”

“Did you not? And what if I hadn’t been here?” She spat, gesturing to her men with a hand trembling from cold and icy anger. “Would you have killed these men? Why do you always ask forgiveness when you deserve none?”

Cole dismounted, his leg swinging wide and dropping in between their horses. He looked up at her as he spoke, the hood of his cloak falling back to his shoulders.

“We never meant any harm,” he said, soft enough that the wind wouldn’t carry his voice to either of their companions. “My men are hungry, and we know how rich your brothers are in food and fuel. We would have taken nothing more than they could spare.” He took her hand in both of his, warming it for a long precious moment before she snatched it back.

“How do I know you’re telling the truth? You could have been planning to spill their blood the moment they refused.”

“I am no liar, Vivian,” he said, with surprising heat. His hand gripped her thigh with not-quite-bruising strength and he crowded close to her side. Her leg tensed under his palm, but she didn’t push it away. “Look at me, and accuse me of telling untruths.”

Cole's eyes were blue. Vivian had never noticed how blue they were, how clear. He was young, to have such laugh lines at their corners, but his eyes were beautiful. And honest, as far as she could tell. They bore into hers with icy fire and she thought it would take a cold person indeed to fool so well.

"Alright, then. You'll have to believe me, in turn. We have nothing." She gestured to her modest guard and the small cart. "The clothes on our backs and food to last us a week, if we're lucky."

His brow furrowed in growing confusion. It seemed that news of her exile hadn't yet reached this far north.

"I am banished," she told him, the bitterness of this admission like ash on her tongue. "My brothers have sent me away with too few supplies and insufficient defenses in the hope that nature will take its course and kill me so that they won't have to."

Cole's face went blank, then his lips went pale and tight with rage. "Those bastards."

"Not quite. Their mother married my father fairly and properly. If she hadn't, I wouldn't be in this situation."

He shook his head and laughed, softly, then looked searchingly up at her. "Don't worry, Vivian." His hand reached up to brush underneath her chin, and Vivian found herself leaning down closer to him and his comforting touch. "I promise you. All will be well."

She nodded, though she didn't know quite what he meant. In the next moment, he'd remounted his horse, and was shouting to his men to head back to their camp. He called to Bertram, bidding them to follow. Vivian's men looked between each other,

confused and wary. The sun was going down. Vivian kicked her horse into movement, and whistled. They would follow or they would freeze, but she was going to Cole's camp.

"Is it not to your liking?"

Vivian congratulated herself on not startling at Cole's voice behind her. She hadn't even jostled her mostly full bowl, which she set on the ground next to the fire to keep warm. He helped himself to a seat on the fallen tree she'd claimed as her own.

"I've had enough rabbit stew to last me a lifetime," she said, dropping her spoon into the thin sludge.

"That's something your people and mine have in common."

Vivian let her eyes roam over their camp, noting, not for the first time, how her men huddled together on one side of the clearing, while Cole's merry tramps laughed and talked on the other. They were succeeding quite well in ignoring each other's existence, considering the small space they occupied.

Cole's men looked a lot like him, she'd observed. Plain, but serviceable clothes made of wool and leather, with knives and swords that looked impressive and costly even to her inexperienced eyes. She'd seen them speaking with Cole while they busied about preparing a modest supper for them all, joking with him, clapping him on the shoulder in camaraderie, but always, *a/ways* tilting their heads in respect before they turned their backs.

Vivian wrapped her cloak tighter around her. "So, tell me. Who are you, Black Wolf? Where do you come from? I'm sure you have quite the story."

"It's not so interesting a tale." Cole stretched his legs out, warming his feet by the small fire. "A penniless, landless, but ambitious orphan, with the dubious skill of inspiring

loyalty in ne'er-do-wells such as these blackguards." He raised his voice at the end, and the nearest cluster of men protested laughingly at the weak insult.

"And how do you spend your time? Do you often lie in wait for travellers to rob them of their supplies?"

"Sometimes. When the mood strikes us. I will tell you, though, we only take from those we know can spare it."

She hissed a disbelieving noise, arching a brow. "You're a virtuous thief, are you?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that. I'm selfish at heart. You are, too." She opened her mouth to object, but he talked over her. "No, don't deny it. Everyone is. When it comes down to it, we do what is best for ourselves. Damn the rest."

"Do you really believe that?" He'd once accused her of being cynical for her lack of trust, but it seemed he was no more idealistic than she was.

"Yes. With very few exceptions. I think you do too."

Vivian thought of her brother's smug face when he taunted her with her father's death, and the choice he knew she would make to keep silent about her father's murder. Cole was probably right. Perhaps, if she was a truly virtuous woman, a perfect, loving daughter, she would have yelled the truth from the rooftops, to hell with the consequence. But, she had no interest in being a martyr, even for her father.

"Where have you gone?" Cole leaned forward, into her vision, and she blinked away the memories.

“Home. My home, where I grew up, played with the boys I thought were my brothers, waited for my father to come back like a good girl.” Her voice broke and she dashed the tears away, angrily. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright, Vivian.”

She pushed away the comforting arm he started to stretch over her shoulder. “Please, don’t patronize me. I’ve had enough of feeling weak in the presence of men for a lifetime, thank you.”

“You are far from weak,” he said, firmly, and he lifted his leg over the log so that he could face her. He reached for her hand and gently unfolded it from its tight clench on the closure of her cloak. With both of his own hands, he traced the bones of her wrist, then her palm, then her long fingers. “I knew it from the moment you first spoke to me. You’re no wilting flower. You are a force of nature.”

His hand brushed over her wrist and up her arm, calloused palms catching on the coarse wool of her dress. It travelled over the round of her shoulder to the nape of her neck, then he ran just two fingers down her spine. She felt the light touch through her heavy cloak, and when he reached the small of her back and his fingers spread wide, she exhaled in a rush, turning her head into her shoulder to hide her sudden flush, but he was there, too. His face was right next to hers, his lips inches from her own and they looked as soft and inviting as the pillows she’d left behind in her bedroom at home.

The thud and crackle of a log falling in the fire snapped her out of her daze and she nearly kicked over the bowl by her feet in her haste to rise.

“Goodnight,” she said, tightly and firmly to disguise the shivery feeling in her stomach that could creep into her voice if she allowed it.

“Even forces of nature need their rest,” he said, and dipped his head in farewell.

The skin of her lower back tingled all the way to her side of the camp, and for a long time afterward.

She was far from sleep when a cold breeze alerted her to the open entrance of her makeshift tent. She sat straight up, holding the old blanket she'd carried with her to her chest. Cole knelt at the edge of her pallet, staring unashamedly at the spill of her unbound hair over her collarbone. Her overdress served as her pillow, a sacrifice of warmth for comfort.

The tiny flame from the ineffective lamp she'd placed next to her pillow reflected red in his eyes.

"You'll let the cold in," she said.

Cole crawled on his hands into her small space, letting the fabric close behind him. He prowled up her body until his face hovered an inch from her own, and she could feel the heat of him through his clothes and the shift she wore.

"I wouldn't wish you to be cold," he said, in a deep rumble. "I feel nothing but heat for you, Vivian."

He lifted a hand from the pallet and tucked his wide palm underneath her jaw. Vivian took a deep breath in that seemed to go on and on, unable to breathe out, as if it might break the spell they were both under that drew them like moths to each other's bright flame.

He stroked his hand down her neck, fingertips tangling in her hair, his wrist dragging down her skin slow enough that she could feel its pounding pulse against her throat. He settled back on his heels, knees straddling her hips and gently coaxed her

hands away from her chest. She released her hold on the blanket and it fell into her lap, revealing the thin white shift.

“Cole,” she whispered, allowing her fingers their desire and combing them through his thick, dark hair. “Tomorrow, I have to--”

“Don’t think about tomorrow.” His hands swept up the sides of her body, then settled under her shoulder blades, encouraging her urge to lean in with gentle pressure.

“I have to. I need to think ahead to survive.”

He smoothed her hair back from her temple and she tipped her head back into the feel of his fingernails against her scalp. “You’ll survive. You will always endure. Have this night for yourself, then go back to enduring tomorrow.”

From one moment to the next, Cole lifted off her, backing up on his knees until there wasn’t a part of him that touched her, even in the small space. She missed his warm weight on her hips immediately. He said nothing as she considered the possible outcomes of this night, whether she took Cole to bed or sent him back to his own. He merely stared at her with a hint of the teasing smile she’d seen in her dreams.

She pushed the woolen blanket down and curled her legs underneath her. Then she drew up on her knees, peeling her thin shift up and off, revealing her whole body at once. Still, he didn’t come closer. He waited until she leaned forward and pulled him to her, consciously and definitively choosing him. He followed her down onto the pallet, and she helped him remove his shirt, then they were chest to chest, and her newly bared skin tingled from the contrast between the cold and the places his hands stroked and made warm.

He kissed down the side of her neck, lavishing a hot line down between her breasts, leaving behind a trail of red from the scratch of days-old beard growth. He

returned to her mouth but she broke away with a gasp when he cupped her breast, letting his thumb flick across her nipple.

“I want to take all of your worries away,” he rasped in her ear, and she stifled a moan at his sweltering breath in the hollow of her jaw. “Punish those who hurt you. Move those who stand in your way. You are magnificent, Vivian. I am no one’s guard dog, but I would live at the end of your leash, doing your bidding a scrap of your favour.”

“Will you punish them, then? Make them suffer?” Vivian panted, pent-up rage boiling over with the combined heat of her lust.

“They’ll regret the day they were born.”

His ruthlessness took her breath away and when he parted her knees, she welcomed him with a clinging embrace and heavy, humid passion.

Vivian lay on her back, the blanket covering them both. Cole was propped up on an elbow, leaning over her, tracing his fingers over the map of blue veins visible at the juncture of her shoulder and chest, through her pale skin.

“Where will you go?” Cole asked, quieter than ever, since morning noises were beginning to float into their shelter. Bertram would be itching to leave.

“There’s a keep not far from here. A day’s journey, no more. It’s abandoned, but it belonged to my father.”

Cole’s fingertip paused in its lazy circle. He took a deep breath, then used his finger to tip Vivian’s chin so that she was looking into his eyes.

“I knew your father. He was a good man.” He hesitated, then pressed on. “And I knew that your step-brother wanted to move up in the world because he sent a man to ask if I would do the deed.” Vivian kept her silence and waited for him to elaborate, while

her heartbeat sped at his admission. "I refused. I wanted to go to the King, see if I could stop it, but Bran had already found someone else, someone closer. I came to your home to confront him, but there was no way to punish that upstart without beginning a fight that I didn't--"

She laid a hand on his shoulder to stay him. "There was nothing you could have done. He wanted my father dead, so he killed him. I care not the weapon he used, whether an assassin or his own hand."

Cole dipped his head down and kissed the hollow above her collarbone, then murmured, "Well, he's started the fight now."

With one last, hard kiss, he started putting his clothes on, explaining as he dressed, "You won't hear from me for a while, but don't worry. I'll come to you, as soon as it's done."

"Cole," she said, when he was almost through the opening of her shelter, and he stopped and looked back. "Let them know whose will you carry out before you kill them."

With an incongruous smile and a nod, he was gone, and moments later, she heard his men mount their horses.

She'd waited long weeks, with no news, other than the untrustworthy murmurings in the village and the whispers on the wind. Her heart pounded as she descended the last set of steps to the main hall, from equal parts excitement and fear. Fear that Cole had been injured, or killed. Fear that he wasn't who she remembered from short, taut conversation and one heated night.

"My lady," Bertram called, when he spotted her. "They're right outside. We locked the door, but--"

“Open it.”

Bertram flinched back, clutching the crossbow with shaking hands. “My lady. I know you think these men are trustworthy, but you can’t *know--*”

She reached out a hand and grabbed the shaft of the bolt in the loaded weapon, pulling it up in Bertram’s hands so that it aimed at the ceiling. “Open the door, Bertram. Now.”

He nodded, clutching the crossbow to his chest when she let it go. He headed for the tall double doors, and waved off the rest of the men when they pelted him with questions, requested their help with the heavy wooden barricade instead. The moment it was free, the doors swung open to reveal Cole.

Dirt stained his clothes and he looked windblown, like he hadn’t stopped for respite since the fight had ended. He entered with long, powerful strides and the closer he came, the more obvious it was that tiny flecks of old blood covered one side of his face and neck.

Silent, now that they’d reached their destination, his army waited outside the open door. High above the tallest man, they hoisted a banner, a wide piece of red and cream fabric that she recognized as a runner from Bran’s overflowing table. In the centre, they’d scrawled the rough, but unmistakable face of a wolf, its jaws open and begging for a limb to rend.

When he neared her, he went to his knees, his legs spread wide so that he could be closer to the floor. A barbarian to her princess.

“My lady,” he said, his voice rough from the battle cry. His hand went to the hilt of his sword and he withdrew it from his belt, laying it at his side.

“Are they dead?” Vivian asked, her eyes lingering on the dried gore cracked on the surface of the blade, like the bed of a barren river.

“Yes.”

“And their armies? How much blood did you spill before you killed them?”

“The loyal ones died quickly. The disloyal ones put down their swords the moment we breached the walls.” His familiar smirk graced his lips. “We swam through a sea of surrendered weapons, not blood.”

Vivian cocked her head to the side and appreciated the view she had. Cole’s head tilted up to meet her eyes, baring his neck. His powerful shoulders held back and wide, showing his chest. Under her scrutiny, he reached out a grimy hand placed it on her hip, squeezing hard, but just shy of painful. His gaze seemed drawn, not by his own will, to the deep dimples his fingers pressed into her hip.

She felt a surge of a power she couldn’t name when she grabbed a fistful of his thick hair, and jerked his head back so that he looked up at her once again. Cole’s mouth fell open in surprise and she wanted to lick the inside of his mouth and his sharp teeth like animals did. Instead, she gentled her hand and ran them both through his tangled hair, smiling when he bared his teeth and shivered from the rake of her fingernails on his scalp.

“You did well, my wolf,” she crooned, satisfaction thrumming in her veins. “I’m so pleased.”

He made a noise deep in his throat, like a growl and surged forward, burying his face in the soft pout of her stomach. She let him nuzzle her for a few minutes, stroking her hands across the broad expanse of his back.

“What is my reward?” Cole asked, his voice inhumanly low and warped, then he pulled at her knees so that she spilled into his lap, her legs wide over his hips.

“Anything,” she breathed into his mouth. “Everything.”

They rocked together as they kissed, nothing but rough cotton and weathered breeches between them, biting and bruising each other’s lips, unmindful of the eyes around them, watching, waiting. He drew in a great pull of her air, threw his head back in a howl, and his men--his wolves--sent up their own cries. Alongside them, the wind screamed an echo and a blessing.