



## Celebrations

A STONE HEART BONUS CHAPTER

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Ember let the book fall shut, warm and satisfied as the final words echoed through her mind. She looked up, intending to insist Dyre read the book in her hands regardless what he thought of novels, but she found him asleep.

*Of course he is,* she thought, as a soft smile crept across her face. *He's gotten so little rest lately.*

The days since Ember's curse had been broken had been busy and chaotic, at least for Dyre. He'd tried to shield her from most of it, but there was only so much he could hide when he'd moved half his study to the library to keep Ember within sight.

Members of the Aerie came and went often to report to Dyre. Though he was free to leave Nyxwood's grounds, the Aerie continued to act as Dyre's eyes and sword to clean up the mess Duke Kelan left behind. Dyrerisan had refused to leave Ember's side to see to it personally.

She certainly wasn't complaining about *that*: if she had her way, she'd never have to leave him again. But a haunted look had dwelt in his eyes, one that she hadn't found a way to banish yet. Though Ember's heart was stronger than she ever remembered it being, the rest of her weakness was proving slower to disappear. Ember knew it worried him. It seemed that, though both curses were broken, they had left a scar.

She had promised the Almighty that if she lived, she would love without thought to the cost. But how could she rid herself of the fear of grief? Having come so close to losing Dyre, after she had quite literally died in his arms before being brought back...how did they release that terror of being torn apart again? Her parents had never learned to release that fear. She didn't want to follow their example.

From the stories he told her, Dyre's parents had shared the sort of love Ember wanted to have...but they weren't here to teach Ember and Dyre how they did it. Where did that leave them? She didn't want to spend her whole life haunted by a curse that no longer existed.

*One day at a time*, she told herself, taking a deep breath. That's what Izzy had advised when Ember confessed her worries to her. What Ember and Dyre had gone through wasn't something that could be erased in a few short weeks...she needed to give them time to heal. Perhaps when the remnants of her curse-induced weakness were gone, and when Dyre stopped staring at the back of his hand like he expected to see gray stone instead of skin, then that fear would be easier to leave behind.

After a moment more of staring at Dyre, Ember leaned over to grab the writing desk on the nearby table. She scratched out a short note to Dyre explaining where she'd gone. He might still worry when he awoke to find her missing, but this was the best she could do. She imagined Miri and Freya were already waiting for her downstairs.

The note written and folded on top of her book, Ember stood, gripping the back of the settee as she waited for her head to settle. The dizziness faded more quickly than it had a few days ago, bolstering Ember's confidence as she walked quietly toward the door. The curse *was* broken...she simply needed time to recover before she'd run up any staircases.

As Ember stepped into the hall, she breathed deep and reveled in the lack of dust and decay. The curtains were drawn back, flooding the halls with light as Ember made her way to the Silver Parlor where Freya and Miri waited. There was a lightness to Nyxwood that Ember had never seen before: a taste of freedom.

Although Nyxwood's sudden reappearance had understandably left people disconcerted and wary, curiosity was proving the stronger influence. Dyre had already hired over a dozen servants to free Nyxwood from centuries of disuse.

He'd also hired people to relieve Helen and the rest, insisting that after all this time Nyxwood was their home, not their place of employment. But, to Ember's amusement, every one of them had disobeyed Dyre's orders and were hard at work training the new servants and setting the castle to rights.

However, they had also claimed suites on the second floor, and now spent their evenings with Dyre and Ember in a warm companionship that Ember treasured. Those were the only moments that Dyre seemed to truly relax: with Ember tucked against his side, and their friends chatting and laughing around them.

Freya and Miri had also proven invaluable help to Ember, taking on most of the labor of preparing for her and Dyre's wedding in a few days.

Dyre had suggested they wait longer to marry, to give them more time to know each other. But Ember had refused. She knew she wanted Dyre. Their lives together would have challenges whether they married now or in a year...and now that Ember had decided, she didn't want to wait. Once she'd assured Dyre that she was ready to be his wife, he'd made it clear that he didn't want to wait either.

But *planning* a wedding in only three weeks was no easy task, especially when Ember's friends insisted on making it an event worthy of the king himself.

When Ember reached the stretch of hall with the silver parlor, she found the door propped open. Freya and Miri's voices filtered out as Ember approached.

"The hydrangeas should be blooming by then," Freya was saying. "And John made sure there will be plenty of roses...now we just need to talk Ember into actually carrying a bouquet."

"And hide her magnificent dress?" Miri teased.

Freya scoffed. "Not hide, *complement*."

"And there's the bride herself," Miri said, as Ember stepped inside. "Did Dyrerisan try to hold you hostage?"

Her eyes glinted with humor from where she sat, surrounded by mounds of white and pale blue fabric.

"He's asleep," Ember said, closing the door behind her.

Freya looked up from her lists, her eyebrows furrowed. "Dyrerisan, asleep? In the middle of the day?"

"I know...he needs it."

"Enough about that," Miri said. "Let's get you into this dress before he comes looking."

It took all three of them to get Ember cinched into Miri's creation. The dress was massive, with dozens of layers falling over each other like petals on a rose. The sweetheart neckline felt daring to Ember, though Miri assured her it was tame, and the sleeves were loose and airy around her arms. It was also, surprisingly, one of the most comfortable dresses Ember had worn.

"You have enough to worry about on your wedding day without your dress giving you fits," was how Miri had explained it, when Ember had first tried it on a few days before.

Trying it on again, for what Miri claimed was the last time before she donned it for the ceremony, Ember struggled to comprehend it all. A large mirror dominated the back wall of the parlor, and Ember found herself staring at her reflection as Miri walked around her, making small adjustments and muttering under her breath. The ice blue layers within the skirt and slightly darker needlework curling around the bodice made her eyes appear more cobalt than lavender. The splashes of color also brought a little life back to Ember's skin, which was almost translucent when surrounded by so much white. It made her look like a fairy princess fit for an ice palace.

Like everything else Miri and Freya were planning, it felt like too much. But after seeing the bright joy in their eyes as they discussed flower arrangements and menus, Ember had long given up trying to rein them in. If Miri wanted to dress her in diamonds and Freya decided to bake a dozen cakes, Ember would let them. They deserved a bit of fun more than anyone.

"I'm still worried that it's too heavy," Freya says, eyeing the dress critically. "Ember, are you sure it isn't too much?"

Ember was saved from reassuring Freya, yet again, that she could handle the heavy skirts by Miri scoffing.

"It'll be *fine*. She only has to walk down the aisle, and then Dyrerisan can carry her everywhere."

Freya glanced at Ember, her lips twitching with a hidden smile. "I don't know...do you think Dyrerisan can really carry her with so much *fluff* in the way?"

Miri straightened, planting her hands on her hips. Ember looked away to hide her own smile.

"Who's the seamstress, here?" Miri asked.

"You, but you're biased."

"It's beautiful, Miri," Ember said, though she saw well enough that there was no true heat to their argument.

"Of course, it's beautiful," Miri said, turning back to Ember. "More importantly, *you're* beautiful."

Ember's face warmed as she muttered her thanks.

"That's what you need," Freya said. "A bit of color in your cheeks."

Miri muttered conspiratorially, "I don't think we'll have to worry about that once Dyrerisan sees her."

That only made her blush more, much to Miri and Freya's amusement.

"I'm finished," Miri said. "Let's get you back into your normal clothes before you faint on us."

Ember rolled her eyes as she followed Miri behind the dressing screen set up in a corner.

"Izzy sent word back," Freya said, as she helped undo the row of tiny buttons running down Ember's back. "She and Collin should return in time to come."

"Good," Ember said.

She wanted as many of the Aerie to be there as possible. After all they'd done for Dyre, and for *her*, she wanted them to have a chance to relax and celebrate for an evening.

"What's your opinion on ribbon?" Freya asked.

Ember glanced over her shoulder, only for Miri to turn her head back forward.

"It depends on what you're using it for," Ember said.

"Tying around flowers and candlesticks, mostly."

"It sounds beautiful."

"Truly?" Freya asked, helping Ember step back into her day dress. "Or are you trying to appease me?"

"Truly," Ember laughed.

"Then I'll go with John into town this afternoon and choose some." Freya sighed contentedly. "I love that I can say that again."

"Me too," Miri said. "Though I'll enjoy it more once people stop staring at us like we're ghosts."

Ember slipped her shoes back on and stepped around the screen. "Give it a few months. Something new will come along and they'll forget to be wary of you."

"In the meantime, I'll make sure to act peculiar to give them something to gossip about."

Ember laughed as she backed toward the door. "I should go check on Dyre."

Miri and Freya exchanged a knowing look as Freya replied, "By all means, return to your fiancé before he starts pining."

Ember laughed again. Her smile only grew when she found Dyre waiting for her in the hall, wearing a narrow-eyed look that indicated he'd heard Freya's comment. But that look melted away as his eyes rested on Ember, and he stepped forward to take her into his arms. Ember melted against his chest gladly.

"You should've awoken me," he whispered near her ear, sending shivers across Ember's skin.

"You need rest," she replied.

"So do you."

Ember tilted her head up so Dyre could see her raised eyebrow. "I've been doing little more than resting."

"Regardless."

Dyre scooped her into his arms without warning, and a surprised laugh slipped through her lips as she grabbed onto his shoulders.

"I'm not going to regain strength as quickly if you carry me everywhere," she warned him.

He raised his eyebrows. "Would you like me to put you down?"

"I didn't say that."

"That's what I thought."

Dyre turned back toward the library, and Ember shifted in his arms so she could lay her head against his shoulder.

"I received word regarding your family," he said, climbing the stairs slowly. "Your cousins are safe."

"Good," Ember breathed.

That had been the thorn in the midst of her bliss. Fear for Sophia and Louisa had plagued her since she'd seen her uncle in Duke Kellan's custody.

"Your aunt is fine, as well. Radcliff seems to be the only one harmed by the ordeal, and he's recovering without issue."

"I'm glad," Ember said, with some reluctance. Or perhaps it was guilt.

She could invite them to the wedding; Dyre had offered to bring them to Nyxwood for the occasion. But as much as she knew Sophia and Louisa would regret missing it...she wasn't ready to face her aunt and uncle again. That reconciliation would come eventually, but not yet. Not on her wedding day. She wanted this celebration to belong to those who truly cared about Ember and Dyre. She wanted it to be a commemoration of their freedom from curses and Sarnere alike.

"What are you thinking?" Dyre asked, as they entered the library.

Ember forced thoughts of her family from her mind, smiling up at Dyre.

"That our wedding can't come soon enough."

Dyre sat on their settee, positioning Ember on his lap. The position felt deliciously intimate, though she sincerely hoped no one caught them like this. Dyre dropped his head, his lips ghosting across Ember's cheek toward her ear.

"Agreed," he whispered.

Ember closed her eyes, surrendering thoughts of all except Dyre's gentle kisses. Right then, a few days felt like an eternity.



Wandering among towering bookshelves, Ember hummed to herself and ran her fingers over leather spines. Most of them were hundreds of years old, though occasionally she spotted a newer volume the Aerie had brought Dyre. Most of those newer books came from the precarious piles in Dyre's study; she'd used his insistence on keeping Ember in his sight as an excuse to bring order to some of his towers of books. He'd grumbled at first, but he couldn't deny that he found things much faster now.

Toward the front of the room, Ember heard the shuffle of papers as Dyre read through reports and took notes. She smiled as she continued her meandering search. It wasn't long before she found herself at the back wall, where the portraits of Dyre's ancestors hung. Her eyes lingered longest on the portrait of Dyre himself...and his parents. She wished desperately that she could've met them.

Perhaps there was another way she could get to know them.

Ember turned her back on the portraits, to the books shelved beside them. She thought she remembered Dyre saying some Marquis kept journals or wrote memoirs later in life. Perhaps his parents wrote *something*. Ember ran her fingers over the spines of the books just below eye level, pulling a few to check if it was arranged in chronological order.

But Ember paused when she opened the cover of the second book. Someone had written a title on the first page: *A Life Lived in Love*. Ember didn't recognize the name written below, other than that she was related to Dyre. The date on the first entry was a little over a century before Dyre's birth. Any records Dyrerisan's parents left behind were probably a little further along the shelf, but... Ember's eyes fell on the first line and she knew she had to read it.

Shutting the book gently, Ember hugged it to her chest and wove her way back to where Dyre worked. She had a nest of blankets and pillows on one of the settees perfect for reading.

"What did you find this time?" Dyre asked, glancing up from his reports.

Ember held up the clothbound book. "A journal written by one of your ancestors. Have you read this one?"

"Not that I remember. If you discover any dark family secrets, don't hold it against me."

Ember matched his smile, settling into her seat with the book propped on a pillow. "I'll try not to."

As Dyre returned to his work, Ember opened the cover again, her eyes falling to the top of that first entry.

*Today we've finally reached our sunrise: today I marry my Marquis.*



Ember glanced at Dyre once more, just to reassure herself that he was there. And hoping that he wasn't watching her read. She had no idea what expression she wore. She shouldn't have worried: he was engrossed in a letter, comparing it against one of his maps. Ember returned her eyes to the page before her.

The journal was hardly the warm, happy account she expected it to be at the beginning.

Beatrix began the diary on the suggestion of her mother-in-law, and it began with all the happiness Ember had expected. Beatrix had faced obstacles before marrying her husband, Lucien, and she didn't take their union for granted. They were wholeheartedly in love with one another. For two years, Beatrix's entries mainly consisted of recording small moments of marital bliss, or her work at her husband's side.

But after the birth of their first son, things began taking a darker turn. Beatrix described trouble on the edges of Rausbane forest...disappearances and word of dark magic. Then trolls on the northern edges killing travelers. Her husband was gone more and more, and slowly storm clouds descended over their happy sunrise.

Ember was six years into Beatrix's story and everything was going wrong. But unlike Ember's story, she didn't believe there was a happy ending coming. Part of her wanted to shut the book and pretend she had never found it.

"Don't feel like you need to read every dusty page merely because I'm related to the author," Dyre said, glancing up.

Ember smiled with effort. "I do if I want to unearth those family secrets."

Dyre huffed, a smile edging his lips as he returned to his own reading. Ember took a deep and continued.

She was right. There was no second dawn.

Tears burned her eyes, blurring her vision, as Ember read Beatrix's grief at losing Lucien. The sorcerers troubling Rausbane had come to Nyxwood, and Lucien had sacrificed his life to vanquish them. He saved his family and the people under his protection...but he didn't live to see it. Beatrix's heartbreak felt far too familiar, and again Ember nearly closed the book. What more could there be to tell?

Except the following pages were filled with the same, looping handwriting. The tone of Beatrix's entries were different, more somber and tinged with grief, but Ember couldn't take her eyes away as she watched joy slowly creep back into Beatrix's life. She poured love into her children, she ruled Nyxwood with all the compassion and wisdom she'd learned from her husband, and she *kept living*.

Ember was transfixed, unaware of anything else as she raced through the long years of Beatrix's life. It wasn't until the final entry that she came back to herself, aware of her racing heart as she took in Beatrix's parting words.

*As my eyes dim, and I know my time to depart draws near, it seems natural that I reflect on my life. I have come to a realization as I read these many pages: I am blessed. For my life has been full of love, and what better life can one hope for?*

*I can leave in peace, knowing I've lived the life Lucien left for me as well as I could. Our love has never faltered, not even in these long years apart, the time is coming for me to finally rejoin my love in the eternity beyond. I do long to see his smile again.*



The handwriting on the next page was different, and Ember shut the book. She didn't want to read the words of whatever son or daughter closed Beatrix's life story. She was already overwhelmed. She stared at the towering shelves, her mind ringing with Beatrix's words as her heart struggled to comprehend all that she'd read.

Perhaps Beatrix's life wasn't the tragedy Ember had thought it. Perhaps she had her answer, now.

Dyre dropped his pen, and the clack of it hitting the desk made Ember jump. She wiped her eyes quickly and turned to face Dyre.

"I need some air," he said, setting paperweights on scattered papers. "Will you join me?"

The way he was looking at her was careful, and Ember knew that he'd been paying more attention to her than she'd guessed. The smile she offered him was weak, but genuine.

"Of course. Where are we going?"

"The gardens, I think."

He helped her stand, taking both of her hands in his and staring at her a moment. Ember let out a breath, and some weight fell from her shoulders as she stared up at Dyre: *her* Marquis. There were no great threats standing against them now, and she thanked the Almighty for that. Her smile was a little easier to hold afterward, and Dyre nodded in approval.

But even as Ember and Dyre walked into the sunlight, Ember's mind was caught on Beatrix and Lucien...on the kind of love that outlasted even death.



Ember took a slow, shaking breath as Miri straightened the many layers of her skirt. Freya stood in front of her, watching Ember with a soft smile that didn't hide the worry drawing lines around her eyes.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

Ember nodded, not trusting her voice. Freya handed her a bouquet of white roses, carefully wrapped in blue ribbon. She and Miri both offered Ember sympathetic looks as Ember continued to fight to keep her breathing steady.

"Just keep your eyes on Dyrerisan," Freya said, squeezing Ember's elbow. "You'll do fine."

Ember sincerely hoped so. Her heart was beating far too fast at the moment, and she was praying fervently that she wouldn't faint halfway to the altar. She wasn't sure she could recover from that kind of embarrassment, even if it was only friends watching.

Miri and Freya left her to join their husbands in the garden. Alone, she found it harder not to hyperventilate.

Was she sure about this? Was this really the right time to be married? *What if Dyre changes his mind now that I'm not someone in need of saving?*

"No," she whispered savagely, tightening her grip on her bouquet until she was sure the flowers would fall to pieces.

She wouldn't doubt Dyre. After all they'd been through, after all he'd done for her...she trusted him with everything. She'd allowed fear to rule her life for so long...would she really let it mold her mind now? No...she loved Dyre. He loved her. And she was going to step forward and vow to spend the rest of her life at his side, even if she trembled every step of the way.

Holding that promise in her mind, she took a step forward and knocked on the door that stood between her and the garden. It opened silently, and two new servants stood on either side as Ember stepped through.

Beyond, well over a dozen familiar faces turned to watch her. They stood gathered in a stone courtyard, surrounded by countless flowers bedecked in bright ribbons fluttering in the breeze. They all smiled as she stepped toward them. But as glad as she was to see their faces surrounding her, *they weren't* who she was searching for.

She cast her eyes over the clear aisle strewn with rose petals, to the arch of flowers where Dyrerisan and the minister stood. Then, taking another deep breath, she raised her eyes to his face.

Immediately Dyre's bright, love-filled gaze captured her. He stood tall, and as she watched his mouth spread in a wide grin. For the first time in far too long there was no shadow of fear in his eyes, nothing but joy. Ember found herself smiling. Her steps were a little steadier as she walked toward him.

After that, the ceremony passed in a haze. She must've said the right words, though, for the next thing she was aware of was Dyre kissing her and everyone cheering. As he pulled back to smile down at her, Ember felt she could breathe again.

The rest of the day passed with congratulations, embraces, and shared tears that all made Ember feel like she was spinning through the sky. But Dyre never let go of her hand, and that kept her tied to the ground. It was dusk, and Freya had enlisted everyone's help in lighting hundreds of candles, before Ember and Dyre managed to slip into the corner and sit together.

Ember leaned against Dyre, sighing in bliss as she watched their friends dance and eat and laugh. She was glad they were enjoying themselves, no matter how exhausting this celebration was turning out to be. Freya might not have been joking about Dyre carrying her away...her massive skirt felt far heavier now than it had when she first put it on.

"Are you ready to disappear?" Dyre whispered, running his fingers down her arm in a way that sent pleasant shivers across her skin.

“Yes.”

It had been a while since anyone had come over to speak to them. She didn't think anyone would mind if they quietly left. As Dyre helped her stand, Ember looked over the party once more. In the mingled light of the moon and candles, she could just make out their smiles. She followed Dyre gratefully into the shadows. Ember preferred to slip away quietly and leave everyone to their celebration.

Away from the party, Ember and Dyre walked slowly through the garden, circling around to an entrance hidden from Freya's thousands of candles.

But when they were nearing the door, Dyre tugged her sideways into a hidden alcove. Before Ember could ask what they were doing, he'd captured her lips with his in a kiss *far* more intimate than their kiss after the ceremony. Ember's knees went weak, and he was half carrying her by the time he pulled back to press his forehead to hers.

“Have I mentioned today how much I love you?” he whispered breathlessly.

“Not in words,” Ember replied. “Another kiss might make up for it.”

Dyre didn't need to be asked twice. And when they broke apart again, Dyre scooped her into his arms to carry her toward the door.

“Datted dress,” he muttered, struggling to get the door open around the fabric of Ember's skirt.

Ember giggled.

He wrestled it open, and as he stepped into the dimly lit hall, Ember laid her head on his shoulder and breathed deep. *Sunrise, indeed.*

Perhaps loving fully didn't mean being fearless...perhaps it meant being determined to love and *keep* loving. Perhaps it meant using that love to batter down any walls fear tried to build.

Ember would always fear losing Dyre, just as he would always fear losing her. But that didn't mean they had to let that fear rule their lives. As long as they *were* together, Ember was going to offer him every part of her heart again and again. And she wouldn't take a single moment for granted.