

Fire and Gold

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Sarah Ellen Ford

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Sarah Ford

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Signature:

Sarah Ford, Student

Date

Approvals:

Christopher Barzak, Thesis Advisor

Date

Imad Rahman, Committee Member

Date

Mike Geither, Committee Member

Date

Dr. Salvatore A. Sanders, Dean of Graduate Studies

Date

ABSTRACT

The kingdom of Oscide is used to violence; in fact, they thrive on it. They are under constant attack for the land, for their wealth, for their dragons and the dragon riders but Oscide does not fall. It isn't until something goes terribly wrong at the coronation of their newest Queen that the country learns that they may not be as strong as they once thought. Worse, they find that they may be more divided than they thought.

With their warrior queen dead, the crown falls to the last living descendent of the previous ruling family but Loic Naell isn't equipped to be king. Loic is better suited to spending his days teaching poetry in the local university and that is exactly what he had intended to spend his days doing. Being King is not for him but he doesn't have a choice.

Nor does Grey, the new head of the dragon riders. With her mentor accused of a heinous crime Grey not only has to lead her people through their struggle but protect a king who she doesn't understand.

And on the other side of the world, Corali struggles in vain to protect the people she cares about from the one person who is supposed to care about her

When the three come together in defense of their kingdom and people, they find that strength and wealth and even dragons mean nothing if they cannot work together.

Table of Contents

Chapter One.....	1
Chapter Two.....	12
Chapter Three.....	36
Chapter Four.....	42
Chapter Five.....	49
Chapter Six.....	59
Chapter Seven.....	70
Chapter Eight.....	99
Chapter Nine.....	117
Chapter Ten.....	129
Chapter Eleven.....	135

Chapter One

In Loic's experience, the best way to deal with Nidi and Ronin was to just give them whatever they wanted. He had relented, easily, on letting them sit inside his classrooms while he taught, and always allowed them to drag him to the pub after class for drinks that he somehow wound up paying for. So when they decided they wanted to drag him two miles to the new Queen's coronation he had made his protests quietly known as they pushed him out the door and up the hill towards the main portion of the city, but followed them easily and without real argument.

He could have said no. He could have forced them to stay behind. They were, after all, assigned as his guards and meant to go wherever he wanted and not the other way around. With the entire university empty as the city poured out for Queen Patia he could have gotten a week's worth of work done--there were only a few stanzas of that poem left for him to translate and hardly any grading. It would have been nice to sit there and do the work in silence. No students knocking to ask questions he knew he had answered in class or fellow professors there to bother him, but he would have grown exhausted by the silence. He didn't mind noise. He minded the crowd and how they pressed against him. Only one path led from the outskirts to the city of Doret proper and that path was narrow, hardly allowing for seven or eight people across at a time so that people found themselves spilling onto the grass and walking at odd angles to deal with the small hills. They were still far enough back from the main city area that the path

was dirt and had not yet changed to cobblestone. Loic didn't mind any of that. He didn't mind the thumping of feet on the ground or the dirt kicking into the air as people tried to rush by to no avail. He did mind the fact that people shoved so closely against him that he swore he could tell what they had for breakfast; beer, for the most part. The streets would be covered with vomit and piss by midday.

Maybe he should have stayed home. The sun sat too high this early in the day and he had already begun to sweat. It didn't seem as if anyone had noticed the beads that trickled down his face but couldn't be certain. Someone caught him staring at the crowd, or maybe they were making fun of the only man so out of shape to be sweating a half mile into the walk, and he dropped his gaze quickly.

"Stop your huffing, old man," Nidi said.

Loic was only twenty-eight, three or so years older than Nidi. He let it go.

"You've been inhaling too much dust from your books," Ronin agreed.

She was older than Loic but he couldn't believe it was by much. He did know her birthday but had never managed to find out what age she turned each spring and it seemed too late to ask this far in their friendship and employment.

"My books are not dusty," Loic mumbled.

"What about the one you were hunting for last week? The librarian said it hadn't been checked out in thirty years," Ronin said.

"That book could have been a lot worse," he said.

Nidi shoved through the crowd and forced a path for Loic, making her yell over her shoulder back at him. "At least this one didn't have blood in it."

"We never confirmed that was human blood," Loic remind her.

Ronin, behind him, snorted. "Why would it be better if it was animal blood?"

He didn't have enough breath to walk and talk so instead he kept his focus on Nidi dead ahead, her tightly twisted hair snaked into ropes that grazed her collarbone and bounced with each step. Having her in front seemed strange when the top of her head came only to Loic's shoulder--and Loic was squarely of average height. Rushing ahead was more of Nidi's strength than it was Ronin's, however, and people tended to feel less threatened with Nidi in front. She had a sweet face with a cheek to cheek smile and broad, flat nose that she used to hate. Sick of feeling ashamed of her face, she had dragged Loic and Ronin with her when she decided to place a jewel through her nose and claim the hated feature as an item of pride. Loic had been convinced to do the same to his left ear and wore the small gold stud every day. The intention had been silver, something distinctly not Naell gold, but had still somehow found the word 'gold' falling from his lips when asked what he wanted.

Ronin had not pierced anything that day but had forced the two with her when she got dark leaves inked onto her collarbones. It had been a long process, the dark color difficult to make permanent against dark skin. Brown skin, where Nidi's was something almost like a red-brown and Loic's was easily labeled black. But the leaves had taken, and Ronin forever bemoaned how her gold guard uniform hid their beautiful work. She wore her hair up and out in a dark halo that she occasionally colored with red clay pigment in order to better show off the work on her skin. Taller than Loic, she brought up their rear of their group.

Ronin grabbed Loic's shoulder and steered him forward. "If you really want to leave, we can," she whispered so only he heard.

He shook his head. He was out, and close enough to the city that the ground had turned to cobblestone. His feet stumbled at the sudden change. He could, would, see this through. Having Damir at his side would have been nice, but the scoundrel had run off ahead, chattering something that none of the three had been able to decipher. Finding him in this crowd would prove impossible.

The crowd continued to press. It seemed to be breathing as a single entity, swelling and shrinking as one in their haste to get a sight of Queen Patia. Loic could do without seeing her. He had a sneaking suspicion in the back of his mind that Patia, if she saw him, would want him to join her on the dais as a display of both unity and humility and he had no desire for that.

The sun disappeared from the sky as one of the city's dragons crossed overhead. Drakling, the dragon riders, were out in small but full force today. He had only a few interactions with the select group of people who bonded to dragons and even less interactions with the dragons themselves. He intended to keep it that way. The dragons may have protected the city but they were still dragons and he had no desire to get closer than where he currently was. Keeping his eyes on Nidi allowed Loic to pretend that he didn't know this city. He didn't, not anymore. He still knew the paths and the low buildings, but it had morphed away from him, morphed from the cold gold of his family to a red so red it was almost indecent. The entire city stretched towards the island that the dragons lived on. While Doret sat on the edges of a low cliff and beach that gave them access to

an ample ocean, the dragons had their own island tower they lived atop. They sat above the rest of the world and connected to the city by only a strong bridge that Loic had never crossed. Everyone except for the drakling used the open air elevator that took one from the beach to the caverns blasted away into the island tower. The caverns had been smoothed by dragonfire years ago so that the nobles and monarchs could live safely within. That had been before dragonfire had been banned and before the Naells had lost power. That castle up there had once held Loic's family. The Naells had ruled from that cave for century after century, and now they ruled nothing.

In the center of the city, a small dais had been built for Patia to greet her new people. Loic had no desire to be anywhere near it or Patia herself but to say anything, even the barest hint of displeasure, would stir gossip. He didn't want that. Patia had already called him before her to discuss his loyalty and although she seemed kind, he did not want to test how far that kindness stretched.

Her summons had come two weeks after her slaughter of a Naell cousin, someone so distant Loic wasn't entirely sure how they were even related. Haegan's hands were all over the summons. The royal adviser had a soft spot for Loic and had ever since the two learned they had once shared a professor at university, albeit nearly a decade apart. Haegan must have advised Patia to send a written summons rather than armed guards and it was Haegan who ensured it was a private affair. Should Loic write a letter of thanks for that? Or simply pretend it had never happened?

Loic had met the end of his dynasty in a small antechamber that likely had no purpose other than oaths of loyalty. A single chair for Patia herself and no sort of rug or comfort on the floor for when Loic would kneel before his queen. Perhaps she had expected him to kneel as soon as he got there but he let the door slam shut, Nidi and Ronin on the other side, and stared until she spoke. Loic may not have cared for the politics of their meeting but he had something close to pride.

He had never seen Patia until that moment and they each took a minute to size up their opponents. She had a warrior's build, without a doubt. It was not hard to imagine that arm swinging the sword that had pierced his cousin's neck, nor hard to imagine the other arm wielding the shield that had so perfectly defended her. Even sitting in her chair she sat with a warrior's posture; comfortable but coiled and ready to spring. Her face had a bruise along a sharp chin and a lip with a stitch still holding part of it together.

"My Queen," Loic finally said with a bow of his head. He would not kneel unless so ordered.

That pleased her. She smiled, the gesture pulling at her stitch, and motioned him closer. Loic took only a step forward. That pleased her even more

"Prince Loic," she said. "Thank you for coming today. I cannot say I understand how you feel right now but..."

She trailed off. Loic had no idea how old she was. There were lines in her face and some creases in the burnt rust of her skin, but those could have been

stress lines. Old enough to fight a war and still young enough to have many heirs. Not that Loic would flatter himself to imagine she had called him here for that.

Was she waiting for him to tell her how he felt? He couldn't do that. He felt no mourning for the man she had murdered nor despair over finding himself finally removed from the far shadow of the throne. He did not like her but probably shouldn't say that. She was a woman who had conquered a kingdom, resorting to a violence Loic found unnecessary. And yet she had done so in order to feed her own tiny country, struggling in a northern territory that had not seen rain or a good harvest in some time. And everyone loves a story where the unappreciated and unexpected person wins. There was a little fear, of course. Patia was well within her rights to have him banished from the country. Or killed. Or imprisoned. Or whatever she felt would be necessary to make sure he did not attempt to take the throne back.

Then again, the smartest thing would be to let Loic live as he had been. She could keep an eye on him and would be able to know if he dared to plan something.

If she wanted Loic to speak, he wasn't about to. He had stared down classroom of fifty students waiting for one to answer his question with a record of four minutes. He could certainly wait her out.

"I suppose you know why you're here," she said.

"To swear loyalty to you."

She shook her head. The silk black braid of her hair draped over her left shoulder did not move with the gesture. "I don't need to you do anything so dramatic. I just want your assurances that I won't have to worry about you."

"You won't," he said.

"You understand what will happen to you if I feel threatened in any way?"

"I do."

She tugged on the end of her braid, a youthful gesture. Her hands dropped to her lap immediately as if she was aware of how it made her look. "If you would like, I would be happy to add a seat on my council for you. It's always useful to have someone...like you there."

There was no precedent for someone like him.

"I have a lot of classes," he had muttered.

Perhaps, he thought as he continued to be shoved from side to side in the crowd so eager to see Patia where he had been so reluctant, if he had agreed to sit on her council he would have been somewhere with her retinue and not in this mass of people only a single sneeze from becoming a panicking mob. Had his cousin's coronation been so well attended? No, that had been a private affair for just the nobles and just the barest amount of effort put into his procession. People had gone out of duty and not enthusiasm.

People carried banners with Patia's red colors and vendors gave away their goods cheaply or even freely. They were real buildings along the path now, closer and closer towards the dais and city. Everyone seemed to have gathered flowers to throw from their windows and Loic pulled red petals from his braids every few

steps before accepting that it wasn't worth it and just leaving them there. He could not smell the flowers over the frying fish and frying dough, as well as the ocean salt that tinted everything in their lives. People ate with their hands, fish occasionally wrapped in something else. At one point Loic swore he saw a man eating a piece of fried fish inside a piece of fried dough and that seemed to be asking for immediate death.

People shouted for no reason. They breathed too loudly or maybe that was just his own breath as he walked. Could he possibly be that out of shape? His body had not turned entirely to fat yet but it was softer than it had been when his parents attempted to instill some kind of combat training in him. But still, he spent his days going up and down the stairs at university and on his feet teaching, had that counted for nothing?

His foot kicked out from underneath him and he reached both in front and behind him in the hopes one of his guards would catch him. Both let him fall.

"Some protection you are," he muttered. They at least hauled him to his feet before he found himself trampled. A fine ending that would be for the last Naell.

"Your own two feet are not on our list of potential enemies," Nidi said.
"Give me some coin, I want to buy some food."

"Where's your money?" he asked even as he dug through his pockets for some coins.

"Relax," she said, "I'll get you some too. Ro?"

But Ronin shook her head just before Nidi slipped into the crowd. The tall guard tucked Loic under her arm and ushered him towards a small grassy area where people sat and ate and kissed and played games of catch.

"Are you alright?" Ronin asked, all but pushing him so he sat.

"I'm fine," he said. He was better now that they were out of the crowd itself. And now that he sat, his breathing returned to him in deep breaths that heaved his chest. "Guess I should be training with you guys more."

"That wasn't the problem," Ronin said. She stood high above him in a manner that blocked him from both sun and crowd. "You were panicking."

"I was not."

"You can't breathe."

"I'm out of shape."

"Sweating."

"I'm getting fat, I get it."

"You're perfect, my prince," she said in a flat tone that let Loic know she was teasing. "Tell me this then. Where were your thoughts?"

All over. He had been so in his own thoughts he had not even noticed how close they were to the dais.

"Fine."

"If you want to go back--"

"--no, no." He didn't. Although being so close to people made his skin crawl, he liked where they sat now. He could see the crowd, but they left him alone with only a few staring. It was probably his easily identifiable Naell

hairstyle, the braids tight and spilling down his back. Maybe he should cut the hair that he kept out of either a misguided sense loyalty or sheer laziness.

Oh, no. He knew those faces--second to last row of his classroom, but he couldn't remember which year. The one with the blue hair had turned in a brilliant essay on reclaiming a female poet from the husband who had over-edited her work. His hair hadn't been blue then.

"Ronin, give me your cloak," he hissed. She did so without question. He draped it over his shoulders, ducking so it covered his head too.

"What are you doing?" she asked, more amused than anything else.

"Students," he said as way of explanation. "I just don't want to deal with them right now."

"Your students like you," she said.

"Exactly. I don't want to deal with them," he said again.

He liked teaching. Truly. His students found him a bit strange, a bit awkward, a bit hand-flapping, but the ones who signed up for his classes were often the ones who themselves were slightly strange to begin with. But every time he saw them it was doing an act and he hadn't rehearsed his lines for the day, a comparison so bad he would have easily marked it down on a student's paper, so he said nothing aloud and huddled into Ronin's cloak.

Chapter Two

The entire city of Doret had bloomed to life for the coronation. Even one hundred feet above the city, standing on the drakling cliff-top, Grey could hear how they celebrated. People warbled off-key songs of victory, which was foolish because they had lost the battle to Patia and her army. They danced in swirls of bright colors, mostly red. They reeked of sweat and sea salt that everyone carried on their skin but also bodily functions caused by too much food and too much exercise and too much drink so early in the day. She did not want to go into that crowd at any point.

And she wouldn't have to. Because while the rest of the city and the rest of the drakling and their dragons would be out there celebrating or protecting their new Queen, Grey and her dragon would be left behind.

At least the other drakling were excited. Not all of them lived in the city so just to be in Doret was a thrill for someone like Jade or Gold. The pair stood at the edge of the cliff and pointed at the things that only their drakling eyes could see, giggling in delight. Gold was certainly a little too old for that kind of thing.

The soldiers standing nearby stood much further from the cliff's edges. Even if they had dared to get closer they would not see as clearly as Jade and Gold. The soldiers could be in the middle of the crowd and they would still not see as clearly as Jade and Gold. Being drakling wasn't just about whatever it was

in their blood that calmed the dragons they rode; being drakling was about having enhanced senses and strength and speed and being something just a little more than human. Even above the city, the two women could see distinct faces in the crowd and, if they focused, could hear a single conversation as clearly as if the speaker whispered into their ear. Perhaps they giggled because they heard a particularly good joke below or maybe they giggled at Grey herself, standing there so lost while the others did their jobs.

All of the dragons lounged around outside. All of them. Except Sifa. Grey's own dragon was still happily asleep inside the dragon stables. While six of their eight dragons jumped around and rolled in the dirt, Sifa slept. The only other dragon not there was Egon but that was because he and Rose soared through the sky like a wild comet. Only Egon and Sifa were actually capable of flight but only one dragon was allowed in the sky at a time in case something went horribly wrong. That dragon was never Sifa.

The elevator that connected to them to the ground groaned and shuddered as it clicked into place. Made of wood and iron and chains and pulleys, it was strong enough to lower any of the dragons to the ground, but they usually took the bridge. The elevator was mainly used to get people up and down the caverns that littered the island tower and faced the city.

"Morning!" Olin said with more cheer than necessary. His first steps off the elevator were wobbly but he got his footing and gave Grey a ridiculously low bow. "Drakling Grey," he said with a wicked wink.

Grey turned on her heel and walked away.

He would follow. Not only was it his job as a member of her carefully cultivated squadron of soldiers and healers but he was also used to her antics. Healthy competition made up most of their friendship. Olin couldn't just catch up to her. He had to catch up and pass her with a quick jog.

"Did you sleep at all last night?" he asked, dropping the fake formal act. "You don't look it."

"No," she admitted. "You?"

"No."

"Then why don't you show it? Wait, wait." She grabbed his arm and pulled him to a stop. "Let me see the new uniform."

Olin laughed and spun in a circle for her because he was an awful person.

"It suits you," she said. It did. His uniform, the new Queen's red, sat nicely against skin that was golden now but would dramatically pale in the winter months when the sun disappeared behind permanent clouds. His chest plate tapered to a waist smaller than Grey's own and the black leather seemed somehow duller than the shine of the black hair that he slicked back to show off wildly thick, wildly expressive eyebrows and hooded eyes that made him seem so much more serious than he was.

"You owe me," Grey told him. "Either a thanks or a drink. I'd rather the drink."

"I owe you everything," he said.

Grey wrinkled her nose in disgust. He wasn't being kind; Grey had chosen him to be captain her newly chosen squadron and it was a choice she would

happily make again. "You say anything sweeter than that and you're going off the cliff."

"I will throw myself," he agreed. "Where's Sifa?"

"It's not even close to noon," Grey said. "You can't expect her to be up."

"You don't need her today?"

Grey shook her head without changing her expression, but Olin must have noticed how tense she got because his brow creased. "No," Grey said. "You know the rules. One dragon in the sky at a time. And Rose is the head of the drakling."

"You can't do a patrol or something?" he offered.

"Of course, let me just ask Rose."

Olin nodded in agreement. Asking Rose anything was almost always a foolish idea.

"Is this all of you?" Olin asked quietly, looking around at the other drakling. Only Rose, Raven, Cobalt and Grey herself lived in Doret and they were the only dragons Olin was really familiar with. But this array of dragons of all sizes and colors must have been magnificent to see. Even Grey, whose blood spoke to the dragons or whatever it was it did that let her ride them, had to stop and smile at the sight.

"All of us," Grey answered. "There's not point whispering, you know we'll hear you anyway."

"Right." But he continued to speak in a low voice and had not taken his eyes of Gregor. The gold dragon stood on his hind legs and slammed his front paws into the dirt with a loud roar in a sign of pure joy. Arsa, black as night but

smaller than Gregor, repeated the gesture. Olin jumped at the sounds each time.
“They’re...something.”

“Beautiful,” Grey said.

“How did we possibly lose?” he asked.

Grey growled. “We didn’t. King Alam got himself stabbed in the neck.
We can’t protect a king from his own stupid.”

Olin laughed. Alam Naell hadn’t been a bad man or a bad king, as far as anyone knew. There just hadn’t been enough time to know anything about him. He had been young and untested and unmarried and, most importantly, un-heired and the other lands decided that was the perfect time to get a piece of Oscide. Their country was almost constantly under some threat of attack, despite the peace treaty in place. Apparently that treaty only applied to Oscide. Sure, they were not allowed to attack or let their dragons breathe the fire that came naturally to them, but any other country could make an attempt for them. That never worked. Oscide and her dragons fought off attack after attack but as Grey said—there wasn’t much to do when the king got himself killed in single combat.

The city had taken the coup well. She always took violence in stride. She had been designed for it, in fact. The city sprawled low with few buildings more than one story high and their roofs domed. It had been built low to ground to survive the days before the drakling tamed the dragons, back when the dragons took great joy in tossing themselves onto buildings and collapsing them onto innocents. The roofs were now domed to protect the dragons and prevent archers from taken position atop them. But those roofs had always been gold, the gold of

the ruling Naell family who loved to show off their wealth more than they loved anything else. They were now the deep red of Olin's cloak. Queen Patia seemed to welcome the association of her rule with blood even though her takeover had been largely bloodless.

Oscide handled war well. People rationed the farm food that came from the heart of the country and relied on the bountiful ocean instead, sending farm foods to their troops waiting on the borders. Sons and daughters enlisted to fight or enlisted in school in order to avoid the fight. Lords and ladies returned to their distant castles to hide behind the guise of supporting the coming fight with the foods and goods their lands churned out perfectly well without their aid. The city's defenses were strengthened just in case an army made it past the border and the stretches of farmland, past the woods and to the crest of the city's edge. If they made it that far they would be faced with the deliberately left rubble and ruin of buildings thousands of years old. A reminder, that the even if the city fell it was not yet won. Those buildings had been destroyed by dragons of course, but no one mentioned that. Grey saw it. The walls of those buildings were scorched with the tinges of a dragonfire she had never seen

Not that Grey had been able to see any of the war. She had been stuck guarding the capital. She would have given anything to have watched the battle unfold, the battle of Oscide and the two countries that had made it to the open fields first. Anything, to watch Rose and her dragon in the sky as they protected their soldiers like a living shield and a weapon or Gold, Umber, and Raven as their dragons smashed through rows and rows of bodies and armor.

Grey had missed the battle that led to Patia taking the throne. And now Grey was going to miss the coronation because she was going to be stuck, once again, guarding the castle. Because Sifa had bonded to Grey, Grey stood as the heir to the drakling leadership and yet she was doing the easiest job. It wasn't like Grey was a child. At sixteen, Jade was younger by eight years and yet she was going to be out on the edges of the forest while Grey sat and watched.

“Oh no. No, no,” Olin whispered. The soldiers, Grey's squadron, seemed to have the same mindset as Olin and hurried as quickly as they could away from the landing dragon. Olin wasn't fast enough. The deeply red dragon landed nimbly next to Grey, the slow motions of his wings forcing Grey's hair back and ruining all the work she had done to brush it that morning.

Rose slid off the dragon's back. It was not a far slide. Flying dragons were always smaller, better equipped for slicing through the air rather than destruction on the ground. As if he and Rose had been waiting for Patia and her red their entire lives, his scales matched the new roofs and flags of the city perfectly. Egon had dull white fangs but that did not take away from their sharp points, just as the smallest injury to his left wing did not take away from the force he landed with.

Grey understood Egon. It wasn't hard to understand a dragon, even if that dragon wasn't yours. But Rose was an entirely different matter and in the years since Grey had left her family to come to the drakling, the two had never been on the same foot. Something in the elder drakling Rose still felt as if it were judging Grey but Grey had not been in training or judgment for years. Rose had ruled the drakling for almost thirty years, had ruled them since she was about Grey's

current age, and it was hard to withstand the gaze of someone who stared at you with the kind of experience you could never hope to have. Grey was always finding disapproval behind Rose's dark eyes and annoyance in the frown that had no frown lines despite its age.

“What are you doing?” Rose asked her.

“Is there something I could be doing?” Grey snapped. She had meant to ask it sweetly.

Rose's lips, large and always pierced into a frown, turned even further downward. Olin had wandered away from the pair and instead struck up an extra loud conversation with the squad of soldiers as if he were trying to prevent anyone else from hearing Rose and Grey. Impossible. The drakling were all listening and they were all gossips, the lot of them.

“Given how important today is,” Rose said, “I assumed you would be able to find something to do. But if you need me to assign you a task—”

“—I know my job,” Grey said. “I'll be here with my squad. Waiting.”

“If you don't think you're up to it, I'm sure Jade would be,” Rose said.

“Or even Olin. It doesn't have to be a drakling.”

Grey burned. It would do no good to attack Rose for the insult. Rose could flatten Grey with a single slap and had done it, once, when Grey really spoke poorly to her. Even Grey would admit she had deserved that one. But would she have deserved it now? Grey was supposed to be out there, doing something, she was the next in line to take Rose's position and yet she was going to be dumped behind while the others did all the work and got all the glory.

“You have a plan in place, I trust?” Rose asked.

“My men and women will know what to do,” Grey said. She swallowed down the burning sensation that overwhelmed her body. Rose had probably been trying to provoke her. She was always trying to do that.

“Today is not just about protecting the Queen,” Rose said loudly. She never had to yell. Even if the drakling had not all been eagerly eavesdropping, they would have come running at just the sound of her voice. Cobalt nudged Grey when he approached, giving her a wry smile. It was the only kind he was capable of.

“Today is about making sure our people know we are at peace after the war,” Rose continued.

Umber chuckled. “Sure. The *war*.”

The others smiled. They had seen how small the fight was first-hand. Grey, who had seen nothing but a bit of smoke from the battle field, could do nothing except for exchange a look with Jade, the only other one left out of the battle. Jade smiled and shrugged in a ‘what can you do’ way. Grey made some sort of expression that made Jade turn away

"Patia will be getting this procession over with as quickly as she can," Rose announced. Behind her, Egon stretched and flicked his tail to scare Olin even further away. Poor man couldn't find a spot without dragons or drakling to stand in.

“Cobalt, Jade and Gold, I want you in the woods,” Rose said. “Jade, you’re going to stick to the edges. Cobalt and Gold, I want you two in the heart of

it. Spread your squadrons out amongst the treehouses. No further than five miles into the woods however. Anything further won't hit the dais. Umber and Raven, city edges. Do not worry about entrance gates, those are guarded well enough."

"That leaves no one on the beach," Grey pointed out loudly. "I can get Sifa, we can--"

Rose held up a single finger. Grey knew what that meant. They all knew what it meant. One dragon in the sky at a time.

"That leaves the beach unguarded," Grey said again, softer this time. No one looked at her except for Rose, who's eyes did not leave Grey's.

"Don't downcast your eyes like that," Rose said. "If you're to say something, say. Alright. Attack from the beach."

A lesson. In front of everyone. Grey really should have known better.

"You can scale our home," Grey said. She tapped her foot on the ground to show she meant the island tower. "Get people on the beach while the coronation is happening and get someone into the castle cavern."

"Where my people and your people are," Rose said. "You may not trust your squad but I trust mine."

"Cannons on the beach."

"Which I would see from the sky. Which I hope you would see from up here. If we are attacked it will be from inside the crowd," Rose added.

"Then we need more people there." Grey said.

"There are going to be 500,000 people out there today," Rose said. "Do you know how hard it is to pull a sword in a crowd that size? Every building near

Patia's dais and path has been swept and has a guard stationed outside it. You yourself checked the ruins towards the woods but if you want Egon and I to check it again--"

"--there's no way to launch an attack from there, I checked it." Grey would pay for that interruption later.

"Then we're covered," Rose said. "People are not supposed to notice us. We're just a part of the city and I do not want to hear reports otherwise. The dragons will be excited by the crowds, make sure they're under control. If they get upset then bring them up here. Am I understood?"

She was understood and even if she wasn't no one would dare admit so to her face.

They dispersed quickly. Rose jumped back onto Egon's back and off they soared into the sky while the others grabbed the reins around their dragons and hauled themselves into their saddles and down the stone bridge to the city. A few gave Grey light hits to the shoulder or pats on the back but no one said anything. Maybe her face told them it wasn't worth it. She had been told, many times before, that she always looked upset. Her name may have come from the name of Sifa's scales (all drakling were named for their dragon's colors) but it may as well been for her own pallor, a young woman who always looked under the weather no matter what the weather was.

The sun had finally hit the midday sky and it blazed onto the coronation is if giving its own approval of Patia. Grey's drakling uniform melted to her body. She wanted to toss something off but she needed the cloak, needed something to

remind people she was drakling. Her cloak, the design passed down from a drakling husband years and years ago, caught the sun and turned into silver scales beneath it in a texture that was neither cloth nor chainmail yet somehow both as it mimicked the scales of her dragon. Perhaps she could have done without her goggles as she wasn't flying but they gave her comfort atop her head. In the sky, she could turn the dials and knobs to see just as well as Sifa.

Her body vibrated with the onslaught of noises and smells coming from the city below. She tried turning her nose to the sea in the hopes the salt would cover everything else but she had become so used to that smell that it was merely an afterthought against the fried fish or sweat or damp clothing mixing with too heavy perfume. The air smelled sweeter than normal, that was the problem. A sick sweet, not the sweet of vanilla but the smell of vanilla sprayed over a room that hadn't been aired out in weeks. Her nose tingled with a sneeze that never came. It wasn't as if she could rub her nose across her arm like some of the soldiers around her did. She didn't even want to risk sniffing in case someone thought it was her gesturing disgust at the new queen. Not that that really would have mattered; drakling stood by whomever sat on the throne. For the most part. There had once been a king who didn't see a use for the drakling but his name could be found in no history books.

She needed something to focus on. Yes, that would help. Grey needed to be doing something, always needed to be doing something to stop her body from twitching and doing something she didn't want it to be doing. Her fingers danced against her thighs even now.

"I want two people at the top of the elevator," she called to her squad. Fifteen men and women picked because they were good fighters or healers or brawlers. Too fresh. Their uniforms were shiny and the dragon wings etched onto their leather breastplates stood out too much, having not settled into the leather as just another part of them.

"We'll need three on the bottom of the elevator, on the beach," Grey said, pointing at whom she meant to go. "Once the procession starts, I want the elevator left halfway and two people on it, in case you need to go either direction. Four of you are going to the castle cavern to stand guard there. Final four will be here with me."

She did not point at Olin. He knew he was with her. They would be staying on the flat land of the drakling home and watching it all. The only thing Grey was good for.

Her body tensed even as her squad nodded in agreement and went to their jobs but there was no way she could go for a run or anything now to calm herself. Throw herself off the island, maybe. Go for a swim. Come back. Eventually.

Olin must have seen her twitching and itching because he smiled at her broadly. "Have you heard the little lordlings and ladyships gossiping about the Queen's dress?"

"No. Didn't Sebe design it? She's the best seamstress in the city. What's wrong with it?"

"I just want to point out that it's weird you know who designed her dress," Olin said. "And I don't know but they're horrified. Something about *the scandal*."

He used his fake nobility voice, the one he had down perfectly. Smooth, too high pitched, too affected to be natural and somehow always breathless even though the lords and ladies did nothing all day.

"Then let them be horrified," Grey said. "See if she cares."

Grey hadn't heard that bit of gossip about the Queen's dress but she usually had a pretty good idea of what the lords and ladies were grumbling about since it was part of her job. Knowing what was happening in the caverns was just as important as knowing what happened in the city below them, a philosophy not all the drakling shared.

Down the path towards the city, people mobbed. Some brought out instruments. Grey could now add banging drums, one offbeat, some strings and a particularly annoying flute to the constant barrage of noises begging for entry at the back of her head. Not one of the musicians played the same tune. There were plays happening on every street corner. Doret was known for many things and its theater was chief among them. While Grey could recognize some of the pieces from their outlandish costumes, some seemed newer. Probably accounts of Patia's glory in battle in the hopes of pleasing their queen. Or maybe they had been hired to do it to make sure the crowd knew just how perfectly she had taken over. Grey couldn't stand listening to it. She tried distracting herself by talking to her squad but their voices were too loud and too spread, smiles making their vowels too long and the words too fast in their excitement.

Looking out over the city below did not help either. The city looked too foreign. Her eyes had been used to years and years of soft gold, not this harsh red

that stained everything---flags, banners, costumes, faces coated with paint and makeup alike.

At least she could depend on Rose and Egon and their blazing path through the sky. If she closed her eyes, Grey could hear the air cut by Egon's wings and the rumbling purr-like noise in his throat. Or perhaps she was imagining it. No, there truly was something rumbling. The elevator. The queen was on her way up. Grey needed to gather the four standing with her but they were already there, just as eager and nervous as she was. It was calming. She smiled at them. It didn't help anyone's nerves. She knew better than to smile at people.

And then the elevator that led up and down the island tower clunked to the top and Grey knew exactly why people had complained about the Queen's dress.

Queen Patia wore red and yet, somehow, it seemed less that she wore red and more that she had found strips of red fabric to drape her body in. The fabric may have been silk or may have been stronger or may not have been fabric at all but merely red painted to the Queen's fighting form that was on full display. The bodice of the piece cut low, just below her navel, and stopped only a few inches above true indecency. Her back lay exposed and even her legs could be seen as she walked, since the slit on the side left little to the imagination. Imagination wasn't what she wanted. Every bruise that decorated her body and every healing cut were revealed to the world to remind people of what she had done and how she had so conquered their great country. The blue and black and brown and

yellow and purple were more effective than any speech she could make and brighter than any jewel she could wear.

The Queen walked slowly and stiffly at the head of a group of noble women and men. Grey had seen the Queen return from battle and move with more ease in her heavy armor than in the barely-there dress.

"Drakling Grey," Patia said with a genuine smile that almost threw Grey. The word 'drakling' still sounded foreign on her tongue but she gave it her best. A common language, started in Oscide, had taken over most of the countries but each still had its own accent and secondary language. Patia's accent was easy to forget until she tripped on true Oscidian words.

"I trust Drakling Rose is---ah, there she is." Patia beamed as Rose and Egon swooped a circle around the island. Her hand fluttered as if she intended to give the pair a wave. "And your dragon?" Patia asked. "Sifa?"

"She's in the stables Your Majesty. The rest of our people are on the ground to make sure everything goes well today."

"Thank you."

Grey wished she could turn around to see the look on Olin's face as a queen thanked her.

"The whole city is there, aren't they?" Patia said. She stood where Grey would consider foolishly close to the edge for anyone but the drakling. A few of the guards and even fewer of the nobles reached as if to pull her back but no one did.

"They are," Grey agreed. "They're excited for you, Your Majesty."

Patia laughed. "They don't give a damn who sits on the throne, not down there. They're happy the fighting is over."

"I--"

--I hope Lord Haegan spoke to them about the gifts."

"What about the gifts?" Grey asked, thankful for the change in topic.

"The gifts." The Queen waved her hand. "The ones they're supposed to be giving me. It is such a strange custom. The entire thing is. A walk through a newly conquered city is begging for trouble."

But the Queen couldn't help grinning at the word.

"And," she continued, "to expect this people to give me gifts? What could they give me that I don't already have?"

"It's an old custom," Grey admitted. "But one that has always been used, not just after war. It shows a connection to the city and our people. That you are one of us. The presents are just as you give a gift to an old friend that you've welcomed home."

"And the bare feet?" Patia lifted her dress, just a hair, and wiggled her red painted toes.

"Humility," Grey said with a shrug. Rose would have yelled at her for such a casual gesture but Rose was off in the clouds. "You are free to refuse them."

"That would be horribly rude," Patia said. Grey had been told that this woman had killed Alam Naell by stabbing him through the neck and that she

killed another man with a shot through the bowels, but refusing a gift was where she drew the line at 'rude'.

The nobles and guards began to get restless. Dresses and cloaks rustled as the heavy fabric dampened beneath the sweat of its owners, a sweat Grey could smell from where she stood even though the nobles waited far behind the Queen. Some fussed with their hair and a few began to tap their feet with an echo that hit Grey's delicate ears like cannon fire. Whether Patia's conversation had come from politeness or stalling her walk, it was time to go. Grey motioned her to the only path back down towards the city.

The Queen's walk was slow-going. The path was easy enough, a bit narrow and off sides at times, but far easier to manage than the stairs carved into the cliff or even the elevator that had a mind of its own. But Patia took each step with deliberate effort and the crowd of onlookers clung behind her. Even the walk had to be a careful calculation. Too fast and she wanted to get this over with quickly, didn't care about her new people. Any slower and she dragged her feet. She didn't. Grey listened for each footfall, the sound of Patia's bare feet clear against clanging boots and heels. The Queen wobbled at times, noticeable only to Grey, but never halted.

Grey waited for the procession to reach the edge of the city and for the delighted scream of the crowds before she felt comfortable telling her men and women to relax. A few were on the elevator, as so ordered, with three stationed at the top and bottom. It left only four with her.

She sat on the ledge of the cliff, legs dangling over. No one else followed suit but Olin leaned against her back and she grabbed at his ankles in jest. He cursed at her. "What do you drakling eyes see, my lady?" he teased. He knew just how good her vision was. Part of her job, after all.

"They're almost at the city," Grey told the others. "One of the lords just fell--Tyk, I think. Not off the path, he just fell down."

"Pity," Olin muttered.

"Please hold disdain and comments until the end," Grey said. "They've reached the city. See how people bow? They're even smiling. The whole front row of the crowd is smiling at her. That's her, that red speck. And here come the gifts."

But it wasn't the jewels and clothes the Queen had been so afraid of it. If Grey had to say, she would bet Sifa that Haegan, the top adviser to whomever sat on the throne, must have arranged something. People gave her that which they could spare--flowers, bread, small trinkets that a Queen may not have. She accepted them graciously but passed the bread to nearby children who lurked in the crowd. The flowers were given to the various lords and ladies and guards who walked behind her.

The city had never been so lively. Even the previous coronation had not held this kind of joy or warmth. That had been a duty while this was a celebration. No one sat this out, protesting yet another ruler who would do nothing for them because this Queen was already doing something. They had not had a Queen in several monarchs and had not been conquered in far longer, yet she had given them the hustle and bustle of war without the lengthy bloodshed. She had given

warriors the chance to find glory without threat of death and mothers and fathers the glory of their children serving without fear of losing them.

War had always been a great economy for their city, whether it was their war or someone else's. Farmers doubled their output to send crops abroad, merchants made fortunes off baubles to remind soldiers of home or ribbons to remind home of their soldiers. Artists wove tales of battle and sorrow. School teachers found a renewed interest in history and a fierce intensity from students who feared being sent into the army. The drakling went from something that was simply there to something that was necessary, worshiped, even. People were hardly celebrating the Queen so much as the good fortune she brought them.

Grey looked up to see where Rose had gone but the dragon hovered over the woods, likely where Grey's people patrolled. Today was Jade's debut ride and Rose would want to see that.

"Oh!" Grey yelled, eyes focusing back on the crowd. Sitting only at the top of the tower, she was still close enough that her drakling eyes could see without the use of her goggles. A few hundred feet was nothing to her. "The Queen has reached the dais!"

"That didn't take long," Olin said.

"I think she is trying to get out of this as quickly as possible," Grey said. "Can you blame her? This is it. She is asking permission to lead."

Grey focused her attention on the Queen, focused her drakling ears with enough force that she could hear the large inhale the Queen took before forming

the word “my—” but that was all Grey heard. Something thundered out in the woods. It was distant, even to Grey’s incredible ears, but she heard it.

Blood, maybe not even hers, roared in her ears until she could hear nothing else except the beating of her heart that kept skipping beats and trying to speed itself back into rhythm. Something was wrong and she wasn’t the only one who knew it. She saw Raven and Umber stop their dragons as they prowled the edges of the city. The woods stretching behind the city were too dense for her to see what Cobalt, Jade and Gold heard but they must have heard it, they were so much closer. And Rose and Egon—

—she stood, ignoring the surprise of her squadron and Olin's attempts to ask what had happened. Egon. Egon was wrong. The dragon flew too low over the trees. And he was further out than there was any reason to be. Nothing closer than five miles could reach Patia in the center of the city and yet there Egon hovered, a mile or so beyond the limit, pushed far enough back that even Grey’s eyes strained to see what Rose and her dragon did. He was looking for something. Whatever pulled Rose so far from her Queen and city could not be good.

Grey grabbed Olin. It would leave a bruise even through his armor. "Until I get back, don't let anyone up and down this elevator or into the castle. The Queen and drakling only. Not even her guards--fuck, keep Haegan out if you have to. Mari, tell the ones at the elevator the same. I don't want to use it at all, too easy for something to go wrong. Understood?"

"What is it?" Olin asked.

"Something is wrong." The more she said it, the more she knew it. Rose had no reason to be flying so low or to even be flying over the woods at all. There were three other riders out there, riders on the ground who could see what was happening but they were four miles away and that was out of Grey's eye or earshot. "I'm getting Sifa and getting the Queen."

"You can't have two dragons in the sky," Olin protested weakly.

"Get to the elevator!" She shoved Olin and off he went, the others with him. She ran towards the stables and tried to focus herself on Rose and Egon, just Rose and Egon, just them and nothing else until she only heard the whistle of the air around the dragon as he shot across the forest and further and further away from what Grey could sense. Further and further from the city, from the Queen, and that must have been a distraction so why was Rose still going for it? *A distraction, Rose, you know this.* But Rose would never hear Grey and the pair had pulled far enough from Grey's enhanced earshot that could no longer hear the flapping or slicing of Egon's wings. Grey couldn't stop to turn and see what was happening, she needed to run for Sifa. A run that would take even a trained runner at least ten seconds. Grey could do it in five. Even if she couldn't see Egon, she could still smell him, her drakling nose catching the unique smell of dragon. Sweat and warmth and embers that she tasted against her lips.

No. No, no, no. There shouldn't have been embers. She had never tasted that before because it wasn't done. Grey finally stopped, so close she could have reached out and knocked on the stable. Embers burned into her lips. She imagined that or exaggerated it but she knew what it meant, even if it wasn't possible. Egon

had moved a little closer to Grey but still far enough that she could not see him clearly. She fumbled with her goggles but was too slow. A blessing.

Egon's chest swelled and the world melted.

Dragonfire was never meant to be seen, let alone survived. Even from Grey's distance the array of colors blinded her and she wanted to slip her goggles over her eyes but the command got lost somewhere between brain and body and her arms never moved. At times red or orange, at times blue or maybe even black, the fire that poured from Egon's mouth must have been waiting there for years. Wait, no, the black was ash, not fire. Grey could see that now, ash from the forest that had already burnt to nothingness and would not be salvaged within Grey's lifetime. Rose and Egon had no control of the fire now, even when Egon finally closed his mouth. It had become a creature all its own and more destructive than the dragon that unleashed it onto the world.

The silent horror of the crowd grated on Grey. She had been too focused on listening and now it was like something had been ripped away from her body, her breath maybe. She needed to breathe. She needed to move. Move, yes. She started to reach for the doors again but her ears, still focused on Egon even as the crowd began to scream and run and crashing feet flooded her focus, caught the tell-tale *click* of a heavy weapon being loaded into place. Her fingertips grazed the door and dropped back to her side. She had to watch.

Egon shot upwards, higher and higher until he was easily out of the arrow's range and it floundered uselessly below him. An arrow wouldn't pierce Egon's body, no matter where it was aimed. An arrow wouldn't even slow Rose

down, unless hit square in the head. Drakling skin was thicker than the typical person's but Rose wasn't about to test how many arrows she could take. She spun Egon and aimed for the city, back to her queen. Or maybe towards Grey. Rose was grounding Egon. She just needed a clear patch of ground where no one could get him and the best option was the drakling home. The safest spot to regroup.

Something boomed and it wasn't a dragon. Something like a canon explosion but not as loud, a smaller object and a whistling sound faster than a usual canon as the distinctive projectile from a dragonpiercer smashed through Egon's left wing. A weapon meant for a dragon and a dragon only and meant to kill. And then the second projectile, a small metal ball that exploded with what Grey knew was shrapnel and fire as it hit Egon's eye. The third one did nothing but wretch a sob from Grey. Egon was already falling.

The dragons roared from everywhere at once. Finally, something in them released Grey from whatever had fastened her to the ground, she could move but she didn't know where to go. Not to Sifa--the dragon needed to stay out of the sky at all costs. One dragon in the sky at a time, one at a time. She repeated it to herself even as the thunder of Egon hitting the ground told her there was no dragon in the sky. The Queen. Grey could at least get to the Queen, but first that meant getting to the elevator. The elevator she had ordered not to move.

Why was the crowd panicking? Foolish. They were only adding to the forces screaming inside Grey's mind and body. Constant yelling of names or just yelling for the sake of yelling, the crunch of fingers and toes and bones as those

who fell were trampled mercilessly, sword and knives scrapping as they were pulled from scabbards but the ground hadn't been under attack, only the sky and that was now empty and would stay empty.

The elevator, as Grey had instructed, hung halfway down the island and there wasn't time to get it up or down. She grabbed one of the heavy metal chains and swung herself onto it. Rappel, then. Drop herself little by little until she reached the floorboards and could shout for them to move that, that they had to get to the Queen.

Something above her shattered. Grey didn't have time for that.

She could hear the Queen from a hundred feet in the air. Patia must have been shouting, was certainly shouting, but it was only a whisper to Grey as the Queen's voice demanded, "a sword, someone get me a fucking sword!"

A shadow crossed Grey and lowered to her. *No.*

"Sifa!" Grey yelled. "Sifa, go back! Get down."

But the damn dragon wouldn't listen, never listened. Sifa reached her front leg out and plucked Grey from the chains easily, refusing to let go until the two had their feet on the drakling land again. The dragon had busted through the door to get out.

"Get back inside," Grey shouted. They were nose to nose so that there was no need to shout but she did it anyway. She grabbed the dragon's face and pressed it to hers. "Stay inside."

Sifa's scales burned, contained dragonfire swirling inside as if she already knew what had happened and wanted revenge. Grey wouldn't, couldn't, give that

order. Sifa had to stay on the ground. Grey wanted to stay with Sifa but she needed to go to Rose or the Queen; it didn't matter which but she had to go.

The Queen. She could get there faster. Grey pushed away and knew her face had been burned by the heat of Sifa's scales but that didn't matter now. None of it did, even Grey's decision to go to the Queen on the dais. She managed to take three steps.

And then the dais exploded with a crack like lightning and then a crackling as the new Queen burned away.

How was that blue flame fire? It was so dull compared to the dragonfire that Grey could still see bursts of color every time she blinked but it was fire, just unnatural fire. Smoke was already rising from it and the smell of burnt flesh made Grey gag and made Sifa recoil and wrap her tail and wings around Grey in a shield. Grey pushed her away and ran once again towards the elevator.

She didn't know why she was running. There was no one she could save.

Chapter Three

Coral,

I'm sorry if this letter makes no sense. I'm hardly in the right state of mind and probably will not be for some time. But I am alright. Nidi, Ronin and Damir are also unharmed and that is more than we could ask, given what happened.

I can see you now, telling me to start at the beginning, but I'm not entirely certain where that would be. The coronation itself? As you've always said, our customs are so different. A coronation is not just a crown upon a head but an elaborate affair (too elaborate, I would say) where the new ruler must walk from the drakling lands down to the city in a symbol of humility. Not only must they ask the city for permission to lead it—not the country, just the city apparently—but they must do a dance to symbolize...something. The ruler doesn't dance so much as people around them, before the crown is placed upon a ruler's head. I'm very glad I have not had to go through it.

Patia made her way through the crowd well enough. We stood towards the back and it may have saved us. When she began her speech we could not hear her but only the constant cheering and applause of the crowd that drank in every word she said. And then it simply happened. There was no change in the wind, no warning feeling in the pit of my stomach but where there was once calm there was now the end of all things. There is a reason we're not supposed to see dragonfire, Coral, and it has nothing to do with the treaty or laws, but our very nature. I've never seen anything like it and I don't want to ever again. A myriad of colors that

we have no words for and the sensation, even from miles and miles away, that something is melting your skin. I've no idea the destruction it caused. The dragon simply let loose fire, far off in the woods and there was nothing we could do about it.

Nothing I could do, certainly. Nidi and Ronin were already in action. Almost everyone else froze but they grabbed me and got me out of there. By the time the dais the Queen stood upon exploded we were out of the crowd. Patia is dead. I'm not sure how many others. I would have stopped, probably would have been trampled by the chaos, but Nidi and Ronin pulled away—truly pulled, I don't think I was moving my feet at all—and tossed me into Damir's house because the fool has never learned to lock his door. We were fortunate to be near it because of how far back in the crowd we were.

We just waited. You've no idea how horrible it is to do that. Although we sat a safe distance from the explosion we could smell the fire through closed windows and could see the smoke that shrouded the city. Hearing it was the worst part. So many people screaming and sobbing and the constant crackling and popping of the fire that took them too long to put out. We must have waited for hours. I couldn't say. Damir made it home and Ronin nearly ripped him in half when he opened the door.

It didn't feel real. We were sitting there, just listening, and it was hard to believe that this was our life, that just outside those thin walls such a disaster could be happening. I could hear it but it felt like a play, where I could just walk away and ask someone else how it ended. Nidi and Ronin stood by the windows. I

refused to. They kept trying to tell me what had happened but I didn't want to know. What good would it do? We couldn't do anything, I certainly couldn't. I'm sure in a few more days or weeks I'll be able to look back with real appreciation and awe at how well they handled everything but also a new fear and loathing for this whole act of violence and war and chaos that so many other in Doret seem to revel in. I heard laughing out there. Maybe genuine, maybe hysterical, but I heard it.

No, no. That wasn't the right thing to say, certainly not to Corali and certainly not to any of the people who read Corali's letters before she did. They would see Loic's distaste for violence as weakness rather than strength and to say something like that to Corali, who he knew would agree with him, could result in it being read the wrong way. He blacked it out with ink. Corali would find a way to see through to it, even if other readers didn't.

I couldn't say how long we huddled in there but long enough for night to set in. The streets cleared quickly with only the heavy shouting and stomping of soldiers. I cannot imagine there is much evidence left. At the time we were not certain if Patia herself was dead but we all knew without anyone telling us. The explosion had been placed almost mockingly close to where she gave her speech. I've since been told there was no body to bury or remains to identify.

Ronin heard the dragon first. Have you ever seen them, truly seen them? I know that you saw them while you were here as they flew or patrolled, but to see them up close is an entirely different thing. We could see the creature from outside the window. You used to laugh at how wide the streets of our city are and

it is because of those dragons. This one took up every inch of available space and then some. It knocked over abandoned food carts and stalls and anything else that stood in its way. At first, all we saw was the outline of a moving form. No one had bothered to light the street lanterns and the dragon was as black as could be. And then, of course, the fangs appeared—patches of white and yellow and brown and I think red but I tried to turn away from the window at that point, expecting them to pass by as they looked for the guilty or the dead or whatever they were doing.

They did not. They stopped at our door. Ronin and Nidi demanded the reason for their visit and all they would say is that they wanted to see me and Nidi and Ronin certainly won't going to allow that. We had to wait until Haegan proved he was who he claimed to be. Did you ever meet him? A somber man, he sits on the ruler's council. He went to university, before our time, and was a great favorite of Professor Royce. I didn't know it was possible to be a favorite of Royce's but here one stood on our doorstep.

The dragon stayed outside, as did a small group of guards. Even more filled the room; Haegan, the guards and one of the drakling who never once spoke but whose entire demeanor certainly said enough. He looked exactly the kind of man you would expect to be riding a black dragon through the city like it was the easiest thing in the world.

I've never seen Haegan so flustered. He had bits of city and dust still clinging to his clothes and his hair had been snowed with it. The whole thing seemed to have aged him a hundred years. I thought it had made him mad as well. He spoke quickly and without waste. The Queen is dead, he said. There are no

heirs. And you are the last Naell. A group of representatives from both Chambers have agreed to crown you king.

Nidi laughed. I don't blame her.

However, the man was entirely serious, and he stuck to his story even as I made him repeat it three or four times. In the midst of the chaos he had managed to find a majority from both the Upper and Lower Chambers to vote to pass the crown to me. I've no idea what he said to convince them. At least the Upper Chamber, nobility who had inherited their positions, know who I am. But the Lower Chamber, elected representatives from all walks of life, voted me in solely based on my name. That is no way to decide a ruler but neither is war and neither is bloodline so I suppose it will have to do.

Corali, they offered me the crown. They did not whisk me away or start waiting for orders but they waited for my decision. I had no idea I had even said yes until they surrounded me and led me from the house. I feared they wanted me to ride the dragon but they instead walked it in front of us as a protection or procession or premonition. I couldn't say. I couldn't stop shaking, I admit it. I had no idea what I had just done.

There was no crowning ceremony, no walk, no dance. They just brought me to the castle cavern. It is in that tower island, the one you always wanted to explore, and you must take the elevator up to get there. You know how I do with heights. The first impression of me as king was thus a man shaking and sweating while he stayed far away from the edge of the platform as it crept towards the sky. The men and women there must have been horrified, especially after a queen like

Patia. Haegan did not seem to notice. He talked a thousand words a minute but I heard none of them and couldn't bring myself to ask him to repeat himself. I don't think he fully knew what he was saying.

My crowning was just that. They put a crown on my head and had me repeat some words from a book that Haegan read where I promised to protect the country at all costs and swear that my own life and wants and desires meant nothing now that I was king. (Yes, I am paraphrasing but not as much as you would think.) And the poor people who had been gathered there applauded and left me alone with nearly fifteen guards to show me to my new bedroom.

I've rambled, I'm sure. I'm sorry. But I suppose you could forget everything I've said and know only this—I am now King of Oscide and

—‘and I do not want to be’ was how he wanted to finish it. But those spying eyes. He could not admit to in paper. Corali would know anyway.

I am now King of Oscide and I suppose that is that. A Naell, once again on the throne and once again brought there by bloodshed and catastrophe. A fine family legacy to uphold, don't you think?

I hope this letter finds you in a better situation than I find myself. Please, write back soon.

Loic

Chapter Four

One did not really sneak a dragon out of the drakling compound. One didn't really sneak a dragon anywhere. They could be stealthy when they wanted to be, they just very rarely wanted to be. It meant that Grey's quick get away from the compound was not quick and not really a get away. Even from inside the house, all the drakling must have heard Grey wake Sifa and open the heavy doors to the stables. The doors had to be repaired quickly after Sifa's wild escape through them. Grey did not bother getting the creature's reins or saddle. They were just walking into the night.

Sifa didn't want to go. The dragons were still in mourning after the death of Egon, a brother in arms. They huddled in cowed postures and allowed for a constant trip of tears and snot from their faces. The other dragons just watched the pair leave with eyes that didn't truly seem to see them. They had not dealt with a death in battle in a very long time. At times, they took to wailing loudly as if Egon could hear their cries and come to comfort or punish them.

Grey would not let Sifa fly. Could not. Not only were they sneaking out (although with Rose still unconscious from the fall, there was no one to tell Grey 'no') but Grey did not want to risk it. She forced Sifa to walk down the path to the city and then around the edges to the forest. The dragon did not like it but her energy had been sapped by sorrow. She walked with her talons dragging into the dirt and making an obvious path behind them, should anyone be following. Grey almost wished someone would. A good fight would do her well.

But they walked the edges of the city without incident. The soldiers patrolling gave them wide berths out of deference for their position, or maybe it was just fear of Sifa. She was smaller than the other dragons but still larger than comfortable for most. It was part of her ability to fly. Flying dragons were always just a little smaller. Their riders often were too. No less powerful, just more compact.

Sifa did not want to go into the woods. They were difficult for her to walk through and she was always crashing into trees or getting her tail wrapped around something she had not meant to wrap it around. She stopped at the first tree.

“I know,” Grey said quietly. “I just want to take another look. I know it’s hard. Please?”

Whether dragons understood them or not was hard to really say. They understood words. Sifa could hear ‘sugar’ or ‘treat’ or ‘ride’ from miles away. But whether she understood the meaning behind ‘please’, Grey couldn’t say. She could say that Sifa knew that when Grey spoke this quietly and stood this close to the dragon, that she really wanted or needed something. She could say that Sifa sometimes just knew what Grey was feeling. She let herself be led into the woods

Truth be told, Grey hated the woods too. Her drakling senses came a fire in here. Every rustle from an animal sounded like it was right next to her or every squeak and croak and caw and hiss and what kind of animal makes that slurping noise? Something in here always made her so itchy. Not bugs, as far as she could tell, but something in the air that prickled at her skin until she was scratching through the layers of armor she had not taken off since the attack two days ago.

The clothes underneath the armor had not been changed since then. She probably smelled ranker than the woods.

The woods smelled of sweet sap and musk. She didn't like it. Some of the drakling and their dragons loved the woods. Cobalt was always out here exploring on Godric and now that Jade had come, so did she. Grey saw no appeal. All she saw were tall trees that Sifa could soar far above if she wanted to and fallen logs that kept tripping Grey. The woods were dangerous. They had known that even before the attack. Being drakling was no help here. Your ears caught too much and your eyes too little. Grey saw no better than the average person here, not with the trees densely packed and all looking the same. At least being drakling meant she could navigate the night without a lantern. Sifa, of course, could see perfectly in the darkness but the dragon was too caught up in moving through tight spaces and over patches of murky wood water to really be looking for anything. Not that Grey knew what they were looking for.

Soldiers dotted the path to the spot Egon had destroyed. They gave salutes or bows of their heads but most of the men and women just went about their business. They were grateful to be left alone. They lived out here, high in treetop outposts that allowed watch over a small patch of woods but the spot Egon had targeted had been so perfectly chosen that none of the treehouses or watchers could see it. It meant no one had seen the attack but also that no one had been burnt. Grey had made the soldiers tally off to make sure. They would never find a body even if there had been someone out there.

Away from the soldiers, Grey spoke quietly to Sifa. “This is going to be the last time we can really go out for a while. Not until we know what happened. No flying. No patrol. That’ll make you happy, right? You can sleep all day.”

Sifa huffed. The dragon did love her sleep, but not like this.

“You think I’m happy? Not being able to ride?” Grey asked. It was one of those moments she was glad the dragon could not really answer, although she was sure Sifa had opinions and none of them flattering. Grey was never sure why Sifa had picked her to be the dragon’s bonded rider. Laziness, probably. Just get it over with and pick the strange thirteen year old with hands and feet she had yet to grow into and never really had. Sifa, of course, hadn’t understood that by picking Grey as her rider she was selecting Grey as the next head of the drakling since someone bonded with a dragon with flight was always in charge. Or maybe Sifa had known and wanted to play the world’s longest joke.

The spot that Egon had burnt was several miles into the woods but Grey could smell it long before they saw it. Even beneath the general stench of cloying forest she could smell the smolder that had not yet gone away. It would be there for years.

Grey had ordered the scorched earth roped off for whatever reason. Foolish. The soldiers who walked the perimeter of it and gave her the customary head tilt as greetings were necessary but it wasn’t as if the rope were going to hold someone at bay if they really wanted to see what had happened. All you had to do was raise the rope to step under or just step right over it, if you were Sifa.

“Can you really do this?” Grey asked the dragon, staring at the circle of destruction.

Sifa did not move. She stood in the center of the blackened earth with just as much shock and dismay as Grey herself did. The ground beneath them had no ash or dust. It was just black. Trees had been cleared almost a mile and half wide, without a single fallen leaf or twig. There would be no evidence here. There would be no anything here, not for hundreds of years.

Whatever had been out here had been horrible enough for Rose to risk everything. The use of dragonfire would have forced Rose to give up Egon, had he survived his fall, and would have stripped Rose of her place in the drakling. When she woke, as the healers insisted she would, she would be under a form of house arrest and not allowed to leave the drakling lands. A useless punishment compared to what she would have to be told.

“Anything?” Grey asked Sifa.

Sifa managed to furrow her brow. She did not have eyebrows, but small curled horns in the place of them and while the horns did not move, her scales did and her eyes blinked slowly in confusion. Nothing. Grey could not smell or see anything here, nor had any of the drakling or their dragons. The ground had been trampled with dragon footprints by this point. Grey could have laid down in them and stretched her arms and legs wide and just barely touched the edges of the imprint. The spot where Egon had fallen, nowhere near where they stood now, could fit a hundred men and women.

His body had been burnt for his funeral. It took hours and none of the draklng had stayed to watch the whole affair (Jade, the youngest had not stayed for any of it and Umber had left quickly with the pretense of seeing to Jade) but Olin had stayed in order to report to Grey when it was finished. Grey appreciated the traces of tear marks on his face more than his confirmation that it had been finished appreciated, it more than she could tell him without choking on the words. Wouldn't that be something? For Grey to die by choking on words and tears before she ever took her real position as head of the drakling.

Sifa pawed at the edges of the dead ground. Grey let her. She wanted the dragon to get out one last time before her confinement, wanted that more than she wanted Sifa to really be looking for anything. They had nothing to go off of. Grey had ordered the forest searched for the dragonpiercer but the weapon was already gone. They had managed to recover the two projectiles that had brought Egon to the ground as well as traces of explosive powder on them. That powder did not match the power used to murder Patia and her retinue. All they knew was that they were dealing with a group that had access to explosives and that was very little to start with. Worse, it was up to Grey to make the decisions now that Rose couldn't. She had no ideas and nor did any of the drakling. Rose would have. The head of the drakling was amazing in stress. Or should Grey consider her the former head? When Patia's armies had gotten close it was if Rose came to life and Grey saw the woman for the first time. She answered questions before you asked them and had plans for every possible thing that could go wrong, one by one, until there was a map of plans in her head that only she could follow but she didn't

need to because nothing went wrong on her watch. Grey should have been studying with her to learn how she did all of that. And yet Grey had always been left behind to defend the city or to keep watch. A lot of good it had done them now when Rose was out of commission and Grey couldn't afford to keep watch. She needed to do something.

Grey didn't do well with lists. She'd tried for a time, at Raven's suggestion, to keep actual lists of the things she wanted to do for the day but they always wound up lost and turning back up months later in strange spaces. Plans were not Grey's strongest point. She could plan a battle or an attack, not that she'd ever needed to, but a normal plan for daily life or investigation was just not how her mind worked. She often wondered if there was something wrong with the way she thought. The other drakling saw six and seven steps ahead at a time. Grey was lucky if she saw the next step.

Sifa nudged her from behind. It nearly knocked Grey to the ground. "What?" she asked. "That was rude."

The dragon didn't care. She wanted to go. She had found nothing and wanted out of the woods. "Alright," Grey soothed. She ran a head down the center of Sifa's face. The area just below the space between a dragon's eyes was the controlling spot for all of them. Something about that spot seemed to turn them to the most pliant creatures in the world. Pliant, with fangs and furled talons and fire in their bellies.

Sifa stared at the sky. Legend said that dragons were actually fallen stars, the fire inside them fire from the stars above and, as a child, Grey had loved those

legends. She loved all legends and stories of heroes because, as Raven so liked to tease her, *of course she did*. As a child her favorite had been soldiers and monarchs. Her tastes had refined to a palate of tales about rogue spies or assassins taking revenge on their former employers but she had a soft spot for true heroes. One legend said the first drakling had plucked a falling star from the sky and found an egg at its center. A lie. The first drakling had conquered an already living and fighting dragon, not raised it from birth. It made a good story and one that was easy to believe when one saw how longingly Sifa stared back towards the stars.

“No,” Grey said softly. She turned the dragon’s gaze back down the ground for their walk home.

Chapter Five

"A poet," Grey repeated. She had said the word a hundred times in the past few days and each time it became sharper and sharper on her tongue until it had become a weapon all its own. She could probably kill a man with it.

"A professor of poetry," Haegan corrected. "He is the only living Naell and we could not go without a leader."

"No one had a say in it," Grey protested.

Haegan didn't look up from a mountain of papers that always existed around him, practically clung to him. "No one had a say in the last one, either. Or the one before that. But the Lower and Upper Chambers agreed to crown him and that's better than can be said for the past few monarchs."

She huffed but Haegan didn't notice. The man looked as bone tired as she felt and somehow it did nothing to endear him to her. He had no excuse for his exhaustion. Grey had been running around for the three days after the disaster, three days and nights of piecing together the fragments of what had happened and finding that no one had a damn clue. 500,000 people watched a Queen die and a dragon fall from the sky and now there were 500,000 different stories about it and it was Grey's job to sort through them all because Rose had yet to wake.

Grey slumped further into the soft chair of the council room. This was her least favorite room in the castle, easily. Shuttered away and yet somehow in the center rung of the castle, the room did everything it could to entice its members to work far longer than necessary with its cozy feather chairs and fireplaces that

were not yet necessary in the early fall weather. The circular room barely had enough space for the tables and chairs in it, as if making the councilors sit close together would make them get along.

It wasn't that Grey didn't get along with Haegan but it would be a stretch to say anyone got along well with him. There was a reason he sat on the king's council at a relatively young age but the past few years of service and the stress of losing two monarchs in a year had started to gray the hair around his temples, hair he had forgotten to cut and now sprung to life with a newfound curl. There was also the new addition of a beard to hide the ever present frown lines, an easier option than to just stop frowning. He and Rose could have a disapproving competition when she woke up. The healers said that would be any day now but they had said that yesterday and the day before and it would probably be today, when Grey wasn't there to be with her.

They had been waiting for their new king too long. Grey had better things to do be doing. The area of the dais explosion had been roped off but there were still rubble and bodies to sort through in the hopes of finding some indication of what had gone so terribly wrong. And now, according to some of the soldiers standing guard over it, people were trying to collect that rubble to sell as souvenirs. Better to make a profit out of horrors than wallow in them, Grey understood that, but it was making her job so much harder and there was already so much she wasn't sure of doing. People wanted to move on in their own way. Some made light of it as just another part of living in Oscide while others just ignored the giant rubble in the middle of their city, pretending that day had never

happened. That initial panic had given way to an eerie stillness that covered most of the city. People went out only for work and some had yet to return to their jobs, although Grey wasn't sure what they were doing with their time since the reports of patrol that came to her always described empty streets. Once Egon had fallen and the queen was gone, people had returned to their homes as quickly as they could so that when Grey got to the city there were few people for her to talk to apart from the soldiers. And when people did talk, they had nothing of note.

At least the other drakling were trying to help. Raven had been guiding her through the logistics of leading and Gold, Umber and Violet had agreed to stay rather than returning to their various outposts in the countryside. It meant all the drakling were living in one roof and that did not happen often. The only thing keeping them from each other's throats was the still form of Rose herself. She lay on her bed supposedly sleeping but truthfully, as Grey had heard one night as she tried to decide whether it was better to send more soldiers into the woods or not, truthfully stirring and sobbing while the rest of the house slept. Three days was not enough time to accept what had been ripped from Rose.

Grey rolled her neck. It cracked, jarring the dead air of the room and still Haegan did not stop writing. She could not have said what he was working on nor could she have said she cared. She just wanted to be doing something.

Her fingers tapped. During meetings she often brought some sort of needlework with her, just so her fingers had something to do. It kept her focused. Grey's body was not equipped to do one task at a time and even worse equipped

to just sit still. Sitting on her desk in the drakling compound was a pair of gloves she had promised to fix for Cobalt, why had she not brought them with her?

Right. Because she did not yet know the king and how he would take to her sitting there and stitching while they were introduced. Her network of eyes and ears in the city had shockingly little to report on him but that was cause for concern in itself. He had been a palace fixture when younger but after the passing of his both his parents (father, sudden heart problems and mother of a long illness almost a decade later) he had disappeared from royal functions and retreated into the university where he had a position as a professor of fucking poetry, specializing in translation. His known friend group was small--an engineer who he had attended school with and his two guards paid for by a Naell family trust. Which he now sat as the sole inheritor of.

It was enough to make one suspicious but it never quite added up from what Grey heard of him. A few former students had spoken, without bribery, of a man they loved for his earnest rantings on word choice and habit of tripping over his own feet. Patia had spoken to him after taking the throne and told Rose that he was not a threat and not worth anymore of their time, a phrase taken word for word from Rose's notes.

"I'm going to need you to stop that," Haegan said.

He meant her finger-tapping on the arm rests.

"How is Patia's country?" she asked instead.

"Chaos," Haegan said. "Too many cousins fighting for control."

"Who will win?"

"I couldn't say," he told her. At this point she just wanted him to look up at her.

"Who will win?"

"I couldn't say."

"Come on."

"I couldn't say."

"I'm going to keep asking."

"Probably Prince Quent."

"There. That wasn't so hard," she said. "Well. Clearly, our king has found something better to do—an excellent choice in ruler, Haegan, truly—but since I do have work to be doing..."

She started to rise but they both knew she wasn't actually going to leave. Grey had been told to meet her king and that was what was she was going to do. She could have left. Drakling answered to no one besides other drakling but even she knew that it was the right thing to do. Haegan didn't even give her attempted goodbye a proper watch. He just waited until she sank back into her seat.

The too comfortable chair sucked the life from Grey. She could feel how it pulled at her until she was certain she had melded to it. Even the footsteps down the hall, the three sets coming towards them, could not rouse her. Two of those footsteps were guards, certainly. Light of foot and an easy rolling from heel to toe. But it was that third set that was her king and they thumped down the hall in a heavy, all foot down at once manner. Was that poetic? A king unused to the weight of his crown? Grey certainly thought it was and a thought so ridiculous

that you had to laugh at it. Which is exactly what Grey did. Into the face of her new king.

It was not the weight of his crown, a thin gold band around his forehead, that caused Loic to stomp so but a cloak that dragged him down. It was not heavy and very well stitched, clean lines of a barely there black thread and some that were lined with bits of gold so that the cloak seemed to shimmer whenever he moved. Perhaps he thought the cloak made his small frame seem larger. It did not. In fact, everything about Loic seemed to dwarf him, everything from the cloak to the Naell braids that hung past his shoulders. Naell braids were not unique in themselves. It was the pure gold threads braided into their hair and the pure gold cuffs along with them. This was not a king. It was a man playing dress-up.

"Your Majesty," Haegan said with a deep bow. "Thank you for coming. This is Drakling Grey."

Grey did not rise from her chair and the two guards behind Loic glared at her. A mismatch of women, one tall and one short, they would be an interesting pair to fight. Grey would suspect the shorter, more muscular one, to be good with her hands. Better to protect a man walking down an alley or in a large crowd. The taller one was a clear weapons fighter, short swords if Grey had to guess. Better for defense in a real combat situation.

"It's nice to meet you, Grey," Loic said. His mouth popped open again as if he realized how ridiculous it was to say that but instead pulled out his chair and dropped into it with a heavy thud. He stared at Grey and Haegan for a minute as if waiting for them to speak. When they didn't, he tried to roll his shoulders but the

cloak clasped across them with a gold chain stopped the motion. "What do we know about the attack?" he finally asked.

Nothing. At least, nothing she was going to admit to them.

"We're still gathering information," Grey said. She intended to leave it at that but Loic continued to stare at her with heavy lidded eyes. "Our focus has been the two devices used in the attack. The dragon piercer and the explosive on the dais."

"What is in a dragon piercer?" Loic asked.

Grey had to at least appreciate the question. She was less appreciative when he held up a finger to quiet her before she had even begun speaking, making her wait as he dug a small leather-bound notebook out of his cloak. He motioned for her to continue once he was posed with quill over the pages. Behind him, the guards exchanged very quick and very horrified glances.

"A dragon piercer is a form of cannon," Grey said. Loic's quill moved furiously and in remarkably neat handwriting. "A heavy one. The projectiles are small and fast, designed specifically for dragons."

"I've never heard of one being used before," Loic said.

No, why the fuck would you? But what Grey said was "they're very difficult to make and very difficult to aim. This attack was...extremely well-planned. Piercers are difficult to move so we suspect this was a group attack. They must have had a cart or something to move the piercer so quickly."

"And you had no idea this was being planned?" Loic asked.

The tall guard kicked Loic's chair and he jerked forward.

He tried again. "Were there not sweeps done of the forest?" he asked. "I don't understand how any of this could have happened without the drakling being aware."

"Whoever did this knew our patterns," Grey said. "They knew how to force Rose and Egon into a position where they could be attacked."

"They took advantage of your cockiness," he said and even seemed to make a note of it.

Haegan interrupted before Grey could throttle her new king. "We've also found no trace of explosive device at the center of the city. Almost nothing has been recovered from the site."

"We're still piecing bodies together," Grey said.

This time, it was Haegan who looked like he wanted to kick Grey's chair.

"How many people are necessary to operate a piercer?" Loic asked.

"It depends on the piercer," Haegan said. "Likely two."

Grey wanted to rip the writing book from Loic's hands. Maybe if she beat him with it she'd be allowed to leave.

"They would have kept the group as small as possible," Loic said. "It pulls less attention and there is less risk of betrayal."

"Where do you go from here?" the shorter guard asked.

Haegan looked at Grey, the barest hint of surprise on his face at the breach of protocol. The shock on his face was almost worth the whole damn meeting.

"We're not sure." Haegan chose to address the question as if it Loic had had spoken it.

"Do we know of any one with vocal grudges against Patia?" Loic asked.

"We cannot even be certain whether the Queen, the drakling or the city were the true target," Haegan said. "We are entirely in the dark about this."

Haegan was never in the dark about anything. Grey did not say this but made sure he saw her staring at him and hoped he saw that she knew he was lying. Grey wasn't always good at making her expression and her thoughts match.

Loic sighed and rubbed a hand along his rounded jawline. He had a soft face. A sharp nose but it had clearly never been broken in a fight, amber eyes that had never once been blackened, lips never split with a well-placed punch.

"How is the city recovering?" he finally asked.

"Well enough," Haegan said. "People are in shock but this is to be expected. Assassinations happen. We were fortunate the cost of life was not higher. But we did lose a dragon and that has not happened in some time."

"Seventy years," Grey said. "

"Seventy-three," because Haegan couldn't stop himself.

"And Drakling Rose is--"

"--healing," Grey cut off. "She is still healing."

"But you're in charge, now." The way Loic said it sounded like an accusation.

"Yes. She's just lost her dragon and mine is the last with flight."

"So that means you're in charge? Just because yours can fly?"

"Your Majesty," Haegan said quickly, "we need to make arrangements for you to meet with the Upper and Lower Chambers for a formal introduction. In

lieu of the circumstances, I think a proper coronation would not be wise but it is important for you to meet with the Chambers."

"To do what?" Loic asked.

"An introduction. They will feel more comfortable working with you if they know who you are," Haegan said. "We're in a terrible situation here. Usually a monarch comes to throne after years of waiting and the Chambers have time to understand how they will work. They don't know you."

Did Grey really have to be here for this? She should be with her network by now, to see what information they had. She could be at the drakling compound. She could be anywhere else. But the two men continued to talk and Grey didn't know if she was supposed to leave or not. So she stayed and melted into the chair until everyone seemed to forget she was even there.

Chapter Six

Every morning that he had been in the castle, Loic wrote down and rehearsed telling the servers what he wanted for breakfast. And every morning, to his horror, he forgot all foods that weren't bread and porridge. He didn't even like porridge. It was what the university had served so it was just what he was used to. For six years, porridge porridge porridge, so of course he could not think of anything else.

He felt certain the staff laughed at him when they took his order back to the kitchens. It looked even worse when they set it upon the long table. The whole room was too big for just Loic but everyone insisted that this was the king's eating chamber so this was where he sat, alone at a table that could easily fit three families and a room that could hold multiples of that. After two days the staff had stopped lighting the candles all the way down because it seemed a waste of good wax and he couldn't blame them. Except now it meant that Loic sat alone at a table with a half-lit room and a breakfast he didn't want.

He didn't like the quiet. The silence made him all too aware of his own eating habits, how loudly he chewed or slurped. Had he always done this? He must have, he didn't remember changing his eating habits recently. Did one ever change their eating habits?

It was the kind of question he could have asked Nidi and Ronin but they stood outside the doors, not inside. He could have called them to sit with him if he

wanted--and he certainly wanted to--but people already seemed wary of how close he was to them. Loic had tried to assure the two that they wouldn't be replaced or pushed aside but they had not been happy and neither was he. Not with any part of the situation. But when a desperate council arrives on your doorstep and asks you to be king, you don't refuse. Even if you had always assumed you would, had always told his parents that he would refuse, and if they were still alive maybe he would have. How glorious it would have been to tell them that their lowly branch of the family finally had the opportunity to take the throne and their strange and only son had turned it down.

And yet he hadn't even hesitated.

A knock on the door made Loic jump. Not only jump, but do so with such force that he dropped his spoonful of porridge to the table and it made a mess but he couldn't care. He knew who knocked with both fists beating a drum beat with no discernible pattern. Loic leapt to his feet and pulled the door open before Damir could declare himself, pulling him into a hug while his friend still had his hand in the air. Damir awkwardly patted Loic's shoulder and faked cough as if Loic held him too tight but both knew that wasn't true even though it was not impossible to imagine--Damir was thin and Loic was too many helpings of porridge and bread to be called anything less generous than thickly built.

"Nice to see you too." Damir pulled back and swept into a bow purposely too low. "Your Grace."

"Majesty," Loic corrected. "It's Majesty now."

Damir laughed and reached across the table to swipe some of Loic's bread. His open mouth smile before he bit into it revealed the tooth he had lost in a trebuchet accident their first semester of school. The missing tooth gave him a mischievous smile even though Damir had never once done anything worse than fall asleep in class, which he had been wholly apologetic for. His entire demeanor, from the slightly disheveled clothes that matched from a distance but not up close to the hair he continued to grow despite the fact that it had grown long past the fashion of ear-length, was a carefully crafted act of not caring. He thought it made him look dashing. It made him look like a mess.

"I got quite an earful from our ladies." Damir waved a hand back towards the door.

"They're not your ladies," Loic said.

"Your guards--my friends--gave me quite an earful."

"Better. About?"

"I've gathered that they do not like the drakling."

Loic stood. Pacing gave him something to do and a reason to avoid looking at his students when lecturing but Damir, eyes lined with a black kohl that may have just been left over from his drawing tables, continued to stare at him.

"No, they do not. The head drakling does not like me."

"You always think people don't like you," Damir said. "And everyone does. Except Professor Meenha."

"Meenha does hate me. He tried to stop me from getting my position at university."

"So, let the drakling hate you." Damir shrugged. As if he wouldn't tailspin at thought of someone not falling for his charms.

"The drakling are the best fighters in the damn world. In the history of the world," Loic added. "I cannot afford to push them away. Do you know what happened to the last king who tried to remove them from power?"

Damir shook his head. He may not have even been listening.

"No one does. His name is entirely removed from history. A man took the throne and the drakling wiped away even his name. I can't fight that."

"You wouldn't even go to the Language Master when you realized he mistranslated that prayer. I had to go for you."

"Epitaph, and you're not helping."

Damir stood. "If you're going to be like that, I can go."

"Don't!"

Loic wasn't able to stop the desperation in his voice or how he physically took a step towards his friend to stop him from leaving. It had been an idle threat. Friends since their first day of school, Loic knew how Damir operated and how ridiculous he could get if the mood struck him. But just the thought of sitting back down alone in this room had rendered Loic foolish.

He dropped his hand to his side. "I'm a mess," he admitted.

"You are," Damir said. "What has actually been going on?"

Loic laughed. "I wake up. People try to help me dress, they try to feed me breakfast and I can't think of a single breakfast food that isn't porridge--"

"--eggs, sausage, olives, cheese--"

"--and when I'm done eating a breakfast I don't want, I get run from room to room and I'm not actually doing anything. I haven't done a single kingly thing. No laws, no meetings, nothing to sign or look over. They bring me to a dinner with people I almost know and then they bring me back to bed. I have a meeting with the Chambers in a week, I think, and I keep waking up in cold sweats thinking I've already missed it."

"Sounds like first year."

Loic sighed and sat. Not on a chair, but exactly where he stood on the floor. His body seemed immensely heavy, too heavy to hold up. He had turned to sludge. "I'm a horrible king."

"You haven't been king long enough to be a bad one," Damir offered. "I'm sure they are just easing you into it. What has Lord Haegan said?"

"I hardly see him anymore. He's in his office with Lady Vila--treasury--all day. Everyone keeps telling me not to bother them," he added.

"And?" Damir said. "Loic, no one tells you to do anything. You're king."

"A king without limitations is not a king. He is ruin."

Damir frowned. "That's from something, isn't it?"

"It doesn't translate well, but yes."

"This isn't you declaring war for fun. This is you trying to get a meeting with your own counselors."

Loic pressed a hand over his heart and beat his fingers in time to its rhythm, a way of assuring himself it was not running off. Damir knew what the

gesture meant and waited for Loic to nod to show that he was alright and not falling into one of his attacks.

"So." Damir joined his king on the floor, sprawling where the other sat straight. "What are your thoughts on the attack?"

"Well planned," Loic said.

Damir somehow managed to laugh. Loic couldn't see what was funny but his friend said, "Well planned is a good way to put it. Loic, they had dragon piercers. Do you know how hard those are to build?"

"Somewhat."

Damir twisted himself upright. "First, you need the piercers themselves. They are, technically speaking, fucking giant beams of gunpowder and explosives. And people design their artillery bits differently because no one wants to caught making one--you can't pretend it's anything other than a dragon piercer--and you need to design it for that dragon. A winged dragon is a different from a grounded dragon. They're incredibly rare, especially because the powder to make the explosive is illegal."

"How many people could make one?" Loic asked.

"Professor Galant," he said immediately. "Maybe five or six craftsmen in the city."

"Could you?"

"Of course."

"Go to Galant, make a list of who could have built one. Bring it to me."

Loic stood and Damir followed. "Loic, I'm sure they've already done that."

"I know," he admitted. "But I have to feel like I'm doing something. Please."

It turned out to be the most exciting thing that Loic did that day, or the for the next two. His job was less about being king and more about annoying people who were actually doing the real work of running his country. Haegan had all but disappeared since their meeting with the drakling. Loic asked, daily, where his supposed top adviser was and people could only shrug and tell him that Haegan could only be found when Haegan wanted to be found. Lady Vila reluctantly allowed Loic to sit in her office while she went over numbers that blurred and swirled on the page when he stared at them. He had never had the head for numbers nor a reason to get a head for numbers and his mind was not about to start that now.

He tried wandering the castle to learn his new home, Nidi and Ronin with him, but the two women seemed to understand that things were different here. At least while they were in public. In private, in his chambers, they gave him the same back talk and humor that he had always loved them for but when he walked the halls they stalked behind him as shadows.

And then people began to corner him in those halls. Not his advisers or the palace workers whose names he tried in vain to remember, but lords and ladies. He knew their names well while they could not remember that they had once known him. As a child, yes, but their obvious ignorance of that fact annoyed him. His parents had seared these names into his brain in a mockery of a child's lullaby.

Lord Zar owns the farms, Lady Weta is the master at arms, the Roders own nothing but the Yuns have everything, and we don't talk about the Petys anymore.

None of these people remembered him. He had seen them at state dinners when he and his parents sat in a spot where they could be seen and not heard from, and these lord and ladies had walked straight by him, straight through him, on their way to King Rihd. By the time Rihd had died and Alam became king, no one invited him to state dinners and that was how he wanted it.

The people who cornered him did not yet ask him for things. What they were even doing in the castle? Could anyone just walk in? He would assume they were bribing the palace guards but that was a horrible thought for a staff he didn't even know yet. He could have these people kicked out, he supposed, but he had no real complaints other than that they bothered him. All they did was bow and simper while they introduce themselves and reminded him that they had a daughter he truly had to meet (*had his letter reached Corali yet?*) and all but begging for an invitation to dinner. Loic wasn't sure who sent the invites out. Eventually, he supposed, he would be allowed to make his own dinner decisions or perhaps even eat by himself but for now it seemed best to let someone else take care of it, just as 'someone else' took care of everything in his life. Not that he looked forward to meals on his own but it was better than pretending to like people who were pretending to like him.

Damir was not invited to those dinners and had not appeared since Loic sent him off on his mission to learn more about the dragon piercers. The library had told Loic little about them that Damir had not already. At least he could use

the dragonpiercers as an excuse to take refuge in the book stacks. It was comfortable, even if the two library rooms combined held only one shelves of the poems and epics he preferred to spend his time with. Everything else, floor to ceiling, was covered with history and laws and economics and while they were useful they certainly did not make for good company.

The library was too dark. Everything was too dark. The castle sat far enough back in the cavern of the island tower off, far enough back that there was never natural light and the requirement of so many candles and fireplaces just to see where one was going gave everything a drowsy feel that he did not appreciate. The smell of fireplace smoke felt familiarly inviting but it made everything seem hazy, even with the 'windows' open. All of the windows just revealed black stone outside.

How had it been so easy to slip into this routine? He had become complacent already. He missed the routine of getting up and grading, going to class, talking with people who actually wanted to talk to him because they had a question about a translation or a choice of rhyme scheme that was inconsistent with the rest of the poems. Questions for Loic and not for King Loic Naell. A king wishing to be a commoner made for a boring story and yet now he was stuck in one. Loic had marked students down for turning in such trite fare.

And yet when he saw the letter from Corali waiting at his breakfast table, a letter from someone who may not have even known he was king yet, he reached for it with such eagerness that he knocked over his bowl of porridge. Good, he thought with far too much malice for one to have for an inanimate object. He had

even started to leave with the letter before remembering that one of the palace workers would have to clean it up and he didn't want them to think him such a mess. He cleaned it as best he could before running out of the room. As much as Loic ever ran.

Corali marked her letters with a black stamp when she knew they were likely to be read before getting to Loic, her stamp purple when they were safe. Black wax meant he needed to read both letters. There was one she had written for spying eyes and then one for just him that she wrote on the other side with an ink she had developed herself. Lemon would reveal the true letter, although there were times she had decided to write the letter in lemon itself and he would need heat to see what it was. She stopped using that after Loic admitted he had dropped her letter into the candle flame he held it over.

His personal kitchens, if he remembered correctly from his wanderings, sat in the middle circle of the castle. Since the cavern did not allow for building upwards or outwards, the castle had been made in three rings, one within another within another. He spent most of his time in the center circle since that was one meant for privacy and for royalty only. His libraries were in the second circle and his public dinners and any balls and functions that could be held in the future were in the outermost circle.

Loic got lost in the rings too easily. The halls were a single, continuous loop that never ended unless you knew where you wanted to leave it and the only spots Loic was certain of were his bedroom and the library. More than a few times he had found himself walking into completely empty rooms and once or twice

rooms that he would rather have been empty instead of forcing him to sneak out in the hopes the palace workers in there hadn't noticed him. The problem was the gold, he decided. Every single thing in the inner portion was covered in various shades of Naell gold. Some rooms had bricks painted gold while others were just draped with golden cloths, and one was nothing more than gold statues of long dead rulers but there was gold in every single one. A few had gold-painted doors and for some reason that seemed worse to Loic than everything else.

The halls weren't real halls, which made navigating them that much worse. They had been halved--to one side sat the doors to the various rooms and to the other side was a small ledge and arches that came up only to Loic's thighs. Going in between each ring actually meant going outside of one ring and crossing towards another. If it were appropriate, Loic could have easily jumped the ledges to get to the small stone path that ran in between each castle rung, but that seemed un-kingly. A gate let you out of the hall and into the next rung of the castle. Loic always had a hard time finding the gate and instead found himself walking in circles and circles until Nidi or Ronin finally asked him where he was trying to go.

He stopped. Turned halfway around to stare at Nidi and Ronin, who had followed him wordlessly to the spot he stood now. "Kitchens," he said. "I need a lemon."

Nidi laughed but Ronin rolled her eyes without actually rolling them. He waved the letter slightly and watched as they both gave him matching frowns that had probably perfected together just for this occasion.

"Oh," Nidi said. "I didn't realize her highness had bothered to write."

"Enough. Go get me a lemon."

He really should have just sent them the two of them out in the first place but he had been too excited to finally hear from Corali. He had written two letters in the past month and both had gone unanswered despite the relatively short distances between his and Corali's countries. By the time Nidi handed him a slice of lemon and he had dismissed them from his dining room, his legs bounced uncontrollably. At least his hands did not shake while he read the letter, her real letter, three and four and five times.

Once he felt certain he had it memorized, he held it over his candle and watched it burn until he could no longer hold it and it curled into its own destruction. He watched his own name burn away at the top and her name at the bottom. He wanted to save his name, just his name, where she had not called him king or given him any titles and just wrote Loic in tiny handwriting that had taken her months to learn but he let it burn away along with Corali's name and dusted the ashes off the table so there was no trace of them.

Chapter Seven

Rose did not simply wake, or admit to being awake. She burst from her grief induced coma and into Grey's room so forcefully that Grey yelled even though she had heard footsteps in the hall. She had just assumed it was Raven or Cobalt coming to make sure she was actually asleep since that they had developed a highly annoying concern for her even though she was sleeping at least four hours a night. Rose had no such concern.

“Should you be up?” Grey asked.

Rose dropped herself onto the edge of Grey's bed. The elder drakling certainly looked better than she had any right to. Her body had bruised substantially in the fall and one leg entirely crushed beneath Egon's weight, the arm on the same side fractured and pinned to her side. At least her face looked as disapproving as ever. There was comfort in that familiar scowl.

“What have you found?” Rose asked.

“Nothing,” Grey admitted. “We know they used a dragonpiercer but it was gone when we got to it. What did you see?”

Rose sighed. Grey must have imagined that she could hear the crackling of already fractured ribs with Rose's breath because even drakling ears were not that good. “I'm not sure.”

“You can't remember? The healers said—”

Rose smacked Grey's hand, not hard, but enough to silence her and enough to bring back memories of swords slapped out of her grasp or food or any thousand of items when she misbehaved. "I'm not sure," Rose repeated.

"You used dragonfire," Grey said and her voice dropped as if it were some well kept secret and not a catastrophe the entire city had seen. "You used it when you weren't even sure what was there?"

"I heard someone going for Jade and Nikol. A dragonpiercer. Not the one the got me but a different one. It was never fired." Rose meant it as a question but would never allow the upward inflection in her voice that revealed it as such. Grey learned the trick as a child but never how to use it.

"No. Jade and Nikol were fine. You could have found another way."

"How?"

A lesson? Was that what she was going for? "You could have landed on it," Grey said.

"You know we cannot land in the woods like that," Rose said.

"Roared to scare the person." That was a horrible suggestion.

"They had a dragonpiercer," Rose said again. "I couldn't even be certain it was there, not that deep into the woods. The goggles won't see through treetops. I could smell the powder and hear the piercer but that was it. If I hesitated both Jade and Nikol would be dead. Patia is dead, isn't she. I thought I heard talking while I slept but..."

Grey could not recall hearing Rose trail off before. It wasn't the kind of thing one remembered but being presented with it felt so odd, so touching, that

Grey almost wanted to place her hand on Rose's in comfort and that was an urge she had never had before. "Patia is dead," Grey confirmed. "An explosion at the dais. We lost a few guards in the action, mostly from her country. We have a new king. Loic Naell."

Rose looked surprise. The last time Grey had seen that kind of eyebrow raised and wide-eyed look on her commander's face was when fourteen year old Grey held out a hand to reveal that she had an incident during a training session and managed to get an arrow straight through her hand. She still had a large scar there. "The professor of poetry at the university," Rose said slowly. "He's King?"

"Yes," Grey said through gritted teeth.

"What do you think of him?"

"I saw him a few days ago and—"

Another hit to the hand. "You need to be with him as much as you can," Rose said. "Grey, we were attacked and we don't know by who. Stay with the king."

"I've been trying to figure out who was behind the attack," Grey snapped. She folded her arms across her chest in case Rose tried to smack her again. "I've been out asking questions of every single damn person in the city. I've had people combing the woods to find what they can and I've been out there with them. I've got all the drakling here and do you know how hard it is to have them around constantly? They talk all the time and they eat all the time and they take up space all the time and they need attention all the damn time. As a whole, we're awful. And we've got seven dragons in the stables."

There it was. The thing they had so carefully been avoiding. Of course Grey had mentioned it when it was the one thing she wanted to leave unsaid. Rose took a deep breath through her nose, let it out, took another through her mouth and let that one out too. Grey had been taught to use it as a calming technique. She had never thought to use it to stop herself from crying.

“What do you have them doing?” Rose finally asked.

“Raven and Violet have been talking to the merchants,” Grey said.

Raven’s wife, Mora, was a merchant herself and had thousands upon thousands of connections. “They’re trying to find where the pieces came to make the piercer. The powder is not commonly sold in the city and we’re trying to see if anyone brought it in. Cobalt, Gold and Umber have been doing sweeps of the woods. We’ve yet to find anything. Not even tracks of how they got the piercer in.”

“Focus on the merchants,” Rose said. “This was extremely well planned and you won’t find tracks. They can’t cover up other people. But you need to stay with...with...”

Rose’s mouth fell open as the word got away from her. Grey wasn’t whether she should give the word or not, as Rose so clearly struggled with recalling Loic to mind. Or perhaps the word was in her mind but couldn’t make it to her tongue. None of the healers had any experience with this kind of injury and had not warned them what to expect. A few lost words could hardly be the worst of it.

“Loic has his own guards,” Grey said. “And I don’t think he’s the one under attack. I think we are. If someone wanted to attack the monarchy why even bother with us?”

“We don’t matter,” Rose said. “Oscide is fine without us but needs a ruler. There are no more Naells.”

“We haven’t ruled out that he helped in this, that he wanted the throne.” Grey said it just to say it. She’d bet Sifa that Loic had nothing to do with the attack.

Rose frowned. Or, she tried to. Part of her face was still swollen and the gesture did not work the way she wanted it to so that she seemed to be pouting more than frowning. It must have been painful. “You think he had a hand in this?”

“No,” Grey admitted. “But we can’t rule out that people weren’t trying to get him onto the throne. He is unsuited for the throne and weak-willed. Easy for people to control.”

“Possible.” As good as comment as one got from Rose. “You’ll need to keep an eye on who attempts to get close to him. Which is why you need to stay with him.”

“He has a friend,” Grey said. “An engineer. A good one, from what I can tell.”

The implication hung in the air. It would take a damn good engineer to make a dragon piercer.

Rose nodded. Grey knew that nod. It meant they were done but Rose did not up and leave. She sat there, not looking at Grey, but focusing on the door as if

she wanted to will herself through it. Eventually she stood. Her body rocked with the effort and Grey nearly reached out to steady her but Rose did it herself. Then, a step. Another. All of Rose's energy had gone to her dramatic entrance and now she could not make the strong exits she so loved and instead shuffled as if the act of merely lifting her foot would send her toppling to the ground. Grey could feel her own body groaning in sympathy. Sifa had once darted off before Grey had a good grasp on her and the fall, not even a few feet, had only knocked the wind out of her but felt like it had knocked every organ out of her. Your insides rattled loose from their holdings in a fall like that. In the days after her fall, Grey had poked and prodded at purple bruises so hard they deepened from purple to black. She had wanted to feel her organs and make sure they were each in their same spot. Impossible, but she needed to know that her heart had not broken free of her rib cage and that her lungs still hung in their right spots. That had been a few feet. Rose had fallen from the clouds.

Rose finally, finally made it out the door and back down the hall. It wasn't until she was gone that Grey allowed herself to pull her knees to her chest. Rose had not cried and neither would Grey, no matter how much she wanted to.

They had not discussed the things Grey had been thinking for days. There was no talk of Rose leading the drakling once she was recovered. Grey had been working on her argument; that being without a dragon did not take away Rose's expertise or experience, that even though everything had changed nothing had changed as dramatically as they feared, that Grey wasn't ready despite all her training. Nothing. Rose had all but handed over her reins.

Rose had told her everything she knew, as far as Grey could tell, but Grey had not given her all she knew, nor had she told Haegan and Loic. They had found part of the dragonpiercer, specifically the small projectile that had torn through Egon's wing. It was actually two small, heavy balls linked together with a chain so that when fired the device not just went through the dragon's wings but shredded them. It had made his landing even more difficult and was why Rose had been so hurt in the fall. But the fall hadn't killed Egon. It had hurt him, badly, but had not killed him. Something else had gotten to him on the ground and they had yet to learn what. By the time Grey had gotten to the dragon he was already dead but Jade and Cobalt, first on the scene, had said he was still breathing when they got there. They were the ones who reported the black blood, unnaturally colored, that came from his mouth. Neither of their dragons could have ever reached Egon in time to save him but a winged dragon certainly could have. Not that one could have gotten through the damned woods.

Grey had not taken Sifa to the sky since the fall. It was first dangerous and then cruel. She did not want Rose waking up to see the shadow of someone else's dragon going past her window. Sifa, normally a creature that had no problem spending her days inside and sleeping, had begun to get restless. She mewled at Grey every time she went in to feed her and fluttered her wings hopefully but that was as far as she got. The dragons were just as much in mourning as they were.

The dragon would have to wait. If Grey was to spend her time with Loic then she certainly wouldn't be flying her anytime soon and gone were the days when Grey would have let Sifa go on her own. It was too risky. Until she had

cleared every spot of the woods or razed them to the ground, she did not want any of the dragons outside alone. Haegan had resoundingly shot down her attempts to destroy the forest. In better seasons it offered protection, would require too much manpower and would be a clear sign that they were afraid and they certainly could not afford that, no matter how true it was.

Grey woke with puffy eyes that did not go down no matter how much cold water she splashed on them. She really considered just jumping off the drakling cliff and into the water below to shock her system back into working, back to being Grey, but she thought about it too long and lost her chance. That was the kind of thing you just had to go and do. You couldn't think about it while you braided your hair and put on your full drakling finery so that people understood you were in charge because you knew that they doubted everything you said.

Most of the drakling compound was already awake and likely knew that Rose had spoken to Grey last night. The walls were not thick enough for drakling ears, probably by cruel and intentional design. Someone would have heard their talk last night. Jade, the youngest drakling at seventeen and brought in from her training outpost with Umber, shared the wall next to Grey's. It would take thick string to sew that girl's mouth shut. Grey had considered it more than once but none of her thread was thick enough at the moment. It was the curse of the open configuration of their house. All the rooms surrounded the dining space in a circle so your wall was your neighbor's wall and so on and so forth.

The dining space was the only one where you were likely to get all of the drakling together and breakfast likely the only meal to do so. It was the only time of day you could guarantee they would all be in the same spot. Once upon a time it had been Grey's favorite part of the day. That was when it just a few of them in the compound—Rose, Grey, Raven and Cobalt were the only ones who lived there full time. Umber and Jade lived towards the center of the country and Gold and Violet at the border. It made the large house come to life with clanging and swearing and gentle footsteps that ran for no reason and the smells of sweat and dirt that never got out from your fingernails and a feast that could easily feed twice their numbers and would somehow never have leftovers. Grey could smell it as she got dressed, too much meat, a food she had not eaten since childhood. Hints of fruit and bread and oatmeal. Someone had thought of her, at least.

Having them around was not so bad. What Grey did not appreciate was the lack of privacy. Olin had often told it was strange, how intimately and comfortable the drakling lived amongst each other but Grey had never understood the need for privacy or shame. The single handful of lovers she had ever brought to the compound were often uncomfortable by the openness of the house but Grey had ways of making them get comfortable very quickly. She always dressed or undressed with her door as open as she pleased, as did the others. It was a way of making sure no one was hiding injuries. A closed door often meant that one had something to hide and you had two options—hide it and hear them gossip or show it and silence them. After Grey's fall from Sifa, years ago, they had given her teasing smiles and laughing eyes at her bruises but she had shown them because

they would have thought it that much worse behind a closed door. Besides, what was the point of a closed door when you could hear them arguing with it open or shut? Grey heard them all at breakfast before she dragged herself out to join them and she would have heard them from outside the house, let alone from the next room.

“If one could live underwater—”

“—they have to, at least one—”

“—if, if if, why would it have wings? Fish don’t have wings. They swim.”

“I’m not saying it would have wings,” Umber argued. He jabbed a fork at his plate with too much force and splat went the potato onto the floor where Violet scooped it up to toss in the dragon bucket. All their dropped food went into that and eventually to the dragons. They would eat anything you would give them. “I’m saying a dragon underwater would be designed more like a dragon with flight. Size doesn’t serve them well swimming around.”

Grey turned to Cobalt. His thin lips and sharp were always held tight, like he was physically biting back words but that was just how he held his face. So tight that he had to curl his lips back to smile at Grey.

“This conversation is as thrilling as it sounds,” Cobalt told her. “You look like shit.”

“Thanks.” She poured the largest bowl of porridge she could and kept the serving dish next to her. “You heard?”

“About Rose?” He nodded. “Jade heard you two last night. How did she look?”

“Fucking great. Fully healed.”

Cobalt knew well enough to let it drop that that, blue eyes that didn't match his namesake sliding away from her and back to the table at large.

Grey allowed herself the first bowl of porridge and half of the second before addressing the group. “I'm sure you all heard about Rose waking,” she said without introduction. Even her ears could not detect a bit of noise although, somewhere, she was certain Rose also listened. “She's healing. Well enough, as can be expected. But she saw heard dragonpiercer that day. Aiming for one of us. We have to assume this attack was designed to hurt us and Patia was just a part of it. I want the dragons kept in the stables or our land as much as possible.”

“They're not going to like that,” Violet said. Ten years older than Grey, Grey had lost more baby teeth to Violet during training sessions than to natural causes.

“They're not,” Grey agreed. “But we will not risk them. Our only lead right now is those piercers.”

“And we still have nothing,” Raven said quietly. He had always been Rose's second in command but Grey was not sure if he was hers. He had thirty years of experience and none of it showed on his still smooth face. “The merchants won't admit to importing the powder, if they did.”

“We should be looking at outside sources,” Gold said. “Every country has something to gain if we fall.”

“That's too big,” Umber argued. As it to spite his namesake, his mane of hair had gone prematurely silver and he had the look of a wild man seeing

civilization for the first time. He ate like it too, food on his hands and wiped from his face onto his sleeve. “We’re getting into politics and that’s not our domain.”

“Everything is our domain,” Grey said. “But you’re right. Gold, I think you’re right in that this had outside help but looking at it from that angle will overwhelm us. Focus on the piercer. The weapon was uniquely designed and someone has to admit to it. Those things take a lot powder to work and someone had to be hiding it somewhere. Raven, Violet, continue talking to the merchants to see what you can get. Gold and Jade, you two are going to the docks to go through shipment records. Stand on each ship and smell it for powder if you have to. Umber and Cobalt, I know it seems useless but the woods have to tell us something. Keep going through them.”

“Mora says that anything like powder coming through the city would have to have been declared,” Raven said. “It needs special casing to avoid going off. But, a lord or lady could get through without being stopped.”

“Fucking ‘course they could,” Umber growled.

“Not helping, Umber,” Grey said. “I’ll think about that, though. It is possible we’re looking at a noble who at least financed it. Do not start looking into it yet, understand? Good.”

Grey did not bother saying dismissed. They would all leave when they were done eating or the food ran out. The latter always came first.

Her network of castle intelligence was not as large as she would like it, but Grey felt confident in it. The people who fed her news about the goings on in the

cavern got their information right and that meant a lot more than a large network. She had cultivated it carefully. Chefs were useful but did not leave the kitchens so it was better to use those who served the food. Those who cleaned the personal rooms were the most important part of the network, particularly those who were only temporary workers. Life-long staff often felt a loyalty towards discretion. Builders could be used when they came in to fix this wall or that floor but they were too infrequent to be relied upon. Soldiers, as a rule, were gossips and were not part of the network but rather a nuisance she had to shut out because they wanted to tell her about people or things she really did not care about—what did this lady’s second cousin’s bastard child matter to her? Part of her job was to sort through the information she had her favorite courier leave on her doorstep every night and decide what was relevant and what was unfounded gossip. There had been a startling consistency to their reports since Loic’s arrival. It seemed he did nothing but sit in the library and wander the castle. A few days ago there had been a true flurry of activity where he ran around looking for something but it turned out to be a lemon.

Grey really should have jumped in the ocean that morning.

What was she supposed to do with a king like that? With someone like Patia there would have been work to do. Perhaps she would have walked about the city to prove herself to her people, doing acts of charity. Perhaps there would have been a war to join or a spy war to partake in. Grey had a fondness for intrigue stories that Olin loved to tease her about. Or, if Patia had survived her attack, they would have caught the culprits already.

Grey wasn't even entirely sure how to talk to Loic. She was never sure how to talk to people who weren't drakling or the soldiers. Everything she said sounded so coarse around the lords and ladies or the nobles or even anyone with an education beyond how to kill and hurt and fly and obey the orders of others. Before all of this, Haegan had been her main point of contact and that suited her fine because if there was one person more ill-equipped to casual conversation it was the lead adviser. None of her usual points of reference worked for Loic. He had no battle stories to swap, even though Grey's were less battles and more skirmishes and training disasters. Unless he had a good paper cut story. She felt certain he did not enjoy the same tourneys she enjoyed watching or even the murder intrigue plays she forced Olin and Cobalt to go with her to see. She always figured out the mystery before them. Olin said that wasn't the point, that it was supposed to be a surprise when the wife or the husband or the son or the daughter was revealed as the true killer but it was always a family member. Loic probably had no stomach for those kinds of stories. He seemed like the type who would be uncomfortable with blood. No, he probably liked stories without any meaning and yet everyone fawned over because they were so deep and Grey felt certain they were talking out of their asses because they wanted to seem like they understood a a three hour play where two people discussed a man who never even showed up. Loic probably loved that kind of thing.

Guards and soldiers she knew how to talk to though, even Loic's strange duo. Nidi had a wrestler's build and it turned out that was exactly what she was. She had been a professional fighter and entertainer for a few years, mostly hand-

to-hand fights, before transferring her skills to the private sector. Grey had probably seen her fight at some point but she did not come to mind. Ronin had always been working for the private sector to get out of some poor town whose name Grey had never heard before. And they did not like her. She didn't need a report to tell her that.

“Is he in there?” she asked them without preamble.

“Who?” Nidi asked with outlandish confusion. At least she still found use for her performance chops.

Grey was not going to play this game. She reached for the door but the two women moved as one to block it. “Ladies, this is not how you want to lose your job,” Grey said.

“We're doing our jobs right now,” Ronin said. “Which is more than I can say for you.”

“I am doing my job. I need to see him,” Grey said. Refuse her entry, she begged. She'd love to see what the two could do in a fight although the hall was a small space unless Grey could use it to funnel them and—

“I see no dragon,” Nidi said.

“Nor will you.”

“Shame,” she said and Grey had to believe her.

The door opened despite the two women, opened from behind them in fact. Loic must have heard the argument.

“Who are you—oh. Grey,” he said. He seemed perfectly content to hide behind their shoulders. “Is something wrong?”

“No.” Grey placed a hand on each of the guards’ shoulders and moved them aside with more force than she needed or even meant to use but she would lose face if she apologized. “But I think it best that I stay with you until we have a better idea of what happened. For your safety.”

“Nidi and Ronin are my guards,” he said. “I’m fine.”

Grey really thought he was supposed to be smart. This was a man who locked himself up with books all day long but it clearly hadn’t done him much good. His guards probably had been fine when he was more professor and less prince. But shy of telling him he was a damned idiot she had no idea how to convey that and it didn’t seem the right thing to say to her king, even if it was the necessary thing. So she just stared back at him.

Her unmoving gaze must have told him how stupid he found that because he muttered, “alright, come in, join,” before retreating to the shadow of his library.

Grey made sure to pointedly ignore the looks the two women gave her.

Loic’s personal library, small and dusty, was under attack. Half the books had been pulled down from the shelves and sat in piles on the floor as if he were going through each and every one. A large scroll of papers with titles told Grey that was exactly what he was doing. That ocean jump was looking better and better by the second. She needed something to get out of this windowless room with nothing but candles placed perilously too close to books. There weren’t enough chairs either. Haegan sat in one of them and Loic took a seat in the other.

“Hello,” chirped a voice from a ladder. Right. Loic’s friend. He let one hand off the ladder to wave at her but immediately clutched it again. “I’m Damir.”

“This is Grey,” Loic introduced.

“I wasn’t aware there was a meeting,” Grey said. She had been expected her king alone. No one had given her any reports about this.

Did Haegan carry a stack of papers around with him everywhere? Maybe they were blank. Maybe he just wanted to look important. Whether they were real or not, there they were on his lap because Loic had covered the tables in books he had pulled from their dusty homes that clogged Grey’s nose. Every time Haegan tried to write the papers jostled as if they were going to fall off his lap. Grey would give anything to see that.

“His Majesty is having his first meeting with the Chambers at the end of the week,” Haegan explained. “We’re just going over what to expect.”

“Why wasn’t I informed?” Grey snapped and that wasn’t how she wanted it to sound. It was supposed to be angry, not petulant.

“This isn’t really drakling area,” Haegan said.

She grabbed the papers from his lap and held them hostage above his head. He not did stand. “Everything is drakling area,” Grey said for the second time that day. She should stitch it onto her clothes. A nice purple thread onto her cloak, maybe.

“Can I have those back?” Haegan asked. Grey dropped them and he began shuffling them back into order.

“May I get back to what I was saying?” Vila asked. Their treasury woman had a large ledger stretched onto a podium and leaned against it lazily. It would take more than a bit of shouting to rattle her. Grey appreciated that. “Thank you.”

The woman had no real need for the ledger and never once referred to it while Loic struggled in vain to write down numbers as quickly as she spit them out. Neither of them were Grey’s focus. She watched Damir kick his ladder around the upper shelves of the library, ink stained fingers skimming over books and leaving impressions behind. Her eyes clocked them all. Later, she would need to see if it was only ink or if his finger left behind any trace of powder. It had been days since the attack but it was no worse a lead than the others.

Grey had no problem listening to Vila and watching Damir. A drakling trait enhanced just by being Grey, her mind carried both strains of thought easily. It was easier to do both of those things than it was to just focus on the one, especially since she had not wanted to bring her needlework with her. The few stitches she had managed over the past few days had been sloppy anyway. Maybe she would do something easy when she had the chance, fix the stitch in Sifa’s saddle bag. The damn dragon had torn it in the attempts to get a treat out and nearly shredded the whole thing before Grey snatched it from her.

Damir paid no attention to the conversation as Vila moved on from their trade numbers to crop output. At least, he did a good job of not paying attention if he was. People pretending not to pay attention always did it so obviously, straining to turn their ears towards the sound of their target but their eyes away. He seemed far more interested in stretching out to reach the books in front of him

and that served Grey fine. His body was too lean. He could have built the dragonpiercer but not have wielded it.

“—wait, is that Patia’s country?” Loic asked. Damir turned his head at the former queen’s name. “How are they?”

“Well enough,” Haegan said. “They’ve crowned a king—Quent—and a letter of both condolences and congratulations would be welcomed to show that there is no animosity.”

“How do you spell his name?”

“We’ll take care of that,” Haegan said as he added an item to a list in front of him. It stretched several pages.

“Speaking of lists,” Vila muttered to Haegan. She beamed at him when he frowned.

He cleared his throat. “Yes. Your Majesty, one of the problems after King Alam’s death was the lack of heir.”

Loic’s friend suddenly seemed a lot more interested in the conversation.

“As far as we understand,” Haegan continued, “you are not currently...involved with anyone. We could put together a list for you. Women who would be acceptable queens or men who would be acceptable king-consorts and then allow you to chose a ward or a child-bearing woman with your partner. But we do feel it is important that steps are taken to prevent a situation like this from happening again.”

Grey almost felt bad for Loic. He squirmed in his seat and could not bring his gaze off of his own hands, as if the answer were written there. “The list of women would be fine,” he finally said.

Damir raised a hand but thought better of it, clutching the ladder once again. It was hardly a fall worth the concern if he did let go. “I’ll take that other list, if you’ve got it.”

Loic smile was the shadow of a true expression. “Please, give it to him. I’m sick of his complaining about his own poor taste in men.”

“It’s not an actual list,” Haegan said with more than some confusion.

“They’re joking,” Vila explained. “Something most people do.”

“What about Lady Brilane?” Loic’s friend asked. “Wasn’t she engaged to King Alam? We’ve met her at functions,” he said to Loic, “she’s very nice. Beautiful. Smart, from what I remember.”

“She was never truly engaged to King Alam,” Haegen corrected. “But we could certainly invite her to dinners, if you want us to.”

“That’s fine,” Loic said. He glared at Damir but his friend ignored him with great purpose and turned back to the shelves.

“We can do that,” Haegan said and made another note on his list. “Did you have anything for us, Your Majesty?”

Loic started to shake his head but Damir jumped in. He climbed down the ladder in awkward gestures, nearly losing his footing at the last rung. “Actually, yes. Yes, we do, Loic, don’t look at me like that. I’ve been doing research into the dragon piercers, but Lady Grey--”

“--Drakling Grey,” she said without thought. It wasn’t important. She shouldn’t have bothered. “And I don’t think the piercers are any of your concern.”

“Alright then, Drakling Grey. L—His Majesty asked me to look into them. I had some questions about the dragon that was killed.”

Grey ground her teeth. “Egon.”

“Do you know where he was struck?”

Grey could have drawn it a thousand times over. “His eye and his left wing.”

Damir clicked his tongue. “Those spots were planned,” he said. “Each one came from a different direction with the intention of attacking Egon and Drakling Rose. Dragon piercers take too much time and effort to be placed randomly about and to aimed whenever. And they need to be calculated--once it’s in position then you cannot reset it without a great deal of trouble. I’ve been asking around who could make the kind of dials necessary for that kind of work. But someone planned for wing and then eye to be hit.”

“His left wing was damaged,” Grey said. “Barely. From Patia’s attack. But he had a bad landing and crumpled it.”

She wanted to see Damir’s face. It was true and information that she would rather have kept to the drakling only but reactions could tell her a lot. Damir’s breathing stayed at the same right and his mouth kept in its same upward line that was its seemingly natural position. He did not clear his throat or make deliberate efforts to hide his eyes or mouth and his gestures matched up with his

words. He plucked a quill from the table and began to sketch illegible words and numbers onto it. Even Grey's eyes could not tell what they were.

"That cannot be common knowledge," Haegan said.

"Anyone looking closely would have seen it," Grey said. Although not an obvious injury, anyone planning to attack would have seen how his wing wrinkled when fully extended. "I believe the attack was meant for Egon and Rose. Patia's death was just a means of chaos."

"And yet no one attempted to take over," Vila added. She had the kind of face that always seemed to be in a foul mood although she was often pleasant to Grey. She continued to lean over the podium, although with more interest now so that her pale eyes darted to every single person in the room. "No one claimed the throne for an entire day while we found Your Majesty."

"Right. What are the other rulers saying about me?" Loic asked. Gods, he sounded like a child desperate for friends, Grey realized.

"We won't know that until Lord Immonal gets back from his travels," Haegan said. His face twisted with more displeasure than usual, as if the name of their foreign affairs expert left a bad taste and a bad smell in his mouth. "He's traveling. We can expect him back whenever he damn well pleases it."

"Haegan, such language," Vila teased.

He frowned. "If you've heard from him, please, let me know. He never met our last ruler and I'd like him to meet this one."

Grey hid her own smile. She liked Immonal. He had a habit of bursting into council meetings with unannounced and unbridled glee and disrupting Haegan's perfect plans and notes with a single phrase.

Loic stood and began to pace. His breathing turned shallow, as if something blocked it from getting through his body. "The meeting with the Chambers, he said. "We're expecting the full Chambers?"

"Upper and lower, yes," Haegan said. "About 100 people."

"About?" Vila prompted with a knowing smile.

"103," Haegan said. "Two lords are traveling and one of the ladies has taken ill. Rather, she says she's ill. Her cousin was poisoning her but the cousin has been arrested. She'll be back for the next meeting."

"How could you possibly know that?" Vila asked.

"Healers talk," Haegan said with a verbal shrug.

"I just." Loic turned too quickly in his pacing and nearly stumbled over the damn cloak he had worn every day since Grey had met him. "I'm just not entirely sure what the point of this meeting is."

"An introduction," Haegan said. "They want to know their king."

"They do know me." Loic stopped his pacing but his eyes did not stop moving. "I've known the lords and ladies since I was born."

"Not the Lower Chamber," Haegan argued. His arguing voice was infuriatingly gentle, the habit of a man who had never raised his voice in order to win because he always won. "They are elected every three years. Even if you knew them at one point, it is not the same make up."

“But all at once?” Loic whined. “Wouldn’t it make more sense to do smaller groups? Right, Damir?”

Haegan did not let Damir answer. “This is how it is done, Your Majesty.”

Loic put a hand to his chest and tapped his fingers above where his heart sat. Grey could guess its rate was flying. The man was panicking over nothing. All he had to do was sit and make nice and smile and he didn’t even have to make nice. He could sit there and scowl at the Chambers and they would call him tough and just, swear at them and they would declare him honest or stride in naked and they would declare him fashionable. He was king. They would fawn over everything he did until he raised their taxes or cut their trading routes. And yet there were beads of sweat around Loic’s hairline as if he had been running.

No one said anything as he returned to his pacing but they all stared. Well, Damir did not. His friend had picked up Loic’s notebook and ripped several pages of it out in order to continue his mad writings. Loic didn’t notice. His chest rose with heavy breaths that did nothing to calm him and Grey could hear how the breaths became wheezes, his throat tightening them.

“What if I forgot the speech?” Loic asked.

“You won’t,” Damir said without looking up.

“But what if I do?” Loic yelled. “I forgot—remember, my first lesson with the the the the—gods, that poem I hate about the ship and the bird—you know which one I mean.”

“I really don’t,” Damir said. But he had looked up and followed his friend’s footsteps carefully, gazed not on his Loic’s face but the spot where his hand continued to tap above his heart.

“Yes, you do, you know what I’m talking about,” Loic snapped.

Damir cleared his throat. “Lord Haegan, Lady Vila, I’m sure you have other things to do if we’re done here.”

They got the hint, scooped up their papers and bowed on the way out. Grey immediately took Hagean’s empty seat.

“I can’t breathe,” Loic told Damir. Grey wasn’t sure he knew she was still there.

“You can. If you’re talking to me, you can breathe.”

“Why do I even have you here?” Loic demanded. “You’re supposed to be supporting me and instead you’re you’re you’re inviting random women to dinner.”

“It’s not like Corali is coming,” Damir muttered. Grey stored the name away for later. It was not one she recognized amongst the lords and ladies but Loic was certainly the type to fall for some farmer or maid in the hopes of saving her from a life of poverty.

“You’re fine,” Grey said. “The meeting isn’t even for a few days. Calm down.”

Loic spun to face her. His face shone with unnecessary sweat and his eyes kept blinking as it dripped into them. “Don’t have you something else to be doing?” he asked.

“I’m supposed to be guarding you,” she said.

“I don’t want you to,” he snapped but his body shook. “I’ve got Nidi and Ronin.”

“You’ve got me,” she said. “I’m not having this argument again.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” Damir soothed. He hovered near Loic but never reached out to touch him. “Loic, why don’t we finish going through these books?”

“I don’t want to.”

“No, but it’ll help. Come on. Is this one a keep or a donate?”

Loic took the book with trembling hands but they steadied, slowly, as he flipped through the pages. His breathing did not deepen. Eventually he just tossed it aside like a child who didn’t want the toy anymore. Thirty seconds later, he picked it up and placed it in a pile.

Grey was not able to leave the castle until Loic had finished his dinner with several of the lords and ladies. He did not speak to them. Any question that could be answered with a yes or no received only gestures and anything that required more effort was just ignored. Grey had never been so uncomfortable in her life. Sure, she wasn’t great with people but at least she knew how to carry on a conversation and pretend to be a person. She herself had to chime in once or twice just because it twisted her gut to have such silence. Eventually, the crowd got the idea to just leave Loic out of the conversation.

She had not eaten and although she was starving, her stomach making most of the conversation with the soldiers stationed there on the elevator ride up,

she didn't go for the drakling compound. The restless energy from the stables soaked into her skin. She could feel the dragons pacing around in there and sure enough, when she opened the door, Nikol nearly knocked her to the ground.

“Enough,” Grey said. She placed a hand firmly in the space between Nikol's eyes. Like Jade, he had too much energy and not enough wisdom. He allowed himself to be pushed to a sitting position and then flat to the ground.

“Good. I'm sure Jade will come see you soon.”

He whined and covered his eyes with his front legs.

The circular stables were the largest building in the city, likely the country. They had to be. It could only be called a building because of the rounded walls and high, high roof but there was no floor, just grass, and no dividing walls. Grey liked to leave her boots at the swinging doors, since repaired after Sifa's wild smash through them on the day of the fall, and feel the grass beneath her feet. It was cool and flattened by the constant movement of dragons, making the grass tickle more than prickle. The area in the middle had been so smoothed by play-fighting that there was only dirt and that was where Persi and Arsa rolled onto their backs and pretended to attack each other. Nikol bounded by Grey to join them. The other dragons, older, raised their heads to see if Grey had any treats for them but returned to their sleep. A dragon could sleep twenty hours if it wanted to and they always wanted to.

Sifa hid her head under her wing but she was awake. Grey couldn't say how she knew, she just knew. Sifa just wanted to show her displeasure. It wasn't as if Sifa was a particularly active dragon—she often had to be dragged out to

patrol duty—but she didn't like being told she had to stay inside. When Grey reached out to stroke her, the dragon shook the hand off and curled further into herself. Grey ran her hands over Sifa's head in slow, steady strokes. She loved to be scratched and petted on her head and chin and slowly, reluctantly, Sifa pulled her wing down so that Grey could better reach the right side of her face that caused Sifa to make soft rumbles of joy in her throat.

Dragon scales felt so brittle up close. They could withstand arrows and swords and fangs but to run your hands over them felt like running your hands over a charred log, fire freshly extinguished but still hot to the touch. Their scales bumped and caught underneath your hand and you felt certain it would be easy enough to pry away and get to pure skin beneath that was impossible. It was not impossible to cut yourself on a scale as it shifted with a dragon's body and Grey's scarred hands stood as testament to that.

"I know," Grey said. Sifa blinked at her. At a distance her eyes were gold pools nearly consumed with black in the center. Up close the black revealed itself to be a deep blue. "Not yet. A few days. I hope."

Sifa bowed her head to let Grey scratch at the top again and to show that she understood.

Sifa's eyes seemed puffier than normal. It was hard to say why but Grey knew her dragon's face better than she knew her own. The dragons had stopped their mourning only a few dawns ago, their wails and cries dying to whimpers and eventually silence. These were battle creatures though, no matter how innocent

they looked rolling around and sleeping. To lose a brother hurt but they would move on.

Maybe they knew that the dynamic had changed. Egon had clearly been in charge of the dragons, just as Rose had been off the drakling, so did that mean Sifa was now in charge? Strength went a long way with dragons and that would go to Violet's dragon, Yewe, and Cobalt's dragon, Godric, was the fastest. But Sifa could fly and none of them could. Did they understand the importance of that? Or did they tease Sifa for her difference?

The dragons understood each other, understood each other very well. They had squabbles over territory and personality clashes just as their riders did. Sifa found Nikol too active and Godric too vain. Once, out on a ride with Cobalt and Godric, Sifa had scooped a pile of mud in her wing and flung it square at Godric's face. It didn't matter to Sifa that her own wing got dirty because Grey would clean that. All that had mattered to the dragon was the squeal that Godric gave and his frantic attempts to clean his face while his rider laughed.

Sifa put her head flat on the ground. Grey sat with her, nestled in what would be the crook of her neck and wing. It was not uncommon to find a rider asleep beside their dragon but Grey and Sifa both valued their time alone. Sifa did not like to have Grey near her as she slept but now she let Grey press their bodies close, although the dragon did snort to show she wasn't entirely pleased with it. Usually she only acted this affectionate if she wanted a treat. She had a penchant for sugary things that Grey insisted she shouldn't have and Rose liked to point out that if a dragon could eat three men in a single bite, what harm was a caramel

dipped apple going to do her stomach? It wasn't about the health. Once Sifa took a liking to something, she did not understand the word 'no'. They had learned that with the wine barrel incident.

“When we can,” Grey said, “we can go flying. I promise. Do you want to ride the city?”

Sifa's eyes narrowed.

“Ocean?”

A dragon's smile always revealed their fangs. It was hard to tell from an attack stance.

“Not far,” Grey added. “There's a new king that needs us. And he's going to need us to keep him alive. You ready for the job?”

The dragon humped in her version of a shrug.

“You're supposed to be cheering me up,” Grey said. “I spent all day watching our new ruler sort through books like it was the end of the world if this book came before that one. Can't you be cute or something?”

Sifa raised her head and tilted it away from Grey. Slowly, she rolled onto her side and with a thump onto her back in a mockery of the other dragons. Her expression did not change.

“You're very funny. See if I ever take you flying again,” Grey said. “You'll have to break down the doors every time you want to get out and that hurt, didn't it?”

It had. Sifa still had some dark bruises on her underbelly that Grey could see clearly. She poked at one of them and Sifa swatted at her with a forearm.

Grey smiled. It didn't matter that Sifa was not faster or bigger or smarter than the other dragons if she was willing to put up with Grey's shit. She was always doing that. She let Grey come up with failed maneuver after failed maneuver and didn't snap when they crashed into yet another tree or misjudged the landing and went into the water. Sifa always let her try it. Of course, she never stopped them from falling as if to make sure that Grey knew how foolish her ideas were and she was more than happy to sit and watch while Rose yelled at Grey for risking injury but Sifa let her try the next day and the day after that. And, sometimes, if she were in a kind mood or knew that Grey needed it, she let Grey fall asleep beneath her wing.

It wasn't the footsteps or Raven's voice that woke Grey. It was Sifa licking at her face to get her attention.

"That's disgusting," Grey told Sifa. "Stop that. I'm sorry, I won't sleep here again. What?" she asked Raven.

He pulled her to her feet. "The king is missing."

"No he's not," Grey said. She brushed dirt from her clothes and tried to get her neck to crack. "He's in his library."

"He's not. He's not in the castle at all. Grey, Haegan is in the compound and he's losing his mind. Go find the king."

"You go find him," she said.

"Grey."

"I'm going."

Chapter Eight

Loic may have fucked up.

He wasn't lost in the city, certainly not. He could not get lost in this city he knew so well. But he could be overwhelmed by it and he could not remember the last time he had gone out without Nidi or Ronin with him. He wasn't entirely certain they weren't with him. He had managed to climb out his window, a feat that took him ten minutes and ripped his traveling cloak, but he would bet his new crown that one of the women knew and followed at a safe distance. Maybe he should have bribed those monitoring the elevator with more money to keep his secret but right now he was glad he hadn't, certain that Nidi or Ronin were somewhere behind him and wouldn't come forward until he needed them.

Which he might. He managed to keep walking through the morning crowd but it was beginning to crush him. No one recognized him with the hood over his face, which was good since that was the whole point of the cloak, but it meant they didn't care if they smashed into his back because he walked with his head down and the cloak cut off his periphery vision. He probably wouldn't be recognized without it. Most of the palace workers only seemed to recognize him because of his crown. They pointed at him when they thought he was far enough down the hall as if say "yes, that's our king" and it was never done with pride. He couldn't not expect the people in the street to recognize him or act any differently.

Why had he thought this was a good idea?

He hadn't. It had been an impulsive decision and those were not his strong point. His impulses were horrid. Comically bad, almost. He was the kind of person who needed to write out a list of breakfast or risk ordering oatmeal. Running out of the castle and into the rising morning light was not the kind of decision Loic should ever, ever have been allowed to make but he had to get out or suffocate.

At least his feet knew where to go. Down the cobblestone path and around the merchants stalls with your head as low as possible so you did not risk someone catching your eye and trying to entice you with a bottle of a miracle cure that was entirely piss and ink. Keep your nose low too. Better to avoid the smell of too many bodies and animals in a small space and the shit that both of them left on the side of the road. Someone needed to clean that up. He supposed that was his job. Not to clean it, but to tell someone to do it. Was there a polite way to ask for a shit-cleaner? What did you pay that job?

It wasn't just the morning light that dawned but the entire city. Doret had bathed itself in red overnight for Patia but the gold underneath came back slowly in protest of another regime change. The gold roofs had reappeared on the outskirts but the heart of the city still burned red. Some people still strung red flags from their windows in what may have been laziness, mourning or outright defiance of yet another Naell. No one bothered to put Naell colors back up.

Just ahead was Loic's favorite morning stop. The small dining hall was far off campus but Loic had actually liked the morning walk to get coffee that Nidi insisted was too bitter. As hard as was to imagine Loic throwing himself out the

door every morning and into this crowd, he had once done it so casually. Morning was Loic's best time of day. It was not uncommon for him to wake up unnecessarily early just to get some work down while Nidi and Ronin grumbled and groaned about his so-called strange schedule. With all the hustle and bustle and people late for work or late to sleep, the morning was the best time of day to be in Doret. People were still smiling before the day got them down. At least, Loic assumed they still were. He kept his head down and avoided the dining hall. He didn't want to be recognized just yet.

Someone on a street corner had found a box to stand on and yell their end of the world prophecies. Loic had done an essay on those prophecies and how consistent their wording was. A repetition of fire and ash and rain that could be stretched until one's voice gave out. You had to admire that kind of dedication.

He meant to slow to see if his name was mentioned but his feet somehow speed up instead.

Loic did not have have much time, he knew that much. Either Nidi or Ronin would come to collect him or, worse, they would send the drakling and he did not want to see her strangely blank face. Having her in the library during his panic attack had been awful enough. She wouldn't just come and collect him either; she would probably drag him back to the castle like a child in a tantrum.

He wasn't throwing a tantrum. He just wanted some fresh air. A castle in a cave, on island, was the most ridiculous idea he had ever heard of it. It kept a ruler away from their people and history had long told them how bad an idea that was.

The successful Naells had been loved because people knew them and they knew what their people wanted.

Fresh air, and a little freedom. The meeting with the Chambers pressed on his mind with a physical weight that settled in the front of his head, a throbbing weight that got worse in the sunlight. Perhaps something was there, really there. Something growing in his brain that would burst with blood when he opened his mouth to speak to the Chambers and blood would drip from his mouth and they would laugh at him because what kind of king died on his own blood before ever getting to do anything? And down he would go, straight to the floor where he could see Haegan shaking his head and looking for a list with the next ruler's name and the drakling would be there smiling because maybe they could get a real ruler this time.

The towers of the university loomed suddenly and Loic hurried toward them. Solid ground. Safe ground. The first classes of the day had already started and the university, a city within a city, sat as it always had as if Loic too were late for class. He had only been late for class twice in his life, once because of oversleep and once because of Corali. She still hadn't written back.

Nothing on campus was gold. It was not red, not silver, nothing pretty or fancy but brown brick that probably had not been brown when first built. The outside of the buildings was so rarely cleaned because it simply wasn't worth it. The engineering students would find a way to collapse something into a pile of rubble and dust or the chemists would force another evacuation with a failed attempt at making gold from nothing even though they had been explicitly told

not to do so. Once, during a week of examinations, a musician had buckled under the stress and tossed a lyre through a stain glass window that had never been properly cleaned and even now, at least a year later, Loic could see shards of purple and orange winking from the ground. He avoided that area.

A common area of grass sat to the side but no one was there yet. Loic's favorite stone bench still stood. There had been no reason to think it wouldn't. He had been gone less than a month and there was no reason to remove a perfectly good bench that he had no claim to other than that he liked how close it was to his office and to the food halls. If he asked to have it brought to the castle, would they? Except he had nowhere to put it. The point was to sit and do his work outside and there was no outside up there in the cavern and there was no work to do. Except memorize the speech for the Chambers that got caught in his throat. Damir had suggested learning it as a poem, since those always stuck in Loic's mind so well. Loic had suggested Damir get out of the castle.

Across from Loic's bench were the science halls that he had only ever ventured to in order to drag Damir away from his drawing table. The engineers had their own strange group of customs and rituals that Loic had no concept of but he supposed the art students did as well. One of the upper level classes must have been working on a new project as something almost like a swing dangled from the window of one of the short towers. He was not eager to find out what that project was, although he was grateful it was one Damir had not been a part of it.

Loic went straight up the steps of the literature and language hall. The left door still did not open but the right did. The empty hall he strode through felt good. It wasn't like walking through the palace, where his feet dragged and caught on stones and turns he was unfamiliar with. He knew where to go here and he didn't mind how loud his footsteps were. Let them hear him coming. It wasn't as if he could get in trouble.

He took the stairs two at a time to get to his second floor office. It still had his name on the door, and "master of poetics" next to it. But someone had carved 'king' before his name. Too legible to be Damir. One of his former students, he would assume. Could he ask for the sign? Just to put in his library, certainly not to carry around with him to meetings. He had taken everything else from the office. All the books had been shipped to the castle by now and they were slowly making their way onto the shelves in the order Loic like best—alphabetical by author last name and then in order of publication in the cases where he had multiple of one author. It had been a good project when he had nothing to do. Now, he had something he should be doing and instead dawdled in an office devoid of everything except a desk too large to get out. There was still a coffee ring in the spot immediately next to the coaster he really thought he had been using all that time.

Had he still been teaching, Loic would have been up one more floor at this hour. An advanced seminar on poetics in theater and how one could bring strategies from one form to the other. In all his time teaching it had been his second favorite, besides a translation course of a poet who only he seemed to

enjoy the works of. That man had come from Patia's country, now that he thought about it. He could have discussed that with her instead of shuffling his feet awkwardly and insisting he had classes. It was probably a topic he could bring up at those miserable dinners but he didn't want to lecture his suffering guests when they were already so clearly in pain. At least Damir pretended to listen. Nidi and Ronin had sat in enough of his classes to have opinions but they were still standing outside his doors during dinner. He wasn't sure if it would be breaking custom to invite them in or not. That was his problem. He knew none of the palace customs or what was expected of him or what he was supposed to do at any given time. At least back in these corridors, he knew. He just didn't care.

No one noticed him sneaking into the back of the lecture hall. It was a hall far, far too big for the classes it held and there were rows and rows of empty chairs and half-moon tables that led down to a small podium. He loved the podiums. They gave him something to clutch onto and hide behind when his body started to shake but he always had a habit of thinking he put his papers on there only to hear the whoosh as they fell to the floor and the class laughed, mostly in good nature but sometimes not. Most of all, he appreciated the windows. Walls and walls of windows that distracted his students but were such a relief after his time in the castle.

Baila had taken over his class, then. Fine. Her grasp on poetics was weaker than Loic's but she was stronger on dramatics. Even now, she seemed to be acting where she played two different characters as the sevens students—none of whom had dropped following Loic's departure—laughed with absolute delight.

Loic had only once gotten them to laugh that hard but that was because someone had suggested that Hauschild was better than Talbott and Loic could not let that kind of slander stand in his classroom.

The class finally stopped laughing as Bailia threw her hands in the air for quiet. “Alright,” she said. “Setting aside the general humor of that scene, what is so significant about it? We’re looking for language here, not the jokes about genitals.”

Loic raised his hand but did not wait to be called on. “It’s the only scene in the play without a discernible rhyme scheme. It reminds you that these characters are farmers, not lords and ladies. They also correctly predict the story’s end.”

People began shouting immediately, leaping from their chairs and clamoring over each other. Only Baila waited in her spot but she smiled at Loic with real warmth and no ill-will at him having interrupted her class. Loic let the small crowd surround him and shout and giggle for several minutes before he parted a path between them and walked towards the podium.

“I’m sorry,” he said to Baila. “I had to.”

“Of course, Your Highness.” She did not bow, not really, but she did dip her head and did step back to motion Loic to the podium.

Loic shook his head. “Oh, no, I’m not—”

Students back shouting at him, demanding and beginning in equal turns for him to lecture them on something and a few even began shouting suggestions on which poet they wanted to hear about or asking if he had read Rotchild’s new

piece (he hadn't he had been so busy doing nothing but wallow) or couldn't he just continue he was saying about the rhyme scheme? Loic turned to Baila.

“What are you working on?” he asked her with an overplayed sigh.

“*Newell II.*”

“Why?” Loic wrinkled his nose. The class laughed. They knew fully well how he felt about most of Eran's plays and they were fine, he understood why people liked them but they held little appeal beyond gratuitous blood and sex jokes. Loic liked those things as much as the next person but there was a limit to what he could stomach and the miming of a disembowelment on stage seemed to be his limit.

Loic let his cloak fall to the floor with a flourish, much to the applause of the class. He immediately bent to pick it up and place it over a nearby chair, earning more laughter. He was certain he'd never had this kind of warm response when actually their professor but maybe he had and it had slipped away in the memories of doing this day in and day out. It had been enjoyable but stressful at the time. None of that stress rested in his bones now.

He began by outlining a tract they knew well from him in all his problems with Eran's plays. These were students who had been with him for a year or two before taking this class and they were able to shout out repeated quotes of his often. Was he quotable? A few of his lines seemed to be inside jokes amongst the students. When he moved onto the specific problem of this play and stepped out from the podium to borrow someone's book, seven books were shoved in his face. In his excitement, he riffled the pages with too much force and knocked the book

straight back to the ground. He apologized, picked it up and dropped it again. This time, he just took someone's else book. He even made it halfway through the first scene before the door slammed open and startled him enough to drop it yet again.

Grey had pulled the door open with too much force and ripped the handle straight off, which she let drop from her fingertips. It clanged in the newfound silence. The class stared at her and she stared right back. When her gaze finally met Loic's, however, she smiled.

He had truly fucked up.

"Class," he said with a noticeable tremble to his voice. "This is Drakling Grey. Seems I've been away from the castle too long."

A few seconds ago they would have booed his shuffling goodbye. None of them seemed to want to remove their eyes from Grey, who continued in her stillness. Didn't snakes do that before striking? Loic placed the book back on the podium and mumbled a quick goodbye to Baila. He had gotten halfway up the stairs to the door before remembering his cloak and had to go back for it with Grey's eyes boring fire into his back. She did not relent until he stood by her side and then walked out the door she had so carelessly broken.

She led him down the hall and Loic, although taller, hustled to keep up. Still, she did not speak. Her smile had finally dropped but the way she clenched her jaw reminded Loic too much of those teeth that barred more than grinned.

"You're not going to eat me, are you?" he asked.

"What?" she asked in genuine shock. "No. That's not a drakling trait."

"I'm sorry, it was a silly thought," he said. "It seemed...not important."

She ground her teeth with enough force for Loic to hear and cringe in sympathy. “I cannot believe you did something so foolish,” she said. “I thought you were supposed to be smart. Poet and all that.”

“I’m a professor of poetics, not a poet,” Loic corrected. Alright, he had earned most of her glares today but not that one. “And forgive me for thinking I was allowed some measure of freedom.”

“You’re king,” she said. “You’re free to sit in a damn classroom all day so long as you have guards with you. We can’t—fuck’s sake, how do you get out of here?”

“Oh.” Loic pointed back down the hall. “We went the wrong way when we left the classroom.”

“Why didn’t you say something?”

“I really thought you were going to eat me or something,” Loic admitted. He meant it as a joke. She did not take it as one.

They finally made it out of the building and back to a darkening sky. Grey insisted on Loic putting his hood back on, as if he hadn’t already known to do so. She wore none of her drakling finery today and without the silver swinging cloak Loic finally saw how small she was. Yes, this woman had broken the door handle straight off the door but to look at her told none of that. Her face was pinched with lack of sleep and her hair had clearly not been brushed in a day or two, barely contained by a long braid. She just looked tired. Tired and puffy-eyed and graceful and angry and much like one of Loic’s own students stumbling into his

office right before they sobbed about how they hadn't expected this much work and there just wasn't enough time to do it all.

"I'm sorry you had to come get me," he said.

"Good. Don't do it again," she snapped. She navigated the city well, keeping Loic on the outskirts of it.

"If I want to leave the castle, I am allowed to." He tried his gentlest voice, the one for telling really stressed students that it might be best to drop one or two classes for their own sake.

"Not without me," she said.

"Nidi and Ronin are probably following us," he told her. "Gone now that you're here, I'm sure, but I would not have been able to leave the castle without them knowing."

The sky rumbled. Grey's footsteps sped up but Loic slowed his. She had no choice but to fall back in step with him.

"I'm supposed to be with you," she insisted. Her voice maintained the even tone Loic had always heard from it. She had two tones; angry and bored. It was much easier to work with angry student who cared than one an apathetic one.

Loic kept their gait almost painfully slow, hoping the rain's timing would work and for once in his life, things went as he wished. The clouds unleashed hell upon them just as they rounded the corner a few blocks from a bar Loic knew well. Grey swore, reaching for the hood of her cloak that was not there, and swore again and likely would have continued on swearing had she not remembered Loic was there. Loic put his hand on his hood to keep it from blowing away as those

did of the stragglers around them. He reached out to grab Grey's hand but thought better of it, instead shouting for her to follow and running for the hall.

Grey moved faster than he did, of course, and slammed into him when he stopped short just inside the door. It was he, not her, who rocked forward. It felt like he had slammed his back into a wall.

She made no apologies. "You can't do that," she insisted. In only a few minutes outside, she had been drenched. Mindless of the tables around them she bent forward and shook her hair and upper body out. More than a few people were hit with sharp water.

"I wanted to get out of the rain," he said simply. "I know this place. We're safe here."

Grey growled and continued to ring the water out from her hair. She muttered something to the floor that Loic could not hear. He didn't think he wanted to.

Fortunately, the barkeep here remembered his face but not his name. When Loic asked, quietly, for a slightly more private table the woman raised her eyebrows and darted her gaze between Loic and the still fuming Grey knowingly. He flushed but let the insinuation stand. It worked, at least, and Grey was none the wiser. They were given a table in the very back of the room and in a back corner where they could see but not be seen. Grey insisted on forcing Loic to sit with his back to the crowd while she faced them.

"I used to come here with Nidi and Ronin," Loic explained. He picked up the menu without looking it. "I recommend any of the food."

Had he slipped into another language? Grey stared at him with such confusion that he feared he must have but eventually she said, “we’re not saying here. We’re just waiting out the rain.”

“I’d like to eat,” he said. “I’ve grown a little sick of the palace food. Don’t you?”

“I don’t eat at the palace,” she said.

Right. Of course, she ate with the drakling on their little clifftop home.

This had a terrible idea. Loic had thought, hoped, that without the stress of being in the palace and being king, he could find a common footing with the drakling or at the very least come to an understanding. She did not seem to share the same concerns. She hardly even looked at Loic, focusing her sharp gaze on the crowd and scanning each person as if she could see through their clothes and to any weapons hidden below. Perhaps she could. Loic knew very little about what the drakling could actually do besides the obvious.

Loic ordered a tea and too large breakfast of eggs and toast and sausage. Grey asked for nothing.

“Thank you for indulging me,” he said.

Her eyes narrowed. “I don’t have a choice.”

“You could have dragged me back the castle,” he said.

“Yes,” she said, missing entirely that it was a joke. “But everyone would have seen.”

Loic did not say another word until his food arrived and neither did she. He counted the minutes—seventeen—spent in an agonizing silence where she

paid more attention to the crowd and he paid more attention to his hands. At least when the food arrived he had something to distract him, something that wasn't oatmeal for the first time in weeks. He devoured it. Grey's nose twitched at the sight or the smell or the everything but she said nothing. Not that he expected her to.

He was almost through his eggs and onto his bread when her eyes narrowed even more, so slim you would think them closed. Her head tilted. Loic swallowed too much food at once and coughed. She motioned for him to be quiet, so, naturally he coughed more. She thumped his back. Hard. He almost coughed up the food and his lungs.

“That's going to kill me,” he said.

“Can't you shut up?” she hissed.

“Why? What do you hear?” he asked, completely ignoring her request.

“Nothing but you now,” she said.

Loic took the hint and returned to his food. Grey opened her eyes and slid into her seat in what looked like defeat. She quickly pulled herself back up.

“People were talking about you,” she said.

“Me?”

“Yes. You chew very loudly, you know.”

“I didn't. What were they saying?” he asked. Had he been recognized? He didn't want to deal with a hurried escape but even worse would be a drawn out affair where he had to shake the hands or accept the nervous bows of every single person in the hall. He wanted neither. He wanted to finish his food and pay and

walk back to the castle when the rain had cleared and not hear the word king until he was back in the cavern.

“They didn’t recognize you,” she said.

Could drakling read minds?

“They’re just talking about the new king,” she continued. “Didn’t even know your name. Just called you ‘the Naell’. That man by the front door is in the Lower Chamber so he’ll be at your speech. He’s holding it over the others and they hate him for it.”

“Please don’t remind me about the speech,” he said. Just the thought made all that food in his stomach churn. He’d eaten too much. Still, it was rude to leave so much food on the plate so he took another spoonful.

Grey raised her eyebrows. Good. A reaction. “Are you going to panic again?”

“No.” Loic swallowed his food. “That was...it doesn’t happen often. I was having a rough day.”

She didn’t believe him. Fine. This whole thing had been a bad idea anyway. He reached into his cloak for some money to pay for the meal and learned it was not only a bad idea but a terrible one. “Uh. I don’t have any money,” he told her.

“Neither do I.”

It took several minutes of hushed, anguishing conversation on Loic’s part to get the barkeep to at least get her boss to verify if Loic was who he said he was. Luckily, the owner knew Loic’s name and face and she was more than happy to

give him his meal for free despite his protestations that he would send someone with the money for the meal and that this really wasn't a habit he had. Grey stood behind him. He could have sworn she was laughing, if her muscles were capable of such an action.

They walked back in dejected silence.

Loic counted. Grey said nine more words that day while stalking him around the castle. Three of them were to Nidi and Ronin where they waited at the top of the elevator, having abandoned their surreptitious following of Loic the second they saw Grey break the door. *Do your jobs*, she snarled at them but they recounted a detailed map of the route Loic had taken and Grey had no choice but to silence upon learning they had, in fact, been doing their jobs.

I wouldn't, she told Loic when he asked her if he should go find Haegan. Point taken.

No. Thank you, when Loic asked if she wanted a cup of tea. The latter two words had come almost full minute later. They surprised him enough to make him drop his cup.

And, of course, *night*, when she finally left him as the sun went down. Not even 'good' night.

A failure of a day then. Visiting the university had not calmed his screaming nerves but worsened them. Being on campus, in front of the podium and students, had felt so natural that he had begun a lecture off the cuff and did so with everyone's rapt attention. And yet, putting him at dinner only a few hours

later found him struggling to form coherent sentences. Maybe there was something in his brain that just went to sleep every time he was in an important conversation. There, then gone. Was that something a healer could check for? Except Nidi and Ronin always made Loic fill out a small questionnaire before letting him go to the healer because he had a habit of assuming everything in his body was trying to kill him.

“Has the dragon left?” Nidi asked, head poking around the corner of his door. She knew Grey was gone. The two women entered, Damir close on their heels. “That woman has ice in her veins.”

“It’s possible,” Loic said.

“Possible?” Damir laughed. He sat sideways in an armchair, completely disrespectful of the fact that he sat in the king’s private sitting room. His legs dangled over the armrest. “Loic, she makes Corali seem like a true person.”

Nidi laughed. She at least sat in a chair the proper way, although one boot rested on the empty end table in front of her. Heathens, all of them. This was a beautiful room with flowered wallpaper lining it from floor to ceiling and chairs more plush and comfortable than almost any bed he had slept in, chairs cleaned so thoroughly the wood bases shined, and here they were acting like it was his first dormitory.

“Do not—” Loic started.

Ronin, sitting in her chair with her feet on the floor, had slunk so low that she was all but laying down. “—are you going to defend her right now?”

“Coral?” Loic asked. “Yes.” He would always defend Coral to these three. They had not liked her from the first day of classes, when she sat next to Loic in introduction to dramatic literature, and continued to hate her when she left halfway through their second year to return to her home country. That had been years ago and her periodic, far too infrequent visits, had done nothing to endear her to Loic’s friends. How they felt about her was possibly the only issue where he did not care for their opinion.

“I hope your day was better spent,” Loic said, hoping to change the subject before he worked up himself trying to lie to his friends.

Damir held up bandaged hands. The left had been wrapped tight with medical cloth around the center so he could still use his fingers. The right had been entirely bandaged into a strange mitten. “I had a slight misfire,” he said with a smile. “Trying to see what compounds could recreate the dragonpiercer.”

“That’s a chemist’s job,” Loic said. “You can’t keep doing that.”

Damir waved his bandaged, likely burnt and bloody hand to prove that he was fine.

Ronin pulled a sealed letter—purple wax—from her pocket and tossed it towards Loic, who missed. Wildly. He tore it open and ignored their jeers and laughter while he read Coral’s words twice, just to make certain he understood it.

“She’s coming,” he finally announced. “Coral. And her sister.”

“Her sister?” Nidi asked.

“Kaethe. She’s the commander for the Lenian army. They’re coming,” he said again because that was the part of the letter that made sense and made his

heart, poets forgive him, flutter. It was the second part that squeezed his stomach into a vice.

“Why?” Damir finally asked.

Loic read it again. “For the trial,” he said.

Chapter Nine

Grey swallowed. She had not eaten since in some time but the words brought forth bile she didn't know she still had in her stomach. Whatever was there made its way back down to her stomach but she didn't want to open her mouth or eyes for fear that just seeing Raven, or Rose, or the letter in Rose's hands would risk her vomiting right then and there.

"We had to expect this," Rose said softly.

"We fucking didn't," Grey snapped.

"It's always been understood," Raven agreed. Only the three of them sat in Rose's room, a space Grey had been in only a handful of times before. It had no books or paintings but large tapestry maps of countries Grey had never been to hung to the walls and occasionally shifted at the wind wafting through the window. Raven got up to shut them.

"But the law is that we can use dragonfire for protection," Grey said. "You used it to protect Jade."

"That's not how they will see it," Rose said. She lay on the bed with her back against the headboard and her crushed leg in front of her. Yesterday morning she had made it all the way to Grey's room to admonish her for letting the king loose the day before. Grey's incompetence at least seemed to speed Rose's healing process. "As far as they will be concerned, I broke the treaty."

"Who are we dealing with?" Raven asked.

“All six countries. They’re all sending representatives or rulers,” Rose said. The letter had not left her hands since it arrived. “There’s nothing we can do.”

“We’re not going to let them put you on trial,” Grey said. “You did nothing wrong.

“I broke the treaty.”

“For the right—”

“—shouldn’t you be with the king?” Rose asked.

Grey’s mouth clicked open and shut again. “I’ll go later. We need to—”

“—you should go now,” Rose said. Her eyes stared into Grey’s. They seemed bigger than usual, but no, that was a shimmer of tears borne of stress and sadness and strife. Grey stood and left immediately.

She still felt vaguely ill but that had nothing to do with the jerky ride down to the castle cavern. Kyel must have been manning the pulley system that day. The bile clinging to the insides of her throat and so desperately fighting to get out had everything to do with the letter that Grey never should have given to Rose. It had come from Hagaen but he had not delivered it personally. A wise and a cowardly move. He had instead instructed a palace worker to give it to Olin and Olin had innocently handed it over without ever being aware that it contained the signature of the rulers from six countries agreeing that Rose must stand to decision for her actions. A miracle to get them to agree to anything when two of them were in open war and three in a war of trade and piracy and bandits the government had ‘not’ funded and had ‘not’ given maps to.

Grey swallowed again. Her stomach had disappeared and there was nowhere for the sickness in her throat to go. She tried clearing her airways with a deep breath of cold air but all she got was a taste of salt that only preserved the slimy feeling coating her insides. The polite greetings of those on the elevator was met with stares for fear of vomiting straight onto their shoes. Perhaps she could be sick over the side and see which made it to the ground first, the sickness or her body.

But she made it. Her legs buckled slightly stepping from the moving contraption to the stone rock of the castle cavern, the lack of motion confusing her body briefly. By the time the guards had looked up, seen it was her and gone back to their card game, her balance was back. Rose would have chided the guards for being so lax in their jobs. Let her do so, if she ever left the drakling compound. Grey was not certain the elder drakling had left the house since her fall. She wasn't supposed to because of her house arrest but the old Rose would have at least tried.

Oh, no. Not what Grey needed to deal with that morning. Nidi and Ronin sat on the castle stairs, Loic nowhere in sight, and seemed to be doing absolutely nothing. "Drakling Grey," Nidi called.

"Where's the king?" Grey asked as a greeting.

"Practicing his speech with Haegan," Ronin said. "Are you alright?"

"Fine." Grey stepped over the two women but Nidi reached out and grabbed her cloak. Grey whipped it from the guard's fingers with enough force to make her wince. Grey would not apologize.

“You look unwell,” Ronin said.

“You look like shit,” Nidi clarified.

Ronin frowned and got to her feet. “What we meant to say is—”

“—that you look like shit.” Nidi got to her feet as well. “You’re not sick, are you?”

“No. Are they in Haegan’s office?” Grey asked.

The conversation that Nidi and Ronin exchanged with two glances and three small gestures probably said more than Grey did in an entire week at the castle. Grey could read voices well but eye twitches and head tilts were harder. Eventually, they must have decided on something because they turned back to Grey.

“Since Loic is with Haegan,” Ronin asked slowly, “and we’d all be horribly bored with whatever they’re doing, how would you feel about a training exercise?”

“Meaning?”

“We beat the shit out of each other until you feel better,” Nidi said with a wide grin.

Grey almost returned the smile. “This won’t end well for you, you understand.”

Rose would claim Grey was shirking her duties by not being with the king but his guards were right. There was nothing Grey could do while he sat with Haegan. The only danger there was death by boredom. She didn’t understand how they did that day in and day out. After only minutes in their stuffy rooms she

could feel her body itching with a desire to run, jump, punch, kick, do something that wasn't sitting still and listening to the same words over and over again.

Besides, Grey assured herself as the three began their shaky ride to the soldiers' quarters, she was doing her job in testing the king's chosen guards. They must have had some ability but some didn't necessarily mean enough to protect the king. It had served well for a lowly prince who hadn't been near the throne but times had changed. More accurately, times had gone fucking sideways. She watched the two women while they chatted. Nidi was short but thick with muscle. Ronin may have been taller and slimmer but Grey had a suspicion she had speed on her side. She moved with a natural grace that told of dance training at some point in her life and probably years of it. Grey liked fighting dancers. It came few and far between but they were always interesting and always fell down with such grace it almost became a bow.

The soldiers' quarters were on the beach. They were the only thing on the beach and spread out in small houses where squadrons would learn to live and fight together. Her squadron was out, yet again, in the woods and Olin with them. Grey recognized a few of the faces that stared at the three women. The soldiers there not so subtly followed the women to the training ring. Soldiers were always up to watch a good fight.

“Weapons?” Grey asked Nidi and Ronin. “Your choice.”

“Oh, we don't need weapons,” Nidi said. “We're not really trying to hurt each other here.”

Nidi and Ronin removed their cloaks and armor so they were stripped to just pants and shirts. Grey did the same to her cloak but had been wearing no armor. She let them do their stretching while she talked to the training master to explain what they wanted. He knew Grey and while it could not be said he liked her, he did like to watch her fight. So did the soldiers that lined their ring.

“One on one or two on one?” Grey asked. The training master wrapped heavy amounts of white linen around each of the woman’s hands to soften their blows. Grey got a little extra padding, rightfully so. Nidi was right; she had no wish to hurt them.

“One on one is good. Unless you need a partner,” Ronin teased.

Grey did not return the banter. She kicked her boots off to feel the wooden slats beneath her. Fighting on sand would have been better but the training square had been roped off and a wooden floor erected in a large, low platform. Pads of flattened blankets and knit material were placed on top of that to prevent injury in case of fall. They did not help.

“I’ll go first,” Nidi offered. She also kicked her shoes off and bent her knees slightly, fists up in a protective stance with her right arm forward as if she were going to start with a punch. She wouldn’t. She’d start with a kick to try to get Grey on the ground or at least winded. Probably favored a kicking, more showy style in general. Useful for a shorter stature.

Grey did not like violence per say. But damn did she enjoy a good fight.

Nidi jumped at her the second the training master called for them to begin, moving as if she were going to strike Grey in the hip with her knee but kicking

out her leg at the last second. Grey dodged it, smashed a fist Nidi's shoulder as she went by.

Nidi took the hit and lunged to grab at Grey's knees. Smart move. But Grey bent her knees in time and squished the guard's fingers as she tried to hurl Grey to the ground. A good move that would have worked on a weaker opponent.

Grey let Nidi's fingers go. She jumped over the foot Nidi swung across the ground as she tried to trip Grey. Nidi learned quickly. When Grey came down from her jump the guard spun around again and kicked out her other foot so that Grey lost balance and stumbled. Nidi took the moment to jam a knee into Grey's stomach.

For the second time that Grey, she nearly vomited. Maybe she could claim it was an intimidation tactic.

Instead, she danced away. Drakling fighting style was all about conserving energy until necessary. Nidi had no such concerns. She put her fists up again, higher than necessary because the woman was too concerned about her face. Never be concerned about anything in a fight. Grey learned that during her first ever fight.

Grey made the first move this time, faking a punch at Nidi's face but really landing a quick hit to her stomach. Nidi grunted. Grabbed at Grey's wrist in a move that would have worked without all of the padding on her hands. Annoyed, she used the close distance to instead hook a foot behind Grey's knee and try, once again, to pull her to the ground. She pulled too far. Grey just twirled

herself from in front of Nidi to behind and threw her to the ground. Nidi thundered to the floor.

Grey wiped a stray hair from her forehead. “You’re welcome to help her,” she told Ronin.

Ronin laughed, despite her friend on the ground. She hopped the ropes and used the force to throw herself at Grey. Grey had been right; very graceful.

Grey let the guard land a hit to her face but returned it with a hit to Ronin’s left side that left the other woman wincing. Good. Follow it with a kick to that same spot so Ronin leaned over to protect it, then hit her right shoulder so that further punching would cause a slight pinch each time.

Nidi, ground. Grey jumped high as the woman kicked out from where she lay.

Ronin got another hit to Grey’s stomach on the way down. She took it and stepped away so Nidi could get to her feet.

The pair knew how to fight together. Ronin placed a foot behind her in a dancer’s position and kicked off on it so she whirled through the air at Grey but no, *no*, that wasn’t the real attack. Grey stepped aside from the dancer and smacked away the real punch from Nidi who emerged from just behind Ronin. No. It wasn’t a punch, not a fucking punch. While she did punch at Grey’s face, the real threat was when she wrapped both her hands around Grey’s neck and tossed her legs around Grey’s waist and hauling them both backward so Grey hit the ground and not the grinning guard.

Well played. Grey kicked her hips up to toss Nidi off and directly into Ronin's feet. The momentum didn't do enough to knock Ronin down and that was good. Grey wanted both women on their feet.

Grey twisted and spun herself back to a standing position in a move that was more for show than necessity but immediately found herself ducking again to avoid a jab from Ronin and then leaping to avoid a cut from Nidi. A kick to the back from one of them, didn't matter which, and Grey kicked someone in the chest, didn't matter which, and followed that person to the ground with her knee on their sternum. The other one tried to pull Grey off but the drakling did not budge until she wanted to and she did so only to place a forearm against the throat of the one below her and roll so that she had them in a headlock.

The standing one(*oh Ronin it was Ronin*) saw it as an opportunity to punch now that Grey was busy holding Nidi down but Grey gave a giant heave of both her body and of Nidi's, managing to flip both women so that Nidi groaned with her face in the mat and Grey landed on her knees, crouched. Too cocky. She took Ronin's knee square to the jaw. That would bruise nicely.

Punching and blocking blurred until Grey was never sure if she was on the offensive or defensive but she kept pushing forward—Nidi hit harder while Ronin was faster and there was punch after punch after punch so that Grey's chest would be a beauty of colors that she would have to hide at the drakling compound but the punch-jab-kick-kick felt nice. They stung but Grey's skin was thick and used to being slammed into by all sorts of strange objects. Violet had once slammed a wooden board into her during a training session and that knocked the wind out of

Grey (and some food) but she had gotten revenge, got her revenge by body-slammng the older drakling into the side of the house a few days later and Rose had punished her for it but Rose was always punishing Grey for using too much strength when it wasn't necessary. She had done that to Cobalt once and nearly torn a finger off while trying to flip him over her shoulder but then he had broken her wrist so they had been even, didn't matter who threw the first hit so long as you were both bruised and bloody and missing a bit of a tooth.

Nidi bobbed, Ronin dodged, and Grey continued to hit. Defenses were good when you had someone else to protect but not as useful when it was just you. The hit Ronin had landed on her jaw a minute ago hurt. Minute? At least seven minutes ago. Too long. Time to end this.

Grey grabbed at Nidi's next punch and twisted the poor guard's arm while kicking straight out at Ronin's chest with both feet. All three women went down but it was Grey who got to her feet first. She grabbed Nidi and tossed her into Ronin just as the latter started to stand again so that both went flying across the entire length of the training square. Grey ran before they could finish getting up and clotheslined both of them.

"Yield," Grey said. Sweat dripped into her mouth. Probably her sweat but who could say.

"Please tell me you feel better," Nidi coughed. She tried to hack up something but nothing came up. "Fuck."

"Breathe through your nose until your throat stops hurting," Grey said. She offered both woman a hand and pulled them to their feet.

“Were you even trying?” Ronin rubbed at her throat.

“At times,” Grey said with a smile.

The crowd wandered off without the promise of further bloodshed, although really very little blood had been shed. More bruises blooming than anything else, although wait, that was a bit of blood by Nidi’s lip and some there by Ronin’s temple.

“I didn’t meant to do that,” Grey said. She pointed at each spot of blood.

“Just happens sometimes. You fight well. Both of you.”

“Of course we do.” Ronin was more than a little offended at the accusation.

“No I mean, you held your own against a drakling, even one who wasn’t trying. That’s better than most of these soldiers could do.”

Neither woman looked very convinced it was that hard. Difficult, yes, but they hadn’t just proved it was possible to do so?

Grey didn’t like that. She let it sit as they walked back to the elevator up, nodded when it was appropriate to answer something but offered nothing. They didn’t seem to understand just what it was that Grey could do and really, *really*, it was in everyone’s best interest to fully understand what made Grey drakling and what made drakling so special. People knew when they saw the dragons. It was hard to miss one of them. But even if you left the dragon on the side of the battlefield you were a facing a hellion unlike any other. These two deserved to know. To know what they had beaten, of course, not because Grey’s neck and

chest flushed with embarrassment at the idea that they found her merely a good fighter or a dragon rider.

Someone had once made a comment like that when she was out with Olin. Grey had let that red flush across her body get the best of her then too and had been placed under Rose's form of house arrest for several weeks for it. Grey stood by her actions. People should know how good she was.

She ran. Her feet, still bare, kicked sand into Nidi and Ronin's open mouths as they called to see what she was doing but she was already gone. The wind her body cut through felt good. Not as good as the wind when she rode Sifa, but refreshing and salty in the few cuts she always seemed to have. She needed more of that light burn. She would need more. The elevator was still halfway up the tower.

The jump wasn't that problem. Grey leapt and her body did the work without thinking. Up and up almost fifty feet as easily as anyone else put one foot in front of the other. The problem was really in the landing. She hadn't wanted to land on the elevator and cause it to shake forcefully. She needed to catch it at just the right time. Her fingers grasped the edge of the boards, nearly ripping her arm out of the socket as her body finally remembered that it was not supposed to be airborne in this way, but she gritted through the pain and hauled herself up so she could lay flat on her back as the elevator continued its way down. She would spend her night picking splinters out of her fingers. Those on the elevator did not even ask if she was alright. She was.

Too showy, Rose would say. Why show off for them? They're not worth it.

Because, a younger Grey would have said, because I wanted to. Younger Grey. Only-a-few-days-ago-Grey. Because it made her happy. Made her smile and eventually made her laugh at the looks on the women's faces when the elevator finally stopped. Because she was sometimes allowed a few minutes to do things that were not her duty, no matter how few and far between. And then she would go back to her sour-faced king and his stack of books and his nerves and she would be able to last another day without slapping some sense into him. Because she wanted a few minutes to forget about how much she should be doing instead and because she wanted to do something stupid and showy. Most importantly, because she could do it.

Chapter Ten

In a time where that kind of thing had still been done, there had been a Naell queen who had been well liked by the people she ruled but despised by the nobility—something do with her tax policies. So the nobility had taken matters into their own hands and locked the queen in a banquet where she was forced to, knowingly, drink poison. There were scores of poems about her death although surprisingly few about her life and Loic supposed that said something about Oscide values. All that Loic knew was that maybe the dying queen was less miserable at her banquet than Loic was at his.

That wasn't fair. Loic was miserable, yes, but the heart rate he checked constantly assured him that he wasn't dying. Shy a spontaneous death caused by something in his body shriveling and dying in shame as Loic continued to nod and nod and nod and never once speak to the poor gathering that sat before him, he was going to have to sit this out. It wasn't anyone else's fault. Loic knew exactly what to say and even understood the mechanics of how to be charming but somewhere between his brain and his mouth a phrase like "yes, I quite like the countryside in the summer, where is your house?" came out as "isn't there a rumor that the road to that place has fallen bandits buried underneath it?" Maybe there was something misfiring in his brain. Yes. There was absolutely something misfiring up there.

He nodded once again to something Lord Joby said. The poor man sat to his left at almost every dinner gathering and the large size of this one, the night

before Loic's dreaded Chambers meeting, had not been able to push Joby away. Loic had nothing to say to this man. He talked about hunting and dances and travels. Loic had not done any of those things since he was a teenager.

The size of this banquet had forced them out of Loic's normal dining space and into a room that could hold fifty people and nothing else but them and the table and chairs. It was a long table that was probably nothing more than a stone slab but had been, of course, painted gold because apparently the word tasteful was not in Naell vocabulary. At least the chairs were a nice brown wood. Horribly uncomfortable, even with dark cushions, but Loic was at the point where he would take anything that wasn't his dreaded family color. It was hard to tell what color the walls were; there were too many paintings of past Naell rulers and conquests and a few dragons here and there to tell what color the walls beneath were. None of the paintings were a consistent style. That bothered Loic more than it should have. This one was traditional, this one abstract, this one new classical and that one just seemed to be a splotch of blue that he supposed represented the sea? Impossible to say. He could probably get a good conversation going about that. What did you start with? 'That's a horrible painting, let's burn it?'

Joby had finally given up trying to talk to Loic about the finer points of some new crossbow development. He spoke over his king now, or around him, to Lady Brilane on Loic's right. As bad as Loic felt for himself, he had to feel worse for her. She had all but been engaged to their previous king and fully expected to become queen. That dream had been stabbed clean through by Patia's sword and any further dreams of the crown stunted by Loic's refusal to engage in her

conversation. He had no problem with her. Maybe a small problem with the gold color of the dress she wore but the light cloth made her skin turn to bronze and highlighted a body she clearly had no problems showing off. He wasn't sure if the gold was a deliberate appeal to Loic or not. He could ask. He had almost asked about the small half-moon jewel that sat tight beneath her nose and above lips stained purple. Somewhere, at some point, he had read about jewels like that as a symbol of something. A friend of his had done a paper on symbols in fashion and body modification. It was right there for him to ask Brilane about but the words never came. Probably for the better.

No one else had a problem talking. Brilane kept three or four conversations going at once, tossing high piled curls this way and that to make sure everyone got a fraction of her clearly sought after time. Had fate not turned against her she likely would have been a good queen. Shame.

Loic tried to focus on any one conversation to see if he could fit himself in somewhere but there were just too many. These two were talking about a family member who Loic did not know, these three were regaling a fourth person with the story of a drunken escapade that should have ended in jail but of course hadn't, and there were two women so engaged with only each other that Loic had absolutely no wish to interrupt them. And the small string quartet in the corner underplayed everything. He would have liked to hear them more. Would it be rude? To call for silence to hear the band play what he was certain was from an opera he had been fond of as a child, had made his parents sit through three or four times just to see some childhood fairy tales join together only to have their

lives ruined by an ogre. Much more fantastical than Loic's usually fare, even as a child. Yes. The song they were playing right now was the one where they learned the wife of the main character had been killed and where they decided to sacrifice the narrator to appease the ogre. One of Loic's favorites. Corali's too.

In a few weeks, Corali would be here. It wouldn't be out of the ordinary for Loic to invite her to a banquet such as this. Damir would scoff but Damir had deferred from this banquet due to difficulty eating with his bandaged hands. A pity, really, as that would have taken focus off the hunched over king. He tried sitting straighter but after a few minutes it began to hurt his back. His body seemed to be locked into an 'I forgot to grade these essays and I need them in an hour so let's do this' posture where he leaned too close to the table. If he were bolder he could have asked Grey how she did it. Poor girl almost seemed just as miserable as he was, standing in the corner, but a small part of Loic was happy to see her suffer just the slightest bit. Nidi and Ronin had asked him to be a little kinder to her after some bonding moment that seemed to involve more violence than Loic thought necessary. He didn't see how he could be any kinder to the drakling than he already was.

He went to take a sip of wine and somehow dribbled a bit onto his lap. No one saw. Possibly Brilane.

It was a miracle he had not spilled more food onto himself. Loic was not a particularly clumsy eater but something about being in here turned his hands to mush where everything seemed to just slip right through them. His fork had clattered to the plate more than once under the weight of too much lamb meat, a

sure sign that he should instead be going for the easy to manage vegetable mix with cucumber and tomato and cheese. He really did need to be careful. His nerves liked to show themselves in a constantly rumbling stomach that he was certain would make most of his speech for him tomorrow. But who would go for the vegetables with roasted lamb and fresh lobster and oysters that he had eaten at least an entire plate of?

Could he tell the oyster story? Ronin had been born in the inland part of the country and had never tried them before so Loic and Nidi had forced her to do so. She fought back. Said they were too slimy. It took several glasses of ale down her throat for her to shoot down the oyster and then she had proclaimed them an insult to the gods. Was it a good story? It had made Loic laugh at the time and made him smile now but maybe that was the alcohol—he had matched Nidi and Ronin glass for glass. Nidi often stopped after two or three beers but Ronin could drink straight liquor like it was water. She would wake up hungover but still human. Loic had woken up unsure of where he was or who he was. Perhaps that was a better story. Did people want to know about their king when he was drunk? The day after defending his thesis he had, as had all the other poetic masters students, showed up to their graduate seminar drunk off of breakfast liquor and Loic had been inspired to enact his favorite poem. Fine, except his favorite poem was about a young man accidentally turned into a large bird by a god whom he refused to worship since the god had given him nothing but misery.

Maybe Loic was being punished by the gods for that mockery. He didn't really believe in them but stranger things had happened. Such as him sitting at the head of a banquet table with a crown on his head.

At the very least, the food was delicious. The smell was not. Individually they may have been but so delicately placed on the table with the goal of looking beautiful, they all joined together in a manner that was full of fresh herbs one minute and then salt brine the next and then smoky fire after that. Add the overwhelming stale smell of the castle and too much perfume made Loic long for a breath of fresh air. He had the sneaking suspicion Grey would tackle him if he bolted for the door. Based on bruises Nidi and Ronin so proudly displayed from their play-fight, he did not want the drakling coming anywhere near him.

Then again, if she knocked him out he could probably avoid his speech tomorrow. A winning situation for both of them. And it gave the lords and ladies gathered around the table a good story. A winning situation for everyone involved, except Loic's would-be broken body. Haegan, always absent from these dinners, would probably make him give the speech anyway. So Loic sat in his seat and waited for the dessert to be served because he may as well eat himself to death.

Chapter Eleven

Cobalt tapped Grey's shoulder. He tried to tap Grey's shoulder.

Exhausted, stumbling as he tried to run, he wound up dragging his hand down her back rather than tapping her but she knew what he wanted. She slowed herself from a sprint to a run to a jog to a walk to stillness. When she turned around she found him already doubled over with his hands on his knees.

"Done?" she asked.

"Done," he admitted. "You win, or whatever it is you want me to say."

Good enough for Grey. Her body burned with the refusal to take a deep breath and she had no choice but to follow Cobalt's example, except she spit up clear liquid where he merely dry-heaved. This was why Rose loved to make them do their training together. It had nothing to do with their close age but the fact that they would never let the other win unless there was no other option. Cobalt must have been in rough shape to admit to Grey that he needed to stop. She herself had been ready to give up and now, four laps around the length of the city, her body was making her pay for it. There was more liquid on her skin than inside her body.

"You should go to the Chambers meeting like that." Cobalt stood now, trying to push his hair back from his forehead but finding that sweat had plastered it there. "It's a good look for you."

Grey tried to push him but the movement jostled her brain and she nearly fell over. Cobalt grabbed her elbow. Her body screamed at her for having pushed

herself too hard on the run but her mind knew it wasn't far enough. She should have been able to do another lap. "I'm sure the Upper Chamber would love it," she agreed. "Lords and ladies, this woman here sweating like a stuck pig is in charge of the city defenses. Don't you feel safe?"

"I'd love roast pig right now," Cobalt muttered to himself.

"We've got fish at the house. Plenty of bread and an obscene amount of corn," she said.

His lip twisted down. "Not that same thing. Should we wait for Olin?"

"Oh, Olin." Olin was nowhere that Grey could see behind them. "No. We'll meet him back at the bridge."

They fell into a walking rhythm slower than they normally would have taken as Grey's lungs remembered their full capacity. Cobalt continued to attempt to get his hair off his forehead but Grey left hers where it was. She would need an extensive shower before going to the meeting. For any other ruler, her duty would have been nothing more than standing there as a reminder that the drakling had a part in the rule of the city. With Loic, she would be on edge to make sure the king did not lose his nerves or his mind or his stomach or consciousness. All equally likely. If Grey were to bet, she would say nerves. If she were to get what she wanted, the visual of Loic fainting during his speech was too good to pass up.

The edges of the city had no pathways so they walked across well-trod grass. These were the areas where people planted gardens behind their buildings or where children painted grotesque words or murals onto the brick walls. One weary father stood over his son as the boy washed away a word that was probably

a sexual term that Grey certainly wasn't about to ask about. A few houses down, a loud couple tended to their garden while attempting to make sure that their dog did not eat or roll on any of the plants and failing miserably in doing so. No one looked up. They did their work outside of the city to get just a small glimpse of peace, peace they did not get. It was still far too loud. People shouted for no reason and slammed their feet against the ground, feet in heels and boots and flat sandals that slapped against their feet. Grey couldn't focus on any of that. She turned her ears to the ocean. Fishing ships floated by and if Grey had wanted to, which she did not, she could have heard any of the hundreds of conversations shouting from bow to stern or even ship to ship. She focused on the water instead. It rolled more than it crashed today and did its job of dulling the other noises.

“Think he'll get through it?” Cobalt asked.

No need to ask who he meant. “I couldn't say,” Grey admitted. “He's been panicking ever since it was announced. Haegan did all the work for him—wrote the speech, made the arrangements. All he has to do is stand and talk. Isn't that what his last job was?”

“Maybe?” Cobalt shrugged. “Maybe he'll surprise you. Although he is less...equipped than Patia was.”

“I'd give a hundred Loics to have her back,” Grey sighed.

“I don't believe he can be that bad,” Cobalt said. He had a diplomacy in him that Grey had never learned. There had been no lessons for that in all her training and she had no idea where he managed to pick up.

“He just—he hasn’t—he’s just not a king,” Grey finally said. “I don’t think he has done any actual ruling, which is probably for the best. You ask him anything and you can see his mind start whirring but none of the cogs go anywhere.”

“How poetic,” Cobalt teased.

Grey punched his shoulder.

“He wasn’t trained for it,” Cobalt continued. “Patia at least had a warrior’s background. Alam knew he was going to be king. It’s not something you can just wake up one day and be good at.”

“I understand that. But Haegan couldn’t find one person better for it? He’s a fucking Naell, big deal. The last Naell got himself killed,” she spat.

Cobalt knew better than to push her in that kind of mood. Days and days sitting with Loic were starting to grate not just on Grey’s nerves but every part of her body. How could a man sit so all day long? Forgive her, on occasion they moved from the library to the kitchens and then back to the library but that was it. He just sat there and read and wrote things down and panicked about speeches he had yet to give or things that would never even happen—he had once asked her what would happen if the castle caught on fire. There were no records of that every having happened. It had not comforted Loic, who so worked himself into such a spell about it that he demanded to be speak to the volunteer fire workers. Once faced with them, of course, he had hardly managed three words out.

“Son of a bitch,” Grey muttered. “Olin, what are you doing?”

Her friend pushed himself off the rock he had been sitting on and smiled at the two drakling. There was not a bead of sweat upon him. “Waiting for you lot,” he said. “Looks like you had quite a run.”

“Did you just turn back once we lost you?” Cobalt asked.

“I did a full lap,” he protested. “How many did you do? Twelve? Thirteen?”

“Four,” Grey said.

Olin shook his head. “So slow, what kind of example are you setting?”

Unlike when she punched Cobalt, Olin reacted. He yelped and insisted she had dislocated his shoulder but he had no problem using that arm as a shield when she went to punch him again.

A Chambers meeting required Grey’s best look except there really wasn’t one. She could make herself presentable, of course, but there was no ‘best’ involved. Everything besides her comfortable black pants and sleeveless tunics just fit her the wrong way, even when it all had been tailored for her. Her formal outfits were the worst. Loose fitting black pants (a danger in a fight, but no one expected one, foolish to assume) that she had to kick in front of her to walk in and constantly risked tripping on, which was absurd because Grey had fantastic balance and spent an hour doing exercises for better balance each morning. The pants were just too wide and the shirt, of course, too tight. She could still fight in it, if need be, but it had been designed to show off her arms. It did, very well, but would hardly be helpful in a fight. It was not chain mail but something Jade

jokingly referred to as ‘scalemail’ in reference to how the silver pieces of metal overlapped in rippling lines down her chest in a manner meant to mimic a dragon’s scales. Grey needed Jade’s help to pull the tight shirt over and clasp it behind her neck and double check multiple times that it was fastened tightly. Grey was not about to burst out of her shirt in the middle of her first meeting as the head of the drakling.

“It looks nice,” Jade said.

“It feels like a cage,” Grey said. She tried to twist her torso around. It worked but scratched below her armpits where the shirt scooped low and revealed quite a bit of skin on her sides. “Why would people wear something like this?”

“Because they like how it makes them feel,” Jade said. “Sit. I’m brushing your hair.”

“You’re not,” Grey said.

Jade put a hand on Grey’s shoulder and shoved her to sit on the bed before taking a kneeling position behind Grey and pulling a heavy brush through her hair. It tangled itself in her hair before it had even passed her scalp. “Grey, this is horrible. You have no excuse not to brush it.”

“I do brush it.” Grey would not pout or admit that Jade’s jerking motions to get the brush out brought tears to Grey’s eyes. “It just knots itself right after.”

Jade sighed. With a great pull, she got the brush free. Rather than return to the scalp she started at the ends of Grey’s hair, which now came past her shoulders. Maybe she should just cut it all off.

“With your hair, you’re better off starting at the ends,” Jade told her. “Did your parents have hair like this? They should have known.”

“I don’t really remember,” Grey admitted. “I joined the drakling when I was seven. My parents just started to blur away at one point.”

“Seven,” Jade repeated. “Much younger than me.”

Grey tried to shrug but it was difficult with the operation Jade performed on top of her head. “I demonstrated abilities. Not uncommon. Rose joined at six, I think. Raven was probably eight or so. It is all about when you show as drakling. You were what, eleven?”

“About,” Jade said. “I climbed a tree to put a bird back with its mother. Tree was about twenty feet tall. Gave them a pretty good idea that I could do something. They called Umber out, he did some tests and took me in, Nikol chose me a year later.”

“I remember that,” Grey said. She did. Umber had been so excited with Jade’s promise and strength and even more delighted when Nikol accepted her. His letters to Rose had been of gloating exclamations of what Jade could do. So excited when she managed to pull apart her first log with her hands, Umber’s quill had gone right through the paper and left a small hole.

“What did you do?” Jade asked. She began brushing from higher and higher points in Grey’s hair, up to the nape of her neck now.

“Some of the older children were playing a game,” Grey said. “I don’t know what it was exactly but they were throwing a ball against a wall and

catching it. They wouldn't let me play. So I knocked one of them down and grabbed the ball. Threw it straight through a brick wall.”

Jade laughed.

It was a story Grey had been told more than she remembered it. She had no doubt it had happened but she wished she could remember it, if just for the looks on their faces when the tiny girl managed to break the wall down. Sometimes she liked to think she could remember what the wall coming down looked like but maybe that was just the memory of Sifa's tail destroying a condemned building. Grey remembered little from her time before the drakling. She knew her birth name and that there had been two younger siblings who had not been old enough to understand why she wouldn't be coming back. Young enough that they would not recognize Grey should she return. It was likely her own parents wouldn't. It didn't matter. The parents of drakling were given the choice to maintain contact with their children after they bonded with their dragons. Grey's parents had not. So be it.

Jade continued to chat as she pulled through Grey's hair. Her words meant absolutely nothing but their patter was nice and a good cover for the limping footsteps Grey kept waiting to hear outside her door. They never came. When Grey insisted on having her hair put back into a simple braid, Jade pulled the sides back tightly and braided them into a large braid that went down the center of her head. Her argument was that Grey never managed to get the one braid to contain all the hair. She was not wrong.

The other drakling sat at their dining table, not eating for once. For the most part. Violet had produced the leg of an animal from somewhere and Gold kept tossing nuts into the air to catch with her teeth, although she didn't seem to be eating them.

“Our little silver star,” Raven said when Grey entered the room.

“You call me that again and you're sleeping outside,” Grey said. “I'll find a way.”

“I don't doubt you.” But he still smiled at her. “Do you feel ready?”

“I'm fine,” she said. “I'm not the one who is at risk of having an attack in front of everyone.”

“Just make sure to catch the king if he falls,” Cobalt said.

“Of course I will. I dragged your ass back here when you broke your leg trying to climb that tree, didn't I?”

Cobalt protested as the others laughed. He did not do well with heights. Always got dizzy, lost his footing or his hold the second he looked down. She had taken him out on Sifa more than once and he would always clutch at her only a hundred or so feet in the air, begging to return to the safety of the ground. Grey used their laughter as a chance to slip away without well-wishes or good lucks. If Rose did not want to give her one, then Grey would not dally until the last second.

The elevator to the castle had too many people on it. When Grey tugged the bell on the rope to let them know she wished to come down it took several minutes as other people needed to be carried up and down the cavern. Likely the Lower Chamber. They were elected from the various communities within the city,

a mass of merchants and sailors and teachers and concerned parents who wanted to make sure their interests were not forgotten. The lords and ladies would not be so concerned with timeliness. They could afford a later, more dramatic entrance, so long as they arrived before their king. At least the elevator was, mercifully, empty on Grey's ride down. It was just soldiers on duty. She had no problem complaining about her top and attempting to pull it into a more comfortable position. She did not miss how their eyes focused on the exposed skin. Let them, even though her cheeks blushed. She couldn't blame them. It was a nice view.

Too many people in the castle cavern, far too many. Mostly the Lower Chamber. They had dusted off their finest clothes without knowing they were a season or two out of fashion. Grey had not seen that shade of pale pink in a while and she couldn't remember the last time she had seen that square cut around the neck of linen shirts. Many of the woman opted for dresses that they wore with such evident pride only to find that their pride would be dashed when the ladies and lords entered in their silk and taffeta to reveal that pale pink had had its day and that a deep blue had taken over as the primary color of choice. No one wore red or gold. Even the few bits of jewelry Grey could see were made of leather or silver or other materials that had been painted with any non-Naell color.

Grey could say this for the Lower Chamber representatives; their clothes were well made. If they were going to spend the money on something that could only be worn on the best of occasions then it was going to be worth the money. Those seams would not split at the first raise of the arm for an important vote and their fabrics would not wilt and discolor in the first hint of rain. Even if their

fabric was nothing more than linen or cotton it was woven together tightly and revealed no lines or bumps at any possible angle.

She couldn't speak to anything else they wore. All of her knowledge went to fabric and cloth and the thread holding them together. The bold swipes of color across the eyes of both men and women seemed a little much to Grey, especially since she felt the nobles had given more towards high swipes of pinks and reds and purples on their cheeks than bold eye looks. Anyone with the hair long enough coiled it around flowers or pieces of jewel.

The one thing Grey could say about all of the people milling about was that they seemed to look around the cavern in awe. Even the man Grey had heard bragging to his friends at the damn tavern Loic had dragged her to, all his bluster gone as he stared up at the ceiling of the cave with an open mouth.

They stared with at Grey with even more wonder. That was, if they saw her at all. Her feet added no sound to the high pitched voices that she heard once as they left their owner's mouths and then twice and thrice as they bounced around the cavern. She did not like the feeling of even those few eyes on her. When she fought, when she flew, it meant nothing—she invited the stares. But for just walking she felt like she was on display and she wanted inside as quickly as possible.

She should not have been surprised to find that Loic wanted the same thing. Nidi and Ronin really should have given Grey some sort of warning when they opened the king's doors for her.

He sat in his inner chambers, the unnecessary parlor space between his larger parlor room and his bedroom. Despite the several available and overly-plush chairs, he sat on the floor with his knees pulled up to his chest and his face hidden away by his arms. Grey had seen children do this when told they couldn't have another cookie. She had seen the dragons do something similar, mostly when Sifa didn't want to go on patrol.

She scoffed and turned to, surprise surprise, Damir. "Can you fix this?" she motioned at Loic.

Damir's entire face twitched as he fought back something. Anger, probably. His face scrunched with it. "He doesn't need fixing," he said slowly. "He's having an attack."

"Can you stop it? We have ten minutes," she pointed out.

"I'm trying," Damir snapped. "You wait outside, I'll deal with this."

"I'll be staying."

Damir frowned but didn't argue. Either he knew better or didn't care enough to press the issue. He knelt down next to Loic without touching his friend. Damir's hands were bandaged and the bandages spotted with black powder. She'd need to look into that later. "Loic," he said. "You have to do this."

"I'm not," Loic said from the muffled confines behind his arms and legs.

"I'm going to say the wrong thing and they're going to laugh at me."

"They won't," Damir assured him. "No one wants to see you fail."

"They do."

“They don’t. Loic, what are you? You’re a Naell. They loved your family for years. I’m sure they’re all thrilled to have you on the throne,” he said. Damir turned to Grey and motioned, eyes only, back towards Loic. He wanted her to repeat the sentiment. She would not. She didn’t have a damn idea what anyone thought about the king except herself and he did not need to hear that right now.

Damir switched tactics. “It won’t take long,” he said. “You make the speech, they tell you how happy they are with you, you leave. We drink everything in this castle. We can even drink the bath water if we want.”

Loic did not laugh.

Grey sat away from the two as Damir kept trying to make his friend raise his head. She could not hear Loic’s heartbeat but she could hear his deep breaths that never made it to his lungs, how he kept gasping for air, and how his fingers tapped against his chest. His body visibly shook with the strain of holding up a non-existent weight. Grey didn’t want him to look up. The slightest hint of tears would send her back to the drakling compound where she would tell Rose that her training had not prepared for any of this. If they wanted her to do her job, then they should have damn well prepared for it.

It was as Cobalt said only a few hours ago; you needed to be prepared. And Loic just hadn’t been. He was a man doing his best. It wasn’t his fault that his best wasn’t very much.

Damir grew frustrated. It wasn’t hard to see and even harder to blame him for. “Loic, everyone is on your side. Right, Grey?”

“I couldn’t say,” she said. “But if they’re not, then fuck ‘em.”

Loic heard her and finally looked up. No tears. She would say it was the surprise of her voice that got his attention and not her words, but Damir motioned eagerly for her to continue. That had been the extent of her thoughts on the matter.

“Just. Fuck ‘em,” Grey repeated. “Not all of them. You’d probably get tired. But a few of them.”

At least Damir smiled.

“Damir’s right,” she said. “What are you afraid of? That they don’t like you? You’re still their king. Even if you mess up, you’re still their king.”

“But I still would have messed up,” Loic argued.

“Then don’t mess up.”

Loic clicked his tongue. “That’s not how that works.”

“If you don’t want to mess up, don’t mess,” she repeated. It seemed to be working. Loic’s body no longer shook. She stood so that she was in front of him now. “I don’t know what else to tell you.”

“You should be telling me not to mess up,” he pointed out.

“I can’t do that.” She stuck out her hand and pulled him to his feet. His palms were clammy but at least they weren’t sweaty in the way she feared.

Damir scrambled to his own feet, absolutely beaming with the same kind of pride Umber looked at Jade with when her arrow sliced into the target two hundred feet away. “And if you do mess up, and they do laugh,” he said, “Grey here can kick their asses.”

“I can’t do that,” she said again. “I could, if I wanted to. But I can’t kick the ass of everyone who laughs at you. I’m certain it’s a lot of people. But, let them laugh. Most of these people just want a story to tell and isn’t that part of what you do?”

“Not even close,” he said. And yet, despite the frown in his voice and the way his hands continued to shake, the left side of his mouth fought against a smile.

“I really have no idea what you do,” she admitted. “And neither do they. If you don’t want them to know you, don’t let them. Say your speech and get the fuck out. And, we drink the castle. Not the bathwater.”

It was hard to say how much her words had helped but Loic could at least bring himself to stand and walk out of the door when Ronin informed them it was time to go. Grey kept as close to his right shoulder as she dared as their quartet made their way down the hall—Damir slipped away from them at some point, whispering something quietly to his king before disappearing. He would be able to sit at the back of the chambers as a spectator. Nidi and Ronin would have to stand behind their king’s chair throughout the ceremony but Grey would be free to wander as she wished. She wouldn’t. She would stand next to Loic just in case something went as badly wrong as he feared.

Loic at least looked more kingly today than usual. The thin crown he favored had been replaced by a broader gold headband with dark jewels around it. That damn cloak, the one he never needed, was gone and replaced with a much thinner black one that seemed almost sheer in the right or wrong light. Everything

else he wore was a deep yellow that bordered on gold but never quite reached the shine of his crown.

Outside the doors to the chamber, Nidi leaned forward. “Remember your first day teaching?” she asked.

“I forgot my lesson plans,” he said. “That’s not helping.”

“But you got through it,” Ronin reminded him. “You were great.”

“I can’t start talking about use of body imagery in Lamer poems,” he muttered.

“You could,” Grey added. “You’re king. They’ll listen to anything you say.”

Nidi and Ronin smiled at her just before the doors finally opened.

The Chambers hall was used for one thing and one thing only. It meant that the palace workers had been there day and night to make sure not a bit of dust clung to the long wooden floor because even a speck of white or gray dust would have been glaringly obvious against the high gloss of a floor the color of burnt wood. The room still smelled like the lavender soap used to get that shine. Lavender soap and about one hundred different perfumes that had the overwhelming scent of orange and Grey wanted to yell at them because who wanted to smell like a damn orange? All the lords and ladies, apparently. The smell only came from Grey’s left side, the side that was a sea of fashionable deep blue out of the corner of her eye.

She wasn’t looking at them. She kept her gaze on Loic as he walked. She had horrible visions of him slipping on the shining floor and crashing to the

ground and while it would be funny any other day, while the idea would have been funny to her only ten minutes ago, she couldn't wish it upon him now. Not as she watched his hunched shoulders (*stand up straight, just stand up straight and they'll think you magnificent*) and slow gait that seemed to take forever. They were not even halfway down the long length of the room.

The walls lined with portraits of old, most of them Naell but a few usurpers here or there. A painting of Patia had never been commissioned. Maybe Loic would take comfort in the gaze of familiar and familial portraits staring back at him. A few of them had his traits but no one that you could point to as a clear relative of his. He was a distant relation, of course. It became more and more evident as they got further down the line of portraits and further into the various branches of the family. Grey knew a handful of their faces but would be more likely to recognize their names and deeds than the unsmiling stares looking back from gilded portraits.

Finally, finally, Loic reached his throne and sat with obvious relief. It couldn't have been comfortable. A cold golden iron that twisted and wound its way into pointed edges and curled armrests that Loic clutched at as if he were about to be dragged away.

The Upper and Lower Chambers took their seats again. They were nothing more than rows of stacked benches but the Upper Chamber, certain that they would always be there, had a few personalized touches here and there in a comfortable pillows or decorative throw. Pure vanity, a cheap trick to remind the Lower Chamber that they didn't really belong here.

Silence. Not to Grey's ears, but silence to everyone else's. Wooden benches whimpered beneath shifting bodies and those same bodies emitted noises they didn't mean to in shaky breaths or deep yawns or coughs that they desperately attempted to muffle so as to not be that person. Someone did a poor job of covering a sneeze from the Lower Chamber side. Someone on the Upper Chamber did a better job of hiding a belch that Grey could smell a mix of beer and mutton on. It wasn't even noon yet.

In the back of the room stood the few people were allowed into the meeting but not positions in either Chamber. Various secretaries for the representatives or for individuals, some children and spouses who were granted to permission to see their family members at work, some soldiers on hand—not Olin, who had adamantly refused the assignment when Grey offered it to him—and of course, Haegan and Vila. Vila technically had a seat on the Upper Chamber as the senior member of her noble family but she stood in the back with Haegan, who possessed no noble family or any family of note. Damir hovered near them, trying to catch Loic's eye. Grey stood behind Loic and could not see where he gazed but she would bet it was on the floor.

Loic finally cleared his throat. It echoed.

"I welcome you, both Chambers, to the castle," he began. His voice shuddered. "It is my great honor to bring you here at the beginning of my reign."

Every word came out stilted, like someone was feeding the words to him one by one. Or they were being pulled from him with excruciating torture.

Although, with no insult to him, Grey had a hard time imagining him holding out against any form of real torture.

“My ascension to the throne has been unconventional,” he acknowledged. ‘He’. Haegan had written every word as far as Grey knew. “And I understand that. I want it known that I bore no ill will to Her Majesty, Queen Patia, and regret that I sit here now in her place. The day of her assassination was a tragedy for our country and our drakling will make it right.”

Eyes moved to Grey. She stared right back. As a wise woman once said: fuck ‘em.

Loic shifted his chair. “I do not want my regret taken as hesitation. However I may have come to the throne, I am here, and I will do my best to serve this country. As my family has always done. I come to you new to the act of ruling but I am a Naell and it is in my blood.”

Ruling wasn’t in one’s blood. Even Grey knew that. Loic did too, if his tense shoulders and gritted words were anything to go by.

“Oscide is strong,” he continued. His voice gained just a touch more confidence and went from a shudder to a tremble. Either he was becoming more comfortable or he had shut down entirely and was just going through the motions. “It will take more than an attack to knock us down. However, we were attacked and we will not let that pass. Patia’s assassination and the slaying of a dragon were done with the intent of hurting our country. Those responsible will be punished. It is possible more attacks will come. With our country’s great soldiers and drakling, we are preparing for the possibility that this is not over.”

Were they, now? As far as Grey knew, all of their focus had been on looking behind them. Over the heads of the crowd, Haegan looked directly at Grey as if he knew what she was thinking. There was no reason he could not have given her that message in private.

“You are here because I’ve called you here,” Loic said, “and I’ve called you here not only to assure you that we remain safe and strong but because you have a right know to your king. I am a Naell but I am more than that.”

You’re a mass of nerves and anxiety some god gave the misfortune to walk, Grey thought. There was less bite to the thought than there would have been a few days ago.

“I was not raised in this castle, or any castle,” Loic reminded them. “I did not even grow up in any of the caverns. I spent my youth on the banks of the ocean, on Griffen’s Way.”

A few people, likely those who knew the area, smiled. The gesture, the acknowledgment that the crowd was actually listening and responding like real people, seemed to calm Loic a bit as his hands loosened their death grip.

“This means that I know the issues you face better than most,” he said. “When you come to me with your problems, I will hear them and understand them. My chambers will be open to discussion starting at the beginning of the next week and I will hear each and every one of you as necessary.”

How fun.

“My loyalty lies to Oscide and her people,” Loic said. “I come to you as a professor from our great university, the greatest in the land.”

Someone, possibly Damir, gave the quietest whistle possible. Definitely Damir. Haegan and Vila gave him such horrified looks that Grey swore their eyes were about to pop out of their heads. He was luckily only Grey heard it.

“This means that I give preference to neither our nobility nor our farmers nor our merchants nor our artists,” Loic promised. “Just as you serve me all equally, I serve you. Oscide is strong because our people are strong. We do not merely mourn those lost in the attack. We swear to honor them. We lost more than a Queen and a dragon that day. I understand that the family of one of the brave soldiers, Elwin Marsh, is here to represent him today. Elwin was a young man who signed up to serve his country. He should not have had to give his life so soon.”

It was hard to deny Haegan’s brilliance, as much as Grey would like to. The family of the young man stood to be acknowledged and both chambers rose to applaud the sacrifice they and their man had made. More importantly, it gave Loic a real chance to breathe until they sat down again.

“I regret,” he said once there was silence, “that I cannot offer insight onto who planned this. But the drakling have never failed us and they will not fail to bring these horrors to justice.”

Fucking Haegan.

“I promise you that when the day comes, the dead will receive their due. And we will receive our justice. But my reign will not be marked by bloodshed and war. I am no warrior,” he admitted with a sheepish smile that no one returned.

“I will not send our men and women to die in battles I myself cannot fight in. But should that day come, know that I will always stand with you.”

He took a deep breath. It took the last bit of strength he had from him as his body deflated.

“I have said all have come to say,” he continued. “If there are any here who wish to speak—”

“—Your Majesty,” chimed an immediate voice from the Upper Chamber.

Lord Tyk, Grey wanted to tell Loic. Wealthy beyond reason and greedy beyond need. Lies, almost everything he says.

“If I may,” Tyk said although he certainly did not doubt that he would be granted permission to speak. He was the kind of man who didn’t do a damn thing until he was certain of its outcome. Grey wouldn’t be surprised if he had let his face be purposely cut by the bandits he had so bravely fought off in his teenage years. He had probably decided the slashing scar on his cheek would add to his persona. “Despite the circumstances of your arrival, I know I speak for the Upper Chamber when I saw we are honored to have a Naell back on the throne where you belong. I cannot speak for the Lower Chamber.”

He smiled. No one else did. They stared with largely hostile eyes, leaning forward in their chairs as if he stood poised to attack them and not merely speaking from the front row of his side.

“We believe that you are right about the threat of attack and are immensely wise to be preparing for the possibility of more. But we cannot prepare

fully until we know who planned this. It is not secret that the drakling have been interrogating the merchants about their role in the attack—”

“—we had no role in it,” someone shouted. After a shuffle of bodies and legs moving to accommodate her, a woman with an out of date pale pink dress stood and tossed her long dark hair away from her face.

“The drakling have been talking to you,” Tyk pointed out.

Loic started to turn his head to Grey to look to her but she hissed, “look fucking forward,” and he snapped to obey.

“They’ve been talking to everyone,” the woman pointed out.

Tyk’s smile withered. “All I am saying is that while we know the merchants remain strongly suspect in the actions of the attack, perhaps some sort of incentive to help the investigation is necessary. The restriction of trade routes, perhaps.”

The Lower Chamber erupted. A steady stream of indignant ‘how dare yous’ and righteous ‘that isn’t necessary’ and a few words that probably shouldn’t have been shouted at such a formal function but many of them had just been accused of something treasonous and had their livelihood threatened. Grey couldn’t blame them. She could blame the Upper Chamber for rising and hurling further accusations of misdeeds.

Grey leaned forward. “Tell them we are not giving any information until we are certain of it,” she told Loic.

“You tell them,” he whispered. His eyes shot back and forth between the two sides with absolute panic. In the back of the room, Haegan and Vila did something similar.

“Your Highness,” Grey hissed. “Tell them.”

Loic cleared his throat as if that would somehow be heard in the roars. He tried again, louder but nothing. He could stand but that would be seen as throwing himself into the argument and they all knew that was the last thing they wanted.

Grey couldn’t bear it. The voices soaked into her body and her head pounded with the sound of anger and fury and horror and smugness. “Your King speaks,” she shouted with a force she had never used before. It worked. No one sat but they certainly silenced.

“Until we are certain of those behind the attack,” Loic said, “restricting trade routes is unnecessary. It only hurts us.”

“There are plenty of goods in the city,” Lord Tyk said. “We would not suffer.”

“That’s because the Upper Chamber controls the goods in the city,” the same angry woman said. “If our routes are shut down then we have nothing to bring in and we lose business.”

“Business,” Tyk repeated with distaste. “How good was your business with the sale of the powder?”

Grey needed another drakling with her, Cobalt or Raven, to at least show her horror to. She would need to make Tyk a visit. There was no reason for him to know this much of their investigation. They had been careful, making sure to talk

to as much people as possible to spread out the level of suspicion and asking many questions, not just about the powder or the piercers.

The woman shook with fury. “I speak for all of the merchants, my Lord. We had no hand in this. We stood less to gain than any one of you.” She gestured towards the Upper Chamber with smile that mirrored Tyk’s.

He did not take the bait. “What have we to gain?”

“What have we?” she returned.

“The roads remain open,” Loic said. It was loud enough to be heard but weak enough to be ignored. “Until—”

“—we cannot risk further attack,” Tyk said. “We are here to discuss the protection of this city and that includes the dangers the merchants bring in for the sake of profit.”

Something in Loic’s shoulder’s twitched and straightened. As Tyk continued to speak at length about the dangers of the open trade routes, something seemed to connect for Loic. He sat straighter. His tight grasp on the handles of his chair loosened into something almost lazy, fingers barely curling around the gilded edges. Although his shoulders remained straight the rest of his body sunk into a position not of submissiveness but boredom. Grey had never seen him look so casual. No, yes, she had. Just before she had pulled him out of his classroom a few days ago, his body had held the same alert but languid posture that it returned to now. She wanted to see his face but it remained fixed on Tyke. His head tilted in curiosity. And his fingers began to drum, not on his heart as she had so often seen him do, but against the armrest of his chair.

People noticed. They stared at Loic even as Tyk droned on and on and on. Some began to whisper. Damir, in the back, looked enraptured as if he were watching a great play on the stage before him. Haegan's brown furrowed and his mouth kept working its way open to say something to Vila. Grey had never seen him confused before. She did not like it. She enjoyed it, but it disturbed her.

It took too long for Tyk to notice. His voice trailed off and he stared with surprise and confusion and perhaps even a little bit of shame at his king.

"Please," Loic said. He waved his hand at the lord. "I'll wait."

Damir physically bit his lip to stop himself from laughing.

When the lord did not continue, Loic stood. He managed to get himself tangled in his cloak and stumbled doing so but he was standing and he did not look afraid or reluctant. "My lord," he said to Tyk, "as I promised, your concerns have been heard. But the drakling have no evidence that any of the merchants have had a hand in the planning of the attack and until they do, there will be no punishment. Our city is to be protected by her great soldiers and citizens. As she has always been. If you fear it, I believe you have a nice place by Lale that would be lovely at this time of year."

"I—"

"—I am not finished," Loic cut off. He turned to the Lower Chamber and to the woman who had been so viciously protesting Tyk. "What was your name?"

"Karlene," she said.

“Thank you for your honesty today,” Loic said. “To those who have been questioned by the drakling, I thank you for your openness with them. Every person we can eliminate brings us closer to the real culprits.”

He swallowed. Although he seemed more at ease than Grey had ever seen him, that didn't say much. To uncurl all of the tension that sat in Loic would take hours of work. “In a month's time,” he said, “we will find ourselves hosting representatives from around our world. The other countries are coming to honor the treaty that we were forced to break with the attack. Drakling Rose allowed her dragon to use dragonfire. To do so violates the laws that govern our peace.”

“Lord Tyk.” Loic spun and nearly lost his footing. “You seem so passionate about our city. I would be honored to place you in charge of lodgings for our guests.”

It sounded like a punishment to Grey but the lord seemed to beam with genuine pleasure. “You do me a great honor, Your Highness.”

“The drakling will continue their investigation,” Loic said. “But we must look forward to the trial. We need to prove that the attack did not cripple us. I am asking all of you to help us prove that.”

They clapped. Loic didn't seem to have meant it to be a clapping moment because he turned back to the throne with a cocked eyebrow, the gaze meant only for his guards and Grey. If he could have shrugged, he would have.

“If there are no further concerns,” he said once the applause died down, “I consider our meeting down for the day. There is a feast in the next hall to thank you for your presence today. I shall join you shortly.”

The Upper and Lower Chambers finally united in the common cause of free food and left eagerly, almost all of them bowing to Loic as they did so. Grey didn't like him so close to a crowd of people. She pushed through quickly, physically moving people out of her way in the few cases where it was necessary in order to get to his side.

“Where did that come from?” Grey whispered to him.

He heard her but ignored her. He was too busy playing king and acknowledging those who bowed to him or the bolder ladies and lords who spoke to him. Loic had apparently forgotten his words as he just smiled and nodded his thanks to him. Even as the crowd thinned and only a few stragglers were left, he could not bring himself to speak.

Lady Brilane remained last and gave Loic an unnecessarily deep gesture that was a cross between a bow and a curtsy, her right leg kicking out behind her and bending her left knee while her upper body remained rigid. “Well spoken, Your Highness,” she said.

“Thank you,” Loic finally managed.

Brilane's smile managed to infect even Grey. The drakling smiled as the lady rose and left the room, offering slight head to nods to Haegan, Damir and Vila on her way. It wasn't until the door shut behind her that anyone else spoke.

Damir whooped and threw himself at Loic. The king barely caught the hug.

“What just happened?” Grey asked Loic as the two separated.

Whatever spirit had taken over Loic finally left his body. His knees wobbled with noticeable effort to himself upright. Damir pulled away but kept a tight grip on Loic's shoulder as if the man were going to fall to the ground.

"I don't know," Loic admitted. He could have just run miles around the city from the way he breathed. "They were all shouting at each other and the thought struck me. They were like children. Or my students. And I just started...not teaching but treating it like a classroom."

"It worked," Vila assured him. "Beautifully. Well done, sir."

"Thank you." He turned to Haegan. "I forgot an entire page. I'm sorry."

"No one else noticed," Haegan said. "You did very well."

"Was that page more about how the drakling need to do their jobs?" Grey asked.

Haegan at least had the sense to pretend to be ashamed. "I couldn't say," he lied. "Perhaps. It was just to assure people that you are doing your jobs."

"Speaking of your jobs," Loic asked her. "I can't order you to do anything. But I were to suggest that you look at Lord Tyk for anything—"

"—I would agree that it was too obvious to suspect him," Grey said. "But I would have already planned to do so."

"Unfortunately," Haegan cut off. "We're not quite done. The feast."

"Right. I'm not sure if I'm not hungry or if I could eat the entire table myself." Loic almost laughed but it seemed more a puff of air than anything else.

"Let's get this done for good. And then we drink the castle."

“I’m afraid I cannot join you,” Grey said. “I have some duties at the compound.”

Loic looked surprised but not in the least bit disappointed. “Oh. Of course.”

Damir’s house was not difficult to find but hard to spot in the darkness. The street had little lighting, just a few posts with high candles that had been lit at random intervals. One was lit here, and then three dark posts, and then three all lit in a row. It made for a strange and eerie glow rather than a soothing one. They were too far from the center of the city for the lights of taverns or homes to guide their way. Only Grey’s eyes, better at piercing the darkness, found the entirely unremarkable house Loic’s friend lived in.

“Not a bad place,” Olin said.

It was horrible. The houses down here were buildings mashed together so they seemed to be a single long stream of brick broken up only by doorways. You would be on top of each other at all times. Grey was often tripping over people in the drakling compound but they had air around them. She could step out of her house and onto real grass and smell nothing but the sea air. To step out of Damir’s house was to step onto uneven cobblestone that even Grey’s sure feet struggled with and had nearly knocked Olin down a handful of times. They stood on a side street, which meant no one bothered to clean up their trash and there were strange piles of unknown objects and puddles of unknown liquid that Grey avoided at all

cost. The entire street smelled like someone's attempts to cook pork had gone horribly wrong.

"Remind me to never visit where you grew up," Grey said. "This is shit."

"Not all of us get to live in a castle in the clouds," Olin said.

"I live in neither of those things. C'mon. I don't know how long they'll be celebrating and I want to see what we can find."

As far as Grey could tell, Damir planned on staying in the castle all night. He had finished a good portion of wine before Grey had even left and he didn't seem the type to hold liquor as well as he imagined he did. She wouldn't have minded seeing her newly confident king drunk but that man had already been replaced with the usual Loic by the time he arrived at the banquet. The change must have started the Chambers but word of his strangeness had already spread amongst the Upper Chamber and the Lower was too preoccupied with memorizing every inch of the castle and food that they could. More than a few had squirreled food away in bags brought specifically for the occasion.

"Do you have a key?" Olin asked Grey at the front door. "Are you certain he doesn't live with someone?"

"I had Jade tail him for a day," she said. "Lives alone. Forgets to lock the door half the time and if not—," the door opened easily with her tentative push, "—damn. I really wanted to break it."

"I really wanted to see you break it," Olin agreed in sympathy. "Candles?"

"Just one," Grey said.

"What are we looking for?"

“Anything out of place,” Grey said.

Olin took a candle from its holder and lit it to reveal a room maybe twice the size of Grey’s bedroom and filled with more items than she had imagined could fit in such a space. “What...what would suspicious be?” Olin asked.

“A clean spot,” Grey joked. “Anything related to the piercers. If he was involved, it would be in be in building those.”

“Do you really think he was?” Olin walked away from her, the candlelight dancing away with him. He needed it more than she did.

“I honestly don’t know,” Grey said. “I don’t doubt that he loves Loic. Maybe he just wanted to get his friend onto the throne. Get something out of their friendship for himself.”

“I think you have very skewed view of friendship and we should probably talk about that some day,” Olin said.

She didn’t know if she was supposed to agree with that or not so she just began her search. Drakling eyes were not as good as, say, a cat’s in the night but where Olin saw only darkness Grey could see distinctive shapes and even writings. Damir seemed to write onto everything. Not write, she saw as she picked up pages at random. Draw. Drawings for machines that Grey could not see a purpose behind but weapons that she recognized instantly. No piercers but plenty of cannons and weapons for firing at a greater distance than she had seen before. One or two that seemed to be for tearing down buildings.

“He’s more violent than I would have guessed,” Grey muttered.

“That is not the impression I am getting,” Olin laughed.

True. To look about the rest of the room was to get not clear impression of a person except for that they were in desperate need to hire someone to clean for them. Damir lived in a single room and all of that space had been filled and crammed to bursting. A bed, sized only for one, had been shoved into the furthest corner but none of the blankets or sheets or pillows (of which there were plenty) were on the bed. They sat in a heap on the floor. Clothes joined them there, most of them brightly colored shirts and cloaks.

The largest wall was taken up by a desk that seemed a contraption itself. What started as a slightly curved table had been added to so there was a top shelf above it and a small latch at the end of the table. When Grey pulled it she kept on pulling until she had drawn a new leaf of the table out and around towards the other edge of the table so she had trapped herself in a circle. She shoved it back together. The chair with the desk seemed ordinary until one sat in it and realized that Damir been had given the ability to turn so that he never had to get up as he worked.

The walls were plastered with drawings and numbers and more numbers and more drawings. At least he had left the two windows by the door uncovered, although there where curtains there to shield him from whatever light could reach him during the day.

Grey shouldn't have been surprised by the amount of books. She should have assumed anyone who spent his days with Loic would have to enjoy them to some degree. Unlike his friend, Damir had no organization for his books to speak

of. A few sat on an end table. More sat at the feet of a large purple chair that probably cost more than the rent for this single room.

“How do you cook?” Grey asked.

“Communal space,” Olin said. He seemed fascinated by a particular drawing on the wall. “Out back, probably. There will be fire pits or something like that, plus a room to store food in in the winter.”

“Sounds miserable,” Grey said.

“It’s not that different from your table,” he said. “Except you do have to cook it yourself. There are no servants.”

“We don’t have servants,” Grey said. “We have people hired to cook for us.”

“That’s a servant.”

Grey wasn’t going to argue the point. She rarely saw their cooks anyway. They dropped the food off early in the morning and left as soon as they could. She wouldn’t recognize a single one of them if she were to see them on the street.

“What is...this is just a bag of money,” Olin muttered in disbelief. He jiggled the drawstring back so that Grey could hear the clattering of coins.

“Payment for the piercers?”

He tossed her the bag and she caught it with a single hand. There was no note for the nearly fifty coins. “Seems a small payment,” Grey said. “Might just be money.”

“People who live here don’t have money just lying around,” Olin argued.

Grey threw it back to him. He nearly missed it as he struggled to catch it and hold onto the candle. “His parents are noble,” she told him. “He would have some money?”

“He’s a lord?” Olin asked.

“No. Just a gentleman.”

Olin shook his head. “How is that different?”

He knew the difference very well but still, Grey played along. “You bow to a lord and probably give him what he wants without payment so he won’t have you arrested,” she said. “A gentleman you bow to so he’s distracted when you charge him double.”

The papers revealed nothing like a dragon piercer amongst them. She couldn’t even say what most of the writings were and a pile of letters seemed to largely be correspondence with his parents who lived about two hours horse ride and a half hour dragon’s flight from the city. The top few mentioned Loic extensively, how Damir was concerned that his friend was about to be overwhelmed by his new position but how Damir knew he had it in him to be a good ruler. How he would certainly pass along their congratulations to the new king. How now was not a good time to visit. The further back the pile went, the less mention of Loic and more assurances that Damir had the money he needed, that he was eating well, that he would be home for the holidays. Nothing of note.

“Grey,” Olin said. He knelt on Damir’s bed to better see some of the papers nailed to the wall. “You said that Egon’s wing was torn , right? Like a ball and chain?”

“Yes.”

“And it had a ball on each end?”

Grey jumped onto the bed and pulled at the paper. Olin grabbed her wrist.

“Don’t, we have to leave it.”

But it was the exact weapon that had caused Egon’s wild plummet to the ground. The one they had recovered from the site looked exactly as the one on Damir’s walls. He had written some numbers, dimensions, next to it and only the single note of “wing strength?” at the bottom. Grey lifted the other side but it was blank.

“It’s not proof,” Olin reminded her. “You don’t know when he drew it. Maybe it was after the attack. You said he was asking questions.”

“I didn’t mention this,” she said.

Her body warmed. Olin was right, it wasn’t proof of anything but it was closer than any of the information they had and to think that she could have been so close to the person who had so hurt the drakling and never really suspected it made her palms clammy with the desire to smash his face until his teeth found a new home in the ground.

“If he did design it,” Olin said softly, “he may not have known what it was for. Nothing else is part of the piercers. Maybe someone hired him. We can talk to him. Calmly.”

“If you can talk to him before I rip his throat out, by all means,” Grey said. “Be as calm as you want.”

“That’s not going to help,” Olin said. “You can’t assume he’s guilty.”

Grey ground her teeth. “I’ll have Jade and Cobalt tail him for a few more days,” she decided. “See what he’s up to. I won’t ask about it until after that.”

“Do you think you’ll be able to keep calm?”

“It would be a first.”

Body Continues