

Chapter 7: Small Council

KIERYGAN'S POV

This was the first Small Council meeting held in the castle since we reclaimed Altierra. And I demanded full attendance.

Everyone had taken their place at the long council table, except one. Ashteryn. My reclusive smith. Master of the forge. An expert in weapons, both mortal and arcane. He seldom appeared at these meetings, favoring the solitude of his workshop over the clamor of politics.

But today, his presence was necessary.

Normally, I don't wait for anyone. My time is not something I give freely. But this once, we waited. His expertise outweighed my impatience.

Ashteryn finally arrived, half an hour late.

The doors creaked open, and in he strode, soot still smudging his sleeves, the scent of forge-re clinging to him like a second skin. His silver-streaked hair was pulled back messily, and his sharp eyes scanned the room with thinly veiled irritation.

"Well, well... Look who finally crawled out of his cave," Callum called, a crooked grin tugging at his lips.

Ashteryn didn't so much as glance at Callum. Brooding as ever. The half-human, half-orc clearly had better things to do than waste breath on the commander's usual jabs.

He walked to the far end of the table and dropped into the empty seat beside Orryx, his movements stiff, like each one cost him something. With a sigh that sounded more like a growl, he muttered, "This better be worth dragging me out of my forge."

I said nothing. Words rarely worked better than actions with Ashteryn.

Instead, I reached into my coat and retrieved the small gem the girl had given me. I set it on the table and nudged it forward. It slid across the polished wood and stopped in front of him with a faint, crystalline click.

Ashteryn stared at it for a heartbeat. Then his entire bearing changed.

The scowl relaxed. His shoulders, perpetually hunched with tension, rose slightly. Even his eyes, usually dull and disinterested, ickered with sudden sharpness.

He raised a brow and picked up the gem with careful, calloused fingers, turning it slowly. Studying. Measuring.

"Where did you get this?" he asked at last. His voice carried a rare, precise edge of curiosity.

I leaned forward, hands clasped on the table. "I'm glad to finally have your attention," I said, a faint smile tugging at my lips as I watched him examine the gem.

"The girl gave it to me," I added, letting the words fall casually.

Ashteryn's eyes lifted to me. "The witch from the tower?" he asked, surprise threading his voice. "She just gave this to you?"

I nodded, offering nothing more than necessary. "I want to know how Malric turned that gem into a weapon."

Ashteryn studied the gem as if weighing it, then lifted it to the light. He turned it slowly between his thick, soot-streaked fingers, the crimson core catching the glow and pulsing faintly—like a heartbeat trapped in crystal.

He gave it a small shake, listening intently, then brought it close to his face.

"Pyraethyst," he muttered. "Stable under extreme heat. They probably used it in explosives. This kind doesn't melt—not even under dragon re."

I crossed my arms. "Apparently, it can hold something even hotter," I said flatly. "Hot enough to burn dragons."

His eyes icked to me, brief, calculating, then back to the gem. "Malric must've primed it with something volatile. It's dormant now, but still dangerous." He turned the crystal again in his fingers. "I'll need time, but I can isolate the catalyst. Figure out what sets it off."

Before I could respond, Mirael leaned forward, her interest sharpening every line of her face. A sly curl tugged at her lips as she tapped a black-painted nail against the table. "If we've reclaimed the mine," she purred, "why not make more?"

Evander spun toward her, eyes wide. "Gods, Mirael," he exclaimed. "Do you even hear yourself?"

She blinked at him, calm and deliberately innocent.

He rose slightly, his voice sharpening. "Do you know what triggers that crackling light?" he hissed. "Pain. Fear. They broke her bones. Again and again. And that damn thing feeds on it."

Mirael scoffed. "You speak as if you've never slaughtered an entire village before," she drawled, one brow arching as she looked at Evander. "And now you can't stand the sound of a girl crying?"

Evander slammed his fist against the table, the sound cracking through the room. His blue eyes were red as he jabbed a finger at Mirael. "And you speak as if your kind didn't help create monsters like me."

The vampire advisor rarely lost his temper—but when he did, nothing good followed. I had to step in before all hell broke loose.

"Enough," I snapped. "If I wanted to hear children bicker, I'd visit a nursery."

Mirael shrugged, reclining with casual grace. "I'm just saying, if it protects the realm and obliterates our enemies, it's worth considering."

A few murmurs of assent rippled around the table. Most gave slow, thoughtful nods—quietly agreeing with Mirael's suggestion. I turned to my second-in-command.

Orryx shifted uneasily. "I agree, we need to create the weapon to defend our kingdom," he said. "But harming the girl just to forge it doesn't sit right with me. If there's another way to draw on her power, we should find it."

But Evander wasn't satisfied. "What we should do is destroy that damn bracelet," he snapped, his usual warmth gone. "If it weren't for that cursed thing, Malric wouldn't have had anything to turn her into a weapon in the first place."

"Bracelet?" Ashteryn's head tilted slightly, the edge in Evander's voice catching his attention. His curiosity awoke again, eyes narrowing. "What bracelet?"

I exhaled slowly. "It's made of some dark mineral," I said. "A metal. If it even is metal, we don't recognize it. It's not from this realm."

Ashteryn straightened slightly, his brooding scowl giving way to sharp interest. "Unknown metal?" he echoed. "I know every alloy that walks, breathes, or burns."

His fingers drummed against the table, excitement barely contained. "Can I see it?"

Evander and I exchanged a glance. "You'll have to see the girl," I said. "It's fused to her wrist. Can't be removed—at least, not without harm. Mirael touched it once; the thing pulsed and knocked her out cold."

Ashteryn frowned, rubbing his thumb along the edge of the gem, thoughtful. "Hmm... so it's reactive," he murmured. "I need to see it."

Callum let out a loud laugh from the far end of the table, shaking his head. "Good luck with that. The girl scares easily. I sneezed near her once, and I swear she nearly passed out. And that was with my dashing good looks," he added, gesturing to himself with a grin. "Imagine what'll happen when she gets a look at you."

A few bursts of laughter echoed around the table, though Ashteryn remained unmoved. If anything, he looked more intrigued. Or perhaps irritated.

"I'll need to examine it. Closely," Ashteryn muttered. "If we're to understand exactly what we're dealing with."

I didn't answer right away. Instead, I watched Ashteryn for a moment, gauging how serious he was.

"Fine," I said at last. "But I need to warn you, the girl hasn't seen much of the world outside her tower. She's not used to people."

Callum let out another amused huff. "Well. That makes two of them."

Ashteryn, as usual, didn't dignify him with a response. He just sat there, stone-faced.

I shot Callum a sharp look before turning back to Ashteryn. "Just... try not to be intimidating," I said, pausing to choose my words carefully. "Maybe look a little more... friendly."

Ashteryn gave me a stare, like I'd just asked him to hug a kitten. But he nodded once, barely.

"I'll arrange your meeting with her," I said. "Evander will bring the girl to your workshop."

Then I rose from my seat, a signal that the meeting was over. Most began to shift and stand, but I remained where I was, palms braced on the table.

"I'll be going north to survey the land and track Malric's trail," I announced. "I won't return for three days."

Orryx crossed his arms over his chest. "I'll hold the fort while you're gone."

I gave a curt nod. Mirael leaned in, eyes alight with hope and excitement. "Can I come with you?" she asked. "I could help."

"No," I said firmly. "But you're more than welcome to do your usual spying on the ground."

Mirael had asked to come with me before, often during our exile. She always wanted to ride on my back. I never let her. Never let anyone.

She had this ridiculous notion that, because she carried a drop of dragon blood, we were meant to stick together. The trace of blood she inherited from her grandfather was just enough to grant her immortality, but not enough to shift or breathe re.

Still, I kept her around. She was skilled in illusion magic, made for a sharp spy. And she was good at other things, too. Both in bed and out of it.

Mirael huffed and folded her arms with a theatrical pout but didn't press the matter.

Before turning to leave, I glanced at Evander. "Keep an eye on the girl while I'm gone," I said. "Your little magic trick seemed to work on her."

He smirked. "Wonderful. Advisor, scholar, tactician... now downgraded to babysitter."

I didn't say anything. As if I hadn't noticed how delighted he seemed while speaking with the girl. In fact, he wouldn't stop talking about her. At one point, I'd had to subtly, indirectly remind him that she was just a child. She couldn't be more than fifteen by the looks of her.

"I'll see you in three days," I said quietly as I stepped out the door.