



HEART OF DRAGONS
BOOK TWO



BY FANG AND FIRE



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Come not between the dragon and his wrath.

- William Shakespeare

Book Four

Kian

CHAPTER ONE

Adrissu was certain that his mate would never again have a life so peaceful.

The majority of his and Braern's time together was spent in leisure. After they were bonded, Braern did little besides stay at home for a long while, relaxing and reading and enjoying an existence free of duty or responsibility. Adrissu was happy for him, knowing how much struggle and pain had been present in his lives, both this and the previous ones.

After a few months of this, though, living idly seemed to lose its luster for Braern, and he dove with gusto into a never-ending stream of hobbies and interests. Adrissu was more than happy to provide him with anything he asked for. He did some work at the academy on and off, and after nearly thirty years together, Braern sat in on a few lectures and found himself fascinated by a lesson on archeology. It started with the dwarven history of Polimnos, but his interest soon spread to a variety of ancient ruins scattered throughout Autreth, all remnants of its various former conquerors.

His passion ignited, he often left Polimnos to explore these sites with groups of other students or archeologists, but occasionally alone, or with another hobbyist or two. The first time, Adrissu was hesitant to let him go unaccompanied, but Braern insisted that he was more than an adult and could handle himself. So he went, and returned so happy that Adrissu couldn't fathom trying to prevent him from going again. After that, once or twice a year, Braern would leave on extended excursions to faraway ruins, exploring and studying, bringing back sketches and small trinkets from the places he visited. It reminded Adrissu very much of his life with Ruan; though, this time, he had a deep reassurance that Braern would always return to him safely. He was out learning about ancient relics, not hunting dangerous creatures or fighting a war.

When Braern wasn't traveling, they were largely inseparable. He still helped out around the academy, read voraciously, played music for Adrissu, and even forced him to leave his tower sometimes to walk through the market and sit out on the beach. *This* was what it meant to have a fated

mate, Adrissu thought—to have someone by his side through everything, who looked at him with just as much adoration as he felt boiling up in his chest when they were together. It was easy. It was *right*. He hoped it would last forever.

When the first touches of silver became visible on the edges of the elf's hairline, Adrissu finally brought up the soul transference again. It had been a dormant subject for several decades, but the signs of aging were something he could not ignore; for elves, when their hair began to gray or wrinkles started to line their face, it was evidence that they were truly long-lived and their time was coming to an end.

“Haven't we had a wonderful life together?” Adrissu asked him, his voice soft and his lips brushing the other man's forehead. “Don't you want it to always be like this?”

Braern did not answer right away—that alone was enough to send Adrissu's heart sinking down to the pit of his stomach.

“I don't know,” the elf finally answered, just as quiet. “I don't know, Adrissu. I'm not afraid of dying this time. I don't think I'm ready to commit to being alive forever.”

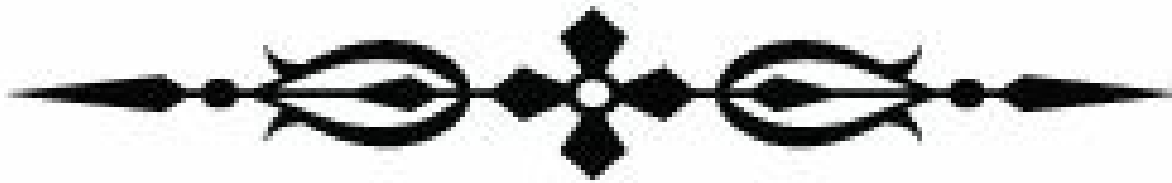
Adrissu's chest roiled with emotion. *Why?* Why wouldn't a mortal creature choose immortality? Why would he not fear death? Why didn't he want to stay with Adrissu, just like this, until the end of time?

Maybe there was something wrong with him. Something that made his mate want to be apart. But he *knew* Braern loved him. He could feel it in the bond between them every time their eyes met.

“You're overthinking this,” Braern said, cupping his cheek and bringing his attention back to reality. “You know I'll return to you. I always do. I'm just... not ready to really be a dragon yet. It's okay if things change.”

“You're right,” Adrissu said hoarsely, forcing a smile. “You're right, of course.” It was true that his mate would always come back to him, but the thought of living through another death, another period of his life alone after being with his mate for a century—he recoiled at the very idea of it. But Braern's mind was made up, and to try to sway him would be a futile effort that would only frustrate them both. His only option was to accept Braern's choice and hope for a different outcome next time.

Next time. The thought burned Adrissu's eyes with unshed tears. He had hoped there would not be a next time, only a *this time*.



Braern died peacefully, an old man in the comfort of his home. He'd laid down for a nap in the middle of the afternoon—Adrissu had helped him get settled, his joints aching—and did not wake up. That was it.

Adrissu felt it the moment it happened; when one was awake and the other asleep, it wasn't uncommon to feel flashes of feelings through the bond as the other slept. There had been a rush of scattered emotion, and then a burning pain in the back of his head that took all his awareness of Braern with it. His nose started to bleed—the way Braern's had, so many years ago, when he'd severed the first bond that had linked the elf to another—and instantly he knew.

After over a century in Polimnos, Braern had been nearly as much of a fixture in the town and the academy as Adrissu himself. Adrissu allowed a small service at his home so Braern's friends and acquaintances could pay their respects. Then the elf's body was sent to Aefraya to be buried with the family members who had preceded him in death, as was typical for elves. All in all, the experience should have been easier than it had been in the past.

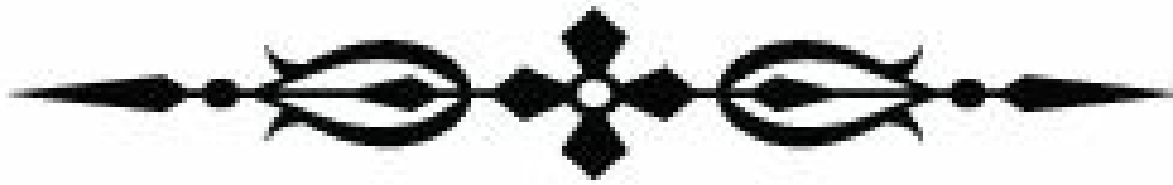
It should have been easier, but Adrissu was consumed with grief all the same, far more than the long years of anticipation had prepared him for. Hadn't he had time to grow and nurture acceptance? This time it was easy, natural—not at all the sudden trauma of Ruan or Volkmar. So why did his chest still tighten with despair when he thought of his mate? Why was it still so painful the third time around?

“I hate this,” he mumbled, his face pressed into his sheets where he'd been laying miserably for half the morning. Vesper was coiled up next to him, her head resting on the length of her body and peering at him with unblinking eyes. He could feel soft waves of sadness and concern emanating from her, so even though she did not outwardly respond, he knew she was commiserating. “Why do we keep having to go through this? Why?”

Her head tilted slightly, and her worry swelled in his chest. *Someday*, she thought. Sighing, he reached out to trail his fingers on her cool scales.

“Someday,” he agreed. “Someday we'll know this was the last time. When he comes back. I'll convince him once and for all.”

He sighed heavily at the resolution. He would have to try harder when he met his mate again. He had been so close with Braern—surely it wouldn't take much more to persuade his next reincarnation. After all, Adrissu thought, he was a dragon. He always got what he wanted, eventually.



Time passed, as it inevitably did. Lord Representative Susanna Allistair, a descendant of a former representative Rowena Allistair, offered Adrissu a spot on the city council. He declined, keeping his focus on the academy. He had been heading a project that, if implemented, would vastly improve the city's sewage system, so he did not want to divide his attention. It had been so long since he'd been a council member that it felt strange to be asked. Maybe he would take it up again someday. Maybe.

The project he was overseeing had been brought to him by one of his professors, a few months after Braern's passing. Throwing himself headlong into a project was exactly the distraction he needed, so he approved the proposal and pored over the designs. The current system carried fresh water via aqueducts throughout most of Polimnos; the new plan would add a subterranean sewer network that would allow soiled water to be transported out of the city, cleaned, and used for agriculture in the nearest village—a small farming community that had developed a few miles down the road. It was an ambitious undertaking, but the magic fueling the aqueducts could certainly be adapted to an underground sewage network, which would then connect every building in Polimnos to the new water system. If they could get a small-scale example of the system working, Adrissu was certain that the Lord Representative would approve.

It was a significant undertaking that would require years of work. But once the initial plans were made, the project slowed, having to wait for permits and approval to install even the experimental system beneath the academy. With so many idle hours suddenly on his hands, Adrissu worried his grief would return full-force; but as it had a habit of doing, time had lessened the sting of it all. What once had been a black hole of despair settled into the old familiar longing for his mate. He would bide his time.

Finally, everything was approved, and construction began. Building out the small sewer system beneath the school was a multi-stage effort, with several of the staff lending their magic to excavate tunnels and entrances. It reminded Adrissu a bit of when he would accompany Braern to the archaeological digs that interested him so much, which was a slight comfort.

When he was working alone, he made a few changes that were not on the approved blueprints, but that he doubted would be noticed. A few extra corridors, leading to rooms where a handful of bodies could take refuge—his thoughts had turned once again to dragons, like Naydruun or Heriel, who might still hold a grudge against him. If they should ever return, then having an underground hiding place away from his home would only be helpful. And if anyone noticed, he would tell them the truth that suited them: the rooms were an emergency shelter for students or staff if, gods forbid, some natural disaster struck. For mortals, how different was a hurricane or earthquake to the coming of a dragon?

But the project was tedious and time-consuming, and by the time it was done, three years had passed. Then they had to show it to the Lord Representative, and to all the committees and organizations that would be involved in such a venture; but Susanna was rightly impressed. A shrewd woman, Adrissu could tell she understood without needing to speak aloud how such a development would launch Polimnos into becoming one of the most advanced cities in the world. Rudimentary running water systems such as the aqueducts were implemented in many coastal communities, but to Adrissu's knowledge, nothing like the filtration system they proposed existed anywhere. It would be a difficult undertaking, but Susanna was ambitious and Adrissu was itching to throw himself into another project. They would make it work.

It took another year of preparation, coordinating with the academy to enchant large quantities of stone, and mundane workers mapping out the soon-to-be-dug subterranean tunnels that would service the entire city, before ground was broken and work truly began. Adrissu spent much of his time helping to enchant the stone that would help to keep water flowing continuously, and crafting the drains and levers that would be installed in each building to allow fresh water in and soiled water out. Enchantment was a tiring task, so he returned to his tower most days utterly exhausted, falling into soundless, dreamless sleep.

Because of his groundbreaking project, Susanna invited Adrissu that year to accompany her to the Council of Lords in Gennemont. It would really only be an opportunity to boast to the other lord representatives about Polimnos' progress, Adrissu thought; but even that had a certain appeal to it, so he agreed.

"Are you sure you won't consider a place on the city council?" Susanna asked him during their trip to Gennemont. "Arguably, you deserve it more than anyone else in Polimnos."

"I am reconsidering my refusal," Adrissu replied, bowing his head. "Let's see how this meeting goes first."

"Reasonable," she said, smiling wryly, and did not press him any further on the matter.

The Council of Lords was just as insufferable as it sounded: twenty-two Lord Representatives gathered in one grand meeting hall, along with their retainers and honored guests, such as Adrissu. Rumors had spread of the massive undertaking Polimnos had started, so the moment they arrived, other representatives clamored to speak with Susanna about it. When she revealed that it was, in fact, Adrissu who was the mastermind behind much of the project, the attention shifted soundly to him. He wasn't sure whether to hate it or to preen beneath it; but over the course of a week he explained the basics of the magic-fueled water pumps and filters, rejected multiple requests for the blueprints, refused several pleas to repeat the experiment in this or that city, and entertained an offer from a prominent Gennemont mage to come and assist on the project, but ultimately declined. What did he care about Gennemont or any of these other cities? Polimnos was his home; until he was reunited with his mate, it was all that mattered.

While a return to civic life and a position on the council once more continued to hold a certain appeal for Adrissu, the experience in Gennemont reminded him of everything that he had hated about being involved in governance—and besides, even he had his limits. His insistence on spearheading such a major project left him precious little time to himself; while that was all for the good, as it kept him from dwelling on his darker thoughts, he wanted to guard what remained of his free time zealously to rest and recuperate in the privacy of his tower. Susanna did not seem surprised by his refusal, but reiterated that he deserved a place there should he ever change his mind.

The further along the sewer project went, the less his direct attention was needed, and the more revenue the academy generated. Adrissu hired more instructors to teach more classes, so even as the project took less of his time, Adrissu kept himself busy by overseeing the changes being implemented at the school.

Eventually, the sewer system was fully excavated and attached to every building in the city: a boon not only to Polimnos, but to Autreth as a whole. Every major city was scrambling to implement something like it, Susanna told him with no small amount of pride. But it was a group effort, Adrissu said, so he took only partial credit for it. The name of the professor who had first come to him with the idea, Rylen Stone, was prominent on every piece of news and every diagram that was distributed regarding the system; Adrissu was happy to have his own further down the list.

By then, eighteen years had passed. His mate was somewhere in the world, now an adult, or near enough if he had come back again as an elf. That would be nice, Adrissu thought, to know that even if he did not agree to the soul transference, he would still have many years with his mate. Polimnos was too large by far now for him to simply walk about town looking for his mate—the way he had so long

ago, when he'd found Volkmar. No, Braern had shown him that his mate would come to him. He had waited a hundred years before; he could be patient. He was a dragon. He had nothing but time.

CHAPTER TWO

“Headmaster, they’re ready for you.”

“Thank you, Eris, I’ll be right there.”

With a sigh, Adrissu set down his pen and stood from his desk. In recent years, he had started the practice of giving a short speech to the incoming students on the first day of the new term: partly to welcome them, partly to thank them for joining the Academy, and partly to brag a bit about the school’s newest accomplishments to whet their appetites for what they could achieve.

He carefully smoothed his surcoat as he stood; he did not especially like the long, shapeless garments, but they were popular this year, and he always put forth an effort to keep his clothes in-fashion. Satisfied, he glanced back to the door, where Eris was still waiting for him. The slender human had been watching him, but averted her eyes quickly when he looked up, and kept her gaze down as he approached.

It was a shame her fondness for him had become so obvious of late. Adrissu had no interest in her, but she was a good worker, and he had no desire to remove her from her position as his secretary. But now she became so obviously flustered when they were alone that it was grating on his nerves. Of course, getting rid of his assistant at the start of the new school year would be even more inconvenient, so he resigned himself and put up with it for now. Hopefully, by the time he gave his next welcoming speech, she would be over whatever silly crush that she’d developed and moved on to someone else.

“Did you need anything else, sir?” she asked, holding the door as he strode past her.

“Will you follow up with the man from the city council who had those contracts—Darren or something like that? They were supposed to submit those to me for a signature a week ago,” he said over his shoulder.

“Of course,” Eris replied, her voice distant now as she remained behind.

The auditorium where the new students gathered was relatively recent, having been built where some of the academy's initial classrooms had once stood. They had been demolished during the trial phase of the original underground sewer system, more than fifteen years ago now. But it was not the only new building; in truth, the academy and its layout had changed significantly since its inception, over two centuries ago. Sometimes the memory of that first three-room building felt as distant as a dream.

“Good morning, and welcome to the Polimnos Academy of Magic,” he said, his voice magically amplified as he entered the auditorium from the instructor's side. Though there had been some chatter audible even from behind the door, the gathered students fell silent as he arrived, seventy-one pairs of eyes landing on him all at once. He paused, scanning the crowd, and a wide smile split his features as pride filled his chest. “I am Headmaster Adrissu, and I am pleased to see each one of you. Simply by being here, you've become part of something far greater than yourself. You're now part of a driving force of innovation and education, not only for Polimnos, but for all of Autreth and the world at large. In its two hundred and fifty-four years, the Academy has educated and trained some of the most influential mages of their time. If your home has such amenities as enchanted iceboxes, self-stirring utensils, candles with everlasting flames—you have the Academy to thank. If your home is connected to our revolutionary subterranean sewer system—and if you live in Polimnos, it almost certainly is—you have the Academy and Professor Rylen Stone to thank. By being here, your names are now among theirs in the annals of history.”

He grinned wider. “And who knows? Maybe someday your name will soar even higher.”

A low murmur spread through the crowd as some students chuckled, others grinning and smirking in youthful self-confidence.

“I won't keep you long, as I know many of you have your first classes shortly, but not all of you are lucky enough to have class in this very auditorium,” he said, answered with a few more laughs. “I just wanted to reiterate that—”

He stopped abruptly, a jolt of surprise shooting through his limbs as the world around him ground to a halt. Bright green eyes met his from a seat in the center of the crowd, eyes that he would recognize anywhere—the eyes of his mate.

That was *bad*: his first coherent thought jolted him back into action, and he forced himself to look away before his attention on a student—why a *student*?—became obvious. “I—pardon me. I just wanted to reiterate that your education at the Academy will enable you to accomplish that which the world has never seen before. Future innovations and breakthroughs of magic are now in your hands.”

Adrissu paused, breathing in a slow, controlled breath. The rest of his little speech was completely gone from his mind. His mate was here, *here* in this room, and there was nothing he could do about it. No, he told himself, his mate always found him eventually. He had waited this long. He could wait until the end of the day. Couldn't he?

“All this to say, I welcome you again to the Polimnos Academy of Magic,” he continued, his voice as smooth and even as ever, despite his sudden turmoil. “I hope you each have an excellent, productive school term. Thank you.” He bowed his head slightly as a smattering of applause answered him, glancing surreptitiously in the direction where he'd spotted his mate. Green eyes met his once more, finding him easily, and this time he allowed himself to look for a beat longer.

The first thing he realized was that those verdant eyes were in a delicate, feminine face—and second, that they were absolutely *glaring* at him. His mate sat motionless, face twisted with anger, even as the surrounding students clapped politely and began to chatter amongst themselves, some standing to leave and head to class.

The relief of finding his mate was far outweighed by his sheer confusion. Adrissu turned away before his stare could be noticed and exited through the instructor's door. The professor who would be lecturing in this auditorium said something to him, but it didn't register until he was already turning down the next hallway. He had to get back to his office.

“How did it go?” Eris asked, glancing up as he strode into the room.

“Very well,” he replied, his tone sounding clipped even to his own ears. From the corner of his eye, he could tell her friendly smile faltered, and she glanced away. “I need an hour undisturbed. Unless Darren brings me those papers.”

“Darien,” she said, her voice small. “He told me he'll come by tomorrow.”

“Great,” Adrissu muttered, and closed the door behind him. He let out a shuddering breath once he was in the safety of his office, sitting down heavily at his desk.

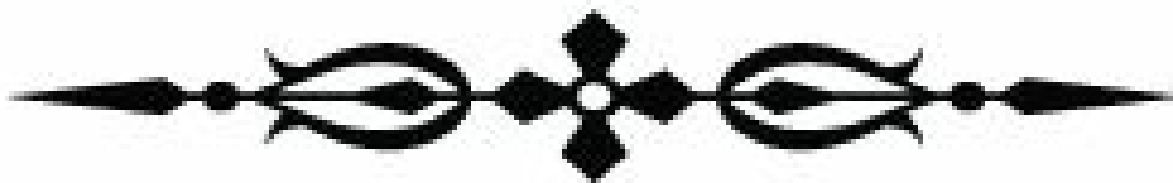
Had his mate been a woman? In that brief instance, that was how it seemed—he had not considered that possibility, but he hadn't thought that his mate might return as an elf either until Braern arrived at his doorstep. It was *possible*, he supposed. He hadn't looked long enough to tell. Maybe he was just a pretty boy—Volkmar had been much the same, lithe and feminine. That would be... fine, he told himself. His heart yearned for his mate, but apprehension still swirled in his mind. Why had he been met with such an angry expression? How much did his mate remember this time around?

And a *student*. That was really going to upset everything. To show such interest in a student would be wildly inappropriate on many levels, regardless of their status as a fated pair. Humans didn't have

such a thing, so it would be no excuse. He would have to bide his time until his mate graduated or left the school. Knowing of his mate yet being unable to be near them... The thought hurt more than the simple, patient waiting of the last nineteen years.

“Damn it,” he muttered, rubbing his face with both hands. Nothing was ever easy. He didn’t even know their name.

But he was sure his mate would find him soon enough. The look they’d shared in the auditorium, no matter how brief, attested to that. Classes would start about now; a standard course lasted an hour and a half. Depending on where in the building his mate was, he expected to meet them again in about two hours. His body buzzed with anticipation that he begrudgingly quashed; it didn’t seem promising that the meeting would be a pleasant one, unless he had somehow wildly misjudged the situation.



Adrissu waited, keeping himself busy with the pile of paperwork on his desk. There were always last-minute contracts to sign and lesson plans to approve at the beginning of term—not that he gave any of them much of his attention, unable to fully subdue the worry and wonder chewing through his gut.

He could hear an increase of ambient noise as the first class ended and students began milling about, some already on their way to another class, while others were heading to the library to study or to their dormitory to rest. All the while, he listened closely for anyone approaching. A few times he heard Eris speaking indistinctly, but no one came to his door.

At almost two hours exactly, though, the familiar rap of her small fist sounded on the wooden door to his office.

“Headmaster,” her voice came. “A student is here to see you.”

“Send them in,” Adrissu called, looking up quickly. His gaze remained locked on the door as it swung open to reveal Eris, who stepped aside for the student to pass. Green eyes and a shock of red hair—it was his mate, exactly as he’d expected.

Now that he had longer than an instant to look, his mate was decidedly androgynous: a human with a smaller-than-average stature and narrow, delicate features. Freckles splashed across their upturned nose, which was wrinkled with the same expression of barely restrained anger as before. A loose, flowing gray robe covered most of their frame, hiding the shape of their body.

For a moment, all three of them were silent, then Eris awkwardly cleared her throat and announced, “I’ll leave you to it, then.” She closed the door behind her as she stepped away.

“Welcome,” Adrissu said slowly, leaning forward in his seat and gesturing for his mate to sit. “I am headmaster Adrissu, as I’m sure you know.”

“I know,” the student snapped, still standing. Even their voice was hard to place, a strained deep tenor to it, as if they were purposely speaking lower than what came naturally. “You—what did you do?”

Adrissu sighed, folding his hands in front of him on the desk.

“Please, sit,” he said, and this time they sat, though their expression was unchanged. “First, you are...?”

The student’s face twisted again, teeth flashing in a grimace before answering. “Kian Farrow.”

“Kian,” Adrissu repeated. It sounded like a masculine name, but he still wasn’t certain. “I’m not sure what you mean by your question. Could you explain?”

“I saw you,” Kian said, eyes narrow with accusation. “I saw when you felt it, too. Like—like lightning. And all through class I felt... pulled to you. What did you do to me?”

“Was that all?” Adrissu pressed. There was something more personal in the way Kian glared at him—and, as if in confirmation, Kian’s scowl faltered.

“I...” they started, unable to force out the words. “I...”

“You’ve had dreams, or perhaps flashes of memory,” Adrissu offered, and Kian’s eyes bulged. “You had some recognition of me. Perhaps that’s why you came to the Academy in the first place.”

“I didn’t come here for you,” Kian snarled, the suggestion obviously offensive. “I’m here for me. And you still haven’t answered my question.”

“I did not do anything to you in the auditorium,” Adrissu said. “I felt a similar sensation, but it was just as much a surprise to me. We are...”

He paused, unsure. He had vowed to tell the truth to his mate after everything that happened with Volkmar, but he hadn’t anticipated his mate coming back as one of his own students. “Let me start with the simple fact that reincarnation exists, and this is not the first life you’ve had in which you’ve known me.”

For a long moment, Kian was silent. When they eventually moved again, it was to lean back in their chair, their angry expression finally crumpling away with a heavy sigh. “I knew it.”

“I am unsure how much you might recall of your... previous iterations,” Adrissu continued, observing his mate’s reactions as he spoke with slow deliberation. “And you were male each time

before, so I was surprised—”

“I *am* a man,” Kian snapped, head whipping up again to glare at Adrissu. “I know what I look like. I’m not a woman. That’s why I’m here.”

Everything started to click into place. Adrissu was silent for a long moment, considering. Kian’s eyes met his, as if challenging him to say anything otherwise.

“I see,” Adrissu finally said, nodding. “Of course you are. Your soul has always been male, regardless of the body it’s born into.”

Kian’s expression faltered, and for a moment, he stared at him blankly. It occurred to Adrissu that this was perhaps the first occasion the youth heard someone echo those sentiments about himself. But it only made sense—as he’d learned with Braern, there were clearly no limitations as to what kind of body his mate’s soul could inhabit when it was reborn into the world. If the soul remained the same, then he would remain male, even if the body happened to be female this time around. And magic could certainly be a boon in changing his body to reflect the mind within.

“I can help you with this, of course,” Adrissu started, but trailed off in surprise as Kian’s face twisted in anger again.

“Oh, fuck *off*,” he snapped, and it took all of his self-restraint for Adrissu not to burst out laughing at the unexpected vitriol. “I don’t want your help. I came here to study transmutation so I could do this myself. I didn’t ask for this reincarnation shit. And I don’t owe you anything.”

“Of course not,” Adrissu agreed, unable to stifle an amused grin as he spoke. “I had not meant to suggest otherwise. If you have no desire for my help, then by all means, continue your studies of transmutation. The Academy is an excellent place to study such things.”

Kian tensed at his amicable response. Adrissu had the distinct sense that Kian almost wanted him to be angry, though it was only conjecture as to why that might be.

“I don’t want your help,” Kian repeated, sounding less sure of himself this time. “And—And stay away from me. I want nothing to do with you.”

“I agree. It would be inappropriate to give the appearance of favoritism,” Adrissu remarked dryly, and Kian sputtered.

“Favoritism—inappropriate?” he exclaimed, his face instantly flushing red. “I don’t—You—I don’t even know you!”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Adrissu countered. “We have known each other for a combined total of, oh, about two hundred years. We know each other very well. And you know me better than you’d think. Obviously, you have some memories; I am the same today as I was then. You are... mostly the

same, but always different.” He grinned, all his teeth showing, and relished in the continued blush creeping up Kian’s nose and warming the tops of his ears. “I’m looking forward to getting to know you all over again.”

“No, thanks,” Kian muttered, standing up. “Just—stay away from me. Or I’ll report you to—to—I don’t know, to someone.”

“I won’t bother you,” Adrissu repeated, shrugging as Kian gathered his things to leave. “My door is always open to you, and all students, of course.”

“Whatever,” he scowled, then hurried out of Adrissu’s office. Adrissu watched him go and stared at the empty doorway for a long moment, processing.

This was unexpected. Challenging. But he did enjoy a challenge.

Adrissu stood to close the door, but leaned his head out first, catching Eris’ attention.

“Eris, will you put together the lesson plans submitted by the transmutation department this term?” he asked, forcing an amicable grin that she hesitantly returned. “I want to have a closer look at a few... topics of interest.”

CHAPTER THREE

True to his word, Adrissu did not try to speak to Kian again. He was more surprised than irritated at his mate's sound rejection of him; and while it did make some matters inconvenient, he found himself mostly amused at the human's knee-jerk reaction. If Kian had something to prove, to himself or to Adrissu, let him prove it—Adrissu would still be there when he'd accomplished whatever it was he set out to do. This, more than anything else, reminded him of Ruan, so he couldn't bring himself to be bothered by it now. What were a few more years in the scheme of things?

While he did not approach Kian directly, he did look over the human's class schedule and monitored his grades. While he probably wouldn't appreciate the scrutiny, Adrissu had made no promises regarding his schoolwork, and after all, he was the headmaster.

By all accounts, Kian seemed to be bright and studious with an average-at-best magical capability for humans—a step above his ability in his past lives. But between that and his apparent determination, Adrissu felt sure he could nudge Kian along the right path to excel in transmutation.

Shapechanging was tricky magic, and the more different one tried to make their form, the more difficult it became. Simply changing a female body to a male one, while certainly requiring some effort, was far less complicated than his own transformation from dragon to elf. Of course, *that* was innate—and he had already shared enough secrets of dragonkind in his lifetime, so he wouldn't share that even if he could. No, even if he was somehow able to pass down the means of his own transformation, he doubted Kian would want to hear it. In the brief interaction they'd had, he was obviously fiercely independent.

In the meantime, Adrissu brushed up on everything he knew about transmutation and tracked down some new books and research to study. Just because Kian didn't want to interact with him directly didn't mean he couldn't suggest to the instructors some new topics to cover in transmutation lessons.

After all, as headmaster, it would only be appropriate for him to keep a solid grasp of the curriculum—expected, even.

But neither could he risk the appearance of favoritism toward the transmutation team, so he conducted most of his study in his own time. Luckily, there were rarely pressing matters that kept him at the academy longer than the standard hours he was expected to maintain, so in the evenings he could devour the last several decades' worth of transmutation theory and innovation.

Was a physical transformation, the kind Kian seemed to want, possible? Theoretically, yes. Had it ever been accomplished before? Not that Adrissu could find. Like the soul transference he had discussed with Caemar Illuren in Aefraya, the concept had been floated among intellectuals in the field; but as far as he could tell, nothing beyond idle conjecture had been performed regarding changing one type of body to another, or simply shaping a body into a desired form. This struck Adrissu as odd. For all the wonders magic afforded the world, did mortals really have so little interest in such an ability? He did not quite believe it. Humans were not only visual creatures, but he had found most of them to be rather vain. Surely someone had attempted to alter the appearance of a body, their own or another.

Transmutation was not a subject he had studied extensively, so Adrissu suspected he was missing something. So he kept moving back, reading increasingly older research and reports in pursuit of anything that would point toward a reason for this lack of experimentation.

And, finally, he found it—one text mentioned in passing the “failed experiment of Starck’s”, and at last he had a name, a point of reference to follow in the right direction. A bit more searching told him that this “Starck” was likely a human by the name of Camden Starck, who had lived some five hundred years ago. That this research had been conducted before his birth, at least, was some comfort to Adrissu: neither carelessness nor ignorance on his part were to blame, only the obscurity of a failed mage buried beneath the relentless march of time.

Because this experiment was so long ago, especially by human standards, it took several inquiries with his connections to the various libraries of Autreth to finally track down the manuscript by Camden Starck that detailed his ill-fated experiment.

The details were unpleasant. Starck had begun his theory pondering the question of how to increase one's lifespan, or even achieve immortality, which amused Adrissu at first. But the human conjectured that by becoming an elf, he might obtain their naturally longer lifespan. Was it possible for a human to become an elf? This was the crux of the man's research, and ultimately he discovered the answer to be yes, but with some significant caveats.

After his transformation, Starck reported various physical ailments. His bones had become brittle, his skin thin and easily bruised or broken. He complained of near-constant pain throughout his body, struggled to tolerate most foods, and in the end did not achieve the lifespan of an elf despite his transmutation. He died only a few years later, and some speculated that he could not bear his failure on top of his physical pain and took his own life—though that was, of course, conjecture. But Starck’s first-hand account did not paint a pleasant picture, so it only made sense that it became a cautionary tale for many others in subsequent decades. It may have even been passed down through word-of-mouth to dissuade others, eventually morphing into a tacit understanding in the field that such things were not to be attempted, even if individual practitioners did not know the exact story.

That did not seem promising. Frustrated, Adrissu pored over the hints of the incantation Starck had used—predictably, he had not published it in its entirety—to piece together the runes and components the long-dead human might have used to perform the ritual. But what he could extrapolate was not nearly enough to complete the spell, so he would take to experimentation. More farms had sprung up on the outskirts of Polimnos, so he would not lack for chickens.

By this time, the first term was at an end, and the academy would soon take its winter recess before starting classes again in the new year. Adrissu reviewed the overall grades from a random sampling of students; if Kian happened to be in that sample, well, there were only so many to choose from. At a glance, Kian’s innate magical ability was middling, but he was quite studious, which made up for that lack. Adrissu was unsurprised, but nevertheless pleased.

On the last day of term, most classes were finished, and most students had left to celebrate the new year with family and friends. While several remained on campus, the academy was overall quiet and empty now. Though it was not snowing, thick, dark clouds overhead warned of imminent snowfall.

“Headmaster,” Eris called, peeking her head through his open office door. “I’m about to head out for the recess. Is there anything else you need before I go? I won’t be back until the start of next term.”

“No, Eris, thank you,” he said, looking up at her. His neck ached from where he was hunched over his desk, and when he looked up, he could see she had a large box held awkwardly in her arms. He frowned. “Do you need help with that?”

“Oh, erm,” she stammered, glancing back at the crate. “It’s not too heavy. Just a bit awkward. Nethendriel in enchantment gifted me a sebran sapling, so...”

Adrissu had to stop himself from rolling his eyes. The half-elf teacher had been trying to woo Eris for most of the term, though he supposed he should be grateful that it seemed to pull her attention away from him.

“Don’t drop it, then,” he said, forcing a smirk. “I’m sure it cost him a small fortune, importing one of that size.”

“Gods, do you really think it was that expensive?” she muttered, frowning over at it. “I just gave him a bottle of wine, but...”

Inwardly, Adrissu sighed with relief—if she had gifted the half-elf something, too, then maybe that was a sign she really was over whatever feelings she’d had for him, and he wouldn’t have to look for a new secretary at the beginning of next school year.

“I’m exaggerating,” he lied, waving his hand. “Though I don’t seem to recall anyone else getting quite so extravagant a gift from him...”

Eris blushed, glancing away with a suppressed smile. “Me neither.”

They were both silent, then she sighed and looked back over at him.

“Well, if that’s all,” she said. “Then I’ll see you next term. Have a good holiday, Headmaster.”

“And you as well,” he said, smiling as she then turned to go. He remained at his desk until her shuffling footsteps were long gone, then stood and stretched. A walk sounded pleasant about now, so he would take the scenic route home.

Once he’d gathered up his belongings and pulled on a heavy winter coat, he left his office and began the slow amble around the stone paths that led through the school grounds. It was a course he had taken many times before; its familiarity was soothing, but there was always something new to observe: whether a spirited conversation between students, an instructor who’d been hoping to run in to him, or something as simple as a plant blooming or a rabbit cautiously foraging in the grass. It was all pleasant to witness.

He had gotten about halfway around the campus when he noticed Kian, his eyes drawn to the student as if he were a beacon. Kian was sitting on a bench along the paved walkway, with a book in hand and a heavy winter cloak draped over his slight frame. He glanced up the moment Adrissu saw him, as if he too felt the pull between them; even from a distance, Adrissu could see color rising in his cheeks as he hastily looked away.

He had not spoken to the boy in months. It was the last day of term; surely there was no harm in saying hello? So Adrissu continued walking up the path toward him at a leisurely pace, pretending not to notice Kian’s eyes constantly darting between his book and Adrissu.

“Good afternoon,” Adrissu said, as he stopped beside the bench. Kian scowled, glaring down at his book. Even the tips of his ears had taken on a pink flush.

“What do you want?” he muttered. Adrissu grinned, stifling a laugh.

“To be polite to a student as I’m walking,” he replied. Kian sighed, shrugging. “It’s quite a gamble reading outdoors. It looks like it might start snowing at any moment.”

“I live in the dorm right up the hill,” Kian said, gesturing with the book toward the building a short walk behind him. “So it’s not far. I like reading outside.”

“You’re not preparing to leave for the holiday?” Adrissu asked, his tone gentler now. He knew nothing about Kian or his background, but the right questions could give him a better picture of the other man, so long as he didn’t anger him in the process.

“No,” Kian sighed, setting the book in his lap and begrudgingly focusing on Adrissu. “I grew up on a farm outside Polimnos, so it’s not too far, but... I don’t know. My family’s not great. I’d rather just stay here.” He seemed as if he might say more, then clamped his mouth shut with an irritated expression. Adrissu’s hands itched to reach for him, for the casual intimacy he had so long enjoyed with Braern—but he clasped his hands behind his back, maintaining a polite distance between them. Finally, Kian spoke again. “And you?”

Adrissu shook his head. “Familial ties are not especially valued in... my culture. So no. I have not seen my parents in many years.”

To his surprise, Kian smirked, a soft laugh escaping him. “Sounds nice,” he sighed, leaning back on the bench. “You, uh... You live in that tower up on the cliff, right?”

“Saltspire Tower, yes.”

“Seems like a long walk.”

“It’s not terribly long. I enjoy it.”

Kian nodded, and for a moment both were silent, Kian looking uncomfortably down at his lap, as Adrissu watched him impassively. He obviously wanted to say more, so Adrissu waited.

A single snowflake landed on the cover of Kian’s book in his lap, and he gave a start, as if being pulled from deep thoughts. He glanced up at Adrissu, his face reddening again, and he stood quickly.

“I, uh, I better get back inside,” he muttered, tucking the book into his cloak. Part of Adrissu was disappointed, but at least this time Kian hadn’t told him to “fuck off”, so that had to count for something.

“Of course,” Adrissu said, nodding and pulling up the hood of his own coat. “Stay dry.”

Kian had turned to go, but glanced back at him. Their eyes met, and he hesitated before stammering, “You too, Headmaster.”

Then he darted away, and Adrissu watched him hurry up the opposite path for a moment, before continuing on his way.

That had been... good, he thought. Progress. He stifled a grin in the high collar of his coat. He *always* got what he wanted, eventually.

CHAPTER FOUR

By the middle of the second term, well into spring, Adrissu was confident that he had found just about everything there was to know about the study of transmutation throughout history and into the modern age. Still, none of it had helped him puzzle out the actual runes and rituals that were used unsuccessfully by Starck, despite his handful of experiments. It might be easier to start from scratch, he decided, than to figure out what didn't work and extrapolate from that.

It was during one of these experiments, down in his lair, that he felt Vesper startle from where she lay coiled amongst his hoard. He frowned, looking toward the cavern uncertainly, but remained unmoving until a distinct thought emanated from her—*something different*. Not as urgent as danger, but still unusual. Carefully, he set aside his work and walked to his hoard, his small footsteps echoing through the cave network that had been carved to house his much larger form.

“What is it?” he asked. Vesper had slithered over to peer curiously at a box pressed up against a stone wall. She glanced at him, then looked back down at the box. His scowl deepened as he recognized it: the small wooden chest where he had stored the large amethyst that housed the soul of Lorsan, Braern's ex-husband, whose soul he had removed in his experiments with soul transference to determine whether the ritual would work on a sentient being.

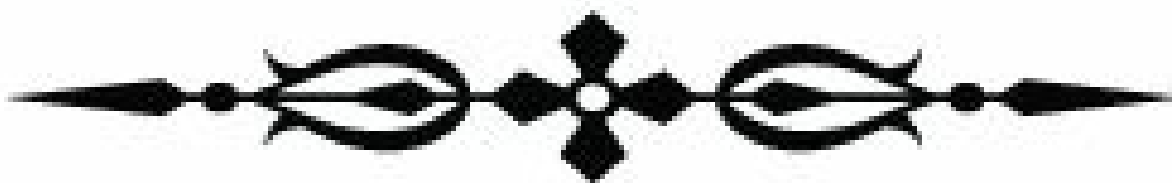
It had remained there undisturbed for over a hundred years, but now the lid of the box was open. When he stepped closer to peer into it, he could see that what was once a large, cloudy amethyst had broken into several smaller chunks. The faint light that had emitted from within, evidence of the soul's presence, was not visible.

“Strange,” Adrissu muttered, more to himself than to Vesper, then cautiously he touched one of the pieces before picking it up to inspect it more closely. It looked now like a perfectly mundane stone. There was no sign of the soul housed inside.

“Did it break just now?” he asked, looking back down at Vesper. The massive snake shook her head. *Like this*, she thought at him. It must have happened sometime earlier, when the lair was empty—and it must have split apart with some force to break the lid off, so he would have heard if he had been present. But he hadn’t been down here in a few days, so there was no telling when, exactly, it might have occurred.

What did it mean? There was no evidence anyone had been here and disturbed anything; only another dragon could have safely made it into his lair from the cliffside entrance, but he had not sensed another dragon in a century or more. Had Lorsan’s soul forced itself out of the stone where Adrissu had trapped it? There was no body for it to return to—the elf had long been dead—so if it had freed itself, it would have departed to wherever elven souls went when the body expired. Perhaps there was some time limit to the soul containment, a decay to the efficacy of the spell over so many years. It might be worth trying to replicate the phenomenon just to make sure. Adrissu had found it amusing to keep around, but if anyone more important were to be kept in stasis in such a way, knowing that time limit would be imperative.

He added it to his mental list of things that he would eventually research, investigate, and experiment with; then he cleaned up the remnants of the crystal, threw out the broken box, and resumed his transmutation experiments. There would be time to get to it all someday, but his transmutation efforts were his sole focus for now. Kian would only be a student for so long.



Adrissu did not speak to Kian again until the summer. Their one stilted conversation in the previous winter had been promising, but Kian did not approach him again, and Adrissu decided it was prudent to let their next encounter be on the other man’s terms. But Kian was busy; his grades were above average, and his instructors all seemed to like him, which pleased Adrissu. His mate had started his first lifetime with no magical prowess to speak of, and was now not only enrolled in the Academy, but excelling. He wondered if Ruan could have believed what he would one day be capable of. The thought was bittersweet, so he didn’t linger on it for long.

Adrissu had spent nearly all his time studying transmutation, when he was not busy with other tasks needed to keep the school functioning; and by the beginning of Kian’s second year at the Academy, he had compiled enough research and done enough of his own study that he thought himself capable of

performing a lecture for his students. He had given a few such seminars throughout the decades on topics that interested him, but weren't sufficiently substantial to justify an entire months-long class. So when he scheduled the seminar and explained that it would be regarding transmutation, the usual instructors for the subject were very enthusiastic. They highly encouraged all students specializing in transmutation to attend, and students in other tracks were also welcome, of course.

The day of the seminar, Adrissu sat and watched the lecture hall slowly fill with students, certain that Kian would come. Students trickled in for a quarter of an hour beforehand, then in the last five minutes, more arrived in a steady stream. But still he did not see Kian. He would come, wouldn't he? Transmutation was the entire reason he was attending the Academy. A special seminar on fresh developments in the field would be something he could not afford to ignore, even if Adrissu was teaching. He had thought their last conversation was a sign that Kian's initial hostility toward him had faded with time, but maybe he had been mistaken after all. Had he forgotten so much about his mate in the short time they'd been apart?

The clock chimed, and the chatter of students quieted down, knowing the seminar was set to begin on the hour. Adrissu hesitated, eyes lingering on the door, before clearing his throat and standing to address the auditorium. Disappointing as it would be if Kian did not show, he had an obligation to the students who had.

"Welcome," he said, eyes scanning the crowd as if he could somehow find Kian amongst them, even though he knew he wouldn't. "As you may know, I am Headmaster Adrissu Rolastra. I have studied the nature of magic itself in various forms for many years, longer than any of you have been alive. As Headmaster, I haven't conducted a full class in quite a while, but when something strikes my fancy, I may give a presentation or seminar, such as this. In recent months I have been conducting experiments on the nature of transmutation—"

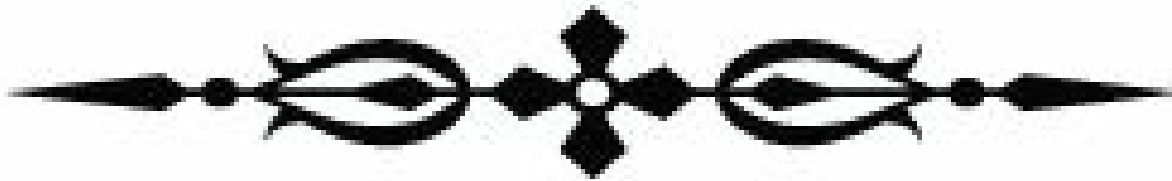
The door of the lecture hall creaked as it opened, cutting him off. It seemed every set of eyes followed his own to glance at the late arrival. Kian's shock of red hair was the first thing he saw, then the boy's disgruntled expression, color rising in his face as he realized everyone's attention was on him. He turned, closing the door slowly so it wasn't as loud. Adrissu stifled a grin and continued as evenly as he could manage.

"That is, I've been conducting experiments and research into the nature of transmutation, exploring its limits. I'm eager to share what I've learned with you, as it isn't anything covered in a normal transmutation class or tome. I don't profess to be a transmutation expert, but I haven't seen this research replicated anywhere else, so make of that what you will."

Kian had shuffled into the back row, but Adrissu could still make out the frown on his features, frustrated and embarrassed. Adrissu imagined he hadn't planned to come—had argued with himself and tried to resist the force of nature that drew them together—only to succumb to his own curiosity. In all likelihood, there was an endless list of reasons why he might run a bit late, and Adrissu wouldn't be surprised if a few more late students snuck in late. But the thought of Kian standing flustered and angry with himself behind the door for seconds, minutes, before finally flinging it open in a frenzy, was appealing in a strange way.

But that was a distraction for another time. Gathering his thoughts, he flicked his wrist to summon an illusory diagram of the runes that he'd been studying, plastering a smile on his face that would have been scholarly, if not for his singular focus on Kian in the back row.

“Let's begin.”



The seminar was well-received. Adrissu lingered in the lecture hall for nearly an hour after it was done, speaking with students and answering questions. Every time he glanced up, though, Kian was still sitting in the back corner, eyes downcast as he waited. Whatever he wanted of Adrissu, clearly he intended to speak to him alone.

The tension was delicious, so Adrissu didn't rush through any conversations and answered every question that was brought to him as thoroughly as he could. By the time the last group of transmutation students had said their goodbyes and stepped back out of the lecture hall, Kian's expression was quite sour. But he finally met Adrissu's gaze and rose from his seat, walking with slow intention down the rows of chairs until he and Adrissu stood only a few feet apart.

“That was a good lecture,” Kian muttered. Adrissu smiled.

“Thank you,” he said, bowing his head slightly. “I hope you found it educational.”

“I told you I didn't need your help, though,” Kian continued.

“I study all aspects of magic and have given many similar seminars in the past,” Adrissu countered, his smile still lingering despite Kian's bullheadedness. “I was helping the student body at large. Why should I deprive them of new knowledge only for your sake?”

“You—!” Kian snapped, mouth twisting in anger. He took a heated step toward Adrissu—the thought he might try to strike him was laughable, so Adrissu remained exactly where he stood. The

smaller man glared up at him for a long moment, color rising up his neck and in his cheeks. “You know that’s not what I meant. I—I wanted to—”

The human’s mouth snapped shut, and he finally looked away, scowling.

“Wanted to...?” Adrissu prompted. Kian scoffed.

“I just... wanted to say,” he muttered, wincing as if every word stabbed through his tongue as he said it. “That I guess I... misjudged you. I don’t know. I didn’t expect you to... research this kind of stuff. You’re smart.”

“I founded this school,” Adrissu said, lowering his voice in case anyone was in the hall or outside the door. “I made it possible for you to be here today. You didn’t remember that I’m intelligent? You thought this was all for show?”

“No!” Kian snapped, shaking his head. It seemed impossible for his face to flush any warmer, yet somehow his face grew redder by the minute. “Can you try and be a little less insufferable? I’m trying to fucking compliment you.”

“I see,” Adrissu said, folding his arms across his chest. He had no idea what Kian was trying to accomplish, but at least it seemed Kian was just as uncertain. “Proceed, then.”

Kian frowned up at him. There was a familiar heat in the gaze between them; Adrissu’s body ached to reach for him, but he kept his arms firmly where they were and his feet planted on the stone floor.

“Why do you have to be so fucking hot?” Kian growled. His eyes flickered back and forth, but kept landing on Adrissu, who grinned over at him.

“I think you are... predisposed to feel that way about me,” he replied, his voice softer now.

“I don’t want this,” the human groaned, shaking his head. “I don’t want to... feel like this toward you.”

“I understand,” Adrissu said, his heart beating rapidly in his chest now. The most primal part of him wanted to lunge forward and take Kian as his own, but he kept the urge tightly tamped down. “I felt much the same the first time around. But things can’t be changed now. And eventually it does all start to make sense, in a way.”

Kian was silent, staring at him with an unreadable expression. His mouth and eyes were as tense as ever, but something in his face had shifted that Adrissu couldn’t quite place. Finally, the human’s eyebrow twitched as if he were flinching, and he snapped, “Are you going to kiss me or what?”

Adrissu stifled a laugh. “I wasn’t planning on it, no. First of all, you’re still a student, and I am still the headmaster, regardless of our status in a previous life. And second, I think you might punch me if I tried anything.”

Kian laughed. Adrissu's heart fluttered; as perpetually angry as the human seemed, he'd made him *laugh*.

"I guess you're right," he finally said, shaking his head with a slight grin. "Maybe that would be a bad idea."

"As long as you're a student, yes," Adrissu said.

"Well, I came here in the first place because the lecture sounded interesting to me," Kian continued. "Obviously I still want to study all this on my own, but... Maybe we could study together sometime."

"I don't want to give the appearance of favoritism," Adrissu said slowly, considering the offer. Being able to spend more time with Kian could be a double-edged sword; he missed his mate, but if any instructors or other students were to suspect anything, it could end disastrously. "But... Perhaps we can meet once every week or two, outside of school hours. I do want to help you with everything you've set out to accomplish."

"I won't tell anyone," Kian said quickly. "It's fine. I don't really see my family anyway, and I have a few friends, but..." He shrugged. "They know I prefer to study alone. So they probably won't notice. Can I come to your office?"

"Occasionally," Adrissu said, then sighed. "But, ah... my home would likely be more... discreet."

Color rose in Kian's face again, and he looked away. "Okay. I know where it is. I... remember."

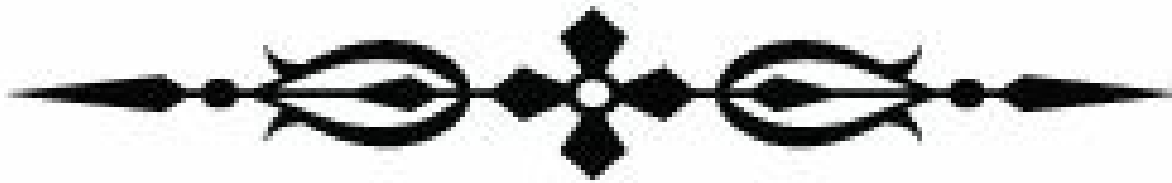
"Good." Adrissu took a slow step back, creating more distance between Kian and himself. He only trusted his self-control so far. "Let's try to keep it to days when there are no classes in session."

"Okay," Kian repeated. For a moment they stood in awkward silence, Kian's eyes darting about again. "Um, well... I should get going. I have an exam to study for, so..."

"Don't let me keep you," Adrissu said, turning toward his desk to gather up his papers and hide his smile. While he had hoped he would see Kian again today, their meeting had gone far differently—far *better*—than he had allowed himself to imagine.

"I'll see you later, then," Kian said. Adrissu glanced over his shoulder as the human turned away. His face was rosy pink, the color rising to the tips of his ears. He always felt attracted to his mate, of course, but something about this iteration's easily flushed skin was especially sweet.

"Goodbye, Kian," he replied softly, turning back to his desk, and a moment later, the human's footsteps trudged up the stairs. The heavy wooden door swung open, then closed.



Kian turned up at his office the next afternoon.

“There’s a student here to see you, Headmaster,” Eris said, looking uncertain as she stood in the doorway of his office and glanced back behind her. “Um... Kian Farrow, from the transmutation department.”

Adrissu’s hand froze over the lesson plan he was revising, a drop of ink spilling from his quill onto the paper below. He cursed under his breath and set it aside.

“Send him in,” he sighed, and she nodded.

“Come on in,” she called, and a moment later, Kian appeared in the doorway.

“I was hoping I could get the notes from your lecture yesterday,” he said, brusque as ever, and Adrissu sighed. “*Headmaster*. Sorry.”

“Yes, that’s fine,” he said, gesturing for Kian to sit. “Thank you, Eris, we’ll be a few minutes.”

“Of course,” she said, closing the door behind her as she stepped away.

“I told you, only when classes *aren’t* in session,” Adrissu sighed the moment the door was closed. A smirk appeared on Kian’s face, in stark contrast to the irritated scowls Adrissu was so used to seeing.

“I just wanted the lecture notes,” he replied, but there was a teasing tone to his voice that betrayed him. He was doing this on purpose, solely to prod at Adrissu, he was certain. He marched up until he was leaning right over the desk. Tension quivered in the air between them as Adrissu looked up at him, Kian gazing down expectantly.

“Is that really why you’re here?” Adrissu asked, softer this time. Kian’s eyes flickered downward across his body, making his skin prickle with heat. This was *unbearable*.

“Did you have something else in mind?” he asked, his lilting voice now rough. Adrissu huffed in frustration, breaking the eye contact between them to glance across his desk.

“No,” he replied quickly, and when he risked a glance back up at Kian, the human was scowling again, blushing. “I meant it when I said I would wait until you’re no longer a student. I love you, but the academy has been my pet project for the past three hundred years—” He glanced nervously at his closed office door as he said it. “—and I don’t want to put that at risk. Another few years won’t very long for me.”

“You—” Kian stammered, his eyes wide. He took a faltering step away from the desk. “You don’t—You don’t love me. You don’t even know me.”

Adrissu raised an eyebrow—of everything he’d said, *that* was what Kian had fixated on? “You think I don’t know you? I know your soul, the most core parts of you. You might be a little different now, but...” He paused, watching Kian shift uncomfortably with his face redder than ever. “You know, they say that if you break it down as much as possible, there’s really only a handful of stories that exist. They’re just told different ways. That’s how it is to me. I love the story. You’re telling it in a new way, but it’s the same story at its heart.”

It was the truth, after all. He had not thought he would say it to Kian so soon, but the human seemed to have some memory of their past lives in the way Braern had. Surely he must remember Adrissu having done all this *because* he loved him. He did not think it should be such a surprise—but shock still sparked in his chest when he realized Kian was *crying* as he turned away, sniffing.

“Kian,” he said, standing abruptly. “I—I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“Shut up,” Kian growled, shaking his head and glaring over at Adrissu, even as his eyes still shone with tears. “You didn’t. You didn’t upset me.”

“Where is this coming from?” he asked, taking a more cautious step closer to Kian. He hesitated, then reached out to touch his shoulder as gingerly as he could manage. The contact was feather-light at first, but Kian leaned into it, and Adrissu rubbed a small, soothing circle with his thumb.

“This is going to sound so stupid,” Kian started, shaking his head with a bitter laugh. “But... I don’t know. I got told so often that no one would love me that I really believed it. Even without having this—this body—” He gestured toward himself as he spoke, tugging self-consciously at his loose, oversized shirt. “—I was still the weird kid who had all these dreams and memories about stuff that didn’t happen—well, that no one else thought happened. My family always assumed I was crazy. Always. I don’t remember the last time someone told me they... they loved me.”

Anger flared deep in the pit of Adrissu’s stomach, even as his heart squeezed with grief. If he could find every person who had ever said such terrible things to his mate and rip them apart, he would have done so without hesitation. Yet that same part of him knew he had some culpability in this, as well. Adrissu was the one who ultimately put Kian in the position he was in—kept his soul coming back again and again with the risk that it could manifest in a body so unsuited to its nature. He had not thought himself short-sighted at the time, all those years ago, but perhaps he had been exactly that.

“I *do* love you,” Adrissu said softly, leaning slightly closer so their eyes met. “And I am sorry for the part I’ve played in your suffering.”

Kian snorted, but didn't look away. "That wasn't really the point I was trying to make."

"I know. But it should be said, regardless," Adrissu replied. Kian let out a long, shaking sigh. "And I understand entirely if this is... too much, too soon for you. If you would prefer I take a step back from all this, from you, I will do so. It will not change my feelings toward you."

"It's a lot," Kian said softly. "And I still feel... a few different ways about everything. But I don't want to go back to before. I didn't understand you then. I was... angry. But it's not your fault. You're the only person who's really—um, really on my side." His cheeks burned as he said it. Finally, his gaze dropped away from Adrissu's, but he continued despite his obvious discomfort. "So I still want to be able to talk to you and study with you and... and all that. If that's alright with you."

"Of course that's alright with me," Adrissu said, nodding. "You are my mate. There is nothing I wouldn't do for you."

"Maybe research the whole *fated mates* thing, too, you know," Kian muttered, his lips twitching with a suppressed grin. "I don't think either of us were really... happy about it. At first."

Adrissu sighed, considering. He *had* thought about delving more deeply into the mechanics behind fated mates, but ultimately had decided, time and again, there was no point. The deed had already been done; he had already found his mate. He had a passing curiosity, but there would be no tangible results or rewards to any answers he could uncover, so his time was better spent on other cares and projects.

"Perhaps someday," he compromised. "Even amongst my kind, we understand very little of how it works. It would take a concerted effort to just find out where to start."

Kian opened his mouth to reply, but a knock at his office door cut him off.

"Headmaster," Eris' voice called, muffled through the thick wood. "Professor Stone is here to see you. He says it's about the lesson plans he dropped off."

"Just a moment, Eris," Adrissu answered, hardly able to contain the irritation in his tone. But looking back at Kian, he managed a slight smile. "Here. Let me get you those notes."

"Okay," Kian said, nodding and wiping angrily at his eyes. "I, um, I won't bother you in your office again. Sorry."

Adrissu laughed, pulling the notes from his desk. "I'm glad we see eye-to-eye now. You can come by my tower instead. If I'm there, of course."

"I think your snake would eat me if I showed up without you," Kian chuckled bitterly, shaking his head. Adrissu paused, wanting to ask just how much Kian remembered now; but he could hear the voice of Professor Stone behind the door, his words muffled and indistinct. The man was an excellent

teacher and an indispensable part of Polimnos, but impatient and bullheaded, so it would be in Adrissu's best interest not to keep him waiting. He and Kian could talk more at another time.

“That's possible,” he conceded, stepping toward the door and raising his voice a bit as he did. “As I said, let me know if you have any further questions, and I would be glad to discuss this with you.”

Kian blinked, then nodded, playing along. “Thank you, Headmaster. This will really help me out.”

Adrissu grinned salaciously, then opened the door. “Think nothing of it. I'm always happy to help a student.”

CHAPTER FIVE

As always, Vesper was enamored with his mate the moment Kian walked through the door of Adrissu's tower. Adrissu had been reading absently in his study when he felt Vesper perk up. *Stranger?*

Then there was a knock at the door. He grinned over at the massive snake as she uncoiled herself from atop one of his chairs.

"Not a stranger," he said as he headed for the door, and the slight thrill of excitement that he felt in response from her made his smile even wider.

"Sorry I'm late," Kian said briskly, as Adrissu opened the door. "I—oh!" His eyes flickered just behind Adrissu, widening as Vesper slithered toward him.

"Gentle," Adrissu warned her, but she barely slowed, bumping her head right up against Kian's legs. He laughed nervously, then yelped as she coiled around his calf. "Sorry, sorry. She's happy to see you."

"I—I sort of remember," Kian stammered, and lightly touched the top of her head with one finger. "What's her name?"

"Vesper."

"That's right. I remember now."

Adrissu watched them for a moment, distinct memories of all their past meetings running through his head, as Kian slowly began to scratch under her chin and run his hand along the length of her coiled body. Maybe this would be the last; never again would he need to watch them meet for the first time.

"I don't think I can walk like this," Kian said, shaking his leg, and pulling Adrissu back to reality. Vesper had curled all the way up his leg, her head resting on his hip and her tongue flicking out rapidly as she looked up at him.

“Vesper,” Adrissu said, snapping, and obediently she loosened her grip and lowered herself back down onto the ground, though he still felt her excited contentment bubbling away in the center of his chest.

His connection to her sometimes reminded him of the bond he had shared with Braern, though it was far more rudimentary. Being able to sense her exact feelings only made sense: as his familiar, she was part of him made corporeal, an extension of his arcane ability. He missed being able to sense his mate that way.

“Thanks,” Kian said, grinning sheepishly over at him.

“Come to my study,” Adrissu said, gesturing toward the staircase. He watched Kian glancing around as they walked, his expression part curious and part something that Adrissu could not quite place, perhaps nostalgia. His gaze lingered on the rug that covered the trapdoor entrance to his lair; Adrissu’s heart quickened, but Kian said nothing, only followed him to the stairs.

“It’s so weird being in here,” Kian said softly, as they ascended the staircase. “It’s like... I know I’ve been here before, even though it all feels new.”

“I am curious about how much you remember,” Adrissu said.

“Hmm,” Kian replied, considering the prompt as they entered his study. Adrissu sat at his desk; Kian glanced around for a moment, before sitting in a chair by the window, the one where Braern always sat. “It’s all bits and pieces, really. Stuff from dreams or... sort of like *déjà vu*. I mostly remember being an elf... A few flashes from before that, and maybe a little bit that’s different from even before that. That was my first... my first life, right?”

“Yes,” Adrissu said softly. “Before you was Braern. Volkmar before that, and Ruan first.”

“Volkmar,” Kian murmured, glancing around the study. “Ruan... I didn’t know their names. My names? I don’t know. This is all strange.”

“It is,” Adrissu agreed, stifling a chuckle. “We don’t have to talk about it if it makes you uncomfortable.”

“I mean, it *is* weird, but I don’t mind too much,” Kian said, looking back over at him. In the light coming through the window, his eyes were so green they may as well have been glowing. “Before I knew you were real, I tried to just... ignore the things I remembered, because trying to talk about them and make sense of them made people want to avoid me. Or worse. So it’s sort of a relief to talk about it now.”

“I understand.” Adrissu’s chest tightened with anger again. Someday, he told himself, someday he would destroy anyone who had ever harmed his mate. “And... What do you remember about me?”

Hesitance flashed across Kian's face; it was only a minute change, but Adrissu recognized it instantly. A strange mixture of relief and apprehension flooded through him at Kian's reaction. Kian knew who he was, *what* he was—he wouldn't have to confess, as he had with Volkmar. But his hesitance suggested that maybe he feared what he knew, or didn't quite believe it, and that could be enough to drive Kian away from him all over again.

"You were headmaster when we met back then, when I was an elf. I remember that," Kian said, closing his eyes with his eyebrows furrowing in concentration. "I remember all sorts of magic you could do. I remember us flying to Aefraya, and..." His eyes opened at that, and he met Adrissu's gaze with his brows furrowed and his mouth pressed into a tight line. "I remember a dragon. You flew as a dragon. But you didn't just... transform into one. You *were* one."

Adrissu let out a long breath.

"That is correct," he affirmed, watching a multitude of expressions cross Kian's face as he spoke. "I am one. That is why I am still here the same as ever, even after Braern died of old age at over two hundred years old. I had... hoped you might remember that. Having to explain it all over again would have been... difficult. Ruan struggled with it for a long time, at first. I couldn't bring myself to tell Volkmar and regretted not doing so immensely, if you remember how that turned out at all. Braern remembered, so I'm glad you did too."

"I think I'm remembering more each time," Kian interrupted, looking down into his lap. "Is that normal? Braern remembered, but the others didn't?"

"I don't know what is normal in this case," Adrissu confessed, and Kian sighed. "To my knowledge, no other humans have been bound in this way to an immortal creature such as myself. Not many dragons have done it either, but from the accounts I have read, fated pairs will typically retain most, if not all, of their memories if they are slain and reborn. They gain their memories back slowly through adolescence, but by the time they are old enough to leave their parents, all memory of their past life has been restored."

"I guess it was sort of like that for me," Kian said, still looking into his lap. He remained silent for a moment, and Adrissu watched him. Mentioning his nature as a dragon had almost been an afterthought to Kian, which surprised him—though, he supposed, Braern had remembered to an extent and adapted to the idea rather quickly as well. "I don't know how old I was when I started remembering things. I think I thought they were dreams at first. But I was pretty young. I remember..." He flushed, looking away as if embarrassed. Adrissu remained silent and gestured for him to continue; after a moment, Kian sighed and spoke again. "I was a little kid, and I asked my mom

something like who *she* used to be. And when she asked me to explain, and I told her I had these memories, she said they were just dreams, and I had an overactive imagination. So I didn't think much of it until I realized there was... I don't know. Continuity between them, I guess? And I tried to write out everything I remembered—to try and piece it all together—but my brothers teased me so much about it that I stopped.”

“They never believed you,” Adrissu said softly, and Kian laughed.

“No, never. None of them did. So no need to be concerned that any of them really suspect there's a dragon living under Polimnos.” Despite his chipper tone, Kian's smile faltered, and he glanced away with an uncomfortable expression.

“I'm sorry no one took you seriously,” Adrissu replied.

“No, it's better that way. What if they did? What would they have done? Them taking me at face value could have ruined you, ruined everything.” Kian gestured between them as he spoke, then sighed. “Though I guess they could have been nicer about it. My oldest brother took everything I wrote and showed his friends, and everyone our age in the village made fun of me for years, even though I never talked about it with anyone. It was just... one more thing that made me different.”

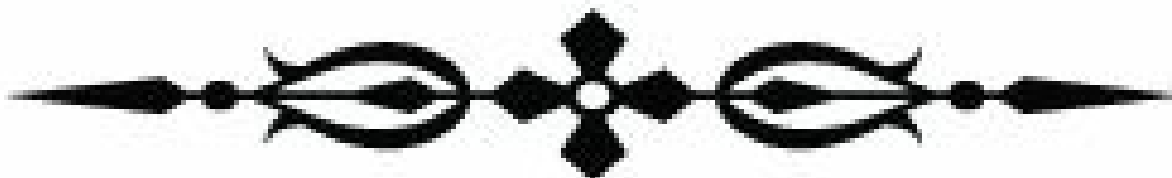
“Where is your family now?” Adrissu asked, hoping the disdain in his voice wasn't as obvious to Kian as it was to him.

“My parents run a farm out in Colnos,” Kian said, shrugging. “I'm the youngest, so... My oldest brother still lives in Colnos with his wife. Our middle brother moved out to Vlissingstadt a while ago. I don't really keep up with them. Not even my parents write to me, so... But it doesn't really matter. I don't need them or their help. I've been fine on my own.”

“You aren't alone,” Adrissu said quickly, though he winced as soon as the words left his lips. Kian obviously valued his independence; such a statement, meant to be reassuring, nevertheless would likely only frustrate him. “Rather, I mean... I want to help you. I'm on your side now.”

Kian peered at him with an indiscernible expression for a long moment, then smirked.

“Yeah,” he sighed, leaning back in his chair. “Yeah, I know.”



Adrissu was a man of restraint, or at least he liked to think so. He was rarely rash or impulsive, but being alone with Kian in his tower was pushing him to the absolute limits of his self control. It did not

matter that Kian was already *his*, Adrissu told himself over and over, as the smaller human sat quietly in a chair and pored over a sheaf of papers, notes from his lecture on the transmutation ritual. First and foremost, he was a student. That was all anyone else would see if he were to give even the smallest reason for someone to suspect that something untoward was happening between them. He had already promised himself—and Kian—that there would be nothing physical between them until after he was no longer a student. That was the smart thing to do, the *right* thing to do, but every animal instinct that lurked just beneath Adrissu's consciousness was hyper-fixated on his mate's presence in his lair. He could focus on nothing but the visage of his mate sitting in the sunlight, the sweet scent of him filling the room. He knew he had to keep his distance, but that only made him want to draw closer.

Kian frowned, glancing up at him. "I don't understand this," he said, pointing to the page, but then his expression faltered. "Were you just staring at me the whole time?"

Adrissu glanced away, feeling his face become warm. It was not often that he was embarrassed, but the evidence of his obvious weakness felt shameful. "I... Yes. My apologies."

For a beat of silence, Kian only stared at him, then he laughed. "Gods, that would be unsettling if you were a stranger. Well, are you going to help me study or just look at me all afternoon?"

"What did you need help with?" Adrissu asked, ignoring the human's teasing tone as he moved to read over Kian's shoulder.

"I don't recognize these runes at all," Kian said, lightly touching the paper where the arcane script was laid out in a careful circle. "Are they just old? They don't look like anything used today."

"Partly, yes," Adrissu explained, leaning over him. This close, he could smell Kian with every inhale, a clean herbal scent with a touch of something floral, like lavender and sage. If he leaned a little further down, he could bury his face in the human's soft red hair. He kept his feet planted, pulling away slightly with his hands clasped firmly behind his back. "They are elven runes, quite old and unrefined. Starck, the mage who devised this ritual—or at least as much of the ritual as I can piece together—used elven runes because he planned to turn himself into an elf."

"Right," Kian said, nodding slowly with his eyes still locked onto the paper in his lap. "That makes sense. But his ritual didn't work."

"No," Adrissu agreed. "At the time, runes with very general, broad meanings were commonplace. They were thought of as catch-alls, to accomplish a wide variety of tasks. More general runes have their place, of course, but I think it is obvious now that a delicate procedure such as this would

benefit from very specific runic meanings. There should be no room for interpretation; the runes should describe exactly what is desired.”

“I see,” Kian murmured, shuffling through the papers until he pulled out one with his own handwriting, notes he had taken from those Adrissu had given him. He made a note—*specific runes*—then glanced up at Adrissu with a grin that was nearly a smirk. “See? I didn’t want to fuck up your notes.”

“Very thoughtful of you,” Adrissu chuckled, forcing himself to look away from Kian’s smiling face. “I would not mind, though. I gave those to you, for you to keep.”

“Yeah, well,” Kian shrugged and turned his attention back to the ream of notes. “It helps me remember things when I write them down, anyway.”

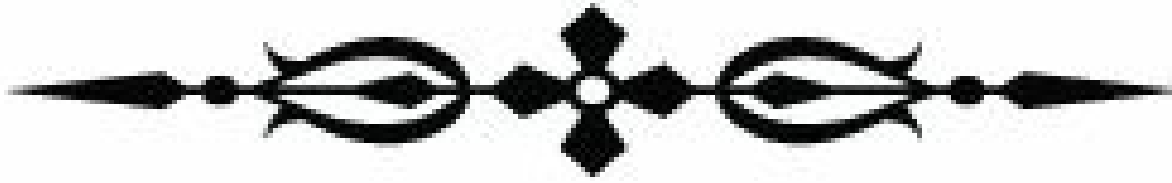
The change in him was like night and day, Adrissu thought as he settled back at his desk. Kian had openly hated him the first time they met, and he had maintained an obvious hostility long after that. Yet it had only taken a single lecture, a display of his intelligence and investment in Kian’s interests, for that hate to instantly transform to love, or something close to it. Was the human really so fickle, or had his disdain for Adrissu been exaggerated to disguise the pull of fate? Adrissu suspected the latter, though some elven poets claimed the difference between love and hate was thinner than a razor’s edge. He probably still had some volumes of elven poetry in his study, lingering artifacts of Braern’s collection.

The thought of Braern sent his mind careening back through time, comparing his mate through each of his lives in turn. They were all different, yet the core of them was the same: how damned stubborn they all were. He had always thought Ruan’s stubbornness exceeded that of the others by far; but now, considering Kian and how doggedly he pursued his goals, the student very well may have wrested the title away from his past self. It reminded him very much of Ruan—as did the distance he struggled to maintain between them—the obvious attraction they each harbored toward each other, yet begrudgingly refused to indulge.

It was comforting, in a way, to have a mate so similar to Ruan again. Adrissu had sometimes feared his mate might become someone he did not recognize someday, might grow so far from the way Ruan had been that there would be nothing linking them together. But human souls were not so malleable, it seemed, and Kian was a perfect example: that even if it were reborn into a female body, the soul stubbornly insisted on its maleness. He should not have doubted.

“You’re staring at me again,” Kian teased, just above a whisper, and this time Adrissu grinned at him, relishing in the flush that crept up the human’s face at his unabashed focus.

“There is nothing more worthy of my attention,” he replied. Kian muttered something indistinct and turned away, but the blush remained on his cheeks and the tops of his ears for a long while afterward.



Though they could not quite settle into a comfortable routine, they had a semblance of one after that day. Most weeks, Kian would visit Adrissu's home when there were no classes in session. Sometimes he visited more than once a week; occasionally he made no visit at all, most often when he had exams.

His visits were mostly for them to study and research the ritual, but Adrissu relished in the time they had together no matter how impersonal. The longer their visits went on, at least, the less guarded Kian became. It would be two years before Kian graduated. It felt like an interminably long time to wait, and yet no time at all. What were two years in the face of an eternity together?

The more they uncovered about transmuting flesh, though, the less certain Adrissu was that Kian's goal could come to fruition. During the winter break of Kian's third year at the school, when Kian was staying with him for two weeks until the next term, Adrissu decided that he had waited long enough to bring up his own thoughts, and he would broach the topic of what was sure to be a better solution.

“In your memories of the past,” Adrissu started carefully, glancing over at the human with what he hoped was a casual expression, “Do you have any recollection of the soul-transference ritual you witnessed?”

Kian blinked owlishly at him from where his nose had been buried in yet another book, processing the question. He liked to talk about what he remembered of his past lives with Adrissu; but Adrissu had noticed that when he was the one to bring it up, for a split second, Kian often seemed confused and surprised, having to collect his thoughts for a moment before responding. He had kept his memories secret for so long, Adrissu thought, that to hear someone else talk about them was startling.

“Um, I think so,” Kian finally replied. “Why?”

“I know your goal is to ultimately use transmutation to achieve a form that aligns with your inner sense of self,” Adrissu continued. “But the more we study transmutation, the less promising the idea seems to me. I know it is important to you that you're able to do this yourself, but...”

Kian's eyes had narrowed, his frustration obvious, but Adrissu hesitated for only a moment before continuing resolutely.

"The soul transference ritual I developed would be a surefire method of resolving this issue," he said. "I had created it hoping to put your soul into the body of a dragon, so that we would never be parted again. But if this is too much of a commitment for you, we could instead find a suitable human body to place your soul within, as well."

It felt illicit even as he said it, but it would solve many of the problems they were facing. Kian would have his correct body without any risk of the transmutation magic not functioning, and he would no longer be the student that was entirely off-limits to Adrissu. It would be a neat, simple solution to it all, but part of him knew Kian would balk.

And, indeed, Kian's frown only deepened.

"What about the other guy?" he asked, the corners of his mouth twisting.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, we would have to take the body of someone else for this to work, right? What would happen to him, his soul?"

Adrissu blinked, uncertain. "Does it matter? We could place it back into your original body or simply get rid of it."

"Get rid of it?" Kian exclaimed. "That would be killing someone!"

"It would not be the first," Adrissu protested.

"Yeah, well, that elf deserved it," Kian sighed, looking uncomfortable, as whatever memories he had of Lorsan surfaced. "We're talking about finding some random guy off the street and killing him for no reason."

"Then perhaps we could find someone who, as you said, *deserves* it," Adrissu countered.

"Yeah, then I'd have to live looking like someone who might be on the run, or have some kind of criminal background, or something else that would get me into trouble," he said.

"We could get someone from a different part of the world who would have never set foot in Polimnos."

"This is sounding way more complicated than it would be worth," Kian sighed, shaking his head. "I don't think it's a good idea, Adrissu."

"Then take the body of a dragon," Adrissu pressed. "Then you can have whatever human form you want. Look however you want, the same way I do."

Kian had no retort to that. He stared at Adrissu for a long moment, the air between them still and silent, the human's expression unreadable. Finally, his eyes flickered away from Adrissu's as a deep, tired sigh escaped him, sounding far more world-weary than any human of his relative youth should.

"Maybe," he said softly, then seemed to flinch at his own words. "I don't know, Adrissu. I don't know if I want to... have these kinds of memories for all of time."

"I don't understand," Adrissu said, his voice softer now, too. When Kian glanced back over at him, his eyes were glassy and on the verge of tears, taking Adrissu by surprise.

"I guess I just sort of want all this... all this pain to be something I won't carry with me next time," Kian said, gesturing at himself. "The way I only remember bits and pieces of my—my past lives. Maybe next time I won't remember all the shitty things that happened to me in this life. Or at the very least, it won't hurt as much to have those memories."

"Kian," Adrissu said, his chest aching with sympathy. "That's possible, but there's no way to guarantee what memories make it to the next life and what remains. But time dulls all things, especially when you're counting in decades and centuries. When you..." He gulped, feeling suddenly vulnerable. He had not been so emotionally open with anyone since Braern. Braern *was* Kian, yet at the same time, he was someone entirely new. "When you died, the first time, as Ruan. I did not think I would survive it, sometimes, even though I knew you would come back to me, eventually. It was by far the greatest I had ever suffered in my life. But it's been, what, nearly three hundred years since then? When I reflect on it, I do remember the pain, but it's distant and dull. It's only the memory of pain now."

From the way Kian's mouth had tightened as Adrissu spoke, he knew the human wasn't fully convinced—but how could Adrissu blame him? Kian was young, and humans were so terribly short-lived. He was sure Kian thought it had been "a long time" since some of his old wounds, too, and felt the pain just as acutely. Decades couldn't be compared to a century or three, but Kian had no frame of reference for that vast span of experience, even amongst his own shadowy memories of his past lives.

Adrissu knew then that it was a futile argument, at least this time. Kian's eyes hardened, and he seemed to visibly steel himself before speaking again.

"I understand your point," he said, his tone sounding far more gracious than Adrissu would have expected, considering his cold expression. "But no. I want... I need to be able to do this for myself. If it's impossible, then fine. I'd consider the soul transference as a last resort. But this is too important to me, has been too important to me for too long, for me to just... drop it. I have to know that this is something I can do."

That, too, Adrissu could understand, much as it frustrated him. He had not truly expected Kian to relent—not when he was so very like Ruan, who had fought him until the very last moment to undergo even the soul binding that made their conversation today possible. Kian was so young, and his independence probably still felt new and treasured, something he had to defend against anything that even remotely threatened it. It was illogical, but understandable, that he would resist Adrissu’s solution as the easy way out.

“That’s fine,” Adrissu said, nodding slowly. “I will continue to do what I can to help you, of course. But that option is always on the table. All you have to do is ask.”

Kian smirked. “I know.”

CHAPTER SIX

Kian graduated with honors, completing his study of transmutation at the Polimnos Academy of Magic. While they had not yet worked out the ritual that Kian would need to transform himself, he had all the building blocks—at least, those that Adrissu could give him.

Adrissu gave his usual speech at the graduation ceremony, forcing his eyes not to remain on Kian, where he sat in his formal robes. And when the graduates lined up for Adrissu to shake their hands and present them with their certificates, his skin burned with need when he clasped Kian's hand. But he did not allow his grip to linger, despite the mischievous glint in Kian's eye that flashed for a moment as he took his certificate from Adrissu's other hand. No one had ever suspected them of anything, and Adrissu had no intention of stumbling at the finish line.

"I'll see you later," Kian murmured, barely above a whisper, before he stepped away and the next student took his place. Adrissu watched him go for only a second, returning his attention to the line of graduates still awaiting their certificates. He had been patient so far. He could wait a few more hours.

When he had distributed all the certificates, there was a small celebration with wine and food for graduates and instructors in the courtyard. Adrissu's eyes kept landing on Kian, but the human stubbornly kept his distance, mingling with other transmutation students and a few instructors. Adrissu remained in the back and watched the gathering with forced disinterest on his face, occasionally sipping from a glass of wine. On the opposite end of the courtyard, Kian's cheeks were flushed from drink, and he was grinning at another student, nodding as she spoke animatedly to him.

"Enjoying the celebration, headmaster?"

Eris had come up alongside him, looking out at the crowd before turning to him with a bright smile. Though he knew she was now romantically involved with Nethendriel, the half-elf enchantment professor, she often still tried to include him in social events or make a point of speaking with him at school functions. It had confused him at first, but now he was quite sure that she thought he was lonely

and was genuinely worried about him. Her heart was in the right place, but he had no need for friends, especially not human ones. But he indulged her concern with a smile, raising his glass toward her.

“Very much so,” he said, nodding.

“This is the largest graduating class we’ve ever had, isn’t it?” she asked, gesturing toward the students.

“It is,” he agreed. “Hopefully that will be true every year.”

“I hope so, too.”

She stood next to him for a little longer, then Nethendriel approached them with a grin. “Cheers to another great year, headmaster,” he said brightly as he wrapped an arm around Eris’ waist.

“Thank you, Ned,” Adrissu replied. The three of them chatted for a while longer, then Nethendriel gestured for Eris to accompany him as he stepped away. They said their goodbyes, and Adrissu was alone again. When he glanced back at where Kian was, he caught the human watching him. Kian looked away quickly, but a slight grin lingered on his features. After a moment, he turned back to Adrissu, holding his gaze for a long moment, then he turned and left.

Adrissu did not need a signal to know where Kian was going. He lingered for a little while longer, speaking with one of the alchemy instructors about his plans for the break and his complaints about having too many first-year students enrolled next term. When it had been an appropriate length of time since Kian left, and a few of the teachers started filtering out, he said his goodbyes and excused himself.

Anticipation swelled in his chest with every step through the uninhabited school grounds and out toward his tower. They had agreed the week before that Kian would stay with him after graduating; in fact, they already moved all his things out of his dormitory. Kian would be there, waiting for him, no longer his student—they had discussed that, too, and Adrissu knew they were on exactly the same page. His cock was already at attention in keen interest, making his gait awkward and shuffling, but luckily the path was empty.

As he approached, he could sense Vesper, a tight ball of contentment in the center of his chest. Kian must have already arrived; she was always glad to see him. *Go wait for us in the study*, he thought at her. He felt some resistance at first, but then acquiescence—the last thing he wanted was for Vesper to interrupt them. He could see the tower on the hill now, a light on in the ground-floor window.

When he arrived, striding through the heavy wooden door, Kian was standing in the sitting room, already turning to look at him as he entered.

“Headmaster,” he said breathlessly, taking a step toward him. The same warm flush was on his cheeks. “You’re finally here. I wanted to speak with you.”

Adrissu frowned. “Speak with me?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. He had not thought there was anything left to discuss.

“Yes,” Kian said, nodding rapidly—and as he did, a playful grin flickered across his mouth and was quickly stifled. “It’s about my transmutation exam. I had to miss it, but...”

Realization struck Adrissu all at once—his teasing smile, his heady flush—arousal flooded his veins like adrenaline. If this was the game Kian wanted to play, he was more than happy to oblige, letting the imperious mask of a stern headmaster fall over his face effortlessly.

“Missing a final is grounds for failure, Mr. Farrow,” he said, relishing in the sharp inhale that answered him. He stepped closer to Kian; they were only about a foot apart now. “There’s not much I can do for you in that regard.”

“Please, Headmaster Adrissu,” Kian replied, his voice breathy, his chest rising and falling rapidly. “I need to pass this class. I’d do anything for you to fix my grade.”

“Anything,” Adrissu echoed, his own breath hitching. Kian slowly reached toward him, his hands settling on Adrissu’s waist.

“Anything,” he repeated. His eyes lingered on Adrissu’s for a moment, then fell to his lips, and the human leaned forward and kissed him.

Adrissu moaned against him, hungry, deepening the kiss the moment their lips touched. He felt Kian whimper against him, his hands sliding up his torso. With his own, Adrissu cupped Kian’s face, holding him in place as he drove his tongue past his parted lips. He still tasted of wine as their tongues met, Adrissu licking into his mouth with an animalistic need, and Kian utterly succumbing to his onslaught. The human’s smaller hands drifted lower, hesitating as they palmed against his erection—Adrissu groaned as Kian’s hand dipped within the folds of his formal robe and gripped him hard through the thinner layer of his trousers.

“This is—highly inappropriate, Mr. Farrow,” he rasped, pulling away enough to meet Kian’s gaze again. Despite the admonishment, his hips rolled against Kian’s grip, sending sparks shooting up his spine. Kian grinned up at him.

“So is this,” he murmured, dropping to his knees. Adrissu stifled a groan, watching as the human unlaced his trousers and freed his cock, rock-hard and eagerly dripping with precome. Kian glanced up at him, meeting his gaze as he licked a long stripe up the underside of his cock, before taking the head into his mouth.

“Oh, *fuck*,” Adrissu panted. Kian’s lips were pulled taut around him, sucking him eagerly—it had been so long since anyone had touched him. He forced himself to breathe evenly, his hands fisting in Kian’s curls, as he tried desperately not to come right then and there.

“Will this convince you?” Kian gasped, pulling away from Adrissu; but with his hands still in the human’s hair, he guided his open mouth back to his cock. He needed no more encouragement, stroking Adrissu’s length with one hand as his tongue swirled around the head.

“Missing a final is a serious infraction,” he replied, his voice shaking as he struggled to keep the same stern tone. But it must have worked; Kian hummed contentedly around him, eyelids fluttering. “You’ll have to—truly impress me, Mr. Farrow, if you’re hoping I’ll—ah, change your grade now.”

Kian moaned around him again, nodding. When they had spoken of this last week, Kian had confessed he was a virgin; but now, with how eagerly he sucked his cock, Adrissu wasn’t sure if he believed him.

“Where did you learn this, filthy boy?” he panted, pulling Kian’s hair to lift the human’s eyes to his own. “Well? How many cocks have you sucked for your education?”

Kian only moaned around him again and sucked harder, bringing him right up to the edge. Adrissu swore, pulling Kian off of him, but it was too late; with a groan, he shot his load across the human’s face. Kian gasped, startled, but hesitated for only an instant, before stroking Adrissu’s length in time with each pulse of come that spilled from the tip. He opened his mouth again, pressing his tongue against the head of his cock to tease out the last drops of his orgasm.

“*Fuck*, Kian,” Adrissu panted, releasing his grip on the human’s hair and taking a shaky step back. The human grinned up at him, wiping the come off his cheek only to stick his fingers in his mouth, making Adrissu stifle another moan. “Did you lie to me about never having been with anyone else?”

“No,” he laughed, shaking his head. “No, but I remember what you like, and I’ve dreamed about what I wanted to do to you for years. How long until you can fuck me properly?”

Adrissu bit his lip; his cock twitched eagerly, but tingled with discomfort when he gave himself a cautious squeeze. “Not long. Come to bed with me.”

“Does this mean you’ll fix my grade?” he asked, pouting, and Adrissu forced himself not to laugh.

“Yes, you pass,” he said, stepping forward and pulling the human to his feet. He was still in his graduation robes and everything; he had *reveled* in the inappropriateness of it all. His patience must have been wearing just as thin as Adrissu’s after all.

“Only a pass?” Kian pressed.

“Highest marks,” Adrissu murmured, kissing him again. Kian hummed in satisfaction; Adrissu groaned, tasting himself on his lips. “Come to bed with me.”

“Yes,” Kian agreed, nodding, and he allowed Adrissu to lead him up the stairs. They tumbled into his bed, the sensation of his mate in his arms so achingly familiar that for a moment Adrissu wanted nothing more than to hold Kian until the sun rose. But then the human grabbed Adrissu’s hand and pushed it beneath his trousers, making his own need all too obvious. His fingers were met with soft skin and slick wetness; Kian’s breath hitched, as Adrissu explored cautiously.

“As I said, all my, ah, previous experience has been with anatomy like my own,” Adrissu murmured, pressing kisses against Kian’s neck as he spoke. “So please tell me if I do anything you don’t enjoy, aside from what we’ve already discussed. I want you to feel good.”

“It feels good,” Kian affirmed, nodding rapidly. His body felt tense beneath Adrissu’s, his hands balled into fists in Adrissu’s robe. Gods, he was still wearing his formal robe; they very well could be teacher and student with how they were dressed, and his cock twitched at the lewdness of it all.

Adrissu moved his hand slowly, acquainting himself with the unfamiliar shape of Kian’s body. The slickness coating his fingers felt quite similar to how Braern’s body had produced its own lubrication; he let his fingers dip lower, gathering more of the wetness, before trailing higher again and pressing against the harder nub of his arousal. Kian groaned low in the back of his throat as Adrissu stroked him there.

“Get these off,” Adrissu said, using his free hand to unlace Kian’s trousers. Kian’s hands grabbed him, stilling the movement before he could do more than unlace them.

“I...” Kian stammered. His face, though already flushed, now had a pained expression. Tension built around his eyes, as his gaze flickered between Adrissu’s face and his hands. “If you... If you don’t like it, how I look th-there, we can... we can stop.”

Adrissu paused, leaning back with a frown. “Did you want to stop?”

“No,” Kian answered quickly, shaking his head. “No, I don’t—I don’t think so. I’m nervous. But I know that... that, you know, you’ve always been with... men, so if you don’t like what I have--”

“Stop,” Adrissu interrupted. “Kian, if that was going to be a deal-breaker, I would not have allowed this to go as far as it has. Your body, the parts it has—that’s irrelevant to me. *You* are my mate.” He leaned closer, pressing their foreheads together. “The you that has always come back to me. The you that’s inside, that’s the spark that ignites everything else. Your body is an afterthought compared to that. Every time you’ve come back, it’s been unique. Your physical forms have all differed significantly from each other.”

“That’s true,” Kian relented, his voice barely above a whisper.

“I adjusted when you came back as an elf last time,” he continued. “This is the same, as far as I’m concerned. We are already of a different species. Our physiology would never be an exact match, regardless. Trust me when I tell you that the shape of your body is of much less concern to me than the soul it houses.”

For a long moment Kian was silent, though his fingers fiddled nervously with the bunched-up sheets. Adrissu watched him, waiting for any sign to proceed. Eventually, Kian’s eyes flickered up to meet his, and a slight smile spread across his soft, flushed features.

“I trust you,” he said, nodding slowly. He lifted one hand to touch just below his collarbone, rubbing the hem of his graduation robe. “I... I’d still like to keep this on, if that’s okay.”

Adrissu grinned. “How scandalous of you, Mr. Farrow.”

The playful smirk that he had so been enjoying returned to Kian’s face, as he leaned back once more. “I don’t know what you mean, Headmaster.”

He stifled a laugh, returning his attention to the laces of Kian’s pants. When they were undone, he pulled them down in one fluid motion, exposing the fair, freckled expanse of his legs. For an anxious moment Kian kept his knees pressed together, then hesitantly let his legs part and fall to his sides. Adrissu knew he was still nervous—his eyes looking everywhere but down at Adrissu—so he only let his gaze linger for a moment on the thatch of gingery hair and soft pink folds beneath.

It was different from what he was used to, of course, but he felt none of the distaste Kian obviously expected him to feel. And Kian had made it clear that he did not want to be penetrated there, so that act, at least, would be familiar. So in truth, the only real difference was that his cock was much smaller, a small nub peeking out from his pubic mound. For an instant, his heart squeezed with sympathy that Kian would hate his body so intensely that he feared it would disgust Adrissu. There was nothing to hate, but he knew no one could convince Kian of that, not even him. It was, as the human had said, something he had to do for himself.

“You’re perfect,” he murmured, leaning forward to press kisses along Kian’s exposed neck, eliciting a soft moan from the human. “Can I return the favor? Use my mouth on you?”

He could practically feel the heat emanating from Kian at the question, but he gave a stilted nod, before answering in an unsteady voice, “Y-Yeah, that sounds... good.”

Adrissu tilted his head up to capture Kian’s mouth against his own, kissing him deeply for a moment, before pulling back to settle lower between his legs. He traced along Kian’s skin with his fingertips first, smoothing along his hips and brushing close to where his pubic hair began, but then

diverting away and instead trailing down the length of his inner thighs. Kian jumped, a sharp hiss of a laugh escaping him.

“That tickles,” he said, so Adrissu dug his fingers in harder, making him yelp. “Bastard.”

“Language, Mr. Farrow,” Adrissu murmured, grinning. “That’s no way to get your grade changed.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Kian muttered, obviously stifling a laugh of his own. “Sorry, headma—ohh, *fuck*.”

Adrissu had leaned down and licked softly at the junction of his thigh, where he knew the skin was tender and sensitive. Judging from the choked noise Kian made, his words forgotten, it had elicited exactly the reaction that Adrissu was hoping for. He pressed a kiss there, letting his lips brush ever so slightly against his skin, as he moved upward until he was kissing and licking up Kian’s hipbone. He moved to the other side, just close enough to his skin so that his breath was ghosting along the small nub of his cock, which he knew ached to be touched. But instead, he pressed his mouth to the opposite hipbone, repeating the same cycle of kissing and licking, mere centimeters away from where Kian expected.

“Tease,” Kian hissed through his teeth when Adrissu peered up at him.

“Not a fan?” he murmured, his lips still brushing against the skin of Kian’s thigh.

“You know that’s not what I meant,” Kian groaned, shaking his head.

“This, then?” Adrissu murmured, then pressed his tongue to the slick nub of his arousal. Kian groaned, then sucked in a sharp breath as Adrissu swirled his tongue, circling the hard flesh, before enclosing his mouth around him.

“Oh, fuck,” Kian panted, hips jerking, as Adrissu sucked on him gently. “Yeah, that—that feels good.”

Adrissu made a soft sound of acknowledgement in the back of his throat. It was not so different from what he had done a thousand times before; less aggressive, certainly, but the movements of his tongue were familiar, and they made Kian gasp and shudder against him. He tasted different, but so had all his other iterations.

No, it was not so different. This was where he belonged—with his mate. He moaned against Kian, his cock stirring with renewed interest now. Kian’s hands reached down to grip his own where they pressed against the human’s thighs, holding them apart. Their fingers interlaced, and Kian squeezed him hard; he gave a softer squeeze in response, too much of his focus on his mouth to do much else.

“Adrissu,” Kian panted, squirming against him. “This—this feels good, but I don’t think I can come from it.”

Adrissu hummed, hearing him, but unwilling to part so soon. He kept his mouth enclosed around Kian's flesh, pressing his tongue against him in broad, slow strokes that made the human shudder.

"Headmaster, please," Kian gasped. The word made Adrissu groan, his cock fully back to life now. He pulled away, grinning up at Kian's blissed-out expression.

"I want to make you come," he said, his voice gravelly. "Tell me what you want."

"I want—" Kian stammered, suddenly shy again. "I want you—inside me. Like how we talked about."

Adrissu nodded eagerly. He had not wanted to pressure Kian into anything that would feel like too much too soon, but if he wanted Adrissu inside him, he was more than happy to comply.

"Absolutely," he agreed, propping himself up on his knees to reach past Kian for his nightstand. The vial of lubricating oil there was new; he set it on the bed beside him, before moving back down to rest between Kian's legs. His pants were already unlaced. He kicked them off easily, but kept his formal robe on, partly so Kian wouldn't feel self-conscious, and partly because it made what they were doing feel far more forbidden. "Lift up a bit."

Kian hesitated, then shifted his weight to raise his hips. Adrissu pushed his legs up further, and Kian held them in place so Adrissu could run his hands along the soft globes of his ass. Giving in to temptation, he kissed the smooth skin there, before letting his teeth graze against the pliant flesh, making Kian hiss.

"You really are a fucking tease," he groaned, and Adrissu laughed.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "No, I've just missed you. This."

Kian did not reply, but a small smile played at his lips even as he looked away, his face still flushed.

"But if you want me to get on with it," Adrissu continued, now in an overtly teasing tone, and he spread Kian's ass cheeks apart to expose the small pucker of his hole. "Gods, you look so good. You're going to feel so good stretched around my cock, aren't you?"

Kian's breath hitched, then he made a strangled noise, as Adrissu leaned forward to lick a stripe from the cleft of his ass over his opening.

"Fuck," he panted, shuddering as Adrissu mouthed over the small ring of muscle there. "This wasn't—exactly what I—what I meant."

"Do you want me to stop?" Adrissu murmured, pulling away just enough to peer up at Kian, who was looking down at him with his green eyes wide and dark with arousal. His face was nearly as red as his hair, but after a beat of hesitation, he shook his head.

“Don’t stop,” he said softly.

“Good,” Adrissu murmured, then pressed his mouth to Kian once more. His thighs trembled against Adrissu’s hands, but he didn’t try to squirm away again. A low moan escaped the back of his throat as Adrissu circled the tight ring of muscle with his tongue—over and over until all the tension was gone, and he could dip the tip of his tongue inside.

“Come on,” Kian urged, panting, as his fingers tightened in Adrissu’s hair. He didn’t need any further encouragement, pulling away while leaving a trail of kisses up Kian’s thighs, before grabbing the jar of oil and propping himself up over the human’s smaller frame.

“Ready for me?” he purred, kissing the side of Kian’s neck.

“Yes,” he groaned, nodding.

Adrissu coated his fingers with oil first, then he let some fall directly onto Kian’s skin, reaching down to find him again. He was already slick with saliva, so Adrissu’s first finger encountered little resistance as he slowly eased it inside. Kian hissed, shifting slightly.

“Don’t stop,” he said, when Adrissu hesitated. “It’s—a bit uncomfortable. But it doesn’t hurt.”

“I’ll go slow,” Adrissu murmured, rocking his hand just enough to let his finger slide in and out. Kian made a faint noise, whether of pleasure or pain Adrissu couldn’t tell, and his head fell back onto his pillows. Their pillows. Kian was his, and everything Adrissu had belonged to him.

The human slowly opened up underneath him, and his second finger slid in without difficulty. Kian groaned again, but this time sounded less pained. Adrissu watched his fluttering eyelids and his flushed cheeks, arousal coursing through his veins like adrenaline.

“Touch yourself,” he urged, his voice rasping with want. Kian grunted in response, nodded, and reached down with one hand. They trailed down further to feel where Adrissu’s fingers entered his body; he made a soft exhalation, feeling Adrissu’s hand move for a moment before settling higher and rubbing against the small nub of his cock.

“Feels good,” he murmured, eyes closed as he touched himself. After a moment, Adrissu could feel him relaxing further around his fingers and slipped a third inside. Kian panted, and Adrissu groaned at the wet tightness around his fingers, working him open for only a moment longer.

“You’re ready for me,” he said softly, easing his fingers out to coat his cock with more of the oil. “I’ll go slow. Tell me if anything hurts.”

Kian nodded, his eyes half-open to watch Adrissu line himself up. He pressed the head of his cock against the human’s pliant hole, the very tip slipping inside.

“Take a deep breath,” he murmured, and Kian breathed in deeply. “Bear down a bit.” He felt Kian’s muscle tense against him, and he pushed himself inside. Pleasure shivered up his spine as tight heat enveloped the head of his cock. Kian let out a small yelp, brows furrowing, and Adrissu rocked gently against him, letting his cock push a tiny bit deeper each time.

“Hurts a little,” Kian grunted, reaching with his free hand to grab Adrissu’s wrist where it was braced against the bed by his waist. “Just go slow.”

Adrissu nodded, his eyes lingering on the spot where their bodies were joined, Kian’s fingers moving languidly just above it. Being here, with his mate, inside of him—it was like the world had been askew, snapping back into place now. The sensation should have been familiar, but the sheer relief of it was new and overwhelming every time. His draconic instincts growled to claim and devour, to sate himself in the heat of his mate’s body, but he pushed the urge down and kept the same careful pace. Kian’s shuddering breaths and soft grunts were reward enough.

He’d moved slow enough that he didn’t realize he’d bottomed out until he could feel the wetness of Kian’s arousal press against his lower abdomen; a pleased smile spread across his face at the realization.

“Good boy,” he groaned, relishing how Kian whimpered underneath him at the familiar praise. “Look, you’ve taken me all the way in. You’re doing so well.”

“I feel it,” Kian panted. Adrissu could feel him trembling now that they were pressed so closely together. “Fuck, couldn’t you have made your dick a little bit smaller?”

Adrissu laughed, and despite his rapid breathing, Kian smirked up at him, too.

“You’ve never complained before,” he murmured, then leaned down to kiss Kian. The human stiffened, tasting himself on Adrissu, but soon melted against him as Adrissu’s hips moved again in a slow glide.

“*Fuck*,” Kian hissed as Adrissu pulled almost all the way out, before pushing back in at the same careful pace. “Yeah, I—okay. Yeah. Fuck, this feels good.” His hand was moving quicker between their bodies now, his breathing rapid and shallow. Adrissu kept moving, slowly at first, but gradually increasing speed, and Kian’s noises of pleasure only increased.

Adrissu bit his lip. It had been so long since he’d been inside his mate, but he wouldn’t let himself over the edge until Kian came first. He dove down again, pressing his lips to Kian’s neck and making him gasp with relentless kisses and bites.

“You feel so good around me,” he panted against Kian’s skin, feeling him shudder in response. “Gods, I’ve wanted you so badly. You feel so fucking good.”

“Headmaster,” Kian whimpered, his mouth pressed against Adrissu’s ear. “*Fuck*. You’re going to—you’re going to make me come.”

Adrissu could already feel the human pulsing around him impossibly tighter—the wet sounds of their bodies sliding together reached a fever pitch as Kian let out a strangled cry. The way his body convulsed against Adrissu was more than enough to send him over the edge. He slammed into Kian’s tight hole, his movements stilling as he came with a low growl.

They both lay there panting for a long moment, Kian still trembling beneath him, his rapid breaths cool against Adrissu’s sweat-slicked skin.

“Ow,” Kian grunted as Adrissu shifted slightly.

“Sorry,” he murmured, pulling back carefully. “You’re alright?”

“A little sore,” he replied, a tired smirk returning to his features. “It’s fine. Worth it.”

“Let’s get you cleaned up,” Adrissu said, easing his spent cock out, making Kian wince as a stream of come spilled out with it.

When they were both cleaned up and laying in bed together—another first that filled Adrissu’s chest with contentment—Kian nervously curled against his side, one arm snaking across Adrissu’s torso. The human had discarded his formal clothes and was now in a loose shirt and underwear; Adrissu, having sweated through all his layers in the warm spring evening, had peeled them all away and remained naked.

“What are we going to do now?” he asked softly, pulling Adrissu away from the beginnings of sleep.

“What do you mean?” he murmured, tilting his head to kiss the human’s forehead.

“What am *I* going to do?” Kian said, his arm around Adrissu tightening. “Now that I’m done with school.”

“Keep studying,” Adrissu replied. “As an independent scholar, you should be able to access libraries all over the world. I have connections and contacts for most of them. I’ll help you. You can do whatever you want.”

Kian was silent for a moment. Adrissu was unsure what he might have been thinking about, but exhaustion had settled over him like a heavy blanket, so he said nothing. He wasn’t sure how long it had been when Kian’s voice came again, barely above a whisper.

“Thank you.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

For the first several weeks after Kian's graduation, he seemed to revel in doing absolutely nothing. He slept late, occasionally helped Adrissu with his own research or experiments, and read a variety of books in Adrissu's personal library; but he made no move to continue the research that he'd been so doggedly pursuing while in school. The extended break was obviously welcome, if his longer sleeping hours were any indication.

But after a month had passed, he seemed ready to resume his study and asked Adrissu if he would write him a few letters of introduction to scholars and librarians at all the major learning centers—especially the College at Gennemont, which still boasted the largest library in Autreth and arguably the known world. Adrissu sent off a handful of letters the next day, introducing his *esteemed colleague* to various practitioners of transmutation and inquiring if he might study under them, or visit their own libraries in pursuit of his continued education.

Kian spent the next several weeks helping Adrissu with his own work. Now that Kian had graduated, Adrissu had moved his focus away from transmutation and back toward his curiosity about the soul containment and its decay, and he kept a handful of animal souls housed in various gems under careful observation. But before long, replies arrived, welcoming Kian to visit libraries and private collections throughout Autreth and even Aefraya.

"I've never traveled out of Polimnos," he finally admitted, holding the third invitation that he'd received in a trembling hand, not quite meeting Adrissu's eyes. "I'm—I'm really nervous to actually go."

"That's understandable," Adrissu replied.

"What if I get there, and they see me and don't believe I'm who I say I am?" Kian blurted, color rising in his face. Adrissu paused—the idea had not occurred to him. That anyone could look at Kian

and see anything other than a studious young man seemed ridiculous to him, but he also knew he was biased.

“I will go with you if you want,” Adrissu said softly, reaching over and grasping Kian’s wrist, stilling its anxious quiver. “I can go and introduce you myself. You know I’ll always help you.”

But even that seemed to embarrass Kian. He glanced away, silent, but after a moment gave a sharp nod.

“Maybe just the first time,” he muttered, tension around his eyes. “Just so that... you know.”

Adrissu waited, but Kian didn’t elaborate.

“Of course,” Adrissu finally replied, and gave Kian’s wrist a reassuring squeeze before letting him go again. The human managed a slight smile, setting down the letter with the others.

Kian arranged to visit the library in Gennemont the next month, and Adrissu planned to go with him. The Academy in Polimnos had grown enough that, as the headmaster of their direct competitor, he did not have as free a reign of the library as before, but he could at least visit those he had connections with and accompany Kian through most of the school grounds until he got his bearings.

“We can just... fly there. Can’t we?” Kian asked, not looking at him.

Adrissu hesitated. Though Kian knew about his true form, Adrissu had never been a dragon with Kian, not yet. Kian remembered him. It made no sense to be nervous. But the question—the way Kian didn’t look at him when he said it—sent a sharp sting of anxiety through his chest.

“Yes,” he said slowly, choosing his words carefully. “It might be best to try a... test run first, though. The first time we flew, you were quite nervous about it.” He suppressed a smile, remembering how Braern had clung to him so fearfully for the first hour that they’d been in the air.

“That makes sense,” Kian replied, nodding, then finally looked at Adrissu. He seemed anxious, too. “When can we do that?”

“Tonight,” Adrissu said, glancing at the timepiece on the wall. It was a few hours until dusk. “After the sun sets.”

Kian agreed, and Adrissu kept himself busy until sundown, wondering how the human would react. It wouldn’t be a surprise, so maybe he would have no reaction at all. Maybe Adrissu was overthinking it. Braern had adapted well enough. Wouldn’t Kian be the same? And if Kian hated flying, there was still time to arrange a carriage to Gennemont instead. There was no need to be anxious.

Despite all this, he felt sweaty with nerves when he heard Kian coming up the stairs to his study. The sun had set, and he had lit candles to continue his reading.

“Adrissu,” the human said, his head poking through the doorway. “I’m ready whenever you are.”

“Of course,” he said, standing up abruptly. “Shall we go?”

“Sure,” Kian said, eyeing him with an unreadable look. They went down to the ground floor, where Adrissu pulled away the rug that covered the trap door to his lair; and for a long moment, they both stood there looking down at it. Finally, Kian’s eyes flickered over to him, but he couldn’t bring himself to look away from the metal latch.

“Why are *you* nervous?” the human blurted, laughing, and Adrissu felt his face flush with heat.

“I—” he started to protest, then sighed. “I don’t know why, but I’m anxious about you... seeing me. How I really am.”

“Why would you be anxious about that?” Kian chuckled.

“I don’t want you to be frightened of me, I think,” he answered, and Kian’s laugh tapered away, his expression growing somber now. “And... If you are afraid of me this way, I wouldn’t know how to fix it.”

Kian gave him a long look, lips pursed thoughtfully.

“I get it,” he sighed, folding his arms across his chest. “I mean, that was basically how I felt about you, you know—seeing *me*. That you would think I was gross or something. And you didn’t. You thought it was a silly fear to have.” He managed a reassuring smile. “So, you know, same thing. It’s *you*. I remember most of it. I’m not afraid now, and I don’t think I will be when we’re down there, either.”

For a long moment, Adrissu only stared at him, heart racing. Part of him bristled at having his words thrown back at him, but Kian wasn’t wrong—if anything, it was a relief to hear. It was similar, in a way. What Kian worried over had barely registered for Adrissu. He could only hope that this would be the same.

“You’re right, of course,” he finally murmured, managing a tight smile at the smaller man. He smirked back up at Adrissu in response, smug and self-satisfied. “Shall we go, then?”

Kian’s grin faltered as he glanced down at the trap door between them. Apprehension returned to his face, but he nodded.

“Not looking forward to the drop,” he sighed, peering down as Adrissu kicked the hatch open.

“It’s not so bad, really.”

“Because you’re the one who can fly,” he retorted, rolling his eyes, and Adrissu chuckled.

“Fair point,” he said, spreading his arms to hold Kian. “Ready?”

With one last nervous glance toward the dark drop, Kian nodded and wrapped his arms tightly around Adrissu's waist. Adrissu squeezed him in return, then with a few shuffling steps, he moved for the door. Kian yelped as they stepped through, falling fast. But Adrissu held him securely as the illusion condensing his body faded away, and his true form burst forth. A mighty flap of his wings slowed their descent, making Kian yelp again as the sudden deceleration sent his head snapping back against Adrissu's broad, scaled chest.

He landed at the bottom of the tunnel and carefully set Kian on the floor. The human staggered as he got his bearings, and Adrissu could see him looking around with uncertainty in the dark.

"I can't see anything," he said, his arms extended at his sides, and Adrissu chuckled. The low, deep sound reverberated through the cave, and Adrissu saw Kian jump, startled.

With a glance, magic flowed through Adrissu and lit every torch and candle in the cavern, illuminating it with warm light all at once. Kian's eyes landed on him, widening as he craned his neck to look up at his towering form. Adrissu watched him, apprehensive for a moment—but the expression which he'd been dreading, the fear on his mate's face, never came. After a moment, Kian took in a deep breath, then smiled weakly up at him.

"You're much bigger than I thought you'd be," he said, chuckling, and Adrissu's face split in a grin. "Guess I didn't remember that part very well."

"Shall we go on, then?" he asked, and again Kian gave a start at the low rumble of his voice.

"Gods, you sound so different," he muttered, stepping closer to Adrissu and lightly touching the scales of his forelegs. "That's the weirdest thing, really."

Adrissu stared down at him expectantly, and after a beat of silence, the human laughed.

"Alright, alright," he said, walking around to Adrissu's side. "I have no idea how to get on top of you, though."

It took a little while for Kian to find a comfortable position between the ridges of Adrissu's spine and secure himself there with several long leather straps; but eventually, Adrissu lumbered to the exit of his lair that led out to the ocean with Kian safely on his back.

"You're sure we're going to fit?" Kian said as they looked out through the narrow opening, a tinge of doubt in his voice.

"I'm sure," Adrissu reassured him, backing up. "Just keep your head low." He did not wait for Kian to answer before leaping forward, as his wings beat powerfully and sent them soaring through the tight corridor. Kian shouted, echoing through the chamber for only an instant before the cold ocean air hit them, and they were in the open.

“Quiet, before someone hears us,” Adrissu grumbled, still flapping his wings to get higher into the air.

“Oh, fuck,” he heard Kian muttering on his back. “Fuck, fuck, *fuck*, this is so high up, Adrissu.”

“We have higher to go,” he replied, trying to ignore Kian’s nervous noises. He couldn’t look back at the human, but at least he wasn’t shouting anymore.

When they were high enough that anyone below would be unable to make out the shape of him against the clouded night sky, Adrissu let them glide along for a little while, drifting with the breeze.

“What’s the verdict so far?” he asked, turning his head to peer back at Kian. It was hard to see him clearly, but out of the corner of his he could glimpse a shock of red hair blowing in the wind and the small human form beneath; his body was tense, and he could feel how tightly Kian was holding the straps of leather that held them together. His knees pressed hard into Adrissu’s back, encircling his spine in an anxious death-grip, which would have been uncomfortable if his scales were not so thick there.

“How long would it take to fly to Gennemont?” Kian asked, his voice coming out as a nervous croak. The wind was sending his hair streaming away from his face in ripples of red. Adrissu stifled a grin.

“A few hours,” he replied. “Five or six, depending on the wind.” He felt more than heard Kian groan in response.

“Maybe,” the human replied, wavering. “I... maybe.”

“Want to go back?”

It took a long moment before Kian replied. “No... No, keep going. I want to try to get used to it.”

Adrissu did not respond, only flapped his wings to lift them a little higher. He knew that getting too high up would make it difficult for Kian to breathe, but he instinctually yearned to soar above the clouds, where he could see the stars. Half of him belonged in the sky, the other half with his mate—when they were here, together, his head felt clearer and his heart lighter than anywhere else. Humans were not fond of flying, he knew, but part of him hoped Kian could learn to like it. Braern had been alright with it over time, so hopefully Kian would grow fond of it quickly.

He took them on an aimless path, soaring north along the coastline until the peaks of the northern mountain range became visible far into the distance, and he knew they should start heading back. Kian had spoken little during their ride, but Adrissu could feel that he was not clinging so desperately to the leathers now, and his legs were more relaxed around his back. He still shivered, but whether from the chill or from lingering nerves, Adrissu could not say.

“We’ll be back home soon,” Adrissu said, and he felt Kian squeeze him a little tighter with his legs. “Too cold?”

“A bit,” he replied. “I could cast a warming charm, but—I can’t bring myself to let go long enough to.”

Adrissu stifled a laugh, instead casting the charm himself. He felt it settle over his back like a thick blanket, and Kian groaned in relief. “Better?”

“Much better.”

As they flew back toward Polimnos, some of the cloud cover faded away, and patches of stars peeked through the clearing sky.

“Wow,” he heard Kian say softly, and when he glanced back, the human’s eyes were trained upward on the sky. He smiled; the stars were often his favorite part, too. They soared in silence for a long while, until Adrissu dove toward the ocean, as Polimnos came into view, and the cliffs that hid the entrance to his lair approached. Kian yelped, startled, and clung hard to Adrissu.

“Keep your head down,” he rumbled as he started heading for the cliff face. He heard Kian swear, felt the warmth of his breath against his scales, then turned himself sideways to slip through the narrow opening; and once again, they were in his lair. When he landed, Kian laughed, trembling on Adrissu’s back.

“Holy shit,” he stammered, making no move to get off. “That was—I mean, that last bit was kind of a lot, but—that was amazing, Adrissu.”

“I hoped you might like it,” he replied, teeth flashing in a wide grin. “I’m glad.”

He crouched lower, and Kian fumbled with the leather straps for a moment, before freeing himself and sliding down Adrissu’s ribs with a slight stumble as he landed.

“Hey,” he said, and Adrissu turned his head to look over at him. Kian reached up, cupping Adrissu’s long jaw in both hands. Adrissu shuffled slightly, so he could face the small human. He pressed a kiss to Adrissu’s snout, his lips almost as cold as his hands from the wind. His eyes were bright as he looked up into Adrissu’s face, and he grinned.

“I’m glad you had fun,” Adrissu murmured, unsure what Kian wanted, as he stood there silently holding his head.

“I love you,” Kian blurted out, and Adrissu froze. “I’m.. I’m sorry it took me so long to say it back to you. I know you knew, but... I don’t know. I don’t know why I never said it before. But I do. Love you, that is.”

Warmth flooded Adrissu's veins, centered in his chest and spreading further with each beat of his heart. He pressed forward just enough to bump his snout against Kian's face, pressing their skin together.

"I know," Adrissu replied softly, closing his eyes. "I love you. Tell me again."

Kian laughed, then answered, "I love you."

He breathed out a long sigh he hadn't realized he'd been holding. He had known Kian must have loved him—he never would have agreed to all this otherwise—but to hear it directly from his mate was... something else. It was true and right and made his heart swell, like music. Fate bound them together, but the words themselves were a different type of magic entirely.

"It's cold in here," Kian murmured, pulling him from his reverie. "Can we go back up now?"

He nodded, a low rumble escaping from deep in his chest. He pulled Kian closer to him, getting ready to make the ascent, when Kian suddenly laughed.

"Are you *purring*?" he asked, his voice dripping with disbelief and amusement. Adrissu scowled, craning his neck to look down at the human with distaste.

"Absolutely not," he replied, and despite his scolding tone, he couldn't help but smile back as Kian laughed again. "I'm not a cat."

"Is that so?" Kian teased, his cheek pressing against the scales of Adrissu's chest. "It sounds an awful lot like purring."

"I'm only breathing," he retorted, then launched himself into the air before the human had the chance to reply. He felt Kian tense in his arms, yelping as the strong flaps of his wings sent them upward. The surrounding tunnel narrowed, and Adrissu held Kian harder as he transformed, shrinking down into his elven form. Kian's arms squeezed him tightly the instant he was small enough for them to reach; and with one last pulse of magic, they arrived at the ladder that led up into Adrissu's tower. Kian was breathing hard in his arms, but quickly extricated himself to clamber up through the trap door.

"You didn't tell me going up was *worse*," he snapped, as Adrissu followed him.

"Is that so?" Adrissu answered mildly, and Kian scowled again at the echo of his teasing tone.

"I ought to close this on your head and lock you down there," he muttered, but a grin played at his lips as he spoke.

"It would be a wasted effort," he replied, shrugging as he got to his feet before closing the trap door behind them. The tower was warm and bright compared to the cool, dark lair below. He never noticed it much when he was in his true form, but when he was small, his thin skin made him more

sensitive to the temperature. But Kian was shivering, and he could still smell the adrenaline coming off of him. “Feeling alright?”

“Warming up,” Kian said, nodding, their play-fight evidently forgiven and forgotten. “Some tea sounds nice right about now.” He grinned salaciously, before continuing, “Or maybe you had a different idea on how to get me warm again?”

Adrissu smiled back at him, heat pooling deep in his belly. “What did you have in mind?”

CHAPTER EIGHT

They went to Gennemont not long after that, and it should not have surprised Adrissu how much Kian loved it.

For a farm boy who'd only seen Polimnos, Gennemont was utterly astounding to the human. Polimnos was certainly no sleepy village, but Gennemont was the hub of civilization, the center of all of Autreth, host to embassies and markets and the yearly gathering of all Lord Representatives. And, of course, it was home to the College of the Arcane, still the foremost institution of magical learning, despite all of Adrissu's efforts to close the gap between them and the Academy.

Between the sights of the city, and how much the library was a spectacle in itself, Kian was entirely enamored during their first visit. He had daily meetings with scholars at the library over the course of a week; but when he was finished attending lectures and reading rare tomes for the day, he would return to Adrissu, and they would explore the city together.

Humans were such funny little creatures; Adrissu never understood the point of all the different *kinds* of food that could be found throughout Gennemont, nor the reason behind importing ingredients that originated from half a world away for the sake of novelty or nostalgia. It was all variations of the same thing to him, but Kian wanted to try all sorts of the food—that claimed to be the cuisines of different locales around the world—so of course Adrissu indulged him. It all seemed the same to him, but Kian's eyes went wide with wonder each time he took a bite of something new, so it was worth the cost.

Adrissu did not understand the purpose of the theater either—watching humans pretend to be other humans, or perform the same choreographed dances every day—but Kian dearly wished to see it, so Adrissu bought them tickets. The human's eyes were wet with tears at the end, but he insisted he had loved it.

“Why cry over it if you enjoyed it?” Adrissu asked, frowning.

“It was just... really beautiful, you know?” Kian answered, wiping his eyes as he laughed. Adrissu still thought it silly, but he had long since given up trying to understand the strange reactions humans had to these sorts of things, so he did not question it. If he said he liked it, Adrissu would have to take him at his word. Still, the tickets weren’t cheap, so Kian didn’t ask to go again.

Adrissu had planned for them to remain in Gennemont for a week, at which point he would need to return to Polimnos. Before the week was up, though, he could sense how reluctant Kian was to leave.

“Do you... do you think I could stay a little longer?” Kian asked, after having spent the first part of their dinner visibly anxious and distracted.

“Will you feel comfortable here on your own?” Adrissu asked, as nonchalant as he could manage. It should not have surprised him, but the thought of being apart for any extended, unknown length of time still made his insides twist.

“I think so,” Kian replied, smiling nervously over at him. “You’ve really helped me get my bearings, so...”

Adrissu forced a smile. “Then of course you can. As long as the scholars at the library approve, stay as long as you’d like, Kian.”

“You’re sure it’s okay?” he pressed, leaning closer to Adrissu. “You’re not... You’re not mad?”

“Hmm,” Adrissu replied, considering the question as he leaned back in his chair. “I am not mad. I will miss you, of course, and wouldn’t want you to stay too long, but we’re both adults. If you want to remain here to continue studying for a little while longer, I won’t stop you. Although, if I find out you’re staying because you’ve found someone else...” He grinned wickedly, and Kian laughed.

“Gods, no. The only people I’ve interacted with other than you have been a bunch of stuffy elves and old professors,” he said, shaking his head in mock disgust.

“Younger than me, I’m sure,” Adrissu huffed, and Kian laughed again.

“It’s not the same, and you know it,” he said. They smiled at each other from across the table for a moment, then he added in a softer voice, “I don’t want to be away from you for very long, either. I know you have to get back to the school, but... Gods, sometimes I think I would be happy to read here forever, you know?”

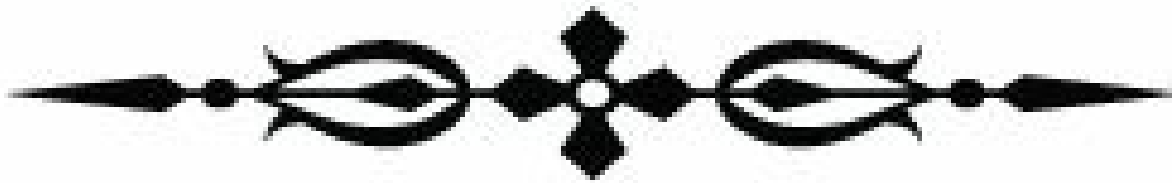
Something ached even harder in Adrissu’s chest. He was so like Ruan, and so unlike him, too.

“I understand,” he answered quietly, reaching over to clasp Kian’s hand. “I want you to do whatever you feel is necessary to accomplish your goals. If this is where you’ll learn the most, then I want you to be here to learn it all.”

Kian’s smile became watery, and he glanced away, blinking hard.

“Thank you,” he said softly, and the conversation ended there.

So Adrissu left Gennemont alone, having paid for another week of boarding, so Kian would not have to worry about where to stay. He also left behind plenty of gold and stern instructions as to who at the College could contact him most quickly, should Kian need him for whatever reason. It unsettled him, but he trusted Kian; and it would be unfair of him to treat the human like a child forever, regardless of how much older Adrissu was. But it was not as difficult as he had feared. After all, he was used to solitude, and in a way it made him nostalgic for those early years with Ruan, when they would often be apart for weeks at a time. At least when Kian was in Gennemont, he told himself, his life was not at risk the way Ruan’s had been. At the very least, he had that.



With this, they settled into something of a new routine all over again. Kian loved the freedom of being an independent scholar: able to visit schools and libraries across the continent to study under transmutation experts. Adrissu would travel alongside him when he could, but mostly, he would remain behind to attend to his responsibilities at the school and to his own studies, which were never-ending. When they could visit new places together, Adrissu would spare no expense to spoil Kian with sights to see and delicious food; when they were apart, he still made sure that Kian had more than enough to live comfortably while he was away. Sometimes Kian would protest, giving back a handful of gold coins and complaining that Adrissu gave him too much; but after insisting long enough, his protests mostly stopped.

When Adrissu could not join him, he remained home in Polimnos and kept busy with his own work to avoid worrying too much about the human, fragile and mortal as they all were. Sometimes he would fly Kian to and from his destination, but sometimes the timing was simply too inconvenient. The first time Kian returned from a trip by carriage, he complained of how much time it wasted, how much bumpier the ride was, how tedious it had felt to spend days on the road—he never complained about flying again, though it was not the last carriage ride that he had to take.

The worst thing about being apart from each other, Adrissu decided, was not being able to contact Kian or have Kian contact him if something were to happen. Long-distance verbal communication was still a problem that he had yet to unravel, and to his knowledge, no one else had worked out a simple method of such magic, either. But he had seen firsthand how some students would place

enchancements on slips of paper to share notes, without needing to physically pass paper between them. He had found the mirroring charm quite clever, though against the school rules.

It took a bit of trial and error, but before long, he had a set of blank scrolls that would reflect anything written on the other. Of course, only so much could fit on the finite space of the scroll itself, but that would be a problem for another day. When Kian returned from his most recent trip, Adrissu presented the enchanted scroll to him and explained its purpose.

“Clever!” Kian exclaimed, bright green eyes flashing between the scroll in his hand and Adrissu’s pleased smile. “You think it’ll work across a long distance?”

“I believe it should,” Adrissu said, nodding. “The only limitation is how much text can fit on the scroll. Distance shouldn’t affect it, but if we find it does, I can keep working on it.”

“It’ll be nice to be able to keep you updated on everything,” Kian continued.

“Don’t use it frivolously,” Adrissu said, despite his own longing for the same. If he could have written an entire letter to Kian on the scroll every night that they were apart, he would have done so gladly, and still missed him. “Until I can figure out something a bit more robust, let’s try to limit it to emergencies, change of plans... That sort of thing.

“So I can’t write you a dirty letter on this?” Kian asked with an exaggerated frown. Adrissu let out a huff of a laugh, shaking his head.

“I’m afraid not, no,” he said wryly. “I’ll take it into consideration for the next time.”

Kian most often went to Gennemont, since its library was the largest, and it had the widest network of scholars and professors for Kian to contact or study under. But there were a handful of transmutation specialists in other places throughout the continent, and even a small cluster of researchers working out of the castle library in Aeфраya. Kian met an elf with connections there through the college at Gennemont and eventually received an invitation to study under them for a month. This, Adrissu was most hesitant over—to go to another country entirely felt different from traveling around the Federation of Autreth.

Plus, the stability Aeфраya had recently enjoyed was proving to be unsurprisingly short-lived; its unification with the northern orc territories was crumbling, following the recent death of their first orcish king, who had reigned for nearly eighty years before dying of old age. Now, the widower elfen king and their heiress, the eldest daughter of their half-elf half-orc children (a combination Adrissu would never have expected to see at any point in time, yet they did indeed exist), were struggling to keep their hold on the northwestern territories, which had historically been the most reticent to unification. Rumors claimed their rebellion, though it was as yet non-violent, was gaining ground

further south—closer to the historical border between the orc territories and the elven kingdom—and the further it spread, the less likely it seemed to remain peaceful.

It was difficult to get an accurate idea of the situation when it was half a world away; but from everything Adrissu could gather, Aefraya was perhaps not the safest place to be at the moment, especially the capital. But he was also acutely aware of how deep the elven study of magic went, and how much more there might be to glean under the tutelage of an elven expert in transmutation. There seemed to be no imminent danger, and Kian very much wanted to go. Aefraya was very far, and Adrissu couldn't be away for too terribly long, but he could at least take him there.

It had been several decades since Adrissu had been in Aefraya at all; his last visit had been to see Braern's family, celebrating the birth of his great-niece. The Rolastra family was mainly situated in Menserine, so Adrissu did not expect to encounter anyone in the capital whom he might know; still, when they arrived a few hours walk from Castle Aefraya, he decided that his illusory form should be slightly different, just in case.

Kian did a double-take as his elven form appeared, frowning as he shouldered his heavy rucksack. "What's going on with this?" he said, gesturing up and down the length of Adrissu's body. He had made himself scrawnier and given himself a different nose entirely.

"I shouldn't be too easily recognizable," he replied lightly, adjusting his robes, which didn't fit quite so well now. "Just a precautionary measure. I don't think there will be anyone I once knew here, but on the off-chance there is, I don't want to deal with any difficult questions."

"Huh," Kian replied, blinking; the thought clearly had not occurred to him. He was silent as they headed toward the road, but after a little while he asked, "It would be weird to try to see any of, well, Braern's family, wouldn't it?"

"Hmm," Adrissu replied, pursing his lips. Much of Braern's extended family *was* still alive: his parents were long deceased, but one sibling remained alive at the time of Braern's death. Surely most, if not all, of his nieces and nephews and their children—and possibly even their grandchildren now, considering how long it had been—were still alive and well. But how could he explain his presence, looking as young as he did for an *elf* of his age? If they even knew who he was at all; and if they did not remember him, then what reason would he have to see them in the first place? "I don't think it would be wise, love. Sorry."

"Don't apologize," Kian said quickly, waving a hand dismissively. "I get it. It was just a thought. I only sort of remember them myself, anyway. I just thought it would be... Well, I don't know. Strange, but interesting."

They did not speak of it again as they walked along the packed dirt road, the early morning sun illuminating their way. But he could tell Kian continued to think about it; he had a particular expression that only appeared when he was thinking of his past lives, trying to bring up memories that were often foggy at best. Adrissu did not press, though. If Kian wanted to talk about it, he would.

But they made much of the walk in amicable silence, and Adrissu watched as Kian's pensive expression melted away into the familiar look of curiosity that he often wore when they went somewhere new. And Aefraya was quite different from the places in Autreth that they'd been together, especially here in the more central part of the elven kingdom. Everything from the plant life to the architecture of the farmhouses that they passed seemed uniquely elven, and entirely unlike what they were used to in Polimnos and the rest of Autreth.

When they arrived at the city gates, Kian presented his letter of invitation to the elves who stood guard there. They looked Adrissu up and down, then waved both of them through, much to his relief. He had his own fake documents, of course, but avoiding scrutiny in the first place was always ideal.

"Have you been here before?" Kian asked, self-consciously shifting the weight of his backpack to smooth out the front of his robe. He had asked Adrissu to help him find a few that would suit the elven fashion for the time he was in Aefraya—he confessed that he was not much of a fan of the elven style of clothes, but Adrissu had loaned him one of the loose, flowy robes that had been more in fashion perhaps a decade ago or so, and Kian had liked it best. He always gravitated toward looser clothing, things that would disguise the shape of his body. Sometimes he would use illusions if he were wearing something a little more form-fitting; but simple illusions like that were easy to see through when observed by other magic-users, and Castle Aefraya was sure to be full of them, so he'd packed loose, comfortable clothing for his trip.

"I have only been in the capital once before, a long time ago," Adrissu replied, his eyes drifting up and down Kian's form, before settling on his eyes again. "But I have visited other parts of Aefraya, of course. The inn you'll be staying at is one I visited briefly while I was here. It's among the nicest in the capital, so you'll be comfortable and safe."

"I don't need luxury rooms, you know," Kian teased with a grin, leaning closer to him as he spoke. "You could just get me a regular room at a regular tavern."

Adrissu shook his head. "Not with times being what they are. The better the inn, the safer you'll be."

"Is that so?"

“Of course. The inn will have its own guard, of course, and I’m sure many of its visitors will have their own personal guards as well. If anything were to happen...”

Adrissu trailed off, glancing around. The capital looked as peaceful as he remembered it—busy, of course, but with no hint of impending doom or overt fear of attack. “Well, I don’t expect anything to happen, but if it did, being surrounded by people who would know how to defend themselves will put you in a better position than the alternative.”

“I can defend myself, too,” Kian muttered, rolling his eyes.

“Of course,” Adrissu said, nodding. “Your magical ability is the same as many of the elves here. But the elves fear orcs for a reason. Have you ever seen an orc before, in the flesh?”

For a moment Kian was silent, then said softly, “I haven’t.”

“They’re *huge*,” Adrissu said, gesturing. “Not only in height, but in muscle. This orc king that just died: he was considered small for an orc, and I’ve heard he was seven feet tall. Something that much bigger and stronger than you—well, magic will only do so much against a wall of flesh.”

“I’d be safe if *you* stayed with me,” Kian said.

Adrissu met his gaze again, and Kian raised a knowing eyebrow. Kian disliked being apart nearly as much as he did; even if he knew otherwise, the human would always ask him once if he would stay longer, whenever Adrissu dropped him off somewhere. So he knew that this was that moment, but like so many other times, he could only refuse.

“One of my kind would have no issues taking on an orc, of course, or even a group of them,” Adrissu replied evenly, then he lowered his voice. “Unfortunately, I cannot stay with you longer than a day, so unless there is an imminent attack planned for tomorrow morning...”

Kian snorted with laughter. “I’ll see what’s on the schedule when we get there. What’s the name of this place again?”

“The Magenta Marigold,” Adrissu replied. “A very old inn, even by elven standards. Historic, one might say, but quite nice the last time I was there. It’s down one of the main roads...”

He walked slowly until the surrounding streets started to look more familiar, and before long they were approaching the inn with its vibrant sign: a carved flower painted a gaudy pinkish-purple. The sign was new, Adrissu thought—he would have remembered something so eye-catching if it had been there the last time he was in Aefraya, probably a hundred and fifty years ago or more.

A pair of elves behind the long counter called out a greeting as they entered, and seeing the heavy rucksack on Kian’s back, another waved them over to check them in. Her eyes lingered for a brief moment on Kian’s rounded ears, then flickered between the two of them as Adrissu paid. But she was

perfectly polite, and Adrissu supposed that he couldn't fault her for not having seen many humans in her life, especially within the walls of the capital city.

"And here are the keys for you," she said brightly, holding a key in each hand. Adrissu paused, waiting for Kian to answer that they needed only one, but the human smiled politely and took one with a murmured thank-you. So he shrugged and took his as well, helping Kian with his belongings as they turned toward the narrow staircase that led up to the private rooms.

Kian's room was comfortable, not exactly spacious, but perfectly serviceable for a month-long visit. But Kian barely looked around, tossing his things onto the bed, before turning back to Adrissu with a deep sigh.

"You're sure you can't stay? Even an extra day or two?" he asked, stepping closer to him. Adrissu laughed.

"Is that why you wanted me to take that second key?" he teased, opening his arms as Kian reached for him. "You know I can't. Staying until tomorrow is the best I can do."

"I've just never been so far from home," Kian replied softly, pressing his face into Adrissu's chest. "I'm—nervous, I suppose."

"You'll be fine," Adrissu reassured him, squeezing his shoulders. "Elves can be a little stuffy, of course, especially the ones who study in the castle for a living, but that's nothing new. Just study hard and don't go out alone at night, and I'm sure everything will be fine." He pulled away just enough to look down into Kian's eyes. "And if anything does happen, write to me on our scroll, and I'll be there as soon as anyone possibly can. I'd teleport to you if I had to."

Kian laughed at that, shaking his head. "Teleport all the way here? You'd be dead of exhaustion by the time you arrived."

"You're probably right," Adrissu sighed, squeezing him again. "Very well. I'd teleport halfway and fly the rest. Shave off at least a few hours."

He felt Kian nod, but for a moment they were both silent, hugging each other.

"I don't truly think anything is going to happen," Kian said softly, muffled against Adrissu's traveling cloak. "The city already seems too peaceful for anyone to really be worried about an attack, at least not here. Right?"

Adrissu thought of the last time Polimnos faced an attack, when the newly minted Federation of Autreth came to bring them to heel. He remembered the tension that was all but palpable in the air, even before their small band of mercenaries and soldiers left to meet the invaders in the field. Aefraya was nothing like that now, not even close.

“I agree,” he replied, keeping his tone carefully light. “I don’t think anything will happen either. But if you even hear a rumor, or start feeling worried, write to me, and I’ll get you out as soon as I can.”

Kian pulled away, smirking up at him. “Is that the only reason you’ll come? What if I just really miss you?”

Adrissu scoffed, but smiled in return. “I might be able to get away for a weekend in two weeks. Otherwise, enjoy your break from me. You’ll be too busy to miss me.”

“Don’t forget to eat while I’m gone,” Kian chided, now finally moving away to unpack his things. “You always do that. You’re always skinnier when I get home.”

“That’s quite impossible,” Adrissu sighed, helping him unpack. “It’s all an illusion. And I eat less often because I don’t *need* to eat as much.”

“No, I can definitely see it in your face,” the human laughed, shaking his head. Adrissu rolled his eyes, but didn’t protest this time.

They spent the afternoon resting after their long journey, then strolling the major streets of the elven capital. Kian eyed all the different restaurants and food carts that he wanted to try during his visit. In the end, they had dinner back at the Magenta Marigold, which Adrissu thought was probably the best meal the city could offer—outside of the castle itself, of course.

Kian did not ask him to stay again, though he could tell from the way he looked at him that he very much wanted to. But it was just as well; much as Adrissu would have liked to stay, there was far too much to do back at home.

In the morning, Kian saw him off at the city gate, kissing him desperately for a long moment, before finally pushing him away, face nearly as red as his hair.

“Don’t forget about me while I’m gone,” he called, as Adrissu turned to go.

He smiled, all his teeth showing. “Never,” he said, shaking his head, and Kian’s smile softened.

“Hopefully, I’ll have a lot to show you when I get back,” he added.

“I expect you to,” Adrissu replied.

“I love you. Travel safely.”

“I will. I love you too. You know how to contact me.”

Kian beamed. “I do.”

Adrissu did not look back as they parted. If he did, and Kian was watching him go, he wasn’t sure that he would be able to continue resolutely on his way. Kian would be fine. He told himself this over and over as he walked, never once turning back.

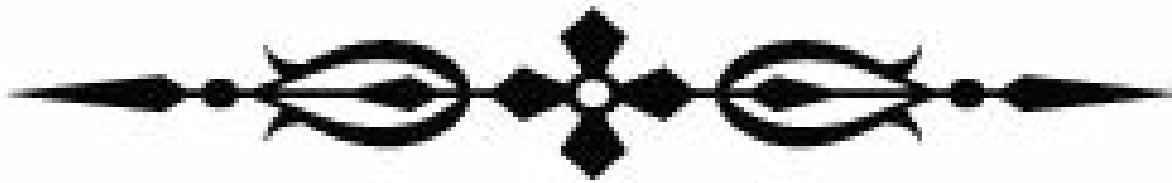
When he arrived a few hours later in the woods, where they had landed the previous day, he did pause long enough to pull their scroll out of his own backpack and tell Kian that he left Castle Aefraya without incident and would take flight soon. But when he pulled it out, there was already a message—written in Kian’s neat, cramped script in the very upper-left corner of the parchment.

Miss me yet?

Adrissu laughed, staring down at the familiar scrawl, as fondness and worry welled up in his chest all at once. Kian *would* be fine, but Adrissu already missed him terribly.

Yes, he wrote back, making his handwriting as small as he could manage while holding the parchment in one hand and a pen in the other. *Arrived at forest without incident. Will check in when home.*

There was no immediate reply, not that he expected one. He tucked the parchment away, transformed, and took flight.



When Adrissu arrived back in Polimnos, he kept a close eye on every piece of news coming out of Aefraya that he could track down, but word from even the quickest couriers was nearly a week behind. The news itself was often the same: tensions were high, but it resulted in no violence as yet.

Kian wrote to him once a day, but the messages were concise and largely the same: *Today went well. No news. Love you.*

Adrissu did his best to keep busy, as he always had when Ruan was away, when Braern was away. Not that it took much effort now: this year he had two particularly troublesome students, so he was often either dealing with the aftermath of their pranks and misbehavior, or actively trying to prevent them from furthering their chaos. Already, he had confiscated several magically empowered stink bombs from various students, which he knew, but could not prove, came from the two troublemakers. And once, a professor found herself within a silencing charm so effective that she hadn’t even been able to tell Adrissu what was going on until nearly an hour after the class—that she’d been attempting to teach—had ended. Between this and his usual duties, he did not have much time to spend ruminating on Aefraya’s tenuous political state or Kian’s absence.

He had hoped that he might get away for a weekend to visit Kian in Castle Aefraya during the month he was away, but in the end, he was too busy to make the trip there and back with any

meaningful length of time spent together. Kian seemed unbothered when he replied to that message, but considering how short they had agreed to keep their missives, it was hard to tell.

Toward the end of the third week, though, Adrissu arrived home exhausted; but he could feel Vesper urging him up into his study the moment that he walked through the door, which usually meant she had noticed that Kian left him a message. So with a weary smile, he headed upstairs and found her curled up in his chair, their scroll open on his desk where he'd left it that morning. When he caught sight of it, the note was immediately, noticeably different. For a moment, his heart sank, until he drew near enough to read it.

I think I've figured it out. More soon.

CHAPTER NINE

“Explain.”

Kian laughed incredulously at the first word out of Adrissu’s mouth. His packed bags fell to the ground beside him as they embraced; he’d barely made it down the stairs of the Magenta Marigold when Adrissu spotted him from where he sat in the tavern, and was at his side in an instant.

“Really? A month apart, and all you care about is figuring out how I accomplished my groundbreaking research?” Kian teased, grinning up at him as he allowed Adrissu to take one of his bags.

“Of course, Mr. Farrow,” Adrissu said, letting his stern headmaster persona ooze through his voice. “You can’t expect to tell me something as cryptic as, ‘I’ve figured it out’, and *not* have that be the first thing I ask about. I’ve been trying to wrap my mind around it for a week now.”

“Well, we’ll have plenty of time on the road for me to explain it in *excruciating* detail,” Kian sighed, waving at the elf woman behind the counter as they walked. The elf waved back cheerily; if nothing else, Adrissu was glad that Kian had made acquaintances and hadn’t been lonely during the time they’d been apart. “Although I’d hoped our first moments back together would involve more kissing.”

Adrissu smirked down at him. “Oh, I’d be happy to oblige that as well. We’ll be out of the city soon enough.”

He watched the tips of Kian’s ears flush red with pleased embarrassment, but the human didn’t reply. A smug grin lingered in the corners of his mouth as they walked. Adrissu wanted to ask him a thousand questions, wanted to look over every one of his notes, wanted to understand what Kian had pieced together under the tutelage of the warlocks at the Aefrayan library—but the sweet smile that curled around his freckled mouth made everything rattling in his brain seem pointless and secondary. It had been a month that they’d been apart, after all.

The further they got from the city gates, the closer Kian walked beside him, until their arms brushed against each other and Kian slipped his hand into Adrissu's. He squeezed the human's smaller hand in his own. Anticipation buzzed through his skin at the contact, but Kian kept looking resolutely ahead, whistling cheerfully as they walked.

They would veer off from the main road nearly an hour south of Castle Aefraya, and after another twenty minutes or so through the woods, they would reach the clearing just large enough for Adrissu to take form and fly. But Adrissu wasn't sure he could wait so long, so he interrupted Kian's whistling as he prompted,

"So tell me what you learned."

Kian laughed, grinning up at him. "That eager, huh?"

"I'm much more eager to be inside you, but we have a bit of a walk ahead of us, so I figured this would help pass the time," Adrissu replied, gesturing to the road before them, and Kian snorted with laughter again.

"Oh, headmaster, I couldn't *possibly*," he replied breathlessly, and even though his teasing tone was familiar, it made Adrissu's cock twitch all the same.

"Keep speaking to me like that, and I'll find somewhere in these woods to bend you over," Adrissu murmured, squeezing his hand and pulling him closer. Kian flushed, grinning up at him.

"I wouldn't say no to that," he said, and finally Adrissu stopped walking, Kian stumbling to a stop alongside him.

"Then what are we waiting for?" Adrissu said, watching Kian's face—but there was no hint of hesitation, just a lewd, eager smirk.

"*I'm waiting on you*," Kian retorted, and without any further answer, Adrissu hauled him off to the side of the road. They had passed only a few elves on their walk so far, fewer the further they got from the capital; but still Adrissu walked until they could no longer see the road through the foliage, although Kian's excited laughter probably did them no favors if there was anyone approaching.

"Be *quiet*," Adrissu growled, rounding on Kian to push him up against a tree. In one quick motion, his lips were on Kian's, and one of his legs pressed hard between the human's thighs, which parted eagerly around him. Kian's tongue plunged into his mouth at the same moment his fingers began to fumble with the laces of Adrissu's pants, making him groan with anticipation.

"And you're telling *me* to be quiet," Kian muttered against him, Adrissu moaning again as Kian's deft fingers wrapped around his aching cock.

“You should be quiet,” Adrissu said, hips rutting against the human’s smaller form. “Or I’ll make you be quiet.”

Kian smiled wickedly at him. “That isn’t a deterrent at all, you know.”

As much as Adrissu had wanted to take control of the situation—wanted to manhandle Kian and have his way with him—when Kian dropped to his knees in front of him, Adrissu couldn’t bring himself to resist. Kian took his length into his mouth in one quick motion, sucking eagerly until Adrissu let out a ragged gasp.

“You’ve missed me,” he said, gripping Kian’s hair firmly in one hand and rocking his hips to feel the slide of his cock against the human’s tongue. “All you’ve been thinking of is my cock, haven’t you?” Kian groaned against him, nodding as his eyelids fluttered closed.

His cheeks were flushed and his lips swollen, and Adrissu had wanted him so very badly over the past month—it was a terrible combination, so after only a moment of fucking into the human’s mouth, Adrissu pulled away, ignoring the petulant whine Kian made when his cock slipped from his lips.

“Turn around,” Adrissu said, as he hauled Kian to his feet. The smaller man obeyed without question, bracing himself against the thick tree. He unlaced his breeches and dropped them, hitching up his loose shirt so Adrissu could admire his perfect, freckled backside.

“Be gentle,” Kian groaned, as Adrissu grabbed a handful of his ass, squeezing hard to pull his cheeks apart and rub the head of his cock against his pink hole. “Shit, I don’t have any kind of lube.”

“I do,” Adrissu said, and Kian laughed again, bucking against him.

“This was your plan all along, wasn’t it?” Kian teased breathlessly. Adrissu laughed, kissing the human’s neck.

“Of course it was,” he growled against Kian’s ear, relishing how the smaller man shuddered against him in response. “Did you really think you’d make it home before I had to get my hands on you?”

“No, I suppose not.”

Adrissu pulled away just enough to dig through his pockets, retrieving the small vial of lubricant he’d brought along. He made quick work of slicking his fingers and pushing them inside Kian, making him yelp.

“Be *gentle*,” Kian groaned, but rocked against him all the same. Adrissu smirked, still kissing along the side of his neck. “It’s been a month. You have to go slow.”

“Oh, I don’t think I can do that,” Adrissu teased, slipping another finger inside. “It’s been an entire month. I’ve needed you for *weeks*.”

“Adrissu,” Kian whimpered, grinding against him with each thrust of his hand. For all his protests for Adrissu to be gentle, he was obviously caught up in the moment as well.

When his third finger slid inside with little resistance, Adrissu worked him open for only a moment longer before withdrawing his hand to slick his cock and line himself up with his opening.

“Slow,” Kian repeated, his voice breathless, and Adrissu forced himself to go slowly as he pressed himself inside. Tight, wet heat enveloped him, pulsating around his length; it took every ounce of his self-control to stop himself from mindlessly losing himself in his mate. “Fuck, I’ve missed you.”

Adrissu nodded silently, pressing his mouth to Kian’s skin to stifle the moan threatening to escape him. Kian yelped as Adrissu moved faster, the sound echoing through the woods around them, and with one hand, Adrissu reached over and clamped his fingers around Kian’s mouth to silence him.

“Quiet,” he hissed, even as Kian moaned against his hand. “Unless you want anyone walking by on the road to hear you.” Kian whined against him, hips rocking, as if the very thought excited him. Adrissu groaned, the hand that was around his waist gripping him harder as he quickened his pace, pressing the human’s body into the rough bark of the tree they braced themselves against. One of Kian’s hands lowered to touch himself, and within moments his tight channel clenched hard around Adrissu’s cock as Kian came, his cries still stifled.

“You’ve wanted me so badly, haven’t you?” Adrissu growled, dropping the hand covering Kian’s mouth to grab him by the hips and fuck him harder, chasing his own orgasm. “You came so fast, you’ve wanted me all month.”

“Come inside me,” Kian urged, his voice rasping. Adrissu moaned, pressing his lips to the side of Kian’s neck and nodding. “Please come inside me, please, I want to feel you.”

It took only a few more hard, rapid thrusts for him to come, driving himself as deep inside Kian as he could reach. For a long moment, all he could focus on were the primal waves of bliss radiating through his body, sated with his mate in his arms. How had he ever functioned when they were apart?

Adrissu snaked his arms around Kian’s waist, pressing his face into the crook of his neck. He could feel the human panting hard against him, but eventually his breathing slowed down, and he chuckled.

“We’re never going to make it home before sundown at this rate,” he teased, and Adrissu smiled against his skin.

“Alright, alright,” he conceded, then carefully separated their bodies. “You don’t happen to have anything to clean up with, do you?”

“Oh, you’ll remember the lube, but not that,” Kian complained, but he smirked as he turned to face Adrissu. “Can’t you just magic us clean?”

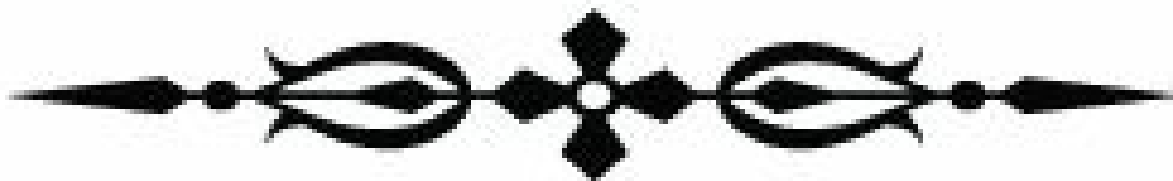
Adrissu huffed, but did magic the oil off his skin. He hated cleaning himself this way—it made his skin prickle and sting afterward as if he had scraped it raw—but it would be easier than digging through their things to find a towel. He did the same to Kian’s backside, making him hiss with discomfort before pulling up his trousers.

“Can’t believe I let you talk me into having sex in the woods,” Kian grumbled as they walked back toward the road. “Look, my hands are all scraped up from being pressed against the tree.”

Adrissu grabbed his hand as Kian held it up, then held his palm to his lips and kissed it, letting healing magic flow from his grasp as he did so, knitting together the superficial wounds. Kian chuckled as Adrissu released him, turning his hand to observe the healed skin.

“Better?” Adrissu asked, wrapping one arm around the smaller man’s shoulders. Kian grinned up at him, eyes brimming with possibility and promise. They still hadn’t talked about his discovery, but there would be plenty of time for that.

“Better,” he agreed.



Just as Kian said, they ended up arriving back at Adrissu’s tower in Polimnos long after the sun had set. Glad as he was to see Vesper, who was overjoyed at his return as always, Kian went straight to bed after he’d unpacked. Adrissu was just as tired: flying great distances like that, soothing as it was to his mind, left his shoulders sore afterward even in his elven form, and weariness had sunk deep into his bones.

They both slept late into the next morning—luckily there were no classes that day, so Adrissu did not need to worry about being on campus—and had a leisurely breakfast together; it was well into the afternoon before Adrissu finally herded Kian into his study so they could discuss what he had learned.

“Okay, okay,” Kian sighed, sitting down at Adrissu’s desk next to him and setting out a pile of notes. “So, how much do you remember about Starck’s ritual?”

“Most of it,” Adrissu replied, and Kian rolled his eyes.

“How do you have room in your brain for centuries’ worth of stuff? Transmutation isn’t even your specialty.”

“To be fair, this was only, what, four years ago? And *everything* is my specialty.”

“And so humble,” Kian teased, nudging Adrissu’s foot with his own beneath the desk. “Anyway, so, I know Starck didn’t really get it right, but his ritual is the closest anyone’s ever gotten, at least that we know about or has ever been recorded. Every time I tried to start from scratch, it ended up being similar enough to Starck’s ritual that I decided to just use it as the starting point and work out where he went wrong.”

“I see,” Adrissu said; none of this was news to him, but he learned long ago that this was just the way humans explained things.

“So *where* did Starck mess it up?” Kian said, shuffling through his papers. He procured a diagram of the ritual, which had his own notations in red. Some runes were circled, some crossed out. “That’s what I spent a lot of time figuring out. The consensus is that we think the runes he used were too broad and general, that they weren’t precise enough to accomplish what he wanted in the way he wanted. But what specific runes were wrong, and what specific runes would work better? Everything that seemed like it might work was *too* specific, if that makes sense—so instead of being able to transform myself into whatever I wanted, I would need a specific ritual to transform myself into, for example, a big brown dog. And it would *only* work to make me that exact thing. Sort of like the iron-to-gold rituals that are banned. It works, but it doesn’t have the flexibility I think something like this would need. But obviously there’s a point of it being *too* flexible, hence the whole Starck debacle, and why no one else has tried this.”

“So you narrowed down the range of flexibility it needs, then?” Adrissu asked.

“Sort of,” Kian said, pausing as he shuffled through his papers once more. The next sheet he pulled out and set atop the rest was another ritual, one Adrissu was unfamiliar with. He recognized the same layout as Starck’s failed ritual, but the runes used were not the same. In fact, he thought as his eyes flickered up and down the paper, several of the runes were not transmutative in nature at all.

“I thought about you,” Kian said softly, gesturing up and down Adrissu’s body. “How your form like this is... different. It’s an illusion, but it’s physical. It’s really *there*, obviously. And you can make yourself look however you want, the way a glamor charm works, but with a true physicality that illusion doesn’t have. So I figured, why not use the transmutative formula, but with illusory runes?”

“That seems dangerous,” Adrissu said, frowning. It made sense; but to combine schools of magic like Kian was suggesting, while not impossible, was known to be perilous if implemented incorrectly.

“It does,” Kian agreed, and pointed to two runes. “But look. The primary illusory runes, really the only ones that influence it, are *will* and *vision*. That’s the only part where illusion is used, and these are already similar to transmutative runes that let you adjust the physicality of something. It becomes what you envision, what you will it to be. But the driving force behind the ritual is still transmutation, so the change is physical, rather than illusory.”

“So you would need to have a very specific vision,” Adrissu said.

“And a strong will,” Kian agreed, nodding. He was smiling as he spoke, but a thrum of anxiety still pulsed in Adrissu’s chest. It made sense, of course, but so had Starck’s ritual. There was still so much about magic that was a mystery—that he had long ago accepted would forever be a mystery—it would be impossible to say for sure whether this new ritual might work, and therein lay the problem. If it were to backfire, it had the potential to do so explosively, enough to harm or even kill Kian.

“Have you tested this?” Adrissu asked sharply, turning his attention from the parchment to Kian’s bright eyes.

“No,” he admitted, now sounding a little more reluctant. “The elves are... well, they’re a bit harder to convince about trying these things on living creatures. I did a few plants, but it’s not really similar enough.”

“Do not attempt this without trying it on a living creature,” Adrissu said, frowning. “We would need to do this multiple times, with creatures of a similar mass—nothing as small as a chicken or a rabbit. Maybe goats or sheep. And monitor them afterwards—”

“Yes, I know all this,” Kian sighed, folding his arms across his chest in a huff of irritation. “I thought you’d be more excited.”

“I *am*,” Adrissu said, though admittedly he sounded more flustered than he would have liked. “Kian, you know I am. This is remarkable, and groundbreaking if it works. But I’m also worried, and I don’t think that’s unreasonable. There’s a reason nothing like this has been attempted after Starck.”

“You think something’s wrong with it,” Kian said flatly, frowning down at the paper.

“No,” Adrissu countered. “I think this is extremely dangerous, but we always knew it would be extremely dangerous. I am only reminding you that we must take every precaution to make this as safe as it can be. You cannot rush this, Kian. I know it’s not what you wanted to hear, but we *cannot* rush this.”

Kian’s scowl had deepened the longer Adrissu spoke, and he remained silent for a tense moment; then finally he sighed, his green eyes flicking back up to Adrissu’s face.

“I know all that,” he muttered. “You don’t have to treat me like I’m a student. A child.”

Adrissu couldn't stop himself from smirking in response. "Forgive me. You'll see when you reach several hundred years of age that everyone seems rather like a child."

Kian snorted, laughing despite himself, and Adrissu's heart squeezed with relief at seeing him smile. "Yeah, I guess that's true. Alright, experimentation next. Can you help me with this?"

"Of course," Adrissu said softly, and reached over to squeeze his hand. "You don't have to ask me. Of course I will. I'll see about buying a few goats or something tomorrow."

"I can track some down," Kian said, shaking his head. "Although... getting them down into the workshop might be tricky."

Adrissu laughed. "Yes, I should warn you, if you bring any livestock into the tower, I can't promise that Vesper won't kill them."

"Kill them?" Kian exclaimed, aghast. "She's your familiar, isn't she? Just tell her not to!"

"Her instincts are rather strong when I'm not around," Adrissu said. "So I'm just warning you. But if you'd like to handle that, please be my guest. I'll certainly be busy with work until tomorrow evening."

Kian's smile softened, and he leaned closer to Adrissu.

"Thank you for helping me," he said softly. "With... everything, you know."

"There is no need to thank me," Adrissu replied, wrapping one arm around Kian's shoulder. They sat in comfortable silence for a moment, the weight of Kian's head on Adrissu's shoulder soothing in its familiarity.

His mind was roiling with thoughts, though, despite the tranquil scene. Even trying Kian's ritual on animals might not give them an accurate enough understanding of how it would affect a human. Trying it on some other human first would be ideal, but Kian would never agree to it. He could try it on a human without Kian's knowledge, but that could be tricky to coordinate—he doubted Kian would leave for any extended length of time now that he had enough to begin experimentation on what he'd been studying for all this time.

It all came back to the soul transference—it would be safer, Adrissu *knew* it would. He knew he could do it. Kian had even said it himself: his innate ability to transform himself was exactly what Kian wanted. Why, *why*, did that seem so different to the human, so distasteful his mate had never agreed to it in all his lifetimes?

"Kian," he said softly, unable to tamp down his desperation. "You know I am very proud of your accomplishments, and I know you're pleased to have worked all this out on your own. But I..."

He felt Kian stiffen next to him, releasing his breath in a huff in anticipation of what he would say next, but remaining silent.

“I still think the soul transference would be an even safer, more effective option,” he continued resolutely, knowing already it was a doomed effort. “As you said—a dragon’s ability to take an illusory form that is far more physical than anything a human can procure—that’s exactly what you’re looking for. Taking the body of a dragon would allow you to do this. You would never have to leave that form if you didn’t want to. But this is a ritual I’ve done before, that I’ve observed to be safe and effective, so if this new ritual isn’t--”

“Adrissu,” Kian interrupted, shaking his head. “I can’t rule it out yet. You know that. If this ritual doesn’t seem to work when we run some experiments, if I can’t figure something else out after this, then fine. I’ll do the soul transference. But I have to try. I have to know for myself if I can do this. Because...”

Kian flushed, looking suddenly embarrassed, and turned his face away. “It’s not just about me, you know.”

“What do you mean?” Adrissu asked, frowning.

“Lots of people want to change their bodies,” Kian said. “Like me. Who were born girls, but should have been boys. Or the opposite. We can’t make all of them dragons, but if I can figure this out... If I can figure out how to really do this, then anyone who’s like me can make their body the way it should be, too. It would change a lot of people’s lives.”

Adrissu leaned back in his chair, letting out a long breath. That, too, was very much like Ruan—just selfless enough to drive Adrissu mad.

“That is very noble of you,” he replied softly. “But you know you are the only human I care about. The rest of these people, however many of them there are—they can study and figure it out on their own, just as you have. You shouldn’t have to be the test subject for them. Your safety is more important to me than the lives of every single person in Polimnos, in the entire world. I don’t care about them. I care about *you*.”

Kian managed a weak smile. “I know. But someone has to be the first. And if I can figure it out, then it should be me.” His smile widened, and he nudged Adrissu’s foot under the table. “And besides, I have you. That’s saying a lot. Who knows if I could have even started figuring this out without your help? I have that advantage.”

Adrissu sighed, relenting. He should have known. Kian’s answer was not a surprise, but it still left worry gnawing at his insides.

“I defer to you, of course,” he mumbled, trying to mask the petulance in his voice. Though from the way Kian’s smile twitched, it seemed he was unsuccessful. “Just... Please keep that in mind. If this doesn’t work, I don’t want you trying anything *more* dangerous.”

“I know,” Kian said, smiling fondly over at him, despite everything. “That’s always been my backup plan. You don’t have to worry about me.”

CHAPTER TEN

Their experiments using Kian's ritual went frustratingly well. Adrissu had expected there to be setbacks, difficulties, some kind of proof that they would need to continue working on the ritual in order to make it work. But their first few tests—turning hens into roosters—had no obvious negative effects on the creatures. They seemed a little disoriented and groggy immediately after the ritual, but showed no signs of pain or discomfort after the first few hours. This heartened Kian, but unsettled Adrissu.

Perhaps it was selfish of him to want the ritual to fail, but nothing could dissuade his conviction that the soul transference would be the most preferable option by far. He could not convince Kian of it directly, but if his ritual proved too difficult, then maybe he would finally, *finally*, listen to reason. But the human was too talented, too intelligent for his own good—whatever he had learned seemed to work far better than the original ritual Starck had attempted.

Something about the runes left him uncertain, as well, though this was harder to put into words. He could not explain *why* he doubted it would work beyond his own selfish, personal investment; but every time he looked at the diagram of runes, something itched in the back of his head. Maybe it was just his own selfish desire after all.

Next Kian changed a goat to a sheep, and vice versa. Neither creature seemed especially perturbed to be transformed into a new species entirely, which only frustrated Adrissu further. All evidence so far pointed to the ritual being an unparalleled success, and yet he could never shake the feeling that something was not right.

“Don't look so glum,” Kian teased, as Adrissu pored over the diagram of the ritual for the hundredth time late one evening, eyes still searching for whatever missing piece his mind seemed so convinced was there. “It's not a flattering look to be jealous you didn't come up with it yourself.”

“I am not jealous,” Adrissu replied, giving Kian an indulgent smile, despite his own knot of worry. “You know I’m very proud of what you’ve accomplished. I only want to make sure everything goes entirely according to plan.”

“You’ve spent way too long looking at the same piece of paper,” Kian chided, pulling him to his feet. “Come to bed. You deserve to rest.”

Kian’s body was warm against his, his grin inviting. Adrissu sighed, nodding.

“Perhaps you’re right,” he agreed, allowing Kian to drag him to bed. Not that he needed much convincing.

But the experiments continued to go well, and after a few months, still none of the animals seemed to suffer the ill effects of Starck’s failed ritual. Adrissu could tell Kian wanted to try it on himself next, could practically sense the anticipation buzzing off of his skin, but his stomach knotted with fear every time he thought of it.

“We should try this on another human, to be safe,” Adrissu blurted, when it had been several months since their experiments started, and the small menagerie in his lair was still alive and well. Kian immediately balked, gaping at him for a long moment, before shaking his head in bewilderment.

“Adrissu!” he started in a scolding tone, but Adrissu kept on, bowling over his protests.

“I’ve said it before,” he growled. “I don’t want you to have to be the experiment for this. It isn’t right. It isn’t *safe*. This is all well and good—” He gestured to the animals in pens before them. “But there is no guarantee it will affect a human the same way, and if it’s going to have a negative effect on you, you deserve to know ahead of time.”

“But it’s okay for someone else to be the experiment,” Kian said flatly, frowning.

“Yes!” Adrissu hissed, unable to force his frustration down. “Yes, it would be okay. Because none of them matter. It could be anyone. Hell, we could pull someone out of the prison right now to do this—to replace their sentence—and they’d thank us for sparing them however long they had left. So, no, I would have no qualms about doing this to another human. I *would* have a problem letting you do this to yourself without knowing—”

“*Let* me?” Kian snapped, anger flashing across his face. Instantly Adrissu regretted his words, but he had already said them. “I don’t need your permission to do this, Adrissu, so no, you cannot *let* me do anything.”

“That isn’t what I meant,” Adrissu said, holding up a placating hand and willing his tone to be cool and even. “I only mean—I don’t think I could do this, help you do this, if there was any chance I could hurt you by doing so.”

“Then don’t help me,” Kian said flatly, turning away and tossing the stack of notes that he’d been reviewing onto the table. Not that he could go anywhere here in Adrissu’s lair. He took several steps away, folding his arms across his chest and looking down at his feet with hunched shoulders as he walked. Adrissu watched him for a moment and sighed. How did he always cause the exact opposite of what he wanted?

“Kian,” he said, taking a step closer to the human. “You know I didn’t mean it that way. I’m sorry.”

Kian huffed again, turning just enough to scowl over his shoulder at Adrissu. “Why is it now that you’re putting up a fuss about all this? Did you think I wouldn’t be able to do it before? Is that really so shocking to you?”

Adrissu hesitated, taken aback at the accusation. It was difficult to parse out his feelings about the situation—while he was impressed and proud of Kian’s accomplishments now, *had* he thought the human’s goal to be unattainable? It had certainly sounded impossible, but he had always believed Kian would figure something out. Hadn’t he?

“I had doubts... that what you wanted might not be possible for anyone,” he started slowly, careful to choose his words now. “But the longer you researched, the more it convinced me that if anyone could accomplish such arduous transmutation, it would be you. No, it isn’t shocking to me that you’re on the verge of accomplishing it. It is only the possibility of you being hurt that’s beginning to feel more... real.”

Kian’s scowl had mostly faded away, replaced with a look of mild irritation tempered with fondness, an expression Adrissu was all too familiar with now. He took in a deep breath, then turned to face Adrissu again.

“I know,” he sighed, scrubbing a hand through his red hair. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to... snap like that at you, either. I guess I just feel, I don’t know, insecure. This is something I’m really excited about, so it really feels like a slap in the face for you to... doubt me like that.”

Adrissu bit back the protest that rose in his throat, instead nodding silently. Kian reached over to take his hands, peering up at him with bright green eyes.

“So I just need you to trust me on this,” he continued, holding Adrissu’s gaze. “Can you please just trust me? I know you don’t like it, Adrissu, but this is something I have to do. I have to try.”

Every draconic instinct in him demanded to refuse, to hide Kian away where he would be safe forever, to never let him do anything that could bring him harm. But he knew it would be impossible, even if that was what he truly wanted. Kian was his own person, stubborn and passionate, even if Adrissu’s innermost heart wanted to hide him away from the world with the rest of his hoard. But the

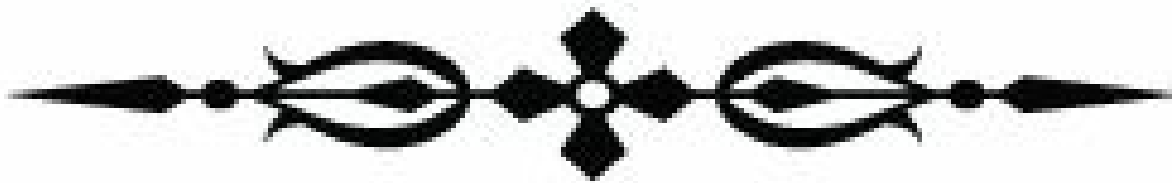
human was not part of his hoard, not really. In the end, he had barely any more control over Kian than he did the weather or the stars.

He took in a deep breath, and on the long exhale, let go of every part of him that wanted to burn all his notes and destroy all the evidence of his experiments. Kian was going to do what he wanted, and Adrissu could either be there to help or be shut out. And if the absolute worst happened—if Kian died because of his experimental magic—Adrissu at least had the tiny shred of comfort that he would have another lifetime to try it again. Hopefully, it would not come to that; but if it did, Adrissu had survived three of his mate's deaths before. There was nothing he could not survive now.

"I trust you," he murmured, lifting one hand to cup Kian's soft cheek. "I won't fight you on this anymore. If this is what you want to do, then I only want to help."

Kian's smile widened, and he leaned up to kiss Adrissu. "Thank you," he said softly, then added in a much more self-satisfied tone, "That's what I like to hear."

Adrissu smirked and released him. Something inside of him still felt hollow at the concession, but there was nothing else to do.



It was only a few weeks later that Kian said he thought he was ready to try the ritual.

"You're sure?" Adrissu asked, meeting the human's gaze steadily. Kian's expression never wavered as he nodded once, sharply, watching Adrissu with an expression he could not place. "Then what do you need from me?"

Kian's expression remained uncertain for only a moment, then he managed a smile. "Well, I'll need a lot more clay, for one. And probably more charcoal. It's going to be a much bigger circle than the ones we've done before."

Adrissu forced himself to smile. "I'll see what I can do."

He wanted to drag his feet ordering more charcoal for the runes, but he did not. He wanted to say that he couldn't procure enough clay locally and would have to go out of town to get more, but he did not. At the end of the week, he had everything ready for Kian. But by then, the human had lost a bit of his gusto about it, and Kian made plans to perform the ritual the following week instead.

Waiting was a relief, and absolute torture, all at once. Adrissu couldn't shake the fear that something was going to go wrong; and for all Kian's bravado, he seemed more and more nervous

with each passing day, so they were both tense and short with each other, which only made the wait more miserable. Adrissu spent as much time as he could at the school to avoid ruminating on it. Kian didn't complain, happy to study his notes over and over in preparation for the event.

When he'd stayed late for the third day in a row, Eris—still his secretary—poked her head into his office as she was preparing to leave, watching him with an uncertain expression.

“Is everything alright, Headmaster?” she asked. “You seem stressed today.”

Adrissu sighed, lowering his pen to look up at her. Pain throbbed between his temples, and he lifted a hand to his forehead without meaning to.

“Just a headache,” he replied, shaking his head. “My apologies if I've seemed curt with you.”

Her gaze lingered on him for a moment longer, not quite believing him; but after a beat she offered, “I hope you feel better soon, then. If you took tomorrow off, I don't think anyone would be too terribly inconvenienced, you know.” A smirk played at her lips, but he could barely manage a tight, brief smile in return.

“Maybe,” he said simply. “Thank you.”

Still unconvinced, she looked at him a moment longer, then turned to go.

“Have a good evening, Headmaster.”

“Good night, Eris.”

She closed his office door behind her, and he listened to her footsteps grow fainter and fainter as she walked away. When he could no longer hear her, he sighed and lowered his head into his hands. He could not remember the last occasion he had felt so distressed, and it must have been more obvious than he'd hoped if Eris was commenting on it. The last time he had ever been so helpless was in the week leading up to Polimnos' rebellion against the Federation of Autreth, when Ruan had prepared to leave and fight, when Adrissu was certain he was going to die. And he had. Adrissu's instincts proved more accurate than he liked, so his gut feeling that the ritual would not work made him fearful and restless.

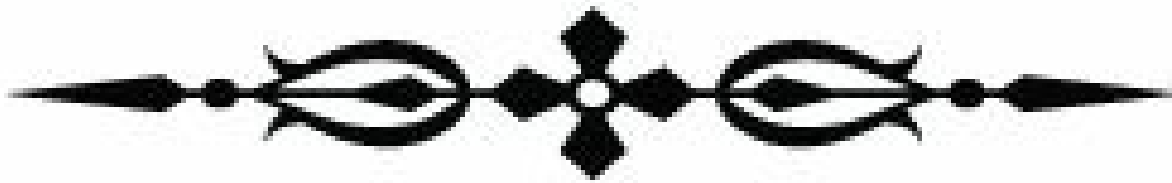
But *why* was this ritual so daunting to him? Nothing in it seemed especially dangerous now that they had done it so many times—the ritual itself on paper *looked* like it should work, and their experiments so far pointed toward its success. But even if it were to fail, it simply wouldn't do anything, the magic failing to hold. Kian would be disappointed, yes, maybe even upset or angry or depressed, but he would not die. Considering how often Adrissu had pored over the ritual and its runes, he did not think its failure could cause Kian to die.

But Starck's ritual, which it had been based upon, had caused the man such misery that he died only a short while later. Kian's ritual was different, but maybe the same thing would happen. Maybe the failed ritual would cause him to suffer, even if he did not die.

And that was it, Adrissu thought miserably, as he stared down at his paperwork without seeing it. He did not want to watch Kian suffer. If the ritual was unsuccessful, it would not kill him, but it could hurt him. And Adrissu would have led him right to it, having done nothing to stop it. Could he live with that, if that was what it came to?

He would have to. He had promised Kian that he would help him. No matter how it turned out, he would be at Kian's side.

The pen he'd been holding between his fingers snapped, splattering ink all down his hand, his papers, and the sleeve of his robe. Cursing, Adrissu tossed it all aside, and begrudgingly he packed up his things to go home. He would deal with all this tomorrow.



The morning of the ritual, Kian rose early, when the first rays of the sun were peeking through the window of their bedroom. Adrissu woke to the feeling of the human rolling out of bed, sighing as he leaned down to pat Vesper's head. After a minute, the bed shifted again as Kian stood, and his bare footsteps padded down the hallway until Adrissu couldn't hear him.

A moment later, he felt Vesper come up onto the bed, curling in the warm spot Kian had left behind. He sighed and rolled over to stroke her cold scales, meeting her beady-eyed gaze.

Worried, she thought at him, and he nodded.

"I know," he whispered. "Me too."

He laid listlessly in bed for a little longer, until the sound of Kian preparing food downstairs roused him enough to get up and dress himself. Spring was nearing its end, so the mornings had become warmer in the past few weeks; he pulled a light linen robe on before walking to the top of the stairs to look down and listen. He could not quite see into the kitchen from where he stood, but he could hear Kian stirring something over a low fire.

Any semblance of an appetite was gone for the anxiety gnawing at his stomach, but Adrissu rallied his nerves and walked downstairs all the same. Kian turned at the sound of his steps coming down the stairs—Vesper's body thudding along behind him—and smiled brightly over at him as they came into

view. But Adrissu recognized the telltale way his smile wavered, and his eyes tightened; he was nervous, too. Maybe not as nervous as Adrissu, but it was certainly a daunting task all the same.

“Morning,” Kian said. “I made some porridge. Want a bowl?”

“No thank you,” Adrissu sighed, sitting down at their table to watch him finish. Would this be their last morning together? His final breakfast with his mate as Kian? He chased the dark thoughts away, but worry lingered in his gut.

“Didn’t sleep well?” Kian asked, softer this time. He hadn’t: anxiety kept him awake, but that, at least, he could keep to himself.

“No, I didn’t,” he replied, rubbing between his eyes. “I’ve had a headache on and off the past few days.”

“Drink some water,” Kian prompted, pouring him a glass. Dutifully, Adrissu took a sip. “You’re still feeling well enough to help me with—well, with everything, right?”

If he said no, how long would Kian postpone it? A day? A week? How much more time could he possibly buy?

“Of course,” Adrissu answered, giving him a strained smile. “I’m probably just dehydrated. It’s getting warmer, after all.”

Kian pursed his lips, shooting Adrissu a suspicious look. Considering how infrequently he needed to eat or drink, Adrissu was sure Kian knew it was a lie. But he said nothing, then turned back to his own breakfast.

The rest of the morning was equally unsettled, Adrissu mostly observing silently as Kian prepared. He measured out the clay and salt that he would need, then set fresh charcoal in a small linen bag before going over his notes a final time. When everything was ready just before noon, Adrissu carried them down into his lair, where they could work undisturbed.

“I’ll start drawing it out,” Kian said, as Adrissu set him on his feet. “Here.” He fished through his bag of components, pulling out a large hunk of rock salt and handing it to Adrissu. The chunk was so large that Kian had to use both hands to lift it out of the bag, but Adrissu could hold it without issue between his first two claws.

Silently, Adrissu watched as Kian mapped out the broad circle with his charcoal, then he set the piece of salt where Kian indicated. He remained silent as the human surrounded it with a rune, then moved on to the next, and the next, until the entire first outer circle was marked with a range of transmutation runes—the same they had used so many times before in all their experiments, only larger.

“Give me the clay,” Adrissu rumbled, finally rising from his position now that the exterior runes were set. Kian nodded, handing over the bag that held several pounds of the thick red material. In the very center of the circle, Adrissu spread the clay out until it was a roughly Kian-sized oval, marking the place where he would lie. Kian had continued to mark the inner circles with more runes, connecting them to the center once Adrissu had spread it all out evenly; but he looked up and smirked in amusement as Adrissu stepped away to irritably shake his claws free of the last clinging bits of clay.

“Want to look over my work, Headmaster?” Kian asked, his tone only half-teasing. Adrissu nodded, peering over the large circle. It was bigger than any circle that they had ever created together, but Kian was bigger than any of the animals that they had experimented on as well. It had to be sized just right, but it looked like it was the correct scale to Adrissu. He had the ritual and its runes memorized, and he could see it quite clearly in his mind’s eye; still he held up the paper with Kian’s model for his own peace of mind, comparing it with the circle Kian had just marked down on the floor.

It was immaculate, not a single rune out of place. The work of a true master of transmutation, Adrissu thought, pride breaking through the constant backdrop of his anxiety to well up in his chest.

“Perfect,” he said softly, his deep voice resonating through the cavern. “You should be very proud of what you’ve accomplished, Kian.”

Kian laughed nervously, glancing away. “Well, let’s make sure it works before submitting it for any awards, you know.”

Adrissu nodded, that tiny spark of hope already disappearing beneath his worry once again. He hated how flippantly Kian could say that. It had to work. He had to believe it would work, or he would destroy the circle that instant.

“Ready?” Kian continued, turning back to face his work.

“Yes,” Adrissu replied, taking his place once again where the chunk of rock salt was positioned at the bottom of the array. Kian stepped into the center of the circle, careful not to smudge any of the runes as he moved, and laid down on the bed of clay. In the quiet of his lair, Adrissu could just barely hear the thud of the human’s heart in his chest—a rapid, nervous beat.

The human took in a deep, steadying breath, then placed his own chunk of rock salt on his sternum and held it there with clay-covered hands.

“Ready?” he asked again, and this time Adrissu hesitated for a moment before answering. It had to work. It *had* to work.

“Yes,” he said, as he sent his magic flowing through his claws where they grasped the rock salt. It immediately flared with light that spread across the circle, creeping outward from its starting point like water filling a reservoir—in a way, it was a reservoir, made of magic that Kian would draw from and shape into the spell with his vision. When every rune was lit, glowing a pale blue, Kian took in one more shuddering breath, then recited the incantation.

Immediately the glowing runes shifted in color, morphing from a cool blue to a warm orange-red, like fire flickering over the charcoal marks. The incantation took about a minute to recite: the sound was familiar now, with how many times they had performed the ritual before. The cadence and intonation were exactly the same as they had always been, and again a tiny spark of hope lit in the center of Adrissu’s chest. If this was like every other time they had done the ritual, it should work. It *would* work.

Partway through, the clay that Kian laid upon glowed with a soft, warm light as well. When it was all aglow, tendrils of it drifted upward, like mercury in a vial.

The glowing clay touched Kian’s skin, and the human hissed in surprise. He was silent just a beat longer than he should have been—there was no visible difference in the rune and its glow—then Kian started up again right where he’d left off, but still alarm bells began ringing in Adrissu’s head.

Kian continued resolutely, even as the slow-moving clay encapsulated his body, and his voice became muffled as it formed a thin shell around him. When Kian spoke the final word of the incantation, Adrissu pulled his claws away from the conduit. The array glowed for a moment longer; the low thrum of it was just audible in the silence that filled the cavern in the absence of Kian’s voice. Then it flared brightly, bright enough that it burned to look at, but Adrissu could not allow himself to close his eyes or turn aside, not this time. He had to be certain. If he looked away from Kian for even an instant, that might be all it took for it to go wrong.

The blinding light faded as quickly as it had come, and within seconds, the magic in the air had dissipated. Adrissu crouched at the bottom of the array, watching the human-shaped cocoon of clay as if his life depended on it.

Then—he heard a grunt, an exhalation of breath, and a hundred tiny cracks as Kian pushed his way out of the dried earth. One arm broke through at his side, then another, then he was pushing himself up. His head popped out first, eyes wide and eager, uncertain—Adrissu was already condensing himself into his elven form, so he could help pull the human out of the cocoon and onto his feet.

Kian sat up and immediately winced, spreading his legs further apart. Where the slight swell of his breasts, small as they were, had once been beneath his tunic, now there was only a flat plane.

Kian looked down at himself for a moment, blinking and hardly breathing. Adrissu stared at him with wide eyes, his breaths coming in rapid, uncontrollable bursts. He was okay, wasn't he? It had worked, hadn't it?

Finally, Kian glanced up to meet Adrissu's eyes, and he laughed, a smile of disbelief spreading across his face. Even the structure of his face seemed different now—not so much that he couldn't recognize him, but this close Adrissu could see it easily: a wider jaw, thinner skin around his eyes, a thicker brow.

"I think—I think it worked," Kian laughed, his voice coming out lower, and he laughed again. "Oh, gods, is that *my* voice?"

A slow, nervous smile spread across Adrissu's face despite himself. "I—Yes, I think it is."

"I did it," Kian continued giddily, then immediately reached for the hem of his shirt, stripping it off in one quick motion. "*Gods*, Adrissu, *look*—"

His chest was flat and sprinkled with light hairs. Kian lifted a hand to touch his chest—and immediately yelped, hands flying away from his skin as if he'd been burned, and his smile died just as quickly.

"*Ouch*, fuck," Kian hissed, touching himself gingerly again, before pulling away. He hesitated for a moment, tension building in his face, then glanced nervously at Adrissu. "It—It hurts."

"Where?" Adrissu said quickly, looking him up and down. There was no sign of bruising or bleeding, no outward sign of anything that could cause pain. He carefully pressed his hands to Kian's belly, well below his rib cage; the human shifted uncomfortably, then hissed as Adrissu pressed harder.

"It stings here," Kian groaned, gesturing to his chest. "And yeah, that hurt—but don't poke me so hard, fuck. *That's* what hurt."

Adrissu looked him over once more, but nothing *seemed* amiss. Kian was silent, looking down at himself as well. After a moment, he said in a smaller voice,

"Maybe it's just that the skin is new. Like a scab, you know? So it'll go away in a little while."

Adrissu had no idea if it would. Maybe Kian was right. But Starck's ritual had caused him such constant pain that he eventually died of it. Maybe that brief beat of silence had been enough to throw off the entire process. Kian was the experiment, so all they could do was guess and hope.

"You're right," Adrissu lied through his teeth, smiling weakly down at his mate. "Of course it will."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

They both slept down in his lair that night; Adrissu would need to hold him tightly to bring him back up to the tower, but Kian couldn't tolerate so much contact against his skin, biting back a cry the moment Adrissu lifted him with his claws. So he had remained behind as Adrissu went back up and gathered up some food, bedding, and fresh clothes, with instructions for Vesper to alert him if anyone came to the tower—not that he expected visitors—before descending once again. Kian was laying down right where Adrissu had left him, but sat up slowly as he descended.

“You wouldn't happen to have a bathroom in here, do you?” Kian asked, flashing him a nervous smile. Adrissu frowned, shaking his head. He was rarely in his lair long enough now to need one, and as a dragon, he could just soar out over the ocean to do his business and return; of course, that would not be possible for Kian in the state he was in now.

“No,” Adrissu said, turning. They still had some hay and a bucket from when they'd kept a whole menagerie of animals in one of the other chambers. “I'll bring you a bucket, but I think that's the best we can do for now.”

“Sorry,” Kian called after him. Adrissu waved him away—it was the least of his worries now.

When he returned with a bucket and placed it in the corner, Kian dropped his pants immediately with a giddy smile, and Adrissu smiled back despite himself.

“Look,” he laughed, wiggling his hips so the soft, perfect cock between his legs bounced with movement. He winced even as he laughed, but continued resolutely. “Gods, this feels so surreal.”

“Definitely real. I see it,” Adrissu chuckled, kissing his forehead. Kian grinned up at him, then moved toward the bucket. Adrissu turned away to give him privacy, but after a moment, the human yelped in pain again.

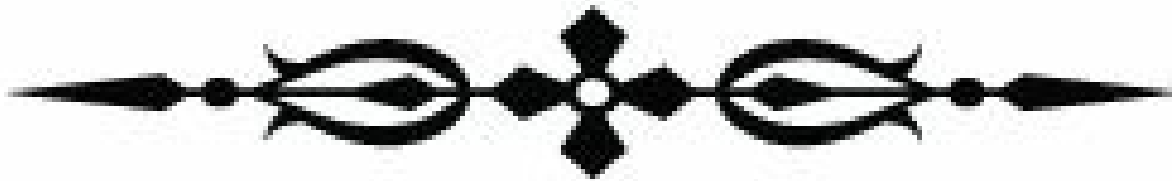
“Fuck, fuck, *fuck*,” he hissed, prompting Adrissu to turn back around, worry spiking in his chest again. The low whimper that escaped his throat nearly drowned out the sound of him relieving

himself; his back was turned to Adrissu, but he could still see the tension in his shoulders.

“Are you alright?” he asked softly, feeling idiotic even as he asked it. Kian was obviously *not* all right—was obviously in pain—but Adrissu was helpless. What else could he do?

“Hurts,” Kian grunted, remaining motionless over the bucket for a long moment. “Fuck. So much for pissing standing up.” He gave a single bitter chuckle, but Adrissu watched him silently as he pulled his trousers back up gingerly, his heart thundering in his chest. There was nothing he could do to help, but he hated how hopeless it made him feel.

“You should rest,” he finally said, barely above a whisper, as Kian turned to face him again. The human nodded, his meager smile falling away entirely. He laid down where Adrissu had set up his bedding, his eyes staring up into the darkened ceiling for a long time. Adrissu watched him silently; there was nothing he could say.



Kian was not in any less pain the next day—if anything, he seemed to be worse, wincing anytime something made more than feather-light contact on his torso. But he could not remain down in Adrissu’s lair forever, so he bundled himself up in a thick blanket, and Adrissu held him as gently as he could. Still, he cried out in pain as Adrissu flew upward, groaning with every beat of his wings.

He was shaking when they made it back up to the tower, legs wobbling as he stumbled up through the trap door and into their sitting room.

“We should take you to see a doctor,” Adrissu said, unable to look away from Kian’s shivering frame, as he closed the trap door behind them.

“What? No,” he protested, shaking his head. “I don’t want to see a doctor.”

“Kian,” Adrissu said, but Kian shot him a glare that told him that there would be no convincing the human otherwise. “Let me at least see if healing does anything for you.”

Healing magic was still far from his specialty. But after Volkmar, the loathing and regret had turned bitter and boiling inside of him, so he studied the basics in the hopes of never feeling so helpless in such a situation again. But already he doubted that the simple healing spells he knew would do anything for Kian, rendering him just as useless as before.

“Fine,” Kian relented, then eyed the stairs miserably. “I just want to lie down here, though.”

“I can bring down everything I need,” Adrissu said, already rounding on the stairs. Vesper perched at the top of the staircase, looking down at them with palpable worry.

Hurt? she thought, and he nodded.

“Stay with him,” he breathed, and she slithered down the steps. “Try not to touch him.”

He gathered up the dried herbs he needed in his study; when he arrived back down in the sitting room, Kian was lying on the chaise lounge with Vesper coiled on the floor beside him, her head propped up on the edge of the lounge so he could lightly stroke her broad snout with his fingers.

“Give me your hand,” Adrissu said, kneeling down beside Vesper and spreading the various herbs he’d gathered onto the floor. Kian placed his hand in Adrissu’s; whatever was happening did not seem to affect his extremities, at least, for which Adrissu was thankful. His magic reached out tentatively, probing for any hidden wound or internal trauma that might be causing Kian’s pain. But nothing felt out of the ordinary, at least not that Adrissu could tell—he was, of course, feeling acutely aware of how little he truly knew of healing magic now. Why had he only ever learned the basics? All the things he could do with his endless time, and he hadn’t spent a few years studying under a master healer?

“I can *feel* you stewing,” Kian muttered, peering at Adrissu. “If you’re going to say *I told you so*, just say it and get it over with.”

“That is not what I was thinking,” Adrissu replied, his voice coming out clipped. Kian scoffed, his grip tightening around Adrissu’s palm.

“Then what are you thinking?”

“That I hate myself for not studying healing more,” he snapped. “That for all the centuries I’ve spent studying magic, it’s entirely worthless if I can’t do anything to help you. That in my selfish need to keep you with me, I’ve sentenced you to suffer over and over again.”

Kian blinked, eyes wide—whatever he had expected, this certainly had not been it. Then his expression crumpled, his green eyes becoming glassy, and he looked away.

“Don’t say that,” he croaked. “I don’t—it isn’t selfish.”

“Of course it is,” Adrissu sighed, mechanically pulling one hand away to gather up a different bundle of herbs. Maybe if he tried healing him directly, even without being able to sense a wound... “You only agreed to soul-binding because you were facing death, and you were frightened. As any mortal would be. Until that point, you were happy to have your one human lifetime and hated when I asked you for more.”

Kian was silent for a long moment, unmoving as Adrissu squeezed his hand and sent a surge of healing magic through him, pressing so it spread through every inch of his body. It didn't seem to have an effect, though Kian's face seemed a little less pallid.

"It isn't selfish," Kian said again, his voice barely above a whisper. "Because then I wouldn't be here. And I like being alive. Here, with you."

Adrissu paused, taking in a long breath. Guilt wracked him now that he'd said it aloud, and already he wished he could take it back.

"And you know, it was, what, two hundred years ago? Three hundred?" Kian continued, undeterred despite Adrissu's silence. "So maybe it was selfish of you then. But it's not like you can change the past. And maybe you're not selfish now."

Adrissu squeezed his hand again before bringing it to his lips, pressing kisses on his fingers. He did not know how true any of what Kian said was, but it at least made him feel a little better. They would give it some time. Kian would get better, and Adrissu would feel less stressed. It would all become a distant memory, like so much else.

"Maybe," he agreed. "Maybe you're right."

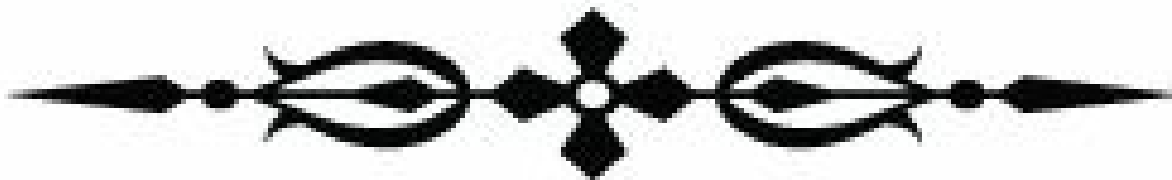
"Of course I'm right," Kian grunted, pulling his hand out of his grasp only to ruffle Adrissu's hair, making him huff with an irritated laugh. "Well, I hate to say it, but I don't think your healing did much. Do you have any painkillers I could take here? Something strong?"

It took a moment for Adrissu to go through his mental inventory of all the various ingredients and alchemical items stashed away throughout the tower.

"Some willow tincture," he finally said, shaking his head. "It's not much, but it might take the edge off for now. Try to eat something, and I'll see if I can find anything stronger for you."

Kian smiled over at him, but his expression was one of utter exhaustion, betraying how much pain he must have been in.

"Okay," he murmured, nodding once. "Thank you."



Of all the things Adrissu bought from the doctor's office, only an extract of pavera root proved strong enough to dull Kian's pain enough for him to function. The downside, however, was that the medicine only gave him about an hour where he was pain-free and still alert enough to do anything; after that,

he became drowsy and slow, often sleeping for several more hours until the painkiller faded from his system, and he would wake in pain all over again.

It was a miserable cycle, but the alternative was intolerable. Any kind of physical contact with his chest or abdomen was enough to make Kian yelp in pain, even if it was only a light touch to the skin. His genitals were the same; Kian had been eager to use them, and in one of his good hours after taking the pavera root extract, they had been intimate. But when Kian woke up later that afternoon, he was weeping with pain until his second dose kicked in, and Adrissu thought he might die of guilt. After that, it was an unspoken agreement that such activities were off-limits until they could find a solution.

A week passed, and then a month, and Kian's condition did not improve. Every free moment he had, Adrissu was studying or experimenting, trying to find a way to help Kian; but everything they tried was either just as temporary as the medicine or entirely ineffective. To his credit, Kian did his best to help, but with only a few hours in the day free of pain and lethargy, his contributions were few and far between.

Everything felt bleak. Adrissu kept thinking back to that one tiny verbal stumble, that instant when Kian gasped and stuttered. Had that alone been enough to throw everything off-balance? The ritual had *worked*, but something had gone wrong, hadn't turned out quite like it was supposed to, and for all that he'd wracked his brain, the only difference he could recall in that moment and every other time they'd tried the ritual had been that one brief instant.

But how could he say that to Kian? The boy was resilient to a degree, but the thought that such a tiny slip-up could be causing him a world of pain now was crushing to Adrissu, so it could only be a thousand times worse for Kian. How could he be the one to tell Kian he'd stumbled at the finish line and now had to suffer?

Or worse, what if his involvement in the ritual had disrupted the delicate balance that Kian needed to make his vision a reality? Despite how hard Kian had worked in this lifetime, he simply did not have the sheer amount of magical energy needed to perform the ritual on a human being. Adrissu added his will to the ritual when he channeled his energy through the salt conduit: they had practiced it, but now he wondered if his doubt and fear had ruined everything.

He could think of only two solutions: first, to try to reverse the ritual. But he did not know if they could, if it would ease Kian's pain, if Kian would even *want* to. After all this time spent trying to figure out how to change his body, Adrissu suspected he would not want to make the attempt, despite his pain.

The other option was the soul transference. Adrissu was certain that would work. It had to. But he knew how hesitant Kian was about it, how hesitant all his past selves had been about it, so he didn't dare be the one to broach the topic. No, the only chance he might have of Kian accepting the soul transference as an option was if Kian suggested it first—if he came to the conclusion on his own that this would be the best solution to the problem.

So Adrissu continued his research to find any semblance of a solution, and stepped away from the Academy for the first time to be better able to care for his mate. He told his instructors that his partner was ill and that he needed to care for him. He would only be at the Academy one day a week; in the meantime, he named Nethendriel, the head of the enchantment department, to be the interim headmaster. He could tell Eris was wildly curious about his unnamed partner, could hear the whispers amongst the teachers wondering how they never knew this about Adrissu, but he ignored it all.

His primary focus beyond his research became keeping a steady supply of the pavera root extract in his tower to ensure Kian would never be without, no matter how fast he went through it. Much as Kian hated how exhausted it made him, it was the only thing that seemed to even touch his pain. When able, Kian would read or draft letters to some of the transmutation experts he knew to ask their advice; but even this seemed to sap his energy quicker and quicker as time went on, until all he could manage was a few pages of a book, or a few paragraphs written in a shaking, messy script.

But Adrissu refused to be the one to broach the topic. He knew Kian would arrive at the same conclusion eventually. And as they neared two months, one morning after he'd managed a few bites of breakfast before laying down again, Kian finally broached the topic.

"Do you think it would make me better? The... soul transference?" he asked, not quite meeting Adrissu's gaze. Despite the medicine, he hadn't been sleeping well in the past week, so his downturned eyes had dark bags beneath them. Adrissu took in a steadying breath—*finally*—then nodded.

"It would," he said softly. "I'm certain it would, Kian."

The human was silent for a long moment, looking down at his lap. Finally, when he looked up at Adrissu, something in his gaze was so utterly exhausted that Adrissu's heart broke for the hundredth time. Maybe, he thought, he should have said something sooner after all.

"Then I want to do it," Kian murmured, his voice breaking. Angrily he wiped at his eyes, before continuing, "I thought—I thought I could do this, could *fix it*, but... I don't know. I feel horrible all the time. I can't focus enough to even try to fix it. And I don't want to be like this forever."

“I understand,” Adrissu said, reaching over to clasp his hands, fingers still damp with tears. “It won’t be forever, Kian. Give me a few days to locate a dragon and make sure I have everything we’ll need, okay? We’ll figure this out. I promise it won’t be like this forever.”

His eyes were still glassy, but Kian nodded resolutely with his lips pressed together in a tight line. “I know. I trust you.”

Gingerly, Adrissu leaned down to kiss his forehead. “I’ll go right now. Do you need anything?”

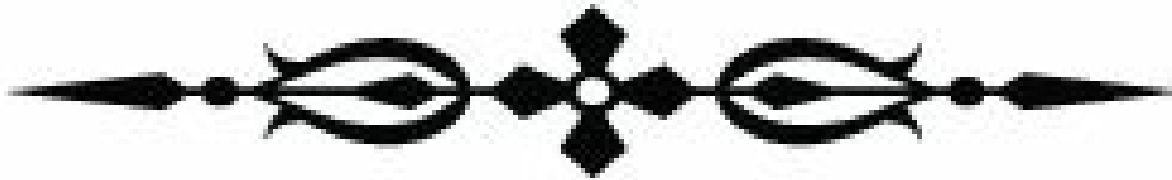
“No,” Kian sighed, leaning back where he lay on the chaise lounge, his favored spot for most of the day since he could no longer bear to climb the stairs on his own. “No, I just took some medicine, so... I’ll probably sleep until the afternoon.”

Adrissu nodded, smoothing his messy hair. “Alright. I’ll try to be back before you wake up. Vesper will be right next to you the whole time.”

Kian managed a weak smile at that. “I know. She’s a good girl.”

From where she was coiled next to him, Vesper’s head perked up slightly. *Good*, she agreed.

“Keep an eye on him,” Adrissu said to her as he straightened up. “I’ll be back soon.”



The first order of business was to ensure that he had all the necessary items for the soul transference ritual. He had not performed such magic in a while, but a quick inventory of his lair revealed he had kept everything he needed; some of the dried herbs were a little *too* dry, but he didn’t think it would be an issue, as long as he handled them carefully. Finding a stone suitable for a human soul took some digging through his lair. One that would hold a dragon soul was much more time-consuming, but eventually he had both: a medium-sized, but extremely clear diamond for Kian, and a massive chunk of raw emerald for the dragon.

Next was to locate a suitable dragon. After some asking around, he learned that there were rumors of a new dragon taking up residence a few days to the west, near the southern coast. Of course, the stories conflicted. Some said it was golden-scaled and others that it was yellow, but all agreed it was quite young, and the lair very recent. A young dragon, barely established, probably seen as a nuisance by any local human populations, and unlikely to be missed—this would be the ideal option, but Adrissu would have to go scout out its lair to be sure.

Though it would have been a few day's journey by foot or on horseback, it was only a few hours by flight; the town it neighbored was hardly more than a village sustained by farmers and brick-makers, the local soil dense with clay. With Kian in such a sorry state, Adrissu was loath to leave him for so long, but he had to be sure the dragon was even there before attempting anything. So he left early the next morning before Kian had woken for the day, leaving Vesper with strict instructions to make sure that he drank water and took his medicine as soon as he woke. Depending on how quickly he could gather information, Adrissu hoped he would make it back in time for dinner, but that was optimistic. Vesper knew not to truly expect him until the next day, and he brought the enchanted scroll they shared so Kian could contact him if he needed to.

When he arrived at the village late that morning, he took the visage of a plain-looking human man, a monster hunter searching for his next big kill. The small village had only one tavern, but that was where information could always be found, so he went straight there.

"I've heard rumors of a dragon in the hills," he said to the local barkeeper, leaning on the countertop with all the manufactured swagger and self-confidence he could muster, thinking of Ruan. "Any truth to them?"

The woman rolled her eyes, looking up and down his unassuming frame—but when he tossed her a gold coin, she raised an eyebrow before pocketing the coin and answering with an exasperated sigh,

"Sure is. A young one, but they're dangerous the moment they're big enough to be on their own. But everyone knows not to go beyond the first set of foothills if you want to ever get home. If you're seeing the treeline where the forest gets dense, you've already gone too far."

"Excellent," Adrissu replied, grinning. "And how long has it been since this dragon has been spotted?"

"I don't know. I've never seen it," she said, balking. "You couldn't pay me enough to go looking for that thing. Though I will tell you, we've had a few men just like you, sniffing around, hoping to get the glory of killing a dragon, and I only ever see them the once. Trying to slay a dragon is a fool's errand."

Adrissu's smile widened. She wasn't wrong.

"I'll keep that in mind," he said. "Thanks for your help."

With that, he headed north, toward the hills where the dragon's lair was supposedly hidden in the woods. It would be a faster trip by air, of course, but he did not know exactly where the boundary was where the other dragon would be able to sense his approach; and, of course, its first instinct upon

sensing another dragon would be to look to the skies. Approaching on foot was far more time-consuming, but it gave him the best odds of getting away unscathed.

He trudged through the foothills, noting the general layout of the land, imagining what it would look like from the air. As he crested the hills, he could see the treeline that the barkeeper had mentioned; the landscape quickly went from a few sparse groups of trees to dense forest, which would be easy to pick out from above, at least. It was quite likely he would sense the dragon once he reached the treeline; so he walked slowly, all his attention honed on the telltale prickle along his spine that would tell him there was indeed a dragon lurking in the depths of the woods.

His first steps past the treeline were especially cautious, but he felt nothing. A few more, just as slowly—still nothing. He stood motionless, listening, waiting. The silence felt oppressive, even though he was only a few feet into the woods. There was certainly a magical quality to the environment—the very air felt different, alive with magic.

After only about a minute of walking, it finally happened. His body shuddered, awareness burning up his spine—there was absolutely a dragon in these woods, and now it knew he was here. Fear buzzed beneath his skin, the instinctual response of sensing a dragon within its own lair, where it would be strongest and he would be disadvantaged. But he forced himself to breathe in slowly, deeply. He imagined himself as a young dragon who had misjudged his flight path, having no knowledge of the other dragon's newly established home and stopping the moment he felt the awareness of the other, then turning around—only then did he back up, taking a few stumbling steps backward until the alarm bells stopped ringing in his head.

Adrissu turned and ran out of the woods, heart pounding, but he smiled even as he crashed through the underbrush and out into the sun again. The dragon was *here*, barely old enough to live on its own. Helping Kian and finally, *finally* keeping his mate with him forever was now in his grasp. All they had to do now was make a plan and see it through.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“I can do it,” Kian snapped irritably the morning they prepared to leave to confront the young dragon. “I’m telling you, I don’t need it.”

“Kian, the trip is going to take hours. Flying is fast, but it isn’t exactly a smooth ride,” Adrissu repeated, tamping down his mounting frustration at Kian’s refusal to take the pavera root that would ease his pain. “If you’re in so much pain you can’t move, you’re going to be useless.”

Kian’s face flushed with anger. “I’ll be useless if I take it, too.”

“It will help you sleep through the worst of it,” Adrissu growled. “By the time we get there, you’ll be waking up. And even if not, we can just *wait*. Don’t be foolish about this, please.”

“I said no,” Kian muttered, but his determined glare withered under Adrissu’s stern gaze. “...I’ll take half. And that’s *it*.”

“I’m bringing it with us if you change your mind. *When* you change your mind,” Adrissu sighed, ignoring how Kian bristled. But he filled the stopper only halfway with the cloudy liquid, and despite his sullen expression, Kian dutifully opened his mouth and let Adrissu give him the medicine.

“Now,” Adrissu sighed, placing the vial of extract in with the rest of the supplies—everything they needed for the ritual, plus a day’s worth of camping gear on the slim chance they would need to stay within the lair overnight. “Once it’s kicked in, we’ll go down below and head out.”

Kian nodded silently, and Adrissu sat down next to him. Vesper watched them both uneasily from where she lay coiled beside the bookshelf. After a long moment, Kian sighed and leaned against Adrissu.

“Sorry,” he muttered, his gaze down on the ground. “I just feel like shit, and I’m nervous.”

Adrissu nodded, squeezing his hand gently. “I understand. No need to apologize.”

Before long, they were taking flight from below, slipping out of the darkened cliffs into the pale early morning light. He had tied Kian to him with extra care, knowing he would sleep for the first few

hours, and the leather straps dug irritatingly into his scales. Once they were high in the sky, and Polimnos was no longer visible on the horizon far below, he felt Kian's tense grip on the straps loosen along with the rest of his body as sleep overtook him. The young dragon's lair was several hours away yet; it would have been foolish for Kian to be awake through it all, exhausted and miserable by the time they arrived. He had not expected the boy to fight him over it.

As they flew west, the sky that had once been dotted only with clouds became more and more dim, until Adrissu could feel the condensation in the air around him. The surrounding clouds were gray and endless. Summer rain would be irritating, but it couldn't be helped. Luckily, though, the clouds never quite gave way to rain as he soared—it was dim and damp, but that he could deal with. Occasionally, he heard Kian mumble or shift in his sleep; but the tight leather straps held him securely, and Adrissu cast a warming charm over him to keep the worst of the chill off. Maybe, he thought with a slight thrill of excitement, they would *both* be flying when they returned home.

The clouds had tapered out a bit, but still blanketed most of the sky, when Adrissu dipped low enough to get a better view of their surroundings. He could just make out the tiny village where he asked about the rumors of dragons not even a week ago. He veered north until he could see the foothills, the edges of the forest that hid the dragon's lair, then began to drop down to the wilderness below. Kian was still asleep, and he didn't dare get anywhere near the dragon's lair while the human was so vulnerable—Adrissu would not risk even the smallest chance that the dragon might detect them. Instead, he found a spot where the trees were reasonably thick and curled up on the ground, listening intently for any signs of life around them while he waited for Kian to wake. He doubted it would take much longer, since it had taken about four hours to arrive.

Sure enough, within half an hour he felt Kian stirring, a soft groan breaking the silence.

“—’re we here?” he mumbled, pressing his body closer to Adrissu’s “‘S cold.”

“It rained,” Adrissu replied softly. “But yes, we’re here.” He felt the human nod against his shoulders and struggle against the leather straps. “Wait a little longer. You’ll wake up more in a moment.”

Kian muttered something in response, but stilled. He remained motionless for a few more minutes, then Adrissu felt him breathe in a heavy sigh, propping himself up into a sitting position.

“Okay,” he said, but Adrissu could practically hear him wincing. “I’m ready.”

With Adrissu’s help, he was soon sliding down to the ground and stumbling to his feet, stretching with a groan.

“We’re close by,” Adrissu said, gesturing to the west. “Less than a mile that way.”

“A mile?” Kian sighed, wrinkling his nose.

“You should take some medicine now,” Adrissu said, even though he knew Kian would resist if this morning was any indication. “Even just another half dose. Just enough to help you stay sharp.”

“I’ll be anything but sharp,” Kian muttered.

“If you’re in too much pain to move, you’ll be useless,” Adrissu pressed, and Kian glared up at him. “You’ll be worse than that. I’ll have to worry about taking care of you *and* dealing with this dragon.”

“Fine, fine, fine,” Kian muttered, angrily digging through his knapsack to find the vial of liquid Adrissu had stashed within it. “I’m taking half. I already said I was only going to take half this morning. Happy now?” He made direct eye contact with Adrissu as he wrenched the stopper free, tilted his head back, and squirted half the stopper into his open mouth. Even though he knew Kian was angry, Adrissu smirked, all his teeth showing.

“Yes,” he said, lowering his head to hover just above Kian’s, breathing in the scent of his hair. “Thank you. That was the last time you’ll ever have to take it.”

Some of the tension drained from Kian’s shoulders, and although his scowl barely faltered, he reached up to cup Adrissu’s snout in his hands.

“I know,” he said, his voice softer now. “Thank you for doing this for me. I love you.”

“I love *you*,” Adrissu replied. “Anything for you.” He felt Kian nod. For a moment they stood, motionless and silent, as Adrissu’s eyes slipped closed. The air around them was cool and damp, making Kian’s hands against his scales feel warm.

“Give me a few minutes, and I’ll be ready,” Kian sighed, as he released Adrissu’s snout to carefully stretch, leaning over to touch his toes. “And then we can go kill a dragon or whatever.”

“We aren’t killing it,” Adrissu sighed, though they had gone over the plan many before. “Just incapacitating it enough to perform the ritual.”

“Same difference?” Kian teased, smirking up at him. It was a relief to see him smile, enough that Adrissu had no retort; he only gave a long-suffering sigh and nodded, relenting.

“When we go over there,” Adrissu continued, Kian’s expression becoming more somber at the change in his tone. “I don’t think I should strap you to me. I think you should be able to jump off as soon as I land. Can you do that? I won’t be flying high, just enough to clear the forest until I can sense where he is.”

Kian frowned, eyeing Adrissu’s back.

“Maybe,” he said, but sounded nervous. “Maybe just one?”

“I just worry that you’d be stuck if... well, you know. We wanted to have this be two against one, but it might not work if you’re on me the whole time.”

“You don’t think I’d be safe on you? I wouldn’t be more of a target on my own?”

Adrissu hesitated—both were possible, and he had considered both options. But Kian was well-versed enough in magic that he thought he could hold his own, and he might need to move around or quickly create distance between them.

“I still think it would be better,” Adrissu said. “Your magic will keep you safe. I think it would be better for you to move as you need to. Plus, it’s harder to hit two targets. And you might be the easy target, but I’m the more threatening one, so I think I’ll command most of his attention.”

Kian laughed. “Yeah, I guess you *are* kinda scary.”

After a few minutes longer, Kian climbed back onto Adrissu, settling just above his wings. Only a single leather strap bound them together now, so Kian’s grip around his neck was even tighter than before. Adrissu lifted into the air, and he could feel the human’s breath quicken as they soared almost straight up for the best vantage point. Cautiously, Adrissu flew closer to the edge of the forest; from here, he could just make out some crumbled structure in the distance deep within the woods. Some sort of abandoned building, he guessed, but it would be a decent spot to hide an entrance to an underground lair.

“I think that’s it,” Adrissu rumbled. “There’s some kind of building in the woods. Do you see it?”

“Not really,” Kian replied, sounding nervous. “It’s too foggy.”

Adrissu grunted and soared closer, but stopped well short of the edge of the forest. He could see the structure better now: it was some sort of watchtower, but long abandoned. Even from this distance, he could see crumbled stonework. “Now?”

“I think so,” Kian agreed. “I mean, yeah, if you think it’s there...”

“He’ll be able to sense me as soon as I get close,” Adrissu warned. “I think that’s it, but we’ll have to act fast.”

“I understand,” Kian said. His grip around Adrissu’s neck tightened. “I’m ready.”

Adrissu nodded silently, then surged forward. It took only a few flaps of his wings before that familiar awareness of another dragon in his space flared in the back of his mind, sparking an urge to flee that he firmly tamped down. The clock was ticking.

“Hold on tight,” he murmured, and Kian’s arms and legs tightened even more around him. He tucked his wings in, and they dropped, speeding toward the tower and the forest floor below.

The tower filled his vision as they descended rapidly—and, suddenly, a glimmer of yellow scales, a flash of teeth—the tower was *not* an entrance, but the lair itself. The dragon had already spotted them, Adrissu realized with a surge of anger, but it must be younger and smaller than he thought for its entire lair to fit in a singular tower.

“It sees us,” he hissed, realizing all this in a split second. “We won’t surprise it. Be ready to jump off as soon as I land. Hold on!”

Kian did not have the chance to reply, as Adrissu stretched his wings once more, slowing their descent so he could maneuver between the dense trees and land in the small clearing around the tower, where the yellow dragon was already leaping forth. The ground beneath them was wet and muddy, making his claws sink in heavily as he landed. Adrissu swore, wrenching himself free, even as he felt Kian quickly unbuckle himself and leap down into the mud below.

“Who are you?” the dragon hissed, all his teeth showing in a snarl. He was only about half the size of Adrissu, but he showed no fear as he surged toward them. Adrissu saw his eyes—a more greenish-yellow color than the rest of him—flicker toward Kian, a sneer crossing his features. “What the hell is this?”

Adrissu did not answer, instead lunging forward and pinning the young wyrm to the ground. The smaller dragon roared, half in surprise and half in rage, struggling against him in the mud.

“I’ve got him!” Kian exclaimed, dropping to his knees in the wet earth. His hands squelched into the muck, and with a quick incantation, lines of magic surged toward the smaller dragon. Adrissu watched as the wet earth around the yellow dragon glowed and solidified, becoming a dark, heavy iron. He grinned even as it continued to struggle.

“Good job,” he growled, then hissed as the wyrm bit him hard at the base of his neck. He dug his claws in deeper, feeling them break through scale and dig into muscle—he had wanted to avoid injuring the body, but without the surprise he’d hoped for, immobilizing him would be tricky.

“Get off me!” the yellow dragon roared, one of his claws digging into Adrissu’s chest, the other scraping at the chunks of iron that had solidified onto his scales. Adrissu felt him breathe in heavily—cursing, he leapt away just in time to avoid a stream of fire straight in his face and circled around the younger dragon quickly. The fire could not do much damage, but would be an annoyance in his eyes all the same.

“Be still!” he growled, encasing the smaller form with his magic. The dragon froze, muscles twitching and straining.

“Good,” Kian panted, then he repeated his own transmutation, trapping each of the dragon’s limbs and part of its tail in iron where it had sunk into the mud. “Here—the ingredients.” He threw his knapsack toward Adrissu, who caught it in one claw and emptied the contents. Kian held a thick piece of chalk in one hand, but he looked dubious as he stepped closer to the wyrm. “Shit, do you think the runes will work in mud like this?”

“You—You—” the yellow dragon hissed through gritted teeth. He could not move, but his eyes flickered rapidly, angrily, between Adrissu and Kian as he struggled to speak.

“I’ll drag him into the tower,” Adrissu panted, grabbing the dragon’s tail and yanking him backward. The dragon roared in anger, muffled by his closed mouth, and Adrissu could feel him struggling wildly against his magical bindings. “We’ll do it there.”

“Right,” Kian agreed, nodding. He jogged ahead of Adrissu as he hauled the yellow dragon’s quivering form closer to the crumbling tower. “I don’t think we can get him back in—but, look, there’s a bit of a stone path left here. Think it’ll work?” Adrissu nodded in response, grunting with exertion. The dead weight was hard to move, especially with his extremities encased in heavy iron, but Adrissu managed to get him closer to the tower and onto the worn stone path, where Kian had already marked down the first of the runes.

With the young wyrm in place, Adrissu grabbed his own piece of chalk and hurriedly placed down more of the runes as well, until they marked a full circle out on the stone pathway, the yellow dragon still hissing and growling in the center.

“Good job,” Adrissu panted, dropping his chalk to lift the heavy emerald, in which he would encase the yellow dragon’s soul. “Quick thinking with the iron.”

“Sorry it made your job harder,” Kian replied, chuckling nervously. “You did really well, too.”

Adrissu managed to smile down at him, though tension still filled his chest. He had never tried to pull the soul out of something as powerful as a dragon before, and though he had felt confident in his ability to do so, the task seemed far more daunting now that it was right in front of him.

“Almost,” he rumbled. “Take over immobilizing him. I don’t think I’ll be able to hold it and get the soul out.”

The yellow dragon made a noise, somewhere between indignation and panic, but Adrissu ignored him.

“Alright,” Kian said, nodding, and Adrissu felt the human’s magic settle over the yellow dragon’s body like a heavy sheet over his own. Adrissu took in a steadying breath, positioning himself over the smaller dragon, and pressed the emerald to his scales.

The moment he reached within, the dragon screeched and bucked wildly against the magic restraining him. His body was still immobile, but Adrissu could practically hear his teeth gnashing.

“Don’t let him break it!” he exclaimed.

“I’m trying!” Kian responded, his face twisted with effort. “I’m trying!”

Embers sparked between the yellow dragon’s teeth.

“Shit!” Adrissu hissed, lunging out of the way again just in time to dodge a stream of fire.

“Adrissu!” Kian exclaimed, reaching for him. The magic around the yellow dragon shattered with an audible snapping sound, and he leapt forward at Adrissu with all his teeth bared. His tail, weighed down with the iron still clinging to his scales, lashed around him—it caught Kian in the chest and sent him flying backward, followed by the thick chunks of metal.

“Kian!” Adrissu roared, leaping toward him, but his tiny human form was already far out of his reach. His body struck the tower first, then the heavy, iron-laden tail followed an instant later with the sickening crack of stone breaking and bones shattering. “*Kian!*”

Adrissu barely felt the bite of the yellow dragon as it lunged at him. Its tail pulled away from Kian’s crumpled form, revealing the crushed remnants of ribs and viscera beneath. Kian’s eyes were wide and vacant, all the color drained from his face. His lips trembled as if struggling to speak. Weakly, he lifted one hand to his side, as if trying to somehow put himself back together. His fingers brushed fragments of bone, then fell down to his sides, his body slumping forward. He did not move again.

“*No!*” The shriek left his maw unbidden as Adrissu whirled on the yellow dragon to attack, every ounce of rage and fury he could muster bursting from his mouth as he breathed fire onto the smaller creature. The yellow dragon screamed, trying to leap away, but every thought had left Adrissu’s mind except to *kill him*. His claws dug in hard around the smaller dragon’s shoulders, holding him in place, as he writhed and screeched in indignation; the fire barely hurt him. When all the breath fled Adrissu’s lungs and only embers remained, he lunged forward to close his teeth around the dragon’s neck. Hot blood poured against his tongue, and he wrenched back as hard as he could, bringing a massive chunk of the dragon’s flesh with him.

He could see the dragon’s eyes, huge and fearful, as Adrissu pulled away. He had not been trying to hurt him so far—foolish, the young wyrm thought he had a chance of fighting him off—but now, Adrissu wished he could kill him a hundred times over. Blind with rage, he dove into the dragon’s neck again, pinning his body to the muddy earth below, as he ripped and tore every inch of his body that he could reach.

When he could think again, the sulfurous taste of dragon blood was all he could focus on. The thick liquid coated his mouth entirely, spraying from his nostrils like red mist as he panted for breath. Beneath him, the yellow dragon's body was mangled and unmoving.

"Kian," he whimpered, finally turning away to face the tower again. "Kian!"

He crawled to the human's body, where it still lay against the tower wall. The right side of his ribcage was simply gone, crushed to pieces beneath the momentum of the iron that had weighed the dragon down. Claws trembling, Adrissu touched his left shoulder, healing magic surging at the contact. He could feel Kian's heart beat once in response, and coagulating blood splattered onto the stone below; but the rest of him remained motionless, and no light returned to his eyes.

He was dead.

Wailing, Adrissu curled around his body, his head settling in Kian's blood-soaked lap. He had been so close, *so close*, to never losing his mate like this again. Now he was gone, and Adrissu was alone. He *was* cursed, doomed to keep his mate coming back to him only to suffer and die a gruesome death again and again, and he had done it to himself. If he had just let the yellow hit him with his fiery breath, the dragon wouldn't have been able to break free. Kian had transmuted the hunks of iron that killed him, but Adrissu brought him here in the first place. Kian had trusted him to keep him safe, and he failed, again, again, *again*.

He had no idea how long he lay there, but when he finally looked up again, the sun was setting. Mechanically, he collected the two gemstones that had fallen to the ground and carefully placed them in Kian's rucksack. Then he gathered up the cold body into his arms—he did not know what he would do with him, but he knew he couldn't leave Kian here—and took flight, heading east, toward their home.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

When Adrissu arrived in Polimnos, the sky still dark in the predawn hour, he was at a loss as to what to do with Kian's body. He hadn't had a plan when he'd gathered him up into his arms and flown through the night with him. He hated the thought of bringing the body to Kian's family and doubted that they would want him, anyway. But neither could he simply bring his body to the mortician to be buried, not as mangled as it was—it would raise far too many questions, and he didn't have time to formulate believable answers.

So, instead, he soared well north of Polimnos, until the skyline of the city was no longer visible and he was deep in the uninhabited woods. He would burn the body here; it wasn't ideal, but it was all he could think of.

He found a rocky offshoot of the cliffs and placed Kian's body upon it, where it wouldn't risk setting the forest ablaze. Far below them, the ocean crashed relentlessly against the cliff side, making the dark waters bright with froth and foam.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, his voice rough. "I'm so sorry. Next time I—I'll make sure..." He trailed off, unsure of what he was promising. He hadn't proven very good at keeping his promises so far. "I'll keep you safe. I won't let this happen again, never again."

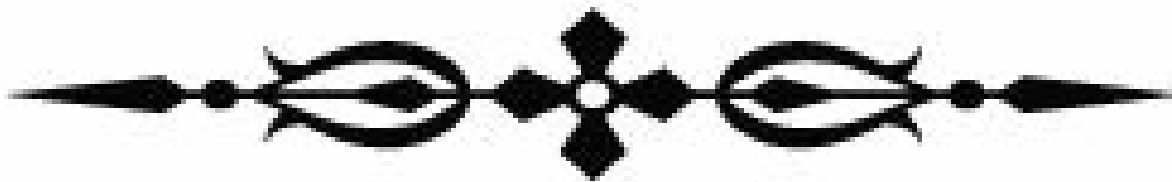
He sat with his words for a long moment, feeling woefully inadequate, but unable to speak further. What was the point? What could he say that would fix any of this? His mate couldn't hear him now—anything he said would be for his own benefit, so there was nothing to be gained. Adrissu squeezed his eyes shut as they burned with emotion, so that he did not have to watch as he exhaled flame over his body. The fire blazed hot enough that he did not have to do it twice; the scent of smoldering flesh filled his nostrils, making his stomach churn. Still, he kept his eyes closed—unable to bear the thought of watching his mate's face melt away—until the worst of the smell and smoke seemed to have faded, and fearfully, he opened his eyes again.

The body was mostly gone already, burning away effortlessly, as easily as his life had been snuffed out. Only the vague shape of him was visible now, all the features burned off, but Adrissu stood sentinel over the smoldering fire until it faded down into embers and all traces of his mate were gone. He beat his wings once and sent the remaining ash sailing off the cliffs and down to the dark, roiling waters below.

As he looked down to watch the ash disappear into the wind and the surf, the first rays of dawn were glinting off the surface of the water. For one miserable moment, Adrissu wanted to stay there until the sun rose, to fly back in the light of day and let the forces of Polimnos kill him. But then where would Kian's soul go? What would happen to his own soul if his mate wasn't alive to tether it? No, he had to live, if only to give Kian another chance to find him and finally shed the trappings of mortality that kept them in this cruel cycle.

Adrissu flew back to his lair in the dark, swooping through the narrow opening in the cliffs and making his way up into his tower, as a resigned numbness settled into his body. When he emerged in their sitting room, he felt more than saw Vesper uncoiling from where she lay on the chaise lounge, an uncertain sadness emanating from her.

Gone? she thought, and that was more than Adrissu could bear. He bit back a sob and collapsed onto the cushions next to her, letting her wrap herself around his limbs. Her grief radiated from the center of his chest, an echo of his own despair. The pillows still smelled like Kian.



Eris did not press when he told her that he would take a leave of absence from the school, citing a death in his family. She knew well enough not to ask questions when his tone was so cold and clipped, though she looked at him with an expression that was somehow curious and heartbroken all at once. He couldn't bear to confirm the unspoken question in her gaze. He would deal with it later. For now, he wanted to disappear, and that was exactly what he did.

For the first time he could recall in his centuries of life, he had nightmares. The image of Kian's ghostly pale face, as his eyes flickered down to his gruesome wound, was imprinted in his brain—the moment playing over and over in his dreams—and Adrissu woke sick to his stomach for weeks afterward. He had seen his mate die before, twice now, but even Volkmar's death seemed peaceful in comparison. His wounds had been bandaged up, and he'd faded away slowly. Kian's ribs had broken

to shards in his hands, and he was gone in seconds. No, this was worse, *far* worse, and he doubted the nightmares would ever stop. The thought that the image could ever fade from his mind seemed impossible.

For several weeks, he did nothing but mope, either in his bed or down in his lair, where he could at least lay atop his hoard. What else was there to do but wallow in his misery? What else but to wait however many years it would take for his mate to come back to him?

He was unsure exactly how long had passed—no more than a month, but he couldn't be certain even of that—when curled up on his hoard, the prickly awareness of another dragon near his lair woke him with a start. It was approaching from the north. He felt it stop, but it did not turn back. The awareness remained. He growled, irritated, but forced himself to rise from his resting place. Whatever dragon had come to bother him had picked a terrible time to do so.

The presence lingered like a thorn in the back of his skull as he crawled through his lair and soared out into the open, hissing at the late afternoon sun as it burnt his eyes, which were accustomed to the darkness of his hideaway. Once he could see, he swooped northward, passing high over the cliffs and the trees below. The road was empty, but as he flew further over the forest, he caught a glimpse of scales between the trees—not one, but *two* dragons, he realized with a sneer.

He dropped down, and the two spotted him. One was black-scaled and red-eyed—Adrissu recognized him immediately as his father Mithantos, whom he had not seen since he'd established his own lair centuries ago. The other was small and yellow, unsettlingly familiar. If Adrissu had not been absolutely certain that the yellow dragon they'd killed was actually dead, he might have suspected it had somehow recovered and come to confront him.

He scowled, realizing the reason for the visit. The smaller yellow wyrm must have been a relative of the one that he'd killed, who had discovered its untimely demise and suspected the nearest dragon of being responsible. But instead of coming to confront Adrissu directly, it must have tracked down his father, as if that would somehow give it power over him. He almost couldn't believe such infantile behavior, and he was sure it showed on his face as he snarled at both of them, landing heavily several yards away.

“Who are you?” he snapped, feeling all his spines bristling. He stood up to his full height, rage sparking in his throat; it was satisfying to watch the smaller yellow dragon instinctively crouch lower to the ground, its belly grazing the grass. His father, on the other hand, simply lowered his head politely.

“Zamnes,” Mithantos said, his voice quite calm, despite Adrissu’s open hostility and the yellow dragon’s near-palpable anxiety. “This is Atillath the Yellow. She’s come to me with some disturbing news, which we’d like to ask you about.” He turned to the smaller dragon, and she pushed herself back up into a standing position, though her eyes flickered rapidly between him and Adrissu. “Tell him what you told me.”

Atillath’s eyes settled on Adrissu, distaste crossing her face as she spoke. “My brother, my twin, Vantas—we set out on our own only a year ago. I hadn’t heard from him in weeks, so I went to see him, and he...” She snarled, looking away. Dragons could not cry the way mortals did, but her breath trembled and came rapidly, as if she were sobbing. “He was dead. He’d been burned and bitten. Another dragon must have killed him. And you—you’re the closest one to his lair.”

Adrissu growled. Twins were quite rare for dragons, but of course the yellow had been a twin, just to be a further thorn in his side. Clutchmates from separate eggs would slaughter each other until only one hatchling remained; but twins, always brother and sister, emerged from the same egg and would slay all their siblings, save each other. They were not quite like fated mates, but as two dragons that could not only tolerate but thrive alongside each other, there was some connection between twins that almost certainly shared the same magic. If she truly suspected him of slaying her twin, then she was notably level-headed to have not come alone, and to not try and kill him outright.

“I do not know this Vantas,” Adrissu replied coldly. After all, he hadn’t known the other dragon’s name. “So you think to implicate me in this just because I live nearby?”

“Who else?” she exclaimed, a shrill edge to her voice. “What other dragon would have sought him out? He would have moved if you’d told him he was too close to your lair. We’re not even a *year* away from our parents!”

“Atillath,” Mithantos said, interrupting her hysterics. Obediently she shrunk back, but still she glared at him with eyes full of hate. “Zamnes. You truly did not know of this? You weren’t involved?”

“No,” Adrissu snapped, scowling down at them. “You might know that I live quite peacefully in my lair, watching over Polimnos. The city is my hoard. I did not know this Vantas, and I didn’t care that his lair was nearby.”

“Liar,” Atillath hissed.

“What proof do you have, then?” he retorted. “Did you find some black scales there? Do I look injured to you?”

She glanced away, cowed. He had inspected himself for missing scales when he’d returned home and knew that she would have found none there. “No. There was nothing.”

“And you found no human bodies, no human blood?” he pressed, though his chest constricted painfully as he said it.

“I... There was human blood,” she muttered, still not meeting his gaze. Adrissu spat, contempt roiling off him.

“Then it seems to me your precious twin put up a fight, but the humans won out eventually,” he said. Atillath hissed—the shame of being killed by mortal hands was more than enough to send her grasping at whatever straws she could find, and he knew it. “Don’t pin this on me. If he’s dead, he won’t care about his reputation. If it embarrasses you so much, I’d suggest you burn his bones and never speak of him again. But trying to put the blame on me to save face is nearly as shameful.”

“Shut up,” Atillath replied. “It was a dragon that did it, I know it is! I saw his body, I saw the burns and bite marks. No humans touched him.”

But already Mithantos was looking at her dubiously. Adrissu’s words had been enough to make him doubt the truth of her account, and that was all that mattered. A single dragon’s accusations weren’t enough to warrant some kind of investigation; and if his own father doubted his involvement, as Adrissu’s reputation reflected on his parentage, then it was unlikely anyone else would raise the issue, either.

“I had nothing to do with this,” Adrissu spat, turning away from them. “Unless you have more inane accusations to throw at my feet, leave my home.” He turned his gaze to Mithantos, ignoring how Atillath seethed, and lowered his head respectfully. “I am sorry you had to get involved in this, Father.”

“It is no trouble,” Mithantos replied, sighing. “My condolences for your loss, Atillath, but if Zamnes says he was not involved, I believe him. There is nothing linking him to this other than proximity.”

“I know you did it!” Atillath snapped, taking a step closer to him. “I *know* you did!”

“I’m telling you to leave,” Adrissu hissed, answering by stepping closer in turn. “If I have to tell you once more, you won’t live to regret it. You know our custom as well as I do, unless your parents failed in imparting *that* knowledge to their children, too.”

“Zamnes,” Mithantos said, his voice still even. His father’s posture changed subtly in response to the mounting aggression, turning more toward Atillath, so he could leap into action if she lost her wits and attacked him. “Atillath, this has gone far enough.”

She snarled, but slowly her posture lowered until her belly touched the ground again—though her tail lashed back and forth angrily behind her.

“Fine,” she hissed. “Fine! I’ll go. I know you did it. There has to be proof, and once I find it—”

“You’re threatening me in my own home?” Adrissu snapped, and she snarled up at him.

“I’m leaving!” she countered furiously. Without waiting for an answer, she lifted into the air and flew north, away from him and Polimnos.

“Thank you for speaking with us,” Mithantos said mildly, as if he had not been about to witness a fight. “She was quite upset when she came to me. I thought it sounded out of character for you, but, well... She was convinced you were involved.”

“I suppose she thought it would be easy to blame me,” Adrissu scowled. “As if our scales don’t vilify us enough.”

Mithantos sighed, turning away.

“I know how you feel about our kind, Zamnes,” he replied, a forced calm now in his voice. “I apologize for bothering you with this. Hopefully, it will not happen again. Goodbye.”

“Wait,” Adrissu said quickly, and Mithantos paused, looking at him expectantly. “Do you know where Atillath’s lair is, so I can be sure to avoid her entirely when I do travel?”

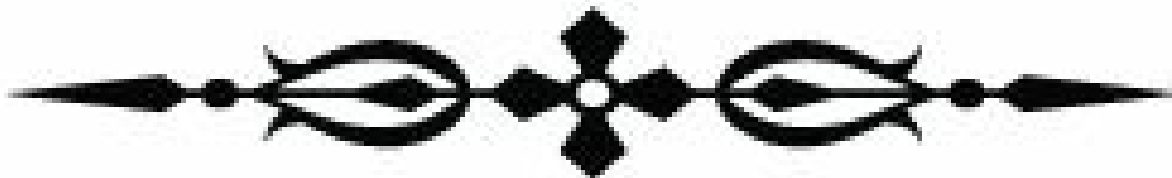
Mithantos chuckled. “A good thought. She mentioned she took up residence in a swamp a few hours north of her brother’s lair. I have not seen it for myself.”

“I see,” Adrissu replied, trying to map out where that could be. He did not know of any swamp in that area, though it was not a part of Autreth he often visited, so he supposed he would have to look at an actual map to narrow it down. He would avoid the territory as much as he could—or, eventually, hunt her down and get rid of her if she continued to bother him. “Thank you.”

“Goodbye, then,” Mithantos repeated, turning away once more.

“Goodbye,” Adrissu sighed, then watched as his father took flight, heading northeast. He watched the sky until his awareness of them both faded from his mind, and only then did he make his way back to his lair. With that taken care of, he hoped no one and nothing would bother him again for a year, or maybe a century.

When he arrived in his hoard chamber, Vesper peeked out from beneath a pile of gold to look at him questioningly. He only grumbled, not answering her, and settled back down to sleep again.



Adrissu had originally told Eris he would take a month-long leave of absence, but after a month, he still couldn't bear the thought of sitting in his office and dealing with the school; so he officially took an extended sabbatical, not quite resigning, but not committing to return, either. In his place, he assigned an interim headmaster: Nethendriel, who was the head of enchantment and had already been serving in Adrissu's absence. He gathered them both to discuss the matter, and when they took their seats across from him in his office, he reached forward to grasp each of their wrists, his magic flooding them.

"What are you—?!" Ned stammered as they both tried to pull away, but Adrissu was already rifling through their memories. They went slack-jawed, their eyes becoming vacant.

Changing memory was time-consuming and tricky, but luckily he could, at least, make them forget this as well. He had decided to do this when he resolved not to return to the school—he would have needed to alter Ned's memories of him eventually anyway, since he would likely live long enough as a half-elf to notice that Adrissu did not age.

For his purposes, though, Adrissu only needed to change a few key memories; namely, that he and Braern had a son, and that with this death in the family, Adrissu was going to Aefraya to be with him. In the false memories, Eris only knew of his son in passing, while Ned would remember meeting him once or twice when he was young, in the years before Braern died. He made this fictitious Adrissu the younger look very much like himself, with only a hint of Braern in his face.

Eventually, Adrissu would return to Polimnos in the guise of his son and take his place back at the Academy, without having to worry about his immortality becoming apparent. But for now, he needed to get away, and this was likely the best opportunity that he would ever have to sow the seeds of his next identity.

When adequate memories had been planted, he pulled his hands away, breaking the connection between the three of them. Ned shuddered, and Eris hissed with pain as she lifted her hands up to her forehead. Adrissu's head throbbed with exertion, too, but he kept his expression carefully neutral.

"What did—did you—?" Ned started again, frowning and blinking. Adrissu glanced between each of them with concern on his face.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "You both had a strange look on your face just now."

Ned frowned deeper, putting a hand to his forehead. "I... Forgive me, I have a headache all of a sudden, I think."

"I'm sorry to have brought all this stress on you all at once," Adrissu replied, letting his voice waver.

“No, no, don’t apologize,” Eris murmured, rubbing her temples. “It’s alright, Headmaster. What were you saying about your son?”

It was as simple as that. His guise was safe for another century or so.

They both seemed to shake off the effects of the memory alteration after a moment and returned to their same attentive, sympathetic expressions, as he explained he would be away for at least a year, while remaining in contact with them as best he could.

“We’ll miss you,” Eris told him, as he gathered his belongings out of the headmaster’s office—it was a strange feeling, since it had always just been *his* office.

“I know,” he sighed, not quite meeting her gaze. “But I’ll be back.”

“Headmaster,” Nethendriel said suddenly, frowning. “Are you sure this is what you want to do? Don’t you think it would help, being somewhere familiar, where you have people who know you and care about you?”

Adrissu stifled a bitter laugh. They cared about him to the extent any employee might care about their superior; they wished him well only enough to pay their salary and keep the academy running smoothly, to deal with all the minutiae and red tape so they could teach their classes and conduct their studies. No one here *really* cared about him. Even if they did, if they knew what he truly was...

But he couldn’t say that, so he managed a slight smile in response to Eris’ worried frown.

“I just need to get away from all this,” he sighed, gesturing. “It’s all... too much of him, still.”

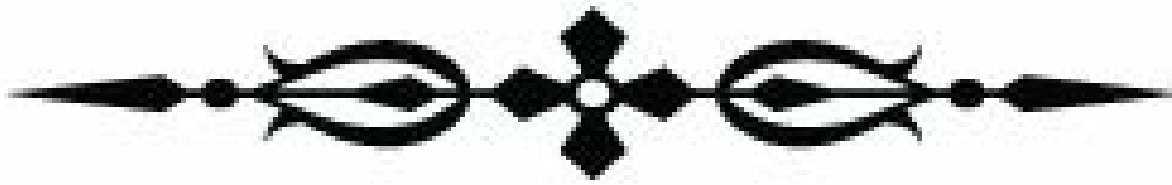
For a long moment, they were silent. *Him*. Though he hadn’t named him, from the way Eris looked, Adrissu was sure she, at least, knew now that he was talking about Kian. But after a beat of silence, she only sighed and glanced away; Ned remained quiet, an increasingly uncomfortable expression passing over his face.

“And my son is there,” Adrissu added.

“That’s understandable,” Eris said softly, sadly, as Ned reached over to place a hand on the small of her back. She had always thought he was lonely, Adrissu knew, and all this must have only made him seem even lonelier.

“I’ll keep you updated,” Adrissu continued, shouldering the bag that held the last of his personal items.

“Safe travels, headmaster,” she replied. He brushed past the two of them and did not look back.



Adrissu spent longer than he would have liked simply wallowing in misery at home, but eventually he mustered the strength and momentum to leave. He had meant to travel, to get away from everything that reminded him of his mate and how much he'd failed, but part of him felt frozen with grief. A letter finally spurred him into action; it was addressed to Kian from one of his colleagues in Gennemont, asking after his progress on his research, and if he would like to visit again sometime. Adrissu penned a very uncomfortable message curtly informing the sender that Kian was deceased, then almost immediately decided that he would go to Gennemont himself to deliver it, so he might lose himself in their massive library. What he would study, exactly, he was unsure; but if there was anything that made him feel some semblance of normalcy anymore, it was studying.

He packed his bags, leaving Vesper behind to guard the tower, before soaring through the dark night. He flew until the first light of dawn inched up the horizon, then landed in an empty field about ten miles from Gennemont. In his go-to, unassuming human disguise, he slept for a few hours, then began walking toward the road around midmorning. It was early in the afternoon when Adrissu arrived on foot in Gennemont, and the heat of the day was at its peak. He rented a room at an inn that neither he nor Kian had ever visited, then bathed and changed into fresh clothes before heading toward the school with the letter for Kian's colleague. He also carried a fake letter of introduction from Adrissu, dubbing his human guise as Adam, a promising student, with a request to access the library for his research. It was vague, but would suffice to grant him access for the semester.

The receptionist at the library was a bored-looking boy, probably a student volunteering at the library for extra credit.

"Identification," he prompted as Adrissu stepped through the doors, and he handed him the letter of introduction. The boy considered it, gave Adrissu a careful look, then handed it back. "Let me fill out a visitor's form for you. Long way from Polimnos, eh?"

"It was," Adrissu agreed, nodding. He pulled out the second letter. "I was also asked to deliver this, but I don't know who the recipient is..."

The receptionist took it, looking at the name with a frown. "I don't know him myself, but I know his advisor. I can pass it to her to give to him if that's alright with you."

Adrissu nodded silently, and the boy set the letter aside, bringing his attention back to the visitor form. Once it was complete, he handed it to Adrissu and waved him through.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd been in the Gennemont library. It was expansive, and he had no idea where to start.

A thought tickled him—he wondered how much information they had on dragons, and how much of it was true. As he wandered, observing the layout of the library, he realized maybe understanding what mortals truly knew of dragons would be beneficial. Could anyone in that village have known that the yellow dragon—Vantas—was barely a hatchling, or that he had a twin? Did even the wisest of mortals have any conception about the stages of draconic growth, any recognition that a dragon was at its weakest when its lair was new, its body small and young?

Knowing would only help. He walked slowly, purposefully, until he found a section on magical beasts and creatures: monsters that were real and monsters that were myths. The section was sorted alphabetically by creature name, so it was quick work to find the section on dragons, which took up an entire bookshelf, narrow as it was. The number of books surprised him; he wasn't sure what he had been expecting, but he would have been far less surprised by either only a handful of texts, or else an entire section.

The first book was titled “An Overview of Dragons”, which seemed a good place to start. He pulled it from the shelf and found an empty chair amongst the groups of students gathered around long tables, studying with their own tomes and parchments strewn about; then he began to read.

The study of dragons is extremely dangerous, it opened, thus we owe this knowledge entirely to those brave men and women who made such knowledge their life's work, many of them giving their lives in the noble pursuit of greater understanding. We, the authors, dedicate this book to them and give them our eternal thanks.

“Gods,” Adrissu muttered, rolling his eyes. If the entire book was like this, maybe he would not be able to get through it after all. But he continued reading, and the first full chapter was not nearly as insufferable as the foreword, so he kept going.

What he found was quite broad, though he supposed a book claiming to be an overview of knowledge would be rather general. But most of it seemed accurate: it described how dragons were almost entirely solitary creatures once they were adults, occasionally interacting with other dragons, but with long-term bonds only forming in order to procreate. Once the hatchling was raised, the parents would leave each other to live their singular lives once more.

It made no mention of the two major exceptions to this rule: fated mates and twins. They were rare enough that Adrissu supposed the writers—or the researchers they had so gratuitously thanked in the foreword—might never have encountered them, or not understood what they were seeing if they had. That was just as well; mortals would only see such bonds as weaknesses to be exploited.

It also made no mention of the values assigned to the color of a dragon's scales, nor any of the complicated, rigid customs surrounding the way dragons were to act around each other. And plenty of what he read was outright wrong, too, such as the assertion that dragons' power came from the sun, or that every single dragon was capable of feats of magic far beyond what any mortal could do. While all dragons were innately magical, of course, Adrissu knew that their power varied by degrees just the same as mortals—though even the least magically inclined dragon would probably be on par with the average elf. And as far as their magic coming from the sun, he had never heard of such a thing, so Adrissu dismissed it as complete conjecture on the writer's part.

But it was an amusing read, and he could get through the entire tome before the library closed for the evening. He could not check books out, since he was not a student of Gennemont, so he placed it back and resolved to return the next day to make his way through the whole shelf. He did not know how much of it might prove useful, but at the very least, it had kept him entertained and distracted. That was, for now, the best he could hope for.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Within a month, Adrissu had read every book pertaining to dragons that he could find in the Gennemont library. Much of it was conjecture, and much wrong entirely, but a surprising amount was accurate, or at least close to the truth. But overall, it gave him a clearer picture of what mortals thought of dragons, and why they believed the things they did. Neither that barkeeper, nor any human in that village, could have given him any insight into Vantas, which was somehow a relief. It was impossible for them to have known about his twin, or that she would have come looking for him, and Adrissu would not have known unless he'd asked the dragon directly or somehow known their parents. Even though it wasn't an absolution, it relieved some small amount of the guilt he carried.

Now that Gennemont had nothing else to offer him in the way of dragons, he had decided what he would do with the rest of his year off: he planned to investigate every single dragon that was known, or even suspected of existing, on the continent of Autreth, even up into Aefraya if he could travel there. His lack of knowledge had been what had allowed him and Kian to be taken off-guard, which led to his mate's death, however indirectly. He had been arrogant, assuming that his first instincts about the situation were correct, when he'd taken barely a day to investigate. He would not make the same mistake twice—and this way, his mate would have the choice of any dragon he could possibly want to become, which might make the decision a little more tempting. That, too, Adrissu was determined to fix in his mate's next life: he would not sit around waiting for him to choose the soul transference. He would pursue it more aggressively this time, knowing that somewhere in his mate's mind, he had grown exhausted by the cycle of reincarnation.

Adrissu stopped back at his home in Polimnos for a little while to make sure nothing had happened in his absence. Vesper greeted him happily, but had nothing to report. Once or twice someone from the Academy had come to check, but they had not pressed any further upon seeing that he was still gone. The city was operating as it always did.

He rested for a few days, then set out once more. Other than the young yellow dragon, Atillath, the next closest dragon to him was a red just over two centuries old, which lived inland and several hours north of Polimnos. He knew little of this dragon, but there was a human fishing village only a few miles south of its supposed lair; and Adrissu was certain that they would have at least rumors concerning its nearby presence. This village was his first destination. It was noted as Camfort Cliff on his map, which somehow sounded far more developed and well-off than the shabby little town he arrived in that afternoon.

The village itself was on a cliff, and a little to the north was a path that led down to a small beach nestled at the foot of the cliff, where individual fishing boats docked in the evenings and set out early each morning. It was too small to have cobblestone paths; instead, a packed dirt road led straight through the middle of the village, veering off to the right and becoming rough-hewn steps that led down to the narrow, rocky beach below. There was a single inn, a general store, a few small shops and stalls, and what looked like some sort of town hall. He had passed a few cottages and small farms on his way into the village, but still its small size took him aback. It had been a long time since he'd been in a village this small.

Evidently, they did not get many visitors either, though the inn suggested that the town was at least a stop along the way for those traveling further north. The humans he passed openly stared at him, their expressions more surprised and curious than hostile; but still, he felt their eyes lingering on him long after he walked past. He wondered briefly if he should have taken a human disguise instead of appearing as his usual elven self; but it was too late now, he supposed.

Despite how uncomfortable all the silent attention made him, the villagers who gathered in the tavern when the sun set were open to his questions, as intrigued as they were to find an elf amongst them. When he explained that he was a scholar here to study the local dragon, though, their expressions would change. They did not turn dark and angry the way Adrissu would have expected, but they seemed uneasy—their eyes darting about, or their voices lowering as they answered. The consensus was that, yes, rumor and legend put the dragon to the north, but it had not been seen in the village for quite some time, maybe a century or more.

This did not explain their peculiar behavior, though, and for a moment Adrissu wondered if they had some strange dragon-worshipping cult or something equally outlandish—but when he was asking a group of three workers about the dragon, one man pulled a disgruntled face and muttered, “The mayor says dragons don’t exist.”

One of the others laughed and waved away the comment, and the third remained silent; this made everything click into place for Adrissu. If the humans had never actually seen the dragon for themselves, then maybe it was easier to believe that the creatures were simply the stuff of legend. If this mayor were vocal about his disbelief in dragons, then this would explain why those who had talked to him had seemed so secretive about the information they shared, which was all rather mundane and expected.

The man who had laughed off the comment about dragons not existing, though, advised Adrissu that he would be better off looking elsewhere for information.

“Instead, you should head to Wintergrove, which is to the west. It’s further from where the dragon lives—where it’s *rumored* to live—but since it’s a bigger city, a real city, they’ll probably have a lot more information for you there,” the man explained. His gaze was entirely too warm as he regarded Adrissu, though, so rather than ask what else he knew, Adrissu placed a gold coin on the table between them and stood up.

“Wintergrove,” Adrissu repeated as he stepped away. “I’ll have to look into it. The next round’s on me. Thank you.”

He had seen the city noted on the map, but hadn’t thought to visit since it was further from the red dragon’s rumored lair. But if it were large enough to have a library, or even just more people willing to discuss what they’d heard, it would be worth it. It was a good thing to know, really—Camfort Cliff smelled entirely of fish, and it became more unbearable the longer he was here. He stayed the night at the inn, then set out for Wintergrove in the morning.

Wintergrove was positively bustling compared to Camfort Cliff when he arrived, but it was certainly no Polimnos. There were a handful of taverns and inns, the sorts of places where rumors and local legends were easiest to discover. He scoped out a few and chose one that had a bulletin board advertising odd jobs for mercenaries and adventurers, figuring that this would be the place where he was most likely to find someone who knew *something* about the red dragon. He still got a few strange looks as an elf in a crowd of what seemed to be entirely humans, but at least there was no obvious distrust or hostility in anyone’s gaze this time.

This inn was large enough that there were two workers behind the bar: two men, one obviously older, perhaps the father of the younger man. He nodded at Adrissu as he approached, shooting him a friendly smile.

“Something to drink, sir?” he asked.

“I’d like to rent a room for the night,” Adrissu replied, and the man nodded.

“Sure, sure, let’s get that set up for you,” he said, pulling out a ledger. “Just one room, one night?”

“One room, probably one night,” Adrissu said. “I’m here on research, so it will depend on what I’m able to find out and how quickly. But let’s say one night for now.”

“Research, huh? What brings you to Wintergrove for research?” the man asked, still looking down at the ledger. His tone revealed only mild interest, more indulging in small talk than anything else.

“I’m a scholar,” Adrissu answered. “I’m studying dragons.”

The man’s scribbling paused for a moment as he glanced back up at Adrissu, a surprised expression flitting across his face before he finished writing. “Dragons? Don’t hear that every day. Well, there is one that lives to the northeast. Can’t say I’ve ever seen it up close, but it’s spotted flying by every once in a while.”

“You know of it?” Adrissu asked, feigning surprise. “Lucky for me, then. What have you heard about it?”

“Don’t get him started,” the younger man interjected. His tone was sullen, but his expression was one of good-natured teasing, and the older man rolled his eyes. Now that he was looking at both of them, Adrissu was certain they were father and son. “He’ll never shut up.”

“Don’t talk to me like that when I’m helping a customer,” the older man chided, laughing and shaking his head before looking at Adrissu again. “Don’t listen to him. My son just loves to make me sound like an old man losing my mind. He thinks he’ll inherit the inn faster that way.” He leaned in conspiratorially to Adrissu, but whispered loudly, so the other man would hear. “He doesn’t know I’ve already written him out of the will.”

The man snorted, rolling his eyes as he walked past, disappearing through another door. Adrissu forced a smile.

“Charming,” he sighed. “So what have you heard about this dragon, then? Have there been any recent sightings?”

“Oh, the sightings are often enough,” the older man sighed, tapping his chin thoughtfully. “Usually a few times a year, we’ll see it passing overhead, or someone will go too far into the woods and say they saw the dragon or heard it warn them to leave. Sometimes, though...” He sighed, looking away uncomfortably. “Well, sometimes it will come into the city and take people. Just one, usually. They never come back, but, well, you can imagine what would happen if a dragon snatches you up off the street, so...”

“I see,” Adrissu murmured, taking down notes. “When would you say was the last time it was spotted?”

“Hmm, maybe six or seven months ago was when it was last seen from the city, I think. More recently, I had someone come in saying they heard it in the woods and managed to escape. But it’s been a few years since it snatched anyone, thank the gods,” the man answered.

“Is the person who heard it still around? Or a traveler?”

“Oh, they’re usually travelers and adventurers, to be honest. People who live here know better than to go looking for it. Better to let sleeping dragons lie.”

“Do you know anyone in town who’s seen it? I’m hoping to learn more about it, so anyone you know who might have any insight at all would be of great help.”

The man was silent for a long while, looking pensively down at the cleaning rag he held in one hand. Adrissu waited, watching him think, until finally the man sighed and rubbed a hand over his beard.

“A few,” he said. “Your best bet is probably Daiana. She comes around here a few times a week when she’s in town, so you’re bound to run into her if you’re here long enough.”

“And who is this Daiana?” Adrissu asked, noting down her name.

“She’s a... hunter. A mercenary, sort of,” he said.

“Sort of?”

“Well, she’s not associated with any mercenary guilds, or organizations, or anything. She usually works alone and takes odd jobs, but fighting or hunting sort of jobs, you know? Mostly she hunts monsters. I guess she’s closest to a trophy hunter.”

“That sounds promising,” Adrissu said, grinning at the man. “Do you know if she’s around? Is she a resident of Wintergrove?”

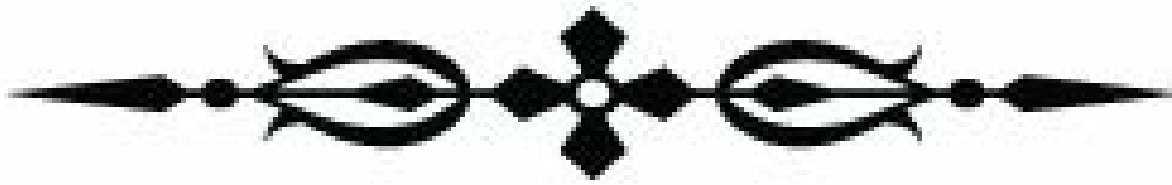
“She was born here, yeah. She lives with her mother in town. I haven’t seen her in a week or two, so she’s probably due to swing by soon. She’s almost never gone for longer than a month.”

“Excellent. What does she look like?”

“She’s tall for a woman, with dark hair that she keeps back in a braid. She has a, uh, scar on her face. So, you know, pretty distinctive. You’ll recognize her when you see her. She has a certain... aura.”

Adrissu chuckled. “I can imagine. Well, thank you, sir. You’ve been very helpful.”

“Happy to help,” he said, smiling in return. When he grinned over at Adrissu, the wrinkles around his eyes deepened, making him look all the more world-weary. “I’m Luc, by the way. Shout if you need anything.”



Adrissu ended up staying in Wintergrove for several more days, waiting for the huntress to show up. In the meantime, he scoured the city's single library, looking through its historical archives for any signs of the dragon within the city council meeting notes and announcements of major events, even through its collections of fiction and lore. There was very little to glean there, but he noticed that if the records were accurate, the red dragon had never gone longer than three years without coming into the city and taking someone away. It was always just one person, so Adrissu was sure there was no purpose behind it other than keeping the populace afraid of him—and if the pattern held, the city was due to have its next visit from the red dragon within the next several months, but he kept that to himself.

Aside from that, he asked around at the tavern, and a few of the other places in town that seemed promising, but he walked away from each of them with the same message: talk to Daiana.

On the third day, he was speaking with a burly, one-eyed man—a retired mercenary who claimed to have seen the dragon once, but his story turned out to be unremarkable. He had been deep in the woods hunting boar, when suddenly through the darkness of the trees, bright yellow eyes and blood-red scales glowered at him; and a deep, rumbling, frightful voice told him to leave before he was devoured. He had, of course, obeyed and escaped with his life.

“I’m always hoping Daiana will finally make her move against the damn reptile,” he concluded, shaking his head with a self-deprecating laugh. “I’d help her, you know. She’s a tried-and-true dragon hunter. Supposedly, she’s got three kills under her belt.”

It took every ounce of self-control Adrissu had to not physically recoil away from the man. Daiana had been described as a hunter, yes, but no one had mentioned that she’d actually killed a dragon before, much less *three*. The very thought evoked a deep, instinctual revulsion within him—after all, there were very few things capable of killing a dragon, so anything that could was met with immediate blind hate.

“Three kills?” Adrissu repeated in as mild of a tone as he could manage. “That’s... significant.”

“Well, it’s a group effort, of course, as it always is. No one could take down a dragon alone,” the man explained, scratching his bald head. “But, yes, she’s got the scale necklace and everything. No

red scale yet. I keep telling her, whenever she wants to add it on, I'd join the fray. The town would think of us as heroes!"

"Of course," Adrissu said absently, already checking out of the conversation. Was it worth it to keep waiting for the chance to speak to this woman? Did he really want to get so close to a dragon hunter? He did not think she would *recognize him for what he was*—in fact, he was all but certain she wouldn't—but if she had killed a dragon before, there was always the chance that she would know one when she saw one.

But if she *was* a dragon hunter, it seemed likely she would know not only about the nearby red dragon, but other dragons in the area. It could be everything he sought packaged up neatly in a single human, if he just had enough time to ask the right questions.

He was already here. He had already waited this long. If she didn't turn back up in the next few days, then he would depart. He would leave it in fate's hands.

"You all right, there?" the bald man asked, frowning, and Adrissu realized he must have still been speaking, even though he had long since stopped listening.

"Yes, sorry," he said, standing abruptly. "My apologies, I've just remembered I have to go—you've been very helpful, thank you. Next round's on me." He set a gold coin on the table, and the look of annoyance on the man's face immediately fell away. Humans could be bought so easily. Maybe this Daiana would be the same.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

As fate would have it, Adrissu met Daiana the dragon hunter only two days later.

He had taken to spending the evenings at the tavern, usually in a corner or at the bar, watching humans mill about while drinking wine. It was not his favorite activity, but it passed the time; and he had seen quite a few interesting things, including explosive arguments and mating rituals. He recognized several regular patrons now, nodding politely at them when their eyes met. They were beginning to recognize him as well, and that alone was a sign he should get going.

Then one evening, early enough that only a few people were in the tavern, either indulging in an early dinner or a late lunch, the door swung open and bathed the room in daylight.

“Daiana!” the barkeep exclaimed, grinning, and a cold shiver ran down Adrissu’s spine. “Welcome home. Good to see you. How was the hunt?”

Adrissu glanced behind him as a gravelly woman’s voice answered. “Went just as planned. The pelt’s hanging with the rest of them. It’s a nice centerpiece, I think.”

Daiana sat at the bar a few seats down from Adrissu, the stool squealing loudly when she pulled it out. She was tall and stocky for a woman, wearing a leather vest over a plain tunic and trousers, with dark hair streaked with gray and pulled back in a braid. She glanced toward Adrissu, and he could see a thick scar that curled from the right corner of her nose, slashed diagonally across her lips, and ended along the left side of her chin. He looked away to keep from staring, and he heard her snort as she spotted him.

“What the hell are you doing that you’ve got a fucking elf hanging out in your bar, Luc?” She laughed, but without waiting for him to respond, she spoke again, this time to Adrissu. “Or the better question is, what’s an elf doing in Wintergrove in the first place? You’re about as far from Aefraya as anyone could be, friend.”

Adrissu managed a pained smile; abrasive as her tone was, she didn't seem outwardly hostile. But still his heart thrummed rapidly in his chest, and distantly, he wondered if this was how humans felt in his own presence.

"I take it you're Daiana?" he asked smoothly, and she smirked. The scar made it a crooked smile—the corners of her mouth uneven, and her lips dipping inward toward the center where the scars touched.

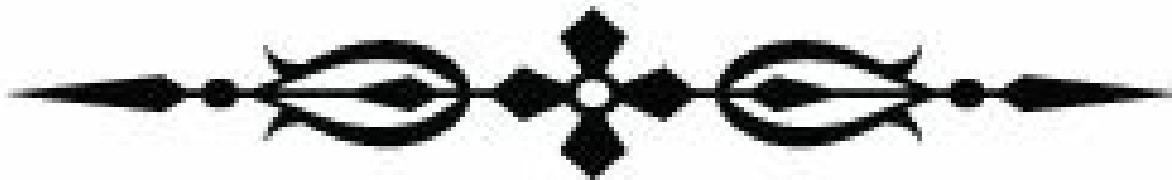
"My reputation precedes me," she chuckled with a nod.

"Then I'm here to see you, actually," he replied. "My name is Adrissu, and I'm a scholar. I study dragons, and I was told you'd be the most reliable source regarding the red dragon that's rumored to live nearby."

Her smile couldn't quite widen, but her eyes brightened at the mention of dragons, making him feel supremely unsettled.

"You've been told correctly, then," she said. "I'm a hunter. I've helped bring down three dragons in my time. There's probably no one who knows more about dragons than me 'til Gennemont, and even that's a stretch. What do you want to know?"

"Everything," Adrissu said, smiling with all his teeth. She had no idea what he was. "I want to hear it all."



Despite her abrasiveness, Daiana clearly was a true expert about dragons, enough so that it made Adrissu anxious to be in her presence all over again. Her boast had been more genuine than she knew: Daiana's knowledge was even more expansive than what he'd found in the Gennemont library. While she, of course, could not know everything, it was far more than he would have expected of any human. As she showed him the three scales she wore around her neck, two silver and a blue, she described the connotations of each scale color with an eerie accuracy, explaining how the brighter the scales, the better the dragon—an overall accurate, though simplified, assessment about the basis of draconic custom.

"So we confirmed the dragon to the east to be a red. There's no dispute there," Daiana explained. "We know it's at least two hundred or so, probably a bit older. Younger than five hundred, for a

certainty, making it an adolescent. Basically, it's an older teenager as far as humans would go. Er—I'm not sure how that would translate to elven ages, but..."

"I understand," Adrissu said. "Go on."

"So it's young, but established. It wouldn't be as strong as an older dragon, but is too strong for most groups to stand a chance against it in a fight. All the dragons I've killed have been about that age. I don't know if any dragon over five hundred or so has ever actually been killed, at least not by humans. Elves maybe, if they're really capable mages." She paused, sighing. "I've considered going after it since it's so close, and the right age to have a shot at it, but... Reds have a reputation for being particularly cruel and violent. Maybe it's best not to find out how true that is. I don't know. I'm getting older, which is harder for humans, you know. My dragon hunting days might be behind me."

Adrissu managed a smile at that. "Do you know anything about its lair, then?"

"Lairs are tricky," Daiana replied, shaking her head. "You can't get into one without the dragon knowing—unless it's already dead, of course. So I've only ever seen those three lairs. They've all been underground, but usually have above ground entrances. A cave entrance leading to it, or an opening in a canyon... They're meant to be difficult to get into without being able to fly, or at least climb really, really well. This one lives in the forest, so I would guess it has a cave or something that leads to the rest of its lair. They say some dragons can breathe underwater and have lairs in rivers or lakes, but I've never seen that for myself, so who knows?"

"Does it have a name?" Adrissu asked. "The dragon nearby."

"Most people call him the Red around here, to be honest. They think it's bad luck to say its true name, like you'd be summoning it, and no one wants that," Daiana said, snorting with a suppressed chuckle. "I don't know for sure. But the oldest accounts I've heard have been from folks my grandparents' age, and they called him Tyrsun."

"I see," Adrissu said softly. That was something, at least. He had a name, an age, and not much else, but it was more than he'd had before.

There was little else Daiana could tell him that he didn't already know. She described a few other dragons within several days of travel of Wintergrove, including Zannes himself; luckily all she said of him was that he was rumored to still live somewhere deep below the city, or perhaps beneath the ocean, but was almost never sighted. But none were new to him, and none were as ideal for his eventual purposes as Tyrsun, the red. Tyrsun was younger than him by a century, so he had some time yet before he needed to worry about the wurm's ability to overpower him. He would just have to be

more careful, start planning something *now* so that they weren't acting rashly—the way he and Kian had with Vantas.

“If you were to track down this Tyrsun,” Adrissu said slowly, not quite looking at her as he spoke. “How would you do it?”

Daiana gave him an appraising look that he did not meet for a moment. Eventually, she leaned back in her seat and took a deep drink from the tall glass of ale that Luc had long since placed on the bar beside her.

“Well,” she said, just as carefully. “I always start with determining exactly how many people I'll have helping, and what they're capable of. I make sure we have enough fire shields for each person, and all my successful hunts have involved a weapon enchanted with antimagic.”

Adrissu's heart skipped a beat, unsettled all over again. Antimagic was *difficult*, even for dragons, and to have a weapon enchanted with it—an expert would still need to wield it, of course, but something like that would level the playing field in many ways.

“Where would you get such a thing?” he asked, raising his eyebrows in an expression that he hoped seemed curious and surprised, rather than frightened. “I've heard *of* antimagic, of course, but I've never heard of a weapon enchanted with it. That sounds... antithetical.”

“It sounds that way, but it's not,” she said, shaking her head. “It's elven make, actually. Developed up in the Aefrayan wildlands, where it used to be only orcs. There's a military outpost there now, and they have a team doing all sorts of experimental stuff with weapons, but this has been their biggest achievement to date if you ask me. It cost more than I'd care to admit, but there's only a few people in this world who have anything like it.”

“I'm surprised you were able to even discover such a thing existed.”

“It was luck. I was working with an elven hunter whose sister was on the team producing this shit. I never would have known otherwise. They're keeping it all pretty under wraps, since things have been so tense with the orcs for years. After the orc king died, if it had gotten out that they were developing new military weapons with the help of orcs in the wildlands—well, the ones that are already on the verge of rebelling would have been pushed over the edge for sure. It's pure luck I got my hands on one of these.”

Briefly, Adrissu wondered if there was a way he could leverage his own position to find out where such things were being created and have a look himself. He could probably work out how to do it if he dedicated some time to it, but being able to see firsthand how such enchantments were carried out

could be indispensable. He was no warrior, but the knowledge could help him develop a defense against them before it became a dire necessity.

“Well, if one didn’t have such a weapon,” he said lightly. “What would you recommend?”

“Magic,” she replied bluntly. “The more magic-users you have, the more of an advantage you can eke out. And have an element of surprise. Dragons are vain and won’t expect you to have backup or some kind of contingency plan. That’s where you can get them.”

“This is all good to know,” Adrissu said, nodding.

“So are you planning to take down this red dragon, then?” Daiana asked, smirking over her drink at him. “No offense, I’m sure you’ve got a decent grip on magic yourself as an elf, but as a scholar…”

He had to stop himself from laughing. “Something like that. Mostly I’m curious how you could accomplish such a feat three times. But I’d also prefer to continue my study of these creatures without losing my life to them, so your insight could only help.”

They chatted for a little while longer, but eventually Daiana stood up once more. “Well, it was quite pleasant speaking with you, Adrissu,” she said, grinning. “I’m afraid I have to be going now, though. I just arrived back home this morning, and it’s been a long journey. I really only meant to drop in to say hello to Luc, so…”

“Of course, don’t let me keep you,” Adrissu said, smiling in return. “Thank you for sharing this information with me. You’ve helped far more than you know.”

Her grin softened slightly as she stepped away. “You’re welcome. I’m glad to help.”

He watched her go, his face growing stony and cold as she stepped through the door. There were other humans like her, ones who hunted and killed dragons—but this one was right in front of him. The chances of her ever going after *him*, after Zamnes, were slim to none, considering how she had talked about how Zamnes was dormant beneath the city: to slay a sleeping dragon would pose no challenge. But she was a danger to dragonkind, and might end up slaying Tyrsun, or some other dragon that he could use to his benefit. Could he let her live, knowing what she knew?

And if she were dead, he could have a good look at her antimagic weapon, which intrigued and frightened him in equal measure. He could even take it for himself, study it, figure out how it worked and how to counter it.

That was enough to solidify the decision for him. He waited only a beat longer, then slipped out of the tavern, shifting the illusion that contained him as he leaned against the door. The light stung his eyes as he stepped out into the late afternoon sun; but he caught sight of Daiana walking down the road to his left, her long braid swinging with movement as she walked. Though he was now a dark-

haired, plain-faced human as he exited the tavern, he still magically silenced his steps and followed her at a distance. The streets were busy now that the afternoon was winding down.

He followed her down a few streets, never drawing quite close enough that she might notice him, always with one or two other people on the street between them. As they got into the more residential part of town, she veered off toward a larger house with a broad, fenced-in yard. He watched her go through the gate from a distance, then kept walking past the house as she approached the doorway. Then he turned, walking alongside the other side of the fence to make a slow path around the perimeter of the house. The fence was short enough that he could hop over it easily, and there was a back door, along with several windows—getting in unnoticed wouldn't be the hard part.

From the backside of the house, he glanced around quickly to ensure there wasn't anyone nearby, then leapt over the fence, pulling shadows closer to him as he slunk through the yard. He could hear voices from within the house, and he paused, pressing himself up against the back wall. First came Daiana's voice, muffled but recognizable, then another woman's voice—she sounded older. Vaguely, he remembered Luc having said something about her mother living in town. As he listened, the voices faded, and he distinctly heard someone going up a set of stairs.

Still muffling his steps, he reached out and tried the door handle; it was unlocked, so he cast another silencing charm and slowly pushed it open. He waited. No one seemed to notice, so he slipped inside and closed the door behind him. It opened into a long hallway, with a staircase to his left, and the hallway turning to the right up ahead. Distantly, he could hear someone moving around, slowly and methodically—an elderly mother—and footsteps from above that matched the weight and cadence of Daiana's steps.

Silently, Adrissu moved toward the stairs, taking them slowly and watching the landing for any movement. He could still hear footsteps further ahead; and as he reached the top of the stairs, he could see a few doors along the hallway, one at the far end slightly ajar.

There was movement behind it, and Adrissu stopped short, motionless. Daiana was in the room, and he could see her walk from one end to the other, holding a cloak in both hands as if preparing to hang it up. Once she was out of sight, he lunged for the wall, hugging it as he approached. For a moment he hesitated, unsure if he should leap in and try to take her by surprise, or wait until he had a better view of the room and her position inside. But the longer he waited, the more likely it was that he'd be noticed, so he slipped through the doorway as silently as possible, sweeping his gaze around the room. It was empty, and another door on the other side of the room was closed. As he paused, he could hear water running—his luck was perfect. She was bathing.

He took a moment to look more closely at his surroundings. A range of pelts and taxidermy animals were displayed on the wooden walls, and a plush bed was pushed into one corner with a myriad of equipment tossed on top of it. Set on a long table on the opposite wall, though, was a longsword that had been placed with far more intention than the rest of the clothes and equipment thrown haphazardly across the bed and floor.

Adrissu stepped toward it, slowly reaching out to touch the hilt of the blade, immediately feeling the low thrum of magic pulsing through it.

She had helped him, and this was what had frightened him the most out of all Daiana had told him. It would probably still be best to kill her, but...

Maybe he had grown soft—maybe everything with Kian was still too close. But he couldn't shake the thought that Daiana's mother was just downstairs, that she would be the one to discover her body if he killed Daiana now.

He hesitated for only an instant, then grabbed the sword by its sheath and hurried out of the room, silencing his steps. For a moment, he was worried the antimagic of the sword would prevent his magic from holding, but it seemed that the sheath kept its range contained.

Exiting the house proved just as easy as getting in, and within moments he was slipping through the back door of the tavern again, his elven visage flickering back into place. He stashed the sword amongst the rest of his things and packed everything he had brought with him back up. It would be best if he was gone before tomorrow, before Daiana could return.

"I'm checking out early, Luc," he said, dropping his room key off on the counter as he brushed by. "I appreciate your hospitality."

"Going so soon?" the old man exclaimed, reaching for the key and eyeing him with surprise. "Well, safe travels to you. You're always welcome here if you're ever in Wintergrove again."

"Of course," Adrissu called over his shoulder, but he was already halfway out the door.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The longer Adrissu investigated, the clearer it became that the antimagic sword was nothing short of a marvel. The metal had been enchanted with antimagic from the beginning of the smelting process, so each layer that formed the blade carried within it a thin layer of the enchantment; to forge a weapon in such a way would never have occurred to him, but now that he had seen it, he couldn't fathom any other way to get antimagic charms to stick. And the sheath, enchanted with the counter charm, contained its antimagic property so it looked and felt like any average blade while sheathed.

Luckily, he learned that lesson in the safety of his lair. Holding it sheathed gave him no trouble, but when Adrissu reached toward the naked blade while still in his elven form, he could feel the edges of the illusion starting to waver and tear before he even made contact with the metal. He hesitated, then touched it, and the hand became his black-scaled claw. He yanked his hand away before the rest of his true form could burst forth, holding the illusion in place.

"Incredible," he murmured, sheathing the sword. It was certainly dangerous technology, so the longer he could keep it out of the hands of dragon slayers like Daiana, the better off all draconic society would be. No wonder the elves were so secretive about its development.

He was no warrior, at least not with a sword, but it would be an invaluable tool to have if and when he had to face off against another dragon in the future. Even if he had learned little about Tyrsun in the end, this alone made the excursion to Wintergrove worth it: now he would always have the upper hand.

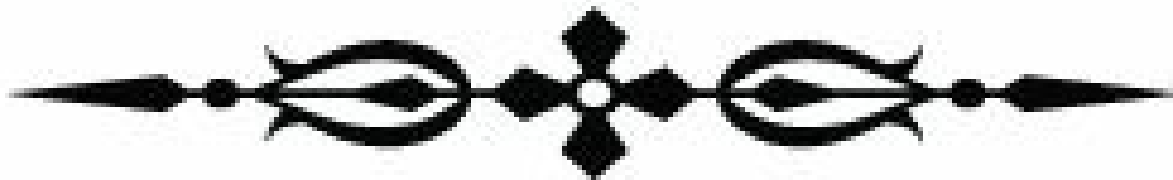
He still had months to kill, however, so he continued with his tour across Autreth as he had planned, investigating local rumors of dragons along the way. He luckily (or perhaps unluckily) did not come across anyone as knowledgeable, or as dangerous, as Daiana again; instead, he mostly learned local legends surrounding dragons that were older and far more established in their lairs than himself. But much of what he discovered had the same underlying threads: legends always described

dragons, no matter the color of their scales, as arrogant, vain, and cruel creatures that protected their territory fiercely, but had no qualms about invading villages and towns whenever it suited their own purposes. Their hoards kept local towns in poverty, preventing wealth and resources from being spread around.

It was interesting, learning the unfiltered thoughts of humans and mortal creatures regarding dragons. Adrissu had never concerned himself with what mortals might have thought of dragons before; but even if their opinions never put dragons in very flattering lights, they weren't inaccurate. After all, he avoided the company of other dragons for a reason — they were all entirely insufferable as far as he was concerned.

But, eventually, he checked the last village off his list and had no more dragons in the whole of Autreth to investigate. He had a little time left before he planned to return to Polimnos—in his newest role as Adrissu the younger, prepared to assume his grieving father's duties—so he considered stopping in Aefraya, but ultimately decided against it. Tensions between rebel orcs and the elven king were running higher than ever as the nation struggled to hold itself together, and the last thing he wanted was to be caught up in the first sparks of a foreign war. Maybe some other time. It would all blow over in a decade or two.

Instead, to build some credibility in his new, younger persona, Adrissu compiled all of Kian's research, his transmutation ritual, and all the permutations it had gone through before being finalized. He condensed it down to the most important parts, wrote out an explanation of how it worked and why, and published his findings through the Gennemont library. It was not under Kian's name, but it gave him some sense of closure, knowing that his life's work wouldn't go unnoticed. He had wanted to help others as much as he'd wanted to help himself, so the thought of all his research culminating in nothing was desperately sad. This way, at least, some part of him was still out in the world. Beyond that, all he could do was wait.



When he returned to Polimnos, Adrissu made himself look a little younger and redecorated Saltspire Tower a bit, just enough to make his new identity distinct from the last, then introduced himself to Eris, Ned, and the rest of the instructors who had kept the Academy running in his stead. He had written to Ned a few times before explaining that his “son” was to take over his position for the next

term, so his arrival was not unexpected. He was sure some instructors were less than enthused that someone they didn't know was taking over, but they would adjust.

Adrissu settled back into the job easily, though, and his obvious aptitude seemed to assuage the instructors who had silently been worried. Before long, he had fallen into the same rapport as always, and it almost felt like he had never even left. It was nice to be back in his old routine.

When he had been back in Polimnos for a few weeks, Nethendriel came to him with an unexpected proposal.

"Did your father ever consider opening a second campus?" he asked, sitting across from Adrissu in his office, which was still mostly bare.

Adrissu paused, frowning. "Not that I'm aware of," he replied, raising an eyebrow at the half-elf. "Why?"

"I had a lot of time to think about how to help the Academy grow," he offered, flashing Adrissu a nervous smile. "And, to be honest... I really did like being headmaster when your father was gone. I don't want to take the job away from you, of course, but if there were two schools... Well, we're reaching the point where we probably won't be able to accept many more students, but if we had a second campus, there would be room to grow even more. We could help a lot more people learn. And we certainly have the funds to do it. It would just be a matter of where."

"Hmm," Adrissu replied, interested, but not quite convinced. "I'll consider it."

"I think it's something worth looking into," Nethendriel said, nodding eagerly. "I have some ideas, too, about where we could move it—"

He started rifling through the stack of papers that he was carrying, then slipped a few of them across Adrissu's desk. Adrissu gave him a tight smile, not wanting to be rude despite how much Nethendriel had put him on the spot.

"I appreciate your enthusiasm, Ned, but I don't think I'll be able to have a proper look until I've finished reviewing the rest of these lesson plans. I'll look over these next week, if that's alright with you."

"Of course, of course," he answered, sounding not at all dissuaded as he stood. "I'll leave you to it, then. Gods know everyone's busy this time of year."

Adrissu did not think of the matter again until the following week, when he found the papers amidst the lesson plans he'd meant to review, so he finally sat down to look at them. Ned's write-up described ideas for a small satellite campus somewhere close enough that it would only be a few day's travel from Polimnos at the most, but far enough away to appeal to a wider audience of students

eager to receive an education in magic that was second only to the college at Gennemont. The paper listed a few suitable cities—places that were well-established, but overall smaller than Polimnos—to help spread wealth and resources. He had even drawn a few sketches of what such a campus might look like, which made Adrissu chuckle—it reminded him of the earliest days of the Academy, when they only had the three buildings that he'd been so proud of.

It would be expensive and difficult, but the thought kept coming back to him. Maybe it would be nice to spread out and attract more students—maybe he could position a second campus somewhere that he could keep an eye on Tyrsun, or some other dragon that he wanted to keep tabs on. Polimnos was his territory, the center of his wealth and his lair, so he would not leave it, at least not permanently; but the past year had taught him that there were benefits to seeing new places. He would have to be careful not to set down roots in a place too close to another dragon's lair, but most of the places Nethendriel had suggested were perfectly feasible.

It occurred to him that giving this to Ned—heading up a secondary campus—would also likely be in his best interest to keep his own job. The others thought of him as a newcomer, so if Ned had really wanted to, he could have refused to step down and insisted on staying in his position, which would have made things quite difficult for Adrissu. Plus, Ned seemed ambitious, and Adrissu wondered if he might even look beyond being a headmaster of a second academy, trying to position himself as a candidate for Lord Representative in some other city. Headmaster of the Academy's first satellite campus would certainly be a good place to start if that were the case.

This theory only made more sense when Eris knocked on his office door a few days later, asking to speak with him. Classes had ended for the day, and instead of her customary goodbye, she stepped into his office and closed the door behind her.

“Is something the matter?” he asked, frowning, but she shook her head.

“No,” she said, smiling nervously at him. “I just wanted to tell you—we haven't told anyone else at the Academy yet, but, well, I—that is, Ned and I, we're having a baby.”

Adrissu blinked, surprised, but forced himself to smile back at her after a beat of silence.

“Well, congratulations,” he said, his smile becoming genuine as she grinned back at him, obviously pleased to tell him. “I'm happy to hear it.”

“Thank you,” she said breathlessly. “I was worried you might be annoyed—having to find a replacement secretary and all. I promise I'll make it easy for you. I can pick someone and train them myself before the baby's born, and hopefully I won't be gone too terribly long.”

“It’s far too soon to worry about that,” Adrissu said, waving a hand dismissively. It *would* be annoying to have to find another secretary; but he knew enough about humans that if he were to say that, it would upset her, so he held his tongue. “Though I *will* admit, that makes Nethendriel’s ideas about a second campus make *much* more sense.”

“Oh, no, he had that idea a month into being interim headmaster,” she laughed, shaking her head. “It’s all he’s been talking about since your father left, it seems like. It didn’t influence his proposal much, if at all. He put together most of what he gave you months ago.”

“Just fortuitous timing, then,” he replied with a wry smile, and she chuckled. They talked it over a little longer—she was due at the end of the year, so the timing for a replacement secretary wouldn’t be too inconvenient, and she already had a few people in mind. She and Nethendriel had decided to marry, but would wait until the following year, probably in the summer.

Eventually, she thanked him for his graciousness, he congratulated her again, and she left for the day.

Despite her insistence on its lack of correlation, he felt certain that knowing he had a child on the way at least motivated Nethendriel to bring the topic up to Adrissu almost immediately upon his arrival. It was a lot to consider all at once, and he had not wanted to take on another major project so soon after establishing his new identity as a younger Adrissu. But if he refused, either to explore the possibility of a second campus, or to consider Ned for a leadership position at a second school, Eris would be upset. She might even fear for the future of her child, and as much as he tried to distance himself from the lives of the humans that surrounded him, he *did* like her and wanted her to be safe and comfortable.

If he did open a second campus, it would still present the problem of finding someone he trusted enough to run a school associated with his name, hiring more staff, handling students... Nethendriel had proved he could do it, and rather well, if the reports from the other instructors were true. Adrissu could avoid the headache of getting someone else if he went with Nethendriel.

If he were going to follow through with a second campus, putting Ned in charge of it was the best option he could see. So, with his decision made, he called Nethendriel to his office late in the afternoon several days later, and asked where, if anywhere, he most wanted to open this new campus.

They deliberated over this for a month, but eventually came to an agreement. If the city was amenable to such a thing—and Adrissu was quite sure they would be—they selected a slightly larger city about twenty miles to the west of Wintergrove called Feld Heslyn. It was far enough away from Polimnos to justify opening a second campus, and nearby enough that Adrissu could easily check in

on the school whenever necessary. And, of course, it was near the lair of Tyrsun so that he could keep tabs on the other dragon, since he still thought it would be the best candidate for an eventual soul transference.

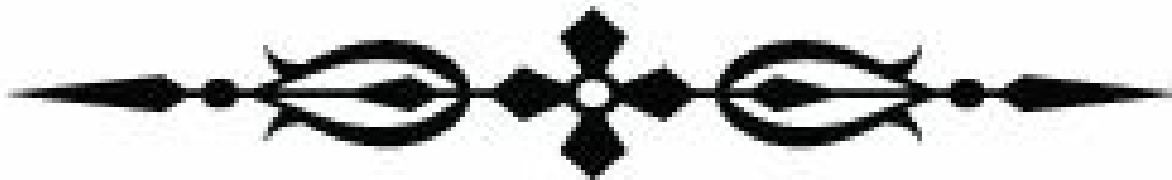
Nethendriel was pleased with the decision. Feld Heslyn was in a part of Autreth that was not as developed as Polimnos, but had steadily improved in recent years; and it was on the cusp of meeting the requirements set out by Gennemont to have a Lord Representative and other boons that the Federation offered such cities. It would be a good place to build a career, he explained, quietly confirming Adrissu's suspicions that Ned had ambitions beyond a second Academy of Magic.

This decided, they put together a proposal, and Adrissu traveled to Feld Heslyn the next month to present it to the city's mayor. His presentation seemed to convince the mayor, a stern-looking human woman named Annaliese, who invited him to remain an extra week to scope out a location for the potential secondary campus. Walking around the city, it reminded him very much of Polimnos in the years before it was annexed into Autreth: still rather small and quaint, but buzzing beneath the surface with growth and possibility.

He asked about local legends of the nearby dragon; while Feld Heslyn was about a day's journey from Wintergrove, Tyrsun was still the nearest dragon. Annaliese confirmed that there was indeed a red dragon rumored to live to the northeast; she had never seen it, though, and only a few citizens of the city claimed to have ever witnessed it.

"As far as rumors of dragons, I don't think our resident beastie would cause you any trouble here, headmaster," she joked with a smirk. "After all, I hear the Scourge of Polimnos sleeps just beneath the surface of your own city, but it still stands. A dragon miles away from here shouldn't be any more of a threat than *that*, would it?"

He smiled back at her. "No, I suppose it wouldn't."



The first ground broke for the Feld Heslyn Academy of Magic just under a year later. There had been no suitable structure existing in the city for them to use, so it would take extra time to build up the school. Adrissu was in no rush, but Nethendriel seemed discouraged by the timeline presented to them by city workers; of course, now that he was a father, Adrissu supposed he could understand his dismay at his promotion being delayed another year.

The secretary he had found in the meantime was considerably less friendly than Eris, Adrissu thought, but did the job. He resigned himself to getting used to her presence. Eris had promised she would return after only a few months, but Adrissu doubted the logistics of it; and even if she did, she would move to Feld Heslyn with Ned before much longer to keep their new family together.

Sure enough, despite her promise, Eris did not return. By the time the school was built and enrollment was underway, Ned and Eris' daughter was two years old, and Ned had shared excitedly with Adrissu that they had another on the way. He had been in Feld Heslyn on and off throughout the past year to oversee construction and was now preparing to move his family there permanently.

Adrissu traveled there a few weeks after they had left Polimnos and toured the school grounds with Ned, before joining them for dinner in their new home. It was all quite different from Polimnos and the Academy there, but he supposed it would suffice. He was glad at least that *he* wasn't the one moving. While he was there, he made a few side trips, seeking rumors of the nearby dragon. Everyone he spoke to agreed that Tyrsun, while alive and well in his lair to the north, rarely bothered Feld Heslyn. Adrissu became more confident that his presence in the city would remain undetected, and that any unusual activity from the dragon would likely be noticed by the mages at this new campus. All in all, it seemed like an ideal arrangement, as far as he was concerned.

The second Academy opened to much more fanfare than the original had, with over one hundred students attending classes conducted by ten instructors. Though it had been far more Ned's project than his own, Adrissu still felt a swell of pride in his chest when Ned sent him a letter with all the details of the first day. It was all his legacy, one that mortals would recognize and admire far more readily than a pile of gold buried beneath the earth. How could he not be pleased?

Once that was all settled and running smoothly, though, little else of note happened in his day-to-day life. He busied himself with all the minutiae of keeping the Academy running and ensuring the second school didn't stray too far from the curricula and lesson plans set up at the main campus. He thought of picking up more of his own personal studies, but lacked the motivation. Instead, he kept his head down, and worked, and waited. His mate would return eventually.

Book Five

Pollux

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

While the second academy was the first project Adrissu worked on when he adopted his new identity, it was far from the last.

Another instructor had been working on a pet project in his absence as well. Alana Pughes was attempting to enchant a device that would build up steam and redirect it, creating a rudimentary power source. When she presented it to him several months into the term after his arrival as the new headmaster, he had been mildly impressed, but unsure of what practical applications it might have.

“I think I could get it to power a cart,” she answered firmly, when he expressed his uncertainty. He raised an eyebrow, the response unexpected.

“A cart?” he repeated. “Instead of a horse?”

“Yes. It would be faster than a horse could travel,” she said. “Or a larger cart to carry more people. This is a small model, but the larger the tank, the more steam it could generate, and the more force it could push.”

“I see,” Adrissu murmured, eyeing the little device again. “I see. An interesting premise, Alana. I think the academy can certainly help fund this.”

A wide smile crossed the human woman’s face. “Thank you, headmaster. I truly think it could be revolutionary. There are surely many other applications I haven’t considered. I’ll make it worth your while, I promise.”

“I’ll hold you to it,” Adrissu chuckled, pulling out the paperwork to fill.

He mainly let Alana work in peace, although she approached him a few times to brainstorm new ideas as she progressed. But for the most part, he remained unaware of how the project was coming along for several months until the middle of the next term, when Alana presented him with a miniature model of the horseless cart. The model hissed as steam built up within it, then it moved in a long, lazy circle across Adrissu’s desk.

“Fascinating,” Adrissu said, watching the model rattle over the various papers that were strewn in its path. “You’re sure it’s scalable? How large do you think you could get it?”

“Absolutely,” she answered, her smile radiating confidence. “I don’t think there would be a limit. As long as the generator can produce enough steam, it could move anything: twenty, fifty, a hundred people, even. And I could definitely adjust the enchantment to get it large enough.”

Her work continued, and within a year, the Academy was the first to present the world with a horseless carriage—driven through a magically powered steam engine with no need for a person to feed magic into the cart to make it move, which was the only method by which existing horseless carts functioned. They were quite rare because of this requirement; but one day, Alana’s invention very well could become as commonplace as a mundane cart, given enough time and resources.

The new cart was lauded often and by many at that year’s Lord Council meeting in Gennemont; Adrissu did not attend, but Alana herself had been invited by Polimnos’ Lord Representative, and she told him all about it upon her return. Less than a month later, Adrissu was receiving correspondence from various mages he knew in Gennemont who wanted to replicate it. He passed them all to Alana, telling her it was entirely her prerogative if she wanted to reply at all, though he was pleased when she kept the nature of her work within Polimnos. If anyone in Gennemont wanted to create such a thing for themselves, they would have to do it unaided.

By the time he heard any news about Gennemont creating its own steam-powered model, several mages in Polimnos had already expanded on Alana’s initial discovery. Steam power was used to bring flowing water into Polimnos homes more efficiently than the pre-existing magical sewer system, so construction was underway to augment the system with steam pipes to improve the existing infrastructure. The magically enhanced steam could power simple lights, an easier method of procuring light than enchanted candles.

The world around him seemed to transform overnight.

Alana’s wild success brought only more attention to the Academy, so enrollment at both the original academy and the academy in Feld Heslyn exploded with growth. This was, of course, a source of great pride for Ned, so he often had Alana visit the second campus for lectures and demonstrations; afterward, a group of students at the second academy trained under her to expand on the uses of steam.

Then, several years after her initial discovery, the Lord Representative of Polimnos died, and Gennemont itself asked Alana if she would consider being the next. Her invention had changed the shape of the world so profoundly that they could not imagine offering the position to anyone else, or

so they said. This was highly unprecedented, as typically the former Lord Representative's advisors chose the next Representative; in this case, they were skipped over entirely. It was an unsettling precedent, giving such overt power to Gennemont, when Adrissu himself could remember the bloody struggle that had won Polimnos its relative autonomy centuries ago. At the same time, Alana did seem an excellent choice as Lord Representative, far more suitable than anyone the two advisors, who were family members of the previous representative, might have picked out. The world continued to change, he supposed.

Alana Pughes accepted Gennemont's proposal, and she left the Academy at the end of that term to officially take on the title of Lord Representative of Polimnos. It had been a long time since Adrissu had personally known the Lord Representative as well as he knew Alana, so he paid a little more attention to the civic activity of Polimnos after she was sworn in. She seemed well-liked by the general populace—how could she not, with how revolutionary her inventions were? Everyone wanted to be on her good side, but from the beginning, Adrissu could tell she wasn't entirely cut out for the politics of a major city like Polimnos.

She dropped by the school to visit him one afternoon, about two months after becoming Lord Representative, and they had dinner together to chat and catch up. For the most part, they discussed her ideas for her next developments, and what some of her students had been working on. After a lull in the conversation, she gave a quiet, bitter laugh.

"To be honest, I sort of hate this job already. Suddenly all these people want to be my friend, but they really don't," she sighed, leaning back and looking away from him. "I'm going to do my best to just keep my head down, and do what I can to improve the city, and keep developing my ideas, but... It's all much more of a distraction than I anticipated it being, headmaster. I don't know how I'll get anything done that isn't part of my Lord Representative duties now."

"I can only give you this advice," Adrissu replied. "Find the people you know you can trust and delegate as much as you can to them. That's the only reason we could open the second campus. I've dedicated my life to the academy, as my father before me, so it was... difficult to see it grow beyond what I can manage as one person. But Nethendriel is a trustworthy man, and I'm glad he's leading the second school. You just need to surround yourself with people like that in your own life, who you know are capable and aren't trying to take advantage of you, and give them as many tasks as you can so you can focus on your own work."

"Someone like you?" she laughed wryly.

“Unfortunately for you, I’m already busy enough with my work,” Adrissu laughed, shaking his head. “My sincerest apologies.”

“Do you think it will get easier?” she asked, her tone shifting abruptly. When he looked up, she was peering over at him with a profoundly tired expression. He considered for a moment.

“I don’t know,” he finally said. “I hope it does. Ideally, it gets more manageable, and you excel. If it remains this difficult, you’ll either suffer through it as long as you can bear, or you’ll step down when you realize it’s not getting easier. Those are the only options I see.”

Her nose wrinkled in a frown, but she let out another harsh laugh. “Very encouraging.”

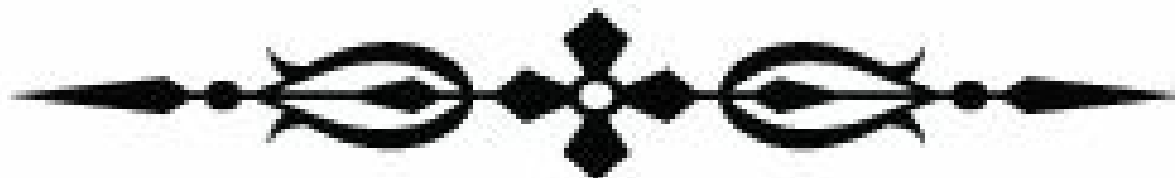
“Not what you wanted to hear?”

“No, but you’re not wrong, either.” She sighed, leaning back heavily in her chair. With her pensive expression, she looked like a sullen, tired student, and Adrissu was struck with the thought that she had attended the Academy around the same time as Kian; he would have only been a year or two younger than her at the most. The thought made his chest ache. Could his mate have accomplished something as world-changing as this, too, if he’d only had the time?

“You have an incredible opportunity here, Alana,” Adrissu said softly, and her eyes flickered back up to him. “You’re the youngest Lord Representative in living memory. Gennemont chose you specifically, which is all but unheard of. Your discoveries and inventions have already changed the trajectory of the world, and I’m sure you’ll only continue to develop more revolutionary applications for what you’ve already discovered. Your name is already going down in the history books, regardless of what happens, but think of how much more you can still do with the time you have. This is difficult, yes, but if you didn’t believe you were capable of it, you wouldn’t have accepted. Don’t squander this chance you’ve been given.”

Her smile wavered, and he realized she was on the verge of tears. He looked away uncomfortably, clearing his throat. “That is to say, busy as I am, I’ll try to help however I can. Even if it’s just helping you find other people you can delegate to.”

“I’ll do my best, headmaster,” she replied, her voice rough. “Thank you.”



In hindsight, it should not have surprised him as much as it did, but in less than a year after Alana Pughes became Lord Representative of Polimnos, a student at the second academy of magic, who had

been studying under her, applied the use of steam power to weaponry.

For all Adrissu's reservations, it was true that Autreth as a whole had been largely peaceful since the Federation was formed. While small-scale conflict was inevitable any time mortals were gathered together—or any beings, really, when he considered how much he hated being around other dragons—no major war had gripped Autreth in centuries. Its neighbors could not say the same; the pendulum of war and peace had been swinging wildly in Aefraya as of late, as elves struggled to maintain unity and keep their hold over what had once been orc territories. As for Robruolor, the dwarves were so intensely insular that no one could say what they might have been up to; but Adrissu expected they faced some in-fighting of their own, just by the very nature of their sheltered existence.

But Autreth was the center of the world—the site of countless struggles, as the continent was claimed first by one neighbor, then another—and though the bloody process of independence had led to the equally fraught wars that led to the Federation, its existence had by and large given its people centuries of peace. Adrissu thought that the residents of Autreth would thus have no reason to spend what precious little time they had developing weapons of war. Apparently, though, his assumption was incorrect.

“I don't like this,” he muttered, shaking his head, as Ned showed him the diagrams the student had submitted. The weapon in question was, essentially, a crossbow that used steam to shoot the bolt, rather than tension: a small engine behind the trigger built up pressure rapidly, so that the bolt shot out with enough force to punch through metal armor as if it were cloth. The bolts that the student proposed using would need to be reinforced, of course; and the engine did cause the crossbow to be unevenly weighted, making it difficult to handle. But it was an initial pass, Ned had explained, and the student was eager to complete his first working model, so that he might have a better idea of how to fix the problems that he'd already identified. “Why should the Academy facilitate the creation of weapons?”

“I agree, headmaster,” Alana interjected, before Ned could reply. “The steam engine was created to help people, to make difficult tasks more convenient, to help connect people to the rest of the world. To use it to strengthen weapons is... Well, it's entirely against everything I had envisioned, and it's *my* invention.”

“I—I can understand that,” Ned stammered, obviously taken aback at their disapproval. He often kept Adrissu updated as to the developments and general goings-on of the secondary school, and never before had Adrissu reacted so negatively to something Ned presented to him. Alana, though she was no longer officially associated with the academy, was still privy to these meetings, since they did often involve student theories and advancements using her steam engines. “But, well, there are

practical applications for this as well, of course—hunting and self-protection and all that. I mean, something like this, it could pierce the scales of a dragon, even. And gods know, a reliable weapon against something like that could be world-changing. Imagine if old Zamnes wakes up one day, if just a handful of people in the city have a crossbow like this—whatever hold he might have over Polimnos would be gone in an instant, don't you think?"

Alana sighed, shrugging in begrudging acceptance of his point, but Adrissu's scowl only deepened. An icy shiver crept up his spine; such a weapon *could* become a genuine threat to all dragons, so he could not let it be developed right under his nose—with resources he'd paid for.

"I still don't approve of this being associated with the Academy," he snapped, shaking his head. "We are not an institution of war."

"What do you mean? The magical defense track with the mercenary guild was one of the first tracks the school had," Ned protested.

"That wasn't the same," Adrissu insisted, though he supposed it was quite similar. "And besides, the mercenary's guild has been disbanded for over a century. There is no need for something like this, not anymore."

Ned scowled, looking away, but he remained silent. Adrissu knew he cared too much about staying in his good graces to go against him, no matter what his true opinion was. After a moment, the half-elf added in a quieter voice,

"It's his senior thesis project, headmaster. I don't think it would be fair to tell him to start on something entirely new now."

Adrissu sighed, frowning down at the schematics once again, and considered. It was still early enough in the term that the student could reasonably propose a new thesis without too much difficulty, he thought; but maybe it would be best to allow it this once, as a favor to Ned, one which he could hold over the other man as needed.

"What's this student's name?" he asked, and Ned sighed.

"Granville Kipp."

"A human, then?"

"Yes."

Adrissu sighed, then pushed the diagrams back across the table to Ned. "If this is his senior thesis, then I will allow him to complete his project. But no other students may pursue a project like this, and we will not use Academy funds to further any sort of research like this starting next year. Ned."

He kept his grip on the diagrams as Ned reached for them, and the half-elf raised his head when Adrissu said his name, looking intimidated.

“Are there any other students conducting research like this?” Adrissu asked firmly, and for a long moment, Ned was silent.

“Not to this extent, no,” he finally answered, cowed. “But some were considering something similar. I’ll make it clear to them that the academy won’t allow it, going forward.”

“Please do,” Adrissu said, letting him take back the papers and sketches. “Alana, did you have anything to add?”

When he looked back over at the human, she seemed conflicted, frowning as her gaze flickered between the two of them.

“Ned, I’m sorry to put you in this position,” she finally said. “I know the students are just eager to take advantage of new technology however they can. But I think Headmaster Adrissu’s compromise is fair. Let Mr. Kipp finish out his thesis, since there was no rule in place before this; but going forward, we can’t allow weapons to be submitted this way. The Academy’s reputation aside, it just seems too dangerous to allow.”

“I understand, I understand,” Ned sighed, as he gathered up the various papers that were strewn about the long meeting table where they sat, before carefully placing them back in the thick portfolio that he’d brought with all the other projects and reports he’d presented. “I suppose I should have considered this before approving his thesis.”

“It’s fine now,” Adrissu replied, but with the way both Ned and Alana glanced at him when he said it, he suspected he sounded as unsettled as he felt. “Was there anything else for today?”

Ned was silent for a long moment, looking pensively down at his portfolio.

“No,” he finally said. “Thank you for taking the time to meet with us, Alana. I know you’re busier than ever now.”

Alana shot him a weary smile. “It’s no problem, Ned. Good to see you.”

Ned left after exchanging polite goodbyes, leaving Alana and Adrissu alone in the meeting room.

“A steam-powered crossbow, of all things,” she muttered when he was gone, looking over at Adrissu. “I guess I really shouldn’t have been surprised, but gods, why would he think that was a good idea?”

Adrissu shook his head, unable to formulate an answer. Already he was considering ways he could get ahead of this, ways he could prevent such a weapon from ever being made. Was it already too

late? Could he really let this student continue unimpeded? What else might he develop in the future, outside of the academy's purview?

"You know," he finally offered, his voice rasping. He cleared his throat before continuing. "I used to think about setting up a track for healing magic for the Academy. Maybe I should do that now."

Alana looked at him with an inscrutable expression. In truth, he had meant to learn more about healing magic when Kian had been killed, but so many other projects had competed for his attention in the first years following it that he never pursued it further. But it went back even further than Kian; when Volkmar had died, he'd regretted not knowing more healing magic. He had picked up bits and pieces of it over time, of course, but had never committed to the study of it, always busy with something else.

But for the academy to institute a healing track, while rejecting the development of magically augmented weapons—that would send a clear message, both to its students and to outsiders looking to them as the forerunners of magical innovation.

"I think that would be a great idea, headmaster," Alana said softly.

"I suppose I'd better start on some research of my own, then," Adrissu sighed, and without waiting for a reply, he stood and left.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

After his meeting with Ned, Adrissu kept a close eye on Granville Kipp and his steam-powered crossbow. By the time the human was set to graduate, he indeed had a functioning model, though Ned had reported to him that there were several issues Kipp would have to figure out before anyone could hope to construct such a weapon at a scale large enough to cause concern.

But it was still something that was out in the world now, which Adrissu was not fond of. He contemplated finding and killing the human after he graduated to ensure that his creation would never be developed further, but ultimately decided it was not worth the risk of drawing that much attention and suspicion. He would just have to do his best to follow Granville Kipp's career after he left the academy, and maybe he would eventually step in if things escalated too far for comfort. If he were lucky, Kipp would get himself killed with his dangerous work, and the problem would solve itself. One could only hope.

After the end of the term, though, Adrissu went on a short sabbatical, this time to gather information and seek out instructors for the healing track to introduce to the Academy. He hoped to learn more about it himself, and fortunately a healer in Aefraya had accepted his request to study under them over the summer months. He knew little about the healer, save that he was a half-elf named Dirge Petkas, who was apparently well known for his skills.

The city where he was to meet the healer was north of the capital, further than he'd ever been in Aefraya before. It was a settlement in what would have once been orc territory, so Adrissu had been hesitant at first; but most of the news coming out of Aefraya now was that the rebellion had largely been quelled, and the peace between elves and orcs remained, though how long it might last was anyone's guess. But it seemed as safe as anywhere else in Aefraya, so Adrissu left just past sunset and flew under the cover of night until the first hints of sunrise. He landed high on a mountaintop and rested there for several hours, waiting out the warmest part of the day. Since it would be several more

hours to reach the city on foot, he waited until the sun went down once again and flew the rest of the way, arriving in the city late in the evening.

He got a room in the local inn, and the next morning set out to the address Dirge Petkas had given him. It was a cozy-looking cottage with a large, overgrown garden in the front that was full of flowers and plants that Adrissu mostly did not recognize. A bird perch stood near the gate, and a hawk was preening itself on the perch. Its bright eyes flashed as its head turned to watch Adrissu; it screeched at him once, then flew away, swooping through an open window of the cottage.

It was the healer's familiar, Adrissu thought—a sign of a powerful magic-user, which heartened him. He carefully made his way through the garden, trying not to touch anything, then knocked at the door. A moment later, it swung open, revealing an extremely tall figure within.

Adrissu blinked, momentarily taken aback. Dirge Petkas had been described to him as a half-elf, but Adrissu had not realized that the other half was orcish. But the figure, who he assumed was Dirge, was easily seven feet tall and had mottled green skin. His build was far more slender than an orc's would be, and his ears came to a narrow, tapered point far more elegant than the stubby points most orcs had—so he was certainly half-elven as well.

“Dirge Petkas?” he asked, forcing himself to speak, before the silence could go on too long.

The half-orc nodded, eyeing him. “You must be Adrissu,” he said in perfect elvish, stepping aside to hold the door open for Adrissu. “Come in.”

Adrissu nodded and stepped through the door. “Yes, thank you.”

The inside looked nearly as overgrown as the garden. All sorts of herbs and plants were strewn about, some growing out of pots, other in vases of water, and still more drying from where they hung in bunches from eaves and shelves. Briefly, Adrissu wondered if the man really was a healer after all, or if he was just an alchemist; all the herbs seemed to point toward the latter, which would be a disappointment. But he did have a familiar, the hawk which now watched him from the window—and as Dirge led him toward a sitting-room adjacent to a kitchen, he flicked one hand toward the stove, and a small fire burst to life beneath a kettle.

“You must have had a long journey,” Dirge commented, as he pulled two mugs from a high shelf. He reached for various dry plants hanging around the kitchen, then sprinkled them into the mugs. “I had to pull out a map to even see where Polimnos is. I’ve heard of the Academy, but I couldn’t have told you where in Autreth it is. You’ve come so far.”

“Well, you were highly recommended,” Adrissu replied, grinning over at the half-orc as he sat down at the wooden table. “And it had been quite a while since I visited Aefraya, so that influenced

my decision, as well. I've never been this far north, though."

Dirge snorted, the corners of his mouth lifting in a slight smirk. "No, I expect this wasn't Aefraya when you were born."

It most certainly was not, Adrissu thought. "You would be correct," he replied simply, stifling a chuckle. "Just another layer of interest that drew me in, I suppose."

"Zaveed from the college told me you're a very accomplished mage yourself," Dirge said, abruptly changing the topic. "But you don't know any healing magic?"

"No, I admit I had very little formal schooling. I know the very basics of healing magic, but nothing beyond that. Much of what I've picked up has been trial and error, and simply natural luck at developing, ah... the talents I was born with, I suppose," Adrissu sighed. "But, well, there have been some... incidents in my life that have left me wishing I knew more than the simplest healing; and especially now that there is interest in offering a healing track at the Polimnos Academy, I figured it would be remiss of me not to do some in-depth learning myself."

Dirge looked at him for a long moment; only when the kettle whistled behind him did he look away. When he turned back to face Adrissu again, kettle in hand as he poured the steaming water into the mugs, he smiled.

"Good," he said. "Curiosity is a virtue. I'm happy to teach what I know to anyone who wants to learn."

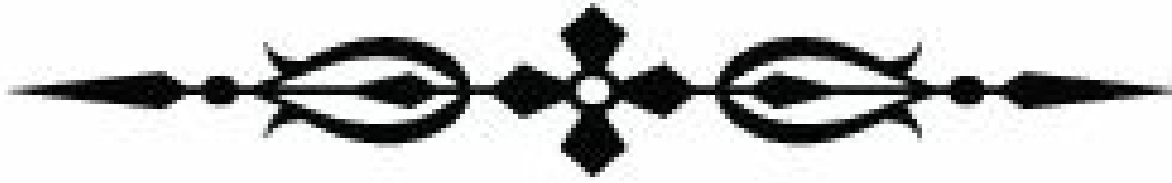
Somehow, the grin around the barely visible protrusions of his tusks made Adrissu feel less nervous. Dirge had been feeling him out and decided that he approved of whatever he saw in Adrissu, which was a relief. He doubted the half-orc or his familiar would have been able to sense anything particularly suspicious about him, but since he operated independently, there was nothing compelling the man to teach him except his own desire to do so—and perhaps the coin Adrissu was willing to pay him. He needed Dirge to at least tolerate him.

Dirge handed him the mug, and Adrissu took a sip without asking what it was. The hot liquid on his tongue nearly burnt him, but it was a sensation he did not mind, and the bright, herbal flavor that accompanied it was palatable as well.

"This will help energize you," Dirge said, taking a careful sip of his own cup. "I find it's particularly helpful after a long journey."

Adrissu nodded gratefully as he took another drink. It tasted good, at the very least; but when he had drained the mug, he thought maybe he did feel a little more alert.

“Well,” Dirge sighed, setting his cup down and gesturing for Adrissu to stand. “Let’s not waste any time, then.”



Adrissu spent the next two months studying under Dirge, who, despite his eclectic appearance, turned out to be extremely knowledgeable about healing magic. Adrissu was quickly impressed with the sheer breadth of his knowledge, drawing deeply from both orcish druidic magic and more practical, traditional elven healing. Dirge explained his fathers were an orc druid and an elven soldier, who met shortly after the finalization of the peace treaty between Aefraya and the orc wildlands, about a century ago. Between the two of them, he learned everything there was to know about both types of healing, and studied formally for several years at the Castle Aefraya library, before returning to his hometown. In addition to magical healing, Dirge also gave him a crash course in the various herbs, tinctures, and potions that were commonly used among orcs as well, which was quite interesting.

After two months, Adrissu had learned enough of the fundamentals, and gained a grasp of the study as a whole, to better discern what instructors were needed to ensure the success of a healing track at the Academy. Unsurprisingly, he offered Dirge a job as a part of that curriculum. And unsurprisingly, the half orc turned him down.

“I’d never want to live in a city like that,” he muttered, rapidly shaking his head. “Besides, that far into Autreth... I bet most of the residents have never even seen an orc in their lives. No, far too much hassle. Thank you, but no.”

“You’re probably right,” Adrissu laughed, and though he would have sorely appreciated Dirge’s expertise, he did not press the issue. He was sure he could find someone else, if not for the upcoming term that was rapidly approaching, then perhaps before the next.

When he had only two weeks left of his tutelage under Dirge, he was gathering herbs in a thick, overgrown part of the forest about a mile from the town, when all the hairs on the back of his neck stood up at once. His heart plummeted to the very bottom of his stomach—there was another dragon nearby, and it was drawing closer. If he could sense it, then surely it now could sense him, too.

Cursing, Adrissu ducked under the cover of the trees and peered anxiously up into the sky. There were no records anywhere of a dragon even remotely nearby to the village, so why? Why would a dragon be here now? How did he have such rotten luck, again and again?

He'd hoped the dragon might veer away, just as surprised to sense him as he was to sense it, but this did not prove to be the case—in fact, after waiting a moment, Adrissu was sure that not only was the other dragon continuing on its trajectory, but was purposely seeking him out. He swore again, then draped himself with invisibility; hopefully the dragon would give up if it could not see him, though such a strong charm wouldn't hold for long if it decided to stick around and investigate.

A dark shadow passed over the dappled sunlight—and then another. Adrissu could have screamed in frustration—*two* dragons? Two dragons purposely seeking the presence of another could only be a sign of something supremely unpleasant.

For a long moment, the only sound Adrissu could hear was the pounding of his heart thudding in his ears. Then, the same two shadows passed over him again, and he heard a distant, loud thump—they must have landed. He crouched closer to the tree he was huddled beneath, waiting as silence filled the woods again.

“Zamnes,” a woman's voice called out, vaguely familiar, but not enough that he readily recognized the voice. “We know you're here, Zamnes.”

“We're here to talk, not to fight,” a second voice came, this one more recognizable, and Adrissu scowled, half in anger and half in confusion. The voices belonged to Heriel and Naydrun, with whom he had parted on very unpleasant terms. He'd threatened Naydrun's life if he ever saw the other dragon again—how had they found him here? What could they possibly want so badly from him they'd come all the way from their home in Robruolor, to Polimnos, and on to the far north of Aefraya?

Their voices came again, softer this time as they seemed to talk amongst themselves. “He must be here. I still sense him...”

“I am here,” Adrissu barked in irritation, though he kept the invisibility charm on himself. “What do you want?”

He heard a rustling in the underbrush, then he could just make out a figure between the trees several yards away, mostly obscured in the overgrowth. It looked like Heriel, but the hood of her long, forest-green cloak was pulled up.

“We're here to talk,” she said. “Can you come out? We don't want to fight.”

“We...” Naydrun started, their voice coming from behind Heriel. “Well, we need your help.”

Adrissu hesitated, the admission unexpected. What could they possibly need his help for, especially after how poorly their last meeting had gone?

“Do you have any weapons on you?” he snapped, eyeing Heriel suspiciously as she stepped carefully through the dense woods, clearly following the sound of his voice. She didn’t look like she had a weapon, but her cloak concealed much of her body.

“We don’t,” she called out, eyes flickering around. “I give you my word, Zamnes. We’re unarmed and just want to talk with you.”

Adrissu sighed, and against his better judgment, dropped the invisibility charm as he stepped out of the shade.

“What?” he snapped, glaring at the form of Naydrun appearing in the trees a little ways behind Heriel. “How did you even find me here?”

“We sought you out in Polimnos, but your servant told us you were studying in Aefraya,” Naydrun said

“Servant? What servant?”

“The woman at the school.”

Adrissu bit back a laugh; they must have meant his secretary, though he supposed that to a dragon who lived outside of human society, a secretary and a servant might look suspiciously alike. “What could you possibly want so much that you came to the entire other side of the world just to speak to me?”

The two glanced at each other, each bearing an inscrutable expression. But they must have understood each other, because Heriel was the first to speak, her gaze lingering on Naydrun for a moment, before turning to Adrissu once more.

“We need your help,” she started. “It’s a bit of a long story, but... Well, Naydrun and I, we have a son, from when Naydrun was Grizenth the Red. His lair is rather close to you... In fact, you’re the closest dragon to him, so you might know him. He’s also a red, and his name is Tyrsun.”

Adrissu remained silent, processing. The very red he’d wanted to keep a close eye on was the son of these two—that very well might put an end to his plans, now that they were approaching him.

“He has been causing problems,” Naydrun said. “He is... arrogant, to a fault, and of late has enjoyed lording over the humans in the nearest cities. Flying over the settlements, intimidating people, even killing just for the sake of frightening the rest. He is garnering a lot of attention, in a negative way, and he won’t listen to us when we tell him to tone it down. And now...” They sighed, scrubbing a hand through their hair. “Now, a woman in the city nearest to him is building a weapon specifically designed to kill dragons. If it works, it could be a threat not only to our son, but to all dragonkind.”

Everything clicked into place, and Adrissu grimaced at the realization that he was much more involved in this already than perhaps even they realized. “I might know the woman,” he said, sighing. “A woman known as Daiana? A monster hunter?”

Heriel frowned. “You know her?”

“I stole a different, dangerous weapon from her, once,” he said, leaving out that the reason he’d been there in the first place was to learn more about their son. “And... If she is commissioning a new weapon, I might also know the maker. Do you know any details about this weapon?”

“It’s enchanted,” Naydruun said slowly, though both their expressions had changed, partly suspicious and partly surprised that Adrissu seemed to know the human at all. “A crossbow—powered by magic—with pressurized steam.”

Adrissu sighed, rubbing his temples with one hand. Of course, all his headaches would coalesce into one far bigger issue.

“I may know something about that as well,” he muttered. “Let me be sure I understand correctly. Tyrsun the Red is your son, and he has been bothering the people of Wintergrove to the point that they’re actively commissioning a weapon that they can use to kill him, and presumably other dragons. And you want me to do what exactly? If Tyrsun wouldn’t listen to either of you, why would he ever listen to me?”

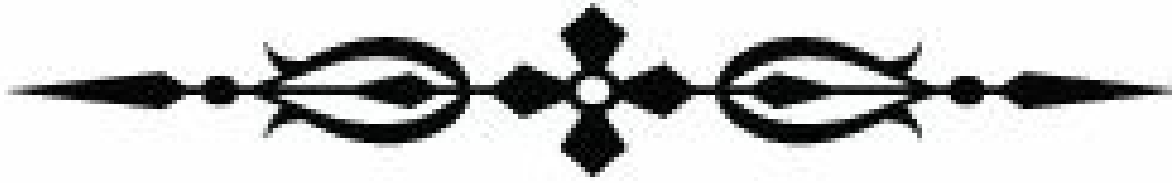
“We’ve given up on trying to talk sense into him,” Heriel sighed, shaking her head. “No, we just want help dealing with this weapon. We had hoped since you have some interaction with the humans in the area, you might know something about it, or at least give us more information, so we can come up with a plan to get rid of it.”

“I see,” Adrissu said, considering. For a long moment, all three of them remained silent, standing with several yards of distance between them, each eyeing the other with distrust. He did not especially want to work together with them for anything, but the creation of a weapon strong enough to threaten the life of a dragon was the exact situation he had feared—one he was unsure he could handle on his own. Making sure such a weapon was never created would be in the best interest of not only him, but all dragons. At the very least, if such a weapon existed, the people of Polimnos might finally try seeking out the hiding place of Zamnes, since rumors still circulated that the scourge of Polimnos remained sleeping beneath the city.

“And we—” Naydruun said abruptly, then glanced hesitantly at Heriel, before clearing their throat and starting again. “That is, *I* would like to also... apologize to you. For our last meeting. I offended you in your home, which was wrong of me. Please accept my apology.”

“It was long ago,” Adrissu muttered, though the memory of that time stung anew as he thought of it. “Well, I accept your apology. And this is disturbing news, so I would be remiss if I did not at least try to help. I will tell you what I know.”

The relief that flooded the other two seemed palpable, and Heriel offered him a hesitant smile. “Thank you, Zamnes.”



Over the course of the next hour, Adrissu explained he had come to Wintergrove a few years ago to investigate the dragon because it was nearest to his own home, and because he had been implicated in the death of the yellow dragon that had once been his closest neighbor. Following that incident, he decided he needed to have a better understanding of his immediate neighbors, even if he did not want to approach them directly. This was how he met Daiana, how he learned about the antimagic weapon she wielded. Luckily, he took it from her, largely nullifying the threat of her presence near Tyrsun or any other dragons. When they asked what he had done with it, he claimed to have destroyed it, after being unable to figure out how to replicate it. It was a lie, as he had neither destroyed it, nor puzzled out how to reproduce it; but his frustration was real enough that they seemed to trust his claim.

Then, he explained, one student at his school recently began to study the use of steam to augment ranged weapons, strengthening them. This, he explained, was unprecedented, and was immediately banned; but now that this Granville Kipp was a graduate, and no longer associated with the academy, he expected that the human continued his studies and developments. The second school at Feld Heslyn was close enough to Wintergrove that he confessed he would be surprised if it was not Granville Kipp himself who was helping Daiana create this magical crossbow.

“Could you find out for certain?” Heriel asked him.

“I can,” Adrissu affirmed.

In turn, the two of them explained what they knew, which was not much more than they had already told Adrissu. They had first learned of the weapon’s development about six months ago, meaning development on it had begun even before Kipp had graduated from the Academy—so somehow Daiana had heard of his research, or perhaps he had reached out to her first, since she was something of a local celebrity. Tyrsun had complained about it to them shortly after encountering the prototype of

the weapon, but had not seemed to grasp the dire consequences of its mere existence, instead asking how he might intimidate the city further to prevent them from brandishing such a thing at him again.

“Do you recall exactly what he described?” Adrissu asked.

“Yes,” Naydruun sighed. “He said he had landed in the town square to snatch someone up, when an older human woman with a scar on her face—this Daiana you mentioned—rushed him with a crossbow that seemed larger than was normal. He said he heard it hiss loudly, then it fired a bolt at him with much more speed than he anticipated. The shot grazed him, wounding him, which he didn’t expect. It frightened him, so he flew away, then came to us perhaps two weeks later to... ask our advice, which on its own was worrying. He doesn’t usually—well, he does not like that we disapprove of how he handles the humans in his territory, so before this we had not spoken in perhaps three or four decades.”

Other than that, they knew no more than he did.

“I am in the middle of something,” Adrissu sighed. “While this is concerning, it does not seem especially urgent to me. Give me a few weeks to consider it, and we can reconvene in Polimnos to discuss this further.”

The pair glanced between themselves again, communicating silently. It was aggravating, but for a brief moment, Adrissu wondered if anyone had ever observed the same phenomenon between him and his mate. Had they felt the same? The amusement of the thought soothed the sting of irritation.

“We did not want to impose,” Naydruun said slowly, not meeting his gaze. “And I understand you do not want me to return to Polimnos. If you’d like, just Heriel could meet you there, especially if my presence would upset your mate—”

“My mate is dead,” Adrissu interrupted. After an uncomfortable beat of silence, he added, “For now.”

Naydruun glanced back at Heriel, looking surprised and unsettled; but Heriel was now looking right at Adrissu with a look of sadness that even took him by surprise.

“I’m very sorry to hear that,” she said softly, shaking her head. “That must be very difficult.”

Adrissu lowered his head, breaking their eye contact. “I appreciate your sympathy.”

For a long moment the three of them were silent again, then Naydruun cleared their throat and continued cautiously,

“If you are inviting both of us, or only Heriel, we will accept either way. Simply tell us when.”

“You may both come,” he said stiffly. “I should be back in my territory this time next month. That will give me enough time to think this over and perhaps investigate a bit. Is this suitable for you?”

“Yes,” they replied in unison.

This agreed, they said their goodbyes. He watched as Heriel and Naydruun retreated into the forest, to whatever clearing they had landed in. A moment later, the unmistakable sound of heavy wings lifting off told him they were on their way. He remained where he was, watching the sky through the trees, until his awareness of their presence faded away. Only then did he return to the village, though to Dirge’s dismay, he was short on the herbs he had meant to gather.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Adrissu's final two weeks studying under Dirge were less productive than he would have liked, but the issue with Tyrsun proved a significant distraction. He spent much of his waking time mulling over the situation and considering what to do with the information that Heriel and Naydrun had given him.

The easiest thing, of course, would be to simply kill everyone involved—including Tyrsun—but somehow he doubted Heriel and Naydrun would be happy with that option, at least not as a first choice. They did not seem to have the best relationship with their son, but that was not uncommon between dragons; after all, he himself had seen his own parents only once or twice in the past few centuries. He was sure many dragons had even less contact with their progenitors once they were no longer hatchlings. Tyrsun was particularly arrogant, though, if even his parents seemed displeased with his recent behavior.

He would not kill Tyrsun, which was just as well, since he was still the best candidate for his mate's eventual soul transference. Daiana and Granville Kipp were most likely enough of a threat that Heriel and Naydrun would aid in killing them. The only question was how to do it.

He mulled this over as he finished his studies, said goodbye to Dirge, and headed back to Polimnos. He considered it as he flew late into the night, until the familiar coastline came into view, and he could just spot his tower rising far on the horizon. When he arrived home, Vesper coiled on his chest radiating contentment, and he slept for a long while. But when he woke and tidied his tower and his hoard the way he often did after he'd been away, he continued to turn the situation over and over in his mind.

By the time Heriel and Naydrun came to Polimnos two weeks later, he had a vague idea of how they might proceed. He sensed them approaching late in the afternoon on the day they had agreed to reconvene, then stood outside his tower watching the path that led from town to his home until he spotted them.

“Thank you for allowing us to come here, Zamnes,” Naydrun said, when the three of them gathered in the sitting-room in the tower. Heriel nodded next to them. “We have come up with a few ideas of our own, but I’m curious about what you’re considering as well.”

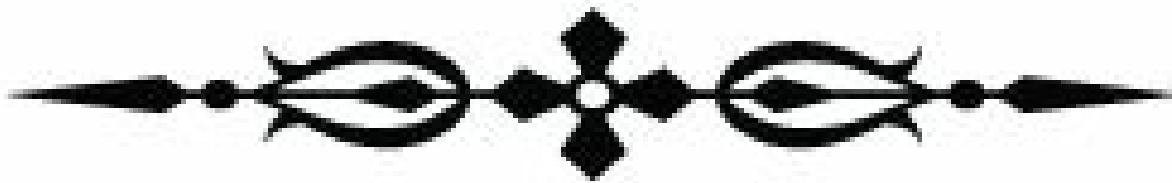
“I have thought of a few things,” he replied.

When he explained, they remained silent for a long while, looking at each other in wordless communication, as he had seen in the past. After a moment, Heriel glanced back at him and nodded.

“I think that sounds much better than what we had thought of,” she said slowly. “We will help you with this. The sooner the better.”

“I can arrange an audience as soon as next week, I think,” Adrissu replied. “Can you wait until then?”

“We will wait,” Naydrun agreed.



Just as he hoped, Adrissu secured an audience with both Granville Kipp and Daiana in Wintergrove the following week. Under the guise of being a creator of magical items, he expressed interest in Kipp’s weapons, offering additional funding for his projects, which was sure to pique the human’s interest.

He, Heriel, and Naydrun had also discussed the difficulty of communicating over such a long distance. Much as it pained him to do so, Adrissu procured some of his enchanted paper—the kind he had used with Kian when he was away—and gave a sheet of it to the pair, explaining its use.

“I will tell you what day we’re to meet them,” he explained. “So check for my note each day and let me know you’ve received it. I’ll alert you as soon as I get a response.”

“Clever thing, isn’t it?” Heriel said, examining the paper before handing it to Naydrun. “I had no idea humans made things like this.”

Adrissu smiled wryly. “They can be quite inventive, obviously. If only all their little creations were like this.”

They shared a nervous laugh, and for a moment, Adrissu wondered what it would be like if dragons were able to get along this decently all the time—if dragons could be *friends* with other dragons without needing to be drawn to them through some magical force that they didn’t understand. He liked Heriel well enough. After all, she had been quite generous with him; and while he wouldn’t say he

liked Naydrun, their presence was becoming more tolerable now. The sheer awareness of two other equally magical and dangerous creatures in his space was uncomfortable, but he could tune it out over time. They were the only dragons with whom he had any kind of decent interaction, aside from his own ancestors, but dragons did not have friends. They worked together when necessary, but dragons always preferred their own company.

And they had only come to him because they needed his help, he reminded himself, not because they wanted to be friends. He was just becoming lonely without his mate. That was all. He pushed the thought from his mind as they concluded their business and said their goodbyes.

Once he received the reply from Kipp, he wrote to Heriel and Naydrun to let them know the day Kipp had agreed to meet them. They replied they would meet him in Wintergrove then.

When he arrived, just before sunrise the day they planned to meet, he disguised himself as a human, taking on the appearance that he had used when he visited the Gennemont libraries as a student several years before: a plain-looking man by the name of Adam. Adrissu had warned the other two of his disguise, so they knew not to betray any surprise. It would have been easier not to change his disguise, of course, but both humans were too likely to recognize him on sight for his comfort, so it would be best to be someone else entirely.

“Thank you for meeting with us,” Adrissu said smoothly, bowing his head in greeting as Granville Kipp led them into his workshop. The man was tall for a human, with brown hair that was cut close to his skull and a tidy goatee. Though Adrissu knew he was a mage first and foremost, he was dressed more like a metalworker, with a thick leather apron over his plain clothes. “I’m Adam, and these are my associates, Heriel and Naydrun.”

“Thank you so much for coming all this way,” the man replied, grinning at them. “I’m Granville. Daiana should be here soon. Shall I give you a tour in the meantime?”

“We’d love that,” Heriel said, smiling demurely up at him. The dress she wore accentuated her curves, and the human’s gaze lingered on her as he led them further into the workshop. She knew more about dealing with mortals than she let on, Adrissu thought, though he supposed many dragons could be dealt with in the same way. Naydrun seemed unphased, following silently as Granville led them, his resonant voice explaining how they had opened only a year before.

“I was very lucky to develop the prototype with as much guidance as I had,” he said with a slight laugh. “The Academy didn’t like it, but it had never been done before, so there was no rule against it. Of course, they banned the creation of weapons the year after I left.”

“Very fortuitous,” Adrissu replied dryly.

“I had some connections here in Wintergrove, and it wasn’t far from Feld Heslyn where the school is,” he continued. “So I asked around, and all signs pointed me to Daiana. I was lucky enough to meet her before she was about to leave on another hunt, but she really liked the prototype and helped me out a bit before she left. But by the time she came back, I had secured the workshop space and started on my second pass at improvements, and her help was invaluable in getting that finished. I knew we could get investor funding early on... Well, hopefully, of course. I really think you’re going to be impressed. Daiana should be here any minute. She’s been testing the newest prototypes—they’re looking more promising than ever.”

“So we’ve heard,” Heriel said, stepping a little closer to him as they walked. “Oh, what’s this?”

“Ah—the enchantment forge,” Granville said, and they stopped in front of what looked like a blacksmith’s forge, but significantly smaller. Where there would normally be fire was a carefully laid out collection of gems and other ingredients. “I’m sure it must look rather eclectic if you don’t know what you’re looking at, but this is what allows such intricate enchantments to be cast on mechanical components like the crossbow.”

“Fascinating,” Adrissu said, suppressing a scowl of distaste as he looked it over. Most of what he saw was standard enchantment fare, but a few of the ingredients were unfamiliar to him. “The gems make sense to me as conduits, but what are these other components?”

“Know a little of the arcane yourself, then?” Granville replied, smiling indulgently over at Adrissu, who forced himself to smile back with a sharp nod. “The other ingredients have particular associations that help bring out certain properties when they’re used in the enchantment process. Usually, you’d keep them separate and only have them out when you’re doing specific enchantments, but since I’m really only making variations on the same thing, I just keep everything I need out in the forge. Helps me work a lot quicker.”

Adrissu peered over the components again—sebran flowers, obsidian shards, a large orb that looked like moonstone, and some kind of long, pale horn. They all seemed to be items that either granted power, or things that absorbed and neutralized heat or flames, which he supposed all made sense for a weapon designed specifically to target dragons.

“Hello?” a woman called from back the way they came; years after their short meeting, Adrissu still recognized Daiana’s voice. “You here, Kipp?”

“We’re in the forge, Daiana,” Granville answered, grinning at them. “Told you she’d be here soon.”

A moment later, Daiana joined them. She looked just as Adrissu remembered, though maybe her face seemed a little more lined as the years had passed, a few more touches of gray in her long,

braided hair. His eyes flitted to the dragonscale necklace around her neck; a cold shock passed over him when he noticed a fourth scale looped through it, this one yellow and smaller than the others. Perhaps that was why Atillath had never come to bother him again. Adrissu shook the thought away, forcing himself to remain focused. In her arms, she held a heavy wooden case big enough to fit a longbow, though a bit wider. As Daiana stepped toward them, she offered the group a tight smile, the scar running from her nose to her chin and causing her lips to dip in the center.

“Hello,” she said briskly, brushing past Granville. “I’m Daiana. Pleased to meet you.”

“Daiana,” Adrissu said stiffly, bowing his head. “I’m Adam, and these are my associates, Heriel and Naydrun.”

“Now that we’re all here,” Granville said cheerily, turning to gesture down the hallway. “Would you like to join us for a drink, and we can show you our newest prototype?”

He led them to a small lounge area further into the workshop, where he pulled a bottle of sweet wine from an ice box and poured a glass for each of them. It was only when they had all taken a seat around a low table that Daiana placed the heavy wooden case down between them.

“I’ve had the idea for a weapon like this for years,” she said slowly, unlatching it. “But Kipp was the one who finally figured out the specifics. This is our final prototype of the crossbow.”

The weapon inside was made of a dark, burnished material; Adrissu recognized it as magically fortified wood. The crossbow had a much thicker stock than normal, which must have been where the steam was generated. It narrowed slightly into a leather-bound grip and a heavy-looking trigger, and at the top where the latch connected to the flight groove, a small gem was inlaid right where the end of a bolt would sit—presumably a conduit for the generated steam power to be released.

“Shall I give you a demonstration?” Granville asked eagerly, pulling it from its case.

“Please,” Naydrun said, gesturing, and with a nod the human turned to face the rest of the workshop, gesturing at a thick metal shield mounted to the far wall.

“Even at about a fifty percent charge, this should still be able to punch right through that shield,” he said. “At full power, it could cut through a dragon’s scales just as easily.”

He set the bolt in place, aimed, and let out a slow breath. At his exhalation, Adrissu saw the repository glow faintly with magic, and a hissing noise filled the air. With two fingers, Granville pulled down on the trigger, and steam burst from the crossbow, directed away from Granville’s face due to the slight curve of the lathe. At the same moment, the bolt exploded out, and with a resounding blast, it stabbed through the metal shield and the first few inches of the wall behind it.

The silence that followed was nearly as deafening, until finally Adrissu forced himself to pull his eyes away from the bolt-pierced shield, glancing quickly at Heriel and Naydruun.

“Impressive,” he said, then stood up to move toward Granville. “Very impressive. May I?”

“Just be careful,” the human warned, but handed him the crossbow. It was heavier than it looked. Adrissu inspected it for a moment, stepping further past Granville as he did. “What do you think?”

Adrissu glanced back; both Granville and Daiana were watching him with interest, so when he gave a slight nod to Heriel and Naydruun, the two humans did not notice the couple also rising from their seats.

“This is truly an innovative piece of work,” Adrissu said, nodding at Granville, who smiled at him with pride. “I would wager that there is nothing like it in this world. It has the potential to change the dynamics of self defense and warfare forever.”

He sighed heavily, looking back down at the crossbow heavy in his hands. As magical as it was, breaking it was probably going to be painful.

“Thank you, sir,” Granville started.

“Which is why,” Adrissu interrupted him, pressing a finger to the small gem beneath the latch. “We cannot allow this to go any further.”

“I—what?” the human stammered, but Adrissu was already channeling a thick tendril of force into his fingers, pushing down on the stone with his thumb until it shattered, burning his hands as it cracked apart with a sound like thunder.

“What are you doing?!” Daiana exclaimed, scrambling to her feet; but behind her, the forms of Heriel and Naydruun were already starting to shift, tearing apart at the seams. Granville stared at Adrissu, his face ashen, unable to even react, but Daiana pushed past him.

“It’s nothing personal,” Adrissu said, knowing it was not reassuring in the least. He pressed harder into the crossbow, and the entire heavy piece splintered in half, finally eliciting an anguished shout from Granville.

Before Daiana could get close enough to touch him, he dropped the pieces of the crossbow and let his illusory form fall away—at the same moment, the back wall collapsed where Naydruun and Heriel had stood, as they too erupted into their true form.

Everything was suddenly a blur of shouting and walls crumbling around them. When Adrissu could see clearly again, his head was pressed right up against the ceiling; with a snarl, he flexed his wings and pushed upward, the beams splintering against him. A streak of red surged toward him; Heriel in her true form, her lithe body lunging forward to grapple Daiana in her claws. The woman screamed,

thrashing against Heriel. Granville was trembling all over as he whirled to see not one, but three dragons in his workshop, so large they made the walls crack and the ceiling crumble.

To his credit, Granville seemed to shake himself into action after only a moment, sprinting back toward the forge where other prototypes and weapons must have been kept. But he wasn't fast enough; Adrissu lunged at him, claws curling around his abdomen, and the human shouted in pain as fresh blood poured onto Adrissu's scales.

He heard Daiana still shouting behind him, and he sunk his claws in deeper, until Granville's face grew pale and his struggling ceased. Another screech pierced the air, this one draconic rather than human; Adrissu turned to see that Daiana had managed to pull a dagger from a holster somewhere on her hip or thigh, plunging it into Heriel's shoulder. Beside her, Naydrun was snarling, fire flickering behind their teeth, their claws reaching to wrench Daiana away from her.

But the very fact that a blade that small could break through dragon scale was setting off alarm bells in Adrissu's head—it had to be some kind of enchanted weapon; and the way Heriel thrust Daiana away from her and clutched at the wound, where the blade was still buried in the joint of her shoulder, only made him more sure that it had some effect beyond simply piercing flesh.

"What is this?" he snapped, dropping Granville's now-still body as he surged toward the struggle. A cruel smirk flashed across Daiana's face even as she struggled against Naydrun, and Adrissu reached out to stop the other dragon, but it was too late—fire exploded from Naydrun's maw, and the human's smirk vanished as the upper half of her body was engulfed in flame. She screamed, thrashing in Naydrun's claws, until the dragon bit down on her hard and her movement stilled. They threw aside the half-burnt body and leapt back toward Heriel.

"I—This—" Heriel stuttered, clutching at the wound with one claw. Beneath it, a spiderweb of sickly black was spreading outward from the wound. Suddenly, she gagged and spat out a thick stream of black ichor—both Adrissu and Naydrun froze, staring down at it in uncertainty and fear.

"Can you fly?" Naydrun urged, nudging her. "We have to get away from here. Can you try to fly?"

"Y-Yes," she choked, though her eyes were wide and frightened as her wings flapped weakly.

"Get out of here," Adrissu said. "I'll burn everything down and meet you back at the clearing where we landed."

"Right," Naydrun stammered, and together the two managed to take flight, Naydrun breaking through the damaged ceiling with Heriel following.

Whatever had been on Daiana's blade was deadly, Adrissu was sure, but was it lethal enough to kill a dragon? He would have to deal with that later; for now, he breathed fire toward the forge, heat

blooming around him as he quickly set the workshop ablaze. Then he, too, took flight and streamed more fire down onto the ruined building below. Now that he was in the open air, he could hear screaming and shouting. He could see Heriel and Naydrun already high up and flying away, though Heriel was lagging behind, and Naydrun kept doubling back to help her.

He would have to make sure that they were not followed. With the most fearsome roar he could muster, Adrissu breathed fire down onto the workshop again, then made a tight circle around the city, roaring and spitting fire onto the ground. People were fleeing and screaming beneath him, but he purposely tried not to hit anyone directly. It was not his city to burn, after all, and he only wanted to frighten them enough to ensure no brave idiot would try to follow them. He circled over what looked like an abandoned building, and hoping it truly was empty, he set fire to that one as well, before lifting into the air and heading to the clearing.

Soon the screaming faded away, and the only sound was the rush of wind as he sped through the air, looking down below for any sign of where the other two might have landed. Then, the noise of wood splitting, followed by an anguished roar—his heart sinking in his chest, Adrissu headed toward the source.

When he found the pair, he could see from the state of the surrounding trees that Heriel must have crash-landed, unable to fly any further. She was on the ground writhing, and Naydrun paced restlessly around her, looking up to the sky for Adrissu.

“You know healing magic, don’t you?” they exclaimed, as Adrissu landed beside them.

“A bit,” Adrissu answered with uncertainty, trying to get a better look at Heriel. Her eyes were wide and looking around frantically, her claws scrabbling in the soft earth as if she were trying to get up. As she moved, he could catch a glimpse of the blade still deep in her shoulder; the black veins he had first seen starting to spread out from the entry point had made a dark, thick border around her wound that spidered outward in every direction. It looked like poison, or some sort of blight enchantment that corroded or sickened. “Let me try.”

“Please,” Naydrun urged him. “I don’t—I don’t know anything like that. I can’t help her. Please, you have to try.”

“Hold her as still as you can,” Adrissu said, and Naydrun grabbed her good shoulder, bracing her against him as she struggled, growling and choking with pain. Gingerly, he placed his claws near the wound; she howled, trying to pull away, but Naydrun held her firmly. As quick as he could, Adrissu found the hilt of the blade and wrenched it free, wincing as she screamed and spat. She was trying to breathe fire at him, he was sure, but only a few weak embers escaped her—along with more black,

sticky ichor. The blood that poured from the now-open wound was tinged with black as well, but the spreading veins didn't seem to subside. Adrissu put his claws near the wound again, closing his eyes and reaching with his magic through the opening and into her body, feeling her blood as it traveled sluggishly through her.

It didn't feel like poison, at least not the kinds of poisons Dirge had shown him. It felt more magical than that: no toxin would work so unimaginably quickly on a creature as resilient as a dragon. Magic flowed through them like blood, so only an extremely powerful enchantment could do this to her. *Where*, he thought, did Daiana keep finding these things?

With his magic, he tried to draw out some of the rot—Heriel screeched, snapping at him in vain.

“Hold her still!” he hissed.

“I'm trying!” Naydrunn snarled back, their voice breaking. Adrissu could all but feel the anguish in their every word, and knew that Naydrunn would weep if they were human.

She was mindless with pain, but he had to keep trying. Adrissu leapt toward her again, pushing her long neck back with one claw, and pressing the other to her wound once more. His magic surged through her anew, and he tried every technique Dirge had taught him about drawing out toxins and neutralizing infections; but whatever enchantment the blade had on it was far more sophisticated than poisons made by mortal hands. Maybe this was some other weapon Granville had enchanted, just for Daiana, something that would kill a lesser creature near-instantly.

Heriel had finally gone very still, but her breathing was labored. Instead of roaring at him, she let out a long, drawn-out whimper—her frantic eyes finding Naydrunn and locking onto them.

“No, no,” Naydrunn panted, squeezing her with their claws. “No, stay, you have to *stay*--”

“I don't—I don't think I can get it out,” Adrissu said, his voice sounding small and frightened even to his own ears. “I've never... I don't know what this is. It isn't poison, but it's not like any magic I've ever seen before.”

“Heriel,” Naydrunn wailed, lowering their body so they could curl around her, as her body became still. “I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.”

One last time, Adrissu tried to reach in with his magic, searching for *anything* that he could draw out, any process he could still reverse, any weak pulse he could try to coax back to life—but all he could find was pain, and a heart that was fading away too quickly for him to stop.

It was useless. Quietly, he pulled away and took a few slow steps back, looking down at the ground to avoid having to witness Naydrunn come apart as Heriel's last ragged breaths faded into silence.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“I’ll kill them,” Naydrun snarled, sparks of rage spitting from their mouth as they paced back and forth beside Heriel’s body. “I’ll kill every last one of them—”

“You don’t want to do that,” Adrissu replied sharply, then shrunk back with a sigh. “I know. I know you want to. But it won’t bring her back. You have to keep yourself safe. If you died too, what would her soul be tethered to? You’ll only see her again if you live.”

Naydrun roared angrily, turning away from Adrissu, but at least they did not look like they were going to fly away. Instead, they took a few more paces, then all but collapsed next to Heriel with a long, low whine.

“How did they do this?” they finally croaked, not moving from where they lay. “How did a human kill her? What was that weapon?”

“I don’t know,” Adrissu admitted, looking back at the blade where he had thrown it to the ground. “It had some enchantment on it that caused the flesh it touched to rot, and the rot spread... I haven’t seen anything like it before. It looks like it would kill any mortal creature instantly. She had another weapon that was very dangerous, too, when I first met her. That time, it was the elves who had made it. This one, though, I don’t know.”

“And that crossbow,” Naydrun hissed, writhing. “We came here for that damned crossbow and it’s a blade that kills her? How are they creating these things?”

“Humans survive by being resourceful,” Adrissu replied. “But... with those two gone, and the rest of the town seeing three dragons wipe them out, I don’t think anyone will want to try anything similar for a long time. They know we’re watching now.”

Naydrun did not respond, only nodded silently. Adrissu sighed, then he too settled on the ground. He couldn’t leave Naydrun alone in this state. They sat quietly for a long while, until the sun was

setting and the sky was becoming orange, when finally Naydrun seemed to shake themselves into action, standing back up abruptly.

“I will tell Tyrsun about this,” they said bitterly. “So that he knows his arrogance killed his mother.”

If their previous warnings had gone unheeded, Adrissu doubted Tyrsun would care, at least not enough to change his behavior. They were his parents, and draconic custom would compel Tyrsun to allow them into his territory and to hear them out, but whether or not he obeyed would be entirely up to his own discretion.

But he could not say as much to Naydrun, so he only nodded.

“Should we burn her here?” he asked softly, and the other dragon shook their head vehemently.

“No,” they spat, as if the very idea was offensive. “No, I... I can carry her. If not back to Robruolor, at least somewhere far from here.”

“Alright, then,” Adrissu sighed, taking another step away. “I... I don’t know what to say. I’m sorry this happened. But she will come back to you. You only have to be patient. It’s hard, but that’s all there is to it.”

Naydrun was silent, their expression unreadable as they stared down at Heriel’s body, not once looking back up at Adrissu.

Finally, he added nervously, “Keep the enchanted paper. I will do my best to monitor the situation here and... If another threat like this should arise again, I’ll keep you informed.”

“Yes,” Naydrun said. “And let me know if Tyrsun keeps... acting out, if you can.”

“I will,” Adrissu replied. “I’ll leave you alone now. I... Well, goodbye.”

“Zamnes,” Naydrun interrupted, before he could get very far. “Your mate has come back to you before?”

“A few times, now,” he said softly.

They were silent again for a long moment.

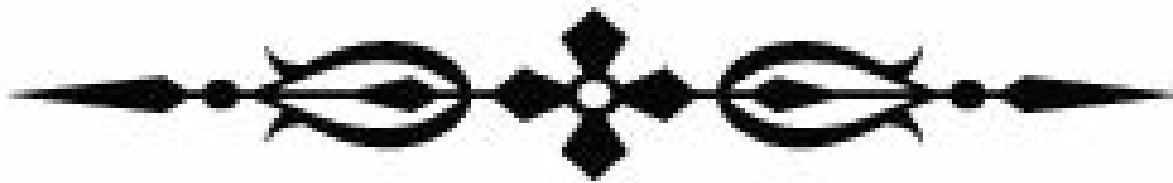
“Then all three of us have known this,” they muttered. “I am... sorry for how I spoke to you before.”

Adrissu hesitated, but they said nothing else.

“I understand,” he finally replied. He did not forgive them, exactly, but Naydrun’s slumped form was so miserable that he couldn’t help but pity them. “I am sorry all three of us are in the same unenviable club now. Hopefully, we will all have better news for each other the next time we speak.”

Naydrun nodded, but did not speak again. After a moment, Adrissu turned and took to the air, flying high before heading south, back toward Polimnos. It was not quite dark, but it would be by the

time he returned home.



Adrissu wrote on their shared parchment only once. Part of him felt responsible for how the meeting had gone, even though it had been their idea in the first place. A small, petty part of him was almost glad to see the other dragon's suffering, after having played a part in his own suffering in the past—but that feeling was far outweighed by the part of him that still felt the same tense respect he and Heriel had shared—and he was sorry to have had a hand, however indirect, in her demise.

In the end, he wrote only a sentence: *If there is anything I can do to help you, please ask.* The parchment didn't have the space for him to elucidate any further, but he thought the message struck a balance between succinct and sympathetic.

He checked periodically over the next several days, but Naydruun never wrote back. It was just as well, he supposed, as the idea of having any further correspondence with them made him feel anxious. Instead, he kept his head down as the new term began, listening to the shocking news and swirling rumors about the dragon attack that had decimated several buildings in Wintergrove. From all reports, Daiana and Granville were the only two casualties, though he was sure others must have been injured.

"A red, a blue, and a black," he overheard one of his professors saying to another, as they ate lunch in a school courtyard the first week of class. "The red must have been the one local to Wintergrove, and I'd bet anything the black was Zamnes."

"You think so?" the other professor asked, sounding surprised. "He hasn't been spotted in years... What would he be doing in Wintergrove?"

"He must still be around," the other replied in a hushed tone. "That he knew what was going on... It's frightening to think about, isn't it?"

"And what about the blue? I've heard nothing about a blue dragon anywhere near here. Do they travel so far? I know Kipp was developing weapons, but... Is that really all it took? Why there? Why now?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"Well, let's hope it's another, what, hundred years before he's spotted again. Hopefully, whatever woke him from his slumber is over now."

He should not have been surprised they suspected it was Zamnes—after all, there was no other black dragon nearby, so who else could it have been? Still, it unsettled him to hear his own professors discussing him with such blatant fear, so he stayed in his elven form exclusively for a few months afterward. When he risked taking on his true form again, he was excessively cautious, never leaving his lair unless the sun had been down for at least an hour, and returning well before sunrise.

He did not hear from Naydruun; and once all the chatter had died down about the dragon attack in Wintergrove, he heard nothing about that either for a long while. He kept an ear out for rumors about new weapons, those that were magically enhanced especially, and often asked Alana Pughes about anyone else that had used her steam enchantments for similar purposes. For several years, it seemed no one wanted to risk drawing the attention of not one, but three dragons once again.

Instead, researchers in Gennemont approached Alana with an idea for something new entirely: the steam-powered cart had inspired them, and they had almost completed planning on something far more ambitious. They aimed to create something like a ship that would levitate magically, while using steam to steer and propel it. Their progress impressed her, and after some back and forth, she elected to bring the team of researchers to Polimnos so they could work on the project together.

When word of this project spread, Adrissu was certain proposals would be submitted for even more new uses of steam augmentation—and sure enough, the next year, many senior theses included steam augmentation to improve or expand upon one thing or another, several of which were adjacent enough to weaponry that Adrissu denied them outright. He would have to keep a close eye on those students, even after they left the academy. Part of him was certain that something as dangerous as Kipp's steam-powered crossbow would be developed eventually; but while he was here, he had to do what he could to slow its progress, or at least prevent it from happening in his very territory.

Luckily, projects proposed by his students were easy to keep tabs on; and for several years, it did not seem like anything threatening was on the horizon.

But, of course, the memory eventually grew stale; and over a decade later, Adrissu heard the beginnings of such a weapon being developed again. The people of Wintergrove, once cowed by three angry dragons all at once, had again chafed against the red dragon's continued influence that stifled the growth of their city. A few brave souls were trying to pick up the research from what Granville Kipp and Daiana had left behind, this time with a far more obvious purpose: they called their weapon the *Dragonslayer*. Adrissu knew of the moniker before even the names of the humans working on the project. The absolute gall of it was like poison sticking in his throat.

This time, its development was not associated with the Academy in any way—when he tracked down the names of those working on it, he did not recognize any of them as former students, which surprised him. It was, at best, an unsettling reminder that for all the power he had over his dominion, there was much of the world he had almost no knowledge of, and even less influence over. Regardless, he made an effort to keep tabs on the project; but with no official reason to be involved, it proved difficult to gain any information beyond the observations of others in Wintergrove and the speculation of the teachers and students at the Feld Heslyn campus.

The secondary campus, though, was doing extremely well. Ned, Eris, and their two daughters were thriving there; and every time Adrissu visited, whether on business or pleasure, Ned was excited to see him and had some piece of good news to share. Adrissu would visit at least once a year, usually near the end of the term, so Ned could tell him about how the school year had gone, compare students or grades, and discuss plans for the following year. Eris always seemed glad to see him, too, though sometimes she still seemed a little embarrassed that she had promised him so readily that she would return to her job and never had. But their two daughters kept her quite busy, and with Ned's career only continuing to grow, she had not taken another job since they'd moved to Feld Heslyn. They always welcomed him warmly, and while Adrissu would not consider them as friends, the time he spent with them was typically more pleasant than not.

Ned was much less concerned about the development of steam-augmented weapons than Adrissu, though, which was often the sole point of contention between them when Adrissu came to visit. He always wanted to know more about what was being developed than Ned could tell him, and Ned usually seemed bewildered at best, and irritated at worst, by Adrissu's urgent interest in the matter.

"If it's weapons they want, it's weapons they're going to make," he would sigh, shaking his head. "Not much we can do to stop it, Headmaster. The best we can do is just not get involved."

His words were never reassuring, so beyond asking what rumors Ned had heard, Adrissu learned within a few years that his trips were more enjoyable if he didn't ask too much about it.

When it had been about twenty years since Kian's death, he tried to look a little more closely at the people he encountered, students that walked through his halls, and young men he passed in the streets. He never felt that telltale sense of knowing—of being drawn to someone without knowing who they were—but still he felt the small hope that today might be the day, every time he left Saltspire Tower.

But it did not happen that year, nor the year after, nor the next several years. He wondered if maybe his mate ended up far from him again, the way Braern had, and hoped he would not miss him in that lifetime. It seemed unlikely, however—if Kian's memories indicated anything, his mate would have

some awareness of him even from a young age; and if they ended up far apart, he thought it likely that his mate would come to seek him out anew. But all he could do was hope and wait.

Adrissu was in Feld Heslyn, visiting Ned for his yearly check-in, on the thirtieth anniversary of Kian's death. He never meant to keep track of these morbid anniversaries, but it was hard not to dwell upon it after so long without his mate.

It was strange visiting them now. Even with his half-elven blood, Ned was beginning to look visibly older; and Eris was an old woman, her face lined and her hair gray. Their two daughters were full adults: their eldest taught illusion classes at the Academy, and the youngest was an artisan, crafting and selling pottery out of a small studio on the other side of Feld Heslyn, so he hardly saw her even when he visited. He had rarely kept acquaintances for so long, so it was strange to have seen their children grow into adults and to witness the gradual changes in their faces, as time took its toll on them in the way it never would on him.

When he and Ned were sitting alone in the half-elf's study, full of wine and breathing in the cloying smell of tobacco emanating from a wooden pipe they passed between them, he ventured asking his usual question: "Have you heard anything about steam-augmented weapons this year?"

Ned sighed, leaning back heavily in his chair as he took a deep drag of the pipe. He did not answer for a long moment, even after he had finished blowing smoke-rings toward the open window where cool evening air wafted in. It was unlike him to take so much time before answering, which made Adrissu's pulse jump with anxiety.

"Yes, actually," he finally said, handing the pipe over to Adrissu. It was nearly empty, but Adrissu took a polite puff before passing it back to be refilled. "And rather recent, too. Just last month, I heard the same group that was expounding on that old steam-powered crossbow design has moved to something more... ambitious. The way it was described to me, it was less like a crossbow, and more like a... a cannon, but handheld. Its projectile was smaller, but could shoot faster than a crossbow bolt."

"Hmm," Adrissu grunted in response, frowning. "A hand-held cannon? I can't imagine such a thing would be safe to handle."

"It's much more reliant on warding magic than the crossbow, to my understanding," Ned said, shaking his head. "I know the mass-production of such things concerns you, so this at least seems like something that would have to be handmade by an enchanter for the foreseeable future, and would be too expensive to get into the hands of many."

"I still don't like it," Adrissu muttered.

“I know you don’t,” Ned chuckled darkly. “Ever the pacifist. But it’s not under our jurisdiction, so not much to be done except monitor it.”

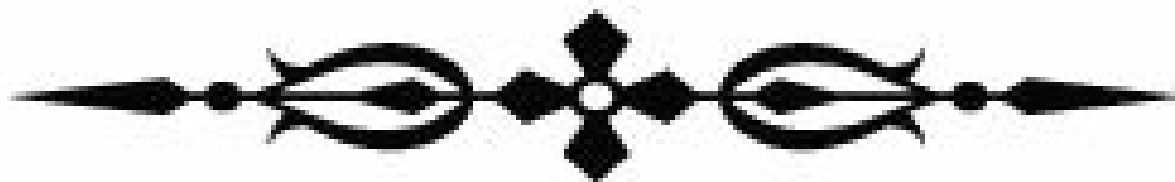
“This is that same group in Wintergrove?” Adrissu asked, and Ned nodded in response. “I can’t believe they’re trying this *there*, of all places. Aren’t they afraid of dragons finding out again?”

“They’re young, Adrissu. They don’t remember the dragon attack, if they were even alive when it happened, so of course it’s not something they’re concerned about. And I think they’re doing their best to keep things under wraps as much as they can, for now,” Ned sighed. “Since this seems so much more dangerous and, really, less accessible to the public. I only know about it because a former student is an acquaintance with one of their enchanters. Actually, you might know him—he’s a full elf, and I know there aren’t many of those this far southeast. His name is Pollux Blackthorn. I only recall because it’s unusual for elves to be so established in Autreth and have translated surnames like that, so I figured he must come from a notable family.”

“Blackthorn,” Adrissu repeated, mentally filing through all the elven families he knew of in Polimnos and its nearest neighbors. Blackthorn was not among them; as Ned had said, it was unusual that any elven family would not have an elven surname. “Pollux Blackthorn... No, I don’t think I recognize the name. You said a former student knew him?”

“Yes,” Ned replied, and his expression soured. “Don’t go getting any ideas, Adrissu. The student isn’t involved. Leave it alone.”

“I’m not planning anything,” Adrissu lied, shaking his head in protest. He would not ask about the student, but quietly he was already planning to make a stop in Wintergrove on his way home. That would have to suffice.



The rest of his trip to Feld Heslyn went well; he made his usual circuit to greet each of the teachers and speak with some scholars, mainly older students on the cusp of graduating, who were always eager to talk his ear off or seek guidance on their future endeavors.

He had dinner separately with Ned’s eldest daughter Shima, who had always been fond of him and called him “uncle”. She was cheerful and always happy to see him, but seemed far less interested in the goings-on of the rest of the world even compared to Ned, so she never had anything to say to him

that he didn't already know. This time, though, rather than telling him about her personal life, she nervously asked if she could come work for him at the Academy in Polimnos.

"Polimnos?" he repeated, surprised. "You don't want to keep working here, with your father?"

"I've been in Feld Heslyn all my life," she said, shaking her head. "I want to see what other places are like. I tutored before this and I enjoy teaching, but... I've just been thinking, it would be nice to see what life is like in other places."

Adrissu thought it over for a moment. She was only a quarter elf—she might live long enough that he would have to worry about changing her memories of him the way he had with her parents, but maybe not. It would not hurt to have her in Polimnos, all things considered.

"I cannot promise a teaching job," he said, shaking his head. "But at the start of the next term, I could hire you as my secretary. Would you be alright with that?"

She beamed widely at him. "Yes, I'd love that."

He smiled back at her. Ned would be less happy about it, he was sure, but all children had to leave their parents eventually. Plus, he thought, Eris would be pleased.

Once his social visit was complete, and there were no more meetings, formal or otherwise, Adrissu said his goodbyes and walked about a half mile out of the city before taking his draconic form and heading east for Wintergrove. If he flew directly there, it would have taken only an hour, if that; but he was careful to give the populated areas a wide berth, especially when he drew near to Tyrsun's territory. Finally, he landed down in a heavily forested area where he could change back to his elven form and walk the rest of the way, so it was nearing sunset when he arrived in Wintergrove.

Like most of the villages and towns in this part of Autreth, it had grown considerably in the past few decades and was significantly larger than it had been when Adrissu first visited. It was large enough now that there were several inns and taverns he could choose from. Even though it had been long enough that he was certain that Luc, the owner of the tavern where he had met Daiana, was surely long dead—and his son probably too old to remember him, if he still operated it at all—he decided still to go to a different inn on the other side of town. In part, Adrissu wanted to avoid even the slightest chance that his visit might be remembered and remarked upon; but also, a new inn in the more up-and-coming part of town was more likely to house rumors of the new weapon being developed here in Wintergrove.

He did little that first night, tired from his travel and eager to relax. The next day, though, he sat in the tavern and watched people go by, noting younger folks and those who looked like they could be mages or tinkerers themselves—any who might know about the weapon, or those developing it. He

had very little luck with the lunch crowd, so in the afternoon he left the tavern and instead took a long, meandering walk through the neighborhood, listening for any indication of workshops or unusual smiths. There he had better luck; he noticed a blacksmith's apprentice working on an odd-looking metal tube. When he asked the human about it, the boy told him they supplied small pipes and things of that nature to an enchantment studio operating out of that district, which sounded promising.

Adrissu asked the boy where the enchanter worked, but he had never been there and could only point him in a general direction. Adrissu thanked him anyway and resumed his search, but he could find nothing that seemed like the kind of workshop he was looking for, so he resolved to return in the morning and give the neighborhood a closer look. He returned to his room, had a decent meal, and rested.

The next morning he set back out in that part of town, making a careful circuit up and down its orderly roads. It was mostly inhabited by artisans, so the buildings were eclectic and mismatched, despite the neat grid of walkways that they were built upon. He passed a pottery studio painted a deep eggplant purple, and a shop where a woman was sketching a mural on a pastel-pink wall. The streets were already noisy with activity, so Adrissu blended in easily with the various passers-by milling about.

In the early afternoon, he found it. It was a nondescript building compared to many of the others Adrissu had seen that morning, built of practical brick with an unassuming metal sign beside the door: *Blackthorn Enchantments*.

He hesitated in front of the door for a moment, then began to walk again, giving himself time to come up with a plan now that he'd actually found it. The only name he knew was Blackthorn, but there was no guarantee the elf would be there, and he needed a reason to see the studio even if he were absent. He would need something enchanted, then—perhaps Adrissu was a visitor and had lost an item he needed—or, no, he was interested in getting a gift for a friend, something special, something unique.

Once his story was set, Adrissu turned around and headed back toward the enchantment studio, still at the same casual pace. This time, when he approached, he pulled open the door and peered inside. It opened into a small showroom with several items displayed on shelves and wall mounts, and a human sitting behind a counter who perked up as Adrissu stepped inside.

"Hello, welcome," the man said, smiling up at him. "Can I help you find anything in particular?"

"Well, I'm looking to have something custom done," Adrissu said, flashing the man a polite smile. "And I'm hoping you can give me some insight whether it's something you can do."

“Sure, let’s hear it.”

“I’m here on a leisure trip, and I’d like to get a souvenir for a friend,” Adrissu continued. “I had a thought, but I’m not certain how to execute it. I was thinking something small, like a locket, but when opened it would display a larger picture, maybe an image of Wintergrove. Would something like that be some kind of little illusion, or...?”

“Definitely!” the man answered brightly. “We can do something like that. Do you have a locket you’d like to enchant?”

“No, I don’t have anything yet.”

“That’s alright, we can produce one for you, too, but that will take an extra day, if that’s alright with you.”

“That is acceptable,” Adrissu said, bowing his head slightly in agreement. “I have to admit, I’m curious about how such things are made. Would you just buy a necklace from another store and enchant it? Or would the locket need to be made yourselves in order for the magic to work?”

The man laughed, his eyes crinkling. “We can do either way, although flashier stuff needs to be made in-house—just the nature of how enchantments work. Do you know anything about magic?”

“A little bit,” Adrissu answered.

“Would you like to have a peek at our workstations? I know people are often curious,” the man said, and Adrissu nodded. He gestured for Adrissu to come around the counter, then unlocked the door behind him.

“I am rather interested to see how it’s done,” Adrissu agreed, and followed him through. “Do you do anything bigger than little trinkets like this? I’d imagine you must work on a variety of projects if you have multiple workstations.”

“That’s correct,” the man said, starting to explain, but Adrissu mostly tuned him out as they entered the back room. There were several small stations with humans working at them, each set up with a large stone table carved with various runes that Adrissu recognized as different variations of enchantment: some quite simple, while others were complex even at a cursory glance. Near the back was a forge, similar to what he had seen Granville Kipp use all those years ago. He did not recognize any of the humans, three of whom waved politely at him as the human giving him the tour led him by; but the larger forge in the back was unoccupied.

“What is that big station in the back?” he asked, interrupting the man’s explanation. The man hesitated, glancing between Adrissu and the forge.

“That’s for very complex projects,” he said, and to his credit, his tone was just as cheerful and informative as it had been. “We’re actually doing some cutting-edge applications of steam-augmented magic, the same kind that’s used to power hot water and light fixtures in cities like Wintergrove. Unfortunately, I can’t really tell you much, though. As you might imagine, lots of contracts and patrons limiting what we can say about it.”

“Of course,” Adrissu said, and let the man continue with his routine; but he kept his attention on the forge, trying to figure out as much as he could from this distance. The size and shape of it was familiar, but the magical components within were mostly hidden from his sight; the few that he could see were not immediately recognizable to him.

“So Lathe here would be the one who would work on your locket,” the man continued, pulling Adrissu’s attention to the youngest human working there: a bespectacled, dark-haired boy who must have been no more than twenty, who gave him a friendly smile as his gaze lingered on his ears. “He’s just graduated from his apprenticeship, but I can assure you his work would be of perfect quality for a project like yours.”

“I see,” Adrissu said, then nodded. “Well, I look forward to seeing it, then.”

“I can have it done in three days’ time,” the boy offered.

Adrissu started to answer, but a sudden, painful awareness of another dragon made him shudder. A dragon was approaching from the northeast, and rapidly. It must have been Tyrsun, he thought angrily, biting down the panic that was bubbling in his chest. He had to get away from here.

“Yes, that’s fine,” he stammered, turning aside. “I’m so sorry, I’ve just realized, I left my coin purse at the tavern. Let me go get it. I’ll come right back, I’m sorry, how foolish of me—”

“Oh, that’s alright,” the first man said affably, completely unaware of the imminent danger approaching them. “Here, let me show you the exit. I’ll get an order form started for you, so you can just fill out the details when you get back.”

Adrissu followed him back to the door that they had come through, internally seething at his comfortable pace. Once they were back in the showroom, Adrissu hurried for the door, nodding and agreeing absently as the man pulled out a sheet of parchment from the desk. But he was out the door before the man could even finish his sentence, calling out behind him, “I’ll be right back.”

The sky was clear when he looked up, but he could still sense Tyrsun getting closer. Adrissu was on the western side of town, so Tyrsun wouldn’t be anywhere near him when he flew over the city, at least. But still, Adrissu couldn’t risk being seen. He hesitated for a moment on the street, then hurried

through the alleyway and behind the building, heading south to get as far away from the dragon as he could.

It was barely a minute later that he heard first a warning horn, then distant shouts—then the unmistakable roar of a dragon. Adrissu winced and pressed himself closer to the building he was slinking past, every instinct in him desperate to get away from the other dragon, to flee its territory as quickly as he could.

“I know you’re here!” he could just make out the dragon shouting, anger rumbling through his voice. “You think I wouldn’t sense you in *my* territory? You think I wouldn’t know that you’re here? Hiding like a human—*coward!*”

Adrissu remained motionless, waiting for the dragon to draw closer. It was only a matter of time before he was found—still he could sense Tyrsun circling the city, drawing closer with each pass—and then he heard the heavy flapping of wings and knew that he was close. A shadow passed over the sunlight that was streaming down through the alley, and Adrissu flinched, but it was too small to be the dragon.

He looked up toward the rooftop, seeing a silhouetted figure standing above him, and it felt like his heart stopped. He couldn’t make out the man’s features, but everything within him felt pulled toward the person, his *mate*.

Adrissu stood stunned, motionless for a heartbeat that felt like minutes, then a shadow passed over them both. The hulking red form landed heavily on a rooftop on the opposite side of the alley as his mate, ignoring the other figure as his burning yellow eyes turned toward Adrissu. His vibrant face split into a cruel grin that showed his rows and rows of pearly, razor-sharp teeth.

“*Found you.*”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Adrissu had never been so at a loss for words in his life. His mate was *there*, maybe peering down at him, maybe focused entirely on the dragon—he had no idea what he was going to do. He wanted to reach for his mate, protect him from Tyrsun’s terrifying visage, yet the red focused only on Adrissu. He wanted to show his submission to the other dragon, as was custom when in another’s territory, but he knew that Tyrsun was unpredictable at best, and might take that opportunity to cause him true harm.

Instead, he held his hands up in a display of non-aggression.

“I have no ill intent toward you,” he said, his voice trembling even to his own ears. “Please accept my sincere apology. I was friends with your parents—Heriel the Red, and Naydruun the Blue.”

Tyrsun seemed to hesitate at that, his yellow eyes narrowing suspiciously. Adrissu did not expect that to move him, though. The red leaned even closer to him, embers flickering in his mouth.

“You are no friend of mine,” he hissed. “Tell me why I shouldn’t kill you where you stand.”

“I’ll leave right now,” Adrissu continued, but a strange mechanical sound from above interrupted him. He and Tyrsun looked up at the same time—the dragon snarled, but Adrissu still couldn’t quite make out exactly what was happening.

The weapon, Adrissu realized; and without being able to truly think about what he was doing, he reached out with his magic and shoved his mate just as a loud *bang* exploded through the alleyway. Several things happened all at once. Light and steam burst from a long, narrow rod that the figure held in both hands; and at almost the same instant, a second rush of magic sent the steam flying away from his face and body—the wards Ned had mentioned. Tyrsun let out a hideous shriek, pain and rage roiling off him; and when Adrissu looked, the segment of his wing that was closest to his shoulder had been torn to shreds, gushing blood down his body.

Above, his mate staggered with the force that had changed his trajectory and tumbled from the rooftop. With a shout, Adrissu reached out with his magic again to try to break his fall.

The elf tumbled down next to him, though he kept a tight grip on the weapon even as he fell. Adrissu only had an instant to look for injuries, marking his mate's fair skin and dark hair on a body that was nearly as tall as his own, before Tyrsun swiped at them both with his claws, howling in agony.

"I'll kill you!" he roared, light spilling from between his teeth.

They had to get away. Adrissu threw himself to the ground beside his mate, grabbing his wrist with one hand and snapping his fingers with the other. The surrounding air lurched as he teleported them, as far away as he could manage, far enough that Tyrsun could not sense where they were. The light around them warped and shifted, and as all the energy drained from Adrissu's body, they were no longer in the alley.

He brought them to a small clearing in the forest that surrounded Wintergrove: the place where he had touched down several miles from the city itself. He had never teleported himself so far before, and as his mate stumbled to his feet, Adrissu could only roll over with a groan. His limbs felt impossibly heavy and his head swam, unable to tell which way was up, until his mate entered his line of vision, peering down at him from above.

"Why didn't you let me kill him?" the other man snapped, and the icy rage in his voice pulled Adrissu's attention back. He tried to push himself up into a sitting position, but something pressed against his chest—the weapon, he realized with a hot surge of fear. It was long and narrow, much more narrow than the broad augmented crossbow that he had seen once before, with a polished wooden handle housing a heavy trigger. The metal was fastened to a thick, flexible tube on the end closest to his mate, and Adrissu's eyes followed to where it connected to a strange, square device on his hip. That must have been where the steam was generated, he thought, which was certainly an improvement to Kipp's design with its heavy canister affixed to the crossbow's handle.

"We need him alive," Adrissu panted, forcing himself to look away from the weapon and into the face of his mate.

He realized with a somewhat pleased jolt of surprise that the other man was an elf, exceedingly beautiful in that otherworldly way, despite the sour expression on his face. His eyes were a brown so light that they appeared golden, and his hair was raven-dark, pulled into a long, loose braid that flowed over his right shoulder down almost to his waist.

"Give me a good reason why I shouldn't have killed you both," the elf pressed.

"Kill me, then," Adrissu groaned, letting his head tip back. He felt like he had fallen from the top of his tower—silently, he resolved to never again try teleportation at such a distance—so he couldn't

fight his mate off, even if he wanted to. “You know what I am. Who I am. You wouldn’t be rid of me for long.”

He felt more than heard the elf above him spit in indignation. For a long moment, both were silent, then slowly Adrissu risked lifting his head again, opening one eye to peer up at the other man. He was looking down pensively at him, a bitter expression on his face. Then, finally, he sighed, looked away, and lifted the weapon away from Adrissu’s chest.

“Get up,” he muttered, now nudging Adrissu with his boot. “He might come looking for us.”

“I don’t think so. You ripped up his wing and damaged his ego, if nothing else,” Adrissu replied, trying to push himself up off the ground. His limbs didn’t quite feel normal, and it took a few tries before he managed to stumble to his feet.

“Why are you even here?” the elf pressed.

“For that,” Adrissu said, gesturing toward the weapon in his hand. “I can see you’re involved somehow. Would you mind putting the pieces together for me? You know who I am, don’t you?”

“Yes,” the elf spat, his expression darkening again. “I know who you are. That’s why I’m here, and you’re not supposed to be here.”

Distantly, Adrissu felt like the words should have stung, but he could barely keep up with the conversation as it was.

“What’s your name?” he asked, realizing he still didn’t know.

“Pollux Blackthorn,” the elf replied, and Adrissu couldn’t stop himself from laughing at the absurdity of it all. “Does that amuse you?”

“It’s not that,” he said, biting his lip to stifle himself. “No, the only lead I had about this dragon slaying weapon of yours was the name Pollux Blackthorn. I was in your enchantment studio right before the red showed up. Of course it would be you. Of *course*.”

Pollux was still looking at him with a cold expression; Adrissu couldn’t get a read on what he was thinking, except that the other elf was extremely unhappy to be in this situation.

“I still don’t understand why you’re involved in this,” he said, gesturing again at the weapon. “If you remember me... Do you really hate me so much now?”

“I don’t hate you,” Pollux said, though his expression implied otherwise. “I hate what you’ve done to me. I’d hoped I’d have the means to kill you if you came looking for me, so you could get a sense of what this misery is like.”

Adrissu frowned, his head clearing up enough for the words to trouble him. He extended his arms at his sides, fingers splayed wide. “Well, here I am, perhaps the weakest I’ll ever be around you. I

already told you to kill me if that's what you want."

Pollux's eyes tightened, and he looked away, glaring down at the dirt. "I don't want to kill you now."

That heartened him, if only a bit. His mate still seemed to really hate him this time, but at least he wouldn't die by his hand. That had to count for something, didn't it?

"I don't think I entirely understand," Adrissu said, shaking his head. "But I'm not exactly in great shape to be having a deep discussion at the moment, I think."

"I would agree with that," Pollux said, eyeing Adrissu's feet, which were unsteady even as he stood still.

"You live in Wintergrove, don't you? Can we maybe meet over a meal and clear the air?"

Pollux's frown deepened, but he remained silent for a long moment.

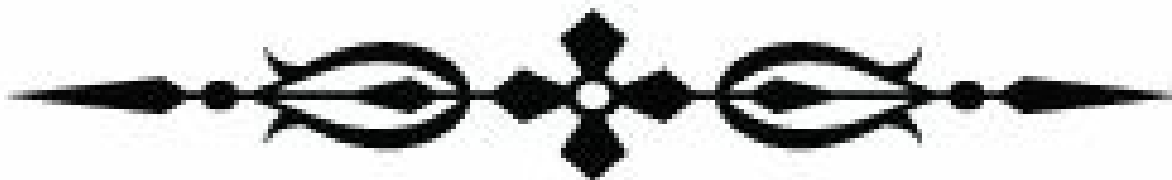
"One meal. That's all," he finally relented, still frowning over at Adrissu. "There's a restaurant in the town square run by an elven family. We can have dinner there. You're paying."

"Do you really want to have this kind of conversation in public?" Adrissu protested.

"Yes," the elf answered dryly, already turning to leave. "Don't get eaten by a bear out here. I'll see you at sundown tomorrow."

When Pollux turned aside, Adrissu leaned heavily against a tree, his hands trembling. Still, he watched the elf walk away as if transfixed, unable to focus on anything but his mate. Pollux was *here*—he had been so close to him all afternoon. Pollux had wanted to kill him. The thought should have frightened him, should have concerned him wildly; but in truth, it only made him wonder how violent their sex might be. There was a certain appeal to fucking someone who wanted him dead, now that he considered it.

When Pollux had vanished amid the trees, presumably walking back to town, Adrissu allowed himself to slump back down to the dirt, closing his eyes as his head still swam and his heart slowed to a less rapid thrum. He would not be disturbed here in the middle of the woods, he thought, so he curled up on the ground and almost instantly fell asleep.



Adrissu awoke with a start just after sunset, the sky dark, but with a faint tinge of orange to the west. He almost thought he had dreamed it all—the confrontation with Tyrsun, finally meeting his mate, all

of it. But waking alone in the middle of the forest, his body still sore while his mind began to clear, snapped it all into focus. A sinking feeling of dread settled into the pit of his stomach as it all replayed in his head. He had been entirely foolish, and his mate *hated* him. No, he had said he hated what Adrissu had done to him, but there was barely a distinction. How was he going to fix this?

He mulled it over during his long walk back to town, through the main avenue, and back to the tavern where he was staying. He lay awake thinking about it for several hours, unable to sleep as he played the strange interaction over in his mind again and again. It occurred to him, too, that Pollux was very young for an elf—he couldn't be more than thirty, and elves only considered themselves full adults at twenty-five. Did he have a family here, parents and siblings? He must have been very accomplished to have an entire enchantment studio in his name only a few short years into adulthood.

It was difficult not to speculate, even though he knew that he would get no answers until they were able to meet and discuss everything. Still, it perturbed him for his mate to be so outwardly hostile toward him; Kian had been prickly at first, too, but had only tried to avoid Adrissu. He would not have ever expected his mate to threaten to kill him, holding a loaded weapon made specifically to slay dragons up to his chest. What had happened for his mate to be so angry with him? Would he really try to kill Adrissu?

As long as Pollux lived, Adrissu's soul would be tethered to him, so while he was not entirely enthused at the prospect of death, neither was it so terrifying as to put him off all interaction with his mate. Pollux appeared to know that as well; but Adrissu was uncertain as to what, exactly, the other man did and did not remember about their past lives together. If he were so unhappy with what Adrissu had done to him—which he assumed to mean the cycle of reincarnation, since Kian had expressed some dissatisfaction with that as well—why wouldn't he seek Adrissu out sooner to perform the soul transference and be done with the cycle he seemed to hate so much?

He knew mortals were not always the most logical of creatures, but still, it did not make sense to him. He would just have to wait.

The next day was maddeningly slow, and it felt as though he were simply wasting his time waiting for sundown, until he could meet with Pollux again. He only bothered leaving his room to ask the innkeeper about the restaurant Pollux had mentioned, which was easy enough to puzzle out: it was the only one owned and operated by an elven family in all of Wintergrove. The innkeeper gave him the name and a recommendation to try their house white wine.

So Adrissu twiddled his thumbs all afternoon and took a long walk around the town square as sunset approached, putting his name in early at the restaurant and sitting idly with a glass of wine for

nearly half an hour before he caught sight of Pollux entering the building.

The elf wore a set of dark robes that were practical and plain, but of much nicer quality than the work clothes he had been wearing when they met yesterday. Pollux caught Adrissu's gaze from across the restaurant, hesitated, then walked toward him. As he drew nearer, Adrissu could see silver accents on the hems of his robe, sparkling threads that caught the light on his collar and his sleeves. He hid a smile in his glass of wine; it was a flattering look on him, despite his stony expression.

"Hello," Pollux said stiffly, as he sat down across from Adrissu.

"Thank you for coming," Adrissu replied, managing a smile. "I wasn't sure if you were going to come after all. That one's for you."

Pollux looked suspiciously at the glass of wine in front of him, but begrudgingly picked it up and took a sip. His eyebrows raised slightly, and he took a small second sip before setting it back down.

"So," he said, looking resolutely down at the table instead of at Adrissu. "What shall we talk about?"

"What do you remember about me?" Adrissu asked. Pollux frowned.

"I remember enough."

"But *what* do you remember? Everything? Most of it? If there are any gaps in your knowledge, I'd be happy to fill you in. I want to make sure we're on the same page."

Pollux was silent for a long moment. Then, finally, he started in a small voice, "I remember most of it, I think. I remember being a human, and an elf before that... And I think a human before that, as well, but it gets blurry. I know I'll keep reincarnating to come back to you. I know... what you are. Who you are. I remember you quite clearly, clearer than any other details of my past lives. I remember... dying." He flinched as he said it, and Adrissu's heart squeezed painfully.

"I'm sorry for the burden that must have been on you," Adrissu replied softly, and almost immediately Pollux's expression hardened to stone once again.

"Don't say that," he answered quickly. "I know you're not sorry about what you've done."

"I'm not sorry for that, no. But that's not what I said," Adrissu replied, relishing in the flash of angry heat that crossed Pollux's face. "I don't want you to suffer. That was never part of my plan. If you remember most of it, then surely you remember that we had a solution to it, a plan to..." He trailed off uncomfortably.

"What got me killed last time," Pollux said flatly, and Adrissu nodded. "Yes. I remember that too."

"Then why did you try to avoid me? Why wouldn't you come to me so we could fix this?"

Pollux did not seem to have an answer to that, looking down at his wine with an expression Adrissu couldn't place. It frustrated Adrissu to feel like he understood his mate so poorly, but already he could tell that pressing Pollux for an answer was likely to drive him further into silence. Instead, he drank deeply from his own glass and waited.

It took a minute for Pollux to find the words that he was searching for. When he spoke, his voice seemed even smaller than before, making Adrissu painfully aware that the elf was still terribly young.

"I don't know why," he murmured, his face pinched in a bitter frown. "The first thing I could remember feeling about all this, the more I remembered, was being angry. It all felt so unfair. And that was the motivation for so much of my life that I don't think I ever thought about it beyond just... needing to be angry."

Adrissu mulled this over for a moment, considering the abrupt change in Pollux's tone. "Tell me about your life," he finally said, in as gentle a tone as he could manage. "You know about me, but I don't know anything about you yet. Tell me about yourself."

"I am an orphan," he said sharply, the cold mask falling into place again effortlessly. "I grew up in the Sunrise Children's Estate, about a day's journey west of Polimnos. It's distantly related to the mercenary guild you were once involved in, so the most robust option for the children there to make their own way is through the combat training they provide. I participated in this until I aged out. I'd earned enough for two years of study at the Feld Heslyn campus."

"You were a student at the Academy?" Adrissu interrupted, for the first time utterly taken aback. Pollux had been in his own secondary campus and yet they had never met?

"I purposely avoided you, if that's what you're asking," he responded dryly. "And like I said, I could only afford two years. But I had a natural aptitude, and remembered much of what I knew in the past, so... That was all I needed to get a foothold in the field of weapon enchantment. I heard that there was a group trying to expand on the research of Granville Kipp and Daiana Gray in Wintergrove, so I headed here after I left the Academy. It only took two years or so before I spearheaded that group, and we'd earned enough money on other enchantment jobs to set up a dedicated studio, which you've seen. So I have some employees working on rote enchantments to pay the bills, while I work on the... Well, the weapon."

"The Dragonslayer," Adrissu remarked. To his credit, Pollux had the decency to look cowed.

"Well, it's technically not the Dragonslayer," he said. "The Dragonslayer is a variation on Kipp's original design. The new one is my design."

"Does it have a name, then? I'm sure you don't just call it *the weapon*."

Now he was looking uncomfortable. “They’ve just been calling it the Blackthorn.”

Adrissu stifled a laugh at the irony of it all. Evidently, Pollux was a warrior at heart, more like Ruan than any of his other lives had been; he had been ready to kill Adrissu with a weapon of his own design, bearing his own name.

“I thought I was doing something good,” Pollux blurted, capturing Adrissu’s attention again. “The red dragon that’s been terrorizing Wintergrove—that’s the one I’ve been more concerned about. I wanted to avoid you, yes, and sometimes I thought about hunting you down, but... Yesterday I couldn’t kill you. I realized I never really wanted to hurt you. I don’t...” He trailed off, grimacing. “I don’t know how to feel about you.”

“I see,” Adrissu replied just as carefully. “Well, I can understand that. I have no expectations of you, truly. I only wanted the chance to talk with you like this and get to know you better. So you don’t have to decide how you feel about me, as it were, right now. Or any time soon. I have all the time in the world.” He managed a slight chuckle at that, and it heartened him that a tiny smile ghosted at the corners of Pollux’s lips in response.

“Perhaps some time to think all this over would help,” he agreed. “Strange as it sounds, I... I had tried to avoid thinking about what would happen if we did meet. I spent so much effort in avoiding you that it didn’t occur to me that we could meet outside of Feld Heslyn.”

Adrissu wasn’t sure how to respond, but at that moment their food arrived, so he was able to avoid commenting on the topic. Just as Pollux seemed unsure of what to make of him, so, too, Adrissu was uncertain exactly what to think about Pollux. He was never sure what to expect of his mate—he had learned that lesson with Kian—but this iteration was different enough from the others that it felt like meeting someone entirely new this time.

They ate quietly, neither brave enough to start the conversation back up again. The food was decent, but Adrissu mostly just picked at his meal as he thought everything over and considered how to respond going forward. When it looked like Pollux was nearly done with his own meal, Adrissu ventured,

“I appreciate you coming to talk with me today. I understand if that’s too much all at once, though, so we don’t have to meet again like this if you don’t want to.”

Pollux eyed him suspiciously; but after a beat, his expression became almost relieved, which was a disappointment and a relief to Adrissu all at once.

“I think some space would be good,” the elf replied, his tone forcibly mild. “So I can... think about all this and sort out what I should do.”

“What you should do? What do you mean?”

“About the weapon, mostly. Should I really be so involved, knowing who you are? I thought I was doing good, but now I’m less certain.”

“I see,” Adrissu replied, frowning. “I don’t want to influence you too much one way or the other, but if you were to ask me... The prospect of it is unsettling at best, yes. I understand your desire to protect your home, though, so don’t let my thoughts color your actions.”

Pollux nodded, but his expression had become tense once again.

“I’ll always be in Polimnos if you do want to meet again,” Adrissu continued. “I’ll give you your space and time to think, but you can always reach me. Always. Could I maybe... write you a letter occasionally, perhaps?” Pollux was silent for a long moment, long enough that Adrissu added nervously, “It’s alright if you don’t want me to contact you. Really, I think I understand. I’m sorry I asked.”

“No, it’s fine,” the elf interrupted, still frowning. “You may write me a letter. Here.”

He reached into the inner pocket of his robes and pulled out a slip of thick parchment, where *Blackthorn Enchantments* was printed in bold type with the workshop’s address in a smaller font beneath it. “If you address it to me, I’ll get it.”

Adrissu hesitated—writing a letter to Pollux at his business address felt disingenuous; but if that was what Pollux wanted to give him, he supposed he should be grateful to have that at all. He took the paper and pocketed it.

“Thank you,” he said softly. This time Pollux’s golden gaze met his and softened, almost imperceptibly, but enough to make Adrissu’s heartbeat stumble. “Pollux, if there is anything I can do to... to help you, or... I don’t know. I understand space and time will help you sort out your feelings, but it pains me to know that you’re struggling and that I can’t help.”

Pollux frowned, though his expression was less cold than before. “I am not struggling.”

“Well... You know what I mean.”

“Yes,” Pollux sighed. “I appreciate your concern, but I don’t know if you can help me at all. I don’t know that you should. I remember being angry at you before, and I remember being... very fond of you. I would just need to remember how I got there, I think.”

“Yes. That makes sense,” Adrissu said, heartened.

They spoke for a little while longer, but when the waiter brought the check, Adrissu paid and Pollux stood, seemingly ready to go in an instant.

“Thank you for dinner,” he said, sounding stiff all over again. “I’ll look forward to your letter.”

“Oh—yes, of course,” Adrissu managed, sounding utterly like a besotted fool as Pollux smirked and turned to go. What kind of bumbling idiot had he become? He could not recall being so easily flustered in his mate’s past lives; something about Pollux took him entirely off-guard compared to the others.

He quietly left Wintergrove much later that evening, when the sun had been down for several hours and the clouds blocked out most of the moon’s light. Even though, objectively, his meeting with Pollux had gone considerably worse than any other first encounter with his mate’s past lives, the flight was tinged with the pleasure of knowing that he was here and alive. Even if they were apart now, Adrissu knew he wasn’t alone. That was worth something, at least.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Not wanting to appear overly invested, Adrissu managed to wait a day after returning to Polimnos before writing a letter to Pollux. But when he finally sat down in his study with Vesper curled across his lap, he stared down at the blank parchment for a long while, unsure of how to start. He wanted to stay in contact with Pollux, of course, but what was there to say?

Eventually, he decided to simply tell Pollux about what he had been up to in the years between Kian's death and their meeting in Wintergrove. He wrote about his sabbatical, during which he had studied everything that he could find about the mortal understanding of dragons, partly for his own amusement and partly out of concern for his own safety—omitting his various encounters with Daiana and Kipp, though he was sure that Pollux had puzzled out his involvement in their deaths. He described how Alana Pughes had become Lord Representative, the improvements her inventions had brought to Polimnos and beyond, and how he had tried to implement them as much as possible through the school's curriculum and methodology. He recounted his months spent studying under Dirge Petkas, the half-orc druid, and how he had created the healing track at the Academy almost entirely from scratch based on what he had learned. Last among his accomplishments, he confessed in delicate terms how he had compiled and refined Kian's research on human transmutation to publish and disseminate their work, so that other transmutation specialists might study and build upon it.

He had done little interesting work in more recent years, so instead he described how strange it was to watch Ned and Eris grow old and their daughters become full-fledged adults. It should not have made him feel any sort of way anymore, but the two were the closest thing he'd had to friends in something like a century, so it was hard to ignore the fondness that he had for them and their family. It seemed silly when he wrote it down, but he thought maybe Pollux would like to see that side of him—that it would make him seem less like a shadowy figure he only knew from dreams and memories, and more like a regular person.

He asked Pollux what he had been up to, what sorts of things he liked to do in his free time, and other idle questions he hadn't been able to ask in their two brief meetings. It all seemed inadequate, but what else was he to do?

When he couldn't think of anything else to write, he folded up the parchment, sealed it in wax, and took it to the local courier's office to have it sent to Pollux in Wintergrove.

A week passed, and Adrissu still had no response, which he supposed he should have expected. He busied himself with preparing the curriculum for the next term, meeting with his instructors to ensure that they were prepared, and going over their proposed lesson plans and student rosters. Another week passed before he wrote a second letter, this one much shorter and more casual, recounting what he'd been up to and wishing Pollux well.

Being so far from him, now that they had met, was misery. But there was nothing he could do but wait it out and hope Pollux decided he wanted to see him again sometime soon. He wouldn't force the matter; letting Pollux come to him in his own time was surely the safest option. Letters seemed unobtrusive enough—something to keep them connected, while allowing Pollux to interact with him on his own terms—but Adrissu felt a small sting of disappointment with each passing day that the courier did not bring him a reply.

And so he wrote into the silence about once a week, until the school term started up again and he had no idle time to sit and worry over a letter, as he was caught up in the flurry of activity that always overtook his life during the first few weeks of a new term. True to his word, Adrissu had hired Shima, Ned's daughter, not as his secretary but as a part-time instructor leading two introductory illusion classes, so he spent a lot of time helping her develop a last-minute curriculum in the last few weeks leading up to the school year. Pollux was always on his mind, but it was easier to push the thoughts aside when he had a thousand other tasks awaiting his attention.

Finally, nearly eight weeks to the day since he'd sent off the first letter to Pollux, he came walking up the hill to his tower when an unmistakable feeling of anticipation radiated from Vesper. Someone had come by and left something in his letterbox, and when Adrissu saw it was from Pollux, a grin split his features as he hurried inside to read it.

"It's him," he told Vesper, as she uncoiled from where she had been waiting in the kitchen. "You haven't met him yet this time around. But this letter is from him." She moved closer to him, her tongue flicking in and out of her mouth rapidly, as if she could smell Pollux just from the folded parchment in his hand. Carefully, he removed the wax seal with a knife, and unfolded the letter to read it.

Headmaster Adrissu,

Thank you for your kind letters. I have been well. I hope the start of the new school term is going smoothly for you.

In response to your inquiries, I have various hobbies, the foremost of which would likely be hunting and sparring. I also enjoy sketching and playing the lute.

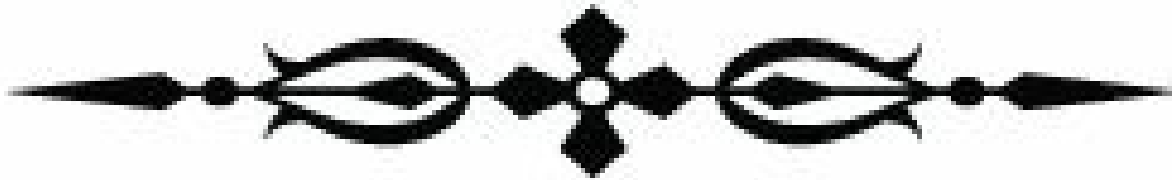
We have recently hired a new apprentice, and I have spent much of my time in the past two weeks training her. I am still undecided as to how to proceed with the development of the weapon. Currently, it is on hold, but my fellow enchanters are confused about the delay. I am unsure what to tell them, but ultimately, it is my creation.

Do you have any thoughts on the matter?

I look forward to hearing from you again.

Pollux Blackthorn

Despite the curt tone of the letter, Adrissu couldn't help but smile as he read it. Pollux looked forward to hearing from him. That was the most important part of the letter. He had actually read Adrissu's letters to him, and was taking the time to respond, and *looked forward* to receiving another. If Vesper could have rolled her eyes, Adrissu knew she would from the way she was looking at him, but he couldn't bring himself to care. He went up to his study and immediately began writing a response.



After that, their letters came and went every week. That was enough for a few months, but soon Adrissu's excitement at receiving such regular correspondence from his reluctant mate turned into an immediate need for something more. He floated the idea of the enchanted paper he had used before with Kian, asking Pollux if he would be open to using it so they could converse more often. Though his reply was curt as ever, Pollux was willing to try it, so he placed the enchantment on two very long pieces of parchment and carefully rolled one up to send to Wintergrove. On his piece, Adrissu wrote, *Tell me when you receive yours.* A few days later, a reply appeared in Pollux's careful, even script: *Received.*

Their correspondence was a daily occurrence after that, though it was usually limited to a few sentences here and there throughout the day. Pollux consistently remained cold and clinical in his responses, but the very fact that he always responded kept Adrissu from feeling discouraged. Now

that they could write daily, every so often Adrissu would leave something softer that he didn't expect Pollux to answer: an added *I'm thinking of you*, or *this reminded me of you*. These went unacknowledged by Pollux, but the other man didn't seem to outright reject the words either, which heartened him.

Once, when he had told Pollux about a rare ingredient he acquired—a flower that only grew on a mountain far to the north, but that was a key component in creating never-melting ice—the elf responded, *perhaps you can show me when we see each other next*. This sent Adrissu into such a frenzy that he went nearly an entire day without answering, which worsened when he realized he had never gone so long without responding, fretting over the thought that Pollux might think the suggestion had upset him. In the end, the best reply he could come up with was: *I look forward to it*.

Their correspondence continued in this way for several more months; and even though Adrissu felt confident that Pollux would accept his invitation to meet in person again, if there was anything he had learned about each incarnation of his mate, it was that letting the other man take the lead usually had a more favorable outcome. So he waited with the sort of long-suffering patience that he suspected only creatures untouched by time could manage. Almost a year after they had first met, Pollux left him a short message: *Do you have any plans for the summer recess?*

Trying very hard not to get his hopes up, Adrissu responded: *No plans as of yet*.

Later that afternoon, a second question appeared next to his reply. *Would you like to come visit me in Wintergrove?*

He thought his chest might burst open with sheer joy and relief at the thought that his mate wanted him near, wanted to *see* him, which meant that he must not hate Adrissu, must miss him even a fraction as much as Adrissu missed Pollux—a thousand thoughts all in an instant that maybe his wait was finally over and this was the beginning of the end of all their suffering. When he could finally compose himself to write a reply without his hands shaking, he answered: *I would love to. Tell me when and I will be there*.

It took a few more days of back-and-forth, but by the time the school term was over, they had a solid plan in place for Adrissu to visit Pollux on the first day of summer. He planned to stay at least a few days, and depending on how it went, he might even stay a week or longer. Quietly, he hoped it would end up being *much* longer, but their messages to each other were still short enough that Adrissu didn't trust his opinion of the other man's feelings toward him yet.

Vesper yearned to go with him this time; normally she never cared about where he went, or how long he would be gone, since her instinct was to look after Adrissu's hoard and keep watch over the

lair. But she *was* Adrissu, at least some primal part of him, so the only thing she ever wanted more than his hoard and his home was his mate. But he could not bring her, he explained, because he needed someone to stay and protect what was here; and someday, he promised, he would bring Pollux to her so they could meet properly. She was dissatisfied, as he would be, but could not disobey.

Adrissu left in the night, as he always did, flying high near the meager cloud cover that was available this early in the summer. When the sun was nearly on the horizon, he swooped down to rest in a shaded copse deep in the woods, a place he had stopped at before that was far too remote for anyone to bother him. He slept through the morning, stirring again late in the afternoon, and walked through the woods until it was dark enough that he felt he could risk taking flight again. He landed outside Wintergrove in the middle of the night, debating whether he wanted to spend another several hours hiding in the woods, but ultimately he decided that walking into the town before the crack of dawn would garner undue attention. Besides, Pollux did not seem like the type to be overly grateful for such an early morning visitor.

He rested in his elven form on the off-chance that someone might be out on an early woodcutting trip, or camping nearby; after all, a lone, eccentric elf asleep in the woods was considerably less alarming than a dragon hiding just outside Wintergrove. Luckily, he remained undisturbed, and he dozed for a few hours despite the tight anticipation simmering in the pit of his stomach. Sunlight flickering against his eyelids woke him, and he quickly roused himself and headed down the road on foot. It was about an hour before he arrived at the town gate, and the guard waved him through with hardly a glance in his direction.

Pollux's home was near the workshop, where residential and industrial streets mingled. It was a plain, no-nonsense, one-story building; but it had a cozy-looking yard surrounding it that was filled with various plants and flowers, all encompassed by a low brick fence. Adrissu passed through the gate, hesitated in front of the door for a minute, then knocked sharply before he could overthink things. A moment later, the latch rattled as it was unlocked from within, and Pollux opened the door.

He looked almost exactly the same as Adrissu remembered, although his hair was unbraided now, so it fell down to his waist in a smooth, dark curtain. He wore a loose satin-looking, leisurely shirt and soft linen trousers, while his feet were bare.

"Good morning," he said, his voice as cool and stern as ever, as if it hadn't been a year since they last saw each other.

"Good morning," Adrissu answered, unable to stifle the smile spreading across his face. *This* was where he belonged. "May I come in?"

Pollux stepped aside and gestured for Adrissu to enter, closing the door behind him once they were both in the house. For a moment they both stood there, looking at each other uncertainly, then Adrissu offered,

“Thank you for wanting to see me again.”

Pollux chuckled once, a dry, humorless sort of laugh. “Don’t thank me for that. You wore me down until I had no other choice.”

There was no malice in his voice, though, so Adrissu grinned back at him. “Are you surprised?”

“Not at all.”

“So... now what?”

For a moment, Pollux only peered at him with an inscrutable expression, then he gestured behind him. “Why don’t I give you a tour? It’s not a large home, but, well, I suppose you’ll be staying here with me for the next few days, so you should know where everything is.”

“I’d like that,” he replied.

The room they entered was a light, airy entryway with wide windows that let in the early morning sunshine. A few plants stood by the door, and the walkway opened into a sitting room with a plush-looking couch and even more plants set about. It was a much more inviting-looking home than Adrissu would have expected, considering how icy Pollux’s personality had seemed thus far. He was then led through the sitting room, where a small kitchen was visible to the right and a smaller hallway to the left.

“The bedroom and bathroom are this way,” he said, then gestured toward the kitchen. “This is, of course, the kitchen. Feel free to eat anything here.” He glanced back over at Adrissu with a frown. “You do eat, don’t you?”

Adrissu laughed. “Not as often as you need to. But yes. We got dinner together last year, remember?”

“Right,” Pollux said, glancing away with a hint of color rising in his cheeks, as if he were embarrassed at the question. His cold exterior had come apart so easily, Adrissu thought—though perhaps the year’s effort in wearing him down from afar had more to do with it than his immediate presence.

“Can I put my extra clothes in your room?” Adrissu asked, giving him an out. Pollux nodded quickly before brushing past him down the hallway. Adrissu peeked into the bathroom as they walked by: it was of a decent size, with a copper tub that looked like it would make for a very comfortable

soak. The deep tub made Adrissu think of Braern, and of their time spent in Aefraya enjoying its hot springs. Elves did love their baths, he supposed.

Pollux's room was far more practical than the rest of the house had been in comparison. It had a bed outfitted with white linen sheets, a nightstand, a lamp, and an armoire in the corner. This seemed more like the personality Adrissu would have expected—minimalist and practical—and he wondered briefly how often Pollux entertained guests for the sitting area to be so much more welcoming than his room.

But Pollux seemed unbothered, and he opened the armoire for Adrissu. "Here," he said, gesturing, and Adrissu stifled a laugh at his no-nonsense speech. "Is something amusing to you?"

"No," he replied, smiling. "You, perhaps."

Adrissu could practically feel Pollux restrain himself from rolling his eyes. He did not want to push his luck so soon after arriving, so he placed his belongings in the armoire with no further fuss, then glanced back at Pollux with a smile. "Now what?"

"It's early," Pollux sighed, looking away irritably. "We can go to a cafe, if you'd like. Do you want to see the workshop again?"

"I'll do whatever you want."

"That doesn't help me."

"You didn't plan anything for while I was here?"

"I..." Pollux started, then trailed off with another hint of a flush in his cheeks. "I wasn't certain how much... free time I should allot for."

Adrissu's heart leapt up into his throat at that. The very idea that Pollux had been considering, well, other matters—that he had been thinking of it for days, weeks, maybe even months. He had tried not to think of it, not wanting to get his hopes up over something that would not happen; with how reticent Pollux had been to just speak with him regularly, he doubted sex was on the table this time. But knowing Pollux was imagining it, the prospect was suddenly real, and he could focus on nothing else.

"I—I see," he stammered, sure he was sounding all at once like a lovesick fool. "In that case—I think a cafe would be a nice place to start. And the workshop. If you want to show me, of course."

Pollux made a noncommittal noise of agreement, evidently as suddenly embarrassed about their uncertain position as Adrissu was. "Let me put on something else, then."

He looked pointedly at Adrissu, who took the hint and stepped out of his room, heart pounding.

Pollux emerged a few minutes later wearing robes similar to the ones Adrissu saw him wear before, when they first met. Relaxed, flowy robes had come back into fashion, especially in Aefraya, though Adrissu was sure Pollux was not aware of this trend and was only wearing what was practical. He had pulled his hair into a loose, low ponytail, but a few strands still framed his face, making the angles of his chin and cheekbones even more striking.

The primal part of Adrissu very much wanted to lunge forward to smash his lips against Pollux's and push him back into his bedroom. But it was early, he had only just arrived, and they were going to get breakfast. He could control himself, but knowing that Pollux had thought about it, too, was making it very difficult to focus on anything else. Pollux was silent as they walked, evidently just as aware of the newfound tension between them as he was, so after a little while, Adrissu offered,

“So where is it we're going?”

“A cafe I often visit,” Pollux replied, cold as ever. “They have a wide variety of tea.”

“And you like trying new ones,” Adrissu offered, remembering Pollux had told him so in one of their letters, what felt like a lifetime ago now. Pollux glanced back at him with a tiny smile.

“Yes,” he agreed, and the tension between them seemed to ease up. They walked side-by-side where they could, but the morning was growing busier, so for the most part, Adrissu had to walk behind. It was only a few more minutes to the cafe, though; it truly must have been Pollux's favorite, as Adrissu counted three other small cafes that they passed along the way. Finally, Pollux led him into a narrow brick building, emanating the scent of fresh bread and pastries that he could smell even from the street.

“Hello, Pollux,” a tall, half-orc woman behind the counter greeted him cheerfully, then gave a slight start as Adrissu followed him inside. “Oh—welcome in!”

“Good morning,” Pollux said to her. “Do you have anything new in today?”

“Yes, actually, I got that red tea that I was telling you about, the one from deep Robruolor,” she replied. “Did you want to try it?”

“Yes,” Pollux said, then glanced back at Adrissu. “Two, please. And the pastry platter.”

“Of course,” she said, glancing curiously between him and Adrissu as Pollux counted out coins onto the countertop. But Pollux did not offer any further information, and wanting to respect his obvious desire not to discuss it, Adrissu only gave her a friendly smile. But he had picked up a few words of orcish in his time studying in Aefraya under Dirge, so when Pollux stepped away to lead them to a table, Adrissu leaned in closer to the counter.

“Thank you,” he said in orcish, and she blinked in surprise before a pleased grin curled around her tusks.

“You’re very welcome,” she answered in orcish as well. Luckily for Adrissu, who only knew a handful of other phrases, their conversation ended there.

He joined Pollux at a small table near the window, where the elf was looking out onto the street with an impassive expression, barely glancing over as Adrissu sat down across from him.

“So are we going to sit in silence?” Adrissu teased, and Pollux shot him an annoyed glance.

“You know what I’ve been up to. We’ve communicated almost daily,” Pollux replied, his tone mild despite his imperious expression.

“And we have nothing more to discuss, then?”

“Hmm,” Pollux murmured, but at that moment the half-orc girl came up with a teapot and two teacups, which she placed in front of them with a grin.

“I’ll have that pastry platter out in just a few minutes,” she said as she turned to go. Pollux nodded, and when she was out of earshot once again, he glanced back at Adrissu.

“I suppose we have much to discuss,” he sighed, reaching over to pour himself a cup of tea. “Here.” He poured Adrissu a cup as well.

“Did she say this tea was from Robruolor?” Adrissu remarked, glancing down at the steaming liquid as he lifted the cup. It looked like any other cup of tea, but had a slightly more earthy scent. Pollux nodded, delicately taking a sip. He seemed to contemplate it for a moment, then took a second sip before putting the teacup down.

“Dwarven tea has an unusual flavor profile,” he said, gesturing to the teapot. “This is a red tea from deep Robruolor, so in the most remote mountainous parts, where the dwarves live only partly underground. The tea is grown above ground but aged beneath the mountain, giving it that earthy tone. It has an almost fermented pungency to it. It’s an acquired taste, I think, so if you don’t like it, I can order you something else.”

Adrissu eyed his cup of tea more suspiciously now, but took a drink anyway. As Pollux said, it had a deep earthiness to it that he couldn’t tell if he liked or not. It was unusual, to say the least, compared to what he normally drank.

“Well, I don’t think I would order it again,” he chuckled, setting the teacup down. “But you don’t need to order me anything else.”

“How long are you planning on staying?” Pollux asked, changing subjects so abruptly that for a moment Adrissu only blinked at him, taken aback at the question.

“However long you’ll have me,” he replied, relishing in the way the elf’s lips twitched, as if he were suppressing a smile. “I’m hoping for a week, but if you get sick of me sooner than that...”

“I think I can probably manage a week,” Pollux said, taking a sip of his tea. “And after that?”

Adrissu considered the question for a long moment. The half-orc girl came with a small tray of pastries as he thought, setting it down alongside the teapot with a grin before hurrying back to the counter to serve another customer.

“After that,” he said slowly, watching her leave their table, unsure if he could bear looking at Pollux as he spoke. “It depends entirely on you. I want to be near you, of course. But my work at the Academy is important to me, as well, and it would be... complicated to hold the same control of it from outside of Polimnos.”

“So you would want me to come to Polimnos to be with you,” Pollux replied bluntly.

“Is that what you want?” Adrissu asked.

“I don’t know,” Pollux said, sighing. “My life is here. I don’t know about giving it up, either.”

“We don’t have to talk about this now,” Adrissu said, frowning. “I’ve been here for an hour. Why worry about the future already? I just want to enjoy the time I have with you, regardless of how long it is.”

Pollux’s stony gaze softened when Adrissu glanced back over at him. “Well... Alright. Later, then.”

“Later,” Adrissu agreed, and picked up a pastry.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

They spent the rest of the morning walking about town, Pollux leading the way and showing Adrissu places that he often frequented or mentioned in their letters. As the sun rose high into the sky, and the day grew hot and humid, they moved to walk down a shaded trail a little ways out from the main roads. Soon enough, however, they decided to return to Pollux's home to rest in the shade until it cooled off.

When they arrived, Adrissu was acutely aware of the way Pollux looked at him—his skin flushed and damp with sweat, breathing a little harder than normal. It was the heat, and the sticky humidity should have been a deterrent, but every cell in his body ached to be closer to his mate, to fill him, to possess him utterly.

“A cool rinse-off might be nice,” Pollux said mildly, not quite looking at Adrissu as he stepped toward the hallway that led to the bathroom. “You could... Join me, if you wanted.”

Adrissu thought he might burst into flame then and there. “Yes,” he answered, a bit too quickly despite his best efforts. “That, ah, does sound nice.”

Pollux nodded, color rising in his face, but he gestured for Adrissu to follow him as he stepped into the bathroom. Adrissu watched from the doorway as Pollux set the water running, feeling the temperature with his hand, before tugging anxiously at the collar of his robe.

“Undress me,” he said, turning abruptly to Adrissu, looking for the first time entirely overwhelmed. Adrissu reached for him, and Pollux instinctively leaned into him, their bodies pressed together tightly. His scent was overwhelming, and without even truly being aware of it, Adrissu pulled him closer and kissed him hungrily. Pollux groaned against him, his rigid form melting in Adrissu's arms, which only filled him with another surge of lust. For all his pretense, Pollux was completely and wholly *his*, and he knew it, no matter how much he tried to fight it.

All but wrenching his clothes off, Adrissu's hands found the smooth, warm skin of his chest, making Pollux gasp as his fingers skimmed over his ribcage, trailing lower to settle on his bare hips. Pollux pulled his hands away from Adrissu only long enough to pull them out of his sleeves, letting his robe fall to the floor in a soft heap. He was naked against Adrissu now, his hard cock pressed against Adrissu's thigh.

"Gods," Pollux gasped as Adrissu's mouth pulled away from his—only to trail hungry, biting kisses along his neck and collarbones. "You feel, you feel..." He trailed off, shaking his head, and Adrissu made a low growl of agreement. Words were too much, and not nearly enough, all at the same time.

He released Pollux and pushed him back just enough to drop to his knees before him, swiftly taking the elf's cock into his mouth and grinning at the choked noise of surprise that it elicited from the other man.

"Adrissu," he panted, squirming against Adrissu's grip, but he held Pollux tightly in place as he swallowed his cock down to the base, making him gasp and moan. All he could think about was keeping Pollux right there, tasting him and smelling him and breaking the thin veneer of cold control the other man kept up—so his mate would know that he irrevocably, indisputably belonged to Adrissu. After a moment, he felt Pollux's fingers snaking into his hair, so he released the grip that he had on the elf's hips to touch himself with one hand and use the other to stroke Pollux's length, keeping his mouth firmly encircled around the tip. "A-Adrissu!"

Pollux's grip against his hair tightened as he groaned, pleasure sparking from the sharp sensation. Pollux held him there as his hips rocked mindlessly, but it took only a few thrusts before Pollux was shuddering and gasping his release into the back of Adrissu's throat. He swallowed greedily, pressing his tongue along Pollux's length until there was nothing left to draw out, and only then released him to lean back and look up at his mate with a delirious, blissed-out smile.

"You still have all your clothes on," Pollux panted, now stroking Adrissu's hair idly, and he laughed.

"So it seems," he said, getting to his feet and tugging the collar of his robe to loosen it. It came off easily, and he threw it down to the floor beside Pollux's discarded clothes, then reached over and turned off the water. "Let's save this for after, don't you think?"

Pollux nodded, his gaze lingering on Adrissu's cock. "This would be more comfortable in the other room."

“Lead the way,” Adrissu replied with a smug grin, and even though Pollux scowled at his self-satisfied expression, he grabbed Adrissu by the wrist and led him into the bedroom, where he laid down on his back and pulled Adrissu down with him.

“How badly have you wanted this?” Adrissu teased between kisses that he pressed to Pollux’s neck. “Is this all you could think about from the moment I walked through your door?”

“Yes,” Pollux breathed, his fingers skimming along the planes of Adrissu’s back and sending tiny thrills of pleasure up his spine. “Even before that. I’ve dreamed of you all year.”

“Dreamed of me,” Adrissu repeated with a groan, rolling his hips. “Dreamed of my cock, more like it. Gods, I’ve missed you.”

He shifted against Pollux so he could get between his legs, groaning as his cock found the wet evidence of his arousal. “Look at you. I could slip into you just like this.”

“Please,” Pollux gasped, shifting his hips so the head of Adrissu’s cock rubbed up against his slick entrance. “I want you—I want to feel you.”

“Anything you ask for,” Adrissu murmured, pressing his lips to Pollux’s neck, damp with sweat, as he moved to line himself up. Pollux was wet and hot against him, but opened up so impossibly easily that Adrissu’s vision blurred, and he had to squeeze himself hard at the base of his cock to keep himself from coming right then. “Fuck, Pollux. You feel so good.”

Pollux’s eyes were squeezed closed, and he nodded silently against Adrissu, but as Adrissu moved at a leisurely pace, he failed to stifle his gasps of pleasure. The way Pollux’s fingers dug into his back, holding him close, felt wild and needy, echoing Adrissu’s own desperation. *This* was where he belonged—here, one with his mate. Nothing else mattered but this.

“There, right there,” Pollux groaned, his tight channel pulsing around Adrissu. His cock had been coaxed back to life as Adrissu fucked him, now hard and insistent where it pressed between their bodies, the flushed head leaking a steady stream of precome against Adrissu’s belly. Adrissu nodded, panting, and kept the same pace and movement, feeling himself hitting the same spot deep inside the elf until he was shuddering and crying out beneath him—his cock twitching wildly against Adrissu as he came again.

He couldn’t keep going for long after that, thrusting hard into him for only a moment longer before he followed, biting back a shout as he buried himself to the hilt and spent his release.

For a long moment they were both motionless, panting and gasping in the aftermath, until Adrissu rallied enough to relax the death grip he had on Pollux’s hips, and instead skim his thumbs against his

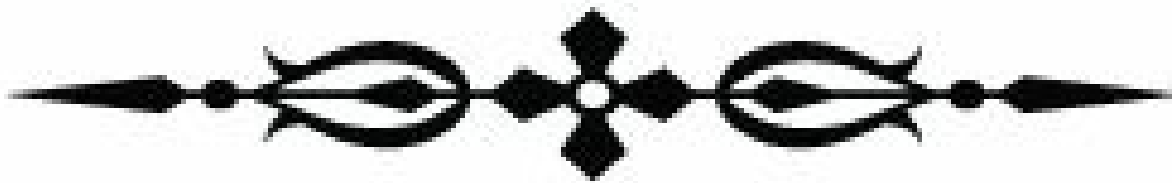
hipbones in soft, soothing circles. It was a small gesture Kian had liked, and Braern too—but Pollux grunted and pushed himself up into a sitting position.

“You’re going to make a mess,” he panted, frowning up at Adrissu. The immediate reinstatement of his cold facade should have irritated Adrissu, but something about his sudden cool distance only made Adrissu want to push him back down and fuck him all over again. That was maybe too much for now, though, so he only smirked and obliged, easing himself out carefully as Pollux reached for a cloth sitting on his bedside table to clean himself up.

“Now we really need to bathe,” Adrissu chuckled, helping the elf to his feet. “Coming with me?”

Pollux glanced over at him, his gaze as imperious and distant as ever; but his face was still flushed with exertion, and his mouth twitched as if he were trying very hard not to smile back.

“Yes,” he said simply, and followed Adrissu.



The next several days were much of the same: they would spend the cool parts of the morning exploring the city and the afternoons in the shade of Pollux’s home, getting hot and sweaty in other ways, before cooling off in a shared bath. In the evening, they would venture out again for dinner, or one of them would cook. Pollux did not seem to know any elven dishes, so Adrissu brushed up on some recipes Braern had liked, then tried making them anew; they weren’t exact, but Pollux seemed to enjoy them all the same.

They did not fight, but sometimes Pollux seemed tense around him and would make some excuse to have time alone; this did not bother Adrissu, as he too liked his own space well enough. He did notice, though, that Pollux seemed to sleep terribly, waking often throughout the night, or tossing and turning restlessly for a long time after they had laid down. He wasn’t sure if it was because of his presence, or if this was common for the elf; but after a week straight of bearing witness to this behavior, it left him feeling unsettled and concerned. He considered asking Pollux about it, but it seemed a strangely personal inquiry.

The next day, Pollux was restless again, and Adrissu asked him if he had worn out his welcome.

“I had only really hoped for a week, so...” he offered, but was then perplexed at the look of frustration that passed over Pollux’s face when he said it.

“I don’t know,” the other man sighed, seeming uncharacteristically pouty as he glanced away from Adrissu and folded his arms across his chest. “I... I enjoy having you here.”

“I like being here, too,” Adrissu replied, smiling hesitantly.

“And I...” Pollux started, before trailing off with a frustrated groan. “I’ve been thinking about the... projects I’ve been involved in. With the workshop.”

“I see,” Adrissu said. He waited as Pollux seemed to gather his thoughts, afraid to get his hopes up about what he would say next.

“I thought I could continue to keep you at arm’s length and still work on the weapon,” Pollux continued. “But having you here... I underestimated how strong this is, how strong our connection is. I don’t know if I can... stay so far from you for so long again. But if I have you here, or go with you to Polimnos, I couldn’t... Well. Maybe the weapon is something I shouldn’t be working on, regardless.”

“I... I see,” Adrissu repeated faintly. It was exactly what he had hoped to hear, but he felt that if he reacted too strongly or pressed Pollux too hard about it, the elf might change his mind entirely and would never want to see Adrissu again. “I think that sounds reasonable. I did have some... qualms about your work on the, ah, weapon, as you know.”

“I know,” Pollux sighed. “You have made things very complicated for me.”

His tone was cold, but he smirked as he said it, and Adrissu stifled a chuckle. He was getting better at reading the other man’s expressions, stoic as he tried to be.

“I’m not sorry for that, I’m afraid,” he murmured, leaning over to kiss him. Pollux hummed softly in contentment as their lips pressed together.

“I know you’re not,” he said, when Adrissu pulled away. “But. Well. *I’m* sorry, for what it’s worth. Getting involved in all this seemed like a good idea at the time, but in hindsight, it seems... immature.”

“You were immature,” Adrissu agreed, grinning back at the scowl it elicited. “You *were*. Elves aren’t adults until their mid-twenties. Humans might have treated you like an adult when you got involved with this, but you were a child, acting out and rebelling against something you didn’t fully understand.”

Pollux’s scowl deepened, and he glanced away. “You might be right, but you shouldn’t say it like that.”

Adrissu paused, looking him over quickly. Maybe he wasn’t getting as good at reading him as he thought—he wasn’t sure whether it was genuine hurt in his voice or feigned superiority.

“I’m sorry,” he said, deciding to play it safe, regardless. “You’re right. I know life has not treated you kindly, and you thought it was what was best for you at the time. I did have qualms about it—I *do*—but I hold none of it against you.”

They had talked a bit about Pollux’s life and his childhood, but it was very little—just enough for Pollux to explain that he did not want to talk about it. But he had been an orphan, from so early an age that he had no memory of his parents, or why he was left here, so far from Aefraya or any elven settlements. He hadn’t even known his true surname, having been told *Blackthorn* was a translation of it, but with no knowledge of the elven tongue himself. All things considered, Adrissu thought he was remarkably well-adjusted now.

To his relief, Pollux smiled in response—a tiny smile, but a smile all the same. “I know. Thank you.” Then he sighed and leaned away. “All this to say, I don’t want you to leave, but I realize you can’t stay forever.”

“I can visit any time,” Adrissu replied.

“Yes, but that doesn’t solve the problem of the workshop.”

“The workshop?”

“Well, yes. I can’t exactly shut everything down without an explanation to the people working there.”

“Why not?” Adrissu asked, confused.

“Because—because it’s their *jobs*,” Pollux said, visibly flustered at the question. “I can’t just take that away from them.”

“Don’t close it down, then. Just leave it to whoever you trust most to keep it running. Or whoever you think will run it into the ground, depending on what you’re wanting to see happen.”

Pollux stared at him for a long moment, then stammered, “Don’t you want to stop this research? You killed two people for developing a *prototype* of something we have working models of today.”

Adrissu sighed, pursing his lips. That was true, but that had also been a separate issue. Now, the weapon was already made—in hindsight, it had already been too late to completely stop something like the Dragonslayer crossbow when he had killed Kipp and Daiana twenty-something years ago. He and Naydruun had only delayed the inevitable. It did not bode well for dragonkind, but he was not very concerned about the well-being of other dragons, either. He was only slightly worried for himself—after all, Adrissu Rolastra was an elf, not a dragon. If he had kept that a secret for centuries so far, he didn’t see why he couldn’t continue to keep it a secret in the future, so he had no reason to truly fear dragon-slaying weapons. He was more anxious about keeping Tyrsun alive and unmaimed;

but if the red dragon perished, well, he would find another suitable body for his mate eventually. Pollux was young, so they had plenty of time.

“I am not as invested in it now as I was then,” Adrissu said, choosing his words carefully. “The prospect of it was much more frightening to me then, compared to now. Going forward, as long as Adrissu keeps his head down, and Zamnes isn’t spotted...” He shrugged. “No one would have any reason to target me with such a weapon if I’m not a dragon. And the weapons are too difficult and time-consuming to make at a scale that would be of concern to other dragons, at least for now. To be honest, I’m more worried about what the Aefrayan army is developing—those elves have created some magic weapons I wouldn’t have thought possible. Did I show you the antimagic sword I have?”

“You’re really not concerned about it?” Pollux interrupted, his frown only deepening. Adrissu shrugged.

“I don’t like it, but I’m not going to lose sleep over it either,” he said.

“I—You—” Pollux stammered, for once looking utterly lost for words. “All this time, I’ve had all this guilt—and you don’t even care?”

“Guilt? Why?” Adrissu frowned, truly bewildered. “Pollux, I just said—I don’t hold any of this against you. There’s no need for you to feel guilty. You haven’t done anything to hurt me.”

Pollux’s face twisted in a scowl, his eyes looking glassy—Adrissu was only more confused now than he was before. The elf turned abruptly, taking several steps away from Adrissu. He didn’t follow, letting Pollux get the space he needed so he could sort out whatever was going on inside his head. He could hear the elf breathing hard—could almost hear his heart pounding—but Adrissu remained where he was, waiting silently until Pollux finally faced him again.

“I created a weapon,” he said, each word coming out stiff and forced, “that is more dangerous than anything that’s come before. That I wanted to use to *kill* you. And you don’t think I should feel guilty for it?”

“No,” Adrissu said immediately, shaking his head. “You shouldn’t. It was a logical course of action, considering what you knew and felt at the time. Now you know better, and you aren’t trying to kill me.”

“You don’t hate me?”

Despite himself, Adrissu almost laughed at the question. “Of course not. I could never hate you. You are my *mate*, Pollux, my fated mate. There is nothing you could do that would make me hate you, that could make me stop loving you.”

Pollux's frown wavered, his lips trembling. "I—I don't—I don't know what to say," he stammered, his voice choked with emotion.

"Come here," Adrissu said softly, holding his arms out. Without resistance, Pollux all but fell into his embrace, pressing his face into Adrissu's shoulder. His form trembled in Adrissu's arms as he wept silently, no sound escaping him as his fingers dug painfully hard into Adrissu's back. "I love you. You're mine, and I've loved you from the moment I saw you, even before that. I loved you before you were born. I could never hate you. Do you really think I would write you such lovesick letters if I secretly hated you?"

Silently, Pollux shook his head, and Adrissu rubbed his back in slow, soothing circles.

"I love you," he repeated, contentment swelling in his chest as Pollux relaxed against him. "I was born to love you."

Pollux whispered something against his shoulder, barely strong enough to hear — "*I love you too.*"

Adrissu took a deep breath and let out a heavy sigh, closing his eyes. Hearing those words in the voice of his mate never got old.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Adrissu stayed with Pollux for another week. They discussed their best options for the coming months; Adrissu would be needed back at the Academy before the end of the summer, and Pollux hoped to have handed over Blackthorn Enchantments by then. He did not want to be idle, though, and seemed at a loss as to what he would actually *do* if he joined Adrissu in Polimnos.

“If you had your own personal workshop, would you want to continue working on enchanting other things?” Adrissu asked, and Pollux shrugged.

“I think so,” he replied, trying to sound noncommittal, even though Adrissu could tell that the suggestion definitely intrigued him. “I do enjoy my work, so... If I could keep doing something similar, I think the move would be tolerable.”

“Then I will find you a workspace,” Adrissu said, kissing the top of his forehead. Pollux scowled, but didn’t pull away.

“Should I come help you?”

“No, handle your affairs here. I know plenty of people in Polimnos who would cut me a deal, I think. Just tell me what kind of space you want and if there are any non-negotiables, and I can find something that will work or modify something that’s close.”

“Alright,” Pollux answered. He sounded unconvinced, and Adrissu was sure he was already worrying about the situation; but he knew he could prove to his mate that he could keep his promises.

Finally, Adrissu departed for home with the tentative plan for Pollux to join him sometime in autumn, so he immediately busied himself with finding a place for his mate’s work. While his own lair could sustain such things, he knew Pollux liked having his own space; and as an elf, he would have a hard time getting to and from his lair as well, being much too proud to ask Adrissu to take him up and down all the time.

Adrissu did not want him to be too far from his tower, but neither could it be directly on the school grounds, which left only a few neighborhoods in Polimnos that would have buildings suitable for that sort of work. He thought of walking those streets just to see what might be around, but decided instead that he would go directly to the counselors of the Lord Representative, who handled such matters. Alana Pughes was still Lord Representative, but in recent years had withdrawn from the more public-facing parts of the job; her lack of political ambition meant that now she acted more as a figurehead than any real bastion of power. Thankfully, her counselors remembered that she and Adrissu had a good relationship, so they were more than happy to meet with him.

The two counselors were both human women who were related to Alana in some way or another, cousins or nieces or something—Adrissu did not know them as well, but he had interacted with them on and off throughout Alana's tenure, so they got along decently. The counselor who handled architecture and zoning in the city was the younger of the two, a bright-eyed woman called Bea. When he walked into her office, she smiled at Adrissu with a flash of surprise that was quickly suppressed.

"Good afternoon, counselor," he said, pausing just outside the doorway. It had probably been at least a year since he'd seen her last, if not more, but she her smile was as friendly as if they saw each other daily.

"Why, hello, Headmaster, I wasn't expecting you," she said, gesturing for him to close the door. "Come in, come in."

Adrissu obliged, stepping inside. "I have a small request for you. Well, perhaps not so small, but nothing major either."

"Sure, how can I help?"

"I'm looking for a workshop space," he said, wasting no time with pleasantries. "Something that would be suitable to house some advanced enchantment equipment. This is an independent venture, not associated with the Academy, so it cannot be on school grounds—although it should not be too far from my home, either. I'm wondering if you would know of anything suitable that would be available, or if the owner might be willing to sell if there is nothing immediately open."

Bea stared at him for a long moment, processing the request, before smiling more nervously this time and reaching for a stack of papers on her desk.

"There are a few things that might fit," she said, flipping through them. "Workshop space, workshop space... Does it need to come with any equipment already installed? That may not be possible due to the nature of the work, as you might imagine, Headmaster..."

“The equipment is of lesser importance,” he said. “An empty space would be fine as long as it’s spacious enough.”

“Let me make a few inquiries, and I can have more information for you,” she said, not quite looking back up at him. “How urgently do you need this available?”

“Ideally sometime in the next few months. The sooner the better, of course, but no real urgency yet.”

“That’s doable. I’ll have my assistant double check the places I have in mind and get back to you.”

“That would be perfect. Although...” He paused, considering. “Well, I suppose you can send any missives to my office, but my home address might be more appropriate, since this is a personal project.”

Bea glanced up at him at that, but her expression didn’t change. After a beat, she chirped, “Of course. Not a problem at all.”

Adrissu smiled at her. He loved humans that knew not to ask unnecessary questions.

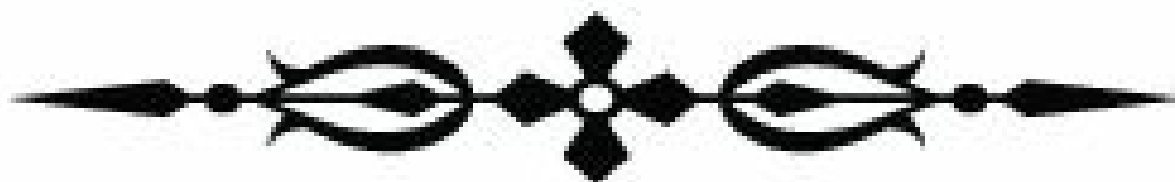
“Excellent. Thank you so much,” he said, stepping toward the door again. “I’ll keep an eye out for your correspondence.”

“I’ll keep you updated,” she said, already turning her attention back to her papers.

That done, he did a quiet audit of some of the academy equipment to see if he could offload anything without causing any problems. There were a few older enchantment tables that he probably could have taken, but they looked nothing like the ones he had seen in the Blackthorn workshop. He suspected Pollux would be particular about them, so instead of taking them, he wrote to Pollux through their shared parchment, asking if more basic pieces would be alright, or if he could bring one of his preferred enchantment tables with him. He did not get an immediate reply.

There was nothing left to do but wait, and only then did the old familiar restlessness of being apart from his mate start to settle in. He had all his own personal projects on hold, of course, so he didn’t even have anything pressing to turn his attention to, so he decided to start the upcoming term’s curricula edits early.

“Soon,” he murmured absently in his study, as Vesper slithered anxious circles around the room. “Soon, I promise.”



A few weeks later, Adrissu received a short missive from Bea: there were two work spaces she thought would be suitable, so she listed the addresses and invited him to visit at his leisure, as both were currently vacant. He spent the next afternoon looking over both; one was much too small, and the other a better size, though a little further away. It would have to do, so he told Bea he would take it, and received the keys the following week.

With this secured, he told Pollux that he had procured the workspace and would work on getting it up to speed, but he was welcome to come whenever was convenient for him. The reply from Pollux seemed noncommittal, but he almost expected it. The elf might be feeling hesitant, but Adrissu knew his mate felt the same pull he did and would come to Polimnos in his own time. Plus, it meant he could take his time furnishing the studio instead of trying to rush it to completion.

The one thing Pollux did insist on, though, was his own specialized enchantment forge. An old one from the Academy would suffice in a pinch, but for long-term work, Pollux wanted his own design. Transporting one from Wintergrove to Polimnos would be nigh on impossible, though, so he had Adrissu purchase the various different parts that he would need and planned to construct it when he arrived. It was a pain to get all the parts—the specialized stone that Pollux had ordered from an elven mason in the far northwest, right near the Aefrayan border, was the most costly and time-consuming—and it took nearly two months to complete. Eventually, Adrissu had all the parts that Pollux requested, the space was fully furnished, and all that was left was to wait for Pollux to arrive.

It took another month for Pollux to settle all his affairs; Adrissu offered to come help him, but Pollux refused, as stubborn and independent as he expected. He arrived in Polimnos one sunny morning a few weeks into autumn, carrying most of his belongings in two heavy bags with many of his other personal items due to arrive via courier the next day. The type of steam carriage he hired for the trip couldn't drive easily in the streets that had been paved long before such carriages existed. They would only pick up or drop off passengers outside the city walls, so Adrissu met him at the gate with an eager smile. Pollux's eyes were glancing around the city walls suspiciously, but when his gaze found Adrissu's, his expression relaxed just a tiny bit.

"Let me carry that," Adrissu said, taking the bag that Pollux was carrying, which he begrudgingly allowed. "I hope the carriage ride wasn't too miserable."

"The ride was bumpy," he muttered, scowling. "Motion sickness. It was entirely miserable."

"I'm sorry," Adrissu replied, his gaze softening. "I'll deal with all the unpacking. Just come and rest." Pollux flushed, embarrassed, but didn't protest as Adrissu led him further into the city.

Once Adrissu's tower was visible on the hill in the distance, Pollux stopped short, staring up with an inscrutable expression. Adrissu stopped, watching him carefully, until Pollux looked back at him.

"It's... strange," he said simply, shaking his head, and Adrissu knew that was probably all Pollux would share for now. Kian and Braern had similar experiences, seeing or being in his home for the first time—he supposed it must have been a strange sensation, finding that something they had only ever seen in their dreams was firmly situated in reality.

"Come on, then," Adrissu urged him softly, placing his free hand on the small of his back. "Don't you want to see it?" After only another moment of hesitation, Pollux nodded, then continued walking alongside Adrissu.

But he again stopped short when they were on the cobblestone path leading up to the tower, looking up with the same dubious expression. This time, Adrissu kept walking past him, until he was at the heavy wooden door, and only then turned back to look at him.

"Have you really never made a change to the tower in all your years here?" Pollux called up to him, the question taking him by surprise. "Not even a new door or anything?"

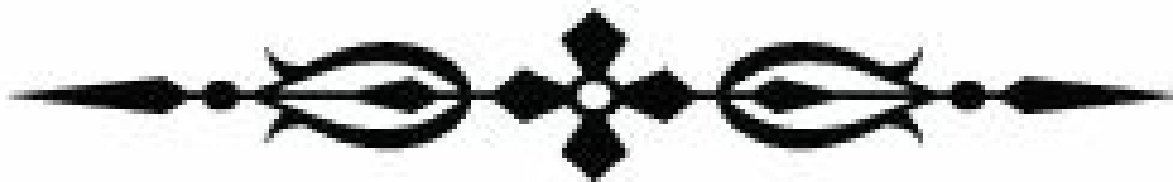
Adrissu laughed. "No, I've never needed to." Pollux had a small smirk on his face as he followed Adrissu up the path and into the tower.

As always, Vesper made a beeline for Pollux, landing with a loud thud when she dropped down from her perch on the kitchen table.

"Gods, she's much bigger than I thought," Pollux exclaimed, but he allowed the huge snake to coil around his leg, so her broad face rested against his chest and looked up at him with her beady eyes.

"She's glad to see you, as always," Adrissu murmured. Despite himself, Pollux smiled a bit at that, stroking the top of her head with two fingers. "Welcome home."

Pollux glanced up at him, his smile widening. "It's good to be back, I think."



The workshop that Adrissu had set up for Pollux was well-equipped enough that the elf could live there part of the time, so after he had found a place for some of his belongings at the tower, they brought a few more things to the workshop. It was much smaller than the Blackthorn Enchantments shop had been, of course, but it was more than suitable for a single person, and Pollux seemed

pleased with it. They dropped off the extra clothes and toiletries that they had brought, and the next day, Pollux returned to the workshop to set up his enchantment forge.

Adrissu did not see him again for two days. He had partly expected it, knowing the workshop had a small sleeping space and Pollux would be eager to bring it up to his own personal standards. Still, it was strange to know his mate was so close, had finally come to Polimnos to be with him, only to be apart again for the first few days. But Adrissu had the comfort of knowing he was near, so he didn't bother the elf. When everything was complete, Pollux arrived back at the tower, walking in as comfortably as if he had done it a thousand times before—not quite with a smile, but with a self-satisfied, tired expression.

“I take it everything's set up, then?” Adrissu asked, looking at him over the top of the book that he was reading. Pollux nodded.

“Yes,” he said, sitting down next to Adrissu with a long sigh. “I think I'll take tomorrow off, but after that, everything should be good for me to start work.”

“Any ideas as to what you want to work on first?”

“Hmm,” Pollux murmured, glancing away. He seemed to mull it over for a moment, then said, “I'm not sure. I'll see what feels right when I see all the supplies I have.”

Adrissu smiled indulgently at him. “If you need something, just ask. I can get a hold of almost anything.”

Pollux nodded, leaning closer to Adrissu. “I will.” He was silent for a long moment, tension palpable in his body where their shoulders touched. Adrissu remained silent, eyes on his book, even though all his attention was centered on Pollux next to him.

“Adrissu, I—” he stammered, only to cut himself off with a huff. “That is—put that away.” He pushed the book out of Adrissu's hands, so he set it down, stifling a laugh. Pollux frowned at him, color rising in his face. “I—I want to—”

“Want to what?” Adrissu asked innocently, forcing himself not to smirk as Pollux's expression darkened. The elf groaned and, instead of answering, swung his leg over Adrissu so he was straddling his hips.

“Oh, this?” Adrissu teased, grabbing his waist and grinning up at him salaciously. “All you had to do was ask, my love.”

Pollux didn't reply, only kissed him so fiercely that if Adrissu didn't know better, he might think that Pollux was trying to suffocate him. They both gasped when Pollux finally pulled away, both his hands on Adrissu's face, their noses still brushing up against each other.

“Is it always like this?” Pollux muttered, his eyes squeezed shut and his mouth turned into a frown.

“Like how?”

“I think about you all the time. I can barely focus on anything else. I hate it.”

“It is very distracting,” Adrissu agreed, idly moving his hips in a slow, rocking movement that made Pollux groan. “It lessens over time, but being together like this is still so new—I think we have to get it out of our systems before it settles down, hm?”

Pollux opened his eyes to give Adrissu such an unconvinced stare that he had to laugh.

“I’m serious,” Pollux scowled. “How am I possibly going to get any work done like this?”

“Don’t,” Adrissu replied simply. “You don’t have to work. My hoard can provide for us for centuries, even without my salary from the Academy.”

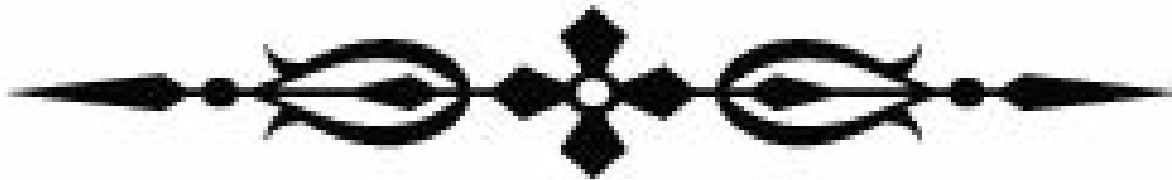
Pollux stiffened at that, not in a good way, and his expression darkened considerably.

“No, you don’t want to be around me when I’m idle,” he muttered. “I don’t want to be idle. I have to have something to work on.”

Adrissu hesitated—unsure if he should pursue this unexpected, darker turn that the conversation had taken, or direct it back to their more lighthearted exchange. In the split second it took him to think it over, though, Pollux seemed to have decided for him, grinding down against him with the same irritated expression on his face.

“Don’t make me ask,” he growled, burying his face in Adrissu’s shoulder. Adrissu’s nostrils flared, breathing in as deeply as he could to fill himself with the scent of his mate.

“I won’t,” he murmured against his skin, hands already reaching to slide the elf’s robe off his body. “I won’t.”



Things were going well, Adrissu thought, more so than he might have anticipated when Pollux had first agreed to move to Polimnos. Pollux would often be gone for a day or two in his workshop, but most nights he came back to the tower and slept in Adrissu’s bed. The elf was not a warm person by any means, but he seemed to be quite fond of Adrissu, and expressed it in his own way. Adrissu was in no rush to hear some opulent declaration of love; after all, it was his mate. They had already said so a thousand times before in past lives, so even if Pollux didn’t say it as overtly or as frequently as the others, Adrissu knew Pollux felt it just as acutely as he did.

Despite all this, though, he often had an underlying sense that Pollux was... not unhappy, but tense, as if he was waiting for some unforeseen shoe to drop. It was similar to the tension he had felt from Pollux when he had visited him in Wintergrove, which made him uncertain. Was he only imagining it? Pollux said nothing, but he always seemed restless at night and tired during the day, as if he couldn't sleep.

One night it seemed particularly bad, about a month after Pollux first came to Polimnos. He had woken Adrissu several times as he tossed and turned, then finally got up with a defeated sigh when Adrissu was certain that it was still at least two or three hours before sunrise.

"Pollux?" he murmured as the elf stood. "What's wrong?"

Pollux was silent for a long moment, then answered in a soft voice, "Can't sleep." He left, and Adrissu thought of going after him, but Pollux seemed irritated, so he stayed. When he got up later that morning, though, he found Pollux curled listlessly on the downstairs lounge with Vesper coiled half next to him and half in his lap.

"Good morning," Adrissu said, and Pollux only grunted in response. He had a thought, then, that maybe Pollux was going into heat—Braern was often irritable and restless in the day or two leading up to his own. "Are, ah... Are you well?"

Pollux looked at him with an utterly annoyed expression, but it faded quickly into something more melancholy. "Sorry if I worried you. I haven't been sleeping well."

"I noticed," Adrissu said, unsure if he should press the issue more. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

Again Pollux was silent for a long moment—but then, much to Adrissu's shock, he covered his face with his hands as if he were trying not to cry.

"I never sleep well," he choked out, curling in on himself. "For as long as I can remember. I'm always tired. I have these—these dreams—memories of my past lives. I hate it. It feels like I never truly rest. It's why I can't just be idle. I have to be working, or it's too much to bear. I'm so tired, Adrissu, I'm *so tired* of all this. I don't want to be in this cycle anymore. I don't think I could handle another life's worth of memories rolling around in my head like this. It gets more intense every time. I remember being Kian and hating it already—and it's worse now, Adrissu, it really is."

Shell shocked, Adrissu couldn't come up with a response for a long while, staring at Pollux—a strange mixture of despair and hope and sympathy and shame roiling in his chest all at once.

"I..." he started, then shook his head. "Of course. You know I'll do everything in my power to help you, Pollux. I already have a plan, or at least an idea of what we can do. That is—if you mean the

soul transference.”

Pollux’s expression darkened, but he didn’t reply. Whatever that meant, Adrissu was unsure, so he added cautiously, “Is that what you meant?”

“I don’t know,” Pollux sighed, looking away. “Last time, I... When I wanted to try it, that was when everything... happened. I don’t want to die. Not like that.” His hands unconsciously moved to his sides as he spoke—for an instant, Adrissu had a flash of Kian, reaching for his shattered ribs in his last moments. He looked away, blinking hard, until Pollux spoke again. “You said you have a plan?”

“Yes,” Adrissu said, his voice rasping. He cleared his throat. “The red dragon, Tyrsun—he’s a menace. I knew his parents. I thought he would be a good candidate even before I spoke with them, but when they asked for my help in getting him to... behave a little less petulantly, I was much more certain.”

Pollux’s face twisted in consternation, finally breaking through his miserable expression. “Really? Him? *Really?*”

Despite himself, Adrissu laughed and nodded. “I think he’s the best option, really. Close enough that we can scope out his lair, and no one will be upset if he stops coming around. He has no friends, no allies, even for a dragon. Getting rid of him will do a service to the people of Wintergrove, as well as working for our own purposes.”

“I see,” Pollux said, though he sounded unconvinced. “I don’t know if I like the idea of... taking over Tyrsun’s body. But I suppose if you think it is our best option, I have no alternatives, so I’ll have to trust you.”

Adrissu paused, then placed a hand on Pollux’s fists, which were clenched over his knees. “I do want you to trust me, but if you want me to find a different dragon, I will. It will be your body. If you would prefer something else...”

Pollux shook his head. “I don’t want to think that hard about it. It still makes me nervous to even entertain the notion.”

“I won’t let this be a repeat of last time, I promise. I’ve thought about it much more already. We’ll have a better plan. We won’t be rushing the way we did then. That will make all the difference.”

Pollux’s expression didn’t change, but he nodded silently. His gaze was still vacant, looking listlessly out the front window. Adrissu leaned down and kissed his forehead, and he looked back up at Adrissu with a tiny, weary smile. “I trust you.”

The words thrummed underneath Adrissu’s skin, filling him with warmth. Coming from Pollux, that very well may have been an ardent declaration of love. “Thank you. I promise I won’t let you down.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Despite his words, Pollux almost immediately seemed to backtrack, coming to Adrissu the next day to tell him not to act too rashly on his behalf.

“I have a long life ahead of me yet,” he said, carefully expressionless. “I want to... Well. I might not be making a dragon-slaying weapon anymore, but I still want to be more prepared than last time. I’ll work on things that can help us when we eventually deal with Tyrsun.”

“Say the word, and I’ll be ready,” Adrissu sighed. “But if you prefer to wait, I won’t rush you.”

“I know,” Pollux said, and neither of them said anything else on the matter.

Pollux kept himself busy with his new workshop, and Adrissu came to see him sometimes, but mostly tried to let him tinker away undisturbed. Pollux had a few ideas for things that could subdue a dragon, but nothing worth showing yet. Adrissu knew not to rush him; and besides, he had plenty of his own work to keep him busy, between the school and his own renewed study of soul transference. He knew how the soul transference worked, of course, but it had been over a century since he’d successfully performed it last, and it wasn’t something he wanted to be unsure of when the time finally came. So he re-read all his notes about it, tried it a few more times with some chickens he bought from one of the outlying farms, and spent some time trying to sort out what had happened to the stone containing Lorsan’s soul, which had shattered unexpectedly about a hundred years after he had contained the soul therein.

What he could deduce was that putting a soul into a container, rather than another living creature, would cause it to decay over time—or at least, something akin to decay. He did not fully understand it, but it seemed to be contingent on both the size of the vessel and the complexity of the soul; the tiny chicken souls he pulled out fit neatly in small shards of precious stones, but within a few months those small gems would be cracked or split entirely with no evidence left of the soul inside it.

Luckily, he did not anticipate needing to put his mate's soul into anything other than a dragon body for longer than a few moments, and he did not especially care what happened to the soul of the other dragon when he took it out. Some part of him thought it might be interesting to see what would happen if he put the dragon's soul into Pollux's body, but it would be a dangerous gamble—and besides, he felt quite sure that Pollux would be against it for one reason or another. So he sorted through his hoard, a monumental task in itself, and found two suitable gems that he set aside to perform the ritual at a moment's notice.

It was during this time that Alana Pughes died. She was getting old for a human, but her death was not a natural one; she was killed in an accident involving a steam tank, part of a project that she was working on to improve the steam engine transport that ran along the southern coast. An overfilled tank exploded, killing her and some others working near it, and injuring several more. It was very unfortunate, and Adrissu wondered if the tank being overfilled was actually an accident, or if someone was vying for her position and plotted this lethal removal; but no evidence of wrongdoing was found, and his suspicion wasn't strong enough to investigate the matter himself.

“Didn't they ask you to become Lord Representative once?” Pollux asked when Adrissu was recounting the gory affair to him a few days after it happened, since the elf had been sequestered in his workshop since the day before it occurred.

“Oh, a few times now,” he laughed, shaking his head. “I considered it when they first asked me about it, when the Federation first took over and set up the position, but, well. I figured someone would eventually notice that their Lord Representative hadn't died or aged at all, and that would be a complicated issue to traverse, don't you think? Far more trouble than it's worth.”

“When the Federation took over,” Pollux echoed, his eyes becoming distant. He frowned, as if trying to think of something.

“Do you remember when that happened?” Adrissu asked cautiously, and Pollux's frown only deepened.

“It sounded familiar somehow, but... no, I don't think so. I was... there for that?”

“That was the end of your first life, so I suppose it makes sense you wouldn't remember much, if anything,” Adrissu sighed, inwardly chastising himself for getting his hopes up. Even if his mate did not recall being Ruan or Volkmar, he was still both of them at his core. “You died trying to defend Polimnos against the Federation.”

Pollux's eyebrow quirked. “Against the Federation? Why?”

Adrissu had to laugh at that. “Well, at the time, they were an invading army. In hindsight, the unity and shared resources of being part of the Federation has been a boon, of course. But back then they were just another city-state’s army coming to us and saying we were to become part of this new alliance, whether or not we were willing. And most of us were not.”

“I see,” Pollux murmured, his frown easing away. “I’m sorry to hear I died in vain, then.”

Adrissu let out a bitter laugh, but his chest squeezed with regret at that. He had had the same thought more than once over his many years—that Ruan didn’t need to die then—but it was only facing his near-certain death that Ruan was willing to undergo the soul-binding ritual in the first place. If the Federation had never come, and Ruan had never resolved to fight against it, would they even be here now?

But that had been well over two centuries ago. There was no purpose in entertaining *what ifs*. Adrissu squeezed Pollux’s shoulder, and the elf leaned into him, wrapping his arms around his waist.

“It wasn’t in vain,” Adrissu murmured. “It was important to you, to us.”

“Who do you think will become Lord Representative next?” Pollux asked, his voice muffled against Adrissu’s shoulder, evidently ready to move on from the conversation.

“I don’t know,” Adrissu admitted. “I haven’t been keeping up with local politics as much as I used to. It bores me now, to be honest. It was interesting when Polimnos was younger and smaller, and it would perhaps affect me in one way or another, but now... It’s really all the same. Alana was the most practical Lord Representative we’d had in well over a century, I think. They’ll be hard-pressed to find a suitable replacement.”

As it turned out, the replacement was not entirely suitable, and only deepened Adrissu’s suspicion that Alana had been purposely put in harm’s way. The next Lord Representative of Polimnos was a half-elven woman, Willow Elafaer, a bastard daughter of the Elafaer family. They were one of the very few elf families that were a fixture of Polimnos, and thus a family Adrissu tried to avoid as much as he could. Adrissu was surprised both at her nomination and subsequent success, but despite her illegitimacy, it seemed her elven father and his connections were working for her own gain. This would be an annoyance, as he estimated Willow was only about forty years old, and even a half-elf would live long enough to wonder why *he* didn’t age—a fact that might become all the more apparent if he and Pollux were seen together over many long years, as the latter began to show the subtle signs of elven aging. Hopefully it would not come to that, but it was a possibility. He would have to avoid her. It was a shame, as he liked having connections to the Lord Representative for whenever he

needed a favor; but she wouldn't live more than another century or so, and part of him suspected she would not make it to the end of her natural lifespan, considering how Alana's life had ended.

Through all this, between the school and Pollux, he kept quite busy. He still went and visited Ned and the second Academy once or twice a year, but more for business than pleasure now, as Eris was getting old for a human. Her health was poor and seemed worse every time he saw her, which only served to remind him why he shouldn't let himself befriend humans in the first place.

It couldn't be entirely avoided, as he had to see Ned at least once a year, sometimes more—especially since he wanted the second Academy to implement the healing track that had been quite successful so far at the main Academy. Still, she was noticeably less energetic each time he saw her; and the last few times before she died, he hardly saw her at all, Ned making some excuse or another that she wasn't feeling well. The last time, Ned seemed to know it wouldn't be long, and asked Adrissu if he wouldn't mind coming to say hello to Eris at the house. Adrissu did not want to, not really, but from the way Ned looked at him, he knew the half-elf hoped that he would take the opportunity to say goodbye, so he acquiesced.

"It's so good to see you, Adrissu," Eris said warmly to him when they arrived. "Goodness, every time I see you, I think you look more like your father."

Adrissu's smile tightened as he sat down next to her. She was sitting in a plush rocking chair, draped in a blanket, looking exactly as elderly and frail as he had imagined. "It's good to see you as well, Eris."

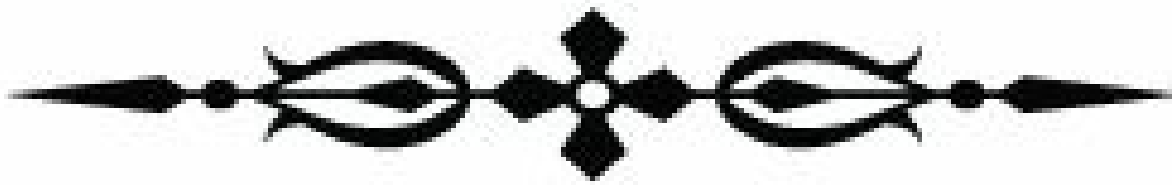
She waved her hand. "Someone should have warned me how awkward it would be to be the only one who gets old. I should have known better than to surround myself with elves." She laughed, then coughed. "Well, I'm sure Ned twisted your arm to come see me, so I won't keep you long."

"On the contrary," Adrissu said, shaking his head. "He only had to ask, hmm, maybe twice." She laughed again, and his smile eased as he continued, "I have appreciated your friendship all these years. So I apologize if it seems like I have avoided seeing you as of late. I've been busy, but that's no excuse, of course."

She shook her head, placing a thin hand on his own. "You don't have to explain yourself to me. I understand."

He nodded silently, unsure of how to proceed. They sat in silence for a little while, until Ned came back into the room and sat with them, an uneasy smile on his face. They chatted about pointless things, the weather and how the one thing Ned missed from Polimnos was the sea—occasionally, Eris interjected, but seemed mostly content to listen and observe.

When sunset approached, Adrissu hugged her goodbye, and that was the last time he saw her. It was only three months later that Ned wrote him to say that she had passed away in her sleep. He hated the tiny pang of sadness that thrummed in his chest when he read it. Having human friends was always a mistake.



In the meantime, Pollux had developed a few promising weapon prototypes that made Adrissu confident that they would set their plan in motion sooner rather than later. He had put together essentially a whip made of a heavy, braided chain and infused with magic to increase its strength and durability, so that when bound around a dragon's wings, it would make flight impossible. Second, he had crafted a shield, lightweight and easy to carry, but enchanted with cooling properties so that it would defend its wearer from a dragon's fiery breath.

Both things would be exceedingly useful if and when they had to face off with Tyrsun, but Adrissu's chest ached with nostalgia when he looked at the shield, gleaming and bright compared to Ruan's time-worn shield still displayed on the tower wall. A different unease ached in him when he thought of how Kian died—not from the dragon's fierce breath, but the sheer power and weight of a lashing tail—and there was nothing he or Pollux could do that would negate that, at least not that he could think of. Trapping it and keeping it bound would be their best bet, but it would have to be more effective than what Kian had done. It had to be perfect this time. But Pollux was still working on his inventions, and there was no rush. They could come up with something that would be perfect.

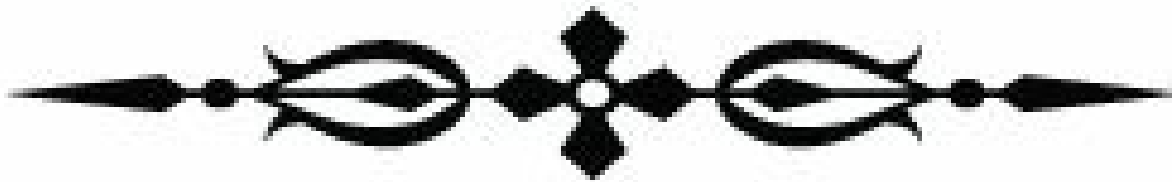
The last piece of the puzzle would be reaching Tyrsun to trap him in the first place. Though he knew of Tyrsun's territory, of course, Adrissu did not know exactly where the red dragon's lair was, and where within the lair they might find Tyrsun. Luring Tyrsun out of his lair would likely be the best option, but this risked interference from others. Either way, Tyrsun would have knowledge of their surroundings that he and Pollux lacked. Fighting a dragon in its own lair was a death wish, though, so Adrissu was adamantly against that as well. He turned the problem over and over in his mind over several months, coming back to it often when he lay awake at night with Pollux restless beside him, or in quiet moments in his office when he was supposed to be reviewing lesson plans or developing his own.

Some part of him was certain that Pollux would have some idea that he was missing—some key piece of information that he had not thought of—but he was loath to bring it up to the elf, not yet. Everything still felt so fragile and breakable, like if he mentioned it now, Pollux might change his mind about everything after all. He was not sure where the feeling came from, but it reminded him of Ruan and their struggle over the initial soul bonding ritual.

He had been thinking of Ruan often, of late, because Pollux reminded him more of Ruan than any other incarnation before him. Though they were exceedingly different in temperament and appearance, something about Pollux's warrior nature was a stronger echo of Ruan's heart than ever before. Yet Pollux also seemed more like Adrissu, strangely, than any of his previous iterations—cold and calculating, emotionally unavailable, but desperately attached to him. Not to mention his magical ability, which was far beyond even what Kian had been capable of.

His mate was undeniably becoming more like him the longer time went on. This too unsettled Adrissu, so he hoped more than ever that this would be his mate's final incarnation. He was not sure what another would do to either of them.

Time passed, as it always did, and before long, it had been two years since Pollux had come to live with him. A new school term was well underway, and Pollux was nearly finished with the first of his inventions. Once it was perfected, he would move on to the shield; and when both were completed, Adrissu hoped, they would finally move on Tyrsun—then they could close this chapter of their lives together to proceed to the next. Even if it took two more years, that would be fine, Adrissu thought. Two years had gone by in a flash; another two were sure to be just as quick.



“A letter for you, headmaster.”

Adrissu glanced up to see his secretary stepping through his office door with a folded piece of parchment held out to him—this one was a human man, tall and wiry and not particularly friendly, but he was punctual and his handwriting was very neat, so Adrissu liked him well enough for the job. He reached across his desk to take it, only to frown at the unfamiliar script addressing the note to him.

“From...?” he asked, but his secretary only shrugged, already stepping back toward the door.

“A courier dropped it off, sir,” he said, pausing in the doorway. “My apologies.”

Adrissu waved him away and opened the letter; it was not uncommon to get a missive from someone he did not know, but he had not been expecting anything. But the letterhead at the top of the parchment identified the note as coming from the Lord Representative herself, Willow Elafaer, which was even more of a surprise. He had been trying to avoid the Elafaer family as a whole—why was she writing to him now?

Headmaster Adrissu Rolastra,

I have recently become aware of an interesting connection between yourself and a favored weapons dealer, whose wares I've purchased to arm my household guards. If you are still able to manufacture the Blackthorn model from approximately five years ago, I find it much preferable to the models being created currently and would pay a premium for more of these weapons. I would love to sit down with you and discuss over a meal at your convenience. Reply to the above address, and I will be in touch.

Lord Representative

Willow Elafaer

This was not at all what Adrissu had expected. She thought *he* was the maker of the Blackthorn weapons, not Pollux—but how had that connection even been made in the first place? Someone must have recognized Pollux, or at the very least noticed him moving between the workshop and Adrissu's tower. He could think of no other explanation. Unless...

Could she have drawn the loose threads connecting Zamnes to himself? Pollux started Blackthorn Enchantments in Wintergrove and had made the only advancement in steam-enchanted weaponry since Granville Kipp of that same city, who had died in the destruction of his workshop at the hands of three dragons—one of whom *could* have been identified as the nearby Zamnes, which would have been the first confirmed sighting in centuries of the black dragon. Could the letter, then, be some kind of veiled threat?

He was getting ahead of himself, surely; and regardless, he did not want to interact with Willow more than absolutely necessary. He could go and deny his involvement with the Blackthorn, but it perturbed him that the weapons were still being made—even if they were now of poorer quality, if her words were anything to go by. And she was arming her own personal guard with them? They had been designed to kill a *dragon*, and she was giving them to petty guards.

“What a waste,” he muttered, unable to hold back the revulsion rising in his throat. The letter disturbed him, so he set it aside to deal with later; but the unsettled feeling lingered with him for the

rest of the day. When he returned to his tower, Pollux was not home, so he walked to the workshop to discuss the matter with him before making a decision.

“Oh, Adrissu,” the elf said, his normally stern face coming alive with surprise when they locked eyes, though only for an instant before his usual stoic mask slipped back into place. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

Adrissu smiled at him. His little secret expressions, the ones only Adrissu saw, made him feel like his heart might burst. “I wanted to come by and talk to you. I received a strange letter and thought I might get your advice before acting.”

“Strange?” Pollux repeated with a frown, immediately looking uneasy.

“Nothing to be too concerned about, I think,” Adrissu said, pulling the letter from his robes and handing it to Pollux, rather than waste time with explanations. The elf took it and read it quickly, but his frown only deepened.

“She’s equipping *guards* with *Blackthorns*,” he finally said, once he had read it, his voice dripping with incredulity. “By the gods, what is she thinking?”

“I had the same thought myself,” Adrissu replied dryly. “This poses several questions to me. How did she even learn about the weapon? And why does she think *I’m* associated with their production and not you? How did she get a hold of an older model, putting aside how she even knows about these weapons in the first place? You know I don’t want to associate with the Elafaers for a range of reasons, but I don’t know how to deny such an invitation. I think I should go, if only to get answers. What do you think?”

For a long moment, Pollux was silent, looking down at the parchment in his hand.

“I didn’t know there were more of my original weapon out in the world,” he finally said, his voice sounding small. “I thought I had the last one, and the rest were accounted for. Gods, I wish I had never made the damned things.”

“I’m sure she got it secondhand somehow,” Adrissu replied, reaching over to grasp his wrist. Pollux leaned into him, his tense form easing against Adrissu’s steady frame. “I know I can’t control how you feel, but truly, I wish you wouldn’t hold on to this guilt.”

“It wasn’t meant to be used this way,” he growled, pushing his face into Adrissu’s shoulder. “You should go just to try to find out where she got it—if you can get it back. And see what new weapons they’re making. Gods, I knew they would still work on it, but... I didn’t want to see any of it.”

“I understand,” Adrissu replied, keeping his voice low and soothing. “I’ll see what I can do.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Adrissu went to see Willow a few days later, putting on a nicer set of robes and walking across the city to the Elafaer estate for supper with the Lord Representative. The estate was everything he hated about wealthy elves: walled off from the rest of the city and sequestered in its own secret gardens, guards standing watch every so often along the length of the wall and two at the ornate wooden gate. He could hear a fountain running behind the gate and fought back a scowl at the wanton display of opulence.

“I’m here to have supper with the Lord Representative,” he said coolly to the guard who looked askance at him as he approached, holding out the letter that he’d received. The guard scanned it quickly—Adrissu looked at his face as he read it, noting that the man was a half-elf—then he nodded and opened the gate. As he headed up the winding garden path toward the home, he wondered if all their help were half-elves, since he was sure no full elves would come all the way to the far end of Autreth, only to serve another elven family. With equal certainty, he doubted that the Elafaers would want humans regularly in and around their house, servants or not. But, he reminded himself, Willow too was a half-elf, so perhaps this was only his own assumption getting the better of him.

A servant met him at the entrance of the house and led him to a formal dining room, where a long table took up much of the space with a single figure sitting near the far end. Willow Elafaer looked up as he entered, smiling brightly and standing to greet him. She looked mostly elven, with a tall, slender frame and long, silvery-blond hair in a neat braid down the middle of her back, an ornate silver clip holding it together at the end.

“Thank you for coming to see me, Headmaster. I believe we’ve never met before, but I’m Lord Representative Willow Elafaer, as you know,” she said, extending her hand to him as he came to his seat. Adrissu shook her hand, forcing himself to smile.

“A pleasure to meet you, Lord Representative,” he said. She gestured for him to sit, and they took their places, facing each other on opposite sides of the rectangular table. Two servants must have been waiting for them to sit, as each of them were presented with a full goblet of wine as they settled into their seats. “I must admit, I was surprised to receive your invitation.”

“I apologize for the sudden request, but, well,” she said with a smile, before taking a sip of her wine. “There’s no, ah, subtle way to ask about these matters, I suppose.”

“Well, I hate to be the bearer of bad news,” Adrissu said, “But I am not the creator of the Blackthorn weapon. I was not involved in any way. I know its creator, but it seems you were given inaccurate information.”

“Is that so?” she asked, a tinge of disappointment in her voice. Adrissu watched her face carefully, as she seemed to mull over the admission. She did sound disappointed, but something else crossed her face, too, that he wasn’t completely sure he could place; but when she spoke again, it was with the same pleasant smile and upbeat tone. “Then, tell me, how do you know its creator?”

“My partner, Pollux,” Adrissu replied evenly. They had agreed that there was no point in trying to obfuscate the truth when she was already so close to it; and besides, Pollux pointed out, maybe he could make some modified weapons for her as a side job, if that was what she really wanted. “Pollux Blackthorn. I’m sure you can see the connection.”

“Blackthorn,” she repeated. “Isn’t he a full elf? Strange for his family to have translated their name.”

“He is a full elf, but has no family. The humans who raised him gave him the name,” Adrissu replied, trying not to sound as defensive as he felt. Pollux’s name seemed a point of contention everywhere. “He did create the Blackthorn weapon, but is no longer associated with the studio that makes its predecessors. Perhaps you made the connection between him and I, but mistakenly attributed the weapon to me.”

“Exactly what happened,” she said, quickly enough that he was sure it did not happen quite like that. But he had not expected the full truth from her at any point. “It’s unfortunate he’s no longer making them. Those early Blackthorns are a technological marvel. Something about them just has so much more of a... *kick*, compared to the newer models. Can I ask why he moved on?”

At that moment, two more servants brought out the first course: a cold, blended soup that was popular in the heat of the summer. It was approaching fall, but the dish was an elven staple, so he was not surprised to see it. He waited for her to take a spoonful, then took a polite sip of his as well.

“It is a complicated story,” he said slowly. “But in short, he left the studio to come be with me in Polimnos and decided against setting up a new studio here. I’m lucky enough to be able to support us both, so he invents for pleasure now, rather than profit.”

“How romantic,” she said, smiling, and he nodded with a tight smile. “Well, who could argue with that? If he won’t make them, he won’t make them.”

Adrissu was silent for a long moment, taking a few spoonfuls of soup as he thought. He had expected her to protest, or try to weasel her way into getting more Blackthorns—from a woman who had probably had the former Lord Representative killed for the purpose of taking her seat, for her to fold so quickly was not only surprising, but suspicious. What would she have to gain by giving up? Would she move on to something far more drastic?

Adrissu hated the thought of it, so he would have to be proactive in offering a compromise.

“However, perhaps on a smaller scale, I think he would not be opposed to creating something similar,” he said. “It would have to be modified, of course, as the original studio holds the patent for that particular model. But he is quite inventive, and if it were only a few... I could arrange for you to speak with him, instead. If you’d like.”

Her smile brightened considerably, and he wondered if he had just been played—if she had been waiting for him to offer, so no one could say that she had strong-armed them into it. Annoying, but he would play her little games for now. He always outlasted them in the end.

“Why, I would absolutely love that,” she agreed, taking no notice as the soup was removed from the table and a platter of soft flatbread topped with herbs and greens took its place. “Pollux, you said? I’m sorry I didn’t know sooner, otherwise I would have invited him. Both of you, of course. Let’s plan that out now, shall we? As you might imagine, my schedule tends to fill up quickly.”

Adrissu smiled. She was banking on the fact that they had already discussed what Pollux would be open to.

“Next week, perhaps?” he offered.

“I’m all booked up, unfortunately. The week after? I could do something earlier in the day, I think.”

“Perfect.”

They set the day and time, opting to meet in a fancy cafe in this part of town, a place Adrissu was sure she frequented. It felt safer than the two of them coming to her home, in any case.

The rest of the dinner felt far less fraught, as she was content to talk with only the occasional comment or interjection on his part. She went on about the current projects and improvements

happening in the city, one involving the newest steam engine development that was gathering funds, until finally she asked him about the Academy.

“I know you have a second branch in Feld Heslyn,” she said. “Have you considered opening a third branch? For such a longstanding institution, I’m surprised it’s still as bound to Polimnos as it is. Even the College at Gennemont has a handful of smaller campuses across Autreth now.”

“Two is quite enough for now,” Adrissu laughed. “Maybe if I had the right person, the right place... But, no, I don’t think a third campus is in the cards for the foreseeable future.”

“I’d be happy to help you find a location and secure funding, if you should ever need it,” she offered.

“I appreciate your offer, but for now I must decline,” he repeated. Her smile didn’t waver.

“Of course. I have a long memory, and I plan to have a successful tenure as Polimnos’ Lord Representative, so the offer is always on the table.”

Their meeting began to wind down, and before much longer, she was walking him to the door, although her gait was slow and leisurely.

“I know you had a good relationship with Alana Pughes,” Willow said, making him entirely alert once more. “I understand you must harbor some... suspicion, or even ill will toward me, for how things happened. But I can assure you, nothing nefarious occurred between us. And while it was an unfortunate accident, it was also an opportunity I couldn’t pass up. I fully understand why you might want to distance yourself from me, but I hope someday we can have a beneficial partnership too, the same way you did with Alana.”

“Alana was a colleague before she was ever Lord Representative,” Adrissu said coolly. “Our close relationship was due to that. I mean no offense to you, Miss Elafaer, but we do not have that sort of history and never will.”

“And I wonder why that is,” she mused. “The elves of Polimnos have always wondered why such an influential family line such as yours has eternally distanced itself from its cousins. Elves should stick with elves, don’t you think?”

“My forebears came to Autreth because they were outcasts in Aefraya. Forgive me if I still harbor some of that residual suspicion of its denizens.”

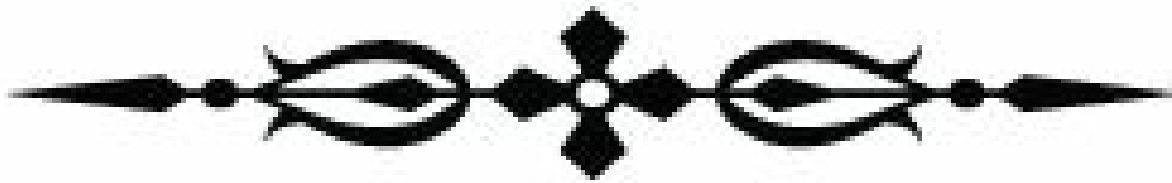
“But we are hardly elves of Aefraya any longer. I was born and raised in Polimnos, as was my father before me. I’ve never been to Aefraya, and he has only visited. We are much the same, Adrissu, and it’s a shame you won’t see past whatever preconceptions you have to join us.”

He stared at her for a long moment—a cold stare that she met with a smile, whose warmth, in light of their conversation, seemed to Adrissu only calculating. This was why he hated elves.

“I will consider it,” he said simply, knowing full well he would not.

“I only want to see us all as allies, if not friends, Headmaster,” she said, turning away as he stood in the doorway. “Forgive me if I was too bold. I hope we can still have a productive meeting with your partner in two weeks.”

“We will see you then,” he said stiffly, then stepped out into the cool early autumn evening. As he walked, he studied the guard who was leading him to the exit, and the two that they passed on their way out. Each of them had a long, thick metal rod hanging from their hip, with a flexible tube connected to a small canister alongside it. They were not the Blackthorn weapon, but they looked eerily similar. Seeing one on each of their hips, as if they were mundane swords, made Adrissu’s skin crawl. Much as he tried not to put himself into the affairs of dragons, this was something he had to warn others about.



Adrissu still had the paper that he had used to communicate with Naydrun and Heriel; he could only hope that Naydrun still had their corresponding piece. He debated over what to say for a few days, unsure of how much information he wanted to give; but in the end he decided that Naydrun already knew about his own involvement, so there was no point in trying to be coy about anything.

More dragon slaying weapons have been created like those we once destroyed. I have done what I could to minimize their presence and delay their production, but I have seen several iterations of this weapon procured by the wealthy for their own protection. They are weaker, and unlikely to be used exclusively against dragons. Still thought you should be aware. Warn others as you will.

The curt message only took up a few lines of the paper, and he stared down at it for a long while as the ink dried. No reply appeared, but he knew that he should not have expected an immediate response. He had no idea if Naydrun even still owned the roll of enchanted parchment. The other dragon might not see it for days, months even—uncertainly, Adrissu added the date to his note. Still no reply came, so he put it aside and tried not to think too much about it.

He and Pollux attended the meeting Willow arranged, which went much the same as their previous dinner, despite the change of location. Pollux’s cold, withdrawn persona returned in full force;

Adrissu knew he was that way, of course, but still it almost took him by surprise, having gotten so used to Pollux's soft warmth whenever they were alone.

"How many would you want?" Pollux asked after Willow had alluded to her admiration of the original Blackthorn model, so utterly direct that both Adrissu and Willow seemed to hesitate for an instant, before Willow said,

"Well, as many as you would be willing to offer, of course. But we could start with something small like, perhaps... Ten units?"

Pollux frowned. "Too many. I could do five over the course of a year."

Willow's lips twitched as if she wanted to speak, but held back. It took only a moment for her to gather her thoughts, though, and the same pleasant smile remained on her face after taking a long drink of the tea in front of her.

"If five is what you offer, I'd gladly accept," she said, smiling over at Pollux, whose expression did not change. "Would six months be possible instead of a year?"

Pollux eyed her with such open disdain that even Adrissu felt cowed, and he had to stop himself from pulling on Pollux's shoulder or squeezing his thigh under the table.

"Five in six months is how you end up with poor quality work," he answered coolly. "If that's what you want, fine. But I offered a year for a reason."

"You're right, of course," Willow said quickly, her voice strained. "I understand you're only one person. Please forgive my over-eagerness. I really am just a big fan of your work." Her expression didn't quite betray her irritation, but it certainly did not match her words, and Adrissu's nervousness at the tension between them melted into pride that his mate so easily stood his ground. His eyes lingered on Pollux next to him as they negotiated on the price, which also ended in Pollux's favor.

Their luncheon went on for a little longer, but Willow seemed far more miffed than she had when Adrissu had seen her last, having only gotten a fraction of what she evidently wanted. Once the details were decided, she excused herself shortly afterward, while inviting them to stay, as she had already paid for their meals. When she had said her goodbyes and was no longer in earshot, Adrissu smiled so widely over at Pollux that the elf stifled a laugh.

"You are incredible," he murmured, pressing a kiss to the side of Pollux's throat, feeling his racing pulse beneath. "And I love you."

"I did nothing special," Pollux protested, fighting a smile, but Adrissu felt his heart race anew. "Anyway, shall we go home? I wasn't especially impressed by this place, so..."

He met Adrissu's eyes with a heat that surged straight to his groin. He had never broached the topic of being married and bonded to Pollux—the elf was young and their relationship still felt new—but at moments like this he missed feeling that answering swell of arousal through the bond, something he had grown so accustomed to with Braern that it still sometimes took him by surprise.

“Let's hurry home, then,” he replied, his voice low, and Pollux nodded. Of course, they were on the far side of the city from his tower; but being in the wealthy part of the city did have some benefits, so Adrissu quickly hailed a carriage to get them home quicker. This had the added benefit of some measure of privacy as they traveled, so Adrissu kissed him hungrily the moment the carriage doors had closed and kept kissing him until it came to a stop in front of his tower.

“Come on, then,” Pollux goaded, his lips swollen and flushed, as Adrissu paid the driver. He grimaced, handed the man probably too many coins, and followed Pollux up the stone steps and into their home.

“Teasing me out in the open,” he growled, seizing Pollux the moment the heavy wooden door closed behind them. His hands found the smooth skin of Pollux's body underneath his robes easily, peeling away the layers of cloth. “So cruel to me.”

“Don't act like you don't enjoy it,” Pollux panted, fumbling to get Adrissu undressed just as quickly. “Are we really going to do this here in the sitting room?”

“You're lucky I don't take you right here on the stone floor,” he retorted, then pushed Pollux toward the chaise lounge. Pollux chuckled, but didn't resist, and quickly Adrissu had him on his back atop the lounge. There wasn't enough room for both of them, so he propped one knee next to Pollux's hip and kept the other planted on the ground so he could fit between Pollux's spread legs.

“Just going to take me like a beast?” Pollux teased, grabbing at Adrissu's cock and stroking him roughly.

“I spent the whole carriage ride getting you ready,” he said, rocking his hips to thrust into Pollux's fist, as his own hands trailed along the elf's pale thighs, before squeezing the soft mounds of his ass and spreading them apart to reveal his slick hole. “I don't think you need anything else to be ready for me.”

Pollux released him, and without waiting for an answer, Adrissu lined himself up and pushed into Pollux all at once, making the other elf gasp as he groaned in pleasure.

“You *are* a beast,” he panted, but his hard cock bounced between them as Adrissu quickly set a rapid pace. “You just said you were—proud of me, and you're—fuck, you punish me for that.”

Adrissu let out a breathless laugh. “Don’t act like you don’t enjoy it,” he said, echoing Pollux’s retort to him. The grin that curled around Pollux’s flushed cheeks felt almost as good as his cock buried in his tight, wet channel.

“I love—I love you,” Pollux said suddenly, grabbing Adrissu’s forearms and meeting his eyes. His pupils were dilated, making his eyes almost black. “You know that, don’t you?”

Adrissu hesitated, slowing just enough to lean down and kiss him, far more tenderly now than he had. “I know. And I love you.”

“If you don’t want me working for that woman—” he started, and Adrissu groaned, starting to fuck him in earnest again to cut him off.

“I don’t want to think about any of that right now,” he growled, fucking him harder until Pollux was yelping and moaning with each thrust. “Focus on *me*. None of that matters.”

“Only you,” Pollux agreed breathlessly, his cock leaking onto his belly. Adrissu grasped his length, making him moan, and stroked him in time with each thrust. “Fuck—oh, fuck, yes, only you—only *you*, Adrissu, please.”

He shuddered and came with a wordless cry, his cock pulsing hard in Adrissu’s hand as he shot lines of come up his chest. Adrissu only lasted a few more thrusts, rutting deep into him until he too came with a gasp.

They stayed that way for a long moment, until Adrissu’s breathing slowed to a normal rate, and Pollux was pushing him away playfully. When they were cleaned up, though, and sitting side-by-side in Adrissu’s study to read together, Pollux seemed quiet and pensive again.

“What are you thinking, hmm?” Adrissu murmured, nudging him slightly with his elbow. Pollux smiled weakly, but the same listless expression lingered.

“I’m already not sure about this agreement with the Lord Representative,” he sighed, leaning against Adrissu. “I can make more weapons, of course, but should I? For her? Is it really worth it?”

“You haven’t signed anything yet,” Adrissu answered softly. “But, well. If it’s you supplying her, at least we know it’s there. And you can... You know. Maybe, ah, *alter* the design enough that it perhaps is not quite as powerful as she’s hoping for.”

Pollux was quiet for a long moment. “You don’t think that would upset her?”

Adrissu shrugged. “Only if she found out.”

“She has an original Blackthorn, so I’m sure she’d be able to tell the difference.”

“What is it, exactly, that you feel so uncertain about?” Adrissu pressed. “It was not that long ago that you wanted to make something stronger. Even now, you make weapons. Why is this so different?”

“Because I made it to harm *you*,” Pollux snapped in reply, his expression becoming pained. “And I wish I hadn’t. I don’t want to hurt you. I wish I had never wanted to hurt you. And, yes, I know—you don’t care, you forgive me, all that. It helps. It does. But I remember what I felt, what I thought, and it embarrasses me to have ever been that way at all.”

Adrissu leaned back to look at Pollux in the face. The elf wouldn’t meet his eyes at first, looking tersely down at his fists clenched in his lap. After a moment, he looked up through his eyelashes at Adrissu, looking so pathetically *young* that Adrissu couldn’t help but feel sorrow for him.

“Pollux,” he said softly, taking the elf’s hands in his own. “Do you remember anything of what I was like in your previous lives?”

Pollux blinked in surprise, considering him now with an expression of confusion. “Before...? I mean, a little bit.”

“Perhaps you remember me as vain and arrogant,” Adrissu said. “Maybe you remember that I was even cruel, to others, if not to you. But you don’t remember far back enough to see how *different* I was when you were Ruan. I very well may have been a different person then, too. The way I saw the world was... much more draconic. I hated that fate had bound me to you, and in a way, I hated *you*. I was cold and unkind to Ruan, very often. And even though I have tried my best in all your subsequent lives to be kinder, to show you love more openly, I still think all the time about how terribly I treated Ruan—and how fiercely he loved me anyway. So please understand that I really do empathize with being ashamed of your past self. I can’t promise that you will ever feel that you’ve atoned in your own eyes, but in mine, I forgave you long ago. And in my experience, someday you will be able to see that having things you regret doing is just a sign that you’re growing and improving. So if we can make sure that the Elafaer family doesn’t go to some other weapons-maker to get her disproportionately dangerous arms, and make a little coin at the same time, I think that seems like a good deal.”

“I...” Pollux started, only to trail off uncertainly. He seemed to mull it all over for a second, then smiled hesitantly over at Adrissu again. “I don’t really remember you being that different from how you are now. I remember Kian best, and you were always kind to me then. And Braern. Were you really so different with Ruan?”

“Very much so,” Adrissu sighed, glancing away with some discomfort for the first time. He always remembered Ruan fondly, as he did all his mate’s previous iterations, but it had been a long time since he had considered how he himself had been back then. Would Ruan have willingly chosen him if it weren’t for the draconic magic drawing them together? Considering how cold Adrissu was to him

for so long, part of him doubted it, but he didn't like to follow that train of thought. The truth was that they were here now, together, and Ruan *had* chosen him, as all his subsequent lives had chosen him.

“Somehow I've always assumed that you've been exactly the same all this time,” Pollux chuckled, breaking him from his thoughts. “But I suppose that doesn't make sense once you think about it. You've lived this long. Why wouldn't you change?”

“Why wouldn't I indeed,” he murmured in reply, but the thought struck him. Why *wouldn't* he? He had changed quite a bit since he had first met his mate. He had been so preoccupied with how much his mate had evolved since he was Ruan, yet he was absolutely not the same Adrissu that he had been so long ago. It was a strange thought, but comforting somehow. They were both different, but still together, and that was what mattered.

“All this to say,” he continued abruptly, squeezing Pollux's shoulder. “I truly do not care whether or not you work with this woman. If you decide you don't want to for your own reasons, then by all means, back out before you've signed anything. But if it's only out of some loyalty to me, or something along those lines, that should not be a factor here. Even if she causes us some sort of trouble, all we would need to do is lie low for a while until she dies and there's a new Lord Representative to deal with instead.”

Pollux laughed aloud at that—a rare sound, but one Adrissu was becoming increasingly familiar with. “I suppose that's one way to approach the problem, isn't it? You do win when you can outlive everything.”

Adrissu grinned at him, all his teeth showing. “I always win eventually.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

After some deliberation, Pollux did end up signing the contract to make five modified Blackthorn weapons for the Elafaer family over the course of a year. The first few months he would spend developing a new model, and the remainder of the year would be spent producing them. He did not seem entirely happy about the arrangement, but Adrissu's reassurances that it would not bother him seemed to sway Pollux's opinion enough that he agreed.

When Adrissu asked him about the new model, Pollux's answer was noncommittal. He didn't seem to have a solid idea of what he would change and how, only that it would have a far less brutal punch to it since it would only need to pierce mortal flesh, not dragon scale. He spent the first three months sketching out various different designs, but finally seemed to settle on one that had a thicker barrel and a smaller steam canister—overall, Adrissu thought it looked rather more intimidating, but in reality would be far less lethal than the original. He did not join Pollux for any of his subsequent meetings with Willow, but she seemed satisfied with the menacing appearance of the new weapons and gave him the go ahead to begin production. Adrissu saw him less and less after that, as his work took up most of his time.

Two months into his work, Pollux left in the morning more irritable than normal and returned later that night completely miserable, muttering to Adrissu as he stomped up the stairs that his heat was coming on.

Adrissu had been with him through his last few heats and knew now that Pollux was especially cold and angry in the day or so leading up to it, so he gave the elf a wide berth for the rest of the evening, anticipation simmering in his gut—knowing that when Pollux came to him of his own accord, it would be positively explosive.

When he came to bed, Pollux was already laying down, but his eyes were open and watching him, gleaming in the dark. He said nothing, nor did he move toward Adrissu as he got into bed beside him.

Adrissu could all but smell the arousal on him; but he closed his eyes, breathed in deeply, and waited. As if to spite the both of them, Pollux remained motionless still for a long while, and Adrissu almost fell asleep before he felt Pollux finally stir next to him, shuffling closer and putting a hand on his chest.

“Adrissu,” he whispered, his voice hoarse. “I’m sorry—I need—”

“Whatever you need,” Adrissu murmured, grasping his hand. “Take it.”

That was all the encouragement it took; Pollux straddled Adrissu easily, pulling his sleeping clothes off with a singular focus. Adrissu was barely half-hard when Pollux had reached for him, but the elf was rock-hard and his thighs were slick with his arousal. He brought Adrissu’s cock to full attention with a few rough strokes of his hand, before settling down onto him and taking him down to the base in one careful movement. Adrissu groaned, and Pollux gasped and shuddered, rocking back on his heels to adjust.

Pollux’s first orgasm always came quickly and easily when he was in heat. He bounced on Adrissu’s cock for only a moment before Adrissu felt him clenching and shuddering around him, biting back a cry as he came. His cock was untouched, but still streaked Adrissu’s chest with come; finally moving, Adrissu grasped Pollux’s hips hard and drove up into him, making him shout and writhe against him.

“Yes, yes, *yes*,” Pollux panted, the wet sound of their bodies moving together nearly drowning out his voice. Adrissu wanted to wrench him down and kiss him, to devour his cries before they could leave his mouth, to consume him entirely. Instead, he only gripped harder, hard enough that he was sure it would bruise later, and fucked Pollux hard and fast until the elf was coming again.

“More,” Pollux gasped, even as he was still twitching around Adrissu. “Please, Adrissu, more.”

Adrissu nearly laughed as he pushed the elf onto his back, manhandling him easily. “I know, greedy boy. You know I’m going to give you everything you want.”

Pollux made a soft sound somewhere between a moan and a whimper, and this time Adrissu fucked him more leisurely, knowing if he drew it out longer this time that Pollux would be more likely to sleep after he’d come again. They had all of the next day to get through still.

This time they were close enough that Adrissu could lean down to kiss him—could feel the soft puffs of his rapid breath against his skin and the wet slide of their come-stained torsos as they moved. He knew Pollux hated how open and vulnerable he was with Adrissu during his heats, but Adrissu loved it. He pulled back just enough to watch Pollux’s face as he fucked him, adoring each flutter of his eyelids and the tension that built then ebbed away in his brow. His face was flushed, his lips

swollen, and he could only meet Adrissu's eyes for a few seconds at a time—before his gaze darted away again or his eyes squeezed closed.

When he knew the elf was on the verge of orgasm, Adrissu said sharply, "Look at me."

Pollux's eyes flew open, his heat making him obedient and compliant despite all his efforts.

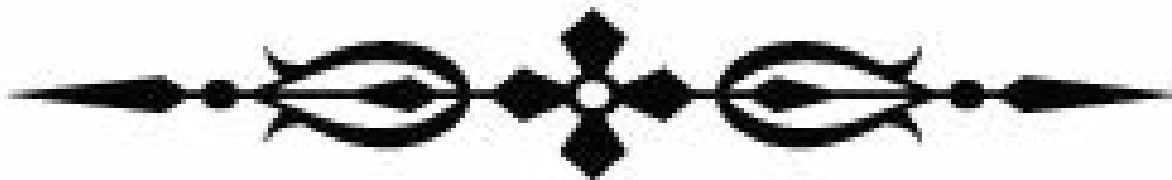
"I want you to look at me when you come," Adrissu continued, relishing the way more color rose in Pollux's cheeks. He bit his lip in response, but didn't look away. "I want you to look at me when you feel me come inside you."

"Come inside me," Pollux echoed faintly, nodding. Only then did Adrissu speed up, just enough to make Pollux gasp, and he reached down with one hand to stroke his cock in time with his thrusts. Pollux moaned, his back arching, his cock pulsing in Adrissu's hand as he came, but still his eyes stayed open and locked on Adrissu's gaze.

It was all a rush of intimacy and power and pleasure all at once, sending Adrissu over the edge too. Fire burned down his spine through his cock as he gave just a few more hard thrusts, burying himself as deeply as he could in his mate's tight, slick hole as he came. And still Pollux's eyes stayed focused on him, even as he moaned and sighed with satisfaction—his primal need to be filled finally met.

"I love you," Adrissu murmured, leaning down to kiss him again, softer this time. Pollux nodded, eyes fluttering sleepily, barely reacting as Adrissu slipped out of him and wiped them clean. "Drink some water, and we can sleep."

Pollux muttered something that sounded like a protest, but obediently he sipped from the water Adrissu offered him. By the time Adrissu had cleaned up and come back to bed, the elf was dead asleep. Adrissu smiled and curled his body around him.



He had Pollux bent over their kitchen table before and after their breakfast the next morning, the elf utterly insatiable in the depths of his heat now. The day passed in the familiar rhythm of fucking, eating, napping, and fucking again; by sunset, Adrissu's cock was exhausted, but Pollux still begged him for more.

"It's not enough," Pollux complained with a whine as Adrissu finger-fucked him, three fingers sliding into him easily. "More—I need *more*."

“You’re sure?” Adrissu asked, though with how readily his first three fingers fit into his slick hole, a fourth seemed almost negligible.

“Yes,” Pollux urged him. “Please, yes.”

Adrissu tucked his pinky finger against the rest of his digits and eased it into Pollux’s opening until all four of his fingers were buried to his knuckles. The elf hissed and grunted, bearing down and trying to rock against him, but Adrissu held him in place with his other hand pressed firmly on Pollux’s chest.

“Stay still,” he said. Pollux whined, but obeyed. He moved slowly, drawing his fingers all the way out, before sliding them back in—Pollux’s moans, and the lewd wet sound of it, making his aching cock twitch in half-hearted interest. It didn’t seem to hurt him, and his fingertips could brush against the spot deep inside Pollux that always made him come hard and fast. But this time, as he rubbed his fingers against it, Pollux groaned in frustration and writhed in protest.

“It’s not enough,” he panted. “All of it, I want all of it.”

“My whole hand?” Adrissu said, frowning in concern. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“It won’t hurt,” Pollux protested. “Please, Adrissu, please.”

Still unsure, Adrissu looked down at where his fingers were pressed inside of Pollux. The elf’s slick asshole was pliant and tender to the touch, but he supposed that the rest of his hand would not be so much thicker than his cock—as long as he was careful, it wouldn’t be any rougher than the sex they’d been having all day. Pollux’s cock was still at full attention, looking painfully hard where it jutted out from between his legs, as if he had not come a dozen times over already.

“We can try it,” he agreed tentatively. Pollux’s sigh of sheer relief when he said it turned his uncertain expression into a smile. “But if it hurts you, I’m stopping, no matter what you say.”

“Yes,” Pollux agreed, nodding. His cock twitched with eager anticipation as Adrissu shifted his position, moving down to settle between Pollux’s spread legs to see what he was doing.

Adrissu pulled his fingers out a bit and tucked his thumb against his palm. It did look like it would all fit, but still he said softly, “Take a deep breath.”

Pollux inhaled deeply, and as he exhaled Adrissu pushed his hand upward, his fingers slipping in easily with only a beat of resistance, as his knuckles spread Pollux’s hole wide. Then the resistance faded away as the widest point of his hand passed through the tightest ring of muscle, and Pollux let out a broken sound of relief as Adrissu’s hand pushed inside of him almost to the wrist.

“Oh fuck,” Pollux panted, his cock twitching wildly. “Oh, gods, fuck, Adrissu, fuck, it’s so—it’s so much.” His cries melted into wordless sounds as Adrissu pulled back just a tiny bit, then pushed back

in just as slowly—but this seemed to be more than enough for the elf, overstimulated and desperate as he was. He clenched hard around Adrissu’s hand, and his spent cock twitched and leaked a few meager drops of come that dripped down his length and mixed with the copious slick coating the rest of him.

“Tell me if you want me to stop,” Adrissu murmured, but Pollux shook his head vehemently.

“Don’t stop,” he choked out. “Don’t stop, Adrissu, it feels so good.”

Adrissu smirked. “If that’s what you want…”

“Please,” he repeated, and Adrissu began to move in earnest this time. Pollux wailed, shuddering against him, eyes rolling back in pleasure. He was slick and wet and impossibly tight around Adrissu; yet his hole stretched so easily around the widest part of his hand that for a little while, Adrissu entertained the idea that he might even be able to take the first few inches of his cock as a dragon. The thought reinvigorated him, but he was much more interested in seeing how far he could push Pollux’s limits now to want to do anything else.

Pollux never stopped making noise, his voice becoming hoarse as he moaned and sobbed and gasped. He came a second time without even needing to touch his cock; but when it had been several minutes without another orgasm, Adrissu very gently reached with his free hand to lightly stroke Pollux’s cock, making his mate shudder and gasp as he came unexpectedly.

“Don’t stop,” he begged, even though he already looked absolutely wrecked. “Gods, just like this, don’t stop.”

And so Adrissu continued, pulling his hand out to his fingertips, then pushing it back in up to his wrist at an even pace, stroking Pollux’s cock at the same speed. The elf was mindless with pleasure, begging to come again immediately after his orgasm tore through him, but it was easy to oblige. His face was streaked with tears and his body stained with come and slick, but still he urged Adrissu to keep going.

Adrissu’s wrist was sore, and his cock painfully hard, by the time Pollux’s wild sounds of pleasure were punctuated by a pained groan—one hand coming up to the muscles of his abdomen, a telltale sign he was reaching his limit.

“Think you’ll ever want my cock again after this?” Adrissu teased, slowing the movements of his hand. Tired as he was, Pollux nodded weakly, his eyes flickering between where the hand disappeared inside him and Adrissu’s cock.

“Yes,” he croaked. “But I—I think I’m almost done.”

“Will you come one last time around my cock for me?” Adrissu murmured, pulling back. Pollux moaned as the thickest part of his hand stretched him wide and slipped out of him, then nodded.

“Want your come,” he mumbled, as Adrissu fully withdrew, using the slick dripping from his fingers to coat his cock. “Want it inside me.”

“I know you do, greedy boy. You’re going to get it,” Adrissu assured him, positioning himself between his spread legs. First, he leaned down to kiss Pollux deeply. The elf had submitted to him entirely—every trace of his cold, defiant facade long gone—and his mouth opened easily against Adrissu’s tongue. Pollux raised his arms to wrap them around Adrissu’s torso, filling his chest with tender warmth—as intense as it all had been, he still wanted the comfort of Adrissu’s embrace.

“I love you,” he murmured against Pollux’s skin when he broke their kiss. “More than anything in this world.”

“I love you,” Pollux echoed softly, gasping as Adrissu pushed his cock inside, sliding in with no resistance at all. “I love you.”

“I know you do,” Adrissu panted as he began to set a quick pace, knowing Pollux was at his limit. He wouldn’t last, not with how long his cock had gone untended. “So good—so good for me, you did so well, taking every last bit of me...”

Pollux nodded, moaning with each breath—this too was a constant with his mate, how readily he responded to Adrissu’s praise.

“I’m going to come inside you,” Adrissu groaned, and Pollux groaned in response, his hole twitching around Adrissu’s length. “Ready for me?”

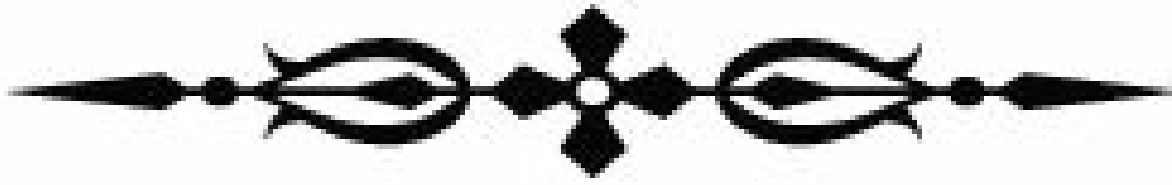
“Please,” Pollux murmured, exhaustion tinging his voice. But he rocked his hips in answer to each of Adrissu’s thrusts, his spent cock still hard where it was trapped between them. “Want to—to feel you.”

Adrissu nodded, moaning wordlessly as he chased his orgasm, driving himself into the warm depths of his mate until all the heat building up inside him released with a burst of pleasure, which raced through his body and left him shuddering and gasping. Pollux cried out in response, his cock twitching as he came one last time, his voice broken in half-pain and half-pleasure.

Utterly exhausted, Adrissu remained exactly where he was for a long while, until his cock had softened and slipped out of its own accord. His breathing slowed, and his heart began to beat normally. Beneath him, Pollux’s eyes were closed, his lashes damp and sticking together, but they flicked back open as Adrissu extricated himself and stood.

“Stay there,” he said hoarsely, and Pollux nodded, unmoving. “I’ll get you cleaned up.”

What they really needed was a long bath now, but it would have to wait. Adrissu managed to get them mostly wiped clean and coaxed Pollux into drinking a bit of water, downing what he didn't drink. Exhaustion overtook him, and he slept with his mate curled up in his arms.



The intensity of what they had done seemed to satisfy the rest of Pollux's heat. He woke the next morning tired, but without the single-minded need for Adrissu to be inside him. They ate and bathed, and Pollux murmured he should get back to work; but Adrissu forced him to stay home and rest. Pollux protested only once, but afterwards he seemed quite pleased to have Adrissu taking care of him.

Adrissu wasn't sure if he would ever understand why Pollux seemed to push him away and pull him closer all in the same breath, but he was glad to have his mate all to himself for a day. When Pollux went back to his workshop the next day, he was more cheerful and affectionate with Adrissu than he had been before, and Adrissu was loath to let him leave when he was in such a good mood. But he still seemed happy and content over the next several days, so Adrissu made a mental note that when Pollux was being particularly prickly, the problem could likely be solved by fucking him with his fist again.

This delayed the production of the weapon about a week, but still Pollux managed to get the first prototype to Willow exactly when he had promised. He became a little more withdrawn after he'd handed it over, but if he regretted what he had done now that the weapon was in the world, Adrissu could only guess. He had learned soon enough that Pollux would only share his emotions with him if and when he wanted to, so Adrissu wouldn't ask him directly. And Adrissu's plan to improve his mood did work, though not quite as well as it had during his heat—not that Pollux complained.

By the time a year had passed, he created all five weapons and handed them over to the Elafaer family. Pollux reported that they had been given only to those directly responsible for the protection of Willow and the family patriarch. That was a small comfort, though Adrissu hadn't even realized that he'd been nervous about it. He knew the weapons were scaled down, designed to harm mortals and not him, but some part of his primal brain must have still been shaken by the very existence of such a threatening piece of work.

It was around this time that a reply appeared from Naydrun on their shared parchment—Adrissu was unsure how long it had been there when he spotted it, but the message was not exactly confidence-inspiring.

Thank you for the notice. It also seems to me nothing more can be done. I will alert others so we can spread the message that humans should be avoided as much as possible going forward. The weapon will only continue to spread over time. We will do our best to be prepared.

Adrissu wondered briefly if the “we” was in reference to all dragonkind, or if Naydrun had found their mate again—it would be quite fast, and their mate would be particularly young now if so. But they were not friends, even after everything, so he set the parchment aside and did not reply.

He thought this would be the last that he had to worry about dragon slaying weapons for a long while, but it was only a few months later when Pollux came storming into the tower hours before he was due to be home that day. As he called for Adrissu, there was an unmistakable edge of panic in his voice.

“What’s going on?” Adrissu asked, startled, as he came hurrying down the stairs. Pollux stood in the middle of the ground floor, looking up at him with an expression that was somehow both defeated and full of righteous fury; and he held up a parchment that was clenched in his hands for Adrissu to see. Adrissu took it gingerly when he reached the bottom of the stairs, reading it quickly.

The Newest Technology from Blackthorn Studios—Autreth’s premiere developer of magical weapons

Blackthorn Studios is pleased to announce the development of the DRAGONSLAYER CANNON. Dragons have had dominion over the land of Autreth for far too long. Now, humans can FIGHT BACK and DEFEND THEIR CITIES using the latest defense system from Blackthorn Studios.

Units are limited. Priority given to locations with known dragon infestations. Please express interest in equipping YOUR CITY with this world-changing technology by writing to the address below:

“What is this?” Adrissu muttered, frowning as he read it over. “A dragonslayer cannon?”

“I’m so sorry,” Pollux choked out. When Adrissu looked back up at him, his face was red and his brows furrowed tightly together, as if it were taking every ounce of strength not to weep. “I hate that they’ve continued with this. That fucking—that fucking red dragon—killing it is all they think about, because killing dragons was all I could think about. And now—now Willow wants one.”

“What?” Adrissu exclaimed, fear creeping at the edges of his consciousness. It was an unfamiliar feeling—it had been a very long time since he had felt truly afraid.

“That’s how I found out about this,” he muttered in response. “They sent it to her. I’m sure all the Lord Representatives are getting the same letter. She approached me about what I thought it was, if I would make something like it for her—I refused, of course. But Adrissu, she wants to hunt down Zamnes and kill him. She wants to make sure there are no dragons anywhere near Polimnos so she can, I don’t know, be a hero and secure her position for the Elafaer family permanently.”

“I... I see,” Adrissu said faintly, sitting down on the stairs. “Well. It would be in Zamnes’ best interest not to show his face around Polimnos again then, I suppose.”

“Can you do that?” Pollux urged, sounding utterly broken. “Can you just... be Adrissu forever, for the rest of all time?”

“*Forever?* No. But for a long while still? I think my time in Polimnos would need to draw a close sooner rather than later, but perhaps,” he sighed, leaning back, but Pollux shook his head.

“Polimnos is your home,” he said, sitting down next to him. “You shouldn’t have to leave. I don’t want you to have to leave.”

“My home is with you,” Adrissu answered. “Polimnos is nice, but I care more about being with you. That’s all that matters.”

Pollux was quiet for a long while after that, thinking. Adrissu’s pounding heart began to subside, but still he watched Pollux with equal parts curiosity and uncertainty.

“When I finish this,” he said, his golden-brown eyes flicking upward to meet Adrissu’s gaze. “When I finish the shield, I think... I’ll be ready. I don’t want to wait any longer. I want to do the soul transference.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

It took a moment for Adrissu to process what Pollux had said to him.

“You’re—you’re sure?” he stammered. “Pollux, these people are making a real push at killing dragons. Are you sure you want to do this now? It’s alright to wait longer. We can let all this die down first. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

To his utter shock, Pollux *laughed*. It was a single humorless bark of a laugh, but still it was the last thing Adrissu expected.

“Yes, I’m sure,” Pollux answered. “If you have to leave Polimnos, we’re leaving together. And the more I think about waiting, the more I’m sure I don’t *want* to wait any longer. Adrissu, I’ve told you how miserable this all is—these memories rattling around in my head. Maybe being a dragon will make it easier. Even if it doesn’t, though, it will ensure we can’t be separated. I’m tired of that too. I’m ready for all of this to just be over.”

Adrissu stared at him for a long moment, heart pounding. He had wanted this for so long that the realization it was nearly within his grasp was almost unfathomable. He had thought it would happen with Kian, yes, but it had been all in such a desperate rush that he barely had time to think about it finally, actually happening. All the years of waiting and studying and wondering were going to be over.

“Adrissu,” Pollux said, sounding alarmed. He stepped closer to Adrissu and took his face into his hands, his thumbs swiping under Adrissu’s eyes—and Adrissu realized he had started to cry.

His eyes prickling with shame, he turned away to wipe his face dry. “I’m fine, it’s—yes, if you’re sure.”

“Are you alright?” Pollux asked, sounding uncertain. Adrissu managed to laugh.

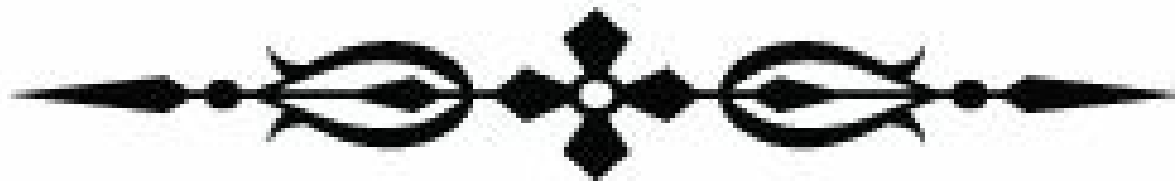
“Yes,” he said. “Sorry. I don’t know what’s come over me. A mix of being eager and nervous, I suppose. Yes, when you’ve finished the shield. We can do it then. I have a basic plan, but I’ll start

working out the details now as best as I can.”

Pollux’s eyes flickered across Adrissu’s face, considering him with an inscrutable expression. Finally, he leaned closer and kissed Adrissu gently on the lips.

“Don’t get soft on me now,” he murmured, and again Adrissu laughed.

“Never,” he promised.



They each set to work with a renewed fervor after that. Pollux had always been one to throw himself into his work, but somehow he seemed even more preoccupied with it now. Their mornings together were growing shorter, and now he rarely returned from his workshop before sunset.

As for his own work, Adrissu had Shima take on more tasks than her position normally allowed, not outright saying it but allowing her to believe he was testing the idea of training her to someday take over, perhaps for Ned or even for him. Adrissu assigned her to periodically review and approve lesson plans, one of his more frequent, tedious tasks, and coordinated with his secretary to have her run several meetings he decided he did not need to be present for. This allowed him to step away as much as he dared so that he could formulate a real plan.

He gathered new rumors and information about Tyrsun—easy enough, as the red dragon had been particularly cruel and domineering over the people of Wintergrove in the past five years or so, perhaps still enraged at being wounded by Pollux, though he surely knew that they both had long since left the city. Adrissu found several new essays and articles about Tyrsun, lamenting his chokehold on the area, postulating how to drive him away or somehow minimize his reach. While the precise location of his lair was still mostly unknown, as he jealously guarded the woods that must hide the exact entrance, it *was* widely believed that his lair was in a cave system or something similar north of Wintergrove, where the forest turned into rocky outcroppings near Camfort Cliff.

Much of it confirmed what Adrissu already knew about Tyrsun: he was cruel and aggressive, but only to intimidate the people of Wintergrove. His actual skirmishes were few and far between, preferring a display of dominance, then flying away before warriors or weapons arrived on the scene. But some of it helped, especially the various theories put out about where exactly his lair was, which would be the hardest part to plan around.

Adrissu could not get too close to the lair, knowing their draconic awareness of each other would tip Tyrsun off to his presence. It would have to be Pollux who found the lair, then he could double back and lead Adrissu. They would be committed to their fate after that: the point of no return. The moment he sensed Adrissu approaching, he would surely be ready to fight—Pollux’s weapons would be key at that point as well.

They should practice fighting, he realized, but he was not sure how well he could spar against Pollux, knowing how gently he would have to treat the human to avoid actually harming him, and how much fiercer Tyrsun would be in a real fight. But it would be better than nothing, so he explained his reasoning to Pollux. His mate agreed that he would have to test the weapons’ efficacy with Adrissu once they were completed, and practice holding his own against a dragon.

Finally, he gave Pollux the antimagic sword that he had stolen from Daiana so long ago, the one she had used to fell dragons herself. This—combined with the shield and the chains that Pollux had developed—would be enough to subdue Tyrsun, enough to perform the ritual. When he handed the blade to Pollux, for an instant, he was filled with dread, knowing his mate wielded one of the few weapons that could take his life. Somehow his mate had ended up with so much power over him, over all dragons—but Pollux held it reverently, just as keenly aware of what it must have taken for Adrissu to put it in his hands.

“I promise I won’t let you down,” Pollux said, keeping the sword in its sheath as he looked it over. “I know you’re trusting me with all this, and I’ll make sure your trust is well-placed.”

Adrissu smiled wearily at him. “There is nothing you could do to betray my trust, I think. But thank you.”

After that, Pollux trained with the antimagic sword and would sometimes ask Adrissu to spar with him using wooden practice swords. Adrissu had very little knowledge in swordplay, but watching Pollux reminded him of seeing Ruan fight, which was strangely reassuring. He couldn’t say with any authority whether Pollux was a good enough fighter to hold his own against a dragon, but hopefully Pollux would never have to face down Tyrsun alone. Mostly, though, he teased Pollux that it was only an excuse for Pollux to smack him around a bit, which the elf did not deny.

Pollux continued his work on the fire-resistant shield, which had gone through several rounds of revisions, but never seemed to quite meet his expectations. First, it wasn’t large enough to provide effective coverage, then it was too heavy to wield with just one arm; then the enchantment wasn’t strong enough so that while it would split a stream of draconic fire, it would burn too hot to hold, which defeated the purpose entirely. Adrissu helped how he could, but Pollux was the enchantment

expert between them. It seemed a delicate balance between the physical item and the enchantment itself, so most of Adrissu's contributions were hunting down the finest blacksmiths who specialized in shields, ordering things exactly to Pollux's specifications, and paying to have them all made. He had never seen his hoard so small—another reason they would have to succeed in subduing Tyrsun, as the other dragon's hoard would be theirs once the process was complete.

Through all this, Willow could tell Pollux was working on something and pestered him every so often about working for her again; but he repeatedly refused, and eventually she seemed to give up. A few months after that, though, the Dragonslayer Cannon was wheeled into town and displayed prominently along the easternmost wall. Lucky they had not chosen to put it on the wall facing the sea, Adrissu thought with no small amount of relief.

The thing was hideous: a metal crossbow-like contraption the size of a human man, mounted to an equally large steam reservoir. Its bolts were nearly five feet in length. It was installed with all manner of pomp and circumstance, but Adrissu hated even thinking about its presence in the city. Zamnes had not been seen in years, nor caused any problems for Polimnos in centuries: why the Lord Representative had taken such a keenness to finding and killing him all of a sudden was a mystery to him. But, evidently, others in town agreed with her.

But he kept his head down, and so did Pollux. Adrissu had taken a stronger interest in learning more healing magic and spent another summer in Aefraya to study with Dirge, who was getting on in years, but still able and willing. Pollux went with him this time, curious to visit Aefraya, and equally curious to learn the basics of healing himself. It was interesting to see Aefraya anew through Pollux, who had only vague memories of a few places within it, and who was very interested to know more about his yet-unknown elven heritage.

Quietly, without telling him, Adrissu tried to find out any information about Pollux's parentage, but was quickly met with a dead end. He had been dropped off as a small child at the orphanage after being found wandering on the road. Adrissu investigated the few elven caravans that traveled in that area, wondering if he had been born to merchants who had perhaps come to an unfortunate end at the hands of beasts or brigands; but there was almost no elven commerce that far into Autreth, and the two companies that he could find information on had no record of losing a caravan or employees in the area at that time. So it remained an eternal unknown, but Pollux didn't know any better and couldn't therefore be disappointed at the lack of answers. For his part, Pollux seemed to mostly enjoy their time in Aefraya, as it was largely work and little leisure, and he picked up healing easily.

When that summer was over, however, Pollux went right back to work on his weapons. The shield went through several more iterations before he tentatively declared that it was done. By then, it had been nearly a year since the Dragonslayer cannon had been first wheeled into the city.

“I don’t even want to say it’s finished,” he sighed, looking dejectedly at the gleaming shield he’d handed to Adrissu for his inspection. “More like... ready to be tested. I’ll have to do some sparring with it first to be sure. But it’s more promising than the rest.”

“It looks just about perfect to me,” Adrissu remarked, handing it back to him. “Though, in truth, it just needs to be good enough to keep you alive.”

“It needs to be perfect,” Pollux muttered, but leaned into Adrissu gratefully anyway.

They tested the shield later that week, bringing it down to Adrissu’s lair where he could breathe fire in his true form. It cleaved the stream of fire perfectly in half at the exact angle Pollux wanted: the enchantment drove the flame away, while shielding the area behind it from the intense heat by simultaneously sending a flurry of cold air around the user. Steam billowed from where the two airstreams met, one ripping hot and the other biting cold. It reminded Adrissu of the enchantment on the first Blackthorn weapon that he’d seen Pollux wielding—how it blew the steam away from the wielder the moment it went off. They had placed the shield on a stand so they could safely test it without Pollux needing to wield it himself, and when the steam cleared, it remained unmarked by the fiery onslaught.

“That looked the best of all of them,” Adrissu rumbled, swiveling his long neck to peer down at Pollux, who was watching beside him.

“I think so too,” Pollux echoed faintly, looking impressed. “Maybe this is the one, after all.”

He spent a few more days fine-tuning it, then he and Adrissu had a few mock fights using the shield, the chain, and the sword.

“Don’t hold back,” Pollux said as Adrissu emerged into his draconic form. “It needs to feel like a real fight—how it will later on.”

“Of course,” Adrissu agreed, though he knew he would have to be careful to not truly hurt Pollux. But the fact that Pollux had the antimagic sword did even the playing field a bit.

He had seen for himself how well the shield worked, but still it made him nervous to now be breathing fire at his mate, sheltered behind it. His heart seized up into his chest, and he braced himself to quickly drop back into his smaller form to heal any accidental injuries as he exhaled flame toward Pollux. But the shield stood fast, and when the burst of steam blew back toward him, he could see that Pollux was unharmed.

“Perfect,” the elf said, then lunged at him. Adrissu leapt aside, dodging the sword that Pollux swung at him, purposely slow enough that there was no chance it would make contact with him. As he feinted, Pollux dropped the sword and pulled the whip-like chain from where it was looped at his hip, swinging it at Adrissu. The chains whistled through the air, reaching for his outstretched wings, and this time the move was lightning quick and meant to capture. They collided with his wings, twisting around them near the base where they met his shoulders—the enchantment bound them tightly together the moment they found their target. Adrissu hissed in discomfort and tried to break through them, but the fortified metal held fast. He could not tear them away, nor could he move enough to take flight.

“It works,” he growled, lowering himself so that Pollux could reach the chains to remove them.

“I need more practice,” Pollux sighed, sounding annoyingly disappointed in himself as he unwound them. “It’s been far too long since I’ve used a sword like this.”

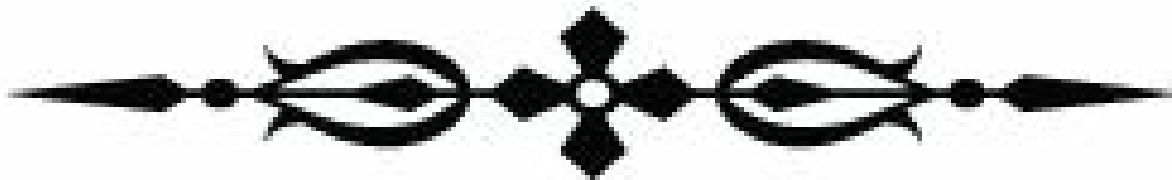
“Hopefully you won’t have to use it much, if at all,” Adrissu murmured. Pollux smirked up at him, and for an instant, it was like he was Ruan again.

“Can’t count on that,” he said, shaking his head. Adrissu blinked, and the resemblance was gone. “If worst comes to worst, better it dies than one of us. We can always find another.”

“It won’t come to that,” Adrissu replied, perhaps too forcefully, as Pollux flinched at the rumble of his deep, draconic voice that was so much like a roar. Adrissu huffed, and added in a softer tone, “I will do everything I can to make sure it doesn’t come to that. We could always find another, yes, but it will take time. And I know you don’t want to wait any longer than you need to.”

Pollux’s uncertain expression melted into a hesitant smile. “I know. I trust you.”

“Then let’s go again, I suppose,” Adrissu sighed, and with a similarly smug smirk, Pollux moved into a ready pose once more.



It took a few more weeks of sparring on and off, but soon Pollux thought he was ready to take on Tyrsun, and Adrissu agreed. They were as ready as they would ever be, at least; so he arranged to take a leave of absence from the Academy to prepare and complete the ritual with time to spare. Luckily, Shima was now perfectly capable of acting in his place for a month or two, having trained

under him for several years between her own classes. The school was in good hands, which meant there was one less thing for him to worry about.

Next would be the problem of Tyrsun's lair. The only solution was for Pollux to investigate it as stealthily as possible, but that still left the problem of where Adrissu should wait for him. Wintergrove was the obvious choice; but Tyrsun had found him there once before, which made him nervous, even though he had visited other times without incident. He floated the idea of waiting somewhere in the deep forest, far from where the lair was, but remote enough to remain undisturbed, or even in the smelly fishing village of Camfort Cliff since it was technically closer—but Pollux hated both ideas and insisted Adrissu should wait in Wintergrove. So, begrudgingly, he agreed.

They gathered up everything they would need: the weapons, the ritual components, and all the normal things needed for travel. It felt strange to be packing up things like clothes and toiletries, knowing that they would return as two dragons. The thought made Adrissu's heart squeeze in a strange mix of anticipation and terror, which he tried not to think too hard about.

To avoid even the smallest chance of being seen, they left in the middle of the night and went in a more roundabout way: Adrissu flew north over the sea a mile or so from the coast, veering westward at a stretch of uninhabited cliffs and following a meandering path to avoid passing over any cities or towns along the way. On his back, Pollux tried to sleep, but Adrissu felt him shifting and moving far too often for him to be resting at all.

The sun was rising behind them by the time Adrissu landed. They were far enough from any civilization so as not to have been spotted, and it would be a long walk before they reached Wintergrove—where Pollux would continue onward toward Tyrsun's lair, and Adrissu would stay behind.

That would be the worst part, he thought as they walked. He couldn't stop himself from ruminating on it, dreading it already and hating that he would be unable to protect Pollux even though the man was walking right beside him, his long, dark hair pulled back in a neat braid. The elf seemed to sense Adrissu's gaze lingering on him and glanced over at him with a questioning look.

"I told you not to get soft on me," he said, a teasing tone underneath his stern expression, and Adrissu chuckled. Cold as ever, but now he could recognize the affection underneath it.

"Forgive me for being nervous," Adrissu sighed, taking one of Pollux's hands into his own. "I hate that I can't go with you. It will be dangerous, and I just want to protect you."

"Do you trust me?" Pollux asked pointedly, and Adrissu nodded in affirmation. "Then it will be fine. I'll be careful. I can handle myself. And, well, if things do go south, I could probably teleport

myself a decent distance away and get back to Wintergrove.”

“Hmm.” They had talked about it as an emergency backup plan, and Adrissu had practiced teleportation with Pollux to make sure he could even do it; but it was even more draining for the elf than it was for him, so he couldn’t get more than perhaps half a mile from his starting point. It would get him out of the dragon’s lair if he needed to, but would leave him too exhausted to do much else. It was not ideal, but Pollux seemed unbothered.

“Adrissu,” Pollux said, pulling back on his hand. Adrissu met his gaze, and they stared each other down for a moment, before he continued in a softer tone, “I’m nervous too. But we’ll be alright.”

How had their roles reversed so utterly? Adrissu managed a tight smile back over at him.

“I know,” he said, and kissed his hand. “We will.”

The pair arrived in Wintergrove in the early afternoon, both of them tired from the long journey. Initially, they had planned that Pollux would leave Adrissu at an inn and would continue onward toward the lair, but as they approached—on the side of town opposite where Pollux had once lived, as he hated the idea of possibly running into people he knew—Pollux’s shoulders sagged, and he said to Adrissu,

“Maybe I’ll rest with you for a little while before I keep going.”

Adrissu hesitated—it seemed a minor enough change, but still he didn’t like having to adjust their plans on the fly—then nodded. “Of course. You should be at full strength when you get there, or as near to it as you can be.”

Pollux smiled wearily over at him, sensing his uncertainty. “I think so too. I won’t stay long, just enough to be refreshed. It shouldn’t delay our plans.”

They paid for a room at the inn, went up to it, and laid in bed. Pollux’s breathing next to him was deep and even, as if maybe he really had fallen asleep. Adrissu lay awake, acutely aware of Pollux next to him, his own heart thudding rapidly and nerves buzzing under his skin. He remained motionless for the first half an hour, then a full hour, and still Pollux did not stir.

He really *had* fallen asleep, quickly and easily. It was rare for Pollux to fall asleep so effortlessly; it would only delay their plans further, but Adrissu was even more loath to wake him, knowing how rare this was for him. Why now? Why here?

After nearly two hours, Pollux finally stirred. He rolled over away from Adrissu, a soft sigh escaping him. Adrissu hesitated, wondering if he was awake, then gingerly reached over to touch his shoulder.

“Pollux,” he said softly, feeling the elf’s body jolt in response. A beat passed, then Pollux slowly sat up, rubbing his eyes, and guilt flooded Adrissu’s chest—knowing he had woken him from the first decent sleep the poor elf had probably had in weeks.

“Sorry,” Pollux breathed. “I didn’t realize how long it’s been. How long has it been?”

“Maybe an hour and a half,” Adrissu lied. “I’m sorry I woke you.”

Pollux shook his head with his brows furrowed, as if even he was perturbed at how well he’d slept. “No, that’s alright. I didn’t mean to stay so long. I should go.”

Adrissu helped gather up his things as Pollux stretched and changed clothes. The sword and shield he would bring with him just in case the scouting mission went poorly; the chains would wait until they were ready to truly take on the red dragon.

“I’ll be back by this time tomorrow, no matter what happens,” Pollux said as he stood in the doorway, ready to leave. Adrissu nodded, his hands lingering on Pollux’s waist.

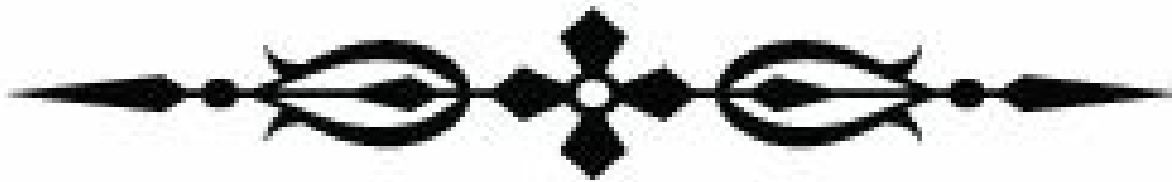
“You have the parchment, right?”

“Right here,” Pollux said, patting his pocket. “I’ll keep you updated as best I can.”

“Be safe,” Adrissu urged. “You can come back for any reason. If it seems strange at all... I’d rather this take longer than we thought than have you get hurt.”

Pollux managed a smile at him. “I know. I will.”

They kissed, then Pollux left, and Adrissu was truly alone. He stared at the door for a long moment, wondering if he had damned his mate to die yet another painful death—this time all alone. Eventually, though, he tore his gaze away and settled down to wait.



Waiting was absolute agony, Adrissu decided only a few hours into his vigil. There was nothing he could *do*, and he was not at all accustomed to feeling so helpless. While he could keep himself busy, none of it mattered if it couldn’t help Pollux. He could do nothing from here, yet his presence with Pollux would certainly doom them to fail all over again.

He stared uncomprehendingly down at a book for nearly an hour, his mind racing with thoughts entirely unrelated to the paragraph on the page that he couldn’t seem to get past. Then he paced around for a little while, trying to expel some of the pent-up nervous energy vibrating under his skin, but to little avail. Every half-hour or so, he would look at their shared enchanted parchment, but it was

always blank. They had agreed Pollux had twenty-four hours to scout out the lair to the best of his ability and return to Adrissu, so he had almost an entire day to wait before he could do anything.

Adrissu couldn't bring himself to sleep for fear that Pollux would write to him in need of his help, so he ordered a flagon of wine up to his room with his supper, picking at the food and helping himself to the wine. He lit candles and stared at the enchanted parchment on the table before him—sipping from the goblet that he kept full through the night, feeling the seconds crawl by at a maddening pace—and still no word ever came from Pollux. He caught himself nodding off as the sun rose, exhausted from traveling the day before, and started pacing again to stay awake.

One of the tavern workers brought him a plate of breakfast; the innkeeper must have been trying to appeal to them, as the proffered tray carried the light, bland fare elves often began their days with, even though Adrissu had made no special requests. He sipped on a bowl of clear broth with paper-thin slices of mushroom while it was still warm, then picked at the soft flatbread that came with it. It was surprisingly authentic, and Adrissu wondered how the innkeeper, or the chef perhaps, had known this part of elven culture. If he had had any appetite at all, it might have been nice just for the nostalgia of the days that he'd spent in Aefraya with Braern; but as it was, he felt too sick to enjoy anything.

It felt all too much like when Ruan had left. Here he was again, helplessly waiting to find out if his mate somehow survived against a much stronger foe, knowing his interference would likely cause far more problems than it would solve. At least with Ruan, there had been some survivors who returned to confirm that he had died—a conquering army come to tell him what he had lost. This time he would be met only with silence, and a long journey home alone. Why had he ever agreed to this plan? Why had he ever allowed Pollux to put himself in harm's way? Why was his mate a mortal, condemning him to suffer all over again every time he died? It was stupid and cruel, and Adrissu was a fool to think they could weasel their way out of this fate.

When it had been twenty-three hours and still Pollux had not returned, Adrissu thought he might die of despair. Dragons could not die in such a way, at least not that he had ever heard of, but maybe he would be the first. Cursing himself and his terrible luck and his arrogance and his foolishness, he almost missed the dark smudge of Pollux's handwriting appearing on their slip of shared parchment—normally neat and small, but the letters now thick and slanted, as he wrote with a short charcoal stick he'd brought along.

On my way.

Adrissu nearly jumped out of his seat, bringing the parchment closer to his face in fear that he was hallucinating its appearance. But the brief message remained under his scrutiny, and he stifled a mad laugh as he fell back into the chair, dizzy with relief. He was alive. He was coming back. Maybe they really could do this after all.

Now that his anxiety had flooded out of him all at once, he was just left with an aching weariness from not having slept at all for nearly three days. While he didn't need to sleep as often as humans did, this was still far longer than usual for him, and it was catching up to him now. Adrissu laid down and managed to nap until he heard the latch of the door rattling, and he leapt up out of bed in time to see Pollux slipping inside—looking dirty and tired, but entirely self-satisfied.

“You did it,” Adrissu said, nearly breathless with relief at seeing his mate whole and healthy before him. Pollux smiled and kissed him roughly, the smell of earth and sweat and the herbal scent that was uniquely Pollux flooding Adrissu's senses.

“I did it,” he agreed when he finally broke their kiss, pulling from within his robe a carefully folded piece of parchment. He unfolded it and tossed it down to the table beside Adrissu; it looked like a hastily sketched map or diagram, but he barely spared it a glance. “And I have a plan.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Pollux's map was indispensable and his plan was solid, so they agreed they would leave the following morning just before dawn on foot, then fly the rest of the way when they were far enough out that Adrissu could transform without the risk of being seen.

Adrissu helped Pollux bathe, feeling acutely aware that this might be the last time his mate would inhabit this body. He washed the elf's hair, memorizing the feel of the silky wet strands in his fingers—the way his muscles shifted under his fingers as they rubbed soap up and down his back—the pulse that thrummed with vitality when Adrissu's touch lingered along the sides of his neck or drifted down to hover over his heart. The elf was exhausted and seemed to relish in Adrissu's undivided attention, so he said nothing about how his bath went on far longer than usual.

When the day's travel was washed away, Pollux ate hungrily and prepared his weapons, then together they laid down to rest. Though the night was still young, sleep came quickly to Pollux again—Adrissu couldn't think of any other instance when he had slept decently two days in a row. Though Adrissu himself was still restless with nerves, seeing how easily Pollux slept seemed strangely reassuring, as if it were a sign that they would succeed. He hoped it meant, at least to Pollux, that this was what they were *meant* to do. Eventually, his prior exhaustion caught up with him, and he too found some rest.

Adrissu woke about an hour and a half before dawn. Pollux was still asleep next to him, moonlight making his fair skin almost glow. His brow was smooth, no hint of tension or worry on his face, and his eyelids fluttered every so often as his eyes flickered, dreaming. Adrissu hated the prospect of waking him, having never seen him sleep so deeply and relishing the chance to drink in his mate's beauty—but they had a job to do, one that wouldn't wait. So, as gingerly as he could manage, Adrissu reached down to stroke his cheek, trailing along the curve of his jaw. With a sharp intake of breath, Pollux's eyes opened, instantly awake.

“It’s time,” Adrissu murmured. Pollux’s eyes closed, and he took in a deep breath before nodding and getting up with Adrissu.

They dressed by candlelight; armor would provide little protection against a dragon, but still Pollux donned a chain shirt layered between a linen undershirt and a heavy doublet, along with thick leather gloves and boots that guarded his legs past the knee. Adrissu kept his clothes the same as always. They would make no difference in his true form, and if anyone happened to see them leaving the city, they would look less like two unknown soldiers and more like a wealthy man and his bodyguard—a far more forgettable duo.

With the hour being as early as it was and only the light of the moon half-hidden to guide them, they only trekked a short way into the nearby woods before Adrissu transformed, his dark scales blending into the dark night.

“Careful,” he growled, as Pollux strapped himself securely onto his back.

“I know,” Pollux replied tersely, binding them together with a second set of straps. This would be perhaps their most dangerous flight yet.

Adrissu lifted off, the first few flaps of his wings the noisiest, then the sound melted away as they soared up into the cloud cover. He flew silently, feeling Pollux’s knees digging painfully into his sides as the stress of it all was finally catching up to the elf, making his fingers flex nervously over and over against the thick scales of his spine.

“Higher,” Pollux called behind him, the wind carrying his voice away and making him sound distant and faint. “I’m worried he’ll sense you.”

Adrissu made a deep rumble of acknowledgement in his chest, then brought them higher still. Pollux’s mortal constitution lingered anxiously in the back of his head, but the elf seemed fine so far, despite the air growing cold and thin around them.

“Higher,” Pollux urged him again. This time, Adrissu shook his head.

“No,” he said. “Even if he does sense me, I’ll know. I’ll sense him too. I need you awake and alert for this.”

Pollux muttered something, but his words were lost to the wind. It was true—Adrissu needed him at full capacity. If he went any higher, he might risk the elf losing consciousness, which would be a far worse complication than Tyrsun noticing their approach too early.

“More to the west,” Pollux called, and Adrissu veered west gradually until he added, “Yes, it shouldn’t be much longer now.”

They lapsed into tense silence once more, Adrissu remaining keenly alert for the telltale prickle up his spine. Part of him worried that the sensation would be nearly indistinguishable from the nerves roiling in his belly, so he focused as much of his awareness as he could manage to his scales, his spine, the burn of his wings carrying him and his mate through the air, until—

The shock of it was unmistakable. Electricity shuddered across his entire body, painfully conscious that he was now in another dragon's territory.

"I feel it," Adrissu said, flapping his wings harder and speeding them through the clouds.

"You're going to see a clearing," Pollux said, barely audible behind him. "It'll be quick. It's a fissure in the ground, hardly visible down there, but it should be easier to see from above—"

"I see it," Adrissu growled. All his instincts were screaming at him—to run, to turn away, to flee from the other dragon's home—but still he forced himself to surge forward. When they were directly above the dark crack in the ground far below, he tucked his wings into his body and nosedived. Pollux's breath became rapid and fearful, his arms and legs squeezed Adrissu impossibly tight, and the wind whistled around them like a scream.

A distant roar broke through the air, coming from far below. Tyrsun had noticed them, rousing him from his sleep. Adrissu imagined he had waited to see if this strange dragon would turn and retreat—enraged now that it had done no such thing. This was the only exit or entrance that Pollux could find, so even if another existed far off in the surrounding mountains, Tyrsun would surely come to meet the challenge here; but he could not truly expect that another dragon would plunge headlong into his lair, nor imagine the extent of their preparations.

Sure enough, as they plummeted, Adrissu could start to make out the faint red glow coming from deep within the fissure. Tyrsun's face appeared, fearsome in its wrath and rage at first; but his expression quickly morphed to one of surprise, even fear, as he saw Adrissu about to crash down atop him. He saw Tyrsun breathing in, embers glowing around his teeth—Adrissu closed his eyes, and he felt Pollux shift, positioning the shield in front of him. Together, they were bathed in the dragon's fire; but he could feel Pollux holding firm, and his own scales protected him. It was uncomfortable, but fire could not truly harm a dragon. Another moment, and Adrissu was atop him, arms extended to claw into him as their bodies collided.

"Fucking filth!" Tyrsun thundered, slashing at him as they tumbled back. They were still falling, but Adrissu could feel the passageway of the cave narrowing around them. "Who do you think you are?! This is my lair!"

The cave around them opened up suddenly—the antechamber Pollux had described—and Tyrsun half-flew and half-scrambled away from him in the open space. The red dragon rounded on him again, and this time he seemed to finally clock Pollux on his back. Yellow eyes widened in shock, then narrowed in suspicion.

“*You*,” he spat, recognizing Pollux as the one who had injured him all those years ago, and his entire demeanor seemed to change, his teeth flashing in a snarl as all his thick spines bristled with rage.

“Now, Pollux,” Adrissu hissed, and he slashed at the leather straps that tied them together. They fell away easily, and Pollux leapt down from his back; before Tyrsun could react, Adrissu lunged at him again. Tyrsun leapt away, fearing his claws, but it was magic that poured from Adrissu’s outstretched limbs. With a growl of exertion, Adrissu condensed the air around Tyrsun as much as he possibly could, slowing him and making him struggle to breathe.

“What is this?!” Tyrsun snapped, confusion obvious on his face now. “Who are you? Working with a mortal—”

His words were cut off with a snarl, though, as Pollux’s heavy chain whistled through the air and clung to Tyrsun’s wings. Adrissu grinned cruelly at the way Tyrsun tried to snap them by extending his wings, only to shout in pain when the chains didn’t break.

“Sleep,” Pollux said, reaching a hand out to touch Tyrsun. Adrissu could feel the magic take hold, and Tyrsun’s head drooped forward; but his mouth twisted in a growl as the dragon forced himself awake and inhaled heavily again.

“Shield, Pollux!” Adrissu exclaimed, but Pollux was already in motion. The column of fiery breath struck, splitting perfectly around Pollux and shrouding him with the ensuing billows of steam. He took advantage of Tyrsun’s distraction to lunge at him again, wrenching at the red dragon’s long neck to divert the stream of fire.

Tyrsun snarled wordlessly, jaws snapping as he tried to bite back at Adrissu; but he was too slow, and Adrissu dodged him deftly. He struggled again against the chains—against the thick air that slowed him, keeping him from reaching Adrissu—and roared in impotent frustration.

“Sleep!” Pollux repeated, his voice trembling with adrenaline. Again, Tyrsun’s head lowered limply, but he was motionless for only an instant, before rousing himself once more and snapping at Pollux. Adrissu’s magic still slowed his body, but he was close enough that Pollux had to lift his sword to parry the strike. Tyrsun hissed, blood gushing from his mouth where Pollux had struck him;

and for a moment he was frozen in shock—the sword had not only hurt him, but slashed deep into his scales and drawn blood.

Adrissu could sense the shift in his demeanor almost instantly, going from enraged and territorial to focused entirely on survival. The antimagic sword was terrifying, especially to one ignorant of its true nature—no common blade could pierce the magical scales and skin of a dragon, so Tyrsun’s fear toward this instrument of destruction was all too easy for Adrissu to understand. The red dragon recognized Pollux as a genuine threat now; he turned and screamed out another stream of fire at the elf. Pollux could barely lift the shield in time, and Adrissu heard him shout in pain, as some part of him must have been struck by flame.

“Stop!” he snarled, wrenching at his neck again. The fire broke off suddenly, as Tyrsun pivoted to snap into the thick muscle where Adrissu’s shoulders met his neck. He hissed, pain sparking from his arm into his chest as he tried to pull away.

“Adrissu!” Pollux shouted. Tyrsun’s body shuddered against him as he released Adrissu from his jaws to howl with pain. Adrissu pulled away to see the elf’s sword buried to the hilt in Tyrsun’s side. When he pulled it out, a thick stream of fiery blood poured forth onto the cavern floor.

“You—You—” Tyrsun panted, scrabbling to get away. His yellow eyes were tiny pinpricks now, wide with horror at the sight of his own blood, something so rarely seen by dragons.

“Damn it,” Adrissu hissed—such a piercing wound could be a problem, so they had to end this as soon as possible.

“Sleep!” Pollux tried again.

“*Sleep!*” Adrissu added his magic to the command.

Tyrsun stumbled, and he could feel his magic seep through the red’s scales, spidering through his veins and into his mind. Tyrsun shuddered as he struggled to fight against the order, but Adrissu’s magic took hold, far stronger than Pollux’s; and with a growl that faded to a hiss, Tyrsun slumped to the ground, his eyes rolling up into the back of his head.

For a second, they both stood there panting with exertion, then Adrissu shook himself into action.

“Hurry, hurry,” he said, and Pollux wrenched the sack that he’d been carrying from his back and tossed it to Adrissu. He poured the contents haphazardly to the ground, and Pollux seized the chalk they would need and began marking out the runes with a measured quickness of having practiced a hundred times before. “I’ll take the soul first. Then we can heal the body.”

“I’m sorry,” Pollux murmured, barely audible from where he was kneeling on the dark floor. Adrissu shook his head.

“Don’t be,” he replied. “Like you said. Better to kill him than let him hurt one of us. You did very well.”

Pollux nodded curtly, focusing on his task, but Adrissu saw a small hint of a smile playing at the edges of his lips as he worked. Meanwhile, Adrissu sorted through the things they had brought, grabbing the stone he had chosen to capture Tyrsun’s soul. It was a large, unshaped emerald, larger even than the one he had tried to use on the young yellow dragon with Kian.

That set aside, he moved to help Pollux. Soon they had the entire array set up, and chalk markings covered the dark stone floor. With a grunt of exertion, Adrissu pulled Tyrsun’s limp form into the center of it, Pollux fixing any smudges left behind from the body or blood.

“Try your sleep spell again,” Adrissu urged him. “I’ll have to drop mine to start the ritual. But since he’s already asleep, I think yours will stick this time.”

“You’re sure?” Pollux said, eyeing the sleeping red dragon suspiciously.

“No, but it seems unwise to release the spell without backup,” he said. Pollux sighed, sensing his own trepidation—this had been the exact moment where everything fell apart with Kian—but still placed his hand on the dragon’s scales.

“Sleep,” he murmured. Adrissu felt his magic settling over the hold he had on Tyrsun, like a cool, dewy webbing being draped atop him. Bracing himself, Adrissu released his own spell, ready to fight again the second Tyrsun showed signs of waking—but when he wasn’t awake to resist it, he succumbed to Pollux’s magic far more easily, hardly even stirring.

“Good,” Adrissu said, and positioned himself over the dragon. “Alright. Here I go.”

“You can do it,” Pollux said, and Adrissu looked down at him. His eyes were bright, full of conviction; his hair had come loose from its neat braid and was now barely half-contained, messy strands sticking to his sweat-dampened face. He was noble and brilliant and strong and brave, and Adrissu drank in the beauty of him for a long moment, wondering how a mortal creature could contain so *much*. But they had little time for him to admire his mate—he filed the memory away in the archives of his mind, then turned his attention to the ritual at hand.

He reached out with his magic, the way he had done so many times before: in all his experiments on animals, on the elf Lorsan, and his failed attempt on the young yellow dragon. Reaching out was the easiest part; it channeled easily into the precious stone, making the runes surrounding him burn brightly in answer, and from there he directed it to Tyrsun.

Delving into Tyrsun’s consciousness was like sticking his hand into a flame. Tyrsun, even asleep, had some awareness of him and raged against him, fighting against the intrusion with such force that

Adrissu nearly dropped the stone. But he grit his teeth and pushed harder. He had the strength of his mate behind him, of having been separated again and again, of yearning for an end to their centuries-long struggle once and for all. He could feel acutely how Tyrsun hated him and fought against him with the desperation of a creature clinging to life; but after a few moments, Adrissu finally felt his magic latch onto something strong, something that thrummed with heat and vitality—the dragon’s soul.

He wrenched back as hard as he could. The soul did not want to come free, but Tyrsun had only the power of his will, full of fear at what Adrissu was doing; as far as their magical ability went, Adrissu was easily the stronger of the two. It felt like pulling a pebble out from the bottom of a barrel of molasses, thick and sticky, but Adrissu drew it out all the same. The moment the soul passed through the rock, he released his magic, and the stone flared brightly.

The red dragon’s massive body shuddered, then lay still. In Adrissu’s claws, the stone thrummed with life. He had done it.

“You did it,” Pollux whispered, echoing Adrissu’s triumph. Exhausted, Adrissu nodded and carefully handed him the stone.

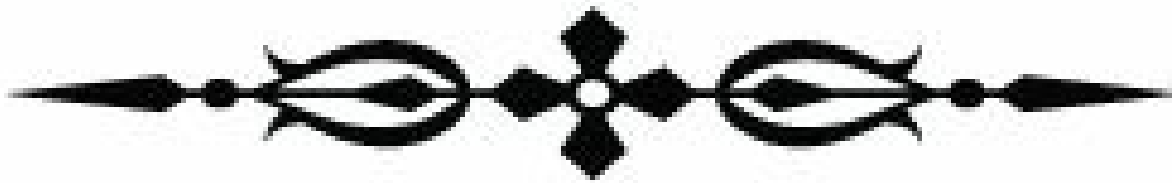
“Let’s heal the body up,” he panted. “And then I need to rest.”

Pollux set down the glowing stone in the far corner of the chamber, then diligently went back to the red dragon’s body, placing his hands on the deep wound in his side. Grateful that he had taken the time to learn more about healing magic, Adrissu touched Tyrsun’s side as well, reaching out with his magic once again; this time he mapped out the pathways of his veins and the planes of his muscle, finding where it had been torn apart and knitting the pieces back together. The injury was deep, but its damage was localized, so with Pollux staunching the blood, Adrissu was able to heal it from the inside out without too much difficulty.

After this, he was utterly drained. The moment the wound was closed, he crawled to the other end of the chamber and laid down, barely able to keep his eyes open.

“How long do you want to wait?” Pollux asked, and even with the urgency in his voice, Adrissu could hardly rouse himself enough to answer.

“Give me two hours,” he mumbled, his voice like a low roll of thunder as it echoed. He heard Pollux make a noise of dissatisfaction, but the elf didn’t argue. After a moment, he felt Pollux settle down on the ground next to him, leaning against the softer scales of his exposed belly. They were as safe as they could be, and Pollux would protect him; it was the last coherent thought he had before sleep claimed him.



“It’s been two hours, Adrissu.”

Pollux’s hands on him were too small to really shake him awake, but his voice brought Adrissu to consciousness. He grumbled, turning away, but Pollux nudged him again.

“Come on,” he urged. “I’ve been sitting here doing nothing but stewing in my own nerves for hours. Let’s get this over with.”

Adrissu sighed and stretched. He easily could have slept much longer, but now that he had rested, he could feel enough magic coursing through him to complete the ritual.

“I’m up,” he groaned, pushing himself up off the ground.

“I set up a smaller rune circle, too,” Pollux said, pointing to the opposite end of the chamber. “Figured it would be easier than dragging his body out of the bigger one.”

Adrissu smiled, his rows of razor teeth showing. “Good idea.”

Pollux fidgeted nervously. “So, all that’s left is for you to, well... use the spell.”

“It will work,” Adrissu assured him, and Pollux nodded sharply.

“I know,” he said, but there was still an anxious edge to his voice. Adrissu supposed he couldn’t fault him for being nervous; he felt a bit of it himself, too. But it *would* work—of that, there was no doubt in his mind. Words wouldn’t assuage him, though, so instead of trying to talk Pollux out of his anxiety, Adrissu moved to the other end of the room to inspect his work. The circle was flawless, as the first had been, but a smaller size suited for Pollux’s elven body. Not a rune was out of place.

“Perfect,” he rumbled, and Pollux managed a small smile. “Put your things down, and let’s begin.”

Pollux nodded, his smile falling away, and he carefully removed all his weapons and equipment, placing them near where Adrissu had slept. He hesitated, then stripped down to his underwear, folding his thick doublet in a neat pile beside his equipment and his boots, and tossing his sweat-soaked cotton undershirt to the side.

“I’m ready,” he said softly, the soft sound of his bare feet against the floor echoing through the wide chamber as he entered the smaller circle. Adrissu nodded and watched him lay down in the center, hearing his heart beating a rapid, uneasy rhythm in the near-silence.

“Pollux,” he breathed, looming over the elf. He lowered his head until his snout was pressed against Pollux’s chest, and after a moment, the elf sat up again to hold Adrissu’s head in his arms. His

face felt warm and flushed against the cool scales at the top of Adrissu's skull. "I understand why you're frightened. But I promise everything will be fine."

"I know," he whispered.

"Do you trust me?" Adrissu murmured, and without a beat of hesitation, Pollux nodded.

"I trust you," he said.

Adrissu wished he had changed back to his own elven form just so he could kiss him in that moment; it was a frightening prospect, but Pollux trusted him. That alone was a gift, nevermind everything that was to come after.

"Lay down," he said softly. Pollux released him to lie back down, then took in a long and shuddering breath before closing his eyes.

Adrissu picked up the stone he would use for Pollux—a finely carved emerald, one of the original pieces of dwarven craftsmanship in his hoard, and a far lovelier specimen to behold than the massive, uncarved hunk of stone that he had used on Tyrsun. He held it carefully to Pollux's bare chest; the elf's eyes remained closed, but he flinched slightly as it touched his skin.

Adrissu launched straight into the ritual, unable to wait any longer. The runes around Pollux flared to life as Adrissu suffused them with magic, then pushed through the stone into Pollux. Finding the core of him was simple compared to the dragon's: it felt like a coin he could easily pluck up. Still, Adrissu pulled at it carefully, easing it into the bright emerald in his claws. There was no resistance as he pulled Pollux's soul from his body, absolute trust emanating almost palpably.

When the soul was sequestered in the emerald, Adrissu released his hold on it, and the emerald glowed with vitality and warmth. Pollux's body shuddered, but his eyes remained closed, and his breathing became rhythmic and slow—if Adrissu had not known better, Pollux might have been enjoying another blessedly untroubled sleep.

What had been the hardest part with Tyrsun had been simple, even natural with Pollux—because Pollux's soul knew it belonged with Adrissu. This was the part of Ruan that had always come back to him: the part that was the same between Volkmar, Braern, Kian, and now Pollux. Emotion swelled in his chest at the thought that this was the closest he had ever been to his mate—that this glowing gem he held in his claws was what fate had bound to him so entirely. Whatever forces of magic had brought them together, everything had culminated into this.

He looked down at the gleaming emerald for a long while, marveling at the way it flickered with movement and vitality; and he wondered if Pollux had any awareness in the stone, or if it was truly like a deep sleep from which he would awaken in an entirely new body. But he shouldn't make him

wait, he thought, so he carefully carried the emerald over to Tyrsun's slumbering body. In all his experiments, it had been as simple as placing the soul-containing stone against the new host body. Fearing that Pollux might wake with a start, he took care to position himself away from the red dragon's teeth and claws, then pressed the emerald against the warm scales.

In his experiments, it had felt simply like pouring water into a receptacle. This time, though, there was some resistance—a sensation he could not quite name, but was unmistakably *there* as he held the emerald in place. The stone flickered where it touched the dragon, as if something in it was stuck. He hesitated, but there was no reason it shouldn't work. Maybe it just needed a push, something small to get it going. He reached out with his magic again, gently nudging the contents of the stone—when he touched it, he felt the resistance fade.

At the same moment the soul departed from the emerald, the red dragon's body shuddered with life.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Pollux's eyes snapped open, the bright yellow orbs flickering around the room as a low, rumbling growl resounded through his chest. Adrissu stepped back from him carefully, moving slowly, but still he seemed to shrink in on himself. Fear and confusion skittered across his face as he looked at Adrissu, baring his fangs.

“Pollux,” Adrissu murmured, and the dragon shuddered again, turning his head away. “You’re alright. It’s me. I’m here with you. You’re okay.”

Pollux did not respond, but his claws scrabbled against the earth beneath them as he struggled to push himself up. He was still growling, the noise interrupted by the sharp staccato sound of his rapid breathing. Adrissu wanted to hold him, to comfort him, but took a further step away in uncertainty. The red dragon's wings flexed tentatively as he stood on all fours, his limbs moving awkwardly—he tried to step toward Adrissu, but slipped back down to the ground, falling onto his belly.

“Relax,” Adrissu urged him, taking a step toward him. “Breathe, Pollux.”

When he stepped toward him, though, a territorial snarl flashed on Pollux's face, embers sparking from his mouth. Adrissu easily dodged the weak stream of fire that Pollux spat at him, but worried confusion started to make his heart beat faster. He had expected Pollux to perhaps be disoriented, or even confused, but couldn't he recognize who he was?

But Pollux never would have felt that unsettling awareness of another dragon, Adrissu realized, and instinctively saw him as an intruder. He would not know to ignore it—would not know that it would fade after a little time being together—so all he could do was try to keep Pollux from hurting him until the feeling faded. Though with how uncoordinated Pollux was in this state, he did not think that would be terribly difficult.

“Pollux,” he said again, keeping his voice low and gentle. Pollux's yellow eyes flickered back up to him, though his teeth were still bared. “You’re alright. I’m not here to hurt you. You know me, don’t

you? Don't you know who I am?"

The dragon made a sound somewhere between a groan and a growl, turning away even as he nodded his head.

"Do you remember what happened?" Adrissu asked, and Pollux nodded again. "Can you speak?"

Pollux breathed in shakily, uncertainty on his face, but he made a low rumbling sound, before stuttering out, "A-A-Adrissu."

"Good," Adrissu encouraged, stepping closer to him slowly. Pollux's jaws snapped open and shut a few times, his tongue moving strangely—it must have been difficult to adjust to being so much bigger, not to mention the many sharper teeth, Adrissu thought. "You're all right. It will take some getting used to, but you're all right. Are you in pain?"

Pollux paused, as if having to consciously focus on whether or not he was in pain, then slowly shook his head.

"D-doesn't hahh... hurt," he growled, trying again to take a few shaky steps. "Too many—too many legs."

His tail swished anxiously, curling tight around his body, before lashing back out in a wide arc. Pollux looked at it suspiciously, as if trying to control it.

"Maybe it would be easier if you got used to your smaller form first," Adrissu said, slowly coming up alongside him. This time, Pollux leaned up against him, instead of shrinking away. Adrissu could feel his warm, scaled skin trembling. "Try and turn yourself into—well, your elven self. Focus on what you looked like and shrink yourself down into it."

Pollux's brows furrowed, his yellow eyes narrowing into barely visible slits. "Hhh-how?"

Adrissu had to think about that for a moment—his elven form was second nature, and he could describe how he changed shape no more accurately than he might describe how he breathed. It took little effort and even less thought, but still he had to try to put it into words that Pollux could understand.

"Think of it like casting an illusion of yourself," he said. "When you're casting it, you'll feel this... sort of urge, to push yourself into it. Just let go and do that, and you'll shrink down into the illusory form."

Pollux grunted, his eyes closing in concentration. A warm glow suffused his body, and his form flickered for a moment as he struggled.

"Watch me," Adrissu urged, and when Pollux's eyes opened, Adrissu condensed himself down into his elven form. "Just like that. You can do it." Pollux nodded and closed his eyes again. This time

when his form flickered, it shrank down slowly, his features morphing, until finally his familiar elven visage was standing beside Adrissu—naked and trembling, his eyes still screwed shut in concentration.

“There you are. You did it,” Adrissu said softly. Pollux’s eyes snapped open, still a too-bright yellow. Adrissu hesitated, but decided not to point it out—they could fix that later. Pollux tried to reach for Adrissu, but stumbled, swaying in place as if he were drunk.

“Everything feels—feels strange,” Pollux said, his voice now the same as it had always been. “I feel... dizzy, I think.”

“That’s alright,” Adrissu said. “You’ll get used to it. It will just take some time. Here, you’ll be more comfortable if you put these back on.”

He held Pollux by the arm, and slowly they walked back toward his neatly folded pile of clothes. Adrissu helped him dress, minus the heavy chain shirt, then braided his hair the way he had done a hundred times before, which seemed to help ground Pollux a bit. But the other man still trembled when Adrissu was done, running his hands up and down the sleeves of his robe.

“Tell me what you’re feeling,” Adrissu said, and Pollux winced. He was silent for a long moment, struggling to speak.

“I feel too... too big,” he finally said, still unconsciously rubbing his arms. “But like I’m being squeezed all at once. I don’t like being shrunk down like this. It feels like I’m going to—to rip apart at the seams.”

“It will just take time,” Adrissu repeated. When he thought back to it, he didn’t much like being in his elven form in the past, either, but the feeling had faded with time. “I promise. Give it a few days, and then you’ll feel much better. Alright? We’ll just rest for a few days until you’re used to it, and then it will feel like nothing happened at all.”

Pollux nodded, but the same frown lingered on his face.

“I want to go home,” he said. Adrissu hesitated; it was true that they probably should not linger here too long, but he wasn’t sure that Pollux could make the journey. He seemed barely able to walk as a dragon, much less fly, but neither did he seem stable enough to make the whole trip riding on Adrissu’s back.

“We can’t leave yet,” he said, though the words stabbed him with guilt, as Pollux’s face twisted with a miserable expression. “It will be mid-morning now. We have to wait until the sun goes down, at least if we’re going to fly home. Plus, you should practice flying for a bit before making such a long trip.”

Pollux frowned, but nodded. “All right. I’ll practice.”

“Try to rest first,” Adrissu said. “You’ll feel better if you sleep a little bit. I’ll clean everything up here. We’ll both get some rest, and in the afternoon, we can practice flying. Then we’ll head home tonight. Sounds good?”

“I don’t know if I can sleep and stay like this,” Pollux said, shaking his head and gesturing at his body. “I feel like I really have to... to concentrate, to keep myself this small.”

“Try it for now, and if you have to rest in your draconic form, that’s alright,” he replied. Pollux sighed, his face falling with resignation.

“Let’s at least get somewhere more comfortable than this,” he said, glancing around. “I saw where he sleeps. It’s down this way.”

He took a few careful steps, leading Adrissu through the lair, albeit slowly. The sleeping chamber was down a long, downward-sloping tunnel that eventually opened up into a room that was oval-shaped, a nest of furs and cloth and straw at the far end. Briefly, Adrissu wondered if Pollux saw where his hoard was as well, but that would be a question for later. For now, he helped Pollux get settled and as comfortable as possible, though a troubled expression remained on his face even when he closed his eyes.

Adrissu watched him for a little while as he tried to fall asleep, tension lining his brow and his eyelids flickering restlessly. He too felt restless, a heady rush of adrenaline washing over him every time he remembered: they had *done it*. All the decades of waiting and wondering, of not knowing who his mate would be the next time fate pulled them together, the years of anticipation that he would watch his mate die all over again—they were over. He would never suffer through them again.

And even beyond that, he was probably the only one to have ever successfully performed such a ritual—it might be that no one in the world could have accomplished what Adrissu had just done. He did not think it would be wise to share the ritual, but a small part of him thought it would be quite a thing to be able to brag about.

But he was getting ahead of himself. Shaking himself from his reverie, Adrissu made sure Pollux was sleeping—he was, but fitfully—before heading back to the first chamber. He gathered up their things from the floor, put them into the sack that Pollux had carried, and brought them to the sleeping chamber. Then he went back and cleaned all the chalk and blood off the floor, easily magicking away the runes to leave no evidence of what they had done.

Then there was still Pollux’s elven body, empty and soulless, and the raw emerald that held Tyrsun’s soul. He would leave the emerald here, he thought, hidden in plain sight amongst whatever

they left of his hoard. Doubtless in a decade or a century, some scout would come to see why Tyrsun no longer troubled Wintergrove and the surrounding lands, only to find the remnants of his lair and hoard: the emerald would only be another precious rock amongst gems and gold. Even if they could tell it was magical, there was no indication that a dragon's soul was contained within.

But they had not really discussed what to do with Pollux's body once the transfer was complete, a rather morbid oversight now that the deed was done. Would they take it with them? Leave it behind? Either option seemed unsatisfactory, so Adrissu simply left the body where it was laying for now, until Pollux woke and could decide for himself.

When he came back into the sleeping chamber, he was briefly surprised to see that Pollux had, indeed, lost control of his illusory form. Still asleep, the red dragon was sprawled out—his breathing a deep, low rumble that filled the room.

“Pollux,” Adrissu said softly, and Pollux's eyes snapped open. His pupils flashed toward Adrissu and constricted, a savage snarl tearing across his face as he scrambled to his feet. “Pollux, it's me, it's me.”

Pollux started to lunge at him, but then seemed to become aware of himself halfway through, his violent expression immediately giving way to one of surprise and shame. He stopped and lowered his head to the ground.

“S-Sorry,” he said, his voice sounding distorted as he struggled to speak in his new body. “I didn't—I thought—int-intruder.”

“I know,” Adrissu replied, keeping his voice as low and calm as he could, despite his heart hammering away in his chest. “It's alright. I'm sorry I startled you.”

Pollux groaned, squeezing his eyes shut, and his body glowed as he condensed himself down into his elven form. It still took him a moment, but overall it happened much quicker and easier than it had before.

“I'm sorry. I just had this instinct to... I don't know. Protect the lair, I suppose,” Pollux muttered, running his hands over his face in frustration. “How do you not try to kill me every time I'm down in your lair with you?”

Adrissu bit back a laugh. He couldn't very well tell Pollux that when they were down there together, it felt as though Pollux was simply part of his hoard. “Because everything I have belongs to you. It's yours as much as it is mine. Dragon instincts are... strange, and powerful, so it will take some getting used to. But it's alright. We won't be here for long. It already feels less stressful to have me near, right?”

Pollux hesitated, again making a face as if having to consciously think about and interpret what he was feeling. “I... I think so.”

“Good,” Adrissu said softly, and very carefully, he stepped closer to Pollux, lifting his hand until he could cup Pollux’s cheek. His face was warm, and he wouldn’t quite meet Adrissu’s gaze. “It will just take time, my love. We’ll get through it together.”

Silently, Pollux nodded, still not looking at him. Adrissu waited, but he did not speak, so instead he continued, “I think we can practice flying for a bit if you’re up for it. But first I wanted to ask you what you wanted to do with the, ah... the body.”

Pollux blinked, then frowned. “I forgot about that. It would feel strange to leave my body here, but... What would we do if we brought it with us?”

“From my experiments, I’m fairly sure the stasis effect on the body continues, even if the soul is in another body,” Adrissu offered. “So the body would just remain... sleeping.”

“But it would be difficult to explain if it were found,” Pollux countered.

“Then we leave it here.”

“But...” Pollux started, looking uncomfortable. “It’s my body. I don’t know if I can just leave it. What if I want to... to go back to it?”

It took Adrissu a moment to catch up with what Pollux had said. “Go back to it?”

“What if I never get used to this?” Pollux burst out, turning away. “If it’s always like this, Adrissu... I couldn’t do this forever.”

“It won’t always be like this,” Adrissu said, grasping his hands before he could turn any further. They had *just* found success, finally, and already he was thinking of throwing it all away? It took every ounce of his self-control not to fly into a panic, but he had to stay calm for Pollux’s sake. “I promise, Pollux. You won’t need to go back. It won’t be like this for long.”

Pollux was silent for a long while, eyes downturned. Finally, he said in a small voice, “Let’s at least bring my body with us back to Polimnos. We can figure out what to do there.”

Adrissu sighed, looking at him. Whatever happened, he had to make sure Pollux could adapt to being a dragon; he didn’t think that he could ever bring himself to put his mate’s soul back into a mortal body now, but he did not want to consider what might happen if Pollux asked it of him and he refused.

“We can do that,” he relented. “But first, let’s practice flying.”

Reverting to his draconic form was easy enough for Pollux; like Adrissu, it felt more like letting go of something that he’d been holding, rather than consciously transforming. But as a dragon, Pollux still

wobbled and moved with a strange gait; as he flexed his wings, a dubious expression crossed his face, as if he doubted they could carry him.

Slowly, Adrissu came up alongside him, admiring the red and black of their scales side-by-side.

“It’s partly your wings, and partly magic,” Adrissu said. “Use your wings to steer, but most of the propulsion comes from within. Have you used magic to fly before? I know many mortals attempt it.”

“A few times,” Pollux said, still looking uncertain. “I was never v-very good at it.”

“That’s fine. As long as you understand how to do it, it’ll be easy. Just lift yourself off the ground the same way,” Adrissu said. Pollux sighed, sending a rush of warm air surging around them. It took a few tries, but he eventually got it, lifting his body off the ground for a few steps, before floating back down to the earth.

“Good!” Adrissu said, all his teeth showing in a wide grin. “See? Easier than it looks.”

“I think I can do it,” Pollux agreed, looking a little less wary now.

“All you need to do is follow me. I can get us home,” Adrissu promised.

Pollux practiced a little while longer, still trying to get used to the new size and configuration of his body. Flapping his wings seemed to take a very conscious effort, so Adrissu mentally adjusted their course to be as much of a straight shot as possible without risking being seen.

A little after sunset, he left Pollux to practice on his own, so that he could gather up their things in preparation to leave. Transporting the body would be another complication; normally Pollux would ride on his back, but that took a good amount of effort on his part, plus he was able to strap himself in to stay secure. Now, he did not think Pollux would stomach lashing what had once been his body to Adrissu, so he would have to figure out how to secure it on his own.

He ended up wrapping the body loosely in a cloth so it was held rather like a hammock, tying both ends closed, and securing it to his chest that way. It was inelegant, but functional; he did not want to harm the body, but at least he did not have to worry about whether it was comfortable. All the other things they had brought with them went into the rucksack that they had originally used, and he simply looped the handle of the bag through the same ropes that he used to tie the body to himself.

This done, he went back to the sleeping chamber to find Pollux.

“Do you know where the hoard in here is?” he asked, and Pollux hesitated, thinking.

“I think so,” he said, then moved out of the chamber. “Follow me. I’ll find it.”

Pollux led him through the labyrinthine lair, which was a series of long, relatively narrow tunnels—not unlike a spider’s web. Adrissu found it exceedingly uncomfortable. Why would a dragon want to be squeezing, like a worm, in his own lair?

Strangely, it was an even tighter fit for Pollux. While the tunnels never entirely closed in on him, of course, there were several passageways where he had to tuck his wings closely against his body, and the walls were barely an inch away from his scales. Adrissu was a bit more serpent-like in stature compared to the red dragon, so the walls never surrounded him quite so tightly. It was a good thing humans had never ventured into Tyrsun's lair, Adrissu thought; the narrow corridors would deter other dragons, but if mortals followed him through the tunnels, he would be easy to follow and trap. The cramped walkways, the constant terrorizing of Wintergrove—Tyrsun was strange. *Had been* strange. Adrissu was sure the city would welcome his sudden unexplained absence.

It took a few uncertain turns, but eventually Pollux led him down a walkway that opened up beneath them to a deep pit, glittering with gold and gems at the bottom. Tyrsun's hoard was in an inelegant pile, though Adrissu had to admit that it would be quite difficult for any mortal to access without significant forethought. However, it would be easy enough for him to leap down and fly back up.

"That's it," Pollux said, looking down at it nervously. "It's smaller than yours."

Adrissu laughed. "Well, Tyrsun was a bit younger, and he didn't have an entire dwarven city to claim as his own. I wouldn't judge the size of it too harshly."

Pollux stifled a laugh, his sharp teeth flashing. His yellow eyes flickered between Adrissu and the pile of coins down below, and even without any change in his expression, Adrissu could sense warmth buzzing in the air between them. It was not entirely like the bond he had shared with Braern, but it was similar enough that it made him pause.

He had never been with another dragon before like this. Fated mates were said to share a connection; if his mate had been a dragon from the beginning, would they have always had something like the elven bond? Adrissu had felt very attuned to Pollux's distress and the difficulty of adapting to his new body, but he had not thought it was because of their fated bond. Now, feeling the small flash of desire from Pollux when discussing his *size*, he wondered if that bond had flared to life the moment Pollux's soul—bound to his—inhabited a draconic form.

The elven bond with Braern had been easier to understand. This, though, felt far more primal: an instinct that merged so seamlessly with his own, he hadn't even realized it was there until now.

"Do you feel that?" he rumbled, leaning closer to Pollux.

"I... I think so," he murmured, frowning as he too leaned into Adrissu, as if pulled in by the very gravity around them.

"Much as I've dreamed of this, I must admit I gave little thought to what it would be like to have you this way," he said, pressing his head against Pollux's long, warm neck. "What it would be like to

feel you, to mate with you the way we always should have been able to. Aren't you curious?"

The air around them felt suddenly very hot.

"P-Perhaps," Pollux stammered. "I don't know. Everything feels strange."

"You won't have to do anything," Adrissu purred. "Only be here with me so I can make you feel good."

"Alright," Pollux agreed, nervousness still tinging his voice. But the heat between them was burning now, and Adrissu wasn't sure that he would have been able to stop himself even if Pollux had asked him to. It felt like pure instinct driving him, like every draconic impulse to bite and mark and claim that he'd suppressed for as long as he'd been with his mate was roaring back to life. His cock had already slipped free from its sheath, rubbing against the soft, warm scales of Pollux's underbelly.

His teeth found the junction of Pollux's neck and shoulder, pressing hard against the hard scales there, and Pollux let out a low groan—half a growl, and half a cry of surprised pleasure. The noise filled Adrissu with lust in response. He felt barely aware of what he was doing, as they fell and rolled amongst the piles of coins and gems.

Pollux's cock had slipped free now too, thick and hard where it jutted out from his body. He seemed uncertain of it, shifting uncomfortably as it slid from its sheath; but when it fully emerged, and Adrissu twisted his neck to lick and taste the strange newness of him, Pollux gasped and shuddered against him.

"Adrissu," he grunted, turning his body to press more of his cock into Adrissu's mouth.

Some small part of him still worried about his teeth—fearing that the shape of his mouth would be too much, too difficult for Pollux to adapt to—but instinct had overtaken both of them now. Pollux rutted against him like he had done it the same way a thousand times before, as if his body was not entirely new and foreign to him, and Adrissu sucked him eagerly, reveling in the feeling of the thick cock filling his maw to the brim. The other dragon moaned and gasped, the room echoing with low rumbles and vibrations, the coins and gems clinking softly against each other.

"Adrissu," Pollux gasped again, and that was the only warning he managed, before Adrissu's mouth was flooded with his release, hot and sweet on his tongue. Adrissu groaned and swallowed him down, his cock twitching eagerly now that he was sure Pollux was ready for him.

"Stand up," he urged Pollux as he clambered off of him. With a dazed nod, Pollux rolled back onto his four feet. Adrissu mounted him in one quick motion, his cock finding the pliant entrance beneath the base of his tail. They both gasped and shuddered as his cock slid inside all the way to the hilt effortlessly.

Would their bodies have always fit together so seamlessly if his mate had been a dragon from the start? Adrissu couldn't focus on the thought long enough to decide. Heat and pleasure overtook him, the sounds Pollux made and his own voice in response drowning out everything but the tight warmth squeezing his cock.

This alone made all their effort worth it. This was how it was supposed to be: a dragon and his mate. He would never have to do this in his elven form again, small and condensed and incapable of feeling the sheer intensity of what was overtaking him now.

"Pollux," he groaned, biting down hard on his shoulder again. Pollux moaned in half-pain and half-pleasure as he pushed back against Adrissu's cock, sending him over the edge. He snarled and squeezed his eyes shut, biting down harder as he came—his body shuddering as he filled Pollux to the brim.

Adrissu had been correct; now he could never put Pollux's soul back in an elven body, even if he asked. The world had always felt right when he was with his mate—now that his mate was a dragon, too, he wondered how he had ever felt that way before now. *Now*, it was as if the very vibrations of the earth and air around them had finally come back into tune.

"I love you," he murmured, his voice a low rumble. He pressed his face against Pollux's thicker neck, feeling the heat of his scales and the rapid thrum of his pulse.

Pollux nodded and curled closer against him. Everything was exactly as it always should have been.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Pollux seemed sated and calm for a little while after, as they went through the mess of Tyrsun's hoard and stuffed what they could into their extra rucksack. It was mostly coins, along with a few gems that would replace some of Adrissu's own that he had needed to use for one reason or another. It was here that Adrissu also tossed the hunk of emerald that held Tyrsun's soul, where it was lost amidst the coins and gold. Hopefully, they could come back here again to take more of Tyrsun's hoard to bolster their own; but all things considered, Adrissu figured it would probably be best for them to lie low in Polimnos for a year or two, lest Tyrsun's disappearance be linked to them somehow.

It was only when they were preparing to leave, lifting themselves out of the hoard and back into the main antechamber that led up to the surface, that Pollux seemed to become tense and anxious again. He didn't say as much, but Adrissu could sense his rising discomfort, like the air around him shifting in the wind.

"All you have to do is follow me," Adrissu assured him. Pollux nodded silently, his gaze still troubled; but with some effort, he lifted himself off the ground and followed Adrissu up the tunnel that led back out into the cool night air. The smell of trees and rotting leaves surrounded them, and the only sound that Adrissu could hear were the sounds of nocturnal wildlife—an owl calling from far off, and small rodents scurrying away from the commotion—as they rose up from the narrow opening in the earth. They were well and truly alone.

Adrissu flew slowly. Even laden with all their equipment, which kept him from flying as fast as he could, Pollux still struggled to follow him, often losing height or veering off-course. It seemed to take all his mental effort to stay on track, which frustrated him; but as long as Adrissu could see him, he knew they would be safe.

Their flight, difficult as it was, passed without incident. Most of the night, they flew high over uninhabited areas; but when they did soar closer to villages and cities, Adrissu did not spot any late-

night scouts or hunters that might have spotted them in the dark skies above.

When they arrived back at Polimnos, Adrissu led him through the narrow crack in the cliffs that fed into his lair. The red dragon's body was bulkier than Adrissu's, though, and Pollux scraped his wings and sides as he followed him through, hissing and snarling with pain and sudden anger.

"It's alright," Adrissu said, startled as Pollux landed with a crash, all his teeth bared. "Pollux, you're alright. I'll fix the passageway. You won't have to go that way again. Let me heal you."

Tired as he was, he still managed to find enough magic within him to touch the superficial wound on Pollux's side and help knit it closed. As it quickly scabbed over, the anger that had flared in Pollux's eyes faded, and a darker expression overtook him.

"Sorry," he murmured, looking away. "I don't know what... What that was. Everything feels so different. Everything makes me angry."

"Dragons are not exactly known for being cool and collected," Adrissu replied, trying to keep his tone light. "It will be a bit of a learning curve, but that's alright."

Silently, Pollux nodded.

"Will you help me get back up into the lair?" he asked, looking at the narrow channel above them. "I don't think I can do it."

"Of course," Adrissu said. They unloaded their things first; Adrissu gave Pollux the bag of gold and gems to dump amidst his hoard, and while he busied himself with that, Adrissu scurried into one of the many little hidden passageways and small nooks in his lair. Gently, he laid Pollux's former body there, hoping that if his mate did not have to see it, then he would not dwell on his life before now. This was a new beginning for them—Adrissu was sure he would see that in time—and eventually Pollux would be ready to fully let go. It would be easiest, and somehow poetic, to burn the body as he had done with Kian's, a final remembrance of what they had gone through together. But that would be a conversation for a much later time.

He came back to the main chamber of his lair just as Pollux was transforming into his elven form, his brows drawn tight with concentration as his body glowed and shrank. He sighed in relief when the glow settled and he stood there as an elf. Adrissu scooped his smaller form up into his arms, and Pollux relaxed against Adrissu's broad chest as they lifted off, heading up into the tower.

Vesper was eager to see them, as she always was when they had been gone, but she seemed to hesitate when she reached Pollux, her tongue flicking in and out rapidly. His smell must have changed, Adrissu thought. He knew she did still recognize him as Pollux, because she was a part of Adrissu

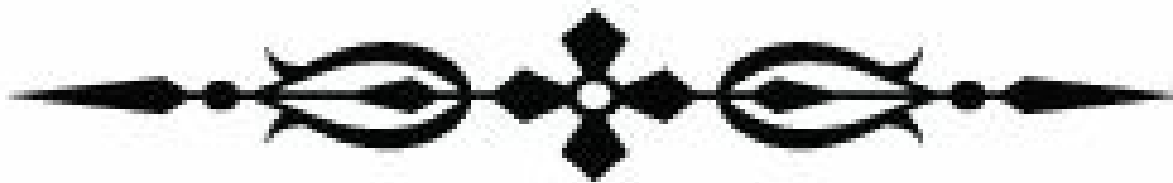
and always recognized his mate. It was only a moment, though, then she came up to him as pleased as ever, coiling her long, heavy body around him. He smiled wearily and patted her broad head.

“Glad some things never change,” he said softly, more to her than to Adrissu, who smiled at seeing them together.

“We should get some rest,” he said, pulling Pollux closer to him. The moment he said it, Pollux’s shoulders sagged.

“Yes,” he agreed, and Adrissu led him to their bedchamber, where he immediately got into bed and was out like a light.

For a long while, Adrissu looked down at him with a soft smile. They had done it. It had *worked*. This was the first moment of the eternity they would have together in Polimnos. The thought of it almost made him feel drunk with giddiness and relief. The worst was behind them, and things could only go up from here. Joyful and content, Adrissu laid down beside Pollux, holding him as he too fell asleep in the soft light of the rising sun.



The peace Adrissu felt was short-lived, as Pollux slept fitfully through the morning and was restless when he woke.

“It feels like I’m going to rip apart,” he groaned miserably from where he had been pacing back and forth in Adrissu’s study. “And don’t tell me I’ll get used to it. I know that. But right now I feel it, and it’s terrible.”

“I understand,” Adrissu said softly, but there was little else he could do. He had a bit of pavera root extract left from Kian’s things that he offered to Pollux; he refused at first, then begrudgingly took a half dose an hour later. This helped calm him enough that he laid back down, but he still shifted his legs restlessly, and sometimes sighed or groaned with discomfort. Adrissu read to him, and the distraction seemed to help, but often he seemed unable to truly pay attention.

“Will you bring me down into your lair?” Pollux finally asked, sounding defeated after several hours of struggling. “I just want to... let go of this.”

“Of course,” Adrissu said, and together they went down to the lair, where there was enough room for both of them to be dragons for a while. Pollux was still restless, but at least he seemed more comfortable here.

Over the next several days, they alternated between a few hours down in the lair as dragons, and a few hours above in the tower as elves. Pollux feared that his illusory form would unravel in his sleep since it took so much conscious effort to maintain it, so he had taken to sleeping as a dragon down below in the lair. But Adrissu pushed him to spend longer and longer in the tower during the daytime, and while it was difficult, Pollux did visibly improve over the course of a few days, which heartened both of them.

Vesper, sensing his difficulty, was always right next to Pollux, if not coiled directly on top of him. She would follow him as he paced listlessly around the tower, pursuing him doggedly even when he stepped over her long body, or ran up and down the stairs just to release some of the unending pent-up energy. Luckily, he appreciated this more than it annoyed him, so Adrissu did not have to tell her to stop.

The change had not been as immediately enjoyable as Adrissu would have hoped, as Pollux seemed mostly miserable; but after a week, Pollux insisted that Adrissu return to work, and promised him that he would be fine on his own for a few hours a day.

“Besides,” he said, chuckling bitterly at the coils of black snake curled up at his feet. “Vesper has been keeping a very close eye on me. Sometimes I think she worries over me more than you do.”

So, begrudgingly, Adrissu gave word to Shima he would return to his post at the Academy sooner than expected, though when he arrived that day, he got little work done and was constantly on the alert for any sense from Vesper that something was amiss. But the first day passed without incident, and the next, and the rest of the week. By then, Pollux was a bit more at ease, though still often restless. He wanted to start taking walks in the city instead of pacing the tower endlessly. Adrissu was uncertain of this as well, but figured if they were together, it would be alright.

Their first walk was just around the Academy grounds and back to the tower, which was a short and familiar route. The next day they ventured a little further, and on the third day, they walked down to the town square to buy some vegetables and look at vendor stalls. It was late in the afternoon, so it wasn't especially crowded, and the heat of the late spring day was finally beginning to ease up. Pollux was mostly amicable and conversational with the people they saw and the shops they visited, and his bouts of irritation and frustration had been short-lived when they did crop up. Regulating his emotions had been the slowest change to start improving, so that alone was progress Adrissu was happy to see.

Their last stop for the day was a pastry stand. They each got a sweetbread, and Pollux stopped to say hello to the proprietor, whom he knew in passing, who remarked that she hadn't seen Pollux in a

while.

“I was ill,” Pollux was saying to her between bites of pastry, as Adrissu looked on from a few steps away. “But I’m doing much better now.”

Being out and about with his mate, comfortable and happy, knowing he was already adjusting to being a dragon—and that now there was nothing that could separate them ever again—Adrissu couldn’t recall ever feeling happier in his life. Pollux, sensing his joy, glanced back at him with a soft smile.

His eyes flickered to a point behind Adrissu, and his smile faltered. Adrissu turned back to find what he was looking at: a guard was approaching them, one with the modified Blackthorn weapon at his side. One of the Elafaer family’s personal guard, then. He stopped next to Adrissu, nodding at him and Pollux.

“Headmaster,” he said, his head bowed as he greeted them. “And Mr. Blackthorn. The Lord Representative would like to speak with you. She’s in the Poppy and Pomegranate just down the road. Would you be so kind as to join her?”

Adrissu suppressed the urge to roll his eyes; the restaurant was a newer one, but already known for being overpriced and pretentious, so of course she would be there. He did not want to go, and he could tell Pollux did not want to go from the dismayed expression that crossed his face, but he doubted Willow would take no for an answer.

“Unfortunately, we were just about to head home,” Adrissu said anyway, lifting the bag of sundries that he’d been carrying to emphasize his point. The guard hesitated, then bowed his head once again.

“I’m afraid I must insist,” he said, sounding just as displeased about it as they were to hear it. Adrissu sighed, and behind him, Pollux huffed in vexation.

“Fine,” he said, taking Pollux’s hand. “Lead the way, then.”

The guard nodded quickly and led them back the way they came until the restaurant came into view on their left. A few people were seated outdoors, but he did not spot Willow until the guard brought them inside. Near the window, Willow Elafaer sat alone at a table set for four. Adrissu clocked another of the Elafaer family guard standing against the wall a few paces away, though this one did not appear to have a Blackthorn weapon on him.

“Gentlemen,” Willow said in a far-too-friendly tone, beaming up at them as they approached, as if she had been expecting them all along. “Thank you so much for joining me. Such a sudden invitation is a bit uncouth, I know, but I spotted you walking by at the window and just had to get a hold of you

while you were here. I recently sent a messenger to your home, but they tell me you've been rather sequestered as of late. So it seems fate has brought us together in this way instead."

Adrissu sat down directly across from her, Pollux at his side, hoping that he could help deflect the brunt of whatever it was she wanted. Already, he could feel annoyance roiling off of Pollux in waves.

"Thank you for the invitation," he said as gracefully as he could manage, hoping Pollux's stiff posture and sour expression were less obvious to her than they were to him. "We have been rather difficult to get a hold of, this is true. We went on a small leisure trip, but unfortunately fell ill while returning home. But as you can see, we are doing better now. How can we help, Lord Representative?"

"I was hoping to talk to you about another possible job, Mr. Blackthorn," she said, barely glancing at Adrissu. He felt Pollux tense next to him. "The Elafaer family are big fans of the weapons you've made for our guards, and as you know, we would really love to own more. My father agrees with me that we'd benefit from equipping more of our guards with the Blackthorns. He's provided me with a significant sum to offer you, in addition to what I had paid previously, if you would take on another contract with us."

"Not interested," Pollux said sharply, and Adrissu winced. Willow paused, obviously taken aback at the sudden rejection.

"I—well, *we* are prepared to offer triple what I paid last time," she continued with a nervous, uncertain smile.

"I've told you before, I don't want to make any more of the damned weapons," Pollux snapped. "Is this really why you interrupted our afternoon?"

The surrounding tables seemed to have grown deathly quiet.

"I'm sorry to have interrupted, Pollux," Willow said in a smaller voice, brows furrowing. It was the most frustrated Adrissu had ever seen her, but to her credit, she was obviously still trying to be polite. On the other side of him, though, Adrissu could feel heat rising from Pollux's tense form. "Perhaps it was shortsighted of me to ask you here."

"Perhaps it was," Pollux replied.

"It's been a long day," Adrissu interjected quickly, keeping his voice smooth and even. "Maybe we can revisit this at a later time."

"Revisit?" Pollux snapped, whirling on Adrissu. "Revisit? Are you not going to take 'no' for an answer anymore, either?"

“Pollux,” he said softly, an edge of warning to his voice. Pollux seemed to catch himself then and scowled, looking away in obvious embarrassment.

“I...” he started, then stood up abruptly. “You’re right. Long day. We should—”

“Are we going to have a problem?” The guard who had escorted them had stepped closer to Pollux—one hand on his weapon, the other reaching out to grab Pollux’s shoulder. Adrissu swore under his breath, but already things were escalating faster than he could manage.

“Don’t touch me!” Pollux snapped, wrenching his arm away from the guard. The entire restaurant had gone eerily silent now, patrons and workers alike pausing to take stock of the scene.

“You two should probably go,” Willow said, her tone still aggravatingly chipper, and Pollux snarled down at her.

“Don’t tell us what to do, you uppity bitch,” he hissed, and this time, her eyes widened.

“Pollux,” Adrissu repeated, standing and putting a hand on his shoulder. “We really should—”

“I said don’t fucking touch me!” he shouted, and when he shoved Adrissu’s hand away from him, sharp claws dug into his skin.

For an instant, they were both motionless. Adrissu looked down at his hand, blood quickly welling up and spilling over down his wrist from the four gashes Pollux’s claws had left. His eyes flickered back up to Pollux, whose face was frozen in a look of horror, mouth open and eyes wide. His eyes, normally a brown so soft they were nearly gold, were quickly becoming too gold, too yellow—

“By the gods,” he heard Willow murmur across from him. The guard was now focused on Adrissu more than Pollux, looking aghast at the sudden deep wound in his hand.

“What in the hells is this?” the guard said, reaching for Adrissu’s hand—he pulled away, but Pollux had already snapped with possessive rage.

“Stay away!” he roared, and this time embers sparked from his mouth with each word. Dawning terror spread across the guard’s face as he reached for his weapon, too late now.

“Pollux!” Adrissu exclaimed, grabbing at Pollux’s glowing form, but he was helpless to stop his transformation.

The red dragon burst forth, breaking through the ceiling and shattering the nearby window, as his towering form filled the space. The guard was instantly crushed, a guttural sound escaping him—just before the steam canister at his side exploded with a thunderous crack. At first, there were only screams of terror and shock, then the panic was drowned out as half the restaurant broke apart, rubble raining down on them. Dazed, Adrissu pushed himself up from where he had been knocked back, but

the first coherent cry he could make out snapped him back into the moment with a sickening awareness.

“*Dragon!*”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“Pollux!” Adrissu shouted, shoving all the rubble around him away with a forceful burst of magic. He leapt up to his feet, just in time to spot Willow staggering upright out of the corner of his eye. They locked eyes across the destroyed room for a moment—her face was ashen, her expression full of dread—before a draconic roar above them caught their attention again.

“*Dragon!*” came another scream, this one a woman’s voice from the street.

“He’s—he’s—” Willow gasped, stammering and pointing to the open sky through the ruined ceiling.

“Pollux!” Adrissu called out again, ignoring her. He shoved through the hole in the wall that Pollux had created, out into the chaos of the street. Pollux had leapt up onto the roof of the building across from him, prowling and snarling down at the people fleeing. “Pollux, you have to stop this now. You need to calm down and change back.”

His eyes were narrow, yellow slits that glanced down at Adrissu with some measure of recognition; but still all his teeth remained bared, and he did not seem to hear or understand Adrissu’s words. The tiles of the roof beneath his heavy claws splintered and clattered to the ground as he stalked along their lengths, watching the streets as they emptied.

Far behind him, a horn blared a long high note. Adrissu whirled around to see one of the city guard with a gleaming metal horn pressed to his lips—warning the others, perhaps readying the Dragonslayer cannon. He swore and chased after Pollux as the red dragon stomped down the street.

“Turn back!” he shouted, this time reaching out with his magic to try to subdue him. He felt the tendril of it connect even at this distance, and he tried to send calming feelings through the connection that flared to life. Pollux paused, peering down at him with renewed interest.

“Pollux,” he said, softer now, but even he could hear the panicked urgency underneath his words. “Listen to me, Pollux, you need to change back now, or they’re going to hurt you. They’re going to get

the cannon—”

“What are you waiting for?” Willow’s shrill cry broke through the chaos, and Adrissu swore, as he turned back again to see her stumbling through the rubble, pointing up at the red dragon. An Elafaer guard he did not recognize followed her, the Blackthorn weapon raised. “Shoot it!”

“Don’t!” Adrissu shouted desperately. “You’ll only anger him!”

But the ear-piercing hiss of steam sounded through anyway, and the weapon fired with an explosive burst. Pollux shrieked, a tiny red pinprick appearing where the weapon had hit him—it had barely cracked the scale, but it was enough to enrage him again. Fury darkened the dragon’s eyes as his long neck swung in the direction of Willow and the guard, his teeth flashing as embers gathered in his mouth. Adrissu swore again and blindly threw a layer of force behind him. The stream of fire rushed toward Willow and the guard, but just in time, hit the invisible wall and flowed aside to the crumbled building instead, setting it ablaze in an instant.

He had to get Pollux away from the chaos, somewhere he could calm him down enough that he would change back, then they could—hide? Run? He couldn’t think that far ahead. Fifteen minutes ago, they had been chatting with the owner of the pastry stand that was burned to ashes now. How had everything fallen apart so quickly?

“Fly!” he shouted at Pollux, this time striking him with a heavy burst of wind. “Fly!”

Pollux snarled, but the wind against his scales seemed to encourage him, and he lifted off the roof with a few heavy flaps of his wings.

“What are you doing?” he heard Willow shouting at him, but he was already sprinting down the street. Pollux was heading eastward, in the direction of their home—and the school, Adrissu realized with a cold shock. He couldn’t teleport that far and still have the strength to help Pollux, however that would look. But he could fly in this form, fast enough at least to match Pollux’s speed and hopefully mitigate whatever damage he might cause.

The decision made in a split second, Adrissu suffused himself with wind and fire, launching himself over the burning building, carrying him faster than any human or elf could naturally move. It was slower than a dragon’s flight, but enough that he could keep his eyes on Pollux as they soared over the city, which had descended into chaos around him.

By the time the tower came into view in the distance, he could tell Pollux was making a beeline for it, seemingly undisturbed by the pandemonium going on below. But Adrissu could not bank on that for long, so he veered toward the school. There were no classes today, but many students lived on-campus; he knew at least some instructors would be around, either working on their own projects or

leading informal study sessions. He landed in the yard and ran straight for the old lecture hall, bursting in to find Shima, who had that year started teaching an introductory alchemy course in addition to her illusion courses. She was struggling to get all the glassware and tools packed away as students milled about in obvious disarray, having heard some sort of commotion, but not knowing what was happening outside.

“Uncle!” Shima exclaimed, fright and relief on her face all at once before she seemed to remember herself. “H-Headmaster. What’s going on?”

“Dragon attack,” he panted, ignoring the frightened cries that rose up around him. “Listen to me. In the sewers beneath the school, there are shelter rooms. You can get to them from a trap door behind the old well on the walking path nearest my office. Evacuate all the dormitories and get the students there.”

“The sewers?” she repeated, obviously baffled, even as she obediently headed for the exit that would lead in that direction. Adrissu turned to leave the way he came. “I had no idea—but, headmaster, where are you going?”

“To try to help,” he called over his shoulder, then stopped and turned back to face her. “Get them all down there and stay there until... I don’t know. I’ll contact you when it’s safe.”

She hesitated, looking at him for a long moment—her eyes wide and her mouth slightly agape—then something in her expression steeled over, and she nodded firmly.

“You heard the headmaster!” she exclaimed, the frightened students around her snapping to attention. “You all go find the trapdoor behind the well he mentioned. I need two of you to come with me to help me clear the dormitories.”

“I’ll go with you,” one student said, and another echoed, “Me too!”

The rest of the conversation was lost to Adrissu, as he sprinted back out the way he came, looking desperately toward their home. When it came into view, he had some small measure of relief: Pollux had perched atop the tower, his claws digging into the stone and sending pieces of it flying to the ground, as he paced restlessly around and around its narrow width. Adrissu was near enough now that he could sense Vesper, partly frightened and partly angry at the chaos.

Protect the tower, he thought firmly at her, feeling her turmoil still. *Let no one in but us.*

He sensed her acknowledgement, then focused all his attention on Pollux.

“Pollux, come down from there,” he called out as he approached the tower, landing near the front door. Pollux turned at him with a snarl, but his expression faded as soon as he recognized Adrissu. He

began to climb back down the tower, stones cracking and windows shattering as he moved. Adrissu winced, but it was the least of his worries for now.

“Adrissu,” Pollux rumbled, his voice frightened. “I can’t—I can’t—”

“Just try to calm down,” Adrissu murmured, reaching up. Pollux pushed his huge head against Adrissu’s hands, the scales of his forehead burning hot to the touch. “Relax. Focus on transforming back.”

“I’m—I’m sorry,” the dragon stuttered out, his thick brow furrowing.

“Don’t worry about that right now. Everything will be alright. You just have to change back,” he said.

Pollux squeezed his eyes shut, but for a long moment, nothing happened. Adrissu could still sense his panic, fear, and an undertone of something like regret; and despite his own pounding heart and shaking hands, he took in a deep, slow breath and projected calmness once again. Only then did the familiar red glow start to overtake Pollux’s body.

From behind them, a high-pitched hiss broke the air—the unmistakable sound of a Blackthorn weapon charging up steam in the instant before it fired. Pollux’s eyes snapped open, the glow around him dissipating instantly, and he snarled with fresh rage. Adrissu whirled around as the deafening boom sounded, just in time to catch sight of two Elafaer guards approaching, one having just fired and the other reaching to charge his weapon.

“Stop!” he shouted, shoving them back with his magic. “Stop, you’re only going to upset him again!”

But already Pollux was lifting off with a roar, fire streaming from his mouth, so close the heat made Adrissu’s skin prickle. He could see where the bolt had struck him, another small wound on his neck that wasn’t even deep enough to bleed. The second bolt fired and struck Pollux in the face, still a superficial wound, but this time drawing blood from the softer scales just under his eye. Pollux shrieked with anger, fire exploding from his mouth. One guard managed to leap out of the way with just his clothing singed, but the other was not quick enough. When the fire subsided, only blackened bones were left alongside the curling metal remains of the weapon. The surviving guard went sprinting back down the hill, and Pollux roared, moving to follow.

Adrissu swore and reached out to Pollux with his magic again. He *had* to make Pollux stop, but if they were going to be continually pursued, it would only get worse—Pollux would never calm himself enough to transform back on his own. The guard was fleeing, but they wouldn’t be alone for long. So he seized Pollux by force, pushing him back down to the ground. Pollux had not been

expecting it, so despite his larger stature, he succumbed to the force of Adrissu's will and came crashing down to the earth. Sod and cobblestones alike went flying as he left an indentation in the pathway up to the tower.

"Adrissu!" he cried, betrayed and confused. That nearly broke him, but Adrissu gritted his teeth, ignoring the tears stinging at his eyes, and kept shoving Pollux down. The dragon made a choked sound, struggling and snarling in the dirt, but after a moment he stilled enough that Adrissu could run up and touch him.

"Sleep," Adrissu hissed as he reached into Pollux's consciousness, the way he had with Tyrsun, and forced him into sleep. Pollux struggled for an instant, then went limp as the sedation took hold. He would never normally use such a thing on Pollux, but it was the only way he'd have any hope of forcing the transformation to turn him back into his elven form.

Keeping his hand on Pollux's leg, he felt around again with his magic, trying to coax the illusion into place. It was strange and clumsy, but after a moment Pollux's body glowed a faint red, shrinking down so slowly that Adrissu almost doubted it would work. But eventually, the battered, unconscious form of the elf was laying in the pit that the dragon had created in the earth.

It was only then that Adrissu felt like he could breathe again. He sat down heavily, panting with exertion, and finally lifted his gaze to look around. The first thing he saw was the tower, their home, with deep claw marks on the sides, three windows shattered, and one gaping hole up near the roof where one of Pollux's hind legs had broken through to the inside—he must have landed too heavily.

Then Adrissu looked down the hill, his heart sinking as he spotted several members of the city guard running up the path—followed by the Lord Representative herself. Six guards, and one half-elf woman, who looked unarmed and possessed no magical ability that he was aware of—he could probably fight them off, but if they had reinforcements coming...

He started to stand, hands open at his sides as his mind raced, trying to formulate what he would say, when a soft moan from the ground broke his thoughts.

"Adrissu," Pollux whimpered, curling in on himself. "Adrissu—it hurts—I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"It's alright," Adrissu said softly, dropping back to his knees to place a comforting hand on Pollux's shoulder. "It's alright. You're safe now."

"Get away from him, Headmaster," one guard called out, holding a crossbow that was trained on Pollux. The guards had stopped about twenty feet away, Willow a few paces behind them. "Both of you, hands where I can see them. Don't cast any magic."

Adrissu swore under his breath and straightened, his hands moving to his sides again, palms upturned.

“Guardsmen, I can explain,” he started, despite having no explanation or excuse in mind, but Pollux forced himself into a sitting position and interrupted him in a hoarse voice.

“It’s okay,” he croaked, holding his hands above his head with all his fingers outstretched. “I’ll go. I won’t hurt anyone else.”

“Pollux,” Adrissu hissed, reaching for him.

“I said get away from him!” the guard shouted.

“Just do what they say, Adrissu,” Pollux said, not looking at him.

He could kill all of them, Adrissu thought. He could get rid of every single one of them and take Pollux away. They could hide out down in his lair until all of this blew over, until it was safe for them to emerge again. But when would that be? The humans would relentlessly search for them now. Would his lair stay hidden and secure that long?

“Adrissu,” Pollux repeated, more forcefully now, snapping him out of his thoughts.

“I’ll come for you,” Adrissu whispered, then took several steps away from Pollux.

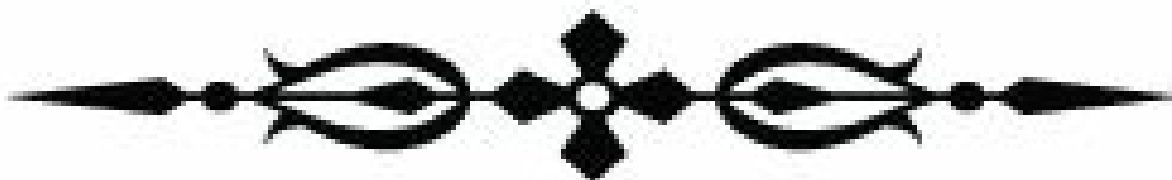
For a tense moment, the entire group was motionless. Then the guard with the crossbow jerked his head to the side, eyes still flickering between Pollux and Adrissu, and the two guards behind him went hurrying up the path. They each grabbed one of Pollux’s outstretched arms, hauling him to his feet.

“Come with us too, please, Headmaster,” Willow called from behind the guards who had remained.

Adrissu was motionless, his mind racing. They were going to question him, certainly. Should he try to make a break for it? Should he play along?

“Please, Adrissu,” Willow repeated, the hard edge in her voice softening now. “I know you must be in shock, but we really need to know what’s going on. Please just come with us.”

His cover wasn’t entirely blown, it seemed. He could play the part of a shocked, shaken partner well enough, at least until a way forward became more clear. Adrissu bit his lip, nodded, and slowly began to step down the ruined path toward the Lord Representative and her guards.



Adrissu was not under arrest, exactly—not the way Pollux was—but when he went with the city guard, they took him and Willow to the offices of the Lord Representative, where they were separated. He was made to wait in a small room that seemed like a repurposed workstation, not detained, but not exactly free to go. Another guard waited outside the door, as Adrissu paced nervously and tried to come up with a plan to smooth all this over, so that he and Pollux could leave together.

It had been about an hour when the door finally opened, revealing Willow—still in her dirty clothes, but who overall looked much less shaken—and a tall human man wearing the armor of a city guard, but with a long cerulean cape trailing behind him as he followed the Lord Representative.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting, Headmaster,” she said brusquely, sitting down at the table across from him. “I’m sure you must be concerned, so hopefully we won’t have to keep you long. I don’t know if you’ve met Dane, the captain of the guard. We just spoke with Pollux, and we’d like to ask you a few questions.”

“I understand,” Adrissu answered, remaining upright. He gestured for Willow to continue, and she glanced between him and the captain of the guard, who was watching him from where he stood next to Willow, his expression one of cold indifference. His armor was gleaming, unmarred by any dirt or scuffs, and Adrissu wondered with irritation where he had been during all the chaos.

“Did you know about this? About Pollux?” Willow asked abruptly, turning her gaze to Adrissu. She was looking at him sternly, obviously searching for any hint of dishonesty or avoidance on his face. Adrissu sighed and folded his hands behind his back.

“Yes,” he said simply. Her expression faltered, eyebrows knitting together in frustration.

“You knew he was a dragon,” she deadpanned.

“Yes,” Adrissu repeated.

“And you didn’t alert anyone? You never thought to warn Polimnos about what kind of danger it was in?”

“Polimnos was never in any danger,” he countered. The captain’s eyes narrowed, but still he remained silent next to Willow as she huffed in obvious irritation.

“That’s clearly untrue!” she exclaimed, gesturing wildly. “He just destroyed several buildings, killed two of my employees. They were in danger, wouldn’t you agree?”

“He didn’t mean to hurt anyone,” Adrissu said. “He had no intention of any of this happening. Do you really think he would have agreed to create these successors of the dragon-slaying weapon for you if his intention was to terrorize the city?”

“That’s the part that still doesn’t make sense to me,” she relented, leaning back with a sigh. Her confident veneer started to slip, and for a moment she looked just as overwhelmed and afraid as she must have felt. “Why? Why would he make those weapons if he were a dragon himself?”

Adrissu did not answer. For a moment they were all silent, the air in the room thick with nervous tension. Finally, it was the captain who cleared his throat and broke the silence.

“Headmaster, how long have you known Pollux?” Dane asked, his voice low and calm.

“Close to a decade now, I think.”

“Have you always known this about him?”

Adrissu thought about the best way to answer, finally settling on a weary sigh of, “Yes.”

“As a citizen of Polimnos, it was your duty to warn city officials about this threat,” he said.

“There was never a threat. I just said that. Pollux never wanted to hurt anyone. We only wanted to live our lives in peace. This was all an accident.”

“Forgive me if I have trouble believing that,” the captain countered, his expression turning darker the longer he spoke. “But even if it were true, it does not change the fact that at least two people are dead, possibly more. I’m still waiting for a complete report of the damage. Pollux will be held accountable, and you are complicit by having withheld this information for so long.”

Adrissu stared at him for a moment, irritated. Then he turned his attention back to Willow, addressing her alone.

“Pollux has worked for you in the past, Lord Representative,” he said. “You have enjoyed his work and sought him out to work for you again. You got along with him, and by extension, me as well. Am I correct?”

“Up until all this, yes,” she sighed.

“Then for the sake of the rapport you once had, let me handle this,” he continued. “Let me take Pollux, and we will both leave. I can pay for whatever damages were incurred, then you never have to see either of us again. You will have rid Polimnos of its dragon. Isn’t that what you wanted to accomplish with all of this, the Dragonslayer Cannon and commissioning Pollux for more weapons, in the first place?”

“So he can terrorize a city that’s less equipped to deal with a dragon?” the captain cut in, incredulous. With a scowl, Adrissu snapped his fingers and forced the man’s lips together, silencing him.

“I’m speaking only to you, Willow,” he said. The half-elf’s eyes were wide, flickering with uncertainty between Dane, who was now grabbing at his face and making a muffled sound of anger,

and Adrissu's hands.

"I don't know if that will be possible, Headmaster," she stammered. As much as he had tried to remain calm, her refusal now made him see red.

"Give me my husband," he snapped, fury burning hot through his veins, "and we will never bother you again. But if you keep him away from me, I can promise you there will be no peaceful resolution to this."

Heat was building in his mouth, and too late Adrissu realized it was not his rage making his face burn, but embers sparking from between his teeth. He snapped his mouth shut, forcing himself to maintain control of his form—but Willow's eyes had become huge, her face draining of color as she gaped at him. The captain had stopped too, hands still on his mouth, but staring at Adrissu with a look of shock and mounting fear.

"Just let me take him," Adrissu repeated, barely above a whisper now.

"It's you... both of you," Willow whimpered. "You're both—you're Zamnes, aren't you?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

For as long as Polimnos had been his home, Adrissu had promised himself that if anyone did somehow find out his secret—that he was the very same Zamnes who had destroyed the city so long ago now—that he would kill them before word could spread. It had seemed like a necessity: Polimnos was his home, and if he was to continue living there comfortably, no one could know. He had no qualms about killing to keep himself safe.

Now, though, with recognition and dread creeping into the face of both Willow and the captain, Adrissu's resolve faltered. If he killed them, there would be no easy solution to any of this. They were both too important to simply kill in secret and wash his hands of it. If he killed them now, even if the revelation about Zamnes did not spread, he would still be hard-pressed to answer the accusations of murder.

In the split second he had to consider his response, Willow had stood up from her seat abruptly and taken a step away from him, and Dane's hand went to the hilt of his sword and gripped it tightly, though he did not draw it yet.

After a beat, Adrissu sighed and answered slowly, "Listen to me. Bring me my mate, and we will both leave quietly. You'll never hear from us again."

"So you don't deny it, then?" Willow accused, her forced calm tone long gone now. "This whole time, it's been *you*?"

"No, I don't deny it!" Adrissu snapped, rage building in his chest all over again. "It has been me this whole time, but think about all I've done for this city. Polimnos would be nothing without my guiding hand! And if you mortals are too stupid and short-lived to wonder why the Academy of Magic has always had a headmaster Adrissu in a long fucking line of Adrissus, that isn't on me."

The sound of steel silenced him as the captain drew his sword. Adrissu clenched his hands into fists on the table, quivering as he forced down the fire burning in his throat.

“Now,” he hissed, glaring between them in turn. “I’ve given you the opportunity to choose a peaceful resolution. Are you going to bring me to my mate, or are you going to make me fight you for him?”

The captain remained silent, but his sword was drawn and pointed at Adrissu. His gaze was trained on him, but Adrissu could see the way he leaned toward Willow, waiting for her command. The half-elf glanced between the two of them, more obviously at a loss for words than Adrissu had ever seen her—for all her intimidating presence before, here she was pathetically mortal, withering in fear to be in the same room with a dragon.

“Captain,” she croaked, barely above a whisper, and without as much as flinching, Dane lunged at him. Adrissu shielded himself with magic, so the blade that had been pointing right at his chest slipped harmlessly away from him. Taking advantage of the momentum, Adrissu grabbed the captain by the shoulders, reached in with his magic, found the glowing center that was his life force, and shattered it with a snarl. It only took a heartbeat. The captain fell dead to the ground beside him, and Adrissu rounded on Willow.

“Are you done with this farce?” he growled, relishing in the tears of fright that had sprung to her eyes. The only sound between them for a moment was her ragged breathing, as her eyes darted around the room, searching desperately for a way out. But he was between her and the closed door. She took in a sharp breath, ready to scream for the guards outside, but she wasn’t fast enough.

Adrissu muffled the sound with a snap of his fingers to envelop them with magic, and in the same movement threw her back against the opposite wall. The breath left her body all at once, and as she slid to the ground, Adrissu shoved past her to place his hand on the far wall. From the window he could see a small courtyard on the other side, hardly more than a patch of grass with a few flowering bushes and a single tree; but he could see a narrow, arched servant’s entrance on the far end that would lead out onto the street. It would be much easier to slip out this way than try to fight past the guards.

A rapid flick of his wrist toward the door was all it took to click the lock into place, which would buy him at least a few seconds. He turned back to the wall, and with a blast of force from his hand, it exploded outwards into the little courtyard. Willow screamed and curled in on herself at his feet; but even as he heard muffled shouts from behind the door and the handle rattling, he reached down, seized her coat, and hauled her up so that she was forced to look him in the face.

“I could kill you if I wanted to,” he hissed as she flinched away from him. “Remember that. *You* are the one who refused my peace offering. *You* are the one who chose violence.” With that, he threw her

back to the ground and ducked through the opening that he had made, running for the far end of the courtyard while morphing his illusory disguise around him. When he emerged at the other side of the clearing, coughing and waving his hand to disperse the cloud of dust, he was a plain-looking human in servant clothes. He slipped easily into the gathering crowd of onlookers, and the guards hurrying past to investigate didn't even notice him.

He pushed past the handful of people who had already arrived to see the commotion and hurried out of the neighborhood, knowing the crowd would only grow in size as word of an explosion at the Lord Representative's office spread. Luckily, the central guard station wasn't too far, and he was sure they would have sent Pollux there to wait in a jail cell.

As he walked, he tried to formulate a plan, but all he could focus on was how everything was ruined. The city guard knew Pollux was a dragon, and they would soon discover that Adrissu had killed the captain and terrorized their Lord Representative. If it had been one, two, maybe even five people who had found out, he might have been able to wipe their memories or change what they thought they knew. But word was spreading far faster than he could keep up with, so he had to assume the entire town knew or would know soon enough. He would lose his home, the school, maybe even his lair and his hoard—he could not let them take Pollux from him now, too. But a plan would not come to him; his mind felt all at once blank and in utter disarray, and it took all of his focus to keep his feet moving until he was at the station.

Violence might be the only path forward now, he thought, but he would try one last-ditch effort to leave quietly. Ducking into an alleyway as if he were looking for a back door, Adrissu returned to his usual elven form, looped around the building, and came out the other side before striding through the main entrance. A few guards were gathered around a table to his left, talking to each other and glancing up as he entered; but he ignored them and stepped to the right, where a guard was posted in front of a closed iron door.

“Is this the entrance to the jail?” he asked the man standing guard, who blinked dumbly at him for a moment, before stammering out an answer.

“Yes,” the man said, perplexed. “State your business.”

“I am Adrissu Rolastra, and an elf named Pollux Blackthorn is being held in a jail cell. I have permission from the Lord Representative to come collect him.”

He slid his hand into a pocket of his robe, and with a small flourish of illusion magic, held out a piece of parchment with a short missive. The guard frowned down at it, but before he could reach and examine it further, Adrissu pulled it away and stuck his hand back in his pocket.

“I mean—this is not standard procedure, sir,” the guard said, running a hand through his hair anxiously.

“I understand,” Adrissu replied, then added in a lower voice, “Do you know why that man is in there?”

“I heard that he...” the guard stammered. His eyes flickered between Adrissu and the guards sitting on the other side of the room. “That he was the one who turned into a dragon and went on a rampage through the city.”

Adrissu forced himself not to roll his eyes—a few buildings being damaged was hardly a rampage.

“That’s right,” he said coolly. “He’s dangerous. I’m the headmaster of the Academy of Magic. I know how to hold him safely—you think iron bars and stone walls would be enough to stop him if he really wanted to get out?”

The man frowned at that, looking frightened. “Well... yes, that makes sense. Alright. One moment.” He pulled a ring of keys from his belt and turned to unlock the door behind him.

As the handle clicked, and the man pushed open the metal door, the entrance Adrissu had first come through burst open behind them. Adrissu swore under his breath as everyone turned to look at the guard who had just come sprinting through, red in the face and panting.

“An—An attack,” he stammered between heaving breaths, his attention on the guards on the other side of the room. “At the Lord Representative's estate—they say that—that Captain Dane is—is dead!”

“What?!” the other guards exclaimed, leaping to their feet.

Adrissu took his chance while they were distracted—he shoved past the guard and slammed the metal door closed behind him, clicking the lock into place.

“Hey!” he heard them shout, muted behind the door. “Get back here!” He heard the key rattle in the handle again, but he shoved his full weight against the door and pressed his hand to where it met the doorframe, filling his palm with fire. The heat seared at the metal, but it would take a long moment to weld them together.

“Who’s there?” he heard a man shouting from behind him—he’d barely had the chance to even look at the room he was now in. Glancing back with his hand still heating the doorframe, Adrissu spotted a guard drawing his sword and walking up to him from across a long hallway. Behind the guard, Adrissu could see a row of metal bars—the jail cells.

“Come on, come on,” Adrissu hissed, turning his attention back to the door. The metal was softening under his hand as he tried to push the two separate pieces together. He could hear the

nervous guard stammering from the other side,

“It’s not working—I don’t know what he’s doing!”

“Hey!” the guard in the hallway shouted again, now running toward him. “Stop that!”

“Stay away from me!” Adrissu warned, but the man did not stop his approach. When he got close enough that the sword might reach him, Adrissu threw his hand out and sent flames streaming into his face—the man screamed and stumbled back as his skin reddened and bubbled, his sword clattering to the ground. The thudding on the door behind him became more desperate; he pressed his hand to the metal one last time to weld it together as much as he could, then grabbed the downed guard, who again howled in pain as Adrissu’s fiery hand pushed hard into his burned skin. Adrissu killed him quickly, grabbing his sword before hurrying down the hallway into the jail.

“Pollux!” he hissed, glancing between the cells. The two nearest him were empty, but there were at least eight more further down. From the very far end of the wall of cells, he heard Pollux answer faintly.

“I’m here.”

Relief flooded Adrissu at the sound of his voice, and he hurried down to the far cell where he finally saw Pollux, still looking dirty and bloody, with a miserable expression on his face. Luckily, there didn’t seem to be any other prisoners in this jail at the moment—Adrissu suspected that if there had been, they had been moved to a different location in fear of Pollux’s mere presence.

“Are you alright? Are you hurt?” Adrissu asked, reaching through the bars to touch his face. Pollux shook his head, his brow furrowing.

“I’m so sorry, Adrissu,” he said. “I didn’t mean for any of this to happen. I’ve ruined everything.”

“Stop,” Adrissu interrupted, shaking his head. “We can talk about all this later. Right now, I have to get you out of here. I need to keep you safe, so we have to leave.”

Pollux’s expression darkened, but he nodded. The pounding on the door reached a fever pitch, and the sound of cracking metal caught both of their attention.

“That won’t hold long,” Adrissu said, grabbing the bars of the cell and ripping them apart with his magic—heat and force flooded them all at once and softened the much thinner pieces of metal. “Listen to me. I’m going to blow a hole in the wall the moment they get that door open. Disguise yourself as an injured guard, and I will do the same. We’ll distract them by sending them out that way, then slip back out the front entrance before they can realize who we are. Alright?”

He could feel Pollux’s tension mounting, but he nodded in response and closed his eyes. His appearance shimmered, and he was a battered-looking human guard the next moment.

“Good,” Adrissu said, changing his own appearance. He helped Pollux clamber through the bars, then they stood at the far wall, watching the doorway on the opposite end. A high, narrow window was the only source of natural light, a sure sign that the other side of the wall led outdoors, and not just to another room. In the faint light, Adrissu could barely see the metal door on the other side of the room, but he listened intently. As soon as the metal creaked and groaned, the fused parts finally shattering against their onslaught, he summoned as much magic as he could into his fingertips and sent the wall exploding outwards, showering them with rubble and dust.

“What the hell is going on?!” he heard shouting from the other end of the hallway, and in the commotion he pulled Pollux with him away from the wall, throwing them to the ground. “Shit, they’re getting away!”

“Tried to—fight them off,” Pollux coughed as the group of guards approached, squinting through the dust. “Went that way—both of them.” Adrissu nodded, coughing as well to disguise the pleased smile that flashed across his face.

“After them!” one guard shouted; Adrissu recognized his voice as the one who had come running into the station just moments earlier with the news of the explosion. The group made exclamations of agreement and filtered out of the hole in the wall. While their backs were turned, Adrissu and Pollux got to their feet and walked toward the busted-open metal door.

“Wait!” another voice called—Adrissu growled, recognizing it as the guard who had unlocked the door. “If that was Ernest, then who are...?”

“Run,” Adrissu hissed, pushing Pollux toward the door. As they both bolted, the guard cried out, “Wait, that’s them, they’re using magic!”

They dashed through the door and past the commotion that had gathered in the station, shoving through the crowd of onlookers who were too confused to stop them. Pollux hissed as they emerged on the street, shielding his eyes against the daylight; but Adrissu grabbed his arm and kept running, Pollux stumbling after him.

“We just have to get to the tower,” Adrissu panted, just loud enough for Pollux to hear him. “If we can get down to the lair, we’ll be safe.”

“Stop!” barked a man’s voice behind them, then something hit Adrissu squarely in the back with enough force to make him fall to the ground.

“Adrissu!” Pollux cried, skidding to a stop beside him. He’d been hit with a crossbow, Adrissu realized, gritting his teeth as he reached behind himself to pull the bolt from his back. His vision went

white with searing pain as he ripped the bolt out, but Pollux's hands on his back were gentle as he quickly healed the wound.

"Don't stop," he rasped, trying to push Pollux away from him. "Get to the tower!"

But Pollux was already looking past him, snarling at the guard who had fired at him. He reached out with one hand and a stream of fire burst from it, eliciting more screams of fright and pain as people around them fled. Adrissu stumbled to his feet and pulled Pollux with him, despite the crazed look that had come over his eyes once again—if they could just *run*, if they could just get to the tower, then maybe it would all turn out alright. But the guards were still swarming after them, and Pollux was wild with desperation to protect him, and it felt like everything was falling apart.

"Pollux, come on," he urged, but already he could feel the magic that contained him in his elven form slipping away. Swearing, Adrissu stumbled back just as the dragon emerged, lunging forward at the group of guards and ripping them to shreds with his teeth and claws. "Pollux!"

The red dragon swung his head back to look at Adrissu then, yellow eyes flaring. "We're never going to make it," he growled, his voice a deep rumble that reverberated through the earth, so intensely Adrissu could feel it in his feet. "We have to fly."

"Clear the way!" he heard men shouting distantly, coming from the direction of the city wall. "Quickly, aim while we have direct line of sight—"

"Fly!" Adrissu shouted, realizing what was happening. "Head for the tower!"

Pollux's eyes widened with comprehension of the danger they were in, and without protest, he lifted into the air. Just on the edge of his vision, the view mostly blocked by buildings, Adrissu could barely make out the dark gleam of the weapon that had been mounted on the wall, now moving slowly on a cart through the street—the Dragonslayer Cannon. They must have retrieved it the moment word had spread of a dragon in the city.

Pollux was right; they would never make it to the tower on foot. They had to fly. And if they were expecting only one dragon, a second might terrify them enough that he and Pollux would have a better chance of getting away unscathed.

Adrissu squeezed his eyes shut, silently mourning the conclusion of his centuries of peace in Polimnos. He had known that it would all end someday, but he could never have expected this.

He allowed himself only a moment of despair, then he exhaled sharply and released his hold on his illusory form. The black dragon leapt forth, his long, serpentine body spreading down the length of the cobblestone street, black wings stretching out high above him. He heard Pollux calling to him from

above and lifted his head to see the larger red dragon blotting out the sun as he soared overhead. Then the street around him erupted into panic.

“Dragon!” he heard men shouting. “A second dragon!” Then, finally, a shrill female voice laden with fear identifying him:

“Zamnes!”

He turned, snarling, to find Willow pursuing him yet again. Two of the Elafaer family guards followed close, obviously armed with Blackthorn weapons, but a slight shock passed through him when he saw that Willow too pointed a weapon at him with trembling hands.

“Damned half-elf,” he hissed. The woman was relentless; he could offer her no more chances at mercy. He breathed in sharply—fear flashed across her face as she and the two guards fired their weapons at him, sharp pinpricks biting into his neck and torso—and spewed fire at the three of them. They shrieked, their overheating weapons bursting in enormous clouds of steam; but he kept his breath on them until the screams died away, and the three figures collapsed to the ground, skin blackened and sloughing off. Only then did he look back up to the sky, spotting Pollux circling over him, waiting. In the distance, he could hear the mechanical sounds of the cannon being loaded. He was not sure just how far of a reach it had, but he suspected that whoever made it took into account a dragon’s considerable mobility. Trying to fly away now would be pointless.

“Pollux,” he said, lifting in the air enough that Pollux swooped down beside him. “Do you think we could melt the cannon? Was it designed to hold up against a dragon’s breath?”

Pollux hesitated, glancing toward the cannon dubiously. This high, they had a clear view of it now: it was mounted to a large cart with a guard fumbling behind it, another cranking the steam-propulsion mechanism. It would fire at them at any moment now. “Against one, probably. Against two...”

Adrissu grinned. That was exactly what he’d wanted to hear. Pollux nodded in understanding, and they soared down toward the cannon, the guards shouting in panic as they approached.

“Shoot them!” the man at the steam mechanism cried, stumbling away from the cart. “Shoot them!”

The cannon did not seem fully charged, and the man aiming it seemed to waver—the weapon’s opening swung first toward Adrissu, then Pollux, then Adrissu again. “Fire!” he shouted, heaving on the lever, and Adrissu veered hard away from his path as a burst of steam exploded from it. Pain ripped through his shoulder, making his vision blur as he roared in shock—a thick metal bolt stuck out from the joint, pinning his foreleg in place.

“Adrissu!” Pollux cried, turning toward him.

“Get the cannon!” he snarled, reaching up and pulling against the heavy bolt. This one, stuck fast in his joint, did not come out as easily as the crossbow bolt had. He groaned as he struggled to stay in the air, then gripped the bolt again and surrounded it with magic, forcing it out of his body, despite the agony screaming through his shoulder and neck. If the cannon had been fully charged, it very well might have punched straight through him or even tore his foreleg off. The thought made his stomach twist with a primal fear that he had never truly felt before—a fear that he might actually die.

Blood gushed from the wound when he finally got it out, and something else dripped from the bolt that was a dark, almost-black purple—he stared at it, wondering what kind of poison it might have been, remembering Heriel. But he would have to worry about it later. Below him, Pollux was streaming fire onto the cannon. The cart burst into flames, and the guard operating it had fled, but the weapon itself was still standing.

Adrissu swooped down, landing heavily on the stone path, and screamed fire at the cannon. The two streams of fire burned white-hot where they met. After a moment, the dark metal began to sag and droop, unable to withstand the heat of two dragons’ fiery breath. The wooden parts of it were charred and blackened, filling the air with an acrid, bitter smoke.

Mortals only knew dragons to be solitary creatures; they never would have anticipated two working together.

Once the cannon had melted enough that Adrissu was sure it would never work again, he turned away, looking up at Pollux.

“Head for the tower,” he called, but Pollux was looking behind him with a snarl. More mortals were coming at them, this time both guards and citizens with their own swords and crossbows—their faces a mix of fright and grim determination. Pollux made a wide circle in the air, heading straight for them, and breathed fire down at their ranks, making the street erupt with screams and destruction.

The mortals were dogged in their pursuit, though, as those who had survived the first blast split into two distinct groups: one still coming for Adrissu, the other chasing after Pollux. Adrissu’s heart sank. He had to make sure they were not followed. If more of the city were in shambles, it would distract them enough, dishearten them enough, that perhaps they would not follow after the dragons.

“Zamnes!” one human shouted, a young man brandishing a sword and shield, stupid and arrogant and surely hoping to win his fame and glory being the one to slay the dragon of legend. Adrissu sneered at him as he approached, turning away to swing his tail hard at the human. The man made a choked sound, flying through the air before landing with a crunch against the stone wall of a building off to the side, where he remained motionless.

“Flee!” he roared, his voice echoing through the streets. “Flee Polimnos, if you want to live!”

Despite the agony still coursing through his shoulder, he lifted himself into the air, wincing with every flap of his wings. A few crossbow bolts skittered across his scales, but none made purchase. Flying over the crowd, he breathed fire down at them, keeping the stream going even as he passed them by. In moments, every building on the street had erupted in flames. He could hear panicked cries, and the screams of women and children as he passed by, and for an instant felt a pang of guilt—they had not been trying to harm him, after all. But none of them mattered compared to Pollux, so if killing them would spare his mate, then he would kill them all.

Pollux was ahead of him, but seemed to notice that he was slowed, partly by his injury and partly by the destruction he was causing.

“What are you doing?” he growled.

“Making sure they’re too busy to follow us out of the city,” Adrissu answered, and realization dawned on Pollux’s yellow eyes. For a moment, he too had an expression of guilt, then his face hardened, and he nodded.

“I’ll do the same,” he said. “I’ll go the long way along the northern wall. Go straight for the tower, and I’ll meet you there.” His eyes flicked to the bleeding wound on Adrissu’s shoulder, the sluggish flap of his wing on that side, and his brows furrowed in concern. “No, nevermind, I’ll stay with you.”

“I’m fine,” Adrissu snapped. “Go the way you planned. We’ll meet at the tower.”

Pollux hesitated, but finally nodded and swooped away again, heading for the north side of the city and spraying fire beneath him the entire way. Adrissu watched him for only a moment, then resolutely moved on, alternating between breathing fire down at the streets and landing hard on the tall buildings nearest the town square. The city had descended into chaos, people screaming and fleeing wherever he went. Some pursued him tenaciously with their weapons, but only the Dragonslayer Cannon had truly frightened him, and that was gone now. For the most part, no one even got close enough to remotely threaten him with their swords, and the crossbow bolts that did reach him never pierced his hide.

Still, his shoulder hurt with such intensity that it left him breathless. It was only the adrenaline coursing through him that was keeping him from collapsing in agony, he was sure, so he had to take advantage of the time he had before it incapacitated him. As he flew, still breathing fire down below, he also used his magic to reach out tendrils of force to collapse roofs, shatter windows, and erupt stone pathways through the city. The air was hazy now with smoke and ash.

Adrissu realized with a surge of strange guilt that he was approaching the district where Ruan had once lived—the home he'd bought with the wages Adrissu had paid him. He moaned with sorrow and pain, turning away to give the neighborhood a wide berth. The thought of harming that house felt somehow forbidden, and he did not have time to parse through his feelings about it.

Even though his route was shorter, his movements had become sluggish and pained, so Adrissu could hear Pollux roaring from the tower long before he reached it. When it came into sight, Pollux was perched atop it again, though luckily it seemed no one had followed him yet.

Vesper, he thought, grief striking him anew. *To me*.

An answering awareness echoed in his chest, and then she was gone. The fraction of himself he had set aside and formed into its own distinct being returned to him, filling him with a surge of extra magic, enough energy to get him out of the city. He could always summon another familiar, later on, but he did not think it would be the same. It would not be Vesper, not quite.

“Destroy it,” he shouted at Pollux as he approached, landing hard on the side of the tower. “We have to make sure no one can find the entrance.”

“But Vesper,” Pollux started, and Adrissu shook his head.

“She’s already gone,” he said. Pollux frowned, confused, and looked down at the tower beneath his feet. For a moment, they were both silent and still.

Adrissu had not considered himself sentimental, but the thought of purposely destroying his home agonized him—all the trinkets within it, all the memories of his mate’s past lives. It had to be done, but he did not think he could do it. Ruan’s shield, Volkmar’s paintings, Braern’s poetry, Kian’s research—they were all in the tower, spread through his study and the kitchen and their shared bedroom and all the other rooms of the tower. It was all about to be rubble, now.

But his mate was *here*. That was all he had ever wanted, all he needed. Pollux was still watching him with uncertainty, so Adrissu squeezed his eyes shut and forced himself to be the first to act. The tower was more stone than wood, but still he craned his neck to breathe fire at it, shooting the stream of flames through an open window. The storage space that had once been Volkmar’s room burst into flame. He crawled along the other side of the tower and screamed his grief into the gaping hole Pollux had created when he’d landed on it earlier in the day. His study, and his collection of books along with it, was reduced to ash in an instant.

With a roar of frustration, Pollux shattered the stones beneath his feet. He drove down and down, until the tower rumbled and collapsed around him, forcing Adrissu to leap into the air to avoid falling with it.

“They’re coming,” Pollux snarled, looking beyond Adrissu. Adrissu nodded, unable to summon the strength to turn his head and look behind. “We have to go.”

“Let’s head east,” Adrissu panted. “Far enough to sea they can’t follow us, then—I don’t know. We’ll find somewhere to land then. Just head east.”

Pollux nodded and took to the air. Adrissu stumbled after him, but hesitated when he got right to the edge of the cliff. His vision was blurring at the edges. He tried to think of what kind of poison it could be that affected him this way, but all the knowledge he’d gained was failing him now.

Hearing shouts and the drawing of steel, Adrissu turned back. Behind him, a group of perhaps twenty men were tramping up the pathway: swords and weapons out, eyes locked on him. From the hill they stood upon, Adrissu normally had a clear view of the rest of the city, but the smoke rising from countless fires made it difficult to see anything beyond the academy that sprawled around the tower.

More than anything, he hoped the students were safe in the sewers, in the rooms where he had told Shima to hide them away; silently, he praised his own foresight, though he never thought the secret tunnels would be used like this. They would be safe there. The Academy would go on—and the students past, present, and future were all a testament to Adrissu and his undeniable impact on all of Autreth. Even if he could no longer remain in Polimnos, that part of him would always be there.

He looked back at the mortals coming toward the tower, his eyes landing on a lone woman bringing up the rear. Shima herself was stumbling up the path, magic flickering around her hands; but her eyes were locked with horror and despair at the crumbled tower. She had looked up to him, called him uncle. Maybe she did not yet know it was him behind all this, he thought—perhaps even now she feared he was in the tower, injured and dying. Maybe the memory of Adrissu—not just the accomplished headmaster, but the person who had been a mentor and friend—would live untarnished for a little while longer.

“Adrissu!” Pollux roared. He turned again to find Pollux had come back for him, though his visage looked blurry and indistinct. “Come on, Adrissu. We need to hurry. You have to fly. Can you still fly?”

“Yes,” Adrissu said. He chanced one last look at Polimnos burning behind him, but the smoke was too thick for him to see any further.

With a roar of pain, Adrissu took to the air. Pollux soared on ahead, the sky red and gray with ash and flames, and they headed east over the dark ocean below.

EPILOGUE

The sun was descending in the west, taking with it the last dregs of warmth of the late autumn afternoon. Adrissu paced, his claws leaving indentations in the snow. He kept his eyes on the sky, knowing Pollux should return soon. From atop their mountain, he had an expansive view of the mountain range as it stretched east to west, deep in central Robruolor. He could see for miles through the cold, cloudless sky. But there was nothing yet, so he sighed and settled back down in the snow, waiting.

At times like this, he sometimes still thought of Polimnos: its sunny shores and cool ocean breeze, the sounds of human life and vitality surrounding him. But the memories were becoming distant now, hazy and undetailed in the decades that had passed since it had been his home. *Their* home, despite how short-lived their time together in the city had been. He did not think he missed it, at least not anymore; but sometimes when the icy wind made all his claws numb, and the view of their mountain range was lost to mist or snow, he would reminisce on what it was like to live in a tower on a cliff by the warm sea.

The sense of another dragon entering his territory pinged in the back of his head, but he recognized the presence as Pollux the moment he became aware of it, so he eagerly stood again and scanned the skies. He spotted the other dragon coming from the west, silhouetted against the setting sun. He grinned, all his teeth showing, and watched as the red dragon took shape against the light of the sun as he soared down to the mountaintop.

“Welcome home,” Adrissu rumbled, stomping through the snow to meet him. They embraced, their necks entwining, before Pollux pulled away to gesture at the heavy load on his back.

“I’m glad to be back,” he answered. “Come inside. I can’t wait to show you what I found.”

Adrissu nodded and followed him eagerly as they made their way through the snow to the icy entrance of their home. As deep as the caves of their lair ran, the dwarves of Robruolor dwelled far

deeper, so it seemed their nearest neighbors remained unaware of their presence. But with the help of their friends who still lived in Gylnefjell—Naydruun and their mate, the spritely green dragon Viona, who had once been Heriel the red—they had borrowed much of the dwarven technology that made their underground cities bright, warm, and inviting.

Adrissu followed slowly, stumbling a bit as they trudged through the snow. His foreleg, where the Dragonslayer cannon had caught him in the shoulder, had never quite healed right. Once they had found a place to settle, they spent a long time trying to discern what poison might have been on the bolt to reverse its effects, but most of their research came too late at best, or came to nothing at all.

Luckily, time seemed to be a better cure than any spell or tincture, and what had once been blinding pain was now a lingering numbness, some loss of dexterity, and occasional soreness—something he would much rather deal with than losing the use of the foreleg entirely, to be sure. The colder the weather got, though, the more often it hurt.

Pollux transformed as they stepped into the lair, the large bag he had been carrying as a dragon falling away as he shrunk. It landed with a soft thump, which meant it must have been mostly herbs and plants this time.

“What did you find?” Adrissu asked, shrinking down as well. Pollux’s elven form looked the same as ever: long dark hair and golden eyes that flashed with warmth when he smiled. His own form was also largely unchanged, though his injured arm could only be disguised with illusion, not truly hidden, and still had limited function even when he was an elf.

“Most of it is the usual stuff,” Pollux said, pulling bundles of various herbs and wood out of the sack. “But I found a little grove of these in one of the cliff-side gardens they have outside of Arlenfjell, and figured no one would be too devastated if one went missing...”

“What is it?” Adrissu asked, frowning as Pollux all but disappeared inside the thick cloth. With a grunt of exertion, he emerged carrying a sapling, its roots mostly bare with just a few chunks of dark dirt still clinging stubbornly to its coiled rhizomes. Despite its exposed roots, the sapling looked quite healthy, so Pollux must only have taken it in the past day or so. The little tree had begun losing its foliage with the change of season, though, so it took a moment for Adrissu to truly notice its pointed yellow leaves and realize what it was.

“A sebran sapling,” he remarked, stepping forward to hold one of its few leaves between his thumb and forefinger and feel the velvet-like texture of its underside.

“I remember there were some on the Academy grounds, back in Polimnos,” Pollux said softly. “So I thought it would be nice to put it in the arboretum, with the rest of the plants.”

“Very thoughtful,” Adrissu answered, smiling. “I would love that. Thank you.”

“Of course,” Pollux answered with a grin. They began to walk through the winding tunnels of their lair, the sapling slung over Pollux’s shoulder effortlessly, despite its size and weight. After the initial adjustment period, he had taken to his newfound body and its abilities as if he was meant to have been born a dragon from the very beginning—using his body’s strength even when condensed down into his elven form was second nature to him now.

They arrived in the arboretum, which was the highest point of their lair; it had carefully set skylights that lit the room and was full of plants from all over the world. Some had been imported from Autreth and Aefraya, and others, like the sapling Pollux carried, were taken from wherever they had found them. Many were medicinal herbs, or else ones they liked to use on the rare occasions they would cook a meal; many more were tea trees, now that Pollux was experimenting with creating his own tea blends. But a sizable portion of them were simply decorative.

Adrissu had not been especially fond of plants back in Polimnos, but here, much further to the north, plant life was so limited that having a room full of it was calming in a way he had not anticipated. They had started with some medicinal herbs, ones he remembered learning about from Dirge that he had hoped would help with his injured arm—they had painstakingly carved out the room, created the lights, then enchanted the climate to be comfortably warm and just humid enough. But their collection continued to grow and was now a veritable greenhouse with all sorts of small plants, flowering bushes, and trees.

Despite calling the chamber an arboretum, the actual trees were rather sparse compared to the rest, so it was easy to find a spot to plant the sebran. Pollux set the sapling down, transformed back into the red dragon, and dug out a hole where Adrissu indicated. Adrissu helped set the dirt back into place, and soon the sapling was standing upright between a few other trees, the soil around it dark and moist.

“Do you think it will live?” Pollux asked, admiring their handiwork. “It wasn’t uprooted for long, but I wasn’t sure how finicky they could be.”

Adrissu sighed, thinking about what he knew of the trees. Sebran trees had originated in Aefraya, but were quite common throughout Autreth now. In Autreth they did not grow in the wild as in Aefraya, but were instead commonly imported ornamental plants that stood in the yards and gardens of those who could afford such luxuries. This meant they were on the hardier side, Adrissu thought, so hopefully the little sapling would recover easily from the journey and thrive here.

“I think it should be alright,” Adrissu said. “It will be nice to have regardless, though. I’ll enjoy it while it lasts.”

They stood looking at it for a long while, then Adrissu glanced over at Pollux.

“Any news from your travels?” he asked. The other dragon had been gone a few days—he was rarely away for more than a week—but could travel quite far in that time. His most recent journey had been out toward Gylnefjell, which typically meant he would stop in to see Naydrun and Viona, and they often had news or gossip to share with him.

“Yes, actually,” Pollux said, his tone suddenly light, which made Adrissu tense. It would be something about Autreth, maybe even Polimnos, when he got that tone. “They told me that the Dragonslayer Cannon has further expanded production—the reinforced one they developed after we left. Seven dragons have been slain by the cannons now, so word is spreading that any dragons taking up residence within the borders of Autreth should leave. Dragons that know of other dragons in Autreth are encouraged to help them flee and find a new lair.”

“*Help* them,” Adrissu repeated, eyebrows raising in surprise. “Things must truly be dire, then.”

“I think dragonkind is fearful of extinction for perhaps the first time in its history,” Pollux agreed, sighing. For a moment, they were both silent, considering the enormity of such a thing. All in all, Adrissu supposed that, in hindsight, leaving Autreth when they did worked out in their favor.

“And anything of Polimnos?” he asked softly. “The Academy?”

That was the only thing that still hurt to think about now. The Academy had been the focus of his work for centuries; even now, it still felt strange to be without it. He still continued his own research, as much as he could in their far more remote home. He would even sometimes take on a disguised appearance to visit the library in Gennemont, when he could manage that long of a flight with his injured shoulder; but it was not the same.

“Yes,” Pollux said, and a small thrill of excitement raced through Adrissu’s heart. “Shima is still headmistress, but the academy has officially begun proceedings to elect a new headmaster. She’s planning to step down once they do.”

“I suppose it has been that long now,” Adrissu sighed, glancing away. She was only a quarter elf, after all, so while he was unsure of her exact age now, he guessed she was somewhere around a century. Her father, Ned, had died perhaps a decade ago, but Adrissu never looked into who took over as headmaster of the secondary campus—it was only a matter of time before the institution became something that he no longer had any familiarity with at all.

“Naydrun and Viona have invited us to come visit them in Gylnefjell,” Pollux said, wrapping one arm around Adrissu’s waist, knowing the dark turn his thoughts had taken. “I think it would be nice to go. It’s not as cold there, either—maybe we could spend a good bit of the winter with them.”

Their relationship with the other couple had been born out of necessity at first—it was the first place they could think of to get back on their feet, after being forced to leave Polimnos. Their initial stay had been tense, as it had only been Naydrun then, but the other dragon ultimately wanted to help and felt they owed a debt to Adrissu for how he had helped them before. It was Naydrun who watched over them when Adrissu was too injured to do much more than lie there in misery, and who helped them find a place to set up their new lair. Perhaps most important of all, Naydrun had said nothing about Pollux’s draconic form; they seemed a bit unsettled, at first, but they never asked about it. There was an unspoken understanding that they had done what needed to be done.

If dragons could be friends with each other, he thought they were certainly friends at that point. Then Viona found her way back to Naydrun a few years ago, and most of her memories of Adrissu were intact, so their friendship with her grew as well. Now the other couple was their main lifeline to the outside world and draconic society at large, since Adrissu and Pollux were deep in the mountains, while Naydrun and Viona were just beneath Gylnefjell.

“I think that would be nice,” Adrissu agreed, leaning into Pollux. “Maybe for the new year.”

Pollux nodded, and they both stood silently for a little while, admiring their arboretum.

“Oh,” Pollux said, looking back the way they came. “I brought some of that Aefrayan willow you asked about, and more parchment, too.”

Adrissu’s eyes lit up as he grinned. “Perfect!”

When they had fled Polimnos, the majority of his personal library was destroyed in the tower, or left behind in the lair below. They had risked returning only once, to gather up the most valuable items to help re-establish their own hoard; while the lair was untouched, to Adrissu’s relief, anything that had been in the tower was long gone. It was then that they had finally burned Pollux’s elven body to ash, deciding it was too risky to leave it where it still might be discovered.

To occupy himself now, Adrissu had been painstakingly recreating many of the books that he once had, especially the draconic tomes that were largely irreplaceable. He had been working on transcribing from memory the tome he had received from his grandmother, so long ago now, that described the soul-binding ritual. Every time Pollux left, Adrissu asked him to keep an eye out for examples of each of the components to bring home, so that his sketches would be as accurate as possible.

“Come on,” Pollux said, holding his hand. “I’ll help you get it set up in your study.”

Adrissu followed him, but paused to glance back at the sebran sapling. It was young and small, but already he liked to look at its yellow leaves and their velvety coloration. It reminded him of Aefraya and of Polimnos all at once.

“Coming?” Pollux asked in a teasing tone, tugging his hand. Adrissu looked back at him, his gaze softening. His mate was here, with him forever, so everything had been worth it in the end.

“I was just thinking it looks good there,” he said.

“It does,” Pollux agreed. “I hope it lives.”

Adrissu gave one last glance at the new sapling. A single beam of sunlight still came down through the skylight above, warming the sapling’s yellow leaves before nightfall. He could imagine it already: a tall, broad sebran tree giving the arboretum a golden glow with its vibrant leaves and filling the chamber with its distinctive scent.

“I think it will.”

THE END

AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading the *Heart of Dragons* duology! If you enjoyed this book, [please consider leaving a review](#). I truly appreciate it!

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