Chapter 1

Hunger gnawed at Authand. If he made this shot, they would have fresh meat for dinner. The game was scarce in this part of the wood, and with the harvest coming up, there wasn’t time to venture deeper.

He’d been tracking this deer for half a mile, and now had the perfect shot to bring it down. But just as Authand let loose his arrow, the deer sensed him somehow and bolted. The projectile stuck in its haunch, causing the animal to falter for a split second before disappearing into the woods.

Authand cursed. If he lost the arrow, he still had more, but this one would still have to be replaced. His father would sigh and stay up well into the night making a replacement. His father never said anything, but Authand knew he’d be disappointed. It would help if Authand had any skill at arrow making, but his always came out crooked.

He ran after the deer. If he was lucky, the arrow had hit deep enough to slow it down. His tracking skills were moderate at best, and he couldn’t hope to catch it if it got too far ahead.

A squawk coming from the east caught his attention. A large bird, he thought. Fear and pain filled the cry. An easy target compared to the one he’d most likely lost.

Something like a goose wouldn’t be as much meat, but this sounded much larger than a goose.

He changed course and headed towards it. The squawking would no doubt attract predators, and he needed to find its source before something else did. Even more nerve racking, he had to keep a watchful eye for those same predators lest they make a meal of *him*.

Werewolves roamed the hills that Authand called home. His father complained often about them. Even before the war with those dogs, children who wandered too far from home disappeared without a trace. And still, that fate seemed preferable to coming home empty handed.

He rounded a bend to find an outcropping of rocks. But there was something strange about these rocks, and….

He stopped dead when he realized what he was looking at.

A tiny orange head, the color of a sunset poked out from one of the large stones, staring at him. It took him a moment to realize it wasn’t a stone but a dragon’s egg, and the rest of the rocks were only camouflage for this feral dragon’s nest. The creature rising from it stood as high as his waist as it trumpeted a call for its mother.

Authand struggled to recall his lessons through the mental fog descending on him. His heart raced, and his feet itched to run as far from this place as they could take him. But something kept him pinned to this spot despite the rising panic. Dragons didn’t stay with their eggs after laying them, so he wasn’t in danger of meeting the full-grown mother. They also didn’t lay eggs out in the wild but rather left them in special hatching grounds spread throughout the Seven Kingdoms.

Had he found one of them? Were there more dragons nearby?

The breeze carried the faint sound of a growl, sharpening Authand’s senses and making his hair stand on end. But it wasn’t the growl of a dragon. A werewolf had likely heard the newly hatched dragon as well and was circling in the brush somewhere close by.

Between the baby dragon and the adult wolf, the boy knew he should retreat for his own safety. Darneta was at war with the werewolf kingdom, and if there was one, there could be others. But instead, he stood his ground. He couldn’t explain it, but while every instinct told him to run, something pulled at him to stay. His weight shifted to the balls of his feet, ready to run, but otherwise stayed still.

Without warning, the wolf broke cover on his right, closing in on the dragonet as it worked to free itself from the remnants of its stone-like egg.

Authand didn’t remember pulling his bow from where it had been slung over his shoulder. The arrow was nocked and readied by reflex. His hands shook as the tip tracked the stalking wolf. If he missed, the wolf would realize he was a threat and maul him before he could try again.

He took a deep breath, and the arrow flew.

The wolf howled as it dropped to the dirt, just feet from the nest. Authand didn’t move as it shifted back into a human-looking female, nude save for sandy brown hair that grew down his back.

Authand dropped to his knees, and voided the meager remains of his lunch hours earlier.

The dragon finally broke free of the egg and stood on its hind legs, fixing Authand two golden eyes. The boy froze under its gaze. Would he have to take this dragon on, too? Could he? The wolf had been a very lucky kill shot. The dragon, with its armor-like scales, would be much more difficult even as a baby.

He backed away, cursing the loss of yet another arrow. He couldn’t keep his eyes off the strange beast as he retreated, though, and the dragon’s gaze was glued to him, fixated on him as well.

“*Wait*,” a voice rumbled. It sounded both near and far, coming from everywhere and nowhere. “*You saved me*.”

Authand stopped mid-step. Who had said that? He could hardly believe it, but as he peered deeper into the eyes of the dragon, he knew. He stopped retreating, and then took a bold step toward the nest.

The dragon kept staring.

The boy advanced, stopping a dozen feet from the creature. “This is as close as I get,” he told it. It still stared intently at him. He could feel that gaze burrowing into his soul, revealing his deepest thoughts and desires. He’d never imagined sharing at that level, but now had no clue how he’d ever lived without it.

Calm. If he had to put a word to it, Authand felt calm.

The sensation withdrew but was replaced with an awareness of the world around him at a level he had never imagined possible.

*"I am Korth*," the baby dragon said—into his mind, it seemed to Authand.

“Authand.” The boy held out his hand but felt silly for it and pulled it back. “So, um, now what?”

"*I’m hungry*,” the young dragon pleaded.“*Feed me*.”

Authand took a step back, not wanting to become Korth’s first meal. “Can … can you track? I shot a deer a few minutes ago. You can help me get my arrow back and get some food in the process.”

Korth climbed up the rocks that had hidden his egg and sniffed the air, occasionally flicking his tongue. “*It’s that way*.” He pointed south with a foreleg. The motion brought him tumbling into the dirt, a small cloud of dust rising around him.

Authand chuckled as the dragon righted himself.

"*It’s not funny*," Korth said, hurt in his voice.

Knowing the small creature was upset chased away any mirth Authand felt. He looked down, drawling a circle in the dirt with his foot.

Korth shook himself and started in the direction he had identified. "*When I am bigger, we will fly above the trees instead of walking under them*."

Authand shuddered. He wasn’t afraid of heights, exactly. But he’d seen a dragon fly overhead once and couldn’t imagine being that high with nothing underneath him.

*"I will be underneath you. And I would never let you fall*."

Authand mulled that over silently as they walked. The idea of actually riding Korth hadn’t even crossed his mind. He didn’t see what use flying would have on the farm, but he had a feeling that Korth would not be satisfied keeping to their small homestead, either.

He guessed they were Dragoneers now, but honestly, he had no clue what that meant beyond the obvious. The Dragoneers were Darneta’s military, and similar groups existed for most of the other Seven Kingdoms. Authand didn’t think of himself as much of a fighter, and what would his father do without him to help? The man was in his prime still, but would eventually grow old and if they left, there would be nobody to care for him.

Korth interrupted his thoughts: *"I smell something else*. *Like that thing you killed back at my nest. Two of them*."

Authand nocked another arrow, muttering, “Werewolves.” He had been extremely lucky shooting the last one. He couldn’t take on two by himself.

*"You’re not by yourself. I will protect you*."

Authand held an arm out to stop him, as if he could stop something the size of a colt with his hand. “How do you do that? It’s like you can read my mind.”

“*Of course*,” Korth answered. “We are bonded. Our minds and our souls are forever connected now. Come on, they’re this way.”

Korth bounded off in the new direction, and Authand sighed. He would have much rather avoided them.

As he and the baby dragon entered a clearing, two wolf pups stumbled from the trees on the opposite side. One was in wolf form, following a scent. The other was in human form, wearing just a pair of breeches, and he waved to them as they approached.

“Have you seen our mother?” he asked. “She was supposed to be home with dinner an hour ago.”

Authand’s heart sank. They couldn’t be more than five years of age. “She, uh … I think she’s dead.”

The wolf-child howled, and the other one ran toward him and buried his head in Authand’s arm, tears streaking his face. Authand patted his back, not knowing what else to do. How does one comfort the children of a woman you’d just killed? The one in wolf form nosed its way in beside its brother.

“Korth,” Authand said quietly as the two children cried in his arms. “Find the deer and bring it here. We have to feed them.”

*"What about me? I’m hungry, too*."

“They won’t eat an entire deer. You can share it with them.” Authand knew he should hate them. They may just be kids, but they would grow up to become warriors who would invade his home and kill everyone he loved. But all Authand could see was two hungry children who had just lost their mother. Their mother he had just killed.

“*The mother you just saved me from*,” Korth interrupted, before following whatever scent those fist-sized nostrils picked up.

Authand sat with them while they waited for Korth to return. His mind kept returning to the fact that these children were in this situation because of him. He’d shot several deer before, but the werewolf mother hadn’t been a dumb animal like his father would have him believe. These children were people, the same as him. Their mother had been a person just trying to feed her family.

He’d committed a murder. His stomach roiled again, not that there was anything in it

*"You saved my life, it was self-defense*." Korth returned, dragging the deer behind him, the arrow imbedded deep in its haunch just above where one of the legs had been torn off. He set it down before Authand. "*I said I was hungry. I still am, so tell them to hurry and eat their share so I can have the rest of it*."

The deer was half as big as the dragon. “Can you eat that much?”

*"And more. You try being trapped in an egg for your entire life."*

Authand wasn’t sure that logic worked, but he turned to the children. “Do I need to cook it for you?”

The human boy shook his head. “I just need to shift.”

Authand nodded. “Go ahead. We will watch out for you.”

The boy looked down and mumbled something. The other pup got tired of waiting and tore into the dead animal.

“What is it?” Authand asked. “I couldn’t hear you.”

“I need to take my pants off,” he said without looking up.

“Oh.” Authand’s eyes widened in understanding, and he turned around. “What are we going to do with them?” he asked Korth while they waited. “I can’t bring them home to my father. He’d kill them.”

*"Their pack can’t be too far. Ask them*."

The sounds of eating subsided behind them. Authand turned to find the boy back in human form and dressed in his sole article of clothing. The other, however, remained a wolf, licking its bloody jaws.

“Why isn’t your brother changing?” Authand asked.

The wolf growled at him, baring its teeth. Korth bared his in return, and the pup scampered off behind its brother.

“That’s not my brother,” the boy giggled. “That’s my sister. And she doesn’t have any pants.”

Authand laughed, which elicited another growl from the pup. Korth didn’t respond this time, too busy eating the remainder of the deer.

“Well, can you get back home?” Authand asked. “Do you have people to take care of you?”

“Our pack is a couple days away,” the boy said.

Authand thought for a moment. It was his fault they were in this situation, stranded in the woods without their mother. He had killed her. Even thinking about it felt like someone was stabbing his heart. A need to help these children overwhelmed him, but there was no way he could journey so far with them.

A thought sprang into his mind. He reached for his belt, then handed the boy his knife. “Take this. To defend yourself if you get in trouble.”

“Thank you,” the boy said, tears welling in his eyes. “I will tell our alpha of your help. Maybe he will see that not all elves are bad. Come on, Meril. Let’s go home.”

Authand chuckled. He’d never considered that werewolves would see elves as the evil ones. They really weren’t all that different after all.

Chapter 2

Korth had gone immediately to sleep after eating the deer. Authand felt overfull and sleepy even though he hadn’t eaten since morning. Against his better judgement, he sat resting against the young dragon and was lulled to sleep by Korth’s light snoring.

When Authand woke, the sun was low in the sky. “Wake up.” He shoved Korth. “If I’m not home by sundown, my father will worry.”

"*Just another half hour, and then I’ll be ready to wake up*," Korth grumbled.

“Fine, but I’m leaving now.” Authand stormed off back towards the farm, making sure to grab the arrow from the deer that had caused everything that had happened this afternoon.

Not even a full minute later, something large crashed through the underbrush behind him. “Finally done napping?”

*"No, but I’m not letting you leave me in the woods, either*."

They walked in silence as they followed a brook that ran near the farm. It wasn’t the shortest path, but it was the one Authand felt most comfortable following in failing light.

“*This is low light for you?*” Korth scoffed. “*This is still clear as day. Next time say something before you limit yourself to your puny senses*.”

“Hey, those puny senses were enough to save your life.” Authand frowned. “What else can you do that I can’t?”

“*That depends. What else can’t you do?*” Koth retorted. He caught a scent of something, and turned his giant serpentine head to the side. He hesitated for a heartbeat before continuing to follow Authand.

“That’s a fair point. Obviously you can fly--.”

“*Not yet*,” Korth interrupted. “*Not until I’ve grown some. I’m not strong enough to take to the air just yet.*” Even though no words were actually spoken, just that weird echo inside Authand’s head, he could swear the dragon sounded wistful at the thought of having to wait before taking to the air.

“*You would be, too. It’s the thing dragons are made to do. How would you feel if you couldn’t hunt?*”

Authand let out a rue laugh. “I already can’t hunt. But I get your point. So, okay, you will be able to fly once you’re grown. Can you breathe fire?”

“*Again, not yet*,” Korth said*. “I think that comes later. And maybe I need something to do it. The memories imparted by my egg do have some gaps in them*.”

And you can speak in my head somehow--.”

Korth interrupted him again. “*You can do that, too. We’re bonded together now. This is how we communicate. Try it. Imagine you are speaking to me, but don’t say the words out loud.*”

“*Like this?*” Authand asked, speaking without speaking. Did it work? He had trouble believing it was possible. If he had this ability of speaking to others in his mind, he would have discovered it already.

“*Hold on, hold on*,” Korth said impatiently. *“Yes, like that. But I can hear all of your thoughts. You didn’t have this ability before. You don’t have this ability now. We have this ability together.*”

Authand stopped. He wasn’t sure he liked the sound - *the thought?* – of that, but he guessed he didn’t have much choice. And that Korth had heard all of that, too.

Korth nodded in his head. He couldn’t describe it in any way that made sense. There was no image involved. Just a general sense of it.

Korth nodded again at that. “*You’ll get the hang of it. Either that or we will drive each other crazy. What do you know*?”

“*Not a lot,*” Authand said in his mind. *“My father always skipped over dragons when teaching me about the world. Most of what I know has come from my friends. Dragons and their riders train somewhere called Tulta to become Dragoneers, an army sworn to protect the kingdom from its enemies. I saw a dragon once, last year. A Green one flew over us. My dad wasn’t happy about it. I don’t think he likes dragons. I don’t think he likes much of anybody who isn’t an elf, really.*”

Authand fell into silence at that. He didn’t like the thought of having to choose between his father and the dragon he’d just met but now couldn’t imagine being apart from. It wasn’t even a choice, but he didn’t know how he felt about that, either.

The sun had just dipped below the horizon when they cleared the seed barn.

Authand’s father sat on a wooden bench in front of their house. He jumped to his feet. “Get down, there’s something following you.” As he ran, he pulled a knife Authand had never seen from inside his pants. His usual blade was still in its holster on his hip.

Authand stopped in his tracks and turned, seeing only Korth behind him. But of course, that was who his father meant.

“Dad, no. Wait!” he called. “I found a dragon egg. It hatched, and now I’m a Dragoneer.”

His father pushed him aside and swung at Korth with the ornate bronze knife. Korth reared and kicked, flapping his wings as he back-peddled. The dragon had better reach than a man with a short-handled weapon, but Authand’s father slashed furiously, almost faster than Authand could see. He pushed and pushed until the dragon backed up to the barn door, which buckled under Korth’s weight.

Authand drew his bow, aiming an arrow at his father. But he couldn’t bear to loose it. He’d already killed one person today. And this was his father, a man he loved, not some strange werewolf.

Their plow horse broke free of its stable and bolted. Korth turned, startled, and Authand’s father took advantage of the distraction. He turned the blade in his hand and brought the pommel down at the base of the dragon’s head.

Korth dropped to the ground. Such a small blow should not have been able to take down such an armored creature, but it did. There was something about that knife. Some reason his father had never shown it to him.

Authand’s father slid the special knife back into its hiding spot and grabbed a length of rope from a peg on the barn wall. Authand dropped the bow and ran towards his father. “No, stop. What are you doing?”

But it was he who stopped when his father drew out his regular knife, pointing it at him. “You’re never going to be a Dragoneer,” his father spat. “That’s a feral. Not a real dragon. They can’t bond. Now, help me secure it before it wakes back up.”

“No.” Authand stomped at the bare ground at the barns entrance. “We did bond. I can hear his thoughts.”

“Yeah?” His father sneered. “What is it saying now? ‘Save me, save me. Because I’m a defenseless little mouse instead of a dangerous dragon.’ He grabbed Korth’s claw and pointed the razor sharp points at Authand. ”Does this look defenseless?“ He turned his back on Authand and grabbed the rope himself, winding it around Korth’s legs.

Authand jumped at his father, beating his fists on the man’s back. “I won’t let you do this.”

His father reached over his back and pulled him off, throwing him against the wall. Stars danced in front of his eyes. He shook them off and struggled to his feet. The room swayed a bit as he staggered back.

His father finished the knot to hogtie the dragon and turned to face his son. Tears streamed down his cheeks. “I'm sorry it's come to this, Authand. But I will fix this. I’m leaving in the morning. Taking that thing to the north to sell to the Goblins. The money it fetches will be more than we earn in a year.”

“I won’t let you,” Authand declared.

 “Get yourself cleaned up and go to bed,” is father ignored his assertion. "You’ll have to do all the chores tomorrow while I’m traveling.” He started towards the house, but stopped. “I’m putting a lot of trust in you. I expect to find everything in order when I get back.”

Authand looked towards the barn. A wave of fear and rage filled him, roiling from the direction of the barn where the dragon was captive. He glanced at his father and took a step towards the barn.

Without looking back, his father warned him in a low voice that carried in the breeze. “Don’t even think about it. Get to the house.” Authand nodded and scurried to catch up with his father.

•••

*"Please, help me*." Korth begged yet again.

Authand rolled over in his bed and pulled the quilt his mother had made for him before she died over his head to block out the pleading, not that it could do anything against a voice that was inside his head. *“I can’t. I can’t stop my father. He’s too big, too strong. Try to get to sleep. He will wake in a few hours, and you have a long trip ahead of you.”*

Korth became insistent. *"Then we must become bigger and stronger. I’ll never be helpless again. But I can’t do it without you. I literally can’t do it without you. We are bonded. Neither of us can live without the other now*."

Authand perked up. *“What do you mean?”*

*"The bond is ancient magic. We are one soul, now. To separate us could be fetal,*” Korth said.

Authand sighed. Korth was right. He could feel it. The bond tugged at his heart that they were apart, even though they were only a few hundred feet apart. *“If we do this, we will have to leave home. My father won’t change his mind.”*

*"Anywhere is better than this. Could we go to where those Dragoneers you talked about are? I think I would like to be one*." Korth perked up a bit at the thought.

*“Tulta,*” Authand said. *“I don’t know where it is, but we will find out. That will be our goal. Now, be quiet while I figure out what to do.”*

Korth stopped talking, but Authand could still feel his presence in his mind. He packed a bag while he made his plan. He would need a knife to cut the ropes off Korth and for self-defense, but he had given his to the werewolf cub. And then he thought of his father’s special knife with the bronze blade, the one he’d taken out for the first time in Authand’s life to use on the dragon today. Authand wasn’t sure exactly why, but he knew that blade needed to come with them.

With a bag packed and slung over his shoulder, he stood at his father’s door and listened to the snoring coming from inside. He pushed the door open gently. Like all the doors, it had no latch. A faint squeal came from the hinges, but didn’t rouse his father. A bedside table contained an assortment of items his father carried with him during the day, including that knife.

Authand tiptoed towards the sleeping figure. A leather belt with a large metal buckle sat on top of the bare blade. Authand grasped the handle; it sent a tingle through his hand, but stopped soon after it started. Maybe he’d imagined it. He slid the knife across the table, making as little sound as possible. The belt buckle rattled once the weapon no longer supported it.

Authand froze.

The snoring stopped, as did Authand’s breathing.

His father turned and settled back into a deep slumber. Authand let out his breath and tiptoed back to the door, closing it silently behind him.

Once Authand was out the front door, closing it as quietly as possible, he ran to the barn where Korth was being held.

*"I knew you would come*." Korth said rubbing his tied up snout against Authand’s cheek. The scales scratched against the stubble that had formed over the course of the day, but he found that he enjoyed the sensation. A lot more than Nualine tried to kiss him at last year’s harvest festival. His friends had been pairing off like that recently, but Authand never felt the need. Until now. He would happily spend the rest of his life with this dragon.

Authand pulled out the knife he had stolen from his father. “Hold still,” he said. “Do you want me to start with legs or snout?”

*Snout*.

Authand sawed at the rope around Korth’s mouth, but the knife didn’t seem to have any effect at all. A dull butter knife would have worked better. Authand looked at the knots, prying at them with his fingers. Korth, encouraged by his efforts began to work his jaw against his bonds, and together they managed to free his muzzle. He opened his impossibly large mouth, showing Authand rows of knife-like teeth inches from his face.

Korth moved the knife to the rope binding Korth’s body and several minutes passed as the blade struggled against the hemp to no avail.

*“Here, silly. Let me,”* Korth said, snapping at the ropes with his razor-sharp teeth, reducing them to a pile of rope fragments in seconds. Korth growled low in his throat and stretched limbs that had been stuck in one position for nearly half his young life.

Outside, the rooster crowed to announce the day. “Come on,” Authand said. “We need to leave now.”

He turned but a shadow fell across him as his father blocked the exit.

“I’m really disappointed in you, son,” he said. “I didn’t want to do this the hard way.” He pulled his everyday knife and pointed it at Authand. “We’ll start with you handing over what’s mine. That’s the proper weapon to kill a feral with.”

Authand looked at the blade in his hand, examining it closely for the first time. A headless dragon adorned the hilt in what looked like a carving but felt smooth against his hand. The blade looked sharp, even though it hadn’t been able to cut rope, and it reflected the sunlight with a glow that he would have sworn was magical, if he believed in such things.

Authand squared his hips against his father. “I think I’ll keep it. If you use this to kill, you shouldn’t have it.”

“I’ll take it whether you give it to me or not.” His father lunged, but something knocked Authand down from behind. Korth roared and rushed at the man who would attack the most important person in his life.

Authand’s father slashed with the knife in his hand, but it slid harmlessly off Korth’s scales.

“That would have been good to know when he attacked the first time,” Authand muttered to himself.

*“I know, right?”* Korth said, leaping and knocking Authand’s father down. One leg came down hard on his wrist, and a bone snapped. The knife fell to the dirt, and Korth pushed it away with his snout. He brought his face inches from the older elf and bared his fangs. "*What do I do with him? Ooh, can I eat him? I’m feeling hungry again.*"

“*No, you can’t eat him*.” Authand scratched his chin in thought.

His father swallowed hard and went stiff, then glared at his son, his eyes filled with rage “I told you dragons were dangerous. It’s not going to listen to you. It’s going to murder me right in front of you, and you’ll think he’s doing you a favor. You think he’s your friend, but one of these days you are going to find yourself in this exact position. Help me, Authand. Help your father. That knife; it’s the only thing that will work against his kind. It’s what you were born to do. It’s in your blood. Please —”

“Enough!” Authand’s shout echoed inside the high-roofed barn. “Nobody dies today.” Authand picked up the normal knife, still sat a few inches from his father’s hand. He chucked it into the rose bushes by the house. He and his father had planted those flowers together in remembrance of his mother’s death. They’d overgrown the flower bed over the years, but neither Authand nor his father had it in them to prune back their rambling beauty.

“Nobody dies today,” he said again softly. He looked at his feet. He knew what he needed to do. His father would live, but if he did this, he would be as good as dead to him. He doubted that his father would be as lenient if they met again.

Authand examined the ropes, which were still in a tangle. There was still a piece that should be long enough to bind his father, who was considerably smaller than the dragon. He grabbed it and carried it back to Korth and his father.

Korth flinched at the sight of it. Authand put a hand on his muzzle and nodded his head at his father on the ground. He brought the rope to his father’s legs. Understanding what was about to happen, his father started kicking. Korth shifted his weight to sit on the man’s legs just below the knees. Authand made quick work of tying his father’s legs together at the ankle. It wasn’t a pretty knot, but it would do the trick. It would take time for his father to get loose. Enough time for them to escape.

“Come on, Korth. Let’s go find Tulta and join the Dragoneers.”

“You’ll never be a Dragoneer!” his father screamed. Korth stood, removing his weight from the man underneath him. Authand’s father immediately started pulling at the loose end of the rope. “I will find you,” he spat. “No matter where in this world you go, I will find you. I will kill that dragon. And if it means killing you, then so be it. You chose your side.”

Chapter 3

*“I’m hungry*,” Korth grumbled. The same thing he’d been grumbling for hours.

It had been a week since they had left Authand’s home, and Korth was already taller than him. They’d eaten well enough the first few days. No worse than Authand was used to, even if he had given most of his share to his growing dragon. But eventually, forest had given way to farmland and, having grown up on a struggling farm, Authand was loathe to steal food from anyone.

Authand had no money or goods to trade for food. Even if he had, other travelers on the road avoided them, some even turning and fleeing in the opposite direction. Alone, boy and dragon trudged along the highway to the only place Authand knew how to find aside from his former home: Salta.

Authand had visited the port city only once before, after his mother had died, but before he was old enough to stay home when his father took their crops to market. He remembered it as loud and smelly, and in no way like the home he’d left behind.

He was pretty sure it was the wrong direction for the Dragoneer camp at Tulta, their real goal, but it was a start. They could get directions once there.

*And food*.

“If you could fly, you might get one of the birds overhead.” Authand tried to keep the frustration out of his voice, but he knew Korth could hear it in his mind. But who had ever heard of a dragon who couldn’t fly?

*“If* you *could fly,* you *might get one*,” Korth retorted with just as much frustration. He’d been eyeing the birds overhead all day; gulls, a sure sign they were approaching Darneta’s largest port. *And to answer your question, anyone who’s ever seen a hatchling. Could you walk when you hatched? I could at least do that.*

Authand had tried to explain to him that elves didn’t hatch, they were born, but he didn’t have the energy to correct him now. He hadn’t eaten in two days, either.

For the next few hours, they trudged in silence. The ground sloped gently towards their destination until, at long last, they reached the city gate.

A guard stopped them as they approached. “Are you lost?” she asked. “There isn’t a Dragoneer garrison in Salta right now. They’ve all been dispatched to the border to deal with the werewolf incursion. And … a hatchling?” She peered at Authand. “Shouldn’t you be in Tutlta?”

Authand swallowed hard. ’d managed to push his crime out of his mind for hours at a time, now. Feeding those pups had been aiding the enemy. But it was still the right thing to do. “We aren’t Dragoneers. Not yet, at least. We are heading to Tulta to join.”

The guard’s eyes narrowed. “How do you get a dragon if you’re not a Dragoneer? Is that a feral?” Her hand moved to her sword hilt, but she didn’t draw it.

“He is,” Authand said, jutting out his chin. Again with the feral talk. Could bonding with Korth have been a bad thing? No, he refused to believe that could be the case. “What’s wrong with that?”

The guard drew her sword this time and took a defensive stance. Beside him, Korth bared his teeth at her. She took a half step back but otherwise stood her ground.

“They’re dangerous creatures,” she snarled. “I will not admit one into the city. Begone. And don’t bother with Tulta. They’ll never let a feral join their ranks.” She waved the sword at them in a shooing motion.

She wasn’t close enough to strike should she decide to, but Authand found himself backing up regardless. He could feel Korth’s muscles tense like he was about to lunge.

“No, Korth,” he whispered quickly. “We will find another way.”

*“I’m hungry,”* Korth complained. “*Why can’t we just go through her?”*

“You barely overcame my father—what makes you think you can take a trained guard with a sword?” Authand said as he led him away from the gate. “I have a plan.”

\* \* \*

*“I’m hungry,”* Korth repeated after Authand explained his idea. They huddled in the back on a barn a little ways off the road. It was thankfully empty; Authand figured it was the wrong time of year for the owner to be doing much with it. “*Why can’t you go now?“*

“Because I have to wait for the guard to change. Otherwise, she will know that you are still around somewhere. But another guard won’t know you exist. Then I can go in, get a job, and buy food to bring out to you.”

Authand peeked out the barn door again. He could just barely make out the gate from their hiding spot. Unlike the other times he’d checked, a new guard stood in front.

His heart leapt, and he turned to Korth. “Okay, I’m going. Try not to get caught. I’ll be back by nightfall.”

Korth grumbled some more but did not object. During the few short minutes it took to walk to the gate, Authand took a deep breath, trying to keep his nerves under control. It was a good plan. It would work.

He approached the guard.

“State your business,” the new guard asked without looking up.

“I’ve been apprenticed to a baker at the market,” he lied. They’d been to see a baker when he went with his father, who had bought their grain. If the vendor remembered him, maybe he could get a job. His father would eventually return to Salta, and he would have to flee again. But it was the best he could do for now.

The guard shrugged and unlocked the gate without any other interaction. Once inside, Authand ran to the market.

He was met by a cacophony of sound, just as he remembered it, with brightly colored ribbons hanging from the stalls announcing what was within.

“Beans,” yelled a hawker, startling him. “Beans, get your beans here. Good for your digestion. Penny a pound.”

Smells of cooking meats and vegetables made his stomach rumble, a stark reminder of how little he’d had to eat in the past week. It felt unfair that there could be so much food around him, inaccessible because he didn’t have coin.

“Excuse me, sir. Can you point me to Rober’s stall?” he asked the hawker.

“Shoo, unless you’re buying something.”

Authand balled his fists in anger but did as the merchant instructed. He tried the next stall, with similar results.

After six stalls, Authand started to despair of finding anyone to help him. He could search the market all day and not find the man on his own.

“Hey, kid,” a voice called behind him.

Authand whirled around, prepared to be indignant. At fifteen, he was hardly a kid. He was, however lost. Without realizing it, he’d made it in the small alley that ran behind the rows of stalls.

An old man sat on a stool with a tub of water before him, peeling potatoes and tossing them in. Behind him, the smell of fried potatoes wafted from inside the stall. “You’re looking for Rober?”

“Yes, sir.” Authand kept his temper at bay. If the old man could help, then he’d swallow his pride a little.

“I hate to tell you this, but Rober died three years ago.”

Authand deflated. “Who runs his stall now? Maybe they will give me a job.”

The old man shook his head. “It closed down. Rober never had any kids. Couldn’t have, with the company he kept.”

“What do you mean?” Authand cocked his head, forgetting his own predicament for a moment.

“He was one of those homosexuals,” the man told him. He paused to toss another potato into the tub and pull another from the bag by his feet.

“I’m sorry, sir. I don’t know that word.”

The old man leaned forward and motioned Authand closer. “It means he likes fellas,” he whispered. “You know, the way a man is supposed to like the ladies.”

Authand pondered that information for a moment. Men who preferred other men over women. Was it possible he himself was like Rober? It would explain why he hadn’t been interested in Clanire kissing him at the harvest festival.

He thought about the other boys in the village. There were a few that had been his age, although he’d never been close to any of them. He tried to imagine making out with any of them below the hollyflower at the winter solstice. The idea felt as unenticing as kissing Clanire again.

Authand shook his head, dispelling his thoughts. “I don’t suppose you need help? I can peel potatoes.”

“Sorry, kid. We’re good. My son runs things now, and he has his own kids to help. I’m just out here trying to stay useful in my old age.” He plopped another potato into the water. “If you’re looking for work, try the docks. They can always use a strapping lad like you.”

“Thank you, sir,” Authand said. “I need to hurry so I can buy food for me and my, uh ... friend.”

The old man guffawed. “You’re one, too, huh? No wonder you wanted to work for Rober. He would have liked you.”

Authand pursed his lips at the thought. Even if he *had* wanted a man, Rober had been old when he’d met him five years ago. “It’s not...” he started, but just ran off instead.

It was already past noon, and he was running out of time.

Chapter 4

Authand followed the smell of salt in the air and the ever-present gulls flying overhead until he found a pier sticking out into the sea. The ocean went on forever. He’d imagined it was just like the lake at home, but bigger. But this was so more than that.

He walked up to the nearest worker, who was carrying a crate slung over his shoulder. “Are you hiring?” he asked. “An old man at the market said you would be.”

The worker pointed with his elbow at a small office away from the hustle of workers unloading a three-masted ship bearing the green, red, blue, and brown flag of the Elemental nation, Femlid. “You want to talk to Doc. Just be warned, kid—he’ll try to take advantage of you. Try to find a job elsewhere.”

Authand looked at his feet. “I don’t have anywhere else to go. The merchant I planned on working for died.”

The worker grunted, already leaving Authand behind. “Suit yourself. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Authand knocked on the door to the office the dockhand had pointed out to him. It was unlatched and swung open from the impact of his fist, causing him to jump. After a moment, he stepped in. The far wall was dominated by a map of the world. It focused on the oceans and various ports, but provided some detail of inland as well. A giant lake, labeled Tulta, dominated the center of Darneta. That must be where the Dragoneers lived.

But the country was vast. Based on the distance between where his village must be on the border to the Wolf country to Salta, they couldn’t possibly hope to make it on foot.

An old Dwarf sat hunched over a desk with scrolls and other papers strewn about, and looked up when he entered.

“Excuse me, sir,” Authand said. “Could you let Doc know I’m here? I’m looking for work.”

The Dwarf hopped off his stool and approached him. A graying beard reached his stomach, and his head barely reached Authand’s chest. But what he lacked in height, the Dwarf made up for in broadness. He wasn’t fat, but powerfully built from a lifetime of manual labor with a little bit of a belly to show that that life was behind him. “I’m Doc. You have any experience?”

“No, sir. But I grew up on a farm. I’m strong and used to working long hours.”

“A farm boy, eh? Okay. I’ll give you half a silver a day. If you start now, you’ll get half a day’s pay. Deal?” Doc held out his hand.

Authand shook it. The dockhand had said Doc would try to cheat him, but that seemed fair. “That works. Where do I start?”

Doc pointed out the room’s one dirty window. “Get that ship unloaded. Follow the hands that aren’t carrying something, grab a crate, and follow the ones who are to where they go. Easy enough.”

Authand nodded and ran out of the office, the door rattling behind him. The work was monotonous but easy enough compared to what he was used to. They worked well into the night to finish, the Dragonmoon and King’s moon illuminating the sky enough to get the job done.

Once the last crate was stowed in the warehouse, Authand ran to the office. “Doc, we’ve finished unloading.”

“I can see that,” Doc said, not looking up from the scroll he was skimming. It was so dark Authand could barely make him out sitting at the desk a few feet away; he couldn’t understand how the Dwarf could possibly see the writing on the scroll. “What do you want? Or did you waste my time to tell me something I could figure for myself?”

“Oh, uh,” Authand stammered. “I’d like my pay.”

“Payday is at the end of the month. And I don’t give advances.”

“But the King just passed the Dragon. That’s three weeks away. How am I supposed to eat?”

Doc shrugged, an almost imperceptible motion. “There’s plenty of fish in the ocean. You’ll figure something out.”

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Korth was dozing at the back of the barn when Authand finally returned. “Must be nice,” he grumbled to himself. He’d spent hours working, and cheated out of his pay, while the dragon slept.

But then he softened. In the past week, Authand had developed a real affection for his accidental life-mate. He’d wondered if you could be attracted to dragons, instead of men or women. But what they felt was as different as it was more than that. Besides, if their positions were reversed, he couldn’t say that he wouldn’t do the same.

But now it was time to act. Authand gave Korth a nudge to wake him. The dragon snapped but stopped mid-motion when he realized who it was. “*You can reach out through your bond. I almost bit you. Did you bring food?”*

Authand filed that information away. There was still so much to learn. “*Well, no. But I know how to get it. Can you swim*?”

*Korth’s head perked up. “I have to swim to get to where the food is?”*

“*Fish*,” Authand said*. “You’re going to eat fish. But we have to catch them ourselves. I got a job, but I won’t get paid for three weeks. And if you can swim in the ocean, we can bypass the gate to get you into the city*.” He glanced behind him before looking back. “*We’ll be sleeping in a warehouse. It’s the best I can do until I can figure out a way to get us to Tulta*.”

Korth stood and arched his back like a cat. He shook his wings out, and the wind it caused rattled the equipment on the walls. “*Why can’t we go straight to Tulta?”*

Authand shook his head. “*There was a map in the dockmaster’s office. Tulta is halfway across the continent. We will never make it there on our own. And if what that guard said is true, they won’t take us anyway. We’re on our own. I’ve got nobody but you left in my life*.”

He deflated a little. He hadn’t thought of it in those terms, but there it was. Immense is what he’d gained by bonding with this adorable orange dragon, who would grow up to be winged death but would never hurt him. But what he’d lost was just as great. His father. His home. His idea of what his future would look like.

He’d never visit his mother’s grave again. He wondered how she would have reacted to Korth. She’d had a big heart and was kind to animals. But he’d been taken aback by his father’s reaction. Could she--. No, he wouldn’t even finish the thought. He’d not sully her memory with conjecture.

But still, there was a lot to speak against the situation,

*“I will follow you anywhere*,” Korth answered him after a minute, having sensed that Authand had needed that time to process all of the conflicting emotions *“You’re all that I want or need. Okay, lead the way so I can find out what fish tastes like.*”

They walked a good half mile to the shore. Authand had borrowed a rowboat after work, finding it a little ways at a smaller wharf where fishermen landed. Well, technically, he had taken it—but he didn’t think of it as theft, because he was bringing it right back. Even if Korth could swim, there was no way Authand could make it that distance in open water. The trip here in the boat, currently beached on the rocky shore, had been more than twice the length of the small lake near his home. Former home. The sea was dark and uninviting, and even though the weather had been calm, the waves had lapped against the docks all day the way the lake only had in a storm.

At the shore, Korth took a few timid steps into the water. “*It’s cold,”* he complained.

Authand shivered in sympathy. “*But can you swim? Or am I going to have to tow you the entire way?*” He hoped that it wouldn’t come to that. They might not make it before dawn, and it would be a lot harder to sneak ashore. Plus, his new boss would dock his pay if he were late to work.

Korth pushed himself into the ocean until he could no longer touch the bottom. The sensation unnerved him, experiencing both sitting in the boat and floating in the cold sea as a dragon. After bobbing a few times, he opened his wings to spread out his mass, finding equilibrium with the salt water. He paddled with his wings, splashing Authand in the rowboat. “*I can do this. But don’t go too far.”*

“*Of course not.*” Authand smiled. *“Try to catch some dinner while we make a way around the sea wall*.” The wall surrounding the city extended well into the ocean, with watchtowers that sat atop it at the ends. But they wouldn’t be concerned with a single rowboat.

They made their way in silence for several minutes. Korth seemed to become more comfortable with swimming. “*Ooh, something tickles!”* He ducked his head in the water, pausing to find the perpetrator. His head returned a moment later, with a fish almost as big as Authand, flopping between his jaws. “*Is this a fish? It looks funny.”*

Authand laughed. “I’m sure that to it, you look strange, too. But, y*eah, it is*.”

Korth swallowed it whole, then considered. “*I liked the deer better.”*

“Well, you better get used to the taste, because you won’t find any venison for miles.”

*“It’s not bad, just different. And there are hundreds down there. This will be easier than catching one deer at a time.”* Korth dove back into the water, his entire body disappearing from view.

Authand sat in boat, wondering how many fish it would take to feed a dragon. Several seconds later, there was still no sign of him. “*Korth*?” he shouted over the side. “*Korth, where are you*?”

*“I’m fine. Dragons have big lungs.”* After a few more seconds, Korth returned to the surface. With a flick of his neck, he tossed two more barracudas into the boat.” *I got you some, too.”*

Authand backed away from the fish flopping about at his feet. “Uh, thanks. But I need to cook my food. I’ll save these for later.”

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They stopped twice more for Korth to fish before making it back to the wharf. An inlet kept away the worst of the wind from the sea. Nearby, an assortment of homeless people of varying races had made their way into the area since Authand had left. They huddled around fires lit in leftover fish barrels. They eyed him as he returned the rowboat to its moorings.

Then, Korth pulled himself out of the water, and a collective gasp went through the small crowd. One of them—a human—started to bolt away, and Authand’s heart jumped into his throat.

“Wait!” he said quickly. “Wait, don’t go. I have these fish to buy your silence.” The man who had started to run stopped and turned his head tentatively, ready to bolt again if the dragon went after him.

With some effort, Authand lifted the large fish over his head, and the people started to crowd around him.

“A mackerel,” someone said. “We’ll eat well tonight.”

The holdout trotted back to the group with a nod. Authand handed the fish over to him and his friends, promising, “If you keep quiet and prepare me some of that, Korth will bring you more every night. Also, will you share a fire with him so he can dry out?” He pointed to the puddle forming beneath the dragon as he tried to shake the water off.

“For a steady supply of food, you can smuggle anything you wish,” the former holdout told him.

“It’s not smuggling, it’s … it’s complicated. But thank you.”

The people made room for Korth, who took up an entire fire barrel to himself. Somebody produced a knife and made quick work filleting the two fish and cooking them on grates over the fire. The mackerel was large and provided enough meat for all to eat their fill.

Authand sat against Korth, who was now mostly dry, to eat his portion. The meat tasted unlike anything he’d had before, stronger than anything he’d caught from his village’s pond or the stream that fed it. The smell of ash permeated it from cooking over the wet wood.

He knew he should talk to the others, and try to get information about their temporary home, but he was hungry, and talking to strangers wasn’t a skill he’d had much practice at. He’d probably spoken to more new people already today than he had in his entire life previously.

After Authand ate, he and Korth, now dry and warm, headed into the warehouses. “*I saw this one while I was working. It doesn’t get used often. I was told a duke rents it exclusively for his use, and it will remain empty for at least a month*.” Speaking with his mind still felt unnatural, but he was already trusting the men at the wharf a great deal, and didn’t want them to know more about him and Korth than was necessary.

*“I don’t like this hiding in the dark all day,”* Korth complained.

Authand rubbed the dragon’s snout. A month ago, if somebody had told him that he’d be this close to a dragon, he would have laughed. But in the past week, they’d grown closer than he’d ever imagined being to someone. He loved Korth, not in a way that his friends back home had declared they loved the various girls of the village, but something deeper that transcended anything he had words for. Authand didn’t know much about how the world worked, but he knew he would trade his life for Korth’s if need be. “*I know, but we aren’t welcome here. Once we come up with a plan, we can move on*.”

*“When I am bigger, I will not care if I am welcome or not. I will do as I please and there will be none that can stop me.”* Korth curled up into a ball on the wooden floor of the warehouse and immediately went to sleep.

Authand knew he shouldn’t, but he’d been up since the previous dawn and had worked hard that day. A short nap would do him wonders. He leaned against the dragon and sleep overtook him at once.

Chapter 5

“Authand, wake up.”

A stick poked at his shoulder, and Authand woke to find the human from last night holding it at arm’s length, clearly not comfortable with being even that close to a sleeping dragon.

“The dockworkers are starting,” the man said. “We thought that if you got fired for not showing up, you would move on and we’d lose our fish.”

“Thank you.” Authand stood and stretched. His back felt like one giant knot from the position he’d slept in. The day would be difficult until he worked it out.

The man nodded and ran out of the building.

Authand turned to Korth. “Are you awake?”

No response came from the Orange mass, and his back rose and fell with each breath. “Guess not.” Authand sighed and left to join the other workers as a three-masted ship maneuvered up to the dock. One of the workers gave him a look, apparently noting his arrival from the warehouses to the North instead of the main road to the East. The older Elf gave a knowing look but said nothing.

The ship’s gangplank came down, halting any chance for something to be said or done. Authand took his place in line to unload the ship. It was much larger than the one they’d unloaded the day before and would take at least two days to empty.

The morning passed with silence. But after a few hours, Authand suddenly felt anxious, more anxious than he’d ever felt before. “*Where are you?”* Korth’s panicked voice filled his head. “*You’re gone. Why did you leave me?”*

“Quiet,” Authand spoke out loud. A worker, the same one who had given him the knowing look before, raised an eyebrow at him. Authand glanced away and focused on thinking his words without speaking. *“I’m at work. I figured I’d let you sleep, but I had to get up.”*

*“Next time, wake me*,” Korth said*.” I don’t like not being able to find you. I was ready to come out of this dreadful cave to look for you.”*

*It’s not a cave, it’s a building. I will visit during my lunch.*

That seemed to settle Korth a bit.

When the lunch bell rang, Authand waited until the others were eating before heading for his dragon. Just as he was heading toward the warehouse, however, a voice came from behind him: “Not hungry?”

Authand whirled around to find the dockhand from earlier, the one who had noticed him leaving the warehouse. While the other workers were an assortment of races from around the globe, this one, at least, was another Elf. A head taller than Authand and about the age of his father, he had a look of weariness, like he’d been stuck in his situation too long to believe it would ever change, but not so long to lose hope that it ever would.

“I don’t have any money.” Authand looked down. That much was true, but if the man started asking questions, he’d have to lie about his true purpose.

“Come. I have some bread. It’s a bit stale, but better than starving. I’m Penno.”

“Thank you, sir, but I couldn’t possibly,” Authand said.

“No, I insist. Besides, you shouldn’t be rummaging about back there. No good will come of it if you are caught.”

Authand sighed. “Okay. I mean … thank you.” He took another glance at the buildings behind him, half wondering if he could sneak off once his new friend’s back was turned.

But the older Elf kept talking the entire way back to the tables near an overhand where some of the others were gathered. Authand tried to evade the small talk with answers that had just enough truth to be believable. They didn’t pry too much. Authand guessed that he wasn’t the first runaway to wind up here.

The other workers made room for him at the table, and once he sat, someone handed him a chunk of bread and a bit of cheese. As promised, the bread had a hard crust that was difficult to bite through. The cheese was unfamiliar, with holes scattered about the mass, making up almost half the hunk.

Authand eyed it, and the other Elf laughed. “Pests haven’t gotten to it, if that’s what you’re wondering. It comes from the north and forms with air pockets naturally. Try it; you’ll like it.”

Authand took a tentative bite. It had a strong taste. He preferred the soft cheese his father sometimes traded for, but this was better than the dry bread.

He was only halfway through the meal when the bell rang again, so he shoved the rest into his pockets. They would make a good addition to that night’s dinner of more fish.

Penno didn’t bother him for the rest of the day, although he kept glancing over to make sure Authand hadn’t snuck off. The crew quit at dusk this time, and Authand waited for the others to leave before sneaking back to Korth.

Chapter 6

*“You didn’t visit at lunch”.* The hurt crept through in Korth’s voice.

Authand rubbed his snout. The touch calmed them both. “Someone suspected me. We can’t afford to let anyone know about you. Not yet. Not until we are ready. Come now, we have to go catch our rent.” He held open the door for the dragon to exit. This part of the port was empty as usual.

*“More like I will catch it. Hopefully the fish will try harder to not get caught. It was too easy.”* Once clear of the warehouses, the fires came into view again.

“Take the easy meals while you can,” Authand said with a laugh. “Once we leave Salta, food will be scarce again.”

*“Then I will eat my fill while we are still here. Even if the fish are no fun.”* Korth slid into the water like he was born to it, making barely a splash. He sank below the surface and rose again several hundred feet away.

Authand approached one of the fires. Only a few people had arrived so far. This group was all elves, veterans of past wars, some missing hands or even entire limbs. They shared stories of heroism and other, more prurient exploits.

Authand interrupted, not really wanting to listen to more boasts of how many women they’d slept with. “Where is Roland?”

There had been a man different from the others last night, Roland. The only one who hadn’t eaten, and his skin had looked unnaturally pale to Authand. Before coming to Salta, Authand hadn’t seen that many light-skinned people. Most of this village shared his dark brown skin.

“He won’t be here until full dark. They can go out in daylight, but it hurts their eyes. Nocturnal hunters and all that.” He shrugged.

Authand cocked his head. “I guess that’s what Korth is, although he says he’d rather be out during the day.”

“Nah.” The elf shook his head. “Roland’s a Vampire. A blood sucker. Don’t let him get too close to you. He’ll drain you dry.”

“Speaking of which,” another soldier cut in. He had all his limbs, but a deep slash crossed his face from cheek to forehead, cutting through a puckered eyelid that had nothing underneath. “I ever tell you about Sera? Boy, could she—”

Authand sighed and turned away, wanting to avoid more sex talk. Just in time to save him from coming up with an excuse, Korth pulled himself onto the dock, this time with three of the succulent fish. The men would eat well tonight, and Authand would actually get a good night’s rest.

The Dragonmoon appeared over the horizon, and with it, Roland. Authand thought the pale man was around twenty, but if he was really a Vampire, he could be a hundred and Authand would never be able to tell the difference. As Roland settled in, he didn’t speak, nor did he take any of the fish as it came off the fire. He simply stared at Authand.

It made Authand uncomfortable. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t shake that stare. He looked away for a moment as their self-appointed cook passed him his piece of fish. When he looked back up, Roland was gone.

How could he have disappeared so quickly?

Authand had just started to scan the dock, looking for him, when, without warning, Roland burst from the shadows. With a hiss, he tossed Authand into Korth’s side, sending the fish flying from his hands and causing the group of elves to scatter, stamping out their small fire.

With a cry, Authand reached out, rousing the dragon from his slumber. He’d been more than twenty feet away, but the Vampire had thrown him as easily as one would toss a stick.

*“Well, that was uncalled for,”* Korth complained. “*I was almost dry.”*

Roland took a few steps forward, his eyes shining with hunger. Authand didn’t need to be an expert on Vampires to know what he was planning next.

Panic gripped his heart, and he pulled at Korth’s shoulder—not that he could budge the dragon. In almost two weeks, Korth had doubled in size. “We’re in danger,” he whispered frantically. “Quick, into the sea!”

Behind them, the Vampire growled, and Authand could hear the thunder of feet running across the dock toward them. Without looking back, he ran, too, in step with Korth. It was only a few seconds until they neared the end of the dock, though, and the dark water churned threateningly before him.

Somehow, he hardly had to think about what to do next. In a movement that felt as natural as blinking, Authand took a deep breath and leapt onto Korth’s back just before they jumped into the water.

Maybe Korth could not support his weight on land yet, but the water buoyed them. The dragon swam under the dock, as far from any edge as they could get. Boot steps clambered above their heads. Whistles blew and several shouted. There were sounds of a scuffle, and then it fell quiet. The only sound they heard was the waves lapping at the piers around them.

Several minutes of silence passed before Authand dared to speak. “I think it’s clear.”

They came out from under the dock, and Authand poked his head above. The rest of the fires had been doused. A gull picked at the scattered bits of the evening’s meal.

*“Can we light the fire again?”* Korth asked as they climbed back onto the dock. *I’m cold.* He shook himself, showering Authand in a torrent.

“I wouldn’t risk it. I think we should just go back to our hiding spot and dry off as best we can.” Authand shivered and stuck his hands in his pockets, finding the cheese and bread from earlier. The cheese had fared okay, but the bread was ruined. He tossed it to the scavenging gull, who swallowed it down and returned to the fish.

He and Korth walked in silence back to the warehouse, thankfully without being seen. The dragon grumbled about being cold again, but the adrenaline from the night’s raid on the dock had worn off for Authand. He draped his clothes over an old table to dry and curled up close to Korth’s belly to keep from freezing.

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The new day came too early, and Authand’s clothes were still damp. As he donned them miserably, he thought back to his bed back home. He and his father hadn’t had a lot, but he’d had a bed and dry clothes in the morning. Now all he had was squatting in an old warehouse.

*“And a dragon,”* Korth reminded him without opening his eyes. “*I think that’s the most important part.”*

“That’s true.” Authand picked at a loose scale above Korth’s shoulder, setting it back into place.

*“Thank you,”* Korth said*. “That had been nagging me. I’m going back to sleep now. I need my beauty rest.”*

Authand laughed and patted him goodbye. Korth was right. He had a dragon. He was a Dragoneer, even if it wasn’t official yet and Korth had never been off the ground. They would be okay.

The day passed without event, but when Authand returned to the docks after dark, he found it deserted. He hoped the others were okay. From their stories, many of them had been living in temporary camps for years. The bigger concern, if any were caught, was if they would talk.

*“Can we light our own fire?”* Korth asked, already dipping below the waves. *“I don’t want to go to bed wet again*.”

“I don’t see why we can’t,” Authand said, looking around apprehensively. “I just … don’t understand where everyone is.”

A voice cut the silence, startling him: “They won’t return for a few more days in case the night watch returns.” Roland appeared beside him, already close enough to touch him. Authand hadn’t even seen him. ”And they will. You aren’t safe here. “

Authand took a step back. “I bet. Let me guess; you called them .”

In a second, Korth had thrown himself back onto the dock and scurried over to them. He pushed himself between the two, baring his fangs at Roland.

Roland bared his in return. “If I wanted your rider dead, the two of you would already be so,” he scolded. “I’m trying to protect him, you stupid beast.”

Korth snapped at the Vampire, but Roland was already behind them. Korth turned just as Authand felt a mouth hover over his neck.

Roland inhaled deeply. “The bond changes the scent of the rider.” He exhaled slowly, a sound resignation tinged with desire. “Just a hint of dragon comes through.”

Roland pushed him away with a flick of his wrist, sending him tumbling in front of Korth. “As I said, if I wanted your blood more than your service, I would already have it. I’m offering you sanctuary. And a job. One better suited for an unaffiliated dragon and rider.”

Authand pushed himself up, dusting off his pants. “Don’t Vampires have their own Dragoneers?”

Roland let out a dismissive snort. “Yes. But I am, shall we say, unaffiliated with my homeland. My tastes are more … refined. Their rules are beneath me.”

“You’re a criminal.” Authand balled his fists. It struck him as a little hypocritical to be upset at that when he was trespassing on another man’s property.

“I’m an entrepreneur,” Roland countered. “But … I see you’re not ready. Come see me once you realize how much the system controls you.”

Then, in a blink of an eye, Roland was gone.

Remembering what had happened the last time Roland disappeared suddenly, Authand motioned to Korth. “Let’s find another fishing spot.”

Chapter 7

The weeks passed without further incident. Authand kept a better ear out for anyone approaching and avoided patrolling night watch every few nights. They seemed to almost be herding him in specific directions, and Authand knew that if he left his guard down, they would catch him for sure.

Korth continued to grow and grow, until he barely fit through the warehouse door. Authand didn’t know what they would do if he got any bigger, and there was no doubt he would. Still, when the dragon tried to fly, he never got far; as yet, he had only managed a few short hops.

The King’s moon sat low on the horizon, visible even during the day. The month was almost up, and Authand would finally get paid. As he worked on the dock, he imagined the vegetables he would buy to give some variety to his nightly meal.

*“A cow for me, please”,* Korth said through their bond, and Authand chuckled. The other workers looked at him, but he hid his face with the barrel he was carrying. It was rough with salt and smelled of brine.

*“I don’t think I’ll get paid that much*,” he replied mentally.

*“Well, something other than fish,”* Korth said, then paused. “*Uh-oh.”*

A lump formed in his throat. *“What do you mean uh-oh?”*

Before Korth could answer, a noise reached Authand—a shout from the direction of their warehouse hideout. “Hey!” someone yelled. “There’s something in here.”

Authand dropped his barrel, and it tipped over. Pickled herring spilled out, drenching his feet and the feet of those nearby with brine.

"Hey, you!" a laborer behind him shouted. "Careful with that. My boots are going to stink for a month!"

Authand waved him off, already sprinting to the warehouse that he and Korth called home.

*“Therearemenhere,”* Korth said all at once. “*I need you.”*

"Calm down," Authand breathed as he darted into an alley. The buildings on the other side were tall with overhanging eves. The passage almost never got direct light and smelled of rot. He rarely went this way, but it was quicker than the larger road that led straight to the warehouse. "What's happening?"

*“I'm not alone. There are three men with torches searching the warehouse. I managed to climb into the rafters above the office, but it's only a matter of time before they look up.”*

Authand’s breathing came in short ragged bursts as he scaled the fence blocking the end of the alley and landed near a small crowd, who were murmuring as they peered into the dark warehouse door. He made his way around the edge of the crowd to try to get a better look. Korth's hiding spot wasn’t visible from the front of the building, thankfully. He felt himself relax slightly. If he could just get inside….

Authand pushed in between two dock workers at the front. "What's going on?"

A sandy-haired elf about a head taller than Authand glanced at him before looking back inside. A lock of hair fell in front of his face with the motion, and he pushed it away before speaking. "Animal of some sort. They found it when Doc ordered this place cleaned up for a shipment coming.”

The other man in the front snorted. "It's nothing that exciting. Just a squatter or something. They'll catch him and deliver him to the Watch. I imagine they'll be here soon enough."

"It's not a bum," the sandy-haired elf responded. "I saw a glimpse of it. It had a tail. Orange like the sands at Velahr and longer than a man."

Authand’s breath hitched, his heart leaping. He had seen Korth.

"You're being fanciful,” the other man scoffed. “What kind of animal looks like that?"

The elf squared up to his companion. The stray lock fell again but was ignored this time. "Could be a dragon."

The man laughed. "A dragon? Really? Do you see any Dragoneers around here? There hasn't been a dragon in Salta for months."

Authand slid away while they argued, distracting the crowd. He snuck inside the open door and into the shadows.

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The warehouse’s windows provided enough light to see, although not well. Authand stood with his back pressed against the wall just beside the door until his vision adjusted to the dimness. He made his way around the perimeter until he reached the hallway leading to the rear area.

Korth had apparently been exploring the building while Authand worked, and had somehow managed to open the locked doors. Most of the rooms contained rows of cots, enough to house a small garrison of troops. Another room held what looked like an armory, albeit one that had been emptied out. Whatever this lord dealt in, it was valuable enough to warrant an armed guard.

Suddenly, a hand fell on Authand's shoulder. "What are you doing in here, kid?"

He whirled around, but couldn’t break the grip. An Elemental stood more than a foot over him. His head was shaved clean, with a large tattoo of the globe, signifying his allegiance to the earth clan. Despite layers of muscle, he moved without a sound. He wore three blades that Authand could see, and could probably kill with his bare hands.

"I, uh, wanted to help." Authand fumbled for a believable lie. "I'm sure there will be a reward when we catch it."

The Elemental chuckled, and the tension eased from his posture. "I suppose that depends on what we find in here. But I can't let you run around in here unarmed."

"I have a dagger." Authand lifted his shirt enough to reveal the scabbard. He slid the bronze blade out of the leather, and the dragon emblem glinted in the light of the torch.

The Elemental backed away as if burnt by its nearness. "Sssh! Put that away!" He hunched down to whisper, but not before checking twice to make sure the coast was clear. "Don't be waving that around where others can see it."

"What—" Authand started, but the man shushed him again.

"Not here. Someone—or something—may be listening. Now, go. We will cover more ground if we split up."

Authand blinked as the torchlight receded into the distance. The mystery of his father’s knife grew, but he couldn’t focus on that now. He had to act fast. And he had one advantage over the Elemental. He’d roamed this building for weeks at night.

His only problem was that he didn't have a clue what he and Korth would do once they were reunited. “*Korth, be careful.”* He told his dragon friend about the man he’d just met while making his way to the corner.

Korth told him how he’d pushed an empty crate up to the sill of a blacked-out window near the entrance. From the sill, he had climbed up into the rafters. Hopping from rafter to rafter had been slower than cutting directly across the open space, but it had kept the dragon from being discovered.

Quickly, Authand followed that same trajectory, climbing the crate into the rafters. Just enough light filtered through the gaps in the boarded-up windows to see the rafters in front of him. Had he not spent a considerable amount of time hunting in the trees outside his village, this would have been foolhardy at best. But in the winter, Authand had frequently gone into the woods before dawn to maximize hunting time.

He steadied himself on his perch and leapt to the next rafter. Momentum threatened to carry him forward past the rafter and hurtle him to the floor fifteen feet below. The upright support brace of the rafter lay just within his reach. He grabbed it and leaned into it until the wobbling stopped.

One down. Twenty-three to go.

"*Hurry*," Korth pleaded. "*They're getting closer*."

*“I thought you were a dragon,”* Authand said with as much reassurance as he could muster. “*I thought you weren't afraid of anything.”* With a small grunt, he landed on the next rafter. Twenty-two.

"*I'm not*." Korth huffed. "*But that doesn't mean I want to fight them alone*."

That was fair. *If I go any faster, I'll fall,* Authand explained. If he was prepared for it, the landing probably wouldn't injure him too badly, but he'd have to go back to the corner and start over.

Just as he leapt for the next rafter, Korth invaded his mind. The dragon was always present in his head through their bond, but this felt different. Authand barely caught the wood, shouldn't have caught it, but his reflexes responded just a hair more quickly than usual.

He could smell the hint of rot in the ceiling above him, and the salt from the ocean through the walls. Somewhere below, echoing off the building, came the sound of breathing from the Elemental, and another person.

The room appeared brighter. It wasn't really; he could tell it was just as dark as a moment ago. But details previously impossible to make out could now be seen clearly. What was happening?

"*I think that's me*," Korth said. His voice felt louder than usual in Authand’s mind. "*I wished you could use my better vision and reflexes so you could move faster. And I guess it worked. But now I can barely see, and my movements are sluggish, so I hope it’s not permanent. You have barely any control over your body and your eyesight is horrible*."

Authand jumped to the next rafter and almost overshot his target. Apparently, there was some borrowed strength as well. *It is not. My sight is one of the keenest in my village.*

Korth snorted. "*Oh, gods. You mean all you elves are this blind? How do you get anything done?"*

*“You're distracting me,”* Authand scolded*. “I thought you wanted me to hurry.”*

Korth quieted, and Authand made the next leap with ease.

The landing after that came even easier. After a couple more, Authand barely paused from one jump to the next until he neared the rear of the main room of the warehouse. The wall here went all the way to the roof.

A sound drew Authand’s attention. The man with the torch was approaching the hallway that led to the rear area. Authand needed to slip past him and reach the door first. But if he made a sound now, it would be impossible to hide.

He stuck his free hand in his pocket as he pondered how to get past this hurdle. He'd picked up the affectation from his father when he was still young enough to idolize him. He felt something in his pocket, way at the bottom. It was his flint. The watch had harried him so much the previous night that he hadn't ever had a chance to cook his food, instead throwing it back in the ocean.

It would be a gamble. If he couldn't retrieve it later, he'd be left with no way of cooking his only source of food until Doc paid him.

"*Once I get my fire, you won't need a flint*," Korth said.

*“That doesn’t really help us now,”* Authand shot back before he could stop himself.

The dragon grew silent again, but Authand could feel his frustration coursing through his mind.

Another plan didn't seem forthcoming, so Authand took a deep breath. Palms slick, he raised his hand and threw the flint toward the far wall.

With his dragon-enhanced strength, it hid hard, making a loud sound in the quiet building. The man and his torch swung toward the sound, bobbing off in that direction. By the time he had reached it, Authand had reached his own target.

He wasn't sure if the borrowed dragon strength would soften the blow of the drop. Instead of chancing it, he crouched down and gripped the beam he stood on. He swung his body over the side, bringing his feet closer to the floor. Letting go, he fell the remaining six feet to the ground.

The wood groaned under the force, hiding his own groan. The enhanced strength definitely did not soften the fall.

Or the noise. The searchers would have heard that. He needed to keep moving.

His knee throbbed when he took a step, sharp pain shooting up his leg, but he could keep walking. Should it come to a chase, he didn't stand a chance. But he'd cross that bridge when he came to it.

The back half of the warehouse didn't have any windows, aside from one in what appeared to be an open dormitory. Without Korth's vision, Authand would have never had been able to make his way to where the dragon hid, slumped down from his perch to the floor.

Authand rushed to Korth. Lethargy threatened to envelop them both through their bond. “*What's wrong?”*

"*So. Tired*," Korth panted. "*Let's not do that agai*n."

Authand nodded. The dragonsight had been useful, but it made sense that it came with a price. According to legend, some elves could heal with light coming from their hands, but Authand had never seen anyone who could do that. He suspected that it was nothing more than an old bard's tale. He sat next to the dragon, with his father's knife in his hand. He couldn't take two full grown men with it, but it was better than nothing.

Authand's eyelids felt heavy. The sun hadn't yet reached its zenith when he’d entered the warehouse, but lack of sleep at night, coupled with lying against Korth’s warm body, made a dangerous combination. Behind him, the dragon snored lightly.

"Kid, wake up." Authand's eyes snapped open at a touch on his shoulder.

The Elemental from earlier, who had recognized his father's knife, knelt at arm's length, his eyes never leaving Korth's head. He was turned to the side, ready to bolt at any indication that the dragon was waking.

"That's bad luck, to get caught by a feral like that. Surprised he ain't eaten you already. But now's your chance. Plunge it into his heart, before the beast wakes." His voice came out in a low whisper, with just a bit of a tremble. Authand realized he was scared.

He might be able to use that to his advantage. He gave the dragon a mental nudge. Korth needed to wake up without reacting until the moment was just right.

The breathing shifted behind Authand, but the Elemental either didn't notice or didn't think it was important.

Authand inched forward, towards the knife. It had fallen from his hand, only a few inches away, but he made a show of caution. "What is this blade, anyway? It was my father's."

The Elemental backed another foot away. "You're not in the League? No wonder a dragon caught you. The dragon king stole our magic when the dragon bond was formed, a thousand years ago. Your elders taught you about all that, right? With the Goblin War?"

Authand nodded. He gripped the knife, but the Elemental wasn't paying attention to it now.

"We lost all our magics. Elves could do great things. All the races lost, but us most of all. The bond was supposed to end with the war, but it didn't. That bastard, Vernis, tricked us, saved all the magic for himself. Some think he's not dead, just biding his time until he can return and enslave us all. The League has vowed to stop it. There's a giant stone, supposed to be the heart of the dragon king himself, that holds the bond. Destroy that, and destroy the dragon bond. Until then, we just kill any dragon we can with these enchanted Dragonkiller blades."

Authand's cheeks burned, and he gripped the knife tighter. Korth tensed behind him. "Why haven't you killed it already, then?" he asked the Elemental stalling for time, scrambling for alternatives to doing violence himself.

"Lost my knife a few years back while attacking a Vampire's beast. Ugly creatures, when they bond with a Vampire. Barely got out with my life."

Korth growled deeply, signaling Authand to strike.

"And this time, you won't." Authand lunged, slashing the blade in front of him. It connected with the Elemental’s arm but didn't pierce the skin.

A cruel grin formed on his opponent’s face. "It don't work on anything but a dragon. Give it here.” He reached out. “You don't deserve such an important weapon."

Authand batted him away. If he couldn't use it as a knife, he'd use it as a club.

Korth took that opportunity to leap over Authand, barely missing the ceiling above. He landed on the Elemental with one claw pinning down each arm. Two sickening cracks mingled in the darkness; the Elf’s arms crushed under the weight of an animal roughly the size of three cows. Thankfully, before he could cry out, his body slumped. Unconscious.

If Authand had eaten in the last several hours, he would have lost the meal to the floor at the sight. He turned his head, his mouth watering, his head spinning. "Come on, we need to go."

*“Can I eat him? I bet he tastes better than fish.”*

Authand's stomach rolled at the thought, and he took a deep breath to keep himself from retching. "No," he hissed. "You can't eat people. And he's not even dead."

*“Of course. I wouldn't want to if he was. I don't know why people insist on dead meat all the time.”*

"Come on, we need to get out of here!" Authand ran to the doorway at the end of the hall, which led into the main portion of the warehouse. He didn't see their other pursuer but the light was too dim to see very far.

*“I don't see anyone, either”,* Korth said behind him.

"Good, then let's go." Authand kept his head on swivel as he made a beeline towards the patch of light that marked the building's exit. How they would escape with a throng of people watching was a plan he had a scant few moments to come up with.

A voice came from his right, a few dozen feet away. "Newell, is that you?"

Authand had hoped to evade the other man, but Farr's luck was not on their side today.

*“Get on my back*,” Korth said. “*I can run faster than you and see better.”*

Authand struggled to scale the dragon's side until Korth pushed him from behind with his snout. A ridge of bone demarcated the transition from body to neck and made a natural handhold for Authand as Korth bolted for the exit. They traveled easily three times as fast as Authand could manage on his own.

The door loomed larger in front of them. They were out of time for a plan.

When they were only feet from the exit, Authand shouted, "Make way, make way!"

The onlookers watched, dumbfounded, as he barreled towards them on the back of a young dragon—but nobody moved.

Moments before trampling the crowd, Korth leapt and spread his wings.

They cleared the heads of the front of the crowd that now extended several feet back, much further than Korth could jump even with his strength. What had happened?

He beat down with his wings, pushing them higher, and realization hit them both.

*"I'm flying!"* Korth cried.

“Yes, you are!” Authand let out a whoop as he held on for dear life. "Keep going. We need to get out of here!"

Korth beat his wings harder as they soared over the crowd, which, silent up until now, erupted into shouts, a mixture of awe and fear. They would have had to have seen a dragon before; Salta had held a garrison of Dragoneers until the latest skirmishes with the Werewolves had driven them north. But none of them had probably seen a dragon this close.

"We need a plan. We can't stay in the air forever." Authand gripped Korth's neck ridge harder. They'd ascended even higher. A fall would be fatal.

"*I'd rather stay in the air*," Korth said. "*And I would catch you."*

"You'd as like shred the flesh from my bones with your talons if you tried. Head out to sea. Out of the range of arrows, in case somebody gets any ideas." If there were enchanted dragon-killing knives, were there arrowheads that could do the same?

Korth veered west, catching the seaward breeze. A three-masted cargo ship drifted in the harbor, navigating the shallows in their approach to the dock. Boy and dragon circled the ship, and the sailors pointed and shouted.

Korth huffed with exertion. It seemed like he was trying to glide as much as possible. “*We need to land*.” Even his mental voice sounded breathless.

"We can't go back to the docks. Can you make it past the city walls?"

"*I'm going to try to land on this boat*." Even before Korth had finished speaking, he dropped down to the deck. It listed dangerously to starboard, and they scrambled towards the center. The ship still rocked dangerously but started to settle.

Sailors rushed towards them, curved swords drawn. Korth roared and beat his tail against the deck, smashing a hole in it.

Authand slid off Korth's back, leaving a slight trail of blood from where he'd broken the skin on his palm holding onto the bony ridge behind Korth's neck. Once his feet hit the deck, he pulled out the Dragonkiller blade. The deck swayed beneath him. He couldn't take six on one—

*“Six on two*," Korth corrected, swiveling his head around to make sure nobody snuck up behind them. "*And really, I have to count as at least two*."

No matter the odds, they weren’t good. Authand's first time on a ship in the open water wasn’t shaping up to be ideal.

"Get us some fish." Authand's voice cracked. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Fish for my dragon."

Nobody moved. The sailors glanced at each other, murmuring.

"This is a feral dragon," he continued. The murmuring stopped. "Feed us and let us rest and we will be on our way. Or would you rather discover how hard it is to control a feral?"

The sailors scattered, leaving only a guard or two. Authand lowered the knife but didn't sheath it. The ship was still heading towards the dock.

Korth slumped down to his belly. "*Now what?"*

Authand leaned against the dragon. "*We rest as long as we can until we are forced off. I'm not sure where we will go next. It would have been nice if I had at least gotten paid."*

A couple salted fish landed at Authand's feet, and he started. He'd gotten distracted and hadn’t noticed anyone approaching. He couldn't let that happen again. The options were vigilance or death.

Korth bent down to slurp the meal up. The fish were smaller than the mackerel that lived in the bay, but larger than what Authand used to fish from the lake near his home. His stomach gurgled. He hadn't eaten since the night before, either, but it was more important for Korth to keep his strength up.

"Go on, then," one of the sailors guarding them shouted. "We fed your blasted animal; now leave us be."

Authand's fingers clenched around the knife. "Actually, I thought we would hitch a ride. I can work, and he"—Authand pointed the blade over the shoulder—"can guard against any dangers in the sea."

"I might've been willing to take you up on that,” came an unfamiliar voice.

The guards parted for an older woman, a human, behind them. Silver grey streaked otherwise jet-black hair cropped close to her head. A sea green jacket fastened with bronze toggles indicated her rank as Captain.

She eyed them up and down with a grimace. "But I don't take kindly to thems who're boarding my ship without permission. You get hung for piracy for that."

"*I'd like to see them try*," Korth interjected.

Authand gulped. "We didn't mean any harm. We were fleeing Salta, and this was as far as we could fly."

"More's the better, then," the captain said. "I run an honest ship. I don't take thems who're on the run from the law. We're heading to dock to turn you over to the Watch." She glanced at the guard on her left. "Take his weapon," she said, before turning on her heel and walking back to the quarterdeck.

"Aye-aye, Captain," he said without taking his eyes off Authand. He stepped towards him.

Authand held the Dragonkiller in front of him. "I won't give it up without a fight."

Their guard prodded Authand’s shoulder with the tip of his sword. "Don't be stupid, kid." The sailor’s arm wasn't even extended all the way. Authand couldn't reach him even if he tried.

Authand slumped against Korth's flank. He turned the handle towards the guard and handed it to him. The man took the blade and stuck it in his belt.

"That's better," he said, returning his own sword to its scabbard.

Authand slid down to the deck, leaning against Korth. If he was going back to be arrested, he might as well get comfortable while he waited. "How long till we reach shore?"

"You in a hurry or something? Just shut up and wait."

Authand shrugged and leaned his head back.

"*Wake up,*” Korth said eventually. “*We've reached the dock*.”

Authand blinked open his eyes. He hadn't thought that he could nap under the conditions, but the aftermath of the surge of adrenaline from their escape had left him weak. He shifted his weight beneath him to stand, only to see the guard's sword in his face again.

"I'm just standing up,” he mumbled. “I'm sure your captain would want me to be ready as soon as the dock lines are secure."

The guard grunted and lowered the sword, but didn't put it away.

Chapter 8

The next few minutes passed slowly. Authand had watched enough cargo ships to understand the procedure. Unless the Watch was already waiting for him—a distinct possibility—it could be some time before he disembarked. Normally, the cargo would be unloaded first, but he and Korth would only be in the way for that.

Not to mention the fact that it would be their best chance to escape. Not that they had anywhere to escape to.

*“They couldn't hold me*,” Korth boasted.

As the dragon stood and stretched, the guard raised his sword again, and Authand’s stomach flipped. Korth snapped his jaws at the man, causing him to jump back … but he didn't notice the spiked tail until it clipped him at the knees.

Authand leapt up, reaching for the man’s fallen sword, but a dozen more sailors came running towards them, all with their blades drawn. He backed away and kept his hands out where they could see them.

"They’re more trouble than they’re worth," the captain said behind the fray. "Are you sure I can't hand them over to the law?"

"It happened on my property," a new voice responded. Authand recognized it immediately. He hadn’t spoken to Doc since the day he'd first been hired, but there weren't many Dwarves in Salta.

The sailors parted to reveal the captain and Doc. "Well, this"—the captain waved at the hole in the deck—"happened on *my* property. I demand justice."

"Your patron will pay for the damage. A few gold pieces will mean nothing to him. But a dragon not beholden to the Corp would mean quite a bit to him."

"I suppose you are right. When does he arrive? I can't go back out like this." She scowled at Authand again.

"On the King's Moon, once all the ships arrive." Doc turned to Authand, as if noticing him for the first time. "Will that animal follow you?"

"Yes, sir. To the ends of the earth."

"We aren't going that far. Come on. And you're getting docked a day’s wages." Without checking to make sure Authand followed, Doc marched through the throng of sailors and down the gangplank.

The guard, having regained his feet and his sword during the conversation, blocked his path. "I don't know, Cap. Seems like he's getting off awful easy."

"Make way, Greel." She squinted in his direction. Her face seemed stuck halfway between cold fury and resignation. "The boy belongs to Doc, and if I refuse him, he'll raise the dock fees. Cheer up; you're all getting a week's leave with pay, thanks to the lord financing this expedition. If this cargo is worth as much as it seems, he'll gladly pay the extra."

Greel grunted. He stepped to one side and grinned at Authand with a mouth missing several teeth. "Well, if it's extra pay for me, then run back to your mama's skirts, boy."

Authand ignored the insult, but Korth let out a low growl and pushed his face into Greel's. The sailors scrambled out of his path. “*If I see him again, I will remove his head from his body*,” he said as they walked toward the gangplank.

Authand didn't repeat the threat. They seemed to be in enough trouble already.

"Quit your lollygagging," the captain shouted to her crew. "You have work to do."

The sailors dispersed behind Authand. He noticed Doc had already left for the buildings near his office and was far in front of them. He broke into a run, but his ankle rolled on the uneven boards of the gangplank.

His arms flailed, trying to find anything to keep from pitching over the side. Luckily, Korth caught his shirt by his teeth. The fabric tore but held enough for Authand to regain his balance.

“*Leave the flying to me*.” The dragon made a sound through their connection that could only be laughter, and Authand shot a glare in his direction. He checked his ankle. A little tender, but he could still walk, so he hurried after Doc, a little more carefully this time. Korth lifted into the air with a hop and landed a few feet away.

Doc wove between the densely packed buildings until they reached the warehouse that had been Korth and Authand's home for the past month. "You can stay in the barracks until Lord Hollysword arrives,” the dwarf said. “You will keep your normal duties, and the beast will guard the building until the guards arrive with His Lordship."

Authand gasped. He recognized the name Hollysword. The previously unnamed lord who owned this warehouse was the king’s father-in-law. He would have never squatted in this building if he'd known.

"He's not bad folk, for a former king," Doc said, as if reading his mind. "But still, best not to be inside when he arrives."

"Former king?" Authand echoed. That seemed even worse.

"You're young yet," Doc said. "Lord Hollysword retired last year. King Ergyn assumed the throne by right of his marriage to His Lordship's daughter. Not quite the way the Dwarves do it, but every kingdom has its own customs, I guess. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do. See me for your pay once the *Orchard* has been unloaded. You have to take point on it, since the other hands won't want to enter the building with your beast inside."

"Yes, sir."

Authand and Korth nodded together, and the dwarf left at once, mumbling something under his breath. With Doc gone, Authand turned to the dragon.

"Stay on the roof, out of the reach from anyone who may have a knife like the one I lost on the *Orchard*. Call me if you see anyone but the hands delivering the cargo nearing. Or anyone staying behind after they're done. Once I'm done, I'll collect my pay and buy supplies.” He smiled. “After everyone leaves for the day, we can go for a flight."

*“More waiting around*.” Korth grumbled. “*Hurry up*.”

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The rest of the morning passed without incident. Remembering Doc's instructions, Authand raced to the office once they finished unloading the *Orchard*. The ship hadn't carried that much cargo, and nothing that Authand could see as valuable. Just some foodstuffs imported from more tropical parts of the world.

Doc looked up from his scroll when Authand entered. “Ah, done already?” He reached into the folds of his tunic and pulled out a canvas purse. With a flick of his wrist, he tossed it to the end of his table, just a few feet from where Authand stood.

Authand grabbed it and poured the contents into his hand. He didn't have a lot of experience counting money, but it seemed to be the right amount.

"I think Korth should be paid, too," he stammered, hardly knowing what he was saying. *What are you doing?* he berated himself internally. *He just saved us from jail. That should be payment enough.*

"Who?" Doc asked, sitting up straighter.

Authand looked at his feet. "My dragon."

"I wouldn't pay a horse wages, would I?" Doc shook his head. "Take your pay and leave."

"He's not a horse. He's sentient. He talks to me in my mind."

Doc's short fingers found their way into his beard, and he ran them through the knots. "I've always wondered how the Dragoneers did it. But the answer is still no. Maybe Lord Hollysword will pay for it when he gets here, but me, I hire dock hands, not dragons. Now go. I'm busy."

Authand bit his lip but didn't say anything more.

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Authand left the docks for the first time since he had started working there. Just as he had followed the scent of the sea to find the docks, he found his way back to the market by the smell of freshly cooked food.

His stomach growled. He looked forward to his first warm meal in a month. First on his list, though, was the leathersmith. If he could afford it, he wanted a proper saddle for Korth.

He wandered the stalls without luck until he found the fried potato stand with the helpful old man from before. Supplies should come first, but Authand hadn't eaten since the night before, and the smell of salt and hot oil was too much to resist.

"I'd like an order of whatever it is that smells so delicious," he told the man at the stand. "And is the old man who peels the potatoes in?"

"Six coppers.” The merchant narrowed his eyes. “And who wants to know?"

Authand gulped. That was more than half a day's wages for something that wasn't even a full meal. *Just this once shouldn't hurt.* He fished the coins from the makeshift purse he'd fashioned from scraps he'd scavenged from the water. He'd been amazed by how much trash floated up to the docks. "The old man helped me find a job. I wanted to thank him."

The merchant scowled a moment longer before disappearing inside the stall. "Dad.” His voice reached Authand's ears over the din of the market. "What are you doing talking to some dark trash boy?"

Authand bristled. Growing up in his village comprised entirely of dark elves, he hadn't been prepared for how many of the dock hands wouldn't talk to him because of the color of his skin. The sentiment seemed too common among the lighter-skinned Elves. Authand debated leaving, but he had already paid, so he should at least get his food. No sense rewarding the bigot with free coin.

The old man hobbled over to the counter, supporting himself on a cane made of polished wood. "I apologize for my son. I raised him better than that. But this new alderman, Jona, has been stirring folks up.” He spread his hands, tucking his cane into his armpit. “Folks is folks in my book. Don't see how anyone looks better by acting like others are worse. How much did Truckle charge you?

"Th-Thank you," Authand stammered. "It's good to know there are *some* good elves in this city. He charged me six coppers. But I paid it." His voice sped up and rose in pitch with each word as he found himself on the defensive.

"Six?" The old man pounded his staff against the packed dirt floor of the stall. "He should have only charged two!" He pulled the cash box out from behind the counter and counted out four copper coins, and an orange disk engraved with a simple *M*. "Here's back what my scoundrel of a son overcharged you. And use this at the stand next door for the ground meat served on a piece of bread. It goes nicely with the potatoes."

Authand tried to hand the disk back. "I—I can't take this. I came to thank you for helping me find my job at the docks. It's even turned into a security job for the former king," he added, perhaps a bit boastfully.

The old man’s eyes widened. "Hush. That's not the sort of thing you want to advertise. Who knows what thieves may be lurking? And,” he added gentler, “take the token. I'm trying to bribe you into silence about my idiot son. Word of his attitude could lose us good customers and leave us with only the crowd that attends those alderman meetings with him."

Authand had watched all kinds of dealing on the docks. This was just how the city operated. He took the disk. "I did have one more favor to ask of you. Where could I find a leatherworker? I'm in need of a saddle."

"A saddle, eh? Where are you keeping your horse? I have a friend who could stable it for cheaper than the places by the gates. Those idiots take advantage of unsuspecting travelers."

Authand shook his head. "Not a horse.” He paused uncertainly. He supposed the secret was out; what was the harm in telling the old man? “I have a dragon. His name is Korth."

The old man chewed on his lip for a moment before pulling out another disk identical to the one now in Authand's purse. "So, *you're* the one who caused all that ruckus this morning. You'll want to see Marwe. She used to outfit the Dragoneers when they were still stationed here. She's by appointment only now, but if you tell her that Maverin sent you, that should get you in the door."

Truckle came up from the back with a waxed cloth smelling of fried potatoes. "Here you go. Now leave, and stop harassing my father. I don't want to see you at my stall again." He pushed the package into Authand's hands.

Maverin turned and started arguing with his son again, which Authand took as a sign that he should leave.

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With a full belly, Authand found his way to Marwe's shop. The faded sign and darkened windows didn't give him much hope. He tried the door but found it locked, so he knocked instead.

After a few moments of waiting, a mousy girl of about ten answered the door and looked him up and down. Elven ears poked out from her brown hair, which hung loosely about the shoulders of a well-made dress of yellow cotton. “My grandmother doesn't accept work off the streets any longer. Goodbye." She started to pull the door closed, but Authand stuck his foot in the way.

"Maverin sent me." He fished out the second disk that the old man had given him.

She snatched it from between his fingers. "I will check, but you must wait outside."

She slammed the door against his foot. It didn't really hurt, but he pulled it away before she could do it again.

Several minutes passed before the door opened once more. "My grandmother says she will see you," the girl said with a toothy grin, and waved him in after her.

Inside, an older woman sat at a small table, in a cushioned chair identical to the one across from her. On the table, in front of the empty seat, was a slate and a piece of chalk. Authand imagined that this must be how rich folk lived, with rooms that served only a single purpose. The old woman wore her tunic that matched her gray hair, which was tightly wrapped in a bun and bore an unmistakable resemblance to the girl, who took the slate and chalk before sitting on a stool on the opposite side of the room.

"Have a seat, young man,” the old woman—Marwe, he assumed—said. “And tell me why Maverin had you give me his chit.”

Authand told her the story of how he had discovered Korth's egg and more, all the way up until their flight this morning, though he left out the part about the mysterious knife he had stolen from his father. "So,” he concluded, “I'm hoping to have a saddle made. We plan to head to Tulta when we can, but it will go a lot faster if we can fly."

"Well, Dragoneers don't ride in a saddle but in a harness," Marwe explained. "It comes in two parts, one for you and one for the dragon, that buckle together. Ordinarily, it would cost more than you have … but I would like for Tiralda to have some experience before she leaves for her apprenticeship.” She peered at him. “If you take her with you and deliver her to the village near Tulta, I will make your harness for half price. Now, how big is Korth?"

Authand hadn't thought to measure him, nor did he really know how to it or with what. "Standing, his back is as high as my head,” he said, “and maybe four times that from snout to tail."

"Goodness!" she exclaimed. "That big already? He's going to be enormous, that one. Even for an Orange dragon."

Authand smiled. "He will be very pleased to hear that. Ever since he hatched, he's been continually frustrated that he hasn't been large enough to meet the challenge."

Marwe laughed. "Dragons, like children, are always in a rush to grow up. And once they do, they miss the carefree days of their youth. Now, give Tiralda your payment and see me in a week. Your harness will be ready then."

Chapter 9

After the leatherworker, Authand bought a piece of rope to secure himself to Korth's back in the meantime. They needed to practice flying, and it couldn’t wait a week, especially since they needed to be able to show their worth to Lord Hollysword when he arrived.

Next, he sought out a butcher. His purse was considerably lighter than it had been when he’d set out, but he should still have enough to buy Korth a couple rabbits as a treat. Authand had been warned by the dock hands of pickpockets that roamed the streets of the city, especially around the market. So he kept the purse in a pocket of his trousers and checked it every few minutes.

The butcher shop Marwe had recommended lay just a few turns ahead. The crowds were beginning to thin as the day waned. There were just a few other shoppers, who mostly avoided him, with the occasional dirty look.

Still, he was surprised when someone threw an apple core at him. He turned to see who it was, but only caught sight of a gray cloak turning a corner. He faced forward again just in time to catch a young boy scampering towards an alley.

Authand checked his purse, but found only an empty pocket. The boy had been a thief.

"Hey, stop!" he yelled as he gave chase. The boy was fast, but Authand's legs were twice as long.

Before he could close the gap, however, the thief squeezed between two broken boards of a fence. Authand climbed it, but found the alley beyond empty.

*“Korth, I need your help. We've been robbed.”*

*“I'll be right there.”* Authand felt a surge of exhilaration through their bond. Moments later, “*I see someone who matches your memory running on the roofs.”*

Authand groaned. "Tell me which way, and I'll follow on the ground."

Korth dropped to the ground in front of him with a thud that raised a cloud of dust around him. “*I'll need to practice that*, “Korth said with a laugh. “*But flying will be faster.”*

Authand didn't disagree; there was no time to argue. He took the rope coiled over his shoulder and wrapped it around Korth's torso, fastening it with a sailor's knot he'd learned. He climbed onto the dragon's back and wrapped the rope twice more around his own waist, before tying it back to the loop on Korth. "Let's see how this works."

Korth was in the air almost before the words left his mouth. Authand grabbed at Korth’s neck ridge as his body lurched. The last time they’d flown, it had happened so fast that he hadn’t had a chance to marvel at it. Before meeting Korth, Authand couldn’t imagine ever wanting to fly. Now, he never wanted to land.

From the air, they spotted the thief leaping from the top of one building to another, almost a quarter mile away already.

With a surge ahead, they began to gain on the boy. Soon, their shadow was passing over him. When he looked up to see a dragon chasing him, he stood there for a second with his mouth open before scurrying away. Without looking, he jumped off the roof.

Korth quickly passed over the edge, and they spied the boy clearing himself from a pile of trash stacked up in the alley before he took off running again. A few hundred feet separated him from another fence.

“Faster,” Authand cried. “We can’t let him get away.”

At the last second, they overtook the boy and landed in front of him.

Authand yanked free the slipknot that held him in place and slid down until his feet touched the ground. "Give me back my purse," he snarled as he grabbed the boy.

The boy stopped, casting a glance behind him as if considering making a run for it again, but Authand wasn’t going to let him go until he got his purse back.

Suddenly, a clap sounded from behind them, and Authand turned to see a gate opening in the fence.

A dwarf passed through the opening, flanked by two men, humans but built like Orcs. The dwarf wore a silk blouse of deep purple, and his beard decorated with golden rings draped down to his waist. A ruby the size of an eyeball sat on his finger. The humans beside him wore simple clothes that wouldn't look out of place on the docks.

"That was very impressive," the Dwarf said. "Not many people can chase down Jerin. Of course, you had a little help." He peered at Korth, as if assessing livestock for sale.

Korth bared his fangs, circling his tail protectively around Authand. “*Little*,” Korth huffed. “*He's one to talk.”*

Authand ignored him. He ignored their audience as well. Instead, he shook the boy again. "The purse. I want it back. Now."

Jerin looked past his captor to the dwarf behind them. The dwarf nodded, and Jerin pulled Authand's purse out of a pocket inside his tattered pants.

Authand slid it back into his own pocket and stared into the boy's brown eyes. "Give me one reason why I shouldn't hand you in to the Watch?"

The dwarf cleared his throat. "Because I'd have him out within an hour. All you would accomplish is wasting my time and yours. But forgive me. Introductions are in place. I am Ace, head of the thieves’ guild. And I would like to offer the two of you a job."

"I have a job." Authand pursed his lips and dropped Jerin, who scampered over to Ace. The boy received a coin from the dwarf and disappeared behind the fence. "And it looks like he does as well."

Ace rolled his eyes. "Of course Jerin has a job. I'm offering it to you and Korth."

Authand's eyes narrowed. "How do you know his name?"

"I have eyes everywhere. I know who you are, Authand, and I know that you are bonded to a feral dragon. I know you have been squatting in Lord Hollysword's building while you work for Doc, and I know that Roland is also after you."

"Are you working with him?" Authand asked.

"He wishes. Roland pays me a fee to allow him to run his gambling dens without interference, but we are not otherwise associated."

"So why bring him up?"

"Because I know he has been bothering you. If you worked for me, he wouldn't dare."

Authand crossed his arms over his chest. "I told you, I have a job."

"A job where you aren't paid what you are worth and Korth isn't being paid at all. And it is precisely your current position that makes you valuable to me. I reward people who are valuable to me."

"I'm not a thief."

Korth flicked his tail inches from the nearest orc in agreement with Authand's words. The bodyguard didn't flinch.

Ace grinned. "That is the beauty of what I'm offering you. You don't need to steal anything. I know Doc has you guarding Hollysword's warehouse. He's expecting a shipment. I have a buyer who wants it. I can take down a dragon if I need to, but I'd rather have that dragon on my side. They are magnificent creatures, aren't they?"

*“Finally, something we agree on*,” Korth almost purred.

Authand smiled but looked down before Ace noticed. "What do you think?" he asked the dragon. "It still feels like stealing to me."

“*Doc wants us to guard whatever this package is. Ace wants us to guard whatever this package is. Either way, we are guarding a package. Either way, we get rewarded."* Korth paused and then added, *"I say we do it*."

Authand bit his lip. *I still don't like it, but you're right*. He looked up at Ace. "We're in."

"Good.” Without another word, Ace pulled a silk purse from a pocket in his vest and tossed it to Authand. It weighed at least twice as much as what Doc had paid a few hours ago.

"What's this?"

"It's a down payment. You will get the other half when I have what I'm after. Be discrete spending it, or people will wonder where you got all that money. I can recommend a brothel that is very good at discretion."

Authand blushed all the way to the tips of his ears. "I'm not really into that stuff."

"That's not a problem,” Ace said, unaffected. “They have men, as well.”

Authand wished he could crawl into a hole and disappear. "I'm not really into that, either. I'm not into anything, really."

Ace's eyes lit up. "Thank the gods. Feels like it's been years since I've met another of us."

"Us?" Authand looked up again.

"You know, an asexual," Ace said, and then frowned. "Don’t tell me you’ve got no idea? You're not attracted to anybody, you say?”

“No, sir … no one.”

“Neither am I.” The dwarf grinned. “That's how I got my name. Dwarves choose a three-letter name for ourselves when we come of age. A distressingly large number pick Roc. There were three in my family alone."

Authand laughed, but sobered as a thought struck him. "So you’re saying I'll be alone, always?"

Ace leaned over and patted his shoulder. "Not if you don't want to be, lad. Me, I've had an Earth Elemental living with me for about … six years now. We're a good match. And when he has … *needs*, he goes elsewhere to fulfill them.”

“That sounds complicated,” Authand said, tipping his head.

“Eh, not as much as you’d think. It works for us.”

Authand considered that uncertainly. He thought about being kissed at the harvest festival and how silly he had felt. He wasn’t even sure if he wanted to be anything more than friends with anyone.

He must have been making a face because Ace chuckled. “You’ll get around to figuring it out; no one’s got the answer but you. At your age, there’s no reason to rush … not that there’s a reason to rush at any age.” He paused and laughed again. “Besides, you're bonded to a dragon. I reckon that's closer than I'll ever be with my man. You'll be just fine, kid."

Authand fidgeted. "Um … thanks. I guess that makes me feel a little better.”

"Good," Ace said. "Now go. We've spent too much time in each other's presence already. When you see Jerin again, you will know what to do."

Chapter 10

The next few days passed without incident. The other dock workers slowly got used to Korth's presence. He could be seen napping on top of Hollysword's warehouse when he wasn't flying lazy circles overhead. He could now feed during the day without the need for secrecy, which brought Authand his first full night’s sleep since they'd arrived.

In the evenings, Korth would catch extra fish and bring them ashore to feed the dock workers, who returned the favor by giving him bits of meat they'd brought from their homes. Just as Ace had said, Roland left him alone now, and the homeless people who had frequented the area before his attack returned for their share of Korth's catch as well.

It wasn't the life of a Dragoneer Authand had imagined, but for the time being, his lot had improved greatly, and they hadn't even spent any of Ace's gold. Authand thought it better to save it for once they were finally underway.

During the lunch break on the third day, Authand felt the slightest brush against his arm and then a slip of paper in his pocket. He reached for it, but the dock hand who always paid such close attention to him coughed and gave a tiny shake of his head. It was a clear enough message to Authand—the note in his pocket wasn't for others to know about.

Authand set down his food, a piece of bread and some carrots he'd traded for Korth's catch. "Keep an eye on my meal, please," he said to no one in particular. "I need to use the privvy."

The privvy wasn't much more than a wooden box with a hole opening directly to the bay, but it provided the privacy he needed to take the mysterious paper from his pocket and read it.

The penmanship contained tightly spaced letters in the simple script the Dwarves preferred.

*Jerin took ill. You are to take his spot behind The Dancing Dragon at eight. The proprietor leaves at a quarter after with a fat purse. Bring it to me at the gate where we met by nine. Fail and Hollysword will know you were paid to steal his shipment. Make sure no one sees this note.*

Authand had enough reservations about participating in the warehouse scheme; he didn't think he could actually steal from another person. “*What do you think?”* he asked Korth, who was flying over the bay.

As Korth answered, Authand felt a vague sensation of breeze under wings he didn't possess. “*If the duke learns you are part of a plot to steal something apparently very valuable from him, you'll be hung. I don't think we have much choice*.”

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Authand's coworkers dispersed after dark. He made his way towards the warehouse, but broke away after they were out of sight. “*I should be there*,” Korth said, returning to the argument they'd had several times that afternoon already.

*“No,”* Authand replied. “*You're too conspicuous. People will definitely notice a dragon. I have to do this alone*.”

*“I don't like being separated while you are getting into danger. Be careful.”*

Authand sighed. He didn't like it any more than Korth, but he agreed with the dragon's assessment from earlier: They didn't have a choice.

Korth had done his part earlier. He'd used his keen eyesight and freedom to fly over the city to find out where the tavern was.

The Blood Moon barely lit the night, and Authand swore under his breath. The red moon alone in the sky was bad luck and not what he needed hanging over him for this nefarious task. The Dragonmoon would be up soon, but not until after he needed to be in place. At least the Dragon was better luck, even if it would also bring more light to be seen by.

The bell tolled eight o’clock a few minutes before Authand reached the alley. It contained fewer hiding places than the other alleys he'd seen this week. If the tavern owner usually left after dark, with a fat purse worth Ace's time, Authand supposed he *would* take the precaution of keeping the way clear.

He was waiting there for what felt like hours, time drawn out by his anxiety. Then, eventually, the door to the back of the tavern rattled. With nowhere to hide, Authand pressed his back against the wall next to the door, trying to make himself as small as possible.

The door opened, and an Orc—short by their standards, almost the size of an elf—stepped out. He wore a silk shirt and linen trousers, both dyed a deep green that reminded Authand of the woods where he'd been raised.

The Orc stopped at the threshold and turned his head, speaking to someone Authand couldn’t yet see. "What do you mean, you forgot your sword? Hurry up. I've only got thirty minutes until the night rush starts."

Another thing that Ace had forgotten to mention: an armed guard. Authand needed to be gone before the swordsman knew he was there. But he couldn't leave without the purse, either.

Authand rushed the tavern owner, shoving hard enough that the man’s head bounced loudly against the hard wooden door. The Orc's eyes rolled into the back of his head, and he became dead weight in Authand's arms.

Authand let him down as gently and as quietly as he could. He considered closing the door, but that would require dragging the Orc out of the way. With luck, the guard would think he had just fallen.

He leaned down and grabbed the purse but found it tied to the man's belt. He cursed. With time to prepare, he would have bought a knife or dagger. But Ace hadn’t given him much warning.

It felt like minutes passed as he worked the knot with shaking fingers. Any moment now, the guard would come upon him and run him through with the sword.

Finally, the knot came free. He pocketed the purse as he ran towards the cobblestone road that led across the length of the city.

"Stop, thief!" someone shouted behind him.

Authand didn't look, but he knew the guard must have seen him. He tried to envision the mental map Korth had made for him earlier. If he could make it two blocks to the south, he'd enter a maze of alleys where he could more easily lose the guard.

The streets were fairly quiet. Few people went out on the night of a Blood Moon. As Authand approached his turn, he hazarded a look behind him.

The guard was fast. He'd closed half the gap between them in the brief minute they'd been running. The outline looked familiar, but it was too dark to identify him. Definitely a human. A few worked alongside Authand at the dock. And, of course, Ace had a pair of human bodyguards.

Authand turned his attention back to his escape. He needed to slow for the curve; he'd never attempt it on cobblestones at a full run.

The guard had no such reservations, however, and tackled him at a full run. Authand bounced against the ground and skidded a few painful feet. He would be covered in bruises in the morning. Assuming he survived until morning.

Suddenly, strength surged through him, and everything became brighter. He recognized the effect from the time Korth had lent him strength in their escape from the warehouse.

Authand grabbed the orc and tackled him, rolling until he was above him. With a draconic roar, he lifted his pursuer, who probably weighted twice what he did, off the ground. As lightly as possible, not wanting to do any permanent damage, he threw the guard against the wall—and it was still pretty hard.

The guard slumped back to the ground, and Authand’s heart fluttered, his stomach turning. He bent to make sure the man was still alive. He hadn't wanted to kill again. Thankfully, he could feel a heartbeat when he touched the orc’s neck, and he could see his chest rising and falling slowly.

With Korth's low light vision, he recognized the attacker. One of Ace's guards.

This had been a setup.

Authand bared his teeth in draconic fashion. It was pointless, but the gesture felt right.

However, there was no time to ponder how to properly respond. Authand dragged the man behind a refuse bin, then stood up straight, brushing his hands off anxious. Before he could turn, though, something hit him in the back of his head, and he staggered.

Without dragon power, it would have knocked him out for sure. Even so, he saw stars dance in front of his eyes. He turned to find a member of the Watch standing over him, wielding a club.

He launched himself at the guard, but Korth's strength failed, and in his weakened state, the other elf deflected. Authand dropped to the ground once more.

Authand struggled as the watchman hobbled him. But without the strength of his dragon, he was no match for a full grown man.

Notwithstanding the initial attack, the watchman was gentle with Authand, more so than Authand probably would have been in that situation. They walked in silence down the road for several blocks, the Dragonmoon shining down on them and bathing the street in dim light. Even if Authand regained his strength and somehow broke free, there would be no hiding.

They turned down an alley, and it briefly registered in Authand's mind that this was the alley where he was to meet Ace.

He raised his eyes and, sure enough, at the end of the alley, the Dwarf sat perched on a stool. Only one guard flanked him, the other still unconscious a mile back.

"This one of yours?" the watchman asked.

"I don't know who this is," Authand spat. He doubted that anything would come of the head of the thieves’ guild getting arrested, but with a dragon, he had other methods of exacting revenge.

Ace waved off the lie. "I'll deal with this. There will be extra in your bribe next week. Where's Drawg? I expected him to catch this one."

The watchman spat near Authand's feet. "Near killed him. This one's stronger than he looks. At least, he was, until all the fight went out of him. Who are you making deals with now, Ace?"

"Never mind that if you want to keep the lifestyle to which you’ve become accustomed.”

"Fine," the watchman said. "Just keep the mess off my streets." He released Authand and left without another word.

Authand scowled at Ace. "This was a setup."

The dwarf laughed. "Of course it was. You didn't think I was going to just trust you without a test, did you? You passed, by the way. And did better than expected. You'll go far with me."

"I'm not going anywhere with you." Authand forced himself to unclench his fists. "Once this business is done, I'm heading to Tulta to be a Dragoneer."

Chapter 11

*“I can't do this*,” Authand told Korth through their bond as he and the other workers finished unloading a small ship. None of the crates had gone to their warehouse, but he was on edge. *I have to tell Doc about Ace*.

Korth sighed. “*We've been through this. You've already taken the money. You'll be arrested. Maybe killed.”*

*“And if I don't, Ace will probably double-cross me again, like in his test*.” Authand didn't know why he bothered. They'd had this argument several times in the last two days. But something needed to be decided. If Doc was right, the shipment that everybody was so interested in would arrive today, and the duke and a small army would come for it shortly after.

*“We could keep an eye out for the thief and provide the details to someone*,” Korth said.

Authand started to shake his head but stopped. Korth couldn't see the motion, and spies potentially could. “*But how do we do it without Ace finding out? We obviously can't trust the Watch*.”

Korth said nothing for a moment before his tone shifted. “*Well, we're out of time deciding what we are going to do. There's a ship in the bay flying merchant colors, but there are guards on it wearing the Duke's colors. None of the other shipments had guards, so this must be the important one.”*

Authand cursed to himself but picked up his pace. He wanted to be one of the first at the dock when the Duke's ship arrived.

Doc met him at the pier. "Where have you been?” he demanded, and then waved a hand dismissively. “Never mind. I want you in the air immediately."

"But Ace—" Authand started.

"If he tries to steal it, you'll be in a better position to spot it from above. Now go!" Doc barked.

Authand gritted his teeth, but said no more and ran off to find Korth.

The Orange dragon paced outside the warehouse with the coil of rope they used for a makeshift harness held between his teeth.

Over the past few days, they'd tried several ways to secure Authand to his back with just a rope, and had finally settled on one that worked. With one section, Authand made an X across the dragon's stomach, leaving just enough space under the rope to slide his legs in before tying it off at the neck ridge. From there, he looped it around his waist and secured it to the section of rope behind him.

Korth gave a little shake to make sure everything was in place, then leapt into the air.

Authand let out a whoop. Each time they took to the sky, his enjoyment of it only increased. The other dock workers barely looked up when Korth's shadow passed over them; they'd grown used to the Orange dragon watching them work.

Shouts erupted from the merchant ship approaching, however. A group of ten guards on the deck unslung crossbows. Authand wasn't sure what kind of range they would have firing into the sky, and so eased Korth higher. The dragon could see clearly from higher than they could possibly shoot.

*“Guard duty is boring*,” Korth complained after they'd been in the air for an hour. The ship had docked and was slowly being unloaded. But the guards still stood at attention, watching all of the dock workers, and none of the crates had headed to the duke's warehouse yet. “*Have you decided what you’re going to do?”*

Authand chewed his lip for a second. “*When it happens, we follow the thief. It should help the guards catch him. I'll tell Ace I tried to protect him but couldn't get too close because of the crossbows. No part of this deal involved going unarmed into combat.”*

*“It's a gamble, but probably our best bet*,” Korth agreed.

The soldiers filed down the gangplank, catching Authand and Korth's attention. They carried their crossbows in their hands, loaded but not pointed at anything or anyone. The one at the head of the group said something, the words lost in the wind, and they split into two groups. The first led the workers bringing out another batch of crates. The remainder took up the rear.

Korth banked to follow them. Excitement coursed through his giant body, ready to finally do something.

*“Wait*,” Authand thought. Two more guards came from below decks. Instead of crossbows, they had swords slung across their backs, and one carried a small leather satchel. They waited until the dock workers and other guards were out of sight, then left the ship.

Korth took up position ahead of them, like he was following the others, but angled his head so he could keep any eye on them. They made it past the first row of buildings, but the two suspicious guards veered off to the right, in the direction of the exit. Korth angled in that direction, while not making it obvious that they were following.

*“Do you think they are the thieves?”* Authand wondered.

*“No*,” Korth answered. “*They didn't come from the dock. Then again, maybe Ace got to them before they even left on this journey, to double-cross the Duke.”*

Authand didn't answer. Ace certainly seemed capable of it. Just how long had this been planned?

Authand watched them but noticed movement in a shadow. He pointed in his mind, and Korth looked in that direction. “*Jerin is heading towards them*,” the dragon said. *“He's good. They might not even see him until he's on top of them*.”

*“Do they not know?”* Authand wondered. *“If they aren't Ace's men, why did they split off in another direction?”*

*“Maybe there's another group trying to steal it?”* Korth wondered.

*“Stealing from a noble* and *the thieves’ guild? That's even riskier than what we're doing*,” Authand replied. “*Get a little closer.”*

*“If we get closer, we risk being noticed*.”

Authand shrugged. *They will notice eventually. And Jerin already thinks we are working for Ace. Either the guards are Ace's and it's okay, or they are a third party and this will push them to abandon their heist. Either way, we are doing what we were hired to do.*

Korth banked hard, dipping his right wing so low that the ground yawned below Authand. They dipped lower until they just cleared the rooftops. If they weren't following the crossbowmen, altitude wasn't an issue.

*“Well, anyone who isn't blind noticed that*,” Authand grumbled inwardly.

Indeed, as Korth's shadow passed over them, the guards ducked under an awning and disappeared into a building. Jerin looked up at them and grimaced. What had happened was not part of his plan. Korth dropped to the ground as Jerin abandoned the shadows and sprinted towards them.

"What were you thinking, scaring them off like that!" Jerin whisper-shouted. "I almost had them."

"They didn't look like they knew you were there," Authand protested as he loosed the knot securing him in place and slid down Korth's side.

Jerin spat. "Of course they didn't. What kind of pickpocket would I be if they saw me coming?"

Any response Authand might have given was cut off by a shout and the sounds of swords meeting inside the warehouse the guards had just ducked into.

Authand started for the door but stopped short, looking at Jerin. "Do you have a weapon?"

The boy drew a knife from his belt. "This is all I have."

Authand grabbed it from him. "Better than nothing. Korth, see if you can find another entrance, one that you'll fit through. I'll see you inside."

The guards hadn't secured the door behind them, and Authand slid through the gap. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust. Windows illuminated this building, unlike the duke's warehouse, but it was still considerably darker than outside.

A few feet away, one of the guards lay bleeding on the ground, sword still in its scabbard. The other had his out, slashing at a dark-skinned elf whose back was to Authand.

Authand scurried towards the fallen guard. Then man tried to speak, but only gurgling sounds came out. Authand raised a finger to his mouth, pointing at the attacker. The guard seemed to understand and rolled to his side so Authand could reach the sword.

He had never held a sword before. He'd never even seen one up close. Getting involved in this fight was a huge risk, but he had to do something. He remained quiet as possible as he got closer to the fight.

At the last second, the second guard noticed him, pausing in surprise.

The momentary shock gave the attacker the opening he needed, and he ran the guard through. As the guard fell, the attacker turned to face Authand. This time, they both stopped.

It was his father.

The sword fell from Authand’s hand and clattered to the wooden floor. "What are you doing here?" he asked, his voice trembling.

His father ignored him and rifled through the pack of the fallen solider before pulling out a bundle the size of his fist wrapped in canvas. He slipped it into his own pack before turning to face his son. "I don't expect you to understand, but I'm doing this for your own good."

"My own good? My own good?" Authand's voice rose with each word. "You killed two men in cold blood—two men employed by Duke Hollysword, two men I was hired to guard—for *my own good*? Explain that."

"I'm trying to protect you from that *monster*," his father spat. "To give you your life back. Until the bond is broken, you are a slave to that beast."

*“I'm almost to you, but there’s someone else in here*,” Korth interrupted.

"Who's here with you?" Authand asked his father sharply.

His father flicked his eyes towards the wall behind him. "Call that thing off or he will kill it."

"*Korth*." Authand's eyes narrowed in the dim light. He pulled the knife out of his belt where he'd stuck it to take the sword from the first guard. "You will call him Korth."

"What is he, a pet?" His father laughed, but after a pause, his shoulders slumped.

"Please.” He said, his voice tinged with fear. “My partner has killed more dragons than anyone else in the league. A dragon has never escaped him. And if he kills yours, you will die with it. That's what I'm trying to save you from. Your lifeforce is tied to it, and that's an abomination of nature."

*“Korth!”* Authand screamed in his mind. “*Get out of there, now!”*

A moment later, the entire building shook. “*They are going to need another roof*,” Korth chuckled. “*I'll meet you where we found Jerin*.”

*“No, it's too dangerous. Stay clear. I just have to try to talk some sense into my father*.” But when Authand turned back to address his father, he was alone.

He sighed, shoulders slumping. This was such a mess. How was he going to explain what was happening to Ace? To the duke? They would never believe there was a secret group trying to destroy elves’ bonds with dragons. And if they did believe that, they'd never believe that Authand hadn't helped his father escape.

He supposed he had. He'd dropped the sword instead of attacking. It wouldn’t have been any use against his father, who had been in the military before he was born. Or had that been a lie, too? Maybe instead of a soldier, his father had been a dragon killer. So many questions without answers.

Authand simply stood there in shock, looking at the floor. The dead guard’s blood pooled between the floorboards.

Shouting caught his attention. He jerked his head up in time to see a combination of the Duke's guards and the Watch streaming into the warehouse, their weapons drawn.

Chapter 12

Authand put his hands in the air and dropped the knife. It clanked next to the fallen sword.

*“I'm coming*,” Korth said.

*“If my father knew that our lives are tied together, they might, too. Stay away*,” Authand pleaded.

*“For now*,” Korth replied reluctantly. “*Until it is safe to rescue you*.”

Authand bit his lip. If Hollysword's guards knew what they were doing, he'd never be safe.

Rough hands yanked his arms behind him. Authand winced as the guards cinched rope tight around his wrists, but he didn't resist. Sunlight momentarily blinded him when they forced him outside. They tied him behind a horse, which one of Hollysword's guards then climbed onto. They took off at a speed just fast enough to be difficult but not impossible to follow.

He was winded by the time they reached Doc's office. Without speaking, the guard untied him from the horse and led him inside. Doc was nowhere to be seen, but a door in the back, which Authand had never seen open, revealed comfortable, if sparse, living quarters.

Lord Hollysword sat on a small bed, flanked by a squad of guards. Clad in a gold tunic with black trim and black trousers with gold trim, the Duke looked to be about fifty. Young enough to be vital, but old enough for his wrinkles to crease his face, he still sat with his back ramrod straight. He *looked* important. Where Ace reveled in opulence, Hollysword didn’t need extravagance to exude power.

Crammed into the corner, Ace was perched on Doc's stool with his two bodyguards. No weapons were drawn, but their hands weren't far from them.

The duke and the master of the thieve’s guild talked quietly between themselves until the guard pulled Authand through the door. The guard yanked the rope, and Authand fell to his knees. He got the hint and kept his eyes low. "My lord."

"Why did you scare off those guards?" Ace demanded, sliding down from the stool. Hands gripped their hilts a little more tightly.

Hollysword waved them off. "They probably thought he was a Dragoneer after them. If you had warned me, they would have been prepared and stuck to the plan. Where did you even get a rogue one?"

Ace didn't take his eyes off of Authand. "A feral. Blame Doc. He's the one who found him and hired extra security. I was trying to eliminate a variable."

Hollysword stared at Authand, seemingly taking the measure of his soul. "Usually your elimination measures are a bit more … permanent, Ace."

"Hard to hide a dead dragon in a city. But I considered it." This time, Ace had the decency to not meet Authand's gaze.

"Well, you won't be paid, of course. And the boy is mine. You won't retaliate. You're dismissed." Hollysword waved the back of his hand towards the door.

"What do you mean, I won't get paid?" Ace stomped. "This isn't my fault. I put a lot of money into this operation!"

Hollysword glared at him. "And your employee messed it up."

"Then I should be the one to punish him.”

"You said yourself; you can't get rid of a dead dragon." The Duke spoke in a low tone. "Dismissed. Or you'll be brought up under the King's Law."

"We both know that this has nothing to do with the King's Law." Ace held Hollysword's stare for a moment before pushing past Authand, nearly knocking him over. "You better hope he kills you," he whispered.

Hollysword remained quiet after Ace and his men left, expression impassive. Authand hoped Korth had found somewhere safe to land; this looked like it could take a while. If he could escape at all.

As if Hollysword read his thoughts, he cleared his throat and said, "Alright. Everybody out. I need a private conversation with the boy."

"But, sir," the squad commander said, "you need protection.”

"Nonsense. Look at him. He's not going anywhere.” The Duke sighed. “If it makes you feel better, leave me a sword and remain outside the door. I'll shout if I need help, but there will be no eavesdropping otherwise. That is an order."

The commander pursed his lips before drawing his sword. He pressed the tip to Authand's chest. "Try anything and you won't live to see prison."

"That's enough, Commander." The Duke's tone made it clear that his patience was wearing thin.

The commander pulled the sword away from Authand and handed it to Hollysword, hilt first. Once the duke took the blade from him, the commander saluted and exited the room.

When they were finally alone, the duke turned to Authand. "I'd tell you to sit, but…." He waved vaguely at Doc's cramped living quarters. “But do stand up. Even as king, I hated people kneeling and bowing all the time. As you may have gathered, I hired Ace to steal from me. The plan was for the guards to not even realize it happened."

"Why would you do that?" Authand asked. Struggling to his feet that were still tied, he held his body in the posture he'd seen both the Duke's and Ace’s guards use.

"Because what was stolen doesn't technically exist. Not as far as all but a select few know. But first, tell me what happened. Start with how you found yourself bonded to a feral dragon. The fact that it is even possible is known by even fewer."

Authand told him about finding the egg in the woods. He left nothing out, not even killing the werewolf or helping the pups. He spoke of his father's reaction, and the Dragonkiller, and what he’d learned about it in the warehouse when Korth had been discovered. He ended with watching his father kill the guard and stealing the wrapped object.

When he finished, his mouth was dry and his head swam. The duke stood, leaving the sword on the bed, and lifted a nearby cup to Authand's mouth. "Drink."

Authand resisted, and Hollysword shook his head.

"It's not poison. You're more valuable to me alive. Also, bend your knees a little. You've locked them, and you'll pass out if you stay like that."

Authand opened his lips and let the cool wine wash down his throat. Once he was satisfied that Authand was ready to continue, the duke sat again.

"What I'm about to tell you,” he said, “you must never tell another soul. Do you understand?”

Authand nodded wordlessly.

The duke searched his face before continuing. “The first Dragoneers were formed through a treaty with the wild dragons of the north when Goblins threatened to overrun us all. Only by combining our magic with the dragons' could we ever hope to win. Most people think of a treaty as paper and ink, but a magic bond needs more. The dragons’ most sacred gem, the Heart of Vernis, was used to form the bond. According to their legends, it is the heart of the first dragon. The Heart was used to form the bond and then hidden away for safe keeping.

“The treaty was controversial at the time because it bound up so much of the magic in the world. There were those who vowed to destroy the Heart. Those knives you mentioned were made by a group intent on destroying the bond to free the world of the influence of dragons."

Authand took a moment to process what he'd been told. His head swam from the wine and what the Duke was telling him. "So, where do feral dragons fit in this? Why are they so hated?"

Hollysword's mouth quirked up. "There were a few dragons who refused their king's orders and fled to escape the bond. They are just as dangerous as the league your father is in. By labeling them dangerous and wild, we keep Dragoneer dragons from joining their cause. As you've no doubt realized, dragons are willful creatures."

Authand nodded. He hadn’t been bonded to Korth for more than a few moments before he had realized that dragons were sentient, with thoughts and feelings and wants all their own.

The duke continued. "I'm telling you all this because I'm sending you to kill your father and retrieve the Heart of Vernis. He will still have it. It is a very difficult thing to destroy.”

Authand gasped this time. "I can't kill my own father."

Hollysword stood, just inches in front of Authand. "You can, and you must. The League are traitors and must be put down. I know it's a lot to ask of you, but if you succeed, I will arrange for you to join the Dragoneers …. without anyone knowing Korth is feral."

Chapter 13

Metima. His father had spoken of it the few times he'd spoken of his past. Authand had assumed there was some sort of military installation there. But Hollysword said that the dragons would not stay so close to Goblin lands, and Darneta didn't have ground troops.

So, his father had never served in an army. That only left this mysterious League. A village at the end of the world, with Goblins for neighbors, would be the perfect staging ground for a group that hated dragonkind.

After being outfitted with a few days’ supplies and more weapons than he had ever seen in his life, Authand and Korth set out. They flew up the river that bordered the Dwarven nation of Casar and spilled into the sea just north of Salta. The map he'd been given showed it as one of only two routes to get from the port city to Metima. The other was the road he'd taken to get here from his village that ran roughly parallel to the river.

The flight to Metima would take a day and a half with an adult dragon. Tiralda had assured him that Korth nearly matched an adult in size, despite being little more than month old. He was faster than any horse or barge, anyway.

Up the river and down the road, until they found his father.

And killed him.

Authand still felt remorse for killing the werewolf, still the only sentient being he'd ever struck. To go against his own father…. he still wasn't sure he could do it. But if he was to have any future, if Korth was to have any future, this seemed the only way to it.

Having come up empty on the many barges floating up and down the river, they camped for the night outside of Metima. They stayed well away from the gates, but close enough to sniff out Authand's father if he arrived early.

They slept in shifts, although Korth woke Authand well after he was supposed to and insisted on taking another shift in the pre-dawn hours. "*I can get by on less sleep than you. And you'll have to be at your best. Sleep.*" He nearly knocked him over with his snout before Authand acquiesced. If the past month had taught him anything, it was that whatever a dragon wanted badly enough, he’d wind up getting.

Not that Authand slept much anyway. His dreams were plagued by nightmares about how his encounter with his father would play out.

The day came too early, and they took to the air once more. In places where the forest hid the road, they landed and walked until the next clearing. The trees reminded Authand of home. More and more, he was beginning to think he would never see it again.

They met a few other travelers; none spoke to or threatened them, but no doubt the League would soon be aware of their presence, if they weren't already.

Eventually, while they were in the air over another clearing, Korth broke the silence they had settled into. "*He's close*. *I smell him.”*

Authand grimaced. "Okay, let's land just before the clearing ends. Once I'm on the ground, get back in the air. We can't risk him having another one of those blades."

"*You be careful, too. I'll be ready to swoop in if the danger is too great*."

Authand worked on untying himself from Korth's back, and the dragon touched down in a nearby field with barely a jostle, a far cry from their first landing barely a week ago. Once free, he touched his head to Korth's snout. He was beginning to realize that as long as he had this magnificent Orange dragon by his side, he'd never feel lacking for not having a romantic partner.

With one powerful beat of his wings, Korth was in the air. The distance was nothing to their bond; Authand could still feel him in his mind, always.

With a sigh, Authand squared his shoulders and drew the sword that the duke had given him. He stood behind a tree at the edge of the next section of forest. No sense in announcing his presence.

For a moment, he thought he heard voices—a man and a woman—but they were quickly drowned out by sounds of wildlife emanating from the forest.

Then, just as he was beginning to relax again, a lone figure emerged. His father.

"Stop right there!" Authand shouted, keeping his sword pointed at his father as he closed the distance between them.

Lempira stayed still as his son approached. He kept his hands by his sides, close but not reaching for his own weapon.

"I'm here for the Heart," Authand said. "I'm supposed to kill you, but if you return what you stole, I'll say you escaped."

Lempira barked a laugh. "And you think your Dragoneers will accept that? You're a distraction. Guards are probably on their way now. Do you really think they would send a boy to retrieve the most valuable artifact on the planet?”

Authand was silent, still pointing his sword.

“Neither of us are supposed to make it out of here alive,” his father said grimly. “But there is still time. Join me. Join the League. When we break the bond, you will be free of that monster flying above us."

He reached a hand out to his son, but Authand batted it away with the flat side of his blade.

"Please don't make me kill you, Dad." Authand's sword wavered in his hand, but he continued. "I need the Heart, and then Lord Hollysword will make me a Dragoneer."

Lempira's eyes widened, and for a moment, Authand thought maybe he was getting through to him. His father shook his head—a motion meant to be too subtle for him to see, but Authand caught it.

Before Authand could react, his father lunged at him. At the same moment, Korth screamed, "*Watch out!*"

Authand lost his sword as they tumbled in the dirt. When they came to a stop, he reached for it, but Lempira was faster, snatching it up.

Authand trembled as he realized his father was about to strike him down, his body turning numb. He held his arms over his head for whatever meager protection that might provide.

Instead, metal clashed against metal above him.

He glanced up to see a human woman locked in battle with his father. A bronze Dragonkiller blade hung from her belt. She must have been the other voice Authand had heard before; another League member traveling with his father.

"Turning traitor, Lempira?" she asked, taking another swing.

Authand scooted out of the way, looking for something, anything, to use as a weapon.

His father was fast and well-trained—Authand would have had no chance against him—but the woman was faster and better. Lempira bled from a cut on his arm, and a slash on his trousers revealed uninjured skin underneath.

Korth's roaring had been non-stop since the attack had started. The attacker let out her own as a powerful Orange claw, which dwarfed her muscled arm, wrenched it and lifted her into the air.

Cold fury quickly replaced the fear on her face as her sword clattered to the ground. Authand watched, almost in awe, the exact moment her training kicked in. She stopped fighting once her feet cleared Lempira, and with her free hand, she reached for her Dragonkiller. Jerking around in Korth's grasp, she missed grabbing it on the first try, but managed to on the second.

Authand and his father shouted together. Before she had a chance to swing, Korth dropped her about twenty feet from them.

She landed hard and didn't move for a second.

"Is she…." Authand trailed off.

"No," Lempira said through gritted teeth. "She will live. But is this brutality what you wish to align yourself with? I've seen dragons do much worse than that." He pointed to the broken body in front of them, as she let out a groan.

"Korth saved your life,” Authand snapped. “You should be grateful!"

"My life for yours would have been a fair trade." Tears glistened in Lempira's eyes. He stood over the downed woman. The bronze blade lay a few feet from her hand. "But I am beginning to believe that I *lost* my son that day he found a feral egg in the woods."

Authand gulped. There it was, out in the open. An uncrossable rift between them. While his father turned his attention to the woman, assessing the damage, Authand swooped down and picked up her dropped sword.

Lempira only turned when Korth landed beside Authand. He eyed the Dragonkiller by his feet.

"You'll be dead before you touch it," Authand warned. Tears streamed down his cheeks, but resolve washed over him. "The Heart of Vernis. Now."

"I say it again,” Lempira practically growled. “If this is the life you choose, you are no son of mine.”

"I will choose Korth every time. I love him more than life itself." Authand rubbed Korth's flank for a moment, his face softening a moment before hardening again for his father. "You are the one choosing. Choosing hate over love. What would Mom have thought?"

Something inside his father seemed to snap. He lunged at Authand with the sword in his off hand. Authand raised his own to block, but Korth was faster than them both. The dragon's jaw snapped around Lempira's hand, and he jerked him away from Authand.

With a howl, Lempira stumbled to the ground, a bloody stump where his hand had been. Korth spat the shredded appendage from his mouth.

Quickly, Authand ripped a strip of cloth from his shirt. Dropping to one knee in front of his father, he wrapped the stump tightly. He had seen this done once; their neighbor had lost his hand when a horse had stepped on it.

Lempira's breath came in short, ragged bursts from his lips, which had become ashen. His eyes looked sightlessly off into the distance.

Authand stared into those eyes, his own gaze like stone. "You're cold because all the blood is running from your body, Dad. You're going to be dead soon, unless you see a healer. If you give me the Heart now, we will take you back to Metima. Otherwise, you die here, and I'll take it from your corpse."

Lempira's voice quivered as he said, "It's yours." Shaking, he reached his remaining hand into his jacket and pulled out a pouch.

Authand glanced inside just long enough to ensure that it contained the Heart. The polished red stone inside radiated a draconic energy.

Not knowing what else to do, he stuck his father’s severed hand inside the bag as well.

With Korth's help, Authand gathered sticks to form a litter for his father and the League woman. He lashed them to it, then onto Korth's back, as securely as he could with the rope he usually used for his harness. He'd have to ride unsecured, but he had no other choice.

They flew in silence until the sun reached its zenith and the town finally came into view. Unmarked soldiers met them at the gate.

Without climbing down from his seat, Authand threw the Dragonkiller blade at their feet. "They need a healer. Take them but leave the rope. If one of those blades comes near, they die, and so do you.”

The guards stood their ground while one ran back into the town. Authand considered unsheathing his sword, but unsecured, he was impotent from Korth's back.

After a few tense minutes, a group, unarmed but bearing stretchers and other medical supplies, hurried through the gate. Authand watched for any signs of foul play as they unloaded his unconscious passengers, but his father and the unknown woman were collected, and the coiled rope placed in his hands without any issues.

Authand nodded, and Korth leapt into the air before the League could decide to attack now that they were without their hostages. They flew only as far as to give them the time and space for Authand to tie himself in.

•••

They followed the road back to Salta, keeping to the air this time. Authand wanted to check to see if his father was right about Hollysword. He wanted to believe better of the noble, but after Ace’s betrayal, he wasn’t certain he could trust anybody.

Shortly after passing the scene of the battle with his father, he found them. Not an army, as his father had warned, but a platoon of guards wearing the duke's colors, armed with swords and crossbows—all aimed at them.

"Do you have it?" one called through a horn.

Authand held the bag out as they swooped over the soldiers, clear of the archers' range.

"Good, now land and bring it here," the guard called.

That had definitely not been the plan. With dread creeping up his back, Authand shook his head and pointed to the tree line. The woods would provide cover from the crossbow bolts if need be. Korth grunted his approval at the plan and banked towards the forest.

The distance gave Authand enough time to disembark and tie the bag holding the Heart of Vernis to one of Korth's neck spikes. No one would get it from there without a fight. He debated unsheathing his sword, but he couldn't take on ten men, especially when they were trained and he was not. Deception was the only way out.

So, he met them on the road, with a rock stuffed in his pocket to make it seem like he had the Heart.

"Alright, kid.” The guard, a lieutenant by his insignia, held out a hand while keeping the other near his sword. “You've wasted enough of our time. Hand it over." The crossbowmen faced in different directions, scanning the wood for signs of the dragon.

Authand went to put his hands on his hips but, worried it made him look juvenile to the grown men, crossed them at his chest instead. "Those weren't my orders. I am to give it directly to Lord Hollysword."

The lieutenant's lip curled into a sneer. "You're not going to make it. That thing you ride is an abomination, and according to the Treaty of Vernis, the penalty for both of you is death. Now, give me the Heart, and I'll make it painless for you."

Authand's lip quivered. For this to work, he needed to look scared.

But that was easy. He was terrified.

With a shaking hand, he reached into his pocket and wrapped his fingers around the rock. The guard leaned forward, stretching his arm out further until he could almost touch him.

The crack of splintering wood echoed through the trees, and the sound of fluttering, startled birds followed. A bolt shot into the woods, in the wrong direction. The shooter cursed and reloaded as the others aimed in the direction of the sounds.

While they were distracted, Authand hurled the rock at the reaching guard closest to him. It struck the man in the chest with enough force to knock him down.

Before the others could return their attention to him, a branch as big around as his waist and twice his height came hurtling through the trees at the archers, knocking them down and pinning them to the ground.

The lieutenant struggled for breath as Authand stripped him of his weapons, including a Dragonkiller blade. The bows and swords of the others were likewise removed as they struggled to get free of the giant weight atop them.

Korth came into the clearing and took the weapons from Authand with his claw before flying up into a tree and depositing them at the top. The guards would be able to climb and retrieve them, but by the time they did, Korth and Authand would be back to Salta.

Chapter 14

On the flight back, Korth daydreamed out loud about the adventures they would have as Dragoneers. Authand sat in silence. He wished he shared his dragon's enthusiasm, but the day's events had not been comforting.

They landed on the roof of their warehouse home well into the night, and Korth banged his spiked tail against the building until guards came out, some dressed, others in night clothes.

Authand sat on the edge of the roof, with his feet dangling off the edge. "The duke and I have matters to discuss. Bring him here."

"Look, kid," one of them shouted up. "You don't get to make demands. Why don't you—"

"I said"—Authand raised his voice—"bring him here." He reached into the sack and pulled out the Heart of Vernis. It gave off its own light in the darkness.

Authand waited for Lord Hollysword as the moons marched across the sky. The Dragonmoon had set, and the Kingsmoon was not far behind when the duke finally arrived. Authand held onto Korth's neck ridge, and the dragon hopped down from their rooftop perch.

Hollysword frowned at them. "Normally, I wouldn't answer such a summons, especially not in the middle of the night. But I had to prevent you from making any more foolish displays." He gave a brief nod to his guards, and they dispersed, talking up positions just beyond Authand's vision but well within Korth's.

Authand tossed the sack to Hollysword, who fumbled it. Quickly, he opened the bag, peering inside.

After a moment, he pulled out Lempira’s severed hand, which was now stiff and discolored. His nose crinkled, and he held the gory thing away from him. "And what is *this*?"

"Proof that my father will no longer be a problem for you."

"Crass, but effective enough. Does your dragon want to eat it?" Hollysword tossed it at Korth's feet. The bag with the Heart went into a satchel slung from his shoulder.

"*I prefer fresh,*" Korth said, batting it back and leaning forward until he was inches from the duke's face. Hollysword couldn't hear dragonthought, but the intention was clear enough.

He didn't react to the threat. "Then I suppose our business is done."

"Not so fast," Authand said. He pulled the Dragonkiller from his belt and held the hilt out to the duke. "Your double-cross didn't work."

Hollysword snatched the knife from Authand and tucked it into his belt. "What did you do to my men?"

"They're fine," Authand said. "Should be back sometime tomorrow. But Korth and I will be long gone by then. Give me what you promised and nobody has to know that you hired a teenager to kill his father and then tried to have him *killed* to keep the secret."

He held his hand out, staring directly into the noble's eyes. When Hollysword didn't respond, Authand pointed out the locations of the guards scattered around them.

"Korth could kill them before they got anywhere close to us. That just leaves the two of us, and I have a sword, and you have a knife that only works on dragons. I'm a man of my word. All I need is for you to be a man of yours."

The duke's fists clenched and unclenched before he reached into his satchel. He pulled out a scroll tied with a green and gold ribbon and sealed with the Hollysword crest.

Authand reached for it, but Hollysword pulled it away. "If I ever lay eyes on you again, I'll have you killed."

Just as the words left his lips, the sun burst over the horizon, causing Hollysword to squint furious and hold his arm in front of his face.

Authand shrugged and snatched the scroll from his hand. "Get in line."

He climbed onto Korth's back, and the dragon unfolded his wings, basking in the rising sun.

"The harness should be ready. Come on, Korth. We have a date with destiny."