

Succession

As long as you and your heirs should rule, if they should wear the Dragon Crown, if the Dragon Throne is beatified by your reign, and if the flame of our covenant still burns; our blessing will be upon you and your progeny---and upon all the lands of Aldorin...

---Excerpt from The Book of Sight by St. Narya

Arthair Blackwolf was returning from a hunt with his friends and the hunt-masters when he spied in the distance, riding towards them from the walls of the city of Elkeep, riders wearing the green and gold of the city, the emblem of the Bull Elk embroidered in gold tread upon their breasts.

The son of James Blackwolf, Lord of Dragon Throne, Younger Brother of King Andarius the first, and Prince of the Archduchy of Aldorin, knew the colors well and could see from the glint armor in the summer afternoon and the banners that in the hot air before them, that they were his father's men.

At first, Arthair paid them no attention, they were likely on some formal business or errand. But it was strange, he could tell that there was a rider in black at their head carrying the banners of his house and of his uncle's, the king.

His colors and device with black mail and armor were plain even at this distance. This was obviously Sir Lucas Blackwolf, his other uncle. Lucas was born out of wedlock, to Arthair's grandfather Titus Blackwolf, the King's and his father's father, but with a noble woman---the Lady Catherine of house Wentin.

Being born of noble birth, he was not considered a bastard (and no one who knew him or knew of his foul temper by reputation or experience would call him one to his face, lest they be ready to draw steel or blood) however he was also not in line for the throne. Instead, he was a knight in his brother's---Arthair's father's---service, and in the wars of succession earned that title a thousand times over or more. As a reward for his military service, he was given the right to wear the royal sigil of house Blackwolf, though he wore it in his own device and colors, choosing a royal purple wolf and stripes on a black field.

His presence at the head of this troop of riders was unusual, but not uncommon. Wearing full armor and regalia, including armor for their horses, the riders looked like they were going into battle. Whatever errand they were on must have been official. Spying Arthair and his friends coming back from their hunt, the riders shifted their goal and headed straight for their hunting party.

Arthair spurred his horse in their direction down the grassy slope to see what in the known world the matter was, and both parties parlayed in one of the emerald fields around Elkeep that were lush with clover and busy bees at this time of year.

The boy dismounted and in reprisal so did the host of armored knights before him. His uncle and two of their host, Sir Raymar and Sir Barin, two of his father's most loyal and trusted men, knelt before him, unsheathing their longswords and laid them before Arthair submissively in the grass.

"Uncle? What's all this?" Arthair addressed them, his face in a wash of confusion.

His uncle, Sir Lucas bowed his helmed head lower, "Your majesty I regret to inform you that the prince is dead."

The boy of fifteen years was about to ask, 'Oh? which prince?' when it suddenly dawned on him that One does not address one of his station as 'Your Majesty.'

With that creeping realization washing over him, that something had happened, something terrible, Arthair whispered to himself, "Father..."

In a storm of haste, he remounted his horse, and quicker than they could stop him, and Arthair bolted away from both his friends and the men at arms, both parties calling after him in vain to get him to heed them to desist.

Furiously, the boy rode over the green fields beyond the city walls as fast as the beast could carry him straight to the castle. Riding into the south gate of the City of Elkeep, where the courtyard of the city lay, his legs carried him the rest of the way the boy ran up stairs, up towers, down halls, and ran uncaringly, frantically past denizens of the castle to his father's bed chambers. He did this only because that is where he knew he would find Lord Crayne, his father's second.

Arthair reached the chamber, and the door was open, allowing anyone to pass. The guards outside paid him not notice as the boy entered...this...

For a moment he looked at the dead body, his mother crying over it, in her arms, his older sister Margerete sobbing with her near the bed. And he stared at...for a long moment in utter repudiation. *That cannot be Father, can it?*

"Crayne, who is Lord of this Archduchy?" Arthair asked without looking away from his father lying lifeless on the bed, trying to figure out the situation.

But his question was answered by his sister's approach and a kiss on the cheek. "Gods save the prince," his sister whispered into his ear and walked out of the room, mourning.

"What?" Arthair whispered in consternation, all the color draining from his face.

That could not be true, he was too young, his older sister and her children after her surely should take the throne after...father...That was what they discussed was it not? That was what they agreed to wasn't it? How could he be...prince?

One of the ministers in the chamber explained, "My lord, there was no succession plan, you are the eldest male, the only male eligible, the Dragon Throne is yours, your majesty..."

That cannot be true. That absolutely cannot be true...

This could not be happening. This was not real, Father...dead? He...Prince? His head began to spin, and he felt ill like he would pass out, but he caught himself amid this torrential vertigo.

"Bring Hierophant Henly to Elkeep Castle immediately," the would-be teenage prince issued his first order, and when the lords present hesitated, he yelled, "Now!"

As the men at arms rushed out of the room to do his bidding, Arthair looked back, once---only once---at the form of his mother grieving over his father's body he whispered to himself, a look of horror on his face, "No...No...This cannot be real..." he gave voice to his distain to this and bolted out forsaking this absolutely, retreated maddingly from his sobbing mother and the dead body of his father utterly rejecting...this...rejecting this entire charade, this entire circus, this entire farce, everything about this fucking...*nonsense!*

Immediately, he ran down the halls as if he were trying to escape from a nightmare made manifest, running, running, running into his father's study, a place where he did most of his work and spent most of his time. A place where even if his body was empty his father's spirit surely remained.

Arthair slammed the door and bolted it, pressing his back to it and sliding down the mahogany frame. Athair just sat there on the floor, just stared; he stared at his father's portrait there hanging on the wall.

For a long, quiet moment, he just did that, sitting on the floor, just...staring...

He should morn, shouldn't he? He should cry, should he not? But no sorrow came. He did not feel sadness, nor mourning, nor grief. He felt at that moment only the burning fire of anger. A small, hot flame that was growing brighter and hotter every moment. And he felt that inferno, in that silence collapsed on a heap against the door, staring at his father's portrait, just staring for a long, long time.