

“The Duty of a King”

Hayes

Hayes stomped through the winding halls of his underground home. The ground sloped slowly upward until a sharp turn brought him into the familiar tunnels that he had memorized as a boy and the ladder that led up to the ground level of what once had been the palace.

Now it was little more than ruins. Piles of rubble marked where walls had once stood, the smooth, polished floors were replaced by dirt and dead weeds. Here and there, tall pillars rose above the destruction, standing like gloomy sentries over the barren landscape.

The wind gusted, kicking up a cloud of dust, and Hayes wrapped his scarf around his nose and throat, blocking the fine, ashy particles from collecting in his airways. Though it was technically morning, the cloud cover made it seem closer to dusk.

“You’re so loud that even if I was as blind as you, I would still be able to find you.” Herman’s voice sounded from beside his shoulder.

Hayes ignored him, reaching for the magic that connected him to the realm and feeling the familiar hum as it ran through him like a conduit. He heard the dog’s uneven, loping steps as it ran ahead, then saw it briefly pass through his tunnel vision.

“Make sure you keep an eye on the dog.”

“I thought the whole point in bringing him was so that *you* could keep an eye on him. Or was it because he was supposed to be *your* eyes?” Herman’s teasing voice normally was a welcome distraction, but today it just irked him.

“Despite what Percy thinks, I don’t need the dog to guide me,” he snapped back. “Just...make sure he doesn’t die out here.”

He allowed the magic of the land to continue passing through him, acting as a kind of magical sonar to his surroundings. Vague shapes and shadows filled his awareness, though without color and definitive detail. He moved forward, picking his way through the ruins of the castle towards the Styx where the presence of a particular magic had registered earlier that morning.

“Aww, you care.”

“About the dog? No. But the rest of you seem to.”

“No, I meant about what Percy thinks.”

The comment caught him off guard, and he tripped. Herman grabbed him by the elbow to steady him, but Hayes shook him off. "I don't."

She's already in my heart; I can't let her get under my skin, too.

"That's good, because I'm pretty sure she thinks I'm the more attractive *and* agreeable of the two of us."

Hayes clenched his jaw, choosing not to respond. They passed a pile of rocks surrounding a lonely throne, and Hayes felt the magic surge in his blood. This was where it all started.

And when Percy goes back, it will be where it all ends.

"Of course, that could probably be changed if you were, you know, nice to her. It's probably not the wisest course of action to begin your relationship with your future queen by being a massive grump."

"She's not going to be the queen."

It was Herman's turn to trip, and Hayes listened to the skittering rocks and slipping soles of his boots with satisfaction.

"What do you mean?" Herman's voice, normally breezy and carefree, was tinged with ice.

"She's the rightful ruler, Hayes. You can't think to keep the throne from her."

"She's not going to be the queen because she's not going to stay."

"Hayes!" Herman grabbed his arm, forcing him to stop and turning him so that they were standing face to face. This close, he couldn't make out more than the outline of the other man's face. "You know she's bound to Duinn! If you send her back to her own realm, she'll die." Herman dropped his arm and took a step back, his words growing cautious and accusing. "Unless that's your plan? She dies and the magic passes to you?"

The very idea hit him like a knife in the gut. "No!" He trudged forward. "The bond was never supposed to happen, and I will skin Bede alive the next time I see him. But you heard her—Percy was kidnapped. She was brought here against her will."

"So? Tell her the truth and let her decide to stay."

Hayes laughed humorlessly as he kicked at the loose dirt. "I've known her for less than two days and I already know that if she thought she was responsible for any of this, she would stay. But she has a mother, a flower shop, a *life*, Herman." His voice cracked. "I sent her away so that she could live; I'm not going to be the thing that tears that all away."

“But she’s the queen!”

“Of a people that tried to kill her when she was an infant! We made this mess; we’ll suffer the consequences.”

Herman was quiet for a moment. “You’re not responsible. You tried to save her.”

“And I will keep on trying to save her for as long as I can.”

They reached the banks of the river, and Hayes spied a telltale lump lying on the soft ground. “There.” He pointed and moved forward.

Herman hissed sharply when they came close enough for him to make out the figure. “He looks a little worse for wear.”

“He’s weak. Probably expended the last of his magic just making the portal to get here.” Hayes knelt down and felt for one of Prince Sparrow’s arms. He heard the shuffling sound of Herman following suit. As one, they stood, bearing the prince’s limp form between them. His head lolled onto Hayes’s shoulder.

“You know,” Herman offered as they began walking back home. “You could just leave him here. It’s what he would do to you.”

“I know,” Hayes answered grimly. “But he’s part of Duinn, and as long as I’m king, that means it’s my duty to look after him.”

Even though I’ll probably regret it later.