

KIERA, BEAST IN THE BLACK

Kiera, The Beast in Black

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Pages 477-488



46

DIANNE'S FATHER, KING GODWIN of northern Istridin, was a stout, stalwart, black-bearded man who carried irrefutable power—nearly on par with my own father's. And well, to no man whose ear was not bent, he was among the few that bore his teeth against my father's preceding rule; openly defiant and scornful of his teaching. Following my father's demise, he had been nothing too far off from tolerant of my recent upsurgence.

I remembered the first time I had met him, up close; I stood a little to windward of him, and, though he was a large, powerful man, it was certain that he felt belittled by my father's narrowing gaze. King Godwin was educated far beyond the noblemen of his kingdom's time and he had sworn to emerge from beyond the broad shadow of the king of Solaris' back, as often nobles promise, in the affairs of time. Well, with my father's assassination, that burden was forever lifted from his shoulders.

Among Godwin's three daughters, Dianne held a special place as his favourite. He would readily comply with any of her self-effacing wishes, including her pleas to

arrange a marriage between her and I. And when she would plead, he would find it in himself to say no.

Moreover, I believed that Godwin harboured no personal animosity towards me—any disdain that he must have had carried with him was solely projected at my father. He suspected that, at one point, perhaps the generational conflict that endured between our kingdoms had finally met an end—and he wished for it to be so. He had already given me his blessing, and Dianne, as infatuated as she already was, only needed to hear the words from my lips.

King Godwin is powerful, yes. If Dianne were to unite with me in marriage, her status would be elevated, and our union would serve as a symbol of harmony between the kingdoms of Istridin and Solaris. Such a connection would likely enhance my own influence and authority. Or at least, Tobias had deemed so.

In such wise, when I had lured the princess into my quarters to settle these thoughts, and my fingers had finally traced the girl's slender back upon my bedstead—I saw in her eyes, a genuine lust; and I felt it, too, for a moment.

Every breath felt binding, and for the first time since I had known her from our blurred memories when we were once children, I did not look away from her star-struck gaze. I did not feel shy when my arms draped around her smaller, carefully outlined frame, and when our lips met—for many a time—I did not hesitate to invite myself to strong desires of sensuality.

But yes, there was a moment that I had taken to myself to think, if this was the right thing to do. Her father would be pleased—yes, of course, and as satisfied Dianne already was, I could not understand the conflicted emotions that tugged at my heart with a beating pang.

I could not reveal to Dianne the true reasoning to why I had brought her to my bed, and to why I had lied to myself about my empty, unwitting feelings for her. But the power that she held, and that her father held was something I needed to devour, even if it would not bring a beaming smile to the princess's face.

I needed to trace the footsteps of my father to profit from the same power he once held in the palm of his hands.

On that cold, early morning, when my dauntless spirits seemed to cease, and my exhausted body dozed after troubling itself to a new day's work, I had been pulled to

my study by two demanding royal Officers, speaking with an urgency that I could not properly formalise at the time.

Soon, beyond the towering wooden doors that had led to my office, the hazy image of Tobias' hunched body over my worktable came into view; it voiced a disturbance within my mind. His carcass, whose dilapidated armour had shown a multitude of small wounds, slow bleeding, had spoken of a cruel battle and a hard-fought escape.

"Tobias?" My mind screamed, and it cried and cried at the thought of his fate intertwining with that of Valentine's. I could not bring myself to even think of his trembling, mangled and bloody body. "Tobias, what has happened? Are you alright?"

His face turned, heavy sweat bedewed his forehead; the ruddy colours of his plump countenance, and his young features had been marred by wrinkles etched upon it. As he moved forward, almost tripping, I instinctively reached out and caught him by the elbows.

My brows pinched with worry. "What happened, Tobias? Speak to me!"

His eyes gleamed with perplexing thoughts. "The girl..." his voice was low and brittle, "...is coming."

Girl?

"Who is coming? Who has done this to you, friend?"

"Golden eyes..." a sharp breath escaped him as he had clutched at the wound by his chest, "the one with golden eyes!"

A loud shrill rang in my ears as I listened.

"She's not who you think she is. She's...different," he continued, and his weary eyes fluttered almost uncontrollably when he had breathed to recollect his thoughts, "and I couldn't do anything."

"Why did you go after her?" I questioned him. "You should not have gone!"

"What?" Jak, you told me to," Tobias said, and his brown eyes widened; his strong hands trembled and grabbed at my shoulder, pulling me close, "but that doesn't matter, she's coming," Tobias gulped, "with an army! We need to stop her."

Even before I could question how it was that I had given him the command to hunt down Kiera, Tobias continued. "She's killed everyone, and she's going to kill more, unless you stop her!"

Suddenly, from behind the two Officers that had been stationed past my office to oversee, there came muffled footsteps, and there entered Jaune.

His face was calm, but his eyes glanced over at Tobias's bruises with a tangible concern. He uttered nothing as he made his approach; his long, soft strides were made without noise or effort—almost appearing as if he were floating, save for the occasional large leap that had propelled him forward.

Jaune crouched beside me and spoke with a foreboding tone. "Solaris in danger," he said. "A war has begun."

"What do you mean Solaris is in danger?" I asked him, naively.

"Sir Tobias must have told you already. Jakodan, as king, you must be the first to take action, or else everything that you love in this kingdom—no, this world—will be taken away from you. She has already killed several of your men."

A sudden anger came upon me, fuelled by a much-refined scorn towards Beasts, and towards all the things that I had believed to be false and true. But even when a fume of hot anger swelled in my chest, I had the good sense to choke back the first impetuous acts that I ached to undertake with the quivering of my lips, and the clenching of my fists under Tobias's body.

Calm yourself, calm yourself, Jakodan. This is not how a king should act. No good king would act irrationally!

"We are in great danger, Jakodan; I repeat myself, you must do something," Jaune expressed with the furrowing and unfurrowing of his brows. "Tobias is right. More lives will be lost if we remain idle."

"But," I exclaimed, clutching at my temples, "what should I do, Jaune? I understand the need for logic, but if the kingdom truly faces such dire danger, then..."

He gave a slow nod as he neared my side. "Then, you already know what must be done, Your Majesty," his voice was cool and sonorous. "Did you not prepare for this very moment?"

"How could one be prepared for this? They had almost killed Tobias!"

"Do you not see? Your enemies seek to provoke you," he said. "First, they had the audacity to attack the city, and now they try to take more of your people from you. You must respond to their senselessness and bring justice to the many men who have lost their lives!"

I stammered. "But more lives will be lost! That is not what I wanted. This is not what I wanted! This is not what I wished for! Yes, I sought to prove myself, and I believed I had chosen this path, but I just..."

“Jakodan,” Jaune sighed, “war, you see, cannot be escaped. To subdue the enemy, we must fight. You have heard what your fellow noblemen and commoners that bang on your castle’s doors have said—they are prepared for this; they want this. They have longed for this moment. To secure the fragile peace we currently possess, we must confront our enemies. And what you have witnessed, the deaths that weigh upon your conscience, are but a fraction of what true war entails. Trust me, brother.”

An irresistible force of sudden stress drove me to the ground, and after a moment of heavy breathing, I laid quietly as I held Tobias in my arms, who was now unconscious.

“I cannot bear this any longer, Jaune,” I had confessed. “Too many people expect too much from me: a man, a leader, and now, a perpetrator of mass bloodshed? If I embark on this path, I may lose Tobias. I may even lose you and everything I hold dear. Jaune, I have already suffered enough.”

“It is a heavy burden to bear,” his hand rubbed at my back, “I know.” Jaune positioned himself comfortably beside me where he continued to ease my quick-breathing and sore eyes brimming with fear. “But we will face this together. I am here. I will aid you in your sufferings and be the one that delivers a forceful push on your back during your most unsteady moments; and I will stand beside you in every battle that may erupt, brother.”

All was quiet when I sank into Jaune’s sleeve.

“But for now,” he hushed me, “allow me to fix things for you, Your Majesty. Allow me to be the shoulders to bear this heavy weight for the king, and you just rest. And you rest well, my liege.”

Though, I still remained in Jaune’s hold on his chest, he gave me a brief rest; and my soul and mind were finally granted the opportunity, that it had not been given for the last two weeks, of a peaceful sleep; undisturbed in a placid environment fabricated by my own mind.

Unfamiliar with the impending battles that loomed at the borders of my kingdom, I had found myself cornered in the ever-growing chaos fuelled by the enemies of Solaris. Each passing day brought forth an inferno of death that had only seemed to intensify, pushing me further into the shadows.

And on that following morning, as I had emerged from beneath those covers that cradled the unconscious body of the princess, Tobias made his presence known in my study.

Tobias seemed a little angry, and asked, "Is it true? About Jaune?"

After closing the doors to my office behind me, I made my way towards one of the towering bookshelves that lined the left side of the wooden desk.

"Are you sure you are well enough to be walking already, Tobias?" I asked.

"I've rested long enough," he replied curtly.

"Two weeks hardly seem sufficient for the injuries you sustained."

"I'm fine," he insisted. "Answer my question, Jak."

"What about Jaune?"

Tobias huffed. "That you've granted him the authority to command the royal Officers? To advise the Solar Mystics? And that he has somehow assumed the role of the king's advisor?"

A furrow formed between my brows as I had quietly observed Tobias' quick display of disapproval towards Jaune's newfound position within the castle.

"And what about the rest of the king's advisors? Lord Hadden and everyone else? Was that not their position that they have trained for their entire lives?"

"I have already spoken with them regarding this matter. Although Jaune lacks noble lineage, he possesses leadership qualities. Lord Hadden, himself, has agreed to this arrangement."

"Why?" Tobias continued to inquire.

When I had returned to my seat, the atmosphere was quick to pass, and it carried a much heavier air as I fixed Tobias with a stern gaze. He responded by sitting opposite of me, exhaling deeply as he had focused on the empty chalice before him—a clear indication that Jaune had been present before him.

"I don't trust him," Tobias began. "And I can't."

"Do not waste your breath if the man instills such wariness in you. He has done nothing wrong; in fact, he has aided me."

"Aided you?" his tone rose. "He has assumed command over all the Officers in the castle, with an air of superiority, sending our troops where he pleases, all under your orders! I sometimes find him in places he shouldn't be, tinkering with things he shouldn't have!"

I frowned.

"This is the *same* Jaune we both recall from the past, the one who wanted to kill you for what you did," he said.

"Tobias, we have already discussed this."

“And I will say it again!” Tobias slammed his fists against the hard wood of my table. “He can’t be trusted. After all, he was the one who nearly got me killed with an order that I believed came from you. Do you honestly expect me to tolerate this?”

“I understand your frustrations,” I rose from my seat to meet Tobias’ determined gaze, “but it was thanks to you that we discovered the location of those Beasts, correct? We have already figured out that the only place the rebels would be is in Yhedena. Not Istridin or in our borders. Perhaps we can already take the fight to them!”

At last, he said: “No need,” with a straight face. “Jaune has already mobilised troops to handle our enemies.”

A breath left me. “Jaune has? How do you mean?”

“While you’ve been shagging away your problems with the princess, Jaune’s been sending troops out across the borders, setting villages on fire, hoping to lure out the few crawling Beasts in them. Our men follow his orders unquestioningly, believing it to be a direct command from you, even if it means being aggressive towards innocent civilians.”

“I...have never issued such an order.”

“Exactly. Can’t you see? He’s taking advantage of your friendship!”

It was a great shock that cloaked my face and sucked the colour off from it, and it could not be concealed.

Tobias lifted himself from Jaune’s seat, returning to his post beside the towering wooden doors. He had scarcely uttered a last word when he silenced himself of all resentful thoughts with a slight frown. There, he had placed his hands behind his back, patiently waiting for Jaune’s usual presence in the early mornings of the week. The tapping of his foot, awkwardly not in rhyme, suggested his restlessness.

The silence prolonged and it stretched outwards for another few moments. I would only sit in deep wonderment towards the matter, but never raising a voice to address the spring of imbalance between myself and Tobias, and the news of Jaune.

It took five minutes for the tensivity of the room to wane down in a moderate manner, and another five minutes for Jaune’s approaching footsteps, heavy and slow, to sound on the carpeted corridor.

Finally, the man himself made a striking entrance to my study. Instantly upon his appearance, Tobias stuck his thumb and forefinger into his vest pocket, pulling himself away from beside the door, and sank to the corner of a wall as they had exchanged a many curious stares.

"Am I interrupting?" Jaune stood by the threshold of the opened door, carrying in his hands several important-looking thinned papers that he had likely attended to on my behalf.

"No," I beckoned for him to enter with slow hands. "Sit down, Jaune."

He gave me a questioning look before walking across the floor and settling into a chair opposite me, appearing slightly nervous.

"Is something wrong?" he asked, then gave out a light laugh. "Am I in trouble?"

My hands clasped together as I leaned forward on the table, elbows resting on the wood. With a clear and steady gaze, I spoke quietly: "Jaune, what have you been doing for the last two weeks?"

He studied my stare before comfortably positioning himself upon his chair and crossing his legs. "Work," he answered. "A great deal of work, as you will see in these documents." Jaune arranged the array of papers to be laid out meticulously on the desk.

I pushed them aside. "No," I made clear of my demanding tone. "I wish to know what you have been doing outside this castle. In the borders of Solaris. In the villages of our kingdom."

A strand of his dense, light hair fell to the front of his eyes as he gave out a sigh. Under his brown and grand eyebrows revealed a pair of blue eyes that narrowed and diverted from my protruding stare.

"Tobias must have already spoken to you, then?" His head curved to the figure at the very end of the room, listening quietly at our exchange. "Well, all of it is true. And I have only acted upon your wishes."

"I never asked you to engage in such a rampage, Jaune!"

"But you permitted me to proceed—"

"I did not ask for this! A diplomatic approach could have been more prudent!"

"A diplomatic approach? Where has that even led the previous king? The people want action!" he suddenly exclaimed. "They want justice! They want to feel protected behind the walls of this city, and you have not provided them with any of that. The attack from a month ago has already struck fear in the hearts of the townspeople, forcing them to hide behind closed doors as our enemies advance. What I have done, and what I have only done," he paused, taking a breath, "is answer their desperate pleas with a necessary operation."

His mouth, rather fully curved, expressed his seriousness and undaunted nature against my position, to what I had always believed to be unrivalled.

"I am merely aiding you, like I said," Jaune continued. "I have not lied about anything, and I have done nothing that may have harmed your people, or your crown. So, look what I have brought for you: your people no longer bang on your doors for a pressured statement, the nobles of this house no longer glare at your back wherever you walk, and this kingdom is growing; as long as we assert our dominance, Jakodan. You wanted to prove yourself, no? This is the way."

Tobias, from a quiet corner, emerged from the shadows and leapt to the man's face.

"That doesn't excuse your fabrication of reports and the manipulation of troops that don't belong to you," Tobias scowled. "It doesn't excuse your desire to overthrow the king."

Jaune raised an eyebrow. "I have no intention of usurping Jakodan's position," he responded calmly. "I am not deserving of it, nor do I desire to rule over these people. They are tainted and malicious. In fact, it might be better for humanity to be wiped off the face of this earth by the Beasts!"

Tobias looked shocked.

"However," Jaune allowed himself to continue, "I cannot allow that to happen. It is solely for Jakodan's sake that I am undertaking these actions. They stared angrily into each other's eyes as Jaune continued: "Understand that, Officer."

Before a much more passionate argument emerged from both bitter men's lips, I raised my hand.

"What are your next plans, then?" I inquired, directing my question to Jaune.

One more look, followed by a secretive smirk only shown toward me, and a prolonged humming from his throat—which may have been his way of displaying his thoughts, Jaune responded, casually: "Well," he began, "whoever was responsible for Nord's initial attack, that we all have become knowledgeable of are Beasts, will become threatened by our forces. It will not drive them to hide in the shadows, but instead, it will make them want to fight."

"How are you certain?"

"I have worked around Beasts for as long as I can remember," Jaune said. "And they all have one thing in common: they want to prove themselves. They fear us, of course, but in some such way, it drives them to a spirit that enables them to act bravely and boldly. Take, for instance, King Ulric's death. It had been decades since Beasts had ever done something so...daring."

I nodded in understanding, acknowledging his point.

"They will retaliate, and we must be prepared to respond," he explained. "The only uncertainty lies in the magnitude of their counterattack. However, it does not matter, for we are stronger. If this escalates into a full-blown war, you will have the support of the other three kingdoms, regardless," Jaune's fingers lightly toyed with the corners of the papers he had spread across my desk. "Now, Jakodan, what you stand to gain from this war is power and recognition. The other kingdoms in the Fourfold have been enslaving Beasts for their own pleasure, slaughtering them in the shadows. But by taking the lead in bringing an end to what the Great Cleansing began, you will earn a nobleness of character, just like you wished.

"I still fail to see why exactly you're doing this." Tobias approached my chair to view a different angle of Jaune's face. "You wanted Jak dead the last time you saw him. And now, you're helping him make a difference in this world? It doesn't make sense to me."

As if he had been waiting for those words to escape someone's mouth, Jaune drew back his lips into a queer, little one-sided smile as his face drooped downwards. "Vengeance," Jaune blurted, "towards your father, I suppose. I gain nothing out of this, truly, except for the satisfaction of seeing Jakodan surpass the expectations that have lingered since Ulric's reign. It brings me nothing but delight to witness him bring justice to this kingdom, a place where we have both, perhaps, suffered for far too long. I want to see Jakodan succeed."

"Succeed?" Tobias looked sceptical. He chanced a firm look at my side before tracing his eyes back to Jaune's front. "A true king doesn't need help. That makes you look weak and vulnerable, Jak."

"A king grows stronger by making more enemies, that does not make him weak," Jaune retorted. "A king—a powerful king—utilises those around him for his own benefit. Do not mistake that for weakness."

Tobias clenched his teeth in frustration.

Jaune may have had for evil or for good no argument or true reason to help me achieve this foretold greatness, but it was evident that he held a genuine concern for the values and principles that Solaris represented. Having grown up in the impoverished slums of Nord, Jaune had witnessed the countless injustices inflicted upon those deprived of joy and goddess, particularly during my father's reign.

Now, as I sat across from the same individual who had once been on the brink of despair under my father's rule, my eyes had blinked with pleasant surprise at Jaune's newfound strength of character.

He had truly changed.

"Is there anything else you would like to rehash," Jaune leaned back against his chair, "Your Majesty?"

I quieted my mind. "No," I retreated into the comfort of my own seat. "No, that is all."

"Good."

"But, while you are doing all of this, what am I to do behind the scenes?"

He did not take a second to pass. "Prepare yourself for war."

Tobias, beside me, drooped in bitter disappointment upon seeing the faintest of smiles etched on my face, mistaking my blank silence for displeasure, but Jaune understood my voiceless words.

After enduring a long week, those who had witnessed the recent murders in Fort Sunwatch, including commanding Officers, bereaved family members, and other locals, launched a furious assault on the castle's massive double doors. They had unleashed a torrent of bitter curses so fluent and rapid that even the aged would not hold against their strangely bent and mingled forces.

Amongst the castle grounds, individuals who had previously pledged their allegiance to me posed a threat. They had not only endangered the loyalty to our soldiers, but also contemplated taking up arms against the assailants of the stronghold, intent on seizing or eliminating any of them they would encounter. Their actions amounted to a rebellion against both the royal government and myself due to my preceding decisions to passively observe as the enemies infiltrated and seized several more of the kingdom's fortresses.

But I remained patient despite everyone's demands. I remained calm and allowed for everything to take place. Jaune insisted on shouldering the burden of public appearances, urging me to rest. But rest turned into restlessness.

Within another week's time, as Jaune had anxiously predicted, Fort Solford—more commonly known as the North Gate—the impregnable stronghold of the capital, would face a similar fate if not defended with the utmost vigilance. I had

come to understand that the rebels responsible had a singular objective—to free the prisoners held within the dungeons—and anyone who stood in their way would be swiftly eliminated. Yet, I struggled to comprehend how such a small group could overpower a fortress so well-guarded. How could they maintain such organisation and cohesion?

Reports had arrived swiftly, describing a Beast of unparalleled power capable of decimating an entire battalion of well-armed Officers with a single swipe of its claws. Some reports hinted at a young girl with golden eyes leading the classified forces of Beasts. Only a group functioning with unwavering discipline could be led by such a strong leader. No ordinary army or battalion could exhibit such precise coordination.

Every army had its commanders—and I knew who that commander was.

But I could not properly fathom her intentions, why she had suddenly embarked on this grand plan to free her people and ultimately take my life. She had already taken too many lives from my side, and I could no longer sit idly on my throne. Even if I were to retaliate against her actions, it would not be enough to halt her relentless advances. No matter how many lives were lost, unless she, among her own people, was stopped or eliminated, our efforts would be in vain. And that was precisely what I needed to do.

Doubt gnawed at my resolve. I could not help but recall my father's words: I was merely a boy with a limited understanding of the world.

Could I really do it? Something as daunting as this?

There was no time for second-guessing! Regardless of my reluctance to take action against her people, this cycle of bloodshed had gone on for far too long. War was imminent, and it was only fitting that I led the many armies beneath my command to prove my kingdom's safety.

King Godwin had already given his approval for this war, motivated by the desire to protect his daughters and prevent another outbreak in his kingdom from erupting. As for the rulers of Hesgate, I awaited their response regarding the formation of an alliance against our common enemies. However, with Yhedena's unwavering commitment to eradicating the Beasts from Ecrus, I believed their support was more than sufficient enough.

They shared the same fervour as my father's army in this cause.

And after seeing many of my men fall in advance to the war that was yet to erupt, I had finally adjusted to that view: I had finally come to understand who the enemies were to this god-forsaken world.

I had had enough.

Perhaps I really was fated to embark on the same path my father once did, and perhaps the reason I was born into that world was for that very reason—but even if it was, even if that were true, I was moving in accordance with my own actions; with my own emotions and with the beliefs I had enforced upon myself.

I was not driven by others, and steered not from my father's own preceding beliefs, but my own. And if that path led me to be labelled as evil, so be it. I cared not for becoming a tyrant, but only fighting for what I believed in. A tyrant of my own meaning.