

A Silk & Steel NOVELLA #4.5

# REUNION

ARIANA NASH

‘Reunion’

4.5 Silk & Steel

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## BLURB

After a vicious storm delivers Eroan and Lysander's battered ship to the new world, where elves are in power and dragons must follow the law, the peace seems almost too good to be true.

Until Lysander ends up on the wrong side of those laws, and discovers the real reason Eroan brought him half way around the world: The brother he thought was dead, is very much alive.



Akiem is missing. Zane fears he knows why.

The infamous assassin Eroan Ilanea and his dragon, Lysander, did not come in peace. They came to upset everything Zane and Akiem have created, and for revenge.

Zane isn't about to let them hurt Akiem. He'll stand for his dragon, and for what's right, even if he doesn't stand a chance, because love is always worth fighting for.



Lysander and Eroan, Akiem and Zane. They'll fight for each other, and for love. But now their love faces its hardest test yet.

Will they overcome the horrors of their past to fight for a better future or will Akiem's past (and the truth of who he really is) be too terrible to forgive?

## FOREWORD



Dear Reader,

You knew this would happen eventually...



## CHAPTER 1

Eroan

RUMBLING thunder made the night tremble. Or perhaps that groaning was the ship's hull finally coming to rest against a dockside.

Eroan stepped from the cabin that had been his only shelter for the last six weeks and pulled his hood up, leaning into sheets of driving rain.

Deckhands yelled into the wind, tossing ropes to those waiting on-land to secure the battered ship. The crossing had not been easy, but they'd finally arrived in the new world.

Lightning flashed, blasting the night in startling shades of gray. Huge buildings greeted like bared teeth, each one bigger than Ashford's tree. He'd only seen buildings as substantial around the amethyst tower, now rubble. But here, they loomed everywhere, making him small in their shadow. This land was indeed very different from the one he'd left behind.

More thunder pulled his gaze skyward. A flicker of lightning forked across the sky, splitting the dark in two, briefly scorching the image of a dragon in flight into Eroan's vision. The instinct to fight flooded his veins. His fingers twitched to grasp his sword, slung against his back. The black dragon was huge, its wing strokes vast and silent. In a blink, it was gone, plunged back into darkness. No other elves seemed concerned. The deckhands and dockworkers continued to fuss about the ship's ropes. Did they not know there was a dragon above them, or did they not care?

“Welcome!” A smiling female elf beckoned him down the gangplank, hollering to be heard over the pounding rain. “Come, let’s get you inside!” she urged.

“A dragon—” he began.

“Oh, it’s fine.” She dismissed with a light laugh. “He likes to watch the ships come in.”

Puzzled by her lack of fear, he descended the gangplank and followed her path across a wide street, avoiding the flooded gutters and puddles. When the lightning flashed again, he searched the sky for the dragon but saw only darkness. Did this land have many obsidian dragonkin? Ashore just minutes and already he had dozens of questions.

“Goodness, what a storm!” she declared, sweeping into a small, warm room. She closed the door behind them, pulled off her coat, hung it on a rack, and beamed. “Let’s get you signed in.” Her clothing was unlike any Eroan had seen. Almost intricate in detail, with numerous buttons and fine stitching. His leathers were rough and clumsy in comparison.

He lowered his hood and stepped to the table. A collection of notebooks and assorted trinkets were strewn about the tabletop, the purpose of which Eroan had no idea. Above, a single source of light glowed a constant warm white. Not a candle flame. Something more reliable, like a tiny sun in a small glass bowl, not bigger than his cupped hands.

“My name is Elise. I’m here to welcome you to Bayston.” She spoke the same language as Eroan, but the words flowed differently, lending her an accent he’d heard only from the human dracologist, Ben. He’d called it *American*. “I make sure all ships coming and going are registered, cargo, people, humans and elves, that sort of thing. You’re the first I’ve seen from the old world. This is *very* exciting.” He could see that from her huge grin.

“Do you have a manifest?”

“The captain does.”

“Oh. You’re not the captain?”

“No, just a passenger.”

“Ah, well, I suppose we can start with you.” She picked up a pencil. “Your name?”

“Eroan Ilanea.”

She blinked, looked up, and her smile wobbled. “Eroan Ilanea?”

“Is there a problem?”



“No.” More of her smile fell away. “I’ll just... Please wait here a moment.” She dashed around the desk, grabbed her coat, and left, leaving the door ajar in her haste, allowing the rain to blow in.

Eroan peeked out the door and watched her hurry through the puddles and dash into another building. His name had clearly unsettled her. His own legend preceded him. At times, he wished it weren’t so widespread, but he hadn’t expected his name to have reached the elves across the ocean.

He closed the door, shutting out the rain, and assessed the room more closely. Chairs lined one wall, and behind them, various posters revealed events and tide times. One poster was for a council meeting, inviting both dragons and elves to attend. That seemed foolish. What dragon would be interested in elven politics? Without an emerald to keep the dragonkin under control, surely it would be like placing a shark among minnows. Perhaps they had a formidable Order presence here?

Another poster declared: ALL DRAGONKIN MUST REGISTER ON ARRIVAL in bright red lettering. Beneath it: *Those failing to register will be exiled.*

He arched an eyebrow. It seemed as though elves held all the power here. Interesting.

The door opened and a red-haired elf breezed in. Without a coat, the rain had drenched him, making him look ragged and wild. Water dripped from his bangs and stuck his shirt to his shoulders, although his disheveled state didn’t dampen the sudden flash of a smile lighting up a handsome face.

With fluid grace, he took up Elise’s place behind the table and scanned the books and trinkets, then wet his lips, as though trying to decide how best to proceed. Perhaps he was someone more official?

“Eroan Ilanea?” he asked, lifting his head. The smile he’d tossed Eroan’s way on arrival had grown cold.

“Yes.”

“Are you traveling alone?”

“No. My companion is aboard the—”

“Elf or dragon?”

“Dragon.”

“All dragons must report to the registry office,” he said with an air of prickly authority. Clearly, he was someone of importance. He smiled too

easily but held a deadly keenness in his gaze, suggesting his smiles could turn sharp.

“Lysander is the dragon king.”

The red-haired elf straightened and looked Eroan in the eyes. “Where you come from maybe, but here, he’s just another dragon.”

Eroan measured the male’s glare. They’d never met. He’d have remembered someone so striking. So the animosity must have been due to Eroan’s name.

“You should remove the sword,” the male added, and then with a judgmental tilt of the chin, pointed to a poster on the wall: NO WEAPONS.

He had no wish to upset the local elves moments after arrival. Obliging, he shrugged the dragonblade from his back and rested it against the desk. But now the male looked more annoyed, not less.

“If I’ve offended you, I did not mean to,” Eroan said, hoping to appease him.

“How can you offend me when we’ve only just met?”

Well, that was going to be Eroan’s next question, but clearly this conversation was only getting worse. “You have my name. Perhaps I can have yours?”

“Zane.” His cheek flickered. He offered no further information, and an awkward silence began to stretch to a breaking point.

“I’ll make sure Lysander is registered,” Eroan said. “Is there anything else you require of us?”

“Your intention here?”

He hadn’t written anything down, so who was asking, a dock official or Zane personally?

“To open trade routes and share knowledge.”

Zane snorted.

Eroan forced a smile. He had a limit, and this elf *Zane* was fast approaching it. “Are we done?”

Zane straightened and crossed his arms, and it was only now Eroan noticed the missing finger from his right hand. “For now.”

Eroan knew exactly what Lysander would say to this prickly elf, which was why he’d volunteered to greet the elves here first, but now he wondered if Lysander had a point. If this was how all outsiders were greeted, it wasn’t any wonder why this land hadn’t been visited in generations.

Eroan collected his sword and dipped his chin, acknowledging Zane. He'd opened the door when Zane asked, "You're not looking for someone?"

"Who would I be looking for?" Eroan replied, glancing back.

The elf's demeanor hadn't improved. In fact, he now looked as though he was ready to leap across the desk and make his anger physical.

Eroan flicked his hood up and walked into the rain. If Zane truly knew his name, then he knew Eroan wouldn't be bullied or threatened. It could only have been twisted rumors that had made Zane's hackles rise. Whatever the reason, his ire was not Eroan's concern.

He returned to the ship, passing by the deckhands busy unloading goods, and ducked into the cabin. Warm lantern light illuminated Lysander, lying back on the bed, hands locked behind his head and legs crossed at the ankle. His shirt gaped, carelessly buttoned, and his dark hair fell about him in loose, unruly waves.

"How'd it go?" Lysander asked, smiling. He hadn't smiled in weeks. It was a joy to see it playing on his lips.

"Not what I was expecting." Eroan left his sword and cloak by the desk and, crossing the floor, ran his fingers through his wet hair, relishing how Lysander's green-eyed gaze hungrily devoured every step. "Someone had heard of me, and not in a good way."

Lysander's low growl resonated around the cabin. "Want me to eat them?"

With a chuckle, Eroan settled on the edge of the bed. Dragons weren't meant to ride waves, Lysander had said. He'd spent much of the voyage in the air as dragon, too sick as man to stay aboard. Flying for consecutive weeks with only a handful of breaks on passing islands, had left him exhausted and miserable. But now they'd arrived, he'd clearly relaxed, and if his hungry grin was any indication, he was back to being Eroan's typically playful, content dragon. His green eyes sparkled, his mouth sloped sideways, and with all of him spread on the bed, he was a gift Eroan struggled not to unwrap.

He reached out and teased Lysander's dragon-carving necklace between his fingers and thumb, skimming Lysander's warm skin. "I can think of far more enjoyable things to eat."

Lysander's strong fingers clamped around Eroan's wrist, and in one swift movement, he flipped Eroan onto his back and pinned him to the bed. Lysander's possessive growl rumbled through him and instantly ousted all

thoughts of the grumpy elf from Eroan's head, implanting more pleasurable ideas there instead. "Ah," Eroan mocked, attempting to hide his grin and failing, "I am caught."

Lysander's jaw brushed Eroan's as his warm mouth teased a kiss at Eroan's throat. "Beg for mercy," he purred, deep voice rumbling.

By Alumn, he'd never get enough of his dragon. He made a pathetic effort to writhe free and earned Lysander's knee between his thighs. And now he truly was caught, and he couldn't think of anywhere else in all his travels he'd rather be than pinned beneath Lysander, the Dragon King.

## CHAPTER 2

Lysander

THE SUN BLAZED, making this strange city sparkle in early morning daylight. Mist rose off the puddles and steamed off roofs. He would have quite liked to take a look at the city from the wing, but Eroan had warned him to be subtle. This was a new land, with new rules they didn't yet know. Emerald dragons didn't have the best reputations, so flashing his scales for all to see wouldn't be the best first impression.

He'd left Eroan sleeping in their cabin, satisfied and lightly snoring. He'd almost stayed safely beneath the sheets with Eroan tucked close—after the wretched journey, he'd sorely needed his elf—but curiosity had lured him from the ship to explore.

Everything was different. And it wasn't just the towering boxes blotting out the sky that humans were so fond of living in. Dragons and elves meandered about the street, mingling as though they were *equal*.

He walked the docks and up side streets, toward a market area populated mostly by elves. But there were dragons too. Obvious by their bulky physiques. On the surface, it all seemed too good to be true. But the more he looked, the more a thread of tension underlined the apparent peacefulness. The peace was fragile, held together by something Lysander hadn't yet seen. A dragon, probably. Or many of them. Elves alone couldn't control a city full of dragons. Not even Eroan was that good. An emerald

could, but they were so rare it was unlikely another emerald held this place in its thrall. That thought tripped him. But what if it *was* an emerald? He'd only met one other. Akiem had killed him, ensuring Lysander had learned how to be an emerald alone. There could be other emeralds this side of the ocean.

Could be metals. Eroan was right to suggest caution.

He wandered from market stall to market stall, marveling at the clothes and goods being sold. His own clothes lacked the finesse of the attire here, and he made a mental note to see if he could find some "coin," as they called it, and purchase more appropriate clothing. His leathers marked him as foreign and earned a lot of curious glances from both dragon and elf. He wondered if any here knew his name or if Elisandra and the bronze war had been too far away for them to care.

He made it halfway through the market before realizing he was being followed, and not discreetly. Two mean-faced elves had made him their target and were fast approaching, armed with human rifles slung over their backs. The early morning crowd parted ahead of them, leaving Lysander suddenly exposed. Clearly, this was the welcoming party.

Lysander lifted his hands, for all the good it would do him. He couldn't hide the fact he was dragon. But there were other dragonkin among the crowd, so it wasn't his race that had them hunting him down. Eroan had said something about registering, and maybe he should have done that, but he'd been far more interested in making Eroan gasp and groan than following up on whatever protocol he was supposed to follow here. That lapse was probably about to come back and bite him in the ass.

"Dragon, you will immediately attend the registry office, either by your own will or by force."

Lysander shrugged sheepishly. "I was just..." They looked like they really didn't give a shit that he was exploring out of curiosity, and if he didn't comply in the time it took Lysander to draw his next breath, they'd shoot him between the eyes. "Lead on."

Being escorted to the registry office was probably not what Eroan had in mind when he'd said to be subtle, especially as everyone in the market witnessed it, like he was a naughty dragon stepping out of line. He probably shouldn't have found the whole thing amusing either. The elf waiting in the registry office definitely wasn't smiling.

“Name,” he grumbled. He was short, for an elf, and the lines on his face suggested he was old enough to have seen a whole lot of shit, which was probably why he’d landed the task of registering dragons.

“Lysander.”

“And you’re obviously dragon,” he muttered to himself, scribbling in his logbook. Lots of names had been logged on the pages. Various jeweled dragons. No metals. Good. Those fuckers could stay in Europe. He’d left his own flight of jeweled patrolling the coast, keeping his and Eroan’s home safe from intruders. They’d become mostly well-behaved and self-regulated by eating anyone who stepped out of line. He hadn’t had to remind them who he was and what he was capable of in over a year. Alumn hadn’t been screwing around when she’d made emeralds to manage the dragonkin.

“Scales?” the elf asked.

“What?”

“Your scales?”

“Er...” Was he asking if he had scales? Did some dragons *not* have scales? Was that a thing here?

The elf sighed. “What color are your scales?”

“Oh. Right.” He scratched at his cheek and eyed the two rifle-carrying elves standing by the door. “Amethyst,” he lied. It wasn’t like they’d know he was emerald, but they might know what being emerald meant.

“Lysander Amethyst,” the short elf repeated, eyeing him as though looking for the lie.

He hadn’t heard of him, had he? Eroan had said the elves knew his name, but Eroan was Eroan. *Everyone* knew him. Lysander was just... Lysander. He smiled back, hoping he looked innocent.

“Do you need a job?” the elf asked.

“A what?”

“You’re not from around here, are you?” He raked his glare over Lysander’s clothing, probably noting how scruffy he looked compared to the elves.

“I arrived by ship during the storm last night.”

“So, here’s how it works. Everyone has a job to do. Bayston city doesn’t fix itself. Dragons get the physical jobs, the heavy lifting, construction.”

“What do elves get?”

“Administration, council tasks, management. Jobs requiring... finesse.” He dragged a typically elven look down Lysander as though Lysander

wouldn't know finesse if it hit him in the face.

Lysander sucked on his teeth, considering a reply that might not go down too well with three elves as his audience. "What if I want one of those other jobs?"

The short elf shrugged. "Any grievances are to be raised via your dragon representative. Do you need a job or not, dragon?"

This seemed like an important discussion. This short elf did look very serious. He really should have spoken with Eroan before venturing out. "Do jobs get coin?"

"Yes."

"All right, I'll take a job."

"How big are you as dragon?"

"That's kinda personal."

The short elf was not amused, but from the loud snort behind Lysander, an elf by the door was.

"I'm big." Lysander grinned, relaxing a little now he had some of the door-elves on his side. "The biggest."

Shorty gave him the long look of someone who'd dealt with dragons too long. "How much weight can you lift?"

"A shit-ton."

"That's an opinion, not a measurement."

He shrugged. "So what measurement do you want? Weight in elves? You're all pretty skinny, so, maybe eighty of you? But you wriggle *a lot*—"

"Look, I can put you in an easy job or a shit job. Piss me off and guess which one you get."

He was no fun. "I'll lift whatever you've got. Just give me any job, and I'll do it."

"Fine." Shorty scribbled on a slip of paper, ripped it from its book, and handed it over. "The city laws are on the back. Break them and— Well, just don't break them."

Lysander flipped over the note. ALL DRAGONS MUST OBEY THE FOLLOWING OR RISK EXILE / EXECUTION. By nights, these elves weren't screwing around. DUSK TIL DAWN CURFEW. ALL ELVES ARE TO BE TREATED EQUALLY. VERBAL OR PHYSICAL ABUSE AGAINST ELVES IS STRICTLY PROHIBITED. There was a string of other stifling laws, making Lysander purse his lips. He couldn't exactly



blame them for treating dragonkin like animals when the dragonkin had a history of eating elves, but it still didn't sit easy with him.

"Report to the address on the front at 11:00 a.m." Shorty slammed his logbook closed.

"Eleven what?"

The elf rolled his eyes. "Get out of here."

## CHAPTER 3

Zane

THE CITY SKYLINE was sprawled all around in every direction. A few dragons sailed through the blue sky, but the one he wanted to see was absent.

Akiem hadn't come home last night. Akiem always came home. He always climbed into bed, smelling of the cool night, his skin damp and salty from the ocean mist, and Zane would fold him in close, breathe him in, so he knew he was safe. Before... there had been times when he'd disappear and Zane would find him curled up in a barren warehouse, alone and withdrawn as dragon. He always brought him home again. Those instances had become distant memories.

But the storm last night had brought a new threat to their land. One Akiem had spoken of before.

Eroan Ilanea.

Formidable. Ruthless. The elf whom Akiem fielded questions about but when he answered, it was always with awe and fear and anger and all the things he couldn't voice but Zane saw in his eyes. Eroan was part of Akiem's past. A past he'd fled thousands of miles from. But he hadn't fled far enough. It had found him again, even here.

He'd had Eroan followed. Zane would know his every move. But all of that would be useless if Akiem didn't come home.

Akiem had seen the ship.

Zane was sure of it.

Maybe he'd even seen Eroan Ilanea.

And now he was in the wind somewhere, lost in his own head like he used to be.

They'd been fine. They'd been content. The city was working. Dragons and elves, everything was coming together. And now Eroan was here and Akiem wasn't.

Zane scanned the horizon, looking for the distinctive black wings. "Where are you?"

After everything they'd fought for and survived, Akiem wouldn't leave. Would he?

But Zane didn't know everything, just that whatever torture Akiem had endured, Eroan Ilanea had been a large part of it. Maybe Eroan needed a lesson in how elves did things this side of the ocean, or maybe he just needed to be shoved back on the next ship with his dragon companion and sent back where they belonged.

"You know I'll always keep you safe," he told the wind, hoping that wherever Akiem was, he'd hear him in his heart and come home.

## CHAPTER 4

Eroan

LYSANDER HAD DISAPPEARED after declaring he was busy all day, leaving Eroan to wander the city and soak up its strange ambiance. Barely anyone noticed him, too busy with their daily lives. It was clear the city had been a vast human metropolis in the past. Perhaps it would be again, but much of the outer areas were derelict, with most activity centered around its market heart. Elves outnumbered dragons two to one. Some soared above, but not many. Likely because of the rules Lysander had briefly grumbled about in the morning before setting off for something he called a “job.”

As far as Eroan could tell, the city was ruled by a council of elf and dragon. Which seemed... unlikely, but he had hoped for the same in the past, before Lysander’s “gift” had been revealed. He wanted to speak with the elders of the city and would ask for an audience, but this day was about observing and learning.

Of course, nothing was as it seemed. Made all the more obvious when he spotted an elf trailing behind him, deliberately trying to be subtle and failing. Eroan slipped onto a side street, leading the female away from the crowd, and doubled back to come up behind her.

“Am I that interesting”—she spun at the sound of his voice—“that you can’t help but follow me?” He didn’t have his dragonblade, but he did have

daggers. Still, he didn't think he'd need them. His stalker wasn't armed, and she looked at him now like a rabbit caught in the open.

"Oh, I should just—"

He stepped in front of her, blocking her path. "Why are you following me?"

"I wasn't." She set her jaw in a way that reminded him of Seraph's when she'd been caught in a lie.

"Who sent you?"

She lifted her hands. "He just asked me to follow, okay. Not to talk to you."

"He who?"

Stepping around him, she hurried on her way.

"Was it Zane?" he called.

Her stride tripped. She glanced back before jogging into the crowd ambling to and from the market.

It was time this Zane answered Eroan's questions.

Eroan wandered some more and fell into easy conversation with the market traders, discovering Zane was on the city council, therefore powerful enough to have Eroan ejected from his city, if he saw fit.

He tried the welcome office and asked after Zane there, but Elise had refused to answer any questions and looked a twitch away from summoning the guards. What he'd done that was so terrible as to frighten her, he had no idea. But Zane knew. He'd know a lot of things. He entered the building Elise had disappeared into the night before. The large, open space inside was cluttered with chairs and tables, flanked by a long serving counter along one wall. A meeting place of some kind. Although, it was almost empty now.

"Can I help you?" the male behind the counter asked.

"I'm looking for Zane. He's on the council. Do you know where I might find him?"

"He'll be here tonight, probably. Likes to keep an ear to the ground, listen to the real talk, yah know? But other than that, I can't help you, friend. Unless you want to book an official appointment with the council?" He side-eyed Eroan, spotting the daggers at his hips. "I guess you don't seem the sort for that..."

"I'll return this evening then."

The rest of the day passed quickly, and Eroan returned to the ship moments before Lysander strolled up the gangplank, grinning from ear to ear. He took Eroan's hand and dumped a bag of chinking metal in his palm. The heady odors of metal, sweat, and dust clouded around him. He looked as though he'd been rolling in the street. "Coin," he said, like that explained everything, and then he ducked inside the cabin, leaving Eroan too curious not to follow.

Lysander pulled off his shirt, unleashing a cloud of dust.

"You're filthy," Eroan remarked.

"Hm, I know. It's wonderful." Lysander tossed him a sly look, unbuttoned his trousers, and stepped free. He poured water from a pitcher into a basin and plunged his face into it, gasping when he straightened. After drying off, he grabbed a shirt from a fresh pile of clothes on the bed and tugged it on. "I got you some clothes to blend in."

Eroan tore his gaze from the hypnotic temptation of Lysander half-naked and picked up a buttoned shirt with delicate needlework around the cuffs and collar.

Lysander's fingers worked at the row of buttons down the front of his own shirt. "They all look so neat here. I thought we should make an effort too."

Lysander's shirt was purple, complementing his darker skin, and honestly, Eroan wanted all those buttons immediately undone again. "You've been busy."

"I got paid with coin. Coin buys goods."

"From a job?"

"Exactly. They had me indoors, lifting blocks, rebuilding their houses after a fire ripped through here a year ago. I didn't have to be dragon, or they'd known my scales aren't amethyst like I told them."

"You lied?"

His eyebrow ticked. "Only a little."

"And what happens when they ask you to be dragon?"

Lysander's smile grew. He looped his arms around Eroan's waist and pulled him close. "Worried?"

A flutter of nerves shortened Eroan's breath. He *was* worried. "You need to be careful. Dragons aren't in power here."

"Well then, I have my elf to protect me. Do I need protecting?"

His words brushed Eroan's lips. It wouldn't take much to tilt his head back and accept Lysander's promised kiss, but if that happened, they'd never leave for the meeting place.

"No," Eroan said and then immediately corrected himself, "Yes."

Lysander licked his lips. His strong, warm hands roamed lower, down Eroan's back, to cup his ass. He growled a hungry sound low in his throat, making Eroan laugh and try to extricate himself from his grip now or there'd be no escaping him.

Reluctantly, he pulled free and earned Lysander's heartrending sad-eyes. "Don't give me that look, dragon. The elf I annoyed after we arrived... He sent people to follow me."

"He did?" Lysander's face darkened. "Why?"

"We're going to find out."

Eroan stripped and dressed in the new clothes Lysander had purchased with his coin, feeling strange in the light shirt and clean lines. His patched leather had always felt like a second skin. The new clothes barely felt like he was dressed at all. They certainly wouldn't deflect the point of a dagger.

Lysander spotted him frowning at the thin shirtsleeves and swooped in, nuzzling his neck. Warm arms folded around him from behind. Eroan leaned back against his chest, soaking in his warmth.

"By nights, do we have to go out?" Lysander groaned. "I have everything I want right here." And to prove it, the hard nudge of his arousal dug against Eroan's ass.

They did need to go out, and they needed answers, because Eroan had brought him halfway around the world for more than trading goods and knowledge, and if the rumors were true, Lysander might not thank him, but he needed to know the truth.

Eroan turned in his arms and kissed him quickly on the lips, then pulled free, making him whine. "Come with me now and ravish me later."

Lysander's growl and accompanying glower sparked Eroan's laugh all over again.

## CHAPTER 5

Zane

BEFORE AKIEM, Zane had visited Bayston's bars, looking for someone free and easy to warm his bed. Now, he visited to gauge the mood of the people who'd gotten free and easy with their words over a few tankards of beer. Tonight though, his thoughts were a long way away from work.

Still no Akiem. He'd asked the dragonkin close to the council and none had seen him since before the storm.

Akiem was his own dragon. He was free to go anywhere he pleased. But he never went far. He protected Bayston and routinely patrolled the city outskirts, looking for any dragons who might be watching the city and its defenses with jealous eyes. A few had tried to unseat Akiem in the year since he'd brought peace, but none succeeded. Those Akiem didn't see off, he killed. Meanwhile, the city, the elves, and the dragonkin, were considered Akiem's territory, and his brood, as he called them. He wouldn't just up and leave. He could have been attacked, but nobody had seen any scuffles or signs of attack.

"Zane," an English-accented voice said. Its infamous owner slid onto the stool beside Zane's at the bar. The accent was so like Akiem's, it briefly unbalanced Zane to hear it on another's lips.

He raised an eyebrow at the white-haired elf. Eroan made an attempt to blend in by ditching his leathers. He no more blended in than a dagger in a



drawer of spoons. “Eroan,” Zane drawled. “Where’s your dragon?”

“Outside. As this meeting house is full of elves, he thought it might be better I spoke with you alone,” he replied. “You had me followed. Why?”

He didn’t beat about the bush, this one. Zane twisted on the stool to face the warrior-elf. His exploits were well-known. If the legend was to be believed, he’d killed the dragon queen and set into motion the downfall of the European dragons, with the help of his dragon companion—the one he’d called the dragon king. He didn’t look like the sort who needed anyone’s help. Blue eyes scrutinized Zane. Eroan didn’t mask his expression behind fake smiles. It was all there on his face, and he meant business. He was also sporting two vicious-looking daggers, one at each hip.

“Only city watchers openly carry weapons,” Zane told him.

Eroan’s straight mouth twitched. “Perhaps I wouldn’t need to carry weapons if I wasn’t being stalked.”

“No harm will come to any elf in Bayston. We made sure of that.”

He hesitated, as if considering his reply. “What you’ve accomplished here—the council, the laws—it’s impressive.”

“I don’t need your approval.”

“I wasn’t giving it.”

Zane narrowed his eyes. “Why are you here?”

“I told you.”

“Huh, yeah, you told me what you tell everyone. But why are you *really* here?”

He tilted his head. “I feel we may have started on the wrong foot.”

“Nope,” Zane beamed sarcastically. “I think we started right where we needed to, Eroan Ilanea.”

“You don’t like me.”

“That must be a surprise for you?”

Eroan sighed. He faced the bar and folded his hands together on the bartop as he absently watched the servers flit about. “Are you always this rude to people you don’t know?”

“I know enough about you.”

“What is it you think you know?” He turned his head and met Zane’s gaze. “What have you heard that has you hating me so?”

Zane pinched his lips together and tasted his drink. “I heard your dragon companion almost got himself arrested today.”

Eroan's mouth twitched again, this time hinting at a smile. He thought that amusing. Why? Did he laugh at their rules? "Are you having him followed too?" he asked.

"Lysander Amethyst," Zane said, repeating the name the registrar had logged. "Are there many amethysts where you come from?"

"Not anymore."

"And why is that?" Zane asked.

"The queen was killed, her amethyst brood fell."

Zane nodded. "The war you fought and won. You must be all out of battles to fight. Is that why you're here? Are you looking for more wars to win?"

The question briefly stalled Eroan. "If you're concerned that myself and Lysander are looking for trouble, don't be. We did not come here to upset the careful balance you've created."

He was smooth, this one. Precise with his words. But there was a lot more going on behind his eyes. He wasn't just a warrior, he was a strategist too. And he'd brought his companion, a formidable dragon in his own right. Why would two warriors be here on a mission of sharing knowledge? They wouldn't. Warriors knew only how to fight. Zane would have preferred to have Akiem beside him, telling Eroan and Lysander where they could shove their sharing knowledge, but as he was alone, he had to make do with a friendly threat. "I suggest you and your dragon leave Bayston on the next high tide. There's nothing here for you."

Eroan lifted a hand and summoned a server. He asked what others were drinking and ordered one for himself, then paid in coin. If Zane's words had any effect on him, he didn't show it. After tasting his drink, he set the tankard down and asked, "Do you know of any obsidian-scaled dragons with golden eyes?"

"No," Zane replied smoothly even as his heart thumped. The fact Eroan had called Akiem's eyes golden revealed he didn't know the truth. And that seemed important. Akiem was afraid of his truth—that he was half bronze. Perhaps others would be too. Afraid enough to hurt him? Had this Eroan tried to hurt Akiem before?

"A rumor reached me that he might be here," Eroan said. "His name is Akiem, but he could have chosen another. You haven't heard or seen any dragon by that name?"

“No, there’s no dragon here like that.” Zane reached for his drink again. “Why?” he asked, focusing on the tankard and not Eroan’s piercing eyes.

“He...” Eroan cut himself off, and when Zane glanced over, his face echoed his distant thoughts. “You’re sure?”

“I know every dragonkin who arrives in this city. Every single one must register, and they all do. If he were here, I’d know it.”

Eroan nodded slowly. “Then we’ll do as you suggest and leave at the next high tide.”

Relief lifted the weight off Zane’s shoulders. Once they left, Akiem would return and everything would go back to how it was.

The bar door flew open and a breathless elf stumbled in. “Attack! From the skies! Dragon!”

Zane bolted off the barstool and burst through the door onto the street. Dusklight bathed the city in an orange glow, and there, soaring above the bay and coming in fast, was a diamond dragon. Its firepit glowed, ready to spew flame across the docks.

Gods, Zane fucking hated diamonds. Akiem always dealt with them, but he wasn’t here. The dragonkin flight he commanded would eventually intercept, but not before the dragon reached the waterfront.

“Lysander,” Eroan said, loud enough for Zane to glance over.

A male dragon—Zane assumed to be Eroan’s dragonkin companion—shoved off the wall he’d been leaning against, and with a quick glance left and right, he dashed forward, toward the edge of the dockside. His sudden shift washed colorless light over every nearby building and docked ship. When the light withdrew, an enormous, green-scaled dragon leaped from the dock, spread his vast wings, and beat the air, whipping up a storm of seawater as he fought for altitude. The roar he loosed was a thunder of his own, like a force of nature, and the incoming dragon banked a hard right, rethinking its attack. But Lysander clearly wasn’t about to let it escape. He beat the air harder, fire boiling low in his long throat.

He was... magnificent, and fucking terrifying. If he turned on the city, without Akiem here to defend them, there would be little Zane or Akiem’s dragonkin could do to stop him.

Zane caught a glimpse of Eroan’s expression beside him, and he’d be damned if the elf’s face weren’t full of awe and maybe even the soft lips and aching look of love. Zane’s internal fears shifted slightly. If Eroan—the

infamous dragon killer—was capable of loving a dragon, then could Zane be wrong about him?

Eroan's face fell. "No!"

Zane followed Eroan's stare. A sleek, obsidian-scaled dragon Zane knew well shot like an arrow from above. Akiem! But his elation was short-lived as Akiem—claws out and teeth bared—slammed into Lysander's back. He'd struck while Lysander had been chasing the diamond intruder, and Lysander hadn't seen him. Lysander's scream echoed across the bay. He buckled, and the pair plunged into the bay's dark waters.

A dagger kissed Zane's throat to a chorus of nearby gasps. Someone shouted for the watchers, but Zane froze.

Eroan pushed on the dagger and bared his teeth. "If Lysander dies, so do you."

## CHAPTER 6

Lysander

A FLASH OF BLACK, the burn of pain between his wings, and before he knew what or who had hit him, he struck the sea. Water poured between his teeth, instantly quenching his flame. Steam bubbled and hissed, blinding him—fear gripped his heart. The dark. Like before. He couldn't see—and then golden eyes flashed. Golden eyes flecked with black. Eyes *he knew*.

But that wasn't possible.

A trick.

A fluke.

It couldn't be Akiem.

His brother was dead. Eroan had told him so.

Teeth snapped at him, inches from his nose. Lysander jerked back, kicking out with his feet, and broke the surface, gasping for air. He thrashed his wings, but there was no use in trying to take flight—the sea had him now. He'd have to swim ashore.

He scanned the undulating surface, throwing glances left and right, looking for the black dragon. They couldn't have taken to the wing either. They were as trapped in the water as Lysander. And they couldn't be Akiem. Just some random obsidian who happened to look like Akiem. The shock had Lysander forgetting he could overpower his attacker with a glance, but now the dragon had lost the element of surprise, Lysander could

snare his gaze, and this would be over. But the slippery bastard wasn't showing himself.

Lysander plunged his head underwater. The churning waters blurred his vision. The black dragon could easily hide in the depths below. Until they ran out of air.

Treading water, he spread his wings, creating more buoyancy, and started for the jagged city shoreline. Other dragons had taken to the skies. All enemies until proven otherwise. By nights, he'd gotten complacent. He should have been more guarded. More careful.

Pain snapped up his tail and a sudden pull yanked him down. A gasp and he was underwater again, watching the light fade. Damn it, this wretched obsidian wasn't going to best him in some faraway land. He rolled, pulling up as he used his wings as oars to dive down, and there he was, the black beast. All sleek and matte-black scales, virtually invisible in the water.

*Look at me*, he silently urged. *Look me in the eyes and you're mine.*

The obsidian freed his grip on Lysander's tail and kicked into the dark, vanishing again.

A growl rumbled through Lysander. He kicked after him in the direction he'd swum, but too soon, his lungs burned, demanding he rise. He broke the surface again, gasping and snarling with every breath. The beast was a coward, using the dark to hide himself.

The tide had pushed Lysander closer to land, toward a rocky outcrop that had once held some sort of human structure. Lysander swam toward it, keeping his wings in and body sleek. His tail was the only part exposed, but there was little he could do than hope the obsidian had lost sight of him too.

The sharp black rocks loomed closer. The waters around it would be shallow, if he could just reach them and climb free—

Teeth snapped at his tail again, harder this time. Lysander loosed a roar. He twisted, diving under and hauling the obsidian *above* him like a fish on a line. The obsidian was huge. Lysander lunged for his belly and met a face-full of claws. One raked his nose, too close to his eyes. He withdrew, his tail his own again, and found the rocks. Clambering out of the water, he stretched his wings and beat them once—twice—shaking off heavy water. Turning and whipping his tail out of reach, he backed up the jagged rocky outcrop, watching the churning water for any sign of the obsidian.

The rocks whipped up surf, misting the air and him in saltwater.

Flame sizzled in his throat. He stoked it higher, readying to unleash.

The *thud-thud* of his heart was too loud in his ears.

No dragon emerged.

He'd hardly gotten a swipe in at the bastard, so he couldn't be wounded.

Maybe he'd decided to withdraw and had swum farther out, where his black crown was easily missed among the rolling surface.

Lysander bared his teeth in one final warning and lifted his head. The diamond screamed. Shining claws and purple eyes flashed, *too damn close!* He summoned the wild part of him, the vicious, hungry part inside that wanted to bite and fuck and own everything, the part that would snare this dragon and bring it under his control, but it was too late. The diamond was on him.

A great black wave of scales burst from the surf, jaws wide, purple fire lighting up the dusk, and snatched the smaller diamond out of its dive. He fell back into the water, taking the screeching diamond with him, and both were gone, submerged beneath the surface.

Akiem.

Lysander backed higher atop the rocks.

Purple flame. *Amethyst* flame.

Golden eyes.

There was no other dragon like him.

Lysander couldn't think.

He didn't know what this was.

Akiem was here? Akiem had knocked him out of the sky and tried to kill him? What was this? It didn't make any sense. It couldn't. Eroan had said he'd died saving him and Seraph. Dokul had killed him.

*Eroan was wrong.*

Lysander beat his wings and took to the air again, half of him wanting to stay and face Akiem, but half aching and hurting, because he'd felt the sting of his brother's teeth all over again, and he had no idea what that meant.

He landed at the far end of the docks and licked his tail's bloody scales, not caring about the curious elves watching from windows high in their buildings.

Eroan would have seen Akiem take him out of the sky. Eroan had said he was dead. Eroan, who had apparently grown fond of Akiem in the time they'd spent together, time enough for Akiem to protect him and Seraph—to supposedly sacrifice himself for them.

It was foolish, silly even, to feel jilted, but clearly, someone had lied and all this time Akiem had been alive. Eroan couldn't have known? But it had been his idea to come here. He'd insisted, in fact.

Lysander's long tongue stroked over his tail. He gnawed off a few broken scales and lifted his gaze to a few curious elves who'd snuck closer. Huffing, he ignored them and renewed cleaning his throbbing tail.

He should probably find Eroan. He'd explain.

And Akiem would come after him soon. To kill him?

The last Lysander had seen of Akiem, he'd been with Eroan and the elves, trekking north. He'd joined Eroan to find Lysander, and then Akiem had killed the emerald. An emerald who had been teaching Lysander how to be his true self.

Akiem always killed emeralds. He killed them for their mother, Elisandra, and he'd tried to kill Lysander countless times over the years.

But this time Eroan had brought him to Akiem.

Lysander shifted back to man in front of the startled elves and strode along the dockside, drenched, reeking of salt and seaweed, and feeling like shit. When the stern-faced elves approached, their rifles marking them as guards, he was not in the mood to fuck around with their stupid laws.

"No dragons are to be outside after dusk."

He bared his teeth in a sharp, humorless grin. "Bite me."

They shrugged off their rifles. "Stop!"

He'd had walked right by them, but he felt the targets on his back and reluctantly lifted his hands. "I could eat both of you in one bite."

"Is that a threat, dragon?"

"A fact."

"Abuse against elves is an offense," the chatty one went on, approaching behind Lysander.

Lysander snorted. "Abuse? You think a few words is abuse? By the fucking nights, you wouldn't last a day where I come from."

"Hands behind your back."

He sighed hard. The dockside wasn't large, but he could shift and frighten the two twittering guards. Their rifles wouldn't do much then. But he didn't feel like being dragon again when his tail would throb and remind him that Akiem had almost bitten through it.

He lowered his hands behind his back.



Cool metal snicked closed, locking his wrists together. “Are you going to be any trouble?”

“No.” He grunted. He could just make out the three masts of the ship he’d sailed across the ocean on. Had Akiem taken such a ship, or had he flown all this way? It didn’t seem possible. No dragon could fly that far.

“Come along then...”

The elves tugged him into motion, and Lysander went willingly, plodding one boot in front of the other, needing somewhere else to spend the night, somewhere he could collect his thoughts. Tomorrow, he’d talk with Eroan. Tomorrow he’d find out what really happened and why Eroan hadn’t told him the truth.

## CHAPTER 7

Eroan

THE ELF at the end of Eroan's blade had moments to live, and from the way his eyes had blown wide, he knew it. City guards had poured in from all sides, demanding Eroan release Zane, but he filtered out their blustering and dragged Zane at dagger point to the edge of the dock.

The dark bay waters stretched far beyond the harbor, toward a darkening horizon. Nothing moved among the waves. No dragons rose from the water. No green scales flashed in the dying light. Eroan tasted bitter rage and turned his gaze on Zane.

"Easy..." Zane breathed. "*Easy...* Eroan, wait— Don't. He'll be fine. It's just... it's just dragons being dragons."

"Lie to me again and you'll lose more than a finger, *Zane*."

Zane swallowed and asked quietly, "What lie?"

Rage made Eroan's vision swim. His dagger cut deeper, drawing a drop of blood at its edge. "*That was Akiem.*"

"He's just... He's protecting the city, like he always does. He doesn't know your dragon from any other."

Eroan's smile lifted his lips. "My dragon is his *brother*."

Zane's russet brows pinched. He raised his hands. "All right, all right... Let's—"

"You lied to me about Akiem and now—"

“There!” someone yelled, pointing out to sea.

A dragon climbed a distant outcrop, backing up. The fire in his throat made a beacon of him. Lysander. Eroan released a breath. He was alive. But what was going on here? Zane had lied through his teeth, and Akiem had clearly been watching from afar, waiting to strike. Was their plan to attack all along?

A streak of white shot over their heads, making most of the audience duck in the diamond dragon’s shadow. Eroan watched, fear crawling up his throat as the beast soared toward Lysander. Two against one. Normally, he could manage them both, but throw Akiem into the mix and there was no knowing how he’d react. By Alumn, he should have told him his suspicions that Akiem was alive, should have prepared him, but he hadn’t wanted to hang any hopes on rumors.

The diamond reared mid-flight and dove toward Lysander.

*Look up.*

But Lysander scanned the water, searching for Akiem. He hadn’t seen it.

Eroan freed Zane, his threat forgotten, and stepped to the edge of the dock. “*Look up!*” Alumn, he was useless here. Too far away to warn him, only able to watch the horror unfold.

Guards grabbed his arms, hands suddenly everywhere. Eroan didn’t care. They pulled his arms back, stole his daggers, and he still didn’t care. But as they pulled him from the edge of the dock, he lost sight of the diamond, lost Lysander.

He bucked. “Let me see, damn you!”

“Wait!” Zane yelled. “Leave him.” But his orders were drowned by the rising noise from the observing crowd.

“I said release him!” Zane snapped, yanking one of the guards off. “Let go!” He pulled another off. “Let him go... Let him see.”

Eroan finally managed to tear free. He shoved through those who had gathered to watch the battle and searched the distant point for any sign of Lysander. He was gone. “Where is he?” Nobody replied. “What happened?!” He whirled on Zane and grabbed him by the shirt, hauling him in close. “I swear to Alumn, if he does not return, I’ll kill you and Akiem and any other fool who stands in my way.”

Zane bared his teeth, managed to bring his hands up, and shoved, breaking Eroan’s hold. “Back off. Look around.” A dozen guards. Countless

people. Eroan didn't stand a chance, but that wouldn't stop him. Zane glowered. "Make a move on me and *you* die. Is that what you want?"

Alumn, Lysander was missing, and... This wasn't supposed to happen.

"He's fine..." Zane straightened his jacket. "He flew toward the end of the docks."

Eroan searched his face for the lie.

"Your dragon is *fine*," he said again, sounding far from pleased.

He'd believe it when he saw Lysander with his own eyes.

"I didn't know," Zane added, his glower softening to a frown. "I didn't know he had a brother."

## CHAPTER 8

Akiem

HE LANDED on the flat roof of the building he and Zane now called home, shifted, and entered through the rooftop forward. He hadn't wanted to come back, knowing what had to be done. But he was back now, because he'd failed, and he couldn't do this alone. Not anymore. He'd been a fool to think he could.

Zane would forgive him.

He always did.

The top floor dwelling was made up of a single open area with a breathtaking view of the bay, but it was cold and empty and dark, and nothing like the warm, welcoming place Zane's smiles and laughter always made it.

Akiem sniffed at the air. Zane's wonderful wild scent was old. He hadn't been back all night, and now dawn was warming Bayston's streets once more.

Guilt gnawed on Akiem. He should have returned. He shouldn't have withdrawn after seeing the ship and who it carried. He should have known Zane would listen. But Akiem had never told him the whole truth of who he was and what he'd done. Who he'd *been*. The amethyst prince, Elisandra's son. He'd never said a word about Lysander, because that was his old life. And his old life was dead.

He growled at himself, and the old wounds laddering his arms itched. Wounds hidden by Zane's tattoos. But the ink didn't erase them, not entirely. Nothing could erase his past, and by nights, he'd tried.

He didn't want to be his mother's son again.

But he should have known what he wanted didn't matter.

Lysander was emerald. Lysander had killed Carline, the gold—so messenger elves said. He'd killed countless dragons. He was dangerous, vicious, wild, unpredictable—like all emeralds. And now, he was here. And Bayston wasn't prepared. Akiem had hoped to deal with it himself, but he couldn't strike the final blow. He never had been able to.

Failure was an old friend.

He scratched at his arm through his coat sleeve.

Where would Zane be? A bar, probably, but not all night. He would have come home looking for Akiem, so something had kept him away. *Someone.*

Eroan.

It always came back to Eroan.

He closed his eyes and rubbed at his forehead.

They shouldn't have come.

Why had they?

This was Akiem's territory. His brood. A new life in a new world. Lysander had no right to be here!

Mother's whispers were in his head again. He hadn't heard them in so long, he almost didn't recognize them. Kill all emeralds, make it up to her, be strong, be better. Be the son she wanted, not the one he'd told her he was and earned her endless ire for it. For all her wrongs, she was right in one thing. Emeralds were a threat. Even if this emerald was kin.

He groaned and slumped against a countertop.

He'd tried to hurt him, to scare him off, maybe even... maybe even tried to kill him. But he wanted him to be his brother too. Wanted him to understand, to know the truth, to see the world Akiem had been trapped in alongside his own. And maybe that was why he'd stopped. Maybe that was why he'd torn the diamond out of the sky to save him.

He didn't know what was right. But Lysander was here, and that changed everything.

## CHAPTER 9

Eroan

LYSANDER HAD BEEN ARRESTED for flaunting the law, of all things. He'd tried to defend against a diamond and the foolish elves here had restrained him for it. Zane had him released by late morning, but as the guards freed his cuffs, and Eroan tried to catch his eye, Lysander slid his gaze away. He walked right by Eroan, rubbing his wrists, and out into the street.

Zane arched an eyebrow and muttered something about leaving them alone, but Eroan caught his arm, stopping him from going as well. "Where is Akiem now?"

"I don't know." A muscle fluttered in his cheek, implying he wasn't pleased by events either.

"I need to speak with you about him. After I speak with Lysander."

Zane tugged his arm free. "I don't owe you or your dragon anything, and neither does Akiem. You said you'd leave. The tide's coming in. You should get on that." He stalked from the jail, leaving Eroan staring at the closing door. Clearly, he knew Akiem well to lie for him. But not well enough to know Akiem had a brother. What else didn't he know? Had Akiem lied to them all here and set himself up as some dragonkin leader—King of Bayston? If he had, and if he'd built it on a foundation of lies, he'd do anything to protect that, including remove Lysander, and with him, the truth of his past.

Maybe this had all been a mistake. Maybe they should leave on the high tide and leave the past in the past.



HE CAUGHT up with Lysander walking the docks and fell into step alongside him. Lysander admired the boats and the coastline, anything to keep from looking at Eroan. He'd talk when he was ready. There was no use in pushing him, he'd only lockdown.

"Nothing changes," he said finally. They'd left the central city area and ventured into a part of the city that hadn't been rebuilt. Shells of buildings hosted squawking gulls and sprouted grasses. "He tried to kill me."

Eroan had hoped this reunion would go differently. Akiem had been changing when Eroan had last seen him. He'd realized his mistakes and had tried to do some good to balance the scales, ultimately dying to keep the bronze beast Dokul from catching Eroan and Seraph. Or so Eroan had believed.

"I saw him die," Eroan said. "He fought Dokul, knowing he couldn't win. The bronze drowned him in mud."

Lysander glanced over, his face pained. They hadn't discussed the details, because hours later, Eroan had succumbed to his wounds, saved only by Lysander's healing ability, with a little help from Alumn. Those moments and their memories had been... difficult to recall.

"So why bring me here?"

"Rumors, mostly. *The Black Prince who helped save an elven city.* Messenger tales, but I thought if Akiem had changed, you'd want to know."

Lysander rammed his hands into his pockets and tilted his face skyward. "He should have stayed dead."

Eroan winced. "In truth, I did not expect to find him."

"You brought me back to a brother who has tried to kill me countless times. He killed the emerald to stop me from learning more about myself. He... He had me..." He trailed off. "It doesn't matter. You knew what he was, and still you brought me here?"

There was more in Lysander's past, and all of it terrible. Eroan had seen what went on in the amethyst tower with his own eyes, and none of it was good. In those last few weeks, when he'd spent time with Akiem, he had



been changing. Had Eroan thought a few good deeds could wipe all Akiem's sins away? He'd hoped, with the rumors, that Lysander's brother was different now. Clearly, he'd been wrong. "I should have told you."

"Yes, you should have."

"I'm sorry."

They walked on, and Lysander's silence cut deeper into Eroan's heart with every passing second. "I didn't do this to hurt you," he said quietly. "I meant it—"

"You never stop to think if what you're doing is right, you just know it is, so you plow on, not caring who you hurt. And you get it done, you always get it done, no matter the cost. I'm not sure if that's a good thing."

Eroan planted his feet. Lysander walked on a few steps before turning. He raised a hand to shield his eyes from the sun.

"That's who I am," Eroan said.

"I know."

"If you..." He wet his lips. "Are you asking me to change?"

"No, I..." Lowering his hand, he kicked at the dirt. "Just... maybe for you to see how your heroics sometimes hurt others."

The ache of guilt grew worse, now joined by regret and a flicker of anger. If Eroan hadn't been that person, he'd have died at the queen's hand, he'd have lost Cheen to the dragons, and Ashford would have fallen to the bronze. He knew his actions hurt others. That was part of being the leader his kin had needed. It was *necessary*.

"I'll see you back at the ship." He turned on his heel and strode back along the pathway. High tide couldn't come fast enough.

## CHAPTER 10

Zane

HE OPENED the door and almost missed a step. Akiem stood at the windows, hands clasped behind his back. His long black hair lay in a thick braid, blending with his black coat. He looked like one of the thunderclouds currently threatening the bay.

Zane sighed in relief. He'd feared he might get word of finding Akiem holed up somewhere as dragon, licking his wounds. But no word had come, so he'd returned home, expecting to find it empty, and here Akiem was. Waiting. He didn't smell like blood. Just the rain and the ocean air mixed with citrusy dragon. He was home and safe, and that was all that mattered.

Zane tugged of his coat, tossed it on the counter, and sauntered up to his dragon. Looping his arms around him from behind, he tucked his jaw in against his neck and breathed him in. "I missed you." Having him home made having Eroan's dagger at his throat and the alarm of seeing the great dragon Lysander fade into the background.

Akiem's rigid body relaxed. He braced a hand on the glass, spreading his fingers and bowed his head. "Forgive me?"

Zane sidestepped around him, ducked under his arm, and straightened in front of him to cup his face, making sure he had nowhere else to look but into Zane's eyes. "There's nothing to forgive."

Bronze eyes narrowed, his brow pinched, and he swooped in, scooped Zane up, and shoved him against the glass so hard the window rattled. His mouth was suddenly hot and hungry and exactly where Zane needed it to be—tasting his lips, teasing his tongue. Zane loved him like this, hard and savage and raw, with nothing between them but the need to feel. Akiem's hands tugged at clothing, pulling the buttons and ties free, and then those hot hands were on Zane's abs, fingers roaming, exploring every inch. Alumn, he was a storm. *Zane's* storm.

Zane broke from the messy kiss and thumped his head back against the glass. Akiem's mouth found his neck, his tongue a probing tease, lips sucking, and the rush of having him attack his body had Zane achingly hard and desperately starved for everything Akiem gave.

Akiem stopped suddenly, going still.

Zane captured his face and kissed him slowly, bringing him back from wherever his thoughts had just gone, and when he thawed, Zane swept his hands under his shirt, wrapped them around his back, and absorbed his trembling. Since the ship's arrival, he'd been somewhere dark, somewhere lost inside his own head, but he was home now, and Zane was about to remind him exactly what that meant.

He leaned back, placed a hand on Akiem's chest, earning a raised eyebrow, and gently shoved. "Bed."

Akiem's growl had a laugh trying to burst free of Zane, but he fought it down into a twitching smile instead and walked his dragon backward to the bed, then gave him a gentle shove. Akiem dropped to the bed's edge, looking tousled and unhinged now Zane had upset his shirt and hair. Disheveled Akiem was the *best* Akiem.

Zane backed up a step and flicked open the buttons on his own shirt, one by one. Bronze eyes drank him in.

Shirt gaping, he teased his fingers along his trouser fly, skimming the obvious ridge of his cock. Akiem stared, chest heaving, like he was about to pounce, and the thrill of having a dragon poised to devour him had Zane's pulse fluttering.

He opened his trouser fly, easing the pressure, but kept his cock tucked in—that prize came later. Straddling Akiem's thighs, he rested his arms on Akiem's shoulders and kissed the black prince's offered mouth. He tasted sweet and light and of everything Zane ached for.

There were too many layers of clothing between them, and that had to be immediately rectified. He shoved Akiem's coat off his shoulders, acutely aware of the dragon's gaze never leaving his face. Zane made quick work of Akiem's shirt buttons, laughing when Akiem tried to capture his mouth in a kiss, failing every time Zane teased away.

Akiem had a teasing limit. And he was close to it. "Careful," he growled, his dragon-self just below the surface.

Zane leaned back on Akiem's thighs. He pinched his bottom lip between his teeth, making sure Akiem saw, and slid the dragon's shirt off his shoulders, tugging it down his back, where he held it locked, briefly trapping Akiem's arms behind him. Up on his knees, Zane peered deep into Akiem's eyes, mouths barely touching, breaths shared. Fuck, he was hot like this, primed to strike. He'd hardly touched him, but he'd be hard and leaking, and oh so ready.

Another time, he'd draw this out, tease him longer, make him chase, but not this time. Akiem needed it *now*.

Zane tore the shirt free, and Akiem's arms trapped him close. With a sudden shift in weight, Zane was on his back with Akiem braced over him. A brief flicker of a glance and Akiem dove down, his mouth suddenly scorching the tattoo in the hollow of Zane's hip. Zane stifled a laugh from the tickle, and then his cock was free and between Akiem's lips, and fuck there was nothing amusing now. Zane lifted his hips, sinking deeper, and Akiem took him into his tight, sucking warmth.

He tongued lightly at the head, licked down Zane's shaft, and then Akiem knelt, fighting with his own belt.

Zane grabbed the bottle of oil on the bedside table moments before Akiem grabbed his hips and yanked Zane's trousers all the way off, leaving Zane naked, apart from the open shirt, and spread on the bed beneath Akiem. But Akiem was naked too, and Alumn, he was a sight. His long dark hair—freed from his braid—trailed over his pale shoulders and licked down his chest. Tarnished bronze eyes burned with savage need. Ink spiraled up his arm, hiding the old cuts—cuts he'd made trying to bleed the bronze from his veins and the ink Zane had marked him with to make those marks beautiful.

He *was* beautiful, and vulnerable, and brave, and how anyone could hate him was beyond Zane.

Akiem oiled his hand, braced over Zane, and slid his fingers down his shaft, beneath his balls, finding the ring of tight muscles with practiced ease. And ease in he did. Zane rolled his eyes back and groaned out the pleasure of feeling Akiem's fingers stroke the part of him that made him lose his thoughts and control.

His fingers withdrew, and Zane moaned their loss, only to be satisfied by the hard, increasing pressure of Akiem's cock pushing in, stretching and filling.

"Fuck..."

Akiem fell forward, so all Zane could see were blazing eyes, plump, parted lips, and slightly flushed cheeks. "You're mine," Akiem said.

Zane threw an arm around his neck, making sure he didn't escape. He might have said something, but Akiem thrust deep, and there were no words for this feeling of having him so close, having him *inside*. Having all of him.

"I'm all yours," Zane breathed.

Akiem locked his taut arms around Zane's knees and hauled him higher, thrusting deeper. Falling into the perfect rhythm, rocking against Zane's ass, Zane didn't think the ecstasy could climb any higher. Akiem's strong fingers found his erection against his belly and pumped as he fucked. Gods, he was owned in all ways, and it was everything. He tried to hold on, to keep from coming, but Akiem was in control, and when Akiem grinned at the sound of Zane's ragged breaths, Zane came with blinding ecstasy, creamy seed pulsing against his belly and abs. Akiem's pace stuttered, his growl came straight from the dragon part of him, and then he threw his head back, cock twitching in Zane's ass, unloading more than seed. Letting go of all the nightmares in his head, and for a few blissful moments, Zane knew Akiem's thoughts were free. He shuddered, and it was all Zane could do to stare at the work of art that was Akiem spent and wrecked and absolutely Zane's.

He freed Zane's knee, withdrew, and collapsed along Zane's side, sticky and hot. Akiem hooked a leg over Zane's, draped an arm over his chest, and pulled him close, thoroughly in the clutches of a dragon. Zane nuzzled closer. Forgetting the mess, he let the black prince sleep, knowing his old nightmares wouldn't chase him there.

## CHAPTER 11

Lysander

WELL, his conversation with Eroan had been a spectacular disaster. He was still hurting from Akiem's attack and from Eroan's deceit, but he'd meant the things he'd said. Sometimes Eroan became so fixed on winning, he didn't see the collateral damage he caused. Lysander wasn't asking him to change, just to sometimes stop and look around before attacking the next quest.

But Eroan didn't know how to stop.

And now Lysander felt like a dick for even suggesting it.

"Fuck," he swore. The word echoed down the empty street and into the dozens of empty buildings, all staring at him with blank, glassless windows.

He waited a while, alone, listening to the gulls and watching black clouds roll in from far out to sea, and then started back along the path. A storm was in the air again, bigger than the last. He didn't want to be alone for it.



THE WRONG ELF was aboard their ship. Instead of white hair and fierce eyes, this one had red hair and looked like the kind of elf Seraph's friends would

squeal and swoon over. His smile was charming, and he gave it to Lysander freely.

“Where’s Eroan?” Lysander grunted, not in the mood for any elves but his own.

“No idea. I just got here. He asked to talk, but maybe you and I can chat instead?”

The rising wind rattled the stowed rigging and clanged chains against ship hulls. The tide was creeping back in, but so was a new storm.

He didn’t want this elf in the cabin, which was his and Eroan’s space, but a few fat drops of rain had begun to tap against his shoulders. “What do you want?”

“To talk about Akiem.”

Lysander eyed him again, more thoroughly this time. He was tall, as tall as Lysander, with that wiry physique elves did so well, but this one had a wildness about him that made him unpredictable, like he was flame turned elf. He wasn’t armed, but he wasn’t afraid either. So he had power, just not the physical kind. Elves rarely looked as dangerous as they actually were, a fact most dragons forgot.

“Do you know who I am?” Lysander asked.

“Lysander, Eroan’s dragon.”

Lysander huffed a laugh. “Is that what they call me, *Eroan’s dragon*?”

“You’re Akiem’s brother,” Zane added carefully.

His smile died. “Yeah, well. Don’t get excited. Family means something different to dragonkin than it does elves. What’s your name?”

“Zane,” he said with a flash of white teeth. “Shall we get out of the rain?”

The rain had begun to pound on the deck. They’d both be soaked through soon. “Not here.”

Zane beckoned Lysander to follow him down the gangplank. Lysander’s instincts itched. He’d been led astray by elves before. They all looked amusing and fragile, but most liked dead dragons more than live ones. He followed, keeping an eye on the people retreating inside buildings out of the sudden rain shower, looking for Eroan among them.

Zane led him to the meeting house where Eroan had disappeared inside the evening before. Lysander had seen Zane then too. He’d been the first to run toward trouble when the diamond had made its appearance. The inside of the building was warm. A fire roared in its grate. Most of the people

were elves, but a couple of dragons lingered in one corner, staying out of the rain before dusk, when they'd probably be sent home.

Zane gestured at a table, and Lysander obligingly sat, happy to watch the others chitter and carouse. It reminded him of the village he and Eroan had left behind, several thousand miles across the sea. He missed it, missed being among friends, missed Seraph's laugh. He'd told Eroan that home was wherever Eroan was, but maybe home was also a place now, with people he called his own.

Zane dumped a tankard in front of Lysander and took up a chair opposite him.

Lysander eyed the drink, then the elf. "An elf once poisoned me with a free drink."

"What happened to them?"

"I ate him."

Zane's smile didn't exactly stutter, but it did thin some. "I promise I haven't poisoned you."

Lysander lifted the drink and sniffed. It smelled good. Zane watched him closely. Too closely?

"Look," the elf sighed, "I don't know what your land is like, but we don't poison dragons here."

"How do you prefer to kill them?"

"Akiem, mostly."

Lysander snorted at that. Of course he did. "He's good at that."

Zane leaned forward and folded his arms on the table. "Tell me about him."

Lysander's nose told him the elf smelled like cut grass after the rain, and... like Akiem. "You work for him?"

"No," Zane denied, and he didn't look like he was lying.

"Then why is his scent all over you?"

"Probably because we fucked before I came here."

Lysander blinked. Laughter burst out of him. He couldn't have stopped it if he'd tried. Elves looked over, and Zane frowned, obviously pissed, but by nights, Akiem *did not fuck elves*. Ever.

Zane patiently waited for the laughter to subside, but his thunderous face wasn't helping, and Lysander snickered some more. "I'm sorry, I just... If you really knew him, you'd know how ridiculous you sound."



Zane leaned to one side in his chair and tapped a finger on the table. “Ridiculous?”

“He hates elves. You’re food to him, no offense.”

“None taken.”

He looked like he’d taken a whole lot of offense and then added some on the side for later. “Did he tell you he’s your friend?” Lysander asked. “I can smell him on you, so I know you’re close to him...” He leaned in. “He’ll tell you whatever you want to hear to get what he wants from you. It’s the dragon way.”

“But not you?”

“I’m...” Lysander sighed and leaned back. “I was always different.”

“Special?”

He laughed, but it sounded strained, slightly manic. “No. Not that. Just... not very dragon. Akiem repeatedly tried to kill me for it.”

“Did he, though?”

The flat way he asked gave Lysander pause. This elf, whoever he was, held himself carefully in check. He suspected, beneath all that flare and charm, Zane was furious. At Lysander? What had Akiem told him? It didn’t matter anyway. The storm would delay their leaving, but they’d be gone from this land tomorrow, and Akiem could continue his charade, lying to his elves and dragons so they all called him king. “You don’t believe me?” Lysander asked.

Zane pinched his lips and looked at the people milling about them, hardly seeing them. He had a lot to say, but considering everything he’d said so far, he was clearly trying, and failing, to be diplomatic.

“If you don’t believe me, why bother bringing me here?”

“Akiem protects this city, elves and dragons both. You and Eroan are a threat to that.”

“A threat?” Lysander wet his teeth. “He tore me out of the sky.”

“Maybe he had good reason? You lied. You’re not amethyst like he is.” Now the truth was coming out, and Zane’s smiles had vanished. “You’re emerald.”

“My scales are emerald, but I was hatched under Elisandra Amethyst, so don’t fucking tell me who I am and who I’m not. You have no fucking idea, elf.”

Zane leaned an arm on the table. “Akiem saw a threat and dealt with it.”

“Is that what he told you?” Lysander’s jaw ached.

“Why did you lie?”

This damn elf was starting to piss him off. “Because your laws are ridiculous. I could take this city and Akiem right out from under you. I won’t, but another dragon might. He can’t protect you. He can’t even protect himself. He’s a cruel, lying bastard.”

Zane just smiled, and by the nights, it was chilling. This brazen elf hid a deadlier side. “How can you, his own brother, not know him at all?”

“I know him better than anyone. He was our mother’s son. A killer, like her. He did everything she told him. And when I killed her, because she was a fucking controlling piece of krak, he turned on me, again and again. He’s so amethyst, he’s probably stringing you along to fuck you over later.”

“He’s not who you think.”

Damned elves! Lysander hissed the next words under his breath, “He had me thrown in a dungeon and repeatedly raped by the bronze bitch so her sick fuck of a father could get his claws on emerald and bronze kits, so tell me again how he’s not who I think he is.”

That got him. Zane froze, probably because his pretty picture of Akiem had shattered. Good. Whatever story Akiem had told him, he’d have to spin another now.

“You have no idea, do you?” Zane asked.

“About what?” Lysander snapped.

Zane mirrored Lysander’s pose, facing off over the table. “You think you’re the only one who suffered? I may not have known Elisandra, but given her reputation, you can’t truly believe her abuse was only focused on you? Did you think Akiem was immune?”

“She didn’t touch him.”

Zane cocked his head. “How do you know?”

Akiem had always been the pillar of the tower, everything Lysander was not. He’d had a brood. He was Mother’s favorite, despite him saying it was all for Lysander. He wasn’t tortured. He wasn’t beaten. He didn’t have his wing broken. He was Always-There Akiem. Always watching. Always waiting in the shadows.

“You know, some people appear strong, when inside they’re crumbling,” Zane said.

Lysander would have known if Akiem were like that. He’d have seen it. His brother would have said something.

Who was this elf who thought he knew Akiem so well, who dared sit with dragons and tell them what they did and did not know? Typical elf. Stubborn to a fault. Too stupid to know when to back off. Or was there more to it? Akiem might not have been capable of caring, but elves were. “You care for him?”

“I care that he’s not pushed into a corner he can’t escape from.” And with that gem, Zane left, leaving Lysander alone with his thoughts and the memories he’d have preferred hadn’t been dragged to the surface.

Elisandra hadn’t touched Akiem. There had been threats. She had threatened everyone. But there had been nothing to indicate she’d hurt him, which... in itself, could be considered strange. Why hadn’t she touched him? Almost everyone in the tower had felt Elisandra’s wrath at some point. Had Akiem truly survived unscathed, or had he just hidden it better? And if the elf was right, and he’d hidden whatever Mother might have done to him, what else had Akiem hidden?

Lysander tasted the drink, found it to his liking, and sipped it alone, watching elves and dragons mingle. There was a peace here, albeit a fragile one. Could that peace really be Akiem’s doing? He had always been a natural leader. It shouldn’t have surprised Lysander that he’d found a new world and called it his own. *That* was definitely the amethyst way. But were his methods brutal, or had he tamed this city some other way?

He eyed the door and drew the mingling scents across his tongue. If he hurried, he might pick up Zane’s scent.

Maybe it was time he tracked his brother down for a chat and found out exactly what was happening here and what the red-headed elf Zane had meant when he’d suggested Lysander wasn’t the only dragon to have suffered under Elisandra.

## CHAPTER 12

Akiem

THUNDER RUMBLED outside as Akiem stepped from the rain closet and dried off, startled to find Zane leaning against the counter, his hair and clothes wet. He arched an eyebrow at the towel tucked around Akiem's waist and smirked.

After earlier, when he'd had Zane on the bed, he should have been satisfied, but he never was, not when it came to his red-haired devil. And now Zane was here, grinning, dripping wet, looking like a feast. Akiem's mouth watered while other parts of him took a more obvious interest.

Zane's grin grew. He chuckled as Akiem prowled closer. "You're insatiable."

Akiem had him in his arms in the next breath. Zane was hard and soft, warm and free, and so perfect it made Akiem want to hold him close and never let go. He breathed into his hair, smelling rain and the ocean, and loosed the purr bubbling at the back of his throat.

"As much as I would love to service this..." Zane's fingers had no difficulty finding Akiem's erection through the towel. "We need to talk."

His hand was gone from Akiem's cock, and then his elf was gone too, sauntering away. Akiem leaned against the counter to keep from lunging after him and folded his arms over his bare chest. "Is this about the emerald?"

“Your brother.”

Akiem’s heart stuttered. Had they spoken? How *much* did Zane know? All Akiem’s walls began to crumble. Did Zane know who he’d been before? Elisandra’s tool? Had Lysander told him everything? Had Zane told Lysander about the bronze in him? About the torture. About the killing of elves.

He couldn’t do this. Snatching up his clothes, he quickly threw them on. More thunder growled, and Akiem needed to be outside among the angry clouds, dicing with lightning so he didn’t have to think about how his past had caught him all over again.

“Akiem, wait.”

No, he couldn’t talk about it. He couldn’t relive it. He couldn’t go back there.

Zane was beside him suddenly, his fingers at Akiem’s wrist, holding him. He looked down. A dribble of blood ran down the ink on his arm. His skin burned, fresh cuts only now hurting. Had he just done that?

He pulled from Zane’s grip, shocked at himself that Zane had seen him coming apart.

“It’s all right.” Zane’s eyes were wide with a sympathy Akiem didn’t deserve. “Please, talk to me.”

No, no, he couldn’t. “He has to die.” Yes, that was solid ground. That made sense. Emeralds had to die. They were too dangerous. Elisandra had him kill them all. Even Lysander, but he never had succeeded there. He’d always failed. Because... because he couldn’t. Because Lysander was different. And when she’d hurt Lysander, he’d made sure he was always there so Lysander was never alone, like he’d been all the times Mother had locked him away beneath the tower.

“Akiem?”

He looked up into the elf’s soft eyes. “He’s emerald,” he said. “They control dragons. He can’t be allowed to take Bayston from us.”

“It’s all right. He’s leaving. He and Eroan both.”

He felt claws in his belly, on his back, teeth in his throat, and then Zane had him wrapped in his arms, and the memories faded, replaced by warmth and safety and knowing Zane would never leave him. He hugged him back, holding him close. If Lysander knew what Zane meant to him—after everything Akiem had done—he’d take Zane, maybe hurt him. He’d tell him all of it, and Zane would hate Akiem like elves were supposed to.

He could leave.

Fly now.

“Stop.” Warm hands cupped Akiem’s face. “I know what you’re thinking. If you fucking leave me, I’ll hunt your dragon-ass down.”

Akiem pulled free. “You don’t understand. I... I was different. Before Luceran and coming here, I killed elves like you. I did horrible things. I don’t know what he told you, but it’s all true. I was vicious and cruel—”

“Because Elisandra gave you no choice.”

Akiem turned. “Amalia, my sister, refused her. I could have too...” He’d told Zane that much, if little more. Why talk about a past he wanted to forget?

“Amalia died.” Zane frowned. “Who you were then is not who you are now. I don’t love that dragon, I love you.”

A knock rapped at the door. Zane turned toward the noise, but Akiem breathed in, scenting dragon. “Don’t open it.”

“Akiem! Answer the damn door or I’ll kick it in.”

Lysander. No, he couldn’t be here. He’d ruin *everything*.

The door flew open and struck the wall, bouncing back. Zane blocked Akiem’s view, because Lysander was here, filling the doorway, every inch the dragonkin so many rightly feared.

“Hello, brother.” His green eyes sparkled, their pull undeniable.

Akiem grabbed Zane and shoved him aside. “Get back!” Zane shouted something, but it was too late. The shift poured through muscle and flesh, turning skin to scale, fingers to claws. Fire churned, and Akiem—as dragon—lunged at Lysander. As man, Lysander darted back and out the door, disappearing down into the stairwell. Akiem thrust his head through the doorway, knocking rubble with him. Purple fire spilled from between his teeth but through the rubble and dust, he couldn’t find Lysander. No, he couldn’t escape! Damn this building, damn its walls, and damn Lysander for coming here, to his home!

He jerked his head up, crashing his crown through concrete and metal, and climbed through the hole in the ceiling, pulling his wings free. Rain beat at his scales. Lightning split the sky. Akiem clung to the rooftop edge and peered down to the street several stories below. There... Lysander ran into the street, staggering backward as he looked up. Akiem loosed a roar and, digging his claws in, climbed down the front of the building. He couldn’t allow Lysander to fix him in his gaze. If Lysander shifted...

Too late.

Light flooded the street, like a lightning flash, and suddenly there were emerald scales where a man had been moments before. His vastness took up the entire street from building to building—leaving no room for wings. He wasn't flying out of there. He lifted his head, his crown broken from some unknown battle. His eyes—their pull tried to hook into Akiem's will and rip it out. Akiem tore his gaze away and sprang to the adjacent building, clinging onto broken windows. Glass and concrete rained to the street. There were no elves here, not in this part of the city. Most buildings were abandoned.

Lysander lunged *up* the building, climbing for Akiem.

Akiem unleashed a great wave of purple flame, and as Lysander hunkered down, his head turned away to protect his eyes, Akiem leaped. Teeth met scale. His claws sank into Lysander's back, dragged him to the ground, and pinned him down. Lysander bellowed a cry that shook the world.

It had to be now.

If Lysander regained control, if he caught Akiem's gaze, he'd win.

Akiem lifted his head, bared his teeth, and...

Lysander stared back, teeth bared, but he wasn't stoking his fire, he wasn't fighting, and there was no pull from his gaze. He just... blinked, waiting.

Akiem's top lip twitched. He growled, expecting Lysander to overpower him at any moment, but his brother stayed still. Had he surrendered?

Akiem clambered backward, off Lysander's back, and Lysander twisted, trying to turn, as much as the narrow street would allow. He tried to open his wings and somehow managed to flick one up the side of the broken building, where it wedged, while the other was clamped against his side, the space too small to stretch them both.

He was stuck.

His grumbled warning was just that... a warning. His eyes shone, but not with malice. He could snare Akiem's mind but hadn't.

Akiem watched Lysander wriggle and struggle in the cramped space, trying to fit all of his dragon-self somewhere not designed for dragons his size. Really, it was obvious to them both he wasn't getting out of there.

He huffed at his younger brother. *Idiot.*

Lysander bared his teeth in reply and wriggled his way around, so now he was at least facing Akiem. He still had one wing up in the air, stuck against the building.

Akiem had backed into an old crosswalk. Now he had room, he spread his wings a little, filled his lungs, and let loose an earth-shuddering roar, reminding any nearby dragons—including his brother—how Bayston belonged to him.

Lysander sneezed, then shifted to man, and sneezed again. “Damn it.” He shook his head and looked up at Akiem. “It’s the grass. Never mind...” He waved a hand. “Shift and speak with me.”

Akiem glared. He would not be shifting. What was this? A trick of some kind to make him man again so Eroan could spring from the shadows and stab him in the back while he was vulnerable? Akiem glanced at the empty nearby buildings, but he didn’t smell elf.

“Fine, don’t shift. But listen. Can you at least do that without trying to kill me?” Lysander kicked at some rubble and dragged a hand down his face before looking up again. “I didn’t know. I should have. I thought... I thought you had it perfect. I was jealous. You had everything I didn’t. You had control, or so I thought, but it was a lie. Wasn’t it? You lied. About it all.”

Akiem tucked his wings in and lowered his head to within a few meters of his brother, fixing him in his sights at the end of his nose.

“You were always better at hiding than me,” Lysander said. “I didn’t realize by how much.”

The heavy rain had plastered his hair down his face and stuck it to his soaked shirt. He looked pale and forlorn, and when he approached and reached out a hand, Akiem snuffled around the soft touch, alarmed to find it welcome. Lysander smelled like his home from before, and the memories his scent summoned were not pleasant ones.

“I should have seen it,” he continued. “She ruined us both.”

But Lysander didn’t know it all.

The sweet smell of elf snagged his attention. He turned his head to find Zane running through puddles toward him. “Akiem!” In a flash of elven fury, he was in front of Akiem suddenly, so tiny. He shoved at Lysander, almost knocking him on his ass.

“Back off!”

Lysander lifted his hands. “Whoa... relax, elf. I wasn’t hurting him.”



“Back the fuck off. I don’t care who you think you are, you don’t touch him.”

Akiem’s purring automatically bubbled from inside. His tiny, fiery elf was defending him from a dragon who could be a hundred times bigger than him. Akiem’s heart swelled.

Lysander chuckled, and Akiem’s purr quickly devolved into a growl, prompting Lysander to back up some more. “Not judging,” he said, still grinning.

Zane’s little hand landed on Akiem’s right foreleg and stroked along his scales. “You all right?”

He grumbled a reluctant sound and then growled at Lysander again, warning him to back up some more—preferably out of Bayston altogether.

“Fine.” Lysander ducked his head, the pose submissive, but when he flicked his gaze up, it was full of threat. “But this talk isn’t over, brother.”

## CHAPTER 13

Eroan

WERE THE CANDLES TOO MUCH? There were a lot of them scattered about the cabin. So many, they were probably a fire hazard, especially on a wooden ship, but no more a hazard than a dragon.

Thunder rolled overhead. Eroan ignored the storm raging outside and fussed over the bed. It was always Lysander who did the candles, or filled a bath with rose petals, or strung colored lanterns from trees just for Eroan.

Eroan wasn't nearly as imaginative, but he knew how to cook. Although, it was getting late and the food he'd prepared was cold. Luckily, most of it was fruit, but Lysander still hadn't returned, so maybe it *had* all been for nothing.

He plucked the petals from the flowers he'd picked and dropped them on the bed. One for love, one for not. Bringing him here, not telling him about Akiem, it had been a disaster. He'd plowed in, just like Lysander had said, and it was wrong. He knew it was a fault of his, and he was working on it. Anything for Lysander.

He planned to make it up to him.

If he ever returned.

Boots thumped on the deck outside the cabin. Eroan loosened his shirt and shoved his trousers low on his hips, accentuating the parts Lysander couldn't resist, then propped himself on the bed and flung his hair over one

shoulder in what he hoped to be the artfully disheveled way Lysander always perfected. Nerves fluttered in his belly, which was ridiculous. It wasn't as though they hadn't done this before, but it had always been Lysander springing the surprises. Never Eroan. Until now.

The cabin door swung open and Lysander stomped in. His frown cut deep, shadowing his eyes. Eroan's heart skipped. He instantly regretted *everything*. This was foolish. What had he been thinking? Obviously, with his brother back, now was not the time for silly games.

He pushed up, swallowing regret. "What happened?"

Lysander's steps slowed. He lifted a finger, silencing any further words from Eroan, and scanned the cabin with its too-many candles. His gaze briefly rested on the bounty of food before finally settling on Eroan.

Lysander was normally easy to read. He never guarded himself around Eroan. But his face now was fixed, as though he were trying to hide his true thoughts. Eroan's heart fluttered harder. He *never* hid his expressions from Eroan.

Alumn, what a fool Eroan had been. These grand gestures weren't him. He didn't know how to do romance, as was very apparent in this terribly awkward moment that was lasting *forever*.

He cleared his throat, another apology on his lips.

Lysander crossed the room in three strides. His warm hand and firm fingers clasped the back of Eroan's neck, hauling him close. His mouth was on Eroan's, his need as present and as wild as the storm outside. But the kiss was soft and so full of longing it instantly crushed all Eroan's doubts. Alumn, yes. He snatched Lysander's shirt in his fists, making sure he couldn't pull away, and nipped at Lysander's bottom lip.

Lysander's possessive rumble was all the acceptance Eroan needed to hear. He parted his lips, teased his tongue, tasting dragon, and the fear fell away. He wasn't afraid of Lysander. Never that. The fear came from wondering if he'd one day push Lysander away, if he wasn't enough for him. He didn't know how to do this, how to be whatever Lysander wanted and needed him to be. Eroan was not and never would be dragon. And as time had gone on, and they'd fallen into this wonderful thing they had together, he'd wondered if he'd ever be enough, if Lysander would one day realize his mistake and return to his kin.

The kiss turned messy and desperate. Lysander's mouth skimmed Eroan's jaw and his neck, before gently sucking and nipping, *claiming*. His

fingers threaded into Eroan's hair, cradling his head as he leaned back and offered his throat. Lysander's rumblings grew, his nips became bites, leaving a tingling trail behind—his healing gift. And then his mouth burned around a nipple, his tongue flicked, and Eroan speared his hands into Lysander's hair, *needing* him so close the lines between them blurred.

Thunder boiled the skies outside, the noise almost drowned out by Lysander's growls.

Lightning flashed, lighting the cabin through its small porthole windows, sparking in Lysander's green eyes, and by Alumn, the dragon part of him was right there, a shimmer at his surface. Eroan's breath fluttered to see it, lust igniting his veins.

"Where do you want me?" Eroan whispered against his ear, and Lysander shuddered, his growl becoming a groan.

His rough jaw skimmed Eroan's. "You, on me."

Eroan flicked his gaze to his face, and Lysander's mouth turned down. Something *had* happened, something that had hurt him, but now was not the time to talk. He wanted distraction, and Eroan could definitely give him that.

Eroan climbed from the bed, flicked his hair over a shoulder, and cocked his head. "Get on the bed, dragon."

The corner of Lysander's lips ticked. "I love it when you're mean." He tore off his shirt and dropped his hands to work on his trousers.

"Leave it. Why aren't you on the bed? You're trying my patience."

His grin flourished. Kneeling on the bed, he shuffled backward, keeping Eroan in his sights.

"Lay back." Eroan flicked a hand.

Lysander did as ordered, propping himself on his elbows. He breathed quickly. He wasn't panting, not yet, but he would be soon. His gaze begged for more.

Eroan placed a hand on the bed, then a knee, and slowly prowled up the length of him, barely touching, until they were eye-to-eye. Most times, this position was reversed. Eroan loved being beneath him, loved being restrained, but not this time. This was for Lysander.

Lysander's hands came up, capturing Eroan's hips. "You're so fucking beautiful."

Eroan arched an eyebrow. "I'm doing the touching, dragon." He added a snarl, baring sharp teeth, and Lysander's touch obediently vanished.

“Gods. Fuck me, elf.”

Eroan teased a hand down his chest, trailing kisses behind. “In good time,” he murmured against his abs, roaming kisses ever lower. He knew where to make him moan, where to tease, and where to bring him to the edge. He knew every inch, every dip, every curve that would make him laugh or break. He knew this dragon’s body like he knew the sculpture of a deadly blade, and he knew how to make it sing.

Freeing and immediately neglecting Lysander’s proud member always drove him crazy, but today was different. Today wasn’t about delaying and making him wild. He needed love, and Eroan’s was boundless.

He slipped the vial of oil from his pocket before stripping naked under Lysander’s smoldering glare. That look—filled with fire—was enough to burn Eroan up. He lived for it, and for this. Straddling Lysander’s hips, he stroked Lysander’s straining member free of the loose trousers, massaging the oil with a firmness that drew a long moan from Lysander, and slowly lowered himself over his crown. Slick thickness stretched and filled Eroan, then nudged over his sensitive spot inside, making him gasp as pleasure danced up his spine.

Lysander’s fingers dug into Eroan’s thighs. He bared his teeth and tilted his hips, snarling a curse, and then Eroan had him seated deep, fully caught and thoroughly his. Dark dragon pupils filled his shining eyes. His quick mouth parted, lips so plump that Eroan couldn’t resist leaning forward to taste them. Eroan’s member dug against Lysander’s belly. Friction sparked an urge to move and rock and lose himself to pleasure. He straightened again and watched the marvel of the dragon king coming undone beneath him. Lysander panted and cursed and bit his lip, but mostly he met Eroan’s gaze like there was nothing else in the world.

Eroan would never get enough of his powerful, funny, wonderful dragon. He could only hope that what he gave to Lysander was enough in return.



LYSANDER’S lazy stroking down Eroan’s right side—from his shoulder, over his arm, down his hip, and skimming his thigh—walked that fine line between tickling and into territory that would see Eroan turn and devour

him—which of course, Lysander knew. His erection pressed against Eroan’s ass, still eager even after the last few hours of lovemaking. They’d made love and dozed, but now the storm outside had passed, responsibilities were creeping back in.

Warm, soft lips brushed Eroan’s shoulder, spilling shivers down his back. “Hm.” He leaned back, relishing the feel of Lysander’s arm possessively folding him close.

“Akiem is fucking an elf.” Lysander’s voice rumbled in Eroan’s ear.

Eroan stilled. That seemed highly unlikely, but considering the current situation, he was in no position to judge. “Are you sure?”

Lysander rolled away, forcing Eroan to switch sides and face him. He propped a hand behind his head and stared at the cabin ceiling. “His lover tracked me down, wanted to know who I was. He threw around some *facts*, told me he was fucking Akiem—which I laughed at, for obvious reasons. He got pissed and left, so I followed him.”

“Describe him.”

“Red hair, tall, sexy as fuck.” Eroan frowned. That was not the description he’d expected, made worse when Lysander fought a grin from his lips. “He has your smarts and my mouth,” he added.

That elf was the clever Zane. And that was enough of Lysander’s smiling. Eroan lunged, bit into Lysander’s lip, and growled. It was meant to stop him from deliberately baiting him with talk of other attractive males, but Lysander snickered, found all the ticklish spots, and attacked without mercy, only letting up when Eroan was breathlessly writhing in laughter beneath Lysander braced over him.

Lysander nuzzled Eroan’s neck. “You are the only elf I love,” he mumbled against Eroan’s skin, lips tickling.

“Liar.”

Lysander lifted his head and frowned.

“Seraph,” Eroan explained.

He flopped onto his side. “What do you think she’d make of all this?”

Eroan propped his head on a hand and casually circled a finger around Lysander’s nipple, making him grin. “She made her thoughts clear about Akiem, with good reason. Although she might have tamed some since he saved our lives.”

Lysander’s smile quickly faded, and Eroan recalled how he’d returned earlier looking troubled, and while his reaction to Eroan’s romance had

been exactly as he'd hoped, it hadn't changed anything going on outside. "You followed Zane?" he prompted.

"I did. To the top of a tower-like building, and that's where I heard them inside together. I, er..." He scratched at his cheek. "I was kinda surprised, seeing as Akiem gave me shit for, you know... you. Once, he told me to kill you, just to put you out of your misery. He never fucking got it. So hearing him with Zane, telling him he *cared*... I maybe kicked the door in," he winced. "Which set him off. He shifted inside the building." He sighed. "Their tower box-house is trashed."

"He came after you?"

"Yeah..."

Eroan stroked over Lysander's pec, skimming warm skin, reminding him he wasn't alone. "It didn't go well?"

"I ran, but I had to shift or he'd have crushed me. We fought. He had me, honestly... Then some things Zane said came back to me. I just... I could have forced him off, got inside his head. Had he been anyone else, I would have. But... it felt wrong. So I just stopped fighting, and so did he. And then I got fucking stuck."

Eroan stopped stroking. "You what?"

"The streets here are real narrow," Lysander showed him a gap between his hands, "and I hadn't planned on shifting where I did. I tried to turn and got wedged between two buildings."

Eroan poked his tongue into his cheek. "I see."

"It's not funny." His smile said otherwise.

"What did Akiem do?"

"Stared, like I was a fucking idiot."

Eroan snorted a laugh.

"Then he roared... the whole territorial thing."

"And you—?"

"I sneezed. It's the grass."

Eroan laughed harder. "He was proclaiming himself the victor and you *sneezed* at him?"

"It's not funny."

"No," he swallowed most of the laugh but some still slipped through, "of course not."

"He was trying to kill me. It was stupid. I need to be more careful. I've forgotten what it means to have to fight every day. It's made me slow. I had

a wing in the air like a stupid kit. It was embarrassing.” Lysander narrowed his eyes, and Eroan swallowed the rising laugh. “Do you want me to tickle you again? Because this is how the tickling starts.”

“Please don’t...” The laugh burst free, and damn, Lysander was on him and everywhere, his fingers finding all the sensitive spots all over again, until the laughter fell into kisses and breathless gasps, and the tickling into firm, delicious strokes.



## CHAPTER 14

Zane

THIS COULDN'T CONTINUE.

Their home, the place they'd made their own, had a gaping hole in the roof and half the windows had blown out to accommodate Akiem's tail. It was ruined. Akiem had returned as man alongside Zane, taken one look at the devastation, and grimaced like he'd wanted to shift and curl into an impenetrable ball of scales.

So, this definitely could not continue. And Zane was going to make sure of it.

The storm had broken overnight, and the tide was out once more. There was time to fix things before high tide, to put all this right before Eroan and Lysander left for good.

He left Akiem, readying for their weekly meeting with the council, and headed for the docks.

Spotting Eroan descending the gangplank, Zane quickened his pace. This wasn't going to go well, considering how Eroan looked down on Zane like he was an undisciplined fool, but he had to try, for Akiem. "Eroan."

The white-haired warrior lifted his head, and on recognizing Zane, openly frowned. Wonderful.

Zane jogged up to greet him as he stepped onto the dockside. "You know what happened earlier between Akiem and Lysander?"

“I do,” he said carefully. “Akiem attacked him. Again.”

And of course it was all Akiem’s fault. Did this elf never step out of his neat little box where he was so damn sure he knew everything? “Lysander appeared at our door being a dick. Of course Akiem attacked.” Eroan’s piercing eyes filled with scorn. Zane swallowed his rising anger. Running his mouth off would not win Eroan over. “Look, Akiem is... It’s not my place to say, all right, but... I know he did terrible things. But more importantly, *he* knows it. That’s not who he is anymore.”

“We’ve been here less than two days and he’s attacked Lysander at every opportunity.”

Zane bit back words that would see Eroan draw his daggers—words like Lysander was being an asshole—because this was more important than the pair of them. “Lysander is a threat.”

“He’s not—”

“How is he *not* a threat? Don’t you see? He’s *Lysander*. He’s emerald, and I know that’s bad, and Akiem is on the back foot here. He never expected to have to deal with this, and now he is... Well, he’s not dealing real well. He’s not bad, Eroan, and I think you know that. That’s why you came halfway around the world to find him.”

Eroan hesitated. “I came here for Lysander, and I fear it was a mistake.”

Zane pinched his forehead. “Alumn, I don’t think it was. I think you know Akiem better than you’re letting on. He doesn’t hurt dragons or elves unless he has to. Having Lysander here is fucking him up, and if you leave without resolving this, nothing will change. Is that what you want?”

Eroan tilted his chin, blue eyes appraising in a less murderous way. “What are you suggesting?”

“A meeting.”

“So Akiem can attack Lysander again?”

“He won’t.”

“You can’t know that.”

“I can.”

“Dragons will do as they please.”

Zane studied the male in front of him the same way he was being acutely studied in return. Eroan’s stoic expression, the way he held himself, always expecting an attack. He likely didn’t know any other way than fighting for every step.

“I saw your face when you thought Lysander was hurt in the bay,” Zane said. “You care for him, more than care.” Eroan bowed his head, accepting. “I know what that feels like. I care for Akiem... a lot. I want to protect him, the same as you’re protecting Lysander. We might do things differently, but we want the same thing. I mean, we’re elves for fuck’s sake. We come from different worlds, but we’re the same. Akiem needs closure, he needs peace in his head or it’ll eat him up. I have to help him, to save him from himself, and maybe you don’t give a shit about that or about Akiem. But I do. I think... I think we can end this feud between the brothers, you and I.”

“What happened between Lysander and Akiem never ends. They carry it with them.”

Zane threw his hands up. “So we shouldn’t try and heal?” He huffed a humorless laugh. “I know you didn’t give him an inch before. I know you’d probably prefer he’d died. Maybe you think *you* should have killed him for all the things he did—” Eroan looked away, giving his answer. “He’s changed,” Zane said. “I’m just asking you to see that. Is that so terrible a thing?”

Eroan glanced aboard the ship and then faced Zane. A small smile thawed his hard expression. “All right, but when they both come together, don’t be surprised if it goes wrong. The dragon way is to cut out the hurt.”

Zane grinned. “But this time there’s one difference. They have us.”



ZANE DIDN'T GET NERVOUS. He stumbled through life, tripping up and falling into opportunities. But while waiting outside the council room for Akiem to finish inside, he chewed on his nails and tapped a foot. He rarely asked anything of Akiem, didn't need to, because the dragon always knew his wants, but today, he was asking not for himself, but for Akiem. He just hoped he'd see it that way.

The meeting adjourned and the council members filed out, nodding at Zane as they passed. Akiem saying Zane's name summoned him inside the large, official room, probably one of the only rooms in the city to be finished. Polished marble and glass gleamed, all the best bits salvaged from elsewhere and utilized here as a display of what could be accomplished when dragons and elves worked together.

Akiem stood at the end of a long table, his hair half-braided and his clothes neat and precise. He looked perfect, like the leader he was, and his half smile revealed exactly how much he loved it.

“Any trouble the city watchers need to be aware of?” Zane asked.

“The dragonkin are complaining there’s not enough food. More have been arriving, and they’re working hard to rebuild Bayston. Surprisingly, they’re content to work, so long as they’re fed. The farms will have to increase production. Oh, and there’s that matter of an emerald dragon and an infamous elven assassin, who are something of a concern.”

Zane propped himself against the edge of the table and leaned back, braced on an arm. “So, there’s this thing I want to ask.”

“A thing?”

“An important thing.”

Akiem collected the spread of council notepads together, busying himself so he didn’t have to look up. “Does this *thing* involve my brother?”

He always saw through Zane’s attempts at smoothing him over before asking for something he knew Akiem wasn’t going to like. “You love me, right?”

Akiem snorted, shoved his pile of books aside, and stepped around the table to lay his warm hands on Zane’s thighs, and now he had his hands on him, it didn’t take much to ease Zane’s legs apart, brush his hands behind Zane’s hips, and lean close. “What do you want?” he grumbled, but not all was lost. He still smiled.

“Hm,” Zane licked his lips, “there’s a loaded question.”

His fingers danced lightly down Zane’s face, grazing his chin, and tipped Zane’s head up. “You know I’d do anything for you.”

Alumn, the rumble in his voice had Zane’s thoughts careening off course, straight into a gutter. “Would you jump off a cliff for me?”

“I have wings, so that’s hardly a task.” Akiem’s mouth skimmed Zane’s, teasing and pulling away at the last second before Zane could capture the kiss.

“Would you stay in bed all day with me?” Zane asked, chasing that tantalizing mouth and speaking into his cheek.

“A week, a month, however long you want.” Akiem’s voice had dipped deeper again, into the gravelly tone that made Zane want to spill filthy words into his ear. But Akiem was no fool, and what he was doing now was everything in his power to distract Zane from the real question.

“Would you meet with Lysander for me?” Zane whispered.

Akiem’s wandering hands froze. He leaned back and all the warmth they’d generated snuffed out. Zane watched him turn away and sighed.

Akiem returned to shuffling the books and papers. “He despises me, and rightly so.”

“Bull. Shit. He’s angry. You both are.”

Akiem looked up, his expression of hurt plain on his face. “It’s not as simple as you make it out to be.”

“Because you’re making it difficult.” Zane hopped off the table and moved to his side. “You meet, you talk, and you don’t kill each other. I know you have a hundred things you want to say to him but won’t. These things are never one-sided. He’ll speak with you. On the street, he said as much. Will you try?”

“Lysander and I, we’ve always fought. It’s how we are. It’s too late to change.”

“How do you know if you don’t try?”

Akiem smiled a dragon’s typically belittling smile.

Zane scowled back. “Don’t do that. Don’t dismiss me because you think I can’t possibly understand what it means to be dragon. Talk with your brother. It can’t get any worse between you, so what do you have to lose?” Akiem winced, as though those words physically hurt, but Zane wasn’t taking them back. “He’ll be gone soon, and if you don’t try, you won’t get another chance. Ever. Few people get second chances in this world, Akiem. You know this.”

He left him there, mulling over those words, and hoped he’d done enough.



AKIEM PACED.

Zane sat on a stool at the bar and kept an eye on his dragon just in case he started to shift. He told the server to leave a bottle of wine and suggested he might like to leave too, leaving the building empty—just in case this went spectacularly wrong.

Zane hopped off the stool and handed Akiem a glass of wine. Akiem looked at it as though it were a loaded gun. If he didn’t relax, this was going

to be the disaster he was already dreaming up in his head. Zane set the glass on a nearby table and flung his arms around Akiem's shoulders.

Before Akiem got any ideas about escaping, Zane plastered himself close to Akiem's rigid body and purred low in his throat. "It's going to be fine."

"He doesn't know," Akiem said. "I never wanted him to know. I can't —"

Zane planted a kiss on his lips, silencing him. "You can do this. You're the strongest fucking dragon here, stronger than Lysander, and he knows it. You built peace between dragons and elves. This whole city is yours. You've killed kings and fought battles. Speaking with your brother is nothing compared to all that."

Akiem's hand came up to cup Zane's face. "Will you stay?" he asked softly.

"I'll be right there." Zane jerked his head toward the bar. "And right here." He poked him in the chest, over his heart. "Always."

The door rattled and in walked Lysander with Eroan in tow, hands entwined.

Akiem instantly tensed, like a live wire in Zane's arms. A growl began to rumble out of him. "Steady now," Zane said. "We're safe. They're not here to hurt you."

"I don't care about me," he whispered, so only Zane could hear.

"Well, I do." He kissed his cheek and withdrew, leaving his dragon standing in the middle of the room, all done up in black and shining buckles, like the day he'd killed the old king. Akiem lifted his chin, and pride swelled in Zane's heart.

Giving them space, he retreated to the bar. Eroan peeled off too, coming to lean against the bar beside him, a little wooden with tension and eyeing Akiem like he'd stab a dagger in his heart at the first opportunity.

"Akiem," Lysander said, stopping a few meters from his brother.

"Lysander."

Well, that was a start. Now all they had to do was last long enough to talk it out without killing each other. How hard could that be?

## CHAPTER 15

Akiem

HE AVOIDED meeting Lysander's gaze, which instantly meant he was on the back foot and submissive. It was natural for a dragon to face off and stare down one another, but Akiem couldn't even do that without fear Lysander would snare his mind and force him to submit. But Zane had suggested this was the only way, and here they were, because he couldn't say no to an elf.

"Say what you must, then leave," Akiem told Lysander, fully aware he sounded like the Akiem from the queen's tower and hating it.

"Would you at least look at me?" Lysander asked.

"So you can control me?"

"I won't."

"You tried before."

"That was then."

Akiem lifted his gaze and found his brother's green eyes. They'd been the first thing he'd seen when Lysander had hatched from his egg. He'd thought them pretty, but then Elisandra had growled at him to kill the kit. He'd failed. That was the first time he'd felt her bite. He'd failed again and again since then and always suffered while Lysander lived like he didn't care about anyone or anything. Elisandra hurt Lysander too. But she never shut him away, too afraid of his wrath should he learn the truth about being emerald. She hadn't been afraid of Akiem.

“You fuck elves now, huh?” Lysander asked. Either Eroan or Zane sharply inhaled, and Lysander shrugged a shoulder. “So it’s okay now, because you do it? You always did get your own way.”

“I *never* had my own way. I never had the freedom you did. Every day I lived under her. Every day was all about you.”

Lysander laughed, but the sound wasn’t a good one. “Fine. You’re right. She made you watch me because I’m emerald.” The flippant way he spoke made Akiem’s gut roil. “This doesn’t need to be a competition. She fucked us both over,” he said. “I’m sorry I didn’t see it with you. But you hid it, you know? Maybe if you’d told me, we’d have had each other through all that shit.”

“I told Amalia and Mother killed her,” he said. Lysander lowered his gaze and tucked a hand into a pocket. They’d both loved Amalia once. They shared that at least. “Telling you would have made it worse, and you’d suffered enough.”

“So, what?” He jerked his head up. “You were protecting me? All the times you tried to kill me, you were protecting me? *Right*. I’m supposed to, what? Forgive you?”

“No,” he sighed. “Not that.”

Lysander snorted. “I thought I was alone. I thought there was something wrong with me, and you let me think that, and here you are, fucking males *and* elves. I spent my whole fucking life with you looking down on me, like I was something filthy. You and Elisandra both—”

Was that what he truly thought? It hadn’t been like that at all. He’d only ever tried to maneuver around Elisandra’s wishes in a way that kept them both breathing. “Lysander, that’s not— I was trying to protect you the only way I knew how.”

Lysander bared his teeth. “I’m glad you found him,” he flung a hand at Zane, “because I bet somewhere inside that head of yours, you realize what you did to me was wrong. If I hadn’t found Eroan, we wouldn’t even be here. I’d be drugged up and fucking every bronze bitch Dokul threw at me—when Dokul wasn’t fucking me into the ground—and you’d be you, at the top of the amethyst tower, the queen’s favorite son who couldn’t do a damn thing wrong. And oh poor you, you didn’t get to fuck males like you secretly wanted, but hey, at least you weren’t repeatedly and brutally beaten for being different—”



Akiem's heart thumped like hammer blows. Hot blood scorched through his veins and pounded in his head.

Zane moved, but Eroan caught his arm and said something that had him standing down. Maybe he told Zane how he deserved this, how it was all true. He almost couldn't look at him, but in a glimpse, he did, and Zane's face was full of strength and honor and everything Akiem *knew* he was today. He *had* changed.

"Are you done?" Akiem asked. He weathered the words because of Zane, he was here for *him*, and because he owed Lysander this moment to speak, even though every word cut like a blade.

"Fuck, no." Lysander backed up a few steps. "*I have no brother.*" You remember saying that?" he asked, voice full of venom.

The memories twitched inside, each one barbed. The bronze, Mirann, had been beside him when he'd spoken those words... an extension of her father, Dokul. Akiem winced, feeling Dokul's teeth sink into his neck. He gripped a nearby chair, leaning hard against it as the memories played.

"That bitch wanted my cock," Lysander went on. "And she did everything to fucking get it, just like you let her." The words landed hard, every one a physical blow. "You helped her, Akiem. My own fucking brother. I know we were never close, but fuck, that's cold." He couldn't breathe. His lungs burned. The mud was too thick, swallowing him whole, and Dokul too heavy on his back. "She used me, and you sat on Mother's throne, pretending to be king. Did you even think about me in that dungeon? Did you *care*? You'd have left me to rot down there if I hadn't escaped and beaten her bloody. The bronze were all savage, twisted, vile creatures, and you gave me to *her* because you didn't have the fucking balls to just kill me."

Akiem pulled out the chair and fell into it so he didn't crumple to his knees. He wanted to shift but wouldn't, because every word Lysander had said was right, and he deserved the pain hearing them caused. "I'm bronze." The horrible truth was voiced suddenly, and with it came the terror that it was all true, that Lysander was right.

"What?" Lysander marched forward. "Speak up, like you did then, declaring me dead to all of amethyst."

Akiem lunged from the chair, heard Eroan shout a warning, but in a blink had his hand at Lysander's throat, his brother pinned to the wall. Lysander's emerald eyes were wide, and by the great gods, he'd tear his

throat out and gorge on his insides if he said *another fucking word*. “I’m bronze!” Akiem seethed. “I’m fucking bronze.”

Lysander punched at his chest, dislodging Akiem. He staggered, recoiling inside at himself and his horrible actions. Briefly, terrifyingly, he’d wanted to rip into Lysander, to tear him to shreds and roar over his corpse. Because that was what and who he was inside. *Bronze*. But he’d never wanted to be. He’d tried not to be, every damn day, he tried. “I had no choice,” he muttered.

Lysander’s face twisted with disgust.

Akiem wanted to throw up, to shift, to hide. The elves stared. Zane held Eroan back, saving Akiem from the assassin’s blade, a blade Akiem well deserved. “Dokul is my father,” he told them all. “There’s metal in my veins. It’s always been there, making everything *wrong*. Making me wrong.”

“*Lies*,” Lysander hissed, pushing off the wall. “Mother would have said —”

“My eyes.” He forced himself to look up, forced himself to see the horror and disbelief on Lysander’s face. “My eyes aren’t golden, like she told everyone. They’re bronze. Mirann was my half sister.”

Lysander stopped, suddenly rooted to the spot. He made a short, sharp noise of disbelief and glanced toward the elves. Akiem didn’t know what he saw on their faces. He couldn’t look anymore and stared at a knot in the floorboards instead. Shame crawled under his skin. He wanted to cut it out.

“That’s...” Lysander cut himself off. “That piece of shit Dokul was your father?”

He felt like an open wound, and now everyone could see inside him. Falling into the chair again, he buried his face in his hands. Was this what Zane wanted? Lysander would hate him more, and Eroan would kill him soon, just like he’d once promised. How was any of that better? “It was never discussed, but Mother... every time she looked at me, she despised me.” He looked up, dislodging cool, shameful tears. “It happened before she came into power. Dokul took her, probably by force, knowing she’d someday be a ruler. He didn’t know she kept an egg from his clutch to hatch in a later jeweled clutch. He never said anything, but Mirann knew. She told me she’d tell you if I didn’t... If I didn’t hand you over.” He sighed and finally met Lysander’s glare. “I never wanted you to know.”

Lysander thrust his hands into his hair and paced. “Fuck.”

“He...” The words tasted like blood on his tongue. He had to get them out or they’d poison him. “He hurt me, like he hurt you. And at the estuary, when I fought him, I tried to kill him, but I failed, like I always fail. He held me down in the mud. He... broke me.” His tears fell onto trembling hands. “I flew here. Cowardly, I know, but I wasn’t thinking. I didn’t die. I wanted to... and then here, with Luceran, I thought, for a while, I could be different. Better. I thought he’d make me better, but it was jeweled games, and if it weren’t for Zane, I’d be dead all over again.” He looked up and found Lysander silently looking back. The elves, too, had settled and watched, listening to his wrongs. “The bronze can’t fly this far,” he said. “I almost didn’t make it. But gods, I’m afraid he’ll find me. I watch every ship that comes in, afraid he’s on the next one. I’m afraid I’m like him, Lysander. I never wanted to be, but he’s inside.” Akiem tore his sleeve up, revealing the freshly scabbed cuts and the ink hiding his shame. “I tried to cut him out.”

Lysander glanced at Eroan, the elf nodded once, and Lysander came forward. He towered over him, the emerald he was always meant to be. The survivor. Lysander said he was jealous, but Akiem had always admired his brother for his truth, for never hiding who he was, for being true to himself.

Lysander knelt, bringing him eye-to-eye, and maybe he’d control him now. Maybe Akiem no longer cared, because he was so damn tired of hiding.

“Dokul is dead,” Lysander said. “A dragonblade struck his heart. He’s gone, and he’s never coming back.”

He hadn’t known how much the fear had a hold of him until he felt it finally let go. “Is that true?” he rasped.

Lysander’s hand came down onto Akiem’s shoulder and squeezed. “The bastard can’t hurt you anymore.”

## CHAPTER 16

Lysander

HE HADN'T REALIZED how angry he'd been about *everything* until he'd seen Akiem standing in the meeting house like nothing could touch him. Akiem had opened his mouth and spouted some nonsense about protecting Lysander, which was bullshit, because he'd damn well needed someone in that fucking tower, more than he'd needed a bastard brother who protected him by way of silence and distance, looking at Lysander like he was a runt who should be killed for the good of the amethyst brood.

But then, slowly, as Lysander had said more and more and the truth tumbled free, he'd seen Akiem crumble. It had felt good to see him hurt, to see him sit in that chair and wither beneath Lysander's words. And then he'd come at Lysander like the bastard Lysander knew him to be, and he'd said something Lysander hadn't expected, something he didn't believe, until he saw the pain on his brother's face.

Dokul was Akiem's father.

And then it all made sense.

The reason he'd stayed at a distance, the reason he'd snapped with Mirann beside him, and the reason he'd always been distant and aloof and untouchable. He hadn't had just Elisandra pulling his strings, but Dokul too.

Lysander had felt Dokul's influence in all ways, but he'd escaped. How did you escape something in your veins? Something that made up half of

who you were. No wonder Akiem was a mess.

Suddenly, and wholeheartedly, Lysander wanted to protect his brother from Dokul. He wanted to find a way to tear the bronze out of him and make him see he wasn't like those beasts. Oh, he was still a fucking prick, but nothing like the monster who had abused them both.

"Shit..." Lysander moved his hand from Akiem's shoulder and clamped his grip on the back of his brother's neck. Tears swam in Akiem's bronze eyes, and damn if Lysander's vision didn't blur too. He pulled him close and bumped foreheads. "You're not him, you know that, right?"

Akiem's muffled sob revealed he'd had a heart all along, and Dokul had almost broken it.

"I mean, you're a piece of work, and I hate you for everything, but I don't hate you like I hate him. And maybe I hate you a little less now, as you saved Eroan and Seraph when I couldn't, and how you're not currently trying to kill me. I figure that was mostly Elisandra anyway..."

"She gets in my head," he whispered, the words brushing Lysander's cheek. "I still hear her sometimes."

"I know, brother. So do I."

Akiem's arm looped around his back, and Lysander pulled him close, holding him tight. It might have been the first time he'd ever held him, and it seemed wrong that it had taken this long. He'd missed his brother, and maybe to have him back and to hear his truths was a gift he'd never expected to need.

The elves were at the bar, so good at blending into the background, but both of them looked relieved and maybe a little smug.

Lysander sighed and freed his brother, hastily wiping tears from his face. "They'll be insufferable now." He tilted his head toward the bar where two of the finest elves in all the known worlds patiently waited for their dragons to get their shit together.

Akiem glanced over and arched a brow, then chuckled lightly. "They already were."

"You were dead," Lysander said, voice quivering. "I didn't think to look for you until Eroan brought me here."

Eroan... He smiled coyly now, like he didn't know he'd been right all along. Who else could have brought Akiem back to Lysander? Who else could have tamed two dragons enough to have them talk?

Zane's half smile said that maybe he'd played a part in it too. He winked at Lysander.

"Elves," Akiem snorted, revealing his heart in that one little word.

Lysander laughed, because he knew exactly how that felt. "Right."

## CHAPTER 17

Eroan

EROAN CAUGHT Zane's eye and suggested with a nod that they leave the two brothers to discuss more private things. Zane agreed but took his time leaving the bar area, only relaxing enough to let go when Akiem laughed at something Lysander had said.

The sun was shining on Bayston again, the city carrying on as normal. Eroan maneuvered between the flow of people toward the dockside where gulls squawked and the ocean breeze brought with it the smell of salt.

"I didn't think they'd talk," he admitted as Zane stopped beside him, his back to the sea, facing the meeting place across the road. He was concerned still, and it occurred to Eroan that Akiem had made himself out to be the stronger of the brothers, but the truth was very different.

"They nearly didn't."

"Walk with me?" Eroan asked.

"Do you think we should?" He glanced back at the meeting house again.

"They'll be fine, and if they aren't, we'll be close by to pick up the pieces."

"You trust Lysander?" Zane asked, easing into Eroan's leisurely pace along the waterfront.

"With my life. He won't hurt Akiem unless he has to. He doesn't like to fight."

Zane arched a brow. "That's not the impression I got from him."

Everyone made the mistake of assuming Lysander would fight, when really, he'd always preferred not to. He needed it, there was no denying it, and he was good at it, as both man and dragon, but it brought out the side of him he'd never been fully comfortable with. "When you spoke, if you were defending Akiem, he would have reacted to that. He'll fight when pushed, and he'll win, because he knows no other way."

Zane nodded to himself, then his smile flashed—a real smile this time, making his eyes brighten. "Do you think this truce will last?"

"I hope it will, for their sake."

They walked on some more, watching fishing boats bob on the water, content in the quiet.

"You don't have to leave, if you don't want to," Zane said. "I maybe judged you harshly."

Eroan smiled. "Actually, you judged me just right. I'm not the easiest to get along with. I'm working on it... Thank you, and I appreciate the offer to stay. I'll speak with Lysander, but I suspect he's ready to return home. We have a village, friends, and he has his dragons. It's not *this*," he gestured at the Bayston waterfront behind them and the citizens going about their business, "but it's ours, and it's enough."

"Is it?" Zane asked, and at Eroan's arched eyebrow, he added, "Enough? You don't strike me as the settling type."

He thought of home, of the huts and the elflings and cool evenings around warm fires, sharing food and tales with Seraph and Junoe, all those he'd come to think of as family. "It wasn't before, but it is now. I wanted to see the world and fight all the battles, but I'm ready to let go of that life. If Lysander's content, so am I."

Zane cocked his head. "If? You two seem pretty tight to me."

Eroan hadn't meant to give so much away, or perhaps Zane was more astute than he'd realized. "Do you think of the future?"

"Every day."

"I mean... you and Akiem? A future with him."

"With the city and things as they are, I try to stay in the now and plan what I can control, which isn't much, and I certainly can't and won't control him."

"But he'll be with you, all the way?"

His expression turned pensive, maybe a little concerned. "I hope so."



And that tone, Eroan recognized. “They’re formidable, aren’t they?” Zane looked over, and Eroan added, “Dragons.”

Zane smiled. “Not all of them.”

“No,” Eroan conceded. “I never set out to tame him. I love him as he is, but as elf, I don’t know how this works, going forward. I trained as an assassin. It was my life. Order assassins didn’t entertain relationships of any kind. And I... Well, some things happened in my past. I failed some friends and it ended badly. I perhaps struggle with partnerships, and I wonder...” He also wondered why he was telling Zane any of this. Maybe because he was the only other elf who understood how it felt, loving a dragon. The thrill of it, the fear that one elf could never be enough for something and someone as wild as their dragons were.

“You wonder if he’ll leave?” Zane finished for him. “With Akiem, he gets this look about him sometimes, then he goes out to hunt, and I wonder if this will be the time he doesn’t come back. I can only give him so much. I’m elf, he’s dragon, and I don’t think anyone knows how that’s supposed to work.”

Eroan knew that feeling well. “I’ll love Lysander for as long as he’ll have me.”

Zane’s grin grew, and his eyes took on a shrewd look. “It helps that the sex is phenomenal.”

A laugh burst from Eroan. Zane clearly said whatever he thought, which made him perfect for Akiem. “You are not who I pictured Akiem might fall for, but you’re absolutely what he needs.”

“Naturally,” he preened, running a hand through his hair with flair. “Although it wasn’t all smooth sailing. We had a bumpy start. He thought I was a whore, and I thought he was the old king’s play-toy...”

As Zane went on to explain how they’d met—while Zane had been trying to free a friend from the previous dragon king—Eroan found himself thawing to the red-haired elf who clearly knew his own mind enough to protect a dragon, against all the odds. Eroan respected that and everything Zane and Akiem had achieved in Bayston. He did not believe he could have done the same. Together, they’d survive. Akiem was in good hands, and Akiem would surely devour anyone who dared threaten this elf.

## CHAPTER 18

Akiem

THE SHIP HAD MADE it out of the harbor, and the view of Lysander and Eroan on its deck gradually shrank away, taking the past with them. The memories didn't haunt him like they had. He was still Akiem. His past was a part of him, and while it was painful, it didn't make him who he was today. He was still Akiem, but changed. Better.

Zane tucked an arm around his waist. "Do you forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive."

He softly laughed, and Akiem sighed to hear it, his own heart and mind finally at peace. Everything he had, the city, his brood, Zane. It was safe. And he'd make sure it stayed that way. "Lysander told me to be careful. He said another emerald could take this city from us, take you. He's wrong. There isn't a force in this world strong enough to take you from me. Nobody and nothing can take this from us." He poked Zane lightly in his chest, over his heart. Zane's smile—always so bright and animated—cracked at its edge. He knew that pensive look, and on Zane it was dangerous. "Do you doubt my words?"

Zane faced the ocean and the disappearing ship. "I don't doubt you'll fight for this city and for me, but what about you? There are times when you're somewhere else in your head and I can't reach you there to bring you home."

Akiem tipped Zane's chin up. His eyes glistened, his face so full of concern that Akiem's breath caught. "You always reach me, Zane. Wherever I am, I know you'll be beside me. It's different now. Dokul is dead and I'm..."

"Free to leave?" Zane asked, tripping Akiem's thoughts.

"*Leave?*" Was that what he thought? Was that why Zane sighed with relief every time Akiem returned from the nightly patrols? Why Akiem often returned to find him on the rooftop, watching the skies in the rain and cold? "I'm not going anywhere."

Zane's three fingers laced neatly in Akiem's hand. "It's a big world. You could fly away tomorrow and see it."

Akiem peered at Zane through narrow eyes. He reeled him in close as a possessive growl rumbled through his chest. "There's nothing out there I want more than you."

Zane's grin grew. He threw his arms loosely around Akiem's neck and teased a kiss, pulling away at the last second. The growl burbled some more, issuing a warning that if the teasing didn't stop, they wouldn't make it back to their newly adopted dwelling before Akiem ravished his elf against a wall.

"What else did Lysander say?" Zane asked, a touch of concern still in his eyes.

"He wishes things had been different, but he's glad they aren't, because he sees I'm happy for the first time since Amalia." An annoying lump blocked his throat. He swallowed to clear it.

"She'd be proud of you, you know, and Lysander, I guess, for what he did to the queen, but mostly you."

The lump was back. He cleared his throat, and Zane hugged him tighter, pulling down the last of Akiem's barriers. "Thank you."

"Pfft." Zane smirked. "Sometimes all you dragons need is a little shove in the right direction. Honestly, it could have gone either way. When you had him against the wall, I figured *fuck, here we go*. You were going to tear his throat out, then Eroan would try and kill you, which I'd naturally have to stop—and we both know in a straight fight, Eroan's going down."

Akiem chuckled. "Many have tried to kill Eroan and failed."

"Yes, but none of them were *me*." He fluttered his lashes.

Gods, he loved this elf. He reeled him in and kissed him hard. "You defending me is adorable."

“Adorable?” Zane grumbled. “I was trying for more of the mighty, heroic look.”

“Hm,” Akiem purred. “Mighty but small. Keep trying. I love it.”

Zane wriggled free and laughed when Akiem pulled him back in close. They watched the ship shrink against the horizon line, and Akiem sighed. It felt good, finally being at peace. Like he could soar on the endless wind and never tire.

“I have an idea...” Zane said.

Akiem growled. “Is this one of those ideas I’m not going to like?”

Zane’s little hand slipped into Akiem’s. “This one, I think you’ll love.”

## CHAPTER 19

Lysander

THE EVENING WAS warm and the sea calm, with enough of a breeze to fill the sails. Lysander tipped his head to the wind. He'd usually take to the wing on an evening like this, but the voyage home would be long, and he needed to conserve strength. It would be worth it. Seraph would squeal when she saw them, and Junoe would sing a new song, and it would be like they'd never left. He loved going home.

The deckhands busied themselves, tugging on ropes and yelling commands. It was all very exciting and had the dragon in him tripping over itself to watch elves scurrying.

Bayston harbor had grown small, the sun setting behind the ruins of an old world now inhabited by a new peace. One with Akiem at the helm.

He'd be all right, because he wasn't alone.

Eroan sidled up to Lysander and squinted at the retreating view of the city. "I'm sorry, you know. For everything."

Lysander folded Eroan into his arms, his back against Lysander's chest, where there was no escape. Eroan's rich chuckle and the way his body molded perfectly to Lysander's brought all Lysander's instincts simmering to the surface. "I'm sorry too," he said. "I was pissed at Akiem for nearly chewing my tail off when he was supposed to be dead, and you were right. This needed to happen. You maybe should have told me, but we can work

on that.” He breathed Eroan’s scent in and let the purr burble free. By nights, he loved him so damn much.

“I’ve been thinking.”

“Uh-oh, another adventure? Can we get home from this one first?”

“There are enough messengers roaming the world, enough Order elves keeping the peace. They don’t need me anymore, and I don’t need them. I have everything I need right here.”

Lysander stilled. He could feel Eroan’s heart thumping against the palm of his hand. “What are you saying?”

“What we have, it’s enough.”

Lysander brushed his cheek against Eroan’s tipped ear and the earring glinting there, bringing his mouth close to the elf’s sensitive hearing. “You don’t need to do that for me.”

“I want to. If you’ll have me.”

“As if there are any doubts,” Lysander mumbled gruffly, aching to kiss his neck, but Eroan’s tension still hadn’t thawed. “Wait, is there doubt?”

“I just...”

Lysander loosened his hold, and Eroan turned, meeting Lysander’s gaze with a concerned one of his own. Why was he worried? Oh gods, what was this? He growled a warning and tipped his head. “Eroan Ilanea, what are you thinking that has you giving me that look?”

“You’re dragon and I’m elf,” he said.

“I thought we’d been through this?”

“Yes, but... I love you.” He flicked his beautiful eyes up as though expecting Lysander to reject him, which was absurd.

Lysander laced his hands together against Eroan’s lower back, locking him in his arms. “I know, and it’s amazing, because I love you too. What a coincidence.” He moved in for a kiss, but Eroan dipped his chin, and Lysander’s heart flopped.

“Yes, but, what about later?” Eroan asked.

“Later what?” This was beginning to hurt. What was Lysander missing?

“A year from now?” Eroan asked.

Wait. Was he screwing with him? “I’m pretty sure I’ll still love you then.”

“What if you don’t? What if you need something else?”

Lysander frowned. This was real confusing. “Where is this coming from? Is this Zane? That little sh—”

“No. No, it’s not Zane. Alumn, I’m just going to say it. What if you want a dragon? Kits? A real brood? Or a male dragon you can be... all-dragon with.” He screwed up his face. “Alumn, I’m saying it all wrong.”

Lysander blinked. “Have you met any kits? They’re horrible, vicious things.”

Eroan closed his eyes and looked away, and it was only the fact that Lysander had crowded him against the ship’s rail that he hadn’t walked away. Lysander’s heart rattled in his chest. “Look at me, please.”

Eroan did and sighed, his mouth ticking down at the corner.

“Eroan Ilanea, you’re my everything. I don’t need a dragon, I’m all-dragon with you. I’m not going anywhere, because I have everything I need right here. I love you now, I loved you yesterday, and I’ll love you a hundred years from now, until you’re as old as that ancient Order elf in Ashford and I’m so old I’ll frighten all the little elflings with inappropriate war stories.”

“You already do that,” Eroan said, but smiling again.

Lysander touched his nose to Eroan’s. “I’ll love you until all the other dragons are gone and the world is as it was, with billions of humans and hidden elves and houses and cities, and it’s just you and me, wondering when we got old. I’ll love you until your Ashford tree is as tall as the highest mountain. I’m never going to stop loving you because you’re my heart and my soul and my reason for living.” Eroan sighed against Lysander’s mouth, and it was all he could do not to ravish him right there. “Did you doubt it?” he asked.

“Not you,” Eroan said, a touch of heat in his face. “I doubted myself.”

“Well, don’t.”

A roar punched through the sound of the wind in the ship’s sails. A huge black dragon glided toward them, so big its wings blotted out the setting sun.

A broad grin lifted Lysander’s lips. His brother really was magnificent. As Akiem soared closer, a tiny splash of red showed on his back, between his wings.

“Alumn, Zane’s riding him,” Eroan breathed in awe.

Akiem flew so low over the ship, the deckhands ducked and cursed the black prince. He banked hard to the left. Sunlight washed over the expanse of black scales, making him shine. Zane whooped, Akiem roared, and the

pair swooped overhead once more before heading back toward the home they'd built together.

They were going to be all right. Lysander was sure of that. The same as he and Eroan would be all right, because they'd always have each other, now and forever.

The End



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born to wolves, Ariana Nash only ventures from the Cornish moors when the moon is fat and the night alive with myths and legends. She captures those myths in glass jars and returning home, weaves them into stories filled with forbidden desires, fantasy realms, and wicked delights.

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