

ARIANA NASH

THIRD IN THE SILK & STEEL SERIES



BLOOD
&
ICE

BLOOD & ICE

#3, SILK & STEEL SERIES

ARIANA NASH



Blood & Ice, Silk & Steel, #3

Ariana Nash

Dark Fantasy Author

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CONTENTS

[Summary](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[The Black Prince preview](#)

[Also by Ariana Nash](#)

[About the Author](#)

S U M M A R Y

An elven assassin. A dragon prince.
Three days they had together.
Three days was not enough.

There's a traitor among the elves. A traitor who will stop at nothing to see Eroan pay for the crime of loving a dragon, and Eroan Ilanea will pay with blood.

Lysander has never been free to choose his fate. That is about to change. Finally, he learns what it means to be emerald, but knowledge is power, and power whispers its seductive curse into the ear of a broken prince.

Elf and dragon.
Leaders, lovers, fighters.
Fates entwined.

But as the dragonkin rise under a new king, will Eroan and Lysander's boundless love save the world or destroy it forever?

CHAPTER 1

*A pocket full of ashes,
Fallen leaves on the ground,
Dragonfire, burning pyres,
And her light could not be found.*

~ Ashford archives.

ysander

“THAT’S PICA, SHE’S NICE.” Seraph screwed up her nose. “Mostly nice, sometimes grouchy. Best to stay away from her.” She pointed through the hut window at the next group of elves to pass by. “Kallyn, Jibiha, and Dren. They’re hunters but they’re sort of the hunters you want at your back during a long night’s trek. They would have been assassins only they didn’t make the cut, you know?”

Lysander wasn’t sure if he knew, but he could imagine what she meant. The elves she’d singled out were stockier than most of the others he’d observed passing by the hut, like they routinely spent a few hours a day lifting felled trees for the fun. Heavier than Eroan, they’d be the kind of males Lysander would have recruited for his own flights, had they been dragons.

Seraph went on, singling out who to avoid and who was the least likely to try and stab Lysander in the back. Most Orders assassins were to be avoided at all costs, despite many of them having helped save Lysander when the dragon tower fell three days ago. Lysander listened, forgetting names but absorbing all he could when it came to navigating what could easily be his home for the next few weeks or months. He suspected elven society was trickier than dragon society. At least with dragons, if one intended to kill you, you knew about it. Here, all the elves wore smiles, even those who sharpened their dragontooth blades.

“Oh, there’s Janna!” A broad grin warmed Seraph’s animated face. “She’s really nice.” Lysander turned his attention to the female elf with green-tinged hair passing outside. Clearly heavy with child, she had slung a bow and quiver over her shoulder and looked as though she was heading out of the village to hunt.

“Her and Eroan are like this.” Seraph entwined her two little fingers.

Lysander frowned. "Like what?"

"Like this, see." She wiggled her locked fingers, as though that would help clear up his confusion.

"I have no idea what that—" he mirrored the little-finger hooks "—means."

"*Friends*, you dolt." She chuckled but on seeing Lysander's wary smile her laughter faded. "Don't dragons have friends?" Her bright eyes saddened, making something hurt inside Lysander's chest.

He pushed away from the window and drifted about the small hut. *Eroan's* hut. After three days, he knew every inch of it. It smelled of cut wood and pine, of Eroan.

"She's with Ross now. He's okay, I guess," Seraph continued. "She thought Eroan was dead when... you know... when he didn't—"

"Yeah, I know." Lysander had thought Eroan dead too. And then there had been a time Eroan had believed Lysander dead. They'd been through enough. It should have been enough, and yet Lysander couldn't shake the feeling that what they had, this small pocket of calm, was just the breathless moment before it was all ripped away.

He trailed his fingers along the backs of the hand-made wooden chairs, along the tabletop and down the reed doors covering cupboards. Eroan had made it all, carved it and crafted it with his own hands, like the dragon pendant Lysander wore around his neck. He didn't deserve all this. Three days, and he knew this life couldn't be for him. But he wished it was. He wished it so hard when he waited for Eroan to return from his Order duties, afraid that this night, Eroan wouldn't return.

These walls. This place. He'd been in cages, been kept behind bars, both real and mental, but this village and these elves were a different kind of torture. It would end, like all good things ended, and he didn't think his battered heart could take it. The longer he stayed, the more he wanted to stay, and the more it would hurt when it was over.

"Have you seen Eroan?" he asked.

"I, er..." Seraph straightened and rubbed at her arm, "He's been really busy." She ran her fingers through her long hair and gathered it all over one shoulder, twisting it, giving her hands something to do. "The humans are still here and he feels he needs to be at the center of it all. You know how he is."

Lysander gave her a shallow smile. "It's fine. I know. His people need him." But Lysander needed him too, and although Eroan had returned every day, his visits were brief. He seemed... distant. Distracted. But maybe that was how things were here. Lysander didn't know how Eroan lived. He didn't know how any of them really lived their lives. He didn't know much about elves at all and being told to stay in the hut like a good pet dragon made the unknown just outside that door seem all the more tempting.

Seraph had seen where his gaze tracked. "It's for your own safety."

Sunlight from the window at her back draped over her, casting her long shadow across the floor. Dust motes silently swirled, and outside, elves laughed and chatted and did all the things elves did. Lysander ached to be out there too. He'd spent weeks, months inside Chloe's metal cage, but he hadn't wanted to be among the humans. He wanted to be among elves because knowing them meant he'd better know Eroan. But he was dragon. And most of the village wanted him dead, not living among them.

Seraph's gaze had dropped to where Lysander had curled his hands into fists at his sides. He relaxed them and casually leaned back against one of the counters Eroan used to prepare food.

"The assassins will kill you," Seraph said quietly. She came closer but stopped from getting too close, either afraid she'd say too much or afraid he'd ask more questions. "Some consented with you residing here but most..."

She was a good soul. But she didn't know how it felt being kept in the dark for a lifetime. "Maybe

they should see they have nothing to fear. They can't see that while I'm in here."

"Give it a few more days."

A few more days? All of this wouldn't last. Maybe it would be over in a few more days. He didn't know *anything* and if it ended with him never knowing, it would tear him up inside.

He looked at the closed door. Not locked. He wasn't a prisoner. Eroan had made sure of that. So he could just walk out. Eroan wasn't here to stop him. Seraph could try but as feisty as she was, she wouldn't stop him. A part of her agreed with him, even if she didn't say it.

"Don't," she begged.

"Just a little look." He shoved from the counter and crossed the floor.

"It's not safe." She wasn't reaching for him. That was good. She'd let this happen.

"It's fine." Three strides. Just three strides to go. His heart raced. This was the right thing.

"It's not fine. You can't just say it's fine and have it be so—Lysander." Her tone pitched. "Don't. Please. I don't want you to get—"

He opened the door and walked into the sunlight.

CHAPTER 2

Eroan

STIFLING heat thickened the air in the Order training house. Eroan could have ventilated it by opening all the doors and the few windows, but with summer just a few weeks away, the assassins currently performing a brutal routine needed to be able to function at their best in the heat as well as they did in the cold.

He paced their lines, inspecting each of Cheen's fifteen finest Order assassins, knowing his presence, crowding them close, was its own kind of test. Trey was here, his movements perfectly timed with the others of the pride. He hadn't long been an assassin, but he'd taken to it well. Nye stood at the front of the pride, where Curan had once stood, and watched them all as closely as Eroan. Nye had stepped-up as of late. He'd trained these individuals while Eroan had been busy with the humans and Cheen's elders. And Nye should be proud of them. Each was a fine example of an Order assassin. Each one was a blade, molded and hammered into the perfect weapon. Things were different now the tower had collapsed and the dragons scattered, but the changes made the dragons more unpredictable. It was Eroan's task to ensure the Order was ready for anything.

On and on, the Order elves performed each imaginary strike as though it would be their one and only chance to kill. Muscle gleamed under the house's torchlight. Precision and dedication shone in their eyes. Eroan drifted to the back of the lines and watched their footwork. Perfect. He dared to consider that Nye was perhaps an even better teacher than he. The results spoke for themselves.

"We know your moves by heart." A rich male voice purred from the entrance doorway behind Eroan. A cascade of emotions spilled through him, the first being lust, because he couldn't get the dragon out of his head, but fear quickly smothered the heat when the parade of assassins tripped over their own feet and whirled on the intruder. One threw a dagger, so trained was she to strike at dragons.

Eroan whirled, following the blade's trajectory.

Lysander neatly stepped aside, making the throw seem slow. The dagger sailed past him and strummed in the wall behind. He merely raised an eyebrow and tucked both hands into his pockets. Despite wearing the dark cottons and leathers of elven clothes, he was no more elf-like than the humans scattered about the village. But while Lysander looked human, he wasn't that either. His edges were too defined, his eyes too dark, their emerald green too intense to be anything other than dragon.

“Was it something I said?” Lysander quipped, moving around the edges of the house. His attention skipped over the racks of Order weapons and drifted back to the pride of elves. Each one trained to kill *him*: Prince Lysander. The Dragon Queen’s son and once the most respected dragon in battle.

Eroan should speak, but he’d lost that ability. It was too late to tell Lysander to leave and the look on the dragon’s face suggested he wouldn’t obey anyway. He was enjoying this moment. His eyes sparkled with that odd kind of challenge, the one that said he knew he was walking a thin line, but he’d keep on stepping over it just to see how far he could push before the line broke.

“We learned long ago to watch for your signature swings,” Lysander continued. “Allow me to demonstrate,” he plucked a dagger from the rack, setting a murmur among the pride. “You open with your thrust and lead into an uppercut that I assume is meant to deflect.” He swept through the same moves the elves had all just been performing but made them slow and exaggerated. On dragon, the traditional elven moves gained their own graceful appeal. Strength radiated through his body, into his stance. “All you’re doing is broadcasting your intention to thrust in the gut and, I suppose, disembowel us.” The dance finished, he straightened, eyes sparkling. “Has it ever worked?”

“That’s enough,” Nye said. “Eroan, remove your dragon from this sacred place before I do it myself.”

Eroan bristled at the tone. Nye did not have authority over him. But the situation was delicate. The Order elves, panting out their exhaustion, were poised on a knife’s edge. It would only take the slightest twitch to set them off. Eroan could not rein them all in and Lysander, for all his confidence, couldn’t fight them all either.

Lysander tossed the blade in the air and caught it. “I’d like to see you try.”

A dangerous determination came over Nye’s face. “Would you?”

Eroan’s heart stuttered and something cool and hard sank in his gut. Dread.

“Sure.” Lysander pointed the blade’s tip at Nye. “You got a coward’s hit on me while I was tied up. You won’t find me easy to beat on now.”

“You and I, *dragon*. Outside. *Now!*” Nye started forward and the elves broke rank, ready to spill from the Order house and watch their sassa fight a dragon one-to-one in Cheen’s village center.

“No,” Eroan said, calmly but firmly. The pride stopped. But Nye had already made it to within a step of Eroan. He snarled and met Eroan’s glare eye-to-eye.

“You’re afraid I’ll kill your...” Whatever Nye had been thinking to finish with, he kept it silently on his tongue and swung his glare at Lysander.

“Everyone out,” Eroan ordered.

The pride filtered through the doorway. Trey lingered, his gaze on Nye as though he were looking to convince him to back off, but he deferred to Eroan. Eroan nodded for him to leave. Nye hadn’t moved.

Lysander picked at his nails with the dagger, occasionally looking up, checking he was still the center of Nye’s attention before flashing a teasing smile.

“Stop it, Lysander,” Eroan growled low.

Some of the humorous light snuffed out of Lysander’s gaze. He huffed and stabbed the dagger into the house’s wall, then leaned against a table and folded his arms crossed, waiting.

Eroan reached for Nye’s arm to steer him from the house. Nye jerked away and flung a barbed glance at Eroan. Rage was a cool and sharp glimmer in Nye’s dark eyes. He left, slamming the door behind him. It rebounded open again and swung in the breeze.

“That *was* entertaining.”

Eroan sighed, the tension finally faded with that breath. He rubbed at the new ache between his

eyes and kept his gaze downcast. *Entertaining* would get Lysander killed. Did he not know the danger he was in?

"I wasn't wrong, though. You should switch-up your routines," Lysander went on. "My flights knew them so well they used to mock your graceful dances—"

Anger flashed through Eroan, fast and sharp. "Just stop!" By Alumn, could Lysander not see how close he had come to a dagger in the heart? None of this was amusing. It wasn't a game.

Hurt showed in Lysander's eyes. He looked down. "I was just trying to help."

Eroan felt that hurt like it was his own and now he wished he could take his outburst back. Tiredness frayed his nerves. That and fear. "Lysander... Many of my people will kill you given a chance. You can't walk into an Order house and pick up a blade. What were you thinking?"

The prince blinked up. "I asked an elf where to find you. They sent me here." He shrugged, like it was simple. He had just wandered through an elven village, a dragon among elves, like it was nothing.

One assassin. That's all it would have taken. A blade in the back and Eroan wouldn't have been able to save him. He'd watched Lysander die after Akiem had thrust a sword through him and he had no intention of ever allowing that to happen again. "How can you be so careless with your life?"

Lysander's tiny smile softened some more, but not enough. "Says the elf who routinely threw away his."

His words eased a little of Eroan's frustration. "You should not have left my hut. The people aren't ready to have you among them."

"They'll never be ready, and I'll not stay another day in that hut like some pet you sometimes tend to."

Eroan swallowed. "That's not..." Was that what Lysander truly thought? It had been mere days since the collapse of the tower. The humans had been staying among them; his duties had to come first. He could not indulge in time with Lysander, despite wanting nothing more. "I'm trying to keep you safe."

"That's what Seraph said." Lysander moved from the table and approached Eroan, but did it in that slow, predatory way that Eroan was only now becoming to recognize as a weakness of his own. He stood his ground while his heart thumped harder, racing his breath, until Lysander stopped too close in front of him, and yet not close enough. The heat from the dragon tried to wrap around Eroan and pull him in. The lemony bite tingled his lips and tongue, and with the dregs of adrenalin and fear in his veins from Lysander's foolish introduction, his fingers twitched, aching to sink into this vision of masculine temptation.

"If you want to stop me from walking among your kin, you'll have to tie me up." Lysander leaned closer, so all Eroan could see was the glittering green of dragonsight in his jewel-like eyes. "And we both know you prefer to be bound."

Lysander brushed away before Eroan could snatch at the opportunity to have him, and headed for the door, leaving Eroan breathless, trying to swallow around the sudden heated desire, a desire that had been building for days now.

"Wait."

Lysander turned and leaned a shoulder against the doorframe, snaking sunbaked arms across his chest. How could it be this dragon was an impossible combination of being both pliable, like a liquid, and solid, like a stone. Eroan considered going to him, closing the door on the world outside and tasting every inch of his dragon in this, the most sacred of Order buildings. But if they were seen... The risk was too great, even if the thought alone had him adjusting his trousers to

accommodate the evidence of his arousal.

Lysander's eyebrow had arched again, and this time it had pulled the corner of his lips with it. He knew what his presence summoned in Eroan, but he couldn't know how deep the feelings had rooted. Deeper than any other Eroan had experienced before. The thought of Lysander getting hurt, or killed, twisted Eroan's emotions into knots that wouldn't loosen. This connection between them was more than desire. It had been *more* for a long time and he would not see it destroyed by his peoples' fear. But he could not stop Lysander either. The dragon prince was free now. Free to make his own choices, and that had to come before love. Didn't it?

Eroan cleared his throat and distracted his mind and body by tidying the weapons. "If you must walk among my people, take Seraph."

"I don't need a tiny elf chaperone."

"Clearly, you do."

"What I need, Eroan Ilanea, is you."

Eroan turned and caught a glimpse of the tail of Lysander's long, braided hair slinking out the door.

He hadn't thought to control the prince. That was the last thing he'd wanted after the life Lysander had endured, but if Lysander didn't curb his confidence, an elf—likely Nye—would do it for him, and Eroan had no wish to see it come to that. But it had only been three days. They had time, didn't they? Time to make this work. Time for his people to come around. Somehow.



A FLUTTER of fear shortened Eroan's breath. He hadn't seen Lysander since the Order hall, but Seraph had told him the dragon planned to invite himself to the spring fayre that evening—a fayre only Seraph could have told him about.

Eroan had planned to invite Lysander himself, but now, seeing Lysander standing at the fringes of the village gathering, hidden half in shadow and half in shifting torchlight, a part of him was grateful Lysander was able to have this moment for himself. Then the dread kicked in. He wore a tan-leather waistcoat over a plain gray shirt and black linen pants. Seraph must have found him the clothes. The collar gaped, the laces were loose, and he'd rolled the sleeves up past his elbows. Seeing Lysander in elven clothes shocked Eroan every time. Aroused him, too, in ways that weren't entirely comfortable in public.

The others hadn't seen him. And there were many, many elves at the fayre to *see*. Eroan scooped up two wooden goblets of wine, one for himself and one for Lysander, and skirted the revelry, hoping to reach Lysander before anyone else distracted him.

The dragon's keen eyes scanned the crowd of mingling elves. From a distance, he appeared confident, but Eroan knew the lock of that jaw and what it meant.

Of course, Lysander wouldn't have stayed away, and he shouldn't have to. He was right. The elves would never be ready to have a dragon among them. This had to happen, but it had to happen with Eroan beside him. He wasn't alone. Not anymore.

"Here." Eroan hid his breathlessness behind a smile and handed over the goblet.

Lysander blinked, took the cup, and immediately gulped down a few generous mouthfuls. "There are a lot of elves."

"There are," Eroan agreed. "Cheen is the biggest settlement outside of... in the valley." He'd

been about to say Ashford, but old instincts to keep Ashford a secret, tripped him up before he could. He trusted Lysander absolutely, but there was enough happening without adding the existence of Ashford to the evening.

A fiddle player started up, quickly joined by a flute. Elves clapped, another began to drum along, and suddenly folk were dancing, singing, spinning, laughing. Ribbons rippled in their long, colored hair and at their ankles. Their painted faces bore all the colors of a rainbow.

Lysander's eyes widened. His soft lips parted, lifted by a fragile, genuine smile.

The impromptu ditty had a quick, toe-tapping beat, and Eroan found he wanted to take Lysander by the arm and lead him among those he called family, but by Alumn, he was afraid.

He hadn't anticipated this so soon. He'd planned to introduce Lysander slowly, acclimatize Cheen to the idea of having a dragon among them. In the middle of the May fayre was not slowly.

The song went on. The dancing reaching a pitch, and then, suddenly and too soon, it ended, the final chord strummed, the spell broken. Lysander blinked before briefly checking Eroan beside him. His little smile grew, becoming all the more real with every passing minute.

"You look good," Eroan casually added, hoping it sounded normal and gave away nothing of how seeing Lysander in elven clothes made Eroan want to see him out of them just as much.

Lysander's rigid stance softened. He slid an unashamed head to toe appraisal over Eroan. "You *always* look good."

A new song started up, just as fast as the first, and this time when the dancers twirled, Eroan looped his arm through Lysander's and pulled.

"I..." the dragon hesitated, no longer sure about his grand entrance.

Eroan leaned in, needing to get close to be heard over the sound of the music. His lips brushed Lysander's rough cheek, "It's all right. You have me."

Eroan led Lysander behind him, weaving through the packed crowd—not to dance. Not yet. He heard gasps in his wake, heard some mutter, heard a few scorn *dragon*, and Eroan didn't care. He had fought for Lysander's place here, and Lysander had played a part in keeping every single one of these souls safe. Lysander had earned the right to sit among them. With every step, Eroan's conviction grew. Alumn be damned, none had the right to deny Lysander his place among them.

A gap at a table ahead opened and Eroan slotted himself and Lysander down, startling the half-dozen occupants. Some immediately abandoned their seats, while the rest were more subtle about it, but they still found their excuses to slink off, leaving their table empty while all others overflowed.

Lysander's gaze darted.

"Don't mind them. It will take time. As you say, it has to begin somewhere. Had you stayed in my hut, they'd never know the real you." Eroan swallowed a few mouthfuls of wine, finding he needed it this night. Blades glinted beneath torchlight. Teeth flashed behind smiles. By Alumn, he had never realized how dangerous his people could appear.

"Do you think I'll get through this night alive?" Lysander asked.

There were loyal Order members among the crowd. Unbeknownst to Lysander, they acknowledged Eroan with subtle nods. Lysander did have allies—friends here.

Lysander had clearly seen the blades and the smiles. As a warrior, he knew how to read the enemy. But this night didn't have to be like that. Eroan would see to it that this night was different. "I think it's time you had a little fun."

CHAPTER 3

Lysander

LYSANDER SUPPOSED he couldn't exactly blame them for their bitter hatred. He was the dragon prince, the one the elves had sent their Order assassins to fight to get to Elisandra. Lysander *had* killed many of their kin. Sons, daughters, mothers. He hadn't discriminated. Any elf that came over the tower walls was fair game to dragons. Nobody here was under any illusions that he was some kind of good dragon. Such a thing did not exist. But in the time he'd finished his goblet, and Eroan had gone off to find another, nobody had yet tried to stick their daggers in him, so there was that.

The music hadn't stopped and neither had its pace. He'd caught his feet tapping along, fingers too. There was no music-making like this among dragons. No dancing either. He'd never seen anything so hypnotic, and by the great gods, they were each so beautiful and full of life. Before Eroan, he hadn't even considered how elves lived. And seeing them now, it almost broke him open to think of how many he'd cut down.

An elf that wasn't Eroan stepped over the bench and sat beside Lysander, angled toward him. Lysander guarded his expression. This one, with his intense glares and sharp words, was proving to be a challenge. Nye. The male wore a smile now, very different to the snarl from the earlier encounter in the Order house.

"Here." Nye slid a goblet across the table. Some of the contents sloshed over the sides. "Call it... a peace offering." The elf's words slurred some. Clearly, Nye had begun the celebration right after leaving the Order house.

Lysander took the cup. "Thank you." Nye wasn't armed. At least, nowhere Lysander could easily see, but if Nye was anything like Eroan, he didn't need a dagger to kill.

Nye chinked his goblet against Lysander's and lifted it. "To peace."

There was a catch, wasn't there? Lysander felt as though he was missing something, but as Nye was the first elf to reach out to him, he couldn't very well turn him away. Eroan had chided him for his game at the Order house. Making up with this one might go some way for clearly getting it wrong earlier. "To peace." He could play nice with elves, even this asshole.

Nye took a drink and Lysander mirrored the gesture, gulping deep. The wine was light and sweet, barely more intoxicating than water.

Although the music played and the elves still danced and drank their spring wine and got merry,

Lysander was being watched. He could feel their unfriendly gazes, like insects crawling across his skin.

“Drink up,” Nye urged.

Lysander huffed. “If you think to drink me under the table, you’ve picked the wrong fight, elf.” And with that, he downed the entire contents of the goblet. He was dragon. No elven wine was going to go to his head anytime soon.

Nye lunged. His hard, warm hand snagged the back of Lysander’s neck and pulled, yanking him eye-to-eye. “You don’t belong here,” Nye hissed. “I’m going to see to it you don’t stay.”

Lysander held the elf’s glare, letting him have his threat. There was no use in fighting him here when Lysander was trying to show these elves how tame a dragon he could be. Besides, words had never hurt him. Not much could anymore.

Lysander peeled Nye’s fingers from the back of his neck. “I won’t tell Eroan of this, because if I did, you’d have to sleep with one eye open.” He kept hold of the elf’s hand, even as Nye tugged, and began to squeeze.

“You think I fear Eroan? Not so long ago, it was my bed he warmed.”

“Oh, you should have said!” Lysander deliberately laughed long and loud, hooking curious glances their way, making Nye’s face burn. “If it was a threesome you wanted, I’d happily oblige.”

The angry elf tore from Lysander’s grip and stormed away, almost shoving a pregnant female over in his haste. The green-haired elf he’d shoved threw a colorful curse after him.

Lysander immediately recognized her from Seraph’s lessons as Janna, Eroan’s friend. He stood and offered his hand to help her sit. It seemed like the right thing to do. She looked at his hand and hesitated.

“It doesn’t bite,” Lysander said. “Most of the time.” He snapped his fingers and thumb together a safe distance from her face.

Janna yelped. Her hands shot to her bump. “Oh!”

A few heads turned their way and the fiddle player missed his string, bringing an abrupt end to the music. Lysander winced, wondering if he’d just insulted a pregnant elf, but then she laughed, bright and free and *loud*. The music began again and slowly, attentions drifted away.

Janna took his hand and, still chuckling, settled on the bench beside him. “I see you’re one to keep an eye on, Lysander.”

“Are you going to threaten me too?” he asked. She was lovely, this one. Pale skin, bright eyes, long, tapered ears, and a radiating warmth that had Lysander instantly liking her.

“Is that what he did?” She thumbed over her shoulder toward where the crowd had swallowed Nye.

“He thinks he did.”

“Ah. No, I’m not going to threaten you, though I may have thought about it a few times, until I saw you standing over there with Eroan earlier. I saw how he looked at you. But you already know that.” Her smile was softer than those from the elves around him. Genuine. “Eroan’s been looking for you for a long time.”

“Me?”

“Someone special.”

Lysander found he’d lost the ability to find the right words and wished Eroan was back already with more wine. A small puff of nervous laughter escaped him. “I’m not that special, you know.”

“Well clearly, he sees it. I suppose it makes sense that you don’t.”

“It does?” None of what she was saying made much sense at all.

“Just...” She sighed, and Lysander heard something like longing in it that made him wonder if there had been more between her and Eroan than little-finger-hook friends. Her hand went to her bump again. “It will take someone like you to keep him safe. He doesn’t know when to stop. Will you look out for him, Lysander?”

He knew of what she spoke. Eroan kept poking death with a stick and one day, if he didn’t quit, death was going to take that stick and beat him with it. “I’ll try.”

She looked him over, her gaze penetrating. “I think you will.”

“Janna!” Seraph squealed from Lysander’s right. “When’s the little one due?”

“Oh, a few more weeks yet.”

“A summer babe, for sure.”

They laughed and chatted until Janna made her farewells. Seraph plonked herself in Janna’s place, straddling the bench. “So, you dance, right?”

“Dance?” He arched an eyebrow.

“Oh no, no, no... you can’t tell me dragons don’t dance. I’ve seen you fight. You’re an excellent dancer.”

“I see where this is going—”

Her big eyes grew bigger and plucked on the strings of guilt he’d been carrying with him since this party started. “Please?”

Great gods, she wounded with that look. “Why?”

“I want to be the first-ever elf to dance with a dragon. I’ll be the talk of Cheen for years. Besides, they all want to, they’re just too scared.”

He looked at the swirling, skipping crowd of dancers. There were plenty there that he and Seraph would likely get lost among their number. Or, the elves might all flee, and then he’d have to dance with the whole village watching and the elf wine wasn’t nearly strong enough for that. “I don’t think —”

“C’mon, before Eroan gets back. He’s so growly. He’ll say no. This is your chance for them all to see you’re like us... mostly, a bit. There are humans dancing. See? This could be really good for everyone.”

“You’re not afraid of dancing with me and what others might think of you for it?”

She shrugged. “I don’t care what they think. You’re my friend. Let them think whatever they like just so long as they see you’re who you are, and not some vicious monster.”

He opened his mouth to tell her he was the vicious monster they all feared but Seraph caught his hand and tugged and now there was no escaping her, not that he tried. A large part of him liked that he was being watched as Seraph pulled him into the fray. The elves were wary, suspicious, but also fascinated. He hadn’t missed how many stared with open awe when they thought his attention elsewhere. He found he liked the attention. Whereas before, in the tower, he’d have preferred to forgo the gatherings among dragons in favor of training his flights, or taking to the wing, before that freedom had been stripped from him.

Seraph planted one little hand on his hip and grabbed his hand in her other, and then they were away, spinning and skipping in time with the others. Her enthusiasm infected his veins. He doubted Eroan could have gotten him to dance like this, and now he was twirling Seraph, his muscles loosening more with each beat of the drum. The music pulled him in and lured him on, making him forget he was the enemy here. Or perhaps it was Seraph who had the skill to make him forget. She laughed when he tripped over his feet, and then took a few moments to show him where to step. Other elves initially veered wildly away, but their fear faded, and it wasn’t long before he and Seraph

danced among them as though he *belonged*. He caught sight of Eroan off to the edge of the party, leaning against a hut and watching with a heat in his gaze and a smile on his lips that told a story. The same story Janna had seen.

Lysander grinned, elves clapped, and his heart soared where his wings could not.

Three days into this strange place and his fears had been realized. He never wanted to leave.



ELVES HAD STAMINA that dragons did not. It shouldn't have surprised Lysander to learn they could dance and dance, but like many things this night, it did. Seraph deposited him beside Eroan, then she was gone again, her arm looped with another. Breathless but buzzing, Lysander took the cup Eroan offered and drank it down. "Does she ever stop?" he gasped.

"Not until dawn." Eroan's gaze wandered where his hands wanted to and Lysander stilled, sensing an intensity to his elf that hadn't been there before. It was clear where this was headed, but Lysander, hot-blooded and panting, would make him wait. There was pleasure to be had in delaying what they both wanted.

"Come with me," Eroan's tone ordered.

Lysander glanced behind him. The elves wouldn't miss them, too deep in their revelry were they. He followed Eroan through the quiet parts of the village, keeping his steps elf-light, or trying to. Eroan had always been better at stealth. A path led away from the village, into the dark between wide oaks and towering pines. Lysander's eyes could see well enough, but he suspected elves had better sight in true darkness, proven now by the way Eroan made moving through the brush appear effortless.

Lysander tripped over a root and reached for a tree trunk. "The wine," he explained as Eroan looked back. He couldn't very well admit Eroan was better. Or perhaps it was the wine. He did feel a little light-headed. Or maybe that was Eroan too. Everything of late had felt dreamlike. Too good to be real.

He blinked and Eroan had vanished, as easy as that. One moment he'd been ahead, his pale blond hair like a beacon in the dark. A blink, and then nothing. Lysander pulled up and listened. A soft breeze whispered through heavy branches all around, setting the leaves rustling. There was ample cover here should Eroan decide to stalk him.

"You think to hunt me, elf?" he said. The forest swallowed the words before the breeze could carry them to other ears. Sight had failed him here. He could barely see much farther than a few strides in either direction. But there was one sense he knew to be superior. He sniffed at the air and smelled wood and pine and earth. "Damn."

"You're too easy." Eroan's warm mouth brushed his ear, his chin grazed the back of Lysander's jaw and then that warm, wet mouth trailed lower, placing neat, delicate kisses on Lysander's neck. Shivers cascaded down Lysander's back. He couldn't stop them, the same as he couldn't stop his suddenly galloping heart.

"Easy?" Lysander tilted his head, giving up his neck to Eroan's scandalous mouth. And Eroan took it, pressing himself in close against Lysander's back. His hand shifted over Lysander's hip and roamed down his front, pushing against the belt, making the trouser waist dig in. There was nothing soft about Eroan, there never had been. But he couldn't stand having the elf against his back. He needed to see him, all of him.

Lysander turned, still inside Eroan's embrace, and met the elf face-to-face. In shadow, he was no less beautiful. Gods, his lips alone had been designed to tempt all the good thoughts out of Lysander's head, leaving only the bad ones and how he wanted to savage those lips and the rest of Eroan. Eyes made of a blue so deep, they reminded Lysander of the horizon and how he'd once tried to chase it on the wing. He could never reach it, of course. Like how he couldn't really have this elf forever, but while they had these moments, he'd make them everything. He thrust his hands into Eroan's hair, making him gasp, and kissed him hard, like Eroan alone could sate the terrible hunger inside. Eroan pushed in, meeting Lysander's desperate passion with his own, so they clashed, but too soon, Eroan pulled away.

"I'm sorry for shutting you out," he breathed, kissing a trail down Lysander's jaw. "I never wanted that."

"I know..." *Gods, don't be sorry.* Lysander couldn't take it. His heart was a wrecked thing and it only beat for Eroan, for the elf who somehow made the world better just by being in it. Lysander wanted to feel him beneath his hands, to explore every inch with his hands and mouth and tongue and all of him.

There was a tree at his back, although he didn't recall moving against it. Eroan was all he could think, all he could taste. Lysander kissed his mouth, his neck, his shoulder, but the jacket was in the way of the rest and Lysander's fingers wouldn't work, the laces too knotted. He growled out a curse and felt Eroan shudder against him. These elf clothes were some kind of fresh hell, all laced and tied like a puzzle.

Eroan stepped back, crossed his arms, and pulled the jacket and shirt over his head. Lysander admired the ripple of abs in low light. Then Eroan was on him again, his rough hands sliding down Lysander's back.

Lysander clutched Eroan's naked back, spreading his hands wide, and mouthed down his collar bone, making Eroan lean out. Lysander held him firm and licked lower, nipping at a pale, erect nipple. Eroan hissed, and by diamonds, it was the best sound Lysander had ever heard. Lysander's straining cock throbbed, trapped as it was inside his trousers, against Eroan's grinding hip. He wanted to grab at Eroan and take him, own him, bite him, fuck him, and make him his, but he wouldn't. This was too good to rush, too delicious to ruin with a quick fuck against a tree. He wanted more in ways that hadn't mattered before.

"You're trembling," Eroan said.

Lysander clutched him closer. He considered lying, telling Eroan he was cold, but Eroan would see through it. He let his head drop back against the tree and looked up at the thousands and thousands of dark, waving leaves. "I like it here. I like you." He more than liked it, but the other words, like love, seemed as though they might be too heavy for this moment and the last thing he wanted to do was ruin it.

Eroan purred and nudged Lysander's jaw with his chin. Then those little elven teeth grazed at Lysander's neck at the same time as Eroan's hand found Lysander's aching erection and palmed it through his trousers.

The trembling had Lysander gritting his teeth. Control. He had it. But the damned elf was going to make him come too soon if he didn't do something to lessen the lust. That or he'd snap and be too rough. Ever since Dokul, the viciousness in him had found a louder voice inside his mind.

Eroan stilled, like he knew Lysander's thoughts. He filled Lysander's vision with blue eyes and pale lashes. "You want to fuck me, then what are you waiting for, dragon?"

Those words from Eroan's lips, they made Lysander's control unravel so fast he couldn't have

gotten it back if he'd tried. He clutched at the back of Eroan's head and kissed him so hard he could drown in him. He fumbled with his own fly, desperate to free himself. And then Eroan's hand was there, batting his away, and Eroan suddenly had him pinned against the tree, his hand a blessed torture on Lysander's freed cock. Slow, then fast, then his thumb would sweep over, collecting the leaking wetness to moisten his grip, and all the while Eroan's mouth worked at Lysander's, owning him in both ways. Thoughts split between head and cock, Lysander wasn't a man any longer, he was a creature of need, a beast that hungered and it was only Eroan that held him controlled.

Pleasure snapped and spilled, racing down his spine. He cried out only for Eroan to smother his mouth with his own and plunge his tongue in, taking even that noise from him. Lysander's hips bucked, his seed spilling in a pulsing moment of mindless ecstasy. By nights, the elf wrecked him every time.

Eroan leaned back, his eyes glassy and hair all messed up from where Lysander had pulled at it. He liked this Eroan the best, the one no other saw. Lysander pulled him in close, chest-to-chest, and kissed him slow, savoring the male taste of him. It would never be enough, because Lysander loved him, he loved him so much it hurt every time he thought on it. It hurt in that place inside where his magic stemmed from. Maybe it was his soul, he wasn't sure. But he knew if he lost Eroan, it would destroy him like nothing else in this world was capable of.

Lysander's hands steady now, he caressed Eroan's cock, listening to his breaths as he buried his face against Lysander's neck and clutched at his back, clinging on so there was nothing between them.

"Alumn, yes..." Eroan breathed. The words beat hot against Lysander's neck and Eroan moved in time with Lysander's strokes, thrusting into Lysander's hand. Lysander held him, feeling every tremor, every lustful shudder. Eroan's grip switched to Lysander's shoulder, fingers digging in. He looked up and locked his gaze with Lysander's, and in that moment, the elf's thrusts stuttered, his seed spilled, and he gasped out his pleasure. Lysander pulled him close, the both of them panting and flushed and spent. "I want to watch you come all night every night."

"Making promises, dragon?"

"Only to you."

Lysander smelled it first. Woodsmoke. But different. He breathed in, tasting the hint of smoke on the back of his tongue. Smoke and steam. Fresh wood burning. This was no ordinary campfire or torchlight. "Something is wrong."

A distant cry shattered the quiet. Eroan jerked free, immediately scooping up his jacket and throwing it on. He paused, searching the dark. "The tree... *No.*" He bolted.

Lysander fumbled with his own clothes and stumbled forward. The ground tried to tilt out from under him, almost dumping him on his ass.

He reached for the tree and gripped its gnarly bark, seeking to balance his head. The screams continued. Wails of grief that skittered chills down his back. Dread hollowed out his insides. This was it, he knew. This was the moment it all went wrong, and by nights, why couldn't he see straight? He tried to move again and stumbled forward, making it all of three steps before grabbing for the nearest tree trunk. By diamonds, his head spun.

He pressed a hand to his eyes, trying to rub away the blur. It couldn't be the elven wine. It had been weaker than water. This was something else. This was *familiar*.

Mirann had used a drug on him time and time again. It began as a way to numb his thoughts, but later, it had been worse, much worse. This was the same, and he knew what came next. But it couldn't be Mirann. There was no way she could have gotten to him. She wasn't here. Was she?

He looked up, searching the swirling darkness, and there, a figure even darker than the forest emerged from its cover. Dark clothes, dark hair. He could almost be imagined, this phantom who

came for Lysander.

“I wasn’t sure of the amount, or if you’d taste it in the wine...” Nye said.

Lysander made a grab for him, but his fingers sailed right through. A ghost then. Because this didn’t feel real. The forest slid sideways, dropping Lysander to his knees in the dirt and decaying leaves.

Nye was everywhere suddenly. Lysander could taste smoke on him and hear the screams. “Don’t... do this.”

The dark figure blurred. “It’s already done.”

And Lysander fell into darkness with the screams of elves following him all the way down.

CHAPTER 4

Eroan

“EROAN! Eroan, it’s the tree! The tree burns!”

Hands pulled at him, but he didn’t need to get any closer to see the impossible. Flames clawed at Cheen’s ribbon tree, devouring ancient branches and the memories of thousands dead. Red and orange licked at the night sky. Wood snapped and cracked. Embers twirled, stinging his face. It couldn’t be real.

“Buckets!” he called. “Set up a bucket line now! You, get to the pump, create a line. Go!” He barked at any and all, directing the panic into more useful action. The bucket line grew. Buckets sloshed. But the fire blazed too hot, leaping from branch to branch, tree to tree. He knew the tree was lost, but now it was Cheen he had to save.

Lysander wasn’t here. He hadn’t followed. And that concern niggled the back of Eroan’s thoughts, but Lysander could look after himself. If the village burned, there would be no sanctuary for any of them.

He took buckets and wet the trees ahead of the flames. Order elves climbed into the canopy and tossed water on leaves. By Alumn’s grace, the wind blew the flames away from Cheen, and the fire soon burned itself out on spring green leaves that refused to light.

It seemed to go on forever and yet end so suddenly, leaving elves stunned.

Alumn’s tree. Once so full of life and color, now stood a stark, black skeleton in a burned landscape of trees. His people wept on their knees, collecting ash in their hands as though they could somehow pray the tree back to life.

How?

It was all he could think. How could this happen?

He wandered the ash-strewn path, collecting empty buckets, needing to do something, anything, because if he stopped, the rage inside might engulf him like the flames had engulfed Alumn’s tree. Someone had done this. The tree was green, full of fresh foliage. It wouldn’t have caught by a single flame alone. The celebration saw to it that nobody would witness whoever had done such a terrible thing. He couldn’t imagine any elf setting the blaze. A human then? But why?

Why, why, why.

“Eroan, Anye wishes to speak with you.”

He nodded mutely at the messenger and steered his path through the village toward Cheen's main hall. He had brought the humans here. He had trusted them, offered them food and elven hospitality and they'd repaid him with this travesty?

By the time he entered the hall, his fists and jaw ached, and his thoughts raced. Someone must pay for this.

Anye stood behind the long meeting table with the other council members either side of her. All stood. Eroan hadn't noticed the others here, or how the door had been sealed behind him, until now. He blinked ash from his eyes.

Silence.

He could taste the change in the air and tried to breathe around the sudden bite of fear nipping at the edges of his rage. The humans were here too. Chloe. Her eyes were full of the same rage burning in Eroan.

"Where is the dragon?"

He looked at Anye, wondering if he'd misheard. "What?"

"The dragon. Where is he, Eroan?"

The elder's gowns were soot-stained. She had ash smudges on her cheek and fire in her eyes too. But a coldness had wrapped around her, making her stand rigid.

"I... he's in my hut." A lie. He didn't know what else to say and immediately regretted it when Anye's gaze hardened. She knew it to be a lie. They'd already looked for Lysander.

"You left the fayre together. Where did you go?"

Panic clutched at Eroan's heart. The enraged faces of those around him told him what his heart already feared. "He didn't do this."

"That's not what I asked."

"Don't..." Alumn, this was a trial. He searched the crowd. Seraph wasn't here. Neither was Trey. Only a few here knew him well. No Janna, no Nye. "This wasn't him."

"Where did you go?" Anye asked again.

"Into the woods. Together. He was with me the whole time." Panic raced through his voice and he didn't care.

"Why did you go into the woods?"

He tried to calm his breathing, to stop his fists from shaking, but there was no hiding his rage and fear. His people, they had already made their decision.

"Eroan. You will answer me," Anye commanded. "Why did you go into the woods?"

"To fuck," he spat, relishing the gasps. Disgust ticked across Anye's face. She looked away. "He was with me. I fucked him against a tree and he got me off right after." Others looked away. Some muttered prayers to Alumn. A horrible sense of loss gripped Eroan's heart and emotion knotted his throat. When he next spoke, his voice cracked. "So he couldn't have done this."

"What proof is there of this?"

"Proof?" He blinked at her. "Proof I fucked a dragon? You're truly asking me this?"

She winced. "Where is he then, Eroan? Why can he not be found anywhere in the village? Why is he not here, standing beside you, corroborating your story?"

He swallowed around a harsh dryness. "I don't know. I left him in the woods when I heard the screams." Where was Lysander? He should have been here. He would have been here. There was no doubt in Eroan's mind that Lysander would have come. He would have helped stop the blaze. So why hadn't he? Someone or something must have stopped him. He looked again about the hall. His friends weren't here. Perhaps Seraph knew more. She was always watching, always listening. Maybe

Lysander was with her?

“Why would he do this?” he asked Anye, and then the crowd. “Why? He came here to make peace. You saw him among you. Why would he hurt us?”

“He’s dragon,” Anye replied, her voice coming down like the edge of an axe.

Regret and dread pulled the corners of his mouth down. “Don’t do this.”

“You force my hand.”

“Anye, please...” He stepped up to the table. “Please. You have my word. He didn’t do this.”

The elder’s expression burned with cold condemnation. “You stood where you stand now and you lied to us before, Eroan. Your word is worthless.”

He flinched, the words striking like a physical blow. “I’ll find him and he can tell you himself.”

“When he is found, he will be killed.”

“No.”

“Eroan, you leave me no choice. I did not want this. We opened our arms to your dragon prince. We sheltered him, out of respect for you. But it is clear, he has you bespelled, likely to seed chaos and dissent among us. We were wrong to trust a dragon. We were wrong to trust you. There must be recompense for this heinous act.”

Order elves approached Eroan from behind. He caught a glimpse of their blades, freed at their sides. Lifting his chin, he looked Anye in the eyes.

“Someone must pay,” she said, softer now.

“You’re making a terrible mistake.”

She shook her head. “Our mistake was believing in you.”

A nod from Anye, and the Order elves rushed in, clutching at Eroan’s arms. He didn’t fight, but stood his ground, his gaze never leaving hers. “Say it. Say the words.”

“Eroan Ilanea. You are to be taken to the village square and immediately executed. May Alumn’s light forgive you.”

It snapped. His control. His patience. His everything. For all he had done for his people and this was how they repay him. Fury was a fire flash burning beneath his skin, scorching to his very soul. “You’re fools! All of you! You see nothing, just your own prejudice. He came for love, not to destroy it. Someone else burned the tree. Someone else did this!” The assassins yanked Eroan backward but by Alumn he wasn’t done. He tore from one, only for the elf to snatch at him again. “Kill me. I don’t care. But leave him be. Just let him go. He’s suffered enough for the mistakes of others and I’ll not have him suffer under elves too.” They pulled, yanking Eroan off-balance. He twisted and bucked. More rushed in, their hands closing around him like iron shackles. Too many. He couldn’t move. Couldn’t breathe. And it seemed so wrong that this would be how he died. Killed by his own people. People he loved. People he’d protected.

The same people he’d saved over the years had gathered outside. Cold tears wet his face and he let them see. “He didn’t do this!” He said it over and over. They had to know. Even if they were his last words, they had to know Lysander didn’t hurt them.

A chopping block sat dead center in the village square. He saw it and his thoughts fell as silent as the crowd staring on. This wasn’t how elves did things. This was wrong. So wrong. “Alumn... make it all be for something,” he whispered.

Rough hands shoved him to his knees.

Those same hands held him in place.

Hands shoved against his back, forcing him forward. The timber block’s splinters dug into his neck.

More tears squeezed from Eroan's eyes. He prayed in whispers, begged for Alumn to hear him. "Alumn, take his hand and lead him away from this place, from these people. Help him find freedom, for me. I have served you my entire life. Grant me this last wish. Save him because I cannot."

"Do you have any last words?" Anye asked. She fronted the semicircle crowd. Her white robes dirtied with ash and her eyes haunted.

Eroan tilted his head. He saw Janna then, one hand over her mouth and the other on her bump. Tears streamed down her face. His heart broke. Seraph stood beside her, her eyes fierce and blazing an icy cold. She would go after vengeance. He blinked, for her only, begging her not to throw her life away.

"I am Eroan Ilanea," he raised his voice, even though it broke and quivered. "I was forged in the fires of Ifreann, quenched in Alumn's maelstrom, and crafted by fate to protect my people. I did not fail you."

He closed his eyes.

A blade whispered from its sheath.

The cold edge of that blade kissed the back of his neck where Lysander's touch had caressed less than an hour before. How had this happened?

He wished... he wished Lysander were here, just so he could tell him not to seek revenge. He should walk away from it all, from everything, but of course, he wouldn't. Eroan feared if Lysander learned of what had happened, Cheen would not survive the dragon prince's wrath and the war would go on until all elves had died. Perhaps that was what they all deserved.

"Drop the sword." Chloe's accented voice sailed through Eroan's thoughts. "Or your elder will not see the dawn."

He blinked tears from his eyes. From his low, twisted angle, he could make out Chloe standing beside Anye, a human pistol pointed at the elder's head. His heart stuttered.

"Lift Eroan off the block," Chloe ordered.

"You have no right!" Anye snapped.

"Perhaps not. But this is a mistake, and I cannot stand by while you execute a good man."

"He is elven, not human."

Chloe smiled, but it was a shallow, human smile. So very dragon-like. "Don't you see? What we are doesn't matter. It is *who* we are that defines us. And I have learned who you all are. Free Eroan now." Her thumb cocked the weapon, readying it to fire. If she killed Anye, the Order would kill her, and the rest of the humans here. Chloe's actions would mean war.

Everything Eroan had worked for fell like ash around him. Building bridges, making peace. He could see it in Anye's eyes: it was over.

"Release him," the elder said.

The blade vanished from his neck. Hands pulled him upright and released, leaving him standing alone, numbed and detached from his people. He'd been ready to die. So ready. And now. Where did he stand now? With his people or with Chloe's? Where did any of them stand? Steadying his breathing, he took in the faces of the elves around him. They did not trust him. They did not trust the humans.

Chloe released the gun's hammer, lowered it to her side and moved away from Anye, backing toward Rowan. "It is time we leave your sanctuary. *Merçi*... thank you for your hospitality." Her human troops separated from the crowd and stepped into place behind her, behind Eroan.

The humans had chosen for him.

Seraph broke from the crowd and marched to his side. She planted herself at his right. "I stand

beside Eroan.” She didn’t look at him, likely knowing if she had, he’d have told her to stay. “Who is with me?”

Janna glanced at the sandy-haired elf beside her, Ross. The male watched on, unaware of his partner’s indecision. Her pregnant bump caught Eroan’s eye. He gave his head a small shake, stopping her from making a mistake.

Assassins who had been absent at the trial stepped forward and made their way behind Eroan, bolstering the human ranks. They’d been kept away from the trial, he realized. Nye and Trey moved too, and Eroan’s wrecked heart stuttered some more. Nye dipped his head, acknowledging the sacrifice, giving himself to Eroan’s service.

This was too much. What was he supposed to do with them all? They had lives here. Family. A future. Eroan had nothing to give them.

“Then you are all exiled from Cheen,” Anye announced. Her voice remained steady but her hands trembled. “You are not permitted to return to this settlement. Ever.”

Eroan wet his lips. His breathing had slowed, his tears had dried, and a new resolute determination found its way to his heart. He bowed his head once to Anye, acknowledging her wishes, then turned to the people gathered behind him. Human and elf alike. Chloe’s smile warmed his wrecked heart. As wrong as this was, little else had felt so right.

“Gather your belongings. We move out at dawn.”

Eroan’s new pride filtered away, given a wide berth by those who remained in Cheen.

Chloe leaned in and softly said, “We have an emerald dragon to find, *qui*?”

“Yes,” the word came out too fast, pushed by emotion. He breathed slow, forcing himself to calm, feeling the future shift around him. “Yes, we do.”

CHAPTER 5

Lysander

THE AIR SMELLED like damp and stone and metal, nothing like the earthy, tree sap and mossy smell of Eroan's home. Lysander blinked at his surroundings, trying to fathom how he'd ended up waking in what looked and felt like a concrete box. He groaned around sore muscles and got his hands under him, shoving to his feet. The room *was* a big box. One of those strange boxes the humans had once been so fond of living in, though this one didn't appear to have any windows, just one gaping hole in a wall.

He brushed dirt off his clothes, breathing deeply as he smelled Eroan on himself, and climbed the sloped rubble bank out of the hole, seeking daylight. Warm sunlight beckoned him outside into a landscape he didn't recognize. Strange flat sections cleaved through skeletal vertical towers—nothing the size of the tower amethyst had called home—but similar in design. Iron rods poked from their tops and bent over, gnarled with weather and rust. There had to be a dozen he could see from his vantage point, all smothered in vegetation.

Shit. Moments ago he'd been with Eroan. He bent over, clutched at his thighs, and breathed. How long had he been out? Days? He didn't even know the lay of this land. Was he north, south, east, or west of the dragonlands? He couldn't smell the sea or the forest. Just stone and rust and metal. Gods, so much metal. Wherever he was, it wasn't where he wanted to be.

He started forward. The damned elf who had brought him here didn't seem to be around now. Perhaps it had been an attempt to frighten him off. Once he'd reached higher ground, he could get a good look at the landscape. How far could a single elf take him? A day's hike, at the most. He'd figure out where he was and be back with Eroan at nightfall. And he and that elf would have words.

A shadow washed over Lysander, cutting out all light and chilling the air. The vast bulk of dragon banked in front of him, soaring between the towers before spreading its wings to catch the air to bring itself into land.

Lysander's lips twitched, a snarl trying to bubble free.

Mirann.

She landed well, considering how the weight of her distended belly must have thrown her balance off. A cow carcass hung limp and bloody in her jaws.

He wasn't running. Not from her. Besides, he had no idea which direction to run in. So he waited

as she climbed across the rubble-strewn ground, flattening the vegetables underfoot. Still a few hundred yards away, she leaned in and dumped the cow close enough for Lysander to wrinkle his nose. Then, bizarrely, she used her nose to nudge the carcass closer.

Lysander arched an eyebrow. “If you think gifting me a fucking cow means something, you’re more insane than I realized. Shift and tell me where I am or I’m walking out of here.”

She slammed her front foot down to his right, sending up puffs of dirt and dust, ruffling his hair and rattling his clenched teeth, and brought her head in. Her hot, reeking breath flowed over him.

Lysander held her glare. As man, he barely stood higher than her snout. She wouldn’t hurt him. This display meant she wanted him. Likely to help control that wretched brood of bronze and amethyst hybrids she was about to drop. He’d prefer to eat them than help her raise the monsters. Without a brood of her own to feed her during the nursing stages, she’d die. The kits would eat her carcass. It was her own fucking fault and all the bitch deserved.

She huffed and reared up. Power arched across Lysander’s skin—her power—all its sparking, metallic snap, and with a blinding flash, she was human again, and huge.

“Shifting hurts,” she said, making her way forward, her pregnant belly so big it distorted her back. “Your bastard spawn want out.”

“If you didn’t want them, you shouldn’t have fucked me over—literally. Bitch.”

She stopped outside of grabbing range and rode her gaze over him. Sunlight gleamed off her hairless, naked, golden skin. She clearly didn’t bother with clothing out here, wherever this was.

“You smell like elf.” Her lip curled.

“Because I live with them now. What do you want? Why did you take me? I need to get back.”

“No, you really don’t.” She flicked her wrist and sauntered by him, descending into the concrete box home, her nest. “Your elf is dead,” her voice echoed inside, “and the village half-burned, so you will stay with me now, where you belong.”

He laughed and brushed aside the horrible twisting sensation her words tried to knot within him. “He’s not dead. I was just with him.”

“That was days ago.” She plodded down into the center of her nest and circled it, adjusting a few rocks here and there, making little difference to its layout. “There was a fire. Their precious tree burned to ash. In your absence, the elf got the blame. They executed him.”

He had his hands around her throat in the next breath and squeezed. If her belly hadn’t made killing her so damn awkward, he could have gotten a better grip. She tore free and slashed her nails, zipping open four deep cuts in his cheek.

Bitch. He’d kill her for this.

He pressed a hand to his face to stem the blood flow and stalked toward her. “I should have killed you before.”

“Come near me and I’ll shift again,” she slunk backward, “and then you’re never getting out of here. I’ll bury us inside. Our spawn will hatch and eat us whole.”

He stopped, the nest entrance at his back. If she shifted, she could do exactly as she said, but then he’d be forced to shift too, and he’d kill her. The lust for it boiled his blood. But killing her would not get him answers about who or what he was, about the Gold, about... Alumn, the Silver dragon he continued to see and hear in his dreams. “He’s not dead.”

She shrugged. “Believe that if you want.”

Lysander clutched the carved dragon pendant at his neck, freeing the scent of cut wood and pine. “He’s been rumored dead before. It doesn’t stick. The world could end and Eroan would still be alive.” Eroan wasn’t dead. He knew it for certain. Mirann used Eroan’s name because it was the only

weapon she had.

Gold flashed in her eyes. "What a waste you are. So fixated on an elf, of all things. Elisandra really fucked you up, prince. In our brood, you would have been worshipped. You still can be."

"I saw your kind of worship and want no part of it." He leaned against a large stone lining the ridge of the nest, still keeping the entrance at his back.

She picked up a rock in both hands, walked three paces, and put it down again, then frowned at it and where she'd taken it from, puzzling over something. "My father was obsessed with you."

"*Was?*"

"I haven't seen him. It's not... It's not safe for me anywhere but here."

"Why?"

She grunted. "Why do you think?"

As if in answer, her belly *moved*, the stretched golden skin pulsing. Lysander's insides twisted, disgusted by his own creations.

"These make me slow. They make me weak. I'm forever hungry. When the tower fell, I fled in the confusion. Amethyst and bronze would have killed me. Dokul and the Gold control all dragons north of the channel now." When she held Lysander's glare anew, she made no attempt to hide the fear. "Father would likely rip these eggs right out of me and sit on them himself, if he could."

"Carline." He'd only seen the Gold briefly after she had shifted into her true form atop the tower. She'd seemed to help as Lysander had protected the fleeing elves, but she'd also fought against him. He didn't know what to make of the Gold. Yet. Carline, the woman, had always been kind. He refused to believe her kindness all those years had been an act, as Akiem believed.

"They want me. They want these creatures." She stroked her warping belly. "So I'm here and you're here and we're going to stay here until they're hatched."

She was insane. "No."

Her chin jerked. "You don't get a say. This is how it is."

He stood and skidded down the nest-side into the basin. Mirann backed away, as she should. The shift tried to stretch his skin and roll out of him. He reined it back in. The mock-woman who stood before him had made sure he'd seed her fucking body by any means necessary. First, at the wretched coupling, and then again and again and again beneath amethyst tower, in the dark, his mind fucked-up on that drug of hers. Much of it he didn't recall, it was better that way, but that didn't change what she'd done to him. "You raped me, Mirann. Whatever foul things are growing in your belly are yours to deal with. I want no part of them. Hatch them here and I'll kill them. Every single one."

She smiled her dragon smile and patted her belly, her long nails flashing. "You won't."

He stepped closer, and this time she stood her ground. Her eyes widened, drinking all of him in as he crowded close. "Cage me again, and I'll tear your fucking heart out of your chest. I don't give a shit that you're pregnant. I don't care they're half mine—"

"You will."

He should kill her now. Kill her and crush those eggs and leave her carcass here for the flies.

"They're half bronze and half emerald," she went on. "And *that* you cannot deny."

"So what?"

"Emerald are powerful and the clutch are yours."

He'd heard it all before. Emerald were rare, emerald were different, emerald were feared. He laughed now. "Myths and the *clutch* are products of your abuse of me." He turned from her hideous figure.

Her warm hand snagged his arm.

“The metals and then the jeweled killed them all. All but you. Why would dragons kill their own?”

“Have you met a dragon?”

Her grip tightened. “Dokul knew. Elisandra knew. Akiem probably knows. I... might know.”

“I’m done here.” He yanked his arm free, almost toppling her over, and headed for the entrance. “Raise your own mythical emerald-bronze monsters but know that if they cross my path, I’ll kill them.”

“Has nobody made mention of your eyes, Lysander?”

He showed her a single finger and kept right on walking out of the nest.

“Of how beautiful your eyes are.” She followed, still prattling on, so desperate to lure him in.

“Fuck off, Mirann.” He walked into the sunlight and down onto the flat plain between the two nearest high structures. He couldn’t fly, but he could travel faster on four legs than two. He opened the center of himself, freeing the shift. Power rolled through him, breaking him apart, scattering everything that made him man, and remaking it into dragon. When he breathed, his lungs expanded and wings stretched, even the broken one flexed a little. It didn’t hurt anymore, just hindered. Gods, it felt good to be back in his true skin, to stretch his back and tail, to dig his claws in and shake his head. Sunlight warmed his scales. He gave them a rattle, dislodging dust and dirt, and freed a rolling growl.

“I wouldn’t have believed the old tales either.”

Mirann’s voice was smaller now, no louder than a bug in his ear. One he could crush. He turned his head and peered down at the small thing. A huff, and he tasted her in the air. She tasted like metal, but also like something that was his and should be kept, something precious. Giving his head another shake, ridding himself of the strange thoughts, he rounded on this small thing that was dragon inside. Kin, a part of him recognized. More than kin. She smelled like him. Mate.

“But I felt it.” This small female said. “When you beat me with the whip. I saw it... I saw it at the coupling. There is a power within you.”

Those were bad times. He bared his teeth and brought his head in low.

Mirann’s tiny human eyes widened. “I see it now,” she whispered. Her hands stroked over her belly, and as much as Lysander despised the creatures she had forced him to make, some instinct tugged on him to stay. Those eggs were his. She was his.

“You killed the queen.”

A growl rumbled up his throat, memories of the bitch-queen’s brittle laughter spilling forth.

“You could not have done any of those things if you weren’t *special*.” She lifted her hand.

He nudged the tiny warm hand with his nose and remembered a time when an elf had touched him there, spread his fingers and blinked up at him. He missed that elf. But something terrible had happened at his almost-nest where the elf lived. It had ended, as he knew it would, like all good things ended too soon.

He snuffled at the hand now and smelled himself all over the bronze and in her belly. In the nest behind her too. What other place did he have left? Everything was gone. Changed. But this place? Would it be so bad? He lifted his head and sniffed at the air. There wasn’t a dragon for miles. This place was quiet. It was safe. And the female belonged to him.

Mirann shifted to dragon again, but she kept herself low, dragging her belly on the ground, her wings spread, open and exposed. She bared the long length of her neck and rubbed her chin beneath his, scale against scale.

Kill her.

He wanted to.

Fire warmed the pit low in his throat and growls simmered inside his chest. Mirann hunkered even lower, huffing out her fear. He opened his jaws, clamped his teeth around her neck, and dragged her backward and down-down-down into the nest, where she would stay. Where he would stay. For something that felt so wrong as man, felt so right as dragon.



HE DREAMED OF A SILVER BEAST, as tall as a tower, wings like the ocean, with eyes of darkness. Alumn, she was called, and he knew her in his soul. She had helped bring him back from death but that was just the beginning. She needed him, she said. Needed him to come for her—

Lysander opened his dragon eyes and blinked into the gloom. Mirann was coiled around him and he around her. A clutch of six eggs lay nestled beneath them. He would hunt soon. Provide. It was how things were now, and dreams of elves and silver dragons soon faded beneath ancient instincts to protect and provide. He was dragon.

CHAPTER 6

Eroan

WITH THE COAST to the south and west and Ashford to the east, and without any clues as to Lysander's whereabouts, north was as good a direction as any to travel. But with every passing day, Eroan worried they were heading away from where they needed to be. Then the days became weeks, and their pace slowed, and now here they were, human and elf, making a temporary camp among the ruins of the old-world, stringing tents from trees and fire-roasting small game they'd caught during the day. Assassins patrolled while humans put their ingenious minds to bettering equipment and weapons.

It would be too easy to stop and put down roots.

Eroan leaned against a tree and watched those who had severed themselves from their old lives—for him. He didn't know what to make of it; didn't know how to thank them either. Chloe had saved him. These humans could have returned to their homeland, but none seemed inclined to, even with Ben and his ticking box telling them how their mysterious *radiation* levels peaked and troughed.

Humans were intriguing. Lysander would have been amused.

Eroan missed his dragon.

Seeing Lysander dance with Seraph at the May fayre, something primal had taken ahold. It had always been there between him and Lysander, but that dance before the tree burned was a memory Eroan clung to when his limbs tired and his hungry belly ached. Lysander had laughed and smiled and moved like he didn't have a single care in the world. If Eroan hadn't already fallen for the dragon months ago, it would have been then.

And now Lysander was gone.

Vanished.

Not dead. Of that he was certain.

He took the firestarter from his pocket and rubbed his thumb along its edge.

"This is a good place to stop and consider the future." Chloe sat on a low wall beside him. Vines and roots had grown around the wall, like all vegetation had over these parts, reclaiming what had once belonged to humans. He wondered if she knew her ancestors had walked in the same places, never dreaming that dragons would one day take all they knew away from them. It seemed like fantasy, but the evidence was buried beneath their feet.

"It is a good place." The friction of his thumb warmed the firestarter.

Chloe waited a few moments, letting the quiet settle. Camp noises filtered about them. A chuckle here and there, someone hammering tent pegs into the ground, and as night fell, an owl hooted far away. She appeared at ease and a quick once-over scan revealed no weapons.

“We haven’t seen a single sign of him,” she said.

“Or any dragons.”

Not one. No dragoncalls. No remains. It felt... strange not to be stalked from the skies, not to have to flee or keep to overhead cover. The skies were clear night and day. It was almost as if dragons didn’t exist. Like they too had vanished alongside Lysander.

“An unexpected gift,” she mused.

Or a sign that things were building. Eroan didn’t trust the quiet. He’d lived his whole life killing dragons and this silence felt wrong. “We can’t afford to relax our guard.”

“Oh, I know.”

He knew she did and smiled down at her. “A reminder to myself as well as to you and yours.”

She wore her hair braided in the elven way, fixed close against her scalp, keeping the dark locks under control. She’d aged, Eroan realized. Humans wore age in their eyes and around their mouths. She’d gathered a few more lines. He couldn’t remember when that had happened. Perhaps after the battle at the bronze lines and before she brought her human pride to him.

“We are one, now,” she said, lifting an eyebrow. “Don’t you think? What is it you call a group of elves?”

“A pride.”

“*Oui*, we are a pride now.” She mused on that thought, her smile growing. “This land is very much like our own was. Ben has confirmed there is no risk of contamination here. There is ample food to be found foraging in the woods and fields. Water too, with the river nearby.”

She wanted to stay.

He couldn’t stop. But constantly moving on had left the humans haggard and weary. “I need to find him.”

She nodded slowly and lost her thoughts in watching humans and elves mingle around the campfire. “I hope I one day find a love as fierce as yours.”

There was no denying it. After all the raw things he had spoken at the trial and almost execution, every single soul here knew the depth of his feelings for Lysander, and yet none had frowned upon him for it. Even Nye seemed to have accepted it, though they had hardly spoken since leaving Cheen.

“He just vanished,” Eroan whispered. “I was with him and then... I ran, because of the fire. Before we left, I went back, to the place where he and I...” He hesitated, unsure, but he needn’t have worried. Chloe’s smile was a warm, accepting thing. “Where I last saw him, looking for any sign of what could have happened.”

He had told her the same over and over again since leaving Cheen and she listened every time, thinking it over.

“Someone took him,” she said, her tone leaving no room for doubt.

“I like to think the same, but nobody takes a dragon without their permission. Wherever he went, he did so willingly.” *Lysander left*, is what Eroan truly wanted to say. Perhaps Lysander had seen the burning tree and knew he’d be blamed, and so he ran. Eroan would have told him to do the same, had he been given the chance. Anye would have ordered him killed. The outcome would have been the same.

“You forget I was with you both in France,” Chloe said quietly. “He adores you, you know. He didn’t even try to hide it. Lysander’s emotions are all in his eyes, if you look close enough.” Chloe

sighed and stood, brushing dirt from her hands. “Someone took him. The more I think on it, the more I am certain of it. Seraph believes the same.”

Seraph had tried to speak with Eroan. To his shame, he’d avoided her. He couldn’t speak with her, not about this. She loved Lysander too, and it hurt to see the pain on her face, knowing the same hurt was mirrored on his own. She needed him to be strong. They all did. But when it came to Lysander’s disappearance, he wasn’t strong.

“Dragons then,” he said, watching the fire. “But we’ve seen no sign of them.”

She muttered something in her language that sounded short and sharp. “Listen to yourself. Defeated so soon? Not Eroan Ilanea. He would walk through dragonfire to save a soul. Just not his own.” She looked up. “Why do you not fight for him this time when you have fought so hard before?”

It wasn’t that he wasn’t fighting, it was more that he could feel the frustration rotting him from the inside out. The injustice of it all was eating him up and he had no direction to chase, to target, to track. “I don’t know who or what to fight.” He narrowed his eyes on the firelight, watching the flames dance. “It’s eating me up inside. The things that were said by my own people. They were... It keeps hurting and I can’t make it stop. I don’t know how to find him, Chloe. Not this time. I don’t know what to do. You want to stop here, and I understand that, but I can’t. I can’t stop... and I can’t go.”

“Oh, Eroan...” She looped an arm around his shoulder and tugged him in close. He closed his eyes, allowing himself a moment of comfort in her arms.

“You’ve been so strong for so long, you do not know any other way,” she whispered.

“I told him I’d never give up on him. This is what giving up feels like.”

“You haven’t. We haven’t. We’ll find him.” Chloe freed him from her embrace but held him at arm’s length, looking him in the eyes. All of her fierce warrior instincts glittered alongside the firelight in her eyes. “Will you let me pray with you, to your Alumn?”

Alumn? After everything that had happened, he doubted Alumn had listened to any of his prayers. “I wonder, too, if she is real.”

“That is what faith is, believing in something without knowing for certain. I have faith that we will find Lysander again. You are tired, *mon amie*. That is all. But you’re not alone and you do not need to carry the burden alone. You understand?”

It was true. He wasn’t alone. These people had followed him, for better or for worse. He owed them all more than this relentless trek to nowhere. “When did you get so wise?”

She laughed softly and released him. “Maybe some of your elven wisdom has rubbed off on me?”

He had never claimed to be wise but Chloe and her people often looked to him for answers. Her men and women were good. He admired them now, going about camp business. Strong and reliable, like elves, but with the kind of determination he aspired to.

“Tell me of your light, Alumn,” Chloe asked. “Who is she?”

The campfire crackled and spat. Someone tossed another log on and sparks danced high into the dark.

“She is the light from which all things grow,” Eroan replied.

“Humans too?”

“It depends who you ask, but I’m beginning to think so. Years ago, with Xena—an elder from my old home—I traveled to a place called Ashford, an elven center. There, I read some Alumn scripts, learning things not taught when I was an elfling. Elves were kind before—”

“Forgive me, but some of your kind has strayed from that path.”

Indeed, they had. Kind was not the way of his people. Not anymore. “It would seem so. However, we were kind. We were protectors of all. Humans were the thinkers, the inventors, the imaginers.

And dragons had a place too. To think such a thing among elves today would be blasphemy, but the older scripts did not discriminate. Dragons were warriors and war-makers. And it was said, all three, when brought together, created balance, ushering in peace, but that is not how it was.”

“What happened?” she asked, speaking so softly he almost didn’t hear her.

“They fought, and so Alumn cut the world into three. She watched over all, as the sun does, tending to her creations as they grew. We are taught young that Alumn is watchful, that she sometimes offers a guiding hand when needed, but also that she protects only elves. I wondered if that was my ancestors’ wishful thinking. For all her watchfulness, I have prayed for Lysander’s protection many times with no answer.”

Chloe ran a hand over her braids. “How do you know she did not answer?”

“If she did, he would be here now.”

“Our faith is often tested. Perhaps Alumn tests you?”

The constant simmering rage that had been with him since Cheen tasted like metal at the back of his throat. “Then it’s time she stopped. “

“I’ll pray to Alumn for you, Eroan.”

“It is Lysander who needs your prayers, not I.”

A sadness dampened her smile. “He has featured in them since I could not stop what happened to him in France.”

She left Eroan’s side to tend to the camp. As the assassins returned from their shift on watch, Eroan took up his dragonblade and melted into the strange, barren landscape littered with crumbling walls, leaning towers, and wind-stripped trees. Few elves traveled north but word among the pride was that Trey knew these lands from his time as a messenger, and it was Trey he sought out now.

Sound carried far in this strange, open land. He heard the voices raised in anger before sighting two elves among the bramble covered rubble. Trey and Nye. It was likely none of Eroan’s business what they argued over but doing it so far from camp in a place where their voices carried was reckless.

Eroan whistled, high-pitched through his teeth, silencing them both. He scrambled down a rocky bank, landing on their sheltered plateau between high, old walls. Trey’s face was flushed, his clothes askew as Nye seethed, pacing back and forth by a far, crumbled wall. Clearly their words had been heated and passionate. “I heard your voices at a distance. Had there been dragons—”

“There are no dragons here,” Nye snapped.

Trey narrowed his eyes at Nye before briefly tipping his head at Eroan. “I’m sorry, sassa. It won’t happen again.”

Nye scrambled up the rubble and out of sight. Eroan dampened his own irritation down. Trey peered down, skirting Eroan’s gaze. “Is everything all right?”

“He... I guess you know how he gets?”

So this was personal, more personal than a passing disagreement between Order elves. “Nye can be passionate in his beliefs.” And he had a temper when pushed.

“Yes,” Trey sighed, his gaze seeking Nye’s path, clearly wanting to go after him. “Truth be told, I worry for him. Something has changed in him since... since we left. Will you speak with him? He respects you.”

Eroan should have already spoken with Nye. He owed him that. But Nye had clearly been avoiding him. “Of course. Return to camp. I’ll take this watch and speak with Nye on my return.”

“Thank you, Eroan.” Trey gripped Eroan’s shoulder, his hand firm. He lingered as though to say more, but instead, he squeezed Eroan’s shoulder and left, following Nye’s path out of the ruins.

Trey would be good for Nye. Alumn knew Nye needed the company.

Eroan lifted his gaze to the night sky and its twinkling stars. Did Lysander see the same stars? He almost prayed to Alumn that he did, but what good had his prayers ever done? And the worst of it was, he'd squandered the few days he'd gotten with Lysander, foolishly focused on his duties, assuming the dragon would be there waiting for him.

He should have listened to Lysander earlier. Or maybe he'd been a fool to think it could ever have worked in Cheen. A fool was all he was good for as of late.

Eroan picked up a rock and tossed it far down the valley between towering ruins. The rage bubbled inside, growing hotter. He'd given his entire life for elves. He'd lived and breathed love for his people. No more. Cheen could rot. Ashford could wither. He no longer cared.

"Damn you, Alumn!"

His voice carried far into the still night. He hoped, if Alumn was real, she heard him and she damn well listened. Because he was done with her too.



NYE AVOIDED Eroan's attempts to track him down, always managing to busy himself or make himself scarce as though he knew Eroan sought him out, and so time ticked on, and the camp grew. Stone from nearby ruins was repurposed as walls for temporary dwellings. Definitely temporary. They couldn't stay here, but the natural, sheltered basin was as good a place as any they had come across to stop and consider their next move.

"Nye," Eroan caught sight of the assassin as he strapped a blade to his back, readying for patrol. "May I join you this morning?"

Nye responded with a jerk of his chin and left the camp, leaving Eroan to follow, or not. Their patrols had driven paths into the undergrowth around the camp. Some branched off to the river, and others to the meadow, where deer and pheasant roamed. Mist hung low, obscuring the path ahead, but keeping the sound of their passing muffled.

"I want to thank you," Eroan said, trailing a few steps behind.

"For what?" Nye's loose, dark hair skimmed his shoulders. He wore it down and unbound these days, preferring to tuck it behind his pointed ears than tie it back.

"For being here."

"There is nothing to thank me for. Of course I would follow you. It's all I've ever done—follow Eroan Ileana, walk in his footsteps, finish second to his first, have his cast-offs."

That last one slowed Eroan's pace. Nye strode on ahead, his boots thumping in the grass. Cast-offs? Did he mean Trey? "There was nothing between Trey and I. It was one night, a long time ago. Trey was passing through Cheen. We..." Eroan fumbled the words, still following the snaking path behind Nye's dark figure. "Granted, he was my first, and for my part I was grateful." He winced. Was grateful the right word? He didn't want to insult the memory of his time with Trey by shrugging it off as a dalliance, but Nye's marching pace wasn't giving him anything to work with. Was Nye angry because Eroan had spent the night with Trey and let him go, or because he hadn't spent *more* time with him? The truth was always the best approach. "It was a tryst, meaning little to either of us."

Nye laughed, but the sound was harsh and dark. "It's like you don't even know you."

What did that mean? "Nye, wait." Eroan jogged to close the distance, passing over mossy mounds and pushing through brush. "Wait, will you? This is foolish. What would Curan think of us arguing

over something so small?"

"We'll never know. Your dragon killed him."

"No, his own mistakes did that."

Nye whirled, a scathing glare halting Eroan. Mist dampened his face, making his dark lashes glisten. "I followed you because..." He hesitated, clenching his fists at his sides. "Because despite everything you've done, everything you've put us all through, I still love you. I hate you, but I love you, too. Just like everyone you've used and thrown away. Janna... Trey still looks at you like—"

"Janna? What?" Eroan's anger churned. This was unnecessary and ridiculous. Nye was grown and capable, he shouldn't be behaving like a lovestruck elfling, at a time like this. "Nye, listen to me. I need you to be the leader you're capable of being." He reached for Nye's shoulder, but Nye grabbed his wrist and yanked, pulling Eroan off-balance, trapping him in close.

"You're so self-centered you don't even see the wreckage spread around you. You even think Janna's child is Ross's? The whole of Cheen knows it's yours. Everyone but *you* knows." He jabbed a finger in Eroan's chest. "You fucked her and left, going off to die for the cause you never intended to return from, and she loves you too much to tell you." Nye's top lip pulled tight over sharp teeth. "Seraph loves you and you push her away. She came to me because she thinks you're angry with her, that you blame her. They all fucking love Eroan Ilanea but none of them *see* you like I do. They think you do everything for them, but I know the truth. The bronze wall, the estuary. Every battle you fight, it's not for them. It's for you, because you can't fucking handle that you should have died in the tower..." The fog swallowed his words but Eroan heard them over and over, felt them yank the air from his lungs. "You should have fucking died, Eroan. You didn't, and it screwed you up so bad, you're still looking for death, even now. You're not a fucking hero. You're a coward. You're selfish. You're arrogant. You think only of yourself. You're a danger to those around you. Curan saw it and so do I!"

The rage solidified, turning cold and hard. Eroan switched his grip and clamped a hold of Nye's hand, twisting it until Nye tried to flinch free. "You think I don't know these things?" Eroan forced the words through bared teeth. "I carry it all with me. Xena's death. The death of the hundreds I left behind to go to France. Janna and her child, of course I know the babe is mine. It kills me inside every time I look at her. Yes, I'm a coward. I know it. And you...? I hurt you, Nye. And you're right. I used you. I needed someone—anyone—and you were easy. I'm sorry for that. I'm sorry for a lot of things. You think these things don't hurt me? They do. Every time I breathe, I hurt. It was all necessary. All of it. I sacrificed everything and still my people—the people I love—turned on me."

"By Alumn, you truly believe that." Nye yanked his arm free, shook it out at his side, and pointed at Eroan's face. "They turned on you because they finally saw the real Eroan Ilanea and all it took was a tree burning to do it."

Eroan's thoughts tripped. "A tree? ...What?"

The mist shifted from around them, pulling back like a blanket from a bed, revealing the blaze of two green eyes, each the size of the sun. As the mist peeled away some more, teeth like the one Eroan carried on his back glistened in the fog. So close, Eroan could have reached out and touched them. A dragon, as green as grass, hidden in the mist mere strides from them, and now it *moved*, so large it took the mist with it, making it swirl and dance around its rising head.

"Is that...?" Nye whispered.

"No."

Emerald, yes. But not Lysander. The beast had two viciously curved horns instead of a crown. There were other differences too, subtleties Eroan only knew because he'd been just as close to

Lysander's dragon form. The head was broader, squarer, the snout shorter, but its shimmering green scales and sparkling eyes clearly declared it emerald.

Nye tensed to run. Eroan caught his arm. "Don't. Move."

The emerald could have attacked. One bite and they'd have been dead without knowing what hit them. It hadn't. And instinct told Eroan it wouldn't. The look in its eyes wasn't a killing lust, more of a curious one.

The beast shook its head and huffed, then turned its head, focusing one eye. The pupil widened, soaking up the green, turning the eye almost completely black.

Nye tugged. Eroan held firm. Now was not the time to run. If they ran, it *would* chase.

The scales low in its neck glowed—the firepit. It was stoking its reserves just in case it needed to loose any flame. Eroan could take the blade from his back and pierce those scales in seconds, but the dragon would not react well even if it did later crawl off to die from the wound. Better to wait. To see what it was thinking.

Vast wings spread, whipping up the mist. It gave them a bellows flap, blasting them with sudden gale.

Nye bolted.

The dragon's head swung around. Its eyes narrowed to slits, its lips raised.

"Dragon!" Eroan stepped forward and waved his arms above his head. "Dragon! Here! See me!" The beast slid its attention downward.

Eroan swallowed, lowered his arms, and stood his ground. The head moved in, becoming everything he could see, just like Lysander had once done. Eroan breathed too fast; his heart pounded too hard. But if he ran, it would be over in a bite.

The dragon slowly blinked. It snuffled closer, breathing in short bursts through its nose, scenting elf. A growl burbled from low in its throat, and then, remarkably, it pulled back and swung its massive bulk away. The bank of mist swallowed it whole, leaving no evidence of it having ever been here, just Eroan's thudding heart.



EROAN RETURNED to camp to find his people hastily packing their items. Nerves frayed, he snapped, "We're not leaving. Return to your tasks."

"You're alive..." The words rushed out of Nye so fast he couldn't hide his surprise.

"Were you hoping for a different outcome?" Eroan passed him by, resisting the urge to get drawn back into their fight. It wasn't over but the appearance of the dragon overshadowed all that. For now.

Ben emerged from a hut, his backpack in hand. "Nye said—"

"It didn't attack." Eroan slid the blade off his back and set it beside the campfire's glowing embers. He rolled his shoulders and breathed out, settling his nerves, trying to keep his head clear. "Ben, you're a scientist. What do you make of it?"

Ben had been Chloe's right-hand man. Broad-shouldered, with kind eyes and warm, dark skin, Eroan had immediately taken a liking to him. So had Anye, but Ben had chosen to be here, and Eroan took the opportunity to speak with the dracologist while he could. "It didn't attack," Eroan said again, speaking softly, though he knew most of the camp listened.

"What happened?" the American asked.

Folks returned to their places, cooking, building, tending to chores, but kept their eyes on the sky.

“In the mist, Nye and I walked right on top of it. It could easily have killed us but chose not to. Have you witnessed anything like it?”

“How did it react exactly?” He pulled a book and pencil from his back pocket and flipped it open.

Taking up a seat by the fire, Eroan told him everything, including how Nye had fled but the dragon hadn’t given chase.

“It was emerald?” Ben asked, needing confirmation.

“As emerald as I’ve ever seen.”

“And you’d know,” the man chuckled.

“Yes, I would.” Eroan let his lips lift. “It wasn’t aggressive. If anything, it was intrigued.”

“A dragon that doesn’t give chase sure is a rare thing.” He tapped his pencil against his chin. “Trey told me there used to be an elven settlement north of here. Cheen sent him up here last summer. He found ruins where they’d been. It could be the dragons in this area don’t see elves. Maybe it didn’t know what to do with you?”

“Could be...” Eroan tried to recall what he knew of northern dragons but could only remember brief snippets of things Lysander had said. “Lysander and his flights often fought what he called wild dragons to the north. The impression I got was that they were worse than amethyst, more aggressive, not less.”

“Less aggressive doesn’t fit with what we know.” Ben scribbled on his paper. “I’d like to have seen the encounter.”

“It was... different.” *Promising.*

A dragon who didn’t want to fight. Another like Lysander.

And it was emerald.

A coincidence, or something more? Emerald were rare. *Different.* Lysander had said as much, and Eroan had never seen another. If he could find it again, would it take human form and speak with him? Just the thought alone quickened Eroan’s heart. What if all dragons weren’t inherently vicious? To date, they’d seen no evidence of it, but that dragon had behaved differently like Lysander behaved differently.

“You have that look that says you’re thinking up trouble.”

Eroan surprised himself by laughing. “You’ve been talking with Seraph.”

“Honestly, she does most of the talking. Little firecracker, that one.”

He didn’t doubt that. Looking about him, Eroan considered the temporary tents and stone huts. The people—his people—were doing the best with what they had, but they could do more if they knew they were staying. They could all do more if they settled a while, and maybe the emerald dragon would appear again. It could be an opportunity to learn more about the northern dragons, to learn why this place wasn’t riddled with the beasts. And he might learn more about emeralds.

He stood and drew in a breath to speak. “All right, everyone.” His pride put down tools and faced him. “Double the patrols. Keep your eyes on the ground and the skies. If you see an emerald, do not attack unless you have no choice. Retreat and report it to me. For now, let’s make a more permanent camp here.” A cheer went up, and he smiled for them, knowing they’d want to see it, but inside, his heart ached for the loss of its other half.

CHAPTER 7

Lysander

HE SMELLED IT FIRST. A familiar lemony bite that tingled his tongue and made him think of the dark and the cold. Extracting himself from Mirann's coils, he watched her settle back down, covering her clutch of eggs with one spread wing and tail, keeping them warm and safe. She didn't open her eyes, barely woke at all. That was how it had been for weeks now. Soon, the eggs would hatch. He sometimes heard them purring within their shells. Days now. This time was critical. And now he smelled dragon.

He emerged from the nest, nose in the air and jaw parted, tasting the scent.

The sun sat low on the horizon, drawing the abandoned towers' shadows across the ground. Dusk. The skies were empty. The intruder was not on the wing.

A growl tried to force its way up his throat. He swallowed it and waited. The scent grew stronger, shifting to him on the warm, summer breeze. He stayed low, stayed still, expanding his senses. He smelled rock and grass and metal. He saw birds roosting in the empty towers; heard them too. Their squawking grew until, alarmed, they took flight. Their incessant noise hid any other he might have heard.

The intruder approached from the foot of the nearest tower, having stalked close enough to leave little time for Lysander to prepare. Pink light from the sunset made the dragon's scales seem green, but that couldn't be.

Lysander lifted his head. Stunned. It wasn't the light making the dragon seem green. The dragon was emerald.

The intruder growled and prowled closer still, his glare fixed on Lysander, wings spreading, making himself bigger, making himself the threat here.

Protect.

Lysander hunkered down, blocking the intruder's path to the nest. He lashed his tail and bared his teeth. He would fight this male even though they shared the same-colored scales.

He let the growl bubble free as a warning.

The intruder came closer still, wings out and head up, horns and teeth gleaming. Bigger, older, heavier, and with two working wings, Lysander was disadvantaged in every way.

This didn't need to happen.

But it would.

The intruder was almost on him now, trying to posture his way past Lysander. That might have worked if it was just a kill Lysander protected. But the nest was his. The eggs and his mate, his. This dragon, whomever he was, could not have them.

Teeth snapped. Lysander reared, built the fire and set it free, but the intruder was fast. He recoiled and reacted, lunging for Lysander's neck. Lysander twisted, strafing the beast with flame. The intruder grunted and turned. His spiked tail slammed into Lysander's lower neck. Flame spluttered off. Lysander hacked, choking, still breathing, but winded. And then the intruder was over him, making a strike for his good wing. Lysander snapped his jaws at the intruder's foreleg and clamped on, pulling. The beast screamed and swung its spiked head, clipping Lysander's crown. Something snapped. Pain throbbed down the back of his neck. He didn't care. Charging forward, the intruder rolled, trapping his own wings beneath him, showing the whites of his eyes. Lysander raked his claws at the beast's belly and clamped his jaws around its snout as he'd done dozens of times with vicious bronze. Only this time the intruder had anticipated it. Flame poured down Lysander's throat. He reeled, lungs scorched and vision a blur.

The intruder lunged into the nest.

Mirann's screams triggered a mindless rage.

He'd never heard a sound like it, like claws on ice.

Lysander plowed in and launched himself onto the lower back of the beast, sinking his teeth in. He dragged him out, churning up dust and dirt as wings flapped and claws gouged great troughs in the earth. Mirann came with the intruder, his teeth snagged on her snout. She blocked the nest entrance, spreading her wings, lodging herself in place, but the intruder pulled.

Lost to a feverish rage, Lysander bit at his neck, clawed at his back, tearing off scales. Nothing worked. Blood slicked the beast's back. Great gouges opened in his flesh. But he still had Mirann trapped between his jaws.

The crown.

Roaring his rage, Lysander twisted his head and lunged for the soft spot behind the emerald's crown. The dragon jerked his head back, bringing his two horns down, shielding the weakness. A horn jabbed up, into the roof of Lysander's mouth. He roared back, shaking out the pain and swallowing blood. When he turned back, the emerald had torn Mirann's limp body from the nest entrance and dived inside.

Lysander stilled. Blood poured between his teeth, down his chin. Wounds throbbed, hot and heavy, but it all numbed as he heard each egg shatter. The emerald re-emerged with an undeveloped kit in its jaws. Half bronze, half emerald. The kit's scales shone a strange metallic green. The big emerald beast looked at Lysander, making sure he witnessed. His green eyes weren't rage-filled, they weren't hungry. This wasn't mindless. He knew what he was doing.

The emerald tossed the tiny, almost formed dragon in the air and snapped his jaws shut around it, crushing the fragile carcass in one bite.

Lysander had fought.

There was nothing more he could have done, nothing he could do now. For every attack, the dragon had seen him off, and the emerald wasn't done. He planted a foot on Mirann's motionless body, clamped his jaws around her skull and squeezed, and Lysander let it happen. Teeth pierced behind her crown. Bone cracked. Her body twitched. And then it was done. The bitch who had delayed his death at the hands of the bronze, and then made him wish for it, was gone. And it hadn't been Lysander who had killed her.

The emerald threw his head up and roared his victory. The sound barreled through the empty land, claiming it as his. He fixed his glare on Lysander's and waited for retaliation. None came. Lysander had fought hundreds of battles. This one he'd lost. If he pushed, this dragon would tear his throat out.

The emerald threw his wings wide, beat at the air, and took to the sky. As the day let go of the last of its light and darkness fell, the last sign of the intruder vanished.

Lysander limped to Mirann's side and nudged her, waiting for some sign she still lived. He nudged again, shoving her over. Half-lidded eyes stared at nothing. He'd hated her with every fiber of his being, but she'd been his. The clutch had been his too. And now it was all gone and he didn't understand why.

Curling into himself beside Mirann, he licked dirt and grit from his wounds.

He *did* know why.

The roar had been clear.

This land belonged to another. An emerald who had easily outfought and outmatched Lysander.

He lifted his head and looked in the direction the dragon had flown. *North*. Another emerald. An emerald with answers. An emerald who could have killed him, who *should* have killed him, but hadn't. North where the vicious wild dragons roamed.

He tucked his nose under his tail and waited for the wounds to stop bleeding.



MANY PAIRS of eyes watched him pass. They didn't behave like any dragons he knew. These blended with the scenery. He caught a glimpse of scales among the undergrowth or almost hidden behind mounds of fallen rocks. They hadn't attacked, and so he continued plodding north. The sun baked his scales, and when he stopped to drink, they were there, watching. He hadn't eaten. Where the emerald had done him over, he ached and limped and couldn't have caught a dead deer. The watching dragons knew that too. They'd left a dead horse in his path. Lysander had sniffed at it, expecting a trap, but they'd let him eat, unmolested. Watching.

He didn't like it.

They were planning something, plotting a way to stop him, but that didn't ring true either. They had the numbers; they could descend on him at any time, but none had.

He slept, curled tightly at night, and they left him alone then, returning to wherever they came from. But as dawn broke, they returned and watched him some more.

By the fifth day, he'd had enough. He shifted, forcing all of the aches and loss into the body of a man, briefly staggering under the weight of it all. But when he lifted his head and straightened his back, he could see them. Jeweled. All colors. Black, like Akiem. White, diamonds. Topaz, blue.

These northern dragons were not how he remembered. As the queen's guard, he'd only ever tried to kill them, but with good reason. When they had descended on the amethyst dragonlands, they'd been vicious and half-crazed. These dragons were not like those. At least, not right now. They'd turn on him easily enough, especially if they learned who he was.

"Where's your emerald?" he called.

A dozen pairs of eyes blinked back at him. Some appeared to have grown bored. They gnawed on their scales, cleaning themselves.

He opened his arms and turned in a circle. Showing them who he was, but also getting a good look at them. They were everywhere. Perched on mounds of rocks, sprawled in old, man-made

gullies between banks of stone once known as streets. “Am I really that entertaining that you must follow me every day?” he asked, lifting his voice so they all heard.

Wings ruffled.

“It’s not every day they see another emerald.”

Lysander had missed the man on his first sweep of the scene, but now that the emerald had spoken and drawn his eye, Lysander wondered if the dragon had somehow magically appeared on that rock, because this figure was not one to blend in. The man sat on a boulder, knees drawn up, arms casually resting over them. Sleeves rolled up to his elbows revealed strangely marked skin, like that of some of Cheen’s elves. But this man was dragon. Layered, dark red hair fell about his face, half of it loose, half of it messily braided. He wasn’t as old as Lysander had assumed from his dragon form, perhaps a few years older than Lysander. A shadow of whiskers darkened his chin while a dash of freckles lightened his nose and cheeks, and the smile on his lips spoke of how he knew exactly who Lysander was. But his eyes. Is that how Lysander’s eyes appeared to others? Full and deep and rich, as though he held all the answers in the depth of those eyes.

“You son of a breeding bitch, you killed my mate.” Lysander started toward him.

The bastard jumped down off the boulder and lifted both hands. “Easy now. I did us both a favor and saved yah from your own instincts.” His accent was different, harsher in many ways, cutting from one word to the next with a confidence mirroring the same confidence in his swagger.

“Fuck you and your favors.”

“Aye, there’s the amethyst in you. But look me in the eyes and tell me you’re not relieved.”

“I hated the bitch, but she was mine.” Lysander swung for him. The dragon ducked and laughed. Laughed! Rage lit Lysander up. He righted himself to swing again when an arm hooked around his neck and heaved him back against a hard chest. Lysander grabbed at the man’s forearm, trying to loosen it, but the male tightened, choking off his air. The watching dragons swirled in his vision, none of them apparently concerned for their leader.

“I dunnae wanna fight you, prince,” he said, low enough that only Lysander heard. “But I will. And you’ll lose. Do the right thing ’ere as yah did at the nest. Yield to me.”

Lysander’s heart pounded in his head. Black flooded his vision. If he passed out, there was no knowing what this flight would do to him. He’d come here for answers, hadn’t he?

Lysander let go and fell limp. The brute shoved, dropping Lysander to a knee. Breathing took too much effort, but Lysander slowly regained control of it and his clearing vision. The dragons were still there, watching, dozing. A couple squabbled, but even that scuffle was all show with no teeth behind it. If this had been amethyst, half of them would have been trying to murder the other half. Bronze would have been the same, only instead of murder, they’d be trying to fuck each other. Was any of this real?

Lysander rubbed at his neck and looked up. “Who the fuck are you?”

The emerald offered his hand. “Name’s Rhadgar, an’ you’re welcome ’ere among us, if you wanna to stay.”

Lysander took the hand, gripping it firmly, accepting the pull to his feet. “And if I don’t?”

Rhadgar’s grip lingered a moment longer than necessary before he let it slip free. “Then yah free to go.”

“How un-dragon of you.” Lysander didn’t trust any of this for a second. The smiles, the pleasantries. It all held the same shallowness as the elves had, and that had turned out badly.

Rhadgar chuckled. “Aye, you’ll find we do things different in ta’ north. A fact your queen kept from you.”

“Elisandra keeping secrets? Whatever next.”

The strange emerald laughed at that too. He patted Lysander on the back and steered him toward where the dragons parted, opening a path. “You wan’ answers. See it in your eyes. You’ll ’ave ’em.”

But at what cost? Lysander guarded his expression and his heart. He’d been tricked before. He knew dragons. For all the smiles, there would be another side. There always was. He’d take the man’s so-called answers and then he’d leave to return south, to Eroan, before Rhadgar’s true reasons for offering sanctuary could materialize.

In the next step, Rhadgar jogged ahead, pulling his magic into him. He shifted once there was room among the dragons and debris, and with a jerk of his horned head, he urged Lysander to do the same.

Lysander pulled his dragon form back around him, wrapping himself in scale and flame, breathing deeply as the wounds came back to haunt him. He was stronger as man, but clearly this strange flight wasn’t interested in spending any time on two legs.

He’d barely caught his balance from the shift when a dragon plowed in, but instead of attacking, it rubbed against his side and *purred*. Lysander’s instincts had him wanting to clamp his wings closed and defend. Another veered in and nipped playfully at his feet. Lysander growled before recognizing the invite to play. It had been a long time since any dragon had asked him to play.

Rhadgar made a chuffing sound and the nippy diamond ducked its head, scolded. The beast peeled off and took to the air. Others followed, filling the sky with shining jeweled colors. The sound of so many of them riding the wind seemed as though it surely filled the world.

Lysander’s breath caught. He’d never thought of his kind as beautiful before. But caught in sunlight on the wing, their scales dazzled.

The sense of a heavy stare skittered down his back. Rhadgar was watching him, not the skies. Lysander shook his head and walked on, pretending all of this was normal, hoping Rhadgar didn’t hear how his battered heart thudded. Dragons didn’t behave this way. They didn’t gather peacefully and *play*. The emerald had a hold over them. Lysander had seen this Rhadgar tear his nest apart. The emerald was vicious. Perhaps all these dragons were terrified.

As Lysander passed by Rhadgar, the emerald prodded his broken wing with his nose. Lysander rounded on him and growled. The emerald glared back, blinked, then drew his lips from his teeth in a wide smile.

Unamused, Lysander snarled and walked on, following the grounded dragons ahead. He would play their game. But he wasn’t letting his guard down, not for Rhadgar’s charm or the wonder of seeing dragons in-flight who weren’t obsessed with trying to kill one another to get ahead. He knew monsters, and these were the worst kind. The kind that hid in plain sight.



“WHO BROKE YOUR WING, EH?”

Lysander swallowed what would have been his first reply and reminded himself he was playing their game, which meant pretending everything he saw was normal. “Elisandra.”

Lysander was witnessing some kind of gathering out in the open. There were no walls to protect them from attack, just dragons, some as men and women, sprawled about a field, campfires scattered among them. They kept their voices low. Lysander had no hope of hearing them over the sounds of the fires, but he’d mingle among them and discover Rhadgar’s true character.

Rhadgar straightened at the table he'd earlier invited Lysander to eat with him at. The wood making up the table had been sliced from a fallen tree, likely by dragon claws considering its rough, wave-like surface. Just the two of them sat around it. None of the gathered dragons paid them any mind. "The queen done ordered me killed," Rhadgar said. "Was before her clutch, before you an' Akiem and... what was her name?" He clicked his fingers. "I was a youngun then, a wee kit."

"Amalia."

"Aye, her. Never met her. But others did o'er the years, those who found their ways north. They said she had a softer heart, that one."

"Before Elisandra ripped it out."

Rhadgar's eyes reflected some of Lysander's old anger. "Your mother was a rot at the center of that tower."

"Oh, I know." Lysander consoled himself with a drink from the cup some dainty male dragon had handed him earlier in the evening. Of course, it was water. He'd have preferred wine. Even elven wine would have done. The fucking niceness of this place made his skin crawl.

"I daren't imagine what you suffered beneath her," Rhadgar said.

"No." Lysander met the male's gaze. "You can't." His back itched. They were being watched again. Turning on the chair, he caught several looking over. All looked away the moment his gaze snagged theirs.

"They're curious," Rhadgar explained.

"So am I," Lysander muttered. The nearby fire crackled and spat. The air was warm, the night quiet. Everything seemed... perfect. But there was no such thing. "What do you want from me?"

Rhadgar gestured, opening his fingers. "Nowt."

The accent made his words strange, but Lysander heard the meaning. It was a lie. Everyone wanted something from Lysander. Everyone but Eroan.

Rhadgar hadn't touched his plate of food, but neither had Lysander. Rhadgar had noticed, but not commented. Having recently been poisoned by a backstabbing elf, Lysander was in no hurry to experience the same again. Still, Rhadgar had spent most of the evening so far eyeing Lysander as curiously as the rest of his flight. The male wanted *something*. Lysander just had to figure it out first.

"Nothing?" Lysander pushed.

Rhadgar stood and came around the edge of the table, stopping to lean against it so he could look down on Lysander. A position of power. "You's suspicious. I get why. But no 'arm'll come to ye' here."

He said all the right things, this one. "You lie smoothly."

Rhadgar's mouth ticked into a smile. "Dunnae need to lie."

"Sure you don't." This male had a bigger ego than Akiem.

Rhadgar's gaze turned heavy and half-lidded. He wet his lips and turned his gaze on his crowd of dragons scattered about them. "You an' me, Lysander. Our place ain't among them." A roughness underscored his voice. "It's above 'em." He pushed off the table and walked among his flight. Firelight danced over his impressive outline, lighting half of him up while casting his other half in shadow. As human, his dragons lifted their gazes to him, some looked away, looked down, anywhere but at Rhadgar as he passed them by.

Lysander watched closer. They weren't turning away. They were offering their necks. And when he reached those as dragon, the beasts rolled onto their sides, exposing their bellies. He didn't have to say a single word, didn't look at them, didn't acknowledge them at all. The message was clear. Here, Rhadgar was king.

Lysander watched until the shadows swallowed the strange, alluring emerald whole. Only when he was surely gone did the dragons return to their group, talking, lounging, eating as though nothing had happened.

Elisandra had never commanded such utter respect and devotion. She ruled by viciousness. Dokul ruled by brute force. And these lands, they *had* been wild. Lysander had seen the maddened dragons here. So how had Rhadgar tamed them?

Lysander lifted his gaze to the stars. He didn't want to be here. He wanted to be south, among the smell of pine and earth and Eroan. He wanted to be in the forest again, with Eroan pulled against him, but what he wanted could never last, not while Lysander was weak. Rhadgar wasn't weak. An emerald. A king.

Lysander needed those answers and then maybe he'd be able to protect the future he so badly wanted with the elf he loved.

CHAPTER 8

Eroan

THE CAMP QUICKLY TOOK SHAPE. Stone huts had their roofs thatched with dried river reeds. The long summer days blurred into one another, and still no dragons.

Eroan didn't know what to make of their absence. It felt too quiet, and while the others saw it as a blessing and a sign the world was changing, he couldn't shake the sense that when the storm broke, it would do so quickly, and the results would be devastating. Patrols continued, venturing farther afield. The humans' scavenged items were quickly put to good use, like plastic pipes, brittle with age, but suitable for diverting water into the camp. A spring had been found using divining rods, and they'd even managed to clear an area for crops.

The camp would make a fine home and would soon need a name, but Eroan avoided such questions. His absence in these matters was noticed, and yet he couldn't bring himself to settle like the others. They were here because of him, but he didn't want to be here at all. With no dragons to fight and no clue as to Lysander's whereabouts, he was adrift without direction, an assassin without a purpose, and it was quietly driving him insane.

Old habits reared their head. He wanted to leave, to keep moving, but couldn't. Somehow, some time ago, he'd become a leader, an *elder*, of all things. The people looked to him for answers. He couldn't walk away from them no matter how he often woke at night, soaked in cold sweat, hearing chains rattling against cold stone walls.

When the shout went up that a dragon had been found, relief had him reaching for the dragonblade. And then guilt. He wanted the fight, the blood, the rawness of it all. He *needed* it.

But the dragon he approached now had been dead for weeks. A bronze. He'd expected a jeweled this far north, but there was no mistaking the dragon's metallic scales, even bloated and distorted with decay.

"A nest..." Nye said, standing on the mound above an opening on the ground.

Eroan joined him and peered down inside at the smashed remains of dragon eggs. The bronze had been attacked and killed protecting her eggs, the kits eaten.

Eroan scanned the skies. Dragonless, as always. By Alumn, he wanted to see something, just a hint, so he could hunt it down and do what he was trained to do. Without a word, he sighed and started down the mound.

“We should move camp,” Nye said, jogging down to Eroan’s side. “Tonight.”

“I don’t see why. This happened weeks ago. We’re miles away. We’ve seen no evidence—”

“The dragon that did this could be close by.”

It wasn’t. They’d smell it. But Nye was acting like he *knew* it was.

“Oh shit—I mean, er, damn, that’s Mirann.” Seraph crouched beside the dragon’s snout. Flies and wolves had been at the carcass. The body was badly mangled. It seemed unlikely Seraph would recognize it.

“Mirann...” Eroan knew the name. “From the Bronze chief’s brood?”

“Oh by Alumn...” Seraph stood and backed away, getting an overall look at the scene. “Lysander *was* here.”

“You don’t know that,” Nye said, too quick to dismiss.

“Yeah, I do.” She snapped back. “Mirann was...” Her gaze snagged Eroan and she reassessed her words. “It was complicated. I picked up on bits of it when I was at their warren. Mirann was mated to Lysander.” She frowned at Eroan, catching the alarm in his expression before he hid it. “It wasn’t by choice.”

Eroan nodded, urging her to continue, ignoring the way her revelation reopened old wounds. He’d known, hadn’t he? Elisandra had called it a coupling. The queen had been desperate to trade Lysander off. “How do you know it’s Mirann?”

“The crown. I recognize it. I saw her as dragon when I was at the bronze warren. It was rumored she carried Lysander’s eggs.” Her attention drifted toward the nest opening and the shattered bit of shell. “Oh no, those were his...?”

Eroan hadn’t known the extent of it and he certainly hadn’t known of any eggs. And it shouldn’t matter. But it did. Lysander had a mate. He’d been here. With Mirann. Free to raise a clutch of eggs like a dragon would. Alumn, he felt the ache in his heart like a betrayal. He knew he shouldn’t. Lysander was dragon. He’d said it often enough. And this was what dragons did. But a nest? Eggs?

“Then that’s why he left, to return to his kind,” Nye said, echoing Eroan’s conclusion. “So much for love,” he uttered, passing by Eroan so only he heard.

Lysander hadn’t said anything about a mate, but the three days they’d had together had been over too soon. There hadn’t been time to talk. Or maybe he’d always intended to leave and that moment between them in the woods had been a goodbye. But that didn’t make sense. Lysander hadn’t behaved like he’d been planning on leaving. He’d *wanted* to stay. Or had that been wishful thinking on Eroan’s part?

“There are tracks leading north,” Seraph said.

Eroan barely heard her. Lysander had a brood. Or would have had. Dragons weren’t elves. Eroan knew that. They didn’t care for their young or each other. So then, why had Lysander stayed?

“Eroan?” Seraph approached him, her face full of concern. Like Lysander, she didn’t know how to hide her thoughts from her eyes.

“Yes?”

“The tracks?”

Dragon tracks. A dragon walking. Not flying. Lysander had been here and he’d left, heading away from Cheen, away from Eroan.

“Maybe it’s not what it looks like.” *Like he’d left.* Seraph’s soft words pulled his thoughts back around to the here and now.

Eroan adjusted the blade against his back and looked north, between the towers, and into the distance. The tracks were old. Eroan was weeks behind him. “I have to know.” But he couldn’t leave

the camp. Wasn't that what Nye had accused, that Eroan always left? His heart told him to go, but his head demanded he stay. He was looking for a fight, a mission, something to keep him breathing. And it was a selfish desire.

He found Nye's figure toeing through the eggshells, hearing his harsh words all over again.

"Maybe he had no choice, Eroan," Seraph said, stopping beside him. "She was horrible, like all bronze. He wouldn't have chosen to come here, to her. There's no way he'd leave you for her. Don't listen to Nye."

But Lysander had a clutch of eggs. Maybe that meant something to dragons? And now the eggs were all smashed. Had Lysander done that? Had he killed Mirann? Or had something else happened here? There was old, dried blood on the ground. Was he wounded? The evidence was strewn about them.

Eroan reeled from the questions. After so long, to find something of Lysander, only to have it slip away again. He rubbed at his forehead and shut all the questions down, gritting his teeth.

"I want to go after him, Seraph, but I can't," he said, whispering between them. Too many lives relied on him staying. He couldn't abandon these people. *His* people. Nye was right. He'd walked away too many times. But by Alumn, he wanted to go north.

"I could go." Her expression caught up with her idea and her eyes widened. "I'll go find him. I can track him. He can't fly. It'll be easy." She anticipated Eroan's denial and narrowed her eyes, planting a hand on her hip. "I'm doing this. You can't stop me. I owe him. You wouldn't let me go to France when I knew he was in trouble, but I can do this." Hesitating, he saw the moment she thought she'd said too much. "Let me do this?"

The North was no place for a lone elf, but he trusted Seraph. She would find Lysander. And then Eroan would have his answers. If Lysander truly had chosen to leave, then he'd live with the dragon's choice. If he'd been forced north, Seraph would discover that too. She was the perfect assassin to send. "All right, but Trey goes with you."

"Oh, c'mon. I don't need—"

"Trey goes with you or you don't go at all."

"Fine." She puffed her bangs from her eyes. "But he'll only slow me down."

CHAPTER 9

Lysander

LYSANDER WOKE SURROUNDED by bodies and did not remember falling asleep that way. Memories of the bronze crowding close, pushing in, suffocating, rattled his scales, and the bodies pressed close eased off, allowing him to breathe again. After Rhadgar had disappeared last night and quickly learning that none of the dragons as human wanted to speak with him, he found a quiet corner of the meadow to curl up in. He'd assumed it would stay quiet. But now it was morning, and he'd gained six companions, noses and tails tucked in, wings loose and bellies exposed. If they hadn't been so tightly packed, he'd probably have scrabbled away.

A warm, rough tongue rode up his hind leg. He swung his head around and growled at the diamond. The same one who had tried to nip him before. She blinked big, pale blue eyes and withdrew.

If he'd had a voice, he'd have told them he wasn't theirs to tuck in, and he didn't want them getting close. But as scale rattling and growling weren't doing anything but stirring them in their sleep, he shoved his nose against them instead, prodding them awake.

Rhadgar eventually saved him by way of a bark that stirred them all awake and slowly, painfully slowly, they each stretched and rolled, plodding away to greet their chief—their *king*. Lysander watched it all unfold. The rubbing against him, the way they offered their long necks. Rhadgar's attention lingered on a few of the females who seemed eager for him to mount them, but soon drifted back to Lysander, now alone in the flattened grass. Lysander snorted a forced smile full of teeth. This would be where Rhadgar made him watch him fuck his females. He expected it. Elisandra had used sex to declare her power, and now this northern king would do the same.

But instead, Rhadgar shook off the affection and took to the wing, blotting on the low morning sun. Jealousy coiled in Lysander's gut. If he had his wing, he could fly like that again. He hadn't missed it so much with Eroan, but here, among his own, he was reminded at every turn of the half thing he'd become. Alone, he tried to stretch the wing, but it had seized long ago. The damn thing wouldn't open.

The diamond was back. Almost pure white, her scales were so smooth and translucent they could have been skin. He'd never seen a diamond up close and admired her approach. She was slim, much slimmer than most dragons, but feather-like. She could probably soar for hours.

She blinked, opened her jaws, and let her tongue loll out.

Lysander rolled his eyes and turned away, but she followed, galloping around him to stand in his way.

Clearly she wasn't going to give up.

He snapped at her, making her shy away. Good. Whatever this was, he didn't want it.

She stood on his tail but when he turned to unleash a roar, she'd already sprung back, front end down, ass up, wings tucked in and eyes big.

He'd played the same with Amalia.

The diamond turned and ran.

Lysander's dragon heart leaped, but as much as old instincts demanded he chase, he sat on his haunches and stayed put. When she realized he wasn't following, she padded back and took up the same posture as before. This went on until the sun had arched high in the sky and her bouncing had thrown up enough grass pollen to cloud the air. Lysander sneezed. He didn't see her move. She hit him in the side, and maybe it was just a game to her, but not to him. He had his teeth in her throat and her body pinned beneath him before she could flutter away.

The primal, dark part of him wanted to finish it. Take, bite, own, fuck.

Other dragons swooped in overhead, screeching a warning, and it only made him want to finish her more. She moved, panting beneath him, her fear sweet and intoxicating. Maybe he should take this one from Rhadgar the same way the king took Mirann.

Rhadgar approached, as the man, not the dragon. A wise move. Had he tried to fight Lysander off, Lysander would have killed the diamond. But even as man, the emerald had authority. The sense of his strength quieted the dragons that had circled in close and Lysander too. Lysander pulled his teeth from the diamond's neck and let her up. Rhadgar slid his gaze to her and something passed between them. "He's not ready," he said.

The diamond whimpered and limped away, blood streaking her pale scales.

With his blood pumping, Lysander almost wished Rhadgar would act on the tension clearly running through his veins. They were emerald, they both thought the same way. Rhadgar *wanted* to fight. Maybe even missed it. But instead of shifting, the emerald king walked away, like he had the night before, like nothing had happened.

Lysander growled at the rest of them and watched them all slink off through the grass.

Later, Lysander sought out the diamond again, but this time as man. She stayed as dragon and watched him approach. Her wounds had scabbed over. Lysander made an effort not to look at them. "About earlier... I'm not like the others here. If you come at me, I'll fight you. I lived in a place where if you don't fight, you die."

She seemed to understand, but without a human face with human emotions, he couldn't know for sure.

"Will you shift and speak with me?"

She tucked her nose under her tail and closed her eyes. A clear sign to be left alone. He wandered the vast nest. It wasn't even a nest, not really. More of an entire territory. There was no tower, no central seat of power. Rhadgar mingled among them, but he also seemed apart from them in the same way Lysander was apart from them. None would speak with him, not really, and by the evening, he began to wonder about leaving.

Alone, near the edge of the meadow, on a high knoll, he watched the dragons mingle, feeling a sense of loss. The only place he'd felt he belonged among dragons was with Amalia and that was so long ago now it could easily be a dream, like his dreams of the Silver dragon calling to him.

A scuffle broke out between an onyx and an opal. Lysander didn't see what started it, but Rhadgar

was among them within seconds. He clapped his jaws together at one, but the other, when he swung his glare on the onyx, it dropped without him having to do any more than just look it in the eyes. Lysander might have thought no more of it, but Rhadgar didn't let the opal up. He stalked in close, the two dragons locked inside the other's gaze and Lysander felt it then, the small tug on the center of him in the same place he used to shift. A twitch really, nothing more, but from across the field, Rhadgar suddenly looked up and over, pinning Lysander with that very same stare, and the twitch became a thudding, beating, second heart of power. Not Lysander's, but similar and strong enough to almost pull the shift right out of him.

Rhadgar's gaze.

There was power in it. True power, not just dominance. Power like Lysander's mother had. The same power he'd tapped into when he'd killed her.

He needed to know more.



RAINCLOUDS GATHERED IN THE DISTANCE. Lysander could smell it in the air. As dragon, he sniffed, tasting the baked meadows and scenting Rhadgar beside him. The emerald had urged him to follow, and it seemed they had walked for hours through the long, undulating landscape.

When the rain began tapping the grasses, Rhadgar shifted to man and Lysander did the same, curious as to why he'd been brought all the way into the middle of nowhere.

Rhadgar stroked the waist-high, waving grassheads. "Without yah wing, you're severely disadvantaged."

Lysander rolled his shoulder and straightened his back. "Do you need me to answer or is that just an observation?"

Rhadgar's jaw fluttered. He lifted his gaze to the approaching storm. "Your entire life, you've been told you're worthless, eh?"

"What of it?"

"She tried to kill you." The other emerald turned his gaze on Lysander, and now that he knew what to look for, Lysander felt the strange weight of it. Mirann had said something to him weeks ago, something about his gaze? Was that where Rhadgar's power lay?

"And clearly failed," Lysander finished for him.

"You has power inside you. It's been choked your entire life, but it's there."

All of this seemed too surreal. Lysander waited, keeping his face blank even as his pulse raced. "Whatever power I should have had is clearly broken or else I would have used it by now."

"You have used it," Rhadgar said. "Probably without realizing. Have you found lesser dragons sometimes become submissive around you? Pliable?"

Lysander laughed, remembering how he'd fought for every breath as a kit, and later, fought the ranks of the lowers to become their flight leader and the queen's most skilled guard. "No."

Rhadgar conceded with a shrug. "Nay, fact remains, you survived. An emerald among amethysts. That ain't no easy thing."

"I had help." He'd had Carline to help him heal. Akiem too. His brother had never left him. There had been times Akiem *could* have killed him and hadn't. Times he'd wondered if his brother did care, under all the amethyst shit. He'd gotten close, but never taken that final bite. The sword through the chest beneath the tower had been a mistake.

“Your life is a lie.” Rhadgar straightened up to him, standing eye-to-eye, and there was no denying that this northern king’s eyes dazzled. “They tried to ’ave you killed—they’ve killed us all in the past—because we are stronger than every single one of ’em. Whether tis a glitch in our jeweled genes or if we was always meant to rise above ’em, it dunnae matter. They kill us when we’re young because they know we’re above ’em. We are their kings.”

Power. Lysander had never had power over others. Only Elisandra had that. But Rhadgar’s charismatic words weren’t so easily dismissed. Hadn’t he wished his whole life that he could be different, that he could be strong, that he had control? This emerald’s words were seductive, luring Lysander in. He tried to guard himself against the spell in them, but it was becoming harder and harder to remain detached. He wanted to believe this strange red-haired man with his honeyed words. “How did you stop the fight? I saw you quell it. The opal just... backed off. It wasn’t dominance, it was more than that. I *felt* it.” Lysander pressed two fingers to the spot beside his heart. “Inside.”

Rhadgar breathed in and continued his walk through the grass. “The humans once told of how we bespelled ’em.”

“Myths.” Lysander followed in the path the male cut.

“But part of the myth is real. You and me—*emeralds*—we have the power to control our own kind.”

It was fantasy. It had to be. This dragon was insane, likely driven mad up here in this long expanse of nothingness.

“Think I’m lying, eh?” Rhadgar flashed a coy look over his shoulder.

“I don’t know what to think.” Lysander had seen the way dragons behaved around him. He *had* power. But Lysander didn’t believe that same power extended to him. It couldn’t.

“When you killed the queen, what d’yah you feel?”

Lysander ran his hand over the grass and listened to the fat raindrops tapping all around them. “Like I was rising up, not falling. Like I was something else than what I’d been before. I didn’t feel like myself. I felt... bigger.”

“You tapped into that part a you born to rule.”

Lysander laughed. Rhadgar wouldn’t say that if he truly knew what it had been like in the tower.

And now Lysander knew this was nonsense. He was just the runt, youngest of Elisandra’s clutch. Broken and wrong in all ways.

He stopped walking. The rain fell heavier now, soaking through his hair and dripping from his bangs. He swept his hair back and eyed Rhadgar as the dragon turned to regard him too. Maybe this dragon king was right about it all but one single thing. Lysander could not be the things he spoke of. Not now. He’d been too long kept beneath Elisandra, and then Dokul. He’d survived, that was all. With a broken wing and heart. He couldn’t fly, he couldn’t somehow control his kin. Just like Elisandra had said: he was nothing.

“It’s time I returned south.”

“Ain’t nothing there for you.”

“There is something.” He turned and whispered, “Someone.” He just wanted to go back to Cheen, to Eroan. He deserved that, didn’t he? Nothing else mattered. Dragons and myths and kings and control. He didn’t want any of it. What he wanted was to be in the forest with Eroan there beside him. Everything was simple there. He’d danced with elves and as silly as it seemed, he wanted that again. It had only been a moment of light in a whole lot of darkness, but that moment showed him how things could be.

A dragoncall split the sky like thunder.

Lysander looked up. The beast was huge. Bronze. Old. With a wingspan twice his. Fear tried to rip all sense from him. It wasn't Dokul, but it might as well have been. Out here, in the open, Lysander was exposed.

He turned to Rhadgar, but the spot where he'd been standing in the grass was empty.

"Shit..."

The dragon called again, circling above, zeroing in on Lysander. There was nowhere to hide, just the long grass, but the dragon had already seen him.

Lysander ran. Heart and legs pumping, he ran through the cutting grass, sensing the weight of dragon bearing down.

The beast swooped overhead. Lysander dropped to a crouch in the grass. Fucking Rhadgar. Where was his power now? It was all horseshit; Lysander had known it. At least he'd have the knowledge of being right when the bronze tore into him.

Fuck it.

He wasn't running from this. From the bronze.

He shifted, filling into scale and claw and stoking the fire in his heart, and when the bronze next flew in, Lysander let loose the flame, blinding the bronze mid-flight. It hit the ground with a thunderous thud and tumbled, wing over wing, taking out great swathes of meadow. Lysander would have torn into it then if Rhadgar hadn't suddenly appeared. The emerald lunged in, stealing Lysander's kill. He clamped a foot on the bronze's neck and held it down. Lysander rounded on the king, but his growls fell away. The bronze lay still, panting and huffing, locked in a battle of wills beneath Rhadgar's gaze. Rhadgar's rumbling growls drove home the power of that stare, drilling down, until impossibly, the massive bronze fell limp and dropped its head. Rhadgar pushed off and the bronze stayed on its side, belly exposed and head down.

Shit, it shouldn't have been possible. Bronze were all rage and lust, barely controllable, and yet Rhadgar had subdued it without a fight.

Rhadgar shifted and said, "He's yours." He gestured at the bronze.

Lysander could kill him, and he probably wouldn't defend himself, but a bronze that size might prove useful, not least because he may know where Dokul was keeping Akiem.

Lysander backed up, signaling the fight was over, and as the skies opened, dumping waves of rain over them, he followed the bronze and Rhadgar back across the plains, thinking on all the possibilities. Rhadgar had subdued the bronze with little more effort than a stern glare. If Rhadgar was right, and Lysander could do the same, then he would finally be the one in control. And everything would change.



THE BRONZE HAD SHIFTED to human. His metal ornaments tinkled and glittered in sunlight. Not as big as Dokul, he still had the chief's heavy and cumbersome build. Lysander had deliberately forgotten how their physicality was just as much a threat as their viciousness. But now, tucked in a natural bowl-like depression in the earth, with Rhadgar placed strategically between him and the bronze, he couldn't escape the memories.

His name was Boder, and he'd eyed Lysander with a small smile ever since returning to the meadow.

Rhadgar sat himself on a boulder, like he had when Lysander had first seen him. He seemed to be

waiting for something and was in no hurry to speak.

Lysander leaned against a quarried-out wall of stones, keeping his arms folded, and stayed quiet too. It was good Rhadgar was between them or else he may have already tried to kill the bronze for that fucking smile.

“You know who he is?” Boder grunted, nodding toward Lysander while addressing Rhadgar. Rhadgar blinked back at him as though he’d forgotten the bronze existed. “Dokul’s bitch.”

Rhadgar was off the rock with jeweled reflexes and staring the bronze down. It didn’t matter he was half the male’s size, the bronze still ducked his head, then dropped to his knees, stopping short of rolling over and showing his substantial gut.

By diamonds, Lysander witnessed Rhadgar’s gift and still didn’t believe it.

“What he is,” Rhadgar posted behind him at Lysander, “is a darn sight better than you. Forget that and I’ll let ’im tear your throat out as he has been clearly wantin’ to since you trespassed.” Rhadgar wrapped a hand around the bronze’s thick throat. “Why are you here?”

“*Do-kul*,” the male wheezed, eyes bulging.

“What of him?”

“*Wants... land. Wants ... prince and brood.*”

Lysander rubbed at his face and looked skyward. Of course Dokul wanted him. Only death would stop the Bronze chief. When the chief learned Mirann was dead, and so was the clutch of eggs, he would rage. He’d tear the whole world apart looking for Lysander.

Rhadgar threw the bronze down and stood over him, making sure he stayed down. “If this ’ere metal returns to the Bronze an’ tells ’im you’re dead, your clutch gone, would that please you?”

Lysander couldn’t hide his surprise. Why? Why would Rhadgar do this for him? Only Eroan had been kind in the same way, and with Eroan it was different. Rhadgar didn’t look at him the same way. His wasn’t about attraction, or even control, or some twisted amethyst trick, so why then? Lysander swallowed, trying to think his way around what had to be a trap. What did Rhadgar gain from helping him?

“You can make him do that?” Lysander asked quietly.

Rhadgar’s smile broadened. “I can make him do anything I want.”

“Anything?”

“Any—damn—thing.”

“Could you have him return to Dokul and kill him?”

Rhadgar’s smile didn’t fade, but it did subtly change, becoming darker, like his eyes had. “I can command it, but he’d fail. Dokul an’ the bronze would come ’ere searchin’ for you.” Rhadgar crossed the small distance between them. “Do you really wish for another to strike that killin’ blow, denying you a chance at vengeance?”

How did this male know Lysander’s own mind so accurately? “No.”

Rhadgar gripped Lysander’s shoulder and held it. “Nay. Let the past go. You are stronger than the creature you were before.”

It would be too easy to believe it. He ached to believe this emerald’s promises. To have the dragons beneath him. All of them. The power of it. He could taste it, victory, dominance, the terrible hunger finally sated, and by the great ones, he wanted it.

“You’re both fucking insane,” the bronze grumbled from his knees.

Rhadgar whirled, murder in the dragon’s eyes. Lysander dashed between them and lifted his hands, blocking Rhadgar. For a breathless second, the emerald king looked back at him, through him, all beast and nothing human, but in a blink, the threat vanished. There was a real dragon inside that

man.

“Not yet,” Lysander said, and again, softer, “Not yet.” Rhadgar eased off, but had he been dragon, his tail would have been lashing. The emerald’s eyes shone their warning, and inside, Lysander felt that strange power build, that part of him he used to heal, to shift, but also to kill. Then he realized Rhadgar couldn’t control him like he did the others. He’d likely tried, several times. Lysander had felt him try, but whatever spell his gaze cast didn’t work on him. That was knowledge worth holding on to.

With Rhadgar taking himself back to his rock, Lysander turned and crouched in front of the bronze.

“Where’s my brother?”

Boder sneered. “Under Dokul. Being fucked night and day, punished for not being you.”

Lysander had known what would happen but that didn’t make hearing it any easier. “Is he…” The question died on his lips. No, Akiem wasn’t well. He’d been with Dokul for weeks now. Dokul would break Akiem, if he hadn’t already. Lysander tasted bronze on his tongue, like blood. He remembered all too easily the weight of Dokul on his back, the burn of physical pain as the male took him again and again. Eroan had saved Lysander. Akiem had no such savior.

“You can’t do what he can,” Boder nodded at Rhadgar. “You’re broken, just like the rumors said. If you return to Dokul, he’ll take you in, might even go easy on you. But if you wait, and he finds you, he’ll fuck you until you beg for death.”

Well, it was nothing he hadn’t expected to hear. “Where are the bronze?”

“In the southwest, where land meets the ocean on three sides. Go to him, prince. He owns you. You are br—”

“What of Carline, the Gold? Is she with him?”

“She’s been in the wind since the tower fell.”

Carline left, and strangely that hurt more than the bronze’s threats. He had harbored a foolish hope that she might try to find him, to explain why she’d had him find the gem and if she truly could heal his wing. But now she was gone and maybe it had all been a ruse to free herself, just as Akiem had said.

The bronze, that life, it seemed a long way from these jewel-speckled meadows where dragons frolicked unmolested. He felt as though he should go, for Akiem, for revenge, but it meant leaving this unexpected haven. A haven he was beginning to believe in. Things *were* different here.

Lysander stood and glanced at Rhadgar. The male was perched back on his rock, eyes hard and sharp. He nodded once.

Lysander looped his arm around the bronze’s neck, viper-fast, and pulled, locking the big male against his thighs. He squeezed. The bronze thumped at his leg, clawed at his chest. It didn’t matter. Lysander needed this to happen. The power and rage and desire and lust and all of it built inside like it always did. He pulled harder, muscles burning, and rocked with the bronze’s efforts to push him off, until the male slowed, until his clawing hands fell to his sides and his body weight dropped. And still, Lysander held him, needing to be sure. Gods, vengeance, power, the dragon in him wanted to roll in the kill.

He dropped the body and kicked it over onto its back.

He almost shifted, almost let loose the roar trying to claw its way out of him. Instead, he looked up at the dragons scattered about the lands. Dozens of them. Almost a hundred that he knew of. Each of them under Rhadgar’s control.

A powerful flight.

An opportunity.

Rhadgar joined him and snarled down at the carcass. “Metals are the old-world. We are the new.”

He met Lysander's gaze. "You're beginning to learn."

Oh, he understood all right. Rhadgar was dangerous in a way that Elisandra and Dokul never had been. He had true power over all dragons, but here, it was wasted. These dragons weren't fighters. Under Lysander, they could be. And when Dokul came looking, Lysander would finally bring the bronze beast down.

CHAPTER 10

Eroan

EROAN JERKED AWAKE, heart already racing. Shadows crowded his small stone-built dwelling. Embers simmered in the fireplace grate. He'd fallen asleep atop the covers, half-dressed, exhausted and aching from helping build additional buildings, a wood and grain store.

He watched the embers glow, waiting for his heart to calm. He'd dreamed of dragons. A great wave of them rising up, drowning the world in flame.

A shrieking dragoncall split the night, suddenly bringing the dream into the dwelling with him. Throwing on a shirt and grabbing his blade, he was outside in two strides. His people knew what to do. They'd planned for this. Most had already begun dumping green brush on the fires to instantly snuff them out. Eroan scooped up a pile of leaves and grass and tossed it on the fire nearest him. Smoke, the dragons might miss, but a flame in the dark was an open invitation.

Humans and elves moved silently, extinguishing lamps, until the camp that had become home fell to complete darkness.

Another piercing call barreled overhead.

Eroan looked up.

There was no moon tonight and clouds had stifled the stars, but he could see movement and hear the great *whoomph* of sweeping wings. The dragonblade sat heavy on his back.

More calls joined the first.

Bronze. He couldn't say how he knew, but he sensed it was them. And they were heading north in the direction Lysander had gone weeks before, and Seraph too.

The calls faded into the distance but the tension of seeing dragons again after so long without them lingered in the air.

"The danger has passed," Eroan assured those who lingered. "Go back to your homes. Rest well. I'll be watching." He repeated the same over and over. Order elves and Chloe's warriors were patrolling. If any bronze had seen the settlement and returned, they'd have ample warning.

Nye carved his way through the blurry-eyed crowd, heading straight for Eroan. "We should leave," he said, keeping his voice low. "We are exposed here. We should return to the forests of the south."

Returning south would put them well within Cheen's territories. Returning south meant moving

farther away from Lysander. Returning south meant Eroan could easily find his head on the block and a blade's edge against his neck.

Eroan steered Nye to a sheltered spot tucked away behind two vacant huts, their occupants on patrol. The whole settlement didn't need to hear his dissent. "We have something good here. I'll not abandon it because of one flyby. There have been no encounters, Nye. We're safe here. These people are safe here."

"For how much longer?" Nye stepped back as far as the cramped space allowed. He threaded his fingers through his hair, pulling it back from his face. "Those were bronze. They're probably looking for that *Mirann*. If they find her carcass and scent us, they'll come here." He pointed at the ground. "To us. They'll find us."

"There's no reason to believe that—"

"They will come." Nye snapped. "I know they will. I knew they'd find us. After we left Cheen I thought... I thought it'd be over. There was no reason for them to go to Cheen. She had him—" Nye bit off his own words, sighed, and fell back against the outside of the hut. When he next spoke, a haunted look shadowed his gaze. "Alumn, there had to be a hundred bronze in that flight."

And the flight was going north. "Just a patrol." But Eroan wasn't sure he believed it.

Eroan should have been trekking north. He could still go, leaving Nye in charge. They'd had their disagreements, but Eroan respected the male's skill as an assassin leader. He was perhaps too rash to lead a whole settlement, but it would only be temporary. And Chloe was here to help temper him.

But it didn't matter what argument he came up with, he couldn't leave. There was a slim chance the bronze would double back. He always left too many unfinished things behind him. He had to see this through.

"She had who?" Eroan asked, Nye's words finally sinking in. Something else he'd said came back to him too, before they'd startled the emerald dragon. Nye had mentioned, "*They turned on you because they finally saw the real Eroan Ilanea and all it took was a tree burning to do it.*"

Nye's presence so close in the dark between the huts took on a new weight, one more sinister.

Eroan staggered back, bumping against a wall. "To do what?" he muttered, but fear gripped him as he knew the answer, and Nye looked over, hearing the words, feeling the change in them. "You burned the tree..." Even as Eroan spoke, he denied it inside. No elf would do such a thing. And yet Nye's dark eyes widened and his sneer twitched.

Nye lifted his chin. "Someone had to do something to stop you from killing us all."

"You burned Alumn's tree... as a distraction." The pieces slotted into place, one after the other. "Lysander *was* taken." A thudding started in Eroan's ears, thumping in time with his heart, beating like the drums of war. "Mirann took him and you helped her." Harder, the thudding drummed.

Nye even smiled, like he was proud of what he'd done. "She was going to burn our home. I saved the village. I saved them! Not you!" Nye jabbed at his own chest. "The dragon prince would have turned on us all. He's a monster. You'll see... one day you'll see what he's truly capable of and you'll thank me for saving you too."

Eroan couldn't breathe. The air went in, filling his lungs, but it made no difference, and the thumping in his head grew louder and louder with every beat of his heart.

Nye had him gripped by the arms suddenly, the male's fingers like iron shackles. "This is all... it's some kind of madness that's gripped you," he said, his voice softer. Nye leaned close, his eyes half-lidded. "But I'll not let you go, Eroan. I'm here for you. I've always been here for you. I know it hurts, but you're not alone. I'll help you through this."

That's what the thumping was, an agony. A betrayal. A sense of wrongness that was trying to pull

him down and down. He looked up at Nye, his oldest friend, and no longer knew him.

Nye's mouth was on his, taking what hadn't been given and then his grip switched from Eroan's shoulders to his forearms, trying to back him up against a hut wall. The kiss plundered, reaching where it had no right to go.

Eroan brought his arms up between them and shoved, knocking Nye away. The stolen kiss burned his mouth. He wiped his lips clean. "*Leave.*"

Nye almost came at him again but hesitated. "Eroan... just... think. Cheen is safe. You're here. I'm with you. Look at what you have now. The prince was poisoning you—"

Eroan had the recurved dragonblade blade in his hand. Nye reeled and went for his dagger. He got it free too. Its point pressed into Eroan's side, but Eroan had Nye pinned back against the hut, the blade at his throat. It happened fast, between one heartbeat and the next.

"I don't know what happened to you. I don't know if I should have seen it sooner." Eroan pushed harder, trapping Nye still. He had his free hand around Nye's neck, too, now, and squeezed, smothering Nye's body with his own. "I don't know where it went wrong, Nye. I don't know how to save you."

"I... don't need... saving." Nye wheezed, eyes wide. "You... do."

"You took him from me." Eroan leaned in so damn close he could smell Nye's fear. "You handed him back to the dragons." Alumn, Eroan couldn't think. He wanted to draw the blade cross Nye's throat for what he had done and paint the ground with Nye's blood. But he couldn't, not when Nye was looking at him with sympathy in his eyes. Nye believed he'd been right, and beneath all the rage, Eroan could see it, he could, but he wasn't sure he was strong enough to forgive. Not this.

Nye's blade dug deeper into Eroan's side. Eroan wanted the pain, he almost begged Nye to do it, it would make finishing him so much easier. "Why are you like this?"

"I love you!"

Eroan bared his teeth and leaned close enough to kiss him back. "I don't love you. I have never loved you. We were friends. Now we are nothing. What you've done... I will never forgive it." Nye trembled and breathed hard through his teeth, his fear becoming anger. Eroan wanted to do more, to make him bleed, to feed the rage. "Your actions are abhorrent and against everything an Order assassin upholds. I hereby strip you of your place among the Order." Nye shuddered and tried to turn his head from side to side, but Eroan held him firm. "Nye Cadogan, you are dead to me." He pulled Nye forward and shoved him out into the open where others immediately witnessed. Nye stumbled, but stayed upright and whirled on the spot. "Leave." Eroan stalked forward, aware of eyes turning toward them, "And if I see you again, I will kill you."

"Eroan, please...? I love you more than he's capable of. I've always loved you. Don't do this. Don't turn me away. I did all of this *for you.*"

"If you truly loved me, you'd have let Lysander and me be." Eroan pulled a cool breath deep into his lungs and sheathed the dragonblade. "Leave. Go north or south, I don't care, but never come back to me."

Tears brimmed Nye's eyes, but he straightened, and when he lifted his voice, rage had it trembling. "You're making a mistake!" Nye scanned the group of people, human and elf alike. "You'll die following him." He backed away. "Eroan Ilanea is a curse!" He stumbled through them, shoving a few aside, and then he was gone, melted into the shadows.

Eroan prayed to Alumn he never saw Nye again, but a sense of dread told him it wasn't over. Nye had never given up easily.

"Is everything all right?" Chloe asked, having watched the final blows from the fringes.

“It will be.” Eroan swallowed the heavy bitterness and fought back the desire to scream at the skies. He knew rage and he knew how to turn it into a weapon. “It’s time your warriors learned the way of the Order. We’re going to need the numbers should the bronze—or anyone—return and try to destroy what we have here.” He thought of Alumn’s tree burning, of his kin weeping. Nye had been lucky to escape here with his life. He would not get a second chance.

Chloe’s soft hand settled on Eroan’s arm, so he had no way of hiding how he shook. “Are *you* all right?”

“I will be,” he said, barely keeping the growl contained, “when I get my dragon back.”

CHAPTER 11

Lysander

“TEACH ME.”

Rhadgar merely laughed at that, plucked a flowerhead off the tall, swaying meadow daisies and began to pull the petals off, one by one. “Cannae teach what is already known.”

Lysander folded his arms. “So you just woke up one morning and discovered you could control your kin?”

“More or less.”

He’d learned in his weeks here that Rhadgar was an enigma and a tease. He had all the answers but only shared drops at a time. Lysander was beginning to suspect Rhadgar of deliberately delaying. The dragon was lonely. He shouldn’t be. He had a huge brood to keep him company, but few spoke with him, the same as none spoke with Lysander. Rhadgar controlled them. They lived with that, and him, in a strange kind of mutual truce.

But that wasn’t enough for Lysander.

He’d seen what could be done and by the great ones, he needed to do it too. Nothing this good had ever fallen in his lap. He wasn’t about to let it go. Rhadgar was emerald. Lysander was emerald. So, Lysander had a broken wing. The rest of him worked. Mostly. He *could* do this. He wasn’t leaving this land *until it was done*, as Eroan would say. Lysander wanted to go back to Eroan stronger, as someone who deserved Eroan Ilanea, not the burden he’d been until now.

And if Lysander could control his kin, he could—would kill Dokul. And more. He could do so much more. Rhadgar was wasting his gift. Lysander would bring all the dragons down and end the war. Alumn had said as much in his dreams.

“So...” Rhadgar began, finished with his flower, he focused on Lysander instead. “...Your whole life, you were controlled. Elisandra and then... Dokul?”

“Yes.” Lysander had no idea if Dokul’s treatment of him had reached this far north, but it was likely. Rhadgar knew a great deal for a dragon who didn’t exist.

“Well then, it ain’t no real surprise you ain’t come into your power. They all coveted you, aye? They all wanted a piece of the prince?”

“Yes,” Lysander said again. “I was never told why.”

“But now you see why that was. Can you imagine what would have happened had you learned of

your true potential while under Elisandra? I suppose it happened anyway, eventually. She feared you but she wan'ed you. The same as Dokul. The same as your bronze mate. The same as all dragons. They all admire you."

"How do I learn it?"

"Don't know. It happened early with me. I was to be killed by the queen. I escaped, she sent a flight after me, we fought," he waved a hand like all of this was unimportant, "they thought me dead. But emeralds are tough bastards an' we *heal*... Also nature's way of making sure we survive. I found my way here an' it just *happened*."

"It just happened?" Lysander snorted.

"It was just the one dragon to begin with an' when I discovered how easily it submitted I... anyway... it died, I killed it, but I found another an' learned that if I didn't wanna be alone, I should *play well* with others instead of eatin' 'em."

That sounded more like the jeweled Lysander knew.

"You've seen what I am. I ain't weak. I do not hesitate to kill, but I'm not the *fuck it—kill it* type like the rest of our kin. I'll happen a chance you're the same. Oh, we still have needs, we is dragon, but we ain't mindless in our pursuit of desires, as the metals are."

Everything Rhadgar said resonated deep inside Lysander's soul. "I wish I'd met you sooner." He'd spoken before realizing he probably shouldn't have.

Rhadgar nodded with an understanding deep in his green eyes. "So do I, prince. So do I."



RHADGAR DISAPPEARED DAILY, and because nobody spoke, Lysander had no idea where the northern king went. Flightless, he couldn't very well follow him. So he often shifted and resigned himself to stalking the dumb cows along the eastern coast, but always at the back of his mind he was aware of time passing and his heart aching.

He wanted to leave, but couldn't, not yet. Not when Rhadgar was talking and telling him things. Showing him things about himself. Showing him a different way.

The diamond pounced when Lysander had his back turned and his eyes on the grazing cattle. He'd had his head down and body flattened in the grass, so focused on the prey he hadn't considered he could be prey too. The diamond was on him, claws sinking in. He swung his head back, tore her off him, and pinned her down, panting through the grip he had on her neck.

It was only then it occurred to him that she hadn't hurt him. Her claws hadn't broken his skin. She'd been playing, and yet again, he'd almost torn her throat out. Well, then it was her damn fault for poking him when she should have known by now to leave him alone.

He released her and grumbled, as much at her as himself. He hadn't smelled her. She'd been downwind. Had she been a bronze, he'd have lasted all of three seconds. It was only because she was lighter that he'd managed to pull her off.

She stayed glued to the ground, but her eyes were big and full of *play*.

He huffed at her. *Fool*. She'd get herself killed.

Play, her eyes pleaded.

These fucking dragons were soft. By diamonds, if she'd been in the tower, she'd have been eaten before making it through a week.

He bared his teeth in warning. She hunched lower.

Lysander hoped that'd be it and scanned the land for prey. And now the cows had moved on, hidden deep in the brush.

He could have stalked them but didn't feel much like it now.

She was still watching him.

Play.

He narrowed his eyes and held her hopeful gaze, testing out that center of him where the magic lived. Nothing happened. And now she was panting, suddenly eager, like his staring had...

Oh by nights, she was into him. He'd missed all the signs because he hadn't been looking for them. Had he been man, he could have told her he wasn't interested but things were more complicated as dragon. Snorting, he shook his head. And then the sweetest of familiar scents tickled across his nose. Pine. Cut wood.

Elf.

The diamond bolted, threading through the long grass like a needle. She moved *fast*. Lysander galloped after her, desperately searching the hills for the source of the scent. Eroan. Could it be? If he were here, Lysander couldn't let the diamond get close. She veered left, breaking her cover, and Lysander plowed into her side, knocking her clean off her feet. Her tail lashed, wrapping around his hindquarters, and they tumbled. She let out a yelp and then Rhadgar was on the ridge, wings spread, fire glowing low in his throat.

Lysander had no wish to fight the king, especially as this all was a misunderstanding. He untangled himself from the diamond and watched her limp off and then Rhadgar filled his view, the glare and growl a clear warning not to fuck with his brood, even if he couldn't pull the control trick on Lysander.

The scent of elf had passed, but Lysander lingered long into the evening, hoping to catch sight of movement among the grass. None came.



"Psst."

His drifting, half-dreaming thoughts twitched.

A rock smacked him on the end of his nose, stinging where it bounced off scale. He opened his eyes and looked straight at the innocent-looking boulder ahead. The scent of elf was strong now, even though she had placed herself downwind. The fact she'd gotten this far without waking an entire field of dozing dragons was a miracle.

"Alumn," the elf with an ear-tip missing peeked around the boulder, "you're big up close, huh. Who broke your crown?"

He'd forgotten some part of his crown had broken during the fight with Rhadgar, but that was the least of his concerns in that moment. Seraph was here, and she was going to die before dawn if he didn't get rid of her fast. He considered shifting, but the press of energy could wake those closest to them and he wasn't yet sure how this brood dealt with elves.

Jerking his head, he urged her to move behind an exposed collection of rocks and boulders. It wasn't much but it might be enough to hide her from curious eyes. Soundlessly, she jogged behind the rocks and waited as he moved around, out of sight. Not easy to do. Only once he was sure they wouldn't be seen did he shift.

Seraph blinked into the dark, trying to refocus her night-sensitive eyes. "A little warning next

time?”

He pulled her down into a crouch behind the rocks. “What are you doing here?”

“Looking for you.” Her gaze dropped to the dragon pendant around his neck. “Eroan was nearly killed, we found Mirann’s nest, and then we thought you might be hurt and—”

“Wait. Slow down. Is Eroan well?”

“The tree burned. For some stupid reason, they blamed you and because you weren’t there—where were you?” She punched him on the arm, barely putting any weight behind it. “Eroan got the blame.”

“I wasn’t there because your friend Nye drugged me and dumped me with Mirann. Is Eroan all right, Seraph?”

“Yes, he’s fine. Bossy and grumpy, so normal. Wait... Nye drugged you? But he...” She paused. “Oh.” She didn’t seem surprised. “I told you he had a thing for Eroan. Why didn’t you see that coming?”

“How?”

She snorted. “And he’s not my friend. That’s why he was freaking out at the nest... He thought you were close... Wait, *did* you kill Mirann?”

“No. Look. This...” He circled a finger between them. “You can’t be here. I don’t know these dragons, but they’re jeweled. They’ll eat you.”

“Then let’s go. I’ve come to take you back.”

He smiled. Gods, he loved this little elf. She’d trekked all this way for him? “You’re something, you know that? But I can’t go. There are things happening here... I can’t leave. Not yet. Why didn’t Eroan come?”

“He... can’t. Anye kicked him out, but some of the Order and Chloe’s people chose his side, and now they’ve built a new home and he’s there... being Eroan.”

He could see it so readily. Eroan was always meant to lead. His people loved him. Well, most of them. The ones who were right. And this was going to be the way of things. Lysander with dragons, and Eroan with elves. It couldn’t be another way.

“You have to go to him,” Seraph whined. “He thinks you chose to leave.”

“I can’t.” Lysander rested back against a rock. Oh, but he wanted to. Life was easier with Eroan. Everything felt right with Eroan. But if he went back, nothing would change. He would go back, when he was powerful, just like Rhadgar.

“You’re meant to be together,” Seraph said softly.

She was a fool to think such a thing. “Don’t you see?” he asked her. “This is how it will always be. We cannot be together, Seraph. Not yet. We belong to different people.”

“You don’t belong to anyone. Not anymore. And neither does Eroan. Oh, you’re both as stubborn as each other, you know that? He loves you and you love him. It’s that simple. You’re just making it difficult because you’re afraid.”

“It’s not—”

“And who is this wee thing?” Rhadgar said from above them. He stood atop a rock, one boot resting on a rocky step, his forearm resting on his raised knee. “There are no walls here and no secrets either. Who is your little friend, Lysander?”

The emerald’s eyes shone, and a sly, predatory tone in Rhadgar’s voice triggered Lysander’s instincts. He pulled Seraph behind him, not caring that she hissed at being manhandled. They’d been here before and he had no wish to see a repeat of Dokul’s treatment of her. He didn’t believe Rhadgar would try to fuck her, but the emerald’s interest blazed as plain as day on his face.

“This elf is mine. She’s under my protection,” Lysander said, too quickly, instantly regretting how easily he’d given away how much he cared. He’d been so long outside the tower, he’d forgotten how to hide his weaknesses, Seraph being one of them.

Rhadgar’s eyes flashed. He dropped off the rock and stalked around them both.

Lysander side-stepped, keeping Seraph behind him and himself between her and Rhadgar. “Don’t do this.”

“I’s just curious. For so long I ain’t seen an elf and then I see several in a few weeks...”

“You’ve seen others?”

“Oh yes. I like to watch ’em.”

Lysander swallowed. “Rhadgar... stop.” The sounds of dragons stirring awake reached him. Lysander would fight them all to protect her—and probably die. And then she’d die. And for what? Because she’d come to take him back to Eroan. He couldn’t allow that to happen. “This elf is mine.” He held out a hand, keeping the dragon back. The male smiled, but Lysander knew that smile well. A dragon’s smile, full of teeth and want.

“Seraph, you should not have come,” he snapped. Dragons prowled into sight. Four, then five, then more.

“I had to.” Her voice trembled.

He heard the sound of her freeing the dragonblade, for all the good it would do her. She was prey here and after the dragons were done with her, they’d fight over who got to eat her first.

“Damn it. Run.” He shifted, hoping she moved before the true weight of him filled the space she’d been standing in, and now, as dragon, he threw open his good wing and glared Rhadgar down. His brood gathered behind Rhadgar, more and more swelling the ranks.

Rhadgar shifted too and tried to peer around Lysander at the fleeing elf. Lysander snapped his jaws together inches from the dragon’s snout and growled a warning. He’d fought Rhadgar for Mirann. But Seraph wasn’t Mirann. Seraph was precious. Fire boiled in his throat. He’d die before these dragons hurt her.

“I’m not running, you overgrown lizards!” A small voice said from right near Lysander’s left front foot.

He couldn’t look, couldn’t take his eyes off Rhadgar, who in turn was staring at Seraph like she’d sprouted horns. Rhadgar’s eyes narrowed. He didn’t like to be told no. Lysander saw where this was headed, and there was no way to avoid it now.

Dragons behind growled their warnings.

Rhadgar lifted his head. His firepit blazed, glowing through his scales, his jaws opened.

Lysander lunged.

CHAPTER 12

Eroan

“EROAN!”

Eroan pretended not to hear and brought the axe down, cutting the log clean in half.

“Eroan, come quickly!”

Another swing. Another cut. His shoulders ached. Sweat dripped down his back and chest. He grabbed another log.

“Eroan...” The human appeared and stumbled to a breathless halt. “There’s...”

Eroan lowered the axe and blinked some of the coldness from his eyes. They’d started looking at him differently lately, like this one did now. Part awe and part fear. He’d been distant, torn, distracted. *Resentful*. But knowing it had only amplified those things. “What?”

“A dragon. They’ve brought a dragon to the camp. You must come.”

His heart fluttered, coming alive for the first time in weeks. “Is it dead?”

“No.”

“Then kill it and—”

“It’s the black one,” the human spluttered. “The black prince.”

Akiem. Then Eroan would kill the dragon himself. He gripped the axe harder and took the path back toward the village, forgetting the messenger. If Akiem were here, he had to die. To protect the village. But mostly because Eroan hungered for the bastard’s death like little else he hungered for these days. His blood pumped hotter and faster. He needed this. This place, these people, these expectations. They’d eaten him hollow. And now Akiem had landed in his lap. A gift from Alumn, surely.

He broke into the main village clearing and slowed his pace when the crowd parted. Akiem was on his knees, his wrists bound in front of him with simple twine, not nearly enough to hold a dragon, but he wasn’t fighting. His long black hair hung in tails over tattered and soiled clothes. Eroan kept walking, his grip warming the axe handle.

Akiem lifted his head.

His eyes, so full of pride and arrogance when he’d ordered a dragon to torture Eroan, had dulled and blurred, turning bloodshot and rheumy. What Eroan first thought to be dirt blackening the dragon’s face, revealed itself to be bruises as he drew closer.

Eroan raised the axe.

“*S’il vous plaît*, stop,” Chloe gripped his arm, partially blocking the arc the axe would swing through to take the dragon’s head. “Don’t,” she said again. “Look at him, Eroan.”

Eroan did, and he saw a killer. A monster. A beast who would kill everyone here and destroy it all the first chance he got.

“He is broken,” Chloe said.

Broken. Battered. It didn’t matter. Eroan pulled his arm free. “He dies or we die. Is that a choice you want to make?”

“Just...” Chloe eased back under the weight of Eroan’s glare. “He could have come as dragon. He hasn’t. Just listen.”

“Listen?” Eroan grabbed the favored prince by the jaw with his left hand and forced him to look up. “What words can he speak to absolve him of the past? He had me tortured. He had Lysander abused. He burned my home, killed my people.” Eroan bowed over and stared into the dragon’s dull eyes. “You came to the wrong place if you’re looking for mercy. I kill dragons.”

“Not all,” Akiem rasped. “Not him.”

Eroan tore his hand free and forced himself to step back. The axe’s weight was a comforting promise in his hand. Taking this dragon’s head and raising it on a stake for all dragons to see seemed like a fitting end.

“Speak then. But the words will be your last, so make them good, *dragon*.”

“Dokul is coming for Lysander.”

Eroan’s top lip tightened over his teeth. “I cannot trust a word you speak—”

“He has a flight of...” Akiem’s voice cracked, “a thousand, maybe more. More dragons than I’ve ever seen. And he’s coming...” Akiem’s focus strayed, his thoughts wandering. He blinked. His eyes rolled. “I couldn’t... There is no one.” He pitched forward and fell face-down in the dirt.

Eroan flexed his grip on the axe handle. A dozen pairs of eyes looked to him and most of them did so as though wary. Alumn, what was he doing? He drew in a long breath and held it, then sighed it out and pushed the endless anger with it. “Take him to the cave.” They’d discovered it a few days ago. Little more than a hole in the ground. But it would do for a dragon.

Chloe nodded, her chin lifted and mouth firm. Perhaps she thought helping Akiem would ease some of the guilt she felt over failing Lysander. Wherever the kindness came from, Eroan couldn’t help but wonder if it would get her killed, just as Lysander had said it would. “*Your monsters are real*,” Lysander had told her in France. And Akiem was one of them.



“I THOUGHT you were going to take my head,” Akiem said from his nook at the back of the cave. His wrists were still bound in front of him, but he was able to reach for the fruit, bread and water Chloe had left him. He picked at the bread, wincing every time he lifted a small piece to his mouth.

“I still might.” Eroan stayed back, near the cave’s entrance, glancing around the hollowed out rock. The air inside was cool and damp, very much like the air he’d breathed for weeks inside the amethyst tower dungeons. Akiem had ordered him tortured then, and what followed haunted Eroan’s dreams.

Now, here they both were, the black prince in chains, Eroan holding all the power.

Ben ducked inside and came to a sudden halt when his gaze fell on Akiem. “Do you mind if I

observe?" He patted his pockets, found his notebook, and plucked the pencil from behind his ear.

"Go ahead," Eroan said, keeping his tone cool.

Chloe had sent Ben as both an observer and a witness, should Eroan bring an abrupt end to Akiem's life. She'd discreetly taken his axe and hidden it. Eroan had plenty of other ways to kill Akiem.

Akiem turned his head to the side and vomited up everything he'd eaten in the past twenty minutes.

Eroan locked his jaw, hiding his sneer. Akiem had been beaten, the marks on him were evidence enough, and the bronze would have done more than use their fists. The similarities with how Eroan had found Lysander in France tried to pluck sympathy from Eroan's heart. But this prince was not worth any regret or empathy.

Akiem's glances flitted. He kept his head down and picked at the small loaf again, wincing like every breath pained him.

"He came here knowing you'd kill him," Ben said.

Eroan grunted. These humans were too lenient. Maybe meeting Lysander and seeing how dragons could be had made them that way. "Do not pity him. He'll harbor no such pity for you."

Akiem flinched. "It's true..." he croaked, and then cleared his throat. "The voice... I have been dragon for..." he paused, thinking, "since the tower fell. How long ago was that?"

"Two months," Eroan answered. He'd planned to say no more than that, but the words wouldn't be silenced. "Dokul had you for two months. Lysander's torture lasted much longer, and after I freed him, you caged him with the bronze Mirann. He didn't tell me, but I knew. He was different after that. Vicious. Raw. That's on you."

"No." The black prince's tone still held its lofty pride, even now. Eroan's anger twitched, waking in his blood. "It began before that," Akiem said. "It began with Elisandra and never ended. He was always vicious. He—we had to be. For all your compassion, elf, you are not dragon. You cannot understand."

"Why are you here?" If Eroan had to listen to the prince's sob story he'd go and find the axe again, or maybe his dragonblade. "Tell me why I should keep you alive."

Akiem slowly chewed a morsel of bread. "I can shift," he finally said. "Burn your new home down around you."

"So do it."

He wouldn't. Maybe he couldn't. Or he'd have done it already. Eroan approached and crouched in the middle of the cave, still a few feet away from Akiem but close enough to look into the dragon's eyes and see everything written there. Pain. If Akiem had endured half of what Lysander had, it was a wonder the prince was functioning at all. Dokul had hurt him in the worst ways, a fate Eroan had narrowly escaped. A fate Lysander had endured. And maybe that was punishment enough for this dragon.

"I helped the elves flee... at the tower," Akiem reminded. "I pushed the bronze back, for all it was worth. What happened beneath the tower... I didn't mean—"

"Your behavior after the tower fell is why we're currently talking like two civilized creatures. But if you so much as look at my people wrong, I don't need an axe to finish you."

Akiem nodded, then pressed the back of his bound hand to his mouth. He panted, breathing too fast, forcing back the sickness. Once he was stronger, how long would it be before he attacked? Eroan should kill him now and be done with him but it wasn't often a dragon landed in one's lap, and while he seemed inclined to talk, Eroan could get answers.

"Does Dokul know where Lysander is?"

Akiem nodded. "The only place he could go. North. The farther north you go, the narrower and colder the land becomes. As my brother is not here, with you, he must be north."

Eroan silently prayed Seraph had already reached him. And maybe, just maybe, they were on their way here?

"Did the bronze send you here looking for him?"

Akiem held Eroan's gaze. "You think he's cunning enough to think of that? To send me here to infiltrate your ranks? Dokul doesn't think. He acts. On everything. He is a brute. If he wants something, he doesn't plot and scheme, he takes it." Akiem shuddered. Closing his eyes, he breathed through his nose, fighting off what were likely waves of nausea. "Rest well, elf. Dokul doesn't know this place exists."

Again, a part of Eroan tried to sympathize. He quelled it by remembering it had been Akiem who had killed almost everyone in the village Eroan had been raised in. He'd captured Seraph and Xena and handed them over to the bronze, causing Xena's death. Akiem was dragon.

"How did you know to find us here?"

"I saw... I was among a patrolling flight, at the front, and... I saw the fires before you quenched them. Don't fret, I didn't tell the others. After a time, I doubled back."

"Will they follow?" Eroan asked, wondering if he'd have to abandon the village after all.

"No. They're focused on going north, looking for Lysander. They don't care what happens to me... Dokul does," Akiem's gaze defocused. He looked down. "But he isn't with them. Yet. He's searching for his daughter, for the eggs."

"Mirann is dead." Eroan waited for the reaction. "The eggs too."

Akiem lifted his head, frowning. "How?"

"Lysander."

"They were together?"

"We think so."

He shook his head. The movement must have niggled his throat. He raised a hand and rubbed at the bruises. "Lysander didn't kill her. We can't... we can't kill our mates when there's a new clutch. Instinct takes over, at least until the eggs are hatched. If it didn't, we'd eat our young."

Akiem saw Eroan's disgusted grimace and smiled. "Are dragons too savage for you, elf? Lysander and I once raided a bronze nest. We devoured all the kits inside, eating them as the weak bronze looked on. Do you tell yourself he's different, that he's somehow less dragon because you've formed an attachment to him?"

"He chose to be with her?" Eroan asked, steering the conversation away from his relationship with Lysander.

"It's not something we control," Akiem said, catching on to Eroan's thoughts. "Knowing my brother, he would have resisted, but we are what we are. He didn't choose to be with her, no. We both know why. But the instinct to protect your own brood is undeniable. Do elves not have instincts? Are you not compelled to do some things?"

Eroan half-smiled, deliberately showing a hint of sharp teeth. "Kill dragons."

Akiem huffed a small laugh. "I thought he'd lost his mind." He set the bread down and admired Eroan for a few moments. Eroan only let it happen because the dragon's gaze was a curious one. "Why an elf? I asked myself. He could have taken any dragon he wanted, made a brood for himself, spawned more amethyst. He only had to hide his... desires, sate himself in secret, and submit to Elisandra at all other times."

"Like you did?"

An intelligent flicker briefly lit Akiem's glare. "Lysander isn't the best at hiding his wants, or anything." With his visual assessment of Eroan complete, he nodded to himself. "I'm beginning to understand what he saw in you."

"It's too late for understanding."

"You are not so different from dragonkin." Gold touched Akiem's dark eyes, turning them from curious to hungry.

"We were talking of Mirann's death..."

The gold snuffed out. "If Mirann is dead, why is Lysander not here with you?"

"You're assuming he's not?"

Akiem snorted. "He doesn't know how to sit quietly. He would have been here. He would have been here the moment I was brought in." His eyes narrowed. "You couldn't tame him, could you. What happened? Did you try to order him?" The dragon tilted his head, looking at Eroan from a different angle. "No, you wouldn't try to stop him from being himself. I see that too now." Akiem leaned back against the cave wall and stretched out a leg, wincing with every movement.

Eroan watched, careful to keep his expression guarded.

Ben scribbled his notes, his pencil scratching over creased paper.

Akiem was well known for his intelligence and ruthlessness. All of this could easily be an act. "I ask again, why are you here?"

"I didn't know you were here, elf. It seems like fate, does it not? Or what do you call her?" he waved a hand. "Perhaps your blessed Alumn had a hand in bringing us together?"

"Only if she wishes you dead."

Akiem closed his eyes and kept them closed this time. He rested his head back, lifting his chin, revealing dark purple bruises around his neck, telling a story Akiem would never give voice to.

"I have nowhere else to go," the black prince said.

It must have cost him much to admit that to an elf.

Eroan left the cave. He ordered two guards at the cave mouth night and day but didn't expect any trouble. Not yet, not while Akiem was weak. Akiem had been honest. Akiem likely didn't have anywhere else to go, but it wouldn't last. Dragons were predatory. He'd get hungry for more than bread and fruit soon enough. Eroan planned to kill him before that happened.

A group had gathered in the village center, around where preparations for a well were being dug. In the last few weeks, half a dozen houses had been built. Stone walls, thatched roofs. Built to last. He wanted this settlement to work, and it would, but not with him as their leader.

"The dragon is subdued and unlikely to cause us any immediate harm," he said, raising his voice. His people spilled from inside their homes, drawn by his voice, all looking to him for guidance. *Alumn, forgive me.* He cleared his throat. "We have built a home here, a home worth fighting for. I am proud of that." Some heard the shift in his tone and began murmuring. "But I cannot stay. You all left Cheen because you believe in standing up for your beliefs. Every day I'm thankful for your sacrifice and I carry it with me. But I too must stand by my beliefs. Lysander fought for each of you. He is one of us. He is missing. The bronze flight has increased in numbers. They are heading north, looking for him. I sent Seraph and Trey, but with new information, brought by the black prince, I must go north too."

The pain on their faces would haunt him, but so would not acting in time. He'd delayed before and Lysander had suffered. This was the right thing.

"Chloe will lead you in my absence. I will return with Trey, Seraph, and Lysander. I give you my word on this."

Unlike Cheen, nobody here openly confronted him. All seemed content to let him go, despite a few tears. Better for them to understand this now than cling to an Eroan who didn't exist. He was not their hero. He was not their elder. Those roles belonged to others better than him. But finding Lysander and bringing him home, he *could* do that.

"I'm coming with you." Akiem stumbled against a house wall, his wrist ties broken. The guards flanked him, clearly fearful. Akiem had likely put that fear into them with some form of vicious threat.

Eroan raked his glare over the prince. He was a wreck. As pale as milk and just as weak. If Akiem came, he wouldn't have to worry whether the dragon had recovered and eaten everyone he'd left behind. "You'll slow me down."

"I won't."

"You can barely walk."

The prince swallowed hard. "You told me it was too late for understanding? Not yet, it isn't."

"Are you trying to convince me you found some compassion in that black heart of yours?"

Akiem's cheek fluttered. "I was wrong. I've been wrong for a long time."

He saw it only because Dokul had pounded him into the dirt and he was latching onto the only strong thing he could find: Eroan. "If you come, you keep up. If you hinder me in any way, I will slit your throat as you sleep. You might have found your heart, but I lost mine in that tower. Don't expect compassion or forgiveness from me, dragon."

"I won't hinder you. I won't slow you. You have my word."

The useless word of a lying dragon prince. "Fine," Eroan agreed, looking forward to the moment he left a dragon carcass behind him on the path north.



TRUE TO HIS WORD, Akiem did keep up, but the dragon's shivering and numbed quiet when resting betrayed the cost of the pace. Eroan couldn't find it in him to care. Maybe the beast would succumb to his trauma and die without Eroan having to lift a finger to help.

"Why do you not ride horses?" Akiem asked, a day into their trek through brush and hilly wastelands.

"Do you see any horses?" Eroan answered, several strides ahead and keeping up a relentless pace. "It's almost as though you don't know dragons ate them all. The only reason there are cows is because you figured out if you ate all the stock, you'd soon run out of food." Eroan shrugged the blade from his back and used it to cut the animal track wider. The only horses he knew of were those the dragons had kept. Had there been horses, did Akiem think elves hadn't thought of utilizing them? Did he think elves fools, as dumb as food? Of course he did. He recalled the exact way in which Akiem had looked down on him when they'd first met. Elves were cattle, food, pets.

The sun hung low in the sky to the west. North lay dead ahead, and he wasn't stopping until he found Lysander. Day and night, mile after mile. Not even the dragon behind him was going to slow him down. That dragon had fallen quiet these last few miles. Eroan glanced behind.

Akiem flicked his dark eyes up, the strain showing in the new lines he'd gained around his eyes and mouth, easier to spot now beneath the dust of travel.

"You didn't know horses are almost extinct?" Eroan asked. "How sheltered it must be to live a dragon prince's life."

"You don't know anything of my daily torment, elf."

Eroan snorted. "I know enough."

"There are other ways to torment besides that which is visible."

"You'd know."

They marched on until the sun had set and wolf howls started up in the valleys. Eroan built a fire. Taking the firestarter from his pocket, he crouched by the pile of kindling, his thoughts lost as he turned the firestarter over in his hand. If the bronze found Lysander again, Eroan would tear the world apart. That fate could not be allowed to come to pass. But Eroan needed rest. He needed to eat, to fuel himself. He was no good to Lysander exhausted. But by Alumn, stopping ate at his patience, as did the damned dragon on his tail.

Akiem had tucked himself against a thin hazel tree and watched Eroan work, but now the dragon's body had fallen limp, his breathing coming steadier. It wasn't that he trusted Eroan not to kill him, it was more the dragon was clearly drained. After what Dokul had likely inflicted upon Akiem, death was a blessing.

Eroan lit the fire and fed it fuel, nursing it until it was strong enough to take a few bigger fallen branches. The dragon's breathing became labored, and his feverish shivers started up again. His hands clutched at his overcoat until the fingers turned white.

Eroan tore his gaze away and watched the flames. Lysander had said his brother had laughed once. That Akiem had been different. Eroan couldn't see it and didn't want to. They were enemies, and had the dragon been stronger, he'd have already shifted and tried to kill every elf who crossed his path.

The dragon twitched in his sleep and let out a strangled groan.

Let him suffer. Suffering was all Akiem deserved.

If Lysander were here, would he be kind to his brother? Eroan puzzled over Lysander's feelings for Akiem. At times, he'd clearly despised him, but at others, there had been a fondness in his voice. But it was likely Lysander's familiar feelings weren't reciprocated, at least not until recently. Had Akiem truly come to realize his mistakes? Dragons and their hierarchy were complicated.

Akiem's closed eyes fluttered. His lips pulled back in a silent sneer. Sweat glistened on the male's cheek, dampening his hair, gluing to his face. He'd been a fool to come along. He wouldn't be able to maintain Eroan's pace. The dragon was a liability.

Eroan shifted from his spot by the fire and crouched in front of the feverish black prince. Wherever his head was at, it wasn't a kind place. A blade to the heart would end it now. Eroan removed the blade from his back and tested its weight. Akiem wouldn't see his death coming. It would be over quickly.

Only... this black prince didn't deserve a quick death.

Eroan's mouth twisted. He set the sword down and plucked a piece of rag from his pocket. Dampening it with water from his pouch, he wrung out the excess and pressed the cool cloth to the prince's forehead. The dragon would not be grateful for the care, but if Eroan was to make progress, he needed him fit.

With a heavy sigh, Eroan resigned himself to a night of caring for his enemy.

CHAPTER 13

Lysander

HE'D THOUGHT the northern dragons tamed. He'd been wrong. They came for him as one, with Rhadgar at the front. Too many. He didn't stand a chance, but he'd hold them long enough for Seraph to escape. Rhadgar came at him first—claw and teeth and flame—fast and as vicious as any amethyst.

Lysander couldn't fly, but by the great ones, he could *fight*. The northern king was bigger, heavier. In Lysander's mind, none of that mattered. He blocked Rhadgar's charge, bringing himself side-on, good wing spread while the other hung limp. The emerald pounced, jaws wide. Rhadgar's teeth sank into Lysander's back, igniting a riot of pain down his spine. He twisted, throwing the emerald off. It didn't last. Rhadgar came in again, striking like a whip. They clashed, slashing and snapping jaws. Since Mirann, this had been coming, and maybe Lysander had let Rhadgar have that fight, but no damned dragon was getting past him to Seraph.

Another dragon lunged, eager to get in on the fight. Rhadgar snapped at it—claiming the fight as his.

Rhadgar was distracted.

Lysander searched the fields for Seraph. He spotted her, a tiny thing among the meadow grass with a male elf beside her. He knew the male, but in that moment couldn't place his name. Seraph wasn't alone and she was fleeing. That was all that mattered.

Teeth tore Lysander's neck. The roar that pealed out of him sounded like nothing he'd given voice to before. He whirled on Rhadgar. The emerald king's eyes glowed their multifaceted green. Dragons scattered. Some going after Seraph.

Chaos and claw. Too much. Too fast.

Lysander lunged at any and all, but he didn't have Rhadgar's power to control, and the dragons galloped on, some taking to the air. One took flight beside him. He caught its rear leg, yanking it to the ground.

Pain washed up his left hip. This time, Rhadgar's bite crunched something vital and Lysander tripped. Another dragon roared and plowed in, trying to take a bite out of Lysander's useless wing. Rhadgar was there suddenly; vast mountain of green scales shoved against him as the king blocked his subject's attack. Weight shoved over Lysander. Rhadgar's weight... memories flashed—bad ones, bronze ones. This wasn't the bronze nest, but it felt like it. Wild, mindless panic gripped Lysander's

thoughts. He thrashed and tore and loosed all the flame, and briefly, in the raging madness, it seemed to work. The weight vanished; the screaming stopped. But Rhadgar had left him for another reason. Green wings spread; the king taking flight—toward Seraph.

No, no!

Lysander couldn't follow.

He couldn't damn well follow! He tried to shove onto his legs, to gallop forward, but the numbness had him falling over his own feet. It was too late. He scanned the meadow. He couldn't see Seraph or the black-haired elf. Just dragons in the air and on the ground, throwing up dirt. *Too late!* Curse his broken wing. Curse his weakness, curse Dokul and the tower and Elisandra and it all. Damn them all!

Seraph wasn't dying here.

The diamond hunkered to his left. She hadn't attacked and she hadn't gone after the elf. Lysander swung his glare on her and drilled it deep. He couldn't chase the dragons, but *she* could. She was agile and quick, faster than any other here.

Power beat at his mind, buzzing through his being, rolling in hot, heavy waves. Raw rage and lust and a desperate need to *control*, to *stop*, to *take*.

The rabid, untethered part of him clicked.

The diamond was his.

So easy, now he had her locked in his thrall.

The creature's mind was a simple thing. He'd been right. She wanted him, but he had other plans for her. *Go. Stop them.*

She flashed through the grass and as Lysander hobbled behind, the submissive diamond became his vicious blade. She tore at her dragonkin, clawing and ripping with her teeth, carving a path of carnage through the horde. And all the while, the steady, thrumming power filled Lysander's being with the solid, unforgiving beat of *control*. Real control.

His heart raced.

He wanted more.

He wanted all of them under him.

Rhadgar swung about mid-flight, dove straight for the diamond, extended his feet, and sank his claws into her back, ripping her from her foray. In one sudden, vicious bite, he punctured her skull behind her crown and dropped her limp body. The string of *control* snapped.

Lysander bellowed.

Rhadgar turned his devastating gaze on him.

The power in the king's eyes tried to crawl inside Lysander's skull like a thousand insects beneath his skin. The mental touch crept and slid and slithered, writhing through Lysander's thoughts. But the link worked both ways and Lysander could feel Rhadgar's mind too. The king was cold and hard, but brittle. He could be broken.

Rhadgar hovered above his brood, hesitating for the briefest of moments, and then he dove down and forward, his eyes filled with murderous intent. There was the dragon Lysander had known existed inside. There was the jeweled madness, the true killer behind all the reasoning and words.

And this would be Lysander's end.

He almost welcomed it but wished Eroan were here to understand how Lysander had fought to save Seraph.

If he died here, he'd take Rhadgar with him. Emerald against emerald.

A sleek dragon as black as the longest night blotted out the light.

The beast slammed into Rhadgar's side, using its great, horned head as a ram. Rhadgar released a surprised yowl just as the black dragon snatched the tumbling emerald in its claws.

Lysander knew those matte black scales, those golden eyes, and that amethyst flame boiling low in the dragon's throat. There was no other dragon like him.

Akiem.

The pair hit the ground and rolled in a mass of claws and wings just a few hundred meters ahead, flattening the meadow and throwing up clouds of dirt. Wet sounds of muscle and flesh tearing drowned out dragoncalls.

The dust settled.

Akiem threw his head back and roared. Blood dripped from his teeth and down his neck.

Rhadgar, the only emerald Lysander had ever met, lay gutted beneath Akiem's claws.

"Lysander..."

He blinked. The voice hit him like a slap in the face. Panting, he peered at the impossible sight of Eroan looking up at him.

How?

His elf smiled and the oddest sound of relief purred from Lysander. Fucking hells, his elf was here. He wasn't alone. He didn't have to fight them all. But there were more dragons. They'd take Eroan. A growl swallowed the purr.

"Seraph and Trey?" Eroan asked, voice raised.

Lysander jerked his head north to where the dragons squawked and bickered, so focused on finding the elves they were still unaware their king was dead. But that wouldn't last.

Get out of here! He growled a warning and turned his head south, suggesting Eroan flee that way. *Go! Run!*

Eroan ran, but in the opposite direction—*toward* the angry horde of mindless dragons. Of course he did.

Lysander hobbled forward, snapping at his rear leg when it wouldn't move like it should. *Too slow.* Everything was too slow. Why did his body not work the way it should? Damn it all!

He could shift, but if he did that, he'd lose sight of Eroan in the meadow.

His gaze slid to Akiem. His brother guarded his kill, his snout buried in Rhadgar's belly, devouring slippery entrails. As though sensing Lysander's gaze, Akiem raised his head and snarled. A cold, empty nothingness burned in Akiem's golden eyes.

The thought of trying to control his brother quickly slid from Lysander's mind. Now was not the time to go there. He yipped instead, rousing Akiem from the killing lust and drawing his eye to the scattered dragon horde beginning to realize their king was not among them.

Lysander readied himself for the attack. They would see Rhadgar had fallen and they'd retaliate. It's what any amethyst would do.

But as some of Rhadgar's flight plodded closer and others descended nearby, they sniffed death in the air, recognized it as belonging to their king, and drifted away, dissipating in all directions, until there was nothing left but Akiem and Lysander and the steaming remains of two dead dragons in a flattened meadow.

Akiem huffed and snorted, shaking glittering green dragonscale from his nose.

Lysander eyed his brother carefully, wondering if those bloodied green scales were a sign of things to come.



THEY TRAIPSED—SHIFTED to man—along the valley floor in the dark, following the scent of elf. Akiem loomed heavy and foreboding in Lysander's shadow. Occasionally, a dragon would bark, but it was distant. In this uninterrupted land of rolling hill, sound traveled for miles. The dragons had fled. The only threat now was Akiem.

Considering how they'd left things, with Akiem fighting off the Bronze chief and apparently Carline too, Lysander hadn't yet found the words to convey what he thought of his brother's arrival. Akiem didn't seem inclined to speak. Perhaps that was for the best. But there would be questions, from both sides. Before all that, Lysander needed to find Eroan. He needed to know he was safe, and Seraph too.

Crackling wood and woodsmoke gave the elves camp away, and in the shifting firelight, Eroan stood like some surprise gift, all wrapped up in traveling leathers, his hair bound in a long, loose plait down his back, the green earring shining with firelight. Lysander stopped so suddenly that Akiem plowed into him, alerting the elves to their presence.

Eroan's night-sensitive eyes zeroed in through the dark.

Lysander didn't want to step closer in case he broke the spell. Maybe Eroan wasn't real, maybe he'd puff away like smoke. Maybe Lysander had dreamed him up.

Akiem shoved by and stumbled into the camp where he dropped to his knees like a bag of rocks and bowed his head, succumbing to shivers Lysander hadn't noticed until now.

The elves—Eroan, Seraph, and the other one whose name escaped Lysander—regarded Akiem warily. None moved to comfort him.

Eroan's gaze shifted to Lysander. Flickering heat burned in his blue eyes, making Lysander's heart stutter. Would it be too much to go over there and hold him in front of his elven companions, to fucking claim him and never let him go?

Weeks, months, so much had happened, and there was Eroan. Unchanged. Perfect.

"Is he going to stand out there all night?" the nameless elf asked.

Getting a grip of his runaway emotions, Lysander entered the glow of the firelight, clearing his throat. "I—"

Seraph leaped at him, hitting him dead center in the chest. The breath *oomphed* from his lungs. Little arms squeezed his ribs. Stunned, he let it happen, only thinking again after Eroan's half-smile caught his eye.

"Hello to you too," Lysander croaked.

Seraph stepped back, adjusting her clothes and smoothing her hair, suddenly aware she had everyone's attention, besides Akiem, still hunched over and quiet. "Oh by Alumn's grace! I have never run so fast in my life! Did you see? Trey and me..." she whistled. "We rocked that fight. Dragons are sloooooow."

"You ran—" Lysander started.

"—could have died," Eroan finished.

She waved off their concerns and plonked herself back beside the chuckling Trey. "We had them right where we wanted them." She offered her fist to Trey who bumped his knuckles against hers.

As she prattled on, going over their grand escape in fine detail, Lysander caught Eroan's eye again, or maybe Eroan hadn't stopped watching him. He wasn't sure. The elf's smile lingered like an unspoken invite. Lysander moved around the fire and settled at Eroan's side, close enough to feel the

thrumming sense of rightness between them, but distant enough it wouldn't compromise Eroan's position here, whatever that might be.

"You came," Lysander whispered under his breath. He wanted to say more, to spill all the mad words clamoring in his head.

Eroan waited so long to reply, his gaze lost in the fire, Lysander thought he had nothing to say, and then finally, he said, "I made you a promise."

So simple. The promise: Eroan Ilanea would never give up on Lysander. It was a struggle, but Lysander managed to wrangle his racing heart under control and keep the broad grin from sprouting across his face. Eroan had come for him and everything was going to be okay because of it.

He wondered if this strange elation was what love felt like?

"Are you well?" Eroan asked, his voice level, calm, but tight with a concern Lysander would never get used to hearing. "Your leg was wounded?"

"Battered. Tired. But I'll live." His gaze fell unwittingly to Akiem. He'd killed Rhadgar. Lysander was under no illusion: Akiem had killed Rhadgar because he was emerald.

Eroan tilted his head. "Your brother escaped Dokul."

Lysander nodded once. Nothing else needed to be said but the relief at seeing Akiem quickly turned to his usual mix of distrust and wariness. Had he escaped or had Dokul freed him?

"He's holding up well," Eroan added. The words were lost a little beneath Trey's sudden laugh and Seraph's loud rebuff about something they jokingly disagreed on. "Much to my surprise."

Was Eroan Ilanea warming to Akiem? Lysander kept his smile but added a querying frown.

"I almost killed him three times on the journey up here," Eroan said, reading Lysander's expression. "Once, because he moves as heavily as a cow through the brush."

Akiem grunted and lifted his head. Some of the mad hollowness Lysander had seen in the meadows still lingered, but most of it had thawed into Akiem's resting expression. Lysander didn't trust it, but he also knew what Dokul could do to a mind. This Akiem—on his knees and trembling—wasn't capable of scheming, but he would be, the second the opportunity presented itself.

Out of them all, Akiem was the most dangerous. "Don't trust him," Lysander said.

Akiem snorted at that too and then took himself to a nearby flat piece of grass where he could sit and watch the fire, keeping himself removed but close enough to bask in the fire's warmth. Eroan gave Lysander a look as though to ask if he'd really just told Eroan, of all people, not to trust a dragon. A lock of hair fell over one of his eyes.

A chuckle found its way to Lysander's lips. Despite losing the emerald, and all the knowledge that went with him, he'd have lost it all again a hundred times to have Eroan beside him. And maybe, with the things he'd learned, maybe one day soon he'd be worthy of this stubborn elf who didn't know when to quit.

The camp had fallen quiet and Lysander blinked away from Eroan to find Trey and Seraph were openly staring.

Seraph nudged Trey in the arm. "Told you."

The tattooed elf, Trey, sighed. "All right, all right." He dug into his pocket and handed over something shiny.

Eroan folded his arms. "It's best not to ask."

"I bet Trey this shiny human ring thingy," Seraph waggled the ring thingy in the air, "that Eroan would come for Lysander." Seraph grinned. "I was so right."

"He came because Dokul has a flight of hundreds approaching this area," Akiem said, gruffly, "and Dokul may soon be among them." His dark eyes scanned the camp. "I suggest we rest well

before that happens. Time is not on our side.”

Lysander wanted to pull Akiem to his feet and demand all the answers out of him, but by the way his brother’s eyelids drooped, he was in no condition to be interrogated. The morning, then. Lysander could wait a night.

Eroan stoked the fire, placing on more logs, while Trey and Seraph chatted. Lysander breathed deeply, taking the moment to enjoy the stillness. An honest moment. He was here, with friends, and right now, he felt almost like he belonged.

Approaching Eroan, he knelt beside him, fighting the need to reach out and touch him. “I need to speak with you. I learned some things about... me. Things you should know.” He eyed Akiem but his brother appeared to be sleeping. Akiem likely knew the answers anyway, but Eroan should know everything first. “Not here,” he added, unsure of how Seraph would react to learning what he could do.

Eroan dipped his chin in a brief nod and led Lysander out of the light, into the dark beyond the camp where boulders peppered the landscape. Low-lying brush hissed in the breeze.

They walked far enough that the firelight still lent a touch of orange to Eroan’s near-white hair and warmed his lips and cheek, not that Lysander was paying attention to how that same light still burned in the elf’s eyes, like he had his own fire inside, one Lysander could tease and stoke and make burn for him.

Eroan shrugged off the dragonblade and leaned back against a rock almost the size of him. Had his shirt laces been open moments before? Lysander couldn’t recall, but now he couldn’t seem to look away from that tantalizing glimpse of neat collarbone and kissable skin.

“Let’s talk,” Eroan prompted. A sly lilt lifted his voice.

Talking. Right. He’d had a good reason for wanting this private conversation but now they were alone, a whole lot of other reasons sprang to mind, most of them involving teasing Eroan’s shirt strings open some more. “You are very distracting.”

“Am I?”

Fuck it. Lysander stepped in, cupped Eroan’s jaw and pressed all of himself closer, just enough to tease the provocative elf. By nights, he was even prettier in this soft, rippling light. Lysander brushed his thumb over the corner of Eroan’s lips, wanting to taste that spot and so many others. His damned heart raced along. Heat pumped too fast through his veins. Eroan watched him with those curious, keen eyes, luring Lysander in. Like a lovestruck fool, Lysander would so easily drop to his knees and do anything this elf asked. So this was it, for now; a touch, a promise of more. If Eroan wanted more, he’d have to take it.

“Nye drugged—”

Eroan’s finger sealed Lysander’s lips. “I know. Don’t talk of him.”

The finger eased off but stayed resting gently on Lysander’s mouth. It trailed lower, over his bottom lip, and then across his rough chin and up his jawline, eliciting a thin, sharp cascade of shivers through Lysander. He had no hope of hiding how Eroan strummed him alive. “Gods, elf.” The words blurted heavier than he’d planned.

“I thought you’d left,” Eroan said. “Even after everything, I thought you’d left.”

Lysander grabbed both of Eroan’s rough hands, capturing them, and now he did push in, plastering against the unyielding hardness that was Eroan Ilanea. “Never.” Lysander rested his forehead against Eroan’s, falling into the elf’s saddened eyes. Oh to see the sadness there; it cut straight through Lysander’s heart. “That night—the dancing and the fayre—I kept that night with me. I would have returned long before now. I was going to, but I learned things, things that could change everything. But

every day, every night, I wanted to go to you.” *To go home... to you.*

Eroan’s lashes fluttered down. “It’s gone. Cheen’s elders... It’s not the home I hoped it would be.”

“You are my home,” Lysander whispered before he could lose the moment.

Eroan’s eyes closed. He sighed out. His cool, soft breath mingled with Lysander’s. For the first time, he saw Eroan truly hurting. This wasn’t like the physical torture Eroan had endured in the tower, this wasn’t something Eroan could fight his way out of. His home, his people, they had cast him out. After everything he’d done for them, he’d been forsaken.

A growl burbled low in Lysander’s throat. “I’ll eat them all if you wish it. Just say the word.”

Eroan’s gorgeous mouth quirked. When he opened his eyes, they shone a little brighter. He pulled a hand free from Lysander’s grip and pressed it to Lysander’s cheek, callouses rough.

Lysander leaned into the touch, feeling the dragon in him unfurl and stretch, soaking up everything Eroan gave. He could stay here forever, stay lost in the quiet with Eroan pressed against him. Dragons be damned. He’d earned it, hadn’t he?

CHAPTER 14

Eroan

THE SHAME and anger Eroan had carried with him since leaving Cheen faded away beneath the solid warmth of Lysander pressed close. But he wasn't close enough. Eroan wanted to pull his dragon in and kiss him until he forgot about everything he should be, kiss him until the world became just them.

The three days in Cheen hadn't been enough. He wanted weeks, months, years, but that wasn't going to happen—not for them. So he'd take now, this moment, with Lysander looking at him, his green eyes full of want and compassion and understanding, and Eroan would keep it forever in his heart.

His dragon. His heart.

He couldn't keep losing him.

"Whatever we do next," he whispered, brushing the words softly against Lysander's mouth, "we do together."

Lysander's mouth skimmed Eroan's, his lips soft and warm and opening, inviting Eroan in. Eroan's heart was a pounding, heated thing, his body ablaze with need, but he held himself back. When he fell into the promised kiss, he'd fall hard. He'd never known a feeling like this. It consumed him, made him free, but it hurt too. The tales never revealed that about love, about how much it hurt.

He ran his fingers into Lysander's hair and Lysander tilted his head, rubbing against the touch. Alumn, he was too precious a thing, this dragon who had survived against the odds, the dragon who kept right on fighting. Who never gave up. Eroan wanted to take him away somewhere where the world was different, where it could be just the two of them day and night, and nothing would come between them.

With Lysander's head tilted into Eroan's hand, he left his neck exposed. Eroan drew him close and skimmed a kiss below his jaw, tasting salt and dragon. Pleasure trilled through his veins, his body hypersensitive to how Lysander's hip dug into his, how Lysander's thigh had pinned between his legs, trapping him against the rock. Lysander was careless in his rough beauty. Eroan needed more of him beneath his hands, in his mouth, pinched between his teeth.

Seraph's little laugh danced through the quiet.

The camp was too close.

Dragons likely lingered nearby.

They couldn't do this now. Here.

Eroan pulled Lysander's shirt free and ran his hands inside, over Lysander's hip and up the lean design of lower abdominal muscles, then swept his hands behind Lysander's back, pulling him in. Lysander's shuddering sigh heated Eroan's neck and a raw, demanding sense of need came over him. They'd barely kissed, barely touched, but Eroan had already lost his mind to pursuing every inch of Lysander's body.

Lysander's rough jaw scraped against Eroan's. "What I want to do with you, I cannot do here," Lysander breathed.

Eroan tilted his hips, grinding his arousal against Lysander's thigh, revealing exactly how much he wanted the same. Eroan caught Lysander's jaw and forced Lysander to look him in the eyes. "Can you be quiet, dragon?"

Lysander's mouth twitched. He pulled free of Eroan's grip and snapped his teeth together near his finger. "Fuck, no." Sizzling lust made his eyes shimmer. "And I doubt you want Seraph seeing you pinned against a rock and fucked out of your mind?"

He made a good argument. Reluctantly, Eroan let his hands fall away. "Tell me what happened to you here."

As Lysander slowly moved off, a chill swept in, and Eroan ached to hold him all over again. This pull between them was a force all its own, one Eroan had no hope of fighting. Mostly because he had no wish to fight it at all.

Straightening against the rock, he adjusted his trousers, wincing as the unsatisfied erection snagged. Lysander saw and his twitching mouth settled on a hungry smile. Eroan knew exactly how that mouth felt around the most intimate parts of him. The memories pulsed heat through Eroan's need. He smothered what would have been a groan with a growl. "Continue looking at me like that and I won't care what Seraph sees."

Lysander blinked slowly, dark lashes falling over sly, green eyes. But with another step back and after he'd dragged a hand down his face, he drew in a breath, making his smile fade, replacing it with a more detached seriousness. "There was an emerald here. He killed Mirann. He had the answers that have been kept from me my entire life."

Lysander went on, recounting his time in the north and the alluring emerald he'd met. When he mentioned how the emerald appeared to be able to control his kin, Eroan stilled. Lysander continued, his deep, smooth voice intoxicating in its own way.

His eyes... Eroan considered, not in the least surprised. Hadn't he fallen into Lysander's gaze a thousand times? But to learn Lysander potentially had such enormous power? He was right, it did change things. It could change everything.

Lysander paced as he talked now, speaking of control and of how he'd sensed something in the past, but he'd always attributed it to the dragons' rage. When he'd killed Elisandra. When he'd coupled with Mirann. And other times, he mentioned, his gaze skirting Eroan. *Bad times.*

"Rhadgar and I, we were the same... He learned to live with what he could do, but he didn't utilize it. He wasn't thinking big enough. We can, Eroan. If I can make it work every time, the dragons—all dragons—would be under me."

His words raced after each other. The lust in his eyes had sharpened. Eroan had no doubt a gift such as being able to control all dragons could change the world, but what would it do to Lysander? Clearly, he wanted this, needed it, but a tiny bite of fear nipped at Eroan's thoughts. Lysander had always been different, he'd always been better, he didn't need to control the dragons to lead them, but he couldn't see that, not beneath a lifetime of abuse. He needed this to work.

“It worked on the diamond before Rhadgar killed her,” Lysander said. “If I can find another dragon...” His attention drifted back toward the flickering campfire, toward his brother.

The fear inside Eroan bit harder. “He is weak.” For the life of him, he had no idea why he was trying to protect Akiem. But having Lysander try to manipulate his own brother felt wrong.

“All the more reason to try it,” Lysander said, meaning it.

“Let him rest.” Eroan picked up the dragonblade. “We should all rest. Seraph will take first watch.” He headed back along the path, toward the light, feeling Lysander close behind him. Dragons used one another. That was how they were. Lysander had every right to want to use Akiem. His brother would do the same to him. Eroan knew this, but that didn’t make it any easier to swallow.

“Dokul is coming.”

Eroan stopped.

Eroan could hear Lysander’s footfalls in the grass, and then the dragon was beside him, his eyes the brightest thing about him while the rest of him was shrouded in darkness. “He’s coming for me, and this time he has a flight of perhaps thousands. I’ll not be taken again, Eroan.”

“You won’t be.”

“Are you going to stop him?”

Something in those words cut and Eroan winced before he could think to hide it. Lysander saw. His brow pinched. Eroan wanted nothing more than to be able to stop Dokul, to kill him, but for all his skill as an assassin, getting to Dokul through a flight of a thousand dragons was impossible.

Lysander looked away. “I’ll kill myself before I let him have me again.”

The words cut again, deeper this time. Eroan reached for him, first by gripping his shoulder and then when that wasn’t enough, he pulled Lysander in and folded his arms around him—the prince Eroan had failed to keep safe. “You’re not alone. What we do next, we do together,” he whispered, voice trembling with the weight of the promise. “I won’t let it happen, do you understand? Do you hear me, Lysander? What he did to you, that’s never happening again. I will stop him. I will.” A promise to Lysander and a promise to himself. Dokul would die, and it would be beneath Eroan’s blade.



TREY TOED EROAN AWAKE, although truly he hadn’t been sleeping, just drifting, resting his eyes. He nodded at the assassin and checked the camp in the soft morning light. Mist had crept in, but the sun had already begun to burn it off, sparkling through droplets in the grass, making them sparkle.

Lysander and Akiem were missing. “Where are they?” Eroan grabbed his sword and got to his feet. On the opposite side of the burned-down fire, Seraph stirred.

“I don’t know,” Trey said. “There’s no sign of them.”

Lysander hadn’t gone far. He’d have said he was leaving. But he’d vanished before. “Go north, I’ll go east. Seraph...” She yawned and rubbed her eyes. “Lysander and Akiem are missing. Go south. If none of us find them, we know to head west. Meet back here when the sun has risen.”

The dragons hadn’t been taken. Not this time. But if they had left together, what did that mean?

He heard them first, the rumbling snarling and growling of dragons facing-off. Cresting a rocky knoll, he saw the fight starting up in a hollowed area below. Lysander circled Akiem. The black prince lay hunched on his belly, wings partially spread, head up and jaws open in a clearly defensive pose.

Lysander was trying to control Akiem. Perhaps it needed to be done, but Eroan couldn't shake the sense of wrongness. Whistling through his teeth, Seraph and Trey jogged to him moments later.

"What's he doing?" Trey asked.

"Lysander is finally putting Akiem in his place," Seraph huffed, crossing her arms.

"That's not it." A part of Eroan wanted to stop this, but if Lysander was right, the power he had should be explored.

Akiem panted hard. Some scales were missing along his back and neck. His wing membranes were tattered and split at their edges. Had he been like that since Dokul? *Alumn, why do I care?*

Eroan resigned himself to watching the brothers face-off, ignoring the odd hope that Lysander would fail.

CHAPTER 15

Lysander

THIS HAD TO HAPPEN. He had to do this. He'd unleashed the ability to control on the diamond. He could do it again now after luring his brother away from camp *to talk*. He *had* to. Dokul was coming. Lysander needed to change, to be better, or else Dokul would destroy everything all over again. He'd meant what he'd said to Eroan. He'd rather die than have Dokul smother him again.

As dragon, he circled Akiem's prone form, trying to ignore how wrecked his brother looked. Akiem had been a constant presence, a proud, unyielding pillar against which Lysander measured himself. The favored prince, the queen's special one. Now he just looked pathetic, and it was fucking with Lysander's plans to pin him down and see if he could *control* him.

Lysander locked gazes with Akiem, but instead of fight, Akiem just bared his teeth and stayed hunched, reeking of fear. Lysander needed him to fight, he needed his blood up, or this wasn't going to work. Just staring wasn't enough. He had to feel it inside, the ferocious wildness, the most dragon part of him needed to lust and hunger.

Frustrated, Lysander growled low and menacing and all Akiem did was pant and wither. He smelled of sweat. He smelled of... metal.

Frustration snapped and became something sharp and deadly. He sank his teeth into Akiem's neck. Akiem's front feet scrambled in the dirt, trying to lever himself away, and Lysander clamped his jaws harder. *Hold*. Bite. Take. Fuck. Own. He needed Akiem beneath him. This had to happen. Or nothing changed.

"Lysander, stop."

Eroan.

Lysander eyed the elf's approach. Huffing through his nose, his mouth full of dragon, he considered—just for a moment—making the bite fatal. It wouldn't take a lot more force to crush Akiem's neck.

Eroan stopped his approach. "This is wrong, and you know it."

Wrong? What was wrong was the stench of Dokul marking Akiem. What was wrong, was that Lysander couldn't escape the Bronze chief, but Rhadgar had given him a way out, if he could just fucking make it work. This had to work.

Eroan palmed the dragonblade. "Release Akiem. We'll find another way."

Another way? Wasn't that what Lysander had been trying to do his entire life? Find another way to survive, find another way to live, and where had it gotten him? Gods, he just wanted it to end.

He plucked his teeth from Akiem's neck and bared them at Eroan instead. The elf didn't move, but behind him, the other two looked on.

Eroan narrowed his eyes. "Don't."

Don't what? Don't attack? Don't hurt Akiem? Don't become better, stronger, more powerful?

Akiem licked at his fresh wounds and Lysander burbled a disgusted rumble before peeling off and stalking down the narrow valley. He knew Eroan followed, so he kept right on walking, flattening a path through brambles and shrubs. Content he'd wandered far enough, he dropped, pulled his wings in and rested his chin on his forelegs. It didn't take long for the elf to walk all the way around and stand at the end of his snout, almost making Lysander cross his eyes to see him.

His elf looked angry.

Lysander huffed, mussing up Eroan's hair.

"Your brother is suffering as you suffered, let that be enough punishment for now."

Lysander turned his head away and blinked at a nearby dead tree, its branches stark against those of its neighbors.

Eroan was in front of him again, taking up all his attention. "If you push him, he'll break, and there's no knowing what he'll do after that."

Akiem wouldn't break if Lysander could control him. Well, that clearly wasn't going to happen. It seemed Eroan protected Akiem now too. Wasn't one dragon enough? Wasn't Lysander enough? Akiem always came out on top. He always won. He was always better. Always appreciated. Always admired. And now Eroan looked at Akiem differently too. Eroan was Lysander's.

Lysander turned his head the other way and squeezed his eyes shut. Maybe the elf would go away.

"I'm not leaving. Shift and speak with me."

He didn't much feel like shifting back just yet. He opened his eyes, and there stood Eroan—stupid, stubborn Eroan. Lysander breathed out through his nose and rested his head on his forefeet again, fixing the elf in his gaze.

"All right." Eroan sheathed the blade, came around the right side of Lysander's nose, and perched himself on the ground, leaning against Lysander's foot. Lysander could barely see him right below his eye, but he could feel him getting comfortable against his scales. He was just going to sit there, was he?

"I don't pretend to understand your feelings for your brother," Eroan said, sometime later, when the sun had risen and began baking Lysander's scales. "I don't really know why I'm protecting him either, but it feels like the right thing."

Of course it did. Because Eroan was good. He did good things. Lysander wasn't sure if he'd ever been good, but he wanted to be, for Eroan. For himself. For the future he dared dream they might one day have.

Lysander closed his eyes and waited as the sun beat down and his elf nestled next to him.

"Perhaps you cannot force this thing to happen. Perhaps you just need to believe it can. Isn't that what the emerald told you?"

Rhadgar had said that, and Eroan was right. Like always. But what if he never believed and Dokul came?

If he had two working wings, that would help. If the Silver dragon in his dreams, the one who had saved him after the tower fell, told him where she was, that would help too. As it was, all he got was a coldness, a world of ice, and a sense that for all his potential, he was going to die in that ice before

any of it came to fruition.

“I believe in you,” Eroan said.

Lysander sighed. Gods, he was not worthy of Eroan Ileana.



“YOU ARE A SON OF A BREEDING BITCH,” Akiem said. He looked as gray and sickly as the skinny, half-dead tree he stood next to. “I should have eaten you in the nest right after you hatched.”

“You tried.” A twinge of regret tried to gnaw at Lysander’s steely resolve before he reminded himself Akiem had done worse to him in the past. Much worse.

The elves were clearing the camp, collecting their weapons and traveling sacks while Akiem loitered just outside the camp’s fringes, watching them without making it obvious. Why was he here at all? Was he trying to infiltrate elves for some purpose?

“Intriguing, aren’t they,” Lysander muttered.

Akiem grunted.

Did he still view them as food? Lysander wondered. Or were they something else now that Eroan had taken Akiem under his metaphorical wing?

“Why are you here?” Lysander asked, still keeping his voice low. “And don’t tell me some shit about coming here for me. If Elisandra were still alive you’d be here for her. Dokul doesn’t plot like this. So it’s all you.”

Akiem glanced over, hearing the sharpening edge to Lysander’s voice. “Like I told your elf, I had nowhere else to go.”

That was horseshit. Lysander squared up to him, making Akiem lift his chin just that little bit higher. The bastard was taller, making Lysander lift his chin. “If you hurt Eroan or any elf, I will break your fucking neck, brother, and leave you to die alone in this shithole. Don’t think I won’t.”

Akiem’s top lip rippled. “After everything I did for you.”

“You’ve never done a damn thing but stand by and watch.”

Akiem’s gaze clouded. “I never told you what really happened between Elisandra and Amalia. For the longest time, it didn’t matter.”

Lysander snorted, the sound more dragon than man. “Mother killed her when she would not submit. I know what happened. Bringing it up now just proves you’re an asshole.” He eased off, the posturing pointless. Akiem was who he was. Nothing changed.

The elves still busied themselves. They likely heard every word but pretended they didn’t.

“It’s your fault,” Akiem added.

He’d said the same before, in the tower fight before *accidentally* stabbing Lysander. “How do you figure that?”

“Elisandra told us you were to be traded off to Dokul’s brood long before it finally happened. Amalia said...” Akiem’s voice cracked, bleeding every second from the moment. “She told Mother that it made more sense for her to go because she was female and the amethyst line would continue if she coupled with Dokul. Amalia tried to save *you* from a fate beneath the bronze. That was her way. She knew you were... She knew you couldn’t stomach females.”

Lysander fell silent, his anger draining out of him. He hadn’t known the details, just that Amalia and Elisandra had fought; Amalia had been wounded and cast out of the tower: a death sentence.

“She died because she tried to save *your* useless hide. I hated you for that. After Amalia died, my

whole life became all about Lysander Amethyst. Mother made it so I was to spy for her, watching you, waiting for your fucking *gift* to manifest. She didn't give a shit about me, brother. It was always you."

Lysander clenched his jaw. He hadn't known, hadn't even considered how Elisandra had been using Akiem or that his brother had been forced into a life of servitude. "Why did Elisandra let me live?"

"Curiosity. And fear. While you were under her, the others all feared what you could do. You made Amethyst strong just by being emerald. I hated you for it."

It sounded true. Akiem rarely lied, he didn't need to. "You should have told me. About Amalia. About all of it."

Akiem's laugh sounded as broken as the dragon inside the man. "After you just tried to mindfuck me in the fields, I'm glad I didn't. It took Dokul..." His voice caught. He swore under his breath and cleared the knot in his throat. "What he did to me... to you. Gods, I never wanted that for you. I regret the things I've done to you. I'm... sorry."

Lysander blinked, hardly believing what he'd just heard. Akiem didn't apologize. Ever.

Lysander grabbed his brother's shoulder and spilled a little healing warmth through his fingers. He needed it. Akiem met his gaze and nodded. Nothing needed to be said aloud; the silence held it all. Brothers. Enemies. Trapped together.

Then Akiem nodded at Eroan. "He thinks you're something impossible—a good dragon." Akiem's dark eyes shifted to Lysander. "I know you're not."

Akiem hadn't meant it as a dig. It was fact. "This world doesn't need a good dragon, it needs a powerful one."

Seraph tossed her carrying bag onto her shoulder. "Where next?" she asked Eroan, and then looked at Lysander. "Do we all go home together?"

Home. Lysander met Eroan's gaze. The bronze were coming for Lysander, all of them by the sounds of it, and as much as he wanted to be with Eroan, he also knew Dokul would not stop hunting him. Eroan's new home would be at risk if Lysander were there.

"It's up to you," Eroan said, as though reading his thoughts. "You're free to choose your own path."

He so wanted to go to Eroan's new home but not as he was. Change had to happen, or they'd never be safe. If he could find Carline, or even the Silver from his dream, if he could learn to tame his power, and dragons along with it, then there would be time to live in peace, but not yet. "North," he said. "I need to go north. I can't explain it... I have dreams..." Where to begin? The Silver, Alumn, the ice. His need to find the truth in himself. It was all north. He could feel it.

Eroan merely nodded. "Then north it is. Trey, Seraph, you are free to return to the settlement if you wish."

Seraph tapped her chin, pretending to think on it. "Order assassins don't abandon their prides."

"What she said," Trey drawled, standing firm beside her.

"You don't have to do this." Lysander couldn't stand another elven death on his conscience. "I can go north alone. I'm not even sure what I'm searching for—"

Seraph whirled away and stomped through the brush. "North is this way. Let's go then. We're wasting good daylight."

Lysander caught Akiem's small smile. It seemed almost genuine and nothing like his brother's shallow predatory grins. "A flight of elves," Akiem said, "and a pride of dragons. Whatever next?"

CHAPTER 16

N_{ye}

THE FOREST WAS the kind of quiet that made Nye's skin itch. He dared not light a fire. Not this night, with its many eyes. He could feel gazes on him, like the skitter of spider legs. He'd camped here a few nights now, and perhaps that was his mistake. He should have kept moving.

Nights like this were why Order assassins traveled in pairs.

He straightened, checked the dragontooth dagger at his hip, and slunk into the dark. The air was wet, rich and earthy, and the ground soft underfoot. He needed to stay clear of the marsh, where the black waters were hungry, but that should be easy enough so long as he didn't get turned around in the trees.

A twig snapped to his right.

He stilled, listening, trying to filter out the sound of his heart. It wouldn't be dragon. None were this quiet. A wolf then.

Damn Eroan for this. *"I don't love you. I have never loved you. We were friends. Now we are nothing."* The words tried to steal his breath and blind him. He breathed out, riding the feeling. Nye had been right. Eroan just couldn't see it. He would though. One day soon, he would. The dragon prince would turn on them all and Eroan would beg Nye to return. Nye would wait. He'd waited all his life for Eroan to see him. This was just another step along that path.

A growl, low and muffled from somewhere behind him. Not close. He still had time to take to the tree canopy, if he could just find a branch low enough. Carefully, he stalked forward, easing silently through the brush and over ankle-breaking roots. He wouldn't run. That would see it end sooner.

The tree ahead had a branch dipping from its main trunk, just low enough to reach and climb to safety.

He'd almost made it when the growl sounded again, this time raising the fine hairs on the back of his neck. Ahead, the wolf's eyes glowed. The beast was big but lean and wiry. *Hungry.*

A growl from behind him joined the first in front.

Trapped.

He had no choice now.

Nye bolted left, thrashing through bushes. He dropped down into a natural gulley, searching for a low branch or a river, something to deter the wolves.

The wolves raced after him, panting hard, claws scratching on wood and stone.

The marsh lay ahead, full of spikey reeds and oil-black water. They wouldn't chase him in there. He'd keep to the edges, go no deeper than his thighs and wait them out. It would be enough.

Nye hit the dank, heavy water hard and waded through, clawing at the soup-like texture, trying not to think of how it reminded him of estuary mud just like this and of how he'd found Curan, half-buried, his guts in his arms.

He'd survive this. He had to. It wasn't over and this wasn't how he died, not here. There was too much work left to be done. Eroan would come around. Eroan needed him.

Sticky water clung to his knees, holding him like hands might, trying to pull him deeper. He looked back. Three wolves stalked the edges of the marsh. They fanned out, plodding along its banks, sniffing at the surface.

Nye waited, dagger in hand. Cold soaked through his clothes, leaching all his warmth away, rattling his teeth.

The wolves circled a few times and then one of them, the alpha, sniffed at the air and slunk off. The remaining pair trotted after it soon after.

Nye lowered the dagger.

He should have lit a fire.

The bog waters had a firm grip on his legs. He dug around his knees, opening up some breathing space to break the suction and tried to pry himself free. The mud pulled, but he pulled harder.

A deep, rumbling laughter whipped Nye's head up.

"What have we here?"

The man was huge, rounded out with muscle, and he wasn't alone. Four of them, all strangely similar in bulk and appearance, with smooth, hairless heads. Strings of metal lay over their shoulders and down their chests, like the metal he'd seen on Mirann. Dragonsight lent their eyes a sparkling shimmer.

Bronze.

The four of them spread out, encircling him.

"An elf all wrapped up and delivered," the one who had first spoken continued. A metal ring winked at his nipple.

Nye tasted metal on his tongue. He gripped his dagger tighter. "Stay back."

The bronze laughed. "Or what, little elf? Are you going to stick me with that tiny knife? I use knives like that to scratch my ass."

Nye only half listened. He watched the others. They hadn't yet ventured into the marsh, but they would. Their weight would work against them, might even deter them for a while, but they would get to him. He couldn't run, the marsh waters saw to that. He'd have to fight. Just one of them was easily twice his weight, maybe three times. Eroan had faced bronze like this. He'd fought them off. It could be done.

"I'll kill you," Nye said, teeth chattering from the cold and fear. They'd smell it on him, he realized, smell how he feared them.

They smiled back.

The big bronze crouched, draping his arms over his knees. "Come on then. Try and escape."

Nye kept an eye on each of them in turn and bent down to dig out the rest of his leg, then the other. The bronze watched, never losing their smiles. He'd have to move fast and get a lethal strike in first. A cut to the beast's thick neck would do it. Once the big one fell, the others might back off. It was the best Nye could hope for.

With his legs free, he waded forward.

“That’s a good elf, come to Kash now,” the brute, Kash, beckoned. “There. Just a little farther.” A string of drool slipped down the side of the male’s chin. He wiped it off and continued to leer, his hunger a rabid thing.

Nye reached out a hand. “Help me, won’t you?”

The bronze’s eyes widened. He knelt and reached forward. Nye took his hand. His skin crawled at the hot, gritty touch. The bronze clamped his other hand on Nye’s upper arm and heaved Nye into his arms.

Nye’s knee touched the bank. He got a foot under him, secured it so he wouldn’t trip, and thrust the dagger up, deep into the dragonkin’s chin. It wasn’t a throat cut, he hadn’t been able to get the right angle, but it was enough. The dragon roared, tearing backward, blood spraying, reflexively shoving Nye away.

Nye ran. He didn’t know in what direction or how he was going to go to escape them, he just ran. He was faster, he had to be faster.

A dead weight hit him hard in the side, sending him sprawling in the dirt. His back hit something hard. Nye barked a cry and gasped, trying to refill his winded lungs. He rolled forward, fingers digging into moss. The big dragon grabbed Nye’s shoulder and twisted, flipping him onto his back. He wrestled Nye’s hands to the ground, pinning him beneath rock-like thighs. Blood poured from his chin, the wound a gaping second mouth. Nye bucked and twisted. The dragon’s hands drove him into the ground. A fat, wet tongue slid up Nye’s cheek. Dragon blood dripped over Nye’s face, leaking from the hole in the male’s skin.

Alumn, no. This couldn’t be real. “Don’t!”

“Such sweet cries.”

The dragon’s grip on Nye’s left hand vanished. Nye thrashed, sinking his nails into the male’s arm, desperately trying to lever him off.

“Hold him!” Kash ordered.

Heavy hands pinned Nye’s flailing arm down. He couldn’t move, couldn’t think. Every breath burned. His focus misted. His body weakening.

The dragon’s eyes shimmered with lust. He fumbled his trouser fly.

“Alumn, no,” Nye whispered. This couldn’t be happening. Not to him. Not now.

The bronze pulled his swollen shaft free, stroking over the disgusting piece of dragonmeat, and clawed at Nye’s belt.

“Stop.” Nye twisted his hips. With the weight of dragon on his legs and his arms pinned, he couldn’t do anything more. These monsters were too big, too strong. “Don’t!”

The brute was beyond hearing. Blood and spittle bubbled between his bared teeth. Madness crackled in his eyes now.

Fury scorched through Nye only for it to be ripped away when the male managed to yank Nye’s trousers over his hips.

This wasn’t happening, it couldn’t. There had to be a way out, a way to stop it. He’d rather die than have that thing inside him. “Lysander!” Nye blurted. The dragon stilled. “I’ll tell you where he is.”

“And how would a thing like you know where to find that amethyst bitch?” Kash grunted and levered Nye’s thighs apart, grinning at the naked prize of Nye’s limp and exposed cock. “You’ll have to do better than that, elf.”

Nye squeezed his eyes shut. Rough fingers rode over his penis and slid downward, crushing his

balls before moving on, finding the clenched hole. His breath labored. His heart thudded hot in his ears.

“Mirann...” Nye gasped. The hand stopped, fingers pressed against his hole but not yet penetrating. “Mirann,” Nye gasped again, opening his eyes. “Dokul’s daughter.”

“What of her?” Kash straightened, his terrible weight lifting off a little.

It was working. The others still had Nye’s arms pinned but Kash was backing off.

“I know where she is. I won’t tell you anything if you... if you hurt me.”

Kash looked to his companion on Nye’s right. “He’ll sing like a fucking bird,” the other bronze grunted. “Just fuck him already. I want my go.”

Kash worked his jaw and spat blood to the side. “Maybe Dokul would want this one.”

“Dokul can have him. After we’re done.”

Kash winced. “Ah, shit.” This one did not want to cross Dokul.

Nye locked the dragon in his glare. “There are eggs. Precious eggs? I know where those are too.” Nye would escape them before they discovered both Mirann and her eggs were dead. This Kash just needed to take the bait.

“Fuck.” Kash clambered to his feet. “He knows too much. Dokul will want him.”

A hand locked around Nye’s throat, cutting off his air. A vicious face filled his vision. Not Kash’s. This was one of the other three. “Where’s Mirann?”

Nye writhed, his head and chest pounding. He kicked out, scrabbled, twisted, but the thumping heaviness pulled the fight right out of him. The hand vanished. Air rushed in.

“Tell me, bitch!” A slap scorched across Nye’s face, almost knocking his senses right out of him.

Blood spilled into his mouth, bitter and warm. Gathering the blood on his tongue, he spat into the bronze’s face. The retaliating punch saw the world turn black.



BLOOD HAD DRIED on Nye’s lips. He’d have licked it off, but his tongue was parched, the skin split, his mouth full of dirt. He lay on his side. Dry leaves crinkled against his cheek. This had to be some kind of nightmare. It felt like one. His thoughts swam, his body numb. Pain had dulled to an all-over throbbing ache. And when his blurred focus cleared, there were dragons... everywhere. Just seeing them—barely clothed, bronze skin and broad muscles shimmering in the firelight—made his stomach clench. His back and chest throbbed, his throat too.

Why had Alumn forsaken him? Perhaps this was a trial, like Eroan’s. A test to see if he could survive.

A thick hand grabbed the back of his neck and yanked. “He’s here.” A gruff voice grated across his ear. He? For a moment Nye’s thoughts scrabbled to catch the meaning, but there could be only one. He among the bronze. Nye couldn’t fight, not anymore. Standing, walking, those things he tried to do as his vision spun and the world tipped. The bronze held him up, part dragging, part shoving him through the mass of dragons. Their golden eyes shined. They smelled like blood, or maybe the blood was on him?

Eroan had survived this. Nye would too. He’d survive and escape and go back to Cheen, where he belonged. Where he was safe.

The dragon dumped Nye on a tree stump. Nye wavered, head down, trying to collect the broken pieces of his thoughts and make sense of them. Dragons nearby talked and laughed and wrestled, but

the one in front of him now, that one stayed silent.

Nye slowly lifted his head.

A bare-chested, smooth-headed, monster of a man filled Nye's vision. Light from the campfire lapped over his golden skin, making him glow as though fire writhed beneath his skin too.

Madness glittered in his eyes. Hunger too.

"Elves," he said simply. His voice was deep, like thunder from a threatening storm.

He moved closer, towering over Nye.

Nye's heart raced. He pulled at the ropes binding his wrists behind his back.

The dragon's huge, rough hand caught him by the jaw and forced him to stare up. There was more in this dragon's eyes than Nye had seen in the others. Color shimmered deep and far, as though this one was made of something far older than he appeared. He had a power the others did not.

This was Dokul, Nye realized. The ancient bronze.

Dokul pulled him off the stump. Nye's feet dangled above the ground. Dokul's mouth twitched. He leaned close and breathed in through his nose.

With a grunt, he dropped Nye back onto the stump, his assessment complete. "You're a skinny one. I'm surprised you survived long enough for them to bring you here." He turned away. Golden light slid down his broad, slick back. "Do you know who I am, elf?"

Nye rolled his tongue around his mouth, collecting as much moisture as he could. He tasted dragon and salt and the horror of what had almost happened to him by the marsh. "Yes," he rasped, his voice broken from being throttled.

Dokul merely lifted an eyebrow. "My flight lost my newest prince and gave me an elf. I should have them all flayed."

Nye had planned to escape before now, but here he was, bound and truly caught, just like Eroan had been. Eroan had survived. Nye had to cling to that hope. Everything Eroan could do, so could Nye. It had always been that way between them. Yes, this was a trial, sent to him by Alumn. He would not fail.

"They told me you have knowledge of my daughter, which is why you're not fucked into a puddle. What do you have to tell me, elf?"

Nye tried to swallow, but his parched throat had swollen and clogged. "A deal..." he croaked, "I'll make you a deal."

Dokul's deep, rolling laughter reverberated around their camp. Other dragons joined in, clearly listening. So many. "You are very amusing."

"I will tell you all that I know," he raised his voice. "But..." Nye glanced at the crowd. "They can't touch me. Keep them all off me."

Dokul threw his head back and chortled, setting them all off. "Making demands now! I do find elves so very entertaining." Dokul listened to his laughing flight until the sounds faded. "I should have fought harder to retrieve the blonde one. He had a fire about him you lack. You'll squeal. I can tell that about you. Elisandra's little pet was worth a hundred of you."

"I'll tell you everything! Lysander, Akiem, Mirann... all of it. But your dragons don't touch me. Ever."

The bronze's laughter had gone from his lips, but it still sparkled in his eyes. "All right, little elf. Let's start with something useful and go from there. Where is Mirann?"

"Dead."

Dokul's smile vanished behind a snarl. "How do you know this?"

"I saw her remains. The eggs too. They're all dead."

The beast's chest expanded as he breathed in through his nose, the sound of it too much like the intake of breath before a dragon unleashing its flame. "It was Lysander."

"No..." Dokul shook his head and pointed at Nye. "You see, that's where you're wrong. He's not capable." But there was doubt in the big dragon's eyes.

Nye clutched a hold of that doubt. "He beat her. I heard about it. With a whip. No?"

The male's top lip quivered. Mention of the whip had made him believe.

"He's insane," Nye went on. "He's vicious. I tried to tell them all, but none would listen. But you know, don't you. You know what he's capable of." A twitch on the male's ugly face confirmed it. This dragon knew exactly what Lysander was capable of. Nye almost laughed with relief. Someone else saw the prince as he truly was. "He's different. He does things no normal dragon would do. And you know this. You know how dangerous he is."

Dokul came forward and crouched in front of Nye, studying him anew. "Go on, little elf. Spill your words. Tell me all you know of Lysander Amethyst."

CHAPTER 17

Eroan

“I SAW you sleeping next to Lysander in the meadow,” Seraph grinned, plodding along the path beside him. Lysander and Akiem had trekked ahead. Trey hung back, watching for threats.

“I wasn’t sleeping,” Eroan denied. “We were talking.”

“He’s so big as dragon,” she threw her arms wide, “and you’re so small.” She made a tiny gap between her fingers. “It was *adorable*.”

“Adorable?” Eroan shot her a look as sharp as his dragonblade but her grin widened and his glare turned soft. “All right, so I dozed a little.” A treacherous smile tried to lift his lips. “It was warm in the meadow.”

“You mean *he’s* warm? He feels like the sun, doesn’t he?” She laughed a bright little laugh and elbowed him in the arm. “You’re so scowly. You got your dragon back, didn’t you?”

He did, and he was happy, happier than he’d been in... forever. But it was a fragile thing, like the butterflies flitting about them now. He’d learned not to trust happiness. It didn’t last.

“When do we kill Akiem?” Seraph suddenly asked.

Eroan lifted his gaze ahead. The dragons likely hadn’t heard, but Seraph needed to keep her voice down.

“Don’t tell me you’re going soft on him?” The steel in her eyes wasn’t new. She had carried it since the humans had brought her out to him from beneath the bronze warren, but it had grown colder as of late.

“No. I’m not *going soft*. I’ll kill him, when it’s time, but he’s proven useful. If he hadn’t cut down that emerald, Lysander would likely be dead.”

“Do you think that’s the only reason he killed the emerald?”

The way she asked made it clear she believed Akiem had his own reasons for attacking the emerald. Eroan silently agreed. Akiem wasn’t known for saving his brother. The dragon wanted the emerald dead and took the first opportunity to see it happen.

“As the queen’s eldest spawn. I imagine Akiem has killed many emeralds over the years.”

“And yet he left Lysander alive this long?”

“Not out of love. The black prince isn’t capable of it. He tried to kill Lysander and he’ll try again, when he’s stronger.”

“We’ll kill Akiem before then, right?”

Eroan nodded.

“Good. I owe Xena his blood on my blade.” She paced ahead.

Eroan raised an eyebrow at her back. She’d grown since she’d left the new settlement. Just a little, but enough for muscle to build where there hadn’t been any before. She was losing the long, lanky look of an elfling and filling into the body of a fierce Order assassin.

She’d have likely died before now if Lysander hadn’t killed the queen. Lysander’s actions had changed the fate of all future elves. Eroan would tell him so. He’d hear, but he wouldn’t listen. Lysander wasn’t used to hearing the good about himself.

It had only been less than a day since finding Lysander again, but Eroan sensed something different in him—a fierceness that had always been there, but now the fierceness paced its cage, wanting out. Lysander wanted power, and he’d get it. Eroan prayed to Alumn it changed Lysander for the better, not worse.

“Eroan...” Trey jogged up to greet him. “We should catch up with the dragons. I fear we’re being tracked.”

“By?”

“I’m not sure. I haven’t seen anything, but I feel it, like I used to as a messenger. Wolves, maybe. We should stay together.”

Eroan nodded, offering Trey a thankful smile. He’d wondered if the male resented him for exiling Nye, but he didn’t appear to, at least not while working. Professional to a fault, exactly as an Assassin of the Order elf should be.

They jogged ahead, catching up with Seraph first and then the two dragons, both walking through the brush as men, lost in their silences.

“We need to get to higher ground,” Eroan told them. “Get the lay of the land and find somewhere to rest for the night.”

He also told them of Trey’s concerns, leading to both dragons sniffing the air. “I don’t smell wolf,” Lysander replied. “Just the sea and elf.”

“Regardless, let’s find shelter.”

They trekked some more, climbing a hill through tightly packed scrub. Eroan took the lead and used the blade to cut them a path until they stumbled across a sprawling abandoned structure, mostly overgrown, but with a few walls left exposed, providing shelter.

“I’ll take watch,” Akiem offered.

“No,” Eroan said. “Trey, get to that point,” Eroan gestured at the rocky peak above the valley. “And see if there’s anything rounding on us before we lose the light.”

Trey nodded and slipped into the bushes, vanishing a second later.

“I could shift and—” Akiem went on.

Eroan held the dragon’s gaze. “You’re staying with me.”

They cleared the ground, making a small camp inside the building’s three remaining walls, but agreed on no fire until they were sure whatever had been tracking them had moved on. A fire might keep wolves away but it’d lure dragons closer. Trey returned long after the sun had set, head shaking. “Whatever I thought I sensed, it’s gone. There are several excellent observation points. I’ll show Seraph and we’ll take first watch. Why don’t you all get some rest?”

Seraph took up her blade and went after Trey, leaving Eroan with Lysander and Akiem. With no fire, the only light came from the half-moon’s glow filtering through dense scrub. Summer air, still and warm, hung over them like a quilt.

Lysander was the first to sit, finding a spot against the back wall, tucked in among grass tufts and mossy earth. Akiem stretched all of himself out beneath the opposite wall, interlocking his fingers behind his head. His breaths soon slowed, his chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm.

Lysander huffed at his brother. "He'll sleep anywhere at any time."

His dark skin absorbed the moon's milky light. But the same light made his eyes sparkle. He patted the ground beside him. "Sit beside me awhile?"

As much as Eroan would have liked to take up that spot beside him, his sense that something was out there kept him standing. "I'd have preferred food and a fire. We're exposed here, despite the walls." Eroan gritted his teeth. "I don't like it."

"It'll be fine. Unless it's not, in which case we'll deal with it." Lysander shrugged and rested his head back against the stone wall, peeking at Eroan through dark eyelashes. "We have three Order elves protecting two dragon princes. I'm sure we'll survive another night." He patted the spot beside him again.

Eroan recalled the meadow and how he'd lain, dozing against Lysander's dragon form. Seraph was right, he felt like the sun, like the warmth all elves needed to survive, and Eroan couldn't get enough of it. He settled beside Lysander, folding his legs crossed and lifting his head to observe stars and their silent sparkle. "Perhaps Alumn watches us."

"Alumn, huh."

Lysander's tone had Eroan turning to scrutinize his face. "Something on your mind?"

Lysander leaned forward, and drawing a knee up, draped his arm over it, appearing relaxed, but there was a tension to the movement too. "I think I died beneath Akiem's blade." He rubbed at the point low on his waist where Akiem's blade had sunk in and thrust upward, toward his heart. "But there was someone there in the cold. She told me to return. She healed me."

Eroan considered where this might be going. "Who?"

"She said her name was Alumn."

"She did?" Dreams maybe. Eroan had been close to death and his mind had played tricks on him, made him see and believe things that weren't real. "You dream a lot of this?"

Lysander nodded. "And there's something else."

Eroan waited. Whatever it was, Lysander clearly wasn't sure about voicing it.

"In my dreams, she's dragon. Silver, to be precise."

The Silver dragon was somehow in Lysander's head, she'd somehow brought him back from the dead and she was called Alumn? A smile had made a home on Eroan's lips before he thought to hide it.

Lysander plucked at a tuft of grass and tossed it back to the ground. "You don't believe me."

"I believe you almost died and I believe you saw some things you can't explain. It's very common near death to experience hallucinations."

"For elves, maybe. Not for dragons. We are not big dreamers."

"Alumn is not dragon. She is the light all elves follow. Such a thing is... she's not dragon." It was simple really. No elf would follow a dragon, besides him, but Eroan was different. Lysander was different too. The idea that Alumn could be dragon was preposterous.

"Some things Rhadgar said to me... they're right, feel true. The Alumn in my dreams calls me north. She's in ice somewhere. She saved me to find her. I know this, Eroan."

"Rhadgar was persuasive, you said. Charming even." Eroan hadn't known what to make of this Rhadgar who had apparently been *reasonable*. It was more likely he was taking advantage of Lysander's hopes, trying to lure him along like a fish near the bait. He'd felt a twang of jealousy when

Lysander had spoken of the other dragon, his eyes full of awe. Akiem had done them all a favor by getting rid of Rhadgar.

“You think he fooled me?”

Eroan looked up at the stars. “I think he was dragon.”

Lysander leaned closer, his lips broadening into a grin. “I know he told tales to keep me with him, but there was truth in it.”

Eroan’s gaze briefly flicked to Akiem, sleeping on the other side of the clearing. When he returned his attention to Lysander, the dragon’s eyes glinted with the same challenge Eroan had never been able to resist. “When you find this Silver,” he whispered, “what will you do?” Lysander was so close now, Eroan was sure he could hear how his heart pattered faster. “Will you free her like you did the Gold?”

“That was an accident.” Lysander’s warm hand swept up Eroan’s cheek. “But you fear I might?”

Eroan tried and failed to resist leaning into the touch. “I fear a great many things, but never you.”

“Hm...” Lysander purred, tilting Eroan’s face toward him, but if Eroan admired his dragon, he’d fall into the promise of more that strummed between them and now was not the time to indulge in what his body wanted—*needed*. He straightened a leg on the ground, shifting out of the cross-legged position now that it had suddenly become too tight and uncomfortable.

Lysander’s hand roamed over Eroan’s thigh, the touch frustratingly light. Eroan almost grabbed the hand and placed it where he needed it to be, but again, he reminded himself they were exposed, possibly being hunted, and the black prince dozed just a few meters away. Trey and Seraph could be back any minute. These were not times in which to dally with dragons.

“Your brother is right there,” Eroan murmured.

Lysander’s hand grew heavier. His fingers dug in and raked higher, stealing Eroan’s breath.

“He won’t care,” Lysander whispered, his breath so close it tickled Eroan’s jaw. “He’s seen far worse.”

Eroan could imagine exactly the kind of things both dragons had witnessed under Elisandra. “Elves are different. We don’t display our desires for all to see.”

Lysander’s scandalous hand found its target, the ridge in Eroan’s trousers, and brushed lightly over the bulge. “This says they aren’t.”

Eroan snatched at his wrist and held it steady. He’d meant to push him off, to regain some control of the situation, but instead, he held Lysander’s hand firmly against his crotch, the heat of him soaking through the leather. A similar heat pulsed through Eroan’s arousal, parting his lips with a small gasp.

Eroan swallowed and glanced again at the sleeping black prince. When Lysander’s hand began to move, to *massage* in a way that dumped all thoughts from Eroan’s head, Eroan faced Lysander’s flickering cheek and imagined running his tongue down the firm line of his jaw. “You are impossible,” Eroan ground out the words, unable to keep the need from his voice.

Lysander adjusted his position, turning almost chest-to-chest with Eroan, looking him in the eye as his hand molded around Eroan’s erection and stroked in a way that had pleasure coiling low in Eroan’s spine. Lysander’s heated gaze danced over Eroan’s face, reading everything.

“We should go somewhere...” Eroan suggested, breathless.

“And leave my scheming brother alone?” Lysander’s fingers pinched.

Eroan’s hips involuntarily twitched. Alumn, there was too much leather between his need and Lysander’s hand. Worse still, he could imagine Lysander’s quick-witted mouth closing around his erection, and with thoughts like those, he wasn’t going to be able to stop this, if he even had a chance of stopping this before now.

Eroan gripped Lysander's shoulder, feeling the male's hard muscles shift as his hand worked and then Lysander's mouth sealed his with a slow, lazy kiss. His tongue teased and Eroan chased it, needing more. Lysander lowered his weight over Eroan, straddling Eroan's thighs, and now Eroan was pinned, Lysander's hand working its tingling magic between them, the dragon's smile like something wicked and wrong but so sinfully good.

Lysander rolled his hips, grinding over Eroan's erection, and pushed in, his chest pressed against Eroan's, his eyes aglow. "Gods, I want you like this, beneath me, your eyes fucking me while I fuck you."

Eroan groaned and didn't care now that Akiem was close by or that Seraph might stumble in on them. He wanted his dragon in him, *ached* for it even, and wanted to see the passion in his eyes as he came. He couldn't imagine anything more excruciatingly erotic. The thought had him breathlessly holding back, trying to reel in the runaway desire before the hand on his cock had him coming too soon.

A whistle pierced the quiet. Lysander rocked back, his hand freeing Eroan.

Akiem gasped awake, his gaze snapping straight to Lysander. "You smell that?"

"Metal," Lysander growled, rising off Eroan. "Grab your sword, elf," he said to Eroan, his sideways grin a secret meant only for him. "We're no longer alone."



TREY WALKED them silently through the brush to the sounds of dragon grunts and huffs ahead. He'd heard the sounds while patrolling with Seraph and whistled the alarm. But in the moments it had taken Eroan to gather his wits after Lysander had scattered them, and have them all stalking through the undergrowth, the sounds hadn't moved from where Trey had first heard them. As they emerged onto the edge of a small plain, it became clear why the dragon hadn't moved.

Someone had staked it down. The dragon, a small jeweled, had a tangle of vines and rope around it, difficult to see in the moonlight, but Eroan's eyes picked up the familiarity of it. He smelled blood too. The kit was wounded.

Lysander made a move to break from cover and investigate. Eroan shot out an arm and blocked him with a shake of his head. "Elf trap," he whispered.

Lysander crouched back beside him. "A what?"

"We use kits as bait, stab them—leaving the blade in the wound, preventing them from shifting—tie them down, and see what comes hunting."

Lysander looked again at the sight in the grass ahead. After a moment, his eyes narrowed. "It's jeweled but I smell metal."

"The blood?" Eroan could smell the scent of something unusual, something different. Woodsmoke and mead. His memory hitched, but the source eluded him.

"No," Akiem answered from Lysander's other side. "Definitely dragon but... different."

Eroan glanced to his left at Trey and Seraph, waiting on his word. He sent Trey off to stalk around the area with a simple nod. The assassins melted silently into the dark.

The young, trapped dragon pawed at the ground. Seraph had killed one just like it, losing the tip of her ear in the process of tying it down. This one might wriggle free given enough time. Eroan didn't plan on letting that happen but he also wasn't about to leap into killing the jeweled when clearly someone was deliberately trying to lure them out of hiding.

Trey returned moments later. “Whoever it is knows how to hide. There’s no sign of anyone but us.”

Eroan turned to Lysander, to ask his opinion, when Akiem strode from their cover, head up, shoulders back, typically prince-like. Lysander swore under his breath. Eroan hunkered down and watched.

“What’s he doing?” Seraph whispered.

Akiem reached the dragon and stroked a hand up its snout. Rather than calm this beast, his actions further agitated it. It pulled against the vines, making them creak.

“Eroan?” Seraph asked. “Should we stop him?”

Eroan tensed, his heart rate picking up. Akiem ran his hand over the dragon’s head, up its small crown, and down its neck. The beast panted and twitched. Its eyes rolled, and if its jaws hadn’t been clamped shut, it would have been spewing fire.

Akiem said something but the dragon’s struggles muffled his words. The dragon prince then pulled something from the beast’s side. Magic warped the air, twisting it over the sight of dragon.

“He’s freeing it,” Eroan said.

Akiem used the knife he’d found in its side to slash the vines. With just two cuts, the dragon was able to yank its head free. It screeched its roar, tore the remaining restraints down, and spread its wings, bigger and more ferocious now that it was free. The young dragon was too enraged to be grateful.

Eroan saw the flicker of murderous intent the same time as Lysander must have. Lysander bolted from cover. The young dragon breathed in, filling its enormous lungs with air, and its firepit blazed, its glare fixing on Akiem.

The black prince merely looked up at it, not shifting, not protecting himself.

He wanted this.

He’d die.

“Stop!” Lysander ran forward, but the kit was beyond seeing anything. It hurt, it feared, it was now free, and it was going to kill anything in its way.

Eroan broke cover as the shift tore through Lysander, ripping him open and filling him up, filling the space between Eroan and the kit with emerald dragon. It happened so fast Eroan could only watch as Lysander’s huge jaws came down around the young dragon’s neck and snapped shut, instantly silencing it and its fire. He flung the body aside and whirled on Akiem, roaring out his frustration inches from where the black prince stood.

“That’s quite enough of that,” a tart female voice said, cutting through the thunderous roar.

Eroan slowed, dragonblade in his hand. A dragon in woman form walked from the bushes. Her silvery hair hung loose and smooth about her shoulders, graceful in the same way he remembered her being in the tower kitchens. She wore a heavy overcoat, not aprons.

He lowered the sword, wary.

Both princes stared at her, one dragon, one man. Akiem’s face was easier to read, revealing confusion and alarm.

“Akiem, if you want to die, you merely have to ask the elf. He will gladly see it done.” Carline swept a hand in Eroan’s direction and spared him a small, knowing smile.

Eroan swallowed. She had once offered him kindness in a place where kindness had been alien. “Carline,” he greeted when Akiem said nothing. Lysander was still dragon and staring like he didn’t believe she was real.

“Elf,” she replied.

“I have a name.”

“Oh, I have not forgotten it.”

He wanted to trust her, this relic of the old-world, but couldn't. She was dragon. She was *Gold*, and she'd tricked both Lysander and Akiem out into the open, and him too. Seraph and Trey wisely stayed back.

“Close your mouth, Lysander,” she said.

The thirty-thousand-pound dragon obeyed.

“Carline...” Akiem finally found his voice. “You were tracking us?”

“I was. There's only so much north and you four are not nearly as discreet as you believe yourselves to be. Come now. Let us light a fire.” When she again looked at Eroan, she said, “We have much to discuss.”

CHAPTER 18

Lysander

CARLINE WAS HERE.

Lysander wanted to ask about his wing. About the gem. About being Gold, and whether she meant them harm, and if she knew Alumn, where was Dokul, were the bronze close by. But mostly he just wanted to ask about his wing. She'd promised to heal him. He'd given her the amethyst. She was back, and fully restored as Gold. She owed him.

"Lysander?"

He blinked. She'd asked a question and he hadn't been listening. Eroan stood behind her, keeping to the edges of where the firelight reached, wary and on alert, as he should be. Lysander couldn't help the way his attention drifted to Eroan. The world was shifting beneath his feet. He needed his stubborn elf by his side more than he'd ever admit to anyone here, including Eroan.

"I..." Lysander cleared his throat. "You asked something?"

Carline tutted. "Your head in the clouds again, prince?"

Akiem smiled, and Lysander tossed him a glare. The fool had been trying to get himself killed. If Lysander hadn't been so angry, he could have tried his gaze on the kit. Instead, he'd killed it, like a typical dragon.

"Goodness, the princely kits never did stop fighting." Carline said this to Seraph, perhaps sensing the young elf needed some help warming up to her. Seraph appeared bemused by the whole encounter while next to her, Trey observed, as though he became fully aware the elves in the group now numbered the same as the dragons.

Carline sighed. "I have dire news." She looked at Eroan. The elf's throat bobbed as he swallowed. "The Bronze chief has a flight of over a thousand. Most are jeweled, *adopted* when the tower fell and from weaker broods in mid-France and Spain. I have a number of spies among his flight. They tell me he was flying north, to where he believed you to be, Lysander, but has since adjusted his course. It could be he learned you had moved on and were once again in the wind. He now heads east."

"East?" Eroan asked, coming forward.

"He seeks to draw you out, elf, knowing Lysander will follow." An astute move for Dokul. He wouldn't have normally thought of such a thing. Perhaps the bronze was learning. "What is east?"

Carline asked.

Eroan's face paled. "Ashford," he whispered. Not so much a question as a statement.

Seraph gasped and Trey uttered something Lysander didn't catch. Then this Ashford place was precious to elves? He'd not heard of it and tried not to take that to heart. Had Eroan not trusted him enough to tell him of this Ashford?

"We must go, Eroan." Trey was on his feet and facing up to Eroan. "You and me and Seraph. Now. The dragons cannot be allowed to breach Ashford."

"I know," Eroan replied, too calmly. "How long?" he asked Carline.

"Nine days, maybe ten, depending on the wind."

"It'll be eight days before we can reach Ashford by foot," Trey said. "That's too long. It's too long! Alumn... Eroan, what do we do?"

"Just... Give me a moment to think." Eroan's cheek fluttered. "How do they know of Ashford? Only a select few elves know it exists."

"It doesn't matter how! We have to go, now," Trey urged.

Carline replied, "An elf is feeding him information."

"An elf?"

"My spies tell me he is called Nye."

Eroan staggered, dropped, and braced himself against the ground. Lysander swallowed the instincts to rush to his side. Carline already knew his feelings for Eroan were strong, but he didn't want to give her more ammunition to use against him. He still reeled from her appearance and didn't yet know whether to trust it. Or her. Going to Eroan, showing the affection he felt, was a weakness among dragons.

"Nye?" Eroan gasped. He bowed his head and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. His braid fell forward, slipping from his downcast shoulders. "I should have killed him."

"Eroan," Trey's voice deepened, covering a new tremor. "There is no time for this. We must go." They said much, these elves, without saying it aloud. Eroan feared he'd made a mistake in not killing Nye, but instead of agreement, anger flared in Trey's eyes. He *cared* for Nye.

Nye. The elf who had poisoned Lysander. It seemed as though elves schemed more than dragons.

"I can't." Eroan's blue eyes settled on Lysander. "I'm not leaving."

"You must." Trey scooped up his bags. He'd leave with or without Eroan.

"Lysander?" Eroan asked.

Lysander couldn't go. Gods, he wanted to. He did. But Carline was here and the Silver dragon in the north? He hadn't yet learned to be all he could be. There was too much at stake. His fate was elsewhere. Dokul was wrong. Lysander couldn't follow Eroan, not this time.

"I can't."

"Then I'm staying with you."

Trey breathed out hard. "This is Ashford. I understand your desire to stay. You know I understand. I always have. That's why I left Cheen with you. That's why I'm here. But if Ashford falls, there is nothing left, Eroan. We need you."

"You don't need me."

"We do. For Alumn's sake. For Janna's sake, and your child's future—"

Eroan shot to his feet. "They cast me out! They ordered my death! I will not return to fight for them."

Lysander reeled inside. Eroan had a child? And Janna... the pregnant elf and Seraph entwining her two fingers together. Eroan and Janna. They were mated. The path became clear suddenly. This

had to happen. "It's all right," he heard himself say. "Go back." It didn't hurt as much as he thought it would, but then he wasn't allowing himself to think on it. The pain would come later.

Eroan's throat moved as he swallowed. "I'm not leaving you again."

Lysander got to his feet. "My destiny calls me north and yours calls you east. This is how it will always be—dragon against elf—unless we change things. And we can change things. I know it because Alumn has told me. We will be together, but not yet." It broke his heart to say it because he wanted so desperately for it not to be so. Why did it have to be them? Why couldn't some other dragon and elf stop the fighting? But it was always going to be Eroan. He'd known it since first seeing him, chained and defiant. Eroan Ilanea was meant for great things. And Lysander would be too. But to be great, he needed to be whole.

Eroan's eyes darted over them all. He took a step back. Lysander locked his hands into fists at his sides to keep from going to him. If he closed this distance between them, he would beg Eroan to stay, and Eroan would. And nothing would change. Eroan's people would die. Dokul would wipe them out, searching for Lysander.

"I promised you..." Eroan said, his face falling, dragging Lysander's heart with it.

"You haven't broken anything. We will have our time."

With his eyes glassy, Eroan met Seraph's gaze. She nodded, either telling him it was okay or that she would stand with him whatever he chose.

Carline got to her feet, knees popping. "Lysander will follow you in eleven days, elf."

She seemed sure of that. Lysander wasn't as certain. There was much to be done and he still had no idea how to do it.

"I will have my spies delay the Bronze chief." Carline took Eroan's hand and he allowed it. She patted his hand as though fond of him, like she had done a hundred times with Lysander. "There will be time. Your dragon will come back to you. This, I promise."

Eroan's jaw worked. "I will hold you to your word, old woman."

"I know you will, Eroan Ilanea. I know. Now say your goodbyes. There is much to do and no time to waste." She turned to Akiem, rousing him from his thoughts. "And you, you have much to make up for. Lysander doesn't need you, but the elves do. Travel with them. Protect them."

"What makes you think I'll listen to you now when I never have before?"

"Oh come now," she scoffed. "You cannot fool an old dragon. They are growing on you. Are they not? There once was a time elf and dragon worked side by side. Of course, those days are long gone. But they needn't be."

While Akiem grumbled and Trey and Seraph cleared the camp, Eroan drew Lysander aside with a single glance. A heavy silence fell between them, the weight of it full of things needing to be said. The moon and stars shifted, time passing, but still, neither spoke. Eroan gestured again and lured Lysander farther from the group's background chatter until almost all the sound of company had vanished and Lysander only heard his own heart beating too loud.

"Will you be safe with the Gold?" Eroan asked.

"I trust Carline more than I trust my brother." He hesitated, lowering his voice, "I will come to you... I don't know when, but I will."

"You could come now. We'd be together?" Eroan said, his eyes hopeful.

"I can't." Lysander gathered the elf's hands in his. Eroan looked down between them, at their hands together, and then up again. The hurt in his eyes was a raw, terrible thing to witness. Eroan Ilanea, exposed and vulnerable.

Eroan didn't understand. Maybe nobody could.

“My whole life I’ve been caged. I don’t want someone to cut my ropes for me. I want to cut my own ropes. Does that make sense?”

Hurt crossed Eroan’s face and Lysander feared he’d said the wrong thing. He’d never been good with words, and with Eroan, he wanted everything to be perfect all of the time. But it wasn’t and it wouldn’t be.

“You’re Eroan Ilanea.”

Eroan frowned, and again Lysander kicked himself for not being able to say exactly how he felt. He stepped closer, breathing in elf and freedom and filling his heart with it, knowing he’d need it in the days and nights ahead.

Lysander pushed closer and bowed his forehead against Eroan’s. “You’re like the stars to me.” He looked up into blue eyes. Eroan was watching, listening. “When I could fly, I would chase them and chase them, flying all night, knowing I’d never catch them but hoping one day something would change, that I’d be better or faster or stronger and I’d catch one. Just one. That was all I wanted. One star in my life. You feel like that star, like an impossible thing I don’t deserve.”

“Lysander, I—”

“No, just listen. If I don’t say it now, I might never say it. You are my guiding star, Eroan Ilanea. It’s not possible to love anyone more than I love you. You crossed the sea for me, you faced dragon hordes for me. When I thought I had nothing and nobody left, you came for me. You keep saving me. Every damn day you save me, and by the great ones, I don’t deserve it. I don’t deserve you, but I will. I’m going to be powerful. I’m going to be worthy. I’ll bring the world to its knees for you. I’ll rip the stars from the sky for you, because you deserve more. You deserve a fucking king, not a broken prince.”

Eroan tore his hand free and grabbed Lysander by the back of his neck, pulling him in so tight it hurt. The fierceness burning in his icy eyes had Lysander’s breath catching. “You are not broken,” Eroan growled. “You burn bright in the dark, brighter than any star. You’re the warmth in my veins, you’re the reason my heart beats at all. It beats for you. I live for you. I can’t lose you. Do you hear me, *Lysander*? I can’t lose you again. I can’t live without you.” Eroan’s mouth crashed into his and Lysander kissed him breathlessly back. The desperate need in it had him wanting to roar at the world for making this be a goodbye and not a beginning.

Eroan broke free, gasping. “Don’t change for me,” he whispered. “I love who and what you are. If you must change, change for you. You are free, Lysander. The choices are all yours. Choose for you. Go. Discover who you are, and when you return, I’ll be waiting.”

Emotion lodged in Lysander’s throat. Eroan’s words were real. He clutched at them as though they were a precious gift. Love. Eroan Ilanea, his stupid, stubborn elf loved him. His heart soared. He looked Eroan in the eyes, touched his cheek, marveling at how Eroan felt so vulnerable in this moment, but also a shining light of strength.

Eroan slowly eased from his touch and backed up. Adjusting his sword against his back, his jaw firmly locked, he nodded once, turned, and vanished into the dark.

Lysander let his eyes close and staggered where he stood. Every fiber of his being ached to follow, to go with Eroan, to follow him to the ends of the earth. Tilting his head back, he looked up at those stars. They blurred now, swimming in unshed tears. Gods, why did it have to be this way? But he would make a difference. He would go north, he’d answer the Silver’s summons, and he’d heal again. He’d be the emerald he was born to be. And finally, all dragonkin would bow to him. For Eroan, he’d return a king, or he wouldn’t return at all.



LYSANDER WENT BACK to the camp, sensing the elves had left long before arriving, to find just Carline waiting for him. She looked him over, head to toe, still somehow conveying concern and care despite dragons not possessing those things. Lysander expected to view her differently, knowing what she was, but he saw only the dragon who had cared when no one else did.

“Don’t betray my trust in you.” He hadn’t meant for it to sound like a plea, but it came out like one. His battered heart couldn’t take another shock. He wanted Carline to be everything he’d assumed over the years, even knowing she was Metal.

“I did all I could for you,” she said, her shoulders lifting, back straightening. The weight of years sloughed off her, leaving her tall and proud.

He stood in front of her now, feeling the terrible weight of a dragon such as her push down on him. He hadn’t felt it before, but that had been the gem’s doing. Now she was everything he hated about his own kind. Or was she?

“Akiem believes you’re just like Dokul. That’s why Elisandra locked you away.”

“And what do you believe?”

“These days, I don’t know anymore.”

“You were always different.” She lifted her hand. “My diamond in the rough.”

Lysander caught her wrist, keeping her hand hovering inches from his face. “We had a deal, remember?”

“I had not forgotten, and I meant those words. Now I am restored, I can heal your wing.”

He locked his jaw, grinding his teeth to keep the sob from breaking free. She saw it in his eyes anyway and smiled. When she pushed, he freed her hand, letting her warm, healer’s hand spread across his cheek. He could feel it too. The tingle of magic, a touch just like his own.

“I was trapped because I did not want war. I’m a healer at heart. You know this inside because we are the same, prince. Your mother trapped us both and all I could do was watch over you, chained as I was.”

All the times he’d seen her stare out of the tower windows, all the times she’d been waiting for him, alone in the kitchens, ready to hear his words or heal his wounds, and not once had he known she too suffered in silence. “Why didn’t you say something?”

She lowered her hand and pressed it to his chest, tears brimming her eyes. “If your mother had learned I’d told you, she’d have killed you. My silence protected us both.”

Warmth pulled at Lysander’s skin beneath her hand and the center of him unfurled, opening, allowing the healer’s touch to soak inside and lure his own magic out from deep within.

“You dream of her... the Silver?”

“Yes. She’s calling me north.”

Carline pulled her hand back, breaking the connection. “Then we must get you healed. The journey ahead will not be an easy one and you have a stubborn elf waiting for you.”

He smiled softly, relieved to hear the fondness in her voice for Eroan. “You told him to protect me.”

“I did.” She sighed and brushed her old robes down. “Long ago, so long I wonder if I dreamed it, elves were our protectors too, and more... They lost their love, lost their way, just like the rest of us. But Eroan Ilanea has an old soul. He reminds me of those early ones.”

Yes, it was time to make a difference. “Heal me, Carline. Help me change the world.”

“And that, dear prince, is exactly what I’ve been waiting for you to say.” She thrust both hands against his chest, delivering a shock of warmth. It rolled over and through Lysander, tipping the world upside down. He fell, but where the ground should have caught him, he went through it, falling into the warmth, drowning in it, breathing it in.

“Trust me, prince.” Carline’s gold eyes flashed in the dark.

A flutter of fear tightened his chest, but the swift push of her hands pushed it away. He trusted her. She was Carline, the dragon who had tended his wounds, both seen and unseen; the dragon he’d gone to when all was lost. She was good. She had to be good.

Her eyes scorched, her power filling him up, holding him down.

He tasted blood, tasted bitter metal. A memory of Dokul flashed; stark and blinding, the dragon holding him down, teeth in his throat. Lysander gasped.

“Do not fight ...”

He was drowning. The weight of metal fell over him, burying him in darkness. Too much. It was too much.

He blinked, slowly becoming aware of how he’d tucked himself into the corner of the abandoned building, and of how Carline looked on, her eyes full of regret and pity.

It had failed. His wing was still broken. *He* was still broken.

He breathed hard, taking the sweet night air into his lungs to clear the stench of metal. “I can do this. I just... give me a moment.”

“You must surrender yourself to me.”

“I can...” He wiped at his face with a trembling hand. “I can do this.”

Carline knelt beside the fire. “Come, prince. Come sit beside me. I will tell you the story of how the world used to be and of how it can be again.”

She began speaking, talking of dragons and the time before the ice, when the world was so very different, and Lysander crawled closer, taking up the spot beside her. She spoke of elves and humans and dragons, of how they had once lived together, each helping the other. Until the dragons grew jealous of the humans and their wealth of land. The races split, each becoming weaker because of it. Elves lost their magic. Dragons lost their compassion. Humans lost their integrity. And so the end of the world began. Humans fought dragons and elves couldn’t stop either. The lands changed. Continents broke apart. Ice swallowed the world and the last of the metals with it.

Humans, ingenious creatures that they were, survived the age of ice and built their new world on top of it. Elves lived on in the shadows. But the dragons would always return, and as human activity warmed the world again, the ice melted, revealing its terrible secret. Silver, Gold, and Bronze tore free. They saw how the humans had spread and of how they warred all over the world, destroyed it anew.

Enraged, the Bronze chief self-reproduced and reared a devastating brood of dragons. They all bore the same raging madness. On seeing the viciousness of the Bronze, the Silver—Alumn—tried to confront him, but she alone was no match for Dokul. He tore her apart over northern skies and watched her body fall into the sea. Gold, caught between Dokul’s savage necessity and Alumn’s shining light, played both sides, trying to mediate Dokul’s rage. But then the humans unleashed their weapon and a new race of dragon evolved. The jeweled.

Lysander rested his head against Carline’s shoulder, her soft voice lulling his mind and heart.

“The rest you know.”

“Why did you not kill Dokul?” he whispered. Had Dokul died all those centuries ago, things might have been very, very different.

“Fear. He’d kill me and dying never helped anyone. And besides, why do you not kill Akiem?”

“I sometimes think he can change, that he wants to change but doesn’t know how.”

She nodded. “I know now that Dokul cannot change. His reign must end, and you can end it, prince. Alumn speaks to you. She waits for you. Together, we can heal her and together we will stop Dokul for good. But I must heal you, and for that, you must trust me.”

Lysander breathed in, filling his chest. The air smelled warm and sweet, and still a little of elf and pine and freedom. “I’m ready.”

This time, when her hands spread over his chest, he let the fear fall away. This had to happen. If it didn’t, nothing would change. And if he was wrong about Carline, he’d survive. He had to survive. For the first time in forever, there was a light ahead of them all, one he could finally catch and hold in his hands. The light of hope.

CHAPTER 19

Eroan

THE TREK back to his settlement took entirely too long, but they managed it in two days, traveling through the night. Eroan hadn't realized how much he'd feared his new home had been destroyed in their absence until he'd seen the flickering torchlights and breathed out. Nye could have told Dokul of this place, so perhaps Nye hadn't lost all reason.

Chloe greeted them with a broad smile that quickly turned to concern at the sight of their weariness and without Lysander among them.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I will tell you, but..." He drew her to one side while Trey and Seraph escorted Akiem to a hut. The dragon was getting stronger every day. "Ashford is going to be attacked."

"Ashford?"

"An elven stronghold. Dokul is on his way there with a dragon horde. He has Nye." He didn't need to say anymore. The implications were clear. Everything Nye knew, so did Dokul. Eroan had thought of little else as he'd fought through the landscape, each step taking him farther away from where he truly wanted to be, who he truly wanted to be with. "I need every elf who can carry a blade. Human too, if you're willing to fight with us?"

Chloe didn't hesitate. "Of course. I'll spread the word. I assume we leave immediately?"

Eroan nodded tightly. "Give me a little while... There's something I need to do." He followed Seraph's and Trey's path and entered the hut they'd taken Akiem to. The black prince had shrugged off his coat, clearly making himself at home. Eroan crossed the small hut in a few strides, grabbed the dragon by the neck, and pinned him to the wall.

Akiem winced, but his smile grew. "I wondered when you'd snap, elf."

"When I do, you won't see it coming, *dragon*." Eroan squeezed and a little of Akiem's smile broke off. "Don't mistake this truce as my acceptance of you. Just because Lysander hasn't killed you, it doesn't mean I won't."

Akiem breathed through his nose, his dark eyes drinking in Eroan. "If I wanted to betray you, I'd have done so already."

And that was what Eroan couldn't understand. Why was Akiem still here? He was strong enough to take flight, to go anywhere, why stay? And he wasn't buying the "nowhere else to go" excuse. A

dragon with both wings could go anywhere.

“We’re going to Ashford. You’re either with us or against, and I’ve seen nothing to convince me of either, so convince me now or I kill you here.”

“I killed the emerald—”

“Don’t try to tell me that was for Lysander. You did that because you knew what that dragon could do, and right now, I’m inclined to believe you’ll do the same to Lysander if—when—*when* he returns. You’re a dragon of the worst kind, the type who weaves his lies around his victims.”

A strange kind of wicked delight sparkled in the prince’s eyes. “If you know me so well, kill me already.”

Eroan let him go and stepped away, taking the sword from his back. He should do it. He couldn’t spare the resources to have this dragon watched and taking Akiem to Ashford was only marginally less worse than having Dokul go there. And yet he hesitated. Something held him back, some niggling thought he couldn’t latch onto.

“Do it,” Seraph urged, appearing at his side. “For Xena, for the hundreds he killed at the estuary,” she stepped forward, freeing her blade, “for our home he burned to ashes.”

Akiem’s smile grew. “Must you wait for his permission, little elfling?”

“Oh, he’ll kill you, won’t you, Eroan.” She smiled back at him.

Eroan’s fingers twitched around the sword handle. He avoided Seraph’s glance and the frown that followed it.

“Won’t you, Eroan,” she repeated, turning toward him.

Akiem lunged, caught Seraph by the neck and yanked her struggling against his chest. She lifted the sword, but Akiem caught it with his free hand and tore it from her fingers, tossing it to the ground. “Neither of you is worthy of those blades. You don’t even know where they came from, do you? Lysander never told you. And you wield them like you own them. You play games you don’t even understand.”

Seraph kicked and bucked, but Akiem had more strength at his disposal than his human body belied. He could break Seraph’s neck in a twitch. She wasn’t getting free.

“Eroan, kill him! Kill him! Do it!” she hissed and spat.

Eroan held the dragon’s gaze. “You want to die.”

Akiem’s grin revealed sharp teeth but he didn’t deny it.

“You hate yourself.” The dragon’s glare fractured. Just a flicker. Had Eroan not been looking for the reveal, he’d have missed it. “You failed in everything. You couldn’t protect amethyst and the tower fell. Under Dokul, you suffered unspeakable things. You didn’t come to me for sanctuary, you came to me to die.”

Akiem threw Seraph forward. Eroan caught her, holding her tightly before she could whirl around and stab Akiem. She looked up at him, her eyes begging for blood, but as much as he wanted to kill this dragon, he couldn’t.

She tore from his arms and fled the hut. Eroan nodded for Trey to follow her, leaving him alone with Akiem.

Akiem swayed on his feet, then dropped to his knees. “Do it.”

“No.” Eroan replaced his blade and picked up Seraph’s before Akiem could take it and do himself harm. “I know what it feels like, hating yourself for the things you couldn’t do and for the things done to you. You should suffer, dragon. It’s all you deserve. But you have a choice. You’re free too, just like Lysander. No more Elisandra. No more Dokul. And maybe you mourn that or perhaps you’re finally seeing how things can be different.”

Eroan offered his hand.

Akiem looked up, disbelief widening his eyes.

“Fight for good alongside me.”

Eroan needed this dragon. His elves—even with those of Cheen and Ashford picking up arms—would not be enough. He needed the black prince’s strength and his vicious mind if they had any chance of prevailing.

Still, the prince blinked at him.

Eroan leaned in, hand still extended. “You will die. You’ll get your wish, I promise you that, but not before Dokul pays for what he did to Lysander and to you. Take my hand, Akiem.”

Akiem gripped Eroan’s hand, letting Eroan pull him to his feet. They stood a moment, each staring at the other, hands gripped, history thick between them.

Eroan let go. “We leave at dawn.” He turned and left the hut, ready to rally his pride, and after that, Cheen. He could only pray to Alumn that he’d make it in time and that it would be enough.



THREE DAYS LATER, dusklight had the horizon burning and long shadow-fingers reached across the large forest clearing outside Cheen. A storm had rolled in while Eroan had been away, flattening this part of the forest, making the perfect neutral ground.

Seraph stood to Eroan’s right, Trey to his left. His pride—some thirty humans and elves in total—stood behind. Not enough to battle a bronze force, but enough to show Cheen his intent.

Flame torches bobbed through the trees, signaling the approach of Order elves.

Eroan swallowed, tasting the beat of his racing heart. Anye had made it clear he wouldn’t be welcome if he ever returned. But she would have to listen. The fate of all elves depended on her believing him.

He’d trained many of the elves slowly emerging from the shadows, fought alongside them, grieved and triumphed with them. They had chosen to stay in Cheen. And he didn’t blame them for that. It wasn’t just Anye he needed to convince.

“Eroan Ilanea,” the elder said, her voice the only sound over that of the flame torches licking the air. She wore the trousers and tightly fitted leather jacket of the village gatherers. It suited her more than the elder robes, made her seem younger. With her hair bound, the Cheen tattoos marking her neck stood stark against her skin. “I’ve answered your summons out of respect for the Order, but we will not take you back among our fold.”

“I’m not here for that.”

She lifted her chin. Her attention flicked behind him to the force he’d brought along. Did she think he meant to attack?

Torches fluttered, their flames shifting shadows around.

Eroan counted just fifteen Order elves behind Anye, but there would be more unseen among the trees. They were likely flanking them too, coming in behind, closing the net. When faced with a threat, Eroan would have advised the same thing.

“The Bronze chief, Dokul, has a flight of a thousand or more,” he said aloud, lifting his voice so the quiet carried it far into the forest. “He’s approaching Ashford as we speak.” Murmurs rippled. No gasps, the Order were too restrained for that. “If we combine forces and leave now, there’s a chance we may reach them before his flight.”

Anye's steely eyes sharpened. "How do you know this?"

"I have... a source."

"This information came from dragons. Don't deny it. Speak the truth for once." She almost spat the final words at his feet.

Eroan swallowed the anxious flutter. "It did. The Gold to be precise."

She scoffed. "And you expect me to hand over the rest of the Order on the word of a *Metal dragonkin*?"

"No, I expect you to hand over your Order elves and any resident of Cheen who can fight in Ashford's defense."

"Eroan," she sighed, "what happened to you? Where did we go wrong?" She stepped closer and lifted her hands but stopped short of cupping his face like a doting mother would. Eroan leveled her with his gaze, searching her eyes. Hers were full of compassion and pity. "Xena once told me how you had the potential to be great," she said. "She loved you, you know. To see you here, like this, it would break her heart."

"Take that back!" Seraph stepped forward. "If Xena were here, she'd help us. Instead, you're too afraid to even consider how we can make things better. Dragons are coming and you can't see past your own—"

"Hush, child!" Anye snapped back. "Your devotion to Eroan blinds you to how he has been corrupted by the dragon prince."

"He hasn't—"

"It's all right," Eroan interrupted, turning his head to catch her eye. As much as he appreciated Seraph's attempt, this was going to take more persuading than he'd hoped. But he'd come prepared. Stubborn elves weren't changed by words, they were changed by actions.

Eroan rolled his tongue and whistled through his teeth, pitching the sharp noise high and short. In the quiet that followed, Anye's gaze thinned, her patience fading fast.

For a moment, nothing changed. The Order looked on, a chasm between them and Eroan. One unlikely to be crossed by arguing.

Wing beats thumped the air. A blasting blanket of darkness flew in inches above them all, whipping up a storm of pine needles and leaves. Cheen's elves balked, scattering as a sudden winged darkness swallowed the sky. Eroan stood motionless, his only reaction squinting into the downdraft the dragon wings had churned up.

Akiem let out an earsplitting screech and landed behind Eroan's pride, his vast wings folding in, leaving the dragon no less intimidating. Golden eyes observed Cheen's scattered assassins. He snarled at them all, and to drive the point home, freed a deafening roar.

Eroan half-turned his head, catching the dragon in the corner of his eye. "Don't." One word. That was all. Akiem's rippling growls subsided. Reluctantly, Akiem lowered his head, submitting.

The wind settled, trees calmed, and a stunned quiet returned, broken only by Akiem's bellows breaths.

Anye had stumbled back behind three assassins. Her palpable fear stoked Eroan's determination to get this done. She'd lost all color, her skin as pale as her elder's robes.

"That's... that's not your dragon," the elder stammered, not even trying to straighten.

"Prince Akiem understands the need to stop Dokul just as I do. In this, we stand united."

Akiem snorted, the sound like a distant thunderclap, and bared his teeth in a shallow grin.

"Alumn, you brought that beast to Cheen!"

Frustration had Eroan's fists trembling at his side. Was it not enough that he had the black prince

behind him? Was it not enough that he was here, trying to save these fools, despite them having made it clear his sacrifices meant nothing to them? Stepping forward, Anye's guards lifted their blades, threatening *him*.

"All I've ever done, I've done for my people, *for you*," he raised his voice and addressed the others here. If Anye wouldn't listen, perhaps they would. "You cast me out and still I fight for you! I'm not here to hurt any of you. I'm trying to save you, to save all of us. Dokul flies toward Ashford, and if he reaches them before we do, Ashford will fall. I wish it was lies, I wish I was bespelled because it would mean you are safe. But the fact is the Bronze knows of Ashford. He'll destroy it all and our heritage with it. Elvenkind will never recover. Are you content to let that happen? Because I am not. I'll take my single pride and fight him with just thirty of us if I must. I trained you all to *protect*. Curran trained you to do what is right. We are Assassins of the Order. We are blades forged to fight for those who cannot fight for themselves. We are protectors, like our ancestors before us, and we will never give up. *Until it is done!*"

His words disappeared into the quiet, rippling farther than they should, seeking the souls of all those here. He saw it in their eyes, saw the flame ignite and their elven pride lift their chins.

Assassins crept out of the forest, filling the clearing. Dozens. Thirty. Forty. More. All of them, experienced and novice. His heart thudded harder. "Follow me. Help me protect Ashford and bring an end to this monster, stand with me, until it is done."

"Eroan Ilanea!" someone cried. Another joined his voice and another. "Eroan, Eroan, Eroan," their chanting beat in time with his heart. He lifted his blade. "For Ashford!"

"For Ashford!" the elves boomed, joined by the thunder of Akiem's roar.

He had them. All of them. All but one.

Anye regarded Eroan with a cold stare. "Your mindless ambition will kill us all," she said, echoing Nye's words, before turning her back and striding away.



IN ALL, Eroan counted two hundred elves. Assassins, messengers, harvesters, fisher-folk, rangers. Anyone who could pick up a weapon and had the passion to fight.

"This will work," Trey said beside him as the train of elves threaded through the forest, leaving Cheen.

Eroan clenched his jaw. Many wouldn't return. "It has to."

If they failed at Ashford, it would be the end of elves. He prayed to Alumn that Anye's parting words didn't come true. These two hundred would join Ashford's own sizable Order, all seasoned fighters and killers, swelling their ranks to perhaps five hundred. They would still be outnumbered, but it only took a well-aimed dragontooth-tipped arrow to bring a dragonkin down.

Eroan hitched his traveling bag onto his shoulder, catching sight of a male with a hawk perched on *his* shoulder. Ross. The male glanced back toward Cheen's center toward a waiting female elf: Janna. She had a babe cradled in the crook of her arm and a bow slung over her shoulder. Ross lifted his hand. She waved back.

The elfling babe reached for her mother. Janna smiled down and cooed the little one. The child's chuckle reached Eroan's ears. His heart hardened. He tore his gaze away and fell straight into Trey's knowing expression.

"Ross must return," was all Eroan could think to say. He pushed into motion, uplifting the roots

that seemed to have tied him down.

Trey stuck beside him, ushering on the tail of the elven train. Despite their number, elf and human moved smooth and silent through the woods, like silk through fingers. Long ago, ancestors of both races had fought the greatest of battles. The humans had betrayed the elves that time, but that would not happen this time. Chloe's men and women were strong and bold and brave.

Ashford was a ten-day trek.

They reached the outer hills in five.

Seraph weaved her way back through the procession. Eroan watched her approach. She hadn't spoken a single word to him since he'd failed to kill Akiem.

"Eroan." She drew him aside, speaking low and fast. "Our scouts have reached the moors." She swallowed. "The skies over Ashford are black with dragons. Thousands, Eroan. Too many to count."

They were too late?

"And Ashford?" he asked.

"Intact, as far as they can tell. The doors are sealed. It looks as though they've all gone to ground. The dragons haven't attacked. They're staying outside the range of the ballista, just... waiting."

They didn't need to attack. They had the numbers. Their presence was the threat and they'd stay until Lysander gave himself up or the elves gave him up. But Dokul didn't know the prince he wanted wasn't here.

Eroan scanned the deceptively clear skies. "Find Trey. Have him pull the line back to the trees and make camp. No fires tonight." He started forward.

"Where are you going?"

"To the front. To see the force myself."

Veering from the elven ranks, he descended into a natural valley, keeping low in the grass and ferns. The river at its center narrowed. Eroan followed its course back up into the hills over Ashford's underground position. Sticking to the exposed rocks, he hunkered down and spotted one of his scouts. No explanation was needed. The sky boiled with dragons. Jeweled and bronze. Scales, claws, wings, glinting in the sunlight. This wasn't like the bronze warren, where the bronze had patrolled their wall. The numbers here dwarfed Dokul's previous force. The displaced amethyst dragons were all here.

All because of Nye.

"I've never seen so many," the scout whispered. "What do we do?"

"We hang back and prepare." When they fought Dokul, they would fight as one united force, it was the only chance they'd have at holding the dragons off. "Set up a perimeter watch. Nobody strays from the trees. I'll return tomorrow at dusk." Eroan pushed from the rocks and headed for one of the many hidden doors into Ashford. And if that one didn't work, he'd try another and another. There would be a way inside. Once in, he'd speak with Alador of the Higher Order and his sentinels. Ashford would not fall. It would hold, until Lysander came, just as Carline had said. He had no choice but to believe it.

CHAPTER 20

Lysander

IT DIDN'T WORK.

Carline's healing hands were not enough and her sorry eyes only made it worse. "We try again," she said. "But as dragon. I must re-break your wing, prince."

They had tried as human, but the damage was too deep, too routed in Lysander's true form and Carline's healing was apparently stronger as dragon.

Frustrated, tired, aching, he shifted and eyed the deceptively docile old woman as her figure swelled, as the magic flooded in, stretching her, twisting her into golden scale and ferocious strength. He'd seen her as dragon in the tower, briefly, before it fell, but it didn't prepare him. She matched Dokul in size, perhaps even bigger. Muscular, like all metals, her wingspan alone was enormous. Her scales didn't shine. Gnarled and knobbled, she looked as though some great natural force had shaped her out of golden stone. He wondered, idly, if the Silver was equally as impressive.

He doubted himself. He doubted this drive to go north. He doubted everything. Trusting never came easy. He trusted Eroan. Trusted Seraph. None other. Carline knew much and so far she'd done nothing to hurt him, which made him all the more suspicious.

And now this?

Re-breaking his wing?

He hunkered down, his crippled wing exposed. The damn thing wouldn't stretch out. Carline as Gold loomed over him, blocking out the sun. She smelled of metal and the steady thrum of her magic tainted the back of his throat, stirring the embers in his firepit. She wasn't bronze, but she smelled like them. And when she bowed her head, opening her jaws, a reflexive growl rumbled through Lysander. She struck suddenly, leaving him no time to change his mind. Jagged, backward-facing teeth sank into his wing, tearing through membrane and muscle. Agony blazed, ripping a roar from deep inside. He scrabbled, heaving up great breaths, spilling fire from between his clenched teeth. *Alumn*, he begged, *why must everything hurt?*

If she heard, she didn't answer.

Bone snapped and crunched, pinched and ground between Carline's jaws.

It was too much. Too much! He screamed and let loose the flame, arcing it away from Carline, scorching the trees and ground nearby instead, making them burn, making the whole world burn.

There is no victory without sacrifice, prince, a smooth, cool voice said, or perhaps he'd imagined it because the pain had a hold of him now, burying him beneath its terrible weight. Lost in the dark, he thought of Eroan, of the way the elf smiled only for him, of the feel of his body beneath his hands, strong and warm and smooth. Silk and steel. Gods, he wanted to see him again. Just a moment, that was all he'd need. If that was all they had left, he'd take it. But to do that, he needed to be whole, to be strong, to be worthy. He would survive this, like he'd survived before.

"From the greatest of fires, the greatest of weapons is forged." He fell into the dreams, hearing her voice, wondering if any of this was real.



PAIN AND NOISE AND DRAGONS... so many dragons.

Lysander woke bathed in agony and to a hail of claws and gnashing teeth. Gold flashed in front of him, her roars splintering the earth. He shrank back, thoughts muddled and slow. What was this? Liquid fire washed over gold scales and splashed across his face. He threw his head back, shielding his eyes from the worst of the heat. Carline? Had her betrayal come so soon?

But Carline wasn't attacking. She was faced away, wings fanned, *defending*.

Lysander lifted his head, looking skyward.

Dragons. He didn't know how many. A rogue flight or was Dokul among them? They plunged in, slashing at his back. Jaws snagged his crown, yanking his head back. Pain snapped down his neck. He twisted, throwing his weight forward, pulling the beast out of the air. Instinct flooded into his veins. The dragon slammed into the ground and Lysander was on it, teeth buried in its neck, down low, where the fire churned. He bit, feeling scale shatter. Acid burned his tongue. The dragon snapped at his face and neck, going for the vulnerable spot behind his broken crown. He slammed a foot down, smothering its snout, grinding the monster into the dirt. Liquid heat flushed up his back. Not fire. He whipped around and roared a wash of flame over the vicious diamond. A viscous liquid drooled from between its teeth, sizzling where he splashed across his wings. He lunged up, jaws open, and ripped the diamond from the air. More, he wanted more. And more came. He tore at them, unleashing the worst he could do until his green scales shone red with blood.

He'd kill them all. And wouldn't stop there.

Lust and power sizzled his thoughts, pulling them tight, making him *unstoppable*. Dragons fell. He trod their bones and blood into the dirt. Three remained, two on the wing, but one had fallen to its belly, shaking in its own puddle of piss. Lysander didn't need jaws to pin it down. He had it captured on the end of an invisible chain linked to that newly risen part of him. He could pull, and the beast would buckle. He had it, all of it. Its mind was weak, wild, scared. He loomed closer.

Mine.

Own. Take. Bite. Fuck.

He could do all those things and the jeweled would let it happen.

Power.

He breathed it, lived it, let it fill him up. He was bigger suddenly, he was *more*.

True power like he'd never had, like he'd never dreamed.

Not a broken thing. He was bigger, better, stronger.

Lifting his head, his gaze snared the two in-flight and pulled, yanking them to the ground. They submitted, falling over themselves, exposing their throats and bellies. Their desperation reeked, but

oh how it smelled sweet to Lysander. The power was his. Utterly and completely. And now he knew why Elisandra had feared him, why emeralds were killed, why he'd been kept in the dark. Laughter bubbled inside his dragon-mind.

He flung his glare around and found the Gold, panting, bloody and exhausted. A Metal. One of the first.

Don't, the cool, silvery voice said.

Oh but he could. Advancing, he spread both his wings, vaguely aware that the broken wing tingled as it fully extended. That seemed important, but there was nothing more important now than making every damned dragon submit before him. And the metals... the wretched, vicious, bullying metals.

She fought, this one. Her eyes burned with defiance. But it didn't matter. She'd be his. They'd all be his.

Unstoppable. Powerful. Not a prince. Not a failure. Not broken.

A king.

And they'd all feel his wrath.

She snarled, this Gold, warning him off.

Madness stretched thin and snapped, driving Lysander forward. It wouldn't be until much later, when the setting sun flooded the land already set ablaze with hungry flame, devouring the carcass of the fallen Gold and the countless jeweled, that he'd understand what he'd done, and what he was capable of.

His flames devoured meadows and hills and forests and the flesh of every dragon he'd slaughtered, Gold scale glinting among them.

Carline had told Eroan that Lysander was the future. And she was right. This world would burn beneath him. He lifted his head, spread his wings and roared his promise. The king had risen and everything had changed.



HE IGNORED the Silver's call, pushed the dreams aside, and soared fast and high. Free. He was free at last, his wings kissing the air, his heart blazing.

The metals would pay.

They'd all pay.

Arriving at Rhadgar's old lands, the old king's scattered brood flocked to him, each one falling over themselves, scales rattling, panting, teeth bared. They were weak, but he'd make them strong. Disorganized and wild, but he'd make them vicious again, make them worthy. The weakest, he killed. They rotted where they fell. He flew on, snaring any dragon who crossed his path, until fear saturated his flight of dozens. Fear of him. They would fight for him, because they didn't have a choice. And that's what made emeralds so feared, so powerful. He owned every other dragon, like he'd owned his mother at the moment he'd choked the life out of her, like he'd owned Mirann at the coupling. It had always been inside of him, and now it was free. Now he was emerald.

CHAPTER 21

Eroan

IT WAS NEVER MEANT to be this way.

Eroan jerked awake in the chair, the voice he'd heard already fading out of reach.

He rubbed at his face and leaned forward. Elves scurried back and forth, carrying books and pictures, trinkets and treasures of the old-world, taking them deep into Ashford's vaults.

Ashford's enormous tree drew his eye. Dust motes danced around it, lit by the skylight above. Cheen's had burned. Would this tree outlive him? A shadow swept over that light, briefly plunging the atrium into darkness. The dragons were still out there. An impossible number. A chill shivered through him.

He stood, shaking off the dread. Everything was going to work out. He'd arrived with his pride. Lysander would come. They'd hold the dragons off, maybe even push them back.

Pacing, the dregs of exhaustion fell away. He hadn't properly rested since leaving Lysander. There had been no time. And now he was here, inside Ashford, waiting to be seen, and this was taking too long.

A door slammed, drawing his eye.

"Eroan."

He almost didn't recognize Alador. The old elf wore battle-leathers sparkling with numerous blades. His long gray hair fell in braids down his back. Eroan had known Alador was of the Order, perhaps the original assassin, he was certainly old enough, but seeing the elder primed for battle was a stark reminder of how things had changed and were about to change again.

"How many do you have?" Alador asked, his voice echoing about the atrium. All the other elves, those not fighters, had retreated to the chambers buried deep into the hills. An equally formidable elf accompanied Alador. Sentinel Venali. Tall, with a cascade of red hair tied and pinned back from his face. Eroan had met him the last time he'd been here. He too was equally armed. Other Order elves fanned out, breaking off into prides.

"Two hundred," Eroan replied.

"We will need every single one." Alador waved Eroan on, urging him to follow, passing the tree and into a side room. A wooden table dominated the space. A map had been carved into its surface. A map of Ashford's many rooms and tunnels. Drawn to its detail, Eroan's thoughts stalled at Ashford's

scale. The rooms and corridors went on for what seemed like miles.

“They don’t appear to know how to get inside or they’d already be among us—”

“They know,” Eroan said, dreading that it had come to this. “They have an elf. Nye Cadogan.”

Alador stilled. “You know this for certain?”

“Yes.”

“Then may Alumn’s light be with him.”

Eroan considered telling Alador the truth—that Nye had brought this on himself—but it was doubtful Nye would survive the bronze. The memory of Nye didn’t need to be tarnished by his last actions. Jealousy and love had twisted him, but Nye *had* been good. He had the right to be remembered well, like all Order elves should be.

“We must assume they know everything he knows. How many elves are here, how to get inside, and what resistance they can expect.”

“Then why haven’t they attacked?” Venali asked.

Eroan had considered how best to explain the situation with Lysander during the trek over, but nothing had sounded right. There was no easy way to explain Dokul’s infatuation with Lysander or how Eroan had come to know Lysander so well. “Dokul, the Bronze chief, wants Lysander, the amethyst prince. Ashford is just a means by which he believes he can get what he wants.”

Both assassins frowned but it was Alador who said, “There is more to this?”

They already knew of how Eroan had escaped the tower with Lysander’s help, and how Eroan had come to be in possession of the ballista plans. But now he told the rest, as concisely as he could, leaving out much of the intimacies and intricacies of his relationship with Lysander. As far as Alador knew, Eroan had fashioned something of a bond with the prince, but little more.

“Where is this Lysander?”

“On his way with reinforcements.” Eroan hoped. No, he *believed*. Lysander would come. “We must hold out until then.”

“And he can be trusted, you’re sure of this?”

“Yes.”

Alador and Venali went on to explain how they had tunnels leading to ballista dotted about the Ashford hills, hidden among the gorse and thorns. Ashford was well defended, but in the face of so many dragons, they still wouldn’t be able to hold out long. Once the ballista locations were exposed, the dragons would take them out in minutes. And now they knew Ashford was below ground, the bronze would dig—it was what they knew.

“Use the ballista as your last line of defense. They’re powerful, but it’s shortlived. Once they fall, withdraw into here.” Eroan tapped a section on the carved map buried deep inside the hills. “It’s too deep for the dragons to dig out. They’ll be forced to shift and come at us through this thoroughfare.” He ran a finger along the main, narrow atrium. “We ambush them there.” A last stand. And it would be their last. There was no way out. Once the dragons came in, there would be no retreat.

“Let us hope it does not come to that.” Alador pointed to the far section of the map. “Bring your people in here during the night. There’s a doorway hidden among the rocks. Obviously, make sure you’re not seen. Once you’re inside, we’ll seal the tunnel behind you.”

Eroan nodded.

“Thank you,” Alador added. “For coming.”

“It’s my duty and the duty of all elves.”

Alador’s heavy gaze lingered, its weight telling. They’d be lucky to survive whatever came next. They were too few and the dragons too many.

Eroan was under no illusions. They needed a miracle. But until then, he'd have to be enough.

Alador looked out of the doorway into the atrium with its precious tree. "May Alumn's light protect us all."



EROAN RETURNED to the camp and relayed the plan for how they'd access Ashford at dawn.

Seraph waited until after he'd spoken and the Order had dissipated among the trees before asking the questions burning in her eyes.

"What distraction?"

That part he still had to work on. "You don't need to worry. I'll see it's done."

"I know you will, but the fact you won't tell me what it is has me concerned."

He walked on, heading to the rear of the camp, knowing she'd follow. "I miss the days you'd follow my orders without asking questions. Those were good days."

"Horse. Shit. I always asked questions. It used to annoy you to no end, that's why I did it. You'd waffle on about the importance of oiling your blade, blah blah blah, and I'd ask the same questions every time and you'd answer every time—I've no idea why, because you knew I was being a ferret, so I did it some more, to get a rise out of you. It didn't work as often as I'd hoped."

He stopped. "Horseshit?" And looked back.

She shrugged. "Lysander says it."

"Oh, Lysander says it, so that makes it right?"

She locked both hands on her hips. "He talks more sense than you do. Right now, he'd tell you to stop avoiding my question. What distraction? Are you going to do something stupid like turn yourself into dragon bait?"

He frowned, insulted by her apparent lack of faith in his tactics. But he kept his smile, the one he always seemed to wear around her. "When have I ever turned myself into *dragon bait*?"

An eyebrow arched. "Do you really want me to answer that?"

Laughing, he shook his head. "I'm not the bait. You needn't worry. I'll be by your side when you enter Ashford."

"Then how, Eroan?" she whined. "Tell me, sassa. I need to know. How can I learn if you do not teach me?"

"I can again tell you all the benefits of oiling your blade. Would you like to hear them now or shall we leave that lesson for Ashford?"

"Oh, by Alumn, Lysander is *so* right. You're such a *tease*!"

He smiled. "Go. Help ready the camp. I'll tell you after it's done." Her lips twisted in frustration but she wouldn't question him again. A tease was he? Lysander and Seraph clearly encouraged one another. And Eroan wouldn't have it any other way.

He smiled to himself and roamed the camp, running his eye over preparations, answering questions, until the number of elves and humans fell away and the murmurs faded. He didn't have to go far into the quiet and the dark to find Akiem. The black prince blurred with the shadows, but Eroan could smell the lemony bite in the air, so similar to Lysander's and yet so different.

"I am to be your distraction," the prince said from his perch on a rocky mound, keeping his back to the camp and Eroan. Even with much of the camp's hustle and bustle between them, the dragon had heard his conversation.

Eroan came around to stand in front of him. Akiem lifted his head. He didn't look surprised so much as resigned. "I need you to do this. Only your reappearance will turn the dragons away from Ashford."

Akiem sent his gaze far into the forest. "Dokul doesn't want me. He wants Lysander."

"You got away. I know the chief well enough. He'll want you back."

His mouth turned down. "You don't know what you're asking."

It wasn't hard to recall how the bronze had manhandled Eroan or the vacant look in Akiem's eyes on his arrival and how that look had only now begun to fade. "You're wrong. I know exactly what I'm asking."

"I suppose you do." Akiem folded his arms, hugging himself closed. "I can still taste him. He's under my skin and everywhere. With you... here, among your people. It's been different, better. I even forget sometimes..." he turned his head, looking away, "what was done to me."

Eroan stood firm. "I'm not your sanctuary."

"You were for him. For Lysander."

"Because I love him." Akiem laughed, the sound of it rumbled from his chest, setting Eroan's teeth on edge. "You find that amusing?"

"No." The laughter stuttered off and the dark returned to Akiem's eyes. "There is no room in our world for love. I'm surprised there's room in yours."

Eroan crouched, leveling the prince under his glare. Akiem had never appeared so small, so normal. Not the dragon who had killed countless elves. Not the dragon who had ordered Eroan tortured. Just a man, afraid. "It ends here. Tomorrow, the next, I don't know when exactly, but soon. It's unlikely I'll live through it. Hundreds will die. Dragon and elf. Just like you've killed hundreds of my kin. People I loved. Family. Is that what you wish your legacy to be, *prince*?"

Akiem's straight black hair fell forward, hiding his face. He seemed younger behind his curtain of hair, like a young man behind a mask. "I didn't want any of this. I was different once. Do you believe that?"

Why did it matter what Eroan thought if he was just an elf? "Lysander told me of Amalia and how you were different with her." The prince flinched. "I believe you, but I'll never forgive you. Lysander suffered all those years too, but he kept his heart."

Akiem huffed a dry laugh. "You don't know him because he doesn't know himself. But when he discovers... Let me ask you this, elf." Akiem's eyes glowed golden. "How dangerous does a dragon have to be for its own vicious kin to turn on it?"

"Dragons do not need a reason to kill."

Akiem shook his head, rippling his hair. "Not like this. Emeralds are not allowed to mature. The jeweled get stronger with every generation. We get *worse*. You have forgotten where he comes from. Lysander *is* Elisandra's son."

"So are you."

"But there is one difference between us, one thing that changes everything. He is emerald." Akiem gripped himself harder. "And all emeralds are the worst of us." Looking up, his dark eyes widened. "I fear for you, elf. This love you cling to is a lie."

Eroan straightened. "You will go to Dokul or I'll kill you. Your choice is simple."

"Either way, there is nothing left for me and I am dead."

Anger flared through Eroan's veins. "Just as you wished it."

He left Akiem then, before giving in to the desire to run him through with the dragonblade. The prince would go to Dokul. Eroan had seen a different side of him. Since Dokul, since learning what

Lysander had suffered, Akiem wanted more for his brother. He'd do this for Lysander, but not for himself.

Eroan pushed the prince's words to the back of his mind. Lysander was dangerous, he knew it. He'd known it since first seeing him in the tower dungeons, but Lysander was dangerous because he was different, and all dragons feared what they didn't understand.

Lysander would come.

And he'd bring a miracle with him.

CHAPTER 22

N_{ye}

THE LEATHER COLLAR ITCHED, the skin beneath raw and filthy. He stank of sweat and leather and *them*. He'd known they were horrible, but he hadn't realized how loud they were, how big and brutish and everywhere. They reeked of dragon, naturally, but it was in him now, under his skin and inside his lungs. He couldn't breathe without tasting them, couldn't move without feeling them close by.

Nye would have killed for a bath.

They hadn't touched him, just like Dokul had agreed, but that didn't stop them from looking and leering and wanting. He hadn't slept, barely ate, and only did so when Dokul threatened to choke him with his *meat*. He'd tried too. The deal hadn't mentioned what Dokul could or couldn't do to him, so when the dragon chief had tugged on Nye's leather leash one morning, lust riding him hard, Nye had been forced to sweeten the deal.

He'd given the chief Ashford.

Since then, he'd begun to hope they'd kill him just so nobody would know he'd given up Ashford's existence. He hadn't wanted any of this. And now they were here, on the moorland leading down into Ashford's valley, waiting for Lysander, because Eroan would surely be here and where Eroan went, Lysander followed. Nye had told Dokul that too, although the chief had already realized the same.

It had been days.

The dragons were growing restless. And so was Dokul, always pulling on the end of Nye's leather leash, making him kneel, eyeing him like he was nothing more than a morsel to chew on.

"It is a shame you are not that Eroan Ilanea," Dokul grunted. "They'd trade Lysander for that Eroan elf, but not a worthless little thing like you."

Nye stayed silent. He'd learned to keep his words few unless Dokul explicitly wanted an answer.

Dragons tumbled through the dark skies above and screeched their calls across the land. Nye could only imagine how the Ashford elves were responding deep inside their hill. They'd prepare for attack. They'd fight—they wouldn't run. They'd fight and die.

"I need to know he's there." Dokul clicked his fingers and a dragon appeared. To Nye, they all looked the same, but this one Dokul favored. This one had been watching Nye since he'd almost raped him at the marsh. Kash. "I want to meet with their leader or chief or whatever the alpha elf is

called. If this Eroan is inside, he has the arrogance to be among their leaders. Send an emissary. Let's rattle their cage and see who falls out."

Nye kept his head down, trying to be unseen. If he stayed small and quiet, Dokul often forgot he was present, but the humiliating leash always stayed within the chief's reach. Not being seen was both a blessing and a curse. Dokul and the bronze behaved like nothing Nye could have dreamed up in nightmares. He'd known what to expect, but at the same time, being told and seeing it were two very different things. They fucked and fought with equal fervor. There was no element of care or compassion about them. He'd witnessed one of their own be torn to shreds by five others for no reason, as far as Nye had been able to tell.

"You will come with me," Dokul said, yanking on Nye's leash. "Let them see how I treat elves."

Shame sweated through him. He could not be paraded in front of his people like this. They'd know it was him who had told the dragons.

Eroan survived this. So can I. It was his mantra. He whispered it like a prayer to Alumn. And with every second, minute, hour, and day, he waited for the moment to present itself. The moment he would escape.

Dokul was on his feet suddenly, squinting at the black skies.

Dragons churned above them, whipping up the darkness with wings and claws. It looked like the usual squawking nonsense until fire strafed the belly of a huge black-scaled dragon, lighting him up from below.

It was surely Akiem.

Roars and howls split the night. Dokul stepped forward, hands fisted at his sides.

He'd left the end of the leash tied to a skinny ash tree.

Nye pulled his gaze back, careful to keep looking down, meager and weak. *Go*, he silently urged. *Go and forget me.*

The spicy, metallic smell of their wretched magic burned Nye's nose and tongue. Dokul was close to shifting, and if that happened, Nye would run. "It's Akiem, the black prince," Nye said. *Go on, go to him.*

Dokul's glare raked across his skin, sprinkling gooseflesh down his neck and arms. He shouldn't have spoken. All he'd done was remind Dokul he existed.

Whatever anger had driven Dokul to his feet faded right out of him. His lips carved a smile.

"You should go to him..." Nye tried desperately to hook the dragon back on the sight above, but he was turning, retrieving the leash. He wrapped it around his hand, reeling Nye closer.

"And what makes you think I'd listen to the twitterings of an elf?"

Nye pulled back on the leash, but the gesture was a token effort. They both knew he wasn't escaping.

"My flight will bring that prince to me." Dokul yanked, and Nye fell into the brute's sudden grip on his chin. His fingers bit into Nye's cheeks. "He returns because he has no choice." The grip eased. His rough thumb lifted and stroked. Dokul's hot, wet smell laced Nye's throat and sank deep into his empty stomach. "They all think they have choices..." Dokul turned Nye's head to the side. His teeth grazed Nye's neck. "I fucked their will out of them both. They belong to me... like you belong to me."

A small, stupid noise escaped Nye's throat, a prey noise. It triggered the chief. Dokul's free hand gripped Nye's hip, the one on his chin held firm. Dokul's teeth pinched his neck. Nye clenched his teeth and growled. The skin split, Dokul's teeth sinking in, and Nye stopped fighting, stopped everything. He'd stop breathing if he could. He wanted to die, here and now; let the monster kill him and have it over with. Better that than being fucked and torn apart from the inside out.

Dokul pulled his teeth free and dropped Nye at his feet. “Now you are marked for your elf kin to see. They will fear what it means to be *owned*. Maybe they’ll hand Eroan over...” The bronze tapped his fingers against his thigh. It was all Nye could see with his head bowed. “Now there’s an idea. Why fight when we all know I’ll win. Just hand over the pretty elf and the prince I want will follow.”

“No,” Nye muttered.

“What was that?”

“No.” He looked up through his matted bangs. “You can’t have him.”

“You *dare* say no to me?” Dokul was on him again, his fat fingers thrust into the collar and pulling Nye against his heaving chest. Nye didn’t care. He was done with this. He was dead anyway. Dead to the Order, dead to Eroan. Let this bastard lash out and kill him now.

Nye bared his teeth. “Eroan will kill you. You feel it, don’t you? Alumn is watching. She guides him. Eroan Ilanea will be your end. Maybe the end of you all. He cannot be broken”—Nye’s voice cracked—“not by you, not by anyone.”

Dokul seethed, trembling, radiating heat and rage. But Nye’s words found their mark. A laugh bubbled up and out of him like it had a mind of its own. Dokul flung him down, but Nye kept on laughing, curling up in the leaves and dirt and laughing until his face was wet and his stomach ached.



A LIGHT RAIN stirred the smell of summer and sunbaked earth off the ground. Nye lifted his face to the morning dampness, wishing it would clean the filth and shame from his skin. But no amount of rain could wash away the collar he wore, or the bite at his neck, or the line of dragons behind him, or the worst of them all, standing beside him, occasionally tugging on the leash as a reminder of what he was now.

A pet.

Not an elf. Not an Assassin of the Order. Not even Nye Cadogan. He belonged to the dragon. But as a pride of Ashford elves approached through the steaming mist—Alumn’s sunlight already parting the clouds and gracing them with her blessing—Nye saw the sweet sight. Eroan to the left of Alador. He walked with purpose, dragonblade in hand, his lips a firm line and his eyes their typical, penetrating blue. He’d seen those eyes sparkle with lust; he’d felt the power beneath that body. How had it come to this? Nye pinched his lips together, stifling a sob. There was no stopping the tears from blurring Eroan’s approach.

He tipped his head back, banishing the tears before they could fall. The skies were clear of dragons—a condition of this meeting—and now the rain was easing, making way for what would be a beautiful day.

“My name is Alador. I speak for my people,” the tall, imposing warrior said. Nye had met him briefly during his first and likely last visit to Ashford, alongside Eroan. “My companion is Eroan Ilanea.”

“Oh, that one’s reputation precedes him,” Dokul replied, his attention drilled down on Eroan. “You look well, elf. Elisandra’s chains agreed with you. Rumor is you even liked it.” Dokul lifted a shoulder, his yellow-eyed gaze turning hungry. “Rumor is, you have acquired a taste for dragon cock too.”

Eroan blinked long and lazily back at the chief. Nye wished he’d look over and see him, see the sorry in Nye’s eyes. He hadn’t wanted this. He wanted to blurt it out, to try and salvage some of his

reputation even as he stood, shackled at the end of a leash. Shame made his stomach knot and roil.

“I’m assuming you’ve invited us to parlay to offer terms of a truce?” Alador prompted.

Dokul grinned. He spread his arms. “I can take your little hole in the ground and all your elves this very day if I wish it.”

“Terms,” Alador repeated, leaving no room for posturing.

“Is he here?” Dokul asked.

They stood silent a while with just the breeze hissing across the rough grass.

“No.” A small tick tried to pull at Eroan’s lips. Nye only knew to look for it because he’d seen the same so often when Eroan had tripped during training, or if his dagger had missed its mark. It was a rare sight, that tick, but it told a story.

The news didn’t please Dokul either. “A deal then. I grow bored of watching your hill. So let’s get this done. Give that one to me”—he nodded at Eroan—“and I’ll leave you in peace.”

“No,” Alador said, barely waiting a breath.

Dokul puffed an aggrieved sound before turning that sound into a laugh. “He’s just one elf.” He circled a hand. “Hand him over and you save the hundreds you have tucked away belowground. Baby elflings, bitch elves too. Come now, be reasonable. He can’t be that impressive that you’d risk your entire brood for him.”

Alador lifted his chin. “I remember you, Dokul. I was there when you lit the old-world on fire. I fought your hordes. You never did understand the force that stood against you. I see nothing has changed. You’re as ignorant and shortsighted now as you were then.”

Dokul cocked his head and worked his jaw, seeing the insult in those flowery words.

By Alumn. Nye blinked at Alador and then at Eroan beside him. They were brilliant, he realized. They were everything he’d wanted to be. He loved them, like he loved all his people. And he’d only ever wanted to do the right thing but somehow it had all gotten twisted up and broken. He saw that now. He should be right there beside them but somehow, he wasn’t. Somehow, he was on the wrong side of all this and he didn’t understand how that had happened. He’d only ever tried to do right.

Dokul pointed at Alador. “You can’t tell me you’re really going to condemn your people for the sake of one dragon-fucking elf.”

Eroan stepped forward. Dokul flinched back.

Dokul. Flinched.

Nye had seen it. They’d all seen it.

A small, but no less lethal smile lifted one corner of Eroan’s mouth. “Let me make something perfectly clear, Dokul.” The use of the dragon’s name drove his intent home like a blade through the heart. “There are no terms that elvenkind will agree to. We do not bargain with dragons. We kill them.”

“You fuck them too, Eroan Ileana. You’ve got balls, elf.” Dokul laughed and the dragons behind him stirred. “Elisandra wasn’t wrong when she—”

“I will kill you, Dokul,” Eroan snapped. His composure cracked, falling away, but the anger beneath only made him seem more lethal. “There is nowhere in this world you can hide. I will hunt you down, stab a blade through your filthy heart and carve up your remains until there is nothing left for wolves but scale and tooth.” He stepped back, nodded to Alador and turned away. “Sleep well, dragon.”

Dokul swore. He clutched at Nye’s leash, rattling Nye to his side. “I have this one! You know this one. He says you know him!”

Eroan stopped. Alador looked at Eroan and then cast his gaze back to Nye. The Higher Order

assassin's knowledge-filled eyes brimmed with pity. Nye's heart sank.

Eroan half-turned his head, the line of his jaw and the flutter of his lashes sharp with intent. "That is no elf." He strode on.

Nye's heart shattered. He tried to call out, to beg Eroan to save him, like he'd saved Lysander, but Dokul roared his frustration and tossed Nye to the ground.

The chief turned to his dragons. "Fill the skies with fire," he bellowed. "Burn it all. Find a way inside! *Kill every last wretched elf! Bring me Lysander!*"

Dragons took flight, so many that it felt like a storm had risen out of the ground. The leash yanked and Nye stumbled to his feet, lost and numbed, stumbling behind the beast and away from everything he loved.

CHAPTER 23

Eroan

“I KNOW what you’re thinking, you wouldn’t be an elf if you weren’t,” Alador said. “But Dokul is a deceiver. He would have taken you in one breath and attacked Ashford in the next. They can never be trusted.”

Eroan followed Alador’s long strides down the narrow tunnel. The elder’s words echoed ahead. Of course Eroan had been thinking on Dokul’s offer to trade him for Ashford’s safety. But Alador was right. Dokul wasn’t leaving here without his fight and Lysander. Eroan could give him one of those things but not the other.

Carline had said eleven days.

Today was that day.

Lysander wasn’t here.

“His words... about being intimate with dragons...” The words tripped from Eroan’s tongue.

Alador waved a hand. “Nonsense. He’s good at that. Sticking words in like knives and twisting them.”

Not nonsense but this wasn’t the time to reveal Dokul had been right. “You speak as though you’ve dealt with him before?”

“I have. I was there when the humans tried to negotiate.” Alador’s shoulders lifted in a line. “Indeed, we all know how that turned out.”

Emerging from the tunnel mouth into Ashford’s central foyer, Alador told the waiting elves to seal the tunnel behind them. Chloe had shared her black powder, which they’d put to good use by sealing all but a handful of tunnels in and out of Ashford. The elves manning the ballistae had their own pockets of gunpowder to seal the tunnels when they retreated. Eroan had watched Chloe hand out the fragile powder, knowing those elves would use it to seal them themselves and continue fighting *until it was done*.

By the time they reached the atrium, the explosion boomed through Ashford’s foundations, shaking dust out of the upper levels, making it rain around the tree. The atrium was a weakness. The glass roof wouldn’t hold back a dragon for long. Nobody said it, but they all knew the roof was a weak point, which was why Ashford’s population was making for the deep, underground chamber, leaving the upper levels deserted.

The tree wouldn't last either. Alumn, everything they had worked for, salvaged and sculpted over the years. Eroan couldn't bear to think of it all being destroyed now. The books he'd read when Xena had brought him here. Such precious things. Pictures too, of the old-world, of long-dead people on sunny beaches and huge, red vehicles with dozens of windows, metal tubes that could fly like dragons. If those images were destroyed, the memories would be gone too. They were protecting more than elven lives here, they protected the past for the future, if they had one.

Alador's hand landed on Eroan's shoulder. "We will do our best. That is all we can ever do."

Eroan nodded, not trusting his voice.

Alador left his side to rally any lingering elves along, and Eroan headed for the choke point, finding Trey already there, standing by one of two smaller ballistae set on the overhanging walkway, angled downward, covered by blankets. These smaller versions reloaded much quicker. They'd be invaluable in holding the dragons back.

"Did you see him?" Trey asked. He reached around and rubbed the back of his neck as though to rub away an ache. "Nye?"

Eroan denied the memory any purchase: Nye beside Dokul. Collar around his neck. Teeth marks in his flesh. "I did and you do not want to know the rest."

A shadow darkened Trey's expression. "Have they... Was he hurt?"

Eroan knew what the collar around Nye's neck meant. The bite too. Dokul's mark. But there was little Trey could do for him. There was no use in telling him the horror behind it all. "He appeared unharmed, at least physically." That wouldn't last. Eroan had deliberately avoided acknowledging Nye, but he'd seen the bruises, the haze in his eyes. Nye was strong, he was fast and lethal with a blade, but at the hands of dragons, he was just elf, and it wouldn't be enough.

Trey sighed out his relief, but his gaze lingered too long on Eroan. "You think he deserves it."

"No." Yes. Trey saw the true answer on his face. "He burned Cheen's tree. He drugged Lysander. He led the dragons here." There was more too, but with each statement, Trey's face fell. He cared for Nye in a way Eroan never could. "No, he doesn't deserve this. Nobody deserves what he's going through."

Trey fell silent, chewing on his words, likely because they would come with a tremor. "Will we get him back?" he asked, voice pitched a little higher, clinging to hope.

Yes would be the easy answer, but it would also be a lie. "Alumn will decide his fate."

Trey nodded and set to work adjusting the ballista, hiding his pain. Eroan watched the ex-messenger's quick hands work, wondering if Nye knew he had someone who genuinely cared for him. If anyone could temper Nye, it was Trey, but it was likely too late for that.

Eroan placed a hand on Trey's shoulder. The male looked up. Trey was a good soul, a good friend. Eroan sent a silent prayer out to Alumn to keep him safe. He squeezed his shoulder and moved off, not needing to speak. Sometimes a touch said the same as a thousand words.

Eroan walked the upper galleries, moving among his pride and those of Ashford's Order, speaking the encouraging words they needed to hear.

Vines that had been allowed to climb the walls over the years would hide the prides until it was time to strike. With any luck, the dragons would walk right beneath them, never knowing they walked into an ambush.

Eroan leaned against the rail and watched his people, human and elf, ready their weapons and get to their positions below. With the dragons funneled into this point, forced into their human form by the confines of the walls, it might just be enough. Most of the bronze were slow. The jeweled would be more difficult to take down, but each elf here had trained their entire life to do exactly that. They had

the weapons and the experience. For the first time in centuries, they had a chance.

He'd never been prouder of who he was and at the same time more disgusted by the actions of someone he'd considered a friend. To see Nye in the collar... Eroan rubbed at his neck, feeling its weight still, hearing the queen's laughter. With the memory came the hot, wet stench of dragon, lacing his throat and turning his stomach over.

"Eroan...?"

Eroan flinched. The sandy-haired elf beside him was as lean as a reed. Lost to the past, Eroan almost didn't recognize him.

"Ross." He straightened, facing the male while shoving the harrowing memories aside. The hunter wore Order leathers instead of his more blended hunter attire. The fit didn't sit right. The sleeves were too long, jacket too loose. The items were likely borrowed. And from the way Ross shifted on his feet, he wasn't comfortable in them. They'd barely spoken more than a few words since Eroan had returned alive to Cheen. Seraph had been the one to convince Ross to allow Eroan to *borrow* the hawk, helping him get message to Lysander. The hawk had returned to its falconer but wasn't with him now. Ross seemed diminished without it. "Where's your hawk?"

He cleared his throat, propped a hand on a hip, and then dropped it again. "I let her go." He reached for the rail and squeezed his grip around it.

Eroan wondered if that iron grip was meant for Eroan's throat.

If he'd freed the hawk, then he didn't believe he was going to live through the next few days.

"I wanted to speak with you before... before it happens." The hunter went on, speaking while looking out over the foyer, avoiding Eroan's direct gaze. "Get some things cleared between us."

Eroan waved him off. "There's no ne—"

"Will you allow me to speak?" Ross asked, his tone making it clear this wasn't a request. "Or are you too important to hear me?"

Now the hunter's gaze snared Eroan's and locked on.

So the male did have a backbone after all. Eroan nodded.

"I love Janna." Ross's moss-green eyes burned, daring Eroan to challenge the words.

He would have, once. Janna was his friend. His best friend since he'd walked out of the forest as an orphan and she'd taken his hand, showing him another home. Nobody was good enough for Janna. Eroan leaned a hip against the rail, biting his words back.

"After you... She was stricken when she thought you'd perished in the tower, and then in France. It broke her heart. She loves you. Of course, you know that..." Ross scoffed, like such a thing were impossible. Eroan raised an eyebrow. "We did all right together. We *do* all right. She told me... about the babe. About you being the father."

Eroan looked down at the gallery floor but saw the memory of the babe in her mother's arms back in Cheen, not the elves moving about below. Father. What a word that was. So much responsibility came with it, a responsibility he wasn't capable of. But Ross was.

"Her name is Elle." Ross's mouth tilted. "She has your eyes."

Elle. Eroan gritted his teeth. Pain thumped through his jaw. The rest of him ached too, but mostly right around his heart.

"Janna says it's better this way. That you don't want her—"

What? Eroan looked up.

Ross held up a hand, stopping what would have been a string of denials. "If you do right by her, I'll step aside. You love her and Elle is yours. I have no right to get in the way of that." He lowered his hand and some of the fight drained out of Eroan. "I wanted to tell you now, so there's no bad

blood between us should anything... happen. I don't want to be the one standing in the way of love. That's not who I am." Ross winced. "I'm prepared to let them both go, because Janna loves you and Elle has a right to grow with her real father."

Eroan had a million things he wanted to say, a thousand feelings running through him. He gripped Ross's shoulder and held him there, looking the male in the eyes. "There's nothing to stand in the way of. Love her, like I can't."

The male blinked too quickly. He nodded tightly, trying to hide how the words opened him up. Like Janna, he was useless at hiding his thoughts from his face.

"You'll return safely to Janna and Elle." Eroan released him, giving him a small shove. "You have my word."

Ross backed up, dragging a hand across his face, wiping off the emotion. "Until it is done." He turned away.

Eroan closed his eyes and sighed out the pain. He had no right to feel anything, but that didn't make it hurt any less. He had a daughter. Her name was Elle. He was glad to learn of her name in these moments—moments that could very well be his last. Perhaps Ross had accosted him for that too. He silently thanked the falconer for the unexpected gift.

He'd been right to free the hawk. Only Alumn knew what happened next.

A boom shook the ceiling. Chunks of plaster cracked free and plummeted toward the elves below. "Move!" People scattered. Ancient concrete exploded around them. And somewhere above, through earth and rock, a dragon roared.

It had begun.



THEY DUG FROM ABOVE.

Eroan ran to the atrium. The tree's branches shivered with every booming roar. Leaves rained, the tree weeping its tears. A resounding brittle sound snapped through the vast space, like that of wrongness and of dry thunder. A shadow blocked light pouring in through the glass ceiling. The sound snapped and snicked again. A jagged, jerking crack twitched across the glass ceiling. Through the haze, dragon eyes glowed, dark pupils expanding then narrowing as it realized the prize it had found.

"To your places!" Eroan yelled, scattering the last few remaining Order elves to their posts.

More cracks sounded.

The dragon rumbled, shifting its weight. Huge claws scored the glass. It tilted its head, peering inside with one, huge eye.

The glass roof gave a shuddering groan, hitched, then exploded inward. The dragon was suddenly inside and everywhere, screeching, clawing, wings snagging on metal girders. It tumbled, snagged in the tree for a moment before the mighty ancient branches snapped under its weight and the dragon thumped to the ground in a mangled heap, branches, glass and leaves raining over it.

On the gallery level, one level above the dragon, Eroan slowly backed away from the chaos.

The jeweled—an amethyst with scales like velvet purple—shook glass from its crown and neck. It snapped its jaws around the tree's dangling branches, tearing wooden limbs off, lashing out. Eventually, it righted itself and snuffled the air, parting its jaws to take the scent onto its tongue. Jeweled dragon eyes sharpened.

The beast lifted its head and barked. Once. Twice.

A bronze landed beside the gaping hole and thrust its head inside. Another screeched behind it.

This was it then. Battle was inevitable. But here, in these closed tunnels, the Order had the upper hand.

Eroan merged with the shadows and retreated back to the choke point. Behind him, more dragoncalls joined the first until the air trembled with their noise. Then the calls all stopped. Quiet filled a breathless moment. Eroan crouched beside an elf manning the camouflaged ballista. The male's eyes were cold, ruthless, like all of the Order.

Eroan tasted citrus and felt dragon magic trail its fingers down his spine. They were shifting.

"I smell them," a deep female voice said, her words echoing. "Root them out. Search every hole and passage. Open the tunnels from this side." Boots thundered now in place of the earlier barks and roars. *"WE'RE HERE FOR YOU, LITTLE ELVES!"*

An earsplitting dragon shriek cut through Eroan's skull.

She'd shifted back into dragon.

Eroan rested a hand on the ballista's frame and inched forward to see through the balustrade. The amethyst slunk ahead of the countless dragonkin-humans swarming behind her, lifting her head to see above the ground floor level, exposing the glowing firepit low in her throat.

Closer, she came, sweeping her gaze about her, taking in the rippling vines and gnarled roots dangling from the ceiling and walls.

Eroan waited until she'd turned her head away and then carefully, slowly, angled the ballista toward where she would soon be. Inch by inch, he adjusted the aim, keeping low and concealed behind the camouflage blankets.

Closer still.

A growl rumbled low in her chest, keen senses warning her. The jeweled were more cautious. He'd hoped for a bronze to be the first to fall and block the others' paths.

The ballista needed more adjusting. They'd aimed it in the center, not to the right, from where she came now. A mistake, but it was too late to fix. He just had to inch it around, bit by bit.

Her head jerked up. Eyes fixing on his location. Massive black pupils expanded and then narrowed to slits. Fire glowed behind her scales. Her top lip quivered, rippling over teeth like the one strapped to Eroan's back.

She knew.

Eroan tore the camouflage blanket free in a flurry of movement.

The beast breathed in.

He gripped the ballista handles.

She opened her jaws.

He aimed the heavy dragontooth-tipped arrow at her neck. Fire clawed up her throat and glowed behind her tongue.

He fired.

The arrow sailed free, fast and sharp and slammed into her firepit, releasing a gush of liquid flame. Fire poured, running like blood. She screamed or howled or whatever sound it was that scorched Eroan's soul and then lunged for his position. But she never made it. Suffocating on flame, she stumbled and slumped, coughing up molten mucus. She fell hard, rocking Ashford's foundations.

There was a moment of quiet, a small moment between breaths. Then the dragonkin roared and poured forth in a wave of rage and bloodlust, spilling over their fallen one. "Open fire!" Eroan yelled.

Arrows pitched into the gully between levels, striking the dragons down. They stumbled and

tipped, falling to their knees, clutching at the elven arrows punched into their human skins. Eroan watched them fall like toys, each one toppling in front of the next.

They had them.

The first wave fell silent. No more dragons came. A few more arrows finished those that groaned and bled and the quiet was back. But it wouldn't last.

That had just been the beginning, the dragons knew where they were now, and they would all come.

"Hold!" Eroan called, then crouched back behind the ballista, nodding at the weapon's operator, handing back control.

The quiet was the worst of it. The waiting. He wiped sweat from his face and listened.

His heart thumped.

A roar. Another. Closer.

Many.

So many thunderous roars and wing beats.

He swallowed.

This time, they spilled in from the side chambers, not the roof. They'd found the tunnels. And now the way inside was exposed for them all. They came like a wave of pure madness, their eyes wide, still roaring in human form.

"Fire!" Eroan boomed.

Arrows sailed.

He pulled his blade free and eyed the dragonkin charging down the gallery, the lust for the kill shining in their eyes. He swirled the sword and started forward. He always had preferred facing death this way, head-on, with a blade in his hand. He screamed his rage and on cue, the hidden army of elves exploded from their hiding places, raining down on dragons.

CHAPTER 24

Lysander

THE LADDER of muscles keeping his wings spread *burned*. That same burn radiated down his spine, throbbing a warning. Stop flying. Rest. He'd be no good to anyone if he couldn't keep his head up in battle. But he couldn't stop. Couldn't rest. His flight fanned out behind him, their colors shining beneath sun and moonlight. He'd lost some, their strings in his mind snipping off and falling away. The metals he'd forced to submit weren't accustomed to long-distance flying. He let them fall, not caring that some shattered against the coastal rocks instead of making land.

The eastern coast zigged and zagged beneath him. Salt crusted his scales, making them grind, but the ocean thermals helped keep him and his flight aloft. On and on, relentlessly pushing forward.

The hunger never left. Like the ache, it thudded in his chest, needing, wanting, lusting for the battle ahead. With every new dragon he'd forced to submit beneath his gaze, every new mind he'd tied to his, the hunger grew and so did the power blazing through his heart. More. He needed more. Own, take, bite, fuck. He was a creature driven by vengeance on a world that had wronged him. He salivated at the thought of striking back. Driven. Focused. Relentless.

He knew Ashford was east of Cheen, between Eroan's home and the sea, so that was where he headed, wings beating, the wind lifting him up where the air was thin but the sun warm.

Finally, on the horizon, a black storm of dragons boiled the sky.

Lysander banked, his belly whooshing and wings aching. Behind him, the dragons followed. He didn't need to look to know, they were each a part of him, tied to him in some inexplicable way. Rhadgar hadn't mentioned that—how he touched each of their minds and they touched his. A small part of Lysander feared it. The old part, the broken prince, but he was king now and the bronze were about to discover exactly what an emerald could do.

The metallic brown beasts flocked above a barren moorland, screeching at the sight below. More dragons, digging, spilling through a hole in the ground and out of sight.

They did not see his flight. And if they did, they mistakenly assumed Lysander's dragons were theirs.

They were unaware and unprepared. Lysander bared his teeth and dove.

Midair, he slammed into the first, claws grasping its back while his teeth vised around its skull. The bronze screamed and tumbled over, rolling. Lysander locked his jaw and the bronze's skull

shattered. The dead bronze tumbled from his grip.

Own. Take. Bite. Fuck.

He didn't need to order his flight to attack. A thought, a need, they were connected to him, a part of him. They plunged in, dragon against dragon, clashing in the skies. Jeweled and bronze against jeweled and bronze. Color and blood, claw and teeth. And the screaming. The screaming was bliss. The bronze were strong but the jeweled were vicious. Outnumbered, outstrengthened, and surprised. If it were just numbers, Lysander would fail, but he saw the heaviest, the strongest, and hunted them down, pinning them under his gaze. The first quickly succumbed, their minds weak, confused, easily hooked in, and with a glance, Lysander turned them against their own. His flight gained, growing in number, becoming ever stronger. Like *he* was becoming stronger.

This was power.

This was right.

This was everything he'd been denied his entire life. He had them now. And those that refused to bow were set upon, tearing, clawing, raining blood upon the land until the ground darkened with it.

Broken no more.

Lysander spiraled above the slaughter, watching, controlling, commanding. Bronze blood ran from his jaws. His claws dripped with flesh and shattered scale. More. It wasn't enough. They would all be his. Or die beneath him.

But one was missing. The biggest of all.

Lysander dove lower, streaking between slashing claws and flaring wings.

Dragons still poured into the hole in the ground, either oblivious to the attack above them or uncaring.

He smelled them then: pine and cut wood. Home. Eroan.

The elves.

A new string plucked on Lysander's dragon heart. Different from the others, it knotted in his mind. He tipped his wing, cutting a *U* in the air, coming back around toward the dragon-infested moorland and its gaping chasm.

A dragon hit him in the side, crushing wing and ribs. He rolled, curling in, knowing what was coming. The ground rushed up. He hit hard, shuddering bone and body. Rock and earth and pain pummeled his back and side. Bronze scales flashed. But not Dokul. Just another mind to own, take, bite, fuck.

Lysander speared it with his gaze. The bronze tore his head away and roared.

Others veered toward them, breaking off from the airborne battle.

Lysander rose from the crater his impact had gouged out and stalked forward, trying to trap the beast's gaze under his own. It tossed its head, backed up, snapped and snarled, and refused to succumb. But it would. Lysander jerked his head upward, caught the glance of the incoming dragon on the right and yanked. The beast screeched and scrambled in-flight, shocked out of its smooth dive. Its mind was a fragile thing. Lysander snagged it, and instead of falling on Lysander, it hit the back of the stubborn one, crushing it beneath its weight. They snapped their jaws at one another, teeth tearing off scale.

Lysander owned a third and had it rush in and tear out the stubborn one's throat. He smiled, bearing blood-soaked teeth, and sent the two new bronze back into the skies to rip the heart of their own brood.

Own.

Take.

Bite.

Fuck.

It beat like a drum through the hearts of them all.

Stretching his wings, he fanned them outward, trying for lift, but their ache had grown worse, and lust for the slaughter alone couldn't sustain him, his wings—weakened by lack of use and extended flight—didn't have the strength to lift him again. Didn't matter. Those that had fallen, wings broken, he killed them, useless as they were, while scanning the blood-soaked earth for the biggest beast.

But Dokul wasn't here.

He should be here.

In the hole, perhaps?

Lysander dashed for the exposed hole in the earth, snatching a wing flung his way and ripping the bronze out of his path. So many. They wanted whatever was buried inside.

Pine.

Cut wood.

Elf.

Eroan.

Lysander's heart stuttered.

Ashford.

He was here for them, wasn't he? That was why he'd come. He had almost forgotten.

Carline had said something... He snarled that memory away. Carline was dead. They'd all be dead.

He turned on the bronze and roared out his rage. They'd hurt him. They'd kept him, buried him, made him weak. The one he wanted wasn't here, but it didn't matter. Every single dragon who flew against him would die—jeweled or Metal, he didn't care. Above, his vast flight circled down, trapping the bronze in the center of their storm of wings.

He watched the carnage and bloodletting, knowing this was how the world changed.

N_{ye}

DOKUL'S human form shimmered and warped, as though the beast inside were trying to crawl out from under his skin. Nye shrank back from the chief and from the hell in the skies. He'd expected Dokul to shift, to take flight, but that hadn't happened. He'd hung back with a select few of his closest kin—including the newly re-emerged black prince—and he'd watched. He'd watched the green dragon come in and *destroy*. But it wasn't just the killing that had Dokul rooted, it had to be how his own dragons turned on one another, as though a ripple had passed through them, turning them all mad with rage.

Dokul growled, the sound far from his human appearance. "Retreat," he spat through his gritted teeth. "RETREAT!"

A nearby bronze dragon roared what must have been the command to pull back. The command sailed on the voice of more dragons. The ones over Ashford, locked inside a tornado of jeweled, they were lost. Even Nye could see that.

Dokul turned on him. He yanked on Nye's leash, pulling him in close. "Lysander believes himself a king."

Did that mean the emerald tearing apart Dokul's forces was Lysander? But his wing... Nye glanced anew at the bleeding dragons raining from the sky. He'd been right. Lysander truly was a nightmare.

Akiem caught his eye and held it. Something seemed to pass between them, some weighted knowing, but Dokul's smile soon lured Nye's attention back. His yellow eyes filled with flame. "We both know Lysander's weakness, don't we, little elf."

Eroan.

"Come," Dokul ordered, waving his flight away from the battlefield and dragging Nye alongside him. "The game has changed but it is far from over."

CHAPTER 26

Eroan

EROAN BECAME THE BLADE: its point his vengeance, its edge, his honor. He killed mercilessly. And he wasn't alone. Assassins of the Order cut the dragons down. Arrows flew. The choke point brimmed with the dead. The stench of blood and sweat and shit and dragon laced the air. Thoughtless, Eroan killed, until there was nothing left to whet his blade with. He scanned the scene below, wiping his vision clear, and saw three dragonkin rounding on an elf, his arrows of no use in close combat.

Ross.

Eroan grabbed a vine with his left hand, wrapping it around his forearm, and ran for the edge of the first-floor landing. He leaped, quickly falling, air rushing by, until the vine snapped tight, swinging him inward, toward the three dragons. A slash to the back of the knees took the first down, startling the remaining pair. Eroan released the vine and dropped into a crouch. Magic bubbled around them all, so thick it was almost blinding. He stabbed his blade through the chest of the dragon he'd incapacitated, striking the heart before he could shift. The magic thinned, allowing Eroan to breathe again. The other two would be thinking about shifting. But to do that, they needed time. Seconds. Seconds they didn't have.

Ross's arrow plunged through the back of one, jerking him on the spot, and Eroan sprang, launching off his back foot. The dragon whirled, tried to scramble over the dead, his magic unfurling, but coming to his aid too late. Eroan brought the blade down deep into the dragonkin's spine, making the creature screech. The second swing took his head.

And it was done.

Eroan stood among the devastation, breathing hard, scanning for any movement that didn't belong to elf or human. His pride came forward, toeing and prodding the bodies. Some of the fallen received final, vicious slashes to their throats. None survived.

"Thank you." Ross offered his hand.

Eroan took it and pulled the male into a quick embrace. Hunters and their arrows. "Get yourself a blade, eh?"

Ross mustered a hint of a smile before his attention drifted back to the dead. It was different, killing in battle, not just for food. For Janna's sake, Eroan hoped it didn't change Ross.

Ashford's tree had survived, although it was painted with blood and had lost one entire side of

branches. But it lived; Eroan could feel its life all around as he approached its enormous trunk. Light spilled in from above, illuminating the dead.

They'd done it.

He looked up into the sunlight. Warmth baked blood dry on his face.

The sky outside was clear of dragons.

Order assassins joined him, regarding the tree, the silent dead, and the sky.

Eroan wet his lips, tasting blood. He wanted more, because none among the bodies was Dokul.

"To the surface..." he urged, voice gruff. "It may not be over."

Eroan emerged from a side-tunnel and drifted forward. Thick, baked grass crunched under his boots. The land around them smoked and bled. Fire sizzled and snapped among mounds upon mounds of dead dragons.

The Order hadn't done this. The fighting had been inside, not out here.

"It's not over," an assassin voiced, shielding her eyes and squinting into the distance.

Dragons speckled the distant sky.

They'd withdrawn.

Why?

"What happened here?" the assassin murmured, wandering forward.

Eroan had no answer. The first dragon he came upon had spilled its insides over the ground. The next had its neck bent at a devastating angle. The skull of the next had been crushed. On and on it went. They'd turned on one another, slain and shredded their own kin as though overcome with some kind of madness.

Inside Ashford had been only half the battle.

Another had raged above ground. Dragon against dragon.

A long, warning screech sailed over the killing grounds.

Sunlight licked over the emerald's scales, tarnished red by blood. It soared, circling high above, then spiraled downward before leveling out and gliding toward them. The wingspan was vast. Its scales shone like waters from a lagoon. Alumn, it was magnificent.

"Incoming!" someone yelled. "*Get to your posts.*"

Eroan's heart raced. Emerald. He moved forward, his pace increasing. The dragon grew larger.

"It's him." Seraph tracked alongside him, her face tilted upward. "It's Lysander, I know it." She raced ahead.

It was.

Eroan would know him anywhere, buried under blood or soaring above it. His broken crown of bone confirmed it. Lysander.

He'd done this. He'd come. He'd attacked from above. He'd stopped countless dragons.

And Eroan had never seen a more wondrous sight. He broke into a run, chasing Seraph's light-footed sprint.

A spark glinted in the air between the ground and Lysander's approach.

"No!" Seraph screamed.

A ballista lance arched high, briefly catching the sunlight.

Eroan stumbled.

The lance punched into Lysander's chest, jerking him out of the soar like someone had yanked on an invisible chain. He roared. His wings flared then wrapped in as though to cocoon around himself.

And he fell.

It happened slowly, stretching on in painful detail. He fell, clutching at the lance, claws

scrabbling to yank it free but unable to find purchase.

Another lance launched into the air.

“Hold!” Eroan whirled and thrust out a hand to the Order elves behind him. *“Stop! Don’t fire!”*

The last command lodged in his throat.

When he turned back, the second lance had missed its target, but Lysander still fell, and behind him, hundreds of dragons turned as one great wave, all sweeping toward Ashford.

No, no, no... What had they done?

Another lance flew.

Eroan sprinted forward, chasing Seraph’s path through the dead dragons. He heard the boom when Lysander fell, felt the ground shift.

He’d come, he’d won for them, and now this.

Eroan shut those thoughts down, damming the emotion behind them. Nothing mattered more in this moment than reaching Lysander.

They came upon him, snapping and clawing at the wooden shaft sticking out from low in his throat, above his chest, a few inches from the firepit. Had it hit its target, Lysander would have been dead before he hit the ground.

Seraph stumbled in.

“Don’t!” Eroan grabbed her arm and yanked her back.

She tugged and fought. “We have to get it out! He can’t shift!”

Lysander thrashed and roared, stirring up great clouds of dust and ash. His eyes rolled and burned and flashed. Wild with pain, he’d lash out. He’d hurt her.

“Damn it, Eroan!” Seraph tore herself free. “The dragons are coming! They’re coming because we shot him down. We have to make this right or they’ll kill us all.”

He knew that, but she hadn’t seen the raw wildness in Lysander’s eyes. “I’ll do it.”

She fought to go ahead and Eroan pulled her around, shoving her back. “Seraph, look in his eyes.” She did and gasped. “He’s not himself. Get back and stay back. If I fail... If I fail, retreat inside Ashford.”

Seraph hung back and gave him an accepting nod. She wouldn’t rush in, but she wouldn’t leave either.

Eroan turned and faced the thrashing beast, careful to watch for the swing of Lysander’s powerful, spiked tail. He lifted his hands and crossed them, drawing Lysander’s eye. “See me...”

Nothing.

Lysander growled and clawed at his chest, snapping his teeth near the end of the shaft but unable to pinch it free. There was nothing in his green eyes but the single-minded focus to pull the lance free.

A cloud loomed above. Eroan dared not look but knew exactly what that cloud was made of. If he couldn’t bring Lysander around, those dragons would fall upon Ashford and more lives would be lost.

“Lysander!” He waved his arms. “Damn you, prince! See me!”

The dragon’s thrashing stalled. His huge head swung in, stopping inches from Eroan’s chest. The sudden weight of all Lysander’s attention swayed Eroan on his feet. The whole world became Lysander. Blood drooled from his jaws. His eyes flared, bright like no green found in nature. Betrayal shone there, too, and Eroan’s heart ached to see it. Tears leaked from the dragon’s eyes.

“See me...”

The dragon growled its low threat.

“Seraph...” Eroan called, never taking his eyes off Lysander’s. He gently pressed a hand on the warm, dry scales latticing along Lysander’s nose like he had done once before. Lysander didn’t move.

Eroan spread his fingers over the smaller scales. “Take it out.” Still, he held Lysander’s gaze. It felt like something strummed between them, an understanding, or maybe something more, something deeper than that, something soulbound. Lysander knew him, but if he looked away, it would break.

“This is gonna hurt, big guy,” Seraph mumbled. She must have pulled on the lance, because Lysander thrust his head skyward and howled.

Eroan staggered, but stood tall, suddenly feeling small, just as Seraph had said. Seraph scrambled backward, leaving the lance in the dirt between her and Lysander.

Lysander righted himself, panting hard. Blood oozed from the wound, but it would heal, wouldn’t it? He seemed to regard Eroan carefully, as though not fully seeing. Seraph too. He sniffed at the lance. His top lip peeled back in a silent snarl.

“Does he... does he know us?” Seraph’s hand slipped into Eroan’s.

He couldn’t answer. This dragon, it was Lysander, but it wasn’t. There was a wildness in him Eroan had seen before, but not to this extent.

The dragon blinked, pulled his gaze away, and barked at the sky. The swarm of jeweled and bronze immediately altered their path, veering back, heading north. Lysander turned and limped in the same direction.

It wasn’t safe for him here.

Eroan knew this was the only way, but it tore him open.

This wasn’t right.

Again, Lysander had suffered.

“Wait...” Seraph pulled Eroan back around as he withdrew, heading toward Ashford. “Wait. Where are you going? He needs us.”

Eroan’s gaze flicked to the dragons flying away and back down to Seraph’s open, tear-streaked face. “He doesn’t need us, he needs them.”

She hiccupped a sob. “No, he saved us, and we did this, and he needs to know it wasn’t us. We can’t leave him!”

He grabbed her shoulders. “I’m not leaving him!” Shocked, she turned to stone beneath his grip and the dam inside him broke open. He pulled her close instead of shoving her away, pulled her into his arms and squeezed. By Alumn, he couldn’t stand this. He needed her. “Help me go back to Ashford and not say the things I want to say,” he whispered. “Help me get through this day and we’ll find him. I promise.”

Her little hand locked in his shirt and twisted. “He didn’t know us, did he?”

“He knew us, he just...” He eased her back and thumbed tears from her cheeks. “He is dragon.”

She sniffed and nodded, prompting more tears to fall.

He looped an arm around her shoulders and walked with her among the dragon carcasses. Distantly, dragoncalls faded away, and with them, went a piece of Eroan’s heart.



IF SERAPH HADN’T BEEN with him, he’d have said or done something that would have gotten him thrown out of Ashford, the Order, and probably executed anew. Days and nights bled into one another as the dragon bodies were taken to the surface to be burned alongside the huge carcasses. Dragons, once dead, were flammable enough, although the stench was so bad, they had to wait until the wind blew eastward, out to sea. Eroan spoke little, setting his mind to the task of clearing and fixing, but no

elf could continue without rest and that's when the doubt and anger and frustration crept back in. Not helped by the Order assassins swapping stories of how they'd deterred the last wave by striking down the formidable emerald.

What he hadn't told Seraph, or anyone, was how Lysander had looked through him, not with heartfelt meaning, but with malice. He didn't fear him, not yet. There was more to it. He needed to know what had happened in the north. Clearly, Lysander's wing had healed, but that was not all. He'd returned changed and that thought did not sit well with Eroan.

"You okay?"

Seraph had crept into his room. He'd waited for her to speak, not inclined to move where he lay atop the bedsheets, but she'd stayed silent, and they'd fallen into that quiet, neither needing to talk, both sharing the same thoughts.

"They almost killed him," Eroan finally said. He rolled onto his side and propped his head on a hand. Seraph stood, leaning against the wall by the door. She'd left her hair loose and discarded her jacket somewhere. But she wore her blade. Always. "He thinks I ordered it."

She shook her head. "No. He would never think that."

But Eroan had seen it in his eyes.

"They laugh about the victory, Seraph. They don't even know he was here, that he stopped the horde. They think the dragons just killed each other, because they're dragon." He planted his boots on the floor and rested his elbows on his knees, rubbing his hands together, and when that didn't alleviate his rattling nerves, he ran his fingers through his hair, pulling it all back and wringing it through a fist. "We almost killed him."

She had nothing to say because there was nothing to say.

"It will always be like this," he said softly.

"No. We have to hope that we can change things. It's just going to take time."

He smiled at her hope, wishing it was his too. It had been, once. But he'd been a fool to think he and Lysander could have any kind of future. It wasn't possible, not in this world. "And if they change for worse?"

A knock rapped on his door, interrupting before Seraph could answer.

"Come."

The sentinel who entered was one Eroan recognized from the battle but couldn't recall his name. "There's a dragon at the door, says his name is Lysander, requesting to see you. We tried to restrain him—"

Eroan was up and moving. He shoved past him, out into the hall. Seraph followed but only after saying, "Don't ever try to restrain him."

The walk to Ashford's surface had never taken so long.

And there Lysander was, standing right outside the Ashford tunnel doors, eight Ashford assassins around him, poised to kill. He leaned to one side, hip cocked, arms crossed, a playful smile on his lips, and his own style of delight shining in his eyes. His hair was a wild mess, tumbling over his shoulders, and the clothes were a strange mix of brown elven leathers and a filthy cotton shirt, gaping at the neck like he'd missed a lace-hole somewhere.

Fuck the elves.

Fuck the Order.

Eroan shoved through the assassins and threw his arms around his dragon, pulling him close, breathing him in. He smelled like smoke and blood and grit and male and it was all Eroan could do not to purr. Tension locked the man rigid inside Eroan's embrace, but just as quickly as Eroan had

attacked, Lysander's muscles thawed. Warm breath fluttered against Eroan's neck.

The dragon closed his arms around him and molded him close. "I thought for a moment you were going to stab me."

The soft, quiet words stroked Eroan's throat, intimate, like a long kiss. Eroan considered replying, but words required thought and his thoughts had yet to reorganize themselves into anything coherent.

"What by Alumn are you all gawking at?" Seraph's sharp bark delivered a startling amount of authority. "There are bodies to burn, you know." She clapped her hands together. "C'mon bitches, off with you."

Eroan peeled himself from Lysander and arched an eyebrow at Seraph's grinning face. The assassins had withdrawn, although a few lingered, curious and wary.

"She gets it from you." Eroan let his fingers slip from Lysander's, missing his touch already.

Lysander's soft laugh unfurled, encasing Eroan's heart in warmth. He was here. There was so much to say and explain, and then there was Ashford and the elves and Alador, and Lysander would not be welcome among them, and this couldn't last, but by Alumn, none of that mattered.

"Dokul wasn't among them." Lysander tucked his hands into his pockets. "We searched. He's gone to ground."

"He has Akiem," Eroan said, and added, formally, "Your brother was instrumental in keeping my prides safe."

Lysander nodded, absorbing the information. He eyed the door into Ashford. "I won't ask to go in."

"That shot was a mistake," Eroan began, but Lysander's glance cut him off.

"We both know it wasn't." The breeze teased through his hair and light caught in his eyes. "Your elves can rest well. Dokul's numbers are down to a handful. He won't return. With any luck, you'll never see him again." The flutter in Lysander's cheek belied that last comment. He very much wanted to see Dokul; as did Eroan, at the point of his blade.

"I'll tell Alador," Seraph suggested.

"And *your* dragons?" Eroan asked. The dragons that had swept in after Lysander fell were too coordinated to be acting on their own. They had all belonged to Lysander. That much was clear.

His dark lashes lowered but his look lifted through them, turning the gaze provocative. "A short ways north. They won't attack—unless I'm shot at again."

There was a great deal different about him, but it wasn't an outward change. Something inside of him had shifted. Eroan couldn't place it. He wanted to reacquaint himself with the man—the dragon—he'd come to love, to discover this new version of Lysander. It reminded him of the young prince he'd crossed swords with outside the queen's door. The prince had been ruthless, driven, focused. Lethal.

Eroan realized he'd been staring too long and that both of them appeared to be waiting for him to say something, but what?

Lysander's always-shifting smile was back. "Is there somewhere we can go to talk?"

The door back into Ashford had never seemed more foreboding. They couldn't go inside but there was nowhere else. Just a battlefield peppered with pyres.

"There's a hut to the east, near the top of the cliffs," Seraph said. "You can see the sea through its windows."

Eroan blinked at her, noticing a touch of color finding her cheeks. "And how would you know?"

"Oh, you know. Someone took me there the last time we were here." The dash of pink grew.

"Someone who?"

"His name's Junoe. He plays the guitar. And other things."

Eroan frowned. She wasn't old enough for dalliances with music-makers. Or anyone.

Seraph chuckled and headed back toward Ashford's entrance, waving back over her shoulder. "I'll cover for you."

Lysander had observed all this without saying a word. "The hut?" Eroan asked.

"After you."

They were observed crossing the moorland. Word would soon reach the Order. Remarkably, Eroan found he couldn't care less. Ashford was safe. He owed his people nothing more.

The stone hut sat hunched near a cliff's edge. Its roof had been recently thatched so it blended with the landscape. Pushing inside, he spotted kindling lying inside the small stove. A kettle and pans waited on the small shelf, ready for the next inhabitant. A knee-high cot bed abutted one wall. The place was a lookout, built as a shelter against dragons and the elements washing in off the sea. They were unlikely to be disturbed while Ashford's elves worked to restore their home.

Eroan turned, about to announce they were safe and whatever Lysander had to say wouldn't be overheard, but he lost the words at the sight of Lysander's intense gaze. It was the kind of look a hunter gave its prey, but instead of fearing it, anticipation clutched at Eroan's breath. His own gaze dropped the tantalizing gape of Lysander's shirt, the dark skin a tempting display, demanding to be further revealed.

Eroan cleared his throat and steered his thoughts back around to where they needed to be. "We lost many. If you hadn't—"

Lysander's attention skipped away, taking in the hut's modest interior. He still had his hands rammed in his pockets, locking his shoulders tight. "I'm sure everything you're about to say is important, and we'll get to that, but I lied. I don't want to talk."

The dragon's glare skewed Eroan on the spot. He'd had that same look when he'd taken Eroan in his hut, when anger raced through both their bodies. He often recalled the rawness as Lysander had fucked him—it couldn't be called anything as sweet as lovemaking—and recalling it now sent a rapid pulse of heat, semi-hardening him in seconds.

"What I want... is you."

Eroan almost held the smile off long enough to play hard to get. Alumn, he needed this. After... everything. *They* needed this. "Is that really appropriate. You being undeniably dragon," he gestured at Lysander and then made a show of sweeping at himself, "and me being exquisitely elf?"

Lysander *tsked* his tongue against the roof of his mouth and sent his glare up into the hut's crossbeams, far away from Eroan. "Maybe not. Maybe I should leave? And that embrace outside Ashford?" He tutted. "Elves will gossip." Humor softened some of the violence shining in his eyes.

"Then we should give them something more to titter on."

The hut was only three strides from wall to wall. Three strides and Eroan could have him, but the thudding in his blood and the race of his heart would make the hunt sweeter if it were slower. For the first time in forever, they *had* time. Eroan had no duty to attend to and Lysander no battles to fight, save the one in his head.

Eroan reached for the laces tying his jacket closed and unraveled the knot near his neck, loosening it off. He tugged each loop, slowly opening the jacket, savoring it like opening a gift, then flicked open the top three shirt buttons. Lysander made a valiant effort not to look, and still kept his hands rammed so deep in his pockets they might be stuck there.

Rigid, he was holding himself back, either to protect Eroan or to entice him, either way, Eroan's heart strummed the rest of him, bringing him alive.

Lysander breathed in through his nose, held that breath, then sighed it out slowly. "Gods, I've

missed you,” he told the ceiling.

Eroan flicked open another button and Lysander’s green eyes danced over him. Dark pupils darkened some more, swallowing the green whole.

His Lysander was still in there, and the relief of it made him brash, made him giddy. He had been afraid, but not *of* Lysander, he’d been afraid *for* him. He needn’t have been. They would talk, but Lysander was right, they needed this now.

Lysander pulled his hands from his pockets and stepped *back*, leaning against the wall with a *come here* smile on his lips. Well, that wouldn’t do. Eroan wasn’t easy. If Lysander wanted what Eroan offered, he’d have to take it.

Eroan plucked a few more buttons undone and let the shirt gape open. Lysander’s gaze scorched a trail down Eroan’s chest and abs, then lower, unable to miss the proof of his arousal. Lysander’s throat moved. Eroan wanted to mouth the dragon’s fluttering pulse along his neck. He wet his lips and Lysander’s attention snapped to his mouth. Eroan traced his top lip with the tip of his tongue. He’d soon taste dragon there, but not yet. Still, he let the promise of what he could do with his mouth sizzle between them.

Lysander adjusted his trousers, wincing. Eroan’s erection ached in sympathy. By Alumn, he wasn’t going to go to him, but the need to do exactly that had his fingers trembling at his fly. Lysander hunted every tiny movement. Eroan stroked his fingers along his own hip and Lysander’s stare chased the trail. Eroan spread his hand over the hard ridge of his erection, watching Lysander’s lips part and his chest rise and fall.

He had his dragon trapped behind a wall of need and planned to hold him there until he couldn’t take it any longer, if the anticipation didn’t break Eroan first.

CHAPTER 27

Lysander

ANTICIPATION WAS a fresh kind of torture, one Eroan wielded like his dragonblade. When he'd walked to Ashford, to the elves who'd shot him from the sky, Lysander had been half-mad with violence and hunger and lust and rage and all the things dragons thrived on. Then Eroan had thrown his arms around him and the madness had shattered. He'd broken open in that moment and was still breaking now, with every sinful touch, every bold flutter of Eroan's blond lashes, every sly lick of his lips.

Own. Take. Bite. Fuck.

He wanted all of that, right now, in this tiny stone box, but if Eroan carried on the way he was, Lysander wasn't going to be able to rein in his need to capture this elf in every fucking way. Lysander had learned who he was, and it scared him. It scared him so bad he almost hadn't come back after searching for Dokul, afraid of what he'd done as dragon. The killing, the slaughter, he'd fucking become the monster he hated. It was different now. He was different. But not here, not in this moment in an elf hut on the edge of a cliff. Here he just felt... free. And he never wanted it to end.

Eroan was a vision of elf. His refined edges had frayed in Lysander's absence. A fresh wildness splintered Eroan's blue eyes, revealing the delicious sparkle of lust for life and for Lysander. He'd been pushed and he'd pushed back. The embrace alone was proof of that. Eroan from Cheen would never have embraced him in public. But this new Eroan, he didn't give a shit, and Lysander wanted to taste him all over, make him scream with his new louder voice, make him come undone in his arms.

To do all that, he'd have to move, but if he moved from the wall, he wouldn't be able to stop what came next.

He'd killed Carline.

The madness was real. It was dangerous, and it was who he was now.

Lysander tore his gaze from Eroan and looked at the floor between them, clenching his jaw so hard bones ached. He'd wanted to make everything better, to change the world, but he'd changed himself, and gods, he was afraid of what that meant.

Eroan's hand brushed up his cheek, lifting his head, and the elf was there and everywhere and everything. His eyes shone with understanding, and then warm, wet lips teased across Lysander's, beckoning him to open.

"I'm afraid," Lysander whispered. Eroan's cheek brushed his. He leaned into the touch, breathing in elf and letting the smell of home chase away that fear. "I don't know who I am."

Eroan's fingers clutched fiercely at his face, forcing him to look, to see. "I do."

Lysander fluttered his eyes closed and ran his hands up Eroan's back, folding the elf in close again, needing that solid strength against him. Eroan moved closer, rolling his hips in and arching his back. The elf's skilled hands captured Lysander's hips, holding Lysander in place. Lysander sunk his hands to the small hollow above Eroan's ass and then over the rounded tightness. His fingers sank in, owning. Eroan's gasp sizzled across Lysander's ear and Lysander's control snapped, unraveling too fast to get it back. The growl was real. A warning. A threat. He suddenly had Eroan against the wall, trapped, and still, the elf writhed and ground his hips, driving Lysander fucking insane with need. His cock strained, painfully hard, needing to be *inside*.

"I don't want to hurt you," he breathed across Eroan's mouth, lifting his gaze, terrified of the fear he might see on Eroan's face.

"You won't." Half-lidded elven eyes seduced and teased and plucked on Lysander, pouring sparks down his spine.

It was all the permission he needed. Lysander captured the elf's troublesome hands and pinned them to the wall. Eroan arched instead, mouth open, inviting, while the rest of him rocked, thrusting at Lysander's hip. He had no choice but to answer Eroan's demands. He growled into a kiss that tore him open and wrenched the rest of his control away. He rocked with him, kissing down his neck, tasting elf and the sea and the only fucking thing in this world that he truly cared for. He didn't know what Eroan would think of him when he learned what Lysander had done, and how he had felt doing it. The time for talking would come. But not yet. Gods, not yet. He needed to paint Eroan in his scent, to fuck him, and love him, and hold him close until he didn't know where he ended and Eroan began.

Eroan's hand escaped Lysander's hold and plunged down his abs and waist, capturing Lysander's engorged cock through his trousers. He gasped, maybe swore, certainly almost lost his damned load too soon. Lysander caught the hand and pinned it back where it belonged. Lust and mischief widened Eroan's eyes. Lysander's growls turned to breathless laughs. Only Eroan could do this to him, make him mad and make him happy in the same moment.

"Go down on me," Eroan demanded, his hard, sharp voice lashing like a whip.

Lysander's instincts almost snapped back. He was king, not a lower. But this was Eroan, and gods, he'd do anything for him. He buried his face in Eroan's neck and nipped at the flushed skin. "I kill dragons who speak to me like you just did."

The shudder that ran through Eroan spilled through Lysander too. He groaned out the agony. This fucking elf was wrecking him.

"Do they get to fuck you first or is that pleasure reserved for me?"

Lysander freed a twitching wrist and wrapped his fingers around Eroan's neck, but remarkably kept them loose. At Eroan's sudden intake of breath, Lysander let go, and slid his fingers under the male's shirt, mapping every inch of muscle. Tilting his hand downward, he pushed lower, riding over the angle of his hip, and then clasped the proud need straining inside Eroan's trousers. "You're a wicked tease, Eroan Ilanea."

Eroan tilted his head back, his chin up, and scorched Lysander with a scandalous gaze. How had the elves ever controlled this one? He was a raging wildfire. One that would never stop. Not for anything.

The laces snapped under Lysander's rough fingers and Eroan fucking laughed. He said something about needing the ties to hold on to his dignity when going back to Ashford. Lysander shut him up with

a kiss and then felt his breath hitch as Lysander clenched the elf's proud need in a fist. Eroan stole from the kiss, throwing his head back and panting. His slithery gaze flicked to Lysander's face and it was Lysander's turn to grin.

"Speechless now, elf?"

Eroan's hand landed on Lysander's shoulder and *pushed*.

"Your desire is my command," Lysander purred, sliding down Eroan's taut body. He came to rest on his knees. The erect cock was a prize. Lysander stroked his thumb from tip to base, pushed in hard, then flattened his tongue against the silken head, beneath the tiny slit. He flicked his gaze up, snagging on Eroan looking down, then flicked his tongue up too, sliding the wet tip over Eroan's pre-cum-slickened head. Eroan had both hands free now and plunged them into Lysander's hair. Restrained strummed through the elf. Lysander could taste that too. He wanted to buck his hips, to fill Lysander's throat. It was all in his glare, in the knotted grip in Lysander's hair.

Lysander lavished attention on the hungry, needy thing, feeling his own cock pulse and twitch, leaking inside his trousers. He took Eroan in, dragging the head over the roof of his mouth and down, sealing his lips and rolling his tongue, applying pressure to the sweet edge of pain. Eroan's panting started to fracture, his body quivering.

Lysander fucking had him, but he wasn't ending it there. He pulled free before the quivering signaled Eroan had tipped over the edge, grabbed the elf by the waist, and jerked him close. Now that Lysander had all his attention, he cupped Eroan's ass and lifted, plucking him off unsteady feet. Eroan fell on him, his hair a glorious mass of white, tickling Lysander on his cheek, his neck. Eroan's tiny elf teeth nipped at Lysander's shoulder, sinking in deep enough to nip off the end of Lysander's heaving breaths.

He kicked the cot bed around, away from the wall, and lay Eroan on his back, bracing his arms on either side to trap the elf in. Eroan looked up at him, a strange kind of rawness and vulnerability to him that few got to see, if anyone had seen it at all. Eroan lifted a hand and brushed loose knuckles down Lysander's face.

The jacket and shirt gaped. The male's body was a map; one Lysander wanted to explore with his teeth and tongue and fingers and eventually his cock, but first, a kiss. Lysander kissed him slow, kissed him deep, cupping his face and kissing him like he was a vanishing, fleeting thing, like that star he'd never been able to catch. Knowing how Eroan could wound with his tongue, the softness with which he kissed back screwed Lysander's heart to the wall. The fear was all but gone now, because no beast could love as deeply as he loved this impossible creature. As long as he had Eroan, he'd be all right. Everything would be all right.

As Lysander let the kiss wander, nudging Eroan's jaw, Eroan's hands pushed Lysander's shirt off his shoulders and down his arms, running his warm hands over Lysander's biceps, adding a squeeze, because he was a fucking tease.

Lysander reared up and tore the shirt free, done with barriers and complicated clothing. When he fell back in, Eroan opened his knees, capturing Lysander between his thighs. But then Eroan's trousers, halfway down his hips, managed to lever Lysander away from the part he wanted to feel the most. He tore those off next, leaving Eroan clad in just the shirt and jacket and nothing else, and even those were all snarled up beneath him. Eroan's cock lay erect against his lower stomach, so fucking innocent a thing considering how it could turn Lysander's thoughts inside out. And gods, Eroan was stunning in his near nakedness.

Lysander licked a line up Eroan's cock, grinned as the head nudged his chin, and flicked his tongue higher, over the ripple of abs, around a nipple, until he found the elf's mouth. The bed groaned

and creaked a protest. At the back of his mind, as he plundered Eroan's mouth and stroked his cock, he doubted the rickety cot would last through what he had planned.

Lysander roamed his hand back down—relishing the feel of Eroan's nails dragging down his back—skimmed around the wanting cock, and dipped at the smooth valley beneath Eroan's balls, finding the tight rim of his ass beneath that. He eased a finger in, kissing away Eroan's gasps until they turned into groans.

By diamonds, he'd wanted Eroan spread beneath him, panting and writhing like this, for the longest time. Beneath him, so he could see his face as they fucked. But this had stopped being a raw fuck sometime ago. Maybe when Lysander had gently lain Eroan down, or maybe before that, when Eroan had crossed the floor to him, knowing how much Lysander needed this.

Lysander dug under Eroan's hips and shifted him down the bed, propping his ass on the edge. On his knees again, Lysander spread Eroan's thighs and drenched his hand in the wetness, making Eroan's cock glisten. Once smooth, he worked his middle finger into Eroan's tight hole a second time, this time feeling it slip smoothly in. His own cock was drenched and damned uncomfortable, neglected and still restrained inside his pants, but he'd get to it. This was for Eroan.

The elf arched off the bed. *"Fuck."*

Eroan had lost his pretty words. Nobody said fuck better.

Lysander probed deeper, finding that sweet spot that made most males lose their minds and Eroan was no different. He clutched the bedside, air-fucking in time with Lysander's strokes.

"Alumn damn you, dragon. Fill me."

Eroan reached for his own cock, grasping it. His eyes rolled, his mouth fell open, all of him open and inviting.

Lysander pulled his finger free and watched the elf work his hand over himself. Lysander salivated like a mind-numbed fool. Maybe he was wired wrong to enjoy the sight of an elf making his own pleasure. He'd been told he was wrong all his life. He found he no longer cared.

He was done watching. He clawed his way out of his clothes, finally freeing his cock. He stroked himself, shuddering out the pleasure while collecting all the wetness he'd need.

Eroan's half-lidded eyes drank him down, devouring every inch. *"Come here."*

So demanding.

Not even the dragon king could argue with this one.

Lysander leaned over him, pinning a knee on one side and locking an arm on the other, hovering above Eroan. The elf swallowed, his throat bobbing, pulse fluttering, then a small, knowing smile lightened his lips, like he was fucking shy.

Lysander ran a finger over that smile, capturing the feel of it forever in his memory. *"You are my everything, Eroan."* Gods, it was true. It hurt to say, and that's how Lysander knew this was love. The real kind, not the dragon kind.

Eroan sighed, slung an arm around Lysander's neck and pulled him down. He kissed like a dream, like a thing that wasn't real, couldn't be real. Lysander danced his tongue with Eroan's and lowered against him, careful to keep himself propped up enough not to crush Eroan, then grasped himself in hand and found Eroan's precious, tight nub of wrinkled skin. Tilting his hips, Lysander eased his raging cock into the forgiving tightness, nipping at Eroan's lips and tongue, distracting him, relaxing him. Eroan tilted his ass, opening a new angle, and Lysander sank in, but it wasn't enough. He withdrew to the sound of Eroan's protests, pulled him down again, and knelt against the bed. Eroan's hole wept Lysander's pre-cum and Lysander answered the twitching summons by taking himself in hand again and guiding in. Pleasure danced down his back, snapping through his balls and cock. In he

slid, deeper than before, so deep his hips kissed Eroan's ass and the tightness enveloped every throbbing inch. Lysander clutched the male's thighs, locking them close, and eased his cock out and arched in again. Curses spilled from his lips. He was coming undone.

Eroan's beautiful eyes blazed, locked on Lysander's.

Yes, this. This was peace at last. This was home.

He fell into a rhythm, holding back as much as he could, going slow, careful. "Touch yourself," he breathed.

Eroan clutched his own erection, his expert hands roaming over the head and sensitive inches, slicking his hand.

"Come for me, like this..." Lysander couldn't say anymore. Each word had a direct link to his cock, spiking the pleasure higher, driving needles down his lower back. Eroan obeyed, and Lysander hastened his pace, matching Eroan's hand pumping himself toward release. He forgot who he was in the next breath, forgot there was a world outside. Hips driving, sinking him into Eroan's exquisite tightness, he forgot they were dragon and elf, because none of that mattered. They were two souls, shining against the darkness in a dying world.

Eroan bucked, his hips jerking. His hole squeezed, he spat some kind of elven curse at the same time as his milk-white cum dashed his hand, abs, and hip.

Pleasure coiled, ever-tightening. Lysander admired the messy sight spread beneath him and thrust harder, hips slapping against Eroan's ass. Relentlessly pounding, pleasure sharpened to an excruciating point that had Lysander's skin sizzling and his mind lost. The release thundered through him, spilling free. He grunted, shuddered, lost his fucking rhythm and his seed all at once, and rode out the milking pulses until he was spent and wrecked, and oh-so ruined.

Gods, it had never been this good with anyone. Ever. Eroan was a drug, and Lysander greedily wanted more.

Reluctantly, Lysander withdrew, gritting his teeth against the sweet afterburn, and then bowed over Eroan's cock, flicking his tongue over the trail of cum, but in doing so he discovered Eroan had a ticklish spot in the hollow of his hip. Eroan twitched and laughed. That laugh... It was a beautiful thing. Lysander was going to make it his mission to find all such weaknesses in Eroan and exploit them to hear that laugh a hundred times over. A thousand times, if he could. They had the whole day, the night too. Maybe, this time, they had forever?

Eroan

THE DRAGON PRINCE snored lightly against his shoulder. Eroan teased a lock of Lysander's hair through his fingers, marveling at its smoothness. He wondered how it worked, the magic, the *shift*. Where did this lock of hair go when he turned into dragon? Did it become some other part of him, a scale perhaps? But why wasn't his hair green? And when did they learn to pretend to be human? Was it an instinctual thing or taught? He mulled over such things while listening to Lysander snore. Lysander's body was a hard, hot mass of male, currently plastered down Eroan's side on the bed that was far too small for one, let alone two. A miracle, really, that the bed was still a bed and not shattered into pieces. Despite the bed, and the tiny hut, and the lack of food or water, he could stay like this, smothered by the smell of dragon and sex. Stay tucked against Lysander as though he were the protector, not Eroan. He liked that thought—not having to be the one always protecting others. He needed protecting sometimes too, didn't he?

The snoring ceased.

Lysander opened his eyes. He didn't say anything, the smile said it all, and then he pulled Eroan against his chest and grumbled an odd muddle of dragon chirping that had Eroan fighting back a laugh. He'd laughed enough. His ribs ached from it. Lysander had discovered his greatest weakness. A weakness he'd managed to conceal from everyone. He was ticklish. Nobody knew it, not even Janna. Lysander had rooted it out and then decided to pursue every little sensitive spot, stroking with his fingers and tongue into places that surprised even Eroan. They'd made love again after that, Lysander spooned against his back, the dragon's touches achingly tender.

The tension that had rode them both on arriving was long gone. As was daylight. Seraph could only cover for him for so long before the Order began asking questions. He'd prefer to forget them all, but Seraph didn't need to suffer for his disappearance.

"You smell so good," Lysander mumbled, his voice sleepy and slow, like warm syrup.

Eroan could feel exactly how good pressing into his hip and with that, a few skittish darts of pleasure had his member warming and hardening. Lysander was insatiable, but then, so was Eroan.

"We *should* talk," Eroan began.

Lysander pressed a finger to Eroan's lips and held it there until Eroan rolled his eyes, summoning Lysander's dark chuckle. The same chuckle Eroan found he had a liking for, the same chuckle that had

his semi-hard member now hardening off. With the sheets trapped beneath them, there was no hiding his interest, not that he would.

He assumed Lysander hadn't noticed, his attention all on Eroan's face, but then the dragon's finger was gone from his lips so it could find its new home, sliding around his erection. Eroan's eyelids fluttered. There was no use fighting it, he wouldn't last a minute. Lysander knew the effect he had on Eroan's body.

Eroan twisted to face him, crushed against his chest by the ridiculous bed. The position made Lysander's efforts awkward, but it also exposed Lysander's equally erect member, currently wanting but neglected. Eroan slid his arm beneath Lysander's, took him in his grasp and wasted no time making the dragon pant. It was uncoordinated and fast, the kiss only hastening the pleasure. Lysander came first, his reserves down to a dribble, but it didn't lessen the bright spark of desire in his eyes. The dragon's grunting tipped Eroan over the edge, spilling into Lysander's hand.

Lysander's dark, filthy chuckle was back. He wiped his hand on the sheets.

Eroan rolled onto his back and flung an arm out, resting his knuckles against the floor. They'd saturated the place with sex. The next elf who visited would smell dragon and elf. There was no hiding what had happened here. "We'll have to burn this hut down."

"Really?"

A smile fought its way to his lips. "I'll build Ashford another."

"Are you ashamed of me?" Dark eyes sparkled.

"Not in the least."

Lysander propped himself on his side, his head in an upturned hand. "You don't care what they think happened here."

"I don't care what they think at all."

Lysander stroked a finger down Eroan's elven ear. Eroan let his eyes flutter closed. The finger traced down his jaw, then his neck, tickling over his collarbone, making his smile twitch and dance. Alumn, these tiny unrushed touches, he'd kill to keep them. Reluctantly, he opened his eyes and found the dragon smiling. "We do need to talk."

Lysander sighed and dropped his head back into the pillow.

"Where are your dragons?"

He waved a hand in the air, still staring at the ceiling. "To the north, where the big river widens and the enormous metal skeletons rot in the bay."

"The Thames estuary."

"Yeah. There." Lysander turned his head again, blinking at Eroan. The depth was back, a new depth Eroan had noticed last night. Something had unlocked inside his dragon. "They won't hurt you. They're mine. Every single one."

"You found your calling."

"I did, and more. I..." Lysander closed his eyes. Eroan waited, letting him find the words. He wanted to tell him he was safe in this moment, but Lysander already knew it. "I killed Carline. I... She was Metal. She was stronger than me and there was a fight. I... I just killed her." He opened his eyes. The dark depths in them had grown hungry. "It felt good, Eroan. It felt so good. This power... I control dragons with a glance, but I'm afraid..."

"Of?"

"I don't know if I can control myself."

Eroan guarded his face. Carline had been kind, as much as dragons could be. The fact Lysander had turned on her brought back Nye's words of how Lysander would turn on him. Akiem had told him

he loved a lie. And maybe if he'd learned of Carline's death from someone else and not spent the last few hours loving Lysander, he'd be afraid of this new prince. But he wasn't. Because he did know Lysander, apparently better than Lysander knew himself.

"You killed her because you're dragon, and it's what you do. She was a threat."

"She protected me. She healed me."

"She was Metal. She would have sought to control you, just like all the others."

"But not you..."

Lysander's teasing fingers were back, leaving tingling trails down and around Eroan's neck where once a collar had kept *him* controlled. "It's quiet here..." Lysander sighed, then tapped his forehead. "And up here. When I'm with you. Here, now, everything feels possible. You make everything possible."

Lysander's fingers slipped into his hair and Eroan tilted his head toward the touch, seeking the warmth and roughness of Lysander's fingers. If only it could be like this for them, forever.

"I have a daughter," Eroan said. The hitch in his voice was entirely too raw. "Her name is Elle. And I can't be a part of her life."

Lysander's fingers stroked on, riding over his naked shoulder and sailing down, over Eroan's heart. "You already have someone to care for. Her name is Seraph and she adores you."

"She adores you too." Alumn, the tears were unexpected. He blinked, clearing them before they could fall. Seraph had been more to him than a student of the Order since the humans had carried her out of the bronze warren. He'd almost lost her then. Would have, if not for Lysander protecting her in the worst of places. He faced his dragon, marveling at how someone so strong could be so blind to his strengths.

"Do you think Seraph and Junoe fucked in this bed?" Lysander asked.

Eroan laughed short and sudden. "That's not an image I needed."

Lysander twisted onto his side again, smiling like the devil he was. "You corner this *Junoe*. I'll break his legs and threaten to eat all his bloodkin. That will soon put an end to it."

The laughter was back, so ready to spring free. Eroan couldn't remember ever laughing so much in so short a time. "You're impossible."

"I'm practical and territorial and Seraph is a part of my brood whether she wants it or not." He added a lofty, princely tone to his voice that Eroan hadn't heard since the tower.

"You have a brood, prince?"

Lysander waved a playfully dismissive hand. "It's full of elves. I hoard them like other dragons collect gems. Clearly, I am broken—"

Eroan kissed him quickly, stealing the end of that sentence away. "Never." The prince's hand settled warm on his hip, pulling him closer as his gaze devoured Eroan's face. What did he see? Something that killed his smile and pinched his brows together. Something like how neither of them deserved the other?

"Is it true, your dragons won't hurt us?" Eroan asked.

"They won't hurt *you*." Lysander pinched Eroan's chin then planted a quick kiss on his lips. "As for those other assholes... It depends if they keep trying to kill me."

Lysander moved away, making an attempt to leave the bed. Eroan wasn't done with him yet. He locked a leg around his thigh and pulled. Lysander's warm chest brushed up Eroan's until they met, eye-to-eye. "Did you want something, elf?"

"Mostly your body on mine."

"Happy to oblige."

Their lovemaking was slow, a lavish exploration that Eroan could never tire of. He loved Lysander with his hands and with his body, and when those things were spent, he loved him with words. Because, more than anything, Lysander should know he was loved. And he needed to believe it. Finally, it seemed, he was beginning to believe. Eroan's heart swelled to see the true smiles, a real light blaze in the prince's eyes.

He'd love this dragon to the ends of the earth. Nobody could take that from them. Ever.



THEY PARTED in the quiet moments before sunrise, the sea air crisp with promise and the first hint of autumnal nights to follow. Eroan's fingers fell from Lysander again, but not for long. Lysander would wait a day near the old ruin at the edge of the forest while Eroan made his goodbyes. If elves or humans wanted to stay in Ashford, they could. The rest would return to Cheen, or with Eroan, to his settlement—to the home with no name. And Lysander would join him there. They'd have *time*. Lots of it. Together.

He stopped at a nearby spring and splashed water over his face and neck, washing off the scent of dragon. By now, all of Ashford likely knew where he'd been and with whom he'd been with, but he didn't need to broadcast the fact so soon after the battle with the enemy.

Inside Ashford, the foyer had been cleared of the dead and mostly cleaned, although it would take some time to scrub the blood from the walls. The glass roof still gaped, but beneath it, the ancient tree stood defiant, if battered. Elves tied colored ribbons to the lower branches. Eroan watched them a while. Few wept, this custom was about remembering, not grieving. The tears would come later.

Alador arrived and drifted among his people, looking the part of an elder who happened to have daggers at his hips and shins instead of robes and tassels. The old elf carried dignity and wisdom in every step. He and Eroan had clashed in the past, but Eroan respected the male. He'd be honored to call him a friend.

"Eroan," Alador greeted, softly dipping his head.

They shared a moment side by side, watching the breeze flutter the tree's ribbons.

"I would like to retire from the Order." The words didn't hurt like he'd expected, in fact they lightened an invisible weight on his shoulders.

Alador's dark brows pinched together. He quietly considered Eroan's requests. Peaceful murmurs from the gathered elves sailed around them. "I don't think I've ever heard those words before. Not in all my years. And I've lived a long, long while."

"Because all of your assassins die before they can utter them."

Alador's mouth twitched and Eroan realized his mistake. Alador had lived and still he led the Order. The elder conceded with a nod and said, "Times are changing, Eroan. Assassins are surviving. They are living. We have effective weapons. We're fighting back. We're winning. Thanks to you."

"And to the humans."

"Ah, yes. The humans..." A few mingled with the elves. "You told me they could be trusted and I did not believe you. I was wrong not to listen." Alador's attention fell to a couple of humans who helped tie a green ribbon to a lower branch. The elf beside them said his thanks and a look of shared grief and understanding passed between them. "They fought bravely for our home. It shall not be forgotten."

"Would you allow them to stay, if they wish it?"

Alador studied Eroan closely. "You ask that which others are afraid to. Some admire you for it, some... do not." He nodded. "I'll consult the council, but yes, I should think so."

Not so long ago, such a thing would have been impossible. He'd dreamed of this, hadn't he? He'd wanted change and peace between races. He'd seek Chloe out and suggest she stay, or at least let her know they were welcome. Ben and Chloe would be a valuable addition to the elves. Sharing knowledge had to be the way forward. "And my request to retire?"

Alador sighed and clasped his hands behind his back. "We'd be honored to have you among the Higher Order, on the ruling council."

Eroan couldn't hide the sorry smile. Xena had tried to recruit him as an elder, and now Alador, trying to fit him into a role he didn't want and never had. He was not made to dictate orders; he was made to see them carried out. But that was before Lysander. Now he had another reason to live and that reason wasn't welcome here.

"I've done enough," he said. "I hope you understand."

The elder nodded. "Then it is with great reluctance that I grant your request. Although I'll continue to hope you may reconsider. If you do, we will always welcome you. I'm proud of the Order, of every single member, but there's never been another like you, Eroan Ilanea. You'll be greatly missed."

Freedom. What a wonderful thing it was. "I plan to leave today."

"So soon?"

"With the dragons beaten, you have no need of me." Thinking of his waiting dragon, he added, "My own path beckons."

Alador lifted his gaze to the hole in the ceiling. "We do not know for certain they have gone. The sky is clear but there have been dragons reported along the northern border."

Had Seraph not told him? "I have it on good authority they won't be returning, at least not in a force you can't easily repel. I sent Seraph to tell you?"

"Seraph? Your young companion? I haven't seen her."

A needlepoint of fear poked at his thoughts. It was probably nothing. Yesterday she had said she'd tell Alador the skies were clear thanks to Lysander. Perhaps she had been waylaid. "You didn't see Seraph yesterday?" he asked again, to be sure.

"No, but I've been in the vaults, securing the artifacts... the last I heard of her, she was on the moors, attending the pyres."

"When?"

"Yesterday morning."

The same moment Eroan and Lysander had left her.

"Is something wrong?" Alador asked.

"I'm sure it's nothing." He bid a hasty farewell and checked Seraph's room. The dragonblade lay resting against her messy bed, but her boots and coat were missing. He picked up the blade, the twin to his own. She rarely went anywhere without it. Not for extended periods of time. If she'd been helping on the moorland, she'd have taken the blade with her.

Strapping the blade to his back, he collected his own from his room, settling both swords in place. Their weight was reassuring even if the circumstances were not. She'd be fine. She was probably above ground, still helping with the cleanup.

He asked the Order elves he came across as he made his way above, and then drifted among the smoldering pyres, asking after her. None had seen her since yesterday. No word of her, no sight of her, nothing.

Panic tried to clutch at his heart.

It was all right.

She'd be fine.

She was Seraph.

He alerted the sentinels, all the same. And then asked after this Junoe she'd mentioned. Maybe she'd rekindled her time with the *musician*.

Eroan found him back inside Ashford with the administrators, plucking on a lute while another female stood close, humming along with his music-making. He appeared to be a dainty elf with a charming face and a hint of roguish mischief about him.

Junoe's eyes widened. He missed a note. "Oh shit!"

The lute clattered to the floor. Eroan's hand around his throat did the rest. "Where is she?"

Junoe's nostrils flared. "Eroan... friend, eh?" he laughed nervously. "Why the hostility?"

"I'm not your friend. Where's Seraph?"

"S-Seraph?"

Eroan narrowed his eyes. "Don't play naïve with me."

"I don't know. I swear. I don't know! I haven't seen her. I mean, not since, you know... after she got here. I saw her then. But I guess... you kinda know that. She said you'd get like this. That's why we didn't tell you! It was just some fun, right? Just some fun, friend."

Eroan ignored the useless twitterings. "I don't care of that. Where is she?"

The young male clawed at Eroan's grip. "We were going to meet last night. I was late. I guess I missed her, I don't know."

Eroan bared his teeth. "Where?"

"The old satellite station."

"The what?"

"A big white dish on the moor. We go there sometimes—north of the pyres. Where the moorland drops away. She wasn't there. I swear. We didn't, you know... We didn't do anything."

Eroan shoved off the musician before his control slipped from its leash and he did something he'd regret. She'd gone to the north to meet with this waste of space, without her blade, because she wouldn't need it for what they had planned. She trusted this reed and he'd left her alone, exposed. Eroan pointed a finger. "I'm not finished with you."

She wasn't one to wait. She wouldn't be there.

But he had to know. He had to check.

The sun beat down from its highest point when he had made it to the huge, white, metal dish, an old structure of laddered steel shaped like a bowl as though to catch the rain. She wasn't here. He circled the frame beneath the dish and crumbling piles of aged brick. Old brush had grown up around much of the structure, shielding it from observers. It made for a perfect secret meeting place, or an ambush point.

He stopped, his eye caught by the splash of red over lichen-covered rock. Scratches. Overturned soil and dislodged moss. There had been a recent struggle.

Eroan turned on his heel and bolted in the direction of the forest.

CHAPTER 29

N_{ye}

THE UNRULY ORDER elf didn't weigh as much as he'd expected. She was all bite, this one. He adjusted her unconscious weight over his shoulder and plodded through the mud.

Dokul would be pleased, so pleased he might keep his hands off Nye for another week, maybe more. Nye's gift to the chief wasn't Eroan, but she was the next best thing. She'd always had an unhealthy obsession with the dragon, and now she'd pay for that obsession. She'd had this coming. It was her fault. Alumn, help him do the right thing. This one would bring Eroan and Eroan would bring the dragon, and this hell would finally be over.

The collar bumped around his neck, grazing against raw skin, reminding him of the *thing* he'd become. *That is no elf.*

He just wanted it to be over...

CHAPTER 30

Lysander

LYSANDER RESTED his head back against a tree trunk and closed his eyes. Birds chattered and tweeted, causing a raucous somewhere farther down the edge of the forest. The wind had dropped, making the sun strong today. He heard dragons in his head, felt them pull on him, demanding he return, but that niggling itch he could ignore, for now.

He mapped out a future in his mind. It would be like this: He'd start a new life in a village with humans and elves while keeping control of the dragon flight he'd subdued. He'd be a protector, not a destroyer. He'd be good. In the afterglow of his time with Eroan, it seemed as though anything was possible. The reality would be more difficult, but he was willing. And with Eroan by his side, the madness in him had calmed. Together, they could change the future for the better.

Bracken crackled nearby. He cracked an eye open. Eroan darted over the uneven ground, coming in fast.

Lysander pushed off the tree. "That was quick. Did they throw you ou—?"

"Seraph..." he breathlessly panted out, planting his hands on his thighs.

A chill robbed Lysander of warmth. He'd never seen that look on Eroan's face—elven eyes wide and darting—it reached into his chest and tore at his heart.

Two dragonblades lay crossed against Eroan's back. Seraph never willingly parted with hers.

Lysander moved in and Eroan's hand fell to Lysander's arm, leaning into him, *falling* against him. "What happened?" He'd never seen Eroan so shaken. It might have shaken him too, if he hadn't sensed Eroan needed someone else to be strong for him.

"Seraph is missing." He gulped air. "Your sense of smell is better than mine. Can you track her?"

Seraph. His little elf. Lysander swallowed a growl. "Not among so many other elves. If she were alone—"

"She wasn't in Ashford. She went north to a communications dish. There's... There's blood." Eroan's fingers tightened, cinching around Lysander's arm. "It leads north." Concern filled Eroan's eyes.

"My flight didn't hurt her." But even as he said the words, he wasn't sure. His connection to the flight was still new, still untested and raw. Maybe some had slipped his control. It wasn't as though he knew what he was doing. "Take me to the dish."

Eroan led the way back across the moorland. Blood scented the air as soon as they arrived at the upturned dish. He paced the scene beneath the structure, his skin chilled among shadows. But beneath the stench of smoldering pyres, he didn't smell any scent of dragon. "Dragons didn't do this."

The statement rocked Eroan. He looked around them at the gorse, the debris, looking for new foes to fight. "It has to be."

"I smell only elf and smoke. No new scents beneath those."

Eroan turned on the spot, fingers flexing at his sides. He stopped suddenly. His expression hardened into a cold mask. "Come with me."

Lysander followed, only hesitating when Eroan reached an Ashford foot-tunnel and plunged inside. The elves weren't going to welcome him. Despite all he'd done for them, they'd made that clear many, many times. But Seraph needed him. *Eroan* needed him. He wasn't hanging back now. He was king. And kings had power. His flight was a mental tug away. The elves would know to stay back.

He garnered a few glances pacing behind Eroan, until word spread that there was a dragon among them, and then the glances became glares, and the assassins began peeling from the shadows, distinct in their dark leather and bristling blades.

Eroan didn't seem to notice how a crowd had gathered in his wake. He walked deeper into Ashford, into parts no dragon had seen before.

Lysander's skin crawled under the scrutiny. He kept his head up, his eyes on Eroan's twin blades.

"Chloe." Eroan found her helping to erect a temporary section of wall. She saw him, smiled, but the smile died a second later. Either Eroan's expression banished it or it was the sight of Lysander over his shoulder that stalled her.

"Eroan?" She wiped brick dust from her hands. Behind her, elves froze at the sight of Lysander, wide-eyed, like rabbits caught in the open.

The dragon in him wanted to bare his teeth, especially now that they were the center of attention. Too many assassins here wanted to sink their blades into his skin. Their bloodlust tingled his tongue, plucking on instincts to fight back, to lose his control and rage at them all. He pulled his fingers into fists and maintained a neutral face, like he'd done countless times with Elisandra. Hidden who he was, what he was, for the sake of survival.

"Seraph is missing," Eroan said, his voice cutting. "I need you to rally every loyal member of our prides and bring them to search aboveground."

As Eroan ordered and organized, Lysander turned, sliding his gaze over the watching elves. This was not the time to rile them up. Their blood likely still ran hot from the battle. They had the numbers. The killers among them probably believed they could pounce before he could fight back. He didn't have his blades, Eroan had those, and these assassins were all armed with half a dozen each.

They *could* take him down.

Eroan had fallen silent.

Everyone had fallen silent.

A tic twitched in Eroan's cheek. Now he too scanned the observant crowd and the danger within. "My companion, Seraph, is missing," he told them all. "I'll take anyone willing to help find her."

Nobody moved.

Didn't they care?

Seraph was one of theirs. She was better than them. She cared when her world said she shouldn't, knowing it could cost her everything. Lysander would give his life for hers, and he was dragon. These fools weren't worthy of her. Or of Eroan.

Lysander's lips twitched, pulling into a sneer.

"Eroan, you bring a dragon into the heart of us."

The male who spoke was all lean and wiry, his skin wrinkled with age, but he carried himself like a leader. Eroan stiffened. The speaker had authority. He had to be one of their elders but dressed in blades.

"Alador," Eroan acknowledged, a warning running beneath the respectful tone. "Lysander fought his kin *for us*. Without him, the bronze flight would have overwhelmed our numbers. We'd all be dead. Ashford would have fallen and eventually all of elvenkind with it." Eroan's scathing glare sliced through them all. "Whether you care to realize it or not, you each owe this dragon your life and your freedom," Eroan flung a hand toward Lysander, "and if any of you so much as raise a blade to him, so help me Alumn, I'll kill any and all where you stand."

And there he was; Lysander's stupid, stubborn elf who stood against the entirety of his own people for a dragon. He hadn't realized there was room in his heart to love Eroan more, but he'd been wrong. This thing between them was boundless. It beat like a second heart and shone like a star he'd never been able to catch. But Lysander had caught him, and Eroan was all his.

Eroan let out a frustrated growl and started forward. "I'm done with every single one of you." The crowd of elves parted like water around a rock. He didn't see them bow their heads to him, didn't see them nod at Lysander, accepting him, didn't see them turn away and go about their business, and he didn't see Alador fix Lysander with a typically brittle elven glare that softened a moment later.

And just like that, Lysander was among them, a part of them: a dragon in a sea of elves. Gods, it felt *right*.



HE CAUGHT up with Eroan breaching the surface with a pride of elves, all spreading out to systematically search the moorland for Seraph. But it wouldn't be enough.

Lysander drew Eroan's steely gaze. "I'll shift and search from above, but I need your assurance your people won't fire on me."

Eroan's jaw worked. "I'll see to it."

Elves be damned, Lysander curled his hand around the back of Eroan's neck, clutching him by the nape and spread his fingers. He'd performed the same touch when they'd been locked together, sharing breaths and heartbeats. Eroan's lashes fluttered down and the ice in him thawed. Lysander pulled him close enough to kiss and lost himself in those beautiful blue, crystalline eyes. "We'll find her," he promised. "Believe it."

Eroan pulled his bottom lip between his teeth, biting down, and nodded. "Go." He clutched at Lysander's arm and then released him.

Lysander left him, weaving through the smoldering remains of dragon, feeling Eroan's gaze riding him through the shift and after, when he spread his wings and roared at the world.

Taking to the air, his wings lifted him higher, keeping a careful eye out for any stray ballista lances. He still ached from their first blow. When none came, he circled higher, scanning the scarred moorland below. Elves spread out like ants. Humans too. Farther, he saw where the grass still burned and where the dead dragons had yet to be carved up and dealt with, their bloated remains sweating in the sun. The air was full of smoke and oil and death. He wouldn't be able to smell her from so high up, but he could cover more ground, looking for anything out of place.

A pride of assassins had converged at the old satellite dish. Eroan had sent them. Eroan trusted them. Lysander screeched as he sailed above their heads, enjoying their flustered scurrying. A reminder, that was all, should any of them loose the arrows slung to their backs. He dipped his left wing and lifted his right, banking around the dish so close to the ground his wingtip almost brushed the gorse and the elves crouching there. Elven blood. He smelled it then, just a flicker. There and gone. His keen sight snagged on a messy line through the yellow-speckled gorse bushes, a disturbed path that couldn't be seen from the ground.

Leveling off, he beat his wings and climbed higher, watching the path stretch north, farther from Ashford, toward his flight. It vanished when the brush thinned. A few more loops and a flatted path among a field of ferns caught his eye. It could be nothing, just an elf track. On the wing, he'd know quickly enough.

What if his dragons had been behind this? He had to know, to deal with it. If they'd taken her, hurt her, he had to know before Eroan discovered the truth.

The path wove down, twisting around rocky outcrops and into a sheltered gully. Lysander lost it there, and scanning the landscape yielded nothing. His dragons were close now. Some yipped an alarm where they circled above the sprawling brown waters of the Thames estuary. Years ago, Lysander had often followed the river from the tower to the coast—to here. He'd sweep low along its widening surface, and where the waters spread and churned, the river mouth opening to the sea, he'd swerve among the jagged remains of some old-world structures, rotting and rusted in the mud. He saw those structures now, beneath his circling flight, great jagged metal things reaching for the sky, as though they'd been caught and were grabbing for freedom with huge, steel fingers.

Ships, his mother had called them. Vast things, like floating cities, topped with rotted containers. Lysander glided over them now, watching the deep water swirl and churn past the structures. They didn't look like anything human-made. Their huge black-and-red bellies lay exposed, half-rotted away. Gulls squawked and mobbed him when he dared get too close. Above, his own dragons circled, curious and wary.

As man, he could ask them if they'd seen Seraph, but they wouldn't know one elf from another anyway and it would take too long to question them all.

Sailing in low, the warm air lifting off the muddied banks keeping him aloft, he eyed the coastline. The air smelled of wet metal, so much metal, so much like the bronze warren. The metal stench was from the *ships*, the water slowly eating at their huge carcasses. But the taste of metal on his tongue summoned a rattle through his scales.

The biggest vessel pulled his attention in, luring his gaze from the river's edge back to its deeper central channels. A vast thing, it was ten times bigger than a fully grown dragon. It leaned to its side, stuck in the mud where it had died all those years ago. The tide was in, filling its cavernous holes with soup-like brown water. But half of its structure still poked above the surface.

His flight dallied above, squawking and chittering like the gulls he'd disturbed. He ignored them, swooping in over the vessel, and spied a relatively stable place to land. Even so, as his claws hit the deck, the enormous ship let out a painful groan.

Lysander tucked his dragon form away, easing the burden on the structure, and as man, approached the strange metal boxes and towers all stacked together on top of the ship. So vast, they rose high above him, like some of the humans' old-world towers rising high above buried settlements.

Offsetting the ship's tilt by leaning to the side, he grabbed at salt-encrusted rails to ease around rotted deck sections. Perhaps these metal towers had housed people once or they were for storage?

This ship lay close to the riverbank. At low tide, it might have been possible to access it on foot.

He'd just take a quick look inside. He'd be back on the wing soon.

Dropping through a hole, onto a lower deck, his nose twitched around the smell of metal and salt and dank river water. Shafts of light filtered through thousands of holes in the top deck, lighting the passages and his path from above. His skin itched. He rubbed at the goosebumps tickling the back of his neck. The reaction was due to the smell of being surrounded by metal. Nothing here could hurt him, not with his dragons above and his wing restored. He was king. Kings did not fear metal crypts.

"Seraph?"

The space grabbed his voice and flung it into the ship's cavernous depths, rolling it over and over in the dark. When it faded, the sound of river water hissed at the ship's metal belly and occasionally something somewhere *thunked*, probably debris carried by the river.

Lysander tentatively eased onward. Unsure. He wouldn't go into those depths. Just a little farther.

The ship groaned again.

A few steps ahead, the floor had rotted away. He inched close enough to see inside the darkness. No bottom. No nothing. Just the cold, wet dark. "All right," he mumbled. "I can take a hint." There was nothing here and whatever his gut was telling him had more to do with the metal here than finding Seraph.

He turned.

Light flashed across a pair of dark elven eyes.

Hands shoved at his chest.

Lysander reeled. Into nothing. The floor didn't exist. His balance tipped out from under him. He snatched at the figure wrapped in black, a figure that smelled like elf in this place of wet metal, and grabbed a thin wrist, yanking it with him. But it wasn't enough. Momentum had him in its clutches.

Backward, he fell. Heart leaping. Stomach whooshing.

The rusted ship tilted around him, under him. The elf fell too, with a shout, trying to writhe from Lysander's grip.

Cold air rushed in.

His heart lurched into his throat. The dark grabbed him and swallowed. The shift tried to rip free, but inside this much jagged metal, if he shifted, he'd find himself impaled on a dozen rusted metal swords. Down, he fell, down into the yawning nothing.

CHAPTER 31

Eroan

AS THE HOURS passed and the sun dipped lower in the sky, it became clear Seraph had been taken. Eroan fought back useless thoughts, the ones telling him she was already dead, that he was too late, that he should have realized she was missing sooner, that if he hadn't gone with Lysander, she'd have been safe. These panicked thoughts were unproductive and distracting. He needed to act, but beyond coordinating the search, there was nothing else he could do. This was hell, he decided. A torture like none other. Seraph was out there. Hurt. That much was fact, and he couldn't *do* anything.

To make matters worse, Lysander should have returned by now. He'd seen him fly to the north but quickly lost sight of him. That had been in the morning. The sun was setting now, the sky bleeding, and he'd not returned.

Eroan paced the chunk of land near the Ashford entrance where he'd already worn a path.

What if the bronze had taken Seraph?

What if Dokul hadn't retreated at all?

What if he'd been close by, waiting for an opportunity...

No, no, that couldn't be right. Lysander hadn't smelled dragon.

Eroan flexed his fists, wanting to palm his swords and fight someone, anyone.

He envied Lysander's wings. Had he been dragon, he could track them both down and rage at whoever had dared take them from him.

What if Seraph was already dead?

What if Lysander was hurt?

"Eroan?" Chloe's accented voice broke through the madness, if only briefly. He threw her a look as she emerged from the path. She flinched.

"News?" he snapped.

"Nothing."

"Then why are you here?!" He knew it wasn't her fault. Nobody was to blame, but he needed a target. "Try the forest. Go deeper—"

"They're losing the light, *mon cher*. The search will be postponed."

No, no! They could search by torchlight, by smell, Alumn damn them all. He stopped pacing. He couldn't think. This wasn't helping. He knew they had to stop the search at night or they'd lose more

elves to wolves. He didn't want more to die. But stopping made him want to tear into his own chest and rip something out. He couldn't stop. Alumn, he was going mad just *waiting*.

A gentle hand sought out his shoulder. He almost snarled at her, but when he dropped his hands, her face was warm and kind, and now she had him, pulling him close, and it was all he could do not to sob in her arms. "I can't lose them, Chloe."

"Lysander will find her. He's likely with her now, bringing her home."

No, he wasn't. He could feel it like ice in his blood. Something terrible had happened to them both. And Eroan was here. Doing nothing! He pulled from Chloe. "I'm searching through the night. I don't expect anyone else to. Go inside, take shelter, begin again at dawn."

"Eroan, it's too—"

"Don't. Just... don't. I will go mad if I do not do something."

"This is not like you. You're not thinking clearly. At least take another Order elf—"

He made for the nearest torch sitting upright and unlit in its bracket, plucked it free, and pulled the firestarter from his pocket.

The firestarter Lysander had kept with him.

They'd shared a campfire once, in human ruins, and Eroan had asked him whether the egg or dragon came first. They'd met at the fallen oak and Lysander had lit the fire, and afterward, they'd spent the night under the stars. Lysander had saved them all when the tower fell, and afterward, he'd woken and given Eroan this flint and steel, asking, *What is this thing between us?*

Alumn, he couldn't lose his dragon.

Eroan struck the firestarter, setting sparks flying, and lit the torch, breathing into it, making the flames glow. Dark be damned, he was finding them both.

"Eroan? *S'il vous plaît*. Do not go alone."

He ignored her and set off into the dusk.

CHAPTER 32

Lysander

THE FALL WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN SO bad had he hit water without hitting the jagged piece of metal first. As it was, the metal protrusion had dug in like a dragon's claw, flipped him over, tearing open a jagged slash, and smacked him face-first into a glutinous mud.

He tore his head back with a gasp and clawed at his eyes, fighting with the gunk to see. A blur of black loomed ahead. He swung, the blur vanished, and then a boot landed between his shoulders. The mud had him again. He twisted, prizing half of his chest free, and then the same boot thumped him in the chest, sending him backward. Mud crept around his shoulders. Its cool fingers slid over his chest. He snatched and groped, flailing wildly in the dark, but the weight pinning him down wasn't moving.

A warm hand smothered his mouth and pushed.

Mud wormed into his ears, up his cheeks, around his chin. He panted through his nose, the only part of him not smothered, but soon that would go under too. Gods, he couldn't see to fight. Mud spluttered at his nostrils. *Shift*. As soon as the thought came to him, fingers looped around his neck and yanked.

The mud let go with a gasping slurp.

"If it were my choice, you'd be dead."

He knew the voice.

The elf that had poisoned him back in Cheen, leading to all this. Nye.

A growl bubbled up Lysander's throat. He blinked, still blinded by mud.

Something cold and hard struck him in the side of the head, almost ripping the consciousness out of him. His gut heaved, his head thumping and ears ringing. If he could just... think straight, just gather his thoughts enough to figure out the dark space they were in.

"Eroan should have killed you. He failed. I will not."

Gods, this elf was a vicious menace. If he could see, he could fight, he just needed time to get this viscous stuff out of his eyes. "Jealous...?" Lysander slurred.

That earned him another thump to the head and the dark folded in for real.

He woke chained to a steel strut, listening to metal groan and water slosh somewhere beyond the metal walls. Still inside the ship's metal bowels. Torchlight flickered in the corners, making his head throb, but at least he could see. The floor and walls glistened red with wet rust. Metal. It was in his

gut, in his head and veins, under his damned skin.

“Such a loyal pet.”

Lysander didn't want to hear the voice, because if he heard it, that meant it was real, and that meant Dokul was here, but Dokul had fled. This was just an elf's doing. Elves he could beat. But Dokul...

Shuffling and grunting alerted him to another form to his left.

He lifted his head, wincing at the hot hammer-like blows of pain trying to crack his skull open. He blinked, but one eye remained bloodied and blurred. With the other, he saw Seraph tied to a metal strut just like his. A filthy gag clogged her mouth. Blood crusted the right side of her face. Her head hung forward, her chin on her chest.

She was alive.

That was good.

Just so long as the bastard hadn't touched her...

Fire flared in his veins. He tugged on the chains, making them rattle, and looked up, flinging his glare at Dokul. The male was as big and foul as always. Lysander's body rebelled at the sight of slick skin and thick muscles. He could taste him all over again, feel him too, a weight on his back, the breath on his neck. But if he could capture the bronze with his glare, it would all be over. He'd control him like he controlled all the others.

Dokul had already looked away to where Nye knelt on the floor. Dokul patted him on the head. “You've done well.”

“You piece of metal *shit*,” Lysander added the weight of his true self to the words, making them growl.

Dokul's stupid smile twitched, but he didn't look over.

“C'mon, you want me, right? That's why you attacked Ashford. It's all been about me. Well, here I am, you fucker. *Look at me.*”

Dokul's breathing deepened, his chest expanding. He lifted his head but instead of looking at Lysander, he fixed Seraph beneath his glare. “You have much to learn, prince.”

“I am a king now, and I'm going to make you kneel to me, you fat fuck. You can service my cock, and you'll do it like you fucking worship *me.*”

The male's cheek twitched. “You call yourself king.” A soft laughter rumbled out of him. “Your ignorance is typical of you, wretched jeweled.”

“Look at me!”

Dokul nodded at Nye. “Did you really think I'd be that easy to control?”

The elf rose to his feet, pulling a length of cloth through his fingers as he approached. The end of a leash dragged across the floor behind him, its other end clipped to a collar around the elf's neck. Dokul's pet. For a proud elf like him, that collar would be torture enough. Lysander couldn't find it in him to care. The stupid creature had caused all this.

The chains bit and clanked as Lysander worked his way to his feet, dragging the chains up the strut behind him. “Stay back or I'll bite your fucking face off, elf.”

Nye smiled and circled around behind Lysander, forcing Lysander to twist and try to follow, not wanting to expose his back, but the strut was too wide and kept snagging the chains, jolting him to a stop. Nye's arm swooped around from the left. The piece of cloth flew in. Lysander ducked. The cloth caught him around the throat instead of the eyes. The elf tried again, and Lysander bucked and twitched, making him miss every time.

A stupid piece of cloth wasn't going to stop him.

Dokul's thick fingers slammed over both Lysander's eyes, cracking Lysander's damaged skull back against rusted iron. His thoughts spun again, gut roiling. He hadn't heard him move and now he was close, so close. Fear had Lysander's heart pumping too hard, his breath racing. Rough hands smothered his face. The wound in his back throbbed. The bronze pushed in and panic tightened every inch of Lysander's skin, pulling him in, making him small.

"I'll fucking shift—"

"Not with your elf friend so close."

Gods, he was right. If he shifted, his mass would crush Seraph.

His heart rattled. He tried to toss his head, but the male's hands clamped on, his thumbs pressing in.

His flight. He was better. Stronger. He mentally plucked on the strings of all dragons close by and heard their brittle screeching calls far above the ship.

Dokul's wet lips brushed Lysander's. Lysander tore his head to the side and the male leaned in. His next words bit at his cheek. "If they land, the ship will sink farther into the mud and drown us all." The male's big hands spread around Lysander's head, fingers wide, holding him firm. "I've killed thousands of emeralds like you." His hands twisted, so his palms cupped Lysander's cheeks. His thumbs pushed against Lysander's closed eyes again, like the bronze was mapping every inch. "Slippery emeralds. Emeralds who thought themselves above the metals."

The male was everywhere, beneath Lysander's skin, behind his eyes, against his body. His aroused cock probed at Lysander's hip, but it was the hands on his face that summoned true, icy-like fear. Those hands could crush his skull, but Dokul didn't want him dead. He'd never wanted that.

Dragons screamed outside. The ship let out a shuddering groan and tilted. Seraph's scream behind her gag joined that of the horrible sound of twisting metal.

No, no... The ship was tipping. Water hissed and thrashed against metal.

Lysander pushed his flight away and the metal decreased its shuddering. Seraph lived. Nothing else mattered. He'd endure, he always did. But Seraph had to live.

"That's better," Dokul purred. "Now, where was I..." His thumbs pushed and a new pain throbbed behind Lysander's eyes. "I need your cock for breeding and nothing else. As for these eyes of yours... They are as precious as emeralds."

His thumbs dug deeper. Nails scored bone. Lysander had nowhere to go. Dokul's hands had him fixed to the strut. He couldn't turn away, couldn't fight, couldn't shift. The thumbs pushed deeper, lighting Lysander's eyes on fire.

"Don't..." He trembled and hated it. "Please don't."

"The power was always in the eyes."

Lightning agony tore through his skull. Gristle and sinew collapsed. He screamed, too lost to the nightmare to hear it. He didn't feel Dokul withdraw, didn't feel the floor when he fell upon it, didn't feel anything outside the thunderous agony. He wept blood. He felt that. Tears of blood running down his face.

Someone sobbed, and he didn't know if it was himself or Seraph.

"Untie the elf," Dokul ordered.

"What?" Nye balked. Beneath the thumping and hammering, Lysander heard the panic in the elf's voice.

"Don't question me. You're doing so well. Untie her. She cut me. I owe her for that."

He couldn't see. The dark was everywhere now, suffocating Lysander, smothering him. But none of that mattered. He groped for the chains, feeling their cool curves in his hands, and pulled at the

links one by one, running them through his fingers.

“No,” Nye said.

The crack of knuckles on flesh and the tumbling of someone falling. Dokul had struck Nye.

“Come here, bitch.”

Lysander tugged at the links, trying to find a weak one, just one.

Seraph’s panting became too loud. She scrabbled and pulled at her chains too, their loud clanking hiding how Lysander prized his apart.

“Stop!” From Nye.

More scuffling. Lysander filtered it out. He knew where they stood, could hear them, he just needed to get free. A link buckled beneath his fingers. He pulled the chain free of the strut.

Scurrying. Grunts. Blood. But he’d never mistake the bastard’s stench. Recalling the tilt and layout of the chamber in his mind and placing Dokul within it, Nye beneath him, either being fucked or beaten, Lysander roared and ran at them both. He lifted the chain, felt it snag, heard Dokul grunt and then went down, tumbling against bare metal and rust. His arm, his hip. Metal scoured at his skin.

“Get her free!” He yelled for Nye. “Run! Go. Get out!”

He pulled the chain tight, knowing without seeing that it locked around Dokul’s neck, but the loop was all wrong, like it had snagged some other part of him too. And within moments, the chain jerked forward. Dokul sucked in air. A solid weight of him knocked Lysander down.

“Saving elves will get you killed, you foolish welp.”

Hands. Everywhere. Around his neck, between his thighs, groping, clawing.

Lysander listened to other things, to Seraph’s chains falling, to hurried footfalls against metal, leading away. Good. She’d go free, she’d get Eroan.

Dokul’s weight vanished.

“No. *No!*” Lysander groped at the air, but Dokul was already gone.

The rest of it he heard in bits. Shouts. Cries. Muffled groans. He heard it and clawed at the metal floor, crawling into nothing, trying desperately to see. But it was gone. All gone. And without the sight, he couldn’t control his flight. In seconds, Dokul had taken his gift, his curse. He was a broken prince all over again, but worse than that. He’d never again see how the sun glittered on the sea. Or a rainbow brighten dark skies. He’d never see Eroan’s blue eyes and sly, forbidden smile.

He couldn’t face this. This wasn’t a broken wing. It was worse, so much worse.

He’d thought he was powerful. He’d thought he knew who he’d become. But it was a lie. He heard Elisandra’s mocking laughter swirling around him mixed with the sounds of the ship.

The metal floor vanished under his hand.

He reached out again and patted around the edges of a hole in the deck. *Get away*. He could do that. He could get away. He could shift and maybe that would see the wounds moved... It hadn’t with his mother. He’d taken her eye as dragon and she’d lost it for good.

The hole opened before him. Big enough to fall through. Wet air wafted over his face. He might fall into something worse. But how could it be worse? If he stayed, only hell awaited him beneath Dokul. He’d been to that hell. He’d rather die than go back.

Lysander pitched forward. He fell for seconds, for a lifetime, until a great weight of water caught him. It poured in and over, bubbling up his nose and down his throat. He tumbled, kicked and clawed, grasping at nothing, anything. There was no light, no way out, no up or down. And this was how it ended, he realized. It seemed so... pointless. His lungs thumped and throbbed, screaming for air, joining the cacophony of pain, until even that faded to nothing. He wished he’d stayed a little longer in the clifftop hut with Eroan wrapped in his arms. He wished he’d told him he loved him, that he’d

never believed he was good enough for love, that Eroan should live—whatever happened, he should live—because the world would miss Eroan Ilanea. But it would not miss a broken dragon. He closed his hand around the carved dragon pendant and squeezed. It wasn't so cold anymore. And the pain was less now too. The thumping in his head faded.

Would Alumn find him in this dark place?

Eroan

EROAN SEARCHED LONG after the torch had extinguished, into the night. He searched until the rough gorse had cut his hands and there wasn't an inch on him that didn't ache. He searched until dawn painted the wide river mouth pink and made the metal monoliths cast their long shadows back up the river.

Lysander's dragons peppered the skies here. They'd seen him and ignored him, thankfully. He didn't have the energy to fight one off, certainly not all of them. They seemed agitated, which was part of the reason he'd found himself so far from Ashford, walking the marshland abutting the estuary's edge. Perhaps those dragons knew something he did not.

A black smudge marked the mud where the tide had pulled back from the shore. Debris, probably. The coast was littered with all manner of weird and twisted things from the old-world, mostly bits of metal off the monuments reaching from the river. He was almost past it when a couple of gulls flew in and started picking at it, prompting the debris to *move*.

Eroan stopped, lifted his hand, and squinted into the low morning light.

An arm lifted, peeling the rest of its bulk out of the mud.

The figure got to its feet, but he staggered and fell again. Mud caked what appeared to be a male outline. He was on his feet again, clearly disorientated as he staggered about. He had something in his arms. Perhaps a length of rope? The figure stilled, shielded his eyes, saw Eroan, and ran.

Eroan bolted along the bank, matching the male's retreat easier on dry ground. The male fell again and again, slowing until Eroan figured he could wade out and cut him off. He'd made it halfway when he realized the item the mud-caked male held was a length of leather, its end attached to a collar around his throat.

Nye.

Eroan fought through the hungry mud, gaining on Nye's every stride. The race had been lost from the beginning.

Eroan grabbed him from behind.

Nye swung around, launching a fist.

Eroan ducked and punched into the male's middle, ripping the breath out of him. Nye slumped forward, hugging onto Eroan. He smelled of metal and mud and blood. Eroan flung him down into the

mire and watched him scrabble on his back, gasping for air. His wide, white eyes found Eroan. He rolled onto his front and began to crawl toward the riverbank.

“Don’t... don’t... It wasn’t supposed to happen,” Nye muttered. “She was all right...”
She?

Of course. Lysander hadn’t smelled dragon at the satellite station because a dragon hadn’t taken Seraph.

Eroan freed one of the dragonblades and followed Nye’s crawling retreat. “You took her.”

He crawled on, fingers digging into the mud.

“You took Seraph.” Eroan placed a boot on his back and leaned in, trapping Nye in the mud. Bubbles popped either side of his body, the mud greedily taking him into its embrace. Eroan wasn’t prone to hate, but the hate he felt for Nye was a visceral thing that had him wanting to drive the sword through Nye’s spine and end it now. Eroan wanted to scream at him, to demand to know why he’d done all the terrible things he’d done.

Eroan pressed the dragonblade’s tip against Nye’s neck, his boot still firmly applied to his back. “Where is she?”

Nye craned his neck, trying to keep his mouth out of the mud. Tremors had water dripping from his matted hair. When he turned his head, his jaw glowed an angry purple. Cuts marred his face. He’d fought. Or someone had fought him. Likely Seraph.

Eroan scooped up the leash with his free hand, wrapped it around his fist, and pulled. “Where. Is. Seraph.”

“The ship,” Nye croaked. “Dokul.”

Keeping Nye pinned, Eroan glanced behind him, out into the estuary where the dragons circled. The biggest of all the metal structures loomed above all the rest. Seraph was inside.

“You left her with Dokul?” Disgust gave his words a jagged edge.

“We tried—I tried to help her—”

“You took her!” Eroan heaved the leash, pushing down on Nye’s back while lifting his head. He leaned over Nye, dragging the blade down the edge of his neck. “She’s still there?”

Nye clawed at the collar, mouth agape, desperately seeking air.

He couldn’t answer. A twitch and Eroan would spill his blood in the mud. There would be no ribbon on the tree for Nye. Eroan would burn that ribbon instead. But he couldn’t kill him. Not yet.

Eroan tore himself free of Nye and staggered back a few steps in the mud. “Lysander?” The voice that came out of him was rough and dark and brittle, but not the kind that would break, the kind that would shatter, unleashing all the rage inside.

“Lysander...” Nye pushed up. His arms shook as he held his weight off the mud. “He’s gone.”

“Gone?”

“Dokul... Dokul took...” Nye dropped his gaze.

Eroan lunged, grabbed Nye by the neck and heaved him to his feet. Eye-to-eye, he wondered if Nye had any honor left in him. “You had better find your voice now or I’ll rip the words from your throat.” He threw him down, splashing mud.

Sobs tumbled from Nye’s lips. He tried again to lift himself, pulling his body up, but the mud kept sucking him back down. “I can’t... I don’t... This—”

“Nye! Fucking tell me!”

“It was all he deserved!” Nye’s shout barreled across the river.

The finality of Nye’s words splintered Eroan’s heart. He was breaking inside, piece by piece but on the outside, he wrapped himself in ice. “Is he dead?”

“Yes. No.” Eroan lunged again but Nye whimpered back. “I don’t know!”

“You escaped. Where was Lysander when you escaped?” Speaking felt slow; the words were too heavy. He didn’t want to be here, he wanted to be on the ship, but he needed to know everything Nye knew and that meant questions.

“It’s a maze in there. We were inside a room. There are holes everywhere. He almost killed me pulling me into a hole with him.” Nye looked up and winced. “Dokul blinded him.”

Eroan’s thoughts stalled. “What?”

“He blinded him, took his eyes...”

The mud, Nye, the sea, the air, it blurred at the edges. Eroan’s breath stuttered, his heart too. Oh by Alumn, hadn’t Lysander suffered enough?! “No.”

“I saw it!” Nye shrieked, misinterpreting Eroan as thinking he’d lied. “I was there. He screamed... Alumn, it was horror-filled.”

Eroan almost fell, but if that happened, he wouldn’t stand again, and he was not done. “Lysander was alive when you escaped?”

A haunted look paled him. “Dokul is disgusting. He was going to... He wanted Seraph, but... I said no. He hit me, he tried to... Then Lysander was on him and it happened so fast. I got Seraph free. We made it a little ways while Dokul was... busy with *that dragon*. I don’t know—”

Busy with that dragon. Oh, Alumn, no. Eroan had promised Lysander Dokul would never touch him again. He’d known something was wrong. He’d felt the wrongness in the world and now he was too late.

Eroan had lunged so quickly he left his own thoughts behind. He’d locked a hand around Nye’s throat and plunged the blade through Nye’s gut, and now his thoughts had caught up, everything about this felt absolutely right. Shock blanched Nye’s face. He clutched at Eroan’s arm in a feeble attempt to push him off.

“*That dragon* is called Lysander and he’s worth a thousand of you.” Eroan twisted the blade. Nye would have screamed had Eroan’s hand not been around his throat. The wound in his gut would gape now, and it would bleed and fester and eventually kill. Pulling the sword free, Eroan dropped Nye to his knees. He would die slowly. It was all he deserved.

Nye clutched at his middle. Blood welled between his fingers and bubbled from his lips.

Eroan stepped back once, twice. Blood dripped from the edge of his blade into the mud, mixing with river water. Nye would die here. Maybe the tide would come in and drown him or maybe the wound would see to it. Either way, he’d die slowly, in agony. It was done.

Nye gaped at him. He fell forward onto a hand and sobbed some more, and then reached, as though he could call Eroan back. “I did it for love.”

Eroan turned his back, sheathed the sword, and headed for the water’s edge.

“I did it for love!” Nye shrieked, voice cracking.

He said it over and over, until Eroan dove into the water and lost the sounds beneath the slosh of river waves.



THE METAL BEHEMOTH GROANED and shuddered and *breathed* as Eroan navigated its dark, skeletal passageways. The odors of rust and sea overwhelmed any scent of dragon, but after investigating deeper into the dark, he picked up the sounds of voices. The ship’s old innards scattered sound,

tricking Eroan into dead-ends and flooded pools, but eventually, he found the main chamber below deck and crouched beside a hole in the floor.

“He’ll return...” Dokul’s deep voice boomed like a drum. His boots thumped on the metal floor, lending the ship a rapid heartbeat. “He’ll return. They always do. Like you... *You* came back. Couldn’t stay away.” He walked and talked, his sentences short and sharp, unlike the relaxed and confident male Eroan had first met in the queen’s chamber.

From Eroan’s position, he could see only moving shadows. He’d need to lower himself through the hole in the deck to get a better view, but that risked being seen. Better to wait and to listen.

“He’s likely dead.” Akiem sounded as rigid and cold as the vessel surrounding them.

Then it was Akiem who had *returned* and clearly not left again. Had he stayed because he wanted to, or for some other reason? Eroan had been careful not to tell the dragon anything of use, but hearing him here, back under Dokul’s wing, niggled that part of him that wondered if Akiem had lied about everything.

“If he didn’t die escaping, in his weakened state, his own dragons would have finished him off.”

Eroan’s thoughts raced. Akiem’s voice had quivered, but under the sounds of Dokul’s thumping boots, the Bronze chief likely hadn’t heard the brief lapse. He cared. He cared that Lysander was missing.

“He’s not dead. Not that one.” Dokul growled. “He survives. He always survives.”

“That he does well,” Akiem agreed.

Eroan tried to interpret the tone, but without seeing Akiem, there was no way of knowing if he was humoring the bronze or agreeing with him. But he was here, and didn’t sound wounded or aggrieved, suggesting he was here willingly. If he could separate Akiem from Dokul, corner him and get answers without the bronze knowing, he’d know what steps to take next.

“The elf will still come,” Dokul grumbled. “My pet will see to that.”

Nye had been freed as a lure, a hook to reel Eroan in. He hadn’t escaped, as he’d said. Eroan wasn’t surprised.

“Perhaps,” Akiem began, “I should scour the shore for Lysander—”

“No. You’re staying. I have you. I have the little one. The pretty elf will come and so will Lysander.”

“Your plan is to just... *wait*?”

The wet smack of a fist on flesh reached Eroan. He winced in sympathy, almost feeling the blow himself. Akiem shouldn’t have pushed the brute.

A whimper pricked Eroan’s ears. He leaned closer to the hole, listening hard, trying to pick apart the sounds of a beating. Seraph. Thank Alumn. She was alive.

Dokul’s relentless attack stopped and Seraph’s whimpering increased.

“The elf is too brittle a thing for entertainment,” Akiem said, his words now riddled with disdain. “We need her as bait. Fuck her and you lose the advantage.”

“Clearly you haven’t met this one. She’s not as weak as she appears.”

Chains rattled. Seraph’s muffled cries plucked on Eroan’s nerves, trying to spur him into action.

“Are you, little elf?” the bronze purred.

She breathed too fast. If the bastard *touched* her. Eroan leveled his breaths and willed his heart to slow. He couldn’t fight Dokul and Akiem without a plan. But to have a plan, he needed to see.

Bundling his hair over one shoulder, he balanced over the hole in the deck, arms braced either side, and leaned down, inch by inch revealing more and more of the chamber beneath. Rusted floors. Seraph’s dangling legs. Dokul’s solid stance and naked back.

Eroan's hair slipped forward. He jerked his eyes up and met Akiem's dark-eyed surprised expression.

Dokul's back was to Eroan. One word from Akiem, one wrong glance, and Dokul would know.

Eroan held his gaze. This was the black prince's moment. His chance to do something right. If he gave Eroan up, they'd all die here. Perhaps not at first, but their deaths would come. Akiem must have known that. The moment stretched, seconds dragging on too long.

Dokul began to turn his head.

Akiem cleared his throat and stepped up to the bronze, as lean as a blade to Dokul's solid physicality. "I was thinking that perhaps you and I might find some time... alone." Akiem's trembling fingers landed on Dokul's shoulder. The words sounded smooth, laced with seduction, but his fingers trembled.

Dokul dropped Seraph. She crumpled on her knees beside him, her head down, hair hiding her face. Tremors shook her.

Akiem's hand slid over Dokul's smooth shoulder. Dokul stilled, his attention locked on Akiem. The black prince's eyes had gone cold, emotionless, but the smile pulling at his lips was a masterful lie. Blood had smeared his chin and bruises bloomed where Dokul had struck him. Neither deterred him from his target. "You like to fuck amethyst ass."

Dokul's hand wrapped around Akiem's throat, forcing the prince's chin up. "Found yourself a liking for cock, have you, princeling? I'd claim credit for that if I didn't already know your brood. You've always liked some meat in your diet, eh prince? Just hid it better than Lysander."

Akiem's steely glare skipped over Dokul's shoulder to Eroan. This was his sacrifice. The black prince who had wept on his knees, the wreck of a dragon who had come to Eroan to die, was still inside him. He didn't want this, but he'd do it... to save an elf; perhaps to save them all.

Dokul tensed. Akiem's eyes widened a warning. Eroan levered himself back through the hole and crouched on his heels. The hard slap and crack followed by the dead weight of someone falling and Dokul's fevered breathing.

Eroan closed his eyes. He didn't owe Akiem anything. The bastard was as dragon as they came. But as the scrabbling grew frantic, his stomach rolled. He knew what the bronze would do next. Seraph would see, if she hadn't seen such things already.

Damned dragons.

Turning around, he gripped the hole's sharp edges and dropped through, landing lightly on his feet. Akiem lay sprawled on his back, semi-conscious, while Dokul towered over him, his hand making quick work of his pant ties to free himself.

Seraph jerked her head up. Her red-rimmed eyes streamed. Purple blotches smothered her jaw and neck. Dokul had touched her. Hurt her. He didn't know what else but prayed to Alumn it had gone no further than that.

He pressed a finger to his lips and reached behind him, releasing the twin blades.

Dokul suddenly turned, moving fast for a creature so big. He saw Eroan and smiled.

Eroan dashed forward.

Dokul braced his stance, anchoring his weight to the floor. He threw an arm up, blocking Eroan's downward strike, and made a grab for the second blade. He missed.

Eroan plunged the blade forward, sinking its edge in Dokul's side. The dragon roared and whirled, the full weight of his rage like a tidal wave, smacking Eroan aside.

Eroan rolled, sprang to his feet and lunged again. The blade's edge cut through Dokul's raised arm. The dragon staggered and Eroan stole the advantage, ducking under Dokul's swing to plunge the

second blade into his gut. The sword juddered, scraping against bone, sinking in so deep Eroan was sure it would see the dragon dead.

So fast. It had all happened in a blur, between seconds.

A moment passed. Dokul looked down at the blade in his bloodied gut. Torchlight licked off his bald scalp. He would go down to his knees and *die* here, and by Alumn, it would finally be over.

Dokul grasped the sword's edge, lifted his head, and grinned. Eroan hadn't counted on that and Dokul knew it. The bronze yanked, pulling Eroan forward, off-balance, and then his free hand had hold of Eroan's arm, squeezing, twisting, threatening to break bone through sheer force alone.

Eroan slammed the first blade in, wedging it into Dokul's side. The dragon barely blinked. And now they were close. So close, his wet breath blasted Eroan's face and the stench of him crawled down Eroan's throat.

"I expected more from you, the infamous Eroan Ilanea. I've lived countless centuries and you think a few cuts from dragon's teeth blades can bring me down?"

Both blades were now lodged in the dragon's muscle and sinew. If Eroan had any chance of escaping, he had to give them up.

He let go and grabbed for Dokul's neck. Dokul shoved him out at arm's length, his grip on Eroan's arm like a vise, and laughed. With his free hand, he pulled the blade in his side free and turned its point on Eroan's chest, freezing Eroan still.

"You're too late, you know." Dokul chuckled.

Eroan scrabbled at the man's arm, sinking his nails in, trying to writhe free. Seraph's sobs filled the quiet around Dokul's laughter. There would be a way out of this, there had to be. The blade dragged down his chest, slicing leather and flesh. Eroan clenched his jaw and fixed the dragon in his glare. "I was forged in the fires of Ifreann for this, dragon. Pain fuels me."

"Pain? There are many kinds of pain, elf. For example, I took your beloved dragon's eyes."

The tip of the blade dug in above Eroan's hip, parting skin, sinking deeper. Eroan breathed around the flash of heat, weathering it, denying it purchase. Deeper, the blade pushed, fuzzing Eroan's vision.

"He won't get far, and he'll come crawling back to me, just like this one..." Dokul turned, dragging Eroan with him.

Akiem wasn't on the floor where he should have been.

A howl filled the air—a thunderous thing, it shook the metal walls and floors, barreling through the ship. Eroan had never heard such a sound, not from a man, and not from a dragon either. The howl belonged to Akiem. The black prince came out of the dark and slammed into Dokul from behind. The bronze barely moved, but as he turned, a snarl rippling his lips, Akiem kicked out, jolting Dokul back another step toward a hole in the deck—dragging Eroan with him.

Dokul's back foot disappeared inside and the hole swallowed the bronze down. Dokul's iron grip on Eroan's arm pulled him down into the dark. The ship tipped out around him. His stomach swooped, the wound in his gut tearing. His heart lodged in his throat. He was falling... falling down and down—

A hand snatched his. Warm fingers locked. Eroan jolted to a stop. Wrenching waves of pain snapped down his back. Dokul's weight clung to his ankle, *pulling*.

"Hold on!" Akiem brought his free hand in and clutched both around Eroan's, but Eroan's fingers were slipping through the dragon's grip.

Below, Dokul's snarls and growls filled the nothing space. The burden of his weight was too much. Pain thudded and throbbed, trying to smother Eroan in unconsciousness.

"Hold on, elf." Akiem heaved, trembling, trying to pull Eroan back, but it wouldn't be enough.

Dokul was too heavy, Eroan too weakened.

His vision fogged, the dark folding in.

“Get her out,” Eroan breathed. “Make sure... she’s safe.”

Akiem snarled, dragonsight bright in his eyes. “*Eroan*, you will not let go!”

Was this the first time the black prince had said his name? He couldn’t recall, but it felt like it. A small victory then, in these last moments.

Dokul’s grip vanished.

Akiem fell back, dragging Eroan with him. Cold metal had never felt so damned good. Eroan lay stunned, everything throbbing and bleeding and beating hot. He should have died. Why had Dokul let go?

“He’s shifting.” Akiem scrambled to his feet and ran for Seraph. He tore her chains free, snapping the links, sending them scattering, and hauled her to her feet. “Eroan, run!”

Magic. It sizzled the air, made his skin itch, and stole the air from his lungs. Metal screamed and groaned. The floor heaved, jolting Eroan to his feet. He stumbled toward Akiem’s shape ahead, grasping at the walls as they *moved*. Metal howled its terrible death throes and the ship tilted. The floor lifted, turning into a wall, sliding Eroan sideways. He skidded down bare metal and landed on his feet, but ahead, Akiem had fallen with Seraph. A crack danced down the passageway, severing the path to Akiem. Water roared somewhere around them and then the dragon’s roar made all that seem like nothing as it tried to shatter Eroan’s skull.

Water blasted up through the gap. Eroan ran, leaped into the spray, and landed hard on the other side, tumbling to his knees. “Go, go, go!” he urged Akiem. Corridors twisted and turned, splitting open, pulling apart, coming undone at the seams. Rivets popped like gunshots. Akiem had Seraph over his shoulder and ran hard, skidding off walls as they warped and twisted into floors.

The passage ended in a wall of metal and a bubbling pool of churning water.

A dead end. No way out.

Eroan turned to go back. Bronze scales slithered past the opening they’d just passed through, sealing them in. A huge dragon eye filled that same gap, the yellow eye dilating, pinning down his prey.

“The water. Go!” Eroan barked.

“We’ll drown,” Akiem hesitated.

Dokul’s huge dragon foot punched in, claws expanding. Metal peeled open, unleashing more waves of water. There would be nothing left of this ship and nothing left of them. The water was the only way.

Eroan dove into the hole, eyes pinched closed—the water was too full of silt to see through. A swirling current turned him around, pulling him upside down. He groped at jagged metal, running his hands around an opening big enough to push through. Kicking up, he broke the surface, gasping, and thrust out his hand to Akiem. “There’s a way out. Whatever happens, don’t let go.”

Akiem clutched Seraph close. “Hold tight,” he told her. She nodded, and Eroan’s breath hitched at the sight of the dragon folding her into his arms. He’d keep her close. He trusted that, just as Akiem took his hand and trusted him to pull them both to safety.

“Deep breaths,” Eroan said.

Akiem breathed in, his fear crackling his magic around him like a cloak of purple lightning.

The bronze screamed its fury, the sound skull-shatteringly loud.

Alumn, save us.

Eroan dove under, pulling Akiem and Seraph with him, not knowing if they’d resurface.

CHAPTER 34

Lysander

THE RIVER SPAT him out *somewhere*. He heard birds and water lapping and the wind. But no dragons. That was good. Weakened and blinded as he was, they'd attack and kill him. King or no.

He lay too long in the mud, wondering if he was in fact dead and this was some kind of torturous afterlife. His eyes throbbed, or rather, the empty sockets did. He groped around the bloody holes with trembling muddy fingers, finding nothing left to heal. The horror of it was too much to comprehend.

He shifted, but the darkness stayed. He'd hoped—he'd prayed to the Silver in his head, but the darkness had swallowed him and he couldn't escape it.

He beat his wings and took to the air, needing to move. Prey stayed still. He wasn't prey. Not yet. Blinded, yes, but his heart still beat, his wings still worked, his jaws could still crush.

Listening. Always listening. Higher, he climbed. Higher and higher where the air was cold and thin, but where the upper winds carried him along at a breathless rate.

Dokul had done this.

Vengeance spurred him on now.

He had a plan.

Sightless, he was as good as dead.

North was the only way, north to the dragon in the ice. But this time, he didn't stop for distractions, didn't slow for the sake of his flight. Alone, he flew and flew, always listening, always reaching out with his other senses, avoiding any hint of dragons nearby. This land was not known for its mountains, and as long as he could smell the sea and land, keeping himself in the middle, he knew his location.

North.

To the ice.

To the dragon who called his name.

Eroan would be looking for him.

He wanted to go back, but if he did that, Dokul would find them all. He had to do this. There was no other way. In the darkness, he'd find Alumn's light and bring it home.

He flew until the sun gave up and the air chewed at his wings, layering them in ice that cracked and fell with every wing beat. Hours felt like days, maybe they were. It hurt. Everything hurt. But *she*

called, and the closer he came, the louder her calls were.

Finally, prince, she seemed to say. Finally, you are ready.

A storm buffeted him from all sides, forcing him to land. He plowed into the ground, raking off scales, and still the storm hassled him, making him walk in circles, he was sure of it. Trapped, his senses useless, he hunkered down and waited it out. Snowdrifts piled up around him, burying him in cold.

Eroan would come for him, but Eroan couldn't fix this. Only Lysander could fix this.

Wait for me, he silently told his elf. I'm coming back. Alumn, tell him I'm coming back.

Alumn was good. She was calm. But also strong. He knew this from his dreams, from Carline's stories, and he knew she was north. He knew it in his blood and in his heart. She was his final hope.

He prayed to her for Eroan, for Seraph. Begging her to keep them safe.

When the storm cleared, it left viciously cold air behind. He smelled only ice now. But he could hear her, feel her pulling like his dragons had. She wasn't far. He took to the air and struck rock soon after. Jagged cliffs tried to block his flightpath, but the higher he went to avoid them, the less he could breathe and the more laden with ice he became.

Maybe this had been wrong.

Maybe this had been a madness.

Eroan would think so. Was he safe somewhere? Was Seraph safe?

He flew full of sorrow and regret. When the rocks blocked him, he tried another route, another way. And when his wings could no longer hold him, he walked and walked and walked. Kept moving. Only prey stayed still.

What is this thing between us? It is everything.

Ice crunched under him, and deeper in the earth, rocks groaned.

He stopped, cocking his head to listen. Ice cracked like lightning underfoot, the splitting sound ricocheting in the snowbound quiet. Snow tapped its light fingers on his scales. This place was quiet. It was peaceful. And damned cold.

He heard it then. A gentle *thud-thud* beneath him. Another's heart.

This felt right.

But how to reach her.

He stoked the fire, stretched his battered and torn wings, lifted himself off the ice, and unleashed the flame below. Water bubbled. Steam hissed, sweating his scales. Ice snapped and screamed. But when it was over, little had changed. The ice rocked and swayed underfoot but still held him up.

More. He needed to unleash the flames and burn the world.

He scorched the frozen basin again and again, until his wings burned and his fire spluttered. But he couldn't rest. More. She had to be here. He stoked years of rage and abuse, used it as fuel, and unleashed his fury in the shape of flame, letting it feast on all the wrongs he'd endured.

Tell me you're here.

Tell me you're real and I haven't lost my mind.

Tell me there is hope.

He waited, listening, always listening.

Yes, came a reply.

He boiled the lake, and when that didn't work, he dove in and under the surface, clawing at the ice, looking for the light. She had to be here, because if she wasn't, if he were mad, then he'd left for nothing and he feared it was already over.

Eroan

THE MUD TRIED to pull him down with every step. He fell to a knee. Tiredness tried to pull him all the way down, but the dragon's howls behind drove him back onto his feet, forcing him to push on. Ahead, Akiem waded through the mud too, Seraph draped in his arms. He had refused to yield Seraph to Eroan, with a look in his eyes that warned Eroan not to push. Akiem had sniffed at the air and then let Eroan see the concern on his face. And so he hadn't pushed, mostly because the deep cut low in his belly beat hotly, numbing his hip and thigh. He knew mortal wounds. He'd delivered enough of them.

They made it to the bank as the enormous bronze broke from the shredded remains of the old ship and flung his wings open, spanning almost the entire river's width. He roared, spewing his fury in flame.

"Keep moving," Akiem said, drawing Eroan's wavering gaze.

The black prince had survived the ordeal relatively unscathed, although his wounds could have been concealed behind the mud, like Eroan's were.

Eroan nodded, afraid his voice would give away his weakened state. They made it to the long grass, but their tracks in the mud left an obvious trail.

"That way," Eroan nodded. Dokul would assume they'd head south, to Ashford. "We stay in the wetlands and make our way eastward." It might take days to return to Ashford but if they stayed concealed, Dokul might lose them, making the longer trek worth the risk.

Sudden dragon screams added to the pounding in Eroan's head and he almost went down again.

"*Down!*" Akiem barked.

Eroan dropped and dug his fingers into the earth. The bronze sailed low overhead and freed an ear-piercing screech, declaring his prey found.

"Quickly," Akiem urged. He lowered Seraph to her feet. "You must walk."

She nodded but hadn't spoken a word. Her brittle glare found Eroan. She watched him climb onto unsteady legs. He tried to keep his head up for her, tried to smile away the pain, but wasn't sure if he succeeded. Akiem loomed in front of him suddenly. The prince caught Eroan's arm and slung it over his shoulders, supporting him.

They walked on, cutting low through the grass and sticking to the coast, moving away from

Ashford, for now. Night seemed to blanket the land too soon, and without a fire, they huddled together, shivering as one. Still, Dokul's calls and fire lit up the night. This was a game, Eroan realized. Dokul toyed with them because he could. There were no dragon carcasses here to conceal their scent.

His teeth chattered. Pain ached through his jaws, into his skull.

"Eroan..."

The dragon prince peering down at him was the wrong prince. Eroan's vision blurred, turning Akiem into Lysander. He much preferred Lysander's half-smile and dazzling eyes.

"You're feverish."

A cool hand touched his cheek. Eroan closed his eyes and breathed in the scent of dragon, so like Lysander's. Lysander who Dokul had blinded. Lysander who had vanished. Not dead. He couldn't be. And so Eroan must continue, as Lysander would.

"I'm all right." He pushed the hand away and forced his shivering body to its feet. Morning light soaked over the land, bringing with it a blanket of heavy rain. They'd walked for hours, on and on and on. Eroan blinked at the horizon, expecting to see a forest, but saw only sand and grass. He had no idea where they were.

"We must turn south," Seraph said. "His wound still bleeds." Those words were meant for Akiem and not Eroan, but he heard all the same.

Eroan stumbled on. He looked down at his side. Red painted his hip and leg. It couldn't be blood, could it? He rocked, the ground shifting, dropping him on his ass. Maybe he'd just sit here a while.

A sudden blast of wind tore off the land, whipping Eroan's hair in front of his face, briefly blinding him. Then he heard the deep breaths belonging to dragon and cracked an eye open to see the hideous creature land atop the mound. The bronze lifted its head and roared its victory at finding them. His golden eyes sparkled. Teeth flashed.

Eroan had no more fight to give. His eyes fluttered closed, too heavy to keep open. Strange that now, in these moments, he heard his parents' voices when he'd so long thought them forgotten. All those years ago they had told him to run—to run and run, and he'd never stopped. He had run into the storm, leaving behind the only life he'd known, until finding a new one when an old, scarred elf had found him. Curan.

Curan was dead now too.

They all died, in the end.

Akiem's steely hands grabbed Eroan's arms and shoved. "Go! I'll hold him off. Run, damn you, Eroan, *run!*"

Seraph's little hand found Eroan's and pulled. Running in that moment might have been the hardest thing he'd ever done. The wetlands and dunes undulated, tripping them both, or maybe just him and he pulled Seraph to the ground with him. They fell a fifth time and Eroan's body refused to cooperate again. He tried. But the throbbing wouldn't stop. He was so damn tired.

"Please..." Seraph's tear-streaked face filled his vision. He remembered when she was small, dancing with pointed sticks. She'd ambushed him once, tried to take his feet out. He laughed at her. She told him later it was his mocking laughter that had driven her to fight. And she'd never stopped fighting. "Please, Eroan. You have to get up." She pulled and tugged at his arm.

Dragons snarled and roared close behind him, their battle sounding like the earth itself was coming apart. In a blur, he saw the black prince stand against the bronze. Dokul was twice his size. Twice as powerful. But Akiem was faster. His tail lashed, zipping through Dokul's scales, and as the bronze snapped at that lethal whip, Akiem raked his claws along the bronze's neck. Blood and fire

rained.

“Please...” Seraph clutched his face. “Eroan, please move.” She sobbed now and it broke his heart to see those tears.

When he touched the wound in his side, his trembling hand came glistening red. The wound wasn’t healing. He was bleeding to death. That’s why he was cold, that’s why he just wanted to lie in the grass and sleep. He knew all the signs. He’d spent his whole life chasing death and now it was here, right beside him.

His head lolled, eyes rolling.

“Damn you Eroan Ilanea! You do not die here!” Her small hand slapped his cheek, lighting his face on fire. She grabbed him by the shoulders and heaved. “Move!”

He stumbled into motion and it seemed like, for a few moments, they’d be all right. Seraph steered him south and Ashford would be waiting for them. It was a long way, but that didn’t matter to his addled mind. One step. Another. He could do it.

The huge bronze dragon blocked his way. Its scales rattled. It lifted its head and there the fire raged in its firepit, bubbling up its throat. Then this was the end. Killed by a dragon, a true Order death. He’d been right, assassins didn’t live long enough to retire. He’d been a fool to think so, a fool to hope there might be more for him, that he could have had a life with his dragon prince.

A storm of black slammed into Dokul, claws extended, wings black, striking for the crown. Only the bronze was too big, too formidable. He flung Akiem off him and into the mud. Akiem’s huge wings flapped, but the mud had a hold of him, trying to suck him down, and Dokul saw it too.

“Oh no,” Seraph whispered.

Dokul’s glare fixed on the struggling prince.

Seraph started pulling Eroan away. Carefully. Slowly.

Akiem screamed his fury and thrashed. He got his wings free, but the mud still clutched his hind legs. Dokul rushed in and struck, his jaws clamping around Akiem’s neck in a vicious bite. The bronze’s vast weight pushed Akiem back into the mud. Deeper and deeper. Akiem clawed and thrashed, sinking faster.

Eroan knew he should run. Akiem was dying here, to save them, and if he didn’t run, it’d all be for nothing, but he couldn’t look away. Dokul tore great chunks of muscle and scale free, opening up Akiem’s veins, spilling blood into the river so it swirled around them, turning the tidal waters red. Dokul crushed Akiem’s crown in his jaws, but not to kill, to smother. He shoved Akiem down, burying his head below the surface. Fire boiled the water, turning it to steam. Akiem’s tail lashed wildly, one semi-free wing flapped, and then that wing slowed, and the tail fell limp. The boiling water fell still.

Akiem didn’t move again.

Eroan tried to run then, stumbling through the grass and over the hill, disappearing inside a copse of trees, hidden in shadow. He ran as Dokul roared, ran until the rain hammered out all sounds of dragon, ran until the grass turned to ferns and the land climbed toward the moors.

“I can’t...” When he went down this time, there would be no getting up.

Rain patted his face and that was good, because Seraph wouldn’t see his tears.

Seraph tore at his jacket, ripping it open, and he let it happen, already knowing what she’d find inside. The wound wasn’t large, but it was deep, and fatal. It didn’t clot because the blade had found some vital part of him and cut it open. It was a miracle he’d survived this long.

Cool hands smothered the wound, trying to stem the flow. “I can stop this. I just...” Her head whipped from side to side, searching for something, but they were alone. There was no way to save

him.

Eroan smiled. It didn't hurt so much now. He lifted a hand and cupped her wet cheek, smearing blood there. "There is nothing to be done. You're safe. That's all that matters. Leave. Go to Ashford. Dokul can't get inside. The Order will kill him."

"I'm not leaving." She sobbed. It wasn't the rain wetting her face either.

He used his thumb to brush her tears away. "Don't let the hate for what happened here consume you."

"Eroan, please..." Her eyes shone. "Just tell me how to stop the blood." Her mouth pulled down in a grimace.

"Don't ever lose your smile." He tried to thumb her smile back into place.

"Stop it! Just stop it!" She thumped at his chest. "You can't leave me." Another thump. "It's not fair. You're not supposed to..." She bit her lip, trying to stop it from quivering and then fell over him, her little arms and body smothering him. He smelled home about her, the pine and freshly cut wood of his favorite places. If he closed his eyes, he could imagine he was among that forest again, running through the canopy, freedom in his lungs and beating through his heart.

"Lysander will need you," he whispered, stroking her hair. His voice had cracked when he'd said Lysander's name.

"Don't. I can't—" She shoved off him and scrambled back. "Assassins never give up! You're giving up! You can't." She sniffed. "Never give up, *until it is done.*"

But death doesn't let you finish things. He'd sent dozens to their deaths in the Dragon Queen's tower. Life hadn't let them finish either. Assassins didn't get to retire.

"Get up." She pulled on his arm. "Get up. Ashford isn't far. They'll see us. They'll come. Just get up!" She tugged and pulled on his arm.

He couldn't. It was over.

Seraph screamed, sending her cry far, and when that resulted in nothing, she sobbed into her hands.

Sniffing, she bared her teeth. "Do you think Lysander would just lay there?!" She yelled. "Do you think he'd just give up? He never gives up. Ever. He's out there now and you know he's fighting to come back, so you had damn well better fight to be here for when he returns. Fight! It's what you do best." She scooped an arm under his shoulders and heaved him upright.

"Seraph..."

"Shut up." Now she took his arm, looped it around her shoulders and heaved. "Alumn, you're heavier than you look."

Impossibly, he was on his feet and moving. A few steps, a pause, a few more. They staggered and stumbled, always moving up and forward. A step seemed to take an hour, a yard a day. He didn't know anymore. His consciousness was a dreaming thing, difficult to grasp a hold of and pin down.

"Ho!" a female called.

Seraph's body shuddered at the sound. "The Order! They see us! We're safe, Eroan. They're coming..."

Eroan smelled metal and sweat and dragon. Wrongness.

Fear shoved steel rods through him. He tore Seraph from him and shoved. She stumbled to the side. Elves were rushing in. Ashford's sentinels. Venali among them.

Seraph whirled, the shock on her face turning to fear.

Dokul's broad arm folded around him. The dragon wrapped him close, his body hot and harsh, swallowing Eroan's trembling in his embrace. One of the lost dragonblades kissed Eroan's throat.

The sight of Vinali and the others blurred beneath rain and tears. So close... They'd almost made it. Dokul had known. He'd stalked them for days now, toyed with them, teased them to within a few strides of Ashford. The bronze had allowed him to get this far. In truth, he was already dead.

"Let's see how much your kind truly love Eroan Ilanea," Dokul said. The words wet Eroan's cheek.

Rain fell hard, streaming down Eroan's face and blurring his view of the Ashford elves as they formed a protective line. Eroan might have told them to shoot because he was dead anyway, but the blade at his throat trapped his voice.

Sentinel Venali with his distinctive red hair stepped from the line. "We have ballista trained on you, dragon. Release Eroan and we'll allow you to walk away."

Don't, Eroan thought. Don't bargain with him. I'm dead whatever happens.

Dokul chuckled. "Your arrows cannot harm me. Where's your leader? Where's that skinny bastard Alador?"

Don't. He wants you exposed.

Eroan's watery gaze flicked to Seraph standing where he'd shoved her. The maddened look in her eyes was a culmination of everything she'd been through. She'd try to attack Dokul and get herself killed.

Don't. He tried to convey it in his glare to them all. All they had to do was walk away. Eroan would die but they'd all be safe. That fate had always awaited him.

"Dokul," Alador's voice drew Eroan's attention back to the elves. The elder assassin stood tall, a pillar of strength and pride. "You are surrounded and outnumbered."

"You want this one." Dokul clutched Eroan tighter, making the gut wound renew its throbbing. "This one is special. Fuck knows why. I wonder if he started it all. Elisandra's death, Lysander's rise and fall. It all began when the queen caught him instead of killing him. How many of your elves have died since then?"

"How many of your dragons have died since you had Eroan in chains?" Alador replied. His eyes narrowed. "Look around you, dragon. You're alone. The pyres behind me still burn with your dead kin. You've lost this battle and you're losing this war. Release Eroan and walk away."

Dokul stiffened, his body turning to rock around Eroan. "Where's Lysander?"

"Not here."

The bronze scoffed. "I blinded him. Where else would he go but back to the elves?"

The line of sentinels stirred, losing patience.

Alador lifted his chin. "What do you want, Dokul?"

"For you to watch as I gut him."

Dokul's arm opened and without the support, Eroan dropped to his knees. The blade was gone from his neck, but it hadn't gone far. He saw it in the eyes of his people, saw the reflection in Seraph's gaze. Dokul had raised the blade behind him.

The elves drew their arrows. Bows creaked, strings taut. They may miss, or they may find their target and Dokul would laugh. And still he'd open Eroan's insides.

Eroan would die, Dokul would shift, and nothing would change. He'd been so close to making things different, making them better, but in the end, the war would go on, elves and humans would die, and the dragons would reign.

He lifted his face to the rain. *Alumn, all of this—the pain, the blood, the sacrifice—for nothing?*

In his delirium, he heard a smooth voice reply, *Not for nothing, stubborn elf. For this...*

A dragon's call sailed across the land. It didn't sound like the others. The shriek was sharp and

cold and piercing, like a knife to the heart.

“Ready the ballistae!” the elves responded.

Eroan blinked. Dark clouds churned overhead. A glimmer of silver flashed through the rolling rainstorm. It had been so quick, he must have imagined it.

The cry sounded again. “Alumn?” Seraph whispered.

Eroan lowered his gaze to her and to where she watched Dokul step back, and back again. Turning, Eroan saw how Dokul watched the skies, his face a myriad of horror. His grip opened and the dragonblade fell.

Seraph sprang.

“Don’t!”

She scooped up the blade and brought it around, blocking Dokul’s retreat. “That cut on your neck was a promise, *dragon*,” she said. “For Xena, for Lysander, for everyone you’ve hurt and killed! I’m an Assassin of the Order, and I will never rest, *until it is done!*”

Dokul’s outline erupted, magic spewing outward, snapping and lashing everything in its path.

Eroan made an ill-timed grab for Seraph, to pull her back and away from the onslaught, but his weak fingers never made it. He saw it happening, saw the beast’s body start to unravel.

Dokul wasn’t watching Seraph or him, he looked up, at the skies *behind* Eroan, seeing something that had the Bronze chief too terrified to care about Seraph.

She seized the moment. As quick as a whip, she flung the sword, setting it free. It streaked through the air and would have struck the dragon in the heart had he still been man. But the shift swallowed the chief’s body and the sword, exploding his mass outward. The weight of Dokul’s true form smothered Eroan in dull bronze scales.

Bronze crushed against him. He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t move, and all he could see was how, in the end, all his promises to protect Lysander had come to nothing.

Silver flashed, pouring down from the skies, slamming into Dokul, smashing him backward, raking his still-shifting body across the ground. A storm of dragonscale and dirt blasted high.

Air rushed into Eroan’s lungs. He coughed up dust and wheezed while searching the clouds of grit for Seraph. She had to be here, she had to be safe. He scanned ahead but couldn’t see her.

A huge Silver dragon had set upon Dokul. The beast was as smooth and sharp as any of Eroan’s most lethal blades. Instinct told him she was female—and she was *beautiful*. She ripped into Dokul, snapping and tearing with long, needle-thin teeth. Dokul wasn’t fighting back. He’d hunkered down in the dirt, clamping his wings in, making himself small. He snapped at her, but she was too fast, a jagged flicker of lightning striking again and again.

And then Eroan saw the reason for Dokul’s hesitance. The sword Seraph had thrown had lodged in Dokul’s throat, nicking the firepit, making liquid flame drip free. He couldn’t spew flame at the attacking Silver. And her strength clearly matched his.

Wherever the dragon had come from, whoever she was, she was killing the Bronze chief.

A shaft of sunlight broke through the cloud cover above. Emerald scales glinted, lifting Eroan’s wavering gaze. An emerald dragon with a broken crown chased that shard of light toward the ground.

“Lysander...” the name fell from his lips as hope leaped in his chest.

The Silver dragon looked up and pulled back, *yielding* her prize.

Hands grabbed at Eroan. His name spoken close to his ear. No, no, he needed to see this. Lysander... Lysander had come! He shook them off and fell to his hands and knees. Numbness thudded through his head, trying to pull his whole body under, but he had to look up, to *see*—even if it was the last thing he did.

Where the emerald's beautiful eyes had shone before, horrible wounds gaped. Then it was true, Dokul had mutilated him, but he was here, he was alive. He'd survived. The dragon prince who never quit. The prince who had cut *Eroan's* ropes in the tower so long ago, setting him free in all ways.

He wasn't pulling up.

Why wasn't he pulling up?

The dive was too fast. Too steep.

A shout caught in Eroan's throat.

He'd surely slam into the ground.

Alumn... save him.

The Silver dragon let loose a world-shattering shriek and at the last moment, Lysander threw open his wings and extended his claws. Emerald slammed into bronze. Dokul's back buckled and the big metal roared in pain, then spun. But Lysander clung on, claws sinking in, clamping his jaws around the back of Dokul's skull, trapping him beneath him.

Seraph screamed, "Fire!"

She was close. Safe.

Eroan's heart stuttered. The numbness robbed him of his hearing, making his heart thump too loudly, drowning out everything else.

Ballistae lances flew in, striking the bronze, only the *bronze*, and Eroan's pride swelled, choking him. His people had finally gotten it right.

The bronze was pinned, crushed beneath Lysander, bleeding from his firepit, lances driving into his neck, chest, and snout. They'd won. Dokul was dying, and Lysander would finally have his freedom.

Eroan fell and when he blinked, fighting off the fog, he saw Dokul's last moments and Seraph's victory. Yes, this was how it should be. Lysander and Seraph would go on. They'd have each other. They'd survive.

His lashes fluttered closed. He didn't hear the battle, didn't feel the pain, but he saw the dragon's silvery light and felt her warmth wrap around him. It felt safe. It felt like coming home.

CHAPTER 36

Lysander

THE KILL. He knew nothing else, just the urge to crush Dokul's skull and rip him open, but the flight north and back had cost him much. His jaws shuddered, muscles screaming their agony. Everything hurt. He'd had enough strength left to dive and he'd been sure to make that dive deal the killing blow. Alumn's cry at the last second had only saved him from what would have been a crippling impact. An impact that *had* crippled Dokul. The chief's back had shattered. And now Lysander had him beneath him. The bronze was weak, he could smell death. He bled and panted and grunted his weakness and Lysander savored every wrought breath, every shudder. *Die!* He levered his jaws closed. Dokul's skull cracked, bone snapping. The dragon jolted, twitching, and then with a final, brittle crush, the dragon's skull gave up and Lysander's teeth sank in, finally killing the monster that had haunted his dreams for too long.

Alumn roared for the years she'd been trapped, for the fight she'd never finished, and she roared for him, because Lysander had nothing left in him.

He stumbled off the carcass, blind and disorientated, until that sweet, wonderful scent of Eroan hooked into him, luring him forward. Then he smelled the blood. So much blood. And heard Seraph's sobs. He didn't need his sight to know her.

His heart sank.

Lysander bowed his head, brushing his chin close to the ground, bringing his head in slowly. He breathed in great lungfuls of elven scent. They were everywhere, but there was only one he wanted to be close to.

A tiny hand touched his nose. Seraph. Her tears smelled like clean sea air. She guided him forward and there, on the ground, his chin brushed his elf. He smelled death. The shock choked him. It could not be. Not his Eroan. Never him. He nudged at the body, but it didn't rouse. But he smelled warm and soft.

Oh gods, he couldn't take it.

A whine started near his heart and found its way through his chest.

Not Eroan.

Never him.

What is this thing between us? *Everything.*

Eroan was everything.

Alumn, he'd returned too late.

He nudged the body, prompting him to wake again. If only he could see, he just wanted to see Eroan... to see him smile and say everything would be all right, because Eroan would always be with him. That had been the promise. Eroan would never give up. Not on the world, not on himself, and not on Lysander. Death had taken him too soon.

His whine grew louder. It came from that place next to his heart, where the magic throbbed. The real heart of him. It hurt, by nights, it hurt so bad he couldn't breathe around it.

"I'm sorry... I'm so sorry," Seraph's little voice tumbled. "I tried, Lysander. I tried to keep him safe for you. I knew you'd come back. You always come back. And he knew it too, but it was... too much. I couldn't stop the blood..."

He huffed, filling his lungs with the smell of home, of his elf. Feeling around, he curled his claws around the body and tucked Eroan against his chest. His elf had slept against him in the meadow. He thought of that quiet, gentle time now. He'd keep Eroan safe from the world that hadn't deserved him, safe beneath his wing where nobody could hurt him again.

CHAPTER 37

Eroan

ALUMN TOLD him it wasn't done and he told her he'd done enough. But that wasn't the end of it. His skin tingled like it had when he'd woken from the lashings, it tingled like it did when Lysander's fingers caressed and teased. He blinked at the dark but found it wasn't all dark where he lay, just diffused and warm. Sitting up, he probed absently at the rip in his jacket. Dried blood flaked off in his hands. He poked inside, fingers touching his skin, searching for the deep cut. But his skin was smooth. The wound had healed. He lived. He wasn't sure how, not yet, but he breathed and his heart beat...

And a dragon smothered him, but the dragon was his.

A wing canopied above, sealing Eroan inside a tiny, quiet haven, tucked in close against warm scales. Lysander's huge heart stuttered a ragged beat in the dark. Eroan ran his hand over the nearest scale. Lysander's breaths labored. The scales were rougher than Eroan remembered, scarred in dirt and dust. Some bore deep scratches and missing chunks. Eroan stroked over those he could reach and then roamed his hands down Lysander's jaw.

The ragged eye socket bore the ugly truth of Lysander's sacrifice and Eroan's chest hollowed out to see it.

"Did you save me again, dragon?" he whispered.

Lysander harrumphed. Then the purr kicked in and Eroan plastered himself against Lysander's scales. "I am so sorry."

In response, Lysander tightened the nook between leg and wing he'd trapped Eroan in.

Eroan pressed his forehead against a scale. "I failed you."

Lysander's growls bubbled. Whether he agreed or not, it was the truth. Dokul had gotten to Lysander again and taken his sight. The brute's death was not enough. Eroan would kill every dragon who wronged Lysander, and it would never make up for it.

"Akiem..." Eroan squeezed his eyes closed and spread his hands on the warm scales. Akiem had wronged Lysander in so many ways, but in the end, he'd fought for Eroan and Seraph. "Your brother is dead. He died protecting Seraph and I."

Lysander's breathing hitched. He snuffled closer to Eroan, seeking the touch, and Eroan answered by running his hands down his snout.

"Is Seraph all right?"

Lysander grunted and slowly lifted his wing off, unfurling away from Eroan, revealing the waiting elves. Seraph ran at him like a battering ram, flung herself into his arms and cried against his shoulder. She trembled like a tiny thing. He folded her in close, holding her heart-to-heart and swallowed around the great swell of emotion. He'd never been prouder of anyone and more honored than to have her as a friend.

The embrace lasted a minute before she suddenly pulled herself free and glared. "Eroan Ilanea, don't you ever fucking die on me again."

A few of the sentinel guards chuckled and then fell silent as she swung them all a withering look.

Eroan cleared his throat and fought to hide his smile. He rubbed at his face, dislodging mud and dried blood. The afterglow of being healed buzzed through him but exhaustion still lingered, and behind him, Lysander was still hurting. "Dokul is dead?" he asked, voice gruff and raw.

Seraph nodded. "And there's a... there's someone..." She waved a hand, urging Eroan to look behind her.

Eroan stepped around Lysander's bulk and blinked at the enormous Silver dragon resting on the grass. Her scales looked sharp enough to cut, each one carrying a lethal razor's edge but there was a kindness to her dark eyes. A kindness he recognized.

I heard you, elf.

I heard you all.

He glanced back and assumed from the alarm running rampant through the faces of the sentinels, they all heard the same voice in their heads.

The Silver's outline shimmered, turning molten, and from her bulk, the Silver coalesced into the form of a tall, lithe female. Her ears were tipped, like an elf's. She wore a gown of glittering white, frosted in silver lace. Her hair lay bundled in a single, plump braid.

Eroan blinked. He knew her name.

Every elf here knew her name.

But she was... *dragon?*

She glided forward, walking elf-light through the grass. "Your prayers did not go unheard. I listened. Crushed beneath the dark and the cold, I listened to you all, my children."

He knew her. He knew her like he knew himself. She was the light that guided them all. She was Alumn.

She drew closer and some of the elven line fell to their knees. Eroan just stared. He'd never seen so fine a beauty, but it wasn't a soft beauty, her appearance was too sharp, too bright, too cutting. There could be no doubt she was divine. And dragon.

Her smooth hand settled lightly on his head and her healer's touch spilled through him, so similar to Lysander's. "For hundreds of years, I listened to you all. I heard your cries and cried with you. I felt your grief and grieved with you. You were never alone, my elves. But I could not reach you."

She tilted Eroan's chin up. Her light warmed his veins, bringing him alive and chasing away the hollow aches, as though he'd been basking in the sun all day.

"Long ago, we fought, the Bronze and I. I fell to him then. And lost, I waited far below the ice where no elf could reach me. Only dragonfire could do that. The bronze slaughtered my emeralds, my healers, each one my attempts to make things right. All failed... All but Lysander."

Alumn turned her attention toward Lysander. He lay tucked tightly into himself, his head down, tail curled close, and his breathing stuttering. Exhaustion showed in every tremor and broken scale.

Never had anyone suffered as much and continued to fight.

Heal him, Eroan begged, and then aloud, “You can.” Her being here felt as impossible as a dream, but if it was fantasy, he couldn’t wake, not yet. She had to heal him, didn’t she?

“Alumn,” he said, calling her by her true name, knowing it was right. Her kind eyes met his. “Please?” he asked.

She approached Lysander. He didn’t recoil, didn’t growl, didn’t do anything, and Eroan knew Lysander’s hurt was soul deep. It would take time to heal it all, but if she could bring back his sight, he’d help Lysander heal the rest.

Her light hand touched his nose and her shimmering glow expanded, rippling over his scales, making them shine anew. Higher, the light licked, until it reached his eyes, he groaned and dug his snout into the ground, trying to bury himself away from the pain.

“Be still, dragon,” she chided. “There is much hurt to heal. I owe you my freedom, and thus you shall have yours.”

The elves observed. There were more of them now, lured from Ashford by the presence of their goddess, their light—as she healed a dragon.

Emerald eyes glowed. Lysander blinked. Dark pupils blew wide. His eyes blazed, their shocking green piercing straight to Eroan’s heart.

“There. Now, rest.” She backed away and addressed the elves. “All of you, rest. There is work to be done, but first, rest and heal. Your skies are clear. You are safe.” She walked back the way she’d come, passing Eroan, and shifting back to dragon before taking to the skies where she soared, keeping a watchful eye on her elves below.

Eroan had witnessed a miracle. Word would soon spread. Alumn was dragon, and that changed everything. Elves, dragons, and humans. They were all more alike than anyone could have known, and they needed each other. Doubt would spring up. Those who hadn’t seen would dismiss it. But those challenges could wait.

He lifted his gaze to meet Lysander’s, tracing the slip of a single tear as it fell from the dragon’s eye.

It was over.

CHAPTER 38

Lysander

EROAN HAD BEEN right and wrong. It was over, but it had also just begun. Dokul was dead, the elves had burned his remains, using Eroan's firestarter to start the blaze, and Lysander had watched on. Elves searched the estuary shore for Akiem's body, but none was found. Any wayward dragons, Lysander swept under his wing, controlling them and leading them away from Ashford, away from all elves. Alumn was ever-present and yet not. There and gone again, like a dream with a mind of her own. And her mind was set to peace, although she hadn't said how. After her appearance, the elves queried if she was what she appeared, but any who saw her knew the truth. She *was* truth. And she was both dragon and elf. Not even stubborn elves could argue with that.

The cleanup took time and the trek back to Eroan's nameless village took time. Time Lysander spent as dragon. He patrolled and watched and protected all those he'd taken under his wing: human, dragon, and elf alike. He needed to be dragon for a while. Being dragon was less... complicated.

When Eroan's villagers decided some revelry was in order, Lysander shifted back to man, and stood on the fringes of their autumn revelry, watching them frolic and sing. Seraph was here somewhere. He saw her cropped hair and one missing ear-tip bob among the crowd of elves and humans. But in the last few days, he'd also seen her cry and let her tuck herself under his wing. It would take time for everyone to heal, time they now had.

Across the village square, Eroan appeared from the far side of the revelry. Someone hooked his arm and tried to pull him into dancing. He laughed them off and was saved by another wanting his attention. He mingled and laughed, and Lysander's heart swelled to see it. Eroan had found his home, and Lysander had too.

The folk music shifted into a jolly, uplifting beat. Elves started up their clapping. Junoe's lute plucked along and Seraph was soon beside him, the pair of them sharing sly glances. Lysander made a mental note to threaten him later.

Eroan appeared at Lysander's side, hooked his arm, and pulled him among the dancing crowd. It had been weeks since they'd touched as anything other than elf and dragon, but the heat hadn't faded.

Lysander purred. He'd been too long as dragon and cleared his throat. "I don't..." Eroan cut him off with a look. *All right then*, he smiled. He knew better than to argue with Eroan Ilanea.

"Dance with me, dragon." Eroan made it an order and Lysander arched an eyebrow.

He'd been watching the elves dance these past few days. He knew where to place his feet, and when to skip, and when to loop with your neighbor, taking on a new partner. He still marveled that any elf would dance with him, let alone clasp his hand and embrace him like he was one of their own. Perhaps it was because they knew he was their protector now. Or maybe knowing Alumn was dragon had enlightened them. Whatever the reason, he danced with them, his body full of music's sweet spell until he was back in Eroan's arms, the elf all smiles. He'd seen more of those smiles in the last few days than in the entire time he'd known him.

Unable to refrain any longer, Lysander pulled Eroan aside, barely making it three steps before yanking him into his arms so he could kiss that smile. Elves bumped against them, uncaring. Eroan molded himself close, tilting his hips in, luring Lysander's instincts from beneath the surface. Eroan laughed and turned his head away, further undoing Lysander's control. Presenting with the curve of his neck, Lysander nipped at the flushed skin. If he fell any further, there wouldn't be any stopping, and as carefree as these elves were when it came to sexual relations, they weren't dragons.

"There's a hot spring nearby," Eroan said against the corner of Lysander's mouth. "A scout discovered it earlier this morning... No other knows of it. Tonight it's all ours."

Lust poured heat right where it was needed. Lysander swallowed. "And we're waiting because?"

Eroan pulled him by the hand, leading him from the celebrations and beyond, where the torches marked the edge of the village, farther into the dark, before dropping down into a hidden gully. Nestled at its center, a moonlit pool bubbled and steamed.

Eroan sauntered ahead, lifted his shirt off, and tossed it aside.

Lysander stumbled. The muscle-play riding Eroan's shoulders and down his scarred back had Lysander forgetting his own name. He slowed, taking time to admire the elf's narrow hips and rounded ass. Eroan unfastened his pants and let them fall from his hips, over his ass, and land in a pool at his feet. Moon-licked elf had to be one the most glorious sights Lysander had ever seen.

Eroan stopped at the pool's edge, tossed a *fuck me* look over his shoulder, then plunged in, sliding like a knife below the surface. Lysander hurried to the pool, fumbling with his shirt, until finally tearing it off and balling it up. His pant ties vexed him. This was taking too long.

Eroan resurfaced with a gasp, his hair plastered down the sides of his face. His blue eyes gleamed with moonlight. The single green emerald earring winked.

"Do you plan on joining me today?" He swept his hair back, his smile a fucking tease. "Or shall I swim alone?"

Lysander growled. Words were beyond him. He finally unfastened the pants. Of course, he'd gone beyond the point of graceful and tried to shove them down, only for the belt to get hung up on the pounding erection.

Eroan's laugh undid him.

Lysander tore the blasted pants off and dove over the edge, plunging deep below the warm, enveloping water. The pool went down and down, seemingly with no end. He opened his eyes beneath the surface and made out Eroan's pale outline treading water above. Thanking Alumn once more for the return of his sight, he kicked forward, grasped the elf by the hips and licked from his navel, over the ripple of abs, up over one nipple, and broke the surface to gulp in air.

Eroan let him breathe, then hooked a leg around his, drawing him close. He nudged at Lysander's chin and his mouth became that hot, teasing thing, asking but not taking, teasing and not giving.

Lysander chased the promise of a kiss, letting Eroan set the pace. They shared breaths, barely touching, drawing out the moment to a thin point, ready to snap. Eroan's hand found Lysander's ass, keeping him close enough that the brush of Eroan's hip against Lysander's sensitive tip had him

bucking like a rabid kit hunting down its first fuck.

Eroan's cock nudged at Lysander's lower belly. Gods, he loved this, the feel of Eroan erect and ready and his own savage arousal trapped between them. He wanted to lick him, take him and bite him and own him and fuck him and all the things dragons did, but right now, he'd be content to probe his mouth with his tongue and tease his lips.

The kiss wasn't so much a kiss as a dance of whispers and the lightest stroke of tongues, so fucking gentle Lysander had a rabid urge to clutch Eroan's cock and make him come in seconds. It was that or he was going to have to do the same with his own pounding need before it drove him mad.

Eroan's fingers found his balls and lifted, and as the elf continued to tease with his tongue, he reached down, swept behind Lysander's balls and slid a finger inside.

Lysander broke. He thrust a hand into Eroan's hair and devoured him in a rough kiss full of tongues and mouth and sharp elven teeth. Eroan threw his head back, luring Lysander to his neck and shuddered his pleasure. He'd braced against the rocks and now Lysander had him trapped against them. His fucking impossible elf. He caught Eroan's lean hips, too crazed to marvel at the feel of him in his hands, and ground against him, the water creating that sliding, frictionless pressure that had Eroan groaning and Lysander enraptured.

He must have stopped—which was impossible—but Eroan's lazy gaze roamed Lysander's face as Lysander admired his. He had perfect eyebrows and pale lashes framing eyes the color of a calm ocean, although they could just as easily rage and churn like a storm.

"You stopped," Eroan said.

"I'm thinking."

"Dangerous."

"Definitely." Lysander's heart hammered at his ribs. His body *wanted* so bad it was beginning to tear itself apart, the magic sizzling across his skin. But still he waited, committing the exquisite detail of Eroan to his memory.

They hadn't talked about what had happened on the battlefield. With Alumn's arrival, and his sight being gone and then being healed, learning of Akiem's death, and moving back to this place, to their new home, there hadn't been time to talk about how Lysander thought Eroan gone for good. He'd thought Eroan had died before, but the battlefield, after Dokul, had been different. Eroan *had* died. Lysander wasn't sure, but he thought he'd maybe... brought him back, with Alumn's help. He'd never tried to heal as dragon before. But as Carline had healed his wing as dragon, Lysander had maybe done the impossible too.

"I lost you," he whispered, bracing an arm over Eroan's shoulder so he could brush the words against Eroan's ear. "You were gone. I felt it. You died and I..."

"Do not dwell on it."

Lysander clutched at Eroan's face. "Is this us now?"

Eroan puzzled, his sly smile falling away. "What do you mean?"

This wasn't the time to talk, but he needed to hear the words from Eroan, because they'd had moments before, but those moments had ended. Was this how it would be now? Eroan and him, dancing to elven songs, helping harvest plums from the trees, plucking carrots from the earth like some fucking paradise, living one moment to another, day by day. Lysander wasn't sure he deserved such peace.

"Never mind... I'm spoiling it."

Eroan's hand slid down Lysander's chest, fingers sweeping and digging in, hinting at where they may go next before veering away.

“You know you can talk to me.” Serious words from an elf who had his hand brushing Lysander’s cock.

The warm water soothed and lapped. “I know.” Lysander teased Eroan's mouth, nipping and sucking, losing his concerns and himself in the feel of Eroan. Maybe, just maybe, this was how things were now. No more battles to fight, no more wars to rage. He could dream it in this moonlit pool with the elf he loved in his arms and finally make the dreams real.

Eroan

HE WAS SO FRAGILE A THING, his dragon. Strong and fierce and outright terrifying to some, but vulnerable in moments like these, the quiet, passionate moments none other but Eroan saw. In the moonlight and steam, he was a dark gift, his long hair like oil on the water, his expression intense. Eroan knew what he feared, but time would ease his concerns. With every day his dragon would learn he was safe. Nobody could hurt him anymore. Eroan would tell him, but not now, now was for tasting, and feeling, and becoming one, tangled together in these warm waters.

They stayed until the moon had passed on. The village would have retired for the night hours ago. Steam rolled off Lysander when he climbed from the pool. Cold air nipped his tanned flesh, raising gooseflesh. In the pool, Eroan watched his dragon collect his clothes, grieving the loss of that warm body against this.

“Don’t tell Seraph of this place.” Lysander pulled his wet hair back and tied it in a dripping bun. “She’ll tell the lute player and I’ll be forced to deal with him the dragon way.”

“Delighted to, you mean.” Eroan propped himself against the edge, admiring Lysander from below, looking up his impressive muscular legs, hard thighs and tight ass until Lysander hid the sight behind tight elven pants. That wasn’t better. In fact, having him hidden only made Eroan want to unwrap him all over again.

“That too.” Lysander paused and closed his hand around the carved dragon token at his neck. He never removed it. “We’ll continue this in your house.”

“*Our* house.”

Lysander smiled, and dove back into the brush toward the village, disappearing from sight.

Eroan laid his head back on the water’s surface. Stars silently blinked across a canvas of dark. The night was calm, serene, like Eroan’s thoughts. There would come a time he’d ask Lysander about the future, about what they both could accomplish, if Lysander wanted to. But that would come. For now, the peace they’d found here would heal them both.

Slow handclaps ricocheted through the quiet like pistol shots.

One. Two. Three.

The approaching elf was difficult to see, even with Eroan’s night-sensitive eyes. He wore black and moved silently, a shadow among shadows. Recognition stirred Eroan’s memories. He’d known

another who had moved just as stealthily through the night, but he was dead.

He came closer to the pool's edge, the night peeling off him and the dragonblade now in his hand.

Eroan's lip curled. "Nye." Impossible. The wound he'd dealt him had been fatal. He died in the mud where Eroan had left him. And yet, here he was.

"Ah, that shock on your face," Nye's moonlit smile stretched razor-thin, "it was worth it, just to see the great Eroan Ilanea surprised."

Eroan gripped the edge of the pool and scanned the brush, searching the dark for Lysander. He had no reason to return. He'd be back at the village, lighting a fire, waiting.

"Your dragon has left you all alone."

Eroan pinched his lips together. How had Nye lived and how had he found the sword? Seraph had claimed the one in Dokul's ashes. The other had been lost in the estuary. That had to be the one Nye now carried. And Eroan had nothing. No blades, no weapons, and his clothes lay scattered where he'd tossed them. He was... *exposed*. Vulnerability poured ice through his veins.

Nye crouched at the pool's edge. He narrowed his eyes. "What a precious thing it is to see fear in your eyes. The great Eroan Ilanea fears me. Maybe now you fucking see me, huh?"

A half-moon scar marked Nye's neck. Dokul's bite.

"How?" Eroan asked. "I left you to die."

"Perhaps Alumn answered my prayers as I lay dying on that riverbank. She healed you so why not me?"

"Lysander healed me."

Nye's smile was all white teeth in the dark. "Inch by inch I crawled out of the mud you left me in. I lay on the bank, vowing to find you with every breath. Days I stayed like that, clutching at life, wishing you dead. Eventually, I could crawl, then walk. I made my way home, to Cheen. Anye was most sympathetic. She really does hate you." Nye paused, letting the information settle. His cheeks had hollowed, his jaw hardened. Vengeance had stolen anything soft about Nye. "Death can't have me until I am done with you."

"And what is it you want with me, Nye?"

He stood and circled the sword's tip at the ground. "Get out."

Eroan swallowed. In the pool, he was as good as useless, but safe. For this to end, he needed to get out of the water and somehow retrieve the sword from Nye. But Nye wasn't some ill-trained fisher-folk. He was a damned good Order assassin.

Spreading his hands on the edge, he heaved himself up out of the water and rose, naked, to his feet.

Nye arched an eyebrow, his gaze roaming over Eroan's flushed skin, snagging on the new scar at his hip where that blade in Nye's hand had already killed him once. Eroan knew what Nye saw, he'd watched a similar sight when Lysander had climbed out of the water. But Nye's hungry gaze was unwelcome, like the Dragon Queen's had once been, like all the dragons' gazes had been as they'd admired him tied to a bed or locked in whipping stocks. Eroan wasn't chained now.

"Get a good look, Nye. I'll likely be the last thing you see."

"I've thought of you, every second of every day since you left me," he lifted the blade. "Not to save you, not anymore. I've counted all the ways I'd kill you." He stepped closer, hovering the tip of the blade over Eroan's heart. "It can't be quick, not for you." He pressed the tip against Eroan's skin, sparking a tiny burn of pain and a dribble of blood. The blade shifted with Eroan's breaths. "You've destroyed everything I loved. You even destroyed our blessed Alumn by turning her dragon. I'm going to destroy everything you love. I'll start with your village and burn it like I did Cheen's tree. The

humans that flee will be the next to perish beneath this very blade. Seraph dies after them, her crime that of loving a dragon. I'll make you watch. Make you hear her screams."

Eroan's breaths quickened, his heart too.

"And then I'll butcher the dragon prince. He'll die slow. A blade to the chest to stop him shifting and I'll take his fucking fingers for touching you, and then his eyes again, so he can't see you weeping for him."

Lysander might come still. Eroan flicked his glance to the brush behind Nye.

Nye's mouth twitched. "You are *nothing* without your dragon. So weak, you search for him even now."

The sword dug into Eroan's chest, wrenching a hiss from between his teeth.

"I admired you... My whole life I fucking worshipped Eroan Ilanea. I wanted to *be* you."

The blade shook, digging deeper, forcing Eroan back a step. If he lunged for the sword, Nye would drive it between his ribs.

He lifted his hands. "All right, Nye. You have me. I can't fight you. You win, you hear? You win. Isn't that what it's all been about? You've finally beaten me."

Nye's mouth twisted. "You even sound weak. And to think I loved you? You're pathetic."

The blade-tip jabbed. Eroan stepped back, bumping against a boulder, his retreat blocked. The blade sank deeper, shortening his breath. "The village then," he gasped. "Take me there. Show them you're stronger than I am."

Nye's stillness was unnerving. "I was going to," he said. "But now I have you here and at my mercy..." He wet his lips and dropped his gaze. "After watching you fuck *him*." Nye applied his free hand to the end of the sword's handle and pushed, holding Eroan back as he reached in and traced his fingers over Eroan's abs. "I've missed loving you."

The touch made Eroan's skin crawl. "You are not the Nye I remember." His chest burned, the cut at the sword's tip dribbling more blood. "You truly think to force me after knowing my past? The Nye I knew and admired would never consider such a vile thing. Who are you now?"

His smile tilted but kept its edge. "I'm a dead thing. You made sure of that. Like you'll be dead inside when I am done with you."

A growl bubbled from the night, so deep it sounded as though it came from the earth itself.

Nye froze.

Eroan flicked a glance to the brush and the source of the growl. Two huge green eyes glowed in the dark. Eroan smiled. He was no longer alone.

Nye's eyes widened. He turned, taking the blade with him.

The emerald dragon with a broken crown raised his head out of the brush, towering tall. His lips peeled back, and the growl bubbled again, this time rumbling loud and free. Fire throbbed low in his throat.

Eroan grabbed Nye's sword-arm by the wrist, tore the sword free of his grip, and kicked out, sending Nye stumbling into Lysander's reach.

Nye gaped up, so small in front of Lysander's true form. "You!"

Lysander's dragon smile stretched wide. He opened his mouth, revealing huge curved glistening teeth.

"No!" Nye pushed his arms up, as though that might somehow protect him. He tried to turn, but not to beg—rage contorted his face. He sprang, murder in his eyes—for Eroan.

The dragonblade strummed in Eroan's hands, ready to find its mark.

Huge jaws snapped shut around Nye. Lysander threw his head back and swallowed.

Gone. It happened so fast, Eroan's thoughts had yet to catch up to the fact that Nye was no longer running at him. That Lysander had...

He should feel something, shouldn't he?

The sword tumbled from his hand. He fell against the boulder, needing its support.

Lysander's throaty growl bubbled again. The dragon king blinked huge, glassy eyes, waiting for Eroan to speak.

Eroan nodded. Words weren't needed. He couldn't speak them anyway, not yet.

It was finally done.

Lysander huffed, turned away and prowled toward the village, ruffling his wings and resettling his scales.

Alone beneath the stars, Eroan closed his eyes. He sighed out, steadied his thoughts and himself, and opened his eyes. This was how it would be now—Lysander and Eroan. Nothing could touch them just so long as they were together. And they would be together. Nothing could tear them apart.

He knelt at the pool, splashed the cut at his heart clean, and gathered his clothes.

CHAPTER 40

Lysander

HE FEARED Eroan might hate him for what he'd done. But he needn't have. Eroan's nod had been a forgiving one.

That damned dark, vicious little elf had deserved it. A quick death, really. Some might even say honorable. What Assassin of the Order didn't want to die by dragon? Besides, elves were delicious.

Right after Lysander had finished-off Nye and returned to the house, he'd lit the fire and paced, wondering if he should go back and explain why he'd killed Nye like he had. He'd smelled the elf on leaving the pool and hung back to see if his suspicions were correct. Nye was supposed to be dead. The sight of him threatening Eroan had flipped Lysander to shift, and like he'd learned from the dragons in the north, he'd hidden low in the brush, watching to see if the elf tried to redeem himself. He hadn't. Lysander wasn't sorry. He'd kill him again, even if Eroan forbade it. He knew broken when he saw it, and Nye had been exactly that.

Eroan had returned to their house, taken up a chair by the fire and stayed there while Lysander teased the flames.

He waited for the argument to begin, for Eroan to scold him, berate him for being dragon. And this haven would all come to an end. Because if Eroan wanted Lysander to be different, he couldn't be. He was dragon, and if anyone touched Eroan, he'd by-fucking-diamonds well act like a dragon.

"Thank you," was all Eroan said, his voice so low Lysander almost hadn't heard him.

Lysander took his hand and guided him to bed, where his elf had lain tucked against his chest until his shivering subsided. He'd fallen asleep soon after, but Lysander stayed awake, keeping his elf close, watching the door for any who dared take him.

And so the days went on. Under Lysander's protection, the village grew, expanding into fields and keeping stock. Alumn had vanished, or so the messengers said. She'd gone wherever she was needed, he was sure of that. There were whole other continents out there. More dragons and elves to save.

New elflings were born. Humans too. But Lysander forbade the dragons from reproducing, and any who did, he dealt with the dragon way. There were enough dragons in the world. His mental grasp of his flight reached far, growing stronger the more he used the power, until he was sure the entire land was safe, from horizon to horizon.

And then there was Eroan. Through the winter, he'd laughed less. Lysander often found him

patrolling the village fringes, or sitting atop the rocky tors, watching the horizon. He guided his people when they came to him, but more and more, his people became settled and content in their village life, needing Eroan less. He'd retired from the Order and tutored Trey and Seraph to lead in his place. Lysander suspected it took more than words to retire. He couldn't retire from being dragon, so how could Eroan retire from being who he was?

An elf like him wasn't made to settle. He was made to fight, like a blade. And what was a blade good for if there were no more battles to fight? Old blades were hung on walls, pretty to look at, but they soon grew rusted and useless.

This evening was a fine one. No rain, but cool enough to make flight bracing. On the wing, Lysander spied Eroan atop a rocky tor. He blended in well against the stone. Lysander felt Eroan's gaze sliding across his scales the same as he'd feel Eroan's hands stroking over him.

He altered his course, rearing up mid-flight, and swooped in to circle around the elf's rocky outcrop. After a few downdraft beats of his wings, he landed behind him and shifted.

"Do you think there are more humans out there?" Lysander asked, clambering over the boulder field to join Eroan sitting atop the biggest rock. He'd waited a while before joining him, breathing in the quiet springtime air. From this vantage point, it seemed as though the whole world spread around them in every direction. The coast to the east, towers and wildness to the north, Cheen to the south, and to the west, well... who knew? The land looked green and undulated until a hazy horizon blurred the rest.

"Yes," Eroan finally answered. He wore a dark, untucked shirt, the kind that flapped in the wind. Laces unknotted and free. The wind teased with his hair too, tickling its unbound length across his shoulder and down his back. So different to the restrained, stubborn elf Lysander had first met chained in the queen's tower.

"Elves too?" he asked, kicking pebbles off the rocks, watching them skip over the edge.

"Ben said it was likely. While most elves were cut off from this land when the humans unleashed their weapon, there were others elsewhere."

Eroan finally looked over, and for a briefest moment, a longing made his gaze distant until those elven eyes sharpened on Lysander. "You asked me once if this was us now."

Lysander remembered it well. He smiled and looked down at the rocks they stood upon. Unmoving. Stable. This land would be here long after they had both moved on.

"Are you happy, Lysander?" Eroan asked.

He breathed in and admired the horizon. He could be happy here, or anywhere, just so long as he had Eroan. "I was."

Eroan's smile ticked, threatening to fail, but he clung onto it. "You were?"

Lysander tucked his thumbs into his pockets to keep from reaching out and pulling Eroan close. "We both needed healing. But you were never going to be content with village life, *Eroan Ilanea*. You need a purpose like I need to fly. Without those things we are half ourselves."

"You were never half a thing."

By nights, he couldn't hold back and plucked a hand free of his pocket to touch Eroan's cheek. And once he'd touched, he had to draw Eroan close. There was no resisting him. "I'm not happy, no," he told him, watching his face fall.

Eroan's brows pinched. "What are you saying?"

The press of him, so warm and hard, so very Eroan, it summoned a purr low in his throat. "I'm saying, yes."

Eroan's brows pinched tighter and Lysander almost laughed. By diamonds, he adored this male.

“There’s a whole world out there full of dragons and elves and humans.” Lysander swept a hand, encompassing all they could see, and that which they couldn’t. “Some people need saving. Some need eating. But I’m certain they all need an Eroan Ilanea. You are wasted here. You’re not ready to put down roots. Any fool can see it. Any fool but you. You can’t be caught, you can’t be tied down, you can’t be chained. Your spirit is too wild a thing.” Lysander laughed. “You’re *Eroan Ilanea*. You should go beyond that horizon, find new battles to fight, new wars to win, more people to save.” Lysander almost kissed him. He was close enough to. He flicked his gaze up, marveling at the sparkle in Eroan’s blue eyes. “It’s who you are.”

“Come with me,” Eroan whispered, eyes searching Lysander’s as though he truly feared Lysander might say no. Even now, Eroan couldn’t see how much he was loved. Lysander would make it his life’s mission to change that.

“I already answered, didn’t I?” Lysander traced a thumb down over Eroan’s lips and then brushed those lips with his own, falling into Eroan’s spell. He’d go anywhere with Eroan, do anything for him, love him, protect him, be what he needed, because this was them now. Dragon and elf. Dragon King and Assassin of the Order. And nothing could stop them.

A home wasn’t a place, it was a person, and Lysander had found his.

He withdrew from the kiss and bumped his forehead against Eroan’s, losing himself in his elf’s pretty eyes.

“Will you carry me across the ocean, dragon?” Eroan asked.

“Always.” He slipped his hand into Eroan’s. “You were forged to save the world.”

Eroan squeezed back. “Until it is done.”

“Together.”

The End

Did you enjoy the Blood & Ice and the Silk & Steel series? [Please leave a review](#). Just a few words will do but those words will help the series find new readers.

Thank you!

But it’s not over yet!

Read on for an exclusive snippet of Akiem’s spin-off novel, *The Black Prince*.

THE BLACK PRINCE PREVIEW

(This is an uncorrected preview that may change before publication).

Zane

“Who do you think the king’s new pet was?” Jevan bit into the roasted chicken leg and tore off a chunk of meat. He soon followed that with a tankard of whatever swill this inn served and gulped half its contents without stopping for breath. A quick wipe of his sleeve and the whole display started again.

Zane stared at his friend, openly disgusted by the male’s ability to eat like a fat horse, yet secretly impressed. His own stomach had turned over at the thought of food so soon after what they’d witnessed at court. He hadn’t known the victim of the king’s wrath, but he’d heard she’d been foolish enough to steal food. There was nothing wrong with that. Everyone had to eat. Her mistake was in getting caught.

“What new pet?” Zane asked, feigning ignorance. He kicked his boots up on the table and leaned back in the chair, fingers laced together behind his head, claiming the entire tabletop as his. The lower angle also happened to offer the best view of the server’s ass. A little young for his taste, maybe eighteen, but if the earlier smile and brush of the shoulder were any indications, he’d be game for a frolic. Zane wasn’t much older, but he preferred males who knew their way around themselves and others. Besides, the young were too quick to fall in love. Still, he hadn’t tapped *that* ass yet, and it really was the kind he couldn’t resist.

Jevan dropped the gnawed-on bone into its bowl and wiped his hands on a cloth. “The dragon you spent the whole time eye-fucking.”

Zane mock-scowled. “I have no idea what you’re referring to. An elf of my esteemed character would certainly not be interested in a dragon.”

Jevan barked a laugh. “You’re so full of shit. I saw his face while you were eyeballing him. He about shifted on the spot. You’re lucky he didn’t squeal to the king.”

“Just some extra piece of ass that washed ashore. The king’s clearly fucking him,” he said, answering the earlier question.

“Must everything be about sex with you?”

Zane grinned. “Said like a male who isn’t getting any.”

Jevan showed him his middle finger in a gesture they’d picked up along the north-east coast.

Although, to be fair to Jevan, Zane had been eye-fucking the dragon dressed in black. The beast

had looked wrapped tight enough to pop, and Zane wanted to be there when that happened. Strictly speaking, elves and dragons didn't mix, unless a dragon happened upon the docks near the full moon to see if they might find an elf to satisfy their *other* hungers. He'd heard rumors. Didn't plan on ever going there, though. Zane didn't need to solicit such attention when, more often than not, it was thrown at his feet.

There wasn't much Zane didn't do, but one of those things was dragons. Still, Luceran's shadow was interesting, so dark beside the king's diamond-whiteness. He had an emptiness about him, as though someone had hollowed him out and left him standing. Zane would have gladly spent the night filling him right back up again. He rarely had such thoughts about dragons. It bothered him more than he let on to Jevan. There was one easy way to cool his blood, and that was with some other fine piece of ass.

The server was looking over. Zane flicked a hand up and jerked his chin, summoning him. The man added a sway to his hips that wasn't there when dealing with other customers. Good, because Zane really needed company later.

"What can I serve you, sir?"

Zane let the question linger before giving him a smile that had melted hearts up and down the east coast. "Besides some time alone with you when your shift is over, I'd like some wine. Make it strong."

The server cocked an unimpressed eyebrow and flounced to the bar.

Zane pursed his lips, unaccustomed to anyone refusing him. "Did I misread him?"

Jevan twisted in his chair to get a long look at the server. He faced Zane again, mouth chewing up a laugh. "Maybe he's heard of the red-haired devil fucking his way through every east coast town."

"You think?" They'd been in these parts for weeks now, working as hired muscle for what little coin there was rattling around, and Zane had sampled some of the goods in the local bars. Where else was an elf supposed to get some ass?

"By Alumn's light, you're so freakin' gullible when it comes to your number one love," Jevan said. Zane frowned and his friend laughed harder. "*You*. If you weren't my friend, I'd punch some of that pretty right off your face."

Circling a hand near his face, he replied, "This pretty is untouchable." He puckered his lips.

"Don't." Jevan pointed a thick finger. "Take yourself and your ego"—he waved his hand at Zane—"to one of your fuck boys."

The server chose that moment to dump a tankard in front of Zane and scoop up the coin waiting on the tabletop. He left with a huff, making it clear he'd heard every word.

Zane rolled his eyes and watched the missed opportunity stalk away, all the lean and muscled inches of him. With a sigh, he picked up the drink and found Jevan scowling at him from across the table. "What?"

"I'm wondering what I did to piss off Alumn and get stuck with you as a friend."

"Oh, come now... what have I done that's so bad?"

"At the execution, didn't you care?"

His mood abruptly soured. He'd come here to *forget* about the execution. "She knew the fucking rules." He took a drink, needing it more now. The hot, spicy liquid went all the way down and tried to burn a hole in his soul. Damn, that was good stuff. "Don't fuck with dragons and we all get to live."

"You're all heart, huh?" Jevan grumbled.

What was Jevan's problem? Zane planted his boots on the floor, leaned in, and looked his friend in the eye. He could remind him how they'd crawled out of the westland mud while dragons

screeched above, but the shadow in Jevan's eyes suggested he knew. Here, on the east coast, King Luceran did things differently, and that was a *good* thing. Sometimes, an elf paid with her head so the rest of their race could roam mostly free. "Go get laid."

"Yeah, maybe I will." Jevan stood, grabbed his tankard, and stumbled to the bar. He'd probably stay there for the rest of the night.

Zane huffed through his nose. The combined chatter from the elves rose and fell in waves. He needed to be around his people, to hear normal talk, but what he needed was a few more of these tankards and someone willing to get personal with him for a few hours. The pain would return tomorrow. Until then, he'd do his damndest to drink and fuck the memories into submission.



That last tankard of wine had been a bad idea.

Zane reached for the wall to prop himself up. Like many of the tall buildings in this town, the surface was shiny and cool. He rolled into it so his shoulders propped him up. A fat moon hung over a jagged skyline. Huh, the moon was full, and here he was, a stroll from the old docks. Well, that seemed fateful, didn't it? As he happened to be in the area, he'd take a quick look to see if the rumors about the docks were true. Alumn had clearly guided him here, so it was the sensible thing to do.

Shaking off some of his drunkenness, he crossed an old road and fell into step with other elves headed toward the waterside. He couldn't imagine they had much of a reason to be going down to the docks in the middle of the night, besides the less savory pursuits he'd heard of, but perhaps they had a legitimate reason?

A few market stalls lined the street, a hanging lantern lighting each one. As the street narrowed and the stalls grew in number, the bustle enveloped him like an old friend. This was the intrigue? A night market, held on the full moon. He browsed the lamplit wares and caught sight of a few thieves working coin from the pockets of those in the crowd. In the past, he'd done the same, but unlike the unfortunate elf who had lost her head, Zane had never gotten caught. He'd met Jevan on a street like this one, scruffy clothing, hat in hand, begging for coin. Zane had stolen his hat, and the asshole had tracked him down. They'd scrapped like their lives had depended on it, and perhaps they had. Jevan had won. Zane had proposed they work together, and to this day, they'd remained a team.

He plucked his coin pouch from his belt and tucked it deeper into his pocket, just in case any little-fingered elfling took a shine to it.

The stalls sold old-world trinkets: hooks and boxes, and bells and pots, and twisted things that made no sense. Nothing he needed. He saw no use in carrying anything other than weapons and a spare pair of boots. He barely had roots, didn't have a home, and certainly didn't need strange metal fancies. But some folks lived here, and they traded what little coin they had for the curiosities of the human world, now long dead. He'd seen elven homes brimming with bits of the old world, their owners reminding him of magpies.

A citrusy tingle on his lips alerted him. He smelled the dragons before he saw them, but once he did see one—a tall, imposing female—he spotted others mingling among the crowd. Really, they didn't mingle so much as carve their way from point A to point B, brushing aside anyone in their path. Some talked with elves, some browsed the stalls. The deeper into the docks he wandered, the dirtier the lamps became, and the distance between elf and dragon grew smaller.

Zane knew sex. He reveled in it—life was too short not to partake in pleasure wherever available

—but the one thing he'd never realistically entertained was sex with a dragon. Yet here it was, out in the open, plain as day. The beginnings of it anyway. He saw their touches and how the dragon's body language crowded the elves. He saw their coy smiles and illicit touches. Dragon and elves getting more than personal was forbidden by dragons, but there were plenty here who hadn't gotten the message, and the rest looked the other way.

Coin changed hands.

Then it occurred to his alcohol-addled mind that all of this was unlikely consensual. Dragons held the power. If an elf said no, that elf would lose his or her head.

He recalled the sound of the axe coming down and how the elf's sobbing had suddenly ceased. Such a simple thing. Obviously, the axe would kill her, but witnessing her end had been something else entirely.

He'd seen death.

What elf hadn't?

But it wasn't something he sought out. He was paid to guard higher-society elves, mostly, and to look the part, but he wasn't a killer—if he could help it. He'd done enough killing on the frontline.

Memories jostled for purchase. The mud of the battlefield. Its gritty taste mingled with blood. Jevan's hands around his waist, pulling him free.

His gut flipped in warning.

He hadn't eaten, and now the wine was coming back to haunt him too.

Someone thumped into his shoulder, almost whirling him around. Hands grabbed his arms to steady him.

"Hey, sorry there! Didn't see you." The male elf stomped on, head down.

"Sure, fine..." Zane wavered on the spot. He'd been going somewhere, hadn't he? He distinctly recalled coming downhill to the docks, so he needed to go uphill to get back to the lodge. He'd seen enough of the docks to know he didn't need to linger or return.

"Oy!" The shout from a young'un sounded behind him.

Zane turned. A figure cloaked in black lifted an elfling off his feet and held him dangling like a worm on a hook.

"Hey!" Zane barked before noticing the cloaked figure had the same square set and heavy presence of all dragons.

The dragon tensed.

Nearby chatter fell away.

Shit. Zane was no idiot. He couldn't win a one-on-one fight with a dragon, not at the best of times and certainly not in his inebriated state. But, by Alumn, he couldn't watch a dragon pick on a little elf either. Zane hadn't been much older than him when he'd taken to the streets.

"Hey you..." He stepped forward, found his bravado held, and kept on walking until he was almost chest to chest with the hooded beast.

The dragon dropped the elf, who rebounded fast and darted off, leaving Zane facing a hooded figure that, in dragon form, would fill this street.

A shaft of light cut across the male's whiskered chin, but the rest of his face was hidden well beneath the hood, as though he'd deliberately cloaked himself from head to toe.

Zane's instincts ticked. Now would be a good time to apologize and back off, saving his neck from the executioner's blade. The only problem was, his feet wouldn't budge and the apology had lodged in his throat. The dragon wasn't moving either. According to protocol, Zane should dip his head and turn away, but as the dragon hadn't called him out on it, his mischievous streak demanded he

see how far he could push his luck.

“Your coins.” The dragon produced a money pouch, just like the one Zane had.

What? Zane tapped his pocket. Empty. That damn little elf, the one he’d just saved, had stolen from him!

“That little...” Zane plucked the offered pouch from the dragon’s fingers. “I er... Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

He didn’t sound like anyone Zane had ever heard. His accent was all angles and edges. Zane wanted to hear him speak some more. He tried to think of something to say, something to keep the dragon from leaving, but the seconds ticked on, and the silence was becoming sharp and uncomfortable. Damn, he was usually better than this.

The dragon dipped his head, moving just the hood and shadow, and stepped around Zane with some destination in mind.

The exchange was over, yet Zane wasn’t done. He sensed that the dragon had wanted to say more, or perhaps that was Zane’s imagination making more of the male’s strange silence. But there was an opportunity here, wasn’t there? A hint of *something*.

Zane turned. Beneath the heavy cloak and hood, the male could be anyone. He could be vicious or cruel, like the rest of his kind. He had no reason to think otherwise. But why hide? The other dragons here announced their presence. This one was quiet. Too quiet. If he hadn’t stopped the thief, he likely would have moved among the crowd unseen. Now Zane had to know what this one was hiding from.

“Are you looking for... someone?” he asked, raising his voice enough so the fleeing dragon heard.

The dragon pulled up short.

Zane tasted his own damn heart beating in his throat. It wasn’t wise to provoke them, yet he’d done just that. This was one of those moments Jevan had warned him about. The moments when Zane went too far, pushed a little too hard, asked one question too many.

The dragon turned his head, all cloak and hood. Nothing of his face or expression showed. Was he angry, intrigued, insulted?

Alumn, this was a terrible idea. Damn the goddess for guiding him here. He’d be having words with her the next time he prayed. He’d heard a rumor that the elven goddess was part dragon, so maybe she was behind his actions tonight. Little else made any sense.

“You know...” He laughed and waved off his own comment. “Forget I asked.”

He’d head back to the lodge, crash on the bed, and write this off as a drunken misadventure. But the way back was past the dragon, and despite the street being some twenty feet across, the male somehow filled it. There was only one way he could go, and that was deeper into the docks, where fewer lanterns flickered.

Fuck it. How bad could a night get anyway?

Zane turned and walked deeper into the dark.



Akiem

Were you looking for someone?

Akiem hadn’t come here for *that*, though he knew other dragonkin did. He’d just needed to get out, to get away, to hide under a hood and walk and walk. Taking to the wing was too painful. Old and

new scars pulled every muscle taut. These days, flight was always the last option. After he'd walked the streets for an hour, nothing hurt save for his feet, and nobody cared to look twice at him. Even the elves paid him no mind. He was nothing here. Invisible.

Nobody cared to even *see* him, unlike at Luceran's court, where eyes crawled over him every moment of every day.

He could have walked all night if not for the red-haired elf with his constantly moving smile, like it had a mind of its own, and glitteringly mischievous eyes.

The same elf from the execution. The same one who had *winked*.

Akiem had seen him ambling through the crowd. He'd seen the thief's partner bump into him while the young elf had used the distraction to free the coin pouch from his pocket.

The elf hadn't recognized Akiem from court and Akiem preferred it that way.

He'd come to the docks for the air, for the people, for the pleasure of being a shadow.

Were you looking for someone?

He hadn't answered, because he hadn't known how. The question had been simple, really, yet Akiem had lost his voice. He hadn't thought he'd been looking for anything in particular, but upon hearing the elf's question, he'd stumbled.

He knew what happened in these parts: propositions and coins changing hands. Courtly dragons spoke of it in whispers. More than goods were traded at the docks. More... like pleasure.

Dragons came to dally with curious elves. It was all... beneath Akiem. Elves were little more than animals. Yet standing there, with the elf's words ringing in his ears, he understood the appeal of having company. Part of him ached so badly to no longer be alone, but a larger part recoiled deeper inside himself.

Then the elf had said to forget it, leaving Akiem with an alarming sense of loss. He had turned to stop him, to ask what he'd meant, but the redheaded elf had already walked away, deeper into the dark. Did he know where he was going? What if another dragon found him? Someone likely to hurt a lost elf? He'd appeared a little unsteady for an elf and nothing like his rigid, poised self from earlier that day.

He should leave him to his fate.

An elf such as him didn't need Akiem interfering.

Akiem tapped his fingers against his thigh. It was clear this elf attracted trouble. He was clearly intoxicated, and few dragons could resist such easy prey.

Akiem sighed and followed the distant figure deeper into the docks, where empty structures hugged the water's edge and old metal cranes hung like enormous gallows across the sky.

Trouble soon appeared in the form of a pair of dragonkin in human form. They peeled away from gaping doorways and closed in behind the elf. Only moonlight licked the old streets here. Either the elf was a fool or he was deliberately leading the dragons along. Akiem had known elves that would trap curious dragons this way, but those on this side of the ocean didn't possess the same murderous or suicidal streak.

One dragon lunged at the elf. The elf produced a small dagger and got a slash in, but such a small weapon was no match against a dragon. The big male grabbed for the elf, making him tip over a curb and fell onto his side.

Akiem's pace quickened.

The dragons towered over the fallen elf. Bad times flickered across Akiem's eyes. How many memories featured Akiem falling the same way? With someone bigger, stronger, heavier crowding close? He'd experienced the great weight of an unwanted dragon pressed over him, inside him,

tearing him apart. He would not witness such a thing again, not even on an elf.

He tore off the cloak and whistled through his teeth. The shrill sound darted like an arrow through the empty streets. The dragons jerked their heads up.

One had his hand on his crotch, indicating where he intended the assault to end.

Rage warped Akiem's better judgment. Distantly, it occurred to him that Luceran might not appreciate him brawling in the streets, but the need to see this end before it properly began crushed that thought..

Heated power rushed in, filling him up and pooling fury into the emptiness until it was all he knew. He couldn't have stopped the shift if he'd wanted to. He breathed magic in, collecting the raw rush of power in his entire being, then breathed out, freeing the truth. Matte black scales exploded outward, too many scarred and broken. His soul stretched far, swallowing all the pain and hurt, until it became part of who he was and what he'd become.

Dragon.

Scales as black as night.

Eyes of gold.

Teeth as sharp and bright as the crescent moon.

He stoked the amethyst fire low in his throat, lifted his head, and bared his teeth, giving the dragonkin a moment to understand this was no posturing.

He clamped his jaws around the first dragon before he could shift too. Magic tingled on his tongue, a warning that his prey was about to shift. He held him clamped inside his jaws and freed amethyst fire, keeping his teeth caged around the dragon's body. Dragons were resistant to his fire, but not in human form. The one he'd bitten screamed for all of two seconds before his fire burned him to cinders. Akiem tossed his roasted carcass aside. The second dragon was the one who'd been about to free his cock and rape the elf.

Akiem lowered his head, fixing the foul male in his sights.

He hadn't shifted and seemed reluctant to. Whatever he was in dragon form, it was weak enough for him to drop to his knees and blubber like a runt. "Don't tell Luceran! By the Great Ones, please!"

At the mention of the king's name, Akiem's fire simmered hotter, burning his throat, seeking freedom. He'd killed worthless dragons like this one the moment they'd hatched from their eggs, doing them a favor by making their deaths quick. Dragons were different here. Luceran tolerated sniveling weakness. Akiem did not.

"Please," the runt snuffled. "He'll—"

Akiem might have had mercy in him once. Not anymore. He snapped his teeth through the dragonkin's middle, cutting him clean in half, and tossed his torso aside too.

The fallen elf watched on. Akiem expected him to reek of fear. If the elf ran, Akiem might have a hard time not chasing, considering how hot his blood pumped. Impossibly, however, the elf didn't smell of fear. He didn't tremble. He looked up, the tiny dagger clutched in his hand as though it might protect him from a dragon the size of a dockside building.

Were you looking for someone? The fool had asked a monster to his bed.

Akiem huffed, blasting the elf with air and dust. He spluttered and coughed, then rubbed at his eyes to clear them, but still he looked on, unfazed.

Akiem was done here. He opened his wings but found the dockside too narrow to fully expand them for flight. Pain danced down his back. Old scars lit up like fireworks beneath his scales. The one on the back of his neck, too close to his crown, burned the most. It was old, older than Luceran's new scars. He grunted off the pain and climbed the outside of a derelict building, needing the

elevation to take to the sky properly.

At the top, he turned in a circle, taking in the glittering elven town reclaimed from a much older human one. Oil lamps throbbed warmly. It seemed almost peaceful from above, more peaceful than any life Akiem had known. He resisted the urge to open his jaws and scream to frighten the elves into their homes. The old Akiem would have, but he was a shadow now. Shadows did not scream into the night.

He spread his wings, gave them a few experimental flaps to measure the airflow, then dove off the side, skimming the dockside where the elf lay before soundlessly gliding out across the water.

The elf watched him the whole way.

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

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